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Buenos Aires: La Ciudad Frente al Río

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Paper presented at the Society of Architectural Historians Conference; Chicago, April 2010.*

Part One

The construction of Argentina's national identity during the nineteenth and twentieth century has traditionally been rooted in the tension between what has been called "the Argentina of the cities" and the "Argentina of the pampa."¹ The extensive, solitary pampa is the environment of the gaucho (in all its guises: gaucho rastreador, gaucho baqueano, gaucho malo, gaucho cantor) where, according to Sarmiento's book *Facundo*, physical courage, and some skill with knives and horses, was what established individual notoriety. He argued this was the representation of "barbarism", isolated individuals divorced from society. In opposition, he defines the environment of "civilization" as that of the cities where the arts, commerce, education, and legal courts enable a cultured society the possibility of association, and therefore of public life. It was in the cities where modernity, understood as social, economic and cultural progress, could flourish. In an alternative to this dichotomy of a country radically torn apart, Carlos Altamirano proposes a re-reading of Esteban Echeverría's *Dogma Socialista* that envisions a dialectical identity where "we will ask for the light of a European *intelligentsia*, but with specific conditions: we will always have one eye set on the progress of nations, and the other on the depths of our own society."² Literary texts construct Argentine identity in the nineteenth century. Images (in particular photography and film) document and shape ideas of modernity in the early twentieth century.

First, the texts. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888) published *Facundo* (originally entitled *Civilización y Barbarie: Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga, Aspecto Físico, Costumbres y Hábitos de la República Argentina*) while in exile in Chile in 1845. Argentina was by then torn apart by two irreconcilable political factions: unitarios and federales. We must remember that *Facundo* is also a denouncement of the tyranny of Juan Manuel de Rosas (that governed on and off from 1829 through 1852) and of his campaign, the "*campaña del desierto*". Sarmiento introduces Facundo, the character, as "the manifestation of Argentine life, as the result of colonization and the peculiarities of the land."³ The work is divided in two parts. The first part is an outline of the landscape, the theater where the story will take place. The second part depicts the protagonist of the story: his character, habits, and behavior. According to Sarmiento, Facundo's way of life is not only embedded, but actually determined by the physical land he inhabits. In

characterizing this landscape Sarmiento believes that “the evil that impacts Argentina the most is its expanse: the desert surrounds it everywhere, it insinuates the innermost solitude of its people.”⁴ He argues that families are scattered throughout an immense area in order to occupy these plains, but with no possibility of association, no *res pública*, and surrounded only by isolation and solitude. He concludes that “here civilization is not a possibility, barbarism is the norm.”⁵ According to him it is the vastness of the pampa that inhibits the dispersal of progress which is concentrated in Buenos Aires. The cities, (14 of them to be exact: Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, Entre Ríos, Corrientes, Mendoza, San Juan, La Rioja, Catamarca, Tucumán, Salta, Jujuy, Santiago del Estero, San Luis and Córdoba), on the other hand, are centers of civilization. A century later in 1937 the author Eduardo Mallea (1903-1982) in *Historia de una Pasión Argentina* when coming to terms with this reality of city and pampa depicts the country as: “Deserted land and large cities – the whole country is like this: deserted land and large cities, vertiginous noise and solitude.”⁶ For Mallea, the landscape is equally symbolic: “You are either born to this consciousness of the pampa, or not. This is the pampa: the distant horizon, the plain, the desert.”⁷

Within this context, the gaucho is “solitary, alone within a land that surrounds him with no scale.”⁸ Following Sarmiento, the lack of *res pública* means that he can only develop physical abilities (with none of those of the intelligence). He is limited to knives, horses and the barbarism of the campaign struggles. To be part of the campaign he then becomes a gaucho rastreador, gaucho baqueano, gaucho malo, or gaucho cantor. The gaucho rastreador basically traces the location of animals and this gives him his mysterious dignity: “In such expansive open plains, where trails and paths cross in all directions, it is necessary to know how to follow the footprints of an animal and to distinguish it among others, to know if he is moving, fast or slowly, loose or in a group, with or without a load.”⁹ The gaucho baqueano on the other hand is he who knows how to orient himself in the pampa: “The baqueano is a private and restrained gaucho who knows intimately thousands of miles of land. He is the most complete topographer, he knows all the secrets. If he’s in the middle of the pampa, with no path crossing it, and someone asks him to take him to a distant locale, he stops for a moment, recognizes the horizon, fixes his sight in one point, and gallops towards it with determination, until he changes direction with reasons only known to himself, and galloping day and night he arrives to the designated place.”¹⁰ The gaucho malo is the outlaw, the squatter: “The gaucho malo’s name is feared, spoken of in a whisper, almost with respect... he is a mysterious character, divorced from society and wanted by the law. But he is not a bandit, the attack on human life does not enter his mind, he only steals horses and delivers them when and where agreed to.”¹¹ The gaucho cantor is the bohemian of the bunch: “The gaucho cantor goes from place to place singing the tales of his heroes of the pampa... He is

candidly doing the chronicler's job recounting customs, histories, and biographies. He has no fixed home, his preferred place is where there is wine and celebration, the gaucho cantor stays wherever the night finds him.¹²

Now let's delve into Esteban Echeverría (1805-1851): he is the first Argentine intellectual and poet whose name is associated with the beginning of what has come to be called the "americanismo intelectual" of the Río de la Plata. As pointed out by Beatriz Sarlo and Carlos Altamirano, Esteban Echeverría travels to Europe in 1825, when he is only 20 years old, and basically makes a true journey from the "desert" to "civilization." As expressed by them his trip is a "cultural exploration and educational exercise in the notion of public life."¹³ Upon his return he becomes one of the most influential literary voices in Argentina during the 1830s promoting a cultural break from Spanish colonialism, and the building of a new "American identity" (continental America that is), together with his colleagues of the Salón Literario, "los jóvenes del '37." In 1838 he publishes in Uruguay, also while in exile, but almost a decade before Sarmiento a text initially entitled *Código o Declaración de los Principios que Constituyen la Creencia Social de la República Argentina* ["Code or Declaration of the Principles that Constitute the Social Beliefs of the Argentine Republic"], that would later be come to be known as his *Dogma Socialista*. The text was intended to be understood as a creed, a flag and a program. The text has an initial enumeration of principles, in the manner of a manifesto to Argentine youth, but the substance of his thought is presented as a series of sections that expand on the meaning of what he refers to as "symbolic words": these are association, progress, fraternity, equality, liberty, and so forth, but also emancipation and confraternity of principles. The argument that follows is of course that "without association there is no progress [...] that association is the mandatory condition of all civilization and all progress [...] there can be no real association but among equals [...] the perfect association is directly in relation to the liberty of all, and of each and every one [...] liberty cannot be exercised but through equality [...] liberty and equality are the founding principles of democracy."¹⁴ As noted by Sarlo and Altamirano, "The paradox, of course, is that he is at the same time outlining and establishing these parameters for Argentine society. The way out is the recognition that his knowledge does not come from his own efforts, but from foreign generosity."¹⁵ The "lights of the European intelligentsia" are clearly embedded in his discourse.

However, the novelty is in how this is contextualized. Even when tipping his hat to the "progress of nations" Echeverría states quite clearly the particular conditions of the American context. Again he is referring to continental America: "Revolution for us is progress, America believing it could improve its

condition emancipated from Spain: since then it is in the path of progress [...] America must therefore study the progressive movement of the European intelligentsia, but must not tie itself blindly to its influence, each population has its own life, its own intelligence from which its special mission is born. [...] When American intelligence has reached the level of European intelligence, then it will shine of its own emancipation [...] The American generation has in its blood the habits and customs of another generation. Its body is emancipated, but its intelligence is not.”¹⁶ Echeverría recognizes in Argentine history two tracks: a revolutionary track, that of 1810, identified with the love of progress and of liberty; and another a counterrevolutionary one (represented by Rosas) characterized by isolation and colonial prejudices.¹⁷ He is in essence presenting his declaration of principles as an alternative to the two existing parties (unitarios and federales). The way out: a body of legislation and the application of his “social dogma.” He argues that for emancipation to take place a body of legislation is needed, but –and this is key- he indicates: “political emancipation *and* social emancipation is needed [...] we need a *continental* social emancipation [...] We must first determine who we are, and applying certain principles search for what we want to be, where we want to go [...] but we must not go beyond that which is practical, we must not lose ourselves in abstractions, we must always have one eye deep within our own society.”¹⁸ “Continental social emancipation”, this is the core of Echeverría’s program of Americanization, what has come to be called the “americanismo intelectual” of the Río de la Plata.

Part Two

Against this topography of literary texts that help us understand Argentine identity, three specific images of Buenos Aires from the Ferrari Hardoy Archive may be used to represent different constructions of modernity. The first image is a series of static panoramas, as published in the centerfold of the newspaper *La Prensa* in 1936. The different views emphasize those landscapes that show the city embracing modernity, understood in the sense of material progress: the buildings, the port, the railroad. They document an existing reality, and may be understood as a literal translation of what the city is. The second is an aerial view photomontage, utilized by Jorge Ferrari Hardoy and Juan Kurchan in Paris when designing with Le Corbusier the *Plan de Buenos Aires* in 1938. It represents an idealized view, where the city becomes the operating ground for strategic surgical planning procedures that will launch it into the modern world. It envisions an imagined reality, and may be understood as an interpretive translation of what the city could become. The third is a 1947 film.

First, the panoramas kept by Ferrari Hardoy: On May 24, 1936 (this is the day before the celebration of the Revolución de Mayo of 1810 on May 25, that would lead to the Argentine Declaration of Independence on July 9, 1816) *La Prensa* published in its centerfold a series of panoramas of Buenos Aires. Photography is by Claudio Antelo.



Panoramas of Buenos Aires. Jorge Ferrari Hardoy Archive, H039. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard University.

The first panorama is a view taken from plaza San Martín (probably from the Kavanagh, one of the first and tallest high-rise concrete structures in Buenos Aires, which had opened in January of that year). This view shows the growth of the city in terms of its built physical environment. The second panorama shows Plaza Colón and the port warehouses, with the newly built building of the post office to the left and the customs building to the right. The third panorama shows Retiro (the railroad terminal), the Plaza de los Ingleses (at the time called Plaza Británica) and Dársena Norte of the capital's port. The fourth and last panorama shows the Riachuelo and the central market, the Mercado Central de Frutos. Interestingly enough, and this is 1936, almost a century after Sarmiento and Echeverría's texts, these panoramas are bracketed by two advertisements: To the left, an advertisement for Salus, a *yerba mate* presented as a

“The yerba of the nation [...] a true symbol of Argentinity”, that “together with the *galleta* and the steak are the typically criollo nutritional Trinity of the country”, the add also indicate Salus is sold throughout the country from La Quiaca, the most northern city in Argentina, to Tierra del Fuego, the southern tip. It goes on to say “Be a patriot, always demand Salus.”¹⁹ To the right, an advertisement for Hinds, a hand cream, with the alleged connotations of an aristocratic, sophisticated, city elite (as opposed to the exclusively patriotic, national references of the first advertisement). The advertisement shows a woman in an evening gown playing the piano, there is a close-up of her hands, and three suited men comment admiringly on her ability as a piano player... but, above all, on her “adorable” hands: “Hinds gives your hands that ivory whiteness, that aristocratic smoothness that enchants.”²⁰ What we have represented here, once again, is the “Argentina of the pampas” and “the Argentina of the cities.”

Panoramas are structured by two main elements: the high view and the horizon. In the dissertation *Picturing the Modern City as a Panorama*, the author explains that “The high view provides the distance, leading to the expansive visual presence of topographical and architectural detail [...] the visual perception of distance and closeness are not separate but linked within the high view [...] also, within panorama structure, the horizon is a connective point.”²¹ The panorama, in effect presents us with a totality, it stitches the fragments we recognize within the image and therefore assumes a significant role in our knowledge of the city. These images are in the end a mapping of the city that provides us with a sense of identifiable city space. In other words: “The city is perceived objectively, but it also becomes familiar.”²² The panoramas of Buenos Aires were published and distributed throughout the country. This suggests that they are also operating at a different level: they are not only mapping the city, but they are also interpreting the city and therefore collaborating in the generation of a collective imaginary. The Argentine architectural historian Graciela Silvestri, when referring to depicted landscapes points out “the didactic of landscape images puts into play a marvelous fiction: it convinces –not from the economy, morality, history, art or patriotic symbols, but through the beauty of referring to something real, visible and tangible to which they are faithful to.”²³ They are in fact –as she asserts- an “efficient instrument in the construction of the idea of patria, the idea of nation.” The same can be said of these panoramas, they are there to “convince” through images (structured by a central element that is nothing else but the horizon) that Argentina is embracing modernity, its progress already present in its buildings, in its port, in its railroad, in its market. They document an existing reality, and may be understood as a literal translation of what the city is. They are static images, modernity here is understood as that which is already present.

The second image contained in the Ferrari Hardoy Archive that I would like to refer to is the aerial photomontage of Buenos Aires used by Jorge Ferrari Hardoy (1914-1977), Juan Kurchan and Le Cobusier (1887-1965) in his atelier of Rue de Sèvres in 1938, to develop the *Plan Director para Buenos Aires*.



Jorge Ferrari Hardoy with photomontage of Buenos Aires in the background. Jorge Ferrari Hardoy Archive, G003. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard University.

The photomontage measures 9 feet x 9 feet and was actually based on an aerial photograph that was sent to Paris from Buenos Aires by Itala Villa, a woman architect who had studied with Ferrari Hardoy and Kurchan in Buenos Aires and who was at the time working for the municipality. Little has been written about the actual construction of this well-known Buenos Aires photomontage. The following quote and letter may help explain the process: “These are photographs taken from an airplane at a constant speed, with an automatic camera shooting images in quick succession, they can later be pasted together in a mosaic that can be scaled and read like a map”²⁴ In a letter dated February 15, 1938 Itala Villa writes to Ferrari Hardoy: “If I can I will send you this week copies of the new aerial photographic plan that the Marine Ministry has done lately. I’m not quite sure how to use the Leica to photograph the plan, but I think the photos won’t be that bad. I’ve been testing this out and the reproductions are pretty good. It’s not a

great aerial, but it's the most current we have."²⁵ Her photos are the ones that landed at Le Corbusier's atelier. As extensively developed by another Argentine architectural historian, Jorge Francisco Liernur, in *La red austral: obras y proyectos de Le Corbusier y sus discípulos en la Argentina (1924-1965)* the Plan Director was based on a series of *éléments constitutifs* in which a series of centers were conceived as structural elements for the reorganization of the city, that had an estimated growth of 2 to 2.5 million inhabitants between 1930 and 1940. The Ferrari Hardoy Archive includes the development of this plan in drawings, draft texts, correspondence, clippings, and the original manuscript and typescript texts by Le Corbusier (that with the realities of the war were sent from Paris to Buenos Aires in 1941). A comprehensive version of the plan was developed in Paris, but only partially published in 1947 by André Bloc in the Spanish version of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*. In synthesis, eleven centers or districts connected through a hierarchical system of streets were superimposed onto the traditional grid of Buenos Aires with the intent of reorganizing the city. Their names clearly indicate each function they were assigned: Government Center, Municipal Government Center, Panamerican Center, Unions Center, University Center, Hotels Center, Entertainment Center, Sports and Leisure Center, Financial Center, Housing Neighborhood and Cité des Affaires (the proposed business district that most resembled Le Corbusier's 1929 vision of Buenos Aires and for which he lobbied unsuccessfully for many years). An architectural program and design proposal was developed for each of these centers, with indicated locations and area within the federal district. Although most of these centers occupied several blocks, contrary to widespread belief, the plan did not propose a *tábula rasa* or the ignoring of existing conditions. The Entertainment Center, for example, was concentrated along Calle Corrientes, and maintained its existing corridor-like aspect, recognizing the already by then historically established, and still existing, lively café and theater street in Buenos Aires.²⁶

By the time this aerial photograph (and overlaid photomontage) was created, Le Corbusier had already experienced flying over Paraguay and Brasil a decade earlier when delivering his famous ten lectures in Buenos Aires, later assembled in *Précisions...*²⁷ According to one historian "The aerial photograph was more than a simple "record" of architecture for Le Corbusier. The aerial photograph, standing in for the planners view, was the key to city form."²⁸ The distanced view not only documented the city but enabled a new approach to urban planning, to the point that it was seen almost as an activity of scientific precision. Furthermore, as a technique of observation and representation, it enabled the study of the city at a different scale. In the 1940s not only were aerial photographs used to document damage resulting from aerial bombs, but they also provided the basis for reconstruction and "they acted as objects of memory, reflection, and strategic plans [...] they created an imaginary entry into the urban fabric."²⁹ As noted by Jean

Marie Haffner, “one of the key benefits of aerial photography was that it allowed for comparison, synthesis, and a new aesthetic.”³⁰ Furthermore, as a technique of observation and representation, it enabled the study of the city at a different scale. If the panorama is recording modernity, the photomontage (with its distanced view) is the *vision* of modernity. It uses a modern technique to envision an imagined reality, and projects it into the future. This photomontage, a “manipulated”³¹ aerial photograph may be understood as an interpretive translation of what the city could become. It is a dynamic image, modernity here is understood as that which will come in the future.

Part Three

The third image of Buenos Aires is a film, *La Ciudad Frente al Río*. The product of advertising for the government agency chaired by Ferrari Hardoy in 1949, it may be understood as a step beyond the literal and interpretive views of the city. Within a documentary format, with photography of what the city is and photographic constructions of what it could become, it is in fact a collection of stills that use the idea of the city and of the pampa to construct a new narrative of modernity. Aware of the importance of the inclusion of the pampa in the construction of a national identity, it proposes a radical solution where “it is necessary to conquer for the citizen, through the vertical re-positioning of city blocks, the green of the pampa that sleeps under the cement.”³²

The first stage of Argentine cinema coincides almost literally with the centenary of 1910. The first cinema theater, the Salón Nacional, had opened in 1900 in Buenos Aires with a capacity of 250 seats³³, and by 1910 the showing of brief news programs documenting the celebrations, and short documentaries with the predictable patriotic themes were the norm. This is the year of *Revista del Centenario*, *Revolución de Mayo* and *La Creación del Himno*.³⁴ By 1930 the first sound films appear and, as expressed by one historian, “The word required the rethinking of a language until then based exclusively on images.”³⁵ Furthermore, until 1942 Argentina saw a steady growth of film and cinema as a new industry producing 16 films in 1936, 28 in 1937, 41 in 1938, 51 in 1939, 49 in 1940, and 56 in 1942.³⁶ The period 1942-1945 sees the change in the economic structure of the country from an economy based on agricultural exports to an industrial economy that brought about a process of increasing social realignments³⁷, where issues of national identity were brought to the foreground once again. The film *La Guerra Gaucha*, of 1942 by Artistas Argentinos Asociados under the direction of Lucas Demare, according to the book *Cine e Imaginario Social*³⁸ claimed that “The gaucho and the traditional society of the provinces were presented as the prototype of nationality, immune to the commercial and oppressive contamination of cities. The vision of the return to

the pampa and the desert was seen as the medicine to the ills of the metropolis [...] the film intended to guide the forthcoming processes of integration of the industrial bourgeoisie and the urban immigrant proletariat to their patriotic, national destiny.”³⁹ The film *Pampa Bárbara*, of 1945, on the other hand “presents the expansive sky and pampa as the predestined landscape for the conviviality of a diversity of ideologies on the idea of nation, except for he who crosses the frontier, the border, who is seen as a deserter to the national cause, acting beyond the admissible.”⁴⁰ It concludes that “If a new life is what is longed for in *La Guerra Gaucha*, in *Pampa Bárbara*, on the other hand, what is revealed is the existence of this new life in Argentine soil, but its continuity is what must be protected.”⁴¹ Many decades would pass, and it is only at the end of the twentieth century that this seemed to become a reality: as Tomás Maldonado said when he lectured at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (in 1984, the first year of Raúl Alfonsín’s democratic government after decades of military dictatorship) the “modern project is nothing less than the democratic project, and it is not only desirable, but possible.”⁴²

Back in 1944 a decree controlling the commercialization of films was put in place. By 1947, during the first Peronist government, a new decree on cinema theaters, which were classified by geographic location and number of seats, required that they show a specific amount of Argentine movies per week.⁴³ Seventy percent of the cost of producing movies was subsidized by the central government when they were on Argentine topics, and by then control was under the Subsecretaría de Información y Prensa of the national executive branch, the Presidencia de la Nación, basically with a structure similar to that of a Ministry of Propaganda. This was a period of severe control of media.⁴⁴ According to the historian Félix Luna “not a line in the newspapers, a phrase in the radio, or an image on the screen escaped the close control of the propaganda apparatus of the central regime.”⁴⁵ Within this context I would like to present the emergence of the film *La Ciudad Frente al Río*. Ferrari Hardoy was appointed as Consejero Ejecutivo del Estudio del Plan de Buenos Aires (EPBA) on January 8, 1948 where –together with Bonet, Roca, Vivanco, and later Kurchan- he worked under the Municipalidad de Buenos Aires as the main government official for the urban planning of the city. The mentioned 1947 publication by André Bloc had spurred interest on the part of the municipal government and Guillermo Borda, a childhood friend of Ferrari Hardoy who was the Secretario de Obras Públicas under city mayor Emilio P. Siri, called him in. The meeting lead to the creation of EPBA (with a stipulated period of 3 years), where Le Corbusier’s “disciples”, as referred to by Pancho Liernur, intended to bring the long awaited implementation of the *Plan de Buenos Aires* to fruition. This was a plan that they had envisioned as a group of ideas that could have certain impact and could generate favorable public opinion. However, although intended by Ferrari Hardoy, there was no real opportunity to

bring Le Corbusier as a consultant for the city. However, one of the projects developed by EPBA, a housing project for 50,000 inhabitants in the neighborhood of Bajo Belgrano, is the one Antonio Bonet would present -together with the 16 mm. documentary film *La Ciudad Frente al Río* - in the 1949 CIAM 7 Congress at Bérghamo (a congress that Josep Lluís Sert had expressed in a letter to Ferrari Hardoy on January 14, 1949 that he thought this Congress “should be more latino than previous ones.”)⁴⁶

The supervision of the film was under Ernesto Rogers, the Italian architect active in CIAM, who was the one who brought in Enrico Gras to direct the film. On June 27, 1949 EPBA had already been organized into 14 divisions⁴⁷, one of them named “Divulgación y Educación Urbana.” A true propaganda machine, the division had the fortune of having the talented Enrico Gras among its members. He described himself in 1947 as “an early Italian experimentalist in cartoon film who joined forces with Luciano Emmer, an Italian painter, to produce a series of experiments in surrealist film, attempting to develop a poetic documentary form.”⁴⁸ During the war the Italian Ministry of Popular Culture condemned these films; Emmer retreated to Switzerland, but Enrico Gras continued to direct films in Argentina and Uruguay. His film *Pupila al Viento*, produced and directed in Uruguay, was worthy of note as an innovative documentary film in the Venice Film Festival of 1951.⁴⁹ There is no doubt that with the support of central governments and/or the nationalization of the film industry “documentary production occupied a prominent position in education and public relations”⁵⁰ and Argentina was no exception. On August 22, 1949 on a memo to Gras from Ferrari Hardoy he asks what was planned in relation to the distribution of the film internationally, and requests that Gras prepare a detailed plan to make the showing of the film mandatory in cinema theaters throughout Argentina. He also demands that Gras meet with the press to make a positive impression before their reviews, and to submit the film at festivals to see if they can obtain the added benefit of an award.⁵¹ Once the first EPBA film, *La Ciudad Frente al Río*, was finished, the department of Divulgación y Educación Urbana began to consider other themes for the script of a second movie: public space, centralization versus suburbanization, block apartment buildings, modern housing units, and so forth.⁵² By September 6, 1949 in a letter to Edgar Kauffman Jr., Ferrari Hardoy writes: “So far it seems that we have been right in believing that film would be the most efficient approach to public opinion. We have already produced one film which has proved to be a success among the public entitled *La Ciudad Frente al Río*, which is in general terms a statement about present conditions of the city of Buenos Aires, and the proposed transformation of these conditions according to modern standards of planning and architecture.”⁵³ By then four additional films were on the works: *La Manzana Vertical*; *El Tránsito en Buenos Aires*; *Centro Deportivo y de Esparcimiento en el Bañado de*

Flores; and Remodelación de La Boca y el Puerto.

The script, together with a relatively sophisticated artistic cinematic approach, was quite direct in its social purpose. Enrico Gras, the director, was known for his “short documentaries with techniques that stemmed from the subject matter itself.”⁵⁴ In *La Ciudad Frente al Río* the city is presented as being afflicted by a colonial structure, the urban grid, which has become oppressive to the point of threatening the life of its inhabitants. Indeed, the grid is shown in an aerial view, from above, and as being analyzed by a group of people (presented almost as surgeons) that will operate strategically on the city. Within and between shots, sudden changes in scale, and distance and closeness to the grid itself seem to leave us with a sense that the city (and the film) were constructed out of carefully selected fragments that cannot be perceived in their totality, almost as if their frame of reference, the city as a larger totality had been abolished. One critic indicates that Gras’s documentaries were “notable for their mood and pace which were often achieved through the dynamic editing of stills.”⁵⁵ Chimneys, traffic, danger, congestion, density, noise -as if “snippets” of daily life- all seem to bombard the catastrophe that the city has become. In opposition, nature and the river front are the only signs of hope for the return to healthy living. This is when the possibility of the city’s transformation is presented through the notion of “vertical blocks.”



Stills from 16 mm. film *La Ciudad Frente al Río*. Jorge Ferrari Hardoy Archive, C164. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard University.

With this “vertical re-positioning of city blocks” the script argues that what is unleashed is “the green of the pampa that sleeps under the cement.”⁵⁶ One cannot but instinctively relate it to Mallea’s description of the city as “a primary layout of large blocks that sleep their flat dream.”⁵⁷ What is being presented, in the words of the narrator is “the third foundation of Buenos Aires.” Once again, this is the re-definition of the idea, if not of a modern nation, at least of a modern city that is rooted in the pampa.

In fact, through the images and the text of the film, the pampa is now diluted into a flat green plane to be simply “uncovered.” It is no longer the solitary, deep terrain of the gaucho. In this sense it seems a return to

the well-known 1929 sketch by Le Corbusier when arriving at night, by steamboat, to Buenos Aires. He describes the city as “that phenomenal line of light ... the simple meeting of the pampa and the ocean in one line.”⁵⁸ Le Corbusier’s pampa was an aesthetic pampa, a poetic landscape. A city only of lights, not of solitude. However, if the city is understood as the physical embodiment of modernity one could also make a dialectical reading of his sketch: a synthesis between how the city is perceived from the outside, and how it reveals itself to the rest of the world; between what the city is, and what it envisions to become. It would then be keeping one eye on the progress of nations and the other deep within. And in that sense it’s a thoroughly modern project: *la ciudad frente al río* is continuously in the making.

¹ Gorelik, Adrián. “Buenos Aires y el País: Figuraciones de una Fractura”, in *La Argentina en el Siglo XX*, edited by Carlos Altamirano (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1999).

² Altamirano, Carlos. *Para un programa de historia intelectual y otros ensayos*. Ed. Siglo XXI, 2005.

³ Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino. *Facundo, o Civilización y Barbarie en las Pampas Argentinas*. Ed. Peuser, Buenos Aires, 1955.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mallea, Eduardo. *Historia de una Pasión Argentina*. Ediciones Anaconda, Buenos Aires, 1938 (1st edition: Editorial Sur, 1937).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino. *Facundo, o Civilización y Barbarie en las Pampas Argentinas*. Ed. Peuser, Buenos Aires, 1955. (First published 1845)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Altamirano, Carlos y Beatriz Sarlo. “Esteban Echeverría, el poeta pensador” in *Ensayos Argentinos de Sarmiento a la Vanguardia*. Ed. Espasa Calpe, Buenos Aires, 1997.

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