

Nitrato script for Domitor 2020 - Carolina Cappa

I'm here to present to you *Nitrato argentino, una historia del cine de los primeros tiempos / Argentine nitrate, an early cinema history*.

Nitrato argentino is a preservation and research project held between 2016 and 2020 on the Argentinian nitrate film collection at the Museo del Cine “Pablo Ducrós Hicken” in Buenos Aires. Its products are a book, an open access website nitratoargentino.org, a catalogue and a series of public exhibitions.

During this project, our aim was to link two main purposes:

On the one hand, to develop archival practises and the very same need within the film archive at the Museo del Cine to catalog, digitise and build access to the argentinian nitrate film collection. On the other hand, to research and build historical approaches to the collection specially from a technological perspective, trying to trace the techniques and the technologies that existed in the early days of cinema in the argentine territory.

The films preserved at the Museo del Cine, the target objects of this project, were mostly surviving elements of the silent era which were previously considered of none or low archival value. This was probably due to the fact that they seemed to be far away from the so called “argentinian canon”: few gauchos and tango films will be found here and practically none long feature fiction films. Instead, plenty of institucional films, actualities, fragments, incomplete and anonymous pieces, all of them very hard to identify and study.

Fortunately, value is a historical concept and these previously considered “disposal films” are now a small treasure. They, as survivors, allow us today to study the ways in which Argentinian filmmakers worked in a very different way from that of european or north american filmmakers at the time.

Despite the fact that this is a project developed by archivists from inside the archive to document and allow public access to information, the film archivist here is not a mere caretaker of documents. When dealing with such manipulated traces of what the original films were, we become key

figures in the interpretation of the documents. The research side of *Nitrato argentino* was meant to be an aid for the identification of these previously unknown or “lost films”.

Our research topics focused on technology and techniques developed in Argentina, arguing that early cinema in Argentina had a slightly different development than those of north american or european countries. It could be said that it had something to do with the worldwide position in which Argentina was placed during the first years of the 20th century as an agricultural and livestock supplier of raw materials for european markets. This economic dependency was also cultural and, in the case of the early cinema, it created an unstable, precarious and semi-professional environment for filmmaking.

Several aspects made the Argentinian context different. First, there was no invention but appropriation. Film equipment arrived in ships from Europe as a consequence of adventurous and indeed rich travellers, who usually came back with a camera, some raw stock and several film prints acquired for small market distribution. Certain imitations can be found in early representations, such as this beautiful film on the workers leaving a cigarette factory. This is our oldest registry in the catalogue and the front cover we’ve chosen for our book.

Soon, the first film production companies emerged as laboratories initially installed to shoot the spanish-language intertitles for the films that came in the ships. It is the case of this glorious pathecolor film, *Una serpiente inofensiva, la culebra*, made by Pathe Freres in 1914 and distributed in Argentina by Max Glucksmann, one of the first laboratories to settle down in Buenos Aires. This film belongs to the collection of Colegio Nacional Buenos Aires, one of the most prestigious educational institutions at that time and nowadays too. This series of Pathe Freres films distributed with spanish language intertitles in Argentina is composed by a total of other 10 similar scientific films.

By the end of the first world war, two main economic perspectives soon emerged in the newly-born argentinian film market: to invest in distributing foreing films or to invest in local small filmmaking. It was only between these two outlooks that an argentinian film industry was thought. It never existed the real opportunity to build a formal and strong studio system that would allow continuous local film production.

This semi-industrial environment forced film companies to design new strategies to make ends meet.

A variety of laboratory labors emerge. Companies specialized in title design, intertitles translating, editing and printing of new spanish-language versions of foreing films.

Companies also promoted the making of a variety of non-theatrical films that allowed them to create full sustainable productions: industrial films, educational films, social events films.

Some companies such as Talleres Cinematograficos Martinez - De La Pera built some sophisticated techniques on macro-photography for the creation of scientific films that soon became a series.

Cinematografía Valle and Rapid Film set up their weekly edition newsreels, from which Film Revista Valle was the most popular and prolific.

In the absence of a permanent long feature film production, there was practically no division of labour in the argentinian film industry. Technicians will concentrate as *cinematografistas*, as they were called, who did it all: shooting, printing, developing, photographic enlarging, projecting.

As a sum up, there was no industry; only survival.

Despite this lack of resources, this semi-crafted/pre-industrial environment did not supposed a lower quality in film production during the silent era in Argentina. On the contrary, it brought to light very curious and creative forms as response to technical and economic precariousness that actually settled the basis of what will then become a regular trait in the history of moving images in Argentina.

The permanence of early film technologies promoted the continuity of practices and records of certain visual motifs for longer periods than in hegemonic countries.

In fact, the date of the last registry on our catalogue is 1938. By then, silent films were still being made in Argentina.