

**ANXIOUS SPACES: THE NOIR STYLISTICS OF JOSÉ  
PABLO FEINMANN'S  
*ÚLTIMOS DÍAS DE LA VÍCTIMA***

Erik Larson  
University of California, Davis

A good portion of Argentine novelists have ventured into the detective genre as a consequence of the social turmoil of the Argentine Dirty War, wherein the state implemented a campaign of terror "disappearing" close to 30,000 leftist "subversives." With this most recent<sup>1</sup> resurgence of the crime novel, we likewise see a departure from the armchair rationalism of Edgar Allan Poe or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and instead a stylistic preference for the hard-boiled noir found in Raymond Chandler, James Cain or, interestingly, film noir itself. According to Gail González, "For those [Argentine] authors who begin to publish detective fiction in the 1970's a more immediate influence comes via the North American hard-boiled genre, and its filmic version, *film noir*" (González 40). This use of a highly cinematic and visual aesthetic within the novels of writers like José Pablo Feinmann, Mempo Giardinelli, Ricardo Piglia, and Juan José Saer, betrays a unique preoccupation with space that seems to react to the anxieties of the Dirty War. Just as the paranoia of this moment in history largely stems from the insecurities and threats from within the public domain, so too the spaces of noir connote an ominous sensation of unease that hints at some un-materialized and disquieting trauma. As a case study, we will take into consideration Feinmann's *Últimos días de la víctima*, a classic Argentine thriller

---

<sup>1</sup> While the detective novel has, in its latest incarnation, been a central part of dictatorial and post-dictatorial literary production, it has held a preponderant position within Argentine national letters since Sarmiento and Echeverría. According to Jorge Lafforgue "Ningún otro género, como el policial, ha estructurado tan raigalmente el sistema de la ficción argentina a lo largo de este siglo. Y si pensamos en el origen de nuestra prosa, en *Facundo* o "El Matadero," bien podríamos extender el juicio a todo su desarrollo. Se me dirá que personajes como Mallea o Larreta no lo cultivaron; lo que me obligaría a reforzar mi afirmación alguna muletilla, cual el buen sistema o el más auténtico. Prefiero señalar que la marca del relato policial es indeleble en escritores como Borges o Walsh; que si bien para muchos otros el género ha supuesto recuperaciones parciales y/o esporádicas de sus elementos configuradores, su huella es también visible y, no pocas veces, profunda" (11).

published at the height of the dictatorship, and place it into dialogue with films like Coppola's *The Conversation*, which, like the novel, seem to be directly involved with issues of spatiality. By unlocking the novel's use of typical noir tropes such as disorientation, uncanny and obscure scenery, and off-centered visual compositions, we may posit that Feinmann utilizes an aesthetic of spatial anxiety reminiscent of these films. Such a stylized narrative has social significance as it ultimately engages in a discussion of collective, societal trauma unique to Argentina.

However, before analyzing the novel, let us explore the precedent already set by film noir. In their excellent study, *Noir Anxiety*, Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo shed some interesting light on the "free-floating anxiety"<sup>2</sup> of these movies and its relation to space: "Indeed, the signs of noir's geography condense and displace the ideas, desires, and fears of a defensive subject who undermines his own identity by obsessively mapping it out" (218-219). Noir space, in an expressionistic gesture, serves as a screen onto which the protagonist's own compulsive insecurities and unease are projected.<sup>3</sup> Such a dynamic between a subject and its immediately threatening topography is perhaps best demonstrated in Coppola's excellent neo-noir, *The Conversation*. In this film, Gene Hackman's character, Harry, is an audio surveillance specialist hired by an unnamed corporation to monitor the conversation of a couple in San Francisco's Union Square. By strategically planting microphones throughout the plaza, he and his team set out to literally map both the couple's wanderings and dialogue from various vantage points. Harry

---

<sup>2</sup> According to Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo, the "free floating anxiety" of these movies is always related to identity. Issues of space therefore have to do with the protagonist's efforts at mapping out his or her identity, which indubitably become obsessive and end up undermining their original objective.

<sup>3</sup> As an example, Oliver and Trigo cite *Detour*. Al Roberts, played by Tom Neal, leaves the east coast and attempts to map out a life for himself and his debutante girlfriend in Hollywood. However, the unknown "wild" west geography has other plans in store for our protagonist—the corrupt "bible salesman" who gives Tom a ride abruptly dies on him, forcing Al to assume his identity and also inadvertently subjecting Al to the manipulations of Vera, the movie's femme fatale. This new space of the west is laced with an anxiety and insecurity that compromises Al's hopes of a stable identity and life in Hollywood.

becomes obsessive in his transcription of their conversation, seeking to elucidate every nuance of the dialogue in order to come to a full understanding of who they are and why they must be monitored. This audio and spatial mapping, however, becomes more complicated when Harry brings to light the final phrase of the conversation: "he'd kill us if he could." Who would kill them and why? What is Harry's role, if any, in this murderous plot? Is the culprit the very man for whom he is working? Or, is it a more diffuse conspiracy of which he is a mere pawn?

As is to be expected, Harry experiences an anxiety stemming from his own spatial insecurity in this network of discrete and sinister power relations. His disorientation concerning where he and those around him stand compounds his own obsessive need for privacy and security, both of which wane as he becomes ever more entrenched in the conspiracy. After a significant twist in the narrative, wherein the supposed victims turn out to be the aggressors and vice versa, Harry is utterly overwhelmed. Unable to navigate through this quagmire of sedition, he is reduced to a state of paranoia, obsessively searching for audio bugs in his once secure and private apartment. As a subject under surveillance by some unknown and conspiratorial organization, he is now the victim of a domination springing forth from unknown and unmappable spaces. It is precisely this insecurity, this underlying spatial anxiety, that which leads to a discussion of a noir aesthetic.

According to Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, what we have, in formalistic terms, is a cinematic style "designed to unsettle, jar, and disorient the viewer in correlation with the disorientation felt by the noir heroes" (68). The aberrant quality of the frames and shots becomes the catalyst for an underlying tone of agitation, leaving both the spectator and character ill at ease regarding their surroundings and, ultimately, their fate. Compounding all of this is the often vertiginous temporal sequence of the films, which through intercalated fragments and flashbacks complicates the flow of the narrative, and leaves us as viewers and co-participants wondering where we are.

Returning to *The Conversation*, we see that these formalistic aspects of the noir aesthetic reiterate the movie's own explicitly

spatial themes. Just as Harry becomes perplexed about where he stands in the conspiracy, so, too, the cinematographic style of the film, through dizzying montage, flashbacks, and off-kilter camera angles, permits the spectator to visually commiserate with Harry's spatial anxiety. For example, at the *dénouement* we are nothing less than confounded by the abrupt montage of the supposedly corrupt corporate villain being murdered by what we thought were the victims -his daughter and her lover. There is, in fact, no explanation for this plot twist and the movie's aforementioned stylistics confirm this very opacity, leaving us just as confused and paranoid as Harry. What is more, the oblique angles used throughout seem to posit San Francisco, as well as Harry's own apartment, as unmappable areas. Such cinematography begs the question of what evil lies just outside our gaze, and makes us wonder how we are to locate and account for that seemingly invisible dynamic of domination.

In its treatment of space, Feinmann's *Últimos días de la víctima* bears a fair amount of resemblance to this and other film noirs. To begin with, the novel's locales are consistent with the dark terrain that serves as a backdrop to many of these films. Feinmann takes us on a tour of Buenos Aires's underworld through ill-lit and smoky night clubs complete with prostitutes and strippers, sultry nocturnal streets, and eerily empty apartments. This vision, combined with the filmically charged third-person narration, wherein even the protagonist tries to document his surroundings on film,<sup>4</sup> grants the novel the overall ambience of a film noir, something which is not surprising for Feinmann, a self proclaimed "cinéfilo."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> A key aspect of Mendizabal's obsessive behavior is photographing Kulpe. He seems to gain some sort of erotic pleasure through capturing Kulpe on film while simultaneously placing himself in a position of power: "Mendizábal lo enfocó con su teleobjetivo. Ahí estaba, ahí lo tenía finalmente. Los labios delgados y entreabiertos, los cabellos rubios" (22). We can therefore easily refer to Mendizabal as a kind of camera man and therefore liken much of his focalization throughout the novel unto that of a camera.

<sup>5</sup> Feinmann thoroughly treats his obsession for film in *El Cine por asalto*, a collection of essays on a vast array of movies ranging from classic to contemporary. In the essay "Cuando calienta el sol," he touches on "El calor del *Film Noir*" (114) and thus proposes "heat" as a constituent of noir's unique ambience. He actually distinguishes between noir and classic detective literature on the basis of hot and cold. A figure like Sherlock Holmes is a cold rationalist, whereas a noir figure, like say William Hurt in *Body Heat*, is given to passion, to irrationality, to heat: "El

However, this is not a mere exercise in postmodern pop cultural pastiche. As the novel demonstrates, there is more to noir than tough detectives and *femmes fatales*. Rather, what we have, on a deeper level, is a kind of unsettlement in space similar to that of *The Conversation* -an anxiety spurting forth from the protagonist, Mendizábal's, inability to negotiate his surroundings. These ultimately allude to a diffuse and sinister conspiracy reminiscent of the Dirty War.

As an assassin hired to kill another character -Külpe- Mendizábal attempts to map out the latter's life: "Porque así son las cosas: un hombre se define, ante todo, por los espacios que habita: un hombre es siempre un mapa, y no hay más que saber trazar su geografía para dominarlo" (63). Mendizábal, like Harry the surveillant in *The Conversation*, closely monitors Külpe's wanderings through Buenos Aires and prides himself on being the predator in this deranged and sinister game of pursuit. The entire narrative deals with Mendizábal's own personal need to realize his compulsive and, at times, highly erotic cartography of Külpe in order to come to some understanding of who he is and why he must be done away with. This kind of mapping can likewise be extended to Mendizábal himself, wherein he strives to reaffirm a specific relation to Külpe, that of observer and, ultimately, aggressor. This is taken to a sadistic level when, during one of his clandestine visits to his target's apartment,

---

mundo de *Cuerpos ardientes* es otro. Los valores victorianos han muerto. La pasión domina a los hombres y los arroja al crimen. No hay detectives racionales y puros. Sam Spade y Marlowe se acuestan con los personajes de sus novelas. No son figuras analíticas que observan despasionadamente desde afuera. No hay mentes frías, tramas lógicas. El mito de la ciencia ha muerto. La sociedad es un desquicio y el crimen no es una alteración parcial que el detective solucionará regresando todo a su orden esencial. La totalidad es la culpable. Ya no hay lógica, ya no hay frío. Sólo hay pasión y hay muerte. Los cuerpos sudan, arden, la carne grita, el deseo estalla, el calor aturde la inteligencia. Se piensa con el cuerpo. Y más aún: se piensa desde la genitalidad y desde ella se asesina" (105-106).

If heat is central to Feinmann's analysis of films like *Body Heat*, *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, it likewise finds a place in his own *Últimos días de la víctima*. The sultry Buenos Aires nights seem to be the proper ambience for Mendizábal's irrational and highly erotic fixation upon Külpe. Mendizábal is therefore a character driven by irrational urges that don't cease to enclose a certain anxiety, which is vaguely alluded to through constantly "sofocante" (30) heat. Read in this manner, the heat could indeed be a significant element of the spatial anxiety that seems to forewarn us of the impending doom of our protagonist.

he leaves a small cigarette burn mark in the curtains. This is a simple gesture of intimidation to let Külpe know that some unseen eye is watching him, and that, in this particular relationship, he is the object to be observed, manipulated, and, finally, eliminated.

At this point, a specifically film noir aesthetic emerges. Mendizábal's gaze becomes that of a voyeuristic camera, surveying the events in his victim's apartment through the window and making public his more private intimacies. In fact, this very type of focalization, peering through the window of a neighboring apartment, holds iconic status for this type of films, epitomized most memorably in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. Mendizábal's perspective is, like Jimmy Stewart's, limited to unorthodox, off-center vantage points which give normal events an abnormal slant (Place and Peterson 68-69). We are forced to gaze through Külpe's apartment window from the public benches below, or from across the street in our protagonist's rented room, vantages which offer us only short, tantalizing fragments of the former's life: "Sólo con largas intermitencias, muy fugazmente, era posible verlo" (56). At times, our view of Külpe is limited to his shadow seen through the curtain: "sus ojos se detuvieron en la cortina de la ventana principal, aquella justamente en que se recortaba la sombra de Külpe cuando él la observaba desde el banco de la estación de trenes" (28). Such a precarious mode of vision seems to approximate the bizarre camera angles and cinematography of film noir which is able to "[undercut]...all attempts to find safety or security" (Place and Peterson 69). As in Coppola's *The Conversation*, the overall aesthetic is unsettling, and therefore seems to forewarn us that Mendizábal's efforts at cataloguing space will indeed go awry.

If we can liken his contorted observation unto that of a camera, we can adduce that it is likewise laden with an anxiety that is key in promoting the aforementioned aesthetic: "Una ansiedad desconocida lo fue dominando de a poco" (216). As cameraman in this vertiginous film noir, he is thrown off-balance by what he views, thus placing into question the coherence of his surrounding spaces. For example, during one of his observation sessions, he is momentarily thrown off by the closed shades, a detail which he had neglected to notice previously: "Las persianas de Külpe continuaban cerradas por completo. *Cerradas por completo*. Se puso un

impermeable y salió a la calle. *Cerradas por completo*. ¿Cómo no se había dado cuenta antes?" (210). Initially, the state of the curtains is an inconsequential detail, one that is to be rattled off like any other in Mendizábal's observation. Their change in state is subtle, to the point of going unnoticed even in the midst of its own enunciation in the narrative. The subsequent recognition of the curtains' change, emphasized by the switch to italic font in the text, can be interpreted as a quasi cinematic double-take. The figurative camera, while taking in the scene, moves along with ease until it is startled by the presence of something out of place, which it can't quite account for. Focalization is thrown off, and its supposedly thorough registering of the visual field -Külpe's apartment- is unable to dissimulate its own failure to note the faint, suspicious movement. Just as noir has the tendency to decenter a given shot or perspective in order to render a seemingly habitual scene strange or uncanny, so too Mendizábal's camera-like gaze counterposes the strange with the quotidian, demonstrating how the former may already have infiltrated our more familiar topographies without notice. It is precisely this flaw in detection that is most disturbing to our protagonist, and which concretely signals the "free-floating anxiety" emanating from his insecure position as camera-man/cartographer.

If indeed Mendizábal's role as camera man is paramount in creating an aesthetic of ambiguity and anxiety, so too are the frame compositions which litter the imagistic narrative. Powell and Peterson, in their analysis of the visual motifs of film noir, differentiate between the balanced composition and framing of traditional film and art, and the more askew perspectives of these films:

Those traditionally harmonious triangular three shots and balanced two shots, which are borrowed from the compositional practices of Renaissance painting, are seldom seen in the better film noir. More common are bizarre, off angle compositions of figures placed irregularly in the frame, which create a world that is never stable or safe, that is always threatening to change drastically and unexpectedly. Claustrophobic framing devices such as doors, windows,

stairways, metal bed frames, or simply shadows separate the character from other characters, from his world, or from his own emotions. (68)

One particularly claustrophobic framing device central to *Últimos días de la víctima* is Külpe's window, through which we gaze together with our protagonist. This is augmented by Mendizábal's own window, an aperture which grants us a doubly-framed and therefore doubly-claustrophobic composition. As stated previously, rather than offering a balanced and complete view of Külpe in his apartment, the windows -in cinematic fashion- reduce the scenery to brief, opaque fragments. If we add to this the many photos which Mendizábal takes of Külpe while shadowing him throughout Buenos Aires, we begin to conceive of the latter as a consistently framed subject, an act which reiterates the text's paranoiac underpinnings. Nevertheless, the hit-man's camera-like vision, which seems to control and manipulate his prey, ironically signals his own status as an object under surveillance. If we consider the possibility that the two characters are doubles of one another, then Külpe's framing is really just a misplaced projection of Mendizábal's own status as an imprisoned figure. He is, in a sense, caged within claustrophobic spaces that themselves bespeak his heightening agitation and uncertainty. He inhabits an eerily vacuous hotel room wherein he is framed by the very window through which he gazes out upon the city, he travels in overcrowded public buses, and is ultimately under the tight vigilance of his employers Peña and "el hombre importante."

Mendizábal, more so than Külpe, resides in locales whose ominous composition encloses an unconscious and yet ever-present claustrophobia that alludes to the invisible, conspiratorial forces already beginning to entrap him.

Such spatial anxiety culminates in the final scene. As Mendizábal enters Külpe's apartment for the last time, intent on killing him once and for all, he is stunned by what he sees: Külpe waiting for him, gun in hand, standing in an almost empty room furnished only with pictures of our protagonist that seem to have the same erotic and obsessive quality of Mendizábal's own photos of Külpe:



Entró. La oscuridad era absoluta. Encendió la luz. Lo paralizó el asombro. La habitación estaba totalmente cubierta por fotografías que mostraban su imagen: Mendizábal saliendo del chalecito de la calle Lugones; Mendizábal en la puerta del residencial; Mendizábal en las Barrancas, sentado en un banco, sólo; Mendizábal abriendo la puerta de entrada del edificio de Külpe; Mendizábal saliendo de la casa del hombre importante; Mendizábal en la esquina del *Albor*, esperando a Peña; Mendizábal sentado en el banco de la estación; Mendizábal otra vez en las barrancas, pero con Amanda ahora, y con Sergio, y el barrilete; Mendizábal entrando al Stromboli; Mendizábal frente a la agencia de Prode y Lotería; y, finalmente, el rostro de Mendizábal, y también sus ojos, muchas veces sus ojos. (257-258)

This slew of images, virtually impossible to process, seems to parallel the coarse montage of film noir and its often dizzying flashbacks as they frustrate the continuities of time<sup>6</sup> and space and, in this case, disperse Mendizábal to numerous times and locales. These flashbacks, though, contrary to those seen in typical film noir, do not emerge as some subjective turn in the plotline with its accompany-ing, and somewhat cliché, voice-over. They are, rather, a series of intercalated stills that suggest another version of the narrative from a different perspective -that of Külpe. These are all scenes from the novel with which we are familiar, but they are now presented from an *un*familiar vantage point. If indeed ours' as well as Mendizábal's temporal and spatial positioning is thrown off by this rapid fire onslaught of images (as is customary with flashbacks and montage), it is only to signal the new position into which our protagonist is inserted: he goes from being the *observing subject* to the *observed object*. Such an uncanny use of montage and flashbacks is not without its precedent. We see the same thing in Coppola's *The Conversation* where such filmic techniques serve to

---

<sup>6</sup> According to Foster Hirsch these movies typically present a "fractured time sequence, as flashbacks intersect present action" (72).

invert the entire plot, ironically casting the surveillant now as he who is watched, and confusing us to the point where we can empathize with Harry's spatial paranoia. Thus, both cases offer us images that only *hint* at some unknown conspiracy without offering us the particulars. Mendizábal's simultaneous spatial and temporal bewilderment gives us only a fleeting glimpse of a vast and unaccountable net of violent power relations which, despite their discrete presence, are well at work in dictatorial Buenos Aires. Hence, all of the anxiety that has permeated the novel's visual aesthetic up to this point achieves some sort of release in these compulsive and erotic snapshots by affording us an explanation, however vague it maybe: Mendizábal has been the target of some discrete conspiracy all along.

The observatory techniques employed by Feinmann, so reminiscent of film noir cinematography, place into question both Mendizábal's ability to navigate his surroundings and our ability as readers to be objective observers. What possibly disorients us, to the point where we begin to commiserate with Mendizábal's spatial anxiety, is the episodic and somewhat fragmentary structure of the novel. At this point, visual mapping and literary structure converge. Just as Mendizábal is constantly frustrated in his attempts to sketch a coherent cartography of his and Külpe's subjectivity, so too we have a hard time putting together the pieces of the narrative into a complete, unified whole. Rather than thoroughly explicating the narrative and its outcome, the novel leaves us in the dark concerning many key plot points. We don't know why Mendizábal has been hired to kill Külpe or the nature of the enigmatic organization that has hired him. We are likewise given no explanation as to how Külpe comes to be the aggressor at the end of the novel, as he corners Mendizábal and, in a very uncanny gesture, recites the very words that the latter had penned as an ironic and sinister farewell for his victim: "No tengo nada contra usted, Mendizábal. Pero tengo un trabajo que cumplir" (258). This opaque ending, a tragic episode seemingly tossed on to the novel's pages, is indeed indicative of the book's structure as a whole -an amalgam of episodes sutured together that doesn't offer cogent explanations as to how we get from point A to point B. Such an unsettling form, confusing us more than offering closure, is

consistent with what we could call the structures of film noir. Hirsch asserts that "Film noir introduces a narrative method that, by contrast, is sinuous, oblique, often deliberately confusing" (72). If indeed the spaces of film noir are often laced with an anxiety that is difficult to pin point, this anxiety is compounded by the narrativistic structure itself which complicates both *when* and *where* we are in the story as well as *how* we got there.

At this point, the connections between such a cinematic style and the novel are evident. What remains to be considered are its specific historical circumstances; in other words, what is the correlation between the spatial anxieties of a noir novel like *Últimos días de la víctima* and its immediate historical context, namely, the Dirty War? Such an anxiety-laden aesthetic bears a direct correlation to a distinctly spatial brand of trauma belonging to this historical moment (the late 70's). However, let us first offer a working definition of trauma itself.

According to Freud, trauma consists of a "frightening" moment that shatters the psyche's protective shield and is therefore unable to be assimilated by the ego (607-609). It is relegated to the unconscious and there it continues to fester, ever threatening the subject with its compulsive eruptions into the conscious mind. Cathy Caruth elaborates on the un-assimilated quality of trauma, going so far as to dub it a "missed experience." This is, however, a "missed experience" with which the mind continues to grapple in order to affect a reconciliation between knowable experience and those blank moments which disrupt the subject's ostensibly coherent self-narrative: "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature -the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4).

If, for Freud and Caruth, trauma is the inaccessible and repressed moment of fright, so, too, may a state-sponsored campaign of terror be traumatic. The hauntingly invisible and stealthy Dirty War can be interpreted as such a moment. Not only does the national memory have a hard time assimilating the excessive violence, but the evidence of the crimes themselves is essentially unknowable; the bodies or graves of those

“desaparecidos” are, as their name implies, absent from the national/spatial field. Such an absence only reiterates its own traumatic nature, and the subsequent efforts to forget such a state of violence and paranoia is evidence of a post traumatic society -one that is weighed down by its past, and, for a time, did not know how to address it, let alone resolve it.

As stated earlier, the term “trauma” here is also indicative of a specifically spatial and social dynamic, similar to that seen in the novel. In the Argentine case, the social collective was traumatized by the ubiquitous threat of state violence during the dictatorship which consisted of an invisible form of domination akin to a panopticon, grounded on state power apparatuses. According to Andrés Avellaneda,

Este rasgo de ubicuidad, este estar en todas partes y en ninguna, fue desde 1974 el elemento de mayor efectividad del discurso de censura cultural argentino. Su modo operativo se encuadraba así en la planificación general del terrorismo de Estado, una de cuyas metodologías básicas fue la represión ejercida de modo indiscriminado y sin fundamento claro para internalizar masivamente el concepto de castigo y paralizar de tal manera el mayor número de reacciones posibles. (14)

By subjecting the public domain to discrete surveillance,<sup>7</sup> the state

---

<sup>7</sup> The military dictatorship’s tactics were consistent with this need for clandestine operation. Their war against subversion was effectively divided into specific geographic zones that gave authority to the corresponding junior officers, who, acting within their own authority, were able to use brutality as they saw fit. In this sense, a figure like Jorge Videla was able to indirectly condone excessive violence, while simultaneously forestalling any attempts at tracing the atrocious crimes back to the military *junta*. The Dirty War’s excesses could be attributed to the individual officers’ caprice, and effectively create a faceless figure of authority while also imposing a more pernicious threat. Surveillance followed those forms delineated in Coronel Roger Trinquier’s *La Guerre Moderne*, a step by step manual for counterrevolutionary warfare, and was likewise organized according to localized, specific zones. According to Paul H. Lewis, Trinquier’s brand of vigilance included the following tactics: “The population should be censused, identity cards issued, and family heads held responsible for the whereabouts of their family members. It is essential to know each inhabitant of a district and where he lives. Surveillance should also be extended to the work place. Sooner or later, people will be

could instill paranoia within the citizens that would extend to the domestic sphere, thus exacting obedience through spatial intimidation. For Foucault this type of domination is "the permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain *invisible*" (214). The fact that the state-run intimidation exists on such an imperceptible and almost invisible level, however, makes it all the more traumatic. Just as trauma is "unknowable" for Freud and Caruth, so, too, this widely dispersed net of power relations is unmappable as it violently regulates the public. Unable to thoroughly account for this invisible and *quasi* unconscious dynamic, we are reduced to identifying its "free-floating anxiety" as its symptom.

Noir, as an aesthetic of anxiety, allegorizes this particular mode of trauma. As such, it responds to Argentina's specific moment of state terrorism, whose sinister nature is rooted precisely in its own opaque operation. This sense of insecurity characterizing life under dictatorship is captured by the display of unnerving territory within noir geography. Feinmann's mimicry of the irregular camera angles, unbalanced frame compositions, or the simple narrative thematics of these classic films puts into play an artistic model that confounds rather than illuminates. It therefore creates an unsettling ambience that seems to enclose some secret or traumatic presence whose truth will never fully materialize. This immaterial and ubiquitous threat constantly festers, ever frustrating any attempt at understanding one's self or how one relates to the surrounding social collective and its corresponding locales. As the typical protagonist, Mendizábal is never able to map out thoroughly his subjectivity nor to dominate the environs around him. He is, rather, subject to a system of violent regulation whose functioning is too discrete and too invisible to comprehend. The malevolent power relations are essentially unknowns for him and are consequently only alluded to through the vague anxiety that permeates the topography and subjectivities of

---

discovered coming and going where they have no business to be; then they will be arrested and interrogated. As the terrorist organization is uprooted, and ordinary people in those places gain a greater sense of security, they should be recruited into the surveillance network." (140)

urban Buenos Aires.

Perhaps the best example in the text of trauma's relation to spatial anxiety would be the motif of the cigarette burn. As mentioned earlier, Mendizábal leaves a small, seemingly insignificant burn mark in Külpe's apartment as a gesture of intimidation -to let him know that things are not as they seem and that some invisible, sinister force is watching his every move. The irony in this action is revealed at the end of the novel, after Mendizábal's death, when we learn that there had also been a almost insignificant burn mark in his own hotel curtains. At this moment we find out that Külpe likewise shadowed him and left a similar sign of intimidation. However, this burn mark has gone unnoticed until the end of the novel. Is this barely perceptible sign not a metaphor for a similarly unconscious and discrete trauma? Like psychic injury, the mark goes unperceived by our protagonist and yet, in it lies the secret of Mendizábal dilemma -the fact that in this particularly diffuse net of power relations he is the victim. True to noir literature, this truth never fully materializes for Mendizábal, but is only insinuated through his inability to navigate those subjectivities surrounding him. All of the novel's distinctly noir anxiety, moreover, would be a mere symptom of this one hauntingly uncanny reality contained within the seemingly invisible cigarette burn in his hotel curtain.

This particularly stylized model of the noir aesthetic seen in Feinmann's *Últimos días de la víctima*, refashions the literary response to trauma. Rather than casting it as an individual "frightening" moment that is key to deciphering a given character's compulsive neurotic behavior, these novels conceive of political violence and its psychological effects as a spatial, and therefore, social configuration. Its corresponding anxiety-laced subjectivity is precisely that which finds a place in this type of aesthetic. The Argentine noir style responds directly to the brute physicality of society under dictatorship -to the shapes and contortions of a social collective that has been wounded by the threat of state violence. Approached in this manner, the entire aesthetic question of the *novela negra* becomes more urgent as it ceases to be a mere citation of the previous U.S. model, but rather exhibits the qualities of a national aesthetic with direct political relevance.

### Bibliography

- Avellaneda, Andrés. *Censura, autoritarismo y cultura: Argentina 1960-1983*. Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1986.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Feinmann, José Pablo. *Últimos días de la víctima*. Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1979.
- . *El Cine por asalto: ensayos y variaciones*. Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2006.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York: Norton, 1989.
- González, Gail. "Postmodern, Post-Boom and Post-Borges: José Pablo Feinmann's *Últimos días de la víctima*." *Hispanófila* 147 (2006): 39-50.
- Hirsch, Forster. *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1981.
- Lafforgue, Jorge. *Cuentos policiales argentinos*. Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 1997.
- Lewis, Paul H. *Guerillas and Generals*. Westport: Praeger, 2002.
- Oliver, Kelly and Benigno Trigo. *Noir Anxiety*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Place, Janey and Lowell Peterson. "Some Visual Motifs of *Film Noir*." *Film Noir Reader*. Ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini. New York: Limelight Editions, 1996. 65-76.