

character that could have been born from the imagination of Robert Crumb, Federico Fellini, Gabriel García-Márquez, or Elías Morante. In the video she is a young woman, uncomfortable with herself and the world around her, easily perceived as a rejected outsider. Her somatic features can find associations with a vast list of races. Her face might evoke the November 18, 1993, *Time* magazine cover art attached to the article, "The New Face of America: How Immigrants are Shaping the World's First Multicultural Society," which depicted a computer-generated multi-racial visage.

In the culminating scene in the video, Zarin enters a public bath where women and children are assembled. Solid bodies with matriarchal demeanors find a calm comfort in a monumental intimate space. As the protagonist undresses, it is clear that she may be anorexic, bulimic, or very sick.

The visual pleasure of matriarchal comfort is juxtaposed with the horror of eating disorders. After pushing away a woman who is trying to gently wash her back, Zarin scrubs her skin violently. A child watches until a woman covers his eyes and pulls him away. Zarin continues what appears to be a ritualistic process of flagellating an already tired body. In a space that is architecturally puzzling, the viewer can sense a strong association with spaces of Northern Africa and the Middle East, but where no recognizable specific location or ethnic identity can be named, as an awkward, underweight woman scrubs herself until she bleeds. The images spark questions of female identity, definitions of beauty, and matriarchal power. It also made this viewer painfully aware of the fragility of young women in contemporary western society, as I saw something of the cinematic Zarin in most of the young art students who were

strolling around Chelsea that afternoon.

As Roland Barthes stated in *The Responsibility of Form* (1985), people will always trust text over images. The reference to a specific short story as the basis for the video almost functions as a disguise for a visual message that is strong, complex, and critical, but ultimately very different from the one of Parsipur's prose. Ultimately *Zarin* fails as an adaptation of a short story, but works beautifully as a melodramatic cinematographic piece, awkwardly claiming a space in the scene of contemporary video. **ⓐ**

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NOTE

1. Press release from Gladstone Gallery, October 2005.

HISTORY AND MEMORY

BURNT ORANGES

BY SILVIA MALAGRINO

90 MINUTES, ENGLISH, 2005

JANINA A. CIEZADLO

My savvy students often ridicule *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). They seem to find Dziga Vertov's montage, with its continuous motion from the individual to the collective, trite or overdone and, I suppose, ideologically simplistic. Perhaps they are embarrassed by his naive vision of the camera's power, living as they do in a world where that power is pervasive, although often surreptitious and fictive. But what if these cinematic patterns and Vertov's implicit vision of the social production of space had been refined over time and their political and cultural implications shifted to chart the discovery of political positions rather than their reception? The film *Burnt Oranges* (2005) by photographer Silvia Malagrino, whose filmic language is informed by Vertov's heirs Chris Marker and Agnes Varda, reinhabits early modernist shot sequences and editing patterns in order to tell the story of the Dirty War in Argentina (1976–83). The

result is a film that makes the connection between what happens to individuals during times of social catastrophe, examining the trauma that is inevitable for people whose lives have been rent into before and after, and the effects of state terror on the plurality of a city. The film (which recently won the CINE Golden Eagle Award) portrays the gradual reclaiming of the city of Buenos Aires by a powerful coalition of women, youth, and human rights organizations.

Malagrino's scrupulous attention to form reveals the distressing truth that people living through any chaotic situation lack information about what is happening. We experience the history of the Dirty War from the position of the street: the political situation is revealed through civilian rumors, paranoia, and lack of information, keeping the audience in a position of uncertainty. In Argentina, after the military coup, many people did not know what was going on because the



Still from *Burnt Oranges* (2005) by Silvia Malagrino

press had been silenced by the new regime. Stories of disappearances filtered through groups of people who had been politically active during the demonstrations of the 1970s, but the surface of daily life seemed undisturbed. The filmmaker builds up a visual texture of sensual distraction with shots of everyday life in the city: the camera roves like a restless eye, catching a detail here, obscured by something there—a table of food, a store window display of semi-automatic weapons, a child. The point of view is often purely subjective, moving at street level; at other times it moves over the street to a high angle, privileging the viewer with a moment of power and clarity above the maze of streets of the contested city. The associational montage sequences are interpolated with rhetorical forms: interviews and newsreel footage. Interviews with journalists (with diametrically different views of the disappearances) recount the details of the clampdown on the media.

The occasion for the film is a return visit to Buenos Aires by Malagrino, who narrates the film. The narration, written by Monica Flores Correa, is in the second person, addressing an enigmatic "you" whom the narrator has gone back to claim. Writing in the second person moves the film into the territory of poetry, which often seems as if it were overheard. Poetic voice and diction changes the ideological pitch; the spectator must make a series of adjustments to determine their position with respect to the narrator and the images. Although we are party to an intimate search through the city of Buenos Aires, and we identify with the narrator as a matter of course, the use of the second person distances the viewer. We do not lose our critical position by fusing with the narrator. Latin Americans are comfortable with a mixture of lyric poetry and politics: Pablo Neruda and Ché Guevara come to mind immediately, but they are only part of a greater tradition. Malagrino's intimate discourse on the soundtrack is extended by the cinematography. The photographer's heightened knowledge of how objects, spaces, and people fit together is revealed by her use of lighting and editing techniques. Narration, shots, and sequences switch continuously between intimate soliloquies of memory and loss, and the collective quests for understanding the past and present, often accompanied by the music of Astor Piazzola. Burning oranges over a gas stove provides a complex, sensual symbol of family, Argentine identity, nourishment, taste, smell, and transformation, contrasting with the rhetorical discourse of various authorities and bystanders: the press, the generals, a child of one of the victims, and the mothers, children, and members of the group Grandmothers of the Disappeared, among others.

During the 1970s, students and intellectuals in Argentina, as in the rest of Latin America, were influenced by the Cuban Revolution and the passion of Guevara to act against long-lasting social inequities held in place by colonial oligarchies. The bombings and actions of the students and intellectuals, holding a spectrum of positions and ideologies on the left and right, served to strengthen the right, which was already active and using similar guerrilla warfare tac-

tics. Argentines became tired of political unrest and wanted social order. The price and the means for establishing social order in Buenos Aires was very high and insidiously brutal. After the military coup in March of 1976 a program of kidnapping, imprisonment, torture, and murder of activists took place. Malagrino, along with three million other Argentines, went into exile.

The search through a labyrinthine city in pursuit of a mystery connected with the past is a mainstay of narrative film. It fuels our fascination with detectives and alienated individuals; deeply urban and anti-rational, it feeds off disorder. A series of interviews provides counterpoint to Malagrino's romantic and intimate internal dialogue. The viewer is cast out of the realm of questions mixed with desire into the world of the law, of file cabinets and history. Interviews with a female lawyer, a reporter, a publisher, and one of the generals (who assures us that people always disappear in war) are woven into sequences of memories as the filmmaker tries to match her internal geographies with a map of the living city. The curving staircase of the university, the empty streets she walked with a chance acquaintance the night before the coup mingle with the gathering evidence about political events. One riveting sequence of interviews with a young man, whose mother was shot by the police on the roof of their apartment building when he was six years old, vividly bridges the gap between personal and political for the viewer. The camera travels through the past and present, retracing the long passageway that leads to his apartment, and the scars where the door was broken down. This synthesis between personal and political understanding comes into its final realization with the introduction of the group of mothers and grandmothers from the movement Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Linea Fundadora.

The filmmaker represents the emergence of the mothers' coalitions from the vertigo of memory and loss to public witness through a strategic search for evidence about the fate of their children and grandchildren as an authentic insurgency, privileging neither pole, neither the individual nor the collective. Her quotations, the patterns of montage

and mobile framing from the traditional avant-garde film language of the European left, are balanced by an empirical attention to the details of Latin American reality. She has learned the lesson of Argentina well, she is not searching for a restoration of order. The texture of continuous rupture reproduces the sense of her attempt to negotiate actual events, rather than accept a fictional or factional resolution. She quotes the mothers who insist on keeping the memory of their individual children alive, gathering together in public to bring their children's dreams of a better world back to life. All the institutions in Argentina failed, explains the journalist Robert Cox of the *Buenos Aires Herald* (which published information about the disappearances when the other newspapers were silent); the only institution in Argentina that did not fail was motherhood.

Malagrino introduces the mothers and grandmothers one by one. Their lined faces are enlivened by their engagement and poignantly revealed in available light as they recount their stories of bereavement and movement toward resistance: in their words, pain transformed into struggle. The filmmaker lets their stories unfold slowly, keeping personal testimony and legal details in play. Once the mothers exchange stories they begin to recognize that they are not alone and they form coalitions between the children and grandchildren of the disappeared. They recount their move from clandestine meetings in their homes (public demonstrations were forbidden by the military coup) to the Plaza and their own transformation from private individuals into activists. The stories of these everyday witnesses are vastly different than any ideological discourse of authority of the left or right. In the beginning of the film, the narrator evokes the euphoria and omnipotence of the left's goals and we see banners with slogans from various revolutionary movements such as the Revolutionary Army of the People; at the end, several mothers explain that for them, history and memory are the same—what the narrator describes as fragments of experience that never left are in fact part of a history made up of individual relative truths.

Toward the end of the film, the nar-

rator speaks about the past again, while another montage of city life accompanies (but does not illustrate) her internal dialogue. The sequence resolves as she reminisces about the radiant bond of sorrow shared with friends in her youth. The shots in the montage move from a close up of a sun drawn on a napkin by a her friend Claudio, who disappeared, to letters in light and shadow, and larger daylight shots of people in the city. A series of shots of night and darkness follows, accompanying images from the past the oranges burning over the gas stove, and finally an arcing, slightly blurred shot of bicyclists at night on a balustrade lit with yellow lights; the cyclists move beyond the frame when the camera stops. The next shot, a low angle of the mothers with their hand-made banners marching into the frame

in bright daylight, marks the narrator's movement out of the past.

At the conclusion of the film there is footage of a demonstration that is held each year on the anniversary of the coup, March 24. Thousands of people walk through the streets with a banner over one thousand feet long and ten feet wide carried by the assembled groups of *madres* (mothers), *hijos* (children), *abuelas* (grandmothers), and human rights groups. The banner is covered with the photographs and names of the thirty thousand people, most in their twenties at the time, who were detained, tortured, and murdered; the mothers explain that holding the banner is like holding their lost children once more.

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fragments of experience that never left are in fact part of a history made up of individual relative truths.

Toward the end of the film, the narrator speaks about the past again, while another montage of city life accompanies images of the disappeared to the streets of the city, defying the power of those who would have obliterated them. Their monument to the disappeared is not a static representation: it is a fluid procession made up of the living and the dead, a political process based on courage and love. ④

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