

Paper

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Understanding Urban Paranoia in Benjamín Naishtat's *History of Fear* (2014)

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Abstract: This paper studies Benjamín Naishtat's *Historia del miedo/History of Fear* (Argentina, 2014) as representative of a cinematic treatment of urban violence that can be found in a number of contemporary Latin American films such as Rodrigo Plá's *La Zona/The Zone* (Mexico, 2007), Kleber Mendonça Filho's *O Som ao Redor/ Neighbouring Sounds* (Brazil, 2012) or Naishtat's *Rojo/Red* (Argentina, 2018) counter to what Christian León calls "cinema of marginality" (León, 2007). Cinema of marginality as León sees it, uses a close observational approach towards marginal lives entrapped in a relentlessly violent world. This is apparent in the manner in which everyday violence that takes place in barrios and favelas are depicted in films such as *Cidade de Deus/City of God* (Brazil, 2002), *Un Oso Rojo/Red Bear* (Argentina, 2002) or *Secuestro Express/Express Kidnapping* (Venezuela, 2005). Naishtat's film on the other hand belongs to the kind of cinematic exploration that focuses on the more invisible forms of violence that maintain and perpetuate the conditions of inequality. In this paper, a cinematic representation of the conceptualisation of the urban space as a protected space such as that of the gated community is studied. This analysis aims to show how such protected spaces are a violent imposition on the experience of urban public life as well as bearers of the legacies of past authoritarian attempts to establish order on society.

Argentine sociologist Beatriz Sarlo points out a paradox in the imaginary of urban violence found in certain sections of Buenos Aires inhabitants, the *porteños*, post return to democracy. Sarlo points out the irrational yet strong residual imaginary of the city as being safer during the rule of what she calls a "Terrorist State"/"Estado terrorista" (Sarlo, 2009, p. 92) as opposed to the period under a democratic government. The so-called 'Dirty war' or 'Guerra sucia' in Argentine history was the period between 1976 and 1983, when Argentina was ruled by a right-wing military junta that carried out a 'cleanse' of Argentine society which led to the death and disappearance of 30,000 people according to estimation made by various human rights organisations and left behind a legacy of tortures, extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, secret

concentration camps and annihilation of any viewed as a dissident. Furthermore, the Argentine military was responsible for the theft of the children of those disappeared, an act which saw new born children taken away from parents who were being tortured and killed and placed under the ‘care’ of families connected with the dictatorship. (Franco, 2013) Yet, the time of state-sponsored extrajudicial murder of tens of thousands of Argentine citizens is also perceived as a period when the state was keeping its cities in order.

In essence, the perception of a safe city under an autocratic regime justifies the genocidal scale of violence on citizens as being part of the legitimate techniques of governance and exercise of social control by the state. The idea of legitimate or illegitimate violence is based on the observation and the simultaneous non-observation of certain forms and aspects of violence. It is determined by factors such as class, race, gender, ethnicity, religion and is understood through the use of law. According to Dutch sociologist Willem Schinkel, violence must be seen as emerging from within a “web of social relations” which gives meaning to what constitutes as violence and it is the state that provides this framework to understand and define it as such (Schinkel, 2013). This frame is what Schinkel calls “regime of violence” and he states, “Blindness to an existing regime of violence means an implicit acceptance of the prevalent ways of defining and recognizing violence.” (Schinkel, 2013, p. 316) This blindness forges a network of tacit complicity with the ideology governing the actions of the state and has a lasting legacy that impacts all socio-economic and political relationships and encounters that take place even after the end of the brutal authoritarian regime. Lucrecia Martel’s film *La mujer sin cabeza/The Headless Woman* (2008) is an exploration into this very aspect of Argentine society. A film about the cover up of an accident caused by the lead protagonist, it points to a larger history of silences and denial of justice for crimes committed during the dictatorship. Cecilia Sosa in her analysis of Martel’s film emphasises the impact of the film on the viewers:

“Martel’s film performs a contemporary narrative that places the viewers in a double role: each of the spectators becomes not only a witness but also a survivor, and thereby subtly compelled to respond. For if the film turns on the fact that the crime is less the ‘accident’ itself and more the web of denial that comes afterwards, significantly it offers the opportunity to reverse the web of complicities, inviting the audience to break the silence. It offers a frightening mirror in response to the guilt that flows from one time to another, embracing successive generations. In doing so, the film invites viewers to consider the distortions of their eyes, and eventually to re-make reality”. (Sosa, 2009, p. 259)

The intention is to make the viewer question their perceptions of society or what they regard as normal or common-sensical. Instead of portraying violence of the *villas miseria*¹ with the implicit ascribing of violence as solely the domain of the marginal classes and communities, the film turns the cinematic gaze on the violence that goes unobserved, that of the upper class, the political elite and the code of silence and ‘cover-up’ that accompanies it.

¹ A slum in Argentina is popularly called ‘villa miseria’.

A survey of films produced in Argentina between 1976 and 1983 offers excellent insight into the kind of cinema that would attract state funding under a military dictatorship. In 1976, Jorge Enrique Bitleston, the controller of the Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía (I.N.C./National Institute of Cinematography) laid out what kind of films the junta government would help to produce. He declared:

“All films that exalt spiritual, moral, Christian and historical or current values of nationality, or that affirm the concepts of family, order, respect, work, fruitful effort and social responsibility; seeking to create an optimistic popular attitude in the future...avoiding lewd scenes and dialogues”. (Varea, 2006, p. 1).

Historically, in Argentina, order was viewed as associated with progress. Virginia Guerstein points out that while early twentieth century in Argentina was marked by labour movements, the camera did not document strikes by workers or any kind of opposition to the political system. That would have contradicted the narrative that the state would have wanted to project. The aim was to portray Argentina as a modern nation, “ordered and embracing progress and modernity, having successfully established its sovereignty and the integration of its inhabitants”. (Guerstein, 2004, p. 15) As the military dictatorship focused its efforts on eradicating all elements in society which they held to be counter to the ideals of a Western Christian civilisation, it reflected on the cinema of the time. It became important for the government to produce a cinema that upheld their ideology which precluded any form of criticism of the state or state machinery, be it neoliberal economic policies, racial hierarchies inherited from a colonial past, conservative Catholic morality or patriarchy.

The spirit of optimism and respect for order and conservative societal values of the cinema under military dictatorship found an audience in the sections of the society who saw the excesses of state violence as legitimate and aimed at those posing an internal threat which for the Argentine military were the *subversives*. In 1977, Ibérico Saint Jean, the de facto governor of Buenos Aires province of the time, stated, “First we will kill all the subversives, then we will kill their collaborators, then their sympathizers, then those who remain indifferent, and finally we will kill the timid”. (Ferreira, 2013, p. 5) Marcelo Ferreira emphasises the obscurity of the term ‘subversives’ by laying out the various definitions it had been associated with: “atheist, stateless, Freudian, pro-abortion, enemy of the family institution and, in general, anyone lacking in national spirit (an enigmatic trait potentially applicable to anyone)”. (Ferreira, 2013, p. 5) The enemy was not clearly defined. Furthermore, those perceived as possessing a sympathetic attitude towards such enemies of the state were also held as equally guilty and finally citizens judged to be lacking in the proper ‘spirit’ as demanded by the state were also in the risk of the violent punishment awaiting the *subversives*. Such a moment of paranoia on the part of the state, gave rise to what Guatemalan sociologist Edelberto Torres-Rivas calls the “suspicious person”. (Torres-Rivas, 1999, p. 290)

The excesses of the dictatorial regime in the 1970s in Argentina with its aim to establish what they viewed as order on society, compromised the democratic institutions to such an extent as to shatter the very fabric of social security. Torres-Rivas views the contemporary culture of fear dominating societies across Latin America as being intrinsically connected to the nature of state violence under authoritarian regimes. While the

origin of a ‘culture of fear’ or ‘terror’ based on the potential repercussions of violence on community life lies in the violent history of the ‘pioneering’ quest of colonial expansion in Latin America, the more contemporary ‘construction of fear’ is tied to the immediate histories of state perpetrated violence and human rights violation that took place across Latin America since the mid-1900s. (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004) The fact that the enemy the Argentine junta government hunted was not a concrete one made the rendering of violence indiscriminate. The brutality was justified by the acknowledgment of a permanent menace and the justification formed the ideological identity of the state. (Torres-Rivas, 1999, p. 290) The state had created the enemy as the “suspicious person” and since it was a fluid signifier, it implied the presence of a permanent menace which would thereby necessitate permanent surveillance. Torres-Rivas describes the environment of fear and insecurity:

“People spy on each other in order to report each other, and accuse in order to bring punishment upon the other. There can be no punishment without previous accusation and since the aim is punishment, surveillance is the first step. A vicious (and infernal) circle is thus constructed that does not, however, always begin with that implacable logic of watching-accusation-punishment. Sometimes people are punished without accusation, and accused without surveillance. And worse: watched over without motive, while everybody watches everybody else”. (Torres-Rivas, 1999, p. 290)

Contrary to the narrative presented by a media that sensationalises urban violence promoting a culture of fear and greater surveillance of society, statistically violence in the form of homicide, rape and drug related conflict is more likely to take place in the less affluent parts of the city. (Sarlo, 2009) (Koonings & Kruijt, 2015) Yet, statistics cannot replace or correct urban paranoia which relies on a conceptualisation of the city as a space of chaotic violence and permanent state of crisis. As Beatriz Sarlo says, “To err does not exist within the possibilities of the imaginary. There is no arguing with the imaginary.” (Sarlo, 2009, p. 92)

One of the urban structures that has haunted the imagination of contemporary Latin American writers and filmmakers in terms of the complex web of encounters between classes it creates and is founded on is the protected space such as the gated community. Desire for an ordered secure space and the fear of becoming a victim to a chaotic urban violence is at the heart of this form of urban development. Perceived as symptomatic of the growing inequalities within the nation, a symbol of affluence, safety as well as segregation, the gated community appears over and over in Latin American film and literature post-1990s. Films such as Lucrecia Martel’s short documentary *La ciudad que huye/The City that Ran Away* (Argentina, 2006), Rodrigo Plá’s *La Zona/The Zone* (Mexico, 2007), Celina Murga’s *Una semana solos/A Week Alone* (Argentina, 2007), Marcelo Piñeyro’s *Las viudas de los jueves/Thursday Night Widows* (Argentina, 2009), Kleber Mendonça Filho’s *O Som ao Redor/Neighbouring Sounds* (Brazil, 2012), Miguel Cohan’s *Betibú* (Argentina, 2014) and Benjamín Naishtat’s *Historia del miedo/History of Fear* (Argentina, 2014) among others delve into the phenomenon of urban paranoia, segregation and surveillance through the various aspects of living within such protected spaces—the solidifying of class privilege and the fragility of such a performative lifestyle. These films aim to confuse the demarcations of safe and unsafe, violent and peaceful by delving into the nature of the exclusive

lifestyle of the gated community and the structures that help in maintaining it. In her film *The City that Ran Away*, Martel foregrounded the ways in which the very entry into a gated community is controlled through forces that justify their surveillance on the grounds that “It is for your own safety”. (Martel, 2006) Martel’s film chooses to focus on the seemingly endless walls of the gated community that bar the gaze of the onlooker, the passer-by, the neighbour. The camera captured the residential buildings that surround this gated community, both middle class homes as well as shanties providing an exercise in contrasts. In her analysis of Martel’s film, Holmes writes:

“The high-speed tracking shot alongside the stationary wall of the country emphasizes the imposition of this structure. To enhance this further, the screen segments into various parts—at its busiest, it divides into twelve moving images—and the image sizes shift between full and partial screens. Dizzying and oppressive, these layouts complement the swift camera movement to capture both the imposition of the wall and the unnerving response this structure elicits. Contrasting shots compare opposing landscapes; the apparent vibrancy of community life is juxtaposed with the aggression and exclusivity signaled by a wall of this type.” (Holmes, 2018, p. 64) (See Fig. 1)



[Fig. 1 From Lucrecia Martel’s *The City that Ran Away* (2006)]

In 2008, Brazilian photographer André Gardenberg used the phrase “Arquitetura do medo” or “Architecture of fear” as the title of a photographic display showcasing the rise of urban architecture responding to the fear of violence through heavily armed security personnel, electric fences, sophisticated video surveillance networks and so on. (Lehnen, 2012) The safety of a protected space is premised on the idea of segregated existence where the inhabitants of such a community experience the city in the form of fragmented spaces structured through surveillance such as shopping malls, centres of entertainment, the ‘architecture of fear’, which at the same time isolates them from the public democratic space of the street. They traverse from one into another “armour-plated universe”, in the words of Argentine writer César Aira. (Aira, 2008)

Benjamín Naishtat's *History of Fear* plays on this idea of fragmented spaces through the abrupt cuts and transitions from one seemingly self-contained space to another. Movement from one to another occurs within a controlled space such as a car. The car does not signify stepping out into a public space but is an extension of the private privileged exclusive space of the home. In the film, the scene at the tollbooth where the two upper class characters, Edith and Camilo stop on their way to a family dinner is representative of the way the car acts as a sort of final barrier between those inside from the chaotic world outside. The naked homeless man that appears in front of them, framed by the windshield echoing the gaze of the surveillance camera (See Fig. 2), is a manifestation of the fears they have regarding the urban space and its potential to harm. Here the violence is targeted at them in the form of the man who tries to enter the car. However, Edith nearly runs him over in her desperation to escape and in that is embodied the capacity for violence of the protected space she inhabits. Instead of enabling the encounter of differences which is the essence of urban existence, a protected space is premised on keeping out certain elements of society, creating an illusion of a homogenous community unaffected by the socio-political circumstances of what lies beyond.



[Fig. 2 – The naked man as seen by Edith and Camilo through the windshield in Naishtat's *History of Fear* (2014)]

Benjamín Naishtat's film is an intervention into this urban paranoia around the possibility of violence that frames upper class urban lives juxtaposed with the structural and systemic violence that affects the lives of the marginalized, the 'faceless'. (Butler, 2004, p. xviii) The opening scene is the aerial view of Greater Buenos

Aires, where the helicopter passes over the poor neighbourhoods, the shanties as well as the ‘country’² that it surrounds, a sprawling gated community with swimming pools. Sarlo describes Greater Buenos Aires as “a pathetic and grotesque network of shanty towns and extremely poor neighbourhoods, old consolidated working-class neighbourhoods where unemployment prevails today and huge swaths of new gated communities (the so-called country clubs and private neighbourhoods, which are the marginal version of the North American gated communities)”. (Sarlo, 2009, p. 92) The aerial point of view allows a unique perspective of the area in totality, unencumbered by the walls and wire fences that separate these two very disparate forms of urbanization on the ground reflecting the all-pervasive power of surveillance. Guy Thuillier notes that, “upper class enclaves, requiring huge areas of land, spring up at the fringes of the metropolis, which in Buenos Aires do not consist of ‘edge cities’ but of slums concentrating the poorest and more recent immigrants in town, coming from the most underdeveloped provinces of the country”. (Thuillier, 2005, pp. 255-56) Ownership of the land by such individuals would be difficult to prove legally and in recent times Argentina has witnessed violent crackdowns on the part of the state on such vulnerable settlements. This notice of eviction delivered from a helicopter through a loudspeaker to the ‘occupants’ of the houses between 72nd street and Provincias Unidas street in Moreno, Greater Buenos Aires, poses a real threat of violent dispossession to the inhabitants. Here the state is seen stepping in to perform the act of clearing the land for the purpose of private enterprise albeit violently. This in effect will change the area demographically, removing the threat posed by the presence of the poor neighbours to the residents of the gated community. This is a moment of intersection of the violence of the state and that of class divisions in society.

The aerial shot in a sense foregrounds the state’s godlike dispensation of the status of legal ownership or illegal occupation of land juxtaposing extreme affluence and extreme poverty. This creates an unsettling environment where inequality frames all social encounters that take place in it. In *History of Fear*, this manifests in acts that disturb the elite, underscoring a refusal on the part of the marginal to be rendered invisible and showcase the latent possibility of social revolution that threatens the elite psyche. It is there in the garbage that is dumped next to the wire fencing of the community and which bleeds onto the lawn across the fence or in the burning garbage and the smoke it creates that cannot be kept away by fencing. (See Fig. 3)

² In Argentina ‘country’ is a term used to denote suburban gated communities that have been developed along the model of North American country clubs.



[Fig. 3 The ominous presence of burning garbage and the smoke it creates in Naishtat's *History of Fear*.]

Despite the close proximity of wealth and poverty, the affluence does not translate into an overall difference in the community. In reality, owners of the houses within the 'countrys' of Buenos Aires have resisted paying municipal taxes that would go into funding developmental projects outside the walls of the gated community itself. (Holmes, 2018) A gated community as pointed out by studies on urban development is based on an understanding of community where the responsibilities of the resident can be met through the satisfaction of the economic obligations necessary to maintain the ownership. However, as Evan McKenzie points out, "cities, states and nations have vast networks of public and private threads that tie citizens together and make them interdependent. We are linked ... in ways that encourage or compel us to be responsible to, and for, each other. These responsibilities extend far beyond maintaining property values and conformity". (McKenzie, 1994, p. 149) Reduction of these networks to the financial transaction involved in the ownership is a negation of urban public life. Martel names her film about a gated community as a city that has run away presumably from its civic responsibilities, its role within the Argentine society and its past of tacit complicity with a brutal dictatorship.

In a firmly entrenched neoliberal society, radical social change is not present as a process in effect yet the very possibility of it has the power to threaten. The fear the characters in Naishtat's film feel is one based on the premise of possibilities. In the midst of the darkness as the elderly Amalia left to the care of the house-maid, Tati, calls out, "We must do something, they are getting inside the house". It is a voicing out of the fear held by the upper class of their carefully guarded privilege being impinged upon. It is the fear that makes the security guard move through the thicket of woods with his gun cocked because of the dogs who might bite the owner he is hired to protect. Prior to the sequence of the guard moving through the thicket, a dog is seen passing in the background of a frame, out of focus, without attacking anyone. On one hand, anecdotes are shared within the gated community where these dogs are presented as feral creatures with human motivation

to harm. On the other hand, when glimpses of residents of a poor neighbourhood playing with fireworks are shown, the dogs are seen excitedly running around the children, a welcome part of that community.

The intent of Naishtat's film is not to direct the audience towards a fixed conclusion. What it does is bring out the isolation of the gated community that seems to be more and more ignorant of what is happening beyond its borders even while the borders seem to be not as impenetrable as they would like them to be. A threat that is unseen, faceless, drive the residents of the gated community to shut themselves inside their carefully guarded walls, driving them further into a claustrophobic paranoid state of existence protected by armed security personnel and technologies of surveillance. The fencing is cut by unknown hands, the security system fails at the time of a blackout, both garbage and smoke defy walls.

During a family dinner, Carlos, an owner of a unit in the gated community, listens to an account of a mayor attacked by an angry mob of possibly evicted families because he had called out their 'lies' in order to secure free housing. 'Did they kill him?' he asks, the answer to which is unknown to the storyteller Marcelo though they both stare at each other wide eyed, a silent tribute to this horror story they had just shared. It is a very conventional moment in terms of the way ghost stories have been structured. There is an entire literary and cinematic genre of ghost stories for Christmas gatherings which this scene can be viewed as paying tribute to. Only it is not a story about paranormal or supernatural presences but the omnipresent class war that haunts them.

In Latin America, the current social and economic character of society cannot be viewed as separate from the histories of past inequalities (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004). The socio-economically privileged class, the residents of such gated communities, have benefitted from the history of violent exploitation, be it through the economic policies under a dictatorship or the colonial past. In their urgency to prove that the regime of violence has ended with the end of slavery or the collapse of a dictatorship, the government had focused on forwarding a narrative of reconciliation such as 'La Ley de Punto Final' passed under Raúl Alfonsín's presidency in Argentina seeking to set a time limit to the search for justice for crimes committed during the dictatorship. However, there can be no reconciliation without justice and in effect the legacy of violence breeds a culture of complicity that is insecure because of the constant fear it holds of justice arriving in the form of violent retribution. Films such as *History of Fear* explore this fear based on the politics of class, race, gender attuned to the persistent legacies of past histories of violence and use the genre of horror with its implications of a return of the repressed 'Other'. Jack A. Draper names this kind of horror as "materialist horror (Draper III, 2016). He says, "The contemporary South American 'accent' on horror, or what I am calling *materialist horror*, involves a framing of the genre within a dramatic narrative emphasizing not fantastical characters (as South East Asian ghost films and Latin American magical realist films and literature have done) but the everyday, material reality of class, race and/or gender violence and unequal social relations that are deeply

rooted in Latin American history” (Draper III, 2016). The moments of terror are generated through the fear that lies of being confronted by what they had thought to have exterminated.

History of Fear creates moments of extreme suspense through characters being exposed to an unseen threatening force such as the house security alarm being set off for reasons unknown or mud being thrown at the hired security guard’s car by assailants who are hidden behind the rain that obscures visibility. The fear comes from the possibility of the technologies of surveillance as somehow not being adequate to the task of creating an impenetrable protected zone. In fact, the limitations of technology are consistently revealed by the film through the technical failure of the loudspeaker that is used to announce the eviction notice or the power cuts that as the film progresses increase in duration. The naked man who appears in front of Edith’s car did not exist for the occupants of the car prior to his attack on their car. Just as his appearance was not anticipated, Edith does not know what he will do once he is no longer framed by her windshield. The film juxtaposes the capacity for violence on the part of the elite through their structures of protection with the image of the upper class imprisoned in their own architecture of fear that can be breached by forces of retribution in a form that cannot be imagined by these structures of surveillance.

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