

## Melodrama and Class Performance in *Cama adentro* by Jorge Gaggero

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### **Abstract**

The analysis of the Argentine film *Cama adentro* (2004) focuses on melodramatic elements and cinematographic strategies for the dramatization of class performance. The drama unfolds in the context of the country's economic crisis that reaches its climax in 2001 when the bourgeois world of the businesswoman Beba crashes down with her realization that she is not better off than her maid who has not been paid by her for months. By applying Judith Butler's concept of gender-a construct dependent on the habitual repetition of performative acts-to the concept of social class, it is possible to examine the melodramatic aspects of the film as a vehicle for the performance of class by both characters, Beba and Dora, the maid. The film's mise-en-scène and the editing strategies of the split screen, cross-cutting and match cuts engage the viewer in the parallel lives of Beba and Dora and the different pressures they experience while maintaining appearances and explore their long-established alliance beyond the social conventions of their respective class and its outdated norms and patriarchal values.

**Key words:** Gaggero, Class performance, Middle class destabilization, Melodrama, Film studies, Argentine films

The 2004 Argentine film *Cama adentro* (*Live-in Maid*) is set in 2001 when the national debt and capital flight reached its climax and the country's poverty index equaled or even surpassed that of its Latin American neighbors (Caetano 96). The 'corralito,' or freezing of bank accounts to prevent further mass withdrawals, provoked endless protests with banging on pots, known as 'cacerolazos', as well as lootings and violence by protesters and police, resulting in the deaths of citizens and finally the resignation of the president, Alfonso De La Rúa (Kraus). Jorge Gaggero's film starring Norma Aleandro, the country's most renowned actress, does not focus on these tumultuous incidents but rather on the intimate drama of an upper-middle class divorced business woman who, so far sheltered from realities of day-to-day survival, realizes that she is not better off than her live-in maid whom she has not been able to pay for months. The acting collaboration of Aleandro, a national icon, with Norma Argentina, who began her acting career with her role as the maid in this film, produced an inspired portrait of two women from different social classes at a turning point in their lives when each has to tap her individual resourcefulness in order to deal with the dire economic circumstances. *Cama adentro* not only performed well at a series of international film festivals but also at the box-office thanks to the creative alliances between countries, actors, and genres. A co-production of Fondo Raíces de Cine (The Roots of Cinema Fund), the film received support from the Argentine National Institute for Film and cultural entities in Galicia and Catalonia (Falicov 140).<sup>1</sup> Gaggero's direction, in turn, mobilized the creative possibilities of camera work, plot structure and spatial setting to complement a character study that foregrounds the excellence in the acting of Aleandro and Argentina.

Taking elements from melodrama, woman's films, and chamber drama, the movie's hybrid character reaches a mainstream audience that typically prefers the American imports to the art films of the country's independent filmmakers such as Gaggero. This director not only successfully matched the acting talents of a novice actress with the Grande Dame of Argentine cinema, but also wrote the screenplay of the film for an exploration of a relationship between two middle-aged women of unequal status with limited options at this point in their lives. With a minimal plot, the action focuses on laying bare the behavioral codes and power relations which Beba Pujol and her maid Dora have established over three decades. An important element in the plot structure is the apartment building that signifies a lifestyle that the former businesswoman can no longer afford after her divorce. She is slow in confronting this fact and it will take Dora's decisive action of leaving her position and thus her sustaining presence in the apartment to reveal Beba's dependence to the fullest. It is not so much the lack of chores that her maid used to complete faithfully or the meals she prepared, but rather her sudden absence that brings Beba to the realization that she is failing in her attempts to survive by pawning family heirlooms and selling cosmetics door to door. Dora's return to her modest house in the outskirts of the city, on the other hand, provides her with the opportunity to redefine her relationship with her former employer as well as her live-in-boyfriend. Her steady steps towards self-realization and independence pave the way for a surprise ending which, improvised by Beba, does not seem sustainable yet celebrates the human bond between the two women. As Beba sheds the pretensions of her bourgeois status, Dora gives in to her protective heart.

In her essay on melodrama and woman's films, Susan Hayward outlines the major points of intersection between the development of these genres and a growing consumer culture for film that included and increasingly addressed women, presenting the female spectator with a "mise-en-scène of her own experience" (237). Similar to the purpose of countering anxieties and "exposing alienation under capitalism and technological depersonalization" that Hayward identifies as a purpose of melodrama during modernism, the melodramatic elements in *Cama adentro*

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1. While historical events give context to Señora Beba's personal financial crisis, there is another story intrinsic to this film. As Gilles Deleuze remarks: "The cinema as art itself lives in a direct relation with a permanent plot [complot], an international conspiracy which conditions it from within, as the most intimate and most indispensable enemy. This conspiracy is that of money; . . ." (*Cinema 2* 77). As a metaphor for Argentina's surrender into economic chaos due to neo-liberal policies and globalization, the film thus also tells the story of the Argentine film industry and this film's moderate but nevertheless noteworthy financial success due to its co-production with Spain and the use of elements from genre film.

proof effective in addressing the destabilization of the urban middle class during the 2001 economic crisis of Argentina's neo-liberal market place and the fear of those that are no longer able to participate in it (238). *Cama adentro* also addresses a topic important to feminists as it examines the relationship between an upper-middle class professional, in other words an 'emancipated' woman, and her maid whom she sometimes prefers to see as part of the family and the domestic sphere rather than another working woman.

The common notion of "live-in-maid" in Latin America complicates the separation between personal and professional spaces. Importantly, Dora, who has worked in the Pujol household since she was a young girl and also helped raise the couple's daughter, has the semblance of a private life in the weekends unless her employer imposes the importance of her own plans, such as a bridge party for her friends. Dora is used to prioritize Beba's needs over her own, as well as bearing in silence such condescending suggestions as taking up with the building doorman instead of going home to her unemployed boyfriend in their lower-class neighborhood. Nevertheless, when such breeches of her social contract with Beba concern the most intimate aspects of sentimental matters, Dora reacts with an outburst of anger followed by a calculated response. Thus, Beba's indiscreet allusion to her maid's date with a certain Luisito, obviously a long time ago, and what could be heard through the walls, provokes Dora to grab the English china teapot that Beba just had praised for its value as a collector's item and to drop it on the floor with the remark that the cost could be subtracted from the owed salary. Redrawing the boundaries of their relationship, she demonstrates her frustration as well as her awareness that the salary owed may never materialize. Interestingly, Beba accepts being put into her place this way although, stepping on one of the chards accidentally, she is able to subvert the professional boundaries with her blood and tears that arouse Dora's nurturing compassionate side. Lured back from her maid's room and ready to help, she takes off Beba's stocking and cleans the wound, more like a mother than a maid.

Aleandro injects her role as Señora Beba with emotional and sometimes comic moments which give melodrama, in David Bordwell's definition, the power for "opening up areas of feeling unanticipated by character or audience" (Gledhill "Prologue" xxi). More than just a foil for Beba, her maid emerges as a stabilizing and dignified force that, in spite of her acceptance of the social norms of class difference, manifests the "individual energy" that in melodrama, according to Peter Brooks, "is both product and generator of socioeconomic forces that power modernity" (Gledhill "Prologue" xxi). By applying aspects of the melodramatic mode for the expression of socio-cultural changes on the personal level, the director offers the audience an opportunity to respond as a "socio-emotional" being, in Deidra Pribam's words, that is, a channeling of emotion into social discourse and practice (Gledhill and Williams "Introduction" 7). In addition, *Cama adentro* achieves emotional identification by drawing the female spectator into the cultural negotiations of the main character as a woman of a certain age that not only lacks the financial means she is used to but also experiences increasing invisibility in a culture and economy that values youthfulness. Melodrama, according to Gledhill, reveals the 'decentered subject' in a society of consumerism and depersonalization (quoted in Haywood 237). As Beba's class-based self-worth and identification slowly erode, her maid becomes a catalyst for change, and a relationship emerges in which both women negotiate a fluid space in relating to each other and in performing their social roles. The film's *mise-en-scène* and the editing strategies of the split screen, cross-cutting and match cuts engage the viewer in the parallel lives of Beba and Dora and the different pressures they experience while maintaining appearances and exploring their long-established alliance beyond the social conventions of their respective class. Montage often abounds in reflective surfaces, mirrors and glass that define the

bourgeois appearance of the apartment and give it an aspect of bygone days and the diminished value of once precious objects.

Arguing that social class, like gender difference and division, is a construct and product of a habitual repetition of performative acts, this analysis focuses on the melodramatic aspects of the film as a vehicle for the performance of class during an economic crisis and the disintegration of the traditional family structure exemplified in the film. The absence of the so-called “man of the house” in their individual lives, such as Beba’s status as a divorcee, and Dora’s relative independence from her boyfriend, opens a space for the women to probe opportunities for self-realization and livelihood that are not restricted to their prescribed roles. However, analyzing their actions and resulting situations through the lens of class as performance allows a better understanding of the complexity of social norms and prescriptive behavior, not because they are inherent to identity, but rather because they are presumed to be. Speaking about gender, Judith Butler points out that “it constitutes the identity it is purported to be” and therefore “is always a doing though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (25). The argument that gender identity is “performatively constituted” offers a way to address issues of class identity and gender that continue to inform social transactions between presumably equal participants (25). Thus, while class, in contrast to common-sense notions of gender, is not considered to be an intrinsic attribute of identity, both concepts are destabilized when they become visible as constructs. *Cama adentro* connects screen space, movement and performance to probe the possibility of a resignification of class roles in the context of an economic crisis that affects the middle class at its core.

Beba and Dora perform their respective roles, actions, and speech acts as Señora and maid but, due to the scarcity of money, they are forced to test the boundaries of their class difference. The screen text of *Cama adentro* frames the dialogic structure of class difference with a demarcation of the social space for each character in the apartment they inhabit, and the respective activities associated with class. In order to appreciate the possibilities of film as a medium for destabilizing social class constructs, it is important to analyze the cinematographic strategies that present these class specific operations visually. As the title of the film implies, Dora has a room in her employer’s apartment which she occupies during the week but leaves for her own house in the rural outskirts of the capital in the weekend. The floor plan of the apartment provides the scenario for the negotiations of class performance with a long hallway allowing for appearances and withdrawals, as well as the occasional interaction of the women in one area. Mostly they shout their commentaries at each other, their voices traveling over the boundaries of their assigned areas, though Dora, due to her work, moves around more frequently and freely. Standing upright while Beba is seated, the maid commands the scenes in which she threatens to resign her position. She is adamant though to retire to the privacy of her small room at the end of the day, or when conversations turn into arguments. When at one point, Beba suggests she move into the vacant room of her daughter, Dora refuses. The offer is remarkable because Beba hopes that her daughter will at some time return from Spain, at least for a visit. The prospect of Dora’s leaving, however, prompts her to negotiate the spatial boundaries of class difference, or as Clara Gavarelli fitly remarks: “Her daughter’s room comes to represent for Beba a symbolic upgrading of Dora to her own level and a recognition of the thin line that separates them, with an implied suggestion that it will be a moving of places in exchange for ‘moving away’ from the money owed” (42). Dora’s rejection upholds a clear definition of the existing spatial arrangements that ensure her theoretical status as a paid employee rather than a family member, while Beba tries to negotiate a relationship that emphasizes the ties between them formed over decades of Dora’s employment in her household. The scene, leaving aside considerations of how to pay her maid, is indicative of Beba’s willingness

to override the spatial setting of class division in her apartment, thus preparing herself for the resolution of her dilemma at the end of the film. In addition, both women transgress the boundaries that define their culturally assigned space and relationship in order to eaves-drop out of curiosity or concern for the other. The hallway then becomes an area for the blurring of their spheres of activity, which after contentious or emotional moments return to normality. Camera angles and framing play with the borders. Living room screens and door frames facilitate the interaction and juxtaposition of the two women inhabiting the space of their respective social roles which, due to the dynamics of the economic crisis, have become porous and extremely challenging to uphold. Importantly, while the spatial visualization of class difference lends itself to explore the “doing” of class performance, close-ups, especially of Dora’s reflective face, paint the inner turmoil the prospect of leaving Beba causes her, and the strength required for carrying out her decision. It is during the moments that reveal Dora’s need for privacy as she retreats to her small room, that the complexity of her character emerges as the driving force of the narrative.

The self-affirmation that Dora finds in her work becomes comprehensible for the spectator through the emphasis on the ‘doing’ of her chores. The initial shots during the opening credits first introduce her as she performs a series of gestures pertaining to her work that become symbolic for her professional identity. She sprays furniture polish on the shining surface of a piano. The care she bestows on the objects in the living room demonstrates the seriousness with which she executes her duties and upholds the appearance of an upper-middle class home reflecting economic and family stability. She dusts family heirlooms and the portrait of the absent daughter, whom she has helped to raise, and who, according to the young woman’s father, does not have any intentions to return and get married in Argentina, except perhaps to another woman. The sentimental possessions and objects of Beba’s bourgeois lifestyle, carefully handled by Dora, have become reminders of a family that has not survived the trends of modernity and globalization. Her own divorce and her daughter’s choice to live in Spain have left Beba deprived of family support. Similarly, her financial situation reflects that of the country. The action of the film is set in the context of Argentina’s transition to the new millennium and the challenges for modernization and increased competition with other Latin American and global markets. The privatization of state institutions, including Social Security—a measure taken by President Menem in the 90s in order to attract foreign capital—only increased the mistrust of a middle class aware of corruption and the over-extension of presidential powers. By 2001, ongoing tax evasions and flight of capital had further depleted the government’s resources for basic operations. However, when Argentina, due to stricter guidelines officially defaulted its payments to the International Monetary Fund in November and was denied further credit, the shock to the population was unprecedented. Measures to restrict access to bank accounts, the “corralito”, led to mass protests in Buenos Aires and other major cities with participation from all sectors, including the middle class. The realization that the state had violated the elemental rights of its citizens, the access to private savings, forced President de la Rúa out of office (Ugrín 9-11). In sharp contrast to the preceding decades, including the years of terror during military rule and the Dirty War (1976-83), the oligarchy and wealthy upper middle class was no longer protected by economic policies that had worked into their favor and affluent women – nicknamed “I’ll take two” – enjoyed the pleasures of shopping-trips abroad as well as in the luxury shopping malls of the capital (Kaiser 1). It becomes apparent from shared recollections with her former husband that Beba’s income, even during past times of financial bonanza for the upper class, was not always secure. The couple embarked on many failing business enterprises, mirroring the country’s path during years of changing policies and inflation. Beba’s continuous efforts to keep up with her friends, at least in appearances, require her maid’s presence as she pretends that her comforts of a sheltered life have not changed. All the same, the

apartment in the Belgrano neighborhood, once a sign of exclusivity, has become for both women an empty nest, full of memories of Beba's daughter and her up-bringing there.

As the plot develops, repetition of performative acts as well as the exploration of new possibilities on unfamiliar ground take the action beyond the apartment. A cross-cutting montage introduces Beba walking a busy street with a shopping bag and the accessories of sunglasses, earrings and fashionable boots. Her image matches the well-to-do urban shopper who ignores the cheap merchandise offered for sale on the sidewalk. However, this appearance turns out to be false when she enters a pawnshop, still hiding behind her glasses, to produce at the counter a teapot she hopes to turn into cash. Deducing a situation from an action, as Gilles Deleuze describes the creative and economic strategy of the reasoning image in cinema's small form, the spectator experiences with surprise the discrepancy between Beba's appearance in public and the purpose of her visit of the pawnshop (*Cinema 1* 160-61).<sup>2</sup> Nearly comic in her attempt to conceal her situation, Beba explains that she is running this errand for an infirm older neighbor but retreats disappointed by the low offer. This failed attempt of finding a market for her belongings initiates her new regimen of daily excursions to find customers for a facial product she has enlisted to sell, also unsuccessfully as she lacks the courage to aggressively hawk her wares in contrast to her younger, working class competitors. Thinking of herself as a businesswoman, Beba feels shame in asking for payment from friends or her hair stylist and her attempt to sell her product to a stranger, the owner of a Chinese restaurant, turns from what she hopes will be an impersonal transaction into a barter for a meal that she consumes tearfully in a completely empty dining hall. Eventually, the sale of her golden earrings, intended heirlooms for her daughter, will have to provide for the payment of Dora's missing salaries and settle the end of their relationship as employer and maid. In the meantime, the action also offers moments of comic relief and even satire at the cost of an economic group to which Beba no longer belongs. Thus, revealing a mode of behavior that enables and at the same time violates her code of "doing" class, she relishes a cocktail in her local restaurant but slips out after skillfully charging her drink to the bill of an unsuspecting man whose attention is directed at the woman at his side.

Dora has an important function in keeping up a façade of stability when she goes shopping, paying for detergent out of her own pocket and explaining to the shopkeeper that she needs domestic rather than imported whiskey for cooking. When she fills the alcohol into an old import bottle for a bridge party which Beba's hosts for her women friends, Dora becomes an essential player in a false display of financial security. In contrast to the comic effect of Beba's frustrated efforts to maintain appearances, such moments involving Dora open up a tragic dimension of the discrepancy between her sense of honor in performing the duties of a house-keeper and the lengths she has to go to do so. Unwillingly she also becomes the subject for Beba's demonstrations of a facial mud she tries to sell. Her friends consent that Dora now has a beautiful complexion though presuming that it is darker and therefore less wrinkled than their more sensitive skin, they steer clear of having to buy anything. Instead, they proceed to discuss the appropriate pay for a newly hired help in the household of one of the guests, a young inexperienced girl, she explains, whose wages are not comparable to Dora's and her many years of service. At such instants, the viewer grasps the irony of Dora's situation in performing her part in Beba's charade, that is, as an enabler of a class consciousness that keeps her trapped without consideration that she may have middle-class aspirations herself.

Two images that reveal the double vision of this situation illustrate the gap between a clichéd version of reality, often assumed to be the building block of melodrama, and the social codes that constrain these notions,

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2. In Deleuze's description of the film's movement from action-image to situation, "an action (or an equivalent of an action, a simple gesture) discloses a situation which is not given. The situation is thus deduced, by immediate inference, or by relatively complex reasoning" (*Cinema 1* 160). Thus, Beba's attire and behavior upon entering the pawnshop belies her real situation, which nevertheless reveals itself to the spectator in the immediately following moments when she lifts a teapot out of her fashion shopping bag: "It is as if an action, a mode of behavior, concealed a slight difference, which was nevertheless sufficient to relate it simultaneously to two quite different situations, situations which are worlds apart" (*Cinema 1* 161).

producing “emotional cross purposes” that undermine sentimentality in the face of social truth (Gledhill xxxiv). One shot, which tends to appear on the cover jacket for the film DVD, shows Beba and Dora side by side under dryers in a hair salon. In preparation for the bridge party, each having chosen her desired style from a magazine, they enjoy equal treatment in return for Beba’s beauty products. The image communicates camaraderie between the two women, and a moment of shared pleasure as they get ready for the important event. Another image after the party captures Dora’s coiffure destroyed by a downpour as she escorts the departing guests to the taxi and protects their hair with an umbrella not big enough to stay dry herself. The image is a powerful reminder of class difference and although Dora’s face does not betray anything but stoicism, the spectator has access to the inside of the situation and a possible reaction to come. Focusing on Dora’s character, it is possible to appreciate the extent to which the film, by intersecting genres such as melodrama, chamber drama, and comedy, can provide dramatic depth of a situation with great economy and, similar to Gledhill’s description of melodrama’s genericity, “make movements in structures of feelings and cultural imagining accessible” (xxxiv).

Alternately, Beba’s role allows for moments of surprise and comic relief as her hair, costume, and gestures become performative elements and a shield for her social degradation. Her elegant designer outfits hail back to better days and a social life with her former husband who now has become her last resort for the big financial boost she needs. Unable or unwilling to help her, he invites her to the occasional lunch, at one point to reminisce about their joined and often failed business enterprises. While he seems to operate on safer ground now, her career has stalled, signaling the effects of gender difference in an economy that requires connections she seems to have lost with her divorce. On the symbolic level, her customary gesture of swirling the ice around in her whisky glass becomes an empty gesture of class performance once the electricity has been cut off in the apartment and she rotates her glass but the usual sound of clicking ice is missing. By the time Dora leaves Beba’s household, her role in the joint project of performing class for Beba has slightly changed. She has become more of a caretaker for somebody on a physical and emotional downward spiral and the painful separation appears on a split screen that shows the coordinated motions of Dora’s leaving and Beba’s realization of it. With a mirroring of the two characters’ simultaneous movement through time and the divided space of the apartment, contrasting Beba’s awakening from stupor with Dora’s decisiveness, Beba’s reaction associates with belatedness and Dora’s with taking control of her future. The simultaneity of the two ongoing sequences on the split screen creates intense suspense and double identification with the characters as time pushes the narrative and releases Dora from a cycle of repetition while it awakens Beba from lethargy to an unknown future.

In her comparative analysis of *Cama adentro* with Gaggero’s documentary *Vida en Falcón* (2004), Garavelli outlines the dire circumstances brought on by financial hardship during the economic crisis that for the first time also involved the middle-class: “The space called ‘home’ is thus restructured and delocalized. Whilst in times of economic stability the middle class associated the ideas of “home” with four walls within which the traditional family could live and grow, at times of crisis the physical infrastructure ceased to have that evocative power” (39). Garavelli proceeds to present the concepts of nomadism and sedentarism, coined by Gonzalo Aguilar who explains:

(...) el nomadismo es la ausencia de hogar, la falta de lazos de pertenencia poderosos (restrictivos o normativos) y una movilidad permanente e impredecible; el sedentarismo muestra la descomposición de los hogares y las familias, la ineficacia de los lazos de asociación tradicionales y modernos y la parálisis de quienes insisten en perpetuar ese orden. (quoted in Garavelli 39)

Although both terms may be realized in Gaggero's documentary, and sedentarism aptly describes the hollowing out of Beba's fundamental middle-class values and hopes, Dora's path from live-in maid to the rural community she also calls home, by-passes the paralyzing defeatism of sedentarism as well as the errant wandering of nomadism. The performative symbolism of her use of plastic shoe covers illuminates the range of meanings that "nomadism" takes on in her character. When Miguel picks her up from the train station on one of the weekends early in the story, she slips the covers on to avoid the mud on the country road. While this habit may be related to seasonal weather, it is also demonstrative of an internalization of middleclass values that further become manifest in a quickly following sequence as she sticks to her preference for higher prized tiles that she wants to purchase whereas Miguel assumes that the cheaper ones are good enough for them. In contrast to signaling sedentarism or nomadism, Dora's performative gestures show a sense of negotiating the two spheres, middle and lower class successfully as she proceeds to up-grade her house in the country.

Dora's full-time return to her rural home where the urban upheaval and "cacerolazos" only appear on the TV screen in the local pub, may first suggest a "coming home" to her life with Miguel. The episodic insights into their relationship clarify however that his live-in status in her house has turned into more of an economic than a romantic arrangement. As she provides money with her savings and he offers his services in renovating the kitchen floor, the alliance sours when Dora discovers that he shares his skills and companionship with another woman in the neighborhood. He loses her trust and perhaps his home while Dora shifts her energy towards securing a new position. In an interview at the labor department she states her preference for work that does not require her to live in the household of the employer and it is interesting to observe how her domesticity expressed through performativity takes on a different purpose once she has more time to spend in her own house. A scene with the spray bottle shows the same attention to the chore but now in her own service, so to speak, and as part of an identity reconstruction while also reinforcing the notion of class performance as an internalized repetition of gestures that shape identity. In her search for work, she shows authority and determination as a professional. Reluctantly she concedes to look after a toddler for an afternoon as the mother asks for her help, but during a temporary appointment as a server for a party at a wealthy household, she proudly teaches the young and inexperienced staff the correct etiquette in the preparation and serving of appetizers, not without mentioning that her former employer, a business woman, taught her these things. During a visit to Beba's now neglected household, in order to surprise her with a birthday cake, she takes the first opportunity to straighten up the kitchen, slipping back into her role it seems, but maybe also that of a homemaker. As if resisting the commodification of her work, she gives it freely when she desires so. In this instance, Dora is also dismayed to find that Beba has draped her furniture and seems to no longer use her living room, just as in a moment of anger for not receiving her wages, she had suggested to her. This sign of sedentarism and dismantling of Beba's middleclass life stands in contrast to Dora's determination to take control of her own destiny.

Always her nurturer, Dora gifts Beba for her birthday with a home-made cake and a pair of stockings. And as Dora still proudly wears the pretty outfits Beba has handed down to her, she is now in a position to reciprocate on equal terms with the gift of an intimate article of a lady's clothing. The present also refers back to the earlier scene in which Beba cut her foot and stocking due to Dora's exasperation. In a series of scenes that create powerful emotional moments and open the melodramatic dimension of the film, the birthday sequence reaffirms Dora as the agent rather than the recipient of favors in the relationship. While a popular still on posters and DVD covers depicts a playful reversal of class performance as Beba treats Dora to a facial with a sample of her beauty mud to soothe her temper after a spat, the second half of the film, after she has left Beba,

underscores Dora's individual energy to power changes in her life. During a scene on the train home, Dora's voice-over reading of Beba's reference letter, which comments her impeccable service for three decades and states that she is leaving on her own wish, marks this moment with gravity. It is not insignificant that Dora requires this letter in her search for a new position and that Beba, with professional integrity, honors this request, just as some weeks before she paid the outstanding wages with gratuity.

Although the plot does not follow the patriarchal mandates of romantic love and traditional family values associated with classical melodrama, Dora's professional separation from her former employer does not sever her emotional ties with Beba and her daughter, the object of loving preoccupation for both women. An old photo of the formerly intact family that Dora removed from the family album now rests on her bed stand and her gaze glides over it before she turns over to sleep. In turn, loneliness along with a lack of means in the end drive Beba to put up her apartment for rent. As she moves into a small narrow space that will not hold all of her furniture, her transition to an existence devoid of décor is captured in her ride in the furniture moving truck, in the pilot cabin where one of the movers good-naturedly offers her his water bottle to drink, which she declines. When she arrives at Dora's house unannounced to drop off the grand piano, another plan is revealed since, as it turns out, she has brought her bed too. With metaphors abounding, the final montage places the out-of-tune piano into the patio with a tarp covering it, and the bed inside the house beside the cage with a singing canary who provides a rare moment of intradiegetic sound comparable to music in the film. Returning to the device of spatial arrangement for class difference, Dora's small house promises the possibility for a communal domestic relationship. Discarding the trappings of her former life style such as the piano now devoid of any function, Beba, consoled by the refreshing breeze of the country side and the freshly brewed tea, pointedly helps putting ice for it in the glasses which the women raise and from which they sip side by side. The open-ended fantasy lacks a script and the reversal of the former live-in situation comes tongue-in-cheek, accompanied by the extra-diegetic soundtrack of Café Tacuba's 'Amor Divino' for the closing credits. In the film's context, the song by the Mexican rock band celebrates a humorous redefinition of romantic expectations and the decentering of outmoded patriarchal values of family. Still, while both women seem comforted by each other, it is Beba who is receiving Dora's attention, both comfortable in their old performative roles. The improvised aspect of Beba's arrangement points to the possibly temporary nature of her move to the countryside and an eventual return to post-crisis normality and the old mandates of class consciousness. Nevertheless, the very fact that Dora does have a home and is in the process of steadily improving it, speaks to her middle class aspirations based on hard work and pride in her occupation rather than the sense of entitlement of those she has served and may continue to serve once she has found new employment.

With a focus on class as performance and facilitated by the hybrid possibilities of melodrama, *Cama adentro* unravels upper class pretensions and class differences between women, and due to its dramatic and cinematic strategies ensures audience recognition. As a film that found relative success among a box-office paying audience generally more attuned to mainstream blockbusters of the globalized market, it provides a point of departure for presenting class difference among women as a construct that like gender can become a "shared structure of oppression" (Butler 14), especially during a time when anxiety about access to consumerism affects the Argentine middle class. The following thought in an article about the relevance of Deleuze's teachings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is helpful in recognizing the importance of the casting of Dora's character: "In asking how a practice may enhance or diminish a being's capacity or power to act, Deleuze was intrigued by the problem of autonomy. How are the flows of life — bodies, commodities, money, finance, matter, ideas, language — socially structured and

unstructured. . .?” (Parr). Framing

Gaggero’s film in the context of this question, invites comparisons with other Latin American films that address the complex relationship between the maid and the family that employs her. It is especially due to Alfonso Cuarón’s semi-biographical drama *Roma* (2018), that the character of the maid in Latin American films has gained more critical attention and entered public discussion in the media. The internationally acclaimed filmmaker focuses in this memory piece on his childhood in the middleclass neighborhood of the Colonia Roma in Mexico City. Set in 1971, a year of political upheaval and student protests and their violent repression by specially trained forces, the family also experiences a marital crisis when the father leaves for a medical conference and ends up deserting his wife and children. The centerpiece of the film however is the psychological and physical trauma of Cleo, the maid, an indigenous woman played by acting newcomer Yalitza Aparicio, whose performance galvanizes Mexican audiences into the discussion of race and class to an unprecedented degree. The film’s ending offers a vision of solidarity between the female members of two different social classes as the liberal and educated woman of the house takes Cleo in her reassuring care. However, as a scientist, her professional career depends on Cleo to bring up her children and, consequently, there is no hint of a plan for the maid to grow beyond her class determined role in society. It is however important that within the frame of the film as a return to the director’s childhood, the issue of class disparity within the Mexican middleclass family provides an important directorial gesture and testimonial to the woman who partly, if not mostly, raised him. Motherhood, or the prevention of it due to professional pressures, is a reality that structures mistress and maid relationships and deserves closer analysis as to where most of the pressure falls and to what degree mutual support among women allows for individual self-determination. Thus, Cleo receives plenty of support to bear her child and raise it in the family of her employers. Sofia makes sure she receives medical care and instruction while the grandmother in the household takes her shopping for a crib. That Cleo loses her child due to traumatic experiences is not the result of neglect or pressures from the family. In comparison, *Cama adentro* raises the issue of an abortion paid by Beba for Dora, and although the circumstances are not clear, Beba’s women friends, who bring it up during a conversation, assume that this was a way of helping her young maid, rather than denying her motherhood. Both films testify to the intimacy and strong bond between the maids and the children they raised, perhaps as a substitute for the children they might have had, and definitely in order to facilitate the freedom or professional advancement of their mistresses.

The example of a Brazilian film, *Que horas ela volta?* (*The Second Mother*), from 2015 and about a maid at the age of Dora, introduces generational conflict in the context of class division. Similar to Gaggero, the director Anna Muylaert uses space for the demarcation and deconstruction of social roles, much to the exasperation and anxiety of Val (Regina Casé), who wants her visiting daughter to respect the arrangements and postures of being a servant. Val left Jessica to be raised by relatives in the country, and with her financial support for schooling from her many years of service, her daughter is an emancipated modern woman headed for the university, much in contrast to the immature son of the family brought up by Val. Jessica is readily accepted in her own right by Val’s employers, and the humor of the action arises around the seemingly outdated and ludicrous rules enforced by Val. She insists that her daughter share the tiny maid’s room with her and that she cannot enter the pool, which Jessica gleefully disobeys. While the action focuses on the barriers maintained by the maid through seemingly outmoded codes of performativity, there is room for glimpses of disrespect for her, especially from aspiring professional women whose self-worth seems to depend on demonstrations of authority.

Considering the time difference between the making of each film, it is important to note that the more recent films have successfully elevated the character of the maid to the role of protagonist that is carrying the action. In contrast, *Cama adentro*, more than a decade earlier, is pioneering the character of the maid side by side with that of her employer, with equal attention to their performative roles of class difference as social constructs. In this sense, *Cama adentro* stands out in a group of Latin American films that explore the dramatic potential of the maid but often leave the mistress of the house in a safe place, unwilling or unaware of the potential for breaking the rules of social divisions and conformist mandates. Thus, in comparison with the other films, Dora emerges as the only maid that probes her ability for self-determination in a system of commodification and codes for class difference.

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