

REVIEW

Eleni Kefala, *Buenos Aires Across the Arts. Five and One Theses on Modernity, 1921-1939,*

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The city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, experienced numerous social and economic changes during the first decades of the 20th century, including industrial growth, railroad expansion, and economic consolidation of the agro-export model. Additionally, mass immigration from Europe—mainly from Italy and Spain—transformed the city into a vibrant cosmopolitan metropolis. However, in subsequent years, two important events—the Great Depression and the first military dictatorship, both at the beginning of the 1930s—marked the way of understanding Buenos Aires in its modern context. While comparing rural Argentinian towns to urban Buenos Aires, Beatriz Sarlo suggests that the term “city” implied modernity in all aspects, from physical descriptions to ideologies. As a result of development in the early 20th century, as well as of avant-garde groups and aesthetics, literature in Buenos Aires embraced modernity in political and artistic spheres, leaving its mark on the culture of the city (16).

Eleni Kefala’s book *Buenos Aires Across the Arts: Five and One Theses on Modernity, 1921-1939* investigates the connection between literature, culture, and modernity within Buenos Aires, observing different sociopolitical and cultural reactions to modernity by analyzing creative materials, mediums and genres, namely: poetry, prose, film, painting, and photography (Kefala 4). The book comprises in-depth analyses of the intellectuals and artists Jorge Luis Borges, Oliverio Girondo, Roberto Arlt, José Agustín Ferreryra, Xul Solar, Horacio Coppola and Alfonsina Storni, and of their respective major works in relation to the city. Kefala explains that most writers and artists in question either belonged to, or were connected with, the avant-garde literary-artistic clique “Grupo Florida” and/or the literary magazine *Revista Sur*, with the exceptions of Ferreyra, a filmmaker who was part of the tango scene, and Alfonsina Storni, a feminist writer often ostracized by “Grupo Florida.” Kefala’s thorough analysis of modernity in Buenos Aires during the 1920s and 1930s, alongside an impressive compilation of creative artists hailing from various backgrounds and traditions that are not often studied together, is commendable. She displays an understanding of how the artists both defined and reflected modernity within the city through their artistic contributions, as each presents a different aspect of modernity, demonstrating the complexity and sometimes conflicted aspect of this phenomenon.

The book is divided into “five and one” theses (chapters) that focus on aspects of modernity as viewed by creative artists: the last “one” encompasses various elements of the previous five. Conclusions within each chapter are supported by several studies; however, Kefala prefers the social theories of German authors, such as Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and some from the Frankfurt School. In her comprehensive research, she combines these theories with Argentinian literary and cultural analysts who specialize in the avant-garde interwar period, such as Beatriz Sarlo, Jorge Schwartz, and Adrian Gorelik.

The first chapter, titled “Utopian City,” analyzes Jorge Luis Borges’ collection of poems *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923) and other essays from the period. This collection reflects a transition in Borges’ intellectual work: he abandons the ultraism of his European experience to embrace *criollismo*, Argentina’s most “enduring narrative” (Kefala 8), in order to reconnect with his hometown. His attempt to recover this relationship was, however, “disrupted by accelerated urbanization” that had taken place during his 1914–1921 absence (Kefala 22). Borges eventually locates *criollismo* in the utopia of the city’s *orillas* (borders), which were devoid of modernity expressions like immigration or industrial development. Kefala understands the creation of this space as an innovation of the author in the sense that he transforms it in a national *topos* restoring the patria, whose traditional values were threatened, to the *criollo*, albeit in an urban variation.

In contrast to this nostalgic perspective, but also relating to the interaction of space and time, Chapter 2, “The Atopian City,” analyzes *Veinte poemas*

para ser leídos en el tranvía (1922) by Oliverio Girondo. Instead of searching for a new space as Borges did, Girondo's collection of poems presents, as a succession of photography and cinema snapshots, diverse and random cities like Rio de Janeiro, Venice, Dakar, Mar del Plata, and Buenos Aires. According to Kefala, the collection challenges both "progressive linearity" (61) and "temporal or special order" (37). Speed, crowds, anonymity, and "non-places" (Marc Augè) like hotels or train stations catalyze the alienation and commodification of people: technological progress—which Girondo often personifies in his poems—does not necessarily lead to personal fulfilment. In contrast to Borges, who is preoccupied with space, Girondo portrays the people within the landscape. He does not, however, explore the inner self. In the next two chapters, Kefala explores how José Agustín Ferreyra and Roberto Arlt extend Girondo's observations of humans in a modernized city to include personal morality.

Chapter 3, "Melotopian City," analyzes the only film referenced in book, *Perdón Viejita* (1927), by José Agustín Ferreyra. The setting, on the outskirts of the city, reflects Borges' poems discussed in Chapter 1. But, in contrast, Ferreyra introduces working-class characters as victims of the "social and moral innovations of modernity" (Kefala 63). The characters' low socio-economic status (a result of modernization) correlates with their moral decline, especially in the case of the women who are bound to be sexually corrupted. This chapter is the only one in which Kefala studies the representation of the working classes in industrial neighborhoods, recurrent characters in the popular culture of the city, and of the formation of the "Grupo Boedo" that distances itself in aesthetics from the Grupo Florida writers and artists, proposing an interesting thematic connection between the two avant-garde groups. However, in contrast to Grupo Boedo, *Perdón Viejita* did not seek to provoke personal outrage and political reaction in audiences. Instead, as Kefala notices, it restores bourgeois values through melodrama, much like other films, radio dramas (*radioteatros*), and *novelas semanales* of the period. By the end of the movie, when the protagonist family moves to the countryside, they embrace the traditional values of the *criollo* and *nostalgia*. Ferreyra's film reflects political reforms of the 1910–1920 period previous decade that, from electoral law to urban reforms, aimed to integrate the working classes to the city and the nation.

The novels *Los Siete Locos* (1929) and *Los Lanzallamas* (1931) by Roberto Arlt, analyzed in Chapter 4, "The Dystopian City," also focused on marginalized groups but do not address the consequences of capitalism for the working classes. Instead, the novels focused on groups morally opposed to this social class, operating—in most cases—outside the rule of law. A critique of the unfulfilled promises of capitalism and technological progress can be found within the novels: the city becomes uninhabitable for the human, who is considered only a cog in the machinery that moves the city forward. José Romulo Erdozain, the protagonist of both novels, wanders around different neighborhoods, observing the effects of industrialization and discovering the emptiness of consumerism and of the self (Kefala 109). This exposes a "cognispace of the enlightened turned inside out" (Kefala 101), which is reflected in the social and existential crisis of the characters. As these novels outline an unexplored part of modernity, Kefala also proposes a decolonial approach, an original interpretation of Arlt's work as a way of understanding avant-gardes in Latin America.

In Chapter 5, "Eutopian City," Kefala analyzes Xul Solar's paintings from the 1930s as well as some excerpts from his book *Los San Signos*. Kefala claims that Solar's work imagined possibilities for the near future instead of offering an escapist outlet, as others like Jorge López Anaya have argued (137). Like Georg Simmel (1903) in his analysis of mental life in the metropolis, the emotional void of the modern city offers a powerful force to explore other ways of transcendental life (Kefala 134). Solar's city (in his

paintings as well as his writing) can be understood as “eutopian” in that it could be a good “realizable” place within the new modern and technological world—something that Arlt, Ferreyra, and Borges rejected in their portrayals of Buenos Aires. Moreover, Solar revolutionized the subject of modernity by highlighting his spiritual life, an aspect often ignored in the industrial and materialistic world.

The last chapter of the book, “Objective City,” examines the photo album *Buenos Aires 1936: Visión fotográfica* (1936) by Horacio Coppola, presenting several portrayals of Buenos Aires and revisiting many aspects of the previous theses. The “Atopian City,” for example, is implied in the picture of a car factory, and the photo depicting a line of cars and commercial buildings from the angle above Diagonal Norte. In other pictures, the rationalist architecture, exaltation of machines and consumerism, and non-places like soccer fields and racetracks, reflect partly Gironde’s poetry and Arlt’s dystopian city (Kefala 166–167). Within some photos, signs of modernity are interrupted by the emergence of elements from the past, like a horse-drawn carriage among cars and trams. This multi-temporality can be interpreted as a *recriollización* of the city center (Kefala 178–179). Certain pictures address urban liminality, like those of Ferreyra and Borges. Following the “return to reality” of New Objectivity from the Bauhaus, some depict industrial neighborhoods like La Boca; others focus on Borges’ casitas on the *orillas*, standing in clear contrast with the tall buildings of the city center. In all cases, Coppola focuses solely on the topography of the city and not on the people, which distinguishes him from Arlt and Ferreyra (Kefala 171–172).

The “Epilogue” of the book recovers and expands upon some of the explorations throughout the book. Kefala analyzes the poems of Alfonsina Storni’s *Mundo de Siete Pozos* (1935), which merges “atopian” and dystopian features already mentioned in Gironde and Arlt, respectively, allowing the possibility of connecting authors beyond avant-garde groups and differing intellectual and political interests. A further analysis of Storni’s poetry (or even *crónicas*) could have been added as a seventh thesis of modernity. Although male writers and artists dominated the cultural sphere of Buenos Aires during the interwar period, the activity of women writers like Storni, who thematize modern urban women’s roles and work with the contradictions of urban modernity (Kefala 191), could have been further analyzed. Nonetheless, despite excluding women authors and artists from her main analysis, Kefala did address women roles in the city throughout the book: first in connection to women’s morality in *Perdón viejita* and then with the depictions of modern women and consumerism in Coppola’s album.

In conclusion, Kefala’s book offers a fresh perspective of modernity in Buenos Aires, focusing on specific figures across the arts, and establishing connections between literature, cinema, and visual arts during the interwar period. In Argentina, the decades between 1920 and 1940 were marked by the first coup d’état and the consequences of the Great Depression. These two events, which heralded the failure of democratic and capitalist projects alike, frame the conception of modernity as a struggle of the subject between integration or displacement within society, as many of Kefala’s analyses suggested. A more in-depth analysis of women and their place in Buenos Aires during this time could have further enriched the book.

Positioning the city of Buenos Aires as a contested concept of multiple temporalities and spatialities demonstrates not only the “implications” between the city and modernity (Sarlo 8), but also the instability of both, even when the authors refer to similar material spaces. The five and a half theses presented in Kefala’s book mirror the openness and complexity of Buenos Aires that, alongside theoretical framework regarding modernity, permit a broader dialogue about urban modernity in Latin America.

WORKS CITED

Sarlo, Beatriz. *Borges, un escritor en las orillas*. Siglo XXI, 2007