

Allá en el setenta y tantos (1945). Female Pioneers in Argentinian Cinema

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Summary

This paper recovers an exceptional homage paid by Argentinian cinema in 1945 to three medical pioneers of that country: Élide Passo, Cecilia Grierson and Elvira Rawson Guiñazú. The paper also makes a brief reference to their careers; it records the technical details of the film addressed for which a synopsis is laid out in order to finally establish similarities and differences between the reality experienced by the above women and that reflected in the film.

Keywords: Female doctors, Argentina, Pioneers, Cinema.

Three pioneers of Argentinian medicine

Élide Passo was born in Buenos Aires in 1867. Daughter of a pharmacist, she decided to follow a university degree in Argentina at a time when no woman had ever attempted this. First she provisionally studied Humanities and Philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires; she then briefly passed through the degrees in mathematics, physics and natural sciences, where she managed to pass four subjects, before deciding on Pharmacy, following in her father's footsteps. There she became the first woman professionally devoted to this profession. When she attempted to enrol in Medicine it was not easy. In this sense, she had to lodge an appeal, which had huge impact in the academic sphere and media of the time, thanks to which her enrolment was finally allowed. She also became the first woman to become enrolled in a higher degree of an Argentinian university, she reached the 5th year and she would have been the first female doctor if she had not died of tuberculosis in Buenos Aires in 1893. Her case made things easier for Cecilia Grierson¹⁻³.

Cecilia Grierson was born in Buenos Aires in 1859 (Figure 1). She entered the School of Medicine of the

University of Buenos Aires as a teacher not long after Élide Passo did. She worked as an assistant in Histology. She founded – while still a student – the first Argentinian School of Nurses, and she graduated at the age of 30 with a doctoral dissertation entitled “Hystero-ovariotomies



Figure 1: Cecilia Grierson (1859-1934).

carried out at the Women's Hospital from 1883 to 1886". In 1894 she applied for a post as a stand-in teacher for the Professorship of Obstetrics for Midwives, which was declared void because women could not aspire to teach at university. This, her not being able to teach as a Professor at the School of Medicine, would be recalled by her as something extremely painful. In 1896 she took part in the beginnings of the Argentinian Socialist Party together with Alicia Moreau de Justo and other women of the time. In 1910 she presided over the Argentinian Congress of Female University Students (founded in 1905 by Elvira Rawson Guiñazú, among others). She wrote books, formed associations and started magazines, and she was awarded and honoured on many occasions for a life devoted to education and medicine. She died in Buenos Aires in 1934¹⁻³.

Elvira Rawson Guiñazú, born in Buenos Aires in 1864 (Figure 2), decided to enrol in the School of Medicine of the University of Buenos Aires. With no support from her family, since their opposition was intractable, she worked as a teacher at a school in the Barrio Norte. She passed nine equivalence subjects to enter the School; she was the only woman among 84 men in the first year, and she was the second professional to graduate after Cecilia Grierson in 1902, with the doctoral dissertation: "Notes on women's hygiene". In 1890 she took an active part in the *Revolution of the Park*, a civil-military insurrection that took place on 26th July 1890 led by the newly established Civil Union, which was headed, among others, by Leandro Alem. On that day, together with other doctors, all of them members like her of the aforementioned political entity, she set up a field hospital on the battle front to tend to the wounded of each of the contending sides. After the Revolution, the Civil Union split into the National Civil Union and the Radical Civil Union. The latter, in which Elvira enrolled, would be the origin of the still existing



Figure 2: Elvira Rawson Guiñazú (1867 -1954).

Centenary Party. She directed her professional work towards Gynaecology. She taught Hygiene and Paediatrics, and in 1916 she founded and directed the first institution devoted to the care of children with disabilities in Uspallata, Mendoza. To fight for women's rights and in favour of women's suffrage, Elvira Rawson Guiñazú, like Cecilia Grierson, joined forces with Alicia Moreau de Justo, with whom she formed the Feminist Centre of Argentina and the Committee in Favour of at the International Congress of 1910, are worth remembering: (1) equality in paternal authority between the father and the mother; (2) free administration of wealth by women, and (3) maintenance of all women's individual rights (in an equal status to that of men) even after marriage. She died in Buenos Aires in 1954¹⁻³.

An outstanding film homage

Technical details

Title: *Allá en el setenta y tantos*.

Country: Argentina.

Year: 1945.

Director: Francisco Mugica.

Music: Julián Bautista.

Photography: Hugo Chiesa.

Film editor: José Cañizares.

Screenwriter: Manuel Agromayor, Alfredo de la Guarda and Tulio Demicheli.

Cast: Silvana Roth, Carlos Cores, Felisa Mary, Virginia Luque, Matilde Rivera, Susana Dupré, Federico Mansilla, Pedro Laxalt, Mario Medrano, Horacio Priani, Gloria Grey, Mario Armand, Hilda Vigliero, Domingo Mania, Olimpio Bobbio, Gonzalo Palomero, Jorge Villoldo, Carlos Belluci, Miguel Vanni, José María Gutiérrez, Alberto Bello and Darío Garzay.

Colour: Black and white.

Runtime: 90 minutes.

Genre: Drama.

Production Companies: Estudios Río de la Plata and Sur Cinematográfica Argentina.

Synopsis: the life of Cecilia Ramos, who is "characterized" in the film as one of the pioneers of Argentinian medicine.

www.imdb.com/title/tt0175437

<http://www.cinenacional.com/peliculas/index.php?pelicula=62>

On May 24, 1945, the Argentinian film in black and white *Allá en el setenta y tantos...*, directed by Francisco Mugica and whose screenplay was by Manuel Agromayor, Alfredo de la Guarda and Tulio Demicheli, was released with no restrictions (suitable for all the public). Its cast was

made up by Silvana Roth (not related in any way to the current actress Cecilia Roth), Carlos Cores, Felisa Mary, Virginia Luque, Matilde Rivera, Susana Dupré, Federico Mansilla, Pedro Laxalt, Mario Medrano, Horacio Priani, Gloria Grey, Mario Armand, Hilda Vigliero, Domingo Mania, Olimpio Bobbio, Gonzalo Palomero, Jorge Villoldo, Carlos Belluci, Miguel Vanni, José María Gutiérrez, Alberto Bello and Darío Garzay. Joaquín Lautaret and Manuel Peña Rodríguez were in charge of the production; the photography was by Hugo Chiesa; the editing by José Cañizares; the music by Julián Bautista; the stage design by the outstanding Mario Vanarelli, and the assistant director was Fernando Ayala (later a well known director).

The film, with a runtime of 90 minutes, was written based on an “idea” (sic) of Tulio Demichelis and it explicitly pays homage, as mentioned above, to the first women to study Medicine in Argentina: Élide Passo, Cecilia Grierson and Elvira Rawson Guiñazú. Such “idea” consisted in fictionally mixing distinct parts of their lives, avoiding to centre the film exclusively in one of them.

The action begins in the Córdoba mountains, where Cecilia Ramos (Silvana Roth), an orphan, works as a countryside teacher. Transferred to an unnamed Córdoba locality, she goes to live with her aunt Dalmacia (Matilde Rivera) – a very religious and conservative woman – and her uncle and godfather Carlos (Gonzalo Palomero) – a doctor and liberal –, where she discovers her true vocation when she helps Carlos while he is attending to a mountain accident, in which she also meets Marcos Elguera (Carlos Cores). In spite of her aunt’s firm resistance, she manages to travel to Buenos Aires with Carlos and to enrol in the School of Medicine of the University of Buenos Aires. In this city, she stays at the house of another of her aunts: Melchora (Felisa Mary) and her cousins.

Not only her aunt and cousins disapprove of Cecilia’s decision, but it transpires that her uncle must appeal to the court so that the School will allow her to enrol, despite the authorities’ firm opposition to her doing so. At the School she meets up with Marcos Elguera again (Figure 3), who later becomes her suitor, and she begins a career full of successes.

Although the years during which the action takes place are not explicitly mentioned, there are clues. Thus, when the School’s authorities angrily oppose Cecilia Ramos’ admission, there is mention of the recent establishment of



Figure 3: Cecilia Ramos with Marcos Elguera.

the foundations of the French Republic, which took place in February 1875. Later, while in the 5th year of her degree course, she witnesses the arrival in Buenos Aires of the mortal remains of General José de San Martín, repatriated from France in the Transporte Villarino on 28th May, 1880. During that year, Cecilia participated disinterestedly, assisting the wounded during the 1980 Revolution^a, and being awarded for this with the Decoration of National Gratitude by President Nicolás Avellaneda, in the final stages of his mandate (1874-1880).

Her coughing, episodes of fever, and asthenia, at first sporadic, eventually became persistent, leading her to seek medical attention from one of her teachers (Pedro Laxalt).

The final sequence confronts three characters who are devastated by Cecilia’s imminent demise: Melchora, Carlos and the doctor who treats her, with Marcos and Mercedes (one of her cousins, played by Virginia Luque), who arrive elated after attending a conference by the Rector of the University, Dr Nicolás Avellaneda, emphasizing the importance of knowledge over other matters (among them sex, which is implicitly understood despite not being mentioned).

Their joy disappears upon hearing the unfortunate news. Marcos and Mercedes enter the room where Cecilia lies.

- “You know what, Cecilia? – Marcos exclaims, trying to look hopeful – We have wonderful news for you! Another woman has enrolled in the Faculty today: your cousin Mercedes”.

^a The facts that triggered the 1880 Revolution are related to the struggle for the power of two factions: one headed by Nicolás Avellaneda, at the time President of the Nation (1874-1880), and the other headed by the Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, Carlos Tejedor, who aspired to succeed Avellaneda in the Presidency. However, his candidature was bluntly rejected by the provinces, which supported General Julio Argentina Roca. Since the province of Buenos Aires was not willing to sacrifice economic capital or to see its pride wounded, it rebelled at around midday of June 20, 1880. The combat, which was fought hand-to-hand, went on for hours until the victory of the national forces was established the following dawn. Roca thus became the President of the Republic of Argentina from 1880 to 1886.

The film ends with the dying Cecilia's hopeful smile.

Similarities and differences between fact and fiction

In the period, never specified but suggested, covered by the film (between 1784 and 1880 – coinciding with the Presidency of Dr Nicolás Avellaneda) Élica Passo was between 7 and 13 years old; Cecilia Grierson between 16 and 22, and Elvira Rawson Guiñazú between 10 and 16.

Mistakenly, some synopses and television programmes mention that the film pays homage only to Élica Passo, in some cases, and only to Cecilia Grierson, in others.

The fact that the character of Cecilia Ramos bears the name Grierson and a Spanish surname similar and euphonically related to that of Rawson is thought-provoking.

Grierson and Rawson Guiñazú were teachers before studying Medicine, like the film's main character, although not in the Córdoba mountains but in Buenos Aires.

Like Élica Passo, Cecilia Ramos lodges an appeal in court (which in the film is processed by her uncle and godfather), she reaches her 5th year and dies of tuberculosis before graduating.

In the film, Cecilia takes part in a Revolution between brothers (that of 1880) as did Elvira Rawson Guiñazú in another civil riot in 1890.

The welcome enrolment of Mercedes imitates Grierson's enrolment. However, hers took place almost simultaneously with that of Passo (they were classmates

at the School) and not after her death.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that in 2008 *Tierras prohibidas*, by Silvia Chagüe, was released; this is an Argentinian colour film (75'-with English subtitles-) by the CineMato Production Company that, filmed in 2007, evokes Cecilia Grierson in a documentary and fictional way. The technical details record Ana Yovino and Leonor Manso as part of the cast; Silvia Chagüe as Scriptwriter and Director; Miguel Mato as Executive Producer; Fabián Giacometti as Director of Photography; Emiliano Serra as Editor, and Javier Farina as Sound Engineer (Figure 4).

Cecilia Grierson's life undoubtedly deserved this film, but that is another story...

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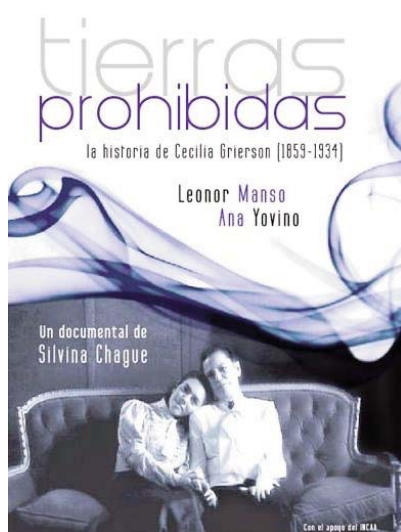


Figure 4: Argentinian poster of *Tierras prohibidas* (2008) by Silvia Chagüe, a film about Cecilia Grierson.



Argentinian poster.

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