

PERCEPTUAL DEVICES FOR DEPICTING THE *VILLA MISERIA* IN THE FILMS OF CÉSAR GONZÁLEZ

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INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest debates in the world of contemporary art revolves around whether it is appropriate to refer to a fixed definition of the identity processes of artists in order to establish their position in the art world. Articulated between the notion of “strategic essentialism” proposed by Gayatri Spivak and its rebuttal by Nicolas Bourriaud is a territory in tension, marked by a proliferation of reflections on the relevance or irrelevance of the geographical origins of identities in the context of globalised art. In this sense, the production of the Argentine filmmaker César González poses the challenge of identifying the limitations of essentialist policies that seek to find explanations for an artist’s work in that artist’s origins. To meet this challenge, the dispute between Spivak and Bourriaud can be nuanced with

reference to Jacques Rancière’s discussion of the possibility that marginalised sectors may become creators of images and discourses. Following this line of thought, this article will examine the tendency to interpret González’s films on the basis of preconceptions that assume that a filmmaker born in a *villa miseria*¹ would film these spaces and their inhabitants in a way that challenges conventional depictions. To do this, the theoretical discussion offered will need to be complemented by a historical overview of representations of social marginalisation in Argentine cinema. Once this overview has been presented, the main objective of this article will be to examine the first two feature films directed by González to identify, in their materiality, the perceptual devices designed to depict the bodies of the characters and their complex interactions with the films’ temporal and spatial dimensions.

THE VOICE AND/OR SILENCE OF THE BODIES OF THE POPULAR CLASSES

Despite widespread acceptance of the theories asserting the death of the author since the 1960s, critical approaches to the films of César González seem incapable of avoiding the inclusion of references to both the filmmaker's personal background and his explicit intentions. In all cases, it is assumed that his poetry and films can be explained by empirical data in a way that would not be possible for other poets or filmmakers. This confidence in his biography as a source for explaining his work is inevitably related to his origins and his current circumstances as an inhabitant of a *villa miseria*. The scarcity (or complete absence) of filmmakers born in squatter settlements has resulted in the exclusive definition of his poetry and filmography based on this background.²

THE SCARCITY (OR COMPLETE ABSENCE) OF FILMMAKERS BORN IN SQUATTER SETTLEMENTS HAS RESULTED IN THE EXCLUSIVE DEFINITION OF HIS POETRY AND FILMOGRAPHY BASED ON THIS BACKGROUND

A brief perusal of González's biography³ reveals the interest that both mainstream and alternative media have taken in his identity.⁴ His story, articulated in a teleological and positivist manner, functions as an embodiment of the myth of meritocracy. However, before accepting that his biographical details contain the key to understanding the meaning of his films, it is worth questioning the reductionist nature of this tendency, with reference to different debates that have emerged in recent years in relation to such critical stances. One of these is Nicolas Bourriaud's interrogation of the notion of "strategic essentialism" proposed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in

In Other Worlds: Essays on Cultural Politics (1987). For Spivak, in the context of their emancipatory processes, different colonial or neo-colonial societies may recognise the effectiveness of establishing a shared cultural identity which, while it may not necessarily be subjected to an essentialist logic, nevertheless flattens certain differences depending on the importance or urgency of particular ideological battles. This gives rise to a set of ideas that provisionally defines the identities (ethnic, social, national) of individuals, to which their internal heterogeneity is subordinated.

While for Spivak, strategic essentialism is conceived as a cultural substance creating an identity that can allow the subaltern to speak in the context of a globalised world, Bourriaud examines the effects arising from the implementation of this kind of strategy in different contexts. In *Radicante* (2009) he thus discusses the use of this classification in the context of post-colonial studies. Bourriaud frames its use in the context of post-modern aesthetic politeness, whereby artists from peripheral nations may become exotic guests on the cultural scene but never protagonists. Their participation depends on the strangeness of their origins from the perspective of the dominant spaces in the art world. In this state of affairs, strategic essentialism merely replicates the operation of the policing systems that aim to classify identities, and therefore enters into the game of the hegemonic forces by re-territorialising individuals who do not fit into the standardised identity models. Because it operates on the basis of anchoring their ethnic, national or cultural identities, it ties individuals to a single, stable place of enunciation. For this reason, Bourriaud argues that post-colonial theory ascribes individuals to their roots. Those roots would then be defined not only in terms of a mythical place of origin, but also as an ideal destination. In this way, individuals are viewed on the basis of this primary identification.

Bourriaud's observations offer a background for the discussion of this tendency to tie down

identities that do not subscribe to hegemonic models. However, Bourriaud also ignores the fact that the convenience of such classification is almost irresistible, and that we are therefore faced with the challenge of cultivating non-essentialist forms to incorporate into a definition (partial, complex, incomplete) of identity. In this respect, the philosophical ideas of Jacques Rancière points in directions that may lead us out of this conundrum. Rancière dedicated the first book he wrote on his own, *Proletarian Nights*, first published in 1981, to an analysis of writings by young proletarians at the time of the French Revolution of 1830. For these workers, the night was the time stolen from sleep and from manual labour to be able to write. It was a moment uprooted from the continuity of work and rest, an interruption in the natural course of things. The act of writing initiated a breakdown of the hierarchy that subordinated those who work with their hands to “those endowed with the privilege of thought” (Rancière, 2010a: 20).

On those nights, the proletarians began to exist as individuals rather than objects of discourse. Rancière is sensitive to the complexity of the connection that links these proletarians to the intellectuals of his era. This is why he asserts that “these people needed to exist already constituted by others, doubly and irremediably excluded for living as workers and speaking as bourgeois people did” (Rancière, 2010a:22). This convergence of proletarians who write with intellectuals concerned about their living conditions was marked by a breakdown: the intellectuals were concerned about the suffering in silence of the workers. They were the ones who presented themselves as spokespeople for the proletarian pain. With this in mind, Rancière asks: “Isn’t there some sort of dodge in this fascination with the mute truth of the popular body, in these evocations of another culture that the workers—the masses, the people, the plebs—practice with enough contentment to leave to others the lacerations of conscience and

the mirages of representation?” (Rancière, 2010a: 39). The workers constituted the voiceless surface of the reflections of the intellectuals. Their entry into the territory of the written word and their emergence as producers of images generated a disruption in the world of literature and art. Determined to create another image and another discourse of worker identity, they waged war on the representations that had been developed previously. The political power of this appropriation is overwhelming: “The beings intended to inhabit the invisible space of labour, which leaves no time to do anything else, take the time they do not have in order to affirm that they belong to a common world, to make seen in it what was not seen, or to make heard as a word that argues about what is common that which was only heard as a noise of bodies” (Rancière, 2010b: 62). In light of the radical nature of this affirmation, Rancière feels the need to ponder how these untapped capacities can be awoken in the bodies of the popular classes.

Following this line of argument, the tendency to flag César González’s identity as a squatter takes on great significance. In the strict distribution of the powers to see and speak, the emergence of a producer of images and discourses who was born in a squatter settlement could contribute to a radical deconstruction of the old divisions of the visible, the audible, the thinkable, and the feasible. On many different levels, his background is markedly different from that of most contemporary filmmakers. He received no formal academic training (he took workshops with Luis Franc at the San Martín Cultural Centre in Buenos Aires), most of his productions have been made without financial support from the State, and he does not appear on the international festival circuit. This marginalised position in the Argentine film industry is not unrelated to his socio-economic and cultural origins. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that this aspect of his history exists in tension with facts such as his work on a documentary series for the *Encuentro* channel

(founded in 2007 by Argentina's Federal System of Public Media and Content), a level of media coverage that few other Argentine filmmakers have enjoyed in recent years, and the positive response his films have received from audiences, demonstrated by the number of views his work has registered on YouTube: over 650,000 views for *Diagnóstico esperanza* and 2,300,000 for *¿Qué puede un cuerpo?* This data suggests that, despite González's marginal status in the Argentine film world, he has found alternative routes to promote his filmography and acquire remarkable levels of distribution and prominence.

However, accepting the need to consider this detail of his life and his current production conditions is only possible if we can avoid two potential hazards. The first is his insertion in Argentine and Latin American film studies as an act of compassion. In the aforementioned context of post-modern politeness, the inclusion of peripheral filmmakers functions as a demonstration of political commitment that leaves no need to consider the aesthetic value of their work (given that for such considerations we have the films made by directors who have received training in recognised institutions of the bourgeois world). The second hazard is assuming that his birth in a *villa miseria* and his determination to challenge conventional and stereotypical representations means that his project will necessarily succeed in subverting that tradition. To deal with these two difficulties (token beneficence and declarative essentialism), I propose a methodology that consists of attentive viewing of his films and an interrogation aimed at exploring their materiality, his work with spaces, gazes, bodies and temporalities.

DEPICTIONS OF THE VILLA MISERIA

Given that all of González's films have a specific agenda to challenge conventional film and television depictions of squatter settlements and their inhabitants, any analysis of his work should in-

corporate a history, albeit concise, of such conventional depictions. In this complex history, forming part of Argentina's social and political film tradition,⁵ these spaces appeared for the first time in Argentine cinema in *Suburb* (Suburbio, León Klimovsky, 1951). At that time, the Argentine expression for a shanty town, "*villa miseria*", was not yet in use, as this term was introduced by Bernardo Verbitsky's novel *Villa miseria también es América* [The Shanty Town is America Too], published in 1957.⁶ In *Suburbio*, the people of the city are hostile towards the internal migrants who are forced to leave their rural homes in the context of the country's industrialising economic policies. The poor migrants are depicted as victims of social inequality and government ineptitude.⁷

Towards the end of the 1950s, after Juan Perón had been overthrown, a series of films were made which, for different reasons, included depictions of *villas miseria*. *Behind a Long Wall* (Detrás de un largo muro, Luca Demare, 1958), filmed in Villa Jardín in the city's Lanús district, explores the hardships caused by the processes of internal migration. References to the growth of these settlements can also be found in *The Kidnapper* (El secuestrador, Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, 1958), *The Candidate* (El candidato, Fernando Ayala, 1959) and *Chronicle of a Boy Alone* (Crónica de un niño solo, Leonardo Favio, 1965). Documentaries including such references include *Buenos Aires* (David José Kohon, 1958), set in Villa 31 in the Retiro district, and *Tire dié* [Toss Me a Shilling] (Fernando Birri, 1960) in the city of Santa Fe. The visibility of the *villa miseria* in the Argentine films of the period, both documentary and fiction, constitutes clear evidence of the public attention that these peripheral spaces were attracting. In the years after the military dictatorship, *Buenos Aires, crónicas villeras* [Buenos Aires, Chronicles from the Slums] (Carmen Guarini and Marcelo Céspedes, 1986) not only outlined a history of squatter settlements in the city, but also foreshadowed the challenge they posed for democracy.

The onset of the neoliberal crisis in 2001 resulted in renewed population growth in the *villas miseria* and an equivalent increase in their visibility in society and in film and television productions. This gave rise to a new panorama of social reactions that ranged from the video activism of the *Piquetero* groups⁸ (Grupo Alavio and Ojo Obrero, among others)⁹ to the bleak pessimism of *White Elephant* (Elefante blanco, Pablo Trapero, 2012). While in the productions of the activist groups the *villa miseria* was less important than the political activity of the *Piquetero* movement and its leaders (Aguilar, 2012), in *Elefante blanco* the slum dwellers serve as background characters in a story featuring repentant members of the bourgeoisie (Veliz, 2017). Documentaries as varied as *Bonanza* (Bonanza [en vías de extinción], Ulises Rosell, 2001), *Social Genocide* (Memoria del saqueo, Fernando Solanas, 2004) and *Estrellas* [Stars] (Federico Leon and Marcos Martínez, 2007) also explored the subjective experiences of the casualties of neoliberal economic policy.

From *Suburb* through to *White Elephant* there are two recurring approaches to the depictions of *villa miseria* inhabitants: the first is to criminalise them, while the second is to victimise them. Of course, not all filmmakers or films can be reduced to these two possibilities; in many cases, directors have attempted strategies aimed at picking apart the stereotypes of the squatter as a criminal or victim and have effectively promoted transformations in the ways of looking at, listening to and thinking about these marginalised spaces. González's films propose a depiction of the *villa miseria* that seeks to introduce a departure from film representations that dehumanise and de-subjectivise its inhabitants. It is an approach that exposes the fact that squatters are conceived of as creatures unable to reflect, lacking critical thinking skills and speaking only in slang (Bernini, 2015: 134). To challenge this firmly established view, González attempts to construct an alternative image. His films engage in active dialogue

with the stereotypes and it is out of this exchange that their demythologising power emerges. However, it should not be assumed that González's socio-economic background guarantees a counter-hegemonic depiction of the *villa miseria*. On the contrary, it is important to question this essentialist stance and to interrogate the depictions of squatter settlements and their inhabitants present in his films.

DIAGNÓSTICO ESPERANZA

Diagnóstico esperanza [Diagnosis Hope], the first feature film made by César González as part of the Todo Piola work collective, was filmed in the Barrio Ejército de los Andes neighbourhood (also known as Fuerte Apache) in the city of Ciudadela, and in the Carlos Gardel de Morón neighbourhood, both in the province of Buenos Aires. The landscape is comprised of run-down apartment blocks and shapeless areas covered in debris. The topographical construction challenges the labyrinthine spatial conception identified by Gonzalo Aguilar (2012) as one of the most common clichés in films about *villas miseria*. The labyrinth usually functions as a spatial representation of the spectator's feeling of strangeness and otherness, but also as an embodiment of the idea that the characters find it difficult (or impossible) to escape from this confusing territory, with no centre or order, which has grown without any regulation or planning. This representation of the labyrinth as a spatial symbol for the *villa miseria* is often shown using an aerial view of the area. This allows filmmakers to introduce a reference to the magnitude of the settlement, but also in some cases to its proximity to the central districts of city life. In contrast with these standardised depictions, *Diagnóstico esperanza* reconstructs a social map that is not viewed from above, but through the movements of the characters. It is not a space mapped out using a top-down view that presents the network of dwellings from on high. Instead, it



Spatial configuration in *Diagnóstico esperanza* (César González, 2013).

is a space experienced by its inhabitants and observed through the wanderings of the young people who populate González's stories. These characters are not trapped in a labyrinth, although they still have no way out. No desire to escape is expressed, nor is any speculation or alternative presented. In a representation that clearly knocks down the myth of social mobility, the *villa miseria* is neither transitory nor a prison sentence; it is presented as the experience of people positioned as the refuse of capitalism, individuals tossed aside as casualties of the system.

This space is not isolated. The containment walls of social marginalisation fail to hold the inhabitants within them. Between the middle-class world and the squatter settlement we are shown bridges. This territorial composition constitutes one of the main points of interest of *Diagnóstico esperanza*: on the one hand, the space is presented as a ghetto, as a place with no escape, whose inhabitants are territorialised, imprisoned within its borders; on the other, these individuals not only break through the boundaries of the settlement but are called out to provide manual labour to the very members of the middle class who fear them. This dialectic between opening and closing organises the narrative of the film.¹⁰ The inclusion of the world outside the *villa miseria* allows other phenomena to enter it: exploitation, the logic of the marketplace, the operations of capitalism. In this sense, the characters are territorialised, tied

down to a differential spatial realm from which they cannot escape, while at the same time they are de-territorialised, allowed freedom to come and go to the extent that the outside world summons them and expels them.

In this territory of rubble lives a heterogeneous community. González's films are articulated as ensemble pieces that weave individual stories together in multiple structures. Notable in the proliferation of characters is the presence of children, teenagers and youth as protagonists. In this respect, González emerges as an heir to the neorealist approach of positioning children in key roles in the story and choosing their gaze as the organising perspective for the perception of the social universe. Childhood is expressed here in its utmost vulnerability. The absence of the State is absolute. The *transa*¹¹ mother who prepares the bags with her daughters and refuses to accept that her son wants to be a musician embodies the complexity of the relationships between adults and children. The children are exploited, ignored, and abused. They are also in certain ways protected, looked after, especially at the end of the film, when González lingers on the face of the mother caressing her baby. This image and in the son's desire to sing offer the only explanations for the film's hopeful title, as no clear information is provided in the film to justify it.

While the spatial composition and its interweaving with the development of the characters'

subjectivity promote a shift in conventional conceptions of Argentina's *villas miseria*, the structure of this family suggests that stereotypes are operating in the film. As noted above, depictions of the inhabitants of these peripheral neighbourhoods tend to fall back on the same variations of victimisation and criminalisation, and González appears largely unable to escape this pattern. This appropriation of the victim and criminal stereotypes is associated in part with the invocation of the crime genre as one of the frameworks for the story. The film is constructed on the basis of the clichés of the noir police film, particularly noir films narrated from the perspective of those organising the crime. On this point, in his study of the crime genre and its influence in Latin America, Mempo Giardinelli (2013) argues that the Latin American

noir film is no longer narrated from the point of view of the law enforcers, but from those on the wrong side of the law, in an approach that shows evidence of the dynamic of capitalist corruption. In this sense, *Diagnóstico esperanza* is structured as a crime film about the edges of society, a story in which the police organise crimes to be carried out by the *villa miseria*'s inhabitants. Rather than law and order, what is portrayed is the decay that has taken root within the institution of law enforcement itself. The squatters provide the manual labour for criminal projects planned by the members of the middle class in collaboration with the police. At this point there emerges a notable ambiguity of the film: the use of the noir police genre results in a wake-up call about the political and economic system, but at the same time it effectively preserves the existing stereotypes, albeit with slight alterations. The squatters are characterised as either victims or criminals. While among the children the victimisation is ex-

plicit, in older youth the depiction is rather more complex. Among the youth, the delinquents constitute unorthodox personifications of victimisation. In this way, the film replicates the usual stereotypes, while at the same time modifying them.

Although the film's dialogue with a genre structure results in the reintroduction of stereotypes, the narrative is also broken up by the fleeting appearance of shots that disrupt the story. Various scenes in the film are interrupted by images showing other local situations which, although not directly related to the story being told, constitute something like rough snapshots of the

living conditions in the settlement. These images come into conflict with the narration. Although they do not contribute to its progression, they tie in with the social mapping of the story. The scene in which two

youths plan a robbery cuts suddenly to footage of a group of kids playing with an empty baby's pram in a nearby rubbish dump. These images do not function as an illustration of the dialogue or as an element interwoven into the narrative; on the contrary, they undermine the continuity of the narration and break the linear progression of the traditional crime story. These moments, marked by obvious documentary pretensions, are placed at the service of a project of visibility.

In this sense, in *Diagnóstico esperanza* César González relies on the aesthetic and political effect of the presentation of these dilapidated spaces and their inhabitants and uses the tropes of the crime genre and its corresponding stereotypes as an excuse to render visible the social conditions and experiences in the *villa miseria*. In this way, the depiction will supposedly lead to an inversion of the symbolic weight of the stereotypes. The proposition of an unorthodox view of the settlement and the desire to show its inhabitants can be

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reasserted based on an assumption proposed by Jacques Rancière in *The Intolerable Image*: it is not the horror in the images that needs to be explored but the devices of visibility constructed to bring that horror into view. It is here that the condition of the bodies and the kind of attention they warrant is revealed. In the gaze on these individuals, we discover a device that chooses ways of showing what was not seen. While the information system presents nameless bodies that are objects of the words of others, with no access to speak for themselves, *Diagnóstico esperanza* initiates a complex process of attentive viewing of the squatters' bodies that focuses on prioritising their faces and eyes. This effectively posits the squatters as subjects of the gaze and not merely as beings objectified by an external perception. These eyes of the *villa miseria* are what perceives the social universe depicted, and thus become generators of images, makers of spatial trajectories, and distributors of fields of observation.¹²

Diagnóstico esperanza begins a journey that initially assumes the power to render things visible. César González articulates a story marked by the urgent need to deconstruct the stereotypes promulgated in mainstream media. In his appropriation of a style of essay film, he constructs an argumentative structure that is presented as an assertion. The film attests to the universe depicted, its causes, and its relationship with the outside world. However, the allusions to the crime genre and the subversion of the stereotypes are destabilised with the introduction of a system of documentary-style images that threaten the solidity of the story and through the presentation of the bodies, faces and eyes of the squatters. In this way, the film is positioned in a conflictive territory where the efforts to preserve the stereotype overlap with the efforts to undermine it. This suggests that the fact that González originally belonged to this social universe does not inevitably mean that he will abandon conventional depictions of squatter settlements and their inhabitants.

¿QUÉ PUEDE UN CUERPO?

In *The Image of the Other*, Victor Stoichita explores the clash between the development of the Western visual canon, expressed in the art of the Renaissance, and the emergence in that context of the image of the Other. Through the analysis of four predominant figures of otherness ("the Black", "the Jew", "the Gypsy" and "the Muslim"), Stoichita examines how this Other is constructed outside or on the edges of the image. Although in Renaissance art the Other does not constitute a focus of interest, a gradual process of giving visibility to difference began at that time. Stoichita thus analyses the visual system within which this redistribution of space and of the narrative value of the characters operates. However, he argues that it is not enough to confirm that the inhabitants of the territory of the Other acquire greater visibility, nor does he view this development as a triumph for the representatives of Otherness. On the contrary, he determines to explore the devices of visibility constructed around these figures.

The perspective suggested by Stoichita, like the approach taken by Rancière, represents a questioning of the ingenuousness of operations aimed at equating a mere assignment of visibility with an effort to transform the social space. Stoichita is not convinced that making the Other visible inevitably constitutes a disruptive act. Among the prolific variety of works he explores is a famous drawing by Dürer kept in the Print Room at the National Gallery in Berlin. In the foreground of Dürer's drawing is "the ideal profile of the Western man, a paradigm to which all the other heads present on the page refer" (Stoichita, 2016: 37). Set against this model of beauty and harmony is a vast display of "differences", on a scale that leads finally to the head of a Black African. This work of Dürer's, which anticipates the studies of racial physiognomy some centuries later, shows that the visibility of otherness can be used to confirm and reinforce pre-existing prejudices. The interpretation of visibility formu-

lated by Stoichita should prompt us to reconsider the narrative space assigned to the inhabitants of the squatter settlements in González's films, and to explore the depiction of their bodies and the construction of heterogeneous temporalities. In this sense, we should not be asserting that the presence of the squatters represents a disruption of established imagery, but studying the changes made in relation to their depiction.

González's second film, *¿Qué puede un cuerpo?* (What Can a Body Do?), contains both continuities with and departures from the first. Notable among the continuities is the choice of the same geographical and socio-economic territory, the use of technical instability as an aesthetic expression of social fragility (this aspect also connects González with the "poor cinema" advocated by the Cuban filmmaker Humberto Solás, who founded a festival in Cuba in 2003 dedicated to exploring the democratisation of film production facilitated by the expansion of digital technology and the reduction of production costs; in this sense, poverty of means constitutes an aesthetic and political stance), and the recurrence not only of certain actors, but even of the same character within the diegesis: Alan, the boy who had planned to be a singer in *Diagnóstico esperanza*, confirms the failure of his project in this second film, as we find that he has turned into a delinquent—a revelation that effectively snuffs out the tiny glimmer of optimism that was practically the only justification for the title of the first film. But alongside these similarities are a number of notable differences. In aesthetic terms, the filmmaker has dispensed with both the extra-diegetic music and the sporadic use of black-and-white in the first film. On the narrative level, there is a clear move away from genre models and an exploration of a scattered narrative approach, more attentive to the trajectories than to the actions of the characters. These differences result in a break with the partial adherence to conventional stereotypes present in the first film, a break that finds a privileged space

in the depiction of the bodies and their overlapping with the temporal flow.

Even with its title, González's second feature film makes its concern with the body explicit. The title is an allusion to Baruch Spinoza's analysis of corporeality in his *Ethics*, published in 1677. Spinoza reflects on the power of the body, given that "no one has yet determined what the body can do." Gilles Deleuze (2015) suggests that Spinoza posits the body as a power and, therefore, as a political force. The body is capable of doing the opposite of what the system imposes.¹³ The Spinozan reflection leads González to reflect on what the squatters' bodies feel. In contrast with the approach taken in *Diagnóstico esperanza*, in *¿Qué puede un cuerpo?* he gets up close to the characters' bodies. From the beginning of the film, the body of the *cartonero*¹⁴ blends in with the garbage, and among the garbage of the middle classes he finds a present for his daughter. These bodies are thus framed in a landscape of refuse, the waste of the consumer culture. This accompaniment of the *cartonero* on his daily journey draws out a different corporeality and a different temporal flow. The body worn out by its work requires and establishes different system of time. This story cannot be told according to the temporal flow of classical cinema, with its adherence to narrative action and climax. In-

The body of the urban nomad in *¿Qué puede un cuerpo?* (César González, 2015).



stead, it is a story told through the exploration of the temporalities established by the bodies rejected by capitalism. Beatriz Sarlo (2009) uses the idea of “urban nomads” to analyse the particular qualities of these bodies circulating around the social structures. In their wanderings, these individuals in movement become privileged spectators of the universe that surrounds them and of which they form part.

Together with the *cartonero*, the film returns to the figure of the delinquent youth engaged by the forces of repression to commit a robbery. While the repetition of the figure of the delinquent maintains the reference to the crime genre, the appearance of the body of the *cartonero* is only possible through the assignment and configuration of a different temporal flow, marked by a detailed observation of his mechanical tasks, of his movements around an urban and suburban setting that takes him out of the squatter areas and back again, enabling him to bear witness to the comfortable living conditions of the middle and upper-middle classes. The presence of this feeble body represents the destruction of the stereotypes. It is thus not a question of giving visibility to the body or the space but constructing a device whereby the exposure of that body effectively subverts a representative system that depicts squatters as criminals or victims. This deconstruction operates by opening up other opportunities to overlap bodies and temporalities: the wandering bodies of the children forced to beg for change in the street; the gang of kids who clean windcreens; the underclass youth who spend their nights playing video games and taking drugs; the exhausted worker who continues to believe that the choice of an honest job is less risky than a life of crime.

In this way, César González explores the strategies of temporal configuration that bring a different corporeality into view, and in so doing, a radical deconstruction of the existing stereotypes. These stereotypes fall apart with the introduc-



Corpo-temporal imbrications in *¿Qué puede un cuerpo?* (César González, 2015).

tion of bodies and temporalities that cannot be reduced to the prevailing models. The unproductive moments of wandering, marked by the crisis of young bodies rejected from the productive system; the moments of waiting experienced by the tense bodies of the delinquents, the repetitive moments endured by the body of the *cartonero*. In this explosion of bodies and attitudes, gestures and temporalities, the established stereotypes of the squatter begin to blur. The fate of the bodies is also given a temporal association: the dead body of one of the delinquents, wrapped in a plastic bag; the incarcerated body of another; the free body of the *cartonero*, prepared to carry on to the point of exhaustion.

CONCLUSIONS

In the journey he takes with his first two feature films, González maps out the social universe of the *villa miseria* that deconstructs the outdated stereotypes that continue to predominate. However, the analysis of these shifts does not require speculation on his explicit intentions or the identification of the aspects of his personal history that would give meaning to his aesthetic production. Instead, what is needed is an exploration of the materiality of a device that constructs a body-time-space

overlap. The emergence of other bodies inscribed in other spatial and temporal configurations results in a subversion of conventional depictions that conceive of these marginalised individuals as objects of study, and as a source of fear or of commiseration. The opening up of the power to construct images and discourses and the expansion of the ability to look and listen are not associated with an essentialist, fixed and stable identity, but with an aesthetic and political product in constant evolution. ■

NOTES

- 1 In Argentina, the term *villa miseria* is used to refer to a type of shanty town or squatter settlement predominated by substandard housing resulting from the absence of urban and social planning on the part of the State.
- 2 References to his personal history and his explicit intentions can be found in reviews like “Período villa villa” by Gaspar Zimmerman, *Clarín*, 18 July 2013, and “El cuerpo como fuerza política” by Emanuel Respighi, *Página 12*, 26 December 2014.
- 3 Some of the details that comprise González’s biography are listed simply here: he was born in 1989 in the *villa miseria* known as Carlos Gardel in the Morón district of Greater Buenos Aires; he began taking hard drugs in his early teens and turned to stealing at the age of 14; he spent time in different reform schools and came to be what in Argentina is known as a “*pibe chorro*” (young delinquent); he suffered a bullet wound in a shoot-out with the Buenos Aires police; he served five years in prison for a case of kidnapping and extortion that he claims he did not commit; during that time, he passed through various juvenile detention centres in the city of Buenos Aires (José de San Martín, Manuel Roca, Manuel Belgrano and Luis Agote) as well as the Ezeiza and Marcos Paz prisons; during his time in Instituto Manuel Belgrano he met Patricio Montesano (a.k.a. Merok), a magic teacher who encouraged him to read and reflect on life; this led to the project to found the magazine *Todo Piola*, whose first four issues were published while he was still in jail; he also finished high school while in prison; he published his first book, *La venganza del corde-ro atado* [Revenge of the Tied-Up Lamb] in 2010, and his second book, written after his release, *Crónica de una libertad condicional* [Probation Chronicle] in 2011; he chose the pseudonym Camilo Blajaquis in tribute to the Cuban revolutionary Camilo Cienfuegos and Domingo Blajaquis, the member of the Peronist resistance whose murder in 1966 was documented by Rodolfo Walsh in *¿Quién mató a Rosendo?* [Who Killed Rosendo] (1969); he presented the program *Alegría y dignidad* [Joy and Dignity], broadcast on the Encuentro channel; he offered literary workshops in his *villa miseria*; he made his first short films with Martín Céspedes: *El cuento de la mala pipa* [The Story of the Bad Pipe] (2011), *Mundo aparte* [World Apart] (2011) and *Condicional* [Conditional] (2012); his first feature film, *Diagnóstico esperanza* [Diagnosis Hope] was released in 2013; he directed all four episodes of the documentary series *Corte Rancho*, broadcast on Encuentro; he made the short films *Guachines* and *Truco* in 2014; he released his second feature film, *¿Qué puede un cuerpo?* [What Can a Body Do] in 2015; that same year he published his third book of poems, *Retórica al suspiro de queja* [Rhetoric to a Sigh of Complaint] and he released his third feature film, *Exomologesis*, in 2017.
- 4 Numerous newspaper articles on González support this. These interviews range from reconstructions of his life story to discussions of his literary and/or film output. In most cases, the reference to his identity as a “*pibe chorro*” or young delinquent in article headlines make the centrality of the biographical dimension explicit. Articles featured in the mass media include: “Es más peligroso un pibe que piensa que un pibe que roba”, interview by Silvina Frieria (*Página 12*, 18 October 2010), “La historia del ex pibe chorro que se convirtió en poeta”, interview by Valeria Vera (*La Nación*, 3 November 2011), “La sociedad repite la lógica del pabellón” (*Clarín*, 14 July 2013), “Lo único que me queda es el arte”, interview by Leandro Arteaga (*Página 12*, 10 September 2018). Publications in alternative media include: “¿Qué puede un cuerpo?, la segunda película

- del ex pibe chorro César González" (*Diario registrado*, 22 December 2014), "Si un villero exige un lugar dentro del arte despierta sentimientos muy oscuros y miserables", interview by Santiago Brunetto (*El furgón* magazine, 13 February 2017), "La construcción de la villeritud", interview by Matías Máximo (*Cosecha roja* magazine, 8 September 2017). In academic journals, "Rostros: una geometría del poder en el cine", interview by Eva Noriega (*Kadin, estudios sobre cine y artes audiovisuales*, 2017).
- 5 Andrea Cuarterolo (2009) offers an exhaustive analysis of Argentina's political and social film history covering the period from 1896 to 1933. His exploration addresses the emergence of the first films to articulate a critical view of the social realities in the years following Argentina's centenary of independence (1910). In this context, and although they were isolated cases lacking continuity, a number of films appeared that explored troubling social issues, featured different forms of otherness as the protagonist of the story, mapped out alternatives to the conventional spaces, or adopted the tradition of political satire. In some cases, the concern with making the story told as realistic as possible even led to the introduction of elements of documentary. Although social issues were addressed as early as *Nobleza gaucha* [Gaicho Nobility] (Eduardo Martínez de la Pera, Ernesto Gunche, Humberto Cairo, 1915), in *Juan Sin Ropa* [Juan with No Clothes] (Héctor Quiroga, Georges Benoit, 1919) class conflict was explored through a focus on the social conditions of the urban proletariat, thereby presenting a peripheral space that received very little attention in films of the period in Argentina. The "*folletines de arrabal*" ("slum melodramas") directed by José Agustín Ferreyra, like *Muchacha de arrabal* [Slum Girl] (1922), *La chica de la calle Florida* [The Girl from Florida Street] (1922), and *Mientras Buenos Aires duerme* [While Buenos Aires Sleeps] (1924) reveal notable efforts to achieve realistic representations of the popular classes and their living conditions. These films present a new face of the city of Buenos Aires that focuses on its most vulnerable neighbourhoods. All these pictures constitute foundational works in a tradition whose function was to propose an alternative map of the city. The articles published by Gonzalo Aguilar (2013) and Patricio Fontana (2013) are important for proposing a chronology for the emergence of these spaces in Argentine cinema.
 - 6 Verbitsky used the expression for the first time in a series of news articles published in *Noticias gráficas* in 1953.
 - 7 In *Cine y peronismo. El Estado en escena* (2009), Clara Kriger recounts the difficulties faced to secure the release of the film. Raúl Apold, Perón's public relations secretary, had expressed objections and suggested some changes. As a result, an epilogue was added to show the settlement being transformed into a working class neighbourhood by the Peronist government. This epilogue was eliminated after the coup d'état in 1955.
 - 8 In the mid-1990s, groups of unemployed people in Argentina formed the *Piquetero* (picketing) movement, which used the organisation of roadblocks as a form of protest. The first public expression of the *Piquetero* movement was in 1996 in the towns of Cutral Có and Plaza Huincul, in Patagonia, in response to mass layoffs by the oil company YPF.
 - 9 The vast panorama of video activism included: *El rostro de la dignidad, memoria del M.T.D. de Solano* [The Face of Dignity: Report on the Solano Unemployed Worker Movement] (Alavío Group, 2001); *Piqueteros. Un fantasma recorre la Argentina* [Piqueteros: A Ghost Is Haunting Argentina] (Ojo Obrero, 2001), *Argentinazo, comienza la revolución* [Argentinazo: The Revolution Begins] (Ojo Obrero, 2002), *Por un nuevo cine en un nuevo país* [For A New Cinema in a New Country] (ADOC - Myriam Angueira and Fernando Krichmar, 2002), *Piqueteros carajo! (la masacre de Puente Pueyrredón)* [Piqueteros, Damn It! The Pueyrredón Bridge Massacre] (Ojo Obrero, 2002).
 - 10 In this respect it is worth highlighting the contrast with the spatial arrangement present in the films of José Celestino Campusano, another filmmaker interested in mapping peripheral spaces. In some of his films, like *Twisted Romance* (Vil romance, 2008), *Viking* (Viking, 2009) or *Fango* (2012), the squatter set-

lements of Greater Buenos Aires constitute closed spaces that never come into dialogue with the world outside.

- 11 The Spanish expression *transa* refers to people who sell narcotics in peripheral neighbourhoods. In the film, this character is played by Nazarena Moreno, César González's mother.
- 12 The compositional work of visibility should be contrasted with the establishment of certain audibility strategies. *Diagnóstico esperanza* begins with sounds of gunshots occurring off screen. In this way, while dispensing with the need to show it, a surrounding environment of violence is suggested. The gunshot establishes the space, providing an explicit soundtrack for the *villa miseria*. The diegetic music confirms a prejudice: the characters listen to hip hop and cumbia villera, very obviously musical genres associated with Argentina's underclass. In contrast with this predictable choice, the extra-diegetic music used by González is from quite a different tradition: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven. This sets up a tension between the image (social collapse, worn-out bodies) and the sound. The music vests the image with new meaning and attributes a new dignity to the devastated subjects.
- 13 The references to these concerns are embodied not only in the title of the film, but also in the inclusion of the book *What Is Philosophy?* by Deleuze, Guattari and Kauf among the cardboard boxes that one of the characters collects to sell.
- 14 *Cartonero* is the expression used in Argentina to refer to people who pick cardboard boxes and other paper derivatives out of the garbage they find on the city streets in order to sell them.

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PERCEPTUAL DEVICES FOR DEPICTING THE VILLA MISERIA IN THE FILMS OF CÉSAR GONZÁLEZ

Abstract

The exploration of the films of Argentine filmmaker César González poses a series of theoretical and critical difficulties. First of all, it is important to examine the reasons why his socio-geographical origins, in the Carlos Gardel squatter settlement in the province of Buenos Aires, is inevitably referred to in studies of his work, especially his feature films *Diagnóstico esperanza* (2013) and *¿Qué puede un cuerpo?* (2015). Concepts proposed by Gayatri Spivak, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Jacques Rancière are adopted here to construct a valid theoretical context for analysing the complexity of González's films. Secondly, it is necessary to go beyond the filmmaker's origins to explore the aesthetic and political power of his work. In this respect, avoiding the paternalism of other critical studies, this article aims to investigate the construction of a perceptual device concerned with overlapping bodies, spaces and temporalities.

Key words

César González; *Villa miseria*; Bodies of the popular classes; Perceptual devices; Argentine cinema.

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Article reference

Veliz, M. (2019). Dispositivos de percepción de las villas miseria en el cine de César González. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 28, 157-170.

DISPOSITIVOS DE PERCEPCIÓN DE LAS VILLAS MISERIA EN EL CINE DE CÉSAR GONZÁLEZ

Resumen

La exploración de las películas realizadas por el cineasta argentino César González (1989) supone una serie de dificultades de orden teórico y crítico. En primer lugar, conviene interrogar las causas por las que su origen sociogeográfico, la «villa miseria» Carlos Gardel de la provincia de Buenos Aires, aparece como referencia ineludible en los estudios sobre su obra, en especial de sus largometrajes *Diagnóstico esperanza* (2013) y *¿Qué puede un cuerpo?* (2015). La recurrencia a algunas categorías propuestas por Gayatri Spivak, Nicolas Bourriaud y Jacques Rancière permitirá ordenar un contexto teórico válido para pensar la complejidad de esta producción cinematográfica. En segundo lugar, resulta necesario explorar cuál es su potencia estético-política más allá del origen del realizador. En este sentido, lejos del paternalismo de ciertos posicionamientos críticos, aquí se pretende indagar la composición de un dispositivo de percepción atento a la imbricación de los cuerpos, los espacios y los tiempos.

Palabras clave

César González; villa miseria; cuerpos populares; dispositivos de percepción; cine argentino.

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Referencia de este artículo

Veliz, M. (2019). Dispositivos de percepción de las villas miseria en el cine de César González. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 28, 157-170.

Edita / Published by



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ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com