


November 2016

# “The Hour of the Furnaces: Collaborative Cinema’s Fragmentary Form”

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## Recommended Citation

Choi, Eunha (2016) “The Hour of the Furnaces: Collaborative Cinema’s Fragmentary Form,” *Dissidences*: Vol. 7: Iss. 12, Article 2.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/dissidences/vol7/iss12/2>

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## “The Hour of the Furnaces: Collaborative Cinema’s Fragmentary Form”

### **Abstract / Resumen**

Cinematic structure remains constitutively collaborative. While critics like André Bazin have described cinema as mixed or impure, this article advances the concept of cinema as collaborative aesthetics. The conventional understanding of collaboration is that it represents aggregation, namely the gradual growth toward a total and completed whole. After all, collaborative practice generally works toward identifiable goals. Conversely, I argue here that *The Hour of the Furnaces* shows us how cinematic collaboration also operates by subtractions, unresolved dissonances, unfinished instances, and contradictions rather than syntheses or cohesive totality. Despite the filmmakers’ express intentions, I contend that their political documentary film lacks a monolithic structure at the service of a single narrative. Thus my interpretation of films as collaborative art form goes even against Solanas and Getino’s understanding of Third Cinema’s collaborative nature, at least as presented in their manifesto or suggested in the documentary. While advancing an alternate model for reading the three-part film, this article highlights the fragment as the cinematic unit by which a conception of reality can be not so much reproduced or represented, as transformed.

### **Keywords / Palabras clave**

Film theory, cinema studies, Collaborative, fragmentary, The Hour of the Furnaces

## “*The Hour of the Furnaces*: Collaborative Cinema’s Fragmentary Form”

### Abstract

Cinematic structure remains constitutively collaborative. While critics like André Bazin have described cinema as mixed or impure, this article advances the concept of cinema as collaborative aesthetics. The conventional understanding of collaboration is that it represents aggregation, namely the gradual growth toward a total and completed whole. After all, collaborative practice generally works toward identifiable goals. Conversely, I argue here that *The Hour of the Furnaces* shows us how cinematic collaboration also operates by subtractions, unresolved dissonances, unfinished instances, and contradictions rather than syntheses or cohesive totality. Despite the filmmakers’ express intentions, I contend that their political documentary film lacks a monolithic structure at the service of a single narrative. Thus my interpretation of films as collaborative art form goes even against Solanas and Getino’s understanding of Third Cinema’s collaborative nature, at least as presented in their manifesto or suggested in the documentary. While advancing an alternate model for reading the three-part film, this article highlights the fragment as the cinematic unit by which a conception of reality can be not so much reproduced or represented, as transformed.

Few artistic endeavors can be considered to be as collaborative as it is cinema. Even films commonly described as auteur films necessarily result from a collectivity of skills, technologies and even artistic visions.<sup>1</sup> According to Jacques Rancière (2006), a hybrid form of art, cinema intersects the various regimes of art.<sup>2</sup> For Robert Sinnerbrink, “... film is inherently plural, hybrid, with myriad, sometimes conflicting, aesthetic possibilities” (2011: 44). In *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1979), Stanley Cavell remarks on cinema’s aesthetic pluralism to present film as an art form potentially more democratic than

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Sinnerbrink helps us to understand the concept of auteur “... if not as a particular individual, then as a postulated construct unifying the cinematic text” (2011: 54). He adds that, even though structuralist and critical theories of film “challenged the individualist assumptions that underpinned auteur theory,” it would be an exaggerated fallacy to presume the death of the cinematic author” (54).

<sup>2</sup> Rancière qualifies cinema as an aesthetic regime of art, which “... comes afterwards and undoes the links of representative art, either by thwarting the logic of arranged incidents through the becoming-passive of writing, or by refiguring old poems and paintings. This work presupposes all past art to be available and open to being reread, reviewed, repainted or rewritten at will. [The art of the aesthetic age] presupposes also that anything and everything in the world is available. [...] The properties of this regime of art—identity of active and passive, elevation of everything to the dignity of art, work of de-figuration that extracts the tragedy in suspense from the dramatic action—are the properties Jean Epstein attributes to cinema” (*Film Fables* 9).

any other. Perched on these statements, I propose to understand collaboration as the non-definable or non-specific negation of one. By non-definable or non-specific, I refer to the accidental or contingent, namely happenings that arise outside of intention, premeditation or planning. Even though it may be impossible to arrive at a permanent understanding of what collaboration is (in the arts, the political, the social and the cultural), my point of departure is that collaboration becomes activated insofar as the presence or idea of one relinquishes sovereignty, when the plural replaces the singular. Reading closely Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *The Hour of the Furnaces* [*La hora de los hornos*] (1968), I argue that cinematic form is structurally collaborative, for both the production and consumption of films hinge on the sustainable collaboration, first, of the senses: the moment when the visual invites the audible, and together they intimate the tactile.<sup>3</sup> Several examples of this will be gleaned from Solanas and Getino's celebrated collaboration.<sup>4</sup> Meaning proliferates in *The Hour of the Furnaces*, which consists of scenes and sequences that are not so much parts of a coherent whole as autonomous parts and wholes at the same time. The three parts of the film, for instance, operate at once interdependently and autonomously from each other. The second reason is that the cinematic image remains collaborative because it is never only visual: it is haunted by language and language's interaction with image in films. Film theorists regard cinema as one of the most impure, contaminated forms of art (Oubiña 2014). Thus, cinema remains collaborative not so much as an aim, goal or telos. Rather, I advance that

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<sup>3</sup> My choice of film may appear to some as odd, particularly considering that the dogmatic militancy of *The Hour of the Furnaces* can readily serve as evidence for quite the opposite of a collaborative project. Robert Stam notes that current students of cinema "no longer looked kindly on the militant cinema of the past," such as the film in question, but instead they express increasing interest in recent video productions by indigenous filmmakers who promote different types of aesthetic and political projects (Paul Julian Smith 2009: 64-65).

<sup>4</sup> The cinema of Argentinean filmmakers Lucrecia Martel and Lisandro Alonso and the Mexican Carlos Reygadas is generally viewed as aesthetically experimental and as such fits the category of authorial cinema. When it comes to the structure of their filmmaking, it seems to me that my reflections about *The Hour of the Furnaces* can be broadly attributed to their films as well.

collaboration, rarely final and decidedly aleatory at its core, proves cinema's necessary condition of being.

Tamara Falicov (2007) briefly discusses the *The Hour of the Furnaces* within the context of national cinema and culture. She notes Solanas and Getino's desire to "propose the creation of a politicized national culture that is imitative of neither Hollywood nor European auterurism" (4). Hence, Falicov concludes that, "Argentine cinema might be described as dancing a complicated tango, with the Hollywood film industry on one arm and European cinema on the other" (5). Moreover, in their book *Cine, cultura y decolonización* (1973), Solanas and Getino themselves argue that both industry films and the experimental works of the French New Wave succumb, albeit from arguably opposite angles, to the cultural codes of a market economy that serves the interest of imperialist ideology. In *The New Latin American Cinema: A Continental Project*, Zuzana Pick (1996) argues that since the 1950s Latin American cinema can be spoken as a continental project with common aesthetic and ideological aims. Notwithstanding these crucial categorizations, my analysis of the film takes it outside the frames of national discourse, cinema or cultures. I situate my analysis within a critical frame other than the national, inter-national or intra-continental to focus, instead, on a discussion that shows how the dance Falicov alludes, reflects less a contextual problem of filmic traditions than a structural one in cinema. Solanas and Getino's Third Cinema does not represent a dialectic dynamic or synthesis between what they label first and second cinemas, but rather the attempt to negate them from every aspect concerning the art of mechanical reproduction: the production, montage, distribution and viewing of it.

## **1. Decentralizing film theory**

In an essay discussing primarily Godard's films, the Argentinean critic Eduardo Gruner says the following regarding cinema in general: "El cine es, por lo tanto, el lenguaje más impuro, contaminado, dialógico y 'sucio' de todos los sistemas estéticos, el que menos permite, precisamente, hablar de 'especificidad' como si supiéramos de qué estamos hablando" (105). Thus Gruner concludes that an invariable condition of impure mixture remains the single specificity attributable to cinema since its emergence as a quintessentially modern art form. That cinema can be read and studied from such varying angles (content, form, reception, technology, and production, just to name the most salient perspectives of critique) attests to the plurality that Gruner maintains is specific to film's structure. Gruner makes the case that Godard's films exemplify the fact that non-specificity in cinema expresses itself in the kind of plurality that in turn Gruner describes as impure.

I allude to Godard's cinema for two reasons: First, Solanas, more so than Getino, on several occasions distinguishes their political cinema from the auteur-centric films of the French New Wave. On interviews for publications such as *Cahier du Cinéma*, Solanas stresses that despite the modernist similarities between their films, *The Hour of the Furnaces* results from a vigorously collaborative effort<sup>5</sup>, as is indicated at the beginning of the film when the contribution of numerous parties is acknowledged. In contradistinction, Solanas regards the cinema of the New Wave filmmakers like Truffaut, Chabrol, Varda, Demy, and Godard himself, to name some of the movement's main figures, as that of the characteristically modern artists who see their work as the solitary endeavor that substantiates their bourgeois self-identity. This is not to suggest that Godard's films are less collaborative than *The Hour of the Furnaces*. After all, I am arguing that collaborativeness characterizes cinema's structure

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<sup>5</sup> Solanas and Getino declare that their cinema is the kind that should be able to continue and be finished even if they were to be forced out of the project. Far from being the result of a single person's idea and will, the film is promoted as the necessary work of many.

rather than refer to conditions of production external to the film. It must also be noted that, despite Solanas's self-alleged distance from the experimental Second Cinema of the European avant-garde, the aesthetic composition of his and Getino's film exhibits plentiful influences from the Italian Neo-realism and the French New Wave, especially Godard's cinema (Falicov 37). Emilio Bernini underscores *The Hour of the Furnaces's* divergence from the classical social documentary based on the former's modernist aesthetic, which conceptualizes the documentary's form in its materiality (2004: 162).

The second reason is that Godard's cinema frames several of the critical references to follow below. According to Daniel Morgan, "One of the exciting features of Jean-Luc Godard's work is that everything he touches invariably seems to lead to a disquisition on the nature and possibilities of cinema" (Page 1).<sup>6</sup> Because this article argues that collaborativeness characterizes a crucial aspect of cinema's nature, it seems helpful to include some relevant critical references to a filmmaker whose films always deal in one way or another with the inner structure of cinema. Moreover, the French New Wave and the Italian Neo-realism have become ubiquitous references when discussing counter-cinema, the kind that offers a critical and conceptual alternative to Hollywood or Industry movies. Not only did the advocates of Third Cinema scorned mainstream films driven by illusory narratives, but they also rejected the commensurate Capitalist system of film production, distribution and fetishizing consumption. Solanas and Getino's conception of cinema opposes those of the experimental New Wave and Neo-realism as well as the narrative-driven movies of Hollywood. Solanas seems to oppose the kind of artistic enterprise that pits actions against reflection in favor of the latter. Remember that Godard's *The Little Soldier* (1963) includes the following quotation: "The time for action is over; a time of reflection is beginning" and "the

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Morgan's *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema* (2013) is to my knowledge one of the latest, most comprehensive studies of the New Wave filmmaker.

era of naïve filmmakers is over.”<sup>7</sup> For Solanas, reflection that does not translate directly into consequential action proves not only futile but also corollary of bourgeois culture. For the theorists of Third Cinema, the film becomes the occasion for debate that ineluctably inspires transformational action. Third cinema’s dogma went beyond political messaging or the unshackling the passive spectator’s dependence on narrative-based cinema to appreciate conceptual reflection. As Bernini notes, their films sought “the conquest of a new political ‘public’ and space” (1004: 161-2).

If Solanas and Getino situated their documentary film in opposition to mainstream Hollywood and experimental Europe, here I propose to discuss *The Hour of the Furnaces* outside such an oppositional binary. In *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (2011), Lúcia Nagib proposes a critical frame that breaks away from the Hollywood-versus-formalist-cinema dichotomy to read world cinema as plural yet interconnected phenomena. She instead privileges a method that is “positive, democratic and inclusive” (1). In short, she advances an approach to film studies that regards world cinema “as a polycentric phenomenon which speaks of creation in different places and periods” (1).<sup>8</sup> The points of intersection between Nagib’s concept of polycentrism and my argument of cinema as structurally collaborative become readily evident based on the terms’ basic allusions to plurality or exceeding one. One of the central differences, however, will stem from how we propose to understand these seemingly interconnected concepts.

Nagib proposes that understanding cinema as a polycentric phenomenon saves us from proliferating exclusionary criticism that zeros in on differences that reinforce

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Mattias Frey’s “Filmkritik, with and without Italics: Kracauerism and Its Limits in Postwar German Film Criticism” (98).

<sup>8</sup> Nagib effectively lays out the traditions of film studies from which she gleans her concept of polycentrism, citing the works of Stam and Shohat, Franco Moretti, and Dudley Moore among a few others.



hierarchies among films and cinematic traditions. Attempting to de-systemized film studies,<sup>9</sup> she concludes that, “More interesting than their [films’] difference is, in most cases, their connectedness” (1). Plurality proves the method to focus on interconnectedness. Conversely, my analysis of *The Hour of the Furnaces* concerning the concept of cinema’s collaborative structure focuses less on illuminating interconnectedness within the film or with other films. Rather, while drawing attention to the collaborative structure of the film, I demonstrate that the collaborative structure manifests most eloquently in fragmentedness, disintegration as well as the loss of formal and even thematic connectedness.

## 2. The disunity of the documentary form

A documentary-film, *The Hour of the Furnaces* held from its inception a burden other than to entertain for the financial profit of a production company. Rather, its burden was to inspire the spectator to a specific political response. Note that the post-1968 body of film theories promotes what came to be regarded as counter-cinema, one that opposes and criticizes the mainstream realist cinema and its tendentiously passive spectator (Peter Wollen 1972).<sup>10</sup> Not only does Solanas and Getino’s film exemplify counter-cinema in crucial ways, but also distances itself from other counter-cinematic incarnations such as the French New Wave, embodied chiefly by Godard. Lúcia Nagib reminds us that Godard’s counter-cinematic and anti-realist productions became the “non-narrative paradigm against which all other films were measured” (2012: 162). *The Hour of the Furnaces* was no exception. With this

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<sup>9</sup> “At the core of this proposal is the belief that different cinemas of the world can generate their own, original theories. They do not depend on paradigms set by the so-called Hollywood classical narrative style and in most cases are misunderstood if seen in this light” (1). On the other hand, my attempt to interrogate the collaborative structure of cinema, I am proposing a more systemic frame to understand film than Nagib.

<sup>10</sup> In his seminal essay on Godard’s cinema, Peter Wollen coins the term counter-cinema to describe the emerging tradition of films that oppose, both in content and form, narrative-driven industry films.

four-hour-and-twenty-minute collaborative effort, which surpasses the obvious involvement of the two filmmakers, Solanas (producer and director) and Getino (co-writer) aimed to lay the conceptual ground for Third Cinema<sup>11</sup> (Falicov 2007; Stites Mor 2012). Choosing the genre of the documentary may seem self-evident given the film's explicitly didactic purpose, in addition to its privileged register of archival and discursive realism. The classic compositional form of the documentary was of completion and finitude, documentary properties that, according to Bernini, have been "continually challenged and reassessed," nonetheless (2004: 44). According to Michael Chanan (2010), the quandary of how the documentary genre can and should represent its content finds resolution only "in the fact that documentary is continually reinventing itself" (152). Solanas and Getino do not write, direct and produce the documentary to represent artistically or present realistically struggle and resistance. Instead, they gather images that engage the spectator both ideologically and politically to transform subsequently the reality of the images.<sup>12</sup> Speaking of Solanas and Getino's production company, Bernini notes that Cine Liberación group "dismissed the notion of an image of reality, since reality for them was not material to be registered and recorded but to be transformed by means of cinema" (2004: 160). Part of understanding cinema as collaborative, I wager, serves as a way to grapple with such an intricate statement: a reality that ought to be transformed by means of cinema.

Considering the clandestine conditions in which much of the original footage was filmed, the realist impression of *The Hour of the Furnaces* resides less in the recorded images

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<sup>11</sup> In their manifesto titled "Toward a Third Cinema," Getino and Solanas declare that their documentary cinema is produced to address and even attempt to redress the social and political perils that the popular or working classes in the so-called third world endure within a capitalist system, in which, as they argue in the manifesto, great parts of the population remain alienated.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the theoretical distinction between representation and presentation, see Nagib (2011). Nagib's argument particularly addresses the specific ethics that can be associated with either form of articulation: "More recently, presentational modes of address have been connected to the historical contingent, as in Willemen's approach, which formulates the issue in terms of 'representation (one thing standing for another) versus presentation (something manifesting itself even if only in a disguised distorted or translated manner)'..." (6).

but in how they were recorded. This is evident particularly in the third part of the film, in which an evidently hidden, shaky camera captures images of the opposition. The stylistic register of the documentary also subscribes to a particular understanding of the cinematic medium, including the mechanical and philosophical functions of the camera, as well as visual and audio montage. For Rancière, the documentary film manifests a specific incarnation of the “Romantic poetic of double significance.”<sup>13</sup> He adds that the documentary’s “...very vocation as the revealing (*monstration*) of the ‘real’ in its autonomous significance gives it, even more than fiction film the possibility of playing with all combinations of the intentional and the unintentional, all transformations of documents into monuments and monuments into documents” (2012: 24). While not exactly aligning with Rancière’s characterization of the documentary, *The Hour of the Furnaces* comes to embody the combinatory forces of planned and unplanned filmic possibilities particularly given the repressive conditions of the production. The film’s material and aesthetic structure came to perform the sheer contingency that, after Onganía’s 1966 military coup, governed the productions of the Third Cinema. For Solanas and Getino, the desired transformation was less from ossified monuments to political documents, from tacit fallacies to shattering revelations, than directly to militant action. With mounting insistence, the film advocates that political and social transformation can come about violently. In the case of cinema, such a transformation owed less to the filmmakers than to the actual material conditions of filmmaking.

Solanas and Getino sought out to produce a film that subverted the dynamic of film as cultural commodity, one that was tied to capitalist market economy. For that reason, the documentary proved to be the aesthetic system that more than any other cinematic genre

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<sup>13</sup> For more on what Rancière means by categorizing cinema in general as “Romantic poetics of double signification,” see chapter 2 of *Figures of History*.

preserved the material reality of the filmic object as intact as possible. Another crucial reason lies in the collaborative condition of the documentary, as it is commonly believed, albeit erroneously, that the authorial presence of the director is eclipsed by the very topic of the documentary, which is promoted as truth rather than as an individual's particular incarnation of the truth. Paradoxically, Third Cinema advances the documentary genre as the material embodiment of a historical account, fixed in concrete temporal and spatial coordinates, which express in turn a universal and trans-loci truth. This, of course, remains a facile binary to understand the documentary, as Solanas's oeuvre itself shows how the documentary genre seldom produces a single type of film. Jens Andermann's astute comparison of *The Hour of the Furnaces* and *Social Genocide (Memoria del saqueo, 2004)* demonstrates that Solanas's documentaries themselves do not render equal form, let alone cinematic results: "But thus, the short, slogan-lie images of social misery and oppression, which in *La hora* had been part of an attempt to change the documentary itself from an instrument of representation into one of transformation of society, in *Memoria del saqueo* threaten to relapse into well-meaning clichés. Reducing the worlds of misery and opulence he shoots to mere evidence of the truth-claims asserted in the voiceover, without exploring them in their singularity or even so much as naming his interlocutors, Solanas' film ends up becoming the very mirror-image of the shallow and superficial news coverage he claims to be denouncing" (2012: 100). For Andermann, Solanas's more recent documentaries adopt a cinematic language that emulates rather than cut through the realities it condemns.

Tamara Falicov (2007), on the other hand, offers a diverging critical interpretation of the aesthetic and technical changes between the two documentaries. She notes that Solanas, rather than naively mimicking the visual media simplistic tendencies to which the documentary objects, has "adopted digital video technology to return to a style of

filmmaking which is more televisual direct and immediate in feel” (146). In *Social Genocide*, Solanas privileges a realist aesthetic that in its visibly low or elemental quality reflects materially the documentary’s subject matter of socio-political breakdown. The distinction that is crucial to notice is that *The Hour of the Furnaces* privileges an aesthetic composition that opposes the audiovisual effects of domestic familiarity and immediacy, even when some of the original footage bears crude form. As I am seeking to show, the 1968 film mobilizes distance and estrangement rather than familial intimacy based on content-form immediacy. What remains unchanged, however, is the quality of raw imagery that constitutes the visual composition of both documentaries. The raw imagery consists of primarily documentary footage sequenced with black screen graphic slogans in white letters that simulate the aesthetics of advertising pamphlets.

They envisioned an explicitly political cinema that not only intellectually inspires or awakens spectators but also activates their ideological determination for concrete political activism. Some critics have seen in *The Hour of the Furnaces* an example of how political filmmakers constructed “a postmodern historical engagement” with Argentina’s mid-twentieth century context of post-Cold War intellectual left politics (Stites Mor 4). *The Hour of the Furnaces* both exemplified and conceptualized what was promoted as revolutionary (or liberation) cinema by the filmmakers. In a review published only two years after the film began to circulate, James Roy MacBean draws attention to the fragmentary quality of *The Hour’s* film-mosaic structure, in which each individual piece acts on its own as well as in relation to the emerging whole (1970: 31). In an interview for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Solanas notes that for every aspect of the film, from the camerawork to sound and to the montage, it was imperative to find the form that presented well the story told or the point being expounded (March 1969: 64). Thus, gearing the spectator to assume a particular form of

consciousness is far from being the film's only condition for being. It remained crucial that discrete form was to engage dialectically with specific content throughout the three parts of the documentary film. Solanas seems to suggest that form and content in his film become wedded for reasons that are mutually affirming.

The *Hour of the Furnaces* was neither strictly representational nor presentational, in the way Nagib mobilizes the dichotomy. Rather, as Andermann and Bernini note, it attempted to be transformational, not only in terms of how spectators were to respond once they finished viewing the film but also concerning what it meant to partake of the film's cinematic experience.<sup>14</sup> The metamorphosis, I argue, was to result from a collaborative endeavor at whose core lies the deconstruction of the self-identity of the bourgeois individual. In the film, such deconstruction unfolds primarily at the level of the visual and sound images.

### **3. Collaborative structure's photographic approach**

Classically, as was the case for Solanas and Getino in making *The Hour of the Furnaces*, the idea and practice of collaboration points to the inevitable outcome of aggregation gradually building toward the totality of completion, be it political or aesthetic. In fact, for the filmmakers collaboration represents not only a cinematic or artistic methodology, but also and perhaps more critically the political ideology of solidarity for which every part necessarily rallies after what has been identified as the greater and common good. Thus the way the various contestatory, revolutionary, popular and subversive movements have

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that the altered focus the Solanas and Getino attribute to the documentary genre stems less from an avant-garde will for political and aesthetic renovation. Instead, as Bernini notes, "The passage from a sense of documentary as registration of reality to one of the production of meaning in relation to it, was in part a consequence of the historical changes that brought politics into the cultural sphere, although the cultural sphere in Argentina has always been relatively imbricated with political practice, and particularly so since the sixties" (2004: 160).

understood collaboration negates the bourgeois, individual-centric culture that buttresses the liberal philosophy of the capitalist market system. Solanas and Getino's film does not only attempt to restore a sense of historical perspective within an emerging social and political struggle that, according to it, must involve an entire continent as well as other continents (Asia and Africa), but it also tries to situate the film within a broad narrative of cinematic history in which aesthetics and politics remain dialectical toward the goal of a particular political consciousness. Every scene in the film, particularly the static photographic images interlaced in between a black screen, or later when various photographed images are sequenced consecutively.

According to Rancière, "At the origin of the cinema, there is a 'scrupulously honest' artist that does not cheat, that cannot cheat, because all it does is record...Cinematographic automatism settles the quarrel between art and technique by changing the very status of the 'real.' It does not reproduce things as they offer themselves to the gaze. It records them as the human eye cannot see them, as they come into being, in a state of waves and vibrations, before they can be qualified as intelligible objects, people, or events due to their descriptive and narrative properties" (2006: 2). Rancière's thoughts on cinema echo earlier film theorists like Bazin and Kracauer, who, with ontological and phenomenological emphasis respectively, saw cinema as a realist medium. Bazin describes the mechanical reproduction of photography as one in which human intervention is not needed: "Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction. [...] The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it" (Bazin, 1967: 14). For Kracauer, "Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality" (1968, ix). In fact, films' relation to physical reality did not stop at recording and revealing it: "...films are true to the medium to the extent that

they penetrate the world before our eyes” (ix). What Kracauer means by penetrating the world could be gleaned from the subtitle that accompanies *Theory of Film*: “The Redemption of Physical Reality.” What Kracauer understands as cinema’s ability to penetrate or redeem physical reality, the filmmakers of *The Hour of the Furnaces* saw in cinema the potential capacity to transform such reality.

For the filmmakers of Third Cinema, it is precisely the material dimension of the film that engages the material conditions or socio-economic realities of the world. In their co-authored manifesto “Toward a Third Cinema,” Getino and Solanas note that, “Culture, art science, and cinema always respond to conflicting class interests. In the neocolonial situation two concepts of culture, art, science and cinema compete: that of the rulers and that of the nation.”<sup>15</sup> Through a historical materialist angle, the filmmakers theorize that cinema, like any other artistic expression, reflects materially (or sensorially, rather than just thematically) how the film is produced, financed, circulated and even viewed. It is not just the content or narrative that expresses the film’s position in the binary. The technological, formal and production components reflect the film’s existing physical reality at the time of both filming and viewing.

In *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960), Kracauer theorizes cinema by establishing an intrinsic relation between films and what he names the existing physical reality. Kracauer’s definition of the latter may strike us as invariably confusing: “Physical reality will also be called ‘material reality,’ or ‘physical existence,’ or ‘actuality,’ or loosely just ‘nature’” (28). Later in the book, he also refers to it as “camera-reality.” Pointing to the collaborative quality of film, Kracauer states that, “photographic film developed from distinctly separate components” (27). This is what has become known as Kracauer’s

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<sup>15</sup> “Toward a Third Cinema.” <http://documentaryisneverneutral.com/words/camagun.html>.



photographic approach, which has garnered a fair amount of incorrect, facile interpretations of the concept in particular and of Kracauer's theory of film in general. It seems rather helpful to bring in Kracauer's theory of film into the discussion of *The Hour of the Furnaces* because of the principal role photography plays in both. For Kracauer, cinema can hardly be understood if one fails to grapple with its photographic beginnings and structure. For Solanas and Getino's film, photographs remain formally and thematically crucial building blocks of the larger edifice that is the film. That some photographs come from archival sources, while others generated anew for the purposes of the film, furnish a layered density to the aesthetic materiality of the documentary that proves collaborative just as structurally inevitable. For the filmmakers of Third Cinema, the varying provenances of the photographic materials embody the film's conditions of material realities. Yet there is another aspect that remains unsaid in the discursive manifestos and yet evinced by the film. The diverse photographic productions, it seems to me, preserve the film's unstitched and unstitchable quality. *The Hour of the Furnaces* exposes suture's ineluctable structural precarity.

By the photographic approach, Kracauer refers to a process of demythologizing the image's content as well as the technological operation by which the content becomes an image. In other words, he does not suggest that the photographic approach assumes a transparent, unmediated process of representation. For him, it is not so much about purporting to show "the real event." One of Kracauer's most refined readers, Miriam Hansen reminds us that for Kracauer "the politicophilosophical significance of photography does not rest with the ability to reflect its object as real but rather with the ability to render [that object] strange" ("With Skin and Hair": Kracauer's Theory of Film, Marseille 1940" 453). If the notion of transparent representation serves to trigger the experience of either familiarity or identification in the spectator, Kracauer proposes that film's aesthetic and for

that matter political capacity lies rather in injecting strangeness or distance into the known or the familiar.

Kracauer theorizes film as a singularly apt form of discourse in a disintegrating, discontinuous and fragmented world, which is the post-WWII world that the time-image, according to Deleuze, comes to represent more aptly as opposed to the movement-image (1989: 1-24).<sup>16</sup> For Kracauer, cinema most ably corporealizes (in sonic and visual images) the physical conditions of the concurrent world. However, he does not suggest that the relation between the cinematic structure and the world outside of it is mimetic, namely that both parts mutually correspond. Rather, it contends that the fragmentariness of the film as artform is the world. The same can be seen in *The Hour of the Furnaces*, whose three parts contain still and moving images that render the world invariably strange rather than familiar.

From Kracauer's theorization of the photographic approach as a historico-philosophical concept, I tease out the notion of temporality and time as central in continuing to think further about the collaborative character or structural condition of cinema. Kracauer stresses the moment of the snapshot as the instantiation of the photographed object, the image to be, as both real and strange—or rather, real insofar as it is strange. How does strangeness or distance relate to a film that is populated by medium-shot bodies or close-ups of fundamentally expressive faces? The camera gaze in *The Hour of the Furnaces* interacts with the subjects it captures rather briefly emphasizing the moment of the snapshot or capture. The same happens with the countless archival images, especially in the second part when violent images of political protest around the world are collected in a haphazard way to imitate the chaos perhaps the chaos of the alluded situation. Another sequence of filmed

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<sup>16</sup> For Deleuze, the time-image is not so much an image lacking movement or action, as one that has been liberated: "The image had to free itself from sensory-motor link; it has to stop being action-image in order to become a pure optical, sound (and tactile) image" (1989: 23).

faces transpires in the second half of the first part, when the aged patriarch of a poor family on the outskirts of the city is interviewed. The moment materializes as the filmed individuals stare back with gazes that express distrust, curiosity and distance, facial expressions that visualize the instant moment of the cinematic capture.

*The Hour of the Furnaces*, I suggest, shows that it is not so much the photographic approach per se but rather the cinematic collaborative structure that allows for strangeness in the form of confusion, fragmentation, contradiction and incompleteness to materialize in film and the cinematic experience.<sup>17</sup> Without a doubt, Solanas and Getino's film is an intrinsically historical film. Its first part begins by denouncing the falsity of the history people have been told as a way to contextualize the historical corrective lessons to follow in the film. In the second part, the voiceover narrator suggests that part of assembling a national historical discourse requires entering the people's sub-conscious. Through its historical focus, *The Hour of the Furnaces* attempts to expose the self-alienation inscribed in the governing neocolonial system. By grappling with its late capitalist context as well as the global tradition of cinema,

#### **4. The fragmentariness of cinema's collaborative structure**

Earlier it was mentioned that Solanas and Getino's documentary upholds a realism that is less representational or presentational, than transformational. The concept of the film as transformational must be understood in at least two possible ways. The first is in relation

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<sup>17</sup> My approach to film studies and cinematic analysis finds great inspiration in the works of Miriam Hansen, especially in her understanding of a "genre of theory, or at least the kind of the pitches its hypotheses at a level presumably above historical variability" (1993: 443). The challenge here is to glean a theoretical interpretation that is not strictly or dogmatically beholden to historical variability from a film that remains consummately historical, namely meaningful insofar as its concrete historical engagement frames the viewing and reading of the film.

to the political militancy of which the film was advocate, witness and even contributor. The second interpretation concerns the film's aesthetic form as cinema and audiovisual art. To begin interrogating the concept of transformational cinema as mobilized by the Third Cinema filmmakers, I alluded to Kracauer's understanding of cinema as a form of artistic reproduction that penetrates or redeems physical reality. Simply put, what does it mean to redeem or penetrate or transform physical reality by means of cinema? The concept of penetrating physical reality grapples with the second definition above. That is, it points to the inner structure of cinema rather than the social consequences following the film or the filmmakers' express or implied intentions. It must be asked again, in what concrete ways does cinema as audiovisual medium transform the material reality that at the same time contains it? To continue explicating how *The Hour of the Furnaces* proposes to understand transformational cinema, I propose that we ought to grapple with how the fragment becomes a central visual and sonic unit of the documentary.

Fragmentation constitutes *The Hour of the Furnaces's* main thematic organization as well as aesthetic structure. Bernini notes that "the ceaseless fragmentation of the images" constitutes the film's "basic procedure," one that Solanas borrows from the language of publicity (2004: 161). Even though Bernini's analysis focuses on the film's first part, I propose that fragmentation structures the organization of all three parts of *The Hour of the Furnaces*. Consisting of parts, sections, sequences, scenes, shots and photographs, Solanas and Getino's film relies on the fragment as both the aesthetic and ideological method to undercut while deconstructing the monolithic discursive structure of bourgeois history, which operates within the horizon of totality, completion and self-identity in western capitalist society. Because of the film's style of visual and audio montage, the structure of the fragment, along with the different components that also prove rather fragmentary,

predominates in the three parts of the film. The famed introductory sequence consists of an increasingly louder drumbeat that accentuates the staccato-styled montage of moving or frozen shots, photographs, black screens with white letters that evoke the newsreel. Grounded in fractured times and spaces of production, the film's fragmentariness underscores the multiple-part collaborativeness that constitutes this film in particular and analogously cinema in general.

It is through the fragmentary structure that Solanas and Getino emphasize a particular relation between the physical and social reality and the film. The two relate to each other mimetically. When the filmmakers speak of transformational cinema, they do so to forge a filmic tradition that opposes the concept of cinema as a bourgeois tool of representation or reflection. Based on *The Hours of the Furnaces* itself, the concept of transformation (penetrating or redeeming), it seems to me, presupposes a mimetic relation between the art of mechanical reproduction and the portrayed world. However, what is it meant by mimetic relation here? I borrow here Theodor Adorno and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's understanding of mimesis.<sup>18</sup> Martin Jay explains that both Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe do not regard mimesis as imitation, copy or formal correspondence, but rather as a space of non-identity in which mimesis remains formless rooted in indecision and instability (1998: 120-37). Not a copy, cinema mimetically reproduces the non-identity of the portrayed world. That is, it shows that it hardly the same with itself. Adopting this particular iteration of mimesis, I read transformational to mean mimetic, for *The Hour of the Furnaces* makes evident the unstable and oscillating relationship that the cinematic medium maintains with

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the intersections between how Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe's works incorporate, interrogate and deploy the concept of mimesis, see Artemy Magun's "Negativity (Dis)embodied: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Theodor W. Adorno on Mimesis."

the portrayed physical world, as well as the instability and oscillation inscribed in the world itself.

Whether by visual or sound composition as well as the strident combination of the two, *The Hour of the Furnaces* both allegorizes (in the Benjaminian sense)<sup>19</sup> and materializes plurality. Toward the middle of the first part, for instance, in the fifth section titled “The System,” the camera captures medium shots of a man whose voice had preceded his visual appearance on the screen. The man tells about the marginalized condition of many more like him, of indigenous heritage, who have seldom mattered to society’s political and economic elites. Disenfranchised, the indigenous population, the man continues, has been left behind or on the margins not so much accidentally as necessarily. As the man’s narration continues, the volume of his voice diminishes for the voiceover narration to begin overlapping and soon takes over. The voiceover organizes the man’s diegetic narration as well as the multifarious images that accompany the diegetic account. Multiple layers of images and sounds configure this sequence in a slightly chaotic fashion. Not only does the extra-diegetic voiceover continue the man’s narrative, but it also subsumes it, thus unwittingly performing the instability of the man’s voice and narrative.

It would be inaccurate to emphasize the visual and sonic composition of the film at the expense of noting the central role that the sustained extra-diegetic rhetoric plays in all three parts of *The Hour of the Furnaces*. However, the voiceover narrative and the particularly choppy sequencing of images that are organized along broad themes, recreate an experience

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<sup>19</sup> Benjamin theorizes that allegory is constitutively fragmentary representation. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1998), he argues that allegory becomes the representational method by which things are turned into signs, and historical “progression” is assembled from “a series of moments” (165). In the final pages of the book, Benjamin concludes: “In the allegorical image of the world, therefore, the subjective perspective is entirely absorbed in the economy of the whole” (234). Because of this absorption, only traces or ruins of the “subjective perspective” can be found in the allegorical representation. Thus, the expression and experience of plurality emerges less in the totality of *The Hour of the Furnaces* than in traces, which in their fragmentary and scattered fashion make the whole.

of dissonance rather than the unified experience attempted by the voiceover narration. And yet, the experience of dissonance becomes only possible because of the material and sensorial continuity that the voiceover rhetoric, along with the ubiquitous intertitles, recreates between image and sound.<sup>20</sup> Bernini argues that despite the rich ways in which the documentary engages the visuality of the photographic and filmic image, the continuously superimposed and interspersed presence of oral and written text charges the image with falsity (2004: 163). Bernini's discussion does not lay out explicitly what type of falsity this is. Does he mean that the visual image is false intrinsically, namely structurally, or contextually, that is, susceptible to being deployed falsely? The film's fragmented structure demonstrates that it is the latter rather than the former, for notions of falsity and veracity are largely contextual in the film.

Let us turn to another sequence that happens toward the end of the second part. Consisting of haphazardly captured facial shots, the sequence employs a hand-held camera gliding through a series of disenfranchised, poor individuals. With few cuts, the scenes show the faces without captions explaining specifically who and where they are. Despite the proximity of the shots, the faces are shown without names or minimal context, as they all remain silent yet with their gaze fixed on the camera that gently moves from face to face as in an effort to coax a particular expression out of them. The extra-diegetic music accentuates the gradual, almost poetic movements of the camera, and soon it becomes clear that the sequence assumes a different register from previous sequences filled with close-ups of unidentified individuals. The register here is less documentary realism than symbolic. The gently moving camera seems to suggest a coaxing that captures the faces not only as examples of poverty and political disenfranchisement, but also in search of expressions that

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<sup>20</sup> For more on an illuminating analysis on the concept of sensorial continuum, see Craig Epplin (2014).

are ultimately difficult to codify. The way in which sound accompanies image in this sequence produces a layered edifice of signification in which the communication of facts (*i.e.*, these faces represent the large majority of the population that the neocolonial capitalist system marginalizes under economic and social oppression.) is hardly the only meaning conveyed. What happens besides the factual signification of the scenes remains not entirely intelligible. What adds the layer of unintelligible yet deeply emotive or affective meaning to the sequences results precisely from the way that the scenes are framed and later sequenced with other shots, in addition to how the extra-diegetic music glides remarking on the gentle movements of a camera that appears to be dialoguing with the filmed people. The absent extra-diegetic narration accentuates rather than obstruct the unintelligibility of the sequence. The sequence replete with unspeaking faces produces a striking contrast to the kind of unprecedented discussion *The Hour of the Furnaces* is determined to incite among the audience.

In *The Hour of the Furnaces*, just as much as the numerous facilities that populate the film, such as in the first and second parts when the camera gaze focuses on unidentified members of the poor working class, the voiceover rhetorical narration also points to cinema's corporeal constitution; the face or the voice emerges as synecdoche of the body that in cinema is hardly anything if not moving, displacing or (de)territorializing surface. The voiceover narration attempts to inscribe the camera's captures within a certain narrative. And yet, the nameless specificity of the images exceeds the content of the extra-diegetic voice. Who are these individuals, especially the ones captured in Tucumán in the second part of the film? In this part, jobless workers expressing what may be construed as exhaustion, agony or disgust, stare back at the slowly tracking camera. These relatively brief tracking is interspersed with other brief tracking of similar shots but of hungry and seemingly destitute children. They, too, stare back at a camera that not only records but also demands their silent



bodily presence. Sitting or standing in rows, the children wait to be served porridge from a large black steel pot. Have these men and children been reduced to represent only the economic and political destitution and thus disparity pervading Argentinean social history? How to interpret their fixed gaze, which speaks but in dramatically opaque ways? Rather than being interpellated by the camera, these anonymous faces that intently stare at it seem to be interpellating the recording machine in a way that remains unintelligible. From these unintelligible moments, these visual images, with the superimposing extra-diegetic narration, remain deafeningly elliptical. By failing to trace a continuity of signification between visual and sound images, and among images themselves, the voiceover narration does not supplement, let alone correct, the muteness embedded in the images, for the added discourse does not make them speak fully and clearly.

The sustained ellipsis of these visual and sound images manifests the collaborative structure of *The Hour of the Furnaces* in particular and cinema in general, as the necessary presence of more than one component is expressly shown. According to Deleuze, “the obliteration of a whole or of a totalization of images” is what characterizes the modern cinema of filmmakers like Godard (*The Time-Image* 187). Ceasing to be narrative, Godard’s cinema no longer holds the “collective or distributive unity through which the characters still spoke one and the same language” (187). If the traditional documentary organizes itself based on a unified narrative or discourse, *The Hour of the Furnaces* breaks the unified wholeness for the emergence of multiple faces and voices, such as the numerous testimonies that are collected in the second part. The significant middle body of the film’s second part consists of numerous brief accounts offered by different militant members of the industrial or rural working class and university student activists. Some of these segments are titled “El espontaneismo,” “La Resistencia,” and “La clandestinidad.” These terms name concepts that

became fundamental not only to the political movement of liberation itself, but also to this particular exemplification of Third Cinema, which coalesced sonic and visual images that not only summoned an alternate cinematic aesthetic but also resulted from untraditional production forces. The film was to embody, especially in the sonic constitution of the voiceover narration, the simultaneity, resistance and clandestinity that were also central coordinates of the political movement opposing Onganía's military government. This line of interpretation, contrary to my earlier point, has been the prevalent critical reading of Solana and Getino's documentary. For instance, Bernini opines: "The omnipresent voiceover of the elders' documentary cinema is transformed here into a multiplicity of internal voices, yet which nevertheless, thanks precisely to a remarkably precise editing work, converge in a single voice" (Andermann 111). In an interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Solanas addresses explicitly what he considers the film's principal aim: to articulate "the place of nationalism" in the struggle of individual and social liberation. He adds that in order for nationalism to be a central part of the liberation process, it had to cease to be bourgeois to undertake instead the call for a socialist revolution (Mestman 125). Stam (1990) has noted that *The Hour of the Furnaces* attempts to enable in the space of the film and occasion of its viewing the encounter of the political vanguard and the aesthetic avant-garde, which traditionally have been regarded as irreconcilable.

## **5. The temporality of collaborative cinema**

Even though Bernini's analysis acknowledges the multiplicity of voices, he argues that the film's tight editing manages to assemble the fragments into a unified discourse. Continuing his analysis of the film's unified discourse, Bernini notes how the film assembles

different testimonial statements in such a way that they “agree on one and the same version of the process [...], not because they use similar arguments nor necessarily because they share the same vision, but because their discourses are cut up and pieced back together in a way that makes each of them become part of the unified discourse constructed by the film” (2004: 31). By editing work Bernini seems to refer to both visual and sound editing. It may seem that the arguably imposing voiceover narration serves to make sense of the at-times discontinued images and other-times confusing sequencing or montage on the screen. I have sought to demonstrate that based on the fragmentary visual-sound relations that prevail in the documentary, the intended unified discourse does not quite materialize. The seemingly sovereign voiceover narration does not subsume the many and autonomous parts of the film’s sonic-visual composition; so the fragmented parts stand as both parts and wholes precisely because their place vis-à-vis the extra-diegetic sound and entirety of the film hardly becomes fully intelligible.

In *Figures of History* (2014), Rancière notes that Godard’s films are characterized by an excess of signs that circulate on the screen unexplained. Godard’s films, Rancière adds, embody an abandonment or suspension of explaining or explanation.<sup>21</sup> It could be said that *The Hour of the Furnaces*, on the other hand, is saturated by explanations of historical facts, social conditions, political interests, and economic inequalities. As noted earlier, the self-professed purpose of the documentary film is in part didactic, as it aims to establish why political and social liberation remains the only meaningful course of action for the sectors of society the film is also trying to mobilize. Not only is Solanas’s film filled with statistical data that substantiate the level of economic and social inequality that the film denounces, but it

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<sup>21</sup> To develop the significance of this curious statement, Rancière notes that the word explanation alludes to two definitions that may be considered contradictory: “It can mean providing the sense of a scene, the reason for an attitude or an expression. But, according to the etymology of the word, explaining can also mean letting the scene, or attitude or expression, unfold the fullness nestled in its simple presence” (18).

also promotes the case that no solution other than emancipation from the system can possibly alter the steady course of such numbers and the perilous conditions behind them. If Godard's cinema endeavors to obfuscate or erode the idea of reasons or causes for what transpires in the film, *The Hour of the Furnaces* assembles a monumental three part filmic edifice of reasons and causes for the type of individual and collective response that coalesce the film's telos. However, the contradiction between the dogmatic voiceover narration and the seemingly haphazard sequencing of images is hardly resolved despite the unequivocal declaration at the start of the first part: "Latino América es un continente en guerra." The contradiction between the extra-diegetic sound and the film's visual composition is sustained because the images and their sequencing are afforded a muteness that resists or spills over the instructive tenor of the voiceover. Then, how is muteness ascribed to these images?

The muteness (or what Deleuze also describes as unthinking faces or bodies) that governs the many images interlaced by the montage, opposes the hyperactive and ubiquitous voiceover that tries to tie all the visual parts toward some form of totality that is synthesized from the beginning of the film: present the country's history and social reality to contextualize and inspire political action toward the political and social liberation of the working class populace. The assemblage of extra-diegetic and diegetic sounds includes unspecific noises, human uttering or chanting, drumming beats, personal stories, and statistical data narrated by changing voiceovers. Deleuze eloquently theorizes this point: "The body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking. It is on the contrary that which it plunges into...in order to reach the unthought, that is life. [...] To think is to learn what a non-thinking body is capable of, its capacity, its postures" (*The Time-Image* 189). Sound images or the sonic component of the film enters the film in such a way that the extended montage technique is

shown as recreating disruption and fragmentariness rather than the illusion of sensorial continuum and Aristotelian narrative continuity.

Hence, disruption highlights the moving property of the filmic image rather than the stillness of the photograph, even when the film's sequence deploys the latter. As Laura Mulvey notes in *Death 24x a Second* (2006): "The still photograph represents an unattached instant, unequivocally grounded in its indexical relation to the moment of registration. The moving image, on the contrary, cannot escape from duration, or from beginnings and ends, or from the patterns that lie between them" (14-15). It is precisely through the form of the fragment that the film connects spatial progression or movement to temporal passing. Albeit in a disjointed fashion, the fragment instantiates the connection between the filmic object and the spectator's reception. As Deleuze insists: "Cinema not only puts movement in the image, it also put movement in the mind...One naturally goes from philosophy to cinema, but also from cinema to philosophy" ("The Brain Is the Screen: An Interview with Deleuze" 366). Deleuze suggests that in the collaborative structure of cinema the movement from the aesthetic to the political must necessarily grapple with the philosophical, a triadic relation that this discussion has been trying to perform and showcase. Implicitly emphasizing the collaborative structure of cinema, *The Hour of the Furnaces* privileges the formal composition rather than the strictly thematic organization of the filmic structure precisely to avoid becoming a commodity prone to fetishization by market forces.

The film's fragmentary audiovisual aesthetics suggests that the mechanically reproduced physical world is "...not that of an immutable organic nature but the historically formed, constantly changing nature of urban industrial capitalism, with its growing heap of

ever-new commodities, gadgets, masks, and images” (“Benjamin and Cinema” 330).<sup>22</sup> Thus Solanas and Getino’s film underscores time as the main structural property of cinema. Simultaneity and diachronicity replace chronology as the indisputable historical temporality.<sup>23</sup> Through the mimetic correspondence between visual and sound image and the physical reality that is to be transformed, *The Hour of the Furnaces* affords aesthetic figuration to fragmented socio-political realities in their oscillating and unstable state. Cinema remains collaborative insofar as collaborative form undoes or negates the singular, unified self-identity of the bourgeois individual and its market driven culture. Cinema’s collaborative inner and outer structure manifests itself, I have argued, in particular aesthetic compositions: fragmentation of sound and visual images, self-reflexive montage technique and dissonant juxtapositions. These in turn can thrust the viewer into pondering the form that the spatiotemporal transformation of any contingent present undertakes.

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<sup>22</sup> Hansen remains possibly the most authoritative reader of both Benjamin and Kracauer’s writing, especially films and the visual arts. Benjamin’s understanding between the cinematic medium and the physical world quoted above echoes in persuasive ways Bernini’s reading of *The Hour of the Furnaces* for which “there is no reality to register but only a call to a consciousness of it in order to transform it” (2004: 163).

<sup>23</sup> It must be noted that chronology should not be collapsed with consecutiveness, as the former responds to a specific discursive order whereas the later alludes to a technical ordering.

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