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Buenos Aires Dreaming: Chronopolitics, Memory and Dystopia in *La Sonámbula*

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Dystopian versions of the science fiction genre, as several authors have argued, are usually linked to the expression of social fears and anxieties which, in some cases, can be better conveyed through the representation of futuristic scenarios (cf. Sontag 1967, Kuhn 1990, Sobchack 1999). While cinematic dystopias are often associated with Anglophone films –Hollywood blockbusters in particular– there is an important tradition of dystopian science fiction films produced in Latin America. One key example is the Argentine film *La Sonámbula* (*The Sleepwalker*; Fernando Spiner 1998), which portrays a post-apocalyptic Argentina in what was, at the time of the film's release, the near future. The story is set in 2010, the year of the country's bicentenary and a time in which, according to the film, Argentina finds itself devastated by some unspecified ecological catastrophe and under the rule of a totalitarian and repressive government. As I will develop in the present paper, the fictional scenario that the film portrays is directly informed by the Argentine sociopolitical context of the 1990s. The neoliberal approach to the economy that the government of President Carlos Menem undertook during this decade, coupled with a negligible policy of human rights that deliberately ignored the crimes committed during the country's dictatorship of 1976-83, allowed the filmmakers to establish clear connections between these two historical moments. Relying on a theoretical framework that privileges a chronopolitical perspective as understood by Paul Virilio (an approach that pays attention to the urbanistic and political cycles within the life of the city) I will show how the visual and narrative tropes presented in *La Sonámbula* contribute to establish the connection between the dictatorship and the neoliberal administration of the 1990s. At the same time, I will explore the issue of the biopolitical manipulation of remembering and forgetting – a process that can be understood, in theory, by what Paul Ricoeur calls the instrumentalization of memory. This analysis will reveal that the main social anxieties that find expression in the film are related to the political manipulation of memory and forgetting, and to the negative consequences of the neo-liberal projects implemented in the city of Buenos Aires – initially during the military dictatorship of 1976-1983 (known as the *Proceso*) and later under the Menem administration. I will conclude by pointing out that these key concerns are as valid today as they were in 1998, as demonstrated by the political practices regarding the instrumentalization of memory under the Cristina Kirchner government, and by the neo-liberal project of Mauricio Macri in the city of Buenos Aires.

La Sonámbula is one example among a few dystopian and anticipatory films produced in Argentina. Its closest precursors are *Lo que vendrá* (Gustavo Mosquera, 1988) and *Moebius* (Gustavo Mosquera 1996), two films set in the near future with a distinctly political tone. But *La Sonámbula* stands out in this group because of its elaborate visual effects, rather accomplished for Argentine standards at the time of its release, and because its description of a future Argentina is much more detailed and extended than the one offered in the other two films. Unlike Hollywood SF, however, where visual effects are often limited to providing spectacle without necessarily serving any narrative purposes, the intricate post-apocalyptic scenario in *La Sonámbula* fulfills central narrative and symbolic functions that contribute to convey

a series of political critiques. In addition, *La Sonámbula* is also exceptional in that, unlike most Argentine SF films, it has attracted a significant amount of critical attention (cf. Cuarterolo 2007, Kantaris 2007, Paz 2011). However, most of the existing scholarship on the film does not discuss it at length, and approaches it either in comparison to other films or in order to explore very specific topics. Cuarterolo, for instance, offers an introduction to the film in a paper that is dedicated to a general overview of Argentine SF cinema. Kantaris, for his part, has explored the issue of the figure of the cyborg, in comparison with the Mexican film *Cronos* (Guillermo del Toro, 1993)¹. In my case, I have discussed the relatively minor presence of a voice whose source cannot be located within the image (Paz). However, there are no papers exclusively devoted to discussing *La Sonámbula* at length –an important omission because the film is deliberately ambiguous and it is likely that many relevant points will be missed without a comprehensive examination of the text as a whole.

A brief outline of the plot may be useful here since, regardless of the critical attention it has received, the film has not been particularly popular either at home or abroad. Shot mostly in black and white, but with a few scenes in color, the story takes place in 2010, the year of the bicentenary of the *Revolución de Mayo* (May Revolution) –the first step towards Argentina’s independence from Spain, taken in 1810. The film begins when the protagonist, a woman named Eva, is found wandering around the city and captured by undercover agents. She is taken to a government building which houses the Centro de Investigaciones Psicobiológicas (CIP, Centre for Psychobiological Research), where we learn that she is the victim of an industrial accident: an explosion in a chemical plant released toxic gasses which provoked a complete amnesia among those who were exposed. As a result of the accident, about three hundred thousand people have had their memories completely wiped out. The CIP is the agency that the government has set up in response to the crisis, and it is in charge of investigating the problem and also of reconstructing the lives of the victims, helping (or rather forcing) them to accept their recovered identities. Here, scientists are able to access the minds of the amnesiacs through special machines that allow them to visualize the dreams, thoughts and memories (if they have any) of those studied. In this sense, Eva’s case is unique because she is the only one among the victims to have retained a few brief but vivid memories (always shot in color). The scientist in charge of the CIP, Dr Gazzar, believes she may be the key to finding a possible cure for the amnesia. But there is a caveat: Eva’s memories seem to include a man who might be Gauna –the leader of a dissident underground movement calling for rebellion against the totalitarian government. Dr Gazzar, together with Santos, the head of the state police, decides to set Eva free, to see if she will lead them to Gauna.

It is immediately clear that the fictional Argentina of 2010 is a mirror, in political terms, of Argentina under the military junta during the *Proceso*. The parallel is established in a number of ways, the most significant being the victims of the accident, who constitute a thinly veiled allusion to the disappeared. Although the amnesiacs are alive and physically present, they can still be associated with the disappeared in many ways: by losing all their memories, the amnesiacs have also lost their identities, so they are still partly absent; the CIP and its rehabilitation clinic where the amnesiacs are interned act as a metaphor for the military detention centers in which the disappeared were held captive, interrogated, and tortured; it is estimated that 30,000 is the total number of disappeared, while in the film it is stated that 300,000 people have been affected by amnesia, a number that is clearly the former one multiplied by ten; a euphemism has also been coined in this context, since the amnesiacs are referred throughout the film as *afectados* (affected).

There is also another important signifier that reinforces the parallel between the dictatorship and the imaginary Argentina of 2010 – one which has been omitted from the critical literature on the film but which is, in my opinion, essential to understand its key political subtext. This point is related to the representation of Buenos Aires. Whereas audiences learn that the film is set in Argentina in 2010 through the ubiquitous government advertising that celebrates the bicentenary, the same cannot be said of the country's capital, which is not immediately recognizable. In fact, as Cuarterolo argues, the film intentionally de-familiarizes the city, and the audience must reconstruct Buenos Aires through fragmented images of a few traditional places and symbols such as the *Obelisco*, the Abasto Market or the *Carlos Gardel* underground station (2007: 89). But the main feature that underpins the estranged, unrecognizable cityscape of the futuristic Buenos Aires is the extended network of elevated highways that crosses the entire city, meandering between the buildings and resulting in an unsightly urban landscape. Most critics and reviewers have read this as a reference to other dystopian films such as *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). However, I believe this cityscape can be interpreted as a reference to one very specific instance in the history of the Buenos Aires: the redevelopment undertaken by Osvaldo Cacciatore during the *Proceso*. Cacciatore, a Brigadier in the Air Force, was named Mayor of Buenos Aires by the military Junta after the 1976 coup d'état (an office he held until 1982). One of his most controversial measures was to initiate a major overhaul of the city through several architectonic and infrastructure projects. The plan by which he is mostly known was the monumental construction of eight highway networks, of which only two were eventually made. For this, approximately 3,000 houses were demolished (many of them valuable examples of colonial architecture), undermining the look of the city. This episode acquires a renewed significance in *La Sonámbula* and it should not be overlooked. An audience familiar with local history may well wonder if the Buenos Aires portrayed in the film could be what the city would look like today had Cacciatore's projects been completed.

It is here where the concept of chronopolitics, as defined by Paul Virilio (1997), becomes relevant. Virilio reminds us that the inextricable link between the city and politics is already evident in the etymology of the latter term, which derives from *polis*: “urbanist and politician, etymologically speaking, are the same thing. Involvement in a political ideology has obscured the fact that politics is first and foremost the polis” (Virilio 9). For Virilio, politics has to do with the space of the city as much as with the sphere of government and power. But whereas geopolitics has to do with nation-states, the world system, and territorial borders, chronopolitics highlights the dimension of time, and involves temporal changes of what is political in its most complete sense, involving both the space of the city (*polis*) and political ideology. In particular, chronopolitics emphasizes the increasing speed of communications and the intensification of information networks in globalized society.

In *La Sonámbula*, the imaginary highway network acts as a signifier of an urbanistic/political episode from the past of Buenos Aires, and at the same time it implies a chronological association between urbanism and politics and between the city and ideology through its allusions to the dictatorship. However, the connotations behind this estranged cityscape go beyond the *Proceso*, and can also be read as an allusion to the period known as Menemato (the double presidency of Carlos Menem, 1989-1999). The Menem administration was characterized by the systematic implementation of neoliberal policies that dismantled the Argentine State –and which can be considered a continuation and intensification of the economic reforms brought

about by the military junta and later interrupted after the fall of regime in 1983 (cf. Sidicaro 2002, Bonnet 2008). Moreover, Graciela Silvestri (1998) argues that a process of continuity can be identified between the urban redesign proposed by Cacciatore and the overambitious architectonic projects carried out or conceived during the *Menemato*, whether completed or not. Indeed, during this period a series of large-scale urbanistic schemes were implemented, changing once more the physiognomy of Buenos Aires. Among the completed projects were the erection of several shopping malls and the *Tren de la Costa* rail and entertainment network; among those that did not go beyond a planning stage the most ambitious ones were the construction of a floating airport for the city to be located on the *Río de la Plata* (River Plate), off the coast of Buenos Aires, and a bridge over the River Plate to connect the cities of Buenos Aires and Colonia in Uruguay (it would have become the longest bridge in the world had it been built). Thus, Silvestri argues that the connections between the *Proceso* and the Menem administration are played out in urbanistic terms –something that highlights broader parallels in relation to the economic agendas of both governments, equally concerned with the implementation of neoliberal policies and with modernizing the look of Buenos Aires by means of over-ambitious urbanization schemes. The contemporary shift from geopolitics to chronopolitics and the ensuing cultural and ideological changes it produced has led, according to Ian James, to the “dominance of ideologies of the minimal state, free markets, privatization and deregulation” (James 2007: 97). These are precisely the economic policies that both the military junta and the Menem administration sought to impose in Argentina, evidenced in the buildings and highways of Buenos Aires.

Directly related to the discussion above is the issue of memory and its manipulation by corporations or by the state – a conventional trope in science fiction films, from *Blade Runner* to *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987). Memory, according to Paul Ricoeur (2004), is an activity that is exercised and put into practice, both individually and collectively. As such, then, memory can be subject to both uses and abuses. In the latter category Ricoeur includes individual forms of abuse on the one hand (manifested mostly through psychic pathologies such as repressed or blocked memories) and political abuses on the collective level. These social forms of abuse include the instrumentalization of memory, a practice that is the outcome of “a concerted manipulation of memory and of forgetting by those who hold power” (Ricoeur 80). Political abuses constitute, for Ricoeur, the strongest form of abuse of memory. A crucial point here is that the instrumentalization of memory is not only related to the political manipulation of remembrance but also of forgetting, something he states very clearly: “It is on this plane [instrumentalized memory] that we can more legitimately speak of abuses of memory, which are also abuses of forgetting” (Ricoeur 80).

Ricoeur’s point is very clearly illustrated in *La Sonámbula*, where amnesia has been the starting point that subsequently enables those in power to manipulate and mold memory. In the film such an idea has been taken to its most literal level. Although we do see the conventional practice of manipulating memory through the constant use of mass media (in the commemoration of the bicentenary), the government explicitly and literally manipulates memory and forgetting –to the point of erasing the memories of certain citizens and enforcing new memories through repressive techniques. This, of course, is the ultimate totalitarian achievement: it is not necessary to condition memory through the lengthy and costly process of education and socialization, but memories are directly enforced by the government on

the minds of passive, helpless subjects. Moreover, this is done under the pretense of assisting and “curing” the victims².

According to Beatriz Sarlo (2005) “the past can remain unspoken of. A family, a state, a government may sustain such a prohibition; but only in an approximate or figurative way can the past be eliminated, unless every subjectivity in which the past is located is eliminated” (Sarlo 10). This, she argues, is one of the aims of political violence and repression, of which the systematic killings during the *Proceso* are one historical example among many others. In *La Sonámbula*, however, the government has managed to “eliminate the past” in a large part of the population without the need to eliminate the physical bodies of individuals. It could be counter-argued here that the government was not originally responsible for the tragedy, which was caused by an accidental explosion (or so we are told). But even if this was true, it is still clear that the government is taking advantage of the situation by coercing the people into accepting the identities and memories they are being given, which are most likely false. One clear indicator of such a process takes place when Santos briefs Ariel, the undercover agent assigned to follow Eva, on his mission. Santos says to Ariel that, if Eva leads them to Gauna, the rebel leader is to be shot immediately. When Ariel attempts to refuse the order, arguing that he may be an informant but not a murderer, Santos replies: “Are you sure? You are what I tell you to be and do what I tell you to do. I know more about you than yourself!” So far, it had been evident that in many cases the amnesiacs could not accept their identities, and that they were unable to reconcile the new memories with their deeper feelings. Since their memories had been completely lost, there was no way of knowing if this was an indication that the new memories were false or just an impression of the affected, a further psychological effect of the accident. But when Santos says to Ariel that he is nothing more than what Santos instructs him to be, it is evident that identity becomes a fiction or construct directly manipulated by the government to suit its interests.

The issue of memory and forgetting on the one hand, and neoliberal political projects on the other, converge in the 1990s under the *Menemato*. It should be mentioned here that, after the return of democracy in Argentina, over 400 military officers who had participated in the *Proceso*, including the senior officers who had been prominent members of the ruling Junta, were brought to trial and convicted for crimes against humanity. In October 1989 and December 1990, however, President Menem issued full pardons for all these convicts, which included top-level officers Rafael Videla, Emilio Massera and Leopoldo Galtieri, in the name of a national reconciliation policy that was supposed to unite Argentineans at a time of economic crisis (cf. Moreno Ocampo 1999, Robben 2005). Although the amnesty was met by a relatively strong opposition from Argentine civil society, it produced little impact in the hegemony of Menem’s regime. Besides the obvious objections to the pardons – those responsible for mass murder should remain in prison for legal and moral reasons– it could be added that, in a country that has seen six military interruptions to democratically elected governments, not to punish those responsible for a coup d’état seems to set a very bad precedent in constitutional terms. Writing on the problem of democratization in Latin America, Patrice McSherry (1999) argues that the impunity granted to the armed forces tends to encourage military interventions in the political sphere at the expense of democracy, and adds that it “perpetuates the political autonomy of the military and its ability to act beyond the reaches of the law and civilian authority” (McSherry 465).

This point is directly relevant to the present analysis of the film because it shows how *La Sonámbula* can be interpreted as a warning against the consequences

of the amnesty. Pardoning the crimes of the dictatorship is a way of forgetting those crimes. The lack of collective memory becomes thus a major problem, giving way to impunity and setting the conditions for the recurrence of military coups and dictatorships. In this light, the link that the film establishes between the *Proceso* and the totalitarian regime of the future can be said to hinge in the present (1998), in which the government is attempting to forget the crimes of the dictatorship. It is important here to note that Argentina's present at the time of the film's release is not merely an extra-diegetic concept found only at a subtextual political level in the film. The Argentina of 1998 also constitutes one of temporal dimensions in which the story, albeit briefly, takes place. *La Sonámbula*'s main narrative –the dystopian future, the appearance of Eva and her search for the house in her memories, her adventures with Ariel, and the authorities search for dissident leader Gauna– is bracketed by two brief sequences shot in color (unlike the rest of the film), and which are set in the present. The first scene is quite brief: it corresponds to the opening sequence, in which we see Eva sleeping quietly in her bedroom and the house where she lives. The second scene is a slightly longer sequence of about seven minutes, and it corresponds to the film's ending. Because this scene is deliberately ambiguous and complex, it must be examined in more detail, particularly since it poses a problem of interpretation which has not been dealt with by the critics who have written on the film. After escaping from the city, Eva and Ariel travel across the province of Buenos Aires –the area known as the Humid Pampas, the vast, green fertile prairies in the center of Argentina. In the film, the Pampas have become an arid desert: there is no vegetation to be seen, only ruins are left of the many towns that dotted the region, and hardly any people travel along the abandoned roads. Eva suddenly remembers the name of the place she wants to reach: Saavedra –the town where the large house in her memories is located. After a series of incidents Eva and Ariel reach a tiny train station on the outskirts of a ghost town. Unexpectedly, a train appears and Eva jumps on it. Ariel is unable to board it and starts running after the train along the tracks. At this moment the film adopts the point of view of Ariel, who is unable to catch the train and falls to the ground, exhausted. The screen fades to black. In the following shot we see Ariel lying on the tracks, regaining consciousness. The cinematography is now in color. Ariel stands up and realizes he is in Saavedra –but it is the ordinary 1998 version of the town, and everything seems entirely normal, without any vestiges of a natural catastrophe. It is early morning; the place is quiet and only a few people are out walking along the streets. One of them is a former inmate at the CIP, one of Ariel's acquaintances. Ariel greets him but the person ignores him. Ariel continues to walk through the tidy, tree-lined streets of the town until he reaches the house he knows well from Eva's memories –having closely studied the recordings Gazzar had provided. He rings the doorbell. The next shot shows Eva lying in bed, opening her eyes (a reference to the opening shot of the film). She stands up and walks down the stairs. When she opens the door Ariel embraces her, but Eva pushes him back, looking surprised. She does not recognize him. A male voice is heard asking who is at the door, addressing Eva as his partner. The man suddenly appears: it is Dr Gazzar, with a different haircut and without his mechanical eye. He looks at Ariel and asks politely what they can do for him. Ariel leaves without answering, reaches a payphone and calls his wife. A recorded message tells him that the number he has dialed does not exist. The camera pans upward: a crane shot shows us the town stirring up to the usual morning routine as the end credits roll.

In her review of the film, Rosén (1998) writes that the ending “does not make sense.” This, of course, is not accurate: the problem is that the ending can be

interpreted in more than one way. The most obvious explanation is that everything – the dystopian future, the estranged Buenos Aires, the industrial accident– has been Eva’s dream. However, there is an alternative hypothesis I would like to propose here: one that claims that the estranged future has been something more than a mere dream. I will examine both possibilities below, but in any case it should be said that the ending is deliberately ambiguous and the film offers clues that support both theories. The problem is condensed in a phrase Eva says to Ariel towards the end of their adventures in the countryside: “I no longer know which side of my dreams I am on.” But what is the answer to this question? Who is sleepwalking: the Eva of the dystopian future or the one of the quiet and ordinary present? Regarding the first option, there are several factors that indicate that the future may have been a dream. The first one is the opening scene of Eva sleeping in her bedroom. This very first sequence comes before the film’s credits and is shot in color. After the credits, we again see a shot of Eva asleep, but now it is in black and white, and Eva is no longer in her bedroom but in a cathedral. She soon wakes up, not knowing who or where she is; an undercover police office approaches her and thus the main narrative begins. The second reason is that, as Marino (2001) notes, many of the images that characterize the film possess an oneiric quality. Several of the characters Eva and Ariel meet seem to materialize out of nowhere and then simply disappear after a brief interaction with Eva, as might happen in a dream. At one point they reach a hotel in the middle of the desert, where they spend the night in a room that is clean and comfortable and where they eat breakfast the following morning. The hotel is the only building they find intact throughout their journey, which conveys the idea that it may be more an imaginary setting than a real one. (However, it should be noted that these oneiric quality only begins once Eva and Ariel have left the city of Buenos Aires, and not before). In addition, the possibility that everything is a dream is explicitly mentioned by the characters. Not only by Eva, who at one point states that “my dreams seem so real”, but also by Dr Gazzar, who tells Santos that the death of Eva will imply the end of the world for them (as characters in Eva’s dream, they would be destroyed if she wakes up, which is precisely what would happen if Santos shot her). The title of the film would make more sense from the perspective of the present: Eva, like the audience, lives in 1998, and is having a very vivid nightmare about the future.

On the other hand, the alternative explanation of the ending proposes that the dystopian future is more than just a dream. In fact, it is my contention here that the entire story that is told in black and white, bracketed by the brief opening and closing scenes shot in color, should be read as Eva’s prediction of the future rather than dismissed as a mere dream. In this light, Eva waking up and finding a normal, ordinary world, should not be taken as a happy ending reassuring the audience that everything has been a nightmare. Several elements support this theory. The first one is the film’s subtitle, “memories from the future.” When the title of the film appears after the credit sequence it also has a subtitle or caption: “Recuerdos del futuro”. This is doubly significant: first, the subtitle does not appear anywhere apart from this shot. It is absent from the film’s advertising and promotional material, posters, DVD covers, and in most references in newspaper and magazine reviews. The subtitle then seems to be just a part of the film, and its meaning becomes important only at the end. The phrase itself is of course a contradiction, but it represents more than just an impossible oxymoron. In the realm of SF, where time travel is a concrete possibility, it is technically feasible to have memories from the future. Whether the protagonist has travelled to that future using a time machine or simply imagined or visualized it in her mind is of no relevance here. Perhaps Eva has had a proleptic dream, as conceived

by the ancient Greeks, or she possesses precognitive abilities that allow her to see the future.

Further evidence of this alternative explanation is the opening sequence in which, as described above, we see Eva sleeping: after showing her lying in bed, the camera tracks back, slowly getting away from her. A fade-out as the camera leaves the room is followed by another tracking shot: this time the camera is backing away from the lounge. After another fade the camera is now outside the house, moving away at an increasingly faster pace that soon encompasses the street and later the train station. Thus, rather than closing in on her –something that may connote an inwards movement, suggesting that the events that follow are taking place inside Eva’s mind– the camera moves away from Eva, implying an outward movement instead, perhaps forward in time rather than towards Eva’s unconscious.

The idea of moving forward in time reappears later on, when Dr Gazzar is studying Eva’s memories and discovers that some of these images correspond to events that have not yet taken place. For example, Eva has memories of herself and Ariel travelling by car –and this is before she has met Ariel, somebody she had never seen before (a reference to Eva’s ability to see the future). Finally, if the second half of the film has a certain oneiric quality, it should be remembered the opposite is true of the first part, set in the dystopian Buenos Aires. Here the narrative is straightforward, coherent and well-structured, free of any gaps and inconsistencies in the plot.

The last sequence in the film is particularly important regarding the interpretation I favor here: the shift from black and white to color cinematography takes place not when Eva wakes up but when Ariel regains consciousness on the tracks. This is an evident displacement in terms of the main point of reference in the film. So far, the story had followed Eva. However, once she boards the mysterious train we will only see her again from the point of view of Ariel. Eva has not only dreamt or predicted the future, it seems, but even brought back a character from her visions. According to screenwriter Piglia (1998), this phenomenon can be explained by love: Ariel has been brought out of the realm of dreams by his strong love for Eva, which has somehow caused the materialization of Ariel, a thoroughly virtual character. However, such a romantic explanation in a decidedly political film is unconvincing, and it is possible to find an alternative one which is more in line with the style and discourse of the film.

According to Hernández Celiz (2003), we see that in the last sequence “another part remains loose, and the pieces that do not fit the perfect puzzle are the ones that function as an escape valve, allowing us to dream of a possible way out of the bucolic official realities” (Hernández Celiz 127). The loose part in the dystopian future is Eva, since she never entirely fits that reality: first, because a year and a half have elapsed since the accident, and every amnesiac has already been accounted for. Nobody is able to explain how Eva has managed to escape the authorities for so long. Second, because unlike the other amnesiacs she has managed to keep a few memories. She is clearly an enigma, certainly falling out of the norm, as Santos states when he explains why he wants to kill her. But in the final sequence Eva is no longer a loose piece. Now she fits in perfectly in the colored reality, sleeping comfortably in her stately house, where she lives with her husband. Instead, it is Ariel who has become the piece that does not fit.

Discussing an earlier Argentine SF film, *Hombre mirando al sudeste* (Eliseo Subiela, 1986) Kantaris argues that the protagonist, Rantés (a person who simply appears one day in a mental institute, claiming to be an extraterrestrial visitor) “is a

reaparecido, having appeared from nowhere in a Buenos Aires mental asylum, and is thus a spectral corollary of the *desaparecidos* of Argentina's Dirty War" (Kantaris 61). The same claim can be made of Ariel at the end of *La Sonámbula*. If in the black-and-white totalitarian society the amnesiacs function as a parallel to the disappeared, in the color scenes of contemporary reality the figure of Ariel can be read as exactly the opposite: Ariel is somebody who has simply appeared, materializing out of nowhere, an *aparecido* rather than *desaparecido*.³ If before he was an amnesiac without any memories, now he is, in a sense, the only person to have them: the crucial memories of the future, of the dystopia that awaits Argentina in only a decade's time. Memories, writes Sarlo, cannot be displaced or controlled, and eventually irrupt within individual or collective consciousness. The past, she states, "makes itself present" (Sarlo 10). In *La Sonámbula* it is the future what makes itself present, through Eva's precognitive or predictive dreaming and, in more materialistic terms, through the figure of Ariel. As an "appeared", Ariel has become an inextricable remainder of a totalitarian Argentina –the fact that such a reality has not yet taken place does not undermine his role as critical warning against official histories and official stories.

At this point, it could be asked whether the social concerns expressed in *La Sonámbula* were proved unfounded when the year 2010 eventually arrived. Needless to say, the events that took place after the film was made would not invalidate the ideas originally expressed in the text, which are indicative of the problems latent in Argentine society during the 1990s. However, it is interesting to compare the discourses identified so far with recent developments in Argentine politics, if only to highlight the potentialities of science fiction as an instrument for speculating about the future (always, and inevitably, from the point of view of the present). It is not my claim here that *La Sonámbula* has successfully predicted events that were going take place in a future Argentina. But given that the bicentenary was celebrated under a consolidated democracy and in a period of relative prosperity when compared with the country's recent history, it might be considered that the future proposed by the film was excessively pessimistic. Dystopia, after all, has been accused of being a conservative genre due to the fact it negates utopian thinking. Perhaps, then, *La Sonámbula's* fictional Argentina was overly negative, too focused on past traumas to be able to imagine a more positive future for the country. I believe this is not the case. If the two main problems underlined by the film are the negative effects that an unrestricted neoliberal project may produce in the urban spaces of the country, and the erosion of democracy produced by the political instrumentalization of memory and forgetting, then it can be said that these issues are still related to political issues that are a matter of debate in present Argentina. In fact, they underlie some of the practices of the two main political forces now at work in the country. The first point can be associated to the mayor of Buenos Aires (the office is now called Chief of Government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires), Mauricio Macri. Macri, a representative of one of Argentina's richest families and a close supporter of President Menem during the 1990s, is an outspoken advocate of the neo-liberal projects implemented during the *Proceso* and the Menemato. In fact, Macri has publicly expressed his endorsement of the Cacciatore administration (cf. Blaustein 2013, Sued 2013). Further connections between Macri and the dictatorship are evident in some of the official appointments he made for the Buenos Aires government during his first term in office, when he selected, to occupy several key offices and ministries within his government, persons who had been directly involved with the military junta and the *Proceso* (cf. Fioriti 2009, "Al final", "Repudiada", Nenna 2012). At worst, these

elements would indicate consistent links and sympathies with the dictatorship but, if nothing else, they show the lack of political memory of Macri and his supporters.

On the other hand, the Kirchner administrations (Néstor Kirchner was president between 2003 and 2007, followed by his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, in office since 2007) have been accused of systematically manipulating official memory through diverse strategies that range from the continuous use of official propaganda (which, like they do in *La Sonámbula*, interrupt everyday TV broadcasts), to the creation of a National Institute of Historical Revisionism (Instituto Nacional de Revisionismo Histórico Argentino e Iberoamericano Manuel Dorrego). The Kirchner administrations have also been accused by both the national and international press of attempting to limit freedom of expression, of building a network of TV and radio stations that respond only to the interests of the government, and of manipulating official statistics in order to produce an artificial reality (cf. “Duro editorial”, “Duro documento”, “Polémica en Argentina”). All these strategies point towards a clearly defined project that aims to construct an official memory of both Argentina’s and the Kirchners’ past, and an official story of the present –both of them being, of course, functional to the hegemony of the political movement known as Kirchnerismo.

The above paragraphs do not mean to say that either the Macri or Kirchner administrations are comparable with the dictatorship –such claims would be absurd. It is a fact that both governments are legitimate, constitutional regimes that are the result of democratic elections. Likewise, it is not my purpose to imply that there is a teleological connection between these regimes and a potential totalitarian future. It is highly unlikely that either a continuation of the Macri or Kirchner governments would lead to a future regime like the one that is imagined in *La Sonámbula*. Likewise, the claims made above would be rejected by the adherents of either political movement. Macrists would deny the association of their party with the construction of a neoliberal project in the city of Buenos Aires. Kirchnerists would contest the idea that they may be engaging in the political manipulation of memory and forgetting. It is not my intention here to resolve such a problematic argument, which would ultimately depend on particular individual positions and which cannot be demonstrated theoretically.

However, I believe the above considerations may open an interesting line of discussion related to the critical dimension that can be found in science fiction texts. In this sense, *La Sonámbula* can be said to retain a critical instrumentality that goes beyond not only particular governments but also beyond the political opinions of the filmmakers themselves. This is not necessarily surprising but rather an indicator of one of the crucial strengths of the science fiction genre: its capacity to convey critical reflections on political, economic and corporate powers. As the presence of Ariel in the colorful and peaceful sequence at the end of the film reminds us, it would be foolish to ignore the potential danger behind certain tendencies that have not vanished from Argentine society, either in the form of an uncompleted but persistent neoliberal agenda, chronopolitically supported by important sectors of the civil society, or in the form of the manipulation and instrumentalization of memory and forgetting –a biopolitical technique of which several sectors of the state are fond of. This is precisely why, regardless of specific partisan sympathies and political affiliations, Argentine citizens would be wise to listen to the words of Gauna, the dissident leader in the film, enticing them to distrust the official stories, stay awake, and keep their eyes open.

¹ Kantaris' interpretation of the film's protagonist is in fact rather problematic. According to him, Eva can be considered a cybernetic figure, along the lines of "the original android, *L'Ève Future* (Villiers de l'Isle Adam 1886), the robot Maria in *Metropolis*, or the replicant Rachael in *Blade Runner*" (2007: 66). But it is not easy to justify such a claim. The thesis that Eva is a cybernetic figure is explained, according to Kantaris, by her virtual appearance on the screens of Dr Gazzar's dream-reading machine. However, this explanation is not convincing. Eva is by no means a cyborg in the sense that *Metropolis*' Maria and *Blade Runner*'s Rachel are. It is true that, as Kantaris indicates, the protagonist of Ricardo Piglia's novel *La ciudad ausente*, who has some points of connection with Eva, is a cyborg. But *La Sonámbula* is not an adaptation of Piglia's book.

² Although the premise of artificially induced amnesia might seem at first one of the most fantastic elements of the plot, Naomi Klein (2008) describes how, in the 1950s, the CIA engaged in secret experiment on the use of electroshock to wipe out and manipulate memories. Klein goes on to argue how individual shock treatment can be interpreted as evidence of a larger economic project by which unrestricted neo-liberal policies can be imposed easily by taking advantage of the personal and collective disorientation that follows individual and social shock.

³ *Aparecido* is here, I believe, a better term than *reaparecido* (*reappeared*) since the latter implies the appearance of somebody who had previously disappeared. This would not apply to the disappeared, since there is no real possibility that they could reappear. In the present context of *La Sonámbula*, Ariel never existed before –he only did so in Eva's dreams/predictions, so therefore he has *appeared* rather than *reappeared* into this reality.

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