

**QUEERING THE FANTASTIC:
GENERIC DISPLACEMENT
AND SUBALTERN SENSIBILITIES
IN *RONDA NOCTURNA*,
BY EDGARDO COZARINSKY**

Lo fantástico cuir:
desplazamiento de género y de sensibilidades subalternas
en *Ronda nocturna* de Edgardo Cozarinsky

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Abstract

The Argentine film *Ronda nocturna* (2005) (*Night Watch*) by Edgardo Cozarinsky challenges genre expectations by fusing the portrayal of a taxi boy or hustler in Buenos Aires with the disquieting, phantasmagoric dimension of the fantastic that irrupts during the night of November 2nd, and the celebration of All Saints Day or Day of the Faithful Dead. With a focus on the cinematographic strategies of the fantastic, this analysis examines how the subversion of normative concepts of reality coincides with the destabilization of such binary concepts as gender identity that structure daily life and the psyche. The socio-critical aspects of the film give visibility to subaltern populations as a workforce in the commodified, cosmopolitan marketplace while the project of queering dovetails with the effects of the fantastic in foregrounding conflicting realities that underlie the concept of national identity in its neo-liberal configuration.

Keywords: sex trade, gender performance, homosocial bonds, subaltern minorities, cinematographic strategies, *Ronda nocturna*, Edgardo Cozarinsky

Resumen

La película argentina *Ronda nocturna* (2005) de Edgardo Cozarinsky desafía los límites de los géneros cinematográficos al fundir el retrato de un *taxi boy* o escort en Buenos Aires con la dimensión inquietante y fantasmagórica de lo fantástico que irrumpe durante la noche del 2 de noviembre y la celebración del Día de todos los santos o Día de los muertos. Con un enfoque en las estrategias cinematográficas de lo fantástico, este análisis examina la correspondencia entre la subversión de los conceptos normativos de la realidad y la problematización de los conceptos binarios de la identidad de género que estructuran la vida cotidiana y la psique. Los aspectos de crítica social de la película dan visibilidad a grupos subalternos como fuerza de trabajo dentro de una economía mercantilizada y cosmopolita mientras el proyecto del cine cuir encaja con los efectos de lo fantástico al iluminar realidades en conflicto que subyacen al concepto de la identidad nacional en su configuración neoliberal.

Palabras clave: mercado del sexo, performance de género, relaciones homosociales, minorías subalternas, estrategias cinematográficas, *Ronda nocturna*, Edgardo Cozarinsky

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Experimentation with genre distinctions in film, such as the fusion of documentary and fiction, served the Argentine writer and filmmaker Edgardo Cozarinsky in the late 60s and early 70s in his exploration of a new aesthetics for a political cinema which also informs his subsequent work in France, as well as his more recent film, *Ronda nocturna* (*Night Watch*) (2005). Filmed in Buenos Aires after the director's long absence from his home country, *Ronda nocturna* blends observation with fiction by casting the action of the characters in the historical neighborhoods of Santa Fe and Avenida Pueyrredón, its subway stations, and the intersections between residential streets and buzzing commercial centers. As the camera catches up with the movement of traffic at evening rush hour and then allows its eye to rest on the young men whose work in the city begins at night, it also repeatedly catches a glimpse of busy teams of *cartoneros*, engaged in sorting through and hauling away the mounting heaps of paper and plastic that pile up in front of stores and restaurants. Frequent cuts to the

by-products of consumerism at the street curbs and the families that make a living on its margins, describe the reality of a cosmopolitan center that frames the fictionalized narrative, which traces the path of a male prostitute or *taxi boy*. As Víctor makes his rounds from dusk to dawn selling sex and the occasional cocaine, the inclusion of fantastic elements complicates the interpretation of the events. The director's cinematographic strategies generate the interplay between realism and fantastic ambiguity for the foregrounding of the effects of consumerism and globalization while also pondering the connections of friendship and solidarity in the intimate spaces of Buenos Aires at night.

Cine ojo, a production company that dedicates itself to documentary films within certain aesthetic and etic parameters took on Cozarinsky's film, and his creative approach seems to correspond to the company's guidelines for choosing their projects which, as the website presentation spells out, «no son concebidos como un mero 'documento' o 'testimonio' de lo real sino como un relato cinematográfico autónomo, organizado según sus propias leyes de narración y de estructura dramática» (*Cine ojo* «Presentación»)¹. In a *Cine Ojo* essay, Eduardo A. Russo describes *Ronda nocturna* as a film with exceptional courage in its treatment of a fantastic theme, the return of the dead: «Y lo hace con la ayuda de un realismo escarpado que pide espectadores tan exigentes como refinados, que sostengan simultáneamente el doble juego de ver la ficción en el documental y el documental en la ficción» (88).

The 2005 release of *Ronda nocturna* did not meet with even modest expectations of finding its audience, perhaps due to distribution and promotion difficulties. Movie critics in the main press commented the respectful treatment of sexual diversity but also claimed that such topics, «otrora tabú [...] ya no sorprenden a nadie» (Sartora). This critic also describes the inclusion of the *cartoneros* as a sinister invasion of the filmic urban landscape, one that might have been intended as a touch of localist character for a European audience. This misreading may be due to the film's subversion of genre expectations, or the heightening of uncertainty arising from its fantastic elements which discourage its categorization as a

¹ Carmen Guarini, an established Argentine documentary filmmaker and one of the two founders of *Cine Ojo*, created the documentary *Meykinof* about the filming of *Ronda nocturna* with an eye on the use of extras who enter the filmic fiction portraying their occupations, such as the *cartoneros*.

film of the New Argentine Cinema (NAC). Initiated by young directors in the 90s, with digital technology and innovative ways of funding through co-productions, its initial branding suggested a gritty semi-documentary style, «un realismo inédito basado en la representación de la violencia lumpen, su declive material y desamparo social» (Amado 222). A distancing from overt political messages is however an important characteristic of the NAC, as well as the rejection of genres, such as melodrama, science fiction, and even horror “as ideologically suspect” (Chanan 46)². Many directors associated with the NAC, including Lucrecia Martel and Albertina Carri, have also gained attention in the faction of the Argentine LGBTQ+ cinema as their films subvert heteronormativity in themes or techniques. *Ronda nocturna* appears in the context of the *cine queer* in a study with the topic of masculinity in crisis that correlates the cycles of economic crises and the erosion of cultural concepts of masculinity, such as authority and the capability to find employment, with a process of feminization and opening to passive roles in homosexual relationships (Pagnoni Berns). While the author raises important questions about the gap between progressive legislation in gay rights in Argentina and the often-pessimistic representation of gay characters in relation to economic power and masculinity, he does not address the spectrum of homosocial relationships that Cozarinsky’s film dramatizes nor the role of the fantastic in disrupting hegemonic thinking about gender identity.

One could argue that the irruptions of the fantastic in the realism of *Ronda nocturna* does not serve any other goal than the director’s experimentation with audience expectations about the portrayal of homosexual prostitution. However, along with the film’s crossing of genre boundaries, an analysis of the fantastic effect as a vehicle for hesitation also addresses questions of identity and the binary oppositions supporting them. With attention to such cinematographic strategies as montage, mise-en-scène, focalization and the gaze, this analysis proposes to show the alignment

² The lack of serious critical discussion of *Ronda nocturna* at the time of its release may have various reasons, including the director’s absence from the country when a new generation reinvented Argentine independent cinema. Thus, in spite of his familiarity with the European festival scene, co-productions and his role in facilitating European funding for at least one of the Argentine newcomers, in his homeland Cozarinsky is best known as a novelist and essayist. Quoted repeatedly in Gonzalo Aguilar’s influential book, *New Argentine Film: Other Worlds* (2008), as a critic, he does not enter the index of directors of the book although *Ronda nocturna* appears in the appendix of films released during 2005.

of queer and fantastic film as a means to create relations of solidarity between transgender and other minorities in the interstices of the globalized urban marketplace. Rather than implying that the queering of the fantastic serves the take-over of a narrative mode—in other words, to make it conform to the expression of a none-normative sexuality unfettered by the neutralization techniques of mainstream cinema—the proposed analysis examines the correspondence between two methods of reading against the grain. Susan Hayward describes the New Queer Cinema as the “expression of sexuality as multiplicity and not as fixed and essentialized” (232), a practice that dovetails with the disturbance of other cultural constructs, such as the convention of realism, in the fantastic. With unexpected events that defy a cause-and-effect logic and the laws of space and linear time, the fantastic questions the *status quo* of realism and exerts a subversive effect on a “‘bourgeois’ category of the real” (Jackson 26). It is especially thought provoking to see this premise in operation within the filmic world of *Ronda nocturna* where it is difficult to determine the gender identity of some of the characters as well as their status as actors, extras, and non-actors. Whoever populates the streets of Buenos Aires during this specific night of the Day of the Dead may no longer recognize the custom of remembering their dead beloved and, like Víctor, be oblivious to honor their presence. In simple brushstrokes, the plot of *Ronda nocturna* takes course during the night of November 2nd, and weaves through Víctor’s encounters with clients and chance meetings with friends he has not seen in a while. The latter lead him to relax his work schedule for parts of the night, but increasingly leave him with a sense of disorientation and fear when he experiences brushes with threats on his life. The film ends as Víctor reconciles his nightmarish visions with the advancing morning when, on his way home, a group of children helps to dispel his melancholic mood.

The film’s lighting plays an important part in its cinematographic language, especially for the creation of an atmosphere that summons the fantastic from a narrative based on the mundane and unromantic routine of a hustler. The title’s reference to Rembrandt’s painting, *The Night Watch*, signals the technique of chiaroscuro which deepens the contrast between light and shadow to suggest an added dimension. In contrast to the hard artificial brightness of the bars and store fronts that Víctor passes, the light of lanterns and indirect sources casts his nightly round in drama and psychological intensity. Especially when a scare has profoundly altered his

mood, the *mise-en-scène* imitates the color palette of ochre and brown of *The Night Watch* and frames him in the intimacy of the old backstreets from bygone days. In an interview on Argentine TV on the film's release, Cozarinsky speaks about his fascination with Buenos Aires at night and his notion of filming a world, that like its characters, has many facets, «tiene varias capas» («En las mejores salas» 10:08-10:11-44:53). With the techniques of the literary fantastic, the director creates what he calls a film about love rather than about a specific issue, however, his fantastic love story enables the exploration of a middle ground between the binary concepts and either-or constructions in the discourse of reason and gender binaries.

The opening shots of *Ronda nocturna* announce this inquiry into the invisible intermediate space of reality. Preceded by the diegetic sound of traffic and car horns during the opening credits, the first image takes in the blue of the sky contrasting with a bright streetlight, and the seemingly incongruous presence of both within one image admits the existence of two opposing poles, day and night, and its metaphoric implications. There is a changing of the guard that takes place at dusk between those who frequent this centric part of Buenos Aires during the day and the workers of the night. The first subjects the camera takes in are the adults and children that dedicate themselves diligently to the removal of accumulated trash in front of storefronts and at street corners. Completing the picture of an informal economy, the camera also takes notice of the arriving taxi boys as they take their habitual positions and observe the movement of cars and pedestrians headed for the subway. The montage of parallel shots creates clear contrasts between the stillness of the observers waiting for the appearance of customers, and the day working population on its way out of the city. Víctor is singled out with a white t-shirt, crossing the street with an air of relaxed anticipation as he makes his way past store windows and the families of the garbage hauling *cartoneros*. He presents himself as a possible customer, first only interested politely in a cheap gadget that a street vendor offers him, and then attracted by a glass case display of expensive tennis shoes, their international brands signaling the allure of the global market as a possible incentive for his type of work. As he tells a group of friends who gather in the same area, he is not dating at the moment, just working but having fun. The pointedly dialectic montage of shots alternating between the *cartoneros* and the products and waste of the capitalist economy in which Víctor aspires to insert himself, makes it

clear that the gaze of an elderly lady and her flower stand do not enter his field of vision. Nevertheless, taking his position and waiting for the first client, Víctor turns introspective and notices how the flower vendor freshens her roses and carnations with water from a spray bottle. A close-up of her lighting an incense stick suggests a ritual to attract not only her regular customers but also wandering souls. As Víctor's night advances, it will be punctuated with moments of indecision and apprehension, and the flower lady's presence, as well as that of the *cartonero* families, will provide grounding and the opportunity to show his most humane side.

If the beginning of the film sheds light on the presence of the male workers of the sex trade on a typical evening during rush hour, the following scenes undermine a more traditional documentary style with self-referential gestures that could be called directorial marks, like those of an auteur in the art film, and also as a nod to queer cinema and a practice of appropriating and recycling topics and clichés, as Susan Hayward explains, "Queer cinema advocates multiplicity: of voices and of sexualities. Multiplicity in a generic sense too: vampire films and comedy, thrillers and musicals. Unstick the queer from the moribund representation to which much of mainstream cinema has confined 'it'" (333). Fittingly, as Víctor and his friends occupy their individual positions at the street corners, they appear in the frame of a musical soundtrack, a song by the Argentine group, *Los piojos*, with lyrics about a prostitute who, at dusk, takes the train to the city for work. Moving to the rhythm, the taxi boys playfully own the melody as it crosses from the imaginary inner ear of the characters to the extradiegetic space shared with the spectator. Cozarinsky's choice of a popular Argentine band from the 90s allows him to appropriate the theme of prostitution in a gay context and to inscribe the film into a nationally growing presence of gay culture and its issues on TV and in film during that decade. Snippets of «Al atardecer» touch on themes of poverty and the prostitute's loathing of the police officer she will have to face, thus preparing for Víctor's encounter with the first client of the night, a civilian police official, for a routine transaction of sex for protection.

With an explicit montage that cuts from a close-up of a status symbol, the star of the official's Mercedes, to the CD of tango music he slides into the cassette player before the sex act, the concept of prostitution appears mirrored on the national level and Argentina's status on the global market as it creates increased social disparity in the population, a fact that is

driven home bluntly, when the official opens the car door to throw out a condom a few meters away from the night shelter of a homeless family. Víctor seems oblivious of such realities though he knows how to feign an orgasm and rid himself of his «papi» when the latter starts talking about getting him off the street and changing the nature of their relationship to a more intimate one. In contrast to the prostitute in «Al atardecer» who, surrounded by poverty and the stench of cheap alcohol takes the train remembering, «El tercer vagón me dio suerte ayer», Víctor prefers to see himself as independent and having options, and after meeting a customer in a bathroom stall strictly for a drug deal, he enjoys ordering a pizza and a beer and also to motion the waiter to bring a second plate when a friend enters the bar. This chance encounter spotlights the mutual affection and the homosocial, non-sexual bond between the young men in the gay community. The scene of Carlitos teaching him Tai Chi movements in a slow dance with an extra-diegetic tango motif celebrates this moment of tranquility and intimacy in Víctor's business-oriented mind and, in retrospect, casts doubt on this friend's flesh and blood appearance. His questions about Víctor's view on his life aim deeper than just stress and bad posture but also inject the scene with humor when Víctor, trying to take the last drags of his joint, cannot respond to Carlitos' existential ponderings and befuddled sees the butt being slapped out of his hand. The sequence is another interlude in a pastiche of narrative styles that prevent the spectator to settle into a clearly marked viewing position according to preconceptions about the genre of the film. The notion of the filmic text as a multi-voiced discourse in which different generic registers are vying for attention thus also describes an aspect of queering in the film and its stylistic versatility. The range of different tango themes from traditional to more modern and also electronically mastered pieces may not be lost on an Argentine audience familiar with cultural references to the music. In combination with mobile framing shots of Víctor through the restaurant window from a moving car—suggesting that the driver is spying on him—tango music in the film may also indicate danger.

The topic of violence against gay men in the national imaginary of the 80s and 90s associates with an idea of homosexuality as a loss of masculinity and therefore of power, which in turn invites aggression and attacks, destitute lives and failed relationships (Pagnoni Berns). *Ronda nocturna* acknowledges this topic with a threatening fantastic gaze that infuses the

atmosphere with a growing sense of paranoia, but simultaneously dispels these notions with examples of affection and love in queer bonds, and a visit to the health club *Spartacus* introduces the gay scene of the wealthy. The noise of exercise machines and a detailed shot of a man's shorts as he is stretched out on a workbench hint at a desiring male gaze taking stock of the place, which according to Carlitos, "is the top". As Víctor will learn, his client pays him handsomely for just lying there naked, depicting the customer as effeminate, rather than the one rendering service. The spa allows him to take advantage of the shower with Carlitos in the adjoining stall, their well-shaped, youthful bodies in view as they show off their tattoos to each other. In lieu of a display of homoerotic desire, it is Víctor's satisfaction with the money he counts after deserting the place. It enables him to take a taxi to return to his preferred hunting grounds, and to help himself from the cocaine hidden in his underwear, as if to tease the audience each time he reaches down for another helping from his stash. Enjoying the ride and happily gesturing to himself, his eye catches a young couple kissing passionately at the side of the road when the taxi stops for a traffic light. Smilingly he observes them and then, to his horror, witnesses how the woman pushes the man from the sidewalk at the very moment a utility truck approaches. The synchronization of the woman's calculated action and her lover's fall into the traffic does not allow for much processing of the violent reversal from passion to hatred played out in the blink of an eye. The changing traffic light that causes Víctor's taxi to move on only affords him a glimpse through the rear window of the commotion caused by the seemingly mortal assault on this busy thoroughfare. For the spectator, the semi-subjective focalization of the event, observing Víctor and then seeing what he sees, may cause doubt on the reliability of his experience, nevertheless, once the taxi has left, the camera returns once more to the scene where bystanders now crowd around the body on the street. The murderous act seems incomprehensible without further investigation as it violates the principle of causation for the eyewitness who, in Tzvetan Todorov's description of a common-sense world view, "must opt for one or two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination –and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality– but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us [...]" The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty" (25).

Todorov's requirement of the clash between two irreconcilable orders within the fictional realm of the literary text defines a type of the fantastic that evaporates once the protagonist and implied reader come to a decision about its interpretation. For the sake of suspense, hesitation is prolonged in the literary text as well as the screen with the return to a common-sense world before another irreconcilable event occurs. In *Ronda nocturna*, the backdrop of Buenos Aires at night serves to anchor the spectator position in a mimetic reality while irregularities disturb its realism and result in a vacillation between viewpoints that often complement each other but also result in dramatic irony. Russo argues that «en *Ronda nocturna* domina lo fantástico no en la duda entre la condición natural o sobrenatural de lo que su protagonista observa sino en la duda entre las posibles alteraciones en su percepción, [...] haciendo friccionar los órdenes de registro documental y de construcción ficcional en la película» (84). It is compelling to examine if the play between various registers of spectator identification and critical distancing eventually disrupts a dominant discourse on the real, power, and normative masculinity.

For this purpose, it is helpful to analyze how the fictionalized narrative drawing from Buenos Aires nightlife inscribes queer sexuality ideologically. All representations of sexuality appear in a common-sense reality and invite a closer look at the ideologically constructed versions of gender identities in the national context. The first sex scene with a police official stages gay prostitution as an expression of a type of marginal masculinity that signals submission and loss of power as well as danger, at least from the perspective of the official who offers protection in lieu of money. Although his sexual orientation is not normative, his relationship to Víctor mirrors patriarchal power relations. This polarization in the sex trade is also present in the display of wealth and therefore phallic power at the health club Spartacus, even though sexual desire there flows in unexpected directions, at least in Víctor's experience.

He returns to a more familiar Buenos Aires as the camera tracks him crossing the street in front of the Obelisk, a historic and tourist landmark. The monument beckons normality and its phallic connotation frames Víctor in a heteropatriarchal reality as he passes. His high seems to be fading as he is headed for a historic luxury hotel where he receives admission by claiming to have an appointment with a high-ranking diplomat. The ambassador's hotel suite is populated with Argentina's power brokers and

security personnel as well as a posse of young escorts or taxi boys like Víctor who listen to a conversation in which the ambassador holds forth about his preoccupation with an assignment in Bern he might have to reject because of cuts in government spending. His demand of a luxurious lifestyle in Europe comes with a critique of other Argentine officials that in contrast to him have to rely on their chauffeur to be able to communicate in European countries. Provincialism versus civilization is a national theme in Argentine letters since the country's inception, and the slight at Argentina's position on the world stage in this conversation causes amusement among the young listeners. They are however quickly escorted from the room after a self-identified Thai massage specialist dares to offer his excellence light-spirited advice. Víctor uses this opportunity to make his way into the private part of the suite to hastily comb through closets and drawers. He freezes when he becomes aware of an older woman with still beautiful features observing him as she lays out lines of cocaine on a tray with a credit card. Taken aback, he declines when she offers him to join her, but he follows her helpful suggestion to look for cash in the bottom drawer from which he helps himself before he heads for the exit, leaving the spectator with the conundrum about the meaning of this scene. Settling for a metaphoric reading of the female apparition as a personification of Lady Cocaine and her influence in the corrupt circles of high society, the credit card she uses foregrounds the entanglement of the elite with global market forces as well as its sinister connections that make money seem to flow freely.

Back in the street, he stoops to pick up those bills that a scattered lost soul showers on him in exchange for cocaine. Víctor is stupefied by the stream of words the stranger directs at him as if he was an old acquaintance, and when more men he does not seem to remember beckon him to join them as he passes the Bar Oviedo, it is as if he did not belong into his neighborhood anymore. Walking slowly with downcast eyes, or even gesturing to fend off approaches by these unknown solicitors, Víctor becomes introspective and troubled. Drawn to the flower stand where incense and the familiar tango theme provide a rarified atmosphere, his profile in a close-up and a cut to the full moon announce a crisis of identity as he wanders the backstreets unaware of potential clients. As the night progresses and the other taxi boys, for lack of business, have fallen asleep on their posts, a disquieting phantasmagorical dimension turns into shock and

fear when he barely escapes a car speeding towards him at a pedestrian crosswalk. The vengeful expression of the female driver reflected in the rearview mirror is accessible only to the objective camera, thus throwing in doubt that it is Víctor's paranoid imagination.

Continuing the pattern of rapid transitions from subjective focalization, shock and disbelief to an objective, realistic depiction of Buenos Aires night life, the action switches back to Víctor who is sitting on the curbside in front of a McDonald's —what could be more normal— and roused to attention when Mario, a friend he has not seen in a while, beckons him from his taxi. Víctor instantly transforms into his joyful self and the friends' decision to pay a visit to the red-light district announces the staging of homoerotic desire in the film. The immediate sequence, however, turns out to be a playful interlude of homosocial bonding with a focus on the prostitutes as goods, skillfully packaged and obeying the rules of the market, and evaluated by Mario and Víctor according to their creative effort in their own commodification. The banter between the pretended clients, Mario and Víctor, and the «mamas» is flirtatious, not only in the sense of a game that both sides are playing but also as a performance and impersonation of learned gender identities. While performative codes such as dress and decorum are considered natural and intrinsic within the heterosexual paradigm for organizing biological sexual attributes as either masculine or feminine, this interaction emphasizes “the self-conscious parody inherent in the drag performance [that] functions as a kind of ‘talking back’ to cultural gender norms” (McCabe 109-10). The joke is not lost on Mario and Víctor who are greatly amused by their own role reversal and transition from their usual status as wares to buyers who are courted with a display of hypersexualized femininity.

With a reference to an Argentine audience and the queering of national issues, the only drag queen to appear in a deserted side-street is dressed up as Margaret Thatcher. Her low-price tag and sullen attitude seem to be aimed at a client who, as Mario reflects, has not gotten over the war of the Malvinas yet. This extra-diegetic stab at the military dictatorship (1976-1983) and its demise shortly after losing the Falklands to Great Britain frames the theme of cross-dressing and heterogenous masculinity in the context of the defeated regime's narrow model of manhood. While the episode provides a sense of comic relief and distraction in an increasingly ominous and suspenseful narrative, it also offers what Chris Straayer iden-

tifies in films with cross-dressers as a “momentary, vicarious trespassing of society’s accepted boundaries for gender and sexual behavior”, and for the viewer access to safely forbidden pleasures (402).

The filming of the sequence mirrors this strategy as all shots of the *travestis* originate from inside the taxi that Mario drives. Appreciated through the open window, the parade of enhanced breasts and bottoms takes on a fetishized status in the queer gaze, suggesting that neither viewing position, heterosexual or homosexual, is inherently gender specific but can be assumed, shared, and subverted in a parody of binary oppositions. As a foreplay for celebrating their former relationship, the visit of the red-light zone transitions to the typical activities for a date, having a meal together and buying refreshments. References to the globalized market abound and it is Mario who discourages Víctor from buying a useless postcard with a Chinese print, and during dinner in an Asian restaurant, Mario’s unfamiliarity with chopsticks arouses the laughter of two Asian girls at a neighboring table but also reveals the generational gap between the two friends. The conversation between Víctor and Mario however drifts towards serious topics, of friends and clients they both knew who died, and one, who according to Mario, disappeared. As a loaded term referring to the Dirty War, the disappearance of their friend, as Mario explains, was an attempt to cover up that he was dying of AIDS in a hospital while pretending to have moved to Miami³. Víctor is indignant about the deceit as well as the stupidity of such a fate, while Mario takes the stance of a seasoned though reformed hustler who has witnessed and experienced the dangers of the sex trade. Later in the jacuzzi of a hotel they checked in for memory’s sake, he shares a story about the love of a man who saved him from the streets, and his generosity of leaving him an apartment and the taxi he drives now, even though he also was a family man. Víctor is sensitive to his friend’s sharing and their intimacy leads to sexual arousal even though they declare themselves both «machos». The mutual masturbation scene

³ The word choice triggers associations with the people that were disappeared during the Dirty War, whose perpetrators often explained their sudden and unaccounted absence with stories about their voluntary exile in a foreign country. Mario’s account of the AIDS patient who invented his departure for Miami as he was dying in a local hospital foregrounds an extra-diegetic theme of fear and silencing that persisted in the public consciousness during the years of the military dictatorship when the oligarchy prospered and was able to finance vacations in the U.S. and Europe.

in which Mario assumes the role of satisfying his partner, is filmed with a stationary camera directed at the two figures on the bed with medium-long shots that, accompanied by an emotional orchestral soundtrack, move to medium and medium-short shots of their chests to end by resting on their touching heads. One question that may engage the observant viewer is the importance of a scar, perhaps from a knife wound, on Mario's neck which stands out when, in a close-up, he turns his caring gaze to his friend who has drifted into sleep.

A cut then confronts the spectator with verifying the reality of a scene that, devoid of sound and in high angle that underscores the vulnerability of Víctor, shows Mario stealthily approaching him with a pillow in his hands. The scene is reflected in the large wall mirror, giving the impression of a split screen and fractured time, as if in a dream. Fighting with the aggressor who is trying to suffocate him, Víctor wakes up to find himself alone in the eerily deserted hotel suite, its silence accentuated with an uncanny soundtrack and a back and forth of external and internal focalization as he moves around the room still under the effect of his struggle for air, its vivid afterimage and the fear of being attacked again. With suspense and indecision at a maximum, the sound of a dripping water tap leads Víctor into the bathroom where traces of foam in the jacuzzi confirm the memory of the shared bath as one of many activities with Mario, whose character eludes a metaphoric interpretation such as the sudden appearance of Lady Cocaine earlier in the evening. While the sequence of Mario's failed murder attempt and his disappearance have all the trappings of a nightmare, if interpreted as such, it would cast doubt on the reality of all the preceding events in the realistic frame of the narrative.

Nevertheless, the profound alienation caused by the murderous attack, real, dreamed, or supernatural, describes the effect of the fantastic which, in Rosemary Jackson's words "exists in the hinterland between 'real' and 'imaginary', shifting the relations between them through its indeterminacy" (35). With a concept taken from the field of optics, Jackson supplies a helpful illustration of the place inhabited by the fantastic in its realistic context. A paraxial position, in its technical meaning, refers to "an area in which light rays seem to collide, but in fact neither object nor reconstituted image genuinely reside there: nothing does" (19). Jackson takes this paraxial area to represent "the spectral region of the fantastic, whose imaginary world is neither entirely 'real' (object), nor entirely 'unreal'

(image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two” (19). Structural and semantic implications of the paraxial position of the fantastic are the grounding of the unreal or imaginary in a realistic context, the arising ambiguity as to the interpretation of the events as objects or images, and the resulting questioning of normally accepted categories of the real. Jackson’s illustration of the fantastic as an intermediate and in-existent space does not only explain its ephemeral effect in the literary text but also applies to the screen and the combination of the cinematic images of two shots which the spectator processes as a third one, due to the velocity of their projection. Accordingly, a fantastic effect then invades the screen when the third image subverts the interpretative codes which in classic cinema amount to the notion of mirroring reality (Poloniato 47-48).

From the array of inexplicable events that Víctor has experienced throughout the night, the hotel sequence with Mario emerges as the most effective one in problematizing the construct of reality on the screen. In addition, it challenges the binary concepts underlying social and psychic reality, such as the notions of love and hate which are not only tested in the events between Víctor and Mario but also Víctor’s witnessing of a heterosexual couple whose display of sexual passion turns to violence and reveals the woman’s murderous intent. In consideration of the fantastic effect arising from the mental third image described above, it is useful to add the concept of a third meaning attached to the image which goes beyond the first (informational) and even a second (symbolic) level to an unspeakable or obtuse image (Smelik 124). Anneke Smelik applies this Barthian conception of the “third meaning” to her understanding of excess in the sense of carrying a meaning in excess of the story line of a film (125). It coincides with the paraxial position of Jackson’s optical illustration of the fantastic and, in this light, the meaning in excess, the irreconcilable idea that love breeds hate, forces the spectator to postpone narrative coherence and like Víctor, to dwell on the uncanny transformation of his nightly round into a place of haunting. The emotional and interpretational repercussions of his time with Mario take the story into an area that resembles the effect of visual excess that Smelik defines as “a subversive element creating other meanings, outplaying narrative structures, evoking emotions” (125). Dieter Ingenschay’s reading of Mario’s attack offers that “perhaps drugs or maybe a sudden sadistic stroke of aggressiveness could be blamed for it”, or the possibility of an answer “by means of a super-

natural legend” (29). This suggestion however does not take into consideration that in this film haunting is an effect of the oscillation between compatible and incompatible events as a strategy to increase hesitation and suspense and to defer an explanation that neutralizes the fantastic and its subversive, and in this reading, queering effect.

The hotel sequence ends with a dissolve and a transition to the street where reality has been drained of color with noirish tones that communicate a jaded view and a camera focus that depicts Víctor as an observer if not a seer. With the soundtrack of piano music, his outlook becomes softened and caring as he takes in the child playing *bandoneón*, the group of *cartoneros* receiving food from a bar, the street vendor he remembers from earlier in the evening, and the woman from the flower stand whose eye he meets and whose gift of a carnation he receives as a token of love and protection. When his tender touch of her cheek returns color to the display of roses, the night seems animated by new energy. Joining a group of boys playing soccer leads to sharing mate with the families of *cartoneros* and returning with them to the recycling depot where he helps with the unloading and enjoys a sense of community. Under the warm haloes of the streetlights, the realism of the episode is infused with lyricism that reflects Víctor’s unusual introspective mood. As he crosses the platform of a deserted and boarded-up train station and a distant whistle of a train coincides with the close-up of a burning incense stick, it hails back to the flower vendor and her role in upholding the celebration of the Day of the Faithful Dead that passes ignored or forgotten in the soulless, commercialized sections of the capital.

With the symbolism of this shot, the concept of cyclical time transfers the fantastic to the mythical level and the possibility of the return of the dead, which in ghost tales “disrupt the crucial defining line which separates ‘real’ life from the ‘unreality’ of death, subverting those discrete units by which unitary meaning of ‘reality’ is constituted” (Jackson 69). Thus, the date of November 2nd on the wall calendar in the establishment that Víctor has entered rouses his attention. While the possibility of having spent time with friends that are no longer among the living may occur to him, what is deeply frightening him are the attacks on his life and the sense of a hostile, panoptical gaze, evidenced for the spectator throughout the night by an objective camera. When the bartender explains to the waiter that this customer will not be able to pay for his order, it is with

a hint of irony for the spectator in view of Víctor's general enterprising vision of the world and the money he has earned during the night. Tired, distraught, and in no condition to consume anything, he slumps down at a table by a wall mirror. His mirror image reflects a body that seems drained of blood and vitality, although the carnation he still bears on his chest stands out like a beacon of observance in these last hours of this special night. If Víctor's double reflected in the mirror describes a kind of crisis of identity, it is one of becoming in the sense of coming to life to a consciousness that splits reality in two identical versions, one not more real than the other, and thus sharing the paraxial space of the fantastic. With a montage of becoming more like a ghost like Claudio and Mario, the scene introduces absences by making visible "that which is culturally invisible and which is written out as negation and as death" (Jackson 69). If Claudio and Mario were apparitions that returned to spend time with Víctor, they did so out of love and care for his well-being and also to remind him of those that were disappeared, not only from Víctor's personal memory but also from official remembrance, such as the Day of the Dead. In her book on the fantastic as a temporal critique, Bliss Cua Lim remarks that the nostalgic allegory of ghost films "undermines modernity's homogeneous time, fomenting instead a radicalized accountability to those who are no longer with us, a solidarity with specters made possible by remembering" (181). Like Víctor's figure and its mirror impression, one real and the other virtual though both identical, time also splits into a present and a past to merge and allow for the appearance of the last phantom of the night. Her character comes from a long tradition of the feminine fantastic in literature and film as a haunting apparition of the Other in the heterosexual matrix and as a harbinger of crisis for the masculine subject.

Accompanied by an uncanny soundtrack of high-pitched violins, Cecilia enters majestically in all her beauty of a young woman and is instantly recognized by Víctor. When she sits down across from him, reflected like him in the mirror, this special moment registers like a *mise-en-abîme* of other stories circulating in the room with a recurring focus on a billiard player concentrating on his moves, a woman reading in a book, and a writer, who once in a while lifts his head as in the process of creating a scene or a character and as a directorial or self-reflexive gesture of the film. Cecilia's appearance opens the way for a romantic love story between a man and a woman, one that in mainstream cinema is culturally intelligi-

ble as setting things right but neutralizes a reading against the grain and cinematic queering which, as Nick Davis clarifies, does not “translate pre-existing models of desire into corresponding visual images” (69). Víctor surrenders his carnation to Cecilia, now fulfilling its promise of love and a final revelation of the true nature of his experiences during the night. After he confides his fear and the attacks on his life, she reveals to him a belief still upheld in the provinces, where she is from, that the dead return during this sacred time to take with them those they truly loved, and she offers: «Si lo pedís, me quedo con vos». Cecilia associates with the past and the tradition and values that have been lost in the capital and a culturally uprooted present. Her attitude reverses the classic Argentine dichotomy of civilization and barbarianism, the latter now ruling Buenos Aires where Víctor sells himself. Led by her to the deserted railway station, Víctor succumbs to a long passionate kiss on the tracks where Cecilia transforms into a vengeful phantom hurling her resentment and accusations at him, a «mentiroso» or a fake. As she talks herself into a frenzy like the mythical Mexican Llorona, she blames him for sex during a fifteen-minute taxi ride that left her pregnant and with consequences resulting in her death. Víctor rejects the claims as impossible but also insists ambiguously, «Es cierto. Es cierto. Nunca dejé de pensar en vos, es cierto».

For the spectator who is increasingly alerted by the warning horn of the approaching train, Víctor’s character has become unintelligible, violating the most cherished of all human unities in realism that the fantastic undermines (Jackson 82). At the height of suspense, Cecilia lets go of her grasp on Víctor and he falls violently back to the platform, missed by the train whose speed dispels the specter and leaves him spared, or perhaps rejected because the dead only take those with them they truly loved. As he leaves the station, a jump-cut to a huge billboard contrasts with one of a boarded-up building bearing a «se alquila» sign. The dialectic of the shots underscores the dismissal of the historic aspects of the metropolis and the selling out to the hegemonizing pull of progress through corporations, leaving behind fragmented spaces where the past resurges fantastically. The transition to a sequence in which Víctor helpfully stops the bus for two elderly women with flower bouquets headed for the cemetery dispatches the past symbolically. The scene also makes a humorous allusion to the false image of youth as untouched by death when one of the ladies remarks to her companion that he is much too young to have lost any

beloveds. However, Víctor continues his walk along a long, shaded wall as the first sun light falls on his profile and shows a tired if not thoughtful gaze. Not knowing what he thinks though, this spectator comes to her own conclusions about his experiences of the night, helped by the last of John Berger's "Twelve Theses on the Economy of the Dead":

How do the living live with the dead? Until the dehumanization of the society by capitalism, all the living awaited the experience of the dead. It was their ultimate future. By themselves the living were incomplete. Thus living and dead were interdependent. Always. Only a uniquely modern form of egoism has broken interdependence. With disastrous results for the living, who now think of the dead as the eliminated. (5)

There is no filmic gesture to assume that Víctor resolves the fantastic experiences of his nightly round, but there is no doubt about his kindness to the children of the *cartoneros* he encounters fighting each other with filled garbage bags while others are playing soccer. Joining them, he regains his animated and contended mood, and the fact that the ball is made of wadded-up paper does not diminish their enjoyment of the game. As a hint to an allegorical resolution of the fantastic, that for the players the ball is not less real than a normal manufactured one, this extra-diegetic interpretation of the image works as a self-reflexive reference to the fantastic in the film similar to Jackson's description, that "by foregrounding its own signifying practice the fantastic begins to betray its version of the 'real' as a relative one" (84). The scene also suggests that there are creative and alternative ways of life in the gaps still unclaimed by profit-making and the demand for consumer goods even in the busiest and consumerist parts of the capital. The ending of the film thus returns to its documentation of the labor force from the opening scenes and a reality that now appears in a different light with new associations of complexities. As to the status of *Ronda nocturna* as queer cinema, it is important to consider Pagnoni Berns' critical perspective in including *Ronda nocturna* in the films he examines as depictions of a crisis of masculinity in the presentation of homosexuality: «Pareciera que un film luminoso en el cual predomina la ausencia de una crisis de identidad aún no tiene cabida en nuestro país, que apela mayormente a dramas de crisis

de la masculinidad a la hora de representar la figura queer». It is however crucial to remember that Víctor's encounters and experiences during the night illustrate a spectrum of homosocial bonds and of queer identities or performances in different strata of the social power structure. Thus, rather than reflecting a crisis of masculinity, his encounters during the night help the spectator in discovering the link between the fiction of binary constructs such as reality and gender identity.

As Judith Butler argues: “‘Intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (17), in other words, those binary oppositions that the fantastic subverts. If Víctor's gender identity is not completely discernible from his sexual encounters, it is not a crisis of sexual identity or of coming out that undermines his confidence during the night, but rather the testing of his reason and uncertainty about the motivation of unexplained attacks on his life. With the thematic context of the tradition of the Day of the Dead, forgotten in the centers of consumption and commodification, the fantastic infiltrates the realistically portrayed urban space and disturbs a cause-effect logic and the linear movement of time. Through the strategic queering of the fantastic, *Ronda nocturna* fulfills the function of queer cinema in dislodging “automatic, idealized relations within or among sex, gender and desire” (Davis 69). The friction between mimetic realism and the fantastic not only prolongs suspense and repeated attacks on notions of normativity but also illuminates coexisting social realities that underlie the official concept of national identity in its neo-liberal configuration.

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