

Lucrecia Martel's *Nueva Argirópolis: Rivers, Rumours and Resistance*

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Abstract

This article analyses Lucrecia Martel's 2010 short film *Nueva Agirópolis*, which was commissioned by the Argentine Ministry of Culture as part of the Bicentennial celebrations. It explains how the film both inhabits yet contests the discourses of the modern nation state underpinning those celebrations, in particular through its representation of conflict between the state and indigenous groups. Its representation draws on images proposed by an earlier work, Sarmiento's utopian tract of 1850, *Argirópolis*, images including the river and the island which in Martel's film undergo a resignification, which overturns Sarmiento's understanding of relationships between geography, capital, nation and ethnicity. Political and cultural debates of particular relevance to indigenous communities, such as access to land, as well as the way the indigenous are represented in state discourses, surface obliquely in this short film, which both represents diegetically the circulation and relay of rumours of indigenous resistance, as well as suggesting these formally through a soundtrack suffused with murmurs and barely audible sounds. The unsubtitled words of indigenous actors, as well as the authorities' attempts at investigation of indigenous political activity through staging encounters of (failed) interpretation, and the subversive mimicry by indigenous activists of hegemonic ideas of national foundation are themselves muted, rumoured suggestions of a resistance which always lies just outside this short film's visual grasp.

Una conspiración. Fragmentos de noticias sobre algo que estaría sucediendo aguas arriba de Buenos Aires. Es una ficción, levemente inspirada en *Argirópolis* de Sarmiento [...]. Siempre me llamó la atención la audacia de ese texto político. *Nueva Argirópolis* está inspirado en esa audacia. Nos gustaba la pretensión de fundar un espacio que sea un nuevo orden social. Ciencia ficción sería el género, me parece. Las islas lejanas, los idiomas desconocidos. Fragmentos de un movimiento de fundación.

A conspiracy. Fragments of news about something that might be happening upriver from Buenos Aires. It's a fiction, which draws lightly on Sarmiento's *Argirópolis*. I've always been interested in the audacity of that political text. *Nueva Argirópolis* is inspired by that audacity. We liked the idea of founding a space which would be a new social order. I think science fiction would be the genre. Far off islands, unknown languages. Fragments of a movement of foundation.

Lucrecia Martel (2010)

In preparation for the celebrations of the Bicentennial of the Revolución de Mayo the Argentine Ministry of Culture commissioned 25 eight-minute short films for the commemorative project *25 miradas: 200 minutos*, which invited filmmakers to meditate filmically on national identity with particular attention to the moment of national foundation being celebrated.¹ Contributors included several of the auteurs associated with the innovative and experimental turn taken by Argentine cinema in the 1990s and early 2000s, such as Israel Adrián Caetano, Pablo Trapero and Lucrecia Martel, in addition to more veteran filmmakers such as Leonardo Favio and several who have produced their first films more recently such as Lucía Puenzo and Celina Murga. The 25 shorts were screened at 125 cinemas around the country and subsequently shown on national television, in international festivals and as part of the in-flight program of Aerolíneas Argentinas. This chapter looks in detail at Martel's contribution, *Nueva Argirópolis*, which was filmed in the Argentine provinces of Corrientes, Chaco and Salta, and features actors (trained and untrained) from the Qom communities, as well as other non-professional Guaraní speaking actors. This strange, oblique short film presents the watery world of the Río Paraná, which a group of indigenous people are attempting to cross on a raft made of plastic bottles, when they are intercepted by the police. The film's approach to narrative, its depiction of indigenous political organisation, its use of sound and treatment of language are suggestive of Gayatri Spivak's discussion of rumour, which stresses the anonymous, transitive nature of this form of communication

¹ The project aimed to create '[u]na introspección y una poética acerca del quiénes quisimos ser y del quiénes hemos sido, cruzados con la realidad del qué somos y con la utopía del qué seremos', (an introspective and a poetic look at who we wanted to be and who we have been, mixed with the reality of who we are and who we will be'). This text was included on the website <http://www.25miradas.gob.ar> (Accessed 11 December 2014, no longer available).

as well as the impossibility of attributing it to a single originator. Spivak writes: '[R]umor is not error but primordially (originarily) errant, always in circulation with no assignable source. This illegitimacy makes it accessible to insurgency' (Spivak 1988, 213). For Spivak, as in *Nueva Argirópolis*, rumour is a radical, plural and potentially unreliable form of communication which counters official discourse and eludes (colonial) authority.² This chapter shows how *Nueva Argirópolis*, despite its dwelling (as part of the '25 miradas' project) within the discourses of the modern liberal nation state – celebrated and upheld by the Bicentennial celebrations of which the film is a part – functions to subversively inhabit or mimic these values and discourses, through a drawing upon, yet radical reconfiguration both of its intertext and precursor, *Argirópolis* (1850), a lesser-known work of Argentine intellectual and president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and of Sarmiento's visions of nation, nature and capital.

Martel is well-known for the elliptical, muted narratives which have characterised her feature films, and *Nueva Argirópolis* is no exception in this regard.³ The short film hints at the political organising of indigenous groups and figures the River Paraná as site of contestation: it is used by these groups for clandestine movement, yet heavily policed by the authorities. Water is a highly politically charged component of Martel's filmmaking; it evokes both attempts to contain, and capture, as well as an ultimate mutability and elusiveness.⁴ The narrative of *Nueva Argirópolis* is composed of fragments and murmurs; of conversations in Spanish, Toba and Quechua (amongst other indigenous languages), of the interrogation of detainees, of radio communications by police and of the attempted translation of an indigenous activist YouTube video into Spanish by the authorities. Just where we seem to get closest to what is being investigated – a sequence in which a group of indigenous people can be seen emerging from underneath a jetty aboard rafts, another in which a large group can be seen walking down to the water's edge, the film language functions to impede a dominant gaze and a clear vision of what is happening by using physical obstacles to our vision or insufficient depth of focus. In this sense, and intermittently, the film puts the (Spanish-speaking) viewer in the position of the authorities in the film whose attempts at investigation of indigenous movements are hampered by a lack of understanding both of their activities and of their languages. The fragments of information and dialogue, the limited visual information to which we are given access, and the whispers and murmurs present on the soundtrack are the material from which the viewer must actively create meaning; they decentre narrative and textual authority, and thus

² Spivak is here glossing Ranajit Guha's discussion of rumour in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, as part of her consideration of the work of the Subaltern Studies group on insurgency. Spivak does take issue with what she reads as the 'phonocentrism' of Guha's, and the group's, conceptualisation of rumour (1988, 212). For Spivak, rumour is in fact akin to Derridean 'writing', in its anonymity and plurality, its 'power [...] in the subaltern context [...] deriving from its participation in the structure of illegitimate writing rather than the authoritative writing of the law' (213).

³ Martel has been seen as a crucial player in the ideological and aesthetic break with previous styles of filmmaking in Argentina known as the New Argentine Cinema. She has released three feature films to date, *La ciénaga* (2001), *La niña santa* (2004) and *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008), which have been the subject of ample critical attention. Since completing *La mujer sin cabeza*, Martel has made three short films: *Nueva Argirópolis* (2010), *Pescados* (2010), and *Muta* (2011), all of which share an interest in aquatic or riverine environments. These short films are aesthetically and thematically rich and exciting, and this chapter aims to bring one of them to the attention of a wider audience.

⁴ See Deborah Martin *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel* (forthcoming; awaiting pagination).

constitute *Nueva Argirópolis* itself as a kind of filmic rumour, or collection of rumours; a film in which (political) information is partial, anonymous, transitive.

'El río no es una cosa'⁵

Geography and specifically rivers – their directionality, their creation of connections between communities, their symbolic potential for imagining both unity and diversity, as well as destiny – have been crucial for cultural constructions of nation in Latin America,⁶ whilst water more generally is a highly charged symbolic and material site, which as Veronica Strang argues, is especially associated with both the creation and display of economic and social power (Strang 2004, 125). *Nueva Argirópolis* engages with the politics and ideologies of water and rivers as they informed Sarmiento's vision, and connects these with their contemporary counterparts. The navigability of rivers was a nineteenth century obsession in Argentina and the subject of Sarmiento's *Argirópolis, o la Capital de los Estados Confederados del Río de la Plata* [*Argirópolis, or the Capital of the Confederate States of the River Plate*].⁷ This text posits the free navigability of rivers as a pre-requisite for progress and trade, upon which Sarmiento's vision of Argentine national identity was built, part of his envisioning of a grand-scale re-organisation of national space and territory, which involved the redefining of borders and the refashioning of nature. As Cerutti Guldberg writes: 'Sarmiento afirma la necesidad – reiterada en sus numerosas obras – de organizar un sistema de ríos y canales que sirva a la comunicación y al comercio de cada uno de los estados asociados' [Sarmiento states the necessity – reiterated in his numerous works – of organising a system of rivers and canals to aid communication and commerce in each of the associated states' (Cerutti Guldberg 1991, 70). The concern with the navigability of rivers was part of a broader colonial-patriarchal drive to dominate nature and Argentina's 'vast' landscapes and to eradicate 'barbarism'.

In Sarmiento's vision Argirópolis was to be the utopian capital of the Confederation of the states of Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay. He proposed to establish this city on the Island of Martín García, in the River Plate, and saw it as an essential step to allow for trade and economic development, and so the values of civilization and progress fundamental to his thinking. As Criscenti notes, 'the basic thesis of *Argirópolis* was that the riverine and interior provinces would never enjoy economic development and trade without unhampered navigation of the Paraná and Uruguay rivers' (1993, 111). As Sarmiento explains in a footnote, Argirópolis means 'city of silver', from the Greek *argurion* (Sarmiento 1916 [1850], 127). Like Thomas More's Utopia, Sarmiento's Argirópolis is also arranged for ease of commerce: the strategic position of the island in the estuary of the River Plate near the mouth of the Rivers Uruguay and Paraná, meant that whoever controlled it would dominate trade in the region, yet it was the perfect capital for the Union because it belonged to none of them. As Cerutti Guldberg

⁵ [A river is not a singular thing]. Martel, in D. Martin, 'Interview with Lucrecia Martel' (2011).

⁶ See Pettinaroli and Mutis (*passim*).

⁷ Other nineteenth century thinkers also dealt with the topic. See, for example, Florencio Varela, 'Sobre la libre navegación de los ríos'.

writes: 'por no ser de nadie, representaría al todo. Por carecer de significado en sí, sería el significado que podría remitir el conjunto. La isla es la polis de la plata, pero representa supletoria y paradigmáticamente a todo el país confederado' [Because it belonged to nobody, it would represent the whole. Because it lacked its own meaning, it would take on the meaning of the group. The island was the city of silver but it represented in addition and paradigmatically the whole Confederation] (Cerutti Guldberg 1991, 76).

Lorena Amaro Castro sees Sarmiento's Argirópolis as both an example of and a place to defend the values of civilisation and progress – based on European and North American models – from those of 'barbarism'. She writes: 'En [Argirópolis] se proyecta una nueva civilización, salida de la nada, totalmente planeada, organizada por los hombres, que habrá de superar la barbarie americana e instaurar los modelos europeo y norteamericano' [Argirópolis imagines a new civilization, which comes out of nothing, totally planned and organised by men, and intended to overcome American barbarism and to install European and North American models] (Amaro Castro 2003, 10). She goes on to note: 'Si se considera el total de la obra de Sarmiento y su particular determinismo geográfico, se puede lograr una aproximación más global y apreciar claramente la impronta ética de esta propuesta, que hace deseable el modelo *civilizado* europeo y denigrante la *barbarie* americana' [If we consider Sarmiento's *oeuvre* in its entirety, and its particular geographical determinism, we can see more clearly the ethical significance of this proposal, which aims to make the *civilised* European model desirable, and to denigrate American *barbarism*' (10). Indeed, scholars such as Ruth Hill have argued for a connection between the 'Aryanism' (to use her term) of Sarmiento's writings and his designs on Argentina's rivers. Hill shows, for example, how bodies of water in Sarmiento's lesser known writings are 'instrumentalized [...as] spaces of fated domination and expansion for Aryan families' whilst modern indigenous peoples are treated in these writings as degenerate, 'prehistoric', (Sarmiento, cit. in Hill 2013, 103), as 'fossils embedded in the River Plate's future' (Hill 2013, 103).⁸ Sarmiento's thinking was, of course, fundamental to the foundation of the modern nation state in Argentina, and, as David Viñas argues, constituted the ideological justification for the exterminations of Indian populations which reached their height with the 1879 Desert Campaign, or *Conquista del Desierto*,⁹ during which many indigenous leaders were in fact imprisoned on the Island of Martín Garcia, which had been used as a penal colony since 1765. For Viñas, the Desert Campaign constituted the consolidation and institutionalization of the conservative republic and its values (Viñas 1983, 11-14).

Martel's *Nueva Argirópolis* appropriates and radically resignifies many of the terms of Sarmiento's text, drawing on Sarmiento's 'audacious' approach to geography and foundational discourses. Whilst Sarmiento's text is aimed at the domination and instrumentalisation of the landscape, the river and the island, and whilst for him the utopia of Argirópolis is associated with 'civilised' values

⁸ There have been many discussions of the denigration of the Indian in Sarmiento's thought. See, for example, Viñas (1983, 263-266).

⁹ The Desert Campaign was a military expedition of extermination of Indian populations in Patagonia led by the minister of war General Roca, in 1879.

(for which read whiteness), in Martel's 'new' Argirópolis, the very morphology of rivers and islands is imagined as a means of undermining the instrumentalization of nature, whilst foundation and utopia are associated with the clandestine activities of indigenous groups. Three minutes into *Nueva Argirópolis*, we are briefly transported away from the police station and investigation to the brightly sunlit banks of the river, where indigenous and mestizo children play by the water and a rural *maestra* teaches a group of them about the formation of islands in the Paraná Delta through sedimentation of particles being carried by the water. Holding up a plastic bottle filled with water and sediment, she demonstrates the process, saying:

Quando llueve el agua baja. Lleva toda esa tierra al río Iruya. De ahí va al Bermejo, al Paraná y llega al Río de la Plata. Como ahí merma la velocidad, se asienta la tierra y se van formando ... ¡islas! [when it rains the water flows down and takes all that mud into the River Iruya. From there it flows into the Bermejo, then into the Paraná, and on to the River Plate. And because the water slows down there, the earth settles and starts to form... islands!]¹⁰

A little girl replies: 'son unas islas sin dueño...no son de nadie' [They are islands without owners. They don't belong to anybody] (recalling the defining characteristic of Martín García for *Argirópolis*). The teacher's lesson suggests the movement and mutability of both water and land – their propensity to evade human capture and control – and the little girl's comment questions the qualities of fixity and property which we associate with land, attributing to the land the qualities we normally associate with water: mutability and elusiveness. The morphology of the environment as understood in this sequence calls into question the existence of private property. Thus the imagery of flow and movement, so regularly associated with capital, is here associated with the dissolving of systems of capture and enclosure. Martel has commented that, around the time of making *Nueva Argirópolis* 'el río se transformó en algo muy fuerte para mí [...] por muchas cosas, por su materialidad, porque me parece que es una materia que nos obliga a pensarlo de otra manera, más interesante' [the river became very meaningful for me, for lots of reasons, such as its materiality which makes us think in a different, more interesting way'] (in Martin 2011). There is a transgressiveness to the river's materiality and to its formation of islands: they challenge established forms and suggest a revolutionary potentiality. The camera stays for a long moment on the little girl's serious face as she delivers her words, giving them a revelatory quality.

Though the film speaks only in the mode of rumour and fragment, without an explicit linkage between this isolated riverside lesson and the events happening in and around the police station, through knowledge of its intertext *Argirópolis*, we can posit that it will be the 'islas' identified by the little girl as 'sin dueño', which might be the site of any *Nueva Argirópolis*, any new foundation of community which results from the organising of indigenous groups which we glimpse elsewhere in the short film. Again, this functions to resignify both

¹⁰ The Paraná carries around 160 million tonnes of sediment and the landform, or delta, that results from deposits of this sediment on meeting the River Plate grows by between 50 and 90 metres per year.

Sarmiento's text and the historical function of the island (of Martín García), in its suggestion that indigenous groups are reclaiming island spaces akin to those which were used to hold their forebears captive. If Sarmiento's *Argirópolis* aimed to construct a 'utopia of civilisation' (Amaro Castro 2003, 1) in a site associated with 'barbarism', Martel's island-utopia is given over to the groups repressed by both Sarmiento's utopia, and by history.

Nueva Argirópolis also speaks about the contemporary politics of water. In the late twentieth century in Argentina as in many countries, water resources were privatised, with 60% of supply being placed in the hands of private companies during the period 1991-1999, as part of the Menem government's neoliberal reforms, and with Martel's home province of Salta being one of the first provinces to undertake the measure (Mayer 2013, 153).¹¹ Strang analyses the phenomenon of water capitalism from a social and cultural perspective, arguing that it is precisely the meanings of water 'as the essence of nature, and as the source of life, wealth and human agency' that means that its appropriation by multinationals 'more than any other hegemonic enclosure, assists the promulgation of capitalist ideology' (Strang 2004, 249). The question of water as property is particularly important to Martel who has spoken about the water shortages and the inequitable access to the resource in Salta, and especially about the use of swimming pools by the better-off when the poor do not have access to enough clean water for basic necessities (in Guillen). In Martel's feature films, water is indeed such a sign of social power, domesticated in private pools to which only the well-off have access. In *Nueva Argirópolis* water is present not only through the river which is associated with indigenous movement and which connotes, as I have argued, a certain liberatory potential; it is also distributed to the detainees in the police station in little plastic cups from a dispenser, from which they attempt to drink whilst handcuffed. Its commodification is also implied throughout the short by the presence of plastic water bottles: it is on rafts made of plastic bottles that the group is intercepted, and they are also used by the children in their riverside games. A close-up of the sunlit river as the water tumbles over pebbles, carrying with it a number of empty plastic bottles, starkly contrasts the water's free movement with these evocations of its containment and commodification. In Martel's 'new' Argirópolis, however, as we have seen, emphasis is placed on water's evasiveness and propensity to elude that capture; it is identified with forms of flight, evaporation and transformation; it is a medium for indigenous organising and is identified with those groups and their clandestine activities. In *Nueva Argirópolis*, then, water functions symbolically to undermine its contemporary commodification and containment, as well as the incipient capitalist, nationalist coloniality of power embodied by Sarmiento's view of the river.

'Otro bicentenario, el bicentenario de los pueblos originarios'

¹¹ The privatisation of water in Latin America, and resistance to it, was the subject of another 2010 film, Iciar Bollain's *También la lluvia* (*Even the rain*), which deals with the protests of people in Cochabamba, Bolivia, against the sale of the public water company SEMAPA to a transnational consortium controlled by the North American Bechtel.

Martel's synopsis associates the founding of a new indigenous community on an ownerless, utopian island with the genre of science fiction, yet this aspect of *Nueva Argirópolis* also speaks to a very tangible contemporary context of crucial developments in the position of indigenous communities vis-à-vis the Argentine state. Four years prior to the making of the short, in 2006, after years of struggle by indigenous groups to recuperate their ancestral lands, the long-awaited 'Ley de reorganización del territorio' was passed, which ordered a survey of lands currently occupied by indigenous communities and declared a state of emergency, during which these groups could not be thrown off them. However, regional authorities have been slow to implement the law and indigenous groups are still suffering violence and intimidation in eviction attempts by private and state interests, whilst a 2013 report suggested that, even though most of the budget allocated to the survey had been used, only a small proportion of lands had been surveyed since the law was passed (Castro 2013). *Nueva Argirópolis* is, then, in dialogue with a legal and political scene in which land – its ownership and control, and indigenous groups' access to it – is very much a present, and pressing issue. In a sense, the film attempts to draw attention to this debate and to place it on the agenda of the Bicentennial celebrations of 2010. The Bicentennial was also an opportunity for indigenous groups to challenge state discourses and practices, reminding the world that from their perspective there was little to celebrate in the creole elite's gaining independence from the Spanish crown, since it did nothing to ameliorate their own conditions and paved the way for the further consolidation of the elite's power in the form of extermination or continued marginalisation of indigenous populations. This they did by forming the initiative 'El otro bicentenario, el bicentenario de los pueblos' which organised marches and rallies in Buenos Aires alongside the official celebrations, and which has become a forum for indigenous campaigns against the seizing of indigenous lands, industrial farming techniques and mining megaprojects (VV. AA. 2010). In its focus on indigenous conflict with the state, its foregrounding of the groups that Sarmientian discourses have, or would have destroyed, *Nueva Argirópolis* can also be read as forming part of the counter-discourses associated with 'El otro bicentenario', a means by which these counter-discourses inhabit the official ones.

In *Nueva Argirópolis* the closest we – and the authorities – come to understanding the nature of indigenous activism is through the YouTube video which the authorities try to decipher with the help of local speakers of indigenous languages. On the video (which produces a witty *mise-en-abyme* given that *Nueva Argirópolis* was also disseminated on YouTube subsequent to its inclusion in the '25 miradas' screenings) a female elder, filmed against a backdrop of books suggestive of an environment of learning, speaks in direct address to the camera. Her words, translated by some young girls, hint at some kind of organised resistance: smiling, she urges her people to mobilize, promising that their invisibility and social marginalisation will protect them and enable their political activities to go undetected, saying:

'Deberíamos estar extinguidos, después de todo el esfuerzo que ha hecho esta nación [...] Subamos a las balsas. *Llevemos al trono a la noble igualdad.* 'Indígenas' de 'indigente'. No tengan miedo de moverse. Somos

invisibles...' (my emphasis). [We ought to be wiped out by now, after everything this nation has done [...]. Let's get on the rafts. *Let us see noble equality enthroned*. 'Indigenous' comes from 'indigent'. Don't be afraid of moving. We're invisible...].

The line the elder quotes from the Argentine national anthem (emphasised) again suggests a subversive mimicry, a re-signification of the hegemonic ideas and sentiments of national foundation. By foregrounding learning, internet activism and agency, *Nueva Argirópolis* counters dominant understandings of indigenous groups as passive victims, and emphasises their involvement in contemporary political cultures, in which the Internet is figured as a space for increasing democracy and participation.¹² In this way the film suggests the transformation rather than the fossilisation of contemporary indigenous cultures and as such does not 'deny coevalness' in the way that Johannes Fabian has argued Western views of non-Western cultures do (2002, 31).¹³ This is particularly important since, under the 2006 law, indigenous groups are required to adhere closely to what the state deems authentic identities and practices, if they are to recuperate their lands. As Martel comments:

La Ley de Reorganización del Territorio les obliga [a los indígenas] a persistir en el pasado si quieren recuperar sus tierras. Tienen que mantener sus costumbres y rituales, y de esa manera el estado los reconoce como comunidad indígena, y su reclamo de tierra [...]. Condenan a una población a no transformarse, cuando es un derecho de cualquier organismo, la transformación. [The Law obliges (the indigenous) to stay in the past if they want to recuperate their lands. They have to maintain their customs and rituals for the state to recognise them as an indigenous community, and to recognise their land claim [...]. This condemns the indigenous population to not transforming, when any organism has the right to transformation].¹⁴

In the first few moments of the film, when a police officer communicates via radio to his chief that 'cuatro masculinos y un femenino sin documentación' [four males and a female without documents] have been intercepted on the river on a *camalote* (or makeshift raft), the chief misunderstands, asking '¿Cómo en un camalote? ¿Son restos humanos?' [What do you mean? Are they dead bodies?] a joke which recalls both the science fiction genre – evoking ideas of invasion by zombies – and the casting of the indigenous other by the state as relic or fossil. The watery setting and the indigenous groups' alignment with it in the film's meaning-system suggests, again, a counter to this ossification; the river's transportation of sediment and the formation of 'islas sin dueño' itself suggests ideas of transformation, dissolving, dispersal and coming together in new

¹² As Claire Taylor and Thea Pitman note, Latin American cultural theorists including Jesús Martín Barbero have seen a liberatory potential in the Internet's capacity to 'circumvent traditional routes of power, influence and bureaucracy represented by established states' (Taylor and Pitman 2007, 12).

¹³ Fabian argues that there is a 'persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse'. He calls this the 'denial of coevalness' (2002, 31), and judges it to be 'a murky, ultimately political practice' and a facet of anthropology's 'complicity [...] with the colonial enterprise' (35).

¹⁴ In Martin (2014).

configurations, and is thus associated with the deterritorialisation of identity, the privileging of movement over fixity, and the disintegration of established orders and constructions of difference.¹⁵

As Homi K. Bhabha writes:

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated... (1994, 94-5).

Nueva Argirópolis meditates on the ideological construction of otherness through stereotype, through the state's vilification and criminalization of the indigenous detainees. As with other communications between the authorities and the indigenous in the film, the interrogation of the detainees by police takes place through a complex system of relay and translation, in which one officer passes his questions on to a second, who then poses the question to the group. The group confer in their own language, and then, in Spanish, answer the second officer who finally passes the answer back to the original questioner. As the first officer, positioned off-screen, remarks to the second, within full earshot of the detainees: '¿De dónde vienen? ¿Qué es lo que hacen? ¿Qué es lo que tienen? Porque esa gente también puede estar transportando drogas..... Pregúntales, de dónde son...'. [Where are they from? What are they doing? What have they got on them? 'Cause you know these people could be trafficking drugs....ask them where they're from]. His words attribute to the detainees a known criminal identity – that of drug trafficker – which contrasts with the unknown nature of their activities, suggesting an epistemological imposition, a construction of the indigenous within the discourses of the state, as well as a stereotyping and 'fixing' of the other ('esa gente') as criminal and degenerate. In this production of knowledge about and criminalization of the other, the officer also demonstrates Bhabha's point: it is a fixing which must be 'anxiously repeated' by the dominant group. In this short sequence, the two sides of the state discourse emerge: '*restos humanos-relic-fossil-authentic*' and '*esa gente-criminal-degenerate*', producing an ambivalence which undoes the fixity of these designations.

Todos los que hablamos en Wichí, Mocobí, Ilarrá, Toba, Guaraní. Todos pobres. ¿Qué, seremos todos tontos?

¹⁵ In his work on Colombia's River Magdalena Rory O'Bryen suggests that rivers precipitate a 'becoming-minor', a 'breaking with identity', as well as a deterritorialisation of 'the reified political and social maps around which nations are organised', because of the way they are characterised by movement rather than fixity, flow rather than structure, pointing to 'the river as a mise-en-scène for modes of becoming which are multitudinous' (2013, 229).

The monolingualism imposed by the other operates [...] through a sovereignty whose essence is always colonial, which tends, repressively and irrepressibly, to reduce language to the One, that is, to the hegemony of the homogenous. This can be verified everywhere, everywhere this homo-hegemony remains at work in the culture, effacing the folds and flattening the text (Derrida 1998, 39-40).

If *Nueva Argirópolis* presents a challenge to the state's view of the indigenous other, it also provides a creative outlet and digital platform for a number of indigenous languages spoken in Argentina.¹⁶ In this sense it is engaged in the contestation of hegemonic monolingualism and the representation of a plurilinguistic society, as well as constituting a practical endeavour to counter the endangered status of these languages. Early on, our attention is focused on the relationship between language and (economic) power when an unnamed, unidentified male speaker remarks: "Todos los que hablamos en Wichí, Mocobí, Iarrá, Toba, Guaraní. Todos pobres. ¿Qué, seremos todos tontos?" [Everyone who speaks Wichí, Mocobí, Iarrá, Toba, Guaraní. We're all poor, does that mean we're all stupid?]. At other moments, especially when the detainees are in the police station, indigenous languages form a medium of resistance and refuge rather than disempowerment, especially when the detainees speak, laughingly, to one another in their own language, incomprehensible to the officers. There is a sense, then, in which the short allows the subaltern to speak, and in which linguistic opaqueness constitutes a means of countering the power of ruling groups.

Sections of dialogue in indigenous languages are not subtitled, and as such *Nueva Argirópolis* refutes linguistic hierarchies, and seeks to avoid the risk of 'reduc[ing] language to the One' (Derrida 1998, 40), of 'reduc[ing] others to sameness' which translation incurs (Berman and Wood 2005, 90).¹⁷ Instead, the film focuses attention on the authorities' drive to decode subaltern communications by self-reflexively staging diegetic encounters of (would-be) translation and interpretation, in ways which draw attention to these practices as sites of power struggle, of domination and resistance. These encounters also perform the communicative function of making some snippets of the indigenous languages spoken in the film accessible to the Spanish-speaking viewer. The first of these diegetic interpretative encounters, recounted earlier, takes place between the detainees and police. In two further sequences, officials in local government offices draft in translators (first a couple of young men, in a later sequence a group of small girls of perhaps 8 or 10 years of age) to translate the YouTube video in which the female elder is speaking and which is circulating on the Internet. In the first instance these potential 'native informants', the young men, do not seem able to translate the video at all. They seem unable even to identify the language being spoken, stating 'Guaraní no es' [It's not Guaraní], but the face of one of them as he stares at the screen suggests that perhaps he does

¹⁶ Many of Latin America's indigenous languages, even some with relatively large numbers of speakers, are in danger of dying out (Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America 2016).

¹⁷ For Berman and Wood, writing on the ethics of translation, 'If linguistic otherness reminds us of all we cannot comprehend, including our "pre-ontological" ethical responsibility to those whom we do not, and cannot, ever fully know, translation (in the usual sense) can be seen only as a "comprehension," a taking of power, and a reduction of otherness. [...] We have ethical grounds to be suspicious of the idea of translation, especially as it relates to communities, and their tendency to reduce others to sameness' (2005, 90).

understand and is simply unwilling to provide the authorities with the desired interpretation. The second instance of translation is again characterised by a complex system of relay, as the littlest girl – the only one who understands the elder’s language – whispers her version in the ear of her older sister, who then pronounces it in Spanish for the watching officials, who, smartly dressed in formal officewear, hover in the backgrounds of the shots with perturbed expressions. The girls translate and pronounce in Spanish the elder’s words (reproduced above). Here, the camera – which has intimate access to the girls’ faces and their whisperings – shows us what the officials in the background cannot see: that the older girl delivers information only selectively. The final part of the elder’s words, her exhortation ‘no tengan miedo de moverse...somos invisibles’, is translated by the younger sister, whispering into her sibling’s ear, but the older girl refrains from pronouncing it, meaning it is just audible to the viewer, but does not reach the ears of the officials. Thus, the site at which the state representatives attempt to decode subaltern language and activity becomes instead a site for unexpected and resistive consequences. Throughout this sequence there is a focus on the older girl’s face, which is lit in close-up by the light from the computer screen on which the video is being shown. This illumination underscores the sense that an understanding is passing between the speaking elder and the older girl which is not accessible to the watching officials. Given that the older girl is not a speaker of the elder’s language, but must instead have her words translated by her younger sister, this sequence represents the elder’s language as a vital and living medium, proliferating and reaching new audiences (as indeed, it does through the short itself), rather than dying out, since the speaking girl is being engaged with a language to which she previously did not have access and it seems to hold a message for her. Her reception of this message and her choice not to translate it for the authorities suggests that these attempts at control and investigation of subalterns serve rather to produce new forms of solidarity and communication amongst them.

The sequence also suggests a subversive mimicry of the hegemonic discourse, in particular through the line from the Argentine national anthem which the elder includes in her speech: *Llevemos al trono a la noble igualdad*. She pronounces this line in her own language, and it is duly whispered by the younger girl into the ear of the older girl, who pronounces it – in close-up – slowly and without recognition. There is a cut to a medium shot of one of the officials, a smartly dressed and coiffured woman of European descent, who visibly sighs, in a way that does suggest recognition of the line’s provenance. The elder has translated this line – from the most nationalist of nationalist texts, and representative of white liberal hegemony – into her own language and recontextualised it for distinct political ends. Just as *Nueva Argirópolis* takes the terms of Sarmiento’s text and inhabits them subversively, redeploying them in ways that work against their original aims, the elder’s re-inhabiting of this foundational national text attempts to call on the terms of the original (‘la noble igualdad’) to effect an indigenous mobilisation or foundation, that is to say, for a political agenda which explicitly subverts that for which it has been employed in the nationalist project, and which clearly draws attention, at best, to the lack of fulfillment of lofty nationalist ideals, and at worst to the emptiness of 19th century notions of ‘equality’ in relation to indigenous populations. As Quijano writes, in Latin

America, 'nation-building, and especially nation-state building has been intended, and worked against, the majority of the population: "Indians", "Blacks" and "Mestizos"' (2000, 228). Again, though, in this sequence, there is a sense in which hegemonic discourses and mechanisms of state power end up working against themselves, as they are recontextualised, re-claimed and re-cited by indigenous subjects, or in which these subjects harness the power of these for their own ends.

These moments of linguistic and discursive subversion are enhanced by the complex, long-winded system of relay and translation within which they are embedded, as language is passed between speakers of the same language and between speakers of different languages in a manner verging, at points, on the absurd. This relay effect, in which each phrase passes through several individuals, serves to decentre and unmoor language, distancing it from ideas of authority or originality. As Glissant writes in *Poétique de la Relation*, 'La Relation relie (relaie), relate. Domination et résistance, osmose et renfermement, consentement de langage et défense des langues. Leur totalisation ne produit pas un procédé net, ni perceptible avec certitude' [Relation relinks (relays), relates. Domination and resistance, osmosis and withdrawal, the consent to dominating language and defense of dominated languages. They do not add up to anything clearcut or easily perceptible with any certainty] (1990, 187). Relayed language constitutes a form of resistance to hierarchy and authority, it functions to undo the common sense association of language with identity, since it suggests an intervention between subject and language.¹⁸ The relaying of language in *Nueva Argirópolis* emphasises the plural and collective rather than the singular generation of language. The relay effect highlights the idea that the dominant group does not own the dominant language, an idea which is communicated especially acutely by the appropriation and relaying of the words from the national anthem. Indeed, as Derrida puts it: 'contrary to what one is often most tempted to believe [...] the master does not possess exclusively, and naturally, what he calls his language, because, whatever he wants or does, he cannot maintain any relations of property or identity that are natural, national congenital, or ontological, with it, [...] because language is not his natural possession' (Derrida 1998, 23).

In its undoing of the link between language and authority, and its undermining of the sense in which language can be owned or attributed, relayed language recalls Spivak's discussion of rumour. Indeed, for Spivak, rumour is inherently associated with this relayed structure; as she puts it '*rumour is a relay of something always assumed to be preexistent*' (1988, 214, my emphasis). The diegetic relays of language upon which *Nueva Argirópolis* dwells point to its more general mode of narrative and communicative organisation, whereby information – about what is happening on a narrative level, and about the central premise, an indigenous conspiracy or movement of foundation – is not communicated directly, but rather given in fragmentary and opaque form. These effects constitute *Nueva Argirópolis* as a film which itself 'speaks' in the mode of rumour, as well as one which depicts the circulation of rumours as they are both

¹⁸ See Britton (1999, 164-65), who glosses Glissant's discussion of relayed language in these terms.

detected by the authorities and pass between the indigenous subalterns. Through both form and diegesis, then, the film privileges the potential for mutation and contestation of meaning associated with rumour, a plural, anonymous means of communication which is not associated with a single origin or speaker. *Nueva Argirópolis* can thus be characterised as a multi-voiced, pluri-linguistic and decentred text which resists any oppressive and singular authority through its own organisation. Far from being a 'flat' or homogenous text, it is one which attempts to reintroduce the 'folds' which for Derrida are effaced by linguistic homo-hegemony.

'Escucho voces'¹⁹

Fragments of conversation in both Spanish and indigenous languages are combined on the soundtrack of *Nueva Argirópolis* with unintelligible whispers and murmurs, in this way also introducing textual folds, troubling any sense of univocality, and suffusing the soundtrack literally with rumours. Martel's cinema has been described both as 'aurally conceived' (Russell 2008, 1) and as an oral cinema, or a cinema of words.²⁰ In it sound is always potentially more revolutionary, more open to interpretation than the more heavily coded and ontologically defined visual field.²¹ The director is well-known for the innovative use of sound in her three feature films, and especially in *La ciénaga* and *La niña santa*; in them sound tends to have thematic and narrative importance, often fulfilling functions traditionally performed by the visual. Martel's immersive, heightened soundscapes typically feature acousmatic yet diegetic sound (i.e. sound emanating from off-screen but generated by the film-world) which contributes to spectatorial estrangement and immanence of meaning and works against the tendencies of dominant cinema to use sound simply to support and explain the visual image. Instead, sound is used to continually suggest further layers to reality beyond the limits of the visual image, and thus to challenge the hegemony of the visual.²² In Martel's earlier films this attention to sound has been read as a feminist decentring of scopic regimes, an overturning of the usually subordinated or 'feminised' position of sound in cinema (Russell 2008, 15-16). In *Nueva Argirópolis*, however, the interplay between sound and the visual is used rather to express the neocolonial power relations depicted in the short film, with attempts to exert power being associated with visual forms of domination, and resistance, or the propensity to elude that domination, with sound. The detainees are subjected to interrogation at the police station, but also, importantly, to x-raying. We watch as each of them is handed their x-ray,

¹⁹ [I can hear voices].

²⁰ On the subject of orality in Martel's work, see Porta Fouz, who argues that 'El cine de Martel es el cine de las palabras' (2008, 18). Martel herself has commented that 'todo mi antecedente cinematográfico lo debo al lenguaje oral' [I owe my entire cinematic heritage to oral language] (cit. in Russell 2008, 3).

²¹ The director has said: 'Me parece que estamos mucho más colonizados visualmente; estamos mucho más encaminados a ver determinadas cosas que a escuchar. El oído está todavía muy suelto. Uno escucha mucho más que lo que ve. Las contradicciones en la palabra, en la conversación, en el intercambio oral, para mí son mucho más perceptibles que en la imagen' [I think that through vision, we are much more colonized; we are much more likely to see specific things than we are to hear them. Hearing is still very loose. We hear much more than we see. Contradictions in language, in conversation and oral exchange are to me much more discernible than they are in the image] (Martel, in Porta Fouz 2008, 22).

²² For further discussion of sound in Martel's work, see Martin (forthcoming), Russell (2008) and Greene (2012).

and as each is pronounced not to be carrying anything internally. In the final moments of the film we see a long shot of a large group of people, slightly out-of-focus so as to remain indefinable, walking down to the river bank – about to follow, perhaps, the elder’s exhortation to ‘take to the rafts’. This shot is accompanied by both strange, high-pitched acousmatic sounds (which subtly allude to the soundscapes of science fiction) as well as by the sound of barely audible whispers. There is a cut to the film’s final shot, of two policemen on a patrol boat. As they navigate the river, scanning the horizon, they are again plagued by something barely audible – the sound of whispers and murmurs intermingled with the lapping of the water against the boat – and the closing words of one to the other, shortly before the final credits are ‘escucho voces’ [I can hear voices]. The x-rays and river patrol hint at the way that power is exerted through visual regimes, whilst the presence of unidentified acousmatic sounds, sounds which have no visual anchor, suggests a confounding of the visual image and of state power. The final moments of *Nueva Argirópolis* underscore the role that sound has had throughout: that of undermining the hegemony of the visual and its support of the state. The positioning of this vignette at the end of the film, on its narrative and visual borders, suggests what is beyond the film itself, a sonorous yet barely detectable outside which, eluding visual and narrative authority, challenges the regimes within which *Nueva Argirópolis* – and the commemorative ‘25 miradas’ project – are embedded. *Nueva Argirópolis* unsettles the visually predicated language of cinema and that of the project; it is a film which listens as well as looks.

In conclusion, *Nueva Argirópolis* can be seen as at once inhabiting and refuting the institutional platform which it occupies. Indeed, this relationship to power – a subversively mimetic one which redeploys the terms of hegemonic power structures in ways that undermine these structures, is present in many of the film’s symbolic and narrative components, as well as its formal organisation. The film’s own contestatory position within the Bicentennial celebrations is echoed by its relationship to Sarmiento’s text, which can be understood as an overturning of many of the symbols and the terms of that text: its understanding of rivers, geography, the island and utopia, and ultimately of nation and foundation. And yet it is important to note how *Nueva Argirópolis* draws on, or harnesses, the power of 19th century myths and symbols of nation created by texts such as *Argirópolis* and the national anthem (and implied by the Bicentennial celebrations and the ‘25 miradas’ project), as well as how it seeks contemporary resonances, using them to speak about contemporary politics, especially in relation to the position of indigenous communities in Argentina today.

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