

“The Short Films of Raymundo Gleyzer”: Works by left-wing filmmaker murdered by Argentine military junta

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“The artist is an intellectual: a worker who must choose either to use his skill in service of the people, urging on their struggles and the development of a revolutionary process, or to openly side with the dominating classes, serving as a transmitter and reproducer of bourgeois ideology. As intellectuals, we must take the same risk as the working class in our daily lives.” —Raymundo Gleyzer

The March 1976 military coup in Argentina inaugurated what became known as the National Reorganization Process, or simply “El Proceso,” a campaign of fascistic repression that amounted to a political genocide, with some 30,000 workers, students, intellectuals and youth killed and many more imprisoned and tortured.

Similar regimes elsewhere in Latin America, including Chile, Uruguay and Brazil, killed tens of thousands more. The military dictatorships coordinated their efforts through Operation Condor, a transnational campaign of state terrorism initiated under the supervision of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) against the revolutionary movements of the working class. Under Operation Condor tens of thousands of students, workers, intellectuals and youth were also tortured and detained.

Raymundo Gleyzer, a filmmaker and socialist, was one of those “disappeared” under the Argentine junta. “The Short Films of Raymundo Gleyzer” was released on DVD last month by Facets Multi-Media.

Gleyzer, born to Jewish parents in Buenos Aires in 1941, came of age during a tumultuous time in Latin American history. The impact of the Cuban Revolution—and Guevarism—was felt far and wide among revolutionary-minded workers and intellectuals during this period. So-called “armed struggle” and guerrilla warfare were falsely promoted as synonymous with Marxism and socialist revolution—with disastrous results.

Tragically, such politics had nothing to do with socialism, and many militant youth and students were diverted from the struggle to build a revolutionary leadership in the working class and led into suicidal battles with the state that were then used as a justification for the establishment of right-wing dictatorships throughout the Americas. The legacy of the defeat of the revolutionary wave of working class struggles in the late 1960s and ‘70s is still felt today in Latin America, which is the most unequal region on the planet and has seen the rise of fascistic figures like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

Gleyzer, along with wife and fellow documentarian Juana Sapire, founded Cine de la Base, a filmmaking collective that went beyond the mainstream Argentine film industry to make movies about peasants in the fields and workers in the factories. The films were then taken on tour to be shown in poor neighborhoods, peasant communities and workers’ collectives.

In viewing “The Short Films of Raymundo Gleyzer” a few things can be said. One looks at these short documentaries with a mixture of historical

curiosity and also aesthetic admiration. Gleyzer’s sincerity and commitment to the working class cannot be questioned. However, his political outlook remained firmly within the orbit of the movements, including left Peronism, that were espousing the gospel of guerrillism, combined with various Popular Front-style formations, which were to lead to bitter defeats in Argentina and beyond.

Despite the bleak circumstances that his camera documents and his own eventual fate, Gleyzer evinced a hope and optimism in his films that to this day continues to inspire. Watching his “Short Films” is not unlike opening a time capsule and witnessing the immense possibilities and severe political limitations of the era.

The collection opens with video from a 1996 rally entitled, “Diego Gleyzer Introduces His Father’s Films,” featuring Raymundo Gleyzer’s son speaking at a rally with the mothers of those who were disappeared by the Argentine military junta. Hebe de Bonafini, President of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, also speaks. “When they made Gleyzer disappear, they thought they had killed him,” she says, “However, his films were saved by his friends, they recovered them in pieces, they stored them, then reconstructed them piece by piece. And so today we have the possibility, because the son brings the father, to life.”

She continues, “When one sees the labor that another does, their work... You realize why they took them and they took them, damn it, because they were doing ‘something’. And how lucky today, we are all doing ‘something.’” It is a memorable and moving scene.

The first of Gleyzer’s shorts is entitled, “Swift” (1971), described as “Comunicado 5 and 7” of the Revolutionary Army of the People (ERP) of Argentina. It details the kidnapping and ransom of a British diplomat, Stanley Silvester, who runs a meat-packing plant that brutally exploits its workers.

The film describes the links between the Swift cold storage plant and British imperialism and the “Yankee” monopoly Deltec. The local Argentine bourgeoisie, intimately tied to international capital, has turned meat products into a luxury item, while the average worker makes around 20,000 pesos a month. “Would Mr. Silvester and his family live in the Fisherton mansion with that salary?” Gleyzer asks.

The production quotas for the meatpacking workers are impossible and hand injuries are a daily occurrence. Sick workers are sent back to work under threat of termination. The unions collude with the bosses. The mere fact that all of this should still sound very familiar to a modern audience is to Gleyzer’s credit.

The ERP demands that in exchange for Mr. Silvester’s freedom all workers be compensated for lost wages, along with an end to police repression, the lowering of work quotas, reduction of cold temperatures inside the factory and the provision to the workers of food supplies worth 20 million pesos. The company complies, and thousands of workers and

their families show up to collect their food packages.

The narrator states, "Fellow co-workers, a revolutionary act of violence has been necessary to uncover the violence of the oppressors ... the everyday suffering. We know that with this we're not going to resolve the problems of the working class. We know that with the blankets, the food, and the school supplies we will not finish with the misery of the Argentinean workers. We know that very soon the Swift company will be the same exploitative company, but this action of popular justice has been useful to show that the victories for the people do not come through begging, they are taken by force. The military dictatorship is ineffective in repression in this invincible revolutionary war that has already begun."

The film ends with footage of workers rioting against the government and calls for workers to "follow the example of Che" and take up arms. More on this later.

The second film is entitled, "Don't Forget, Don't Forgive," from 1973, and it documents the 1972 mass execution of political prisoners known as the Trelew Massacre. A group of ERP prisoners and Montoneros—left-wing supporters of the Argentine populist and former army general, President Juan Domingo Peron—stage a prison break that is unsuccessful. While a few manage to flee the country, most are recaptured, and 16 are summarily executed.

The film consists mostly of interaction between ERP and Montonero members and the media following the successful escape of some of the prisoners via an airplane to neighboring Chile, then ruled by Socialist Party President Salvador Allende. The prisoners who are unable to escape hold a press conference at Trelew airport, hoping that this public exposure will ensure their safety before surrendering to the military authorities.

The speakers, although certainly courageous, evince a tragic naïveté in their belief that the presence of media and other officials will protect them against governmental reprisal. Photographs of the martyred are shown with the noise of machine gun fire in the background. Footage of mass demonstrations involving the ERP, Montoneros, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), which emerged out of the Stalinist Communist Party's youth movement, are then shown, with promises to avenge the dead.

The third film is called "The AAA are the Armed Forces," and was released in 1979, posthumously. It features fragments from the "Open Letter from a Writer to the Military Junta" by Rodolfo Walsh, a journalist murdered by the Argentine dictatorship in 1977. Perhaps the strongest of the three, it features dramatic recreations alongside documentary footage of the military junta's coup d'état, providing a chilling portrait of the repression that followed.

The AAA or "Triple A" stood for the Argentine Anti-communist Alliance, armed death squads formed before the 1976 coup, which brought together members of the security forces, union officials and fascists in the hunting down and assassination of working class militants and leftists. Their considerable crimes were escalated to an industrial scale under the military junta.

The narrator refers to the thousands disappeared, imprisoned and murdered since 1976 and describes the barbaric methods used, including the throwing of prisoners out of helicopters, the use of blowtorches, drugs, drownings and other atrocities.

The reasons for the repression lie in definite material class interests, Walsh argues. The narrator reads from his letter: "These events, that have shaken the civilized world's conscience... are not what has brought about the major amount of suffering to the Argentinean people. Nor the most horrible human rights violations that you are involved in. We must uncover in the economic policies of that government not only the explanation of their crimes, but a terrible atrocity that punishes millions of human beings with premeditated misery."

"In one year, you reduced the salaries of the workers by 40 percent. You diminished their participation in the national gross domestic product by 30

percent. The workday extended from six to 18 hours, which is what is needed by the worker to pay for their family's food. In this way [they are] resurrecting forced labor that was not even seen in the worst of colonial times."

The film goes on to document the terrible living conditions in the slums of Buenos Aires, contrasting them with the newfound wealth of the police and military officialdom, tied to world imperialism. The film accuses the CIA and USAID of functioning as the secret army of multinationals like Esso, ITT, major auto manufacturers and US Shell.

Walsh ends his letter saying that his words will invite repression, but he will continue struggling regardless. The titles indicate that he was gunned down the next day, on March 26, 1977, by the Argentine military.

The last film, "They Kill Me if I Work, and If I Don't Work, They Kill Me," from 1974, details the efforts of factory workers to uncover lead poisoning by their bosses. The film notes that of 81 workers tested for lead in their bloodstream, all but two tested positive. "The lead is squeezing the people's blood," protests one worker. Others complain that deaths labeled "cardiac arrest" by the authorities are actually a result of the toxins.

The workers mobilize under a popular committee and eventually demonstrate in Buenos Aires. Chanting slogans like "the bosses' control will soon end," they demand legislation from parliament to protect them. Representing them is Rodolfo Ortega Peña, a left Peronist lawyer and legislator who, as the film notes, was assassinated by Argentine paramilitaries of the AAA in 1974.

An amusing animated piece follows that explains how the capitalists acquire their riches. A bespectacled bourgeois proclaims, "My family had land, which I sold and purchased a machine. I contracted a worker and bought the prime materials and made three hats." A worker to the left is then shown operating a machine that devours a lamb and spits out three caps.

"I gave one of the hats to my worker and kept the other two. Why do I need two hats?" the capitalist asks. "I sold my hat and bought another machine, I then contracted another worker, they produced six hats." Another worker magically appears and produces the same motion as the first worker in unison. "I gave one to each worker and the other four I kept. Get the idea?"

He continues, "I sold the other hats and bought another machine and here I am. Everyone is happy and no one complains."

The workers, however, evince a militant class consciousness, saying that they should be the ones running the factory, not the employers. The film ends with footage of mass demonstrations and street battles with the police. One can see why the Argentine ruling class was scared of the growing offensive of the working class.

After Gleyzer's kidnapping, his wife Juana Sapire fled to Peru with their infant son, Diego. A call was circulated for his release that included signatures from such figures as Elia Kazan, Francis Ford Coppola, Terrence Malick, Judith Crist, Jane Fonda, New Yorker Films founder Dan Talbot and many other filmmakers, critics and programmers.

The tragedy of Gleyzer's life is bound up with the bankrupt politics of groups like the ERP, the Montoneros and the FAR.

The ERP was encouraged on its disastrous path of armed struggle by the petty-bourgeois revisionists of the United Secretariat led by Ernest Mandel, which had broken with Trotskyism and the Fourth International and, in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, advanced the perspective that "armed struggle," even when led by petty-bourgeois forces, could lead to the defeat of imperialism and the socialist revolution.

Recognizing the ERP, led by Mario Roberto Santucho, as its Argentine section, the United Secretariat supported its program of guerrilla warfare, even as Santucho moved steadily toward the embrace of Maoism and other guerrilla movements in Latin America.

The kidnappings and other acts of terrorism carried out by the ERP were

reactionary and completely antithetical to Trotskyism, which aims at the complete material and spiritual liberation of the working class through a revolutionary struggle waged by that class, the overwhelming majority of the population, led by a Marxist party.

The attempt to substitute the armed actions of politically untrained middle class youth for the mass actions of the working class—which were shaking Argentina at the time—and the building of a revolutionary party to lead them served to spread political disorientation.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International explained at the time, these actions, “far from raising the consciousness and the self-confidence of the working class, can only lead to political passivity and a mystical belief in a liberator with a gun.”

The armed actions of these groups, which were practically destroyed by 1976, were seized upon by the military junta as a pretext to clamp down on any and all social opposition in the working class.

Despite Gleyzer’s political limitations, his films stand as a testament to an extraordinarily revolutionary period in world history and invite modern audiences to carefully study and learn the lessons of the political betrayals carried out in 1960s and ‘70s in order that they not be repeated.



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