

## Roberto Arlt's Urban Montage: Forms of Combination in a Peripheral Metropolis

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In "How to Write a Novel," a piece published in his daily column *Aguafuertes Porteñas*, the Argentine writer Roberto Arlt envisions his literary works as literally the products of cutting, what he calls "the work of scissors [*la tarea de tijera*]." <sup>1</sup> Arlt explains that, "[h]aving finished the 'bulk' of the novel, that is, the essentials, the author who works in a disorganized manner, as I do, must dive, with monumental patience, into an enormous chaos of papers, clippings, notes, marks in red and blue pencil." <sup>2</sup> Arlt seems to prefer this chaotic process of revision over the moment of creation on a blank piece of paper perhaps because "the work of scissors" does not simply describe the final stage of writing; it indicates Arlt's materialist approach to the readymade materials of urban modernity in the interwar moment. In the prologue to *The Flamethrowers*, Arlt similarly argues that the contemporary moment demands a literature whose form articulates the contradictions of the social totality. Although Arlt aspires to write a beautiful, "panoramic canvas" like the novels of Flaubert, "today, among the noise of an inevitably collapsing social edifice, it isn't possible to think about ornamentation." <sup>3</sup> Arlt must thus abandon harmony and write works that "contain the violence of a 'cross' to the jaw." <sup>4</sup> Against the idealist impulse to produce works whose seamless unity compensates for social reality, Arlt grounds literary construction in montage.

This article reads Roberto Arlt's *The Seven Madmen* (1929) and *The Flamethrowers* (1931) in terms of a form of montage that consists not in the mere accumulation of incongruous fragments but in the arrangement of contradictory elements in a dialectical manner that reveals their social mediation. Siegfried Kracauer, in his contemporaneous *Die Angestellten* (1929), likewise insisted on a critical montage whose juxtapositions were derived from knowledge of the social structure. "Reality is a construction," he wrote, but "it is by no means contained in the more or less random observational results of reportage; rather, it is to be found solely in the mosaic that is assembled from single observations on the basis of comprehension of their meaning." <sup>5</sup> This montage, in other words, does not constitute the attempt to shock and disrupt

habit, as if by assimilating the excessive stimuli of the metropolis, but a conceptual map of the unevenness of global modernity. In this regard, montage also appears as a determinate response to the representational dilemma outlined in Fredric Jameson's "Modernism and Imperialism." Because the structure of imperialism, in which a fundamental part "of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere," means that the "daily life and existential experience in the metropolis... can now no longer be grasped immanently," modernist literature must substitute a spatial language for the absent totality.<sup>6</sup> Jameson, of course, finds a solution to the dilemma in Joyce's *Ulysses*, since Dublin amounts to an "exceptional situation, one of overlap and coexistence between these two incommensurable realities... those of the metropolis and of the colony simultaneously."<sup>7</sup> Arlt's Buenos Aires displays a similar mediation of capitalism's contradictory structural tendencies, albeit for different reasons. Situated between the European metropolis and the periphery, Buenos Aires folds within itself and points to aspects of both realities, making this Latin American city into what Beatriz Sarlo calls a "peripheral metropolis."<sup>8</sup> Jameson maintains that the modernist situation "is still organized around two distinct temporalities: that of the new industrial big city and that of the peasant countryside."<sup>9</sup> But the relationship of the country and the city, Harsha Ram argues, effectively serves "as a diminished substitute for modernity's larger geographies."<sup>10</sup> While the European metropolis tends to appear as a complete microcosm, Buenos Aires foregrounds its incompleteness and the international dimension of uneven development. As a result, Arlt's montage, by drawing on ready-made materials, does not simply juxtapose contingent fragments but constitutes, by building on the way the peripheral metropolis posits its relationship to global modernity, a formal attempt to mediate individual experience and the underlying structural tendencies of global capitalism.<sup>11</sup>

In this paper, I argue that Roberto Arlt's *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* evoke the city and utilize factual forms through a peculiar dialectical montage. This montage serves to articulate and overcode contradictory tendencies, keeping alive the tension between opposites while forming a chiasmus in which each tendency turns into its opposite. The novels, as I will show, imitate and parody factual forms — journalism, footnotes, etc. — undermining their appearance as immediately verifiable, while also appropriating and rearranging pseudo-fascist clichés and mythical images — above all, in the Astrologer's plans for a secret society that would install a dictatorship and redeem meaningless existence in modernity through the invention of "metaphysical lies" — to insist on illusion as a fundamental reality of the historical situation. Moreover, I show that this dialectical reversal informs Arlt's conception of the urban modernity, which, through expressionist language, technical images and geometrical forms, appears simultaneously as the new and the same, as possibility and the ineluctable necessity of meaningless modern existence. Roberto Arlt's urban montage, as a result, figures the combined development of the peripheral metropolis and provides a vantage point from which the problem of the

opposition of realism and modernism may appear as its own solution, illuminating Arlt's own peculiar position in literary debates at the time in Argentina and speaking to contemporary discussions of the relation between realism and modernism.

### **“Century of Phrases”: Montage as the Unity of Journalism and its Opposite**

Because of its semi-peripheral position — not a colony, not a core region — Argentina may appear to have been relatively isolated from the interwar crisis. The Great Depression, of course, impacted all nations in the global economy, but Argentina maintained its neutrality during the two world wars. In reality, the interwar crisis prompted a significant transformation in Argentina's position in the global economy and in its political and social structures. From the second half of the nineteenth century to the interwar period, the prevailing economic model was based on the export of agricultural raw materials and beef to industrializing economies in Europe and the US. As Ernesto Laclau argues in an early essay, this arrangement — in which labor-intensive and even precapitalist modes of production persisted in Latin America while industrialization rapidly advanced in the center — enabled the formation of an average rate of profit whereby surplus-value produced in Latin America compensated for the rising organic composition of capital and the corresponding tendency for the rate of profit to fall.<sup>12</sup> Argentina, however, held a peculiar position in the global economy. While entirely dependent on export, the productivity of the land in Argentina surpassed that of many other countries, leading to a situation in which, according to Laclau, differential rent allowed Argentina to appropriate surplus produced elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Dependent and exploitative, Argentina indeed formed a peripheral metropolis, and the contradictions of this peculiar combination were expressed most clearly in Buenos Aires. Ultimately, this relationship to the global economy was incredibly tenuous; it thrived insofar as export demand remained high, but the aftermath of World War One began to dispel the illusion of this model's future viability. Unemployment soared in Buenos Aires, and although things stabilized in the second half of the twenties, the problems intensified during the Great Depression. Liberalism — the ideology of the Latin American oligarchy, who sought to maximize production for the global market — slowly crumbled during the twenties, and the thirties saw the rise of authoritarian nationalism and populism, with vague resemblances to fascism, and strained attempts to expand domestic industry. These changes, unfolding in the peripheral metropolis, thus mediated Argentina's shifting position in the global economy.

“The Art of Collecting Cigarette Butts,” a piece written in 1931, exemplifies how Arlt utilizes montage to map the extremes of the peripheral metropolis. In this text, Roberto Arlt discusses how desperate *porteños* — inhabitants of Buenos Aires — devised inventive strategies to deal with the harsh economic realities of the interwar period. Arlt quotes a man he met in a café:

This city lacks nothing in misery and poverty to match European cities. The only thing that distinguishes us from over there are appearances. Because, tell me: “Who, seeing my look, this cheap tie, my cheap boots, my cheap suit, my cheap hat, which all together give me the appearance of a decent person, could suspect that many nights, at twelve or one in the morning, I go out to gather cigarette butts in the streets so I have something to smoke the next day?”<sup>14</sup>

This acquaintance abruptly reverses the conception of the European metropolis and its peripheral counterparts, since the city embodies not human achievement but “misery.” In its deteriorating economic condition, Buenos Aires has overcome the distance separating it from Paris and Berlin, but its inhabitants cling to the fading appearance of distinction. Rather than give up smoking, this acquaintance — and, as Arlt relates, many others whose economic position would not seem to necessitate such desperate measures — continues this habit by recovering the scraps of bourgeois society. The cigarette-butt collector thereby thrives on the city’s inequality. The inhabitants of the city’s poor neighborhoods could not afford to waste anything, smoking the cigarette till nothing was left, but inhabitants of the rich neighborhoods might take a drag or two before causally throwing the cigarette onto the street. The cigarette-butt collector’s attention to the disregarded materials of the city, however, also articulates how Arlt in his writings gathers and arranges prosaic scraps that elude the typical *porteño*’s attention. Arlt, like his acquaintance in the café, is “a ragpicker, at daybreak, picking up rags of speech and verbal scraps with his stick and tossing them, grumbling and growling, a little drunk, into his cart.”<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin famously used these words to describe Siegfried Kracauer. Arlt developed a similar montage technique grounded in the particulars of the metropolis.<sup>16</sup> The reality of the interwar crisis, whose tension between value and material wealth could not simply be dissolved by a conceptual synthesis, demanded a montage that was not simply a contingent combination of mundane objects but a conscious form of construction that articulated the relationship between the elements of an inherently contradictory social reality.

More specifically, Arlt’s journalistic writings arrange verbal fragments through overlapping and open-ended quotations. In the second half of “The Art of Collecting Cigarette Butts,” Arlt describes a discussion with a friend who elaborates on the details of this practice. The friend’s voice initially appears as one quote among others, subordinated to Arlt’s authorial voice, but the ending suggests that the second half of the text has been either one continuous quote without quotation marks or an ambiguous mixture of two voices. As a reporter, Arlt defers to the friend’s account, but Arlt neither returns to make a final comment nor makes a clear distinction between the direct discourse and the discourse of the column writer, violating the supposed objectivity of journalism, based on the separation of reporter and words reported. This *aguafuerte* has become what Bakhtin might describe as “double-voiced,” since “we hear in that word another person’s voice.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, this double-voiced

word does not amount to stylization or parody, phenomena in which the speaking subject, out of agreement or disagreement, subordinates the intentions of another speaker. The words of the friend (and Arlt) would be more accurately described as passively double-voiced. The voices enter into a dialectical relationship whereby “the other person’s words,” which are manipulated for external purposes in stylization and parody, instead “exert an active influence and inspiration on the author’s speech, forcing it to change accordingly.”<sup>18</sup> As an avid reader of Dostoevsky, Arlt appears to have come to the same conclusion as Bakhtin about dialogism. Because of the massive wave of immigration to Argentina in the early twentieth century, dialogism was an urgent political matter, prompting writers and the dominant class to defend the purity of literature as a model of the national language. But Arlt, as Ricardo Piglia argues in a memorable moment from *Artificial Respiration*, “works with what *remains*, what is sedimented in language, with leftovers, fragments, amalgams, that is to say, he works with what really is the national language.”<sup>19</sup> The negativity of this prosaic national language — its non-identity, its inter-national and relational character, its tendency toward fragmentation — disqualifies it as a static model, whether real or ideal, to be copied. Arlt does not reproduce a static, pre-existing language but rearranges, overlaps and thereby transforms these recognizable verbal scraps.

The journalistic practice described here differs significantly from that of the *modernista* chronicle: the journalistic writing of turn-of-the-century Latin American poets. As numerous critics have shown, the chronicle (*crónica*) played a fundamental role in the constitution of Latin American literature.<sup>20</sup> Since Latin America’s publishing industry was still in its infancy at the time, poets turned to journalism as a source of steady income, initiating the incomplete autonomy of literature from political power. But journalism also represented a serious threat to literature. Aníbal González, for instance, refers to the *modernista* concern that “journalism not only degrades the author, but it also ‘chops him to pieces.’”<sup>21</sup> Unlike the time-intensive craft of poetry, the newspaper’s “impersonal, reportorial ‘telegraphic style’ was, for them, the very negation of style, and, therefore, of the author.”<sup>22</sup> The chronicle constituted, as Julio Ramos argues, the place “where literature would represent (at times anxiously) its encounter and conflict with the technologized and massified discourses of modernity.”<sup>23</sup> As a result, the *modernista* chronicle registers the gap between prosaic object and unitary poetic subject, a struggle that marks the uneven modernization of Latin American literature.

But in Arlt’s journalism, as we have seen, the author no longer maintains a rigid separation between self and urban modernity. The peculiar form of combination in Arlt’s use of voices reveals his conception of the urban subject as an overloaded, or supercharged, montage. That is, Arlt combines his voice with another in order to render visible the inherently fractured and multiple nature of the subject who has been pieced together from impersonal urban fragments. In this way, Arlt’s *aguafuertes* may bear more similarities with the articulation of voices in Baudelaire’s prose

poems and with a set of modernist fragments that Andreas Huyssen had identified as “metropolitan miniatures.”<sup>24</sup> These short prose pieces — written by Kracauer, Benjamin, and Bloch, among others — dispense with plot and character. Preferring a provisional, kaleidoscopic approach to the city, the miniature both performs and reflects on the urban transformation of subjectivity and perception. The multi-perspectivism of the literary miniature coordinates, without collapsing, the distinct modes of expression that overlap and coexist in the metropolis: slang, advertisements, headlines, etc. Likewise, in Arlt’s journalistic writings the montage form registers what Beatriz Sarlo calls the “culture of mixture” in Buenos Aires, where questions of immigration and periphery overlaid the already dissonant combination of cultural forms in the city.<sup>25</sup> The newspaper, the very medium in which Arlt’s *aguafuertes* appeared, provides an exemplary instance of this juxtaposition of incongruous elements because it incorporates, without any apparent hierarchy, heterogeneous registers on the same page: factual, fictional, banal, and sensationalized observations. Sarlo has also discussed how the major newspapers in Buenos Aires in the twenties and thirties, in apparent violation of the standards of journalism, presented an almost fantastical combination of news, technical information, and utopian technological dreams, and she has rightly connected these “modern dreams” to Arlt’s work.<sup>26</sup> The newspaper thus bears an intrinsic relationship to the combined unevenness of the city and Arlt’s journalistic writings embody in their formal principle the inner connection of metropolis and newspaper.

At the level of subtext, *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* incorporate another dimension of journalism: its claim to factual presentation. The novels offer themselves as reportage, as the non-fictional reconstruction of events that had been sensationalized in the news. The narration initially appears omniscient, but the narrator intervenes directly about half-way through *The Seven Madmen*, at which point he explains that the story has been pieced together from first- and second-hand accounts. For instance, Erdosain, one of the principal characters, told the narrator about the events prior to committing suicide.<sup>27</sup> The narrator, who refers to himself as “the commentator,” claims to have housed Erdosain for three days, during which Erdosain explained every detail.<sup>28</sup> After Erdosain commits suicide, the commentator claims to have consulted other characters and various police and journalistic accounts. The novel’s jarring *in medias res* opening becomes clearer in this light. The narrator provides no background but simply jumps into the first scene, assuming that the reader already knows about Erdosain from having read the newspaper.

*The Seven Madmen* begins as Remo Erdosain is accused of stealing money from his employer, the Sugar Company. To return the money he stole, Erdosain goes to the suburban neighborhood of Temperley to seek out the help of “the Astrologer” and Arturo Haffner, also known as “the Melancholy Pimp.” Erdosain subsequently becomes involved in the Astrologer’s plans to use brothels to finance a pseudo-communist, pseudo-fascist secret society. To obtain the initial capital needed for

the brothels, Erdosain proposes that they kidnap, ransom, and murder his brother-in-law, Barsut. This plan fulfills Erdosain's need to kill in order "to be." In the end, the Astrologer fakes the murder in order to satisfy Erdosain's need but uses the opportunity to recruit Barsut, whom he will double cross in the next book.

In *The Flamethrowers* the story becomes increasingly dispersed and disjointed. Erdosain moves into Barsut's old boarding house and begins work on plans for a chemical weapons factory that would allow the Astrologer's secret society to rapidly spread terror and overthrow the Argentine government. At the boarding house, Erdosain gets engaged to the owner's daughter, "the Cross-Eyed Girl." In the meantime, the Melancholy Pimp is murdered by a rival pimp. The Astrologer establishes an alliance with Hipólita, to whom Erdosain had confessed the plan to kill Barsut in the previous novel. Hipólita initially planned to blackmail the Astrologer, but his fascinating ideas convince her to become a devout follower. After Barsut kills the Astrologer's dim-witted assistant, Bromberg, the Astrologer and Hipólita burn down the house in Temperley and leave the country. At the same time, Erdosain delivers the plans for the chemical weapons factory to the Astrologer, murders the Cross-Eyed Girl and then commits suicide on a train.

Although these characters appear eccentric and unlikely to reveal overarching historical tendencies, Arlt insists that the novels bear a fundamental relationship to their historical situation. Like Kracauer, Arlt believed that "[o]nly from its extremes can reality be revealed,"<sup>29</sup> and these characters, these "madmen," are nothing if not extreme. In an *aguafuerte* written shortly after the publication of *The Seven Madmen*, Arlt responds to a letter in which a potential reader asks if the novel is worth buying. Arlt, who had no qualms about self-promotion, uses the opportunity to give a review of his own book. The plot of the novel, he says, is minimal. Instead, the novel revolves around its the characters. They, in Arlt's words, "[h]ate this civilization. They would like to believe in something, to kneel before something, to love something, but they are denied the gift of faith, 'grace,' as the Catholics say."<sup>30</sup> They are, in other words, spiritually homeless. But Arlt does not hypostasize this existential crisis as the fundamental condition of humanity. Instead, he relates it to "the disorientation that, after the great war, has revolutionized the consciousness of men, leaving them empty of ideals and hopes."<sup>31</sup> But, Arlt insists, these characters are not simply literary illustrations of the historical moment. Arlt claims that they are "individuals and women from this city, whom I have met."<sup>32</sup> Arlt, in other words, had no need to invent extreme characters because they existed ready-made in Buenos Aires, embodying the historical shifts of the interwar moment. Moreover, this *aguafuerte* reiterates the novels' self-assertion as documentary works, as factual accounts.

Indeed, *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* often suggest, but never claim, that Arlt is the "commentator," the narrator-journalist who took down Erdosain's testimony and carried out an investigation of the events. In various footnotes, Arlt appears to speak directly, announcing, for instance, the details of the second novel

or commentating on the remarkable similarity between the Astrologer's plot and the "conservative revolution" of September 6 in Argentina.<sup>33</sup> Occasionally, these comments carry the heading "author's note" and thus appear to set themselves apart from notes made by the narrator.<sup>34</sup> But not always. The last footnote in *The Flamethrowers*, simply titled "note," reiterates Arlt's frequent complaint about the temporal constraints he faced as a writer and journalist: "This work was finished with such speed that the publisher was printing the first sheets as the author was editing the final chapters."<sup>35</sup> These are surely Arlt's words, but they occupy the space — the footnote — reserved for the narrator's comments. The notes thus open the possibility of two distinct interpretations, that the novels are factual documents of real people or fictional representations of reality. A qualitative distinction, of course, exists between Arlt-as-author and Arlt-as-narrator, and Arlt would not deny such a distinction. But he writes the novels in such a way that they constantly shift back and forth between fictional and factual registers, asking the reader to do an impossible task: to see the work as both simultaneously.

While the footnotes entail a complex mediation of author and narrator, they also produce reality effects through journalistic references to contemporary events in an international framework. The novels thereby make explicit the connection between the plot and the interwar moment, and perhaps more importantly, they claim empirical verification for the reality of the story. Arlt, in other words, does not create reality effects by means of meticulous descriptions of urban and domestic settings, as in a novel by Flaubert or Balzac. Instead, he relies on documents, on forms of writing whose factual status seemingly enables them to make truth-claims. In *The Flamethrowers*, for instance, Erdosain claims that there is no escape from suffering, because "[e]very coast of the world is occupied by ferocious men who, with the help of canons and machine guns, install factories and burn alive poor indigenous people who resist their robbery."<sup>36</sup> The commentator agrees, including in a footnote a recent report from a French newspaper about Chinese writers and Communists who were executed or burned alive. Or, in another instance from the beginning of *The Flamethrowers*, the Astrologer justifies his conviction that "half a dozen willing associates can turn the best made society upside down"<sup>37</sup> on the recent news that Al Capone and George Moran had formed an alliance. Despite operating outside the law, these men have become so powerful that the alliance is reported as if it were "an offensive or defensive treaty between Paraguay and Bolivia, or Bolivia and Uruguay."<sup>38</sup> The Astrologer thus seeks to convince his interlocutor, the Lawyer, and the reader by extension, of the feasibility of his secret society on the basis of what is actually happening elsewhere in the world. The commentator, however, footnotes updated news on the alliance: Capone's thugs, disguised as police officers, killed a number of Moran's men and nearly killed Moran himself.<sup>39</sup> The alliance, it seems, was simply a deceitful maneuver, a way to get close to Moran in order to then destroy his organization. Correspondingly, the news report, the fact that presents itself as immediately verifiable, turns out

to be an unwitting illusion. The footnotes thus stage a dialectical reversal whereby the most factual moments of the novels — journalistic reality effects — reveal their falseness and, in another reversal, suggest that deceit may be the fundamental truth of the historical situation.

As a result, the footnotes underline a fundamental problem in the novels: unreliable narrators. The footnotes often interrupt the narrative flow in order to offer a conflicting perspective or even explain that something is false. During a meeting of the secret society, in a chapter aptly named “The Farce,” a Major in the military proposes how the Argentine military could be used to serve the society’s goals. Yet, after delivering his speech on the failings of parliamentary democracy, the Major admits that he is playing a role, that “this was nothing more than a rehearsal, but some day we’ll act out the drama for real.”<sup>40</sup> But the footnote reverses the picture once again: “It was later discovered that the Major was a real rather than an imaginary officer.”<sup>41</sup> Suspicions multiply further when “the Gold Prospector,” another member of the secret society, tells a captivating story about the discovery of colloidal gold in Patagonia, only to admit to Erdosain that the story was false. Unreliable narrators are the norm in these novels. Erdosain’s testimony constitutes the fundamental basis of the commentator’s reconstruction, and while Erdosain does not appear to deliberately deceive, unlike other characters, his hallucinations and delirious experiences deprive him of reliability. The chapter “In the Cavern,” for instance, oscillates between three levels: Erdosain on the train (present); Erdosain’s first encounter with Hipólita’s husband, Ergueta (past); and Erdosain imagining that he is telling Hipólita about his first meeting with Ergueta (hypothetical future). The narration often conflates these levels within a single sentence, eliminating the possibility that one could definitely decide which parts are true. Even if the novels, in their fictional self-presentation, aspire to the objectivity of reportage, the narration and its sources cannot coalesce into a factual report. The commentator may claim to rectify apocryphal accounts, but the narration cannot completely purge itself of the unreliability of its sources. Moreover, the Astrologer disappears by the end of *The Flamethrowers*, making him unavailable for questioning, but the novels contained detailed chapters on the Astrologer’s thoughts. The narration thus contradicts its claim to empirical verification. And yet, this is not a fault or a sign of inconsistency. Arlt’s novels, Ricardo Piglia suggests, deal fundamentally with “the possibility that fiction has to transmute reality... the possibility to *make believe*.”<sup>42</sup> In raising the question of belief in the context of a self-declared factual presentation, *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* ask what counts as a fact.<sup>43</sup>

Ultimately, the dialectical relation between factuality and deceit unfolds in the framework of the peripheral metropolis. For Arlt, cynical reason prevails among urban subjects, but this cynicism also paves the way for mythical, compensatory images. In “We Are Suspicious for a Reason,” an *aguafuerte* published in 1929, Arlt insists that “you cannot believe anyone.”<sup>44</sup> Sitting on the train or in the park, overhearing

conversations, Arlt notices a recurring pattern of deceit in the city. In the countryside, Arlt explains, deceit is uncommon because everyone knows everyone else, but the city is “a sort of masonry forest where in every cavern a wild animal hides and stalks its prey.”<sup>45</sup> The city thus highlights the peculiarity of the capitalist social formation, which, Marx argued, replaces “[r]elations of personal dependence” with “[p]ersonal independence founded on objective [*sachlicher*] dependence.”<sup>46</sup> Insofar as it is structured by the logic of capital, modern urban life entails anonymity and alienation. Moreover, and more fundamentally for Arlt, urban modernity creates cynical subjects who deceive in order to avoid being deceived. Accordingly, Arlt states that we are witnessing “the twilight of compassion... This is the *century of phrases*.”<sup>47</sup> Arlt does not elaborate here on this terse and brilliant historical diagnosis, but “phrases” (*frases*) refers to quotations, empty sayings and clichéd language, encapsulating thereby the proliferation of mass media and disingenuous political propaganda in the early twentieth century. The idea of a “century of phrases,” in other words, identifies how cynicism prepares the ground for its opposite, creating the conditions for a desired return to mythical images.

The Astrologer bases his secret society precisely on this need for “a metaphysical lie.”<sup>48</sup> In his diagnosis, modern rationalization and the brutality of recent world events have led to a spiritual and existential crisis: “Once science has extinguished all faith, nobody will want to go on with a purely mechanical existence... an incurable plague will return to the earth... the plague of suicide.”<sup>49</sup> In this desperate situation, the Astrologer proposes “tak[ing] a step backwards,”<sup>50</sup> inventing gods and cultivating myth. Deceit would serve as the cement holding together the secret society and the society it would rule. The Astrologer’s grandiose ideas appear absurd, but they are nothing but a montage of pseudo-fascist and pseudo-communist clichés that were readily recognizable at the time. In a brilliant work on fascism in Arlt, José Amícola has shown, for instance, that one of the Astrologer’s most notorious quotes — “We’ll be Bolsheviks, Catholics, fascists, atheists or militarists, depending on the level of initiation”<sup>51</sup> — evokes a well-known statement made by Mussolini, whom the Astrologer considers his model.<sup>52</sup> Given Arlt’s commitment to write a work that grasps the interwar moment, what Jameson has described as “a wholly new force field, in which, not the older nation-states, but rather the great new emergent and transnational forces of Communism and Fascism, become the ‘subjects of history,’”<sup>53</sup> he draws widely on readymade materials found in newspaper reports. Arlt condenses the contradictions of the historical situation into the Astrologer’s ideas, which thereby appear as a caricature comprised of over-coded and overlapping ideological clichés and historical fragments.<sup>54</sup> Because his words assume the form of an over-coded montage, the Astrologer is the master of what Bakhtin describes as the loophole, “the retention for oneself of the possibility for altering the ultimate, final meaning of one’s own words.”<sup>55</sup> He rearranges readymade clichés and always holds onto the possibility of another reorganization that would transform the meaning. These factual documents

— sayings, propaganda, etc. — thus posit the novels' relationship to the historical situation, but they also appear as mere "phrases," as the empty words fascism used to deceive and over-coded words that appear to fill in the longing for stable meaning. Through this form of montage, Arlt appropriates, imitates and parodies the fascist discourse of mythical images.

In this regard, there is a striking affinity between Arlt's novels and the photomontages of John Heartfield. Unlike his earlier work with Berlin Dada, characterized by explosive fragmentation and the disintegration of illusionism, Heartfield's photomontages in *AIZ (Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung)* mobilized montage to simultaneously create the appearance of reality and parody the imagery of National Socialism, producing a project which, according to Devin Fore, amounts "to a zealous overcoding" of the techniques of "mimetic illusionism."<sup>56</sup> Heartfield's "Hurrah, die Butter ist alle!" (1935), for instance, presents a quasi-realistic image of a bourgeois dining room that turns out to be an absurd realization of Hermann Göring's statement that butter and lard make the nation weak, but ore makes it strong. In appropriating and imitating fascist images and sayings, Heartfield does not present an unambiguous message but rearranges fragments in such a way that they say more than what was intended and thus highlight a contradiction. Accordingly, Devin Fore writes, following the lead of Tret'iakov in his monograph on Heartfield, that montage does not consist of "mere accumulation"; rather, montage only happens when "pieces have been assembled in a way that supercharges the image semantically, giving rise to dynamic visual impressions and a multiplicity of potential interpretations."<sup>57</sup> As a result, Heartfield's photomontages often assume the form of a multistable Gestalt figure, like the duck-rabbit, that can be understood in two different ways but not both simultaneously.<sup>58</sup> And Heartfield achieved this "overcoding" through the rearrangement of exclusively pre-existing images and sayings, factual and imaginary materials in circulation that would have been easily recognizable. Rather than explode the appearance of coherent reality, as in Dada, or present utopian images of Communist workers, Heartfield imitates mythical images and illusory appearances through a dialectical montage that operates as an immanent critique.<sup>59</sup>

Like Heartfield, Arlt stages a relationship of fact and myth that is deeply dialectical, in which factual documentation becomes illusion and in which myth and deceit appear as the fundamental truth of the "century of phrases." *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* thus exploit the constitutive tension at the heart of the documentary novel. As Barbara Foley defines it in her brilliant study, the documentary novel "purports to represent reality by means of agreed-upon conventions of fictionality, while grafting onto its fictive pact some kind of additional claim to empirical validation."<sup>60</sup> However, the point, as Foley makes abundantly clear, is not to eradicate the distinction between fictional and factual discourse, since the documentary novel asserts that such a qualitative distinction exists by shifting back and forth across the dividing line. The documentary novel, in its peculiar montage of fact and fiction,

entertains and overcodes two Gestalt frames of interpretation simultaneously, even as it denies the possibility of their synthesis. Arlt likewise undertakes a montage of contradictory tendencies, a parodic imitation of factual forms (journalism and the footnote) and mythical images (fascist distortions) not in order to assert that all reality is fictional but to insist on the need for a dialectical mediation, a shifting back and forth, that grasps the contradictory imbrication of reality and illusion.<sup>61</sup>

### **The Expressionist City: Geometry, Second Nature, and Combined Unevenness**

Montage also operates as the logic of the Arltian city. Arlt finds in the city's "culture of mixture" a constructive potential to disassemble and reassemble existing relations. In the Buenos Aires of the twenties and thirties, Corrientes was the street that most embodied this tendency toward contradictory extremes. Porteños would go to Corrientes above all for the theater, but the street, located at the center of the city, also displayed the most intense manifestations of crime, modernity and immigration in Argentina. In "Corrientes, at Night," an *aguafuerte* published in 1929, Arlt presents Corrientes as Argentina's Babel, as a chaotic combination of extremes. "[A] unique and strange cosmopolitan humanity," Arlt writes, "shakes hands in this unique drain that has the city for its beauty and joy."<sup>62</sup> Arlt thus suggests that, as a result of mass immigration to Buenos Aires and the structural peculiarity of the peripheral metropolis, cosmopolitanism assumes a peculiar meaning in Corrientes; no longer an expression of the desire to escape narrowly nationalist concerns, cosmopolitanism appears as a moment within the national frame, deflating ideas about a singular Argentine essence and making the contradictory combinations of national reality appear as the result of its determinate relationship to global modernity. Moreover, Arlt's language echoes *The Communist Manifesto* because Corrientes embodies the creative destruction of capitalist modernity: "Everything here loses its value. Everything is transformed."<sup>63</sup> In this street, the restless pursuit of novelty sweeps away any fixed identity. The street thus seems to lend itself to infinite variation:

Unique street, absurd street, beautiful street. Street for dreaming, for getting lost, for going from there to every success and every failure; street of joy, street that turns women into gauchos and thugs; street where tailors give advice to authors and where cops fraternize with morons... street that, as day breaks, turns blue and dark, because its life is only possible in the artificial light of methylene blue, of the copper sulfate greens, of the picric acid yellows, which inject in it a pyrotechnic, jealous madness.<sup>64</sup>

Corrientes, in other words, breaks out of nature's constraints and rhythms. With neon lights, the night opens up to new activities and encounters. All rigid, seemingly natural hierarchies crumble in the absence of any firm foundation. As Oscar Terán

argues, Arlt's representation of Corrientes contrasts sharply with the conception of the neighborhood (barrio) found in tango lyrics at the time. While tango imagined "the neighborhood as a *locus amoenus*, a familiar stronghold, protected from the anonymity of the big city and providing all primary affects," Arlt sees nothing but stingy opportunism in the neighborhood.<sup>65</sup> Instead, Corrientes presents Arlt with "exceptional marginality and social mixture," with "modernity... taken to its most intense extremes."<sup>66</sup> In such an unstable environment, tradition had no place, so conservatives regarded Corrientes as the embodiment of the threat of immigration. Arlt had no interest in the nationalist agenda and instead saw in the extremes — noise, bright lights, technology and cultural mixture — the internal contradictions of urban modernity.<sup>67</sup>

The Arltian city invariably affirms its provisional status as a montage that can be reconstructed. Unlike many of his contemporaries, whose family names were intimately linked to the history of Buenos Aires and the nation, Arlt was a first-generation Argentine who, according to Beatriz Sarlo, "lacked all nostalgic feeling for the past."<sup>68</sup> Beatriz Sarlo identifies the parallel between this attitude and the colonial image of Latin America as a world without history.<sup>69</sup> But, for Arlt, the absence of history does not derive from the colonial past; rather, it marks the most modern dimension of the city. At roughly the same time, Ernst Bloch and Jean-Paul Sartre insisted that Berlin and New York, respectively, were colonial cities. Berlin, Bloch writes, evoking the city's sandy foundation and incessant transformations in the early twentieth century, is an "eternal colonial city... a structure that, so to speak, always becomes and never is."<sup>70</sup> Arlt's Buenos Aires, we might then say, was not "the Paris of the South" but "the Berlin of the South." From these determinate perspectives, Buenos Aires and Berlin exhibit a sort of pure modernity that is simultaneously a deterioration of the city insofar as this modernity entails the ongoing transformation of existing reality and the creation of new possibilities and, through its inner logic, the systematic shutting-down of these same possibilities.

And yet, the novels never explicitly present this sort of enthusiastic celebration of the dynamic metropolis. *The Seven Madmen* begins in the city center, enumerating the various streets Erdosain passes as he thinks desperately about ways to come up with the 600 pesos he stole from the Sugar Company. The city, at this point, reflects the anguish of Erdosain's existential crisis. And far from presenting a continuous path from one point to another, the narration jumps from one urban reference to another, skipping intermediate steps, and even includes a chapter on Erdosain's penchant for walking in Palermo and Belgrano, the rich neighborhoods to the north, and fantasizing that a millionaire woman will save him from his despair. The narration does not engage in meticulous description of the physical landscape of the city but evokes obliquely the urban surroundings through disjointed images. The city only becomes an explicit object of narration after Erdosain visits the Astrologer's house in Temperley, in particular after the Gold Prospector rails against the city in his apocryphal speech

on colloid gold. At this point, Erdosain, apparently having internalized the Gold Prospector's comments, regards the city and its miserly inhabitants as something to be conquered or destroyed. This city, the rotten city (*ciudad canalla*), embodies the deterioration of modern civilization and pervades the Astrologer's theory of need for a metaphysical lie. Urban modernity, in short, assumes a determinate form in *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* when it appears on the explicit level of narrative, but it assumes a different shape on the implicit level, the shape of a determinate negation of the city's explicit form, so to speak. In the words of the characters, the city consists of brutal, meaningless existence, but this immediate appearance remains one-sided, since Arlt also patterns his expressionist language and technical images on urban modernity and its historical dynamics.

The city, in other words, constitutes the subtext of the novels, acting as a constructive, informing principle. Unlike the balanced silence of the countryside, this city, the expressionist city, is characterized by extremes: noise, clashes, chiaroscuro, speed, etc. Like Simmel and Benjamin, Arlt registers the presence of the city in terms of overwhelming stimuli that disrupt the normal workings of mental life and generate anxiety. Maryse Renaud thus highlights the characters' physical and psychic mobility: "restless, anxious, unstable, they seek to develop in a rather hostile environment, which drives them to cover an extensive range of experiences, to explore the capital's multiple hells."<sup>71</sup> In effect, Arlt makes Corrientes, the Babel of Argentina, into the basis for his characters and the literary construction of Buenos Aires. Corrientes permeates the fabric of the narrative, even when the action takes place outside the city. Indeed, a surprisingly great deal of plot occurs at the Astrologer's house in Temperley, a suburban area in the south. Arlt frequently employs organic motifs in descriptions of the house, which was probably built in the art nouveau style preferred by the emergent bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. When Erdosain first approaches the house, "[h]e felt as if he were far from the city, in the middle of the countryside... the rose bushes gave off such a strong and penetrating scent that it seemed the whole garden was tinged with a red shimmer as cool as a mountain stream."<sup>72</sup> The Astrologer's house in Temperley first presents itself as natural oasis from the anguish of the city. But the house also becomes the source of violent ideas about dictatorship, mass deception and chemical warfare. This seemingly natural dimension turns out to be mythical insofar as the violent extremes of the city shape the construction of the Astrologer's house as organic. What appears to lie outside, rooted in the organic world of the countryside, is actually a projection from within the city. The city, in other words, plays the role of the masses in Baudelaire's poetry, paraphrasing Benjamin, we can say that the city "had become so much a part of [Arlt] that it is rare to find a description of [it] in his works."<sup>73</sup> As subtext, urban modernity structures the characters' subjectivity and the formal language and imagination of the novels.<sup>74</sup>

This underling figuration of the city would best be described as expressionist

for the way it constitutes itself as a geometrical totality. “Geometry and anguish”: Federico García Lorca used this phrase to describe his impression of New York, but the words are no less apt for expressionism’s relation to the city in general and Arlt’s in particular. Overpowered by the city, the expressionist could not see buildings, streets, and crowds as separate. The impressionist sees the city as landscape, like the natural settings he or she painted *en plain air*, but the expressionist seeks “the inclusion of the spectator in the frame of the street.”<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, expressionist representations are often built on correspondences between internal and external. In bringing the subject into the frame, the subject is contaminated by the object and the subject projects his or her intense emotional states onto the object. César Aira relates the extremes of Arlt’s fictional world to the tortuous distortions undergone as a result of the expressionist’s participation in the object, in the artistic material. The artist finds himself immersed in a world “of excessive contiguities and deformations from lack of space in a limited area,”<sup>76</sup> but the artist refuses to step back and observe. Subject and object thus mutually determine one another, but the expressionist city does not amount to harmonious reconciliation. Whereas the impressionists emphasize fleeting perceptions through soft edges and indistinct boundaries, the expressionists use straight lines to figure the ongoing antagonism between subject and object and the geometrically-organized metropolis. The city, organized according to a grid, could only be artistically rendered by a geometrical imagination. Indeed, Arlt figures anguish geometrically in what Erdosain calls “the anguish zone.” At the beginning of *The Seven Madmen*, Erdosain walks the streets in desperation:

He imagined this zone floating above cities, about two meters in the air, and pictured it graphically like an area of salt flats or deserts that are shown on maps by tiny dots, as dense as herring roe.... [The zone] slid from one place to the next like a cloud of poison gas, seeping through walls, passing straight through buildings, without ever losing its flat horizontal shape; a two-dimensional anguish that left an after-taste of tears in throats it sliced like a guillotine.<sup>77</sup>

The anguish zone appears as the result of condensing the city’s oppressive height into a horizontal plane. Both amorphous and razor-sharp, it cuts into domestic spaces and inflicts pain. Similarly, Arlt utilizes the image of a mill to depict how the city weighs on its inhabitants.<sup>78</sup> After his wife leaves him, Erdosain “felt himself crushed by a sense of pure dread. His life could not have been flatter if he had gone through the rollers of a sheet-metal mill.”<sup>79</sup> Although this sensation derives immediately from his wife’s departure, the technical metaphor of the mill once again links Erdosain’s suffering to the geometrical organization of city, flattening out individuality and thereby creating the anonymous existence of the masses. Arlt’s expressionist city gives geometrical form to the anguished existence of urban modernity and thereby

constitutes the ineluctable center of gravity for the novels.

The geometrical nature of Buenos Aires posed a problem for many Argentine writers and politicians in the early twentieth century. In the Argentine liberal tradition, the search for national identity depended on the fate of the city, a circumscribed, centrally organized entity, in contrast to the Pampa's ungovernable vastness. But, as Adrián Gorelik explains, "it became increasingly clear" to the Argentine elite that "through the [urban] grid the city was extended along the Pampas in a process of metamorphosis rather than in a process of acculturation."<sup>80</sup> The destiny of Buenos Aires, with its checkerboard-style urbanism, appeared to resemble the shape of the Pampas, a flat, horizontal, indefinitely expanding terrain. As such, this city could no longer offer itself as the positive alternative to barbaric nature. Urban politicians thus felt the need to modernize the city, to make it into a unifying point, and to set limits on the city's growth. Against this centralizing endeavor, the avant-garde in Argentina initially played a progressive role insofar as it turned away from the city center and toward the peripheral *barrios*.<sup>81</sup> But, Gorelik argues, the creole avant-garde's project to discover the essence of the Buenos Aires turned into a conservative restoration and culminated in the construction of the obelisk in 1936.<sup>82</sup> The obelisk — designed by Alberto Prebisch, a frequent contributor to the *Martín Fierro* journal — stood at the center of Buenos Aires, at the meeting point of major diagonal streets, which were also completed in the thirties. Against the dispersal of the barrio, the obelisk reestablished the city's classical hierarchies. Its verticality broke the ceaseless horizontality of the Pampas. With respect to this creole avant-garde, Arlt presents a distinct trajectory. His point of concern, as we have seen, was Corrientes, the city center, but he never mobilized the center for the sake of national identity. Instead, Arlt sought to trace the contradictions of urban modernity, the dialectical reversal whereby historical possibility turned into its opposite.

At this time, in the context of the restructuring of Buenos Aires, the geometrical configuration of the city raises questions of nature and history. In Arlt's works, the most emblematic image of this configuration is the copper rose. Erdosain invents the copper rose and then convinces the Espila family, with false, fantastical promises of future wealth, to devote their time to its production. The rose — the organic poetic form par excellence — undergoes a mechanical, industrial transformation: "the flower contained a botanical life that had been consumed by the acids, but was its very soul."<sup>83</sup> In its submission to a technologically-mediated labor process, the copper rose negates organic life, but, at the same time, it reestablishes nature in its artificial "soul." The copper rose, in other words, exists as a form of second nature. As such, it displays a dialectical tension between myth and history: the man-made copper rose represents an "advance" over the merely natural rose but it also resurrects the very categories its invention would seem to render obsolete, making the natural — and, by extension, the rural — appear as a product of the very modernization process that would claim to destroy it. The city follows the same logic in the Astrologer's diagnosis. At the

beginning of *The Flamethrowers*, the Astrologer engages in a fascinating discussion about the truth of suffering and the fate of civilization. “The Truth is Man. Man with his body,” he proposes.<sup>84</sup> Whereas intellectuals and artists turn toward abstractions, denigrating the body in turn:

[B]usinessmen, soldiers and industrialists and politicians crush the Truth, that is, the Body. Complicit with engineers and doctors, they have said: man sleeps eight hours. To breath, he needs so many cubic meters of air. To not rot and to not corrupt us, which would be the most serious, so many square meters of sun are necessary, and with that criteria they build the cities.<sup>85</sup>

The geometry of the city — divided into “square meters of sun” and “cubic meters of air” — was initially conceived as a rational solution to basic human needs, but this geometry, the result of a mechanical paradigm, ultimately intensifies human suffering. Rather than a separation between myth and history that maps onto discrete entities — the city and countryside — the city presents itself as a technical human construction that comes to dominate its inhabitants as a form of unfreedom. *The Seven Madmen* highlights this dialectical reversal of the geometrical city when Erdosain is unintentionally pushed into a wall by a stranger in the street. Erdosain, “like a tiger cub let loose in a brick jungle,” promises to avenge this outrage on the urban setting itself: “You will be ours, city.”<sup>86</sup> This is Erdosain’s Rastignac moment, when the protagonist asserts and projects his heroic triumph over the city. But, immediately after articulating this threat to the city, the commentator explains that the Major, on the Astrologer’s orders, has been following Erdosain. Unlike *Père Goriot*, where this moment concludes the novel, Erdosain’s fate will unfold pathetically over the course of another novel. Arlt’s geometrical city thus establishes itself as an ineluctable horizon of necessity.

Like the copper rose, the Astrologer’s plans exhibit a paradoxical combination of history and myth, intense industrialization and primitive nature. His attempt to recreate the messianic figure, for one, is not premised on any genuine belief but on a cynical, completely disenchanting view of human existence. The members of the secret society, he says, must know fundamental truths if they are to effectively deceive the masses with mythical images:

[M]y idea is this: there will be two castes in this new society, with a gap between them. . . or rather, an intellectual void of some thirty centuries between the two. The majority will live carefully kept in the most complete ignorance, surrounded by apocryphal miracles, which are far more interesting than the historical kind, while the minority will be the ones who have access to science and power. That is how happiness will be guaranteed for the majority, because the people of this caste will be in touch with the divine world, which today they

are lacking. The minority will administer the herd's pleasures and miracles, and the gold age, the age in which angels roam along paths at twilight and gods are seen by moonlight, will come to pass.<sup>87</sup>

Despite the language of “miracles” and “divine world,” the Astrologer in no way attempts to return to a pre-industrial age. The secret society is based on a rigorous division of labor and its myths are suffused with technological imagination. This, in other words, will not be a traditional secret society, but one based on industrialism in the wake of Ford, Morgan, and Rockefeller, god-like men who “were capable of destroying the moon... [who] could wipe out a race with a snap of their fingers, just as you trample on an ant-hill in your garden.”<sup>88</sup> And, again evoking the gap of “thirty centuries,” the Astrologer imagines a landscape that combines industrial dynamism and nature: “at the center, among clouds of coal dust, rise the blast furnaces, their cooling systems like monstrous armor plating. Tongues of fire leap from the reinforced furnace mouths, while outside thick, impenetrable jungle stretches into the distance.”<sup>89</sup> In this secret society, technology would serve merely to reinstate mythical nature, and fantastic miracles would be made possible by scientific research and rationality. This surreal imagination, in which the jungle exists alongside industrial machines, illustrates the Astrologer's profound capacity for holding together contradictory elements in such a way that each one turns into its opposites and becomes compatible with the other.

Ultimately, the Astrologer's montage of contradictory tendencies derives from the peculiar historical dynamic of capitalism and the way it manifests itself in determinate national formations. By juxtaposing mythical nature and intensified industrialization, the Astrologer's plan bears a striking resemblance to the German proto-fascism that Jeffrey Herf describes as “reactionary modernism.”<sup>90</sup> Herf uses this term to describe proto-fascist writers and intellectuals in Germany who rejected the philosophical and political heritage of the Enlightenment but affirmed “the most obvious manifestation of means-end rationality, that is, modern technology.”<sup>91</sup> Unlike conservatives, who posited an insurmountable gap between technology and German culture, reactionary modernists like Ernst Jünger embraced modern technology for a reactionary defense, and even intensification, of the existing social order. This incongruous ideological combination, Herf argues, was made possible by the combination of rapid, yet partial, industrialization of the German economy and the absence of a corresponding bourgeois revolution.<sup>92</sup> This internal unevenness marks Germany just as much as Argentina, even though the former occupies a core position in the global capitalist economy, the latter a semi-peripheral position. And the Astrologer's plans, accordingly, no longer appear as the deluded dreams of a madman but as the intensified description of latent historical tendencies, of how the uneven development of capitalism plays out in national situations in the form of peculiar combinations of the new and repetition.

In the case of the Astrologer and reactionary modernism, this combined unevenness consists not in the mere coexistence of old and new but in the dynamic fusion of opposites whereby pre-capitalist social relations retain their form but acquire another valence as a result of incorporation in the capitalist world economy. More broadly, Arlt's urban montage registers the structural contradiction in capitalism between value and material wealth. With relative surplus-value, this contradiction gives rise to the peculiar historical dynamic of capitalist modernity, what Moishe Postone calls a "treadmill effect" in which the new and the same are produced simultaneously.<sup>93</sup> The expansion of capital requires ceaseless increases in productivity and thus "the ongoing transformation of social life in capitalist society, as well as the ongoing reconstitution of its basic social forms."<sup>94</sup> The ambiguity of the Arltian city, as both revulsion in the face of meaningless modern existence and the intuition of futural possibilities, as mythical nature and history, gives form to the "shearing pressure"<sup>95</sup> of capitalism's contradictions, the way it pushes forward while staying in the same place. Ultimately, the Arltian city foregrounds the sameness of the treadmill dynamic and the existential anguish of life in urban modernity, formalizing how Argentina's social structures repeat themselves, despite political changes. Distrustful of both liberal promises based on export and nationalist hopes to build Argentina's industry, Arlt recognized and gave form to the underlying sameness, the ineluctable limitations resulting from Argentina's peripheral condition.

And yet, Arlt insists that this repetition is not a consequence of the lack of modernity but the determinate form that modernity assumes in Argentina. At other times, modernity takes on an extreme form in Arlt's works — as acceleration, industrialization, creative destruction, and above fantastical dreams — but the intensity of these images does not derive from the absence of modernity. Marshall Berman argues that whereas "the modernism of advanced nations" can build "directly on the materials of economic and political modernization," peripheral modernism "is forced to build on fantasies and dreams of modernity," giving these works a "desperate incandescence."<sup>96</sup> Berman's account, premised on a rather one-sided interpretation of modernity as the new, suggests that modernity as such does not exist in the periphery and will accordingly have an oneiric character in the periphery. Borges presents a similar view, even though he is more ambiguous about modernity in Argentina. Preoccupied with the problems of the "new country," he spoke of the need to create myths for Buenos Aires, since "[t]here are no legends in this land and not a single ghost walks through our streets... the life of our imagination is paltry."<sup>97</sup> Modern dreams would thus seem to stem from an absence, as a way to compensate for a prior lack. Arlt, I argue, would respond that there was no need to invent myths for urban modernity since they already exist readymade in the international conjuncture and in the peculiarities of combined unevenness. Moreover, this modern mythology derives from the determinate existence of modernity in the peripheral metropolis, the new always pushing against the same, despite their interdependence, and giving rise to

the image of a modernity defined exclusively by the new. As Arlt formalizes it in the peripheral metropolis, modernity consists of a contradictory historical dynamic, and this non-unitary reality calls for montage as its necessary form of articulation.

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Roberto Schwarz, in his discussion of the novel in nineteenth-century Brazil, insists on the paradox that the novel is “an artistic form whose presuppositions, in the main, either did not apply to Brazil at all, or applied in altered circumstances.”<sup>98</sup> The novel thrived in Brazil even though the novel’s various organizing topics — the conflict between the rising bourgeoisie and the *ancien régime*, the emergence of the commodity-form, etc. — appear out of step with national reality, which was based on slavery until the very end of the nineteenth century. Schwarz, however, does not draw the conclusion that the novel, as a foreign form, should be rejected because of its extrinsic relationship to local reality. Rather, Schwarz argues that this disparity, which is itself a function of the uneven character of global capitalism, structures the form of the novel in Brazil. By moving from a consideration of “the contingency of geographical origin” to “the sociological presuppositions of the forms,” Schwarz reconstructs the notion of literary form — what he calls elsewhere “objective form” — as a mediated category, form as “the abstract of specific social relationships,” because “a part of the original historical conditions reappears, as a sociological form, first with its own logic, but this time also on the fictional plane and as a literary structure.”<sup>99</sup> Social reality, in other words, appears in the work not in its descriptive details but in its principles of construction, which mediate in peculiar ways the contradictions shaping that social reality.

Along these lines, we might say that modernism and realism are literary forms whose presuppositions partially apply in the peripheral metropolis. Roberto Arlt’s urban montage, with its emphasis on journalism, unreliability, expressionist language and images, amounts to a self-conscious recognition of the way that forms of combination in Buenos Aires demand contradictory formal articulations. Montage, in other words, is not simply a modernist technique but the juxtaposition and dialectical mediation of modernism and realism. As the story goes, often in exaggerated form, in the twenties, the literary field in Argentina was divided between Boedo and Florida, two literary groups (and city streets) that were associated with realism and modernism respectively. Roberto Arlt has always been difficult to place in this polemic, but his realist modernism (or modernist realism) intimates the solution: that, in Argentina and perhaps elsewhere, the opposition of realism and modernism is a false problem. Seen from the perspective of the peripheral metropolis, where the reality of combined development makes palpable the treadmill effect of capitalist development, modernism and realism appear not as successive literary movements but as necessarily contemporaneous.<sup>100</sup> The opposition is not overcome in a final synthesis by displacing the realism/modernism debate to the periphery. Rather, the

dissonant combination of realism and modernism appears as the formal articulation of the contradictions underlying global capitalism's historical dynamic.

### Notes

1. Roberto Arlt, *Las aguafuertes porteñas de Roberto Arlt: Publicadas en "El Mundo", 1928-1933*, ed. Daniel C. Scroggins (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1981) 144.
2. Arlt, *Aguafuertes* 143-44.
3. Roberto Arlt, *Los siete locos. Los lanzallamas*, ed. Mario Goloboff (Madrid: Colección Archivos, 2000) 286.
4. Arlt, *Los siete locos. Los lanzallamas* 287.
5. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1998) 32.
6. Fredric Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism," *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso Books, 2007) 157.
7. Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism" 164.
8. Beatriz Sarlo, "The Modern City: Buenos Aires, The Peripheral Metropolis," *Through the Kaleidoscope: The Experience of Modernity in Latin America*, ed. Vivian Schelling, trans. Lorraine Leu (London: Verso, 2000) 108-23.
9. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso Books, 2012) 142.
10. Harsha Ram, "Futurist Geographies: Uneven Modernities and the Struggle for Aesthetic Autonomy: Paris, Italy, Russia, 1909-1914," *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, eds. Mark Wollaeger & Matt Eatough (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) 318.
11. To put it another way, we could paraphrase Althusser: the Arltian city represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real, global and contradictory conditions of existence.
12. Ernesto Laclau, "Modos de producción, sistemas económicos y poblacion excedente, aproximación histórica a los casos argentino y chileno," *Revista Latinoamericana de Sociología* 69.2 (1970) 276-316.
13. Laclau, "Modos de producción" 292.
14. Arlt, *Aguafuertes* 239.
15. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 310.
16. Indeed, Arlt takes up this *aguafuerte* as if it were one of the scraps he found in the city. He reuses the material in a chapter of *The Flamethrowers*.
17. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. R. W. Rostel (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1973) 152.
18. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 164.
19. Ricardo Piglia, *Artificial Respiration*, trans. Daniel Balderston (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) 134.

20. See Aníbal González, *Journalism and the Development of Spanish American Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Julio Ramos, *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, trans. John D. Bianco (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).
21. González, *Journalism* 89.
22. *Journalism* 89
23. Ramos, *Divergent* xli. Ramos's account, however, seems to artificially separate *modernista* journalism and poetry. The chronicles were not simply a buffer, absorbing the shock of modernity. Rather, they gave the poets an opportunity to flex their literary muscles by writing poetically about non-poetic topics. For instance, *modernistas* often wrote about American and European cities—chaotic, crude realities far removed from the ethereal forms of *modernista* poetry — to show that the poet could even make the city into a stylized, beautiful object.
24. Andreas Huyssen, *Miniature Metropolis: Literature in an Age of Photography and Film*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).
25. Beatriz Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires, 1920 y 1930* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1988).
26. Beatriz Sarlo, *Imaginación técnica: Sueños modernos de la cultura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1992). See especially the chapters “Arlt: la técnica en la ciudad” and “Divulgación periodística y ciencia popular.”
27. In a recent television adaptation of the novels, Ricardo Piglia's opted to foreground the relationship between Erdosain and the commentator. The series opens with Erdosain waking up on the commentator's couch and beginning to recount the story.
28. The narrator also refers to himself as “cronista,” “comentarista” and even “autor.” For the purposes of simplification, I will use “the commentator,” the most frequent name the narrator gives himself.
29. Kracauer, *Salaried* 24.
30. Arlt, *Aguafuertes* 139.
31. *Aguafuertes* 139. In the novels, the narrator makes no such socio-historical explanation. The narrator's explanations are few in number and largely psychological in nature. But these explanations are difficult to take seriously because the novels cultivate a pervasive sense of unreliability.
32. *Aguafuertes* 139. Arlt's friends and contemporaries often reiterated this idea, claiming that the characters in *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers* were real people. Onetti, for instance, once described his friendship with Kostia — the nickname of Italo Constantini — Arlt's lifelong friend who claimed to know various characters in the novels. See Juan Carlos Onetti, *Requiem por Faulkner* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Calicanto, 1976) 127-37. Mirta Arlt, Roberto's daughter, claimed that Ergueta was her childhood dentist in Córdoba.
33. On September 6, 1930, the military overthrew president Yrigoyen, replacing the largely liberal orientation of the Argentine government with an authoritarian, nationalist tendency that curtailed popular participation and distanced itself from the export model in the economy.
34. In his translation of *The Seven Madmen*, Nick Caistor renders all the footnotes as “commentator's notes” and thus eliminates the ambiguity of speaking subject in the original.
35. Arlt, *Los siete locos* 599.
36. *Los siete locos* 492.

37. *Los siete locos* 353
38. *Los siete locos* 354.
39. By referring to the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, as it became known, the commentator implicitly foreshadows the failure of the Astrologer's secret society.
40. Roberto Arlt, *The Seven Madmen*, trans. Nick Caistor (London: Serpent's Tail, 2015) 178.
41. Arlt, *The Seven Madmen* 178
42. Ricardo Piglia, *Crítica y ficción* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2001) 24.
43. In part, Arlt's approach to journalism is not unique. Aníbal González has argued that the Latin American avant-gardes, unlike their *modernista* predecessors, often incorporated journalism into literature with "the effect of undermining journalism's claim to be fundamentally different from fiction" (104). Yet, with the exception of Borges, whose use of footnotes and reality effects uncannily resembles those of Arlt, no one takes this relationship of literature and journalism to such extreme ends. And, as I will explain, what is at stake in Arlt is not simply the postmodern erosion of the distinction between fiction and reality but a dialectical shifting that maintains but does not reify the distinction.
44. *Aguafuertes* 206.
45. *Aguafuertes* 206
46. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicholas (London: Penguin, 1993) 158.
47. Arlt, *Aguafuertes* 206, emphasis added.
48. *Seven Madmen* 154.
49. *Seven Madmen* 153.
50. *Seven Madmen* 154.
51. *Seven Madmen* 161.
52. Mussolini: "Noi ci permettiamo il lusso d'essere aristocratici, conservatori e progressisti, reazionari e rivoluzionari, legalisti e illegalisti, a seconda delle circostanze di tempo, di luogo, d'ambiente nelle quali siamo costretti a vivere ed agire." See José Amícola, *Astrología y fascismo en la obra de Arlt* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editorial, 1994) 39. At the time Arlt was writing these novels, German National Socialism had not attained the level of visibility that Italian fascism had, but one can imagine that the novels would have been littered with Hitler's sayings, if Arlt had written the novels in the mid- or late-thirties.
53. Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) 11.
54. Devin Fore has reconstructed the context in which caricature fascinated montage artists like Heartfield and Eisenstein because caricature, like montage, "designate[s] a supercharging," seen in the Italian root of the word *caricare*. See Fore, *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012) 259.
55. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 233
56. Fore, *Realism* 247.
57. *Realism* 258.
58. Various critics have pointed to the parallel between Heartfield's photomontages and Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit. Fore evokes the comparison in his discussion of "The Meaning of the Hitler-Salute: Millions Stand Behind Me!" (1932) in which "millions" refers both to the masses supporting the Nazi Party and

to the financial backing of National Socialism by German capital. *Realism* 265.

59. Sabine Kriebel refers to this as “suture” to distinguish Heartfield’s phantomontages from the standard association of montage with fragmentation and anti-illusionism. “His photomontages,” Kriebel writes, “stage our illusory, unstable apprehension of the world by *exploiting* the discourses of illusion, of false cognition, by engaging in and reproducing its very terms ... Thus, the viewer experiences a constant relay between illusion and disillusionment, myth and demystification, accompanied by a baseline of seditious laughter.” Sabine T. Kriebel, *Revolutionary Beauty: The Radical Photomontages of John Heartfield* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 12.
60. Barbara Foley. *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 25.
61. Again, the dialectical point, shared with montage, is to hold together opposites without eliminating the tension that exists between them. As has argued, ideology does not consist in an external misrepresentation of reality. Rather, illusion, in the form of commodity fetishism, structures social reality.
62. *Aguafuertes* 148.
63. *Aguafuertes* 149.
64. *Aguafuertes* 150.
65. Oscar Terán, *Historia de las ideas en la Argentina: diez lecciones iniciales, 1810-1980* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2008) 212.
66. Terán, *Historia* 212-213.
67. Arlt “sees a city in construction, where other writers, his contemporaries, see a city that is being lost: for Arlt, Buenos Aires was not but will be: teams of workers dig the foundations of future skyscrapers, the disorder of the facades indicates the mixture of the old that is being demolished and the new that has not been finished.” Sarlo, *Imaginación* 46
68. *Imaginación* 44.
69. *Imaginación* 45. In *The Lettered City*, Rama outlines how Spanish colonizers invoked the notion of a *tabula rasa* in the foundation of Latin American cities. Rama links this project to the Renaissance episteme, where, in Foucault’s analysis, signs acquire autonomy from objects. The Renaissance episteme, as a result, enabled Spanish colonizers to organize the city according to a rational order, not through an organic connection to nature. Ángel Rama, *The Lettered City*, trans. John Charles Chasteen (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 1-15.
70. Ernst Bloch, *Literary Essays*, eds. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, trans. Andrew Joron (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 366. Sartre claims that “New York is a colonial city, an outpost,” and like Bloch, he connects this claim to the remaining presence of nature in the metropolis. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson (New York: Collier Books, 1962) 130. Unlike the European city, built as refuge from barbarous nature, New York stands exposed to the elements. This, along with the absence of history, gives New York a lightness that one would not find in the enclosed European city.
71. Maryse Renaud, “La ciudad babilónica o los entretelones del mundo urbano en *Los siete locos y Los lanzallamas*,” *La selva en el damero: Espacio literario y espacio urbano en América Latina* (Pisa: Giardini Editori, 1989) 198.

72. *Seven Madmen* 30-31.
73. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 322. We could also draw a parallel here between Arlt and Dostoevsky. In contradistinction to Balzac and Dickens, whose novels create panoramic descriptions of the city, Dostoevsky “experienced the city as a total environment thoroughly internalized and assimilated in his personality and outlook.” Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) 95. Dostoevsky was perhaps Arlt’s biggest influence. *The Seven Madmen* and *The Flamethrowers*, for instance, were based in part on Dostoevsky’s *The Demons*. Incidentally, Dostoevsky’s novel was based on real events, so Arlt’s inspiration to write a pseudo-reportage novel may have also come from his Russian precursor.
74. In using the term subtext, I intend to evoke Jameson’s argument in *The Political Unconscious* about how history manifests itself in the formal structures of the work. Literary objects, Jameson argues, do not passively reflect history in their content because at the level of subtext “the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction.” Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1981) 81-82.
75. David Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity: Critical Explorations* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001) 238.
76. César Aira, “Arlt,” *Paradoxa* 7 (1993) 57.
77. *Seven Madmen* 6.
78. See Renaud, “La ciudad babilónica” 204.
79. *Seven Madmen* 70.
80. Adrián Gorelik, “A Metropolis in the Pampas: Buenos Aires, 1890-1940,” *Cruelty & Utopia: Cities and Landscapes of Latin America*, ed. Jean-Francois Lejeune (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003) 47.
81. Against this impulse to search for the center, Borges discovered the essence of Buenos Aires in the city’s edges, the *orillas*. In these quiet corners of the city, far removed from the crowds of the center, Borges found the bare urban grid, the point where city and country converged. Unlike his politically conservative contemporaries, who feared contamination by the countryside, Borges maintained that abstract geometry — the model of the city and the Pampas — could serve as the “mythical foundation of Buenos Aires.” For Borges, the city lacked myths, but they were to be found in the city’s solitary edges.
82. “In the center was the Obelisk, its pure form connecting the modern city with the universal culture and, most of all, with national history since it established an immediate dialogue with the old Pyramid of May 9th (the monument to the founding of independent Argentina) located in the historical Plaza de Mayo at the other end of the Diagonal. In the middle of the confusion created by the ‘vulgar’ languages of the modern metropolis, this special version of modernism managed to produce, finally, the act of recognition that the cultural elite had looked for... The ‘modern Buenos Aires’ assumed its definitive appearance at the end of the 1930s through an architectural avant-garde that looked for an elitist and nostalgic return to order, denying the metropolitan expansion that would continue nonstop throughout the Pampas.” Gorelik, “Metropolis” 58.
83. *Seven Madmen* 226.
84. Arlt, *Los siete locos. Los lanzallamas* 298.
85. *Los siete locos. Los lanzallamas* 298

86. *Seven Madmen* 295.
87. *Seven Madmen* 155.
88. *Seven Madmen* 152.
89. *Seven Madmen* 272-73.
90. Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
91. Herf, *Reactionary Modernism* 1.
92. *Reactionary Modernism* 5-6.
93. The notion of the “treadmill effect” comes from Moishe Postone’s brilliant discussion of the value-form and its temporal determination. Since value is an average, “socially necessary labor time,” once increases in productivity are generalized, total value produced doesn’t change, “increased productivity results neither in a corresponding increase in social wealth nor in a corresponding decrease in labor time, but in the constitution of a new base level of productivity—which leads to still further increases in productivity.” Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 347. The treadmill effect is not, in other words, static; it is a dynamic that stays in the same place.
94. Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, 300.
95. Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, 302.
96. Marshal Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 231-232.
97. Qtd. in Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, trans: John King (London: Verso, 1993), 20.
98. Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, trans. John Gledson (London: Verso, 1992), 41.
99. Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas*, 53.
100. The Warwick Research Collective makes roughly the same point when it argues that just as Adorno defended modernism for its realism, realism must be defended for its modernism. WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 77.