

Everett Hamner

Remembering the Disappeared: Science Fiction Film in Post-dictatorship Argentina

Los muertos siguen entre los vivos. [The dead remain in the midst of the living.] —Adolfo Bioy Casares, *La invención de Morel* (1940)

During Argentina's 1976-83 "Dirty War," over thirty thousand citizens were labeled as dissidents, forcibly removed from their homes, and "disappeared" by a military dictatorship. Infants and young children were separated from parents and given to childless officers and bureaucrats; adults were hooded, tortured in 340 clandestine detention centers, and eventually shoved from cargo planes over the South Atlantic. Another twelve thousand people were held as political prisoners but survived, and countless others were threatened with similar treatment should they fail to comply with military orders. In some ways, this "Process of National Reorganization" was not unique: twentieth-century Argentine politics featured a seemingly endless cycle of promises of democratic freedoms and national reforms that never quite materialized. And, of course, atrocities occurred elsewhere in Latin America, too, especially as US officials became willing to lend material and ideological support to virtually any regime willing to repudiate communism. What stands out in Argentina, however, is the extent to which fear and passivity dominated citizens not only during but after the junta years. Groups in neighboring countries such as Chile and Brazil protested vigorously against similar takeovers, but silence reigned in Argentina because agitators so quickly became abductees, "los desaparecidos." Even when the dictatorship collapsed, threats and violence continued for decades against those who would speak out against the nation's former leaders.

It has only been in the 2000s that Argentine politicians have proven ready to condemn the policies and crimes of their predecessors. Within several years of the dictatorship's collapse—the result not of grass-roots revolution but of a costly overreach in defying Britain and occupying the long-contested Falkland Islands—the nation's new democratic president, Raúl Alfonsín, succumbed to military demands for amnesty from trials concerning Dirty War operations. Some Argentines had vigorously campaigned to bring murderers to justice; led by writer Ernesto Sábato, the National Commission on the Disappeared submitted an exhaustive report demanding reparations. Alfonsín's *Punto Final* (Endpoint) and *Obediencia Debida* (Due Obedience) legislation, however, provided a blanket pardon to junta leaders. This policy of repressing history was expanded by the subsequent neoliberal administration of Carlos Menem, which held sway throughout the 1990s, so that even officers convicted before Alfonsín's laws took effect were released. In 2003, however, popular protests finally succeeded in repealing this legislation. While the nation's economy has faltered and support for the most recent presidents, Néstor Kirchner and his widow Cristina Kirchner, has been mixed, the official repudiation of Process-era

crimes constituted a major national milestone. Since then, former military and civilian leaders have been sentenced to life in prison, a “National Day of Memory for Truth and Justice” has been created, and Argentina has erected a series of public monuments to the memory of the disappeared. As Silvia R. Tandeciarz demonstrates, these emerging parks, sculptures, and excavated detention sites sometimes convey mixed messages, but on the whole, they represent progress toward addressing the dictatorship’s abuses and the nation’s official amnesia.

For my purposes, it is particularly apt that Tandeciarz’s essay on these memorials shows “how histories buried for the last quarter of a century are *resurfacing* in contemporary Buenos Aires” (152; emphasis added). This essay is about how Argentine science-fiction film—a less concrete, more ephemeral sort of monument—delved below ground and behind institutional walls considerably earlier. Before official memorials acknowledged the Dirty War’s horrors, several innovative, low-budget sf narratives were working alongside other *testimonio* films to restore the nation’s memory. As detailed recently by Mariano Paz, Latin American countries such as Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina have supported small but vibrant sf film industries for more than half a century. Although often constrained by meager production funds and unsupportive governmental agencies, such cinema has occasionally reached new creative heights for those very reasons. Without romanticizing the challenges involved, Mark Bould observes that there are often “greater opportunities (and necessity) for inventiveness which come with financial restrictions” (95), and Vivian Sobchack defines a special low-budget subcategory she calls “the *film noir* of science fiction,” referring to works which use inexpensive special effects, but still “evoke wonder in their visual ability to alienate us from Earth’s landscape and from human activity and from the people next door.” When she proceeds to note this subgenre’s regularly discomfiting effects—“it is our security in the power of being human which is visually undermined” (109)—Sobchack might as well be writing specifically about Latin American sf and its tendency toward political subversion. This has long been a defining characteristic of the subgenre; in Argentina, enduring magazines such as *Más Allá* and more recent online fanzines such as *Axxón* have regularly deployed sf metaphors against governmental corruption. In their groundbreaking English-translation anthology *Cosmos Latinos*, Andrea Bell and Yolanda Molina-Gavilán explain how “in times of political repression ... the science fiction mode has proven to be an excellent tool to foreground a particular ideological position or to disguise social criticism from government censors” (14). Furthermore, “very often the genre is also used to reflect on a country’s recent history and even to defend a particular political position” (15).

This subversive, allegorical effect also characterizes the postdictatorship sf films of Argentine directors Eliseo Subiela and his mentee Gustavo Mosquera.¹ Subiela’s *Hombre mirando al sudeste* (1986; henceforth *Man Facing Southeast*) and Mosquera’s *Moebius* (1996) challenge the way official Argentine histories were glossing over patterns of militarism, political corruption, and human rights

abuses. While refusing to provide unambiguous, easy solutions either to their own nation's repression of past horrors or to humanity's broader tendencies to sugarcoat reality, the films offer a measure of meaning to the survivors of injustice and push both domestic and international audiences to confront memories of individual and cultural shame. At the same time, the decade separating the works' releases makes for distinct aesthetic choices. In a *Science Fiction Studies* bibliography of Latin American sf, Molina-Gavilán and several co-authors indicate that in the 1983-89 span immediately following the Dirty War, "more Argentinean sf works were published than in the whole of the previous period" (385). This verdant time in which *Man Facing Southeast* was released differs markedly from the early 1990s, when an economic downturn and the Menem administration's heightened restrictions on discussing the junta produced a significant decline in both sf literature and the nation's cinema. This does not render *Moebius* less politically engaged than its predecessor; but while I will contend that the alien messiah of *Man Facing Southeast* directly pits Latin American liberation theology against Catholic complicity with the dictatorship—in the process remediating Adolfo Bioy Casares's *La invención de Morel* (1940)—its filmic descendent confronts the political ideology of its own time through subtler allusions to Bioy Casares and a more abstract and transcendent mathematics and physics.

Politicized Medicine, Religious Complicity, and a Projected Messiah. At its core, *Man Facing Southeast* epitomizes the popular sf trope by which aliens function as space gods. In Hollywood, its earliest forerunner may be *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), in which the main character draws geometrical symbols that look very much like those used by Subiela's protagonist. Caron Schwartz Ellis compares Subiela's film with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* (1982), and *The Terminator* (1984), recognizing that the Argentine film follows these Hollywood blockbusters in offering audiences "fascinated with the myth of science" a secularized opportunity to "look up and 'worship'" (151). Although he does not specifically cite *Man Facing Southeast*, Hugh Ruppertsburg extends Ellis's connection between the sacred and sf cinema. Looking for trends in the historical circumstances that have produced alien-messiah films, he pinpoints "the fear that civilization has run amok and is about to destroy itself, the individual's consequent despair and sense of unimportance, the inability to find coherent meaning in the modern world" (32). A visitor from space helps resolve such anxieties through a two-stage process whereby the "vulnerability and weakness of the human characters" is established, then alien forces rescue the humans and apparent dead ends yield new openings: "Meaningless lives find meaning. Old men are granted immortality. A boy gains a friend. A grief-stricken woman is consoled. Nuclear war is avoided" (33).

This messianic formula also thrives in more recent films. Consider *K-PAX* (2001), which features a psychiatric patient (Kevin Spacey) who claims to be from another world. His overworked doctor (Jeff Bridges) eventually finds himself wavering between amazement at the purported alien's encyclopedic

knowledge of astronomy and growing evidence that he is simply using an extraterrestrial alias to repress memories of the rape and murder of his wife and daughter. A nonconformist, pacifist messiah, Spacey's character criticizes professional medicine, US capitalism, and institutional religion, particularly their common lack of concern for the lower classes. "Even your Buddha and your Christ had quite a different vision, but nobody's paid much attention to them, not even the Buddhists or the Christians," he warns. But his rebellion against conventional power structures is short-lived. As the film ends with the spaceman's tacit admission that he might really be human and the doctor's fond reflections upon his now-catatonic patient, the audience is allowed a wide range of potential meanings. An avenue remains whereby determined interpreters may imagine the body of Spacey's character to have been temporarily inhabited by an alien being, but ultimately, the film is less concerned with either its main character's real identity or its own coherence than with showing that all is well and all will be well. Ruppensburg might say that *K-PAX*'s real meaning lies in the psychiatrist's newfound gentleness toward and enjoyment of his patients: "a meaningless life has found meaning."

This contented Hollywood resolution is strikingly absent in the Argentine film from which *K-PAX* unapologetically appropriated most of its plot. Some evidence for this plagiarism was presented in a 2003 California lawsuit, which was settled confidentially, but what matters here is how *Man Facing Southeast* complicates the messianic resolutions that Ellis and Ruppensburg find in much Hollywood film, and how the film epitomizes the political capacities of Latin American sf. In Subiela's story, audiences wonder about the real identity of Rantés, an apparent wanderer who suddenly arrives at Buenos Aires's largest mental institution claiming to be a visitor from the stars. Dr. Julio Denis, a middle-aged psychiatrist with the same family problems and midlife disillusionment that Jeff Bridges's later character displays, is flummoxed by the depths of his patient's delusion and marvels as Rantés earns the unanimous devotion of his fellow patients. Whereas the ending of *K-PAX* allows audiences to look past this charisma and resume their blithe consumerism, *Man Facing Southeast* undercuts the narration of its physician by aligning Rantés with the disappeared. Rather than rendering Rantés triumphant and devolving into "escapist fantasies grounded in the patterns of the past instead of the possibilities of the future" (Ruppensburg 37), Subiela's film ends in tragedy, demonstrating that meaningful futures for individuals and nations alike depend on truthful histories. By visually aligning Rantés's fate with Dirty War abuses, exposing its narrator's unreliability, and pursuing a vision of earthly salvation derived from such liberation theologians as Gustavo Guitérrez, the film becomes an impassioned protest against the amnesty granted to junta leaders, and especially against the Catholic Church's unacknowledged complicity with the dictatorship.

On its surface, the film's plot is relatively simple. Rantés appears out of nowhere at the asylum, confounding Dr. Denis for weeks with detailed explanations of his alien world and its disdain for human stupidity. Exhausted by his vocation before Rantés's arrival, Denis is reinvigorated by the new

patient's delirium. When it seems their debates about Rantés's story have reached an impasse, a woman claiming to work as an evangelist turns up during visiting hours. Rantés clearly knows Beatriz well, so the next time Denis takes Rantés out, she comes along. In the ensuing sequence, Subiela juxtaposes a performance of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, where Rantés inspires the audience to dance and even takes up the conductor's baton, with scenes back at the mental hospital, in which patients cavort through the halls as if they too can hear the music. This joyful climax, however, is soon stifled by the hospital director's outrage at news reports of Rantés's exploits, and he orders the patient sedated via injection. A last conversation between the purported alien and his doctor occurs while the former dissects human brains in the hospital's pathology lab, where Denis had allowed him to volunteer. Disappointing any audience hopes that the psychiatrist might ultimately defy his bureaucratic context, Denis reverts to the party line that in drugging Rantés, he is helping the man. And when Beatriz makes love with Denis and confesses that she too is an alien, Denis betrays her as well. The film ends with Beatriz dropping into an elevator shaft, Rantés descending into a heavily drugged death, and Denis trying to drown both of their memories in liquor.

Subiela's plot may be relatively straightforward, but his cinematography is quite intricate. Consider the patience with which the first several minutes of *Man Facing Southeast* visually associates its alien character and his psychotic followers with the disappeared. The film's immediate but subtle gesture to recent history comes with a series of subjective shots that take us into Denis's subconscious. Exhaustedly listening to a patient describe a suicide attempt, the psychiatrist lets his mind wander to three images that remain on the screen for only several seconds each. First, we see his hands caressing a saxophone, a symbol of escapism throughout the film.² In a later juxtaposition, as Rantés's fellow patients line up to make confessions to their alien-priest, Denis will be found resting at home, playing the sax and lamenting his status as "el Pilato de las Galaxias" [the Pilate of the Galaxies]. Like the Gospel character who washes his hands of Jesus's death, Denis decides he would rather "arriesgarme a una resurrección" [risk a resurrection] than continue to endure his patient's delusion. Next, we see an enactment of one of René Magritte's most haunting paintings, *The Lovers* (1928), in which a hooded man and woman kiss. Art critics believe the couple's hoods reference Magritte's experience of seeing his mother's body after her self-drowning, but in Subiela's adaptation, the man expels blood when the lovers kiss. Thus the image simultaneously registers the strange blue liquid to be emitted by Beatriz when she kisses Denis, and aligns her with Rantés as representatives of the Dirty War's victims. Citing Fernando Reati, Elia Geoffrey Kantaris realizes that "the atrociously hooded figures, their identities rubbed out, may well be a displaced representation of the hoods and blindfolds which the military torturers would put over their victims' heads to prevent them from recognising those who were carrying out the torture" (164). The physician's final mental image extends the Dirty War connotations while rejecting any interpretation that its horrors were inevitable. A younger man holds two children and grins at a home movie camera, but the divorced doctor that watches is now

an absent father who only entertains his children out of ulterior, professional motives. Unfortunately, that neglect anticipates Denis's treatment of his new dependents, Rantés and Beatriz. Like the patient he interviews in this opening scene, of whom Denis acknowledges, "En poco tiempo desaparecerá entre los otros. Será uno más" [Soon he will disappear among the others. He will be one more], the film's alien nonconformists will also be abandoned.

But *Man Facing Southeast* is not just a lament for the Dirty War's victims. It is also critical to recognize that Denis's increasingly unreliable narration makes him specifically representative of the postdictatorship government's repression of history.³ Astute interpreters have hinted in this direction—Garrett Stewart observes that "against [claims like those of Rantés] the doctor must at all costs inoculate himself" (*Between* 106)—but the psychiatrist's hyper-rationalism has even greater symbolic power. Denis is not only threatened by Rantés's improbable narrative, but he comes to epitomize the repressions of Argentina's postdictatorship era. Hector Mario Cavallari inches closest to my argument in his attention to *mise-en-scène*:

El discurso del médico nuclea una focalización individual (en primera persona) que va elaborando un diagnóstico, mientras que la cámara produce una visión transpersonal que va revelando justamente lo que el Dr. Denis no puede 'ver' (es decir, percibir/comprender) de sí mismo como sujeto construido dentro de un sistema particular de valores [The discourse of the doctor centers around an individual focus (in the first person) on making a diagnosis, while the camera offers a broader interpersonal vision that reveals how Dr. Denis fails to 'see' (i.e., perceive or understand) himself as a subject constructed within a particular set of values]. (265)

Cavallari's analysis implies that instead of accepting Denis's abdication of responsibility for Rantés's demise, we should note how the film juxtaposes medical and political authority as the means of erasing ideological opposition. Furthermore, close attention to the film's technical elements reveals not only Denis's unreliability as a narrator, but Subiela's distinction between a liberation theology that readily blurs the physical and the spiritual, on one hand, and institutional Catholicism's complicity with the dictatorship and its offers of pie in the sky, on the other. Rather than allowing dogmatism to serve political corruption, the Marxism-inflected, heterodox Christianity embodied by Rantés views the pursuit of socioeconomic justice as intrinsic to authentic religion.

The film's cinematography is particularly heavy with clues that Rantés's alien identity is not the simple delusion it at first appears, but a testament to his non-conformism. Initially, and appropriately, *Man Facing Southeast* depicts Rantés as the jailed character, framed repeatedly in Denis's office against its barred window. Soon, though, we grasp that Rantés can escape the asylum at will, and we begin to sense that the doctor is actually more permanently imprisoned, ideologically if not physically. As Rantés stands in the garden, where he claims to communicate with fellow aliens via radio signals, Subiela repeatedly frames Denis's frustrated gaze through his barred office window. Likewise, when Rantés tells the doctor, "yo soy una alucinación suya" [I am

your hallucination], the camera angle emphasizes the extent to which Denis projects his problems onto his patients by filming him through the reels of his home movie projector. And when Rantés provokes Denis by asking, “¿Qué pasa, doctor? ¿Se siente frente a límites y no quiere más allá?” [What’s wrong, doctor? Are you approaching limits you don’t want to face?], the conversation ends with Rantés foregrounded against the open half of a double door, while the psychiatrist stands before the darkened, closed half. The physician has acquiesced to a power structure that renders his patients the passive objects of institutional maintenance, while Rantés defies that system in favor of a radical populism, daring Denis to question the enforced hierarchy in which he participates.

Even sharper evidence of Denis’s unreliability comes in later scenes, where the audience sees what the psychiatrist either cannot or will not. While we witness Rantés’s telekinetic escape from the asylum and provision of food for the hungry, Denis is aware of neither marvel, nor does he notice the blue liquid that Beatriz wipes away after their first kiss and that stains his shirt during intercourse. Instead, the doctor becomes a foil to Rantés’s open-minded curiosity, refusing to see anything that challenges medical tradition. While purporting to offer an objective interpretation of Rantés’s “illness,” imagining himself “el único testigo a su existencia” [the only witness to his existence], he assumes an unquestioning scientism that hinders rather than assists his vision. And just like medical practices that fail to take patient narratives seriously, *Man Facing Southeast* suggests, governments are doomed that convince themselves of their ideological invulnerability. Denis starts to check Rantés’s story with psychiatrists in other nations whom the patient claims are also interviewing alien visitors, but the doctor hangs up his phone before being connected. Similarly, the Argentina confronted by *Man Facing Southeast* began to investigate atrocities under its military dictatorship, but quickly stopped short, effectively sanctioning those horrors by assigning them to a past era no longer connected to the present.

At some level, even Denis admits that quashing history is ultimately dangerous and impossible. For example, when his supervisor expresses fear that Rantés will go beyond taking over public concerts and will draw worse attention to the hospital, perhaps with a headline like “Demente Ordena Ataque Militar” [Madman Orders Military Attack], Denis mutters, “Eso ya pasó. Y no creo que fuera culpa de Rantés” [That already happened. And I don’t think it was Rantés’s fault]. Notwithstanding this reference to the dictatorship’s error with the Falklands, Denis surrenders to his boss, sedates Rantés, and lies to Beatriz: “se va a recuperar” [he’s going to recover]. Somehow, though, his narrative’s unreliability has often been overlooked by critics, and as a result, so has been the extent of Subiela’s attack on his nation’s denial of recent history. I think this has been possible partially because Denis wears the coat of a scientist and Rantés that of a mental patient: of course, viewers are inclined to trust the physician. It may also be that when Subiela compares his medical expert with political authorities who apply band-aids to gaping wounds, Argentine’s recent history remains invisible to international audiences (as occurs even more completely in

the film's uncredited remake as *K-PAX*). Perhaps the most compelling reason that Subiela's film is often misinterpreted lies in its juxtaposition of religion and politics. Particularly in North America, a Christ-like scapegoat may be less recognizable to many interpreters than a triumphant, smiling savior would have been. Rantés embraces the destitute rather than cheerfully appealing to the middle and upper classes, and after becoming a political liability, he stays pinned on his crucifix. In other words, because *Man Facing Southeast* relies on a seemingly failed, un-resurrected messiah, it is easy to miss how intensely the film uses its religious symbols for political ends.

In a recent volume on Argentine film, Tamara L. Falicov speculates that a major non-sf film of the period, *La historia oficial* (The Official Story, 1985), shields dictatorship leaders from blame while painting Catholic leaders as corrupt because "such overt criticism might have been easier to make toward the Church, since the Church and State had become less linked after military rule" (70). By contrast, I am suggesting that the film's overt criticism of medical malpractice is an allegory for *both* political and religious corruption. While some might prefer to keep these categories separate, they are too commonly and tightly interwoven in many Latin American cultures to do so. *Man Facing Southeast*, at least, demands that we account for the facts that Rantés is the asylum's thirty-third patient (Jesus's traditional age at his death), that we first meet him playing sacred music on a chapel organ, and that in his first interview in Denis's office his face is framed in multiple shots directly beneath a cross. Nor is it accidental that Denis scoffs at Rantés, "Sólo falta que me diga 'bienaventurados los pobres de espíritu' ... debe haberme dicho que era Cristo" [The only thing you haven't said is "blessed are the poor in spirit" ... You should have said you were Christ]. The good doctor is even dense enough to wonder why the original Christ story was political but this messiah "en cambio se aislaba, buscando el más total de los anonimatos" [instead isolates himself, searching among the most anonymous of people]. As the film's self-designated Pilate, he recognizes that "su final no sería muy distinto" [(Rantés's) death will not be much different], and indeed the patient is soon tied down in a crucified posture, groaning, "Doctor, doctor, ¿por qué me abandonó?" [Doctor, doctor, why have you abandoned me?]. As if this were not enough, just before dying, Rantés lies in Beatriz's arms in a pietà arrangement mirroring a sculpture that remains outside the frame, but that still sits in front of the Buenos Aires asylum chapel near which the scene was filmed.

Of course viewers might still be tempted to understand these images as answering a heartless bureaucracy with religious escapism. Subiela would then be using images evocative of Jesus and Mary merely as spiritual consolation for earthly injustices. To interpret the film this way, however, overlooks the extent to which religious authorities in the Dirty War years were publicly tied to the military's abuses. As has become painfully clear during recent trials, the Catholic hierarchy only began to distance itself from junta leaders in the last couple of years before its collapse. Before sensing that inevitability, the Church was badly entangled with the dictatorship, which had been savvy enough to

recognize the value of placating religious authorities. The Process therefore became a period not only of political terrorism, but also of enforced cultural homogeneity. As historian Luis Alberto Romero explains, “censorship was extended to all manifestations of new fashions, from the miniskirt to long hair, all expressions of the evils that according to the Catholic Church were a prelude to Communism: free love, pornography, and divorce” (175). Bishops were awarded personal favors, so that with only rare exceptions, the ecclesiastical hierarchy “condoned the association that the military made in its public statements between state terrorism and Christian virtues. The Church refrained from criticism and justified in a barely disguised manner the eradication of so-called atheist subversion” (238). In some cases, Church leaders even participated directly in torture sessions. In a particularly heinous case, Rev. Christian von Wernich worked as a police chaplain and “extracted confessions to help the military root out perceived enemies, while at the same time offering comforting words and hope to family members searching for loved ones who had been kidnapped by the government” (Barrionuevo).

This context makes it difficult to claim that Subiela’s film is offering heavenly comfort as an antidote to earthly atrocities. Instead, its repeated distinctions between the desperation of Argentina’s forgotten citizens and the callousness of its empowered classes draws heavily on liberation theology’s preference for the poor and its condemnation of religiously-sanctioned abuse of power. In this sense, it resonates with poetry anthologies published by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who marched for an hour every Thursday afternoon over several decades to demand reparations for their disappeared family members, “reproduc[ing] in their writings elements of liberation theology that not only countered the rulers’ demonizing, but reestablished the presence of the victims by actualizing the ideological constructs they had embraced” (Partnoy 7). Rantés is not a romanticized savior aimed at soothing audiences’ anger, but an intense messiah who serves the destitute and defies those who wish to control history. He is remarkably alien to Process-era Catholicism, acting neither calculatingly nor sentimentally, but giving away his coat because it is “un reflejo totalmente racional. Si alguien tiene frío, tengo que evitarlo” [a totally rational reaction. If someone is cold, I must help]. His Kantian assumption is that a life that neglects others’ suffering is as absurd as a government that impedes ethical inquiry. A Christ of the poor, Rantés is literally and figuratively alien to his country’s power brokers, a man more concerned with the anonymous and the incarcerated than with personal possessions. As Joanna Page summarizes, in this film the greatest knowledge is “only fully possessed by the divine and the utterly downtrodden” (396), and the gap between these categories is minimal.

One last element of *Man Facing Southeast* is inextricable from Argentina’s efforts to confront its history: the film’s references to Adolfo Bioy Casares’s surreal science-fiction classic, *La invención de Morel* (1940; henceforth *The Invention of Morel*). In Bioy Casares’s novel—hailed by both Jorge Luis Borges and Octavio Paz as “perfect”—a fugitive arrives at a small, apparently deserted island occupied only by several buildings. Soon, however, he finds himself

surrounded by a small community of friends who appear to be on vacation, enjoying a pool, tennis courts, and ocean views along with opulent dinners in the “museum” where they sleep. The cautious narrator’s gradual but shocking discovery is that these persons cannot sense his presence. Only slowly does he understand that he is not invisible; instead, these men and women are part of a different space-time continuum. They are mechanized projections that appeal to all five senses, like those found on the holodeck of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, with the exception that they are recordings, not expressions of artificial intelligence, and therefore cannot change their predetermined behavior in any manner. Moreover, the narrator slowly discovers that the island’s miraculous invention literalizes the old fear that photography means death, in that the human originals are sacrificed for the sake of their copies, which go on replaying whole weeks of their antecedents’ behavior indefinitely. Ultimately, the narrator joins these phantoms, using the island’s holographic technology to record an image of himself seemingly interacting with the blind, deaf, unfeeling images, then superimposing it upon the previous recording. Enabling this artificial eternity, one gathers, is preferable to a real lifetime of interacting with such ghosts.

Subiela’s innovation is to adapt Bioy Casares’s imagined technology for Rantés’s explanation of how he interacts with human beings, a revelation that sends Denis looking for his copy of *The Invention of Morel*. While expanding on the novel by introducing lasers into the equation, Rantés not only claims that he is himself a projection, but implies that as Denis and other humans evolve, they will eventually become holograms as well. In an early scene, after Rantés warns the doctor that his fingerprints might match those of a dead man, Denis asks, “Usted cree que podría estar muerto y sin embargo estar aquí frente a mí?” [Do you believe you could be dead and still be here in front of me?]. Rantés not only agrees, but also indicates that such death-in-life is apparent in most people, and not just figuratively. He explains that his culture has built “un gran proyector programado con una computadora muy compleja, que incluye en esos rayos todos los datos vitales para que esa imagen tenga vida” [a great projector programmed with a very complex computer, which includes in its rays all the data necessary for its image to be alive]. By contrast, Denis and human beings remain in “la prehistoria de los hologramas” [the prehistory of the holograms], like the narrator of Bioy Casares’s novel before he uses Morel’s machine to record himself. The magic of this description is that it reflects the film’s broader effort to turn the tables on its unreliable narrator. Denis might have expected Rantés to identify himself with a projection, an only half-present entity that is more archive than free agent, but the patient alien dares to explain that his projected reality is more complete than the one Denis knows. Similarly, the bureaucrats of Argentina’s postdictatorship democracy might be comfortable viewing the disappeared as apparitions who will eventually fade from popular consciousness, but *Man Facing Southeast* reminds viewers that they too will eventually become memories. No one can escape the projecting machines; the real question is what it will take for those living in the recordings’ “prehistory”

to recognize and accept their own transience. In this sense, *Man Facing Southeast* not only echoes a novel from a half-century earlier, but anticipates the memory-making machine of a film that would follow in its tracks a decade later.

Underground Transcendence and Quantum Paraspaces. If Subiela's film needed to challenge Argentines to confront recent history, official attitudes toward discussions of the junta years were considerably more hardened by the time Gustavo Mosquera followed in his mentor's steps. There had been too much conflict already, the argument went, so as Latin American cinema historian John King summarizes, President Menem sought "an amnesty for all parties in order to 'reconcile' Argentine society through a process of forgetting crimes that had been committed, tried and sentenced" (265). References to the Dirty War disappeared from a weakening film industry; in 1994, only eleven features were released, whereas twice that number had been common in the mid-to-late 1980s. In this climate, Mosquera and forty-five students at La Universidad del Cine took a considerable risk in reengaging Dirty War history, even via sf motifs. Precisely because of its official suppression, the topic was inescapable, Mosquera explained: "En realidad mis películas no hablan de los desaparecidos, sino de los que sobrevivieron, y que tienen internalizado el tema de la desaparición. La vida de estos personajes ya no puede escapar a contener este tema" [Really, my films are not about the disappeared, but those who survived and have internalized the theme of the disappearances. The lives of such people cannot help but contain this theme] (Larrain 3). For Mosquera, the junta leaders might have been able to whisk perceived insurgents off the cultural stage, but subsequent democracies should not be allowed to do the same with the memories of these individuals.

In 2005, in a coffee shop across from the national film institute where he was teaching, Mosquera told me how being drafted into the military forced him to leave film school and bitterly lamented the nearly two years he spent "cleaning toilets [for] those bastards." Even after his service ended, he felt it necessary to complete degrees in electrical engineering and psychology rather than film studies in order to camouflage his ongoing, unofficial film study and his intellectual ambitions. This did not save him from harassment: one evening before an exam—by coincidence, of course—he received a call from his former military supervisors demanding he immediately deliver a package to a distant town. The overnight trip brought him back to Buenos Aires only as his test was ending, and he was not allowed a makeup. Yet it is worth repeating that Mosquera's concern with *Moebius* is not the dictatorship itself, but more recent administrations' attempts to gloss over the past. Inspired by the holographic machines in *The Invention of Morel* and *Man Facing Southeast*, but in this case allegorizing Argentina's *memories* of the disappeared rather than the individuals themselves, *Moebius* uses metanarrative imagery to reach beyond both linear and circular notions of temporality toward a combined, spiraling form. Reati observes that in "manifest[ing] an obsession with psychological asphyxiation," Argentine fiction and film of the 1980s often rely upon enclosed spaces like "prisons, boarding schools, hospitals and other similar institutions," as well as

“tunnels, subways, trains” (31). My argument is that a decade later, Mosquera’s disappearing subway train redeploys what was once a symbol of captivity and fatalism, reaching beyond cycles of repression into an elusive realm in which change remains possible.

Mosquera’s protagonist, Daniel Pratt, does not claim to be from outer space, but like Rantés, he stands against the bureaucracy that reigns in Buenos Aires institutions, here the city transportation office rather than a psychiatric hospital. A theoretical mathematician badly overqualified for his work on a new highway (presumably one of many the Menem administration started but never finished, to judge by a lingering shot of an incomplete overpass), Pratt is asked to investigate the strange disappearance of a subway train, along with its thirty or forty passengers (one per thousand of the disappeared). Following leads to the apartment of his old mathematics professor, Dr. Mistein, he gains the help of an adolescent girl named Abril, a neighbor who cares for the retiree’s cat in his absence. After examining missing subway plans and notes about the “Moebius” effect, Pratt returns underground. There he endures the ridicule of incurious bureaucrats dedicated only to restoring the status quo, men who would rather deny that the train exists and risk public safety than hinder the economy by shutting down the system. Eventually Pratt must navigate the subterranean labyrinth of dark, dripping tunnels alone, and after nearly being hit by the speeding, half-invisible missing train, he almost abandons the chase. At this point, however, the young man suddenly finds himself aboard the lost train 86, engaging its conductor, Professor Mistein, in a weighty discussion about time, memory, and ideology. The film concludes with the train’s reappearance at a station bereft of its passengers, and just when it seems everything is back to normal, news that a second train has gone missing.

If *K-PAX* illustrates a pattern whereby US narratives silently assimilate Latin American sources, *Moebius* refreshingly complicates its North American inspiration. Openly acknowledging his debt, Mosquera adopted the skeleton of his plot from a short story by A.J. Deutsch, “A Subway Named Moebius” (1950). The name pays homage to the actual mathematician who discovered the Möbius strip, a figure-eight feedback loop with a two-dimensional surface twisted so as to have only one side. In Deutsch’s relatively straightforward story, a Boston subway train disappears, only to rematerialize after a month and to allow its passengers to disembark, unaware that anything unusual has happened. Mosquera’s transference of his screenplay to an imaginatively expanded Buenos Aires subway system also draws heavily on Argentine fantastic fiction like *The Invention of Morel*. Audiences who know the city quickly recognize that all but one of the station names, the nonexistent “peripheral line,” and the tripled length of the tracks move the film into a space-time continuum that is alternative more than it is futuristic. *Moebius* does not attempt to predict any coming state of affairs or to seriously imagine a new time-traveling device. Instead, the film’s science-fictional elements provide the audience with emotional distance from the horrors of the Dirty War, then unflinchingly return to those events in a manner defying further attempts at repression. The train on

which Pratt eventually rides might best be understood as the metaphorical antonym of the memory-removal device central to the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). *Moebius*'s machine restores memories.

Idelber Avelar's *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (1999) is particularly helpful for grasping this capacity of Mosquera's narrative. Following Walter Benjamin in showing how "mourning lies at the very origin of allegory" (3; emphasis in original), Avelar's book indicates why it makes sense to interpret the individuals aboard train 86 not as signifiers for the Dirty War disappeared, but for Argentina's memories of those victims. The passengers are already dead, "lost objects"; *Moebius*'s concern is how to mourn them. Avelar offers a particularly valuable contrast between introjection and incorporation, one he borrows from Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok:

introjection designates the horizon of a successful completion of mourning work, whereby the lost object is dialectically absorbed and expelled, internalized in such a way that the libido can now be discharged into a surrogate object. Introjection thus secures a relation to the deceased at the same time as it compensates for the loss. In incorporation, on the other hand, the traumatic object remains lodged within the ego as a foreign body, "invisible yet omnipresent," unnameable except through partial synonyms. (8)

This difference is at the heart of *Moebius*'s references to the Dirty War: instead of the neoliberals' repressive strategy of incorporation, the film imagines a new path of introjection. When we first encounter train 86, it is acting as an incorporated object, an "*allegorical crypt*, that is to say, the remainder that exposes unresolved mourning work," "an intrapsychic tomb" that mummifies its occupants as "phantasmic doubles" (8) of the disappeared. Train 86's riders are stuck in a temporal loop in which the ideology of the new government has become so fully incorporated as to be invisible. In the blue light of the film's climax, however, Mosquera reveals the introjective alternative. Now the runaway train carries a man who has learned from an older generation, a man who understands what has really happened. An even younger person on the outside, Abril, can meet Pratt's gaze as he passes, suggesting that the cycle of repression has been interrupted. In this "circumscribed period when history is suspended, and secular, onward-flowing time gives way to an eternalized time devoid of growth or progression" (68), Argentina's younger generations can see time holistically, gazing backward and forward at once.

Scott Bukatman's vocabulary is also valuable at this strange juncture. In *Terminal Identity*, he follows Samuel Delany in probing the kind of paraspace Mosquera imagines with his subterranean realm. In such a quantized space-time, Bukatman explains, "there may be multiple, and perhaps infinite, universes flickering into existence at all given moments [and] standard notions of linearity, causality, temporality, and ontology have been thrown into disarray" (173). In *Moebius*, we see this in the subway system's scrambled timepieces: when Pratt charts train arrivals immediately before encountering train 86, his stopwatch reads 4:34 one moment, 4:43 the next, and then backs up to 4:37 in

a third shot that his handwriting's progress indicates must be subsequent. Before he finally boards train 86 (at "Borges" station, appropriately), time is further contorted by an ancient clock reading an even earlier 4:32. Why this reordering? Bukatman emphasizes that "in the world of quantum physics ... the observer fundamentally *determines* events" (173; emphasis in original), implying that instead of viewing *Moebius*'s underground paraspace as magical, we should regard it as reflecting its inhabitants' foundational assumptions. For the politicians, train 86 returns empty because this is the only reality they can conceive; on the other hand, it remains outside of conventional time for Pratt and his former teacher because they can imagine a new, paradoxical possibility, one that reproduces the projected temporalities of *The Invention of Morel* and *Man Facing Southeast*. One moment we have politicians echoing the absurd denials of the town square massacre in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967): "Ahora llévalo a la cochera y que no se hable mas del tema, ¿entendido? Acá no ha pasado nada!" [Now take it back to the garage and let no one speak anymore of this, understood? Nothing happened here!]. The next, we learn a second train has gone missing, indicating that Pratt, his professor, and the first train's occupants have not disappeared as fully as it might have seemed. History can only be denied for so long, *Moebius* intimates, and despite all efforts to the contrary, the dead remain among the living.

Of course it is hardly surprising that a work with this title comes full circle. We might even look for it to reflect a figure-eight narrative shape, to become a kind of feedback loop. As it turns out, though, Mosquera's film does not just repeat its pattern eternally in the manner of the projected entities in *The Invention of Morel*. There remain observers outside the phenomenon, who will confront the problem of a second missing train in light of their prior experience with train 86. The impatient neoliberals who run the Buenos Aires of Mosquera's film will step into the river of time again, but their perspectives will be different because of train 86, however they might wish to forget it. In truth, as Argentina has begun circling back to its Dirty War past, it has done so in full awareness of previous efforts to quash the details. The nation's perspective on what happens next is therefore much like that of Pratt in the film's prologue. On a first viewing, his words seem a conventional introduction to the ensuing events, but once we understand the film's treatment of time, we realize that his narration can only proceed from the paraspace achieved in the film's conclusion. The narration's use of the past tense rules out any other explanation:

El subte es, sin duda, el símbolo de los tiempos que corren... Un laberinto donde nos cruzamos en silencio con nuestros semejantes sin saber quines son ni adonde van... Cientos de túneles en los que aprovechamos para establecer un balance, reveer una situación, e intentar abordar, más que un tren, un cambio de vida... Un extraño juego en el que nos sumergimos sin darnos cuenta que con cada cambio de línea estamos variando definitivamente nuestro destino. Con el subte descubrí una poderosa máquina de mirar...., pero nunca llegué a imaginar lo que al poco tiempo me iba a ocurrir! [The subway is undoubtedly the symbol of our times: a labyrinth where we silently cross paths without truly knowing

others or where they are going. Hundreds of tunnels where we look for balance and new insight into our situation, and then intend to change not just trains, but our way of life. A strange game in which we submerge ourselves without realizing that with each transfer between lines, we are definitively changing our destiny. In the subway I discovered a powerful imaging machine—but I never began to imagine what was going to happen to me!]

Pratt's retrospective allusion to Bioy Casares evinces two ways *Moebius* functions as cultural commentary. First, once we understand that he is speaking from a space-time beyond the story's apparent chronology, Pratt's anxieties about individual isolation, the need for personal transformation, and the challenge of overcoming fatalism emphasize the persistence of such afflictions long after periods of national horror. Atrocities come and go, but malaise is always with us, this underground prophet suggests. Through various metacinematic images, the film indicates that before any real healing can occur, we must directly confront our culture's wounds. Second, and even more subtly, the prologue invites us to interpret *Moebius* not just as a film about Argentine history but as a reflection upon the capacities of film, especially sf film. In purchasing movie tickets and DVDs, Mosquera proposes, we are seeking not just entertainment but a new way of being in the world, a way to "chang[e] our destiny." Like the narrator of *The Invention of Morel* or Rantés in *Man Facing Southeast*, we are searching for habits of memory that face rather than flee history. In this sense, Mosquera's film does not just use the equipment of the movie theater, but as with Bioy Casares's and Subiela's works, itself becomes a "powerful imaging machine." With its inexpensive but entrancing metacinematic effects, *Moebius* would transform Argentina's future by reframing its past.

The climactic scenes on train 86 convey this phenomenon not just thematically but formally. Once Pratt is aboard the mystery train, Mosquera uses his main character's direct acknowledgment of the camera and a complex *mise en scène* to pursue psychological depths similar to those achieved by *Man Facing Southeast* in the series of brief cutaways during Denis's interview of the suicidal patient. First, Pratt's eyes are drawn to a passenger's newspaper, which still shows the date of train 86's disappearance, even though several days have passed in the external world. One of Pratt's eyes stays hidden behind the newspaper, but the other shifts toward the camera, momentarily addressing us as the audience and foreshadowing a more extended gaze later in the sequence. At that point, Pratt's face fills the frame for a long beat with an inescapable interrogation: what do we as audience make of all this? Mosquera avoids melodrama by answering the shot with Professor Mistein's own quizzical expression, but we are already sutured into the exchange. And that is to say nothing of the stories told by the earlier shots over Pratt's shoulder. While we watch the subway platform slide by in slow motion, the train's rectangular windows become individual photograms, immense negatives divided by the subway car's partitions. As they slide from right to left, a prostitute looks for business. Another pan, another vignette: an old man hopes for change from a middle-aged businessman, but he is too busy on his cell phone to notice, then

merely annoyed. Also evoked by the series of homeless men who populate the film's margins with their accordions and begging bowls is the nation's unemployment rate, which would reach 15% within a year of *Moebius's* release, and was headed for 20% by 2001. Unfortunately, though, as Mistein says, "vivimos en un mundo en el que ya nadie escucha" [we live in a world where no one listens anymore]. Then Pratt and Abril lock eyes. She is sitting on the same bench where he left her hours before so that he could talk with the bureaucrats, and they may even be encountering each other across that temporal wrinkle. In any case, as Mosquera explained in another interview, "It's a connection. And the professor is talking about this connection, but not only in terms of the girl. The professor is also talking about the big connection between the people and 'missing people'" (Moss 80). Each Argentine generation and each citizen, the film insists, must define their own relationships to the nation's history if more disappearances are to be avoided and future memories are to be more complete.

Ultimately, Pratt is overwhelmed by Mistein's "perfect machine," declaring, "No puede ser que todo esto se pierda." As translated in the English subtitles, Pratt seems to be referring to the success of Mistein's physics experiment and the wonder of an alternative space-time: "This can't get lost." A better translation, however, would render his words in the present subjunctive—"It can't be that all this *is* lost"—or even in the present tense, used to express the future—"It can't be that all this *will be* lost." Either way, beyond praising Mistein's achievement, Pratt emphasizes that the people on the train are not simply the disappeared, but Argentina's memories of them, and that the scene is not about romanticizing history, but about completing the work of mourning. Mistein's response then becomes the film's clearest statement about those who have disappeared, whether during the Dirty War or otherwise: "El hombre no conoce ni sus límites, ni sus posibilidades. No conoce siquiera hasta qué punto no se conoce.... Ni los hombres ni el tiempo desaparecen sin dejar huellas—quedan fijados en nuestras almas" [Humanity neither knows its limits nor its possibilities. It doesn't even know that it doesn't know itself.... Still, neither people nor time disappears without leaving traces—they stick to our souls]. As the scene concludes and the subway platform recedes, the frame of the train window crosses Pratt's retina, etching these scenes onto his vision, and perhaps the audience's. Train 86 retreats into the tunnel, becoming a small rectangle of light, then darkness, but cinema has succeeded in offering the possibility of change. Entities as complex as human beings can never be recalled exactly, but no matter how suddenly they disappear, they always leave traces.

Moebius's gestures to its genre only deepen this claim. Appropriately, the work's low-budget special effects were inspired by the Stanley Kubrick film Sobchack once described as a "vast spatial and temporal Moebius strip" (226). In making a subway train that could not exceed twenty mph appear to approach infinite speed, Mosquera was recreating the famous Stargate sequence in his longtime favorite film, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Making do with limited

resources, the director found two nearly seventy-year-old 35mm cameras at a pawn shop and retrofitted them so as to create his special effects. As a local magazine article summarized the process, “From a moving train, Mosquera and his students slowed down the camera and shot images of the subway tunnel walls. The resulting footage, transferred to video, was projected at normal speed on screens set up on the track beside the subway” (Moss 80). In other words, Mosquera’s team followed Kubrick in creating the illusion of infinite speed by *filming film*. With these scenes, we view a literal “image of temporal self-inclusion” (Irwin 21), an effect simultaneously aesthetic and thematic, and one that encapsulates the larger work’s reflections on cinema’s potential.

This climactic homage to *2001* is only one way *Moebius* illustrates Lynne Kirby’s argument that “as a machine of vision and an instrument for conquering space and time, the train is a mechanical double for the cinema and for the transport of the spectator into fiction, fantasy, and dream” (2). One of Mosquera’s favorite metacinematic devices, what Stewart calls the “inlaid screen” (“Vitagraphic” 194), is featured throughout the film, not just in the blue-light scene at the end. As Pratt walks through the subway system in the prologue and muses upon the events we are about to observe, he is framed momentarily by a dark rectangular tunnel, a screen upon which Pratt himself is projected. The motif reappears in Professor Mistein’s apartment, whose many temporal references (a globe whirled by Abril, an hourglass, a print of Escher’s “Hand with Reflecting Sphere”) recall the spinning timepiece foregrounded in the scenes of Denis’s apartment in *Man Facing Southeast*. When Abril punches an overhead projector on and off in a rhythm echoing that of the subway’s confused stoplights, she also draws attention to a rectangular window shade that becomes another screen, this time so that various nodes in the subway system can be projected. These metacinematic signals culminate in the moments underground when Pratt grins defiantly into a security camera and his image registers on an unattended security office monitor; also when he gazes into a broken, rectangular mirror in a restroom near Borges station. In the latter case, as Pratt leans forward, we see him confront a graffiti image of a demon, then watch his reflection move from the borders of the larger screen into the broken sections of glass. There is no perfect mimesis, no exact recording or neutral projection, *Moebius* reminds us, but we are better off pursuing narratives that represent as much of history as possible than attempting to edit out parts we find offensive. The devils dance wildest when the details disappear.

Nor can cultural efforts to recover history ever be considered complete. Even with the successes of recent years, Argentina’s pursuit of justice for Dirty War victims and perpetrators continues to meet resistance. In the same month that President Néstor Kirchner declared a new holiday to remember the disappeared, a leader of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo was beaten in her home, and her masked attackers “made clicking sounds as if holding a gun to her head and pulling the trigger” (Rohter 3). The convictions of former military leaders and complicit civilians keep coming, but so do news flashes about witnesses who mysteriously die before giving testimony.⁴ Argentina’s transformation is as gradual and spiraling as the structure of *Moebius*, and it

continues to involve the tragic mode as much as *Man Facing Southeast*. Still, there remain good reasons to regard science-fiction film as one medium through which memories can be recovered and justice encouraged. John Carlos Rowe showed in “Culture, U.S. Imperialism, and Globalization” that Hollywood war spectacles in the decades after Vietnam—even the most pacifistically motivated—ironically helped to remilitarize the US; but in the same period, Argentine sf film was having a very different impact. Rather than working as a palliative, like the glorifications of bravado and firepower that assuaged memories of the US’s first national military defeat, *Man Facing Southeast* and *Moebius* used a more restrained—though no less ingenious—brand of special effects to urge audiences to face events some Argentines still find difficult to discuss. Of course, Subiela’s and Mosquera’s films did not change their nation’s political atmosphere on their own, but they were two more nudges in a badly needed direction. It is never convenient to redress past wrongs, whether in the northern or southern hemisphere, but these works powerfully demonstrate that glossing over atrocities is even more costly.

NOTES

I would like to thank this essay’s anonymous reviewers as well as Veronica Hollinger, who shepherded it through several very worthwhile revisions. In earlier stages, it also benefited from careful readings by Claire Fox and Garrett Stewart, and from a travel grant through International Programs at the University of Iowa.

1. For additional examples of postdictatorship Argentine sf film, see other works directed by Eliseo Subiela and Gustavo Mosquera, as well as the hard-to-find adaptation of Adolfo Bioy Casares’s *Otra esperanza* (Another Hope, 1984); the sf/horror film *Alguien te está mirando* (Someone is Watching You, 1988); the farcical apocalyptic musical *Cipayos: la tercer invasion* (The Third Invasion, 1989); Fernando Spiner’s relatively serious and well-funded *La sonámbula* (The Sleepwalker, 1998), comedic *Adiós querida luna* (Goodbye, Dear Moon, 2004); and the animated films *Condor crux* (2000) and *Mercano el marciano* (Mercano the Martian, 2002). For a sampling of Argentine sf’s most recent, rather melodramatic tendencies, see *La antena* (The Aerial, 2007), *Filmatron* (2007), and *100% lucha, el amo de los clones* (100% Fight: The Master of the Clones, 2009).

2. Ricardo Manetti astutely observes in Claudio España’s expansive *Cine argentino en democracia 1983/1993* that Subiela’s use of the saxophone may also refer to the main character of Julio Cortázar’s “El perseguidor” (The Pursuer), who “necesita de un saxo en los momentos de honda reflexión” [needs a saxophone in moments of deep reflection] (120). For Denis, by contrast, the instrument is a means of escapism and denial.

3. For examples of criticism downplaying the seriousness of *Man Facing Southeast* about its aliens’ unearthly origins, see Pablo Arredondo, who argues that “el planteamiento de una diferente visión de la realidad, a partir de la locura, crea el sentido de ambigüedad con que se construyen los contenidos filmicos” [the approach of a differing vision of reality in the form of insanity creates the feeling of ambiguity that structures the film’s contents] (133), a view that strikes me as forcing the film into the same inert neutrality that it problematizes. Likewise, Richard Scheib recognizes the supernatural elements that Arredondo neglects but sees no way of resolving them with the photograph’s apparent testimony to their human origins: “Rantés’ [sic] displays of telekinesis and the blue fluid Beatriz dribbles definitely land the film in the otherworldly,

yet contradictorily the film definitely roots both Rantés and Beatriz as having a human past” (Scheib). Certainly Denis’s discovery of the torn photograph showing a younger Rantés and Beatriz is important evidence of their human histories, but whether it also demonstrates that they are not in any way alien is questionable. Finally, Gustavo Verdesio suggests that the film relies on an intentional contradiction: “Creo que si algo da cuenta de la constante oscilación entre tipos discursivos en esta película, si algo explica que la tensión entre ellos se rompa sólo al final, es concebir este filme como una dramatización de la imposibilidad de narrar” [I think that if anything can account for the constant oscillation between types of discourse in the film, if anything can explain why the tension between them is broken only at the end, it is to understand this film as a dramatization of the impossibility of narrating] (160). For me, this shuts down the film as an ode to the impossibility of meaning, an interpretation difficult to reconcile with the film’s political investment. I prefer the analyses of Paraná Sendrós, who suggests Rantés is an alien driven insane by humanity, and Octavio Getino, who admires the film’s recovery of the subjective in the face of the hyper-rational.

4. For more evidence of progress in bringing former military leaders to justice, see Charles Newbery and Alexei Barrionuevo’s article, “25 Years for Leader of Argentine Dictatorship,” as well as the Associated Press article, “Former Argentine Navy Officer to be Tried in Torture Deaths.” But note also Maria Trigona’s piece for the Americas Program, “Murder of Human Rights Witness Sparks Fear.”

WORKS CITED

- Arredondo, Pablo. *Sobrevivir entre imágenes y palabras: literatura y cine en Eliseo Subiela*. Tucumán, Argentina: Instituto Interdisciplinario de Estudios Latinoamericanos, 2000.
- Associated Press. “Former Argentine Navy Officer to be Tried in Torture Deaths.” *New York Times* 10 Dec. 2009. Online. 20 Jan. 2011.
- Avelar, Idelber. *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999.
- Barrionuevo, Alexei. “Argentine Church Faces ‘Dirty War’ Past.” *New York Times* 17 Sept. 2007. Online. 20 Jan. 2011.
- Bell, Andrea L., and Yolanda Molina-Gavilán, eds. *Cosmos Latinos: An Anthology of Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2003.
- Bioy Casares, Adolfo. *The Invention of Morel*. 1940. Trans. Ruth L. C. Simms. New York: New York Review of Books, 2003.
- Bukatman, Scott. *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993.
- Bould, Mark. “Film and Television.” *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. Ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. New York: Cambridge UP, 2003. 79-95.
- Cavallari, Héctor Mario. “El exilio sin fin: De Subiela a Bioy Casares.” *Alba de América: Revista Literaria* 15.28-29 (July 1997): 262-71.
- Deutsch, A.J. “A Subway Named Moebius” [1950]. *Fantasia Mathematica*. Ed. Clifton Fadiman. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958. 222-36.
- Ellis, Caron Schwartz. “With Eyes Uplifted: Space Aliens as Sky Gods.” *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*. Ed. Sean Redmond. New York: Wallflower, 2004. 145-53.
- Falicov, Tamara L. *The Cinematic Tango: Contemporary Argentine Film*. New York: Wallflower, 2007.

- Getino, Octavio. *Cine argentino: entre lo posible y lo deseable*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones CICCUS, 1998.
- Hombre Mirando al Sudeste* [Man Facing Southeast]. Dir. Eliseo Subiela. Perf. Lorenzo Quinteros, Hugo Soto, and Inés Vernengo. FilmDallas Pictures, 1987.
- Irwin, John T. *The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994.
- Kantaris, Elia Geoffrey. "The Repressed Signifier: The Cinema of Alejandro Agresti and Eliseo Subiela." *Identity and Discursive Practices: Spain and Latin America*. Ed. Francisco Domínguez. New York: Peter Lang, 2000. 157-73.
- King, John. *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America*. 2nd ed. New York: Verso, 2000.
- Kirby, Lynne. *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997.
- K-PAX*. Dir. Iain Softley. Perf. Kevin Spacey and Jeff Bridges. Universal, 2001. DVD.
- Larrain, Marina. "Moebius o el infinito en 35 mm." *Haciendo Cine Magazine* 8 Dec. 2004. Online. 11 May 2005.
- Manetti, Ricardo. "Cine de autor." *Cine argentino en democracia 1983/1993*. Ed. Claudio España. Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 1994. 105-23.
- Moebius*. Dir. Gustavo Mosquera R. Perf. Guillermo Angelelli. 1996. Latin American Video Archive, 2005. VHS.
- Molina-Gavilán, Yolanda, et al. "Chronology of Latin American Science Fiction, 1775-2005." *SFS* 34.3 (Nov. 2007): 369-431.
- Mosquera R., Gustavo. Personal interview. 1 July 2005.
- Moss, Nathaniel. "Ribbon of Cinema: Moebius." *Film Comment* Nov.-Dec. 1997. Online. 28 June 2010.
- Newbery, Charles, and Alexei Barrionuevo. "25 Years for Leader of Argentine Dictatorship." *New York Times* 20 Apr. 2010. Online. 28 June 2010.
- Page, Joanna. "Postmodernism, History and Social Critique in Post-Dictatorship Argentine Cinema: A Reading of Eliseo Subiela's *El lado oscuro del corazón*." *Modern Language Review* 96.2 (Apr. 2001): 358-96.
- Partnoy, Alicia. "Textual Strategies to Resist Disappearance and the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.1 (Mar. 2007). Online. 15 January 2011.
- Paz, Mariano. "South of the Future: An Overview of Latin American Science Fiction Cinema." *Science Fiction Film and Television* 1.1 (Spring 2008): 81-103.
- Reati, Fernando. "Argentine Political Violence and Artistic Representation in Films of the 1980's." *Latin American Literary Review* 17 (July-Dec. 1989): 24-39.
- Rohter, Larry. "On Coup's Anniversary, Argentines Vow 'Never Again.'" *New York Times* 25 Mar. 2006. Online. 28 June 2010.
- Romero, Luis Alberto. *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*. 1994. Trans. James P. Brennan. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2002.
- Rowe, John Carlos. "Culture, US Imperialism, and Globalization." *American Literary History* 16.4 (Winter 2004): 575-95.
- Ruppersburg, Hugh. "The Alien Messiah." *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*. Ed. Annette Kuhn. New York: Verso, 1990. 32-38.
- Scheib, Richard. "Man Facing Southeast (Hombre Mirando al Sudeste)." *The Science Fiction, Horror, and Fantasy Film Review*. 1990. Online. 28 June 2010.
- Sendrós, Paraná. *Eliseo Subiela*. Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1993.

- Sobchack, Vivian. *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1987.
- Stewart, Garrett. *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000.
- . "Vitagraphic Time." *Biography* 29.1 (Winter 2006): 159-92.
- Tandeciarz, Silvia R. "Citizens of Memory: Refiguring the Past in Postdictatorship Argentina." *PMLA* 122.1 (2007): 151-69.
- Trigona, Maria. "Murder of Human Rights Witness Sparks Fear." *Americas Program*. 30 Apr. 2010. Online. 28 June 2010.
- Verdesio, Gustavo. "Tipos discursivos y narración de la historia en *Hombre mirando al sudeste*." *Cine-Lit II: Essays on Hispanic Film and Fiction*. Ed. George Cabello-Castellet, Jaume Martí-Olivella, and Guy H. Wood. Portland, OR: Portland State UP, 1995. 155-62.

ABSTRACT

Produced after Argentina's 1977-83 "Dirty War," in which over thirty thousand citizens were murdered by a military junta, Eliseo Subiela's *Man Facing Southeast* (1986) and his mentee Gustavo Mosquera's *Moebius* (1996) are Latin American science fiction films that powerfully defy postdictatorship efforts to cover up the nation's militarism, political corruption, and human rights abuses. While refusing to provide simple paths to restitution, the films use the sf motifs of alien encounter and time travel to offer a measure of meaning to the survivors of injustice, pushing both domestic and international audiences to confront memories of individual and cultural shame. At the same time, the films' separation by a full decade suggests how differing political contexts may require distinct aesthetic choices. While the alien messiah of *Man Facing Southeast* directly pits Latin American liberation theology against Catholic complicity with the dictatorship—in the process remediating Adolfo Bioy Casares's *La invención de Morel* (1940)—its filmic descendent, *Moebius*, confronts the political ideology of its own time through subtler allusions to Bioy Casares and a more abstract, transcendent mathematics and quantum physics.