A Useful Life (La Vida Útil)

A Useful Life, 2010, Uruguay

In Spanish, with subtitles in English
63 minutes

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ONE-PAGE SUMMARY: Before Screening

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SYNOPSIS
After twenty-five years, Cinemateca Uruguaya’s most devoted employee, Jorge (real-life Uruguayan critic Jorge Jellinek), still finds inspiration in caring for the films and audiences that grace the screen and seats of his beloved arthouse cinema. But when dwindling attendance and diminishing support force the theater to close its doors, Jorge is sent into a world he knows only through the lens of art—and suddenly is forced to discover a new passion that transcends his once-celluloid reality. Stylishly framed in black-and-white with brilliantly understated performances, Federico Veiroj’s sly and loving homage to the soul of cinema is a universally appealing gem and knowing charmer about life after the movies.

CHARACTERS/(CAST)
Jorge (Jorge Jellinek) A friendly but solitary man, second in charge at the Cinemateca Uruguaya
Martínez (Manuel Martínez Carril) Slightly dour, longtime director of the Cinemateca
Paola (Paola Venditto) A law professor and Jorge’s love interest

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. How is Jorge affected by the loss of his job? Does this change over time and if so how?
2. How does the style of the film—visual and otherwise—relate to the story and its telling? Does the style change as the story evolves, and if so, how?
3. What does the film suggest to you about the relation between cinema and “real” life?
ABOUT THE DIRECTOR: Federico Veiroj

DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT
In Spanish, “la vida útil” means the estimated duration that an object is capable of functioning correctly. In the film, I ask myself about the future of a character conceived for an activity about to finish its existence. The ‘rebirth,’ or the adaptation of that character to his new world is what interested me in developing the film. The main character, drowned in movies, will find the reply to his life in a cinematographic way. I like to think about Jorge as a Don Quixote, whose background allows him to start living his own adventures; and I think that’s the only way he has to survive.

BIOGRAPHY
Federico Veiroj was born in Montevideo, Uruguay in 1976. He received a degree in Social Communication from the Catholic University of Uruguay and began making short films in 1996. His first feature film, Acne, was awarded the Films in Progress TVE Award at the 2007 San Sebastián International Film Festival, premiered at the Directors’ Fortnight in Cannes and went on to receive the Grand Jury Prize at the 2008 AFI Festival in Los Angeles. A Useful Life is his second feature film.
FILM AESTHETICS

Film is unique as an art form in its synthesis of visual arts, writing, drama, movement and sound. The following notes about film aesthetics and technique suggest some things to watch and listen for while viewing A Useful Life.

Framing and Editing
Framing refers to the composition of an image. This includes choices like the distance between the camera and a subject, the context in which a subject appears (alone or in a crowded room, for instance) and the angle at which we see a subject. Such compositional decisions affect how we interpret a scene. For example, close-ups may be used for dramatic emphasis and to create a feeling of intimacy; wide shots from a distance may emphasize a character’s relation to setting and/or allow only a detached, impersonal view of the character. A high angle looking down may make a character seem powerless or victimized, while a low angle looking up may make a character seem powerful or menacing. Equally important to the creation of meaning in a film is editing: the sequence of individual shots. A close-up of a desperate face glancing at a cluttered table, followed by a close-up of the gun on that table, can tell us what’s in the mind of the character. Thus, two discrete images, put together in a specific order, convey a third “unseen” image or idea.

Music and Sound
Music in a film’s soundtrack can be used to comment on or enhance a setting or action. Music often underscores, literally, the emotional significance of a scene, or merely sets a mood or establishes a particular atmosphere (cheerful, somber, dangerous, etc.). In film, music and image are always in a kind of dialogue with one another.

Natural sounds can add a dimension of reality or unreality to a scene. Off-screen sounds, such as traffic noise or gunshots, can contribute subtly or overtly to the narrative elements at work within the frame.

After losing his job at the Cinematheca, Jorge moves through the city in an agitated state of mind. The soundtrack conveys this by sometimes mixing sounds from the environment (known as “diegetic” sound) with sounds not implied by this setting (“non-diegetic”). The first time this happens, Jorge is waiting to step off the city bus: we hear the growing sound of an angry mob. This continues as he walks down the street. By now it’s clear the sound is not coming from his immediate surroundings. Rather, it’s a non-realistic addition to the scene, and suggests the newly hostile or intimidating character of the city for Jorge. Such use of sound is a classic cinematic effect, here made humorous given our protagonist’s deep appreciation for film. In fact, it’s almost as if Jorge were supplying the soundtrack for us!
Dialogue
Dialogue refers to the spoken lines in a film, whether spoken “out loud” between characters or as internal monologues or narration to the audience. Dialogue helps give us the story. It also helps to situate the action by telling us what’s happened before and “off screen.” But how the dialogue is delivered often communicates much more than the literal information or meaning in the words themselves. For example, accents and word choice (including the use of slang) can say much about a character’s background or social position. Likewise, the fact that characters might use more than one language in a given conversation can suggest something about their backgrounds or the social setting. Thus, dialogue can serve several functions:

- It can help set the scene by explaining events leading up to it, or by describing something about the characters and their relationships with each other (this kind of dialogue, “exposing” the basis or background of a scene, is called exposition).
- It can serve to develop the relationships between characters.
- It can bring out or highlight indirectly some of the larger themes in the film as a whole.

Dialogue can get a point across by calling attention to itself outside the context of the story. For example, Jorge hosts the Cinemateca’s weekly radio program devoted to film appreciation. At one point, his boss Martínez is the guest. Jorge grows nervous because Martínez proves very boring and long-winded. The film represents this partly in Martínez’s droning speech, and partly in the static shot itself, where the only real action is Jorge’s subtle but growing impatience. And what, meanwhile, is Martínez discussing? He’s describing how the “alert, sensitive spectator” engages with good cinema! He uses an illustration from a film by a universal master, Eisenstein, describing a particular scene as “an apparently cold, formal exercise where the camera doesn’t move…”! While the scene’s humor comes partly from Jorge’s comic distress, no less important is this ironic link between Martínez’s dialogue and the scene’s own nature, set within the context of a self-conscious “art movie.”

Narrative Structure
The narrative structure of a film establishes the order, or way, in which the story progresses from its beginning to its end. The structure may be linear, running in a straight line chronologically from start to finish; it may be episodic, composed of a series of connected but also distinct sections; or it may even be circular, ultimately returning viewers to the beginning of the story, but with perhaps a new perspective on it. Visual and other metaphors are often employed throughout the narrative to underscore the meaning, or significance, of important parts of the story. Although a narrative usually centers on some problem or conflict inherent in the story, there is not necessarily a sense of resolution at the end of a film. In fact, the lack of resolution often spurs viewers to further consider the themes developed in the course of the narrative long after the film has ended.

The story in A Useful Life is, on the surface, very simple. A man loses his job and, at the same time, pursues a romance with a female acquaintance. But because Jorge is so closely associated with the art of motion pictures—both by virtue of his job and by being in a film that stylistically recalls a whole history of moviemaking—it’s impossible to separate his story from that of cinema itself. The narrative calls attention to the relationship between cinema and life. Note how the plot and style are in sync throughout: As Jorge’s routine dissolves, the film’s mode shifts from sedate and realistic (almost like a documentary) to animated and fanciful (as if both Jorge and the film itself were thinking of classic Hollywood comedies, musicals, and westerns, or 1960s-era French New Wave art films). This transition mirrors Jorge’s development from staid film curator to lost soul to triumphant romantic. Life becomes something like a movie of his own making.
NARRATIVE THEMES IN THE FILM *A USEFUL LIFE*

Watch for scenes or events that correspond to a particular theme, making mental or written notes as to how the theme unfolds in the film. Note whether the film developed the theme as expected, and if not, what happened instead. Questions for each theme are designed to encourage discussion.

**Working life**

1. In what ways is Jorge’s work at the Cinemateca different from other forms of employment you’re familiar with, and in what ways is it the same?

2. What is the subject of the impromptu lecture Jorge delivers to the unsuspecting class at the law school? Why do you think he impersonates a teacher and says what he says?

3. Why do you think the film is called *A Useful Life*? How does the story relate to your idea of a useful life?

4. There is one song in the soundtrack that we hear at length (and whose lyrics appear in the subtitles at the bottom of the screen). It occurs at a crucial turning point: the collapse of the Cinemateca, which leaves Jorge and Martinez without jobs. The lyrics to the song are somewhat odd. Can you recall what the song is about? How would you say the song relates (musically and/or lyrically) to what is happening in the story?

**Film as a reflection of culture**

5. Name at least two things that the film tells you about the cultural life of its setting, namely, Uruguay’s capital city of Montevideo.

6. What do you think is the value of having an institution like the Cinemateca? Try to describe in detail the functions it might serve.

7. Consider an American movie you’ve seen at the cinema recently. Based on this film, what sorts of impressions might a moviegoer at the Cinemateca Uruguaya have of the United States and its society?

8. Martinez and Jorge learn that a major funder of the Cinemateca will no longer be able to offer financial support. The man delivering this news says his organization cannot support a business that is not profitable. Do you think this is fair? What are some arguments for and against supporting a place like the Cinemateca, even at a loss? Explain which you find most compelling and why.

**Love and romance**

9. What do you think of Jorge’s notions of romance? For example, are they realistic, old-fashioned, delusional? Explain your opinion with specific references to the film and story.

10. Jorge says very little to Paola in the course of the film, and he never discusses her with anyone else. What are some of the ways the film conveys Jorge’s thoughts and feelings about Paola?
11. How are romance and cinema related in the story? Do you think, for example, that Jorge’s love and understanding of cinema influences the way he thinks about Paola? Explain with reference to specific scenes.

**Personal and social change**

12. The black-and-white photography in *A Useful Life* evokes an earlier era as well as an earlier period in filmmaking, although the story is set in the present. How does the film’s look relate to the story it’s telling?

13. After he loses his job at the Cinemateca, Jorge goes into a coffee shop and makes a call to his father on the payphone. He tells him not expect him for dinner that night. But he also assures him everything is fine. Why do you think Jorge refuses to tell his father what is really going on?

14. Jorge makes a living from his knowledge and love of film, and by helping others appreciate great film. But after he loses his job, his place in Uruguayan society—and the place of cinema there generally—is called into question. What kind of social role does film play where you live, and is there a different kind of social influence you think it could or should have?

15. Would you describe the final scene of the film as a happy ending? Why or why not? What do you think will become of Jorge now that he has left the Cinemateca?

**Art and inspiration**

16. How many different film genres (for example, a Hollywood Western) can you find allusions to in the film? What function does each serve at that specific point in the story?

17. In the recorded announcement asking for support before a screening at the Cinemateca, we hear the phrase, “You need the Cinemateca, and the Cinemateca needs you.” Do you think the role performed by the Cinemateca is one that the local community does really need? Why or why not?

18. People like Jorge and Martínez have a very serious relationship with cinema, but what does the film suggest to you about the place of cinema in the lives of most people? And is this the same for most people where you live?

19. How would you describe the attitude of the film towards the Cinemateca and similar cultural institutions devoted to the art of cinema? Support your answer by referring to specific details in the film.
PROFILE OF URUGUAY

FULL NAME: Oriental Republic of Uruguay

SIZE: 176,215 sq km (68,037 sq miles)

POPULATION: 3,316,328 (July 2012 est.)

CAPITAL: Montevideo

GOVERNMENT: Constitutional republic

RELIGION: Roman Catholic 47.1%, non-Catholic Christians 11.1%, nondenominational 23.2%, Jewish 0.3%, atheist or agnostic 17.2%, other 1.1% (2006)

ETHNIC GROUPS: white 88%, mestizo 8%, black 4%, Amerindian (practically nonexistent)

LANGUAGES: Spanish (official), Portunol, Brazilero (Portuguese-Spanish mix on the Brazilian frontier)

LITERACY: 98% (age 15 and over can read and write); 97.6% male; 98.4% female (2003 est.)

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE: 6.1% (2012 est.)

GEOGRAPHY & CLIMATE: Slightly smaller than the state of Washington, most of Uruguay’s low-lying landscape (three-quarters of the country) is grassland, ideal for raising cattle and sheep. Rolling plains and low hills make up most of the country, with fertile coastal lowland to the south. The climate is warm, temperate, rarely freezing, with seasonal droughts, floods and high winds (including the pampero, a chilly and occasional violent wind that blows north from the Argentine pampas). The absence of mountains, which act as weather barriers, means all locations are particularly vulnerable to rapid changes from weather fronts.

CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: Water pollution from meat packing/tannery industry; inadequate solid/hazardous waste disposal.

(Source: CIA World Factbook)
BACKGROUND

Uruguay, couched between Brazil and Argentina on the east coast of South America, is the second-smallest state on the South American continent (after Suriname). Its capital, Montevideo, sprawls beside the Atlantic Ocean on the country’s southern coast, near the mouth of the Río de la Plata. Montevideo is Uruguay’s main port and its biggest city by far, containing over 40% of the entire population.

Mostly made of gently rolling plateau, Uruguay lacks any mountain ranges. Its weather is generally mild year-round. Lying entirely within a temperate zone, Uruguay is the only Latin American country without any tropical territory. Uruguay has also been, generally speaking, one of Latin America’s most politically and economically stable as well as socially progressive societies. It was among the very first countries of Latin America to establish a welfare state. Uruguay has a high literacy rate and a large urban middle class. Moreover, relatively even income distribution means that the average Uruguayan enjoys a higher standard of living compared to that of many other Latin Americans.

Also unusual is Uruguay’s strict separation of church and state. While the vast majority of the population remains nominally Roman Catholic, most Uruguayans do not actively practice any religion and the government demonstrates a strong secular orientation. In matters pertaining to gay rights, for example, Uruguay leads much of Latin America and the United States in the passing of legislation designed to ensure more equal treatment under the law. Uruguay remains a staunch advocate of constitutional democracy, political pluralism and civil liberties.

Uruguay distinguishes itself in yet another way from its Latin American neighbors: its population is overwhelmingly of European descent (nearly 90% of the total population), mostly of Spanish and Italian extraction. At the same time, while Uruguay is largely free of the starker disparities in income visible in much of Latin America and the United States, the minority populations of African or mixed European-indigenous descent make up a disproportionately high number of its poorest citizens.

HISTORY

The indigenous people of Uruguay were mostly nomadic hunter-gatherers Archeological remains found in northern Uruguay dating back 10,000 years point to two former hunter-gatherer cultures, the Catalan and the Cuareim. About 4000 years ago, two other linguistically distinct groups arrived in the region: the Charrúa and the Tupí-Guaraní. Other indigenous groups that have inhabited the region of modern-day Uruguay include the Yaro, Chaná and Bohane, with the Chaná developing agriculture and ceramics. At the time of the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century, the only inhabitants of what would become the country of Uruguay were the Charrúa people, comprised of nomadic tribes covering an area that also included northeastern Argentina and southern Brazil. Subsisting on hunting, fishing and foraging, they left no permanent structures due to their itinerant lifestyle. The lack of permanent settlements made this territory distinct from much of the rest of Latin America.

The Spanish meet fierce resistance from the indigenous population Spanish explorers led by Juan Díaz de Solís, searching for a waterway linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, reached the Río de la Plata of present-day Uruguay in 1516. Reportedly, the ship was immediately attacked by the local Charrúa, who killed everyone onboard except for a boy who was rescued over a decade later by Sebastian Cabot, an English seaman in the service of Spain. While the Charrúa would menace Spanish colonials for the next three centuries, historians have since suggested that the real attackers of Juan Díaz de Solís’s ship were in fact Guaraní tribesmen. Nevertheless, the “Charrúa legend” endures as a permanent symbol of courageous
resistance to oppression. Indeed, the hostility of the native population and the lack of any gold or silver in the region combined to discourage extensive Spanish settlement for many years.

The Spanish introduce cattle and horses to the region amid Charrúa resistance  Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan landed at the bay of the Río de la Plata in 1520, at the site of the future capital, Montevideo. More expeditions soon went further into the territory and its rivers. But it was the first Spanish governor of the Río de la Plata region, Hernando Arias de Saavedra, who compensated for the disappointing absence of precious metals by introducing cattle and horses to the area’s rich pastures in 1603. Portuguese and English inhabitants joined in exploiting the wealth potential of cattle. At the same time, the Charrúas gained from Spanish knowledge of horsemanship, which increased their ability to resist European encroachment despite a population numbering only about 10,000 in the 18th century. Resistance would finally give way, however, before a large influx of colonizers from Brazil and Argentina, who were after the large herds of cattle and horses. Eventually, genocidal warfare, European diseases (to which indigenous peoples had no natural immunities) and intermarriage all combined to reduce the Charrúa population drastically until, by 1850, pure-blooded Charrúa natives had essentially disappeared.

Spain responds to Portugal’s expansion of Brazil’s frontiers, leading to the founding of Montevideo  Spanish colonization of the region increased in earnest by the early 1700s as a means of checking Portuguese competition, which was pushing southward from Brazil’s frontiers. Portugal had founded Colonia del Sacramento on the Río de la Plata, across from Buenos Aires. The Spanish king responded by ordering the building of a military stronghold, Fuerte de San José, at the site of present-day Montevideo. Subsequently, the Spanish port of San Felipe de Montevideo was founded in 1726. The Spanish crown distributed plots of land to new settlers who eventually spread throughout the interior. Montevideo’s large natural harbor gave it an advantage, meanwhile, over Buenos Aires. This would contribute to a rivalry between the two cities that worsened in 1776 with the establishment of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata, with Buenos Aires as its capital. Montevideo, a growing commercial center, gained the authority to trade directly with Spain instead of going through Buenos Aires.

Montevideo’s commercial role grows with the slave trade  The use of salted beef as food for ship crews and for slaves in Cuba expanded the commercial activity in the port of Montevideo. The port came to serve as a major entry for the transfer of African slaves into Latin America. Actual numbers of slaves in Uruguay, however, remained relatively low since the raising of livestock, the country’s main economic enterprise, was not labor intensive. Moreover, labor needs in the region were being met by increasing immigration from Europe. New Spanish settlements were encouraged throughout the 18th century as a buffer to separate Spanish and Portuguese colonial possessions.

European wars affect colonial life and politics in the early 19th century, sewing seeds of independence  The development of Uruguay in the early 19th century was shaped by conflicts between Britain, Spain, Portugal and local colonial forces over control of the territory then known as the Banda Oriental (essentially present-day Uruguay and some parts of southern Brazil). In 1806, British forces, then at war with Spain, invaded the Río de la Plata Estuary, occupying Montevideo in early 1807 in response to the Spanish re-capture of Buenos Aires. The British forces abandoned the city in July to retake Buenos Aires but were defeated in the attempt. The following year, France’s Emperor Napoleon invaded Spain and unseated King Ferdinand VII, installing his brother Joseph on the Spanish throne. Montevideo’s cabildo (or town council) created an autonomous junta that remained loyal to Ferdinand VII. The city’s military commander, Javier Elió, soon brought the junta under his control. In Buenos Aires in 1810, criollos (or native-born colonials of Spanish parents) took control of the government from the Spanish viceroy, dividing opinion in the region between those who favored an autonomous government and those who remained nominally loyal to the Spanish Crown.
José Gervasio Artigas launches a revolt against Spain, leading to the creation of Uruguay as a buffer state between Brazil and Argentina In 1811, the Montevideo-born military officer José Gervasio Artigas, today a national hero in Uruguay, led a successful revolt against Spanish rule. But in 1816, Portuguese troops invaded the Banda Oriental from Brazil, capturing Montevideo in early 1817. The struggle continued for several years until Artigas was forced to flee into exile in Paraguay in 1820 (where he died 30 years later). The following year, in 1821, the Portuguese annexed the Banda Oriental and incorporated it into Brazilian territory. The new province, however, revolted repeatedly and finally, in 1825, declared itself independent and in regional federation with Argentina, sparking a three-year war between Brazil and Argentina. The Argentine victory over Brazil led to the 1828 Treaty of Montevideo, brokered by the British, which formally created the independent state of Uruguay.

Uruguay’s volatile early development in the 19th century The new nation adopted its first constitution in 1830. At this time, the estimated population was less than 75,000, with less than 20% of that residing in the capital, Montevideo. Most people lived throughout the countryside, where political power formed around caudillos, local leaders who won allegiance for their wealth or bravery. Two of the biggest caudillos at the time of independence later became presidents, including Fructuoso Rivera, who was elected the country’s first president in 1830 and serving two terms (1830–35, 1838–43). Between his terms, Rivera, who dominated the first four decades and more of the new nation’s political history, chose General Manuel Oribe (another powerful caudillo) as his successor. But Oribe soon broke with Rivera and their at-times violent rivalry led to the forming of two distinct political blocs, the Colorados (led by Rivera) and the Blancos (led by Oribe). The names came from the red and white hatbands, respectively, which were worn in the battles that erupted between the two sides in 1836. Having initiated what would be a long period of civil strife, these two groups later evolved into the Colorado Party and the National Party (a.k.a. the Blancos). For the rest of the 19th century, Uruguay would see both elected and appointed leaders, as well as interventions by neighboring states, amid serious political and economic turmoil. This period also saw a significantly large wave of immigrants, mostly from Europe.

Uruguay’s modern political development begins in the early 20th century After a stint as acting president in 1899, José Batlle y Ordóñez, son of former President Lorenzo Batlle y Grau, was elected to the presidency twice, serving from 1903 to 1907 and from 1911 to 1915. The staunchly anti-militarist Batlle y Ordóñez was a member of the Colorado Party, the founder of the newspaper El Día (1886) and a non-Marxist social democrat. Huge changes, including those that established Uruguay’s modern political system, took shape under his rule. In 1904, he had managed to put an end to the ongoing intermittent civil war with the Treaty of Aceguá, ushering in an era of relative civil peace. In his second term, Batlle y Ordóñez initiated a campaign of state action against economic imperialism from abroad, a movement known as Batllismo. Reforms taking place under this movement included the relatively early introduction of universal suffrage in 1910, as well as the eight-hour workday (1915) and unemployment compensation (1914). These reforms set the precedent for extensive government involvement in the economy, as the state took over previously privately held monopolies and imposed protective tariffs on foreign imports. Uruguay’s livestock industry, the country’s main source of wealth, benefited from the protectionism. At the same time, the new constitution of 1910 would prove a strong bulwark against the kinds of power grabs that haunted other South American countries during this period. Some of Batlle y Ordoñez’s widespread political, social, and economic reforms were continued by his successors in office.

A coup d’état in Uruguay during the Great Depression Politics grew increasingly polarized in Uruguay under the strain of rising unemployment and national debt, and reform measures by the administration of President Gabriel Terra (1931–38) that particularly affected and alarmed wealthy interests in the country. The financial crisis and political tensions provoked Terra into staging a coup d’état and taking control of the
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government in 1933. A new constitution—giving more power to the executive branch while also bringing in female suffrage among other reforms—was submitted to a plebiscite (a vote by the people of a country) in 1934. A revolt against Terra’s harsh rule in 1935 was met with a brutal crackdown. Other results of Terra’s dictatorial rule included the deportation of opposition leaders and press censorship. The general elections of 1938 (in which women were allowed to vote for the first time) saw the election of Colorado Party candidate, and Terra’s brother-in-law, General Alfredo Baldomir (1938–43). Batllists, Independent Nationalists and Radical Blancos refused to participate in the election.

An end to dictatorship during World War II and beyond  

Baldomir steered Uruguay’s course though World War II, ultimately bringing it in line with the Allied cause against the Axis powers, with which Uruguay had maintained relations heretofore. The following administration of Juan José de Amézaga (1943–47), greeted as the first wholly constitutional presidency since Terra’s 1933 coup, returned the political system to social legislation and an interventionist and welfare role for the state. Further popular reforms went forward under Luis Batlle Berres (1947–51), the nephew of former president José Batlle y Ordóñez. Batlle Berres, who saw the state’s role as maintaining social peace and correcting the inequalities produced by the socioeconomic system, led a multi-class movement advocating compromise and conciliation. He was succeeded by another Batllist, Andrés Martínez Trueba (1951–55), who oversaw the promulgating of a new constitution. A plebiscite accepted the constitution in 1951, restoring the plural executive (the colegiado) that had first been put into practice by José Batlle y Ordóñez. This was a period of unprecedented prosperity for Uruguay, whose purely collegial, Swiss-style executive branch lent weight to the country’s nickname as the “Switzerland of South America.”

Economic decline in the 1950s leads to growing unrest and a military coup in 1973  

Reduced exports, falling agricultural prices, labor unrest, and unemployment plagued the era following the prosperous early 1950s. Gross National Product (GNP) fell 12% between 1956 and 1972. Real wages fell dramatically during this period as well, as labor unrest increased despite various government measures and concessions. In this context, the Colorado Party lost control of the government for the first time in 94 years and was replaced by the National Party (NP). No less than eight NP governments ruled Uruguay between 1959 and 1967 amid continuing economic and social turmoil. The Colorado Party came back into power in 1967 with the election of General Oscar Gestido (1967), but he soon died in office and was replaced by his little known vice president, Jorge Pacheco Areco (1967–72). Pacheco swung the country in an extreme rightward direction, instigating a limited siege of state and provoking a dark chapter in modern Uruguayan history. The security measures he put in action to deal with domestic disturbances and unrest were justified as a response to a growing urban guerrilla movement under the Tupamaros.

The MLN (Tupamaros) escalate an insurrection against the state  

The MLN (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional or National Liberation Movement), also known as the Tupamaros (a name derived from Peru’s Incan revolutionary, Túpac Amaru II), joined the peasant movement with workers unions in impoverished areas of the country. The Tupamaros’ influence, which grew in opposition to increasing influence of the Uruguayan military, reached its height in the early 1970s. It was then that the Tupamaros renewed armed struggle after a six-month truce. But they were up against a determined administration headed by President-turned-Dictator Juan María Bordaberry (1972–76) and an increasingly sophisticated and unrestrained military. In the spring of 1972, following an armed battle with the Tupamaros, Bordaberry declared a state of “internal war” and suspended all civil liberties. In July, his government enacted the highly repressive State Security Law. Under these conditions the army soon defeated the Tupamaros and imprisoned its surviving members or forced them into exile. The military then moved to overthrow civilian rule altogether. In 1973, amid increasing unrest and economic insecurity, the armed forces took over Uruguay’s government, shutting down Congress and putting in place a repressive civilian-military regime that was characterized by
widespread human rights abuses. After a 1980 plebiscite rejected a new military-drafted constitution, the military rulers announced a plan for return to civilian rule and in 1984 elections were once again held.

**The presidency of Julio Maria Sanguinetti marks the return of civilian rule** In the first free elections since 1973, Colorado Party leader Julio Maria Sanguinetti won a five-year term as president that began in 1985. His administration spearheaded economic reforms geared toward attracting foreign capital and trade, and a consolidation of democratic processes following the long period of military rule. As an act of reconciliation, Sanguinetti put forward a controversial general amnesty for military leaders accused of human rights violations under the former regime, and expedited the release of former guerrillas. The National Party’s Luis Alberto Lacalle followed Sanguinetti as president, serving from 1990 to 1995. His administration pursued major economic reforms and further liberalization of trade. In 1991, Uruguay became a founding member of Mercosur, the Southern Cone Common Market, which includes Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. The structural adjustment and privatization measures under Lacalle provoked political opposition despite overall growth in the period, and some of these reforms were later overturned in referendums. Sanguinetti won a second term in 1994, returned to power from 1995 to 2000 and continued economic reforms as well as other improvements designed to strengthen social security, the electoral system, education and public safety; however, problems in the country’s principal export markets triggered an economic downturn by 1999.

**Uruguay into the 21st century: liberalization and declining influence among the two leading parties** That year (1999), Colorado Party candidate Jorge Batlle (with help from traditional rival the Nationalist Party) defeated left challenger Tabaré Vázquez of the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) coalition. But the Colorado-National coalition fell apart in late 2002, with the National Party withdrawing its ministers from Batlle’s cabinet as the president faced the deepest economic crisis in the country’s recent history. Batlle’s efforts met with a strong measure of success, attracting foreign capital to the country. He also tried to deal with the aftermath of the repression and disappearances under the former military regime. Meanwhile, the Frente Amplio coalition, which ruled Montevideo since 1990 and joined various left-of-center political factions, continued to grow in popularity. Its candidate Tabaré Vázquez ran again in 2004 and won, beating out Blanco candidate Jorge Larrañaga. Among other things, the Vázquez administration pursued its campaign promise to re-open inquiry into the human rights abuses committed under the military dictatorship.

**POPULAR CULTURE**

**Film culture in Uruguay begins in 1896, and an erratic film industry emerges shortly afterward** The first film shown in Uruguay screened on July 18, 1896 at the Salón Rouge, a dance hall in Montevideo. Soon after, motion picture screenings also took place at the Teatro San Felipe, where they were added to the traditional zarzuela (light operetta) programming. By the end of the year, Montevideo saw the opening of its first theater devoted specifically to moving pictures.

Spanish-born Félix Oliver (1856–1932) was Uruguay’s first filmmaker, and his *Bicycle Race in the Arroyo Seco Velodrome* was one of the very first films produced anywhere in Latin America. (It is today housed at the Cinemateca Uruguaya, along with other short scenes of Uruguayan life filmed by Oliver in the first years of the 20th century.) French-born Henri Corbicier soon followed Oliver’s lead with *The Peace of 1904*, a documentary detailing the end of Uruguay’s civil war in the Treaty of Aceguá. In 1909, Lorenzo Adroher established the country’s first film production company with cameras and a projector he obtained from the factory of the pioneering Lumière brothers in Lyons, France. Adroher also opened a movie theater with his own brother, Juan, where they showed their own non-fiction and newsreel films as well as films from Europe. (Corbicier produced Uruguay’s first newsreel in 1908.) The brothers’ business ended amid the economic repercussions following the outbreak of World War I.
Film production in Uruguay continued to be a very sporadic affair after that initial period, owing largely to the small size of the country and its market, and the dominating influence of foreign films and film industries. In particular, the influence of American film and television in Uruguay was and is enormous, as it is throughout Latin America. At the same time, Uruguay’s film and television industries have faced stiff regional competition from much larger and more developed markets in neighboring countries like Argentina and Brazil. Moreover, state support for local filmmaking has generally been minimal. Likewise, internal political conflict has contributed to the erratic fortunes of a homegrown Uruguayan cinema, despite the persistent popularity of cinema itself. The military regime that came into power in 1973, for example, brought a dramatic if temporary halt to Uruguay’s active film culture. After a burst of socially conscious and politically outspoken films in the 1960s, filmmakers like Ugo Ulive (b. 1933) and Mario Handler (b. 1935) found themselves prevented from working. Handler went into years of exile on the eve of the military coup.

Since 2009, Uruguay’s Ministries of Tourism and Culture have sponsored an annual Latin Film Festival in Punta del Este (a resort town on the country’s southern tip), an international festival focusing on the cinema of Spanish-speaking countries. Beyond such international film festivals, most of Montevideo’s movie-going public today flock to the cinemas concentrated in the shopping malls east of downtown, or enjoy art films and harder-to-find international titles at places like the Cinemateca Uruguaya (more on the Cinemateca below).

**Exceedingly popular Uruguayan soccer has a prestigious past** Soccer plays a large role in Uruguayan popular culture. Uruguay’s national soccer team, known as La Celeste (The Blue Sky), has an illustrious history, twice winning the FIFA World Cup™ in 1930 and 1950, in addition to other international glories (including two Olympic gold medals, in 1924 and 1928). The 1930 victory came as Uruguay hosted the very first FIFA World Cup competition, with all games taking place in Montevideo. These achievements are all the more impressive since Uruguay is by far the smallest country to ever win a World Cup. (The 1930 win also had an indirect impact on the development of Uruguayan cinema: Justino Zavala Muniz produced popular documentaries around the victorious World Cup competition, and the success of these helped him in founding the influential Uruguayan Cine-Club.) The 2010 World Cup games in South Africa marked the first time since 1970 that the Uruguayan team had made it as far as a fourth place finish—and this despite just barely qualifying for the competition. The strong showing was a euphoric outcome for fans back home, made sweeter by the awarding of the Golden Ball to Uruguay’s star forward, Diego Forlán, as the best player of the tournament. Montevideo is home to two major South American football clubs: Nacional and Peñarol.

**Eduardo Galeano, Uruguay’s literary giant** One of the towering figures in contemporary Latin American literature is Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, who has built a far-reaching reputation as a journalist, essayist, novelist and historian. Born in Montevideo in 1940, Galeano worked at odd jobs while still in his teens and sold his first political cartoon to a socialist weekly at age 14. His novel and other books dealing with political and cultural life led to his arrest and imprisonment in the 1973 military coup, followed by years of exile, first in Argentina and later, after that country’s military coup in 1976, in Spain. He continued publishing from abroad. Among his many important works is Las Venas Abiertas de América Latina (The Open Veins of Latin America, 1971), which first brought him worldwide acclaim and has since been widely translated, making Galeano one of the most read of Latin American authors. Written in an unconventional style but deeply researched and documented, the book’s central theme is the ongoing imperial exploitation of Latin America’s population and natural resources since the arrival of Europeans in the late 15th century. Galeano, a lifelong soccer fanatic, also wrote an admired book called Soccer in Sun and Shadow (1995).
URUGUAY TODAY

Former left-wing militant José Mujica becomes president in 2009  José Mujica’s victory in Uruguay’s 2009 presidential elections confirmed a decisive shift away from the conservative rule represented by his main opponent, former President Luis Alberto Lacalle, whose administration (1990–95) had been tainted by corruption scandals. Mujica, who spent nearly 15 years in prison under the country’s military dictatorship, succeeded the popular Tabaré Vázquez, Uruguay’s first leftist president. Both men were candidates of the center-left coalition, Frente Amplio.

Uruguay’s economy relatively stable but vulnerable  Uruguay’s economy relies heavily on agriculture and services, including livestock and related exports. This leaves it especially vulnerable to fluctuations in global prices for such goods. A tourist industry has blossomed, thanks to the country’s attractive beach resorts, colonial towns and consistently mild climate. Offshore banking has also somewhat lifted the economy. Uruguay also has a small but rapidly expanding information software industry. Nevertheless, economic downturns in neighboring Argentina and Brazil—whose populations absorb a disproportionate share of Uruguay’s exports as well as supply the bulk of its tourists—led to a serious economic crisis in 2002. This was met with infusions of cash from the International Monetary Fund and a restructuring of the country’s foreign debt. The ensuing recovery still left many mired in poverty, however, and limited opportunities forced many younger Uruguays to leave the country. By 2009, the global economic recession slowed Uruguay’s growth, which was based largely on increased exports. Uruguay is still considered a positive investment climate, given its open financial markets and robust legal system. State involvement in the economy has long been significant and privatization frowned upon—the state owns all or part of companies dealing in insurance, water supply, electricity, telephone service, petroleum refining, airlines, postal service, railways and banking. Recent governments have nevertheless put forward modest degrees of economic liberalization as in many other Latin American countries, including lowering tariffs and reducing the size of government. In recent years, Uruguay has sought to diversify its trade and consequently reduce its economic dependence on Argentina and Brazil. Uruguay is a founding member of Mercosur, the South American trading bloc that also includes Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil.

Recent emigration of younger Uruguays  Uruguay has seen a significant amount of emigration, particularly of younger people who face limited opportunities for advancement in the current economic climate. Approximately 500,000 Uruguayans have left the country over the past two decades, mostly going to Spain and Argentina, although emigration to the United States has also risen. This emigration combined with a low birth rate and high life expectancy means that Uruguay’s is generally an older population.
REFERENCES FROM THE FILM:

**Cinemateca Uruguaya**  The story of the Cinemateca Uruguaya as depicted in the film is fictionalized, but the Cinemateca is a real and ongoing cultural institution of Uruguay. A member of FIAF (Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film), the Cinemateca is dedicated to the conservation, preservation and exhibition of films from all over the world. Its mission includes conservation of all films produced in Uruguay since the 19th century. Each year in Montevideo it mounts the International Film Festival of Uruguay, jointly sponsored by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Tourism and the Municipality of Montevideo. The Cinemateca also holds thousands of international film titles in its vaults. In addition to the annual International Film Festival, the Cinemateca presents screenings to the public and its film club membership at its five cinemas throughout the year, as well as hosts a number of smaller festivals.
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