The Embodiment of Trauma in Science Fiction Film:

A Case Study of Argentina

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Abstract

A small number of articles and book chapters have analysed post-dictatorship Argentine science fiction film from a historico-political perspective, tracing embedded references to the 1976-1983 dictatorship and showing the ways in which films such as Hombre mirando al sudeste (Subiela, 1986), Moebius (Mosquera, 1996), La sonámbula (Spiner, 1998) or La Antena (Sapir, 2007) address the themes of political repression and violence through metaphor and connotation, under cover of a fantastic narrative.

My approach complements these readings, extending the corpus and outlining the first book-length study of Argentine science fiction film. Contesting positions held by certain critics that science fiction is inadequate in terms of dealing with traumatic historical issues, and aiming to move beyond seeing the genre only as a ‘camouflage device’ which has enabled authors to hide their message within a fantasy framework under the threat of persecution, this thesis argues that science fiction film fills a gap where representations of trauma memory are concerned. On the one hand, its narrative strategies and tropes are highly suited to such representations. On the other, its status as popular culture places it on the outer margins of a political and cultural framework that has consistently denied the atrocities perpetrated in a totalitarian context and sought to impose a unilateral, hegemonic version of history. In the course of the study I draw on the fields of science fiction, psychology, and Latin American studies in a cross-disciplinary approach.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. 2

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................. 3

List of Figures ........................................................................................................... 6

General Introduction ............................................................................................... 7

Chapter 1: Contexts and Definitions ................................................................... 14

  1.1 Science fiction and the issue of genre ......................................................... 14
  1.2 Science fiction film ....................................................................................... 23
  1.3 Toward a definition of science fiction (or not) ........................................... 26
  1.4 Science fiction, time, and memory ............................................................. 32
  1.5 Trauma and science fiction film ................................................................. 36

    1.5.1 Trauma ................................................................................................. 36
    1.5.2 Shortcomings of testimony ................................................................... 38
    1.5.3 Science fiction cinema: a good alternative .......................................... 42
    1.5.4 Approach ............................................................................................. 44

Chapter 2: The sublime aesthetic of science fiction in *Invasión* (Santiago, 1969) and *Hombre mirando al sudeste* (Subiela, 1986) ........................................ 47

  2.1 Introduction .................................................................................................. 47
  2.2 The sublime: a brief introduction ................................................................. 48
  2.2 The Burkean and Kantian sublime in Santiago’s *Invasión* ......................... 50
  2.3 Tragedy and the cinematic sublime in *Hombre mirando al sudeste* .......... 66
  2.4 Conclusion: hope within the eternal return ................................................. 76

Chapter 3: Going round in circles? Non-linear time and divergent narratives in *Moebius* (Mosquera, 1996) ................................................................. 78

  3.1 Introduction .................................................................................................. 78
  3.2 The Dystopian geometries of the underground ........................................... 79
  3.3 The cinema as a site of ghosts ..................................................................... 86
  3.4 Divergent connections: finding freedom in the time-image ....................... 91
  3.4 Conclusion .................................................................................................. 102

Chapter 4: A dystopian city: the topography of trauma in *La sonámbula* (Spiner, 1998) ................................................................. 104

  4.1 Introduction .................................................................................................. 104

    4.1.1 La sonámbula ....................................................................................... 104
    4.1.2 Science fiction and the city ................................................................. 105
  4.3 Urban projects under the junta .................................................................. 119
  4.4 Buenos Aires: a dystopian tradition ............................................................. 122
  4.5 Beyond the physical structure of the metropolis: language and time .......... 124
  4.5 Conclusion .................................................................................................. 129

Chapter 5: *La antena* (Sapir, 2007): reviving the Gothic origins of Science Fiction ................................................................. 131
List of Figures

Figure 1: Cover of the pulp magazine Amazing Stories (April 1926, vol. 1, no. 1), published by Experimenter Publishing Co. ................................................................. 18
Figure 2: Moebius strip ........................................................................................................... 95
Figure 3: Klein Bottle ........................................................................................................... 98
Figure 4: Screen shot of Buenos Aires in La sonambula .......................................................... 114
Figure 5: Screenshot of the city in Fritz Lang’s Metropolis .................................................... 114
Figure 6: Moses King postcards representing a futuristic New York, 1908 and 1911 .................. 115
Figure 7: El Hombre Ratón’s uniform. .................................................................................... 139
Figure 8: Shots from La antena (left), Voyage dans la Lune (Méliès, 1902, top right) and Metropolis (Lang, 1926, bottom right) ................................................................. 140
Figure 9: Anthropomorphic communication device (La antena) ........................................... 148
Figure 10: Shopfront, ‘Reparaciones TV’ in (La antena) ....................................................... 148
Figure 11: The front of La Voz’s house; picture taken on set during the making of the film (from ADF, p.19) ........................................................................................... 149
Figure 12: El Hombre Ratón, Low angle shot and close-up .................................................... 151
Figure 13: El Hombre Ratón takes the nurse hostage ............................................................... 152
Figure 14: Dr Y (La antena) .................................................................................................... 153
Figure 15: Dr Y’s rubber gloves .............................................................................................. 154
Figure 16: Sr TV’s distorted face ............................................................................................ 155
Figure 17: The city’s inhabitants watch the match .................................................................. 155
Figure 18: The scream ............................................................................................................. 156
Figure 19: Hand drawing of La Voz by Esteban Sapir (left), Walt Disney’s Grim Reaper (right) .... 157
Figure 20: The death of the Globe Fairy .................................................................................. 158
Figure 21: “¡Padre!” ................................................................................................................. 164
Figure 22: “Lo odio.” ................................................................................................................. 164
Figure 23: ‘El don puede ser hereditario’. ............................................................................... 165
Figure 24: Silent nurses in La antena ..................................................................................... 166
Figure 25: World War II nurse poster ‘Silence means security’ .................................................. 167
Figure 26: Silencio ..................................................................................................................... 168
Figure 27: Lucas’s creation, comic book superhero Filmatrón (top); Lucas as Filmatrón (bottom) ..... 188
General Introduction

Released in 2003, Albertina Carri’s film *Los rubios* documents the film-maker’s attempts to reconstruct the lives and personalities of her parents, political activists who were kidnapped and later executed by Argentina’s military junta in 1977, when she was three years old. Unusual in its form, *Los rubios* was ‘at odds with the ways in which the work of memory had been carried out previously’, breaking the traditional conventions of the documentary film.¹ The image chosen by Carri to represent the actual moment of her parents’ kidnapping was one of the focal points of the negative criticism received by the film: a re-enactment of the alien abduction scenario, a recurrent trope in the science fiction cinema since the 1950s, in which the characters are Playmobil toys. In the following extract from an interview conducted by María Moreno, Carri counters these criticisms by questioning the very possibility of representing a real traumatic event such as the one she experienced:

–Se te reprochó el uso de los Playmobil en la escena del secuestro, que la apelación a los extraterrestres despolitizaba su sentido. ¿Tendrías que haber puesto Temerarios, haciendo de militares?

–O Dráculas. Pero, ¿cómo hacés para representar el secuestro de tus padres? ¿Con un docudrama? ¿Llamás a actores?²

Criticism aside, the fact that this defining moment of Carri’s life, which stands at the crossroads between personal history and national history, was represented using a science fiction trope has hardly been dwelled on. Gonzalo Aguilar refers to the scene as a ‘childlike’ one, based on ‘action B-movies’; he views it as a natural outcome of Carri’s age at the time of the event.³ Verónica Garibotto and Antonio Gómez also overlook Carri’s choice of genre, referring simply to ‘la renarración en claves alternativas (como el relato hiper simplificado de las escenas con playmobil y su

apelación al imaginario infantil).\(^4\) As suggested in the above exchange, other critics felt the imagery de-politicized Carri’s work. Moreno’s point, that a fantastic representation that might have translated a clearer accusation against an ‘evil’ perpetrator (Carri humorously mentions vampires) would have been better accepted, speaks of expectations regarding the representations of trauma that ignore the complex displacements of traumatic memory.

If one crosses disciplinary boundaries into the field of science fiction studies, however, further food for thought on the matter can be found in the first article to consider the relationship between the science fiction trope of alien abduction and trauma from a cultural theory perspective. In it, Roger Luckhurst discusses the proliferation of alien abduction narratives in the personal and cultural spheres of 1980s U.S.A., relating the phenomenon to a rupture in memoro-politics and to the further development in psychiatry of the notion of trauma, both of which are relevant to the Argentine context. Referring to North America, Luckhurst writes:

If the category of “memory” can be divided into personal identity, the collective practices of commemoration, and the institutional disciplines which determine the means and meanings of recall […] , then each of these modalities can be claimed to have undergone destabilization. The narrative and continuity of personal memory have been transformed by the effects of crises in collective commemoration […] and, institutionally, by the revolution in psychotherapies which have located identity in terms of the discontinuity of memory resultant from trauma.\(^5\)

The crises referred to by Luckhurst here are specific to the North American cultural context; they relate to the challenges posed to a dominant version of history by the alternatives defended by Native American, African-American and Chicano movements that were at their most active in the 1960s and 1970s. The Vietnam War undermined master narratives of heroic warfare waged by a united nation against a clear common enemy, and its consequences led to the adoption by the American Psychiatric Association, in 1987, of the term ‘PTSD’ (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder) to describe


the psychological and physiological impact of the war on returning veterans. However, Luckhurst’s reading of the changes in North America’s memoro-politics is structurally relevant to Argentina. There, the concept of a unified, hegemonic version of history became subject to severe disruption as a consequence of the rupture in the national fabric of history and memory generated by the brutal oppression of political opponents carried out by the military junta. Between 1976 and 1983, systematic kidnapings, torture, and executions were perpetrated by the State against its own people. Argentina had been subjected to a number of dictatorships in the course of its history as an independent nation: that of Rosas in 1841; the ‘infamous decade’ inaugurated by Uriburu’s military coup in 1930; a succession of transitional military juntas in the 1950s and 1960s, and General Onganía’s ‘Revolución Argentina’ in 1966. However, the so-called Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, initiated on 24th March 1976, acquired a distinct character by virtue of its scale and nature. For Argentine historian Hugo Vezzetti, the State terrorism carried out under the junta was unique:

una situación límite, distinta por sus condiciones, su ejecución y sus efectos hacia el presente. […] Ese ciclo llevó a la sociedad argentina a un extremo de desintegración y alienación que alcanzó su núcleo más terrible, desmesurado y al mismo tiempo revelador, en la práctica de la desaparición de personas. La tragedia de los desaparecidos se ha convertido en un símbolo de una profunda fractura en la trama social […]..

An estimated 30,000 people were arrested, secretly detained and executed without trial, disposed of in such a manner that their corpses could not be recovered. Their children were often placed in the families of the perpetrators and grew up unaware of their history. One of the symbolic images forming the collective memory of these killings is the disposal of bodies first in the Río de la Plata, then at sea; witness testimonies report that detainees were thrown out of planes drugged but alive, their hands tied. To this day, thousands of bodies remain unrecovered by families; the victims are condemned to remain, in dictator General Videla’s famous words, ‘ni vivos ni muertos’. Since the downfall of the junta, collective memory has been articulated around the absence of the desaparecidos, which is also a form of presence.

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7 The estimated number ranges from 10,000 to 30,000
In this context, the image chosen by Carri to represent the moment in which her parents are taken by the army is strikingly relevant, since at the heart of the abduction trope is, in Luckhurst’s words, ‘a gap that structures memory by its absence’. Luckhurst describes the alien abduction narrative as a suturing narrative, a form of resistance against ‘the intermittency of a subject constructed by trauma’. Carri’s choice of image also constitutes a form of resistance to a pressure that would have her employ simplistic forms of representation. These ultimately fail to acknowledge the psychological implications of the trauma she experienced, as well as implying that history, personal and collective, should be told using prescribed forms and tones. The use of a science fiction trope thus becomes political, countering hegemonic approaches to the telling of (traumatic) history.

The dismissal of the science fiction element in *Los rubios*, viewed as mere a-political fantasy, echoes criticism levied at Eliseo Subiela’s *Hombre mirando al sudeste* (1986), which was released nearly twenty years earlier, in the wake of the dictatorship’s fall. Although this film is not, as is the case with *Los rubios*, explicitly about the dictatorship or postmemory, it has been widely interpreted by academic critics as an allegorical representation of the *junta*’s oppression. For example, Andrea Cuarterolo suggests that the asylum where the story is set is ‘una metáfora del ambiente opresivo y claustrofóbico de los años del Proceso’, while for Geoffrey Kantaris the main character, Rantés, who appears in the asylum claiming to be an alien from outer space, is ‘a reaparecido […] and is thus a spectral corollary of the desaparecidos of Argentina’s Dirty War’. Academic readings of *Hombre mirando al sudeste* focus substantially on the film as an allegory for the 1976-1983 dictatorship and its aftermath; yet, as noted by Catherine Grant, Subiela’s use of a framework and conventions that are associated with the fantastic prevents ‘an unequivocal coding of his film as political’. This has caused exasperation among certain critics who have argued that ‘Subiela’s choice of genre is not up to the symbolic task of exploring past

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8 Luckhurst, ‘The Science-Fictionalization of Trauma’, p. 37 (original emphasis).
9 Luckhurst, ‘The Science-Fictionalization of Trauma’, p. 47.
atrocities in a “politically responsible” manner’.\textsuperscript{11} Grant cites, among other critics, David Foster, for whom ‘the focal point of the film [is suspended] between two essentially irreconcilable meanings […] investing the film with a considerable degree of ideological indecisiveness’.\textsuperscript{12}

In the two cases cited above, one a film explicitly about postmemory that includes a science fiction trope to represent a key traumatic moment, the other a science fiction film consistently read as an expression of the collective trauma experienced by Argentina under the 1976-1983 dictatorship, the science fiction genre has been viewed as an inadequate medium through which to comment on the consequences of trauma. At best, it has been seen as a camouflage device, a fantasy form hiding truths too dangerous to express publicly in the uncertain years following the \textit{Proceso}.\textsuperscript{13} To date, very little attention has been paid to the specificities of the genre as a form of cultural expression of trauma, despite a boom in sf literary production in the 1980s, and a small but consistent production of Argentine sf films that have sometimes been related by critics to the \textit{Proceso} and studied individually within this historical framework. Hardly any emphasis has been placed on analysing how the generic makeup of science fiction – its structures, approaches and typical tropes – might interact with the trauma that is expressed in these counter narratives.

Several elements contribute to this state of affairs: the low cultural status often attributed to science fiction, and more so where film is concerned; the relative recency of a consistent body of academic criticism on science fiction (henceforth sf); in Latin America, perceptions of science fiction as a cultural form developed by, and therefore belonging to, the Northern Hemisphere, and a lack of interdisciplinarity bringing together sf scholars and Latin American Studies scholars. The situation is changing; over the course of the last decade, there has been an opening up of English-speaking criticism to Latin American science fiction, and a process of documenting science

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Like Andrea Cuarterolo, I will refer to the 1976-1983 dictatorship as the ‘\textit{Proceso}’. The deliberate, chilling euphemism of the term coined by the \textit{junta} is revealing of the complex issues affecting this period and its aftermath. The term also distinguishes the 1976-1983 dictatorship from previous periods of totalitarianism, without resorting to repetitions of a longer phrase such as ‘the latest dictatorship’ or ‘the 1976-1983 dictatorship’.
\end{flushleft}
fiction production in Latin America has also been taking place, from within Latin America as well as outside of it. While this movement was initially mostly anthological and therefore descriptive, recent endeavours have moved towards a more systematic, critical approach to Latin American sf. To date, however, these works have mostly focused on literature, and a vast gap remains to be filled where science fiction cinema is concerned.

This thesis thus participates in multiple contemporary movements. First of all, a double movement in the field of Latin American Studies in the UK, where a new appraisal of science fiction is taking place at the same time as an intensification in the field of collective memory, and specifically traumatic memory.14 Analysing a corpus of Argentine science fiction cinema spanning the period leading from 1969 to 2007, from the perspective of genre and in the context of trauma memory, brings these two fields of study together. A small number of academics have opened up this path – Mariano Paz and Geoffrey Kantaris are two notable examples – but much work remains to be done. A broader perspective is all the more useful as it also helps address the issue, often raised, of whether science fiction is a mainly Northern genre which might impose its voice and tools on a Latin American film culture viewed as peripheral.15 At the same time, science fiction scholars in the UK and the US are currently striving to widen the field's study of sf produced by countries outside Europe and Northern America. The present study contributes to this process also.

My approach places an emphasis on exploring the vehicle itself: science fiction film, its characteristic structures, tropes and narrative devices. Contesting the view that science fiction film is inadequate in terms of dealing with traumatic historical issues, and aiming to move beyond seeing the sf genre only as a ‘camouflage device’ which has enabled authors to hide their message within a fantasy universe under the threat of persecution, I argue that the science fiction framework is instead particularly adapted to the resurfacing and embodiment of traumatic memory. To these ends, the study that follows draws on the fields of science fiction, psychology, film theory and Latin

American studies in a cross-disciplinary approach. The thesis examines how aspects of traumatic memory are articulated by the structures and tropes that characterise science fiction film, in order to demonstrate that certain features of the genre make it a particularly apt vehicle for the expression and narration of trauma; in some respects more so, perhaps, than the historical or documentary narrative.

Chapter One provides a set of tools, giving definitions and explaining concepts that are used throughout the thesis, as well as contextual information. I start by discussing the evolution of approaches to the science fiction genre, and provide a working definition of sf. This aims to provide a solid background to non-sf scholars in the context of an interdisciplinary study. In Chapter One, the characteristics of traumatic memory are also examined, and in particular the relationships between time, memory, narrative and the traumatic experience, with an emphasis on the Argentine context. These working definitions and contexts established, Chapters Two to Six examine the articulation of science fiction tropes and trauma within a selection of Argentine science fiction films. The boundaries of the corpus are defined chronologically and thematically, both seeking to examine characteristic tropes and observing evolutions in manifestations of the genre across time. All the works selected deal with oppression in a metaphorical or allegorical fashion, which means that their inclusion in the corpus rests on personal interpretation to some extent. In most cases, the works included have been discussed by at least one other critic in relationship to the Proceso: this is the case of Hombre mirando al sudeste (Subiela, 1986); Moebius (Mosquera, 1996), which was positioned as a comment on the dictatorship by the director himself; La sonámbula (Spiner, 1998), and La antena (Sapir, 2004). The last film of the corpus, Filmatrón (Parés, 2007) has not been examined by academic critics aside from a mention in Mariano Paz’s overview of Latin American sf film. Invasión (Santiago, 1969) is included in the first chapter alongside Hombre mirando al sudeste as a point of comparison between pre- and post-Proceso film. It too is a response to the experience of dictatorship; it is also a seminal film that has had a significant influence on Argentine sf from the 1980s onwards. A further exposition of my approach to the films is given at the end of Chapter One.

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Chapter 1: Contexts and Definitions

1.1 Science fiction and the issue of genre

‘The term “science fiction” is a misnomer […] trying to get two enthusiasts to agree on a definition of it leads only to bloody knuckles.’

- Damon Knight, In Search of Wonder

‘There is No Such Thing as Science Fiction.’

-Mark Bould & Sherryl Vint, Reading Science Fiction

Most critical works on science fiction (henceforth sf) start with a discussion concerning the problem of defining and delineating it as a genre, as is illustrated by Annette Kuhn’s statement in her introduction to Alien Zone: ‘One of the problems here must be the very difficulty of arriving at a critical definition of science fiction as a genre, even if it is readily recognizable in practice.’1 In the same spirit, The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction mentions the ‘raging debate’ over how to define the genre,2 while the introduction to Part One of Reading Science Fiction, ‘Mapping Science Fiction’, comes with a warning to the reader:

None of the essays in this section really tells us what SF is. Instead, they give us detailed approaches through which a definition of SF might be made, terms under which we might discuss what we mean when we point to this thing we call SF.3

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1 Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, ‘There is no such Thing as Science Fiction’, in Reading Science Fiction, ed. by James Gunn, Marleen Barr and Matthew Candelaria (New York: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 43-51.
4 James Gunn, Marleen Barr and Matthew Candelaria, Reading Science Fiction, p. 11. The authors are implicitly referring to a famous statement by science fiction author and critic Damon Knight: ‘Science fiction […] is what we point to when we say it’ (Damon Knight, ed., In Search of Wonder (London: Orion Publishing, 2013) p. 11. SF Gateway e-book.
For Gary Wolfe, issues of definition tend to affect all genres, given the problematic notion of genre itself: a term which he views as ‘almost too slippery to be useful’ since it is used to refer, in turn, to commercial categories, literary or narrative conventions, or ‘a collection of texts with perceived commonalities of affect and world-view’. However, Wolfe argues that the fantastic genres have a particularly problematic nature, a view that is also held by Carl Freedman: ‘it is symptomatic of the complexity of science fiction as a generic category that critical discussion of it tends to devote considerable attention to the problem of definition. […] No definitional consensus exists’.

Several elements underpin the complexities associated with defining science fiction. First of all, academic criticism in the field is recent in relative terms. Darko Suvin identified a small total of nine sustained critical works published in the 1960s; long dismissed as pop culture, science fiction indeed received very little serious critical attention until the late 1970s, and the newness of its entry on the academic scene meant that a new set of critical tools needed to be forged. In his essay on the language of science fiction The Jewel-hinged Jaw, first published in 1978, science fiction author Samuel R. Delany wrote: ‘intensive criticism of science fiction is a comparatively new phenomenon. Its most effective organizing principles have not yet been established’. This is a global phenomenon, which applies equally, if not more so, in Latin America. Although Argentine science fiction critic Pablo Capanna wrote the seminal essay ‘El sentido de la ciencia ficción’ as early as 1966, and despite the existence of identifiable science fiction works dating back to the eighteenth century, academic criticism remains comparatively scarce. As highlighted by Silvia Kurlat Ares, although there has, in recent years, been an upsurge in critical interest with regards to Latin American science fiction, with a number of anthologies, chronologies, and critical articles being published both in the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking worlds, the field is still affected by a degree of prejudice:

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perviven los prejuicios de muchos críticos del ámbito académico que siguen siendo renuentes a siquiera debatir la ciencia-ficción como fenómeno cultural o como problema estético o como discurso ideológico aún en el acotado espacio donde muchas veces ésta misma se ha atraincherado, es decir, el de la producción marginal.¹⁹

In the English-speaking world, science fiction has equally retained a degree of stigma linked to its labelling as ‘low’ culture. Indeed, even though sf was seen to become culturally and critically relevant in the eighties and nineties, two decades that saw an unprecedented ‘explosion of critical writing beyond what anyone might have expected’, divisions have endured between academic and popular contributions to the discussion; at the end of the twentieth century, only one English-speaking journal, the British Foundation, bridged the gap and published ‘contributions from all available sources’.¹⁰ Kurlat Ares highlights a further phenomenon affecting the genre in Latin America: while other critical fields have started to incorporate science fiction production to their broader contexts, sf has yet to be treated as a legitimate field of study in its own right. The analysis of sf texts has, overall, been multi-sited, re-contextualised and studied within other fields of discourse. Kurlat Ares writes:

La ciencia-ficción como objeto está generalmente confinada a las carreras de comunicaciones o de ciencias políticas, donde muy de vez en vez se la suele estudiar, o bien como un fenómeno de mercado, o bien como un fenómeno de comunicación de masas, o bien como el lugar de cruce de los discursos sobre la utopía. La ciencia-ficción se presta a todas y cada una de estas lecturas: es un objeto semiótico complejo.¹¹

Annette Kuhn, writing from the North American perspective in the last decade of the 20th century, described a similar situation applying especially to science fiction cinema. While specific, iconic science fiction films such as Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982) or the Alien series¹² attracted critical interest within the realm of screen studies, they did so mainly as ‘self-contained objects of analysis’ rather than as texts belonging to a

¹² Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979); Aliens (James Cameron, 1986); Alien 3 (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1992); Alien Resurrection (David Fincher, 1997).
genre. Indeed, Kuhn’s research revealed that systematic explorations in this field were scarce in relative terms, since ‘within the broader study of film genres there is relatively little sustained reflection on science fiction cinema, and [...] extensive studies of science fiction cinema as a genre are few and far between’. Unsurprisingly, Latin American science fiction film has suffered a similar fate, having ‘mostly been ignored by critics and academics, both nationally and internationally’; what criticism there is tends to focus on literature over cinema. This last point might reflect the proportion in terms of output as much as any prejudice relating to concepts of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture.

The second problematic aspect when attempting to define a global corpus of science fiction relates to the labelling and retro-labelling of its individual works, an issue that goes hand in hand with the relatively recent development of criticism in the field. Indeed, the greatest difficulty faced by academic critics is perhaps the range and diversity of productions that can lay claim to the science fiction label, as well as a corpus in constant evolution (I refer here not only to fresh output but also to retrospective revisions of what to include in the global corpus of works). The term ‘science fiction’ itself was coined by Hugo Gernsback, publisher of the first science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*; the terminology thus derives from the commercial US pulp fiction of the mid- to late twenties and forms one of Hollywood’s main popular genre categories. Until the late seventies, ‘science fiction’ was mainly understood in this sense, despite the inclusion in the very first pulp productions of texts by canonical authors such as Poe, Wells and Verne (see Figure 1). However, with the emergence of sf in critical theory, the term has since been extended to include a wide range of texts and media from both popular culture and canonical literature, ranging from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the earliest surviving Mesopotamian text, to the latest Hollywood blockbuster, via, to name but a very few, philosophical-political texts in the vein of More’s sixteenth-century *Utopia*, early twentieth century expressionistic / Gothic horror cinema in the tradition of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, selected texts by Jorge

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14 Kuhn, *Alien Zone II*, p. 2.


Luis Borges, the terror fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, or in Fredric Jameson’s words ‘the European art tradition of H.G.Wells’ “scientific romances”’.  

Figure 1: Cover of the pulp magazine Amazing Stories (April 1926, vol. 1, no. 1), published by Experimenter Publishing Co.

As a result, the field is fraught with debates and divisions as to what constitutes ‘science fiction’ and how to describe it. Mark Bould, frustrated with the consistent requests he receives to neatly define sf, refers to ‘the irresolvable fluidity of genres as discursive objects produced by ongoing processes of text-labelling and boundary-construction, by claims and counterclaims, debates and arguments, squabbles and spats’. Science fiction in Latin America has its own issues with genre labelling, addressed in depth by Rachel Haywood Ferreira. In the U.S., in 1926, Hugo Gernsback’s description of works by Poe, Verne and Wells as science fiction to explain what he meant by the term, initiated the retroactive labelling of ‘a body of existing texts that he felt belonged to the same tradition’. This ongoing process is one that also

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17 Jameson, Fredric, *Archaeologies of the Future* (New York: Verso, 2005), footnote 5, p. xiii. The list I provide here reflects the broadening of the field of inclusion mainly as described within English-speaking criticism.


started to take effect in Latin America from the 1960s onwards. Haywood Ferreira writes:

Like all such bibliographical processes, the effort to retrolabel Latin American sf has in part been the result of a desire for the stature and legitimacy that identifiable ancestors bestow upon their descendants. While Latin Americans can point to the Northern Hemisphere antecedents for their science fiction and claim that established pedigree as their own, their late twentieth- and early twenty-first century search for a more direct national or continental sf family tree represents a desire for evidence that science fiction has been a global genre from its earliest days and that Latin America has participated in this genre using local appropriations and local adaptations.20

Several elements in this passage deserve further debate: whether this process reflects a desire for stature, for example, rather than simply a desire for a more balanced representation of the evolution of sf as a global genre, one that might be built and represented through multiple perspectives. Whether, also, specifying that Latin American authors of sf ‘participated […] using local appropriations and local adaptations’ is fitting, given that it implicitly introduces a measure of hierarchy. Rarely, if ever, is North American sf referred to in terms of its ‘local adaptations’, for example. In a sense, while Haywood Ferreira’s undertaking is laudable, it sometimes appears to perpetuate a ‘founding fiction’ (to borrow González Echevarría’s terms) that would have Latin America as a minor contributor, whose work is distinct from the main body of sf production, rather than a major intellectual force on an equal footing and engaged in an ongoing dialogue with cultural output in other parts of the Western world – albeit on a smaller scale in terms of quantity and global distribution. In his (mainly positive) review of Haywood Ferreira’s book, Juan C. Toledano Redondo pushes this point further; he believes that in order to debate the matter of a Latin American science fiction, one would first have to answer the following question, too complex to be properly discussed here but noteworthy nonetheless: ‘Is there an entity called Latin America that produces ideas, philosophy, science, literature, etc., distinctive from the rest of the world and uniquely Latin American?’21

20 Haywood Ferreira, The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction, p. 1.
I would argue that one of the issues at the root of the current imbalance in representations of Latin American sf is accessibility for audiences and critics outside of its boundaries, and the difficulty, from a distance, to have a truly comprehensive view of a Latin American corpus, especially for those who do not speak Spanish or Portuguese. This has had an impact on the works selected to represent the genre, and therefore on critical approaches (this is an issue that has no doubt affected the present study). For example, although sf scholars such as Rachel Haywood Ferreira, Andrea Bell and Yolanda Molina-Gavilán are actively seeking to redress the imbalance in perceptions of Latin American sf, Argentine critic Luis Pestarini notes that four of the five Argentine works selected for their *Cosmos latinos* anthology are what he considers to be derivative texts all written during the same period. Citing three separate instances where critics have paid close attention only to these Argentine works, published in the mid-to-late nineteen sixties, he writes:

Curiosamente, aunque a la distancia se reconocen como textos menores, casi clichés de la tradición anglosajona de la ciencia-ficción, estos libros son los que parecen haber llamado más la atención de la crítica, en desmedro de otros más valiosos publicados con posterioridad.\(^{22}\)

It would be worth investigating whether these choices were made on the basis of structures that are recognisable and therefore perhaps more palatable to the tastes of the English-language readership of the anthology, or whether a lack of familiarity with the wide but not always well-known corpus of available works is to blame. Either way, the relatively low volume of academic sf criticism within Latin American countries certainly does not help this state of affairs.

The issue stands out even further when the critics involved in representing sf from Latin American countries outside of their borders are unfamiliar with their broader historical or cultural context. Global critical perspectives on science fiction until now have often been either North-centric, or written from a Northern perspective and thus at times have been afflicted by misperceptions or prejudice.\(^{23}\) Mexican writer

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\(^{23}\) Following Rachel Haywood Ferreira’s lead, I will use the capitalised terms ‘North’ and ‘Northern’ to refer to ‘the region that has historically exercised the greatest political, cultural and sf genre influence on Latin America. Most often this region includes the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, and perhaps Russia and excludes Spain, Portugal and usually Italy’ (*Emergence*, p. 232).
and critic Miguel Ángel Fernández Delgado quotes the following passage from the chapter on Spanish and Latin American science fiction in the sf anthology *The Road to Science Fiction Vol. 6: Around the World* (1998) as an example of a misguided approach to Latin American sf:

> When it comes to science fiction, Spain and Latin America share more than a language: primarily agricultural, slow to industrialize, influenced more by tradition than the forces that produce change, they have found little in science fiction that speaks to their condition. Because of their European neighbors, perhaps, Spain had some early SF experience, but Latin America was more isolated [...] Latin America’s major contribution to science fiction and fantasy (and literature itself) has been “magic realism”.24

While it feels a little unfair to be criticising editor James Gunn for what was one of the earlier concerted attempts to bring science fiction from outside the Northern hemisphere to the attention of the English-speaking world, Fernández Delgado’s frustration is nonetheless understandable. In this passage, Latin America is viewed in a comparative manner, read through the prism of a configuration and set of criteria that apply to the North. As such, definitions of and views on what constitutes Latin American sf are retrofitted – one might say shoehorned – into pre-established categories and perceptions that are not culturally relevant or informed. Fernández Delgado discusses this elsewhere in his article, comparing the rediscovery of Latin American sf that has taken place since the 1960s to a parallel exercise: the uncovering of the archaeological remains of dinosaurs. He writes:

> Hay que reconocer que la forma en que se ha investigado hasta ahora la ciencia ficción en Latinoamérica no ha sido la más indicada. Al iniciar los descubrimientos sudamericanos de restos de dinosaurios pertenecientes a familias o géneros desconocidos en el hemisferio norte, eso no fue motivo para forzarlos a encajar en los ya existentes. Esto, que parece muy lógico, no se ha visto con igual claridad en la mayoría de los estudios de la ciencia ficción, no únicamente de Latinoamérica, ya que ha sido frecuente minimizar lo relativo a

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la producción de esta corriente literaria en las regiones geográficas distintas a la europea y estadounidense.25

The recent increase in Latin American sf criticism, coming from both Latin American critics and critics from elsewhere who combine various levels of expertise in Latin American / Hispanic studies and science fiction, and therefore have the capacity to grasp the complexities associated with both domains, is likely to help to redress the situation. Two examples of this movement are the January-February 2012 issue of Revista iberoamericana, which is entirely devoted to Latin American science fiction, and the newly created online journal Alambique, dedicated to peer-reviewed criticism of sf composed in Spanish and Portuguese.26

The effort to review the shape and current limits of a science fiction corpus in Latin America is also confronted, locally, with what the term is understood to mean and the connotations attached to it. As has been the case in the Northern hemisphere, science fiction’s reputation in academic spheres suffers from a degree of negative association with ‘low’ culture, a situation that stands in contrast with the nineteenth century, when what would later be renamed science fiction was read by the educated elites.27 A further issue specific to Latin America is rooted in a sense that the genre as a whole is associated with the domineering North, an approach Fernández Delgado refers to as a form of malinchismo.28 He writes: ‘Texts carrying the sf label are frequently assumed to be second- or third-string works of pulp fiction, and they often draw charges of being a party to cultural imperialism and failing to reflect local realities.29

Haywood Ferreira also points out that carrying the science fiction label can be problematic for authors and publishers from a commercial point of view, and this is true regardless of the cultural context, further muddying the waters when it comes to assigning genre definitions. Just as publishers in the Southern Hemisphere have often sought to sell works that might be classed as sf under the label ‘magical realism’, making them easier to sell at home and abroad, authors in the Northern Hemisphere have sometimes fought to ensure their works were not published as science fiction and

25 Miguel Ángel Fernández, ‘Discurso sobre un nuevo método para el estudio de la ciencia ficción latinoamericana’.
27 Haywood Ferreira, Emergence, p. 5.
28 Fernández Delgado, Visions periféricas, p. 14; see also Haywood Ferreira, Emergence, p. 232.
29 Haywood Ferreira, Emergence, p. 3.
thus affected by the stigma of preconceptions against the genre, an apt illustration of John Rieder’s suggestion that ‘attribution of the identity of sf to a text constitutes an active intervention in its distribution and reception’.30 Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. eloquently expresses the attitude frequently reserved for what Suvin called ‘the noncanonic, repressed Twin of Literature’:31

I have been a sorehead occupant of a file drawer labelled “science fiction” ever since [my first novel], and I would like out, particularly since so many critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal.32

1.2 Science fiction film

The lack of consensus among academic critics over definitions of science fiction has applied to content, but equally to the medium of delivery, since there is disagreement as to whether film and literature should be addressed under the same heading, using the same critical tools; an issue that merits some discussion since it is relevant to the present study. Vivian Sobchack writes:

a great many SF writers and critics – unable to agree even among themselves what kind of beast SF literature is – have chosen to find only the most specious connection between written and filmed science fiction.33

Illustrating this point, Brooks Landon asserts that there is a ‘mistaken central assumption [in] most science fiction film criticism – that science fiction film and science fiction literature sprang from the same roots and pursued the same goals’.34 Writing in 1970, John Baxter went even further, declaring that ‘science fiction film [...] is an intellectual impossibility’, which implies that sf cinema should not even be

33 Vivian Sobchack, Screening Space, p. 20.
included in a definition of the genre. Landon is not quite so extreme, but his arguments resonate with those of Langford for whom, overall, ‘SF cinema has subordinated ideas to images’. Landon posits that whereas science fiction literature places narrative first, science fiction film privileges ‘cinematographic technology – spectacles of production largely associated with “trickery,” special effects, trucage’. He argues that science fiction film theory should, therefore, constitute a category of its own, one that ‘should privilege the concept of spectacle and the meaning of special effects over narrative’. Admittedly, one could argue that science fiction has retained a high degree of closeness to the early ‘cinema of attractions’, the focus of which was ‘to astound and fill people with wonder at the new form of magic made possible by the motion picture camera [and] show objects and lands that were beyond reach’. However, to oppose in a binary way, as does Baxter, science fiction literature’s ‘movements and ideas’ and science fiction film’s ‘fantasy and illusion’ is to ignore the complex interplay of cultural production in its multiple guises. Attempting to trace the direct and indirect impacts visual experiments with on-screen technology in so-called ‘popular culture’ have had on works hailed as literary classics is beyond the remit of this thesis. Clearly, however, one cannot easily separate the two without acknowledging the complex manner in which individual examples of cultural production interrelate on multiple levels. In fact, Andrew Milner proposes a different approach altogether to the questions of genre raised above. Indeed, he argues that distinctions regarding the medium of delivery should be altogether disregarded when dealing with the issue of genre:

genre is better defined in terms of its characteristic tropes and topoi than its media of delivery [and] is better understood as traversing, rather than being contained within, the binary opposition between supposedly ‘elite’ and supposedly ‘popular’ cultures.

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36 Langford’s full sentence reads: ‘With some conspicuous but isolated auteurist European exceptions [...] SF cinema has subordinated ideas to images.’ *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*, p. 200.
37 Landon, ‘Synthespians, Virtual Humans, and Hypermedia’, p. 60.
38 Landon, ‘Synthespians, Virtual Humans, and Hypermedia’, p. 60.
Like John Frow, Milner also steers away from a use of the word ‘genre’ that points solely to the formulaic, restrictive conventions born out of the commercial culture industry, and the redefinition of art as sellable artefacts which ‘promis[e] the pleasure, and limi[t] the risk, of the new, the unexpected’.41 This discussion echoes the issues raised by Argentine critic Pablo Capanna in his 1966 seminal book-length essay *El sentido de la ciencia ficción*, which equally discussed the limited definitions created by the culture industry and their lack of adequacy to describe ‘una literatura tan compleja y de niveles tan desiguales’.

Frow dismisses genre in this sense since he believes that it ‘obscures the extent to which even the most complex and least formulaic of texts is shaped and organised by its relation to generic structures’, the latter being, therefore, a universal aspect touching all texts.43 Milner, for his part, draws on Williams’s classification of cultural production into three categories: ‘mode’, which specifies how a cultural form is delivered – that is to say, narratively if it is recounted by a teller, dramatic if it is performed in front of an audience, and so forth; ‘genre’, which in Williams’s classification refers to persistent instances within each mode – in this sense, the novel or the short story, for example, are seen as ‘genres’ within the narrative ‘mode’; and finally ‘type’, which Milner correlates to what would more typically be called genre within criticism; ‘types’, for Williams, reflect ‘radical distributions, redistributions and innovations of interest, corresponding to the specific and changed social character of an epoch’.

For Milner, this approach provides arguments that both counteract those value judgements that would categorise science fiction as ‘popular’ or ‘low’ culture, and offers a framework which is inclusive of cultural expressions of science fiction across all media. Indeed, Williams’s approach implies that genre (what he names ‘type’) is sociologically based rather than text-based, and that its expressions within different media are merely redeployments of a ‘type’ within various instances of different overarching ‘modes’. To give a simple illustration provided by Milner, in nineteenth-century Europe science fiction was thus established through

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a radical redistribution of interests towards science and technology within the novel and short story genres of the narrative mode. In the twentieth century, the same concentration of interests persists within the novel and, more especially, the short story genres, but is also redeployed into various theatrical, film, radio and television genres of the dramatic mode. Some of these SF texts have been canonized as Literature by academic criticism.45

Milner’s reading equally applies to Latin America and, since ‘the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were times of nation building […] in terms of institutions and infrastructure, and also in terms of great real and/or perceived national potential’.46 The discourse of science was also endorsed ‘as a sign of cultural modernity, and as a means by which the various countries of Latin America could emerge as powerful actors on the world stage’.47 The emerging science fiction genre was thus conferred an authority that derived from a wider socio-cultural context, in other words from outside the text, rather than from the text itself. In Latin America as in Europe, therefore, the nineteenth century saw a redistribution of interests towards science that generated a similar focus in terms of literary production.

Having established that this thesis will approach the issue of genre within science fiction in terms of content rather than form, in line with Milner, and will disregard divisionary practices that would categorise science fiction according to value judgements passed on said content or on its various forms of delivery, I will now seek to establish a working definition of science fiction, to help situate the individual texts studied here within a wider field of cultural production, and provide a theoretical context by summarising the debates pertaining to the issue of definition.

1.3 Toward a definition of science fiction (or not)

Gary Wolfe suggests that science fiction belongs to the wider category of the fantastic genres, distinguishing itself from horror and fantasy through its scientific

45 Milner, Tales of Resonance and Wonder, p. 157.
46 Haywood Ferreira, Emergence, p. 6.
bias, while Pablo Capanna views it as exhibiting a scientific bias, and simultaneously employing surrealist methods of rupture with the reader’s reality:

Ocurre que las tendencias más actuales del género van hacia la asimilación del elemento fantástico tradicional y un acercamiento de estilo con el superrealismo, de manera que, paradójicamente, una literatura con pretensiones de objetividad adopta los métodos de ruptura de la realidad cotidiana.

Capanna sets sf aside from other forms of literature, believing the rational, scientific basis of the form to engage in a thought process responding to deep-seated worries experienced by the readership: ‘Podemos estar seguros de que, aunque resultara difícil comprobarlo, lo que buscan [los lectores] no es ya evasión o novedades científicas expuestas de modo agradable, sino colmar ciertas inquietudes profundas que la literatura no satisface.’ Vivian Sobchack, like Wolfe, highlights science as a central defining theme of science fiction:

The SF film is a film genre which emphasizes actual, extrapolative, or speculative science and the empirical method, interacting in a social context with the lesser emphasized, but still present, transcendentalism of magic and religion, in an attempt to reconcile man with the unknown.

Sobchack’s definition seeks to reconcile generic crossovers with horror and fantasy that are often viewed as problematic, while her expression of sf’s ultimate aim resonates with that of author and critic Judith Merril, who believes that the essence of the science fiction story is to learn ‘something about the nature of the universe, of man, of “reality”’. However, this expression of science fiction’s didactic experimentalism is, for Mariano Paz, too vague for the purposes of identifying a science fiction text, and falls short of a useful working definition in critical terms:

What does reconciling man with the unknown mean? How can this process be identified in a text? Although the various philosophical and metaphysical issues that are implicit in many SF films should not be denied, a definition should

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51 Sobchack, *Screening Space*, p. 63.
propose more concrete variables and specific parameters that allow the critic to identify the films.53

Instead, Paz, in agreement with Carl Freedman, prefers Darko Suvin’s approach to defining science fiction, which he believes establishes the genre’s differentia, that is to say, ‘the criteria that differentiate SF from other genres and make it unique’.54 Suvin, who is perhaps the most oft-cited critic in discussions concerning the characterization of science fiction over the last few decades, defines it as a genre

whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.55

Suvin borrows from Bertolt Brecht’s writings on the Verfremdungseffekt in theatre the concept of estrangement, which describes the act of representing a subject that is familiar in such a way as to make it appear unfamiliar, although still recognisable. As for cognition, which Suvin states must interact with estrangement within the alternative environment, Freedman describes it as the process ‘which enables the science fictional text to account rationally for its imagined world and for the connections as well as the disconnections of the latter to our own empirical world’.56 In this context, cognition therefore forms the basis for a critical interrogation of the author’s reality through the mental projection of logic-based continuities and disruptions, rationally linking the fictional universe with the audience’s real environment.

From Freedman’s point of view, however, it is worth extending and enriching Suvin’s definition on this point. Faced with the instability of the concept of cognition, in the sense that one would have to first establish whether connections between the reader’s reality and the text’s environment were indeed rationally possible or scientifically acceptable before being able to determine whether a text fit Suvin’s definition, Freedman prefers the more specific notion of ‘cognition effect’. This, he argues, describes the attitude or intention of the text, rather than requiring an evaluation

53 Mariano Paz, Ideology and Dystopia: Political Discourse in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema (University of Manchester thesis, 2010), p. 34.
54 Paz, Ideology and Dystopia, p. 36.
55 Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction (1979), pp. 7-8 [emphasis deleted].
56 Carl Freedman, Critical Theory and Science Fiction, p. 17.
and validation of the correlations, in real terms, between the fictional text and the reader’s empirical reality:

The critical issue for generic discrimination is not any epistemological judgement external to the text itself on the rationality or irrationality of the latter’s imaginings, but rather […] the attitude of the text itself to the kind of estrangements being performed.\textsuperscript{57}

Two points can be opposed to Freedman’s extension of Suvin’s definition. First, as noted by China Miéville, the concept of ‘cognitive effect’ is no less problematic than Suvin’s ‘cognition’. Miéville argues that a text does not have an attitude per se, but sits at the intersection between production and interpretation. As such, Freedman’s suggestion would require that the reader decipher the intentions of the author, bearing in mind that while the latter’s extrapolations may be rooted in empirical reality and a rigorous scientific approach, they might equally be a less straightforward construct, ‘the result of a strategy, or a game, played by writer and, often, reader, based not on reality-claims but plausibility-claims that hold purely within the text’.\textsuperscript{58} Freedman’s extension to Suvin’s definition thus comes full circle without having completed its intended goal, since it too, ultimately requires a ‘judgement external to the text itself’.

A second point that can be raised in response to Freedman’s doubts over the usefulness of the concept of cognition is that Suvin himself clarified the point in an article submitted to the journal Science Fiction Studies the same year Metamorphoses was published. Indeed, Suvin, drawing on Ivan Foht, makes a distinction between that which is known to be scientifically possible within the reader’s world – the ‘really possible’ – and that which is ‘ideally possible’:

Only in “hard” or “near future” SF does the story’s thesis have to conform to a “real possibility”; on the contrary, any SF thesis has to conform to an “ideal possibility” in the sense […] of a conceptual or thinkable possibility the premises of which are not in themselves or in their consequences internally contradictory (as in, e.g., time travel, or omnipotence and similar metaphysical wishdreams). It is intrinsically or by definition impossible for SF to

\textsuperscript{57} Freedman, \textit{Critical Theory}, p. 18.

acknowledge [...] an agency going beyond *physis* (nature), beyond the ideal possibilities of physics or any other science.\(^{59}\)

In other words, Suvin does not regard the process of cognition as resting purely on scientific facts or hypotheses; what is important is that the method employed within the fictional text mirrors the scientific method; in Suvin’s words, that it ‘is identical to that of the philosophy of science’.\(^{60}\) In this, Suvin converges with Capanna, who writes:

La cf emplea una cierta lógica para tratar aun las hipótesis más descabelladas o agotar las posibilidades implícitas en una situación dada. En esto se diferencia la cf de la literatura fantástica tradicional: no en la científicidad de sus temas sino en el modo en que se los trata. Se puede hacer cf sin recurrir a la física, partiendo de la historia o de la psicología y aun tratar los temas fantásticos tradicionales con lógica y ‘realismo’.\(^{61}\)

Expressed thus, the distinction between science fiction and fantasy in the larger sense does not require the reader to assess the validity of the fact or hypotheses outside the fictional text, removing the need for Freedman’s intervention.

In an article entitled ‘On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History’, John Rieder suggests that Suvin’s formal organisation of the genre through the concept of cognitive estrangement should in part be understood in terms of Suvin’s resistance to commercial practices; as such, his definition ‘becomes part of the history of sf, not the key to unraveling sf’s confusion with other forms’.\(^{62}\) Rieder argues for a historical approach to genre, where genre is viewed as a social process, rather than a formal one. In order to apply the latter, a text must be examined in order to determine whether given, fixed structural traits are present. An historical approach, on the other hand, asks a different set of questions of the text that situate it temporally and culturally, and take into account not just the object (the text) but the subject (the audience / critic). He writes:

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An historical approach to genre would ask instead how and why the field is being stretched to include these texts or defended against their inclusion; how the identification of them as sf challenges and perhaps modifies the accepted meaning of the term […] ; what tensions and strategies in the writing and publication and reading of sf prepare for this sort of radical intervention; and what interests are put at stake by it.⁶³

Within this mutable concept that is genre, argues Rieder, there is no single unifying characteristic; by definition, neither is there any room for a traceable point of origin, since ‘genre’ signals repetition and accumulation, not originality. Whereas some critics seek to establish the genealogy of sf in the form of a family tree, Rieder argues instead that ‘the collective and accretive social process by which sf has been constructed does not have the kind of coherent form or causality that allows one to talk about origins at all’.⁶⁴ Rather than a term that describes a set of texts, Rieder therefore views ‘science fiction’ as a set of practices: the drawing of relationships between texts, and the manner in which these texts are used.

My own approach to the cinematic texts I have selected, and between which I have drawn a set of relationships, incorporates Suvin’s concept of cognitive estrangement as a way of understanding the internal structures of the films under study. In line with Milner, Bould and Rieder, I make no distinction in terms of medium, and indiscriminately incorporate references to film, literature and comics where ideas are concerned. The fact that I concentrate on film and support further critical examination of science fiction cinema does not mean that I wish to treat the medium as a separate category, away from other discussions relating to sf. I will therefore only make such distinctions when they are justified. Finally, I do not view science fiction works created in Latin America and in the Northern Hemisphere as fundamentally distinct, despite differences in budgetary scale that affect film in particular. I consider all texts to participate in a global, interactive corpus, with some distinctions in terms of the historical and cultural references that are contained within these texts and sometimes reflect the geographical and historical concerns of the country of production. This is the case of the films under study here, which I view within the framework of a specific collective experience on the level of a nation. This is the starting point for the next

section, which examines the relationships between science fiction, time, and memory in order to better understand how a form that rests on displacement can address historical events.

1.4 Science fiction, time, and memory

When Suvin states that the process of cognitive estrangement is applied to the author’s empirical environment, he implies a temporal dimension; in other words, the cognitive approach of the science fiction text is applied to the author’s present, a notion that is reinforced when Suvin argues that ‘SF sees the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable, and therefore subject to a cognitive view’. Fredric Jameson articulates a similar view in relation to the utopian text. He refers both to the process of estrangement, or defamiliarisation, that takes place within science fiction, and expresses the notion that this process applies to the present, even when it is displaced to an alternative temporal framework; as, for example, when the narrative is set in the future:

[T]he apparent realism [...] of SF has concealed another, far more complex temporal structure: not to give us an “image” of the future [...] but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization.

Where both Capanna and Suvin speak of a critical approach to the author’s reality engaged in by the science fictional text, Jameson adds a further dimension whereby our engagement with science fictional texts leads not only to an interrogation of our reality but to a shift in our inner representations of the present. From Jameson’s Marxist perspective, the emergence of a postmodern capitalist society has changed our relationship to the past: no longer do we (that is to say, the inhabitants of contemporary industrialised societies) perceive history as a continuum connected to the present by way of being its precursor. Instead, says Jameson, history has become a disconnected product, the ‘pretext for so many glossy images’, while ‘the present – in this society, and in the physical and psychic dissociation of the human subjects who inhabit it – is inaccessible directly, is numb, habituated, empty of affect’. This depiction of the

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65 Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 7 (my emphasis; emphasis on ‘cognitive’ removed).
capitalist present finds resonance in Istvan Csicsery-Ronay’s exploration of science fiction world models within which national identity has ceased to exist; most notably, in the narrative framework he entitles ‘corporate globalization’, a futuristic context where profit-driven corporations have appropriated the powers formerly held by the State.\textsuperscript{68} Side-effects include a destabilised sense of self, and therefore a reduction of solidarity; the ability generated by technologies to both virtualise physical space and manipulate consciousness, perception, memory, and the physical body, rendering ‘self-identification with a territory […], with religion, […] and with history’ problematic.\textsuperscript{69} Csicsery-Ronay relates the territorial and political concept of the nation to the temporal dimension of history, observing in cyberpunk’s fictional future the interruption of a sense of historical continuity that illustrates Jameson’s position:

\begin{quotation}
In cyberpunk, especially, the concept of nation, with its implication of some historical homogeneity through time, has been made obsolete by the dramatic heterogeneity of human, primarily urban, society.\textsuperscript{70}
\end{quotation}

If Suvin and Csicsery-Ronay view science fiction, respectively, as critically interrogating its contemporary society and ultimately revealing ‘what is most powerful in the present’,\textsuperscript{71} Jameson’s take on the matter differs somewhat, despite a degree of convergence between all three scholars. For him, science fiction’s representations constitute strategies enabling us to perceive a present that can no longer be directly grasped by the mind, for two main reasons. On the one hand, argues Jameson, the present is no longer experienced as issuing from a historical continuum, a process that prepared the ground for individual perception. On the other,

\begin{quotation}
the sheer quantitative immensity of objects and individual lives it comprises is untotalizable and hence unimaginable, and also because it is occluded by the density of our private fantasies as well as of the proliferating stereotypes of a media culture that penetrates every remote zone of our existence […].\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quotation}

Rather than view the science fiction text as an extrapolation or thought experiment that highlights issues contemporary to the author’s society, Jameson, like many other sf

\textsuperscript{68} Csicsery-Ronay, ‘Dis-imagined Communities’ in Hollinger & Gordon, eds., \textit{Edging into the Future}, p. 223.
\textsuperscript{69} Csicsery-Ronay, ‘Dis-imagined Communities’, p. 226.
\textsuperscript{70} Csicsery-Ronay, ‘Dis-imagined Communities’, p. 225.
\textsuperscript{71} Csicsery-Ronay, \textit{Dis-imagined Communities}, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{72} Jameson, \textit{Archaeologies of the Future}, p. 288.
critics, sees it as a perception filter helping us to approach the present. By turning it into history – ‘the determinate past of something yet to come’ – science fiction’s alternative universes lend our present the intensity formerly generated by a sense of a past history, while simultaneously enabling us to by-pass our own defence mechanisms against an overwhelming, ‘intolerable’ reality. This, sf does in a way that other modes cannot; science fiction, says Jameson, ‘is sending back more reliable information about the contemporary world than an exhausted realism (or an exhausted modernism either)’.

This acquires a different perspective, perhaps, when applied to Argentina, where the temporal proximity of the last dictatorship and its unresolved nature applies a distinct curve to relationships with the past. Idelber Avelar reports a disruption to a historical continuum linked to commodification, much as does Jameson, arguing that ‘The market operates according to a substitutive, metaphorical logic in which the past must be relegated to obsolescence. The past is to be forgotten because the market demands that the new replace the old without leaving a remainder’. At the same time, the Argentine present is suffused with images of the past that participate in a process of coming to terms with what happened during the years of the Proceso. Martín Kohan notes the potential for these memorial processes to become overwhelming and counterproductive. He writes:

hay memoria por demás: recordamos demasiado. No es que recordemos demasiadas cosas, es que recordamos demasiado (en el recuerdo mismo, en la disposición recordativa, está la demasía; no en los objetos recordados. Hay demasiado recuerdo, no demasiados recuerdos). Demasiada memoria, se nos advierte, hace mal. Huyssen precave de un riesgo de implosión por exceso de memoria; un cierto afán de recordarlo todo habría producido un giro pernicioso desde el privilegio del futuro hacia el privilegio del pasado.

Ultimately, however, Kohan argues not for less remembering, but for a re-evaluation of memory. If he initially takes into account Tzvetan Todorov’s warnings, in Les abus de

la mémoire, against a cult of memory that becomes paralyzing, his final assessment of this point resonates with Jameson’s position: if one can argue that excessive attention paid to the past is a sign of the times, one can equally argue that there is very little capacity for the retention of this memory in a society where images of the past are both a political tool and the basis for a commercial industry. Drawing on Nicolás Casullo, who argued that memory was under threat despite its apparent prominence, Kohan suggests that memory becomes falsified by virtue of its instrumentalisation:

Lo que la amenaza, sin embargo, no es solamente la santificación del presente, sino también, y sobre todo, la circulación social de falsificaciones de la memoria: la memoria como dispositivo de las políticas consoladoras, la memoria de mercado, la industria de la memoria, la memoria de clausura; y sobre todo, en especial, la memoria que “en realidad, desmemoriza”: la que parece memoria, pero procura el olvido.77

The repetitiveness of memory’s images can numb its audience, a fact that was acknowledged even by Primo Lévi, ardent defender of the duty of memory in the context of the Holocaust. In a society saturated by media images, worries Nelly Richard, the memory of Latin America’s dictatorships risks losing its substance: ‘lo que está a punto de desvanecerse en la cultura del simulacro es, dramáticamente, la memoria de las dictaduras latinoamericanas’.78 At the same time, the participation of the contemporary State in the discourse of commemoration and reparation of the past is viewed by Kohan as having the potential to displace abuses of power that exist in the present. He writes:

La memoria puede ser no solamente una herramienta de la justicia retrospectiva para con la represión del pasado, sino también la estrategia de una justificación prospectiva para con la represión del presente. El tiempo de esta “memoria” no es el pasado (el tiempo propio de lo recordado) ni el presente (el tiempo propio del recordar), sino el futuro, un futuro especulativo que permite percibir al presente como si ya fuese un pasado, y validar la producción de nuevas

77 Kohan, ‘Sobre el olvido’.
Kohan’s description of a speculative temporal displacement caused by political manipulations of the concept of memory structurally echoes Jameson’s description of science fiction: a form that makes the present already past, in order for it to acquire substance. With this in mind, it is tempting to conclude that whereas a documentation of the past that is chronologically linear and rooted in realism erodes the power of memory, weakening the outcomes of commemoration (the assignment of responsibility, the transmission of lessons to avoid a repetition of history), the science fiction form has the potential to combat this erosion. It, too, operates obliquely while still being connected to the real world by virtue of its structure of estrangement, operating on a similar temporal terrain as political manipulations of memory.

1.5 Trauma and science fiction film

1.5.1 Trauma

Any discussion relating to trauma – or to borrow Roger Luckhurst’s words, ‘the re-experiencing of woundedness’ – is susceptible to debate given that the concept is used to describe an ever wider set of experiences, within increasingly diverse fields of academic inquiry. Since the earliest use of the term to describe the delayed impact of train accidents on passengers in the late nineteenth century, the trauma paradigm has expanded to such an extent that it has, according to Luckhurst, ‘come to pervade the understanding of subjectivity and experience in the advanced industrial world’, while ‘academic monographs have proliferated, often appearing to subsume the whole area of Memory Studies under the sign of trauma’. At the same time, the academic study of collective memory has also undergone an expansion, transcending disciplinary boundaries in the humanities and social sciences and establishing itself as ‘a fundamental research topic’ in the field of Latin American cultural studies, in the UK at

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79 Kohan, ‘Sobre el olvido’.
81 Luckhurst, The Trauma Question, p. 12.
least. Nerea Arruti suggests that where Argentina is concerned, ‘this is a direct result of her troubled recent history, so that the main focus when studying memory is on collective trauma’. In 1950, Maurice Halbwachs wrote:

On n’est pas […] habitué à parler de la mémoire d’un groupe, même par métaphore. Il semble qu’une telle faculté ne puisse exister et durer que dans la mesure où elle est liée à un corps ou à un cerveau individuel. [We are not […] accustomed to talking of the memory of a group, even metaphorically. It seems that such a faculty is able to exist and last only when it is bound to an individual body or brain].

Over sixty years later, ‘collective memory’ is well established in the vocabulary of cultural theory; however, its scope is still subject to debate. In line with Halbwachs, critics such as Paul Connerton and Jeffrey Alexander regard collective memory as ‘a set of changing social practices rather than exteriorizations of psychic structures’, following ‘a tradition in sociology that objects to modelling societies on the individual psyche’. Other theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Kai Erikson relate individual memory to the memory of the group, especially where trauma memory is concerned. This approach resonates with Sigmund Freud’s linking of personal and collective memory. For Luckhurst, ‘Freud’s elision of neurotic and national history has been another important place where psychical trauma has been delimited and easily transmissible by analogy, providing a set of models in general circulation’. My own approach bears in mind the characteristic traits of traumatic memory noted in individual, direct participants in trauma, and considers some of those traits to apply equally to indirect participants. These include the delayed effect of trauma; the fact that it is an embodied experience, and therefore has physical as well as psychological effects; that memory is experienced in a recursive manner and tends to situate

83 Arruti, ‘Writing Trauma’, p. 517.
85 Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 27.
86 Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 27.
traumatic events out of time, away from the linear chronological structures of historical narrative.

However, rather than establish a correlation wherein the traits of individual memory are directly transposable to collective memory, I seek to follow the approach of Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, who ‘consider the mutual influence’ and interplay of individual and collective memory, exploring, in their edited volume of essays on trauma and memory, ‘how […] various memory practices draw from and refer to one another in complex exchanges of metaphor, authority, and power’. Like Roger Luckhurst, I view trauma as ‘a complex knot that bins together multiple strands of knowledge and which can be best understood through plural, multidisciplinary perspectives’. This is the approach I have sought to implement in this study, approaching each film from a different perspective to draw out the relationships between trauma, memory, and power within a science fiction framework of representation. Science fiction film has sometimes come under criticism for being inadequate for the purposes of expressing historical trauma; the next section examines some of the shortcomings of so-called ‘realistic’, mimetic, representation (such as witness testimonies). This thesis argues that science fiction film fills a gap where representations of trauma memory are concerned. On the one hand, its narrative devices and tropes are highly suited to such representations. On the other, its status as popular culture places it on the outer margins of a political and cultural framework that has failed to support victims of the Proceso. As noted by Judith Herman, trauma can only be publicly dealt with in a political context that clearly challenges the perpetrators, since ‘in the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousnesses’. The next section further examines the manner in which representations of trauma that seek to factually reconstruct experiences of the past are fundamentally affected by the State’s counter-narratives.

1.5.2 Shortcomings of testimony

88 Luckhurst, The Trauma Question, p. 337.
Conducting a study on witness testimonies shared by imprisoned victims of the Proceso in the 1980s, Fernando Reati noted that these statements had to contend with other public representations of the facts that were distorted by a desire to move on from or deny the brutal events that had taken place. Public discourse sought to place the guerrilla warfare that had preceded the takeover of power by Videla on a par with the systematic State violence that ensued, downplaying the role of the military authorities. This reflects attitudes towards abuse victims observed by Judith Herman in a range of contexts, at both the individual and collective levels. She writes:

After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail. […] Without a supportive social environment, the bystander usually succumbs to the temptation to look the other way.\(^90\)

Such practices, referred to by Reati as ‘prácticas sociales del olvido’ were the bedrock of competing versions of memory that both cast doubt on the narratives of ex-prisoners and, by extension, shaped them, calling for testimonies to be shared according to formats that would have a higher likelihood of acceptance.\(^91\) Reati writes: ‘Aquellos relatos carcelarios […] competían, entraban en diálogo y en última instancia eran moldeados a pesar suyo por las representaciones públicas (oficiales y no ficiales) del pasado inmediato argentino’.\(^92\)

The linear chronology and/or familiar structures of narrative often assigned to testimonials relating to traumatic events make the latter more acceptable socially, and assign higher credibility to the stories being shared. However, while the eventual construction of ‘an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context’ supports the cognitive processing of events that is necessary to recovery, it also falls short of representing the full extent of the traumatic experience.\(^93\) Since this encompasses complex physical and affective dimensions, contemporary therapists

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\(^90\) Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p. 8.
\(^91\) Reati, ‘Trauma, duelo y derrota’, p. 106.
\(^92\) Reati, ‘Trauma, duelo y derrota’, p. 106.
\(^93\) Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, p. 177.
strive to include imagery and bodily sensations in the recovery of memory. A remark by Jessica Wolfe highlights the relevance of the filmic form when dealing with trauma narrative: ‘we have [combat veterans] reel it off in great detail, as if they were watching a movie, and with all the senses included’.94 Herman also emphasizes the importance of a visual approach:

At times the patient may spontaneously switch to nonverbal methods of communication, such as drawing or painting. Given the “iconic,” visual nature of traumatic memories, creating pictures may represent the most effective initial approach to these “indelible images.” The completed narrative must include a full and vivid description of the traumatic imagery.95

The imprinted memory, which is not always fully accessible, does not fit a uni-directional, linear chronology. Judith Herman reports that traumatic memory is a-temporal, experienced as ‘fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation’,96 while Hugo Vezzetti contrasts a historical perception of events with the way in which the same events might be internalised by individual memory. He writes: ‘Mientras que la conciencia histórica admite la historicidad de los acontecimientos, la memoria tiene a situarlos fuera del tiempo. En un presente continuado, en relación a una verdad esencial que no pasa.’97

This complex set of relations affecting the retroactive construction of collective history further compounds the complexity of sharing an experience that is not always fully accessible by the victim, as mentioned earlier; the traumatic experience and its effects are often veiled from consciousness, meaning the event must be reconstructed. Dominick LaCapra writes:

To the extent an event is traumatic, it creates a gap or hole in experience. […] With respect to trauma, memory is always secondary since what occurs is not integrated to experience or directly remembered, and the event must be reconstructed from its effects and traces. In this sense there is no fully

94 Jessica Wolfe, cited in Herman, Trauma and Recovery, p. 177. Extract from a 1991 interview conducted by Herman.
95 Herman, Trauma and Recovery, p. 177.
96 Herman, Trauma and Recovery, p. 177.
97 Hugo Vezzetti, Pasado y presente: guerra, dictadura y sociedad, p. 192.
immediate access to the experience itself even for the original witness, much less for the secondary witness and historian.98

Primary memory (an individual’s immediate, ‘raw’ memory of an event, which is prone to a range of lapses) is thus always supplemented by external factors to shape secondary memory, which is derived from the application of an alternative critical perspective by the holder of the primary memory and/or an external observer. LaCapra suggests that the shaping of memory happens in the form of a negotiation between participant and observer, the outcome of which is then shared with others (in the form of history, for example, when the external observer is a historian). This secondary memory can become internalised, including by the person who experienced the event directly, as a true representation of what happened. In other words, secondary memory has a tendency to supersede, rather than simply support, primary memory. Given the subtle complexities of memory and its malleability, the introduction of official public versions of memory by the State, in the form of images and facts that compete with the shared experience of the victims, has a strong impact on the formation of a cohesive collective memory. For LaCapra,

The question of memory may come to the forefront of attention or even be exaggerated precisely because of the difficulty of remembering events that defy the imagination and are not fully encompassed by conventional methods of representation. This difficulty is exploited by those commentators, such as negationists, who have self-interested reasons for raising extreme doubts about memory, undermining the credibility of witnesses, and denying aspects of the past.99

The heightened attention paid to memory and multiplication of accounts described here resonates with the notion of an ‘excess of memory’ and social-political manipulations of memory leading to ‘desmemoria’ and numbness referred to by Kohan, discussed in the previous section of this chapter. All of these different aspects highlight the complex issues affecting the sharing of traumatic experience through narrative forms rooted in mimetic realism, such as testimony (but do not deny their importance).

99 La Capra, Memory and History, p. 182.
Linked to these issues is a necessary reflection on the function of testimony. Various critics conclude that conveying a traumatic experience has two main functions. On the one hand, it seeks to avoid a repetition of events, as expressed for example by the title of the *Nunca Más* report commissioned by the CONADEP. On the other, it is part of a necessary process enabling those affected by trauma, both individually and collectively, to work through the aftermath of the experience. Fernando Reati writes: ‘Un recuerdo consciente y terapéutico permite al sobreviviente de una situación traumática integrarla a una narrativa del pasado y concluir el duelo’.

We have seen that the processing of trauma memory is a physical as well as a psychological process, as noted for example by Judith Herman. While verbal reporting or sharing of the experience can provide a number of facts and cognitively structure the experience, it conveys only one dimension of the latter. LaCapra suggests that in order for the trauma survivor to not only reconstruct a memory of events but also work through these events, the recovery of memory needs the assistance of a range of processes that give a shape to these memories and supplement secondary memory, ‘for example, narration, analysis, bodily gesture, or song’. We have seen in this chapter that Jessica Wolfe compared the retrieval of traumatic memory to a film. The next section briefly discusses some of the aspects that make film particularly relevant to trauma representations.

1.5.3 Science fiction cinema: a good alternative

Roger Luckhurst’s chapter on trauma and narrative cinema in *The Trauma Question* reminds the reader that ‘the foundational stories of cinema […] circle around profound physiological shock’, an effect noted, for example, by Sergei Eisenstein and

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100 Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas Desaparecidas. The report is accessible online at http://www.derechoshumanos.net/lesahumanidad/informes/argentina/informe-de-la-CONADEP-Nunca-mas-Indice.htm [accessed 3 May 2014].


102 La Capra, *History and Memory*, p. 21.
Walter Benjamin.\textsuperscript{103} Over the course of its evolution, cinema has maintained this quality, becoming

one of the key means for the narrative temporalization of experience, and its specific stylistic devices (\textit{mise en scène}, montage, conventions for marking point of view and temporal shifts in particular) have made it a cultural form closely attuned to representing the discordances of trauma.\textsuperscript{104}

A central point of Luckhurst’s chapter is that cinema has not merely been an appropriate form through which to convey trauma; instead, its qualities and devices have meant that it has itself helped shape the discourse of trauma, in terms both psychological and cultural. He argues that ‘cinema in fact helped constitute the PTSD subject in 1980’; he cites the example of the flashback, used in film throughout much of the twentieth century but only incorporated to clinical descriptions of trauma in 1987.\textsuperscript{105} Luckhurst further suggests that the development of linear temporality disruptions that became frequent in the cinema of the 1990s was, in part, ‘driven by attempts to convey the experience of traumatized subjectivity’.\textsuperscript{106}

The tropes and structures of science fiction cinema are particularly well suited to reflecting the recurrent traits of traumatic memory listed earlier in this chapter. The genre is characteristically experimental, and often deals with the metaphysical; it has a displaced approach to time, while retaining a logical link to the empirical world. It also engages with the power dynamics between the State and its citizens, notably where dystopian narratives are concerned; and, rooted in the Gothic, has the capacity to examine and visually project dark themes. At the same time, as noted by Pablo Capanna, the genre rarely centres on the internal world of an individual character, tending instead towards a collective approach:

No es nunca un mundo interior individual y limitado sino que es el inconsciente colectivo, el que aflora como insondable fuente de simbolos y arquetipos que remiten a las raíces de la especie. […] Aun el enfoque generalista del género

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{104} Luckhurst, \textit{The Trauma Question}, p. 177.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{105} Luckhurst, \textit{The Trauma Question}, pp. 177-178.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{106} Luckhurst, \textit{The Trauma Question}, p. 178.}
And yet, to date, the relationship between trauma and science fiction has scarcely been studied, except on a case-per-case basis. To my knowledge, Roger Luckhurst is one of very few critics in the field of science fiction studies to broach the matter from a wider theoretical perspective. One of the intended outcomes of my thesis is thus to further contribute to this area of study.

1.5.4 Approach

This thesis aims to demonstrate that the science fiction form, rather than simply providing a fantasy cover for the representation of State coercion and terror, provides relevant, alternative structural possibilities in terms of narrative. As mentioned earlier, manipulations of time, for example, are a typical manifestation within the genre rather than a departure from a norm as is the case in ‘classical’ cinema. In order to demonstrate that sf film is more than a mere ‘camouflage’ for the expression of the traumatic experience, a different framework or narrative strategy that is characteristic of science fiction is focused on in each film: the sublime, non-linear time, the dystopian city, the gothic, and the superhero mask. This has sought to avoid assigning to every film an identical relationship to the Proceso through time: a static, repetitive one in which the past is continuously returned to and used as a point of reference, without progress or resolution. The approach adopted here sought to avoid perpetuating a tendency in cultural theory that ‘too often demands that the impossible, aporetic or melancholic response is the only appropriately ethical condition for individuals and communities defined by their afterwardsness’, where the term ‘afterwardsness’ refers to the condition of being suspended in the persistent pathological aftermath of traumatic events.\footnote{Capanna, 	extit{El sentido de la ciencia ficción}, p. 279.} It is important not to impose a reading on these films that presents them as conforming to a trauma aesthetic, or, to borrow Roger Luckhurst’s description of war novelist W.G.Sebald’s work, seeks to hold them to ‘a model of history that coincides exactly with the idea of traumatic occlusion and the belated recovery of traumas’.\footnote{Luckhurst, 	extit{The Trauma Question}, pp. 211-212.}
memory.’\textsuperscript{109} This is all the more to be avoided since none of the films studied in this thesis are explicit trauma narratives. While Gustavo Mosquera did state that \textit{Moebius} included intentional references to the \textit{desaparecidos}, for example, these are presented metaphorically; none of the films included in this study openly address the crimes committed under the 1976-1983 dictatorship; most of them have interpretation frameworks that are deliberately ambiguous, and allow for universal readings as well as containing specific experiential references that act as cultural expressions of trauma.

Fernando Reati suggests that the delayed response to the traumatic event is at the heart of cultural representations of traumatic memory, and that the latter are ambivalent, acting both as a process of dealing with the event and as a repetitive return to the past that can be a symptom enabling the trauma to persist:

\begin{quotation}
\'\textit{Cada recuento […] representa un intento de procesamiento y resolución de la experiencia traumática, pero puede ser también un síntoma más de la pervivencia del trauma a través de la repetición de la situación original. Escribir sobre una catástrofe es siempre escribir asimismo sobre sus efectos posteriores, ya sea que el relato del evento forme parte de un intento de procesamiento de lo catastrófico para que deje de manifestarse como síntoma traumático recurrente, o que forme parte del síntoma mismo al reconocer la causa original pero ignorando a la vez los profundos efectos tardíos del trauma sobre el individuo.}\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quotation}

Roger Luckhurst argues that ‘some of the most interesting cultural work to emerge from the trauma question has involved an attempt to find a model of trauma that acknowledges yet seeks to \textit{work through} the traumatic past, premising communality not on preserving trauma but on transforming its legacy’.\textsuperscript{111} This is an attempt to transform Freud’s distinctions between remembering, repeating and working through in 1914 to a model for cultural or political critique. Nerea Arruti, for whom contemporary Argentina cannot be understood without studying the traumatic period of the \textit{Proceso}, also argues that expressions of memory in art should be viewed as a form of working

\textsuperscript{109} Luckhurst, \textit{The Trauma Question}, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{111} Luckhurst, \textit{The Trauma Question}, p. 213 (emphasis in original).
through, in line with Maurice Halbwachs’ approach to collective memory.\textsuperscript{112} Drawing on Elizabeth Jelin and Dominick LaCapra, Arruti suggests that while trauma is usefully approached from a transnational perspective, in which the experience of different communities is shared, it should not be viewed as transhistorical. In other words, the traumatic experience should be viewed as a specific instance in time, rather than essentially define a community’s identity across time.

In line with this approach, what this thesis seeks to do is not to define every work as backward-looking, even though correlations are established between the narrative devices of science fiction, characteristic traits of traumatic memory, and instances of reference to the \textit{Proceso} in these films. Rather, the intention is to examine the way in which traces of the traumatic experience of dictatorship, deliberate or not, are articulated through sf at the point in time at which each film was made, examining their contemporary cultural context and approach as well as their anchorage to the past. In other words, the approach to these works can be visualised as an outward movement, where each filmic text contributes towards weaving a progressive interpretation of the corpus, rather than an inward movement starting from a blanket reading that would be imposed across the board to each film, seeking the confirmation of a predetermined pattern in individual texts. By applying the former rather than the latter, evolutions of the way in which the cultural echoes of the traumatic past are incorporated to these science fiction narratives can emerge from the study. This will contribute toward forming a broad profile for trauma representations within the framework of the science fiction genre that is more strongly rooted in the works themselves.

\textsuperscript{112} Arruti, ‘Writing Trauma’, p. 518.
Chapter 2: The sublime aesthetic of science fiction in *Invasión* (Santiago, 1969) and *Hombre mirando al suiste* (Subiela, 1986)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the sublime in two films chronologically placed either side of the latest dictatorship: *Invasión* (1969) and *Hombre mirando al suiste* (1986). The first of these two films is set in Aquilea, an alternative Buenos Aires quietly but relentlessly infiltrated by mysterious invaders and defended by a group of men and women under the leadership of Don Porfirio, an old *criollo*. The context and character motives are never fully explained, leaving the film open to a range of interpretations; the invasion is ultimately portrayed as unstoppable, and the narrative has tragic and cyclical qualities. *Hombre mirando al suiste*, released less than three years after the dictatorship, is set in a psychiatric institution. It tells the story of Rantés, a mysterious 36th patient who appears one day in the ward, claiming to be from another planet. The narrative follows the unfolding of his relationship with Julio Denis, a doctor who first thinks he is faking in order to hide from the police, then becomes fascinated with his new patient and takes it upon himself to ‘cure’ him by any means. The viewer, in the meantime, is left wondering whether Rantés is, in fact, an extraterrestrial (as his telekinetic powers would seem to indicate), or whether a hinted at family drama is at the root of a prolonged delusional state. This chapter will look at *Invasión* and *Hombre mirando al suiste* separately, aiming to demonstrate how the sublime in these two films translates the estrangement and dislocation associated with the threat of oppression in *Invasión* and the traumatic experience of the 1976-1983 dictatorship in *Hombre mirando al suiste*. The first section will draw on Cornel Robu’s reading of Burke and Kant and examine how the sublime moment articulates estrangement, identifying the film as science fiction. It will also examine some of the relationships between the horror genre and science fiction in their approach historical trauma. The chapter’s second part will examine how *Hombre mirando al suiste* sits astride religious transcendentalism and the postmodern sublime, conveying the complex
cultural status of the church in the aftermath of the junta and the compromised nature of the image as truth.

2.2 The sublime: a brief introduction

Philip Shaw defines the sublime as ‘the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated’, giving the mind a sense, in the very moment of defeat, of ‘that which lies beyond thought and language’. The notion of the sublime has evolved over time; situated in a religious context in the 17th century, it was later associated with nature by the Romantic poets of the eighteenth century, who explored the feelings inspired by the contemplation of imposing scenes such as mountains or vast stretches of land or ocean. For Longinus, who wrote one of the first treatises on the sublime in the 17th century, nature ‘seeds the idea of greatness in man’; for the Romantics, the grandeur of nature eventually becomes ‘the scene for darker meditations on the nature of the self and its relations with the external world’. In a later cultural shift, the sublime becomes correlated with the developing notions of anxiety and the individual, and associated by Burke with terror. In psychological terms the notion of sublimity has been correlated to fear responses in the face of a perceived danger associated with excessive power; as such, it can be said to derive from neurological responses to a shocking or traumatic experience. In artistic terms, whereas once the experience of sublimity pointed to an external object beyond both reason and expression, it now points to ‘that within representation which nonetheless exceeds the possibility of representation’. Notions of the transcendent and the sublime weave together the spiritual, the aesthetic and the psychological across different layers of time and evolving cultural perspectives.

One of the aims of this chapter will be to understand how these variables interact within the science fiction form. As modern Western society has grown less

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2 Shaw, The Sublime, pp. 28, 5.
spiritual and more scientific, science fiction has become a new vehicle for representations and explorations of the ‘absolutely unknowable’ that were once the remit of religion, while retaining some of the latter’s frameworks and constructs: the vertical relationship to a universe spatially visualised ‘above’, or the fear of apocalypse, the latter retaining its biblical proportions but now stemming from environmental issues, the misuse of technology or alien intervention rather than the wrath of a deity. In many cases, however, science fiction has retained a degree of overlap with the spiritual, echoing religious tropes and aesthetics in varying degrees. To a great extent, science fiction is the contemporary art form that most explicitly resonates with the sublime’s historical metaphysical ambitions, which it shares and seeks both to both fulfill and represent. For Shaw, the sublime ‘encourages us to believe that we can scale the highest mountains, reach the stars and become infinite’; yet at the same time ‘the desire to outstrip earthly bonds leads instead to the encounter with lack’ and with material limits. The science fiction narrative also merges the material and the metaphysical as it constantly seeks to confront and surpass such limits. It is in the nature of the genre to explore the unknown, that which lies beyond the ordinary boundaries of experience, perception and cognition. In the science fiction text, the sublime is most often located in the moment where the crossing of a new boundary is represented, be it physical, metaphysical or representational, and participates in defining the genre. However, the science fictional sublime need not be diegetically induced (i.e. generated at the point of discovery of a new universe, artificial intelligence or representation of awe-filling technology or time travel), especially in SF texts that rely less on special effects than on a sense of alienation. For Milner ‘resonance’ and ‘wonder’ are constitutive features of the science fiction genre; like Suvin’s cognitive estrangement, resonance requires both the recognition of a familiar object and a sense of alienation from it. Milner draws on Greenblatt, for whom resonance is defined by the object’s power ‘to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world’, evoking ‘the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which […] it may be taken […] to stand’ either as a metaphor or metonymy, while wonder describes the power ‘to convey an arresting sense of

uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention’. The term ‘exalted’ denotes the convergence that exists between theories of the romantic sublime and the defining concept of wonder in science fiction studies. The sections that follow examine how *Invasión* and *Hombre mirando al sudeste* reach out ‘beyond [the] formal boundaries’ of their filmic text ‘to a larger world’ to convey the complexities both of the traumatic experience and of the dynamics between representation, culture and politics.

### 2.2 The Burkean and Kantian sublime in Santiago’s *Invasión*

In science fiction film, the sublime, ‘a response to a shock of expansive imagination’, is most obviously expressed in special effects that convey overwhelming magnitudes of space, time, and complexity. Indeed, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay suggests that ‘Capturing, reproducing and foregrounding the violence of the sublime and [...] grotesque shocks has become one of the main purposes of f/x technology’. More generally speaking, Cornel Robu argues that science fiction, in its many forms, is ‘the best positioned to generate, capture and communicate the millennial aesthetic of the sublime’, and suggests that the latter has often been expressed and experienced in science fiction as a ‘sense of wonder’. However, wonder, ‘the power of the object [...] to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention’, has a generally positive connotation, whereas many forms of the sublime relate to a darker experience, associated by Edmund Burke in particular to overpowering, fearsome forces operating ‘in a manner analogous to terror’.

The sublime, therefore, is a powerful component of dystopian films that alienate the viewer with little or no recourse to literal representations of technology. *Invasión* (Santiago, 1969) falls under this category, to the extent that its lack of genre-

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9 These are the three infinities identified by Cornel Robu, the fictional manipulations of which generate the sublime. ‘“A Key to Science Fiction”: Revisiting the Sense of Wonder’, *Hélice*, 1:2 (2012), 29-38 (p. 29).
10 Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, p. 146.
11 Cornel Robu, ‘“A Key to Science Fiction”’, p. 29.
specific visual iconography, combined with uncertainty regarding the ontological context of the narrative, renders its status as science fiction uncertain. Set in an alternative version of Buenos Aires (Aquilea), its premise is the relentless struggle between a mysterious, powerful group of invaders whose motives are unknown, and a besieged group of resistant fighters led by an old criollo, Don Porfirio. The film’s dystopian tones, alienating landscape and unstoppable invaders convey the experience of terror referred to by Burke, while a Kantian approach to the film’s sublime aesthetic provides grounds for discussion of the film’s cognitive effect on the viewer. In this part of the chapter, I examine how different aspects of the sublime combine with science fiction tropes in Invasión to articulate an estrangement and a dislocation associated with the threat of oppression, while addressing the limits of representation.

The script of Invasión, Hugo Santiago’s first feature film, was co-written by Jorge Luis Borges and based on an idea he developed with Adolfo Bioy Casares (author, among other notable works, of the 1940 science fiction novel La invención de Morel). The film set a new trend within the Argentine fantastic genre. Fusing film noir – the product of Santiago’s seven-year apprenticeship with Robert Bresson – and allegorical fantasy, Invasión is viewed by Andrea Cuarterolo as Argentina’s first original science-fiction production, a film that paved the way for the following decade:

Este film [no puede] ser ignorado a la hora de delinear una historia del cine de ciencia ficción en nuestro país. [Es] un ineludible – y por más de una década – solitario antecedente que traza diversas líneas que […] serán transitadas por la mayoría de las películas de ciencia ficción a partir de fines de la década del ochenta. [E]stos caminos abiertos por el film de Santiago permitirán […] el surgimiento de una versión vernacula del género con identidad propia.14

In spite of this reading, the film’s status as a work of science fiction remains ambiguous. Invasión is not clearly futuristic; neither does it centre on the discourse of science. In fact, although it does reference technological and industrial progress and resembles Buenos Aires at the end of the 1960s, the date provided in the opening

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scenes sets the action in the past, in the year 1957. Visually and narratively, *Invasión* falls into the film noir category of science fiction described by Vivian Sobchack:

Quietly and grayly, [these films] turn the familiar into the alien, visually subvert the known and comfortable, and alter the world we take for granted into something we mistrust. Using a minimum of special effects, if any, the films evoke wonder in their visual ability to alienate us from Earth’s landscape and from human activity and from the people next door.

For David Oubiña, the ambiguous narrative register ‘[es] propicio para la oscilación de lo fantástico’: the allegorical space of Aquilea, named after a besieged Roman city, ‘parecería quedar en otro planeta’ while Marcel Martín asks: ‘¿Sus invasores vienen de otro mundo o de los abismos de nuestro inconsciente?’ Perhaps in order to distinguish and distance *Invasión* from a pre-existing tradition, Borges stated:

No se trata de una ficción científica a la manera de Wells o de Bradbury. Tampoco hay elementos sobrenaturales Los invasores no llegan de otro mundo; y tampoco es psicológicamente fantástico: los personajes no actúan —como suele ocurrir en las obras de Henry James o de Kafka— de un modo contrario a la conducta general de los hombres.

The lack of any clues that might hint at the invaders’ motives or enable the viewer to apprehend the broader diegetic context leaves the text open to a wide range of readings, not all situated within the register of science fiction. This perhaps explains why *Invasión* has been overlooked by critics in the field, notably in the English-speaking world. Oubiña sums up the text’s susceptibility to diverse readings thus:

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15 According to the film-makers, this date was chosen for its neutrality in political terms. In cultural terms, however, 1957 was the year H.G. Oesterheld’s first instalment of the seminal sf graphic novel *El eternauta* was published.
20 *Invasión* has received more attention in France, where it was reconstituted from 35mm originals in 1999 after 8 of 12 reels of film were stolen from archives under the junta, in 1978.
Se trata de un film en estado de disponibilidad […] que se ofrece a todas las versiones, […] una película-medium que se deja hablar por otras voces, una imagen vicaria que presta su cuerpo para alojar diferentes discursos.21

According to one critic, this quality reflects Robert Bresson’s approach to film: ‘Para el director francés, la imagen filmica no debía expresar algo nitidamente o generar una interpretación en sí misma’: to impose a reading through the image would be to constrain and thus compromise the freedom of the cinematographic whole as a site of artistic resistance.22 Eduardo Costantini argues that leaving the interpretation open enables the film to function beyond what can be immediately apprehended intellectually: ‘más allá de los sentidos que se comprenden fácilmente, de las ideas cerradas y de lo esperado’.23 Invasión is purposefully crafted so as to encourage the viewer to construct meaning through sensual as well as intellectual apprehension. This is expressed in its most concrete form in the soundtrack, a collection of contrapuntal sounds that were recorded from the urban and natural environment (footsteps, a cawing magpie, a creaking gate). These function as allegorical devices to be decoded by the viewer. The magpie’s cawing takes on a particularly gothic hue as it haunts the image; invisible on-screen, it signals the proximity of death and implies an external point of observation that remains inaccessible. The sound of a creaking metal door recalls the entrance gate to a cemetery; doubly liminal, it signals the gateway to another world. It is both voice and object, omniscient and foreboding.

Invasión’s narrative instils a sense of pervasive threat by establishing a context of opposition and conflict centred on multiple dichotomies and dividing borders: most notably the borders of the city and the border between life and death. Both are increasingly transgressed throughout the film, building towards a climax where the city and its inhabitants succumb to the unstoppable onset of the invaders, prompting the start of a new cycle of resistance. However, it is the lack of a wider context and the absence of explained motives that most generates a sense of the uncanny, resonating with the Kantian sublime: uncertainty and the failure to grasp the whole holds sway over the imagination, which is confronted to its limits. This effect is enhanced by the

dual, ambivalent quality of the film’s setting. Aquilea, ‘una ciudad imaginaria o real’,\textsuperscript{24} is the source both of resonance and alienation for the Argentine viewer, for whom the city is recognizable as Buenos Aires. One of the film’s narrative devices is a map, the outline of which closely resembles that of the capital, while presenting gaps and distortions. As a result, as noted by Edgardo Cozarinski, ‘[suscita] en quienes conocen Buenos Aires un doble asombro de reconocimiento y extrañeza’.\textsuperscript{25}

The blurring of the lines between the cinematic representation of the city and the real city was further highlighted, at the time of the film’s release, by the distribution of leaflets entitled ‘Aviso a la población’, warning porteños of an imminent invasion and calling them to action. For Oubiña, reaching out beyond the boundaries of the film’s formal world in this way embodied the spirit of a period in which revolt and the threat of militarized political upheaval were close at hand. Although the year in which the events of the film are set was reportedly chosen because it was of no particular significance, it is hard to ignore the fact that Argentina had been subjected to repeated military coups and systematic political oppression since 1930, which intensified in the decades of the 50s and 60s.\textsuperscript{26} David Oubiña visualises a blurring of the line between the fictional and real worlds that causes the events taking place within \textit{Invasión} highlight patterns outside of it: ‘se deslizan subrepticiamente fuera de su universo de ficción para sobreimprimirse a la realidad y transparentar sobre las cosas’.\textsuperscript{27} The permeability of the boundary between the fictional and non-fictional world implies that, conversely, the sense of threat experienced in the real world also leaves an imprint on the filmic text, as it would on the psyche. As such, \textit{Invasión} is fertile ground for instances of the sublime, which are threaded through the film, eliciting an emotional, rather than a rational response.

The eeriness that pervades \textit{Invasión} is not just generated by visual discrepancies in the geography of this city that is not quite Buenos Aires. Shots of Aquilea project a

\textsuperscript{24} Extract from Borges’s synopsis of the film: ‘\textit{Invasión} es la leyenda de una ciudad, imaginaria o real, sitiada por fuertes enemigos y defendida por pocos hombres, que acaso no son héroes. Lucharán hasta el fin, sin sospechar que su batalla es infinita.’ (Oubiña, ed., \textit{Invasión} (2008), p. 21).


\textsuperscript{26} The film was made in the context of General Onganía’s ‘Revolución Argentina’ and subsequent leadership, from 1966 to 1973 of a new type of totalitarianism, which Guillermo O’Donnell famously named \textit{el estado burocrático autoritario}, ‘[un régimen] no formalizado pero claramente vigente’ (O’Donnell, p. 62).

\textsuperscript{27} Oubiña, ed., \textit{Invasión} (2008), p. 25.
sense of desolation reflected on screen by dilapidated buildings and wastelands, and the
near emptiness of the streets, void in particular of children and women. To this is added
further unease generated by the plot. Aquilea is under threat from a group of
mysterious invaders dressed in beige suits, whose motives and ultimate aims are
unknown, while the city is defended by a group of men whose status, relationship and
ulterior motives remain equally nebulous to the viewer throughout the film. Within this
context of resonance, linked to Brechtian and Suvinian estrangement by virtue of a
convergence of the familiar and the alienating, Santiago unfolds scenes that, to borrow
Csicsery-Ronay’s words, ‘generate a shock of imaginative expansion’.28

Resonance combined with a sublime aesthetic generated by these scenes or
‘visual objects’ make it possible to identify Invasión as science fiction. Indeed, while
the sense of desolation and estrangement conveyed by the city does not single-
headedly situate the film in terms of genre, the uncanny demeanour and behaviour of
the invaders does. While their numbers, activities and material resources would
initially suggest traditional military operations, their bureaucratic dress code and silent
symmetry create a discrepancy which requires resolution by the viewer, given that the
narrative provides no answers. This discrepancy reaches a climax in the two sequences
that are connotative of the invasion referred to in the film’s title.

The first sequence, in which Herrera is finally murdered by the invaders in the
stadium building, is striking due to its visual orchestration. The action is pre-empted in
a series of shots that build up to a climax. On the ground floor of the edifice, Herrera
opens a double door out onto the stadium (an ominous space in Argentine history);
backlit and filmed from the rear, he stands out as a dark silhouette against a blinding
white light that masks the background, save for a few steps leading upwards. The play
with light is deliberate, emphasized by pauses in the action before and after the door is
opened; this becomes dramatically construed as a metaphorical door to another plane,
the white light and upward steps presaging death. Herrera eventually chooses a
different path to the top floor of the building; as he ascends, the camera progressively
reduces the viewer’s peripheral vision. A sense of entrapment is conveyed through
shots of long, increasingly narrow spaces; close-ups are filmed at angles that become
disorienting. The effect is further reinforced by contrasted lighting and shrinking

28 Csicsery-Ronay, Seven Beauties, p. 147.
geometrical shapes. As Herrera reaches the top of the stairs, his face is fleetingly framed by a small, black square opening in a white wall. The *mise en scène* thus creates a claustrophobic atmosphere of estrangement and entrapment, which culminates in the last scenes of the sequence with the sudden arrival of the invaders.

Set to the constant, consistent electrical humming of the transmission station that Herrera is attempting to disable, the action in these sequences is otherwise discontinuous, the physical movement of the actors across the floor disjointed in time. In the first shot, a group of four invaders enter from the far end of the floor. Herrera panics and turns to hide behind one of the columns that line the space; he faces a second group entering from the opposite end. As he turns again toward the first group, their position has changed: each of the four men steps out from behind one of the columns, while a new group makes its entrance. When Herrera turns around a third time, the camera pans round to show that every column now has an invader stationed by it. The unnatural symmetrical effect is emphasized by further groups of invaders standing in regular geometrical configurations, all wearing similar clothing and colours. This, and the discrepancy between the real time of Herrera’s actions as he is followed by the camera and the accelerated speed with which the invaders seem able to appear and position themselves around the space, create a strong sense of alienation. The sublime aesthetic of this sequence is generated by the unclear status of these entities, the contradiction between their human exterior and their apparently supernatural abilities. For Robu, magnitude (of space, of time, of complexity) is ‘the ultimate source of the sublime and sense of wonder’.29 More specifically, the sublime is generated by ‘magnitudinal disparity’, that is to say, the experience of an event, object or duration that is not commensurate with a human scale of perception. Here, the *mise en scène* introduces a distortion to temporal isochrony, that is to say, it disrupts the rhythms or temporal intervals that are expected in relative terms; a disparity is experienced between a human capacity for speed and movement, embodied by Herrera, and that exhibited by the invaders. Uncertainty and fear are further elicited by the contrast between action and expression, since the invaders finally murder Herrera silently and emotionlessly. Robu refers to the source of such dislocations as ‘complexional infinity’, overwhelming ‘not by size or span, but by complexity: […] by

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29 Robu, ‘Revisiting the Sense of Wonder’, p. 29.
otherness and alienness, by proliferation and versatility, by psychic power and hostile intelligence.  

In its final moments, the murder scene blends with the first scene of the following sequence, an invasion of apocalyptic proportions that marks the end of the film’s internal recursive cycle. The two processes (invasion of the body and invasion of the city) are linked by overlapping sound and image. The droning of the planes that appear in the first shot of the invasion sequence overlaps the humming soundtrack of the murder scene eight seconds before it ends, and the invaders move out of the frame, still hitting Herrera, while the camera remains static, filming the blank wall that progressively fills the frame with a white colour echoed in the following shot: a plane against a blank, white sky, moving in the same direction. The sequence that follows, a two minute stream consisting of thirty-nine alternating shots of planes, trucks, cavalry, cars and boats invading the city, is tied together by the sound of the plane which carries on throughout, becoming a unifying contrapuntal soundtrack that has a distancing effect: the sound is ominous, and removes the viewer from the real-time action. The invasion of the city shares some of the murder sequence’s qualities: an all-pervading beige colour scheme, a hyper-structured choreography, and a sense of endless repetition echoing the stream of invaders entering the top floor space and the flow of repetitive blows they land on Herrera. On one level, the assault on Aquilea echoes classical war film tropes, but the mise en scène prevents an interpretation of the sequence as mimetic (realistic) fiction. The images exhibit extreme symmetry: all the vehicles are the same colour and shape; the trucks all carry the exact same load, placed at exactly the same angle; equal distance is maintained continuously between the objects on the screen, and the sense of a constant flow, increasing in pace and intensity, is generated by the montage, which loops the images in a stream and accelerates the rhythm of the shots, while zooming in closer and closer. The length and style of the sequence hints at infinity as well as an inhuman symmetry and creates an ‘on and on’ effect which induces the sublime moment. This is Kant’s mathematical sublime, where repetition forms what Thomas Weiskel calls an ‘excess of substance’ in the signifiers – here, the objects on screen – which thereby become overwhelming, eluding meaning. For Robu, accumulation is one of the basic patterns of the sublime in science fiction;

30 Robu, ‘Revisiting the Sense of Wonder’, p. 33.
infinite accumulations in space and time are dislocated from the human scale of perception since ‘only a little segment of this scale can be perceived by man directly, intuitively’. Both the sequences described above illustrate Robu’s suggestion that ‘magnitudinal disparity is proper to generate that “sense of wonder” which signalizes the aesthetic emotion of the sublime in science fiction’.

Weiskel identifies three stages of the sublime moment, with a progression as follows. In stage one, there is no disruption; the mind has an unconscious, habitual relationship with its environment – that is to say, one that is consistent through time and where everyday expectations or norms are unchallenged. Stage two is an abrupt breakdown of this habitual relationship, triggered by an object or event that is both unexpected and ungraspable within normal boundaries:

We are reading along and suddenly occurs a text which exceeds comprehension, which seems to contain a residue of signifier which finds no reflected signified in our minds. Or a natural phenomenon catches us unprepared and unable to grasp its scale. Any excess on the part of the object cancels the representational efficacy of the mind which can only turn, for its new object, to itself.

The final and third stage is a reactive or adaptive stage in which balance between mind and object is restored; the mind resolves the disruption by interpreting it as symbolically representing a relationship between itself and a higher, transcendent order; the sublime depends on this process of resolution. In the two invasion scenes – one an invasion of the body, the other of the city – the viewer is indeed faced with a breakdown in representation. The images on the screen can be described, but their overwhelming, unnatural quality prevents the viewer from immediately connecting them to a wider context, posing ‘[an obstacle] to the expansion of the imagination’.

The interpretive faculties of the mind cease to function in a straightforward manner: a disjunction occurs, since the images are graspable perceptually, but not conceptually. The sublime, ‘a response to a shock of imaginative expansion, a complex recoil and recuperation of self-consciousness coping with phenomena suddenly perceived to be

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32 Robu, ‘Revisiting the Sense of Wonder’, p. 29.
35 Csicsery-Ronay, Seven Beauties, p. 151.
too great to be comprehended’, takes root in this discontinuity.\textsuperscript{36} In order for the images on the screen to make sense, and for the fictional narrative to remain believable, the mind must close the gap; by logical extension, the imagined solution must supersede ‘the average complexional dimension of man’.\textsuperscript{37} There is a structural correlation between Weiskel’s third stage of the sublime – which is a response to the need for resolution of a conceptual gap – and the process of cognitive estrangement that takes place in science fiction, where the mind strives to account rationally for the differences between the empirical world and the projected, estranged world presented in the text.

Where the scenes showing Herrera’s murder and the final invasion are concerned, both the behaviour and the material and aesthetic qualities of the invaders could be rationally explained in a number of ways, within the framework of science fiction, illustrating Robu’s complexional magnitude. For example, they could be due to the invaders’ alienness (they do not behave as humans because they are not human) or to a shift in technological capacities within human society, placing the narrative in a distinct temporal zone or parallel universe. In other words, the action might be taking place either in the future or in an alternative quantum reality, where governments have access to mind-controlling drugs or cloning technologies, and where shifts in geography have changed Buenos Aires. The sublime moment therefore provides a narrative gap that allows for an interpretation within the framework of science fiction, but also forces the viewer to shift from a receptive state of immersion in the narrative to a productive state that is detached from it. For Weiskel, the sublime is indeed ‘cognate with the experiential structure of alienation’, where alienation presupposes

[the] collapse of the signifying relations which make a social order. When the significance of things is no longer “natural” or immediate, when making sense requires the mediating intervention – as opposed to the assumed immanence – of a transcendent idea, the world is being understood rhetorically, at second remove.\textsuperscript{38}

The concept of alienation can be interpreted literally here, depending on one’s point of view; the \textit{mise en scène} of Herrera’s murder could suggest that the title refers to the invasion of an alien hive mind, rather than the human military invasion one might have

\textsuperscript{36} Csicsery-Ronay, \textit{Seven Beauties}, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{37} Robu, ‘Revisiting the Sense of Wonder’, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{38} Weiskel, \textit{The Romantic Sublime}, p. 36.
expected at the start of the film. This sequence is in fact closer, structurally, to those scenes in the science fiction genre that overlap with the horror genre. The lack of empathy and unnaturally synchronised movements of Santiago’s invaders are reminiscent of, for example, the alien replacement of humans in science fiction horror crossover Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Don Siegel, 1956). Lowenstein suggests that ‘the modern horror film may well be the genre of our time that registers most brutally the legacies of historical trauma’, the disconnection experienced during the latter echoed in the sublime moment.39 Noting the simultaneous post World War II emergence of the art film and the modern horror film in North America and Europe, and the reliance of many art films on narratives of war as subject matter, and highlighting also a transition in that period within the horror genre which replaced ‘gothic, otherworldly monsters’ with ‘all-too-human threats’, Lowenstein asks:

Could this transition itself be construed in part as a response to, and an engagement with, the traumatic impact of war? Does the modern horror film, like the art film, draw on the war for the fiber of many of its representations?40

For Lowenstein, representation sits at the crossroads of art and history, ‘between experience and reflection’, promising the possibility of being able to communicate trauma.41 However, it has a complex relationship with history, in particular where issues of responsibility to historical factual accuracy are concerned. Lowenstein argues that ‘subordinating artistic representation’s potential for communication to its responsibility to history […] defeats the possibility of making trauma matter to those beyond its immediate point of impact’.42 The allegorical moment of the horror film opens up a space that allows for alternative representations of historical trauma, empowering audiences to negotiate meaning and feeling through a diverse range of modes of representation that compete and contrast, while also providing points of convergence. Lowenstein’s definition of the horror film’s allegorical moment overlaps with that of the sublime, and is applicable to the sublime in Invasión:

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39 Adam Lowenstein, Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 10. For a discussion on disconnection and traumatic events, see for example Herman, Judith, Trauma and Recovery (1997), pp. 51-73.
40 Lowenstein, Shocking Representation, p. 7.
41 Lowenstein, Shocking Representation, p. 5.
42 Lowenstein, Shocking Representation, p. 5.
[A] shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted and intertwined. These registers of space and time are distributed unevenly across the cinematic text, the film’s audience, and the historical context. [...] [In the] allegorical moment’s complex process of embodiment, [...] film, spectator and history compete and collaborate to produce forms of knowing not easily described by conventional delineations of bodily space and historical time.43

The elicitation of these ‘forms of knowing’ resonates with Bresson’s philosophy, adopted by Santiago, which consists in drawing from the viewer feelings ‘más allá de los sentidos que se comprenden fácilmente’. The ‘shocking collision’ referred to by Lowenstein is consistent with Burke’s take on the romantic sublime. Burke believed terror to be the ruling principle of the sublime: images that are ‘dark, uncertain, confused, terrible’ are ‘sublime to the last degree’.44 Interested mainly in the emotional states elicited by experiences of the sublime, Burke views the source of the latter in ‘whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror’.45 He places an emphasis on the subject’s realization of their own physical limitations, which has an effect both in psychological and physiological terms. For Burke, the sublime object viewed ‘at certain distances, and with certain modifications’ is imbued with the dual quality of fear and attraction, pain and pleasure: the fear of being overwhelmed, and the pleasure of confronting the source of the fear.46 Distance and modification characterise artistic representation, and Robu reaffirms the ambivalent pain / pleasure principle of the sublime in science fiction:

[T]he minute and fragile human being, given the finitude of his/her body and the ephemerality of his/her life, is physically outrun and feels painfully overwhelmed by the unchallenging (sic) hugeness of the cosmic magnitudes: and this overwhelming is exactly the catalyst that triggers the “sublimation” of

43 Lowenstein, Shocking Representation, p. 2.
44 Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry, p. 45.
the pain into pleasure, the specific trigger that the aesthetic pleasure of the sublime needs [...].

The murder scene in *Invasión* is marked by the realisation that Herrera cannot escape, and that he is physically in an inferior position; it is marked, also, by the certainty of death, bringing the narrative into the realm of classical tragedy. *Invasión*’s characters are doomed, devoid of any hope of winning against the enemy. The boundaries that define the narrative spatially and conceptually exist only to be sustained over time, then ultimately violated:

De eso se trata: extremar las condiciones más allá de las cuales no hay supervivencia posible. En el largo plazo, el aislamiento se convierte en condena. Una muerte segura. No se trata de vencer o ser derrotado. El enfrentamiento se plantea en otros términos; es un ejercicio de perseverancia, una prueba de valor. Y si esto es así, lo verdaderamente trágico del argumento no es el resultado del combate sino la constatación de que no tiene fin.

The epic quality of the text is conveyed by the overwhelming masculinity expressed in the relationships between the all-male group of protagonists at the centre of the narrative:

Su culto del coraje y de la amistad varonil, su modo estoico de enfrentar la muerte, sus modales caballerescos para con las mujeres, [...] las frases cortas y contundentes que intercambian [...] el perfecto sentido de la lealtad que los anima.

These characteristics, in particular the lack of expressed emotion faced with death, stand in contrast with the behaviour typically exhibited by the script’s overall less central female characters, none of whom die or are wounded and who are more typically associated with emotion (they are shown to cry in response to death, for example, whereas the men are not). In this sense *Invasión* provides a textbook illustration of Burke’s theory of a gendered sublime, in which the negative sublime is masculine, derives from the authority of the father. The latter is incarnated by Don

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48 Oubiña, ‘En los confines del planeta’, p. 207.
Porfirio, who exhibits dual qualities associated with love and death in an Oedipal fashion: he both shows affection towards Herrera, and sends him to his demise in spite of Herrera’s protest at the futility of his sacrifice: ‘Quedamos solo nosotros dos, Don Porfirio. ¿Por qué seguir peleando? [...] ¿Por qué morir por gente que no quiere defenderse?’ In the final scene of Herrera’s death Don Porfirio stands over his bloodied corpse, uttering a statement that contradicts Herrera’s failure to fulfil his mission and stop the invaders: ‘Claro. Yo sabía que vos no fallás’. As the camera pans out from Don Porfirio sitting by Herrera, stroking his hair and body as a father would his son, one gets the sense that Herrera’s true task lay in fulfilling his inevitable death, inscribed in the tragic rules of the narrative and enabled by the father figure of Don Porfirio.

For Shaw, the Burkean sublime is not only negative, but masculine and constructed through ‘authority associated with pain and terror’, whereas the feminine realm is associated with beauty and positive emotion, the ‘fondness and indulgence’ of the mother. These concepts are conveyed within the dramatic and symbolic framework of Invasión, in which the female element is typically associated with life, emotion and the natural world. The young girl who inhabits the delta island that forms the north-east border ultimately seems ethereal, as though juxtaposed to the action taking place; while two groups of men engage in a gun fight, burning down her hut and killing her male companion, she wanders by the riverside through tall grasses, cradling a baby puma in her arms. Irene equally escapes unscathed from confrontations, despite leading a rebel faction, and the verbalising of her emotions – ‘Yo sé que tengo para llorar; hoy o mañana da lo mismo’ – takes place in an open field crossed by galloping horses. Conversely, the film’s male characters appear static, devoid of sentiment. If Herrera exhibits an apparently emotionless curiosity as to the whereabouts of Irene, she is visibly distraught faced with his absence. Frustrated in her search for him and knowing that he has chosen to walk to his death, Irene strips naked and lays face down on the bed while Herrera observes her, unseen and expressionless. In a separate sequence, Lebendiger is led to his death by a young woman whose emotions on hearing the shot are also translated physically: she is filmed from the rear so that her face cannot be seen, but her body starts and her shoulders hunch as she walks through a door that becomes symbolic of the passage from life to death. Meanwhile, both Lebendiger and his killer appear utterly impassive faced with what is about to take

50 Shaw, The Sublime, p. 57.
place. One could read this scene of emotionless confrontation with death within the framework of Kant’s concept of the dynamical sublime. Kant, says Vanessa Ryan, seeks to distinguish ‘positive empowerment from negative, freedom-denying violence’, differentiating ‘two polar possibilities of the sublime, namely its ability, on the one hand, to exert an overpowering force that dominates the self and, on the other hand, its status as a force that empowers the self’. Extradigetically the viewer, at a safe distance from the film’s events, is able to experience the latter; indeed, Kant writes that ‘When in an aesthetic judgment we consider nature as a might that has no dominance over us, then it is dynamically sublime’. In contrast, diegetically, the former is expressed. Although Lebendiger intimates that his sang froid is derived from a newly discovered bravery, the repetitive nature of death and the sense of the ineluctable, overall, appears to paralyse Don Porfirio’s resistance fighters, at least in the sense that one by one they meet their death knowingly, without attempting to avert it.

The moment of Moon’s death brings both the inexorability of the process and the helplessness of its victims to the fore. The sequence is both symmetrical and metaphysical, shot against a black-and-white chequered surface that resembles a chess-board, all the more so given that Moon is wearing the resistance fighters’ black suit while his killer is dressed in a beige ‘uniform’, mimicking the colour scheme of opposing chess pieces. The mise en scène creates a mirroring effect; both men are filmed from the waist down as they enter the space through doors at opposite ends, the backlit shots causing a cinematic echo in the lines and hues of their legs in the doorways. The contrapuntal cawing of the magpie is heard for the last time in this scene; as Moon is shot, the bird’s call echoes into the distance to the receding sound of flapping wings. The ‘away’ movement of sound through space, which creates a bridge between two planes of reality, is mirrored in inverted form by the physical movement of Moon’s killer towards him, until both are touching in the centre of the screen. Just as the magpie signals an omniscient presence beyond the diegetic world of the film, the dialogue at this point both distances the characters from the plot, temporarily removing them from the diegetic sequence, and reveals the helplessness of being subjected to a script they do not control, like blind pawns in the inferred chess game. ‘¿No vio el

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revólver?’ asks the killer. Moon, who at this point in the narrative is dead, answers: ‘No. Yo era ciego.’

The acceptance of death and the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful, divisively correlated to gender, is perhaps more usefully informed by Kant’s opposition between reason and self-interest and his concept of sublime ethics. Within this framework, the sublime is viewed as a quality of the mind, not of nature; it is elicited by the triumph of reason, the recognition of a higher authority or cause that is worth foregoing self-interest and the natural world for, including love. In Kantian terms, the sublime occurs when the transcendence of the rational over the sensible is asserted, no matter how disturbing the implications: ‘It is beautiful [...] to love our children more than we love ourselves; it is sublime to sacrifice one’s child for the sake of the truth’.\(^5\) Shaw’s example here resonates strongly with Invasión’s narrative, in particular the relationships between Don Porfirio and Herrera, and between Herrera and Irene. Self-preservation in the face of death and love, both filial and romantic, are among the individual desires that must ‘submit to the categorical imperative, even to the point of death, lest ethics be reduced to a matter of taste’.\(^4\) Viewing the text in these terms frees us from a restrictive binary approach whereby positive emotion belongs solely to the realm of the feminine. Despite initial appearances, male emotion is not absent from Invasión’s filmic text. Repressed on the physical plane, it is however transferred to external elements and thus verbalised indirectly: Don Porfirio writes his fear onto a piece of paper, in the form of a letter; Silva recites a haunting tango foretelling the men’s death and expressing their attachment to the world.\(^5\) The camera-work combined with the tango’s understated lyrics generate a sublime moment as fragmented images seek, but fail, to represent a whole; that is to say, to condense within the space of one song the complex forces at play and the lives, identities, depth of feelings toward one another, and imminent deaths of the characters. The attempt at representing such breadth hinges on the synecdochal: a shot of Vildrac mixing a chemical compound, dressed in a white lab coat, symbolises his life as a pharmacist. The shots are short and presented in quick succession, conveying a sense that the camera gives up nearly immediately on what it sets out to do. The visual evocation of Moon’s identity places an emphasis on the works of art that cover the walls of his

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\(^4\) Shaw, *The Sublime*, p. 86.
\(^5\) ‘La Milonga de Manuel Flores’, written by Borges.
room; the camera lingers long enough for him to sit down and start drawing, only to interrupt the shot mid-line, as though the image has both fulfilled its objective, and reached the limits of what it is able to represent. In a sense this passage is the true culmination of the cinematic sublime in *Invasión*. It embodies the notion, developed by the Romantics in the 18th century, that while the sublime is rooted in our sense perceptions, it is a product of correlations established in the mind, in the face of the limits of experience, knowledge, and/or representation, occurring when ‘the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language’, at the point of defeat of the capacity to express a thought or sensation. Here, the defeat is that of cinematic representation, and it transports the viewer beyond the film’s formal boundaries.

In Santiago’s *Invasión* the sublime, structurally essential to the dislocation inherent to Suvin’s concept of estrangement and, to paraphrase Robu, intuitively experienced in science fiction as the ‘sense of wonder’, thus provides a space for the expression of the untranslatable. In so doing, it brings to the fore the sense of fear and estrangement that accompanies the disjunction of the traumatic experience. Meanwhile, the foregrounded limits of cinematic representation move the viewer towards an empowering construction and negotiation of meaning that occurs beyond words and images, in a masterful interpretation of Bresson’s philosophy.

### 2.3 Tragedy and the cinematic sublime in *Hombre mirando al sudeste*

The negative sublime and the sacrifice of the son by the father are also at the heart of the Christian allegory contained within *Hombre mirando al sudeste*, and Rantés’s death is as inevitable as Herrera’s. At first glance, however, Subiela’s style is radically different from Santiago’s Bresson-inspired approach. Whereas the latter goes to great lengths, as we have seen, to provide as little guidance as possible for the viewer, *Hombre mirando al sudeste* initially appears to impose meaning through a strong allegorical framework. Rantés’s status as a metaphorical Christ leaves no room for doubt; it is clear cut and sustained throughout the film, both in the dialogue and

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56 Shaw, *The Sublime*, p. 3. Cornel Robu notes that “Science fiction proves to be surprisingly adequate to illustrate the old concept of the sublime in its very core and also in all its conceptual articulations and ramifications, such as the “kinds” of sublime defined as early as the late eighteenth century” (‘Revisiting the Sense of Wonder’, p. 31).
through visual isotopies that establish the film’s universe as a unit of meaning.\textsuperscript{57} While the dialogue establishes increasingly explicit analogies between Rantés and Christ as the film progresses, implicit visual references to Rantés’s transcendental nature are present from the outset. The space of the chapel where Denis first meets him is a symbolic hint that gains intensity as Denis climbs a flight of stairs, looking for the mysterious 33\textsuperscript{rd} patient who has appeared in the asylum. The Bach piece being played on the organ in the background rises to a crescendo as Denis ascends to the higher level where Rantés is playing, surrounded by patients who appear to be communing with the music. From the outset, Rantés is therefore visually associated with a higher realm. References to Christianity become increasingly explicit in the second half of the film, once the character of Beatriz is introduced into the narrative, reinforcing the already present theme. Nicknamed ‘the Saint’ due to the blue secretions she excretes when she feels positive emotion, Beatriz wears pale blue, a colour traditionally associated with female figures in the Christian tradition. The Christian spatial symbolism of levels vertically connecting Heaven (above), Earth, and Hell (below), expressed when Denis ascends the stairs to meet Rantés, is reproduced when Denis ‘banishes’ Beatriz from his flat after the lovemaking scene and her confession to being an alien. Beatriz’s face is shown in a close-up shot, framed by the metallic criss-cross grid of the elevator’s gate, then she swiftly moves downwards and out of the frame, which goes black. As Beatriz initiates her descent down the elevator shaft, her last words, in the past conditional tense, refer to a future that can no longer happen: ‘¡Yo también te hubiera querido!’ The vertical movement and symbolism of Heaven, Hell and lost innocence are emphasized moments later when Denis drops her handbag from the height of his balcony: the white object, mirroring Beatriz’s white shirt, falls in slow motion against a dark background, the shot fading into darkness before it reaches her.

Doctor Denis also verbalises the Christian metaphor, reinforcing the narrative thread; he refers to himself as Pontius Pilate, and says to Rantés: ‘Solo falta que me diga “Bienaventurados los pobres de espíritu”. Creo que cometí un error al asumir su papel. ¡No hubiera debido decir que es de otro planeta, sino que sos Cristo!’ After the open-air concert, a turning point that seals Rantés’s fate, the doctor’s off-screen voice

\textsuperscript{57} If textual isotopy is a recurrence of interrelated semes which ‘grounds and secures [a] micro-universe as a unit of meaning’, introducing homogeneous elements to a story and thereby giving direction to its interpretation by the reader, one could say that the presence of thematically related images in a film constitutes a visual isotopy. On textual isotopies see A. J. Greimas, ‘Elements of a Narrative Grammar’, \textit{Diacritics}, 7:1 (1977), 23-40 (p. 26).
prophetically announces what is to follow, while the camera shows Rantés moving through the ward, allowing the inmates to place their hands on him as he moves past them: ‘a mediados que Rantés se acercara a Cristo, su final no sería muy distinto’.

From this point onwards it becomes clear that, like Christ, Rantés is destined to be sacrificed to the altar of social order. The narrative, which until that point bears comical traits, in the classical sense – Doctor Denis regains faith in his work, spends time with his children, and falls in love – becomes defined as a re-enactment of the Christian tragedy, supported by the film’s imagery. Beatriz cradling Rantés in her arms as he becomes increasingly catatonic recalls the Pietà, while the shot of a semi-conscious Rantés being carried on a fellow inmate’s back echoes both the bearing of a cross, and Christ collapsing during the via crucis, superimposing both images. The ‘micro-universe’ thus created lifts the narrative out of its diegetic space-time, encouraging us to establish parallels with a Christian narrative of sacrifice which, being echoed, becomes cyclical. For Burke as for Kant, the sublime in this context is elicited not only by intimations of transcendence but also by the viewer’s identification, from a safe distance, with a tragic fate that is inevitable:

The passions which belong to self preservation, turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances; this delight I have not called pleasure, because it turns on pain, and because it is different enough from any idea of positive pleasure. Whatever excites this delight, I call sublime.58

*Hombre mirando al sudeste* also presents a gender dichotomy similar to that of *Invasión*, where male characters appear emotionally disconnected, contrasting with female characters that physically exhibit emotion. Denis acknowledges his numbness early on in the film: ‘hacia tiempo ya que no sentía mas nada por mi profesión’; and Rantés informs him that his own kind are devoid of feeling: ‘no podemos sentir’. This absence of feeling is compounded and reinforced by the catatonic state of the medicated patients, all of which are men. Beatriz, on the other hand, is associated with emotion and the liquid element: the mysterious blue liquid that appears at the corner of her mouth when she is happy, the tears she sheds when Denis rejects her. Although she

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58 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 32.
claims to be an alien like Rantés, Beatriz is characterised by a deviation associated with feeling: ‘soy uno de los agentes de los que Rantés habló, corrompidos por un atardecer, ciertos olores’. Beatriz’s body is a site overwhelmingly permeated by a capacity to feel that defines and drives her, and is a catalyst for emotion in others, eliciting Rantés’s curiosity and Denis’s love.

At first view, then Hombre mirando al sudeste appears to incorporate sublime aesthetics that echo those of Invasión, despite a very different approach to engaging the viewer in a process of interpretation. The Christian tragedy embedded in the narrative indeed hinges on the concept of sacrifice, and Rantés, like Herrera in Invasión, walks knowingly to his death: he enters the asylum of his own accord, and will not renge on his position. However, although the male characters appear limited in their ability to display emotion, they oscillate between disconnection or numbness on the one hand, intensity and euphoria on the other. Rantés’s confession that he cannot feel contrasts with his rage at the asylum’s policies and poor food, while the catatonic inmates switch to an eruption of euphoria that transports them outside the hospital in the orchestra sequence. Likewise, Rantés’s rational, subdued approach to his fellow inmates’ suffering, modelled on biblical precepts, contrasts with the dramatic tone and triumphant soundtrack of the scene in which he feeds a woman and her children in the lonchería. The sublime in Hombre mirando al sudeste is rooted in religious transcendence. It is performative and spectacular, as for example when Rantés, directing the orchestra, generates a wave of euphoria that sweeps the crowd. Whereas in Invasión the sublime is generated by a gap, an absence of signifiers, in Hombre mirando al sudeste it is generated on the contrary by an excess of signifiers that resonates with theories of the postmodern, in particular with Vivian Sobchack’s application of Fredric Jameson’s theories to North American ‘alien messiah’ films of the 1970s and 1980s.

These two decades mark a transition in sf cinema from aliens that are portrayed as creatures to be feared, distinctly ‘other’, to a new trend of benevolent spiritual guides. These ‘faith healers’, as Sobchack calls them, are portrayed in a cluster of films released within the same decade as Hombre mirando al sudeste: for example, Close Encounters of the Third Kind (Spielberg, 1977) E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial (Spielberg,
1982), *Starman* (Carpenter, 1984), *The Brother from another Planet* (Sayles, 1984) or *Cocoon* (Don Ameche, 1985). Far removed from the bug-eyed monsters of the 1950s, aliens in the new SF film are represented as ‘friends, playmates, brothers and lovers’.\(^{59}\) Sobchack reads them as characters that provide vessels for the decentered emotion of postmodernism that is linked by Jameson to the fragmentation of the ‘formerly centred subject’ of high modernism:\(^{60}\)

As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centred subject may also mean, not merely a liberation from anxiety, but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings – which it may be better and more accurate to call ‘intensities’ – are now free floating and impersonal, and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria.\(^{61}\)

Sobchack argues that affect, in postmodern science fiction, is displaced onto special effects that emphasise emotional dimensions over rational science, crystallizing intense feelings akin to religious transportation. Csicsery-Ronay also believes that ‘the genre of sf film has evolved into an apparatus for rendering affects through special-effects technology’.\(^{62}\) A noteworthy illustration of this point is provided in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, a film in which benevolent aliens come to Earth to select one member of the human race to join them aboard the mother ship. Originally entitled *Kingdom Come*, the film has clear religious undertones, and like *Hombre mirando al sudeste*, it exhibits a sublime that rests on religious imagery. The time and place of the aliens’ arrival is determined using scientific instruments, but is revealed in parallel to non-scientists by prophetic dream-like visions of a (Holy?) mountain. Both groups of characters are drawn together for the climax of the ship’s landing, in a sequence that is imbued with the aesthetics of transcendence. The crowd, silent save for a few religious expletives, is ecstatic; the camera zooms in on open-mouthed faces looking up towards the lights of the ship, while one man kneels in awe, and communication is established

\(^{59}\) Sobchack, *Screening Space*, p. 292.  
\(^{60}\) Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, *New Left Review*, 146 (1984), 53-92 (p. 63).  
\(^{61}\) Jameson, ‘Postmodernism’, p. 64.  
\(^{62}\) Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, p. 147.
from a machine that is shaped like an altar. For Sobchack, the film, and this passage in particular, ‘initiates a new iconography of beatific human wonder, editorially linking affect to effect. […] This is the face of human transcendence whose emotion is enacted by what it sees’. As such, religious transportation translates literally and materially as ‘alien transportation’:

> Alien-ated emotional transcendence becomes objectified in the transcendental and loving alien, and the alien-ated experience of “rapture” or “religious transport” is narrativized literally – as human beings are ecstatically “carried away” in body and spirit, as “religious transport” is effected by “alien transportation”.

In *Hombre mirando al sudeste*, this point is illustrated most clearly when the patients gather on the lawn in a circle following Rantés’s death to await his return aboard a spaceship: ‘Los pacientes no creyeron en la muerte de Rantés. Decían que se había ido, pero que volvería en una nave a buscarlos. Ellos estarian allí, esperando.’ The hope expressed in the dialogue is emphasized by the camera, as it pans away in an upward movement. The perspective of the shot implies an omniscient point of view from above, while the circle is connotative of connectedness. This final sequence marks the end of a progression from the film’s first portrayal of an isolated patient physically separated from the doctor by a table, with two radically distinct monologues taking place in parallel, through the progressive awakening of emotion in the inmates who gather around the central figure of the alien messiah to touch him, speak to him or be fed by him, to the final unification around the trope of the returning spaceship.

> If the sublime in *Invasión* highlights the limits of a translation of affect to effect, *Hombre mirando al sudeste* appears to embrace it. Its spectacular, religious transcendentalism provides an illustration of what Jameson sees as ‘a new type of emotional ground tone – what I will call “intensities” – which can best be grasped by a return to older theories of the sublime’. Yet at the same time, Rantés’s quest to locate human emotion externally, in the material world, consistently fails. Fascinated by Beatriz’s ‘mecanismos no habituales de coneción entre lo afectivo y lo físico’, Rantés takes to dissecting the human brain: ‘¿Dónde está aquella tarde en que sintió por

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63 Sobchack, *Screening Space*, p. 284.
64 Sobchack, *Screening Space*, p. 288.
65 Jameson, ‘Postmodernism’, p. 3.
primera vez el amor de una mujer? ¿Qué marcas quedan de los momentos de goce o de dolor que debe haber sentido este hombre?’. Finally, crumbling the physical matter under running water and down the drain, he asks: ‘¿Usted qué cree, doctor? Esta cloaca irá al cielo o al infierno?’. These questions remain without answers, as do his questions about music that fundamentally seek to locate the source of the sublime in his own performance: ‘¿Dónde cree que está la magia? ¿En el aparato? ¿En él que escribió esto? ¿En mí? ¿En ellos, que se emocionan cuando lo oyen?’.

That the generic word ‘aparato’ is used here to designate the potential source of emotion, means Rantés’s questions can be transferred to the ‘machine’ that generates film, all the more so as Rantés later justly defines himself as a projection, a simple image. Through Rantés’s duality as Christ/alien or Christ/madman, the cinematic text appears to question itself, examine its own effects on the viewer; a self-conscious distance is thus established between the narrative and its recipient as perception and emotion are called into question and dissected. *Hombre mirando al sudeste* thus hinges on a dynamic of contradiction between the certainties of religious transcendentalism and the ontological questions posed by the science fiction motif. The latter not only offers a possibility of escape from the closed, circular tragedy of the returned Christ – an escape visualised by the upward movement of the camera away from the confines of the asylum’s walls – but consistently destabilises the core narrative thread centred on the Christian allegory. *Hombre mirando al sudeste* is a collection of red herrings that play with this duality. For example, ‘Beatriz’ is the first name of Dante’s love in the *Divina commedia*, and the nickname ‘la Santa’ reinforces the Christian motif. Yet her second name is ‘Dick’; this is a clear reference to science fiction author Philip K. Dick, famous for his experiments within universes where nothing is quite what it seems. Meanwhile Denis explicitly defines his own place in the Christian myth that is being played out when he refers to himself as Pilate, yet ‘Julio Denis’ is the first pen-name of Julio Cortázar, whose own texts present the split narratives and plural ontologies commonly associated with postmodernism.66 If at first *Hombre mirando al sudeste*, unlike *Invasión*, appears to strive toward the clear references and interpretative filters of a master narrative, the latter are undermined in the same movement, opening up space for a much wider questioning of the text – one that extends beyond the oscillation between two divergent versions of the truth offered by Denis and Rantés.

Added to the diegetic uncertainties, extradiegetic concerns are indeed posed by Rantés’s repeated destabilisations of the viewer’s relationship to the images that are presented, as the *mise en scène*, dialogue and intertextual references simultaneously build our trust in Rantés as an alternative narrator and disrupt it.

The insertion of scenes from which Denis is absent, in which we witness Rantés’s telekinesis, appear to provide evidence that Rantés is telling the truth and is, in fact, from outer space. His empathy for others, and his positive impact on the doctor, further encourage us to view him as diegetically reliable. This, however, becomes problematic at various points in the film. When, for example, Rantés says to Denis ‘ustedes son robotes, y todavía no se dieron cuenta’, his statement can be interpreted metaphorically. However, several embedded references are made to Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, which poses an ontological quandary. As we have seen, Beatriz’s second name is a reference to Philip K. Dick, on whose novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* the film was based, and the discussion takes place just after Denis has asked Rantés about his mother, which is the trick question used in *Blade Runner* to determine whether a character is human or not. Since *Hombre mirando al sudeste* is presented as an alternative universe in the sense that contact has been made – if we are to believe Rantés – with aliens, it becomes impossible to determine whether Rantés is speaking metaphorically, or whether his statement should in fact be taken literally. The same issue presents itself when, asked by Denis whether he suffers from hallucinations, Rantés answers: ‘No. Yo soy una alucinación suya’, introducing the possibility that the whole film is imagined by the doctor, or that the doctor himself is mentally ill. The explicit reference that is made to Adolfo Bioy Casares’s 1940 novel *La invención de Morel*, which Denis thinks may have inspired Rantés’s story, introduces further doubt on the matter. In this novel the protagonist and sole narrator, ‘p’, is exiled on an island that becomes peopled with a group of friends who cannot see him and who appear to repeat the same gestures and dialogues over time. The group is in fact a projection, re-enacting a week-long stay on the island in an infinite loop. ‘P’, who has fallen in love with one of the group-members, Faustine, eventually finds this out, and comes to

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67 For Geoffrey Kantaris, *Hombre mirando al sudeste* was ‘remarkable for setting up a cyborg aesthetic through reference to the now classic Ridley Scott film *Blade Runner* of 1982 as well as its literary antecedent in Philip K. Dick’s novel’ (Kantaris, ‘Buenos Aires 2010’, p. 197).
69 The story became the basis for Alain Resnais’s *L’année dernière a Marienbad* (1961).
understand that every person recorded that week by the inventor Morel has died, since
the machines consume the real in the process of creating a simulacrum. While trying to
understand what is happening around him, ‘p’ writes a passage that undermines our
faith in his narrative:

Intenté varias explicaciones. Que yo tenga la famosa peste; sus efectos en la
imaginación: la gente, la música […] Que el aire pervertido de los bajos y una
deficiente alimentación me hayan vuelto invisible […]. Se me ocurrió
(precariamente) que pudiera tratarse de seres de otro planeta.\textsuperscript{70}

‘P’\textquotesingle s fourth hypothesis, which presents itself in the form of a dream, provides a cross-
textual metaphor embodied cinematically in \textit{Hombre mirando al sudeste}:

Yo estaba en un manicomio. Después de una larga consulta (¿el proceso?) con
un médico, mi familia me había llevado ahí. Morel era el director. Por
momentos, yo sabía que estaba en la isla; por momentos, creía estar en el
manicomio; por momentos, era el director del manicomio.\textsuperscript{71}

The theme of a crossover between director and patient calls to mind Robert Wiene\textquotesingle s
1919 film \textit{Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari}, in which a fairground hypnotist is exposed as
the director of an asylum gone power-mad, only for a final twist to reveal that the
narrative was a fabrication and that all the characters in the film are, like him, patients
in the institution. Both \textit{La invención de Morel} and \textit{Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari} hint at
the fundamental untrustworthiness of the single narrator, the latter laying bare the
illusion of cinematography. When Rantés says of the inmates, echoing \textit{La invención de
Morel}, that they are already dead, his ambiguous answer to Denis\textquotesingle s invitation to expand
on that point remains yet again unanswered, indirectly handing the issue over to the
viewers: ‘¿Usted qué cree?’.

Ultimately, \textit{Hombre mirando al sudeste} leads the viewer from an initial sense of
being guided by a master narrative towards a postmodern reading where nothing is
what it seems; from the trusting belief in a transcendent power (that of the narrative
voice) to the postmodern sublime\textquotesingle s intimation that ‘the highest of the high is nothing

\textsuperscript{70} Adolfo Bioy Casares, \textit{La invención de Morel}, (Madrid: Edicion de Trinidad Barrera, Catedra Letras
Hispánicas, 1999), pp. 140-141.
\textsuperscript{71} Bioy Casares, \textit{La invención de Morel}, p. 141.
more than an illusion brought about through our misperception of reality’.72 While both *Invasión* and *Hombre mirando al sudeste* convey the traumatic nature of the oppressive historical context in which they are rooted, the evolution from *Invasión*’s Burkean and Kantian sublime to Santiago’s postmodern sublime points to a shift that perhaps owes more to the legacy of the 1976-1983 dictatorship and the fragmentation of the concept of a national culture than to a more global, cultural shift towards postmodernism. For Page, the adoption of an anti-realist, postmodern aesthetic constitutes ‘a singularly appropriate tool for the totalitarian abuse of power and for the exposure of its image productions’.73 The inclusion of the Christian allegory’s transcendental sublime adds an extra dimension. Through Rantés, a contradiction is displayed between the face of the Church and its actions, between projection and reality: ‘Hay torturadores que aman a Beethoven. Quieren a sus hijos. Van a misa. El Hombre se permite eso.’ Everett Hamner discusses at length the political dimensions of a post-dictatorship metaphor involving the Church, in the light of its complicity with the dictatorship, enforcement of homogeneity and ‘offers of pie in the sky’74 and institutional Catholicism’s condoning of the association made by the military government ‘between state terrorism and Christian virtues’.75 The ‘Documento final de la junta militar sobre la guerra contra la subversión y el terrorismo’ powerfully illustrates these manipulations. A 45 minute long documentary aired on public television in April 1983, in which the government justified their actions during their time in power, the film opens to the image of a sun which is either rising or setting; the camera zooms in slowly as the first sentences are pronounced until the light fills the screen in a blinding freeze-frame, associating the junta with the transcendental power of the sun, a prominent symbol on the Argentine flag. Cut to images of peaceful, everyday life: citizens walking down the street, little girls in white dresses playing in a fountain, a pigeon, providing an uplifting and peaceful visual background, accompanied by the tinkering of an acoustic guitar. Meanwhile, the following text is pronounced off-screen:

72 Shaw, *The Sublime*, p. 3.
74 Everett Hamner, ‘Remembering the Disappeared: Science Fiction Film in Postdictatorship Argentina’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 39 (2012), 60-80 (pp. 65, 68).
Esta síntesis histórica de un doloroso pasado todavía cercano quiere ser un mensaje de fe y de reconocimiento a la lucha por la libertad, por la justicia, y por el derecho a la vida. Ha llegado el momento de que encaremos el futuro. Será necesario mitigar la heridas que toda guerra produce. Afrontar con espíritu cristiano la etapa que se inicia, y mirar hacia la mañana con sincera humildad. Su destinatario primero somos nosotros: el pueblo de la nación, víctimas de una agresión que nunca mereció.76

Faith and the Christian spirit, freedom, justice, humility and the defence of the right to life are all presented here as being characteristics of the junta, while the ‘doloroso pasado’ refers not to the Proceso but the years leading up to the 1976 coup. This passage clearly exemplifies the instability of signifiers which is translated in Hombre mirando al sudeste, whose postmodern sublime challenges and undermines the romantic sublime and the manipulation of image and message employed by the military dictatorship in their own communications.

2.4 Conclusion: hope within the eternal return

What distinguishes the sublime in Invasión and Hombre mirando al sudeste is perhaps, then, that the former signals that which is hidden and sensed, inarticulate, whereas the latter hinges on that which is seen and has been over-articulated by those in power. The Burkean, Kantian sublime of Invasión provides a space for the expression of the untranslatable by bringing to the fore the sense of fear and estrangement that accompanies the disjunction of the traumatic experience; the foregrounded limits of cinematic representation move the viewer towards an empowering construction and negotiation of meaning beyond words and images. Hombre mirando al sudeste’s postmodern sublime, on the other hand, is more oppositional, challenging the very possibility of conveying narrative and / or truth through either narrative or images. It denounces the inherent illusion of the image through the interplay between the transcendental sublime and the immanence of the postmodern sublime. However, if the utter destabilisation of the film’s ontology is a

76 ‘Documento final de la junta militar sobre la guerra contra la subversión y el terrorismo’ (April 1983), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uS1I9cO8jnI> [accessed 12 May 2013].
remarkably relevant translation of the military government’s legacy to a traumatised population, it also opens up a space of freedom and hope represented by the final shot of the inmates on the lawn, moving up and away from the text. The viewer, in a position of informed omniscience and in the absence of any stable framework, gains ultimate empowerment in the moment of defeat conveyed by the sublime: the freedom not just to create meaning, but to assign their own ontological structure to the filmic text.
Chapter 3: Going round in circles? Non-linear time and divergent narratives in *Moebius* (Mosquera, 1996)

3.1 Introduction

*Moebius*, released in 1996, was the product of a collaboration between Gustavo Mosquera, writer and director of the dystopian *Lo que vendrá* (1988) and professor at the Universidad del Cine de Buenos Aires (UCBA), and the students forming part of the University’s Colectivo de cine, five of which contributed to writing the screenplay. The students participated on a voluntary basis, and did therefore not receive payment for the project, the total cost of which was 250,000 dollars. The plot is based on ‘A Subway Named Moebius’, a mathematical short story by American author A.J. Deutsch first published in 1950, in which a complex underground system takes on the properties of a Moebius strip. This causes one of the carriages and all the passengers aboard it to disappear from the grid, as they slip into an alternative space-time. Deutsch’s tale recounts the attempts by Tupelo, a young mathematician, to unravel the mystery of the disappearance, and his interactions with the authorities who resist his (ultimately correct) hypothesis. Adapted to take place in the *subte* or Buenos Aires underground system, since that was where the film would be shot, *Moebius* acquired an additional political dimension. In the process of geographical translation, the concept of disappeared passengers naturally became a reference to the legacy of Argentina’s latest military dictatorship:

Everything began to fill with a special significance […] Changing the places was quite simple, when compared with the deep changes in the meaning that arose when one even only imagined the possible dialogues about the disappearance of a train filled with people […] specially in a country in which so many people had disappeared for political reasons.²

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Befittingly for a story centred on a Moebius strip, the movement within *Moebius* is double: on the one hand, Daniel is seeking the answer to an abstract mathematical problem; on the other, he is moving the viewer towards a hidden truth which is political and extra-diegetic. The film culminates in a sequence aboard the missing train where Daniel experiences the concept of infinity, which is both the outcome of his mathematical quest and the metaphorical revelation of ‘the cruel historical truth of the desaparecidos in Argentina’.\(^3\) For Geoffrey Kantaris, the political aspect added by Mosquera to the concept of ‘infinity’ in his adaptation expresses ‘the infinite nature of disappearance […] which is to say a phenomenon which did not have closure’; the Moebius strip thus becomes ‘a very precise figure for the spatial encoding of (national) memory’.\(^4\)

*Moebius* also conveys the malaise experienced in the economic and social context of Argentina in the nineties, adding a second metaphorical layer which is also absent from Deutsch’s short story. In Kantaris’s words, Moebius ‘connects the spatial vertigo of the cybercity, its megapolitan labyrinths and globalised networks, to the unfinished temporal work of remembrance of the disappeared in Argentina’.\(^5\) The labyrinth image is highly relevant here, not least because it provides a link with Borges’s work, which played an important part in the aesthetic and conceptual choices made by Mosquera.\(^6\) The Borgesian trope of the labyrinth also offers a key to understanding how both storytelling and the distortion of chronological time, on which the plot of *Moebius* rests, provide an escape from the totalising ‘fictions of power’.\(^7\) I will further observe how a counterhegemonic alternative is provided, not only in terms of the narrative outcome, but also through the film’s inherent encouragement of active viewer participation.

### 3.2 The Dystopian geometries of the underground

By translating Deutsch’s short story to a film set in a future Buenos Aires, a timeframe made clear by the additional stations in the underground network, Mosquera introduced a change in the genre associated with the narrative. Deutsch’s story is a

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\(^3\) Mosquera, ‘A Few Reflections’, p. 159.
mathematical science-fiction tale with a twist, as illustrated by the title of the second anthology it was published in: *Fantasia Mathematica*. Although Mosquera’s adaptation retains the mathematical element, it is an example of dystopian fiction; not least because it addresses a dark political issue. Naomi Jacobs describes a dystopia as a universe bereft of agency, where the individual is pitched against the State or other equivalent entity. *Moebius* best corresponds to Darko Suvin’s definition of a ‘fallible dystopia’, defined as such because it contains within it a clear potential for resistance and change that weakens the encroachment of the State on individual freedom. Suvin writes:

*Fallible Dystopia* [is] a new sub-genre arising out of both the shock of Post-Fordism and its imaginative mastering: 1) the society of the actual text is dystopian, in open extrapolation or subtle analogy to human relations and power structures in the writer’s reality; 2) this new Possible World is revealed as resistible and changeable, by our hero/ine, often with great difficulty.

*Moebius* fulfils both the above criteria. Set in an environment that is familiar to the Argentine viewer, and especially the porteño viewer, it is marked as an extrapolation through its displacement in time. It is also clearly an analogy to the Argentine political reality. For example, Daniel has to deal with a triumvirate of officials; the number three, says Mosquera, ‘is associated with the grotesque generals of the military *juntas*’.

The narrative line of *Moebius* exhibits a traditional dystopian dichotomy between two sets of characters: on the one hand, figures of authority representing a rigid, controlled system, and on the other, characters that do not fit this model and seek to resist it. The city officials, who acquire an additional dimension in the context of Argentina’s history, are nonetheless a classic feature of dystopian science fiction film, standing as clear symbols of inflexible systems and totalitariannisms the world over. They are portrayed as dismissive, overly defined by their status, and prone to

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8 This volume was originally published in 1958 (New York: Simon & Schuster). Deutsch’s story was also included in the earlier anthology *The Omnibus of Science Fiction* (New York: Crown Publishing, 1952).
categorisations and divisions. All are introduced as ‘Señor’ or ‘Doctor’, except for the machinist who is simply introduced as ‘Eduardo’. This implies a strict hierarchy which they apply to Daniel: they are there ‘not to answer questions, but to ask them’, even though their approach undermines his attempts to uncover the truth. Their unwillingness to conceive of any alternative to a reality they feel they have control over is such that they prefer to support a distorted version of facts. As a result, their response to the crisis is classically totalitarian: ‘Que no se hable más del tema. ¡Acá no ha pasado nada!’ These words echo the response of the government officials to the Macondo massacre in Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad*: ‘En Macondo no ha pasado nada, ni está pasando ni pasará. Macondo es un pueblo feliz.’ The film’s dialogues, which Mosquera says evolved from ‘the attempt to imagine the tone of the dialogues of the authorities of a society which had emerged from a military dictatorship’, clearly differ from Deutsch’s text, in which the authorities do ‘not fully endorse Tupelo’s conclusions’, but put forth reasons for not doing so, and engage in a discussion of the facts.

A further significant difference in the film adaptation, which points this time to the dehumanising nature of administration systems, is the description of staff working in the system. In ‘A Subway named Moebius’ these characters are referred to by their names: Jack O’Brien, at the Park Street Control, calls Warren Sweeney at the Forest Hills yards, to tell him ‘to put another train on the Cambridge run’. Motorman and conductor Gallagher and Dorkin go missing, and both men’s wives are called, adding a realistic human touch to the story. The equivalent exchanges in *Moebius* are distinctly allegorical in comparison:

> las primeras escenas de la película plantean el problema del tren perdido a través de mensajes entre los trabajadores, técnicos, supervisores. Los mensajes entre ellos se destacan por el lenguaje técnico, jerárquico, y numérico: “Interno 101”, “negativo”, “Atención cochera, aquí Bolívar… Conteste cochera…”

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14 Deutsch, p. 233.
15 Deutsch, p. 223.
As noted by Zunino, however, this well-oiled machine exhibits welcome flaws; the problem of the missing carriage causes a re-surfacing of human imperfection: “¿Podría contestarme alguien?”, “¡Usted sabe que está hablando con su jefe, carajo!?”.17

Characters in the film have clearly defined positions: they either embrace hegemonic principles, or resist them. As the narrative unfolds it becomes clear that the upheaval in the system has been caused by Professor Mistein, who has applied calculations enabling the creation of a Moebius effect. Daniel Pratt follows in his footsteps; as he tracks clues left by the professor the latter ‘accompanies the entrance of the young Pratt in a new field of knowledge’.18 Decker, the architect who hands the problem over to Daniel, stoutly refuses to return to the closed offices of the underground run by ‘delirantes’ – madmen – saying he prefers an open road. Finally, somewhat apart from the other characters in that she is ‘young and external to the corruption that the adults of this labyrinth are subjected to’, Abril seems unaffected by the rules that regiment the underground.19 In her interactions with the environment, she challenges and changes spatial signifiers: Mistein’s locked door becomes a point of access, the window becomes an escape route; in the underground, static benches and forbidden rails and electrical boxes become pathways, spaces of playful exploration. After letting Daniel into the Professor’s flat, she insists that her new friend bend the rules in his turn as he very symbolically stops her at the turnstiles on entering the underground: ‘A mi mamá tampoco le hubiera gustado verte – pero te dejé pasar igual.’ Her open-minded approach, or in Mosquera’s words ‘her innocence’, means she is also the only character who is able to see Daniel aboard the missing train as the final scene unfolds.20

The dystopian structures of the film’s narrative are reflected in its imagery and more particularly the representation of space in the underground, which is both geometrical and overbearing. The wide-angle first shot of the building that houses the administrative headquarters of the subte accentuates its imposing nature. As Daniel climbs the steps to the entrance, the camera zooms out, revealing the scale of the architecture. Daniel recedes into the distance through the movement of the camera, his beige overcoat merging with the beige tones of the walls and steps, before being

17 Zunino, “‘Moebius’. Buenos Aires subterránea y un relato de fuga’.
swallowed up inside the building. The image reflects the relative powerlessness or vulnerability of the individual faced with an authoritarian administrative system, in the tradition for example of Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985), where it features as a dominant, recurrent theme. The trope also appears in later Argentine science fiction films, for example in *La sonámbula* (Spiner, 1998) or the Orwell-inspired *Filmatrón* (Parés, 2007), both of which are discussed in later chapters of this thesis.

The sequence that follows Daniel’s entry to the headquarters, shot inside the director general’s office, shows a similarly oversized room. This is very symmetrical to the eye, since it is covered in white rectangles of paper and doubled up by the reflective surface of a long table. It is also overbearing in size compared to Blasi himself, sat at the far end. The photography is further characterised by cold tones, emphasizing the effect of the architecture on characters ‘who feel lost, and therefore small, when faced with the enormous labyrinth.’ The travelling shot that follows Daniel, Blasi, and his assistant through the building highlights this effect with wide angle, top-down shots that cause the characters to appear very small in the background. Railings, partitions and clocks are emphasised in the foreground, both close up and in sharp focus.

*Moebius* places a great deal of emphasis on the series of grids or lines formed by the environment, which reflects both the mathematical theme of the narrative, and the underlying reference to totalitarianism. That humans become increasingly subjected to an inflexible constructed environment is indeed emphasised by the camera-work. This focuses on channels such as stairs, corridors, or points of transition such as turnstiles and doors, all of which direct the movement of travellers, but also take precedence over them visually, since they are usually at the centre of the frame and in the foreground. Equally, the staff working in the various offices appear secondary to switchboards and telephones, which appear first and linger last in many frames, while characters move towards or away from them. They are the visible extension of a network which both controls and connects the space in the underground. The repetitive ringing of the telephones which punctuates the initial search for the missing train fulfils a synechdochic function here: the sound symbolises the circulation of the message through a network which is not visible to the eye. Unsettling, because it threatens a message from an unknown place, the telephone also suggests a form of communication.

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which is mechanised, where the human element is secondary. Because the telephones dominate the frame, and because the camera remains fixed on them, static, they appear to dominate the human characters too, not least in the sense that they generate a pattern of movements, demanding action. The geometry of space, regimented by management systems, timed by clocks, and physically organised and segmented by networks, tunnels, maps, and specified points of entrance and exit, affects the bodies within that space.

In *Moebius* characters are often absorbed, visually, by their environment, becoming a part of the on-screen symmetry: Daniel’s body blends into the Headquarters building, while Blasi’s head appears to fuse with a map placed behind him on a wall, generating a metaphor for control and dehumanisation. This treatment does not apply only to the main characters. In the opening sequence, for example, the careful composition turns anonymous human bodies into geometrical elements: the low positioning of the camera, close to the train’s doors, means the passengers’ bodies are only visible from the neck down. As they move closer to the camera only their legs, then feet, are visible in the frame, producing the illusion of a downward tilt. The heads of passengers placed further back in the field are either blurred, or obscured by their positioning against background colours which absorb them rather than providing a contrast. With the static camera showing human bodies only from the waist or from the neck down, an emphasis is placed on their contribution to the geometry of the environment: multiplied legs echo other parallel lines provided by the walls and ceiling, and the doors of the subway. The ‘machinery’ of the commuters’ bodies is presented in a detached manner as it evolves within a patterned grid, blending into it. The recurrent geometrisation forms a visual thread which underlies the surface themes of the narrative, hinting both at mathematical tropes and authoritarian control patterns. However, it also speaks of fragmentation; just as the lines and grids fragment the space, the de-centred framing segments the bodies of the characters. Headless, thus de-individualised and dehumanised, they become ‘reflections, metaphors, experimental spaces of representation’. 22 One of the keys to understanding what such imagery might reflect is perhaps the symmetry in the overall progression of *Moebius*: it begins with shots that cut out the upper half of the bodies, and moves towards a climactic series of

shots aboard the train which centre almost exclusively on the characters’ faces, restoring humanity and individuality to them. De Baecque, referring to a trait of contemporary North American cinema that is applicable here, writes:

cinema that functions first and foremost through the decomposition, fragmentation, destruction, then re-fusion of stories / histories, images and bodies, is a subversive Trojan horse […] Indeed, what it cuts then re-composes is, precisely, the social fabric which has become […] profoundly unstable matter.23

Moebius expresses social instability relating to a double fragmentation, linked on the one hand to the social repercussions of the economic situation of Argentina in the nineties, and on the other hand to the human repercussions of the junta. Speaking about the popular uprising which took place on the 19th and 20th of December 2001, a member of the Argentine World Social Forum mobilising committee refers in explicit terms to this double fragmentation:

It’s partly a reclaiming of the old social spaces that had been lost – because we suffered a similar fragmentation though it was greater, stronger, more palpable in the 1990s – but we had been suffering it since the last dictatorship. […] And it was strange, it was a reconnection with something that was lost. […] One of the first things we regained with the nineteenth and twentieth was face-to-face interaction. We regained our community.24

The loss of face-to-face interaction, linked to both fear generated by the dictatorship and an individualising preoccupation with the economic situation, is concretely represented in those scenes in Moebius where bodies occupy the same space, but where heads, faces, are unseen. The sense of loneliness conveyed by Daniel’s footsteps echoing on the platform, making it appear empty although it is not, is also expressed in the interviews conducted by Sitrin in the wake of the 2001 uprising, where the social fragmentation is described in terms of space occupancy: Argentine society in the decade leading up to the riots is experienced as ‘a kind of desert, marginalized, even

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culturally, and out shopping’. However, the sense of absence and loneliness conveyed in the film and the fragmentation then recomposition of bodies can also be related to the absent victims of the dictatorship. The groups of bodies shown on screen, fragmented bodies at the start of the film, missing, and therefore absent, bodies as the narrative unfolds, and recomposed but silent bodies at the end of the film, are clearly readable as echoes of Argentina’s past.

3.3 The cinema as a site of ghosts

For De Baecque, the cinema, historically, is both a site of ghosts, and a site of resurrection that recreates in the viewer’s present the image of bodies that will eventually pass away, or have already done so. Like the wax museum (de Baecque cites the musée Grévin, opened in 1882), early cinema fulfilled the role of preserving and recording bodies that told stories. The silent cinema was thus perceived by the audiences as transforming bodies into things of the past. The earliest projections in cinema houses gave a ghostly quality to its recorded figures: ‘In black and white, walking at an unreal pace, going through the world in silence, these bodies belonged to the other world.’

Several scenes in Moebius rest on the interplay between representing the trope of time elapsing at different speeds, associated with Einstein’s scientific theory of relativity, and gothic hints at ghostliness that depart from scientific grounds, moving the frame of reference towards loss, death, and the recurrence and time-shifts that typify traumatic memory. In the opening scenes, slow-motion bodies move along the platform to a soundtrack of Gregorian chants that embody the departed; these occur at several points in the film, as though haunting the narrative. The reference to the desaparecidos is deliberate, since the film-makers chose ‘to insert real human voices that would give consistency [sic] to all those who had departed’. A further sense of otherwordliness is conveyed by the quasi immobile passengers aboard train 86, who sit uncannily still, unresponsive to Daniel’s presence as he moves among them. This cannot be logically interpreted according to the scientific premise of the film; once

25 Sitrín, ed. Horizontalism, p. 31. The person speaking in this interview is a member of one of Buenos Aires’s many neighbourhood assemblies.
27 De Baecque, p. 373.
aboard the carriage, Daniel is in effect in the same time-frame as the passengers and should therefore not be invisible to them.

In *Moebius*, only the named characters have a complete body and a voice. Other groups of bodies are either fragmented, silent, or displaced in time, hinting at a collective trauma. The dream-like quality of the interaction aboard the train, and the fact that families attempt to find the missing passengers during the course of the film (we are made aware of this through props such as newspapers, posters, as well as a phonecall received by the director) makes them clearly readable as allegories of the *desaparecidos*. Of the latter, Mariano Paz writes that they are ‘bodies that are absent but continue to mark the political field precisely because of this absence’. The marking of the political field is fictionally represented by the pressure applied by members of the public to the underground administration officials. The train, like the passengers, is delocalised, affected by a tension between presence and absence which is translated to the concept of the Moebius strip.

The train as a vehicle for the expression of memory, unresolved loss, and the consequent suspension in time is one of the main themes of Korean director Wong Kar Wai’s *2046* (2004). The film, which combines four criss-crossed narratives, presented non-chronologically and in fragments, features an enclosed train with a time travel twist embedded in a fiction within the fiction entitled *2047*. Written by Chow Mo-Wan, the protagonist, *2047* takes place in a dystopian networked universe where people board a train to return to a specific point in the past, the year 2046, in order to relive their memories of lost ones. Wong Kar Wai’s train is not only a channel into the past; it *is* the past, and memory itself. As such, time aboard it becomes elastic, infinite; the love-sick protagonist who has boarded it does not age, ‘because nothing ever changes in 2046’. This is the ‘state of memory’ described by exiled Argentine writer Tununa Mercado, who also uses the image of a train to describe exile as a timeless space in which the present does not pass into the future.

Similarly, aboard *Moebius’s* displaced carriage, the passengers are arrested in the eternal present of March 4th. In Mosquera’s film the number 86, providentially assigned to the missing train by A. J. Deutsch in his short story, acquires a metaphorical

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29 Mariano Paz, “‘La Antena’”, *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 3:2 (2010), 325-328 (p. 327).
30 *2046*, dir. by Wong Kar Wai (Sony Pictures Classics, 2004).
dimension since it is historically relevant to the tropes of the film. In 1987, less than four years after Argentina’s return to a fragile democracy, Raul Alfonsín’s government, facing renewed pressure from the military, passed two laws: the *Ley de punto final*, which stated that after February 1987 claims for human rights abuse under the *junta* could no longer be heard, and the *Ley de obediencia debida*, which absolved military subordinates for any crimes committed between 1976 and 1983. In effect, then, 1986 was the last year the Argentine population were able to hold the *junta* to account for the torture and persecution they had inflicted, or demand answers concerning the estimated thirty thousand people who were kidnapped or killed under their administration. Any cases that had not been brought to justice by the end of 86 would remain unresolved – suspended in time.

A second level of interpretation of *Moebius* moves away from this culturally specific reading toward a more global contemporary experience. The opening shot of the film shows Daniel walking toward the camera from the far end of the platform, the long shot and the amplified echo of his slow-motion footsteps emphasizing the sense of empty space; as the doors of the subway open, he becomes lost in the crowd which appears to submerge him. This has the effect of illustrating the voice-over narrative, which establishes an implicit parallel between the fragmented bodies on screen and a disconnected social body symptomatic of neoliberalism and the modern industrialised city: ‘El subterráneo es, sin duda, un símbolo de los tiempos que corren: un laberinto donde en silencio nos cruzamos con nuestros semejantes, sin saber quiénes son ni adónde van.’ For Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo, the policies implemented by Menem since his arrival in power in 1989 caused Argentina to undergo ‘a far-reaching transformation comparable only to the profound changes brought about by modernization a century ago’. This, they say, has generated ‘symbolic activism’ among Argentina’s artists as a form of resistance against the ‘shaking of Argentina’s long-standing cultural and political traditions’ by globalisation and neoliberalism.

*Moebius*’s underground, then, can be viewed as a distorted, anamorphic mirror of the city. As mentioned, the visual aesthetic of the film is dominated by geometry; it sometimes removes a coherent sense of depth with its series of (at times ambiguous)

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34 Nouzeilles and Montaldo, p. 507.
horizontal and vertical lines, moving towards abstraction. Because of the way in which objects are presented at the start of the film (lines, grids, cancelling of depth), its images err on the side of abstract art, and call for a translation: close-ups of the turnstiles and steps, for example, emphasise form over content; they provide shapes that are at first unreadable except as a series of lines in two dimensions, until human interaction with them occurs. Here the voice-over, and the fragmented bodies, give a sense that Mosquera is expressing lines and patterns running through the social and political fabric of his time, attempting to communicate the inner experience of existing within a geometrised world – an experience that affects not just Argentina, but the wider context.

Referring to Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s history of the railways which ‘dissects the imposition of a Cartesian grid of straight lines and of a standardized Newtonian time on the landscape’, an example which is of particular relevance to the analysis of Moebius, Pickering argues that

In […] a technologically reconfigured and geometrized world, we very easily fall into a perception of space and time themselves as abstract categories, detached from the flux of experiences and ready to hand for the construction of yet more detached representations.\(^{35}\)

This provides a point of reference for the interpretation of the clock, an item that features heavily in Moebius: it imposes a detached, therefore closed, man-made representation of time. For the purposes of illustration, we could contrast the clock, which is a mechanical construction, to a time-telling device such as the sundial, for example, which does not represent time in an abstract fashion but reflects and accompanies the sun’s motion. In Isaac Asimov’s words, ‘timekeepers pretend that there is a sun crossing the meridian every day at the same time, as there would be if the earth’s orbit were circular and its axis were not tipped’.\(^{36}\) Thus the clock, a detached representation, supersedes the reality of a time measured by the movement of planets, and reinforces the illusion of a time that is constant and universal rather than


\(^{36}\) Isaac Asimov, *Far as Human Eye Could See* (London: Grafton Books, 1988), p. 193. Asimov also emphasises the potential of the clock as a control instrument: ‘While Americans would scorn to be slaves to the government, they are pathetically eager to be slaves to the clock’ (p. 194).
changeable and relative. In a similar fashion, the underground map provides a distorted, detached representation of space (and indeed, time), on which the city officials base their argument that the train cannot have disappeared, against all evidence.

For the city officials, the map is an official document enabling the enforcement of authority. The director, on the other hand, sees the map as a management tool, whereas Daniel reads it as a set of mathematical formulas, and the train users approach it as a navigational instrument. Arguably, therefore, the discrepancy between the two-dimensional map and the concept Mosquera playfully puts forward of the subway system as an impossible figure points at the difficulty of imposing one totalising schema, simultaneously calling into question the concept of a unified truth and its representations. Geoffrey Kantaris pushes this notion further:

The emphasis on maps and machines in this film is suggestive not only of a Borgesian challenge to rational systems of measurement, indeed to the concept of fixed Euclidean space, but also of a breakdown of ‘cognitive mapping’ in the increasing complexity of urban networks. 37

Kantaris, in line with Fredric Jameson, relates the contemporary complexity of urban space to ‘the global space of multinational capitalism’, which he argues can no longer be represented in cognitive terms. 38 He sees a double movement in Moebius: on the one hand, a liberating movement in the opposition to rational space; on the other, a movement that goes nowhere: faced with complex new topologies which cannot be mapped, the film expresses a wider ‘conceptual and social paralysis’. 39 This double impulse is one identified by Vivian Sobchack in the science fiction of late capitalism generally, and in particular marginal science fiction films whose ‘visual and narrative logic is at once the most informed by the logic of late capitalism and the most liberated by it’. 40 Paralysed in its lack of capacity to imagine the future, this science fiction is ‘dynamic in the intense attention it pays to the spatialized present’. 41 This is certainly the case in Moebius, where the allegorical space of the underground is placed under intense scrutiny. Far from being a stage for the narrative, space in Moebius becomes a

40 Sobchack, Screening Space, p. 302.
41 Sobchack, Screening Space, p. 302.
grid which maps the contemporary experience, while in the same movement expressing the distortion and simplification inherent in this very exercise. As a movement, non-commercial science fiction tends towards what Andrew Pickering calls ‘a politics of experiment’, the purpose of which is ‘to imaginatively and critically explore the open-ended spaces of the world’s possibility’.\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Moebius}, presenting a narrative which takes place almost exclusively in a highly organised enclosed space, provides paths for such exploration both diegetically and extra-diegetically. As highlighted in the next section, the film’s image of the Moebius strip conveys the notion that the tracks that organise the space in a closed loop are also the pathway to ‘the open-ended spaces of the world’s possibility’. Elements of dialogue, camera-work, and cultural and literary references contribute to drawing the viewer into an active reading of the film, revealing a series of divergent narratives and representations within the context of a metaphor both mathematical and cinematic.

### 3.4 Divergent connections: finding freedom in the time-image

\textit{Moebius} sets up an interactive dynamic with the viewer from the start, the interior monologue of the main character facilitating the transition from image to concept, from perceiving the underground as a physical space to perceiving it as a metaphorical space. Deleuze identifies two movements in the effect of cinema on the viewer according to Eisenstein, which he relates to the sublime. The first is a movement from the visual stimulus of the image to an intellectual concept. The second is an inverted movement returning to an affective relationship with the image.\textsuperscript{43} Here, when Daniel invites the viewer to see the underground as ‘a symbol of current times’, the perception of it immediately shifts from a purely physical plane – it is no longer simply the backdrop to a narrative – to a metaphysical one. This detachment from the purely physical, visual stimulus of the image requires a thought process relating image and experience. Daniel describes the latter as ‘un extraño juego en que nos submergimos por infinitos túneles, sin darnos cuenta que en cada transbordo, estamos cambiando definitivamente nuestro destino’. The first person plural (‘nos’, ‘nuestro’)
used here places the emphasis on his experience as a collective one, extending to the viewer and thereby blurring the distinction between character and viewer. In addition to establishing a metaphorical framework (concept), this also establishes an emotional relationship to the images that follow (affect). The viewer is thus primed to actively engage in the construction of meaning.

An active approach to the text is further reinforced by the presence of a small wooden puzzle handed to Daniel by Decker, the architect who asks him to solve the mystery of the missing train. The toy is a topological puzzle, meant to encourage lateral thinking. When asked by Daniel what its purpose is, Decker answers: ‘No lo sé – dicen que potencia la percepción.’ This provides a counterpoint to the two-dimensional approach Decker relates to the academic discipline of topology, which is Daniel’s field. Referring to the ‘fascination’ of topologists for surface analysis, Decker says: ‘una fórmula, un cálculo, y lo guardan dentro de un libro’, intimating that this approach is a sterile one. The puzzle is given a certain importance in Moebius: it remains present throughout the film, changing hands a second time as Daniel gives it to Abril, of whom Mosquera says: ‘during the film she plays, she does not look for anything […] It is this tranquillity that enables her to find the answers more rapidly’. The puzzle instils in the viewer the notion of a game that must be played in order to unlock the answers to the film’s riddle. Mosquera indeed refers to a ‘double game between the abstract mathematical notion and the hidden story’ which is expressed in the dialogue:

The characters had to dance on a complex line of dialogues which had a double sense. […] The dialogue of the film […] had to play with the starting data of a train that had disappeared and hide the new meaning of the concept of infinity up to the very end, a concept that was proposed initially in the short story and was now intentionally given a political significance.

The film thus relies on the viewer to pick up on clues and determine hidden meaning. This is reinforced by the use of ambiguous references, which are intended to maintain the viewer in a state of active reading of the film:

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44 Daniel is a topologist, whereas Tupelo, in A Subway named Moebius, is an algebraist.
A disconcerting atmosphere was created with the use of real names, various numbers and/or references that would enable the spectator to find a double association so that the fiction is what the reality was. […] Is it by chance that the bureaucrats always participate in their meetings in three? 47

The notion of play is mirrored in the mise en scène through the representation of space. In the opening sequences, the camera plays a subtle game with the viewer that functions as an exercise in perception-shifting. In the first sequence of the film, which precedes, then merges with, the opening credits, the camera consistently places emphasis on the repetition of symmetrical, geometric forms. One shot initially shows a series of lines in two dimensions, until Daniel’s feet enter the frame; the form is revealed actually to be three-dimensional, a flight of stairs shot from above. Later, the camera follows Daniel as he walks down a different flight of stairs. He is in the background of a long shot; the foreground shows several rows of lines: railings, vertical wall sections, and a third row, in the foreground, which cannot immediately be read. It is unclear where the shot is taken from, until a set of legs walks across the screen, enabling the viewer to understand that the geometric shapes are stationary turnstiles. This game with perspective, where the viewer gains a clear sense of what they are seeing only at a specific point in time and space, has traits in common with the anamorphic art of the 16th and 17th centuries. 48 A liminal artform par excellence, anamorphosis, with its formal duality, ‘makes uncertainty certain’, sometimes expressing opposites on one single plane. 49 Many anamorphoses appeared at first glance to be either random intertwined lines and colours, or landscapes. However, when viewed from a particular point, which the ‘audience’ would either be specifically directed to or naturally reach in the course of their exploration, they would reveal religious or political figures, lewd scenes, or images intended to awaken metaphysical doubt. A celebrated example of the latter is the skull hidden in Holbein’s Ambassadors, which calls into doubt the authority of science on the one hand, and of the Church and other earthly power structures on the other. Although these early anamorphoses were

48 The term ‘anamorphosis’ appeared in the 17th century, although there are earlier examples of it – there is a reference to the art form in Shakespeare’s Richard II, for example, when the Queen is told that her tears of grief have the effect of ‘perspectives, which rightly gazed upon / show nothing but confusion – eyed awry, / distinguish form’. The Oxford Shakespeare: Richard II, Dawson & Dachnin, eds. (Oxford World’s Classics) Act 2, scene 2, lines 18-20, p. 184.  
two-dimensional, the play with perception and the hidden political meaning resonate with the film-makers’ approach in *Moebius*.

The abstract, unreadable geometrical figures shown in the opening scenes of *Moebius* are thus reminders of the limitations of the human capacity for perception. Without certain points of reference, or without a wider context, the eye is unable to distinguish between a two-dimensional and a three-dimensional surface, for example; or between a fixed static object and a mobile one, in the case of the turnstiles. In a similar manner, as mentioned earlier, the limitations of patterns of representation such as maps are highlighted. The blueprints of the *subte* at the start of the film clearly place it in Buenos Aires, and the system is a closed system, represented by a map. Both the blueprint and the map, however, are simplified two-dimensional representations, not only of a familiar three-dimensional reality, but also of a four-dimensional reality: the train travels not just through space and time, but through a space-time that is non-linear and non-chronological. Eventually, we come to understand that the clocks we see repeatedly on the walls are also distorted representations: not only because, as noted earlier, they reflect an illusion of perfect symmetry in the motion of the planets, but because they give the illusion of a time which is homogenous; that is to say, identical from one clock to another. The premise of the film, that the train is travelling along a Moebius strip which enables it to reach infinite speeds, uses scientific theory as a metaphor to counteract a unified stance on space and time which is relatable to political hegemony. There are two aspects to this metaphor; on the one hand, the fact that the passengers are stuck in time is a fictional illustration of Einstein’s theory of relativity; on the other, the concept of the Moebius strip, combined with the comparison of the networked underground to a labyrinth, provides a link to the work of Borges and opens up new paths for the interpretation of *Moebius*.

Tupelo, Daniel’s alter ego in Deutsch’s mathematical short story ‘A Subway named Moebius’, tells the subway director: “The train has no real ‘where’. The whole System is without real ‘whereness’”. This is because in a Moebius strip, the inside is also the outside; running along tracks that have taken on the properties of a Moebius strip, the train has entered an inverted space which Tupelo calls ‘the non-spatial part of the network’ (see Figure 2).

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Train 86 is equally without ‘whenness’; in Héctor Kohen’s words, it is steeped in ‘una dimensión sin tiempo’.\textsuperscript{52} To clarify this concept, I will first turn to a simplified version of Einstein’s theory of relativity (or theory of invariance, as he recommended it be called); a short story by Borges will then be examined in order to shed further light on the image of the Moebius strip in fiction.

It is unclear why, in \textit{Moebius}, train 86 is able to travel at infinite speeds; there is no attempt by Mosquera truly to justify this point, which is loosely related to the ‘infinite connectivity’ of the system. What is important, however, is that the laws of physics as they were understood when the film was made show that an object that is travelling through space, as is the case of the train, will travel more slowly through time than an object that is stationary, relative to or from the perspective of that second object. Because visible objects in our everyday life, and we ourselves, travel at relatively slow speeds, we are usually not aware of this fact on an intuitive level; the higher the speed of movement through space, the higher the difference in the relative speed of time passing. Put very simply, according to Einstein’s principles ‘an object’s combined speed through all four dimensions – three space and one time – […] is equal to that of light’.\textsuperscript{53} Because the combined speed of any object is always equal to that of light, any increase of speed in the spatial dimension corresponds to an equivalent decrease in speed in the temporal dimension. As the speed of train 86 through space increases, time aboard the train (viewed from outside the train) slows down; since the train reaches a very high speed, time progresses very slowly. This is illustrated in \textit{Moebius} by a passenger’s newspaper, which shows a date several days behind time outside the train.

Einstein’s theory, applied to the fictional context of *Moebius*, acquires a political, counterhegemonic quality. Its use in the film posits divergence as scientific fact, since the rupture caused by the train’s trajectory calls into question the existence of a single unified time-frame, of a unique ‘correct’ or ‘truthful’ perspective on the universe. This cinematic embodiment of the theory of relativity is perhaps a response to *junta* admiral Emilio Massera’s view of Einstein’s physics as the third catalyst of a ‘crisis in humanity’, which he shared in 1977 with newspaper *La opinión*:

La crisis actual de la humanidad se debe a tres hombres. Hacia fines del siglo XIX, Marx publicó tres tomos de *El Capital* y puso en duda con ellos la intangibilidad de la propiedad privada; a principios del siglo XX, es atacada la sagrada esfera íntima del ser humano por Freud, en su libro *La interpretación de los sueños*, y como si fuera poco para problematizar el sistema de los valores positivos de la sociedad, Einstein, en 1905, hace conocer la teoría de la relatividad, donde pone en duda la estructura estática y muerta de la materia.\(^\text{54}\)

The concept of time as non-chronological and divergent is further supported by the central image of the Moebius strip. Borges, whose name features prominently on one of the platforms visited by Daniel, can help shed some light on the abstract concept presented in *Moebius*. The Argentine author’s short story ‘El Sur’ takes the reader on a journey through time and space, while calling both into question. Borges’s protagonist, Dahlmann, travelling after a period of illness, suspects that the train he has boarded is going ‘al pasado y no sólo al Sur’.\(^\text{55}\) He also expresses doubt as to whether he is travelling at all, and touches on the possibility of simultaneous realities taking place within one time frame:

*Mañana me despertaré en la estancia*, pensaba, y era como si a un tiempo fueran dos hombres: el que avanzaba por el día otoñal y por la geografía de la patria, y el otro, encarcelado en un sanatorio y sujeto a metódicas servidumbres.\(^\text{56}\)

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The reader never finds out whether Dahlmann has, in fact, boarded the train, or whether he is still in the ward, dreaming or delirious – possibly even dead or dying. Given Borges’s penchant for quantum universes, it is quite possible that all of those scenarios exist simultaneously. In his short story ‘El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan’, for example, the protagonist’s ancestor Ts’ui Pên creates an infinite narrative where every option, at every intersection, is explored:

Creía en infinitas series de tiempos, en una red creciente y vertiginosa de tiempos divergentes, convergentes y paralelos. Esa trama de tiempos que se aproximan, se bifurcan, se cortan o que secularmente se ignoran, abarca todas las posibilidades.

The existence of Man, muses Dahlmann, is conditioned by time and the successive juxtaposition of events, as opposed to that of the cat he strokes in the station, whose kind live ‘en la eternidad del instante’. His own existence, however, enters a dimension where the movement of space and time are inverted, as in a Moebius strip; as the train moves forward, he moves both forward in time, and back towards the past (while the present tense employed in the last sentence of the story leaves him suspended, from the reader’s point of view, in the cat’s eternal instant). Like Daniel and the professor, in Moebius, who find themselves aboard a train which disrupts the conventional relationship between time and space, Dahlmann boards a train that takes on the properties of a Moebius strip: moving forwards in space and time eventually leads him to a place which started out in his past on a time continuum, in a space of inverted – and maybe simultaneous – possibilities (he is in a closed ward being nursed / he is under an open sky being attacked).

The concept in Deutsch’s short story, simplified by Mosquera in the film, is that the subway system functions like a Moebius strip, but in infinite dimensions. The Moebius strip is two dimensional and has one singularity, which means it has one face and one edge, whereas the Klein bottle has two singularities, and is three dimensional; this means it displays the same properties as the Moebius strip, but can also be inside itself (see Figure 3).

Tupelo says of the subway:

“A network with infinite connectivity must have an infinite number of singularities. Can you imagine what the properties of that network could be?”

After a long pause, Tupelo added: “I can’t either. To tell the truth, the structure of the System […] is completely beyond me. I can only guess.”

In *Moebius*, this property enables Daniel and professor Mistein to escape what Borges’s character Stephen Albert calls ‘uniform, absolute’ time. I have hinted previously at a relationship between the clock and power, and between the clock and a uniform, standardised representation of time. In Lapouge’s words, the clock metaphorically embodies ‘a rigorous image of the utopian structure’. He compares the inner workings of the mechanical clock to those of the utopian city:

A closed, mathematical world, void of mystery and wear, the place where time is kept is the place where it is cancelled. Thus are ideal cities: the metal gears are replaced by institutions, perfect objects and men like dummies. Like the

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Platonic republic [...] the clock’s mechanism tolerates neither freedom nor innovation.63

Lapouge draws a direct connection between the clock and the city as an expression of utopian, that is to say totalitarian, drives. Escaping ‘uniform, absolute’ time is therefore political in nature. In ‘El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan’, which also harbours the concept of multiple complex connections, this is expressed in the fact that the monarch Ts’ui Pên abandons his position of power to create his temporal labyrinth:

Todo lo abandonó para componer un libro y un laberinto. Renunció a los placeres de la opresión, de la justicia, del numeroso lecho [...] y se enclaustró durante trece años en el Pabellón de la Limpida Soledad. A su muerte, los herederos no encontraron sino manuscritos caóticos.64

In effect, once Ts’ui Pên engages in a process of creation that challenges chronological time, he becomes incompatible with power: defined by his position, he dies on completion of his work. Mosquera deliberately strove to create ‘a Borges-style atmosphere’ for Moebius since he felt that the themes developed in Borges’s fiction ‘had a good resonance with the requirements of the film’.65 This included the conceptualisation of the underground as a labyrinth, which in Borges’s work is both temporal and spatial. A space that can be walked in, as does Tsingtao, the narrator of the story within a story in ‘El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan’, the labyrinth is also a book, which is a physical object, but one which is an interface between the physical world and the world of ideas. Finally, the labyrinth is ‘a labyrinth of symbols [...] an invisible labyrinth of time’.66 A similar layering occurs in another Argentine text, Ricardo Piglia’s La ciudad ausente:

[T]he city becomes a metaphor for the novel, and vice versa. [...] The map of the city is constructed by a series of fictional narratives. [...] The intrigue of each of these stories [...] multiplies as they intersect each other (like streets and avenues of a city) and unfold to make up the enigma of the text.67

63 Lapouge, Utopie et civilisations, p. 110 (my translation).
64 Borges, Ficciones, pp. 109-110.
La ciudad ausente, like Ts’ui Pên’s labyrinth, moves between timeframes, making chronological time irrelevant. Equally, space, time and narrative are entwined. The protagonist, Junior, combines and fuses the semantic fields of space and narrative: ‘Entraba y salía de los relatos, se movía por la ciudad, buscaba orientarse en esa trama de esperas y de postergaciones de la que ya no podía salir.’ Here, the physicality of Junior’s progress through a story which is also a city becomes inscribed in his choice of words. Juxtaposed in the first two clauses of the sentence, ‘stories’ and ‘city’ become fused immediately after with the use of ‘bearings’ and ‘plot’ in the same clause. The second half of the sentence adds a temporal dimension to Junior’s movements within the city / story. This notion of travel through space, time and narrative is crystallised in the conceptual metaphor of a subway network: ‘Parecía una red, como el mapa de un subte. Viajó de un lado al otro, cruzando las historias, y se movió en varios registros a la vez.’

Moebius is traversed by a similar metaphor. At the end of the film, it is made clear that the off-screen narration, in Daniel’s voice, is read from the notebook which Blasi finds on the floor of the reappeared carriage. This has the effect of creating a loop, where the words pronounced at the end of the film are also those pronounced at the beginning. It also defines the action that takes place between these two points as narrative, since what unfolds is the story told by Daniel; the narrative itself becomes a place of resistance. Viewed in this light, the underground with its endless connections becomes the potential context for endless stories, endless narratives, told from perspectives that are multiple rather than singular, and which are not controllable or predictable. In the film’s last scene, the telephone starts ringing behind Blasi as he walks away from what he thinks is a solved problem, and a voice in the background announces the disappearance of another carriage.

Moebius combines a movement into the future with a return to the past bearing political connotations. Like ‘El sur’, the film also opens up a space of inverted possibilities; the reverse of the closed temporal and spatial loop is Daniel’s experience of the concept of infinity. While the connotations of this concept are multiple, it can certainly be interpreted in terms of perception and a reclaiming of space and of social connections within that space. If at the start of the film human characters seem less

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68 Piglia, Ricardo. La ciudad ausente, 3rd edn (Buenos Aires: Anagrama, Argentina), p. 87
69 Piglia, Ricardo. La ciudad ausente, pp. 72-73.
important than their physical environment, there is eventually a reverse movement which culminates in the sequence that takes place aboard the train. The emphasis here is reversed, as the camera centres nearly exclusively on close-ups of Daniel’s face, with detail shots of his eyes. This final climax literally embodies Daniel’s remark at the start of the film, that he has discovered in the subte a ‘powerful seeing machine’ that opens up new horizons in the midst of a controlled environment. This adds a layer of interpretation to Moebius, which becomes readable as a metaphor for film:

La ciudad-máquina aparece representada en el cine en forma mimética. “Con el subte descubrí la más poderosa máquina de mirar”, dice el protagonista. El objeto representado es una máquina de transporte, un artefacto de infraestructura, un espacio mecanizado, pero si consideramos que a la vez el cine es una forma del arte en la era de la reproducción técnica, ambos (objeto y modo de representación) quedan emparentados. [...] Ambos, tren y película, ruedan. 70

In this context, the Moebius strip acquires a new meaning, reflecting the irrational cut and temporal divergence of Deleuze’s time-image. At the start of the film, the sequence involving Decker ends with a shot of Daniel standing on an unfinished strip of road stretching over empty space. Whether this image is interpreted as an unsolved enigma, an unfinished journey or a strip of film that has been cut, it points both to a story in the making and to an interruption of linearity. The film reaches its point of resolution with the image of a strip which is now joined, restoring continuity, but without chronological linearity. The camera, deliberately managed by Mosquera ‘so as to travel across the space without letting the movie camera disclose the presence of a human being behind it’, moves along the tunnel with the train at increasing speed. 71 Rather than filming from one or two fixed points, the camera constantly shifts angles, facing both forwards and backwards from the front, rear, and both sides of the train, top and bottom. Within the shot, there is an instance of rapid, seamless switch between forward and backwards motion, the change in direction reflecting a juncture in the Moebius strip. Whereas the rational cut in the cinema of the movement-image, intended to maintain chronological harmony ‘exists to join; it has no independent significance and the viewer pays it no attention’, the cut in Moebius is central; it is the point of

70 Zunino, “Moebius”. Buenos Aires subterránea y un relato de fuga.
convergence of the narrative and brings together the different layers of meaning. In line with Mosquera’s intent to reveal hidden meaning, the time-image brings together thought and that which is ‘un-thought, un-evocable, inexplicable, undecidable, incommensurable’. Deleuze relates the time-image to an all-encompassing conjunction of opposites: ‘negative and positive, [...] past and future, brain and cosmos, inside and outside’. As boundaries dissolve aboard train 86, Daniel enters the heart of the time-image itself, discovering infinity within the unstable relationship between the inside and the outside: film and the exterior world. For Sheldon Penn, whereas the cinema of the movement-image replicates ‘a logical and unitary system’, the irrational cut in cinema of the time-image ‘is itself an instance of meaning, bringing images together at the same time as it signals a disjuncture’.

3.4 Conclusion

The disjuncture of the irrational cut and the conjunction of opposites permitted by the time image are reflected across Moebius, enabling the film to embody both halves of Suvín’s fallible dystopia. On the one hand, the film expresses traditional dystopian tropes. The geometrised spaces translate a totalising, dehumanising environment; while the characterisation, and in particular the symbolic trio of bureaucrats, provides a representation of totalitarian, top-down repression. The concept of the network, revealed by objects such as telephones, maps and railway lines and reinforcing the image of a unified, pervasive organisation of the underground, is interpreted by Kantaris as ‘a new conceptualisation of power [...] no longer as a vertical hierarchy of repressions, but instead as a horizontal network of interdependencies, one which is by no means any less frightening’. As such, Moebius is dystopian in its references both to Argentina’s last dictatorship, a past which bleeds into its present, and to the networked, but disconnected, megalopolis: a contemporary experience that transcends national boundaries. Viewed differently, however, the mathematical lines and the network which fragment and organise the underground are

75 Penn, ‘The Time-Image’, p. 1172.
also the key to the fallibility of this ‘logical and unitary system’. As Daniel follows the mathematical clues left for him by Mistein, approaching the enigma with an open-mindedness embodied by Decker and Abril, he is drawn into the Moebius strip, where chronological time is disrupted and opposites converge. Literary references, and in particular explicit references to Borges, whose spirit is embodied in the character of a musician who plays a tango on the bandoneon as Mosquera boards train 86, open up the concept of the networked labyrinth as a space of endless divergent, therefore counterhegemonic, narratives. Finally, translated to the concept of the cinematic machine, the Moebius strip becomes a metaphor for film itself, embodying the cinema of the time-image in which ‘film no longer asserts its given place within a unitary, ordered whole’ but becomes, instead, ‘one instance of a series of signification’, capable of opposing the unified, totalising fictions of power.

Chapter 4: A dystopian city: the topography of trauma in *La sonámbula* (Spiner, 1998)

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 *La sonámbula*

The premise of *La sonámbula* (Spiner, 1998), like that of *Moebius* (Mosquera, 1996), is linked to the 1976–1983 period of dictatorship in Argentina. The film is set in a futuristic Buenos Aires, where an explosion in an experimental chemical plant, the *Laboratorio Central de Investigaciones Biológicas*, has caused part of the population to lose their memory. The event has physically marked 300,000 members of the population – a figure which recalls that of the 30,000 *desaparecidos* – with dark stains across their skin. As the story opens, psychologists and doctors working for the *Ministerio de Control Social*, the State’s surveillance branch, are engaged in running rehabilitation schemes based in the *Centro de Investigaciones Psicobiológicas*, where they teach partners and families that have been assigned to each other on the basis of State records to (re)connect physically, acting out traditional gender roles. The process whereby the government organizes the re-injection of a history and an identity into the rounded-up population has authoritarian undertones. Affectados who have no memories of the people they are paired up with undergo the ‘treatment’ against their will; they are placed under surveillance and can receive no social security if they refuse to perform the different stages of the rehabilitation. The two central characters, Eva and Ariel, are brought together after Doctor Gazzar, using a machine which projects the images of memories that resurface in the dreams of his patients, becomes aware that newcomer Eva’s dreams not only link her to Gauna, a rebel sought after by the authorities for exhorting the population to ‘wake up’ and join him, but also extend both into the past and into the future. Unlike the dream images of other patients, which are in black and white – as is indeed the whole environment of *La sonámbula* throughout most of the film – and barely discernible as images, Eva’s dream-world is highly defined and appears in colour. Reluctant government agent Ariel is sent by the doctor to accompany Eva on a quest for her identity which takes them outside the city walls, into an
increasingly unstable and fragmented environment, in search of the idyllic countryside house she sees in her dreams.

This section deals with the cinematic representation of Buenos Aires in La sonámbula and its relationship to the power dynamics experienced in the context of the then recent dictatorship. La sonámbula, released in 1998, is set in 2010, the year commemorating the Bicentenary of the city of Buenos Aires. Unlike Invasión (Santiago, 1969), which was deliberately set in a year that was of no particular political importance, La sonámbula is thus explicitly positioned as a basis for a historically oriented socio-political reflection. This is confirmed by co-writer Ricardo Piglia when he says: ‘La película apunta a cómo queda el país tras la dictadura, los efectos de ese periodo y ciertas hipótesis de cómo se están desarrollando las cosas hoy.’\(^1\) The film was partly inspired by Piglia’s novel La ciudad ausente, which director Fernando Spiner read and certain aspects of which were incorporated in the film. In particular, Spiner was interested in Piglia’s vision of the city as a palimpsest, a complex heterotopian space bringing together different layers of time, distinct versions of histories / stories, where power dynamics are expressed and played out between individuals and the state, and more specifically between the multiple, divergent stories woven by a female android nicknamed ‘la Eva futura’ and those produced by the State machine. Although the thread of La sonámbula’s narrative is not based on that of La ciudad ausente, the film, like the novel, gives the city a prominent place.

4.1.2 Science fiction and the city

The emphasis on the city and its characterisation are traditional features of science fiction globally. Brignardelli et al., referring to the development of science fiction in the nineteenth century, note that ‘la ciencia ficción […] hizo [del] nuevo hábitat urbano y de las suspicacias que despertó uno de los partícipes esenciales en la configuración de sus relatos’,\(^2\) while John Gold writes: ‘Cities are the typical setting for

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science fiction film, often as much a part of the action as the actors themselves’. La sonámbula is no exception in this respect, as its mise en scène clearly highlights the metropolis. The opening sequences, in which the viewer is introduced to the narrative environment, both from Eva’s point of view and from an omniscient point of view, during the movement of the car from the cathedral to the clinic where Eva is placed under observation, lay a greater emphasis on the city than on the film’s human characters. Despite the fact that shots of the inside of the car are shown, the camera focuses on Eva and her view of the city rather than on the men who have seized her. The city itself is given a central place and even a form of word-based language through the traffic signals (which alternate between ‘PARE’ and ‘SIGA’) and graffiti. The absence of humans in a number of city shots throughout the film illustrates the fact, noted by Juan Carlos Reyes Vázquez, that in science fiction cinema ‘la arquitectura es considerada un espacio cinematográfico por sí solo’. For Gregory Beck, science fiction cinema comprises ‘a range of films in which the future of the city emerges as a dominant theme within the context of the story’; he believes that science fiction reasserts the concept of the (contemporary) city as ‘the dominant setting for social interaction within our culture’, combining and relating a physical structure with the social structures of the population inhabiting it, including hierarchical structures. As such, the on-screen science fiction city becomes a metaphorical expression of these social and political dynamics; in Reyes Vázquez’s words, ‘la ciudad imaginada por el cine de ciencia ficción es más que una mera representación visual, ya que también funciona como un posicionamiento discursivo respecto a lo que al habitante actual de la ciudad le preocupa’.

Brignardello et al. provide a further breakdown of the different types of representation of the city in Argentine science fiction film, which helps situate La sonámbula within a wider tradition both local and global:

4 Juan Carlos Reyes Vázquez, ‘La ciudad automática: imaginario urbano en el cine de ciencia ficción’ in Ciencia Ergo Sum, 20:1 (2013), 53-60 (p. 56).
6 Reyes Vázquez, ‘La ciudad automática’, p. 54.
existen tres maneras en las cuales aparece la ciudad en el cine de CF argentino. La primera es la representación de una ciudad imaginaria que se corresponde con configuraciones pertenecientes al verosímil de género, y tras la cual no se vislumbra la ciudad en tanto realidad inmediata, sino como convención genérica. La segunda es la que, recuperando índices de la ciudad contemporánea, se vale de ellos para desplegar a través de figuras retóricas la proyección de una ciudad construida. Y la tercera, que en su concepción visual parecería no diferir de la ciudad actual pero que, por efecto de la narración que sobre ella se hace, se transforma en una ciudad imaginaria ante la percepción del espectador.\(^7\)

*La sonámbula* belongs to the second category: one where the cinematic city is a hybrid, including recognisable, realistic elements of the actual city which serve as a basis on which to weave fabricated elements that act as rhetorical devices. Here, as we shall see, the invented elements of the city and of its surroundings serve as alternative visualizations of the city’s history.

*La sonámbula* is aesthetically striking, not least in its representations of a future Buenos Aires that resonates with the large scale visions of futuristic cities that were dreamt up in early 20\(^{th}\) century North America and subsequently Europe, at a time when large-scale industrialisation was booming. On this level, *La sonámbula*’s aesthetics perhaps resonate most with Fritz Lang’s sets for the seminal *Metropolis* (Lang, 1926), inspired by 1920s New York and in which the city combines the utopian vision of the industrialised city and with the dystopian undertones of man’s slavery to the machine-city. In *La sonámbula*, the future Buenos Aires both projects the image of a completed project of modernisation in the shape of large-scale feats of engineering, and the claustrophobia of a sprawling city that leaves little space for the human element. While this trope may at first view appear to be the simple extension of a global science fiction tradition stretching back to the start of the last century, connections between *La sonámbula*’s visually arresting Buenos Aires and the junta’s real urban projects for the city under the dictatorship have been established by Argentine critics, as will be discussed later in this chapter. In a similar fashion, both the contrast between the city and the countryside, and the movement of escape from one to

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\(^7\) Brignardello et al., *Espacio y poética de la ciudad*. 
the other participate in a long tradition of global science fiction literature and film. However, as we shall see, this dichotomy and movement also take on a distinct national character when they are traced back to the earliest literary works produced in the newly formed Argentine Republic, following its independence in 1816, and to later science fiction literature penned by the likes of Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Julio Cortázar and Ricardo Piglia. Finally, city and memory are indissolubly connected in the film, providing a form of topography for the traumatic past of the Argentine nation. As we will see, the city in *La sonámbula* is a metaphor that is not only spatial, but is also linked to the disruptions in time and memory that are typical of post-dictatorship trauma. By approaching *La sonámbula* from these different angles, this chapter aims to demonstrate that the cinematic representation of the city, which is a typical feature of science fiction films that often acts as a vehicle for social and political criticism, successfully combines with culturally specific elements to become a channel for the communication of the trauma experienced under the 1976-1983 dictatorship.

### 4.2 From Buenos Aires 1910 to Buenos Aires 2010: ruptures and representations of history

The city of Buenos Aires is a highly appropriate structure through which to relay the expression of national trauma within the framework of science fiction. Indeed, the city, generally speaking, is the space *par excellence* where collective memory is given concrete form, where its historical markers are erected or torn down. At the same time, the decisions that are made concerning what is publicly remembered or forgotten are based on collective negotiations and involve the intervention of the city authorities, a process that exhibits notable parallels with the manner in which traumatic memory is processed, as discussed in Chapter One. This process of negotiation in the context of various collaborations and power dynamics was particularly well expressed by Mónica Lacarrieu, in her introduction to a study on the commemoration of Buenos Aires’s bicentenary in 2010. Her approach demonstrates that the ‘proyección de una ciudad construida’ referred to by Brignardello et al. in the context of a science fiction typology

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does not apply only to the creation of fictional cities, but has a parallel in a real socio-political process:

La producción de ciudades, o en otros términos el ‘hacer ciudad’, es necesariamente parte de un ejercicio o trabajo contextual, histórico, relacional y relativo desde el cual se ordena, penetra e impone cierta visión legítima del mundo social, político y cultural. Desde esta perspectiva, las ciudades son objeto de ocupaciones, usos y/o apropiaciones disputadas, aunque también negociadas, no solo ligadas al poder público […] sino también a los múltiples actores sociales que contribuyen en la permanente construcción de “política de lugares” […]. Esa organización inestable del espacio y tiempo de lo urbano, da cuenta de los procesos públicos y políticos que ponen en juego las disputas entre estrategias de visibilización / invisibilización […] vinculadas a patrimonios, memorias, olvidos, monumentalizaciones y/o recursos de transitoriedad.9

The authors of La sonámbula, by placing their story in 2010, initiated a preemptive model of the decision-making process and choices involved in the commemoration and representation of two hundred years of the history of a city; not only what is represented but also what can be represented in the context of a historical rupture such as that inflicted by the 1976-1983 dictatorship. This process provides a (perhaps simplistic) parallel with the choices and negotiations that take place on a wider scale, when decisions are made at the level of the city or of the nation concerning what to consign to history; what to commemorate or represent in the form of statues, monuments, or history texts. This process, in turn, reflects the inner workings of memory in broader terms. Indeed, Tzvetan Todorov suggests that the dynamics of memory are based on an internal selection process whereby certain elements are remembered and others forgotten.10 In Hugo Vezzetti’s words, ‘[p]ara que un contenido, o un grupo de representaciones sea fijado, destacado, evocado y reconocido, otros contenidos y representaciones deben pasar a un cierto estado de borramiento,


transitorio o definitivo’. Vezzetti further suggests that collective memory is a practice that has a form and a substance; for it to be collective, it needs to be externalised onto objects that can be accessed in the material world, what he calls ‘artefactos públicos’, which include not only monuments and places – Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* – but also ceremonies, books, and of particular interest to us here, films. Anne Huffschmid indeed views the urban imaginary as a crucial contribution to the articulation of collective subjectivities:

el conjunto de imágenes y sentires compartidos socialmente, narrativas identitarias que asignan sentido a lo vivido o, en el caso del quiebre traumático, marcan al menos las dificultades – o la imposibilidad – de hacerlo. El imaginario nos facilita pensar la presencia de las ausencias en términos de visibilidad social, incluso más allá de lo visual o lo geográficamente cercano o tangible.

As such, the city of *La sonámbula* is a space that is at once political, social and historical, extending beyond its own physical boundaries through a wider web of interconnections and relationships that are inscribed in Argentine history and literature. That Piglia uses the present progressive as he describes the changing, unplanned incorporation of culturally Argentine elements in the film highlights the dynamic, transformational nature of spatial and historical representation, based on a series of choices and ‘negotiations’ between the authors and the text: ‘la propia historia iba transformándose y localizando con los elementos que le sumábamos’. Huffschmid establishes a clear contrast between the utopian drive of totalitarian visions of a unified, stabilized, static city and the reality of the city as a process based on these multiple negotiations, in a democratic context:

Pese a toda tentativa institucionalizadora no hay pacificación o consenso social, nada estabilizado o garantizado para siempre, sino negociación, conflicto y una multiplicidad de modos por marcar y significar el pasado en el presente.

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12 Vezzetti, *Pasado y presente*, p. 32.
14 Esseverri, ‘Un país como de ciencia ficción’.
In the context of trauma, Huffschmid views urban space not as something fixed, but as a set of effects and relationships that articulate experience and memory:

Lo que interesa aquí son los procesos de memoria, relacionada a pasados recientes y violentos, en su articulación espacial, en esta conjunción densa de materialidades múltiples que solemos llamar ciudad, nuestro entorno vital. Nos acercamos a la materialidad de la memoria en la traza urbana, sus lugares, marcas y vacíos, pero también a los mapas de sentido, de cómo se construyen y conectan entre sí la experiencia y la percepción, prácticas, políticas y debates.\footnote{Huffschmid, ‘Introducción: topografías en conflicto’, p. 11.}

The emphasis here is on the material city itself as a ‘memory map’; the underlying question is which or whose memory/memories are represented. Lacarrieu notes that the Centenary celebrations of Buenos Aires in 1910 were based principally on a restructuring of national memory around the fixed symbols of monuments – either existing ones or new ones that were built for the commemorative purpose – aimed at establishing the illusion of a unified, homogenous memory. This reconstruction of a canonical past, based on official archives, neutralized events that were perceived as inconsistent with the ‘historia oficial’; it projected a unified national project and identity from the centre (the capital) outward. As a result, it constructed a coherence affecting ‘no solo el contexto de 1910 sino incluso los procesos con mirada hacia el futuro, desde los cuales estructurar nuestras experimentaciones y relatos’.\footnote{Lacarrieu, Mónica, ‘En busca de la Buenos Aires del bicentenario’, p. 85. Lacarrieu draws on Anna Morawska Vianna, ‘En busca de narrativas densas: quesotes acerca de realidades narrativas, subjectividad y agencia social’ en Cuadernos de campo 16, pp. 157, 161.}

Participating in the context of a genre that typically introduces experiential and ontological shifts aimed at restructuring or at least rethinking the shape of the future, La sonâmbula was therefore singularly well placed, in 1998, to provide a radical and anticipatory alternative to any ‘monumentalising’ take on historical events that might occur in 2010.

To a certain extent, the film maintains this dichotomy between a monumentalised public architecture that is disconnected from the city’s inhabitants and an experienced architecture that is fragmented and unstructured. The former is
expressed through futuristic cityscapes that are created by the film’s authors, while the latter relates to those aspects of the city that, in Brignardello et al.’s words, ‘recupera[n] indices de la ciudad contemporánea’.\footnote{Brignardello et al., \textit{Espacio y poética de la ciudad}.}

In stark contrast with the opening scenes depicting the calm interior of a provincial house, which is shot in colour, the metropolis of \textit{La sonámbula} is initially presented as fragmented, threatening and claustrophobic. Alternating with a series of close up shots of main character Eva, her face and eyes, the first partial glimpses of the city implicitly convey her sense of oppression within the urban context she has woken up to in a state of amnesia before being forced into a car by government agents. Only fragments of the city can be seen through the windows: sections of buildings appear briefly, and are partially obstructed. The camera plays with the high constrasts of chiaroscuro as sections of light and dark alternate while the car moves under steel bridges; the light sections are striped, as though crossed by bars. This creates an oppressive atmosphere reinforced by the traffic lights changing to the word ‘PARE’ as the camera tilts upwards, filming from Eva’s point of view. The shots alternate in quick succession, sometimes flashing onto the screen only briefly, creating a sense both of urgency and tension reinforced by the choice of locations enclosed by high, narrow walls. Once the car has passed under the last bridge, it moves off screen; the camera focuses on the graffiti ‘Gauna nos espera’; blurred, fast alternating shots show men running past; one man shouts ‘Hijos de puta!’’, his voice receding with the car’s movement. This, and the sound of helicopters overhead reveal the city as a site of conflict.

This negative characterisation of the city is situated in the context of Eva’s initial experience of it and of the internal conflictual relationships that are revealed in the opening shots. This contrasts with the first panoramic cityscape, which is shot from an omniscient perspective. In this take, the car is now a small black shape in the distance, while the emphasis is on the city as a whole: its scale and structures. In this first overview of the city, multiple highways criss-cross the frame on two levels. Two aerial roads form a V from the left and right top corners of the screen inward, pointing to a central building with turrets placed at the centre of the screen, flanked on either side by skyscrapers. Apart from the car that is transporting Eva, no sign of life is
discernable on screen. In contrast with the previous brief, alternating shots, the camera lingers on two longer shots of the cityscape, the length of the shot determined by the slow trajectory of the car, in real time, from one end of the frame to the other. The length and relative stillness of the shot provides ample time for the viewer to take in the image, much as would be the case with a painting; furthermore, the clean-cut contrast in colours off-setting the black car against the white stone of the city structures gives it an appearance of orderly cleanliness. In this sense, despite the authoritarian undertones of the city initially conveyed by the camera – further reinforced here by the geometry of the composition and the setting of the shot’s pace by the official vehicle – the latter simultaneously appears to be presented as though it were a work of art. The length of the shot gives the viewer ample time to ‘admire’ the city’s features, in a contradictory movement that communicates the structures’ utopian quality while simultaneously hinting at dystopian undertones.

On the one hand the ambivalent nature of the city conveyed here in La sonámbula hinges on a utopian / dystopian duality that is common to a wide corpus of science fiction films stretching back to the start of the 20th century. The alternative Buenos Aires of 2010 can indeed be viewed as a reference to science fiction cities in the tradition of Fritz Lang’s influential Metropolis, which according to Beck ‘established cinema as the definitive medium for articulating the future of the urban environment in the 20th Century’.19 The film, shot in 1926, was inspired by Lang’s ambivalent experience of New York in the early twenties, and his sensitivity both to the awe-inspiring qualities of the impressive feats of engineering that had brought the New York skyline into existence, and to the negative aspects of a new urban environment which expressed a new set of social dynamics:

Lang traces his vision of a futuristic world to his first encounter with America, as he sat on a steamship in New York harbor, staring at the city’s brightly-lit skyline. Yet despite the dazzling impact of those distantly seen images, the film that resulted offered what may well be the definitive “dystopian” view of the modern world and the technology that empowers it.20

While Lang’s extrapolation on New York enabled him to address the contemporary social and political issues of Weimar Germany in an abstract and symbolic fashion, it also mirrored the futuristic urban imagery that was blossoming at the time, particularly in the United States, where rapid social and technological changes generated a need to visualise the future of the city.

Figure 4: Screen shot of Buenos Aires in *La sonámbula*

Figure 5: Screenshot of the city in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*
As pointed out by Ian Roberts, however, although the city is a representation of the changes brought about by the machine age, its utopian projections can also constitute little more than the semblance of civilisation within a society which is fundamentally flawed. Roberts establishes a comparison between Lang’s *Metropolis* and his previous film *Die Nibelungen* in which he brings the political interpretation of architecture in film to the fore:

Whilst *Die Nibelungen* showed that the strict geometry of the Burgundian court was little more than a hastily-applied veneer which still leaked the miasmic fog of atavistic jealousy and desire, Lang’s futuristic vision of society merely rendered the façade of civilisation more visible. The city of Metropolis is built quite literally on inequality, on subterranean caverns which the favoured leaders don’t care about and don’t want to know about.\(^{21}\)

*La sonámbula* can be interpreted along similar lines, the smooth surface of its cityscape read as the outer expression of the junta’s quest for order and the appearance of civilisation. Director Fernando Spiner clearly stated that he viewed the city as a metaphor for political power.\(^ {22}\) Lewis Mumford indeed argues that the city is


\(^{22}\) Eseverri, ‘Un país como de ciencia ficción’.
historically both utopian and dystopian, and based on the power structures associated with religious myth:

[T]he city is the creation of a king […] acting in the name of a god. The king’s first act, the very key to his authority and potency, is the erection of a temple within a heavily walled sacred enclosure. And the construction of another wall to enclose the subservient community turns the whole area into a sacred place: a city.\(^{23}\)

The city’s physical structure and the city community’s hierarchical structure were both based on a perceived cosmic order, as reflected in the description of Tommaso de Campanella’s utopian City of the Sun, ‘divided into seven rings or huge circles named from the seven planets’.\(^{24}\) As such, the difference between the smaller rural communities that predated the city and the city itself was not that the latter was simply larger or constructed with different techniques or materials, but rather that it was a symbolic embodiment of the universe. For Mumford, the city was at first an ideal, utopian form representing the cosmos – ‘a glimpse of eternal order, a visible heaven on earth […] in which every subject had a place, a function, a duty, a goal’.\(^{25}\) Symbolically, the obelisk stands for the centralised power of government; this is all the more relevant in Argentina where the obelisk that has adorned the centre of Buenos Aires since 1936 is a national icon, thereby becoming a comical object of destruction in later science fiction films such as Tetsuo Lumière’s *Buscando la esfera del poder* (2013).\(^{26}\) In archeological terms, the obelisk is related to the sun, which appeared on Argentina’s national flag in 1818, representing both the *Revolución de mayo* and the Inca sun god Inti. As such, representations of power within the city, both real and in *La sonámbula*, are connected to religious myth; the relationship between the city and the sun is further reinforced when Eva and Ariel leave the city. A panoramic shot frames the city from the outside, showing its thick walls inclined inwards, like the base of a pyramid, while the sun appears to shine from behind or inside the city, its rays obscuring part of the view, mimicking religious paintings. This image provides a direct reference to the iconic film *Blade Runner*, in which one of the central features of the


\(^{25}\) Mumford, ‘Utopia, the City and the Machine’, p. 282.

future megalopolis is the Tyrell Corporation, a superstructure also shaped like a half-pyramid. Tyrell is the tycoon responsible for creating replicants, the humanoids at the centre of the narrative. As such, he fulfils the god-like task of creating life, a parallel which is further reinforced by the austere, temple-like structures of his interior filmed against a backdrop of a shining sun set in a clear horizon, in clear contrast with the jam-packed, claustrophobic shots of the metropolis that surround it. The latter contrast also exists in *La sonámbula*. If from one perspective the landscape echoes a past utopia of national glory renewed under the dictatorship, from another, it presents the face of a nightmarish dystopia of crowded, excessive industrialisation. The camera reflects both those aspects; while some shots of the city glorify the architecture, others show an asphyxiating, horizonless megapolis of cramped skyscrapers, reflecting Gonzalo Conte’s assessment of contemporary Buenos Aires as ‘una ciudad sin planificación, que no tiene claro hacia dónde y cómo crece’. These shots present a stratified, layered, two dimensional city in which the human disappears. Ariel, filmed as he walks towards the high rises, literally fades into the buildings in the background, which becomes the new foreground.

If the visual parallels between the two films are clear, one could also argue that the sun-god-city relationship is a historically relevant one that extends far beyond the history of film to the very origins of the city. As such, the utopian / dystopian duality of the science fiction city and the correlations between religious myth and power depicted in science fiction films such as *Blade Runner* and *La sonámbula* are to be located in the history of the city itself, which evolved from its projection as a utopia to become cast as the site of dystopian representations, associated with organised military power and the machine. Mumford uses the term ‘machine’ in a wide sense, initially correlating the regularity of the planets’ movement with the concept of an ‘invisible machine’ which pre-dates the industrial revolution. In the early days of the city, the organised control of a labour force generated ‘a totalitarian mechanism, whose rigors were softened by the many captivating qualities of the city itself’. The regimentation of labour and of an army was signalled by the uniform, which Mumford views as an early example of mass mechanical reproduction. The multiple attributes which at first cast the city as a

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27 Gonzalo Conte, ‘Densidad y fragmentación de la memoria’ in Huffschmid and Durán, eds., *Topografías conflictivas*, p. 64.

28 Mumford, ‘Utopia, the City and the Machine’, p. 286.
desirable habitat thus turn, over time, into the central attributes of its dystopian representations:

[I]solation, stratification, fixation, regimentation, standardization, militarization – one or more of these attributes enter into the conception of the utopian city, as expounded by the Greeks. And these same features remain, in open or disguised form, even in the supposedly more democratic utopias of the nineteenth century [...] In the end, utopia merges into the dystopia of the twentieth century; and one suddenly realizes that the distance between the positive ideal and the negative one was never so great as the advocates or admirers of utopia had professed.29

*La sonámbula*’s metropolis bears the marks of these tensions and overlaps between the utopian and the dystopian. While the cityscape, filmed from a point of view that is not connected to the characters, displays futuristic feats of engineering built to impress, it is filmed in such a manner as to appear oppressive when connected with the characters. From inside the lab where Eva is placed under observation, the architectural structures appear too large, stifling in their looming proximity to the windows and the fact that they block the horizon. Likewise, the marks of civilization and progress displayed on the outer façade of the clinic building are betrayed by its inner workings, that is to say, the relationships between the physical structure and the characters. Indeed, the affected population is herded into lines in the lobby, while Eva is led by armed men into a room where she is barcoded, scanned, and placed under observation in a memory-recording machine, her face appearing distorted though the lens of a screen. Inside the building, the human body is thus isolated, regimented and standardized, illustrating Mumford’s perspective. Furthermore, the body is forced to respond to the architecture, for example when Ariel finally gets back to the social security counter with the required signature, only to find it has just closed and that he has seconds to evacuate the building. The latter is completely empty; both the threatening warning to evacuate the building and the countdown to automatic closure are enunciated by a disembodied voice. As the camera pans away from Ariel, hastily leaving the premises, he appears smaller and smaller compared to the building, which takes precedence over the human. Ultimately, Ariel disappears off screen and the

29 Mumford, ‘Utopia, the City and the Machine’, p. 277.
viewer is left with an image of an empty building and the sound of an abrupt lockdown.

A distinction is thus established, at the start of the film, between a glossy, unified ‘outside’ and a darker, more fragmented ‘inside’ displaying a tension between different sets of characters within the context of controlled, regimented spaces. Reinforcing this distinction between the outer veneer and the internal structures is the fact that the higher figures of authority are shown in darker, more enclosed spaces. Doctor Gazzar operates from within a claustrophobic, machine-filled room; he himself is part machine since he has a cybernetic eye implant. The central control room he occupies has no light, natural or otherwise, and is filmed in such a way that the space appears unnatural, oneiric, as is the case when it is filmed from above in a style that is reminiscent of Weimar cinema, using chiaroscuro and elongated shadows. His hierarchical superior visits him there for updates and to give him instructions; in a similar fashion, Santos gives Ariel his orders to shoot Eva if necessary not in an official meeting room, but in a dark corner of the clinic building, at the bottom of a flight of metallic stairs that could be a service entrance. Ariel’s meeting with the police also takes place in a windowless room, following a first encounter in the toilets of a night club where he is arrested. As such, the architectural context of these different interactions, which reflect the hidden power structures of the city, contrasts strongly with that of the glorified, ‘civilised’ feats of engineering and technology that are an expression of the official face of power. This dichotomy is one that has roots in the history of Buenos Aires.

4.3 Urban projects under the junta

Mariano Paz reads the metropolis in *La sonámbula* as a reference to the urban projects elaborated under the junta. He argues that from an Argentine point of view, Spiner’s fictional city relates to the controversial city development plans of Osvaldo Cacciatore, Mayor of Buenos Aires from 1976 to 1982. Cacciatore was best known for a colossal project involving the construction of seven highway networks planned under the *Código de 1977*; at the time, only two were constructed and the project failed in the face of huge costs and corruption scandals. For Paz,
An audience familiar with local history may well wonder if the Buenos Aires portrayed in the film could be what the city would look like today had Cacciatore’s projects been completed. Therefore, apart from the standard connotations of a decadent or exaggerated industrial context, the highways can also be read as [an] instance of temporal displacement in which the film speculates on memory and politics in relation to past and future Buenos Aires.30

In her study of urban processes under the junta, Luján Menazzi clearly establishes a link between political power and architectural projects, highlighting ‘el carácter estrecho e interactivo de la relación entre procesos de estructuración espacial y los procesos económicos, sociales y políticos’.31 Her article specifically underlines the government’s conscious and deliberate linking of order on a visual level and order on social level. Although researchers disagree to some extent on the overall levels of cohesion within government in the context of urban project planning during the dictatorship, and approach the topic from a variety of angles, they agree on one point: ‘confluyen a la hora de señalar que la idea de una ciudad limpia, en orden y eficiente atravesó todo el periodo dictatorial, y dio razón de ser a diversas acciones en pos de blanquear la ciudad’.32 In a separate assessment of the filmic text, Bragnardelli et al. go so far as to establish a correlation between the architectural composition of Buenos Aires in La sonámbula and that of Berlin under Nazi rule: [su] arquitectura monumental y racionalista, destinada a la función pública, […] recuerda en cierto sentido a la arquitectura nazi y sus formas: la amplitud intimidatoria, el gigantismo de los cielorrasos.33 As hinted at earlier, La sonámbula presents a dichotomy between the geometrical, pristine, ‘high tech’ surface of the cityscape and the underlying conflict represented during Eva’s journey from the cathedral and the clinic. The first image of the latter is an outside shot that places emphasis on the building’s façade and initial appearance in a manner that echoes measures taken by the junta’s administration. According to Menazzi,


32 Menazzi Canese, ‘Ciudad en dictadura’.

33 Brignardello et al., Espacio y poética de la ciudad.
Las primeras medidas, como la limpieza de frentes de edificios públicos y privados, la reparación de aceras, la prohibición de venta de productos en las vías públicas, pusieron de manifiesto ciertos lineamientos del régimen que luego cobrarían más sentido: el cuidado higiénico y estético y la búsqueda de orden.\(^{34}\)

On the outside, the Centro de Investigaciones Psicobiológicas presents a civilised image of order and serenity; the first shot of its façade is a symmetrical one showing steps forming a pyramid shape flanked on either side by white obelisks. Two pairs of people wearing white lab coats (perhaps a literal embodiment of the ‘blanqueamiento’ mentioned by Menazzi) further enhance the regular, symmetrical effect of the shot, while a digital screen with a rotating logo hangs above the entrance, emphasizing the futuristic nature of the building and lending it a sophisticated appearance. The image therefore contains hints at a technological society juxtaposed with obelisks, which are both examples of ancient Greco-Roman architecture and national symbols referred to by Lacarrieu as a ‘signo de la modernidad urbana’.\(^{35}\) These images reflect the aesthetic and conceptual drives behind the urban planning that took place over the two decades leading up to 1980.

Although not all Cacciatore’s plans came into fruition, large sections of the population were nonetheless displaced to make way for new construction. Furthermore, a policy initiated in 1977 saw the expulsion and displacement to the Province of an estimated 180,000 inhabitants from Buenos Aires’s northern villas, informal settlements perceived by the junta as a blight on the city. The side effects of Cacciatore’s vision for Buenos Aires, rooted in the totalitarian precepts of the Proceso, left marks on the population that were highly symbolic of underlying processes all aimed at establishing order and rooting out “undesirables”. As pointed out by Paz, the highways shown in the film take on a particularly symbolic dimension; indeed, for Menazzi,

Las autopistas se constituyeron en símbolo de la gestión de Cacciatore para la ciudad de Buenos Aires y, por extensión, en símbolo del impacto de la dictadura en la ciudad por varios motivos: el modo subrepticio e individualizante de

\(^{34}\) Menazzi Canese, ‘Ciudad en dictadura’ (my emphasis).

\(^{35}\) Mónica Lacarrieu, ‘En busca de la Buenos Aires del Bicentenario’ in Huffschmid and Durán, eds., Topografías conflictivas, p. 85.
llevar adelante las primeras expropiaciones sin posibilidad de resistencia colectiva a las mismas, el desprecio por las críticas y miramientos de los actores más directamente involucrados en la problemática, la drasticidad de las medidas, la falta de soluciones para la población afectada y el paralelo entre la desaparición física del patrimonio y la destrucción de barrios enteros con las desapariciones masivas de personas ejecutadas por la dictadura.36

Through the mise en scène of its representation of the city, La sonámbula succeeds in conveying the complex knock-on effects of the urban projects implemented, or part implemented, during the junta, including the less visible, concrete effects. These include the totalitarian intent behind the utopian-oriented modernisation drive and the experience of a population subjected to displacement as well as trauma on a larger scale. In this sense, the film successfully employs a generic trait of the science fiction film – the dystopian portrayal of the city – to project an experience that is specifically Argentine. It could be argued, however, that the dystopian portrayal of the city in Argentine culture far predates its appearance in European cinema, as discussed in the next section.

4.4 Buenos Aires: a dystopian tradition

Historically, Buenos Aires has indeed always been represented as dystopian. In 1845, Sarmiento, from his exile in Chile, wrote Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie in response to the then dictatorship of Juan Manuel Rosas. A work of creative non-fiction hailed by literary critic Gonzalez Echevarría as ‘the first Latin American classic and the most important book written by a Latin American in any discipline or genre’,37 Facundo establishes an opposition between the countryside – the ‘limitless expanse’ of the plains and desert around Buenos Aires – and the city, the former associated with brutality and barbarism, the latter with civilisation:

El desierto circunda [las ciudades] a más o menos distancia: las cerca, las oprime; la naturaleza salvaje las reduce a unos estrechos oasis de civilización,

36 Menazzi Canese, ‘Ciudad en dictadura’.
enclavados en un llano inculto, de centenares de millas cuadradas, apenas interrumpido por una que otra villa de consideración.\textsuperscript{38}

The opposition is one of the cornerstones of Argentine culture as expressed by the *generación del ’37*, a group of intellectuals that came together in the decades following the country's independence in 1816 to establish a new cultural identity for the recently formed Argentine nation, distinct from both the Spanish cultural identity imposed through colonization and the indigenous American culture. Rooted in the European Romantic ideals promoted by Esteban Echevarría, who spent five years in Paris at the peak of the Romantic Movement, this opposition between city and countryside encounters a fundamental contradiction in its translation to Argentina, however: between the ideal of the city as a place of civilisation and the reality of a Buenos Aires occupied by a *caudillo*. As a result, a schism occurs between two incompatible versions of the city, between a desirable representation that can only become reality in the future if at all, and an undesirable present:

[C]uando se escriben los textos que contribuyen a fundar el concepto de la nación […] Buenos Aires se encuentra en una situación contradictoria: el supuesto centro de la civilización está ocupado por la barbarie, en forma de los federales y la dictadura de Rosas. Dada esta condición, los escritores de la generación del ’37 suelen describir a la realidad actual (o sea, la tiranía de Rosas, una sociedad perversa, violenta y caótica, invadida por la chusma popular), mientras que, simultáneamente, plantean una ciudad futura, civilizada, (desde luego unitaria), y, efectivamente, europea.\textsuperscript{39}

As such, the earliest representations of Buenos Aires in the newly born Argentine literature were dystopian at their core, while bearing the hope of an utopian future, and it is the dystopian nature of Buenos Aires that has endured in the national imagination. For Waisman, *Facundo* suggests that ‘la barbarie americana, del interior, ha ocupado a la capital, creando una distopía’;\textsuperscript{40} for Riera, ‘Buenos Aires entered literature as a


\textsuperscript{40} Waisman, ‘De la ciudad futura a la ciudad ausente’.
dystopia [in the 1830s] and remained as such thereafter.'

La sonámbula follows in the footsteps of this tradition, reflected in some of the film’s structures: the contradictory utopian and dystopian aspects of the city, and the contrast between the latter and its surrounding landscape, qualified by Piglia as culturally Argentine:

No hubo una búsqueda consciente de argentinitud, pero el resultado ha sido una película muy argentina: la propia historia iba transformándose y localizando con los elementos que le sumábamos. El espacio pampeano, por ejemplo: queríamos incluir dramáticamente el paisaje de la llanura, tan presente en nuestra literatura. La ciudad es la metáfora del poder político, la libertad más allá de esa planicie.42

This aspect is important in that it shows that the authors of La sonámbula did not simply employ a ready-made generic canvas of science fiction elaborated in a separate cultural context (one that is generally viewed as hegemonic and central, as opposed to a Latin American culture cast as peripheral). Instead, it shows that some of the most distinguishing features of the film, that are traditionally present in science fiction as a global genre, equally have their roots in a local, nationally specific set of cultural references and historical circumstances.

4.5 Beyond the physical structure of the metropolis: language and time

La sonámbula’s metropolis and what lies beyond its walls are not as distinct as they might initially appear; in some ways, they are presented as undergoing a process of fusion. In the natural world, the passing of time is marked by biological elements: the rising and setting of the sun, the changing of seasons marked by physical changes in the natural environment. In La sonámbula, the passage from day to night is represented instead by the lighting and extinguishing of the city’s electric lights. Although there are variations in the tonality of the sky, the sun is mostly not visible on screen, usually because too little of the sky can actually be seen for this to be the case. The regularity of temporal cycles is also disrupted. The sun sets and rises several times in the course of the film; in every instance, the transitions from day to night are unnaturally rapid. It is not the cinematic time-image that distorts the relationship

42 Eseverri, ‘Un país como de ciencia ficción’.
between time inside the film and in the viewer’s empirical world; but time itself within the narrative: the setting and rising of the sun is unnaturally fast in the film’s diegetic world. This becomes clear when Eva and Ariel are driving away from the SS Karol, after having stolen a government vehicle. The camera follows the real-time movement of the vehicle in a single uninterrupted travelling shot. In the space of the movement from the initial frontal shot of the car to the final rear shot of the car, daylight disappears, replaced by the electric lights of the city against the night sky. The movement of the car unifies the shot, acting as a temporal reference measuring the shift from day to night within the narrative.

One interpretation of this phenomenon is metaphorical; the *mise en scène* aims to indicate that the city, representing the control of the state, has invaded nature to the extent that it has taken over its most fundamental functions. This notion is further compounded by the fact that the birds in the desert have become confused, no longer able to migrate in rhythm with the seasons but flying back and forth to the point of exhaustion. Aldo, the *domador de potres* Eva and Ariel meet in the desert, explains that he has seen the birds fly over three times already that year. There is a reference here to Piglia’s *La ciudad ausente*, in which the flock of confused birds is mechanical, creating a further hint at the encroachment of the city on its surroundings. Kantaris writes:

> In the world of *La sonâmbula*, […] the urban consumption of organic time, the compulsion to subsume all vestiges of natural rhythms and cycles into synthetic times and life-cycles of the commodity, has been taken to a nightmare extreme […]. This has a dual focus: that of ecological disaster and the literal loss of that which links us to organic time cycles, memory itself.43

The industrialised city, seen by Mumford as a machine, becomes a universal clock not only measuring time but defining it. If the city, as suggested by Mumford, was originally established to represent the working of the cosmos, in *La sonâmbula* the dysfunctional metropolis has come to replace the movement of the planets: the symbol has replaced the substance; the representation has superseded the real element.

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The confusion that reigns in the natural element, traditionally ruled by the movement of the planets, indeed further extends to language and memory. Aldo is slowly forgetting his name and the meaning of words. Deleuze and Guattari associate language with centralised power: ‘There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity. Language stabilizes around a parish, a bishopric, a capital.’

Deleuze and Guattari locate the origin of language in the state-city, and visualize it spreading across the land. Likewise, the loss of memory that affects the city’s population in *La sonâmbula* extends out across the plains, affecting Aldo, his horse Oscar and the birds. When Piglia says ‘la ciudad es la metáfora del poder político, la libertad mas allá de esa planicie’, he does not specify where the city ends and freedom, or the beyond of ‘esa planicie’ starts. In reality, one might argue that the characters never leave the city. Outside the boundaries of the walled city, the landscape is scattered with ruins and buildings that appear to be the postapocalyptic remains of a city or cities: ‘un paisaje llano, sólo interrumpido por las ruinas y por las huellas de aquello que una vez estuvo (hoteles, rutas y autopistas)’.

Saavedra, the location that Eva finally reaches but does not exist within the diegetic world of Buenos Aires 2010, is itself viewed in Argentine literature as the point of encounter between the city and the countryside. As such, the desert traversed by Eva and Ariel appears to be the remains of a more extended Buenos Aires. The point ultimately reached by Eva is not a liberation within the narrative, but a transition to different narrative that exists on a separate plane of reality. As such, the train that provides a point of entry into the city at the start of the film and a point of exit from it at the end functions as a rhizome, envisaged by Deleuze and Guattari as a multiple, heterogenous connector that permits different points of entry to different parallel realities. As they put it, ‘any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be’.

There is no narrative progression between the black and white world of Buenos Aires 2010 that Eva initially wakes up in and the home she shares in a smaller town with a different version of Doctor Gazzar, since she cannot remember the film’s

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45 Brignardello et al., *Espacio y poética de la ciudad*.
narrative journey. As such, the end of the film does not provide closure; instead, it throws the narrative into a new loop (the cyclical element of the film is further emphasized by the a-chronological echo created by the final images of Gazzar’s death and Ariel shooting chief of security Santos, shown in near-subliminal flashing glimpses at the start of the film, in the opening credits). In this new reality, Ariel is now the protagonist; like Eva at the start of the film, he wakes up in a strange city with memories that do not fit within the universe that surrounds him. As such, he takes the role held by Eva at the start of the film, although he is not affected by amnesia. Just as Eva is driven in her dreams by names of places that do not exist on the map of Buenos Aires 2010, Ariel sets out in search of the wife and child assigned to him in a parallel world. This is materialized in a photograph he finds in his pocket, just as Eva’s alternative life is symbolised in the locket hidden in the flat’s toilet cistern. However, just as Saavedra does not exist in the universe of Buenos Aires 2010, Ariel’s home phone number does not exist in Saavedra.

The false ending of the film could be read as pessimistic: Gauna turns out to be one and the same as Gazzar, who in a parallel world is a doctor conducting experiments for a totalitarian government. Eva has no memory of the alternative reality or dream world she has experienced, which can be viewed as a parallel with the children of ‘dissidents’ placed in pro-junta families and reaching adulthood unaware of their personal history. Furthermore, Eva’s itinerary through the city, both disconnected and knowing and based on flashes of a recurring memory situated outside of traditional time structures, exhibits the paradoxical characteristics of repressed memory. Hugo Vezzetti writes: ‘lo que es amnesia y desconexión de sentido en un nivel, resulta ser, por el contrario, un recuerdo tan intenso que es como si el suceso estuviera siendo todavía vivido, sin mediaciones ni tiempo transcurrido.’48 On one level, Eva is held in the eternal present of the house; as for Ariel, he is imprisoned in a new world without any valid points of reference. Both characters are, in Lefebvre’s words, ‘caught up not only in the toils of parcelized space, but also in the web of what philosophers call “analogons”: images, signs and symbols’.49 The characters pursue these signs to a dead end, shifting from reality to reality within a Borgesian space-time labyrinth.50

48 Vezzetti, Pasado y presente, p. 36.
However, Eva and Ariel’s resonating yet distorted stories also constitute a positive analogue of the narratives produced by the ‘Eva futura’ of Piglia’s *La ciudad ausente*. These are endless distorted repetitions and reinventions of original stories that counter the fixed narratives of the hegemonic state. The clinic that appears both in *La sonámbula* and in *La ciudad ausente* is referred to in the latter both as ‘una cárcel’ and as ‘la ciudad interna’. It is the place where the State imposes a binary framework opposing truth, dressed in the white lab-coat of science, and non-truth, labelled as either madness, amnesia or attempts at subversion:

- […] Vive en una realidad imaginaria – dijo el comisario-. Está en la fase externa de la fantasía, es una adicta que vive huyendo de si misma. Introyecta sus alucinaciones y debe ser vigilada. –La policía usaba ahora esa jerga lunática, a la vez psiquiátrica y militar. De ese modo pensaba contrarrestar los efectos ilusorios de la máquina. […]

- La policía –dijo– está completamente alejada de las fantasías, nosotros somos la realidad y obtenemos todo el tiempo confesiones y revelaciones verdaderas. Sólo estamos atentos a los hechos. Somos servidores de la verdad.

The alternative stories produced by Piglia’s machine destabilize the notion of truth, replacing it with a framework based on error and possibility. Just as the notion of truth is physically embodied by the police (‘somos la realidad’), the web of intersecting stories and memories is represented spatially in the form of the city, as is the case in *La sonámbula*. The city thus becomes the space of confrontation between two different frameworks, one seeking to enforce a single unified truth, the other striving to multiply divergent connections and distorted versions of stories containing similar elements. In one of the machines’ embedded stories, the narrator of *Stephen Stevensen*, a distorted echo of Poe’s *William Wilson*, says:

La verdad es precisa, como la circunferencia de cristal que mide el tiempo de las estrellas. Una leve distorsión y todo se ha perdido. […] [L]a verdad es un artefacto microscópico que sirve para medir con precisión millimétrica el orden del mundo. Un aparato óptico, como los conos de porcelana que los relojeros se

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52 Piglia, Ricardo, *La ciudad ausente*, pp. 95-96.
ajustan en el ojo izquierdo cuando desarman los engranajes invisibles de los complejísimos instrumentos que controlan los ritmos artificiales del tiempo.  

The watchmaker’s eyepiece features in *La sonámbula* as a cyber-extension of Doctor Gazzar’s body; an optical instrument that enables the doctor to monitor and classify his patients, it competes with the human eye shown in a close up at the start of the film which Kantaris interprets as ‘an analogue for the screen which feeds the spectator’s eye’  

The eye is not only consuming what it sees; it is also an eye-camera, interpreting and producing meaning in the same way Piglia’s ‘Eva futura’ does. *La sonámbula* pitches the controlled physical and temporal structures of the city, symbolising the homogeneity of official memory, against the disjunction signalled by Eva’s alternative memory. As such the film, while bringing to the fore the gaps, lack of closure and temporal loops associated with traumatic memory, simultaneously provides alternative visions of the city-state, cancelling its scientifically posited truth-narratives and monumentalised versions of history through memories that, although incomplete, relate to different ontological strata (layers or versions of reality), distinct and diverse sets of spatial and temporal references.

### 4.5 Conclusion

Providing a different take on the 2010 Bicentenary of Buenos Aires, Spiner and Piglia brought to the fore the complex network of threads weaving together the city’s architecture and its history, especially in the context of unresolved issues relating to the dictatorship that had ended less than two decades before the release of the film. If the city’s centenary had highlighted the homogenising tendencies of central urban policies, the approaching bicentenary would need to deal with the urban changes that had occurred under Cacciatore’s administration. These were changes that had physically affected the population, displacing them in a process that could not but reflect the displacement of the bodies of the disappeared. They were also changes that displaced

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markers of collective memory and imposed new ones, in accordance with a political agenda. Conte expresses the trauma of the changes to the urban landscape thus:

Hablamos allí de un presente vaciado de historicidad, lleno de lugares huérfanos de su tiempo histórico y social, donde predomina la historia suprimida y deprimida en espacios ausentes y anónimos de identidad.\(^5^5\)

The notion of an ‘absent city’, present in the film through the inspiration provided by Piglia’s novel, evokes the loss of historicity in the face of totalitarianism, but also refers to a postmodern vision of a city that is fluid and multiform, created and recreated according to multiple narratives and diverse representations. The science fiction form chosen by Spiner and Piglia to explore the concept of memory, ‘what is remembered and forgotten in Argentina’, proved structurally relevant both to the theme and culturally. The characterisation of the city as a narrative device provides the ideal support with which to materialize totalitarian power structures, including the attempts to reformat a collective memory affected within an industrial context of centralised control. The city-province opposition, at the heart Argentine representations of a dystopian Buenos Aires and also a recurrent theme in the science fiction genre, offers an alternative angle from which to consider the city metaphor, presenting it not only as a physical structure but as a set of patterns and paradigms that affect language and the experience of time. As such, *La sonámbula* successfully displays the tools of science fiction cinema to convey the disruptions in time and collective memory associated with post-dictatorship trauma, providing an alternative map of the urban environment that conveys and embodies the complexities of Argentina’s recent past.

\(^{55}\) Gonzalo Conte, ‘Densidad y fragmentación de la memoria’, p. 63.
Chapter 5: *La antena* (Sapir, 2007): reviving the Gothic origins of Science Fiction

“El silencio no será una respuesta ni el tiempo cerrará las heridas”

-Madres de la Plaza de Mayo¹

*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos.*

- Goya, Capricho Nº43

5.1 Introduction

Written and directed by Esteban Sapir, produced by advertising agency La Doble A, which he co-founded, *La antena* (Sapir, 2007) is one of relatively few Argentine films to have enjoyed a degree of success in the international film market. The film is an expressionistic, Gothic collage in chiaroscuro that incorporates surrealistic, fantasy elements and plays with different media and genres, at times using the two-dimensionality of the comic-strip, a form on which it is largely based in its visual conception. *La antena*, mostly silent and shot in black and white, is set in La Ciudad sin Voz, a city whose inhabitants have lost their voice to an unidentified perpetrator: ‘Alguien se había llevado las voces de todos sus habitantes’.² With the exception of a faceless woman – referred to simply as La Voz – and her eyeless son Tomás, whose hereditary gift for speech she hides, the city’s whole population is condemned to communicating only through gestures and mouthed words. As the story opens, in the year XX, the voiceless city is ruled by the wicked, cigar-wielding Señor TV, who exerts total control over the images and products consumed by its inhabitants.


² The intertittles in the official trailer read ‘Alguien se había apoderado de todas la voces’, highlighting the relationship between voice and power or empowerment.
Egged on by a miniature character encased in a glass globe – a childlike figure wearing a helmet made of letters and set on a games arcade dance platform, referred to by some critics as an ‘evil fairy’ – the media mogul plans to rob the city of words. This he intends to do using a machine created by Dr Y, a character who is part man part television, which will harness the power of La Voz’s voice to capture the city-dwellers’ words. El Inventor, television repairman and father to Ana, a little girl who lives across the road from La Voz and befriends Tomás, uncovers Sr TV’s plan and joins forces with his ex-wife to save the city from falling under further tyranny. The antidote to the theft of words by Dr Y’s machine is the broadcasting of a second voice from a disused radio transmission station placed outside the city, in the mountains. Once there, Ana and her parents realise that the words robbed by Sr TV are to be turned into dough in order to generate vast quantities of *Alimentos TV*. This is the population’s only food, spiral-branded cookies that are mass produced and sold in ubiquitous boxes. The spiral logo, which visually recalls the spiral of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, brands every building, television programme and food item in La Ciudad Sin Voz. Ultimately Ana and her parents succeed in overcoming Sr TV; the citizens recover both their words and their voices, Ana’s parents are reunited, and Tomás’s final words are: ‘¡Puedo ver!’.

*La antena* is Sapir’s second feature film; it follows *Picado fino* (Sapir, 1996) a film that both heralded the hyperrealist new Argentine cinema movement, and was set apart from it.3 Eugenia García sees in *Picado fino* ‘una película consagrada por la crítica, precursora de lo que luego se denominó el Nuevo Cine Argentino’,4 while for the director, ‘*Picado fino* es tan personal que quedó un poco huérmana dentro de lo que fue el Nuevo Cine Argentino […] que era un cine que estaba más ligado a lo social, más ligado al realismo’.5 Gonzalo Aguilar argues that specific aspects of the film, echoed in *La antena*, set a precedent for the movement; in particular, Sapir’s use of faces and more generally of the physical form, his obsession with close-ups of unknown actors whose characters and bodies become constructed through the camera’s

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3 *Picado Fino* was shot between 1993 and 1995, and released in 1998. Different publications assign different dates to the film, usually 1994 or 1996.
scrutiny, were incorporated into New Argentine Cinema. He writes: ‘Picado fino has not left a long legacy in terms of narrative aesthetics, but its casting has had an impact. [Unknown actors] are transformed into bodies that acquire experience as the story progresses’. La antena retains some of the spirit of this earlier film, all the more so as it was born from the recycling of an abandoned script for a follow-up to Picado fino in which Tomás, the protagonist whose vision is fragmented and out of focus, becomes blind. Although Sapir recycled this idea in an altogether different story, he kept the names of both his main characters and sees a connection between the two films: ‘hay una relación que tiene que ver con la ceguera, con la mirada, con la imagen, con la interpretación’. La antena retains some of Picado fino’s experimentalism and formalism, too: it plays with rhythm, sounds and fragmented images, and places bodies and faces at the centre of its expressionist aesthetics.

5.2 Historical and genre perspectives on La antena

Sapir has referred to La antena mainly as a critique of contemporary mass media associated with a lack of communication: ‘el tema de la película es […] la falta de comunicación entre la gente, los problemas de comunicación de este mundo y cómo particularmente operan los medios audiovisuales’. Unsurprisingly, this reading of the film was subsequently repeated in various publications reviewing the film before or at the time of its release, and interviews conducted with Sapir establish no relationship between the darker features of La antena and the traumatic experience of the junta’s practices. The emphasis on media conglomerates was no doubt linked to the contestation, initiated in 2004, of the junta’s 1980 Ley de Radiodifusión 22.285 that strictly controlled news outlets; the ongoing debate led to the adoption in August 2009, under Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner’s administration, of a new media law that proved both highly controversial and extremely popular.

However, whether Sapir explicitly intended to incorporate references to the dictatorship and whether or not this aspect was discussed in mainstream news outlets at

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7 Larroca and Gutter, ‘Entrevista a Esteban Sapir’.
8 Larroca and Gutter, ‘Entrevista a Esteban Sapir’.
the time is ultimately of little relevance. Eliseo Subiela, interviewed at length about the inspiration for Hombre mirando al sudeste, makes no mention of the 1976-1983 period. He focuses exclusively on his experience of studying inmates at an asylum in his early years as a film director, his own psychological vulnerability on visiting Paris for the first time, and the effects of his father’s ill-health on the family during his childhood. In spite of this, Hombre mirando has been extensively related, in academic circles especially, to the dictatorship. The fact that the dictatorship has not been mentioned in articles on La antena published by the mainstream media is, however, noteworthy. Indeed, the clear reference to fascism in the Second World War, translated to an environment which is recognizably Buenos Aires to a Porteño, would seem sufficient to elicit a question on the issue. This is reinforced by the provision of a timeframe, which contradicts the absence of a temporal setting implied in the typical fairy-tale opening of the film: ‘Había una vez…’ The first line of the pop-up book that frames the narrative places the story in the year XX. Arguably, ‘XX’ could be read as a doubling up of the letter X or a cross, hinting at something that is hidden, blotted out. On the other hand, the most immediate interpretation is that XX are roman numerals spelling twenty; from the perspective of a viewer watching the film in 2007, this places the referential year zero in the few years following the official end of the dictatorship in 1983. In her introduction to the interview she conducted for Página 12, Eugenia García clearly correlates the film’s setting to Buenos Aires, and mentions its aesthetic temporality: ‘Entre el café La Ideal, la vieja Biblioteca Nacional, las callecitas de la Boca y la antigua fábrica de Siam, Sapir construye este film ambientado en unos fantásticos años ’30’. She does not, however, make any reference to Argentina’s darker past.10

Although Sapir has stated that the film deals with an absence of communication between people in a modern, media-dominated world, this trope is in fact strikingly absent from the film. Indeed, the narrative is centred on the few characters that take centre-stage; social relationships further afield do not feature until the end, when Sr TV applies his evil plan during a boxing match. In these scenes, the camera moves from the street, where people stand watching the match on television sets in a window shop, to the inside of cafes and restaurants where people are also watching the boxing, to the

10 García, ‘Entrevista con el realizador Esteban Sapir’.
boxing ring itself. In all these scenes there is a sense of social cohesion rather than a lack thereof; although all eyes are on the TV sets, viewers are filmed engaging in an active way with what they are watching, and doing so together without there being a sense of the uncanny. The latter would have been generated by these scenes if, for example, all viewers had performed identical reactions at the same time, or were filmed watching in silence, motionless, as is the case for example in early US-Argentine coproduction Extraña invasión (Vieyra, 1965), in which a strange signal on the television mesmerizes children and old people alike, cutting them off from each other and from reality.\textsuperscript{11} While the hombre globo at the start of the film does appear isolated, receiving no help when the rope breaks and he floats off into the sky, relationships between the main characters fighting Sr TV’s empire are portrayed as warm, supportive and selfless in spite of the lack of verbalization. This contradicts Sapir’s explicitly conveyed intent. What is markedly present, however, is the theme of rupture and absence that is common to all these characters and is inextricably tied to the past. By definition, any form of rupture signals a past event that caused it; it also pre-supposes pre- and post-histories to the rupture. This is signalled by ruptures in material objects such as the crack in the lens of The Inventor’s glasses or the torn photograph, by the absence of body parts (Tomás’s eyes, La Voz’s face) and by physical ruptures: Ana’s wound, which is echoed in the identical scars of her father and grandfather, hints at a trauma that has a historical dimension, since it runs through three generations.

There have been readings of the film with reference to the Proceso since the year of its release; most notably that of Mariano Paz, who reads the figure of La Voz as an acousmêtre, Michel Chion’s term for a voice-character that is heard without its source being visible on screen. Paz argues that this absent presence symbolizes the collective voice of the disappeared, acting as the central point for a political critique of the junta and the silence they sought to impose on Argentine society. He writes:

\begin{quote}
Despite an a-historic setting and a plot that draws on the fairy tale, La antena is nonetheless portraying a novum that is linked to the Argentine context and the social trauma associated with the disappeared and the Proceso. [Its discourse]
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} Extraña invasión was first shot in English and released in the Unites States in 1965; it was later dubbed and released in Argentina in 1974. The film was shot in El Palomar, Buenos Aires, where a North American suburb was reproduced for the purposes of the story.
denounces Argentina’s military dictatorship in particular, and totalitarian systems in general.\textsuperscript{12}

Paz extracts from the film two elements that he feels provide clear cultural references to the local context from an Argentine viewer’s perspective, meaning that the city will be associated with Buenos Aires rather than an anonymous metropolis. One of these is the television channel’s building, that ties the setting not only to Buenos Aires but also to Peronism: the University’s Faculty of Engineering, which was once the site of the Eva Perón foundation, is according to Paz a signifier of ‘[one of] the most fundamental moments in the political history of Argentina’, since Peronism ‘has continued to mark Argentine politics ever since its emergence in the late 1940s’.\textsuperscript{13} The other reference is embedded in the scene in which Ana’s father bribes his ex-wife in order to gain entrance to Dr Y’s office. The banknotes that are exchanged, currency dating from the Proceso years, feature José de San Martín, a revered historical figure and ‘a national symbol of freedom and self-determination’ following the part he played in the nineteenth-century wars of independence. For Paz, the banknotes both create a link between the fictional world depicted in the film and Argentina’s real history, and ‘function[] as an allusion to the Proceso’, bearing in mind that San Martín was a patriotic icon and was therefore ‘used politically by both de jure and de facto governments in Argentina (including the Proceso)’.\textsuperscript{14}

Using these two historical references as a basis for a further political and historical interpretation of the film, Paz suggests, as mentioned earlier, that the character of La Voz is a direct reference to Argentina’s disappeared:

The Voice, by having no face, represents a tension between an absence, the void that constitutes her face (and thus her identity) and the aura of mystery and gravitas that is derived from this lack. The same could be said of the disappeared: they are missing bodies; they exist only as an absence, just like The Voice’s face.\textsuperscript{15}

Through this approach Paz goes a step further than critics who do take note of the film’s depiction of totalitarianism, but restrict their interpretation to correlating the

\textsuperscript{13} Paz, ‘Ideology and Dystopia’, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{14} Paz, ‘Ideology and Dystopia’, p. 126.
\textsuperscript{15} Paz, ‘Ideology and Dystopia’, p. 127.
latter with the power of contemporary mass-media conglomerates – perhaps in light of Sapir’s own comments. For Amanda Holmes, for example, ‘Sapir critica el control opresivo impuesto por la empresas televisivas hoy en día y exige una resistencia contra esta poder que representa como totalitario’. One might argue that the totalitarian character of the media expressed through the film is itself linked to the legacy of the dictatorship, contained within the systems that have permitted the consolidation of media conglomerates in Argentina. Jairo Lugo-Ocando notes that while the media across Latin America as a whole have become less political and more oriented towards commercial interests, in Argentina as in other countries ‘many repressive elements of the dictatorship period remain in place or have mutated into more subtle means of censorship and control’. This has been in part made possible by structural characteristics of the media space, which Lugo-Ocando argues was not built on the basis of a collective need for debate and participation. Instead, they were designed from the start by political elites as mechanisms both serving the private sector and providing a channel for social and political control. As such, ‘explicit censorship and strict media-state control are still the norm in many cases, even in those nations where democratic values such as freedom of speech are constitutionally guaranteed’. This is one of the themes explored in La antena through the trope of silence and the character of Sr TV, a media oligarch. In Argentina, the neo-liberal policies implemented by Carlos Menem in the nineties cancelled the severe restrictions on private ownership of the media established during the dictatorship, removing all obstacles to the formation of oligopolies and ‘multi-media’ giants. These continue to dominate Argentina’s media landscape; far from creating a more diverse range of outlets for expression, they have displaced the traditionally independent newspapers, which against all odds had preserved some freedom of expression during the dictatorship years, in favour of the broadcasting media controlled by conglomerates whose interests merge with those of

18 Lugo-Ocando, p. 3.
the political elites. Sapir himself established a correlation between the media and the government in an interview given to *Clarín*:

> Es una recreación de lo que ocurre en la actualidad de una forma muy naïve. Hay un único canal que domina la ciudad y fabrica alimentos. Es similar a lo que ocurre con las empresas, los holdings y los multimedios. De alguna manera, son el gobierno.

The correlation tentatively established by Holmes between the totalitarianism expressed in *La antena* and the dominance of powerful media groups therefore conveys a concern that is contemporary, while sharing common roots with structures that supported, and were supported by, the totalitarian practices in place during the *Proceso*. As formulated by Paz, the film conveys ‘the trauma generated by two historical moments: the *Proceso* […] and the decade of 1990-2000, marked by drastic neo-liberal reforms which led to the severe economic crisis of 2001’.

Sapir, who initially trained as a photographer, works first and foremost through images in his construction of the film’s narrative. Of *La antena*, for which he drew over three thousand pictures, he said: ‘en realidad, nunca escribí un guión de la película sino que arranqué con un sistema de imágenes para contar una historia, con una impresión visual por sobre lo estrictamente literario o los diálogos’. The text incorporated in the film interacts with and thus reinforces the image: ‘tiene una participación en la estética de la película [y] convive con los personajes’. Used in lieu of intertitles, it provides elements of narration and translates the characters’ lip-reading for the viewer. On-screen words also provide a visual representation of other sounds that are absent diegetically but conveyed in the soundtrack, such as gunshots or the ringing of bells. *La antena* is a postmodern collage and therefore participates in more than one genre. Aesthetically, the narrative is projected onto a temporal canvas set in the 1930s to 1950s, identifiable by elements such as the cars and clothes. This matches the embedded references to the Second World War: the shape of the voice broadcasting

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22 Larroca and Gutter, ‘Entrevista a Esteban Sapir’.
23 García, ‘Entrevista con el realizador Esteban Sapir’.
machines (a swastika and a star of David) or El Hombre Ratón’s uniform and weapon. The time frame is not consistent, however. The film exhibits instances of temporal layering, to comical effect when a modern car alarm goes off in Sr TV’s car (a vehicle from the first half of the last century) and is only silenced by El Hombre Ratón kicking it impatiently; it also features retro-futuristic gadgetry which is used for communications and transport, such as the inflatable flight suits.

Figure 7: El Hombre Ratón’s uniform.

Although the film appears to reference the past rather than the present or the future, La antena’s temporal layering, typical of both the postmodern and the Gothic, subtly draws the narrative into the present, expressing contemporary concerns. Fionna Barber writes: ‘As a cultural mode – literary, cinematic or painterly – the Gothic […] involves dizzying temporal juxtapositions of archaic and modern, registering in perverse and uncanny terms the superseding of one order by another.’ Istvan Csicsery-Ronay suggests that Gothic fiction mixes mythic time with historical time, generally through the manifestation of ancient curses in everyday reality. In a similar manner, science fiction forms such as the space opera bring together layers of contemporary time and ancient time within one narrative framework:

Space opera allows writers to combine several incompatible but fully rationalized systems of causality, some of which will include rationalized

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archaic models (“the Gods are Ancient Astronauts”) and others mythicized models of actual history.²⁶

*La antena* rests on one such combination, bringing together iconic visual references to the Second World War and representations of contemporary mass media, mass production and consumption, subsuming the former to the latter. The application of Csicsery-Ronay’s format above enables the production of the following sentence: ‘modern media monopolies are run by inhuman fascists’.

For Paz, the film’s use of structures and tropes that create an association with the fairy tale, and its many embedded references to early icons of science fiction film such as Meliès’s *Voyage dans la Lune* (1902) and Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) – a film which it both echoes and subverts – also ‘constitute an important visual signature of *La antena*’ and establish a firm link with the genre (see Figure 8).²⁷

![Figure 8: Shots from *La antena* (left), *Voyage dans la Lune* (Meliès, 1902, top right) and *Metropolis* (Lang, 1926, bottom right).](image)

²⁷ Paz, ‘Ideology and Dystopia’, p. 119. Paz also provides an engaging and detailed analysis of the relationships between *Metropolis* and *La antena* in this section of his thesis.
The dystopian nature of the world in which the film is set, an urban environment controlled by an all-powerful corporation that limits the agency of its inhabitants, also places it within the confines of the science fiction genre. In his discussion of the issue, which he addresses at length, Paz writes: ‘despite its association with the fairy tale, [La antena] is still, narratively and visually, an SF film. There is no contradiction behind this statement: first because […] genres are not stable and independent categories, and second, because it has also been established that fantasy genres can also operate according to the logic of estrangement and cognition.’

This last remark is open to debate. In his 1980 article ‘The Gothic Origins of Science Fiction’, Peter Brantlinger wrote:

Though some works of science fiction achieve a very high level of meaning and esthetic quality, “cognitive” is simply the wrong word for the genre as a whole. The central message of the Gothic romance form, involving an assertion of the power of the irrational over the rational, is also the message of most science fiction.

Although I take issue with Brantlinger’s perhaps restrictive approach to the notion of cognitive estrangement, which I discussed in Chapter One, it is clear that La antena does display Gothic qualities which constitute a dominant aesthetic feature not only of Sapir’s work but of dystopian science fiction film generally speaking. There has been much debate over the relationship between the horror film – I take it as a consensual statement that horror is the cinematic expression of the Gothic genre – and science fiction film. Vivian Sobchack devotes a whole section of Screening Space to the issue, opening it with the following statement: ‘Before we can arrive at a useful definition of the SF film, its relationship with the horror film needs further exploration. Their uneasy connection has bothered many critics.’

Many critics see in science fiction an evolution of the early horror film. Sobchack cites Michel Laclos, for whom ‘science fiction cinema […] assimilated all the themes of traditional fantasy. Martians, Venusians or mutants evolved from vampires, while robots imitated the trance-like

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states of zombies and the Golem’. 31 Referring to the field of literature, Judith Wilt establishes an even more direct connection: ‘In or around December 1897, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, Victorian Gothic changed – into Victorian science fiction’. Wilt identifies the clearest moment of this transition in the publication of Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* and the replacement of metaphysics with physics as a dominant focus. 32 Sobchack also establishes a measure of distinction between horror and science fiction film based on their respective emphases, arguing that the former is usually located in the countryside or a castle and opposes the individual ‘with society or some extension of himself’ while the latter opposes ‘society and its institutions […] with each other or with some alien other’, and is usually located in the metropolis or on a wider, planetary scale. 33 In their chapter on the Victorian Gothic, however, Punter and Byron argue that the Gothic evolved in the Victorian era following an appropriation by the sensation novel, its spaces and themes moving from exotic, historical locations such as castles to ‘something more disturbingly familiar: the bourgeois domestic world or the new urban landscape’. 34 While the debates within the field of science fiction tend to portray the Gothic as static, it is useful to remember that the Gothic incorporates a broad and complex set of features and associations that are in constant evolution, as is the case with science fiction. For the purposes of this chapter, and to clear up any confusion that may arise from the use of a term historically associated with eighteenth-century British literature in the reading of a contemporary Argentine film, I am viewing the Gothic as a mode rather than a genre, in line with Jean-Michel Ganteau’s definition:

> The Gothic novel, considered as a series of narratives published in Britain from the 1760s to the 1820s and abiding by [certain] definitional criteria […] falls within the province of genre. Conversely, the category called ‘mode,’ even if it federates texts that share thematic and formal traits is of a more labile nature and may colour poetry, narrative or drama while spreading over various periods and areas. 35

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Overall, it is clear from a historical perspective that early horror film significantly overlaps, one might even say merges, with science fiction film, given that both employ the gothic mode, which I take to be a constitutional feature of dystopian film aesthetically and as a vector for conveying contemporary socio-political concerns. The following section will examine this relationship in further detail in order to demonstrate that the use of the Gothic mode in *La antena* provides a framework enabling the expression of collective trauma. *La antena* features two major Gothic features: hybrid, ruptured, monstrous bodies, and the trope of secrecy and silence that underpins manifestations of the repressed. I will first provide a broad introduction to the Gothic then address both aspects in turn, tying them into relevant aspects of the Argentine context as the chapter progresses.

It has been established that *La antena*, like *Picado fino*, is expressionistic; however, it distinguishes itself strongly from Sapir’s previous feature film by the fact that its dominant aesthetic identity is clearly rooted in the Gothic. While in *Picado fino* the body and the city are defamiliarised and rendered Other through fragmentation and visual associations, *La antena* evolves in an urban studio set: a fairy-tale environment that is not just portrayed as threatening but also mysterious, and includes characters that are Other by virtue either of being not fully human or having bodies that fragmented or heterogeneous diegetically, rather than being projected as such through the *mise en scène*. As such, whereas the fragmentations of *Picado fino* are very much presented as personal ones, projected through the subjective filter of Tomás’s perception, *La antena*’s multiple transgressions (temporal, physical, generic) are embedded physically in its liminal characters and props, and signal fragmentation on a wider scale. The discursive space opened in *La antena* is thus a collective social and political one. The disruptions and transgressions of the Gothic both signal a trauma and point at the source of the trauma; the use of the Gothic in a narrative thus constitutes a form of indictment. This section starts by drawing further parallels between the historically political implications of the Gothic and science fiction. To this end, I will first provide a brief overview of the origins of the term ‘Gothic’ with a focus on its relationship to the science fiction genre as a mode of political and social criticism. I will then examine manifestations of the gothic mode in *La antena*. 
5.3 The Gothic and science fiction

The term ‘Goth’ and its derivative ‘Gothic’ relate to wide-ranging categories, with a vast array of associations and interpretations across political and cultural history. Yet, ‘far more important than any sketchy history of the actual Goths that can be reconstructed,’ write Punter and Byron, ‘are the myths that developed around them, and the varying aesthetic and political agendas that these myths were subsequently appropriated to serve’. Indeed, while the Gothic has constantly shifted and evolved through time, it has always done so within a binary dialectic opposing the primitive or barbaric and the civilized. To provide an early example, while defined in 1775 as ‘one not civilised, one deficient in general knowledge, a barbarian’ the term ‘Goth’ simultaneously became the flagship of a symbolic reclaiming of the English past until then construed as ‘barbaric and superstitious’. The Goths, who had invaded Britain in the fifth century, became associated with positive values now put forward as the foundations of English culture:

[B]rave, virtuous and, as demonstrated by their representative system of government and their invention of the jury system, possessing a strong belief in justice and liberty. [...] In this rethinking of history, rather than being seen as the despoilers of civilized values, the Goths were celebrated as the source of these values.

Embedded in these early historical origins of the Gothic is one of its essential traits which has persisted in future developments of its use. This is that the Gothic, a term employed from its earliest days to encapsulate forms of political representation, has always been ‘the symbolic site of a culture’s discursive struggle to define and claim possession of the civilized, and to abject, or throw off, what is seen as other to that civilized self’. As such, it has also continuously participated in evaluating and challenging dominant definitions of what it means to be civilized. For example, while on the whole Gothic art, in the eighteenth century, continued to be associated with ‘the medieval, the primitive, the wild’, these values came to be seen as ‘virtues and qualities that the “modern” world needed’, where ‘modern’ was associated with order, conventions and rules. Eighteenth century gothic Graveyard poetry focused on ‘the

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36 Punter and Byron, *The Gothic*, p. 3. Further references to this volume are given after quotations in the text.
severe pretensions to rational understanding of the purposes and workings of the cosmos. Through these few examples, it is possible to see already forming patterns that would later be echoed in some of the structural traits of science fiction: the challenging of established conventions, the view of time and history not as something fixed and linear, but as a constantly evolving and shifting process, and a predilection for exploration beyond what is immediately visible to the eye. Most science fiction, through its transgression of the boundaries of the known, its exploration of the effects of technology and its questioning of what it means to be human and alive, touches on deep-seated fears and, as we have seen in Chapter Two, draws on the uncanny, a feature it shares with the Gothic. Dystopian and postapocalyptic fiction in particular share the usually threatening, dark, ruin-ridden environments of the Gothic, and particularly the post-eighteenth-century Gothic, when narrative moved from the castle and the abbey into urban environments. Dark science fiction shares its fragmented, eerie surroundings with those of the Gothic tale, in a long-standing tradition inherited from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein.* Dystopian fiction, in particular, exhibits clear and consistent Gothic traits, as illustrated in the films that have been examined so far in the course of this study. Chapter Two discussed the cawing of the crow and other ‘liminal sounds’ situated on the limit between life and death featured in *Invasión*; the film’s threatening, uncanny invaders, and the shroud of secrecy and mystery enveloping the narrative, are all typically Gothic. *Hombre mirando al sureste* provides prime examples of Gothic features: these are at their most explicit in the naked corpses carried two by two in wooden coffins and the pathology lab’s gruesome cabinet of curiosities, deformed human body parts and foetuses preserved in ethanol. In *Moebius,* the narrative unfolds in underground tunnels, and when Daniel is nearly killed by the sudden materialisation of the ‘ghost’ train, he is led running in panic to his reflection in the broken glass of a bathroom mirror on which the face of a devil has been painted. Finally, *La sonámbula,* which starts in a Gothic cathedral, features the eccentric Dr. Gazzar in a dark, enclosed laboratory from which he observes Eva, dreaming while she is tied to a chair; the expressionistic style of these scenes described in Chapter Four combined with the location, imagery, and trope of the captive female character lend further Gothic qualities to the film.

37 Punter and Byron, pp. 4, 4-5, 5, 8, 10.
5.4 Gothic bodies

The Gothic is particularly prominent in La antena; this is consistent with Sapir’s return to the origins of science fiction film, which as described earlier are generally considered to overlap with the origins of the horror film. The Gothic can be traced in La antena’s settings; the dark urban environment, labyrinthine inner spaces with their distorted proportions and asymmetrical angles are typical of early Weimar cinema, while the first image of the eponymous antena, the broadcasting station, echoes the classical Gothic castle: looming dark and threatening in the desolate mountains, it is set against a dark, stormy sky laced with flashes of lightning. It is, however, in the bodies of La antena’s characters that the Gothic is the most strongly expressed. Maxime Lachaud writes:

in Gothic fiction, the body is partial and fragmented […]. The Gothic body can be made of separate parts put together (Frankenstein’s creature), it can also be an unfinished and crippled one […], an alien one […], or a heterogenous one, half way between the living and the dead […], between the animal and the human.39

The main characters in La antena can be placed in three groups, all of which exhibit one or several of the traits mentioned above. Because the film’s narrative is very simplistic, modelled on the fairy tale, a distinction can be made between ‘bad’ characters (Sr TV and his acolytes) and ‘good’ ones (Ana and her family), while La Voz and Tomás are liminal beings who sit outside of these categories altogether. The bodies and surroundings of the ‘good’ characters are typically marked by fragmentation or rupture. This is signalled in the first close-up shot of the Inventor, which reveals the crack in the lens of his glasses; it is followed almost immediately by a series of shots in which the rope breaks, Ana’s hand is wounded and her grandfather suffers a heart attack, in effect an immediate series of three ruptures. The gash left in Ana’s hand is excessively material; the raised, open flesh and skin, while shocking, is also thick to the extent that it resembles an artificial texture. Through its lack of realism, it takes on

a hyperbolic, symbolic character that is further compounded by the identical scars on her father and grandfather’s hands. These signal a generational trauma associated with the past rather than an isolated instance of physical trauma in the present; the scar indicates an incomplete healing, a non-return to the pre-rupture state. The effects of a rupture located in the past, inscribed here in the body, are echoed in further associations with fragmentation and the need for repair evoked in the word ‘reparado’ which is repeated several times in the film. The broken glasses, torn photograph and broken voice-broadcasting station indicate past trauma affecting vision, family and expression.

The assimilation of the characters to Sr TV’s technology-based media empire is also signalled physically, by the crossing of the boundary between man and object, more specifically machines and architecture. Although the ‘good’ characters are not, in Lachaud’s words, ‘made of separate parts put together’ in the same way the ‘bad’ characters are, there is a blurring of categories which is expressed aesthetically in the machines and buildings, and behaviourally in the human characters. Ana’s father and grandfather imitate the regular rhythm of a machine, for example when they wave goodbye to her outside her mother’s home. While waving would normally be an incorporative practice, in other words an action performed at a given point in time in response to a specific, time-bound situation and which is a one-off, the uncanny symmetry and rhythm of the two men’s wave liken it to an inscribed action, one that is related to a set of prescribed, regulated parameters rehearsed over time. Like the wound in Ana’s hand, their gesture, highlighted by the mise en scène, acquires a symbolic dimension. To some extent, it echoes the assimilation of man to the machine portrayed in Lang’s Metropolis, acquiring a critical, political dimension. The robotic gestures of these characters and their association with humanised machines hint at their progressive incorporation within the regulated, systematic ‘machinery’ of Sr TV’s corporation. This reading is further supported by their labelling, in their quality as employees within that system, by numbers placed around their necks rather than names.

Conversely, machines and buildings display anthropomorphic features, a strong feature in the Gothic (the haunted house is the classical example of this). For instance,

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the communication device Ana’s grandfather uses to call his son for help in the opening scene resembles a human face (Figure 9). The dials and switches on the device imitate the eyes and nose; below them is a small round screen streaming live video of the interlocutor’s mouth voicing words, a juxtaposition that produces an uncanny effect. The hybrid appearance of this device is echoed by other machines that appear in the film, for example in the main television broadcasting station or in Dr Y’s laboratory. Human features are also displayed by buildings: the reparaciones TV shop-window features a human nose and two television sets for eyes, and La Voz’s house is also anthropomorphic, resembling a humanoid face (Figs 9 & 10).

Figure 9: Anthropomorphic communication device (La antena).

Figure 10: Shopfront, ‘Reparaciones TV’ in (La antena).
Patrick Power suggests that

an anthropomorph [...] is neither human nor other but on the edge of chaos, both at once. It is a liminal shapeshifter, playing in the interstitial spaces of becoming, of representational transformation.41

Anthropomorphism engages the brain of the viewer in a process of perceptual problem solving, since it presents an ambiguity in the form of multiple possibilities for interpretation of what the eye can see. Semir Zeki’s research on the reaction of the human brain to visual ambiguity indicates that where complex ambiguity exists, the brain is consistent in its acceptance of various, potentially contradictory scenarios coexisting: ‘Where one solution is not obviously better than the others, the only option is to allow of several interpretations, all of equal validity.’42 As such, says Power, the anthropomorph is the site of metaphor, since:

The neuroesthetic concept of metaphor sees our brain evolved at several levels to notice connections between inputs [...] and an anthropomorph is a sign that points in more than one way at once. Power argues that the antropomorph is never neutral, and that the metaphor it contains is never a simple one transferring meaning from one category to another; instead the human mind uses the metaphor as a vector for transforming meaning. The signification of the antropomorph therefore ‘always engages a narrative dimension’. As such, the Gothic liminality of La antena’s characters, giving one image the attributes of two different categories, as described by Lachaud, engage narrative and interpretive processes establishing meaningful connections and correlations, for example, between the human and the machine in the case of the characters described above. Given the propensity of the Gothic for hybridity, this neuroesthetic process is consistently engaged, explicitly calling for the brain to interpret the images onscreen through metaphoric association and correlation.

While the ‘good’ characters in La antena are not excessively Gothic in aesthetic terms, the ‘bad’ characters have more visibly heterogenous, liminal bodies. El Hombre Ratón in particular functions as an anthropomorph. He is part human, part animal and it is unclear whether the rough sack cloth covering most of his face hides a terrible deformity or is in fact a part of his body, since a button has been sewn on where his second eye should be. Whether functional or aesthetic, this parodic imitation of the human face has an uncanny effect further compounded by the character’s teeth; set in a human mouth, these are rat-like, excessively long and sharp; they are also irregular in shape and decaying, designed to arouse a feeling of repulsion in the viewer. This is a good example of a complex anthropomorph, since the viewer’s brain has no decisive information enabling it to determine whether El Hombre Ratón is mainly a rodent with human traits, or mainly a human with rodent-like traits. As such, it must accept the two options as being simultaneously true: El Hombre Ratón is both a human, and a rodent.

43 Power, ‘Character Animation’, p. 36.
This representation of the main perpetrator of direct physical violence in the film as radically Other has two effects. On the one hand, it projects a perception of the inner qualities of the character onto his outward appearance, as is customary in expressionistic cinema. On the other hand, it mirrors and inverts the concept of otherness that has traditionally been deployed as a political tool to justify mass violence under oppressive regimes. Feierstein establishes a correlation between the representations of biological otherness and degeneracy used by the Nazi regime to support the Holocaust, and the ‘degenerative’ behaviour attributed by the leaders of the junta to dissenters in order to justify their elimination:

El delincuente subversivo se caracteriza por una serie de acciones de orden socio-político – no individuales, sino mayoritariamente colectivas – pero, al igual que en el caso de judíos y gitanos para el nazismo, las consecuencias de sus acciones asumen caracteres de degeneración que remiten a la metáfora biológica y requieren un tratamiento de emergencia, separando lo sano de lo
enfermo y restituyendo la salud al cuerpo social, mediante un tratamiento penal máximo que será, a la vez, secreto, ilegal y extensivo.\textsuperscript{45}

The application of the Gothic devices of fragmentation, boundary transgression and anthropomorphism to El Hombre Ratón’s body, combined with the image of decay conveyed by his rotting teeth, combines the historically negative symbolic associations of the rat with a humanoid form, reversing the concept of otherness and applying it to the narrative’s perpetrators: their physical form reveals them to be devoid of humanity in its ethical and empathetic sense, and as such they are not fully human. The mutation of their outer shell thus functions as a sign of their inner degeneracy. At the same time, the \textit{mise en scène} introduces shifts between otherness and likeness. When El Hombre Ratón takes Ana’s mother hostage, pointing the gun at her and holding her against him, the close-up on their two faces plays with conventions of the Gothic / horror film: their two eyes are placed side by side; hers is terrified, his is ominous (see Figure 13). At the same time, the eye is the rat-man’s most human feature; thus, while the shot expresses fear, it simultaneously conveys a degree of kinship between the perpetrator and his victim.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure13.png}
\caption{El Hombre Ratón takes the nurse hostage}
\end{figure}

Dr Y, like El Hombre Ratón, is also a hybrid, part machine: the lower section of his face is a television set. The mouth is disproportionate in size, larger than it should be relative to the rest of his face. It also exhibits the exaggerated, distorted angles of expressionistic architecture, forming a sharp ‘V’ shape that is accentuated since it echoes the angle of the character’s eyebrows and that of the exaggerated collar on his clothing, causing him to resemble a cartoon character. The bodies of El Hombre Ratón and Dr Y both exhibit features that are grotesque. The strangeness of Dr Y’s mouth is indeed accentuated by his tongue, the texture of which contrasts with the digital nature of the character’s mouth: moist and mobile, moving in rapid motions that are disconnected from any utilitarian function, it becomes obscene, grotesque. Dr Y’s gloves, while material, equally appear ‘fleshy’, echoing and therefore reinforcing the grotesqueness of his tongue; their surface glistens as though moist, as highlighted, for example, when he lifts his index and middle finger in a V shape to signal the possible existence of a second voice, simultaneously providing the letter ‘V’ in the word ‘VOZ’ that appears on the screen.
Figure 15: Dr Y’s rubber gloves

It is the contrast between the object (in its material sense; here, the cloth covering the rat-man’s head or the television set forming part of Dr Y’s face) and the flesh that generates a sense of repulsion in the viewer, ‘violating the sense of the stability and integrity of things, and revealing unsuspected dimensions that escape direct rational, human control’. 46

The boundaries normally delineating the human body, containing it or differentiating it from the material world, are constantly transgressed in La antena. This has the effect both of visually disrupting the integrity of the body and of dissolving any sense of a unified human identity. This is pushed further, as the film progresses, in the increasingly grotesque separation of the eyes and mouth from the rest of the body, where the body ultimately becomes symbolised by its orifices. Early in the film, the Inventor’s spyglass and later El Hombre Ratón’s megaphone fuse object and body literally, reproducing the Inventor’s eye and the rodent-man’s mouth independently from their bodies, at the extremity of their respective instruments. Playful as these occurrences are, they also signal the de-structuring of the body, its de-composition into parts. As the narrative progresses and becomes darker, further examples of this fragmentation occur. These are no longer fragmentations generated by close-ups or choice of frame, but are instead decompositions and recompositions of the body on screen in the form of collage. When Sr TV first opens the safe in which the ‘evil fairy’ in the globe resides and discusses his plan to take the city’s words, his face

46 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Seven Beauties, p. 185.
is replaced by two eyes and a mouth, no longer placed in their natural order but in a vertical eye-mouth-eye pattern. Thus, whereas the machines in Dr Y’s laboratory or buildings such as La Voz’s house are humanised by virtue of circles and lines placed in a pattern that is anthropomorphic, the face of Sr TV becomes a monstrous distortion, no longer human (see Figure 16). Finally, as Sr TV’s plan is put into application, the city’s population watching the boxing match on the television becomes represented on-screen by clusters of single eyes, just as the inhabitants recovering their voices at the end of the film are represented by clusters of mouths, open and screaming (see Figs 17 & 18).

Figure 16: Sr TV’s distorted face

Figure 17: The city’s inhabitants watch the match.
No longer bodies, the city’s inhabitants are thus represented as body parts, and representationally broken down into basic functions: watching, screaming. Trauma here is literally disembodied rather than embodied; the relationship of the citizens of La Ciudad sin Voz to Sr TV’s machinations is as a series of reactive body parts, void of either agency or integrity. While the film’s narrative text announces to the reader, in the closing sequence: ‘todo quedó… REPARADO’, the sense of peace or respite that is normally associated with the ‘order restored’ formula of the fairy tale does not easily apply. Indeed, although Ana and her parents are reunited in a final image that reproduces the structure of the torn photograph, they are not smiling but yelling, and when the book is closed at the end, the voices of the city’s population can still be heard uttering a long scream. While there is a positive association with the act of screaming – it indicates both a recovery of the population’s voice and a release – the faces of the city’s inhabitants express no joy or relief; instead, they hold their hand to their throat as though experiencing pain in the act of releasing their voice.

5.5 La Voz and Tomás: Death and Time

So far, this section has examined the Gothic tropes relating to the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters in the film; this leaves La Voz and Tomás, who, as I stated earlier, are liminal characters. Although Paz makes a very strong case for an interpretation of La Voz as the voice of the disappeared, I would argue that, viewed from a different
perspective, La Voz equally resembles symbolic representations of Death itself, often portrayed in popular culture as a hooded figure whose face cannot be seen.

The death of the old man who receives too strong a dose of the waves emitted by Dr Y’s machine and the deathlike poses of the sleeping population once the machine is finally used on a large scale further compounds this possible reading, as does the instrumentalisation of La Voz by Sr TV. Reading the character in this way, visual metaphors signalling life and death are brought together in one image when La Voz is strapped naked to the swastika-shaped machine, the threatening spirals rising from all parts of her body including her loins, which are framed in the centre of the shot. The juxtaposing of the concept of motherhood or birth and the concept of death resonates with the traumatic associations expressed by Julia Kristeva in her conceptualisation of the abject: ‘The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things’. The shock derived from the juxtaposition of birth and decay is also elicited in the moment of death of the miniature child (the ‘evil fairy’) in the globe. On dying, the child ages rapidly, cycling through three generations (child-mother-grandmother) that echo the three generations of scars in Ana’s family (child-father-grandfather). Once she is dead, the dummy she was sucking as a child is removed from her old woman’s mouth, revealing it open and contorted in a scream of agony. This is one of the most striking images of the film, and one that juxtaposes childhood and the artificial comforts of modernity – symbolised by

Figure 19: Hand drawing of La Voz by Esteban Sapir (left), Walt Disney’s Grim Reaper (right).

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the dummy, but also the games platform from which she controls her environment – with an underlying, hidden, unexpressed trauma. The bringing together of the notions of time and death with the physical expression of a pain represented as hidden function together, hinting at the double historical and contemporary trauma referred to in the introduction to this section.

Like La Voz, Tomás is also a liminal character, whose Gothic characteristics call to mind a classical literary reference to oppression in history. The eyeless child is first introduced to the viewer as an uncanny, somewhat threatening character who appears to be observing Ana and her family. A two-dimensional cut-out black silhouette, void of either depth or light, he stands silent and unseen outside his house, bearing a swinging pendulum; he then glides unnaturally in the direction of the camera in the manner of a ghost. This first image is a clear reference to Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’:

A very singular figure riveted my whole attention. It was the painted figure of Time as he is commonly represented, save that, in lieu of a scythe, he held
what, at first glance, I supposed to be the pictured image of a huge pendulum such as we see on antique clocks.48

Poe’s story of a tortured man during the period of the Inquisition has widely been interpreted as an allegory for the descent into hell, followed by time in purgatory marked by the swinging pendulum, and the final redemption of the character symbolised as the last-minute intervention of the enemies of the Inquisition, who save him in extremis from descent into the terrifying pit: ‘the pit whose horrors had been destined for so bold a recusant as myself – the pit, typical of hell, and regarded by rumor as the Ultima Thule of all their punishments’.

The giant pendulum is a recurrent visual feature of the film, and a further parallel is created by the presence of El Hombre Ratón, which echoes the pack of rats who share the character’s cell and arouse horror in him even as they gnaw through the cloth of his bonds:

They writhed upon my throat; their cold lips sought my own; I was half stifled by their thronging pressure; disgust, for which the world has no name, swelled my bosom, and chilled with heavy clamminess my heart. (164)

There is a parallel between Poe’s imagery of the pit, a place of horror where the character is to be thrown by the Inquisition as punishment for being ‘a recusant’, and the detention centres and execution grounds where Argentine revolutionaries were sent by the military in collusion with the Catholic Church:

The abducted were never publicly acknowledged as detainees once they disappeared into the hundreds of secret detention centers known as “pits” (pozos) and “black holes” (chupaderos). Some were released into exile, but most of them were assassinated.50

The word pozo was not used purely in a metaphorical way; the Nunca Más report reveals that literal outdoor pits were dug, becoming mass graves following the execution of detainees; however, its wider application to the detention centres highlights the terror they inspired. Like the image of the pit, the lunfardo term chupadero evokes the sucking in of a person by a place or entity; the verb chupar was

also used to refer to the act of arrest.⁵¹ The expression implies an otherworldly, monstrous force at work; as does, for example, Ernesto Sábato’s use of the expression ‘tecnología del infierno’ to refer to the systematic procedures put in place by the military dictatorship against dissenters in his introduction to the report.⁵² With this in mind, the use of Gothic images to translate the real fear and horror experienced in the context of the dictatorship thus becomes all the more relevant in its fictional correlative, the dystopia. Intentionally or not, La antena weaves together imagery, references and tropes that elicit parallels with the darkest period of its past, embedding them within the fabric of the narrative and the bodies of its characters. The population of La Ciudad Sin Voz and Ana’s family on the one hand bear the marks of rupture and absence, while the globe fairy, Sr TV’s hombre ratón henchman and Dr Y on the other bear the marks of mutation and otherness. At the heart of the fight opposing the two camps is the fate of La Voz and Tomás, which I have read here as Death and Time. The film’s bodies thus form a canvas bearing symbolic traces of past events that are often not revealed in their details, leaving the viewer to establish relationships of meaning within their personal and cultural framework of reference.

In this section, I identified the inscription of hereditary trauma through time in the body. However, this inheritance is also expressed verbally by Ana when she tells Tomás ‘el silencio es hereditario’. Silence is a major trope in La antena; chosen by Sapir as an essential artistic choice for the film, it also features diegetically and is a theme that is woven throughout the narrative in hyperbolic form. That is to say that the trope of silence is highlighted through words, gestures and embedded visual references. Since silence and secrecy are tropes that are strongly associated with the Gothic, and since the imposition of silence is also a dominant feature of the Proceso, I have chosen to examine this feature of the film in the final section of this chapter.

⁵¹ *Lunfardo*: Buenos Aires slang.
5.6 Hyperbolic secrecy: *La antena’s ‘theatre of silence’*

In their chapter on Gothic cinema, David Punter and Glennis Byron locate the Gothic in the horror film through ‘a kind of melodramatic expressionism of style that is unmistakably Gothic in its cultural and structural force’ combined with ‘an insistence on political and social dimensions’. Of melodrama, Diego Saglia says that it ‘thrives on emotional surplus and the monumentalisation of physically translated sentiments, but simultaneously signifies through absence, silence, dematerialisation and dissolution’. Saglia suggests that one of the defining traits of stage Gothic is the fact that it combines the hyperbolic, which is the corollary to the genre’s expressionism in film, with the unspoken, bringing into play the Gothic’s traditional preoccupation with secrets. In this section, I aim to demonstrate that while Saglia’s exposé applies to adaptations of the Romantic Gothic on stage, the dynamic he describes between ostension (the act of showing) and the unsaid is also deployed in *La antena*, introducing two levels of reading. One is a linear order-disorder-order restored type narrative reminiscent of the fairy-tale, where dark secrets come to light and are dealt with; the other is a network of non-linear associations hinting at an unresolved traumatic experience that must be constructed by the viewer independently of the main narrative, revolving around the trope of silence.

Sapir’s choice of a silent, expressionistic form for *La antena* transforms it into, to borrow Saglia’s words, ‘a theatre of silence’: a form that emphatically highlights the unspoken, in other words, where the unspoken or what is supposedly secret is brought to the attention of the public using hyperbolic strategies. In the passage cited above, Saglia refers to strategies employed on stage such as apsiopepsia (unfinished sentences), false silences, and the use of physical codes in lieu of verbal ones, in the register of the pantomime. These are combined with ostention, which Saglia refers to as ‘perhaps the most basic of all theatrical devices […] a plain unmediated act of presentation’ and which Keir Elam describes as ‘the showing of objects and events

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55 Saglia, ‘I almost Dread to Tell You’, p. 95.
56 Saglia, ‘I almost Dread to Tell You’, p. 94.
to the audience, rather than describing, explaining or defining them.’ Since La antena is silent, it functions mostly through ostension and association, combining these two strategies with the explanations provided by the inserted text to convey the narrative to the viewer. However, whereas most instances of ostension and association convey intention and meaning in an immediate fashion, in other instances an immediate explanation for what is shown on-screen is unavailable. This leaves the audience to form associations which may or may not be consistent from one viewer to the next. The latter instances are typically elements that are shown hyperbolically, but the understanding of which is not required for an understanding of the narrative as a whole.

An example of ostension that generates the immediate understanding of a narrative element would be, for example, the moment in the film when the Inventor finds La Voz’s glove lying on the floor. Picking it up, he hears an alarm and turns to the window, where he sees a stretcher being carried by Sr TV’s men; the bare arm and hand of a woman hangs from the stretcher, the rest of her body hidden by a sheet. Through the explicit showing of both the glove and the naked arm, linked together by the gaze of the Inventor, the viewer understands that the woman being carried away is La Voz, without the need for a verbal explanation. On the other hand, some elements that do not form a necessary link in the fabric of the narrative are shown hyperbolically, but not explained. These usually relate to the elements of rupture or fragmentation described in the previous section. For example, the wound in Ana’s hand is clearly brought to the fore by the mise en scène since even as she is plummeting down from the sky, the focus of the scene is not on the ongoing, potentially fatal drop but instead on the injury she has suffered. The wound is further highlighted when her father dusts her down and reveals his scar, and again when father and grandfather are waving. However, despite the clear ostention of the wound, its place in the narrative is not self-explanatory, and no interpretation is offered by the filmic text. The association must therefore be made by the viewer independently from the narrative. Mariano Paz refers to Zizek’s applications of Jacques Lacan’s point de capiton, a ‘quilting point’ that anchors different signifiers in a text, enabling the reader or viewer to make sense of it and give it a coherent structure of meaning. Paz applies this to the figure of La Voz as an absent

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presence, ‘anchoring the ideological signifiers of the film’. Here I would like to suggest a further ‘quilting point’ which is the notion of secrecy and silence, central tropes in *La antena* that function together. I want to demonstrate that on the one hand, these tropes appear to express a generic trait of the Gothic tradition, while on the other they tie considerations of a political, historical nature into the narrative through the device of ostentation. Like the wound in Ana’s hand or the crack in the lens of the Inventor’s glasses, the need for secrecy is an element that is hyperbolically brought to the fore of the narrative, ostensibly brought to the attention of the viewer.

On the surface, the narrative and subplots of *La antena* are clearly provided, one might even say spelled out, to the audience. The introduction not only informs us that the inhabitants’ voices have been taken, but also provides us with a year; the story of Ana’s parents is reconstructed for the audience with visual props by Ana’s father, and Sr TV’s evil scheme is explicitly revealed to the viewers at the same time as to the main characters, meaning that the simple narrative line driving the film is very clear, thus echoing the silent origins of the horror & SF genre. However, in contrast, some of the most striking occurrences and elements of the film remain unexplained, all of them involving conditions affecting the body: the large wound scars on Ana’s father and grandfather’s hands; Tomás’s absence of eyes, La Voz’s missing face, or the hybrid deformities of El Hombre Ratón or Dr Y, for example, are made visible yet are not naturalised by the *mise en scène*. For example, Ana’s mother reacts with a mixture of pity and repulsion on seeing Tomás for the first time, indicating that his physical form is not a usual or natural occurrence in the diegetic universe of the film. The existence of these mutations therefore remains shrouded in mystery, literally so in the case of El Hombre Ratón and La Voz, since their heads are covered by cloth in such a way that the full truth of their bodies is never revealed. As such, although the main narrative centred on Sr TV’s evil plan is clearly signposted for the viewer, a second, hidden narrative or set of associations that is woven into the film remains elusive throughout, despite being emphasised visually. Generally speaking, communication is hyperbolic and marked by accentuated gestures and facial expressions which produce and punctuate meaning in partnership with the on-screen text. For example, in the two images below, Sr TV’s daughter expresses her anguish at her father’s actions; the anguish that is expressed facially is supported and reinforced by the size of the

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exclamatory letters above her head and the play with light (Figure 21). This highlights the words and brings the focus towards her face, therefore her emotional state. In the second shot, she expresses her hatred towards her father by clenching her fists, simultaneously crushing the words ‘LO ODIO’, thereby further emphasizing the heightened state of her emotions (Figure 22).

Figure 21: “¡Padre!”

Figure 22: “Lo odio.”

Here, the hyperbole reflects the intensity of the emotional content; it highlights the strength of the daughter’s feelings faced with the old man’s death and her hatred of her father. However, within this expressionistic context, the tropes of silence and secrecy are also conveyed hyperbolically; the strategies that are ostensibly designed to occlude communication simultaneously draw attention. Figure 23 below shows Dr Y conferring with Sr TV; the secret nature of the exchange is accentuated by the very devices that hide it: the exaggerated collar of Dr Y’s coat conceals both his lips and the text that would normally participate in communicating the message. The presence of the partially hidden words, here, ceases to be paradoxical only if it is viewed as an intentional display of secrecy, especially in light of the fact that once Dr Y lifts his
head, the content of the exchange is revealed through the words that linger on the screen after it has taken place: ‘El don puede ser hereditario’.

Figure 23: ‘El don puede ser hereditario’.

Saglia writes:

the mechanisms of expressiveness and silence [in Gothic melodrama] work through, yet also contribute to constructing, the specific spectatorial attitude required by this type of drama, one that is predicated upon the balance between knowing and not knowing generated by silence. These devices for the ostension of the unsaid delineate an audience reacting to the staged text through an act of decoding that is visibly suspended yet, in fact, has already taken place.\textsuperscript{59}

Silence is a fundamental predicate of \textit{La antena}, provided as the background context at the start of the film. The word \textit{SILENCIO} is emphasized in the opening text through the use of capital letters: ‘Pasaron muchos años y a nadie parecía preocuparle… EL SILENCIO’; the last two words occupy the screen alone, signalling a prominence that recurs throughout the film. Despite the fact that the inhabitants of La Ciudad sin Voz cannot speak, they persistently bring their fingers to their lips in an entreatment to silence. The use of this repeated visual trope opens up the text to other interpretations through the inherent contradictions it generates. The use of the silence gesture is indeed not always appropriate: sometimes excessive, sometimes contradictory. One prime

\textsuperscript{59} Saglia, p. 95.
example of this is the sequence in which El Inventor and Sr TV’s daughter enter the hospital through the back door (marked ‘residuos’) in order to find out more about Sr TV’s plans. The inventor’s ex-wife, a nurse, gestures to them to be silent on opening the door, the movement performed in a slow, deliberate fashion, with a gesture accentuated by its angles and rhythm. She then repeats the gesture after taking the money, but first attracts the attention of El Inventor and the daughter by ringing a bell. A contradiction emerges here between the sound of the bell, which aims to draw attention and is associated with a physical noise rendered in the soundtrack, and the enjoinment to silence – when in effect the silence has already been broken by the very act of drawing attention to its necessity. Finally, the nurse tells them La Voz has been taken to Dr Y’s office, cupping her hands around her mouth, then brings the key to her lips, eliciting a similar movement in the other two characters who bring their hands to their mouth, a gesture that seems to indicate shock or fear as well as an imitation of the silence gesture. The nurse calls for silence a fourth and final time when El Inventor, chased by El Hombre Ratón, appears in her office. Her gesture, this time, mirrors a poster on the wall behind her, which shows a nurse with her finger to her lips (Figure 24). The poster invites a parallel with wartime imagery enjoining citizens to avoid ‘idle talk’ in order to protect the nation from potential spies (Figure 25).

![Figure 24: Silent nurses in La antena](image-url)
The image comes across as ironic, here, since it implies a sense of national cohesion contradicted by the division within the Argentine nation during and following the dictatorship. Silence, within the Argentine context, correlates to a fear of oppression by internal forces, rather than to the concept of a united front in the face of an external enemy. In 2005, investigative journalist Horacio Verbitsky published an account of the transfer of political prisoners from the infamous Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) to El Silencio, an island in the Delta del Tigre owned by the Church. The political prisoners were transferred to El Silencio by the military to avoid their discovery by a delegation of the Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH), sent to Argentina in 1979 to investigate reports of crimes against humanity being committed by the junta. The CIDH carried out their inspections, but were unable to find trace of the prisoners. One passage in Verbitsky’s account stands in stark contrast to the implicitly cohesive style of European and North American wartime posters, subverting the meaning of the implied ‘silence means (national) security’ message:

The policeman’s wife told the doctor on duty there that she had seen 59 moving bundles. Then someone from El Silencio warned her that if she carried on
talking, they would chop her head off and feed it to the catfish. Perhaps that is why, as a general rule, nobody knew anything.\textsuperscript{60}

The repetitive, excessive enjoinments to silence are repeated throughout the film (see Figure 26). Other occurrences causing characters to seal their own lips or those of other characters are the mention of Ana’s mother, Tomás speaking out loud, Ana referring to hereditary silence, the grandfather discussing the plan to repair the aerial, and the nurse watching the sleeping children.

\textbf{Figure 26: Silencio.}

The trope of silence is highlighted verbally at the start of the film and again at the end, since ‘SILENCIO’ is the first word to drift out of the sleeping population, followed by ‘MIEDO’; both words bear an emphasis as they stand alone on the screen. It is further symbolised by the snow that falls continuously in the city, up until the moment in which the voice begins to draw words out of the bodies lying on the ground. Arguably, snow can universally signify silence due to its physical qualities: the muffling effect it has on sound and the fact that it covers up what can normally be seen. However its presence in La antena creates a further cultural parallel with one of the best recognised works of science fiction in Argentina, Héctor Germán Oesterheld’s El eternauta, published in comic form in the magazine Hora Cero from 1957 onwards. This story of a time traveller fighting the invasion of threatening aliens, los Ellos, starts with a deadly radioactive snowfall which is brought to the attention of the main characters by the unusual silence in the street. As they look out and see people lying dead, they understand that the lethal snow, la nevada mortal, is the cause of the silence. Oesterheld, whose work was reportedly admired by Borges, wrote himself into the plot as one of the characters. Later instalments of El eternauta, from 1969 onwards, became more overtly political, and in 1977 Oesterheld fell victim to the dictatorship; his four daughters were killed, and he became one of the ‘disappeared’. Manuel Rivas, in his article on Oesterheld, uses the image of the nevada mortal to refer to the silence imposed by fear during the Proceso. Describing Oesterheld’s wife’s attempts to find their daughter, he writes:

Elsa Sánchez de Oesterheld comenzó el peregrinaje para recuperar a Beatriz. Pero, en verdad, había caído una ‘nevada mortal’ sobre Argentina. Se encontró con muros de silencio. Con conocidos que la desconocían.61

The trope of silence is thus at the heart of the film conceptually, since its style and aesthetic are based on the silent films of the early 20th century. The Gothic traits implied by the period and associated with early science fiction film incorporate the trope of hyperbolic silence as a narrative device, through which what is hidden is hinted at and pointed at by the mise en scène for the viewer, imitating the hyperbolic silence of on-stage Gothic. Finally, the trope of silence is woven into national history

politically and culturally. Through these devices, combined with the strong Gothic aesthetics expressed in the monstrous, fragmented, hybrid bodies of the characters examined in the first part of the chapter, a series of associations with the legacy of the physical, psychological and social trauma experienced during the dictatorship are drawn into the main narrative. These associations function as a socio-cultural stream of consciousness underlying the main plot of La antena, which outwardly expresses the trauma of a population dominated by a single media corporation. In an interview with Clarín, Sapir made a telling statement about the subconscious contribution of an artist’s cultural, political and historical context to their art: ‘El inconsciente nunca falla. Cuando uno hace algo propio, pone sus vivencias, lo que atravesó durante este tiempo. Y mis sensaciones de estos años están acá, seguro.’ 62

Chapter 6: Bodies and masks in *Filmatrón* (Parés, 2007)

6.1 Introduction

*Filmatrón* (Parés, 2007) is a hybrid text; a low budget family-friendly film, it is a crossover between the science fiction, adventure and comedy genres freely adapting elements of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (henceforth *1984*). Creators Farsa Producciones describe it as ‘[un] film de aventuras y ciencia ficción [que] es una adaptación libre y para adolescentes del libro 1984 de George Orwell, realizado en forma independiente y autogestionado, sin apoyos económicos de ningún tipo.’ Filmatrón foregrounds a dystopian society which, like that of *1984*, is strictly controlled and monitored by a single party, UNO. The party is embodied by the benevolent and ubiquitous ‘El Gordo Héctor’, an implicitly comical equivalent of Orwell’s Big Brother. *Filmatrón* was created as a response to the closed-mindedness of the Argentine film industry in the nineties, and in particular to the selection processes of Buenos Aires’s annual independent film festival, the BAFICI. However, The inspiration it takes from Orwell’s dystopian text also opens up space for a broader form of contestation, reflecting on the power dynamics between State and citizen in a totalitarian context; in particular, the way in which these dynamics are acted out in relationship to the body. Like that of *La antena*, *Filmatrón*’s dystopian universe hints at Argentina’s totalitarian past while simultaneously adopting a critical discourse with regards to contemporary media and commercial oligarchies (see Chapter Five).

This chapter focuses on the theme of the body as a site of control and resistance in the dystopian context, examining the the mask as a trope that articulates issues of power and subversion. This chapter first provides a summary of the film and situates it in Argentine film history; this is followed by a brief a section introducing the place of the superhero character in the film and identifying allusions that are made to the *Proceso*. The chapter then highlights parallels between *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Filmatrón*, using as a starting point Naomi Jacobs’ perspective on the place and

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1 This text appears on the back of the DVD cover. Farsa Producciones was founded by Pablo Parés and Hernán Sáez in 1990. By 1997 the group included Walter Cornás, Berta Muñiz and Paulo Soria, and it has continue to grow with every new project.
significance of the body in classical dystopia. The following sections broach the theme of the holographic, de-corporealised State that is clearly foregrounded in *Filmatrón* through the use of science fictional posthuman tropes such as holograms and cyborgs. Representations of the decorporealised State agents will be contrasted with the emphasized physicality of other characters subjected to UNO’s regime. Drawing parallels with Marco Luceri’s reading of Marco Bellochio’s film *Vincere* (2009), centred on the cinematic representations of Mussolini, the forms taken by the decorporealised State will be viewed as a series of masks. These will be contrasted with the superhero mask donned by Lucas, which functions as a catalyst for disruptive change. As we will see, Lucas’s performative use of the mask initiates a process of re-corporealisation of UNO’s agents, in the mode of Rabelaisian grotesque realism.

### 6.2 Introduction to *Filmatrón*: film summary and context

The opening sequence of *Filmatrón* is a *mise en abyme*: it is a series of shots from a home-made science fiction B-movie, *Escoria rebelde*, which a group of underground film-makers are in the process of creating. They are brusquely interrupted by UNO National Security agents, who raid the premises in a bid to seize both the camera and the videotape of the film. The latter is saved in extremis by Daniel Vega; chased by the agents, he crashes into Lucas and seizes the opportunity to place the illegal tape in the teenager’s school bag. Lucas, a schoolboy and amateur comic-book writer and illustrator, then becomes the central character in the narrative. After a series of events precipitated by his accidental encounter with Daniel, Lucas decides to submit a script to a national competition calling for film projects (*la película de la gente*), based on a comic book he has written about a superhero called Filmatrón. The call for submissions turns out to be a simple marketing exercise: there is no real competition, since the film that is to be screened has been pre-selected, and Lucas finds his script in a dustbin.

The uncovering of this hoax and the subsequent disappearance (and implied death) of rebel underground film-maker Gutiérrez pushes Lucas and his group of friends to actively resist UNO’s hold on creativity. The goal driving the narrative becomes to create and broadcast home-made comic-based superhero movie *Filmatrón* on national television’s single channel (this is also called UNO), during the slot reserved for the government-backed *‘pelicula de la gente’* initiative that is aimed at
reviving falling audience ratings. As such, *Filmatrón* contains two narratives: a sub-narrative embedded in the superhero comic book, and the main narrative, which is about film-making. The latter takes centre stage, but the visual overlaps between Lucas and his two-dimensional character Filmatrón suggest that they are fighting the same underlying cause.

The practice of independent, low-budget film-making, a strong trend in Argentina since the mid-nineties, is clearly and centrally represented in a narrative line that both departs from that of *1984* and is both culturally and personally self-reflexive. The makers of *Filmatrón* financed the film with the money from their day jobs and created it in their free time, collaboratively and on a small budget. Farsa Producciones decided to make *Filmatrón* when the sequel to their first feature film, which had been an underground hit, was rejected by the BAFICI independent film festival organisers. *Filmatrón* was therefore a response to arbitrary parameters imposed by a closed-minded film establishment, and a militant defence of the use of video, an accessible format for cineasts on a shoestring:

*Filmatrón* cuenta mucho de nuestra experiencia como cineastas y artistas. […]

Nació cuando fuimos a presentar *Zona mutante* al BAFICI, en gestiones anteriores a la actual, donde el cine en video no era considerado cine y donde en la planilla que teníamos que llenar no existía esa opción. Al final no la eligieron porque era una película de género. De todas maneras, no existe un discurso contestatario en *Filmatrón*. Eso está porque forma parte de nuestras vidas, nada más.³

Farsa Producciones were vindicated, since the film went on to win awards at the 2007 edition of the BAFICI and the 2007 Buenos Aires Rojo Sangre festival, as well as international film festivals in Brazil, Uruguay and Spain in 2008, placing low-budget genre film firmly on the agenda. The Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales (INCAA) have since funded a genre film for the first time (*¡Malditos sean!*, Rugna &

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³ BAFICI: Festival de Cinema Independiente de Buenos Aires. At the time of writing in 2014 the festival is in its 16th year.

Forte, 2013), a strong indication of new-found acceptance by the ‘establishment’.\(^4\) Farsa Producciones were the trail-blazers at the root of this recognition. Their budget home-made cult zombie film *Plaga zombie* (1997) initiated a new phase in the history of Argentine film, which developed in parallel with New Argentine Cinema: ‘en Argentina, un país donde no había cine fantástico, *Plaga zombie* fue uno de los puntapiés iniciales de una movida que está a un paso de hacer historia’.\(^5\) *Filmatrón*, produced ten years later, was thus firmly rooted in the steadily developing Cinema Independiente Fantástico Argentino (CIFA), defined by Juan Pablo Cinelli as follows:

> Si hubiera que definir qué es el CIFA, habría que decir que se trata de un cine producido de manera casi personal, con vocación por el impacto (sea a través del horror, la violencia, la risa o la combinación de todos) y que toma como escuela inspiradora el cine fantástico realizado por artistas “independientes” norteamericanos en las décadas de setenta y del ochenta, como Carpenter, Romero, Craven, Raimi o Barker.\(^6\)

*Filmatrón* is a departure from the exuberant goriness of Farsa’s zombie films, but it retains the vibrant colours and humour that are characteristic of them, and like them, places the body in its different forms centre stage. Not only does its narrative follow a dystopian tradition that foregrounds the body as a site both of oppression and resistance, a central theme in Orwell’s *1984*, it also incorporates visual tropes that are clear constituents of the science fiction genre. The digitalized, holographic representations of the State, cyborg-style prosthetics and tele-surveillance technologies that are employed by UNO’s totalitarian state are pitched against another traditional staple of science fiction: the comic-book superhero, or rather the cinematic representation of the latter.

### 6.2 The body as a site of oppression and resistance

For Naomi Jacobs, classical dystopian texts are humanistic, placing the individual at the centre of the narrative and focussing on the tension between the body

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\(^6\) Cinelli, ‘¡Malditos sean! y el cine fantástico argentino’.
and mind on the one hand, and a dystopian regime that seeks to assimilate and destroy individuality on the other:

Much of the repulsive force of classical dystopia comes from its portrayal of a world drained of agency – of an individual’s capacity to choose and to act, or a group’s capacity to influence and intervene in social formations. [...] Both capacities are compromised in dystopia because the spheres of thought and action are so severely constrained. The citizens of dystopia are gripped in a social formation so powerful, a web of control so densely woven, that at worst they do not even know they are not free; at best, they might attempt a rebellion, but it will be mercilessly crushed.7

Jacobs’ description of these classical dystopian characteristics certainly applies to Nineteen Eighty-Four, cited by the makers of Filmatrón as the loose inspiration for the film. In Orwell’s novel the protagonist, Winston, has only dim, childhood memories of a time when the Party was not in power. As suggested by Jacobs, the Party has a stranglehold on individuality to the extent that personal interactions between Party members are strictly forbidden, and simple acts such as writing are considered dangerous. As conveyed in Filmatrón, citizens in 1984 are monitored through their television screens. In Orwell’s novel, they are expected to perform exercise collectively and at prescribed times of day, under the supervision of the Party; in Filmatrón, they are monitored from a central control room while all sitting in the same position, passively watching the set’s single channel. In both these examples the State ensures the respect of a prescribed physical location and set of actions. The link between individuality (or the loss thereof) and the carnal body highlighted by Jacobs and exemplified above is further illustrated by A.L. Morton when he writes, speaking of the Party’s control over physical relationships in 1984:

in Orwell’s world compulsory chastity plays the same role as compulsory promiscuity in Brave New World – the object in each case being to prevent

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normal sexual feeling, and so to degrade sex that it cannot afford any basis for individuality.\textsuperscript{8}

If the body is the object of control and conditioning, it also harbours a potential for subversion of the status quo. Through his interactions with fellow Party member Julia, whose name is echoed in Filmatrón’s character Julieta, Winston understands that ‘animal instinct […] was the force that would tear the Party to pieces’.\textsuperscript{9}

In Nineteen Eighty-Four the opposition between physical instinct and political propaganda is mainly expressed through the tension between Winston’s experience of pleasure and the physically distasteful environment imposed by the Party: the ‘oily tasting’ standard Party issue ‘Victory Gin’, the ‘strange evil tastes’ of the unnatural, partly synthetic food, are just some of the aspects that awaken a natural protest in Winston:

He meditated resentfully on the physical texture of life. Had it always been like this? Had food always tasted like this? […] Always in your stomach and in your skin there was a sort of protest, a feeling that you had been cheated of something you had a right to.\textsuperscript{10}

Winston’s five senses contribute, throughout the novel, to an awakening of his sense of self, in an echo of Roland Barthes’s affirmation that pleasure is asocial; that is to say, individualistic.\textsuperscript{11} The pleasure associated with taste and food is central to Winston’s growing rebellion; his progressive (re)discovery of foods that are not Party substitutes transport him to a past time-zone, where the Party does not exist and is therefore powerless. Winston’s Madeleine de Proust is the chocolate Julia shares with him during one of their illicit encounters:

Chocolate normally […] tasted, as nearly as one could describe it, like the smoke of a rubbish fire. But at some time or other he had tasted chocolate like


\textsuperscript{9} George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four, p. 132.

\textsuperscript{10} Nineteen Eighty-Four, pp. 53, 62.

the piece she had given him. The first whiff of its scent had stirred up some memory which he could not pin down, but which was powerful and troubling.\textsuperscript{12}

Although the society depicted in *Filmatrón* does not foreground an environment that is as decrepit and in Winston’s words ‘grimy’ as that of *1984*, or suggest that the foods that are consumed are ‘evil’ tasting, it does nonetheless hint at the fact that foods are no longer natural, and are instead commercial State-sponsored surrogates.\textsuperscript{13} The string of UNO videos that are projected *in lieu* of classes delivered by teachers, and that are also projected on the home TV’s single channel, show that food products such as milk, water, olive oil or lettuce are now substitutes. By manipulating the taste and texture of products that have a sensual relationship to the body – and as illustrated in *Nineteen Eighty Four*, a memorial relationship to a time preceding the monolithic presence of the party – UNO both controls and standardizes the physical experience. This control partly rests on the vulnerability linked to the body’s quality as a physical entity that can be manipulated and harmed, and is placed in contrast with the lack of corporeality of the State, a dichotomy that relates to real-world totalitarian practices.

6.4 The productised media body of the totalitarian State

*Filmatrón’s* food substitutes, its replacement of teachers by television screens that advertise rather than educate and the relentless, monopolistic advertising run by UNO’s various outlets reflects a fusion or collusion between State and megacorporation. El Gordo Héctor is present on every school and city wall, educational video and television programme: teaching, running political campaigns, extolling the virtues of substitute food, promoting family health and reminding citizens to fill their petrol tank. From this point of view, the film can be read as a criticism of the wave of neoliberalism implemented in the wake of the *Proceso*. The Menemist decade that ran from 1989 to 1999 typically offered the illusion of modernity and choice, while simultaneously encouraging a forgetting of the past *in lieu* of memory and mourning. For Idelber Avelar, the commodification of culture and of material life prevents the forming of memory:

\textsuperscript{12} Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, pp. 127-128.

\textsuperscript{13} Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 38.
Growing commodification negates memory because new commodities must always replace previous commodities, send them to the dustbin of history. The free market established by the Latin American dictatorships must, therefore, impose forgetting not only because it needs to erase the reminiscence of its barbaric origins but also because it is proper to the market to live in a perpetual present. [...] The market operates according to a substitutive, metaphorical logic in which the past must be relegated to obsolescence. The past is to be forgotten because the market demands that the new replace the old without leaving a remainder.14

In *Filmatrón*, this process is pushed to its full extent as the ruling party itself becomes a product even as it advertises goods. The portrayal of UNO’s tactics functions as a playful allegorization of the historical link between the authoritarian State of the *Proceso* years and the neoliberal context of the following decades, combining and contrasting the smiling, advertising face of El Gordo Héctor and a political violence exerted against dissenters that is typical of totalitarian states. It also constitutes a wider, critical reflection on the use of media image by political structures, which can be informed by drawing parallels with Marco Luceri’s reading of Marco Bellochio’s film on Mussolini, *Vincere* (2009), released two years after *Filmatrón*. Although the two films are very different in their style and approach, their subject matter creates points of resonance that are interesting, notably in their incorporation of the trope of the mask. In both films the visible, mediatised body is presented as a mask designed to ‘sell’ the ruling power, contrasted and combined with a less public facet revealing the true nature of the power dynamics between citizen and state.

Through media representation the omnipresent El Gordo Héctor, like the figure of Mussolini in *Vincere*, is ‘transformed [...] into an actor whose body has become the incarnation of a myth’.15 Some formal parallels can be drawn between the many parts played by El Gordo Héctor in *Filmatrón* and the Duce’s ever-increasing combination of multiple roles and public facets, both in Bellochio’s film and in reality. Indeed, Gian Piero Brunetta states that Mussolini played the part of ‘a figure capable of covering all

roles, in a very long solo performance, taking place in the most various of places’. Filmatrón juxtaposes State violence and a quasi intimate, personal communication through a friendly, family oriented image on the posters and television screens, which feature Héctor addressing his audience directly and in familiar terms. This is revealing of totalitarian practices that were strikingly emphasized under Il Duce’s regime. The latter combined mythopoeia with a physical violence that was omnipresent in real terms, while being absent from the constructed myth.

In Filmatrón, this contradiction is at its most apparent in the shot that features Esteban opening the door to El Gordo Héctor. So deeply ingrained is the positive image of Héctor as the nations’ advisor, protector, educator and entertainer, that Esteban is unable to suppress a positive reaction to his appearance, despite the fact that Héctor is in the process of hitting him over the head with a baseball bat. Here, Filmatrón expresses in comical, light-hearted terms a relationship between State, image and body that reflects a darker reality. Luceri argues that ‘political physicality’ is at the heart of 20th century totalitarian structures, in which ‘the physicality of the leader is the very essence of his authority’. This political physicality is split into two expressions that are at once complementary and contradictory. On the one hand, it is expressed in the violence exerted on dissenters: ‘the violent and destructive attacks against opponents, the cruel and armed struggles, the kidnappings, the ambushes and murders’. On the other, representations of the dictator’s image take on a mythical, sacred character, progressively receding from the physical world. A similar pattern is reflected across Filmatrón, in the contrast between the fetishized image of El Gordo Héctor and the physical violence to which Daniel, Lucas and their friends are subjected.

6.5 UNO’s political physicality: brutalised flesh vs. Holographic State

The dystopian opposition between citizen and State in Filmatrón is indeed articulated in a clear distinction between corporeal, physically vulnerable citizens and a disembodied, virtualised, mediatised State equipped with technological tools of surveillance and enforcement; the latter is suggested in UNO’s logo, in which the

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17 Luceri, p. 112.
18 Luceri, p. 112.
rounded U and the O are linked to form the image of a pair of handcuffs. Relationships between characters from either side are articulated around the brutal treatment of the body, and Lucas, Daniel and their friends are portrayed as the constant recipients of physical violence. The school bullying suffered by Lucas at the start of the film, for example, during which he is thrown to the ground and spat on, mirrors the violence imparted on Daniel and his friends by UNO agents. Daniel’s first encounter with Baldo and Julieta ends with him being beaten up and shocked; later, after he has been charged at the Agency headquarters, he meets up with his friends who like him are covered in bruises and have been beaten into submission. Their ensuing conversation and separation centres around the theme of brutality; Daniel’s friends abandon the project, and later destroy the only copy of Escoria rebelde, due to the violent treatment received at the hands of the agents.

On the other hand, when UNO agents intervene physically in the context of a raid, their entire body, including the head and face, are covered by futuristic suits, so that they are both protected and menacing; they are thus dehumanised. This stark contrast between the bodies of the citizens and that of the State is foregrounded in the short, old-style computer animation graphics introducing the story in the initial menu section of the DVD. Four vignettes are used to illustrate the departure point of the narrative. Two of these represent agents of the State: they are pictures of a boot and a threatening mask, both of which hide the body from view. The vignettes symbolising civilians, on the other hand, are a pair of eyes widened with fear, and a mouth opened in a scream; the pink, red and white tones of the flesh and eyeballs contrast with the yellow and black of the agents’ uniforms. The vignettes express an oppressor-oppressed relationship through the juxtaposition and contrasting of uniform and flesh that recalls O’Brien’s statement to Winston in 1984: ‘If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever’.

19 The first inference is that the flesh is vulnerable to pain, and thus vulnerable to fear and control; the second, that power is signalled by the masking of the body. This configuration is enacted at various points in the film: UNO agents are either uniformed or projected in virtual forms, while the portrayal of Lucas and the rebels highlights their bodies subjected to physical violence.

19 George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four, p. 188.
The violence foregrounded in the vignettes is immediately echoed in the opening sequence of the film. The very first shot shows Daniel, in the lead role of *Escoria rebelde*, being hit by masked cyber-zombies; his face moves towards the camera under the force of the blow, and the physicality of the shot is further highlighted by the blood that appears from his mouth. This sequence is mirrored moments later in the diegetic reality when UNO agents appear at the door, covered from head to toe in threatening uniforms that mask their face and hide their bodies, augmented with cyber-prostheses. The latter generate what appears to be a form of electro-convulsive shock that overpowers the brain through a non-contact flash applied to the victim’s open eyes. The dress code of the agents creates a parallel with the non-human form of the cyber-zombies in the embedded narrative, which can be interpreted as an implied relationship between artistic creation and reality.

The emphasis lain here on the vulnerability of the rebels’ body is further reinforced a few scenes later, when Daniel is interrogated in the Agency headquarters. His naked body is first shot from a distance so that it appears small and therefore defenceless, lit up under a spotlight against the dark ‘blank canvas’ of the interrogation room. It occupies the central focal point of the shot for a few seconds as the camera zooms in. Daniel’s highlighted nakedness, body hair and cowering posture, which he adopts as a protective response to the giant looming holographic manifestation of agent Baldo’s head, invest him with an animal quality and cast his body as a site of oppression. In contrast, the agents are corporeally absent from this scene, both by virtue of the fact that they are projected merely as heads, and because of their holographic quality: not being physical, they cannot be touched. In a similar way, the figure of El Gordo Héctor combines omnipresence with a lack of corporeality, since he is a two dimensional image shown on screens and posters. When he does briefly appear in the flesh, it is in a dark room at the heart of the *Agencia de Seguridad Nacional*.

Katherine Hayles suggests that disembodiment is a classical feature of the totalitarian regime, as demonstrated by the concept behind Foucault’s Panopticon:

It is not coincidental that the Panopticon abstracts power out of the bodies of disciplinarians into a universal, disembodied gaze. On the contrary, it is precisely this move that gives the Panopticon its force, for when the bodies of
the disciplinarians seem to disappear into the technology, the limitations of corporeality are hidden.\textsuperscript{20}

A literal ‘disappearance into technology’ is foregrounded in \textit{Filmatrón}. UNO’s disciplinarians are projected as holograms or meld cyber-extensions to parts of their bodies that both hide and protect them, participating in ‘an entire semiology of visual narratives on military cyborgs and superhuman techno-augmentation associated with the superhero imaginary’.\textsuperscript{21} The notion of the ‘gaze’ is particularly relevant here given that the Party’s control over the population in 1984 is associated with the refrain ‘Big Brother is watching you’. In \textit{Filmatrón} this catchphrase is shifted to a series of more positive slogans, in line with the fact that all communications through El Gordo Héctor are aimed at selling a range of products. The repetitive posters in the school corridor thus claim that ‘El Gordo Héctor te está protegiendo’ (a blatant case of false advertising, since they are the backdrop to one of the scenes where Lucas and Chino get bullied), while street posters cheerfully exclaim ‘¡Qué bueno estar en familia! ¿Has llenado tu coche?’ This provides a cinematic illustration of Matthew Witt and Lance de Haven-Smith’s view of what they call the Holographic State:

The Holographic State mimics a supercolossal computer program. It is detached from flesh-and-blood people, from real events; it creates its own reality by investing words with new meanings, conjuring the appearance of consensus with sentimental symbols through the radical appropriation of loaded terminology.\textsuperscript{22}

UNO combines the virtual projection of a society of consensus through the ever-smiling face of El Gordo Héctor with ubiquitous surveillance. Not only is Héctor’s gaze everywhere, citizens are also monitored through the television screens on which he unvariably appears. As such, except in cases of intervention against rebels, there are no corporeal interactions between representatives of UNO and the State’s citizens. Even the head of television programmes’ secretary is summoned via a holocall; she

\textsuperscript{20} Hayles, \textit{How We Became Posthuman}, p.194.


appears on his desk and can be switched off at will, the diminutive size of her hologram a representation of her lesser importance within the hierarchy.

6.6 Bodies vs. embodiment: the theoretical body of the disciplined

As we have seen, the ‘flesh-and-blood’ nature of UNO’s citizens is highlighted by the mise en scène, its representations contrasting with those of a decorporealised State. Yet, while UNO inflicts physical violence on bodies that are vulnerable, it also seeks to classify and order them as two-dimensional entities. There is a stark contrast between the animal quality of Daniel’s body in the interrogation room or his friends’ faces covered in bruises, and the two-dimensional, black and white posters recording the rebels’ faces that are pinned up on the wall of the Agency headquarters. On these, rectangles highlight their eyes and mouth in such a way that every picture, from a distance, looks the same. Recorded individuals thus become interchangeable, in the same way the filmed bodies in the television monitoring room are framed by repetitions of the TV set’s rectangular shape. They themselves become repetitive images of bodies, replicated elements in a series, rather than individuals. This process is accurately described by Hayles in her account of Foucault’s representation of the surveillance State:

Although the bodies of the disciplined do not disappear […] the specificities of their corporealities fade into technology as well, becoming a universalized body worked upon in a uniform way by surveillance techniques and practices.23

One of the points made by Hayles in her discussion of embodiment, however, is that the uniform application of practices by hegemonic structures described by theorists such as Foucault has its limits when applied to the real (physical) world. Hayles cites Elaine Scarry, for example, who considers that ‘bodily practices have a physical reality that can never be fully assimilated into discourse’.24 Hayles, in line with Scarry, establishes an important difference between the body as a theoretical construct, and the concept of embodiment, which relates to individual practice and is therefore tied to a

23 Hayles, Katherine, How We Became Posthuman, p.194.
24 Hayles, How We Became Posthuman, p.195.
time and a place. As such, whereas the body can be assimilated to an overarching theory, narrative, or representation, embodiment introduces a element of destabilization with respect to the latter. Embodiment, as opposed to the body as it is discussed within social theory, is performative; thus ‘whereas the body can disappear into information with scarcely a murmur of protest, embodiment cannot, for it is tied to the circumstances of the occasion and the person’.  

The character interactions that take place due to the moustache that is drawn on Lucas’s television set provide a clear illustration of Hayles’s point. The hand-drawn moustache is perceived as a sign of subversiveness, drawing the agents’ attention to the house and convincing Julieta that the tape must be there: ‘Debe estar allí. ¡Se están burlando de nosotros!’ Borrowing the terms used by Hayles, the hand-drawn moustache interferes with UNO’s control over ‘a universalized body worked upon in a uniform way’. Instead of disappearing into information, the body is emphasized and becomes the source of humour, renewed with each individual’s interaction with the image. El Gordo Héctor’s instinctive reaction to the moustache on the face of the child being observed is to laugh, just as the viewer’s reaction to seeing the moustache for the first time on Héctor’s face is to laugh. Humour not only functions in specific, individual instances of time; it also equalizes the observer / observee relationship, and replaces the power dynamic with a more balanced human relationship to the screen: when he laughs, Héctor is no longer observing to control, but observing and being entertained. The power dynamic is also changed when the viewing relationship is reversed: when Héctor first appears on Lucas’s television screen advertising products with the moustache painted on his face, the effect is also comical, creating a critical distance from his marketing tactics by disrupting the believability of the on-screen act. The hand-drawn moustache is a subversive element physically disrupting both UNO’s output and their patterned, repetitive observation and control of citizens; it acts as a counter-mask lain atop that of the State.

*Filmatrón* provides an apt illustration of Hayles and Scarry’s approach to the concept of embodiment. The individual, time-bound practices undertaken by Lucas and his friends as they bring together the different technological tools and performative

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instances required to shoot *Filmatrón* disrupt the State’s image-productions of the body and prevent the latter from ‘disappearing into information’, to borrow Hayles’s words.

**6.7 Re-corporealisation of UNO, dys-appearance of Baldo**

The moment in the narrative when Lucas decides to fight back against UNO’s hold on creativity initiates his own progression from his status as a victim to being in a position to win the final battle against Baldo, which is embodied in a physical fight. However, it also initiates a process of corporealisation of the State’s agents and representatives. It is indeed clear that while the physical nature of the citizens’ bodies are highlighted in the *mise en scène*, the real bodies of UNO’s agents, while being projected and shown to the public in virtual forms, are simultaneously hidden from sight in the darkened back rooms of the *Agencia de Seguridad Nacional* or behind masks and uniforms that cover their body. Agent bodies are thus marked by absence as well as presence, providing a liminal interface between the citizen and the State and placed on the boundary between human and machine. When the agent that is chasing Lucas after UNO’s first intervention against the rebels removes ‘its’ mask to reveal a female face (that of Julieta), the sense of surprise experienced by the viewer and reflected in the close-up of Lucas’s facial expression derives in part from the expectation of a male gender traditionally associated with physical violence. However, it also stems from the sense of re-corporealisation experienced when a human face is revealed behind the mask, taking away the latter’s power (Daniel responds by renewing his attempt to escape; a mistake, since Julieta turns out to be a formidable opponent).

This occurrence is a hint at what is to unfold in the film; one by one, UNO protagonists progressively shift from non-corporeal representations to being fully inscribed in the physical world through their interactions with Lucas and his friends. A reversal of power dynamics is expressed in the contrast between two sequences at either end of the film. In the first, Lucas realises the competition is virtual, when he stumbles in on Antonio’s hologram talking to the troupe of actors hired by UNO at the Ministry of Information. Here, the director of programmes’ virtual body and Lucas’s physical body come together in a space where Antonio has all the power and Lucas
none. By the end of the film, an inversion occurs: Antonio physically enters Lucas’s house, tricked into believing that that is where Filmatrón is being broadcast from. This time it is Antonio who is present in the flesh, powerless faced with Lucas’s virtual manifestation on the television screen.

This shift from an invulnerable non-corporeal presence to a vulnerable corporeal one affects not only Antonio but all the main characters associated with UNO. These are initially either hidden from sight, either by uniforms or inside government buildings, or projected as images. By the end of the film, however, not only Antonio but Julieta, El Gordo Héctor, Baldo and his father are forced to interact in the flesh, as the loci where confrontations take place are shifted in a process of equalisation. These characters are subsequently overpowered or become open to negotiations. Julieta is the first character to undergo a full transition from a uniformed, holographic representative of the State to a corporeal individual capable of empathy. The shift in her position that precedes her betrayal of Baldo is signalled in a physical response that is emphasised by the soundtrack. Just before the first physical confrontation between Baldo and the rebels outside Lucas’s house, in which Julieta shoots him, Lucas reveals that he has Gutiérrez’s camera. The sound of Julieta’s heartbeat comes to the forefront of the soundtrack, and the dialogue of other characters around her becomes muffled. This is what Tony McKibbin, citing Martine Beugnet, refers to as ‘a sound close-up, where sound reflects an intimate over a social audio universe’; in this context, ‘the sensual takes precedence over the social’. The moment of her physical, emotional reaction translated by the soundtrack highlights the fact that Julieta responds to events as an individual rather than as the assenting member of a wider political body. This precipitates the start of Baldo’s physical degradation, in which he progressively becomes marked as flesh, losing all references that define him as an agent.

Later in the film, Baldo comes to in hospital after being in a coma, his physical form now clearly revealed and emphasized in an illustration of what Drew Leder calls the ‘dys-appearance’ of the body. The prefix, here, refers to the dysfunctionality of the

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body, and the role occurrences of bodily dysfunction have in causing it to become re-emphasized within the context of the Western duality between mind and body, where the latter is often given a secondary place. Within this duality the body becomes ‘latent’, viewed as secondary or forgotten by the thinking mind. Leder conceptualises dys-appearance as a form of reappearance of, or refocusing on, the body, which takes place in contexts where pain, illness or embarrassment are experienced. 27 Chris Shilling highlights the affinities of Leder’s views with mainstream sociology, which ‘associate[s] sickness with disruption to the smooth functioning of social roles’. 28

Where the fictional context of Filmatrón is concerned, the ‘dys-appearance’ of Baldo’s body marks a visual and conceptual disruption in the narrative’s initial hierarchy. Baldo leaves the hospital wearing slippers and clothed in a revealing hospital gown, rather than boots and a threatening, masking uniform. Pale, fatigued, and showing the signs of dehydration – his skin is flaking, his lips nearly white and he has pronounced dark circles under his eyes – his body is both present and marked as flesh, vulnerable to the laws of the physical world and to actions undertaken by other characters in the narrative.

The catalyst for this degradation of Baldo’s body, which runs in parallel with the re-corporealisation of UNO’s representatives, is trope of the superhero mask. The reversal of power dynamics and the transfer from image to flesh takes root in Lucas’s decision to perform. This resists both the brutality inflicted on his friends and his own incorporation into a body of information, under the surveillance practices of the State. The disruptive nature of the mask, and the playful nature of the film, mean that Filmatrón can be read as a contemporary expression of Grotesque realism, as it was theorised by Bakhtin.

6.3 Role of the superhero mask

Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that the mask functions as an ‘involvement shield’ making interaction with others possible; it also relates to ‘transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries’ and is ‘based on a particular interrelation of reality

28 Shilling, The Body and Social Theory, p. 217.
This approach translates well to the function of the trope in the film, since the mask is the symbol of Lucas’s personal metamorphosis. It enables him to interact with UNO in a confrontational manner and ultimately initiate the transition to a new world (dis)order, through the manipulation of image and the violation of hierarchical boundaries that are signalled visually. Whereas in the first half of the film the use of coded sartorial practices is UNO’s prerogative, translating and magnifying the agents’ powers, Lucas’s decision to shoot the film is also a decision to confront the power of UNO’s various masks with a mask of his own. Lucas’s superhero costume is the reproduction of that worn by Filmatrón, the hero of the comic book he creates, who appears in a two-dimensional animated form at various points in the film, engaging in conversation with Lucas. At first, their discussions are centred on the motives and next steps of the characters within the story; Lucas’s interactions with his main character reflect the creative process as he tries to write his story. Later, however, the two-dimensional superhero explicitly becomes Lucas’s alter ego. As Lucas takes in the

Figure 27: Lucas’s creation, comic book superhero Filmatrón (top); Lucas as Filmatrón (bottom).

havoc that has been wreaked on Gutiérrez’s underground studio and understands that he has been kidnapped and probably killed by UNO agents, Filmatrón appears on the screen, saying: ‘¡Sabes lo que tienes que hacer!’ This moment when Lucas resolves to fight back mirrors the ‘story of origins’ at the root of most superhero characters; just as the killing of Bruce Wayne’s parents creates Batman, for example, the disappearance of recently acquired father figure Gutiérrez and the presence in his shirt pocket of the figurine representing Lucas confirms the latter’s decision to don an avenger’s mask. For Bruce Campbell,

The story of origins is […] an emblematic moment in the construction not only of many a superhero character, but a specific kind of narrative frame. The genesis story aids in the establishment of that character’s powers and agency within a mythic time/space framework capable of standing outside the ordinary world of real historical experience, and at the same time operating within that ordinary plane of existence.  

Here, the ‘mythic time/space framework’ is the creative moment and final product associated with film-making. In this context the medium of film acquires heterotopic qualities, being both within and outside the realm of ordinary existence. Filmatrón foregrounds an overflowing of the fictional world into reality. In the final battle that opposes Lucas, Daniel and Julieta to Baldo and the Agency, Lucas, wearing his actor’s costume, becomes invested with superhero powers; he fights off multiple armed attackers and ultimately overcomes Baldo, warding off the power generated by the latter’s enhanced cyber-prosthesis. The crossover between the fantastical, fictional world of the comic book and the diegetic reality of the film is signalled by the merging of styles and media in the final moments of the battle, in which the protagonists are represented as two-dimensional comic-book characters. By donning the costume worn fictionally by his creation, Lucas takes on the qualities inherent to his characterisation, including the drive and capacity for action that derives from the superhero’s experience. However, this last element (the superhero’s experience that forms his/her motivation, a notion that overlaps with what Campbell describes as the ‘story of origins’) is never explicitly revealed where Filmatrón is concerned. In fact, very little

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of the narrative associated with the fictional character created by Lucas is shared with the viewer; what is highlighted instead is a set of references to constitutional features of the superhero genre.

If the founding figures of the genre are considered to be North American, and if originally ‘the modern moral code inherent to the superhero profile was not built […] on philosophical universals, but on a national [i.e. North American] ethos’, the genre has survived through evolutions and through revisions of its own tradition.31 Some of these revisions have occurred through time, while others have occurred synchronically, across borders and cultures. Ultimately, beyond national distinctions, Campbell suggests that

both the aesthetic and discursive dimensions of the superhero genre [articulate] a distinctive interplay of individualism and collective identity, of modernity and the moral order, of power and vulnerability in the context of modern mass society.32

Filmatrón’s portrayal of the superhero has less to do with what Sharad Devarajan and Raminder Kaur call ‘transcreation’ – the translation and adaptation of generic and narrative features to a different cultural context – than with the exploitation of structural elements articulating the relationship of the individual with power and political social structures, away from a specific national context.33 That said, some elements woven into the fabric of the narrative can be read as hints referring to Argentina’s history of violent dictatorship. One example is the extract of Lucas’s unfinished comic that is read out aloud as he tries to decide the contents of the next speech bubble. ‘Y así fue como logré escapar’, says the first character. Filmatrón responds with a question: ‘¿Cómo explicas la desaparición de todo el pueblo?’ Debating what the answer should be, Lucas finally settles for ‘No es necesario explicar eso. ¡Era necesario para poder capturarte, Filmatrón!’ No further background is given to the story, but the trope of disappearance, the refusal by the agressor to provide an explanation, and the fact that the disappearance of an entire section of the population is presented as a means to an end, all echo salient features of the Proceso. The dialogue

between Lucas and Baldo that takes place before the final confrontation also hints at Argentina’s historical context. In response to Lucas’s affirmation that an eventual rebellion against the hold of the State was inevitable, Baldo calls on the experience of the previous generation: ‘Esto no es la primera vez que pasa algo así, pibe. Mi viejo estuvo en esta misma situación muchas veces. Y siempre termina igual.’ Baldo then switches on his cyber-prosthesis and proceeds to electrocute Lucas, inviting a parallel with standard torture practices under the *junta*.

Although the ‘story of origins’ of Filmatrón is not revealed verbally, it is visually embedded in the course of the final battle, and adds to the above interpretation. After having been wounded by Baldo, Lucas lies on the ground, his mouth and nose bleeding; getting up, he spreads the blood over the top part of his face, organically recreating Filmatrón’s mask. Vicki Karaminas, drawing on Claude Lévi-Strauss, suggests that ‘the mask functions as part of a system of diacritical signs (with their origin myths and the rites in which they appear). These signs become intelligible only through the relationships that unite them’. Here, the superhero mask is construed as having its origins in violence applied to the physical body by agents of the State; it both embodies trauma and is a tool that brings to an end the repetition of UNO’s cycle of repression. Karaminas focuses on the coded symbolism of the superhero dress, suggesting that the mask, like all forms of dress, both covers and reveals; she further cites Warwick and Carvallo, explaining that ‘in the language of symbolism, one of the key features of all ‘screening’ garments is their ability to conceal and expose, insulate and mediate’. Filmatrón’s mask can thus be decoded as a screen that organically incorporates and symbolizes the traumatic source of its own existence, both concealing and revealing its origins in a collective past.

### 6.8 Filmatrón as an example of grotesque realism

The place and effects of the mask in *Filmatrón* call for parallels with the Rabelaisian tradition of grotesque realism as it is theorised by Bakhtin. In François Rabelais’ work the mask ‘reveals the essence of the grotesque’, expressing a relationship to the body rooted in folk culture. Bakhtin writes:

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35 Karaminas, ‘Über Men’, p. 3.
The material bodily principle in grotesque realism is offered in its all-popular festive and utopian aspect. The cosmic, social, and bodily elements are given here as an indivisible whole. [...] In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such, it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world.  

The relationship to the body as an organic, collective whole no longer applies in a contemporary Western context. It is a concept that has suffered all the more in Argentina in the wake of the Proceso, as indicated by the expressions of a fragmented social body explored in Chapter Three. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the course of this chapter, two poles are represented in Filmatrón, drawing characters towards two incarnations of the body: one a material form, made of flesh and blood; the other a projected form, severed from its ‘bodily roots’. Bakhtin suggests that the different expressions of grotesque realism ‘degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh’, playfully violating boundaries and celebrating ‘the joy of change and reincarnation [and] the merry negative of uniformity and similarity’. This process of degradation or transfer of the abstract into the material is one that operates across the narrative arc of the film. It takes place not only in the progressive materialisation of characters mentioned earlier, but also in a vertical movement from the upper part of the body (for example the holographic heads, or the upper torso and face on television or on posters) to the lower functions of the body. This culminates in Baldo’s visit to Lucas’s house on leaving the hospital, a scene that focuses on ‘the bodily lower stratum’, which is a traditional source of grotesque laughter. Baldo, now in a state of physical decomposition, seeks to enter the house clothed in a hospital gown that threatens to reveal his posterior. His menacing boots have been replaced by slippers, and as he attempts to climb up the wall he is repealed by a function of the digestive system; in other words, he is vomited on by Secuaz, after she has binged on substitute

38 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 20
beer. The source of laughter here rests on ‘the belly, and the buttocks’; it is a laughter that ‘degrades and materializes’, breaking down the symbolic power of UNO.  

There is a clear difference between the elements of grotesque realism expressed in *Filmatrón* and Bakhtin’s descriptions of the Romantic grotesque, which can be applied for example to *La antena* (see Chapter Five). The distinctions established by Bakhtin are particularly useful in the context of this study, since they describe a difference in the treatment of fear and trauma:

These differences appear most distinctly in relation to terror. The world of Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man. All that is ordinary, commonplace […] and recognized by all suddenly becomes […] dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world.  

What Bakhtin describes here structurally resembles the process of estrangement identified by Suvin in the dystopian text. The Grotesque realism associated with mediaeval and renaissance folk culture, on the other hand, dispels fear through laughter:

Terror was turned into something gay and comic. Folk culture brought the world close to man, gave it a bodily form, and established a link through the body and bodily life. […] The images of Romantic grotesque usually express fear of the world and seek to inspire their reader with this fear. On the contrary, the images of folk culture are absolutely fearless and communicate this fearlessness to all.  

This reading suggests a recasting, not only of *Filmatrón*, but indeed of the entire CIFA movement, as a contemporary expression of Renaissance folk culture that is a positive, creative response to a world mediated through vision and where image equates power. *Filmatrón* indeed provides a clear instance of the opposition between the body as a theoretical construct and embodiment as performance. It is the acting performance of Lucas and his friends that brings about a change in the status quo, destabilising UNO and re-corporealising its protagonists. As such, while the start of this section casts the

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body as a site both of oppression and resistance, the approach might now be reformulated as follows: while the body is a site of oppression, controlled, physically assaulted and rewritten by UNO, the performative practice engaged in by Lucas and his friends moves the protagonists away from ‘being bodies’ and towards ‘becoming embodied’. While the film projects the overcoming of oppression as the structurally traditional goal of the superhero narrative, it also conveys the importance of film as a process; not simply the process of viewing, but also and more importantly the process of participating actively, as part of a wider, physically connected social body, in the creation of images.
Chapter 7: Conclusions

7.1 Starting points

A few pages into his introduction to *Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, a study seeking to understand the way in which science fiction interprets the world, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay writes a sentence that casts doubt on the potential of science fiction film to fulfil this task, on the basis that its visual form detracts from critical thought: ‘the power of visual representations of the sublime and the grotesque […] is so great it can easily eclipse matters that demand intellectual reflection, such as fictive history and imaginary science’.1 While Csicsery-Ronay’s comment is not entirely dismissive of sf film, it nonetheless participates in a trend that has tended to segregate film from literature, placing these forms at different points in a hierarchy. Judgements are cast on science fiction film today as they once were on the science fiction genre itself, often on no basis other than personal preconceptions, or else they rely on research conducted with a specific bias toward examining the ‘spectacular’ nature of sf film. Raising the profile of science fiction film became one of the drivers behind this study. Examining a corpus of films that made little use of the spectacular in the form of special effects was one of the strategies I used to draw out sf’s diverse strategies in film.

Reading Mariano Paz’s article ‘South of the Future’, which called for further research on Latin American science fiction film, was a second thread.2 It led to the discovery of a corpus of science fiction cinema I had no knowledge of, and eventually to the exploration of contemporary issues relating to trauma and representation in Argentina. This revealed that the dismissal of science fiction film was not the prerogative of science fiction scholars. Despite the existence of a few solid articles and chapters on sf film written by academics in the field of Latin American studies, the science fiction genre has sometimes been viewed by film critics as an inadequate form with which to convey the darker aspects of Argentina’s historical experience. It has been accused of lacking in seriousness, of being a-political, as was the case when Carri

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1 Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, p. 9.
used a trope from the genre in *Los rubios*. Less critical views have cast sf as a form of camouflage, with no regard for specificities that might distinguish science fiction from the broader category of fantasy.

At the same time, a review of critical studies in Argentine sf cinema revealed a gaping hole, providing little to draw on in the way of understanding the form’s characteristics and strengths, and how these might be relevant to the expression of political trauma. To the best of my knowledge, Argentine science fiction film, or indeed Latin American sf film, has not been the object of a single book-length academic study to date. Alfredo Luis Suppia’s entry in the Oxford Bibliographies Latin American Studies database highlights the dearth of critical inquiry, starting with a reassurance that ‘Latin American science fiction (SF) cinema does exist, although it is seldom noted by most film critics, scholars, and historians’. Research bringing together science fiction film and trauma is also scarce.

### 7.2 Research methods and limitations

In the course of this study, I examined a range of narrative strategies and tropes that are characteristic of science fiction, and sought to understand how they functioned within the filmic form and how they interacted with the concepts of history, memory and trauma. I chose to study a relatively limited number of films, in order to provide an in-depth reading of each filmic text. This was partly derived from an intention to avoid the anthological approach that has most often been used in the study of Latin American science fiction to date, in line with M. Elizabeth Ginway. While anthologies have been very useful in terms of laying out a landscape and providing a broad set of references, the films in the corpus deserved a more in-depth, theoretical approach. I let the films themselves guide my research, proceeding empirically and working outward from the films rather than inwards from a theoretical framework. In hindsight, this approach has limited my capacity to comment on the specificities of the cinematic form. While I do make links to film theory within individual chapters, this is an area that would benefit from more extensive critical inquiry.

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The lack of resources on the topic I set out to study was both a blessing and a curse. Studying an area that has been overlooked is fulfilling and gives a clear sense of purpose. However, I set out to cover grounds that were vast and complex, combining multiple subject areas, academic fields, concepts, and geocultural perspectives, unaware of the implications of trying to draw these elements together within a single academic study. Exploring these grounds has been highly enriching, but developing the capacity to understand and articulate the multiple complexities has been (and continues to be) a great challenge. Reducing the scope of enquiry from the outset might have lightened the task and increased the efficient articulation of the thesis.

7.3 Contributions to knowledge

This thesis aimed to address the issues raised above, and it makes the following contributions to knowledge. First, it has studied the ways in which a range of structures and tropes characteristic of science fiction film address collective trauma, across a corpus spanning four decades and in films ranging from an auteurist film noir to a home-made B-movie. In doing so, it has provided a set of tools with which to evaluate statements regarding the limitations of sf film made by sf scholars, such as that made by Csicsery-Ronay in Seven Beauties.

Building on the work undertaken by Roger Luckhurst on trauma and abduction narratives, it has also established that the narrative strategies characteristically employed by science fiction cinema are singularly relevant to the expression of collective, political trauma and the complexities of trauma memory.

My third contribution is quantitative. While several good articles and chapters have drawn links between Argentine sf film and the traumatic experience of dictatorship, they have addressed only one or two films at a time. Mariano Paz’s thesis is the only example of scholarship extending this to three films, as part of a broader study on political ideology incorporating British and North American sf film. The present thesis has offered a new contribution by consistently examining the theme of trauma representation across a wider corpus of six Argentine films, drawing the outline of a first book-length study. This quantitative contribution also has a qualitative outcome. To date, disagreements over the use of sf tropes to comment on trauma and
history have been confined to the critical assessment of their use in individual films such as Carri’s *Los rubios* or Subiela’s *Hombre mirando al sudeste*, as mentioned in the introduction. Systematically examining this issue across a corpus helps better to understand the contributions of the science fiction genre to the complex expression of traumatic memory, beyond isolated debates regarding the successful application (or not) of sf tropes to specific films.

Needless to say, this study is a small contribution to filling the vast gap that remains, and areas requiring further critical study are extensive. The themes that were analysed closely in each film can be identified to varying degrees across the other texts in the corpus, and each one could form the basis for further study in its own right. Each film was a rich and complex layering of intertextual references, and more work could be done to understand and interpret these. Moreover, the field of film theory could be systematically applied to this research with great benefits. An approach to the corpus that drew mainly on Deleuze would take the connections between time, memory, and film much further, for example.

### 7.3 Findings and outcomes

#### 7.3.1 General observations

Before returning to the main themes addressed in each chapter, a few general observations can be made that respond to the questions raised in the introduction. First, the visual nature of science fiction film does not take away from reflection on historical or political processes; in fact, this study shows that it actively contributes to engaging the viewer in this process of reflection. Second, it is all the more effective in the context of dealing with trauma since it permits an engagement with the past that is not purely verbal but engages the body. The relationships between body and space, body and image, and body and practices are recurrent across the films, providing a unifying thread. Third, science fiction fundamentally questions reality. In its cinematic form, this characteristic leads to a direct, concrete questioning of the relationship between image and reality. This not only expresses the complex, unstable nature of traumatic memory; it also indirectly challenges and destabilises representations of the past (and indeed the
present) that are imposed as truthful. This is especially important in a contemporary context where media and power go hand in hand.

7.3.2 Findings per chapter

Chapter Two examined how the science fictional sublime opened up a space to articulate the untranslatable, away from the spectacular transcendentalism of special effects. In Invasión, the sublime hinted at the inadequacy of the image to translate the experience of terror, while the sublime in Hombre mirando al sudeste highlighted the rift between projected image and reality, in a context where perpetrators manipulate the concept of truth. The chapter on Moebius showed how the absent presence of the desaparecidos and the State’s totalitarian patterns were expressed through geometrical and mathematical patterns, enabling the viewer to construct meaning on a scientific register that was itself prohibited during the Proceso. The time and space distortions conceptualised by the Moebius strip were shown to function as a representation of complex traumatic memory, which is both recurrent and static in time and space. Mosquera’s translation of the Moebius strip from a literary text to a filmic one meant that the form could be interpreted as the cinema’s time-image, bringing together opposites that define traumatic memory in the Argentine context and beyond: absence and presence, past and present, finitude and infinity, coercion and freedom.

In Chapter Four, the examination of an iconic science fiction space, the dystopian city, explored the concept of collective spatial representations of history. The chapter examined how Buenos Aires 2010 embodied the totalitarian State’s control patterns, in the form of monumental structures that projected projects elaborated under the junta. It emerged that these patterns were projected as dominating more than the physical sphere, extending to the realms of language, memory, and time, and affecting the relationship of the characters to their environment. Resistance to an imposed version of history was visualised as a trajectory through the city mapped by an alternative narrative. La sonámbula showed how the generic tools of science fiction cinema can be used to convey the disruptions in time and collective memory associated with post-dictatorship trauma, providing an alternative map of the urban environment that conveys and embodies the complexities of Argentina’s recent past.
The next chapter featured an expressionistic city in which Gothic imagery and tropes weaved in and out of cultural references to the dictatorship, highlighting feelings of alienation. The strong Gothic aesthetics expressed in the monstrous, fragmented, hybrid bodies of the characters formed a series of associations with the legacy of the physical, psychological and social trauma experienced during the dictatorship. This took place through interplay with visual references forming part of a socio-cultural stream of consciousness underlying the main plot. The body was also at the heart of the final chapter, where it was represented as a site of control and contestation. The clear dystopian format of the film pitches a vulnerable physical body bereft of agency against posthuman representations of a State that is virtualised, masked by uniforms and image manipulations. The trope of the superhero mask resists and inverts these power dynamics. Engaging in a tradition of grotesque realism, the mask signals a disruption of the image projected by the media State, operating a transfer from image to flesh and equalising the grounds of interaction.

Taking the corpus as a whole and examining it from a chronological point of view, a progression can be noted. First of all the corpus moves from highlighting the limits of cinematic representation in Invasión, to a systematic questioning of the nature and validity of the image in post-dictatorship films that is expressed in a subversion by the filmic text of the relationship between image and message. A further evolution occurs in Filmatrón, where tools for image production are explicitly used within the story in a mise-en-abyme that highlights the importance of producing images, in the real world, as a form of resistance against reified, colonised versions of memory and experience produced by the State, megacorporations or the media.

Secondly, the narratives of Invasión, Hombre mirando, Moebius and La sonámbula all exhibit closed, circular qualities, whereas the last two films in the corpus are linear, and provide an opening onto a implied progression into the future. At the risk of drawing simplistic parallels, this evolution appears to mirror a progression from a non-integrated traumatic memory to an integration of the traumatic event. The structure of these films is more conventional, since beginning and end are clearly distinct. In both cases ‘happy endings’ are present, although they are ironic to some degree. The cultural integration of the traumatic experience perhaps explains why both films adopt and adapt ‘traditional’ story-telling structures, which are the fairy tale and the adventure story. The melting of the Argentine experience into a now classical
dystopian narrative such as that of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* could suggest that the experience and consequences of the *Proceso* have partly been internalised as a collective myth, feeding into a set of iconic science fiction fictional references.

Finally, the thread that binds these different films together is more than a genre-based one. Gonzalo Aguilar writes that ‘memory has many […] complex mechanisms, the most perverse of which may be that of paralyzing us in the past, suppressing the present: a memory of traces that has lost all projection of the future, a permanent mourning that insists on a perpetual burying of the dead’.\(^5\) However, while the sense of a Borgesian eternal return to the past does pervade the corpus on one level, what has finally emerged through this study is a sense of progression through time, or return to time in motion. These films can therefore be viewed in the context of an evolutionary process, rather than a repetitive, return to a frozen past in a paralysed present. To borrow the words of Argentine critic Elizabeth Jelín, within ‘the interpretive framework and cultural codes’ of Argentine science fiction, this thesis ultimately helps shed light on ‘the symbolic and performative practices’ of a genre that ‘more than representing or remembering, appropriate[s] the past and enact[s] it in the present’.\(^6\) Reflecting this, the corpus can be assessed as a form of collective ‘repetition and working through’, in the Freudian sense, of the traumatic aftermath of the *Proceso*.

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\(^5\) Aguilar, *New Argentine Film*, p. 162.

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