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Bemberg's Third Sex: Argentine Mothers at the Dawn of Democracy

Bruce Williams

RÉSUMÉ

Momentos et *Señora de nadie*, les premières œuvres de la réalisatrice argentine María Luisa Bemberg, mettent en évidence l'utilisation d'une idéologie de la maternité au profit d'une structure sociale bourgeoise et d'une dictature militaire. Dans ces films, Bemberg considère l'institution responsable du partage entre répression et rébellion, les protagonistes remettant en question le rôle idéologique traditionnel de la mère et prenant position contre la répression qu'exerce une dictature en déclin. Bien qu'ancrés dans un discours filmique traditionnel, ces films mettent en place les dynamiques de radicalisation diégétique qui définiront les œuvres ultérieures de Bemberg, et anticipent la redéfinition du concept social du féminin au sein de l'Argentine post-démocratique.

ABSTRACT

The early features of Argentine director María Luisa Bemberg, *Momentos* and *Señora de nadie*, underscore the deployment of an ideology of motherhood in service of bourgeois social structure and military dictatorship. In these films, Bemberg posits the institution as balancing between containment and rebellion, her protagonists confronting the traditional ideological role of mother and asserting a stance against the repression of the waning dictatorship. Although entrenched in a conventional film discourse, these films set into motion the dynamics of diegetic radicalization which would define Bemberg's subsequent work and would anticipate the redefinition of the social domain of the feminine for post-democracy Argentina.

“The maternal is merely the projection of the masculinist version of maternity-paternity in drag,” so argues Diana Taylor (1997, p. 77) in a probing analysis of the specific context of Argentina’s “dirty war” of the late 1970s, early 1980s. Under a military dictatorship, the feminine indeed becomes entrapped in the masculine, and in the case of Argentina, this process follows suit with a longstanding deployment of the maternal in the service of the patriarchal. For Taylor, the very word *patria* implies an ambivalent convergence; it is a feminine word in Spanish, yet makes clear reference to paternity. During the years of the murderous military *junta*, “nationhood became as much a physical territory as a longing for heroic transcendence, as much a vaginal space to be penetrated by the men of the navy . . . as an aspiration to male greatness” (Taylor 1997, pp. 77-78). Such a metaphor is moreover applicable to another act of aggression—Argentina’s 1982 invasion of the Falkland Islands. Once again, the Spanish name for the islands, *las Malvinas*, is feminine, and *la patria* capitalized on the assault to deflect attention from the atrocities at home and to foster a renewed sense of nationalism. Yet the domain of the feminine, and more specifically, of the maternal, emerged during the “dirty war” as a unique cultural space; it turned back in a radical dynamic of resistance upon the regime that sought to contain it. The longstanding demonstrations of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in front of the Casa Rosada, the Argentine White House, revealed the transformative, politicized potential of maternity. Somberly clad and wearing scarves to suggest the traditional working-class iconography of motherhood, the women carried placards with photographs of their children who had disappeared during the brutal military regime. Motherhood as an institution had been torn asunder. Mothers were separated from their offspring by the very regime that venerated the traditional values of motherhood.

During the twilight years of the dictatorship and the early period of democracy ushered in by the 1983 elections, Argentine cinema revealed a similar dynamics in its inscription of motherhood; the separation of motherhood from biology, the refutation of the maternal role, and the bereaved mother cum activist emerged as an increasingly popular motif. The 1980s

Argentine discourse on motherhood rewrites a turn-of-the-century notion of a “third sex,” comprised of women who remained unmarried due to such factors as emigration or who consciously chose to remain single (Taylor 1997, p. 41). In the case of the post-junta period, the new third sex is one which confronts and reconfigures motherhood in the same way its predecessors of some eighty years earlier reconfigured marriage. Inasmuch as the notion of motherhood is inseparable from the historical thread of national identity in Argentina, motherhood as an institution became a key tool of the cinema for debunking the fascist regime for which it once had stood as a bulwark. Such radicalization of a traditional role can be evidenced in the films of María Luisa Bemberg, whose 1980 *Momentos* and 1982 *Señora de nadie* (*Nobody's Woman*) daringly posit alternatives to the conventional Argentine paradigm of motherhood by laying bare the often suffocating narrative space of the maternal.

Mother of the Regiment

A few days following the 1930 coup in Argentina in which the ultra-right regime of General José F. Uriburu toppled the radical government of Hipólito Irigoyen, a group of celebratory mothers demonstrated in front of the presidential palace on Plaza de Mayo for what they termed the “restoration of political order,” claiming that they sought to contribute to the stabilization of the country through their traditional roles of “patriotic mothers and guardians of Catholic morality” (Carlson 1988, p. 170). This event was anticipatory of the mood of the ensuing dictatorship inasmuch as the mother-child dyad was frequently cited in political, legal, and medical contexts to support traditional family roles. Such discourse on motherhood and the family had become key to the Argentine conservative agenda. As Asunción Lavrin (1995, p. 124) explains, “Mothers and their children were welded in a tight ideological unit that left motherhood intact as the paramount role for the female sex. Women remained object and subject of the cult of motherhood.”

Referring to the industrialized West at large, E. Ann Kaplan has identified three major economic/political/technical eruptions that have evidenced changes in discourses on motherhood:

the Industrial Revolution, World War I, and the electronic revolution following World War II. While the first inaugurates “the early modern mother in the modern nuclear family” (Kaplan 1992, p. 17), the second challenges the nuclear family by women’s entry into the work-force during World War I and the first waves of female liberation in the 1920s. The third eruption, which refers to the engagement of middle-class women during the 1980s in full-time professional work, altered traditional family roles in significant ways. The involvement of men in the nurturing of children, new reproductive techniques, and mother-surrogacy challenged the old centrality of the mother. Kaplan (1992, p. 18) argues, “this final shift may be signaled by the concept of a ‘postmodern’ mother-construct, which usefully signals the political and feminist ambiguities in relation to recent changes.” To draw the discussion back to Argentina, one must substitute Kaplan’s “eruptions” with pivotal moments in Argentine social history that fail to reveal the steady progression of the North American/European context, or in fact, display a process virtually the opposite. Such moments are engendered by and large by the nation’s military history, by its divergent fascist regimes, as well as by the unique face of Peronism.

We must note that even turn-of-the-century liberal movements were to a certain extent palatable to patriarchy. As Lavrin (1995, p. 97) asserts, “the female professionals graduating from the universities in the first decade of the century won much support because they were dedicated to social problems that did not detract from their femininity and modeled acceptable social behavior.” Gains in education and the undertakings of the early *higienista* movement, despite a certain parallel with intellectual movements on the continent, remained tied to traditional discourses on the family. This was particularly evidenced during the dictatorship of the 1930s.

Upon the 1945 coming to power of General Juan Perón, the discourse of motherhood went through a period of ambivalence. Despite the obvious gains for women effected by Eva Perón, Argentina’s first lady remained defiantly uncommitted to feminist causes. Though considerably different from the repressive discourse of the earlier dictatorship, the period failed to repre-

sent a return to the ideals of the early decades of the twentieth century. Carlson (1988, p. 195) argues that Eva Perón did not adhere to feminist philosophy and “spoke contemptuously of committed feminists as masculine women of the oligarchy, castrating women who wanted to be men, false progressives who copied foreign ideas, snobs and cultural imperialists, anti-nationalist, and therefore anti-Perón.” Although she argued that Perón had educated her about the needs for women’s rights, she felt that the women’s movement could only accomplish great things with the help of a great man. Taylor, on the other hand, sheds considerably different light on the cultural fetishization of Eva Perón. Referring to Argentina’s first lady, she argues:

She, a childless public figure who obviously exceeded the stated norms, had to justify her activities by stressing that she was the “mother” of her people. Thus, Evita, intentionally or not, continued the notion of a third sex developed by turn-of-the-century physicians and eugenicists to designate women who were not content to accept the domestic role that society forced on them. (Taylor 1997, pp. 47-48)

The military government of the 1970s returned to the cultural ambiance of the Uriburu dictatorship in that it once again squelched feminist discourse and activities whenever possible. Its attempts at restricting the mobility of women were made manifest in its first act of aggression, the house arrest of President Isabel Perón. As during the earlier dictatorships, motherhood, Catholic morality, and national stability once again were intertwined. It was such a climate that led to the disbanding of the Unión Feminista Argentina, which María Luisa Bemberg had co-founded. Moreover, this period ushered in heightened censorship of the cinema. Perhaps ironically, it was in the throes of dictatorship that the director’s early films were conceived.

Mom at Large

Motherhood—or better, divergent treatments of its absence—represents a thematic undercurrent in María Luisa Bemberg’s first two features. Positing maternal problematics in terms of a

reworking of the themes of “the mother that never was” and of “the abandoning mother” (Kaplan 1992, pp. 180-219), the films play with and contest the societal stereotypes of women during the waning years of the Argentine military dictatorship. *Momentos* and *Señora de nadie* appeared at a crossroad both for Bemberg, who was finally bringing her goal of being an independent woman artist to fruition, and for the nation on the verge of a cautious return to democracy. “Cautious” is indeed the best word to describe the process of democratization, particularly in the realm of the cinema. A good number of the films of the mid-1980s spoke haltingly or indirectly about the dictatorship. While Bemberg’s 1984 *Camila* decries the regime indirectly by looking back to a 19th century dictatorship, Luis Puenzo’s *The Official Story* of the following year has been criticized for its failure to indict the military government explicitly. These films are considerably distinct from works of the so-called “Young Argentine Cinema” of the mid-1990s onward, and specifically Marco Bechis’s 2001 *Garaje Olimpo*, whose indictment of the military is direct and explicit. As Argentina approached the toppling of a repressive political system, Bemberg initiated her exploration of one of the prime institutions that held that system in place. To a large extent displaced autobiographies, the films open a critical door to reassessment of marriage and motherhood and of the complicity of such institutions in the fascist ideology of the contemporaneous regime. The early features posit as integral to the director’s work the theme of motherhood and allow a theoretical convergence of motherhood and radical feminist concerns. For as evidenced in *Señora de nadie*, the two are not necessarily mutually self-exclusive. Motherhood—deployed as a cornerstone of Argentine fascism—is, in these films, either recouped and recontextualized (*Señora de nadie*) or rejected altogether (*Momentos*). In either case, the motif is subversive, especially in light of the historical context immediately prior to Argentina’s return to democracy.

Although released two years later than *Momentos*, *Señora de nadie* was actually conceived and written before the earlier film. Its production, however, was held up by censors concerned over the positive portrayal of a gay male character. Despite its earlier

date, *Momentos*, moreover, is visually more sophisticated, structurally more open and ambiguous, and more radical in its stance *vis-à-vis* motherhood than its successor. For this reason, the present discussion will begin with *Señora de nadie* and progress to the “earlier,” more complex film. *Señora de nadie*, John King suggests, takes its title from a line in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, in which domesticated Dolly argues against Anna’s divorce: “No, it’s awful. She will be nobody’s wife; she will be lost.”¹ Bemberg’s film clearly begins where a protagonist has departed from her home and conventional role. If Laura Mulvey situates melodrama in the narrative space following the establishment of the Proppian home, then how can one generically classify a film in which a protagonist defiantly effects a rupture from this space? Surely the film, like the woman’s action, constitutes a response to melodrama. Could it not be deemed an “anti-melodrama?”

The opening image is that of a ceiling fan turning as we hear the squeak of a mattress, groans and sighs, and the passing of a streetcar outside. The camera pans claustrophobically across walls, closed curtains, and domestic objects. In the semi-darkness, a couple’s perfunctory sex act ends as an alarm clock goes off, silencing the hurried sounds of pleasure; there is no time for tenderness or afterplay. Covering herself with a sheet, a woman arises to shut off the alarm. We see a freeze frame of her silhouette, with its back to the camera. The film’s main title is then etched against a black background. As Catherine Grant points out, the alarm “freezes” not unlike the “flatline” monitor of a hospital heart monitor. This audio cue, when juxtaposed with a freeze frame image of Leonor and the flatline of the final stroke of the title, suggests, according to Grant, the symbolic death of the protagonist. The message is clear: the lack of affection in the sex, along with the alarm, is but a wake-up call (Grant 2001, p. 96).

The film’s credit sequence then ensues, a sequence which is considerably revealing with regard to the female protagonist’s domestic space. And this sequence appears to be a classic illustration of what Genette terms the “iterative,” a mode of narration paralleling the imperfect tense in language. We spy Leonor (Luisina Brando) in seemingly habitual activities as she breakfasts with her mother-in-law and children, hangs laundry to dry,

and helps her maid with the preparation of a meal. All of these activities reveal a comfortable, upper-middle-class lifestyle. Leonor's actions are not marked as out of the ordinary; they represent the typical chores of a typical day. When we later learn that in the sequence Leonor is actually at work on preparations for a birthday dinner for her husband, Fernando, we re-read the sequence as singular rather than iterative. Despite the comfortable lifestyle depicted, the images evoke once again imprisonment and claustrophobia. We note a prevalence of bars and closed doorways. As we gaze at Leonor objectively through the windows and frames of a French door, we see the extent to which she is the prisoner of this space, the visual dynamics evoking entrapment. In voice-over, Leonor is heard humming a song. At first slow and melancholy, it becomes upbeat and even jolly, foregrounding a certain pleasure the protagonist takes in her daily routine. When Leonor emerges from her domestic space and ventures forth onto the street, the routine is punctured. She catches a glimpse of her husband as he gives a quick goodbye kiss to his lover (Susú Pecoraro).

Leonor encounters her husband's lover and learns that the affair has been at once long-term and one of many. She returns home, sets her birthday gift on the elegantly-laid-out table, and departs. The film's narrative follows Leonor's defiance of her mother's insistence that she return to home and family. While we encounter a politically un-enabling inscription of the maternal through the person of Leonor's mother, one that seeks to fortify the very bulwarks of patriarchy (and by extension, dictatorship), the protagonist's own path is considerably different. Explaining to her two sons over ice cream that she needs to go out on her own for a while, the heroine secures the boys' "permission" and embarks on a voyage towards independence. This path is not without resistance, and once again a primary obstacle is her mother. Disavowing her daughter's newly-found career as a realtor and covertly endeavoring to induce her daughter to reconcile with Fernando, Leonor's mother uses all means at her disposal to encourage her daughter to return to a societally-correct path. Ultimately, Leonor does attempt to reunite with her husband, a decision which follows a chance meeting at a party.

When an acquaintance attempts to introduce her to Fernando, not realizing that the two are estranged spouses, he asks Leonor her last name. “You are Mrs. ... ?” (You are *señora de* ... ?), using the Spanish “*de*” (of, or belonging to) which traditionally precedes a married woman’s last name. Leonor bluntly and defiantly replies, “I am nobody’s woman” (*Señora de nadie*, nobody’s wife, belonging to nobody). Although the remark initially appears defiant and independent, Florencio García Santillán has stressed that this independence is not without its price; at this point, Leonor, by virtue of her single status, is marginalized and losing her social position and financial support. If García Santillán’s observations partially efface Leonor’s attempts at defiance, they nonetheless undeniably serve to underscore the institutionalized obstacles to a woman’s independence in patriarchal Argentina. Leonor, unable to reconcile with her husband due to his two-timing and disappointed by the similar antics of a potential (married!) lover, finds closeness only through a friendship with Pablo, a gay male she meets in group therapy and whose apartment she eventually shares.

Interfacing the problematic case of Argentina with the most recent eruption in the discourse of motherhood in the industrialized West identified by Kaplan, we note that if Leonor’s flight from home has forced Fernando to undertake more nurturing activities with his sons, we are never privy to this. For the camera’s gaze never returns home unless Leonor herself visits. And once again, this gaze evokes claustrophobia through a prevalence of medium closeups and closeups on dishes and other kitchen *accoutrements*. It is in this space that Leonor learns of Fernando’s life and activities from his maid, as the latter irons. In support of Kaplan’s point, the lack of centrality of the mother in the home is stressed by virtue of Leonor’s absence. Yet in a radical manner, at least in the context of Argentine cinema, the story of separation is told from the point of view of the *absent* one, not from that of those left behind.

The deep pact present in Leonor’s friendship with Pablo contrasts sharply with her failure to develop such a bond with a husband or sex partner. This impossibility recalls Kristeva’s suggestion of a rejection of the other sex present in the female

psychosis that accompanies maternity. Kristeva (1986, p. 117) argues that this rejection, which leads to the exclusion

[...] of any pact between “sexual partners” based on a supposed preestablished harmony deriving from primordial androgyny, [allows for a] recognition of irreducible differences between the sexes and of the irreconcilable interests of both—and hence of women—in asserting those differences and seeking appropriate forms of fulfillment.

In the context of a friendship between a straight female and a gay male, if one is to reposition and extend Kristeva’s argument in a sociological perspective, what is at play is not androgynous harmony, but rather a bond occasioned by social roles and relationships to structures of oppression. In this relationship, all vestiges of patriarchy are absent. On a formal level, Bemberg evokes this rupture with patriarchy through progressively fewer images of confinement. As Leonor’s friendship with Pablo develops, there are more exterior shots and a considerable reduction in interior shots conveying the claustrophobia of the opening sequences.

While living with Pablo, Leonor begins to explore her creative impulses, painting floral designs on a white armoire in her bedroom. The support of the close friendship in place, she continues to seek both her independence and an appropriate sex partner. Pablo does the same: following a domestic squabble with his Brazilian paramour, he decides to dress to the nines in partial drag and go out on the town. Not wishing to remain alone, Leonor as well goes to a party, which she ultimately finds boring and empty. Upon her return, she finds her friend badly beaten, obviously the target of anti-gay violence. By his side is a white feather boa. A close-up on the boa underscores a key aspect of the friendship. Both Leonor and Pablo have transgressed the traditional boundaries of gender. Pablo’s cross-dressing reflects Leonor’s emergence as a “third sex” mother. Helping Pablo to his room and cleaning his wounds, Leonor exhibits almost a maternal tenderness towards her best friend. Pablo invites Leonor to spend the night in his bed; she joins him, fully clothed. The two cuddle, laugh, and voice their love for each

other, in direct antithesis to the opening sex between Leonor and Fernando, which is devoid of tenderness and communication. Here, the physical contact is voluntary and affirming, unlike Leonor's conjugal duty which opens the film and introduces the iterative sequence. We hear Leonor and Fernando's voices as an exterior image of his bedroom window fades to black.

The apparent closure of the window image is immediately subverted in one version of the film in circulation, for Bemberg introduces a surprising and somewhat disorienting coda to the film. A pan of an empty, freshly-painted apartment suggests Leonor's fresh start as a single mother. The interior is brightly lit and spacious, and the camera pans evoke freedom and movement rather than confinement. The shot appears unattached to Leonor's point of view, permitting the spectator unmediated contemplation of the heroine's new environment. In a non-diegetic intervention, a voice now adds words to the film's main musical theme, "Señora mía" by María Elena Walsh, and sings of whitewashing the past and opening up her arms and doors to life, independently. We then see Leonor's two sons riding their bicycles on the bare, wooden floors of the apartment. The three appear on the balcony as the wardrobe Leonor had painted in Pablo's house is hoisted into the apartment. If Leonor has indeed returned to her children, she has brought with her a token of the love of another marginal, a reminder of another domestic environment in which she had been accepted as an equal. As Catherine Grant (2001, p. 109) stresses, Bemberg wrote in a 1992 letter to John King that she disliked this coda, describing it as an "ideological concession" to the notion of "woman triumphant." Such a coda, nonetheless, represents a redemption of the maternal. Absent is any patriarchal figure; loving friendship, in contrast, is present by virtue of the armoire. Leonor has regained maternity, but this time with the caring support of a special friend. As her song concludes, she stares defiantly into the camera, and the frame is frozen, mirroring the freeze frame of Leonor's entrapment in the first scene of the film. *Señora de nadie* permits the threat of a woman who looks back. Leonor's return to the nest is nothing less than

subversive, for she has redefined the axes of motherhood and domestic space, and caused their radical intersection.

Again, it was most decidedly the positive representation of the gay male rather than the defiance of the female protagonist that set off the censorship battle which delayed the production of the film. In a like manner, once completed, *Señora de nadie* could well have caused equal controversy. It is ironic that any media hype concerning the homosexual character was eclipsed by the most patriarchal of situations: the film premiered on the eve of Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands. The film, nonetheless, was given particular attention in a woman's magazine: the April 8, 1982 issue of *Vosotras* published excerpts from a "diary" allegedly kept by the protagonist, Leonor Vitale, who "gave the journal exclusive access to her intimate writing in which she expresses her reflections, sensations, and feelings regarding the event which changed her life forever" (Anonymous 1982, p. 22—my translation). The freeze frame on Leonor's triumphant face and the popular press paratext serve to defy the repression of the "dirty war" and of the Falklands conflict. Motherhood as an institution is not rejected, rather it is recouped on contestatory turf.

Nobody's Mother

Bemberg's first film, *Momentos*, is the story of a middle-aged, upper-middle-class woman, who leaves her husband to pursue an affair with a younger man. The protagonist, the wife of a psychoanalyst, falls for the husband of a woman who has contracted her services as a landscapist. In this film, the protagonist's relationship with her lover becomes increasingly maternal in nature, as if to compensate for her own childlessness. In a cursory analysis of *Momentos*, Clara Fontana acknowledges the importance of the theme of motherhood and, stressing the believability of the characters, notes the childlike traits inherent in the male protagonist that bring out the maternal instinct in the female. Although Fontana fails to develop this observation, it is clear that the presuppositions of the younger man, who not only functions as ersatz child but, moreover, explicitly aligns himself with traditional ethics of marriage and family, are pri-

marily responsible for the inscription of the theme of motherhood into the film. It is significant that a motif transformed in Bemberg's films through a feminist lens is thus initially posited from a male perspective, an irony which brings to the forefront the blatantly misogynist assumptions held by the protagonist's lover. It is moreover essential to note just how intimately the discourse of wife/lover becomes aligned with that of mother; in *Momentos*, the two are strange bedfellows indeed!

In her introduction to *Motherhood and Representation*, Kaplan explores the absence of the mother as speaking figure, a concept which helps clarify the pivotal role of the male in the initial introduction of motherhood into Bemberg's work. Kaplan (1992, p. 4) reminds us of Kristeva's question, "What is it about the representation (of the patriarchal or Christian Maternal) that fails to take account of what a woman might say or want of the Maternal." She stresses that Kristeva's question is precisely so difficult to answer because

[...] how can any historical (i.e. "real life" mother) know whether what she thinks she wants really reflects her subjective desire, or whether she wants it because it serves patriarchy (that she has been constructed to want to please)? Since patriarchy wants women to want children, in other words, how can a woman distinguish her desire for the child from that imposed on her (Kaplan 1992, p. 4)?

Bemberg as well grapples both theoretically and artistically with Kristeva's question. Although *Momentos* initially presents motherhood from within the confines of patriarchy, this film and its successor give voice (initially haltingly) to the mother that never was, or to the unconventional mother. In Kaplan's parlance, they represent "maternal woman's films" rather than "maternal melodramas," or "resisting" rather than "complicit" melodramas. Indeed, rather than passively complying with what Kaplan (1992, pp. 59 and 279) dubs the "patriarchal mother-discourse," or the "Master' Mother Discourse," *Momentos*, like *Señora de nadie*, questions and exposes conventional discourses on the maternal. Yet, of particular consequence is that it does so from an historicized context, that of Argentina in the *Götterdämmerung* of dicta-

torship. In this respect, it permits a retrospective assessment of the convergence of tyranny and repressive societal deployments of the notion of motherhood.

As in *Señora de nadie*, tightly sutured to the theme of motherhood in *Momentos* is the notion of physical space, which closely evokes the narrative space suggested by Laura Mulvey in her discussions of melodrama. For the protagonist's young lover as well as for the pillars of Argentine patriarchy, motherhood, by implication, goes hand-in-hand with the spacial dynamics which set the parameters of Bemberg's narrative discourse. In both films, we find a systematic play of interior and exterior shots which marks the domestic space in which the female protagonist is housed, and which she must rupture, or at least attempt to rupture. However, the interior spaces of *Momentos* are more brightly lit and less claustrophobic than those of *Señora de nadie*. In both works, domestic space is representative of the specious relationship of Bemberg's films to the genres of melodrama and the women's film (which Laura Mulvey links to the narrative space of the "home" and to the moment following the hero's ascension to the throne—themes which the director reassesses throughout her career).

Written together with Marcelo Pichon Rivière, *Momentos* played in Argentine cinemas for some nine weeks and was awarded a prize as Best First Film at the Cartagena film festival. The affair depicted in the film, as Clara Fontana asserts, is devoid of all moral connotation: *Momentos* focuses on emotional conflict rather than moral transgression, a fact underscored by the protagonist's refusal to judge her lover's inadequacies even when he is most quick to do so.

Momentos' title sequence treads a thin line between the habitual and the specific, baring the repetitive rituals to which the protagonist is party. This sequence is an illustration of Genette's iterative, yet unlike the title sequence of *Señora de nadie*, the iterative mode is never broken inasmuch as the sequence is never re-read as singular or particularly significant. Rather than depicting the specific events of a particular day, the montage foregrounds *typical* activities of Lucía and her husband, Mauricio, at their bucolic country house on the Tigre Delta.

The sequence, moreover, is ostensibly idyllic, implying both contentment and marital bliss. The couple is seen arriving at their home by motor boat, bearing a cargo of rustic wooden furniture. Lucía is then shown spraying her trees as Mauricio barbecues. Following lunch, the couple tranquilly (and silently) relaxes. This iterative montage, nonetheless, especially when reread in the context of what will transpire in later sequences, is at best deceptive. Rather than textualizing the normality which will be interrupted by Lucía's affair, it highlights the disquiet of the couple's relationship. Lucía and her husband seem complacent; what is initially read as contentment on Lucía's part might best be described as boredom or withdrawal. The protagonist appears distanced and melancholy, interacting only sporadically with her mate. As the montage draws to a close, Bemberg's directorial credit is superimposed over a night exterior shot of the couple's home. The framing of the windows is accentuated, foregrounding the interior space in which Lucía finds herself trapped.

Following the title sequence, we immediately are drawn into the events that lead to Lucía's affair. We are introduced to a young couple, Mónica and Nicolás, who reside in the posh Buenos Aires neighborhood of San Isidro and who have hired Lucía. The youthful client initiates a relentless pursuit of his contractor and appears especially obsessed with her childlessness. Lucía develops a reciprocal attraction to Nicolás, and her situation is mirrored by a female patient of Mauricio who feels as if she is trapped in a bell jar. All the while evoking Sylvia Plath, the patient's emotions, unbeknownst to Mauricio, reflect Lucía's own sense of frustration and claustrophobia in her marriage. Such feeling, as we soon learn, permeates not only her marriage, but moreover, her subsequent affair. (Lucía is in fact Mauricio's former patient, who most likely turned to him for analysis following the death of her first husband, whom she appears to have deeply loved.)

Nicolás and Lucía leave their spouses to spend an unspecified period of time on the shore at Mar de Plata. Their relationship, though often playful and affectionate, is marred by the same disquiet which has characterized Lucía's marriage. Nicolás is demanding in his expectations and inexorable in his questioning

of his lover. He asserts that he would like to have a child with her, all the while interrogating as to why she and her husband have remained childless. When Lucía explains that it is due to a medical problem on the part of her husband, Nicolás callously suggests that she leave him. Although clearly referring to a specific series of events, the mood of the Mar de Plata sequences is surprisingly similar to the opening iterative title sequence. One senses an undercurrent of disquiet and entrapment in what could otherwise have been blissfully romantic sequences.

Lucía's first husband is discussed at greatest length in the film's most emotionally evocative scene, in which the protagonist and Nicolás caress in the bedroom of their Mar de Plata hotel room on a rainy night. Lucía poignantly recalls another rainy night on which her first husband, Sebastián, lost control of his car and was killed in a crash. Surviving the impact, Lucía gazed as paramedics removed his body from the mangled wreck. She describes the strange position of his head as they placed him on the stretcher. Caressing her husband, Lucía felt his absence of movement. As the camera pans into an extreme close-up, she reveals that she could feel that her baby as well was not moving. The ambivalence of this recollection—the first mention of the child—is never completely resolved. Given that Lucía had rushed to her husband's side and not to that of the child (a violation of maternal instinct?), one must assume that the now immobile child was yet unborn. This is underscored by the privileging of the sense of touch in Lucía's recollection of the event: the woman *feels* rather than sees her husband's stillness. She moreover feels her child's lack of movement as an expectant mother would perceive a change in motion dynamics in the womb. Undisputedly the film's most revealing moment, Lucía's narrative responds to an earlier dialogue with Nicolás as the two once again caress in bed. It is then that Nicolás comments on Mauricio's sterility and muses that he (Nicolás) and Lucía would make a beautiful baby, doubtless a boy. Nicolás' comments recall Bemberg's own awareness of the expectation in conventional Argentine society that a woman must give birth.

The relationship between Lucía and Nicolás soon disintegrates and, following a scene in which she witnesses an accident

which recalls the death of her husband, Lucía boards a train alone for Buenos Aires. At home, she rides an ornate, cage-like elevator to her first-floor apartment. Recalling the bell jar mentioned by Mauricio's patient, the image at once evokes the visual dynamics of entrapment of the title sequence and foreshadows the ambiguity of the final scene. As Lucía enters her apartment, we see a narrow hallway which, for one of the first times in the film, is truly claustrophobic. As she enters the dimly-lit dining room, her husband continues to eat his meal. She sits at his side, yet he fails to acknowledge her. When she whispers that she is famished and hasn't eaten all day, he removes a piece of fruit from a side dish and allows her to serve herself a few spoons of pasta. He then pours her a small glass of wine. The camera then pans across the dark room to a window, where bright light emerges through white curtains. This image, the converse of the closing slot of the opening title sequence in which we see bright lights emerging from inside the windows of the couple's Tigre Delta home, is ambivalent and disconcerting, particularly given what we have learned about Lucía's great love for her first husband during her intimate talks with Nicolás. The couple's silence at the dinner table recalls the near absence of interaction of the pseudo-iterative title sequence. The final image, moreover, is punctuated by the same piano chords that closed the opening sequence. We are left with a feeling of disquiet: has Lucía returned to the same entrapment that provoked the affair?

Albeit in a much more subtle way, in the context of the early 1980s, the reconfiguration of motherhood in *Momentos* and *Señora de nadie* is just as subversive as the representation of homosexuality in the latter film. Francesca Miller has reminded us that a traditional belief in a woman's "different mission" is central to Latin American feminism and distinguishes it from Anglo-American feminism, in which gender differences were traditionally downplayed. Miller (1991, p. 74) argues:

In the Latin American context, the feminine is cherished, the womanly—the ability to bear and raise children, to nurture a family—is celebrated. Rather than reject their socially-defined role as mothers, as wives, Latin American feminists may be understood as

women acting to protest laws and conditions which threaten their ability to fulfill the role.

Bemberg's films redefine such feminism several steps further. In *Señora de nadie*, Leonor demands the ability to nourish a family as a single mother. In *Momentos*, Lucía, deprived of the opportunity for biological motherhood, rejects the maternal role altogether.

The films of María Luisa Bemberg bring testimony to a radicalized cultural inscription of motherhood which defies the Latin American model and, as demonstrated above, is distinct from the cases of Europe and North America. Such radicalization threatened, in the early eighties, the pillars of the patriarchal regime already on the verge of collapse. To this effect, Bemberg's films mirror the activities of the radical Madres de Plaza de Mayo who blatantly protested the crimes of the military regime and who drew international attention to the atrocities (Agosín 1992).

Momentos and *Señora de nadie*, by inverting the discourse of dictatorship, underscore the role and duties of motherhood as paramount to the maintenance of bourgeois social structures. Perhaps even more than Leonor, Lucía, by virtue of her successful profession, violates especially *prior* to her affair the constraints of Argentine womanhood and the relegation of women to the domestic space of the home (a claim supported by the masculine encoding of the pick-up truck she drives which textualizes her professional independence). While Nicolás stresses that childlessness renders marital union pointless, he is blind to the viable alternative upon which Lucía has landed. Not only has she developed a profession as a landscapist, but moreover, she has found a man who will morally support her efforts. When Lucy Fischer (1996, p. 30) argues that "motherhood in the cinema has been a site of 'crises,'" her words address Bemberg's work. Although Fischer refers specifically to maternal transgressions, hysteria, and anxiety, the intersection of the maternal and the political in Bemberg's films posits the institution as a site of another sort of crisis, one of the struggle between containment and rebellion. The ambiguity implied by Lucía's return home foreshadows a process which will prevail in

Bemberg's subsequent films. Women may indeed rebel, but the mortgage on freedom usually results in foreclosure. All the same, the protagonists of *Momentos* and *Señora de nadie* confront the traditional ideological role of mother and, by extension, assert a stance against the repression of the waning dictatorship. The temporal coincidence of Leonor's defiant gaze with the *junta's* final hurrah—the invasion of the Malvinas—is a forward-looking gaze, anticipatory of the discourse of *Nunca más*. These films, although firmly entrenched in a highly conventional film discourse, set into motion a dynamic of diegetic radicalization, one which would continue throughout Bemberg's relatively short career, and would help a nation in transition redefine the social domain of the feminine.

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NOTES

1. We must recall that it is Tolstoy's Anna who explains to the more domesticated Dolly the notion of birth control! An analogy can be drawn not only between Anna and Leonor, but between the Russian heroine and a number of Bemberg protagonists.

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