

La Spirale: Transnational Solidarity, Intellectual Exchange, and Chilean Exile Cinema

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Transnational Solidarity, Intellectual Exchange, and Chilean Exile Cinema

F.D. Fuentes Rettig

The authors of a film are not just the film-makers or cameraman but the people who figure in the film.¹

A collective effort by its three ‘directors’, *La Spirale* presents sociologist Armand Mattelart’s thesis that the Chilean right formed a reactionary ‘mass line’ to destabilize Chile and wrest control from Salvador Allende’s Unidad Popular (UP) government.² Emerging from the auspices of ISKRA, the French Left Bank film cooperative initiated by director Chris Marker, *La Spirale*, perhaps more than any other film of the period, is a document of the intellectual and cultural crossings of the 1970s radical left in Chile and in exile.³ Conceivably for the same reasons, it is a widely neglected film that, until recently, was almost impossible to see and remains under preservation threat.

Consisting almost entirely of footage retrieved from international television news and film archives cut to a rigorous voice-over, *La Spirale* is an exemplar of the political principles of cooperative filmmaking with respect to its production, content, form and distribution. Nonetheless, and despite his continued disavowals, the film is regularly attributed to Chris Marker.⁴ While Marker certainly had an influence on *La Spirale*, to assign him ‘authorship’ is to too readily disregard the principles of ISKRA, the film’s genesis, and to overlook its most interesting features: the intellectual exchange between the cultural politics of Allende’s Chile and the Rive Gauche, the stylistic influence of the Nuevo Cine Chileno, and its use as a dialectic tool of solidarity and resistance during the early years of the dictatorship.⁵

This redirection of focus repositions *La Spirale* within a wider catalogue of work that Juan Miguel Palacios has termed 'Chilean exile cinema' and which he has described as

the sum of all the various networks of production, distribution, and exhibition as well as the cooperative ties among national and international organizations, state offices, and exile communities that enabled the production of this oeuvre. In this sense, Chilean exile cinema is a particular form of transnational cinema, born out of global networks of solidarity.⁶

Palacios' essay fits within a growing body of work on transnational cinema that focuses on exile. This literature emphasizes exile's porous geographical and temporal boundaries, and approaches exile as a state of hybridity.⁷ Where previously Jacqueline Mouesca had identified the end of Chilean exile cinema as 1983, Palacios' historic rather than narrative approach leaves it indefinitely open and also embraces films made in 'internal exile'.⁸ This is a useful intervention and *La Spirale* certainly built on the 'various networks' Palacios identifies. However, it was produced by a team that did not include a Chilean national, although it repurposed a substantial amount of material produced by Chilean filmmakers for the ends of solidarity. It thus raises interesting questions about the distinctions between the overlapping categories of transnational film, a cinema of solidarity and exile film, particularly when examined alongside Mattelart's intellectual trajectory.

La Spirale emerged from a meeting between Mattelart and Marker in 1973; Marker suggested to the sociologist that his thesis could form the basis of a film, and introduced him to SLON colleagues Valérie Mayoux and Jacqueline Meppiel. Belgian-born, educated in France, Mattelart had recently returned to Europe from Chile, in what Hector Schmucler has characterized as 'regreso pero tambien exilio'.⁹ Arriving as a visiting professor at the Universidad Católica de Chile in 1962, Mattelart lived in the country for eleven years, making it his permanent home until he and his family were expelled in October 1973. Mattelart's time in the country spanned the Alessandri, Frei and Allende governments, a period of rich intellectual convergences that inspired a renaissance in his thinking which is indelibly imprinted in his work.

Mariano Zarowsky identifies a transitional moment that redirected Mattelart away from the humanist sociology of development which broadly characterizes his previous work. Of particular influence was the

creation of the Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Nacional (CEREN) at the Universidad Católica, one of several new research centres created in the wake of the reformist drive of the student strikes of 1967 and 1968.¹⁰ It was at CEREN, where Mattelart directed the Área de Ideología y Cultura and encountered influential individuals active in the militant left,¹¹ that his analyses shifted focus to critiques of culture and mass communication and in particular to the problematics posed by the mass media to the aims of the political left.¹²

Mattelart's thinking was also informed by the latest European structuralist works that he was responsible for acquiring for CEREN, as well as by Argentine academics influenced by Gramsci who sought exile in Chile. While all of these were influential, it is important to recall that the connections Mattelart was making across politics, ideology, mass culture and the concept of 'underdevelopment' crystallized in the specific socio-political context of Chile in the late sixties. This intellectual trajectory was subsequently realized under the drive of the Unidad Popular government to incorporate leftist intellectuals in a reassessment of mass communication that proposed a 'nueva cultura Chilena'.¹³ It was during this period that he refined the ideas that would later appear in *Multinationales et Systèmes de Communication, les Appareils Ideologique de l'Imperialisme*,¹⁴ and that informed *La Spirale*.¹⁵ Notably, both works are historically grounded analyses that extrapolate from the Chilean context.

As David Featherstone has argued, solidarity has a 'generative, transformative character... [and] solidaristic practices can shape new relations, new linkages, new connections'.¹⁶ Certainly, Mattelart's intellectual, political and personal journey in Latin America conforms to this characterization, and is illustrative of how solidarity is an active process that involves an unbounding of identity. However, despite Mattelart's immersion in Chilean cultural, political and intellectual life, his return to Europe remains that: a return to a geo-political space and culture with which he was familiar and in which he had the protections of European citizenship. Is Schmucler correct, then, to assert that Mattelart was *also* an exile and, concomitantly, is *La Spirale* Chilean exile cinema?

Schmucler's claim follows the unbounded and generous logic of solidarity. It positions Mattelart as being on the receiving end of solidarity, an act that, coming from those who are in a more precarious position (Argentine and Chilean exiles, who are *only* and not *also* in exile), is a clear articulation of the agency involved in creating solidarity's empowering and generative characteristics. It recognized that

he had shared in their political struggle as well as their trauma and that, in doing so, he was transformed. Mattelart's hybrid *also* status thus made him particularly well-placed to act as a cultural mediator,¹⁷ and participate in ISKRA's collaborative radical filmmaking practice, which had, in turn, been influenced by encounters with global radical movements, including in Latin America.¹⁸ These exchanges convey the fluidity of transnational cinema and of global solidarity. However, while the application of the term 'Chilean exile cinema' to *La Spirale* articulates the agency in and creativity of solidarity, is something central to the experience of exile lost in this usage? Certainly solidarity fundamentally alters the nature of exile, but if we are to take an historical rather than a narrative approach to exile cinema, it becomes important to more closely examine the (admittedly porous) boundaries between an 'exile film' and a 'solidarity film'.

While Mattelart's intellectual influence looms large in *La Spirale*, he had no prior experience of filmmaking and Valérie Mayoux and Jacqueline Meppiel, both of whom had worked in an editorial capacity on previous SLON productions, were integral to its construction.¹⁹ The film's two hours and eighteen minutes consist almost entirely of primary footage that was acquired in a year-long trawl through approximately twenty international news archives.²⁰ Indeed, Mayoux identified the vast quantity of international footage on Chile as one of the driving forces behind the production, explaining that the focus placed on the Allende-led UP during its three years in government, particularly by American and European television channels, created a need to 'rassembler les documents'.²¹

The reinterpretation of news footage produced by 'la métropole impérialiste' (*La Spirale*) goes to the heart of the film's project: the analysis and illustration of mass media as a tool of imperialism in the downfall of the UP. It is perhaps unsurprising then that Mattelart identified such footage, precisely because of its focus on the Chilean middle classes, as being more useful for his purposes than either leftist documentaries by filmmakers such as Patricio Guzman and Saul Landau or news footage by ChileFilms and Cuban news sources.²² The authors of *La Spirale*, then, extended beyond the immediate production (editorial) team to incorporate, as Marker suggests, the subjects: 'the people who figure in the film'. Given one of the film's driving concerns with the processes of the media, the subjects are both onscreen and behind the camera.

Deeply self-aware with a laconicly ironic tone, the film's voice-over immediately explains the internal logic of the team's editorial decisions:

‘queremos explicar como la derecha chilena hizo de esos tres años una maquina infernal que arranca antes de la elección de Allende una espiral ascendente hacia la explosion’.²³ Interspersed throughout are a series of seven intertitle sequences that are built around a US government strategy game called ‘Politica’, which was used by the CIA to predict and control social insurrection in Latin America. These short sequences use animated figures to represent aspects of the game as it applied to the Chilean situation. They are the only sections that do not use archival footage, and they function as the main structuring device for the narrative of the ‘espiral ascendente’. Notably, these sections provide critical commentary on the then-present post-coup situation, in contrast to the archival film which is primarily used to evidence an alternative interpretation of the recent Chilean past. As a consequence, the film’s dialectic of solidarity and resistance is at its most apparent in these segue sections.

As Carolina Amaral de Aguiar has pointed out:

After the military coup, like their makers, the images of the Chilean activist documentaries and of *Chile Films*, recorded during the *Unidad Popular* government, were exiled. In other words, they left the country clandestinely and in a diffuse manner. Gathering the recordings made by both leftwing filmmakers and rightwing television networks, was also a means of challenging this exile which through prohibition and destruction sought to consign the years of the *Unidad Popular* to ‘oblivion’.²⁴

There was, therefore, a clear political justification for producing *La Spirale*: to unite the voice of the Chilean left in its disparate and multiple geographical exiles, to ensure the documentation of its history was preserved and commented upon, but most urgently to raise awareness of and support for the left’s cause. This was active and radical memory-making borne out of an immediate political necessity. *La Spirale* was a tool of solidarity, designed to build consciousness, strengthen political opposition and unify the displaced Chilean left, and was used for fundraising activities by solidarity campaigns. The ‘people who figure in the film’ were thus also the audience.

That the means of producing, distributing and accessing culture should be egalitarian is central to Mattelart’s sociological work and *La Spirale*’s thesis, Chilean *nueva cultura* and the Chilean solidarity movement, and was of paramount importance to SLON and later ISKRA. As William F. Van Wert points out, Chris Marker’s political films

are 'about and *for* his subjects, for committed (and restricted) audiences that can see the films outside of the normal distribution system, that can use the films for internal analysis and that can become film-makers themselves'.²⁵ Certainly these criteria can be applied to *La Spirale's* political production and distribution practice. Unsurprisingly, it was not widely released in the conventional sense but nonetheless made a broad geographical imprint in its dissemination via networks closely tied to its subject, in particular through leftist organizations linked to solidarity campaigns and through cultural organizations and events including film festivals.²⁶

Culture was an integral component of the international solidarity campaign and it is a testament to its connectivity and influence that the English-language version of *La Spirale* was translated by Susan Sontag and the voice-over provided by Donald Sutherland. Subsequently, the film remained widely unavailable for a long period. A single public VHS copy that was available to view in the Bibliothèque Publique d'Information (BPI) at the Centre Pompidou was worn out by repeated viewings by Chilean exiles who heard of its existence by word of mouth.²⁷ While the producers retained a copy, including a Betamax of the English-language version, arranging the rights for a widely available French-language version has proven problematic.²⁸ Indeed, it was due to the efforts of a group of exiles in Belgium working on a committee against impunity and for democracy in Latin America that *La Spirale* re-emerged from virtual oblivion. The group arranged to have the film subtitled, and *La Spirale* was screened in Chile for the first time in 2006. Subsequently, the Agrupación de ex presos políticos Corporación Parque por la Paz 'Villa Grimaldi', together with the leftist international publication *Le Monde Diplomatique*, which has offices in Santiago, produced a DVD as part of a series of films that had long been unavailable in the country. *La Spirale's* cultural *desexilio* consequently was heavily dependent on transnational networks of solidarity that formed in the seventies.²⁹

The process of discovery described here followed in the footsteps of Chilean film archivers' efforts to repatriate, restore and exhibit films of the period that had been 'lost'.³⁰ Indeed, the history of Chilean film archives is one of cultural renewal, cultural blackout, cultural exile and negotiated, transitional revisiting of the recent traumatic past that the nation has undergone. *La Spirale* thus continues to exemplify the political filmmaking principles of ISKRA, the historical processes associated with Chilean exile cinema and, more broadly, cultures of solidarity of the era.

Notes

- 1 Chris Marker, quoted in William Van Wert, "Chris Marker: The SLON Films," *Film Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (Spring 1979): 44.
- 2 Armand Mattelart, Valérie Mayoux and Jacqueline Meppiel, *La Spirale*, France, 1976.
- 3 The name ISKRA was adopted from the Soviet newspaper founded by Lenin, and is also an abbreviation for 'Image, Son, Kinescope et Réalisations Audiovisuelles'. The group were previously known as 'Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles' or SLON until 1974. This article respects these chronological markers.
- 4 For example, Marker stated of *La Spirale* that 'decir que el filme fue una iniciativa mía es... un resumen erróneo'. Carolina Amaral de Aguiar, "Chris Marker: una mirada sobre Chile," *Cinémas d'Amérique Latine* 21 (2013): 20. While it is true that Marker deliberately sought to be cast in an oblique role and regularly rejected claims of authorship, this in itself does not invalidate all instances in which he disavowed an overarching influence over a film.
- 5 For clarification, I follow in Verónica Cortínez and Manfred Engelbert's footsteps in using 'Nuevo Cine Chileno' to refer to the period 1965–70. This is in distinction to its more recent use to refer to the rise in the Chilean film industry in the early 2000s. Chilean film writers refer to this 'second wave' as 'El Novísimo Cine Chileno'. I follow their example. For the most comprehensive summary of debates on 'Nuevo Cine Chileno' and an explanation of the term 'Novísimo Cine Chileno' see Verónica Cortínez and Manfred Engelbert, *Evolución en Libertad: El Cine Chileno de Fines de los Sesenta, Volumen I* (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2014), 25–51 and Ascanio Cavallo and Gonzalo Maza, *El Novísimo Cine Chileno*, (Santiago: Uqbar Editores, 2010), 13–16, respectively.
- 6 José Miguel Palacios, "Chilean Exile Cinema and its Homecoming Documentaries," in *Cinematic Homecomings: Exile and Return in Transnational Cinema*, ed. Rebecca Prime (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 149.
- 7 For an excellent summary of developments in the literature see Prime, *Cinematic Homecomings*, 1–6.
- 8 Mouesca refers to *La Spirale* only in a footnote that is dedicated to films about Chile made by 'foreign cineastes'. Jacqueline Mouesca, *Cine Chileno: Veinte Años 1970–1990* (Santiago: Ministerio de Educación, 1992), 50–1.
- 9 Hector Schmucler, "Prólogo," in Mariano Zarowsky, *Del Laboratorio Chileno a La Comunicación-Mundo: Un Itinerario Intelectual de Armand Mattelart* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2013), 17.
- 10 Mariano Zarowsky, *Del Laboratorio Chileno a La Comunicación-Mundo: Un Itinerario Intelectual de Armand Mattelart*. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2013), 65–9.
- 11 Key individuals in the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria's 'Unidad de Análisis de Contenidos,' which reported directly to the party's political committee, had been heavily influenced by Mattelart's writings, and some had been past students. Zarowsky, *Del Laboratorio Chileno*, 108.
- 12 Mattelart quoted in Paul-Louis Thirard, "À propos de *La Spirale*," *Positif*, April 1976: 26.
- 13 Zarowsky, *Del Laboratorio Chileno*, 77–8 and 113–14.
- 14 Armand Mattelart, *Multinationales et Systèmes de Communication, les Appareils Ideologique de l'Imperialisme* (Paris: Apropos, 1976).
- 15 For a relatively succinct summary of his careful historical analysis of Chilean mass media industries, see Armand Mattelart, "Interview with Armand Mattelart from *Cahiers du Cinema*, nos. 254–255, 1974–1975," in *Chilean Cinema*, ed. and trans. Michael Chanan (London: BFI, 1976), 66–82. *La Spirale* and Mattelart feature heavily in contemporary French film publications, further illustrating the prominence given to Latin American political thought in the country at the time.
- 16 David Featherstone, *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 18–19.
- 17 Zarowsky, *Del Laboratorio Chileno*, 124–5 helpfully speaks of Mattelart's hybridity in relation to Edward Said's essay on

- the intellectual as exile, and sociological approaches to social networks. While this is unarguably applicable, Zarowsky's main concern is Mattelart's contribution to the development of the field of cultural theory in Latin America, whereas I am here more interested in exploring the relationship of solidarity to exile through *La Spirale*.
- 18 Marker first met Mattelart when in Chile in 1972. For examples of the influence of the global radical left, see SLON films *Loin du Vietnam*, directed by Agnès Varda, Joris Ivens, Jean-Luc Godard and others (1967), *La Sixième Face du Pentagone* (by Marker and Reichenbach, 1968) and *La Bataille des Dix Millions* (by Marker and Mayoux, 1970).
 - 19 Mattelart further identifies Brazilian filmmaker Silvio Tendler (Thirard, "À propos de *La Spirale*," 27) and Mayoux credits producer Jacques Perrin as having key roles in the shaping of the film. See Olivier Kohn and Hubert Niogret, "Témoignages," *Positif*, March 1997: 95.
 - 20 Mattelart quoted in Thirard, "À propos de *La Spirale*," 27. Carolina Amaral de Aguiar refers to *Le Spirale* as an 'archive documentary' and a 'dossier film'; however she does not qualify either term – see Carolina Amaral de Aguiar, "Cinema and History: Archive Documentaries as a Site of Memory," *Revista Brasileira de Historia* 31, no. 62 (2011): 243. The proposition of an 'archive documentary' merits further exploration, which sadly is not possible within the limits of this article.
 - 21 Kohn and Niogret, "Témoignages," 94.
 - 22 Thirard, "À propos de *La Spirale*," 27.
 - 23 *La Spirale*.
 - 24 Amaral de Aguiar, "Cinema and History," 243.
 - 25 Van Wert, "Chris Marker," 45.
 - 26 In France it was screened in four cinemas in Paris and a few other cities. It also was shown in Belgium, Switzerland and Quebec – notably all had sizeable exile populations. It was screened more widely on television, in Portugal, Italy, Sweden and Poland. Armand Mattelart and Didier Bigo, "La Espiral. Entrevista," trans. Antonia García Castro and Luisa Castro Nilo, *Cultures & Conflits*, August 29, 2009. Accessed January 15, 2016. <https://conflits.revues.org/17395>
 - 27 Mattelart and Bigo, "La Espiral." Mattelart's anecdote demonstrates the importance of solidarity cultures to exile communities. The film's substantial quantity of historical footage will also likely have provided a much-needed and immediate connection to the recent past of exiles.
 - 28 I became aware of *La Spirale* through my father, a Chilean exile. He originally saw it in the late seventies when he was invited to introduce it at a screening in Hull, UK organized by a group of Iranian students and exiles. When I tried to arrange a UK screening for the fortieth anniversary of the coup in 2013, it was discovered at a late stage that the producer's Betamax copy had also been damaged. A 35mm print of the English-language version was located at the British Film Institute; however it too had degraded substantially and remains under preservation threat. This is the only English-language print I have thus far been able to identify.
 - 29 Elizabeth Ramírez Soto applies the term *desexilio* to the repatriation of Chilean films, particularly documentaries, of the Allende period and of the exile experience. Elizabeth Ramírez Soto, "Journeys of Desexilio: The Bridge between the Past and the Present," *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 18, no. 3 (2014): 439.
 - 30 For example, see Mónica Villarreal and Isabel Mardones, *Señales Contra el Olvido: Cine Chileno Recobrado* (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2012), which recounts the repatriation of films exiled to Germany, which are now housed in the Cineteca Nacional de Chile.