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POLITICS OF ARCHITECTURE IN CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINE CINEMA

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Politics of Architecture in Contemporary Argentine Cinema

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Latin American film studies in a global perspective. These meetings have offered me an invaluable international perspective on my research into contemporary Argentine film.

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An earlier version of Chap. 6 was published in Spanish as "Reciclaje y homenaje en la ciudad televisiva de *La antena* (Esteban Sapir, 2007)," in *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, 2012 (http://nuevomundo.revues.org/62618). This is published with permission of the Editorial Board of *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the essay "Montage and Architecture" (1937), Sergei Eisenstein calls the Acropolis of Athens "the perfect example of one of the most ancient films" (117). For the Russian filmmaker, a walk through the Parthenon underscores the sequential logic of its concept; a montage of impressions evokes architectural wonder in the moving viewer. When a movie camera captures architecture on film, sequential appreciation of built spaces is achieved. In film, movement through architecture not only draws out the aesthetic power of a building, but it also has the potential to reveal social truths. Contemporary Argentine cinema fully embraces the possibilities of architecture in film. Indeed, in this cinema, the meanings of architectural sites are shown to question and even subvert social, political and economic hierarchies.

The parallels between architecture and filmmaking have been noted by scholars throughout the extended century of cinema. Giuliana Bruno's theoretical studies have revealed the architectural essence of cinematic screens that capture and reframe spaces and then link them to an emotional response.[1] From the perspective of architectural history, Anthony Vidler has noted the intimate connections between architecture and film since the nineteenth century: "Architects have taken their cue from film, filmmakers from architects" ("Foreword", ix). This observation was shared by the historian Sigfried Giedion, who "coined the triplet 'space, time, and architecture,'" as well as by the architect Le Corbusier and Sergei Eisenstein, as the "emblematic duo of this cross-medium relationship" ("Foreword", ix). In Vidler's words, not only did

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"Walter Benjamin seal…the marriage as a product of modern technological reproduction," but "psychology reinforced it with the concept of mental projection" ("Foreword", ix).[2] Particular cinematic and architectural contexts have spawned different interpretations of this dynamic interchange. In Argentine cinema since the mid-1990s, architecture has become a political signifier of contemporary socioeconomic conditions.

In these films of the last quarter-century, architecture has served to illustrate the Socioeconomic status quo that developed in Argentina from a combination of the atrocities of dictatorship, classist hierarchies and zealous neoliberal policies. Buildings shown in films of the late 1990s critique the outcomes of Carlos Menem's decade of presidency (1989–1999). Youth marginalization and lack of access to employment are both reflected in the architectural mises-en-scène of *Pizza birra faso* (Caetano and Stagnaro 1997) and *Mundo grúa* (Trapero 1999), while the architecture of *Nueve reinas* (Bielinsky 2000) reveal the globalizing influences of neoliberalism.

Later films respond to revised possibilities during Néstor Kirchner's government (2003–2007), seeking reconciliation with the disturbing legacy of dictatorship. Images of haunting reminders of totalitarianism emerge throughout the constructed environments of *La niña santa* (Martel 2004) and *La antena* (Sapir 2007). The focus on Le Corbusier's house in *El hombre de al lado* (Cohn and Duprat 2009) underscore the continuing dominance of economic hierarchies in contemporary Argentina.

History of Argentine Architecture and Filmmaking

The importance of architecture in Argentine cinema reflects the significant real and symbolic impact of urban development in the country during the 1990s and 2000s, spurred on by global economics and radical changes in Argentina's government. Development of the modern city of Buenos Aires has been marked by changes in economic priorities and population, shifts that have transformed the city in four distinct stages according to Guillermo Tella (2007, 64–66).

The first phase of development (1870–1930), characterized by an economy based on agricultural exports and an important wave of immigration from Europe, consolidated the urban population around railway stations in central Buenos Aires. The periphery of the city gained greater significance in the second stage between 1940 and 1960, due to internal

migration from the countryside and the new economy of import substitution. During the third phase, 1960–1980, this economic model began to be dismantled, and the city saw a reduction in political controls on public services such as housing and transportation. Urban population growth also declined during these decades. Finally, the 1980s and 1990s represented the era of the globalized economy, characterized by the opening of borders, economic and financial deregulation, and the privatization of public companies (Tella, 64–66).

The last decade of the twentieth century saw a significant transformation of the architectural landscape of Buenos Aires and surrounding areas as Menemist policies favored the development of roadways, upscale shopping centers, superstores and, in the outlying regions of the city, gated communities. Promoting an American lifestyle, car culture burgeoned during the 1990s, and government investment in the highway infrastructure between 1990 and 1998 boosted roadways to serve the rising number of gated communities outside of the city, much to the detriment of middle- and lower-class urban neighborhoods (Cerruti and Grimson 2004, 27–28).[3] Most real estate investment was focussed on enclosing upscale residential areas, as well as on some public areas. Recreational places such as parks, beaches and historical sites became increasingly subject to privatization. Wealthy investors purchased these sites for personal use, or corporations transformed them into shopping malls and commercial real estate (Guano 2002, 186). Downtown, newly developed malls, shops and restaurants catered to the international business community, a change that was especially evident in the gentrification of the central port, Puerto Madero. As described by Emanuela Guano, the new Americanized cityscape that developed during this decade combined elements of Los Angeles with its gated communities, Manhattan with its skyscrapers and Miami with its shopping centers (185).[4]

The post-neoliberal era of the 2000s—after the 2001 economic crisis and the country's subsequent recovery during the Néstor Kirchner government starting in 2003—saw new restrictions on international investment in Argentina. While housing prices increased dramatically during this decade—from the historic low in 2002 following the economic crisis, to a level higher than before 2001 at the close of the decade—government investment in residential areas also increased during this period, although the high real estate prices handicapped the state's financial capacity.[5]

Especially in comparison to other Latin American cities such as Lima, Santiago, Mexico City and Sao Paolo, Buenos Aires maintained and

improved the vitality of its downtown and subcentros metropolitanos [metropolitan subcenters] during this decade due to a preference for multifamily housing, vertical construction, the recuperation of local businesses and open air shopping centers (Ciccolella and Vecslir 2012, 26).[6]

What marked the 2000s in this context was the renewed participation of the state in urban development; nevertheless, this change in government policy did little to improve the living conditions of the lower classes. Kirchner's government invested the equivalent of seven billion US dollars in the Programa Federal set up in 2004 to build 120,000 houses for the lower classes across Argentina (McGuirk 2014, 38). However, despite the government's good intentions, spaces designed for the middle and upper classes multiplied as much as those of the lower classes during this same decade (Ciccolella and Vecslir, 38).

In the same way that these political shifts affected urban development during the 1990s and 2000s, they also had a significant impact on the Argentine film industry. Argentine filmmaking in the 1980s followed, to a great extent, the techniques of Hollywood. Highly acclaimed and polished films from the 1980s often depicted allegorical and sometimes surreal or fantastical narratives. Politically, the recent dictatorship in the government emerged in films of this era in historical comparison and through analogies between family and political structures in *Camila* (Bemberg 1984) and *La historia oficial* (Puenzo 1985)—the first Argentine film to garner the coveted Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film—or through uncanny, surreal and highly stylized films that conflated political and personal disappearance in *Hombre mirando al sudeste* (Subiela 1986) and *Sur* (Solanas 1988).

The 1990s saw dramatic changes in Argentine filmmaking, motivated in part by shifts in government policy surrounding the national film industry. After cancelling all forms of government subsidies and support, and decimating the national film industry in the first years of his presidency,[7] Carlos Menem yielded to pressure from members of the film industry and approved the Ley de Cine 24.377 in 1994, which revitalized the national industry and helped to foster new productions. Implemented in 1995, the new law introduced screen quotas and subsidies for national cinema and ordered that ten percent of box office earnings be invested in a fund for national directors and producers to contribute to the development of the national film industry. This law also dictated the establishment of a regulatory organization for the national

film industry: the Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales (INCAA) (Rocha, "Contemporary Argentine Cinema" 2011, 17–34).

New Argentine Cinema, the name that marks independent films from that era, was characterized by a fresh generation of filmmakers—Martín Rejtman, Lucrecia Martel, Pablo Trapero, Diego Lerman, Albertina Carri, Adrián Caetano, and others—who approached cinema in ways that broke with traditional strategies of production and projection. These films adopted a nuevo régimen creativo [new creative system] as Gonzalo Aguilar called it. Through flexible and original narratives, they attempted to make sense of a changed world (Aguilar 2006, 14). For Joanna Page, this cinema "[did] not 'strip away' representational layers to present us with raw reality but replace[d] one aesthetic with another" (*Crisis and Capitalism*, 35).

Having pursued higher education in the art of filmmaking, the directors of New Argentine Cinema brought trained and skilled techniques to their work, and learned to draw benefits from a small budget. Lacking the finances to repeat the filming of problematic sequences, certain "mistakes" in cinematography were used to advantage in these films. Rather than cutting imperfect footage, filmmakers sometimes chose to create a particular tone from the "mistake." While cinematographic conventions were challenged in this way, generic limits also became fluid in many films of the New Argentine Cinema, most notably, distinctions between documentary and fiction characterized a number of these films such as *Los rubios* (Carri 2003), *Bar El Chino* (Burak 2003) and *Bolivia* (Caetano 2001).

Connections with documentary filmmaking also informed casting decisions: directors frequently hired nonactors, choosing people for their particular attitudes or gestures. Lucrecia Martel cast her films primarily with local residents from her home town of Salta. The protagonist of *Mundo grúa*, Luis Margani (Rulo), was a family friend of the director, Pablo Trapero, and started his acting career with that movie.

However, while the New Argentine Cinema maintained its prominence into the early part of the 2000s, mainstream films and *cine militante* [militant cinema] continued to develop (Lillo 2015, 8). Importantly, Argentine commercial cinema reached international audiences; Campanella's *El hijo de la novia* (2001) was nominated for an Oscar in 2002, and his *El secreto de sus ojos* (2009) won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 2010. Fernando Solanas, a principal director of the revolutionary New Latin American Cinema from the

1960s and 1970s,[8] produced five documentary films that critiqued neoliberalism during the 2000s—*Memoria del saqueo* (2004), *La dignidad de los nadies* (2005), *Argentina latente* (2007), *La próxima estación* (2008) and *La tierra sublevada* (2009).

This book studies representative films of several categories of Argentine cinema from the 1990s and 2000s. The independent films, Caetano and Stagnaro's *Pizza birra faso* and Trapero's *Mundo grúa*, pertain to New Argentine Cinema. Their young directors exploite small budgets to the fullest by creating a film aesthetic that values cinematographic "mistakes"; they hire untrained actors for their productions; and they experiment with generic limits between fiction and documentary. On the other hand, *Nueve reinas* and *El hombre de al lado* more readily represent mainstream cinema because of their polished aesthetics, captivating storylines and high production values. While usually considered part of New Argentine Cinema, *La niña santa* and *La antena* both employ a personalized aesthetic that sets them apart from this and any other broad cinematic category. Martel's camerawork and sound are developed rigorously to construct meaningful intertexts among the three films of her Salta trilogy; each gesture and movement of her protagonists, each camera take and sound recording, is shaped meticulously. Sapir's film uses another original approach. This director mixes silent film aesthetics into a modern-day cinematic production, in a way that would be best described as "experimental cinema" with its black-and-white cinematography and surrealist qualities. Each of these six films represents different approaches to countering debilitating contemporary strategies as they use the powerful potential of architecture to convey political meaning.

Architecture in Argentine Film

During the 1990s and the 2000s, one building type becomes representative of the economic, political, architectural and cultural landscape: the shopping center. Symbolic of the globalized economy and neoliberal values, the shopping center also inspired a new means for experiencing the city visually, which gives it particular pertinence for studying cinematic expression. For Beatriz Sarlo, contemporary *porteño* residents take advantage of shopping centers for their organizing features in contrast to the destabilizing urban landscape surrounding them. The city evokes a desorden visual [visual disorder] that the shopping center counters with its

discipline and organization (Sarlo 2009, 24). The urban resident's passive visit to such a site could, for Sarlo, even be equated with "serenity":

> Si se experimenta a la ciudad como peligrosa, el *shopping* produce serenidad porque es muy fácil de conocer y sus cambios son también sencillos de descifrar (como la experiencia televisiva, la del *shopping* es casi instantánea y sin instrucciones). La ciudad presenta una proliferación de signos de naturalezas encontradas que se asocian, compiten, se anulan o entran en conflicto. Por definición, el *shopping* tiene que expulsar estas tramas espesas de signos, no puede estar cubierto de capas y capas de configuraciones significativas; su ideal es presentar una superficie sin profundidad oculta. En este aspecto, es un clásico artefacto posmoderno que se brinda por completo en sus superficies: pura decoración, escenografía que se representa a sí misma. (25)

> [If the city feels dangerous, the shopping center produces serenity because it is very easy to comprehend and to decipher (like the television experience, that of the shopping center is almost instantaneous and requires no instructions). The city presents a proliferation of natural signs that associate, compete, cancel each other out or enter into conflict. By definition, the shopping center must expel these dense correlations of signs; it cannot be coated in layers and layers of significance. Its ideal is to present a surface without hidden depth. In this way, it is a classic postmodern artefact that is offered completely in surfaces: pure decoration, scenography that represents itself.]

In its ability to organize the destabilizing environment of the city, the shopping center represents clarity for residents, a reaction that Argentine films from this era confront and overturn by privileging other architectural symbols, other personal reactions to architectural sites, and creating other ways of being impressed by contemporary architecture and the urban landscape. Indeed, the shopping center exemplifies the ultimate architectural site for the films analyzed in this book. While none displays the shopping center on screen, all confront its symbolism—neoliberalism, superficiality, consumerism—as threatening the creation of contemporary communities. Protagonists in these films remain marginalized from the mainstream globalized economy; some films reflect a desire for more equitable access to wealth, while others call for an overhaul of the entire system. The films fight against superficiality by creating a baroque-like excess of signs (*La antena*), or emphasizing the disquiet of the resting in the extremes of either surface or profound depth (*La niña santa*).

This political rendering of architecture in the 1990s and 2000s differs from cinematic representations before that era. Buildings in Argentine films of the 1980s serve to illustrate or symbolize political relations in reference to the recent dictatorship. While the house metaphorically illustrates the nation in María Luisa Bemberg's *Camila* and Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial*, Eliseo Subiela and Fernando Solanas evoke heterotopias in their choice of a psychiatric hospital (*Hombre mirando al sudeste*) and an abandoned train station (*Sur*), respectively.

After 1995, architecture in films does not function primarily as representational or symbolic. These films participate in defining the complexity of spatial production as contemplated by Henri Lefebvre. The spatial triad of lived, perceived and conceived spaces becomes entwined in the cinematic framing of architecture in these films: the protagonists and the film viewers "live" in the city through their personal understanding of the spaces; they "perceive" the city in its practical experience of site or their use of the spaces; they "conceive" of the city as it becomes transformed and recoded through the protagonists' definition of the sites and their on-screen portrayal. In this later cinema, architecture takes part in the production of meaning. It evokes political memories. It points to economic hardship and marginalization; it underscores class discrepancies; it creates nostalgia for neighborhoods and marks the reevaluation of existing communities.

Landmarks, imaginary buildings and general urban or provincially built landscapes all produce meaning in contemporary Argentine cinema. In these films, recognizable buildings from the Buenos Aires skyline such as the Hilton Hotel, the Kavanagh building, the Obelisk, the ESMA (Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada) building, and the University of Buenos Aires' Facultad de Derecho building suggest historical significance in their revised cinematic contexts.

In *Nueve reinas* (Bielinsky 2000), the glass wall of the Hilton Hotel evokes the illusion and corruption of globalized capitalism. The ESMA building—an infamous detention center during the dictatorship—in *Buenos Aires vice versa* (Agresti 1996) appears on screen as a reminder of the inescapable presence of past political atrocities. In *La antena*, the Facultad de Derecho building is contextualized ironically as the government headquarters of a totalitarian regime. *Medianeras* (Taretto 2011) incorporates the story of Corina Kavanagh's vengeful construction of the Kavanagh building as a comparison for the contemporary young woman protagonist, a solitary and unfulfilled resident of Buenos Aires.

Beyond Buenos Aires, *La niña santa* and *El hombre de al lado* (Cohn and Duprat 2009) both feature provincial architectural landmarks. One of a series of hotels built at the end of the nineteenth century, the Hotel Termas de Rosario de la Frontera in the Salta region, named for its nine thermal springs, serves as the mysterious centerpiece for Martel's *La niña santa*. The ground-breaking Curutchet House designed by Le Corbusier in La Plata illustrates class conflict between neighbors in Duprat and Cohn's feature.

Social relations permeate the use of architecture in these films, from the disenfranchised youth that wander nomadically through the streets of Buenos Aires in *Pizza birra faso*, to the working class protagonist who is denied work in the construction industry in *Mundo grúa*, to the conflicts between neighbors from different social, economic and educational classes in *El hombre de al lado*, and the resentment between customer and immigrant employee in the café of *Bolivia*. Buildings highlight and emphasize this struggle to understand the changing meanings of neighborhoods and community, and the residents' possibilities for relating with the greater category of nation. The portrayal of architectural landmarks underscores an attempt to locate a national sense of community or, cynically, to suggest the loss of such a possibility.

By placing conventional architectural meanings on their head, these films reveal the permeability of locational categories and the shifting nature of social relations. The youths' appropriation of the Obelisk and downtown sites in *Pizza birra faso* illustrates an inversion of traditional classifications. The hotels in *Nueve reinas* (the Hilton) and *La niña santa* (Hotel Termas) function as places that both highlight and question divisions between public and private spaces. Both the glass wall of the Hilton and the fluid boundaries in the habitation of the Hotel Termas underscore these unclear boundaries. Finally, the conflict in *El hombre de al lado* stems from the upper-class protagonist's discomfort that his neighbor is attempting to visually penetrate his home by constructing a sidewall window.

Each chapter studies the interaction between politics and architecture in one emblematic film of post-1995 Argentine cinema in which architecture figures centrally. The first two chapters analyze two of the first films from New Argentine Cinema, *Pizza birra faso* and *Mundo grúa*, respectively. Chapter 2 argues that the built environment of Adrián Caetano and Bruno Stagnaro's *Pizza birra faso* reflect social hierarchies through the film's positioning of marginalized youth vis-à-vis Buenos

Aires architecture. As the young adults move through the city, their interaction with public architecture unravels its symbolism. Their exclusion from dominant socioeconomic categories is underscored through the cinematographic framing of the built environment in its relationship to the boys.

The humanizing portrait of the impact of the construction industry in Pablo Trapero's *Mundo grúa* is the subject of Chap. 3. On the one hand, urban development serves as a metaphor to underscore the growing distance between people and machines. On the other hand, the mise-en-scène of the construction tower crane reflects the contemporary economic and political power model that fails to provide adequate support for the working classes.

Chapter 4's analysis of *Nueve reinas* considers the symbolism of glass architecture in Fabián Bielinsky's film. Here the glass wall becomes a fitting analogy for the scam artist; the combination of permeability and solidity in a glass wall resembles the duality of the trickster's approach in gaining the trust of his/her victim. Also embedded in this analogy is the fraudulence of the 1990s government that created a wealthy façade to cover up economic failures. Architecture in *Nueve reinas* reflects negatively on the modernization of Buenos Aires and its incorporation into the globalized economy.

The political duality of cinematographic architecture also develops in Lucrecia Martel's *La niña santa*, discussed in Chap. 5, in which established architectural categories become destabilized. In defiance of conventional aesthetics, frames, windows, depth, surface, public and private all emerge in excess in the film's mise-en-scène to suggest a challenge to what constitutes order in contemporary Argentina. Gesturing to, but not fully creating, a representational reading, the careful incorporation of the Hotel Termas de Rosario de la Frontera into the film questions the possibility that extradiegetic contexts can permeate filmic narrative.

In Chap. 6, the urban fantasy developed in *La antena* creates political symbolism around the city maquette. While architecture in Esteban Sapir's film serves to underscore the excessive power of a media autocracy, its paper materiality demonstrates the pliability of the urban resident. Also part of the cityscape are three recognizable Buenos Aires buildings—the Confitería Ideal, the Facultad de Derecho and the former Biblioteca Nacional—embedded into the film to critique nationalist politics.

The study of a cinematic rendition in *El hombre de al lado* of the Curutchet House, designed by Le Corbusier, serves as the concluding chapter. Cohn and Duprat's film makes use of this iconic site to underscore not only socioeconomic discrepancies in contemporary Argentina, but also to reflect on the intersections between film and architecture. From the depiction of Le Corbusier's architectural promenade to the heightened significance given to optics in the film, architecture and film in *El hombre de al lado* come together to explore the best means to live peacefully in a community.

Notes

1. See especially *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (2002) and *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts* (2007).
2. See also especially his chapter on film and architecture in *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (2000).
3. In the 1990s, approximately 450 km of the new highways were built, remodeled or expanded including the roadway between Buenos Aires and La Plata and the "Acceso Oeste" which involved a total investment in highways over the decade of the equivalent of around two billion dollars. According to Pablo Ciccolella: "Estas macroestructuras construídas o reacondicionadas a través del sistema de concesión y peaje, se estarían constituyendo en factores generadores de nuevos procesos de urbanización y metropolización al cambiar las condiciones de circulación y accesibilidad y privilegiando el uso de automóviles particulares sobre el transporte público automotor y ferroviario, y consecuentemente contribuyendo a elevar el índice de motorización" [This macrostructure, which was built or reconditioned through a system of tolls and subventions, would generate new processes for urbanization and metropolitanization by changing systems of circulation and accessibility and by privileging the use of cars over public transportation. It would consequently contribute to an increase in motorization] (Ciccolella).
4. See also Agostinis and Di Francesco for a discussion of transformations in urban development during the 1990s and 2000s.
5. Prices increased from 193 US dollars per square meter in June 2002 to 1014 US dollars per square meter in December 2008 (Baer, 45). For a detailed analysis of the changes in housing for Argentina during the 2000s, see Luis Baer's study, "Mercados de suelo y producción de vivienda en Buenos Aires y su área metropolitana" (Baer 2012).

6. Pablo Ciccolella and Lorena Vecslir study this Buenos Aires phenomenon in their article, "Dinámicas, morfologías y singularidades en la reestructuración metropolitana de Buenos Aires."
7. At its lowest level since the beginning of the Argentine film industry, in 1990 only twelve new Argentine films came out. The numbers decreased to only four films in 1994. However, after the new law, the number of films increased almost immediately to 38 new films in 1996 and 65 new films in 2005 (Rocha, "Contemporary Argentine Cinema," 17–20).
8. Solanas published one of the major manifestos of New Latin American Cinema, "Hacia un Tercer Cine," with Octavio Getino in 1969. Their four-hour-and-twenty-minute documentary film in three parts on neocolonialism, *La hora de los hornos* (1968), which encouraged audience engagement by way of both cinema and left-wing revolutionary politics, came to exemplify this movement's aesthetic.

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CHAPTER 2

Pizza birra faso: Buildings of Hierarchy and Exclusion

Thirteen minutes into *Pizza birra faso* (Caetano and Stagnaro 1997), a group of teenage boys break into the iconic Obelisk in the middle of 9 de Julio Avenue in downtown Buenos Aires. After finding a page torn from a magazine posted on the inside wall showing scantily dressed women, they swig wine from a carton they have also found as they climb the ladder to the top of the building. This activity closes out a day that has included two robberies, one of a businessman in a taxi, the other of a homeless guitar player amputee. When the film's protagonist, Córdoba, peers out the small window at the top of the Obelisk, he sees his pregnant girlfriend, Sandra, being escorted away by police in connection with the robbery of the homeless man. Futilely, Córdoba yells at them to release her, and then hurries down the ladder to attempt to free her from the authorities.

The Obelisk at the center of this scene defines the boys' relationship to the socioeconomic politics of Buenos Aires in the mid-1990s. A downtown site that connotes centrality and power, the Obelisk's representational authority is stripped in this scene as the boys forcibly enter the building, uncover the secrets of its interior—including graffiti and pornography—and drunkenly make their way to the top. The boys then mark this subversion by adopting the position of surveyors of the city by gazing out of the window at the Obelisk's summit. However, instead of giving them authority, this only returns them to "their place" as marginalized inhabitants. Despite achieving the dominant vantage point

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through his gaze, Córdoba cannot achieve change and has no voice in releasing Sandra from her arrest.

Youth's marginalization from the neoliberal city of the 1990s emerged in a cluster of films from this era including *Sábado* (Villegas 2001), *Tan de repente* (Lerman 2002), *Picado fino* (Sapir 1996) and *Fuga de cerebros* (Musa 1998). As in *Pizza birra faso*, the city does not become the source of meaningful work or engaged community in these films. Rather, the city represents youth's boredom which leads to delinquent occupations and unfocused relationships. *Pizza birra faso* garnered a host of awards in both Argentine and European film festivals, including Best Film, Best Director and Best Screenplay, for the film's co-directors and screenwriters, Israel Adrián Caetano (born 1969) and Bruno Stagnaro (born 1973), who were in their twenties at the time of the film's release.[1]

In the time since this co-production, the Uruguayan-born Caetano has directed the feature films *Bolivia* (2001) and *El oso rojo* (2002), while Stagnaro has turned almost exclusively to writing and directing television miniseries. With university degrees in cinema,[2] Caetano and Stagnaro knew how to make the best of their low-budget production; they hired nonprofessional actors and filmed in real settings rather than in a studio, both of which are techniques that characterize New Argentine Cinema but also recall the post-World War II cinematic movement of Italian Neorealism to which the film has been compared (Page, *Crisis and Capitalism* 2009, 34–43).[3]

In *Pizza birra faso*, sociopolitical hierarchies are laid out through the juxtaposition of the protagonists with the architecture of Buenos Aires. From the iconic symbolism of the Obelisk to the entertainment venues of restaurants and nightclubs, to the public spaces of the street, the park and the port, architecture illustrates the complexities of the boys' relationship to the city. The built environment is framed through the camera lens to taunt and exclude the boys; to uphold the status quo, but also to challenge social conventions.

The film follows a group of four unemployed and delinquent post-adolescent boys in their attempts to make a living through thievery. After the principal protagonists, Córdoba (Héctor Anglada) and his closest friend, Pablo (Jorge Sesán), tire of performing heists for a corrupt taxi driver, they attempt increasingly elaborate robberies with their other two friends, Frula (Walter Díaz) and Megabom (Alejandro Pous). The boys scam and pickpocket men waiting in an unemployment line, and they rob an upscale restaurant with the help of an older friend, who in turn

steals much of the looted money. Finally, they raid a nightclub, a job that leads to the slaying of two of the boys by the police. Córdoba's reasons for unlawfulness are shown to be his girlfriend and her pregnancy: he expresses his wish to provide for her and to settle down as a family in Uruguay.[4] He manages to give her the money from the nightclub robbery, and she leaves by herself on the ferry to Uruguay, while Córdoba dies at the port from a gunshot wound inflicted by the police as the ferry pulls away and the film ends.

The film's architecture emphasizes contrasts and hierarchies in the sociopolitical and economic structures of Argentina during the Menemist era. A critique of the neoliberal power system emerges throughout *Pizza birra faso*. Under the presidency of Carlos Menem (1989–1999), the government welcomed foreign investment and privatized national industries. In a radical move to stop burgeoning inflation, Menem's minister of the economy, Domingo Cavallo, introduced the *Ley de Convertibilidad* in 1991, which pegged the Argentine peso to the United States dollar. These policies created a façade of prosperity marked in the urban landscape by the construction of upscale shopping malls and business tourist investments such as the restaurants in the exclusive district of Puerto Madero that catered to a wealthy clientele. *Pizza birra faso*'s cumbia soundtrack—associated with the *villa miseria*[5]—and the opening scenes of people washing windscreens in the chaos of downtown traffic revealed the perspective of those marginalized by neoliberal policies. The youthful voice of the film is clearly critical of the government: Córdoba reveals that he had held a job with the national railroad before it was privatized, and Pablo is surprised that his hospital stay is not fully covered by the government.[6]

The film represents the possibilities for manipulating architectural symbolism by exploring the relationship between the built environment and marginalized social groups. One way of understanding such groups is to look at the centrality of media in contemporary society. Over the course of the twentieth century to the present day, the media has played an increasingly significant role in assigning meaning to architecture. Lawrence J. Vale (1999), for example, argues that "the twentieth century marks the ascendance of mediated monuments" (391), a shift in the way in which images come to achieve meaning. This change suggests that now:

> Business, cultural and governmental élites must cope with a diffusion of control over images and, now more than ever, still need "official" sorts of architectural monuments to demonstrate their ongoing power and

> legitimacy. In an image-saturated world, such "petrified memories" cannot "speak for themselves"; in increasingly plural societies there is rarely a commonly understood cultural code. (391)

The media transforms the popular reception of architecture to meanings perhaps unintended by the political and economic authorities that subsidize, sanction and design their construction. With this in mind, the film extrapolates the significance of built environments to then question, subvert and even ridicule them. Indeed, rather than underline the power exuded by downtown sites, *Pizza birra faso* sarcastically challenges their authority by cinematographically framing authoritative architecture in contact with marginalized protagonists. The boys' circulation through Buenos Aires highlights the underside of the city that is lived in by the unemployed, the homeless, and the delinquent.

Downtown Buenos Aires

Pizza birra faso mediates the built environment of Buenos Aires to reveal a city undercut by socioeconomic oppositions. In addition to the Obelisk on the 9 de Julio Avenue, the film captures images of the neighborhoods of Retiro, Once and la Boca, as well as the Pan-American Highway, the Aeroparque and the Port. Economic contrasts are evident in this visual tour: Retiro's *villa miseria* beside the luxurious buildings that rise behind it; the wasteland of the River Plate coast along the Pan-American Highway in contrast to the carefully built waterfront by the Aeroparque; the cheap downtown pizza stand, Ubi, frequented by the boys in contrast with the upscale restaurant in the neighborhood, Once, which they rob (Verardi 2009, 2). These disparities serve to unravel the stability of power hierarchies as the boys seek prospects for a meaningful existence from within their environment.

The manipulation of the architectural meanings in the film is nowhere more apparent than in the Obelisk sequence. While its imposing form recalls the Washington Monument on the downtown Mall in Washington DC, the Obelisk's location, the history of its construction and its incorporation into the political trajectory of Argentina saturate the monument with significant meanings of power and authority—facts that are not overlooked by its portrayal in the film. As Malcolm Miles (1997) has affirmed, "Monuments are produced within a dominant framework of values, as elements in the construction of a national history.... [T]hey suppose at least

a partial consensus of values" (58). Indeed, Miles continues to note that monuments such as the Buenos Aires Obelisk represent a "stability which conceals the internal contradictions of society and survives the day-to-day fluctuations of history … becoming a device of social control less brutish and costly than armed force" (58).

Designed by the modernist architect, Alberto Prebisch, and built in 1936, the Obelisk commemorated 400 years since the founding of the city of Buenos Aires.[7] It stands, significantly, in the Plaza de la República at the intersection of three heavily travelled large avenues in the city's downtown—the 9 de Julio (known as the widest avenue in the world), the four-lane Corrientes Street and the smaller, Diagonal Norte. As if this were not enough to establish its symbolic centrality, during the last year of Isabel Perón's presidency in 1975, the government placed a ring around the monument's center that stated "el silencio es salud" [silence is health] (Fig. 2.1). Apparently, this campaign was intended to raise awareness about urban noise, although many residents understood this as a double entendre to silence the people's voice during the dictatorship that started officially with the coup d'état in 1976 after tensions had already begun mounting significantly.[8]

Fig. 2.1 Screenshot from the short film, "Buenos Aires 1975" (Dir. Enrique Landea)

The film seems to respond directly to Beatriz Sarlo's critique that, in contrast with the Eiffel Tower, the Obelisk has no aerial view:

> Tiene un ojo ciego: se planta en Buenos Aires como si estuviera en medio de la llanura desierta, sin hacer cálculos sobre lo que queda allí abajo, a sus pies. El Obelisco no mira a Buenos Aires, por el contrario, es la ciudad la que mira el Obelisco, que es un monumento sin interioridad y, por lo tanto, sin nervio óptico. (162)
>
> [It has a blind eye: it stands in Buenos Aires as if it were in the middle of the deserted plain without calculating what is down below, at its feet. The Obelisk does not look at Buenos Aires, rather it is the city that looks at the Obelisk, a monument without interiority and, therefore, without an optic nerve.]

Before the boys enter the monument, the camera frames them with Sandra in front of the Obelisk in an important shot that accentuates the youths' challenge of the political and economic authority represented by the structure. For 4 seconds, the camera captures the youths' backs as they sit in front of the Obelisk, while the imposing white base of the column begins its rise in the background (Fig. 2.2). Here, the alternating domination of state architecture and marginalized youth is put into play: the camera privileges the protagonists by foregrounding them, but their authority is undermined mediatically by being filmed from behind as well as through their passive, leisurely seated poses. The Obelisk's background location in the frame minimizes its power, but its ominous size and color reestablishes its authority: its height remains undetermined as it extends out of the frame.

This power competition between architectural authority and those marginalized in the society continues in the sequence in which the boys break into the monument. Previous to that point, they have expressed their fascination with the Obelisk; at the pizza stand, Pablo talks about its phallic semblance and, a few scenes later, Córdoba wonders about the windows at the top. Finally, the boys attempt to appropriate the column as a space they can access; their pursuit of the all-seeing authoritarian gaze from the top is thwarted when Córdoba becomes a helpless observer of Sandra's arrest. This shift in the authority of the gaze reveals the distinction in life necessities between the boys and the larger hegemonic society: when they assume the visual power of the bird's-eye view, they find that their needs rest on the ground in the experience of the

Fig. 2.2 Screenshot from the film, *Pizza birra faso*, 9:56

"everyday." As if in dialogue with Michel de Certeau and his notion of authority linked to the city view from above, the film affirms the different needs of society's marginalized members. The boys become helpless if their vision gains the authority of distance; their minimal power can only be assumed—again, at a minimal level—on the street.

Buildings of Entertainment

While the environment of buildings downtown allows the film to amplify socioeconomic contrasts, the representation of places of entertainment mediates the spatial exclusion that developed out of economic factors in Buenos Aires during the 1990s. Alongside massive levels of unemployment—figures reached 12.2% in 1994, 13.7% in 1997 (when *Pizza birra faso* was released) and 14.7% in 2000—the greater Buenos Aires urban environment saw an investment equal to approximately two billion dollars in the development of new highways between 1990 and 1998, due in large part to the expansion of gated communities in the outlying regions of the city (Cerruti and Grimson 2004, 27).

In fact, the majority of private investment during this period was dedicated to the construction of buildings that uniquely supported business

professionals: "centros comerciales, comunidades cerradas, hipermercados y hoteles" [commercial centers, gated communities, superstores and hotels] (Cerruti and Grimson, 27). On the other hand, neoliberal policies also involved "un nuevo tipo de exclusión espacial de los pobres urbanos" [a new sort of spatial exclusion for the urban poor] in which the traditional middle- and lower-class neighborhoods experienced a "deterioro generalizado" [generalized deterioration] in their upkeep and maintenance due to the extreme levels of unemployment of their residents (Cerruti and Grimson, 28).

As a reflection of these changes to the urban landscape, the youth in the film are excluded from both the restaurant and the nightclub. The boys' knowledge of the norms related to a sit-down restaurant is minimal.[9] When Sandra wants to eat at a table, the boys explain that they do not have the money for a proper restaurant. Later they express surprise when they learn that the restaurant client pays a service charge merely to sit at a table. Although a more possible venue for the boys' entertainment, the nightclub also restricts access to them. They need to pay to enter, and the manager denies his acquaintance with them when they try to bypass the monetary requirement for entry. Instead of accepting their marginalization and exclusion from these locales, the boys choose to enter illegally through armed robbery.

Before attempting the restaurant robbery, the boys consider the architectural layout of this upscale site in the commercial neighborhood of Once. It is an easy task for Rubén, an older friend of Frula's who is leading the job, to convince the boys that the restaurant is popular with the rich and famous. The youth both observe the characteristics of the restaurant from the outside and also discuss its interior design to plan their moves. They gaze nervously at the entrance on the street corner, and discuss possible pitfalls—the place does not look busy; how will they carry out the theft?; can the childish Megabom really serve as lookout? To the question of the interior layout of the restaurant to plan the trajectory to the cash register, Rubén describes the interior design as long and thin, "tipo chorizo" [sausage-like].

The camera underscores the youths' exclusion from the site when they finally enter the front door. In a shot from the restaurant's interior, the camera captures the boys behind the glass doors of the vestibule for 3 seconds as they anxiously peer inside (Fig. 2.3). The viewer is struck by the visual interaction between representatives of different social classes when a pair of diners appears to note that the boys gazing through the

Fig. 2.3 Screenshot from the film, *Pizza birra faso*, 38:19

doors do not belong in a restaurant of this caliber. The duration of the shot at the vestibule creates a moment of hesitation before the rapid action of the robbery. Although excluded from recording the actual theft, the camera focuses on Megabom waiting at the car, and then the sudden thrust of the boys running from the restaurant, yelling orders in a race to the getaway car. Adrenaline mounts as the boys feel discomfort at their escapade. While the previous thefts—the taxi client, the legless busker, the unemployment line—were performed without high levels of anxiety, this restaurant robbery has placed the boys in an unfamiliar environment.

The mise-en-scène of the nightclub robbery also illustrates the youth's marginalization underlined by spatial exclusion. In this case, it involves the play of eyeline matches and reverse shots between the boys and the authority figures who guard the entrance to the nightclub. An establishing shot from the night before the robbery (Fig. 2.4) notes the club's advertisement for the performance of Los Charros, a cumbia group from the Chaco region of Argentina,[10] before the political dynamics of the locale are revealed to the viewer. Large and heavy-built, the club's bouncer covers the entrance to the nightclub to defend it from those who are undesired. Frequently catching the bouncer's eye, the boys attempt to access the establishment but are turned away. On the night of the robbery, when Córdoba, Pablo and Frula manage to enter the ticket booths to steal, the camera captures the glass screens of the booths that both divide and exclude.

Fig. 2.4 Screenshot from the film, *Pizza birra faso*, 45:20

The restrictions on the boys develop from their lack of economic power: social exclusion stems from their unviable choices for making money. Their desire to acquire wealth through delinquency pushes them down in all areas and finally destroys their futures by bringing on the premature deaths of Córdoba, Frula and, probably, Megabom.

Outdoor Designs

While exclusionary politics reflect an era of privatization, the spaces that offer the most access, freedom and intimacy are public ones such as the street, the park and the port. The street becomes the site for the enactment of private intimacies. It returns the boys to animalistic hierarchies based on bodily strength, and it reflects the temporal understanding of society for those removed from the status quo. That intimacy is attained most frequently in the public sphere in the film demonstrates the inversion of conventional meanings of public and private for the boys. The neoliberal era that saw fences and walls erected around previously public spaces—for example, the neighborhood or village transformed into a

gated community; the restriction of public access to parks—limited the possibilities for public spaces:

> In the Buenos Aires of the 1990s, not only were more and more of the upscale residential areas becoming enclosed and gated, but even public areas such as parks, beaches, and historical sites were increasingly privatized: either bought by individuals for their personal use or, more often, acquired by corporations that converted them into shopping malls and commercial real estate, the enjoyment of which was limited to specific social groups. (Guano 2002, 186)

Ironically, or sadly, it is precisely in these spaces that were diminishing during the 1990s where the boys find a level of respite from the restrictions imposed on them. The mise-en-scène frames these moments of respite as interrupted by an illustration of power from the built environment or through human interaction.

Discussions of feelings, emotions, relationships, and revenge, as well as family routines such as dining, all occur on the street, creating a contrasting marker for the site: while the environment calls for fleeting and ephemeral conversations and relationships, the boys redefine normative behaviors for these transitory places. Córdoba and Sandra argue on the street outside his apartment, he gives a reconciliatory gift to his girlfriend,[11] and then he makes significant promises about their future to her during a walk at the port. After the bungle of the restaurant robbery, the boys reassert their friendship while walking through a residential area. When Córdoba and Pablo are denied entry into the nightclub, they sit on the curb to plot their "revenge." They eat dinner on the curb facing the Obelisk instead of at a table.

The street environment is also infused with particular social hierarchies that relate most clearly to an attitude of pure survival. As Gonzalo Aguilar has demonstrated, this drive to survive, represented by the boys' nomadic displacement through transitory places such as the taxi, also challenges the conventions of modern society (Aguilar 2006, 45). On the street, the youths' agile bodies permit them control over certain figures who are more direly outcast. In the opening scenes of the film, Córdoba and Pablo first appear energetically hanging from trucks to meet the taxi driver and stage their robbery while beggars (including a woman with a baby, and a man in a wheelchair) circulate among the cars asking for money.[12] The indigent man who eats the boys' pizza leftovers,

and the theft from the legless busker, also point to this survivalist hierarchy. In another shockingly brazen sequence, the youths steal from those waiting in an unemployment line and manage to outrun the men who chase them furiously through a city park.

For Joanna Page, the opening close-up scenes of dense traffic and circulating people that intersperse with the opening credits—all pulled together through the extradiegetic cumbia soundtrack—illustrate ways in which "the film as a whole attempts to carve a hole in the frenzied time of the city, through which we may glimpse the lives of those who are not integrated into the space–time of global capitalism" (*Crisis and Capitalism*, 37). As Sarlo (2009) has observed in reference to the urban poor: "En los tiempos cortos no hay posibilidad de acumular nada, porque toda previsión necesita de un tiempo extenso y de un aprendizaje que enseñe a navegar ese tiempo, difiriendo las necesidades, eligiendo a cuál se responde primero" [In short lapses of time, there is no possibility for accumulating anything because all forecasting needs extensive time and the learnt knowledge of how to navigate that time, differentiate necessities and choose which to respond to first] (67). In the film's contemplation of its construction, Page identifies an "alternative filmic temporality" that draws it in as a "sociological tool" (*Crisis and Capitalism*, 37). Indeed, two different temporalities are underscored in the experience of the city: that of the constant circulation of traffic and working people (reflected in the shakiness of the handheld camera) and that of the discouraged youth who merely sit and wait on the street (Page, *Crisis and Capitalism*, 38).

An extension of this is the mise-en-scène of the city park as a site infused with the contradictory notions of acceptance and exclusion. After their scam in the unemployment line, Córdoba, Pablo and Megabom race through the park to the main street with the victims hot on their tails. An upscale apartment building looms in the background as the camera captures them with a low-angle shot running down a grassy incline in the park (Fig. 2.5). The lens frames the boys during the moments in which they seem to be losing the men who are pursuing them; they run freely down the slope as if carefree. During this short sequence, the condominium in the background serves as an indication of the boys' continued socioeconomic difficulties: the viewer is reminded that their poverty and lawlessness excludes them from belonging to this space.

Fig. 2.5 Screenshot from the film, *Pizza birra faso*, 24:41

While the film reiterates tensions in socioeconomic hierarchies through its portrayal of the street and the park, the final sequence at the port of Buenos Aires definitively fuses the narrative and the characters with the city. As the ferry departs from the port, the camera on the ship looks back to reveal Buenos Aires in a sequence that lasts a full 1 minute and 40 seconds (Fig. 2.6). That the youths' full identities have been subsumed by the city becomes even clearer when the police radios announce the results of the night-time violence—coldly requesting two hearses for the boys killed in the shooting. Carolina Rocha has commented that Buenos Aires is equated metaphorically with a "tomb" in this final scene ("The Many Faces of Buenos Aires" 2008, 119).

This mise-en-scène breaks from filmic conventions concerning endings and closure. Instead of a sharp image of an urban skyline, in this sequence the city retains the haze of the early morning, a brown-gray color that matches the dirtiness of the river. While the camera will usually film from the front of the ferry towards the future, this camera films back into the past in a way that elicits concern for the protagonists and for the city's future. Does this gray city hold the possibility of optimism for the youth of Buenos Aires? How can this environment be made to protect and embrace those marginalized from the socioeconomic and political

Fig. 2.6 Screenshot from the film, *Pizza birra faso*, 1:12:09

system? Can they be welcomed into the city's buildings, and can the iconic symbols come to represent them as well? Viewers consider these questions in this final scene as they recall the boys' inability to connect with the symbolic significance of iconic architecture such as the Obelisk, their exclusion from places of entertainment and their intimacy with the habitation and use of public spaces. Architecture in the film underscores the boys' marginalization from the mainstream as well as their defiance against social norms.

Notes

1. *Pizza birra faso* was subsidized by the local production company, Palo y a la Bolsa Cine, the Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales, and the Film Festival Rotterdam's financial assistance to projects from developing countries, the Hubert Bals Fund.
2. Stagnaro studied at the Universidad de Cine in Buenos Aires and Caetano studied at a film school in Barcelona, Spain (Falicov 2003, 52).
3. Analyses of *Pizza birra faso* place the film in a postmodern cinematic and historical context; scholars have observed its effective representation

of the globalized economy (Kantaris, "Last Snapshots/Take 2" 2010; Rocha, "The Many Faces of Buenos Aires"); the protagonists' nomadic tendencies that isolate them from the mainstream (Aguilar, 43–47); and the film's mise-en-scène that privileges discontinuity and observation (Page, *Crisis and Capitalism*, 37).

4. Elisa Vidal (2004) astutely has affirmed that it is difficult to read the character of Sandra without thinking about the important political role of women during the past few decades in Argentina. Sandra's determination to leave the life of delinquency and violence recalls the strength of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and the neighborhood women organizers who, in recent years, have pulled communities forward in the face of great hardship (162).
5. Although beyond the scope of this analysis, and worthy of an in-depth study of its own, the film's use of cumbia villera is significant. The music genre expresses resistance to the dominant culture, as Eloísa Martin (2012) has underscored: "On the one hand, it expresses dissidence with the ideals that linked work and family with notions of masculinity. And on the other hand, as a form of disagreement with the social exclusion these *pibes* suffer (from the networks of the dominant order of the state, the market, the law, and hegemonic values), expressed in two different ways: (1) that of recklessness and (2) that of a desire for inclusion, yet not in the terms promoted by the dominant order" (60).
6. Remarking on the relationship between the protagonists and the city, Elisa Vidal has noted that: "La ciudad, con su entramado violento, está lista para 'vigilar y castigar' a quienes hayan sido apartados del 'orden' establecido. Por eso son arrojados a su suerte, sin tener posibilidad de inserción, de trabajo, de progreso; están condenados de antemano" [The city, with its violent framework, is ready to "surveil and punish" those outside the established "order." That is why they are thrown to their fate, without the possibility of integration, of working, of progress; they are condemned in advance] (163).
7. See Ernesto Katzenstein for a description of modernist architecture of Buenos Aires in the 1930s.
8. See Enrique Landea's short film, "Buenos Aires 1975" (http://www.mapsofsilence.com/CASTELLANO/videos/enrique.html) for a filmic interpretation of the reception of this sign in Buenos Aires during this time period (Landea 2012).
9. The boys' resistance to norms of conduct in restaurants begins when Córdoba sits on the counter at the pizza stand and the manager gestures for him to get down, to which Pablo comments wryly, "la ley" [the law]. This infraction against the norms of dining foreshadows the later larger-scale thefts of the restaurant and the nightclub.

10. In another moment that is supposed to represent the same evening, the sign on the nightclub advertises another cumbia band, Los Sheriff—obviously a consistency error in filming.
11. Córdoba offers her cotton to help her in her pregnancy, a gift that is tenderly received by Sandra.
12. Their dominant physical status has certain clear limitations. Pablo's asthma and Rubén's false tooth point to the decadence of Argentine society portrayed in *Pizza birra faso*.

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CHAPTER 3

Machinations of Urban Development and the Construction Industry in *Mundo grúa*

Mundo grúa (Trapero 1999) opens with a low-angle camera shot of a crane at work against the background of the sky (Fig. 3.1). As if in a countergesture to the first scenes of *Pizza birra faso* that record the working circulation of people and traffic on a downtown street, here the machine in motion is framed cinematographically without the operators who work it or reference to the stir of the city at street level. The machine works from the clouds, distanced from the experience of the lived city. In the next sequence, the camera's focus shifts to a medium shot of the protagonist, Rulo, and his search for employment as a crane operator, but the image of the crane as a machine that seems to operate itself persists as a metaphor for the city as a site that remains aloof from the life of its residents. In this way, the built environment is portrayed as dominating urban life and assuming an importance beyond that of the people who construct and experience it.

Mundo grúa is the first in a series of socially engaged films directed by Pablo Trapero (born 1971).[1] Following his opera prima, Trapero has produced a feature-length film practically every 2 years. Almost all examine problems in contemporary Argentina, from corruption in the police force (*El bonaerense*) to injustices of the prison system (*Leonera*) to financial profiteering (*Carancho*).[2] *Mundo grúa* garnered awards in both Latin American and European film festivals in the categories of Best Director, Best Opera Prima, Best Screenplay as well as Best Actor for Luis Margani's portrayal of Rulo.[3]

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Fig. 3.1 Screenshot from the film, *Mundo grúa*, 1:01

As both the principal employment opportunity for Rulo, as well as the linchpin for the film's symbolic web, the construction industry functions centrally to underscore socioeconomic hardships in neoliberal Argentina from the perspective of unfinished building development.[4] *Mundo grúa* portrays the employee's experience of urban growth in 1990s Buenos Aires. Throughout the course of the film, the middle-aged protagonist grows to understand his increasing isolation from Argentina's construction process, while his nostalgia for past opportunities intensifies.

Like Adrián Caetano's *Bolivia* (2001) or Daniel Burak's *Bar El Chino* (2003), this film demonstrates the loss of employment opportunities for the middle and working classes in Buenos Aires. The dream of operating the city crane that first offers Rulo hope to participate in urban development is crushed by an obscure health problem and cedes to the anticipation of meaningful employment in Patagonia. In this process of seeking work, Rulo's rejection from urban construction projects leads to his effective expulsion from the city. When Rulo finds his services to be also undervalued outside the city, he leaves the South to an uncertain future as the film closes.

Spearheaded by the policies of Carlos Grosso (1989–1992), the mayor of Buenos Aires during Menem's first term in office, city construction in the 1990s focused on areas that catered to the wealthy and to business interests: shopping malls, international hotel chains, the port of Puerto Madero, downtown business and shopping areas, and the northern wealthy districts of Belgrano, Barrio Norte, Vicente López and San Isidro. The quality of life in suburban and impoverished areas declined during this decade, except in the exclusive gated communities and country clubs on the city's periphery (Prévôt Schapira). In this sense, the construction of buildings played a significant role in the transformation of the urban experience for city residents in the 1990s and served as a powerful metaphor—adopted in the film—for the political and economic deficiencies of the government regarding support for a willing and hard-working employee.

This chapter interprets the sociopolitical implications of the construction industry as demonstrated in *Mundo grúa*. Through the construction metaphor, the film represents a disconnect between "machines" and the people who can control, fix and operate them. The victimization of protagonists who seek employment points to the deterioration of economic and political support for the working class. Excluded both from the construction of the buildings as well as from the buildings themselves, this representation of urban development underscores systemic political flaws. This chapter analyzes the film's illustration of the crane as a reflection of access to power, and interprets the construction metaphor as emulating social, economic and political changes.

Machines and Human Experience

The longstanding academic debate concerning technology and its role in society—whether society propels technological changes or whether new forms of technology serve as catalysts for social transformations—becomes particularly relevant in the context of *Mundo grúa* in which machines are of central importance to the protagonist's relationship to society. Eliciting this paradox is Andrew Feenberg, who refers to M.C. Escher's "Drawing Hands" to illustrate that technology and society might in fact maintain a circular relationship (xxi). While society adjusts to certain new technologies, social, economic and political systems also inspire the invention and use of others.

Mundo grúa represents a historical lag between technological development and its incorporation into society in neoliberal Buenos Aires. In this way, the film underlines the tension between Argentina's political "modernity" and the worker whose attitude towards mechanization is reminiscent of an earlier era. Rulo and his friends revere the greatness of machines, but also are confident about their ability to repair them. From the perspective of these protagonists, humans remain in control of machines and retain an important role in the creation and maintenance of the mechanical artefact.[5] This personal approach to machinery stands in contrast to a later technological age in which machines are primarily mass-produced by other machines.[6]

The film's cinematography highlights the protagonist's anachronistic approach to mechanics. The aesthetic and themes of *Mundo grúa* have sometimes been compared to earlier filmic expressions such as Italian Neorealism due to its filming choices and its use of nonprofessional actors (Page, *Crisis and Capitalism* 2009, 49–50; Falicov 2003, 55). Shot on 16 mm black-and-white film stock, with a grainy quality that resulted from filming decisions, the cinematography "becomes a marker of the film's ideology" that balances on the line between fiction and documentary to call attention to the illusory reality of neoliberal Buenos Aires (Kantaris, "Last Snapshots/Take 2" 2010, 42–43).[7] While this aesthetic also creates a sort of cinematic nostalgia, and the black-and-white comes to symbolize filmically the two sides of Rulo's life decisions and experiences, situations in which characters are filmed in light and shadow relate to the construction metaphor through its association with the crane.

The opening mise-en-scène of the crane that captures the dark metal bars of the heavy equipment against the light of the sky finds parallels during various sequences in the film. From below, the shot underscores the darkness of the bars that emerge, cagelike, against the light contrast of the bright sky in the background. Calling attention also to the play of light that is the essence of producing film along with the flickering of the celluloid filmstrip, the horizontal shadows of cagelike bars repeatedly project onto Rulo to underscore the limits that restrict him. This image of a metal grid follows Rulo to his house, where the horizontal bars of the Venetian blinds project onto his body; and then to his mother's house, where the bars of the window create a similar contrast; and, finally, to Adriana's apartment and kiosk, where Rulo repairs her broken blind. While Rulo cannot gain employment in the Buenos Aires construction industry, this

cinematography underlines the fact that he also cannot escape its hold on him; the loss of a job affects his very essence from his means of survival to his self-esteem and system of values.

Machines become both the catalyst for and the subject of companionship for Rulo and his friends, either by way of fixing a broken Venetian blind, offering the use of a finely crafted bass guitar, repairing a metal bar on a window or discussing how to build a generator. By following through on his offer to fix her *persiana*, Rulo manages to enter Adriana's life and have a relationship with her. Rulo agrees to allow his son Claudio to use his treasured bass guitar, and through this contact they manage to interact extensively and openly for the only time in the film.[8] Rulo converses with his mother while fixing a bar on her window. The generator that sits on Rulo's kitchen table offers him a number of social contacts between peers and with Adriana. When Rulo fails to repair it by tinkering with it himself, he asks Torres for help. Together they visit another friend, Walter, and the three men sit around the machine to discuss it. In a (playful) parallel scene to Rulo's examination by the doctor, Walter

Fig. 3.2 Screenshot from the film, *Mundo grúa*, 21:06

even listens to the motor with an instrument that resembles a stethoscope to try to diagnose its failing (Fig. 3.2). Later, when Adriana visits his apartment, she gingerly lifts the plastic bag from the machine to see it, and Rulo explains to her how it works.

While machines inspire personal relationships, the characters' approach to different types of technologies offers insights into their position in society. The machines depicted in the film can be categorized into three types: repaired or adapted mechanical objects, e.g., the television set that can be turned 180°, the inner workings of Venetian blinds, the electric generator, the home-made car; artistic machines, e.g., the old movie projector and the bass guitar; and heavy construction equipment, e.g., cranes and excavators.

A certain childlike glee marks the characters' interactions with the smaller home-adapted machines. In the film, these technologies either hover at the edge of operational or they follow makeshift designs. Rulo fixes his car that breaks down on the roadway en route to visit his mother, but he cannot quite repair the generator that sits on his table. To become better acquainted with Adriana, he offers to repair her *persiana*, but admits to Torres that he is not sure how to do that (although he later succeeds). Other machines are almost like toys for Rulo and his friends, and the men take pride in this kind of "homemade" mechanics: the television in Rulo's apartment that pivots in an opening in the wall so it can be viewed from both the bedroom and the living room; the generator that is the object of conversation; the "car" that his friends drive down to Comodoro Rivadavia when they visit Rulo.

While homespun machines are accessible to Rulo and his friends—they can understand how they operate and can repair and even construct them entirely with their own hands—the guitar and the projector inspire admiration. Rulo values his guitar, and explains to his son that it is not a toy, but rather was custom-made by a "luthier." The generational shift in values becomes evident in the following scene in which Claudio shows his friends his father's guitar when he meets with them in an arcade after hours (Fig. 3.3). When Claudio tries to explain the importance of the instrument, he mangles the name "luthier" and his friends appear not to understand its value.

The inclusion of the old movie projector in *Mundo grúa* extends the relationship between "man and machine" to the filmmaking process. Offering a momentary exit from the limits of the narrative, the characters' contemplation of the projector indicates not only the constructiveness of

Fig. 3.3 Screenshot from the film, *Mundo grúa*, 29:44

film,[9] but also historical changes in filmmaking. Rulo stops with Adriana to look enthusiastically at the enormous projector after their first date of dinner and a movie (Fig. 3.4). Apparently in an attempt to impress her, and also to circle his arm around her waist as he shows her, Rulo exclaims, "Fijate, allá está la cruz de Malta" [Look, there's the Maltese cross!], as he points out the Maltese cross mechanical device of interlocking cogs used to advance the film strip in this type of projector. As with the guitar, Rulo's enthusiasm for the machine's intricacies indicates a respectful attitude towards the creation of the technology. While the younger generation represented by Claudio and his cohort appears to have no capacity to understand Rulo's awe, Adriana feigns interest to enter a relationship with Rulo. In both cases, Rulo's enthusiasm for the mechanical illustrates a perspective that veers from contemporary attitudes.

While the homespun machines provide moments of childlike joy, and the artistic technologies inspire reverence, the third type of machine—the heavy construction equipment—serves as the "desired mechanism," one that has the potential to offer both personal satisfaction and economic

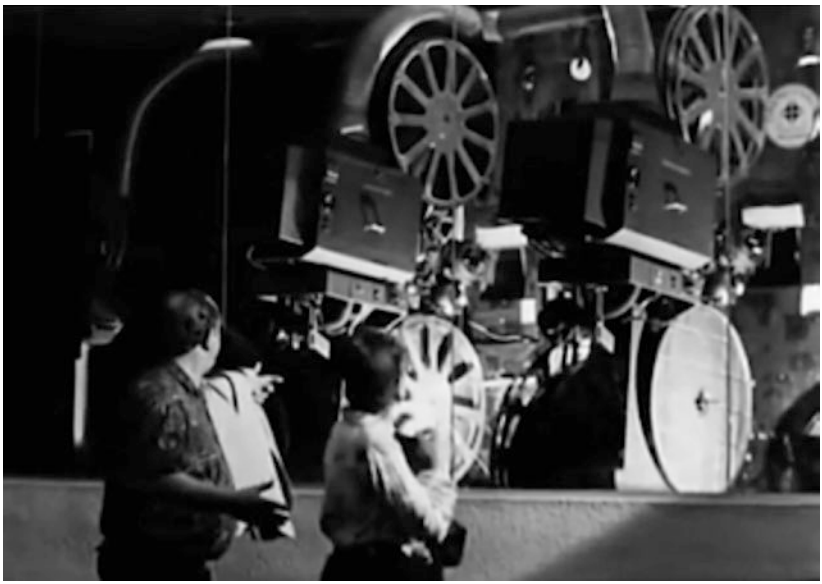

Fig. 3.4 Screenshot from the film, *Mundo grúa,* 33:16

stability to Rulo. Through the mises-en-scène of working a crane in Buenos Aires, and an excavator in Patagonia, the film frames the image of heavy construction equipment as an object of power, illustrative of the neoliberal policies of Argentina at the end of the twentieth century.

A series of six sequences follow Rulo's trajectory as he tries to become a crane operator. The mesmerizing low-angle camera frame of the crane in the sky begins and ends the series to underscore the inaccessibility of Rulo's dream, while the middle four sequences follow the progression of Torres's lessons on how to operate the machine. Rulo is introduced to the crane from the top of the multistory building (4:54–6:30); he then learns to use the crane's lever from atop the building (15:52–18:00); third, he practices walking across a small plank of wood between the rooftop and the crane (24:30–25:24); and fourth, Rulo sits in the crane and learns to operate it with instructions from Torres via walkie-talkie (44:48–45:27). When Rulo climbs up the final time to start his first official shift, he encounters another operator already driving the crane who claims that Rulo is mistaken and that this is not his turn (47:30–49:00).

As if summing up the metaphor of power as it relates to the crane, Torres states proudly when he first mounts with Rulo to the top of the high-rise building construction site: "Acá está todo" [Everything is here]. The desirability of becoming a crane operator continues to be stressed throughout these sequences. To Rulo's question via walkie-talkie to the first crane operator of how he feels up there, the man replies "como un pájaro" [like a bird] in an explicit reference to the "bird's-eye view" achieved from above. In a conversation with his mother, Rulo sells the idea of working a crane—"Sabés lo lindo que es estar cien metros de altura" [Do you know how nice it is to be 100 m up]—and to his son he raves about the independence that the job permits as he sits all alone in the operator's cabin.

First and foremost, the crane represents meaningful employment, but it also stands for a sense of personal autonomy, the domination of the view from above, and entry into the neoliberal construction boom of the 1990s.[10] While the boys in the Obelisk scene of *Pizza birra faso* realize that the view from above in fact detracts from the meager power that they have, the loss of his job as a crane operator disengages Rulo from the working society of Buenos Aires. Rulo's search for labor eludes him both in the city and in the South.

Argentina Under Construction

The disempowering hegemony evoked by the crane captures the economic relations that characterized Argentina during the neoliberal era in which the composition of the class structure shifted radically under Menem's U.S.-inspired policies. Whereas the middle classes had composed 70% of the population during the 1970s, by 1999 nearly 80% lived below the poverty line (Guano 2002, 183). The building boom reflected the political aspirations of the government, but not the economic reality of the population. Guano deftly describes the new Americanized cityscape developed during this era as a mixture of the gated communities of Los Angeles, the skyline of Manhattan and the shopping centers of Miami:

> If many *porteños* perceived the new Buenos Aires as a "Los Angeles" of fortified enclaves with its coercive geographies of surveillance and social fear, they also saw it as a city of spectacular distinction that could be proudly (or, occasionally, sarcastically) compared to a "Manhattan" of

> citadels and corporate skyscrapers or a "Miami" whose shopping cathedrals cater almost exclusively to the local jet set. (Guano 185)

The crane in *Mundo grúa* evokes this historical context and the political policies that exclude the working classes. From this perspective, Buenos Aires emerges as a city under construction that seeks an Americanized lifestyle at the expense of the local residents omitted from this vision. The film underscores the circular irony of this political vision—the "construction" of buildings in Buenos Aires, and pipelines in Patagonia, accompanies the "deconstruction" of the lives of its citizens.

Through Rulo's expulsion from Buenos Aires, *Mundo grúa* revisits a recurring trope in Argentine cultural production: the move to the South from the city. In a number of films including those of Carlos Sorín and Albertina Carri, Argentine Cinema has revised and replaced this image of the South by a politicized representation that stands in contrast to the utopian connotations of previous political cinema. Jens Andermann argues that the earlier cinema had its impetus for this utopian representation in *Las aguas bajan turbias* (Del Carril 1952) and portrays Patagonia "as an open space where the oppressive mechanisms of patriarchal society and of capitalist exploitation can at least potentially be overcome" (66). Carlos Sorín's films maintain some of the idealism regarding Patagonia in his series of films set in the South—*Historias mínimas* (2002), *Bonbon el perro* (2004), *La ventana* (2008) and *Días de pesca* (2012)—while they also record the important influence of globalized consumerist society on residents in this region. In *Mundo grúa*, the landscape of the South emerges, at its most basic level, in contrast to the density of city construction. It demonstrates the extreme reach of neoliberal policies that extend past the limits of the capital city to also contaminate the utopian dream of Patagonia.

Buenos Aires expels Rulo by not employing him in its urban construction industry. The political contrast with Julio Cortázar's short story "Casa tomada" (1944) becomes compelling here as it underscores the difference in ideology and historical context between the two works. The Peronist allegory in Cortázar's story of the landowning brother and sister who are expelled from their urban home by the masses stands in stark contrast with *Mundo grúa*'s working-class protagonist who is forced to leave Buenos Aires because of the city's dominance by elite Americanized interests. The protagonist's attempt to retain his role as a working citizen drives him to leave Buenos Aires to join a construction team that is

laying a pipeline in Comodoro Rivadavia. The company that hires Rulo does not fulfill its promised responsibility to provide basic necessities to the workers including water and food, and he finally leaves the job to return to the city.

The transition between Rulo's urban life and his move to the South is crafted to allude to the cultural trope that idealizes the Patagonian landscape and lifestyle. Before he travels south, Rulo, his family and friends watch the parade of the Día Nacional del Gaucho which includes festivities that mark a celebration of rural life with performances by gauchos, horses, farmhands and landowners, as if in preparation for the Patagonian lifestyle imagined by the porteño (Fig. 3.5). Rulo even boards a train to travel down to Comodoro Rivadavia, a detail that alludes to an earlier time in which train travel was the primary means of transport between the city and the provinces before the privatization of the 1990s. In this same vein, Rulo's choice of transportation for his return to Buenos Aires, after the construction opportunity in the South has failed, represents his change in character; he is shown to return on a

Fig. 3.5 Screenshot from the film, *Mundo grúa*, 54:45

truck, a means of transport that reflects the more recent construction of a network of roads and highways.[11]

In *Mundo grúa*, Patagonia develops from an idealized environment into a real and humanized one through its mise-en-scène. Definitively replacing the fantasized version of this environment imagined in Buenos Aires, the film portrays the South from two perspectives: as a construction site (in the pipeline work settings) and as a tourist landscape (at Laguna Seca).

Creating an association between landscape, labor and politics, Andermann observes that in *Mundo grúa* "the solitary construction site near the oil port of Comodoro Rivadavia is only the most extreme expression of labor's exploitation in the age of neoliberal crisis" (66). Inside his confined and restrictive apartment in Buenos Aires, Rulo attempts to incorporate some connection with nature by cultivating plants that he proudly shows Adriana when she visits. When Rulo arrives in the South, the comparison with his urban life is evoked through the cinematography. While in the city, the camera pans the city from above, or captures Rulo through the projected cages of light and shadow filmed through Venetian blinds or other shadows. When he arrives in the South, the camera rests for various seconds on a frame of his solitary body, hitchhiking in the midst of the expansive landscape. However, even in these first sequences in the South, the cinematography serves as a foreshadowing for the narrative; the camera captures the sudden repeated shifts from light to dark in its focus on the streetlamps that shine on Rulo's body as he rests in the back of a pick-up truck, reflecting the impact of the urban cages of the crane and the Buenos Aires apartment.

The mise-en-scène of the construction site in the South captures the natural environment with excavators in the foreground (Fig. 3.6). As Andermann has noted, this filming decision detracts from the romanticized image of the natural landscape: "The frame is organised, rather, around the movement of the machines—cranes, diggers, drills—and of the workers operating and adjusting them, the camera's movements and the rhythm of editing blending in neatly with the mechanical choreographies of construction work" (67).

Dramatically underscoring the secondary position of the contemplation of the natural environment, darkness obscures the landscape in the work sequences filmed at night. The lighting captures only the heavy machines at work, accompanied by their sounds. Even the entry of Rulo's friends in this environment emphasizes the machine rather than

Fig. 3.6 Screenshot from the film, *Mundo grúa*, 1:06:13

the setting; the camera captures the headlights of their car as they snake down the highway through blackened surroundings.

While the work environment associates the South with the city, the tourism in Laguna Seca defines Patagonia as a "landscape."[12] With his friends who visit him in the South, Rulo visits this lunar landscape, a uniform environment that is also dry and sandy (Fig. 3.7). As Simon Schama has claimed, natural environments become "landscapes" when they are experienced through cultural filters: "Although we are accustomed to separat[ing] nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock" (6–7).

Landscape can inspire a spiritual reaction, and certain topographies have also been associated with modern preoccupations such as the concepts of empire, nation, liberty and dictatorship (Schama 1995, 17). In the case of *Mundo grúa*, the "cultural filter" develops as an economic and political one; while Rulo and his friends admire the landscape, Rulo's

Fig. 3.7 Screenshot from the film, *Mundo grúa,* 1:15:14

melancholy about his labor problems taints the mood of the encounter. Instead of celebrating the geography of Laguna Seca, the friends sit in silence. The friends' subdued humor at this site is reflected in the cinematography: the natural beauty is hidden in the monotony of the black-and-white film stock.

Mundo grúa challenges and then unravels Patagonia's idealized status; it is no longer an environment that harbors traditional cultural codes (illustrated by the anachronisms of the parade), that offers positive opportunities (depicted in the frustrations of the work environment), or that allows for the tranquil contemplation of the tourist (represented by the visit to Laguna Seca). Rather, it also has become contaminated by the capitalist attitudes and values of the era. However, Rulo does not lack companionship in either of the two places; family, friends and colleagues help each other, while the "bosses" do not support their employees either in Buenos Aires or in the South.

Finally, when the urban nostalgia for the South is subverted by the experience of the real space, the film questions the possibilities for

advancement. For Rulo, memories of his days as a bass player dominate his self-image, a nostalgia that is underlined by the recurring melody of the waltz "Corazón de oro" by the tango composer, Francisco Canaro. Sadly, Rulo's adolescent son, a double of his father complete with curly hair and a belly, seems to be on his way to repeat the same life cycle as Rulo; he also plays the bass in a band in Buenos Aires.

Mundo grúa humanizes urban architecture through its focus on the personal impact of policies in the construction industry. Demonstrating a disconnect between the needs of the working-class residents of the city and the upscale buildings that are developed, the crane that hovers above the city becomes a symbol of an abusive power that excludes and expels workers. The film's willing working-class employees seek both social status and economic stability, but both are shown as being elusive for them in this neoliberal political environment. While mechanics and technology fascinate them, their ability to repair them is relegated to the level of a hobby and social activity as they tinker with an old generator, design a television set that pivots, and put together a car. However, these men are denied the opportunity to make a living using these skills. Corruption in the construction industry reaches even to the South, a space that in the past represented the fantasy of an honorable life for the *porteño*, but that now cannot even offer employment in the construction industry.

Notes

1. Trapero was trained at the Universidad de Cine. His first films were shorts before he received a grant from the Hubert Bals fund for the production of *Mundo grúa* (Falicov, 56). He started his own production company, Matanza Cine, after the success of *El bonaerense* (the film was entered into the category of "Un certain regard" at the Cannes Film Festival of 2002).
2. Trapero's comedy *Familia rodante* (2004) functions as an allegory for the state through its portrayal of difficulties in the relationships of a multigenerational family, while the masterfully composed *Nacido y criado* (2006) records the anguish of a father whose young daughter is killed in an automobile accident with him as the driver. Like *Mundo grúa*, *Nacido y criado* also transitions between the city and the landscape of the South; the protagonist's pain is framed by the desolation and barrenness of the countryside.
3. A family friend of Pablo Trapero's, Luis Margani's work as an actor began with Trapero's short film and university project, "Negocios" (1995), and

then the feature film, *Mundo grúa*. Since then he has acted in numerous films and television shows. Margani plays himself in the film: he was the bass player of the band Séptimo Regimiento with the one-time hit song, "Paco Camorra," and he sang and played the bass in the Luis Sandrini films, *El profesor hippie* (Ayala 1969) and *El profesor patagónico* (Ayala 1970) (Paz 2004, 185).

4. While scholars have analyzed the film's aesthetic dialogue with the ethnographic genre (Page, *Crisis and Capitalism*), its discussion of the significance of work in society (Aguilar), and its representation of urban and rural landscapes (Kantaris "Last Snapshot/Take 2"; Andermann), a comprehensive study of the significance of the construction metaphor for the film has not yet been undertaken.
5. Although Rulo's friend, Torres, has not reached the same dire economic situation, his attitude towards mechanics also parallels that of Rulo's. The film's first conflict records a disagreement between Torres and his supervisor over the assembly of heavy construction equipment. According to the supervisor, along with problems of personal disorganization, Torres loses the job because he did not adequately assemble the machine. While the accuracy of this statement is questionable—for the most part, the film represents managers and supervisors as unsympathetic and even corrupt, and it is unclear if Torres did, in fact, fail to complete the job, or if the supervisor is finding an excuse to fire him—it does match Torres's and Rulo's approach to technology. For both men, the machine retains a human connection and is not flawless. Torres acts as if the broken machine were a technicality, argues that he can fix it, and should not lose his job over that. While Torres is pushed to the sidelines of construction duties, Rulo finds himself unemployed after he fails his health examination.
6. Emanuela Guano claims a disconnect in the trajectory of technological development in Argentina during the neoliberal government of the 1990s: "Inspired by the doctrines of conservative Harvard economists, Menem's much-vaunted 'modernization' brought about the privatization of public services, the dollarization of the local economy, and the drastic opening of the domestic market to foreign, predominantly North American, imports and capital—all maneuvers that resulted in the post-Fordization of an economy that had never been fully Fordist in the first place" (183).
7. Concerning the film's cinematography, Geoffrey Kantaris has noted that the "200 ASA film stock was forced sometimes as high as 800 ASA, giving the night shots a heavily grained quality" ("Last Snapshot/Take 2", 42).

8. Rulo and Claudio go down to the storage area together and reminisce about the past when they discuss the old objects they find down there.
9. Joanna Page argues that the camerawork in *Mundo grúa* often "draws attention to itself," due to the length of the shots and the self-conscious positioning of the camera (*Crisis and Capitalism*, 50).
10. The self-reflexive leitmotif of *Mundo grúa* also extends to the crane in Gonzalo Aguilar's interpretation: "El hecho de que la cámara misma se monte a la grúa y se mimetice con ella en sus panorámicas de la ciudad muestra cómo en esos planos el ánimo del director se fusiona con el del actor" [The fact that the camera itself is mounted on a crane and imitates it in the city panoramas shows how in those scenes the spirit of the direct fuses with that of the actor] (162). In a similar vein, Jens Andermann has also contended that "to explore the affinities between cinema and the already vanishing, classic forms of industrial labor, is a driving idea of the entire film" (67).
11. Luis J. Domínguez Roca describes the changes in urban planning that led to the construction of more roads at the expense of the expansion of rail projects. Horacio Torres has affirmed that during the 1990s, 150 km of new roads were laid.
12. In addition to the trip to Laguna Seca, Andermann has also identified the characters' relationship to landscape as reflected in the film's cinematography: "Echoing the character's own point of view, in *Mundo grúa* the landscape—except for two instances—vanishes almost completely behind the construction site, which from the moment of Rulo's arrival occupies the screen, relegating the surrounding plain and mountains in the distance to a mere background with scant importance for the construction of the shot" (67).

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CHAPTER 4

Properties of Glass in *Nueve reinas*

Striking an irritated pose, hotel employee Valeria faces the camera at the exit of the Buenos Aires Hilton Hotel in Puerto Madero in *Nueve reinas* (Bielinsky 2000) as she makes sure that her brother and his accomplice leave the premises. Dressed in the hotel's dark blue uniform, and wearing high heels, with her hair pulled up high into a tight bun, she stands anxiously while the glass doors close in the foreground in a symmetrical mise-en-scène; the metal door frame connects at the center of Valeria's body, two revolving doors flank her, and the glass elevator shafts of the hotel lobby rise behind her (Fig. 4.1). While the architecture that surrounds Valeria both protects her from the exterior and imprisons her in her corporate job, the abundance of glass serves as a visual reminder of the illusion of transparency created by a swindler. Permeable through sight, a glass wall presents a cinematographic metaphor for the exposure of the trick, harnessing with it, in the context of *Nueve reinas*, allusions to local politics and a globalized economy.[1]

Nueve reinas' polished style and box office success, along with the dubious honor of a Hollywood remake, *Criminal* (Jacobs 2004), have inspired numerous discussions about its categorization as either auteurist or mainstream cinema. With these opinions in mind, Ana Laura Lusnich has convincingly referred to its director, Fabián Bielinsky (1959–2006), as a "hinge figure" in Argentine cinema between commercial and auteurist traditions.[2] *Nueve reinas* was "conceived for a local audience and grew without an international market in mind, but then was quickly sold abroad" and enjoyed international success (Lusnich 2011, 119). Even

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Fig. 4.1 Screenshot from the film, *Nueve reinas,* 58:41

though *Nueve reinas* was only Bielinsky's first feature, it won 22 awards in European, Latin American and North American film festivals in a number of categories including Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Film and Best Actor (for Ricardo Darín's portrayal of Marcos).

An assistant director for hundreds of television commercials before he turned his attention to *Nueve reinas* (Dixon), Bielinsky was skilled in the art of trickery both from the corporate perspective of product sales, as well as from the filmic perspective of how the spectacle of cinema can deceive its audience. Bielinsky has affirmed that deception served as the driving concept for *Nueve reinas.* In an interview with Cynthia Fuchs in 2002, he explained that the film was "about manipulation," and that he "wanted to shock everybody at particular moments, to let people think they could think ahead, and then contradict that." Bielinsky claims that because of the predictability of contemporary films, audiences are easy to fool. He wanted to turn this predictability on its head: "I didn't want anyone to predict anything. I wanted to have an internal contradiction, so the moment you start thinking, 'Okay, he's going to do this,' that the guy is going to be friends, but you open a door and out comes a monster" (Fuchs 2002).

Essentially a caper, *Nueve reinas* chronicles the 24-hour collaboration between two Buenos Aires con artists, Marcos (Ricardo Darín) and

Juan (Gastón Pauls), as they use their trickster skills to compete with each other. The first part of the film records the development of their relationship. They first meet when the older Marcos "saves" the younger Juan from trouble at his small-scale robbery of a convenience store. After they decide to work together, Marcos mentors the younger charlatan—e.g., he shows him how to scam an unknowing old lady and to perform a fraudulent transaction at a café. Unimpressed, Juan proves himself by convincing a woman to willingly offer him her purse within 2 minutes.

In the second part of the film, Marcos and Juan coordinate a much larger scam. They attempt to sell a forged set of supposed Weimar Republic stamps, called the Nine Queens, to a Spanish businessman and philatelist who is ending his stay in Buenos Aires. The partners overcome a series of setbacks in their scheme—including losing the forged set of stamps, and being forced to convince Marcos's sister to spend the night with the Spaniard—to finally obtain a certified check for $450,000 from the businessman in exchange for the stamps.

However, when Marcos and Juan arrive at the bank to cash the check, they find, in a scene that is uncannily prescient of the 2001 *corralito*,[3] that the bank has just become insolvent and that the owners have stolen the bank's money. Juan leaves Marcos and, after a ride in the subway, walks into a warehouse that resembles the backstage of a theater, where he greets and thanks a group of friends that the audience recognizes as the characters from the film including the forger, his sister and the Spaniard. It is only in this final sequence that the film audience becomes aware that they also have been duped: the Nine Queens scam was all an elaborate scheme developed by Juan and his fiancé, Valeria (Leticia Brédice), to avenge her brother, Marcos, for having stolen the money from their grandparents' estate. In the end, Valeria has managed to reclaim the money that was rightfully hers.[4]

While the characters work their fraudulent schemes, the Buenos Aires architecture that surrounds them enhances the manipulations of the plotline. *Nueve reinas* takes place in two categories of built environments: "old" Buenos Aires characterized by the downtown street, the typical apartment-style housing, the cafés and the Kavanagh Building; and neoliberal Buenos Aires evoked by the Hilton Hotel, the Esso gas station and the Banco Sudamericano. Over the course of the film, the architecture helps demonstrate a cultural transformation of the city from the small-town fraud illustrative of "old" Buenos Aires to the overwhelming deceit embodied by the contemporary neoliberal city.

Familiar Architecture

Echoes of Roberto Arlt's Buenos Aires of the 1930s resonate in the characterization of the swindles carried out by Marcos and Juan. While in Arlt's work, the trickster and the forger became "emblematic figures of capitalism," Joanna Page has argued—through Ricardo Piglia's reading of Arlt—that the grievousness is extenuated in the financial organization of late capitalism represented in *Nueve reinas*. In this case, "making money from nothing becomes even more possible in a system in which money is becoming increasingly estranged from the production of goods and services" (*Crisis and Capitalism* 2009, 89). Geoffrey Kantaris further associates Arlt's representation of delinquency with that of *Nueve reinas* in its application to the urban topography of the film. In the Buenos Aires of the film, Kantaris finds that "la espacialidad ha perdido la cartografía alegórica inversa (ya en crisis) del Bien y del Mal que encontramos en Baudelaire y Arlt" [spatiality has lost its inverse allegorical cartography (that was already in crisis) of Good and Bad that we find in Baudelaire and Arlt] ("Un tal Arlt" 2013, 63). For Kantaris, Arlt's allegorical spatial categories are replaced by iconic sites that synecdochally represent spatial processes generated by the world financial system:

> De hecho, la mayoría de los espacios de la película se podrían caracterizar como los famosos *non-lieux* (no-lugares) de Marc Augé (1992), espacios de tránsito como estaciones de servicio, calles, espacios comerciales globalizados de la ciudad, o el vestíbulo del Hotel Hilton, en lo que era, en el momento de hacer la película, quizás el espacio icónico más globalizado de la ciudad de Buenos Aires: Puerto Madero. ("Un tal Arlt", 63)
>
> [In fact, the majority of the film's spaces could be characterized as Marc Augé's famous *non-lieux* (nonplaces) (1992), spaces of transit such as gas stations, streets, commercial globalized spaces of the city, or the vestibule of the Hilton Hotel, located in what was, at the time of filming, perhaps the most iconic globalized space of the city of Buenos Aires: Puerto Madero.]

While this list of "nonplaces" captures accurately the mise-en-scène of the globalized architecture in *Nueve reinas*, it excludes the filmic sites that underscore the attributes of "old" Buenos Aires: namely, the downtown street, the cafés, the apartment buildings, and the Kavanagh skyscraper. In the film, these sites illustrate particular historical and cultural aspects of the Buenos Aires con artist. The globalized sites, along with

their accompanying lifestyles—which are analyzed in the second part of this chapter—are superimposed onto this local context.

The traditional Buenos Aires street models the local definition of the fraudster character personified by the film protagonists. Unlike robbers or delinquents who hide from the police and suspecting onlookers, the con artist conceals the scam through its very publicity. Tricksters remain unnervingly visible, but pull the wool over the eyes of their audience through the production of their cons much like the staging of a magic show, a theater production or, indeed, the creation of a film. The prevalence of tricksters on the streets of Buenos Aires is underlined through Marcos's monologue in which he shares an obscure series of names for particular types of swindlers: "descuidistas, culateros, abanicadores, gallos ciegos, biromistas, mecheras, garfios, pungas, boqueteros, escruchantes, arrebatadores, mostaceros, lanzas, bagalleros, pequeros, filos" [opportunists, petty thieves, lock-pickers, go-betweens, illegal bookies, shoplifters, bag-snatchers, wallet-lifters, tunnel-diggers, window-forcers, muggers, mustard-squirters, pickpockets, smugglers, gamblers, grabbers]. The antiquated terminology for fraudsters cited here was gleaned from pre-1950s police manuals according to Bielinsky (Page, *Crisis and Capitalism*, 93), indicating an intent by the filmmaker to link this character historically with the Buenos Aires urban environment.

Similar to the street, traditional establishments become associated with the life of the swindler. The small restaurant that functions as Marcos's office, as well as the café in which the fraudsters scam the waiters, extend public outdoor space to the interior and underscore the public aspect of the con artist's profession. By using a restaurant as his office, Marcos reframes into a work space various attributes that the environment effortlessly and gratuitously provides for him—a table as a desk, the restaurant telephone, the owner/server who doubles begrudgingly as a type of secretary. Despite the exposed nature of the restaurant setting, Marcos sits at the rear of the establishment to plan his next scams, obviously obscured from too much exposure in the face of the other diners.[5]

On the other hand, the mise-en-scène of the café emphasizes the public nature of the site, and the swindle in the establishment embraces the idea of exposure. Two aspects of the café scene underline nuances in the notion of public sites: the histrionic scam of the waiters and the mise-en-scène of the conversation between Marcos and Juan at the open window. In the fraud, Juan, seated alone, pays for a coffee with a ripped 100-peso bill. At another table, Marcos later pretends he has already paid for his

coffee and demands change from this same recognizable bill that Juan used to pay for his coffee. When they discuss the scam afterwards, Juan affirms that he does not like the public nature of these types of tricks; they are not his style because it is necessary to make a scene.

While this con might be too public for Juan, the private conversation that he has with Marcos occurs in an even more public position. This discussion, in which Juan explains that he is double-dealing to raise money to get his father out of jail, is shot across an open window of the café in which Marcos sits inside the café and Juan leans casually against the outside wall next to the window frame (Fig. 4.2). Beside Juan rests a bag of garbage, a reminder of the dirty dealings of the fraudster business. The older swindler sits behind a window frame that stands in for the outline of the film image: Marcos performs in the café as if on screen, while Juan assumes an outside position of onlooker.[6]

While the street, the restaurant/office and the café evoke an antiquated version of Buenos Aires and its relationship with the con artist, apartment buildings serve as the most significant architectural point of contrast with the globalized sites in the film. Marcos and Juan enact three scams at the public thresholds of middle-class apartments or their buildings; in each case the victim is an older woman.

Significantly, in order to carry out these tricks, the partners make use of building attributes characteristic of this traditional Buenos Aires architecture.

Fig. 4.2 Screenshot from the film, *Nueve reinas*, 16:23

In the first case, they identify their victim using the panel of doorbells at the front door of the building. The traditional-style elevator with a metal grid cage serves as the catalyst for the second apartment building scam in which they create a problem with the elevator to catch the victim off-guard. The third instance occurs in the midst of the larger scam regarding the Nine Queens stamps, when Marcos and Juan visit the forger's wife to acquire the copy he has made of the stamps. In this episode, the associates stand in the common hallway beside the actual apartment, and talk to the woman through the crack of the door across the chain locks to convince her to give them the desired envelope. The final apartment building sequence unfolds *inside* the apartment. More significantly, it takes place inside a residence that is located inside the luxurious Kavanagh highrise. The choice of this particular building focuses attention on the old wealth evoked by the famous building; however, its mise-en-scène points to rifts in this antiquated lifestyle in the contemporary city, and represents a shift in social behavior that catches the con artists by surprise.

The Kavanagh Building was built in 1934 by the wealthy Corina Kavanagh using the money from her considerable inheritance during a time in which Buenos Aires saw a sudden spike in the construction of highrises. As Rosa Aboy has described it, after the economic crisis of 1929, "the city grew taller" (25), creating a significant change in the urban landscape. At 33 floors high with a total floor area of 23,500 m^2, and designed in a triangular shape to take full advantage of the plot of land, the Kavanagh represented at the time of its construction both the largest concrete structure and the highest building on the continent of South America (Aboy 2012, 34–35). It was designed to attract the only sector of the population capable of surviving the economic crisis—those families whose wealth derived from agrarian businesses—in order to guarantee a high return through rents to recover the enormous initial investment (Liernur 2001, 202).

Added features of the building include a swimming pool and sauna, gymnasium, hairdresser and bar, a central hot water system, as well as excellent window insulation and a powerful central air conditioning system (Aboy, 35). The apartments also include certain remarkable conveniences for the time such as kitchens with built-in cupboards, marble counters, electric ovens, refrigerators and electric clocks (Aboy, 35). The architectural historian, Jorge Alejandro Liernur, has stated that the most surprising and unconventional feature of the building lies in its distribution of elevators. These are available at different points in the triangle to allow for

individuals to access their apartments without having to interact with other residents (Liernur, 204). Apartments at the Kavanagh were, and still are, advertised as luxurious living; one website promotes the Kavanagh apartments with their Art Déco design to high-end travellers as the height of luxury for a stay in Buenos Aires (www.corporatestays.com).

In *Nueve reinas*, the resident of the Kavanagh apartment represents the old wealth of Buenos Aires. Indeed, the owner of the original sheet of Nine Queens stamps, the forger's sister, lives in this building. Marcos and Juan visit her there to try to buy the original stamps after their copy is stolen. Even after purchasing the stamps from her, they deduce that they will earn a huge amount of money from their sale to the Spaniard businessman, Gandolfo.

Inside the sister's apartment, the camera first frames her hands serving herself a drink, but then shifts to capture the reflection of her face in an Art Déco looking-glass (Fig. 4.3). The mirror, of a design that one would expect in a Kavanagh apartment, features opaque white trapezoids, triangles and wavy lines on the surface of the reflecting glass that obstruct a full vision of the sister's face and body. Carrying her drink to join her visitors, the sister sits facing Marcos and Juan who are settled on an elegant semicircular blue sofa with exotic trinkets on display behind them. In the context of this decor, expectations for the sister's character as an older wealthy *porteña* seem clear, for both the film viewer and for the swindlers.

Fig. 4.3 Screenshot from the film, *Nueve reinas,* 1:10:39

The second part of the Kavanagh sequence highlights changes in the Buenos Aires trickster game through a transformation of the character-type who lives in this apartment building. As shown in the three other episodes with old ladies in middle-class apartment buildings, Marcos and Juan are skilled at swindling this type of victim. However, Sandler's sister in the Kavanagh surprises them with her contemporary lifestyle and knowledgeable responses to their bargaining. When her young lover, with bleached-blond hair (like the sister) and wearing only a white bathrobe, paces into the room behind her and heads to the armchair to lean back and watch television, the camera captures the astonished expressions of both Marcos and Juan as their eyes follow him. They are also surprised by the sister's reaction to Marcos's suggested price for the stamps. When he claims they will only be sold for $50,000, she and her lover both laugh in unison and she snaps: "¿A qué te dedicás? ¿A estafar a jubiladas?" [What is your job? To scam old ladies?] (1:12:27).[7] Of course, during the course of the film, the swindlers have already scammed three old ladies. Caught off-guard, Marcos continues to negotiate with her and, with some help from Juan, reaches the agreement to sell the stamps for $250,000 and give her a 15% commission—an enormous sum of money for both partners.

The changing meaning of wealth reflected in this disconnect between the expectations of encountering a disingenuous wealthy old lady at the Kavanagh, and the astuteness and unconventional morés of Sandler's sister, bears a certain resemblance to the urban legend regarding the construction of the Kavanagh Building. Corina Kavanagh apparently had the highrise built to achieve a spectacular revenge on the Anchorena family. The story goes that Corina's daughter was rejected as a suitable wife for the Anchorena son because the Kavanaghs did not form part of the aristocracy, but were rather part of the "new rich" of the era. The Anchorenas had built a family mausoleum, the Basílica del Santísimo Sacramento, that they could see directly from their home—the Anchorena Palace, now called the San Martín Palace—on the other side of the Plaza San Martín. To enact her revenge, Corina sold two of her family ranches, bought the piece of land in front of the mausoleum and contracted the building of this luxurious highrise to obstruct fully the Anchorena family's vision of their sacred church ("El Kavanagh…"; Aboy, fn. 25). Apparently, this is the reason for the unusual triangular shape of the Kavanagh Building.

Not only does the Kavanagh Building legend of revenge resonate with the film's plot through the concept of a cover-up (the mausoleum), it also highlights a battle for the levels of respect afforded to different types of wealth, albeit in a different historical era, a fight that can be compared to the players and the sociopolitical context of *Nueve reinas*. Because Corina's wealth was not aristocratic, the Kavanagh family did not hold the esteem of the patrician Anchorena family. The characters of the film find themselves at a crossroads concerning the acquisition of wealth in Buenos Aires; while the old swindlers of the Arlt era functioned in the public sphere on the streets of the city, this kind of small-scale fraud could not compete with the large-scale cons brought to Buenos Aires through neoliberalism and globalization. Marcos's list of trickster names is antiquated, and the wealthy who live in the Kavanagh Building also follow new behavioral norms, as can be seen by the sister's sexual prowess.

The fraudsters understand the codes and behaviors related to the traditional sites and can function successfully there, be it in relation to the swindlers on the street, the old ladies in the apartment buildings, or the café and restaurant owners and servers. However, the film's use of these traditional sites also underscores societal changes—as seen in the character of Sandler's unconventional sister—and the legibility of the city for Marcos and Juan is challenged when they attempt scams in globalized spaces. The open window at the café where Marcos and Juan carry on a conversation points, through contrast, to the abundance of glass in the architecture of the gas station, the bank and the hotel; while the Art Déco mirror in which Sandler's sister is filmed and obscured by the opaque designs on its surface in the Kavanagh Building signifies the symbolic deceit of glass.

Globalized Designs

The second series of Buenos Aires sites emerge in juxtaposition to the familiar places of the traditional streets, cafés, restaurants and wealth of the Kavanagh Building. Steeped in the international negotiations of globalized capitalism, the architecture of the Esso gas station, the Banco Sudamericano and the Hilton Hotel matches that of similar businesses on an international scale. The film's director alludes to them as "null space" (Fuchs), while critics have cited Augé's "non-place" (Kantaris, "Un tal Arlt", 63), Jameson's postmodern hyperspace (Gómez Moragas 2009, 38; Kantaris, "Un tal Arlt", 64–65) or capitalist globalized space

(Hines 2007, 118; Copertari, "*Nine Queens*: A Dark Day" 2005, 286) in reference to these buildings. For Deborah Shaw (2007), these sites account, in part, for the international appeal of the film; they ensure "that the national context is easily transferable for audiences" (72).

Characteristic of these sites in the film is the prevalence of glass features that are typical of the International Style, which developed out of modern architecture, and was associated with the "power of capitalism" by the mid-twentieth century, and more specifically with financial exchange in later years (Ramírez-Montagut 2008, 21). The choice of gas station/convenience store, bank and international hotel as illustrative of this modern architectural aesthetic for *Nueve reinas* cannot be incidental. These buildings mark iconic elements in the global spread of capitalism—transportation, efficiency, finance, and international business.

The film's mise-en-scène of the architecture of these globalized sites calls attention to the oppositional and duplicitous qualities of "transparency" and "barrier" offered by a glass wall. With respect to the gas station and the bank, this wall takes only the form of the front door, whereas the Hilton Hotel features a dominance of glass elements in its architectural design that extend into the main foyer with the glass elevators, the indoor solarium, the glass plate barriers on the corridors, along with the glass and steel frame front façade.

In the opening scenes of *Nueve reinas*, after Marcos impersonates an undercover police officer and hustles Juan out of the Esso gas station and convenience store, the camera rests inside the store to capture the soon-to-be associates through the glass door as it closes behind them (Fig. 4.4). The surroundings match those of any Esso station: the dull concrete around the gas pump and the commercial signs on the door and the pump. However, in this case, the glass door becomes emblematic of the viewpoint of the convenience store workers who watch this episode unfold. The transparency of the doors points to a clear and fair resolution to the delinquent incident—Juan's scam in the store—but the wall created by the doors offers secrecy and concealment to the fraudsters. As was true for the Buenos Aires resident of the 1990s in their reception of economic and political events, the understanding of the incident for the employees (and the film's audience) is compromised by this dual feature: what they comprehend through sight is not what has really happened.

The bank sequence provides another interpretation for glass doors. Marcos appears at the Banco Sudamericano ready to cash the certified

Fig. 4.4 Screenshot from the film, *Nueve reinas*, 00:05:49

check for $450,000 on the day after the bank's owners have taken all the money and fled.[8] A mass of people rally outside the locked glass doors of the bank furiously demanding entrance, while the employees hurry around inside apparently working. After having pushed his way through the crowd to the door, Marcos attempts in vain to use his contact inside the bank to help him cash the check (Fig. 4.5). In this case, the glass doors serve as a protective wall that separates the masses from the authority of the bank employees. However, unlike the Esso gas station scene, knowledge is not hidden between the people on the two sides of the doors. Here, both sectors know that corruption has led to the bank failure and to the loss of financial savings. The doors serve an opposite function in this mise-en-scène; they separate both parties from each other physically, but the lack of secrecy represented by the transparent quality of the glass remains intact. That the frustrated crowd manages finally to break through the doors demonstrates the permeability of the barrier in this case. The people have been scammed, but they clamor for compensation.

The architectural aesthetic of the gas station and the bank provides a point of comparison for the film's use of the Hilton International Hotel. The history of the Hilton hotel chain and the Buenos Aires branch offers a compelling context for its employment in the film. Conrad Hilton perceived his hotel chain as a way to promote the United States lifestyle.

Fig. 4.5 Screenshot from the film, *Nueve reinas,* 1:42:21

Hilton International Hotels, which were built in the Middle East and Europe in the 1950s and 1960s would demonstrate to the world the value of capitalist efficiency, and would encourage the United States' Cold War enemies to embrace the capitalist way of thinking. In her architectural history of the Hilton, Annabel Jane Wharton has affirmed that "the clarity and transparency of the building, its efficient plan, and manifest structure gave eloquent spatial utterance to the supple forms of American entrepreneurial expansion" (7). These hotels became iconic representations of the economic authority of the United States, while they also embodied its spatial paradigms (Wharton 2001, 159). Even though the Buenos Aires Hilton was erected 40 years after these examples, the emblematic nature of the hotel chain resonates in its significance for the *porteño* urban landscape.

The Argentine architect Mario Roberto Álvarez designed the Buenos Aires Hilton during the 1990s, construction was completed in 1999, and the building was inaugurated in January 2000, during the same year of the release of *Nueve reinas.* The Argentine businessman Alberto L. González financed the hotel just as he did the neighboring Puente de la Mujer, in Puerto Madero. In keeping with the architectural design of the hotels, the Buenos Aires Hilton features a glass and steel wall as its front façade. Wharton has identified the plate glass of the mid-century Hiltons as the

"ingredient" that most contributed to the hotel's representation of "modernity" (5). Like these previous models, in its architectural design the Buenos Aires Hilton also embraced the transformed categories of observation. While hotel guests might normally feel anxiety at being observed, the Hilton hotels adapted observation into pleasure; indeed the dominance of plate glass converted the Hilton into "a machine for viewing" (Wharton 5). Notably, to create the dramatic natural luminosity of the lobby, the Buenos Aires Hilton used close to 11,000 m^2 of glass ("El Hotel Hilton…").

While the Buenos Aires Hilton represents corporate interests in its location in Puerto Madero—an upscale region of the city spearheaded by the Menem government with international business in mind—as well as its link to the historical identity of the Hilton International hotel chain that promoted American entrepreneurial values around the world, the architectural design relates the hotel building to the representational history of glass-and-steel skyscrapers in the twentieth century.

The prototype for the modern office highrise was the Friedrichstrasse glass skyscraper designed by German-born, American architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1921. Although failing to win in a design competition among 140 entries for Berlin's first highrise, Mies van der Rohe's Friedrichstrasse design nevertheless succeeded in influencing modern architecture of the twentieth century on a global level. Although the Friedrichstrasse design of glass-and-steel walls would function from a scientific and technological perspective, less viable was the "crystal-shaped plan" reflecting Expressionist architectural ideas that featured glass to symbolize "purity and renewal" (McQuaid 2002, 50). Modern architecture "believed that social problems could be solved through architecture" and fostered mass housing projects that included elements such as roof gardens and glass walls to create natural lighting in an attempt to rationalize and enrich daily life (Ramírez-Montagut, 7).

The International Style architecture that followed, and that symbolized global capitalism, shed this idealism to focus solely on the stylistic form "emptied of social, economic, and technical concerns, as well as spatial complexity" (Ramírez-Montagut, 7). Therefore, the original idealist features associated with glass architecture in the early to mid-twentieth century have become hollow to the point of irony. The plate glass and steel walls of a downtown highrise have come to symbolize the illusion of transparency and purity in capitalist society.

In this sense, the figure of the contemporary con artist finds its architectural parallel in a building like the Hilton International Hotel.

Unfortunately for Marcos, the fraudster who emerges from the streets of old Buenos Aires cannot compete in the deception of globalized capitalism that extends the art of the con to an international level. In the scene mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, when the Hilton doors close in front of Marcos' sister Valeria (Fig. 4.1), she becomes enveloped in glass as if fully absorbed by the world represented by the hotel. Valeria's desire to perform her job efficiently and according to hotel protocol is signalled by her business attire and hairstyle, as well as in her negative attitudes towards her scheming brother. At the end of the film, the audience finds out that her association with global capitalism has paid off: the fraud that wins above all other scams in the film is that of Valeria with the expert help of Juan to reclaim her inheritance from her brother.

To mark the uncertainty in the relationship between the partners, glass features from the Hilton also dominate during the argument between Marcos and Juan after the meeting with the Spanish businessman, Gandolfo. He has agreed to purchase the stamps, but Juan finds himself second-guessing Marcos: there must be some trap, claims Juan, because this deal is too good. This conversation is framed cinematographically first by the incomplete feature of the half-wall of glass that lines the hallway (Fig. 4.6), and then by the ephemerality of an elevator always in movement (Fig. 4.7), both of which are architectural elements that represent uncertainty. The fact that both the half-wall and the elevator are made of

Fig. 4.6 Screenshot from the film, *Nueve reinas*, 1:05:22

Fig. 4.7 Screenshot from the film, *Nueve reinas,* 1:06:09

glass only adds to the sense of doubt due to the opposing characteristics of transparency and barrier attributed to this material. While the Hilton emerges as a "sterilized, ordered space" (Page 89), a disquieting ambience is evoked also by the monotonous diegetic music that persists in this site along with the camera's insistent focus on glass features.

By complicating boundaries of inside and outside, glass architecture creates an ambiguity in collective spaces. A glass-and-steel wall in public buildings such as arcades and shopping centers situates these "public collective spaces under the shadow of interiority, thus constituting such spaces as 'dream-houses' of the collective" (Miller 2006, 255). Tyrus Miller has constructed his analysis through Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* to affirm that the arcade "projects individual interiority onto a mass scale" (255). Similarly, the projection of interiority becomes amplified in the context of a hotel that invents unclearly defined categories for public and private spaces. The hotel lobby especially complicates public and private in its spatial mixture of personal living room, privately designated for hotel clients and visitors of these clients, and public space, open to those who first enter from the street. In the film, Marcos is awakened by the hotel staff from his slumber on the couch in the lobby because sleeping is not an accepted activity for this space.

The fraud of glass architecture emerges, therefore, through the unique juxtapositions offered by the material between transparency and

barrier, and between interior and exterior. Its quality of simulation carries glass back to the optical tricks afforded by the camera lens. Sergei Eisenstein, whose architect father's buildings followed the Art Nouveau style mocked by his son, planned a film called *The Glass House*. Oksana Bulgakowa has explained that the screenplay demonstrates Eisenstein's consideration of the association between glass architecture and the vision of the camera:

> The first version of script (1926–27) unfolds a drawn storyboard of an experimental abstract movie, with the mobile camera and an elevator serving as the protagonists: the elevator moves between planes, floors and ceilings, modifying the view of the observer (i.e., the camera). The camera alone is capable of seeing this building, with its blind inhabitants. The transparency of the structure, the change and changeability of viewpoints, creates the basic principle of visual dramaturgy, which becomes the narrative structure.

Eisenstein's film, had it been made, would ultimately have questioned opposing perspectives on the primary purpose of architecture as being either functional or aesthetic: "In his final version of the screenplay, the comedy of the eye and the drama of recovered sight were subsumed by the tragedy of two Utopian dreamers. One is the Architect who designs an ideal house, the other the Poet who doubts the validity of that functional model" (Bulgakowa).

As is the case in Eisenstein's architectural film idea, the prominence of glass in the Hilton's mise-en-scène in *Nueve reinas* alludes to cinematography, in this case through the wealth of lines of sight available to the camera. Donetta Hines has observed the "omniscient" perspectives provided by the Hilton's architecture—such as the all-seeing eye of a movie camera lens—of "an open lobby with visual access from the elevator and all the floors" (119). During their night spent waiting in the hotel lobby, Marcos and Juan venture a nervous glance every now and then up to the door of Gandolfo's hotel room which can be seen from below due to the openness of the architecture. Probably an unwitting mistake, but nevertheless of interest in this analysis, is the fact that in the filming of the scene at the Hilton front door (Fig. 4.1), the reflection of the camera tripod is visible in the lower left glass door. Here, the cameraman has also been tricked by the glass that does not offer easy concealment of the filmmaking apparatus. This accidental self-reflexive moment uncannily adds another victim—the film crew themselves—to the ranks of those

who have succumbed to a scam in the course of the film. This time the trick has been perpetrated not by a person but by the glass in the architecture.

In his interview with Claudia Fuchs, Bielinsky explained the care that went into the cinematography of the film's sites. In order to create the comfort that the characters feel working on the Buenos Aires streets, Bielinsky used hidden cameras with a long lens to try to "blend them into the scene." The director also avoided too much rehearsing, and had the actors work on the street without studio lights. He claims that "the cameramen didn't know exactly where the actors would stop, so they had to be very quick on their feet. I loved that. I wanted to mix them into the environment." When filming the hotel scenes, on the other hand, Bielinsky affirmed that he wanted to create tension to illustrate the characters' discomfort: "They are uncomfortable. They know that someone is looking over them all the time, the security people or the clients. This is not their own environment. So it's like they're aware all the time of where they are."

While the local and global architecture is framed cinematographically in different ways in the film, the temporal distinctions associated with the sites between the early twentieth century and the contemporary neoliberal era of the film are not so easily parsed. Tellingly, Geoffrey Kantaris identifies links between the representation of the Hilton Hotel in *Nueve reinas* and Siegfried Kracauer's article, "The Hotel Lobby," written in the 1920s ("Un tal Arlt", 64).[9] Especially notable are the German philosopher's observations about the inverse concept of community symbolized by the empty space of the hotel vestibule taken in contrast to the congregation that fills the spiritual space of the church.

Kantaris finds relevant the historical coincidence between the time of composition of "The Hotel Lobby" and the sheet of stamps from the Weimar Republic that the swindlers aim to sell ("Un tal Arlt", 64). To this enticing reference to an earlier era of the twentieth century can be added a series of suggestions evoked through the architecture in the film: the mise-en-scène of the Buenos Aires street as representative of a local type of swindler prevalent in the early part of the century; the inclusion of the Kavanagh Building highrise, constructed in the mid-thirties, as a historical counterpoint to the Hilton; and the cinematographic focus on glass architecture that alludes to the Modernist fascination with the material between the World Wars.

In contrast to the glass wall that indicates the dual characteristics of the swindle, the film playfully proposes images of the brick wall. A solid reliable material, brick offers opposing characteristics to the simulating qualities of glass. A brick wall cannot be penetrated with the eye or with the camera; divisions between interior and exterior are clear. When Juan first meets Marcos and considers his proposition to work with him for a day, the camera captures them as they stand in front of a brick wall in the parking lot where they are conversing (Fig. 4.8). As Gabriela Copertari has noted, "The brick wall is not incidental in this scene" ("*Nine Queens*: A Dark Day", 282). She argues for its association with the Rita Pavone song "Il ballo del mattone" ("The Dance of the Brick") for which Juan tries to find the lyrics during the course of the film. In Copertari's analysis, "the 'dance' of the camera in front of the brick wall and Juan's repeated inquiry about 'Il ballo del mattone' as a leitmotif of his performance suggest that it is Juan calling the shots, not Marcos, that Marcos is in fact dancing to the tune played by Juan in this elaborately staged scam" ("*Nine Queens*: A Dark Day", 282).[10] Tellingly, the full lyrics to the Rita Pavone song only come to Juan at the end of the film when he is united with Valeria in the warehouse. The Dance of the Brick—danced exclusively on one tile of the dance floor—is reserved for one's true love, while the lyrics of the song claim that "twist" and "rock" can be danced with others. Corresponding to the soundtrack of the full Rita Pavone

Fig. 4.8 Screenshot from the film, *Nueve reinas,* 00:08:42

song that crescendos to a spirited level in the final scene through the film credits, Juan reserves the Dance of the Brick for his fiancé, Valeria.

The protagonists of *Nueve reinas* seek to apply their knowledge of the local world of the fraudster inherent to the Buenos Aires streets to the international world of globalized capitalism. As they navigate through the city, the built environments signal the level of comfort. The café, the restaurant, the apartment buildings all belong to the legible city that the swindlers can manage and where they can be successful in their scams. The gas station, the bank and the hotel illustrate the new city that they cannot fathom, the environment linked to the international market economy.

Arguably, the younger Juan has more access to this globalized world. However, even his antics to avenge Marcos serve only as a simulation of a new form of capitalism. Juan plays the part, as if in a theater production, indicated by the warehouse at the close of the film where the characters (except for Marcos) have gathered. Like the backstage of a theater, the "actors" relax among odds and ends including the "props" used in the scam/show. They smoke cigars from a box branded "Nueve Reinas," and the motorcycle thieves rev the engine of their bike; the bright colors of the items in the warehouse and the characters' clothing point to a shift in the storyline, a happy ending confirmed by Rita Pavone's joyous song. From the street to the hotel to the warehouse, architecture signals the attitudes of the protagonists and their (in)abilities to navigate the new politics of globalized capitalism.

Notes

1. *Nueve reinas* has been well studied by scholars. While Jens Andermann (2012) has read the film as a comment on the illusory nature of mainstream cinema (152), Joanna Page has argued that the film ultimately reinforces "the logic of capitalism" because the winner does not come out ahead for his honesty, but rather because he is the better swindler (*Crisis and Capitalism*, 86–96). In Gabriela Copertari's close reading, the film exemplifies the drive for "justice" in the context of a "disillusionment" brought about by the globalized economy (280). Both Donetta Hines and Cristina Gómez Moragas interpret *Nueve reinas* as a national allegory: Hines focuses on the prescient nature of the film and its political and cultural reach beyond Argentina; Gómez Moragas studies the film's postmodern representation of the ethical crisis that develops in late capitalism. Deborah Shaw and Ana Laura Lusnich study the film's appeal to both local and international markets, while Geoffrey Kantaris analyzes the

associations between simulation, globalized politics and urban space in the film.

2. Bielinsky was only able to finish one other film, *El aura* (2005), before he died suddenly of a heart attack in São Paulo.
3. In an attempt to curtail the draining of money from banks, the Argentine government put a hold on withdrawals from accounts—known as the *corralito*.
4. In her review of *Nueve reinas*, Angeliki Coconi gushes that "the whole movie experience that the viewer is put through is a con. He meets the protagonists, but never really knows whether they're good or bad, or whose side they're on or who they're fighting. Rather, a con is constantly within a con; nothing is ever what it seems; antagonists keep popping out of everywhere and the viewer is lucky if he gets even a few seconds of merely trusting any of the characters while watching."
5. Deborah Shaw points to Marcos' attitude and business attire to demonstrate the film's comment on the prevalence of fraud at all levels of Buenos Aires society: "Marcos, who dedicates himself to swindling, appears to see himself as a businessman; he wears a suit, talks of his office (a table in a local café/restaurant), and is openly dismissive of '*chorros*' ('thieves'), clearly believing that he belongs to a different class" (Shaw, 75–76).
6. Gabriela Copertari affirms further that this shot implies the "framing" of Marcos by the younger, Juan ("*Nine Queens*: A Dark Day", 283).
7. It is unclear if the lover is actually following the conversation and, even at this point, his laugh might be interpreted as a reaction to the television show. To add to the tension, he ominously cracks walnuts with his hand while he laughs along with her.
8. Gabriela Copertari notes that both the bank and the hotel "represent the privatized and corrupt global Argentina of the 1990s: from the Spanish businessman about to be deported to the bank's board of directors who escape with the bank's funds." They become "the first and the last link in the plot of retribution that the film stages for those who are willing and capable of robbing the 'family inheritance', of selling the 'family jewels' or selling out their own sister" ("*Nine Queens*: A Dark Day", 287–288).
9. According to Kantaris, Kracauer wrote his book on detective fiction between 1922 and 1925 during the period of hyperinflation and instability in the Republic ("Un tal Arlt", 64).
10. Furthermore, Copertari has found that "the word brick in Italian, *mattone*, also carries the figurative meaning of 'an unbearable person—ultimately, something hard to swallow' (FVL, 2003: 2)"—adding that "it is not hard to imagine who the 'brick' is intended to be in the film" (282).

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CHAPTER 5

The Hotel Termas in *La niña santa*: Unstable Frames and Open Boundaries

On her way to Dr. Jano's room in the hotel, the adolescent protagonist of *La niña santa* (Martel 2004) gently caresses the historic window frames as she walks pensively down the corridor (Fig. 5.1). This is one of several sequences in which Amalia touches features of the hotel, evoking a disquieting intimacy with the architecture. She strokes the white-washed exterior wall of a room as she passes it, gently touches the handrail as she climbs the staircase, and her fingertips brush along the plastic sheet that serves as a makeshift wall beside the pool. Through Amalia's haunting intimacy with the Hotel Termas, the film shapes the building's architecture to function as a palimpsest that points, through historical contrast, to the shortcomings of contemporary Argentine society.

After the success of Lucrecia Martel's first feature film, *La ciénaga* (2001), *La niña santa* competed in the official Cannes selection in 2004 and was chosen by the *New York Times* as one of the ten best films debuted in 2005.[1] Along with *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008), Martel's feature films have been termed the "Salta trilogy" because of their setting in the environment of northwestern Argentina.[2] In all three films, the camera captures architectural features in ways that underscore the sociopolitical and subjective contexts of the story. Indeed, certain resemblances can be drawn between the mise-en-scène of the hotel in *La niña santa* and that of the prevalent buildings in Martel's other films.

In a state of similar neglect and disrepair as the hotel, the family ranch—La Mandrágora—in *La ciénaga* reflects the decadence, passivity and apathy associated with this affluent lifestyle. For its part, the

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Fig. 5.1 Screenshot from the film, *La niña santa*, 21:32

claustrophobic cinematography of Vero in her house in *La mujer sin cabeza* recalls the filming of the characters in the hotel of *La niña santa*; shots of the actors framed by doors and windows, along with shots of mirror reflections in both films capture the uneasiness and fragility of these characters. Through its architectural portrait, *La niña santa* functions as a bridge between the first and third films of the trilogy; it embodies the characters' social and economic decline (like *La ciénaga*) through the neglected condition of the building, while it also reflects the characters' fragility (like *La mujer sin cabeza*) through the excessive focus on certain architectural features.

The plot of *La niña santa* revolves principally around Amalia (María Alche), the "holy girl," and her youthful interpretation of her religious calling to save a medical doctor who has groped her. The doctor is attending a conference at her family's hotel in Salta, and Amalia's quest is contrasted by the presence of myriad doctors at work discussing medical treatments. Amalia and her close friend, Josefina (Julieta Zylberberg), with whom she attends the Catholic youth group meetings, spend much of their time together discussing their spiritual vocations and exploring their sexuality. While Amalia pursues Dr. Jano (Carlos Belloso), this doctor and Amalia's mother, Helena (Mercedes Morán), are attracted to each other and begin their acquaintance through a hearing test that the doctor performs on Helena. Amalia swears Josefina to secrecy when she confides in her about her passion and quest, but Josefina, in trouble with

her mother, finally blurts out Amalia's sexual incident. Dr. Jano's family arrives to spend the last days of the conference with him, and the film ends after Josefina's mother has reported the groping of Amalia, immediately before the public announcement of the incident.

A social and psychological response to contemporary political and economic transformations, *La niña santa* is recounted through the eyes of female adolescents, representatives of the next generation who face a decadent and complex reality. Leila Gómez (2005) maintains that Martel's vision is one of a both socially and geographically marginal world: the protagonists are female adolescents and the settings are provincial Argentina, in the Northwest region of Salta. Gómez hones this designation further to identify four types of marginalization in the films, "la edad de la adolescencia en familias disfuncionales, la domesticidad del rol femenino, la sociedad provinciana del noroeste argentino y un país venido a menos" [adolescence in dysfunctional families; the domesticity of the feminine role; provincial society in Northwest Argentina; and a country that is run-down] (1). In the case of Martel, this marginalized vision represents not only the outlook of the female provincial adolescent, but the view from a national and identitarian periphery.

Through its architectural mise-en-scène, *La niña santa* defies hegemonic aesthetics for the framing and definition of interior space and reflects questions about order formation in contemporary Argentina. Aspects of the historic Hotel Termas de Rosario de la Frontera seep uncannily into the film's narrative, creating possibilities, albeit unstable ones, for a representational reading of the film. This instability is further enhanced by the cinematography that captures certain architectural features in excess; both sides of the oppositional spatial binaries of surface and depth, framing and obfuscation are accentuated relentlessly through the camera lens, while the social boundaries of public and private assigned to spaces are challenged persistently through the characters' actions and relationships. Finally, the film questions human mechanisms for filtering and categorizing experience, be it through the senses, through spirituality or through scientific thought.

The Historic Referent of the Hotel Termas

Built by the Spanish doctor Antonio Palau, the Hotel Termas de Rosario de la Frontera opened its doors on April 1, 1880, as a site for vacationing and for physical rehabilitation. This first thermal pavilion in

South America was constructed next to the small town of Rosario de la Frontera—about 200 km south of Salta—around nine thermal springs of temperatures varying between 25 and 99 °C. The waters were used "en cura de bebida para procesos renales, digestivos y metabólicos. Y en aplicaciones generales para procesos reumáticos" [as a drinking cure for kidney, digestion and metabolism processes as well as for rheumatic processes] (San José Rodríguez 2008, 30). Indeed, Dr. Palau bottled water from the one of the springs under the brand name of "Agua de Vichy," later changed to "Agua Mineral Palau," in honor of his memory, according to the product's website (http://www.aguapalau.com.ar/palau/index.html) (Fig. 5.2).[3] Designed in European style, the building itself represents luxurious construction of the late nineteenth century. It was refurbished after the filming of *La niña santa*; no mention of Martel's film appears on the Hotel's website (http://www.hoteltermasalta.com.ar/).

Along with the Hotel Termas, a number of resort hotels were built in Argentina in the late nineteenth century—the golden era for the national hotel industry—inspired by trends in mid-nineteenth-century tourism to the Mediterranean. Argentine hotels of this style founded at this time

Fig. 5.2 Publicity for Agua Mineral Palau, 1927

include the Hotel Edén (1887, La Falda, Córdoba), the Bristol Hotel (1888, Mar del Plata, Buenos Aires), the Hotel Boulevard Atlántico (1889, Mar del Sud, Buenos Aires), and the Hotel Quequén (1895, Necochea, Buenos Aires). These establishments were characterized by excesses and extravagances aimed at upper-class travelers who would be treated with attentions befitting their familial lineage. Along with spaces designed for recreational activities for both men and women, lavish rooms accommodated the guests, and separate quarters housed the personal servants who accompanied them (Camino et al.).

Well-known to Martel, who vacationed at the hotel with her family as a child in the 1970s, is the fact that the Hotel Termas is said to be home to a number of apparitions. The director has explained that when the children were bored during their vacation, her mother would tell them these ghost stories (Lerer). In his article for the Buenos Aires newspaper, *Clarín*, Diego Lerer describes the legends around the Hotel Termas:

> La historia y la algo decadente elegancia del lugar lo tiñen de fantasmas que parecen habitar entre las manchas de humedad, los techos altos y los largos pasillos repletos de reposeras. Dicen que por la noche, cuando la zona se cubre de niebla y el hotel parece flotar por los aires, esos fantasmas salen y asustan a los huéspedes.
>
> [The history and the somewhat decadent elegance of the place colors it with ghosts that seem to live between the stains of humidity, the high ceilings and the long corridors filled with benches. They say that at night, when the landscape is covered with fog and the hotel seems to float in the air, these ghosts come out and scare the guests.]

Martel remembers from her childhood that the specter of the headless priest seemed to summon the guests to daily mass at 5 o'clock each afternoon. Apparently, the chapel bells would ring and the director recalls that "nos moríamos de miedo porque no había nadie allí quien la tocara" [we were terrified because there was no one there ringing them] (Lerer). Another ghost, this one of a suicide victim, would appear in the rearview mirrors of the cars and, significantly for the film, the apparition of the girl who died in the pool of boiling water was said to inhabit the hallways (Maita).

The history, the architecture and the ghost stories of the Hotel Termas tenuously but certainly affect the film's narrative. Again bringing

to the fore filmmaking's disquieting limit between reality and its representation—recall the early films of trains coming into the station that frightened audiences, and the debates surrounding the deception of filmmaking that raised questions of morality—Martel's incorporation of "real" elements of the Hotel Termas points the audience to the film's historical context in a subtle, uncanny but convincing way.[4] *La niña santa*, like *La ciénaga* and *La mujer sin cabeza*, takes part in the "construction" rather than "interpretation" of meaning, as noted by Page ("Folktales and Fabulation" 2013, 72). While Martel's confusing, disruptive and ambiguous narratives bewilder the viewer and lead to the relegation of her films to elite arthouse audiences, Page has argued that her narrative strategies have more in common with the mainstream public than it would initially appear and, in fact, resemble popular thought and speech patterns in which thoughts remain unfinished and subjects are repeated ("Folktales and Fabulation", 73). This narrative style also emerges in relationship to the filmic representation of the past. Martel affirms, concerning her work as a filmmaker, that "me fascina tener un trabajo que te pueda llevar de una manera tan radical al pasado" [it fascinates me to have a job that can take you to the past in such a radical way] (Lerer); indeed, in *La niña santa* the link to the outside referent that represents the past is established in a disquieting fashion.

The ghost stories of the Hotel Termas most readily develop this uncanny association. The comfort and familiarity of the hotel, the "heimlich" or homelike feeling of this temporary home, becomes definitively "unheimlich" or unhomely (uncanny)—following Freud's definition of the term—due to the presence of Amalia. As Deborah Martin has detailed in her article, the safe "familiar" adolescent object of Dr. Jano's sexual desire returns and controls the gaze, now gaining authority over and disturbing the doctor in this space. The girl who is said to haunt the hallways of the Hotel Termas is revived in Amalia who moves through the hotel in a ghostlike fashion, caressing walls, moving in and out of rooms (including those of the guests), and touching the heads of children as they run past. Amalia's rapport with the spirit world is elicited through her relationship to religion: she has memorized and recites a Bible passage; she holds her hands over her sleeping mother as if blessing her; she has visions that are recorded in drawings by her best friend; and, of course, she pursues what she thinks is her calling, to "save" the man who groped her.

The intimacy evoked by Amalia by touching both bodies and buildings enhances the representation of her adolescent desire and reflects the haptic nature of cinema and architecture observed by Bruno who finds a "palpable link between space and desire." Bruno claims boldly that "space unleashes desire" (*Atlas of Emotion* 2002, 66), and Amalia's relationship to the hotel supports this affirmation. In a particularly sensual scene that crosses into the sexual, Amalia caresses the banister and hums to herself as she walks barefoot upstairs to her room after swimming (Fig. 5.5), her bathing suit and hair still dripping. When she arrives in her room she lies down on her bed to masturbate. Familiar but also uncanny, the ghost from the historic hotel makes its way into the film. In this version of her story, the specter's profound association with the space also provokes sensuality and feelings of desire.

Surface and Depth

While Amalia leads the viewer to sense a past tragedy in the hotel through her implied embodiment of one of its ghosts, Martel's representation of the Hotel Termas elicits its decadence and past glory through the "critical vision of the real" allowed in cinema (Vidler, *Warped Space* 2000, 111). In this film, the characters often refer to the hotel's condition of disrepair and to the change in their professional role regarding its upkeep. According to Freddy, they intended to make renovations in the hotel, but did not because of expense; Helena explains to Dr. Jano that water-cooling costs prohibit them from maintaining a cold-water pool.

While the hotel rooms seem to be cleaned only superficially with a disinfectant spray, the shampoo provided to hotel guests does not clean well according to Helena and Mirta. Noted by a number of critics (Page, Podalsky, Martin), an incessant focus on surface and tactility emerges in *La niña santa* through a series of letimotifs including the ineffectiveness of the cleaning products, Amalia's touching of the surfaces, and the disturbing superficiality of the adult conversations that unravel without communicating. Also pointing to the concept of surfaces is a photocopy that recurs throughout the film with regard to the Catholic girls' group; the leader implores the children to find "original" sources to support their ideas.

Critics have found the film's focus on surfaces to reflect Martel's "refusal to represent" (Martin, 61). However, an analysis of the hotel's mise-en-scène offers a reading that contradicts this critical interpretation.

Indeed, the cinematographic framing of the architecture illustrates quite the opposite: the hotel surface is concealed from the audience, favoring instead a focus on depth. One key element of the architectural mise-en-scène rests in the way that the film provides no establishing shot of the exterior of the Hotel Termas. As Cécile François has observed, this filming strategy disorients the viewer and provokes questions regarding this disquieting place that is simultaneously hotel and hospital. A focus on the hotel reveals that it is not only an abundance of surface but also an intensity of depth that dismantles representation.

Seen from this perspective, the filmic manifestation of the hotel becomes analogous to a burial site. The thermal pools in which the guests and the hotel residents swim are fashioned from water that springs from deep inside the earth where it is heated by volcanic activity. Besides the pools, the characters spend a lot of time in the "bowels" of the hotel: in the kitchen, the massage room, and the linen room. Expanded-angle frames of the lobby, the restaurant or the conference hall quickly give way to close-ups of architectural details that fail to provide a full perspective of the space. Helena is so intimately linked to the building that Amalia once implies that she has been buried in it. At one point, in a statement that recalls stories like Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" or Cortázar's "Casa tomada," Amalia tells her mother, "Está helada tu habitación, parece una tumba" [Your room is freezing, it's like a tomb]. Furthermore, the most popular activity for Helena, her brother and Amalia is that of passively lying down on the bed, again implying a corpselike association with the habitat.

La niña santa offers excess in both directions—too much surface as well as too much depth. Both superficial and profound, the construction of meaning and the relationship between characters reaches in both directions, but never settles in the middle where it would be fully formed. Martel admits that the film presents layers: "La película tiene una trama falsa. La trama que tiene no es de lo que trata" [The film has a false plot. Its plot is not what it's really about] (Lerer), adding an inconclusive interpretation of the narrative as "el enfrentamiento de la moral de la clase media y el anarquismo místico, que no es lo mismo que la Iglesia. O algo así" [the confrontation with the morality of the middle class and mystic anarchy that is not the same as the Church. Or something like that] (Lerer).

Unmistakable is the mark of apparitions in the space of the Hotel Termas; this haunting is both on the surface—the specter has no flesh

and therefore no density—and in the depths through its association with the past. Linked to the real site of the hotel, the ghost of *La niña santa* creates a liaison to the sociopolitical context of contemporary Argentina. Martel's subsequent film, *La mujer sin cabeza*, has been read widely as a comment on the recent dictatorship and, retroactively, opens the door to interpretations of the haunting in *La niña santa* as alluding to the disquieting memory of the dictatorship and its thousands of disappeared.

Frames and Boundaries

The haunting of the hotel suggests the crossing of historical limits in that the past continues into the present in the form of a specter. Other boundaries crossed in the film are more evident. Dr. Jano crosses conventional social and political limits: a married man, he has acted on his attraction to a woman who is not his wife, as well as his attraction to her adolescent daughter. The experimentation with crossing boundaries can also be extended to other characters: Freddy and Helena's relationship that hinges on incest; Josefina's sexual encounter with her cousin in their grandmother's bed; Amalia and Josefina's kiss in the linen room. Cinematographically, an abundant attention to the architectural features of the hotel that frame the characters marks this instability of boundaries.

Carefully selected camera angles promote the sensation of a subjective framing of the scene's events, calling attention not only to the personal nature of the analysis of experience, but also to the notion of artistic creation as a controlling process through which to represent reality. Characters are filmed from below, or in extreme close-ups of the ear or cheek. In some scenes, the camera has captured only the characters' torsos.

Even more disconcerting are the scenes in which the main action occurs outside the frame of the camera lens: at different moments, Helena and Mirta are almost out of the scene while they are obviously speaking to another character who appears on screen; Dr. Jano in the telephone booth is almost completely out of the camera's eye. The appearance of certain characters is often also obstructed by some sort of screen, an obfuscated window or glass door. In Josefina's apartment, the naked neighbor who suddenly falls from the second story onto their patio emerges embarrassed from behind a white voile curtain—fodder for the adolescents' Catholic imaginations—into the room. In this incident, the

viewer first hears a loud noise before the camera focuses on the window with the curtain from behind which the man walks into the living room. Similar obfuscations behind screens occur with Josefina behind the whitened glass shower stall while her mother talks to her and with Amalia behind a translucent plastic screen beside the hotel pool. In this instance at the pool, Amalia's shadowed image sneaks to the edge of the screen and taps with a key on a metal post while peeking out at Dr. Jano in the pool.

Almost every filmic image is framed self-consciously again by architectural elements of the decadent provincial hotel. A door or window frame, a piece of a wall or a screen all serve as borders for the scenes in this film. The action may occur within this frame, but often key actors in the scene are talking off-screen, a technique that emphasizes even more completely the process of scenic construction for the production of this film. Even the name, Jano, is borrowed from the two-faced mythical figure, protector of thresholds and doorways.[5]

Martel focuses the camera on architectural elements of the hotel that serve as a frame within the frame of the camera's lens. In many instances, door and window frames surround a scene; the elevator scenes framed by the moving cube emphasize this point. However, two scenes stand out as pregnant examples for their accumulation of frames within frames: when the doctors give Helena a hearing test; and when Dr. Jano calls his family from the phone booth. In the case of the hearing test, Helena is seated in a small sound-proofed room with a window that separates her from the doctors (Fig. 5.3). She listens through her headphones to the words that they pronounce for her as they test her hearing. In this scene, the camera is positioned first behind yet another frame, that of the doorway onto the hall. It moves to the interior to shift between a focus on Helena through reflections on the glass window and the face of Dr. Jano listening to the test. Therefore, the frame of the camera lens is framed once by the doorway and then again by the interior window, which presents an unclear image of Helena, hazy because she is superimposed by reflections on the window.

Similarly, a series of architectural elements of the hotel compound to form a sequence of frames during Dr. Jano's phone conversation with his son (Fig. 5.4). Dr. Jano, who speaks from inside a wooden phone booth in the hallway of the hotel, is first filmed in this scene from outside the phone booth behind a partial divider: an architectural detail made of small glass windows. The perspective of the scene shifts to inside the

Fig. 5.3 Screenshot from the film, *La niña santa*, 57:50

Fig. 5.4 Screenshot from the film, *La niña santa*, 1:12:36

phone booth with the doctor to turn outward from his perspective into the hall in which the viewer sees Amalia climbing up the stairs past the moving elevator in her bathing suit (Fig. 5.5). A large dark wooden slab, part of the phone booth, cuts the image in half as the camera captures Dr. Jano's anxiety over seeing Amalia while he speaks with his family.

Fig. 5.5 Screenshot from the film, *La niña santa*, 1:13:00

Like this exaggerated attention on frames, the focus on opaque walls and half-walls also constructs a sense of instability regarding boundaries. Josefina's mother talks to her through the opaque wall of the shower stall in Josefina's apartment; Amalia creeps up on the doctor from behind the plastic divider on the side of one of the hotel pools; curtains block the full vision from Dr. Jano's hotel room and out to the balcony in Josefina's apartment. The final shot of Helena framed by the heavy red stage curtains combine the two filming details: the incessant framing with that of the unstable walls (Fig. 5.6). The camera captures Helena as she sits on stage ready to perform as a patient in the closing act of the conference, uncomfortably moving in an office chair, while Dr. Jano watches her from backstage and the medics watch her from the audience. The stage curtains flank her body as if to question, in their fluidity, accepted boundaries that have been crossed by Dr. Jano and the other characters.

While this mise-en-scène of Helena on stage brings together notions of boundaries through the frame of curtains, it also marks another key spatial concept that is challenged in the film: that of public and private spaces. The doctors have decided to conclude their meeting by reenacting the personal and private conversation between a doctor and his/her patient in front of an audience. The hotel site itself already complicates notions of public and private: guests normally enjoy the privacy of a

Fig. 5.6 Screenshot from the film, *La niña santa*, 1:37:04

room, but the room regularly houses new guests; the lobby and dining areas are all shared with other guests. As Joanna Page has aptly argued, following contemporary discussions of the political nature of the personal, the private sphere in Martel's films becomes a political space that opens up the possibility of generalized social commentary ("Espacio privado" 2007, 165). This revision of the meaning of political and spatial categories is stressed explicitly in the merging of public and private in the space of a hotel.

In the case of these characters in the Hotel Termas, private and public is complicated even further. Helena and her brother Freddy both live in and administer the hotel occupying both their personal and professional roles in the same space. However, the hotel is really managed by Mirta whose relationship to Helena and Freddy approaches that of mother and daughter[6]—again an overlap of the personal with the professional.

For her part, Amalia, often accompanied by Josefina, roams freely around the hotel, swims in the pool, spies on guests, hangs out in the laundry room, and eats with her family in the restaurant. Josefina's mother gossips that Amalia "necesita una casa, un hogar" [needs a house, a home], although she qualifies this with a comment on Amalia's mother, "Helena se crió en un hotel. Para ella es muy normal." [Helena was raised in a hotel. It is normal for her.] In another instance, Josefina's

mother goes so far as to insult Amalia at their apartment by announcing that "Este no es un hotel. Esta es una casa de familia. Hay una gran diferencia." [This is not a hotel. This is a family home. There's a big difference.] Far from craving private space for herself, Amalia seems to prefer to share her mother's bed; at one point, her uncle, Freddy, pushes Helena and Amalia aside to lie down with them for the night as well.

To further question distinctions between public and private, the hotel is hosting a professional business meeting rather than serving as a temporary home for vacationers. The doctors not only pursue professional contacts, have formal meetings and dinner gatherings, but also share living quarters with one another. When Dr. Jano first arrives, a private room is not yet available for him in the hotel, and he reluctantly agrees to share one with a colleague for one night. Later, in his own room, he is also not left alone: the cleaning lady is shown arranging his space, and Amalia sneaks in to examine Dr. Jano's living quarters. At another instance, Dr. Jano is advised publicly of a phone call by a hotel employee who calls to him up the stairs; Dr. Jano takes this phone call to his family in the public phone booth in the hallway.

The most shocking defiance of public/private limits occurs in the pushing of conventional boundaries for sexual encounters. In a public space, Dr. Jano gropes Amalia on the street, and Amalia reaches for his hand in the elevator. Another doctor at the conference, Dr. Vesalio, spends his time flirting and playing around with women he meets during his time at the hotel. In a final example, a naked man falls onto the family balcony of Josefina's apartment, offering the mixed metaphors of a fallen angel and a sexual dispute.

The series of obfuscations constructed by the filming positions and screens, as well as the situation of the film in a hotel with unclearly defined categories of public and private sites, reflect the obstruction of vision in its attempt to comprehend reality. Martel's attention to the senses extends also to the sense of touch—as seen in Amalia's tactile intimacy with the hotel, and the sexual relationships between characters—and, especially, sound. The complex use of sound in the film, which has been analyzed thoroughly by Gonzalo Aguilar (2006, 97–105), couples an intricately designed soundtrack with certain elements in the storyline such as Helena's tinnitus and the theremin music that point to the possibility for misinterpretation.

The music of the theremin merges spiritual and scientific perspectives represented by Amalia and Dr. Jano, respectively; the strange

sounds appeal to the spiritual sense, while the performance of the instrument involves scientific understanding of electricity. Not only does the theremin music serve as the background for the sexual imposition by Dr. Jano on Amalia, but also as the music for the interaction between Dr. Jano and Helena during the dinner. The theremin, or thereminvox, was one of the first electronic instruments, invented in 1919 by the Russian Léon Theremin. It produces music through electric signals controlled by the musician. Because the electric currents are invisible, it appears as if the musician were magically creating sounds by touching the air above the instrument. Moreover, the sound of the instrument evokes an other-worldliness that has made it attractive for use in science fiction films.

Aguilar has noted the attention paid to this particular element of the film in that Martel hired a professional musician for the role—Manuel Schaller, apparently the best theremin player in Argentina—rather than an actor (97). In separate articles, Viviana Rangel and Joanna Page have interpreted the contrast between an emphasis on the (lacking) touch in Jano's sexual approach and this instrument that is played without touch (Rangel, 216; Page "Espacio privado", 161).[7] For her part, Martel claims that she wanted to create a tension during the sexual encounter without explicit drama or overacted gestures.

While considering the problems of the senses, the film also explores the capacities of religion and science to categorize and comprehend reality. Amalia seeks self-definition in the Catholic group she attends with her friend Josefina. Despite her mother's disapproval, while Amalia watches the happenings in the hotel, she sings hymns or recites passages of the Bible to evoke the Virgin Mary to "save" Dr. Jano. Indeed, it is immediately following a meeting of the Catholic group that Amalia is first groped by the doctor. As Ana Forcinito has argued, Helena and Amalia contrast the religious and the scientific perceptions of the world in their involvement with Dr. Jano. While Amalia plays the holy girl in her quest with respect to the doctor, Helena becomes the patient of the doctors, agreeing to serve as an example in a doctors' role-play performance on the final evening.

Forcinito (2006) has underscored the patriarchal nature of these two approaches, as well as Amalia's unique sexual interpretation of her "calling" (9). Amalia's adolescent understanding of the concept of religious vocation leads her to confuse her sexual desire with her spirituality, an analysis that amounts to a personal subversion of religion. For her part,

Helena happily consents to the hearing test, although she shows discomfort during the testing scene, and seems more interested in the project for the possibilities of sexual fulfillment than for the medical results of the tests.

From their location in this provincial hotel, the sexual desires of Helena and Amalia cause them to move beyond the hermeneutic constraints of science and religion defined by male hegemonic approaches. The revision of filmic frames emphasizes this shift in emphasis, and suggests an artistic perspective that redefines spatial categories. By underscoring the significance of perspective in artistic construction through self-reflexive frames, Martel has also pointed to her awareness of the location of her subject in the provincial Argentine setting, considered the periphery of the already "peripheral" Buenos Aires—to use Beatriz Sarlo's terminology with respect to the unfinished project of modernity defined as hegemonic European culture. Through the excessive attention to the contrary architectural notions of surface and depth, framing and obfuscation, the mise-en-scène of the Hotel Termas conveys instability and unease that also points to the historical context of the film. A combination of decadence and decay stains this contemporary Argentine site and the personal and political relationships that develop in it; it is imbued with a disquiet that develops from an unfulfilled desire to find existential meaning there.

Notes

1. The two films contain certain playful connections: a doctor in both has the name, Jano, and the adolescent protagonist, Amalia, searches for spiritual meaning as if continuing from Momi's failed attempt in *La ciénaga*. A dance scene as well as the high-pitched excited screams of adolescents in several instances of *La niña santa* also recall the former film.
2. Although most critics agree that her third film, *La mujer sin cabeza*, deserved a more meritorious reception, this final part of the Salta trilogy was not well received at Cannes in 2008.
3. The spring for Palau's water has a temperature of 76 °C, and apparently has a number of health benefits. According to a tourist website, this water is "Rápidamente absorbida por las vías digestivas, estimula la osmosis celular y provoca la eliminación, por los riñones, de una cantidad de agua superior a la de agua bebida. Determina a la vez una diuresis liquida y una diuresis sólida, además es de gran provecho para el tratamiento de las dispepsias y de las afecciones nerviosas del estomago" [Quickly absorbed by

the digestive tracts, it stimulates cellular osmosis and spurs the elimination, through the kidneys, of a larger amount of water than what has been imbibed. It also functions as a liquid and solid diuretic, while also being very useful for the treatment of dispepsia and nervous-related conditions of the stomach] (http://web.archive.org/web/20130220234848/ http://www.enjoy-argentina.org/argentina/salta-destinos-salta-termas-rosario-frontera.php).

4. While the plot and character development evoke a disquiet, the uncanniness of the art of photography and, by extension, film, often leads to the exploitation of this sensation to call attention to the artistic constructiveness of the moving image (Royle). German Expressionist films such as F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), Paul Wegener's *The Golem* (1920) and Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) exemplified an early and more stylized representation of this cinematic self-reflexivity. These films represent manmade inanimate objects that become animate, the dead that become undead, and the magic of moving pictures themselves, all images of artistic creation depicted within the artwork of the film.
5. Both Gonzalo Aguilar and Ana Forcinito discuss the mythological aspects of *La niña santa*.
6. As noted by Leila Gómez, although Helena thinks she is in charge of the hotel, she and Freddy act like children in comparison to Mirta, who even advises Helena on her personal life (5).
7. Page has observed further that Dr. Jano's colleague exclaims "No toca nada, nada" [He is not touching anything at all] with reference to the theremin player, ironically at the same time that Jano is running from Amalia ("Espacio privado", 161–162).

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CHAPTER 6

Paper Architecture and Totalitarian Propaganda in *La antena*

Among the first scenes of the film *La antena* (Sapir 2007), a hand unveils the front cover of a pop-up book to reveal city skyscrapers opening up from the page (Fig. 6.1). Shifting from paper to a denser 3D diorama-style cityscape, the screen displays the city with snow falling gently (Fig. 6.2). The camera then zooms in on the detail of Ana and her grandfather trying to save a man from flying away on a kind of balloon, and the story's action begins. While the first unusual establishing shots of a paper city would appear to serve just as the frame for the story, in fact they set the tone for the whole film. While the paper quality of the architecture underscores the artificial quality of a work of art, it also marks the pliability of passive urban inhabitants who accept the status quo of totalitarian-styled governance.

A stark change from Esteban Sapir's first feature-length film, *Picado fino* (1996), regarded as one of the groundbreaking works of New Argentine Cinema,[1] *La antena* appears to belong to another era and another continent. Shot in black-and-white with surreal images of a city under the oppressive control of Mr. TV—a character type somewhere between a businessman and a mafioso—the film relates intertextually with silent films of Europe and North America from the first decades of cinema. *La antena* pairs a cinematography that involves an almost obsessive intertextual referencing with a storyline and thematic content that criticize the totalitarian reach of mass media, revealing Sapir's firsthand knowledge of the advertising industry in his work at the production company La Doble A, which also produced this film. On the film festival

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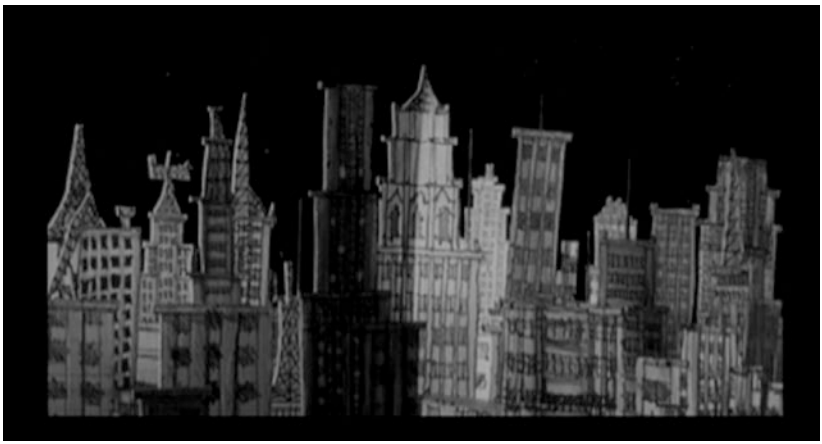

Fig. 6.1 Screenshot from the film, *La antena*, 1:28

Fig. 6.2 Screenshot from the film, *La antena*, 1:52

circuit, *La antena* garnered awards for Best Director (Esteban Sapir), Best Editing (Pablo Barbieri Carrera) and Best Sound (José Luis Díaz) from the Asociación de Cronistas Cinematográficos de Argentina (2008), as well as prizes in festivals for fantasy film such as the "Fant-Asia Film Festival" and the "Neuchatel International Film Festival."

The lively plot of *La antena* embeds anachronistic, surreal and ironic features: the evil Mr. TV (Alejandro Urdapilleta) has stolen the residents' voices so that they can only communicate through lip-reading. Analogous to graphic novels, the words mouthed by the characters float creatively on the screen in the form of speech bubbles while the snow falls incessantly around them.[2] The television company dominates the daily routines of the city's inhabitants; its spiral symbol mars billboards, storefronts and signs. The inhabitants even ingest the logo when they dine on the round cookies, "alimentos TV" [TV food], glazed with a white spiral. They can earn a trip in the apparatus "hombre-globo" [man-balloon] if they accumulate enough points through a television contest. At the beginning of the film, Ana's father (Rafael Ferro) and grandfather (Ricardo Merkin), who manage the balloon-flying prize, are fired from the television company when they lose one of the winners who flies off through the sky enveloped in the strange balloon machine.

Mr. TV, driven crazy by his greed and desire for power, kidnaps the only person who still has a voice, the woman known as La Voz (Florencia Raggi) who performs songs on a television program with Latin American rhythms such as rumbas, salsas and boleros. The doctor (Carlos Piñeyro) who works for Mr. TV is responsible for creating a transmission machine for her voice that would lull the city's inhabitants to sleep and remove their words. The words would then be processed through the antenna machine to make the TV food, denying them all possibility for expression. The doctor manages to invent the voice machine, but does not factor in the existence of another voice, that of Tomás, La Voz's son who also can speak, but who does not have eyes. Ana's family discovers Mr. TV's plans. They bring Tomás (Jonathan Sandor)—now friends with Ana (Sol Moreno)—to the old antenna in the mountains that belongs to Mr. TV's television station and attempt to save the city from the loss of words and omnipotent control by Mr. TV by transmitting Tomás's voice as he calls for his mother. Finally, Tomás recuperates his vision and the residents regain their voices.

Clearly, *La antena* associates market-controlled mass media with totalitarian governance, reflecting an interpretation of contemporary media production in Argentina. Similar to the role played by the culture industries of other Latin American countries, Argentine mass media has become less politicized during the last three decades and more oriented towards the "needs" of the market (Lugo-Ocando 2008, 2).

As Hernan Galperin (2000) has reviewed succinctly, during the decade of the 1990s, "the landscape has shifted from closed markets in which a few providers, either state-owned or tightly controlled by governments, operated with limited (e.g., TV broadcasting) or no competition (e.g., telecommunications), to a relatively open, internationalized, competetive market structure" (176). Jesús Martín-Barbero (2000) has explained that this situation is not limited to Latin America. Globally, interactions between cultural webs are characterized by a complexity that encapsulates not only the technological, the mercantile and the political, but also a system in which "affiliations weigh less than alliances, heavy machines of fabrication less than sinuous trajectories of circulation, and both appropriation stratagems and the logic of property should be taken into account" (28). Therefore, in Martín-Barbero's analysis, it would be more accurate to consider the culture industries as "places of condensation or interaction of multiple cultural webs" and as "crossroads of different areas of social production" (28), a representation assumed by the omnipresence and power of the TV company and the city without a voice of *La antena*, in which every aspect of the lives of its inhabitants is interwoven with television.

Since the beginning of the 1990s in Argentina, the global economy has inspired policies of deregulation and privatization of the media. This has allowed for the creation of a few powerful and concentrated multimedia conglomerates that form part of even larger multinational corporations (Vialey 2008, 25). Even though these media corporations expanded access to cable television and the internet, these developments in and of themselves have not promoted the circulation of multiple voices and opinions (Vialey, 26). To the contrary, with Menem's decision to update the Ley de Radiodifusión 22.285, introduced under the military dictatorship of Rafael Videla in 1980 (Aprea 2008, 20), the television media in its reorganization as business conglomerates have replaced newspapers and independent media and, in this way, have limited the dissemination and diversity of opinions. Under these conditions, the possibilities for communication have diminished even though the possibility for viewing television programs has expanded.

As scholars have noted, *La antena* underlines and criticizes the penetrating role of the audiovisual industries in the city (Cisneros). It recycles images, textures, characters and techniques from the silent film era to underscore the artificiality of film production, while it also emphasizes the centrality of communication for a work of art through its metonymic focus on vocal expression. Through an intertextual relationship maintained with

films of the past, especially *Metropolis* (Lang 1926), *La antena* criticizes the oppressive control of today's media corporations and calls for resistance against this power which is represented as totalitarian.

In the film, paper architecture in the form of a city maquette and a fantastical antenna building/factory underscore the media's autocratic power. Symbolic of the malleability of the population, paper is folded and formed into objects rather than used for written communication. As a complement to the paper architecture, three Buenos Aires buildings are introduced into the scenography to present certain sociopolitical critiques: the Confitería Ideal associated with the Argentine elite; the Facultad de Derecho with overreaching government power; and the former Biblioteca Nacional with the denigration of the written word. Marking principal concepts in *La antena*, this carefully designed scenography supports the film's representation of the excessive power of today's mass media. *La antena*'s incorporation of both fantasy architecture and real sites in Buenos Aires creates a scenography that highlights both the plasticity of cinema as well as the cinematic nature of architecture. These sites also underscore the political imposition of the autocratic state on the personal life of the individual.

Paper Architecture and the *Metropolis* Intertext

In 1922, Elie Faure described cinema as a plastic art engaged in setting architecture into motion: "The cinema is first of all plastic. It represents, in some way, an architecture in movement that should be in constant accord, in dynamically pursued equilibrium, with the setting and the landscapes within which it rises and falls" (quoted in Vidler, *Warped Space* 2000, 103). *La antena* contemplates plasticity through self-conscious representation; it emphasizes the fantastical aspect of the filmic city in order to construct a film that thinks about film while it also expresses a satire of totalitarianism.

The fantasy city of *La antena* develops through a blending of elements including technological anachronisms and interfilmic references. The film combines today's technologies with others emblematic of the mid-twentieth century: the typewriter; televisions with manual knobs, cathode-ray tubes and oval screens; cars and semi-automatic weapons from the era of gangster movies; and rectangular microphones used in radio and television studios in the 1930s and 1940s. These intertwine with contemporary mechanisms such as the antitheft alarm that sounds

intermittently from the imposing black Siam car, or the video game that also recalls the gear-and-chain mechanisms of an old factory. Also included are fantasy technologies such as balloon machines that allow people to fly, paper eyeglasses that give sight to the blind and a glass cupula like a snow globe that cages a tiny live girl. This technological mix culminates in the enormous parabolic antenna that imitates the mechanism of a typewriter; it features huge clawlike letter keys that absorb the words that float out of the brains of the city's residents. Another strange anachronistic machine operates the whole mechanism: inside her glass cage, the girl with a pacifier in her mouth and an electroencephalogram on her head, jumps from one foot to the other over flashing lights—an allusion to kinetic videogames in which the player participates using his or her body like Dance Dance Revolution (DDR)—in order to activate the large greasy gears and chains of the TV cookie machine.

This technological combination creates a kind of anachronistic futurist atmosphere that recalls the scenography of films that explore the dystopic city of the "future past" (Al Sayyad 2006, 71), or the futurist "postmodern" city (Mennel 2008, 131), such as *Brazil* (Gilliam 1985), *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) and *Children of Men* (Cuarón 2006). These films imagine habitable worlds that have been radically isolated from natural beauty. In each case, nature attracts the characters and represents a possible escape from the oppression of urban society. In *Brazil*, this liberation only occurs in Lowry's dream at the end of the film in which he travels on the highway with his lover and finally escapes the billboards that block the view of the landscape. The humble country house of his dream represents the simple happy life that exemplifies the desire to return to the past far from the city's autocracy. *Children of Men* goes even further with this idea by personifying and idealizing nature through the figure of the pregnant mother—the first human pregnancy in 18 years. The attempt to escape here again implies leaving a depressed, dangerous and controlling urban world. Characteristic of a nostalgic postmodern space like these examples, *La antena* also represents the city as imbued with both future and past elements. Also like in these films, the protagonists resolve the problem of the city when they are in the mountains located far from the urban center.

La antena's urban fantasy emerges also from interfilmic allusions, especially silent films from the beginnings of cinema in Europe along with the films of German Expressionism.[3] In fact, *La antena* could be interpreted as an homage to silent film through its black-and-white

cinematography, its innovative use of subtitles, the original extradiegetic piano music composed by Leo Sujatovich[4] that plays in the background to reflect characters' emotional responses, as well as for its specific references to these first cinematic eras.[5] The moon that appears at the end of *La antena* is none other than the moon face invented by Georges Méliès in his science fiction film "Le voyage dans la lune" (1902) (Fig. 6.3). The eye of the telescope recalls the camera eye of *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) by Dziga Vertov and the concept of a machine that lulls a city to sleep evokes René Clair's "Paris qui dort" (1925).[6] The slanted staircases during the chase scene through the TV station building reference angled camera frames in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Wiene 1920) (Fig. 6.4). However, analogies with the German Expressionist film, *Metropolis* (1926), by Fritz Lang, are the most fully sustained in *La antena*; they include similarities between specific characters, scenes and filming techniques, along with changes to certain political elements that situate *La antena* in the contemporary era.

While many films recall the cityscape of *Metropolis* with its enormous skyscrapers that illustrate the classist hierachy of the city,[7] *La antena* refers so completely to the German film that even the storylines resemble each other extensively. Undoubtedly, the son of Mr. TV parodies Freder, the ruler's son in the city of *Metropolis*. Sapir underscores the feminine characteristics of the German antecedent by choosing a woman, Valeria

Fig. 6.3 Screenshot from the film, *La antena*, 1:01:04

Fig. 6.4 Screenshot from the film, *La antena*, 40:08

Bertucelli, to play the equivalent role of Freder in *La antena*. To assure the parallel with the character from *Metropolis*, Mr. TV's son's clothing, facial expressions, emotional reactions and conversations with his father all recall Freder. The doctor of *La antena* also functions as an unmistakable parallel with Rotwang, the figure who creates the robot-double mix of Maria and Hel in *Metropolis*, because of his rubber gloves and sinister characteristics. In both films, these characters tie their "victims"—the woman-robot and the woman "voice," respectively—to the lab table where a series of electromagnetic waves surround their bodies.

Other instances that recall *Metropolis* include the Kafkaesque moment in which the father tries in vain to leave the hospital through a number of closed doors (an allusion to Freder's experience of being locked into Rotwang's house); the technical plans of the antenna that the grandfather brings to the television station (like the catacomb plans of the *Metropolis* workers); the extended reconciliatory kiss between the father and his ex-wife at the most tense moment of the film (like Freder and Maria's kiss during the flooding of the city by its workers); the worker's clothing that the protagonists from *La antena* wear when they arrive at the machine in the city's outskirts (the same overalls as in *Metropolis*, except they appear white instead of gray); and the montage of multiple eyes in the same screen (as in *Metropolis*), revised again afterwards by the repetition of screaming mouths (Fig. 6.5).

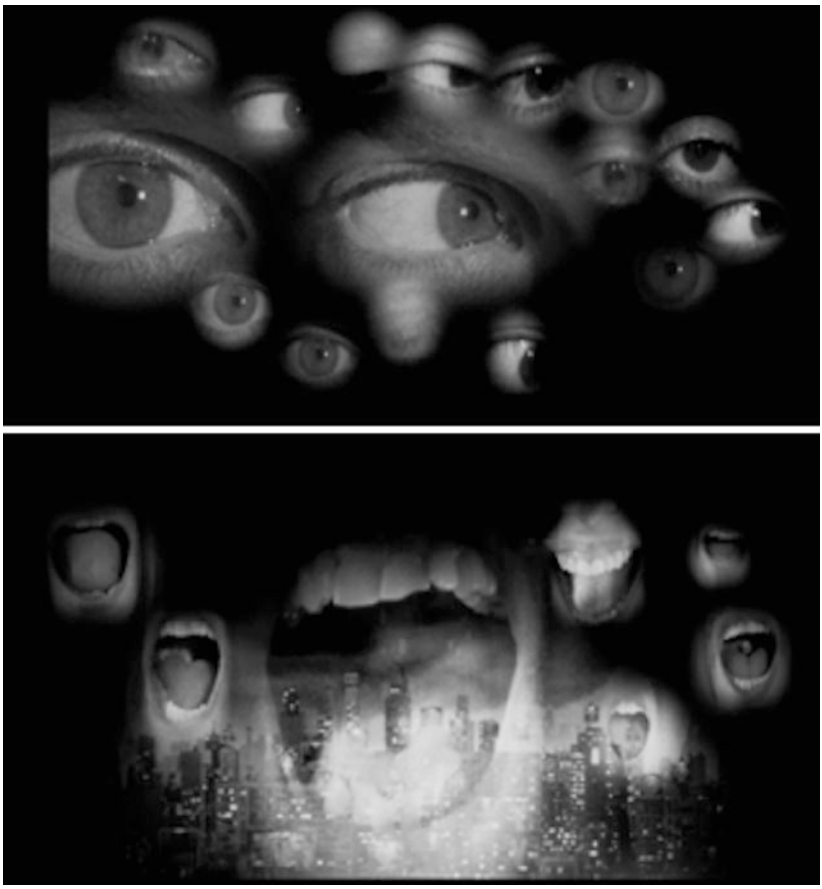

Fig. 6.5 Screenshots from the film, *La antena*, 1:11:41 and 1:33:37

The ways in which *La antena* incorporates and revises Fritz Lang's film point to the dramatic difference in the sociopolitical context of the two works. *La antena* not only refers to formal aspects of *Metropolis*, but also nuances the didactic message of the German antecedent to comment on the impact of the commercialization of contemporary life. The message of the German film, underlined clearly at various moments in the story including through the intertitle at the beginning and end, is that

"the mediator between the brain and the hands must be the heart." This premise develops through the film's plot: the supreme leader and "brain" of the city, Joh Fredersen, searches for a way to maintain control of his workers, "the hands," who are about to rebel because of the atrocious working conditions in the city's depths. The son of the boss, Freder, who falls in love with the woman who inspires the workers, Maria, becomes the "heart" who serves as mediator between his father and the workers.[8]

In *La antena*, which also begins with a focus on the hands, this time as essential tools for artistic creation,[9] the emphasis shifts to underscore the role of the voice and the eyes, pointing to this contemporary film's focus on the creation and perception of media. While *Metropolis* portrays a political hierarchy represented in the city's architecture and based on who has the possibility to work with their hands and who with their brain, *La antena* shows a city divided between those who can only see passively and the powerful producers of television programs and commercials.

The differences between both films in the portrait of power and of the city's leader/dictator underscore the change in context and focus in the Argentine film. Joh Fredersen, the "brain" of the city of *Metropolis*, with his fine dress and manners, maintains power over the city from his Tower of Babel where one finds also the garden of eternity, the club of the sons (following models from Ancient Greece) and Yoshiwara, the red light district, where exotic, "orientalized" and sexually suggestive performances are presented for youth consumption. The character of Mr. TV in *La antena* combines a sort of megalomaniac CEO with an irascible mafioso-style leader like Al Capone with cigar, hat, black car and henchman. Entertainment encouraged by Mr. TV includes boxing matches and the telecast of La Voz who dances and sings with movements similar to those of the robot-double in *Metropolis*.

Despite the film's emphasis on visual perception—from technological details that imitate the camera such as the telescope that amplifies the eye, the magnifying glass that grotesquely exaggerates the doctor's mouth and even the name, Mr. TV—the television machine that perceives and controls the residents, like the all-seeing panopticon, does not have as much power as vocal expression. The film represents the faculty of vision as only reaching a passive appreciation of reality, while the voice maintains the possibility for expression and change. La Voz and her son are the only characters with a voice and without eyes: the woman always covers her face with her cape; the boy has no eyes, or rather, they are

obviously "photoshopped" out, to also underscore the artificiality of the filmic creation. The "good" protagonists aim to save the city's residents from the incipient loss of their words initiated by the pernicious manipulations of Mr. TV by projecting the voice of the blind child through the antenna.

The idea of privileging the use of the residents' voices becomes another show of resistance against the omnipresence and passive consumption of television. The film underscores the function of the media, including film, to encourage communication symbolized by the voice. It also represents the negative side of the media, as a political tool that monitors and controls the population with its capacity to convert citizens into passive recipients of information. The ludic tone of the film not only criticizes the contemporary functioning of the communication media, but also makes fun of the idea of the camera as an "apparatus of surveillance" and urban cinema as a "panopticon" (Webber 2008, 8), because in *La antena*, the viewer is always conscious that he/she is watching a movie.

The aesthetic metafilmic strategies used by Sapir emphasize continually the film's artificiality and assure that the viewer does not watch without thinking. Among other examples of the artificiality is the important aspect of the creative use of subtitles and intertitles to demonstrate to the viewer what the characters mean to say with their lips. As Melinda Blos-Jáni (2008) notes, the use of intertitles in *La antena* does not underscore an inefficiency (the lack of spoken dialogue) as in silent films; rather, it demonstrates the artificiality and self-consciousness of the narration (135–136). In fact, in contrast with film from the beginning of the twentieth century, in *La antena* the use of intertitles emerges from the very plot of the film: the mute city, or the city without a voice, speaks through written words (Blos-Jáni, 138). The words printed on the screen imitate the emotions they represent with capital letters to show surprise, for example, as if part of a graphic novel. The characters themselves seem to be conscious of the subtitles because, among other actions, they shove, erase or hide the words that they perceive in their conversations.

The film's first takes of the paper maquette as it evolves into the "real" filmic city (Figs. 6.1, 6.2) expose the constructiveness of the cinematic city. Abstractly imagined before becoming "real" on the screen, the filmed city is controlled by its creator in a way that parallels the totalitarian control of Mr. TV on the public (Fig. 6.6). The effect of this political incursion is revealed through the façade of Tomás's house; this residence across from Ana's house is fashioned as a literal "façade," with windows

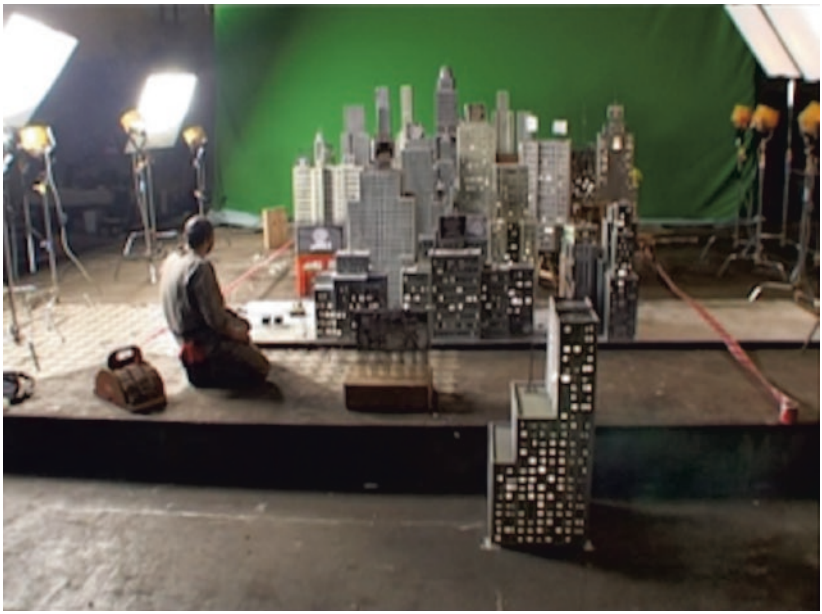

Fig. 6.6 Maquette, screenshot from "Making of" feature on DVD, 8:57

for eyes and a mouth, along with decorative details for a nose (Fig. 6.7). Beyond the playful features of this architecture, the facial expression of the house with its clownlike large mouth, curled up into a sad smile on both sides, betrays the political oppression of the tele-dominated state. The home shelters the two most valuable characters both for Mr. TV and for enacting a political resistance to his power. Because La Voz and Tomás have voices, they have the necessary tool for controlling the mute population. As such, La Voz's fear that her son's unique quality will be exposed is revealed in her gesture to counter the happy façade of the house: La Voz draws her own face on the window's condensation with a sad mouth that curls down.

While the pop-up book alludes to the city's pliability, and the façade of Tomás's house suggests the emotional state of its inhabitants, the strange site of "The Antenna" consolidates Mr. TV's power. The imaginary factory sits in the midst of mountains made of newspaper (Fig. 6.8). Its antenna is designed like giant moving pegs of a typewriter placed in a circle around the machine's input. These pegs grab the words that have

Fig. 6.7 Screenshot from the film, *La antena*, 20:39

Fig. 6.8 Screenshot from the film, *La antena*, 1:05:01

been transmitted from the city's sleeping inhabitants (Figs. 6.9, 6.10). The words then feed into the food factory that produces TV food with the help of the girl in the snow globe who activates the machine through her video-game-style foot movements (Fig. 6.11). An uncanny eye

Fig. 6.9 Screenshot from the film, *La antena*, 1:23:52

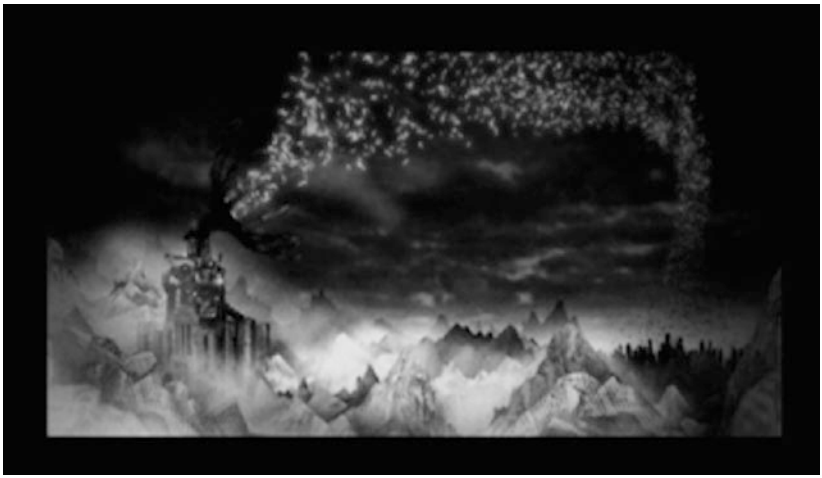

Fig. 6.10 Screenshot from the film, *La antena*, 1:24:08

watches the process from a screen behind her, while a number of the TV station's spiral logos revolve in the background. This disquieting, surreal and strangely comical machine incorporates various leitmotifs of the film including the typewriter to represent print media, the omnipotent

Fig. 6.11 Screenshot from the film, *La antena*, 1:25:17

eye that suggests panoptical power, the anachronisms of the machinery (which include the video game as well as the mechanisms of a factory), and filmic allusions to scenes in the *Metropolis* factory.

Political Buildings

Beyond these examples of fantasy architecture, the film uses certain recognizable buildings in Buenos Aires for its scenography to critique political aspects of these sites: La Confitería Ideal exemplifies the Argentine elite and its historically Europeanized culture; the Facultad de Derecho is associated with authoritarian power; and the former Biblioteca Nacional evokes the past censure of books and written communication. Wryly, all three draw Juan Domingo Perón into the film's intertextual web and suggest critiques of aspects of the politics of this populist leader.

La Confitería Ideal, a well-known tango bar that has been featured in many films including *Los chicos crecen* (Carreras 1976), *Evita* (Parker 1996) and *Tango* (Saura 1998) (Spinetto 2012, 52), serves in *La antena* as the site for a lip-synching performance—in which the LP record gets stuck and the singer finds herself lip-synching the repetitions—as well as the setting for watching a projection of the boxing match (Fig. 6.12). Built in European style at the beginning of the twentieth century by a

Fig. 6.12 Screenshots from the film, *La antena*, 30:28 and 1:11:20

Spanish businessman with luxurious decorative materials brought in from Europe, the Ideal opened in 1912 and transformed from tea house to concert hall to tango café over the course of the twentieth century. The café's décor and building materials associate it with elite European culture:

> Con el estilo y la decoración propia de la arquitectura de principios de siglo, el edificio fue realizado con materiales y elementos importados que Don Fernández hizo traer de Europa: arañas francesas, sillones checoslovacos, vitrales italianos, boiserie de roble de Eslavonia (tallada por artesanos), mármoles para las escaleras, cristal biselado para las vitrinas, bronces, hierro negro, etc. (DG Blog)
>
> [With the style and architectural décor from the beginning of the century, the building was erected with materials and elements imported by Mr. Fernández from Europe: French chandeliers, Czech chairs, Italian stained glass, Slavonian oak wood details (hand-crafted), marble for the stairs, beveled crystal for the displays windows, bronzes, black iron, etc.]

The entertainment received in this site in the film—the lip-synching singer and the projection of the boxing match—contrasts with the elite setting associated with the upper-class intelligentsia. The mismatch of entertainment style and venue calls attention to the disrespect of the city's government for cultural sophistication and the attempt to manipulate the population into simplicity.

The Facultad de Derecho of the University of Buenos Aires functions politically in a different way from the elite environment of the café in *La antena*. Conceived in the 1930s, but constructed during the Peronist era, the imposing monumentalist building from 1949 of the Facultad de Derecho serves (at least in part) as the set for the television station headquarters in the film. The 14 doric columns that line the front represent the power and oppression of the media company and act as the backdrop for the scenes in which Ana's father and grandfather are dismissed from their jobs (Fig. 6.13). As María Huertas has pointed out in her detailed study of the contruction of the Facultad de Derecho building, in architecture such as this:

> El Estado aparecía con el rol mesiánico de realizador protagónico. Los símbolos arquitectónicos de este Estado fuerte debían ser solemnes, fríos, recios, sobrios, monumentales y sólidos. (44)
>
> [The State would take the messianic role of leading producer. The architectonic symbols of this strong State should be solemn, cold, robust, sober, monumental and solid].

Fig. 6.13 Screenshots from the film, *La antena*, 16:11, and an eliminated scene included in DVD extras

In contrast with the Confitería Ideal, constructed in an earlier era with European materials, the building materials and the artistic details for the Facultad de Derecho were produced in Argentina—in keeping with nationalist Peronist policies. The stone used for the front, the portico, the columns and the staircase was all quarried from Mar del Plata (48).

For the storyline of *La antena*, the choice of the building that represents the study of law seems particularly appropriate. Through this architectural liaison between the fantasy city and the city of Buenos Aires,

the film's critique of the judgement of the workers can be extended to a critique of the judgement of law on the residents of Buenos Aires. The building, as described by Jorge Coll, the professor and minister who spearheaded the project in 1938, had a lofty purpose:

> …cumplir una misión utilitaria, sino también, y principalmente, espiritual y educativa, como expresión del significado histórico que ha tenido la Facultad de Derecho en la formación moral e intelectual de los hombres públicos argentinos y de la clase dirigente cuya actuación ilustrada y patriótica ha orientado al país. (Quoted in Huertas 2005, 38)
>
> [...to fulfill a utilitarian mission, but also, and primarily, a spiritual and educational one, as an expression of the historical significance that the Faculty of Law has had in the moral and intellectual education of public Argentine men and the leading class whose enlightened and patriotic actions have guided the country.]

The film's critique of self-serving autocratic government in line with neoliberal policies regarding the multimedia industries is upheld by its mise-en-scène of this Buenos Aires edifice constructed by the state. By refashioning this building into the TV station headquarters in the film, *La antena* suggests the profound and totalitarian implication of the state in the media industries and in market-driven capitalism.

The third Buenos Aires building in the film, the former Biblioteca Nacional, serves as the location for the infamous boxing match that the inhabitants watch while the TV machine transmits the voice that removes their words. Significantly, the boxing ring is set up in the hall of the library, with empty bookshelves visible in the background—the first sequence shows the boxers' rehearsal without onlookers; the second one incorporates also an audience engaged in watching the fight (Fig. 6.14).

While the Biblioteca, like the Confitería Ideal, is designed in European style, it is the building's history that becomes particularly relevant for its mise-en-scène in *La antena*. Inaugurated in 1901, the monumental building was constructed on a site that had been formerly occupied by a slave-trading house, then destroyed to make room for a cemetery, and finally changed (for a brief time) into a prostitution row (Paolantonio).

After the overthrow of Juan Domingo Perón, the writer Jorge Luis Borges became the director of the Biblioteca Nacional from 1955 to 1976, and Borges' association with the labyrinthian spaces of the library

Fig. 6.14 Screenshots from the film, *La antena*, 26:39 and 1:10:48

is evident in much of his writing. *La antena*'s portrayal of the site with boxers' fighting in front of empty bookshelves—one of Perón's sports was boxing—brings to mind the clash between the renowned author and the populist government. Perón's disregard for the internationalized intelligentsia is exemplified by Borges' famous demotion by this government, from librarian at the Miguel Cané Library to poultry inspector (leading Borges to resign from service).

Even more jarring than broadcasting the boxing match in the elite Europeanized architecture of the Confitería Ideal, the film's placement of the boxing match in the intellectual site of the fomer Biblioteca Nacional brings to mind the political ideological conflict of the Peronist era that rejected international cultural influences to support nationalist projects. The headquarters of the all-powerful media corporation in the film, the nationally constructed, monumentalist Facultad de Derecho, erected during Perón's first presidency, represents this nationalist architecture that contrasts with the other sites of the café and the library.

The final scenes of *La antena* are inconclusive. Tomás, Ana and her family seem to have countered the machine by killing the girl in the snow globe who seems to run the whole operation. Furthermore, the team manage to project Tomás's voice via the antenna, stopping the consumption of the city's words. However, the final takes of the protagonists and city residents capture them in a communal scream, implying that the misfortune continues for the city: the people have regained their voices, but lost their words. From the "Making of" segment that accompanies the DVD, Valeria Bertucelli mentions in her interview that this interpretation is the one that was intended. The alternative ending for the film—included in the set of outtakes on the DVD—represents the elimination of Mr. TV, the full restoration of the senses and communication to La Voz and Tomás, and the restoration of voice to the rest of the inhabitants who now sing melodies instead of communicating with words. The confusing element of both endings is that when the hands start typing again, words come up on the screen as if language were restored. The final sentence repeats a leitmotif of the film—"Y todo quedó reparado" [And all was repaired]—suggesting that all is restored to working order, Ana's family unit as well as the communicative potential of the city's inhabitants.

The conflicting possible interpretations are significant for the political meaning of the film. If all is restored to working order, it suggests that a resistance movement, represented by Ana's family with Tomás, can achieve success in combating oppressive systems of power. If one woe is merely replaced by another, it sends the message that autocratic government cannot be resisted. Esteban Sapir explains the concerns about the contemporary media he hoped to address through his film: "Los medios hacen que de alguna forma nosotros perdamos nuestra propia visión y nuestra propia opinión de la realidad, de lo que sucede, de lo que nos rodea. La película infiere y trata de recuperar de alguna manera lo que

yo siento que se perdió" [The media makes us somehow lose our own vision and our own opinion of reality, of what happens, of what surrounds us. The film infers and tries to recuperate in a way that I feel has been lost] (Meira and Grané 2007, 24:30).

Sapir admits that he does not focus on the plot, but rather on "detalles y de sensaciones y de cosas que sentía simplemente porque me pasaron en algún momento como un viento por la cabeza" [details and feeling about things that I felt simply because they came to me at some point like wind through my head] and that these elements pertain to his own personal story (Meira and Grané, 24:30). As this chapter has shown, *La antena's* particular way of evoking these ideas through its postmodern montage of film and culture emerges also in the presence of architecture in its mise-en-scène in which paper buildings symbolize the pliability of the city's inhabitants, and Buenos Aires sites recall political spars between the city's intelligentsia and its populist government.

Sapir's confession about the intimate relationship between his personal history and that of the film might be a reference to the involvement of the production company, La Doble A, in the financing of *La antena*. The omnipresence of the communication media that silences the inhabitants and threatens them also with the loss of words becomes an unavoidable irony when considering the film's producer, La Doble A, where Esteban Sapir works. The producers and sponsors of La Doble A, Gonzalo Agulla and José Arnal, have stated that their participation in *La antena*—a project that did not recuperate the $1.5 million that it cost—was "an investment for the future" (Newbery 2007, 11). Charles Newbery presented this relationship positively in his 2007 article. He concluded that for Argentine cinema this evolution of the financial source to advertising companies "bodes well for an industry that is heavily reliant on state subsidies and [the] foreign coproduction coin—one which is facing higher costs as inflation rises at 10% for a third successive year" (11).

La antena becomes an exemplary case of an artistic work that pushes stylistic limits without escaping the accepted barriers of the cultural industry—an interpretation concerning the possibilities for creative production that recalls the analysis of the culture industry by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. Perhaps the final irony of *La antena* is that the advertising company La Doble A will not be harmed by sponsoring this film nor any others.

Notes

1. Like *La antena*, *Picado fino* is also experimental, filmed in black-and-white and includes surrealist-style filming techniques. However, the first film does not offer the cohesive and fablelike plot of *La antena*, and does not incessantly pay homage to early cinema.
2. The numerous formal, ideological and plot analogies between *La antena* and the two series of the graphic novel, *El Eternauta* (1957–1959; 1976–1977) by Héctor Germán Osterheld (text) and Francisco Solano López (illustrations) deserve a more detailed study. See Joanna Page's *Science Fiction in Argentina* for a discussion of comic book references in *La antena* (Osterheld 2011).
3. This also contrasts with other projects of New Argentine Cinema that typically adopt elements of Italian Neorealism (see Page, *Crisis and Capitalism*), although some of these films (e.g., *La niña santa, Tan de repente* and *Los rubios*) also include surrealist moments.
4. Sujatovich won the Prix France Musique-Sacem in 2009 for the music he composed for *La antena*.
5. Melinda Blos-Jáni arrives at a similar interpretation about the accumulation of interfilmic references in *La antena*. For her, the film can be understood as "a gesture of homage or a postmodern pastiche" (147).
6. James Cisneros also notes parallels with other films: "the masked monster is modeled on David Lynch's *Elephant Man* (1980); the title's spiral lettering evoke…Tim Buron's artwork and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958); the futuristic vision is reminiscent of Terry Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* (1995); and the sensibility for outdated cinematic methods reminds us of Guy Maddin's *oeuvre*" (197).
7. Anton Kaes states: "There are more than a hundred films today in which Lang's *Metropolis* is referenced, adapted, or spoofed" (Kaes 2010, 26).
8. Only Rotwang, the inventor in *Metropolis*, possesses both cerebral talent as well as the ability to work with his hands.
9. *La antena* begins and ends with a close-up of hands working on a typewriter. The movement of the fingers is accompanied by music as if the hands were dancing.

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CHAPTER 7

The Architectural Promenade and the Cinematic Window in *El hombre de al lado*

While Leonardo in *El hombre de al lado* (Cohn and Duprat 2009) anxiously watches from his window across a small courtyard, his neighbor Víctor slowly cuts a slit down the center of the black garbage bag that extends across and covers an opening in the wall that separates the two men's houses. Víctor then sticks his head through the hole he has made (Fig. 7.1). In this posture, he achieves an attitude balanced between menacing and comical as his head emerges from the fissure in the plastic like a baby being born. His unnerving stare and uncooperative responses to Leonardo's requests to abandon his project to construct this window give Victor the upper hand in the confrontation. This interaction between the two neighbors underscores the complexity of the power dynamics in their relationship. The filming location in Le Corbusier's Curutchet House in La Plata, Argentina, the film's mise-en-scène of the architecture, and the narrative conflict surrounding window construction each serve to magnify the tension of power that exists between neighbors from distinctly different socioeconomic classes.

El hombre de al lado's directors, Mariano Cohn and Gastón Duprat, have collaborated on experimental film and video projects, television shows and films since the early 1990s. Their successful television series, "Televisión Abierta," from the late 1990s, in which the general public would contribute short clips to be aired on television, became a springboard for continued extensive collaboration during the 2000s until the present.[1] Their film projects, *Yo, Presidente* (2006), *El artista* (2008) and *El hombre de al lado* (2009), have each garnered prizes on

A. Holmes, *Politics of Architecture in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*,
Hispanic Urban Studies, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-55191-3_7

Fig. 7.1 Screenshot from the film, *El hombre de al lado*, 35:03

the international film festival circuit, the latter being the most successful with awards for Best Director and Best Actor, as well as for Best Original Screenplay, Best Music and Best Cinematography at festivals in the United States, Spain and Argentina.

In *El hombre de al lado*, an architectural renovation leads to exploration of contemporary relations between neighbors of different social classes—Víctor (Daniel Aráoz), a used car salesman, and Leonardo (Rafael Spregelburd), an internationally renowned industrial designer. Víctor insists on opening a window in the sidewall of his house to allow some sunlight into an otherwise completely dark room. This window would have a clear view of his neighbor's house, which happens to have been designed by Le Corbusier. While Víctor seeks light for his room, Leonardo and his wife perceive the project as an invasion of their privacy. After much discussion and unsuccessful negotiation between the neighbors, Víctor is killed by robbers in the film's final scenes when he enters the Curutchet House to try to protect Leonardo's daughter, housekeeper and home. Alone with Víctor in his final moments, Leonardo coldly leaves him to die without calling for medical service.

Critics have analyzed the social and political aspects of neighborly contact in the film. Gabriela Copertari has placed *El hombre de al lado* within the politics surrounding the "neighbor" and his/her changing relationship with the Other in contemporary Argentine culture, while Marina Moguillansky has focused on the filmic representation of a classist society. For his part, Hugo Hortiguera has contrasted *El hombre de*

al lado with the film, *Medianeras* (Taretto 2011)—which also uses the construction of a sidewall window as a central catalyst—to analyze relationships between the individual and the community in both cases.[2] This chapter places emphasis on the centrality of architecture in the film as it highlights attitudes towards home, intimacy and community. The film's evocation of the Curutchet House underscores the impact of architecture on the body while it also explores the adjacent arts of architecture and film. In following with Le Corbusier's notions regarding vision and the camera lens, and the appreciation of buildings through movement, the film constructs the sidewall window as an architectural feature that illustrates and probes cinematic options for approaching the Other through vision.

The attention to the heightened awareness of the spectator's gaze in *El hombre de al lado* rests on the theoretical framework of Laura Mulvey's now-classic essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Mulvey, who incorporates Foucault's concept of the panopticon as well as Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to substantiate her claims, argues that the gaze represents power politics in Hollywood film.[3] Scholars have taken issue with Mulvey's interpretation of Lacan (Copjec; Krips), but also have used her work as the springboard for further analysis of the spectator's visual reception of cinema.

Clifford T. Manlove's critique of Mulvey's conflation of politics and psychoanalysis develops another way of understanding the complexities of the spectator's gaze: "Although Mulvey's work pioneers understanding the political effects of the social eye upon individual bodies, her work begins with the thesis that these political effects have strictly cultural and/or biological causes" (90). Manlove argues that Mulvey simplifies the politics of the gaze in Hitchcock when she affirms that it only serves to reinforce power struggles; in fact, according to Manlove, the gaze reveals changes in dominance between Self and Other, an approach that significantly complicates the concept of the gaze.

Similar to the complexity of the gaze underlined by Manlove, *El hombre de al lado*'s treatment does not strengthen power mechanisms. Instead, the politics of the gaze engages concepts of social power and explores different possibilities for relating with the Other. According to one of the directors, Gastón Duprat, this proposal to explore socioeconomic hierarchies drove the decision to choose the Curutchet House as the filming location. Duprat clarified the choice in an interview with Alfredo García:

> Es una obra maestra de la arquitectura moderna, por lo cual, el problema que plantea la película multiplicaba su potencia, porque el agujero que hace el vecino para ganar luz, se lo hace a esta obra maestra de la arquitectura, es por eso que adquiere una dimensión mayor, por eso decidimos hacerla ahí, y termina siendo un personaje más de la película. (García)
>
> [It is a masterpiece of modern architecture, for which the problem posed by the film multiplied its potency, because the hole that the neighbor makes to gain light is made to this architectural masterpiece, that's how it acquired a greater dimension, that's why we decided to make it there, and it ends up being another character in the film.]

While this filming location might offer the directors an explicit means for underlining the socioeconomic discrepancies between neighbors, it also adds a rich conceptual network through the architectural significance of the property and the connections it provokes between the arts of architecture and film. The first part of the discussion here incorporates Le Corbusier's ideas on architecture and cinema, as well as the architect's concept of the promenade, as they apply to the treatment of the Curutchet House in *El hombre de al lado*. The second part of the discussion focuses on the film's construction of links between optics and architecture to compare the window with the camera lens and eye to underscore the role of vision—and the possibility of deception—in the understanding of the Other.

The Curutchet House

In 1948, Pedro Domingo Curutchet, a physician from La Plata, asked Le Corbusier to design a mid-priced "casa consultorio" [house and clinic] for a married couple with two children (Figueroa Pireira 2010, 46). The French architect accepted the commission with the hope that his design would help him to carry out his larger urban plan for Buenos Aires, the Plan Directeur de Buenos Aires, designed in Paris in 1938. The Curutchet House was built during the early 1950s, and it was the architect's only commission to be carried out in Latin America. The Curutchet family lived there between 1953 and 1962; the house was then practically abandoned until 1986, when it was restored and declared a national monument. Although still owned by the Curutchet family, the site is now reserved for a professional association of architects, La Plata's

Colegio de Arquitectos, from the province of Buenos Aires (Lapunzina 1997, 17; Figueroa Pireira, 49).

Le Corbusier's interest in Latin America began when he traveled there in 1929, a trip that became a turning point in his life. In his series of lectures in Buenos Aires, published as *Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme* (1931), Le Corbusier represented South America as a "promised land for architecture" (Pérez Oyarzún 2005, 99). The architect found that the continent stimulated "his imagination with the power of its geography." For Le Corbusier, South America was "a place with enough cultural tradition to understand his classical and poetic approach to modernity, and enough openness to accept his innovations. It was also a place where the need for new institutions and monuments matched the political will or the economic power to bring them about" (Pérez Oyarzún, 99). Despite this interest in the region, Le Corbusier had difficulty garnering commissions in South America; of the six projects that were initiated to differing degrees, only the Casa Curutchet was finally completed (Pérez Oyarzún, 101).[4]

In their architectural analysis of the Curutchet House, scholars have followed two main streams of interpretation (Figueroa Pireira, 46).[5] One perceives the project as the culmination of 20 years of thought for Le Corbusier concerning the role of architecture in the Argentine city. This line interprets the building as extending the concept of the "casa chorizo" [sausage house], the traditional style of housing in Buenos Aires in which the rooms are situated in a row alongside the gallery and outdoor courtyard. The second line of thought perceives the project as a moment of transition in the architect's work between his purist period and the discontinuities of the materialism of his later period (Liernur 2001, 255).

According to scholars, foremost on Le Corbusier's mind in designing and building the Curutchet commission was the realization of his Plan for Buenos Aires: "En parte 'cosa' y en parte 'casa,' abstracta y concreta simultáneamente, la construcción procura dar cuenta—como lo manifiesta el propio Le Corbusier en una de sus cartas—de la disposición abierta, dispuesta a mediar que quería presentar a los argentinos" [In part "thing" and in part "house," simultaneously abstract and concrete, the construct attempts to suggest—as even Le Corbusier affirms in one of his letters—an open disposition, open to mediating what he wanted to present to the Argentines] (Liernur, 255). His city design would have

required fundamental transformations of the skyline, but this plan failed to convince the local authorities. For Buenos Aires, Le Corbusier envisioned a large platform built out over the River Plate that would face the city center along with "five cruciform skyscrapers, 650 feet tall, [which] reflected the dark surface of the river and created a super-scaled urban façade visible to travelers arriving by transatlantic liners or by air at the new airport to be built close to the towers over the river" (Pérez Oyarzún, 102). Le Corbusier conceived of this design as "providing a vertical landmark against the horizontal extension of the pampas under the Argentinean sky" (Pérez Oyarzún, 102). Although finally unsuccessful as a springboard for further projects in Argentina, Le Corbusier intended the Curutchet House to serve as a catalyst for achieving this restructuring of Buenos Aires.

For this reason, the architect perceived of the Curutchet House as an "urban piece," a designation that was not fully understood by Amancio Williams, the first local person responsible for building the house (Liernur, 255). For Le Corbusier: "La casa actúa asimismo como *trait d'union* entre la masa urbana y las construcciones pabellonales típicas del parque al que se abre" [The house acts in this way like a union between the urban mass and the pavilion constructions typical of the park onto which the building opens] (Liernur, 255). However, Williams followed Le Corbusier's design in every way as "un objeto aislado y perfecto en sí mismo" [an object that is isolated and perfect in and of itself] without introducing adjustments to allow the piece to match the style of the adjacent buildings as Le Corbusier intended (Liernur, 255). In *El hombre de al lado*, the inflexibility of the resident of the Curutchet House regarding renovations to his neighbor's property follows more the attitude of the unbending project manager, Amancio Williams, than that of Le Corbusier, who intended to negotiate to blend his design with that of the neighborhood.[6]

The Filmic Walk Through the Curutchet House

Le Corbusier affirmed the importance of evaluating architecture by way of the body's movement through it; the "architectural promenade" described in his work emphasized certain aspects of the building. Le Corbusier insisted that "it is while walking, moving from one place to another, that one sees how the arrangements of the architecture develop" (Le Corbusier 2014, quoted in Samuel 41). In the architect's

buildings, rhythms are enacted through both regular and irregular patterns in walking through them: the play of light and shadows to affect emotions; the colors of surfaces to influence mood; anthropomorphic forms to impact the visitor psychologically; the manipulation of sound in reverberations; form and texture to arouse the body (Samuel, 30–35). When architectural historian Alejandro Lapunzina discussed the significance of the Curutchet House, for example, he included its promenade experience:

> The drama of Maison Curutchet's *promenade architecturale*, the sheer poetic power of its masses and voids, the magnificent ramp, pilotis, brise-soleils, and hanging garden, and the didactic nature of the building's resolution are comparable to the architect's best-known masterpieces. It is one of the most beautiful, spatially dramatic and poetic houses designed by Le Corbusier. (18)

It is only a short jump to compare the architectural experience of Le Corbusier's promenade with the manipulated version represented on film.

From the perspective of filmmaking, Sergei Eisenstein—whose ideas were shared with his friend, Le Corbusier—also affirms the filmic nature of architecture; for Eisenstein in "Architecture and Montage," the path through a building bears a clear analogy with cinematographic montage. This similarity between the arts seems to be confirmed in Cohn and Duprat's filmic rendering of the Curutchet House. *El hombre de al lado* develops a filtered representation of the architectural promenade through its emphasis on the characters' corporeal presence in the building in their particular activities as well as through their movement through the space.The adolescent daughter, Lola, spends her free time in her room with headphones on following a dance video on her television; Leonardo's wife, Ana, teaches yoga classes in the house; Leonardo designs a luxury line of chairs for an international market. All three of these examples underscore individualist, mechanical attitudes towards the body: while she dances, Lola wears a constant apathetic disdainful expression (Fig. 7.2); Ana tellingly replaces the "object of contemplation" for her yoga class from a small cactus to a telephone to match her detached attitude (Fig. 7.3); although highly recognized for their ergonomics, Leonardo's chairs follow a 1960s style that also emphasizes an individualist outlook (Fig. 7.4).[7]

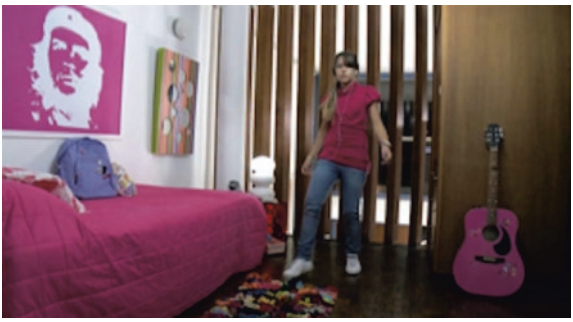

Fig. 7.2 Screenshot from the film, *El hombre de al lado*, 14:52

Fig. 7.3 Screenshot from the film, *El hombre de al lado*, 19:38

Juxtaposed with this controlled attitude towards the body, Víctor's open approach towards others is highlighted in his active sex life, and his invasive presence in Leonardo's house that includes swiveling without a care in the designer's ergonomic chair. In one telling scene, Víctor takes over the party with his dancing, much to Leonardo and Ana's irritation (Fig. 7.5).

To underscore a focus on the body in architecture, the film not only illustrates differing attitudes towards the body through the

Fig. 7.4 Screenshot from the film, *El hombre de al lado*, 15:18

Fig. 7.5 Screenshot from the film, *El hombre de al lado*, 1:30:16

particular activities of the protagonists, but it also captures a version of Le Corbusier's architectural promenade. The first 5 minutes of the film offer a walk-through of the building from the perspective of Leonardo. Awakened by the banging of the neighbor's renovation project, Leonardo stumbles out of bed and walks through the house to identify the source of the noise. Through a tracking shot from behind Leonardo's shoulder, the handheld camera offers the film spectator a

Fig. 7.6 Screenshot from the film, *El hombre de al lado*, 3:32

close view of his experience as he moves through the spaces. Leonardo peers over a landing, peeks into Lola's room, moves through a living room and along a passage, descends a staircase and walks down the ramp past the indoor tree to the front door (Fig. 7.6). Finally, the protagonist identifies the source of the renovations and hurries to the back of the house to express his indignation to the worker.

Instead of being contemplative, Leonardo's architectural walk is driven by a need to identify a jarring sound, and the viewer experiences the building through fast-paced camerawork. Leonardo's walk offers the spectator a chance to sense the light and shadow, the depths and shapes of the architecture, the modernist paintings and the furnishings, but does not allow time to understand the building's spatial layout. Rather, the filming gives the impression of narrow corridors and tight spaces to mark Leonardo's anxiety. Accompanied by the unpleasant beating of the hammer as it echoes through the architecture, this promenade privileges the development of the protagonist's psychological frustration.

While the protagonists' activities underscore attitudes to the body in their relationship to the architectural surroundings and Leonardo's walk-through demonstrates his escalating irritation, *El hombre de al lado* suggests a liaison between architecture and film through a number of metafilmic episodes. The camera captures Leonardo in the process of developing a website for his business, and doing various takes for a filmed interview. In another sequence, Lola's grandfather explores a new "handycam" video camera, and certain frames of the sequence are represented through his confused/playful lens. Furthermore, these takes emphasize corporeal image. Leonardo refuses make-up for the interview,

and upholds a critical stance regarding his website. For his part, the grandfather discovers different filming techniques as he explores his camera, contorting the family's faces, solarizing them, turning them upside down, or duplicating them through the camera settings. Here the camera lens is represented as a filter with its own perspective, certainly a "tool for vision"—in the words of Le Corbusier in his manifesto on art and vision in film "Ésprit de vérite" (1933)—as it captures and manipulates the surroundings.

In "Ésprit de vérite," Le Corbusier emphasizes the power of the machine-eye, or the camera lens, as a tool that offers a different sort of vision. Attached to the body, the eye is affected by the feelings and the other senses of the viewer, while the camera lens serves as an "impassive, indefatigable machine" (Le Corbusier, 42). The lens has the potential to record more than the human eye; for Le Corbusier, it can "disclose the intensity of human consciousness to us through the intermediary of visual phenomena which are so subtle and so rapid in nature that we have no means ourselves to discover and record them: we are unable to observe them, we simply feel their radiance" (Le Corbusier, 43). For the architect, the hierarchical power of the human gaze develops from the categories of class, society and economics as they do for Mulvey, whereas the objectivity and the mechanical capabilities of the camera lens can potentially capture a truth that escapes the mere human eye. Therefore, for Le Corbusier, "the cinema appeals 'to the eyes that see.' To the men sensitive to truths" (43).

The Cinematic Window

It is the representation of the sidewall window construction that becomes the most complete expression of self-reflexive cinema in *El hombre de al lado*. From the principal perspective of Leonardo, the window focuses the spectator's attention on the barriers that limit approaching and understanding the Other. In its various phases of construction, the window serves repeatedly as the primary setting for the filmic action; the mises-en-scène illustrate the various means of perception, while they also underscore the difficulty of fully understanding the Other's experience. The sidewall opening undergoes certain transformations as it is staged in the film: in one sequence the window evokes the lens of a camera obscura; in another it suggests the screen of a film projection; and in a third, it serves as a theatrical stage. These scenic revisions for the window

allow it to function as the symbol for possible strategies for human observation and (mis)understanding.

In Víctor's second appearance at the sidewall window, the camera frames him in a way that is doubly symbolic: he peeks his head out of the small hole in the black plastic that covers the window under construction in the sidewall, recalling both a birth as well as a camera aperture (Fig. 7.1). Víctor's head, bald like a newborn, enters into the visual field of his designer neighbor, who scolds him for appearing in his space. Over the course of the film, Leonardo then proceeds to do everything possible to make his neighbor disappear again from his privileged and intimate reality.

Another interpretation of this framing—as the camera aperture of a camera obscura—offers a web of symbolism in the context of this film, from that of inversion to historical implications of this camera's image as well as the concept of the gaze. To create an image with a camera obscura, light passes through a hole into an enclosed dark interior to project an inverted image of what is outside on the wall opposite the aperture (Fig. 7.7). In *El hombre de al lado*, this idea of inversion becomes a key aspect of the film. As has been well demonstrated by the critics, this notion develops from the beginning of the film in which the credits appear over a screen divided by black and white (Copertari, "Vistas del vecino" 2012, 161–162; Hortiguera 2013).[8] Through the allusion to the camera obscura, the film questions and attacks economic and class disparities by playing with the idea of inversion. It is telling that

Fig. 7.7 Camera obscura, 1752. Wellcome Library, London

in this framing, instead of showing Víctor's head *inside* the room, the neighbor looks outdoors through the slat. Instead of a *reflected* image of his head, the spectator sees his "real" head. If it were a real apparatus, Leonardo's position in his verbal observations and interactions with Víctor on the opposing wall would constitute the site of the projection screen. In this way, the film tests the stability of the neighbors' class status to provoke contemplation about power positions.

The history of the camera obscura also connects the apparatus with power games that have been associated with the cinematic gaze. In the theorization of this apparatus over the years, "radical historians" have perceived the camera obscura and cinema as "bound up in a single enduring apparatus of political and social power, elaborated over several centuries, that continues to discipline and regulate the status of an observer" (Crary, 26).[9]

The history of the metaphoric representation of the camera obscura shows a change in perspective with respect to its reference to the gaze. As Jonathan Crary has described it, even though the formal operation of the camera obscura did not change, "the function of the device or metaphor within an actual social or discursive field has fluctuated decisively" (29). For thinkers such as "Marx, Bergson, Freud, and others, the very apparatus that a century earlier was the site of truth becomes a model for procedures and forces that conceal, invert, and mystify truth" (Crary, 29). In other words, the analysis of the photographic gaze captured by the camera obscura has been transformed from an acceptance of its veracity to distrust of its capacity to truly represent reality. This historic metaphoric change regarding the apparatus serves as an appropriate parallel for *El hombre de al lado* which questions to what degree the gaze can develop mutual understanding. Through its association with power structures, the perspective offered by the camera obscura links also with that of the cinematic gaze.

As a reflection of this relationship between photographic genres, in another sequence in the film, the sidewall window is constructed as a "film screen" (Fig. 7.8). Leonardo and his wife, Ana, spy on Víctor through the window under construction. With a voyeurism that recalls Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, the couple observe a half-dressed Víctor who enjoys an evening with his girlfriend.[10] Leonardo and Ana's whispered comments about what they are seeing are similar to those made while watching a movie: "la deja sola" [he leaves her alone] Ana says to

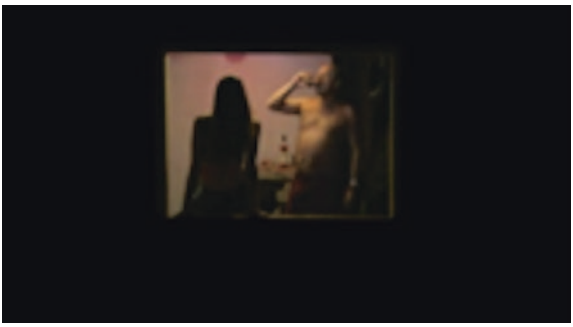

Fig. 7.8 Screenshot from the film, *El hombre de al lado*, 55:17

Leonardo sharing a muffled laugh; "Ooh, no no" exclaims Leonardo when Víctor starts kissing the woman; "qué animal" [what an animal] replies Ana. This conversation that highlights Leonardo and Ana's classist attitudes, as Copertari has interpreted it, represents one of the moments in which Víctor's apparent "monstrosity" begins to be transferred to the "self":

> El film muestra cómo ese otro en su supuesta "monstruosidad" y carácter amenazador, el vecino de al lado que adquiere visibilidad abriendo una ventana en la medianera, va progresivamente perdiendo su exceso monstruoso que se trasfiere paulatinamente al espectador principal dentro del film (Leonardo), que hasta entonces había funcionado como lugar de identificación para el espectador exterior al film. ("Vistas del vecino", 164)
>
> [The film shows how the apparent 'monstrosity' and threatening character of the other, the next door neighbor who acquires visibility by opening a sidewall window, progressively starts losing his monstrous excess that is gradually transferred to the principal spectator in the film (Leonardo), who until now served as the place of identification for the exterior spectator of the film.]

In this way, the scene constructs a complex network of the gaze: Leonardo and Ana assume the role of voyeur, while film spectators become distanced from their identification with the couple for their elitist attitude, and begin to search for another perspective from which to observe the neighbors.

Fig. 7.9 Screenshot from the film, *El hombre de al lado*, 1:03:08

The new possibility for approaching the Other emerges from the open attitude of Lola—Leonardo and Ana's adolescent daughter—which is demonstrated in the framing of the window as a "theater stage" (Fig. 7.9). The gaze is associated in this case with that of a theater spectator. Although the beginning of the relationship is not shown, Lola has established a certain friendship with Víctor; the neighbor performs burlesque shows for her in the sidewall window using boots from a Barbie doll as a "protagonist" of the spectacles. As a stage, Víctor uses a box that he balances on the windowsill of the new sidewall opening. His show consists of small scenes in which, with the doll boots on his fingers, Víctor creates a character that evokes the Parisian can-can dancers of the cabaret, seductively moving their "legs." The show becomes increasingly more surreal: pieces of bananas and oranges, and slices of ham, are transformed into theater props with which the "boots" interact—flattening them, covering themselves with them, overturning them, in a game that unites the coarse with the erotic. Lola enjoys these shows without prejudice against their creator; she shares moments of neighborly complicity with Víctor through a shared smile and sense of humor. Even though Víctor's shows might disgust the spectator, Lola's acceptance of them offers the spectator a more positive means of exchange with the Other.

These three examples of framings of the sidewall window in *El hombre de al lado* underscore the complexity of the Other's gaze represented in the film. In the position of camera obscura, the window alludes to the power games of the gaze; that the image is reflected and subverted shows the tension in the neighbors' relationship. The framing as a film screen

represents the couple who inhabit the Curutchet House as voyeurs who assume a position of power through their gaze. Nevertheless, this scene serves to change the perspective of film viewers, distancing them from Leonardo and his wife. The daughter enjoys a "complicit gaze" with the Other when she observes his shows framed in the window. In each case, the act of looking becomes the principal way to cross borders of interaction, and the encounter with the appropriate gaze opens the possibility for creating a connection across different social classes.

El hombre de al lado uses irony to accentuate certain irritations regarding living in the Curutchet House. Apparently, the abundance of sunlight that shone into the Curutchet House had become an inconvenience to the actual residents. Even the *brises-soleil* that were intended to alleviate this problem provided an insufficient solution, as Dr. Curutchet found the sunlight to be too intense and that it did not allow the family to sleep well (Lapunzina, 114). That the neighbor in the film just wants "un rayito de luz" [a little ray of light] for his home when the Curutchet House features this abundance of sunlight adds a layer of irony to the story.

Another problem with the Curutchet House was its popularity. This was especially irritating to one of the doctor's daughters: "Once completed, the Curutchets lived in what Alcina del Carmen called 'a permanent display' for an unceasing parade of people interested in visiting the house who often did not respect the privacy of its inhabitants" (Lapunzina, 114). Again, the film draws attention to this aspect: Leonardo's daily occupations are so visible from the exterior, that Víctor surmises exactly when the designer is busy or not. In another instance, Leonardo jokes proudly with an architecture professor who is giving his students a lecture about the house from the outside (Fig. 7.10). Another woman begs Leonardo to have a look inside the property, a request that he coldly refuses. Leonardo also offers his own students individual tours of the house when they come over to show him their furniture designs.

While these aspects in the film seem to offer a wink at the history of this architectural landmark, and call attention to the sociopolitical discrepancies between those with the means to access sunlight and those without, they also again mark the cinematic features of architecture by capturing residents on display like actors in a film, under the spotlight of the sun. These aspects, along with the architectural promenade and the window framed as a camera, screen and stage, illustrate the complicity of the two art forms for the expression of human experience.

Fig. 7.10 Screenshot from the film, *El hombre de al lado*, 7:06

Notes

1. Cohn and Duprat have also co-directed the feature films, *Enciclopedia* (2000), *Yo Presidente* (2006), *El artista* (2008), *El hombre de al lado* (2009), *Querida voy a comprar cigarrillos y vuelvo* (2011) and *Living Stars* (2014).
2. It is striking that two Argentine films that feature sidewall windows appeared within 2 years of each other.
3. Despite the many critiques inspired by Mulvey's article, her call to find a new way to conceptualize the cinematic gaze continues to be pertinent. For the most part, Hollywood continues to privilege a gaze that supports the patriarchal system.
4. Le Corbusier's other five unfulfilled projects were the following: the Matías Errazuriz house (1930); the Victoria Ocampo commission; the University City and the Ministry of Health and Education buildings in Rio de Janeiro (1936); the Plan for Buenos Aires (1938); and the Plan for Bogotá (1947–1952) (Pérez Oyarzún, 101).
5. See Erick Abdel Figueroa Pireira for more extensive analysis of these two lines of thought.
6. The complicated history of the construction of the Curutchet House is detailed in Lapunzina's book on the building.
7. The chair allows only one person to sit in a relaxed position as it engages in a bouncing and spinning movement, in this way not inspiring interaction with others.
8. Hugo Hortiguera has interpreted the first scene as calling on the spectator to adopt a side in the conflict: "Por un momento las dos perspectivas quedan enfrentadas en la pantalla y parecen conformar un rostro que mira

al espectador para advertirle que lo que seguirá será algo ante lo cual se tendrá que tomar una posición. No parece haber escapatoria: o se está de un lado o del otro" [For an instance, both perspectives are placed face-to-face on the screen and they seem to create an expression that advises the spectator that he/she will have to take a position in what follows. There seems to be no escape: you are either on one side or the other]. Nevertheless, in her analysis of this beginning, Copertari has sided with Santiago García that the point of view is "un truco estético" [aesthetic trick] that "pase lo que pase, la mirada no es doble" [whatever happens, the gaze is not double] (Copertari, "Vistas del vecino", 162).

9. In addition, Jonathan Crary has traced the change in metaphoric interpretation of the camera obscura: "The formal operation of a camera obscura as an abstract diagram may remain constant, but the function of the device or metaphor within an actual social or discursive field has fluctuated decisively.... In the texts of Marx, Bergson, Freud, and others the very apparatus that a century earlier was the site of truth becomes a model for procedures and forces that conceal, invert, and mystify truth" (29).
10. According to Mark Strauss's description in his essay, "A Peeping Tom's Gaze," Leonardo and Ana clearly represent the category of voyeur when they spy on their neighbor. Strauss explains that voyeurs "find spectacular entertainment in that which was never destined for the public eye.... [Voyeurs] call attention to themselves by hunting down the object of their passion which is off the beaten track, outside of agreed or authorized situations" (Quoted in Manlove 2007, 96).

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CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

Architecture's privileged role in contemporary Argentine cinema coincided with a time when the city was transforming itself from an urban center with interactions among diverse populations to a site reflecting a more Americanized lifestyle. The accelerated construction of gated communities in the outlying regions of the city, the shopping centers, the privatized parks and toll-road highways emerged out of the politics of privatization that marked the 1990s landscape in Argentina and led to more extreme divisions between economic classes. While these policies shifted with the government of the 2000s, the change in buying-power of the Argentine peso in the post-convertibility era continued to encourage foreign investment and to privilege the elite (Agostinis and Di Francesco 2010, 225–232). It is not surprising then that cinema from this era reflects architecture as indicative of lower-class marginalization, political exclusion, and the loss of tight-knit communities.

Architecture mediates political needs in these films. The need for political and economic inclusion in society is underscored through the mise-en-scène of the construction industry in *Mundo grúa* and the protagonists' marginalization from buildings and monuments in *Pizza birra faso*. The obligation to understand the country's role in the globalized economy emerges through *Nueve reinas*' portrayal of the glass façade of the Hilton Hotel in contrast to the 1930s architecture of the Kavanagh Building. *La antena* calls for the multiplicity of voices in the communications industry through its depiction of an urban space in which paper houses and machines show the pliability of residents, and architecture

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reflects the a totalitarian regime. In *El hombre de al lado*, the Curutchet House privileges the search for community across class divisions, and *La niña santa* points to the need for economic revitalization through the mise-en-scène of the decadent Hotel Termas.

Two sites are particularly pertinent in the search for developing and maintaining communities in the context of the increasingly global reach of the market economy: the café/bar and the gated community. The place for meeting friends, discussing current events or spending an afternoon reading, writing or sketching, the setting of the Buenos Aires café/bar represents the city's traditional means of fostering community. In contrast to the positive, inclusive sentiment inspired by the café are the gated communities that have developed during the last decades in the suburbs and outlying regions of the city. Indicative of the continued search for a sense of belonging, the café and the gated community have informed a number of filmic renditions in contemporary Argentine cinema. While the site of the café/bar in these films evokes conflicts and challenges surrounding the transformation of urban communities, the gated neighborhoods underscore the exclusivity, along with the boredom and apathy, generated by this Americanized lifestyle.

Contemporary Argentine cinema presents the café/bar through a nostalgic filter. These sites become idealized as they mark the place for the construction and maintenance of an inclusive community that welcomes immigrants. In *Bar El Chino* (Burak 2003), the renowned tango bar proudly incorporates the Italian immigrant community; in *Herencia* (Hernández 2001), the German tourist who eventually owns the Buenos Aires café continues to foster friendship and solidarity in the site. The café in *Bolivia* (Caetano 2001) presents this nostalgia from a different perspective. In Caetano's film, the café reflects the present political climate; the local Argentine customers aggressively express their fear of losing their place in contemporary Argentina. In *Bolivia*, the Bolivian and Paraguayan workers are excluded from a sense of community by the Argentines in the café, a marginalization that eventually leads to physical and deadly violence (Figs. 8.1, 8.2).

Bolivia contemplates a different, more contemporary Argentina from that of *Bar El Chino* and *Herencia*. The immigrant community in this film has changed from the European—the Italian in Burak's film and the German in Hernández's work—to the South American. Caetano's film tackles racism against the lower-class immigrant by placing protagonists of Paraguayan and Bolivian origins in the sacred Argentine institution of

Fig. 8.1 Screenshot from the film, *Bolivia*, 57:47

Fig. 8.2 Screenshot from the film, *Bolivia*, 1:00:50

the neighborhood café. The murder of the Bolivian worker at the hands of a desperate Argentine customer points to this film's perspective that positive and inclusive community cannot be established in the internationalized economy while racism continues to flourish.

Gated communities further emphasize isolationist attitudes. In 2005, there were about 350 gated communities or closed housing developments in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, covering 300 km^2 of land, 100 km^2 more than the area of the city itself (Thuillier). These included *barrios privados* (private neighborhoods), *clubes de chacra*

(literally, "farm clubs," with larger areas of land per resident), *countries* (full-time residences with all the amenities of a country club) and *mega-emprendimientos* (huge, master-planned communities with semi-public services such as shopping centers and universities). The prominence of this housing trend has also been evident in the publication since the mid-1990s of weekly sections on *country* real estate in two major newspapers in Buenos Aires, *Clarín* and *La Nación*. In response to this new lifestyle, filmic treatments of the gated community have emphasized the unnatural construction of both social community and the surrounding environments in these housing developments.

Filmmakers have explored the ways in which gated communities have created elite enclaves of privilege, while they also have generated fear of their surroundings and have been excluded from the real world. Through experimental filming techniques such as dividing the screen into several frames, for example, in the short film "La ciudad que huye" (Martel 2006) underscores the divisive politics of inside and outside as Martel foregrounds the wall that surrounds the gated establishment (Fig. 8.3). *Una semana solos* (Murga 2007) and the recent production, *Betibú* (Cohan 2014), highlight ironies in the gated community lifestyle. Murga's film represents flaws in the morality of *country* inhabitants—absent parents, classist and uncompassionate adolescents. The conflict in *Betibú* initiates in a gated community. Here the enclosed neighborhood does not even protect its residents from violent crime.

While the traditional café offers an idealized nostalgia of social unity, and the gated community foments an image of happiness through the

Fig. 8.3 Screenshot from the film, "La ciudad que huye," 2:51

imitation of the idealized American lifestyle, isolated from Argentine society, both sites represent the impossibility of these dreams of perfection. As Beatriz Sarlo has noted, "la ciudad perfecta es inhumana y, por eso, debe ser destruida incluso como proyecto" [the perfect city is inhuman and, therefore, should be destroyed even as a project] (144).

The untenable desire for the "happy" city emerges as the principal idea behind the film *Buenos Aires vice versa* (Agresti 1996), in which the protagonists confront post-dictatorship Buenos Aires from diverse perspectives. In this film, a couples hotel evokes the nightmare of torture, and rooftops are cast as the ironic symbol of "beauty" of the neoliberal façade. Here, the café serves to create bonds between characters, but also to instigate tragic relationships, as in the blind couple who seek but cannot find each other even though they are both seated in the same café. The memory of political violence comes to a head in the final scenes of *Buenos Aires vice versa*, in the shopping center in which the young homeless boy is ruthlessly shot and killed by a security guard for stealing a video camera. The film locates tragedy in the midst of the fraud of capitalist prosperity marked by the shopping center, casting doubt on future possibilities for a city that has been so deeply and violently divided.

Buenos Aires vice versa overturns unwritten promises for "perfection" in the post-dictatorship, neoliberalist era. However, for Sarlo (2009), the reality is that, "Los hombres sólo pueden tolerar ciudades imperfectas" [Men can only tolerate imperfect cities] (144). Happy endings in films such as *Herencia*, in which the café flourishes again under the ownership of the young German immigrant, and *Medianeras* (Taretto 2011), in which the lonely protagonists find each other by looking through their illegally built sidewall windows in their Buenos Aires apartment buildings, remain a part of fiction. Memories endure in spaces—those of hardship and injustice just as much as those of joy. More than this, however, the city that does not evoke a full range of sentiments and a multivaried offering of experiences becomes unidimensional and therefore lacks the power to incite the energy to pursue new ideas.

In this sense, the perception of marginalization in *Pizza birra faso* and *Mundo grúa* emerges as troubling for the continued production of ideas. Other films from this era such as *Tan de repente*, *Sábado* and *Picado fino* underscore youth apathy and boredom incited by contemporary Buenos Aires. The young adults in these films seem to seek adventure, but the unexpressive responses to their escapades illustrate the comprehensiveness of these characters' apathy. Amalia's misguided search for a religious

vocation in *La niña santa* also points to the human desire for stimulation. Identifying new possibilities for community becomes central for countering urban marginalization. When these films explore new ideas for companionship, they emerge in the form of the redefinition of family through peer groups in *Tan de repente*, *Pizza birra faso* and *Los rubios*, or by new understandings of community in relationships across economic classes in *El hombre de al lado* and *Buenos Aires vice versa*.

These films represent a search for sites that help generate healthy communities. The café responds to community needs of the Argentine past; the *country* neighborhoods impose a foreign model for community that has not developed organically from Argentine social relations. The opening of the sidewall windows in *Medianeras* and *El hombre de al lado* illustrates the possibility for crossing barriers into new social arenas. If architecture allows for new forms of social interaction, then healthy communities that imitate the positive aspects of the café can develop organically in this new era.

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