

## Editors' Introduction

### Jordana Blejmar and Cecilia Sosa

This special issue is the result of a series of screenings titled Meeting the Directors: Dialogues Between New Argentine Cinema & Theatre, held in 2013 at Senate House in London. A joint venture between the Institute of Latin American Studies and the Institute of Modern Languages Research, both part of the University of London, the screenings were open to the general public and were designed to explore the dialogues and exchanges taking place between the so-called New Argentine Cinema and the less-well-known New Argentine Theatre. The series was the first time that such a range of diverse experimental productions had been shown in the United Kingdom alongside conversations with the young directors, who were either present at the venue or interviewed via video conferences on the day of the screenings.

This special issue builds on those conversations, identifying an upcoming genre in contemporary Argentine cultural production, one that is marked by a hybrid aesthetics, a blending of fact and fiction, a playful spirit, and transnational dialogues that take place on both stage and screen. The various contributions included in this publication highlight the innovative uses of technology, humour, live music, and dance in this up-and-coming body of work, one that, over the last few years, has challenged the rigidity of generic boundaries. The essays engage critically with a particular series of films and theatrical pieces by directors such as Romina Paula, Lola Arias, Mariano Pensotti, Alejo Mogueillansky, Matías Piñeiro, Edgardo Dieleke, and Daniel Casabé, among others. While most of these pieces were screened at Senate House, some of them, such as *Campo minado (Minefield)*, which debuted in 2016 in the UK, were included especially for this issue. It is our contention that together these works exemplify the emergence of a fresh and exciting generational, transnational, and trans-disciplinary voice within Argentine performing arts.

### **Beyond New Argentine Cinema and Biodrama**

While the emergence and development of the so-called New Argentine Cinema during the 1990s and the new millennium have received considerable attention from local and international scholars, critics have suggested that this trend has recently reached a standstill. As Jens Andermann has pointed out: “[A]fter the cusp of social and political emergency in Argentina had passed and the initial excitement had worn off, critics could predictably do little but detect the ‘exhaustion’ of the very movement they had conjured up” (xxi). Thus, Andermann concludes, “the time has perhaps arrived for looking at new Argentine cinema without the capital letters” (xxi). In contrast to the arguable exhaustion of New Argentine Cinema, a community of Argentine theatre-practitioners and young filmmakers has fashioned a unique and lively creative space within both the domestic market and major international festivals. In the current post-New Argentine Cinema period, this collection of essays addresses the way in which cinema and theatre have been experiencing a fruitful exchange of interests, directors, writers, castings, and audiences, giving room to a new circuit that renovates and enhances both art forms.

More specifically, this dossier examines how a playful overlapping of documentary and fiction has managed to push forward and reanimate not only the ostensible wave of neo-realist stories and dry humour introduced by New Argentine Cinema, but also a particular form of documentary theatre that has come to be known as “biodrama.” The term was originally coined by director Vivi Tellas to describe a series of biographical pieces in which performers re-enacted episodes of their real lives on stage. As Philippa Page points out in her contribution, Tellas coined the term “biodrama” in 2002 as a response to the critical aftermath of the economic and political crisis of 2001. Page argues that biodrama “uses theatre to explore the possibilities of rebuilding a sense of community [. . .] in what was, at the time of its inception, a severely debilitated post-crisis social fabric.” For Tellas, the return of experience was also the return of the personal, albeit a particular type of self, one immersed in politics and culture.

Many of the films and theatrical plays studied in this issue could arguably be considered enhanced forms of biodrama. However, they have acquired new and more sophisticated individual characteristics as well as a collective sense of belonging and status. For that reason, we suggest that they not only be analyzed in relation to the original biodrama trend but also that they be seen as having their own distinct characteristics. As many of the

pieces studied in this issue demonstrate, the real lives of the directors and those of their fictional characters play a continual game of hide-and-seek in this new body of work, confusing and blending fact and fiction, autobiography and imagination in ways rarely evident in previous productions. This trend is particularly notable in Moguillansky's film *El loro y el cisne*, in which the real biographies of the performers function as embodied back curtains from which fiction re-emerges. In many cases, the autobiographical playfully re-enters the realm of the fictional, simultaneously regaining an extra testimonial power. This enhanced form of truth resonates between stages and screens, generating novel forms of spectatorship.

In sum, cinema beyond New Argentine Cinema and theatre beyond biodrama constitute the main shifting paths along which this new body of work can be traced. To define the main features of the pieces that comprise this new genre, we could arguably say that they are neither completely testimonial nor autobiographical accounts but rather auto-fictional performances. They are made out of the fabric of the real but are more playful and imaginary than realistic. They are clearly "Argentine" and especially *porteños* but also proudly cosmopolitan. They are ultimately subjective but also highly political and communitarian.

### **Kirchnerism and Aesthetic Autonomy**

The body of work addressed in this issue was mostly produced during the administrations of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015), a highly controversial political period that supporters championed as "la década ganada" and detractors dismissed as "la década perdida." While episodes of corruption have overshadowed the legacies of the Kirchners, certain issues that were not at the forefront of the state's concerns during the 1990s took centre stage in their political agenda. These issues included Argentine sovereignty over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands, the trials against perpetrators of human rights violations committed during the 1976-1983 military dictatorship, and a progressive legal framework in relation to social equality, including a universal child allowance, same-sex marriage, and fertilisation and gender-transition laws.

With the novel intervention of the state as a safe keeper of certain progressive political rights and values, the field of art and culture allowed itself to be less "testimonial," more playful, and even more irreverent with previously sacred topics of Argentina's traumatic past. Arias' performances, Pensotti's sophisticated installations, and Casabé's and Dieleke's melancholic

“mourning film” are good examples of the new relationship between aesthetics and politics established during this period.

The articles included in this issue also show to what extent the Kirchnerist years included a performative element. As Cecilia Sosa argues in her essay, there was something very corporeal about Kirchnerism, something that brought to light a new idea of performance and redefined the meaning of the Spanish expression “poner el cuerpo.” Indeed, as sociologist María Pía López contends, during the neoliberal 1990s it was difficult to imagine “modos de la política que impliquen apuestas corporales” (79). Despite notable exceptions, such as the *escraches* organized by the children of the disappeared within the group HIJOS (Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio), the 1990s was mainly a decade when politics became a spectacle that people watched passively on television screens from the comfort of their homes: “[C]uerpos encerrados en el hogar y conectados con lo público a través de la recepción” (López 79). By contrast, during the Kirchnerist era, the multitudes resurfaced, exhibiting a joyful sense of coming together. This highly controversial period brought back the idea of remaking the street and using bodies to re-appropriate public spaces with political and affective encounters. Simultaneously, the period also became the contested arena of many confrontations between defenders and detractors of the government, often revealing political and social tensions that had been tamed but remained latent in Argentine society.

In December 2015, centre-right businessman and former football club president Mauricio Macri took office, putting forward a regressive political and economic programme with the explicit aim to “deskirchnerizar” the country. In the current political and cultural context, the corporeal flair that defined the Kirchner years became a new form of resistance, as illustrated, for example, by the ongoing “abrazos públicos” and mass demonstrations led by school teachers, workers, and women. In fact, triggered by the constraints imposed by neoliberal agendas, the feminist irruption had a novel international impact, evident in the massive demonstration on October 16, 2016, and also on March 8, 2017, during International Women’s Day.

It is worth noting, however, that even in the political context of recent years, most of the directors whose work is addressed here managed to remain loyal to some sort of aesthetic autonomy. With some exceptions, these productions have engaged with controversial issues of the past in a completely novel way, reluctant to deal with those themes explicitly, as if protecting a playful tone from contamination by over-exposed political ques-

tions. The autonomy of subjects and styles among this wave of directors became a sort of aesthetic platform that subtly addressed, if not ignored, the demands from many Kirchnerist artists and practitioners for a political revision of the past. This apparent disengagement has been, paradoxically, their silent political platform. In this regard, the trend seems to have followed Albertina Carri's groundbreaking film *Los rubios* (2003), released at the beginning of *Kirchnerismo*, and the way in which the actress who plays the director's role in the film expresses a feeling of "tiredness" when confronted with the testimonies of the survivors of the dictatorship and the discourses of the past that had governed the field for so many years. In similar ways, both Carri's film and the productions analyzed here have sought to refresh the ways in which aesthetics engage with politics and speak to new generations with a renovated language, thus shedding light on an alternative way of being political.

### A New Hybrid Genre

The new genre that we identify in this issue involves the multi-layered circulation of subjects, styles, and techniques (in)between cinema and theatre. Firstly, the sense of contagion between these two fields is accompanied by the physical presence of cinematic screens within theatre productions as well as "theatrical echoes" within cinema. Filmmakers explore dramaturgy, while theatre directors make incursions into film production. Similarly, actors from both fields move from one territory to the other, bringing to each medium techniques and styles learned as part of their respective training and their work on stage or in front of the camera. Second, the inclusion of experimental episodes of live music, poetry, and dance within both cinema and theatre acts as a "surprising resource" that fosters a sense of community among the practitioners and challenges the purity of traditional genres. Third, the directors of the productions addressed are "children" of the digital age and, as a result, have been trained to work across diverse media. The use of new technologies and new media in both fields enhances the generational mark of this body of work and blurs the boundaries between virtual realities and the physical realm in their narratives. Fourth, the recurrence of a playful and comical style nurtures the self-referential imprint of these productions in contrast with the dry sense of humour typical of many neo-realist New Argentine Cinema productions. Fifth, this cross-pollination between film and theatre generates new and wider audiences committed to the spirit of experimentation that characterizes the genre. More specifically, far from

passive forms of spectatorship, this body of work stimulates its audience on an intellectual and emotional level with inter-textual references and affective triggers. Thus, the spectators become crucial allies of these productions. As Jacques Rancière argues in *The Emancipated Spectator*, spectators also *act*: they participate and refashion the performance in their own way, as if completing a poem. Thus, many of these productions redefine what we understand by “testimony” or “writings of the self,” changing the rules of autobiography and blending self-exposure with (auto)fictional poetics and experimental strategies.

### **From Buenos Aires to the Global World**

Together with the aforementioned attributes, this up-and-coming circuit of practitioners has built a sense of belonging, for the most part related to and engaging with the megacity of Buenos Aires. At the same time, however, these film and theatre makers have produced their work in close dialogue with counterparts in Europe, as well as with some productions and independent trends in the United States, via the circuit of international festivals, where Argentine “products” are presented (and seen) in a very different context. Indeed, most of the artists and directors have studied and sometimes lived in different European and US cities, acquiring new languages and familiarizing themselves with the cultural landscapes and affective idiosyncrasies of each place. A case in point is Piñeiro, who has lived in New York since 2011 but regularly returns to Buenos Aires to shoot his films. In his series of Shakespearean comedies (*Rosalinda*, *Viola*, *La Princesa de Francia*), these global classics are relocated to the Argentine capital and reinterpreted from a gendered and sometimes queer perspective. Similarly, Arias lives and works intermittently in Buenos Aires, Berlin, and London. Some of her plays, notably *Mi vida después* and *El año que nació*, were also performed in different locations, retaining the original idea (what she calls “a portable concept”) but changing the actors, the language, and the historical events addressed. The theme of globalized identities, polyglots, and transnational places is also explicitly tackled in works such as *Airport Kids* (2008), *Mucamas* (2010-2011), and *Ciudades paralelas* (2010-2011). In both *Campo minado* and Dieleke’s and Casabé’s *La forma exacta de las islas* the issue of national identities and affective territories is also the focus of the plots.

Taken together, the productions addressed in this issue mobilize transnational dialogues that also involve affective forms of contagion and trans-

mission: from Piñeiro's reversions and re-inventions of Shakespeare in Buenos Aires to the contestation and mockery of the American way of cultural production displayed in Moguillansky's latest film, to Paula's revisiting of Dickens in *El tiempo todo entero* and the way in which she plays out the fantasy of more beautiful and blurred gender possibilities in *Fauna*. As a result, this body of work crosses interdisciplinary boundaries at the same time it introduces emergent Latin American paradigms to the English-speaking world. Given the transnational nature of the corpus, many of these productions raise important questions about the act of making theatre in marginal locations, as well as questions about translation and trans-culturation. More than that, these works also manage to play back their own sense of precariousness and occasional marginality, transforming it into the focal point of a rebellious and sometimes ludicrous fight that playfully destabilizes gender positions, locations, and accounts of the self beyond trauma. In this sense, it can be argued that many of these productions emerge from what the post-colonial critic Homi Bhabha called the "third space," a process of "cultural hybridity that gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (Rutheford 211).

Born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many of these filmmakers and theatre directors graduated from La Fundación Universidad de Cine (FUC) in Buenos Aires during the mid-1990s. "Cuando nosotros empezábamos a estudiar actuación, el cine y el teatro eran dos esferas separadas. No había actores de teatro en el cine. Y esto cambió completamente, ahora hay una circulación natural entre los dos espacios," says Paula in an interview quoted in Brenda Werth's contribution. As Piñeiro puts it in another interview, "[Y]o trabajo en Argentina con actores que son muy buenos, pero que además montan sus obras de maneras similares a como yo filmo mis películas. Hay una conexión, una identificación" ("Una entrevista"). In his latest film, *El escarabajo de oro*, Moguillansky blends film and theatre by featuring a community of friends and artists who appear as themselves. To some extent, this form of production can be seen as a strategy that confronts a precarious network of funding. "Hay un prejuicio de que somos chicos ricos que nos gusta filmar," says Moguillansky (Firpo). And he goes on: "Me doy el lujo de filmar, pero al precio de poner en riesgo mi economía constantemente." As in most of his productions, there were no salaries involved and he used his family and friends to create the film. He proudly argues that his films share the same "moral identity." Thus, the circulation and exchange

of names, themes, and skills become “natural” and a key feature of this new genre.

Many of the directors also prefer to exhibit their productions within cultural venues such as the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA) or the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires (MAMBA), both of which usually feature independent directors. Some of the films have also been shown at the annual Independent Film Festival of Buenos Aires (BAFICI), inaugurated in 1999. In one of the scenes from Moguillansky’s *El escarabajo de oro*, which won the award for Best Film at the festival, the theatre director and performer Rafael Spregelburd, who plays the role of one of the actors, refers to those “artistas argentinos que van a Europa a ganar un par de Euros,” the directors who “muestran sus producciones en salas tan pequeñas a las que nadie va [y] que hacen ese tipo de película que a nadie le importa.” This crucial and revelatory self-reflexive moment in the film might also describe a whole community of producers and artists who have learned to play with their marginality and make it the centre of their fantasies and their sophisticated, postcolonial work.

### **A Novel Subjectivity and a Feeling of Community**

One of the main hypotheses present in these articles is that this generation of artists (theatre-doers and filmmakers but also performers and musicians) has revealed the emergence of a new type of subjectivity. They were born during or after the 1976-1983 dictatorship and are mostly contemporaries of the generation of the children of the disappeared, but they have reacted to the resonances of trauma in their own terms. As their productions show, they are capable of being playful, irreverent, and even narcissistic. To some extent, they have explored that recent history mostly as outsiders or bystanders. At the same time, however, not only have they approached the traumatic past in subtle ways within their sophisticated stories but they have also transformed them into enhanced fictions, a move evident, for example, in Pensotti’s and Arias’ work. The freedom of playing with postcolonial identities and bringing into play more fluid gender fantasies and real lives is another focal point of this new wave of prestigious directors. This renovation might also be a way of attracting funding from festivals abroad and appealing to international audiences. In this struggle, they have also transformed the materiality of the local traumatic past into fictional layers of transnational tropes that circulate and provide new bursts of energy to their mischievous productions.



Some critics have accused this ludic approach to the traumatic past of being self-absorbed, disrespectful to victims, egoistic, and apolitical. The authors of these works have been also accused of being a bunch of elitist children. However, it would be unfair and narrow-minded to reduce their complex body of work to such a judgmental and moralistic view. This new group of directors has instead managed to bring to light a new body of work that blurs the boundaries between theatre and cinema, reading and writing, producing and directing. They are also the free heirs of a traumatized generation who have learned to tell stories and approach the real with a new affective tone. Coinciding with a political period that transformed memory into a national and official state platform, they have managed to reinvent themselves within global theatrical trends and markets, at the same time reinventing updated narratives of collective memory and challenging positions of gender, politics, and transnational belonging.

In sum, this new body of work defines a generation of artists who are not afraid of playing with disparate materials and of making fiction out of them. Moreover, this group of directors shares a way of working and producing that has a certain element of camaraderie. Thus, most of their productions become an exaltation of friendship and a space for joy and experimentation.

### **This Issue**

In the first article of the issue, Philippa Page analyses the complex relationships between fiction and reality, theatre and life, stages and screens, virtual and organic spaces, as well as experience and imagination in Mariano Pensotti's theatrical piece *Cineastas* (2013), a biodrama that she sees as emblematic of a new generational gaze in Argentine theatre. In her words, "Pensotti casts out existing categories and asks us to consider the more integral role that virtual spaces, such as cinema, play in making contemporary worlds, inflecting both our sense of being in and (dis)belonging to a specific place." For Page, this piece exposes the fact that "reality must be dramatized, or performed, in order to be thought (stripped of its theatrical artifice, that is)." This aspect of Pensotti's performance, what Jorge Dubatti calls *la teatralización* of life, defines, in fact, many of the pieces addressed in this publication. For Arias, we are all somehow performers in our everyday lives and the re-enactment of real lives on stage highlights that performative nature of our existence.

Cecilia Sosa analyses *El loro y el cisne*, Alejo Mogueillanksy's quirky and hilarious film, which presents the rehearsals of the experimental dance

company Krapp. Sosa argues that the enfolded puzzle of screens, stages, and lives at stake in the film sheds light on an upcoming hybrid genre within Argentine contemporary cultural production. In particular, she examines how the local version of a classic ballet fable provides a playful overlap between documentary and fiction, simultaneously calling into question traditional boundaries across the arts. In dialogue with Bhabha's postcolonial literary theory and insights from affect studies, she shows how *El loro* can be read as a powerful critique of what it means to be an artist in Latin American postcolonial landscapes. Ultimately, she argues that the never-ending layers of documentary and fiction address the aftermath of the dictatorship with a new affective and generational language. Sosa's piece also helps to conceptualize the "corporeal" turn that characterized the Kirchner years. She makes the case that Moguillansky's documentation of dancing bodies on stage becomes expressive of epidemic tensions among regionalization, globalization, and renationalization. In this context, she argues that these bodily encounters stand as an exploration of broader intensities that awakened during the Kirchnerist administrations, which witnessed a rediscovered passion for the collective.

In the following article, Brenda Werth offers a reading of Romina Paula's acclaimed piece *Fauna*. For Werth, "while works by Argentine artists such as Vivi Tellas, Lola Arias, Mariano Pensotti, and Federico León seek creative opportunities for the real to interrupt and ultimately break down the theatrical frame, Paula's *Fauna* offers a poetic reflection on what this slip-page between the real and the fictional means, and indeed what it means to aspire toward capturing the real through performance." Werth's understanding of "the real" is more sophisticated than the mere intrusion of "real lives" in theatre. She sees the "real" "as an ephemeral flash of ineffable truth; as a strategy belonging to both fiction and non-fiction; as a sensation constructed through biographical intimacy; and as a normative category, against which characters in Paula's play enact the fantasy of gender." With a specific focus on the relationship between gender and the real and Judith Butler's conceptual framework, Werth argues that "*Fauna* provides the fantasy of a new gender in which the masculine and feminine are blended, reconfigured in new combinations, and made indistinguishable in the form of a 'beautiful, impressive' being." As Werth contends, Paula's work forces us to think more critically about "the real" in contemporary theatre as a way of exposing its limitations and surreptitious normativity.

Constanza Ceresa focuses on Matías Piñeiro's *Viola* and the way the piece constructs meaning through intertextual references to Shakespeare's plays and local texts, blurred boundaries between cinema and theatre, being and appearance, reality and artifice, and "an unstable affective network in which bodies, sounds, and gazes contaminate characters' everyday lives." Like Werth, Ceresa looks at the way this piece creates "an indiscernible zone where gender identities and meaning are dissolved," or at least contested. For Ceresa, in the task of redefining identities or re-writing classical texts, repetition and iteration play a central role as a way of de-naturalising habits and discourses. This idea is in tune with Arias' concept of the "re-make," or the idea that re-enacting past events always implies the subversion of the original reference.

The last two articles offer a post-dictatorship generational reading of two contemporary works of theatre and cinema that address the same event, the Malvinas/Falklands War. In her study of *Campo minado*, Jordana Blejmar argues that by showcasing an unprecedented collaboration of former enemies on stage, Lola Arias challenges the dichotomies often present in previous accounts of the conflict—victims/perpetrators, allies/enemies, heroes/villains, spectators/actors, subjective memory/historical memory—and delivers a play that avoids Manichean readings of that painful history as well as dangerous discourses on forgetting and reconciliation. For Blejmar, Arias not only successfully overcomes the risks that often accompany biographical pieces such as this one—over-identification, mimesis, and appropriation—with the aid of playful distancing devices, but also demonstrates how theatre can become an affective space of empowerment and enunciation in which the marginal and vulnerable subject takes centre stage, thereby gaining visibility and producing an empathic connection with the audience.

Finally, Irene Depetris Chauvin's reading of *La forma exacta de las islas* highlights how, unlike other films concerning the Malvinas/Falklands War, this production "eludes the discourse of the 'just cause' and questions the validity of the epic narrative." Daniel Casabé and Egardo Dieleke's film looks at the conflict with a more melancholic gaze than Arias' play. According to Depetris Chauvin, *La forma exacta de las islas* is indeed a "mourning film," an "affective travelogue," and "a narrative of return" that explores the islands by using two trips as the starting point of a personal quest. The film also entwines fiction (in this case, the literary fictions written about the war that the protagonist studied for her doctoral thesis) and reality (the real lives of the veterans that accompany her during her first trip and her own

involvement with them, an engagement that produces a love story and an unexpected tragedy). Through a careful exploration of the affective landscapes, cartographies, and geographies of the postwar proposed by the film, Depetris Chauvin highlights another main feature of this corpus, namely the transformation, after the 1976 coup, of the politically tense relationship between the public and the private, the national and the intimate.

This issue also features an interview with theatre director and filmmaker Federico León and filmmaker Martín Rejtman, authors of *Entrenamiento elemental para actores* (2012), a short co-directed telefilm. This telefilm was the result of a public initiative led by Argentine National Television in 2007, which brought together seven pairs of film and theatre directors with the idea of creating a new collective piece. As Sosa argues, *Entrenamiento* “es una obra pequeña, perfecta, casi imposible. El resultado de un encuentro impredecible entre dos directores mañosos, obsesivos.” The short telefilm, which became a cult object, addresses the process of an encounter between friends and disciplinary fields. This non-normative piece features theatre lessons for children led by an eccentric professor. Ludic and strangely performative, *Entrenamiento* has moments of recklessness that make the piece not only an improbable acting class for child-actors but also a school of life for its entire audience. In the context of this issue, the interview marks the beginning of a timely process of exchange between theatre and film, one that has now become much more organic and that shapes the cross pollination of fields and disciplines that has marked subsequent years. The interview was originally circulated alongside the script of the telefilm in a book published by La Bestia Equilátera in 2012 and we are very grateful to the editors for allowing us to include it here.

As the contributions of this issue demonstrate, the establishment of affective bonds between directors, performers, and spectators not only speaks about a novel genre in the performative arts, but also about new political communities of resistance against social fragmentation, against the mere pursuit of financial benefits, and against the resurgence of neoliberal forces in Argentina.

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