



WASTIARY

A BESTIARY OF WASTE

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Ñiquiñaque/extraño

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Figure Ñ.0 Nina Mathijsen, *Collage Ñ*, 2021. © takeadetour.eu. Courtesy of the artist.

ñiquiñaque: rare Spanish word meaning insignificant, 'despicable person or thing'.¹

extraño: strange, unfamiliar; sometimes with a connotation of uncanniness.²

In his observational documentary *La multitud*,³ Martín Oesterheld portrays a series of derelict spaces or 'urban interstices' in order to articulate a critical narrative about urban decay and transformation.⁴ These include abandoned theme parks, car dumps and the edges of the 'Ecological Reserve'. A series of figures slide smoothly, almost speechless, across these spaces, linking two shantytowns, a social housing complex, a power plant and a set of top-end skyscrapers under construction.

The wastelands depicted reflect key junctions of Argentina's twentieth-century history. Built by the last dictatorship (Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, 1976–83) in accordance with a 1960s masterplan, the unprofitable amusement park Interama was left to rust. Echoing it, the Ciudad Deportiva de La Boca sports complex remains incomplete, its concrete ruins evocative of a moment of ambition and optimism coinciding with the presidency of Arturo Illia (1963–66) and the Revolución Argentina dictatorship (1966–73). Each park is bordered by the rusting remains of vehicles in official yet unregulated open-air car dumps. Vegetation is shown growing inside the cars and in the theme parks' imaginative concrete figures. Finally, swelling on the edge of the city, native and exotic plants of the Ecological Reserve grow on the rubble of the demolitions produced by the Proceso. In it, flora and fauna are protected by a municipal bylaw issued in the mid-1980s, in the context of cultural rejuvenation that marked Argentina's return to democracy. This blossoming of life contrasts with the memory of systematic kidnap, torture and murder that is evoked by the waste that supports it (the Proceso was, in fact, Argentina's most traumatic period of the century). This produces an unsettling effect reminiscent, *mutatis mutandis*, of the bombed-out *Brachen* (fallow lands) in divided post-war Berlin as described by Matthew Gandy, where political violence created the conditions that allowed new forms of urban nature to thrive.⁵

Urban margins, abandoned spaces and wastelands are often regarded as *ñiquiñaque*, as things to neglect and abhor. However, as Cristian Silva argues, interstices are, through their very marginality, key to fundamental urban processes such as sprawl, where they 'destabilize institutional orthodoxies'.⁶ External to urban planning, they contribute to sprawl's fragmented nature. In the case of the interstices portrayed

in *La multitud*, this disruptive quality is further highlighted by their proximity to more formalised spaces (the high-end constructions, the power plant, the housing complex), which makes them strangers, alien, *extraños* to their own context. I am here using the term *extraños* in line with Sigmund Freud's analysis of the *unheimlich*, 'something repressed which recurs',⁷ something once familiar which was displaced to the unconscious and which re-emerges displaced, and which duplicates its appearances when it should have remained hidden, becoming profoundly distressing. This extends to the role of vegetation in the abandoned spaces observed: Oesterheld's portrayal of inhabited cars, a dried fountain hosting miniature trees and a mouldy giant Gulliver figure reminds us of the uncanniness produced by encountering life in unanimated objects, by the blurring of the boundary between the living and the dead,⁸ and by the spanning of the artificial/natural divide which largely underpins our culture. By observing these spaces in their 'elegant deterioration',⁹ Oesterheld brings to the fore the disturbing persistence of Argentina's recent past. Furthermore, in *La multitud*, marginal spaces once more become central: by focusing on two locations in the east and the southwest of the city which mirror one another, Oesterheld constructs a counterpoint which fences in most of the Buenos Aires capital district. Waste spaces are, in this film, very far from 'insignificant'.

Postscript: the letter 'ñ' is also itself marginalised, treated as *ñiquiñaque* by digital globalised communications where it upsets character strings



Figure Ñ.1 Martín Oesterheld, still from *La multitud* (Buenos Aires, 2012). Courtesy of the director.

and gets displaced from keyboards, and banned for proper names in France only a few years ago, yet reclaimed as key to Spanish-speaking and Breton culture by its users.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 Our translation. Real Academia Española, 'ñiquiñaque', in *Diccionario de la lengua española*, 23.4 ed. <<https://dle.rae.es>> [accessed 26 November 2020].
- 2 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' [1919], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, XVII (1917–1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. by James Strachey and Anna Freud (The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), pp. 217–52.
- 3 *La multitud*, dir. by Martin Oesterheld (J. C. Fisner, 2013).
- 4 Cristian Silva, 'The interstitial spaces of urban sprawl: Unpacking the marginal suburban geography of Santiago de Chile', in *Creative Spaces: Urban culture and marginality in Latin America*, ed. by Niall Geraghty and Adriana Laura Massidda (Institute of Latin American Studies, 2019), pp. 55–84.
- 5 *Natura Urbana: The Brachen of Berlin*, dir. by Matthew Gandy (UK/Germany, 2017).
- 6 Silva, 'The interstitial spaces of urban sprawl', p. 55.
- 7 Italics in the original. Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 241.
- 8 Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 226 and pp. 241–4.
- 9 Niall Geraghty and Adriana Laura Massidda, 'The spatiality of desire in Martin Oesterheld's *La Multitud* and Luis Ortega's *Dromómanos*', in *Creative Spaces: Urban culture and marginality in Latin America*, ed. by Niall Geraghty and Adriana Laura Massidda (Institute of Latin American Studies, 2019), pp. 201–39.
- 10 AFP, 'French baby boy banned from having name containing tilde', *The Guardian*, 13 September 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/sep/13/french-baby-boy-banned-from-getting-name-containing-symbol>> [accessed 15 June 2021].