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# David Oubiña

## THE SKIN OF THE WORLD: HORACIO COPPOLA AND CINEMA

*During the 1930s, Horacio Coppola made two trips to Europe: December 1930–May 1931, and October 1932–August 1935. These trips were, in a precise manner of speaking, apprenticeship experiences. Apprenticeships in photography and in cinematography. Coppola had begun taking photos at the end of the 1920s but, before leaving for Europe, his understanding of photography was basically intuitive. On the other hand, at that time, he was already a consummate cinephile with a very thorough understanding of the current state of cinematography. In Europe, he directed three short films: Sueño (Traum, 1933), Un dique en el Sena (Un quai de la Seine, 1934) and Un domingo en Hampstead Heath (A Sunday in Hampstead Heath, 1935). From the first one to the last one, Coppola undergoes his own shift from the avant-garde to high modernism. Taken together, his three films reveal that, at least for a time, Coppola harbored the idea of devoting himself to cinema. In his itinerary as a photographer, cinema ended up taking a secondary position. But these films show that he investigated the specificity of the images in motion and that he searched to define a personal style and a gaze that is as revealing as it is non-transferable.*

**Keywords:** Horacio Coppola; cinema; photography; avant garde; modernism; imagemas

### The Cine Club de Buenos Aires

It's odd: the photographer Horacio Coppola describes the primal scene of his education in perception in cinematic language. In an autobiographical text, he refers to the birth of his 'friendship' with the image and explains that 'the cinema was also in its infancy when I was a kid, eager to be able to read the stories of Calleja.' Every day, after supper, young Coppola went down the stairs with his father to close the front door of the family house. During this farewell to the day, the child could glimpse the adult world that stretched out beyond. The café next door 'hid its night-time activities behind closed doors and opaque curtains. My first adventure: looking through the slits at the geometric perspective of the tables, white cups, the black silhouetted profiles from behind, wearing hats. In the background, a window. In there, life offered gestures of its magical, *chiaroscuro* future. I discovered it with one eye open – surely it was the eye of my heart – while closing the other, that of my reality, so that I could engage with the being of the image.'<sup>1</sup> There is no sound. This initiation scene of photography is

a silent film in which, incipiently, the geometric perspective of the tables filters the reality of the world that stirs behind the frame of a window or a movie screen.

And so a silent film, then, like those that could be seen in the theatres of Buenos Aires and that, under the distortion of memory, have retroactively acquired an *avant-garde* aesthetic. It is evident that the cinematic imagination became a part of the young Coppola. In fact, cinema arrived early in Argentina, a few months after the first projections of the Lumière brothers in the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capuchines. From the beginning, the relationship of the Buenos Aires public with cinema was an intense one. In 1930, the British magazine *Close Up* argued that ‘despite the fact that Argentina is not – comparatively – a cinema producing nation, it must be one of the greatest consumers of cinema in the world (. . . .) Two million inhabitants. Two hundred cinema theaters. Ninety-five tons of celluloid imported (. . . .) Buenos Aires is the perfect cosmopolitan city of cinema.’<sup>2</sup> A few years before this assessment, in 1927, León Klimovsky began organizing the first showings of ‘art cinema’ in the Anatole France library and, by the following year, convinced a group of intellectuals and artists of the need to find a space for the exhibition of non-commercial films that would be called the Cine Club of Buenos Aires (*Cine Club de Buenos Aires*). Jorge Miguel Cousello commented:

‘Klimovksy recalls in *Cuadernos de Cine*, Buenos Aires, Number 3, 1955, that in 1928, projections organized by the Cine Club of Buenos Aires began on Calle Florida at *Los Amigos del Arte* [Friends of Art society], which later became the Van Riel art gallery, today closed, but other sources do not agree or document it in this way. The two, seemingly conflicting, versions can in fact both be right: that in 1928 there were isolated showings and that the first organic series took place the following year.’<sup>3</sup>

The board of directors was made up of Klimovsky himself, Marino Cassano, Horacio Coppola, Leopoldo Hurtado, Néstor Ibarra, Jorge Romero Brest and José Luis Romero, although founding members also included such figures as Héctor Eandi, Ulises Petit de Murat, Jorge Luis Borges, Guillermo de Torre, César Tiempo, among others. The newspaper *La Nación* (August 7, 1929) announced that on the twenty-first of the month the club would start its activities and, in the registration form distributed to new members, a set of programmatic principles were explained: ‘We will organize a weekly showing that, briefly, consists of the following: pre-war films, that tend more to comedy than instruction, and a film of recognized value in the dramatic or comic genre, or a film that we could call a *studio film*. Under this heading, we refer to works that in their entirety, as an artistic whole, may suffer from serious defects, even to the point of being rather boring; but that amply compensate a spectator eager to learn how to judge works of cinema with fragmentary values, that revealed in repeated scenes are sufficiently numerous, necessarily original, and innovative enough, to deserve our selection. And, finally, on occasion there will be a documentary or a cartoon film.’ It is clear that the cinema club not only proposed bringing early and *avant-garde* films of relevant artistic value to the public, but that it also aimed to educate its audience. In order to further this aim, it had planned to found a magazine, organize a library and create a *cinemathèque*.

Horacio Coppola, the cinema club’s Secretary, read a few pages of introduction at the opening ceremony: ‘We need to know cinema. We must force ourselves not to ignore it. We can only value it after we have previously undertaken these steps and

admit, right at the start, the existence of values that we have yet to discover. These values to be discovered can be positive – beauty, utility, goodness – or negative – ugliness, uselessness, evil. For now, our task can be nothing other than their rational discovery, to reach the point of saying, for example, the cinema is valuable for reasons and valuable for rational reasons. That cinema is valuable is something we sense, an intuition that we have demonstrated by organizing this Cine Club.’ The first season took place between August 21 and November 27 of 1929, with fifteen weekly sessions. During the following year and until October 28, 1931, the Cine Club of Buenos Aires extended its activities. When the organization had ceased to function, Klimovsky counted a total of 114 showings and lectures. A broad variety and eclecticism were the most outstanding characteristics of these meetings. Guillermo de Torre wrote the following in *La Gaceta literaria* of Madrid in 1930: ‘The most considerable novelty that the Cine-Club of Buenos Aires has by comparison with all similar clubs in Europe is the abundance of Russian and Soviet films, those that the European censors prohibited and that here are shown publicly, without any sense of scandal.’ He goes on to conclude: ‘The Cine-Club will be the only shelter for this art (the cinema) as such, if specialized theatres are not being created, if the typical downtown cinema theatres (and in Buenos Aires there are no less than ten in an area of four city blocks) keep providing, without distinction, the best and the worst of cinema to a public made up more of opium addicts than cinephiles.’<sup>4</sup>

What films did the Cine Club show during the years between 1929 and 1931? The silent film period comedies, the French and German *avant-garde*, classic American cinema, and Soviet cinema. A brief listing allows for an appreciation of the variety of films screened: *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925), *The Starfish* (Man Ray, 1928) and *Entr’acte* (René Clair, 1924) in the second session; *The Cat and the Canary* (Paul Leni, 1924) in the fourth session; *Shoulder Arms* (Charles Chaplin, 1918) in the fifth session; *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919) in the sixth session; a ‘comic’ anthology (consisting of film excerpts by Max Linder, Roscoe Arbuckle, Harold Lloyd, Larry Semon, Harry Langdon, Buster Keaton and Charles Chaplin) in the seventh session; *A Sixth Part of the World* (Dziga Vertov, 1926) in the ninth session; *Berlin, Symphony of a City* (Walther Ruttmann, 1927) in the eleventh session; *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Dreyer, 1928) in the twelfth session; *Moana* (Robert Flaherty, 1926) in the thirteenth session; *The Fall of the House of Usher* (Jean Epstein, 1928) in the twentieth session; *Destiny* (Fritz Lang, 1921) and *The Student of Prague* (Henrik Galeen, 1926) in the twenty-fourth session; *Zvenigora* (Alexander Dovchenko, 1928) in the twenty-fifth session; *Storm over Asia* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1928) in the twenty-eighth session.

The final programme of the cine club was number 49, in which they showed *Big Business* (James Horne, 1929) with Laurel and Hardy, and *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928). In the programme handout, there was an announcement that, by resolution of the board at the last meeting, the Cine Club would be ending its third and final screening series and from then on would ‘put all its efforts towards its own production and importing independent film, which are the most important proposals that originally motivated the creation of this organization. These revival screenings have been, as announced on many occasions, only one part of the Cine Club’s mission; its prologue by obligation if you will, not for entertainment purposes, but for study.’ As a matter of fact, in its founding statement, the organization referred to ‘our tentative plans for our own filmmaking. To this end, we have designated three groups of filmmakers under the leadership of, respectively, Jorge Luis Borges, León Klimovsky, and Néstor Ibarra.

Each one of these groups will present a film essay to be screened to the members in due time.' There are no documents that offer evidence about the production or completion of those 'film essays' and, perhaps, we must assume that they are some of the many projects that the Cine Club proposed but did not carry out. Nonetheless, shortly afterwards, the young Horacio Coppola would carry out this programme and began to shoot his own films.

His two trips to Europe (December 1930 – May 1931 and October 1932 – August 1935) were, in a precise manner of speaking, apprenticeship experiences: apprenticeships in photography and in cinematography. Coppola had begun taking photos at the end of the 1920s and, from the very beginning, had been inclined towards modernism. According to Jorge Schwarz, as a photographer Coppola was a born modernist: 'A large number of acclaimed artists from the *avant-garde* period started as figurative artists and ended up moving towards abstraction or geometric forms. In the case of Coppola, something happened that falls just short of being extraordinary: this "evolutionary" process does not take place. The thesis that Coppola was a modernist prior to studying at the Bauhaus, besides being a claim made by the artist himself, is confirmed by the critics.'<sup>5</sup> Before leaving for Europe, then, his understanding of photography was basically intuitive and, very probably, he had not had occasion to see many modernist photographs; on the other hand, it can be asserted that, at that time, he was already a consummate cinephile with a very thorough understanding of the current state of cinematography. During his first trips he bought numerous books and magazines that make up the core of his cinema library (significantly, Coppola's collection does not include many books on photography of this period): Rudolf Arnheim, Béla Balázs, Paul Rotha, Jean Epstein, Henri Diamant-Berger, Leon Moussinac and Raymond Spottiswoode, as well as various issues of *Close Up*, *L'Art cinématographique*, *Cinema Quarterly* and *Film Art*.<sup>6</sup> In 1930, Coppola's gaze seems to have been permeated more by cinema than photography. And, without a doubt, after the initial influence of his brother, Armando, it is films that shaped his photographic gaze.

### Europe I: the *avant-garde* artists

And so, Armando Coppola and the cinema. We must add Borges and Le Corbusier, whose influences have been acknowledged both by critics and by the photographer himself: Borges's first books of poems, his essays of the 1920s, *Evaristo Carriego*, on the one hand; the famous series of lectures given by Le Corbusier in Buenos Aires in 1929, on the other. The early photographs that Coppola creates in these years (and that are considered among the most remarkable of his long career) are a very personal distillation of what he had so closely observed and heard. These images are consciously located at the crossroads of the popular and the *avant-garde*, at the intersection of the traditional and the modern. As has been noted by Adrián Gorelik: 'All artistic works have an aesthetic programme, but Coppola's photos also have an architectural, urban and cultural programme, a proposal for the definition of a kind of modernity for the city (. . . .) It is this programmatic character that makes it possible for Coppola to avoid the major line of "urban photography": in practice he doesn't photograph *scenes*, doesn't capture *moments* of the city *in movement*. He constructs atemporal, formal motifs, postulates archetypes for the city within a double search of synthesis, typical of one

sector of the *avant-garde* in Buenos Aires: the synthesis between modernity and tradition, and between the city and *la pampa*.<sup>7</sup>

At the beginning of the 1930s, Coppola had combined these intersections to the point of creating a gaze that could be called classical. For this same reason, his second trip to Europe, in 1932, is a real upheaval that throws him once again towards the experiments of the *avant-garde*. On arrival, he meets Grete Stern and, through her, Walter Peterhans, who was running the Photography Department at the Bauhaus-Dessau. At the same time, he takes a course given by the Bulgarian director Slatan Dudow (who had been Fritz Lang's assistant on *Metropolis* and who, at that time, was developing a film together with Bertolt Brecht) and, at the Tempelhof Studio, he is present at the shooting of a film by Carl Froelich (who had directed the first sound film in Germany and who, shortly afterwards, would direct Ingrid Bergman and Zarah Leander, before joining the Nazi party). In 1933, Coppola bought a Siemens 16mm movie camera, which he used to shoot his films during his time in Berlin, Paris and London. Following the ideas of Hans Richter and many of the *avant-garde* artists, he engaged in the forms of cinematography that could counter the emerging entertainment industry: documentary film and experimental film. Years later, in his essay 'The Film as an Original Art Form,' Richter still defended these two styles as an alternative aesthetic to that of the dominant 'narrative cinema.' His starting point is Pudovkin's formulation: 'What is already a work of art before it comes in front of the camera, such as acting, staging or the novel, is not a work of art on the screen.'<sup>8</sup> If cinema wants to be an original art form it must free itself from the ability to merely *reproduce*, and it must instead exploit its ability to *produce* sensations that are impossible in other arts. It must free itself – Richter argues – from its tendency to act as a noble handmaiden to theatre or the novel, and must consider itself a pure artistic form.

With the documentary style, cinema returns to its foundations and, to the extent that it gives meaning to natural elements, finds a development that is outside the theatrical or literary tradition. In any case, Richter comes down on the side of experimental style: 'The influence of the documentary film is growing but its contribution to a filmic art is, by nature, limited. It is limited to the extent that it has overcome the influence of the two old arts. Since its elements are facts, it can be original art only within the limits of this factuality. Any free use of the magical, poetic and irrational qualities to which the film medium might offer itself would have to be excluded *a priori* (as nonfactual). But it is just these qualities that are essentially cinematographic, are characteristic of the film and are, aesthetically, the ones which promise future development. That is where the second of the original film-forms has its place: the experimental film.'<sup>9</sup> What does *avant-garde* cinema offer? We can sum it up as follows: the denaturalization of the object that, decontextualized, can enter into new relationships and produce new meanings; the orchestration of movement through plastic rhythms that create a visual music, as Léger aimed to do; the distortion and reconstruction of forms in cinematic terms following the rules of cubism; the velocity, machines and automatons of futurism; an appeal to the oneiric and the irrational as with the practices of surrealism; the suppression of plot and all narrative strategies for the sake of a pure game of forms and rhythms, as with Dada. Coppola is faithful to this programme. However, he is so in his own way because he follows Richter's proposal through an inverse path: he first tries experimental film and finally opts for documentary. His cinematographic production goes from *Sueño (Traum, 1933: 2' 20")*,

which belongs in the first category, while *Un dique en el Sena* (*Un quai de la Seine*, 1934: 3' 40") and *Un domingo en Hampstead Heath* (*A Sunday on Hampstead Heath*, 1935: 10' 45") belong in the second.

*Sueño* (*Dream*) is a short film inspired by the *avant-garde* films that Coppola had seen in Buenos Aires and his apprenticeship in Germany. It was filmed in Berlin with the participation of Ellen and Walter Auerbach.<sup>10</sup> The first thing we see is a man (Walter Auerbach) lying on a table. He is surrounded by everyday objects: a piece of bread, a glass of water, six halves of egg shells, a knife, a candle, an ashtray full of cigarette butts. The man is dreaming. Subtly, and without any visual flourishes, Coppola introduces us into his dream world. There we see the sheets of a musical score flipping. Intermixed with them, the photo of a woman who, suddenly (as if coming from the mythical world of Tlön), materializes among the objects of the table. Then, a wallet opens to show a bill and, when it closes, the money appears between the man's fingers. Finally, in a cabinet we see a top hat and a bowler that meet the same fate as the photo and the bill. A pan shot leaves the sleeping man until it finds, at the other end of the table, the same man observing the scene. He puts on the top hat, puts the photo in his pocket, steals the bill and flees the room. The sleeping man wakes up, puts on the top hat and leaves in pursuit of the thief. After a short and risible chase scene through the countryside, he finds an inflatable ball that magically appears for him and he throws it at his double. The ball hits the criminal on the head and knocks off the top hat, which also magically disappears on touching the ground. Then, the man in the bowler puts away the recovered bill, takes the lady from the portrait (Ellen Auerbach) by the arm and walks off with her as if it were the end of a Chaplin film.

The film is a visual exercise that moves through a number of topics that are dear to the *avant-garde*. In any case, Coppola is not interested in abstract rhythms, nor in the movement of pure geometric forms or visual distortions produced by special lenses, as in *Ballet mécanique* (Fernand Léger, 1924), *Anemic Cinema* (Marcel Duchamp, 1926), *Emak-Bakia* (Man Ray, 1926), *Rhythmus 21* (Hans Richter, 1921), *Diagonal-Symphonie* (*Symphonie diagonale*, Viking Eggeling, 1921) or *Lightplay Black-White-Grey* (*Ein Lichtspiel schwarz-weiß-grau*, László Moholy-Nagy, 1932). In *Sueño*, there is no fascination with optical effects. Coppola uses very few tricks other than simple appearances and disappearances through stop-motion camera. His film functions essentially through what could be called core dramatic scenes, remnants of a narrative, even though the plot is put through an organic disarticulation. In this sense, we should look to place this film among other films of the period that are interested in poetic-psychological explorations and linked to surrealism, such as *Un Chien andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1928), *The Golden Age* (*L'Âge d'or*, Luis Buñuel, 1930), *The Blood of a Poet* (*Le Sang d'un poète*, Jean Cocteau, 1930) or *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (*La Coquille et le clergyman*, Germaine Dullac, 1927). Precisely during those years, Antonin Artaud (Dullac's scriptwriter) had written: 'What is clear is what is immediately accessible to us, but the immediately accessible is the simple appearance of life. We begin to realize that this too well known life that has lost all of its symbols is not all of life. And the times in which we live are beautiful for the witches and for the saints, more beautiful than ever. An entire insensitive substance takes shape, tries to reach for the light. The cinema brings us closer to that substance. If the cinema is not made for translating dreams or all that which in waking life is related to dreams, it does not exist.'<sup>11</sup>



*L'amour fou*, the double, irrational impulses, and the mixing of fantasy and daytime life are topics that these films present and that also appear in *Sueño* as part of this same *Zeitgeist*. However, even when it can fit comfortably within this group of films, we must note that, in the case of Coppola, there is no destructive or anarchistic quest as in *Un Chien andalou* ('a desperate, impassioned call for murder,' as Buñuel himself wrote) nor the disturbing and sombre atmosphere that dominates the dream world of Dullac and Artaud. In Coppola, the violence is not a structural component and the aggressive aspect that all subversion implies is here ostensibly softened. Compared to the ambiguous and dark ending of *Un Chien andalou*, in which the lovers end up half-buried in sand on a beach, Coppola has his couple calmly walking away on a field. *Sueño* is on the well-lit edge of the *avant-garde*. Just like *Entr'acte* (René Clair, 1924), with its wild chases, exaggerated characters and its absurd games of appearances and disappearances, or *Ghosts before Breakfast* (*Vormittagsspuk*, Hans Richter, 1928), with its flying hats, rampant revolvers and small tribe of everyday objects that rebel before occupying their place obediently when the day begins.

It is remarkable that Coppola never stops being geometric and rational even in this case where he seems to be searching for something delirious and hallucinatory. Under the slightly dislocated surface of *Sueño*, it is possible to reconstruct a logical narration. Perhaps this tension should be attributed to the encounter of the iconoclastic art scene of Berlin with the more classical temperament of the filmmaker. Evidently, Coppola was not immune to the dazzling effects of Bauhaus, the teachings of Walter Peterhans and his friendship with Grete Stern and Ellen Auerbach. As testimony to this impact, *Sueño* reveals the marks left by the works of *ringl + pit*, the advertising studio that Stern and Auerbach set up in Berlin. There, both photographers developed certain obsessions that they had learned in Peterhans's classes: to the obsession with folds in clothing, the perfect smoothness of the egg and the wandering gaze upon the most quotidian of objects that appear in the teacher's photographs, the young women added the pleasure of design, the fetishism of fashion and the application of *photomontage* to advertising.<sup>12</sup> Years later, Auerbach would refer to a 'third eye' when alluding to her style: 'in my photographic work, I have forced myself not only to reproduce what is seen on the surface but also to capture the essence that lies beneath the surface.' In *Sueño*, this intention to see beyond the surface is still applied in a strict sense to discover the other side of what is real. Nevertheless, very soon afterwards, Coppola redefines the course of his gaze turning in a different direction: in his next films, the will to capture an essence no longer supposes the intention of showing the other side of things but, simply, to observe them with different eyes.

When he films *Un dique en el Sena* (*Un quai de la Seine*) and *Un domingo en Hampstead Heath* (*A Sunday on Hampstead Heath*), it seems that he had forgotten the experiments with subjectivity in becoming a predominantly city filmmaker. In the spring of 1935, in between shoots, he undertook a photographic documentation of the Ardèche region (France) as the basis for a film that would have been titled *Paysage et vie* [Landscape and Life]. The project was never realized but the title served to characterize the interests of those two documentary essays that he filmed before returning to Buenos Aires. Years later, he would recall: 'A stroll along the banks of the Seine and the dynamic vision of a black cat submerged in the waters, rippling because of a small boat passing by, incited me to shoot a series of sequences in 16mm from the Pont des Arts and the Pont Neuf. Together with *Traum* (*Sueño*) in Berlin and *Un domingo en Hampstead Heath* in London,

these were my first steps as a filmmaker.’<sup>13</sup> The documentary essays in Paris and in London are quite different from the film he made in Berlin: Coppola seemed no longer interested in the interior reality of dreams, but rather in the description of fragments of city life. What was at stake, then, was fidelity in the detailed representation of urban time and space.

## Europe II: the documentaries

In *Un dique en el Sena* [An Embankment on the River Seine], the image of the sign of the Pont des Arts, hanging on a lamppost, is almost a thematic framework that contextualizes and introduces the actions of the film. Deliberately situating the viewer in a specific environment, a few wide panoramas that show the river and the small boats follow. Two beggars exchange valuables: an overcoat and a newspaper that would make his mattress. They seem like a pair of machine operators, one taking over the other’s shift, or soldiers at the changing of the guard. The new arrival puts on the overcoat and lies down on the spread-out newspaper while the other leaves, carrying his bag. Now the camera has descended to watch him closer. Garbage. More beggars. Some of them sleeping, others simply lying there, trying to take advantage of the sun. A graffiti drawing in the shape of a penis (like Brassai, Coppola likes inscriptions on walls). The mooring rings on the rocks. Excrement. More garbage in the river. A tree. A group of beggars playing cards. The camera moves up again to street level and observes, from above, bums who become hard to distinguish from other passers-by. It would seem there are more people now and the *clochards* have mixed in with pedestrians. The street. With the only moving shot, taken from a vehicle, we move away from the bridge. A panning shot moving upwards, following the smoke from one of the chimneys on a boat, reaches the sky and the film ends.

Coppola said of *Un dique en el Sena*: ‘An elementary exercise of camera and *montage* (...) filmed on an autumn day in 1934. It is an attempt to capture the expression of a specific place, visually analyzing the physical aspect of things and people, and presenting the images in the simple succession of the *montage*.’<sup>14</sup> These are, in effect, the salient features of the film. On one hand, the filmmaker is interested in capturing with his camera a ‘pure reality’ that comes out from the contact between the observer and the object observed; and, on the other, this very thorough gaze describes the site through an analytical description of the individuals and objects of which it is composed. As years later he would state in ‘Imagem’, the photographer is ‘the man who looks, sees, finds, invents, CHOOSES what is to be illuminated. And also by infatuation: the man that sees the skin of the world, with its gestures, its perspectives, the harmonious essentials, the beloved expressions that surge from what is visible, the geometry of the earth and the freedom of the horizon.’<sup>15</sup> The way in which Coppola proceeds tends to repeat itself and responds to a connection between what, in the classical grammar of cinema, are referred to as *establishing shots* and *close-ups*: first he identifies a scene at a distance (long shot) and then he moves closer to describe in particular (in full and medium shots) that which has caught his attention. However, significantly, his gaze does not establish any hierarchy between the beggars and the objects that surround them. The *clochards*, the chain, the garbage and the trunk of a tree are parts of an enumeration that is presented ‘in the simple succession of *montage*.’ They are all part of the landscape.

In some of the photographs by László Moholy-Nagy (*Beggar in the port of Marseille*, 1929) or by André Kertész (*The Vagabond's Siesta Seen from the Pont au Change*, 1927) it is possible to find images resembling those in Coppola's film. In those photographs, the beggars are already present as a subject as well as the preference for perspectives from high above; but it is probable that even before these, Coppola had already learned that mechanism of description and enumeration, so characteristic of his short films, in the movies of the silent period. Especially, in the comic films whose structure was defined by the framework a specific site would provide rather than the narrative lines in the plot. The first films of Chaplin, Keaton, and Harold Lloyd were invariably organized around a specific location in order to accumulate humorous situations that were motivated by this site. In *Un dique en el Sena*, some cuts seem to respond to the mere intention of enumerating through *montage*; but, at times, this also reveals an explicit desire to achieve perfect continuity. At the beginning of the film, for example, when the two beggars exchange the newspaper and the coat, Coppola cuts from an almost overhead shot to a lateral plane angle shot that allows him to anticipate the moment when one of the men will walk away from the place. Between one shot and the other, the camera has been moved and, at least, several seconds have passed. If one considers that the entire situation was filmed with a single camera and that, nonetheless, the cut conserves a perfect *raccord*, it becomes evident that Coppola has consciously incorporated the techniques of ellipsis as applied to the documentary.

*Un dique en el Sena* shares this form of objective poetry that also appears in the first films of Joris Ivens: the systematic analysis of a mechanism, in *The Bridge* (1928), or the abstract investigation of water in *Rain* (1929). Had the young photographer seen these early documentaries? Had he possibly seen some of the films of the British school of documentary filmmakers that had emerged during those years under the leadership of John Grierson? Indeed he did know Robert Flaherty and the Soviet filmmakers (Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Alexander Dovchenko, Dziga Vertov) since a good number of their works had been shown at Cine Club in Buenos Aires. What seems certain is that at the time of this film Coppola had already decided on his course of action: here there is no trace left of the Dadaist-Surrealist experience of *Sueño* that, in any case, would endure as a residual element in his work. Consistent with his ideas on the 'New Vision,' the camera becomes an experimental instrument that reveals what is not seen at first glance and that allows us to observe the world in an entirely different way. From now on, his interests will focus on the 'possibility of realism' – to apply to cinema the formula that Coppola would use for photography – with respect to the specific quality of the image: 'Photographic fidelity is the very element that the photographer's will has at its disposal to permanently fix, upon paper, his vision of visible reality. The photographer uses and takes advantage of this fidelity: he conditions it, limits it, and accentuates it. The photographer sees, analyzes, knows the visible reality, the objects, the things, in order to then capture and fix the photographic image of the object choosing, realizing, the visible values that appeal to his feelings, his will and fantasy.'<sup>16</sup> The image is the result of (the camera's) fidelity and (the photographer's) will. There is no longer a 'third eye' that *pierces through* the surface to reach the other side of things, but rather an observation that *itemizes and insists* on 'the visible reality of being and things.'

In *Un dique en el Sena* as much as in *A Sunday on Hampstead Heath*, Coppola describes the passing of time. It is as if he were interested in capturing a development, a slice of

life, a kind of collective intimacy in the middle of the big city. The films celebrate the singularity and the autonomy of these moments. In one case, the temporal arc is brief and focused: the beggars by the Seine as the daily activities start to unfold. In the other case, he aims to represent an entire day of leisure in the park in a synthetic way. Ivens defines the documentary as 'an emotional presentation of facts' and Grierson as 'a creative treatment of reality'; in *A Sunday on Hampstead Heath*, we can speak of an 'emotional consciousness' of the camera, to use the terms that Coppola himself uses to refer to this margin of personal expression with which one shapes a point of view upon the world. Hampstead Heath, with its hills, sky and clouds, was one of the favorite subjects of Constable's paintings and inspired the poem 'Ode to a Nightingale' by John Keats. Karl Marx used to stroll there during his time in London. In Coppola's film, the site recovers its calm and friendly atmosphere during a day off. As in *Un dique en el Sena*, the first things we see are broad establishing shots: the trees, the hills, and a few chairs spread about the park. It is early morning. The sun is shining. Bit by bit we begin to see the first human presences. Two women cross the park. They talk excitedly. In the distance, some cars drive across the scene. More people arrive. Some lie down on the grass. Two tall men walk up a slope and almost seem to be reflected onto two thin trees that await them higher up. Groups of people pass each other on the park's pathways. A policeman. A horse carriage. An employee sets up deck chairs. A family. Three girls walk towards the camera and three boys follow a bit behind. Almost imperceptibly, the place has become populated. Here and there, people lying on the grass: they are sleeping or sunbathing (at times these seem like images of Cartier-Bresson). In the lake there are toy boats, children getting their feet wet and dogs splashing around on the bank. These people spend their time not doing anything in particular. Kites. A number of individuals standing around a speaker who passionately voices standing on a bench. The sun begins to set. People leave. Garbage on the lawn. We see the first lights of an amusement park while other people arrive. There are hammocks, games, a carousel. Night falls.

*A Sunday on Hampstead Heath* is not only the longest of the three European films but also has the most delicate framings, the best compositions and a perfect structure. A greater sense of certainty in the documentary filmmaker's decisions is noticeable here: in a very short time, Coppola has completed his apprenticeship as a filmmaker. He is now the consummate director who would afterwards film the birth of the Obelisk. In the Paris film, his camera seemed more timid: it moved very little and tended to stay in the same place, concentrating on showing what the space had to offer. Here, however, he surprises us with his exquisite patience for finding the unexpected and his bold conviction in searching for images. The shots of *Un dique en el Sena* were, without a doubt, remarkable. However, now we can see that, in the construction of this documentary tale, Coppola still relies excessively on his experience as photographer more than on his conviction as a filmmaker. In the London film, taking advantage of ellipsis has become less intuitive and more systematic: a couple looks for a place to sit and Coppola's camera follows them in a brief *montage* sequence (maintaining a carefully constructed continuity) in which they hesitate about what to do until, finally, they pick two deck chairs. It is a moment that reveals a great sensitivity for observation but, significantly, the action of looking does not finish with framing and shooting, but rather involves the assumption that each shot would be integrated into a predetermined series. His careful selection of the motifs is

more powerful, then, thanks to a developed capacity to organize them within a synthesis.

In effect, the film does not consist of a mere accumulation of scenes taken outdoors. Coppola has deconstructed this Sunday during the shoot and has reconstructed it according to his own gaze when editing the documentary fragments. By staying true to his vision, he manages to capture the evanescent intensity of that day. Coppola already knew how to achieve this in his previous film, but here he has developed this ability to risk going further and to sustain it longer. That is a qualitative jump: the documentary filmmaker controls and administers with great expertise the time of the shots and the organization of the tale. Or, to put it another way: the discovery of *montage* as a constructive tool, not only as a tactic for cutting but also, in a more ambitious sense, as a general strategy of narrative organization. Although the style of Eisenstein's films is very different, it is possible to infer that Coppola had learned this synthetic conception of *montage* from him. Meaning, its creative use for building a situation that depends upon the shooting but, at the same time, acquires its authentic cinematic existence in its reworking. Coppola was familiar with the great visual frescos offered by *Berlin, Symphony of a City* (*Berlin, die Symphonie der Grosstadt*, Walther Ruttmann, 1927) and *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kinoaparatom*, Dziga Vertov, 1929); but, even though these films have left a certain sediment in some images of Hampstead Heath, there are no traces here of the agitation and proliferation with which Ruttmann verges upon rhythmic abstraction, nor of Vertov's optical experiments with speed, angles, superimpositions or the swiveling and tilting of the camera. In any case, Coppola's descriptive rhythm seems more like that of a film pioneer such as *Manhatta* (Paul Strand, 1921) or like that of the films of László Moholy-Nagy *The Old Port of Marseille* (*Impressionen vom alten marseiller hafen*, 1929) and *Still Life in Berlin* (*Berliner Stilleben*, 1931).

The difference with these works lies in the fact that *A Sunday on Hampstead Heath* doesn't try to capture the big movements of the city; it is a small chronicle about individual stories. It is not a symphony, but rather a *tableau vivant*. And in this sense, its delicate sensitivity to the portrayal of customs lies close to *À propos de Nice* (Jean Vigo, 1929). Vigo's film attests with clarity to the shift in French cinema from the *avant-garde* of the 20s to the poetic realism of the 1930s. It is a perfect point of condensation, a moment of synthesis in the history of cinematography. Or, as François Truffaut stated, in this film the two great tendencies of cinema – realism and aestheticism – converge. There is no beauty more celestial or clarity more terrestrial than the images of Vigo. It is true that the scathing and seditious tone, the irony and 'savage poetry' that cut through the images of Vigo's Nice are absent from Coppola's work, but still they share the same aesthetic creed, the same intention of gaze. As Vigo wrote about his own film: 'The ultimate goal can be considered to be achieved if one is able to reveal the hidden reason of a gesture, if one can extract from a common person who is captured randomly his or her interior beauty or caricature, if one can reveal the spirit of a collective beginning with its purely physical manifestations. And to do this with such force that, from now on, people who had passed us by with indifference offer themselves to us despite themselves, beyond appearances.'<sup>17</sup>

From *Sueño* to *A Sunday on Hampstead Heath*, Coppola goes through his own shift from the *avant-garde* to high modernism. Taken together, his three films reveal that, at least for a time, Coppola harboured the idea of devoting himself to cinema. These are

not the films of a photographer, or of a cinephile. Of course, they build on the fact that he was a photographer and a cinephile: they present an idea of cinema in tune with the films of this period and also in tune with the subjects and styles of his own photographs. It could not be otherwise. But they cannot be thought of merely as the expansion of specific ideas of photography nor of the mere recycling of techniques seen in other films. When he films, Coppola investigates the specificity of the images in motion, seeking to define a personal style and a gaze that is as revealing as it is non-transferable.

### Return to Buenos Aires: cinematographic vision

Upon returning to Buenos Aires, Coppola and Stern presented a photographic show at the headquarters of the magazine *Sur* that is considered the first exhibition of modern photography in Argentina. Following this, to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of the founding of the city, Coppola undertook, under the auspices of the municipality, the project for the book *Buenos Aires 1936 (visión fotográfica)* and, at the same time, the film *Así nació el obelisco (How the Obelisk was Born, 1936: 7')*. The contrast between the photographs and the film allows us to see not only the predictable points of contact but also those elements that are specific to each practice. While in the book his 'photographic vision' is set down, in the film he unfolds his 'cinematographic vision.' In 1920, Louis Delluc published his influential book *Photogénie*. In it he explains that, in cinema, the *photogenic* should not be associated with the image having a better or worse likeness (in the static sense) but involves, in a more complex way, articulating all the visual, rhythmic and compositional elements. The true art of cinema is precisely what does not try to be 'artistic,' but rather tries to extract all the qualities of what is represented through its representation. Shortly afterwards, Jean Epstein took up this idea again and broadened the concept: 'What is the photogenic? I would call photogenic that aspect of things, of beings and of souls that increases their moral quality through cinematographic reproduction. And every aspect that is not revalued by the cinematographic reproduction is not photogenic and does not form part of the cinematographic art.'<sup>18</sup> In cinema, then, *the photogenic* is not the quality of the photo but rather that which the cinema adds to the photograph and that which distinguishes it: the variations that take place because of the mobility of things in space-time. Epstein is not only interested in the very movement of people and things but rather thinks, above all, about the specific treatment that cinema can have over them; meaning, what animation and what motion can be projected on them by their representation on the screen. And Coppola, who knew Epstein's writings well, had reformulated those ideas within his very practice as a filmmaker.

In *Así nació el obelisco* Coppola shows the skill he had achieved as a photographer and as a filmmaker. What come together here are his knowledge of the city and his own way of looking at it, but also the Bauhaus and the European experience. Here we see the Buenos Aires of Borges, but also the images of Paris according to Brassai and those of New York according to Stieglitz. In the films' scant minutes, he manages to extract with his camera all the force that comes from contrasting the stony and monumentalized immobility of the obelisk with the restless and ubiquitous animation of the city. Coppola films the diagonal avenues and the grid-patterned design of the streets. He films the geometric forms of the obelisk (the vertical and horizontal lines, the beams, the

scaffolding). He films the intense activity of the workers. He films the tools and the materials of this work. He films the construction in broad general and in tight detailed shots, in extreme high and low angle shots. The obelisk and the city that embraces it, here, appear in their agitated and contrasting modernity. The way in which Coppola himself describes the task of the photography book and the film proposal is quite revealing: 'I made a plan. I took the map of Buenos Aires and said, Buenos Aires is here, Rivadavia here, Santa Fe-Cabildo here, and here is San Juan and the Avenida del Trabajo, and so I began to try different things on these three axes. From downtown towards the neighborhoods, and I went as far as Avenida del Trabajo y Lacarra. And on my own initiative, I made a film about the construction of the obelisk. I began taking the first shots when all the scaffolding was up, but what I was interested in shooting was going up in the elevator. There was a forklift and I put the camera on the forklift and filmed a sequence that started in the darker area and I could see up towards the little window, and it went up getting closer, and suddenly it reached the sky.'<sup>19</sup> This shot in fact translates the bold gaze of the filmmaker: the vertigo, the velocity, the contrast between heaviness and lightness of the traveling shot, the moving, restless, surprising perspective. This is what Coppola's film represents: condensing his gaze on a Buenos Aires that is beginning to transform itself into a modern city.

Between 1937 and 1943, Coppola made two films for the Dirección Nacional de Maternidad e Infancia [National Directorate for Maternity and Childhood]: *Vestir al bebé* [*Dressing the Baby*] and *Do de pecho* [*Top C*]. However, in a certain sense, his small cinema production was already complete with the film about the Obelisk. In any case, it is significant that this film about such a central landmark of Buenos Aires marks an end to this period of short films that he undertook during his time traveling Europe. *Así nació el obelisco* is a film of return: the result and conclusion of this journey of initiation once the traveler decided to definitively come back to his own city. As Adrián Gorelik argues, in less than ten years (between 1927 and 1936), the photographer had constructed a way of seeing Buenos Aires. The first modernist gaze on Buenos Aires: 'Far from documenting the city that really existed at the time, Coppola proposed to construct an urban imaginary of the *avant-garde* (...). To understand Coppola's constructivism it suffices to notice that his images of Buenos Aires were not representative of the usual set of images used in thinking about the city at that time. Coppola pulled together a series of images – that existed but were scattered about and still had no meaning – and built on them in a very personal manner, creating an imaginary while at the same time inventing his aesthetic matrices: his images led us to see the city that they produced.'<sup>20</sup>

The constitution of this gaze is the gesture of style, a gesture particularly significant in the case of photography because its status as art form was still a fairly contentious issue. The geometric, formal and constructivist vocation allowed Coppola to free photography from its documentary fate and let him instead make reality into a 'creature' of his vision. This is, probably, the best explanation of what he calls the *imagera*. And if he speaks of 'essential photography' in referring to it, it is because in that precise image there is a singular point of view that manages to pass for reality in its purest state: 'From *my window* – looking with desire and wonder – *I watch* reality illuminated: *I meet* – from a given point of view – an *image*, so to speak, of *my own world*. When, from the *infinite* possible points of view from my window, *I choose* for myself the *most essential and revealing of that reality that is present* – my image is an

*imagem*. Now, with the photographic camera, I possess that image: I am a photographer.’<sup>21</sup> In this itinerary, in which the photographer’s identity is constructed, cinema ended up taking a secondary, less prominent position. However, at one time, during those years of visual education, it took on a very active role (significant enough to make the preeminence of photography questionable). And it remains there, at the foundation of this gaze and in the inspiration of his *imagemas*.

Translated by Natalia Brizuela.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

- 1 Horacio Coppola, *Imagem. Antología fotográfica 1927-1994* (1994: 9).
- 2 Cited in Fernando Peña, ‘Amigos del cine’ (2008: 60).
- 3 Jorge Miguel Cousello, ‘Orígenes del cineclubismo’ (2008: 95).
- 4 Cited in *ibid.*, pp. 96–97.
- 5 Jorge Schwarz, *Horacio Cópola. Fotografía*, (2008: 22).
- 6 Thanks to Natalia Brizuela for these references.
- 7 Adrián Gorelik, ‘Imágenes para una fundación mitológica. Apuntes sobre las fotografías de Horacio Coppola’ (1995: 20).
- 8 Hans Richter, ‘The Film as an Original Art Form’ (1955: 15–16).
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 10 Coppola and Grete Stern would be the protagonists of Ellen Auerbach’s short film *Gretchen Hat Ausgang* (1935). This silent drama – about a maid seduced by a handsome man – is completely different from Coppola’s experiment with the *avant-garde*. Thanks to Alejandra Uslenghi for this reference.
- 11 Antonin Artaud, *El cine* (1982: 15).
- 12 In any case, it must be said, although influenced by the aesthetic of *ringl + pit*, the dream of Coppola’s film is somehow different from the *photomontages* that Grete Stern would again take up years later to illustrate the articles of Gino Germani in the section ‘Psychoanalysis will help you’ in the magazine *Idilio*.
- 13 Horacio Coppola, *Imagem. Antología fotográfica 1927-1994*, op. cit., p. 14.
- 14 Cited in the press release by the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires for the exhibition *Horacio Coppola, 100 years*, August 4 to September 11, 2006.
- 15 Horacio Coppola, ‘Imagem’, flyer distributed in 1969 on the occasion of the exhibition *40 Years of Photography*, Museo de Arte Moderno of Buenos Aires (reproduced in Jorge Schwarz (ed.), *Horacio Coppola, Photography*, op. cit., p. 318).
- 16 Horacio Coppola, ‘Sobre fotografía’, in *Campo Grafico. Rivista di estetica e di tecnica grafica*, año 5, n° 3, Milan, March 1937 (reproduced in Jorge Schwarz (ed.), *Horacio Coppola. Fotografía*, op. cit., p. 317).
- 17 Jean Vigo, ‘El punto de vista documental. À propos de Nice (1929)’ (1989: 138).
- 18 Jean Epstein, ‘A propósito de algunas condiciones de la fotogenia’ (1989: 335).
- 19 Adrián Gorelik, ‘Horacio Coppola: testimonios’ (1995: 25).



- 20 Adrián Gorelik, 'Vanguardia y clasicismo. Los Buenos Aires de Horacio Coppola y Facundo de Zuviría' (2006: 11).
- 21 Horacio Coppola, *Imagem*. Antología fotográfica 1927-1994, op. cit., p. 19.

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David Oubiña has a PhD in Literature / Arts from the University of Buenos Aires. He is researcher of the CONICET and professor at the University of Buenos Aires, the University of Cinema and New York University. He was visiting professor at the University of Bergen and at the University of Berkeley, and visiting researcher at the University of London. He was a regular contributor to the journals *Punto de Vista*, *El amante* and *Babel*, among others. Currently he is member of the Editorial Board of *Las Ranas (artes, ensayo y traducción)* and of *Cahiers du cinéma: España*. He has been fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation, the Fulbright Commission, the British Council, Fundación Antorchas and Fondo Nacional de las Artes. His research focuses on Contemporary cinema, Argentine Cinema and the relationship between film and literature. His latest books include *Filmología: Ensayos con el cine* (2000); *El cine de Hugo Santiago* (2002); *Jean-Luc Godard: el pensamiento del cine* (2003); *Estudio crítico sobre La ciénaga, de Lucrecia Martel* (2007); *Una juguetería filosófica: Cine, cronofotografía y arte digital* (2009) and *El silencio y sus bordes. Modos de lo extremo en la literatura y el cine* (2011).

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