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# Verónica Tell

## PORTRAITS OF PLACES: NOTES ON HORACIO COPPOLA'S PHOTOGRAPHY AND SHORT URBAN FILMS

*Beginning in the late twenties and more specifically during the thirties – commissioned by the city of Buenos Aires on the occasion of the city's fourth centennial celebrations – Horacio Coppola created a way of looking at Buenos Aires that continues to be influential to this day. This article focuses on the photographic production that constituted that vision in parallel with the short film *Así nació el Obelisco* (this is *How the Obelisk was Born*) which Coppola shot on his own accord while working on the commission in 1936. With the aim of achieving a more thorough understanding of his perspective and aesthetic choices as a creator, we will analyze an early, little-known article he wrote for *Clave de Sol* (1931) magazine in which he discusses issues regarding photography and film, cinematographic time and documentary film. As an urban photographer and filmmaker, this study would not be complete without also examining the short films he produced featuring the *Pont des Arts* pier in Paris (1934) and *Hampstead Heath* in London (1935). In these pieces, Coppola reveals the ties that exist between places and the people who inhabit and use them, a key to modern urban life, and an insight essential to the modern point of view from which he would later construct such powerful imagery of Buenos Aires.*

**Keywords:** Modern photography; film; urban views; Horacio Coppola

### 1

Two photographs by Horacio Coppola appear in the first edition of Jorge Luis Borges's *Evaristo Carriego*, published in 1930 (Figures 1 and 2); Coppola once commented that the two photos actually predated the book project, and were the product of a series of strolls along the Maldonado stream and through the Palermo and Saavedra neighborhoods that he and Borges had taken together. These meanderings throughout Buenos Aires were part of a search for the city's essence, or 'skin' as Coppola would put it.

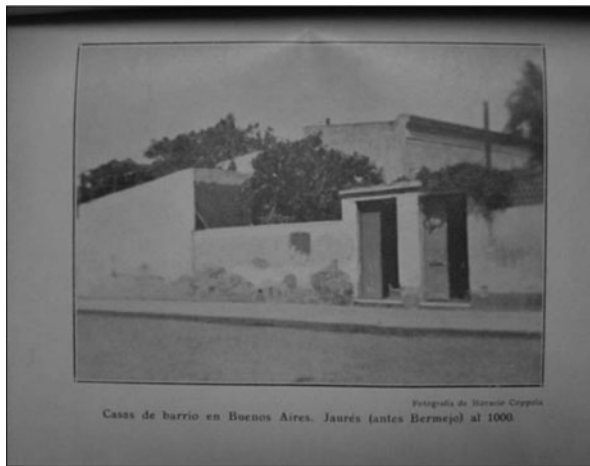
The following year Borges and Coppola would join up again, but this time in the pages of *Sur* magazine in its fourth issue. Borges published a short text titled 'Nuestras imposibilidades' [Our Impossibilities]. It dealt with film and delivered a harsh critique



**FIGURE 1** Horacio Coppola, 'Streetcorner in the old suburbs. 2600 Paraguay Street,' in: Jorge Luis Borges, *Evaristo Carriego* (Buenos Aires: M. Gleizer, 1930).

of the Argentinean public's tendency to underestimate other cultures and aesthetic productions. At one point, the author states:

our lack of curiosity, gushingly given away in all of Buenos Aires' illustrated magazines, which are unaware of the five continents and the seven seas [...] Not only is the overall vision very poor here, but also the vision of home and domesticity. The *porteño's* schematic Buenos Aires is over-abundantly familiar: downtown, Barrio Norte (with the aseptic omission of its *conventillos*), La Boca del Riachuelo and Belgrano. The rest is an inconvenient Cymeria, a futile, conjectural

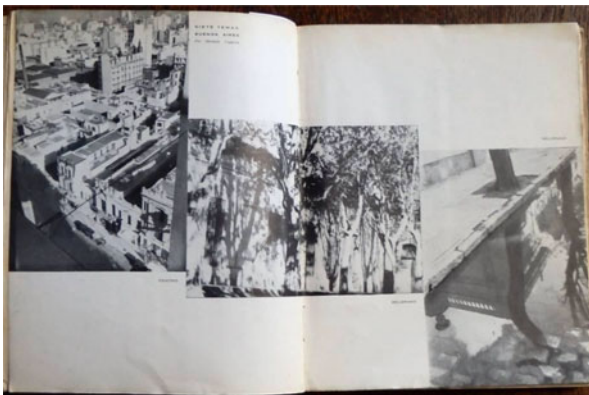


**FIGURE 2** Horacio Coppola, 'Buenos Aires' neighborhood houses. 1900 Jaurés Street (former Bermejo)' in: Jorge Luis Borges, *Evaristo Carriego* (Buenos Aires: M. Gleizer, 1930).

stop for the disorderly buses of *La Suburbana* and the most resigned of the Lacrozes.<sup>1</sup>

What we have here may well be a tacit admonition to the initial gesture of *Sur* in its first issue – or of Victoria Ocampo’s choice in particular – which had included photographs of Argentinean landscapes that distinguished four highly typified geographic areas.<sup>2</sup> Aside from whether or not a sly critique was intended and whether or not the magazine’s director attended to it, what is certain is that in the same issue in which Borges’s text complained about ‘The *porteño*’s schematic Buenos Aires’, Coppola’s first photographs on the topic of Buenos Aires – of a series of thirteen – were published, completely eluding the usual areas or habitual ways of representing the city (Figures 3 and 4).<sup>3</sup> The photos were made using a Leica camera that Coppola had just brought back with him from his first trip to Europe. Significantly called ‘Siete temas de Buenos Aires’ [Seven Buenos Aires Themes], they were accompanied by references to each neighborhood: Almagro, Centro [downtown], Belgrano, Riachuelo and La Boca. Coppola ventured beyond the places most commonly replicated in different publications that tended to repeat the traditional iconography of Buenos Aires, or would represent familiar places in a different way: the shots showing ‘venta de vino’ [wine sales] and ‘venta de carne’ [meat sales] and the two shots taken in Almagro are just a few eloquent examples. His use of reflections, projected shadows, unorthodox framing and high-angle shots clearly form part of modern photographic language.

The central theme of the aforementioned article by Borges was not about visual representations of the city, but his reflections regarding the local public’s attendance at film screenings. We should not forget that in 1929, Borges, Coppola, Jorge Romero Brest, José Luis Romero and León Klimovsky, among others, founded the Cine Club de Buenos Aires. The ephemeral *Clave de Sol* magazine, a publication run by Coppola, Romero Brest, José Luis Romero (from Cine Club) and Isidro Maiztegui that dealt with film, music, painting and literature, would appear the following year, in 1930. Coppola wrote two articles for the magazine, one about the place of the avant-garde



**FIGURE 3** Horacio Coppola. Photograph. *Revista Sur*, No. 4 (Spring), Buenos Aires, 1931.



**FIGURE 4** Horacio Coppola. Photograph. *Revista Sur* No. 5 (Summer), Buenos Aires, 1932.

and the other about American films,<sup>4</sup> and published a photo of the corner of a staircase, where the angle from which it was shot produced a defamiliarizing effect.<sup>5</sup>

If we were to focus on the first years of the 1930s, then, we would find a young Coppola who sees Buenos Aires from a different perspective, using fragments and extensive play with geometry in his photographs; however, in no lesser degree we would also see a person involved in promoting culture, a filmmaker, and an incipient film and visual arts critic. In this article, I would like to refer to precisely this Coppola, who did not employ photography as an exclusive medium, but rather as one of the platforms from which he reflected upon and produced aesthetic forms pertaining to modernity. I am interested in analyzing specific aspects of his artistic production – and his filmmaking in particular – in order to highlight certain positions he adopted and the aesthetic choices he made that bring together different spheres of his work.

## 2

During his second trip to Europe in October 1932, Coppola spent several months in Berlin. There he met Grete Stern and Walter Peterhans and participated in the photography studio directed by the latter at the Bauhaus. He attended the shooting of a film at Studio Tempelhof and bought a Siemens 16mm movie camera. Toward the end

of that year he left Germany for London, where he met up with Stern and the two of them then went to Paris, Budapest, Salvador de Bahía and Rio de Janeiro. The trip would wind up being the one that would bring him back to Buenos Aires definitively, three years later. In Berlin he shot the short film *Traum* [Dream], which embraces an avant-garde aesthetic and is the only fictional piece in his brief filmography. Rooted in surrealist imagery, the work hinges on a dream, a double and the materialization of a photographically portrayed woman, providing the story with a happy ending. This is a portrait of Ellen Auerbach, taken by Grete Stern, and the way in which it was used in the film is thought-provoking (Figure 5).<sup>6</sup> It is interesting both as an aesthetic device and as a fundamental part of the film's plot, and even more so when contrasted with the text that Coppola published in *Clave de Sol* in 1931 – as I shall analyze further along – referring to eventually filming a photographic portrait, a conjecture that would serve as a catalyst for his contemplating the difference between photography and film.

Suppose we have a 2-minute-long film whose first minute is the product of filming a photographic portrait of a person: the elements of the first minute are identical and those of the second are 960 different images (at normal speed). In other words, 960 virtual states in a film that correspond to the same number of real states of the person being filmed. Evidently, as still as the person may remain in front of the camera, film is a succession, an effective change parallel to that undergone by the person. In the same way, this material consideration indicates to us *something happening in the film*, but something that in contrast does not correspond with a change in the portrait, whose *state persists* in the film according to the spectator's need to contemplate it. (...) How this expression conditions film itself as a virtual moment of different states of expression can be noted when photography and film are considered from this point of view.<sup>7</sup>

Let's continue now with two short documentary films that he made in the years that followed: *Un muelle del Sena* [Pier on the Seine] (1934) and *Un domingo en Hampstead*



**FIGURE 5** Horacio Coppola. Still from *Traum*, 1933. Horacio Coppola Archive. Courtesy Galeria Jorge Mara-La Ruche.

*Heath* [A Sunday at Hampstead Heath] (1935). Coppola does not script these films, but instead crops and fragments, following and even anticipating what unfolds before his eyes. In London and Paris, it is not the architecture that captivates him. His eye is drawn to public spaces, and as was the case in his ‘Seven Buenos Aires themes’ published years earlier in *Sur*, nothing is grandiose, nothing has the magnitude of Paul Strand and Charles Seeler’s *Manhatta*. David Oubiña has pointed out that they similarly contrast with the vertigo of *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, by Walther Ruttmann or *Man with a Movie Camera*, by Dziga Vertov.<sup>8</sup> The internal pace of Coppola’s films differentiates them from these last two, and they differ from all three because he moves very little, and does not expect to cover the entire city. Instead, he selects very specific places: a pier and a park. Regarding complex, multi-faceted cities, Coppola chooses to describe delineated spaces and all that inhabits them. He does not choose any old space; both instances deal with spaces that are essential to the urban fabric: green, outdoors spaces that are above all associated with time spent away from the workplace. This space outside the workplace is not handled in the same way in both films. In London it is leisure time, a whole Sunday in a large, public park. In Paris it is unemployment, showing *clochards* or vagrants and the elderly, people who have more time than actually something to do on a day that is not Sunday. We see men talking, playing cards and passing the time – there are no children, no families. He does not portray a vibrant city’s frenzied rhythm or productivity, and yet there is no lack of activity: it is one part of the city and the lives of the people passing through or inhabiting it. By way of his aesthetic decisions, Coppola seems to achieve, in a calculated manner, a way of translating this vital dimension of the city. Without visual effects and using moderate but agile editing, a temperate dynamism emerges echoing the tone of the environment being represented.

In this manner, he puts together short chronicles of single facets of urban life as it occurs in places where nothing very significant transpires. People come and go, speak to or ignore one another, each going about his or her own business paying little attention to anything else, not even seeming to notice Coppola’s camera, either, as he adopts a certain disinterest or detached involvement. From time to time, he follows one individual or action that he then interrupts with a cut, leaving it unfinished. Given that the actions are not really significant, it does not bother the viewer. At different moments in the London film, it would seem that he isn’t looking for anything, that the camera is simply there and things take place in front of it; wherever we look, there will be something to see, neither more nor less interesting than anything else happening there at the time. These are two different – and in a certain way, complementary – ways of filming that Coppola combines to describe something essential about life in these localities, thus creating true portraits of these places.

The urban scenes he films are replicated in his photographs of Paris and London: his attention is not centered on the material aspects of the grand metropolis, but on its everyday pulse and the marks left by it: a bicycle against a wall, graffiti, bird’s-eye views or skewed perspectives of Paris alleyways. The pier and the park were both photographed in addition to having been filmed. In both cities, he focused on blind men with signs hung around their necks, asking for handouts.<sup>9</sup> In London he would pay special attention to men sleeping in the park, a violinist playing for handouts and other scenes where the sweeping backdrop still related to the prolonged consequences of the Great Depression (Figures 6 and 7). It might be interesting to place these images in dialogue with others taken in 1934 by another Argentinean photographer, Liborio





**FIGURE 6** Horacio Coppola. Untitled. Photograph. London, 1934. Horacio Coppola Archive. Courtesy Galeria Jorge Mara-La Ruche.

Justo. One year prior to the outset of the Farm Security Administration's photography program, this young Communist photographer recorded the effects of the crisis in New York, creating an impressive chronicle of North America's desperation. But certainly these were not isolated cases; this kind of image exemplified a recurring theme in modern European and American photography.

It is along these lines that I would like to bring up Jorge Romero Brest's critical text on Coppola and Stern's photographic show held at the head offices of *Sur* magazine in 1935. Romero Brest follows Franz Roh's lead in his long defense of photography as an art form; Coppola himself gave him that reference, having already quoted Roh at length in his article on film published in *Clave de Sol* magazine.<sup>10</sup> Roh would become an important point of reference for the young critic's arguments, offering new perspectives from which to consider the idea of mimesis and establishing parameters for appreciating photography. In Roh's view, objectification and expressivity were not opposed to one another (in what would be a subjectivist view of the artist figure), but participated jointly in the new directions taken by art. This point provided Romero Brest with a solid anchor, affirming that the use of an apparatus in no way weakened



**FIGURE 7** Horacio Coppola. Untitled. Photograph. London, 1934. Horacio Coppola Archive. Courtesy Galeria Jorge Mara-La Ruche.

expressive possibilities and that the true act of creation lay in the selection process.<sup>11</sup> After having managed to thus inscribe photography within the art field, what now remained for the critic was to see what place this art occupied in the artistic-conceptual map that was in the process of being delineated at the time.

In statements such as ‘the use of mechanical means does not in any way restrict creation’, Romero Brest refuted the basis for just about all positions that denied photography’s artistic status and throughout the rest of the text he accordingly minimized the limitations that the technique might inflict upon the creative process. He then went further, purporting that not only were mechanical means not an impediment to creation, but that through them, in virtue of their accuracy with respect to reality, photography manifested outstanding, contemporary directions in art. He says: ‘in its efforts to achieve the most faithful images possible, modern realism may be hard pressed to find any other means of expression that is more adequate than photography.’ In his interpretation, ‘modern realism’s’ greatest achievements remained limited to certain kinds of work and were to be measured according to their level of social relevance. He held Coppola’s reporting on London (which showed ‘social reality dialectically’) as a superlative example of revealing the

fundamental objective of an art that ‘is solidly united with all other activities in society’s culture’.

Romero Brest reached a balanced solution between aesthetic and social values in the article. He stated that ‘this veristic movement is not simply an aesthetic movement, but rather one that responds to a modern conception of the world. [...] this is today’s fundamental task: to liberate the human spirit from old idealist prejudices so that social truth, political truth and the truth of everyday existence might appear’. To a certain extent, Coppola and Stern had already remarked that photography had a social function in their introductory text to the exhibition, a role that Romero Brest would underscore on his own section.<sup>12</sup> I should also point out that above and beyond Romero Brest’s interpretation of his friend’s photography, poor city dwellers were a recurring topic in photography at the time as part of the urban pulse of the cities that photographers were so eager to portray.

The overall tone of *Un domingo en Hampstead Heath* [A Sunday at Hampstead Heath] is quite different, filmed in a public park on a Sunday. While Coppola captures the essence of a carefree day of leisure, when adults fly kites, youngsters laugh together in groups, small children cry or navigate their boats on the lake, dogs frolic about while couples recline on the grass to rest, in some of the shots he also registers the fact that time off from work also exposes some people to loneliness. Confronting this aspect of individual self-absorption in a public space, it is hard not to think of the painting *Un dimanche sur l’île de la Grande Jatte* (1884–1886), by Georges Seurat, the large fresco portraying the alienation of urban spatial divisions, not only because of their common theme but also for the way in which formal structure expresses content: the modern condition exposed from the perspective of *far niente* (whether *dolce* or not).

### 3

I have referred to the critical text that Jorge Romero Brest wrote about Coppola and Stern’s show under the auspices of *Sur* magazine, soon after they finally settled in Argentina. I will not discuss the exhibition and the arena that *Sur* provided for modern photography during its early days in depth here, since I have covered that topic elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> However, I would like to point out that as a result of this show – Victoria Ocampo personally invited Mariano de Vedia, the mayor of the city of Buenos Aires – Coppola received a municipal commission that would culminate in the book *Buenos Aires 1936*,<sup>14</sup> in commemoration of the IV Centenary of the city of Buenos Aires’ first foundation.

In making this book, Coppola established a route through the city that would reshape his meanderings as a *flâneur* and his previous position as a non-professional using a precarious camera with the professional imperative of presenting an overall view of Buenos Aires.<sup>15</sup> For this occasion, his itinerary was organized beforehand: he established three axes over a city map following main avenues and he marked some points along them.<sup>16</sup> The book as a whole was organized just like his itinerary, without following the pre-established urban geography. Takes of different neighborhoods are intermixed and even juxtaposed with scenes from downtown. This order (or disorder, from the point of view of the city’s grid) shows certain solidarity with the photographer’s point of view: from downtown to other neighborhoods – and vice versa – he photographed everything using the same standards. He cut across buildings’

institutional or cultural significance and the symbolic status of different neighborhoods in order to concentrate on the structures and forms of what he was representing. Here he is less radical than in the photographs he had published in *Sur* in 1931 and 1932, for example, or in other images produced during the same era where structures gain priority over the uniqueness of objects and they appear in fragments and a bird's eye perspective wins out over frontal views. Nevertheless, part of this language also appears in the selection made for the book commissioned by the municipal government.

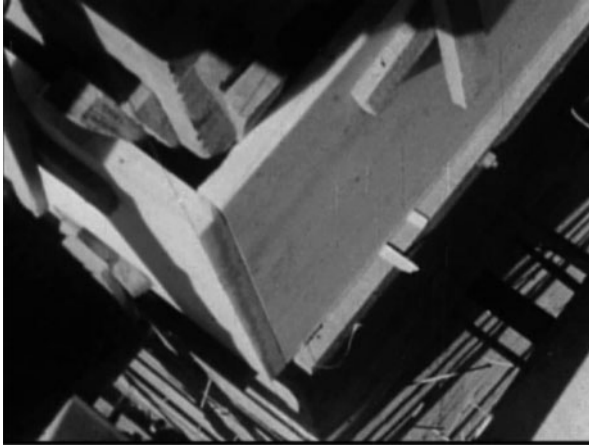
It is relevant to pause on a page devoted to Corrientes Avenue: this one, and another on the city Zoo, are the only ones arranged as a mosaic. In the case of the newly broadened avenue, the shots are fragments of the cinemas and theatre halls and marquees, audiences and neon signs, whose composition on the page emphasizes the dynamism of the new look of this icon of the city nightlife (Figure 8). We should remember that Grete Stern (then 'Coppola' as it appeared in the credits) and Attilio Rossi – both with experience in graphic design – collaborated with the photographer in the editing and composition process of the volume. In this sense, it should be pointed out that this page is not an exception within the book, but that it actually shows how the aesthetic affinity among the three of them can be perceived in how the book's format is in sync with the photographer's gaze over the city.<sup>17</sup>

But rather than survey this book, I would like to take a closer look at the film that Coppola produced on his own featuring the obelisk as its construction – carried out between March and May of 1936 – was taking place in order to commemorate a new anniversary that the city celebrated. He saw it not only as the edification of a symbol, but also as something that would provide a new vantage point for gazing at the city, as evidenced by scenes of Buenos Aires taken from its summit.

*Así nació el Obelisco* [How the Obelisk Was Born], 1936: using a hand-held camera, he combines close-ups with wide shots, varying the point of view; he follows an individual or situation with the camera, or uses a static shot to capture the movement taking place in front of it. Coppola registers workers' hustle and urban bustle in high angle shots, in addition to the shadow of a building that proves to be no obstacle to the



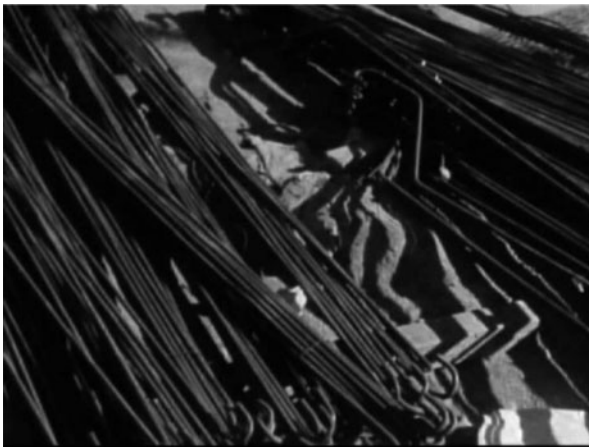
**FIGURE 8** Page image from *Buenos Aires 1936. Visión Fotográfica*. Municipalidad de Buenos Aires, 1936.



**FIGURE 9** Horacio Coppola. Still from *Así nació el Obelisco*, 1936. Horacio Coppola Archive. Courtesy Galeria Jorge Mara-La Ruche.

cars and pedestrians that penetrate it. Shot from a low angle, the obelisk stands out against the sky while clouds urgently parade past. An ascending shot taken from a freight elevator results in a traveling shot out of the darkness and into the light that appears at the end of the shaft's vertical tunnel.

These very dynamic shots – combined and edited in order to emphasize that particular quality – are juxtaposed with other static images of different objects and segments of the edifice during the building process. These shots focus on nails, a pile of sand, wooden planks and the temporary scaffolding that envelops the construction under way. In several of these, the most abstract component of these elements is highlighted, the zooming in on objects produces a fragmentation (Figure 9 and 10). Coppola puts visual interest and attention to the materiality of construction and pauses to focus on a cross made from a wood structure and on the smooth surface of some beams.



**FIGURE 10** Horacio Coppola. Still from *Así nació el Obelisco*, 1936. Horacio Coppola Archive. Courtesy Galeria Jorge Mara-La Ruche.



**FIGURE 11** Horacio Coppola. *Materiales*. Photograph, 1929. Horacio Coppola Archive. Courtesy Galeria Jorge Mara-La Ruche.

The framing, cropping and geometric leaning of the composition make these shots evoke his earliest photos such as *Materiales* [Materials] (Figure 11) and *Ángulo de escalera* [Stair Corner] (Figure 12), both from 1929, the latter having been printed in *Clave de Sol* magazine in 1931. With the camera in hand, as an extension of his gaze and his body, Coppola finds visual stimuli in its action and movement. However, he also reflects on what he sees, penetrating the reality and matter of the things around him just as his intuition had perceived even prior to his stay at the Bauhaus. Similarly, in the text that accompanied the show at *Sur* one year before this film, he had stated that photography ‘signifies essentially new possibilities for knowledge and expression, given its specific capability to reveal detail and “to insist” upon the reality of those beings and things’. By lengthening cinematographic shots and focusing on these objects what he does is precisely that: to insist and to reveal.

Coppola went so far as to insert six consecutive static shots into a lapse of twelve seconds (there are some fifteen static shots in total throughout the film, plus several in

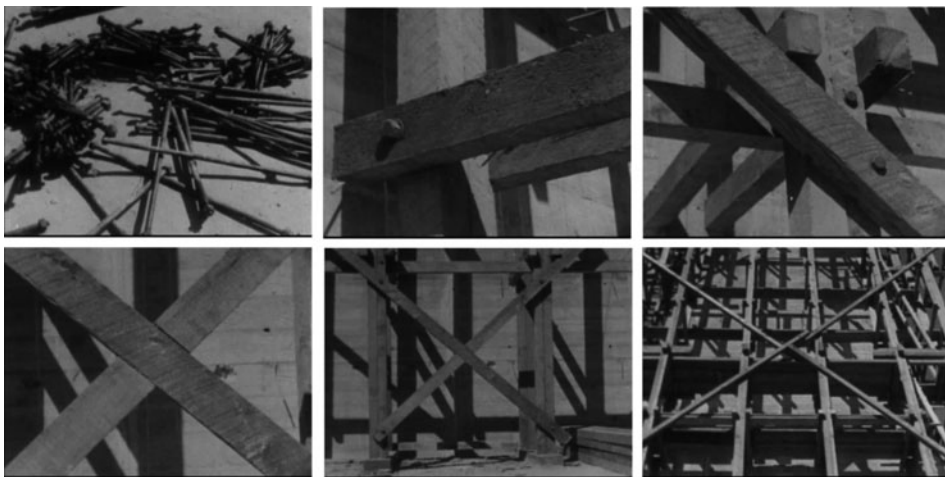


**FIGURE 12** Horacio Coppola. *Ángulo de escalera*. Photograph. 1929 (Published untitled in *Clave de Sol*, No. 2, Buenos Aires, 1931). Horacio Coppola Archive. Courtesy Galeria Jorge Mara-La Ruche.

which a static composition prevails, even in the presence of some element in movement) (Figure 13). Here he was activating his photographic practice (obtaining a fixed image of something – *almost* fixed that is, given that the medium, the surroundings and the hand-held cinematographic camera resist reaching an absolute state), while also simultaneously exploiting cinema’s editing resources to the hilt. In this manner, Coppola achieved a powerful combination of photography and film.<sup>18</sup>

At this point I would like to reflect on an article written by Coppola, mentioned earlier on in this essay, that film and photography scholars of his work have lent scant attention to. It deals with American filmmaking, with precise notes regarding photography in film as already noted. In this text from 1931, he raised the question of how time is handled in both media. He proposed a hypothetical case of filming a photographic portrait: there is a *succession* in film that has no connection with changes in the portrait itself, which he affirmed would remain unchanged. He immediately went on to analyze how including this *plastic* image in the film would influence its expressivity.

Photography is an image of an object that gains potency due to its fragmentary quality and its need to keep segmentation present (and static) as an organic value intrinsic to its expression: photography is conditioned by the exclusion of *the rest* of the object (in temporal and spatial terms) to the extent that what is inanimate matters or not to give it expression, to organize itself as an expressive image (Aesthetically speaking, the value of photography is based on the aesthetic value of nature itself. *Franz Roh*). The plastic quality of film’s photographic element (1/16s.) is not necessary for the film’s expression, since it is independent of aesthetic elements which, if they do intervene in a film, do so *luxuriously*. Film’s plastic aspect goes beyond photography-elements: it lies in how it is shot, since the nature of film is essentially dynamic.<sup>19</sup>



**FIGURE 13** Horacio Coppola. Stills in succession from *Así nació el Obelisco*, 1936. Horacio Coppola Archive. Courtesy Galeria Jorge Mara-La Ruche.

There are most certainly echoes of this analysis in the obelisk film. However, there are differences between the filmed photography he was referring to in the text and the kind of static images he uses in his short film. Given that he was photographing Buenos Aires for the book commission, Coppola could have had a large quantity of photos readily on hand that he might have used to develop this device. And yet he chose not to use photographs of the Obelisk's construction in the film, nor would he do so in the book, where it always appears in an already finished form. What he did instead was to film *as if* he were taking photographs, therefore including photographic time in film. As a result and in his own particular choice, he achieves the 'luxurious intervention' of photography's aesthetic element in film that he had written about five years earlier.<sup>20</sup> As filmed and photographed, then, the Obelisk is shown in very different ways: in one instance it is seen under construction, portrayed in agile editing that combines dynamic as well as still shots, and in another scene it is shown as an already completely finished structure. We can see a correlation between the construction stages and the method employed – in relation to time and movement – as I suggest further on. Furthermore, this correlation can be read in light of the production context that differentiates these two cases: for the book – conceived as an institutional inscription of the Obelisk in commemoration of the city's fourth centennial as a monument – it is already an accomplishment.

In this manner, he did not overlap the two media nor include photography *per se* in film, as Chris Marker would do in 1962 in *La Jetée*,<sup>21</sup> nor did he use superimpositions or transitions between the two as Alberto Cavalcanti had done in *Rien que les heures* [Nothing But the Hours] (1926) – where a film image was frozen and then dissolved into a photograph, grabbed by a hand – or as Robert Siodmak and Edgar G. Ulmer had done in *Menschen am Sonntag* [People on Sunday] (1930) where a roving photographer's work materialized into fixed images. Although these two films have a clearly fictional quality – as opposed to Coppola's three short films here analyzed – both the central role granted to the cities of Berlin and Paris as a framework for human actions and the human condition on the one hand, and on the other the way in which images are arrested, become points of contact that link them to the Argentinean's work. In *Rien que les heures* (which like the other films mentioned concerns a day in the life of a city, where individual solitude is juxtaposed with urban activity, as in *Un domingo en Hampstead Heath*), some shots pause to focus on fresh vegetables and their left-overs in succession – these are practically still shots of inert objects that create a play between the ephemeral and its opposite, as is also the case in *Así nació el Obelisco*.<sup>22</sup>

In his essay on Coppola's films, Oubiña stated that Coppola's film potential comes from the contrast that he achieves between the stony immobility of the building and the movements of his camera.<sup>23</sup> I would add, however, that the building is not *yet* immobile, but still the constant coming and going of men and materials. In this sense, the movements of Coppola's camera create a sense of solidarity with the motions of ongoing construction and of the city itself. The static shots of the elements that will eventually become part of the building thus also metonymically foreshadow its enduring quality. In other words, the mobile camera replicates the movements of the workers and the cars passing by below along 9 de Julio Avenue; they are connected to the upward motion of the elevator inside but, at times, the camera extracts from concrete elements moments of the immobility that constitute their essence.



In Coppola's own words: 'After having seen wood, wire, sand and steel, we find ourselves in a landscape where we experience emotions, recognizing perspectives of our city, bits of sky, and perhaps the river in the distance. We construct the obelisk. Then, we construct the city that surrounds it.'<sup>24</sup> Precisely, the short concludes with four different shots of the city taken from the top of the Obelisk, followed by the same number of shots of the structure itself, still enveloped in scaffolding, taken from each of the streets or avenues that intersect where it stands. This final juxtaposition makes it clearly evident to what extent the city and the gaze that observes it construct one another reciprocally and simultaneously.

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## Notes

- 1 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Nuestras imposibilidades' (1931). '(...) nuestra incuriosidad, efusivamente delatada por todas las revistas gráficas de Buenos Aires, tan desconocedoras de los cinco continentes y de los siete mares. No solamente la visión general es paupérrima aquí, sino la domiciliaria, doméstica. El Buenos Aires esquemático del porteño, es harto conocido: el Centro, el Barrio Norte (con aséptica omisión de sus conventillos), la Boca del Riachuelo y Belgrano. Lo demás es una inconveniente Cimeria, un vano paradero conjetural de los revueltos ómnibus *La Suburbana* y de los resignados Lacroze.' Otherwise noted, translations from Spanish by dossier editors.
- 2 In a 1964 interview with Borges published in the French magazine *L'Herne*, the writer expressed his opposition to the landscape photos' inclusion, given that he considered it a concession to Ocampo's desire to show the country to her foreign friends in that way. Cf. Graciela Silvestri, 'Postales argentinas' (1999: 111–135). The places that the photographs represented were the 'pampas', Iguazú Falls, Tupungato, (Andean section) and Tierra del Fuego.
- 3 Published in the third and fourth issues between 1931 and 1932. Note that in both instances (the Argentine landscapes and Coppola's photographs) the photographs had an independent, autonomous function in relation to the surrounding texts or articles – demonstrating new ways of employing images within the existing framework of publications at that time. This was the case also in the very first issue, with four pages reproducing photographs by Víctor Delhez portraying different perspectives of a tree and carts bearing inscriptions. It is only in the first six issues that this kind of image participates with autonomy, aside from the photographs that are directly related to the

magazine's other content. See Rubén Biselli, 'Tecnologías comunicacionales y procesos culturales modernizadores: El lugar de la fotografía en la revista *Sur* durante la década del '30' (2000–2002). Facultad de Ciencia Política and RR. II. Universidad Nacional de Rosario. In the case of Coppola's thirteen images, it is remarkable that in addition to recognizing photography's intrinsic aesthetic value – an evident trait of modernity – they also implied a rupture inherent to his selection of sites and his way of representing them.

- 4 I will analyze Coppola's text on American cinema further along. With regard to his first article in *Clave de Sol*, 'Superación de la polémica' [Overcoming the polemic] – September 1930 – he states that 'the equivocal avant-garde affirmation' should be overcome and 'we should reaffirm modern art's contemporaneity and relevance dealing with it, living in it critically'. This article echoes the main debates held in the magazine, which, even without a declaration of principles or manifesto, had a well defined core: with the exception of a sociological essay by José Luis Romero, all other texts were related to the arts. Implicit or explicitly, the authors (editors used their initials) presupposed the arts were led by historical determination and they were interested in contemporary and modern art practices. This idea of 'the modern' is a recurring theme – despite the diversity of topics – demonstrating an interest in novelties and the avant-garde in the different arts.
- 5 The point of view and selection of a just a small part were combined with the lack of a title that might facilitate identification of the object. This photograph was later published in *Horacio Coppola. Imagem. Antología fotográfica. 1927–1994* (1994), inverted horizontally with respect to how it had appeared in *Clave de Sol*. It was also cropped and given a title, 'Ángulo de escalera' [Stair Corner].
- 6 The actor in the film was Walter Auerbach.
- 7 Horacio Coppola, 'De la expresión. Sobre cine americano' (1931).
- 8 Originally 'La piel del mundo. Horacio Coppola y el cine' (2009). Published here in English.
- 9 Blindness and even further, blind musicians, became a common theme in Street photography at the time; Paul Strand, André Kertész, and Walker Evans were among those photographers who took these kinds of images. See Geoff Dyer, *The OnGoing Moment*, London: Little, Brown 2005.
- 10 Both Guillermo de Torre – editorial consultant for *Sur* – and Romero Brest, one year later, would cite Roh in arguing in favor of photography's creative value, based on the idea that selectivity is a veritable act of creation ('La fotografía animista' (1934)). De Torre referred to Coppola and Delhez as points of reference for this new photography in Argentina. If we recall the works both had published in *Sur*, we will have an idea of the images that the Spaniard had in mind when he included them in this short list comprising some fifteen names. In addition, it is interesting to mention this text by De Torre here given that it linked film to photography, stating that the former had opened up new possibilities for the latter ('it is not photography—as people tend to think—that has originated film by way of evolution. It is film that has given birth to photography, at least to a new photography with its previously unheard of angles of vision and unexpected perspectives').
- 11 Franz Roh, *Realismo mágico: post-expresionismo* (1927: 57).
- 12 Romero Brest stated: 'art does not lead to action as directly as is commonly held, but rather in an indirect way (...) these artists' photography leads to action in a dialectic way, by contrast of opposites, through images of realities (The reporting from London

- series).’ ‘Fotografías de Horacio Coppola y Grete Stern’ (1935: 91–102). I have analyzed this text in ‘Entre el arte y la reproducción: el lugar de la fotografía’ (2005: 242–262).
- 13 ‘*Latitud-Sur*: coordenadas estético-políticas de la fotografía moderna en Argentina’ (2006: 195–201). My article takes as point of departure Coppola and Stern’s show at *Sur* in October of 1935, and highlights the significant role this magazine and its director, Victoria Ocampo, had in promulgating a new aesthetic and new ideas about photography. I analyze three aspects that, in addition to the works exhibited, made that show a turning point in the history of Argentine photography: the introductory text written by the artists; the show’s impact in art criticism – particularly Romero Brest’s essay; and the site where it took place. Moreover, I pay attention to Coppola and Stern’s participation in other cultural press in the 1940s. These magazines – *Cabalqata*, *Correo Literario*, *De mar a mar*, *Latitud* – were edited and published by Spanish exiles and clearly affiliated with anti-fascist principles. I also reconstruct here the ties and intellectual affinities between Coppola, Stern and other intellectuals, particularly their relationship with editors like Lorenzo Varela and Attilio Rossi.
  - 14 Horacio Coppola, *Buenos Aires 1936. Visión fotográfica* (1936).
  - 15 I point out that Coppola included one of his photographs from *Evaristo Carriego* in the book, but redone with a medium-format camera (9 × 12) and from a slightly different vantage point. This could perhaps be a subtle self-reprimand with regard to the imperfect shot that he published 5 years earlier, as Luis Priamo has suggested (‘El joven Coppola’ (2009)) or, as Adrián Gorelik states, an adjustment in his gaze of the grid (‘Horacio Coppola, 1929. Borges, Le Corbusier y las casitas de Buenos Aires’ (2008)). It is curious that he returned to shoot – albeit with slight modifications – that same house and that same corner for the new project, which differed significantly from the one from five years earlier. The two images that portrayed Palermo – site of Borges’s own foundational mythology – were actually taken in another neighborhood, Once. As Adrián Gorelik points it out, this area ‘represented the outskirts of the city in the time that Borges set his story (1889)’, so even if these images did not correspond geographically with Borges’s narrative, they did so chronologically and as suburban images (according to Gorelik the houses portrayed are not from before 1890s, therefore contemporary with Carriego). This temporal dimension is central in sites where the traces of old Buenos Aires are sought but whose material reality is testimony to construction progress and the quick growth of urban texture, grid by grid. It is in this light that Gorelik interprets Horacio Coppola’s photographs, which combined the residues of countryside among the city, as a synthesis of tradition and modernity. In most suburban images, Coppola seems to anchor his gaze in ‘an essential order’ that redeems the simple and traditional buildings, photographed as modernist objects. This can be seen in the celebration of horizontal lines of horizons cropped by cubic bodies of suburban houses, the long perspectives of streets that recede in the infinite view of the pampa, and in the takes of street corners which for the author are key to the intelligibility of the blocks that structure the a-temporal order of the grid. See his essay published in this dossier.
  - 16 Quoted in ‘Apéndice VI’, in AAVV: *Horacio Coppola. Fotografía*. Fundación Telefónica, Madrid, 2008.
  - 17 The book has more than two hundred images, with a concise reference to the sites photographed at the end of the volume. There are two editions: the first one in 1936, whose cover has an oval and presents the emblem of the city, no doubt a requirement from the municipality (as Horacio Fernández pointed out in *Fotolibros latino-americanos*

- (2011), an anachronism that Attilio Rossi intended to subvert with the inclusion of a removable strip with modern typography and some Stern photomontages made out of Coppola's images. The following year's edition, a spiral bookbinding with significant changes to the cover – an aerial urban view with juxtaposing photographs and low-relief letterhead – achieved aesthetic coherence with the book as a whole. See Fernández's description.
- 18 He had also employed some static shots in his previous short films, *Un muelle del Sena* (1934) and *Un domingo en Hampstead Heath* (1935), but there are only a couple in the London piece and four in the Parisian work (including a close-up of a sign with the name of the bridge that functions as an introduction to the story and the location). Also in it, a view of the pier staircase resonates with the Buenos Aires work's abstracted compositions. Regarding his interest in the technique of montage, it is relevant to point out that in 1929 the Cine Club Buenos Aires (of which Coppola was a founding member) screened Eisenstein's *Bronenosets Po'tyomkin* (Battleship Potemkin, 1925), and that Coppola wrote about his unfinished film *Qué viva México!* (Viva Mexico!) in *Latitud* magazine in 1945.
  - 19 Horacio Coppola, 'De la expresión. Sobre cine americano', in *Clave de Sol*, No. 2, May, 1931. It is impossible not to connect the case presented here as a hypothesis for his first short film, *Traum*, the only fictional piece, in which a portrait is filmed (a work that undoubtedly figured among those exhibited at the offices of *Sur*, as the article appearing in the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Prensa*, on October 6, 1935 allows us to infer), forming part of a dreaming person's fantasy; toward the end of the short film, the woman portrayed is embodied and comes to life to become the main character's companion.
  - 20 In light of this idea of Coppola's regarding photography in film as a 'luxurious intervention', Roland Barthes inevitably comes to mind, who finds that which is specific to film in each frame (let us not neglect, however, to point out the difference between a filmed photograph and a filmed frame) rather than in the 'situated' film or the film 'in movement', in other words, in a third sense found in the passage between language and meaning (which we can therefore relate to the *punctum* from *Camara lucida*). This obtuse meaning inevitably appears, he adds, as a luxury (the emphasis is mine). Cf. Roland Barthes, 'Le troisième sens' (1992, p. 56 and ss).
  - 21 Regarding this use of photography in *La Jetée*, Roger Odin sustained the hypothesis that Marker had filmed and then selected a single frame for each shot, multiplying it 24 times for every second. The other, canonic version of how this paradigmatic film was constructed holds that previous, fixed photographic images were filmed. In regard to this, see: Philippe Dubois, *Fotografía y cine*, México, Serie Ve, 2013.
  - 22 In the case of Cavalcanti's film, these contrasts are not limited to materials and these shots; they also give meaning to the film: poverty and wealth, beauty and ugliness, life and life extinguished.
  - 23 David Oubiña, 'La piel del mundo. Horacio Coppola y el cine', *op. cit.*
  - 24 Quoted in the introductory text for the film series *Horacio Coppola – 3 films*, held at the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, August 3 to September 3, 2006.

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