The Social Spaces in Mutation: Sex, Violence and Autism in Albertina Carri’s La rabia (2008)

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This essay studies the abrupt mutations of social spaces that suffuse Albertina Carri’s La rabia (2008) through the presence, expressiveness, and art of an autistic child’s subjectivity. In depicting such mutations, the film becomes a narrative on gender-based violence, especially in socially isolated settings in Argentine society. The key setting in the film – the airy and open pampas – is not, therefore, just a physical dimension with its culturally encrusted attributes but a terrain for the complexities of domestic violence, struggles with undiagnosed autism, and sexually crude co-dependencies. As the film progresses – tinted with rigid patriarchal ways of life – the immensity of the represented landscape grows increasingly more claustrophobic with each social interaction. The intricate role of the child’s cognitive otherness – her simple, candid yet stirring autistic familial ethnography – ultimately expounds on complex manifestations of interpersonal abandonment within a diegetic locale shaped by patriarchal structures in ruins.

Keywords: Albertina Carri; childhood; gaze; space; violence

Desire, violence, and emotionally claustrophobic spaces rest at the heart of most of Albertina Carri’s cinematic production. Carri’s recent film, La rabia (2008), reflects these thematic pillars from a seemingly oxymoronic standpoint, an autistic child’s observations of and impacts on her immediate surroundings. The little girl’s forthright – yet reflexive – uneasiness with the oppressive familial dynamics, set in a village of the Argentine interior, engender an autistic ethnography of sorts – a process of defiant observation by means of screaming fits, sexually explicit drawings as well as other transgressive forms of social conduct toward and within the patriarchal structures of domination.
The film’s acute attention to the Argentine interior, therefore, is palpably non-neutral. According to the filmmaker, and unlike her previous films’ scripts in which the pampas are not entirely without their symbolic weight, this film only came to life – and its tragic ending was only determined – after she had settled on this remote and solitary farm site. More precisely, La rabia is entirely set in an impoverished estancia, whereby the latter linguistically indicates not only the potentially stagnating trait of this space, but also its elemental social rhythms that traditionally adhere to patriarchal ways of life. To that end, the film’s setting inevitably and latently confronts the spectator with those historically and culturally encrusted singular subjectivities (gauchos, caudillos, patrones and estancieros) – some of whom Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s Facundo: civilización y barbarie: Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga vividly analyzes in and beyond 1845. The spectator is, therefore, reminded of how such culturally significant subjectivities had defined the rural landscapes of Argentina as much as nurtured them, especially after the Viceroyalty of La Plata had collapsed and civil wars ensued toward and beyond the country’s independence.

Keeping these cultural implications in mind, the spaces represented in La rabia are hardly ever a phlegmatic physical backdrop. This is revealed relentlessly through the characters’ interactions with their immediate surroundings through financially austere, emotionally raw, and socially broken contracts: meager attempts at raising sheep, surviving on destitute farming, and leading severed familial lives. Largely dominated by ‘the silent, authoritarian, macho men of the Pampas’ (2014: 27), the austerity of interpersonal understanding, empathy, and mutual deference is another predominant trait that often impels the characters to existential dead ends. The frequent inter-subjective acts of violence and emotional angst the film’s central characters endure ultimately demonstrate the ways violence becomes quite literally instilled and transmitted from one generation to another, especially through the children’s assaulted psyches. The film, produced during the Argentine post-2001 economic collapse, ultimately unveils a mordant critique toward the traces of patriarchal structures encapsulated in the easily recognizable, traditional ways of subsistence in this cultural context.

Such a critique manifests through the relatively contemporary context. This Argentine contemporariness (both urban, rural and their mélange) has remained a significant element of New Argentine Cinema (NAC) in general. Film critic Gonzalo Aguilar’s recent metaphor that cinema generates and embodies ‘an archive of faces’ might be an insightful way of beginning to grasp the multilayered Argentine contemporariness New Argentine films tend to portray. This metaphor is certainly applicable to Carri’s films, but with the necessary qualifiers: hers is an archive of aesthetically multifold, emotionally complex, and socially defiant faces. Carri’s archive, furthermore, often privileges the faces of Argentine children or adolescents for exposing the traces of patriarchal structures through the dimensions of gender, sexuality, class, or cognitive otherness. La rabia merges most of such dimensions in a rural microcosm permeated by interpersonal violence. If, as Emilio Bernini states, NAC is ‘un cine realista, un cine como transparencia respecto a la realid\'ad contemporßnea’ (‘a realism-based cinema, a cinema of transparency regarding contemporary reality’) (2003: 89), then this filmic narrative goes beyond symbolically engendering the little girl’s socially active agency as a ‘cultural’ expression that seeks to ‘destabilize heterosexual tradition and the canon of
At the rawest emblematically discursive level, *La rabia* first can be perceived as a socially committed piece, which plainly sheds light upon bruised women’s lives and subjectivities, especially at the most marginal interstices of the Argentine society. In so doing, Carri ultimately features a subtly vengeful autistic subjectivity, triggering the mutability of social spaces within which interpersonal frailty as well as interconnectedness coexist or clash. This article, hence, studies the protagonist’s autistic subjectivity as a driving force for exposing physical, emotional, and social abandonment on interpersonal levels within a diegetic world infused with the traces of patriarchal domination.

**The politics of face: seeing voices of terror**

The Argentine interior has featured distinctly in contemporary Argentine cinema as well as other cinematographic work by Carri, such as *Los rubios* (2003) and *Gemínis* (2005). If the former seeks out the pampas as an alternative space to the urban territories of Buenos Aires regarding the attempts at piecing together personal and non-essentialist connections to a past ravaged by state terror (1976–1983), the latter film selects the rural interior to portray extreme practices of non-normative sexuality through incestuous transgressions. Yet *La rabia* can also be aligned with those filmic narratives that opt for situating their characters’ stories in the Argentine interior in order to challenge, frustrate or embolden the characters’ psyches. Two contemporary filmmakers and their thematically relevant films come to mind immediately: María Victoria Menis’s *El cielito* (2004) as well as much of Lisandro Alonso’s cinematographic work. Domestic violence, parental neglect and social isolation permeate both *El cielito* and *La rabia*, in which the families’ children usually usurp, aggravate or undercut patriarchal demands. Yet while Carri’s central families’ environmental alternative is utterly non-existent, for their lives are never imagined away or pushed from the farm’s oppressive premises, Menis’s film offers an alternative in the city of Buenos Aires only to expose the need for a nuanced knowledge regarding basic urban survival. The city, as it turns out upon the rather trivial death of the protagonist, Félix, can be an equally vulnerable territory for the rural, unlearned poor. Unlike Alonso’s *Los muertos* (2004), moreover, (in which the jungle functions as a primarily soothing terrain for the main character) and *La libertad* (2001) (in which the male protagonist’s rural loneliness appears to be part of his autonomous preference), the solitary and brute attempts at survival within male-dominated, rural, and isolated settings in *La rabia* set up an implicit interrogation of historical and cultural idealizations of the Argentine interior. The pampas, which had provided much of the autochthonous essence to the nation’s formation in the early 1800s, function in this film as a symbolic platform for vigorous displays of patriarchy in ruins.

*La rabia’s* plot is seemingly unassuming. It portrays the intricacies of social and emotional relationships within and between two neighboring farm-bound families. From the outset of the film, these relationships remain tense, broken, and hostile. Nearly every character experiences rage, fear, and violence, the mélange that ultimately bolts them into a perpetual emotional claustrophobia. The spectator witnesses, for instance, an unquestionably abusive relationship between Pichón and
his child, Ladeado. Both characters lead an inimical daily existence, thus facing or causing different upshots of violence: while Ladeado stays focused on killing weasels and on pitiless hunting, his father remains centered on physically and verbally abusing him and securing regular, clandestine, and sexually crude encounters with a married neighbor, Ale. Ale, her husband (Poldo), and daughter (Nati) lead an equally rigid existence. These characters’ daily routines are tedious, full of domestic and farm chores, but not without certain deliberate or unintended interruptions: Ale’s secret and sadomasochistic escapades with Pichón, Nati’s unintentional voyeurism during such encounters, and Poldo’s advances on a teenage girl in the village.

Chosen, with perfect irony, as the key intermediary in framing the excess of violence and social stagnation in the film is a mute child. Muteness, in essence, speaks decisively in La rabia, for non-verbal autistic behavior permeates the film as a form of communication. Carri focuses on silence that appears compulsory, especially toward women or vulnerable child characters. The female characters in La rabia, in particular, literally must remain silent in accordance with their male counterparts’ orders, desires or preferences. The child protagonist, though, serves an exceptionally unique – beyond subversive – function in testing, if not defying, those compulsory silences through her autistic otherness. The non-verbal autistic subjectivity in La rabia, unable to speak/practice the languages of the repressive order, holds the position of a perceptive familial ethnographer in a neo-realist way.

At the core of neo-realist films, according to Gilles Deleuze, ‘the mental world of a character is so filled up by other proliferating characters that it becomes inter-mental’ (1986: 8). Such ‘mental worlds’ in La rabia are principally autism-related. Carri’s selection of a cognitively active autistic child character creates a non-neutral medium that captures, exposes, and even punishes certain ill-mannered socio-individual interactions. More specifically, the mute character – or her non-dormant cognition – functions as a repository of the social (hidden and overt) occurrences that surround her: Ladeado’s hidden hut in the woods; the sites of Pichón and Ale’s raw eroticism; Poldo’s aggressive interactions at home and in public. And Nati does not stop at the ‘inter-mental’ point, for many of her observations translate (and often mistranslate) outwards into tangible and sexually explicit drawings. Ultimately, these drawings destabilize both a protective silence that Ale and Pichón practice to shield their escapades as well as an uncomfortable silence manifested through Nati’s muteness at home and in public.

Silence, as a mode of meditation, survival or communication with oneself, again brings to mind La libertad, in which Alonso uniquely merges the Argentine interior with his characters’ taciturn selves. By choice, it appears, the main character (Misel Saavedra) willingly stays away from cohabiting or interacting verbally with others. David Oubiña views Alonso’s films as cinematographic territory that constantly questions the boundaries between non- and documentary films ‘a través de una particular forma de observar la realidad física: la mirada de Alonso no pretende explicar o interpretar a sus personajes sino que busca y encuentra un espacio que pueda albergar la diferencia’ (‘through a particular mode of observing physical reality: Alonso’s gaze does not seek to explain or interpret his characters but rather seeks and finds a space that can host difference’) (2007: 13). This ‘space’ in La libertad also engenders what Paulina Bettendorff calls a silent cohabitation between the director (Alonso) and his main character (Saavedra) in the form of a quiet pact of empathy ‘porque el personaje
y el director se identifican, uno es impenetrable sin el otro’ (‘because the character and the director identify with each other, it is impossible to understand one without the other’) (2007: 127). In *La rabia*, the non-verbal autistic character’s muteness persists through her drawings to expose or shatter other interpersonal silences, largely among embattled adults, that the spectator witnesses.

Critics have already commented on the symbolic intricacies such drawings might entail. Nati’s drawings, in Cynthia Tompkins’s terms, refer to the child’s torrential inner world, for they ‘represent a mute young girl’s psychic processes’ (2012: 190). Alejandra Josiowicz, on the other hand, views the child protagonist’s drawings as ‘the possibility of retelling familiar traumatic memory’ (2014: 35), thus indirectly alluding to the importance of Carri’s complex ties with cross-generational mnemonic transmissions within her own (disappeared) family. Sophie Dufays underscores the structural metamorphosis that Nati’s drawings enable in this film. According to Dufays, Nati’s drawings show how ‘the representative cinematic image opens, as if it were wounded, into another type of image – a nonrealistic and even abstract one’ (2014: 25). Yet Nati also plays a crucial role in returning ‘some reality’ to the spectator in Deleuzian terms (1986: 9). This is particularly evident when spectators are denied (or barraged with) visual access to certain emotional breakdowns within this diegetic world’s everyday banalities as well as violence.

Although driven by autistic subjectivity, *La rabia* distances itself from many cinematic portrayals of autism – mostly found in the twentieth- and early twenty-first-century films from the United States such as *Change of Habit* (1969), *Rain Man* (1988), and *Temple Grandin* (2010), to mention just a few most notable films – in which autistic savants’ behaviors are represented reductively. The autistic characters in such films either exhibit complete dependence upon, or represent a strengthening force for, those around them. Carri’s autistic character is not an utter savant nor is she a uniquely needy character. The young child is not exceptional in any skill. Even if her drawings are compulsive, rich in adult-related sexual implications, and ultimate facilitators of her speech, these drawings are aesthetically uncomplicated and reflect her age in their lack of complexity. Yet the child is a relatively independent character in the film. She wanders around and outside her farm, sometimes completely unsupervised, engaging in games with Ladeado or intense observations of the occurrences in her immediate surroundings. When juxtaposed with the majority of mainstream cinematic depictions of autistic subjectivities, the autistic character in Carri’s fictitious world, in fact, appears moderately participatory and socially transgressive: she is an autistic ethnographer who draws or screams her impressions and observations. Much like Diamela Eltit’s young autistic boy in *Los vigilantes* (1994), whose perceptiveness is hardly ever completely dormant alongside his mother’s eloquent missives to the absent/abusive father, Carri’s young autistic girl character is the catalyst for exposing and weakening the isolating restrictions that keep the other characters in social chains.

Much of that drive becomes noticeable in the character’s mute face and in the directness of her gaze. Carri accomplishes such a mirroring through tight framing of Nati’s face frequently throughout the film. Commenting on Raúl Antelo’s remark, via Deleuze and Agamben, that the face is a ‘political space of enunciation,’ Aguilar underscores symbolic indeterminacies of the face in New Argentine cinema: ‘in the face, there is a search for a blank page […] upon which actions
and affect can be inscribed’ (2008: 209). Keeping this remark in mind, Carri’s
autistic character’s face indeed becomes a semiotic terrain onto which domestic
violence, verbal abuse, emotional disregard, and betrayal are constantly inscribed
only to then be exposed, weakened or significantly diminished. The child’s face,
furthermore, functions as a mirror of social spaces that are deprived of interper-
sonal harmony, regard, or praise.

If the production of social spaces depends largely on the activities that unfold
within them, as Henri Lefebvre suggests in *The Production of Space* (1974), then two
sequences stand out in particular as they exhibit the production of excessively vio-

tent space for another two characters, Ale and Ladeado. Such production of space
is mediated through Nati’s intense observations and, therefore, through her face.
In both sequences, albeit to a different degree, the spectator is intimately con-

nected to the girl’s face in order to secure some sort of narrative continuity about
what is solely accessible through sound, is not accessible visually, or is graphically
unambiguous.

The first such example is Pichón’s brutal beating of his son. When Ladeado
transgresses his father’s orders to not play with Nati, a prohibition that follows a
public confrontation between Poldo and the boy’s father, Pichón grabs and drags
Ladeado into their home for a merciless beating. Confused by the abrupt interrup-
tion of their play, Nati follows the father and son and stops before the house win-
dow that frames the violent scene. The mute girl’s face turns into a sound
intermediary of the physical beatings the boy suffers at the hands of his father. The
spectator, though, is deprived of almost all visual access to this violent act. Instead,
the camera focuses, with an utmost stillness, on Nati’s persistently attentive (and
beautiful) face, which bears witness to Pichón’s sadistic brutalities and shares with
the spectator the boy’s helpless cries. Apart from being a ‘page,’ as Aguilar suggests
(2008: 209), Nati’s face becomes a screen that mediates, in Deleuzian terms, ‘the
descriptive power of color and sound,’ onto which the spectator may inscribe
images of the vicious beating (1986: 12). Deleuze reminds us that in films, a
‘purely optical and sound situation does not extend into action any more than it is
induced by an action. It makes us grasp, it is supposed to make us grasp, something
intolerable and unbearable’ (1986: 18). Carri folds Nati’s baffled gaze into the boy’s
invisible (yet piercingly audible) screams, thus allowing us to ‘grasp’ or see the boy’s
anguished voice in our imaginations. As the cries continue, mediated through Nati’s
relatively still face, a sensation of double helplessness emerges: Ladeado’s earsplit-
ting screams appear to paralyze Nati just as her attentive gaze further implies her
own vulnerability. And the spectator, too, appears cornered by this emotional dead-
lock. One watches, in fact, wondering if Nati might be next when her intense gaze
suddenly ducks under the window, after Pichón abruptly ceases to strike his son.
The cessation of the beating is synchronized with the dipping of the young girl’s face
below the window as if to underscore the spectator’s dependence on Nati’s gaze to
access what defies precise or adequate representation.

The girl’s intense gaze is equally significant during several sex encounters
Pichón carries out with Ale, revealing the complex dynamic of severing socio-indi-

vidual relations. Unlike the sequence with Ladeado, the tight framing goes beyond
Nati’s face frequently and straightforwardly to Ale’s and Pichón’s naked bodies,
quivering jaws, and shuddering intercourse. Such encounters are interspersed
throughout this filmic narrative and not all are accompanied by Nati’s voluntary or involuntary voyeurism. But those that involve Nati also juxtapose the young girl’s physically distant gaze (she often observes from outside) with the crowded oneness these two adults exhibit through their sexual acts. Yet this stifled unity, depicted through the tightness of the physical room the couple absorb through their sexual act, also communicates the disunity of their inter-subjective interactions. This scene is replete with aggressive and uncomfortable poses, which are further highlighted through the confines of the frame the couple are granted. When the camera ultimately generates the bird’s-eye view, positioning the spectator above the couple, it suggests a peculiar type of transgression: cornered, held in place, and restricted. We are reminded that this transgression is ultimately partial, as it ends up being short-lived.

As the child engages in gazing at these sexually crude encounters, she also mediates the spectator’s gaze just as the camera disallows rigid angles during these scenes. The most direct outcome is not solely in conversation with Sigmund Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), but also with Laura Mulvey’s contestations of scopophilic instinct in film. Mainstream cinema, according to Mulvey’s seminal “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” embodies ‘voyeuristic potential’ (1999: 843), which, as Ann Kaplan reminds, traditionally marks ‘the male pleasure in his own sexual organ transferred to pleasure in watching other people having sex’ (1983: 30). In traditional films, according to Mulvey, the ‘pleasure in looking at the human form’ results in the monochromatic cinematographic approach that goes ‘far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, [and] builds the ways she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself’ (843). Carri suspends the normatively practiced voyeurism in *La rabia* without sacrificing scopophilia. The latter, in fact, manifests in a modified way, for it is repetitiously re-appropriated by the autistic child protagonist whose gaze confronts numerous sexual encounters, zooming in on Pichón’s stiff penis with frequency and bewilderment. The practice of scopophilia in Carri’s film is, nonetheless, never a source of pleasure regarding ‘woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness.’ It functions, instead, as a compelling source of confusion, threat and loss.

As the central male characters’ unyieldingly insist on maintaining the patriarchal order, their families gradually fall apart; and this breakdown includes their own demises. This climax turns *La rabia* into another strong example of the ‘cinema of disintegration.’ Such films focalize, in Aguilar’s words, ‘families with confused ties, institutions and heroes of the past that function like broken-down automatons, and characters that sink into parasitism’ (2008: 34). This focalization of the autistic child’s subjectivity, whose muteness intentionally or otherwise voices and ultimately lessens much of the adults’ socio-emotional entrapment, reiterates that the child characters in Carri’s film are simultaneously at the mercy of the adults while not completely beyond the realms of personal agency.

**Spaces in mutation: social frailty and interconnectedness**

Agency, or struggles to demolish the lack thereof, among other socially frail characters (both adult and children) in the film, is often linked to socially mutable...
spaces. This mutability, rudimentarily defined as when a space mutates from hosting one type of activity to another or hosts a number of simultaneous occurrences that are often at odds with one another, brings to mind Doreen Massey’s discussions on space, clearly in harmony with Lefebvre’s theorizations on the production of social spaces, as an inevitably unfixed dimension. While both place and space hold both certain and less firm sociopolitical implications, spaces produced through interpersonal relations are never fixed. Space, Massey reminds us in *For Space* (2005), ‘can never be that completed simultaneity in which all interconnections have been established, and in which everywhere is already linked with everywhere else. A space, then, is neither a container for always-already constituted identities, nor a completed closure of holism’ (2005: 12). Carri’s cinematic representation of the pampas’ social space coincides with Massey’s conceptualization of space, especially since the filmmaker depicts social spaces in mutation to accentuate the specific struggles for personal agency among most central characters in the film.

This mutability of social space is highlighted when Ale and Nati confront and expose the social precariousness of the most rigid figures around them, namely Poldo and Pichón during the morning of a pig slaughtering. Toward the middle of the film, the front yard in Ale and Poldo’s home turns into a slaughterhouse that is followed by a village feast of sorts. Andermann calls this scene, together with other frequent and brutal killings of animals in the film, an example of the ‘atmosphere of increasing bestiality’ (2012: 83). Such ‘bestiality’ serves as a prelude to the most direct social exposure of the two families’ precarious interconnectedness: the secret and adulterous interactions between Ale and Pichón. This exposure is alluded to indirectly in the act of cutting the pig open and spilling its bubbling entrails. Carri’s camera patiently represents the men’s struggles to keep the pig still and tied up before cutting into its flesh and letting its blood soak the front yard. The mélangé of the men’s instructive chatter about the slaughtering, the pig’s disturbing squealing, and the subsequent evisceration fill the scene with torn intestines but also vital organs. This scene brings to mind the literary torture sites of those who harbored political dissent in Esteban Echeverría’s *El matadero* (1871), as they are suggestive of the potential exposure of the adultery between the protagonists in question in Carri’s narrative. This space, which initially hosts primal survival rituals in the film, then mutates into a space of antagonistic interpersonal interactions.

Such interpersonal interactions take over (during the feast that follows the pig slaughtering) when Pichón notices Nati’s drawings of erotic scenes, which include a figure with an eerie resemblance to his own effeminate physique. In panic, Pichón tears the drawings away from her. Not prepared for such an exchange with Pichón, Nati protests in her most vocal language – screaming – in the midst of this social gathering. Dufays argues that Nati’s monotone screaming reactions allude not solely to the pre-linguistic order in Freud’s terms, but also to the notion of a deterministic labyrinth against or within which this (and other) child character(s) continuously struggle in *La rabia*. ‘With human language losing its metaphorical character,’ argues Dufays, ‘and reverting to the status of noise to its elemental and animal origins, the entire symbolic order is affected and gives way directly to an archaic (preverbal) imaginary order’ (2014: 28). Furthermore, Josiowicz is right to suggest that the young girl’s screaming fits could be viewed rudimentarily as social attempts to secure her own agency since Nati usually *draws* her voice.25
In this scene, though, Nati’s screaming also functions at two socially interconnected levels, which mutates this space into a terrain for personal clashes. The child’s drawings (her creativity) appear to be both acts of survival as well as revenge. We are reminded of a different creativity-induced context altogether in which Sylvia Molloy’s protagonist, in *En breve cárcel* (1981), confesses overtly that writing (just like Nati’s drawing) potentially boasts vengeance. In other words, artistic efforts (writing, drawing, painting or artful creating) can be a retaliatory act against oppressive energies, echoing perhaps Jean-Paul Sartre’s post-WWII remark, that is, ‘the most beautiful book in the world will not save a child from pain, one does not redeem evil, one fights it’ (1988: 240). Drawing, for the young child in *La rabia*, means generating her own book of social interactions, energies and conflicts, and is thus an attempt to survive their often dark impositions. Snatching away Nati’s drawings subsequently functions as an attempt to silence her not solely as a social – but also subtly retaliatory – agentic subjectivity.

This spatial mutation, changing from a sociable terrain into an inimical one, does not cease with this particular incident. The same screaming fits mutate the social space of the pig roast for Poldo. His uneasiness about his daughter’s condition, here publicly on display, comes to life aggressively. It is not surprising, then, that Poldo’s brewing aggressiveness instantaneously spills into two abusive interactions: one in which he expels Pichón from this social gathering for the neighbor’s disrespect for Nati’s screaming; and the other when he hits Ale publicly for having challenged his action toward Pichón. If, as Bryan Turner notes in *The Body and Society*, ‘human vulnerability refers to both physical and psychological harm: it indicates human exposure to psychological harm or moral damage or spiritual threat’ (2008: 13), then this space of collective social gathering, village conviviality, and ritualistic undertakings turns into a space of personal vulnerabilities and social damage: namely, inter-personal wounding, emotional carnage, and verbal butchery.

The vulnerabilities in question relate, above all, to the three adult characters – Ale, Poldo and Pichón – who engage in antagonistic social relations. Such relations, or incongruous social role-playing, generate certain realities that are at odds with one another: Ale’s semi-passive wifehood yet fairly active sadomasochistic adultery; Poldo’s helplessness before the child’s autism wedded to domineering husbandhood; and Pichón’s private erotic bravery in stark contrast with his public cowardice. The characters’ vulnerabilities become especially apparent when such incongruous role-playing collides in Goffman’s terms. In his classic *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman underscores that social behaviors must be understood as constructed as well as performed appearances. At the heart of such constructed performativity, the notion of ‘front stage and back stage’ distinguishes between relaxed social performances that are not directed to others (back stage) and those that are aimed straightforwardly at others (front stage). The front stage, then, demands carefully orchestrated social interactions. Keeping social complexities at bay requires that these two stages and their related behaviors be kept discretely apart. Nati’s drawings about the sexual encounters between Ale and Pichón threaten to interconnect the two stages during the slaughtering ritual. Pichón’s reaction toward such a threat results in another collision of these stages: first through the disturbance of Nati’s quietness in public (normally most of her screaming fits are done in private settings) and Poldo’s subsequent physical abuse of his
wife in the same public setting. The spectator is left with an emotionally taut, unsafe and ultimately socially severed space as an outcome of the unyielding insistence on maintaining the social (patriarchal) systems of domination.

**Inenarrable episodes: claustrophobia, abandonment or autonomy?**

This collision of two stages results in two deaths (Poldo’s and Pichón’s) in *La rabia*. Such diegetic climax is triggered by the child characters’ undertakings: Nati’s drawings trigger Poldo’s intention to kill Pichón, which results in Poldo’s death. The same climax significantly subtends the film’s unquestionable concern with abandonment. Abandonment in *La rabia* remains mainly unlinked to Nietzsche’s ‘death of God,’ Sartre’s abandonment as an offshoot of atheism, or Heidegger’s insistence on the subject’s need to confront the non-existence of external sources of moral authority. Carri’s film depicts abandonment that brims with multifaceted – yet straightforward – implications (unintentional, deliberate, physical, and emotional) that stem from the tense relationships between space (personal and public) and familial emotion (positive and negative). As most spaces that the film’s characters inhabit or frequent remain vulnerable to different mutations and abandonment of their inherent social functions, Carri undergirds that any space, including those culturally encrusted ones, is ultimately challengeable. The film depicts this through the physical claustrophobia most characters feel within the vastness of Argentine interior, a terrain for the featured families’ interpersonal terror. The characters’ palpable deprivation of emotional openness manifests paradoxically through excess. *La rabia* brims with either excessive noise or silence, excessive lack of considerate communication, or excessive behavioral control and transgression. On a broader level, and in Marx’s terms, the spectator is reminded, from the outset of the film, that comparatively isolated or concentrated lives, especially in rural and remote settings, are overwhelmingly prevented from engaging with a broader social world. In Carri’s film, this socially hermetic condition only exacerbates their social inertia.

Such lives hardly ever preclude the characters’ striving for autonomy in the film. At the same time, personal autonomy is hardly ever completely attainable, for the search for it appears doomed, tragic, or imperfect from the outset. Poldo’s intentions to seize the country girl sexually only frustrate his libidinous freedom and potential extramarital autonomy. On two occasions, his prolonged and lustful gaze communicates both his interest and frustration, especially since the adolescent girl shows an overt indifference toward him. In each shot in which Poldo seeks her attention, the spectator notices the presence of a concrete physical obstacle between the two: a store counter, her household walls or windows, or Poldo’s truck. Unlike Poldo’s intent, Ladeado’s intentions toward autonomy are not driven by eroticism. The boy mainly seeks autonomy through play, yet affirms his independence tragically toward the end of the film through his first non-animal killing. Before his death, Pichón continuously seeks autonomous escapades with Ale, but those signal their personal disconnection as well as interpersonal entrapment. One such an example is the close-up shot, through a closed window, of Ale and Pichón ostensibly performing anal sex. Fractured in their togetherness, they constantly face
away, downward or through the window, thus disallowing any eye contact or possibility of intimate connection. Such attempts at and failures of their sought autonomy are captured in the scenes that defy an easy narration, precisely as they exhibit raw physical mistreatments, behaviors, or bodily and gaze-induced aggression.

These scenes – filled with interpersonal violence, killings, and verbal and physical abuse – gradually become the inenarrable episodes in the film; episodes that tense or challenge their own narrative flow. Deleuze holds that narration in films stems from images and subsequently drives them forward. More specifically, ‘[n]arration is never an evident [apparent] given of images […] it is a consequence of the visible [apparent] images themselves, of the perceptible images in themselves, as they are initially defined for themselves’ (1986: 27). If narration results from the visibility, perceptibility and self-definition of images, La rabia abounds with necessarily inenarrable episodes. They are inenarrable because their content often defies language as it exhibits atrocious behavior. The previously discussed scene of the pig slaughtering offers a fitting example. Having endured a heavy slap in the face, Ale falls off her chair and, defeated, walks away from Poldo into their house. There she encounters Nati’s compassionate face. Their words fail them for a moment as they hold each other in a lopsided hug. When Ale finally speaks, she defers to Nati’s world of drawn images and wishes that Poldo be taken away by one of the monsters Nati draws. This (infantilized) remark confirms both the personal inerrability as well as that Ale’s autonomous existence is completely devoid of any concreteness. This existence, therefore, is at the mercy of the imagination of her non-verbal autistic child.

The inenarrable attributes of certain scenes in the film are particularly strengthened through short sequences of cartoon animations. Tompkins (2012: 197), Andermann (2012: 83) and Josiowicz (2014: 42) have studied these sequences recently. Andermann notices the seemingly aesthetic ordinariness of such sequences within the film’s montage just as they function as reflections of or trigger points for violence, cruelty and disorder. ‘These sequences,’ specifies Andermann, ‘impregnate diegetic space with a latent ominousness and brutality always on the verge of exploding into the open’ (2012: 83). Focusing on Eisenstein’s notion of dialectical montage in films, Tompkins views the first sequence of cartoon animations (Poldo’s conversation with Nati about the inappropriateness of unclothing oneself in public) as an equivalent of speech. Josiowicz appears to be in agreement with Tompkins and views the child protagonist’s artistic abilities as a potent agentic trait since ‘Nati is able to reformulate her perceptions into the fictional scenario of her watercolor animations, in which she projects her intrapsychic and intersubjective representations’ (2014: 42).

Yet these sequences can also be viewed as structurally amorphous palimpsests of the inenarrable. They are pictorial palimpsests, as each sequence emerges from, expands, or announces menacing undertakings in the film. Such animations are scraped clean digitally before they reappear again through the same or similar images, colors, motifs or fluidity. Violent, dark and portentous events defy language in this film, and cartoon animations spill over the scenes, thus underscoring the linguistically inenarrable attributes of the events themselves. These digitized sequences function as an affirmation of the impossibility of cohesively and acutely
representing the afflictions, abuses, violence, or certain forms of social rejection that permeate this film. Such sequences additionally sustain the presence of the characters’ psyches in distress.

The unhindered hostility, particularly toward women and children (but also other men), maintains the film’s focus on gender violence until the last scene, which brings to mind concrete Argentine contexts of domestic violence in conjunction with law. To this end, Susan Franceschet sheds light on the contradictory sociocultural mazes that women (especially mothers and wives) must endure in abusive domestic settings, specifying that in ‘a region dominated by Catholicism where religious groups often mobilize in opposition to perceived threats to Catholic values, it is not surprising that domestic violence laws have prioritized the protection of the family over individual women’s rights’ (2010: 5). Barbara Sutton, furthermore, considers carefully these sociocultural structures, with the highest rates of violence against women globally, and zooms in on even deeper interpersonal platforms for violence. For Sutton, interpersonal violence is ‘a form of direct control over the body, exerted by one person over another with the intention and/or likelihood of inflicting bodily and psychological harm’ (2010: 129). Bodies, continues Sutton, ‘bruised, scarred, and mutilated are more easily identified as targets of violence than bodies deprived of liberty, verbally and psychologically harassed or threatened’ (2010: 129).30 La rabia exposes the inevitable links between gender violence and social stagnation, with a degree of relative contemporariness, yet exclusively within the same space that had hosted the ‘essence of the Argentine nation or argentinitad’ in the foundational past.31

The kinds of anguish and its sources, moreover, emblematically cut beyond the spatial and cultural boundaries of this film. Domestic violence toward children and women, who must – or refuse to – bear it in quiet desperation, is hardly containable or limited to this particular space, culture or historical moment. Apart from Menis and Alonso, Carri’s contemporaries’ films such as Pablo Trapero’s Leonera (2008), Lucía Puenzo’s El niño pez (2009), Adrián Caetano and Bruno Stagnaro’s Pizza, birra, faso (1997), and Lucrecia Martel’s La ciénaga (2001), to mention just a few, center-stage physical or verbal abuse in family homes within urban, rural, Argentine, or transnational spaces. La rabia and such films could be situated thematically or discursively alongside those contemporary films in the Latin American context which, in accordance with Laura Podalsky’s The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema (2011), ‘solicit particular emotional responses and/or stimulate more diffuse, affective reactions’ (2011: 7). Yet such ‘emotional reactions’ Podalsky refers to might be as broad as the depth of anger-provoking circumstances that pervade La rabia. To this end, Patricia Greenspan’s Emotions and Reasons (1988) proves helpful, as it makes a clear distinction between sadness and anger. Anger, according to Greenspan, remains ultimately connected to desire. This comes forth ‘in a way that sadness at a perceived injury is not. It involves not just a wish that things were otherwise […], but also an urge to act to change them somehow … to take some sort of aggressive action in response’ (1988: 50–51). As the surviving main characters (Ale, Nátí and Ladeado) continue on less muzzled yet equally distressed, abandoned, and confined in the aftermath of their familial tragedy, La rabia ends, above all, on a note of retributive affect.
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Notes


2. Much of Carri’s cinematographic work has been linked scholarly to those films that privilege experiences from childhood and adolescence as ways to express mordant critiques toward patriarchal ways of domination. The two recent collections of essays edited by Carolina Rocha and Georgia Seminet prove essential in this context: Representing History, Class and Gender in Spain and Latin America: Children and Adolescents in Film (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) as well as Screening Minors in Latin American Cinema (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

3. See Carri’s interview during the Berlin Film Festival in 2009. In addition, Carri’s films (La rabia, Los rubios and Géminis) have been comparatively studied in Josiowicz (2014), Andermann (2012), Page (2009) and Aguilar (2008), to mention just a few.

4. The emergence of estancias also signifies the birth of the complex relationships men from the Argentine interior faced at the outset of the nineteenth century. Elizabeth Garrels puts it insightfully in her introduction to Sarmiento’s Recollections of a Provincial Past: '[a]s the estanciero became the gaucho’s patron and, during the civil wars, often his caudillo, these two individuals, of starkly different social class, were bound together in a hierarchical and authoritarian relationship, which could be – and was – used politically and militarily to challenge the authority of centralized and – at least nominally – representative government.’ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005: xxxix.

5. Two indispensable studies prove helpful here: Doris Sommer’s Foundational Fictions (Berkley: University of California Press, 1984) on love stories in the foundational novels as metaphors for nation building and Masiello’s Between Civilization and Barbarism (Minneapolis: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) on counter-masculinist discourse among women, which ‘acquired a new symbolic value in building the nation’ (23). In addition, see Carolina Rocha’s discussion on the reformulation of the discourses about masculinities in Argentine cinematic representations in the 1990s onward. Rocha draws attention to the competing masculinities during the foundational era of the nation: ‘[t]he presence of numerous foreign-born males created a certain anxiety among nationalist intellectuals who resorted to exalting the rural male inhabitants of the pampas – the gauchos – as a defining element of national identity’ in Masculinities in Contemporary Argentine Popular Cinema (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 5. Rocha also reminds us that Ernesto Gunche and Eduardo Martínez de la Pera’s Nobleza gaucha (1915) as well as La guerra gaucha (1942) by Lucas Demare come to mind immediately when recalling early cinematic representations of raw masculinities in conjunction with the foundational national identity.

6. See Ana Laura Lusnich’s El drama social-folclórico: el universo rural en el cine argentino (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos Artes y Medios, 2007) and Estela Erausquin’s
Witnesing violent acts in their familial and social surroundings instills in them both quiet (Nati’s drawings) as well as vociferous (Ladeado’s act of murder) forms of violent behavior.

In this way, we are also reminded of the first Argentine films, from the turn of the twentieth-century, yet with a significant twist. While Mario Gallo’s *El fusilamiento de Dorrego* (1908) represented the violent past of the nineteenth century through gaucho-like male and mostly docile women characters, Carri’s *La rabia* focuses on the darker side of early cinematic idealization of the pampa by overtly critiquing patriarchal modes of socialization.

In ‘The Aesthetics of New Argentine Cinema’ Sergio Wolf (2009) underscores that New Argentine Cinema directors choose to present bits and pieces of local and everyday destinies, adding that ‘to this date the works of the new directors have not tried their luck with the model of period films’ (1). Deborah Shaw draws attention to cinematic foci on the contemporary among both commercial and what Tamara Falicov calls ‘artistic’ contemporary Argentine films. The Argentine economic crisis in 2001 has served as a stimulating element for several Hollywood-appealing (as well as independent) films. See Shaw’s ‘Playing Hollywood at Its Own Game?’ in Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market, ed. Deborah Shaw (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 68. In Tamara Falicov’s *The Cinematic Tango* (London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2007) we are reminded of how New Argentine Cinema directors ‘create overtly polemical statements or march under the banner of a political movement, they are working to expand the notion of Argentine citizenship to include subjects and characters who have traditionally been invisible or excluded from Argentine screens’ (133).

According to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, domestic violence against women continues to be pervasive in Argentina, despite the fact that in 2009 the Argentine Congress passed a law providing comprehensive protection to prevent, penalize and eliminate violence against women. For more
16. *La rabia*’s rural characters are not in search of ‘an alternative way of life’ (Dieleke 2013: 61) as is the case with the lead characters in Alonso’s films on rural Argentinean topographies.

17. Carri has refused to connect *La rabia* emblematically with any one historical period, stating at the Berlin Film Festival in 2008 that her film principally tackles ‘la naturalización de la violencia en la vida del campo donde poco o nada se analiza’ (‘the naturalization of violence in rural life where little or nothing is scrutinized’). Yet the film’s figurative echoes are certainly multivalent in terms of Argentina’s sociocultural and political history of patriarchy. Two recent and interconnected remarks come to mind immediately. Jens Andermann observes in *New Argentine Cinema* (New York/London: I.B. Tauris, 2012) that *La rabia* contains symbolic undercurrents regarding the post-2001 revival of the ruralista movements in Argentina, and Cynthia Tompkins similarly underscores the film’s political undertones, explaining that ‘el 2008 es el conflicto entre el oficialismo y el campo’ (‘2008 is the conflict between the countryside and the representative of the governing party’), 2012: 194. The film’s excess as well as manifestations of violence also may be suggestive of (or inspired by) the social and political upheavals the country endured during state terror (1976–1983). This, in particular, is possible to envision, as the subjects in the film are brutally beaten, harshly penetrated, tied up, physically and verbally abused, silenced, and in some cases killed either arbitrarily, wrongfully, or for having challenged repressive orders. This political period is close to Carri, professionally and personally, for her own parents were disappeared during state terror in Argentina. Carri’s first documentary, *Los rubios* (2003), fundamentally explores the complexities behind the disappeared, memory and identity. This film symbolized a shift in the way cinema approaches the recent past and the issue of generational transmission aesthetically and politically.

18. Her father misinterprets her drawings, thinking that Nati draws Pichón as her rapist. This is the reason for Poldo’s decision to kill the neighbor.


22. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Deleuze considers the importance of the ‘descriptive power of color and sound’ in examining how it helps to ‘replace, obliterate and re-create the object itself’ (12).


24. The pig is ultimately roasted and served in a quiet feast for all involved.


26. Molloy’s text reads as follows: ‘She begins to write a story that will not leave her alone. She would like to forget it; she would also like to give it a shape, and, in shaping it, find revenge: for herself, for her story. She wants to exorcise that story as it was, in order to recover it as she would like to remember it’ (3).
References


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