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LETTER FROM BUENOS AIRES

Monday 9th June

I LEFT THE LONG summer days of Paris for the Buenos Aires winter: it was zero degrees and the afternoons were over by five thirty. The Kirchner government had been installed in May, and even among the capital's disillusioned, not to say cynical inhabitants, it was enjoying the obligatory honeymoon period. In the taxi from the airport, the driver asked me my opinion of the president's first measures: a green light for the trial of corrupt Supreme Court judges, the sacking of dozens of high-ranking military officers, government subsidies for public works under the auspices of select workers' organizations. I tried to explain to him that, having witnessed an array of more or less inefficient civilian governments and brutal military regimes, it was hard for me to have any illusions on this score, even if the outlook seemed quite positive. 'We are just like you,' he said, 'waiting for the first foul-up.'

Four Argentine films were showing in Paris when I left, including Diego Lerman's remarkable *Tan de repente* (*Suddenly*, 2002). My first surprise on arriving in Buenos Aires was to learn that this film—its opening section based on César Aira's short story, 'La prueba'—had not yet been released in its native country; it was to premiere two weeks later. As a juror at the 2002 Buenos Aires Independent Film Festival, I had been astonished by its grainy black-and-white images, its totally unconventional casting, and above all by its seemingly aimless, improvised narrative, the second half of which overturns everything established by the first.

All of these qualities, whilst unusual, are not entirely novel in the 'new' or 'young' Argentine cinema. (Though such promotional labels are worth little, it seems all but impossible to remove them.) Seven years ago, I discovered Martín Rejtman's first film *Rapado* (*Shaven*, 1992), a bolt of lightning in the desolate landscape of the time. Like Rejtman's next film, *Silvia Prieto* (1999), *Rapado* was striking for a ruthlessly pared-down aesthetic, and for its reserved but at times fanciful humour—all of which ran quite counter to the sentimentality and *telenovela* theatrics that then dominated most 'ambitious' Argentine films.

Rejtman has just turned forty, Lerman twenty-seven. Only thirteen years apart in age, they are separated by widely divergent life experience: the former spent his adolescence under the military regime, the latter amid the contradictions of the return to democratic rule. But the world-views of the two men—as manifested in their fictions and in the behaviour of their characters—are both equally alien to the *bien-pensant*, unnuanced presentation of testimony that Europe has too often expected to be the sole product of societies in conflict elsewhere in the world; as though Europeans had a monopoly on exploring the imaginary.

Tuesday 10th

The current crop of young directors approach the cinema with a strength and desire unknown to most of their elders. I can sense this in their work—films neither the industry nor the public demanded, and which exist only because of the determination of their makers. Once they are made, however, their necessity becomes fully apparent. This is most likely not the result of some new development, since the history of the cinema, no less than History itself, consists of what Vico referred to as '*corsi e ricorsi*'. And yet how to describe, if not with the word 'new', certain images and forms of behaviour that evoke a whole country and its people as if they were being filmed for the first time?

When I saw Lucrecia Martel's *La ciénaga* (*The Swamp*, 2001) in Paris, I was struck, not by the dysfunction of the provincial bourgeois family, but by the skill with which this first-time director choreographed the movements of the various characters within her frame; and by the film's setting—a country house or holiday home, where the beds are never made, where children come and go from the swimming pool without wiping their feet. Then there is the delicate evocation of the pains of

adolescent love, experienced above all in what is left unsaid, a transgression to which we cannot yet put a name. Filming 1,200 miles north of Buenos Aires in Salta province, Martel did not choose the picturesque scenery to the west—mountains, crystalline rocks eroded to fantastical forms—but opted instead for the low jungle and muggy atmosphere of the east. (Hence the frequent talk in the dialogue, so exotic to *porteño* ears, of going shopping in Bolivia, ‘where it’s better value for money’).

On screen I had always regarded the great variety of the Argentine landscape—stretching for nearly three thousand miles between the Tropic of Capricorn and the ice-floes of Antarctica—as little more than a backdrop intended to stir patriotic sentiment. In Martel’s film, the wind rarely ruffles the exteriors which, because of the sheer immobility of the camera and the deliberate lack of conviction in the acting, begin to seem as if they were made of cardboard. Perhaps one has to go back to Mario Soffici’s *Prisioneros de la tierra* (1939) to find nature so bare, and yet playing such an effective role. That ‘classic’ was an ambitious literary adaptation, but a long way from the chamber films to which the logic of production always consigned urban interiors.

Carlos Sorin is not a beginner. He is over fifty, and worked for a long time in advertising and as a cinematographer. Returning to directing after more than a decade of absence, he too left the metropolis—this time for the scenery of his beloved Patagonian desert. His *Historias mínimas* (*Minimal Stories*, 2002) was a word-of-mouth success in Argentina, with screenings multiplying week by week. The film combines anecdotal minimalism with extremely careful attention to the image and the actors—with a single exception, all non-professional. Its appeal, impossible to quantify or replicate, lies not only in its unending, empty scenery, but in its details: the tv game-show airing on a cable channel in the middle of nowhere, complete with shabby décor and rinky-dink presenter; the old man searching for his dog, sheepishly wondering if the animal could somehow know that his master had done something wrong; the boastful, love-struck travelling salesman who incessantly changes the name of the cake he is bringing to his girlfriend’s child.

Wednesday 11th

I visit the Rojas Cultural Centre, the most visible branch of the University of Buenos Aires’s ‘cultural wing’. A controversial forum for alternative

art in the eighties, *el Rojas* still hosts initiatives previously unthinkable in the local academic sector—such as a Queer Cinema festival, the first of which took place in 1996 and the most recent in 2002. Works on video that the general public might prefer not to know about have found an enthusiastic audience here: *Lesbianas de Buenos Aires*, a documentary by Santiago Garcia; *HIV* by Goyo Anchou; *Clarilandia* by Violeta Uman; *Historia de amor en un baño público (Love Story in a Public Toilet)* by Pablo Oliverio. The 2002 programme included a Fassbinder retrospective which served to place these promising, civic-minded film essays in the context not just of cinema, but of culture in its broadest sense.

The head of the cinema department at Rojas is the former critic, Sergio Wolf. His *Yo no sé qué me han hecho tus ojos (I Don't Know What Your Eyes Have Done to Me, 2003)*—co-directed with Lorena Muñoz—won a prize at the Buenos Aires Independent Film Festival. This kind of ‘creative documentary’ is unusual in Argentina, where documentaries are generally based on straightforward reportage rather than on the intricacies of language. Wolf went in search of Ada Falcón, a tango singer with a tempestuous and extravagant lifestyle whose popularity was at its peak in the thirties. In 1942 she left her career, her house and her lovers, and took refuge—forever, it was said—in a convent deep in the sierras of Córdoba province, some 500 miles north-west of Buenos Aires. The film is like a ceremony conjuring the dead, with the editing suite taking the place of the spiritualist’s table. Through his research, Wolf brings out the vanished world of cabarets and radio halls behind the façades of today’s supermarkets and parking lots; he tests one unreliable witness against another and finally, like a cinephile Philip Marlowe, sets off for a remote village in Córdoba whose (real) name is Salsipuedes: Leaveifyoucan. Sure enough, there he finds a woman in her nineties being cared for by nuns. She puts make-up on to receive her guest, but refuses to recognize herself when he shows a video of one of her films, mocking her own languorous tones of long ago: ‘How badly she sings’.

It has been said that the emotional potency of popular music outweighs that of high-cultural forms. Cristian Pauls’s portrait of the accordion player Leopoldo Federico, *Por la vuelta (To your Return, 2002)*, filmed over four years, is another ‘creative documentary’ whose asceticism contrasts sharply with Wolf and Muñoz’s scintillating narrative. An ageing and rather unappealing figure, Federico simultaneously opens up to and hides away from Pauls, whose project he has not quite grasped. But in

the process, he nevertheless plays *for* the camera, and Pauls is able to encompass, without penetrating it, the mystery of tango—music which, according to Borges, suggests to us an imaginary and yet real past. While the musician cleans and tests his instrument, Pauls reads aloud Federico's memorable correspondence with the great composer and *tanguista* Astor Piazzolla. The tone of the letters moves from warmth to rancour and then, via professional respect, back to friendship once more.

These films were produced by Cine Ojo, a company owned by the directors Marcelo Céspedes and Carmen Guarini. Their stance is one of unswerving resistance, but their films, while dealing with awkward topics, have never been demagogic. Their latest vindicates this choice on both the political and cinematographic levels. Its title, *H.I.J.O.S.* comes from the initials of a group formed by descendants of the 'disappeared'—its acronym the Spanish word for children. The film is a discreet chronicle of the apprenticeships of a handful of young people who want to contribute to society, but who are at the same time highly distrustful of existing structures, above all any notion of authority. The editing of their meetings takes into account the tentative nature of their remarks and the difficulties involved in reaching an agreement when all 'verticality'—a word with a sinister past in Argentine politics and union organizing—has been rejected in favour of the strictest 'horizontality'. Three characters gradually emerge, three experiences of the 'disappearance' of parents due to state terrorism; the film consists as much in these stories of the past as of daily lives in the present. The H.I.J.O.S. collective comes together during *escraches*, a slang word for public protests outside the homes of those responsible—and still unpunished—for the horrors of the Dirty War. Filming in 2001, before President De la Rúa's December flight from the Casa Rosada at the height of the economic crisis, the makers of *H.I.J.O.S.* courageously included footage of the *escrache* denouncing Basilio Pertiné, head of the naval air corps and brother of Mme De la Rúa.

Further connections between personal stories and History are explored in another Cine Ojo co-production: *La televisión y yo* (*Television and Me*, 2002) by Andrés di Tella. The director studies the history, as much private as public, of the industrial empire built by his immigrant grandfather, and its present ruin—a story that runs parallel to that of Argentine radio and television, both entangled with the Perón regime in an impenetrable set of conflicts and complicities. Di Tella puts himself in the

frame, face to face with his father and his own son. His thoughts take the form of a series of digressions—often very funny—that reflect without nostalgia on the film’s central theme: the bankruptcy of social projects and the unpredictable connexions between generations, which succeed each other in the same place but in different worlds.

Thursday 12th

What made the emergence of these young (and not so young) filmmakers possible? One important factor might be the incredible proliferation of film schools in Argentina over the last decade or so. Some of these are well equipped; others make do with the barest means. Often run by dedicated directors, they can be crowded and massively oversubscribed, like Manuel Antín’s ‘cinema university’, or take the form of a select group, such as that working with José Martínez Suárez. Some years ago, before the current flowering of Argentine cinema, I often heard people say that, given the lack of professional opportunities, such institutions were only ‘schools of frustration’. I now realise that with the sheer strength of their desire, these young people have turned the tables. Rather than waiting to take their assigned places in a pre-existing market, they simply dived in and made their films—and in the process were often taken up by producers with an eye for talent. This is the case for Lita Stantic, herself a director, who produced *La ciénaga* and made possible such outsider projects as *Tan de repente* or Pablo Trapero’s *Mundo grúa* (*Crane World*, 1999). Today even the most obtuse civil servant will speak of cinema as a cultural good with an export value that should be taken into account.

And yet one often hears the bitterness of a displaced generation: ‘How many out of this avalanche of parvenus will stay the course?’ (As though a selection process were not in the very nature of things, or had not applied to every breakaway movement in the arts.) In April 2001, at the Buenos Aires Independent Film Festival, I was about to see *La libertad* (*Freedom*, 2001) by Lisandro Alonso when I bumped into an old acquaintance. ‘You’re going to see that?’ he said. ‘You know what it’s about? A woodcutter who chops wood and shits outdoors for an hour and five minutes.’ Alonso’s film did provoke extreme reactions in Argentina, especially after its selection in the *Un certain regard* category at Cannes. Twenty-five at the time the film was made, Alonso was pilloried as the cause of a potential slump in public interest in Argentine film. But Alonso, who

possesses an inextricable combination of candour and audacity, never had any intention of excluding other types of cinema; his sole aim is to work in his own space, which he is determined to defend.

Between the 1960s 'Third Cinema' of Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino and the present, there is an entire intermediary generation which, though it continues to make films that are occasionally successful, has largely been discarded by critics in search of novelty, if not by the public. Young cinephiles seem to have taken from the recent past only the uneven work of Leonardo Favio, whose films are interspersed with devastating flashes of lyricism; or else that of Jorge Polaco, whose work was considered extreme thirteen years ago, but is today seen as the living link to a 'young' or 'independent' cinema. Beyond these two, I can only see the influence of Alberto Fischerman, an isolated figure with a hesitant approach, most notable for making *The Players vs. Ángeles Caídos* (1969), a film that is both without equal and highly representative of the spirit of 1968. Fischerman, who died in 1995 at the age of fifty-eight, had a taste for risk, a certain indifference to convention, even when making straightforward comedies; qualities which make him the rarest bird ever to have visited Argentine cinema.

Marcelo Piñeyro forms a separate case, since his well-funded films have gradually revealed a strong directorial persona. Starting with his third film, *Cenizas del paraíso* (*Ashes of Paradise*, 1997), and then with *Plata quemada* (*Money to Burn*, 1999)—freely inspired by Ricardo Piglia's novel of the same name—and now *Kamchatka* (2003), Piñeyro has emerged as the only filmmaker to have successfully married the demands of the industry with that something else that makes them live on, in the desires and memories of the public.

Friday 13th

I didn't see any films today, even though friends had pointed out to me the screening of two well-regarded first works: *Nadar solo* (*Swimming Alone*, 2003) by Ezequiel Acuña and *Ana y los otros* (*Ana and the Others*, 2002) by Celina Murga. I wandered through areas I didn't know when I lived in Buenos Aires, and which I only became curious about after long years of absence, thinking that I might never be able to return. Marcelo, a 26-year-old taxi-driver, insisted that 'there is nothing to see'; for me there was everything to see.

Eighteen months on from the collapse of 2001—in which Argentina defaulted on its \$155bn public debt—there are hints of an economic recovery everywhere: ‘to rent’ or ‘for sale’ signs have given way to cafés, internet salons, laundrettes or other businesses that take twenty-four hours to set up, and can disappear in twelve. Misery itself has been institutionalized: many *cartoneros*—collectors of recyclable rubbish—are paid by middlemen who each night take their haul off to the paper mills. Shanty towns have now sprung up even inside the ring-road and by late afternoon, whole ex-suburban families can be seen hurrying to sort through the dustbins in upmarket areas or shopping districts. Elsewhere the *piqueteros*, road-block activists for workers’ rights, are more or less tolerated by the authorities; many of them receive a rather paternalistic and selective form of unemployment benefit for large families, set up by the 2002–03 Duhalde government in a bid to stave off social violence.

What remains of the middle class is the most active element in this defeated society, which expects the new government to take concrete economic or social measures, not just gestures proving its moral integrity—however necessary these may be. For many, culture has become the only refuge, a source of vital energy (I think of Berlin in 1919, of Vienna in 1921). Just like in the good old days, several bookshops on Corrientes stay open until midnight and—if utterly disorganized and of uneven quality—there are more plays, concerts and films to see than in many European capitals.

At the Buenos Aires Independent Film Festival in April 2003, Bernard Bénoliel of the Cinémathèque Française was utterly astounded by the four-hundred-strong audience that flocked to a screening of Jean Epstein’s *Tempête* (1947). Claire Denis was given a triumphant welcome by admirers familiar with her complete filmography. The American critic Jonathan Rosenbaum presented a programme entitled ‘Lost Cinema’, showing rare films—without announcing their titles beforehand—to an eager, curious public. (I am told that the programme included a vhs of my first underground film, *Puntos suspensivos* of 1971, of which I have no copies.) Now a regular at the Festival, Rosenbaum considers it the most exciting in the world, due to its range and bold programming, and the interaction it affords with an ever-enthusiastic public. I remember meeting, in June 2001, a young couple who had come by bus all the way from Tucumán—an eighteen-hour

journey—solely in order to catch *Dukhovnye golosa* (*Spiritual Voices*, 1995), Sokurov's five-and-a-half-hour film on the Afghan war. Founded by Andrés di Tella, the festival was revived by Eduardo Antín, editor-in-chief of *El amante*, the oldest surviving Argentine cinema journal. In the midst of the crisis of 2001–2, Antín managed to secure international funding which enabled the festival—it always fills at least ten of the city's cinemas—to go ahead. (Other journals have opted to publish on the internet after years of paper editions: *Film* has for some time now been *Film on line*; the lively and younger *Otrocampo* was born on the web.)

At the Independent Film Festival I also came across the films of Gustavo Postiglione, a director from the River Plate commercial port of Rosario, Argentina's second industrial city. *El asadito* (*The Barbecue*, 2000), filmed in a single night on the roof of a building, and *El cumple* (*The Birthday*, 2002), made in a weekend, are both set in his home town. The 'barbecue' in the former and the birthday party in the latter provide snapshots of life, *ensemble* pieces full of mumbled conversations and rich in incidental detail. They are similar in tone to some of Altman's films, though less focused. The most daring film at the festival—perhaps my favourite because of its unapologetic marginality—was Ernesto Baca's *Cabeza de palo* (*Stick Head*, 2002). Running for an hour and five minutes without dialogue, the film is a mosaic built around the unexpected but always compelling behaviour of an assortment of odd characters, and framed in sequences of eloquent simplicity.

Saturday 14th

I am told that Pablo Trapero, the 31-year-old director of *Mundo grúa* and *El bonaerense* (2002)—possibly the two most powerful films of this new Argentine cinema—has decided to produce seven films between June 2003 and December 2004 with his company Matanza Cine, some in co-production with Chile, Brazil and even Bolivia. Trapero's films are harshly critical of the social relations he explores, but are also marked by a great tenderness towards his characters: the construction worker in *Mundo grúa* who, made redundant for being overweight, sets off on a journey to the distant south in search of work; or the local locksmith in *El bonaerense* who joins the notoriously corrupt Buenos Aires police force after serving a sentence for petty crime, and there encounters new levels of brutality and criminal impunity.

Trapero works with non-professional actors—*el Rulo*, the endearing central character of *Mundo grúa*, is played by a former rock musician—and members of his own family. His grandmother appears in all his films, and will be the protagonist in his forthcoming *Familia rodante* (*Touring Family*). He draws from them performances true to life in ways I have not encountered since Rossellini's work from 1945–7. Trapero goes beyond naturalism by recognizing the humour in his characters and their situations; his films possess, too, a latent lyricism which subtends the lonely moments when his male characters allow their fragility to show through. No other Argentine director has been able to portray men's vulnerability in violent situations in this way.

This very mature young director's move into production is highly significant. After the local and international success of his first two features, Trapero is assured of financing for his own projects. He has refused to work in the privileged conditions of television, choosing instead to produce films such as those by Raúl Perrone, a fifty-year-old filmmaker known affectionately as 'the underground's underground'. For over ten years now, Perrone has been making video-films chronicling the lives of young people in Ituzaingó, Buenos Aires province—a colourless locale that has become his microcosm, a land of his own like the worlds novelists populate with their creations.

Trapero has also offered to produce the next project by Albertina Carri, a twenty-nine-year-old director whose second feature, *Los rubios* (*The Blondes*, 2003), is an investigation into the 1977 'disappearance' of her own parents. Despite the use of a well-worn *mise en abyme*—in which an actress declares to the camera that she is playing the role of the director, who herself then appears in the frame, directing the actress playing her—the film avoids the solemnity and ideological simplifications common to many cinematic treatments of the *desaparecidos*. The real subjects of Carri's films are the impossibility of compensating for such a lack, the brutal severing of family ties, memory's search for facts—and unstoppable fictionalization of what it finds. There is a very funny scene in which the film crew reads a letter from the National Institute of Cinema refusing financial backing on the grounds that, since the director's parents were intellectuals, she should be interviewing important figures rather than mere neighbours. The Institute later reversed its decision, but the letter, signed not only by state

bureaucrats but by a film director and writer, remains a monument to right-thinking censorship.

There have been further-flung instances of such *bien-pensant* interference. In France, for example, a television channel demanded that 29-year-old Daniel Rosenfeld's *Aborigen Rugby Club* (2002)—co-produced by France 2—be fitted with a commentary that would clear the film of any possible charge of indulgence towards its chief protagonist. As in his last film, a portrait of the musician Dino Saluzzi, Rosenfeld works without commentary. No voice-over allocates blame or directs the viewer's gaze. Instead, Rosenfeld juxtaposes actions and words, and the confrontations between them become pregnant with meaning. The central character of *Aborigen Rugby Club* is Eduardo Rossi, the white trainer of an indigenous Toba rugby team from Formosa province in the north-east of Argentina. Murky and fascinating in equal measure, Rossi reveals himself unreservedly to the director's gaze: his fascist sympathies, his puerile militarism. At the same time, he uses sport to tear a group of young men away from alcohol and idleness, and inspire in them a pride in their ethnicity and the reclamation of their land from an indifferent, faraway capital. Rossi's contradictions are the real subject of the film's zigzagging narrative, which culminates in a journey to Buenos Aires, where the Indian players take it upon themselves to beat the 'sons of Europeans' that another 'son of Europeans' taught them to hate.

Sunday 15th

Before leaving for Paris—returning to the bright summer skies only to shut myself up in an editing room—I visited the bars in Palermo Viejo. Fifteen years ago it was a run-down, abandoned district. Today it is full of designer boutiques, Thai or Scandinavian restaurants, architects' and psychoanalysts' offices. Veronica Chen, a young Chinese-Argentine director, is my guide to this preserve of Buenos Aires's *bobos*—bourgeois bohemians. I felt that her first film, *Vagón fumador* (*Smoking Compartment*, 2001), had been unfairly ignored by the critics. Though far from perfect, and full of impenetrable dialogues, the film nonetheless has a certain visceral urgency. It recounts a young bourgeois girl's passion for a *taxi boy*, a homosexual gigolo working the streets, whom she follows until she manages to join his circle and, eventually, share his bed as part of a threesome. The two most powerful scenes in the film were the late-night sequence of the boy doing his job in the

cashpoint lobby of a bank, captured on CCTV; and that showing a gang of *taxi boys* roller-skating in the rain, circling a statue of General San Martín, whom schoolbooks term ‘the father of the fatherland’.

When Chen was born, I was leaving Argentina for the first time on a scholarship. A general was in power, who ensured that boys with long hair were followed through the streets; his wife, meanwhile, was agitating for the prohibition of a contemporary opera which she’d heard contained obscenities. Are they both still alive? For a long time I detested them. Later there would be other uniformed officials in power, murderers this time, and if I happen now to think of that slightly ridiculous, unhappy couple, I do so without enmity, but with a certain curiosity. Even while they were alive they became fossils, no longer threatening. I tell all of this to Chen, who laughs: she has no personal recollection of the couple in question.