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The Corporeal World in the Age of Capitalism: The Development of the Body in New Argentine Cinema

Introduction: The First Sights and Sounds of New Argentine Cinema

Martín Rejtman's *Rapado* (1992) opens with a shot of Lucio (Ezequiel Cavia) on his motorcycle driving towards the camera. Neither determined nor carefree, like the machine, and as part of the machine, he is simply moving forward. He does not seem to have a destination and if he does he will never reach it because the narration of his journey is interrupted by the credits and ultimately cut short by the theft of his motorcycle. Though Lucio demonstrates no emotional response to this event, there has been a physical repercussion as the machine that was part of him is now missing.

The opening shots of Lucrecia Martel's *La ciénaga* (2001) present a boldly different aesthetic of New Argentine Cinema. Martel begins her feature with a collage of juxtaposing sights and sounds: images of vivacious red peppers are followed by those of a sickeningly blood red wine and sounds of grumbling storm clouds are interrupted by screeching rusty chairs. In the first moments of the film, the vitality of nature triumphs in some unannounced competition against the sagging bodies sadly shuffling across the screen in a drunken stupor.

Both directors prioritize visions over sound to introduce the themes of their first films, whereas in their following features sound takes precedence to convey similar topics. As the credits role in Rejtman's third film, *Los guantes mágicos* (2003), the sound of a passing storm is heard, interrupted by that of somebody dialing a phone. This sound correlates with the appearance of an image on screen, however it is not one of a person

speaking on the phone, though this is what is heard, but rather the back of the driver's head. Though he will be the film's protagonist, Alejandro (Gabriel "Vicentico" Fernández Capello) is not the person first heard, nor is his face visible until he has been verbally identified by Sergio, "Piraña", (Fabián Arenillas), shown only after he hangs up the phone. Lucrecia Martel's *La niña santa* (2004) has a similar opening sequence in that the sound precedes the image. The voice of Inés (Mía Maestro) is heard singing during the opening credits, yet the image of Amalia (María Alche) first appears on screen. Despite the worlds of differences separating these two directors of New Argentine Cinema, they share a strong connection in their goals and the techniques they use to achieve them.

The factor uniting these four films is the use of the human body as a medium of expression and thematic focal point. Departing from the popular psychological dramas that characterized Argentine cinema of the 1980s, directors Martín Rejtman and Lucrecia Martel have undertaken the creation of a more physical cinema, where the body, not the mind, sets out on a journey, bumps up against the limits of society, absorbs the blows of life, and in the end either loses or learns something. Feeling limited by the expended formulas of past Argentine cinema, Rejtman and Martel undertake a new approach to addressing contemporary issues faced by Argentine society by reverting to the primary unit of the body, stripping it away of its intellectual rationality in order to expose its elements in hopes that something new will be created from the remains.

These two directors both use the body to represent the changes facing Argentina as it enters a faster-paced stage of global capitalism but their resulting products, despite similar themes, have drastically different appearances. Rejtman hyper-accelerates the process of modernity by converting the human body into a machine, depriving his

characters of normal human emotions and interactions as they are transformed into a tool of the economic system. Martel takes the opposite approach, stripping man to the bare carnal existence of the body itself, portraying physical contact as the main link between man and his world. With these two distinct approaches to the human body, Rejtman and Martel address similar themes regarding the decomposition of traditional societal institutions and the individual subjectivity that continue to face Argentina in its transition.

Before the Light: Argentine Cinema and the Birth of a New Argentine Cinema

Argentina has a strong cinematic history, but one that has been marked by fluctuations as the logistics of filmmaking have been severely affected, both positively and negatively, by national and international politics and economics. Directors such as Leopoldo Torre Nilsson and Lautaro Murúa have made an impact on the current well educated generation, many of whom graduated from a new wave of film schools and are well informed of their country's cinematic past. The biggest influence on New Argentine Cinema, however, is the Argentine cinema of the 1980s as this contemporary cinema can be seen as a direct response to the productions of that period.

Cinematic art had been in hibernation during the military dictatorship of 1976-1983, but was revived subsequently after the fall of the dictatorship. Supported by the government that came to power in 1983, these films frequently addressed the violence of the dictatorship and the process of re-democratization. The films exhibited strong moral messages against the military regime or used allegories to address the question of "who are we?" that faced many Argentines who had survived this trying time. Artistically the films were not revolutionary, the most popular ones being, "outstanding examples of films produced with a high degree of technical skill and commercial gloss"(Foster, 1992).

Their importance, however, and that which separated them from the Hollywood mainstream cinema that dominated the market, was in their quest to address sociopolitical issues through a questioning of history. As the transition period ended, the moralizing manner in which they dealt with this subject matter became exhausted in Argentina, opening the doors for a new cinema.

By the beginning of the 1990s Argentina's cinema industry was all but extinct. Bugged down by oversaturated themes and unable to compete with foreign competition (namely, American Hollywood cinema which had gained greater access under the new democracy), Argentine cinema lost its funds and its viewers. Argentina's entrance into the global market doomed the more modestly budgeted Argentine films, though out of this crisis sprung new hope as the death of one cinema liberated a new generation to create another from its ashes.

The temporary demise of a national cinema signified that something new had to change in order to ensure survival, a challenge to which the filmmakers of New Argentine Cinema responded. Accepting this generation of directors took the greater part of the decade, as most Argentines were not ready for the radical change that New Argentine Cinema proposed. An example of this is the case of *Rapado*. The first feature of New Argentine Cinema, this film was made in 1992, but was not commercially released until 1996. Pablo Suárez emphasizes the importance of this film, describing the Instituto Nacional de Cine y Arte Audiovisuales' (INCAA; National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Art) refusal to support this film as "narrow-minded" and "negligible." "His first feature demonstrated that another type of cinema was possible in Argentina, one capable of pushing boundaries. *Rapado* was an absolute oasis in a land plagued by films with agonizing narratives, with neither depth nor genuine inspiration, and yet still

subsidized by a State in favor of the *status quo*”(Suárez, 2002). However, as critical acclaim began to build around these films by a new generation of filmmakers, they could no longer be ignored and New Argentine Cinema was born.

The trait that binds the directors of New Argentine Cinema into this “movement” is neither a shared aesthetic nor pedagogical program, but rather a commitment to break away from the characteristics of the dominant Argentine cinema of the past and show contemporary issues in a manner never seen before in Argentina. Choosing to ignore the prophetic path of Argentine cinema of the 1980s, these new directors, including Rejtman and Martel, cultivated a style that incites debate about the changes facing Argentina and its cinema. Though artistically unique, these directors do share certain characteristics, as seen in the first examples of Rejtman’s and Martel’s films.

In his book *Otros mundos: Un ensayo sobre el nuevo cine argentino*, Gonzalo Aguilar thoroughly outlines common traits of a “movement” that sometimes only seems to be bound by its shared generation. In regards to the narration of the films, for example, directors have turned away from focusing on a sole character and rather have opted for a “dispersion in the narration”; developing several characters at the same time and thereby avoiding the creation of the central, moralizing character popular in the 1980s. Further impeding the creation of this role is the type of characters portrayed in these films. The characters of New Argentine Cinema are, as Aguilar has termed them, characters “out of the social order.” They are not simply the marginalized, sympathetic anti-heroes of the Argentine cinema of the 1960s (Daney, 2004), but rather they exist completely outside of all social orders, appearing as, “...personajes amnésicos, verdaderos *zombies*, que no vienen de ningún lugar ni se dirigen a ningún otro, obsesionados por un mapa indescifrable” (Aguilar, 2006). These thematic similarities have united New Argentine

Cinema in a general critique of several aspects of Argentine society, a critique furthered in their artistic representation of these themes.

These commonalities have created an environment that allows for artistic creativity that can challenge society and the individual viewer for it is not dependent on mass consumption for its survival. The issue of funding is vital as film demands a high initial capital investment and without sufficient funding, directors do not even have the chance to begin to realize their work. The importance of the funding and production of New Argentine Cinema cannot be underscored, and it is in this area that the directors have the most in common, for they have forged several new avenues in the search for funds.

Critical acclaim won by new Argentine directors has opened up alternative funding and, with that, greater artistic freedom. Independent production companies and screening areas let directors showcase their work to a national crowd while international institutions such as the Hubert Bals Fund of the Rotterdam International Film Festival not only financially support a number of the films, but they also allow for the films to be seen outside of Argentina. International recognition helps directors find more support at home, as INCAA can hardly ignore those films that have won international acclaim and support. They are therefore more likely to financially back or at least recognize the films so they can be released in Argentina.

Despite the help that these new forms of funding give to directors, finding enough of these sources to finance a film is difficult and many have had severe trouble in funding the production of their films. The shoestring budgets of most directors, however, have helped to inspire artistic innovation. In an interview with Patricio Fontana, director Martín Rejtman discussed this situation that he and so many other directors of New

Argentine Cinema¹ experienced while making their films, “...es difícil hablar de riesgos cuando hay tan poca plata para hacer cine y las películas se hacen con tan poco dinero; es decir: cuando las películas se hacen por necesidad, siempre aparece algo nuevo”(Aguilar, 2006). This new artistic freedom, allowed by the alternative sources of funding available or created out of necessity, has sparked a revolution in Argentine cinema, letting it break away from the structures of that which was produced in the 1980s and giving it the means to survive in a world of cinema dominated by Hollywood.

The greatest freedom, however, is the newfound freedom of the spectator who, left without a clear moral message, must come to his own understanding about what he has just seen. As opposed to strong messages delivered to the audiences in the 1980s, the films of New Argentine Cinema are seldomly consumed with the desire to convey one message or to break the world into a melodramatic dichotomy of good and evil. The point of the film is left open to interpretation.

“The new directors have a relationship with the politics and reality of Argentina located outside former pigeonholes. Argentine cinema used to be sententious, explanatory, omniscient and aspired to express consensus truths, to articulate the misfortunes of a predictable and idealized country. The breaking of that worn-out, sterile (and notably false) mold implied the declaration of Argentina as a territory open to discovery-”(Quintín, 2002).

Instead of reciting messages, these new directors are much more concerned with showing a world, one from which the spectator can draw varying conclusions (Aguilar, 2006).

The act of offering up a world is never completely unbiased, and despite the fact that so much room for interpretation is given to the spectator, there are still several subtler messages conveyed throughout the films. Through their defiant aesthetics and themes of decay, New Argentine Cinema directors like Martín Rejtman and Lucrecia

¹ This situation does not apply to Martel who has worked with the famous Argentine producer Lita Stantic since her first feature and has always benefited from strong financial support.

Martel are not only alert to the collapse of the governing institutions of their world, but also offer a plan of change through their radical aesthetics. Breaking away from all that has dominated Argentine cinema in the past, these directors propose an escape from the current conventions, showing that only through radical ruptures from the status quo can progress be achieved.

Bodies Cut Free: Loss of Institutional Agency

Just as the body has succumb to the changes forced upon it by this new wave of modernity, so too have the traditional institutions succumbed to a modern transformation. The post-dictatorship cinema of the 1980s addressed the loss of power by political institutions and therefore Rejtman and Martel focus on the decay of the institutions of the family, religion, and societal standards. Whereas Martel demonstrates the actual process of disintegration of these institutions, Rejtman shows their loss of power by proposing an absurd (though in a strange way credible) reality that has risen to take their place. Caught in the middle of this transition, it is man and his body that absorbs the blows of change as all that formerly controlled his societal behavior crumbles before his eyes.

The death of the traditional family is announced in many forms in Martel's *La ciénaga*. The most obvious is the decay of the marriage between Mecha (Graciela Borges) and Gregorio (Martín Adjemián). This is represented by the constant physical distance maintained between the two, culminating in the symbolic loss of his place in the marital bedroom. Gregorio is relegated to a room in the back of the house, physically separated from his family and from the patriarchal position that he traditionally would have held as the man of the house. Before this move has even occurred, Gregorio's personal physical state has shown that he is no longer in control of his family, much less

himself. His perpetual drunken stupor, slurred speech, and inability to even properly dye his own hair (which, like the rest of his body, bears the marks of his aging and alcoholism) signify the complete loss of patriarchal power. While Rafael (Daniel Valenzuela) is able to exert more control over Tali (Mercedes Morán) his physical absence from the film during the moments where his family needs him show that he too has lost some of the power over his family that he works so hard to maintain. When Luciano (Sebastián Montagna) dies, the shots of the empty house highlight not only the absence of the child, but also the absence of his family, who was unable to prevent this tragedy.

In *La niña santa* the physical absence of the father figure is even more marked as Amalia's father never once makes an appearance. Whereas Amalia's uncle Freddy (Alejandro Urdapilleta), who is also a father, does appear, his children never do, another physical separation that he cannot even breach through the telephone. His one attempt to call his children fails as he hangs up the phone as soon as his ex-wife picks up, ending in a fit of giggles that reveal him to be as much a child as those with whom he is trying to connect. Josefina's father silently follows his dominant wife, while Dr. Jano, the one man seen in a traditional patriarchal role, is only shown with his family just as he is about to lose control of his power over them.

Though the loss of the patriarchal family structure leaves the position of power open to be taken by the matriarch, this also fails to happen in the films of Martel as the majority of mothers portrayed can barely take care of themselves, let alone their families. Like her husband Gregorio, Mecha also spends the majority of her time inebriated, with the scars from her drunken fall a constant reminder of the control she has lost. Mecha cannot see or be part of the family life that goes on around her as she rarely takes off her

dark sunglasses and even more rarely leaves her bed.

Tali, on the other hand, is always in the midst of her children but, while physically there, she is often not conscience about the world around her. Her absent minded behavior and inability to communicate with her children creates another power vacuum that her children themselves must step in to fill. Agustina (Noelia Bravo Herrera) is the surrogate mother of the family and is often pictured enacting the maternal role as her real mother sits by, looking into the distance. Agustina cooks, sews Luciano's uniform, and is the only one who really communicates with her father, helping him to intervene in Tali's plan to go to Bolivia. Even her little sister Mariana (Maria Micol Ellero) seems to be more responsible than Tali, as she helps remind her mother what shots Luciano has received and sits in an authoritarian position during one of Tali and Mecha's conversation, gazing disapprovingly at the two and making Tali nervous.

Mercedes Morán's character in *La niña santa*, Helena, is equally unable to fulfill her role as a mother. Helena cannot see beyond her own image, nor hear anything else but the sounds that haunt her. During one conversation with Amalia, Helena can only respond to everything her daughter is telling her with the expression "Que horror." This phrase is repeated with the same tone in response to Amalia's story of the man who fell from his apartment and, by a miracle, didn't die; the news that Josefina (Julieta Zylberberg) is going to cut her hair, and to the fact that she cannot decide what to wear. Even when not lying on the bed like a corpse, Helena still appears to be barely conscience in her interactions with her daughter.

The loss of authoritative figures in the family structure leads to the break down of the regulatory powers of the institution and sexual transgressions within the family abound in Martel's cinema. Unhindered by rules, the body takes control, turning the

common meeting place of the characters from the living room into the bedroom. Martel's films have often been described as a cinema of beds, placing emphasis on this abnormal meeting place as the center of her constructed worlds. In his analysis of *La ciénaga*, David Oubiña stresses the violence that this dramatic shift of traditional roles produces saying, "En esa promiscuidad mórbida se confunden la inocencia de los juegos infantiles con una agresión y una sexualidad apenas reprimidas. Los choques entre los cuerpos son siempre violentos, pero no es posible discernir cuánto hay de ataque y cuánto de atracción"(Oubiña, 38). In *La ciénaga*, characters are either openly welcomed into the beds of others, as in the case of Mecha's two older sons, who often enter her bed barely clothed, whereas others are violently rejected in their attempts to enter certain beds, as is the case of Momi (Sofía Bertolotto), who is forcefully pushed off the bed by Verónica (Leonora Balcarce), and later Verónica herself, who is denied entrance to the bed of her brother José (Juan Cruz Bodeu).

José, as the most carnal sexual force in the film, is the one seen in the greatest number of beds. He not only shares one with his father's ex-lover Mercedes (Silvia Baylé) in Buenos Aires, but also with his mother when he is at home. When not in bed with these two women, he is flirting with his sister Verónica, sticking his feet in the shower while she is in it or entering her bed as she changes in the corner. As José runs from bed to bed, the sexual relationship between parent and child and brother and sister is questioned by the sexual form his presence takes in the family structure.

The sexual tension of *La ciénaga* carries over into *La niña santa* where Helena and her brother Freddy maintain a relationship that while as children might have been construed as innocent, as adults is overly intimate. When Freddy comes home drunk one night, instead of going to his room he gets into bed with his sister and niece. Later, a

maid surprises Freddy with his head between Helena's legs. Though she is just checking his head for lice, the low lighting, the closeness of their bodies, and the silent stares that follow the surprise appearance of the maid all suggest that some type of transgression has occurred.

This tension finally erupts in the character of Josefina who carries out a sexual relationship with her cousin. By physically crossing the line that the rest of the characters had only played around, Josefina's transgression represents the total collapse of the institution of the family. Though the eminent death of the traditional family had been previously announced, its actual downfall is an event of such magnitude that it disturbs the peace of the surrounding world. In order to postpone the realization of this disaster, Josefina must tell of another physical transgression, Dr. Jano's (Carlos Bellosó) molestation of Amalia. This revelation condemns Dr. Jano's family to its own death, as after this shocking news it will never be the same. The physical crossing of traditional boundaries finally spells the end for this institution.

Martín Rejtman situates his films in a stage posterior to this collapse, where a new order has already begun to fill in the resulting power gap. With his often absurd as opposed to traumatic portrayal of the new type of relationships he predicts for the future, Rejtman uses a humorous approach to address changes brought on by the accelerated new wave of modernization that Argentina is facing. Characters that have stronger skills communicating with machines than with other humans and human relationships governed more by economic contracts than personal interaction announce not only the disintegration of traditional relationships, but forecast what kind will take their place. Though in a different manner, he too uses the human body to demonstrate the effects of Argentina's social transitions. Instead of focusing on the carnal transgressions that are

given expression as institutions fail, Rejtman takes away the humanity of his characters and converts them into machines. Capitalism becomes a substitute governing body, displacing the human body.

Both *Rapado* and *Los guantes mágicos* are about a man and his love for a machine, a deep felt attachment that eclipses all other sentiments in Lucio's and Alejandro's worlds. After the robbery of his bike, Lucio wanders around with only one purpose: to find a replacement. All other relationships are ignored, as Lucio is unable to communicate neither with his friend Damián (Damián Dreyzik), who is very enthusiastic about the subject, nor with his family about the robbery of his bike. The *mise en scène* highlights the lack of relationships as, despite the proximity of others, Lucio always seems to be alone in his own world. When Lucio's mother (Mirta Busnelli) returns from Canada, both he and his father (Horacio Peña) accompany her to an outdoor café along the highway. During the whole scene the sound of traffic drowns out the one-sided conversation she is having with her family. The fact that both men are looking away from her shows that they are not even bothered by this as they have nothing to say. After stealing a new bike, Lucio tries to escape from his family, silently and without warning, though at the end of the film he is again waiting for a bus to take him home. His plans are thwarted by his own physical inability to take himself away from his situation and by the loss of his new bike, which for a brief period had become part of him.

The lack of real conversation in *Los guantes mágicos* is substituted with the intimate conversation that Alejandro engages in with his Renault 12. "A lo largo del film, la única comunicación verdadera es el interminable diálogo que Alejandro mantiene con su Renault 12"(Oubiña, 2005). Despite others' criticism of the "piece of junk" that he drives and urges that he upgrade and move on, Alejandro loves his car and is comforted

by its familiarity and sounds, which appear music to him. In a world where one-sided conversations are the only kind, this dialogue between man and machine represents the possibility that these two entities can form the only true union.

As man becomes more like machine, his interactions with others become more mechanical too. The human interactions that do take place in the films of Rejtman are based less on traditional human behavior and are instead defined by economic relations. Capitalistic values have replaced human ones, and the characters must negotiate their relationships in a world where everything and everyone is a commodity measured by their economic worth. Valeria (Valeria Bertuccelli) proudly repeats that her relationship with Alejandro came from an “economic arrangement” and indeed, it is only this and the fact that they both work in the transportation of passengers, a similarity which fascinates Valeria, which unites them in a relationship. Susana’s (Susana Pampin) interest in Cecilia’s (Cecilia Biagini) depression increases when she fails to return from the Brazilian spa that Susana prescribed as a changed person. Susana now has a professional interest in Cecilia’s case, for as the travel agent she feels that she has failed in her duty, and both she and her boss get Cecilia blank prescriptions as part of their work related mission to provide good service. Even presents are given in the form of economic exchanges, as Daniel (Leonardo Azamor) the dog walker offers to walk Lutor as his birthday present to Alejandro while Cecilia offers her gift as paying for the rides between Daniel and Alejandro’s apartment. The only time that the characters have a physical connection is when they catch a disease from another. After sleeping at Gustavo’s (Gonzalo Córdoba), Lucio catches his cold, just as Susana catches Cecilia’s depression (Oubiña, 2005). This hint of physical connection cannot remedy the loss of real human relationships, as it represents the diseased stages of human interaction into which these

characters have fallen. The characters cannot communicate with nor understand one another, and therefore must base their relationships off superficial bounds like the economic ties or illnesses they pass from one to another.

The other dominant institution shown crumbling in Martel's films (though it is not even mentioned in Rejtman's) is that of religion. The corporeal law that seems to rule in *La ciénaga* does not leave any room for belief in something that is not visual and the characters trust only what their eyes can see. Yet with eyes that are physically damaged, sometimes blinded, they miss out on even this level of visceral experience. When Momi tries to go to see the Virgin with her own eyes and ask her for the return of Isabel (Andrea López), she returns disillusioned for she cannot see anything. True belief is only viewed through a television screen, as the faith of others is something that the characters can actually see through the screen and therefore it is the television that converts into the new dominant religion. Mecha herself is already seen as subscribing to this faith when she is shown with the new mini-fridge that she has ordered from a commercial.

As suggested by the title, religion and faith are two of the core themes of *La niña santa*. Though a fervent believer, Amalia's quest to save Dr. Jano from his sins shows the changing face of religion. Like the characters in *La ciénaga*, Amalia is also obsessed with having a sensory proof of God, and throughout the film she listens for his voice to give her a mission. Believing that she has finally been sent one, Amalia sets out on a quest to save Dr. Jano. However Amalia as the holy girl makes an atypical religious figure, for despite the saintly air that surrounds her actions, she is very much still an entity of the corporeal world.

“Amalia encarna la “inocencia” o la santidad...Se masturba, persigue al hombre que la acosó, o se besa en la boca con su prima con la misma pureza con la que asegura que la caída de un hombre es un milagro, con la que canta una canción religiosa y con la que sostiene que ya tiene una misión en el plan divino. Amalia

cree en lo que ve y en lo que oye, y es la única que gira la cabeza hacia atrás para ver más, para ver todo, para comprender en qué consiste la llamada divina”(Aguilar, 2005).

Her sexuality and physical presence as she carries out her holy mission underline the conversion of a spiritual experience from a soulful one to a corporeal one. It is by physically pursuing Dr. Jano that Amalia tries to save him, kissing him and whispering to him that he is good in hopes that her touch can help save him from his sins. Though she has been educated in a religious institution, Amalia’s faith and holiness come from a different source, like the physical connection she has with her world and those in it. In the end Amalia is shown in her true sanctified status as she floats in a pool of water, physically grounded in the elements of this world yet communicating with the voices of another.

Floating Bodies: Loss of Individual Agency

As traditional institutions such as the family and religion lose power, the opposing forces of naturalism and capitalism fight to control the new world that will rise from this transition. Just as the characters must physically absorb the blows caused by the collapse of the known order, they must also deal with the shock of the rise of a new one. The highly corporeal world of Martel serves as an example of the new naturalistic domination, where nothing is ruled by logic but rather by carnal instincts. Rejtman, moves in the opposite direction with the body, depicting the economic force that strips away the humanistic qualities of the characters and converts them into machines. Despite different paths taken, Martel and Rejtman once again end making similar points as they use the body to bring up another important theme in their films: the loss of individual agency.

In *La ciénaga* the characters, caught in a fatalistic cycle, seem to have little

chance to shape their destiny. The naturalistic component highlighted in the first sequence of the film reappears throughout as the characters violently clash with their fate and as the story develops, the allusions to how each character is simply developing into an image of the previous generation grow stronger. Though side comments and unfinished conversations hint at the cyclical fate that awaits all, more can be learned by following the bodies of the characters as they re-enact the movements and words of those that have passed before them. Highly critical of her mother, Momi cannot escape her fate to turn into her as she loses hope for something different. She slowly and unconsciously converts into her mother as she repeats her words, calling Isabel a “china carnalera” and finally completing the transformation when she lays prostrate in a deck chair in front of the pool with Veronica, the same image that their parents were part of in the beginning of the film. José also finds himself condemned to repeat his father’s actions as throughout the film he is shown in bed with both his father’s ex-lover Mercedes and with his father’s wife. Finally Mecha provides a visual representation of Momi’s description of her grandmother, who one day decided to not leave her bed and never did again.

Further emphasizing the control of nature over the characters are the effects of the oppressive climate on their bodies. “...la ciénaga se infiltra en los medios civilizados de la pileta y de la cama de Mecha, creando un ambiente acuático en el que intentan moverse los personajes y que no deja de opacarse todo el tiempo...en medio de un clima opresivo, los personajes se mueven como *zombies* sin poder interpretar nunca sus propias situaciones”(Aguilar, 51). The heat and the nature itself, represented by the Mandrágora plant which is not only an anesthesia and aphrodisiac, but also the name of the family estate, places all the bodies in a perpetual sleeplike state, rendering them helpless in shaping their destinies and announcing the triumph of nature over them.

The naturalistic forces of Martel are replaced by capitalistic ones in Rejtman's films. Here the bodies of the characters have been converted into commodities whose existence depends on their ability to circulate in the market. This transformation is most demonstrated by Luis (Diego Olivera), whose livelihood literally depends on his body. He must constantly train in order to keep his body as a marketable item in the field of pornographic videos, and in this process he loses his human individuality, demonstrated by the fact that his own brother cannot even recognize him on the cover of his porn video. In the capitalistic economic system that controls "una sociedad que ha desvirtuado el valor del trabajo"(Oubiña, 2005), Luis has no individual value or control and is easily replaceable.

Alejandro's visit to the doctor furthers the concept of the body as a commodity rather than an individual as here it is treated like a machine. Before even examining him, the ophthalmologist prescribes Alejandro a pair of glasses, since he prescribes all patients in their forties glasses (though Alejandro is not yet 36). Here Alejandro is not viewed as a person, but rather as an age. The doctor continues this view of the body as a machine in his long explanation of how the body works.

"El cuerpo a los cuarenta es como esas casas viejas: cuando uno toca algo, aunque sea una cañería que parece completamente insignificante, encuentra que lo que está podrido es estructural. Está todo interconectado. En realidad, está todo podrido. Hay que seguir arreglando una cosa, que lleva a otra y después a otra. Hasta no terminar nunca. Me pasó a mí. Al final me cansé y decidí vender. Me mudé a un departamento mucho más nuevo. Claro que el cuerpo uno no se lo puede sacar de encima."

Here the body is again treated like a product that can be used and, when it gets too old, simply replaced like any mass-produced good.

Rejtman highlights the loss of individuality that is a product of the capitalistic market by visually robbing his characters of the traditional connotations of individuality

in his films. By incorporating a cinematically un-natural repetition of shots, Rejtman proves Walter Benjamin's thesis that through mechanical reproduction, all individuals and objects inevitably lose some of their unique "aura". Contemporary society overcomes, "the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction... To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction"(Benjamin, 1968). In his films, Rejtman repeats the same shot to not only diminish the individuality of each character, but of each situation. Alejandro is shown driving his car in the exact same position from the exact same angle several times, and though the characters around him change, he never does. The characters lose part of their "aura" as their image is continually reproduced, and end up being portrayed more as never-changing machines than humans with the potential to change and grow.

Adding to this effect is the lack of facial expressions of Rejtman's characters. The face is an extremely important element for conveying individual feeling both in films and in reality, and therefore the loss of this characteristic is devastating. "The face in films, although also seen in passing, becomes a more stable object of attention and a receptacle for many of our feelings about the body as a whole. As the most prominent part of the body not covered by clothing, it has tended to become this in any case"(MacDougall, 2006). Without his face, the individual has lost all ability to express himself, a deficiency that robs him of his humanity. Lucio's stone-faced response to the robbery of his motorbike is at first unsettling, until it is discovered that it is with this same expression that he responds to all changes in his life, including the death of his grandmother, the act of cutting his hair, and his escape. If he is emotional about any of these events, he is

unable to communicate his feelings through his body, which has turned more into a machine for function rather than a tool for human expression. This same characteristic is also found in *Los guantes mágicos*, where Alejandro's forever forward gaze seems to remove him from the human world. Cecilia threatens to break this mold of a mechanical human as her tendency to cry gives the appearance that she is expressing emotions. However this physical reaction is actually attributed to an allergy, and the fact that her eyes well up with tears signifies nothing.

Unable to express himself through his face, Lucio tries to transform his exterior by shaving his head to demonstrate his individuality. This act proves pointless, as it neither changes anything about him nor about those surrounding him. His mother does not say anything when she sees him walk by and his father comments that his hair is also falling out. This commentary undercuts the defiant and individual aspect of this change in two ways: first by describing it as a natural process, he denies Lucio the ability to claim responsibility for this act of defiance, then, by comparing it to the same natural process of hair loss that he too is experiencing, he shows that Lucio is not the only one who will be bald. Lucio's attempt to transform his body is a failure, categorizing him as still one more replaceable entity.

In Martel's films the characters have also lost the factor of individuality associated with a face as Martel frequently decides to hide this body part by focusing on others. Extreme close-ups of varying parts of the body denies the traditional view of the face as the most important defining entity of a person and instead reduces the characters to images of other aspects of their body, from which their individual identity cannot be derived. The characters in Martel's films have lost their individuality not by being converted into machines, but instead by being converted into mere pieces of flesh and

bone.

When characters' faces are shown, the often super-populated frames tend to subvert the character's individuality by showing that he or she is just another face in the crowd. José's venture into the Carnival dance in town strips him of all powers over Isabel that he, as the son of the patrons, believes are his personal rights. Isabel in the same scene also loses her identity as she is converted into a female body for the display of all the drunk men. The opening sequence of *La niña santa* shows Amalia in the midst of a sea of girls and even though her role as the main character is announced by her central position, she is still pictured as just one of many. The crowded shots of both *La ciénaga* and *La niña santa*, shots which many times cannot even contain themselves within the frame of projection, demonstrate the difficulties of finding a place for the individual to emerge.

The body's relegation to the status of machine or flesh not only takes away the individual identity but also the individual's control over his or her life. Though a sobering thought, Rejtman expresses this idea through the comedy of body. The humor in Rejtman is not found in what is said, but the *mise en scène* that frames what is said. The position of the bodies and the manner in which the actors deliver their lines is the joke, showing that it is humor created out of the control of the characters for they do not intentionally try to be funny. Susana's interminable monologues delivered to barely listening audiences, Piraña's enthusiastic sales pitch juxtaposed to the cardboard expressions of Luis and Alejandro, and Valeria's repetition of one or two superficial facts that she finds interesting are all examples of the bizarre humor that Rejtman develops. All the characters turn what could be normal situations into humorous ones simply by the fact that something about their body position or speech pattern seems so inhuman. In the

case of Valeria, for example, she is not trying to be funny, nor is the phrase “seven kilos” necessarily humorous, but by mechanically repeating this phrase she transforms the word, as through its reproduction it gains a new meaning that is out of her control.

Heightening the humor is the fact that the characters are not conscience of the absurdity of their situations. In his essay on Rejtman, Pablo Suárez describes the humor as an effect of the tone, which is evident even in the less outwardly comedic *Rapado*.

“With almost no dialogue, *Rapado* is a film that follows the rhythm of its characters. If it can be considered a witty look at the middle class and its pseudo-intellectual aspirations, Rejtman found the perfect tempo: a limbo inhabited by a family submerged in total apathy, a family so alienated that it doesn’t even realize the absurdity of the situations it finds itself in. Yet the characters remain immutable; they are never deformed by that absurdity, for that would rupture the film’s careful tone”(Suárez, 2002).

The absurd mechanical tone of both films is humorous, but it is a humor not determined by the characters, turning them into products to be laughed at rather than with.

The more serious side of this powerlessness (though portrayed in an equally humoristic light in Rejtman) is Cecilia’s loss of control caused by her drug and alcohol addiction. Cecilia loses control over the corporeal, for her consumption does not appear to take a toll on her behavior, but rather on her body, which gains seven kilos in one week. This physical side effect of the drugs and alcohol combination is what most worries Cecilia and her friends, who send her to the spa in Brazil so that she can return to her normal weight. The loss of physical control is the low point of Cecilia’s habit, and the main sign that she must stop. Despite her efforts to curb her consumption, it is not Cecilia who is able to pull herself out of her addiction, but rather the brute force of Hugh that frees her. When he sees her taking pills, Hugh just throws the box out of the window, ending Cecilia’s addiction. The characters have little control over their own destiny, which is shaped by others, economics, or chance.

For Martel, a conscience intervention on the part of her characters in shaping their destinies can never be fulfilled. In an interview in *El Eclipse*, Martel says of her characters, “Que los personajes fueran conscientes de sus actos sería falso, significaría no respetar la historia”(cited in Oubiña, 2007). After proclaiming that she will not end up in a bed like her mother, Mecha makes little effort to leave the bed, and, unconsciously aids in the fulfillment of this destiny by buying the mini-fridge to put alongside her bed so she never needs to get up for ice. Isabel, who actually does manage to escape the stifled environment of La Mandrágora, is only able to do so through an unconscious effort, as it is her unwanted pregnancy which propels her to leave. The oblivious manner through which the characters walk through life, controlled more by the natural impulses of their body than by planned decisions, signifies their relinquish of personal control.

Those who do attempt to intervene in their destiny ultimately fail, for they truly have no control over it. After Isabel’s departure, Momi goes to see the Virgin to ask that the maid return. However because of her inability to actually see the Virgin, Momi returns from this quest to change her destiny lacking the only thing that could have saved her from sharing the same fate as her family: her innocent hope. Momi’s frustrated experience drains her of all desire to even try and intervene in her destiny, for she comes to the realization that she has no control. Amalia never loses her fate in *La niña santa*, though the last sequence of the film suggests that despite her efforts to intervene in the fate of Dr. Jano, she has no control over his or her own life. Unaware that Dr. Jano is about to be accused of molesting her, Amalia floats innocently in a pool, unable to control the direction in which the water will take her body. Once again this powerful last image, so serene in the face of impending tragedy, serves as a strong, silent reminder of the situation of Martel’s characters whose bodies uncontrollably float through life.

Body of Film: Limits of Cinematographic Agency

Just like the bodies Rejtman portrays, film too is defined by its existence as a marketable good. The aesthetical and narrative appearance of the majority of films is limited by the market controlled by Hollywood style and economics, forcing films to give up some of their individual control in order to survive. In her analysis on contemporary cinema, critic Silvia Schwarzböck examines the economic dependence of the art of making films, which always influences the final product. “Para existir plenamente, necesitan circular como mercancías y someterse a las leyes del mercado...El cine está atado a la dinámica capitalista...” (Schwarzböck, 14). In response to this idea of imposed economic authority in cinema, Rejtman and Martel use the body of film itself as they use the bodies of their characters: to expose the limits of the institution of cinema and the individual filmmaker within it. However unlike the bodies of their characters, which succumb to the greater strength of outside forces, Rejtman and Martel’s films challenge the dominant system with their non-traditional aesthetics and narration.

In different manners, both Rejtman and Martel break the traditional view of the cinema as an art of creating a parallel reality into which the viewer can escape by denying the spectator the ability to completely immerse in this other world and forcing him to acknowledge that what he sees on the screen is an artificial construction. These directors accomplish this goal by portraying an unrealistic depiction of life and by exposing the body of film: showing its frames, technology, and limitations. Cinema can hardly be said to be presenting “reality” when the characters on screen are so unrealistic so as to appear inhuman or when the extreme close-ups clearly expose the hand of man in the creation of what the viewer is seeing. Rejtman and Martel bring the attention of the viewer to their critique of the hegemonic art form of film by putting him in dialogue with that

constructed aesthetics and the apparatus of cinema itself.

The flat, often repetitive shots of Rejtman add to the mechanical feeling of his cinema conveyed through the bodies of his characters. The shots of Alejandro in his Renault 12 are always taken straight on from the same, medium distance. The camera, just as his expression, never changes. Other characters are often shown in similar shots, as Rejtman does not venture from his straight on camera angles. In this manner Rejtman refuses to use the cinematic medium to capture what many view to be reality on the film by only showing the surface of his characters and their world.

It is film's potential ability to simultaneously show the surface and the inner feelings of humanity that fascinates the spectator and critics as it represent the possibility of bringing man closer to a true representation of reality. In his discourse on film, Béla Balázs was optimistic about this potential writing,

“A novelist can, of course, write a dialogue so as to weave into it what the speakers think to themselves while they are talking. But by so doing he splits up the sometimes comic, sometimes tragic, but always awe-inspiring, unity between spoken word and hidden thought with which this contradiction is rendered manifest in the human face and which the film was the first to show us in all its dazzling variety”(cited in MacDougall, 2006).

Rejtman, however, does not take part in this popular mission to find ways of coming ever closer to representing the reality man experiences in everyday life on screen. Instead he creates an alternative reality, thus dismissing this popular desire of film to convey the real and challenging its ability to do so.

Martel also challenges the senses of the spectator by breaking the allusion that cinema is a mechanism to transport him completely into the “reality” on the screen. She employs the technique of repeating shots in *La ciénaga* in a different manner than Rejtman, pointing out the cycle that all are doomed to repeat and thus further emphasizing that this is a highly constructed story with a beginning and an end to a

fictionalized account. That the film begins and ends with the same shot of first Gregorio and Mecha and later of Verónica and Momi contributes to turning *La ciénaga* more into an oral story tale (Martel herself describes it as much (Oubiña, 2007)) than a depiction of reality.

In *La niña santa*, Martel uses the framing to announce this fabricated fatalistic tendency within the story. Amalia is often trapped within a sea of bodies, while as her mother is constantly trapped alone within a mirror. The first image of Helena is that of her back seen through a mirror by Dr. Jano. Later in the film she dances seductively in front of a mirror, absorbed by her own image and oblivious to the world around her. This fascination with capturing the body of Helena within the four frames of a mirror, highlighting her obsession with the visual, shows her as trapped in her own world which she cannot escape (Aguilar, 2006). Martel plays with the idea of what can and cannot be seen, and what can and cannot fit into the camera frame all in a quest to show the limits of the spectator's experience.

Though the image is usually given first priority in a film, the sound can be equally important, and therefore Martel also shows the limitations of the representation of this sense in the cinema. In her article "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space", Mary Ann Doane describes the importance of the soundtrack in creating the sense of reality in a film. If the correlation between body and sounds or objects and sounds is broken, the spectator quickly loses the sense that he is viewing a reality and becomes acutely aware of the construction of cinema. "The aural illusion of position constructed by the approximation of sound perspective and by techniques which spatialize the voice and endow it with 'presence' guarantees the singularity and stability of a point of audition, thus holding at bay the potential trauma of dispersal,

dismemberment, difference”(Doane, 343). With her soundtracks, Martel purposely initiates this trauma as a way of showing that sound too is a constructed element of cinema. The source of the sound is often not shown, giving several sounds an eerily, other worldly feeling. The death of Luciano coincides with two abnormal sounds in the film: the first being the repetition of the song they listened to at Mecha’s house heard through the walls of Tali’s home, the second being the bark of the mysterious dog that draws Luciano to his death.

The role of sound is further developed in *La niña santa* which, while *La ciénaga* starts with a highly visual scene, begins with an emphasis on the power of sound. As described earlier, this film starts with a sound-image disconnect where the delay in the production of an image that is correlated with the sound imparts the disconcerting feeling of not being able to connect a sound with its source that Doane referred to in her article. This “sensory deprivation” as MacDougall describes it, “leaves the viewer more helpless than usual, without an avenue of escape into the “realist” conventions of cinema”(MacDougall, 2006) and therefore hyper-aware of the construction of the senses through the medium of cinema.

Just as the spectators are fascinated with this disconnection between source and sound, so are the characters, especially in *La niña santa* where the shared bewilderment caused by the Thermin unites all in the same human curiosity. Helena is constantly bothered by a noise in her ears that nobody but her can hear while as Amalia is following a call from God that she too can only hear. Sounds without sources take on a religious dimension but also a horror dimension as Dr. Jano is pursued by the sounds, disconnected with their image, created by of Amalia. The characters, like the spectators, are limited by their own humanity and thus experience a similar trauma as they are equally accustomed

to being able to identify the sound with its source. In her art, Martel has shown that real man, just like his fictional counterpart, is also limited by societal institutions.

Conclusions: The Rise of the Spectator

There is not always an easily defined message of hope or confidence in a positive fate for humanity in Rejtman's and Martel's cinema. Rejtman's anatomical world announces the replacement of humanity as we know it. In Martel's films, the fact that the children, associated with the hope of the future, end up either dead, hopeless, or failed in their goals also seems to offer little reason to dream of a positive future.

The films themselves, however, tell a different story. They are aesthetically defiant, addressing contemporary issues in their own style independent of Argentina's cinematic history and the Hollywood industry. Addressed in the introduction, it is again important to bring up here the new relationship these directors are cultivating with the audience as one of the most important aspects of their break from dominant cinema. The act of putting more responsibility with the spectator shows that these new directors do not want to be prophetic and that they actually respect the viewer. "By eschewing the overbearing need to bring enlightenment to his viewers—a pompous ideal typical of most previous Argentine movies—Rejtman not only avoids being pretentious, but also leaves open the possibility of finding as many readings as spectators" (Suárez, 2002). The audience is allowed to have individual interpretations of the films, as the directors have only shown the issues facing their society but have not proposed a solution to them. Rejtman and Martel thus create an inviting forum for dialogue, proposing to change society by exposing it to and having it discuss its own issues in hopes that through interactive dialogue, rather than sermons, people will come to a greater understanding of their reality.

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