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This section examines four different perspectives on post-dictatorship Argentine film. Whether in recent films by children of the victims or the compelling work of Fernando Solanas, history is a powerful protagonist.

New Argentine Cinema

The People's Presence

BY GONZALO AGUILAR

THROUGHOUT THE YEAR 2004, WHILE I was finishing my book *Otros mundos* on New Argentine Cinema, I kept thinking both about recent film productions and the turmoil caused by the Peronist government in the 1990s. In the chapter on politics, “Adiós al pueblo,” (“Goodbye to the people”), I contended that unlike in the Argentine films made in the 60s to the 80s, one cannot talk about “the people” in New Argentine Film, understanding “pueblo” (people) in its very Latin American sense of “common folk” or “the masses.” People were no longer active political subjects, I asserted. At one time, the people had symbolized the gateway to liberation, but later—whether in discourse or in deed—the people became part of a consensus (no longer antagonistic) within a reality that was increasingly more statistical and less political—or at least, that’s what I thought back then. The people, I wrote at the time, were a mere vehicle for the state’s re-absorption of politics through bureaucracy and police power.

As I was putting the finishing touches on my book, I took frequent breaks to view the televised march to the Plaza de Mayo—a so-called popular mobilization—that had been organized by the new Peronist government. Of all the films that I analyzed in my book, the film from which I felt the most distanced was Fernando Solanas’ *Memoria del saqueo* (2004) (“Memories of Looting”).

In retrospect, the film seems prophetic. In its final scenes, it not only invokes the people as a subject of history, but also predicts their return to full glory. Once the fiction that had been constructed by the Peronist government of Carlos Menem in the 90s dissipated, the people returned to the forefront to participate actively in decision-making. In a series of quite transparent references to the world of the 60s (the title evokes the well-known Cuban film *Memories of Underdevelopment* by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea; the film in general, together with *La hora de los hornos*, shares its documentary lens). *Memoria del saqueo* restores the idea of politics in film because it assumes the presence of the people (the appearance of many of them in the background) as a central conceptual category of the film. All this is to confess that the central theme of my book—that people were passé in both film and politics—was rendered obsolete or at least limited after the events stemming from the economic crisis in 2001. In that crisis, even middle-class people were reduced to poverty, and the so-called obsolete “pueblo” mobilized in unimagined, creative and political ways.

In the most political Latin American film of the 60s—from Santiago Álvarez to Patricio Guzmán, from Jorge Sanjinés to the Grupo Cine Liberación—the documentary image had appeared as the appropriate means through which to represent, raise political consciousness of and interact

with the people. Thus, the film-manifesto *La hora de los hornos* (“The Hour of the Furnaces”), with its forceful arguments and instrumental use of images to inspire direct action, expounded the temporary necessity to do away with all forms of fiction. Grupo Cine Liberación considered the category of fiction as a cheap disguise and a deviation, unmasked by essay-like narration. After several works of fiction, with *Memoria del saqueo*, Solanas returned to the language of the physical—the use of the human body—that had characterized his first film with its nervous movement of the camera in the middle of the street (what a witness in danger would see) and with shots of agitated and vociferous bodies trying to unmask the power and the falseness of the image. He depicts the choreography of multitudes whose enthusiasm and political objectives transformed them into *el pueblo*, hence into protagonists of history.

However, the differences between the films from the early 90s and those of the 60s are evident; the urgency of “the hour” is replaced by the retrospective vision of the “memories” which, with a touch of nostalgia, permeates almost all the documentary productions of recent years. In any case, the fact is that Solanas returned the great tradition in which masses of people burst upon the silver screen, and that film, in turn, creates an image of the people. The image in trance, through that image the multitudes pass to



This image was made during the production of *El bonaerense*.

acquire a visible form in the choreography of bodies that fills up the big screen, that goes beyond the screen and shatters it.

Movies from the 90s often questioned the discrepancies between the politics of action and politics in the form of strategic thinking, and one of the ways these films dealt with the issue of politics was to leave images empty through several means. The most extreme example of this emptying process was that of Lisandro Alonso in *La libertad* (2001): in this film, there is almost never more than one person in sight, and from the very beginning, the concept of freedom and the image of people appear as a dichotomy. Another strategy is that

of Pablo Trapero: in *El bonaerense* (a film about a policeman nicknamed Zapa in Buenos Aires Province), the protagonist comes upon a *piquetero* march, but simply goes his own way, paying no attention to this mass protest that blocks the road. It is as if the *El bonaerense* had encountered a fragment of *Memoria del saqueo*, but had not fallen under its spell. In Martín Rejtman's *Silvia Prieto*, a group of product promoters—the ladies who hand out free samples—mobilize to demand justice for a colleague who has been killed in a work accident. But while in political film, the multitudes fill up and burst forth from the screen, in Rejtman's film, the march of the crowd is marked by

emptiness. Unlike the famous poster for *The Hour of the Furnaces*, showing close-ups of faces distorted by shouting, the scenes in *Silvia Prieto* register apathetic or inexpressive faces. We go from the world of the masculine to a feminine multitude, from social demands to demands for life, from the audacity of popular outcry, expressed through shouts that fill up the screen, to emptiness and dispossession as elemental starting points. Rather than seeing politics as an external fact that sustains the image, these films—negating the category that dominated Argentine film from the 60s to the 80s—introduce the concept of the political through images, as a force in and



from top to bottom: Scenes from *La Libertad*, *El bonaerense* and *M*

of itself and as an open question.

The transition from the masculine to the feminine (since Gustave Le Bon at the end of the 19th century, multitudes have been associated with the feminine while the *pueblo*—the historical masses—have been associated with the masculine) is demonstrated most visibly by Enrique Bellande's *Ciudad de María* (City of Maria), in which the life of the modern manufacturing city of San Nicolás, sustained for and by the labor of workers, is transformed in the 90s into the religious capital of the Virgin, with its legion of female believers and devotees who have performed *another* miracle. In addition to the appearance of the Virgin, the miracle is that the pilgrimages and tourism by the faithful have changed the economy of the city so that it revolves around religious tourism. The substitution of the believer for the worker, of the consumer for the citizen, demonstrates the decline of political belief as the central factor in the choreography of masses. Moreover, the very body of woman becomes inserted into the image, bringing an irreversible and complex link between the public and the private that will displace those choreographies of public space of politically militant films through this complex umbrella of concepts under which the public and private have to be constantly redefined.

A diagnosis for changing times, emptiness, however, is a negation of the political that allows the interpretation of politics as impossibility, deficiency and even disorientation (a position that in any case does not cease to be powerful if one thinks of it as a rejection of identity or political demands to which films were subject in Argentina for a long period). However, in this instance, *nothingness* replaces the people because the public scenario in which the actors operate, as well as the very concept of *pueblo*, have been thrust into crisis. Instead of relying on conventional techniques of making the people visible (they are just outside and will burst upon the screen), these more recent films take a tiny detail such as a fingerprint or a clue as their starting point. In this manner, they create connections between the bodies (choreographies) and identities that are never perceived as stable. The *community* will slowly become visible, abolishing all exteriority (Nicolás Prividera's *M* and Martín Rejtman's *Copacabana*). In the process of creating community from fragmented parts, an emptiness is always created as well. It is

precisely in this twilight between community and emptiness that I believe we ought to think of how the political is portrayed in new Argentine film.

In *M*, director Nicolás Prividera investigates the events surrounding the disappearance of his mother and records the changes taking place in the sphere of politics (or at least, in the politics of memory). How can one penetrate the state so that it will have to tell the truth? This seems to be the question that characterizes the first investigations of the protagonist (the director himself). The regime of visibility is expressed in a poster shown time and again throughout the film, displaying the words of a declaration by Jorge Zorreguieta, the former head of the agricultural agency INTA, where Prividera's mother worked at the time she was kidnapped and disappeared. In the poster, the man is simply quoted as saying that he had "nothing to do with" the disappearance of the filmmaker's mother, Marta Sierra. The phrase is not only a denial of responsibility in the case but also forbids seeing, as "ver" in Spanish forms a pun that plays with seeing and doing. In total contradiction to this mandate, Prividera uses film to see more, to see everything that is possible to see, though not exactly the truth, but the ways in which individuals have processed the past into a regime of fiction that consists of repressing the intolerable. In cinematographic terms, the greatest contribution of this film is in its use of the body, a *hélix* as Bourdieu would say, that "carries" the camera in a very pre-

cise way: not on the shoulders, but by his side, as an objective witness that at the same time is an extension of his body. The spectator accompanies this body throughout the investigative journey through the camera, which follows it in an obsessively close fashion and, at times, even allows the body's breathing to be felt. Indeed, several of the documentaries about militancy and the disappeared in Argentina stage a body, rather than a scene. Many are ghostlike and Prividera manages to show them as such, for example, in the insipid speech in a meeting at his mother's workplace—a meeting of neighborhood militants around a table under the displayed sign with the motto "compañeros" (comrades). The many (the collective, the community) cannot help displaying the fissure that makes any choreography impossible.

In contrast to this temporal and intellectual out-of-phase quality that *M* explores is *Copacabana*, one of the more energetic films marked by collective choreography. Made as a television documentary to illustrate the preparations for the celebrations for the Virgen of Copacabana by the Bolivian community in Buenos Aires, the final scene occurs along the border and in customs, when Bolivian immigrants entering into Argentina are being checked by the border guards. The entry into a foreign country is the entry into invisibility that Rejtman's documentary proposes to make visible. Some critics see in the film a tension between the modern asceticism of Rejtman's camera and the

"report" about the portrayed community. After first traveling through the fair, the film focuses on a series of dances that shine in their own right. The bodies registered by the camera move with coordination and grace throughout the entire course of the film, even in a meeting of the the bosses in which organization co-exists with argument. The Bolivian community exists camouflaged in a city that is totally indifferent to its existence (as underscored by Rejtman's exceptional urban perspectives), but it is not because of this that the community is weakened and abandons its secret plot. Of course, the scene at the textile factory leads one to understand—without judging—that the choreography of work is linked to that of the fiesta, but this inference is less important than the director's decision to link his obsession with formality with that of the foreigners he portrays. Here are two unrelated orders that do not mix, and their rhythms are constantly present throughout the film: the eye of the director upon the lives of his subjects, neither surrendering to the other.

This encounter between the Bolivian community and the most modernist of the New Argentine Film directors (also the involved son of a disappeared woman, also the actor-director who rejects any gesture of sentimental identification) is what produces the political. No longer—as happened and happens in Solanas' films—are the many constituted as subject through the category "people." Rather, politics results from a few who do not take orders from anyone except in the context of the fragile community in which they express themselves, constantly pushing against the threshold that separates them from the great unknown emptiness. As separate entities, they do not connect the image with politics. However, they do make us ask about the very possibility of politics when certain traditional categories—like that of the people—no longer are dynamic or effective.

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ALGUNAS PELÍCULAS

POR DANIEL SAMPER PIZANO

¿Mi película favorita del cine español? Dos: "La escopeta nacional", de Luis García Berlanga, un delicioso y divertido fresco de personajes representativos de la España tardo-franquista, estrenada en 1977. Franco había muerto dos años antes. Y "Volver" (2006), de Pedro Almodóvar, con la mirada zarzuelera que a veces tiene la cultura hispánica sobre la muerte.

En cuanto a las latinoamericanas, disfruté varias de las clásicas de Cantinflas ("Si yo fuera diputado", "El Siete machos", "El señor fotógrafo", "Ni sangre ni arena"), me gustó mucho "Doña Flor y sus dos maridos" (brasileña, 1976, de Bruno Barreto) y estoy encantado con el cine argentino de los últimos años, en especial las películas de Carlos Sorín ("Historias mínimas", "Bombón, El Perro") y las de Juan José Campanella ("Luna de Avellaneda", "El hijo de la novia").

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