
The Road Movie, Space, and the Politics of Lesbian Representation in Diego Lerman's
"Tan de repente"

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The Road Movie, Space, and the Politics of Lesbian Representation in Diégo Lerman's *Tan de repente*

Mediante el uso del concepto de género cinematográfico planteado por Christine Gledhill y de la teorización del espacio social propuesta por Henry Lefebvre, este artículo busca indagar en las políticas de representación que el filme argentino Tan de repente (Diego Lerman, 2002) utiliza para hacer visible al sujeto lésbico. Siguiendo a Gledhill, el entrecruce de géneros cinematográficos que caracteriza la cinta pone de relieve la idea de género como modalidad. A su vez, una interpretación del espacio social como espacio percibido, concebido y vivido, según Henry Lefebvre, permite el examen del género cinematográfico con respecto a su dimensión de práctica estética, industrial y crítico-discursiva, y en relación con discursos sobre la juventud, el deseo sexual y el control de la recepción/interpretación que la película invoca. Si bien Tan de repente se puede considerar como un avance en términos de representación al darle un protagonismo "positivo" al sujeto lésbico, la ambigüedad que caracteriza tal representación revela ansiedades culturales que desdibujan la línea entre la visibilidad y el borramiento de la lesbiana. Esto se nota tanto en el interior del filme, con la negación del lesbianismo por parte de las protagonistas, como al nivel parafilímico, a juzgar por los comentarios de Diego Lerman y de las actrices en los papeles principales. La desazón expresada enfatiza el posicionamiento del género cinematográfico como parte integral del espacio social, el cual está intrínsecamente conectado a la producción de conocimiento, su diseminación, control y reformulación.

Shot in 2001 and 2002, in the midst of one of the worst economic crises in Argentina's recent history, Diego Lerman's *Tan de repente* (2002) conveys a brief but real sense of menace in a series of vignettes and encounters that offer a glimpse into social space. By featuring three young female protagonists the movie focuses on issues of representation and sexual desire at the same time that it plays upon generic markers in sudden and unexpected ways. Lerman conveys that even in his title, there is a sense of uncertainty and risk both in respect to plot development and production possibilities (see Saidón). Here, therefore, I shall centre my study on genre and spatio-temporal relations to highlight the politics of lesbian desire and representation in this film.

As I have commented elsewhere, not only is the representation of the lesbian(s) a contested sign in Latin America, the critical parameters governing the analysis of lesbianism indicate a spatialization that is driven by factors such as identity politics, social class, the academic literary canon, marketing, and the commodification of desire.¹ To this list we might also add lived experiences within gay and lesbian movements, and, noteworthy in the 1990s in Argentina, a radical questioning of the nature of sexual identity (Brown 130-31), a shift among some lesbian groups towards women's issues rather than gay rights *per se* (Sardá, "Lesbians" 41; Friedman 794), and a search for alternative methods of expression and association through cyberspace (Friedman 791). All of this, however, should not obscure the central fact, as Elizabeth J. Friedman (794) has noted, that the social stigma attached to lesbian identity continues to make coming out difficult, if not dangerous. There have been cases of the disappearance of lesbians and gay men both during the dictatorship during the 1970s and after the return to democracy in the 1980s, as well as continuing and more recent examples of police harassment as cited by Stephen Brown (121, 123). Also, at the level of national policy "in Argentina public discourse constructs gay, lesbian, transvestite, transsexual, transgender, bisexual and intersex people as exceptions, on the margins of citizenship" (Moreno 142). All such issues contribute to a spatialization that both produces and limits the performance of lesbianism.

Lerman's film focuses on a few days in the lives of three protagonists: Lenin (Verónica Hassán), Mao (Carla Crespo), and Marcia (Tatiana Saphir). Mao and Lenin have been described by the critics (Young, Suárez, Sartora, Smith) and the actresses themselves as punks.² Because of Mao's desire to sleep with Marcia, the two itinerant, jobless, urban, skinny "punks" kidnap the plump emigrant from the provinces who, working as a conscientious but bored shop-attendant, is very far from sharing the world view of Lenin and Mao. These three unlikely companions embark on a road trip in which they meet up with various individuals who, willingly or unwillingly, provide them with the means to travel. After a first stop on the Atlantic coast made to give Marcia her first experience of the sea, the trio goes to Rosario, where Mao and Marcia finally have sex. In Rosario the protagonists interact with Lenin's aunt Blanca (Beatriz Thibaudin, 1928-2007) and her two lodgers, Delia (María Merlino) and Felipe (Marcos Ferrante). After the sudden death of the septuagenarian Blanca, the protagonists part ways: Lenin and Marcia take a bus back to Buenos Aires, while Mao offers Felipe his first direct encounter with the killer whales that he studies and knows only from textbooks.

Tan de repente won critical acclaim both nationally and internationally as well as a considerable number of prizes in world-wide film festivals (Kaplan, Pauls, Pecora, Soto, Suárez). As well as showings on the festival circuit, the film also ran commercially in Holland, Germany, Canada, and the United States

(Kaplan 200). It has been described as “impressive” (“Cannes Heat” 6); “intriguing but obscure and bizarre” (Laight 162); “strange” (Smith 66); and “delightfully unpredictable” (Young 41). In addition, it has been depicted as a “moody, *chiaroscuro* character piece” (Mitchell); and as a film that “make[s] you eagerly anticipate the unexpected” (Suárez 20). Such a varied reception indicates the impact of its minimalist narrative structure centered on the visual with brief dialogues and numerous close-ups of people and objects, in small but meaningful events. On this level, *Tan de repente* resembles such Argentine films as *Bolivia* (Adrián Caetano, 2001), *La ciénaga* (Lucrecia Martel, 2001) and *Historias mínimas* (Carlos Sorín, 2002), and, given the film’s minimalist thrust, grainy black-and-white photography, low production budget, open ending, and virtually unknown cast, Betina Kaplan (199-200) has situated Lerman’s first feature within the so-called New Argentine cinema.³ In the same vein, other critics compare Lerman to well-established film-makers within this tradition such as Albertina Carri, Martín Rejtman and Lisandro Alonso (Sartora), while yet others credit *Tan de repente* with presenting an alternative to two proposed basic models of New Argentine Cinema (Pauls).⁴ Although Lerman does not completely reject such alignments, he does refer to a mythic Argentine *nouvelle vague*, as New Argentine cinema has apparently been called in France, to clarify that he only made contact with other Argentine directors at film festivals and that they do not form a uniform group but rather work independently. As he puts it: “Me parece que lo homogéneo es lo heterogéneo” (Saidón). As is clear from this comment, New Argentine cinema as that part of the national film industry with a critical focus is more diverse than the term might imply, and Lerman acknowledges his involvement in the heterogeneity and complexity both at the technical level and with respect to the themes of the film.⁵ By exploring an essentially female world, *Tan de repente* also shows under-represented segments of the Argentine population such as the obese, the elderly, and the lesbian, although here we shall privilege only the last-mentioned representation.

In Latin American cinema generally the lesbian subject continues to be scantily represented or studied, although it is true that the 2000s saw a slight increase in films featuring lesbians. Besides *Tan de repente*, other contemporary Argentine films that portray lesbianism either directly or obliquely, include Marcos Carnevale’s *Almejas y mejillones* (2000), Daniel Burman’s *Esperando al Mesías* (2000), Lucrecia Martel’s *La ciénaga* (2001) and *La Niña santa* (2004), Pablo Sofovich’s *El favor* (2004), Alejandro Agresti’s *Un mundo menos peor* (2004), and Lucía Puenzo’s *El niño Pez* (2009).⁶ At the same time, in Latin American Film Studies until now, only a few scholars, such as Emily Bergmann, Lori Hopkins, María Elena Soliño, and Bruce Williams have dealt with lesbianism, and sometimes only in passing.⁷ In a seminal overview of lesbian characterization in Argentine cinema of different periods Natalia Taccetta and

Fernando Martín Peña link lesbianism with the depiction of sadism and crime in prison movies, with sensationalism in sexploitation features, and with characterization for comic relief or phases in character development in comedies and contemporary films. By concentrating on a film that presents “cool lesbians” who refuse the lesbian label, the aim here is to add depth to the study of lesbian representation.

Although the term genre is difficult to pin down, Christine Gledhill provides a framework of analysis using the concept of modality as a specific method of aesthetic articulation in that “modality provides the genre system with a mechanism of ‘double articulation,’ capable of generating specific and distinctively different generic formulae in particular historical conjunctures, while also providing a medium of interchange and overlap between genres” (229). Furthermore, if taken as Gledhill (223) proposes, in its triple existence as industrial mechanism, aesthetic practice, and arena of cultural-critical discursivity, genre also provides a framework to study the iconographies used for the characterization and recognition of lesbian subject(s) in order to historicize this content. In this sense, genre and space are closely interlinked as the production of social space is connected to knowledge and ways of disseminating, controlling and challenging it. Space, thus, will be scrutinized here through Henry Lefebvre’s perceived-conceived-lived triad to see how the lesbian subject in *Tan de repente* is represented, interpreted, and undermined.

Tan de repente focuses on youth, a fairly typical subject for Argentine cinema: films from the 1960s such as David José Kohon’s *Tres veces Ana* (1961), and Rodolfo Kuhn’s *Los jóvenes viejos* (1961) and *Los inconstantes* (1963), as well as more contemporary features like Adrian Caetano and Bruno Stagnaro’s *Pizza, birra, faso* (1998), Pablo Trapero’s *El bonaerense* (2002), and Ezequiel Acuña’s *Nadar solo* (2002), all centre on young people from various social classes. In Lerman’s film, the category of genre as a modality situates the youth represented within recognizable frameworks, and the film reviewers cited above have, indeed, noted the variety of genres invoked in the movie.⁸ Here the connection I wish to focus upon is, however, how *Tan de repente* uses genre as a modality through the overlap between the thriller and the road movie. The thriller conventions in the first sequence of the movie place, for example, Marcia as a lone woman who is, apparently, being stalked in the Buenos Aires subway. This sequence starts at the metro station Uruguay, and the frontal angle of the camera which frames the platform, together with the intradiegetic sound of trains and people walking, creates a surveillance effect that centres on Marcia. Close-ups of her and two male passengers inside a train and, soon after, a low angle frame and a *ralenti* of Marcia on an escalator reinforce the feeling of isolation and fragility. Shortly thereafter this tension translates into the impulse Marcia feels to run from one of the men seen in the previous close-ups, who apparently is following her in an empty subway corridor. However, when

Marcia looks back the man stops and retraces his steps. Although danger does not materialize in this sequence, the thriller mode serves to locate Marcia by using recognizable genre conventions within the city as a place full of danger for young women who might be attacked. Also, since during the first sequences of the movie Marcia is often tightly framed within enclosed areas, public places seem basically unfamiliar to her. Besides enhancing the sense of suspense, the portrayal of the city as a place in which Marcia does not feel comfortable conditions the sudden intrusion of Lenin and Mao into Marcia's life.

The tactics of the thriller repertoire play up Marcia's fears and also underscore her provincial background which differentiates her radically from Lenin and Mao. The identification of this trait allows me to introduce here Lefebvre's first triadic element known as perceived space, or spatial practice. This concept refers to physical location and the particular sets of behaviours and activities that generate in each member of society a "guaranteed level of *competence* and a specific level of *performance*" (31). Marcia's provincial origins are key to how young city lesbians such as Mao and Lenin can read her clothing as an unsuccessful attempt at passing as an urbanite and so distinguish themselves from her. Even after Marcia remarks that she has lived in Buenos Aires for six years and that she bought her clothes in the city, Mao responds: "No tiene nada que ver, no entendés. No importa de dónde es la ropa, el tema es que la elegiste vos" (00:17:27). Since dress constitutes what Valerie Manzano ("The Blue Jean" 660) has called a situated bodily practice, Mao and Lenin's anchoring of identity in dress helps them to read Marcia as trying to perform that which she is not. This, of course, reflects historical tensions between Buenos Aires and the provinces, but it also establishes a differentiation at a visual level. While Marcia wears patterned pants and a conventional top and sweater, both Mao and Lenin feature stereotypical punk fashion. In addition to piercings on her left eyebrow, Mao is dressed in a hooded sweatshirt with a knee-length skirt, while Lenin wears a leather jacket with shorts. Both of them also sport heavy military-type boots. In this sense, the three young women's dress performance and Mao and Lenin's competence at assessing this performance link perceived space with the production of social space. This space is marked by origin, taste, and ideas of belonging, particularly with respect to gender diversity, through the introduction of the lesbian *via* an iconography based on punk-style dress and short hair, as well as an irreverent demeanour and the androgynous look.

The introduction of punk lesbians brings us back to modality. If Marcia is often framed in enclosed locations, Mao and Lenin seem to own the city. Through this contrast, *Tan de repente* moves from thriller to road movie to provide an example of modality as a medium of interchange and overlap between genres as the introduction of the two lesbians serves to recycle and rework the road movie genre in a move that draws attention to genre as an industrial mechanism capable, as Gledhill has said, "of generating specific and

distinctively different generic formulae in particular historical conjunctures” (229). This is related to the representation of youth at opposite ends of a spectrum, with Marcia occupying a submissive position while Lenin and Mao act as the aggressive lesbians. Technically, the shift to road movie is achieved through cuts that go from Marcia to Mao and Lenin and back to highlight their differing daily routines. At the level of perceived space, this tells us about the protagonists’ preferred physical locations and their behaviour. Thus, Marcia’s physical setting is bound by her job and her apartment, and to activities like eating by herself in a park. In contrast Mao and Lenin are seen riding a stolen scooter, roaming the streets, and spending time in the usual haunts where young people hang out or socialize like fast-food joints, game parlours, and shops. In fact, the first time they see Marcia, they follow her but only approach her against the background of a graffiti-scribbled wall. The medium shot of the three women against this backdrop further helps situate Lenin and Mao within a very different environment from that of Marcia, in its connection with short-lived art, spontaneity, and “disorder,” as compared to the tiny lingerie shop where Marcia is surrounded by articles and posters of conventional femininity. Thus, while Marcia is associated with tradition, immutability, and order, the two lesbians embrace spontaneity, disorder, movement, and an unconventional femininity.

Before exploring further the link between lesbian representation and youth, I wish to address how *Tan de repente* dialogues with the road movie, a process which, in narrative terms, may be said to displace the thriller impetus of the film. The road movie is introduced initially in how Lenin and Mao journey within the city and then, after the kidnapping, take a trip to prove Mao’s love for Marcia and which takes the protagonists to the sea and then on to Rosario. In recycling and reworking the road movie Lerman draws attention to contemporary historical conjunctures in which new subjects vie for representation. Marcia’s kidnapping at knife-point, the high-jacking of a taxi, and the harsh treatment of Marcia during a segment of the trip cite both the thriller and the outlaw road movie. The film features a sequence in a Burger King which serves to illustrate certain traits and behaviours that suppose the lesbian characters to be tough and vulgarly direct about sex. This harks back to the beginning of the film where violence and perversion seem to be the characteristics anchored in the lesbians. At the fast-food joint Mao accosts Marcia in an abrupt way saying: “¿Querés coger?” and “Te quiero chupar la concha” (00:16:57-00:17:02). Lenin also questions Marcia’s sexual prowess further inscribing her within her provincial origins by remarking: “No sé, tal vez en tu pueblo no cogían nunca e iban todos los domingos a la iglesia” (00:17:15). She also pressures Marcia by asking: “¿Te la chuparon alguna vez? ¿O a las asmáticas no se la chupan?” (00:17:08). This crude characterization mixed with thieving and violent behaviour harks back to Argentine films of the

1950s through the 1990s in which lesbian representation is linked with criminality and low life. In these films, as Taccetta and Peña comment “if the lesbian character is not in prison, she should be” (119). Nevertheless, such a connection is not made here since it is soon revealed that, although Lenin and Mao engage in petty theft and do become mobile by stealing a scooter and a taxi, they are not hardened criminals. They neither rape nor force Marcia into any unlawful or illegal action; on the contrary, they take her to the sea in what amounts to a joyful breaking out of her routine and her secluded world.

Having lesbian protagonists on the Argentine road also constitutes a re-working of the genre. As Steven Cohan and David Laderman remark, the road movie has been a genre predominantly driven by heterosexual male protagonists. In Latin America such is the case of features like *El viaje* (Fernando Solanas, 1992), *Por la libre* (Juan Carlos Llaca, 2000), *Miel para Ochún* (Humberto Solás, 2001), *Diarios de Motocicleta* (Walter Salles, 2004), and *Cinema, Aspirinas e Urubus* (Marcelo Gomes, 2005), although more recently heterosexual women have also taken to the road, for example, in *Sin dejar huella* (María Novaro, 2000) and *Qué tan lejos* (Tania Hermida, 2006). *Tan de repente*, then, proposes new subjects in a move to diversify this heterosexual tradition at the same time that it creates specific aesthetic features and offers a lesbian iconography, albeit only to shatter expectations. The wanderings of Lenin and Mao in Buenos Aires and beyond do not have the specific motivation of escape common to the usual road movie. Besides proving Mao’s love for Marcia by showing her the sea, the protagonists are not engaged in any type of quest, or in any kind of cultural mapping, typical of Latin American road movies.⁹ Instead, Lenin and Mao’s overall lack of purpose and whimsical comportment follows Wendy Everett’s (167–68) observation that contemporary road movies trace urban trajectories that play a vital role in remapping new multi/cultural city spaces and new motivations for the journey. Here motivation seems to be allied to movement and to transient experiences as Lenin and Mao challenge the central role of the car in the genre, as they move on foot, by scooter, by taxi, and hitch rides, so challenging any rearview-mirror cartography of Argentina. In Rosario the film shifts towards temporary domesticity in which Lenin’s old self “Verónica,” a young woman with a mother and happy childhood memories, resurfaces in her interaction with her Aunt Blanca. Marcia becomes friends with Lenin and Delia, and Mao even cooks for everyone. If, at the end of the film, Lenin and Marcia presumably go back to Buenos Aires, Mao’s decision to move from home and domesticity translates into a trip with Felipe under the pretext of showing him something that he has not seen with his own eyes. Such an open ending leaves the road open. In addition to exploring interchange and overlap between genres, modality here also signifies shifts occurring within the road movie itself in the re-accommodation of changing historical and cultural parameters. In this way, *Tan de repente* engages

in industrial mechanisms of recycling and reworking previous generic conventions, traditions, boundaries and expectations, not only in comparison with developments in Hollywood but also with respect to how the road movie has been used in Latin American cinema.

Returning to Lefebvre, the discussion above dealt with patterns of aesthetic repetition that allow genre to be produced, used, and reproduced and which also mark the limits of representation. This script or set of signs and codes pertains to the second of Lefebvre's triadic component, better known as conceived space or representations of space (Lefebvre 33). Specifically, conceived space points to the unambiguous production of codes and signs as forms of knowledge used to organize, regulate, and structure relations. Since Lefebvre's triad is closely knit, representations of space codify and produce the signs used for acquiring the competences and performances mentioned previously as to clothing and gender identity. In this way, conceived space or representations of space are closely linked to perceived space or social practice. Needless to say, representation as an ideological tool falls under conceived space. I shall now turn to the cultural and political basis of representations of youth in the movie.

Above and beyond recycling genre repertoires, including the thriller and the road movie, *Tan de repente* also works with cultural scripts that, as I have suggested, help situate the young women concerned as adherent of discourses on youth and femininity that are opposite. The association of characters with open or closed locations sets the grounds for different behaviours that pinpoint dissimilar regional origins and values. These values, in turn, are framed in relation to discourses on youth. In Argentina, discourses on youth date back to the late 1950s during the government of Arturo Frondizi. Valeria Manzano has established three main types of discourses in the early films: in the 1960s youth was seen first as "hope and promise," as the future of the country, and then as "trouble," mainly in relation to heterosexual freedom; in the 1970s youth was defined by revolutionary politics ("Sexualizing" 435, 460); while in more recent decades the crises in democracy and the economy, which led to the weakening of the order supposed in the family, school and state as neo-liberal policies gave rise to rising unemployment, have led not only to typical representations of youth as divided between the "socialized" and those predominantly linked to violent acts and conflict, but also to increasing discrimination against non-heterosexuals.¹⁰ If in the 1960s heterosexual free sex was seen by conservative forces as a sign of youth in trouble, in more recent times this "trouble," is embodied in *Tan de repente* as young women who break the law and who on top of this sleep with other girls. Marcia is a socialized woman whose conventional employment in a tedious job, solitary lunch breaks in the park, yoga classes, dinner in front of the TV, calls to her family in the provinces, and a link to an unfulfilled heterosexuality through calls to her ex-boyfriend, mark

her as a young woman who respects the usual desirable rules of social behaviour. In contrast, Mao and Lenin neither work nor study, nor do they seem to have any family ties; furthermore, they steal, hijack, and kidnap during the film, thus aligning themselves with the images of troubled youth.

Further analysis of the Burger King sequence previously mentioned provides more light on the patterns of socialization followed by Marcia, which Mao and Lenin reject. Lenin lights a cigarette despite the fact that they are sitting in the non-smoking section. A cut to the picture of the female employee of the month on the wall close to their table materializes almost immediately as the woman herself approaches them. As if to convey the weight of the prohibition through a double image, the employee appears in profile with her picture in the background before requesting that Lenin put out the cigarette. Although Lenin complies, she and Mao compare the employee to an insect and tell Marcia that if they could they would kill her. By refusing to buy anything they also stand as non-clients and outsiders to the conventional cycle of consumerism. Marcia, in contrast, compares herself to the Burger King employee and acknowledges her participation in the cycle of demand and supply by performing an imitation of herself and the way she conducts business at her work place: “Me tendrías que ver a mí en el negocio: ‘Ay, te queda relindo. ¿Por qué no llevás dos? Están de oferta. Podés pagarlo en...’” (00:16:50). Marcia shows respect for the rules and the principles of the service industry for which she works and a work ethic coded in the slogan of quality, service, and tidiness that she cites. Early in the movie Marcia is presented as in charge of closing and opening the lingerie store where she works and of receiving the merchandise which is seen neatly organized in shelves. Marcia’s criticism of the unemployed Mao further situates her own identity within a work routine around which she organizes her time for leisure and her life in general. In their worldviews and behaviour Mao, Lenin, and Marcia embody the codes and signs that make up conceived space which regulates and structures that which is socialized and “normal” in order to distinguish and discipline that which is not. Such structuring is designed to maintain the socio-cultural, historical, and political contours of a society trying to control and constrain its subjects. However, in keeping with Lefebvre’s theorizations these controls are not rigidly maintained.

In *Tan de repente* there are at least two ways in which scripts and emplacements are challenged. By hinting at, but not developing, a violent line, *Tan de repente* defies “the destiny of the genre” which Cohan and Hark see in the “apocalyptic outcomes in narratives of gay sexuality” (318-322) that have characterized contemporary North American road movies. In this sense, the aesthetic aspect of genre constitutes conceived space for the diegetic world represented in certain codes and signs according to which characterization, physical location, and plot development are produced. Although this interpretation has a clear connection to Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the chrotonope, here aesthetic

conventions suffer interventions that bring about change including the reformulation of genre for the inclusion of new subjects and the representation of a benign lesbianism. This probably accounts for Josefina Sartora's review of the movie that states that Lerman's film offers a "sympathetic" look at lesbianism. On an aesthetic level, *Tan de repente* functions as representational space that marks the third element of Lefebvre's triad. As Lefebvre (26-27) explains, in addition to being a means of production, space is also a means of control, and hence of domination or power; yet as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it. By linking representational or lived spaces to the clandestine or underground side of social life and to complex symbolisms, which are sometimes coded and sometimes not, Lefebvre (33) is addressing the potentiality offered by social space to question and reinvent its own scripts.

On the level of what characters want, *Tan de repente* offers a view of representational space. Enough narrative time is devoted to Marcia and, in consequence, Mao and Lenin are seen to serve the purpose of unsettling Marcia's routine and ways of knowing, especially in connection with sex. However, besides being conventionally socialized, Marcia is also bored and isolated from social networks and other young people. If at first reluctant to leave Buenos Aires with Mao and Lenin, after seeing the sea she decides to go to Rosario and in Blanca's house she also begins to consider sleeping with Mao: once alone in a room with Mao and as a signal that she is ready, Marcia takes off her clothing and finally consummates woman-to-woman sex. This demonstrates clearly that conceived space may be de-stabilized *via* conscious or unconscious body drives. The ability to elude control, construed by Lefebvre as representational or lived space, means that socially produced space may also provide the means for agency, revealed in alternative or "clandestine/ underground" bodily-lived experiences. Although Marcia is first introduced in the movie as a heterosexual woman who still thinks about her ex-boyfriend and the children she wanted to have with him, that is, as a person possessing the competence and performance in spatial practice or perceived space that attest to the production and reproduction of behaviours that ensure continuity and some degree of social cohesion, she gradually moves on to desire woman-to-woman sex in the hopes that this time she will not be abandoned but rather forge longer-lasting links. These two scenarios, one at the level of general aesthetic concerns and the other at the level of desire, exemplify not only how social space is produced, consumed, and reproduced, but also contested.

In the case of *Tan de repente*, lived space seems to point in the direction of a contestation of desire as heterosexual. Nevertheless, although Marcia's experience might be interpreted as a break from heterosexuality towards the exploration of a lesbian self, discourse within and without the film reveals an increasing anxiety about naming the women's experiences as lesbian. Here, therefore, I wish to explore the issue of the representation of the lesbian as the representa-

tion of desire in the film using Gledhill's third aspect of genre as an arena of cultural-critical discursivity in order to examine what the characters say specifically about being lesbian and what the actors, the director, and the reviewers of the film have said about lesbianism as a theme in *Tan de repente*.

Besides being called punks, Mao and Lenin have also been described as "butch" (Chang 75), "lesbian outlaws" (Klawans 42), "lesbian anarchists" (Laigh 162), and "lesbians" (Young 41). Paul Julian Smith also noted that local reviewers praised the film for its focus on lesbianism; although he noted the woman-to-woman liaison, he made the distinction that "while the film is admirably direct in its approach to gay sex, its true theme seems to be female friendship" (66). Betina Kaplan (201) went further than Smith to avoid the term "lesbianism" altogether in favour of the description of desire as attached to new patterns of sociability and sexual fluidity. Gustavo Geirola (230), for his part, simply relegated lesbianism in the film to an absent and weakened masculine perspective that is projected onto Mao as the embodiment of some sort of crude, aggressive, and unveiled masculinity. In fact, Geirola considered the characters in the film to be devoid of dreams and demotes to the category of whim any desire they may have.¹¹ It is clear from these reviews that some reviewers rightly identify lesbians in the film, others comply with the unspoken rule of referring obliquely to the "love that has no name," while others still conceive of desire as masculine in order to represent lesbianism as masquerade.

Such ambiguous comments are not surprising as the film itself cites an iconography for lesbian recognition at the same time that it has the characters affirm that they are not lesbians. During their first encounter, for example, Mao asks Marcia if she believes in woman-to-woman sexual desire. Marcia demurs, but then asks Mao why she wants to sleep with her if she already has a girlfriend. Mao explains that Lenin and she are just lovers and that she would understand if Lenin desired another woman. In fact, Lenin suggests a threesome and acknowledges that she could fall in love with Marcia. Confronted with such pressure, Marcia says she is not interested in woman-to-woman sex because she is not a lesbian. Mao in turn curtly responds that neither is she. Later on, after Marcia and Mao have had sex, Lenin asks Marcia if she enjoyed being a lesbian. Marcia reiterates that she is not a lesbian and adds that she is sure of the fact. Mao also feels uncomfortable being called a lesbian and at least on two occasions negates that she might be one. Nevertheless, the film does give a stereotypical iconography of lesbianism, thereby rendering the lesbian visible and identifiable. Even if it is not known how long Mao and Lenin have been together, their level of mutual understanding is made evident through their gaze. The way they mirror each other is also striking: in addition to their analogous clothing, demeanour, and build, the black-and-white film stock stresses similar complexions and hair colour. Such mirroring strategy for lesbian representation has been seen before in Argentine cinema in the contextual resemblance be-

tween the characters of the Countess Paredes and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in María Luisa Bemberg's *Yo, la peor de todas* (1990). In *Tan de repente*, Mao and Lenin have such affinity in looks, taste, and values that no words are needed to commit their crimes. Mao also takes decisions such as going to the sea or to Rosario without consulting Lenin. As Jenni Millbank (168) notes, the conflation of desire with identification has featured extensively in dominant cultural representations of lesbian attraction as well as in much feminist film theory. In this sense, the characterization of Mao and Lenin extends stereotypical sameness or mirror replication as a trait of lesbianism to the extreme of doing away with words and being able to communicate by eye contact.

On another level, the gaze also makes possible the representation of lesbianism in the film. When Marcia and Mao finally consummate their desire for each other, Felipe, one of Blanca's lodgers, enters the house and, on hearing heavy breathing coming from a room with the door ajar, he sneaks a quick look. Felipe sees Mao and Marcia kissing and caressing each other. Mao also sees Felipe and continues caressing Marcia as she returns Felipe's gaze. This exchange is problematic as it seems to play to Felipe's voyeuristic instincts; moreover, in a film in which male characters play a minor role and in which they seem to be "emasculated," it is puzzling that the sex act between Mao and Marcia has to be witnessed by a man. Felipe's sudden voyeuristic intervention and Mao's encouragement empower the male gaze and facilitate the formulaic representation of woman-to-woman sex. This amounts to a stereotypical titillation strategy that further questions the possibility of lesbianism by introducing the idea of spectacle. If, on seeing what appear to be lesbian outlaws, audiences might suspect Diego Lerman of playing to the lower instincts of the arthouse and festival crowd (Klawans 44-45), the displacement of the female gaze for the male one might also serve to appease the sensibilities of mainstream heterosexual publics. Concretely, by seeing the lesbian subject, audiences are not actually *seeing* one, as Mao and Marcia deny their lesbianism and as the idea of lesbianism as spectacle emphasizes.

If, as some reviewers have suggested, the film employs ambiguity, Lerman and his cast seem equally to be engaged in a struggle for control over a more definite interpretation. Lerman, for example, although not denying that the film is about lesbianism, expressed apprehension about the film being categorized as "lesbian" and preferred an analysis based on universal concerns such as life and death which would downplay any lesbianism (Saidón). Tatiana Saphir, who plays Marcia, agreed and insisted that she herself never saw Marcia as a lesbian character. For Saphir, what Marcia wants and what she discovers is that she can be desired. According to this actor, this conscience-awakening realization is more important than any specific gender concerns (Sabanés). Such a discourse based on construing wanting to be an object of desire does, however, ignore the fact that Marcia also desires Mao, and that is why they have sex. Carla Crespo

and Veronica Hassán, who play Mao and Lenin respectively, were even more categorical in their denial of the film's identification with lesbianism. Crespo envisioned Mao as a character who did not fit any definition, including that of lesbian; instead, she felt more comfortable portraying Mao as a character acting on a fluid desire since at the end of the film she channeled her feelings towards a man: Crespo, also remarked that Mao treats Marcia in a manly manner (Soto). Although she did not expand on this last comment, it would appear that there is a contradiction here. In spite of a discourse that privileges desire as a universal value outside gender and sexual constraints, Crespo establishes, on the one hand, an association between woman-to-woman desire and a manly attitude, and on the other, a link between the end of the film and the election of a heterosexual relation. Even if Crespo were not speaking of a closed ending for the film, these assertions do inscribe desire within heteronormative limits that try to erase lesbianism.

Hassán made a more straightforward attempt at controlling the reception of the film. Speaking about the good response to the film in Vienna, where *Tan de repente* won the Fipresci prize, Hassán complained of the advertising of the movie as a lesbian feature and she blamed this for the strong presence of gay couples at the ceremony. Her criticism of the press extended to a magazine, probably an Argentine one, that focused on *Tan de repente* and lesbianism and on interpretations that presumably saw a lesbian connection between the characters Delia and Blanca, played by María Merlino and Beatriz Thibaudin. As Crespo and Saphir did, Hassán also insisted on an explanation of Mao as a character willing to seduce others (Soto). Hassán equated any view of lesbianism in the film with sensationalism and marketing strategies used by the press. Moreover she and Lerman cited the existence of a "lesbian movie genre" that pointed towards reception by a lesbian ghetto, as if only lesbians watched lesbian movies. All of this amounts to a double gender and genre disqualification. Clearly, in different degrees, by seeking to attenuate or negate lesbianism, the director and the cast of the film tried to control interpretation and, as can be inferred from the anxiety expressed, struggled to direct the film towards a heterosexual public. As an aside, Hassán remarked that Lerman's grand-mother Ana María Martínez, who played Ramona in the film and who had previously seen only the sequences in which she appeared, left the cinema during the screening of *Tan de repente*: apparently Martínez felt uncomfortable because she had invited her doctor, presumably a representative of the heterosexual gaze, to attend the show with her (Soto).

If Lerman's fear of classification were to be read as an aversion for a clear cut inscription within New Argentine Cinema and *par rapport* to a presumed "lesbian film genre," since both which arguments might pigeonhole his first feature, the motivation of both director and cast for obscuring and denying lesbianism can be better understood in light of discourse on sexuality prevalent

in the 1990s, and cited also by Kaplan (199-201). Although this kind of discussion has focused particularly on work in the US, there is a remarkable similarity between the views expressed by Lerman and his cast and ideas about desire as “anything goes” which in the 1990s won widespread recognition in media representations of sexuality. This has contributed, as Lisa Diamond has observed, to “a safe sense of sexual ‘Utopia’ in which questions about sexual orientation and identity are fundamentally *personal* choices about love, desire, and fulfillment that have little or no social context” (107-08). Diamond notes in such representations a de-politicization of sexual feelings and behaviours that ignores the struggles of feminist and lesbian movements and hides the status of heterosexuality as a hegemonic social institution. This bisexuality “à la mode,” as Sue Wilkinson (299) calls it, also glosses over the possibility of politicizing bisexuality and situating it within specific socio-historical coordinates. *Tan de repente*’s purportedly “sympathetic” representation of lesbianism in Argentine cinema needs to be questioned if woman-to-woman sexual and erotic episodes are depicted, as here, within a rhetoric that markets sexual flexibility as a form of sexual identity that seemingly exists outside of social space. For a film that does not seek to address gender politics, *Tan de repente* actually engages in a de-politicization that ignores the specificities, gains, and continuing struggle of the lesbian movement in Argentina and worldwide. Moreover, by using the sexual flexibility move, *Tan de repente*’s ostensibly positive representation casts doubts about such “positive projects” if they are to be inscribed within discourses that indeed portray heteronormativity as sexual freedom and by doing so use, recuperate, and deny the possibility of lesbian representation in the movies. Far from being outside of gender politics, *Tan de repente* engages in a politics that invokes heteroflexibility for the “normalization” and control of female sexuality and social space.

My analysis of Lerman’s film shows the intrinsic connection between the cultural, the economic, and the politic which is inherent to genre as an important component of social space. Although for the sake of analysis I have tried to separate the elements of Lefebvre’s triad, it is obvious that the three are interconnected and that, as Lefebvre (73) puts it, social space subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity. Although *Tan de repente* does not focus on an examination of reality, it does offer glimpses of the economic crisis of 2001 and 2002 through references to Delia’s casual employment, the taxi driver’s wish to leave the country, Marcia’s concern that the Burger King employee might lose her job if Lenin makes a scene, and the state of Blanca’s dwelling and precarious situation.¹² While depictions of these aspects might be taken as more representative of social space and the positions learned, occupied, and contested by the characters, an examination of genre in its link with space theories serves the wider purpose of foregrounding film in its dimension as cultural, economic, and political

process in which production is linked to the consumer *via* a product that dialogues and exists within codes and discourses and in relation to social practices and representational space. If *Tan de repente* has marked out, however tenuously, new possibilities for lesbian representation in Argentine cinema, perhaps in the future less “positive” representations in Latin American cinema might still provide revisions of lesbian representation grounded in contextual and historical specificities.

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NOTES

- 1 See also Bermúdez, “Sexploitation.”
- 2 The term is used in César Aira’s novel *La prueba* (1992), which Lerman first adapted into a short, *La prueba* (1998), and which also featured Crespo, Hassán, and Saphir. Lerman later readapted this short into a longer feature (Lerman in interview with Saidón and Saphir in interview with Sabanés). All of these levels of adaptation call for an examination of the politics of adaptation, for which, unfortunately there is no space here. For an ideological study of adaptation from literary text into the screen see chapter 2 of my book *Sujetos transnacionales*.
- 3 For production constraints during the making of this film, see Suárez (20).
- 4 This view is expressed by Alan Pauls in a rather cryptic way as follows: “*Tan de repente*, film a la vez lunático y realista, gratuito y social, se desmarca de los dos modelos básicos que se disputan la hegemonía en el (nuevo) cine argentino: el que sostiene que la ficción, para sanearse, ganar consistencia o ser reconocida, debe rendirse a lo real, y el que (de ‘*Los simuladores*’ – el cine en la tele – a *El hijo de la novia* – la tele en el cine) recupera la idea de la ingeniería de calidad – el ‘mecanismo de relojería’ – como paradigma de la ‘buena’ ficción.” *Tan de repente* has also been compared to Jim Jarmusch’s *Stranger than Paradise* (1984) (Kaplan 200; Smith 66), and has been vaguely linked to the French *Nouvelle Vague* (Geirola 229; Sartora).
- 5 Lerman makes a point of distinguishing himself from other directors identified within New Argentine cinema by emphasizing his work with professional actors and his distaste for improvisation. See Sabanés and Suárez (20), respectively.
- 6 Earlier samples include films by Armando Bo, Enrique Carreras, Catrano Catrani, David José Kohón, René Mugica, Anibal di Salvo, Daniel Tinayre, Leopoldo Torre Nilson and Emilio Vieyra, among others. For the titles of such films, see Taccetta and Martín Peña.
- 7 In my book *Sujetos transnacionales: la negociación en cine y literatura*, I touch on the issue of lesbian representation in Alejandro Pelayo’s *Miroslava* (1993) and in Sergio Cabrera’s *Ilona llega con la lluvia* (1996). My forthcoming article on

Armando Bo's *Fuego* offers a deeper study of lesbian representation in connection with space, sexploitation, and transnational consumption.

- 8 *Tan de repente* has been noted for its mélange of genres such as psychological comic drama, thriller, road movie, comedy, melodrama, drama and thriller (Klawans, Laight, Sartora, Sabanes, Smith, Young). In terms of genre, Lerman calls his film unclassifiable (Pecora).
- 9 Ismael Xavier was one of the first to address the issue of travelling in Latin American films in his study of Brazilian cinema in the period between 1964 and 1974. In his interpretation (Xavier 200), the journey served allegorical purposes and often marked a movement towards disintegration and defeat. More recently Walid El Khachab (124) has studied Solana's *El viaje* as the messianic quest of a male protagonist who in mapping the cultural diversity of Latin America seems to try to erase it by emphasizing the idea of unity against a common imperialist enemy. Pascal Fin's analysis (37) of the intercultural road movie mentions *Historias mínimas* as a film located at the interstice of a return to cultural unity and a questioning of the possibility of such unity.
- 10 For a critique of public policies based on an idea of youth as a transitional period and of youth visibility centered on social disorder see Krauskopf (145). Of course, youth as a historical subject has also been represented in other ways, for example, as linked to political apathy or, to counter this position, as active participants in non-traditional causes such as the defense of the environment and the promotion of human and sexual rights (Balardini 101). Such representations, however, ignore that participation has been more restricted for young women. As Rodríguez (66) explains, generally speaking young women do not have an active presence either in youth movements which are predominantly controlled by young men, or in women's movements which are run by adults. Much negative visibility concerning non-heterosexuals has to do with the existence of a provision against scandal in the Buenos Aires Misdemeanors Code, which actually targets travesties for engaging "in prostitution in public, in a scandalous manner" (Sardá, "Resisting" 32), and Moreno (139).
- 11 Geirola's reading is not only rendered myopic by an optic of the seventies that reduces desire to activism. Its in-the-name-of-the-father Lacanian undertones also reinstate heterosexuality and patriarchal order as the only possible basis for desire.
- 12 Wucker states that in 2002: "Worried that Argentines will come here en masse, the United States has stopped allowing them to enter the country without visas" (50). She adds that: "European consulates are mobbed by Argentines who want to return to their ancestors' homelands" (50). It is also well known that in 2002, the unemployment rate in Argentina was about 25 percent.

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