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Watching the City: The Politics of Space in *Pizza, birra, faso*

Abstract:

In this article I discuss the representation of Buenos Aires in *Pizza, birra, faso*. Paying attention to some of the film's salient aspects vis-a-vis its portrayal of urban space, my analysis has as ultimate goal to reveal the ways in which the film engages in a political critique that might seem absent if studied solely from a narrative point of view. In this sense *Pizza, birra, faso* is a paradigmatic example of the ways in which many of the films of New Argentine Cinema engaged with their political context differently to films of the post-dictatorship generation. To unearth this political content, I will argue, it is necessary to study these films as films, and not merely texts.

Marginality and spatial contradictions

Adrian Caetano and Bruno Stagnaro's tour de force *Pizza, birra, faso* (1998) follows the ramblings of a group of marginal youths in the Buenos Aires of the late 1990s. Pablo (Jorge Sesán), Megabón (Alejandro Pous), Frula (Walter Díaz), and Córdoba (Héctor Córdoba) and his girlfriend Sandra (Pamela Jordán) are some of the many impoverished *porteños* lost in a hostile city, trying to make ends meet without much success. The characters' petty thefts start to escalate into more serious crimes, tragedy unleashing when their desperate and precariously planned attempt to rob a *bailanta*ⁱ ends with most of them dead or captured by the police.

Eighteen years after its release, it would be hard today to fully comprehend *Pizza, birra, faso*'s impact on the Argentine film scene: to the spectator and critic alike, the impression of dealing with a *game changer* was evident from its opening secondsⁱⁱ. It could be claimed that the film contributed to establish New Argentine Cinemaⁱⁱⁱ, particularly in the eyes of Argentine film criticism, something British scholar Joanna Page puts into words when she argues that "it was the

screening of *Pizza, birra, faso*, that gave critics the confidence to herald a regeneration in Argentine cinema” (Page 2009: 37). That it snatched the Best Latin American Film Award and a Jury’s Special Mention at the 13th Festival Internacional de Mar del Plata (1997), a stronghold of the Argentine film establishment, should also contribute to understanding its impact and importance.

The allusion above to the film’s opening seconds is not intended metaphorically, although it is slightly imprecise. A more accurate description would refer to “the first two opening minutes that follow an eleven-seconds long shot of a police operation”^{iv}. These are two fast paced minutes musicalised to loud Argentine cumbia, in which highways, vehicles and people — shot by a shaky hand-held camera (due to the use of zoom lenses) — are intercut with the film’s opening credits. This film will take place in a Buenos Aires in a state of decay, a city of visible social contradictions. Money and scarcity coexist here, they form part of the same urban mass, as it is clear from one of the seminal moments in this sequence, with the Retiro office buildings in the background almost blending into a single frame with the infamous Villa 31 in the foreground (01’23”) . The rest of the sequence seems intent on continuing to highlight urban contradictions in similar ways: the use of vertical tilts to show the height of wealthy Buenos Aires stands in opposition to lateral panning shots that focus the camera on tramps, car windshield cleaners, a pick-up truck stuffed with workers challenging any health and safety regulation, beggars, street sweepers, a group of policemen in riot gear stuck in the middle of the traffic at the Avenida 9 de Julio, and the film’s main characters hanging from a moving freight train. This opening sequence acts as a brief summary of *Pizza, birra, faso*, establishing tensions and the peculiar version of urban space that will prevail throughout the film, the overall social cartography that will sustain the plot.

Jens Andermann, highlighting the importance of this opening sequence argues that “[t]he [film’s] opening shots [...] prior to the start of the action proper, are a kind of founding manifesto of a cinema literally relocating itself on the other side of neo-liberalism’s speed barrier” (2011: 31), a

fact that would allow this film, like many other films associated with New Argentine Cinema, to capture a “glimpse of the social margins, of what has been cast aside” (idem). Speed is certainly an important element in these opening moments — the montage in this scene stands out for that particular reason^v. Nevertheless, I will argue that beyond the occasional use of hectic montage, it is space and the depiction of certain modes of experiencing and being in the city, that are central to the film’s opening up as a political artefact.

To argue my point, I will first focus on the iconic locations portrayed in the film, and how through these the film establishes a dialogue with Buenos Aires and with other Argentine films. I will then go on to discuss the film’s use of readymade urban texts — what I will call ‘wallspeak’ — in order to incorporate its context of production. To end, I will analyse the film’s final scene, paying particular attention to the way in which it converses with the film’s opening moments, revealing in the process a different version of the city.

Marked spaces

The space where *Pizza, birra, faso*’s action takes place is clearly marked and named, many of its locations recognisable; spatial concerns are incorporated into the film, visually and through the narrative. The same can be argued of the space beyond the city, incorporated into the film in dialogue, traffic signs, accents, nicknames^{vi}. Although not narratively essential for the evolution of the film’s plot — the misadventures of this group of young delinquents, all the way to their deaths — the peculiar version of space depicted in the film is nevertheless central to the social critique collaterally delivered by the film.

Among the marked locations of the film, Buenos Aires’s centre plays an important part; and within this area of the city so does its most famous landmark: the *Obelisco*. Far from being mere locations, the importance of the centre and the Obelisco are pivotal to the film’s portrayal of the Argentine

capital as an unwelcoming and impoverished city. The Obelisco features prominently not only visually but also in the imaginary of the characters. They think about it, study it, loiter around it; they ponder about what it might be like to see the city from its top, how it resembles an erect penis. Later, they reject it as a metaphor for a certain stupid *porteño* arrogance (Córdoba: “A mí no me cabe eso de poner una poronga gigante en el medio de la ciudad... Hay que ser porteño para eso...”^{vii}). Finally they break into it (13’30”).

The Obelisco — Buenos Aires’s most recognisable vertical icon — is a powerful central object in the cityscape, a sign of a “typically European pride” (Pryston 2006: 254) and modernity from which the film’s characters are excluded, or at least into which they are not necessarily welcome (255); it serves as a point of rebuttal for their powerless and grounded lives. The fact that upon their invasion the Obelisco shows itself to be hollow and somehow ‘blind’ provides an interesting hint to the film’s use of space as a vehicle of socio-political critique. Andermann does not miss this when he observes that the Obelisco is:

“literally turned inside out, its monumental surface visibility undermined by social rot, not only by being found to be hollow inside but, furthermore, to contain a makeshift shelter for the homeless, wallpapered with porn magazine cuttings. What is more, the ascent of the monument by the youths does not yield any panoramic shots across the city below, as a kind of momentous and compensatory visual empowerment of the disenfranchised” (2011: 35).

There is no way out of their pedestrian lives, no joy in occupying the panoptical sites of the city, for the Obelisco, by being forcefully penetrated by them, abandons its monumental status and ocular powers to become one more marker of decay in the city, a rotten and hollow marker.

A similar claim could be made about the film’s portrayal of these youths’ appropriation of another landmark, that of the proper urban core of the city of Buenos Aires. *El centro* — downtown Buenos

Aires — has a history of its own in the *porteño* imaginary, historically providing the by turns bohemian at times chic counterpart to the neighbourhoods (*barrrios*). Visually, *Pizza, birra, faso* is at its most salient in its depiction of the centre's decadence. This space, as depicted in the film is now the territory of crime and poverty. There is nothing of its former splendour left but a cacophony of lights and hollow monuments, reminders that perhaps connote more the falsity of these imaginaries than a splendid past.

This is the centre of a city in a process of spatial segregation; the process by which, in order to escape the — perceived or real — threat of violence and poverty, “much of the porteño elite and whatever was left of the impoverished middle class began to seek sanctuary in a segregated organization of space that offered a ‘safe’ separation between classes — one that guaranteed that the growing population of the slums would not interfere with their everyday life” (Guano 2002: 185). This is consonant with Adrián Gorelik's warning (delivered in 1997, at the time the film was being shot) that, due to the city government's inability to carry out effective metropolitan politics: “el proceso de fuga de sectores medios a la periferia puede llevarla [to Buenos Aires] a la típica situación de las ciudades europeas y norteamericanas en los años setenta, cuando se desfinanciaron y ‘tugurizaron’ sus distritos centrales”^{viii} (2004: 240). *Pizza, birra, faso*, is thus one of the first films to capture this process of middle and upper class flight from the city and the reverse movement of the poor and marginal elements into the centre, setting a trend that many other films of the period would follow^{ix}.

Another of these marked locations is the Riachuelo basin, as seen from the Boca harbour.

Andermann suggests that the use of this landmark setting, “the riverfront at La Boca, the working-class neighbourhood whose iron bridges provided a picturesque backdrop for legions of social melodramas” (2011: 35), in conjunction with the importance the film attributes to the Obelisco, result in “both inscribing the film on an urban cinematic and literary tradition evolving around the

centre vs neighbourhood (*barrio*) opposition at the same time as [disavowing] it” (35). It is true that the very markedness of these locations, their iconic status and the solitude of their iconicity in the film compared to other settings which constantly refuse such emphasis, demand that we put them in dialogue with each other. It is also true that their insertion in the film suggests an intertextual dialogue with literature, film, and tango^x. Furthermore I will propose that this particular setting, due to its iconic status^{xi}, can serve as a intertextual vantage point from which to throw light into the differential ways in which New Argentine Cinema deals with its socio-political context. Comparing a scene from *Pizza, birra, faso* with one from the 1982 drama *Volver* (David Lipszyc) might illustrate this point more concisely.

As the title suggests, the film is a story of a return. Alfredo (played by Héctor Alterio), a businessman, comes back to Argentina following an exile of 18 years, to perform the unpleasant task of closing down a factory. When in Buenos Aires he meets friends, an old flame called Beatriz (played by Graciela Dufau), and witnesses a land in crisis, both institutionally and economically. In the allegorical fashion common to many Argentine films from the 1980s, *Volver* narrates a story that seeks to emblemize a particular historical moment. Here is a man who comes from the North (New York) to decide the fate of a thousand factory workers — once more the North dealing with the destiny of the South, or so the film seems to imply allegorically and unproblematically. In a scene that would be replicated in negative fifteen odd years after in *Pizza, birra, faso*, Alfredo and Beatriz are walking around the La Boca harbour, cigarette in hand, dressed elegantly (26’00”). They are having a sentimental conversation while the non-diegetic melancholic music of Ástor Piazzolla’s bandoneon plays behind the scene. They move about the harbour with the Puente Transbordador de La Boca in the background. The dialogue touches upon Alfredo’s return from New York.

BEATRIZ: ¿Por qué viniste?

ALFREDO: ¿A Buenos Aires?

BEATRIZ: No. Aquí esta noche.

ALFREDO: Tenía ganas de verte. Y cuando el Chino me dijo que Marta estaba viviendo en nuestra casa, la tentación era demasiado grande. (Long silence). Y tenía muchas ganas de verte.

BEATRIZ: Claro, todos los turistas son así. En pocos días quieren verlo todo. Todos los museos, todos los barrios bajos, todo lo que sea *typical*. ¿No? Vos sabés que no entiendo como no andás con una cámara.

ALFREDO: ¿Qué clase de periodismo hacés ahora?

BEATRIZ: Zoológico. Toda clase de animales. ¿Y vos?

ALFREDO: Soy una especie de mandadero de lujo.

BEATRIZ: Así que somos dos triunfadores (nods to a shipyard worker).

ALFREDO: (nods as if to say hello to a worker). Si vos hubieses ido a Nueva York, ¿no hubieras querido verme?

BEATRIZ: Vos no quisiste verme: vos me encontraste.

ALFREDO: Te hubiera buscado.

BEATRIZ: ¿Para qué?

ALFREDO: Nunca más volví a enamorarme. Ni siquiera lo pensé. Hasta ahora (bandoneon music gets louder).^{xii}

These are two middle-aged professionals, well-off members of society, conversing with words and phrases seemingly taken from a novel, moving about the workers with the same touristic detachment and voyeurism that Beatriz criticises. The non-diegetic music, the use of colour (almost sepia, under the orange sunset), and the dubbed sound create a melodramatic and unnatural situation.

Fifteen years on and shot in the same location, with the same bridge and the same rotten body of

water in the background, a scene in *Pizza, birra, faso* remains geographically close yet existentially removed from that in *Volver*. After picking her up from her father's house, Córdoba and Sandra walk around the harbour. The sun is setting once more. But this couple is far from elegant (or doted with literary communication skills). They move and talk clumsily, Córdoba even more so. The conversation — live-recorded as the rest of the film and with audible foghorns and background traffic — is about leaving, about working, about [not] stealing (30'36").

SANDRA: Y ¿de qué vas a trabajar vos?

CÓRDOBA: Manejando un taxi...

SANDRA: Si no sabés manejar, Córdoba...

CÓRDOBA: ¿Qué tiene que ver? Aprendo ahí nomás... Subo y aprendo...

SANDRA: (puffs in irritation).

CÓRDOBA: ¿Qué pasa, no te gusta mi trabajo?

SANDRA: No, a mí me gusta cualquier trabajo. Pero quiero que me prometas una cosa.

CÓRDOBA: Sí, yo te prometo lo que vos quieras.

SANDRA: No una sola cosa. Quiero que me prometas que si este trabajo no funciona vas a buscar algún otro pero no vas a robar más.

CÓRDOBA: (silence)

SANDRA: ¿Y?

CÓRDOBA: ¿Y qué?

SANDRA: Y... No te hagás el imbécil. ¿Me lo prometés o no?

CÓRDOBA: Sí, pero vos tampoco no entendés un carajo como son las cosas... ¿eh?

SANDRA: No, yo lo que no entiendo es que vos no me cuidás nada. Porque si un día de estos vos caés en cana, yo ¿qué mierda hago? ¿Me querés decir? ¿Eh?

CÓRDOBA: Pará... Pero eso no va a pasar. No te preocupés que no va a pasar. ¿Entendés? ¿Eh?

¿Todo bien? ¿Sabés qué estaba pensando?

SANDRA: ¿Qué?

CÓRDOBA: Que podríamos irnos los dos a Uruguay.

SANDRA: Los tres.

CÓRDOBA: Bueno, los tres.

SANDRA: ¿Querés tocarme la panza?

CÓRDOBA: ¿Tocarla?

SANDRA: Sí, vení.

CÓRDOBA: (crouches to put his ear on her belly).

SANDRA: ¿Lo sentís?

CÓRDOBA: Hmmm (kisses her belly).^{xiii}

These moments of dialogue between couples, shot in the same location, could not be any more different. Alfredo's upper class return to a soon-to-be democratic Argentina is painted in dark tones. This is an unwanted return, a melancholic return, a hopeless return, a tango-like return^{xiv} to a country still ruled by a dictatorship^{xv}. The fact that Alfredo is—in his own words—a deluxe errand boy coming to close down a factory, the facts that he lives in New York and has an executive role in a multi-national company, do not lessen the melancholy but somehow emphasise it: this dialogue drives home the truism that life is as miserable abroad as in Argentina and that no professional achievements or social status can change this. On the other hand, Córdoba and Sandra's future exile is a hopeful one, a movement beyond a city and a country that can offer them nothing. It does not matter that this exile will be half accomplished, that Córdoba will not be able to make the trip to Montevideo because he will die after a shootout with the police: this walk around the Boca harbour is a moment full of possibilities.

It is also expressive of the changes in Buenos Aires between the shooting of the two films that the shipyard in *Pizza, birra, faso* is deserted. If work, the absence of it, and the impossibility of having

a job, is an important part of the dialogue, this presence in absence is replicated in the mise-en-scène: the shipyard workers from *Volver* are nowhere to be seen in *Pizza, birra, faso*; this is an absence coherent with a moment of Argentine history when unemployment and de-industrialization reached dramatic levels^{xvi}.

The Obelisco, the centre of Buenos Aires, and the Riachuelo basin are in the film thus used for their iconic status yet put to work against this very iconicity. A blind panopticon, a decadent centre, an intentionally cheerful *tangoed* locale with an aura of unemployment and poverty, are three of the ways in which *Pizza, birra, faso* both joins in and departs from the myth of Buenos Aires, in order to reveal and meditate upon the socio-economic conditions that condemn its characters to a life of marginality.

Wall-speak

Caetano and Stagnaro's film like the vast majority of the films associated with New Argentine Cinema is filmed in location. This preference for location shooting — and the mise-en-scène that results from this use — many times invites the *real* into the *reel*, incorporating in that way narratives that are otherwise absent from the main plot of the film. It is in a way as if there was a parallel narrative to the one carried forward by the film's plot, dialogues, relationship between characters, and the central action. This resonates with Laura Mulvey's dictum that "mise-en-scène also acts as a means of narration, contributing a kind of cinematic commentary or description, inscribing into the scene significance that goes beyond the inarticulate consciousness of the characters" (2006: 147)^{xvii}. In this section I will pay attention to two moments of what I will call *wall-speak*, that is the diegetic presence of indexical urban texts — graffiti, advertising hoardings, posters, or any ready-made textual mark— in this case in particular advertising and political posters^{xviii}. These indexical traces, I would argue contribute to the film's critique of its contemporary moment, without this critique needing to become narrativised as central to the film or

made an articulate part of the characters' consciousness.

The first of these two shots takes place during a transition from the police station — where Córdoba meets Sandra following her arrest as a result of Córdoba's and Frula's robbery of a disabled street musician — to the bedsit where the characters live as a group. After a short establishing shot that shows an impoverished street of the La Boca neighbourhood in perspective (17'45''), before reaching their bedsit, Córdoba and Sandra walk past a hoarding covered with advertisements, followed by the camera for four seconds (17'48''). Between the camera and the characters we see a group of children playing on top of a battered car. The kids are pulling pieces apart, jumping up and down on top of the vehicle. The posters cover the whole background from left to right. A closer shot of the characters before they reach the pension brings these if not to the fore at least to a place where they cannot be missed (17'53''). The posters read "En Garbarino^{xix} — 90 días sin pagar". They refer to the 1990s' rush to buy *a crédito*, facilitated by the pegging of the peso and the US dollar during the period in which the Convertibility Plan^{xx} was at work, guaranteeing the stability of credit rates on the one hand, but also inciting personal debt due to the rather lax way in which credits were handled by business and banks. The fact that these posters serve as background in a transition shot between two clearly marked spaces of poverty is suggestive.

These posters, their invitation to participate in an economy to which the characters have no access, serve the purpose of highlighting the characters' marginality in society, as well as their lack of future^{xxi}: they cannot even buy *a crédito* therefore they have to steal; they will not last a week, let alone 90 days. This shot could be read as a transition from misery (the establishing shot in the sequence), via the negated promise of economic well-being and debt, to more misery (the bedsit). Thus it follows the same logic of the film, with its miserable beginning, promising middle, and miserable and tragic end. The fact that upon arriving at the *pensión* Córdoba joins Megabón and Pablo to watch *Dog Day Afternoon* (Sidney Lumet, 1975) — a film about a bank robbery that goes

wrong, turns into a media circus, and ends with the arrest of one of the robbers and the death of his accomplice — reinforces the feeling of foreboding that results from this transition shot.

Another moment in which wall-speak makes an interesting appearance is following the failed restaurant robbery, which ends with the petty crooks themselves being robbed by a police officer first, and the getaway driver later. The driver has left with the guns and most of the money that the policeman did not take, and the main characters are left in a corner, drinking beer, childishy cursing and kicking one other for their failure and gullibility. Frula is urinating against a wall that is covered with graffiti, as we can see from the camera pan following Córdoba while he approaches the scene from the right. Yet of all the indexical traces available, the camera stops to frame the urinating character against a poster of Jorge Domínguez, Buenos Aires' last *intendente* and a member of the Partido Justicialista (of which Menem was the leader at the time) who would lose the elections against Fernando de la Rúa^{xxii} (45'15"). Domínguez's appearance in the film automatically inscribes *Pizza, birra, faso* in its contextual moment, by bringing the audience's attention to the victim of Frula's urine-fuelled 'political statement'.

Domínguez was one of the most loyal enforcers of neoliberal urban politics during the 1990s. Such loyalty earned him the nickname 'Topadora' (bulldozer) after he forcefully evicted several families from a section of Villa 31 by sending bulldozers in in January 1996 to tear everything down in order to finalise the construction of the Arturo Illia highway^{xxiii}. The brutality of the event, the fact that several families still had their personal belongings in their precarious dwellings^{xxiv}, the advent of an unsuccessful hunger strike by eight Catholic priests to stop the eviction, and the fact that this was the same *villa miseria* that the military junta had tried to eradicate several times, would have been difficult to miss at the time. (Villa 31 is of course the shantytown that features prominently in the opening moments of the film.) This 'dialogue' between Frula and the poster seems to strike the same chord as the dialogue between Villa 31 and the business buildings of the Retiro area in the

opening sequence, speaking of the coexistence of and tension between different modes of living in this city, one under the aegis of the other: the powerless and the powerful, the respectable people in ties and suits deciding the shape of the city, and the marginal elements whose few ways of taking revenge is by defacing a poster, loitering in the city centre, or carrying out petty thefts.

Dominguez was also Buenos Aires' mayor during the relocation of 60 families from the central area of Córdoba and Juan B. Justo^{xxv} to the peripheral neighbourhood of Gonzales Catán, Partido de La Matanza. Although this episode was not marked by violence, perhaps due to the fact that it took place six months after the Villa 31 eviction and was handled in a more PR-friendly way^{xxvi}, it is still exemplary of a politics of eradicating the poor from the centre, something many mayors of the dictatorship and since have unsuccessfully attempted to do^{xxvii}. I refer here to the presence of Dominguez in a film that narrates — among other things — the process of “*tugurización*” of Buenos Aires' centre as argued by Gorelik above, a process that Dominguez tried ineffectively to oppose. Dominguez's poster is here as a stand-in not so much for the politician himself but for that centrifugal movement of urbanism during the late 1990s^{xxviii}.

It could always be argued that these appearances of the index in the film are mere coincidences. This should not necessarily annul the possibilities of a political reading of the film. As argued by Roger Koza “[u]n film sin ideología es imposible, de allí que en la puesta en escena y el punto de vista elegido por un director se puede leer la política del plano... El ojo mira desde un sistema de y unas coordenadas simbólicas, y la puesta en escena exterioriza siempre esa mirada.”^{xxix} (In Duarte and Lara 2013: 249). On the other hand, Koza is actually of the opinion that there is nothing spontaneous with *Pizza, birra, faso*, saying of Adrián Caetano in particular that a “conciencia histórica y política resulta evidente en su ópera prima: *Pizza, birra, faso* ni es espontánea, ni narrativamente inconsistente y menos aún retrata a su marginales como si se tratara de sujetos en el margen de los márgenes; su historicidad precisa devela los estragos de las políticas del presidente

Menem y sus efectos estructurales en el orden social^{»xxx} (in Duarte and Lara 2013: 250).

Whether intentional or not, these indexical traces linking to the film's contemporary moment are present in *Pizza, birra, faso*. The possibility of unearthing them is left to the viewer.

A final image of the city

Pizza, birra, faso's final shot condensates and yet counterpoints the whole film. Lasting just under two minutes, it serves as a slow coda that argues with the film's initial impetus — urban immediacy and speed; shown both through the proximity of the urban mass, the depiction of transit, and a hectic montage. Here we are at the opposite end of the “speed barrier” mentioned by Andermann (2011: 31). Here we are leaving the city.

This final scene depicts *Dársena sur*, an area of the *Puerto de Buenos Aires* (south of the urban development of *Puerto Madero*), shot from a departing ferry, that will take Sandra to Montevideo and that Córdoba fails to board (73'10"). Prior to this final shot he has died in the harbour, after seeing Sandra getting on the ferry. The other characters, with the exception of Megabón, have already been killed in shootouts with the police after their failed robbery. As in the opening scenes, both the short ‘foreword’ depicting the police operation, and the travelling shots across the city that follow, background radio conversations are important in this scene, except that it is now clear what we are hearing: the police radio operators give indications to the ground officers, who arrange for ambulances to be sent to pick up the bodies of Córdoba and Pablo. This conversation now acts as a confirmation of the tragic event and not mere background noise.

This final radio dialogue might enable the viewer to read the opening radio conversation as a filmic prelude: it could have been the same police operation. But more interesting is the fact that the filmmakers leave this open and that by leaving this option open the result is an emphasis on the

repeatability of violence and the generic nature of the protagonists of the social drama: they could have been other “sospechosos” (suspects), “N.N. masculinos”, (N.N. males) as the police officers call them. Unnamed at the beginning and the end, the same or different thieves, it does not matter.

Image and sound are two separate tracks in this final scene, placing the spectator in two places at once, sending information in a twofold manner, aurally and visually. The first striking visual aspect of this shot is the slow travelling away from the harbour, the ferry moving away, and the static camera capturing this slow movement away from land and the city. The fact that this point of view belongs to none of the characters^{xxxii}, the slow speed with which the ship moves, seem to emphasize a temporal element, a manifestation of Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the “time image”^{xxxii}, an image with its own value in the film, its focus on the passage of time, in this case the ‘slow’ passage of time, a coda and a commentary to the hectic opening sequences of the film, with its focus on speed and manic circulation across space. This film, which starts with such an agitated pace dies, both literally and through its characters, in a slow mournful travelling shot. If the images of *Pizza, birra, faso*’s beginning, with their hectic montage, threw the spectator into scopophilic dizziness and confusion, this final shot, with its soothing tempo, forces the spectator to stop and think about the fate most of the characters have met.

The second striking aspect of this shot is the presence of the cityscape. The city, even if distant and receding, is present in the background, in the upper third of the screen, with the middle third occupied by the harbour buildings and the bottom third with the water. It is a bleak early morning, covered with clouds and some mist or smog; regardless of being natural or man-made this mist works to separate the spectator from this cityscape. This is a film that, during its opening sequence, literally throws the viewer into the urban flux; now the spectator is left out, exiled from Buenos Aires, made a companion to Sandra’s uncertain trip to Montevideo. Ironically, this being left out is what inserts the spectator into the film: the spectator is sutured^{xxxiii} into this travelling shot, sutured

into a space of uncertainty that is any type of exile^{xxxiv}. The spectator, in other words, is expelled from the city in the same way as the characters have been negated access to this space throughout the film.

The last image in the film — an image that connotes Córdoba's death and Sandra's departure — involves no city lights, no Obelisco, nothing of the mythical Buenos Aires with which the film flirted earlier. The last image the viewer sees shows a shabby harbour and a city now definitively out of reach.

Closing remarks

The recurrent observation that New Argentine Cinema is an apolitical movement — what Argentine critic Emilio Bernini (2007: 31) refers to as “poética de la abstención” (poetics of abstention) — without even going into an enumeration of the films of the period that deal with political concerns directly and explicitly^{xxxv}, can always be countered with Fredric Jameson's dictum that “there is nothing that is not social and historical” and “everything is “in the last analysis’ political” (2002: 5)^{xxxvi}. But even if what we are discussing is the explicit presence of politics in the films it could be argued that this observation is still flawed, being the result of a common trend in film criticism of approaching films from a ‘textual’ point of view, with those aspects of the films not necessarily central to the evolution of the plot judged to be of less importance than those that are part of the narrative.

Carolina Rocha, in her essay “Cine despolitizado de principio de siglo: Bar el Chino y El abrazo partido” (2006: 349) argues that “A diferencia de los filmes de la década del ochenta y parte de la del noventa, en estas películas producidas en los últimos tres años, la política actúa como telón de fondo y pasan a primer plano la representación de la globalización y de los efectos del neoliberalismo en la población porteña en particular”^{xxxvii}. Leaving aside that it could be argued that

Rocha suggests a separation between politics and phenomena that are nevertheless political (globalization and neoliberalism), and that she refers to latter films to the one that pertains this article, I find her statement exemplary of a way of understanding film as a text, in that she seems to disregard the importance of that “telón de fondo” in contributing to the construction of a film’s apparatus of meaning. Taking the case of *Pizza, birra, faso*, a political critique that in the case of *Volver* was delivered through dialogues — Beatriz and Alfredo’s for example — is here staged (as I have discussed in relation to Frula urinating against the Dominguez’s posters or when the Garbarino ads take on a prominent role in a transition shot). This “telón de fondo”, I would argue, is actually a false background; as the film is aware of this backdrop and in clear dialogue with it. This trend, I would suggest, would persist in Argentine cinema. It is only by putting the different parts that constitute the semiotic assemblage that is a film — mise en scène, sound, montage, narrative, etc — in dialogue with one another and with the context of production of that work that we can get to the bottom of what happens in these films, both as works of art and as cultural artefacts representative of their time.

On the other hand, perhaps it is not only about finding new ways to think about film but more importantly to rethink what we understand by politics. In his pivotal *Otros mundos: Un ensayo sobre el nuevo cine Argentino* Aguilar points at the need to re-evaluate our definition of what constitutes *politics*, in order to accommodate to different and evolving aesthetic modes (2006: 137):

El hecho de que al hablar de la política en las películas del nuevo cine argentino se desemboque en su negación [...] nos lleva a preguntarnos si no se trata de redefinir su estatuto. Ya no como algo que se encuentra desplazado [...] o suprimido [...] sino como una categoría que adquiere nuevas potencias y cualidades en un medio cuya función se ha transformado radicalmente en los años noventa. Es decir, antes que lanzar una condena, ¿no vale la pena preguntarse si la política en el cine no exige una redefinición de nuevos supuestos? Se trata en definitiva, de una discusión de estética: no qué hace el cine con la política que aguarda en su exterioridad, sino cómo ésta se nos entrega en la forma de estas películas.^{xxxviii}

Pizza, birra, faso is a paradigmatic example of a film consciously dealing with politics not as something external but as part of its aesthetic program. Politics is present indexically in the film but also in the role attributed to the viewer as decoder: it is not the characters who are in charge of pedagogically reciting the film to the spectator. The opposite, the work of interpretation here is offered to the viewer, with all the possibilities and trust that this transferral of power might entail.

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Notes

- i A working class nightclub.
- ii See Essever 1998 and Pauls 1998 among others.
- iii New Argentine Cinema is a label that is deeply contested, equally embraced and rejected. Although in its common-sense use these words point to the emergence of a new form of filmmaking in the early to mid 1990s, on closer scrutiny it is hard to ascertain with accuracy what these words really encompass. When did New Argentine Cinema begin? Is the current Argentine cinema, for example, part of the same phenomenon? Should “industrial cinema” also be considered part of New Argentine Cinema? It is not the purpose of this article to resolve the meaning of this taxonomy. The label is in this article used for the possibilities it opens up of joining ongoing discussions. See Aguilar 2006, Andermann 2011, and Page 2009 et al for extended debates on these topics
- iv This first eleven seconds serve as a sort of ‘foreword’ to the film, establishing more an atmosphere than the film’s action. They could refer to the police operation that ends with most of the film’s main characters’ lives or it could be another police operation — this is not clear and I would argue below is intentionally left open.
- v Page also pays attention to speed and time in this scene, particularly to the intervals between the film and its credits, arguing that “[i]n the same way that the speed of the city is literally paused to give way to the credits, so the film as a whole attempts to carve a hole in the frenzied time of the city, through which we may glimpse the lives of those who are not integrated into the space-time of global capitalism” (2009: 37).
- vi There are differences in accents between the main characters (and secondary characters too) that not only serve to establish class differences between them, with Pablo and Córdoba belonging to the middle and working classes respectively, but also geographical provenance: Córdoba is from the city that gives him his nickname. His accent betrays this, not only for the viewer but also for other characters who recognize him as such.
- vii “I don’t get that thing of placing a giant dick in the middle of the city... You have to be *porteño* to do that...” All translations are my own.
- viii “The process of middle-class flight to the periphery can take it [Buenos Aires] to the typical situation of European and North American cities in the 70s, when their central districts under-financed and ghettoized.”

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- ^{ix} For example *Vagón fumador* (Verónica Chen, 2002), *Ronda nocturna* (Edgardo Cozarinski, 2005), and *Vladimir en Buenos Aires* (Diego Gassachin, 2002) among others.
- ^x *Niebla del riachuelo*, *La Boca está de fiesta*, *Riachuelo*, among other tangos, reference this locale.
- ^{xi} There are many films that engage with this locale in different ways. To name two of the most renowned films: *El hombre señalado*, Francisco Lauric, 1957 and *Happy Together*, Wong Kar Wai, 1997.
- ^{xii} BEATRIZ: Why did you come back? / ALFREDO: To Buenos Aires? / BEATRIZ: No. Here tonight. / ALFREDO: I wanted to see you. And when Chino told me that Marta was living in our house, the temptation was too much. (Long silence). And I really wanted to see you. / BEATRIZ: Of course, all the tourists are like that. In a couple of days they want to see everything. All the museums, all the shanties, everything *typical* [in English in the original]. Isn't it? You know what? I don't understand why you don't go around carrying a camera. / ALFREDO: What kind of journalism do you do now? / BEATRIZ: Zoological. All kinds of animals. And you? / ALFREDO: I'm something like a deluxe errand boy. / BEATRIZ: I see that we are two winners. (Nods to a shipyard worker). / ALFREDO: (Nods as if to say hello to a worker). If you had gone to New York, wouldn't you have wanted to see me? / BEATRIZ: You didn't want to see me: you found me. / ALFREDO: I would have searched for you. / BEATRIZ: What for? / ALFREDO: I never fell in love again. I never even thought about it. Until now. (Bandoneon music gets louder).
- ^{xiii} SANDRA: So, what job will you do? / CÓRDOBA: I'll drive a taxi... / SANDRA: But you can't drive, Córdoba... / CÓRDOBA: So what? I'll learn then and there. I get on the car and learn. / SANDRA: (Puffs in irritation). / CÓRDOBA: What? You don't like my job? / SANDRA: No, I like any job. But I want you to promise me one thing. / CÓRDOBA: Sure. I'll promise you whatever you want. / SANDRA: No. Just one thing. I want you to promise that if this job doesn't work you'll search for something else but you won't rob again. / CÓRDOBA: (Silence). / SANDRA: So? / CÓRDOBA: So what? / SANDRA: So... Don't be an idiot. Do you promise? Yes or not? / CÓRDOBA: Yes, but you don't get how things are... Do you? / SANDRA: No, what I don't get is why you don't take care of me. If you end up in jail, what will I do? Can you tell me? / CÓRDOBA: OK, stop. That won't happen. Don't worry because it won't happen. Get it? All cool? Do you know what I was thinking about? / SANDRA: What? / CÓRDOBA: That the two of us can go to Uruguay. / SANDRA: The three of us. / CÓRDOBA: OK, the three of us. / SANDRA: Do you want to touch my belly? / CÓRDOBA: Touch it? / SANDRA: Yes, come. / CÓRDOBA: (Crouches to put his ear on her belly). / SANDRA: Can you feel it? / CÓRDOBA: Hmmm (kisses her belly).

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- ^{xiv} The film's title is the name of a tango song made famous by Carlos Gardel.
- ^{xv} *Volver* was shot in the last year of the Junta dictatorship, just before the Malvinas war, a conflict that signalled the collapse of the dictatorship. This date is marked in the film, after the last images fade to black, just before the titles: "Marzo de 1982". Considering that the collapse of the dictatorship had been anticipated for some years, it was becoming obvious by 1982 that the military was clinging to power. There is clearly a testimonial intention in this dating of the film.
- ^{xvi} See Ministerio de Economía y Producción 2005, for a detailed analysis of these phenomena during the 1990s.
- ^{xvii} The role of the spectator in decoding these uses of the *mise-en-scène* is of course of utmost importance — Mulvey's ideas of "delayed cinema" and "attentive spectator" are for that reason relevant here. In *Death 24x a Second* Mulvey writes of "delayed cinema" which "works on two levels: first of all it refers to the actual act of slowing down the flow of film [with the use of contemporary technology such as the remote control]. Secondly it refers to the delay in time during which some detail has lain dormant, as it were, waiting to be noticed" (2006: 8). An "attentive viewer" is a viewer that by "halting the image or repeating sequences... can dissolve the fiction so that the time of registration can come to the fore" (2006: 184).
- ^{xviii} There are certainly other uses of the index in *Pizza, birra, faso*. It would be unnecessarily laborious to attempt to reproduce every time the Buenos Aires of the late 1990s appears in the film, hence my focus on one particular type of indexical image.
- ^{xix} Garbarino is a famous Argentine home appliances store, the biggest in the country, operating since the early 1950s.
- ^{xx} For an extended analysis of Convertibility and its impact, see Galiani, Heymann, Tommasi, Servén and Terra 2003.
- ^{xxi} Knowing of their lack of future is of course only possible once we know the ending of the film.
- ^{xxii} The term *intendente* was changed to *jefe de gobierno* in 1996, coinciding with Buenos Aires being granted autonomous status. After losing the elections to De la Rúa, who would become the next Argentine president, Dominguez became Minister of Defence until the end of the Menemist government in 1999.
- ^{xxiii} The Argentine daily *La Nación* declared in 1996 that the eviction had been pacific, although this version was

subsequently denied. See “Villa 31: Pacífico fin del desalojo” 1996.

xxiv See “En el pasado con la dictadura” 2006.

xxv The area of Palermo where these streets cross is now one of the most attractive touristic and real estate locations in Buenos Aires.

xxvi It would be hard to believe *La Nación*'s journalist Willy Bouillon's dictum that the “eradication” was carried out almost in a “festive environment” (Bouillon 1996). This said, the fact that this settlement was only six years old, while Villa 31 has existed since the early 1930s, in addition to it being a relocation not a mere eviction, might have played a decisive role in decompressing the situation.

xxvii See Alcaraz 2010.

xxviii See Guano 2002, for more information of neoliberal urbanism in Buenos Aires during the 1990s.

xxix “[a] film without ideology is impossible, that is why a politics of the shot can be read in the mise en scène and in the point of view chosen by a director... The eye gazes from a system and from some symbolic coordinates, and the mise en scène exteriorizes this gaze.”

xxx “...a historical and political conscience is evident in his opera prima: *Pizza, birra, faso* is not spontaneous, nor narratively inconsistent, and let alone does it portray its *marginals* as if they were subjects at the margin of the margins; its precise historicity reveals the ravages of the politics of president Menem and their structural effects on the social order.”

xxxi Sandra went onto the ferry but not necessarily to the bridge of the ship, from where this shot seems to be taken.

xxxii In *Cinema 2* Deleuze writes of the existence of a “direct image of time” that originates in the postwar period (2011: xi). He sees this image as an evolution of a movement-image, typical of “the so-called classical cinema” (idem).

xxxiii The idea of suture originates in the Lacanian concept of the same name and has been developed by, among others, Laura Mulvey and Stephen Heath. See Mulvey 1989 and Heath 1981, particularly the chapter “On Suture”. Heath describes it as “a stitching or tying as in the surgical joining of the lips of wound. In its processes, its framings, its cuts, its intermittences, the film ceaselessly poses an absence, a lack, which is ceaselessly bound up in

and into the relation of the subject, is, as it were, ceaselessly recaptured *for* the film” (1981: 13) Therefore, by suture I understand the inscription of the spectator into the film in a way that the spectator no longer perceives that they are watching a film, an artifice produced by the cinematic apparatus.

xxxiv Page rightly signals the role the viewer is given in this scene arguing that “the spectator is effectively imprisoned here, in the longest shot of the film [...] This final scene metaphorically confirms the replacement of action with observation: confronted by the bathos and the tragedy of these lives, we become aware of our inability to act and of our conditions as spectators” (2009: 43).

xxxv For example with films such as *Los rubios* (Albertina Carri, 2003) or *Historias cotidianas* (Andrés Habbeger, 2001), *Crónica de una fuga* (Caetano, 2006). These are explicitly political works that foreground the individuals’ struggle to recover a space in history, one removed from the necessity of questioning a totality, or delivering a clear political message that speaks for a collective. These films are clear examples of what Clara Kriger defines as a “superposición entre la esfera de lo privado y lo público” (in María José Moor and Paula Wolkowicz 2007: 47).

xxxvi In a similar vein, Roger Koza argues that “[l]o político es un *a priori* (histórico) de la mirada” (in Duarte and Lara 2013: 250).

xxxvii “In contrast with the films of the 80s and part of the 90s, in these films produced in the past three years, politics acts as a backdrop, with the representation of globalization and the effects of neoliberalism — particularly on the *porteño* population — taking central stage.”

xxxviii “The fact that the political ends up being negated each it is mentioned in the new Argentine cinema... leads us to question whether it might not be a case of of redefining its status — not any more as something displaced... or suppressed... but as a category that acquires new powers and qualities in a medium whose function changed radically in the 1990s. In other words, before launching into a condemnation, wouldn’t it be worthwhile to question whether the political in cinema requires a redefinition? In the end it is an aesthetic debate: not what film does with a political that awaits in its exterior but how the political is offered to us in the form of these movies.”