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Captive Subjects: The Figure of the Child in Contemporary Argentine Cinema

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Spanish and Portuguese

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Abstract

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Captive Subjects examines the figure of the child in contemporary Argentine cinema. I contend that the child figure circulating in Argentine film today projects the aesthetic, social, and political climate of the country, as well as changing notions of childhood. The first chapter of this project focuses on the relationship between children and divisive history in the films *Cautiva/Captive*, *Cordero de dios/Lamb of God* and *Kamchatka*. Through an analysis of artifacts and characteristics associated with both history and children's culture in the films, this chapter provides a reading of how the notion of inheritance has become one of the lasting preoccupations in Argentine culture in relation to the dictatorial period.

The second chapter of the project analyzes the documentaries *Los rubios/ The Blondes* and *Papá Iván*. I argue that these films interrogate the fragmentation of memory through the use of artifacts and themes generally associated with childhood. This chapter specifically analyzes the modes of representation utilized by the directors in order to highlight the ways in which they problematize the notion of complete and verifiable personal histories.

The third group of films, taken up in the third chapter of my project, represents the aftermath of the Dirty War and the subsequent economic collapse of 2001. The films *La ciénaga/The Swamp*, *La hora de la siesta/Nap Time*, and *La rabia/Anger* present the child as the unknowing heir of a violent and/or stagnant social landscape. I contend that these films depict children in both implicitly and explicitly precarious situations, thereby underscoring the ineffectiveness of national and familial institutions.

The final chapter of the dissertation focuses on the films, *Géminis/Gemini*, *La niña santa/The Holy Girl*, and *XXY* and traces how they employ child figures with non-normative desires and sexualities as narrative devices. The chapter also relates the deviation from normative representations of children and sexuality to larger critiques about the failure of traditional institutions and anxieties regarding the future within the Argentine context.

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INTRODUCTION

And then there are bodies (of children) that must live inside the figure of the child.
- Kathryn Bond Stockton

From its inception, cinema lays claim to the child - both on and off screen.
-Vicky Lebeau

When, in 1994, Argentine film and cultural critic Sergio Wolf surveyed a group of upcoming directors regarding their affinities with prior cinematic movements and productions, the response he got was both unanimous and surprisingly candid: “We are a generation of orphans” (29). By evoking the figure of the dispossessed child, young directors throughout the country cast themselves as figurative orphans that inherited not only what they considered to be a national cinema impoverished by dictatorship, but also a stark contemporary political and cultural landscape still reeling from the legacy of military rule and defined by overwhelming inflation, high external debt, and widespread social unrest.

The evocation of the figurative orphan by directors and the subsequent preponderance of child characters in their films also summon the literal orphans that still haunt the Argentine imaginary. The Argentine dictatorship (1976-1983) saw the mass disappearance of people, many of whom were young mothers and fathers who left behind orphaned children. In other cases, pregnant detainees were kept alive long enough to give birth, and their children were illegally adopted by regime members and their supporters. Today, many of these orphaned or kidnapped children form part of the group

H.I.J.O.S. (“Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio” [Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence] whose members identify as orphan children whose political action stems from a lost childhood, thereby embodying the sociopolitical legacy of their missing parents and fighting the oblivion surrounding the unpunished crimes of the past.

The circulation of the orphan, and the child figure more generally, in both rhetorical and literal form, within contemporary Argentine culture and society has also made its way into the very medium of film. Since the mid 1990s, there has been an explosion of films focusing on or highlighting the experience of children. These films are characterized by a significant deviation in the conventional characteristics generally attributed to children such as wisdom, innocence, beauty, and vibrancy. Child characters in contemporary Argentine film tend to be excessively violent, overtly sexual, neglected, or disfigured. In order to fully examine the multiple valences that representations of the child can take in Argentine cultural production, and cinema in particular, it is useful to understand the transformations that the notion of the childhood and the child have undergone in a relatively short time.

The Birth of Childhood

Philippe Ariès’s canonical text on the emergence of childhood, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, was published in 1960 and contends that childhood as a concept did not come about until the seventeenth century with the parallel development of Modernity and changing social structures. Supporting Ariès’s contention, literary scholar Ala A. Alryyes traces how the child became a primary symbol for the French citizen looking to rebel against the authority of the king. For Alryyes, the

child is likened to the new citizen, rejecting royal rule to become the child of the nation, or what Alryyes refers to as the “Nation Child” (22). Within Latin America something similar happens when the child comes to reflect the needs of the state in its various formulations and forms part of the one of the most enduring national institutions - the family unit. As literary critic Jean Franco argues in “Killing, Priests, Nuns, Women, Children,” the Church and the family unit played a vital role in the burgeoning Latin American nation states. According to Franco, “... the Church and the home retained a traditional topography and traditional practices over a very long period, and also because during the periods when the state was relatively weak these institutions were the only functioning social organizations” (416).

The child figure circulating in political and literary circles was characterized by its vulnerability to the social changes and interests of the adults around him or her. Eliciting Rousseau’s conception of the “natural child,” many of these representations presented a romantically coded child who was cast, primarily, as a silent observer of the world around him or her. In this way, the child becomes a historical witness of sorts, representing a utopic and pure origin that adults would be unable to claim or access. While symbolizing an unmediated truth, the figure of the child, through the temporality of childhood, is also “...representative of a lost realm, lost in the individual past, and in the past of the culture” (Steedman 10). Due to its relationship to both the notion of an origin as well as an inaccessible time, the figure also becomes a central myth within western institutions and the western psyche.¹ This mystification of the child and its incorporation into national discourse is most clearly articulated in the writings of primary

¹ Carolyn Steedman, Lesley Caldwell, Jacqueline Rose, and Neil Sinyard each signal the importance of the child figure in relation to how adults construct their selfhood and their place within the social realm.

figures of Latin American State formation in contrasting ways. For instance, Cuba's José Martí sees in the child the hope for a nation about to bloom, while on the other side of the spectrum, Argentine president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's child was projected as a savage whose only salvation relied on a solid education and his or her entrance into the civilizing project.²

As a great number of Latin American intellectuals came under the spell of positivism in the late nineteenth century, the child all but disappeared from Latin American literature. As the child in representation declined, however, the concept of childhood as it is known today began to circulate and was based on the scientific study and categorization of children's bodies. Ultimately, the child as a form and the beginnings of the notion of childhood as a separate stage of life also gave way to curiosity about the internal lives of children. As Carolyn Steedman provocatively argues, the appearance of the child figure allowed for the emergence of human interiority.³ Steedman asserts:

the interiorised self, understood to be the product of a personal history, was most clearly expressed in the idea of 'childhood', and the idea of the 'the child'. The sum of technical knowledge about childhood increased dramatically in the middle years of the nineteenth century, and there was a veritable explosion of information about this period of physiological and cognitive development in human beings.

(5)

² Currents of anxiety over the education and welfare of families throughout Latin America can be found in the canonical texts, *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and *Ismaelillo*, a collection of poems by José Martí.

³ Both Jacqueline Rose and Lesley Caldwell also consider childhood to be a primary myth in western culture through the way that it shapes our personal, social, and discursive registers, as well as being an important tool in the reconstruction of personal "history."

The child was becoming more knowable, meaning that his or her actions and behaviours also became more visible, especially in public spaces. This new visibility evolved into a growing concern for the multitude of children roaming around burgeoning Latin American capitals in full swing of Modernity.⁴ The culturally indiscernible children, who spoke a mix of Spanish and foreign languages and circulated in public spaces, became a constant preoccupation for intellectuals concerned with retaining a unified and civilized sense of nationhood in the face of mass migration from other countries.⁵

In addition to the political ends the child served for an intellectual minority, the beginning of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a variety of representations of the child, many of which contested the idea of childhood as an innocent and natural state.⁶ According to critics, Freudian psychoanalysis and its focus on the child psyche (especially in relation to sexuality) affected how the child was taken up both socially and in artistic representation.⁷ Notably, Jacqueline Rose considers the role of the child as fundamental to the inception of psychoanalysis:

Freud was first brought up against the unconscious when asking how we remember ourselves as a child. The unconscious is not an object, something to be

⁴ Chris Jenks argues the following regarding the child figure throughout Modernity: “childhood has gradually sequestered adult experience, it has claimed a greater duration within the total life experience, it has claimed a greater duration within the total life experience, it has usurped and assumed greater segments of adult labour: cognitive, affective and manual” (99).

⁵ For more on the use of the child as a justification for political reform by intellectuals concerned about the changing face of the nation in Argentina during the late 19th century, see Hernán Feldman.

⁶ Perhaps one of the most canonical works of this time was by Ellen Key, who called for dramatic changes to the living conditions of children internationally within the blossoming century. Key argued that the child ought to be the main concern in any given society as declared in the title of her seminal book *The Century of the Child* (1909). In Latin America the Romantic child continued to be the prominent conceptualization of the child. However, in works such as those by writers Horacio Quiroga and Silvina Ocampo, child characters varied from idiots to sadists to voyeurs. Furthermore, as Inés Dussell indicates the early 1900s in Argentine saw a critical engagement with the problem of the young delinquent in the social sciences (206).

⁷ Beside Rose, James Kincaid, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, Lebeau, and Lury all comment on the influence of psychoanalysis on the reformulation of the relationship between the child and sexuality.

laid hold of and retrieved. It is a term which Freud used to describe the complex ways in which our very idea of ourselves as children is produced. (12)

For Sigmund Freud, adult neurosis and the unconscious, especially in terms of sexual psychosocial behaviour, were ultimately linked to experiences in childhood.⁸ Freud's intervention suspended the notion of the child as an asexual being whose entry into sexuality occurred at a later stage of development. Furthermore, his theories on the child and the family structures became a predominant theme in both literature and cinema, especially in the latter which appeared to be as consumed with the projection of the child as with Freud's excursion into the recesses of children's experience.

However, as influential as Freud's theories on the sexuality of the child have been within artistic and literary circles, the child is still largely overshadowed by the Romantic child. In a climate in which childhood, and by extension the notion of the child, are thought to be threatened by a rapidly changing technological world, it is important to remember that these constructions were largely created by the shifting conditions of Modernity. Yet, the same constructions that were created in order to protect this group of individuals from social and economic exploitation also imposed a normativity that worked to limit their discursive and physical movements in the world. As Chris Jenks reminds his readers, the "dominant modern discourse of childhood continues to mark out 'the child' as innately innocent, confirming its cultural identity as a passive and unknowingly dependent, and therefore as a member of a social group utterly disempowered – but for good, altruistic reasons" (124). In other words, as knowledge

⁸ Freud's collection of essays entitled "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," published in 1905, is possibly the most integral to his theorizing on the sexual maturation of the child and his or her relationship to family and social structures.

about the child evolved so too did the construction of the category of child also marked the exclusion of real children from certain parts of social life.

Marking the shifting boundaries of this category, in the last thirty years there has been a wave of critics proclaiming the end of childhood.⁹ Perhaps the most recognizable is Neil Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood*, in which he contends that the boundaries separating the child from the adult are beginning to fade. Arguing that advances in technology, mass media, and children's rights have caused the rapid decline in literacy and notions of shame, Postman maintains that modern culture is "causing the expulsion of childhood after its long sojourn in Western civilization" (120).

Within Argentina, a similar concern for the child was articulated in Cristina Corea's (1999) text *¿Se acabó la infancia? Ensayo sobre la destitución de la niñez*, in which the author marks the disappearance, or better said, the absorption of childhood into two invariable categories: consumer and non-consumer. Corea maintains that the disappearance of childhood in Argentina is precipitated by the emergence of technology and the rise of consumer culture, thus toppling the key traditional institutions that upheld the notion of the child: the family and the universal educational system (14).

By the same token, the anxieties surrounding the perceived loss of childhood also initiate a tighter grip on the meanings and investments we place upon the child figure. As Leandro de Lajonquière argues in *Figuras de lo infantil: El psicoanálisis en la vida cotidiana con los niños*, notion of el "El-Niño" is a completely new creature which has nothing to do with actual children, but derives from adult insistence and ambiguous

⁹ Some of the principal books dedicated to the decay of 19th century notions of childhood include: Louis Roussel's book *L'Enfance oublié/Forgotten Childhood* (2001); Paul Ariès' *Déni d'enfance* (1997); David Elkind's *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon* (2001); Marie Winn's *Children Without Childhood* (1983); and Joshua Meyrowitz's *No Sense of Place: The Impact of the Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (1985).

feelings surrounding the decay of traditional notions of childhood (18). I maintain that it is this constructed notion of the child, Lajonquière's "El-Niño," that we see circulating in the films that form the basis of this project.

However, before launching into how the pervasive notions related to the socially constructed child contrasts with the filmic treatment of the child in Argentine cinema, it is necessary to trace how children have been produced and utilized throughout cinematic history in general. In other words, it is important to trace how directors utilize the child figure either to disrupt or uphold this vision of the child, and in doing so also challenge, or not, the biological, social, and natural constructions that the extra-filmic child figure sustains.

Caught in Time: The Child and the Beginnings of Cinema

The image of the child has held an important place throughout the relatively short history of cinema. As Vicky Lebeau documents in her comprehensive analysis of the image of the child from early to contemporary cinema, both childhood and cinema can be considered converging institutions of modern cultural life (20). Echoing the fears and concerns of modern life, the representation of children has varied from guardians of moral consciousness (such as Vittorio de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* [1948] and Rossellini's *Rome, The Open City*, [1945], evil progenies (LeRoy's *The Bad Seed* [1956]), figures of moral degradation (Larry Clark's *Kids* [1995]) and victims of rigid social institutions (Truffaut's *400 Blows* [1959]). These varied visions of childhood present the utility of the image of the child in tackling contradictory and troubling topics in modern culture. Even so, to a large degree the child's image continues to be related to John Locke's construction of the child as a "tabula rasa" making it an ideal reference point within

visual culture to pose questions relating to progress, history, and violence.¹⁰ Moreover, as a free-floating signifier, the image of the child has been a useful tool of persuasion, deference, and commercialization.

Originally, Victorian writing on the perspective of the child in early cinema often afforded it an innocent quality. The child was projected as a subject whose perspective paralleled the camera's, as a naïve form of looking, thereby establishing the child as an innocent onlooker, divorced from any social critique of the image (Smith 10). Annie Higgonet confirms the Victorian obsession with the nude child in photographs when she argues that "childhood innocence was considered an attribute of the child's body, both because the child's body was supposed to be naturally innocent of adult sexuality, and because the child's mind was supposed to begin blank" (8). Therefore, imbuing the child with vacuity also made it an ideal screen onto which to project the wonders of the cinematic image.

Through the next hundred years, the child would become the ideal figure through which directors would entice spectators into the dark rooms of the movie theatre. As Jorge Larrosa aptly observes, the child has a multilayered function in cinema; it interrogates, interpolates, corresponds, and questions dominant social hierarchies and structures (119). Renowned film theorist André Bazin affirms the relationship between cinema and the child:

The child finally ceases to be a little man to affirm itself before us in an almost

¹⁰ Perhaps the most influential reading of childhood during the early 18th century was John Locke's *Some Thoughts on Education* (1690), which proposed perceiving a child as a blank slate, defenseless and requiring an education to become a rational and independent human being. In strict contestation of Locke's view of childhood is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile or On Education* (1762) in which the author presents the child as innately good and free and deserving of a complete education geared towards the development of a person as a whole.

inaccessible psychological dimension, of which we are nonetheless responsible. Inaccessible to our analysis, vitiated by our adult concepts, inaccessible to our memory incapable to get back to its own infancy. The child could only be known from the outside; it is the most mysterious, fascinating and troubling natural phenomenon ever. (Bazin cited in Grosoli 13)

Bazin sets the child up as the object of desire for an origin while writing during a moment in the mid-twentieth century in which one of the most dynamic and lasting representations of the child figure had made its debut – the child of Italian Neorealism.

Appearing after the greatly documented end of the Second World War, the child in Neorealist Italian cinema cast its steady gaze on a Europe ruined by years of war and violence. The figure circulating in the films of movie greats such as Vittorio de Sica, Roberto Rossellini, Giuseppe De Santis, and Luchino Visconti is perhaps one of the most recognizable of cinematic child types. The child's gaze within Neorealist cinema has also been credited with encapsulating scathing critiques of society, violence, and history as well as symbolizing a figure in which national discourses and expectations are situated and represented (236).¹¹ The child represented by Italian Neorealism can be considered a prototype for the children circulating in other national cinemas including those of Japan, Iran, and the national cinemas of Latin America.¹²

¹¹ There are a number of texts written on Italian Neorealism. The ones that have been most useful for me in relation to this project include: Marcia Landy's *Italian Film*; Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*; Bert Cardullo's essay, "The Children of Heaven, on Earth: Neorealism, Iranian Style"; and the collection of essays edited by Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi M. Wilson entitled *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*.

¹² In reference to Italian Neorealism's influence within Latin American cinema in general see Michael Channan, "The Space Between Fiction and Documentary in Latin American Cinema: Notes Toward a Genealogy." The essay offers an introduction to the emergence of Neorealism and its dissemination throughout a variety of regional cinemas. Channan defines four different kinds of Neorealist categories or functions: Neorealism as style; Neorealism as method; Neorealism as technique; Neorealism as a form of cultural politics. What these different types of appropriations of the movement have entailed is a

Childhood has definitively played a key role in many documentary and fictional productions throughout Latin America. The most known films include: Spanish director Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950), which is set in Mexico and chronicles the lives of a group of children living in a shantytown; *Crónica de un niño solo* (1960), by Argentine director Leonardo Favio, which focuses on the wanderings of young boy through the expansive streets of a flourishing Buenos Aires; the highly critical documentary Argentine film, *Tire dié* (1960), by Fernando Birri, about a group of children who risk life and limb to beg for money from train riders on the outskirts of Santa Fe; and *Pixote: A lei do mais fraco* (1981), by Brazilian director Héctor Babenco, about a group of exploited street children who are shuttled in and out of children's detention centers in Rio.¹³ Notably, what all the films share, is their spotlighting of the misery and marginality of children in the poorest sectors of their respective societies. Through their focus on the violence done to the body and lives of child characters, the directors connect the child with social suffering as a whole. As Karen Lury observes of the figure of the child in relation to Italian 1970s cinema:

Rather than being apolitical, the revisiting of a childhood curiosity, with its hallucinatory quality and creative mix of fact and fiction, may actively encourage spectators to explore and engage with the political and social implications of a particularly traumatic period. ("The Child in Film and Television" 311)

commitment to the portrayal of everyday reality that predominates over the fictional and "superficial" worlds created by established and industrial-style cinema.

¹³ Though the Spanish director Luis Buñuel did not originate from Latin America, his films are still considered to be an integral part of Latin American cinema.

Like the Italian directors Lury describes, Latin American directors also recognized the emotional and social capital that the image of the child on screen possesses and utilized it to highlight and resolve social contradictions and injustices.

Therefore, from very early on in Latin American cinema, as in world cinema as a whole, the child became a precious and powerful symbol. As noted by film critic Neil Sinyard, the child's perspective is an important axis point between the spectator and the filmmaker due to the shared and unifying experience of childhood (12). By placing the child in the center of filmic narrative, directors are able to tackle subjects and explore taboos that they would otherwise be unable to explore through other characters' subjectivities. Not only does the child open up thematic possibilities for directors, but they can also challenge spectators by questioning the very ways he or she sees. In her analysis of the films of Jean Cocteau, Joseph Cornell, and Stan Brakhage, Marjorie Keller observes that the unique perspective of the child in film enables directors to establish a "hierarchy of seeing", in which the child's vision is perceived as being more authentic due to its being unaltered by experience, and is based upon the relationship between verbal and visual power that is then utilized to critique social institutions (234). Not only does the child subject address the creative objectives of the director and/or the perspective of the spectator but, as Vicky Lebeau observes, the figure of the child becomes an object through which to think about the placement of film within both a historical and social context (13). As the above readings of the child convey, the child on film can allow for a complex reading of social and visual preoccupations within a given society and period.

In cinema, the childhood motif often elicits strong ties to memory, time, and nation. In Argentina, this theme is particularly charged due to its relationship with the kidnapping and secret adoption of hundreds of infants who were the children of women detained and disappeared during the seven-year military dictatorship. As a result, the depiction of children on screen in this particular country stimulates a number of memories and discourses related to this period. In most films, childhood represents an allegory for the nation and the desire for a re-encounter with an origin. The figure of the child becomes representative of the needs of a nation, a stand-in for a national memory of the dictatorship and the transitions that have surfaced since this period.

Many of the films that center on children form part of a phenomenon designated New Argentine Cinema. This group is comprised of who have utilized alternative modes of production and distribution to make their films since 1994.¹⁴ Their productions are defined by a rich use of visual techniques and non-standard narratives, which resist simplistic readings of their content.¹⁵ For film critics such as Gonzalo Aguilar, these directors create films that “... trabajan con la indeterminación y abren el juego de la interpretación” [work with indetermination and open a space to play with interpretation] (24). Undoubtedly, the indeterminate nature of these films often presents a challenge when it comes to interpretation, thereby requiring the development of innovative approaches to their critical reading. The distinguishing characteristic of these directors, according to Aguilar, is a rupture with the films of the 1980s that relied upon

¹⁴ Directors such as Esteban Sapir, Martín Rejtman, Bruno Stagnaro, Adrián Caetano, Albertina Carri, Lucrecia Martel, Pablo Trapero, and Lisandro Alonso are perhaps the better known directors associated with New Argentine Cinema. The inventive means of production and distribution that they utilize include innovative uses of film stock, collaboration between directors and film production crews, and the revitalization of independent film festivals.

¹⁵ Non-standard techniques include: the use of jarring or unidentified sound, the repetition of the same scene over and over again, the use of different types of film stock in the same sequences, visual distortion, etc.

allegorization and a determinate political discourse. The visual economies of the films stray from the traditional national allegory and subvert the assumed transparency between private and sociopolitical worlds. While Joanna Page also echoes Aguilar's contention that the films avoid prescriptive political messages, she does note that in contemporary Argentine cinema "the withdrawal of cinema into the private sphere can be read as a critical intervention that signals the failure of a dysfunctional state in crisis" (*Crisis* 166).

Consistently through the indeterminate images that make up the films of New Argentine Cinema, it is the figure of the child that beckons spectators to explore the quotidian politics of the familial and private worlds that characters inhabit. For that reason, this study begins with the premise that the child figure circulating in film today provides a litmus test for how directors are currently reshaping views on the history, present, and future in Argentina. I understand the child to be an individual between the ages of four and eighteen "believed to be qualitatively different from adults" through their position within the family unit as well as their position in relation to the law (Postman xi). Furthermore, it is important to indicate that though some the films deal with events that occurred during the last dictatorial period, the films themselves were produced between the years 2001 and 2009. With this context in mind, I will examine how the figure of the child is instrumentalized to challenge and interrupt dominant national narratives through a management of what spectators see on screen. Through a detailed analysis of the techniques and motifs employed in these films, this study re-evaluates how the child's figure negotiates representation and functions as an instrument of social critique.

My first chapter, “The Child (Dis)appears: History and Play in Argentine Film,” examines the relationship between the child figure and the dictatorial past. This chapter traces the figure of the child in Argentine cinema since 1983, the end of the dictatorial period, and discusses how the characteristics and motifs related to the figure of the child are taken up in post-dictatorship cinema.¹⁶ By establishing the relationship between the figure of the child and contested history in the films *Cautiva* (Gastón Birabén, 2003), *Cordero de dios* (Lucía Cedrón, 2008) and *Kamchatka* (Hector Babenco, 2002), this chapter provides an account of the relationship between the child and history, narrative, and material culture. Argentine directors have had to negotiate between direct and indirect or experimental modes of representation based on the constantly shifting contours of memorial discourse surrounding the dictatorial period, as well as the interventions made by critics about the ethical implications of representations of traumatic events. As a consequence, many directors represent the dictatorial experience indirectly through the use of complex plot structures and visual distortion instead of relying on the direct presentation of this particular historical period. These changes are marked by the evolution of the discourses mentioned above and in particular the changes in memorial discourse.¹⁷

¹⁶ Films such as *La historia oficial* (Luis Puenzo, 1985), *La noche de los lápices* (Hector Oliviera 1986) and *Un muro de silencio* (Lita Stantic, 1993), *Un lugar en el mundo* (Adolfo Aristarain 1992), are the first films to represent the situation of children during the dictatorial period. Through the depiction of the kidnapping and the detention of children during the dictatorship, these films bring into circulation the figure of the child and, by extension, notions relating to nationhood and history.

¹⁷ Memorial discourse, it can be said, moves from an initial period of silence in which authoritarian systems attempt to suppress the collective memory of traumatic events to a period in which testimony surges forth to overcome the imposed silence. This period is marked by the testimonies of victims of human rights abuses and looks to provide a witnessing and the exposition of the “truth,” thus we see the surge of documentation and truth commissions in many Latin American countries. The last noted shift in memory discourse occurs when postmodern theories destabilize the notion of master-narratives and particularly historical truth. Since then, memory discourse does not look to claim a single truth but is instead often presented as fragmented and disseminated. Memory discourse and aesthetic representations in particular are characterized by crisis, a crisis determined by an oscillation between nostalgia and the reification of the

Furthermore, heavily influenced by the child of Italian Neorealism, the children in these films play the role of a historical storyteller, relating their experiences from an indeterminate time in the future. Reading the child through the elements found in the filmic text as well as extra-filmic events such as the creation of the H.I.J.O.S. group, this chapter provides an elucidation of the discourse of memory and the diverse ways in which children embody history.

The second chapter of this study, “Evoking the Child: Mourning and Memory in Documentary Film,” focuses on understanding the child’s complex relationship with history and memory in two documentary films produced by children of the disappeared: *Los rubios* by Albertina Carri (2005) and *Papá Iván* by María Inés Roque (2003).¹⁸ Though there have been many documentary films made about the dictatorial period, these films focus on the disappearance and absence of parental figures from the unique standpoint of the child.¹⁹ The films are self-reflexive in terms of their structure and draw attention to the cinematic apparatus within the dialogue and mise-en-scène. The fragmented nature of their memories of childhood is presented through disruptive cuts, discontinuity, changes in film stock and the manipulation of perspective. The complication and suspension of the narratives underscores the tacit line between history and memory as a way of demonstrating the impossibility of containing grief and experience in a concrete way. These characteristics also speak to the limitations and

authoritative discourses circulated during the military regimes. Accordingly, Argentine directors have utilized the figure of the child in their own ways, producing films that meditate on the ambiguity of memory, its collective nature, and the difference between this concept and history.

¹⁸ Other notable documentary films pertaining to disappeared parents include: *Historias cotidianas* (Habegger 2001), *Nietos* (Ávila 2002), *Botín de guerra* (Blaustein 2000)

¹⁹ Some of the most notable documentary films related to this period include: *La República perdida II* (Pérez 1986); *El Nuremberg argentino* (Arias Rodríguez y Cortés 2004); *Las AAA son las tres armas: Carta abierta de Rodolfo Walsh a la junta military* (Denti 1977); *Memoria del saqueo* (Solanas 2004); *Nuestros desaparecidos* (Mandelbaum 2008)

possibilities of the film medium in representing experience. Through my analysis, I argue that the films mark the loss of identity that both women experienced in childhood through the disappearance of their parents and reflect this loss through visual distortion and childhood artifacts. In my readings I establish how the films interrogate the inexpressible aspects of memory from a particular developmental and discursive site - that of the child. Therefore, in this chapter I show that by using the child's experience as a narrative tool the films represent the ineffable nature of loss and experience.

The third chapter of my project, "The Empty Child: Bodies in Evidence," focuses on how little the figure of the child actually has to do with children. My readings of the films *La rabia* (2007) by Albertina Carri, *La ciénaga* (2001) by Lucrecia Martel, and *La hora de la siesta* (2009) by Sofía Mora suggest that the vulnerable and oddly cast child figure enacts a broader reading of the effects of the 2001 economic crisis in Argentina. The children in these films are pointedly seditious, often disenchanted with adult worlds and the people that govern them. Part of my contention is that by projecting the small and vulnerable bodies of children on screen, the films suspend constructed discourses about the child, thereby casting it as a site in which social anxieties and conflicts are worked through. For as Jo-Ann Wallace reminds readers, the child's body and "its unmanageability, its changes, its growth spurts, remind us that our own bodies are similarly unstable, in process, changing ... we evoke 'the child' and then empty the category of its material specificity as a way of regulating anxieties about somatic and psychic instabilities" (294). Accordingly, I argue that the projection of child bodies on screen also implicates adult-spectator bodies, thus acting as a catalyst for self-knowledge and the awakening of anxieties about children in general.

Most interesting, however, in terms of the study of the child figure is that the disaffection of young characters also reflects on the very form the films undertake. This noted disaffection is a notion I glean from Laura Podalsky's chapter on disaffected youth in Latin American cinema in which she claims that "newer Argentine films engage historical legacies and contemporary political realities tangentially, through gestures and metaphors" (122). By situating these unruly representations of children in the historical context of economic and social crisis, this chapter argues that the presence of child figures in these particular films also creates an invitation for the spectator into the filmic text, thereby making accessible and legible marginal spaces and subject positions.

While Chapter 3 may project the notion of the child as vulnerable and innocent, Chapter 4, "The Illegible Child: Sexuality and Desire in Contemporary Argentine Film," will present readings of marginal childhood sexuality and desire in order to see how the figure is taken up to challenge established ways of perceiving nation and society. Through an analysis of the films *XXy* (2007) by Lucía Puenzo, *Géminis* (2005) by Albertina Carri, and *La niña santa* (2004) by Lucrecia Martel, and the unconventional views of childhood they present, I demonstrate how these representations disrupt a sense of order surrounding adolescent sexuality that also provokes questions pertaining to societal notions of propriety and order. My readings of incest, intersexuality, and the perversion of religious doctrine in the films also draw from Karen Lury's provocative assurance that "the rupture of everyday modern temporality and the recognition that childhood and the child's presence offer opportunities for transgression which usurp or ignore conventional modes of identification and expressions of sexuality" (*The Child in Film* 6).

Through the analysis of the themes presented above, this chapter explores the contours of the sexuality enacted by the child-soon-to-be-adult figures in these films. It also examines how these representations of sexuality and childhood are utilized to disrupt both the notions of social order and the future, especially in light of Lee Edelman's indictment that "the Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (3). Consequently, in considering how the figure of the child circulates in these films, and by extension in cinema as a whole, the child appears to fade into the background and instead projects more about the anxieties surrounding the shifting grounds of childhood as we know it. This chapter argues that the three films above are characterized by alternative visions of childhood that portray children as violent, sexual, and desiring subjects.

Captive Subjects focuses on the overlooked children overwhelming the mise-en-scène within contemporary Argentine cinema in order to see how directors are utilizing this figure to reflect the shifting social and representational structures within film. Furthermore, the project as a whole aims to analyze how contemporary directors trace and question the societal investments imprinted upon the malleable bodies of the young.

CHAPTER ONE

The Child (Dis)appears: History and Play in Argentine Film

Caterpillar: Who... are... you?

Alice: Why, I hardly know, sir. I've changed so much since this morning, you see...

Caterpillar: No, I do not C, explain yourself.

Alice: I'm afraid I can't explain myself, you see, because I'm not myself, you know.

Caterpillar: I do not know.

Alice: I can't put it any more clearly, sir, because it isn't clear to me.

– Lewis Carroll

In several scenes of Lucía Cedrón's film, *Cordero de dios*, little Guillermina is pictured laying in the back of her father's car on the last day that she will see him. Her hair is long and tousled and her mismatched outfit is made up of a bright red sweater, pink t-shirt, and blue shorts. The child is splayed across the back seat with her feet pressed up against the car's back window as she plays with little wooden blocks. Her father is in the front seat driving and takes a short, nervous drag of his cigarette; he does not interact with the child. Far from the idyllic representations of father and daughter moments, the film obsessively concentrates on the banality and silence of their last moments together. The child's mother has been detained by the military, and the father, in a hurry to establish her whereabouts, has hurriedly dressed the child to take her to her grandfather's home. The repetition of the scene throughout the rest of the film, and the

haphazard appearance of the child accentuate an important point about both childhood and history- - mainly, that at some points in history it is impossible for the child to remain just a child.

Argentine cinema as a whole has featured a broad array of films that use children and childhood as their common ground of representation. Though there was a number of films produced before the dictatorial period that feature the figure of the child, its representation has proliferated and held a vital space in the films made after this time.²⁰ Perhaps the most well-known film centering on the figure of the child after the dictatorial period is Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial* (1985), which focuses on the journey of an upper-class history teacher as she learns that her adopted daughter was one of thousands of children taken from parents held in clandestine detention centres. As Alicia (played by Norma Aleandro) begins to question the origins of her adopted daughter, so too does she begin to question her own complicity in the violence committed by military forces in the country. Made only three years after the end of the dictatorship, the film underscores the indeterminacy surrounding the newly instituted democracy and the powerful figures that still haunted the political landscape. It also serves as an important indicator of the growing concern of Argentines to understand the legacy of state violence as well as the traces it would leave in the realm of collective memory. The film's focus on the actual child figure is minimal and points to the impact of the state violence perpetrated during the dictatorship on future generations. Through its focus on the kidnapping of children,

²⁰ Argentine directors such as Leopoldo Torre Nilsson and Leonardo Favio also made films that highlighted the lives of children in relation to broader social issues well before the last dictatorial period. Nilsson's *Graciela* (1956) and *La casa del ángel* (1957) both feature the plight of young girls coming to terms with the limitations cast upon them within upper-class Argentine society. His film *El secuestrador* (1958) follows a group of young people as they try to survive on the dangerous streets of Buenos Aires. Favio's classic film *Crónica de un niño solo* focuses on the violence and neglect faced by an eleven-year-old boy after his escape from a children's institution.

the film was instrumental in highlighting the heinous crimes of the dictatorial period that differentiated it from the dictatorships in neighbouring countries.²¹

The disappearance and kidnapping of children in Argentina is perhaps one of the most enduring legacies of the military government and can be attributed to the prevalence of the child figure within the national imaginary. The child in Argentina signifies a double loss for many individuals, who not only suffered through the detention and disappearance of their children but also saw their loss compounded by the disappearance of their grandchildren. Perhaps one of the most shocking testimonies to emerge from the dictatorship was the recognition that many pregnant detainees were induced or kept alive until they gave birth, and afterwards their children were offered to military families for adoption. Therefore, the kidnappings present an important intervention in the discourses surrounding the dictatorial period given that those who supported the eradication of guerrilla movements, claiming this elimination a necessary evil, could not support a similar victimization imposed on the most innocent of its citizens. Even today, government officials who were earlier pardoned for the torture and killing of detainees are now being tried on kidnapping charges.²² Thus, the figure of the child is a significant lens through which the violence of the dictatorship is perceived and issues of culpability are framed.

²¹ *La historia oficial* has held a notable place in highlighting the kidnapping of children during the dictatorial period. For more on the impact and reception of the film in Latin America see Taylor, B. Ruby Rich, Kriger; for more on how the film decidedly represents a universal, middle-class perspective of the military dictatorship, see Falicov. Ramsey reads the film through a feminist lens and argues that it seeks to override masculinist discourse through its focus on discontinuity and multiplicity. For a re-reading of the film through the lens of trauma and memory, see Tomlinson. For a discussion of how the film falls within Argentine cinema's commercial and discursive project since the return to democracy, see Foster (1992).

²² See *Página 12* articles "El robo de bebés en el banquillo de los acusados" 1 de marzo, 2011 <<http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-163276-2011-03-01.html>>; "Cinco condenas por el robo de dos bebés" 22 de octubre, 2011 <<http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-179463-2011-10-22.html>>

The internationally acclaimed release of *The Official Story* not only provided a forum that enabled a reflection on the consequences of state violence, but it also marked the first of a succession of films depicting the child in reference to the dictatorial period. Amongst the films to highlight the experience of dictatorship and social repression is *La noche de los lápices* (1986) directed by Héctor Olivera. Based on the actual kidnapping of seven students from La Plata, a city south of Buenos Aires, the film relates the politically charged activities of the students, most of whom were members of “UES” (the Union of High School Students of La Plata) and their subsequent detention and incarceration in the fall of 1976.

Though some of the actual ages of the students preclude their inclusion in the category of child, the film relies on the coming of age trope in order to highlight the students’ initiation into the harsh realities of cold war politics.²³ Textually, the film sharply distinguishes the time before and after the student’s detention, marking the stark contrast between the utopian hopes of the students through the use of diffuse lighting, and the dark aftermath of detention through an extensive use of low-key lighting. The play on light and shadow throughout the film traces the engagement of young people in the politics of the 1970s as well as the eagerness on the part of military to exert control over dissent, especially in the realm of student politics. By underscoring the youth and enthusiasm of the characters, the film plays on the innocence and idealism of the students, casting them as helpless yearlings in the face of the state’s regulatory force.²⁴

²³ I just want to remind readers that my dissertation considers characters from the ages of four and eighteen years to be children.

²⁴ For a discussion of *La noche de los lápices* in relation to the representation of historical violence, see Blanes. Raggio offers an in-depth analysis of the literary (authors María Seoane and Héctor Ruiz Núñez) and filmic versions of *La noche de los lápices*, positing both texts as among the first to utilize the testimonial narrative in denouncing the abuses of the dictatorial regime.

In a similar way, other films feature the struggle of children attempting to make sense of the turbulent historical context of the dictatorship. Films such as Miguel Pereira's *Verónico Cruz* (1988) highlight the vulnerability of children to the discourses and mandates of the military government. Through the story of a young boy, Verónico, and his teacher in the small town of Chorcán in the province of Jujuy, the film casts a critical eye on the marginalization of certain sectors of Argentine society. In a similar fashion to the above-mentioned films, *Verónico Cruz* utilizes the image of the child as a means to underscore the effects of the unspoken curriculums of dictatorship and state terror. The child is brought into the filmic text as a way of pointing to the unforeseeable consequences of the violence that characterized the period. Additionally, the film foreshadows the production of a number of films in the following two decades featuring child protagonists.

This chapter will examine three films representing children in relation to recent developments in both film and history: *Cautiva* (2004), directed by Gastón Biraben; *Kamchatka* (2002), directed by Marcelo Piñeyro; and *Cordero de dios* (2008) by Lucía Cedrón. All three films underscore the relationship between the child and the historical events of the military dictatorship. In other words, the films present the child as the central figure through which history is enacted, retold, or reconstructed. *Cautiva* highlights the significance of a child's quest for history, something that differentiates it from earlier films such as *La historia oficial*, in which a child stands at the centre of the action, yet has little impact on the actual events transpiring in the film. In *Kamatchka*, the child enacts a nostalgic voyage into the past and his last days with his disappeared father. In *Cordero de dios*, the child circulates aimlessly through the filmic text, underscoring

both her loneliness and the notion of a lost or superseded childhood in relation to the political and ideological turmoil surrounding her. In all three films, the child plays the role of archaeologist, storyteller, and conciliator, respectively. Through the close readings of *Cautiva*, *Kamchatka*, and *Cordero de dios*, this chapter will focus on the ways that these young characters interact, reconstruct, and cognitively organize the world around them in order to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between the figure of the child and the representation of divisive historical events.

Films detailing the lives of children did not spring up spontaneously but may instead be seen as reacting to a new development in the area of human rights and the quantity of literature and attention paid to how the societal terror of the past carries on into the future. The prevalence of human rights groups dedicated to securing the memory of the disappeared against the institutional push to forget on the part of the transitional government has become a national preoccupation.²⁵ The two major human rights groups most active during the dictatorial period and for the first few years of democracy were the *Madres* and *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* groups. The *Madres* group originally focused on obtaining information and maintaining the memory of their disappeared children, while the *Abuelas* group focused on the recuperation of the grandchildren born in captivity

²⁵ The first president to come to power after the collapse of the military government was Raúl Alfonsín, who promised to investigate the cases of disappearances and human rights violations during the dictatorship. In 1984 the report *Nunca más* [Never again] was produced and outlined the human rights offenses that had occurred under the regime. The report caused national outrage and the generals were convicted for human rights violations. However, there were some limitations related to the cases, including the imposition of the deadline of February 23, 1987 (known as *Punto final* [Final Point]) after which no new evidence or cases could be filed. Later, during the presidency of Carlos Menem, which followed that of Alfonsín, Congress passed the *Ley de Obediencia Debida* [Law of Due Obedience] on June 4th, 1987, which placed a moratorium on all cases against police, army, and airforce officials involved in human rights violations. Both the *Punto final* and *Ley de Obediencia Debida* statutes were overturned in 2003 during the presidency of Néstor Kirchner.

during the dictatorial period.²⁶ Both groups, through a determinate management of discourses surrounding motherhood and family, presented an effective counter to the calculated image of the military regime during the period of repression. They also opened the door for the next generation of individuals affected by the crimes of the period.

In 1994, H.I.J.O.S. (*Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio/ Children for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence*) was formed and ushered in a new form of public protest and performance of memory.²⁷ The organization is mainly composed of the children of disappeared or ex-political prisoners. These individuals in their early 20s participated in the appropriations of memory as part of the legacy left to them by their disappeared parents. The participants' claim is to take up the revolutionary identity of their missing parents and enact spectacular protests as a means of reappropriating a lost past. These performative protests are called *escraches*, and are enacted in order to unmask the torturers and other military officials who have re-integrated into regular civilian life since the return to democracy.

The most fascinating aspect of the emergence of H.I.J.O.S. is how it opens up the categories of both childhood and human rights in Argentina. Since the inception of the organization, the rights of the child has become a powerful discourse, enabling activists to call for reforms to traditional laws such the Law of Childhood Trusteeship ("Patronato") (Nr 10903, October 21, 1919), which governs how much control the state

²⁶ In 1986 there was a split within the group organization due to differences in the perceived mandate of the group. Consequently, two new groups were formed, one of which maintained the name *Madres* and the other with the name *Madres línea fundadora*.

²⁷ Taylor's "You Are Here: The DNA of Performance" provides a rich and nuanced examination of the performative features of the H.I.J.O.S "escraches".

has over orphanages and child detention centres.²⁸ The emergence of the organization has also spotlighted the children at the forefront of the human rights agenda along with other established groups such as the “Madres” and “Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo.” However, the main operation of this new visibility is determinate on an opening up of the very category of childhood. Inés Dussel writes of how the members of H.I.J.O.S. have based their claims to the past upon a child’s rights to know its identity. By framing themselves as stolen children, Dussel argues, the notion of “childhood, then, clearly appears as a discursive space and not a biological reality” (211). Perceiving childhood as a discursive space characterized by loss, and more specifically, the ripping apart and consequent re-appropriation of familial bonds, is perhaps the most significant contribution of the H.I.J.O.S. organization within the Argentine cultural horizon, since it projects the child as an active agent of history. In other words, H.I.J.O.S. has revalorized the role of the child within Argentine society taking children from a passive, victimized group into a unit willing to engage with the difficult past that most sectors of society would have preferred to leave behind.

Not only is the influence of human rights organizations felt in the Argentine political arena, but it has also had a particular presence in a number of fictional films since the late 1990s. Both *Buenos Aires viceversa* (Alejandro Agresti, 1996) and *Figli/Hijos* (Marco Bechis, 2001) feature scenes that incorporate the human rights group within the fictional world of the film. *Buenos Aires viceversa* follows a group of young people as they struggle to come to terms with the military past. Throughout the film the characters traverse different parts of the city, finally coming together at a shopping mall

²⁸ For more on the Law of Childhood Trusteeship reform, the Argentine educational system, and the importance of human rights groups in bringing the child to the fore of sociopolitical life, see Dussel.

where a security officer murders a street child accompanying one of them. The film is considered one of the first filmic texts produced after the fall of dictatorship to concern itself with the representation and legacy of state violence and subsequent trauma.²⁹ One scene in particular depicts a blind character (la ciega/ blind girl) wandering out to the street and joining a group of human rights protesters. The sequence is one of a number of scenes in the film that takes on an explicitly documentary quality, marked by the inclusion of grainy stock and handheld camera. The scene's incorporation of "the real" underscores the commitment of directors such as Agresti to engage with the recent past as well as the notable role of the human rights discourse in the filmic production of the 1990s.

The second film, *Figli/Hijos*, deals with the reunification of twins Javier and Rosa years after being born in a military detention centre. The film tracks the growing relationship between the two after Rosa arrives in Javier's hometown in Italy to inform him that he may be her biological twin, taken during the dictatorship. The two characters eventually make their way back to Argentina to continue their investigation and initiate the genetic testing that will determine whether or not they are indeed related. Most of the film follows a standard plotline, as the characters begin to develop a bond that continues to develop until the genetic tests reveal that they are actually not related. After the disappointing revelation, followed by Javier's reintegration into his normal life back in Italy, the film switches to documentary mode with the two characters/actors participating in an H.I.J.O.S. demonstration. While similar in formal terms to the Agresti film above,

²⁹ For a concise reading of *Buenos Aires viceversa* and the legacies of state violence and trauma, see Copertari. Copertari suggests that the film is one of the most important precursors to the development of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino* through its unconventional narrative and film form.

in *Figli/Hijos* the protest explodes onto the mise-en-scène with the spectacular inclusion of music and image. In this way, the film ushers in the *H.I.J.O.S* group, and the preoccupations of the younger generation it represents, as an important and innovative agent in Argentine sociopolitical life.

Perhaps in response to the prevalence of the H.I.J.O.S. group in the mid 1990s, there has been a preponderance of child characters featured in Argentine national cinema. More often than not, these characters are depicted in relation to the dictatorial period, and question the activities of the adults around them. Interestingly, the witnessing role of the children in Argentine film closely mirrors the child figure depicted prominently in Italian Neorealist cinema. Directors in this movement utilized the figure of the child to testify to the poverty, brutality, and desperation that characterized daily life in Italy after World War II. Within the Neorealist tradition, the child was employed to critique the social and economic conditions in the country and became the embodiment of national expectations and discourses. In the films of directors such as Vittorio de Sica, Roberto Rosellini, and Luchino Visconti, the child plays a fundamental role as the witness to the injustices and hypocrisy of the modern world. With the concentrated gaze of characters such as little Bruno who in *The Bicycle Thief* (Vittorio de Sica, 1948) watches as his father is humiliated by an angry mob after trying to steal a bicycle to support his family, or the devastating last minutes of Edmund's life in *Germany, Year Zero* (Roberto Rossellini, 1949), the child is cast as the primary witness of Italy's devastation after the war. The child in these films is born out of the destruction and violence of World War II and as such casts a critical eye on the world constructed by the adults of his society. The child of Neorealist cinema is almost always male and casts a steady gaze across the landscape of

his social world. In *Italian Film*, Marcia Landy describes the movement as a “ harbinger of the attention that must be paid to the visual image in a world that had been set in motion by the powers of the visual and their relation to the dynamism of time, motion, and change” (15). Therefore, the movement can be perceived as a response to a particular moment in time consumed by the power of the visual, thereby forcing the spectator to examine the very meaning and politics of gazing.

Landy traces the image of the child in other Italian productions outside of Neorealism, showing that the role of the child is not limited to just the aforementioned movement, but has also been used in various other types of film up until the 1990s.³⁰ She explores the role and place of childhood in Italian films as ways to consolidate national unity or to critique the failure of such a project. Landy shows how the image of the child is instrumental in projecting the desires and contradictions within a given historical period, while also providing an indicator for the shifts in spectatorship in general. As Landy demonstrates, the examination of the child in film can reflect spectator expectations and lead to important understandings of the context in which films are produced and distributed.

In the same way, Gilles Deleuze examines the role of children in Neorealist cinema with the notion of the time-image in *Cinema 2: the time-image*. Deleuze examines the ways in which time is represented in film and a particular self-reflexivity or apprehension that the characters reflect towards their own actions and lives within the filmic text. Signaled by the crisis of the action-image, he argues that the camera takes on its own consciousness that converts the characters into the objects of its gaze. Deleuze

³⁰ In *Italian Film*, Landy examines Italian films ranging from Early Italian cinema to Italian Westerns to family films.

attributes these changes in the film medium to Neorealist directors and, in particular, the children they employ. For the philosopher, the child navigating the adult world is “affected by a certain motor helplessness, but one which makes him all the more capable of seeing and hearing” (Deleuze 3). Due to the limited actions that the child has in the world of the adult, it becomes the ideal instrument of a descriptive cinema that deviated from the prescriptive narratives that pervaded Hollywood at the time.³¹

In *On the Ruins of Masculinity: The Figure of the Child in Italian Neorealism and the German Rubble –Film*, Jaimey Fisher analyzes Gilles Deleuze’s theory of the time-image in relation to the notion of gender and childhood. Fisher’s argument is provocative in the Argentine context due to her elaboration of the sociohistorical context in which the Neorealist tradition surfaced. She describes the crisis of the action-image as a broader, gendered social crisis, which contributed to the emergence of the time-image that Deleuze proposes. Focusing on the humiliated adult male devalued and forsaken in the post-war period, she proffers that the innocent male child emerges in order to reflect upon the system of masculine specularly. According to Fisher, the violence of the war made it difficult for men to reintegrate into familial, communal, and national fictions. This noted rupture and crisis of masculinity was also reflected in film, suspending the gaze of the self-assured man that characterized cinema of the action-image. While film reflected this shift on an aesthetic level, it also implemented an interpretive opening in the medium through the use of the child’s perspective of the world. This opening was largely due to the child’s newness in the world, creating a situation in which “the spectator is often left

³¹ My use of the term descriptive is meant to delineate the way in which certain types of film play with elements of a film, such as form or narrative in order to allow spectators to form their own interpretations of a film’s content. My use of prescriptive is meant to designate how certain films follow expected or standard narratives that often foreclose any interpretive openings for the spectator.

uncertain as to what the child understands and, subsequently, has fewer expectations as to the child's ability to act on its spatial or cinematic situation" (Fisher 32). In other words, the characteristics generally afforded the child (lack of experience, honesty, and lack of cynicism) as reflected on the screen create a particular form of insecurity in the spectator and thus parallels the reality of the post-war period. Therefore, the child in Italian Neorealist cinema becomes an important symbol of the insecurity that pervaded in Italy outside the filmic text.

An examination of the films *Kamchatka*, *Cordero de dios* and *Cautiva* through the notion of a lack of determination in the filmic text that, in turn, mimics a similar historical moment of hesitation, is a particularly fruitful way of discerning the prevalence of the child in the films and Argentine cinema as a whole. If the rise of Neorealism is initiated by a noted decline in the ability to read the world (and the destruction of faith in the fictions of the nation), state and family, then it can be argued that a similar disenchantment has motivated a comparable movement in Argentine cinema. One of the main aspects that unite the three films examined in this chapter is the solitude of the child figure; that is, in all cases the child protagonist experiences a profound rupture of the family unit, observable in either the filmic text or at the historical time in which the film takes place.

Cautiva presents the struggle faced by a young girl, Cristina, when she becomes the object of a custody battle between her adopted parents and her biological grandmother. On a thematic level, the film portrays the protagonist's realization that she is the daughter of a disappeared couple. Thus, she joins one of an unknown number of children kidnapped and given to military families and their supporters. However, on a

broader level, the film highlights the encounter between the child, memory, and contested history. The title of the film also conjures that of the epic poem, *La cautiva* (1837), by the 19th-century writer Esteban Echeverría. The film echoes many of the main preoccupations of the poem, including tropes such as captivity, race, and national politics. Therefore, it may be informative to examine how some of these themes play out in the Echeverría text.³²

The poem remains one of Argentina's most momentous works of nationalist fiction. It narrates the story of María, a *criolla* settler kidnapped by a group of native marauders and taken to live in the desert. During the raid her son is killed and she is taken along with her husband, Brian, an Englishman. María is unmistakably the protagonist in the poem and manages to make her way back to "civilization" even after Brian dies on the voyage. The natives and the desert present a counterpoint to the civilizing project of liberal thinkers in Argentina during the mid-19th century. Thus, the poem reflects the binaries between civilization and barbarism, a topic that has played an essential role in Argentine national identity and formation.³³

The conjuring of the image of the kidnapped female subject in the poem also underscores a deeper national polemic defined by the stark delineation between those considered legitimate and illegitimate national subjects. In the poem, indigenous peoples

³² For more on Echeverría's *La cautiva*, see Agüero for a discussion of the representations of land in discourse in the text. For a discussion of female characters in Argentine literature, see Coromina. Dumas offers a concise overview of the contributions of *La cautiva* to the development of Romanticism in Latin America. Frederick offers a critical reading of the text through the perspective of the female reader. Knowlton traces the origins and uses of the epigraph in *La cautiva*. For an analysis of the construction of the figure of the native in *La cautiva*, see Kreis. For the effect of *La cautiva* on intellectual discourses around nation and borders, see Operé.

³³ For more on the relationship between literature and nationhood in Latin America, see Sommer's *Foundational Fictions*. See Masiello's *Entre la civilización y la barbarie/ Between Civilization and Barbarism* for an analysis of the position of female intellectuals in relation to the national discursive binary between civilization and barbarism.

are presented as the barbaric other, kidnapping, raping, and pillaging along the outskirts of civilized society. The depiction of the indigenous in literature and popular culture forms part of the larger political apparatus that would ultimately be used to justify the “*campañas del desierto*” [desert campaigns] that saw the extermination of large populations of indigenous groups.³⁴ The main message of the poem is clear - only through the extermination of barbaric tendencies in society can the nation thrive and progress. The line between the civilized, pure, and orderly and the barbaric, dirty, and unruly is sharply distinguished in order to give a clear illustration of that which must be annihilated for the good of the nation. This motion towards the sacrifice of the few for the good of the many echoes similar discourses during the military dictatorship almost 200 years later.

Both the foundational period of the mid 19th century and the dictatorial period are based on exclusionary political discourses. The first is derived from the disappearance of native people and the second on the disappearance of subversive political agents. Not only do these two moments share a history of violence, but they also share a reliance on forgetting for the good of the nation. In his famous essay, *What is a Nation?*, Ernest Renan interrogates the origins and the characteristics of cohesion of the modern nation. Renan proposes that violence and forgetting are a vital part of nation formation and consolidation. The origination of the nation is based on a violent tearing apart of organic communities and identities, and is consolidated through the subsequent forgetting of this

³⁴ *Campañas del desierto* was the name given to military campaigns, during the late 19th century, into the peripheral areas of Argentina in order to eradicate indigenous communities who posed threats to the country’s civilization process. For more on the *Campañas del desierto* see Viñas’s examination of the role of violent representations in the foundation of the Argentine state during the campaigns. Andermann offers a convincing analysis of the importance of vision or optics in the formation of a concept of nationhood in both Argentina and Brazil. In particular, Andermann discusses the function of images of violence and capture in the triumph of the wars of native pacification in Argentina.

foundational violence. Forgetting in this case becomes the unifying principle through which social cohesion is maintained.³⁵

If we consider Echeverría's text as one of the first representations of the daily violence enacted during the first years of Argentina's formation as a nation state, then it is the victims of said violence that are ultimately forgotten. Susana Rotker examines the forgotten voices of the national record in *Captive Women: Oblivion and Memory in Argentina*. She writes of the lack of recorded information about captive white women in Argentina:

Their fate in the archives was no better than that of the omitted racial minorities. The only explanation I find for this silence is that to recognize their existence would have necessitated the revision of the foundational myths of modern Argentina and the recognition of kinship with an enemy that had to be destroyed (the savage). (7)

As Rotker aptly recognizes, the main issues at play in the poem are the destruction of the enemy and any form of kinship that would unite these minority identities with the state. For the author, the captive woman's omission from the national archive is based on her sexed body, a body capable of bearing the seed of the uncivilized native. Thus the woman's body becomes another contested frontier, a frontier lost and vulnerable to racial miscegenation as in the case of the captive woman. Not surprisingly, in Echeverría's poem, the Indian chief is never able to rape María. Instead, she manages to kill him, free Brian and escape into the desert before suffering such a dishonourable act. However, even after she emerges from the desert with her dignity intact, María is still unable to

³⁵ For more on the necessity of forgetting in the process of national consolidation and progress in Latin America, see Sosnowski.

return to civil society, thereby ensuring that the nation is protected from the threat of racial miscegenation. In this way, María is a character written to encourage a particular type of forgetting.

The importance of forgetting in both the foundational period in Argentina and the reestablishment of democracy in the later part of the 20th century is based on active erasure. Just as in the 19th century the memory of the desert presented a constructed threat to the unity of the nation, so too did the memory of dissident voices present a threat to state unity.³⁶ As in many nations, there was a shift to suppress individual dissent to protect the wellbeing of the country. As Benedict Anderson writes, “regardless of the current inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7). The preservation of a horizontal camaraderie within the imagined community played a major role in the repression of society in Argentina. In fact, the authorities named the dictatorship, *el proceso/the process*, a discursive model which: “was used to control the proliferation of speaking subjects within the sum, [. . .] and give [. . .] credence to a single authoritative voice and imposed an inflexible symbolic code to strengthen the state’s program. (Masiello, “La Argentina” 14).³⁷ The emphasis on the construction of a healthy nation gave the authorities an optimal means to establish control over the masses by casting those who opposed the military rule as pathological. In this way the disappearance of these individuals was projected as a necessary sacrifice in order to maintain the national body in optimal condition. In a sense, the disappearance of these individuals was double. Not

³⁶ For more on the notion of oblivion as a necessary part of nation formation, see Renan. For the role of forgetting and nation formation in a Latin American context, see Rotker and Sosnowski.

³⁷ My translation of Masiello’s text, “La Argentina durante el proceso: las múltiples resistencias de la cultura.”

only was this disappearance bodily, but it also necessitated the attempt to make the very memory of the disappeared fade away at an institutional level.³⁸

While both the Echeverría poem and the Biraben film reflect the relationship between memory and omission within the national imagination, they also share another important characteristic - - both texts focus on female subjects torn between two rival discourses. María is lost in the liminal space between civilization and barbarism; Cristina is caught between two divisive discourses within the dictatorial past. The film engages with the complex battle between different interpretations of the crimes committed during the dictatorship. Cristina is torn between the judicial system seeking to reunite kidnapped children with their biological families and prosecute those responsible for the kidnappings, and her loyalty to her adoptive parents, supporters of the regime. The film underscores the struggle over the child and also graphically presents the character's struggle to piece together the different narratives related to the lost family history.

Whereas in the poem *La cautiva*, María is the protagonist, having survived both her husband and child's deaths, in the film *Cautiva* it is Cristina, the child, who survives. While the poem presents a lost future, the film presents the inverse; it focuses on a lost past. In the film, it is the child who survives the parents, thereby granting youth a powerful social responsibility of recuperating a lost history. In this way, recovering history forms an important part of their pact with the future. As Inés Dussel writes, "the coming out of new memories of their childhood is shaking the grounds of the dominant narratives on the recent past that have proclaimed the national reconciliation between perpetrators and victims" (210). The generation that saw the disappearance of parents

³⁸ Nouzeilles, in *Ficciones somáticas: Naturalismo, nacionalismo y políticas médicas del cuerpo (Argentina 1880-1910)*, examines how medical knowledge, nation, and literature were discourses that sought to create an ideal Argentine citizen.

and other family members faces the perilous challenge of reconstructing a past in which little physical evidence remains. The conscious attempt on the part of the military government to destroy evidence of the clandestine centres and repress any memories of the abuses inflicted during the dictatorial period has meant that those who wish to recuperate the past must first sift through what is left of official documents and testimonies.³⁹

The first scenes of *Cautiva* touch on the importance of the archives in relation to the human rights abuses committed during the period. The sequence includes documentary footage of the 1978 World Cup soccer final between Argentina and the Netherlands held in Argentina. The scene features shots of the action on the field along with cuts to the joyful celebration of the people in the stands. Amongst those in the stands are notable figures such as former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Argentinian military ruler Jorge Rafael Videla. The presence of these figures at the World Cup game in the film alludes to a larger game being played on the global field of cold war politics. The spectacle of the World Cup overshadowed a parallel and undocumented battle between the dictatorial forces and the Argentine citizenry. The archival scenes project the deciding goal of the game and the subsequent explosion of joy from the stands and the players; the camera then cuts to shots of the military junta taking centre stage and the celebration of the spectators and players alike. This scene marks an important differentiation between documented official history and personal memory, and

³⁹ Bickford's article, "The Archival Imperative: Human Rights and Historical Memory in Latin America's Southern Cone," describes the challenges facing archivists in the acquisition and preservation of documents related to human rights abuses in the southern cone. He stresses the need to prioritize the preservation and organization of the testimonial documents related to these periods.

also underscores the difference between the dictatorial memories that were meant to proliferate, and those meant to be forgotten.

Images such as these have played a critical role in the discourses surrounding the Argentine dictatorship. In fact, it can be said that much of the conflict related to the dictatorial period has been contingent on the effective management of image. Due in large part to the creation and circulation of particular images, it is obvious that the Argentine dictatorial period has its own particular iconography. Many of the most lasting images of the era, were vested in by the efforts of the Madres groups. The use of the DNI (Documento Nacional de Identidad / National Identification Document) of disappeared persons by the Madres and Abuelas groups has become an icon of the struggles over memory in the country and a marker of human rights globally.⁴⁰ Therefore, both the headscarf worn by the mothers and the pictures of the disappeared young people “became particularly vital at the beginning of the movements, in the absence of other social and legal structures that could redress the crimes against humanity committed by the armed forces” (Taylor 159). The use of the identity card pictures by family members promoted the idea that the disappeared person was more than just a missing member of an individual family; he or she was both a legitimate member of society and part of an imagined national community. While the individual pictures emphasize the legitimacy of the individual before the state, the collection of images presented at the weekly marches in the plaza also created a collective urgency and effective means of communicating the extensive reach of state violence visited on legitimate members of Argentine society.

⁴⁰ The DNI features black and white pictures of the faces of Argentine nationals, and was used strategically by the mothers to highlight the absence of their children through the use of state-sanctioned documentation.

The distinction between the document and the anecdotal evidence is an important frame through which *Cautiva* represents the search for forgotten history and the importance of the image within the search. The scene after the World Cup match takes place 16 years later, in 1994, at Cristina's 15th birthday celebration. Amongst the most prominent aspects of the party is the projection of family photos of a young Cristina and her adoptive parents. The pictures project an ideal domestic space and happy childhood for the young woman while also providing indisputable physical evidence of her belonging within the family unit. The function of the family photo in promoting a sense of unity and belonging is plainly visible in the film, underscoring the inclination and desire associated with the ideal bourgeois family. Interestingly, the pictures provide evidence that support a false premise; they mark her inclusion into a carefully constructed portrait of a functioning, affluent family. The documents related to her past produce a false narrative of Cristina's origins and elucidate their own efficacy to feed into fiction and mythology. Consequently, the excess of images of Cristina with her adoptive family is later juxtaposed with the lack of pictures of her with her biological family. As a consequence of the absence of any distinguishable evidence, which documents such as photographs provide, Cristina finds it difficult to fully assimilate into the Lombardi family, her biological relatives.

While pictures present particular challenges to the central characters in the film, they are ultimately objects that both inhibit and open up a space for Cristina to access the past. Cristina's constant questions surrounding the circumstances of her birth and a picture of her pregnant adoptive mother illustrate the importance of images and family pictures in the formation and maintenance of identity. The pregnancy picture serves as a

narrative about motherhood, femininity, and reproduction, while also demonstrating the didactic role that the image has on a child's concept of self and others. Cristina's adoptive mother shows no interest in discussing Cristina's birth, especially given the fact that she had miscarried her biological child only a few months before Cristina's adoption. With very little information and only a single image, Cristina constructs a narrative about her origins. In the same way, later in the film, once Cristina learns she is the daughter of a disappeared couple and is looking through photos of her biological parents, her absence in the pictures make it difficult for her to narrate herself into the Lombardi family history. The scenes illustrate the extent to which images and documents affirm particular kinds of loyalties, subjectivities and identifications - - and by extension, denying others. As Marianne Hirsch suggests, "the fact that still photographs freeze particular moments in time, and the ambiguity that results from the still picture's absent context all help to perpetuate a mythology of the family as stable and united, static and monolithic" (51). In this way, family photos become a fundamental part of the filmic text and an important frame through which Cristina is able to piece together the sobering reality of her birth.

Not only does *Cautiva* present the reconstruction of the past through pictures, but also through the depiction of space. There is a notable juxtaposition in the film between the points before and after Cristina finds out she is the daughter of the disappeared couple. In this sequence, Cristina is taken from her school to the justice building and up a set of stairs to the judge's chambers. The moments leading up to this sequence are marked by the static use of the camera. The scenes in Cristina's school, her home, and out in the city are serene and orderly. However, once Cristina hears the circumstances surrounding her birth, the visual orderliness and cohesiveness in the film are temporarily

suspended. As the scene continues, Cristina is seen running from the judge's quarters down a long set of stairs. The work of the camera and the key lighting from above the staircase make Cristina's descent appear almost uncontrollable. Reflective of the fall in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Cristina falls into a world of the unknown. The stairs represent the dissolution of the familiar world, and the introduction of an unknown story, another name and an alternate history for the character. From this point forward the scenes become frantic and chaotic, visually presenting a flurry of bodies and traffic, while also including the diegetic cacophony of traffic and street noise.

What is more, the constant reference in the film to MC Escher's work, *Relativity* (1953), a print Cristina finds in her biological mother's bedroom and that is later pictured in her own bedroom, functions as another visual marker of the dislocation of the character's world. Composed of several sets of inverted stairs, the print echoes the inversion of Cristina's world, as well as the confusion of having to navigate her way between two contradicting memorial discourses. The scene marks Cristina's transition from one reality to another and she becomes acutely aware of the silence surrounding the past. Characters such as her grandmother, adoptive parents, and biological aunt are emotionally unable or unwilling to engage with the past, leaving Cristina to navigate the disorientating corridors of history for herself.

With its intense focus on the role of documentation in the reconstruction of personal narratives of identity, the film offers an engrossing look into how the generation born during dictatorial period relates to the historical circumstances of the dictatorship. Through the inclusion of another character similar in age, Marta, the film offers a rounded picture of different legacies of the dictatorial period. Marta (whose father was

disappeared, forcing her to flee to exile with her mother), becomes Cristina's foil as the two undertake the process of reconstructing the past. Both girls present an ethical mandate handed down to them through the thorny relationship with the dictatorial past. This is most evident in a scene in which the two girls face one another, naked, in the gym showers, both presenting alternative effects of a shared political history: exile and kidnapping. The nudity of the girls presents a significant concept, both in terms of the human rights discourse circulating outside the filmic text as well as the significance that this nakedness carries. The scene depicts a group of girls in a communal shower; as Cristina approaches Marta, the rest of the girls disappear from the *mise en scène*. The room appears empty as the girls stand in front of one another. Low-key light illuminates only their bodies, making everything else around them blend together. The scene not only represents an erosion of the distinctions between one body and another, signifying the dissolution between one identity and the other, but it also underscores the ways in which the characters embody the legacies of the violent period their parents were not able to survive. Thematically, the scene also marks a particular kind of rebirth - the point at which Cristina begins the process of recuperating the hidden past.

Here again, the inheritance of organizations such as H.I.J.O.S makes itself felt in the fictional world of the film. The focus placed on blood in the film ties into the discourse utilized by the H.I.J.O.S. group. In the film there is a prominent focus on the science utilized to prove the relationship between the biological children of disappeared persons and their grandparents. Subsequently, there is an entire sequence devoted to images of Cristina undergoing a blood test. The camera focuses on Cristina's arm as the needle pierces the skin. It remains focused on the needle as the blood begins to fill the

vial, it then pans up Cristina's arm and up to her face as she looks nervously ahead. The camera's focus on the test underscores the importance of DNA testing in the cases of kidnapping in Argentina. With little to no paper trail or evidence of children born in captivity, many grandparents have come to rely heavily on DNA tests to prove their claims to a particular child. In the same way blood ties have become a main claim for these organizations to justify their claims for justice. Members of the H.I.J.O.S. organization, in an attempt to reclaim their own lost identities, have also claimed to have "given birth" to their parents.⁴¹ In this way, the children have become wards of their parents' memories and claim this responsibility as a part of their hereditary constitution.

In all three films, an absent parent or parents are converted into the lost object, which instigates the voyage into the past. In all three films, objects stand in for the missing family members and become key artifacts through which history is reflected. In *Cautiva*, the photographs become the main means through which history is accessed, while in *Kamchatka* and *Cordero de dios*, the theme of the toy and play are paramount in understanding the relationship between the child and the dictatorial past. The board game and stuffed lamb become central objects within the filmic texts and take on qualities that diverge from their regular associations and expectations. These objects become fetishized through their instrumentalization in the films and serve to highlight far more about the historical context and take on different uses far removed from their usual intentions. As Bill Brown indicates in *Thing Theory*, the object is a malleable "thing" which has a volatile relationship with both space and time. Objects seem only to matter at a moment in which they either impede our traversal through space or at the moment in

⁴¹ For more on the importance of DNA testing in establishing blood ties and the identity of *desaparecidos* in Argentina and a critical reading of the documentary film *Papá Iván*, see Amado.

which they capture our attention. What defines an object is not so much its physical characteristics but how it functions in its relationship to the subject. Thus, the fact that in these films the board game and stuffed lamb present a miniaturization of the central tenets of the dictatorial period and its aftermath is due to the complex and unexpected ways that children take up toys and how these objects stand for other things outside the world of play.

Kamchatka also highlights the relationship between the child and history, though in this instance the child becomes the witness and storyteller of history. Of the three films taken up in this chapter, *Kamchatka* has been the most commercially successful. It stars prolific Argentine actors such as Cecilia Roth, Ricardo Darín, and Héctor Alterio and has a noticeably high production value and provides a standard narrative. Buena Vista International, an affiliate of Walt Disney Studios, distributed the film in Argentina. The aspects surrounding the production and distribution of the film differentiate it greatly not only from the other films in this chapter, but in my entire project. With virtually no on-screen violence and a romantic take on family life, *Kamchatka* is without doubt a film made for commercial success and international circulation. This makes it notably different from the other films I discuss in this project that have mainly circulated in the art house or film festival circuit. Due to the film's commercial appeal, many of the readings of the film have critiqued its shallow and nostalgic treatment of the history of the disappeared. However, the film provides a compelling reading of the legacies of the period on a personal level that make it a constructive film to analyze.

The film begins and ends with a voice over; the voice is distinctly that of a child, thus suggesting a privileging of the child's version of the events about to unfold. This

aspect of the narration in the film presents a challenge to its interpretation since it is distinctly framed as a series of memories but is communicated markedly through the voice of the child. Film scholar Tzvi Tal describes this disembodied voice using Michel Chion's notion of "acousmètre," an unseen speaking being that appears in the filmic text. Tal views the disembodied voice as a reflection of Lacanian and Althusserian notions of spectatorship in which the spectator is seen as an infant before its entry into the symbolic stage of development. In this way, according to Tal, the film appears to infantilize the spectator and depoliticize history. However, as will be discussed later in this section, there are alternative ways of reading the disembodied voice that bookends the film.

Kamchatka relates the story of 10-year-old Harry and the final weeks he spends with his parents before their disappearance in 1976. Narrated from a non-specified time in the future, the film traces the family's journey underground as his parents attempt to keep the family together. As an added measure of protection, the family takes on fake identities and names. The protagonist takes on the name Harry, from a biography of Harry Houdini that he finds in the suburban home they occupy while in hiding. A prominent object in the film is the board game *T.E.G.*, a game similar to Risk, which is based on the occupation of strategic places on the board and serves to mirror the strategic hiding game that the family must play while underground.⁴² *Kamchatka*, consequently, is also one of the countries on the board. The game motif establishes both the journey underground as well as the broader global ideological divisions between the West and the former Soviet Union. Furthermore, the board also signifies the symbolic space Harry occupies as both the witness and the subject that enacts memory in the film.

⁴² T.E.G was a game published in 1976 in Argentina. The acronym TEG stands for Táctica y Estrategia para la Guerra [War Tactics and Strategies].

Utilizing both a child's perspective of the period as well as the games and activities related to Harry's particular age, the film takes on a nostalgic tone, as noted through the inclusion of television shows and other artifacts from the era. In one scene in particular Harry is playing *T.E.G.* with his father. Harry has managed to capture almost all of his father's areas and is attempting to claim the last region on the board, Kamchatka. As the scene unfolds, Harry repeatedly attempts to capture the last territory, but is not able to take Kamchatka and ends up falling asleep in the process. Through both the constant allusions to the game in the film as well as the struggle over contested spaces, Kamchatka becomes an important motif due to its strategic place on the board - at the end of the world.

The circling in of the pieces on the board mirrors a similar circling in on the family by the military forces, pushing the family further into hiding and limiting the areas from which his parents, and his father specifically, are able to defend their ideological positions. Kamchatka, consequently, is also the last word that Harry's father whispers to him. In this way, the country on the board becomes a mystified space; one that will apparently always remain unintelligible to Harry since there is little to no discussion of his father's political activities within the filmic text.⁴³

However, the board also denotes a larger game being enacted, in which political opponents to the military regime are forced to retreat to unknown spaces both underground and abroad. This movement also projects the future that awaits the average Argentine dissident during this time, insile or exile. Kamchatka marks a strategic area on the board, a place reserved, as Harry claims, for resistance. It becomes a place of

⁴³ Tal interprets the lack of engagement with the political activity of both parents in the film as a depoliticization of the historical period.

recuperation and whose function relies on creating a stronghold for the values and utopic dreams of what will become a lost generation of citizens. Kamchatka becomes just such a repository of memory for the character.

However, like Harry's interpretation of the past, the board presents its own unique logic. The board itself is erroneous in its positioning of regions and sub-regions, thereby presenting a distorted view of the world. It presents northern continents predominantly so that the southern hemisphere appears dwarfed in comparison. In some ways, the board mimics the very contentions of cold war politics, marking the dominance and conflict between the superpowers of North America, Europe, and what was then the USSR, in which the continents of South America and Africa become secondary theatres of contestation.

The board games, like Harry's memories themselves, create a limited outlook on space and order, a perspective that is strikingly limited and full of omissions. The omissions on the board mirror Harry's own disjointed memory, thereby presenting a notable lack of political history and discourse. Aside from one brief scene that will be discussed later, there is no direct mention of the political and social context of the period within the narrative. This in part is due to Harry's age and the insulation from the violent atmosphere that his parents tirelessly attempt to provide. However, it also has to do with the fact that the film presents Harry's version of events, that is, the events as experienced from the perspective of a ten-year-old boy.

As David William Foster proposes, the film presents a detailed depiction of the middle class Argentine family, creating a version of the family romance in which the family acts as a foil to broader societal relations. Therefore, the family is the primary

material of the film and little of the political leanings and motivations of Harry's parents is ever disclosed. Furthermore, the state is never directly depicted and all, if any, violence happens off screen. All the information the spectator (through the lens of Harry's memory) is privy to, is that Harry's mother is a scientist at a university and his father is a lawyer whose partner had been detained sometime before by the military forces. There is also never any elucidation ever communicated of the political activity of the young man, Lucas, who comes to live with them over the course of the film. The young man leaves as quickly and quietly as he arrives and only later, while eavesdropping on his parent's conversation, does Harry learn that he has been apprehended. In this way Harry's memory, though presented as a cohesive narrative, through careful reading, begins to unravel into a collection of moments and memories divorced from their historical and contextual frame. Consequently, his sequence of events presents a collection of impressions and memories that over time have been sewn together to create what would appear at first glance, and through the continuity expressed in the body of the film, to become a tightly woven narrative.

Another aspect of recreation and childhood underscored in the film is best presented through the scenes of Harry and his brother at play.⁴⁴ Play becomes a central motif in the film and through multiple scenes in which the brothers explore the territory around their suburban home. Play is a means through which the unspoken, or in a sense unspeakable, atmosphere of the dictatorial period is most felt. In other words, the violence and anxious histories reflected in the film are never spoken, but their emergence

⁴⁴ In *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Johan Huizinga argues that play is inherent to all beings. He also contends that there are characteristics necessary to determine an activity as play: play must be a voluntary action; play must deviate from real life; play relates to its own time and space; play must never seek to profit but must remain play for play's sake (Huizinga 7-11).

in the boys' play is in fact deafening. As Foster notes in his assessment of the film, "the confusion, disorientation, and consternation of the adults is magnified in the experience of the child, who has only enough lived experience to sense that terrible things are happening and that there is an impending doom hanging over the family" (109). Never is this magnification as apparent as through the boys' play. Consequently, Harry's fascination with the escape artist Harry Houdini means that over the course of the film there are various re-enactments of the escape artist's endeavours. Throughout several scenes in the film, Harry is pictured with his hands tied behind his back attempting to free himself. The scenes present an interesting parallel to the family's own challenging struggle to maintain its unity and free itself from an imposing political order.

This is most apparent in a scene in which Harry's little brother, Enano, is depicted playing mixing flour and water as Harry reads aloud to him from Houdini's biography, while their father listens intently to the news on the television. The news report begins with a report indicating that the executive power had denied imprisoning any of the people on a list of disappeared persons. Harry's father speaks out loud to the television: "Tienen que blanquear a todos los presos políticos, eso tienen que hacer."⁴⁵ [They have to make known the political prisoners' whereabouts, that's what they have to do.] As the scene unfolds, Harry brings a chair and belt from the kitchen and asks his brother to tie his hands behind the back of the chair, wanting to attempt another one of Houdini's escapes. In the background, the news report broadcasts a speech made by the economic minister announcing new economic measures such as the opening of the market to foreign trade and an increase in "productive forces." Harry's father directs the following

⁴⁵ The term "blanquear" in Argentina and in this particular context means to make known or to provide information about someone or something.

question to the minister: “¿Qué van a producir tus fuerzas productivas? ¿Más miseria?” [What will your productive forces produce exactly? More misery?] The voice of the news reporter then goes on to announce new tactics being utilized by president Jorge Videla to rid the country of subversive elements while in the background the camera focuses on Enano tying Harry’s hands behind the chair as Harry encourages Enano to tighten the belt even more.⁴⁶ The camera cuts to Harry’s father shutting off the television, and then it cuts back to the boys as a slamming door is heard off-camera. At this point Enano grabs a paintbrush he had been playing with earlier and begins to cover Harry’s face in the flour and water mixture. Harry yells: “¿Qué hacés? [What are you doing?]” Enano replies: “Estoy blanqueando al prisionero.” [I am whitewashing the prisoner.] The news report about the political prisoners, economic reforms, and military aggression is simulated in the nature of the play that the boys engage in, thereby marking the very real consequences of the times. The play between the boys transforms from an imitation of a Houdini trick to the emulation of what had previously been alluded to in the news report. Within the Argentine context, “blanquear” describes the action of divulging information about someone or something. However, Enano understands the words to mean the literal whitewashing of something or someone. Enano enacts his own understanding of the word “blanquear” in the whitewashing of the prisoner.

Furthermore, having tied Harry’s hands, he knows full well how tightly his older brother is bound, and this allows him to exact revenge on him while he is at his most vulnerable. Accordingly, Harry goes from being Houdini the escape artist to political prisoner, vulnerable to the abuses of his captor. In this way, the child’s play in the film

⁴⁶ Tal interprets the tying of Harry’s hands in this scene as the literal binding of the generation born during the dictatorial period and the Neoliberal economic model enacted during the dictatorial period.

acts as a rehearsal of what was occurring on a broader scale within the country and what would ultimately be the fate of the brothers' parents at the end of the film. Thus, the boys at play may be read as their interpretation of the unspoken aspects of the dictatorship and a settling in of the asphyxia they experience while underground.

Play is also an important characteristic when thinking about the way in which the figure of the child is depicted in *Kamchatka* and *Cordero de dios* through the ways in which the codes and signifiers most associated with the dictatorial period are taken up and treated. In his book, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, political philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes of the role of the child and play in social and political action. For Agamben the child at play represents a potential for creating new signifiers in the realm of the social. The action of play is based on the manipulation of objects and sacred words divorced from their function and meaning. In this way, he establishes the difference between play and ritual, stating that play is the re-enactment of ritual when it has lost its relationship to a central myth. Play therefore is what remains when ritual loses its mythical status. Thus, the child in the process of play desecrates those objects and notions considered most sacred, thereby liberating them from their previous meanings and functions. In consequence, according to Agamben, the child at play presents the primary model for political and social change since it is not restricted to limitations in reference to culture, space, or time.

Agamben also stresses the importance of the toy as a marker of history and the connection of children to history. In playing with the toy the child plays with history. The toy is the materialization of historicity contained in objects, and the child extracts this historicity by means of a particular manipulation (Agamben, *Infancy & History* 71).

The child's initiation into language and experience is gradual and imbued with potential and, therefore, allows him or her to play at the past, bringing it safely into the present. Through play the child acts as a bridge between the continuous and the discontinuous, between the profane and the sacred. A world without this process would entail discarding, "the signifiers of discontinuity by confining them to a playland or a museum for ghosts." Instead the child through play "accepts them so as to restore them to the past and transmit them to the future" (Agamben, *Infancy* 86). Thus the child playing with the past, transforming and manipulating it, is the key to the future.

In turning back to the film and the various scenes featuring the children at play, and the whitewashing scene in particular, Agamben's consideration of the interrelationship between the child and history is most valuable. Throughout the film the children attempt to make sense of their isolated and confined situation through play. Most scenes feature them playing in their backyard and interacting with both their parents and Lucas. However, the whitewashing scene presents an important deviation in the form of the play that the boys participate in. The scene cannot be read as a free play of signifiers, but instead of the ways in which the crude realities of the dictatorial period affects on the family structure, and specifically, their play. The scene presents a particular haunting which, when read through the lens of Harry's memory, possesses the boys' play. Harry's memory, on which the central narration of the story is based, cannot move forward; both the narrative and his memories lay suspended in that particular moment in time. This is why Harry's voice bookends the film; he is unable to move beyond a nostalgic reading of time. His perspective of the events of those few days before his parents disappeared cannot support the weight of the future.

There is a marked difference in how memory is depicted in *Kamchatka* in comparison to *Cordero de dios*. Through the use of flashbacks, the latter film relates the story of Guillermina and the murder of her father, a radio broadcaster and militant, in the initial years of the dictatorship. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the film is how it fuses the past and present seamlessly, as if indicating a collapse of time and space within the most intimate of spaces and relationships. The story begins when her grandfather, a wealthy veterinarian and friend to powerful government officials, is kidnapped and held for ransom shortly after the economic collapse in 2001. Due to her grandfather's kidnapping, Guillermina's mother is forced to return from exile to help collect money for the ransom. Her return signals the beginning of a series of memories related to the events of the late seventies. The body of the film is best understood as a series of disjointed and contrasting memories enacted by Guillermina's mother, Teresa, Guillermina, and her grandfather, Arturo. Throughout the film, the stories of the characters are disclosed through revealing and temporally disjointed flashbacks that spectators must then piece together to create a complete narrative. The central theme in the film is the death of Guillermina's father, who she mistakenly thinks was killed in a shootout with police due to his militant activities, but whose location was given away by her grandfather in exchange for Teresa's release from detention.

Throughout the film, all the characters participate in a re-appropriation of the past through the act of memory. The nature of memory is particularly interesting in the film, since for the most part memory is provoked through sensual stimuli. Teresa's flashbacks are brought on by reentry into the same house she shared with her husband before he was killed in a shootout with the military police. Arturo's own memories only come to light

at the end of the film when his captors forcibly throw him to the ground and a gun is held to his head. However, it is Guillermina's reintegration into the past that is most intriguing. Guillermina is only able to undergo this process of memory through her re-appropriation of a series of childhood objects that provide different representations of the past. Her re-entry into childhood is predominantly dependant on childhood trinkets, thereby marking an intimate connection between childhood and artifacts, as well as the inaccessibility to adults of the world of the child.

One of the main aspects that differentiates the child featured in *Cordero de dios* from that of *Kamchatka* is the lack of information Guillermina has about her past. The child in *Cordero* experiences a very different kind of knowing from that of the child in *Kamchatka*; in the latter the child has limited knowledge of the political climate of the country but knows how it affects the intimate space of the family. In the former, we see a child who does not consciously experience the effects of the political climate within the space of the family, but nonetheless lives its very real consequences. In a sense, Guillermina is not the child who gazes at the world, visually consuming the injustices around her. She is not the silent child observer of Italian Neorealism; she is instead the child who lives the consequences of the past. *Cordero de dios* is the only film discussed in this chapter that challenges the nostalgic image of the militant parental figure. Though the film does not directly critique the political aspirations of Guillermina's parents' generation, it does demonstrate the sacrifices made in their name. This impression is presented mainly through the multitude of times that Guillermina is depicted playing by herself, as the adults in her life go about their own dangerous games. In scene after

scene, the tacit line between her activities and those of her parents is made visible through cuts from her activities to those of the adults in her life.

In this way, a parallel is established between both worlds in which the isolation of the child is made more and more apparent. In one scene, Guillermina is taken to stay with her grandfather the day after her mother is detained; she is shown playing by herself amongst the horses on her grandfather's estate. Later in the scene she wanders into her grandfather's stable where the sound of an animal in distress catches her attention. As Guillermina tiptoes over to where the sound is coming from and pokes her head around the corner, she sees a group of men and her grandfather struggling with a sheep in labour. Her grandfather is pulling hard to extract the fetus from the grunting sheep's body and, as Guillermina continues to spy, he is able finally to pull it out. The camera focuses in on Arturo holding the lifeless lamb in his hands; it is obviously a stillborn. The final shots show Guillermina quietly sneaking away from the barn. The image of the lifeless lamb in the grandfather's arms signals the problems and stagnation of the future generations when faced with the economic and social legacy of the dictatorial period. Likewise, the solitude of the child figure in the scene, her wandering alone through the fields and the barn alludes to her being necessarily on her own. In a way, before she is aware of it, her family unit has already disintegrated and thus she will be forced, like those of her generation, to engage with the divisive historical context into which she was born.

The importance of play and childhood objects in *Cordero de dios* marks the unique relationship between children and time. Through play, children are able to reinterpret the present, bending and reshaping the order and structures of things. When the child plays, objects tend to take other forms and functions, serving other needs and

fulfilling different desires. In some cases the child plays at the future, using its imagination, it not only pretends to be future selves but also in some cases different selves. Hence the figure of the child in film has a radical connection to history. Toys and play are perhaps some of the things most associated with the figure of the child.

Agamben notes that toys and childhood objects belong “neither within nor outside of the individual, but in a ‘third area,’” distinct both “from interior psychic reality and from the effective world in which the individual lives” (*Stanzas* 59). In other words, the object facilitates the traversal into the world of the child, and teases out the ways in which particular memories of childhood close themselves off in the recesses of the mind only to resurface through unexpected stimuli.

Among the most significant objects is a stuffed lamb given to a young Guillermina by her father. The stuffed toy plays a pivotal role in the reconstruction of the past and becomes a recurring image in the filmic text. Guillermina is able to ascertain her grandfather’s role in her father’s death through her memory of having received the stuffed toy. Thus, the toy becomes a relational bridge between two distinct periods and two very different ideological stances. The lamb also becomes a fundamental symbol in the film, especially in relation to the film’s title, since it alludes to the notion of sacrifice. The central role of sacrifice in the film is related to the Guillermina’s slain father, Roberto. Roberto becomes the main signifier of sacrifice since Arturo gives up the young rebel’s location in exchange for Teresa’s release from prison. Here the stuffed lamb becomes central to the notion of loss since it becomes a marked substitute for Guillermina’s father and is given to her by her grandfather the day after he has given up her father to the authorities.

If the whitewash scene in *Kamchatka* presents play under the weight of too much memory of the dictatorial present, then the play featured in *Cordero de dios* features a form of play liberated from this weightiness, though no less poignant. Here the child figure is presented as having little consciousness of the activities of her parents, and her play is not inhibited by the same preoccupations as in the previous film. The film includes several moments of Guillermina as a child dancing to records, playing in the back of a car, and at one point playing in a field with horses. The depictions of play in the film, in terms of Agamben's reading of play, may be what allows Guillermina to maintain her own identity amidst the ideological and discursive divisions in both her family and history in general. The liberation of her play is perhaps what enables Guillermina to overcome the traumatic and divisive binaries of the past and, as an adult, to reunite her estranged family.

However, though Guillermina is able to maintain her identity and avoid getting locked into a historical loop, as Harry does, she no less is left with a difficult legacy. There are also several scenes in which Guillermina is playing or interacting with her father. In particular there are scenes in which the two sing together. The song, "Malagueña," is based on a traditional Venezuelan folksong, though its lyrics have been changed to better suit the context of the film. The lyrics of the song relate to some of the central themes of the film: loss, death, and exile. The central figure in the song is another Guillermina, who sits outside a jail cell and sings to her husband after he is taken to prison.

Pusieron preso a tu marido Guillermina/ y se lo llevaron para una fuerte prisión, y como Guillermina quería tanto a su marido/ fue a la cárcel a cantarle una canción.

[They incarcerated your husband Guillermina/ they took him to a strong prison,
and since Guillermina loved her husband so/ she went to the prison to sing him a
song]

In the film, there are repeated depictions of Guillermina the child, and her father singing the refrain above. These lyrics underscore the vigilance and loyalty of the song's heroine to a man caught up in conflict with an institution, a loyalty and vigilance that the child in the film will have to emulate. Through the shared name, Guillermina, the song not only illustrates a familiar trope of the individual against the authoritative institution, but also alludes to the responsibility that the young Guillermina will have in reclaiming her own past.

Interestingly, the following lyrics of the song are only ever sung in their entirety towards the end of the film, only after the adult Guillermina finds out about her grandfather's role in her father's assassination twenty years before. The rest of the lyrics unequivocally reflect two more important themes in the film: the loss of the parental figure and the role of the child in the reconstruction and recuperation of history:

Murió mi padre, yo estaba ausente/ yo ausente estaba, yo no lo vi, pero me dijo mi madre que, en su agonía de muerte/ alzó sus manos y me bendijo a mí.

Niña del campo que cortas flores/ de no me olvides y de azahar/ corta una rosa de dos colores/ para mi amada que está al llegar. Niña que bordas la blanca tela/ niña que tejes en tu telar/ bórdame el mapa de nuestra tierra/ y un pañuelito para llorar.

[My father died, I was absent/ I was absent, I did not see him, but my mother told me that, in his death agony/ he threw his hands up in the air and blessed me.

Little country girl who collects flowers/ forget-me-nots and orange blossoms/ cut me a rose of two colours/ one for my love who is about to arrive. Little girl who embroiders white fabric/ little girl who weaves on her loom/ embroider me a map of our land/ and a handkerchief on which to cry]

In the scene in which the entire song is featured, the adult Guillermina is sitting in her father's car, staring out at the Río de la Plata as she inserts a cassette with a recording into the tape deck. Only the voices of Guillermina the child and her father singing are heard. In a closeup of her profile, Guillermina the adult sits holding her knees under her chin as she looks out at the still grey water before her. The lyrics provide a backdrop and deeper context for the imagery on screen. While presenting the transition of one generation to the next with the un-witnessed death of the father, the lyrics also enact a particular blessing or anticipation for the future. The future in this instance is determined by the actions of the little girl. The girl will collect the forget-me-nots and weave a map of the nation on her loom. The action of gathering the flowers and the creation activity represented by the weaving are both productive, and meant to unite the past with the present. The act of weaving is in essence the bringing together of separate and differentiated threads to create an intelligible pattern. In this way, the girl or child becomes the subject who, in the present, weaves together the disparate elements of the past into a united and legible future.

Furthermore, the still, murky waters of the Río de la Plata featured in the scene have become one of the main markers for the memory of the dictatorship. The waters have been featured in many fictional and documentary films related to this period, and have become a dominant symbol of the thousands of Argentine political prisoners who

were drugged and their bodies dumped into the river. This method of execution was called “traslado” [transfer] and was one of the principal ways that the military government was able to rid all evidence of its clandestine activities. In this way, the presentation of Guillermina sitting before the still waters on a visual plane accompanied by the song on an auditory plane, present the inextricable relationship between the children who lived through the dictatorial period and saw parents and family disappeared with the uncovering and recuperation of the past.

Moreover, Guillermina is united to other young people in the country (including Harry, Enano and, even to an extent, Cristina) who, faced by the still and murky waters of the river, must wade into history in order to salvage something of their identities and future from the vast shadow cast by a generation of disappeared persons who have haunted the memories of their childhoods. This notion is perhaps best summed up in *Cordero de dios* as Guillermina converses with Carlos, her childhood friend and the son of another disappeared couple:

Guillermina: La verdad es que no la entiendo. Sé que sufrieron mucho, ¿pero qué hacemos con eso ahora? [The truth is I don't understand her. I know they suffered a lot, but what do we do with that now?]

Carlos : Lo que se puede, Guillermina. [Whatever can be done, Guillermina]

Carlos's response echoes loudly in a country in which the struggles over memory have been so visible and in which human rights groups still occupy public spaces in an attempt to do whatever can be done to fight the desire to forget and close the difficult chapter of national history.

In his book, *Argentina, oscuro país / Argentina, dark country*, Santiago Kovadloff evokes the figure of the child in his analysis of the dictatorial period. “Los chicos y la dictadura” beautifully demonstrates the desire on the part of parents to protect children from the violence and repression occurring during that time and the children’s ensuing sense of betrayal. The essay marks the rift between generations in relation to the oppressive discourses of the military regime. It highlights the way in which these notions were transmitted from parent to child within the family unit in order to suppress the child’s intrusiveness and, by extension, ensure his or her safety from the regime. It also effectively exemplifies the anxieties associated with the child especially in reference to terror and atrocity, for to allow a child to peer into the darkest corners of misery threatens what is seen as the very nature of the child and our constructions of childhood itself.

In this way, the preoccupation with children may have little to do with the actual children themselves, but instead presents the child as the ultimate symbol of historical loss. This chapter has tried to present the ways in which the films examine this charged image, especially in terms of recent human rights movements that have claimed this figure in order to crystallize the lasting effects of the last dictatorial period. Through the depiction of family pictures, objects, and play, the films have complicated the depiction of children in reference to history, forcing the spectator to read between the lines and problematize the very characteristics most readily associated with the child. In *Cautiva* there is a play on the child as collector of history, making visible the forgotten victims of the dictatorial political script. In *Kamchatka*, Harry presents the vision of the child forced to repeat the same memories endlessly, ceaselessly recapturing every moment until they meld into a seamless script. By contrast, in *Cordero de dios* the child plays

quietly, waiting for the moment in which she will be expected to weave together the threads of the past and present. Far from being a nostalgic look back at childhood, the films present a historically coded image of the child, one that exceeds the very qualities we permit the child to have. In other words, there are many things a child has the potential to be, but there are few things we can definitively claim about the child while he or she is still a child.

Furthermore, the child becomes a sacred symbol of the future and, specifically, change. In some ways the sacredness and innocence of the child is all too apparent in the Argentine context, since kidnapped children were perhaps the only victims to escape (at least physically) the repressive regime and not meet the same fate as their detained parents. In some ways, the hundreds of infants adopted illegally by military families were saved due to the ways in which childhood is wrapped up with notions of redemption and change. As films such as *Cautiva* and *Cordero de dios* illustrate so effectively, these children were taken by military and the adopted families so as to safeguard them from what were seen as the subversive scripts they would acquire while under the care of militant parents and family members. The kidnapping of children was read as a necessary intercession both for the good of the nation and in an effort to avoid the continuance of militant ideals from one generation to the next. Thus, the preponderance of the child in Argentine film resonates deeply in the country because of that which it lays bare, the marked absence of the disappeared.

CHAPTER TWO

Evoking the Child: Mourning and Memory in Documentary Film

Children begin by loving their parents;
 after a time they judge them;
 rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.
 - Oscar Wilde

In the introduction of her book, *Los rubios: Cartografía de una película*, Albertina Carri describes a bruise on her arm. She guides her reader through her painful acquisition of the bruise, having fallen on a radiator, and then through the different multicolored manifestations the wound underwent throughout the following weeks. She describes a tiny pit in the middle of the bruise where the skin had broken. She utilizes the bruise and subsequent scar to evoke a recognizable metaphor within Argentine memory discourse in relation to the dictatorial period. However, her explanation does not follow the customary patterns of what we have come to expect from the familiar metaphor of the scar in relation to trauma, since it does not implicate a wound that will never be disremembered or will forever be inscribed on a national or literal body. Instead, she describes a wound whose origin has already been forgotten almost from the moment it is marked on the body. Carri contends that at some point in the future she will have to try hard to remember the circumstances surrounding the dark little patch on her arm.

Carri's description underscores an important aspect of memory and its relationship to those little "marks" that expose our vulnerabilities and mortality. In essence, memory is made up of little stories that we come up with to explain the marks,

little or gaping, that cover our vulnerable bodies and invade our personal histories. While highlighting the role of memory in mapping these impressions on the different aspects of our lives, Carri's story also emphasizes a far more important set of questions— what happens when at the very beginning of someone's life, she experiences a wound that she must carry with her into the unforeseeable future? What happens when the mark becomes an implicit part of someone's life since the earliest she can remember? What role, if any, does memory play in the narration of that wound?

Interestingly, the 2000s have marked a proliferation of films, both fictional and documentary, produced by individuals who either lost family members or lived their formative years under dictatorship. As Gabriela Nouzeilles argues in her article, "Postmemory Cinema and the Future of the past in Albertina Carri's *Los rubios*," "the children of the disappeared have begun to make their own movies about their disturbing memories and the complex sense of identity that they carried with them as a result of the foundational absence that defines their lives" (265).

However, not all these productions rely on straightforward narratives of the dictatorial period. Some films engage with broader questions of subjectivity, the effects of violence, innocence, and guilt through the use of different types of film stock, contradictory narratives, animation set amongst scenes shot in realtime, and other "disruptive" techniques and visual elements.⁴⁷ As Michael J. Lazzara aptly observes in his article "Filming Loss: (Post-)Memory, Subjectivity, and the Performance of Failure in Argentina Documentary Films" about *Los rubios* and another film, *La Televisión y yo*, by Andrés Di Tella, "These new Latin American directors, often products of a generation

⁴⁷ Some examples include *La televisión y yo* (Andrés Di Tella, 2001), *Las lágrimas de mi madre* (Alejandro Cárdenas Amelio, 2008), and *La rabia* (Albertina Carri, 2008)

marked by loss and displacement, have found reflexivity useful for turning the writing of personal and collective memory (and history) into an aesthetic crisis” (149). The disruption in these films not only underscores the impossibility of ever representing the trauma of the dictatorial period, but it also mimics the very nature of personal memory for the children of the disappeared. As Nouzeilles writes of *Los rubios*, “The past... is beyond representation, and therefore can never be fully understood. When dealing with a traumatic past representation is not only difficult to accomplish but can also be objectionable or undesirable” (270). Overall, what spectators see in both films is the impossibility of the filmic text to contain the unruly and contradictory memories of missing parents and the circumstances surrounding their absence.

This chapter will analyze produced by women whose childhood and being in the world was conditioned by the disappearance of one or both of their parents during the last dictatorial period: *Los rubios* and *Papá Iván*. Albertina Carri’s parents were disappeared in 1977 when she was only 3 years old, after which Albertina and her older sisters were taken to live on a farm with an aunt and uncle. In her documentary film, *Los rubios*, Carri delves into the events surrounding the disappearance of her parents, sociologist Roberto Carri and Ana María Caruso (both members of the left-wing guerilla group, the Montoneros) after they moved their family into a working-class neighbourhood in La Matanza.⁴⁸ Similarly, María Inés Roque, also the daughter of a slain member of the

⁴⁸ The Montoneros were a left-wing guerilla group who first emerged during the exile of General Juan Perón in the early 1970s; however, upon Perón’s return to power in 1973 the group was officially outlawed. Though their numbers never exceeded 2000 and only a small division of these members was armed (approximately 400), the group was considered to be dangerous to the Peronist government lead by Isabel Perón, after Juan Perón’s death, during the mid 1970s. For more on the Montoneros, see: Richard Gillespie’s *Soldiers of Perón*; Eduardo Gutiérrez’s *Montoneros*; Jorg Le Blanc’s *Political Violence in Latin America: A Cross-Case Comparison of the Urban Insurgency Campaigns of Montoneros, M-19 and FLSN in a Historical Perspective*; Pablo Giussani’s *Montoneros: La soberbia armada*; Juan Gasparini’s

Montonero group, Juan Julio Roque, returns to Argentina in order to trace her father's entrance into political activities and the final days before his death in 1977. After her father's death, her mother fled to Mexico with her and her younger brother, Iván. The two films share a good deal in common as both present the reconstruction of personal history and play with narrative structures and images to portray a complex understanding of the historical events surrounding the dictatorial period in Argentina.

Together, the films present the challenges faced by the two young directors as they attempt to reconstruct the story of their militant parents' absence from a very early period in their lives. The films mark the loss of identity that both women experienced in childhood through the disappearance of their parents and reflect this loss through visual distortion. The fragmented nature of their memories of childhood is presented through disruptive cuts, the repetition of the same take multiple times, changes in film stock, and the manipulation of perspective. The complication and suspension of the narratives underscores the tacit line between history and memory as a way of demonstrating the impossibility of containing grief and experience in a concrete way. Both filmic texts are strongly determined by the directors' experience of childhood to the extent that the child the directors were at the time of the events seems to haunt the filmic text. In particular, I would like to focus on two aspects that are central to the readings of these films, distortion and disorder in the case of *Papá Iván* and myth in the case of *Los rubios* (though both films make use of these elements).

My focus lies on the lack of visual and temporal continuity in these films and the way in which these directors weave interviews, images, and personal anecdotes together. Specifically, the following pages will reflect on the seams of these documentaries and the splicing together of moments in time captured in a single still, tiny testimonies that prove that something has happened. This engagement with the seams of narrative is what differentiates these documentaries from others dealing with the children of the disappeared, because they deal, specifically, with the tears and gaps in the narration of personal history.⁴⁹ For those peering at history broadly, these tears may appear microscopic or invisible. However, for Carri and Roque the tears in the filmic body represent larger rifts in the construction of personal memory and lived experience of history. Because of the time at which each director experienced a loss, though not remembering it, these films interrogate the very nature of memory through the use of childhood artifacts and themes. This chapter will draw on Jo-Ann Wallace's notion of the symbolic management of the child figure that manifests itself through the social and political activities undertaken or authorized through the 'idea of the child.' In particular, it will analyze the modes of representation utilized by the directors in order to highlight the ways in which they problematize the very notion of complete and verifiable personal histories.

Not only do these films mark an important intervention in terms of what they project about the function of childhood themes and experiences in reference to the role and construction of personal memory, but they will also attest to the changing parameters

⁴⁹ Carri's and Roque's films deviate from other documentaries related to the children of disappeared parents both in their content and form. Films such as *Historias cotidianas* (Andrés Habegger, 2000), *Nietos* (Benjamin Ávila, 2004), and *Botín de guerra* (Daniel Blaustein, 2000) all rely on traditional documentary conventions, such as first person interviews, location sound recording, documents such as photographs, and a chronological unfolding of the histories.

of documentary film and representations of the dictatorial period. *Los rubios* and *Papá Iván* strikingly deviate from the expectations and conventions of documentary films that highlight the dictatorial period. Therefore, most writing has concentrated on the technical aspects of the films, mainly their narrative repetition and fragmentation, rightfully attributing them to an indeterminate relationship with truth claims and the mythologies related to the dictatorial period.⁵⁰

A very important aspect of this indeterminacy can be examined through the very status of the documentary genre today. Over the course of the last twenty years there has been a great deal of controversy surrounding the changing definition of documentary. Initially, the notion of the documentary was united to notions of truth and verifiability, which mirrored general cultural notions of universal truths and the representation of the real.⁵¹ Documentary as a genre was generally seen as the reproduction of reality and filmmakers saw the potential of the form to mirror the world outside the filmic text, and in doing so influence that world. However, with the collapse of master narratives and the

⁵⁰ In his groundbreaking essay, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson cautions that in the modern context in which grand narratives have failed, it is no longer possible to represent the real. He signals that the image culture represents a weakening of historicity. This process, Jameson argues, entails the loss of the referent through the undecidability of representation accompanied by an apparent paralysis of the will to change, further indication of the failure of Enlightenment projects of truth and reason. Furthermore, he considers the postmodern condition to be defined by the intensified nostalgia for a past that is already lost. Following Jameson's arguments, in her essay *Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary*, Linda Williams examines a new form of documentary film, which forms newer, more contingent, relative, postmodern truth. According to Williams, new documentaries present historically complex subjects. In this way the "self-obscuring voyeur of the vérité realism is replaced by the new presence in the persona of the documentarian" (12). The axiom of new documentary contend that films cannot reveal the truth of events, but only the ideologies and consciousness that construct competing truths- the fictional master narratives by which we make sense of events. Therefore, documentary can be defined not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths (14). Therefore, the films do not look to realistically record "life as it is" but instead favor a deeper investigation of how it became as it is. The power of the past is represented by finding its traces in the repetitions and resistances in the present, thereby contextualizing the present within the past.

⁵¹ See Nichols's discussion on the shifting form of documentary film in the introduction of *Introduction to Documentary*. Nichols's chapter, "The Fact of Realism and the Fiction of Objectivity" in *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* also focuses on dominant conceptions about documentary film.

postmodern turn, the very nature of documentary film has changed since it can no longer lay claim to absolute truth. This is not to say that all documentary films have done away with its standard conventions, but many films reflect the preoccupation with the medium's very ability to represent the real. This also entails, as Linda Williams notes, the loss of the referent and the ability for art to act in favour of social change as another indication of the failure of Enlightenment projects of truth and reason. Therefore, through this notable crisis of self-reflexivity, "what was once a 'mirror with a memory' can now only reflect another mirror" (Williams 10).

Within the Latin American context, documentary film has also undergone a similar shift or rift. Current Argentine documentary has changed significantly from the forms that first appeared in the late 1950s when directors, such as Fernando Birri, from the Sante Fe Documentary School (a film school Birri started after returning from Italy), first began to make politically committed films that depicted the unjust living conditions of some of Argentine society's most vulnerable members.⁵² This initial group of filmmakers was later followed by another important group, "Cine liberación," formed by directors such as Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino.⁵³ Another closely linked group

⁵² Fernando Birri's film *Tiré dié* (1960) is perhaps one of the most well known documentaries of the 1960s and focuses on the activities and survival strategies of a group of children from a poverty-stricken community outside of Santa Fe. For Birri, *Tiré dié* was the first Latin American social film and was influenced by the Neorealist movement prevalent in Italy where Birri had studied cinema. Birri understands film as a document created by a collaborative process between social factions with the purpose of creating a national film industry to create links with universities and then spread education to the most marginalized areas of the country. In "The Space Between Fiction and Documentary in Latin American Cinema: Notes toward a Genealogy," Michael Chanan revisits what he calls the "forgotten films" of Latin America that subsume the tenets of Neorealism and utilize both fictional and nonfictional elements in order to overcome the limits between film forms and "create a novel form of representational space, a cross-over space between fiction and documentary that is both and neither" (18).

⁵³ Perhaps the most notable film of Cine Liberación is *La hora de los hornos* (1968). The full-length film was composed of three parts entitled "Neocolonialism and Violence," "Liberation Act," and "Violence and Liberation." The film itself was conceived as a radical response to what the directors believed was US colonial imperialism infringing on both Latin American culture as well as the political sphere. The film itself was inspired and sought to participate in a global movement propelled by the ongoing ideological

was “Cine de la base,” formed in conjunction with “Cine liberación,” and directed by documentary filmmaker Raymundo Gleyzer.⁵⁴ Though these groups were drastically different in their approach to film form, montage, and even in their notions of the objectives of documentary, they aided in the development of a film form that sought to dramatically change broader society.⁵⁵ Broadly speaking, the turn to documentary filmmaking for both groups depended on the certainty that documentary or documentary footage could expose the social reality of what was then contemporary Argentine culture, thus providing a testimony or denunciation of all injustice. For filmmakers of this time, the belief that allowing and, in some cases, forcing spectators to see the harsh reality surrounding them would inspire them to take action to change what they saw.

However, many of these notions have fallen away due to similar questions regarding the ability of the documentary to document truth as established above, but also because the very claims of representation have undergone a fundamental shift. Though the 1980s brought about notable documentary films inspired by the feminist movements of the Southern Cone and groups such as Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the documentary

contestations during the Cold War, the writings of Franz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire, and the global discord over US involvement in Vietnam. Though the films deal with Latin America directly, they do incorporate and articulate solidarity with other third-world nations. A year after the release of *La hora*, the directors of the film, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, wrote a manifesto entitled *Hacia un tercer cine, apuntes y experiencias para el desarrollo de un cine de liberación en el Tercer Mundo*, which proposed a militant aesthetic form meant to educate the Latin American poor and working class and detonate an explosion of resistance. They call this movement a Third Cinema, one that demystifies the technical aspects of filmmaking to make it more accessible. This type of filmmaking, they propose, is characterized by a simultaneous destruction and construction of the image.

⁵⁴ Gleyzer made approximately fifteen films over the course of his career and most were dedicated to his mandate to make cinema more pertinent to social justice. He was eventually disappeared by the regime in 1975.

⁵⁵ Emilio Bernini traces the conceptual difference between Birri’s Escuela de Santa Fe and Cine Liberación’s perception of cinema. He argues that the prevalent difference centered on the perceived role of the documentary film in society: “the School did not believe that documentary film had the function of ‘producing solutions’ for the viewer out of what he/she saw, as was the case with the group headed by Solanas and Getino, but of making him/her see.” (Politics and the Documentary Film 158). Bernini also indicates that Cine Liberación considered film to function as a tool to change rather than simply represent reality (160).

has lost its objective status upon the return to democracy. Film historian and critic Michael Channan states that since the Latin American documentary was “founded on a political conception of itself, the transformation of the political space in which it operated as a result of the democratic turn of the decade, threatened to cast it adrift” (“Documentary Film” 7). Furthermore, both the availability of filming equipment and changing conceptions of the genre meant that filmmaking shifted from a factually-based anthropological mode of representation to a more self-reflexive mode in which subjects were able to turn the camera on themselves. Thus, the mode of the documentary in Latin America as a whole transitioned to a more personalized and less authoritative mode of representation that is characteristic of many documentaries today.

In Argentina, the perceived void between what cinema had been in the past and the sad state of the national film industry at the end of the 1980s compelled many young Argentine directors to refer to themselves as a “generation of orphans” (Wolf, “Aesthetics” 29). This perceived orphanhood, according to Sergio Wolf, is not a complete disassociation or rejection of the film forms or productions that came before, but a syncretic operation that avoids vampirizing other films or movements (“Aesthetics” 37). The result of this perceived lack of continuity in national film production and the availability of resources and cinematographic laws have inspired many contemporary directors to create and blend different filmic techniques that have traditionally not been united.⁵⁶ This rift, and the new context in which these films have emerged, have also

⁵⁶ Diego Batlle’s “From Virtual Death to the New Law: the Resurgence” documents the struggles of the Argentine film industry during the early 1990s. He notes that national film revenue hit its lowest point in 1994 when only 1.8% of sales in the country stemmed from national films. The impoverishment of a once thriving national cinema led to the approval of the Law for the Promotion and Regulation of the National Cinematographic Activity (Law 24,377) in September of 1994. The Cinema Law granted more money for

demonstrated the inability and unwillingness of current filmmakers to pick up the sociopolitical banners of their antecedents.

Along with the changes in the ability of the documentary film genre to incite dramatic social change, so too, did the very modes of the genre come under scrutiny. Noting that there are many ways in which particular documentary techniques are recycled and employed, there are also certain expectations that documentaries are generally required to perform. Documentary is normally assumed to replicate reality in such a way as to conceal the camera and filmmaking apparatus as a whole, which is contradictory to fictional film where viewers are encouraged to suspend their beliefs, thus allowing the fictional world the actors inhabit to “come to life.”

However, in documentary film the images and sounds presented are seen as indexes that point to the real that the film claims to represent. In this way, documentary film “re-presents the historical world by making an indexical record of it; it represents the historical world by shaping this record from a distinct perspective or point of view” (Nichols, *Introduction* 36-37). The life of the documentary film may be indexical but, as Stella Bruzzi warns, documentary film cannot take for granted the narrative of the historical event it represents. For Bruzzi, the documentary’s status as a document of the past is always open to reassessment, reappropriation, and even manipulation without these processes necessarily obscuring or rendering irretrievable its original meaning, context, or content (Bruzzi 12).

This chapter will engage with theories of documentary films in order to examine how Carri’s and Roque’s films complicate different modes of representation. In this way,

promotion and enabled the restaging of the Mar del Plata International film festival in 1996 that had ceased more than 25 years earlier.

the modes outlined by Bill Nichols provide a fruitful lens through which to interpret the ways in which directors Carri and Roque are engaging with particular memories of their childhoods through the evocation of the child figure in their films. Both documentaries straddle the line between poetic and reflexive modes of documentary as outlined by film theorists such as Bill Nichols.⁵⁷

New documentaries, such as those of Carri and Roque, present the struggle of representation and the questions related to claims of absolute truth and reason. The suspension or questioning of truth in the films, reflects the fact that both directors were young children when their respective parents were killed or disappeared. As Jorge Ruffinelli notes, both *Papá Iván* and *Los rubios* focus on the absence of the parental figures, underscoring what the absence meant to the children of the disappeared left behind. The films attempt to lend meaning to the grief and irrefutable marks left by that absence on the youngest of those who remained. As the author states “estos dos documentales no hablan solo de personas muertas sino de personas vivas” [These two documentaries do not only speak of dead people but also of living people] (Ruffinelli 151). As a result, their reflections on their memories at such a young age leads to a questioning as to whether or not the memories they have of their parents are actually their own or the stringing together of stories and personal anecdotes by those who knew their

⁵⁷ Bill Nichols argues that there are particular modes in relation to documentary films. Among those he identifies are the poetic and reflexive modes. The poetic mode is defined through opening up the possibility of alternative forms of knowledge to the straightforward transfer of information, the prosecution of a particular argument or point of view, or the presentation of reasoned propositions about problems in need of solution. The mode stresses mood, tone, and affect much more than displays of knowledge or acts of persuasion (Nichols 103). The reflexive mode, according to Nichols, involves the filmmaker’s engagement with the spectator instead of solely with the material of the documentary. “The documentary in general depends on the viewer’s neglect of his or her actual situation, in front of a movie screen, interpreting a film, in favor of imaginary access to the events shown on the screen as if it is only these events that require interpretation, not the film” (Nichols 125).

parents. Thus, it seems only natural that in a film form based on the exposition of an event in the past, truth claims in this case would become doubly suspect.

As Paula Félix-Didier, Leandro Listorti, and Ezequil Luka assert, the documentary film was a powerful medium to represent the power and transitions of collective memory during the 20th century. However, in contemporary Argentina this medium has transported its gaze to focus on the nexus between truth and performance (Félix-Didier, Listorti and Luka 91). Nowhere is this shift more present than in *Los rubios*.⁵⁸ In one of first scenes of the film, actress Analia Couceyro is filmed from the neck down reading from Roberto Carri's book on revolutionary figure Isidro Velázquez entitled *Isidro Velázquez. Formas prerrevolucionarias de la violencia*, in front of a large sign reading "Teatro." The inclusion of the signage denotes a ludic or imaginary element that the film will continually utilize, thereby underscoring the film's performative aspect.

Though based on the experience of the film's director, the few times that the "real" Albertina Carri is presented she never directly acknowledges the camera. Instead, spectators are guided through the history of the family by actress Analia Couceyro, who plays Carri in the film and announces said fact to the camera in the first few minutes of the film.⁵⁹ Through the use of second-person narrative, the film plays with the expectations of the documentary convention of the first-person interview, while also underscoring the performative nature of memory itself. According to Carri, the use of an actress to play her was necessary in creating a sense of distance that would allow the

⁵⁸ Gonzalo Aguilar distinguishes *Los rubios* from other documentaries of the time, arguing that the film escapes becoming a film-epitaph of mourning and can be considered a film of artifice (156).

⁵⁹ Martín Kohan considers Couceyro's announcement and the subsequent appearance of the actual Carri multiple times in the film to enact a particular "doubling" which allows the director to see and distance herself from the content of the film. This doubling, the author proposes, leads to a dis-identification between the spectator and the film (Kohan 26-27). Kohan also notes that the text Couceyro reads is not from Roberto Carri's text but rather from the epilogue of his book on Isidro Velázquez.

spectator to reflect upon what was transpiring in the action of the film and limit his or her over-identification with a particular person in the film (*Cartografia* 24). Through a noted lack of identification with Carri, the daughter, and a self-reflexive view of the film's production, the feeling of an irrepressible absence is concentrated and spectators are more open to understand the difficult task Carri is undertaking as a director. In other words, the film makes visible the invisible work of film production and the insurmountable task of filming loss.

Not surprisingly, and a fact that features prominently in Carri's film, a fundamental way in which the changing modes of representation are reflected in current documentary film is through the inclusion of memory. According to Nichols, memory enters films in two ways: first as an external, visible representation of what was said and done; second, as part of the memory itself, becoming an artifact of that which it seeks to reveal (*Introduction* 42). Memory also enters into the ways the viewers draw on what they have already seen of the film to interpret what it is they are presently seeing. Through the act of retrospection, a looking back occurs and reoccurs during the course of watching the film. Thus memory becomes a fundamental part of both the making of a film on memory as well as the spectator's interpretation of the finished film form.

Relying on the complexities of memory in reference to documentary film, *Los rubios* places the mechanisms of memory under the microscope, casting memory as an elusive and indeterminate "thing." As the film clearly signals, no aspect of memory can fully be trusted - memory is not, after all, history.⁶⁰ The malleability of memory is

⁶⁰ In "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" Pierre Nora draws a distinction between memory and history. Nora considers the difference between "real memory" and history to be based on the fact that memory is fundamentally a social phenomenon belonging to group or an individual, while history is a conscious pluralistic restructuring of the past available to everyone. In other words, memory may be

perhaps the most striking aspect of Carri's film, the very title of which, *Los rubios*, is based on the memory of a neighbour in the barrio where Albertina's parents were apprehended. The elderly neighbour and her grown son explain the events of the night after the military mistake her home for the Carris':

Vecina: . . . y cuando traían a mi marido el vecino les dijo: no le hagan nada porque esa es buena gente, les dijo, ¿viste? . . . ¿Y cómo son las chicas?, dice. Y ahí yo me apiolé y dije: son tres chicas rubias y el señor es rubio y la señora es rubia, son todos rubios. Había una chica de quince ¿no? Cuando yo les di ese dato, dijeron: uy, nos equivocamos. Y rajaron para allá después que nos tuvieron no sé cuanto acá tirados en el suelo, ¿viste?

[Neighbour]: . . . and when they were taking my husband our neighbour told them: don't do anything to him because he's good people, you see? . . . What are the girls like? He said (speaking of the authority). And then I smartened up and I said: they are three blond girls and the man is blond and the lady is blond, they are all blond. There was a fifteen year-old girl, no? When I gave them that information they said: oh, we're mistaken. And took off there after keeping us lying on the ground for who knows how long, you see?]

Though thoroughly committed to her role as witness, the neighbour mistakenly remembers Roberto and Ana María and their daughters as a family of blonds and thus underscores the performativity of memory that the film undertakes in its totality. The recollection of the neighbour is one of a number of instances in which memory becomes suspect in the filmic text.

seen as a living, unruly, and socially specific practice, while history can be perceived as a conscious and critical cataloguing of that which has come to pass (Nora 8-9).

As Linda Williams suggests, the axiom of new documentary contends that films cannot reveal the truth of events, but only the ideologies and consciousness that construct competing truths as well as the fictional master narratives by which we make sense of events (12). In this way, the past is only ever represented in these works through discrete repetitions and resistances in the present. Understanding or interpreting these small manifestations of the past in the each of Carri's and Roque's works provides an important reading of the films' broader take on the nature of memory. In *Los rubios*, the neighbour's misremembering of the hair colour of the family had less to do with their physical appearance and more to do with both their unorthodox political and social aspirations.⁶¹ The mistaken memory, while marking the difference the family presented within the area, also underscores their ill-fated attempt to overcome class boundaries when they moved their family to the lower-class neighbourhood. This sequence marks one of the central desmystifications of the filmic text while also highlighting the collective construction of memory and the ability for it to be weighed down with other notions and belief systems.⁶²

Gonzalo Aguilar writes in *Other Worlds: New Argentine Cinema* that *Los rubios* is a film predicated on the written word to communicate the main aspects of its narration.

Aguilar states that Carri's film relies mainly on the idea of the failure of visual

⁶¹ Both Aguilar and Sarlo note the importance of the hair colour Carri's parents are said to have. Beatriz Sarlo sees the neighbour's insistence on the blondness of the family to denote either the political differences between them and the rest of the neighbourhood or the fact that many militants changed their appearance, especially hair colour, while underground (*Tiempo pasado* 150).

⁶² In *On Collective Memory*, Halbwachs argues that remembering depends largely upon the relationship between the individuals and the other, since it is largely a social phenomenon. Halbwachs writes, "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories. If we enumerate the number of recollections during one day that we have evoked upon the occasion of our direct and indirect relations with other people, we will see that, most frequently, we appeal to our memory only in order to answer questions which others have asked us, or that we suppose they could have asked us" (38).

representation to present the trauma of her parents' absence; this is why the film relies so heavily on the use of the written word in its text (157). There is no doubt that the texts and captions play an important role in the construction of the film's narrative. However, to privilege the written word over the other elements present in the film is to limit the varied and rich reading of loss and memory that the film undertakes.

In a similar way, Roque's film provides minuscule glimpses of the past that highlight and often overcome the first-person interviews featured within it. Through its very form, the film attests to the uncertainty of the past and the fickleness of memory. The opening sequence of *Papá Iván* presents the scattered images of documents, a cemetery, and a landscape filmed from the window of a moving car. The voice-over, presumably Roque's, describes the difficulties related to producing a documentary offering a definitive history of her father's life due to the dominant hero status often afforded to him. The sequence sets up what will become a pattern throughout the documentary. The shots become fuzzy and unruly any time Roque's voice-over is heard, thereby destabilizing the spectator's view. There is also a pronounced change in the film stock with the image becoming grainy every time Roque brings the narration back to the present in the film. In this way, throughout the film, the present is always grainy, distorted, and difficult to see. These shots make visible a certain degree of indescribability in relation to the past and serve to unite the different testimonies and narratives of the life of Papá Iván. In this way, the act of recollecting is made plain to the spectator, and the graininess forms part of a distorted and illegible present set against the desire to instill and create an ordered and comprehensive history.

What both films enable through the incorporation of distortion, repetition, and collage is the construction of a unique space through which the spectator can experience something akin to what the women struggle to recollect. Both films create their own particular gaze based on the coming into a history needing to know and a transition to knowing through the lens of childhood. Throughout the filmic text, spectators are forced to wade through, and experience, the distortion both directors faced in their own reconstruction of the past. Furthermore, both films attempt to demystify and question the dominant and mythologized revolutionary movements of the past through the intrusion of childhood memory or fantasy into the reconstruction of personal memory. In other words, Carri and Roque revisit the children they were when their parents disappeared, marking this period through childhood objects and imagery. The films mark the loss of identity that both women experienced in childhood through the disappearance of their parents and reflect this loss through visual distortion. In doing so, the films use the figure of the child as a tactic to represent the inexpressible nature of loss and experience. The use of the child figure underscores the limits of representation and problematizes the stable ways of knowing, thereby opening the filmic text to different and competing interpretations.

Through the production of a child's gaze or a way of coming into knowledge, the directors invert longstanding power structures which privilege some ways of seeing over others. As cultural critic Jackie Stacey assures us, to look and to be looked at are cultural practices that always resort to some sort of power structure (9). Though usually associated with gender in film, the gaze is a productive way to examine the ways in which subjects are produced in any filmic text. The gaze is a vital notion when thinking

about how different subjects are produced and instrumentalized within the film medium, especially if these subjects are as closely monitored and controlled as children are. If spectators bring their own experiences, historical context, and cultural codes when it comes time to read the filmic text, what then happens if what they encounter is the gaze or the coming together of history through the eyes of the child? Would it be natural then for a spectator, or even a film critic like Aguilar, to ignore the messy or indiscernible aspects of the narration or child's way of looking and instead focus on the comfort of the written word?

Understanding and reading through the messiness of the child's perspective in these films also functions as an opening up of the unruliness that pervades any attempt to synthesize the past. Taking note of the outliers within any memory and the ways in which we come to history makes the films of Carri and Roque perhaps more parallel to the actual experience surrounding the absence of their parents. Through the incorporation of the trope of the child, even an adult child, who goes in search of the lost parent, the directors attempt to suspend the understanding of their parents as the heroes of a lost cause to examine the end result of such political endeavours on the family unit. The title of the film, *Papá Iván*, exemplifies this through Roque's own search to know the father who forsook his immediate family to militant causes after taking the name Iván while underground. In many ways, Roque's film is constructed around an attempt to negotiate, and perhaps even integrate, this legendary man, Iván, with the image of the father she had always longed for. Sub-textually, the film poses a vital question from the unique perspective of the child left behind, that engenders the main tenet of the militant activities of the 1970s, while also highlighting the tenuous relationship between personal

and societal politics. The question posed by the child to the parent is essentially “why wasn’t I enough?”

Aguilar argues that one of the central critiques that *Los rubios* makes relates to the politicization of all aspects of social life. This was clearly a position that Carri’s parents espoused, and that ultimately led to consequences that their children would have to carry for the indeterminate future. For Aguilar, the film attempts to explore one of the most unique aspects of the militant movements within the Argentine context - the inclusion of the entire family, children especially, within the armed organizations (*Other Worlds* 165).

For example, throughout *Los rubios* there are multiple scenes in which old family photographs are filmed lying next to books written by Carri’s father. Along with the images of the Carri daughters as children is what appears to be a press photo of a dead man with military police standing over him. The image is from the cover of one of Roberto Carri’s books. The juxtaposition between the images of happy, well adjusted, and obviously loved children with the politically charged titles and violent images of the sociologist’s book underscores not only the intrusion of the political on the domestic sphere, but also Carri’s attempt to weave together the drastically varied parts of her parents’ lives. In the introduction to the screenplay of her film, Carri explains that through the accumulation of interviews, documents, pictures, and objects, her memory of her parents grew alongside the development of the film. The result of this work of accumulation is transferred into the very body of the film, resulting in a complicated collage of scattered objects and documents that reflect the work of memory for those children left behind.

Another scene depicts a collage made up of photographs. The photos are placed so that the faces of the adults (presumably her father and mother) are covered. As the camera pans over the images, all the spectator sees are images of children as a strange, high-pitched, jarring noise is heard off-screen. While at first seeming to be non-diegetic, as the scene progresses the noises become more and more decipherable as the sound of editing equipment. The camera then cuts to a close-up of Carri as the auditory distortions become more discernible as a testimony that the director (or better said, the actress playing Carri) is editing as she plays and rewinds the testimony over and over again.⁶³

The scene is relatively brief but offers a rich reading of the vantage point that Carri tries to construct through her production of the film. The sequence may be read as the director's own experience, at the young age of three, of her parents' disappearance. The first thing that the spectator experiences on a visual plane is the absence of adults or parental figures through the placement of the photos. There is also no narration or dialogue to provide an explanation of who or what circumstances the pictures depict. Not only are the images of the Carri daughters, but they also include pictures of both Roberto and Ana María as children. This is important due to the fact that, as Carri notes, she is now older than her parents were when they were disappeared. With the absence of a parent figure to discern or recollect the stories of childhood to the younger generation, the childhood pictures, and the children themselves, have blended together seamlessly. Joanna Page argues that the scene ensures that spectators are not given permission to

⁶³ According to Mauricio Alonso, the truth or veracity of the testimonials/interviews are always subverted through the fact that they are always off-camera, relegated to small television monitors, or technically manipulated by the actress playing Carri. In this way, the documentary does not rely on the testimonials for its truth, while also deviating from any reconstruction of the spaces and events surrounding her parents' disappearance (Alonso 165).

empathize or emotionally engage with the subjects in the film. As Page states, if Carri's "parents were absent from her life, they will also be absent from the screen" (204).

Furthermore, due to the auditory distortion accompanying the sequence, the spectator is not permitted entry into the typical family scene replete with snapshots of rosy-cheeked children. Instead, the short sequence can be read as a brief retracing of three-year old Carri's experience, defined by an unmistakable absence and filled with auditory murmuring about the disappearance of her parents which may have also seemed distorted and indiscernible at that time. The sequence mimics Carri's own experience by creating a parallel between the film and extra-filmic world and tracing how the distortion surrounding the absence of her parents starts to become an intelligible narrative.

In her text on the film, *Cartografía*, Carri evocatively writes the following about her own experience of her parent's absence:

Yo, Albertina Carri, estoy en un llano: tengo destellos de imágenes, sonidos apenas audibles, ínfimos recuerdos, anécdotas que no sé hasta qué punto son reales. Todo es un gran vahído, una mezcla de ficción y realidad. / I, Albertina Carri, am on a plain: I experience flashes of images, barely audible sounds, minimal memories, anecdotes that I'm not sure are completely real. Everything is a dizzying spell, a mix of fiction and reality. (16)

Based on the above quote surrounding her experience, the repetitious rewinding and playing of the testimony in the films mimics the repeated version of events surrounding the disappearance of her parents until it comes together into some sort of audible story. The parallel drawn between the editing work involved in making the documentary that is

depicted on screen, and the construction and chaos of Carri's short description, underscores the malleability of memory that may be woven together in a number of ways.

While the film provides a representation of how the story of her parent's disappearance develops into narrative, reflecting her growth, as the film develops most of the domestic and emotive scenes are represented utilizing the technologies of childhood. The inclusion of childhood memory and fantasy into the narrative of *Los rubios*, that bookend the film, have been largely read by critics as an attempt to demystify and question the dominant and mythologized revolutionary movements of the past.⁶⁴ Notably missing from these critiques, however, is the reading of these scenes in relation to other less symbolically loaded scenes and a discussion of why they are depicted through the objects and themes most closely related to children. This is most apparent in the scenes that feature Playmobil characters, themselves a temporal marker of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the incorporation of stop-motion animation often used in children's films and television from that time period. These toys mark how childhood fictions and imaginings insert themselves into Carri's own narrative and aid her in thinking through this period in her life.

In the first scene of the film, the spectator observes an idyllic country scene composed entirely of Playmobil toys as a small toy person rides up on horseback to a little house. Two bigger Playmobil figures come out of the house to greet the third, take the small figure by the hand and take it into the little house. Throughout the scene, Carri's voice is heard off-screen as she teaches Couceyro how to ride on horseback. Next, there

⁶⁴ The following critics have made this observation: Gustavo Aprea (*Cine y políticas en Argentina: continuidades y discontinuidades en 25 años de democracia*); Beatriz Sarlo (*Tiempo pasado*); Gonzalo Aguilar (*Other Worlds: New Argentine Film*); Gabriella Nouzeilles ("Postmemory Cinema and the Future of the Past in Albertina Carri's *Los rubios*").

is a cut to an actual farm scene replete with fields and a small brook; the sequence then cuts to a cityscape, specifically a bird's eye view shot of cars moving through traffic. The shots of the farm sequence and the voice-over stem from Carri's own avowal, in her book based on the film, that the farm for her was a place of fantasy and escape from what was often a confusing period in her life. The scene ends with a few shots of the cars from above within an urban setting, in which the vehicles themselves appear like small toy cars and mimic the same movements as the Playmobil figures. The parallel between the Playmobil scene and the real life cars underlies the tacit lines between fiction and testimony that the film will trace.

Though the first sequence of *Los rubios* lays out the central premise of the film, there are still several other sequences that relate to the construction of personal identity and ways in which Carri negotiates the witness testimonies and family documents in the film. In the scene that follows the testimony of the neighbour in which she refers to Carri's mom as a slim blond woman, Couceyro is filmed walking through a children's playground in the neighbourhood with an obviously fake blonde wig on her head. The scene centers around the voice-over narration of the reactions of Carri's aunt and sisters after listening to the neighbour's testimony. Carri's aunt is scandalized by the inaccuracy of the statements since her sister was never a skinny blonde, while her older sisters discuss the style of dress and the activities of her parents that the neighbour describes. Carri herself remembers very few details about the time, but she does remember a little girl from the neighbourhood:

Del barrio yo recuerdo . . . a mi amiga Rosita, una chica de de la villa que me enseñó a chasquear los dedos y que según mi abuela me contagió los piojos.

Insistió tanto con los piojos de Rosita, que ahora la veo montada en su bicicleta con un piojo caminándole por la frente . . . Quizás se llamaba María, no me acuerdo bien. [Of the neighbourhood I remember . . . my friend Rosita, a little girl from the barrio who taught me to snap my fingers and who, according to my grandmother, gave me lice. My grandmother bothered so much about Rosita's lice, that now I envision her (Rosita) riding her bike with a louse crawling across her forehead . . . Or maybe her name was María, I don't really remember]

The narration presents the susceptibility of Carri's memory of events to those imposed on her by her grandmother; it also outlines the ways in which her memory of Rosita has become a fixed image in time. In a way, the clip also presents a self-reflexive doubt as to its own status as document. The fact that one of the only memories of Carri's spectators are privy to, her childhood friend Rosita, is cast in doubt- her name may have been María - makes the whole truth-telling status of the narrative, if not obsolete, at the very least suspect.

The playground scene precedes the last installment of the stop-motion action in the film, when the kidnapping of Carri's parents is depicted through the use of Playmobil figures.⁶⁵ Visually, the scene begins with a Playmobil spaceship flying over a country gas station. Seconds later a car carrying two Playmobil people comes down the same road.

⁶⁵ The Playmobil abduction scene has been subject of intense debate. In his oft-cited essay "La apariencia celebrada", Kohan considers the use of the spaceship in the kidnapping scene to depoliticize the actual disappearance of Carri's parents. Of the action of the scene he states: "lo que iba a ser o pudo ser causa política, ahora pertenece al más allá" (Kohan 29). [What was going to be or could have been political, now belongs to the supernatural] Kohan's criticism, of both the spaceship scene and the distancing modes used by Carri to depersonalize her family history, was itself subjected to critique in Cecilia Macón's essay "*Los rubios* o del trauma como presencia." In her pointed essay, Macón accuses Kohan of upholding a dogmatic schema of memory and utilizes Marianne Hirsch's notion of post-memory to argue that Carri's film presents the conflict of a generation faced with the challenge of representing fragmented memories that are in many ways impossible to assimilate (45). Finally, in his response to Macón, Kohan resoundingly contests the categorization that he considers Carri's film to be unique in its representation of the personal – due to the distancing modes she utilizes- and thus subject to a different critique than other films and discourses of the children of the disappeared (48).

The spaceship abducts one of the people and seconds later the other person is also taken up into the spaceship. As the scene progresses three little figures with blond wigs come walking up the same road. As the scene takes place, the only sound heard is the theme to the 1951 film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* by director Robert Wise. Through the strange and hypnotic music, the representation of the Carri abduction is finally reenacted for the spectator.

Not surprisingly, however, the representation is re-enacted through toys, which are symbolic of childhood. Through the Playmobil scenes, the director utilizes the perspective and technologies of the child in the filmic text in order to represent the only aspect that really became tangible beyond the realm of pure politics, that, in a sense, bring to its most basic element– the absence of her parents. In this way, *Los rubios* undertakes a child’s mode of remembering, or better yet, reenacting, relying on other ways of knowing or feeling by providing a more tactile, sensorial, and pre-linguistic form of envisioning the past.

Thus what we see in *Los rubios* is not so much a definitive or truth-based take on the lives of the disappeared and absent parents within the larger plane of Argentine politics, but ultimately the instability of the filmmaker’s own identity and how this identity fits into a larger familial and institutional narrative. In the case of *Los rubios* the only option afforded to Carri is to reject the myth surrounding the memory of her parents by inserting the element of childhood fantasy into the narrative as a destabilizing device.

Just as Carri undertakes the construction of a child’s perspective of the past, Roque’s *Papá Iván* also relates the difficulties and malleability of memory and the past as a type of haunting. The first relation we hear from Roque relates to her father status

within militant circles as a hero of the revolutionary movements of the 1970s. Roque states the following:

Mi padre murió el 28 de mayo de 1977. Cuando empecé a hacer esta película sabía algunas cosas. Lo que había oído que no era una descripción clara de los hechos se convertía siempre en una imagen de una persona muy heroica. Yo una vez dije que “yo preferiría tener un padre vivo, que un héroe muerto” porque me pasé la vida en México y las veces que fui a Argentina fui conociendo a gente que me miraba como la hija de un héroe. /My father died on May 28th, 1977. When I began to make this film I knew some things. What I had heard that wasn't a clear description of events always turned into an image of a very heroic person. Once I said “I prefer to have a living father, than a dead hero” because I lived my life in Mexico and the times I returned to Argentina people I met looked at me as the daughter of a hero.]

The preceding voice-over is heard as the camera sweeps from grainy static shots of landscapes to a series of shots of a burial wall, thereby marking both the initiation of the director's journey as well as the little she has left of her father. Later in the film, the director explains that there her father's body was never retrieved and that with no physical space to mourn him, she hopes that the documentary itself will become a final resting place for her father. Through the rest of the documentary María Inés Roque will continue her collection of narratives surrounding her father's life, but always highlighting how his absence has influenced her life in the present.

Roque establishes from the onset that her documentary will not become a chronicle that focuses on the life of her father from an objective, expository point of view, but

rather the documentation of a child's longing for an absent parent. Not only is the documentary about this longing, but it is also about detaching herself from the underground militant hero to instead concentrate on the impact of his death on the constitution of the director's family and her own sense of self within a private space. Selfhood becomes an important aspect of Roque's motivations for making the film, since from the outset the director, staring into the legacies of her father's past, is only too conscious of his absent gaze. She states:

Realmente siento que lo que más me falta es su mirada. La mirada de tus padres te confirma, te hace, te construye. Y eso es como crecer a ciegas. [I really feel like what is missing for me is his gaze. The gaze of your parents is what confirms, makes, and constructs you. And this has been like growing up blind.]

The interplay of Roque's narration with the visible distortion in the film in scenes such as this make the documentary a mode through which she is able to undertake the task of mourning. Learning about her father's political activities while underground and revisiting his last moments of life provide the director a way to work through the loss that as a child she did not have the experience to truly undergo.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of *Papá Iván* is the film's interest or focus on the everyday or minuscule aspects of Roque's father's life underground. Though the film does examine some of the most notorious aspects of Roque's father's activities in clandestinity, such as his role in the assassination of the General Secretary of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour), José Ignacio Rucci, and his final dramatic shootout with the military, the film largely focuses on the personal relationships between María Inés's mother, father, and the lover and child he had while underground. At times

Roque's questions become intrusive and appear taxing to the participant, thus contradicting the documentary convention that establishes the interviewer as an objective subject in the film. As Ana María Amado aptly observes, the director's questions

Expone a la mirada el paso del tiempo en los rostros y los cuerpos de los sobrevivientes que compartieron con su padre la militancia foquista. Los incomoda con el tenor de las preguntas, registra sus dudas cuando se salen del libreto aprendido, porque los detalles accesorios, las minucias de las antiguas escenas sobre las que son interrogados, son más difíciles de precisar que los términos globales de la política a la que respondían sus acciones armadas. [Allows the gaze to expose the passing of time on the faces and bodies of the survivors who shared the foquista militancy with her father. She makes them uncomfortable with the tone of her questions, registers their doubts when they stray from the memorized script, because the small details, the minutiae of the old scenes they are being interrogated about, are more difficult to acquire than the global political terms to which they violently responded.]

So, while inverting spectator expectations of the standard documentary, the line of questioning, and the obvious lack of concern for the discomfort it produces, are also reminiscent of a child's mode of inquiry. Thus, through positioning herself as a child wanting to know about the parent, Roque brings into suspension the taken-for-granted construction of revolutionary struggle.

Among the primary testimonies in *Papá Iván* is that of Roque's mother regarding the final days spent with the director's father and his final decision to leave his family for his political cause. In one scene in particular, a younger ex-Montonero identified as

Pardo recalls the day Roque's father went underground. He explains the situation and rationale surrounding the decision. We hear Roque's voice off-screen asking him if they left during the day. Pardo responds that it was actually at night, then pauses, and then acknowledges that he actually doesn't remember exactly what time of day it was. He then smiles shyly and asks if it really matters. Roque answers that, yes, it matters to her and that for her it is an important knot (in the story) which represents the moment that he can no longer reconcile his family life with his political activity.

Formally speaking, all the testimonies are woven around a letter written by Juan Julio Roque to his children in which he outlines his motivations for going underground and his decision to leave the family. The voice-over of María Inés Roque reading her father's letter is accompanied by documentary evidence in the form of photographs of the children (María Inés, Iván, and their stepbrother, Martín) left behind. These scenes are generally the most visually cohesive sequences of the documentary, and are usually accompanied by images and sequences that directly reflect the themes that Papá Iván takes up in his letters. They mark the only times that María Inés does not have to distill the information about her father from the memories of others; they are the only time that Papá Iván is able to speak for himself.

And yet, as we see in the clip, there is a price paid for letting the voices of the past intrude on the present. While the segments of Papá Iván's letters are visually legible, demonstrating a chronological or indexical relationship to the themes he discusses, the sequences featuring the narrator's own dialogue are not. When Roque talks about her challenges and motivations for making the documentary, her face and body are fuzzy, filmed in shadow or from afar. Consequently, though the film depicts a letter she wrote to

her father while he was underground, the contents of her letter are never disclosed. Through this juxtaposition the film operates around the notion of a lost self, a child self, who without the constitutive gaze of the parent has not and cannot become whole again. In this way, Roque's film reflects much more than the failed reconstruction of her father's life and death. Through the threads of emotive narration and visual disorder that weave together the narrative *Papá Iván* presents a director/daughter lost in the throes of mourning.

Perhaps one of the resounding aspects of both films is how the directors describe or represent the actual moment of capture or death of their parents. For Roque the moment is presented through stock imagery and news clippings as the camera pans over documents describing her father's final moments. In the voice-over, she describes her childhood fears surrounding his death imagining that he had been hit by a grenade and that his body had been exploded into a thousand little pieces. Carri's version of her parent's disappearance, which she was definitively told of at the age of 12 and is expressed through the Playmobil sequence may be initially read as far more distancing. However, the use of stop motion, which requires hours to produce and is composed of thousands of individual images, also presents a particular obsession with that definitive moment of capture. That is to say, though Carri's final product may be a distancing device within the body of the film, the work and time taken to produce it mark its primary importance within the work. In this way, both directors express through their films their imaginings, through bodily destruction (as in the case of Roque) or a fictional recreation (in the case of Carri), of their parents' demise.

On the whole, what we see in films such as *Papá Ivan* and *Los rubios* is not so much a definitive take on the lives of the disappeared and absent parents within the larger plane of Argentine politics, but ultimately the inability and instability on the part of the filmmakers to know where their own identities fit into the larger narrative. As Aguilar appropriately observes, “the directors of these films know about the difficulties that exist before one is able to say ‘I’ because, ever since their childhood, their identity and that of the people surrounding them have been suspended or called into question” (“The Documentary” 209). In the case of *Los rubios*, the only option afforded to Carri to finally overcome this conflict is to reject the myth surrounding the memory of her parents by inserting the element of childhood fantasy into the narrative as a destabilizing device. By contrast, for Roque the task of breaking through the myth constructed around her father proves too great and, instead, the director focuses on the effects of such narration - the distortion of the present and of her own identity when faced with such an inheritance. Both directors conjure the spirits of the child they once were and use the figure to inspect the fissures, and ultimately the failure, of memory to construct a definitive image of who their parents were. However, the unruly child tactics they instrumentalize in their filmic texts do spur greater questions about the expectations surrounding the child within the medium as whole. Beyond a mechanism through which to conjure the past, critics interested in analyzing the figure of the child must also delve into what the actual bodies of children on screen and the ways in which they circulate mean to the adults that gaze upon them.

CHAPTER THREE

The Empty Child: Bodies in Evidence

For me, then, the ‘trick’ of cinema is that it presents ‘showing’ as ‘seeing’.
Seeing is what children do; showing is what adults do for children.

- Karen Lury

In 2001, Argentina experienced a financial crisis that shook the foundations of the country. In a period of weeks, the country experienced an escalation of mass demonstrations by the middle class characterized by the familiar “cacerolazos,” the banging of pots and pans, and the now famous chant “Que se vayan todos/ Everyone must go,” along with violent clashes between protesters and police. Throughout the world, the images of droves of Argentines banging on the security doors of banks they had been locked out of became testaments to the extent of the country’s financial woes. During the initial month of the crisis, Argentina had a total of five presidents between December 21 and January 1 2002.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the crippling economic situation had plunged half the country into poverty and left a once stable and flourishing middle class scrambling to retain the savings and assets they had from ever more stringent government-imposed limits on financial withdrawals and redistribution of monetary

⁶⁶ After the resignation of elected President Fernando de la Rúa on December 20, 2001, after only 740 days in power, Ramón Puerta held the presidency for forty-eight hours after which the Peronist Adolfo Rodríguez Saá was elected on December 23. As the demonstrations escalated and internal divisions in the government continued, Saá resigned on December 30. Finally, Eduardo Duhalde was chosen to lead the country on January 1, 2002, after the last president, Eduardo Camaño, held the position for a twenty-four-hour period.

holdings.⁶⁷ During the following weeks, the IMF abandoned the country to its fate after the latter defaulted on eighty billion dollars it owed in external debt, the largest default in history.

Not surprisingly, the devastation caused by the economic and political upheaval in the country also meant that Argentines were forced to confront deep-seated challenges to the longstanding mythologies that informed perceptions of their homeland. In what has been denominated ‘a new crisis of identity,’ Argentines were forced to negotiate the new impoverished socioeconomic reality with what had been only years earlier called a new ‘Belle-époque’ reminiscent of the economic prosperity experience in the late 19th century (Rock 57).⁶⁸ With a large and stable middle class that had largely differentiated the country from its Latin American neighbors for over forty years, Argentina now faced the rapid deterioration of the class that had contributed greatly to its high levels of education and socioeconomic stability. What had for years been a reality for the lower classes affected by a string of Neoliberal reforms that began during the last dictatorial period

⁶⁷ These economic measures are referred to as “corralito” [little corral] and were put into place on December 1, 2001 and meant that Argentines were only allowed to withdraw less than \$250 dollars out of their bank accounts per week. They were, however, still permitted to use debit or credit cards to make purchases beyond the withdrawn amount. For an overview of the economic crisis and its relationship to the IMF see Paul Blustein. For an overview of the origins and ramifications of the economic crisis see the anthology *The Argentine Crisis at the Turn of the Millennium*, edited by Flavia Fiorucci and Marcus Klein.

⁶⁸ In his article “Racking Argentina” Rock traces Argentina’s economic situation during the 20th century and indicates that through most of the century “Argentina emulated the prosperity of Canada and Australia; Buenos Aires became one of the richest cities of the Americas. The country seemed destined to fulfill the dreams of mid-nineteenth-century liberal visionaries such as Domingo Sarmiento, whose campaigns for development, education and European immigration sought to forge Argentina into a second United States. Liberalism, both political and economic, enjoyed an influence here as strong as anywhere in the world—apparent in the near-consensus on free trade and support for federal representative institutions. Argentina, as historian Tulio Halperin Donghi once declared, was ‘born liberal’”(58). For a more detailed overview of the political and economic context in Argentina during the 20th century, see Luis Alberto Romero.

(1976-1983) and deepened during the presidency of Carlos Menem in the 1990's had now finally overwhelmed mainstream society.⁶⁹

The anxieties resulting from the economic collapse led to a demystification of the narratives Argentines had created and repeated about themselves. It also prompted a host of questions about Argentine identity and perceptions about the past.⁷⁰ However, the questioning of the legacy and contours of Argentine identity did not only take place in political or intellectual circles, but its repercussions were also apparent in cultural production in the country. The landscape of the “new” Argentina, no longer covered under the veil of prosperity and exceptionalism, was meticulously and quietly being documented by young filmmakers across the country. Almost in anticipation of the collapse and the revalorization of Argentine identity that it prompted, films such as *Pizza, birra, faso* (Caetano and Stagnaro, 1997), *Rapado* (Martín Rejtman, 1992), and *Historias breves* (comprised of a series of shorts by diverse directors, 1995) presented alternative visions of the nation through a detailed focus on disenfranchised youth and marginal regions and stories.⁷¹ These films in particular ushered in a string of films and modes of filmmaking that today pervade the industry. Directors of what would come to be called “Nuevo Cine Argentino”/New Argentine Cinema appeared to focus on the gaps and inconsistencies of Argentina’s economic dream years before the country fully awoke to

⁶⁹ As Romero indicates, “the state got rid of its public service companies, by recklessly handing them over to the oligopolies. A good part of the production sector geared to the local market was destroyed; the effect on employment and job security was not compensated by the expansion of commodities of low added value: agro-products, oil and steel. Unemployment rose above 20 percent, not taking into consideration unemployment” (30-32).

⁷⁰ For an overview of the reactions of Argentine intellectuals such as Beatriz Sarlo and Noé Jitrik to the economic crisis and its origins see *Página 12*'s digital collection entitled, *Otro País* <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/2001/01-12/01-12-23/pag25.htm>

⁷¹ *Historias breves* is credited with being the first film to concretize the aesthetic and cultural characteristics of the New Argentine Cinema. Through the collective nature of its production and its successful film festival run, it united many of New Argentine Cinema’s principal directors for the first time, many of whom would later work collaboratively on future film productions.

the harsh reality that it faced. I am not the only one to situate the state of contemporary Argentine cinema within the events surrounding the economic crisis in Argentina. Joanna Page's *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (2009) delves into the contours of the crisis as represented through film in the country. Page contends that the very shifts in subjectivity and representation seen in contemporary cinema are directly reflective of the legacies of the crisis. For Page, "Cinema does not occupy a space external to the events that it registers but is very much part of the economic system, the social relations, and the cultural milieu it might be supposed to depict" (4). Jens Andermann also considers the characteristically distant and indeterminate nature of the films that make up contemporary cinema to demonstrate the estrangement that subjects feel in relation to national crisis (*New Argentine* xvi). Citing *La ciénaga* and *Mundo grúa* (Pablo Trapero, 1999) as primary examples, Sergio Wolf observes that new directors focus on the past through an active dissection of the "present continuous" ("The Aesthetics" 34).

Comparably, Tamara L. Falicov locates the economic crisis as an important moment in the development of New Argentine Cinema, as a point in which citizens, directors included, begin to rethink the old system and cast their material and representational worlds differently ("Cinematic" 133). She contends that as a result of the crisis, directors of New Argentine Cinema are working to "expand the notion of Argentine citizenship to include subjects and characters who have traditionally been invisible or excluded from Argentine screens" (Falicov "Cinematic" 133). Thus the continual focus on underrepresented or unconventional subjectivities by directors of the

movement functions as a representation of the ways in which Argentine identity has become reinterpreted since the events of December 2001.

Amongst the most recognizable and lauded directors to emerge from New Argentine Cinema is the director Lucrecia Martel, whose directorial debut came with the release of *Historias breves*, and whose film *La ciénaga* (2001) solidified her as one of the key members of the movement. Through an indeterminate storyline that explicitly focuses on provincial bourgeois life, Martel's *La ciénaga* meticulously deconstructs Argentine domestic spaces, racial discourse, and familial dynamics. Most importantly, Martel's film is amongst the first that comprise New Argentine Cinema to include unconventional child figures to foment a rereading of the themes outlined above and draw from the economic and social decay of middle class life that would eventually lead to the crisis of 2001. By focusing on the child figure, and all that such allusion to the future and nation entails, Martel's film marks an important intervention in thinking about the relationship between childhood, nation, and vulnerability.

The proceeding chapter will focus on the relationship between childhood, nation, and vulnerability, examining the intersections between the ways in which the Argentine economic crisis is crystallized through the representation of children's lives in *La ciénaga*, Albertina Carri's film *La rabia* (2008), and Sofia Mora's film *La hora de la siesta* (2009). All three films underscore the vulnerability of children to both the ideologies and physical environments that surround them. Particularly palpable in all the films is the fact that the children featured within them have little control over the events and circumstances that define the world around them, yet embody the consequences of this physical space and time.

The instrumentalization of the figure by directors reflects the child figure's duality and its paradoxical nature. As literary critic Jo-Ann Wallace notes, “ ‘the child’ remains caught in this tension between what might be called the empty and the full, between lack (of personality, attributes, and history) and excess (full natural presence)” (“Technologies” 291). The oscillation between this pronounced lack and excess converts the figure into pure image devoid of any defined frame of reference and appears to break down the barriers, at least on an emotive level, between the fictional world and reality. I argue that through an emptying out of the child figure, the directors create an opening of the filmic text to varied readings of class, vulnerability, and experience that are determinately linked to the history of and rupture caused by the economic crisis of 2001.

Considering the purported focus on unconventional subjectivities in the films that make up New Argentine Cinema, it is not surprising that one of the most preponderant subjectivities depicted is that of the child. In thinking about the limitations imposed on children both in terms of their ability to contribute to discourses about themselves as well as their abilities to make decisions for themselves, the lives of children and conceptions of childhood in general remain one of the steadfast pillars of societal consensus. The films examined in this chapter all feature children who, through embodiment, rhetorical moves, and the spaces they inhabit, do not fit into the contours of spectator expectations of the child on screen. Instead, as I will argue, the child characters present an unravelling of the social fabric of everyday Argentine life and experience.

Lucrecia Martel's *La ciénaga* provides a locus for understanding the figure of the child in relation to the crisis of 2001 through both the management of what the spectator

sees and the circulation of bodies in the text.⁷² The film presents a summer in the lives of cousins, Mecha y Tali, and their children in Mecha's country home, "La Mandrágora." Like almost all the films of Nuevo Cine, *La ciénaga* provides little narrative; instead, it offers a detailed focus of the camera on the activities and movements of the characters. As the camera follows or wanders about the filmic text almost without a particular purpose or direction, it presents conversations already in progress and appears to intervene in the everyday lives of the characters, but never allows a conclusive reading of what those lives necessarily entail. Instead, the spectator captures glimpses of the everyday and often monotonous lives of the characters, making them fade into the background. In this way, the film formally commits to a flattening out of the elements in its mise-en-scène so that other sensorial experiences, especially that of sound, come to take up as much importance as the characters themselves.⁷³ As the proceeding section will reveal, Martel's film extends and retracts the limits of the child figure throughout the film via visual and discursive means. In other words, by destabilizing the very confines of childhood and suspending social and emotive expectations surround the child's body, *La ciénaga* works both with and against the standard tropes surrounding this figure.

⁷² Martel is one of the most commented directors of New Argentine Cinema. Amanda Holmes understands Martel's body of films to present a feminist lens that portrays the decadence of Argentine contemporary social structures, thereby underscoring the constructiveness and significance of personal perspective in projects of spatial representation (133). Agustín Campero describes the director's focus on the domestic sphere, especially her sharp focus on the personal relationships between characters that demonstrate and lay bare the violence that pervades the everyday interactions between the different racial and class-based groups in contemporary Argentine (51). In a similar vein, Gabriela Helac examines the intricacies of the domestic space depicted in Martel's mise-en-scène, noting how sound, image, and fragmentation pervade her films thus breaking down the barriers between the real and the representational (92). For a comparative reading of Martel's *La niña santa* and *La ciénaga* see Kent Jones.

⁷³ The predominance of sound in the film is perhaps the most commented characteristic of *La Ciénaga*. For an overview of sound in the film see Podalsky "Digital Mimicry and Visual Tropes: Some Images of from Argentina"; Wolf's *La propia voz: el cine sonoro de Lucrecia Martel*; Aguilar's *Other Worlds: New Argentine Film*; Andermann *New Argentine Cinema*; Oubiña's *Estudio critico sobre 'La ciénaga'*; Russell's "Audio in films of Lucrecia Martel."

Through most of the film, the adults sit by a dilapidated, grimy pool, drinking, showing little or no interest in the often dangerous and menacing exploits of the children. The opening shot of the film features a window with a line of bright red peppers and other vegetables lying on the windowsill, and thus provides a stark contrast to the grey and angry sky against the green of lush foliage so characteristic of the Northwest province of Salta, where the film is located. The camera focuses extensively on the limp, sweaty bodies of the adults sunbathing around the pool. As the sequence continues, the camera transitions from cuts of adults in their late 40s sunbathing around a stagnant, algae filled pool to shots of the exploits of children with rifles scrambling through overgrown woods or quietly lying about in the interior of the house.

The opening sequence of the film clearly demonstrates the dichotomy drawn between the active, dynamic lives of the child characters in the film and the static lives of the adults around them. The wrinkled, swollen bodies of the adults become the focal point of the opening shots, their slow movements and the dragging of the chairs evocative of the bodily movements of zombies. The bodies of the protagonists, particularly those of the adults, are characterized by a pervasive inertia, as they pass from one bed to another. Throughout the rest of the film, adult characters are often captured staring off into the distance or speak of travels and plans that never take place. For instance, Tali is seduced into going to Bolivia to buy her children's school supplies and obsesses over every detail of her plan. However, all her planning seems to be in vain, considering she never makes it to Bolivia since later in the film we find out her husband has already bought the supplies, thus spoiling her anticipated travel.⁷⁴ Through the stagnancy that

⁷⁴ An aspect of the film never directly commented on in film reviews and criticism is the infantilization presented in the text through Tali and her relationship to her family. Over the course of the film, she is

permeates the film, any anticipation of movement or dynamic change in the fate of characters is subverted in the filmic text.

Gonzalo Aguilar describes the first scenes in the film in the following way: “the sedentary tendency presents a spiral movement toward interiors. The key is the insufficiency of the family order, and one of the disturbing characteristics of the *La ciénaga* resides in the lack of definition of parental links” (29). The lack of parental links noted by Aguilar is apparent from the outset of the film when a drunken Mecha falls to the ground while collecting empty wine glasses from the other adults by the pool. As her husband, Gregorio, stands above her saying “Mechita, levantate que va a llover.” [Mecha, get up, it’s going to rain.] before stepping over her to pour himself another drink, the screams of Isabel, the family’s teenage maid, are heard from inside the house. Isabel shouts, “Momi, la Mecha se ha caído” [Momi, Mecha has fallen] as Momi, Mecha’s daughter, leaps from the bed where her sister Veronica and she had been lying. Interestingly, the spectator is unable to fully see Mecha; her body is blocked from full view by the camera by the adults sitting poolside. It is only after both Momi and Isabel arrive to aid her that the extent of her injuries is revealed.⁷⁵ Momi and Isabel dive into action, stabilizing the inebriated woman, pulling shards of glass from her bloody chest, and getting her dressed to go the hospital. Between them they are able to deal with the catastrophe and herd the adults into the appropriate vehicles to take Mecha to the hospital.

constantly treated as a child by both her children and her husband and often has to ask her children not to report back to her husband about her activities.

⁷⁵ Podalsky notes the importance of visibility and the body in the film and argues that Momi becomes the witness of the familial transgressions through out the film and is the only character who does not “recoil from what they find to be offensive” in relation to the body (109). For Podalsky, these notions make Momi’s character function as a “key register of film’s disquieting materiality” (110).

As the above scene underscores, the stasis of adult characters in the film juxtaposed with the exploits of the child characters establishes a determinate inversion of the adult and child worlds. The adults in the film are useless, unable to navigate or contribute to either the external or the emotional lives of the children around them. Like needy infants around the pool, the adult characters depend on those they treat, due either to their biological or social status, as children. The film sets up a critical vision of the lives of the upper class by juxtaposing those subjects, who due to age and social class are deemed to be most instrumental within society, with those they consider to be deficient. Both in terms of the visual plane and the close proximity between characters, the lines between bodies, objects, and subjects fade within the *mise-en-scène*. Isabel, who is notably darker skinned, is often accused of stealing towels and is called ‘colla’ [a derogatory name for native people] or ‘india carnavalera’ on multiple occasions by different family members, thus exposing many of the prevalent historical discourses still widespread in the country today.

The fact that the domestic help circulates throughout the house sharing the beds and intimate spaces in the film, underscores the decay of the ruling class in the country and a blurring of the distinctions between diverse ethnic and social groups. The open hostility of family members to the lower class and darker-skinned people in their community is also emphasized by the fact that Isabel and those who, like her, display indigenous physical characteristics are constantly denigrated. As Ana Peluffo notes in “Staging Class, Gender and Ethnicity in Lucrecia Martel’s *La ciénaga/The Swamp*,” “Isabel’s role in the family is to perform that negative or deficient identity that Mecha’s racist gaze has assigned her in a pre-existing script” (216).

The outcome of this noted deficiency is never as apparent as a scene in the film which features Isabel, another young girl, Momi, and her older sister Veronica shopping in town. As the camera focuses on the girls in the shop, Isabel steps outside the shop to talk to a young man, who the spectator later learns is her boyfriend, Perro. Veronica orders Momi to go get Perro and asks him to try on a t-shirt she wants to purchase for her older brother José. After protesting mildly, Perro begrudgingly takes his shirt off. Isabel looks away as he does so, reacting to his obvious embarrassment. Momi, the friend, and Veronica look directly at Perro, oblivious, or not, to his discomfort. After Momi examines the tag saying 'medium', Perro takes the shirt off and hastily leaves the store. Isabel continues to look away. Veronica then smells the shirt and throws it to her friend with a disgusted look on her face. The entire scene focuses extensively on the faces of the characters, tracing the subtle looks between them and providing a nuanced representation of the power dynamics between the middle-class “white” young girls and the lower class “non-whites.” The scene also alludes to an underlying discomfort that pervades the filmic text since there is nothing distinctly racist about the scene, unlike the derogatory comments made by Mecha, but the dynamics between characters projects a notably threatening, infantilizing, and violent discourse lying beneath the surface of these quotidian interactions. The girls, through an established historical context are able to summon Perro and get him to perform activities that he obviously doesn't want to perform due to the particular ways in which social expectations govern the dynamics between the two groups.

The servitude so apparent in Perro's reaction to the summons and orders of the girls frames part of a larger problematic related to discourses in which particular groups

are projected as inferior, linked unproblematically to deficiency, to others. Thus, the film features a concept of childhood, emptying it out in a manner of speaking, that does not just extend just to those who biologically embody the notion of the child, but also to those who traditionally have been cast as children as a justification for dominance. Jo-Ann Wallace writes, “there is obviously considerable slippage between constructions of ‘the child’ and of the native Other under Imperialism . . . “ (De-Scribing 175). Therefore, the infantilization of the racial Other, as represented through the various comments about ‘indios,’ underscores their alterity, thereby marking them as subjects in need of the protection of the family from their purportedly perverse desires, while also a tacit danger to the economic and social well-being of the family. However, their presence and infantilization is a necessary part of the family order in order to preserve its image and class status. For, as critics have noted, the women in the film “hire domestic workers not only to get help with household chores but also to affirm an invisible class status based on a racialized process of cultural differentiation” (Peluffo 216).

And yet, the underclass, namely Isabel, who is labelled and treated as a child is the very one who upholds and lend scontinuity to the household structure in the film. In the absence of any real parenting on the grounds of “La Mandrágora,” Isabel becomes a type of surrogate parent to all the members of the household warning them about the dangers of their bad decisions. Through her diligent care of Mecha, as exemplified in the first scenes, and her close mother-like relationship to Momi, whom she instructs to shower and stay out of the algae-infested pool, she is presented as an important factor that keeps the family afloat.⁷⁶ Similarly, it is her departure that exposes the dependency of

⁷⁶ Momi’s romantic desire for Isabel can be considered one aspect of her being able to see what other characters in the film are incapable of seeing. Peluffo considers Momi’s relationship with Isabel to be the

members of the upper class on those of the lower class. In a scene in which Isabel, after learning she is pregnant by Perro, informs Mecha that she will be leaving “La Mandrágora” to go live with her sister, Mecha launches a string of insults at the girl:

Yo te necesito acá ¿Cuál será el motivo, no? China carnavalera. Una les da todo. Familia, casa, comida y así te pagan. Son todas iguales. Siempre te dejan. [I need you here. What could the motive be? Right? Wild Indian girl. One gives them everything. Family, a home, food and that's how they repay you. They are all the same. They always leave you.]

Though notable for the way in which the words underscore Mecha's perception of the domestic workers as an undifferentiated group - a ‘they’ - formed presumably of young working-class women, it also uncovers Mecha's dependence on Isabel. Mecha’s hysterical and panicked reaction to Isabel’s belies her own authority, thereby revealing the social and cultural atrophy of the upper classes that she represents.

However, though Isabel is treated and categorized as nothing more than an ungrateful child - as the above quote establishes - she is the only character able to escape the bourgeois prison. Other characters, particularly the most vulnerable among them - such as seven-year-old Luciano - are left to fend off the manifold threats that surround them. The marked vulnerability of the child is one of the most pronounced aspects of the film since most, if not all of the children, have noticeable scars on their faces and bodies.⁷⁷ One child, Joaquin, is missing an eye while another has two large gashes across his face. Throughout the film, the child’s body is constantly under threat and is featured

principal reason that she is continually called *sucia* [dirty] by other family members in the film. Peluffo argues that through her association and love for the indigenous maid and discourses about cleanliness and race, Momi is considered unclean.

⁷⁷ Podalsky argues that the scars on the bodies of all the children, except Momi’s, indicate more than just parental neglect but also present the children’s cruel behavior that contributes to their injuries (108).

as the site of danger. In “El arte de los planificadores,” Javier Porta Fouz contends the following about the children in the *La ciénaga*:

En un ambiente en el que la mayor parte de los conocimientos “útiles” que se transmiten de generación a generación consisten en tirar con escopeta y manejar autos y camionetas desde antes de la adolescencia, el peligro está siempre presente. Y tampoco es causal que los dos personajes (Momi y Luciano) amenazados tanto por el ambiente y los otros personajes como acechados cinematográficamente sean los más débiles, indefensos, generosos y necesitados de afecto (uno por sus poco años, Luciano, y otro porque ama/desea, Momi). (7)

[In an environment in which the most ‘useful’ knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation consists of how to shoot a rifle or drive cars and trucks before adolescence, danger is always present. It is also not causal that the two characters (Momi and Luciano) who are threatened as much by the environment and other characters as by their being cinematographically stalked are the weakest, most vulnerable, most generous and most in need of affection (one due to his young age, Luciano, and the other because she loves/desires, Momi).]

Porta Fouz aptly illustrates the precarious position occupied by the child in the film. Through the constant allusion to the unruly activities of the unsupervised children, both through conversations and the constant cuts to the domestic home space, the film depicts a generational rift that impedes the transference of history, memory, and experience from one generation to the other.

The camera incessantly focuses on the children in various states of danger: scenes of children running through the woods with shotguns, swimming in open dikes, and

participating in menacing games and cruel play. Through the constant threat to the bodies of the young characters, the children are marked as the space of vulnerability and neglect, that while not a completely new notion in Latin American cultural production, does emphasize one of the main problems presented by the film - the stifled transmission of history and experience from one generation to the other in the landscape of contemporary Argentina.

This is never as clear in *La ciénaga* as when the youngest child, Luciano, falls off a ladder in his effort to see the dog he mistakenly thinks is an African rat. The child's mistake derives from a story told earlier in the film by one of his cousins about a family that brings home a dog only to discover the next morning that the dog has eaten the family cats. As a result of the grizzly discovery, the family kills the animal by chopping it in half, thereby revealing two rows of razor-sharp teeth and the fact that the dog was in fact an African rat the whole time. Terrified by his cousin's story, Luciano obsesses about the dogs he runs into throughout the rest of film. Perhaps most interesting is the way in which the story determines and foreshadows the tragic, though visually obstructed, end that awaits Luciano. Essentially, Luciano's curiosity and desire to see and verify his cousin's story is what leads to his ultimate demise. Luciano's fall underscores the vulnerability and sensibility of the child figure to the transmission not only of stories but to the way stories make up history.

Analyzing the scene of Luciano's fall formally, the camera focuses on the banality of Luciano's fall. The small child is captured in a long shot as he rides his tricycle to the back patio area of the house and his body becomes a willowy shadow set against the bright light coming from the yard. As the scene progresses, Luciano hears the

barking of dog next door and walks towards the wall separating the neighbor's home from his own. In a medium shot, where his face is never definitely shown, he looks up at the wall. The shot is mainly composed of the bright yellow color of the wall with various potted plants attached to it and a small table with potted flowers in the forefront of the scene; along the wall is placed a wooden ladder. As Luciano crosses the scene, he makes his way under the table and up the ladder; all the while the dog is heard panting and pacing in the background. The camera then cuts to a side-view of Luciano as he continues up the ladder, climbing up to the very top step where he wavers and the wooden step gives way. The camera stays focused on the wall as the child falls out of the frame, and the sound of his fall is distinctly heard in the background. The scene then cuts to shots of the darkened and silent house and the only sound heard is the panting of the dog next door. The final shot is a repeat of the first in the sequence, where the camera looks out into the bright patio from the darkened kitchen; the only difference is that in the corner of the frame lies Luciano's small body - barely visible - and lying amongst the patio furniture.

The final shot of Luciano's body lying on the floor hidden by the furnishings that crowd the *mise-en-scène* appears to flatten the significance and imagery related to his fall - his body becomes another set piece. Far removed from the melodramatics of traditional narrative cinema, we are faced with the shots of a quiet house and the sound of dog/African rat barking in the distance. And yet, the scene is not completely shocking, at least not in the way in which other children's deaths in film stir the senses, for throughout the film Luciano is set up for just such a fall.⁷⁸ Within the body of the filmic text

⁷⁸ The fall of the child in *La ciénaga* differs greatly from other child deaths in film. Yet, it still relates to a cinematic tradition which casts the child as a space for tragedy and destruction. See the following films:

spectators foresee, through the menacing and turbulent situations he is exposed to, that something terrible will happen.⁷⁹

Luciano's body becomes a site of anxiety throughout the film - his parents fret over his dental appointments through which spectators learn that he, like the African rat mentioned earlier, is growing a second set of teeth. In another scene, Luciano cuts his leg; in another he stands between his cousins and a dead cow as they point their loaded guns at him; and in yet another scene he is metaphorically diced up by sisters with imaginary cutting shears as he collapses to the ground in play. Constantly in peril, spectators anticipate Luciano's death, yet when it does finally happen the scene lacks spatial depth and the very *mise-en-scène* of the disaster is constricted, thereby making it difficult to see his body amongst the household objects and furnishings. Though characterized by an obstructive *mise-en-scène*, the scene is different from that of the melodramatic set-pieces that usually accompany domestic spaces in film; that is, they don't project the internal lives of the characters about to brim forth, but instead present a listlessness weighing down or the drowning of the image in the swamp of bourgeois life in contemporary Argentina.⁸⁰ The invisibility of Luciano's body is also reminiscent of Mecha's after her fall at the beginning of the film, but seems more dismal since there is

Germany, Year Zero (Roberto Rossellini, 1948); *Las Hurdes* (Luis Buñuel, 1933) y *Los olvidados* (Luis Buñuel, 1950); *El polaquito* (Juan Carlos Desanzo, 2003); *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931); *Perfume de violeta* (Maryse Sistach, 2000); *De la calle* (Gerardo Tort, 2001); *Así es la vida* (Arturo Ripstein, 2000); *Los motivos de Luz* (Felipe Cazals, 1988); *El laberinto del fauno* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006); *El espinazo del diablo* (del Toro, 2001); *Al otro lado* (Gustavo Loza, 2004); *Veneno para las hadas* (Carlos Enrique Taboada, 1988); *Elisa antes del fin del mundo* (Juan Antonio de la Riva, 1997); *Ángel de fuego* (Dana Rotemberg, 1992)

⁷⁹ Porta Fouz also notes the menacing tone of the film and its relation to the both the death of Luciano, as well as Momi's desire to contest the values of the middle-class family she forms part of, at the end of the film (7).

⁸⁰ Thomas Elsaesser explores the importance of objects in the family melodrama of Hollywood film in his essay "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama". In particular he notes the use of household objects and furniture in the family melodrama to project the inner turmoil of the main characters (mostly female characters) in the film. He notes that the more objects fill the setting the more enclosed characters are likely to be (Elsaesser 84).

no one, neither adult nor child, present to notice. Thus through the banality — indeed the uneventfulness — of the child's fall, the film stages the slow and insipid unraveling of middle-class Argentine life.

La rabia is Albertina Carri's fourth feature-length film, and, like *La ciénaga*, is also set in an actual area in rural Argentina. Located in the province of Buenos Aires, *La Rabia* is a sparsely populated area comprised mainly of small farms. Like Martel's film, the title (denoting both a location - Cerro Ciénaga Grande - and an ecosystem) also has multiple meanings that come to reflect the indeterminacy and openness of the narrative. The first meaning can be translated as rage, and is the translated title of the film in English. The second meaning comes from the word's Spanish association with the viral infection known in English as rabies. Though the two notions vary in terms of the definition, there is a play on all three through the movement of the narrative and the presentation of sequences shot in realtime. Thus the film manifests the traversal of lines between fiction and reality that has come to characterize many of Carri's films.

The film explores the common, everyday violence of the rural area through the lives of two young children from neighbouring farms, Ladeado and Natalia. Nati, approximately six years old, is mute and also appears to have what some critics consider to be a mild form of autism.⁸¹ Ladeado is around twelve years old and walks with a noticeable limp. The film explores the relationship between the two children in the brutal terrain that surrounds them. It also focuses on the sexual relationship between Ladeado's widowed father, Pichón, and Nati's mother, Alejandra. The intensity of the sexual relationship between the two adults becomes ever more violent as the film progresses.

⁸¹ Alejandra Josiowicz argues that there is a direct correlation between Nati's drawings and autism and cites Carri's research on autism for the film as evidence of this diagnosis (8).

Though Natalia is often witness to their animalistic encounters, she is not able to communicate what she sees to other characters in the film. Instead, Natalia communicates her anxiety and disapproval behaviorally by undressing in public, screaming animalistically, and drawing dark and violent pornographic images. Furthermore, it is through her strange behavior and activities that her father Poldo becomes aware of the affair and the tension and violence come to a tragic end for both families.

Critics have noted the ways in which the film inverts expectations surrounding the representation of childhood through its detailed focus on the peripheral space of the Argentine countryside. In his regular reviews of film for the Argentine newspaper, *La Nación*, Diego Batlle observes that the *La rabia*'s focus on the indeterminate nature of the characters mirrors the rural space they occupy. He notes that in the film:

[. . .] nadie es del todo bueno ni del todo malo, donde los niños no son la encarnación pura de la inocencia y de la bondad ni los adultos son demonizados aun cuando cargan con miserias, mentiras y perversiones. [La directora] parece recargar en demasía las subyugantes imágenes conseguidas con mucha sangre, tripas y sexo para dejar en claro lo primitivo de la historia y la animalidad de sus protagonistas y del contexto en que se mueven. [No one is completely good or completely bad, where children are not the pure embodiment of innocence and goodness nor are adults demonized even when they bear miseries, lies, and perversions. [The director] seems to focus too much on the captivating images with a lot of blood, guts, and sex to underscore the primitiveness of the story and the animality of its protagonists and the context in which they circulate.]

Battle is not the only critic to focus on the relationship between the quotidian violence of the rural spaces and the representation of its characters. Diego Trerotola also argues that the film provides

Un giro a la repetida representación bucólica, miserabilista y/o nacionalista de la vida rural y marginal, creando un retrato complejo que incluye personajes con un erotismo, un deseo y un mundo interior inéditos en el cine. [A shift in the repeated bucolic, miserabilist and/or nationalist representation of rural and marginal life, creating a complex portrait that includes characters with eroticism, desire, and an interior world unrepresented in film.]

However, Jens Andermann contends that *La rabia*'s setting in the countryside reflects a broader political critique conditioned by “a critical dialogue with the left-wing, utopian ruralism of the New Latin American Cinema of the 1960s and with the post-2001 resurgence of a right-wing ‘ruralista’ lobby in Argentina” (*New Argentine Cinema* 83).⁸²

Similarly, Joanna Page contends that contemporary films that focus on rural settings present the economic crisis effect on Argentine national identity, marking its proximity to the underdevelopment of the region rather than the cosmopolitan centre (*Crisis and Capitalism* 116).

However, Carri herself signals a different justification for the film's locality in an interview in the newspaper *Página 12* in which she notes the influence of John Berger's text, *Porca tierra/Pig Earth*, on the structure of the narrative in her film:

⁸² Andermann locates both costumbristic and expressive-naturalistic tendencies beginning in the cinema of the 1960s (specifically *Los inundados* [Fernando Birri, 1961]) and the militant cinema of the 1970s (specifically *Juan Moreira* [Leonardo Favio, 1973]) and *Los hijos de Fierro* [Fernando E. Solanas, 1972-75]). He notes that rural spaces in these films become an “allegory of historical time, its vase, empty extensions literally opening up the stage for revolution” (Andermann 63). However, he notes that in the late 1980s and early 1990s the space of the rural in cinema experiences a significant shift, and comes to represent the space of historical defeat and mourning.

[Berger] elucubra una teoría sobre el campesinado; dice que son sobrevivientes, pero que no pertenecen a ninguna clase social ni sistema político, ni capitalismo ni socialismo; que siempre están afuera, porque tienen costumbres muy arraigadas, una enorme resistencia al cambio. Y en la película son sobrevivientes: hasta los más violentos son vulnerables a esa inmensidad, en ese paisaje. Es muy exacta la idea de sobreviviente: no entran en ningún sistema. [(Berger) lucubrates a theory about the peasantry; he says that they are survivors, but that they don't belong to any social class or political system, not capitalism nor socialism; that they are always outside, because they have very deep-seated traditions, and present a great resistance to change. In the film they are also survivors: even those who are the most violent are vulnerable in that immensity, in that landscape. The idea of survival is very apropos: they don't belong to any system.]

Survival and the position of the agrarian laborer is indeed one of the most conspicuous aspects of the film. By focusing on a group of people who, according to Carri, are naturally excluded from overarching national ideology and social caste, the film begs a re-visioning of the protection that tradition provides to those inhabitants of the countryside. In its own way the film evokes the imaginary lines drawn between the rural and urban in Argentine intellectual history and the importance of the dichotomy between “civilización y barbarie”, also taken up in the second chapter of this project. Thus, understanding the survivalism that Carri attributes to the rural workers, or the space of the “barbaric” in Argentina in the above quote, also brings to light the conditions in its spatial polar opposite, namely the urban space.

Based on the cultural ways in which Argentina has constructed the relationship between country and city spaces, focusing on one space automatically triggers particular notions about the other, even if one appears to be absent. In *La rabia*, the presence of the absent landowners is evoked early in the film. Throughout the film, Ale's and Pichón's sexual encounters occur in the main house on the grounds of *La rabia*, evocative of the summer home in *La ciénaga*, where the owners would stay during their time away from the city. In a scene featuring both Ale and Pichón during one of their encounters, both characters stand naked before one another and begin rummaging through the landlord's wardrobe. Finding polo and tennis gear and outfits, they begin to try on different articles of clothing, giggling at one another as they do so. As the intimate scene of dress-up continues, both adults are momentarily converted into children who take on the identities of the landowners through the acquisition of articles of clothing related to the leisurely activities of the upper classes. The dress-up scene allows the two characters, albeit for a brief moment, to embody the privileged lives of the landowners, thus becoming, through the act of dress-up, that which they could never ordinarily be. Through the juxtaposition of the jubilation of the characters in the scene with the misery and "barbarism" they experience and reproduce in the rest of the film, a strong critique of the feudal-like conditions of the characters in the rural space is presented. In this way, the scene also presents the characters as part of a broader system which operates by imposing a set of values and social structures not established by the characters themselves, but which they were born into and must adhere to.

The dress-up scene between Pichón and Ale is one of the most politically critical in a film that appears to stray from a proposed or determinate political position. Indeed,

through its gaze on the dysfunctional dynamics set in a rural space of the Argentine pampas, Carri's film elicits the downward spiral faced by the broader extra-filmic Argentine population. The Neoliberal dream that purportedly promised all the ability to play tennis and the occasional polo match is shattered by the harsh reality of the "corralito."⁸³ Through the focus on the misery and animalization of a vulnerable class of people on the "outskirts" of civilization, especially poignant through the suffering of the child, the film alludes to an equal victimization of a class faced with a national context characterized by victimization, incomprehensibility, and perverseness. In essence, the illusion of the dichotomy between civility and barbarism has ultimately fallen away and civilization is nowhere to be found.

Undoubtedly, the brutality of the landscape is one of the most predominant aspects of the film; presented in dark grey tones, the characters are often filmed wandering through barren fields in dense fog wearing dark and sombre colors. Indeed, if as discussed earlier in this chapter, Martel's film collapses the space between the human being and the objects that surround it, Carri's imagery can be said to break down the division between the human, beasts, and the landscape of which they form a part. The film itself begins with the sound of gunfire and the disclaimer "Los animales que aparecen en esta película vivieron y murieron de acuerdo a su habitat" [The animals that appear in this film lived and died according to their habitat.]. The inclusion of scenes in the film in which animals are killed for consumption, or because they become threats to the livestock, become key to understanding the relentless and brutal landscape which the child characters inhabit.

⁸³ I remind my readers again that the "corralito" refers to the economic restrictions placed on financial transactions during the economic crisis of 2001.

However, this brutality, which may be read as a necessary part of living in an inhospitable environment dependent and isolated from modern luxuries, eventually becomes a violent curriculum that becomes most salient in the young members of the two households. In the film publication *La Fuga*, Carri makes note of the contagious nature of the violence in the film through its focus on the rural landscape and the finite line between man and beast throughout:

En el campo es algo que esta ahí, hay una convivencia muy íntima con la matanza, pero no hay conciencia de vivir eso como matanza. Y, bueno, fue un poco alrededor de esas ideas, sobre todo esta idea de la rabia como una peste, una pandemia. El único que parece salvarse es el niño, quien, finalmente también termina contagiado. [It is always there, in the countryside, there is an intimate cohabitation with killing, but there isn't a lived experience of it as killing. And, well, it (the film) revolves around these ideas, especially that of rabies as a plague, a pandemic. The only one who appears to save his or herself is the child who finally also ends up infected.]

Like the plague Carri evokes, the abuse and killing of animals pervades the filmic text and eventually allows spectators to see that violence is also an integral part of the lived experiences of the humans in the film.

However, Carri's words also provide a glimpse into the relationship between the figure of the child and broader social matters. The notion of the plague may be read as a take on the rage, indeed "la rabia," felt by Argentines as wages fell, currencies dipped, and families from all walks of life experienced the devastating effects of the crisis. That the child would eventually also succumb to the plague and the suffering it entails is not

surprising since for the most part children in film “act as a metonym for wider suffering” (Lury 107). Not only is the suffering of children and animals central to the film, but the child’s hand in the suffering is integral and naturalized throughout. This connection is established earlier in the film in a scene in which Ladeado, with his pronounced limp, is shown walking across a field carrying a canvas bag across his shoulders. As the scene continues, the camera cuts to the boy smashing the sack against a tree trunk. He is then shown walking down to the edge of a pond and throwing the bag into the water. Through the rest of the sequence the camera cuts from close-ups of Ladeado’s expressionless face to shots of the mysterious and squirming contents of the bag as they struggle and disappear under the surface of the water. In this way, death and killing become naturally united to the child figure from early on the film, while also foreshadowing the violence Ladeado visits on other characters at the end of the film.

While underscoring the rage that ultimately consumes the child figures, the film also emphasizes the equalizing of both animal and child suffering. This notion is important in thinking about the emptiness that the child figure embodies since, as Lury argues, “there are circumstances in which adults disavow this otherness and see animal and children as entirely open to interpretation rather than ‘other’ – this, possessed by intentions or a consciousness we do not recognize” (*The Child* 106). Therefore, as the scenes of animal deaths escalate throughout the filmic text, spectators are eventually subjected to the real-time slaughter of a pig by a group of neighbors. The sequence begins with the group of men carrying a screaming pig from the back of a pickup truck. The camera does not shy away from any aspect of the pig’s slaughter, from its screams as its throat is slit, to the process of disembowelment to the final cutting up of the carcass.

In the scene, as the laborious work of preparing the pig continues, Nati is pictured seated at a table drawing. Pichón, Ale's lover, is standing next to her contemplating what she is drawing. He suddenly snatches a piece of paper from the stack (likely another one of Nati's pornographic drawings which he protagonizes) and quickly stuffs it in his pocket. Nati begins to shriek wildly and begins to disrobe in front of the group of adults. Ale eventually restrains Nati and takes her back to the house as the child continues to kick and scream. The child's shrill and primal screams evoke the screams of the pig at the beginning of the sequence, thereby underscoring the lack of differentiation between one being and the other. Another parallel between Nati and the helpless pig is drawn later in the film when Ale says to Poldo:

- "¿Qué esperas que diga la gente si ésta no habla y grita como un chancho? Eso no es normal." [What do you expect people to say if she doesn't speak and screams like a pig? That is not normal.]

Playing with the connection of the child figure to the animal, Carri plays with the taken-for-granted relationship between the child and the natural world. Drawing upon pre-established notions surrounding the Apollonian child, Carri's film inverts the dominant notion that the innocence of childhood reflects, or melds with the untouched and virgin space of the countryside.⁸⁴

Though the violent survival in a barren land is a central theme taken up in the film, it is ultimately the adults that are responsible for the suffering of the child protagonists. As Owain Jones indicates in "Idylls and Othernesses: Childhood and

⁸⁴ Owain Jones argues that the relationship between the both the construction of the natural world and dominant constructions of childhood center on the notion of the Apollonian child (178). The Apollonian child is characterized by a natural goodness and innocence and is often cast against its opposite – the Dionysian child. For more on predominant views of childhood within society see Chris Jenks.

Rurality in Film,” films that stray from the bucolic representations of children in rural settings instead focus on childhoods “tainted and oppressed by adult geographies. The countryside as space of labour exploitation and poverty - of family conflict and gender inequalities - or as a space of war. Children are victims (with agency) in the face of such unsympathetic, indifferent or hostile adult striations of space” (185). *La rabia* presents just such geographies through the violence and control exerted on Nati and Ladeado by the adults in their lives.

In a similar vein as in *La ciénaga*, adults in *La rabia* create the conditions that make it impossible for children to attain their own sense of self and break the cycle of familial violence in rural settings. Restrictions on the behavior and bodily circulation of both Ladeado and Nati reflect one of the primary means through which the film presents this notion. Nati, especially, is told repeatedly to watch her comportment in public due to the ways in which her disability, which no doubt creates its own interpretation of the division between the natural and human worlds around, impacts her register of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. In response to her screams of disappointment, excitement, or frustration, she is repeatedly told “no vuelvas a hacer esos ruidos que son feos” [don’t make those ugly noises again]. And after the episode of the slaughter of the pig, her mother points out to her: “A los chicos que se portan bien todos los quieren.” [Everybody loves children who behave themselves]. In this way, through both the preconditions set upon the love and acceptance of those around her, and the restrictions placed on the free expression of her feelings, Nati is subjugated, perhaps even domesticated, by the adults around her.

In his efforts to dissuade Nati from one of her greatest social transgressions, Poldo sits down at the table with Nati and tells her a cautionary tale about Ale's uncle who had a wife who, like Nati, liked to undress in public. He notes in his story:

eso no se hace, ¿cómo las señoritas se van a andar por allí sacándose la ropa? Eso es muy feo - para un papá también es muy feo que su hija se saque la ropa por allí. [That just isn't done, how are young women to go around taking off their clothes in public? That is very ugly - for a father it is also very ugly that his daughter goes around taking off her clothing.]

He goes on to tell her that the uncle is so distraught by his wife's behavior and the dishonor it brings to the family that he begins to drink and gamble to the point where he loses the wages of the employees he supervises at the train station. As a result of his actions, the employees take their revenge by slitting his throat (like a pig), burying his body in the field, and placing his head on a stake on the grounds of La Rabia. Poldo then goes on to tell Nati that even today her great-uncle still appears to young girls who undress in the fields and covers them with his cloak, and should the girls do it again, he returns to devour them.

Poldo's cautionary tale is meant to exert control over Nati's behavior and is indicative of the means through which children are socialized to behave in normative ways. Poldo's story not only demonstrates an anxiety over Nati's exhibitionist behavior, but also about her sexual maturation as a female child. Afraid that his daughter will begin to comport herself in ways unbecoming of a woman, Poldo shares a tragic and graphically horrific story that underscores the hard lesson learned in a barren and rural setting - transgression will lead to misfortune. For Poldo, life in the country is brutish

and the child's education should be based on these very same conditions. Thus, through the horrific story and other scenes in which Poldo instructs Nati in the care and often brutal realities of farm labor, such as teaching her to treat the open wounds of a cow, the film leads us to understand that the education of a child could be likened to the domestication of a wild thing.

Yet, the often violent and brutish education that Nati receives from her father is also transmitted in other ways within the filmic text. One of the main facets of the film is the inclusion of animated scenes that appear to stem from Nati's drawings and represent her emotional reaction to the events occurring around her. The animation dominates the *mise-en-scène* and is often characterized by pen-and-ink-style drawings on a paper white background. Infused with the ferocious emotions and reactions to the uncontrollable actions of the adults around her, the drawings at times depict the headless figure from her father's story and the gnashing teeth of wild beasts that threaten to devour the naked, vulnerable adults surrounding her. Interestingly, Nati's pen and ink drawings only ever depict attacks on the adults, thereby making them as vulnerable as the children outside the drawings. The interruption of the filmic text by the drawings have been described in following way:

The drawings of the girl come into view through a language that forces the limits of filmic verisimilitude and breaks with realism and its cinematic conventions.

Nati turns herself into an absolute projector, a viewer more than an agent, witness of the unspeakable, of her own passive exposure to violence, her own bodily vulnerability. (Josiewicz 3)

Hence, Nati's drawings not only break up the rhythm of *La rabia*, her emotion transformed into a rage that consumes the narrative and body of the text, but they also present a look into how the circumscribed disorder affects and engrains itself into the lived experiences of the child.

Through the vulnerability of the children, represented through their respective disabilities, *La rabia*, like the other films in this chapter, casts its gaze on the rift between generations and the decay of experience marked by the ineffectual relationship between parent and offspring. The inclusion of mute or crippled children underscores both the child's vulnerability as well as the challenge presented to the transmission of history. This is ever more significant, since Nati's attempts to communicate through her drawings end up increasing her own victimization and the cyclic nature of brutality that has no other answer but to be overcome by the finality of violence. Faced with an impossible situation, the children are stunted by the actions of the adults that surround them and learn the very means of violence to which they are repeatedly exposed.

Linking both the figure of the child and the amoral and violent landscape that surrounds them, the film's dénouement depicts the killing of the two adult men. Their murders are not, however, at the hands of one another as one might expect, but at the hands of their children. After seeing one of Nati's drawings that clearly depict a naked Pichón, Poldo travels to the neighbouring farm, where Ladeado, startled by his abrupt entrance, shoots him. Having obviously been influenced by the first killing, and after seeing how the violent sexual encounter between his father and Ale traumatizes Nati, Ladeado also then kills Pichón. Ladeado is the vessel through which the violence is enacted as he shoots both men, leaving the woman and young children exposed to other

forms of economic and social violence that will no doubt follow in the harsh terrain of the pampas. Ultimately, what ends up being most evident in *La rabia* is the watchful gaze of the children, who internalize the unspoken curriculum of brutality and are ultimately destroyed by and destroy what they see.

Through a deep focus on the vulnerable and precarious lives throughout, *La rabia* provides a dark vision of the rural setting, thus straying from the bucolic representation of a space so often the site of innocent tales of childhood.⁸⁵ Throughout the film, the brutality visited on the animals is time and again put on the same plane as the people in the vast space of the pampas. In an a sense, almost democratically, everything and everyone is brought down to the same level of cruelty and affliction, thereby challenging the traditional hierarchy of suffering that conditions the relationship between man and beast. Through a deliberate leveling out of the suffering captured on film, as it consumes the child figures within it, the film provides a representation of the ultimate failure in the transmission of traditions that Carri, through John Berger, has identified as that which excluded the rural farm worker from the ideological and sociopolitical structures of the nation. Ultimately, whether in a country or cityscape, *La rabia* insists that safe spaces do not and can't exist in present day Argentina.

In contrast to the violence and brutality presented in *La rabia*, Sofía Mora's 2009 film *La hora de la siesta* focuses on the stifling transient space of preadolescence. *La*

⁸⁵ Though not a definitive list, films that rely on the relationship between the child and nature include: *The Tree of Life* (Terence Malick, 2011); *El espíritu de la colmena* (Victor Erice, 1973); *La lengua de las mariposas* (1999) y *La educación de las hadas* (José Luis Cuerda, 2006); *The Secret Garden* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1949); *Wild Strawberries* (Ingmar Bergman, 1957); *Stand By Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986); *El laberinto del fauno* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006). For more on the relationship between the child and the idyllic see: "Tomboy Tales: The Rural, Nature and the Gender of Childhood" and "Little Figures, Big Shadows, Country Childhood Stories" (Owain Jones); *The Child in the Country* (Colin Ward, 1990). For a reading of the anti-idyllic in film see Kerry Kidd's "The Child in the Cinema: Representations of a Rural Dystopia in *Billy Elliot* and *The Color of Paradise*."

hora de la siesta is the director's first feature-length film and demonstrates one of the most interesting examples of the decay of social life in Argentina through the prism of childhood. The cinematography is exquisitely shot in black and white and the ellipsis between scenes produced by the fading to black of the screen provides a rich texture to the film. The time of the film is relatively short and spans an afternoon in the lives of three youths: Franca; her little brother, introduced only as "Flaco"/Slim; and her school friend, Genaro. The film transpires on the day of Franca's and Flaco's father's funeral. The camera captures the movements of the children over the course of a few hours in the afternoon as mourners gather in the family's home to view the body of the deceased before heading to the cemetery for the father's burial. The story follows the children as they leave their home, declaring it "tomada" or taken, and wander around their middle-class neighborhood.

Formally, the film concentrates on the space occupied by the children and captures their directionless wandering by the steady use of long shots marking the journey the children take during the few hours of privacy they have to grieve. During the course of their wandering through empty streets, they enter an abandoned church and, empty carnival grounds, and eventually encounter Genaro - a student from Franca's school who mysteriously disappeared one day and lives in a decrepit Victorian-style mansion with his ailing mother. The rest of the film focuses on the activities of the three children as they watch television, roam through the house, and partake in childhood games.

On the cusp of puberty, the children of *La hora* are bored, underwhelmed, and barren of any of the characteristics so closely held to the child. In his review of the film

for the publication *Clarín*, Miguel Frías states that through the film, Mora manages to recreate “a través de imágenes que recrean un complejo estado de ánimo - ese limbo en que no se es niño ni adulto, la preadolescencia.” [through the images that recreate a complex state of being - that limbo in which one is not a child nor an adult, preadolescence.] Furthermore, by summoning the indeterminate time of the day that acts as a limbo between the morning and afternoon hours — most often the nap time of children — the film also reminds the spectator of the expectant boredom of the period of adolescence in which we all experience the desire for something, anything, to happen. As Paraná Sendrós aptly observes of the element of the siesta in the film:

la hora de la siesta fue siempre entre nosotros la hora de las apariciones, de las perversiones, de los cuentos que se susurran de día, porque de noche dan más miedo, aunque en esa quietud también dan un poco de miedo, porque no hay ningún mayor que proteja a los chicos” [The hour of siesta was always for us the hour of apparitions, perversions, tales whispered during the day because by night they became scarier, even though in that stillness they also made us afraid because there isn't an adult around to protect the children.]

The time of “la siesta” also presents a time in which children were free from the constraints imposed on them by the structured time of adulthood. In this way, Mora’s film draws on the unique time of adolescence and the strangeness that embodies that particular in-between period of development.

Featuring children of this age is arguably part of a broader statement about the extra-filmic world in which all that appears familiar and stable is defamiliarized.⁸⁶ The

⁸⁶ I am borrowing the term defamiliarization from the Russian Formalist Victor Shlovsky’s essay “Art as Technique” in which he states the following: “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they

children are at an age in which the world presents both a familiarity as well as an estrangement. This paradox is based on a combination of changing bodies, changing roles and changing expectations vis-à-vis the adult world around them. While this development may seem continuous throughout childhood, changes occur in very definitive ways during this particular stage of development. This making strange that the film employs occurs as the child or adolescents begin to question both the language used and actions undertaken by adults around them.

The disconnect between adult and child worlds is especially relevant in the establishing scenes of the film. Franca's voice opens the film. The voice-over is heard over a series of cross-cuts between her staring out the window of a moving vehicle, the wheels of a hearse, and a woman's hands caressing a coffin during a funeral procession. She states:

Cuando era más chica siempre espiaba por las cerraduras. Pensaba que el mundo se frenaba cuando yo no estaba allí, que yo sola seguía andando - y miraba. Mi mamá cosía el ruedo de mi uniforme, mi papá arreglaba una lámpara rota, mi hermanito se peleaba con el gato. Entonces yo pensaba que los tres se dieron cuenta que yo estaba allí espiándolos y que todos actuaban para mí. Entonces me alejaba de la puerta pisando fuerte y volvía caminando despacio - nunca los pude ver congelados. Después crecí, creo. Ahora pienso que es al revés. Que cuando estoy sola me congelo y todos siguen andando. Algo parecido le estará pasando a mi papá. [When I was younger I always peeped through keyholes. I thought

are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important" (20).

that the world froze when I wasn't there and that only I continued moving - and I would watch. My mother would be hemming my school uniform. My father would be fixing a broken lamp. My brother would be playing with the cat. Therefore I thought that they must have realized that I was there spying on them and they were all acting for me. So I would move away from the door loudly and would come back quietly - I never saw them frozen. After that I grew up, at least I think so. Now I think the opposite. When I am alone I'm the one that is frozen and everyone else continues moving. Something similar must be happening to my father.]

Franca's blunt words also present a recognition that her very identity is dependent on her interaction with the outside world and reliance on other people to claim and shape a particular identity. In paralleling her coming of age to the death of her father, the filmic text broadens the terms of mourning beyond the mortality of the loved one she and her brother have lost, to the mourning of the end of a particular way of perceiving the world. The words also underscore her recognition of the parameters of her movement within the world, mainly that the world does not revolve around her, while also opening up the filmic text to the wandering that the children will undergo in the rest of the film.

Unlike the other two films discussed in this chapter, there is no visible mother figure in *La hora de la siesta*. Franca and Flaco stand outside the door of the room where their father's body is, also never shown, and where their mother is napping. Protecting the literal and metaphorical slumber of both their parents, the children appear to be guarding the door, not allowing the other adults to disturb them even when the funeral guests protest. This provokes their aunt to follow them into another room and plead with

them to let the visitors see the body. As the camera focuses on her aunt through Franca's point of view, the aunt says of the guests:

Está llegando más de la familia. ¿Sabés? Y todos quieren saludar a tu papá [More family is arriving. ¿Do you know? And they all want to greet your father.]

To which Franca replies dryly: "Mi papá está muerto." [My father is dead.] The conversation continues as the aunt, insentient of the reception of her words, insists that the guests have come a long way from Corrientes and that it would be great if both she and Flaco would allow each of them to go upstairs for a while, tranquilly. She indicates that it would make them "contentos" [content]. Flaco reacts to her choice of words by repeating: "¿Contentos?" Both Franca and Flaco's reaction to the carelessness and inconsistencies of their aunt's words underscore their disillusionment with both the expectations and norms of the adult world which they are growing into.

The interaction between the children and adults in the film establishes such a deep-seated sense of alienation on the part of the children that there is a mistrust and lack of connection between generations that haunts every encounter between them. Ultimately, the adults in the text appear both to talk at and see through the children during the funeral sequences. This is most apparent as Franca enters the living room full of adults dressed in black in another scene and the room comes to an impenetrable silence as she enters, and the adults gape at her without uttering a word. The camera angles again dismember the bodies of the adults in the frame, capturing them from Franca's point of view so that the *mise-en-scène* is comprised largely of lobotomized and decapitated heads. As Franca leaves the room, the conversation between the adults commences again.

Due to the uncanniness of the encounters between children and guests, Franca and Flaco take refuge in different parts of the house and eventually feel it necessary to abandon the house altogether. As they leave, Franca declares it “tomada” [taken], thereby invoking the short story by Julio Cortázar “Casa tomada” [House Taken Over] in which siblings Irene and the narrator live in a large, Victorian house that is invaded by a nameless group identified only as ‘they.’ As the intruders continue to take over the house section by section, the siblings are finally pushed out of the house altogether. Cortázar’s short story is most often interpreted as an allegory about class struggles in Argentina under Peronism and the ‘they’ are often assumed to be the lower classes.⁸⁷ However, in *La hora* the notion of the house being taken over, causing the siblings to retreat, is directly linked to the invasion of the adults into the intimate space of the siblings in mourning and therefore underscores a broader clash between adult and childhood geographies.

Expelled onto the city streets, the children undertake a voyage through a quiet and abandoned city. In scene after scene they wander the city streets, playing childhood games on playground equipment. Their odyssey is captured mainly through long shots establishing their smallness and the echoing emptiness of the areas around them. The emptying out of the world presents the ultimate escape from the inconsistencies of the adult modes of mourning and dealing with loss. The escape to the street is, as cultural

⁸⁷ “Casa tomada”, is often interpreted as a reaction to the economic restructuring of the socioeconomic order under Peronismo. However, Cortázar maintained that he did not write the story as a political allegory. For more on the political interpretation of the text see: Juan José Sebreli’s *Buenos Aires. Vida cotidiana y alienación*; David Viñas’s *De Sarmiento a Cortázar*. For an overview of criticism on the text see: Andrés Avellaneda’s *El habla de la ideología*; Rodolfo A. Borello’s *El peronismo en la narrativa argentina (1943-1955)*. For a reading of populism in relation to the text, see Brett Levinson’s “Populism, Aesthetics and Politics for Cortázar and for Us: Houses Taken Over.” For a comprehensive reading of the fantastic in Cortázar’s collection of short stories, including “La casa tomada”, see Gisele Amaya Dal Bó “Lo fantástico en ‘Bestiario’ de Cortázar.”

geographers point out, a well-defined aspect of young behavior, since it is read as “an important arena for young people wanting to escape adult surveillance and define their own identities and ways of being” (Valentine 84). Through the act of roaming, in an act evocative of Michel de Certeau’s rebellious wandering in the controlled city, the children set out their own course and mark a break with adult organization and control of space.⁸⁸

Furthermore, the fact that the children escape to a public space and not a shopping centre also provides an opening in the filmic text to think about broader transformations in Argentina that have made the world controllable and profitable. As Gill Valentine notes in *Public Space and the Culture of Childhood*, most Western nations have made substantial efforts to ‘aestheticize’ what is seen as the unruly and potentially dangerous public space by converting a grand portion of these into shopping malls or other places of consumption.⁸⁹

This notion is particularly important in Argentina where cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo observes the effects of these transformations on youth culture in the country. Sarlo’s text, *Escenas de la vida posmoderna* [Scenes from a Postmodern Life], laments the decay of a youth culture that once promised to hold accountable the state and other forms of authority. The author proposes that youth is in crisis, threatened by an ever diminishing authority from which revolt is co-opted by the free market wherein “morality

⁸⁸ I consider the child’s circulation through the open space of the city to recall Michel de Certeau’s assurance that to walk, and appropriate, the city streets is an enunciative act (96).

⁸⁹ The relationship between the market and unruly places is never as clear as in the case of the Punta Carretas shopping mall in Montevideo. The mall was originally a penitentiary in the early twentieth century, later becoming a detention center for members of the left wing guerilla group “Movement of National Liberation- Tupamarus.” Shortly after the end of the dictatorial period the site was turned into a shopping center. Hugo Achugar and Victoria Ruétalo provide overviews of the center, claiming that its construction was directly linked to the oblivion surrounding the Uruguayan dictatorial period (1973-1985). For a comprehensive overview of the transformations of the center from penitentiary to shopping mall through the last century, see Scaron. Susana Draper provides a detailed analysis of the center, comparing it to other places and texts in Latin American countries that experienced dictatorships in the 1970s in an attempt to examine the connection between the transformation of space and Neoliberal reform.

ceases to be a terrain of significant conflict, to become a catalogue of banal statements” (Sarlo 32). The resulting effect of the privatization of the public commons in the country to the whims of mass culture is ultimately the impoverishment of a youth culture that traditionally played a starring role in intellectual culture during much of the twentieth century.⁹⁰

The general impoverishment of social life and the effects on the young is never as apparent in *La hora* as with the appearance of Genaro Di Testa. In the filmic text he is presented as the awkward boy who would often turn his eyelids inside out and chase the girls around the playground and now dedicates himself to the dissemination of internet porn. From the outset, Genaro is presented as a repellant character with whom Franca would walk to school holding hands even though his constant sweating disgusted her. Having disappeared from school one day, Genaro presents “un espectro de los confusos tiempos por venir, del final definitivo de la niñez y el comienzo de una adultez asfixiante” [a specter of the confusing times ahead, the definitive end of childhood and the commencement of an asphyxiating adulthood] (Frías). Extremely obese, Genaro wears a tight-fitting t-shirt with the words “Good Year” which he has absentmindedly put on inside out. He lives with his dying mother, whom he has left school to care for, in a decaying home that he indicates to Franca is going to be repossessed by the bank.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Sarlo provides a long list of authors and intellectuals that formed part of a politically and socially engaged group of young people, thereby setting the stage for future generations. Among those she identifies are mostly members of the University Reform Movement who sought to break with their conservative professors: José Ingenieros, José Enrique Rodó, Alfredo Palacios, and Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre. Valeria Manzano provides a comprehensive analysis of the role in youth in the cultural and political spheres in Argentina in her doctoral dissertation *The Making of Youth in Argentina: Culture, Politics, and Sexuality, 1956-1976*. Manzano maintains that youth not only had a central role in the construction of the present-day Argentine culture, but that it also provided a locus through which Argentines negotiated their identities during complex social and political changes in the country.

⁹¹ This can be read as a clear instance in which the economic crisis is projected into the fictional world of the film and brought to bear on the domestic space.

Of the child characters to circulate in this grouping of films, Genaro is probably the most non-normative due to his weight, which the characters comment on regularly throughout the film, and the fact that he cares for his ailing mother in a dilapidated mansion constructed sometime in the early twentieth century. The unconventional lighting and takes of the home space, characterized by leaky ceilings, crumbling paint, and darkened corners, present a definitive discord with the projected opulence of the period in which it was constructed.⁹² The compressed frames in the film thus yield a constrictive feeling to the film and underscore the oppressive ambience of the home space for the young characters. Highlighting the labour involved in caring for his mother through takes of Genaro before a table of vials and syringes in one scene, or holding a bedpan in another, the film presents the ultimate failure of familial, social, and public institutions that would otherwise spare a child from having to leave school to care for an ailing family member. Juxtaposed with the earlier scenes of the siblings circulating in the liberating space of the city, Genaro's home space becomes ever more claustrophobic, thus underscoring his entombment in the house.

Genaro's estrangement from the outside world is not only marked by his physical appearance and his adult responsibilities in caring for an ailing parent, but is also presented through his disquieting behavior towards Franca. In one scene, Franca sits with Genaro in his room and asks him to play the game "cuarto oscuro" [dark room] with

⁹² Not only is the house reminiscent of Cortázar's "Casa tomada", but it also evokes the house depicted in Leopoldo Torre Nilsson's 1957 film *La casa del ángel*. The film revolves around an affluent young woman, Ana Castro, who lives in an opulent yet asphyxiating environment. As in the case of Genaro, the protagonist is stifled by her social obligations and is unable to navigate the perplexing transition to adulthood.

her. Genaro says that he doesn't know how to play.⁹³ Even after explaining the game to him, Genaro does not want to play. As Franca leaves the room and proceeds down the stairs she kisses Genaro on the cheek. Genaro starts to cackle hysterically, flips his eyelids inside out, and begins to chase her through the house. With the wind as the only sound, the camera follows Franca through the dark, decaying house. In some takes spectators see Franca from Genaro's point of view as he chases her through the dark corridors laughing maniacally the entire time. Franca becomes more fearful as the chase continues and she finally finds a table under which to hide. She screams out for Flaco, her brother, when Genaro finally finds her. His reaction to her screams is nothing more than a blank stare and he states: "Fuiste tú la que quería jugar." [You were the one who wanted to play.]

As Genaro exits the room Flaco is seen entering. Franca says to Flaco: "Espero que se pudra." [I hope he rots.] Walking the line between childhood and adulthood and limited by the lack of socialization with other people his age, Genaro presents a disquieting sexual maturation. As if not completely conscious of his intimidating adult-like body, Genaro's chasing game presents the uneasy limits between playfulness and predatory behavior. The excess of the chase scene, replete with the motion of the camera through the labyrinth-like interior of the decrepit mansion, underscores the troublesome boundaries that characterize the fleeting period of life of the child protagonists of *La hora*.

Furthermore, through the film's focus on the state of the house and on Genaro's disappearance, Mora draws out larger notions surrounding the degradation of social

⁹³ Genaro's statement about not being able to play can be read as more than just not knowing the rules of "el cuarto oscuro." It can also be read as his inability to access the playfulness other children his age are able to partake in.

bonds and domestic life more broadly in Argentina. The house and the forgotten child — a child who no one noticed had disappeared from school one day — allude to the general decay of the middle class, and the institutions traditionally associated with it, in the years leading up to the economic collapse of 2001. As sociologist Maristella Svampa proposes in *Los que ganaron. La vida en los countries y barrios privados* [Those Who Won. Life in gated and private communities], the emergence of gated communities as they are known today was a relatively recent phenomenon in Argentina. Svampa argues that the emergence of private bedroom communities outside of urban centers began in the mid-1990s and is reflective of a significant shift in the social structures of a country that, particularly during the Peronist era, was characterized by the heterogeneity of the distinct neighborhoods of the city (14). The significant restructuring of physical space in the city that accompanied the privatization of traditional public commons, specifically with the creation of private schools within the gated communities, is indicative of the collapse of social bonds that culminated in the economic collapse at the end of the decade.

Interestingly, even though throughout *La hora* spectators are faced with children in various states of vulnerability presented through either a state of mourning or social marginalization, the film does not incite the empathy for the child characters such as that incited for Ladeado and Nati from the film *La rabia*. This lack of emotional connection to the child characters on the part of spectators derives from the very nature of the children depicted. All three children depicted in the film exceed “the limits of what it is to be a child” in reference to conventional representations of children in film (James and Jenks 321). Franca, Genaro, and Flaco present a definitive lack of emotion in relating to one another, often referring to one another with derogatory names, and also show little

connection to the people and creatures in the world around them. The lack of empathy and connection between the characters in the filmic text also precludes the spectator from empathizing with the characters.

The absence of societal cohesion and abundance of social isolation is not only reflected in the representation of the domestic and public spaces of the city, but is also reflected in the unexpected behavior and experiences of the child characters in *La hora*. The lack of affect or connection with one another is precisely what Laura Podalsky examines in *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*, as a result of the preponderance of films that focus on disaffected youth. Utilizing Frederic Jameson's notion of the 'waning of affect' that characterizes postmodernity, Podalsky argues that the disaffected youth featured in Latin American films represent broader concerns about the depoliticization of youth culture in Latin America in general.⁹⁴ As Podalsky convincingly argues, films that impede spectators from empathizing or relating to characters, through the rejection of a particular character's standpoint or a straightforward narratological representation, instead invite spectators into the world of the film through a deep focus on "the rhythms and textures of the everyday experiences of their young protagonists" (20). Therefore, films that at first may appear to focus on the quotidian and uneventful aspects of young people's lives can, through the very texture of the film, allude to broader political implications, thereby engaging "historical legacies and contemporary political realities tangentially, through gestures and metaphors" (Podalsky 122).

⁹⁴ Indicating a dramatic break with Modernist aesthetics, Jameson describes the waning of affect as the loss of a deliberate connection to the historical context, depth, and origin of a particular work of art (*Postmodernism* 9).

Consequently, the children that circulate in *La hora* present a rupture in a filmic tradition that present children as witnesses to the atrocities of history or the social world around them as they are in the films analyzed in the second chapter of this project. Instead, the characters look out on the world with detachment and a pronounced lack of sentiment. This notion is most apparent in the scene in which Franca enters Genaro's mother's room to look for string to use in one of her and Flaco's games. As in the funeral scenes in the children's home, the woman's face is cast in shadow and cut off in the frame. The woman moans and writhes in pain. Franca seems immune to her panting and groaning and proceeds to say the following to her:

Hola, yo soy Franca y soy amiga de su hijo. Bueno, en realidad, amigos no. Hace mucho tiempo que no nos vemos. Éramos amigos. Compañeros. Está gordo su hijo. Tiene que darle de comer mejor. Balanceado. Como a los perros. En cambio usted está flaquita, se conserva bien. Esto que tiene ya se le va a pasar, faltan unos remedios que vienen de los Estados Unidos y va a ver qué se le pasa. [Hi, I'm Franca and I'm a friend of your son's. Well, we're not really friends. It's been a long time since we've seen one another. We were friends. Classmates. Your son is fat. You have to give him healthier foods. Well balanced. Like you would a dog. By contrast you are skinny, you maintain your figure. This sickness you have will be over soon, medication will be arriving from the United States and you'll be over it.]

The woman begs for some water to drink as her sighs, breathing, and groans become louder. As the woman reaches out for her, Franca proceeds to give her a glass of water and asks her if she has seen any string lying around. Franca then exits the room leaving

the woman alone to her suffering. Neither the woman nor the encounter is mentioned again in the film.

Marking the isolation of the child characters who circulate in the world of the film but display extreme detachment from it, Mora presents spectators with a hollow child who sees everything but hasn't the inclination to invest in anything in the world around it. Following the activities of the child figures one long and dreamy afternoon, Mora's film provides a look into the world of the child in transition between one temporality and another. Through the visual economy of the film that sets the camera's eye on the invasive relations of mourning, the alienated city, and the forgotten stately manor, *La hora* provides spectators with a sense of the strangeness and disconcertion of that time between childhood and adulthood. Furthermore, by parcelling out the different worlds of the adult and the child and, at times, presenting the world through the defamiliarizing eyes of the child, Mora's film highlights the effects of a collapse of social institutions for those who have never known the world before.

As the above readings of the child figure underscore, thinking about how this figure is represented allows for a broader reading of societal structures and conditions. In *La ciénaga*, *La rabia*, and *La hora de la siesta*, spectators are presented with unruly child figures who, through the domestic and social contexts they are born into, represent the decay of social life in modern Argentina. Playing on the juxtaposition between the child and adult worlds, all three films reject what John O. Thompson, inspired by André Bazin's reading of Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero*, considers the anthropomorphism of the child in film. For Thompson, Bazin rightly critiques this notion since the child figure is necessarily unknowable and the films that reflect this unknowability, indeed the

emptiness of the figure, rely on the notion “that the child/adult *difference* is as great as, or at least analogous to, the animal/human difference” (208).

As a result, all three films depict the complex valences that separate adult and child ways of looking at the world. In each of the films, child characters are characterized by a particular vulnerability to the discursive and physical violences imposed by the adult geographies around them. The notion of deficiency is generally attributed to children, wherein the child is perceived as lacking experience, maturity, and the ability to read social situations. However, in these films it is the adults that lack the skills and abilities to affect any sort of change in their lives, while the children bear the brunt or violence of their debilities. What the spectator perceives in all the films is the failure on the part of the adults to protect, intervene, and guide the development of the children.

Through all three films, the child figure is cast as the inheritor of a crippling political and socioeconomic system that threatens the cohesiveness of family structures and is experienced primarily through his or her body. That the child stands in for the political in the film is evocative of Lee Edelman’s contention that “the figural child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation’s good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights ‘real’ citizens are allowed” (Edelman 11). The question then remains - what kinds of citizens do the scarred, violent, and apathetic children circulating in these films present?

Through the neglect of vulnerable child bodies, *La ciénaga* presents the decay of middle-class family life and affirms the end of the bourgeois aspirations apparent to everyone but the families depicted. Furthermore, through the pervasive sounds of the

swamp that at times echoes so loudly it is hard to make out little else, the film enstates a richness of sensual experience that, accompanied by the surface of the image, allows spectators a view into the interior of the domestic space. Through the act of looking and feeling, spectators glimpse the unraveling of bourgeois values to the point in which the boundaries between different classes and races slip away as easily as bodies slip in and out of the beds that pervade the filmic text. The child death that marks the end of the film is equally solemn, never providing spectators the catharsis that they anticipate and instead confronting them with a small body strewn amongst furniture. As Bazin asserts of child death scenes such as this, “our emotion is thus rid of all sentimentality, for it has been filtered out by force through our intelligence” (12). Thus the film ends by presenting us with a child death emptied out of its emotive gravity.

In a similar vein, *La rabia* underscores the vulnerability of child and adult alike, thus indicating that there is no escape, not even in the expansiveness of the pampas, from the violent contexts the characters are born into. Through the leveling out of the hierarchies between man and animal, the film insists on the vulnerability of every being to the everyday violence that pervades the rural spaces. Throughout the course of the film, Ladeado and Nati are schooled in the harsh realities of life in the peripheries of modern society until it comes time to visit such lessons back on their masters. Thus, violence becomes the very means through which the cycle is perpetuated. Overall, *La rabia* provides spectators with a child figure, Nati, who sees all yet lacks the capacity to communicate or alleviate the suffering around her. In a similar way, Ladeado is also imprinted, or filled up, by the violence that surrounds him.

Finally, *La hora de la siesta* provides us with child characters in the throes of transition. Straddling the fine line between childhood and adolescents, they cannot but question everything around them. Mistrusting the adult world that lies before them, their sense of the world is made strange for the spectator. Through their ever-estranging perspective on the world, Franca, Genaro, and Flaco present an unflinching emptiness that not only attests to the decay of social cohesion in Argentina, but also alludes to the hollowing out of the child figure in and of itself.

As these films demonstrate, child characters present a vacancy that allows directors to recreate and extend the limits of the child in order to provide an account of the contradictory national mythologies and discourses that became starkly visible during the economic crisis of 2001. Though the projection of the empty child informs and upholds the directives of the filmmaker, it is worth questioning whether or not the child figure must always be necessarily characterized by both emptiness and fullness. Are there, in fact, other ways in which the child figure can be used to project or deconstruct the extra-filmic world? And finally, can the child figure ever be more than the *tabula rasa* that it is so often envisioned to be?

CHAPTER FOUR

The Illegible Child: Sexuality and Desire in Contemporary Argentine Film

The sexual disavowal is, therefore, a political disavowal.
-Jacqueline Rose

The opening scene of María Luisa Bemberg's 1986 film, *Miss Mary*, presents a conservatively dressed middle-aged woman in the company of two girls around the ages of ten and five, in white cotton nightgowns kneeling beside their beds. Shot in soft lighting, the girls prepare for bed as their parents enter the room decked out in regalia on their way out for a celebration of Argentine general José Félix Uriburu's overthrow of then president Hipólito Yrigoyen.⁹⁵ As the parents exit the room after giving the girls good night kisses, the mother reminds the girls to check under their beds before falling asleep. The nanny proceeds with the bedtime routine answering the girls' questions related to the overthrow of Yrigoyen and whether or not he is really a bad man. The nanny explains in her precise English accent: "He is a rebel rouser, an awful old man, running after all those little girls." As the nanny provides her perspective on the overthrown president, she is depicted tying together the sleeves of the youngest of the sisters. The scene ends with the oldest of the girls pleading with the nanny to leave the light on as they sleep. Her pleas are denied by Miss Ethel with a stern: "Nonsense, child,

⁹⁵ John King provides a rich reading of the film and the degradation of relations between Argentina and the British Empire. King notes that in Bemberg's film popular cultural references are mainly from the United States. Furthermore, he reads the attitudes of the oligarchy and their British counterparts as extensions of the civilization/barbarism binary (King 164-165).

you have to learn to conquer your silly fears.” As soon as the nanny exits the room, the younger of the girls jumps into bed with her sister and they begin singing the popular American song of the era, “Ain’t She Sweet.”⁹⁶

In its entirety, the scene projects a number of important themes that Bemberg examines through the rest of the film. Focusing on the elite class of provincial landowners towards the beginning of the twentieth century, the scene demonstrates the importance of sexual and social expectations surrounding the upbringing of children at that time. The mother’s (Mecha) insistence that the girls check under their beds before falling asleep also highlights the fear instilled in females, even at an early age, of the danger presented to them in a sociohistorical context in which even presidents “run after little girls.”

It is, however, the nanny’s inconspicuous act of tying the sleeves of the youngest of the girls that presents one of the most telling aspects of Bemberg’s critique of the origins of the repression of women’s sexuality and patriarchy in contemporary Argentina. The tying of the sleeves is meant to prevent the child from exploring different parts of her body during the night, when there will be no one present to watch over her. John King describes the act as reflective of Victorian notions regarding children and sexuality and describes the act itself as a form of sexual shackling (166). What is more, the repression that characterized the education of upper-middle class women, who through their social status were to become the wives and mothers of political leaders and powerful landowners, was based on the denial of any sort of intimate knowledge of or control of their bodies. The surveillance and care taken to control the girl’s behavior becomes a

⁹⁶ Elia Geoffrey Kantaris considers the song sung by the young girls to constitute the internalization of the prominent sexual discourse of the time that cast women as sexual objects to be seen and never heard (129).

fundamental part of what Michel Foucault describes as the pedagogization of children's sex, meaning that parents, families, educators, doctors, and, eventually, psychologists would have to be vigilant of the child and his or her propensity towards sex and onanism (42-43). The action of tying the child's sleeves and the nighttime routine depicted throughout the scene underscore the often discomfiting relationship between childhood and sexuality.

Moreover, by connecting the political realities of Argentine provincial politics to the sexual repression of children, and female children in particular, the Bemberg film provides a striking look at the ways in which the political climate in the country was reflected in the domestic space of the family. Not only does her film provide a critique of paternalistic traditions across these areas, but the film's focus on the relationship and education of the children in the home establishes the figure of the child as a useful tool for destabilizing and allegorizing the sociopolitical climate of the twentieth century.

Today, contemporary Argentine female directors, like Bemberg twenty years before, utilize the film medium to raise broader critiques about the status of women and other marginal figures by undermining the continual focus on the body and sexuality of female protagonists reflective of commercial cinema. As Jessica Stites Mor asserts, the two most significant vehicles of articulation for feminist ideology are found in the human rights movements and in contemporary filmmaking. She maintains that it has been female directors that have taken up some of the most critical stances on politics and feminism (137-138).

Francine Masiello emphasizes the importance of the woman and the role of gender in cultural productions in the Southern Cone since the period of democratization. She

argues that the woman and other marginal figures became central to post-dictatorship culture after the decline of the popular subject.⁹⁷ Masiello draws from Chilean cultural critic Nelly Richard's notion of "micropractices," which are essentially gendered representations that cast 'difference' as a way to target the contradictory discourses of democracy, thereby challenging metropolitan practices. Masiello also utilizes Néstor Perlongher's notion of "devenir mujer," to claim that the gendered body in representation brings into relief the relationship between the intellectual and the political.⁹⁸ Overall, Masiello proposes that gender in the work of art functions as part of a broader longing for completion. Thus, works of art that incorporate gender or other minority subjectivities also serve to highlight the gaps "between experience and language, finding ways to sustain and reintegrate difference, to seek a common space for dialogue outside of neoliberal divide" (Masiello 18). If, as critics suggest, contemporary Argentine film provides a way to stage differences that the gaps in the façade of modern life under Neoliberalism attempt to conceal, what does the figure of the child and its relationship to sexuality hold for such representations?

This chapter begins with the notion that not only do the films of New Argentine Cinema dramatize the relationship between the child and his or her sexuality, but they also work steadily to disrupt spectator expectations surrounding it. This chapter will examine the representation of sex and the child figure in order to see how the figure

⁹⁷ According to Masiello, under Neoliberalism the popular subject is turned into the modern-day delinquent with the objective of destroying allegiances between the middle and popular classes. This also meant that any intellectual endeavor that engaged with the popular subject was also set up for failure and established a crisis in theory throughout Latin America. Masiello also states that the separation between intellectual culture and popular social actors is the product of neoliberal thinking itself insofar as it places emphasis on an erotics of difference and announces pluralism as the primary condition for entering the market-run sphere (37).

⁹⁸ Masiello argues that Néstor Perlongher's focus on the margins of a society that in turn produce new centers also provides a "close-up view of processes of negotiation and dissent" (41).

challenges established ways of perceiving nation and society. As prior chapters in this project have illustrated, thinking through the representations of children on film brings into sharp relief broader notions regarding the construction of the child figure. This is especially important since in most cases childhood is constructed once the time of childhood has ended. In other words, the ways in which childhood is narrativized reflect more about the adult looking back than about the actual childhood itself.

Demonstrating the difficulty embodied in the figure of the child, Jacqueline Rose, in her seminal work, *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Literature*, reminds her readers of the impossibility of speaking for the child. Establishing the relationship between literary works written for children and the unchanging, static image of the child they not only cater to but also produce, Rose examines adult investment in the child. This investment, she contends, reflects both the sexual and social function of the child within the narrative of adult psychosocial development. This is especially true when speaking of the child figure: "The child is sexual, but its sexuality (bisexual, polymorphous, perverse) threatens our own at its very roots. Setting up the child as innocent is not, therefore, repressing its sexuality – it is above all holding off any possible challenge to our own" (Rose 4). James Kincaid also considers the relationship between child sexuality and the adult world and in *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* examines how the conventional notion of childhood innocence functions as an erotics that still circulates in literary and cultural works today. Not only does he situate these discourses of innocence in literary works; he also proposes that "narratives of the child not only focus and allow desire, but also erase various social and political

complications, performing essential cultural work that is not simply erotic” (Kincaid, “Producing” 11).

However, as the collection of essays *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* argues, not all childhoods are constructed equally. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley ask readers to focus on the unruly child figures, often referred to as queer, that work beyond the conventional representation of this figure to push the limits of what childhood sexuality is generally professed to be. Both scholars address the power that representations hold over the child and future formulations of the child, noting that it is ultimately an adult who “decides what is inside and outside the narrative world, which is also, implicitly, a decision about what is inside or outside a world whose language tries to normalize some behaviors at the expense of others” (Bruhm and Hurley 10). Most scholars of childhood echo Bruhm’s and Hurley’s assurance that childhood is a narrative constructed mainly from the safety of adulthood and seldom from the perspective of the children themselves.

This chapter will highlight three films that focus on the relationship between children and sexuality: Albertina Carri’s *Géminis* (2005), Lucrecia Martel’s *La niña santa* (2004), and Lucía Puenzo’s *XXY* (2007). In these films, the figure of the child challenges conventional notions surrounding sexual identity, desire, and childhood. The films present characters that are either physically non-normative or demonstrate “deviant” behavior and desires. All three films present teenage protagonists whose position between developmental stages and their impending entrance into adult sexual behavior present the central conflicts in the films. These films also relate this deviation from traditional representations of children to larger critiques about the failure of

traditional institutions and anxieties regarding futurity within the Argentine context. The main objective of this chapter will be to show how these representations disrupt a sense of order and stimulate questions pertaining to societal notions of propriety and order through the lens of adolescent sexuality.

Géminis is Albertina Carri's second feature-length film and focuses on teenage siblings Magdalena (Meme) and Jeremías (Jere) who are involved in a sexual relationship with one another when their older brother, Ezequiel (Eze), returns to Argentina after having married a Spanish woman, Montserrat (Montse). Upon Eze's and Montse's return to Argentina, his mother, Lucía, plans an elaborate celebration to take place on their country estate. As the wedding planning is underway, the family relocates to the estate where they begin to reintegrate into domestic life. As the interactions between family members begin to get heated, Eze discovers Meme and Jere together the night before his wedding. After beating his brother and admonishing his sister, Eze returns to Spain with Montse vowing never to return. At the same time, over the course of the film Meme's and Jere's relationship becomes more transgressive to spectators and eventually culminates in the mental breakdown of their mother when she discovers them together. Afterwards, the siblings make up a story about their mother having tried to commit suicide and continue their romantic relationship.

Though not as well received by critics as Carri's other films, *Géminis* received a great deal of attention for its representation of bourgeois family life through the breaking of the incest taboo. As one reviewer notes of the film:

Géminis representa una decidida inmersión en la disfuncionalidad familiar burguesa argentina (“no creo que haya una sola familia que no sea disfuncional”,

le dijo Carri a *Las 12*), al tiempo que pone al espectador en un lugar particularmente incómodo: el del voyeur que contempla, no sin buenas dosis de libido, cómo hermana y hermano –María Abadi y Lucas Escariz, jóvenes, bellos y sexies– se dan el gusto por los rincones. [*Gemini* represents a decided immersion into the dysfunction of the Argentine bourgeois family (“I don’t think there exists any family that is not dysfunctional”, Carri stated to *Las 12*), while at the same time placing the spectator in a particularly uncomfortable position: that of the voyeur that contemplates, not without a good doses of libido, how brother and sister - Maria Abadi and Lucas Escariz, young, beautiful and sexy - please themselves in all corners]

Like many of the films discussed in this project, the social status of the family is prominently presented. Even so, *Géminis*, is the most direct in its indictment of Argentine upper-class family life and its propensity for wanting to differentiate itself from other classes and social groups in the country. The film locates the impetus for the taboo relationship that develops between the siblings within the very structure of the family. More concerned about the family’s status and appearance within their social circle, family members live in a state of denial about the nature of Meme’s and Jere’s relationship even as the relationship between the two becomes ever more evident.

Incest is thought to be a universal notion that changes depending on the culture and context, however, there is still a great deal of debate about its origins.⁹⁹ Essentially,

⁹⁹ In anthropology, incest taboos are said to exist in every culture and in many tribal origin stories and myths. Turner and Maryanski provide a thorough examination of the incest taboo by highlighting the debates surrounding the origins of the taboo and its interpretation through different cultures and modes of thinking. However, the parameters of what is considered taboo vary from one era and culture to another, thus allowing for some unions between clan (or modern family) members and outlawing others. The origins of the incest taboo are also subject to great debate and range from questions surrounding the biological

the incest taboo is about controlling who is able to form unions. In the anthropological notion of exogamy, coupling and marriage become an integral part of controlling resources. Claude Lévi-Strauss's work is helpful for thinking about how the incest taboo reaffirms social codes of propriety and serves to constrain individual actions that are deemed to disturb the established social order. Under the feudal system in which firm divides between classes were maintained, the impulse to commit incest acted as a guarantee of retaining a family's social status and resources while also protecting the family from the contamination that marrying into lower classes entailed (Whigham 62).

While the desire to commit incest may have enabled families to protect and maintain class privileges under the feudal system, under the current cultural climate incest is most often perceived to be a pervasive problem in lower-class and racial minority households (Wilson 84). The incest taboo also stems from notions surrounding gender and patriarchal structures, for as Mary Hamer points out, "When western cultures forbid siblings to marry, it may be on the grounds that they already know themselves to be so close as children of the same parents that anything closer would put the general separation between the sexes that is enforced at risk" (29). As Cuban literary critic Leidy Vidal García indicates, it is commonly thought that there are two types of families that are more vulnerable to incest: families who grow inwardly so that members cannot easily find space outside of the family fold, and families characterized by very little structure

viability of the offspring resulting from incestuous unions (see L.H. Morgan; Gilbert et.al) to the idea that a natural aversion to coupling occurs in individuals raised in the same environment (see Edvard Westermarck; Robin Fox). Still, one of the most prominent understandings of the incest taboo derives from the theory that the ban on incest was enacted in order to enable the unity of the family and an adequate protection of its youngest members (see B.Malinowski; Talcott Parsons). The other highly regarded theory is that the outlawing of incest allowed the family to marry outside of itself, thereby allowing it to grow in numbers (see E.B. Tylor; L.A. White).

such that sexual restrictions are not upheld and members of the family easily become love objects (13).

The incestuous relationship so central to *Géminis* partakes in a long tradition of literary and artistic representation featuring sibling incest. As Elizabeth Barnes notes in her introduction to *Incest and the Literary Imagination*, “Incest represents the mysterious, vexing, sometimes ungovernable but always undeniable power of kinship ties and their widespread ramifications for individuals and society at large” (1). In Freudian psychoanalysis the sibling complex is thought to stem from the transference of desire from the mother or father to the subject’s sibling (usually of the opposite sex) who is more available to him or her.

In one of the first comprehensive studies of the theme of incest in literature, *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend*, Otto Rank traces the sibling complex through mythology and literature and claims that it is a prevalent motif in Western and non-Western culture and oral tradition. Furthermore, he asserts that incest committed by a brother and sister is a substitution for the desire or incestuous feelings between a parent and child (Rank 364).

Among the most prominent themes presented in *Géminis* is the constraints of upper-class life in Argentina and the claustrophobic environment exacerbated by an overbearing mother figure that makes the children in the film more likely to look inward and act upon their desires. This notion is presented in the first scene of the film with a closeup of a syringe piercing the skin of an unknown person’s arm and its barrel filling with a startlingly red and viscous fluid.¹⁰⁰ The blood is then placed on a microscope slide

¹⁰⁰ The blood test can also be interpreted as Meme’s pregnancy test, a pregnancy which is presented in an alternate ending of the film.

and a vial is placed in a centrifuge before finally being labelled and placed next to another vial of blood. The shot then transitions, via wipe, to a domestic space where the walls are painted red and the camera proceeds into the bedroom of middle-aged parents Lucía and Daniel. The beginning sequence and transition to the domestic space underscore the importance of blood, determined by the centrifugal forces that act upon the siblings, and the dysfunctional family dynamic that builds throughout the film.¹⁰¹

Characterized by tight camera angles and the closed-in interiors of domestic space, the beginning sequence provides insight into the constricted space of the family in which family members cannot help but come into bodily contact with one another. Early in the film, Meme sits on the couch watching a nature documentary as Jere moves to sit on the couch with her. Jere asks her what she is watching and intimately stretches his legs across her lap. She informs him that she is watching a documentary about pandas born in captivity. She then tells him that she finds it strange that although the mother tries at first to care for both pandas, she must ultimately abandon one of them. Meme indicates that she is unsure if the mother panda cannot care for both because of the state of captivity or because of her nature. Her query provokes a similar questioning of whether or not the incestuous relationship between her and her brother is not a byproduct of the insularity of the family. Her inquiry, however, is quickly deemed irrelevant by Jere's response: "Seguro que es por el cautiverio. ¿Cómo un animal tan grande no va a

¹⁰¹ Blood became exceedingly important in Argentine nation formation. In his work on the minor and lesser known literatures of the 1800s that work against foundational fictions and present the nation as the site of sterility, Juan Carlos González Espitia proposes that blood can be conceived of "as heritage, as a means of exchange, as language, as an object susceptible to infection, as a source of life energy, as a mark of kinship, as a distinctive brand, as a sign of denial, and as a means of duplication of identity or ideas" (107). Accompanying the notion of 'pureza de sangre' [purity of blood] that characterized social relations in the Colonial period, only to reemerge under a slightly different denotation during the late nineteenth century when positivism and Darwinian evolutionary discourse gained traction in the area, blood relations and lineage became integral factors in the affirmation of elite power in the country (Novoa 231).

poder cuidar a dos chiquitos?” [I’m sure it is because of the captivity. How can an animal so large not be able to care for two little ones?] The inclusion of the panda discussion foreshadows the scene in which Lucía finally discovers the siblings having sex, and having lost her wits crawls on all fours (due to a broken leg she gets after falling later in the film) towards her transgressing children.¹⁰² However, the panda documentary also introduces the asymmetrical treatment of the siblings by Lucía (she is often shown chastising Meme and praising or embracing Jere) and the absent presence of the children’s father, Daniel, who occasionally exerts his patriarchal power to rein in family members during their arguments.

The captivity reflected in the film with the allusion to the panda bears is also reflected in the everyday relationship between parents and children in *Géminis*. In what Albertina Carri describes as an “exceso de palabras” [an excess of words], Lucía complains incessantly about the siblings’ constant arguing, indicating at one point in the film upon sending them out for groceries:

Lucía: Y allí están los dos, es increíble. No hay día en que no se peleen. Si no empieza uno, empieza el otro. Ahora eso sí, si es en contra de mí entonces sí se juntan. [And there they are the two of them, it’s incredible. Not a day goes by in which they don’t fight. If one doesn’t start a fight, the other one does. That is, unless they fight against me, then they come together]

Lucía’s misreading of the fights between the siblings as the stuff of children and not the antagonistic and heated battles of lovers is only one of the first indications of her inability to face the true nature of Meme and Jere’s relationship.

¹⁰² Lucía’s fall is also reminiscent of Mecha’s fall in *La ciénaga* and thus also underscores the decadence of the Argentine upper middle class.

Not only is her blindness to the relationship emphasized, but there are also indications that her relationship with the siblings is conditioned by a marked and unsettling preference for Jere.¹⁰³ In one scene, a tipsy Lucía converses with her sister, Inés, about the fights between Jere and Meme. During the exchange, she clearly shows her preference and empathy for Jere and talks about Meme more as a rival than a daughter. When her sister attempts to reassure her that fighting is part of a normal sibling relationship, and that they too tried “to scratch out one another’s eyes” in childhood, Lucía responds in the following way:

No es lo mismo, Inés. Nosotras nos peleábamos por ropa, por novios, por cosas normales de la convivencia. Ellos . . . no sé . . . no es humano pelearse tanto. Francamente aunque lo entiendo a Jere, porque la verdad es que es tan intolerante esa chica. [It’s not the same, Inés. We fought over clothes, boyfriends, and the normal things regarding cohabitation. They . . . I don’t know . . . it isn’t human to fight so much. Frankly though, I understand Jere, because the truth is that girl is intolerable.]

Lucía’s words, and her obsession over her children’s disagreements, denote a strong resentment towards her daughter and preference for one child over the other (much like the mother panda bear at the beginning of the film) and can also be interpreted as a manifestation of her own unresolved feelings regarding the transgressive relationship.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ It is interesting to read her “blindness” and preference for Jere as reminiscent of the Oedipus tragedy and the notion that due to her desire for her son, she’s already plucked out her eyes.

¹⁰⁴ At first it seems that Lucía does not know about the relationship between the siblings. However, I suspect that through her obsessive complaining about her children and the number of times she catches them in compromising situations (such as when she enters the bathroom where Meme is kneeling in front of Jere, or when she lies awake in bed listening to the sound of squeaking beds down the hall) Lucía is in denial about the nature of their relationship.

Lucía also lives in a state of repetition, demarcated largely by her stagnant and restrictive social status. Throughout the film she continually carries out repetitive and inane conversations, such as an anecdote about touching Argentine tennis star Guillermino Vilas's buttocks as a young woman. As Carri herself indicates in an interview with Moira Soto of *Página 12*:

el relato remite a la decadencia de la burguesía, que ahora ya no se sabe bien qué es: clase alta, media . . . Esa frivolidad llevada a la máxima expresión. La madre quiere sostener esa fachada a rejatabla. [the story refers to the decadence of the bourgeoisie, that doesn't know who it is anymore: upper class, middle class . . . A frivolity that is taken to its ultimate consequence. The mother wants to sustain that appearance to the letter.]

The frivolity of the Argentine upper-class value system that Carri so meticulously presents throughout the film is ultimately what prevents Lucía from recognizing the activities taking place in her own home while gossiping about the incest that she suspects is occurring in the home of her housekeeper, Olga. Her theory, which she repeats to the rest of the family, is that Olga's daughter's pregnancy is a result of an incestuous relationship with her father. When Monserrat tries to sympathize and expresses that abuse is a prevalent problem in Spain too, Lucía emphatically states that, "Acá, en las clases más bajas, eso es muy común." [Here, in the lower classes, that is very common.] Beyond just highlighting the extent of her denial regarding taboo relations in her own family, her attitude also projects the conflation of the lack of material wealth with the lack of moral values.

However, the association that she establishes between incest and the lower classes fits in with the fact that incest is often seen to plague those perceived to be morally and materially destitute. In her text, *Not in This House*, Elizabeth Wilson observes that for the most part:

White middle-class ideology implies that incest occurs more frequently in other classes or racial groups because these groups are morally inferior and are unable to restrain their animal impulses. The flip side of this, of course, is that the white middle class abstains from incest and that this abstention makes it morally superior. 86

Incest and its association with the lower classes is accentuated in the filmic text by the inclusion of a scene from a popular “telenovela,” a genre often associated with the poor and undereducated. In the brief scene, a rival informs her love interest that his lover is actually his sister. The scene plays out on a small television in the kitchen and is positioned so that spectators see Meme’s reflection on the set as Olga prepares her something to eat, thereby reminding spectators of the incest taboo as a standard trope of melodrama.

Aspiring to appear as functional as possible, Lucía’s domination over and micromanagement of the daily activities of her adolescent children are more reminiscent of the treatment and conditions placed on young children, thus stifling their ability to see and, more importantly, to desire outside their immediate surroundings. Thus, the sibling’s incest can be read as a function of their captivity compounded by the expectations imposed on them by virtue of having to project the interests of the upper class to which they belong. For as Barnes notes of the function of incest in literary

works, “the impulse to incest can be seen as a desire for stasis, a refusal to circulate one’s body, one’s blood, even one’s attention outside the sphere of one’s own family” (4).

Throughout the film, Lucía’s infantilization of the siblings creates a suffocating environment that underscores the feeling of captivity and is most explicitly presented through the proliferation of indoor scenes and the appearance of mirrors and mirror-like images within the body of the film.

There are several moments in the film in which the siblings stand or sit silently facing one another. In one scene, Meme’s back is to the camera and she sits naked in a hot tub; her brother enters the room, also naked, and gets into the tub so that he is facing the camera. The two characters sit facing one another as the moving waters, indicative of the waters in utero, swirl and rhythmically flow around their bodies.¹⁰⁵ In another scene, the siblings, having just fought about one of Jere’s ex-girlfriends, sit on the escalator of a supermarket facing one other as they move vertically through the *mise-en-scène*. Throughout the film, the siblings continually seek one another out within different sites in the house such as bathrooms, hallways, and other enclosed spaces. The camera thus focuses on the intimacy of the relationship as they are often framed tightly together in order to underscore the cocoon they have built around themselves.

Formally, through the tight framing the film projects the gradual enfolding of the siblings into tighter and tighter spaces, thereby making their encounters more frequent.

In his analysis of incest in the works of William Faulkner, John T. Irwin connects sibling incest to a regressive tendency and the “attempt to return to a state in which subject and

¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, the siblings were originally going to be presented as twin boys, thereby making these womblike scenes more obvious. However, the fact that the characters are not twins provides a more open reading of these scenes due to the ways in which it brings to the fore the environmental factors that contribute to their relationship.

object did not yet exist, to a time before that division occurred out of which the ego sprang - in short, to return to the womb, to reenter the waters of birth” (43). The constancy of the images of Meme and Jere facing one another in tight spaces throughout the filmic text marks the womblike intimacy they have constructed for themselves and their estrangement from other members of the family.

The disaffection within the family unit is clearly presented through the prevalence of mirror images that bend and control the space inhabited by the characters and suspend the viewer’s ability to see the characters fully throughout the film. In multiple scenes, characters are depicted staring obsessively at their own reflections or are captured in the reflections of televisions, windowpanes, and full-length mirrors.¹⁰⁶ The predominance of the mirrors works to refract light and extend space, making the domestic space of the family deceptively bigger than it really is. The constant play with mirrors also distorts the perception of the spectator, who is often disoriented thinking that he or she is watching real bodies, but after the shift of the camera or the movement of a character, realize they have actually been observing reflections all along. The indeterminacy of sight for the spectator, coupled with the limited sight of the characters (they cannot see beyond their own reflections), underscores the precariousness of seeing and the voluntary blindness to even those things most obviously before them.

In the pandemonium of reflections throughout the body of the film, the family and their interactions lose their materiality. Through play and bleeding of lines between reality and reflection, the film presents the understanding that the family members cannot

¹⁰⁶ The characters’ obsession over their reflections immediately conjures notions related to Ovid’s myth of Narcissus. In Pausanias’s version of the myth, however, Narcissus is believed to have had a twin sister with whom he falls in love. After his sister dies, Narcissus cannot bear the loss and mistakes his own image for that of his sister.

be anything more than merely the reflection, or simulacrum, of the ideal upper-class family. It is precisely this fact that brings Meme and Jere together. The tangible materiality provided by one another's bodies provides the impression of recognition that serves to constitute both of them as more than mere reflections. The desire for recognition on the part of both characters is also obvious in the number of times they speak one another's name. In one scene in particular, Jere calls out to Meme after a sexual encounter in the empty stairwell of a dance club. Meme turns to ask him what he wants. He states: "Nada. Me gusta decir tu nombre." [Nothing. I like saying your name.] The brief exchange between the brother and sister in this scene and another in which Meme writes out Jere's name on the steam covered mirror where Jere sees it as he gets out of the bath are important to the constitution mentioned above. These brief scenes denote the importance of the act of naming and the fact that each is able to see him or herself in the other through a shared sense of familiarity and his or her name on the lips of the other.

The intimacy the siblings construct is also based on a sense of recognition in which the mirrored experience they share takes precedence. In her intriguing study on mirrors in French literature, Joyce O. Lowrie argues that the love felt by the brother for the sister and the sister for the brother, as the mirrored love for one another, has much to do with our understanding of similarity and difference (22). In this way, the relationship that brother and sister explore in the film provides them a sense of mutual recognition that goes beyond the empty images projected by the rest of the family.

Through the visual economy of the film, the closeness of the incestuous relationship appears at times to be the most functional out of all those in the family.

However, the most unsettling aspect of the film is the lack of shame or remorse on the part of the siblings even after the nervous breakdown of their mother. The attraction between the characters and the initiation of the sexual relationship are neither verbally nor visually explored in the film. Since for spectators these aspects of the relationship remain unintelligible, the film does not provide a prescriptive or definitive reading of Meme and Jere's actions.

Interestingly, though Meme and Jere react dramatically to having been discovered by their mother at the end of the film, they neither express guilt nor shame about their relationship unlike in literature and other cultural production. In his examination of the incest motif in works ranging from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Geschwister* [The Sibling] to Voltaire's *Mahomet* to Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La devoción de la cruz* [Devotion to the Cross], Otto Rank contends that two overarching patterns emerge. The first Rank calls the "theme of sibling recognition," which revolves around the premise that the incest occurs through the ignorance of the two individuals. In other words, the siblings in question have no knowledge that they are related and later seek repentance for the relationship once they learn of their indiscretion. The second pattern Rank designates "the theme of suspension of sibling relationship" and is based on cases in which siblings are already emotionally invested in the relationship and later find out that they are not actually related (427).

Interestingly, neither one of Rank's patterns applies to the sibling relationship presented in *Géminis*. Spectators are never provided the reassurance that Meme and Jere were never really related, nor can they understand the relationship between them to be based on ignorance. In breaking with conventions of the incest taboo, neither Jere nor

Meme ever suffer the slings of their unspeakable relationship. In this way, the relationship between the two young characters breaks with notions surrounding the role of representation in relation to trauma since the traumatic event is devoid of the mental and emotional charge for the characters that it all too often elicits in other literary and artistic works.¹⁰⁷ In other words, though the discovery leads to Lucía's breakdown and the children appear remorseful about their indiscretion, Meme and Jere emerge from the situation relatively unscathed. Through a play with space and image throughout the mise-en-scène, Carri also plays with spectator perception in order to demystify the ideal Argentine family while also presenting a discomfiting projection of the desires of its two youngest progeny. Ultimately, *Géminis* empties out the traumatic element of the incestuous relationship, thereby marking a rupture with normative perceptions and representations of non-normative desire in its two young characters.

La niña santa is Lucrecia Martel's second feature film after *La ciénaga* and, like *Géminis*, presents a child who breaks with normative expectations of the adolescent child figure. The film relates the story of an adolescent girl, Amalia, who attempts to navigate her first sexual experience within the busy and transient confines of a small provincial hotel owned by her mother, Helena, and uncle, Freddy. The story takes place over the course of a week during a medical conference and highlights the relationship of the girl, her contemporaries, and the forces that surround her. The film begins with the arrival of Dr. Jano who quickly becomes the object of Amalia's obsession after groping her in a crowd of people as they all watch a street performance. Due to the unsolicited touch and

¹⁰⁷ In works such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* incestuous relationships between family members end in the demise or insanity of one of the characters committing the act. However, in *Géminis* neither child appears scathed by Lucía's having discovered them together. On the contrary, it would appear that Lucía's fragile mental state would in fact allow the siblings the possibility for even less discretion.

the catechism classes about receiving God's call, Amalia decides that her call is to save Jano by becoming the martyr to his affection. She begins to stalk the doctor throughout the hotel, informing only her best friend, Josefina (Jose) of her plans. Meanwhile, Helena has also become enamored of the married doctor, and begins her own plan of seduction. The love triangle formed by Helena, Amalia, and Jano ultimately is broken when after being caught having sex with her cousin, Jose uses the groping incident between Amalia and Jano to distract her mother from the compromising position in which she and her cousin have been found. In the last scene, as Jose's mother is about to confront Jano about his indiscretion with Amalia, both girls are seen floating serenely in the waters of the hotel swimming pool.

Much has been said about the films of Martel and about *La niña santa* in particular. The universality of Martel's film form and its ability to share stories is particularly noted. Leila Gómez states that Martel is able to tell stories that:

podrían ser las de él o ella en cualquier lugar del mundo, pero especialmente en un lugar: el de la adolescencia femenina en una sociedad periférica de un país en decadencia. [could be his or hers in any place in the world, but especially in one place in particular: that of the female adolescence in a peripheral society of a country in decay.]

As Deborah Martin astutely observes, Martel creates in Amalia a character that "signifies the return of society's repressed elements: the child, feminine sexuality, and that which is repressed by medical and religious discourses" (Martin 54). Martel's ability to recreate the challenging and often loaded theme of the child's sexual and sensual inner life provides insight into how these notions operate more broadly in Argentine society.

In Pablo Brescia's review of the film, he notes that *La niña santa* utilizes the triangular relationship that develops between Helena, Dr. Jano, and Amalia to “desnudar las inconsistencias de la religión y de su función social con los apetitos carnales y la decadencia burguesa” [lay bare religious inconsistencies and their social functions along with carnal appetites and bourgeois decadence] (204). In his discussion of the religious content in the film, Gonzalo Aguilar argues that *La niña santa* is in fact a film that continues the theme of belief that Martel introduces in *La ciénaga*. For Aguilar, the central tension in the film arises from the fact that both Amalia and Josefina are “torn between mystical rapture and religious doctrine, between the desire to interpret their inability to fit into a world and the rules that the catechism offers on how to deal with desire” (86). Thus, the relationship between the child and the traditional and religious imperatives of sexual education and development are central to the text, and thus provide an opening to think critically about the status of the adolescent female in both cultural and visual representations.

Tracing film theory related to the relationship between gender and the power of looking, Ana Forcinito proposes that the film sets up the juxtaposition between Helena's and Amalia's gaze. She aptly observes that Helena often casts herself as the object of the gaze of Dr. Jano and the other male doctors, while Amalia projects a gaze that reinforces her position as subject that is instituted through her own ability to look (Forcinito 122). Similarly, in highlighting both Amalia's age and gender, Aguilar also notes that Martel's “girl-adolescent chooses the world, ‘our world,’ with all of its passion and all of its senses. She is a desiring subject rather than a desired object produced by the gaze of others” (92). Focusing on Amalia's ability to look and pursue the object of her desire,

Dr. Jano, Deborah Martin provides a reading of the character that is intimately tied to the horror genre in film. She argues that Martel's film offers an ironic representation of Amalia that plays on the genre's penchant for projecting both female sexuality and the child as monstrous and 'other' (Martin "Wholly" 60).

In analyzing the forms of seeing and 'othering' that Martin identifies, and that she contends allows spectators to access the child's world throughout the film, the senses and particularly the child's sensual experience of the world come to the fore. Utilizing the work of film theorists Laura Marks and Vivian Shobchack on embodiment in cinema, Hugo Ríos examines the sensual nature of Martel's body of films. *La niña santa* is for Ríos one of Martel's most important films, since it interrupts what he considers the imperialization of the visual in film and instead provides spectators a film form more focused on the senses as characterized by Marks's notion of haptic visuality.¹⁰⁸ Though enlightening in terms of understanding the spectator's multiple and nuanced encounters with the haptic in *La niña santa*, Ríos's analysis sidesteps the fundamental relationship between the film's focus on the senses and the age of the girls featured therein.

It is precisely in staging the relationship between the sensuality of Amalia's circulation throughout the filmic world that surrounds her and her precarious position as a female adolescent that the film provides one of the most innovative representations of the child figure. Not surprisingly, the central conflict in the film begins with touch.¹⁰⁹ Dr.

¹⁰⁸ The notion of 'haptic visuality' was developed by Laura Marks to describe the way in which film appeals to more than just the visual senses in spectators. Marks argues that in certain types of films (particularly feminist and intercultural film) the visual senses give way to a connection between the spectator and the object being represented. In other words, Marks analyzes the effects of the moving image on a spectator's other senses, arguing that in certain films the visual does in fact have a tactile quality.

¹⁰⁹ Dominique Russell notes the importance of the theremin instrument on the body. The theremin is an instrument that works by radio wave and in which players appear to be playing imaginary strings. Russell states: "The theremin's unique touch-less playing emphasizes the paradoxes of sound that Martel exploits

Jano, whose name evokes Janus, the mythological god of transitions and beginnings and therefore symbolizes the weightiness of Amalia's transition from child to adult, stands amongst a group of bystanders watching a street musician play the theremin.¹¹⁰ As he positions himself behind a row of young women, he places his crotch against the body of the young woman in front of him. Through this small and transgressive act of touch, he awakens Amalia to her unseemly calling. In a close-up of Amalia's face, flanked on both sides by the faces of two girls standing before her as Jano approaches, the camera focuses intently on the slight transitions of her expressions from shock to confusion to curiosity as she feels Jano behind her. Throughout the brief scene her face is lit up from an indeterminate source and a loud rumbling (most likely a large vehicle that is never shown) is heard in the background over the sound of the instrument, thereby marking the transition and illumination of the young woman to the calling she longs for.

Consequently, Jano's touch initiates a transformation within Amalia, an awakening of sorts, to the contradictory and often tainted world of adult sexuality marked by her availability, especially as a young woman, to be touched non-consensually by a stranger. This introduction, however, is purposefully and strategically inverted in the film since it produces a string of events that lead to the fall of Jano once he is accused of molesting the young girl. The impulsive and impolitic touch ultimately leads to two fatal misreadings in the filmic text: the first by Jano in thinking that the preponderance of bodies around him provides him the anonymity to act upon his desire, and the second by

and explores. Sound is itself 'touch-less.' Though it is experienced through the body, it cannot be confirmed by it. While it gives materiality to the image, it is itself immaterial."

¹¹⁰ The name Jano is a variation of the name Janus, who in Roman mythology represented a doorway and was often seen as the god of beginnings. It comes as no surprise, then, that through Dr. Jano Amalia experiences a sensual awakening that marks for her the limit between the child and adult world.

Amalia, who believes that the encounter with Jano is a greater calling from God to redeem the man from his sins.

Although he is a medical doctor whose own calling is largely characterized by his interaction with the human body, Jano does not understand the forces he unleashes through his touch. Jano's opportunistic touching is inverted in the film since he soon becomes the object of Amalia's predatory need to touch him. In scene after scene, he becomes the object of Amalia's gaze and desire. This is most apparent in a scene in which, while again standing in front of the theremin player, he attempts for a second time to molest a girl, only to have Amalia position herself in front of him and attempt to take hold of his hand as he presses against her. With Amalia's sudden reaction and the introduction of her own unsolicited touching, the form of their encounter takes on a different relation wherein Jano becomes the object of Amalia's unsolicited touching and gaze. Thus, the film enacts a reversal of power relations between the two characters, highlighted again when Amalia touches Jano's hand as she stands behind him in a crowded elevator and then again when she enters his room to watch him as he sleeps. Not only does the reversal lead to the realization of Amalia's power to touch and to gaze, but also Jano's misreading stems from his ignorance of the importance of touch.

Amalia's openness and ability to transform the structures that constitute social order in the film are mainly due to her understanding of the importance of aspects beyond the visual and the anxieties surrounding the ways in which adolescent sexuality is framed within that social order. Martin argues that Amalia's relationship with the world is characterized by her constant "experiments with the distance between the transmission and reception of sensory stimuli" (68). This is particularly important to understanding

how Amalia's privileging of the sensual is framed in the film. In considering the relationship between the child and touching, Karen Lury asserts that "to touch a child . . . is riddled with ambivalence - whilst physical affection and a caring touch are seen as essential for the children to become properly socialized and emotionally secure, to touch a child is also a sensual, possessive act" (*The Child in Film: Tears* 55). For that reason, the importance of the tactile and its relationship with the perception surrounding the innocence of childhood and the transition beyond childhood in relation to sexual touching is addressed directly throughout the film.

The relationship between the act of touch and the Amalia's initiation into the world of adult sexuality is shaped by the religious education she receives. Through the abundance of scenes presenting the religious education of the girls, the film strategically opens up to the often contradictory and mystical discourse surrounding female adolescent sexuality.¹¹¹ In the film the girls and their teacher, Inés, discuss the Catholic notion of calling. Throughout these scenes, the words of Inés about the ecstasy of God and God's calling to the girls are often interrupted by or coincide with the whisperings of both Amalia and Josefina, who speculate as to the nature of their spiritual leader's relationship with the man that Jose has seen her with and with whom they suspect Inés shares "besos

¹¹¹ Stites Mor also considers the importance of the catechism classes and the adolescence of the characters in her reading of the film. She underscores the contradictory nature of the classes and how they provide the girls a space to explore and share sexual experiences. In particular she notes: "El rol de la Iglesia Católica como adocrinadora de la familia tradicional a los roles de género y sexuales se trastocan cuando las clases de catequesis a las que asiste la niña se convierte en un espacio donde ella y sus colegas pueden compartir sus ideas y experiencias sexuales. Presenta la habilidad de las mujeres al elegir el sexo anal como una alternativa para la pérdida de la virginidad, y vuelve la noción de vejación irrelevante, demostrando la atracción sexual de las adolescentes hacia los hombres mayores" [The role of the Catholic Church as the indoctrinator of the traditional family into sexual and gender roles is warped when the catechism class that the young protagonist attends turns into a space where she and her colleagues can share sexual ideas and experiences. It presents the possibility for women to choose anal sex as an alternative to losing their virginity, and makes the notion of humiliation irrelevant, by demonstrating the sexual attraction that young women feel towards older men] (Stites Mor 150).

con lengua” [French kisses]. The religious meetings thus become a site in which the sexual curiosity of the young women and Inés’ constant warning to be alert to the calling of God (should he need them to commit themselves to his will) become superimposed. Interestingly, Inés’s proclamations become the very foundation of Amalia’s quest to save Jano and thus juxtapose the mystical elements of Catholicism with the equally perplexing stage of adolescence.

And yet, the presentation of the stage of adolescence, or contemporary ways of thinking about this stage, melded with the mystical elements of Catholic doctrine share common affinities about the experience of the immaterial and that which cannot always be easily observed. Furthermore, the fact that these religious notions that the girls faithfully conform to often conflict with the empiricism that acts as a central tenet of science, that doctors such as Dr. Jano place their faith in, is also central to the film’s portrayal of the child figure.

Throughout the film, the folktales that often interrupt the catechism classes also draw attention to the ways in which the child figure complicates the standard ways of thinking about both religious and medical discourses. The compulsion with the status and authenticity of the stories the girls tell one another is exemplified in scenes in which they often fuse urban legends with Biblical stories. One story in particular is told by one of Amalia and Jose’s friends as they ride on a bus in the countryside. The story revolves around a couple being flagged down by a woman and told that another couple and their baby daughter have been involved in a car accident. The first couple make their way to the accident only to find both mother and father are deceased but the baby is alive. The couple then realizes that the woman in the car is identical to the woman that flagged them

down on the deserted road. The miraculous and supernatural nature of the folktale becomes a focal point for the girls, who get off the bus in order to visit the site of the supposed accident. As the scene proceeds, the girls wander through the bush and Jose begins acting like something is attacking her and screams out: “¡una mano, chicas, una mano!” [a hand, girls, a hand!] The girls, laughing and running through the bushes, quickly become disoriented (as indicated through point of view and handheld camera shots) and lose one another in the thick brush, their laughter quickly transforming to screams as gun shots are heard in the distance. Evoking the boys in Martel’s previous film, *La ciénaga*, two boys appear from the bush with their dogs and a large rifle. The short scene conjures up the miraculous story of the car crash and underscores again the importance of the tactile through the focus on the disembodied hand. However, the scene also enacts a staging of an adolescent perspective of the world in which a moment can contain a dizzying variety of emotions, from happiness to ecstasy to fear to sudden relief.

The scene in the woods privileges the connections between the space of feminine adolescence and the religious ecstasy so integral to the notion of Catholic suffering and martyrdom. In multiple scenes, Amalia and Jose discuss and enact mystical rituals in their everyday interactions, sharing their desire to receive the stigmata or chanting prayers like incantations repeatedly with their eyes closed in an attempt to channel what they believe to be mystical energy around them. And yet, in its own indirect way, the film upholds some of the mystical elements of the girls’ desire, thereby perpetuating their faith in the immaterial. In one of the uncanniest scenes in the film, referred to as *The Fall of Man*, a man falls from the second story of Jose’s apartment just as Amalia confesses to

Jose that she thinks that she has received a calling.¹¹² A loud thud and grunt is heard just as Jose asks her “¿Cómo sabés? ¿Tuviste una señal?” [How do you know? Did you receive a sign?] The camera presents the girls’ point of view as the man, barely visible behind the sheer curtains on the window, slowly stands up. The girls and the women behind them slowly come to their feet as they look on in horror. The man, who is naked, slowly opens the patio doors of the apartment, drawing back the curtains and stepping inside the apartment. Amalia later recounts the experience of the fall to Helena, during which she becomes visibly moved describing the fall as a miracle. The entire falling sequence, and the emotions it evokes for Amalia, present a divine signal since it alludes to both the fall of Lucifer from heaven while also foreshadowing the fall of Jano from respectable professional to pedophile at the end of the film. More importantly, however, the falling also alludes to the position of the child figure between the world of the divine and the material world since it transpires at exactly the moment that Amalia reveals that she has received her calling.

The film’s preoccupation with the childhood blending of both materiality and ethereality is also presented through constant references to the photocopies the girls use in their classes. In one scene in particular, Amalia is presented reading a photocopied passage written in first person about an encounter with God. The person in the story is holding the body of her enemy, and states solemnly that she would rather: “Sufrir en este mundo para salvar a un alma que estar en el cielo con nuestro padre.” [suffer in this world to save a soul than be in heaven with our Lord.] This statement causes confusion in the catechism group and is particularly disturbing for Inés, since in the story the notion of

¹¹² Like Mecha and Luciano in *La ciénaga* and Lucía en *Géminis*, spectators are confronted with yet another fall, thus underscoring the decadence of the middle class.

calling is what separates the individual from the divine. Wanting to know the origins of the text that Amalia reads aloud and wanting to suppress the confusion it elicits, Inés asks about the origins of the photocopy. Not satisfied with Amalia's response, she says, visibly annoyed: "Chicas, cuando sacan materiales tienen que saber la fuente." [Girls, when you extract passages you need to know the source] The importance placed on both the veracity and sources of the stories the girls bring to the catechism class combine to present an anxiety regarding the stories the girls create about the spiritual and material world around them.¹¹³ They also present the tacit differences between what adults and children consider to be real experiences. For as Andermann observes:

miraculous, accidental and other enigmatic occurrences are still 'true' forms of experience in the fluid, transformative world of children and young adolescents ... It is only in the world of the adults that they become forms of a disenfranchised mode of historical experience, marked by an incapacity to be actively involved with one's own life and those of others. (164)

In other words, through the blending of myth, fact, and fiction, the stories the girls tell one another cannot be verified due to the fact that, like oral narratives, they can be subjected to embellishment.

Furthermore, the photocopy standing in as a form of the materially tangible original and, more importantly, as something that can in fact stand in for the original, becomes central in thinking through the position of the child figure in *La niña santa*. Analyzing the child through the notion of the copy is necessary since children are all too often considered to be genetic copies of their parents and childhood is generally

¹¹³ This notion is again presented when one of the girls' stories is called into question during a meeting and she is forced to confess that she has made up her story of mystical calling.

determined through a normative set of biological stages and transitions. Not only is the notion of the copy linked to a genetic reproduction of sorts, but there is also a social aspect to this copying. The social and emotional relationships between children and their parents are largely focused on the normative expectation that boys will become like their fathers and girls like their mothers. As Martin observes in her reading of the uncanny in the film, the anxiety about the copies and the relationship between adult women and younger women is mediated by “interchanging and doubling, the scrutiny of processes of female identity formation” (69). This notion is presented in Helena’s obsession over her looks and what to wear during the conference, which she also imposes on Amalia by constantly commenting on aspects of the girl’s appearance. Helena, who Amalia comments feels cold to the touch, is a statuesque, repeating figure who is and likes to be looked at. Furthermore, the transference of this notion of the copy is underscored when, in one scene, Helena dances seductively to a “romance” as the two young children of the chamber maids gaze up at her, the young girl mimicking her movements and the young boy enthralled by the show.

Yet, in the final scenes of the film, both Jose and Amalia reject the models of womanhood that their mothers present. Amalia, refusing to be more than a copy of the feminine, maintains her faithfulness to her own belief system, characterized by the repetitive chanting and sensual experience of the world that her mother time and again chastises her for. Meanwhile, Jose attempts to subvert her mother’s projection of the ideal upper-class Argentine family, complete with chaste and virginal daughter, by carrying on a sexual relationship with her cousin.

However, Jose, unlike Amalia, does not entirely reject the image her mother reifies since she insists that her cousin not kiss her on the mouth as they copulate, and that they have anal instead of vaginal sex so that she can maintain her virginity until marriage. After establishing in one scene that she considers herself to have the gift of fast learning, Jose demonstrates her new-found ability after her parents catch her with her cousin. As her parents enter Jose's grandmother's house, the place in which the encounters between the kissing cousins occur, Jose and her cousin scramble to get dressed as they hear them approach. Upon entering the bedroom, her parents appear worried and inquire as to what they are doing in their grandmother's bedroom. Jose, understanding the need to supply a story that will be equally, if not, more spectacular than the incest story of her own, provides her mother with the succulent tale of pedophilia that Amalia has shared with her in confidence. Ever the quick study, Jose knows enough about the adult world's preoccupation with image and reality to supplant one story with another in order to satisfy her mother's appetite for transgression.¹¹⁴ Thus, through the swapping out of one prohibited touch for another, Jose is able to protect her own projected image within her community and control the directionality of the adult gaze.

Not only does the child control optics in *La niña santa*, but the gaze is also prominent in Lucía Puenzo's film as well. Based on the short story, "Cinismo", by Sergio Bizzio, *XXY* is Lucía Puenzo's first feature-length film and presents an important contribution to current debates regarding the child and sexuality.¹¹⁵ The film relates the

¹¹⁴ I read Jose's mother as having an appetite for stories of transgression, which allow her to escape the monotony and restrictions she internalizes due to her staunch belief in propriety. Furthermore, throughout the film, she constantly critiques Helena for raising Amalia in the hotel, stating that such a place isn't fit for a young woman to grow up in.

¹¹⁵ Lucía Puenzo is the daughter of film director Luis Puenzo whose most acclaimed film, *La historia oficial*, produced in 1986, focuses on an upper-class Argentine history teacher who discovers that her

story of Alex, a fifteen-year-old intersexed person living with her parents, Suli and Kraken, in self-imposed exile in a small fishing town in Uruguay.¹¹⁶ The film begins with the visit of another couple, Ramiro and Erika, and their son Álvaro from Buenos Aires. Suli, it turns out, has invited Ramiro, a cosmetic surgeon, to meet Alex and try to convince her to undergo surgical procedures that will “correct” her disorder. Over the course of the visit, as Ramiro and his wife try to convince Alex’s parents of the dangers of letting Alex go untreated, Alex and Álvaro develop feelings for one another that eventually culminate in a sexual encounter that Kraken accidentally witnesses. The witnessing of the encounter incites Kraken, a marine biologist, to confront both the physical, psychological, and social challenges that Alex will be forced to undergo as an intersexed individual. After much soul searching and a visit to see Juan, another intersexed person, Kraken decides that Alex needs to be the one to make the decision whether or not to undergo medical treatment. Ultimately unsuccessful in their efforts, Ramiro, Erika, and Álvaro return to Argentina, but not before witnessing an attack on Alex by a group of boys in the village.

The release of *XXY* was subject to a great deal of debate and criticism. The film received numerous international awards and drew a significant amount of attention to the challenges facing intersexed individuals and their families.¹¹⁷ Consequently, both the critical praise the film received and the unconventional theme on which it focused have opened a dialogue in the country about the rights of intersexed individuals in relation to

adopted daughter is one of a number of children taken from illegally detained mothers during the dictatorship (1976-1983).

¹¹⁶ I use the pronoun her in my discussion of the film since it is used most often throughout.

¹¹⁷ *XXY* received the Critics Award at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, the Ariel award at the 2008 Mexican Film Academy Award for best Iberoamerican film, and the Goya award for best Spanish American film in 2008.

medical and judicial policy.¹¹⁸ Some of the criticism launched against the film focuses on the film's title, which is clinically referred to as Klinefelter syndrome - a genetic condition in which men have an additional X chromosome in most of their cells, although this condition actually presents little or no physical signs.¹¹⁹ Perhaps one of the most astute reactions to the criticism of the film's fictionalized representation of the use of XXY in the title and its representation of the intersexed subject is activist Mauro Cabral's defense of the film. Cabral argues that the criticism surrounding the veracity and biological incongruencies of the film reflects the inability to consider the intersexed body as anything more than a biological abnormality. In reference to this notion he ironically states:

Sobre todo, la intersexualidad no puede ni deber ser, bajo ningún pretexto, producida y puesta en circulación como una experiencia distinta a la narrada por la biomedicina. No puede haber una poética de la intersexualidad, a quién se le ocurre. No puede haber, menos que menos, una erótica. [Above all, intersexuality cannot and should not, under any pretext, be produced and placed in circulation as a different kind of experience than that narrated by biomedicine. There can never

¹¹⁸ As Estrada-López indicates, both medical personnel in hospitals and parents registering newborns with the state are obligated to report the sex of the infant (144). Furthermore, once the baby's sex and name has been registered individuals are unable to legally change their sex or names unless permission is granted by a judge (Estrada-López 144).

¹¹⁹ The Sociedad Argentina de Endocrinología y Metabolismo (SAEM) [The Argentine Society of Endocrinology and Metabolism] launched a statement critiquing the film's misrepresentation of the condition, stating that the film "acarrea algunos errores conceptuales que pueden dañar moralmente a algunos pacientes y sus familias" [leads to conceptual errors that may morally hurt some patients and their families]. However, as noted by critic Mariano García, Puenzo herself has acknowledged that the film does not try to represent an actual clinical case of XXY. García provides a compelling argument against SAEM's treatment of the film and also defends a director's right to represent scientific theory in films as she or he feels compliments the plot. ("XXY: El gen de la polémica" Web 27 May. 2013. <http://www.solesdigital.com.ar/cine/xyy.htm>)

be a poetics of intersexuality, who would ever think it. There can never be an erotics [of intersexuality] (Cabral 107)

Offering a reading of *XXY* as more than a testimonial of life as an intersexed subject, Cabral notes the productive and aesthetically rich possibilities of non-normative bodies on film. Criticism of the representation of the film's title withstanding, other critiques of the film note its overreliance on the phallus as a symbol of Alex's condition, as illustrated through multiple scenes in which different characters are depicted slicing up carrots, sausage, and other phallic objects.¹²⁰

However, the most interesting aspect of the film in relation to this project is how it deals with Alex's dilemma as she transitions from child to young adult. Through visual cues in the film, the central conflict for Alex is located in her changing relationship with her intersexed body during puberty and her ability to decide for herself. By focusing on the fictionalized world of an intersexed protagonist and other children her age - many who enact and have non-normative desires - Puenzo reflects upon the limited ways in which childhood sexuality is framed and structured according to larger discourses of nature and social expectation. Accordingly, what *XXY* advocates is the freedom of adolescents to make decisions for themselves, especially in regard to their bodies, free of the burdens of adult judgement and intrusion.

The film meticulously marks a before and after in Alex's life and the anxieties surrounding her body as she becomes ever more conscious of the ways in which her body does not fit into the molds upheld by society. In a scene in which Álvaro enters the

¹²⁰ This critique is most prominent in the reviews of both Tamsin Whitehead and Diego Trerotola. Trerotola adamantly accuses the director of staging all conflict in the film squarely between men, thereby upholding a patriarchal perspective demonstrated through the fact that the main character only ever attains pleasure through penetration and ejaculation.

seaside home for the first time, he is presented looking at childhood pictures of Alex. In the earlier images, Alex is presented as a well-adjusted girl - wild-haired, and nude - smiling broadly from the frames. As Álvaro's examination of the pictures continues, the images of Alex become less idyllic and her smile gradually disappears. The final pictures of present-day Alex present her looking away from the camera or holding her hand up in an attempt to block the picture from being taken. As indicated through the sequence and changes in Alex's image over time, the character's relationship with the ways in which her body will be read, as indicated by her resistance to be photographed, has shifted along with the changes in her body. Such shifts not only mean that she must be wary of who is able to see her body, but they also mean that she must take corticosteroids to inhibit the development of secondary male hormones, a treatment that Alex ultimately refuses to continue. Throughout the film little is said of Alex's previous struggles with her condition, if any, particularly in childhood. The only allusions to this childhood period are artifacts such as a doll with both sets of genitalia and a collection of Alex's childhood drawings of her body.

The precariousness of this developmental stage and Alex's shifting understanding of self is also featured in the opening sequence of the film, when Alex and her young friend Roberta are presented running through a heavily wooded area. As the camera sweeps along the dense brush, the girls are presented chasing after a snake.¹²¹ This sequence intermittently crosscuts to an underwater scene of sea anemones and other sea

¹²¹ Interestingly, many critical readings of this scene fail to note that the girls are chasing a snake through the woods, and they often read Alex's wielding of the machete as a symbol of masculinity.

creatures quivering in the water.¹²² The cuts of the rhythmic activity of sea life juxtaposed with long shots of Alex running quickly through the woods wielding a machete finally give way to a continuous shot of Alex coming down hard upon the snake. The scene itself can be read many ways. It may be read as a representation of the inextricable relationship between children and nature, signaled by the similarities between the underwater scene and the physiological functions within human bodies, set in a time before the child is folded into a societal embrace. It can be interpreted as the symbolic entry of the child into sexual maturity through the inclusion of the snake and forest motifs in relation to Biblical scripture. Lastly, it also alludes to the relationship between the snake and the phallus.

Yet another allusion to the connection between Alex's condition and the natural world is presented in the protagonist's father.¹²³ Kraken, named after the mythological beast of the seas, is a marine biologist and works to protect the endangered sea turtles off the Uruguayan coast, a fact that also parallels his role as Alex's protector and his insistence that she not undergo any surgeries until she is sure of her choice. Throughout the film, there are multiple scenes in which Kraken is seen dissecting, operating, and handling dead or wounded turtles, marking the relationship between the treatment of the reptiles and the procedures performed on intersexed infants at birth. Sea turtles, like anemones, are said to have temperature-controlled sex determination, meaning that

¹²² Sea anemones often hold the ability to reproduce both sexually and asexually depending on oceanic temperatures. Therefore, they provide the initial introduction to Alex's intersexed body and a connection between her and the natural world that surrounds her.

¹²³ In "What of Unnatural Bodies? The Discourse of Nature in Lucía Puenzo's *XXY* and *El niño pez/The Fish Child*," Margaret Frohlich questions the usefulness of *XXY*'s focus on the union of Alex with the natural world as a mode of liberation for non-normative subjects. For Frohlich, the film's dependence on the "naturalness" of Alex's body provides the character little actual freedom since it still upholds narratives that count on controlled and knowable discourses about nature.

environmental factors determine the sex of the turtle after fertilization. Sex for the creature is a factor of environment and closely mirrors the same indefinite development of the intersexed body. In this way, the film juxtaposes the indeterminate nature of Alex's sexuality with that of the sea turtle. Her wearing of a sea turtle tag around her neck also provides a strong intimation to the tracking of her movements by the community after they learn of her intersex.

The film's questioning of medical discourses surrounding the body is reflected in Ramiro's clinical gaze throughout the film. On several occasions, Ramiro is presented observing papers and charts related to Alex's situation. In one scene, Alex walks over to the refrigerator near where Ramiro is cutting up sausage. From Ramiro's point of view the camera scans its way up Alex's body from her bare feet to her loose shorts and t-shirt to her tousled hair as she drinks haphazardly from an open milk carton. As a reminder to the spectator of her tomboy persona milk runs down the side of her mouth and down her shirt as she casually brushes her hand across her chin. Almost in anticipation of Ramiro's objectivizing gaze, Alex asks:

¿Te gusta? [Do you like it?]

Ramiro: ¿Qué? [What?]

Alex: Mi casa. [My house]

Ramiro answers in the affirmative and Alex again smiles coyly and says:

No me mientas: [Don't lie to me]

The sound of Ramiro's cutting becomes more pronounced as Alex reaches over and begins to chew on one of the pieces he has just cut. She then asks him:

¿Abrir cuerpos te gusta? [Do you enjoy cutting open bodies?]

Ramiro: Es mi trabajo. [It's my job]

The brief exchange between Alex and Ramiro highlights a number of issues that the film enacts. The first is the way in which Ramiro's wolfish staring conflates both his medical and masculine interest in Alex's non-normative body.¹²⁴ His constant looking and desire to normalize Alex's body are ultimately implicated in the fetishization of bodies that do not fit into the dichotomous construction of gender and sexual differentiation.¹²⁵ Alex, aware of the gaze that converts her into nothing more than a body, contests Ramiro's gaze with her question "do you like it?" The timing of the question and the visual cues throughout the scene make it apparent that the question is meant to refer to Alex's body and not her home as she states. Confronting Ramiro with a mirror of his own perverse and latently sexualized gaze, Alex is able to break the captivation of his gaze as he returns to his surgical work on the cutting board.

A second aspect of the scene underscores how Alex frames the notion of home and belonging. Far more than just the physicality of the house in which her family resides, Alex's notion of home abstractly denotes the open natural space that she inhabits seamlessly through several scenes throughout the film. Exemplifying an openness that precludes categorization and determinacy, Alex's "house" is home to an array of creatures such as lizards, clown fish, and other creatures included in various scenes throughout the filmic text.

The rejection of categorizations is also exemplified when in one scene Álvaro sits on the beach sketching a large beetle, which he refers to as 'un bicho raro' [a strange bug]

¹²⁴ Zomotzny also notes Ramiro's gaze in this scene, referring to it as "overtly sexual" (196).

¹²⁵ In *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, Anne Fausto-Sterling provides an overview of the history of the hermaphrodite in traditional representation and mythology. She also traces the emergence of the modern notion of intersexuality.

crawling across his sketchpad. As Frohlich observes of the sketch and its danger to the unruly creatures vulnerable to its totalizing and limiting classification, “there is a dangerous line between categorization and correction” (164). In her attempt to quash the knowability of the strange bug and the control Álvaro exerts over it as he manipulates the creature with his felt pen, Alex crushes it with her thumb and says: “Qué sabes vos de las especies de mi casa.” [What do you know of the species in my house] Knowledge production, as Alex knows through her observation of Kraken’s work in the laboratory, depends largely on the classification and documentation of real bodies and their parts.

Furthermore, the knowledge gained through this process also produce ideologies that often infringe on the objects of study themselves. In her analysis of the history of medical treatments of hermaphrodites, Alice Dreger argues that the very classifications utilized to differentiate female and male humans today derive from the “pervasive interest among medical and scientific men in keeping social sex borders clear, distinct, and ‘naturally’ justified” (13). By focusing on Alex’s connection to animals that display intersexed characteristics, the film seeks to question the conventional delineations between female and male bodies. Therefore, Alex’s notion of the home space is predicated on the freedom of all things, particularly the “bichos raros,” to roam about freely without the structuring and limiting clinical and scientific gazes that threaten to discursively and physically regulate unruly bodies.

Ramiro’s fascination with the normalization (or “fixing”) of Alex’s body is also presented throughout the text as something that Alex, and to large extent, Kraken, see as

the mutilation of the body.¹²⁶ The notion of cutting is featured in another scene in which both Álvaro and Alex discuss his father's line of work. Walking through displays of marine life artifacts and specimens, Alex asks Álvaro how many sets of breasts his father has operated on.¹²⁷ Alvaro responds that he isn't sure - it is also the first time he tells her that he thinks she is strange. Alex says:

Debe haber operado miles. ¿Vos has ido alguna vez? [He must have operated on thousands. ¿Have you ever gone?]

Alvaro: ¿A dónde? [Where?]

Alex: Al quirófano, a ver como rebana cuerpos. [To the operating theatre to see how he cuts up bodies.]

Alvaro: No rebana cuerpos, los arregla. Mi papá hace tetas y narices por plata, pero a él en realidad le interesan otras cosas. [He doesn't cut up bodies, he fixes them. My dad fixes tits and noses for money, but he is actually interested in other things.]

Alex: ¿Qué cosas? [What things?]

Alvaro: No sé, deformidades. Como . . . esos tipos que nacen con once dedos.

Bueno mi papá les saca uno. [I don't know, deformities. Such as . . . Those people who are born with eleven fingers. Well my dad removes one of them.]

Alex looks down at one of the specimens in the jars before them, smiles, and says

caustically :

¹²⁶ Zamotzny argues that Ramiro and Kraken share a clinical gaze since both are invested in classification and anatomy in some form or other. However, as Zamotzny asserts, Kraken abandons this gaze when faced with Alex's difficult decision.

¹²⁷ Considering that the exchange between Alex and Álvaro occurs as they walk through a gallery of the bones and preserved body parts of different marine animals, larger questions are evoked about the suffering and sacrifices of attaining knowledge.

Y se lo come. [And then he eats it.]

Alex's accusation that Ramiro eats the excised body parts of his patients, however playful, not only alludes to the previous scene of Ramiro cutting and eating the sausage, but also projects the horror of his medical activities from Alex's point of view.¹²⁸

The focus on Ramiro as the eater of the body parts he removes also serves as an inversion of popular representations of intersexed bodies as monstrous. In reading Alex's hybrid body and its connection to marine life, Charlotte E. Gleghorn draws on the theories of the monstrous body by Michel Foucault and José Gil to argue that Alex's perception of her body as monstrous is based on its ambiguity and liminal state between the human and animal worlds. As such the character "is intensely aware of the labeling - evidenced through her wearing of the turtle identification tag - of her body as monstrous and the fascination it provokes" (Gleghorn 162). Though arguably the very category of monster comes from the failure to perform or embody the categories prescribed for particular bodies, the film carefully projects Alex as "indistinguishable from anyone else in terms of speech and behavior" (Zoila Clark 1).¹²⁹

However, by projecting Ramiro as a carnivorous butcher Alex transposes the status of monster back on the Dr. Frankenstein figure that threatens the cohesiveness of her body. Though her body may appear as monstrous to other members of the community - something that Alex herself is aware of when, after revealing her secret to

¹²⁸ Ramiro is not the only danger that Alex faces as she moves between one phase of development and another. The danger presented by members of the small community - particularly from men - who refer to Alex as "una especie en extinción" [an endangered species] on one occasion, and who attack her on another occasion, also explicitly mark the growing expectation that she conform to expected sexual and gender norms. The attack scene in particular emphasizes the vulnerability of Alex's body, seen as nothing more than spectacle.

¹²⁹ Using Carrie Packwood Freeman's notion of 'humanimity,' Clark analyzes both *XXY* and Puenzo's next film, *El niño pez* (2009), and proposes that both films rely on parallels between the young characters and the natural world in order to extend the spectators' understanding of gender and sexuality.

Álvaro, she shouts “Andá decíles a todos que soy un monstruo” [Go on, tell them I’m a monster] - the film’s privileging of Alex’s perspective projects Ramiro’s desire to operate as perverse and monstrous instead.

XXY, though reminding the spectator that the outside world may view Alex as a monster, consistently presents Alex’s condition as a boon that allows her to traverse the constructed binaries that characterize social and sexual life. In multiple scenes, Alex is presented surrounded by and seamlessly integrated into activities that have traditionally been associated with one of the two sexes. In one scene she sits around a campfire drinking and smoking with Álvaro and her best friend Vando, while in another she lays with her friend Roberta participating in “girl talk” and sharing details of Roberta’s sexual activity with her cousin. While the scenes underscore Alex’s ability to cross the expected geographies that traditionally delimit male and female behavior, they also project the multiple experiences that her non-normative body and sense of self have allowed her over the course of the last 15 years.

Nonetheless, Alex is also situated somewhere between the adult and childhood worlds. This notion is exemplified in a scene in which, shortly after an attack by a group of adolescent boys, she is shown napping on her bed with her mother and her friend. Reminiscent of a tableau vivant, Suli lays on her side holding Alex and Roberta lies with her head in the curve of Alex’s legs. Alex, positioned between the other two characters, is a clear meeting point between Suli’s adult frame and Roberta’s tiny body and this marks her as a threshold between one developmental stage and the other. The development of her body, and the expectations of the choices that such development entails, are not only presented in Alex’s anxiety over how her intersexed body will be

read by others, but stems from the very transition she is undergoing. This idea is established in the film when Alvaro looks through a series of drawings Alex has done of herself throughout the years. The drawings start out depicting scenes such as two individuals with different female and male genitalia dancing together and progressively become darker and more violent, often depicting violence being done on the intersexed figure. The thematic content of the drawings reflects a growing consciousness of Alex's body less as her own, as it was in childhood, and more as a reflection of the monstrosity she believes others will read it as possessing.

Childhood, then, presents a space that is as inhabitable for Alex as the natural spaces that she seeks out throughout the film. As a scene shortly after the attack demonstrates, childhood acts as a shelter for the character. Alex, dressed in a striped t-shirt that barely covers her, lies with her mother on her bed. She opens the drawer to her nightstand and takes out a bottle of medication and then slowly begins to drop the corticosteroid tablets onto the floor. As she dumps the pills on the floor she says to her mother: "No quiero más pastillas, operaciones, cambios de colegio. Quiero que todo se quede igual" [I don't want any more drugs, operations, changing schools. I want everything to remain the same.] The expressed desire for everything to remain the same that I read through Kathryn Stockton's notion of "delay" is a manifestation of a resolve on the part of the non-normative child (or gay child, as in Stockton's argument) not to grow-up, since to do so means to belie the reified image of the innocent (and thus neither straight nor gay) child figure. Alex's insistence, however impossible it may be, is essentially the desire to remain a child.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Stockton argues that "growing sideways" is a way of reading the child who does not fit into our normative definitions of the child figure from the frontier space of the adult. Instead, she proffers that this

What is more, Alex cannot even take comfort in the relationships that have remained most constant in childhood, as indicated in one scene where she flees from Roberta after they shampoo one another's hair and Roberta looks down at what the spectator can only assume is Alex's erection.¹³¹ Even after her sexual encounter with Álvaro, an encounter that she initiates because she insists there is no danger of falling in love with him, Alex is unable find solace because as she states: "yo quiero otra cosa" [I want something else]. It never becomes clear exactly what Alex wants. In this way, the film refuses to offer a definitive answer to Alex's dilemma, thereby insisting on Cabral's notion of a poetics of intersexuality that offers a broader lens on sexual difference and different forms of desire. Fundamentally, what does remain clear for spectators is Alex's inability to coordinate what she most desires with the available societal categorizations imposed on individuals once they reach maturity.

And yet, though the film does not allow Alex to regress into the safe space of childhood, it does not impose a categorical reading of her situation. In one of the last featured conversations between the protagonist and her father, he sits next to her bed watching her as she sleeps. Alex wakes and asks him:

¿Qué hacés? [What are you doing?]

Kraken: Te cuido. [I'm taking care of you]

Alex: No me vas a poder cuidar siempre. [You won't always be able to take care of me]

type of growth characterizes "the publicly impossible child whose identity is a deferral . . . and an act of growing sideways" (Stockton 11).

¹³¹ As Estrada-López and Gleghorn indicate, the film purposefully never depicts Alex fully nude and instead plays with the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator who is invited to look but is never given the satisfaction of actually seeing Alex fully. Both authors utilize Laura Mulvey's notion of visual pleasure to argue that throughout the film only Alex holds the power to decide who is able to see and not see her completely.

Kraken: Hasta que puedas elegir. [Until you can decide]

Alex: ¿Qué? [What?]

Kraken: Lo que quieras. [Whatever you want]

Alex: ¿Y si no hay nada que elegir? [What if there is nothing to decide?]

Evocative of the sea monster, Kraken offers Alex his protection until such time as she chooses to make a decision on whether or not to undergo surgery. Through his promise, Kraken cedes all control over Alex's decisions, thus enabling her to make up her own mind, including the choice of whether or not to bring charges against the boys who attacked her. In this way, the film not only enacts an opening for Alex to refigure her body as she sees fits, but it also leaves open the possibility for her to exclude herself from any determinate classification.

In their own ways, Puenzo, Martel, and Carri all reject a definitive reading of the desires of the child figure projected within their films. Through such a suspension they not only challenge the assumed constructions of the child, but also liberate it to contest the bases of the adult world. In *Géminis*, the social order upheld by the family institution is assailed by incest and the threat of an indeterminate or abominable future should Jere and Meme start a family.¹³² In *La niña santa*, both Amalia and Jose undermine religious discourse in order to pursue their desires while also showing a sophisticated and exploitable knowledge of the adult world. Finally in *XXY* Alex chooses to reject the medical gaze that would categorize and limit the desire already reflected in the indeterminacy of her body. In all three films, it is not necessarily the child's sexuality that becomes the central conflict for the adults around them but rather the child's illegibility that make him or her so dangerous to social structures. By displaying and

¹³² In an alternate ending of the film the couple is seen entering and exiting an obstetrician's office.

embodying unconventional and indecipherable desires and relationships, the child figure in contemporary Argentina cinema rejects its relationship with the future. As Bruhm and Hurley proffer, “people worry more about how the child turns out than about how the child exists as a child” (xiv). Consequently, in considering how the figure of the child circulates in these films, and by extension in cinema as a whole, the child appears to fade into the background and instead projects more about the future adult. In this way, the child is always haunted by the adult it will become.

CONCLUSION

While researching in Buenos Aires, I encountered a curious child figure on my walk up to Corrientes from my apartment on Billinghurst. The figure consisted of the stenciled outline of a small child sleeping on the ground with a wad of newspapers as a pillow. From then on, I would come upon the graffiti figure in different neighbourhoods as I circulated throughout the city. Sometimes, the figure was accompanied by a few lines of text reading, “Nada vale si hay un niño en la calle.” [Nothing matters if there is one child on the street.] Over the course of writing this dissertation, I have often thought about this figure. I’ve wondered about the strategic uses of the stenciled child in denouncing the poverty that affects the physical children in the country. In researching the graffiti figures, I learned that a theatre and muralist group calling itself “Tumba Rrati” produced and scattered the images around the city. Though the group’s mandate to use art to promote social change is interesting, what I found most intriguing is its insistence on the instrumentalization of the child figure as the main symbol for the suffering of the poor. The graffiti child figure disseminated across the city, in many ways, crystallizes the emotive charge that seems to be inextricably tied to the child.

My project has focused on the ways in which directors in contemporary cinema, acknowledge the discursive significance of the figure of the child, while also utilizing it in various ways that respond to Argentine society and politics. I suggest that by tracing the child in representation a deeper appreciation of the child in these films emerges and allows spectators to understand, as Claudia Castañeda describes, the figure’s double

force. As Castañeda argues, the child figure's power lies in its constitutive effect and generative circulation (3). Drawing on Castañeda's notion of the child figure and in working through these representations, three difference frames for thinking about the child emerged: The first is the figure of the child that is most often encountered in political and social discourse. This discursive 'child' is utilized most often to incite anxieties about the future, thereby justifying laws and policies meant to protect innocent children from sexual, economic, or other forms of exploitation. The second frame refers to the physical child. This frame is defined by the little bodies that share our space and that we determine to be children. These individuals are often also those most affected by the forms we allow the discursive child (the 'child' of the first frame) to take. Third, there are the actual children in these films, that is, the actors that play the child characters. These have been the most challenging children to locate in this project, since the two child frames listed above almost always supplant ways of thinking through this particular form of child. While having established the different frames for analyzing the child, it is important to recognize the fact that the three categories often bleed into one another, thus underscoring the complexity of this figure within representation.

Furthermore, it is important to note that my analysis of the figure of the child in contemporary Argentine cinema derives from a particular historical moment in which the notion of the child is experiencing dramatic and definitive changes. Based on the politicization of childhood in relation, as this dissertation argues, to both the dictatorial period and the economic crisis that followed, childhood has experienced and will continue to experience significant permutations both in its representation as well as its construction. Overall, what *Captive Subjects* signals is the malleability of the figure of

the child and its utility in cultural representation. Through the instrumentalization and accessibility of this figure, the filmic texts that comprise contemporary Argentine cinema invite the spectator into conversation with pressing contemporary themes and historical periods.

In tracing the child figure through various films produced between the years 2001 and 2009, my dissertation also marks a transition from the dictatorial period to the economic crisis of 2001. The films range from those that deal directly with the dictatorial past and the memory politics that pervaded in Argentina at the turn of the century, to films that seem almost apolitical, but that I extend do have important implications for thinking through the political and social context of the country.

Kamchatka, *Cordero de dios*, and *Cautiva* cast the child as historian. Reflecting the boom of memory in the late 1990s, the films of Biraben, Piñeyro, and Cedrón present child historians who tell the stories for absent victims of state violence who cannot share their own stories. Through the histories that the children in the films reconstruct, these directors are able to represent the emergence of political groups such as H.I.J.O.S., who surreptitiously lay claim to a lost childhood, while also crystallizing the changing parameters of childhood in the realm of contemporary Argentine politics. The consequences of this pairing are that the very artifacts and activities (toys and play) of childhood are mixed into the filmic texts, demonstrating the uniqueness and possibility of a child's way of approaching divisive histories.

Through a reading of the childhood games and play featured in the films, I argue that the child enacts a radical connection to history. Throughout the chapter I borrow from Giorgio Agamben's contention that there is a close correlation between the child

and language, as well as his observation that the child occupies the space before language and through play liberates objects and time from their historical restraints. Thus, in watching the child at play in the films, I contend that spectators are also invited to impart the lasting effects of the dictatorial period on the younger generations that experienced it.

In a similar fashion, the child figure and, more precisely, its ways of knowing, are strategically utilized to document and reflect on the disappeared in Argentina from the perspective of the children left behind. In both *Los rubios* and *Papá Iván*, spectators are faced with the innovative and sensorial integration of filmic techniques and childhood artifacts and technologies. Through the complex interweaving of these modes and materials, directors Carri and Roque ask spectators to re-enter the sacred space of the child in order to initiate a re-examination of the militant movements of the 1960s.

Furthermore, by using the child's experience as a tool of representation, Roque and Carri are better able to open their films to different and competing interpretations of history. Therefore, this chapter demonstrates how the complication and suspension of the narratives underscore the tacit line between history and memory as a way of demonstrating the impossibility of containing grief and experience in any concrete way. Finally, these characteristics also speak to the limitations and possibilities of the film medium, particularly that of documentary, in representing experience.

Thinking through Carri's and Roque's utilization of the child as a mode of filmic narration, and particularly their recasting of the political objectives of their disappeared parents, required thinking about the ways in which childhood complicates the very task of narration. Therefore, based on the open-ended nature of the films examined in chapters three and four, my dissertation teases out a more nuanced connection between the child

and the sociopolitical environment surrounding it. Thus, there is a discernible shift between chapters two and three in which any reference to the dictatorial past is notably absent. As my dissertation proposes, the second groupings of films focus more explicitly on the daily lives of child characters, thereby highlighting the lasting effects of the dictatorship and Neoliberal policies in the domestic space of the family.

While emptying the child figure discursively in order to bend and shape it to better suit their representational needs, directors Martel, Carri, and Mora provide muted and obscure visions of a nation in crisis. *La ciénaga*, *La rabia*, and *La hora de la siesta* focus on the small bodies of children that invite the spectator to consider the larger themes of vulnerability through the leveling out of differences between objects, animals, and characters. While focusing on the images of vulnerable child bodies, spectators are asked to engage in the broader terms of suffering that characterized the economic crisis of 2001, in which fifty-two percent of the population (nineteen million people in total) fell below the poverty line.¹³³ The child characters in these films are cast in various stages of stagnancy that in many cases are determined by the slow unraveling of violence. The directors also insist on the emptying out of the investments placed in the childhood figure, both in relation to its potential as well as its resistance to the physical and symbolic violence cast upon it.

Ultimately, the history of the child is also the history of infantilization. The films of chapter three reflect on the ways in which particular bodies, such as those of women, indigenous populations, and, in our current culture, children, have been and are currently discursively marked by particular vulnerabilities and “deficiencies” that entail strict

¹³³ For more statistics on unemployment and poverty in Argentina after the economic crisis, see Rock’s “Racking Argentina.”

legalistic limitations or social coding on their conduct and behavior. Therefore, a large part of my reading of the films of chapter three analyze how the figure of the child also encapsulates other historical situations in which marginalized subjects and populations were cast as, and treated, as metaphorical “children.” Essentially, the chapter shows how directors extend the very category of child in order to instigate a questioning of the limitations it imposes on actual bodies and social codes that such categorizations instill and uphold. At the end of the day, the child figures that spectators are faced with in chapter three are paradoxical; they demonstrate the emptiness the directors present while also projecting the societal investments that lend the figure its fullness.

The imposition of social codes and limitations is never as apparent as in the relationship between the child and sexuality, or perceived lack thereof. As Foucault says of children and sexuality: “it is supposed that they are not capable of talking about themselves, of being sufficiently lucid about themselves [. . .] They are thought to be incapable of sexuality and they are not thought to be capable of speaking about it” (*Foucault LIVE* 273). Through a focus on the child in transition to adulthood, the films that make up chapter four of my project: *Géminis*, *La niña santa*, and *XXY* provide spectators with figures who destabilize the discursive structures regulating the child. Through the projection of characters who embody and/or pursue non-normative desires and sexuality, Carri, Martel, and Puenzo provide viewers with child figures that exceed social and institutional expectations. In each of their films, the directors present a child figure whose desire or being transcends reading, thus marking it as illegible. Through this indeterminacy, these films upset the assumed allegorical relationship between the child and nation.

The child is also an important figure in thinking about which bodies go protected and unprotected. In these films, race, culture, class, and sexual orientation all become important markers in readings of the child figure. Furthermore, by suspending spectator expectations regarding the normative relationship between children and sexuality and focusing on the children that do not fit, the films mark a parallel destabilization in other taken for granted aspects of social life. Accordingly, by making the child illegible, directors propose an analogous destabilization in the concept of nationhood, thereby marking the decadence of the very foundations of the nation.

It is important to indicate that the films do not only commit to the categories above. Due to the openness and flexibility of the child figure under analysis, many films will represent child characters that lend themselves to many different interpretations. In other words, a film may contain a critique of regulatory sexuality while at the same time representing it through the vulnerability of the child's body. However, instead of seeing this as a weakness of the readings offered in these pages, it merely upholds my insistence on the complexity and richness presented by the child figure within film. It also underscores my insistence that this group of films do not intend, and instead want to question, a definitive or prescriptive reading of the child figure.

As my readings of the above films demonstrate, the child in these films provides directors the means to represent the political climate in contemporary Argentina while also acting as a point of reference for society through the anxieties it engenders. The figure of the child is also cast as a site of resistance in most, if not all, of these films. Finally, the figure of the child can also be read as a mode of representation due to the discursive and varied qualities invested within it.

As the preceding readings of the child figure underscore, thinking about how this figure is represented allows for a broader reading of social structures and conditions. With the prominence of the figure of the child throughout Latin American cinema, including recent productions such as the Brazilian film, *Cidade de dios* (2002), the Mexican films, *Temporada de patos* (2004) and *Alamar* (2009), and the Chilean film *Machuca* (2004), analyzing this figure becomes ever more necessary in order to gauge how it functions across different geographies and cultures. Undoubtedly, as this study attempted to show, the figure of the child and the situations in which it circulates open up the filmic text to varied interpretations and can thus incite a greater understanding of the relationship between film form and nationhood across the region. Moreover, with the continual growth of childhood and youth studies as they pertain to Latin America, we may also come closer to providing a comprehensive account of the indelible child figure captured on film, while at the same time offering a similar account of why this particular figure is so captivating.

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