

Work and the Post-Crisis: Artistic Representations of Claustrophobic Labor Spaces in Argentina
(2001-2011)

By

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Spanish and Portuguese and the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy.

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Date Defended: May 8, 2013

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Date approved: May 8, 2013

Abstract

This dissertation treats a variety of works of Argentine theater, film, and narrative produced between 2001 and 2011, a historical period that serves as the context for the playwrights, directors, and authors studied in this project, as well as for the characters that they depict through their fictional works of art. Common to each of the artistic representations analyzed is a special emphasis placed on a claustrophobic labor space, which I read as a microcosm for Argentine society. This unique setting represents a space from which to establish a critical reflection of the physical, social, racial, and sexual limitations confronted by Argentine citizens of the post 2001 economic crisis. The decision to focus on the suffocating conditions encountered by these characters represents a strategy employed by artists of recent years in order to highlight the lasting detrimental impact of the economic crisis on the country for a full decade after the climax of said economic downturn, despite moderate socioeconomic and political reforms employed during the Kirchner years (2003-present). Although there is not an easily identifiable political discourse shared by artists and texts treated in this project, the emphasis on the problems faced by Argentina of recent years is no doubt a strategy by which to highlight the failure of the neoliberal system employed by Carlos Menem (1989-1999), which arguably resulted in the current situation, and the inability to construct an alternative system capable of providing the country's citizens (especially of the lower and middle class) with a full socioeconomic recovery from the events of 2001.

Acknowledgments

I would most importantly like to thank my dissertation advisor, Stuart Day, for inspiring, encouraging, and motivating me throughout my entire postgraduate career. I thank him for cultivating my interest in Latin American theater through my many classes with him at the University of Kansas and for the opportunity to work as Editorial Assistant of the *Latin American Theater Review*. I am grateful for all of the late nights and weekends that were sacrificed in order to move this project along, and for his commitment and faith in this dissertation from the earliest stages until its completion.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my dissertation committee for their support, encouragement, and guidance throughout each stage of this project. A special thanks to Verónica Garibotto for her countless suggested readings and films and for sharing her insight on all of these materials while sipping on Maté. Approximately half of the works chosen for this dissertation have been selected from her long lists of suggested artistic works, and my readings of these texts have been enriched by conversations and suggested essays about the sociopolitical context of contemporary Argentina. Jorge Pérez was an inspiring teacher and helped foster my current interest in the formal study of film. He additionally offered prompt and constructive feedback that contributed to the timely advancement of this project. I thank Robert Bayliss for his positive support and expanding my knowledge on Spanish language theater. Thank you to Henry Bial for one of the most interesting classes during my graduate career and for introducing me to the theater community at KU.

This project would not have been possible without the financial support of two university grants that funded trips to Argentina in 2009 and 2011 (The Tinker Field Research Grant and the Doctoral Research Travel Grant). These visits allowed me to experience the theater scene in Buenos Aires first hand, where I saw close to 50 plays and I was able to establish important connections with playwrights, directors, actors, and theater critics alike. Every play discussed in this dissertation was seen in Buenos Aires. The play scripts were mostly gathered in independent bookstores throughout Buenos Aires and the unpublished manuscript for *Mundo Fabril*, a work analyzed in the third chapter of this dissertation, was graciously sent to me in a Word Document by the author himself.

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Introduction

Work and the Post-Crisis: Artistic Representations of Claustrophobic Labor Spaces in Argentina (2001-2011)

[T]he process of production is seen to have two political movements. First, the organization of work has political and ideological *effects* —that is, as men and women transform raw materials into useful things, they also reproduce particular social relations as well as an experience of those relations. Second, alongside the organization of work — that is, the *labour process* — there are distinctive political and ideological *apparatuses of production* which regulate production relations. The notion of *product regime* or, more specifically, factory regime embraces both these dimensions of production politics

(Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production* 7-8)

This dissertation treats works of Argentine theater, film, and narrative created between 2001 and 2011, a period of time marked by economic and social unrest that reached its peak in December of 2001. This recent historical period serves as the context for the playwrights, directors, and authors studied in this project, as well as for the characters that they depict through their fictional works of art. Although critics such as Johanna Page suggest that there are only “artificial” distinctions that can be made between “pre-Crisis and post-Crisis” (3) I have chosen 2001 as my point of departure because of the enormous impact that had on the socioeconomic condition of the country, and because of its central role in public debate and art from 2001-2011. Even though all artists may not explicitly aim to produce a work “about” the crisis, the mere fact that their work was produced after this important year makes them open to interpretation and analysis as post-crisis products.

None of the works analyzed here are as explicitly political as many of their artistic predecessors of the post-dictatorship; however, my reading of these texts are political in the sense that I highlight social problems that can be in turn interpreted as a direct result of an economic and political system in crisis. I have strategically selected the workspace as the focus of my analyses for these texts, seeing as it offers an intricate economic and power structure that serves as a perfect microcosm for Argentine society and its governing body. I argue in this dissertation that what unifies this diverse body of texts is a similarly critical reflection of post-crisis Argentine society, as represented by a claustrophobic workspace. Social, gender, and ethnic conflicts in these workplaces in turn serve as a way to question political system of the post-crisis, the product of ten years of neoliberal economic reforms during the 1990s that arguably resulted in the 2001 crisis, and how, despite a shift in certain socioeconomic politics during the Kirchner years (2003-present) and some indications of a recovering economy, a continuation of some of the same political tactics have resulted in the persistence of many of the same problems to be faced by citizens (most noticeably those of the middle and lower classes) ten years after the climax of the 2001 economic crisis.

THE WORKSPACE

This unique setting is appealing for a variety of reasons: first, because it reflects a recent trend in contemporary Argentine cultural production; second, because art set in the place of labor is the most ideal space from which to articulate a commentary on a crisis in labor; and finally, because a workspace not only represents a place where products or ideas are created, but also reflects a space where a sociopolitical culture is constantly being (re)created. As Michael

Burawoy affirms, “as men and women transform raw materials into useful things, they also reproduce particular social relations as well as an experience of those relations.” (7) The workspace is a microcosm of the nation, a space where sociopolitical, sexual, and racial identities are staged daily and fueled by conflicts of interests and an often times problematic socioeconomic power structure.

My analyses of the workspace will not be limited to the physical space inhabited by employees, but will also take into account the employees themselves and the social environment they both inhabit and help to (re)create. This concept of space is in part borrowed from Henri Lefebvre, who considers space to be an active object constantly being redefined and altered by a variety of historical and sociopolitical factors including hegemony, establishment, knowledge, and technical expertise. Lefebvre affirms that “[s]ocial space is a social product” (26), meaning that those who occupy spaces also produce them. In the workplaces treated here, gender, racial, and social identity is transformed as a result in part of the power relations that are played out daily. Unable to function independently of the system that surrounds it, a study of the workplace will simultaneously provide insight on the society at large of the Argentine post-crisis.

Tim Cresswell, a cultural geographer, also interprets places as both physical entities and social structures that are constantly being transformed. For Cresswell, just like for Lefebvre, a place cannot be defined solely by its geographical location and or structure, because its relevance within society also depends on the political and social norms that exist within it. In his book, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* he states,

Places are neither totally material nor completely mental; they are combinations of the material and mental and cannot be reduced to either. A church, for instance, is a place. It

is neither just a particular material artifact, nor just a set of religious ideas; it is always both. Places are duplications in that they cannot be reduced to the concrete or the “merely ideological”; rather they display an uneasy and fluid tension between them. (13)

Just like with this example of the church, a workspace cannot be reduced to the steel structure of a factory, or the decaying façade of a school house, but it must take into account the social and political norms that are played out within these places.

CLAUSTROPHOBIA

Although I have quite consciously selected a diverse collection of labor spaces whose cast of characters includes an array of socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic, and gender groups, I focus my analysis on one common feature: claustrophobic labor environments. The term claustrophobia is an amalgam created from the Latin words *claustrum* (enclosure) and *phobia* (fear). Merriam-Webster defines claustrophobia as an “abnormal dread of being in closed or narrow spaces.” Like many phobias, claustrophobia is often associated with an irrational or “abnormal” fear. By employing the term claustrophobia, it is not my intention to trivialize the plight of the characters and artists treated in this dissertation by underscoring the superficial or artificial nature of their fears. On the contrary, I underscore real physical, social, political, and economic barriers that have produced warranted fear during this specific time period in recent Argentine history as depicted in these selected works of fiction. I use the idea of claustrophobia to articulate the ubiquitous anxiety produced most principally by economic limitations that lead to social, gender and sexual restrictions within the workplace. This feeling of entrapment is manifested in a variety of ways, often quite literally referring to anxiety produced by workspaces with limited physical space or an uncomfortable environment, but also to define the boundaries

preventing the evolution of personal autonomy. Economic and social impotence as a result of the crisis was widespread throughout the country subsequent to 2001; the feeling of claustrophobia or entrapment was reinforced in the popular media. For example, in 2001 the term “corralito” was coined by journalist Antonio Laje in reference to a hold placed on private bank accounts by the economic minister at the time, Domingo Cavallo. “Corralito,” which literally means a small corral or animal pen, clearly evokes the idea of physical limitation and the lack of self-determination and control. If a pen is used as a physical border to restrict the free movement of livestock, during the “corralito” and the ensuing crisis, Argentine citizens were reduced to the seemingly impermeable boundaries established by a restricting economy.

This study of claustrophobia is meant to articulate a fear of enclosure or limitation that is shared by fictional characters, the artists, and the viewer/reader alike. Claustrophobia is manifested most literally by the characters who are trapped in uncomfortable spaces, enclosed by the walls that surround their workspace. The entrapment may be the result of a variety of factors including an unfavorable hierarchical order in which they are placed, economic impotence, or by their social limitations that confront them at work. The same economic limitations (or challenges) shared by the characters are also faced by their creators, whose production methods are necessarily unique in a limiting economic environment. I am particularly concerned with the relationship between the fictional characters and the production methods employed by their authors. In many cases the reality of the artists examined here (whether intentional or not) breaks through the traditionally invisible barrier separating them from their fiction.

AESTHETICS OF CRISIS

While aesthetics and production techniques vary from work to work, I place each of the artistic representations analyzed here in direct dialogue with issues facing Argentina of the post-crisis, even when it may not even be the explicit intention of the artist. The action that occurs in *Smoking Room* (Roger Gaul and Julio Wallovits, 2003), for example, a film discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, does not take place in Argentina, but in Spain. However, the Argentine director depicts an office space that could easily have reflect the reality of a multinational company in Buenos Aires subsequent to the economic crash of 2001. In the same vein, the novel *La nueva rabia* (Marcelo Eckhardt, 2008) that I treat in the third chapter of this dissertation and the play *Ala de criados* (Mauricio Kartun, 2009), from chapter four, never explicitly refer to contemporary Argentina, and much less to the recent economic crisis — the action in these pieces is developed in the early and mid 20th centuries, respectively, and not in Argentina of the post 2001 economic crisis. Yet despite the historical remoteness, my critical readings of these works situate them in the context of contemporary Argentina.

The cultural representations treated here differ greatly from their artistic predecessors of the years following the most recent dictatorship (1976-1983). They offer a historical and artistic distance that at times make them perhaps less accessible, and not as clearly in reference to political events. Mauricio Kartun has observed how much of recent theater has evolved greatly from that produced in reference to the violence of the most recent political dictatorship:

El trabajar ilustrando la realidad inmediata crearía un teatro periodístico. Hemos tenido experiencia de teatro periodístico, de hecho yo me he formado en él, en una dramaturgia de urgencia; y lo que aprendimos es que, si bien es cierto que producía algún tipo de repercusión en la recepción inmediata, no ha dejado luego

productos trascendentes. No se trata de obviar la realidad (ni creo que nadie pueda sensatamente hacerlo), sino de encontrar el cuerpo de imágenes que pueda expresarla sin ilustrarla. (qtd. in Pellettieri 200)

The central message articulated by Kartun can be used to refer to all of the cultural representations analyzed in this dissertation. All of the works treated here can be read as political; however, they do not necessarily lead to simple answers about how the crisis came about or ways to escape it.

THE NEOLIBERAL YEARS

The works treated here are necessarily complex in that they are imbedded in a historical and political context that at times is similarly ambiguous. It is impossible to reflect on contemporary history in Argentina without considering the relatively recent transformation of the political economy. The shift in foreign economic policy began on March 24, 1976, when a group of soldiers, led by the general Jorge Videla, carried out a military coup, taking control of the country by force. Politically, Videla's goals were in line with the government of the United States — both had waged war on communist thought and its enthusiasts. Economically, Argentina of the late 1970s also proved to be a faithful ally of the United States in their fight against socialist ideals. This became evident when Videla — shortly after assuming control of the country — appointed José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz as his economic minister. These two, in collaboration with the rest of the hand-picked government officials and advisors from the United States, wasted no time and quickly began to instate a series of economic reforms that involved what has since been labeled as neoliberalism. Luís Alberto Romero explains, “The policies of

1976 [...] were in line with the new neo-liberal order slowly emerging in the western world: the opening of the economy to world markets, the removal of all controls over financial capital, the suppression of state subsidies, and the reduction of social spending” (“The Argentine Crisis” 30).

The decrease in national politics in the market led to the selling of national industry, together with the opening of the Argentine markets to foreign investors, thus fortifying economic ties from big business in North America and Europe. Although the dictatorship came to a close in 1983, the economic policies which were initiated by Martínez de Hoz only increased in the following years. Neoliberalism reached its peak during the two consecutive terms served by Carlos Saúl Menem (1989-1999), who was working in collaboration with his Harvard-educated economic minister at the time, Domingo Cavallo, and utilizing strategies developed in collaboration with economists in the United States known as the Washington Consensus. Alberto Romero sums up Argentine economic relation to neoliberal policies of the 90s: “Carlos Menem [...] adopted in full the reform and re-adjustment programme, applying it in its simplest and most brutal and destructive form: an unrestricted financial opening to international markets and a completely reckless privatization of state companies” (“The Argentine Crisis” 30). While the reforms carried out by Menem and Cavallo¹ assured their support by foreign businessmen and politicians alike, in Argentina, many economists and historians have interpreted these economic decisions as the direct cause of the subsequent collapse of the Argentine economy, manifesting

¹ These changes included the privatization of the national airlines (*Aerolíneas Argentinas*), the national telephone company (ENTAL, Empresa Nacional de Telocomunicaciones), the national oil company, (YPF, Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales), and trains, among many others. At the same time that national industries in Argentina were being privatized there was simultaneously a considerable decrease in public spending, causing a detrimental blow to public schools, the health care system, and public security (Romero, “The Argentine Crisis” 31).

itself throughout the final years of the 90s, but reaching its peak with the economic crisis on December 20, 2001.

The crisis — described by Lucas Llach to be “the deepest peacetime fall in GDP (Gross Domestic Product) suffered by any capitalist country of some significance at least since World War II” (40) — is where my project begins. I have chosen this moment in history because it is an event that marked structural changes throughout the nation that have had lasting effects on the economic plight of the country’s citizens, subsequently resulting in social and cultural transformations. The worst of the economic crisis hit the country in December of 2001, culminating in the aforementioned “corralito,” when the government put a hold on all private bank accounts, thus denying its citizens access to their savings. Concurrently, the Argentine Peso plummeted in value; in a matter of weeks the Argentine currency went from having the same international market value as the US dollar to being four times weaker. These dramatic changes led to massive protests in which hundreds of thousands of Argentines took to the streets banging on their pots and pans in a public display known as the “cacerolazo.” The protestors demanded access to their frozen bank accounts and insisted that their politicians resign, shouting what has since become a memorable phrase in recent Argentine history: “que se vayan todos.” On December 20, 2001, ceding to the demands of his people, Fernando de la Rúa fled his post as commander and chief and was quickly succeeded by four other leaders, all of whom were in and out of office in only a few weeks time. When international investors witnessed this political and economic disaster, most companies began to pull their money out of Argentina, forcing many businesses to close. As a result, unemployment quickly soared to as high as 20%, and between

2002 and 2003 more than 50% of the population was living below the poverty line (Epstein and Pion-Berlin 16).

While offices were once commonly owned and operated by local Argentine businesses or public enterprises, as a result of the severe austerity measures put into place during de la Rúa's presidency, together with the extensive privatizations of public business throughout the 1990s, a post-crisis office was often operated by a transnational staff whose owner and upper management may have been stationed abroad. The sale of these businesses and services to private and international investors resulted in the transformation of office cultures throughout the country. The new structuring of the office meant massive layoffs. It is predicted that between 1990 and 1996, 27% of employees who were previously working for state business lost their jobs as a result of the privatizations (Gerchunoff et. al 9). Those who managed to keep their employment saw the office culture transformed as a result of the transfer in ownership that drafted new laws for its employees. A newly privatized business may also have changed the language of operation, dress code, schedule, and office geography and landscape. These transformations to office custom and laws drafted by a foreign operator represent a kind of cultural imperialism as foreign nationals take control of and impose laws inside of Argentine territory.

THE KIRCHNERS AND THE POST-CRISIS

In 2003, Néstor Kirchner² became the first elected president to serve a full term after the economic crash of 2001, and his presidency was succeeded by his wife and current president,

² Néstor Kirchner died in 2010, however, he is very much alive in Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's public discourse. As Hugo Chávez said upon arrival in Argentina for Néstor Kirchner's funeral, "Yo no vine aquí para sepultar a Néstor, a Néstor lo vamos a sembrar" (qtd. in "Para despedirlo..."). Consistant with Chávez's words,

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who was elected in 2007 and again in 2011. The Kirchner's have enjoyed widespread approval, in part because many indicators seem to prove that the economy has grown since 2003. Vick Baker from *The Guardian* reports that ten years after the crisis "The economy appears to be booming, with a real GDP growth of 9.1%. Unemployment is down to a 20-year low." These encouraging statistics are appearing at the same time that the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner is working to take a stand against some of the economic policies instated during the 1990s. For example, on April 16 2012, Kirchner's government began the process of renationalizing the national oil industry (YPF) that was owned mostly by the Spanish company Repsol since being privatized under Menem's presidency in 1992. (Hornbeck 15)

So encouraging are these statistics to some that it may seem as though Argentina has been able to successfully escape the powerful grip of the economic crisis. However, many are doubtful that Argentina has truly freed itself of many of the economic troubles that plagued the country in 2001. It also has been questioned whether or not the Kirchner government has done enough to reverse the economic policies established during the 1990s. For example, literary critic and outspoken critic of the Kirchner government Beatriz Sarlo, has identified some of the contradictions surrounding the Kirchners. She observes that although the Kirchners have drastically changed their discourse in what is presumably an attempt to distance themselves from one of their political predecessors, Carlos Menem, they may have more in common with Menem

Néstor Kirchner's memory continues to grow in the public image thanks to its careful nurturing by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. A similar phenomenon has occurred in Venezuela, as Nicolás Maduro's political campaign in 2013 relied heavily on the memory of his recently deceased predecessor, Hugo Chávez. During a public address at Chávez's vigil, Cristina remembered Chavez's words, accurately predicting the equally important posthumous impact that Chávez would have on his country's politics: "Creo que hombres como Chávez no mueren, se siembran" ("Para despedirlo...").

than most people might expect. Indeed, as governor of the Santa Cruz province in Patagonia, Néstor Kirchner supported many of the economic policies employed by Menem, including the decision to privatize the YPF. He was, as Sarlo claims “[e]l caudillo que más había acompañado a Menem en la privatización de YPF no sólo sin protestar sino ensalzándolo como el mejor” (168). In addition to supporting the privatizations in the 90s, after being elected in 2003 he surrounded himself by many cabinet members that used to serve with those who he claimed to be his political opponents, “En una compleja red de alianzas, indefinida ideológicamente, el presidente Kirchner reunió a ex-duhaldistas, ex menemistas, frepasistas, sectores del radicalismo y del socialismo y aliados ‘transversales’ de fuerzas menores identificados con los años setenta” (177).

For her part, Cristina Kirchner has also proven to be a bit of a political chameleon. In 2008, the same year that she nationalized private pensions, she also vetoed a bill that had been approved by the senate in order to protect against pollution caused by foreign mining companies, most specifically the Canadian multinational corporation, Barrick Gold. This decision was surprising considering a nationalist and populist discourse that Cristina Fernández de Kirchner regularly employs in her public addresses. Author and journalist Martín Caparrós has observed a disconnect between a populist discourse employed by the Kirchners and an economic policy that has only seemed to deepen the divide between the rich and poor, “Lamento que el kirchnerismo haga una política de centroderecha con un discurso que a veces apela a cierto populismo ‘derechohumanista’. Para mí, lo que define la política K es un dato: la brecha entre los más pobres y los más ricos, en vez de achicarse, crece. Ese es el tipo de dato que explica cuál es la política socioeconómica del Gobierno: la que definimos como derechista.”

One common criticism regularly used by opponents of Kirchner-style politics (commonly referred to in Argentina as “anti-K”) is that the Kirchners have not been honest in their publication of Argentina’s national economic statistics, projected regularly by the INDEC (*Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos*), a government sponsored agency. Sarlo says of the INDEC, “Los índices del INDEC son el product del voluntarismo político en su momento de más irremediable fantasía. La falsificación crea una especie de ‘sociedad Potemkin’ donde los pobres reales producidos por la inflación se esfuman por la magia de los números imaginarios” (227). Inflation, as mentioned by Sarlo, is one of the biggest concerns faced by a country attempting to escape the suffocating impact of the post-crisis. These numbers vary drastically according to the source: “In 2012, INDEC reported that inflation rose by approximately 10% annually. Private-sector and provincial government estimates place it above 25%” (Hornbeck 9).

Unemployment is another statistic that is fiercely debated. While the INDEC predicts unemployment to be as low as 6.9% in 2012 (a drastic improvement from numbers that reached nearly 25% in 2002), organizations like the IMF (International Monetary Fund) have questioned these numbers, and the leader of this institution, Christine Lagarde, has even threatened to issue Argentina with a “declaración de censura,” (Pisani “Sancionó el FMI a Argentina”) if the INDEC continues to produce figures that appear to be largely fabricated in the view of international organizations.

While it is clear that Argentina has drastically reduced foreign debt (a major factor in the original crash of the Argentine economy), many international institutions are still claiming that the government of Argentina owes them money. Just like statistics measuring inflation and

unemployment, the government and private international institutions have greatly different calculations about foreign debt:

The Argentine government estimated past due interest to be \$4.4 billion at the close of the 2010 exchange, not acknowledging interest after that date. As of January 2013, holdout bondholder groups (largely hedge funds specializing in distressed sovereign debt) put the total value at some \$15 billion with past due interest, of which \$1.3 billion is in litigation in New York federal court. Although “holdout” bondholders remain unpaid, Argentina is current on its obligations to exchange bondholders, an outcome that is being challenged in court under the equal treatment (*pari passu*) provision of the bonds. (Hornbeck 13)

Much of the foreign debt that was originally owed to the IMF and World Bank has been transferred to the Paris club. Money owed to this organization has caused international conflict, especially with the government of the United States:

As of December 31, 2010, Argentina owed the Paris Club countries \$6.3 billion, plus past due interest and possibly penalties. The United States is owed approximately \$550 million. Argentina has at least twice signaled a desire to address Paris Club debt, but not followed through. Members of Congress have expressed concern over Argentina’s failure to resolve this long-standing debt issue, and have supported the Obama Administration’s attempts to press the issue with the Argentine government. Argentina could make payments using either its international reserves or current revenue, which some argue it is capable of doing. The Argentine government argues to the contrary. Failure to address this issue is

another reason the Obama Administration invoked various financial restrictions on official lending and aid to Argentina. (Hornbeck 13)

These public issues have resulted in private legal battles, and the victims have been ordinary citizens. In 2012 a group of sailors was trapped in a port in Ghana for 70 days after they were finally released on March 15 2012. They were being held captive as a result of a conflict between the Argentine governments and private investors from the United States who claimed that the government of Argentina owed them money. The sailors on this ship were trapped in a legal battle that is indicative of unresolved economic issues that still exist today, more than a decade after the crash of the Argentine economy in 2001.

THE POST-CRISIS ARTISTIC SPACE

Despite the continued economic struggles that exist in Argentina after the collapse of the national economy, cultural production, in many respects has reached historic levels since the peak of the crisis. Víctor Goldgel Carballo has observed how the crisis, “paradójicamente parece alimentar [...] energías” (qtd. in Pelletieri 255). Artists may be working with reduced funds, but they continue to have a creative drive, or “energías” that lead to original productions in unique venues. Since the onset of the crisis, Buenos Aires has witnessed the opening of theatrical venues throughout the city that are producing original productions dealing with current issues. National film has similarly increased production in recent years. For example, in 1994, prior to the economic crisis, there were 14 films produced in Argentina, whereas in 2002, during the peak of the economic disaster, Argentina released three times that amount (46 national productions), a number that rose again 2003, when 69 films were created in Argentina. Both theater and film have adapted in interesting ways to the crisis, arguably adding to its appeal.

Theater of the post-crisis has thrived in the 21st century, especially what is often referred to as “Teatro de arte,” “Teatro *under*,” or most commonly, “Teatro independiente.” *Teatro independiente* can perhaps best be defined by what it is not. It is not “Teatro commercial,” theater that is staged in big venues with high ticket prices on La Calle Corrientes in Buenos Aires (Argentina’s answer to Broadway in New York). *Teatro independiente* is also not “Teatro official,” or theater that is heavily subsidized by the state and staged in a couple of key government-owned and operated venues in Buenos Aires, most noticeably, at the Centro Cultural San Martín. *Teatro Independiente* is independent in the sense that playwrights and actors who perform on this circuit produce original material, and they are not subject to the interests of big production companies (as is frequently the case with the “Teatro Comercial”), nor do they have to appeal to the interest of the state (which is often true of “Teatro oficial”). However, *Teatro independiente* is often not completely financially independent because it often does rely on ticket sales for survival (albeit, at prices that are much lower than in *Teatro Comercial*), and it also may receive funding from the state.

While state funding was reduced after austerity measures were put into effect subsequent to the post-crisis, theater continued to be subsidized. The two main sources of state funding came from the INT (*Instituto Nacional de Teatro*), and in Buenos Aires many theaters and playwrights benefit from the support of PROTEATRO. The former was established in 1997 as a result of the approval of the *Ley Nacional de Teatro*, legislation that secured funding for theaters and artists through the creation of the INT: Carlos Pacheco highlights the magnitude of this organization, “El Instituto [Nacional del Teatro] tiene subsidiadas 450 salas en todo el país y 1500 grupos de teatro” (Qtd. in Pelletieri, *Teatro argentino y crisis* 183). PROTEATRO is a similar institution,

except that it is limited to the city of Buenos Aires. In 2003, Pacheco claim that they supported 200 projects in the nation's capital.

In 2008, Buenos Aires was voted the capital of Spanish language theater by UNESCO, in part for its *Teatro independiente*. Many of these stages began to appear after the approval of the *Ley Nacional de Teatro* and received at least partial funding from the *Instituto Nacional de Teatro*. The funds that were provided were small, and this has become part of the unique identity that has formed around *Teatro independiente* in Argentina. For example, reduced funds have made it impossible for many directors and theaters alike to “pagar adelantos sobre derechos a obras extranjeras ya que los avaluares tradicionales, que eran de mil dólares, hoy son impagables (Kartun, qtd in Pelletieri 202). In a way this has been beneficial to local theater, as it forces playwrights and directors to work with original material rather than imported culture. The other result of limited funding in *Teatro independiente* is the creation of theaters with significantly reduced special limitations, which artists have used to their advantage, and has unquestionably become part of the identity of the *Teatro independiente*.

The reduced spaces often guarantee a sold out performance, offering a unique energy. In addition, these venues offer limited room between actors and audience members, creating an intimate environment with little distance separating fiction from reality. Playwrights have had to consider this unique dynamic at the time of composing their works, as it becomes an important part of the performance, and adds to the meaning of the performed text. Playwright Lola Arias comments how her plays are costume made for a specific theatrical space:

En términos de representación, ha cambiado la manera de pensar y producir los espectáculos. En el mismo momento iniciar la escritura uno ya piensa en pocos

actores, en un espacio reducido, en que la distancia con el público sea mínima. Es decir, esta nueva conyuntura ya influye el momento de ponerse a producir.

Supongo que si yo pensase que voy a tener 300 espectadores, haría otro tipo de teatro. (Qtd. In Pelletieri , *Teatro argentino y crisis* 256-257).

Inside of these reduced spaces, and with limited funding, playwrights, directors, and actors have had to be creative in order to sustain themselves, because even the combination of ticket sales and state subsidies are not usually enough to keep these “independent” artists afloat. The most effective way to survive the crisis is by keeping costs to a minimum. Theater practitioners achieve that goal through a variety of ways including the recycling of costumes, materials, and props, minimalist stage design, and perhaps most importantly, small casts with many members performing multiple roles (many playwrights direct, and even act in their own plays). Rafael Spregelburd comments on the need to reinvent oneself in order to function in the challenging economic environment.

Estoy un poco cansado. Este año voy a estrenar cinco espectáculos y, además, actuaré en obras que no son mías. Estoy empezando a hacer cine. Voy a codirigir una película con Javier Olivera para el ciclo organizado por Canal 7. [...]. Por momentos digo: ¿es ésta la vida que quiero llevar? La angustia que produce trabajar en este país, donde no hay mañana, provoca que cuando aparece algo interesante uno diga que sí, porque *carpe diem*, mañana no se sabe. (“Estoy harto de la sensatez”)

Contemporary Argentine playwrights are not just versatile on stage, but they also have invented creative ways supplement their income in order to maintain their artistic independence.

For example, all of the playwrights treated in this dissertation offer theater classes in directing and acting. This is very common in Argentina, and it has also served as an effective way for directors to recruit talent for their plays. In addition, directors like Rafael Spregelburd and Claudio Tolcachir alike have presented their plays at international functions, for which they often are able to raise funds that are not available in Argentina. Claudio Tolcachir is entirely dedicated to *Teatro independiente*, and a testament to this is that he owns and operates his own theater: Teatro Timbre 4. However, in order to secure the success of his independent stage, he has also directed in various productions on the commercial stages of Calle Corrientes, where there are potentially much greater profits to earn.

Film directors have had to be similarly innovative in order to keep afloat during the post-crisis; however, just like in theater, the lack of funds has not slowed the creative process. In fact, the economic crisis has coincided with one of the most celebrated movements in Argentine film history, *El nuevo cine argentino*. The exact meaning of this term varies significantly from critic to critic, but what no one contests is that there was a notable boom in film production that began at the end of the 90s and continued through the beginning of the 21st century: “*existe un nuevo cine argentino, lo que no supone aceptar que este fenómeno se haya provocado deliberadamente o como un programa estético común*” (Aguilar 13). Much like *Teatro independiente*, the indisputable element shared by directors of the *Nuevo cine argentino* is that they are all products of the same crisis, and just like in theater, this has paradoxically produced very interesting results: “Las condiciones precarias que rodean al cine pueden ser consideradas estimulantes desde el punto de vista estético” (Aguilar 15). Director Martín Rejtman, commonly cited as one of the founding members of the *Nuevo cine argentino*, corroborates this claim by Aguilar that

less money does not always result in a less interesting product: “es difícil hablar de riesgos cuando hay tan poco dinero; es decir: cuando las películas se hacen por necesidad, siempre aparece algo nuevo” (qtd. in Aguilar 15).

Pablo Trapero’s *Mundo grúa*, often referred to as one of the original films to form part of what was the *Nuevo cine argentino* is said to have been produced with just 40,000 dollars. He kept costs down by using non professional actors: a cast of characters that included the director’s own grandmother (Falicov, *The Cinematic Tango* 122). *Mundo grúa* was filmed in black and white with 16mm film that was later blown up to 35mm, giving it a grainy look that is uncommon in higher budget films produced in Hollywood. In the same vein, Adrián Caetano’s *Bolivia* (2001) was made with recycled roles of film (Aguilar 15), causing it to have a similarly unpolished look. This unfinished look was widely celebrated by critics who have labeled this a kind of “dirty realism” and a “documentary feel” (Falicov, *The Cinematic Tango* 122).

The few resources gathered by the directors of the *Nuevo cine argentino* came from a variety of sources, including the national film institute (INCAA), grants offered by international film festivals, and international state agencies, most noticeably, the Programa Ibermedia. With economic limitations in Argentina, many directors have also relied on international private funds to produce their films. Like much of the Argentine youth around the time of the economic crisis, *Julio Wallovits* (*Smoking_Room*, 2002) did not wait for funding to arrive to Argentina — he chose to immigrate to Europe instead. Wallovits eventually secured a position in marketing for a variety of transnational businesses, work that allowed him to partially finance El Sindicato, his own production company. Wallovits’s relationship with transnational finance companies is interesting: his work with these companies finances his artistic career, which, in the case of

Smoking_Room, offers a very critical vision of the practices of these same organizations. Pablo Trapero (*Carancho*, 2010) has also relied on international funding for his recent work; however, he maintains his artistic independence through the partial participation of his own production company, Matanza Cine. Similarly, Lucía Puenzo (*El niño pez*, 2009) has received funding from a variety of international agencies, but she also receives financial support from her own father, director/producer Luís Puenzo, who owns his own production agency, Historias Cinematográficas.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The unique aesthetics of the post-crisis (in many cases a directly impacted by the historical circumstances) is a constant theme throughout this dissertation. Central to the analyses is the connection between the artists who are working on critically portraying a specific sociopolitical reality from within the contexts of that same cultural milieu. Indeed, both the characters and their authors have lead to the interpretations offered in these four chapters. The workspace of artists was necessarily recreated after the crisis, just as employees in other fields were required to rethink their own places of labor. Rafael Spregelburd has drawn an explicit connection between theater practitioners of the post-crisis and that of factory workers, who took control of abandoned factories subsequent to the 2001 crisis:

El teatro es lo que más se parece a una fábrica tomada en este país, en este modelo neoliberal que ha sido la Argentina. Cuando se empezaron a tomar las fábricas después de 2001 y los obreros empezaron a decidir qué producían y a quién se lo vendían y cómo se repartían esa ganancia, hicieron lo mismo que las cooperativas teatrales venían haciendo desde la época del teatro independiente. Lo

que nosotros producimos no son sábanas ni grisines, sino sentido, pero la decisión de cómo se construye esto, es producto de un grupo que se encuentra y que discute, no sólo de teatro, sino de lo que pasa, de lo que leyó en el diario. Con todo eso vive durante un tiempo, mientras crea una obra. Esto es inusual. No ocurre en otros países. (“Interview with Marisa Hernández”)

As Spregelburd states, the circumstances by which the artistic material was created during the post-crisis is unique, and has led to original productions. In the first chapter of this dissertation, “White-Collar Confinement: A Suffocating Market and its Cubicles,” I focus most explicitly on the intricate relationship between production techniques and narrative. As the title suggests, I treat artistic productions whose fictional setting is developed in the post-crisis office space. Three works are examined in this chapter: the play *Tercer cuerpo: la historia de un intento absurdo*, written and directed by Claudio Tolcachir and first staged in Buenos Aires in 2008; the novel *El trabajo* (Aníbal Jarkowski, 2007); and the film *Smoking Room* (Roger Gaul and Julio Wallovits, 2002). Each of these artistic productions articulates a criticism of a claustrophobic office, contaminated by social and sexual tensions exacerbated by the constricting globalized economy. The story of these claustrophobic offices is subsequently bolstered by the same economic limitations faced by their artists and reflected in the unique aesthetics of their works.

Chapter 2, “Neglected and Exploited: Public Spaces of the Post-Crisis,” examines the play *Acassuso* by Rafael Spregelburd (first staged in 2008) and the film *Carancho* (Pablo Trapero, 2010). Both of these works resort to popular international genres in their critical representations of important public institutions subsequent to the post-crisis. In this chapter I demonstrate how these artistic productions make use of popular genres that make them appealing

to a diverse audience, while simultaneously calling viewers' attention to decaying public services of the economic post-crisis. I situate both the play and the film in a contemporary political context, which has been severely impacted by the above mentioned austerity measures employed during the 1990s and continued to a certain extent through the Kirchner years.

“Welcome to the Machine: Factories in Crises” is the title of the third chapter. It is here that I treat the play *Mundo fabril* (2009), written and directed by Román Podolsky and *La nueva rabia* a novel written by Marcelo Echhardt in 2008. The factory workers portrayed in these stories are trapped in both a constricting position at work as well as in the circular narrative created for them by their authors. Their plight as exploited factory workers is compared to that of others in Argentine history. The crisis here is critical to the story; however, it is not seen as a new phenomenon. In both of these works the authors present the current situation as a continuation of a circular history of crisis in Argentina.

The fourth and final chapter, “Domestic Affairs: Negotiating Racial, National, and Class Boundaries in Private Residences” underscores precarious working conditions in domestic employment. Both the private hunting club depicted in *Ala de criados* (Mauricio Kartun, 2009) and the middle-upper class home from *El niño pez* — a novel written by Lucía Puenzo in 2004 and later adapted to the screen by the author herself in 2009 — are spaces that harbor cultural and racial conflicts, exacerbated by contemporary economic issues. Both stories can be read as critical reflections of contemporary Argentine society, struggling to create a healthy sociopolitical relationship with bordering nations and new (or at least newly noticed) immigrant communities. In my reading of these works I highlight a disconnect between a progressive

dialogue on border immigration taking place as part of the Mercosur agreement, and an increasingly hostile labor environment faced by young immigrants in Argentina today.

Chapter 1

White-Collar Confinement: A Suffocating Market and its Cubicles

En la sala de espera. Un hombre mayor: ‘Le voy a pedir al doctor que me saque el estómago para que no me vuelva a importar ningún gobierno’. El joven de traje, enfrente: ‘Buenos Aires es una ciudad donde hay que vivir reventado’. La señora de remera negra: ‘Todos nos estamos enfermando por la sociedad’.

(Florencia Abbate, *El grito* 197)

The daily battles and negotiations between foreign owners and their employees that unfold in these white-color offices are a direct reflection of the country at large. The office floor is a microcosm of society, designed strategically to reflect rank, nationality, gender, and utility of each of its workers. Just like a community, where the town landscape and real estate are indicators of class and social hierarchies, in an office, the position, size, and furnishing of each cubicle is a testament to the power that is wielded by its inhabitant within the company. The struggles and conflicts between the various members of a corporate community are indicative of the progress (or lack thereof) that is taking place within the country at large. In the book *On the Job: Design and the American Office*, Donald Albrecht and Crysanthé B. Broikos elucidate the integral correlation between business in the office and society: “The office is a microcosm of American social transformation and a yardstick of cultural progress. National dialogs between freedom and control, the individual and the crowd, private agendas and public concerns, personal mobility and communal connection are played out in the office” (17). Mimicking life and progress around them, *On the Job* demonstrates how offices in the United States were altered by advancements in technology, architecture and furniture design. At the same time, the social structures in offices across the country were transformed due to paramount events in society such

as political conflict and wars: “The office’s image as a corporate barrack solidified after World War II. The war’s successful military organization was mirrored in postwar America’s management model of rigid hierarchies. Khaki-clad soldiers easily morphed into gray-flannelled businessmen.” In the same vein, in Argentina, the sociopolitical norms and regulations that governed their office spaces would be drastically transformed by the economic crisis. Without impenetrable walls to seal them off from the society around them, office cultures do not resist the national (or international) politics that govern them.

Embedded in a depressed economy that offered few options for change, the economic crisis of 2001 created many imbalances of power that often resulted in white-collar workers to become victims of a corrupt, overpowering, and suffocating labor environment. Suffering the effects of an incarcerating and restrictive labor space, without any easy exit or escape in sight, employees across the country felt fear of enclosure in a physical environment (labor space) as well as an economic space (market) that greatly limited their social, sexual, and physical movement, sovereignty, and freedom. These extreme circumstances had a profound impact on office employees that could be best diagnosed as claustrophobia.

In this chapter, I analyze three artistic productions: the play *Tercer cuerpo: la historia de un intento absurdo*³ written and directed by Claudio Tolcachir and first staged in Buenos Aires in 2008; the novel *El trabajo* (Aníbal Jarkowski, 2007); and the film *Smoking Room* (Roger Gaul and Julio Wallovits, 2002). Common to each of these artistic representations is a confining and

³ *Tercer cuerpo* is the second play in a trilogy written and directed by Claudio Tolcachir. Each of the three works has been performed at Teatro Timbre 4 — Tolcachir’s own theatrical space in Buenos Aires — and abroad. The first of the three plays — *La omisión de la familia Coleman* — was first staged in 2005, followed by *Tercer Cuerpo* in 2008, and the final play, *El viento en un Violín* premiered in November of 2010 in the Festival d’Automne in Paris. Between April and June of 2011 all three plays were staged in Las Navas de del Matadero Español in Madrid. One month later, the trilogy was performed together for the first time in Claudio Tolcachir’s own theater in Buenos Aires.

claustrophobic office space resulting in social, sexual, and economic tensions. Enclosed by both physical boundaries of the office workspace as well as social and economic limitations it produces, fear and anxiety are not only perceived but shared by the viewer/reader, who is invited in to this enclosing space of the Argentine post-crisis through the breaking down of the traditional wall separating the realm of the fictional and real. Authors/directors of each cultural representation use techniques that are unique to their fields in order to transmit these feelings of claustrophobia, which go much beyond the physical office space itself. Paradoxically, the same economic restrictions that incarcerate the characters into their jail-like offices simultaneously free these artists to open up to less traditional productions, resulting in creative new methods that in turn bolster their messages focusing on social and economic confinement. The undersized venue in Buenos Aires used for the staging of *Tercer cuerpo*, while potentially limiting, in fact, perfectly transmits the anxieties felt by its characters in the same way that the overbearing narrator, and shaky hand-held cameras entrap their characters in *El trabajo* and *Smoking Room*. These artists, with their restricted budgets, live the crisis that they portray, which in turn is transmitted directly to the audience/readership via both the form and content of their stories.

For spectators of Claudio Tolcachir's⁴ (Buenos Aires, 1975) *Tercer cuerpo* at the author/director's own theatre (*Teatro Timbre 4*⁵) in Buenos Aires, the experience of confinement

⁴ Claudio Tolcachir, one of the so called "nuevos dioses del teatro argentino" (Torres, "Juventud, austeridad y audacia") is a director, playwright, acting coach, and actor. He is perhaps most well known for his three original plays that have been staged throughout South America, Europe, and the United States. While his own plays have mostly been staged at festivals in smaller venues, as a director, he has worked at bigger commercial theater, most notably, in a Spanish translation/adaptation of Tracy Lett's *August: Osage County* at the Teatro Membrives in Buenos Aires and in Spanish and Argentine productions of Arthur Miller's *All my sons*. Tolcachir's acting credits include work in television, film, and in theatrical productions including Daniel Veronese's *Un hombre que se ahoga* and Norma Aleandro's *De rigurosa etiqueta* (Torres, "Cuando intelectualizas, la cagas").

⁵ *Teatro Timbre 4* (accessed by ringing doorbell number 4 from the street) was originally founded in 2001 during the peak of the economic crisis. Like many of the independent theater venues in Buenos Aires, *Teatro Timbre 4* also

begins as soon they enter through a long narrow passageway at the end of this *casa chorizo*⁶, where the tickets are purchased (image 1).



Image 1. Claudio Tolcachir in the hallway leading to *Teatro Timbre 4* (*Buenos Aires Herald*, 29 May 2010)

These feelings of entrapment do not dissipate when the spectators are subsequently herded like cattle into a tiny waiting room. Finally, the spectators are summoned to pass through a dark hallway which leads them to the performance space itself — a small black box theater that measures approximately 20 square yards where spectators are packed in and seated on small chairs that rest unsteadily on rickety bleachers offering room for 50 audience members. The lack of space in this venue is common in the independent-experimental theatre scene in Buenos Aires (or *teatro under*, as it is often called), due mostly to economic confines of the post-crisis which

functions as the director's home, a performance school, and a rehearsal space. It was here at *Timbre 4* that Tolcachir worked in collaboration with students from his own classes to write, rehearse, and stage his first play, *La omisión de la familia Coleman* (García). As a result of limited funding during the economic crisis, before Tolcachir and his cast developed a reputation for themselves — no one was paid for their work in theater. Tolcachir affirms how it began, “comenzamos haciendo funciones gratis, cuando empezaron a dar dinero lo que obteníamos lo repartíamos por igual entre todos. La obra pertenece al conjunto del grupo” (Qtd. in Martínez).

⁶ Casa chorizo is a typical architectural design in Buenos Aires since the beginning of the 20th century that features a long narrow hallway and a series of rooms that are all linked together like sausages.

restricts both the buying power of the audience members, and the owners of the theatres themselves.

Teatro Timbre 4 is very different from some of the massive theatres of *Calle Corrientes* (Buenos Aires' equivalent of Broadway) where audience members pay relatively high prices to sit in spacious felt-covered seats in these venues. In many of the performing arts centers on Corrientes⁷, the elaborate stages are elevated on extensive platforms, framed by grand prosceniums, separated by grandiose curtains, and set back at a safe and comfortable distance from the audience. Each of these features helps to keep a clear and distinct division between the fictional world on stage and the reality lived by the audience. At *Teatro Timbre 4*, however, there is very little physical or metaphorical separation between the viewers and the actors themselves, inevitably creating a certain level of discomfort for the actors and audience members alike. The stage itself is on the floor, which is shared by the first row of spectators, and before each performance begins the entire audience must traverse the stage to arrive at their seats. To add to the limited distance between the fictional and real spaces, during each performance of *Tercer cuerpo* one of these seats on stage left is always vacant, as it will eventually become part of the fictional performance for various actors/characters throughout the duration of the play.

Tolcachir, much like many innovative theater practitioners of the post-crisis, made the best of the situation: “En la escuela de la crisis económica argentina, Claudio Tolcachir y los

⁷ Some examples of the grand theaters in Corrientes include Teatro Tabarís, el Teatro Gran Rex, and el Teatro Ópera. These venues often tend to stage commercial theater that include adaptations of Broadway musicals or “Teatro de revista” — a kind of humoristic satire that entertains its audience with its elegantly dressed men making jokes while accompanied by scantily clad, big-busted women advertised on enormous billboards beckoning for an audience throughout the length of this busy street. While much of Corrientes is consumed by mainstream theatre, there are also a few smaller venues on this same street such as Teatro San Martín, Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas, and Centro Cultural de la Cooperación that are more likely to stage more eccentric and fewer commercial productions at lower prices with government subsidies.

actores de la compañía Timbre 4 aprendieron que la creatividad se nutre de tiempo: sale más rentable invertir en el arte del actor que en escenografía y vestuario” (Vallejo). Despite limited funding and a tiny theatrical space, *Teatro Timbre 4*⁸ is perfectly fitting for the staging of *Tercer cuerpo*. The tight enclosure is a reminder of both the economic limitations faced by artistic and professional lives of many *porteños* as a result of the 2001 economic crisis (both on and off the stage) also felt by the characters on stage. In addition, the reduced and uncomfortable space felt by the audience inevitably produces a level of claustrophobic discomfort which allows them to enter fully into the fictional events that develop on stage.

For the audience, the minimal space on stage feels even smaller when it becomes over crowded with the actor’s loud and interjecting voices, often times shouting in simultaneous and parallel dialogues/monologues. Although this format is no doubt common in all of Tolcachir’s plays (*La omisión de la familia Colemán* and *El viento en un violín*), and it is also a popular trend in recent Argentine theater⁹, in *Tercer cuerpo* the chaotic and at times very intense dialogue (almost on the verge of violence), which escalates in speed and intensity throughout the performance, serves a specific function. These interjected dialogues, especially when the dramatic tension has reached its peak, are essential in transmitting the anxiety suffered by the phobia-stricken characters to the audience, which is trapped inside of this uncomfortable theater for 90 intense minutes in a room that is constantly growing smaller as the voices get bigger and more frenzied.

⁸ Due to recent success both in Buenos Aires and abroad, in 2011 Tolcachir was able to construct a new (and more spacious stage) located at México 3554. This stage is just around the corner from his original theater in the “casa chorizo” (Boedo 640). *Tercer Cuerpo* is always staged on the smaller of the two stages.

⁹ This kind of overlapping or simultaneous and interjecting dialogue is prevalent in almost all plays by young Argentine directors/playwrights today such as Fernanda Orazi (*El rumor analógico de las cosas*), Lola Arias (*Mi vida después*), Rafael Spregelburd (*Acassuso*), and Javier Daulte (*Proyecto vestuario*).

Despite the occasionally intense and overlapping dialogues, *Tercer cuerpo* is relatively void of action. The story is constructed mostly around the personal psychosis of each of the five characters, three of whom are poorly remunerated and frustrated employees in the same confining labor space. Héctor is a man who tries unsuccessfully to begin a relationship with a man who is already in a relationship with a woman; Sandra searches desperately and indiscriminately for any willing and fertile body to help her to bear a child; Moni struggles to find a quiet, safe, and independent refuge to sleep outside of the office; Sofía attempts to conserve a relationship with a man who is possibly gay; and Manuel is pressured to make a decision about his romantic future between Sofía and Héctor. At the end of the play none of these characters manage to reach their goals, find solutions to their problems, or take charge of their independent futures and fates. Central to each characters personal dilemma is the unaccommodating circumstances of the claustrophobic work environment that impedes both professional and personal progress.

The office is a claustrophobic space not only because of the physically limiting amount of room that it offers, but also because of its dysfunctional disposition, archaic supplies, and lack of organization (image 2).

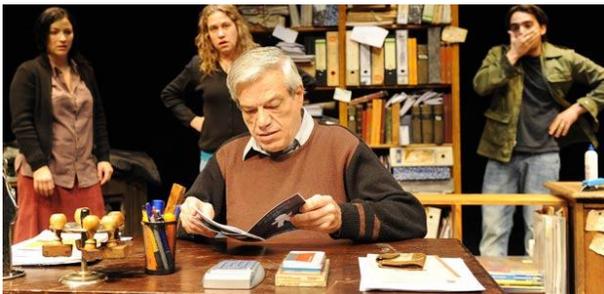


Image 2. Office clutter on the set of a performance of “Tercer cuerpo” in Spain. (“Tercer cuerpo: o a la absurda cotidiana de la oficina” *Rtve.es*. 3 June 2011. Web. 14 Apr. 2013)

The office is evidently caught in another time, isolated from the progress achieved by other similar labor spaces, and the employees are uncertain of their future — it seems that their work has become obsolete in modern society. The technological stagnation suffered by the company not only restricts their professional progress and mobility, but also makes it more difficult for them to escape to the outside world via virtual means such as the Internet, television, or radio broadcasts. The stage design features a poorly-lit office without windows, and with three desks positioned haphazardly, each of which is littered with papers, folders, notebooks, and an assortment of out of date technology (including a prehistoric typewriter and a computer with a dysfunctional mouse). Behind the desks there are some dirty old shelves that are half filled with folders that appear to have been forgotten and ignored for years. In addition to the office supplies there is also an old reclining chair, doubling as both a place to sit and a surrogate bed to those who do not have a home outside of the office. The entire dramatic space measures approximately four by three yards — barely enough room to fit each of the 5 characters when they are all together in action.

The set design is never transformed throughout the play; however, it does serve multiple functions throughout the performance. In addition to an office, it also plays the separate and sometimes simultaneous role of house, bar, psychiatrist's office, and dance club:

El espacio está abierto, sin divisiones ni paredes. En el centro delimitado por unos muebles se recorta una oficina, pequeña, laberíntica, atiborrada de papeles, ficheros y elementos de trabajo. Esa oficina también funcionará como distintos

lugares donde se desarrollará la obra, en algunos casos de manera simultánea.

(Tolcachir, *Tercer cuerpo* 9)

Although in the reading of the play script the stage directions make it mostly evident when the stage changes its dramatic function, during a viewing of the live performance, there are very few clues to help the audience differentiate between the various mimetic spaces inhabited by the characters. Because the audience always sees an office space (even when it is supposedly representing a bar or hospital), it traps the employees in — not just throughout their working day, but also as they go home. The lack of finite physical borders on stage bolsters one of the underlying themes of the play: the workspace (in its decadent state) is a confining enclosure in both a physical (geographical) sense (seeing as it does not offer any form of privacy between coworkers) and in a socioeconomic sense (the space does not offer the characters the financial security necessary to be able to live independently outside of their jobs). The labor setting itself is both a reflection of the employees who inhabit it and at the same time, the employee's demeanor is an obvious reaction of the space that entraps them in all facets of their lives.

The lives of the three office employees are seriously limited by the lack of social and economic mobility afforded to them at work. Hector, for example, is only freed from his mother's vigilance at 51-years-old, upon her death. As a result of his mother's close observation, and his own lack of economic independence, he conceals his sexual identity from his coworkers and family for his entire life. Sandra is a middle-aged divorced woman who searches desperately and unsuccessfully — perhaps because of economic limitations — throughout the play for a man to help her bear a child; Moni is not married and does not have the financial means necessary to live independently, and, after being consistently dismissed from the homes of various family

members, she is forced to sleep in the office itself. She is both physically and socially confined by the decaying walls of her office.

As the play unfolds, it becomes apparent that just as there is no physical or metaphorical wall separating the characters from the audience, there are similarly no established boundaries between the public workspace and the private spaces inhabited by each of the employees in this dilapidated labor environment. This first becomes evident after the death of Hector's mother. Although he aspires to keep this personal issue to himself, it quickly appears that this is no secret to Moni or Sandra. In fact it appears that the news has quickly spread to the rest of the employees working in all of the other branches of the same company, and even to the owner of the bar next door. After hearing the upsetting (and not-so-private) news, Sandra and Moni quickly act to provide Hector with some unsolicited advice and support, when they aid him in the composition of his mother's eulogy. As a result, Hector's memory of his recently deceased mother quickly turns into his officemates' thoughts and opinions on a woman that they never knew. In a subsequent scene, Sandra, in an attempt to enjoy a meal in privacy, is interrupted by her coworker Moni, who not only invites herself to lunch but also manipulates her coworker's take-out order to make sure that it includes exactly what she wants. The final collapsing of the office wall occurs when Hector's private life literally passes through the door and abruptly intrudes into his professional space. In this scene, the play's climax is reached when Manuel, Hector's current (and previously secret) boyfriend enters the office and demands to speak with his lover. Manuel is subsequently followed by his girlfriend, putting the entire love triangle in the same limited space. This theatrical/dramatic encounter unfolds in front of two unsolicited audience members, Moni and Sandra, Hector's office mates.

Following the conclusion of the final scene, in which Hector, Moni, and Sandra sit quietly in shock regarding all that they have discovered about their coworkers, the boundary between the professional and personal space is once again eliminated, at the same time as the metaphorical wall separating the audience and the actors. This occurs when the only light on stage (as well as the only light in the small building) turns off. At this point in time, the reality of the crisis invades the labor space, demonstrating that the owners/managers of the building in which the office resides can no longer pay the energy bill, while at the same time the audience finds itself trapped in the fictional space inhabited by the characters, as they, just like the actors, are left in the dark. The effect is that of fear of enclosure, limited by both the geographical confines of the office/theatrical space, as well as the inadequate economic comfort provided by the office/theatre, deeply penetrated by the economic crisis that surrounds its walls.

While representing a distinct artistic form, *El trabajo*, a novel written by Aníbal Jarkowski¹⁰ and published in 2007, is a story that transmits similar feelings of claustrophobia and enclosure on its audience/readership as *Tercer cuerpo*. The novel is narrated in first person by a struggling writer who tells an excerpt of his own life as it crosses paths with Diana, a young professional trying to keep afloat following the loss of both of her parents and the family business — a small lingerie shop. Although it is never explicitly stated when and where the events unfold, there are certain clues that suggest that it may transpire in Buenos Aires of the late

¹⁰ Aníbal Jarkowski is an author, literary critic, and university professor. *El trabajo* is Jarkowski's third novel. His previous publications were *Rojo amor* (1993) and *Tres* (1998).

90s,¹¹ a time period full of economic and social restrictions, many of which continued to exist up until the time of the novel's publication¹² (well after the crisis in December of 2001). The city is plagued by problems such as universal unemployment, political corruption, labor exploitation, and prostitution. In the middle of this unaccommodating urban landscape, governed by restrictive economic conditions, a struggling author and two exploited office employees attempt to survive.¹³

The novel is broken up into three chapters: "Diana," "Yo," and "Los dos." The first section recounts Diana's brief stint as an exploited office assistant where her success is determined by her ability to keep her boss sexually motivated and aroused at work. The chapter outlines in great detail Diana's restrictive and misogynistic labor space which includes both the architectural and socially limiting and hegemonic boundaries of the office. It is here that she meets and forms an alliance with "La recepcionista," the other exploited female employee at work. The second chapter, "Yo," is the narrator's story. Although he is not physically enclosed at work, his intellectual production is scrutinized by an advanced surveillance system marked by severe governmental censorship. After his first novel is deemed inappropriate for the general

¹¹ In a review of the novel on his blog, Cristian de Nápoli places the story during the late 90s for one specific reason: "la importancia que cobra en la vida de la protagonista el gastar plata en colectivos. El porcentaje del sueldo mínimo que hoy gasta un trabajador en transporte es muy inferior al que gastábamos en el 97."

¹² In the novel the narrator calls attention to problems in the city that existed both during the supposed setting of the novel during the late 90s and at the time of its publication by incorporating both the past and future tense. For example, after observing a problem in the city, he often says, "esto ocurría, y ocurre." Since the narrator is speaking from an indefinite point in the future, it is up to the reader to decide/interpret what the narrator's present refers to.

¹³ While the characters in Jarkowski's novel are fictional, the setting of adversity (Argentine crisis), is very real and relevant in the life of the author and his family, who have shared these character's feelings of claustrophobia and anxiety resulting from a sense of socioeconomic impotence: "yo escribí la novela mientras se derrumbaba la Argentina. En un momento en que la desocupación estaba ahí. Quería escribir sobre eso, en parte por una cuestión personal, porque mi viejo fue arrastrado por el menemismo. Se quedó sin trabajo, ya era un tipo mayor, tuvo que esperar dos años para jubilarse, termina muriéndose. Una catástrofe, realmente" (Jarkowski, "Entrevisita a Aníbal Jarkowski").

public, ironically, he takes up a job that is more “socially acceptable” and considerably more in line with the market demands, when he begins working in a burlesque theater owned by his childhood friend. His new source of income consists of miscellaneous tasks including writing short sketches for the erotic dancers and performers. One day, while hard at work devising a script for one of his many performers, he peers across the street where he gazes in at Diana, at work in her office, performing an erotic ballet for her boss. Instantly inspired and intrigued by Diana’s unique and imaginative choreography, he offers her work on a more formal stage. Thus begins the narrator’s relationship with Diana. “Los dos,” the final chapter of the novel, is the story of the narrator and Diana as they begin to collaborate — playwright and performer — in the creation of original works which they first stage in the burlesque theater, and later, once it is tweaked and refined, in an independent performance venue in southern Buenos Aires. It is here that they stage a story about an exploited office employee and her degrading search for work in a chauvinistic market, which is essentially Diana’s story. While they are a successful team, their theatrical run comes to an abrupt close one dark night when the narrator finds his bruised and beaten protagonist left abandoned on the street in front of her apartment. Although the narrator never discovers what happens to Diana, it is understood that she was raped and beaten by either one of her many sadistic and jealous admirers, or by someone offended or threatened by the social criticism that her dramatic performance represents.

The focus of this analysis will be the first chapter, “Diana,” as it is specific to the office space, sharing a labor environment with the other two artistic works treated in this chapter. Diana is forced to accept this position after a full year of unsuccessful job searches and unemployment. It is in this space that the claustrophobia is best transmitted to the novel’s

readership. Here Diana and her friend the receptionist are entrapped in a physically limiting space, while they are simultaneously enclosed by more metaphorical limitations which include: first, the subordinate position in relationship to their coworkers; second, the inescapable role of sexual object delegated to them as female employees in their company; and finally, the role of characters in a story told by an ambiguous masculine narrator, whose intentions are not entirely clear, and who is free to manipulate and expose his characters to his readership as he pleases.

The precarious working situation suffered by Diana and the receptionist were perhaps not uncommon during the peak of the economic crisis. With astounding unemployment levels, competition greatly increased, employers could count on an expendable surplus of labor. As a result, workers were much less likely to try and ameliorate their situation via strikes and protests for fear that they could easily end up joining the exhaustive list of unemployed. For some, collective bargaining was not only risky, but impossible, as they were working “en negro” (under-the-table); that is, they had no official status, and were therefore excluded from many workers unions or government protection programs.

To be deprived of individual and collective bargaining often meant silently enduring exploitation. This was especially true for low skilled office jobs such as secretaries, or “recepcionistas,” and more common in the case of women than men. In a report directed by Sandra Cesilini in December of 2007, it was concluded that the crisis of 2001-2002 forced many women to go to work in order to help sustain families that could no longer rely on a single household income. This offered women economic and social independence at home, as it gave them their own source of income together with a leading economic role in the household. This proved to be a definite victory for women in Argentina, however, the same report also concluded

that perhaps because of sexual prejudices, women were much more likely than their male counterparts to be employed “en negro,” to be underpaid, and to accept positions for which they were significantly overqualified:

La situación de género continúa sosteniendo las inquietudes que existían antes de la crisis de 2001. Con el incremento de desocupación las mujeres fueron quienes “soportaron” las peores ocupaciones, y al empezar a superarse esa situación con la disminución de los porcentajes de desocupación hubo un gran porcentaje de trabajos que se habilitaron en condiciones que no respetan las normas del trabajo decente y que si bien afectan a hombres y mujeres, son ellas quienes siguen sufriendo las consecuencias de las desigualdades. (Cesilini 119-20)

Diana’s claustrophobic condition at work is no doubt representative of many women of the economic crisis.¹⁴ Her entrapment in the office begins with the four walls that surround her: “El gabinete es una habitación estrecha y sin ventanas, alumbrada desde el cielorraso por una luz blanquísima — cada vez más frecuente en las compañías de esta parte de la ciudad — que impide que se formen sombras” (Jarkowski, *El trabajo* 39-40). Not only is the office small and narrow, adding to possible feelings of claustrophobia, but, the absence of windows also exaggerate the idea of enclosure. A windowless office means that Diana cannot easily envision a possible escape from the current enclosure. This escape may be thought of literally (a place to

¹⁴ In her article, “Sin pan y trabajo: denuncia y resistencia en la novela *El trabajo* (2007), de Aníbal Jarkowski,” Karina Elizabeth Vázquez articulates how *El trabajo* is an example of a recent trend in Argentine narrative that has again resorted to an aesthetics reminiscent of the *realismo* common in Argentina during the 20s and 30s. Vázquez affirms that Jarkowski’s novel and other recent works in Argentine narrative, “presentan una reflexión sobre el trabajo y la dignidad en la sociedad argentina de las últimas décadas. Esta sería literaria, claramente delimitada tanto por los temas relacionados con la historia argentina reciente, como por la adopción del realismo, pone de manifiesto el diálogo que el discurso literario mantiene con los discursos sociales, culturales e ideológicos, el cual lo convierte en un dato único sobre la actual realidad argentina” (127).

jump out of the current space), and it can also be interpreted metaphorically (the window affords the chance to mentally break free of the current enclosure by imagining a better and more independent life outside of work). The office is a cave, completely isolated from the city that surrounds it.

With carefully selected sensorial vocabulary the narrator invites the reader to not only envision a small and enclosing space, but rather, to transmit to the reader the claustrophobic effect of this environment on the novel's characters. The narrator speaks of the “*apretada* disposición de los muebles, imposibles de alterar” (Jarkowski, *El trabajo* 44). The adjective “*apretada*” of course meaning tightly packed, but also, in the verb form, “*apretar*” means to squeeze or to grasp, evoking the feeling of entrapment and incarceration. The tight fitting furniture literally entraps Diana, impeding her free movement throughout the office, but it also works on a more metaphorical level, both squeezing her into a tight situation and threatening to steal her oxygen — the biggest fear of all who suffer from claustrophobia. Not only is the physical disposition of the office itself uncomfortable, but, it doesn't seem to offer any alternative, as the furniture is impossible to alter/change.

Apart from her physical enclosure, Diana also finds herself trapped in the position of subordinate to her superior at work. Like many characters in the novel — including the narrator/protagonist himself — Diana's boss is never assigned a name, but rather, he is only referred to as “*el gerente*” signifying his professional title, and hierarchical role in the office. This tool used by the narrator, further exasperates Diana's feelings of enclosure — she only thinks of those around her by the position of power that they hold over her in *El trabajo*. Much like the rest of the men in the office who celebrate a high ranking position on the hierarchical

labor scale at this multinational office space, “el gerente” takes full advantage of his position of power, and spends the majority of his time in the office observing his assistant. The concern is not necessarily whether or not Diana completes the traditional labor tasks of an office assistant (taking messages and scheduling meetings for her boss, and systematically archiving and endorsing documents) rather, what most interests her boss is that she can keep him entertained with her body.

Diana’s success at work depends on her ability to appeal to the sexual desire of her “gerente” — a role that she does not necessarily choose but is required to accept. This becomes clear in the initial interview/casting call, when it is explained to her that he needed “una persona que, sobre todas las cosas, le impidiera pensar en lo que hacía y lo llevara hasta el punto donde el contenido de la mente eran puras visiones sin lenguaje” (Jarkowski, *El trabajo* 34). After all, “El gerente” selected her for the position after a full day of interviews not because of her traditional office skills, but because “en el curriculum había leído que Diana había estudiado danzas y entonces acaso pudiera comprender lo que le decía” (Jarkowski, *El trabajo* 35). It also may be the case that what set Diana apart from the other applicants was that Diana, after a full year of unsuccessful job searches, began to understand that the only way to obtain work in a corporate office was to swallow her pride and cave in to the sexual demands of her employer. It is for this reason that during the interview process, when she knew the “gerente” was watching she, “movió la silla hacia atrás hasta que la parte superior del cuerpo escape a la luz directa del quinqué, arrolló la falda y dejó a la vista del gerente los labios asomados bajo el vello dorado del pubis” (Jarkowski, *El trabajo* 35). Once given the job, playing in entirety to her role as sexual object,¹⁵

¹⁵ In an interview, Aníbal Jarkowski offers his own perspective/analysis of Diana. For him, Diana’s story is an example of a woman who exercises certain independency and personal freedom, by manipulating the male

the female protagonist puts her talents to work putting on daily performances in which her office is converted into “un teatro para un solo espectador” (Jarkowski, *El trabajo* 43). Diana’s shows involve climbing up and down ladders in order to leave herself exposed for her one faithful audience member, dancing on her desk, and nude ballet performances.

Although Diana draws on her past dance experience, attempting to offer original spectacles for her “gerente,” she also understands that she has to adapt her performances to the desire of her paying public. For this reason, Diana, just like the rest of the office assistance in her area of the city dress the part¹⁶ “con blusas que, unas más otras menos, transparentaban el corpiño, polleras de falda corta y zapatos con tacos de agujas” (Jarkowski, *El trabajo* 25). In one scene, Diana goes into a store to buy a new outfit/costume for her job/performance and the shop owner convinces her to buy underwear that is “el mismo diseño, la misma tela de las que usaban las mujeres cuando eran chicos los que ahora son gerentes. Tenés que llevarla” (Jarkowski, *El trabajo* 67). Although she resists at first, the owner of this small lingerie store is eventually able to convince her to make the purchase, knowing very well that Diana (as well as other women throughout the city) depends on her willingness to suppress her own social identity in order to appeal to the pedophilic desire of the governing bodies in the office.

characters in the novel: “yo lo que quería era que la novela, más allá del final, no fuera una novela del lamento, y no fuera una novela de derrotados. Quiero decir, puede ser que termine todo mal para Diana, pero mientras duró la novela ella gobernó su vida” (Entrevista a Aníbal Jarkowski). At the same time, it can also be argued that Diana is trapped, as her only option seems to be to perform the role of the object of male desire.

¹⁶ The idea to represent the women in uniform came from Jarkowski’s daily observations while working across the street from a bank during the crisis: “mientras yo trabajaba, veía por la ventana la vida de esas oficinas asépticas, totalmente neutras y con chicas que estaban impecablemente vestidas para trabajos que las obligaban a estar corriendo de acá para allá. Todas con una uniformidad de la ropa muy curiosa. Incluso, yo no había entrado jamás a ese lugar, pero podía distinguir las jerarquías del lugar. Las chicas que tenían puestos más bajos se vestían mucho más provocativas que aquellas que tenían puestos más altos, las que tenían escritorios, por ejemplo” (“Entrevista a Aníbal Jarkowski”).

“La recipcionista,” Diana’s friend and ally in the company who is also never assigned a name other than her title at work, is faced by even more harsh labor conditions. She is not only forced to appeal to the mental fantasy of her male superiors, but, also given no other option than to surrender her body to the physical desires of the power that govern her labor space. She feels trapped in a no win situation at work: if she doesn’t give in sexually to the “gerente de personal” she will lose her job and pay check, however, if she is caught with this same character, she will suffer the same unfortunate fate (unemployment), or, be subject to blackmail by another employee who discovers their secret.

The receptionist’s every act in the office is predetermined by the power structure that surrounds her — governed by an advanced surveillance system. From her perspective, the office is designed in a kind of inverted panopticon¹⁷. She is like the prisoner, but instead of being positioned on the periphery where she is observed from one central post, she is positioned in the center of the office, where she is completely surrounded by potentially threatening witnesses, leaving her exposed on all sides and at every minute of her day in the office. The layout becomes clear in this conversation between Diana and her professional ally:

RECEPCIONISTA. Y tu oficina.

DIANA. Chiquita.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault considers the importance of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. This common architectural structure used to maintain order in governmental institutions, places the central authority at the center, in view of all of the prisoners in their cells. This design was used to create fear in the inmates, who always believed that they were being watched by the authority. In the office, however, the receptionist is surrounded by authority.

RECEPCIONISTA. Pero es mejor que trabajar a la vista de todos, créeme.

Cuando tengo dolor de ovarios se deben enterar hasta los del edificio de enfrente.

(Jarkowski, *El trabajo* 46)

The rest of the employees (mostly the males) take advantage of the office hierarchy in order to manipulate the receptionist's every move. Unlike in some labor environments, the office space portrayed in this book is not necessarily governed by a vertical chain of command, in which employees are only observed from above, but rather, in this office, la recepcionista is monitored (and manipulated) by employees of both higher and lower ranking.

The surveillance system in place in the office does not cease to function at the end of her work day. The receptionist's personal life is also manipulated by her labor demands. First, because her financial limitations do not allow her to move in with her boyfriend (or pay for their wedding), and second, because if she were to marry her current boyfriend the company would let her go. She makes it clear that her office is not the only one of the post crisis that manipulates the lives of female employees:

Los gerentes de banco son los peores. No tienen horario.

Ahora nadie tiene horario.

Pero en los bancos es un infierno. Enloquecen a las chicas. Acá por lo menos te dejan tener novio.

[...]

Es más, continuó la recepcionista, te piden que tengas novio.

Para qué.

Por los fines de semana, los feriados, las vacaciones.

Y qué pasa.

Que no necesitan andar llamándote para saber dónde estás, con quién y qué estás haciendo. Ya saben que estás en casa, con tu novio, mirando televisión.

[....]

El problema es el tiempo, dijo. Es como si no pasara nunca pero vos sabés que pasa. Hay días en que te volvéis loca y te querés casar, hacer cualquier cosa. Pero si te casás no te mantienen más, entendés. (Jarkowski, *El trabajo* 47-48)

Despite the fact that she puts her personal life on hold in order to keep her position at the office, the receptionist eventually finds herself with the same fate as many other employees of the late 90s and early 21st century in Argentina — she is left unemployed.¹⁸ While this is liberating in the sense that she is able to escape her subordinate relationship to the “gerente de personal,” she never is able to escape her role as the object of male desire, as she later seeks employment on the street as a prostitute.¹⁹

Following in her coworkers lead, Diana also leaves the company, but just like her friend and ally, even though she is able to set herself free of her direct boss’ perverted desire, she is quickly trapped into the gaze of other equally demeaning eyes. After freeing herself from the pedophilic desire in the office, she later takes a job as a burlesque dancer, and finally, as the

¹⁸ During the peak of the crisis, unemployment reached closet o 20%, and between 2002 and 2003 more than 50% of the population was living below the poverty line (Epstein and Pion-Berlin 16).

¹⁹ Like the receptionist, many women saw prostitution as one of the only answers to survival during the crisis. In the same study cited above, *Argentina: Perfil de Género de País*, coordinated by Sandra Cesilini, national congresswoman Marta Maffei describes many of the problems (including prostitution) brought about by the crisis for society’s more vulnerable groups: “Sin duda la crisis económica golpeó a niños, mujeres y viejos con mayor intensidad. Hambre, desnutrición, mal nutrición, mortalidad, maltrato, mendacidad, situación de la calle, embarazos, prostitución [...] y si bien la legislación menos discriminatoria se mantiene o aun se incrementa, la situación de exclusión y miseria son por sí mismas inhibidoras fuertes de la posibilidad concreta de ejercer los derechos” (96).

actress in a monologue where she ends up partially nude on stage — a project that is terminated after she is violently and sadistically abused.

In addition to the various levels in which Diana and her colleague are trapped in by the male desire at work, they are simultaneously objectified in their own story: they are confined to the role of characters, at the mercy of the masculine narrator. Although it is true that the narrator may portray “his” female characters as victims of a society and labor market that is driven by masculine desire, it is also true that the narrator takes advantage of every opportunity to expose his characters in order to fulfill his own fantasy, which he then shares with his readers.

In her oft-cited article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey observes a common tendency in mainstream Hollywood film of the early and mid 20th century. She identifies a triangular relationship between the strong and active, hyper masculine male character whose desires and actions are communicated through his masculine perspective viewed through the camera. The passive and submissive female character objectified by the masculine gaze, and the audience member, who is meant to identify with the strong male lead and enjoy, together with the male character, the pleasure of the female body, objectified by both the camera and the male protagonist.²⁰ Under this model, film often becomes more about satiating male desire through a lascivious gaze which Mulvey refers to as scopophilia (a term she borrows from psychoanalysis):

²⁰ Mulvey was later criticized for taking only into account a heteronormative male audience member in her analyses of these films. She later expands her theory to include the female spectator in her article, “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946).” Despite criticisms, (and additions to her previous work), her article continues to raise important questions about how and why films (and for the purpose of this analysis, novels) wield power to certain characters while others are delegated a more passive role of objects.

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. For instance, the device of the show-girl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in diegesis. A woman performs within the narrative; the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude. (“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 19)

Although *El trabajo* offers a much stronger female character than much of mainstream film, and similarly, the self-deprecating narrator/male protagonist in Jarkowski’s novel in no way attempts to present himself as an unflawed and stereotypical hyper masculine male common to Hollywood film, clear connections can be made between the films treated by Mulvey and Jarkowski’s novel. Much like in the films that Mulvey deconstructs, in which the camera coerces the viewer into sympathizing with the active male character as we view the female together with the male character, through the masculine gaze as projected by the masculine lens of the camera, in *El trabajo*, the reader is persuaded into sympathizing with the male character because of his first-person narration that, exposes his female character as the reader observes this character via a very “visual narrative.” This is further emphasized by the title of the second chapter, “Yo.” The first person relative pronoun perhaps refers to the voice of the narrator and the main character; however it simultaneously begs the reader to become a complicit ally, as we follow the female character, whose story (and body) is observed without her consent through the narrative lens of her active male counterpart and his readership. The “yo” in the novel, therefore, is distinguished

and set up in opposition to the female character, Diana, who is always observed from a distance, established by the third-person narration.²¹

Diana is first objectified in her story in the very opening scene of the novel, in which she is described in detail by the narrator/protagonist as she gets ready for her interview. The narrator takes advantage of the intimate setting to expose Diana's body to "his" readership:

Se puso la bombacha alisó los elásticos con las yemas de los dedos y después, de espaldas al espejo, deslizó la tela entre las nalgas. Siguió con el corpiño, la blusa, los zapatos. Sobre la cama quedaban las polleras. Eligió la de falda tableada. Cuando terminó de vestirse se sentó en la cama y cruzó y descruzó las piernas delante del espejo. (Jarkowski, *El trabajo* 13)

In addition to this seductive scene in which Diana is exposed while she is alone in her home, she is also captured in her room together with the receptionist. Just when they think that they are free of the masculine gaze at work, they continued to be entrapped in the view of the narrator fulfilling his fantasies:

Diana encendió el velador, vio que la recepcionista comenzaba a desnudarse [...]

Le pidió que se quedara a dormir en el departamento y volviera al suyo a la mañana [...]

Tenés un camisón de más, le preguntó la recepcionista.

Es que no uso.

²¹ While the readership of this novel is not required to be a heterosexual male who identifies only with the active male subject (the protagonist/narrator), and many readers will no doubt identify with the character of Diana, it is important to note that Diana's story is only obtainable in the novel through the masculine lens of the narrator.

Mejor [...]

Diana vio su bombacha en el cuerpo de la recepcionista, alumbrado por la luz de la luna [...]

Diana la tomó una mano y, al acariciarle los dedos, rozó su anillo de compromiso. (Jarkowski, *El trabajo* 94-95)

Whether consciously or not, even after Diana and the receptionist go home from their jobs their bodies and stories continue to fulfill fantasies. If it is not by their corporate offices or clients on the streets, then it is in the story in which they are delegated to the passive and secondary role of characters by the narrator.

In the same way that the narrator consistently exposes Diana's body to his reading public, he simultaneously designates himself as the voice of Diana's story, leaving her powerless and vulnerable to his own desires in a story that may not represent an entirely faithful reproduction of her life. In her article, "Sin pan y sin trabajo: denuncia y resistencia en la novela *El trabajo* (2007), de Aníbal Jarkowski," Karina Elizabeth Vázquez assures readers that during the first chapter, when the narrator tells Diana's story, there is clearly a faithful recount of her personal history because he himself guarantees his public that his words are nothing but a faithful reproduction of previous conversations with Diana: "el narrador escritor da cuenta del testimonio de Diana, cuya fidelidad es ratificada por la frase '—ella me lo dijo —', con la que acompaña cada intervención, reforzándole así al lector la veracidad de estos 'comentarios' de Diana" (133). Yet as Jarkowski observes about his own novel in an interview, "para un lector más o menos entrenado" when a narrator reassures his readership of the veracity of his own story "esto siempre es de desconfiar" ("Entrevista a Aníbal Jarkowski"). Throughout the course of the first

chapter, the narrator repeats not once, more than 55 times that he is only attempting to recreate a story that Diana told him. The incessant repetition of some variation of the line “ella me lo dijo”²² throughout the first chapter is a sure sign the narrator is providing us with anything but a faithful testimony of Diana’s story, and he is not to be trusted.

After all, the narrator, although seemingly sympathetic to Diana’s cause (and that of women in general),²³ much like the boss inside her office, in several instances uses Diana (mostly her body) in order to advance economically and socially in his own life. First, he converts her into a kind of muse, when he is inspired by her nude ballet performances in the office, which he later turns into scripts for his burlesque dancers. Second, he hires Diana at the burlesque theater. And finally, she becomes the protagonist in a play for which he writes the script, taking advantage of her story (and body) in order to move his career along. And even the play that he writes is a sort of dramatic reproduction of Diana’s life, which can be seen as a criticism for the chauvinistic society of the crisis, the narrator perhaps doesn’t take into account the social repercussions in which the staging of this play might result in the life of Diana.

While the narrator can be interpreted as a victim in the novel, suffering similar circumstances as Diana, it must also be observed that he is continually granted a sort of superior hegemonic power in relationship to Diana. He is the narrator of the novel and she is delegated to the lesser role of character, in the burlesque theater he is the employer and she is the employee (or at least he is the one who brings her to the stage), during the theatrical performances he is the

²² Other variations include: “Diana me lo dijo” (25), or “ella usó esa palabra” (17), or “ella usó estas palabras” (43), or “yo nada más la transcribo en el papel” (89).

²³ His allegiance to the cause of women is manifested by his role as an author for a feminist journal before he paradoxically takes a job in a burlesque theater.

playwright and she is the actress. Faithful or not to Diana's cause, he is the mind, (the thinking member of this professional relationship) while she is the body.

Diana, who seemingly has no other choice but to obediently perform according to the demands of others (first, to her boss in the office, later to the audience at the burlesque theater, and finally to the playwright/director who writes and directs her script for the plays in which she acts), is not only a character, but also an actress from the beginning of the novel until the end. She acts on stage but also in the office, and throughout the duration of her life, which is supposedly recounted in the novel, her script is not only written by a playwright or author, but by the demands and limitations of the crisis.

Smoking_Room (2002)²⁴ is a movie that was made mostly by and for the Spanish public, and whose relevance in Argentina has been almost entirely ignored by critics. In his article, "Selling out Spain: Screening capital and culture in *Airbag* and *Smoking Room*," William J. Nichols discusses the film's role within the context of the Spanish cultural and cinematographic tradition. He also demonstrates how the movie "offers a minimalist aesthetic typically associated with an 'indie' film tradition that seemingly adheres to the tenets of such Dogma 95 directors as Lars von Trier" (135), and that this style of film making deliberately ignores and therefore resists American cultural and consumer values, as it rejects the standards set by the American film industry (Hollywood). While this is a valid and legitimate comparison between *Smoking_Room* and the famous well known Danish film movement, a similar parallel could be drawn between

²⁴ *Smoking_Room* has received numerous accolades including best new director at the 2003 Goya's and the special jury prize, the best screenplay, and best male role at the Málaga film festival ("El otro lado de la cama' y 'Smoking room' triunfan en Málaga").

this film's aesthetics and certain movies often grouped together under the title of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino*, a label that has been applied by critics in numerous different ways²⁵, but that mostly refers to movies produced during the peak of the economic crisis and whose content and form represent the economic hardships of Argentina as a consequence of the economic reforms carried out during the 1990s. Like many of the films commonly labeled under the title of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino*, *Smoking_Room* was made on a miniscule budget (240,000 US dollars)²⁶ (E.

Fernández-Santos), and therefore its creators had to be particularly resourceful in order to

²⁵ The exact significance of this term is currently under debate, however, what is undisputable is that there was a boom in film production in Argentina during the late 90s and the beginning of the 21st century (in 1994 there were 14 films produced in Argentina and in 2006 there were 66), and an overwhelming number of these movies were made by young, first-time directors (Pablo Trapero, Adrián Caetano, Lucrecia Martel, Martín Rejtman, Lisandro Alonso, to cite a few of the most commonly mentioned names). Also undisputable, is the fact that many of these movies received rave reviews by critics around the globe and also triumphed in international film festivals. While these films did not necessarily share a common aesthetics, nor did they have a common political or social agenda, a majority of these movies were produced on very low budget and received funding through small international grants, rather than signing with big production companies backed by deep-pocketed multinational investors. "Many of the most celebrated films of this period were made ... using cheaper film stock and nonstandard equipment: 16 mm, black-and-white, Beta, or (increasingly) digital video cameras. Their styles flaunted the roughness and informality of their production, made as they were 'on the hoof,' wherever locations could be found, whenever funds permitted, and with whomever could be persuaded to act or provide technical assistance for little or no pay" (Page 2). Perhaps out of a question of aesthetics, but also maybe by a matter of necessity. Films commonly cited as part of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino* include but are not limited to *Pizza, birra, faso*, (Caetano and Stagnero, 1998), *Silvia Prieto* (Rejtmán, 1999), *La ciénaga* (Martel, 2001), and *Los muertos* (Alonso, 2004). It has also been repeatedly observed that films of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino* differed from their predecessors made in the 1980s in that they were not overtly political, nor did they have one-dimensional characters as was the case in *La historia oficial*, (Luis Puenzo, 1985), and other movies produced directly after the country's return to democracy in 1982. While in-line with certain tendencies of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino*, consistently excluded from this list are those movies made by veteran directors such as Marcelo Piñeyro, Juan José Campanella, and Fabián Bielinsky. Made within the parameters of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino*, and also worthy of praise by critics and international film festivals, films such as *El método*, *El hijo de la novia*, and *Nueve reinas* are not commonly cited as representative of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino* movement because they have relied on substantial budgets, they were funded as international co-productions and they relied heavily on multinational conglomerates to distribute their works.

²⁶ To put this number into perspective, *Pizza, birra y faso* (Caetano and Stagnero, 1997), one of the films commonly cited as paving the way for other independent films of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino* movement (Falicov and Aguilar), cost \$300,000 US dollars to produce (Falicov 119), while Lucrecia Martel's *La niña santa* (2004), funded in part by El Deseo Production (owned by Pedro and Agustín Almodóvar) took US 1.4 million dollars to make (Falicov 126), nearly six times the cost of *Smoking_Room*.

successfully complete their artistic project.²⁷ *Smoking_Room* was first shown in Argentina during the Mar Del Plata film festival in 2003, and it wasn't until six years later that it was shown publicly in Buenos Aires at the "Argentinos fuera de borda" film series, which showcased young Argentine talent living and working abroad as a result of socioeconomic and political restrictions at home. Such is the case with Julio D. Wallovits, co-director and co-author of *Smoking_Room*, who fled Argentina during the first term of the Menem administration in 1991, and after a very successful artistic and professional career²⁸ in Spain, he has been living there ever since.

Despite the fact that the movie was filmed in Spain, with a Spanish cast (save the important lead role by the prominent Argentine actor, Ulises Dumont),²⁹ the story's specific setting is never clearly defined. Unlike in the beginning of popular American television series such as *CSI* or *Sex and the City*, in which the lead role taken on by the cities of Miami or New York is underscored by aerial views of city skylines throughout the filming of each episode, in *Smoking_Room* there is an obvious and perhaps a deliberate absence of an establishing shot offering a panoramic view of a canonical skyline to enable viewers to clearly place the story inside of a particular cityscape such as Madrid or Barcelona. The specific setting of the movie is further obscured by the fact that it is filmed almost in its entirety inside an office space, offering no clues as to where the exhausting chain of dialogues might take place. Although the movie does offer a few scenes in which the characters manage to escape the confines of the office, as

²⁷ It is reported that the actors were not paid a salary for the film, but rather, were only offered a percentage of the ticket sales (Marquez and Casimiro).

²⁸ While contributing actively to fulfill his passion in the arts, Wallovits also works a regular job as a publicist.

²⁹ Roger Gaul recounts in his book *Todo por un largo diario de Smoking Room* that before Ulises Dumont agreed to play this part, that they had previously attempted to cast Federico Luppi, and also Hector Alterio. In other words, they had always planned to have at least one actor that could be easily associated with the strong Argentine film tradition.

William J. Nichols observes, the setting continues to be ambiguous, “[e]ven the few outside scenes destabilise the viewer with extreme close-up shots at street level that impede any attempt to discern spatial markers and identify the Spanish city” (143).

It is perfectly possible that the office depicted in the film does not even reflect a Spanish city at all. Save a few subtle and passing references to Spain, until the final scene, the movie makes no concerted effort to associate itself with any sort of easily recognizable cultural symbol of Spain. Nor does it, as observed by William Nichols, make any attempt to associate itself in any way with the Spanish cinematographic tradition, “Wallovit’s and Gaul’s film exudes nothing in terms of genre that might connect it with films considered to be ‘Spanish’ or exemplary of Spain’s national cinema” (143-44). Rather than define the film’s setting as Madrid or Barcelona, it could perhaps be more accurately interpreted as an urban space negotiating its role in a globalized economy. After all, the actions of the office employees depicted in the film (dictated by foreign rules and regulation such as dress code, and linguistic standards) are not necessarily determined by Spanish citizens and employees, but rather, by their foreign management.

Considering the ambiguous setting of the film, and its context of cultural and economic imperialism, the movie is just as (or perhaps even more) relevant in Buenos Aires, Rosario, or Córdoba, as it could be in Madrid, Barcelona, or Bilbao. After all, subsequent to the full onset of neoliberal reforms in Argentina which reached a historical peak during Menem’s first term in 1989, when the market became saturated by foreign businesses (especially from the United States), offices across Argentina (and the economy in general) faced foreign occupation. In her book, *La sociedad excluyente: la Argentina bajo el signo del neoliberalismo*, Maristella Svampa divides the series of privatizations in Argentina into three stages: The first stage, “abarcó la

transferencia a manos privadas de la empresa telefónica (Entel) y los transportes aéreos (Aerolíneas Argentinas),” the second stage included “la privatización del servicio eléctrico, gasífero, de agua y cloacales, así como también el resto de los ferrocarriles, las áreas petroleras remanentes, las firmas siderúrgicas, alrededor de 500 edificios públicos, la red de subterráneos de la ciudad de Buenos Aires, algunos hoteles, fábricas militares, la junta nacional, los elevadores portuarios de granos, el mercado de hacienda y el hipódromo,” and finally, in 1994, the last stage of privitizations included, “la forma del sistema nacional de seguridad social, y la transferencia de transporte marítimo, la caja nacional de seguro y la corporación agrícola nacional” (39).

Similar to the other two artistic representations treated in this chapter, the film invites viewers into an unsettling labor environment that is full of social, sexual, and economic tensions. Unique to *Smoking_Room* is that this story deals more with international power struggles resulting from economic reform rather than sexual and identitary issues seen more in the other two works treated in this chapter. The film transpires in an office that was recently bought out by an American company, and as a result, the economic and social standards and laws are completely transformed. In a sense the employees are entrapped; they have to cede their personal independent will and desires to the services of the company. The autonomy surrendered by the each of the office workers in this company restricts their social mobility and leads to claustrophobic entrapment suffered by the characters in the film, but, at the same time, transmitted to the spectators by use of formal techniques employed by the filmmakers.

Similar to Brechtian theatre, the spectator of this film is constantly reminded of the artistic techniques and artifices utilized in its creation. Unlike in a high-budget, fictional,

Hollywood film, in which the goal of the director is generally to hide the presence of the camera, in an attempt to allow the viewer to fully lose her/himself in the fictional story that unfolds, in *Smoking_Room* the camera's overwhelming presence is always felt. This sensation is created through the rupturing with traditional techniques that include the use of extreme close ups, unusually high and low angle shots, deliberately shaky camera work that calls the attention to the hand-held camera, and jump cuts that interrupt the flow of the unorthodox story.

Each of these techniques highlight the self reflective nature of the film, and remind the viewer that the characters behind the camera are just actors that do not live in a fantasy world, set apart from that of the viewer, and therefore invites the spectator to participate in the story being narrated in the film. The limited distance between the fictional space and the real world provokes the audience in to the film's setting — an unsettling office space — and, at the same time, these formal techniques also add to the social tension of the movie creating feelings of claustrophobia also seen in the other two works treated in this chapter. Although, for example, the fictional setting (office) of the film is not necessarily a limiting in a physical sense (as was the case in *Tercer cuerpo*), the extreme close ups offer little distance between the camera and the actor, creating the feeling of entrapment, seeing as the characters are never capable of moving freely without the close presence of the camera enclosing them through its projected lens. The extreme close ups help the viewer to underscore one of the central themes of the film, which is that the work space restricts the characters personal and social independence by putting them under constant surveillance.

While the characters are trapped in a reduced office space and accosted in every scene by an overbearing camera, the viewers are drawn into this world by a repetitive aesthetics that does

not allow the audience to ever take a break from the unsettling labor environment. In contrast to Hollywood film, when the dramatic tension tends to rise and fall, often offering viewers a parallel love story or an occasional photo montage, in *Smoking_Room* the claustrophobic tension begins high in a close up of a character nervously smoking his last cigarette before he begins the day of work, and the pressure is not relieved until the very last scene.³⁰ There is never a photo montage backed by a catchy musical score (save one song at the end), and while there is a parallel romance in the film, it only helps to exacerbate the ever soaring dramatic tension as it tells the story of two employees taking part in a perilous extramarital affair, in which neither party in the relationship seems to have any faith or respect in the other. The tension is further marked by a constant and repetitive dialogue filmed almost always in the same style. A critic for *El Pais* captures the recurring and claustrophobic aesthetics of the film:

Abre cada tramo secuencial de *Smoking room* un plano general que nos sitúa ante dos personajes que dialogan a media voz y cuyo tú a tú es atrapado, una y otra vez, en dinámica de plano-contraplano... que sigue con lupa ... los gestos de los interlocutores y que, como única variante espacial, salta de vez en cuando a una toma de ellos en escorzo. (A. Fernández-Santos)

The monotonous repetition of dialogue in the film observed by Fernández-Santos only helps to further escalate both the dramatic tension and the claustrophobic mood of the film.

³⁰ A similarly tense mood can be perceived in Adrián Caetano's *Bolivia* and Lucrecia Martel's *La ciénaga*. Both of these 2001 Argentine movies that are commonly grouped together under the label of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino* similarly transmit high levels claustrophobic anxiety which begin high in both movies, and only seem to escalate throughout the duration of the story. Just like in *Smoking_Room* the tension is perceived by both the content and form of the movies.

Smoking_Room has no obvious central protagonist, and follows no one person's story, rather the true protagonist of the film is the restrictive office space itself. The conflict derives from the fact that the office loses certain stability and autonomy after it (like many businesses in Argentina during the 90s) is sold off to an American company. This transformation represents a widespread reformation of its governing politics. One of the changes that transpire as a result of the recent merger is the introduction of an office-wide smoking ban. This news creates a general outcry as well as social unrest and protests, led by Ramírez (Eduard Fernández), a revolutionary office employee who is willing to put everything on the line in order to create a smoking room, a small space where he can indulge in his personal habit. In an attempt to achieve his goal, Ramírez begins a small campaign with a petition for which he seeks endorsement from his office mates. The plan begins to crumble shortly after his immediate boss (Ulises Dumont) threatens to terminate his contract if he does not abandon his convoluted scheme. When Ramírez's coworkers hear about the interjection of the authority, they all insist that their names be removed from the appeal. After Ramírez refuses, his former allies immediately resort to violence in order to achieve their demands. In a final act of defiance and resistance, a bruised and scarred Ramírez breaks into the office afterhours and burns down a section of the building that he self designates the "sala de fumar."³¹

Although the premise of the film is a bit far-fetched and it can mostly be seen as a comedy due to the generally trivial issues that it deals with and some of its over-the-top,

³¹ Everyone in the office refers to this room as the "smoking room," except for Ramírez, who refuses to use the English signifier — therefore referring only to the "sala de fumar." This is part of his small and mostly individual battle to fight against cultural imperialism in the office. Resistance to the foreign culture in the local branch of this office is indistinguishable from the fight against foreign invasion of local markets, as both are direct results of neoliberal economic reform. The importance of this linguistic debate is further bolstered by the title of the movie, which deprives the film of its Spanish-language identity.

archetypal characters, it does represent some real challenges faced by companies undergoing transformations after neoliberal reforms and foreign invasion of markets:

[E]s una película que habla de cosas de aquí y de ahora, hecha con esa distancia irónica, que no desvinculada, que es condición esencial para un discurso inteligente en nuestros días (en cualquier época, a decir verdad). Si en un registro, la ironía, y en un contexto, el mundo de las oficinas de empresas absorbidas por capitales foráneos, *Smoking room* construye un discurso ocurrente. (Torreiro)

Despite its “distancia irónica,” there is some substance to Ramírez’s struggle, especially when it is approached from a symbolic perspective. The struggle is not just about an attempt to achieve a warm space where he can get a quick nicotine fix — it is representative of a broader fight against cultural and economic imperialism. Ramírez elucidates in an aggravated and defiant tone to his coworker: “no es sólo una sala de fumar. Es mucho más que eso.” For Ramírez, the fight in the office is symbolic of the recent invasion of American business and culture, not just in their office, but in the country in general “Y no somos así. Que Somos diferentes. Que Aquí las cosas funcionan de otra manera. Hay McDonalds por todas partes, hay Burger Kings por todos lados. Pero esto no está bien. Hemos permitido demasiado.” Ramírez later expresses that he feels as though he is losing control of his personal fate in his country, and even more so, in his labor space: “Tenemos nuestros derechos. Si yo quiero morirme así es mi problema. Que tengo 36 años. No soy un niño ya. Puedo decidir cuál es lo que quiero hacer con mi vida.” Similar to Diana in *El trabajo*, Ramírez and his colleagues are forced to cede their personal identity and satisfaction to the governing body of their company. Although the two artistic representations differ in the sense that *El trabajo* dealt more with issues of sexual dominance and male

chauvinism and *Smoking_Room* is more about cultural and economic imperialism — in the end, characters in both labor settings are like robots that are manipulated by the governing forces of their respective offices.

The cultural imperialism that has recently invaded the office in *Smoking_Room* is not merely political; however, it is directly tied to economic control. The commercial imperialism is marked by symbols of American business in the film, first by a glowing sign outside of a Hertz car rental business in the background of the very first scene of the movie (a light that could be projected in just about every major city in the world), and secondly, and more noticeable, by the presence of the Coca Cola company. Strategically positioned in the corner of a hallway next to a coffee table and to the side of the abandoned space that Ramírez fights to turn into the “sala de fumar,” is a bright red Coca Cola vending machine, “that drones monotonously, keeping guard outside the storage room in question” (Nichols 145). This powerful and universally familiar symbol projects a glowing, powerful and ominous light in the background of the very first scene that transpires in the office, and is later converted into the most commonly filmed space within the confines of the building. Curiously, despite the omnipotent and authoritative presence that this machine conveys, beckoning desperately for attention and monetary revenue, the Coca Cola machine is entirely ignored by its potential patrons. Not one employee is ever seen indulging the supposed pleasure of this imported American product.

The employees’ complete disregard for this foreign product is emblematic of their relationship with the company’s newly acquired owners. The recent merger has resulted in transformations which are imposed on them without their consent, and have forced them into a confining situation. While the big haughty Coke dispenser receives no interest or attention from

the Spanish employees, the small and indiscreet coffee station positioned to its side gets constant use. Despite its lack of marketing flare, and its inferior position in relationship to its taller foreign competition, the coffee machine proves to be the decided leader in sales in this office place. The employees' virtually unanimous decision to boycott the internationally influential product simultaneously demonstrates both their metaphorical and literal distaste for American capitalistic consumer values.

Fear of foreign business in this context is justified, especially when looking at the history of Argentina's process of neoliberal reform that took place in the 1990s under the presidency of Carlos Menem and his now notorious Harvard educated economist, Domingo Cavallo. Working together with the IMF and World Bank (financial institutions strongly influenced and supported by the United States), Menem and his team of advisors opened up the local economy to foreign business. While the opening up of markets to foreign investors is often positive for business abroad, it can often represent a challenge for local the local economy. In *La sociedad excluyente: la Argentina bajo el signo del neoliberalismo*, Maristella Svampa underlines some of the negative effects of neoliberalism in recent Argentine history:

[D]urante la década del 90, mientras que la Población Económica Activa (PEA) creció un 28%, el desempleo creció 156% y el subempleo, 115,4% [...] Asimismo, el nuevo modelo modificó la inserción de la economía en el mercado mundial, ya que la apertura a las importaciones condujo a una “reprimarización de la economía”: en este contexto las pequeñas y medianas empresas tuvieron grandes dificultades para afrontar la competencia externa, con lo cual las exportaciones se concentraron ahí donde sus precios se expresaban directamente en dólares

(petróleo, gas, producción agrícola) y donde el valor agregado era débil o casi nulo. (Svampa 34)

In *Smoking_Room*, despite what seems to be a general distrust in the foreign business (represented by their decision to ignore the Coca Cola machine), in the end the employees of this company prove to be powerless in their struggle against the foreign politics that govern their workplace. This is due, in part, to the advanced system of control and surveillance devised by put the foreign ownership of this company. Along with the Coca Cola machine (representative of economic market imperialism) and the general smoking ban (indicative of political and social reform), the Spanish branch of this company has also inherited the hierarchical power structure native to many American businesses. The political standards are set but by the manager of the company, but are enforced by each employee, regardless of his/her position on the hierarchical latter. The employees understand, for example, that any questioning of their superior could result in demotion, and they also recognize, that in a ruthless fight to the top they must callously compete against their colleagues in a quest for economic and political ascension. This competition creates an uncomfortable labor environment based on an advanced surveillance system that begins at the top, but is strategically created to spread throughout the ranks, making each employee a potential opponent and enemy.

The workers are aware that while only their superiors can reprimand them and/or dictate their futures in the company, they know that it is also true that anyone can observe their every move, thus conditioning their actions in the company. The following conversation between Martínez (Francesc Orella) and Fernández (Francesc Garrido) demonstrates the level of distrust,

paranoia, and anxiety that is felt between two average company employees with more or less equivalent power status:

FERNÁNDEZ. Escucha...Por ejemplo...el tuyo...¿Cuánto tiempo hace que trabajamos juntos tú y yo?

MARTÍNEZ. Joder, muchos años.

FERNÁNDEZ. Hace un montón de años que trabajamos juntos, ¿verdad?

MARTÍNEZ. Muchísimos años.

FERNÁNDEZ. Mira, Yo a ti no te conozco.

MARTÍNEZ. ¡¿Pero cómo no vas a conocer?!

FERNÁNDEZ. ¡Te digo que no sé quién eres tú!

MARTÍNEZ. ¿Pero cómo no vas a saber quién soy?

FERNÁNDEZ. Me refiero a conocer de verdad. Me refiero a conocer de verdad, yo no te conozco. No te conozco, Compartimos mesa. Cada mañana, compartimos mesa, cada día, de la mañana fichando. No te conozco. No sé quién eres. ¿Yo qué sé si eres un violador de niños cuando sales de aquí del trabajo?

MARTÍNEZ. No, no soy.

FERNÁNDEZ. Es un ejemplo vale...Es un ejemplo...es un ejemplo. Yo no sé si no tienes una doble personalidad

MARTÍNEZ. No, no, no, no tengo.

FERNÁNDEZ. No, no es porque lo dices tú.

MARTÍNEZ. No es así porque lo digo yo.

FERNÁNDEZ. Bueno.

MARTÍNEZ. Te digo yo que no.

FERNÁNDEZ. ¿Cuántas mujeres de estas que están casadas con asesinos de serie dicen, “no, es que es estupendo con los niños”? No conocen a la persona con quien viven. ¡No conocen a la persona con quien follan todos los días! Nadie conoce a nadie. ¡Nadie conoce a nadie!

The discomfort and paranoia expressed by Fernández in this quotation is later reinforced by the formal elements of the film. Like viewing an inexperienced cameraman work a home video, the handheld, digital camera is constantly unsteady, showed at an angle, or partially blocked by other characters. This creates an uneasy, sickening, and unsettling feeling in the audience. This technique allows for the audience members to sympathize with the characters, as the audience shares the character’s anxiety. In addition, the close proximity of the camera helps transmits the feelings of claustrophobia directly to the viewing public.

Much like Diana en *El trabajo* — who never escapes the suffocating masculine gaze of her boss and the story’s narrator — the office employees never seem to escape the view of the camera, even when they believe they are in private. One frequently filmed space in the office, for example, is the bathroom, where the audience gets a glimpse at some of the characters while on the verge of mental breakdown. Here, at their most intimate spaces and moments, the characters continue to be trapped in the cameras zoom.

In addition to these discomfoting and unconventional camera techniques that both sicken and restrict the personal comfort of the characters and audience, there is also a recurring shot that explicitly expresses the anxiety and social enclosure felt by the characters, as it mimics the view of a surveillance camera. As is the case with many surveillance cameras, in these scenes, the camera does not zoom in or out, nor does it pan or tilt. In addition, it sits in a fixed position from the corner of the room and points up from the floor. Many times, after the characters leave the scene, the camera continues to record, as if it were never shut off.

In many scenes it is as though the characters were aware of the cameras presence — as they often look directly into the camera. While traditionally this cinematographic technique maybe used to demonstrate that the characters are conscientious (or self aware) of their role as fictional characters, thus rupturing the divide between fiction and reality, in *Smoking_Room* this simultaneously serves a second function: it demonstrates that the characters believe that their every move in the office is being observed, judged, and scrutinized. Although it is not clear whether or not the office is truly equipped with surveillance cameras, it is certain that the employees believe that it could be, thus dictating their behaviors in the office.

If it is not the cameras themselves that dictate the actions of the employees, it is the fear installed in them that an omniscient and omnipotent (big brother type) force is constantly controlling them. Armero, the branch manager, in an attempt to maintain order within his professional boundaries, constantly places the fear of the Americans into his employees. In one scene, Armero calls Ramírez into his office in an effort to extinguish the latter's revolutionary flame. In the ensuing conversation, Armero presents himself as only a pawn in the larger

American scheme to sequester the company's pride and dignity, however, it quickly becomes obvious to Ramírez, that Armero is just one more faithful servant to the foreign enterprise:

RAMÍREZ. ¿Estás de acuerdo?

ARMERO. Claro que estoy de acuerdo. Estos putos americanos me tocan más las pelotas a mí que a ti.

RAMÍREZ. Me imagino.

ARMERO. Sí, pero no les gusta que los desafíen.

RAMÍREZ. ¿Cómo?

ARMERO. Que los desafíen. No les gusta.

RAMÍREZ. Pero yo no los desafío.

ARMERO. Pero ellos creen que sí.

RAMÍREZ. Bueno, pues, equivocan.

ARMERO. Y no les gusta que yo permita que los desafíen.

Armero, powerless in his fight to subdue his subordinate, has no choice but to place the fear of the foreign omnipotent force into his employee. After all, as Armero suggests to Ramírez, they know everything: “ellos saben hasta el color del calzoncillo que estamos llevando en este momento.” Thus, as a result of the fear of the omnipotent force, the entire office, including the boss himself is trapped in an enclosing space governed by social and economic policies that are foreign to them and from which they do not benefit. Throughout the duration of the film, almost every character is caught in camera lighting up a prohibited cigarette — including the branch manager himself who sneaks a smoke in the bathroom.

Unwilling to consume imported foreign law, and determined to defy an imported hierarchical power; Ramírez is the only one who dares to make his personal desires known. Aware of the possible consequences, employees in the company decide that it is better to endure unfavorable conditions than to risk punishment, job loss, or demotion. Although it is never explicitly stated what happens to Ramírez at the end of the film, all of the evidence indicates that his final act of defiance and vandalism (when he burns down an abandoned storage space inside of the office that he self designates the “sala de fumar”) will cost him his employment. While his revolutionary act very well may offer him a temporary psychological liberation from his social entrapment and offer him a brief emotional escape from his corporate confines, it will surely cause him to enter a new, and equally enduring and exhausting battle for economic freedom shared by all of the unemployed. Shortly after the incident the camera is placed for the last time in a fixed position from the floor (mimicking once again the position of a surveillance camera). In the view of the camera, directly in front of the dark ashes that represent the memory of the space that was recently torched by the revolutionary accountant/arsine, the camera focuses-in for the last time on the Coca Cola machine, appearing to be more shiny and bright than ever. Evidently, although the general destruction caused by the fire is obviously quite dramatic, burning down a great portion of the building, the Coca Cola machine was quickly replaced, instantly recuperating its economic and symbolic status in the company. It appears that although Ramírez may have won a temporary battle against the company that restricted his social and professional limitations, the war against foreign invasion of markets is far from over.

Despite what is mostly a bleak future for Ramírez in a market driven by foreign currency and values, the movie ends on a positive note, celebrating what is the only moment free of

tension and stress in the entire film — when the employees are finally liberated from their office space on a Saturday soccer game against the employees of the auto mechanics located in front of their office. The energy of this scene is heightened by the upbeat and exuberant melody and lyrics of Joan Manuel Serrat’s “Hoy puede ser un gran día.” The importance of the song is highlighted by the fact that it is the only tune to play during the length of the entire film. Moreover, the lyrics coincide with the character’s actions, pleading for them to break free of their daily, monotonous, and incarcerating labor routine:

Saca de paseo a tus instintos
y ventílalos al sol
y no dosifiques los placeres;
si puedes, derróchalos.
Si la rutina te aplasta,
dile que ya basta
de mediocridad.
Hoy puede ser un gran día
date una oportunidad.

The song’s lyrics are reinforced by the jubilant faces of the characters and beg them to take action against the “rutina” of their work that crushes them day after day. They are not only temporarily set free of the physical walls that surround them in the office, but also the suffocating politics that govern it. One of the characters is seen defiantly marching down the field with a cigarette in his mouth, triumphantly celebrating his short lived liberation from the

office. As the song states, he and the rest of his office mates are enjoying the liberating and “ventilating pleasures” of the sun and a temporary break from office law.

This final scene song is also symbolic because it represents an escape (albeit it is brief) over the international market and foreign law. It is perhaps important that in this scene the characters are playing soccer, a national pastime for both Spaniards and Argentines, and a sport that is relatively foreign to their overseas management. Unlike the imported rules and regulations that prevail inside the office walls, on the soccer field, the boundaries are understood and accepted.

This small victory and its ensuing celebration, is sure to reach an abrupt end at work on Monday, putting a defining halt to this liberating scene. It is doubtful that they will be capable of transforming their restrictive office environment, especially now that they have lost their general (Ramírez). William Nichols observes that this scene is almost presented as an illusion, a fantasy that will never come true, as they will never be able to exercise the freedom and pleasure in the office that they do on the playing field. The fantastical element of this final scene is bolstered by the use of 16 mm film, (the only time it is ever used in the entire movie),³² which grants this moment a kind of tone common in Hollywood, but whose presence in this film becomes almost ironic, a kind of wink of an eye to the spectator, who understands that this kind of fantasy would only be possible in commercial fiction.

³² “Último día de rodaje: el partido de fútbol [...] Rodando en 16 mm para conseguir esa belleza buscada en la fotografía y en las actitudes de nuestros protagonistas que juegan alegremente el partido de fútbol” (Gaul, *Todo por un largo diario de Smoking Room* 66).

Thus, this small office will share the fate of that of those represented in *Tercer cuerpo* and *El trabajo*. While Ramírez and Diana may manage to escape a suffocating work environment, they are still victims of a restrictive economic market. None of the characters in the works treated here prove capable of transforming the suffocating sociopolitical or economic norms of their offices. No one proves capable of surmounting the claustrophobia of the economic post crisis.

The office, as is stated in the introduction, is a microcosm of the nation. The civil and economic liberties surrendered by the characters in their respective places of labor are representative of struggles occurring on a national level. While national offices attempt to avoid becoming obsolete in an increasingly competitive and international market (as seen in *Tercer Cuerpo*), foreign business seek to find a market for their goods. Locals must decide to either passively adapt to a rapidly changing workforce while simultaneously exposing themselves to the possible risk of surrendering their own national and personal identities (as is the case with the majority of the characters in *Smoking_Room*, and the receptionist from *El trabajo*), or to choose to resist at the expense of their jobs and futures (as is the case with Ramírez).

At the same time that office employees either actively resist their situations or quietly accept what at times can be a situation of exploitation, the national government dictates laws to either stand up to foreign business and banks, or to submissively agree to their terms. Indebted to foreign banks, the Argentine government of the late 90s and beginning of the 21st century was trapped in a claustrophobic-producing situation, when they were forced to choose between their citizenship, and the banks to which they owed money:

el esquema neoliberal encierra a los gobernantes en un verdadero callejón sin salida. Se les exigen permanentes ajustes presupuestarios, pero si aumentan impuestos pierden el favor de la ciudadanía y del mundo de los negocios, y si aumentan el gasto público aparece el veto del FMI. La variable de ajuste, como no puede ser de otro modo, está en las partidas que atienden el gasto social, *v. gr.* los jubilados, la educación, la salud, etcétera. (Cuello 147-48)

This leads to chapter 2, in which public institutions (specifically schools and hospitals), underfunded and in many cases, unproductive, prove to be secondary to demands of foreign banks and investors.

Chapter 2

Neglected and Exploited: Public Spaces of the Post-Crisis

[E]n países como el nuestro, en el que unos pocos tienen mucho poder y otros tienen muy poquito, el Estado es necesario para regular las relaciones sociales. Lamento que el kirchnerismo haga una política de centroderecha con un discurso que a veces apela a cierto populismo “derechohumanista”. Para mí, lo que define la política K es un dato: la brecha entre los más pobres y los más ricos, en vez de achicarse, crece. Ese es el tipo de dato que explica cuál es la política socioeconómica del Gobierno: la que definimos como derechista.

(Martín Caparrós, “El modelo Kirchner”)

In contrast to the artistic representations examined in the first chapter, in which the claustrophobia endured by the characters was further bolstered by formal techniques and alternative production circumstances employed by their creators, in chapter two, the relation between the message and some of the formal elements of these artistic productions is much more complex. Due to national and international success and fame,³³ both Rafael Spregelburd and Pablo Trapero have had the chance to create cultural productions with a level of economic

³³ Rafael Spregelburd has directed and acted in productions of his plays all over the world (mostly in Argentina, Spain, and Germany), and his works have been published and translated into 13 languages. In recognition of the quality of his work, he has earned an exhaustive list of accolades including Spain’s most prestigious Tirso de Molino award, El Casa de Américas from Cuba, and each of the most important theatrical honors from Argentina including El Premio Nacional de Dramaturgia, Argentores, and María Guerrero (www.alternativateatral.com). Pablo Trapero first gained critical attention with his 1999 debut feature length film *Mundo grúa*, which despite a miniscule budget was very successful in award ceremonies and international film festivals alike: *Mundo grúa* was voted the “Best Opera Prima” at the 2000 Silver Condor awards in Argentina, it won the Special Jury Prize at the Havana Film Festival, and was nominated for best foreign film in Spanish at the prestigious Goya awards in Spain. Trapero’s penultimate film, *Carancho*, treated in this chapter, was seen by over 600,000 viewers which made it the second most watched film in Argentina of 2010 (Chandler). It subsequently became Argentina’s official selection for the 2010 Oscar’s.

comfort (and independence) that is rare within the otherwise restrictive and suffocating economic market. While Spregelburd's play *Acassuso* (2007), and Trapero's film *Carancho* (2010) share certain thematic characteristics with the artistic representations treated in chapter one, similarly criticizing the current socioeconomic situation as a result, in part, of certain effects of neoliberal policies, what sets them apart is that they present their stories from a more financially secure position, and their productions are more in line aesthetically with mainstream culture marked most prominently by the adaptation of elements common to popular genres. Despite certain claims from critics and accusations that these artists have sold out³⁴, I argue that despite producing market friendly products, both *Acassuso* and *Carancho* effectively and constructively raise consciousness about the claustrophobic situation endured in public offices of the post-crisis: a microcosm of the state.

³⁴ In the online newspaper, *Perfil.com*, director Carlos Rivas questioned the social value of "a certain type of theater produced in the 90s," and although Rivas mentions no names, it can be inferred that he is directing his criticism toward Spregelburd and others of his ilk, a young generation of theater practitioners who made their debut in the 90s, and who were largely celebrated in both Argentina and Europe, especially Germany. Spregelburd took the comments personally and later responded in a subsequent issue of the same newspaper with an article entitled, "Los fillos de la máquina de Hamlet." Rivas's article criticizes what he perceives as a generation of playwrights and directors whose seemingly elitist work fails to deliver any kind of a productive message to society: "En los 90 (¡) apareció cierto tipo de Directores que parecen formar parte de un club privado. Se divierten a sí mismos, como cuando cantamos en un asado. Y se comen toda la molleja. La gente no está invitada. Se desvelan por un público que los aplauda en alemán ("Berlín era una fiesta"). Mientras afuera unos chicos aspiran Poxi-ran (¡Oh, el Sentido!) y abren, por monedas, puertas de taxis a sofisticados espectadores. Que no se atreven a confesarse que, una vez en sus camas, solos, previendo el terror de la Pesadilla, claman por un trago de Sentido. Crearon un público vampirizado, pálido. Como gallinas que corren sin cabeza." In the same vein, Jaime Pena disdainfully reports on the "campenellización" (referring to his supposed similarities to the movies of the Academy Award-winning Argentine director, Juan José Campanella) of Trapero's recent films, "Pablo Trapero está demasiado seguro de sí mismo, tanto que, película a película, da la impresión de que quiere tener cada vez más éxito y realizar películas más grandes. Tras la notable *Leonera*, *Carancho* ya evidenciaba algunos de estos síntomas, en primer lugar la campenellización de su cine, ahora al servicio de un actor como Ricardo Darín (un guión que forzaba las situaciones para darle cabida), y en segundo lugar la espectacularización de algunas de sus secuencias, verdaderos prodigios de virtuosismo (el doble choque del final) que delataban que el Trapero productor había suplantado al Trapero cineasta."

Just like the artists depicted in the first chapter, Spregelburd and Trapero also live the crisis that they portray in their art; however, what sets them apart is their established international fame that results in funding from abroad. While both artists have crossed borders in their work, they continue to tell stories that deal with local themes that are primarily staged/directed in Argentina. Like many of Spregelburd's works, *Acassuso* was independently funded with earnings from his artistic activity abroad. In Europe Spregelburd is forced to adhere to strict time constraints in order to satisfy the demand of his producers and buying public, while in Argentina his foreign earnings are used to invest in his artistic freedom:

[E]n Europa [...] las obras son producciones. Hay alguien que te dice que escribas la obra, para cuándo tiene que estar lista, el escenógrafo empieza a trabajar antes de que comiencen los ensayos y el espectáculo se estrena en cuatro semanas. Yo tengo mucho prejuicio para con esa manera de trabajar, porque no es la que elijo. La tengo que aceptar cuando estoy allá, para poder mantener esta forma de vida en la Argentina. (“Estoy harto de la sensatez”)

Similarly, even though Pablo Trapero's international fame and status continues to grow, he has chosen to continue to live and work in Argentina, despite potential economic limitations. In order to offset growing production costs in recent films Trapero is becoming increasingly dependent on international production companies. Aware that his personal integrity and artistic independence are often sacrificed when dealing with foreign production agencies, he partially finances his own films through the participation of his own production company, Matanza Cine.

The international success shared by both Spregelburd and Trapero due in part to their use of aesthetics that are in line with global trends and their ability to utilize language that appeal to

viewers across borders. For example, the play *Acassuso* (Rafael Spregelburd, 2007) and the film *Carancho* (Pablo Trapero, 2010) both adapt certain qualities of popular genres that are recognizable to viewers from around the world. In the case of *Acassuso*, Spregelburd's use of farcical humor makes it widely entertaining and accessible to audience members from a variety of cultural backgrounds, while in the case of *Carancho*, Pablo Trapero has adapted certain techniques from the *Neo-Noire*, a genre that has proved successful for numerous Hollywood directors of the likes of Roman Polanski, Martin Scorsese, and David Lynch.

In addition to the potential entertainment value and wide appeal to viewers, both *Acassuso* and *Carancho* still manage to deliver scathing criticism of public spaces of the post-crisis. Underfunded, mismanaged, understaffed, plagued by corruption, and infested with greedy, profit-driven forces, neither the school treated in *Acassuso* nor the hospital in *Carancho* are capable of efficiently and effectively serving their communities. As institutions operated on tax dollars, under the jurisdiction of the state, these spaces are not only a product of the government, but they are, in effect, the state itself. Central to the criticism of both these artistic productions is the fact that the public institutions are both abandoned by state funding and invaded and corrupted by market forces. Inefficient, disorganized, and corrupt, many parallels can be drawn between these public institutions and the Argentine government of the last two decades (first during two terms in office by Carlos Saúl Menem and followed by the rule of Néstor and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner). The greatest transformations began during the 1990s, a period in history marked by a full-fledged overhaul of the operation, role, and economic functions of the federal government and all institutions operating under its jurisdiction.

According to economist Oscar Oszlak, these political and economic transformations were unparalleled by other contemporary nation-states: “Argentina es, probablemente, el país que en el transcurso de los años ‘90 ha experimentado las transformaciones más radicales en la configuración, tamaño y papel del estado nacional” (519). The federal government shifted from a provider of goods, services, and social welfare, to a governing body whose main function was primarily the (de)regulation of these services. As Oszlak observes, three principal transformations occurred during the 1990s: state businesses were privatized (for example, this was the case with telephone, electric, gas, and mail services); certain services disappeared completely after their funding was discontinued; and some institutions that were formerly operated by the federal government were transferred to provincial authorities (as was the case with schools and hospitals). Ironically, at the same time that extreme austerity measures caused a detrimental blow to many essential goods and services for the country’s most needy citizens, the government continued to invest astronomical sums of money in the creation of new public offices whose primary function was the (de)regulation of the market. Emergent offices, many in the executive branch of government, wielded great power and were subject to minimal supervision. The concentration of power in the executive branch together with the lack of transparency in these offices led to wide-spread acts of political nepotism, money laundering, and embezzlement by these newly found public organizations that, unlike schools and hospitals, tended to primarily serve their own interests, rather than those of the general population. Two public institutions that were hardest hit by the neoliberal transformations of the Argentine economic policies were schools and hospitals.

Maristella Svampa suggests that those that were most strongly impacted by the economic reforms of the 1990s were lower and middle class citizens who relied on state institutions for education and health care, services that received reduced funding as a part of austerity measures in the 1990s:

En efecto, en América Latina, las clases medias se expandieron sobre todo en los países donde el Estado intervino activamente como productor de bienes y servicios, en el marco del régimen de industrialización sustitutiva. Tocaría la versión latinoamericana del Estado Social, esto es, el modelo nacional-popular, consumir esta suerte de paradigma, contribuyendo así a la consolidación de vastas franjas de funcionarios y de profesionales ligados a la administración pública, así como a los servicios de educación y de salud. Sin embargo, éste fue precisamente el modelo que entró en crisis a partir de los años 80 y particularmente, durante los 90, con la aplicación de políticas de ajuste fiscal y de reducción del Estado. (134)

When Néstor Kirchner was sworn into office in 2003 as the first elected president subsequent to the 2001 crisis, the discourse shifted sharply from his political predecessor of the 1990s, but, as Beatriz Sarlo warns, he was a leader who “llegaba del corazón de los noventa” (225). As governor of the province of Santa Cruz in 1992 he supported the decision to privatize YPF (the national oil industry), demonstrating his support of privatization. Sarlo refers to Kirchner as the “caudillo que más había acompañado a Menem en la privatización de YPF no sólo sin protestar sino ensalzándolo como el mejor” (168).

After being elected president his cabinet was filled with representatives who were supposedly his political foes, “La Cámara de Diputados estuvo presidida por Alberto Balestrini,

ex dirigente duhaldista, aunque quedó secundado por Patricia Vaca Narvaja de filiación Kirchnerista; José Pampuro, ex dirigente duhualdista, fue designado vicepresidente de la Cámara de Senadores; y a Miguel Pichetto, ex menemista, se lo nombró jefe del bloque justicialista-Frente para la Victoria del senado.” (Sarlo 177). Although the economy does seem to have improved since Néstor Kirchner took office, and even more so since he was succeeded by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (elected in 2007 and again in 2011), there is some doubt about whether the government funded census institution, INDEC (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos*), is accurately reporting on the current state of the economy:

INDEC reported that inflation rose by approximately 10% annually. Private-sector and provincial government estimates place it above 25%. Government reporting on nominal wage increases reinforces these estimates given that public- and private-sector wages have been adjusted upward by over 25% for both 2011 and 2012, rates presumably in line with maintaining purchasing power. (Hornbeck 9)

While both Néstor and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner have spoken regularly in public about the importance of investing in state institutions such as health care and education, schools and hospitals of the post-crisis continue to be underfunded and employees are underpaid. The discontent of public employees has led to a long series of strikes by teachers unions and public health officials alike since 2001, most recently in March of 2013 in the province of Buenos Aires. Current governor of Buenos Aires, Daniel Scioli claims he is unwilling to meet demands of unsatisfied public employees because of astronomical public debt “[l]a Provincia tiene un déficit operativo del 13 mil millones de pesos” (Lara).

In the midst of an unstable economic environment, Rafael Spregelburd (Buenos Aires, 1970) has emerged as one of the most celebrated and prolific living independent theater practitioners of Argentina today. He and his works have become ubiquitous throughout the hundreds of small-independent theatrical venues in Buenos Aires and even across the river in Montevideo, Uruguay. A household name for much of the intellectual youth in Buenos Aires, and through his many international tours (mostly in England, Spain, and Germany), Spregelburd has developed a relatively extensive international readership and fan base. He has staged and published more than 30 plays for which he has been recognized with an exhaustive list of accolades including the *Premio Municipal de la Dramaturgia* and the *Premio Clarín* from Argentina, the *Premio Casas de América* from Cuba, and Barcelona's *Premio de la Crítica* (Dubatti, "Estudio critico"). Unlike many other theater practitioners, his plays are promptly published (sometimes even before the staging of his works), translated into various languages, and relatively widely distributed to bookstores internationally. His play scripts are not just a written memory of what is performed in his plays on stage, but rather they compliment and enrich the live experience with a literary element that expands beyond each of the play's live performances.³⁵

In addition to an author of texts, Spregelburd is also very active in the production and staging of his scripts, often working simultaneously as both director and protagonist in his own plays. He is what Argentine theatrical critic Jorge Dubatti calls a "teatrlista," that is, an "artista

³⁵ In my analysis of the play I will be referring to both the written play script (published together with three other plays in, *Los verbos irregulares*, Colihue Teatro, 2008) and a performance of the play that I attended during the summer of 2009 at Andamio 90 in Buenos Aires. Often staging original and contemporary Argentine plays, Andamio 90 has formed an integral part of the independent theater scene in Buenos Aires since its inception in 1990 (<http://www.andamio90.org/>), and is an important member of ARTEI (Asociación Argentina de Teatros Independientes).

vinculado a diferentes roles de la actividad escénica, a la par dramaturgo, actor, director, traductor y teórico” (“Estudio crítico” 281)³⁶. Spregelburd writes “dramaturgia del actor” or “dramaturgia del director” as opposed to “dramaturgia de autor”; that is, he takes an active role in the staging of his plays and he often collaborates with his actors in the creation of the scripts. Unlike “dramaturgia de autor,” plays that are written to be read as any other work of fiction, the works of Spregelburd are written with the performance in mind.

As an actor³⁷ himself, Spregelburd is aware of the integral role played by performers in their interpretation and formation of the play, which is why *Acassuso*, like many other of Spregelburd’s plays, was written specifically for a preselected cast: “los personajes surgieron en el cruce entre mis ideas, imágenes y deseos para la pieza, y los cuerpos concretos de los intérpretes. De allí cada uno (y en especial esta obra, ¡cada una!) le haya entregado a la obra su particularidad y su color propio” (Spregelburd, “Estudio crítico” 285). The actors that Spregelburd selected collaborated with him (as director) to create what has become the script:

Al final de cada ensayo, pasábamos horas recuperando y pasando en limpio cada uno de los hallazgos del ensayo junto a mi asistente, Laura Fernández, tratando de hallar una notación en papel de aquellos momentos privilegiados. Así los actores

³⁶ As an example of the versatility of Spregelburd’s work, in an interview with Jorge Dubatti he explains the various and diverse activities in which he was involved at the time of the writing of *Acassuso*, “yo estaba escribiendo al mismo tiempo *La paranoia*, *Lúcido*, *Acassuso* y *Bloqueo*, mientras actuaba en *Buenos Aires* (hablando inglés con acento de Gales) y filmaba *Floresta* (una comedia trágica, emocional, realista), actuaba en “Nadar perrito”, del suizo Retofinger, estudiaba la lengua artificial Tupal para escribir *La terquedad* e incursionaba como actor, de la mano de Andrea Garrote, en la sit-com *Mi señora es una espía*, donde interpreto a Romeo Butti, espía peronista en los años 50, un dandy inútil y pretencioso” (“Respuestas” 163).

³⁷ Spregelburd acts regularly in the independent theater scene in Buenos Aires (mostly as protagonist of his own plays, as noted above). In June and July of 2011, he played a lead role in two of his most recent performances, *Todo* and *Apátrida, doscientos años y algunos meses*. In addition to his work in theater, he has acted in television (*Mi señora es una espía*) and in independent Argentine film, perhaps most noticeably as the lead role in the recent and popular film, *El hombre de al lado* (Mariano Cohn and Gastón Duprat, 2009).

volvían a recibir, a la semana siguiente, un texto que una vez más iba a ser sometido a la prueba de fuego del escenario. (Spregelburd, “Estudio crítico” 285)

The final result of *Acassuso* is a play that despite sharing certain tendencies with Spregelburd’s previous works, thematically and stylistically represents a sort of an anomaly within his theatrical repertoire. Like his previous works, there is an acidic humor at the center of *Acassuso*, in a play that mixes genres and tones, (finding humor in tragedy, and sadness in humor), and pushes boundaries, making hyperbole the norm and the norm the hyperbole³⁸. Perhaps what sets *Acassuso* apart from other works by Spregelburd is that it is a more concise³⁹, accessible story, featuring a mostly linear narrative that seems to communicate a clear sociopolitical message uncommon in many of his other works. I agree with Paola Hernández who has classified the play as an example of “Teatro de la desintegración,⁴⁰” as it recycles some of the elements of “Teatro del absurdo,” common on the Argentine stage in the 1960s in which

³⁸ In Sophie Gander’s reading of Spregelburd’s *Heptología de Hiernymous Bosch*, she focuses similarly on the many examples of “desmesura” in Spregerburd’s work, that is, like the hyperbole, an over exaggerated reality, and a complete disregard for moderation.

³⁹ At just a little over two hours in length *Acassuso* is a little longer than most plays on the independent theater scene in Buenos Aires (averaging roughly between 60-90 minutes), but it is very short by his standards. *Bizarra*, for example, was staged in ten different chapters at the Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas in 2003 and later published in a book of over 500 pages. *Heptología de Hyronymous Bosch* consists of seven separate performances, of which the most famous segment (*La estupidez*) lasts approximately three hours and twenty minutes, not including a fifteen-minute intermission.

⁴⁰ Defined by Osvaldo Pellettieri this is “la continuidad estético-ideológica del absurdo, como este, a su vez era la continuidad de la tradición irracionalista-pesimista del grotesco. La diferencia estriba en que el absurdo pretendía demostrar la absurdidad de la existencia humana en la sociedad, creía en la noción de sentido, exigía una interpretación, fortalecía aún la significación. El teatro de la desintegración toma del absurdo lo abstracto del lenguaje teatral y la desolución del personaje como entre psicológico, pero no pretende demostrar nada; cree que el sentido del texto, absolutamente arreferencial, lo debe aportar casi en forma exclusiva el espectador” (17). Pellettieri, perhaps a bit unjustly, later accuses *El teatro de desintegración* of being elitist and contradictory, as he affirms, “[s]e podría decir que estos autores trabajan [...] con una estética del nihilismo. Es un teatro que no se avergüenza de su elitismo, que rechaza la chatura de nuestra sociedad; sus cultores son hábiles polemistas, contradictorios, despectivos y esgrimen razones suficientes para cuestionar la banalidad de nuestro fin de siglo.”

“se mezclan técnicas como la fragmentación del lenguaje, lo absurdo de las situaciones de los personajes, la falta de comunicación con un ojo especulativo entre los medios de comunicación, lo que se considera *reality* y cómo se explora la dinámica imagen-ídolo, no importa cuán falsa pueda ser esta imagen” (9). Despite the undeniable link that this play has with the “Teatro del Absurdo,” unlike Hernández, I also believe that despite the abundance of humor in this entirely entertaining play, *Acassuso* simultaneously, and perhaps paradoxically, manages to conserve some key elements of a realist theater⁴¹ more common in Buenos Aires during the 1980s, and still prominent in Buenos Aires, especially with the older generation of theater practitioners⁴².

Spiegelburg himself has commented on a peculiar relationship that his theater (and that of other contemporary artists) shares with reality. While he admits to prescribing to a certain level of realism, there is still a kind of Brechtian distancing that takes place. Reality is observed but it is also paradoxically masked by the artifices of theater:

El teatro asume que es un sistema de construcción de apariencias, y no un sistema de representación de la realidad. Asume la *mentira* como procedimiento constitutivo, así como el pintor asume el color o el fotógrafo el film. Los actores

⁴¹ Hernández affirms in the same article that *Acassuso*, “busca romper con cualquier línea de representación realista” (13).

⁴² This older generation of playwrights includes Roberto Cossa, Mauricio Kartun, Griselda Gambaro, Eduardo Pavlosky, Eduardo Rovner, and Ricardo Monti, among others. Formed in part by the years of the dictatorship, in which theater was used as a weapon to challenge the violent and repressive military dictatorship. In recent years, these authors continue to battle on stage, fighting to bring justice for crimes committed during the most recent military dictatorship, and commenting on issues such as globalization and neoliberal reform. In the essay “El teatro dominante y la crisis: de los ‘pactos de interés’ a los ‘pactos de deseo,’” theater critic, Martín Rodríguez refers to the theater written and produced by these artists as the “Teatro dominante,” in Buenos Aires. This theater is a realist theater that he defines as a body of work that “se fundamenta en la premisa de que el teatro debe presentar algo, la realidad, y a alguien, los espectadores, con quienes establece una relación, ‘vertical’ al producir un mensaje (la tesis realista) que debe ser decodificado sin interferencias” (81). Although Spiegelburg and his generation of the “teatro de desintegración” or “teatro joven” often attempt to distance themselves from the “teatro realista” or “teatro de tesis,” I argue that *Acassuso* is a play that bridges the generational gap between Spiegelburg and his predecessors.

de una nueva dramaturgia local se entrenan en una forma muy curiosa de realismo, que ya no consiste sólo en actuar lo más parecido posible a la realidad (siguiendo una línea de actuación más o menos cercana o Strasberg, o a Hollywood) sino en hacer cómplice al espectador de que se está frente a una actuación, pese a que ésta está atravesada por estados de verdad. Y eso es lo real. Es lo que en Buenos Aires conocemos por “teatros de estados”. “Estados” no sólo como “estados de emoción” sino fundamentalmente por “estar allí”. Es un teatro que busca privilegiar la cosa en sí, y no la cosa que es evocado o señalado melancólicamente. Un teatro como acontecimiento puro. (47)

The realist nature of *Acassuso* is perhaps difficult to perceive, as it is hidden within the discourse of farce. Priscilla Meléndez affirms in *The Politics of Farce in Contemporary Spanish American Theatre* that farce (especially in Latin America) does not necessarily exist in opposition to realism as they both share a powerful connection with society and an ability to convey a sociopolitical message, “Spanish American farce is much more than a mere ‘laughing machine’; it is also a fearless genre that exposes, assimilates, and critiques the most powerful discourses in society” (42). *Acassuso*, just like the plays treated by Meléndez, references important social, cultural, and political events in order to establish a real setting and at the same time reflect critically on these issues through humor. Meléndez concludes that works of farce in Latin America generally “reveal their tendency to self-parody, their capacity to uncover and simultaneously transgress their cultural order, their artistic, social and political rituals, their literary and cultural history” (23). The criticism is set up through the use of “[l]anguage games,

humor, parody, absurdity, the contradictions of role-reversal, the emphasis on popular culture and the questioning of textuality” (23).

The playful tone that persists throughout *Acassuso* originates from within an easily identifiable position in history. Set in a very real place (Merlo, a working/middle class neighborhood in northern Buenos Aires) and time (2006), with explicit references to well-known public events (the robbery at Acassuso), notorious public figures (most noticeably Felipe Solá, then governor of Buenos Aires), and political organizations (the UDA, *Unión de Docentes Argentinos*, and CTERA, *Trabajadores de la educación*), *Acassuso* is explicitly situated in a place and context that is easily identifiable. In addition, the realist setting and costumes make it easy for the audience to identify with the characters on stage, and the historical situation confronted by each of them. Although it is true that the situations and dialogue are exaggerated to a level common in all of Spregelburd’s plays, and that the farcical humor maintained throughout the play, *Acassuso* still manages to preserve a level of authenticity, allowing it to deliver a concise and clear message of a public school suffocated by unaccommodating governmental policy and lack of funding.

In the midst of economic hardships, the school has been severely impacted by the socioeconomic and political climate in which it is embedded. While the administration and faculty of this school are by no means idealized, heroic, or innocent characters, they can all be perceived to a greater or lesser extent as victims of an inefficient and corrupt system. At the root of this school’s complications is a serious lack of financial and political state support, poor leadership, and the infiltration of corrupting market forces. The diverse selection of characters in this play all suffer, albeit in unique ways, in this suffocating space.

The characters in the play consist of a group of three undertrained and exploited classroom teachers, a stuttering speech pathologist, a hyper-masculine female gym teacher, a corrupt and unstable principal and her flip-flopping vice-principal, a complicit and slightly crazed secretary, a stern and severe bookie, the owner of the school Credimart (a small clothing store) who is occasionally requested to fill in as a substitute teacher, and a mostly hypocritical semi-professional evangelistic soccer player who supplements his insignificant salary with criminal activity. For the most part, the play shares the structure of a Greek tragedy, telling the entire story in the same space (a high school) and during the course of a single day. The only instances in which the audience is removed from the school setting are at the beginning of each of the four acts in the play. It is during these metatheatrical moments when the actors are transformed into witnesses of a crime (which is the story of the play) and the audience is transformed into the jury.

Just like the never-advancing, restrictive labor environment, the play is cyclical in structure; the first scene is actually the last, when a public school teacher presents her testimony in front of the audience/jury. She begins to reveal the secrets of the convoluted conspiracy that eventually results in a bankruptcy and violent outbreak in her school in Merlo, Buenos Aires, the plot of *Acassuso*. Until the climax at the conclusion of the play, the story consists of little more than a series of absurd and comical dialogues between teachers and administrators in this chaotic space, revealing the inefficiency, incompetence, and corruption of this state institution. Throughout the duration of the play the dramatic tension slowly rises via foreshadowing, as the teachers' conversation is slowly and constantly entwined with obsessive accounts of the 2006 Banco Río robbery, a highly publicized event in which a group of thieves, considered heroes by

many, proved more intelligent than the authorities when they entered an upper-middle class neighborhood of Buenos Aires called Acassusso and reportedly robbed more than 8 million dollars armed with nothing more than fake guns and explosives. While the robbers were escaping through the city's drainpipes, the police had no way of detaining them seeing as they were occupied fulfilling the request of the kidnappers: purchasing pizza for the hostages. This true account, more outlandish than most works of fiction, becomes the bases of reality for the readers/audience members of this play.

The school's administrators, inspired, stimulated, and even at times sexually aroused by the robbery, devise a plan to stage a similar conspiracy of their own: to steal the school's public funds and invest them in a semi-professional soccer player. They prepare to train him with the intention of later selling him off to the famous Argentine soccer club, Boca Juniors. In other words, following an example set by the Menem administration, the school administration decides to invest public funds in the private sector to make a capitalist gain. The neoliberal capitalist model proved to be a nightmare for both the government and this school's administration. The soccer player quickly proves himself to be a poor investment, and instead of appreciating in economic value as they had hoped, ends up depreciating drastically when he takes all of the teachers hostage with a fire-arm that he steals from the school principal, robs them of the few possessions they have, demands that they take off their clothes, and, in a fit of rage, shoots one of his victims/investors.

Although subtly and perhaps seemingly paradoxically disguised in cathartic laughter, the play ends in tragedy — the audience is left with the recently robbed, half-naked school employees trying unsuccessfully to fathom the significance of the recent events. Despite plans to

imitate the heroic and cunning robbers (in their eyes) of Banco R o, these school employees end up doomed to interpret the much less romantic task of hostages. Unwilling to accept the unappealing role in which they were cast, the hostages of this school continue to imagine themselves in the place of the robbers/heroes. Much to their dismay and confusion — as the lead players of the real robbery had a fairy-tale like ending, escaping in triumphant fashion through underground tunnels of Buenos Aires with millions of dollars in cash — the school employees in this fictional stage have a much less fantastical finale, ending up in debt and partially exposed in front of the audience. One character is incredulous about the tunnel escape in the Banco R o robbery, unable to believe that they could have celebrated such a magnificent ending while she and her colleagues share such a dismal fate. Another teacher inaccurately claims that such fantastical stories are only possible in fictional works such Ernesto S bato's *El t nel*.⁴³ However, despite these characters' disbelief, and inability to accept their unfortunate roles in this play (and perhaps in society in general), their plight is clear to the audience members. What is left unresolved in the play (and in the Banco R o robbery) is who (if anyone) will be tried and perhaps convicted for these crimes. This also begs another unresolved question: who should be blamed for the eroding condition of public services (most noticeably, education and healthcare) in Argentina after the economic crisis of 2001? Spregelburd's play does not necessarily offer a clear or simple response; indeed, it offers a complex view of recent market transformations, perhaps sharing the blame between an inefficient managerial staff and an undisciplined workforce, corrupted by an unhealthy socio-political and economic system.

⁴³ While the protagonists of Banco R o do indeed find freedom through underground tunnels, no character enjoys such a happy ending in S bato's novel. In fact, no one ever enters a tunnel (at least not a literal one) during the course of the entire story.

The farcical setting (an abandoned men's bathroom since converted into a teachers' lounge of a public school) effectively captures the humorous tone of the play, while simultaneously reflecting the dire situation faced by this school's employees. Unable to find a space to accommodate its educators in a proper lounge, the administration decides to delegate teachers to the bathroom, representing both the poor decision making and economic difficulties faced by the school. This setting is even more preposterous when considering that the teachers' lounge simultaneously serves as the space of this school's central government, and it is here where all of the essential administrative decisions about this governmental educational institution are made. Inside the bathroom/teacher's lounge the secretary/treasurer also has her office where the school's virtually non-existent budget is (mis)managed. A top priority is to decide how to invest the few remaining funds, and which of the academic disciplines will need to be cut due to limited funding and the implementation of recent austerity measures. Ironically, while the setting seems to further bolster the play's relation with the theater of the absurd, or its resurgence in the 90s during the *Teatro de desintegración*, the authentic stage design (see image 1) of the bathroom (featuring real toilets and tiles) and the realist costumes of the characters (dressed in casual attire commonly worn in an educational environment), simultaneously reflect the realist tone that is subtly maintained throughout the length of the performance.



Image 1 (www.alternivateatral.com)

The dialogue withheld inside of this uncharacteristic geographical/physical setting is absurd, yet it also helps to establish a criticism of the confusion and disorder confronted by these public employees. An integral piece in the creation of the space itself, the teachers form an important part of the comical criticism as they constantly prove to be unprepared, and unsure about questions of Argentine history (they debate uncertainly about the importance of Rosas in the national narrative), literature (they work together to remember the importance of two canonical literary figures: Sarmiento and Sábato), psychology (they wonder about the significance of Freud and the relevance of dreams and symbols), astronomy (they question about the existence of certain planets), and basic computer functions (such as the purpose and function of the mouse). In addition to revealing their sub-par preparation, these teachers gossip and speculate about the uncertain sexual orientation of their coworkers, their scandalous love affairs with their students' parents, and their respect and admiration for the robbers at Banco Río. They also lament their inconsistent, miniscule, and at times non-existing pay checks and their failed efforts to improve their conditions via public protests and worker's strikes. The administration adds to the chaos by proving to be unfamiliar with their own faculty, mistakenly celebrating the birthday of one teacher and completely ignoring the birthdays of the rest. The principal proves to be apathetic and inefficient, consistently making poor administrative decisions, such as convincing one teacher to join a second and eighth grade class together, encouraging one teacher to advance a failing student based entirely on his exceptional soccer performances, and deciding to cut the psychology program all together (an ironic decision, seeing as many of the faculty could be diagnosed with at least one documented psychological illness). As the employees

debate the challenges facing the school and their personal lives, they constantly alternate positions in the room, and often times at least one or two of the teachers takes a seat on abandoned toilets or urinals that have since been converted into preferred seating. The farcical space in which the teachers decide the fate of the school is almost as ridiculous as the solutions at which they arrive.

Many of the problems that this institution faces can be attributed to poor administration and leadership of principal Lobo. As often common with the authoritative figure in farcical theater, Lobo is not to be taken entirely seriously⁴⁴: she is a rather aggressive leader who acts mostly according to bestial and impulsive instincts rather than by the use of critical reason and thought. A predatory creature, much like many bankers and businessmen, Lobo values investment gains over the well-being of her employees. Lobo adheres strictly to the neoliberal policy that the Menem government established in the 90s in collaboration with the IMF and World Bank, converting the school into a market-driven industry and allowing it to become infiltrated by private investment.⁴⁵ Part of her business model involves such absurd ideas as keeping students in the lower grades in order to improve business, “los grados más taquilleros son los iniciales, después es como que los pibes se traban y no avanzan nada” (29). In addition to

⁴⁴ As sociopolitical theater, farce often attempts to question the status-quo, which is most commonly achieved by criticizing the authoritative figure, and demonstrating “the antagonism between center and periphery in artistic and sociopolitical terms; and a sense of humor ambiguously related to comic catharsis and to a desire to unmask the sources of oppression — call them social, political, familial, economic, and/or artistic” (Meléndez 33).

⁴⁵ Although it is not true that Menem invested private funds into public education, the school can be read as a metaphor for the state. When principal Lobo allows the school (a public institution) to be corrupted by private industry, this can be read as a reflection of Menem’s decision to treat public funds and industry as if it were his own private business (*La era de desolación*, Dardo Scavino). In the same vein, Néstor Kirchner has been criticized for utilizing his position of power in order to improve his personal wealth. “Amasó una fortuna personal en siete años. [...] [E]staba entrenado la perfección en el conocimiento de esta mecánica y territorial del poder. No es un saber que debió recuperar desde el pasado [...] sino algo que practicó cuando fue gobernador de Santa Cruz. [...] Conoció el mapa del tesoro, donde están trazadas las líneas que vinculan fondos públicos y poder” (Sarlo 202-03).

adhering to market demands, the school's funds are first invested in the market. One year, Lobo takes the school budget and invests in a race house named Morondanga who eventually fails them. Later, public money is wasted on losing Quiniela tickets (the Argentine national lottery), and finally Delia invests the funds at her disposition in her failed soccer player.

In addition to futile investments, President Lobo authorizes the installment of private industry inside her school. Both the introduction of the Credimart and the lottery salesmen are representative of private enterprise invading this public institution. As a result, the employees, insufficiently compensated for their work, yet deeply rooted in their capitalist surrounding, are coerced into spending their minimal and at times non-existent salaries on expensive, superfluous clothing at the school Credimart and the inconceivable hope for a brighter future with their weekly lottery tickets. With limited funds, the only investment that they can make is via credit, a promise for a future payment that results in the deepening of these employees' debt.

As a result of the growing debt, these employees, just like the government at large, become beholden to financial institutions. On a national level, this meant that private debt was made public, and tax payers would suffer the consequences, as international entities such as the IMF and World Bank demanded that the federal government implement austerity measures, cutting funds to public services such as hospitals and schools. For the teachers in this school, it means that the school employees indebted to the Credimart would become subordinate to her demands, and that the bookie would threaten with violence all who owed him money. In other words, private industry eventually takes control of public services, in this case school number 78. This is further emphasized when the owner of the school Credimart, Marta Lococo, not only replaces public employees when she occasionally works as an unqualified substitute teacher, but

more importantly, when she replaces public employees as a voting board member of the school, weighing in on important policy decisions that later put public employee jobs at risk.

Although Principal Lobo could be held responsible for many of the problems that school district number 78 faces, just like the government of Argentina, which is at the mercy of the international investors from the IMF and the World Bank, she is also a victim of the system. For example, similar to the teachers in her staff, the principal is also poorly compensated for her work and goes weeks without a paycheck. Lobo claims that her personal problems, resulting in the development of alcoholism, can be blamed on the state itself. After all, Lobo links the origin of her problem to the incompetence and irresponsibility of the state, “Empecé ese invierno que la Provincia no pagó la luz no teníamos ni estufitas de cuarzo. Un chorrito en el té, para calentarme de a poco” (80). Lobo’s predicament is not unlike many others. These problems date to 1994, when many of the national gas, electric, and water providers began to be sold off to private industry. The new international owners of these recently acquired businesses were much less likely than the previous owners to offer reduced energy to those in need. The state, already in debt to foreign investors, was not in the position to bail out its disadvantaged population. As a result, many people who previously depended on subsidized utilities were left without many of their basic needs, especially after the crisis (Basualdo 401).

Lobo suffers from extreme claustrophobia due to her difficulties at work and her own identity issues. Her illness is a result of the fact that she is trapped in a public institution without sufficient funding from the Argentine state, she is trapped in a school with uneducated teachers, unprepared students, and families without economic or social means to support their children. In addition, she is trapped in a body that she sees as incomplete — she views herself

not as a woman, but as a castrated, incomplete and impotent man. In one scene, in an effort to garner support for her convoluted scheme to rob the public funds to invest in private industry she threatens her fellow female coworkers, “somos hombres o no somos hombres” (38). Freud, who is evoked through both explicit and implicit references throughout the play, would have perceived Lobo as a woman who never surpassed the phallic stage of development, and as a result, she is envious of all males,⁴⁶ those who possess what she is lacking.

Lobo is obsessed with any symbols that evoke the imagination of male virility, and her fixation may be beyond desire, and more accurately described as envy. The absence of her phallus is simultaneously perceived as deficiency of power, strength, and authority, characteristics that Lobo (perhaps as a result of her society’s influence) attributes exclusively to males. In one scene she describes a dream in which she is surrounded by the men who orchestrated the robbery at Banco Río: “Yo estoy en enagua y se me transparenta todo, un horror, porque yo trato de hablar con hombres, parece que les debo algo, me gritan, y yo no tengo autoridad... estos están desnudos de la cintura para abajo, y si me diera vuelta y los encarara vería concretamente todo tipo de falos” (60). Lobo is not only envious and afraid of the masculine features that she does not possess, but she is also afraid that when her body is revealed by her see-through clothing, the male aggressors will perceive her weakness demonstrated by her “incomplete” body.

For Lobo, the only visible path to success is by compensating for her perceived deficiencies by demonstrating her masculinity through her performance of what she considers male traits. Lobo’s model for the example of the complete and ultimate male, full of prowess and

⁴⁶ Penis envy was originally discussed in a 1908 essay by Sigmund Freud entitled, “On the Sexual Theories of Children.”

capable of achieving a successful life are those men that orchestrated the robbery at Banco Río, criminals of the state. Made into instant heroes in the Argentine media after some of the impressive details of their elaborate theatrical plan were revealed, the robbery becomes an extreme fetish for Lobo. So enthralled by the talent of these robbers, she instantly wants to imitate their recent act and emulate their hyper-masculine attributes:

DELIA. Ay, no, pará, me olvidé. Parece que los tipos, todo pelo en pecho, les dicen a los rehenes — los tienen a todos así, en fila — y les dicen: ‘Ahora empieza el show’. ¿Podés creer que se ponen en pelotas, ahí, delante de todos? No, si estos tipos tienen testosterona para tirar al techo. Y se ponen unos shores ajustados, como de boxeadores, se llevan los collares de esmeraldas al cuello, y se suben a las lanchas, todos túneles acuáticos subterráneos hasta el río... Los persiguen a toda velocidad, con perros nadadores, porque les olieron la ropa interior.... (58)

Just as the media tends to exaggerate, manipulate, and fabricate “real” events, the story of Banco Río is entirely transformed on stage when it becomes interwoven with the desires, fears, and dreams of Principal Lobo and her coworkers.

Lobo is not the only one who seems to be trapped in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Like Lobo, the school gym teacher (Gladys Rondó) seems to be uncomfortable in a female body, and as a result, she and Lobo feel the need to compensate for their lack of masculine features by taking possession of surrogate phallus. With these phallic symbols, they believe to grant themselves the features often attributed stereotypically exclusively to males such as power and authority.

The expression of gender displayed and expressed by Lobo and Gladys is deeply rooted and restricted by their cultural history. This point has been articulated by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*: “the pro-sexuality movement within feminist theory and practice has effectively argued that sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions” (41). In the case of Lobo and Gladys Rondó, their masculinity is defined according to a history of violence. Lobo’s inner masculinity is achieved by her attempt to emulate the gym teacher and her appropriating of the pistol at the end of the play, while for Gladys Rondó, the gym teacher, her lack of testosterone is compensated by the purchase of the “falconeta,” the constant topic of gossip between her coworkers who both fear and admire her. The falconeta (Ford Falcon) is an automobile that contains notorious national symbolism, as it was the very same car that was referenced in numerous testimonies of victims of the most recent military dictatorship (1976-1983).⁴⁷ The presence of this car is only a foreshadowing for the violence it evokes when possessed by Rondó.

Both Lobo’s and Rondo’s bodies, just like the space that they inhabit, can be interpreted as metaphors for the state, claustrophobic and entrapping. While their bodies are physical reminders of their perceived limitations inside of the school and even society in general, the space that they inhabit reinforces this feeling of impotence and deficiency, seeing as they are trapped in an old men’s bathroom, filled with urinals, a constant reminder to these characters of their bodies perceived absences as women.

⁴⁷ “[T]he Ford Falcon, an Argentine-made car [...] has become a symbol of [...] repression since it was these vehicles, with darkened windows and license plates removed, that were used to abduct victims in the middle of the night” (Schwimler, “Argentina: Coming to Terms with the Past”).

The impotence felt by these characters is a result of their inability to function as authoritative women inside their school, and society at large, and is just one of the criticisms of this claustrophobic school, a direct microcosm of the state. Despite the fact that school number 78 is not a “real” public school, and even though many of the events that take place there are so outlandish that it is difficult to believe they could actually happen, Spregelburd invites viewers and readers alike from the very opening lines of the play to think about this school in relation to the real world. In the first scene, Marta Camaño, one of the teachers, comes on stage and breaks the fourth wall between the “fictional story” of *Acassuso*, in which she and the other actors on stage exist, and the “real world” of the audience when she addresses the audience directly: “Bienvenido al mundo real. [...] Si alguien se piensa que la escuelita 78 es muy diferente de otras escuelas, a ese decimos [...] no” (14). Although Spregelburd has obviously offered us an over the top vision of the Argentine public school system, school district number 78 is a direct reflection of the effect of neoliberal policy in Argentina. During the Menem years the IMF and World Bank called for reduced public spending, and one sector that was most negatively affected by these new reforms was the school system — resulting in less capital and fewer resources, which was of course detrimental to the quality of education (Romero, *La crisis argentina* 86).

While the political implications of depicting a dysfunctional governmental institution are quite apparent, the challenge, as is true in much of what has been classified as farcical theater, is to know to what extent the humor can be taken seriously. In the same opening discourse mentioned above by Marta Camaño, just after she affirms that school district number 78 is really no different than any other school, she proceeds by saying that it could be best described as “manicomio.” As the opening line to the play, this self-referential and self-deprecating humor is

a common strategy in farce, and it sets up complicated relationship between the conflicting tones of the play that simultaneously represent an absurd reality or perhaps real life absurdity, as it draws the parallel between the story of the school (also the story of the play), as a madhouse. To what point can we sincerely consider a story that defines its space as absent of any logic?

Priscilla Meléndez suggests that to this self referential laughter is important way of legitimizing political humor in farce by “launching a sardonic laugh at [a] serious attempt to legitimize and impart seriousness to a discourse that historically has been marginalized and considered a second-class genre” (35). Or, perhaps another way to seek sincerity in an outlandish depiction of reality is to accept the absence of logic in reality. Marta Camaño concludes her opening monologue/testimony by further breaking down the already blurry division between political commentary and humor: “Yo soy muy crítica de...del estado...Del estado de las cosas” (13). Is she critical of the state of things inside of the school, is she critical of the State, or is she critical of things inside of a state institution, which is therefore a criticism of the state?

The final scene of the play, in line within the farcical tradition, further breaks down borders, this time between the tragic and the comic: Edgar Fabiana, the soccer player and big stock option invested in by the school, takes the teachers hostage and demands that they provide a ransom. Because all of the teachers form part of a poorly funded state institution, no one is able to satisfy Edgar’s demand. The only one in the room who can offer anything to the crook is Marta Lococo, the owner of the school Credimart (the clothing store), and also the only one in the room who works in private enterprise. Unfortunately, Marta Lococo’s only business deals come from employees of the school, who instead of paying for their clothing in cash, which they do not have, offer to pay her in credit. In a hilarious attempt to pay off Edgar and set the

hostages free, Marta offers to pay him with the money that is owed to her in credit by the teachers, money that may not ever exist in cash. Marta proposes to Edgar, “Mirá, Edgar: esto es un negocio. Dejá ir a dos, y yo te doy el diez por ciento de lo que entre los dos recuperamos de lo que me deben en blusas.” This type of business plan employed by the citizens of the country after the 2001 Crisis was often the only payment option, especially for state and federal employees outside of the government. State employees had no other option than to pay in credit because they often did not receive their pay for long periods of time; the Menem administration was busy selling off much of the national industry at tax payer’s expense while simultaneously racking up the country’s foreign debt by investing federal money in the form of credit when cash was not available.

This final scene is the culmination of the paradoxical elements of farcical theater often utilized by Spregelburd, as the audience laughs at a very funny tragic ending in this fictional play, which provokes laughter in light of a real tragic event in history. The unfortunate plight of these kidnapped school teachers sit without hope on stage, while the audience is reminded of the tragic events of the crisis, and everyone’s reaction is laughter. The laughter, however, is not without the opportunity for critical reflection. *Acassuso*, just like plays Priscilla Meléndez identifies as farce, “create their own disenfranchised discourse and space, where attacks on artistic forms of communication and on social and political systems become a source of laughter and self-exposure as well as of self reflection” (33).

Although Spregelburd’s play is very critical of the government institutions and the political policies which refuse to fund them properly, he does not seem to answer any possibilities for improvement, and there is certainly no hope for a brighter future. The play ends

the way it begins: a group of teachers discuss the robbery at Banco Río. The cyclical form of the play mimics the economic cycle of the country which may have its short moments of economic prosperity, but is also plagued by constant funding problems and huge internal and external debts.

While Spregelburd disguises his dismal social commentary in playful situational comedy, Pablo Trapero's feature film, *Carancho*, delivers his message in a genre film that has been labeled a "dark romance," "thriller,"⁴⁸ and "Melodrama" (Diego Battle). Featuring a relatively extensive budget and acting from Ricardo Darín (*El hijo de la novia*, *Nueve Reinas*, *El secreto de sus ojos*), arguably the most recognizable face of contemporary Argentine film, *Carancho* represents a shift in style and form for director, screenplay writer, and producer, Pablo Trapero⁴⁹. *Mundo grúa* (1999), Trapero's *ópera prima*, is often cited as one of the founding movies of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino*⁵⁰. Filmed entirely in black-and-white on 16 mm film, the movie was made on a miniscule budget⁵¹ with mostly non-professional actors, and was almost entirely void of Hollywood-like action scenes or billboard hits, as it relied almost exclusively on diegetic sound and creative dialogue to move the story along in a cinematic style that has been labeled by some

⁴⁸ Vicente Díaz says about *Carancho*, "Cine de denuncia, sórdida retrato social y *tenso thriller*, el último trabajo del argentino Pablo Trapero es una obra en la que, por supuesto, se habla mucho, pero que mantiene la atención del espectador a causa de un creciente suspense que termina por quitar el aliento."

⁴⁹ Trapero has been credited for the direction, authorship, and co-production of each of his seven feature-films to date, *Mundo grúa* (1999), *El bonaerense* (2002), *Familia rodante* (2004), *Nacido y criado* (2006), *Leonera* (2008), *Carancho* (2010), and *Elefante blanco* (2012).

⁵⁰ The importance of *Mundo Grúa* in the *Nuevo Cine Argentino* has been affirmed by practically all critics of Argentine film: Gonzalo Aguilar, Tamara Falicov, Carolina Rocha, and Joanna Page among others.

⁵¹ In a 1999 interview with Pablo Trapero, Claudia Acuña said, "*Mundo grúa* consumió cuarenta mil dólares, catorce meses de filmación y los 27 años de Pablo, completos y al contado, el cash de cada escena" (qtd. in Aguilar 15).

as a “dirty realism.” Since his debut film, *Trapero*, like many other directors commonly grouped together under the title of *Nuevo Cine Argentino*⁵², has been slowly distancing himself from his original production techniques as he adapts to market trends in filmmaking while his reputation grows and his career advances. *Carancho* perhaps represents his most market-friendly film (with possible exception to his most recent film, *Elefante blanco*, 2012), as it draws audience members in with thrilling action, a glossy finish achieved with 35 mm film and a RED digital camera, enough gratuitous and perhaps even glorified violence to satiate the desires of the most blood-thirsty-viewers, a loud and imposing sound track used to heighten dramatic tension and aid viewers in their judgment of “good” and “bad” characters and scenes, and a sexual romance that turns audience into voyeurs.

Unlike *Mundo grua*, which was entirely independently financed, *Carancho* was a (Argentine/French/Chilean/South Korean) coproduction, receiving funds from a diverse group of sources including the Ibermedia programa (Europe), Ad Vitam (France), L90 Cine Digital (Chile), and Finecut (South Korea). Despite the international funding, Trapero was capable of maintaining the local flavor of the film by collaborating on the writing of the screenplay⁵³ and contributing to the film’s production with the participation of his own company (Matanza Cine). Unlike many of the films commonly grouped together under the title of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino*, which have been criticized for their inability to appeal to a local audience outside of

⁵² The same could be said for Adrián Caetano, Lucrecia Martel, and Daniel Burman, who have taken advantage of international recognition garnered with their early films to seek bigger budgets from international production and distributing companies.

⁵³ Writing credits have also been attributed to Alejandro Fadel, Martín Mauregui, and Santiago Mitre (www.caranchofilm.com).

film festivals⁵⁴, *Carancho* was one of the most watched Argentine movies of 2010, and it was the official Argentine selection for the 2010 Academy Awards, grossing more than two and a half million dollars in Argentina to date (www.boxofficemojo.com). Despite its local context and content, its entertainment and marketing value inside of the United States has been observed, and for that reason, the rights to the film have been sold Scott Cooper and Aaron Stockard with the hopes of making an American remake (Rohter “A Sequel to Argentine Noir?”).

Part of the international appeal offered by *Carancho* is due to its strict adherence to many of the elements commonly attributed to the neo-noir genre, a term that “describes any film coming after the classic noir period that contains noir themes and noir sensibility” (Conard 2). Film noir, or *cine negro*, as it is often referred to in Spanish, was a term coined by French film critics to refer to a group of Hollywood films from the 1940s and 1950s that “combine a number of elements in a way which makes it particularly complex and interesting: a distinctive and exciting visual style, an unusual narrative complexity, a generally more critical and subversive view of American ideology than the norm” (Walker 9). A common aesthetic in these films has been observed:

The distinctiveness of stylistic elements in film noir is frequently cited: the use of low-key lighting to create unusual shadows and chiaroscuro effects, a high proportion of night scenes, off-angle camera compositions, deep focus shots framing characters in cluttered, claustrophobic interiors, a greater or lesser sense of expressionist distortion. (Walker 26)

⁵⁴ Jorge Carnevale has criticized films of the Nuevo Cine Argentino for their “minimalismo, lugares comunes y diálogos para el bostezo” (“Cine para festivals”).

Also essential to the noir genre is the dark urban city, a space from which to articulate sociopolitical and economic criticism. The dark setting and unique visual appeal of this popular genre is perfectly fitting in Argentina of the post-crisis, as it effectively transmits a dark period of economic hardships marked by the post-crisis.

While *Carancho* consciously and effectively appropriates many elements of a genre developed in Hollywood, it simultaneously manages to sustain a local appeal, offering its viewers a socially-aware, dark, and complex story about the uncertain role of entirely average and totally imperfect citizens engulfed in a claustrophobic and corrupting environment of the Argentine post-crisis⁵⁵. Central to the story is a public hospital which has been completely corrupted by greedy and/or desperate subjects, manipulated by market forces. As a result, the hospital, just like the school in *Acassuso*, is almost entirely incapable of functioning in its primary role as a universal provider of goods and services to the general public, independent of market forces. Again, like the school portrayed in *Acassuso*, the hospital, deeply saturated in corrupting forces, is a complicated and claustrophobic microcosm of the state itself.

The story of *Carancho* revolves around the love affair of two disheartened and confined members of society whose complex relationship reflects their uncertain role's in society. "Sosa" (Ricardo Darín) is an ex-lawyer, who, after losing his license to practice law, seeks work as a "carancho," a colloquial term in Argentina for an ambulance chaser. While he considers himself a kind of social servant who defends the neediest in times of crisis at the expense of corrupt insurance agencies, he is subordinated to his superiors at work — they consistently demonstrate their limitless greed and viscous tactics used to take advantage of the poor and innocent. Like

⁵⁵ According to Pedro Miguel Lamet, the movie had such an impact on society that it actually provoked a change in traffic legislation.

many neo-noir heroes he possesses a kind of moral ambivalence, and, although he seems to want to do the right thing in many cases, he is entangled in the “passions of a criminal world” and can be read as a “victim of a hostile world” (Walker 8). “Luján” (Martina Gusmán⁵⁶) is a soft-spoken and slightly naïve emergency medical technician from the provinces whose long hours and drug dependency make it difficult for her to serve those in need. Like Sosa, she is trapped in a confining position at work, as she is subject to the corrupt greed of doctors, who consistently earn their pay checks by making sordid pacts with insurance agency, rather than serving their patients. Sosa and Luján initiate their turbulent relationship at the scene of an accident, Sosa hoping to benefit from the unfortunate plight of a potential client, and Luján struggling to deliver medical care to a patient in need. The meeting at the accident sparks a short, but passionate love affair that is temporarily brought to a screeching halt when one of Luján’s patients (who happens to be Sosa’s friend) dies under her jurisdiction as a result of one of Sosa’s convoluted plots in which he stages a violent accident with hopes that the premeditated catastrophe will result in insurance claim benefits for his friend. Luján, enraged by Sosa’s dubious and precarious professional dealings, repeatedly ignores all of his attempts at courtship, until he finally proves again to be a worthy suitor when he heroically comes to her aid by violently killing his own boss in her defense, shortly after Luján becomes involuntarily and innocently trapped in the middle of a scheme orchestrated by a veteran doctor in her hospital, working closely with Sosa’s corrupt and violent agency. Captured by the authorities as a result of the murder, Sosa and Luján attempt to liberate themselves from their oppressors, through an intricate plan which involves them

⁵⁶ Martina Gusmán is the director’s wife. *Carancho* is the third film that she collaborated with the director on, after *Nacido y criado* (2006), and *Leonera* (2008). In 2012, the couple combined their talents once again in the making of Trapero’s most recent film, *Elefante blanco*.

heroically escaping from the movie's "bad guys" with a suitcase jam-packed with cash at full speed with bullets careening past them in all directions. Ironically, the plan goes perfectly until they are stopped short of their happy ending — they are smashed by another car in an automobile accident, ending their relationships, and perhaps their lives, in the same way that it all began.

Apart from the heated love affair, violent action, and thrilling and convoluted plot, central to the film is the hospital, set in the Matanza region of Buenos Aires, a setting that was authenticated thanks to Martina Guzmán's (Luján) 6 months of research in a public hospital in the region. Filthy, disorganized, neglected, and filled with apathetic employees, the care offered is abysmal. Honest, hard-working, and mostly uncorrupted by outside forces, Luján is an exception to the rule. Despite her efforts to provide for her patients, she is constantly held up by the bureaucratic receptionist or unable to attend to patients because of insufficient beds and equipment. Patients are crowded together; with limited space in quarantine patients with contagious diseases contaminate the air for the other patients and doctors. The camera transmits feelings of claustrophobia to viewers by focusing on overcrowded and entrapping public spaces including waiting areas, holding rooms, narrow hallways, unhygienic bathrooms (whose walls are filled with graffiti and floors are littered with toilet paper), the suffocating dormitory where Luján rests between call (the bunk beds are draped with soiled sheets and the kitchenette is filled with unwashed dishes), and the chaotic operating room (overcrowded by multiple patients and under qualified and overworked medical technicians).

The discomfort and suffocating environment of the hospital is heightened by the rest of the claustrophobic and uncomfortable spaces filmed in the movie, a common characteristic of the neo-noir:

In the gangster movie, the city may be dangerous, but it's also exciting, and the hero moves through its setting with a breezy confidence and sociability; in *film noir*, it is, rather, bleak and isolating, and the hero tends to take to the streets uneasily, aware of himself as an outsider. If the city may be taken as an image of capitalism, the gangster movie dwells on its luxuries and spoils in a way which captures something of their allure; but in film noir the focus is on the seedy underside of the city: the casualties or crooks of capitalism. (Walker 30)

In the tradition of neo-noir, city spaces in *Carancho* consist of small elevators, immense high-rise buildings where neighbors are literally stacked one on-top-of-the-other, shoebox sized, cluttered apartments, small service stations, bathroom stalls, tiny showers, narrow back-alleys, ambulances, morgues, funeral homes, a small dark basement, and Sosa's cluttered and disorganized office. The camera rarely liberates these characters from a decaying and decrepit urban landscape, consistently framed by large, dirty concrete walls and dark pavement. Neither the characters nor the spectators are given a chance to breathe in green, open spaces, free of entrapping urban structures.

The camera strategically reinforces feelings of claustrophobia by consistently placing Luján and Sosa in entrapping and suffocating positions with relation to the camera. Three specific shots in the film prove to be especially exemplarily of this technique. First, prior to the initial romantic encounter between Sosa and Luján, the two characters are seen innocently engaging in a playful conversation seemingly appropriate of any standard sophomoric romance story (see image 2).



Image 2 (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/11/movies/11carancho.html?_r=1)

What is of particular interest, however, is not the dialogue, but that while the two characters sit animatedly inside of a convenient store with excited hopes of forging a new relationship, the camera ominously frames the two characters in a constricting position as it traps the glowing faces of these seemingly innocent characters inside its lens, which is further framed and enclosed by the dark window frame that surrounds the faces of these two characters. While the camera moves freely in the outdoor setting, the restrictive enclosure faced by the film's protagonist is heightened as they are caught inside of a suffocating convenient store. This is a foreshadowing for the limitations faced by these characters at work, and the eventual tragedy that will soon face their lives and this short-lived romance. Image 3 and 4 similarly, and perhaps more overtly, underscore the suffocating environment inhabited by Sosa and Luján in their turbulent jobs and relationship.

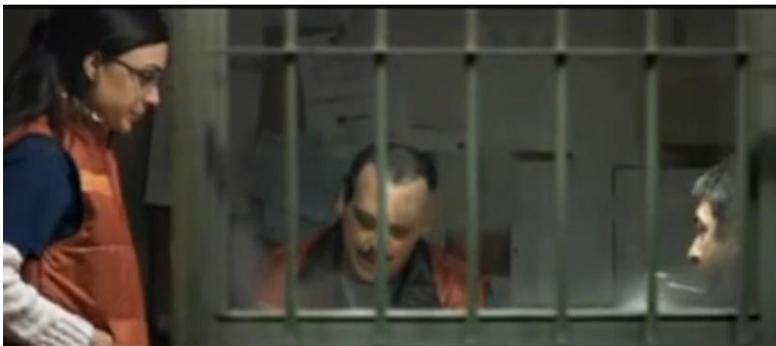


Image 3



Image 4

These two shots, almost perfectly identical to each other, work to draw an explicit parallel between these two characters that are both incarcerated at home and at work, as each of them are filmed trapped behind bars, again underscoring the professional and personal limitations by assimilating their work in a public hospital to that of a state prison.

The entrapment of the protagonists is additionally emphasized by the music, best represented in the opening scene. The film opens with a catchy tune that instantly draws viewers into its narrative. While the song is sure to attract viewers, it simultaneously offers an appropriate introduction to the claustrophobic storyline. “Misiones” is an instrumental song performed by the Argentine musician Chango Spasiuk of the northern Misiones province of Argentina. The dark tenor and slow, monotonous rhythms of the song ominously set the tone for the rest of the film — a kind of foreshadowing for the dramatic story that is to follow. Leading the way in this eerie tune is the accordion, establishing its gloomy tones while it continuously recycles the same dark melody, imitating the melancholy sounds of the voice of a sad singer who is trapped in the same dark venue night after night. The accordion is contrasted with an unsettling and syncopated drum beat that seeks independence, but is conscious of its subordinate and secondary role, relative to the accordion. The music underscores the gloomy and depressing

images on the screen, featuring the scene of anonymous victims of an automobile accident (who we later find out are Luján and Sosa). The camera neurotically scans through a series of photographs to the off-beat rhythms of the music. The pictures reveal close-up images of broken glass, isolated clothing items (including one of Luján's shoes), and severed limbs that have been lacerated by the accident and are further fractured by the camera and the irregular syncopated beat of the music, which further exacerbate the chaotic scene.

Despite the potential joys of the romantic love affair that at times comes close to freeing the public from the tense mood of the film, the lack of light never gives the audience the chance to forget the troubles surrounding the protagonists. Save the very first and last scene of the film, in tradition of the noir aesthetics, the entire story is narrated in the dark of night, transmitting a dark and depressing mood that underscores the difficulties faced by these characters, and the innocent victims of the hospital, whose fate is left in the hands of corrupt and inefficient state organizations. Ironically, the only scenes that are shot during the light of day similarly transmit a dark mood, as they are filmed in black and white. The opening scene of the film is one of these daytime scenes, and it recounts the tragic ending of the film's protagonists through a series of black and white images mentioned above. The decision to use black and white in the very beginning of the movie effectively renders homage to classical noir films, made in the 1940s and 1950s. Therefore, from the very first scene, Trapero's film is self-consciously situated within a history of noir filmmaking. This self-aware nature is common to the neo-noir tradition, and, according to Mark T. Conard, it makes them even more appealing than their artistic predecessors:

Neo-noir films in some ways seem better able to embody the noir outlook. This is for a couple of important reasons. First, the term *film noir* was employed only retroactively, describing a cycle of films that had already (largely) passed. The filmmakers of the classic period didn't have access to that expression and couldn't have understood or grasped entirely the meaning or shape of the movement to which they were contributing, whereas neo-noir filmmakers are quite aware of the meaning of *noir* and are quite consciously working within the framework and adding to the noir cannon. (2)

At the same time that Trapero situates *Carancho* within the history of noir filmmaking with the opening black-and-white images, he also directs viewers to his own cinematographic past within the greater context of Argentine film. Indeed, these same images may evoke memories in some viewers of his debut film *Mundo grúa*,⁵⁷ made entirely in black-and-white. This is self-referential on another level if we consider that *Mundo grúa*, just like *Carancho* explicitly places itself in dialogue with film tradition. Tamara Falicov writes of *Mundo grúa*, "Trapero's hope was to create a mood evocative of Italian neorealism, or what has been dubbed the neo-neorealism' of filmmaking in Argentina. Trapero's philosophy that 'daily life in itself is absurd' by painting a realist portrait of a man in search of work and his identity in a globalized world" (121-22). Trapero's playful dialogue with genres continues with his 2004 film *Familia rodante*, in which he enters into dialogue with the popular, road movie genre. As Johanna Page observes, Trapero is not the only contemporary filmmaker from Argentina to self-consciously put himself into dialogue with canonical popular genre films. Page suggests that Argentine

⁵⁷ Prior to the making of *Mundo grúa*, Trapero directed *Negocios*, a short film that was also made in black-and-white.

directors are not merely duplicating a foreign popular genre, but appropriating it to their own context, and, in some cases, commenting on their own peripheral relationship to the center of film production: “Contemporary Argentine cinema’s forays into genres associated with Hollywood — the crime thriller, the western, film noir, science fiction — have always been self-conscious appropriations of the center’s codes and formulae” (108). Page suggests that self-conscious nature is employed in order to “express something of the temporal and spatial distance implied by these reworkings, as well as the even greater self-awareness with which ‘cultural acts out of its own commodification’ at the periphery” (108).

Carancho again proves to be self-aware in the filming of the final violent action scene. While the special effects of the thrilling action scene that concludes the film provides the viewer with exhilarating adrenalin rush that is full of typical noir violence, and also worthy of popular film, Trapero challenges the viewer to not get lost in the action, as he calls attention to the artifices of his movie, filming the last scene of the story in two extraordinarily long takes, mostly with a hand-held camera (first recounting Sosa’s story, followed by the development of Luján’s point of view as she reconnects with Sosa). During both of these two long takes, the cameraman sits mostly inside of the moving car with the actors, making his presence overtly felt by the viewer. When the car hits a bump, the camera shakes, and in the very end of the movie, when Luján and Sosa are sideswiped by a violent and reckless driver, the camera rolls over and the lights turn off. The overwhelming presence of the camera (and the camera operator) force the viewer to take notice in the production methods of the film, and call into question the movie’s verisimilitude. While there are long takes and hand-held camera use throughout the movie, its presence is perhaps best noticed during this final scene. It may not be coincidentally that Trapero

utilizes these techniques during the most fantastical and far-fetched moment of the film, a kind of wink of an eye to the viewer, who is not supposed to believe the possibility of these characters' heroic getaway at gunpoint. While the escape may have been successful in *Die Hard*, it proves impossible in *Carancho*, when these characters' romantic and thrilling getaway ends in their tragic death. This tragic and pessimistic ending is typical of the noir genre, and therefore makes it different from other popular Hollywood forms: "Whereas melodrama tends to be focused on the home, the action in film *noir* is nearly always centrifugally away from the home: even when the *noir* hero seeks domesticity, it becomes an ideal which he cannot realize [...] or which is violently destroyed" (Cameron 36).

Carancho's structure similarly evokes the traditionally pessimistic view of reality while simultaneously adding to the marketability of the film. Like in an action thriller, the opening scene instantly draws the viewer in and gets the story started with a boom, featuring the scene of a violent collision, instantly raising the dramatic tension, and, as in a crime thriller, it leaves the audience with the exciting task of solving the cause of this supposed accident, and of discovering the identities of its victims. When the final scene of the movie discloses the identities of the previously anonymous victims from the opening scene, the film's circular narrative is revealed. The cyclical motion of the story, void of forward progression, reinforces the dark feelings of claustrophobia of these two victims, who are unable to help themselves, or the society that they are supposedly meant to serve as public employees (in the case of Luján), or private businessman who are supposedly servants of society's victims (as is the case with Sosa). Luján and Sosa are trapped at work, in their personal lives, and in the circular structure that recounts their stories.

After being repeatedly and violently coerced into cooperating with his superiors at work, Sosa seems to have no choice but to act as a mostly servile employee of a corrupt organization that benefits economically from the tragedies of societies most marginal citizens. Between hero and antihero, Sosa helps innocent crime victims claim money from greedy insurance companies, but he also reinforces the profit-hungry tendencies of capitalism's most fraudulent agencies as they turn tragedy into economic gain, settling with insurance companies for enormous sums of money. Once receiving the insurance claims, Sosa's company keeps the majority of the funds and offers a minute percentage to the real victim. Sosa's business works to corrupt complicit members of the hospital staff, who are essentially converted into employees of potentially lucrative insurance agencies. Rather than faithfully serving their communities in exchange for increasingly diminishing public funds, these corrupted doctors choose to accept payments from private business (lawyers and insurance agencies) who offer them quick cash for their lascivious actions.

Despite Luján's seemingly honest effort to serve society's most marginal victims, and convince her new romantic interest to leave his questionable line of work, her attempts seem to be in vain, as a plethora of circumstances make her struggle a failure. Her first obstacle is herself, as she is psychological trapped by a powerful addiction to pain medications, thus impeding her ability to serve those in need. Also detrimental to her positive intentions is the bureaucracy inside the hospital that consistently poses a threat to her attempts at serving her patients. In addition, Luján is surrounded by unreliable and dishonest colleagues at work who leave her understaffed and force her to be overworked to the point that her efforts are in vein. And finally, as a result of

her love affair with Sosa, she is instantly drawn in to the corrupting world of the “caranchos,” which eventually leads to her downfall.

The film’s title obviously refers to the questionable social value offered by this specific type of lawyers, but it also may be representative of greater issues facing the country. An endemic species in Argentina, a Carancho is a beautiful bird, but also a scavenger, prying on decaying carcasses and benefiting from the hard work of others, or, in some cases, making the best out of a tragic situation. Caranchos, much like hawks in the United States, which are often found preying on road kill in the open roads in the center of the country, are prevalent on the long, flat, and desolate highways of the Argentine Pampa in central Argentina. Similarly, Sosa, and others in his firm await accidents, and at times even provoke them, knowing that tragedy often equals economic gain. However, Sosa is not the only carancho in the film, nor is he the only one who benefits from the loss of others. The movie’s title can also be interpreted as a more abstract metaphor for a capitalistic greed that is permitted, and arguably reinforced by a system constructed to deregulate the market.

While the hospital depicted in the movie is an enormous source of revenue for lawyers, insurance agencies, banks, and corrupted doctors, it fails to serve its real purpose in society, which is to provide medical attention to its population. Similarly, the federal government of the 90s became a feeding ground for private businesses and transnational banks, which made sordid business deals with corrupt government officials that benefited personally from the sales of businesses formerly pertaining to the general population. In other words, private corporations and governmental officials benefitted from a situation that was tragic for most of the lower and middle class citizens, who were being deprived of goods and services that were either

disappearing or slowly deteriorating. At the same time, after the 2001 crisis, international banks such as the IMF and World Bank, were slowly getting their loans paid off (with profitable interest), as the general population was facing heightening austerity measures.

Perhaps due precisely to the wide popularity and mainstream appeal of the movie, *Carancho* arguably had an impact on the country's legislation, calling to attention the potential problem of public institutions that are held hostage to private law firms, lawyers, and complicit doctors alike. Shortly after the movie's debut, a bill was proposed in congress to create legislation that would restrict the power and dealings of these corrupt lawyers and insurance agencies. On March 9, 2012, an article in the newspaper *Clarín* confirms that the "Ley Anti-Carancho" was unanimously approved by the senate, and its purpose is to: "[e]stablece[r] un régimen de protección para las víctimas de accidentes para evitar que sean 'estafadas' por abogados que obtienen de ellas un poder para tramitar la indemnización." Reportedly, the fictional film was not only essential in raising political consciousness about this pressing issue, but it even formed part of the political debate, "[l]a iniciativa tomó como punto de partida las historias narradas en la película 'Carancho' (de Pablo Trapero), que muestra los fraudes de los – que pueden ser víctimas las personas accidentadas" ("Ley Anti-Carancho").

The passing of this bill seems to represent the impact of popular film on sociopolitical and economic issues, a concern that is common with many directors who have worked inside of noir (and neo-noir) film. While noir directors of the 40s and 50s were working in the entertainment industry, their films reflect a concern to highlight the potential sociopolitical and economic problems. Considering the fact that these films did not always portray the country or government in a positive light, directors and producers such as Dmytryk and Adrian Scott "were

summoned to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee” (Walker 37) because of views expressed in their film, *Crossfire*. Similarly, Roman Polanski’s 1974 neo-noir film *Chinatown* calls important attention to real issues of corrupt deals being made between private companies and local authorities in the city of Los Angeles. Similar to *Carancho* the sociopolitical and economic issues raised in *Chinatown* are delivered to its audience members in an exciting and convoluted plot that draws in viewers with its big-named actors, passionate love affairs, and a thrilling crime adventure.

Carancho, like many of its predecessors in the noir genre, exemplifies a mainstream film that can both meet international viewer demands while simultaneously maintaining a strong connection with local politics of the Argentine post-crisis. While it is true that Pablo Trapero’s movie budgets continue to grow since his debut film, it is also apparent that his films continue to dialogue with current issues and themes. Indeed, his aesthetics and production methods are distancing him from films first associated with the *Nuevo Cine Argentino*, however, the original themes are still present.

While there has not been any reported change in legislation resulting from *Acassuso*’s popular success, its relevance to contemporary Argentina is equally as important. Indeed, those who have seen *Acassuso* are much fewer than the 600,000 people who saw *Carancho*; however, it has proved to be a largely successful play for the independent theater scene. Its popularity can certainly be attributed to its farcical humor, but its reminder to the audience about the decaying state of public schools is no less important. Although Spregelburd repeatedly affirms in

interviews that he in no way seeks to deliver a sociopolitical message with his theater, *Acassuso* is undeniably a story that is grounded in real problems faced by a post-crisis Argentina.

Aware of the potential impact that art can have on society, Mauricio Macri, current head of the government of Buenos Aires in 2013, and Esteban Bullrich, the Minister of Education, recently fired six public employees (including a school principal, vice-principal, and a school librarian) for staging a controversial play in their high school that questioned recent governmental decision to cut public funding to schools. The content of the theatrical representation, similar to *Acassuso*, both questioned the lack of government funding in public education, and the decision to invest public funds in exclusive private institutions. Dialogue from the play features a conversation of a character named “Mauricio” and “Esteban” having the following conversation:

Tenemos que hacer algo por la educación pública.

Ya sé. Saquemos a los gremios y elijamos los docentes a dedo.

No, pero quiero más. ¡Más!

Y mirá. Ya les sacamos los subsidios para cuestiones edilicias y se los dimos a las privadas.

Mirá: en esta escuela este grado tiene doce y este otro tiene trece alumnos.

¡Ya está! ¡Cerrémoslo ya! Después, les vendemos el chamuyo de que es para que socialicen más. (Qtd. in Pertot “La parodia que no causó gracia a Macri y a Bullrich”)

As is clear, the play questions the government's decision to invest in private education (thus leaving fewer funds for public institutions) while simultaneously abandoning certain public schools.⁵⁸

Although Spregelburd's *Acassuso* is not quite as overtly political as this play, it similarly uses farcical humor to address a real political issue. While Spregelburd has yet to be arrested, his theater, just like Trapero's film, is no doubt a potential for change in Argentina. *Acassuso*, just like Trapero's *Carancho*, demonstrate how the entertainment industry can impact political debate. Both *Acassuso* and *Carancho* use popular genres to raise consciousness about neglected and claustrophobic public institutions that are exploited by private industry and corrupted state officials alike.

⁵⁸ In 2006, following a model set by the Carlos Menem administration in his 1992 *Ley Federal de Educación*, Néstor Kirchner's *Ley de Educación Nacional*, guaranteed state funding for private school education. In other words, public funds were directly invested in private enterprise. Nora Veiras elucidates the impact of this law in the province of Buenos Aires, "En territorio bonaerense funcionan 7300 servicios educativos privados –representan un tercio del sistema [...] El 66 por ciento del total de 7300 es subvencionado por el Estado." This decision reflects how the state continues to distance itself from lower and middle class citizens, who are most dependent on their services, by allocating state funds to exclusive private schools. Policies such as these represent a clear continuation between Menem's presidency during 1990s and the Kirchner years (2003-present), seeing as they arguably increase the gap between the wealthy and the poor, which is precisely Maristella Svampa's criticism of neoliberal governments, and, according to journalist and author Martín Caparrós, it is, "lo que define la política K".

Chapter 3

Welcome to the Machine: Factories in Crises

The reason for studying the industrial working class or any other oppressed group must be political. The industrial working class still represents the most fundamental point of critique, both of advanced capitalism, dominated by private appropriation of the product of direct producers, and of state socialism, dominated by central appropriation of the product of direct producers.

(Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production*)

Si se escribe en una situación de cambio (literario, espacial, social, cultural) dicha literatura es política porque implica una transgresión, una nueva perspectiva, una forma de percibir lo que denominamos el mundo.

(Marcelo Eckhardt, Interview with Damián Blas)

Perhaps one of the most prototypical stages for labor disputes across the globe, and most certainly in Argentina, the factory has been an essential battle ground for union leaders, politicians, and the proletariat throughout the country's history as an industrialized nation since the turn of the 20th century. With an intricate hierarchy not dissimilar to most political systems, in most factories, the president of the business drafts laws which are in turn enforced by a governing body (managerial staff), who fights to maintain order and progress with the common people (the laborers). The physical and hierarchical design of factories and the social and professional interactions between the various players within them are essential indicators of the society which harbors these spaces. Indeed, what Michael Burawoy calls the factory regime (internal factory policies) is entirely interdependent on the national politics in which they are imbedded. Under a strict communist regime most factories are generally subject to the direct

jurisdiction of some entity of the state, while in a capitalist nation the factory is subordinated to the demands of the owners who adhere fervently to the laws of supply and demand. While order, progress, and efficiency on the factory floor generally represent profitable gains and steady production for managers, government, owners, or, share holders, these same results may simultaneously represent worker exploitation and unsatisfied laborers. The decisions made by the workers to endure unfavorable labor conditions rather than challenge the status quo are the decisions that shape societies. The feuds that arise between the various hierarchical powers inside a factory are an integral part of a nation's politics, as they involve a largely diverse group of players in society and set the example for other social, political, and economic conflicts that may arise.

A government's ability to cultivate hearty and flourishing factories, in which the needs and demands of its various factions are met, is often a direct reflection of its ability to maintain a thriving and productive nation. While factories depend on a wide variety of citizens to succeed, they cannot be run without the workers themselves, the biggest, and potentially the most vigorous branch of the institution. Working class occupants are not only a potential force to reckon with inside of the plant, but in society in general. In the 1940s, Juan Domingo Perón's rise to power is no doubt directly linked to his outspoken defense of laborers. After serving a lead role in the DNT (Dirección Nacional del Trabajo) and later as the Ministerio de Economía, Perón developed an integral alliance with the industrial laborers, assuring himself greater political strength. In the context of a large resurgence of national industrialization, the working class would represent a huge political body with numerous allies including workers' unions, artists, and intellectuals. Through a series of moderate reforms and drastic performative

measures, Perón was able to win the trust of the “descamisados”— a strong group of working class allies. Perón fought for important labor reforms such as minimum wage, paid vacations, and retirement and disability plans. In addition, he allowed for unions to develop powerful positions in society, which in turn led to massive public protests and worker strikes. However, despite all that Perón did for the workers, like in fascist Italy under Mussolini or Franco’s Spain, the unions were always subordinate to the power of the state, and unauthorized worker rebellions would often be quashed by the government. To create unions, therefore, at times signifies nothing more than to create the public illusion of a government that supports worker autonomy and privilege — especially when they are in the hands of the government.⁵⁹

The confusion surrounding Perón and his political ideals (at times appealing to the workers, while other times making deals more favorable to owners and foreign business leaders) is perhaps what eventually led to the violent clash between his followers from both the extreme right and left upon his return to the country in 1973. Perón’s ability to garner support from all members of society was the key to his success, but, paradoxically, it eventually would bring about his demise. After 18 years of political exile, Perón arrived at the Ezeiza airport in Buenos Aires and was flanked by such contradictory figures as the right wing leader, José López Rega⁶⁰

⁵⁹ A similar dynamic existed between workers unions’ and government officials in Mexico. Although the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) supported workers’ unions, and regularly pledged their support for the working class, these organizations were subordinated to the control of the federal government, thus limiting their power: “Los sindicatos, por supuesto, después de los años 30 dejaron de ser lo que habían llegado a ser: verdaderas organizaciones de Resistencia de trabajo asalariado y de defensa de los intereses de los trabajadores. Se convirtieron en entes extraños a esos intereses. Fueron, desde entonces, organizaciones al servicio del Estado y fuentes de poder para los líderes que el Estado mismo reconocía como personeros. Los trabajadores, como tales, fueron anulados en el juego político que desarrollaban los sindicatos y sometidos, muchísimas veces por la violencia, a la voluntad de sus dirigentes corruptos y vendidos” (Córdova).

⁶⁰ “José López Rega, que había secretario privado de Perón y luego ministro de Bienestar Social, y a quien se sindicaba como el poder oculto del gobierno, organizó grupos clandestinos dedicados a asesinar dirigentes

(one of the eventual founders of the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance — Triple A), and his left-wing supporter, Héctor Cámpora. This peculiar political alliance was met by a crowd that is reported to have amassed more than three million ecstatic constituents from all across the political spectrum. Members of both sides believed themselves to be safe under the auspices of Perón; however, many were quickly proven wrong when government snipers opened fire on the crowd, targeting members the Montoneros⁶¹ — a group of left-wing militants. It soon became clear that many who had benefited from the support of their leader in the 40s would become severely marginalized during Perón’s brief period in office in 1973.⁶²

The same political confusion returned to the country at the end of the 1980s with the presidency of Carlos Menem. Campaigning under the guise of the Peronist party, it was believed by many that he would support the industrial class and their cause. However, Menem quickly demonstrated a largely unforeseen political and economic agenda when, together with his economic minister, Domingo Cavallo and economic advisors from the United States, the president and his allies quickly worked to open up the market to international investors, privatize

opositores, muchos de los cuales eran activistas sindicales e intelectuales disidentes, no enrolados en las organizaciones guerrilleras” (Romero, *Breve historia de la Argentina* 186).

⁶¹ In *Breve historia de la Argentina*, José Luis Romero defines the Montoneros in the following way, “Se trataba de un grupo de origen nacionalista y católico al que pronto se sumaron sectores provenientes de la izquierda, que sobresalió por su capacidad para asumir el discurso y las consignas de Perón, combinarlas con otras provenientes del nacionalismo tradicional, del catolicismo progresista y de la izquierda revolucionaria, y a la vez movilizar y organizar a distintos sectores: estudiantes, trabajadores o moradores de barrios marginales [...] Montoneros combinó la acción militar con la específicamente política; en ella sobresalió la Juventud Peronista [...] en el que la liberación nacional debía llevar a la ‘patria socialista’” (184). The montoneros were confronted by the right wing group “patria peronista.”

⁶² José Luis Romero articulates how Perón abandoned his left-wing supporters upon his return to Argentina in 1973 in *Breve historia de la Argentina*, “Fue claro que Perón, quien en su anterior lucha con los militares había respaldado a los jóvenes, repudiaba ahora su forma de acción, sus consignas y sus propósitos, si inclinaba por los sectores más tradicionales del partido y se ocupaba de desalojar a los sectores juveniles peronistas de posiciones de poder” (185).

national businesses, and drastically decrease public spending. Curiously, perhaps due to corruption and government intervention in the workers unions during the 1990s, while many workers rights gained during the Alfonsín administration (1983-1989) disappeared under Menem's presidency, Argentina's most powerful union, the CGT (Confederación General del Trabajo), offered its full support of President Menem and his neoliberal reforms (Grimson and Kessler 148). Many of the same economic and social standards established during Menem's two terms in office were subsequently sustained during De la Rúa's presidency, and would be severely detrimental to the industrial labor force — eventually bringing about the economic crisis of 2001.

In this context factory conditions became claustrophobic, entrapping workers in their routines like machines without a foreseeable alternative for change. Although exacerbated by the economic crisis of 2001, situations of economic crises are cyclical in Argentina. Progress gained for the workers in the mid 1940s during Perón's first term in office would already begin to dissipate during his second term in the 1950s and would be completely forgotten with his return to the country in 1973. Similarly, Menem's economic gains made by Menem in the early 90s would eventually result in the economic crisis of 2001. The series of dips and plummeting drops in the economic market — met by devastating results in the factory, is in itself a kind of incarcerating cycle, stealing workers of economic and social confidence and stability at work and thus contributing to their claustrophobia.

Mundo fabril (2009⁶³), a play directed by Román Podolsky⁶⁴, and the novel *La nueva rabia* (2008) by Marcelo Eckhardt, both portray workers who have been conditioned by their

⁶³ *Mundo fabril* premiered in 2009 at Teatro del Abasto in Buenos Aires. It has since been restaged at the same venue in 2011 and 2012.

historical, political, and economic circumstances to obediently and passively become indistinguishable from the machines that they operate. Written well after the economic crisis of 2001, each of the two artistic productions subtly reflects on the current state of the country via the factory setting. Curiously, both *Mundo fabril* and *La nueva rabia* are set in either vague or distant pasts, suggesting that the present condition is perhaps nothing more than a hauntingly familiar reproduction of history. The characters in these works are uncomfortably trapped in narratives that do not progress with time. Their cyclical form tactfully bolsters an overtly bleak and deterministic message — positive change is at worst nothing more than a fictional fantasy, and at best, an ephemeral possibility to be predictably matched by a subsequent turn of less favorable events. Claustrophobia in these works can be interpreted as a result of the restrictive labor environment that converts the working class into machines as well as by the cyclical motion of history itself. Conscious of their own exploitation, but at the same time incapable of envisioning an alternate future, these character's outlooks are bleak — their only clear destiny is that of economic and social exploitation in the factory. Whether they like it or not, the central characters in both works of art become converted into sort of machines, trapped in their roles and moving predictably and tirelessly in circles like the hands on an everlasting clock.

Just like the factory staged in *Mundo fabril*, which is operated by outdated machinery, and poorly paid employees, the 11 actors and their director, Rodán Podolsky, worked under little funding to produce the play. There was no casting call for the play, nor was there a script when

⁶⁴ Román Podolsky is a veteran playwright, actor, and director who has collaborated on various levels in more than 17 theatrical pieces in the independent theater scene in Buenos Aires. He is perhaps best known for his participation in *Harina* (2005), a monologue that he directed and co-wrote with the play's protagonist, Carolina Tejada. In addition to his work in theatrical production, Podolsky also regularly leads courses and seminars on acting, directing, and writing (romanpodolsky.blogspot.com).

the rehearsals began. Just like with the actors in *Tercer cuerpo* by Claudio Tolcachir, the actors were gathered together as part of an acting seminar. While Podolsky is credited for developing the situation and setting of the play (the factory), much of the story and dialogue was created as in collaboration between the director and his actors (all of whom share the authorship of the script). While many of the actors were formally trained, for some stage experience was quite limited, which arguably gave them a certain authenticity, bolstered by the fact that much of the dialogue is delivered directly toward the audience in a first person narration, as if offering a personal testimony. Despite the apparent authenticity of the dialogues/monologues, neither the director nor the actors had real life factory experience, and therefore, in order to research their respective roles in the play, they spent months visiting factories and interviewing employees.

Mundo fabril is not a traditional play in the sense that it has no real sense of time, and it does not have character or plot development. It consists mostly of a series of short vignettes by the play's 11 characters, documenting different aspects of factory life via personal testimonies, conversations, and choreographed routines. Each short scene takes place in a unique setting whose new boundaries are (re)created by the rearrangement of cardboard panels on wheels (about eight feet tall and three feet wide) that are constantly being repositioned on the stage by the actors themselves (image 1).



Image 1. The stage design for this play is constantly being recreated by the panels seen clearly in this image. (<http://mundofabril.blogspot.com/>)

Although each of the various testimonies transpires in a unique setting, as the title of the play suggests, every scene occurs inside of a factory. Also common to each story that is told is a general atmosphere of entrapment and immobility as well as a frustration with unaccommodating and precarious labor conditions. Characters express their inability to act upon dreams and aspirations outside of the factory, and inside of the factory they complain of exposure to toxic and contaminated air; unreliable, late, and incomplete pay checks; little job security; hazardous working conditions caused by outdated and unsafe machinery; unaccommodating schedules; and little vacation time.

Each of the character's discomfort and unease is heightened by the space that engulfs them. The play was staged at Teatro del Abasto, where the audience occupied an insignificant section of the building, sitting on small stadium bleachers inside of an enormous and cavernous space that was purposely left almost entirely open and empty. The tall and windowless cement walls together with the dark laminated floor were left completely unadorned, creating a cool (in

temperature and mood) and impersonal environment (image 2).



Image 2. A photo of the interior at Teatro Abasto in Buenos Aires, where *Mundo fabril* was staged (<http://www.teatrodelabasto.com/>).

Wearing clothing with mostly dark and indiscreet colors (image 3), the actors were similarly void of any originality or passion.



Image 3 (<http://mundofabril.blogspot.com/2011/04/radio-programa-subey-baja-conducido.html>)

One of the characters was appropriately covered from head to toe in a jumpsuit, which, just like the ambiguous cement structure that surrounded him, effectively evoked the feeling of a laborer in most stereotypical factory settings, or perhaps even an inmate in a federal prison. During each

choreographed routine, mechanical music echoed loudly throughout the building, a kind of reminder to the audience and characters alike of the insignificant and powerless role that they played within this unforgiving space. The audience and characters share each other's discomfort from the very beginning of the play; there is little metaphorical or literal barrier between them — the actors regularly address the audience directly from an uncomfortably close distance. In *Mundo fabril*, the breaking down of the fourth wall transforms the audience into a potential ally of many desperate characters in the play, but it also converts them into witnesses of stories of factory corruption and abuse. Despite the close physical distance between the actors and audience, when the actors speak, their voices reverberate ominously off the immense theater/factory/prison walls, emphasizing a kind of metaphorical distance that separates the day-to-day struggle endured by the working class characters and the lives of presumable economic comfort enjoyed by the audience members who paid 40 pesos to enter this exclusive theatrical space.

Although there is never a specific date provided, the conditions of the workers portrayed in the play accurately depict factory life subsequent to the crisis of 2001. Aggravated by the consequences of a depressed economy, the impact of the crisis on these industrial laborers is obvious. These conditions are not seen by factory workers to be original in Argentina, but rather, a continuation of a historically harsh labor conditions in a country plagued by political and economic corruption. This is a cyclical movement of history — offering little room for socioeconomic mobility.

The only historical references in the play refer to people and events that focus on worker exploitation and corruption comparable to the post-crisis. One worker mentions the scandal at

Río Tercero, a city in the province of Córdoba. It was here, in 1995, when an explosion in a military arms factory caused 300 injuries, 7 deaths, and massive destruction to neighboring buildings. The origin of the detonation is unclear, but speculations have been made that the Menem's own government may have orchestrated the event in the attempt to conceal important evidence from covert military arms deals that illegally supported foreign political conflicts in both Ecuador and Croatia. Although not confirmed, if true, this political scandal would clearly demonstrate the government's willingness to sacrifice industrial laborers in order to benefit personal agendas.

One character (Ester Campello), traces her industrial working class family lineage back through history to the time of Perón. Perhaps not fully aware of its political and social significance, Campello pledges her family's allegiance to the Peronist Party. She proudly explains that her grandfather was once visited by Perón himself while working in a factory (most likely on one of his many visits to garner support of the laborers through social propaganda), and ever since, her family has been "peronista." Despite declaring to be loyal constituents of Perón, optimistically adhering to its principles and perhaps naively believing in its ability to provide continuous social and economic prosperity for her family, Ester Campello and her family has formed part of an exploited labor class for generations. Campello's testimony adds to the bleak and deterministic message in the play, which seems to suggest that the fate of a laborer is determined at birth — a consequence of the socioeconomic class inherited from the family. Those born in to the industrial working class are destined to continue to uphold that same claustrophobic and incarcerating role in society for generations. Here is Ester Campello's testimony:

Ahora trabajo acá y además estoy arrancando un emprendimiento personal. Estoy averiguando por subsidios para microemprendimientos, estoy...viendo...averiguando. Es un emprendimiento que tiene que ver con lo...textil. Pero esto no es nuevo en mí, se ve que esto lo traigo porque mi abuelo trabajó toda su vida en una tintorería industrial y mi papá también, toda la vida trabajó en una tintorería industrial...somos una familia textilera. (2-3)

From one generation to the next, the role of industrial laborer is preserved. The growth and subsequent reproduction of laborers is cyclical in form — the termination of each generation is marked by the birth of a future generation — continuously reproducing a similar history. The cyclical form of Ester Campello's family history is imitated by the structure of the play, which begins and ends with the exact same choreographed routine in which the characters move around like machines on stage. The beginning and ending of the play simultaneously represent the commencement and conclusion of a work day, also cyclical in form — as the end of one day at work will soon be followed by the beginning of a new day.

Both the cyclical family history, together with a grueling and monotonous daily labor routine, is capable of turning human beings into machines. The parallels drawn between the factory workers and the machines that they operate are many. The first and perhaps most obvious connection is drawn during the various short intermissions (choreographed dance routines) between each of the testimonies and worker stories throughout the short play, during which the characters move around mechanically as if they were operating a machine (image 4), but also, at times, as if they themselves formed part of the machine.



Image 4 (www.alternivateatral.com)

Each dance routine is framed by the ring of a bell, which, much like a switch, transforms the characters from thinking and breathing humans into robotic laborers who move mechanically to the sound and rhythm of the music. The ring of the bell, together with the music, manipulates each and every move of these workers. During these short intermissions there is no dialogue between characters, and the faces of these laborers immediately become completely absent of emotions and thought, and therefore, robs them of the very essence as human beings.

Upon the conclusion of each dance routine, the bell sounds routinely, and marks the conclusion of the incarcerating routine. At this point, the characters seem to recover some of their human characteristics; however, it becomes obvious that the grind at work has permanently infiltrated their lives, and detrimentally affected their ability (or lack thereof) to act as critical thinking and emotional human beings. This is best expressed in one of the many testimonies when Gisela Páez offers the account of her husband's factory death:

Hola, soy Gisela Páez, viuda, mi marido se cayó de una máquina y se murió. Seco quedó. Cuando lo fui a reconocer pensé que iba a haber oler y me tapé la nariz.

Pero después me destapé y no había. Estaba todo cortado en partes. Le faltaban los dedos del pié. Todos no, le quedaban dos. La oreja cortada vertical, así, *chac*, como un navajazo. Los ojos estaban...(*hace gesto*) Parecía que estaba vivo, pero después por la expresión me di cuenta que estaba muerto. (10)

This matter-of-fact description of her husband's death demonstrates what appears to be Gisela's complete apathy. She describes her husband's body as if it were a dissected piece of meat in the butcher shop. The ease with which Gisela recounts a scene of her husband's tragic and traumatizing death calls attention to her very absence of feelings that arguably represent the essence of what it is to be human, and what simultaneously separates her from the machines that she operates.

In another scene, one of the characters named Kuli falls to the floor where he lies motionless without any signs of life. In order to revive him, the other characters gather around and attempt to "jump start" him as if he were an old abandoned engine. It is unclear at this point if Kuli is a human who resembles a machine, or if he is a machine that has taken on human characteristics.

The boundaries that distinguish man and machine are even further blurred: in this case it is not that human beings resemble machines, but that the machines become shockingly similar (and perhaps superior) to their human counterparts. In another scene, a character named Esteban converses with a coworker about the robot that accompanies him in the factory, and in his description he attributes human characteristics to a machine that is portrayed more like a loyal and responsible coworker than a tool used to realize a labor task:

Con el robot ordenamos todo lo que entra y sale de la planta y ponemos las cosas en su lugar; donde tienen que estar. El robot es lo mejor de la planta, estamos los dos solos en el depósito, es grande, con brazos mecanizados y va hacia arriba y hacia abajo, rápido, es como una montaña rusa, un día si quieres te llevo a conocerlo. (8)

When Esteban employs first person plural form “nosotros,” the robot is converted into one more companion inside of the labor space. Encouraging his coworker to come and “meet” the robot (an inanimate object) is a testament to his own inability to distinguish between man and machine.

Esteban’s willingness to attribute human characteristic to a machine is perhaps due to the demands at work, which alienate him from other human beings and put him in harmony with machines. As was theorized by Marx in the 19th century, industrialized work, through complex division of labor, had the power to trap laborers into monotonous routines that required minimal critical thought or reason and deprived humans of social interaction and leisurely activities — all of which were believed by Marx to be essential human activities. The capitalist system, as described by Marx, depended on, and benefited from, the exploitation of laborers in order to conserve wealth and prosperity of business owners:

Labour, to be sure, produces marvellous things for the rich, but for the labourer it produces privation. It produces palaces for the wealthy, but hovels for the worker. It produces beauty, but cripples the worker. It replaces work by machines, but it throws part of the workforce back to a barbarous kind of work, while turning others into machines. It produces sophistication, but for the workforce it produces feeble-mindedness and idiocy. (65)

From a business perspective, Frederick Taylor's book, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, reaffirms Marx's claims, and argues in favor of a workforce that is free of critical thought. Published in 1910, this was a sort of manufacturers manual. It outlined a guide to the creation of the best (i.e. most profitable) factory possible. Central to Taylor's philosophy was the molding of the perfect laborer, a prototypical man that can be more accurately defined as a machine:

[n]ow one of the very first requirements for a man who is fit to handle pig iron as a regular occupation is that he shall be so stupid and so phlegmatic that he more nearly resembles in his mental make up the ox than any other type [...] The man who is mentally alert and intelligent is for this very reason entirely unsuited to what would, for him, be the grinding monotony of work of this character. (qtd in Cresswell 89)

The prototypical man was based on a series of studies performed while observing laborers at the Bethlehem Steel Company. Taylor found what appeared to him to be the ideal worker, a man with the sir name of Schmidt, who Taylor essentially used as a kind of human patent, which he would later propose could be mass produced and subsequently marketed off to factories around the world. Taylor's work was applauded by factory owners and governments around the world, and his techniques were employed in such diverse economic environments as the Ford Motor company to factories in Lenin's Soviet Union.

Taylor's techniques were later tweaked by other labor analysts, most notably, Frank Gilbreth, who incorporated photographic technology in the factory with the purpose of determining the absolute most efficient use of the human body in order to maximize factory production. After carrying out a series of studies in which he scrupulously tracked workers

throughout the course of a day, Gilbreth concluded that much of a worker's potentially profitable energy was often consumed "wastefully" on superfluous actions and habits that served a purely egotistical and/or personal function. Gilbreth sought to remedy this situation by encouraging workers to frugally conserve every ounce of productive energy to be later thoughtfully and productively invested entirely in the functioning of the machine. Gilbreth would use certain profitable and efficient workers as models, which others would be encouraged to meticulously imitate in their each and every move. Meanwhile, throughout the entire work day, laborers would be closely monitored on camera to make sure that each one of their movements was invested exclusively in the advancement of the factory and its machinery.⁶⁵

This breakthrough study, just like its predecessor, was celebrated by factory owners and managers, but, at the same time, it would strip factory workers of all autonomy and personal expression in the factory. While theories such as these may very well have decreased overhead and increased production for factory owners, they were obviously in direct violation of human rights and individual expression. These types of theories were later parodied in Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film, *Modern Times*. Written, directed, and acted by Chaplin himself, the film follows a mischievous laborer who is constantly harassed by a plethora of managers who observe him from both the shop floor and via camera in remote offices. The protagonist of the film is constantly caught investing his muscular movements to fulfill personal needs (swatting flies, scratching his underarm, etc.), while temporarily ignoring the task at hand, and thus destroying the rhythm of

⁶⁵ This power structure is similar to that of prisons described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. The panopticon places the central authority in view of all his/her subordinates. An architectural construction arranged so "that the surveillance is permanent in its effect, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (Foucault 201)

the machine that he helps to operate. When this same character takes a short break for lunch, his body continues to spastically and uncontrollably jerk as if he never left the production line. This scene humorously demonstrates how this character's body is continuously and mechanically trapped by his arduous labor routine. In this particular instance, this character's muscle memory proves to be more powerful than his mind, which at least temporarily ceases to have autonomous control over the body.

Mundo fabril, albeit with a different tone, similarly emphasizes the machine-like characteristics of certain characters. However, it does not attempt to accentuate the necessity of an inherently ignorant working class as Fredrick Taylor does, but, more in line with Marx's criticism of capitalist society, it suggests the machine-like demeanor of factory workers is the consequence of a monotonous and claustrophobic labor routine as endured by laborers during the Argentine post-crisis. In one of the final testimonies of the play, a character named Mario Aguilar, after hearing the story of a few colleagues who talk of injuries in the factory, suggests that instead of complaining to the authorities of the company when something goes wrong, the best possible solution is to ignore the problem:

Nunca te dicen lo que pasa. Por eso mejor no preguntar, ¿para qué vas a preguntar si no te van a decir nada? Hay que hacer caripela y callarse la boca. Yo me hice pelota. No te sirve... ¿Querés que te crucifiquen? Lo que tenés que hacer es pasar desapbercebido. Invisible. Hay que hacerse invisible, para seguir, porque si no te echan. (12)

Mario Aguilar's complacency and willingness to abide by the corrupt law that governs the workplace is the direct result of the restrictive economy. He fears that any sort of an outcry can

be perceived as the questioning of the authorities and can result in the worst case scenario — job loss.

In the final scene of the play, when it looks like things could take a revolutionary shift, liberating factory workers from their dehumanizing labor routines maintained by corrupt politics, and poor economic structure, it later becomes clear that the only future that the laborers see for themselves is to accept their situation as exploited laborers. This begins when Héctor Díaz complains, “acá estamos todo el día respirando, inhalando tóxicos, inflamables y ardientes, mírame como estoy, esto es hinchazón por los tóxicos” (17). Esteban follows suit and contributes to the list of problems faced by factory workers, “queremos cobrar a tiempo, basta de cobrar el 16 y 18, queremos cobrar como dice en el contrato el 1 al 3” (17). And finally, Gisela Páez somewhat timidly yet defiantly makes her own personal testimony protesting her unjust treatment as a factory widow, “Soy viuda. Antes eran dos salarios los que entraban, ahora uno, uno solo. La asignación por viudez nunca la cobré. Yo no me quejo, solo pido, un poco más” (18).

Just as it seems as though these demands to transform the political culture of the factory may result in an organization of workers and forward moving progress in the way of labor reform, the personal and collective demands are forgotten and ignored when the music sounds for the final time and quickly results in the obedient gathering of all of the worker’s in a choreographed routine, representing their return to the same precarious and monotonous factory work routine as in the very beginning of the play. This ending suggests that, despite both individual and collective desires to bring about change, workers are trapped in vicious labor cycle that silences and successfully quashes all acts of dissidents.

At the conclusion of the final routine, the bell rings for the last time. In perfect unison (much like a fine-tuned machine) all of the characters look up to an imaginary clock on the wall, and subsequently depart from the stage as a perfectly collective unit. While it could be interpreted that these actors have decided to escape factory life — collectively refusing to endure further exploitation — this exit can also be interpreted as just one more instance of how these laborers are perfectly obedient slaves to their work routine. The monotonous and cyclical structure of the play suggest that these workers will undoubtedly return to work at the same time the next day — faithfully and predictably adhering to the factory demands, and quietly ignoring the inhumane conditions that define their claustrophobic labor environment.

La nueva rabia similarly underscores the suffocating environment endured by industrial laborers of the post-crisis, and while it too hints at the possibility of revolution and change, in the end, it offers a similarly bleak and deterministic depiction of factory life. Just like in *Mundo fabril*, the story is cyclical in structure, underscoring the incarcerating factory atmosphere and emphasizing the absence of progress inside this stagnant laborspace. Perhaps even to a greater extent than in *Mundo fabril*, *La nueva rabia* develops distinct connections between the current situation and historical parallels from the country's past. Although the novel is set between the 1920s-1960s, it was published in 2008 and makes numerous, explicit references to 21st century Argentina.

The novel is a sort of memoir, a first person narration in which the narrator/protagonists reflects on his past and attempts to reconcile with his actions. The author (Marcelo Eckhardt⁶⁶)

⁶⁶ Marcelo Eckhardt (1965) is a professor of Argentine literature at the Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia. His affection for national literature is apparent in his numerous references to Argentine authors, texts, and fictional characters in *La nueva rabia*, including Jorge Luis Borges, Roberto Arlt, Martín Fierro, Horacio Quiroga, and

created the book to be a continuation, or sequel to Roberto Arlt's *El juguete rabioso* (1926). Eckhardt's novel shares numerous elements from its prequel including similar themes, quotes, characters, and, most importantly, it features the same narrator/protagonist. One of the most apparent shifts between these two novels is the setting. While *El juguete rabioso*, like so many of Arlt's stories takes place in the gritty urban landscape of Buenos Aires, *La nueva rabia* is set deep in Patagonia, a space that is often referred to in the novel as a foreign land inside of Argentina. The connections between the two novels are hardly subtle, in fact, *La nueva rabia*'s first epigraph is taken directly from the final scene in *El juguete rabioso*. It is worth recounting the end of Arlt's novel, because it is precisely where *La nueva rabia* begins.

At the conclusion of *El juguete rabioso* Silvio Astier finds himself caught up in a polemic situation at work that will determine his professional future, as well as personal fate. He arrives at a sort of a professional and personal crossroads, and regardless of the directions that he turns, he is trapped: each road ends in a dead-end, there is no successful escape to his dilemma. Corporate law demands that he align himself with the ruling power of the workplace, while social code begs him to be loyal to his professional peers and companions. The predicament begins when Astier's friend and colleague, El Rengo, reveals his clandestine scheme to defy a senior member of a corporate office by robbing el Ingeniero Arsenio Vitri, the company engineer. El Rengo trusts that Astier will prove to be an ally, by quietly concealing the information out of personal trust and loyalty. After a long struggle to decide what he perceives to be the correct action, Astier ultimately denounces his friend to the authorities (el Ingeniero Vitri),

Sarmiento. Eckhardt has published books of poetry, short stories, and essays. *La nueva rabia* is one of his five novels: *El desertor* (1993), *Látex* (1994), *Nítida esa euforia* (1998), and *Cero* (2008).

thus conserving the existing hierarchy and becoming a hero to the business and the corporate class system while simultaneously making himself a traitor to his friend, his colleague, and the working class in general. Incapable of reconciling with his recent act of betrayal, Astier decides to abandon his home in Buenos Aires and travel south to the city of Comodoro Rivadavia, an oil town where he seeks refuge and self-autonomy by distancing himself from the scene of the crime. Patagonia will offer the perfect landscape for Astier to rewrite his unfortunate personal history, and try to make a new name for himself, just like Juan Dahlmann did in Borges's "El Sur."

La nueva rabia begins in Patagonia. It is in Comodoro Rivadavia where the protagonist changes his name from Silvio Astier to Nicolás Radek⁶⁷ and begins a job working for the national oil company YPF (Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales).⁶⁸ Despite almost 1,500 kilometers of separation, a new historical setting, a new source of income, and a new identity, Astier/Radek quickly discovers that many of the same problems of his "rabioso" history have come back to haunt him and subsequently give way to the "nueva rabia" of his present situation. He constantly references his betrayal Rengo, his work to defend El Ingeniero Arsenio Vitri, and his private property. Although he repeats incessantly throughout the novel that he has changed, his actions seem to prove otherwise. While Radek's discourse seems to consistently align him with the working class, his actions prove him to be an intricate and reliable piece of the industrial capitalist machine.

⁶⁷ Radek is an anagram of the author's surname — EcKhARDt.

⁶⁸ YPF has been a national oil company throughout much of its history; however, as part of a series of neoliberal reforms carried about by Carlos Menem's administration, in 1993 it was sold to the Spanish company, Repsol. In a recent shift in economic policies, the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner again gained control of the company for the Argentine people, after purchasing 51% of the shares in the company with public funds in May of 2012.

In Comodoro Rivadavia, the protagonist instantly joins a pseudo-political group of self-proclaimed revolutionaries called the *Club de los soviéticos* (a sort of reproduction of Astier's *club de los caballeros de medianoche*): “nos decían los soviéticos porque la mayoría eran comunistas, pero sólo había cuatro rusos reales y yo, que era un falso cosaco; el resto eran chilenos, españoles, un norteamericano y un armenio” (130). This group mostly functions as a social unit that meets in bars and clubs to discuss literature and politics. While the members are presumably sympathetic to the working class cause, and regularly discuss strategies to improve their plight, it is unclear to what extent their ideology is manifested in the form of praxis. Radek is also a member of the *Unión de los Obreros Petroleros*, a collective bargaining group that adamantly struggles for comprehensive and immediate reform inside of the labor space. The success of this group is manifested in the execution of a full-scale remodeling of the professional hierarchy inside of YPF, granting significantly more power to the industrial laborers, while simultaneously subverting the overwhelming authority once wielded by the upper ranks of the labor hierarchy. In addition to these political organizations, Radek upholds an important friendship and political alliance with such prominent political activists and intellectuals as the real-life historical figure, José María Borrero. Borrero is best known for his book *Patagonia Trágica* — a story that denounces the role of the Argentine government in the violent repression of a 1921 workers riot that resulted in the death of approximately 1500 laborers.⁶⁹

Despite Radek's social and political alliances with the oppressed working class, his innate desire for self economic success constantly forces him to mechanically and predictably act

⁶⁹ This same event was later fictionalized in a film directed by Hector Olivera in 1973 called *Patagonia Rebelde*. The movie was subsequently censored by the government officials during the presidencies of both Juan and Isabel Perón.

according to his own personal interests and in favor of the capitalist machine that he constantly opposes (at least on a superficial and ideological level). Radek's time spent at YPF consists mostly of a series of betrayals to the working class. The first of many disloyal acts performed by Radek occurs the very moment he begins working with YPF, when he attends his first company interview equipped with a powerful letter of recommendation from el Ingeniero Arsenio Vitri, the same character who is a direct symbol of Astier's betrayal in *El juguete rabioso*. Radek's dependence on the professional support from Vitri is a perfect continuation of the disloyalty he displays in *La nueva rabia*. Radek's second unfaithful act occurs when he accepts a position at YPF as an assistant inspector "ayudante de inspección" or, as he says, "ayudante de inspección; en criollo, alcuhuete" (105). Even though he is well aware that his new job places him in direct conflict with the interests and well-being of the industrial laborers at his company, he dutifully adheres to his new unfaithful labor demands. He is essentially a pawn to the ruling corporate class, assuring the managerial staff that the industrial labors are on task, but most importantly, diligently struggling to free the company of organized labor: "anotaban las faltas y las equivocaciones de los trabajadores, pero lo que realmente 'apuntaban' era la actividad sindical dentro de YPF" (105). Despite the obvious betrayal committed during his time as assistant inspector, this is not his worst unfaithful act at YPF. Radek's most significant and final act of betrayal occurs shortly after the government quashes a worker rebellion inside the oil company and ends with the imprisonment of all of its protagonists. Incarcerated with the other members of the worker rebellion, Radek receives a final visit from Vitri. Although most of the content of their discussion is never revealed in the novel, it can be inferred that Vitri offers to set Radek free by paying his bail in exchange for essential details about his former allies who accompanied

him in the factory revolution. Due to his cooperation with the authorities (and simultaneous betrayal of his fellow allies in the workplace), Radek is allowed to return to work in YPF. Once again Radek proves a traitor to his own moral principles, willingly aligning himself with the dominant class (as represented by Vitri), in order to save his own position and economic status at the direct expense of his working class friends and allies.

The ending of the novel leaves the Astier/Radek exactly in the same position in which he began the story — attempting to reconcile with his betrayal of the working class. Ironically, the same shameful past and disgraceful decision-making that pushed Astier to abandon Buenos Aires in search of a brighter and more honest future was subsequently reproduced again in a new historical and geographical location. Not once, but twice, Astier/Radek manages to sell himself out to el Ingeniero Arsenio Vitri, a direct representation of the corrupt ruling corporate class. Despite his revolutionary ideals, and occasional revolts, Radek, just like Astier before him, is most interested in conserving his own general well being, which ultimately only helps to bolster the existing corporate hierarchy at the expense of the workers.

However, while both Radek from *La nueva rabia* and Arlt's Astier can be perceived as egotistical members of society whose complacency helps to maintain country-wide corruption in the hands of few powerful citizens and at the expense of the majority, they can also easily be perceived as relatively helpless and powerless pawns — victims of a corrupt and incarcerating labor system. After all, Astier, in the early 1900s is continuously exploited in each and every job by someone above him on the hierarchical power scale. Radek, in the mid 1900s faces similar challenges. At YPF he is at the mercy of a political system that does not support organized laborers (especially when it functions independently of the Peronist government), or the general

well-being of its workers. Radek's every attempt to align himself with the workers and fight for their best interest is directly attacked by the hypocritical state. Perón, who is a character in *La nueva rabia*, first enters the novel in a scene with Radek in a bar in Comodoro Rivadavia and appears to be on the side of the laborers when he states: “[I]a gente, la multitud, siente, fundamentalmente siente. Y si uno quiere ser líder, debe sintonizar ese sentimiento inmenso, único, de una Fortaleza sólo comparable a la de la naturaleza” (126). Despite this statement in which he expresses his sympathy for the general population, and the importance of siding with the common people, these words are later contradicted by his actions, when, later in the novel, Perón's supposed egalitarian government puts a violent end to the workplace revolution led by Radek inside of the YPF factory.

The fictional depiction of Perón in the novel perhaps speaks some truths about his presidency — while he may have publicly expressed enthusiasm for the “pueblo” and “la gente” he simultaneously took actions to silence those same voices, and ignore their social and economic interests. For example, in Perón's first presidency he publicly expressed his support for national industry and workers rights. However, during his second term Perón made some paramount decisions that led to the privatization of the national oil industry, a decision unfavorable to the common laborer. The steps taken to encourage privatization of the oil industry (followed by similar actions taken by Arturo Frondizi — 1958-1962) would help pave the way for Carlos Menem a little more than three decades later. During Perón's first term in office he is quoted as saying the following about what he perceived to be the appropriate politics surrounding the exploitation of Argentine oil: “Yo quiero producción sin explotación. Nosotros queremos explotar los yacimientos, pero no explotar a nuestros trabajadores” (qtd. in Calcagno

71). Not only did Perón claim to be pro-worker, but he also spoke out in favor of national industry as opposed to the foreign influx of markets, “la política petrolera argentina [...] ha de basarse en los mismos principios en que descansa toda la política económica, conversación absoluta de la soberanía argentina sobre la riqueza de nuestro subsuelo y explotación racional por parte del estado” (qtd. in Calcagno 71-72). However, Perón eventually lost all faith in the national oil industry and signed contracts with American oil companies that were hired to assist and or replace national oil industries in the searching, exploitation, sales, and distribution of Argentine oil. During a 1955 meeting with several representatives of various foreign oil companies Perón’s words clearly demonstrate his frustration and violence toward the national oil company, “Pónganse de acuerdo, si para ello hay que quemar YPF, préndenle fuego, si deben destruirlo destrúyenlo” (qtd. in Calcagno 73).

While Radek’s story is set between 1920-1960, and includes an abundance of specific historical references situating within its time frame⁷⁰, the novel itself was published in 2008, and is simultaneously an account of subsequent histories, especially those of the economic crisis of 2001. The different time periods are constantly confused in the narration, which intentionally causes the reader to become disoriented. It is often unclear whether the narrator is referring to his past, present, or even future situation. The abundance of subtle (and not-so-subtle) references to contemporary Argentina invites the reader to interpret the story both within and beyond its fictional setting. This strategy is common in contemporary Argentine literature, as José di Marco observes many contemporary “historical” novels about the most recent dictatorship, do not only

⁷⁰ The narrator never offers exact dates, however he does indicate the decade to which he is referring in each instance (i.e. 192..., 193..., 194...), he also helps situate the setting through the appearance of well known historical and literary figures such as José Luís Borrero, Juan Domingo Perón, and Jorge Luís Borges (all of whom are characters in the novel). In addition he alludes to historical events such as “Patagonia Trágica.”

reflect on recent atrocities, but also show how and why some of these historical events and practices are still relevant in Argentina in the 21st century:

[L]os textos de nuestro corpus aspiran a configurar una comprensión de lo que significó (y sobre todo lo que significa) la dictadura militar, una comprensión cuya particularidad consistiría en iluminar, desde un foco de percepción que implica una toma de distancia, ciertas zonas traumáticas y aún opacas y por lo tanto vigentes de ese período tan complejo como aborrecible. Pero, asimismo, intentan arrojar cierta claridad, aunque sea bajo la modalidad de interrogantes, sobre las perplejidades del presente. (4)

Eckhardt's novel is similarly a fictional account set in the past, but it could easily be read as a commentary on the present state of the country.

The first clue to the reader that the novel should be interpreted beyond its fictional setting in the first half of the 20th century is the regular use of the term “extrangertino,” first employed in the second of the two epigraphs in the novel: “Extrangerinos podríamos llamar a quienes adentro y afuera al mismo tiempo, no se identificaron alguna vez con el Estado y no le dieron su asentimiento indeliberado a un orden natural de cosas” (10). The quote comes from Dardo Scavino's book, *La era de la desolación*, a scathing criticism of Argentine governmental politics in Argentina during the 1990s under the leadership of Carlos Menem. The term “extrangertino” is later used throughout the novel and it is a constant invitation to the reader to interpret the novel within both its fictional setting and the more contemporary context in which it was published.

An *Extrangerino* does not necessarily refer to someone who originates from outside of a certain political boundary, but, rather, it is an outsider inside of Argentina, a marginal citizen,

someone who is left unprotected, ignored and forgotten by the dominant class and by the social services offered by the government:

extrangeros poderosos y ricos eran socios y fundadores de la nacionalidad; pero los extranjeros pobres eran doblemente culpables y directamente eran caratulados como traidores en potencia [...] Yo, si bien argentino, era pobre y , si bien era pobre, era, además, extranjero, por lo que me consideraban, nuevamente, traidor. (Eckhardt, *La nueva rabia* 137-38)

Radek is thus marginalized for his condition as both the son of recent immigrants and because of his marginal economic status. He shares this status with both Roberto Arlt and Silvio Astier.

Extrangertinos were prevalent within and beyond the historical context of the novel. In a sort of wink to the readers, the narrator and author are easily and perhaps intentionally confused when Radek refers to his “present tense,” which is simultaneously a parallel but contemporary present tense of that of Eckhardt (the author): “la cosa no ha cambiado aún; muy por el contrario, se intensifican y se perfeccionan los modos de persecución y de aislamiento social” (139). The present tense here could quite possibly refer to economic crisis of the 1930s, or to the political and economic crisis of the end of Perón’s second term in office. After all, the problems of social exclusion that existed in the 1920s continued to exist throughout the 20th century and into the turn of the current century: “los extrangertinos” of the 1920s became the “desaparecidos” during the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* and the exploited workers, “cartoneros,” and “piqueteros”⁷¹ of the turn of the most recent century.

⁷¹ A *cartonero* is a person who rummages through the trash left behind more fortunate citizens in search of any goods that can be recycled in exchange for a modest amount of cash. In an article published in the newspaper *Clarín* on October 27, 2002 it was estimated that there were approximately 40,000 *cartoneros* living and working on the streets of Buenos Aires, 75% of whom were a product of the 2001 crisis.

In a memory of his adventures in Buenos Aires, the narrator/protagonist recounts a violent history in Buenos Aires which could represent the 1920s, but he could also easily be describing political violence of the 1930s,⁷² 1960s,⁷³ 1970s⁷⁴, or 2001.⁷⁵ The author purposely keeps the historical and political references vague (he talks of “esa guerra” that took place in “aquellos años”), thus inviting readers to interpret both within and beyond the historical boundaries of the novel:

Imaginen una larga trinchera en los suburbios. Luego una infernal franja entre esa trinchera y la otra, como una muralla de defensa, en el centro mismo de Buenos Aires. De un lado los incluidos en el progreso y desarrollo del país. Del otro, los excluidos que intentan, una y otra vez, entrar en la zona donde la gente tiene futuro; en el medio, en la franja de los recludos, de los mártires, de los héroes, de los traidores, de los desertores. (15)

The scene described above between the politically and economically stable and the rest of the population is an unfinished battle in Argentina, and is a continuous source of clashes between civilians and government forces throughout time. Government’s inability or disinterest in

⁷² The violence of the 30s began with the military coup led by José Félix Uriburu.

⁷³ Violence in the 1960s reached its peak during the military coup that ended the democratically elected presidency of Arturo Illia in 1966 and subsequently gave way to a series of military dictatorships known as the “Revolución Argentina”.

⁷⁴ The country was plagued by political violence throughout the 70s. During the presidency of Isabel Perón, the government started using vicious and ruthless war tactics led by the “Triple A” in the effort to quash the violent left-wing uprisings. These same military techniques were taken to another extreme on March 24th 1976, the day that infamous *junta militar* claimed control of the country through a military coup and subsequently waged war on the country’s citizenry during the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*.

⁷⁵ The government’s decision to withhold money from private bank accounts (el corralito), in addition to widespread poverty and unemployment, resulted in widespread looting and protests throughout the country. Although these protests occurred throughout 2001 and 2002, the climax was reached on December 19th and 20th of 2001 when protestors occupied every inch of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires and civilian clashes with riot police resulted in the death of 40 civilians (Svampa 263).

supporting the working class was at the center of the popular uprising in the 2001 crisis, and the history to follow.

In the novel, Radek first refers to the Argentine economic crisis of 1929, however, cyclical in nature, he also refers to the economic crisis of 1952 during Perón's second term in office, and these same descriptions can be used to reflect on the crisis of 2001:

Es cierto que siempre se aprende, pero no es una evolución lineal ni regular; no hay progreso continuo, ésa fue la mentira más grande que nos vendieron (¡y nos endeudaron!) nuestros gobernantes: íbamos, vociferaban, a crecer en todo sentido; íbamos a cambiar nuestras vidas para mejor; íbamos a dar un gran paso junto a la nueva técnica. Pues bien, ¿qué ocurrió? Todo ese torbellino de discursos rimbombantes pasó de largo y dejó a millones afuera del fabuloso tren de la historia del desarrollo social. (97)

In his political discourses, Carlos Menem sold a dream of economic prosperity that would benefit all. While it was true that the country's economy improved during Menem's first term as president, much of the success was due to the increased value that was assigned to the Argentine Peso — putting it on par with the US dollar. This gave Argentines enormous buying power (especially in neighboring countries) that they had never enjoyed before. However, the initial success resulting from economic reforms implemented under Carlos Menem's presidency would eventually result in enormous foreign debt, forcing the country to put in place austerity measures that impacted the entire population, especially the lower and middle classes, or, the “millones” of people that remained “afuera del fabuloso tren de la historia del desarrollo social.”

Just like the protagonist of his novel, Eckhardt also seems to sympathize with all “extrangertinos,” or those excluded from the social and economic power inside the country, yet his novel does not leave readers with a hope for change. The novel both begins and ends with the exact same way — the author reflects on the past and laments the unbalance of power in the country, the incarcerating role carried out by industrial laborers, and the impossibility for social and economic ascension. The same deterministic message from the beginning is recycled toward the end. In one of the first chapters the narrator admits to the impossibility of change “es cierto que uno debe afrontar su destino o, también, que uno lo construye, pero lo cierto es que nunca se nos deja construirlo y nunca nos enfrentamos a un destino porque de tenerlo, éste ya estaría establecido apenas nacemos” (39-40). A similar message is expressed in the final chapter of the novel, “Y desde aquí, desde mis memorias, es muy difícil siquiera vislumbrar cualquier cambio; lo único que puedo hacer, quizás, es plantear y sostener un dilema (y ya es mucho, teniendo en cuenta el estado de las cosas)” (183).

The recycling of this deterministic message in both the beginning and the end emphasizes the cyclical structure of the novel, and it also insinuates that history unfolds in a similar pattern. In his final reflections, Radek suggests that he is given up on a political struggle because in the end there is no use: even if the current political power begins with positive intentions, he/she will eventually be corrupted:

el poder siempre es de turno. Siempre ocupa un lugar vacío. Se cree que se construye un nuevo lugar; se cree en un recorrido, en una nueva época, pero luego se vuelve al mismo lugar (o a un lugar casi igual o poco diferente), se vive un tiempo muerto y todo comienza otra vez. (177)

Just like the politicians that Radek continuously criticizes, he himself is eventually corrupted by the restrictive governing body of his factory. Radek discovers that the only way to stay afloat is to quit resisting through the act of protest and to join the system, aligning himself with the ruling power.

Both Radek and the factory workers in *Mundo fabril* are confronted with a choice that leaves them without a safe outlet. Radek can either choose to remain loyal to his friends and colleagues (most likely resulting in a life in prison), or he can forget about his moral and philosophical standards in exchange for a life of employment inside of an entrapping and incarcerating labor space. Radek is a passive victim of a historical and political system that produces unaccommodating labor situations, leaving him to operate mechanically, much like the characters in *Mundo fabril*. In the end, these factories are nothing more than a reflection of the restricting conditions of their times, one in which an imbalance of power leaves the power in the hands of a few elite members of society, with a large percentage of expendable and exploitable labor at their disposition.

La nueva rabia and *Mundo fabril* both transmit a similarly deterministic message: despite the corruption governing both within and around a factory, the best option is to quietly endure the claustrophobic conditions offered rather than to challenge the system. In an observation from the beginning (which is ultimately the end) of *La nueva rabia*, Radek offers an theorizes about the imbalance of power within a country, which can simultaneously define the poor distribution of power in the workplaces depicted in both of works of art treated in this chapter:

mientras se asciende en las clases, mayores los cuadros individuales (la clase del poder directamente no posee cuadro individual; es la que posee mayor grado de libertad). Ahora bien ¿qué sucedería si los esclavos de los cuadros inferiores quisieran primero romper sus límites y luego subir a los demás cuadros?

Traición, revolución, rebelión, guerra, locura, literatura. (38)

Is it possible for the power within a factory or country to rearrange itself? No, only in literature.

Only in fiction. Welcome to the factory/country in crisis, welcome to the machine.

Chapter 4

Domestic Affairs: Negotiating Racial, National, and Class Boundaries in Private Residences

Ahí cerca, en 116, tenía otro palomar un anarquista. [...] Un 1º de mayo tiñó a las palomas en rojo con carmín de repostería. Carmín de cochinilla. Las soltó al mediodía. Tapado de excursionistas el bosque comiendo huevo duro sobre un mantel al sol. Las palomas dieron una vuelta juntas y los jornaleros empezaron a aplaudir. Pero en la segunda los pájaros se empezaron a mirar. Así colorados no se reconocían entre ellas y empezaron todas a alejar a picotazos a las extrañas. La tercera vuelta fue una batalla aérea. Verdún. Un Barón Rojo contra otro Barón Rojo. Una lluvia de plumas carmín. Carmín de cochinilla. El ácrata lloraba. Un caso los ácratas. Como criaturas. La mitad de los excursionistas lloraban con él. Y la otra mitad se moría de la risa. (*Le alargó una copa*) Bloody Mary...Para la ocasión...

(Mauricio Kartun, *Ala de criados* 29)

In the thesis of her book *The New Maids—Transnational Women and the Care Economy*, Helma Lutz refers to a “refeudilization” of 21st century society as reflected by employee/employer relationships in private, domestic labor. As in feudal society, the 21st century home is maintained by a workforce that has no contractual right to the property that they help sustain. Moreover, a similar imbalance of power is exaggerated by economic discrepancies between home owners (employer) and her/his domestic laborer (employee). A 2003 study in Germany concluded that domestic labor was the profession with the highest rates of unprotected and illegal workers in the country (Williams, “A Cleaner Conscience”). Working outside of the law means to be employed outside of legislation that supports workers in other professions. To be without a contract is to be without minimum-wage protection, worker compensation,

unemployment, paid vacation, disability, and unemployment, making workers more susceptible to social, economic, racial, and sexual exploitation.

Despite the fact that the potential for all kinds of abuse are clear considering the lack of institutional support granted to domestic laborers, the obvious binary of oppressive employer/exploited laborer is not always the only possible interpretation of every household labor space. An analysis of domestic labor becomes increasingly convoluted when the employee considers the employer as an ally, and not his/her oppressor. Indeed, in an unforgiving economy such as that offered by the Argentine post-crisis, for many, domestic employment is the only alternative: a unique means to survival. Household labor is potentially a solution to a problem, as it provides certain economic empowerment and opportunity to many whom seemingly would have had no alternative without the work offered in someone's home.

In this chapter I treat the play, *Ala de criados* (Mauricio Kartun, 2009) in relationship to *El niño pez* — the novel (Lucía Puenzo, 2004), and the subsequently produced film of the same name, adapted to the screen and directed by the author herself in 2009. Each artistic representation depicts racial and sexual conflicts exaggerated by an imbalance of socioeconomic power between the hired help/domestic employees and their employers. Common to these works is that they are at least partially set in an exclusive private residence — an elitist club in *Ala de criados*, and an upper-middle class home in *El niño pez*, where the exaggerated class differences contribute to social and racial conflict. These works can be contrasted to a large collection of cultural texts produced in the much more politicized era of the 70s and 80s, when class conflicts were more explicitly represented, largely influenced by radical ideologies of the times. The representations treated in this chapter similarly reflect the politics of their times, but are much

more nuanced, and the class conflicts will become intricately entangled in sexual and racial prejudices.

Works in this chapter resist simple binaries such as that of oppressive employer and oppressed worker. The complexity in these relationships is grounded in the need to fulfill certain economic requirements and sexual relationships that are established within a problematic power dynamic. Similar to the artistic productions treated in the previous chapters of this dissertation, these characters/employees are seemingly trapped in a claustrophobic position at work — the labor spaces examined here are tinged with sexual, economic, and ethnic/racial abuse. What separates the characters in this chapter from those treated in the previous ones is that these characters will demonstrate a level of complacency unparalleled in the previous chapters.

Ala de criados was written by Mauricio Kartun (1946), one of the most prolific and celebrated living playwrights in Argentina. Since 1973, he has authored more than 25 plays, three of which have been staged under his own direction⁷⁶. Although traditionally opposed to directing his own works, he has been inspired in recent years by a younger generation of theater practitioners to take a more active role in the staging of his plays. Kartun has received numerous accolades, including the prestigious Premio Ace de Oro in 2010 for his work as director and playwright of *Ala de criados*. The play premiered in 2009 at the Teatro del Pueblo in Buenos Aires and has subsequently been restaged in various venues around the world. In Buenos Aires it was staged for three consecutive summers, 2009, 2010, and 2011. The playscript was published in 2010 by Atuel, complete with a critical study under the direction of contemporary Argentine theater critic, Jorge Dubatti.

⁷⁶ *La Madonnita* (2003), *El niño Argentino* (2006), and *Ala de criados* (2009).

The theatrical repertoire of Kartun expands multiple generations and genres, evolving and transforming with the times, allowing him to maintain as much relevance in contemporary Argentina as he once did in the beginning of his artistic career. Kartun himself comments on the evolution of his own theatrical trajectory:

El teatro que hago es político, claro, hago teatro político, pero ya no levanto un dedito. Vengo de una generación que hizo un teatro político de imposición; que enchufaba la idea. En nuestra convicción apasionada creíamos que lo mejor que podíamos hacer con nuestras ideas era imponerlas. Un teatro manipulador, digámoslo. Entendí con el tiempo y los bifes que el teatro es poderosamente más político si, en lugar de imponer, expone. (qtd. in Dubatti, “Enrevista con Mauricio Kartun” 120)

Ala de criados is an example of Kartun’s recent work that, “en lugar de imponer, expone.” Set in June of 1919, the story in the play coincides with the Semana Trágica of Buenos Aires, the name given to a violent clash between a group of protesting metalworkers and paramilitary forces that resulted in more than a thousand incarcerated protestors and an undetermined number of workers deaths, estimated to be as high as 700 by some accounts⁷⁷. This infamous historical tragedy provides the cultural milieu for the play, though the action unfolds approximately 250 miles south of the epicenter of this notorious moment in history in the deceptively tranquil and blissful Pigeon Club of Mar del Plata, an exclusive, private hunting/social club for the most elite members of society. Despite the geographical distance that separates the characters in the play from the central combat zone, the upper class members of

⁷⁷ In *Momentos de luchas populares*, Herman Schiller predicts that there were 700 deaths and 4,000 injured between January 6-13, 1919 (54).

this club clearly sympathize with the actions of the paramilitary forces who violently struggle to quash the worker revolt. The shameless support for this violent movement is demonstrated by their constant references to the legendary, “Tata Guerra,” the Alpha male of the Guerra family, and a hero to the characters in this play. Tata’s importance slowly grows to mythical heights as the play proceeds, due in part to the fact that he never actually appears on stage. Like many of the country’s elite, Tata is off defending his family wealth and notorious legacy in their struggle against the potentially threatening working class citizens in Buenos Aires. Despite their unconditional support for the anti-workers movement, none of the rest of the Guerra family seems willing or able to join their potential allies in Buenos Aires: Tatana, (Laura López Moyano) who is perhaps the most militarily adept of the family, is excluded from the fight as a result of her condition as a woman; Pancho (Rodrigo González Garillo), a closet homosexual, is proved incompetent after he is discharged from the military; and Emilito’s (Esteban Bigliardi) intellectual shortcomings and lack of independence make it clear that he will never successfully join the struggle. Since these three characters are proven unfit for the central battle in Buenos Aires, they plan their own small scale anti-revolutionary movement when they stage a violent robbery of the Juventud Moderno, a local library in Mar del Plata that harbors revolutionary literature and serves as a base of the imagined enemy of the Guerra family, and presumably the rest of the members of their elitist club. Since these three characters alone prove to be mostly incompetent, they solicit the strategic military aid and weapons from their accomplice: Pedro Testa (Alberto Ajaka), their private employee and hired hand in the pigeon club.

Pedro proves to be the only hope for these alcoholic, xenophobic, hypocritical, and indolent family members. Pedro’s interaction with the Guerra family is a constant source of

parody and humor in the play. The ambiguous relationship between the upper class citizens (as represented by the Guerra family) and Pedro can be interpreted as a complicated metaphor for racial and class relationships of the post-crisis. Much like the millions of voters who bought into Menem's political campaign in 2003 to provide universal prosperity for Argentines (including the middle class), Pedro is so intent on achieving upper class status that he willingly traps himself into the role of private servant for this family. While he believes that if he engages in passionate romantic encounters with the elite, and simultaneously imitates the members of this exclusive club in their dress, values, linguistic norms, and leisurely activities, he is somehow gaining the respect and status of the socioeconomic class that he so admires, in reality, his willingness to appease the Guerra family, as represented by the aristocracy, only leads to his tragic death at the conclusion of the play.

Ala de criados is undoubtedly a political play, mostly because of its multiple references to the Semana Trágica, a violent historical event that polarized the country and continues to invigorate debate today from the left and right about workers rights, as determined by workers unions, government forces, and private enterprise. As observed by Carlos Fos, the violence of the time forced everyone to take a side, "Buenos Aires en lucha, con trincheras, fogatas, sonidos de bombas y disparos. ¿Alguien puede ser neutral ese enero de 1919? Como un torpe texto maniqueísta, los buenos y malos quedan determinados, sin grises y expuestos a esta calificación según el posicionamiento del que los mire" (137). For left-leaning politicians and historians, the event has been used as a clear example of the danger in big business under a deregulated market and the proletariat is the obvious victim, losing hundreds of workers in the violent confrontations. Military force employed by the police has been justified by others, however, (just

as it was in the most recent military dictatorship) by the need to maintain peace and order in response to a growing threat of violent groups of “subversives” perceived as egotistical and lazy workers. Working class citizens (many of whom were recent European immigrants influenced by emerging socialist and anarchistic ideals celebrated in such diverse stages as the Russian Revolution, and worker’s rights movements in factories across the United States), have become remembered as martyrs. They have been interpreted as victims of the corrupt, and ever powerful ruling class, who died at the hand of oppressive forces synonymous with free market’s most elite, corrupt, and powerful members. For others, the protesting workers and their dangerous ideologies could only be answered with violent force. As a result, the paramilitary forces were funded by the country’s socioeconomic elite, who depended on cheap labor as a means to maintain their social status.

This political context proves to be relevant today, as is proved in the political discussion that the play has provoked (almost a century after the original event). Theater critic Carlos Reyes observes and celebrates the reference to this important historical event: “el autor de *El Partener* se vuelve a ubicar en un tiempo pasado, para hablar del presente a la vez que ofrece un análisis de las causas de muchos asuntos que hoy siguen siendo gravitantes” (“‘Ala de criados’: una obra espectacular en el Solís”). In an article in *La nación*, Verónica Pagés’s interpretation of the work similarly supports Reyes’ analysis, “Después de *El niño argentino*, Mauricio Kartun vuelve a hincarle el diente a la clase alta argentina de principios del siglo pasado. Y lo vuelve a hacer con una combinación deliciosa de gracia, ironía, crueldad y palabras exquisitas. Lo vuelve a hacer con maestría.” Despite these rave reviews, the play has also been subject to harsh criticism, most notably by Jorge Arias, who could not perceive the relevance, the accuracy, or

the humor in the play. He is anything but subtle in his ironic response to previous criticisms of the play, in which he clearly demonstrates his distaste for Kartun's work and its warm critical reception in the press, especially the one by Verónica Pagés:

[n]o estamos convencidos de que algo, tan siquiera, de la 'clase alta argentina' de comienzos del siglo XX estuviera representado, ya sea en 'El niño argentino' como en 'Ala de criados'. Lo de 'hincar el diente', que parece tomado en el sentido de agresión, como podría hacerlo el conde Drácula, nos sorprende. Suponemos que la escritora se refiere tan sólo al sentido de 'murmurar de otro, desacreditarlo' y no a 'acometer las dificultades' (todo esto según el diccionario de la Real Academia Española) de un asunto no planteado, que sería el enjuiciamiento de dicha clase. [...] [h]emos oído decir que 'Ala de criados' ataca a las 'clases dominantes' poniéndolas en ridículo. Pero si se trata de la crítica de la sociedad, ¿no existen hoy en la Argentina, seres no menos ridículos que aquellos tres pitucos? Nos preguntamos aún si no hay una cierta complacencia en Kartún con sus niños argentinos; por lo menos hay cierto sentimiento de piedad. Son, en 'Ala de criados', más patéticos y miserables que cualquier otra cosa.

Despite the heated debate that the play has produced around the depiction of Argentina's dominant class, other critics have focused their analyses on the middle class, as presumably represented by Pedro Testa. According to María Natacha Koss, for example, the ambiguous role of Pedro is precisely the element that distinguishes *Ala de criados* from the "teatro político" of previous decades in Argentine theater history. In traditionally political theater prevalent in

Argentina during the 1980s, Natacha Koss argues that plays “conservan un aspecto didáctico que requieren de un personaje positivo como modelo a seguir” (175). *Ala de criados*, she affirms, does not offer this model to its audience. Instead, she claims, Kartun’s most recent theatrical production is more in line with the works of characters invented by internationally acclaimed playwright Harold Pinter, who affirms “[h]ay que dejar a los personajes que respiren por su cuenta. El autor no ha de confinarlos ni restringirlos para que satisfagan sus propios gustos, disposiciones o prejuicios” (qtd. in Natacha Koss 171). Jorge Dubatti corroborates this idea, claiming that the play is not only attempt to parody the dominant class at the expense of the poor working class, (he claims that is perhaps a more appropriate interpretation for Kartun’s previous play — *El niño argentino*), but that it also represents a much more subtle criticism of the middle class, as represented by Pedro.

More than any character in the play, Pedro craftily eludes any of the simple binaries. Indeed, while he is an obvious victim, reaching his tragic death at the conclusion of the play, he is also a victimizer, as demonstrated in the violent raid of the revolutionary library — Juventud Moderno. He is undoubtedly a sexual object, coerced into taking part in sexual encounters with those who he interprets as society’s elite members, but at the same time, much like a femme fatal figure, he uses his body and sexual appeal as a tool by which to gain access to a privileged space in society as represented by the Pigeon Club. Pedro’s intellectual ignorance is arguably indicative of the failure of the public education system, yet his disdain for works of literature and intellectual thought demonstrates that he is partially at fault for the failed system. Pedro is subject to the hypocritical moral values of the Guerra family, however he too repeatedly demonstrates to possess ambiguous and contradictory alliances with the characters around him.

Pedro is the object of socioeconomic and racial discrimination by the Guerra family, when he himself does not hesitate to discriminate to all those who he perceives to be his inferiors.

Perhaps the binary which Pedro most relentlessly and affectively resists is that of his class allegiance. While Jorge Dubatti confidently affirms that Pedro is a clear representation of the middle class, “*Ala de criados* es una radiografía profunda de la subjetividad de derecha en la Argentina y del calaboracionismo de la clase media — representada por Pedro Testa — con los sectores dominantes de la la derecha” (Dubatti, “Entrevista con Mauricio Kartun” 116), for me, his class is less clearly defined. The confusion surrounding Pedro’s class allegiance is bolstered by the sexual, racial, and class conflicts staged daily at work. As an employee at the Pigeon Club of Buenos Aires, Pedro often times blends in with the aristocracy, in his speech, dress, sexual preferences, and leisurely activities. Despite his repeated performative efforts to achieve acceptance of the dominant class, the space that Pedro occupies in the Pigeon Club — whose importance is emphasized by the title of the play, *Ala de criados* — seems to be a clear indication that he is a working class member not dissimilar to those leading the violent revolt of the Semana Trágica in Buenos Aires. However, despite his situation as a laborer, and servant to a corrupted ruling class, Pedro evidently has no class consciousness, as demonstrated when he arms the Guerra family with state of the art weapons and leads a violent assault on a group of peaceful workers at the Juventud Moderno.

Pedro’s racial, class, and sexual identity is determined by and through his equally vague position at work. Race, class, and sexuality all are constructed simultaneously in this play, and I aim to demonstrate their relevance in the Argentina represented within the context of the play (1919), and also within the context of its many performances of the post-crisis. Kartun invites the

viewer/reader to interpret the play both within and beyond its fictional historical context. While *Ala de criados* includes costumes, music, and linguistic elements that help to imagine the play's fictional setting, it also self consciously steps out of character to reveal its connection with a contemporary audience.

Not everyone agrees on the purpose or necessity of these potentially metatheatrical moments in the text. For example, theater critic Jorge Arias has interpreted references to contemporary Argentina in the play as examples of historical inaccuracies and inconsistencies of the play:

La obra abunda en rebuscamientos, adornos y alusiones a tópicos de la época, que hoy no resuenan en ninguna memoria humana de menos de setenta años, como las referencias a los cigarrillos balsámicos del Dr. Andreu. Otras menciones son derechamente inexactas: [...] [p]alabras como “boludo” o “pelotudo” no existían en 1919; sólo aparecieron en el habla vulgar hacia los años '50.

Despite Arias's observations, I continue to affirm that allusions to a contemporary Argentina can be more accurately observed as the opportunity to enrich the interpretation of the text. Perhaps the dialogue of the play, rich in vocabulary appropriate to the time period, is intended to lead the audience into a distant past, but intermittent usage of common vernacular is a strategy in order to invite the audience to think about the historical events as a reflection on contemporary Argentina.

Another clue to the audience/reader that the play can and should be interpreted beyond its fictional context within the *Semana Trágica* is the role of Tatana as both character and narrator,

or in terms of the play, as both character and playwright/director. During multiple moments in the play, including the very first and last scene, Tatana interrupts the otherwise chronological, fictional story and addresses the audience directly to offer them privileged information that only she possesses as the narrator, and perhaps as fictional author of the play. During each of these interjections she demonstrates her dual role as character/director in the play and breaks the traditional fourth wall separating the stage and the audience. When she directly addresses the public, she removes the audience from the fictional setting of the story, and by default, from its fictional time period: 1919. As a result, Tatana has the ability to both invite the audience to experience her family's story in 1919, but, at the same time, she speaks from an ambiguous future, putting her in direct dialogue with the 21 century audience.

Many of Tatana's observations, and, therefore, much of the play itself, is based on the construction of the identity of Pedro, a topic that demonstrates the continuity between 1919 and 21st century Argentina. Pedro, a first generation immigrant from Italy, is representative of a wave of European immigration that began at the end of the 19th century and continued to attract millions of immigrants through the first decades of 20th century Argentina⁷⁸. The majority of these recent additions to Argentina came from working class families and took on working class jobs. The low economic status granted to them by their work in fields and factories caused them to be subject to discrimination. Pedro, a member of this class, does not identify with those who share his plight. As a result, Pedro attempts to align himself socially and culturally with the Guerra family in order to distance himself from what he perceives to be his shameful past — his working class, immigrant roots.

⁷⁸ It is estimated that the Argentina population grew from 1,800,000 inhabitants in 1869 to 7,800,000 in 1914. In 1914 half of the Argentine population was born abroad (Romero 27).

Pedro is not alone in his attempt to escape racial stigma. During the historical setting of the play, a moment in history marked by the *Semana Trágica*, racial and ethnic tensions were aggravated and intricately connected to economic disputes. Much like in Argentina subsequent to 2001, Argentina was suffering an economic crisis as a result of World War I: “La ‘Gran Guerra’, que luego fuera bautizada como la Primera Guerra Mundial (1914-1918) para diferenciar de la segunda (1935-1945), paralizó en nuestro país las inversiones. Las dificultades para exportar e importat provocaron carestía y pérdida del poder adquisitivo del salario. En ese cuatrenio de la primera contienda, el salario desendió en la Argentina un 38,2 por ciento, porcentaje más que elevado para aquel entonces” (Schiller 52). The difficult economic conditions faced by many led to social unrest, influenced and in part encouraged by ever-increasingly powerful workers unions who were inspired and empowered by international workers rights movements, “la combatividad obrera creció, estimulada además por la revolución bolchevique en la lejana Rusia la ola de pronunciamientos proletarios que se habían desatado en el resto de Europa, principalmente las acciones de los espartaquistas en Alemania encabezados por Rosa Luxemburgo” (Schiller 52). The rise of a common workers consciousness posed a potential threat to the upper class citizens (as represented by the “Guerra” family in the play): “En este clima creció el pánico de las clases altas: cada sindicato parecía un soviet; cada huelga, el preludio de la toma del poder por parte de los obreros.” In an effort by these upper class groups to halt the growing unrest from the working class, special paramilitary groups were formed often in private clubs just like the one fictionalized in the play⁷⁹ by volunteers hoping to maintain the economic (and social) status quo.

⁷⁹ These exclusive clubs included: the Jockey Club, Círculo de Armas, Club del Progreso and the Yacht Club. (Schiller 59)

The most notorious of these groups were the “Orden Social,” the “Guardia Blanca,” The “Liga Patriótica Argentina,” and the “Comité Pro Argentinidad.” As some of these names suggest, the project of these groups was not only to establish and maintain their economic control, but to establish themselves as “authentic” Argentines who protected their national sovereignty in the face of foreign invaders. The name “Guardia Blanca” may also suggest their claim to defend a homogeneous white identity set up in opposition to, and possibly threatened by, racial diversity. The main purpose of these groups was to combat workers strikes, but their discourse suggests that their economic ideology was perhaps legitimized by racial and cultural prejudices (a distinct paradox when considering the fact that the very country was inhabited almost entirely by immigrants). The object of this economic and social hatred were the workers unions, populated in part by many recent immigrants from Europe: “El mismo odio racial que la burguesía liberal sentía por el mestizo, al que trató de sustituir por el inmigrante europeo se volcó después hacia el propio inmigrante cuando éste se reveló inesperadamente como un dinámico elemento de agitación social” (Schiller 56). The common cries of these groups underscored more than their message of social discrimination (in addition to their obvious economic agenda), labeling the workers as marginal citizens, who threatened the socioeconomic, racial, and cultural purity of the country: “Los gritos comunes eran, ‘Fuera los extranjeros’; ‘mueran los maximalistas’; ‘guerra al anarquismo’; ‘mueran los judíos’” (59).

As working class citizen and cultural other, Pedro arduously struggles to avoid being the stigmatized by these elitist groups as an economic and social outcast. Pedro’s struggle was no doubt shared by many during his time period, but it is certainly not unique to his historical context. For example, in the 1930s, Pedro would have sought to distance himself from the

“cabecita negras,” a term used to refer to “the working class population of Indian ancestry that came from the provinces to work in Buenos Aires factories” (Alejandro Grimson and Gabriel Kessler 119). This term was racially charged; it was as much about class as it was about race:

any differentiation based on national origin or ethnic specificity tended to be dissolved into a racially tinged social class identification that covered both Argentine *mestizos* and border immigrant. The poor were “black,” even though they had no African blood and looked nothing like a “black” according to classification systems as different from each other as those of Brazil and the United States. (Grimson and Kessler 119)

This term continued to be used in the 1940s, now not referring exclusively to economic, ethnic and racial otherness, but political marginality, “What is peculiarly Argentine is that for long decades, racist terminology was used to indicate a political operation as Ratier (1971) pointed out many years ago. The dark-skinned provincial workers became synthesized in a political identity: Peronism” (Grimson and Kessler 122).

After the post crisis of 2001, as Grimson and Kessler have observed, an increase in unemployment and universal economic hardships increased racial tensions. Beginning in the 1990s, unlike in the beginning of the 20th century, the new object of racial discrimination originated primarily from the border countries of Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru. Many of these new immigrants, perhaps as a result of deep rooted and historical racism in the country, have been unrightfully blamed as responsible for recent economic hardships and growing crime rates:

According to government officials, the growing unemployment and lack of security [...] were also a result of immigration: the exorbitant number of border

immigrants were taking jobs from Argentines and were also responsible for the high crime rate.

Sociodemographic figures, however, showed no qualitative jump in the number of border immigrants entering Argentina, nor did the figures support the claim that immigration was behind the growing unemployment and crime rates.

(Grimson and Kessler 117)

Border immigrants, or anyone who looks like a border immigrant, or perhaps even anyone who takes on a job associated stereotypically as immigrant work, are subject of continuing racial discrimination.

In certain contexts poor people traditionally referred to as *negros* are now generically called *bolivianos*. In addition the fans of Argentina's most popular soccer team are called *bolivianos* by their main adversary. If earlier Bolivianos were added to the category of *negros* that was used to refer to the Argentine poor, now the term *bolivianos* is, in certain contexts, used categorically for the same sector. (Grimson and Kessler 126-27)

Much like many of those people grouped together under the pejorative term "bolivianos" in the 21st century, or "cabecita negra" in the 1930s and 1940s, Pedro is hardly distinguishable in race from the other characters in the play, however, his condition at work automatically makes him the obvious opponent in the eyes of the Guerra family. Pedro struggles to avoid this categorization by repeatedly distancing himself from the working class by both explicitly claiming to be unique from those of the working class, and by aligning himself with the

aristocracy through performative measures that include dress, sexual performances, speech patterns, cultural tastes, and leisurely activities.

On numerous occasions throughout the play, Pedro proclaims, “¡Ojo! yo duermo en el ala de criados, no soy criado...Me lo prestan gracias, pero no soy criado de nadie!” (71). He explicitly denies any association with the working class, and all that this represents to his employers at the Pigeon Club. In order to prove his worth, Pedro attempts to distinguish himself from the traditionally marginalized groups in Argentina by discriminating against all those citizens that might not be any different from him, but who he perceives to be of lesser socioeconomic standing. He dismisses “los negros” as “los resentidos” (71), “el gaucho,” he claims, is the, “resentido nacional” (71), “los anarquistas: son como criaturas: sueñan, le hacen versos al hambre,” (71) and the colombaires, “A mí me la tienen jurada porque yo no les huelgueo. Que vayan a trabajar” (23). While perhaps “gaucho” and “colombaires” are stigmas that have lost their bearing in 21st century culture, Pedro’s need to define himself in opposition to those he perceives as inferior is by no means antiquated topic in Argentina. Indeed, questions of racial conflict were recently brought to the stage in a 2010 (re)interpretation of José María Vilche’s *Bululú*, in which Argentine actor of Bolivian descent, Osqui Guzmán, restages the work in a new context in order to shed light on the issue of border conflicts between Bolivia and Argentina. The topic is perhaps even more prevalent in the *Nuevo Cine Argentino*, as demonstrated in Lucrecia Martel’s *La ciénaga* and Adrián Caetano’s *Bolivia*. Both films depict middle and working class Argentines attempting to distinguish themselves from border immigrants who are the subject of violent verbal and physical racism, despite the fact that there

is little or no apparent socioeconomic or racial difference between the victims of racist hatred and the victimizers.

Struggling to escape racial discrimination, Pedro also seeks access to the elite class via performance, which begins with his costume. Much like the maid in the canonical Latin American play *El delantal blanco*⁸⁰ by the Chilean playwright Sergio Vodanovak, when Pedro adorns himself with the clothing of the aristocracy, he temporarily assumes the role of the members that he serves at the exclusive club. Pedro's white suit hides his working class history and diverts the attention from the dark skin of his Italian ancestors (image 1, Pedro carries the briefcase).



Image 1 (<http://www.alternativateatral.com/obra14653-ala-de-criados>)

The suit represents a passage into the elite European society, civilization, progress, and aristocracy. Sarmiento, who attempted to attract European immigrants with hope to improving the status of the country through race, stated the importance of the suit in his oft-cited *Vida de*

⁸⁰ In a sort of wink to the readers, this play is subtly referenced on page 74, just after the death of Pedro, and the simultaneous defeat of the worker strike that ended the *Semana Trágica*. Tatana celebrates that everyone is now performing their appropriate role in society, “Esa tarde cuando la pesadilla había pasado al fin me senté en un thonet de la rambla a escribir la última nota de semana. Había meseros ya de largo *delantal blanco*. Impecables. Todo vuelve a la normalidad” (74).

Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, “El hombre de la ciudad viste el traje europeo, vive de la vida civilizada tal como la conocemos en todas partes; allí están las leyes, las ideas de progreso, los medios de instrucción, alguna organización municipal, el gobierno regular” (66).

If the suit temporarily grants Pedro access into the exclusive society via disguise, it is not the only performative measure in which he engages. In questions of leisurely activity, Pedro, just like the people he serves, is an avid consumer of Blood Marys, a superior horseman, and an expert marksman. In fact, Pedro does not only imitate the members of the club in these activities, but he is their leader in these activities. He drinks Bloody Marys, but he also makes and serves all the drinks that are consumed in the club; in addition to being a talented horseman, Pedro trains the horses and leads club members on excursions; and finally, in addition to being an expert marksman, Pedro provides the arms that are used on the premises of the club, and instructs the members in their use.

Pedro similarly imitates members of the club in his reading interests (and disinterests). Indeed, much like the Guerras, he denounces all literature that he perceives as contaminating the mind of young rebellious groups. He is particularly critical of Catalanian literature, much of which was devoured by revolutionary laborers who had recently immigrated to Argentina, and found themselves at the forefront of the revolutionary workers movement:

[I]os catalanes muy de leer. Para mí, son los libros. Les hacen ver cosas que no son. Noche por medio a la biblioteca. Biblioteca juventud Moderna. Me confundió el nombre y los acompañé una noche. ¡Que moderna! Cargar libros y hablar mal de los señores. No quieren saber lo que dicen de su Tata. No, yo no

soy palomo buchón pero no quieren saber lo que esos colombaires dicen de su Tata. Infamia. Lo remedan. Los libros. Narcóticos. (36)

In speech, much like the Guerra family and many of the upper class citizens and their “civilized” leaders such as Sarmiento and Alberdi, Pedro occasionally incorporates terms and phrases in English and French in his daily dialogue. He is aware that French and English are the languages of “la Europa civilizada,” and by adapting their linguistic habits, he strives to access a privileged cultural space. The Italian of Pedro’s ancestors is the language used by what was considered to my leaders of the late 19th century and early 20th century to be the “Europa atrasada” and “menos culta”. The following excerpt is taken from Juan B. Alberdi’s 1879 letter “Gobernar es poblar” and it underscores the complicated perspective Argentina had in respects to immigration. While Argentina is a country of immigrants, this letter makes it clear that all groups are not accepted with open arms:

Poblar es civilizar cuando se puebla con gente civilizada, es decir, con pobladores de la Europa civilizada. Por eso he dicho en la Constitución que el gobierno debe fomentar la inmigración europea. Pero poblar no es civilizar, sino embrutecer, cuando se puebla con chinos y con indios de Asia y con negros de África. Poblar es apestar, corromper, degenerar, envenenar un país, cuando en vez de poblarlo con la flor de la población trabajadora de Europa, se le puebla con la basura de la Europa atrasada o menos culta. Porque hay Europa y Europa, conviene no olvidarlo; y se puede estar dentro del texto liberal de la Constitución, que ordena fomentar la inmigración europea, sin dejar por eso de arruinar un país de Sud América con sólo poblarlo de inmigrados europeos. (22)

Access to the economic elite is intricately linked with the cultures of “Europa civilizada.” The love affair between the French and the Argentine elite is especially outlined in Kartún’s *El niño argentino*, a play that depicts an upper class Argentine family, their cow, and their servant traveling across the Atlantic to France on a ship. The relationship is further demonstrated in *Ala de criados*. The Guerra family all use French in casual conversation (or their best attempt), and Pedro follows suit. Pedro’s fear is perhaps that they will recognize his working class immigrant roots. A native of Italy, he is not proud of his origins, and this is why he suppresses this part of his identity until the very end of the play, when he faces his dark fate (he is tied on the cross and murdered by the Guerra family) at the hands of these elitist club members. This monologue clearly demonstrates the close relationship between class, culture, and language:

Para decir solamente la verdad hay que tener mucha plata... Ven... Digo la verdad y me crucifican. Solamente con plata se dice la verdad sin castigo... ¿No quieren engañifa...? Bueno, viene la verdad... Se cae todo... ¡Al país: le sacan nuestra engañifa y se cae todo...! [...] Yo acá me curto el upite con sal. De sol a sol. Lo traigo en la sangre. Monguzzo. Italia. Compró y vendo. La casita en La Plata me la hice sólo, trabajando en invierno. Ladrillo por ladrillo con lo que me llevo de acá. Tengo mujer y dos crías. Un casalito. No los veo en todo el verano, un sacrificio, pero cuando llego en abril... todo es hacerme fiesta. Pienso bien. Pienso lindo. Pienso limio. Tengo la cabeza sana: la pongo en ganar un peso más. (72-73)

Despite Pedro’s many cultural performances to disguise his working class history, he is never accepted by the Guerra family. In addition to his performative efforts, perhaps his most extreme attempt at accessing the culture of the Pigeon club is through his sexual bonds with

various members of the Guerra family. Pedro simultaneously engages in sexual encounters with both Tatana and her cousin Pancho. What seems to be Pedro's presumable goal backfires — rather than securing his social bond with the Guerra family by involving himself in this triangular love affair, the sexual act only seems to strengthen the incestuous bond between Tatana and her cousin Pancho, and turns Pedro into the object of racial and class humiliation and violence. Each of these passionate relationships symbolically takes place in the servants' quarters, or the "Ala de criados." While the sexual bonds with the Guerra family represent Pedro's attempt to temporarily reach some sentimental or physical connection with elite society, they only reaffirm his position as exploited laborer, and servant, or "criado" of this exclusive club.

Not only are Pedro's performative efforts to blend in with the aristocracy rendered futile at the end of the play, but he simultaneously fails to serve his family, and others who share his plight as exploited laborer. Although the play never depicts the violent clash between the workers and paramilitary forces that defines the *Semana Trágica*, there are constant references to this moment in history in the play. In addition, Pedro's violent death at the hand of the "Guerra" family accurately reflects the unsuccessful attempt of the striking workers in Buenos Aires. Their protests only result in deaths, and despite the human sacrifice, they failed to achieve the improved wages and workers rights that they were fighting for.

Perhaps the downfall of the workers is because of characters such as Pedro, who experience a failed romance with the dominant class. Pedro is trapped into his role as working class immigrant, as defined by the space that he inhabits at work — the *ala de criados*. Although he adorns a white suit, he is only judged for his dark skin. Pedro's distaste for highbrow

literature (following the lead of the Guerra family), only allows him to become classified as ignorant. And finally, Pedro's attempt to impress the Guerra family by arming them with state of the art equipment and expert marksmanship, only results in his own death at the hand of his once perceived allies.

Much like is expressed in the quote from the epigraph, Pedro fails to recognize his class alliance with others of the working class:

Ahí cerca, en 116, tenía otro palomar un anarquista. [...] Un 1o de mayo tiñó a las palomas en rojo con carmín de repostería. Carmín de cochinilla. Las soltó al mediodía [...] Así colorados no se reconocían entre ellas y empezaron todas a alejar a picotazos a las extrañas. La tercera vuelta fue una batalla aérea. Verdún. Un Barón Rojo contra otro Barón Rojo. Una lluvia de plumas carmín. Carmín de cochinilla.

Like these pigeons, Pedro is unable (or unwilling) to recognize those who share his plight. Via his alliance with the elite members of this club, he defies his family, and other members of his own class.

La Guayi, a domestic servant depicted in the novel, and subsequently produced film, *El niño pez*, shares a similarly complex relationship with her employers. *El niño pez* is Lucía Puenzo's first novel⁸¹, and her second feature length film (her first was *XXY*). Like many of the most recent successful films to be produced in Argentina, *El niño pez* was a Spanish/French/Argentine co-production, receiving funding from a variety of national and

⁸¹ Puenzo has published four subsequent novels: *Nueve minutos* (2005), *La maldición de Jacinta Pichimahuida* (2007), *La furia de langosta* (2009), and *Wakoldo* (2011).

international sources, including Historias Cinematográficas, the production company owned by Academy Award winning Argentine director, Luís Puenzo (*La historia oficial*, 1985), Lucía Puenzo's father. In addition to private production companies, the film received funding from a variety of public funds such as el Programa Ibermedia,⁸² The Spanish Ministro de Cultura (ICAIA), and the Argentine National film institute (INCAA: *Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales*). Many changes were made in the adaption of the novel to the screen, which include important restructuring of the events, a unique point of view, the removal of numerous scenes, fewer characters, and the highlighted importance of the relationship between Lala and her love interest, La Guayi. I focus my analysis on the central affair between the story's two protagonists: Lala and La Guayi. Although this unorthodox relationship has been idealized in many previous interpretations of the film, I argue that *El niño pez* underscores a transnational love affair that may actually reinforce borders rather than break them down. Indeed, *El niño pez* can be read as a metaphor for the complex relationship between Paraguay and Argentina under MERCOSUR, a socioeconomic and political agreement created with the goal of providing balanced economic growth and increased cultural understanding among neighboring countries, but whose implementation has arguably created growing socioeconomic tensions between two conflicting economies and clashing cultures. Similar to the relationship between the nations under this economic agreement, while Lala and La Guayi's bond seems ideal on the surface, the relationship is tinged by socioeconomic power imbalances that make it problematic, especially for La Guayi.

⁸² Programa Ibermedia is a multinational, government sponsored organization that provides funding for films in Latin America, Spain, and Portugal. According to Tamara Falicov it is "the most successful film finance pool in Latin America" (29).

Despite the many differences, the novel and film share the basic storyline. Ailín nicknamed, La Guayi (Mariela Vitale), a Paraguayan immigrant migrates south to Buenos Aires after the death of her newborn son, the product of an incestuous relationship with her father. In an attempt to distance herself from her past, La Guayi takes up a job as a domestic employee for an upper-middle class family in San Isidro, a prominent suburb located to the north of Buenos Aires' city center. Just like in the case of Pedro, La Guayi's situation at work is complex. Her new home offers her some economic stability and a warm bed, yet many of the problems that she attempted to escape from her dark past in Paraguay come back to haunt her in her new place of employment. Despite the economic comfort of her new family, the house is anything but stable: the mother escapes to other continents in pursuit of her romantic extramarital affairs; the father (Pep Munné) is a corrupt judge (an author in the novel) who secretly engages in sexual encounters with La Guayi; the son is sent to a psychiatric ward after continuous suicide attempts (in the novel he is sent to a juvenile detention center for drug trafficking); and the daughter, Lala (Inés Efron), is an introverted teenager who is madly in love with La Guayi. In an effort to escape the uncomfortable surroundings, and further pursue their relationship, Lala and La Guayi plan to flee north to Paraguay and build a home together next to "el lago azul de Ypacaraí." In order to finance their journey, they begin to steal money from the family savings and pawn off other stolen goods from the home. Just before the two finally reach their getaway, Lala discovers that her father is engaging in secret and scandalous sexual encounters with La Guayi. In response to this act, Lala serves her father a poisoned glass of milk, resulting in his sudden death.

Subsequent to the patricide, Lala purchases a one-way bus ticket to Paraguay, where she and La Guayi had previously planned to forge their future together. After days of waiting for La

Guayi to appear as planned, Lala is eventually informed that her former lover has been sent to a juvenile detention center in La Plata (approximately 60 km south of Buenos Aires) after being falsely accused of a criminal act performed by Lala. Enraged by the news, Lala returns to Argentina in an effort to repair the situation. Following a failed attempt at convincing her family and the corrupt authorities that she is the true culprit of the crime, she rushes to the prison where La Guayi is being held in an effort to reconcile with her love interest. Despite a heated discussion in the prison in which La Guayi attempts to convince Lala to forget about their future together, Lala continues her effort to liberate her love interest from the confines of the prison. Through obstinate investigation and searching, Lala is informed by a mutual friend that La Guayi is sent regularly to a home in the outskirts of town where she and other prisoners are prostituted off in exchange for increased privileges inside of the jail. In a thrilling action scene Lala violently liberates La Guayi from those holding her captive, and she heroically escapes with her lover, although she suffers a bullet wound during the conflict. The story ends as La Guayi and a seriously injured Lala seek refuge on a bus on the way to Paraguay. In a self referential ending, Lala asks her lover to tell her how the drama concludes. In the absence of a response to the question, the future of these two supposed lovers is left open to the interpretation of the viewer/reader. Now responsible for multiple murders, it seems doubtful that they will successfully escape the authorities for a second time.

Although in the novel the topic of homosexuality is not central to the plot, it has become the focus of much of the discussion of the film. Boyd Van Hoelj affirms:

[p]ic should be a natural for LGBT fests. [...] [T]he movie has a lot in common with Marcelo Pinyro's queer cult hit 'Burnt Money.' In both films, a couple against all odds

turn to crime to realize their dream of being together, and though their stories start in Argentina — Buenos Aires, to be exact — they soon detour to neighboring countries. A preference for visual panache to narrative fluidity is clear in both films, as is simmering erotic tension that constitutes a large part of their appeal.

Perhaps due to this “simmering erotic tension,” the movie is categorized in movie databases such as Netflix under the “foreign gay and lesbian” section and the passionate love affair has been used as a marketing tool to attract viewers (image 2).

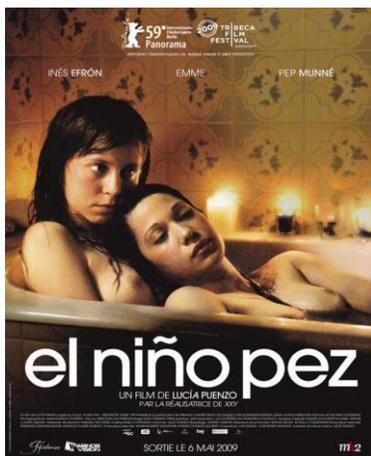


Image 2 (www.imdb.com)

In her article “What of unnatural bodies? The discourse of nature in Lucía Puenzo’s *XXY* and *El niño pez/The Fish Child*,” Margaret Frohlick’s offers a very positive interpretation of the relationship that Lala and La Guayi share together. Frohlich asserts that both *XXY* (Lucía Puenzo’s first feature film) and *El niño pez* “denaturalize the representation of nature [...] through an exploration of how they construct a narrative of self-determination and sexuality in relation to nature” (160). She argues that through the depiction of a healthy yet traditionally unconventional lesbian love story between Lala and La Guayi, the director and author of *El niño*

pez successfully undermines potentially xenophobic perspectives on gay relationships in which “[t]he marginalization of certain types of gendered bodies and sexual practices relies on a discourse of nature that posits the unnatural and the abnormal as aberrations that defy all sense of order and goodness” (160). Frohlick convincingly underscores the formal techniques used by Puenzo in order to naturalize a homosexual relationship that was once commonly perceived as unnatural and marginalized, “Puenzo’s cinematography portrays Lala and Ailín’s queer sexuality via references to a warm natural world” (168).

Although Frohlick persuasively demonstrates how the film successfully advocates for a more inclusive definition of normative sexual behavior by highlighting the romantic relationship between La Guayi and Lala, I question her overly romanticized interpretation of the film’s central love affair. I argue that the film, and to an even greater extent, the novel, offer the reader/viewer with a much more nuanced depiction of the Lala and Guayi’s relationship, and that the movie and novel offer much more than a potentially increasingly inclusive definition of sexuality, but rather, these two artistic representations are much more a commentary on issues of racial, class, and immigration conflicts exacerbated by the Argentine post-crisis.

When the film *El niño pez* is interpreted in relationship to the novel, many doubts arise about the potential success of the relationship between La Guayi and Lala. This is due to two major shifts in narration between the novel and the film that include both a unique point of view and a modification of the construction and organization of the events. Unlike the film, in which the camera is mostly focalized from the point of view of Lala, the novel is narrated from the perspective of Serafín, an abandoned dog that is a gift from La Guayi to Lala. Serafín offers privileged information to readers through his omniscient and humorous narration. Regularly

addressing the reader directly, Serafín breaks down a common barrier between narrator and reader. In addition, the dog casts important insight on the relationship between La Guayi and Lala, complicating it to a level that is also present in the film, but to a lesser extent. In the final lines of the novel, as La Guayi and Lala begin their escape together, Serafín offers his perspective on the young girls' relationship: "En realidad eran extrañas. Enamoradas de un recuerdo que no era más que eso. Mientras el micro se acercaba a la frontera el aire se fue cargando de inconscientes, ecos de un sueño en los otros, un caldo en el que, al final, todos soñamos lo mismo" (190). By clearly contrasting the terms "realidad" with "recuerdo" and "sueño," Serafín explicitly casts doubts on the future of this relationship. Despite a possible dream and desire, the transnational relationship between these girls is grounded on nothing more than fiction, underscoring the impossible bond between these two characters.

The doubt cast by the narrator in the final lines of the novel is further bolstered by the organization of the novel. Cyclical in structure, the story begins and ends with the death of the Serafín, the narrator/character who guides the reader through the story. The decision to include this tragic scene twice in the novel serves as a way of further emphasize the dark future faced by the novel's protagonists. Their story together is framed by scenes of death, symbolically representing the subsequent death of their relationship. Moreover, it is not just any death that surrounds them, but that of Serafín, the dog that once marked the very bond shared by these two characters. Like a child, the dog was raised in unison by La Guayi and Lala, and it served to secure their fleeting relationship. The death of the dog, therefore, potentially marks the end of a relationship that only may have existed in a "sueño," or at most, in a distorted "recuerdo."

While the novel is much more explicitly ambiguous about the possible failure of the relationship between Lala and La Guayi, the movie also demonstrates some possible hints about the potential frailness of their future love together. Despite Tina Escajas's celebration of this love affair, "La estructura fílmica de alternancia de escenas se mantendrá a lo largo de la historia, enfatizando las realidades paralelas de estas dos muchachas unidas en edad [...], complicidad [...], y un intenso amor y deseo sexual mutuas," their mutual love does not seem so obvious, and the imbalance of power and control seems to be reinforced by formal elements of the film. While La Guayi is consistently set up as passive object, Lala, her counterpart, is an active participant of events. While the camera consistently follows La Guayi from above and behind, Lala is mostly seen facing the camera, and the camera often offers us the perspective of Lala. La Guayi's passive role is most clearly demonstrated in the viewer's introduction to La Guayi, in which she is face down on a bed, being penetrated by El Vasco, one of her love interest from when she first arrives as a teenager in Buenos Aires. After the conclusion of the romantic encounter, the camera follows her slowly from behind (image 3).



Image 3

This view marks her lack of control in her many love affairs, and in the destiny of her future as an immigrant in Argentina. In contrast to these distant shots of La Guayi, Lala is often viewed from a close distance, and the camera often focuses on her face. As a result, she is depicted as an active, thinking subject, in contrast to La Guayi, who is depicted as more of a passive object.

One scene that demonstrates the clear imbalance in power is when Lala first discovers La Guayi engaging in a passionate love scene with her father. During this scene, the camera is positioned from perspective of Lala, and the viewer actively looks at La Guayi as she is passively engages in intercourse with Lala's father. The camera is crosscut between Lala's look of terror (image 4), as she discovers La Guayi with her father (image 5), and images of La Guayi and Lala's father's sexual encounter. The crosscutting between these two shots, make the viewer sympathize with Lala, as our reality is shaped by her observations and discoveries.



Image 4



Image 5

Not only are many images focalized from a perspective of Lala in the film, but the story is developed according to her memory and point of view. The beginning of the movie features scenes of Lala purchasing a bus ticket after she murders her father. This scene is crosscut with images of her developing relationship with La Guayi. The fact that the film is constructed according to the Lala's active memory reinforces the imbalance of power that exists between Lala and La Guayi, a dynamic that has received little critical attention. Lala is from a wealthy home in suburbia, with economic security available to her through her parents. La Guayi is a runaway with no economic or social support from her family. La Guayi is servant in Lala's home, and even though La Guayi is not employed directly by Lala, it is her job to serve Lala and the rest of the family. Lala forms part of the mainstream culture while La Guayi's situation as a foreign immigrant places her on the margins of society.

By constructing the story from the Lala's perspective and memory of, viewers are coerced into sympathizing with her, and envisioning the story from her point of view. If the viewer does observe the story from the perspective of Lala, it may seem as though she enjoys a mutual love affair with her family's domestic employee. For this reason, the obvious interpretation is to assume that Lala and La Guayi share a flawless and passionate bond. Indeed, Lala proves time and time again to be completely committed to her Paraguayan domestic employee: she repeatedly interrupts the sexual encounters that La Guayi shares with other characters in the story; she risks facing life in prison when she kills her own father with the hope of earning La Guayi's unconditional attention; and, finally, she puts her own life in danger when she heroically saves La Guayi from the brothel where she is working in order to gain extra

benefits during her incarceration. The last scene especially seems to clearly demonstrate Lala's willingness to sacrifice her entire life to save her relationship with La Guayi.

Despite the apparent dedication demonstrated by Lala to secure the future of this relationship, if the events are interpreted from the perspective of La Guayi, the romance proves to be very different. Every relationship that La Guayi shares with other characters (in both the novel and film) is interrupted by Lala's uncontrollable jealousy. Her romantic future is completely manipulated by Lala's plan for the two of them. It is La Guayi's trust in Lala that eventually puts her in a complex and unfortunate series of events. While it is true that Lala saves La Guayi from her imprisonment at the juvenile detention center, it is also due to Lala that La Guayi ends up incarcerated in the first place. Although Lala seems to save La Guayi from a problematic relationship with her father, she is later coerced into engaging in another similarly complex relationship with Lala. Finally, despite Lala's seemingly heroic effort to save La Guayi from prison, it must be considered that La Guayi is only ever freed from incarceration in order to be trapped once again, if not behind bars, in the context of a complicated relationship.

La Guayi's position at work, and complicated romances with both Lala, and Lala's father, is indicative of a complex relationship between Argentina and bordering countries, exacerbated by the economic downturn. La Guayi is not only representative of Paraguay, but a new class of immigrants who arrived in Argentina subsequent to the post-crisis, and who were the victims of heightened racial and class tensions resulting from the difficult economic situation suffered widely in the country. During the Menem years, new neoliberal economic policies not only resulted in the privatization of formerly publicly owned businesses but also opened trade up to international market. Part of this economic plan included the formation of an international trade

agreement with neighboring countries known as MERCOSUR. Alejandro Grimson and Gabriel Kessler conclude that although this may have functioned on purely economic level, especially for big businesses, for whom many trade barriers were erased, on a sociopolitical level MERCOSUR may have paradoxically exaggerated border disputes rather than working to erase them:

Current regionalization and globalization processes have not erased frontiers between countries but instead altered the way they function and the meaning ascribed to them. In a word, the frequently heard announcement of “the end of frontiers” has no juridical, institutional, or sociocultural basis. Contrary to opinion in some quarters, ‘deterriorialization’ has not occurred; one territorialization process has been exchanged for another. Concretely, frontiers have not been erased in the Southern Cone; their function and meaning have changed, but in many ways they are stronger than ever. (21-22)

El niño pez is yet another example of how borders have been strengthened after MERCOSUR. Despite the fact that *El niño pez* focuses on an attempt to break down international barriers in a romantic relationship that crosses Argentine and Paraguayan cultural borders, the unequal power dynamic between the two arguably serves to strengthen borders between two nations. Lala is from the upper-middle class, while La Guayi and all of the other characters in the story are working class immigrants. Lala speaks Spanish — the language of the colonizer, while La Guayi speaks Guaraní, the language of the colonized. Lala is empowered by the education of an exclusive private school education, while La Guayi has no former education. Lala is from the family of the employer, and La Guayi is the employed.

These differences are heightened by some of the production methods of the film. Although the movie was filmed in both Argentina and Paraguay, none of the funding came from Paraguay, and, more importantly, there was little Paraguayan artistic participation. For example, La Guayi, is played by two actresses — Ailín Salas as a young girl and Mariela Vitale when she is depicted as the grown-up version of La Guayi—, neither of whom are Paraguayan. The exclusion of Paraguayan talent in a movie that deals with transnational issues further bolsters the problematic relationship between the two nations. Not only is there a power imbalance in the story of the film (which is clearly constructed from the perspective of Lala), but there are similar tensions in the production of the film. La Guayi is depicted as object, servant, and a marginalized citizen who arguably reaffirms stereotypes about the way Paraguayans are perceived in Argentina. In addition, the Paraguayan identity is embodied by an Argentine actress, thus further detracting from the authenticity and agency of the character that she plays.

Part of La Guayi's identity is constructed by her use of language, including both Spanish and Guaraní. While the inclusion of Guaraní in the novel and subsequently produced film potentially augments the authenticity of the story, the fact that it is spoken by Argentine actors for whom the language is a foreign tongue paradoxically serves as an additional reminder of the absence of Paraguay in the film. This complicated dynamic is similarly represented in the international trade agreement between Argentina and Paraguay. While MERCOSUR (Ñemby Ñemuha in Guaraní) recognizes three official languages —Spanish, Portuguese, and Guaraní — it is questionable whether or not all languages are treated equally. The inclusion of Guaraní seems to be, at best, an attempt to project the illusion of social integration and political acceptance in relationship with the indigenous community. What is doubtful, however, is that the

language is actually used as a communicative tool by which to form an economic and cultural bridge between cultures. The official website for the trade agreement, for example, can be accessed in both Portuguese and Spanish, but not Guaraní.

Similarly, in the film Guaraní is present, however, it is spoken by foreign actors, and it does not function as much as a tool to communicate. Rather, it as a sexual fetish that further demonstrates the exotic nature of the Paraguayan maid as sexual object. One scene that clearly demonstrates language as fetish is in a conversation between Lala and La Guayi. During this conversation, Lala attempts to coerce La Guayi into ending the relationship with the Paraguayan gardener who is employed in the house next door. The ensuing conversation unfolds as follows:

LALA. ¿Lo querés?

LA GUAYI. No

LALA. Entonces, no lo veas más. A él, ni a nadie.

LA GUAYI. Dímelo en guaraní.

LALA. No sé como se dice.

La Guayi responds with the words in Guaraní which are seductively whispered into Lala's ear. While Lala unsuccessfully attempts to repeat these words, she is cut off in mid sentence by La Guayi's passionate kisses. It becomes clear that the meaning of the words is not as important as the exotic appeal that they offer.

Just as the language serves as a cultural fetish, highlighting the exotic nature of La Guayi in the film, La Guayi and Lala are further bonded by the legendary myth of the "niño pez," a story that similarly heightens the passionate ties between La Guayi and Lala, but perhaps at the expense of further perpetuating cultural imbalances between these two characters and their

countries' of origin. Throughout the course of the film Lala begs La Guayi to repeat the story of the *Niño pez*, a magical legend that originates from La Guayi's hometown in Paraguay. The story is always told in intimate scenes that take place between La Guayi and Lala, and serve to heighten the romance between these two characters. Although Lala's fascination with the story of the *Niño pez* could seemingly promote cultural exchange, the fact that it reaches the level of sexual fetish, only serves to highlight the disconnect between the two countries represented by La Guayi and Lala. When the Paraguayan culture becomes a fetish (as represented by the Guaraní language and the mythical story of the *Niño pez*), the imbalance in the relationship between La Guayi and Lala is further underscored, thus representing the unequal representation of these two cultures in film.

The cultural imbalance between Paraguay in Argentina represented in the story of the film is thus represented in a similarly unequal balance in the production techniques of the film. The problem is economic and cultural. Tamara Falicov has studied the implication that the MERCOSUR agreement has had on film, and concluded that despite increased trade between member nations, cultural exchange (and most specifically, film) has not matched that of the economy. Here she outlines some of the ideas to incorporate film into the exchange of goods under MERCOSUR:

In terms of cultural industries, and specifically film production, exhibition, and distribution in the Southern Cone, these efforts are twofold. The primary goals are first that the national film industries create a common market for trade and circulation of their products to encourage the economic viability of audiovisual production in the region; and second, that national film industries work alongside

governmental bodies to move toward the creation of a regional identity that is expressed cinematically. Unfortunately, in examining more closely the aim of culturally integrating member nations through the interchange and joint creation of cultural artifacts such as film and video, one finds that the situation has been more of a dream than actual material practice. (35)

The lack of international collaboration in the developing of transnational film has resulted in underrepresentation of Paraguay, or, as in the case of *El niño pez*, a problematic vision of Argentina's political neighbor.

One of the key factors preventing a harmonious cinematographic relationship between Argentina and Paraguay is the economic imbalance that exists between these two bordering nations. As an industry, film depends on economic investment in order to survive, and in Argentina these funds are often times partially provided by INCAA (*Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Visuales*), the state film organization. In addition, film depends on a local market to which they can promote and distribute their artistic products. As a much smaller nation with a significantly less significant gross domestic product than Argentina⁸³, Paraguay is not able to offer competitive funding to film directors, nor does it have a substantial local market in which to sell their cultural products.

The economic asymmetry leading to the cultural imbalance in film production can also be observed in the labor exchange between Argentina and Paraguay. Despite multinational efforts to improve regional economies in the Southern Cone under MERCOSUR, economic discrepancies

⁸³ A 2010 census estimates Argentina's population to be 40,091,359 compared to Paraguay's 5,163,198 citizens (estimated in a 2002 census). In 2009, Argentina's GDP was estimated to be 310 billion US dollars and Paraguay's to just over 14 (Doctor 9).

between the two bordering nations continue to be exaggerated — in 2010, average per capita income in Argentina was estimated at approximately 7,725 US dollars compared to 2,265 dollars in Paraguay (Doctor 9). This economic imbalance has led to increased southern immigration from Paraguay to Argentina. A 2001 census estimated that there were more than 325,000 Paraguayan immigrants residing in Argentina, of whom, 80.4% live in the province of Buenos Aires (León Bologna 180). Of the recent Paraguayan immigrants in Argentina, many work in poor paying, manual labor jobs without proper benefits. Of the female population, for example, a 2002 census estimated that 52 % of the working population held jobs in the domestic service industry (León Bologna 183).

Paraguayan immigrants continue to face difficulty in acclimating to their new political environment despite recent policy changes in MERCOSUR that have aimed to solve economic and cultural discrepancies in the Southern Cone. There is no doubt that Argentina's official stance on immigration has improved in recent years, clearly outlined by Eduardo Domenech in his article, "La visión estatal sobre las migraciones en la Argentina reciente: de la retórica de la exclusión a la retórica de inclusión" in which he traces immigration policy and discourse from the time of the military dictatorship up until the Kirchner era. During the time of the military dictatorship, the 1981 Ley Videla offered a tough stance on immigration, and was reinforced in a 1994 law approved by then president Carlos Menem. During this time period the tough policies were justified by violent rhetoric used to refer towards border immigrants:

Como se ha señalado en reiteradas ocasiones, los inmigrantes de países vecinos — especialmente bolivianos, paraguayos y peruanos — fueron interpelados básicamente como una amenaza a la sanidad, al empleo y al "orden público": en

sus declaraciones, (re)producidas por distintos medios de comunicación, altos funcionarios públicos adjudicaban el cólera, el desempleo y la delincuencia a los “inmigrantes limítrofes.” (26)

This discourse exists in contrasts to a more inclusive rhetoric that has been employed in recent years by the Kirchners who have approved more progressive immigration reform, marked by the 2003 Law Number 25.871, commonly known as the law “Patria Grande” (Domenech 21). Under this new legislation, the term ‘illegal immigration’ is replaced by ‘irregular immigration’ in reference to unauthorized border crossings.

The issue of immigration has become a recent priority in MERCOSUR meetings, but it is questionable to what extent it has provoked change. As part of an international effort to soften the rhetoric, immigration is now referred to as a human rights issue, and a potential for cultural enrichment, rather than a problem or plague faced by neighboring countries. However, Ana Margheritis has suggested that despite softer, more inclusive immigration rhetoric, immigrants continue to face harsh policies under this international agreement:

[G]overnments’ discourses and policies have sought consensus, cooperation, and multilateral management of migration problems in the last few years; they have emphasized a distinctive approach to migration nurtured by advocacy groups and based on human rights considerations, as well as on the positive links between people’s mobility, national development, and regional integration. Nevertheless, existing policies point out to the contradictions between the liberal humanitarian rhetoric and the enactment of measures tending towards restrictions and control.

(26)

As Margheritis suggests, although the discourse used in immigration policy has changed in recent years, it may not be so easily observed in the policies themselves. It is even more doubtful that recent immigrants have noticed an improvement after this institutional effort to change the way the topic of immigration, and immigrants themselves are discussed in public discourse.

This is an important question, and it is one that is depicted in central romance or *El niño pez*. While on the surface the story seems to advocate for the breaking down of social and class borders through the love affair between a middle-class Argentine and her working class Paraguayan maid, I again argue about the legitimacy of this relationship, and whether or not it is a truly mutual love. Indeed, the economic and social imbalance leads to a problematic power relationship results in one party (Lala) taking advantage of her situation to coerce her maid (La Guayi) into engaging in a relationship which might not be one that she seeks. This imbalance, as previously mentioned, is again reiterated in the production methods of the film, depicting Paraguayan actors in the bodies of Argentines.

La Guayi's relationship with Lala is indeed complicated. La Guayi is offered refuge and employment by Lala and her family, however, her home in Buenos Aires is the source of similar problems that she attempts to escape in Paraguay. La Guayi's trust in Lala seems to offer her protection from a problematic relationship with Lala's father; however, her trust in Lala also results in her incarceration. La Guayi's trust in Lala later secures her escape from prison, but it also results in a future manipulated by Lala. The story of La Guayi and Lala is a reflection of the relationship of Argentina and Paraguay in recent years. Although Argentina provides a home for many recent immigrants seeking higher wages and better working conditions, the migrations south are marked by racial and social tensions, leading to the question of whether or not the

future is truly brighter in the new landscape. While recent transnational negotiation under MERCOSUR have lead to immigration reforms and laws such as “Patria Grande,” the story of *El niño pez* calls into question a shared regional identity.

Ala de cridados, just like *El niño pez* point to unresolved sociopolitical and racial tensions between Argentina and immigrant communities, as depicted from within the domestic workspace. While both Pedro and La Guayi offer trust in their employers, they both eventually suffer the harsh consequences of this decision: Pedro pays with his violent death, and La Guayi is incarcerated. Neither of these plays seems to offer much room for change. Indeed, the challenge shared by both characters is how to escape sociopolitical and racial discrimination in a restrictive economic environment in which the only room for social ascension is through employment in domestic affairs.

After the Post-Crisis?

En estos tiempos de un regreso a concepciones nacionalistas y estatistas que parecían perimidas, hace falta más que nunca pensar el rol del Estado en función del desarrollo cultural de un país y su sociedad.

(Juan Villegas, “¿Es necesario subsidiar al cine?”)

A few important questions remain unanswered when considering the future of Argentine economic politics and its artistic production: When will Argentina be free from economic constraints resulting from the crisis of 2001? What will the role of artistic production be under that new sociopolitical and economic environment? 3. How will art evolve in this new political space? In one of the concluding chapters of *Teatro argentino y crisis (2001-2003)* edited by Osvaldo Pellettieri, Patricia Fischer challenges a group of theater practitioners and owners to contemplate the first two of these questions when she asks, “¿Cómo vislumbra el futuro teatral argentino después de la crisis?” (162). This inquiry produces very conflicting views, demonstrating the uncertainty facing the future of Argentine culture, which is intricately intertwined with its equally uncertain sociopolitical and economic future.

Many are very negative about the ability of Argentina to surmount the political and economic crisis that faces them in the 21st century. Some, such as canonical playwright Griselda Gambaro, do not foresee an easy escape from the economic hardships currently faced by the country: “Me pregunto si hay un después de la crisis” (qtd. in Pellettieri, *Teatro argentino crisis* 235). Jorge Goldenberg echoes Gambaro’s frustration and pessimistic view of Argentina’s future, “Primero habría que vislumbrar el ‘después de la crisis’. Como no vislumbro el final de la crisis, mal puedo vislumbrar el teatro argentino después de la crisis. Por otro lado, me parece que

estamos llamando crisis a algo que es más que una crisis, me parece que es un rarísimo estado de colapso prolongado” (qtd. in Pellettieri, *Teatro argentino crisis* 194).

Despite the doubt about the future political and economic success of the country, many agree that theater has proved to be resilient in the past and that it will continue to resist any challenges that might confront it in the future: “Hay algo que heredamos del teatro independiente — que es una de las grandes herencias que tuvimos y que tendríamos que valorar porque todavía está viva — y es la obstinación, la perseverancia, la que nada te para” (Perinelli 220). Laura Yusem corroborates this claim, “El teatro argentino está espléndido, como en todas las crisis que conocí. Por ejemplo, la dictadura fue una situación crítica, no equiparable, pero ésta es una crisis monstruosa y aquella también lo fue” (qtd. in Pellettieri, *Teatro argentino crisis* 190). Marta Bianchi extends this idea, not only does she observe a resilience in the arts, but she claims that crises may in fact motivate and enhance artistic energy: “En tiempos de crisis la imaginación se agudiza para generar más fuerzas para la lucha. Eso se ve en las producciones y en los textos. En la dramaturgia se ven cosas más interesantes en épocas de crisis que en las de bonanza” (qtd. in Pellettieri, *Teatro argentino crisis* 213).

Some believe that art will survive during and after the crisis, and that culture may represent an escape from the economic and political hardships faced by the country. While it may seem a bit idealistic, Kive Staiff, the former director of the state owned and operated Centro Cultural San Martín, believes that art can have a direct impact on the sociopolitical reality of Argentina: “Creo que la Argentina tiene valores espirituales y de pensamiento muy poderosos y que — a través de ellos — vamos a salir. Les vamos a torcer el brazo a los malos políticos, a los corruptos, al escepticismo y con la cultura lo vamos a lograr” (qtd. in Pellettieri, *Teatro*

argentino crisis 172). Ricardo Bartís's words reflect a similar faith in the power of art to impact society, but perhaps from a more moderate stance. He asserts that the future of Argentina lies in the general population, not the government. Theater (and art in general) is one way by which society confronts governments in crisis, "El teatro no está separado, como ninguna manifestación artística, del proyecto de la nación. [...] El país existe por la decisión voluntaria de un conjunto de personas que resiste el aniquilamiento. Si fuera por el Estado — que está colapsado — y el sistema de incapacidad y de ineptitud de la clase dirigente, de su proyecto nefasto, el país vendría abajo ya. Está sostenido por una especie de actitud de la gente de perdurar" (qtd. in Pellettieri, *Teatro argentino crisis* 216). Cultural work is just one of many ways by which to survive in the face of political and economic challenges.

Despite the various speculations provided about the future of Argentine politics and art, no one would contest the fact that the events of 2001 demonstrated a dominant presence in the arts. The economic recession and its ensuing sociopolitical consequences had a profound effect on both the stories that artists told and on the way that articulated those narratives. Similar to the most recent dictatorship (1976-1983), which became the central theme for artists both during and after the conclusion of the political turmoil, the economic crash of 2001 became central to public and private debate — and central to artistic development for the decade to come. In addition, the form in which stories were told subsequent to the economic crisis became a unique part of its identity. The reduced sized venues in *El teatro independiente*, while no doubt claustrophobic, became a way to more effectively articulate the stories on stage, in the same way that the frequently limited funding in film became a kind of stamp by which to recognize works of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino*.

The unique artistic identity created around the post-crisis leads naturally to certain questions: Does art depend on a certain level of crisis, either economic or political, in order to succeed? Can artists exist without a certain level of socioeconomic imbalance? Many of the aforementioned quotations seem to suggest that art and artists in fact do depend on crisis in order to stimulate the creative process. But others have advised against this potentially dangerous assumption. Griselda Gambaro is one artist who does not believe that crisis is a necessary precursor to artistic achievement: “no creo que la crisis fomente, por carencia, el ingenio o la creatividad del artista. No creo que un artista tenga que sacrificarse para decir lo que tiene que decir... Odio ese tipo de pensamiento masoquista de que tenemos que estar muy mal para sacar lo mejor de nuestra creatividad afuera” (qtd. in Pellettieri, *Teatro y crisis* 235-36). Indeed, Buenos Aires suffered drastic economic transformations in 2001, but crisis is a relative term. According to recent statistics from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Argentina continues to be one of the strongest economies in Latin America, currently competing with Venezuela for fourth place after Brazil and Mexico (Robossio). Theater and film, and to a certain extent narrative, depend on a level of financial security in order to be produced and distributed (or published, in the case of novels). In addition, they also depend, of course, on the purchasing power of the public and/or readership.

Despite the economic difficulties faced by Argentina in recent years, Argentina (and to a greater extent, Buenos Aires) has always been one of the greatest producers and consumers of culture in the Spanish speaking world. While it is true that Argentina has suffered economic and political insecurities since 2001 and that many artists complain about the “collapse of the Argentine state,” these terms are relative, seeing as the Argentine government has continued to

invest in its art even through the worst of the crisis. Although governmental funds are limited, there continues to be state investment in both theater (most noticeably from the *Instituto Nacional de Teatro*) and in film (through the INCAA, *Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales*). These organizations fund artists, invest in artistic venues, and even subsidize ticket prices at certain locations.

While the 2001 crisis may have resulted in reduced funds for institutions that invest in Argentine art such as INT and the INCAA, which arguably added to the appeal of both *Teatro independiente* and *Nuevo Cine Argentino*, these organizations never disappeared, and that is one of the reasons that artistic production has been able to survive in recent years. The crisis created a claustrophobic work environment for artists across the country, but the arts have continued to thrive. Yet what would happen if the state disappeared entirely from the artistic space? Would it then be possible to talk about national theater, film, or narrative? What is the appropriate balance between private and state investment? Should these entities be funded with local or international funds?

One of the worries of course, is that artists begin to depend too heavily on foreign private investment in order to survive and flourish. One of the potential risks when dealing with significant private investment is that artists will begin to prioritize potential economic gain over the desire to utilize unique artistic aesthetics that reflect or create dialogue around pressing socioeconomic issues. When artists begin to depend on international sources to fulfill production costs, they are often pressured to creating artistic products that are easily marketable to an international consumer audience/readership. Will greater budgets result in superior products? Or is a certain level of economic restriction (claustrophobia) desirable in the artistic space?

These questions are paramount, especially in film. If studied from a purely economic perspective, 1997 could be considered one of the greatest years in the recent film history. On this year, national Argentine productions out-grossed Hollywood imports in the box office: “three out of the four highest box-office hits were Argentine” (Falicov, *The Cinematic Tango* 96). These statistics are even more astounding considering the fact that 80% of films shown in Argentina are generally from Hollywood (Falicov, *The Cinematic Tango* 95). In addition, Argentina has a significantly smaller population than the United States and enjoys much fewer economic resources than its neighbor to the north. At first glance, these numbers seem to mark a clear victory for Argentina’s film industry, capable of conquering the global giants of the film industry from Hollywood. Yet one question remains: to what extent were these films really Argentine?

The most successful film productions in 1997 were co-productions, funded by multinational conglomerates and invested in by a host of multinational sources. In addition, the technology and production equipment was often imported, and the production studios were often located in the United States. This was the case, for example, for the 1997 film *Comodines*. The movie was conceived from the beginning as a consumer product meant to make a profit: it was marketed as the “first Hollywood-style movie spoken in Spanish.” The film featured popular television actors, product placement, and stunning special effects that included the first ever live helicopter explosion in an Argentine production. *Comodines*, just like other popular films produced in Argentina in 1997 such as Marcelo Pinyero’s *Cenizas del paraíso*, and the cartoon film *Dibu la película*, was funded by a combination of both private and state money. As Falicov asserts, it was common in the late 90s for the national film industry to invest in what would essentially result in good business deals, “The INCAA preferred to give loans and subsidies to

multi-media conglomerates (which are presumed to be more likely to return the loans and produce blockbuster hits) over the traditional independent directors and producers. This preferred preference coincided with the more ‘economistic’ turn the INCAA has taken, in accordance with President Menem’s interest in the bottom line and other neoliberal ideals that privileged the market over social spending and producing media for the ‘public interest.’” (*The Cinematic Tango* 95).

While 1997 is a year that marks the unquestionable pinnacle of the blockbuster hits in Argentina, this year is also important in independent film. At the same time that the INCAA was investing in big-budget, Hollywood-style genre films they were also allocating small funds to a smaller and more artistic film production. The New Cinema Law of 1994 eventually began to secure special funds for first time film makers. This involved \$40,000 grants to young directors who were selected to create short films. The final products were collected in feature-length films, *Historias breves I* (1995) and *Historias breves II* (1997), which showcased many of the young directors (Adrián Caetano, Bruno Stagnero, Lucrecia Martel) that would eventually go on to produce a collection of films that would be later dubbed, *El nuevo cine argentino*. These young directors differed greatly from those who were producing the blockbuster hits of the late 90s, “A diferencia de sus predecesores, el nuevo cine argentino tuvo una relación totalmente diferente con la producción: muchas películas se filmaron con lo mínimo indispensable, durante los fines de semana y como sucedáneo una reunión entre amigos. Este es el caso de *Bolivia* de Adrián Caetano, que se realizó con unos rollos de película que habían sobrado de otra producción, o de *Silvia Prieto* de Martín Rejtman, que tardó casi cinco años en terminarse hasta su estreno en 1999” (Aguilar 15).

Pablo Trapero is one of the young directors who appeared in the late 90s, entering the market with low-budget films that offered a new vision of Argentina produced under original circumstances. His career began when *Negocios*, a short film made in black-and-white with non-actors and filmed on site at his father's auto part store. Trapero was awarded with a grant of \$20,000 from the Hurbert Blas fund, after his film won a prize at the Mar del Plata film festival. The Hurbert Blas fund was one of a group of international funding sources that became part of the identity of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino*. This group of funds also included the Fond Sud C inema from France, The Sundance Foundation from the United States, and Ibermedia. A movie produced utilizing these funds is drastically different from a coproduction that is made in conjunction with a big Hollywood studio, because they provide funding without jeopardizing the artistic decisions of the director. Gonzalo Aguilar has observed the importance of these organizations in the story of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino*: "Estas fundaciones no llegan nunca a financiar la totalidad del film, pero dan asistencia a proyectos, y obtener uno de estos apoyos es fundamental para acceder a otras Fuentes econ micas. Casi todas las pel culas del nuevo cine argentino recibieron alguno de estos auspicios" (19).

These small funds awarded to film directors of the late 90s, together with state subsidies provided by the national film institute allowed for young directors to maintain a level of artistic independence and integrity that was perhaps difficult to achieve with the big co-productions that were produced at the same time. The future direction of Argentine film will depend on decisions made by the national film industry. The INCAA will have to choose to invest in "cine rico," or films produced with big-budget with the hope to create revenue creating, made-for-export

products, or “cine pobre,” low budget films that may focus more on original aesthetics and local stories dealing with eminent sociopolitical and economic issues.

Recent statistics from the INCAA seem to suggest that the overwhelming majority of funds in this national industry are being invested in big budget films. A recent report published in *Perfil.com* estimates that between January of 2008 and June of 2011, there was \$66 million dollars invested in the national film industry. Of those funds, approximately half (\$32 million) were invested in just four major film production agencies. One of these companies was Haddock films, a Spanish/Argentine corporation that received \$7 million dollars to make just four movies, one of which, *El secreto de sus ojos*, won the Academy Award for best foreign film at the 2009 Oscars.

The investment in major films such as *El secreto de sus ojos* has no doubt helped to secure a name for Argentina in the international film circles. But is it necessary to invest millions of dollars in a film that is already financed by a major multinational production company? Director Rodrigo Moreno believes that the INCAA should be an industry that invests in art, not in big-business:

El Estado debería desentenderse de la idea de industria cinematográfica porque esa idea ya fracasó: la industria hoy es un budoque sostenido únicamente por el enorme dinero público. No hay una cadena genuina industrial. El Estado se desgasta detrás de esa idea, en lugar de asumir un rol más dinámico ayudando a pensar cómo hacer mejores películas y a delinear mejores estrategias de exhibición y consumo para el mercado interno y externo. Yo estoy a favor de que

el Estado apoye a las artes, pero con poco dinero. Y estoy a favor también de que los proyectos artísticos cuesten poco dinero. (qtd. in Villegas)

Director Juan Villegas agrees that INCAA should invest in small projects. He has advocated for universal funding, distributing a certain amount of resources equally to all national film projects. However, he differs from Moreno in the fact that he also believes that it is important to invest bigger funds to projects that have greater artistic potential: “Tal vez lo ideal fuera un sistema mixto. Por un lado, ayudas universales y comunes para todas las películas, por el simple hecho de existir como películas argentinas. Y por otro lado, ayudas selectivas, para aquellas con un nivel de calidad artístico destacado” (“Es necesario subsidiar al cine”).

Perhaps Villegas points to a healthy alternative for INCAA and Argentine artistic production in relationship to the state. It may be that the state will need to invest in all projects of national interest. As a representative from the DAC organization (Directores Argentinos Cinematográficos), film (and perhaps other artistic genres alike) would not be able to compete with foreign culture without some sort of state support, “Es la protección del Estado lo único que puede garantizar la preservación del acervo cultural de su propio pueblo. Se debe subsidiar a todo el cine, para cuidar la diversidad de miradas.” Small productions may be important because they help to offer a plurality of voices, but, as this representative claims, the big productions are also important, because they help produce revenue for the smaller Works: “se debería poner especial énfasis en no dissociarse del interés del público local, que mediante el pago de sus entradas genera gran parte de los recursos con los que se subsidia la producción local” (qtd. in Villegas). This quote is in reference to the 1994 film law that collects tax dollars from all film revenue which is later reinvested in future INCAA productions. Falicov explains, “The

maintenance of the film industry is greatly aided when large numbers of spectators buy movie tickets to blockbuster movies, thereby contributing to the taxes earmarked for national film productions” (*The Cinematic Tango* 94).

In the future it may not be necessary to choose between mega productions or small, “independent” works of art. It may in fact be possible for the two to coexist. This policy can be applied to all forms of art. While investing in works with potential for consumer appeal, funds can be simultaneously allocated for cultural products by first time directors, filmmakers, and authors. It is perhaps a good strategy to continue to fund artists who have already made a name for themselves in the field, and who are more likely to attract an audience/readership, but it is also important to think of the next generation, who can take a small grant and turn it in to a long healthy career in the arts.

Around the time of the 2001 economic crisis, playwright/director Claudio Tolcachir build a 50-seat theater in a claustrophobic space funded by the INT, and filmmaker Pablo Trapero’s career was launched after he won an award at the Mar del Plata film festival, a government sponsored event. Tolcachir has now opened up a 200-seat theater that operates by his original space and Trapero is now casting the country’s biggest stars (such as Ricardo Darín) in his big-budget films. Even now that both of these artists have developed a name for themselves, and it is perhaps not so much of a challenge for them to fund their artistic endeavors, they continue to receive state money for their work (Tolcachir’s new theater was financed by INT and PRO TEATRO, and Trapero’s most recent film, *Elefante blanco*, was partially funded by INCAA). As the state continues to invest in the future of these veteran artists, it is also essential that they consider the future artists of the next post-crisis.

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