

# C

## Cities in Lucía Puenzo's Films



Inela Selimović

Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, USA

Fiction writer, scriptwriter, producer, and filmmaker Lucía Puenzo was born in 1976 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She grew up in a family of well-renowned artists, including her father, filmmaker Luis Puenzo (b. 1946). Her novels, film scripts, and short and feature films have continued to solidify steadily her prominence at home and abroad since the early 2000s. Most of Puenzo's feature-length films stem from either her own or her contemporaries' fictional writing. Her treatment of urban spaces across different genres – novels, films, short films, and television series – remains uniquely complex. Two cities in particular, Buenos Aires and Bariloche, recur in Puenzo's work not solely as key settings for her fiction or film plots but also as ways of delineating intricate contours of political, social, and cultural importance.

Puenzo's thematic and aesthetic focus on Buenos Aires and Bariloche sets her work apart from films made in the 1970s and 1980s. Filmmakers such as Héctor Olivera (b. 1931) and Luis Puenzo, for instance, frequently sought to capture the political mobilizations of the capital's social spaces, thus allegorically drawing attention to the country's rapid decline toward a catastrophic era of military coups and their subsequent aftermaths.

The spaces of Buenos Aires's Plaza de Mayo, which frame the Casa Rosada (presidential residence), have always been politically one of the most potent, loudest, and defiant territories of the country. Protests against social injustice, political crimes, economic downfalls, and violations of basic human rights were nearly always first displayed in Plaza de Mayo before their aftershocks reached other parts of the country, ranging from Salta in the north to the Patagonian south. Politically mobilized motherhood in Argentina, for instance, gained momentum in the spaces of Plaza de Mayo during the 1970s in the midst of the ruling military junta's death campaigns against sons and daughters perceived as political dissidents (*subversivos*). The mothers' protests took place in Buenos Aires first, as poignantly captured by filmmakers Lourdes Portillo (b. 1944) and Susana B. Muñoz (b. 1954) in their documentary *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* [*Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*] (1985). Buenos Aires in this film, too, becomes focused around – if not reduced to – the politically charged spaces of Plaza de Mayo, thus sending the mothers' human rights-focused impact across the nation in subsequent decades and further strengthening their international visibility beyond the democratic transition. Multifaceted aesthetic manifestations – whether in literature, cinema, photography, painting, or other visual arts – frequently use Plaza de Mayo to spotlight Buenos Aires's political vulnerability and the defiance it reactively generates before,

during, and after the Argentine state terror (1976–1983).

During Puenzo's formative youth, socio-politically committed films regarding the most recent and more distant pasts mushroomed in the early transitional phases toward democracy. With the deepening of democracy in Argentina, several filmmakers focused on politically explicit plots in order to reflect on the atrocities of the state terror. This is the case in Olivera's *Funny Dirty Little War* [*No habrá más penas ni olvido*] (1983) and *Night of the Pencils* [*La noche de los lápices*] (1986), Puenzo's *The Official Story* [*La historia oficial*] (1985), and Fernando Solanas' (b. 1936) *Tangos: The Exile of Gardel* [*Tangos, el exilio de Gardel*] (1985) and *The South* [*Sur*] (1988) to mention just a few. *The Official Story*, for instance, ties the urban settings – Buenos Aires in particular – to the Argentine state terror and complex stories of Argentina's disappeared political dissidents and their “stolen” children (Lazzara 2009: 145). *The Official Story* won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1986, which might have signaled the international spectatorship's readiness to further confront the military junta's crimes and human rights violations in Argentina through different soft-power channels. Such politically committed feature-length films – films focused on Juan Perón's leadership, influence, exile, and death; the military junta headed by General Videla; and the disappeared, who, in accordance with Antonius Robben, vanished in the midst of “political violence and social trauma” and economic afflictions (2005: 345) – reemerged again in the 1990s in direct or subtle ways, as Adolfo Aristarain's (b. 1943) *A Place in the World* [*Un lugar en el mundo*] (1992) and Marco Bechis's (b. 1955) *Garage Olimpo* (1999) imply. Although politically explicit, *Garage Olimpo*, for instance, engages to varying degrees the state terror's aftermath by allegorically featuring the military government-supported clandestine torture sites (ESMA, Olimpo, Club Atlético, among others) across different neighborhoods of Buenos Aires; the disappearance of approximately 30,000 political dissidents (*los desaparecidos*); the tenacity of human rights-focused associations, such as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (Madres de Plaza

de Mayo) and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo (Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo); the unlawful appropriations of dissidents' newborns; and other human rights violations. In the mid- and late-1980s, such political films often sought to juxtapose the perpetrators and victims in allegorical ways. From the early 1980s through mid-1990s, the cinema of María Luisa Bemberg (1922–1995) marked the Argentine film industry in lasting ways. As the most significant Argentine cinematic foremother, Bemberg directed several feature-length films, such as *Nobody's Wife* [*Señora de nadie*] (1982), *Camila* (1984), *Miss Mary* (1986), *I, The Worst of All* [*Yo, la peor de todas*] (1990), and *I Don't Want to Talk About It* [*De eso no se habla*] (1993).

Indeed, the mid-1990s shifted the Argentine film industry significantly through the emergence of a heterogeneous aesthetic wave made possible by young and aspiring filmmakers who solidified New Argentine Cinema (NAC). Puenzo – like Lucrecia Martel (b. 1966), Albertina Carri (b. 1973), Adrián Caetano (b. 1969), Bruno Stagnaro (b. 1973), Martín Rejtman (b. 1961), Pablo Trapero (b. 1971), Julia Solomonoff (b. 1968), Celina Murga (b. 1973), Vanessa Ragoné (b. 1967), and Sabrina Farji (b. 1964), to name a few – has been broadly associated with the NAC (Aguilar 2008: 7–31). Most of the core NAC filmmakers – Caetano, Stagnaro, Rejtman, Carri, and Trapero – have privileged Buenos Aires and its complex social and cultural heterogeneities as a setting for their protagonists' cross-cultural, existential, or interpersonal struggles and triumphs. While Martel has stayed devoted cinematographically to her native Salta, a northern area of Argentina, Puenzo, in contrast, has never stayed solely focused on Buenos Aires (Martin and Shaw 2017). Bariloche, as already noted, along with its peripheries, also grounds Puenzo's cinematographic work and other creative undertakings, particularly her fiction writing. Puenzo's literary and cinematic commitments to Bariloche and Buenos Aires have stayed intact despite the fact that the act of adapting literary pieces to the big screen intrinsically demands different mechanisms of artistic expression. Puenzo has underscored that such demands have

paradoxically engendered a feeling of disloyalty upon turning her novels into film scripts. To date, Puenzo has published several novels, including *El niño pez* [*The Fish Child*] (2004), *La furia de la langosta* [*The Lobster's Fury*] (2010), and *Wakolda* (2011) to mention just a few.

Puenzo's films are urban but never so in rigid ways. Regardless of the artistic medium – literature or cinema – Puenzo disallows the symbolic potencies of Buenos Aires and Bariloche to stand in isolation relative to the discursive symbolisms of the Argentine rural areas. What is more, she often extends her diegetic territory to Paraguayan and Uruguayan areas as well. Yet the sociocultural and political weight of Buenos Aires and Bariloche stays emotionally significant for the protagonists' agentic undertakings, self-explorations, and "affective moments" and quests (Selimović 2018: 9). Such significance is palpable even when these cities' physical spaces appear only obliquely.

Puenzo's feature films – *El niño pez* (2007), *XXY* (2009), and *Wakolda: El médico alemán* [*Wakolda: The German Doctor*] (2013) – establish multifarious ties between their protagonists, on the one hand, and sociopolitical and cultural phenomena relevant to Buenos Aires and Bariloche, on the other. These two cities fill up the diegetic worlds of Puenzo's films – that is, different historical contexts, dialects, and cultural specificities – even when certain remote, semi-rural, and suburban spaces become featured as well. Nonurban spaces from across her native Argentina (the outskirts of Bariloche in *Wakolda* and the seedy margins of Buenos Aires in *El niño pez*), or those relevant to Paraguay (a Guaraní village in *El niño pez*) and Uruguay (coastal settings in *XXY*), appear dependent on the mercy of these cities' sociopolitical and cultural dynamics in direct or latent ways.

Certain glimmers of Bariloche's fascinating history emerge in subtle ways in *Wakolda*, especially through Puenzo's emblematic references to the precolonial Mapuche peoples and to the Nazis' intensified presence in the first half of the twentieth century (Nouzeilles and Montaldo 2002). Prior to the Spanish conquests in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the area of today's Bariloche brimmed with indigenous presence,

especially with the Mapuche and Poya peoples. Distributed throughout the Andes toward the southern shores of Nahuel Huapi Lake, these indigenous groups' communities facilitated the earliest Spanish explorations, particularly from Chile into Argentina's Patagonia. Numerous Spanish missions indeed reached Nahuel Huapi Lake with varying degrees of success, specifically the expeditions led by Spanish conquistadors Francisco de Villagra and Luis Ponce de León and priest Diego de Rosales. Most initial Spanish crossings of the Andes toward Nahuel Huapi Lake took place subsequent to Ferdinand Magellan's voyage (October 1520) and after the conquest of Chile by Pedro de Valdivia in 1541. Two Jesuit priests, Diego de Rosales and Nicolás Mascardi, are intimately tied to the early expeditions into the region in question: Rosales visited in 1650, and Mascardi established a mission in 1670. These missions failed to remain intact, either due to the bellicose indigenous displeasure with the newcomers or the political turmoil in Europe that sent its aftershocks all the way to the conquistadors' undertakings across the New World.

Spaniard Pedro de Mendoza founded Buenos Aires in 1536. According to Daniel Lewis, more precisely, de Mendoza "founded a settlement on the southwestern bank of the estuary, which had been named 'River of Silver' (*Río de la Plata* or *River Plate*). The new town, which Spanish officials hoped to use as a base for the explorations of the region, was named Nuestra Señora Santa María del Buen Aire" (original emphasis, Lewis 2001: 20). Bariloche, which is tucked between the Andes and Nahuel Huapi, is nearly 1,600 km away from the country's capital. In 2017, Buenos Aires boasts close to 16 million inhabitants. During the same year, Bariloche housed approximately 122,700 inhabitants.

In recent years, Bariloche's visibility abroad has continued to grow, not solely due to its stunning landscape but also because of reemergence as one of the most active centers for fugitive Nazis during the first half of the twentieth century (Klich 1995: 53–66). Bariloche's remoteness – in being a city insulated from Buenos Aires and the rest of the Latin American vastness from the north by mountain ranges, lakes, open steppes, and

forested areas – proved congenial for those who had supported Hitler during WWII, including several high-ranking officials such as Erich Priebke. Beginning in 1936, Priebke was part of the Gestapo. Priebke was involved in its administrative undertakings, especially in generating lists of those who were sent to the death camps. His Nazi commitment became internationally crystalized when he rounded up ten people in Rome (Jews and Resistance fighters) and facilitated their deaths in order to avenge several SS officers who had been killed on 24 March 1944 during the massacre at the Ardeatine Caves. Once in Bariloche, Priebke's sociocultural visibility stayed intact. He became chairman of the local German-Argentine Cultural Association and was an extremely vocal community member as represented in Carlos Echeverría's documentary from 2006. Numerous high-ranking Nazi officials indeed found their new homes across Latin America after WWII, sometimes under false identities and other times using their real names. Such instances of brazen visibility prompted Mossad to begin tracking down some of the Holocaust criminals, including Adolf Eichmann, one of the architects of the Final Solution. As Bettina Stangneth's *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* reminds us, Eichmann was located and brought to justice for his crimes on 23 May 1960 (Stangneth 2014: xx). It was also believed that Josef Mengele, the infamous "angel of death," clandestinely lived somewhere in the Patagonian region under several false identities. Mengele's disguised roaming across the southern tip of South America prompted Puenzo to first write her novel in 2011 and return to it cinematographically in 2013.

Puenzo's early novelistic and cinematic work peeled away certain layers regarding the ways in which such historical occurrences might have inscribed themselves across Bariloche in indelible but often subtle ways. Having spent some of her own family leisure time in Bariloche throughout her childhood and youth, Puenzo frequently merges different historical readings, gaps, and discoveries with pure subjective experiences in and mnemonic relationships to this city. Although Bariloche only features in one of her films/novels, which share the same title, its cultural inscriptions

invite the viewer/reader to engage in complex contemplations of certain human rights violations that remain unsettled and unsettling.

While *El niño pez* and *XXY* take place in contemporary versions of Buenos Aires and its rural antithesis, *Wakolda* is predominantly set in Bariloche in the 1960s. The contemporariness of Buenos Aires, a city the spectator sees, above all, affectively in *El niño pez*, is filtered through the class- and race-based clashes that are framed by a queer adolescent relationship within an affluent and *porteño* family. In *XXY*, Buenos Aires's modernity is principally associated with a lack of systematic tolerance of liminal subjectivities in terms of their sexuality and gender. Such intolerance manifests in *XXY* when certain social spaces within the Argentine capital callously expel the protagonist. Bariloche's Argentine-German communities in *Wakolda* furthermore emerge as platforms for unpacking the Nazis' latent presence in Argentina during and beyond the post-WWII era. Indeed, *Wakolda* is principally set in Bariloche and its resplendent natural peripheries, including the Argentine steppe. The film's historical implications remain built into the splendid shots of Bariloche's landscape, thus inviting the viewer to recall simultaneously an era of colonial exterminations of the indigenous populations across the territories of what is today Argentina, as well as another and more contemporary era relevant to Argentina's ties to Nazi fugitives after Hitler's fall. Yet Bariloche's predominantly white and German-based communities in *Wakolda* are never completely cut off from the Argentine steppe and its Mapuche communities' cultural vulnerabilities and resiliencies. Puenzo therefore unfailingly zooms in on Buenos Aires and Bariloche to flesh out certain issues of sociopolitical and cultural importance relevant to the immediate present, distant past, or their *mélange*.

In *XXY* Buenos Aires is present as the territory of the protagonist's hurtful and complex past. It is a space that socially expels the protagonist and her family due to her intersex subjectivity. The film, in fact, features Buenos Aires as an afflictive memory in constant rivalry with the film's immediate and increasingly hostile social surroundings – that is, a small coastal town in Uruguay. Although

physically absent, the idea of Buenos Aires is present mnemonically for the protagonist and through the family's social ties to the city. This film suggests the ways in which social openness toward and acceptance of alternative gender identities and sexualities can be culturally obstructed, whether in urban or rural spaces. In *XXY*, Buenos Aires is personified through a medical doctor. His visit aims at correcting the protagonist's intersexuality. Without seeking to reduce the city to a few sociocultural traits emblematically, Puenzo associates Buenos Aires with the Foucauldian "medical gaze" and the remote and coastal areas of Uruguay as sites of resistance against and support of such a "gaze" (Foucault 2003: 9). Medical knowledge and scientific progress, which are brought from the bustling city of Buenos Aires through social visits to the protagonist's family, must be negotiated in the remoteness of their village in Uruguay.

The themes of sexuality, gender, ethnic, and cross-cultural identities further unfold from within both the affluent and impoverished urban spaces of Buenos Aires in *El niño pez. El niño pez*, which is Puenzo's first feature-length film, situates the main action in an affluent neighborhood of Buenos Aires in order to tease out the abundant interracial and class-based dependences and differences that the adolescent protagonists must face in their everyday existence. The intricate focus on lesbian "affective dwelling" (Selimović 2018: 62) in *El niño pez* further underscores the inevitability of cross-cultural and interracial contact points that the city fosters and forbids simultaneously.

Puenzo debuted her feature films at the outset of the twenty-first century during an era known as the *kirchnerismo*. The period lasted for 12 years, beginning with Néstor Kirchner's presidential victory against incumbent Carlos Menem in 2003. In 2007, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was elected to the presidential office. Fernández de Kirchner's successor, Mauricio Macri, was victorious in 2015, aided by certain neoconservative/neoliberal tendencies. Such contexts also have framed many of Puenzo's other cinematic undertakings, particularly scriptwriting for television series, short films, and films by other

contemporary Argentine filmmakers. Some of Puenzo's most notable short films are *Los invisibles* [*The Invisible Ones*] (2005), *Codicia* [*Greed*] (2009), *Más Adelante* [*Up Ahead*] (2010), and *Cromo* (2015). She has co-written scripts for several television series such as *Final Minute* (2001–2002), *Catfight* (2003), *Malandras* [*Crooks*] (2003), *Sol negro* [*Black Sun*] (2003), and *Cold Blood* (2004). Furthermore, Puenzo has taken part in several scriptwriting processes for (*h*)*Historias cotidianas* [*Stories of Daily Life*] (2001), *La puta y la ballena* [*The Whore and the Whale*] (2004), *A través de tus ojos* [*Through Your Eyes*] (2006), *Lo que tiene el otro* [*What*] (2007), *Showroom* (2014), *Planta madre* [*Toxic Jungle*] (2014), *El faro de las orcas* [*The Lighthouse of the Orcas*] (2016), *O Silêncio do Céu* [*The Silence of the Sky*] (2016), and *Los últimos* [*The Unseen*] (2017).

Several of Puenzo's films have received numerous awards and nominations at home and abroad. *XXY*, for instance, won the Goya Award for Best Spanish Language Foreign Film and the Golden Crow Pheasant at the International Film Festival of Kerala. *The German Doctor* was nominated as the Argentine entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 86th Academy Awards and won the Best Director Award at the 2nd Unasur Cine International Film Festival in 2013.

## References and Further Readings

- Aguilar, Gonzalo. 2008. *New Argentine Cinema: Other worlds*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. 1964. Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires. In *Obra poética 1923–4*. Buenos Aires: Emecé.
- Foucault, Michel. 2003. *The birth of the clinic: An archaeology of medical perception*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Routledge.
- Keenan, Thomas, and Eyal Weizman. 2012. *Mengela's Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetic*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Klich, Ignacio. 1995. The Nazis in Argentina: Deconstructing Some Myths. *Patterns of Prejudice* 29, no. 4: 53–66.
- Lazzara, Michael. 2009. Filming loss: (post-)memory, subjectivity, and the performance of failure in recent Argentine documentary films. *Latin American Perspectives* 36: 145–157.

- Lewis, Daniel. 2001. *The history of Argentina*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Martin, Deborah, and Deborah Shaw, eds. 2017. *Latin American women filmmakers: Production, politics, poetics*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Neuman, Andrés. 1999. *Bariloche*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Nouzeilles, Gabriela, and Graciela Montaldo, eds. 2002. *The Argentine reader: History, culture, politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Robben, Antonius. 2005. *Political violence and trauma in Argentina*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Selimović, Inela. 2018. *Affective moments in the films of Martel, Carri, and Puenzo*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stangneth, Bettina. 2014. *Eichmann before Jerusalem: The unexamined life of a mass murderer*. New York: Knopf.