

Neoliberalism and its effects on labour: *El Tren Blanco* and the Argentinian *cartoneros*

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ABSTRACT:

This article analyses the film documentary *El Tren Blanco* that protagonises and dignifies the *cartoneros* – unemployed Argentine workers who, in order to survive, resort to the informal work of collecting recyclable material from refuse in the streets of the larger cities. It also places into context the visible emergence of the *cartoneros* as new social actors in 2002, under the aegis of the country's neoliberal reforms of the 1990s which culminated in the 2001 crisis. Finally, the paper discusses the aporias of informal work, which both inserts and segregates, as well as its self-reproduction.

Keywords: Neoliberalism. Argentina. *Cartoneros*. *El Tren Blanco*. Aporias of Informal Labour.

Introduction

The documentary film *El Tren Blanco* (Argentina, 2003), directed by Nahual García, Ramiro García and Sheila Pérez Giménez, who together form the group *Cine Efectivo*, features the *cartoneros*, those workers who are part of the informal economy in Buenos Aires and who managed to earn a living by collecting recyclable refuse. The filming of *El Tren Blanco* significantly begins in mid-2001, when unemployment becomes increasingly noticeable. The film anticipates the events of December of the same year known as the *Argentinazo*: the culmination of the neoliberal crisis in Argentina which led to days of continuous protests, including the *Cacerolazo*, and the ousting of President Fernando de la Rúa.

Argentina, a paramount example of extensive neoliberal reforms, including the deregulation of the labour market, witnesses the exponential growth of the informal sector in the aftermath of the 2001 crisis, of which the *cartoneros* can be symptomatic. “A survey by the government of Buenos Aires at the end of 2002 shows that a majority of the 1000 surveyed had begun working as *cartoneros* in that year” (ANGUITA, 2003, p.16).

El Tren Blanco has captured and depicted this precarious and unregulated part of the lucrative recycling industry which functions within the formal market yet relies on informal labour to provide its raw materials. The film gives a more human viewpoint of the informal labour market by giving the *cartoneros* a means through which they can show who they really are, how they ended up in the profession and their sense of being trapped in it.

The article will point out the several ambiguities related to this emergency re-insertion into the labour market and its aporias, arguing that informal work, in this case, can be a *pharmakon* (a remedy and a poison, in Derridean terms). The informal economy will be seen to be partly progressive under neoliberalism because it enables unemployed workers to reconstitute the labour process (VIETA, 2003, p.2). Yet, as remarkably depicted in the film, it is self-reproductive and consolidates instability,

vulnerability and precariousness while cutting on industry costs associated with formal labour. It thus continues to protect capital rather than labour. The paper will conclude that, although the informal economy has enabled new forms of labour and industry to be created, labour remains at a strong disadvantage against capital.

Bonds of solidarity between the *cartoneros* and the *Cine Efectivo* production group will be further analysed. The label, first used when they did their first short for a university film course, literally means ‘Effective Cinema’; but, if the words are read together, it means ‘without money’ (*sin efectivo*). The three young directors were still students when they shared the direction of *El Tren Blanco* and had access only to basic equipment. A family-based reunion of expertise underlies their adoption of the same name for the group. They say:

This is a similar situation to many documentary groups that emerged in 2001. These groups were usually made up of four or five friends: one held the camera, another one the microphone, and everyone went out to film. The spontaneity of going out to film counted more than a thought-out project (VIEIRA, 2012, p. 91).

The play on words in *Cine Efectivo* sums up their agency in making effective films and recreating modes of productive life in adverse times which, in turn, will be seen to parallel the *cartoneros*’ recuperation of a workspace and incipient collective organisation. It will be argued that *Cine Efectivo*’s bonds of solidarity across social classes humanises the ghettoised White Train users. In contrast, *Cine Efectivo*’s offer of screen space to the precariously and contingently employed led to the decision to edit out the interviewers’ images and sounds so as to focus on the *cartoneros*’ response. The intrusion of lights and large pieces of equipment was also avoided.

The *cartoneros* as increasingly visible social actors on the urban scene

The camera follows the *cartoneros* on their night’s work around Buenos Aires, starting from the train ride into the city, walking the streets with them as they collect recyclable materials and finally back onto the train at the end of their “working day”. The documentary contains a series of interviews in which the *cartoneros* are given screen space to express their opinions and tell their own stories, conveying, in this way, the daily pace and pain in a *cartonero*’s life. Those portrayed throughout the film are of all ages and backgrounds, showing the various sectors of society that have been deeply affected by unemployment and forced to resort to informal recycling activities in order to survive.

Cartoneros have existed throughout Argentina’s and the world’s history. But their notable eruption on the urban scene of Buenos Aires in 2002 as “emerging social actors, combining the traditional scavengers with the new” (ANGUITA, 2003, p. 15), relates in part to changes introduced by the military government (1976 - 1983) and in part to the radicalisation of neoliberal policies in the 1990s.

In the late 1970s, the Argentine government banned the burning of litter and replaced the previous method by landfills in the suburban areas of Buenos Aires. It benefited tremendously the large private sectors with the prohibition of scavenging, privatisation of collection and creation of an ecological cordon in suburban Buenos Aires (the so-called Cinturón Ecológico del Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado, CEAMSE) for the recuperation of refuse based on technical planning (ANGUITA, 2003, p. 14).

Neoliberal deregulation and the pegging of the *peso* to the dollar in the 1990s reduced the ability of Argentinian industry to compete on the international market; as a result imports became a lot cheaper than national produce. Because of the decline in trade, national industry decreased, further exacerbating unemployment and increasing the surplus labour force. Banks were forced to close down as speculative capital flight reduced their available capital, leaving a large proportion of the population without access to their already diminished savings.

Devaluation meant a substantial increase in the prices of basic commodities and with the added loss of social services through privatisation, basic living costs began to soar. In order to have an income, the surplus labour force had to resort to informal work. In October 2002 it was calculated that 66% of labour in Argentina was informal (CALLELO, 2006, p. 1).

In the initial 3-minute long images, the documentary visually establishes a cause and effect relationship between the 2001 crisis and the increase in the number of *cartoneros*: the crowd singing the National Anthem situates the protests in Argentina whereas the easily recognisable footage of the *Cacerolazo* (banging of pans) contextualises the shots in the December 2001 events which ousted President Fernando de La Rúa and his Ministers from office. News reports and images further place the viewer in the socio-political context of the country. A long caption then spells out that the crisis has resulted in 45% unemployment in the country and explains who the *cartoneros* are whilst advancing the view that they are a synecdoche of Argentina (“their stories are the history of the country”). They thus become symbolic of widespread unemployment and marginalisation of the working class in Argentina.

The value of what would have previously been discarded as rubbish has increased since the crisis, as importing goods such as paper and plastic became too costly. This made the building of a national industry that produces affordable goods essential to the survival of the national market (CHRONOPOLUS, 2006, p. 168). In this context, the reduction of the formal labour market under the 1990s radical neoliberal policies of the Argentine government led to a rapid increase of the number of *cartoneros*.

The creation of a separate train service for the *cartoneros* is what prompted the directors of *El Tren Blanco* to make the documentary. The services were separated due to the complaints of the commuters who argued that the *cartoneros* took up too much space, as directors Ramiro and Nahual García point out. According to the directors, there are several views on this train:

The *cartoneros* at times pointed out that it had been introduced for their use only because their cardboard load was too big and so they were not wanted in the regular trains for passengers. The train can thus be read as the creation of a ghetto so that they would not disturb people and feel discriminated against (VIEIRA, 2012, p. 91).

The separation of the trains further relates to one of the tenets of neoliberalism named privatisation. Privatisation entails, among other initiatives, the selling of public services in order to reduce the government costs and intervention and receive an injection of capital. The railway company that runs the *cartonero* train had previously been owned by the Argentinian public company FEMESA. When owned by the public sector, no action was taken in response to complaints about *cartoneros* and their rubbish carts travelling on the trains, and they were allowed to continue commuting with the regular passengers. Once the railway was privatised, to maintain customer loyalty, the company radicalised social exclusion by separating the services for the *cartoneros*. This has happened throughout Buenos

Aires and although this segregated train system is seen as a venue of work by the *cartoneros*, it can also be seen as another way of segregating and ghettoising the transport system in Argentina. This is done not in consideration of the customers but because they are more interested in maintaining their profit margins.

The film presents other dimensions of the symbolic violence of social hierarchizing and ghettoising. The parallel contrasting worlds that social inequality inevitably leads to are symbolised in an unassuming way by the documentary shots such as the one taken from above showing the rusting roof top of the *El Tren Blanco* next to the ordinary commuter train:



Picture 1: Passenger and cartonero trains contrasted

At one of the train stops in Buenos Aires, you see the blatant portrayal of two contrasting worlds living alongside each other when the station serves as one of the meeting points between the *cartoneros* and the city dwellers. The difference between the *cartoneros* and the other users of the station is highlighted with the commuter's smart demeanour contrasting with the dishevelled *cartoneros* lumbered with their large carts. The film also depicts the distance between these two social sectors with images of a handful of middle class commuters peering from a distance whilst the mass of *cartoneros* appropriate the space temporarily.

Jens Andermann, in his chapter "Perforated presence: the documentary between the self and the scene", in his book *New Argentine Cinema* (2012), has referred to the "infamous white train" as a metaphor of social segregation in the country (ANDERMANN, 2012, p.95), which is uncontroversial. Yet, as a counterstatement to several levels of symbolic violence associated with the train, the film's initial caption introduces the documentary's main humanising thrust: to dignify and restore humanity to the *cartoneros* (a point to which we shall return). The related sub-themes of downgrading from skilled to unskilled labour and the sense of personal shame from the loss of status and social capital are also presented visually: in Picture 2 a woman is looking around self-consciously as she notes the presence of passers-by during her scavenging chores:



Picture 2: Self-conscious cartonera hiding from the public gaze

When the train is introduced in the 5th minute, a collector's voice is heard for the first time. His reiterated statement that "*El Tren Blanco* is a way of life, a way of life, nothing else" is eloquent. Such an emphasis introduces a contradiction into Andermann's view of the train as infamy only. The train also carries the pragmatic value of enabling an emergency reinsertion into the labour market amidst soaring unemployment; yet this uncomfortable reinsertion is via downward mobility (see aporia in the conclusion to this paper).

Neoliberal deregulation of the labour market, social fragmentation and stigmatisation

The *cartoneros* nostalgically refer to their previous blue collared, skilled or semi-skilled jobs as carpenters, hairdressers, drivers, bricklayers, bakers, painters or gardeners before the crisis. The theme of downgrading from skilled to unskilled labour relates to the deregulation of the labour market in the context of neoliberal policies. Neoliberal theorist De Soto, as far back as 1989, had advocated for the total deregulation and the creation of a "free" and efficient informal labour market to maximise profits (DE SOTO, 1989, p.211-212).

Neoliberal policies, first implemented in the UK and USA in the early 1980s, were imposed onto Less Development Countries¹ by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) through development loans, to ensure their economic growth. These countries accepted this imposition as many were already heavily indebted to the IMF and needed their continued financial support (PERRONS, 2004, p.57-58). These policies subsumed broad deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation, freeing the market to function more efficiently. Up until the 1970s, state intervention had been used worldwide to promote industrialisation and economic growth. State intervention and union pressure would implement protectionist policies that gave workers a voice against profit-seeking corporations. However, the 1970s presented capitalists with the opportunity to demonstrate the detrimental effects of state intervention on the economy and oppose it. Neoliberal theory and its policies, that favour the interests of capital, were put forward as the better alternative.

Labour is an essential part of production. It is thus considered by neoliberalism to be a market in itself. Any state intervention in employment creates an inflexible and inefficient market. Neoliberalism sees labour as a commodity which should be flexible enough to fluctuate with the demands of the market. Therefore, measures, that are mostly imposed by governments pressured by unions, such as contracts, health insurance or minimum wages only cause wages to be set at a price which does not reflect its real variable value (BLOCK, 2008, p.99). Setting wages too high creates unemployment as employers will hire less labour in order to keep their profit margins. When wages are free to adapt according to supply and demand, full employment is possible as it is affordable for capitalists to employ the excess labour whilst still keeping their profit margins.

Although neoliberal reform claims to deregulate and free markets, Olmendo and Murray (2002, p. 422) argue that it has in fact just regulated the market in favour of capital. In Argentina, the National Employment Law, implemented in 1991, aimed for the flexibilisation of the previously highly regulated labour market that was implemented during the Peronist years. Among other things, the law eases the employment and firing of workers, institutionalises temporary and freelance contracts whilst not incorporating any form of security for workers.

Argentinian households do not traditionally separate their refuse. The recycling industry, instead of hiring labour to separate and collect recyclable materials, prefers to buy materials off “independent” informal workers. These workers, at the bottom of the chain, are those who incur the costs saved by the industry such as health, pensions and creating safe working environments (WHITSON, 2007, p. 131). In neoliberal Argentina, the *cartoneros* are convenient for the formal sector as the informal sector allows for cheap production, low price of raw materials and as a consequence higher profits for industries struggling to compete with the international markets. The immediate needs and pressures of life are so great for the *cartoneros* that, when they talk about their work, they are not even aware that, despite the fact that their recycling service is crucial for the Argentinian economy, they are underpaid cheap labour. In contrast, they are crucially aware of the social fragmentation that perversely enables the formal industry to continue to exploit their cheap labour.

This emergency re-insertion into the labour market paradoxically perpetuates exclusion. Dimarco (2005, p. 6) states that the job is considered as the worst one, even within the informal sector, and the longer the individual works as a *cartonero* the less likely they are to get a job elsewhere as it socially separates the worker from the “more acceptable” workers that exist in the informal job market. Despite many *cartoneros* knowing that they carry out an essential service for society, they suffer at the same time from the stigma and prejudice that is attached to their job, especially since they have become increasingly visible in the more affluent areas of cities.

The *cartoneros* pay a fortnightly (10.50 *pesos*) or monthly (18 *pesos*) *abono* (GORBÁN, 2002, p. 15) to use the train service and a *cartonera* states that they earn 60-70 *pesos* a week. A high proportion of the wages they earn has to be spent on the precarious and unmaintained transport to and from work. This shows the power struggle between the private railway company and the *cartoneros*, as they are happy to accept any form of transport and price as *El Tren Blanco* is their only means of transport to work.

The renowned Brazilian film scholar Ismael Xavier has introduced the apposite notion of cinema as the humaniser of life that is also quite relevant to the Argentine context and, more specifically, to address the role of the documentary *El Tren Blanco* in de-stigmatising and de-ghettoising the *cartoneros* via screen space. Xavier points out that film humanises life dignifying those whose personal feelings are permeated by a sense of impotence before complex machineries of power (XAVIER, 2003, p. 62). Besides thematising informal labour and its consequent social split, the film creates a

sense of closeness to the characters, intimacy and empathy with the characters by prioritising close-up images of facial expressions and constant eye contact.

Pierre Bourdieu has drawn attention to the “inevitable dependence of self-esteem on occupational status and income” that leaves the lower classes with “a sense of incompetence, failure or cultural unworthiness” (BOURDIEU, 1979, p. 386). Accordingly, the directors point out the *cartoneros*’ poignant sense of loss and shame in initial stages of the downgrading from skilled to unskilled labour. The words of a *cartonero* provide verbal expression to this sense of shame conveyed in the initial images: “The first time I opened a bag, I was so embarrassed that I looked up to check whether people were watching me from the buildings. And six months later, each time I open a bag I still look up even if there are no buildings around” (VIEIRA, 2012, p. 84).

Further still, there are references to the prejudice that the *cartoneros* face such as when they talk of others referring to them as *cirujas* (people who do not work and live on scavenging). This pejorative term sometimes refers to a person who lives hand to mouth; these people are thought not to take care of their appearance and generally live in the streets begging; in general society does not trust *cirujas* and believe that they purposefully marginalise themselves from the rest of society (PERELMAN, 2008, p. 119-120). In order to refute this notion and distance themselves from the term *cirujas*, the *cartoneros* talk of the dignity of their work. Even though they collect other people’s refuse and live from the proceeds of rubbish they see it as a business and a job that helps them provide for their families.

The directors, with sensitivity, also capture what Anguita describes as the stage that follows profound shame, that of pride. Despite everything they never lost their dignity; the recuperation of left overs is also rooted in work culture. If work does not exist one has to reinvent it recovering materials thrown away by others (ANGUITA, 2003, p. 17). The directors humanise the *cartoneros* by having different ones talk of the ‘dignity’ of their work and the feeling that being a *cartonero* is better than stealing or begging which seems to be the next step down for them. De-stigmatisation via dignified, however humble work, is shown in the documentary in a self-explanatory interview that contrasts the voice of the *cartoneros* with that of a typical *ciruja* who sees begging as a valid way of making a living.

Vulnerability, precariousness and the resurfacing of cooperativism

The *cartoneros*’ work epitomises complete labour precarisation. The train, as Jens Andermann points out, lacks basic security and comfort, and does not even have seats so to make room for their trolleys (ANDERMANN, 2012, p. 95). They are not provided with the proper clothing to work in those conditions, they have to obtain cardboard from litter containing both organic and inorganic stuff and also find ways to access the bottom of bags and boxes in search of the materials they need. They are shown in the film to have no notion of health and safety precautions and are in constant danger of contracting illnesses and infections.

Scavenging can be said to be a social and labour thermometer. Besides the insalubrity inherent to it, the *cartoneros*’ work radicalizes the features characteristic of the labour precariousness under neoliberalism, systematized by Gerry Rodgers. Precariousness involves a combination of instability, lack of protection, insecurity and social and economic vulnerability; work is more insecure the less workers are protected by the law or organisations against discrimination, unacceptable work conditions and lack of access to social security in terms of health, accidents, pensions and unemployment benefits (RODGERS, 1989, p. 3).

Such radical form of work precariousness relates to the deregulation of the labour market and the consequent non-intervention of the state. Liberalisation of the labour market also means the breakup of unions and of any power that could potentially extort or pressure businesses to give into workers' demands. Unions are another intervening factor that distorts market functionality, as they organise workers and impose demands onto capital, potentially making wage labour costly through strikes and negotiation processes (BLOCK, 2008, p. 99).

Another form of deregulation is subcontracting production to independent workers such as the *cartoneros*. Subcontracting in itself causes fragmentation of class solidarity. Additionally, industry does not have responsibility over labour that is not "theirs". The high demand for cheap labour leads to workers functioning with minimal costs leading to precarious work environments with no job security and increased competition for work. In the case of the *cartoneros*, this leads to territorialisation of the workspace.

The informal sector, of which this type of scavenging is a paramount example, increasingly employs the most vulnerable and socially marginalised sectors of society. This vulnerability, compounded by precariousness, has exacerbated the lack of job security, health benefits and also unemployment benefits. Neoliberal policies clearly benefit capital at the expense of the advances made in the 1970s welfare states towards labour protection and stability and it is now becoming increasingly difficult to make a clear differentiation between informal and formal markets. Although informality, in theory, is mainly assumed to be employment that functions outside the scope of the State and any employment laws, a lot of informal work can take place within the law and state regulations (OLMEDO; MURRAY, 2011, p. 435). Such is the case with the *cartoneros*, who are working within the law as freelance workers. But their employment does not fulfill many of the requirements of freelance work.

In 2003, Law 992 legalised their role and at the same time the "Programa de Recuperadores Urbanos" [Plan for Urban Recyclers] was established to improve their conditions. The government also changed the form of payment to refuse collection companies, from paying by the ton to paying according to the standard of cleanliness of the area in which the private company worked in. This allowed for both the *cartoneros* and private refuse collectors to work together to ensure that garbage was properly collected and recycled and also gave the government the space to intervene and try to regulate their job.

At the same time cooperatives have emerged which are very different from previous cooperatives and industry unions because of the kind of work the *cartoneros* do. Firstly it is an individual and independent job which will, at most, consist of family members working together. They work in competition with each other as the more refuse they collect the more they earn. Because of the recent rise in unemployment the individuals that carry out this work come from entirely different backgrounds and do not have a lot in common socially (PERELMAN; BOY, 2010, p. 404). Although cooperatives have surfaced they do not have high membership rates nor do they organise to carry out the actual work together as workers in other industries, for example the ceramic industry. Cooperatives tend to work to resolve issues that affect all of them the same. With transport they organised provision of a train on which they could travel and ensuring that the businesses that buy refuse off them do it at a fair price. Cooperatives have also helped with health issues such as vaccines (CALELLO, 2006, p. 5).

The lack of job security instils a fear in labour to organise against employers that can easily replace them. Therefore, this is not a truly free or equitable labour market in which workers have the power to choose (LERCHE, 2007, p. 426) as Neoliberal theory professes. The power that Capital has,

with high unemployment, means that workers have no option but to accept what work is offered as there is always surplus labour willing to take their place.

This is reflected in the film where the *cartoneros* see the train as their only means of transport to and from work, in other words, as their livelihood. Although they are grateful to have this resource, they also realise that the train is in no fit state to be used and as a result live under the constant threat of the train being removed, as expressed by a Paraguayan *cartonero*. He also gives a sense of isolation and helplessness that comes with the realisation that they are against a railway company which is private and lack support from the government and authorities. Their only hope is to reach the general public with the support of the media to obtain some reaction from the railway company and the government. The *cartoneros'* train is in dire conditions to the point of escaping basic safety requirements, which the cameras capture: bare electric cables, broken windows, holes in the panels and the absence of doors.

An important dimension of the documentary is the prominence given to the Paraguayan who, unlike the others, is not named. Yet he articulates very clearly the several ways in which the train equates precariousness and the importance of collective organization. This paper thus suggests that he approximates what Gramsci has named an organic intellectual. "For this political thinker every social group organically creates for itself one or more levels of intellectuals who give it homogeneity and the consciousness of its own economic, social and political functions" (GRAMSCI, 2000, p. 15). Barker has pointed out that the organic intellectual is an expansive notion in Gramsci, insofar as it does not subsume only those situated within the educational world but also trade unionists, writers, campaigners, community organisers and so forth are said to be a constitutive part of working class struggles and the thinking and organising elements of the counter-hegemonic class and its allies (2004, p. 100).

The nature of neoliberalism is individualist not collective, favouring the capitalist over the labourer. Considerations of workers' needs are not on the agenda of the capitalists whose priority is to seek profits through the reduction of their costs. However, this form of collectivist thinking suggests the revitalisation of a long tradition of cooperativism, extending as far back as the early waves of European migration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as a legal and pragmatic and defensive strategy (VIETA, 2008, p. 6-8). However incipient, this cooperativism begins to counter the effects of individualistic neoliberalism. For example, when the Paraguayan speaks of the influx of large numbers of new *cartoneros* and the worry of the existing ones that these will reduce their share of their income, he stakes a solidarity stance stating that everybody needs to eat and survive and it is only fair that they are given the chance to.

The Paraguayan also administers the *abonos* as an appointed delegate by the *cartoneros*. The delegate deals with all issues related to the train and acts as the intermediary between the workers and the railway company. He clearly describes his responsibility and the ever increasing number of people approaching him to ask for a place on the train, just having lost their jobs and unable to maintain their families. He also describes the conflicts caused by the increase in *cartoneros* and the resulting decrease in the refuse to share. The tendency to a territorial control only confirms their struggle to survive the increasing competition and a crisis that manifests itself in people throwing less and less, which gradually makes it impossible for them to live off recycling.

He also realistically denounces the absence of the government in labour issues and its contribution to poverty. This is followed by images of the 2001 *saqueos* (lootings) as a reaction to a high level of inflation and unemployment which meant that people could no longer feed their families. In desperation people looted supermarkets and local businesses in order to survive.

This subsequently led to the protests that ousted Fernando de la Rúa as his government were unable to offer suitable alternatives. In order to appease the situation and to avoid lootings, supermarkets offered 300 bags of basic food to people who gathered around the delivering truck, in numbers exceeding by far the number of bags. The lack of a political angle to the lootings seems to be apparent by the way one of the looters justifies his actions as out of desperation to provide for his family and looting is “the only way”.

The *cartoneros*, through their organisation, have been able to achieve the satisfaction of some of their needs, yet they are still impotent in relation to corporate power.

Conclusion: the aporias of informal work

The film has a circular structure, it begins and ends with the expulsion of Fernando de la Rúa from office. Footage has been used in such a way that the opening images of the ousting of the President stress the power of people when acting collectively. But collectivisation is still incipient and, as such, impotent in a context in which the neoliberal policy that created the crisis persists. The fact that the private sector continues to prioritise its own benefits highlights the need for the government to regulate how certain industries function efficiently within the bigger, national, picture.

Circularity also points to the number of aporias or unresolved contradictions in the documentary and in the actual life of the *cartoneros*. A major aporia is reflected on the debate of a creche. The *cartoneros* work unsociable hours and cannot afford childcare. They tend to work in family groups; this means that children have to accompany their parents on the train:



Picture 3: A child in a trolley on the moving train

Children also help their parents by carrying out different tasks such as begging for food, money and help them to collect rubbish. The adults are very conscious of the effects that this has on their children who do not sleep until late and very often do not get a quality education due to a lack of resources or responsibilities at home that keep them out of school. This is particularly

highlighted when talking to parents who were working accompanied by their children. For the parents there is a continuous struggle between taking care of their children's future through ensuring they are educated, or taking care of their families' immediate needs which sometimes requires the children missing out and falling behind at school. Children also go out to work by themselves because they need to contribute towards their family income. This means that children are already placed into this marginal lifestyle and the sense of being stuck there predominates among the younger generation. This is emphasised throughout the film through interviews with adolescent and underage *cartoneros* and how they express their worries and hopes for the future. There is social determinism as the children who carry out this work will continue to live in this precariousness.



Picture 4: Adolescent scavenging

The Buenos Aires City Hall has thought of introducing a night-time nursery for the workers' children so that they do not have to travel on the train during their sleeping hours with their parents on their way to and from work. The dilemma is that, if they start a nursery for the children, the government will not feel the need to actively create or find other jobs for them. Many of them, for obvious reasons, don't want to go on working as *cartoneros* (VIEIRA, 2012, p. 84).

The same white train that inserts them, albeit precariously, into the labour market (hence their defending it at all costs as a work tool) also ghettoises them. The film deals with the inherent contradiction of being a *cartonero*. Whilst they feel they are better off than others who end up stealing or begging, they also crave the security and possibly the social acceptance that comes with a formal job. The social marginality and the insecurity that they experience through precariousness and health hazards in this work mean that, although they have more aspirations for themselves and their families they see this work as the only way out. They are also pessimistically aware of the country's situation and their position in the scale of priorities. Among all the mixed feelings and contradictions, there seems to be a resilience in them that manifests in their resourcefulness and the hidden hope in their words.

El Tren Blanco is open-ended. The train is criticised but goes on running and taking the *cartoneros* to work. The contradictions also remain. Towards the end of the film, some say they do not want the train to keep on going, while others say the opposite. And despite the harsh conditions, they keep on resisting with the dignity of going out and saying: “I don’t give up; I’m going to fight for my children and for myself.” If those who do not have anything, just out of their dignity, can send food to Tucumán, there is a possibility of change in the country. There must be a better alternative than the train: a job, a proper salary and health care.

Despite some advantages to the incorporation of informal employment by neoliberalism, lack of job security and precarious work conditions cause long-term problems for individuals and the State. The economy will not be able to maintain these conditions unless it counterbalances the effects of neoliberalism with some form of security for the labouring class. The film further shows the way that the *cartoneros*, as an example of the informal sector, also participate in its own reproduction through the provision of their own forms of transport and by reducing costs through the use of family labour (PORTES; CASTELLS; BENTON, 1989, p. 5). It also creates social fragmentation between the rich and poor that allows the formal industry to continue to exploit this cheap labour. Unless some kind of effective collective power counteracts the excess power of capital and its tendency to work towards profits at any cost, low wages and precarious working conditions in the informal sector will only get worse. The white train can thus be said to be a *pharmakon* (DERRIDA, 1981, p. 69), at the same time a remedy and a poison. It is one of the few ways available for labour re-insertion but one that socially alienates the *cartoneros*. The open-ended film conveys that the train will go on running in its aporia: a ghettoising insertion in the labour market.

A space of humanity comes from the positive visibility and screen space given them by young and progressive documentary filmmakers. “The crisis enabled Argentine society to look at itself and to begin to understand that before a cart there was a life history and that their life trajectories were part of a common history, that of the Argentines” (ANGUITA, 2002, p. 16). This holds particularly true for the film. It took the three directors over a few months to gain the trust of the *cartoneros* to conduct the interviews. The humanising impact of the process emerges in their reference to the first screening: “The affection that the *cartoneros* showed when they saw the film is unforgettable. We were happy that we could fulfil our wish for them to be the first to see it” (VIEIRA, 2012, p. 88).

Neoliberalismo e seu impacto sobre o trabalho: *El Tren Blanco* e os *cartoneros* argentinos

RESUMO:

O artigo analisa o documentário *El Tren Blanco* que protagoniza e dignifica os *cartoneros* – trabalhadores desempregados argentinos que, para sobreviver, recorrem ao trabalho informal de catadores de materiais recicláveis dos lixos das ruas das cidades maiores. Contextualiza também a visível emergência dos *cartoneros* enquanto novos atores sociais em 2002 no âmbito das reformas neoliberais no país na década de 1990 e que culminaram com a crise de 2001. Discute, ao final, as aporias do trabalho informal, que simultaneamente insere e segrega, e sua autorreprodução.

Palavras-chave: Neoliberalismo. Argentina. *Cartoneros*. *El Tren Blanco*. Aporias do trabalho Informal.

Notas explicativas

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Filmography

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