Hour of the Furnaces: Beyond Spectatorship

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Hour of the Furnaces: Beyond Spectatorship

Abstract
Hour of the Furnaces is one of those films you never forget watching, at least I never did. Coming in at about 4 hours, the documentary demands to be seen and heard. Shot clandestinely between 1966 and 1968 by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, the film is a revolutionary call to action meant to awaken and inspire socio-political revolution. Despite the decades that exist between myself and this film, it felt more relevant than anything I have seen in years. The documentary speaks of the ever-present legacy of colonialism and neo-colonial policies which devastates the poor and elevates the rich, while illuminating the consumerist ideologies which pacify its citizens and render revolution unthinkable. Solanas and Getino do not think revolution should be dismissed, and this film makes that unmistakably clear. Using guerrilla film tactics, the films produces what Solanas and Getino call Third Cinema, an active subversion of Hollywood cinema. This forces active spectatorship and is meant to awaken the political consciousness of the passive Argentinian viewer, creating an uncomfortable viewing experience, as if to mirror the historical and emotional realities of the Argentinian revolution. It is an abrasive, shocking, and extremely informative documentary, one which left me with the unshakable need to write about it.

Keywords
Hour of the Furnaces, Third Cinema, Documentary

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"Hour of the Furnaces": Beyond Spectatorship

La Hora de los Hornos (1968), translated as Hour of the Furnaces, is a four-hour revolutionary call to action that documents the effects of colonialism on Argentina and, in so doing, provides context to inspire socio-political revolution. Directed by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino and shot clandestinely between 1966 and 1968, Hour of the Furnaces is the gold standard of political cinema: it is bold in form and brave in the face of Argentina’s dangerous 1960s socio-political climate. Using guerilla film tactics, the film produces what Solanas and Getino call Third Cinema, an active subversion of Hollywood cinema and its consumerist model that dissolves the distance between screen and viewer, forcing active spectatorship in place of conventional viewer passivity. As such, Hour of the Furnaces awakens the political consciousness of the passive Argentinian viewer, garnering revolutionary support and creating an uncomfortable spectator experience, as if to mirror the historical and emotional realities of the Argentine Revolution.

The documentary’s opening speaks directly to the audience through intertitles, one reading, “this film speaks of neo-colonialism and violence in Argentina.” This text is closely followed by flashing words—interspersed with footage—that speak of violence, colonialism, power, and revolution. As Robert Stam notes in “The Two Avant-Gardes: Solanas and Getino’s The Hour of the Furnaces,” “Vertovian titles explode around the screen, rushing towards and retreating from the spectator, their graphic presentation often mimicking their significance” (275). Through powerful buzzwords and quotes, the intertitles present a focused narrative, while intercut revolutionary footage roots the audience in reality. The editing of this opening is abrupt, invasive and wildly engaging, immediately capturing the tone of the documentary, while the mix of text and visuals together produce an aggressive emotional experience. Viewers are bombarded
with words and images that speak directly to the plight of Argentinian civilians, priming the audience with the key themes of the documentary footage that is to follow.

In this way, *The Hour of the Furnaces* becomes a participatory viewer experience requiring self-reflection and immediate interpretation of the subject matter as it is being presented. Stam writes, “In a provocative amalgam of cinema/theatre/political rally, it [*The Hour of the Furnaces*] joins the space of representation to the space of the spectator, thus making ‘real’ and immediate communication possible” (274). The documentary thus creates a public sphere, allowing for what Solanas and Getino call a “liberated space, a decolonized territory” (qtd. Stam 274). The “liberated space” not only reflects a revolutionary atmosphere that provokes discussion amongst the audience but also ultimately fulfils the aspirations of Third Cinema discussed by Solanas and Getino in their film manifesto, “Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World.” Third Cinema aims to illuminate oppressive historical and social processes and to indicate where socio-political transformation is required. It is not meant to be consumed passively nor enjoyed for its entertainment value. Rather, Third Cinema is an extension of political activism that is often produced by and for the people that it represents. For non-Argentinian viewers, Third Cinema presents the realities of Third World nations from a native perspective, countering perspectives offered in ethnographic documentaries and avoiding sensationalism or romanticism (LeBlanc). Indeed, while Solanas and Getino suggest that films were “destined to satisfy only the ideological and economic interests of the owners of the film industry,” they also believe them to be “the most valuable tool of communication of our times” (Solanas 33). Thus, Third Cinema was born to take advantage of exactly that and to push the film beyond a consumerist model.
Hour of the Furnaces is radical in both form and content. Solanas and Getino subverted the consumerist film industry by way of Third Cinema, and risked danger in the production and distribution of the documentary. Shot clandestinely under the Ongania regime, the documentary became an artistic weapon of the revolution that radically opposed colonial institutions (Bladerston et al. 739). As for its radical form, the documentary utilized avant-garde techniques to re-image and re-invigorate the Argentinean masses. As Colin Beckett notes, “formally radical films are the only ones that can be politically useful...only by transforming an audience’s sense of what is possible on the screen can a filmmaker transform their sense of what is possible in the world.” Newsreels, clandestinely shot guerilla footage, photographs, and eyewitness accounts are woven into the film, while sound is layered over the visual mosaic, disrupting and distorting the visual experience. Through these radical techniques the documentary becomes capable of serving as a highly political, independent avant-garde production.

Experimental and avant-garde techniques juxtapose strong aural and visual content, causing viewers to question and perhaps distrust the meaning of images on the screen. As Stam writes, “The film strives to enable the spectator to penetrate the veil of appearances, to dispel the mist of ideology through the act of revolutionary decoding” (276). Take, for example, the slaughterhouse scene, a striking critique of European consumerism and exploitation in Argentinean society. In a five-minute sequence, footage of cattle being hit on the head is intercut with European advertisements, exemplifying the deadening, deafening blow that advertising has on society. Lighthearted music scores the imagery, distorting and diluting the gruesome animal slaughter and thus portraying the escapist reality within which consumerism operates. The slow, melodic, non-diegetic music layers a hollow dreamscape aural experience over the grim visual experience. In this way, the slaughterhouse is no longer merely a slaughterhouse, but an
illumination of the striking parallels between European consumerism and the farming of cattle. This connection is made clear when considering the industrialization of farming, specifically of cattle ranching in Argentina, as reflective of a broader shift towards mass production and, by extension, mass consumption as the result of European capitalist influence.

Likewise, the use of non-diegetic sound also works to dispel the mist of ideology (Stam 276) in the “Monstrosity Disguised As Beauty” segment of the documentary. This segment features footage of young, Argentinian hippies enjoying the privileged “perks” of European consumerism. In one particular scene, the song “I Don’t Need No Doctor” by Ray Charles plays over footage of a packed music venue, while non-diegetic screams play to the tempo of the song. The viewer can hear the indistinguishable screams, while the Argentinean hippies remain passively unaware. The choice of music can be read as a stand in for the hippies’ passivity, as if they themselves are asserting that the country “don’t need no doctor,” because there is no problem to be fixed. Additionally, the scene is intercut with footage of European advertisements, outbursts of violence, the revolution, government newsreels, and victims of the oppressive Argentinean system. The editing illuminates the stark juxtaposition of passive consumerism and colonial governmental practices, two realities that do not exist independently. Jarring montages and visual parallels theatrically illustrate the themes presented to the audience in an earlier intertitle: “violence, crime, destruction become peace, order, and normality.” Thus, these montages intrinsically link consumerism and exploitation, forcing the audience to recognize themselves as subjects and address their passive role within Argentinean society.

Blatant criticism of colonialism is further illustrated through rapid-fire visual montages of neo-colonial violence in Argentina and around the world. Drawing on newsreels and underground footage, Solanas and Getino illuminate similar fights for decolonization in Africa,
Vietnam, and the United States. The images are met with a woman’s non-diegetic laughter, creating an uncomfortable viewer experience. Once again the spectator must actively address the obvious juxtapositions and avant-garde montages and must wrestle with the contradiction between what they see and hear, which challenges their default understandings and ideological norms. This forced disassociation between image and sound thus triggers the need for the audience to critically read both the documentary and Argentinian society as they know it. The audience is indeed called to move beyond spectatorship to actively engage in the documentary and their political environment.

Notably, *Hour of the Furnaces* was shown at the Viña del Mar Festival in Chile in 1969, where above the screen hung a banner quoting Franz Fanon: “all spectators are cowards or traitors” (Bladerston et al. 739). This quote, also cited predominantly in Part One of the documentary, frames the expectation of spectatorship. By calling out the audience to actively watch the documentary, Solanas and Getino attempt to abolish passive spectatorship before the documentary has even begun. Fanon’s words echo the sentiments of Third Cinema, illustrating that, because of the nature of revolutionary documentary, anyone who attempts to watch passively and avoid personal interaction with the film is either a coward or a traitor. Anyone not a coward or traitor would be moved by the documentary and thrust into engagement.

The final part of the four-hour revolutionary film ends with the following words, “Now it is up to you to draw conclusions to continue the film. You have the floor” (Stam 74). Solanas and Getino do not enforce a conclusion, subverting the way ideological control is maintained by oppressive colonial powers. Rather, in the final moments of the film, the audience is provoked to piece together all of the evidence presented through visual and sound montage, and ultimately reach their own conclusions. As Stam eloquently notes, “Rather than being a hermetically sealed
off form of life, the text is permeable to history and praxis, calling for accomplices rather than consumers” (274).

This active spectatorship is ultimately realized, as there exist historical accounts of viewers interrupting the projection to allow for discussion, stopping to take the content of the film outside of its documentary frame and into their own lives (Stam 273). It is through this individual interpolation within a collective viewing experience that the documentary opens itself up to debate, stretching the possibilities of a two-dimensional screen experience and bringing it into the “three-dimensional space of theatre and politics” (Stam 274). Distributed clandestinely though Peronist trade unions, community centres, and union halls, Hour of the Furnaces instigated a wave of political activism where open discussion could take place, despite the threat of violence looming outside the makeshift cinema walls (Bladerston 739).

Works Cited


