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Steve Sloan

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**MODERN PERSPECTIVES IN
JOSÉ A. FERREYRA'S *PUENTE ALSINA*
AND ROBERTO ARLT'S *LOS SIETE LOCOS***

Steve Sloan
Texas Christian University

... Buenos Aires is interesting as a physical space and as a cultural myth: city and modernity presuppose one another because the city is the stage for those changes brought on by modernity, it exhibits them in an ostensible and sometimes brutal fashion, it disseminates and generalises them. (Sarlo, "Modernity" 165)

The social cohesion noticeable in nineteenth-century Latin American literature disperses into fragments of individual experiences in the twentieth century. This fragmentation can be seen in Roberto Arlt's *Los siete locos* (1929) and in the continuation of this novel, *Los lanzallamas* (1931). Argentine cinema of the same era generally follows a different path. Trying to attract as large a public as possible to ensure commercial success, the majority of films from this period seek to incorporate the many different elements of *porteño* society into a coherent whole, offering an optimistic vision of community despite obvious social tensions. Such is the case of *Puente Alsina* (1935), directed by José A. Ferreyra and written by Ferreyra and Marcos Bronenberg. Whereas Arlt's novel depicts a dark world of anguish and hopelessness, Ferreyra's film portrays solutions to class differences; whereas Arlt's novel ends in the senseless homicide of an adolescent girl committed by the protagonist, Ferreyra's film concludes with a happy ending. Despite the many obvious contrasts of the two works, they compliment each other in many ways. They are two dramas of (sub)urban themes in which problems of marginalization, poverty, and

argentinidad are played out. Furthermore, they share similar ideological ambiguities that make them difficult to categorize by any particular “ism.” They are popular works of art, with certain avant-garde tendencies, from which we gain insight to a rapidly changing society. Where Arlt seeks a new kind of literary language to express the alienation of marginalized sectors of society, Ferreyra experiments with the new medium of sound cinema in an attempt to capture the spirit of the poor worker who struggles to overcome socioeconomic obstacles.

Puente Alsina is a melodrama that tells the story of Edmundo, the working class hero, and Lidia, the daughter of the owner of the construction company that Edmundo is working for. Lidia, unsatisfied with her effeminate boyfriend Alfredo, flatly rejects his marriage proposal. Shortly thereafter, she goes to the construction site of her father’s company and accidentally falls into the river. Edmundo, the poor but dedicated worker, sees the damsel in distress and dives into the water to save her. When she loses consciousness, he takes her to his house nearby to care for her. Meanwhile, Lidia’s absence causes her boyfriend Alfredo to worry. Alfredo hires a detective to search for her, convinced she has fallen victim to some dangerous suburban rouse. Edmundo and Lidia are attracted to each other, but their different socioeconomic backgrounds pose serious obstacles they must overcome in order to be together.

The parallel story to this melodrama is that of the construction of a new bridge called Puente Alsina (actually completed in 1938), which alludes to the larger picture of the modernization of Buenos Aires. The city is rapidly expanding, engulfing suburbs in every direction. It is not only the physical landscape but also the ethnic and social landscape of the capital that is changing due to modernity, capitalism, and the influx of immigrants from abroad and migrants from the countryside. The love story between Edmundo and Lidia, the construction of the bridge, and issues such as *argentinidad* and the future of the nation come together when Edmundo proves himself as a freethinking hard worker who stops a strike instigated not by collective proletarian action but by a corrupt businessman.

Roberto Arlt’s *Los siete locos* is a much darker and fragmented tale than *Puente Alsina*. It is the story of Remo Erdosain, a pathologically distraught man whose frustration and wild imagination lead him to do many erratic and even psychotic things: he embezzles money from the sugar factory he works for; he participates in the kidnapping and planned assassination of his wife’s cousin Barsut for the purpose of extorting money; he becomes a willing follower of a messianic leader known as The Astrologer, who is planning a revolution; and in the end he kills his fourteen-year-old bride-to-be. Along the way, the reader meets many peculiar characters, including prostitutes, pimps, and murderers. Many of the characters are revolutionaries hoping to undermine the society in which they live, but at the same time they are trapped by the same capitalistic spirit they are fighting against, resulting in

outlandish schemes and acts of cruelty, humiliation, and betrayal.

The novel leads the reader through the dark alleys and shadows of the streets of Buenos Aires, and the pace is as frantic as the protagonist and, it could easily be argued, the author himself. The often contradictory ideologies, such as The Astrologer's simultaneous left and right-wing political tendencies, reflect in many ways the chaotic side of the political debates going on at the time in Argentina.

1. The Notion of Community

Film directors in Argentina of the 1930s were able to experiment with many different themes and perspectives without serious censorship limitations. State protectionism and censorship in the film industry in Argentina became common only after 1940 (Ciria 506). However, most filmmakers were also businessmen, and they knew that by appealing to the popular sentiments they could make more commercially viable films. Not surprisingly, the issue of *argentinidad* comes up many films, not to mention books and essays, of the 1930s. What did it mean to be Argentine? This was a theme that included a wide range of perspectives and inevitably the question of immigration was never far below the surface. But the social tensions inherent in the debates on *argentinidad* were generally downplayed in the movies, where a positive notion of progress flourished, resulting in film criticism that has traditionally dismissed Argentine melodramas of the 1930s as failed political realism (King 38). It is not surprising that there is a strong sense of community in *Puente Alsina*, where class differences are reconcilable, the workers are happy, strikes are unnecessary, and everyone strives to reach the common, albeit elusive goals of progress and modernity.

In contrast, Arlt's novels leave little room to imagine social unity. His guilt-ridden characters are excluded from mainstream society. The only possible community for them would be one consisting entirely of marginalized individuals, and yet this is not possible either as the characters routinely reject one another: "Esas comunidades de culpables donde la comunidad es imposible, constituyen la imagen invertida de la sociedad" (Masotta 29). Such is the "community" of ill-fated individuals in *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*. The Astrologist explains how it pleases him to have direct contact with thieves, murderers, insane people, and prostitutes: "No quiero decirle que toda esa gente tenga un sentido verdadero de la vida . . . no . . . están muy lejos de la verdad, pero me encanta de ellos el salvaje impulso inicial que los lanzó a la aventura" (*Los lanzallamas* 18). Devious curiosity and common enemies bring people together for short periods in Arlt's novel, but their relationships are characterized by betrayal rather than trust, and greed rather than love.

The *porteño* community alluded to in *Puente Alsina* is a distant and unreachable ideal in Arlt's novels. Fittingly, Arlt's characters see cinema not as a representation of reality but rather as an escape to an alternative world. We see this first with Erdosain when he becomes friends with Hipólita, the street-smart ex-prostitute who never allows herself to be overtaken by her emotions. As he tells her his personal problems, he begins to see her as a potential mate. He tells her that he has decided to follow a man (the Astrologist) who considers lying as the basis of human happiness. She listens to him, and he in turn rests his head in her lap and begins to feel loved. The narrator explains that: "Aquella situación además le parecía muy natural; la vida adquiriría ese aspecto cinematográfico que siempre había perseguido, y no se le ocurrió pensar que Hipólita, tiesa en el sofá, pensaba que él era un débil y un sentimental" (*Los siete locos* 288). This "aspecto cinematográfico" represents an ideal that Erdosain finds "muy natural" but, at the same time, knows is out of his reach.

Erdosain lures his wife's cousin Barsut to the Astrologist's home where they hold him hostage and plan to assassinate him after extorting money. When Barsut is eventually freed by the Astrologist at the end of *Los lanzallamas*, he wonders what to do with his life after this bizarre and terrible experience. Looking for an alternative to going back to the humdrum life he lived before being kidnapped, he contemplates going to the United States in pursuit of a career in cinema: "¿Qué camino seguir? ¿Qué me queda de hacer? Irme a Norteamérica. Enrolarme en el cine. Estoy seguro que en el cine parlante tendría éxito" (262). Whereas Erdosain's cinematic fantasy consists of allowing himself to believe something too good to be true, Barsut seems more aware that cinema is a fictional world. In any case, both Erdosain and Barsut vacillate between trying to attain the unattainable and being painfully aware that they have no hope of ever realizing their fantasies.

2. Political (un)awareness

At the very least, Arlt's novel and Ferreyra's film compliment each other in this rather simplistic way: Arlt's characters endure the harsh reality of marginalized individuals, while Ferreyra's characters represent a utopian world in which social tensions and class differences suddenly disappear. Yet, these works are perhaps more alike than one might think. Both Arlt's Erdosain and Ferreyra's Edmundo are lower middle class workers that, for better or worse, represent unique modes of freethinking. Even though Erdosain's demonstration of self-destructive behavior is in sharp contrast to Edmundo's model citizenry, they are both marginalized individuals whose conditions point to a need for social change. Their inability to see the need for collective proletarian action further emphasize this need for social change.

In "The Poor and the Proletariat," Roland Barthes analyses the political implications of the film *Modern Times*, written and directed by Charlie Chaplin in 1936, and notes the following: "Chaplin has always seen the proletarian under the guise of the poor man: hence the broadly human force of his representations but also their political ambiguity" (39). Chaplin plays the part of the assembly line worker who is so preoccupied with the immediate need of satisfying his hunger that he is not able to see the importance of collective action despite being a mere cog in the system and despite the fact that there are signs of a labor movement happening in his presence. Barthes points out that Chaplin, "repeatedly approaches the proletarian theme, but never endorses it politically" (39). Yet, Chaplin's inability to take an ideological stance is precisely what makes the movie effective politically because the public is able to see that which he cannot see: "His anarchy, politically open to discussion, perhaps represents the most efficient form of revolution in the realm of art" (Barthes 40).

Edmundo in *Puente Alsina* and Erdosain in *Los siete locos* are similar to Chaplin in that they are "politically open to discussion." They are workers that never achieve political consciousness. This is especially apparent in Erdosain when we consider his total lack of appreciation for work. For him, nothing good comes of work. In one instance, he first imagines himself working as a dishwasher, and then imagines himself working as a servant in a brothel. For him, neither one of those two jobs is better or worse than the other. They are equally bad, like all jobs.

In *Puente Alsina*, Edmundo has a very different idea of work. It not only provides workers with monetary compensation but also grants them respect. Yet, like Erdosain, he is incapable of seeing the need for collective proletarian action. This becomes evident when Edmundo puts an end to a strike that is about to take place. The camera shows a businessman coming out of the shadows at the work site like a predator looking for its prey. He introduces himself to one of the workers who appears to be someone he can manipulate and tries to convince him to instigate a strike. The worker says that things are going well and he sees no reason to strike. The shrewd businessman replies: "El asunto es muy sencillo. Todo es cuestión de interés." He goes on to explain that the construction company is charging way too much ("Esta empresa ha presentado un presupuesto escandaloso") and that the contract will be nullified if they do not finish on time, which is to his advantage as a representative of another company in competition. The worker reminds him that the construction company is Argentine, to which the businessman retorts: "El dinero no tiene patria." He convinces the worker by offering him money to start the strike. Edmundo, who happens to be passing by, overhears the conversation. Later, we see the workers about to go on strike. Everyone is in favor except Edmundo, who explains to the others that, "Éste no es el momento," and concludes his brief but convincing speech by saying:

“Bueno, muchachos, °al trabajo!” At this point everyone goes happily back to work. The worker that had allowed himself to be talked into starting the strike cowardly walks away. While it is not a legitimate proletarian strike that Edmundo stops, this incident leaves him politically ambiguous. He is the working-class hero, and yet his most heroic act is to end the strike and go back to work. The strike itself is seen as a form of corruption.

Not coincidentally, it is only after this matter of the strike is settled that Edmundo and Lidia kiss each other for the first time. Edmundo’s demonstration of his value as a productive worker and his dedication to the progress of the nation are the conditions that make their relationship possible. The class differences that seemed insurmountable the day before suddenly vanish and they are able to be together without any revolutionary actions. This is despite Edmundo not being particularly class conscious or convinced of the need for organized collective action. Instead, he reflects more the kind of populist nationalism of Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz’s *El hombre que está solo y espera*, published in 1931, one year after the coup d’etat. Scalabrini Ortiz’s book is less of a historical study than a creation myth in which the author alludes to the spirit of the land, the will of God, and other supernatural forces in order to suggest that Argentina’s destiny will be fulfilled by a collective force of citizens striving to reach the same elusive goals of progress and modernization. But the notion of a collective force of citizens has more to do with the creation of a national identity than the creation of an organized labor movement for Scalabrini Ortiz, whose political strategy is to appeal to the spiritual sentiments of the people in order to create an ideal of the true *porteño*. In *Puente Alsina*, Edmundo has all the important characteristics of this ideal *porteño*, but by never achieving political consciousness, the viewer is left to consider what more the hero could do or ought to do to bring about social change.

3. Revolutionary tendencies

Los siete locos’ Erdosain is even less capable than Edmundo of articulating his condition in terms of class, which causes his revolutionary tendencies to remain ungrounded in any coherent ideology. Some of his criminal impulses seem to stem from his inadequate working conditions. The narrator informs us that Erdosain defrauds the sugar company he works for this reason: “Se vio obligado a robar porque ganaba un mensual exiguo” (*Los siete locos* 88). But poor work conditions are only a partial explanation, “pues aun cuando [Erdosain] tenía dinero para vivir mediocrementemente de renta, sufría el terror de volverse loco, como había acontecido con su padre y sus hermanos” (*Los siete locos* 102). He is incapable of overcoming or even understanding his rage: “Erdosain odiaba a Barsut, pero con un rencor

gris, tramposo, compuesto de malos ensueños y peores posibilidades. Y lo que hacía más intenso este odio era la falta de motivos” (*Los siete locos* 100). Masotta argues that class issues are at the core of Arlt’s characters’ anguish. The middle class, he explains, shares the same morality of the high class. The desire of the middle class to belong to the high class results in frustration: “Es que en una sociedad donde el hombre se define por lo que tiene, gran parte de ella queda condenada a ocultar lo que no tiene” (56). Their attempts to hide what they do not have and prove their importance in life by showing off their material possessions lead Ricardo Piglia to refer to money as a “máquina de producir ficciones” in Arlt’s works (25). At every step the reader is reminded of the characters’ unfulfillable fantasies of becoming rich. While Barsut is being held captive, Erdosain walks through a wealthy neighborhood of Buenos Aires, “apeteciendo el espectáculo de esas calles magnificas en arquitectura, y negadas para siempre a los desdichados” (*Los siete locos* 102). On the one hand, he believes he can get rich by robbing Barsut, but on the other hand he knows he is destined to a life of a “desdichado” and therefore has no hope of improving his situation.

Erdosain, drifting back and forth between the external world and his inner reality, often forgets whether he is awake or dreaming. He forgets that he has committed a terrible crime by luring his wife’s cousin Barsut into the Astrologist’s house where they are holding him hostage. He further forgets that they are planning the even more heinous crime of assassinating Barsut as soon as they are able to extort money from him: “Se había olvidado de Barsut. Sabía que tenía que matarlo, luego tal determinación se cubrió de tinieblas” (*Los siete locos* 184).

Some of Erdosain’s fantasizes involve committing a crime for the sake of curiosity:

Entonces, después de ese silencio y vacío me sube desde el corazón la curiosidad del asesinato. Eso mismo. No estoy loco, ya que sé pensar, razonar. Me sube la curiosidad del asesinato, curiosidad que debe ser mi última tristeza, la tristeza de la curiosidad. O el demonio de la curiosidad. Ver como soy a través de un crimen. (*Los siete locos* 155)

But there is something more than curiosity that gives him criminal urges. He has little importance in society beyond his function as a worker in a company. Coming to the realization that his social importance is limited to the small role he plays in a company for which he has no respect, he concludes that: “sólo el crimen puede afirmar mi existencia, como sólo el mal afirma la presencia del hombre sobre la tierra” (*Los siete locos* 156). Another reason he has to commit a crime is boredom: “además, que tengo ya necesidad de matar a alguien. Aunque sea para distraerme, ¿sabe?” (*Los siete locos* 164).

Erdosain’s traumatic childhood has contributed to his deep-seeded humiliation. His father would warn him in advance of his punishment by

saying, “Mañana te pegaré” (*Los siete locos* 133), causing him to suffer the whole night in anticipation of the “cruelles latigazos” (134) he would receive the next day. But even worse than the physical abuse was the way in which his father would ignore him. Some critics have talked about this novel in Lacanian terms, including Beatriz Pastor who notes that: “Es este mecanismo de negación más que el de la agresión el que producirá en el niño la primera experiencia de la humillación” (12). Well after his father has disappeared from his daily life, the paternal figure continues to haunt him in the form of whoever has the power to inflict pain. Mistreated, ignored, and humiliated, Erdosain fears the world and tries to escape reality by retreating to his inner world. His assimilation into the adult world is never complete, and he is forced to accept what Pastor calls “la mutua exclusión de los dos mundos” (20): the inner world he has created for himself, characterized by games and fantasies, and the external world that has reduced him to his social function and further contributes to his isolation.

Through this humiliation, Erdosain seeks enlightenment: “Estos personajes [Erdosain from *Los siete locos* and Silvio from Arlt’s first novel, *El juguete rabioso*] quieren hundirse cada vez un poco más en el mal, convencidos de que al seguir bajando encontrarán – por la humillación y la culpa – la santidad, la paz suprema: Dios” (Arlt y Borré 47). The narrator explains Erdosain’s logic: “Quizá buscando en el naípe y en la hembra una consolidación brutal y triste, quizá buscando en todo lo más vil y hundido cierta certidumbre de pureza que lo salvará definitivamente” (*Los siete locos* 90). But mixing this notion of purity with the uncontrollable desire to be humiliated and humiliate others often has catastrophic results. This is what happens in his relationship with María, the fourteen-year-old daughter of doña Ignacia, who owns or at least manages the boarding house where Erdosain has gone to live. He tells doña Ignacia that he is tired of sleeping alone and desires a young woman. He goes on to suggest her daughter María as a possible candidate for marriage, to which doña Ignacia says no on account of her being so young. Erdosain then informs her that he has seen her daughter with her hand in another man’s pants, thus humiliating the woman and offering himself as a salvation to the shame her daughter would otherwise bring her. This conversation occurs after doña Ignacia has seen Erdosain with a large amount of cash, oblivious to the fact that it is the money he has extorted from Barsut. He offers her some money, which seals the deal. Suddenly he has a fourteen-year-old fiancé and the consent of her mother. Erdosain’s short-lived relationship with María is an abusive one in which he humiliates her and, in the end, murders her. After shooting her, he says: “¿Viste?... ¿Viste lo que te pasó por andar con la mano en la bragueta de los hombres? Estas son las consecuencias de la mala conducta. Perdiste la virginidad para siempre” (*Los lanzallamas* 289).

Following this tragic incident, Erdosain commits suicide in a train by

shooting himself in the heart. When the secretary of a newspaper hears the news, he orders staffers to go to the scene to take photos and interview the guards, the train operators, and the passengers. The *Jefe de Revendedores* is delighted when he finds out what has happened: “Macanudo. Mañana tiramos cincuenta mil ejemplares más” (297). The assassination of the girl and Erdosain’s suicide are only important in so far as they are the basis for a lucrative story for the newspaper. This is all that is left of Erdosain and María to affirm their existence. After going largely unnoticed by society their whole lives, they make the headlines in tragic fashion. “El objetivo siempre es salirse de la masa, trascender la realidad rutinaria y banal, comunicarse con lo absoluto, *ser*” (Gnutzmann 129).

Whenever Arlt’s characters approach the proletarian question, they fall short of political enlightenment and the narration turns to Dostoyevsky-like explanations of criminal behavior. Compared to Erdosain, however, the Astrologist is far more capable of articulating his revolutionary tendencies in terms of political ideology. He is also less complacent. Convinced that class differences are impossible to overcome through legal means, he sees revolution as the only alternative. However, he differs from Marxist ideology in many fundamental ways. To begin, he is not concerned with social equality. His ideology is complicated and often contradictory. He envisions a new society with a social structure based on that of the Ku-Klux-Klan, but without the racial discrimination as a core belief. He wants to create a new power hierarchy and a new system of exploitation, but rejects fascist ideology. He seeks to employ certain Socialist concepts, but imagines a revolution far different from the Bolshevik Revolution. “Esta irónica fusión de ideologías coincide, desde el punto de vista social y político, con la crisis de las clases medias argentinas” (Merlino 132). As revolutionary as the Astrologist and his partner the Rufián Melancólico consider themselves to be, the only way they can imagine bringing about real social change is by way of money. Their plan is to finance the revolution with profits from brothels. Beyond providing the economic base for the new society, prostitutes will join the thieves, murderers, and other marginalized individuals as the forerunners of the revolution. This inversion of power, in which society’s underdogs will suddenly rule, will require the revolution’s planners to offer classes on revolutionary propaganda and military engineering. The Astrologist imagines a sort of modern-day terrorist network which he calls a “colonia,” or governing colony where newly recruited revolutionaries will be trained in such a way that they will then be capable of starting new cells in other places. Still, as with Erdosain’s dreams, the Astrologist’s revolution is more fantasy than reality. In the end, he knows that there is no way for him to escape his destiny as a marginalized individual on the outskirts of society looking in. Ultimately, the revolution dies in its initial planning phases

4. Modernity, technology, and the new Buenos Aires

Both *Puente Alsina* and *Los siete locos* serve as intelligent commentaries on the project of modernization of Buenos Aires, already a half century old by the 1930s. It had proved largely successful in some ways and uncontrollably dangerous in other ways. In the imagery of the new modernized Buenos Aires, the city was thought of as a heterogeneous space that had defeated the countryside. In other words, the countryside came to represent an idyllic yet defeated past, while the city represented the future. “The modern city is a privileged space where the concrete and symbolic forms of a culture in process of transformation are organised in the dense web of a stratified society” (Sarlo, “Modernity” 173). In theory, the new urban Argentine society would offer a place for everyone. Public spaces would be places for diverse groups to converge, co-exist, and dispute important matters. The anarchic tendencies caused by the incredible cultural and national diversity would be neutralized by the process of modernization. The reality, of course, was somewhat different. Gorelik and Silvestri refer to the urban renewal of Buenos Aires as a “reactive utopia,” where “a vision prevailed in which modernization and history should conflate in harmony, the former being sustained by the renewal designed by the latter” (427). Fragmented projects over the previous fifty years or so were reinterpreted as long-term urban planning, as if the city was finally evolving into what it was destined to become. Arlt’s dystopian vision challenges the “reactive utopia” that Gorelik and Silvestri talk about, demonstrating the failures of the project of modernization from the perspective of marginalized sectors of society.

Buenos Aires itself was a sort of movie star in the 1930s. Claudio España notes that, “Nuestros directores supieron aprovecharla desde siempre y regalaron a la imagen una Buenos Aires cambiante, heterogénea, pintoresca y hasta mitológica” (58). But Ferreyra deviates from the norm in *Puente Alsina*, offering only shots of the suburb around the bridge while alluding to the big city by other means. The construction shows the growth and extension of the city into the countryside. The viewer feels the proximity to the city from the perspective of the suburb without actually seeing any of the large buildings and wide boulevards that highlighted the new, modern Buenos Aires. The semi-developed area around Puente Alsina is marshy and lush with vegetation. It is more countryside than city, but it is clear that the city is rapidly approaching. While a certain nostalgia for a very recent past is noticeable, Edmundo demonstrates his contentment with his simple life in the limits between city and countryside. This is hard for Lidia to understand at first: “Qué extraño es todo esto. Esta canción en la noche. . . con este silencio. . .” Edmundo calmly responds: “Este silencio es un buen amigo mío.” Lidia is not able to understand how anyone could prefer the silence of the suburb the commotion of the city. “¿Cómo se puede vivir sin

el amor, los bailes, las películas...? ¿Cómo puede uno dedicarse al trabajo tanto que se olvida de esas cosas?," she asks. Edmundo replies: "No entiende lo difícil que es la lucha cuando se aspira a ser mejor." Lidia and Edmundo are from two very different yet reconcilable worlds. In the end, the viewer is likely to identify with either Edmundo or Lidia, but not with her boyfriend Alfredo, a whiny and effeminate product of the city who, when in the suburb, claims, "aquí matan a gente como a cucarachas!" The symbolic space of the suburb created by Ferreyra serves to mediate between city and countryside.

Roberto Arlt's characters, on the other hand, do not feel any connection with the countryside or with the past. It is as if they can barely imagine life beyond the suburbs. In one of the very few references to the countryside, Hipólita recalls the time in her life in which she lived with a lover outside the city. Rather than remembering an idyllic, pastoral countryside, she only remembers greedy people willing to do anything for money. The women were only interested in receiving an inheritance and the men only cared about their cars and other material possessions. Money dictated every aspect of life in her recollection, leaving her feeling trapped:

Me acuerdo... en todas partes y en todas las casas se hablaba de dinero. Ese campo era un pedazo de la provincia de Buenos Aires, pero... ¡qué importa!, allí esos hombres y esas mujeres, hijos de italianos, de alemanes, de españoles, de rusos o de turcos, hablaban de dinero... y yo, perdida entre ellos, sentía que mi vida agonizaba precozmente, peor que cuando vivía en el más incierto de los presentes de la ciudad. ¡Oh! Y era útil querer escaparse de la fatalidad del dinero. (*Los lanzallamas* 22-23)

Hipólita debunks the notion of the countryside as an idyllic past completely. Since the countryside for her is as rotten as the city, she sees no alternative to the city.

Modern technology plays a key role in *Los siete locos* and in *Puente Alsina*. In the case of Ferreyra, the medium itself is a form of modern technology. Sound cinema was in its infancy in the 1930s, and Ferreyra was one of the few Argentine directors who had made the successful transition from silent to sound cinema. We see the importance of other forms of modern technology throughout the film. The construction of the new bridge called Puente Alsina is an enormous project that employs many workers and requires both traditional tools and heavy construction equipment. Some scenes emphasize the magnitude of the project while others focus on the individual worker. The first scene is of a man digging with a pick. This is followed by shots of a crane and other heavy equipment that demonstrate the technological advances of the time. These and other scenes alternating between the worker and machines suggest that the new technology aids the worker rather than replaces him.

Later on in the film we see shots of huge quantities of telephone wires extending from post to post. The telephone, in its most elemental function,

mediates between people usually not in the same place. This communicative human function is highlighted more than the technology itself in this film, as we can see in the scene where Lidia's father calls from his office in the city to the construction site at Puente Alsina in search of his daughter, who has not been seen for hours. He first reaches for the telephone, a symbol of technology. The camera then focuses on the concentration of telephone wires, highlighting the urbanization of the suburb and its immediate connection with the city. Finally, we see the telephone ringing at the construction site and a person answering it. Similar to the first scenes alternating between the individual workers and the heavy machinery, here we see the mixing of human beings, technology, and urbanization in a way that emphasizes the human element in the modernization of the city.

The relationship between people and technology is far more problematic in Arlt's city. According to Beatriz Sarlo, "Arlt literalmente *proyecta* una ciudad porque, en sus textos, Buenos Aires es tanto una representación como una hipótesis" (*Imaginación* 44). What he projects is a modern city in which technology is beginning to run amuck. Technological inventions often lead to the destruction of people and things, as we see when Erdosain agrees to lend his expertise of gases and explosives to the Astrologist, who is planning to install poisonous gas factories for the revolution. In the novel, modernity is a space of high tension in which urbanization and industrialism lead to chaos rather than salvation. But chaos is not necessarily a negative thing for Arlt's characters, who believe they can use it to their advantage. The Astrologist insists that industrialism be at the core of the new society he is envisioning, explaining that, "Así como hubo el misticismo religioso y el caballeresco, hay que crear el misticismo industrial" (115). He believes this "misticismo industrial" will take the place of politics and military action in bringing about social change:

Nosotros crearemos ese príncipe de sapiencia. La sociedad se encargará de confeccionar su leyenda y extenderla. Un Ford o un Edison tienen mil probabilidades más de provocar una revolución que un político. ¿Usted cree que las futuras dictaduras serán militares? No, señor. El militar no vale nada junto al industrial. (116)

Here technology serves to destroy more than to construct, and destruction is the first step in the Astrologist's revolution. Modern technology has influenced him so much that even his thoughts seem mechanical:

¿Quién soy yo? Fábrica de bacilos bubónica y tifus exantemático. Instalar academia estudios comparativos revolución francesa y rusa. También escuela de propaganda revolucionaria. Cinematógrafo elemento importante. Ojo. Ver Cinematógrafo. Erdosain que estudie ramo. Cinematógrafo aplicado a la propaganda revolucionaria. Eso es. (*Los siete locos* 308)

The Astrologist clearly does not share Erdosain and Barsut's vision of cinema as an alternative reality. Instead, it represents a potential tool for spreading revolutionary propaganda. The Astrologist and his followers are aware that their enemies will also employ modern technology, and consequently they are willing to fight technology with technology: "¿Cómo se organizarán las fuerzas que deben combatirnos? Suprimiendo el telégrafo, el teléfono, cortados los rieles. . . Diez hombres pueden atemorizar a una población de diez mil personas. Basta que tengan una ametralladora." (*Los siete locos*, 311).

Arlt's work at first seems diametrically opposed to works such as Ferreyra's *Puente Alsina* if we limit our analysis to a simple contrast of one's pessimism with another's optimism. A closer analysis of each work suggests that they have much more in common. What were the reasons for these works of art? What are the important elements of cultural production that inspired or provoked these individuals into artistic creation? Arlt was clearly influenced by the Expressionist films circulating in Buenos Aires in the 1920s and 30s, as we can see through his futuristic vision of the city. But he seems to have been equally influenced by the idyllic romance and happiness of melodramas and sentimental stories in both film and fiction, models he appropriates and distorts. Although not directly influenced by *Puente Alsina*, which was released four years after the publication of *Los lanzallamas*, Arlt was certainly influenced by melodramas. Likewise, it is not difficult to see how Ferreyra draws on popular written narrations for the values and issues important to the viewing public. The intersections between these two different artistic forms, the novel and cinema, serve to demonstrate how modernity and capitalism made Buenos Aires into a complex cultural system. "This system begins to be lived not only as a problem but also as an aesthetic theme, rife with the conflict of programmes and poetics which feed the battles of modernity: humanitarian realism opposes the avant-garde, but discourses with different functions are also opposed to one another (journalism against fiction, politics versus the general essay, the written word as against the cinematographic image)" (Sarlo 171). Arlt's unrefined prose and interest in the general populace, combined with his acute awareness of modern literary innovations and his fascination with the new, modernized city, places him in the margins of both the elite avant-garde and mainstream culture. Through his writing he created a unique and symbolic space of the street in which he experiences and expresses the social and technological changes of his era. Similarly, Ferreyra's overt passion for the common people combined with his fascination of the modernized city and technological innovations such as sound cinema allowed him to create a symbolic space of the suburb. One must look slightly beyond the fact that *Puente Alsina* is a commercially driven melodrama in order to appreciate its narrative originality. By considering Ferreyra's film and Arlt's novel as two sides of

the same coin rather than two incongruous works, we get a more dynamic look into the conflict between tradition and modernity that led Argentina into a unique pattern of disintegration and renewal.

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