

Introduction

There is no representation of modern urban space that is not at the same time a commentary on modernity, just as there is no commentary on modernity that does not stem, in one way or another, from a desire to map the shifting landscapes of the “modern.” Modernity is in a constant state of flux and thus has a Tlönese dimension to it. For the nations of the imaginary region of Tlön, writes Jorge Luis Borges, the world consists not of a series of objects set in space but of a succession of individual acts; the world is not spatial but temporal. For this reason, there are no nouns in the languages and dialects of Tlön but only impersonal verbs. Instead of *luna*, for instance, the verbs *lunecer* or *lunar*, meaning “to moon,” would be used: “*Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned.*” In the absence of nouns or *sustantivos*, a word indicating substance, there is mirrored Tlön’s fluid reality and lack of fixity. The contact with Tlön, we are told, is breaking up the real world. Within a century, the essenceless planet will, in all probability, replace reality—the world will eventually be Tlön (Borges 1996, 1:435, 443). Borges’s volatile planet could be seen as a trope of modernity as flux or *liquid* (Bauman 2000), a shifting ground, unreliable, far-reaching, and unpredictable.

The “modern” is a catchall word, suitable for any occasion and purpose. Although like the daughters of Danaus we have been tirelessly filling it with meanings, neither its origins nor its semantics are free of controversy. The pithos of the “modern” is perforated. Among its plausible beginnings are the conquest of America, the Renaissance, Cartesian rationalism, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the French and Industrial Revolutions. For Karl Marx modernity is capitalism, for Émile Durkheim industrialization, and for Max Weber bureaucracy and rationalization. Marshall Berman views the nineteenth century as the golden age of modernism (Berman 1988, 35), Henri Lefebvre considers it pre-modernity (Lefebvre 1995, 229), and Jürgen Habermas sees Friedrich Nietzsche as the borderline between modernity and postmodernity (Habermas 1987, 83–105). Meanwhile, Bruno Latour tells us that we have never been modern (Latour 1993).

This book reflects my attempt to navigate through the vicissitudes of the “modern” against the sociopolitical and cultural background of Argentina’s capital city, a significantly hegemonic space in Latin America, during the interwar period. It is the product of a decade-long engagement with a diverse corpus of textual and visual depictions of urban space that I read as reactions or *theses* on modernity, variously understood as technocapitalism, rationalization, industrialization, commodification, reification, abstraction, simulation, and hyperreality, but also as mass migration, accelerated urbanization, and rapid modernization.

Under consideration are six iconic works from the fields of literature (verse and prose) and the visual arts (photography, painting, and film), which present us with different and often contrasting views of Buenos Aires. They were produced between 1921 and 1939, a period of heightened cultural activity in Argentina that saw the emergence of several by now canonical artists. These works reveal the influence of the “modern” on the social, cultural, and ideological consciousness of the country, affording a valuable insight into the intricacies and complexities of urban modernity in Argentina.

In the six chapters that follow I discuss works by Borges, Oliverio Girondo, José Agustín Ferreyra, Xul Solar, Roberto Arlt, and Horacio Coppola. The main focus is the city of Buenos Aires as the liquid playground of Argentine modernity in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. This was a period of profound and long-lasting changes in the private and public spheres of the country, especially in its capital city, whose origins are to be found in the late 1870s, when a generation of politicians sought to modernize Argentina along the lines of North American and European “progress.” Social and economic reform meant urban and industrial growth, which in turn necessitated European immigration to complement the limited supply of local labor (Lavrín 1998, 2).

Economic prosperity was brought about by the export of agricultural commodities, which was made possible by the use of refrigerators on transatlantic liners in the late nineteenth century (Navarro Vera 1999, 132). By 1910, details James Scobie, “the revolution on the pampas reached its climax, with an increasingly intensive livestock industry closely supplemented by tenant farming and cereal crop production.” With the aid of the national railway system, “which radiated from Buenos Aires like the spokes of a wheel and encouraged all to buy and ship through the national capital,” Buenos Aires transformed from a *gran aldea*, or large village, of about 180,000 residents in 1870, into “a major world port and a metropolis with a population of 1,300,000” (Scobie 1974, 11); it was a city “in a state of constant transition” (Bergero 2008, 14). Crucially, about two-thirds of those people had not been born in Argentina (Navarro Vera

1999, 132). By 1920, Buenos Aires boasted the largest and most cosmopolitan conurbation of the continent as a result of the massive influx of economic immigrants originating from Europe, particularly Italy and Spain, while the country emerged as a “leading importer of European technologies, capital and manufactured good[s].” Justin Read describes this period as the “internationalization of Argentina” (Read 2012, 122). As in other parts of Latin America, the arrival of immigrants led to rapid, uncontrolled urban sprawl.

In the years 1857–1914, 3,300,000 immigrants entered Argentina through the port of Buenos Aires, while men born abroad still formed 40 percent of the country’s male population in 1930 (Navarro Vera 1999, 132; Rock 1993, 173). Immigrants, says Scobie, prevailed among the “gente de pueblo,” or workingmen, and constituted about “80 per cent of the unskilled labor force and two thirds of the blue-collar and white-collar group.” Those who entered the country as “managers, directors, or technicians” were far fewer in number and “usually had sufficient antecedents in family, education, or wealth to belong to the gente decente,” or the upper class (Scobie 1974, 216–217). Between March and August 1912 alone, 51 steamships, all in the “Linea del Plata,” were scheduled to transport emigrants from Italy to Buenos Aires and Montevideo (Commissariato dell’Emigrazione 1912, 62–63). The Galata Museo del Mare in Genoa offers scale reconstructions of the interior of those liners, most of them having limited places for first- and second-class passengers. As we navigate through the exhibition, we learn that the steamship *Cittá di Torino* had only 40 places available for the first and second class but as many as 1,400 for working-class emigrants, and that in a typical liner, the male dormitories in the third class would be just over 2 meters high, admitting only 2 rows of berths. In those poorly lit and unventilated rooms, hundreds of men slept and ate for the duration of the journey, which, depending on the liner, could last between 19 and 25 days, while several passengers, very often children and infants, would never make it to the “Americhe” because of fatal diseases spreading on board.

Most of those who survived the long and hazardous journey stayed in or near Buenos Aires but were increasingly faced with xenophobia as their presence was thought to threaten the social and cultural structures of the country. The intellectuals of the Centenario, a generation that came to prominence around 1910 when Argentina was celebrating its Centenary of Independence from the Spanish crown, recoiled at the sight of a foreignizing city. They soon became embroiled in a debate on national culture and harped on the perils of immigration, openly disdaining the proletarian newcomers, whose languages and cultures they often lampooned.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the curricula of government-

funded schools were dictated by an institutional nationalism whose goal was the assimilation of the second generation of immigrants through the teaching of the country's language, customs, and history (Sarabia Viejo 2002, 26–27). Among those nationalists who flinched at immigration were the influential politician, Estanislao Zeballos (1854–1923), and the academic scholar and principal representative of the Centenario, Ricardo Rojas (1882–1957) (Arpini 2004, 50). In his book *La restauración nacionalista* (1909), Rojas portrayed an Italianized city littered with linguistic impurity, namely, the Italian-Spanish pidgin *cocoliche* and *lunfardo* (the Argentine slang whose gestation owed much to the arrival of European immigrants). Beatriz Sarlo notes that Rojas “had critically described a city where signs in Italian or Idisch [Yiddish] were displayed in the shop-windows of many traditional and up to then *criollo* neighbourhoods, where children of immigrant origin mixed with the old Hispanic population endangering linguistic purity” (Sarlo 2001a).

In his *Odas seculares* (1910), written to commemorate the centenary of Argentine independence, Leopoldo Lugones inaugurated the nationalist tone that would persist in his work and established him as the national bard (Rosman 2003, 101). In 1916 he published the collection of essays *El payador*, praising José Hernández's gauchesque epic *Martín Fierro* (1870s) for its “patriotic” values and quintessential artistic expression of *criollismo*, purportedly the ultimate manifestation of national identity. Lugones sustained that the poem celebrated the free-spirited *criollo* gaucho of the pampa, furnishing a true image of Argentineness in an age when the pampean rural life was being superseded by the spread of modernization and the steadfast expansion of the city. The poet promoted the once “barbaric” gaucho to the status of national signifier and contrasted his “essence” with “the overseas mob” (*la plebe ultramarina*) of the newcomers, who, he claimed, were responsible for the corruption and withering away of “the criollo race” (*la raza criolla*) and the concomitant decline of the previous order (Lugones 1916, 15). He did so by turning over Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's influential dichotomy “urban” (European) civilization versus “rural” (local) barbarism that the latter had expounded in his essay *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* (1845) in line with the agendas of the Europhile Generations of 1837 and the 1880s. The former generation consisted of intellectuals like Esteban Echeverría, Juan Bautista Alberdi, Bartolomé Mitre, and Sarmiento himself, all of whom worked to turn Argentina into a “modern nation” (Shumway 1991, 112).

Initially, most working-class immigrants who could not afford private property stayed in tenements, or *conventillos*, in downtown Buenos Aires, but in the first two decades of the twentieth century the reduction of tram tickets and the opportunity to buy cheap land in installments allowed

them to move to the outskirts (Gorelik 1999, 40), leading to the pell-mell expansion of the *arrabales*. The suburbs, which mushroomed around the *gran aldea*, were seen as a hotbed of linguistic, social, and cultural otherness, while the unbridled growth of the city had a drastic effect on its socioeconomic and cultural topography. Once again, complex aesthetic, political, and ideological issues were mooted, one of which was to locate the new center of the conurbation.

In the 1920s the socialist and radical reformists set out to reinforce suburban infrastructure and dissolve the breach between center and periphery, whereas the conservatives were bound up in the modernization of the traditional colonial center (Gorelik 2003, 154). The latter gained ground in the following decade, the “*década infame*,” which, set off by José Félix Uriburu’s military coup of September 1930 and precipitated by the Great Depression, set foot in a long period of political instability and social turmoil. The 1930s, writes David Rock, was an “echo” as much of the past as of the future. It paved the way for the return of the old conservative oligarchy that was prevalent before the 1912 electoral reform, “as successive governments again sought to exclude much of the eligible population from political activities,” and launched a long series of feeble democracies, coups d’état and dictatorial regimes (Rock 1993, 173–174).

Read refers to the period 1870–1930 as the “‘bubble’ years,” when the Buenos Aires elite “failed to diversify economic activities, which would have hedged against global economic decline during the Great Depression.” He explains that the internationalization of Argentina created economic dependency. “Argentina’s economic rise,” he notes, “was spurred by waves of speculative investment, mainly from financial markets in London.” This foreign capital “would rush into the country relatively quickly, and then evacuate just as quickly at the first sign of danger” (Read 2012, 122).

As for the Buenos Aires avant-garde, variously known as *martinfierristas*, *ultraístas*, or *Florida* group (named after the elegantly “modern” Calle Florida in downtown Buenos Aires where they used to meet), they vied for prominence throughout the 1920s by reinterpreting local traditions through the spectrum of European avant-garde movements. The name of the most important avant-garde magazine, *Martín Fierro*, around which they revolved in the years 1924–1927, betrays their project to recriollize modernity, in other words, to reclaim and modernize *criollismo* as a national culture.¹ Projected by the press of the time as the new center, the suburb was placed at the core of political and cultural debates (Gorelik 1999, 43, 36), while urban modernity itself unfolded as a spectacle. Strikingly dramatic by virtue of its contradictory complexity, the city’s arresting transformation was at the center of artistic production, with representations of the “urban” abounding. As Sarlo puts it, in those years Buenos

Aires turned into “el campo de batalla simbólico para la intelectualidad argentina” (Sarlo 2002, 54). Although in the 1920s the members of the intellectual elite fixed on the periphery of Buenos Aires as the prime protagonist of their work, in the 1930s, when most of them gathered around the influential and internationally connected magazine *Sur*, they shifted their attention to the city center and its symbolic refoundation (Gorelik 2003, 157). This change of focus on the part of the Buenos Aires intelligentsia was symptomatic of the political conservatism and socioeconomic turbulence into which the country was plunged in the third decade of the twentieth century.

Notwithstanding their differences, most of the artists studied here belonged to or entertained links with the *Florida* and *Sur* groups. This was the case of Borges and Gironde who, along with Ricardo Güiraldes, orchestrated the Argentine avant-garde in the 1920s (Masiello 1992, 147), but also of Xul and Coppola, the youngest among them. Arlt reportedly maintained contact with both the *estetizantes* of the *Florida* and their alleged rivals, the left-leaning writers of the Boedo group, whose socially engaged literature focused on the working class. Ferreyra was in fact the only true pariah, even if his view rested heavily on the intellectual elite’s *criollo* narrative and the established social fabric.

Chapter 1 (“Utopian City”) explores Borges’s reconfiguration of the periphery of Buenos Aires in the 1920s by examining his first poetry collection *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923) and a number of critical essays of the same period. Borges opts for the liminal topography of the *orillas*, the frontier area between Buenos Aires (urban modernity), and the pampa (local tradition), in order to create an essentialist myth for the city and, metonymically, for the nation in an era when the country’s most enduring narrative, *criollismo*, seems to falter under the strain of immigration and modernization, most conspicuously in the capital city. The analysis follows Borges’s return to Argentina in 1921, and contextualizes his swift transformation from “a good European” and a fervent supporter of *ultraísmo*—a Spanish literary movement that, in the poet’s own words, emphasized pure image and metaphor by drawing on German expressionism and Italian futurism (Borges 2002b, 135; 1999b, 75)—into an impassioned *criollo*. Borges trundles his way through the city’s most progressive region, the suburb, in an attempt to overhaul the dissonant, immigrant-stricken periphery, and reassess *criollismo* against the backdrop of a fast-moving modernity. Encoded in his utopian city, whose urban *criollismo* becomes the model of the avant-garde in the 1920s, is a conservative reaction to the dismantling of traditional institutions and values that ensued from the diffusion of modernization and industrialization in early twentieth-century Argentina. The chapter pores over the conceptual

nation-rebuilding that Borges undertakes in *Fervor* in light of contemporary theories of nationalism.

Published a year earlier, Gironde's first poetry book *Veinte poemas para ser leídos en el tranvía* (1922) puts forward a radical view of space and life in the modern city. Chapter 2 ("Atopian City") looks at how the poet capitalizes on the modern technologies of photography and cinema, and develops a new, intermedial poetry, which I name *kinopoetics*, to depict modern urban space. Gironde, for whom capitalist modernity translates into reification, commodification, and hyperreality, demonstrates how kinesis, or motion, is at once foreign and essential to modernity's new realities. Unlike Borges, he does not shy away from the social and cultural changes ushered in by modernity but seizes the modern atopia or "non-place" in its genesis, prefiguring with remarkable lucidity its future permutations and more specifically what I call *topospheric pollution*, which refers to the erasure of the social and cultural architectures of our mappable geographies. Placed at the heart of the maelstrom of modernity (Berman 1988, 15), Gironde's atopian city is an anticipatory mirroring of the spatial and temporal economy of our contemporary era, typically known as postmodernity, late capitalism (Jameson 1991), or high modernity (Giddens 1996, 176).

Opposite Gironde's "non-place" we find Ferreyra's geographically fixed city. His "melotopia" (ancient Greek *melos*, song, melody; modern Greek *melo*, melodramatic; and *topos*, place) draws on the traditions of tango and melodrama. Chapter 3 ("Melotopian City") navigates the melodramatic territory of Ferreyra's last silent film, *Perdón viejita* (1927), which, set against the unsavory underworld of tango, highlights the mishaps of socially and economically displaced individuals living on the urban fringes. Invisible in Borges's city and an extra in Coppola's, the subaltern stands under the spotlight in Ferreyra's celluloid polis. *Perdón viejita's* Manichaeism and its pool of stereotypes are offset by Ferreyra's social realist lens, which zooms in on the plight of the dispossessed amid the cultural and moral challenges of modernity. Although his "tango-melodrama" is regulated by a stiff moral rhetoric that ultimately reproduces the social status quo, thereby paying lip service to the disenfranchised, it still constitutes an anomaly within Argentine and Latin American cinema because it belongs to only a handful of filmic texts shot from the viewpoint of the proletariat. Even though barracked in opposite ideologies, the working-class minded Ferreyra and the bourgeois-oriented Borges converge on *criollismo*. Like the latter, Ferreyra reconfigures the suburb as a national topos for its proximity to the pampa, which is vested with national essence (rural *criollismo*), but contrary to him, he does not strip the suburb of immigrants. Instead, he confers on them a tradition that

they most likely never possessed, and in so doing he recriollizes the immigrant-packed periphery at the same time that he proletarianizes the nation. In spite of being difficult, Ferreyra's celluloid space is void of the dystopian anxieties that make Arlt's subjects teeter on the brink of existence. The working-class barrio may come second to an idealized pampean *ethotopia*, but is nevertheless closer to it than the vertiginous, ultra-modernist city center conceived by Gironde and arrested by Coppola. In sharp contrast to the former, Ferreyra, like Borges, opts not for kinesis (movement) but for stasis (stationariness), while his difficult cinematic landscapes run counter to the frisson of spiritual life envisioned by Xul.

Chapter 4 ("Dystopian City") goes over Arlt's novel *Los siete locos* (1929), whose publication coincided with the onset of the Great Depression. The dystopian turn of modern life, previously intuited by Gironde and Ferreyra, is now fleshed out fully. Arlt's focal point is the underside of capitalist modernity, its systemic violence and devastating impact on the human psyche. While Gironde centers on capitalism's economics of space and elusive geographies, Arlt looks into the contours of its moral economy and its effects on the inner life of the urbanite, converting, in this way, Gironde's *topospheric pollution* into *psychospheric*. The aestheticized, abstract city of Coppola, we shall see, is preceded here by an inner site ruptured by abstraction. In Arlt's alienating city, the *cogito* transmutes into *neco ergo sum* (I kill, therefore I am) and before long into *morior ergo sum* (I die, therefore I am). Incarcerated in the enlightened city, his characters seek not to defy the oppressive mechanisms of modern society but to replicate them in the most destructive way. No more sheathed in the rhetoric of progress, Arlt's "modern," what he calls "nasty civilization," is an ignis fatuus. Hinging on a pathological discourse that questions the entire modern enterprise, his visceral critique of the cancerous city recalls several twentieth-century critics of modernity, especially those associated with the Frankfurt School.

If Arlt projects a Spenglerian vision of the city and the "modern" as cancer, Xul takes his cue from Georg Simmel to advocate disalienation and individual happiness in the modern polis. Chapter 5 ("Eutopian City") throws light on the artist's visual vocabulary of the 1930s by probing watercolor and tempera renditions of the spiritual city. Drawing heavily on the esoteric sciences and spiritualism in general, Xul edges away from contemporary negative depictions of the city to yield a maverick view of the modern metropolis as "eutopia" (*eu*, good and *topos*, place), a good and realizable mindscape. The eutopian city can be read as a backlash against the decrepit urban space of Arlt and Ferreyra and the pathological expositions of modernity that dominated early twentieth-century thinking, as well as a reaction to the general malaise that beset the capi-

talist city during the tumultuous years of the Great Depression. His spiritual city conceptually overlaps with the strand of utopian thought that views utopia as a real possibility, and with Simmel's notion of the city as "mental space." In reality, Xul is the only artist who sees in capitalist modernity the possibility for happiness (*eudaimonia*), and whose faith in technological progress continues unshaken even in the postwar period. His fanciful structures of "buildings-as-mountains," his ecotopian architectures, his mental cityscapes, and flying cities, all dictated by what I refer to as "hands-on spiritualism," outflank contemporaneous anxieties about the "modern."

From Borges's utopian fringes to Gironde's atopian modernity and Arlt's reified urbanity, Coppola's photographic eye cuts across contrasting images of the city and in this sense his visual epic complements the remaining five theses on *porteño* modernity—hence the subtitle of the book, *Five and One Theses on Modernity*.² Chapter 6 ("Objective City") discusses Coppola's *Buenos Aires 1936: visión fotográfica* (1936), an album commissioned by the city authorities to commemorate the fourth centennial of the first foundation of Buenos Aires by Pedro de Mendoza in 1536. By subsuming elements of the *visiones* studied in the previous chapters, mainly those of Borges and Gironde but to some extent also of Ferreyra and Arlt, Coppola's photographs arguably afford a more "objective" view of the city. However, I name his visual narrative "objective" primarily for its affinity to *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity photography, particularly its penchant for urban and industrial sceneries, and its "objective," matter-of-fact approach to the object photographed. In contrast to Borges, Coppola's Buenos Aires is often awash with people, but the photographer's lens nevertheless closes in on the city, not on its residents. The album visualizes the avant-garde's quest for a recriollized modernity, and captures their topological shift from the suburb (reclaimed by Borges in the 1920s) to the traditional center (recuperated by the architectural avant-garde headed by Alberto Prebisch in the 1930s).

The discussion that follows examines artistic responses to modernity that are historically and culturally fixed in order to allow for a relatively cohesive approach to what is a highly multifaceted phenomenon. As we analyze Borges's, Gironde's, Ferreyra's, Arlt's, Xul's, and Coppola's representations of the city, we come across the protean face of the "modern" and its cultural bearings in Argentina over the span of two decades. Arlt and Gironde will meet again in the Epilogue, which, by way of conclusion, probes Alfonsina Storni's take on urban modernity in her poetry book *Mundo de siete pozos* (1934).