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# Controlling Contagion: The Threat of the Madman from Outer Space

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## **Controlling Contagion: The Threat of the Madman from Outer Space**

*Megan Corbin*

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* qtd. in Ingebretsen xi

To make a human being feel like a freak: isn't that a very refined, a sophisticated, form of repression?

-Elena Poniatowska, "Conference Presentation" 219

### **Madness as Monster: The Threat of Contagion**

Madness is a powerful political tool, time and again exercised as a productive means to discredit the opposition, to silence and absence "undesirable" opinions and voices. Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* traces the derivation of the modern psychiatric hospital from an initial intent to separate abnormal and therefore undesirable individuals from society at large, first by casting the mad out to sea (the ships of fools), and later by lumping them into the impoverished masses of the Parisian poorhouses. Yet the figure of the madman itself plays a crucial role in society. It serves as a delineating point

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against which are defined Self and Other, citizen and non-citizen, desirable and demonized.

Hugo Vezzetti traces the roots of the concept of madness in Argentina to nineteenth-century concerns over immigration and the emergence of medical discourse (*La locura*). The emergence of a rhetoric that sought to identify the Other in Argentina—first, those associated with barbarism (*barbarie*) and second, the immigrant—occurred alongside the development of discourses that mark this Other with a faulty biological/psychic makeup that needed to be contained and/or controlled.<sup>1</sup> Like Vezzetti, Mariano Plotkin traces the emergence of psychiatry in Argentina to previous theories of positivism, hygienism, and degeneracy theory, asserting that by the beginning of the twentieth century, the belief that uncontrolled immigration would degrade the country meant that the “image of the ‘crazy immigrant’ became an important element in the Argentine popular imagination during the first decades of the century” (16). The creation and dissemination of such discourses fomented a homogenous view of society, using the identification of the “abnormal” as a means of negatively defining an “hombre nuevo” (34) (new man) and a “nuevo sujeto social y moral” (34) (new social and moral subject) through models of what one ought not to be. With the crisis of positivism came a new combination of previous eugenics and new psychiatric practices: biotypology and psychobiology bridged the gap between the body and the psyche and served as precursors to the eventual combination of psychoanalysis with criminology and degeneracy theory, which would be ushered into Argentina by Juan Ramón Beltrán in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> As Plotkin notes, for leftists, emerging theories of psychoanalysis presented a renovation of previous structures of psychiatry (mainly revolving around the madhouse), while for right-leaning thinkers, psychoanalysis needed to be repressed and revamped, in order to be put to use as an “instrument of social control” (32), productively employed to demonize certain sectors of the population in an effort to mold the citizenry to specific models of “acceptable” comportment.

All of the above signals the historical entanglement of political motivations, medical discourses, and attempts to control the state population—a situation in which the program to both define and contain madness dialogues with agendas that seek population control for other (oftentimes political) reasons. The process ultimately rests on the creation of social norms, on monster-making, for, as Stephen Asma argues “the monster is more than an odious creature of the imagination; it is a kind of *cultural category*, employed in domains as diverse as religion, biology, literature, and politics” (13). The overlap between mental health practices, political agendas, monster-making, and exclusionary attitudes based in the rhetoric of fear creates an exclusionary model that results in the incarceration and forced control of those transgressive beings identified as “mad.”

In an attempt to understand the underpinnings of this process of exclusion, Foucault interrogates the reasoning that underlies the confinement of the mad and begs the question of whether a society which actively polices and incarcerates on the basis of biology, a mere “bad” luck of the genetic (psychic? ethnic?) draw, itself can be deemed reasonable/rational: “Subject and object, image and goal of repression, symbol of its blind arbitrariness and justification of all that could be reasonable and deserved within it: by a paradoxical circle, madness finally appears as the only reason for a confinement whose profound unreason it symbolizes” (227). Yet, this “unreasonable” incarceration of the madman (on the sole basis of his/her being mad) would continue to inform projects that attempted to define society (Self) against what it ought not to be (Other). Foucault follows the strategy of excluding the abnormal from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century, and notes a shift from exclusion to vigilant control and monitoring, thus producing a secondary effect of repression (*Abnormal* xxi).

This shift, from exclusion to vigilant control of the Other, is echoed in the discourses that mark nineteenth-century political policies in Argentina, not only in the way psychiatry is taken up as a discourse of containment, but in its entanglement with more blatant political policies that pave the way for the emergence of the fascist nation state in the late-twentieth century. Federico Finchelstein notes a continuity between the fascism characteristic of the Argentine military junta’s government (1976–1983) and the early period of the twentieth century of Argentina (also, to some extent, the nineteenth century), arguing that the nationalist character that emerged during the previous period simply came to a culmination in the fascism of the dictatorship; the junta was not an ellipsis in Argentine politics, but an amplification of already existing tendencies.<sup>3</sup> Finchelstein’s observations help to understand the trajectory of the discourse around madness detailed above, tracing a direct line between the projects of containment based around immigration and those that sought to control political dissidence.<sup>4</sup>

In considering the so-called *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process for National Reorganization) undertaken by the military junta in Argentina in 1976, a project predicated on a need to quell disorder and unrest in the nation state, one observes the immediate application of the process of monster-making based on fear in the creation of “normality” and “abnormality” in citizen behavior, alongside the violent absenting of those who deviated from such prescriptions.<sup>5</sup> Thus, during this period, citizens remained under the watchful gaze of the military regime and were vigilant about their own behaviors, carefully scripting them in accordance with state expectations in a desire to avoid detention, or, as would later come to be known, disappearance.

Yet, certain sectors of society rebelled within this system, intentionally choosing to behave against the prescribed norms of the state. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo)—a group of activist

women all of whom had lost a child to the state's project of normalization of the citizenry—are one of the most recognized forces that openly demonstrated against the *Proceso's* government. Termed “locas” (madwomen), the Madres broke with the traditional proscribed behavior for their gender. By moving from the private space of the home out into the public space of the plaza, and breaking the appropriate silence of the doting mother in their protests, the Madres disobeyed proscribed gender roles and worked to provoke State response.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, the State employed the rhetoric of madness as a means by which to contain, discredit, and ultimately dismiss the Madres' actions as inconsequential, the ramblings of indecent madwomen (*locas*) who ought to stop being so uppity and go back to their rightful place in the home. This label of madness thus continued the age-old process of creating and demonizing difference in order to decrease the legitimacy of the Other (the opposition) and reinforce the power of the Self (the State). The dictatorship's employ of madness was meant to demonize and control the political opposition, a way of disempowering groups “by marginalizing them, oppressing them, or even eliminating them altogether” (Hubert 1). Engaging the long-standing relationship between madness and undesirability, the junta re-labeled the Madres “Las Locas de Plaza de Mayo” (The Madwomen of the Plaza de Mayo).<sup>7</sup> Yet madness proved to be one area in which the junta's totalitarian exercise of power fell short. As Diana Taylor remarks, “although the junta tried to dismiss the Madres as *locas*, they realized they had to get rid of them” (187) because the Madres had “succeeded in seriously damaging the junta's legitimacy and credibility” (189).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, an early documentation of the Madres's plight by Jean-Pierre Bosquet packages the group's story as *Las Locas de la Plaza de Mayo*, using the dictatorship's rhetoric to venerate the activists, rather than to discredit them.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, madness was at once a tactic of control for the dictatorship and the complete undermining of that control.

To further examine the strategic employ of madness, I turn to Eliseo Subiela's film *Hombre mirando al sudeste* (Man Facing Southeast) and its portrayal of a man who is either mad (a paranoid schizophrenic) or a misunderstood alien from another planet, but whose body/psyche are suspect enough to be cast as a threatening foreign presence that does not and cannot belong to Argentine society at large. The film, when read as an allegorical depiction of the ongoing threat posed by the political dissident, demonstrates the power of madness to work both for and against the systematic exclusion of certain voices. By showing the relatively benign nature of the identified “threat” posed by one madman both inside and outside the walls of a psychiatric facility, the film poses the question to the viewer of whether such repressive, monster-making containment mechanisms, predicated on extreme reason, are actually themselves the embodiment of the very lack of reason.

## The Madman from Outer Space: A Not-So-Fictional Sci-Fi Film

The Argentine film *Hombre mirando al sudeste* (Man Facing Southeast) presents the story of Rantés and his mysterious appearance in a psychiatric hospital.<sup>10</sup> Rantés claims to be a man from outer space, an assertion that underlies the film's vacillation between the rational and the irrational, the "real" story of a paranoid/delusional schizophrenic or the "surreal" science fictional tale of a man who can control objects with his mind. The film's ambiguities, along with its plurality of readings, have prompted critics such as David William Foster to observe that while employing the genre of science fiction in a "systematic subversion of dominant ideologies" (80) the film avoids fixity in its representation of a radical individual, an outcast from society, and denounces this making alien/casting out.<sup>11</sup> For Foster, the film's ambiguities—it's "ideological indecisiveness" (89)—serve to universalize its message, denouncing not only the specific repression faced during the immediate political past (the Argentine Process of National Reorganization), but a general atmosphere of dehumanizing oppression, the "issues relating to the substance of human life" that "extend far beyond the superficial play of political power" (87).<sup>12</sup>

My reading of the film agrees with Foster in the sense that the film's denunciation of repression is relatable to multiple contexts. One can read it literally as an exploration of the lack of societal acceptance toward (as well as the need for control over) those who exhibit "abnormal" psychic states, or one could read it as a denunciation of the capitalist endeavor that stifles individual creativity, or even as the vigilance of the political state in the disempowerment of its citizens. For the purposes of this essay, I read the film as an allegory for the specific context of the Argentine post-dictatorship and the transition to democracy, in large part due to abundant visual and narrative cues that evoke the specificities of the mistreatments endured by citizens during the period of the so-called *Proceso*. Indeed, critiques of the film for its supposed reductive rendering of the complexities that marked the last Argentine military dictatorship reveal that the palpable connection between the film and the transition period was pointedly observed by some audiences.<sup>13</sup> Along these lines, scholars such as Everett Hamner and Geoffrey Kantaris see a clear connection between Subiela's sci-fi tale of a man from outer space and the transitional atmosphere during which the film was produced, a moment in which Argentine society was attempting to work through the repressive and violent legacy of the military regime.<sup>14</sup>

In the film, the nexus between the story of Rantés and the story of the violence of the dictatorship is established from Rantés's first introduction to the viewer in a mock interrogation scene between victim and victimizer. Rantés's initial meeting with Dr. Denis, a psychiatrist, occurs after the

viewer has been introduced to the hospital via a series of dark hallways and doorframes through which can be seen various patients. In the opening sequences of the film, a patient narrates his trauma (a failed suicide pact with his girlfriend, in which he survives and she dies), a confession juxtaposed with images of two people kissing while wearing hoods (a reference to René Magritte's *The Lovers*). For an Argentine audience just emerging from the junta's government this object has clear resonances with the hoods used to clandestinely move prisoners from one place to another, or to maintain secrecy within the scene of torture and the detention center. The man's story holds an equally haunting legacy of doubt, a self-incriminating, lingering guilt as to why one person lived, while another died. These initial destabilizing scenes immediately cue the informed viewer to the period of the dictatorship and condition the interpretation of the early "interview" scene between Rantés, the recently arrived patient to the hospital, and the psychiatrist Dr. Denis. The doctor's attempts to discover the identity of Rantés and the latter's subsequent dodging/refusal of Dr. Denis's questions recall the exchange between prisoner and interrogator, thus anchoring the film within the issues that preoccupy the post-dictatorship.

The suspicion with which Dr. Denis confronts Rantés parallels the suspicion the interrogator exhibited toward the detainee. The doctor suspects that Rantés has done something wrong and wants to use the hospital as a hiding place (and for this reason is feigning psychosis) because, "Quién lo va a buscar aquí?" (Who would look for him here?). Denis proceeds to try to convince Rantés to tell him the "truth":

DENIS: Estamos solo, no somos policías . . . Mire, a mí no me interesa lo que Usted ha hecho, pero no me va a perder el tiempo. Si se queda voy a tener que pedir sus antecedentes a la policía.

RANTÉS: ¿Sabes lo que es la mejor manera de proteger mi misión? Decí la verdad. ¿Quién va a creerla? Y ¿sabes qué es el mejor lugar para decir la verdad? Éste. Si lo digo afuera, ¿qué pasaría? Me traerían aquí. En unos días estaría otra vez enfrente de ustedes diciendo las mismas cosas que estoy diciendo ahora.

DENIS: Si mañana por la mañana usted es desaparecido nadie va a decir nada. Ahora, si se queda, ¿sabe lo que le espera?

RANTÉS: Conozco los métodos. Todos los métodos que usan ustedes los humanos.

(DENIS: We're alone, we are not policemen . . . Look, I am not interested in what you have done, but I'm not going to waste my time. If you stay I will have to ask the police to do a background check on you.

RANTÉS: Do you know what the best way to protect my mission is? By telling the truth. Who would believe it? And, do you know where the best place to tell the truth is? This place. If I said it outside, what would

happen? They would bring me here. In a few days I would again be in front of all of you saying the same things I'm saying right now.

DENIS: If tomorrow morning you were to disappear nobody would say anything. Now, if you stay, do you know what you're in store for?

RANTÉS: I know the methods. All of the methods that you humans use.)

Gustavo Verdesio reads this scene as a decisive moment in determining the genre of the film, arguing that it poses to the viewer a moment in which s/he (along with Dr. Denis) must make a decision about Rantés: “O es un paranoico delirante (en cuyo caso necesitaría sus servicios) o es un delincuente buscando escapar de la policia” (155) (Either he is a paranoid schizophrenic [in which case he would need his services] or he is a delinquent looking to escape from the police). Following Verdesio's logic, I posit that this is also the decisive moment for the allegorical reading of the film—the moment when one can either choose to read the allegory in a universal light or within the specific context of the Argentine post-dictatorship. The conversation that occurs between Dr. Denis and Rantés is easily read as a reconstruction of the interrogation scene: the doctor highlights that should Rantés speak he would not get into trouble, but threatens that if he doesn't speak the doctor will have to take action (“investigate”). When Rantés continues to insist that he is already telling the truth, and that saying more would undermine his mission, the doctor mentions (threatens) disappearance and that nobody would be the wiser should it happen to Rantés.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the doctor signals to Rantés that should he remain in the facility, he should know about the “methods” they use, a choice of terminology that is easily understood as a veiled reference to the use of torture to elicit the ‘truth’ in a similar facility—the clandestine detention center. Lastly, at the end of this interaction, Rantés exits the room and Dr. Denis directs the nurse to continue to list him as “N.N.” on her registrar, a clear labeling of Rantés with the terminology used to officially document the unidentified remains of the disappeared.

Rantés, in his early interactions with Dr. Denis, warns that the doctor may find that Rantés's fingerprints correspond with those of a dead man, but that this is to be explained by the fact that Rantés is a holographic projection, containing all the information necessary to appear to be alive, save for the fact that he is unable to feel emotion. The listing of Rantés as “N.N.”—the same identification used to mark the graves of the disappeared—as well as his possible status as the holographic projection of a dead person, further underlines the interpretation of Rantés's story in light of the detention center's lasting impact. Rantés's alien holographic projection can be read as the projection from the past to the present, dramatizing the destabilizing impact of the disappeared person's story/truth. Everett Hamner analyzes this connection between the dead and the living in his reading of the film's

intertextual dialogue with Adolfo Bioy Casares's *La invención de Morel*, beginning his analysis with a line from the story that reads, "Los muertos siguen entre los vivos" (60) (The dead remain among the living).

Scholarship on the film notes that the intertextual dialogue between Bioy Casares's novel and *Hombre mirando al sudeste* locates the work within the genre of science fiction. For Carol Schwartz Ellis this connection is important because "generic films can act as powerful purveyors of myth. These films serve as repositories and reminders of our deepest concerns" (146). Such concerns in *Hombre mirando al sudeste*, as explored by Geoffrey Kantaris, include an examination of "the effects of censorship, silence, self-denial, and the atmosphere of denunciation and conformity of the period [of the post-dictatorship]" (160) through the employ of psychic metaphors. The fine line walked by Rantés, as a "re-appeared" political subversive, as a non-conformative member of society, but also in the dual role of the "mad" or "alien" subject, employs the suspect nature of madness in a destabilizing manner, ultimately casting into doubt (or maybe even denouncing) the rationality of the project of the *Proceso* and its inhumane (mad? monstrous?) tactics for homogenizing and controlling Argentine society. Stephen Harper remarks that "madness is best understood in relation to its social, political and economic contexts rather than the medical model of 'mental illness'" (1). Subiela's film dialogues with the political context of the time in its subversion of the use of a rhetoric of madness used to silence oppositional voices. It places Rantés in the space of the "madhouse" and carefully crafts his message as the only one that truly responds rationally (and compassionately) to his fellow marginalized human beings. Rantés's questioning voice dialogues with those who sought to change society during the dictatorship, defending the marginalized in an attempt to combat the unfeeling status quo, and brings those voices into the present of the Transition. The subdued violence of the film's reaction to Rantés's refusal to enter on his own into the "rational" world turns the question of ethics back on the viewing public (seeing the film from the temporality of the post-dictatorship), forcing the viewer to confront the ramifications of the process of monster-making and to decide for him/herself the moral implications of the story, and by extension, of the demons of the recent past.

### **Policing the Monster: The Threat of the Abnormal Psyche**

*Hombre mirando al sudeste* foregrounds the relationship between Self and Other in its policing of Rantés's behavior and its attempt to "cure" him of his abnormalities. Contrary to the *Proceso*'s political program, predicated on extreme order and control, the mad body/subject is an abject biological corporality whose bounds exceed neat, sterile attempts at containment. As

such, it is easily scripted as a destabilizing and threatening presence in both the dictatorship and the subsequent transition period that follows. Contrary to upholding demonization, the figure of madness in *Hombre mirando al sudeste* challenges the status quo of the past in its highlighting of the failure and futility of attempts at totalitarian control. In the film, Rantés's uncontrollable behavior reveals the ultimate irrationality and futility of the fascist desire to exercise complete control over the citizenry; Rantés's rebellion is contagious, sits outside of the control of the facility, and ultimately (even after his death) maintains a destabilizing spectral presence that neither the doctors nor the oppressive structure of the hospital can fully disappear.

The threat posed by Rantés is evident prior to his introduction on screen, in Dr. Denis's bewildered realization that his ward suddenly contains thirty-three patients, one more than the number that appears on its registry.<sup>16</sup> A patient informs the doctor that he must not worry, that Rantés "es un hombre muy bueno y viene de muy lejos" (is a very good man and comes from very far away). Such a comment, coupled with the next scene in which the viewer first sees Rantés while he is masterfully playing the organ in a chapel, has resonances with the messianic, with a force that appears out of nowhere and will forever change the people he touches.

Rantés's first sign of rebellious behavior is his refusal to swallow the tranquilizer pill a nurse administers to him on his first night at the hospital. This defiance is repeated in subsequent nights, during one of which Rantés first secretly refuses the pill, then physically "escapes" the confines of the hospital. To orchestrate his escape, Rantés moves the guard's radio with his mind, making it fall to the floor and thus distracting the guard long enough for Rantés to slip by and out of the hospital. This revelation of evidence of Rantés's abnormality (his ability to move objects with his mind) conditions the viewer's interpretation of the film. It poses the question of whether Rantés *really is* from another planet and gives evidence that suggests the viewer accept as truth that Rantés is an alien from outer space, placing the viewer within the realm of the irrational. (For how can one accept that aliens exist? It would be madness to do so!) At the same time, Rantés's supernatural/extraterrestrial ability to move objects with his mind places all attempts to subdue his "alien fantasy" through containment within the realm of the irrational. Both the pill and the guarded structure of the hospital are useless to contain Rantés's actions; he effortlessly evades the rationally designed impediments to facilitate his escape.

Rantés's interior rebellion against reason is outwardly manifested on the walls of the hospital, marking them with the messages that are transmitted to him, alien symbols that remain outside the realm of our semantic intelligibility. Nevertheless, the writings influence the other patients of the hospital who contemplate the symbols in the courtyard where Rantés habitually stands facing southeast, the direction from which the messages

arrive via “transmission” directly to Rantés’s brain. As his influence grows, the other patients blindly follow him on his walks, revealing the growing contagion he introduces into the hospital.

Rantés’s influence spreads beyond the borders of the hospital as well. On one of his excursions out of the hospital, Rantés visits a diner. At the counter, directly across from him, sits a woman with her three young children. The filth on their clothes, the disorder of their appearance, and the fact that the only food they are eating is bread reveals the poverty in which this small family lives. Rantés recognizes the unjustness of the situation in which these four (ostensibly vulnerable and marginalized) members of society go hungry, while other patrons (visibly affluent and definitively not starving) opulently order steak (*un bife*) and rights the situation. What is most marked about Rantés’s actions is their effortless ease; he remains completely silent and largely immobile, using just his eyes to move the steak that comes up from the kitchen down the length of the counter to where the woman sits with her children. Next, his gaze moves another steak to them from beneath a man’s fork (the man can’t see the steak move away as he is reading a newspaper while he eats). Then, a plate of grapes and the utensils necessary to consume the meat. The woman and Rantés are the only ones aware of what is happening. That this is true in the setting of a busy diner emphasizes the threat of contagion posed by Rantés; the objects move without Rantés’s touch, the power of his gaze amplifying his sphere of influence. After the woman and her children eat a few bites of the feast, the cook and the waiter realize that the steak has gone missing. Using his unique power, Rantés creates a distraction, tumbling a shelf of glassware onto the floor and he motions with his eyes that the woman should quickly leave the diner. In a Robin Hood-esque move, neither Rantés nor the woman are caught nor punished for their illegal actions (they are stealing, after all). This scene creates trouble for the viewer who would hope to dismiss Rantés’s alien monstrosity as a negative presence, as Rantés (scripted as a Christ-like father figure) is simply recognizing a social injustice and working to right it.

The actions in the diner make material the threat posed by the ideological stance Rantés espouses throughout the film: that humankind’s “rules” are irrational and that each situation has a clear rational (moral) response. Because Rantés’s actions seem so logical—if someone is hungry, you give him/her food to eat—it is difficult to dismiss his madness as such. The casting of such distinctions between interiority/exteriority, psyche/body, mad/sane, rational/irrational in nondistinctive shades of gray emphasizes the contagious threat posed by Rantés and reflects the rhetoric of fear that cast doubt on the subject during the dictatorship and still conditions a population grappling with how to transition back to democracy. Such an ideological stance goes against the dog-eat-dog realities of a capitalist world, and better aligns with the discourse of the resistance during the dictatorship than with the established order. As Pablo Arredondo notes,

En el film, el estado de locura se aprecia no como una enfermedad, sino el resultado de una diferente visión de la realidad. La ‘verdad’ expresada por Rantés desenmascara las contradicciones de la modernidad. Es la reacción contra la palabra ‘oficial,’ culturalmente hablando, que transforma al hombre por caminos de cordura y sumisión. (128)

(In the film, the state of madness is appreciated not as a disease, but as the result of a different vision of reality. The ‘truth’ expressed by Rantés unmasks the contradictions of modernity. It is the reaction against the official word, culturally speaking, that transforms the man by way of sanity and submission).

Arredondo’s comments parallel the threat posed to the Junta by those that espoused a different political ideology. The contagion posed by Rantés, his uncontrollable/unintelligible psyche—which has the power to effect real corporal actions, even sans body movement—is a threat that must be neutralized in order for the status quo to remain in place. This threat reaches its culmination at the end of the film, when Rantés and Dr. Denis attend a symphony and even the “sane” community at large is affected by Rantés’s contagious “rational” responses/rebellions.

At a performance by the Philharmonic, Rantés breaks the norm of quiet, contemplative observance of the orchestra by standing in the middle of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and inviting his and the doctor’s companion, Beatriz, to dance.<sup>17</sup> The couple’s dancing proves infectious as others also join. Rantés’s non-normative behavior thus spreads as a contagion through the audience, revealing how the actions of non-normative beings pose a threat to even the most discerning social sectors. The scene pushes the envelope further when Rantés steps onto the stage, stops the performance, and takes the conductor’s baton. At first resistant to follow the cues of this new leader, the orchestra refuses to play for Rantés’s, until finally, on the third attempt, they give in to his authority. Concurrent to the rebellion on stage, one is brewing inside the confines of the mental institute. While Rantés conducts the symphony, his influence on the other patients in the hospital proves volatile as they conduct a rebellion of their own (or, perhaps, Rantés himself leads the rebellion in the hospital from the space of the stage—his power, after all, lies in his mind and he is, quite literally, *conducting*). Rantés thus achieves a major destabilizing impact on society simultaneously interior to the hospital and exterior to it. It is an influence that cannot go unchecked. Both rebellions provoke subdual. Rantés is removed from the stage by security and the inpatients are met with police presence at the gates of the hospital, forcibly detained in the hospital by large, ominous iron bars. It is the beginning of a series of actions that will seek to neutralize the effect Rantés has had during his stay at the institution,

but it is an effort that will prove incomplete, even after Rantés's death/disappearance from the mental hospital.

### **Neutralizing the Threat, Facing “Southeast”**

Rantés's threat to the established order requires and is met with subdual. The flourishing presence of Rantés in the asylum enters near immediate demise (he is forcibly medicated and enters a comatose state, eventually dying), demonstrating that non-normative beings are cast out of society and left (or forced) to die. The day after Rantés's rebellion at the concert (and the patients' rebellion at the hospital), the local newspapers headlines read “Un verdadero concierto de locos” (A Real Concert of Crazy-men), “Demente dirige concierto: Dirigió un concierto de la filarmónica” (Demented Man Directs Concert: He Conducted a Concert of the Philharmonic), and “Emulo de Toscanini fugado de hospicio” (An Emulator of Toscanini Escapes from Hospice Care): all very public messages that provoke the director of the hospital to intervene in Dr. Denis's treatment of Rantés. The director accuses Dr. Denis of straying from protocol in his care for Rantés (of straying too far from the rational explanation that Rantés is a madman and must be treated as such) and instructs the doctor that he must immediately begin to forcibly medicate the patient, for the actions he exhibited at the concert were simply unacceptable. In a top-down move, leadership reestablishes order and works quickly to contain the threat.

Rantés's death is gradual, first marked by his loss of the ability to transmit and receive messages from the southeast. His rebellion becomes less focused on improving humanity and arguably more selfish in nature: he stages a protest against the food in the hospital, demanding that it be of better quality, where earlier in the film he was content with the same food, and was shown passing portions of his share to other patients who were hungrier than he (the change evidences a shift from a focus on the sustenance of food to the quality of its taste). Slowly, Rantés's ideological stance fades away and he dissolves into a comatose state. His gaze, once his source of power, becomes vacant and not even his friend Beatriz's intervention can save him. She pleads with Dr. Denis to save Rantés, but the doctor cannot (or will not) stop the forced medication—a critique of the mob-mentality that often accompanies monster-making. Rantés quickly dies (off screen) and his “disappearance . . . is as mysterious as his original appearance” (Foster 86). Foster astutely notes “it is as though whatever project Rantés was supposed to be a harbinger of has been discovered to be dimly futile in a contemporary society” (86). Rantés's mysterious death once again harkens to the sudden and still unclear disappearances during the dictatorship. The non-viability of his rational message of attending to the

needs of all, no matter their economic circumstances, resonates with the eradication of the socialist/communist/Marxist project.

Yet, in the wake of Rantés's death, the other patients of the hospital remain affected by his past presence. The contaminant of the madman's ideological view of rational, kind treatment continues in the wake of his disappearance, revealing the residual remainder that the authorities of the hospital cannot make disappear along with Rantés's bodily existence. This ongoing presence is made apparent by the patients themselves, who arrange themselves in a circle in the courtyard, and stand, in the same space in which Rantés stood, waiting for his return. The waiting makes his absence ever-present and conjures his past effects, his message, forth on screen. Observing this ongoing effect, along with his mysterious appearance and disappearance, Schwartz Ellis characterizes Rantés as a "sky god," which she defines as

Those who come to Earth to participate in the creation and then withdraw to become *dei otosi*, absent gods . . . Unlike angels, who are not originally from Earth but return there frequently to help individuals, sky gods are mysterious and remote beings whose Earthly appearances are associated with times of cosmic creation or collective crisis. (148–49)

Rantés's appearance, then, coinciding with a time of collective crisis in which Argentine society is working through past traumas and re-visioning the nation state in a transition to democracy, serves to question the principles that the viewers will enact to order the new period. If "monstrous bodies are the remarkable presences that appear as signs of civic omen, or trauma, and which demand interpretation" (Ingebretsen xvi), then the appearance and treatment of Rantés in the film, as either a madman or an alien, but always as a being who must be "figured out," or "cured," but, never—as Rantés would like to have happen—simply understood and accepted, is a "monster" that requires thoughtful examination by an audience who, in their own lives, are attempting to reconstruct a democratic society, freed from the authoritarian repression of the immediate past.

The trajectory of Rantés's story in the film offers a critique of the rationality of "sane" society, of the side of society that relies on the control of social normativity to dictate acceptable behavior. Rantés's character cannot feel, yet his behavior is informed by a sense of compassion immediately recognized by his fellow inpatients, reflected in the instant bond he creates with them. Such unbending compassion positions Rantés as a messianic god whose legacy remains palpable post-mortem and directly personifies the junta's fear that communist atheism would subvert the church's power: "Según la mirada ideológica nacionalista, en la Argentina se jugaba una lucha milenaria entre comunismo y cristianismo" (Finchelstein

175) (According to the nationalist ideological view, in Argentina the millennial fight being played out was between communism and Christianity). Rantés, not a member of the clergy, exposes a humanism that is informed by Christian ideals, but remains secular in nature. The diffusion of his ideals out into the community, represented by the cult following that develops on screen with the other patients in the hospital, demonstrates the ultimate futility, and fundamental irrationality, of attempts to quell Rantés's ideological contagion.<sup>18</sup> Schwartz Ellis notes that "Rantés has forever changed the lives of the mental patients. As Dr. Denis says, 'The patients didn't accept Rantés's death. They said he had gone but that he would return in a spaceship. They would be there, waiting'" (149). Just as Rantés stood countless hours in the courtyard of the hospital waiting for transmissions to arrive from the southeast, the patients now stand in a circle, waiting for Rantés's (the disappeared's?) return and the authorities of the hospital, wanting to move on, can only stand by, silently watching.

Foster notes that the "southeast" toward which Rantés faces perhaps marks a future cultural sphere of reference, a "utopia within the southeastern quadrant to be effected at some point in the future—say, perhaps with the definitive installation of a postfascist society" (89). The reason Rantes faces southeast is never fully explained in the film, but remains a point of interest for not only Dr. Denis, but the audience as well:

DENIS: Mira siempre al mismo lado. Se orienta siempre en la misma dirección. Entre el estanque de agua y el Pabellón seis. ¿Qué dirección es?  
 MÉDICO: ¿Dónde está el norte? Allá (señala).  
 DENIS: Entonces, él se pone hacia el sur. Sur. Sudeste . . . ¿no?  
 MÉDICO: Sí, sudeste.  
 DENIS: Sudeste. Y, ¿por qué no suroeste? ¿o norte? Sudeste.  
 MÉDICO: Y él, ¿qué dice?  
 DENIS: Que recibe y transmite información. Sea lo que sea, en esa línea debe haber algo que tiene que ver con su pasado.

(DENIS: He always looks to the same side. He orients himself always in the same direction. Between the water tank and Pavilion number six. What direction is that?  
 DOCTOR: Where is north? There.  
 DENIS: Then, he points himself towards the south. South. Southeast. Right?  
 DOCTOR: Yes, southeast.  
 DENIS: Southeast. And, why not southwest? Or north? Southeast.  
 DOCTOR: What does he say?  
 DENIS: That he receives and transmits information. Whatever it may be, in that line there must be something that has to do with his past.)

During the film, Dr. Denis asks Rantés about his past, about where he is from, where he was born. Rantés, remaining consistent in his madness, answers by saying that there is no data available about his past (signaling a limit to the programming that designed his holographic projection) and informs the doctor that his past can never be understood, for he will never be able to put that past into terms that the doctor will be able to recognize. Rantés's past is not humankind's past: "Usted es mi pasado, este momento, este mundo" (You are my past, this moment, this world). Dr. Denis responds by telling Rantés that he simply wants to cure him, to which Rantés replies "Yo no quiero que me cure, quiero que me entienda" (I don't want you to cure me, I want you to understand me). Yet, Rantés knows that the doctor will never understand him. He later tells the doctor that there are other people like him, other Rantés's in other *manicomios* (nuthouses), having the same conversations that he is having with the doctor. He asks the doctor to investigate it and gives him contacts in other countries who could verify it, but ends the conversation saying he knows that the doctor will never verify it because "es más allá de los límites de la realidad que ustedes están dispuestos a aceptar" (it is beyond the limits of the reality that all of you are ready to accept). Rantés declares that his positioning within the nuthouse allows him to tell the doctor that his people are planning a rescue, "el rescate de las víctimas, de los que no pudieron vivir en el medio del espanto. De los quebrados por el horror. De los que ya no tienen nada de esperar" (the rescue of the victims, of those who cannot live amidst terror. Of those who tremor from the horror. Of those who no longer have hope).

Edward J. Ingebretsen remarks that "history suggests that monsters are made as often as born; in physical and symbolic ways they carry the stigmata of civic discredit" (7). The film *Hombre mirando al sudeste* demonstrates the disastrous effects of the process of demonizing (and disappearing) the Other and waits for another, more egalitarian discourse's arrival.<sup>19</sup> Accepting Rantés's truth, understanding it, is to accept a version of reality, rationality, and the "normal" that revises the hegemonic and exclusionary one markedly present from (if we follow Vezzetti, Plotkin, and Finchelstein) the positivist discourses of the nineteenth-century nation-building projects on into the period of the military juntas. It is an alternate truth that liberates madness from former norms of containment, that integrates it into society, and that breaks boundaries accepting that an individual that professes he is from another planet does not deserve to be confined (and ultimately sentenced to death) for so doing.

This utopia, this message of universal acceptance that lies far off in the southeast is perhaps trickling slowly towards the city, palpable in small changes in the view towards the *loco* in Buenos Aires. In 1991 the noncommercial radio station *LT22 Radio La Colifata* (LT22 Crazy Woman Radio) was founded by Alfredo Olivera, a doctor at El Borda hospital who

had begun tape-recording his patients' thoughts. The voices of the "mad" patients of El Borda, so closed off and silenced in *Hombre mirando al sudeste*, now float across the airwaves of the city each Saturday in the afternoon. A 2007 documentary film bears the name of the radio station and examines what its existence means for both the patients at El Borda and the citizens of Buenos Aires. One patient featured in the film speaks about how once one enters the hospital one loses his/her voice; how the effects of medication and sedation turn people into ambulating mummies: "Sos una momia andante" (*LT 22 Radio "La Colifata"*) (You're a walking mummy). This woman, speaking to a camera, testifying to the controlling effects of the medicine that dulls her senses, is ostensibly Rantés, yet her voice here is heard, recognized, and projected out into the community via radio, thus defying the containment that silenced the madman/alien in the film.

The documentary recounts the community's reaction to the first radio programs, which transmitted the musings of a small group of the hospital's patients, and then invited questions from the community via phone calls. The response from the community was a changed assessment of just who the patients of the hospital were, no longer feared as ostensibly violent beings who "posed a threat" to the community. In other words, the perspective at large was no longer a purely negative one. Radio "La Colifata" is a commonly referenced station, and the non-conformist thoughts of the patients reach a listening public of not only Argentina, but presumably the world via cyber-broadcasting over the internet.<sup>20</sup>

Frank Cawson posits that monsters "are images of the archetype of fear that lies deep in the unconscious" (157). Once known, this fear dissipates and with it the monstrosity of the monster itself. Once the voices from the radio filter out into the city, explain themselves with their own altered logic, the public's reaction changes. During the Saturday programs, citizens call in to the station and the "mad" answer their questions (placing the "mad" in the position of authority, deferring to their answers). A dialogue has begun and it undermines the use of "madness" and "monstrosity" as an ominous form of social control. Remarking on the efficacy of the radio program, the director of Radio La Colifata stated:

Además, no solo ayudaba a que el hombre común empiece a cambiar un poco o preguntarse al respecto de la visión y la actitud que tenía con aquello a que llamamos 'locura' sino que también fui viendo que las personas que eran protagonistas de estos hechos que tenían que volver a hablar en nombre propio tenía también como efecto la mejora de vida de los pacientes propios. (*LT 22 Radio "La Colifata"*)

(Additionally, it not only helped the common person to begin to change a bit or to question him/herself in terms of the vision or attitude that s/he had with that which we call "madness," but, I also kept seeing that the

people that were the protagonists of these events that continued to speak for themselves in their own names also had the positive effect of bettering the life of the patients themselves.)

Rantés's "rational" message, a challenge to the maintenance of the "irrational" status quo, was perhaps a call to action for the Argentine post-dictatorship, challenging society to reflect not only on how to avoid the repression of political ideologies (thus learning from the experience of the disappeared), but also to consider how marginalized, "monstrous," and "Other" identities, could be included in a post-transitional democratic society. The opening of El Borda out into the community via LT22 Radio "La Colifata" created a dialogue that dissipates the very fear that gave power to the discursive use of madness to repress dissident voices and identities. Perhaps now the rescue promised by Rantés, coming from the utopia far off to the southeast can begin its journey. Perhaps Rantés's cryptic symbols can begin to be deciphered, acknowledging that, contrary to the discourses of the past—as one patient in El Borda puts it—"los locos no son tan locos" (*LT 22 Radio "La Colifata"*) (the mad are not all that mad). Simple, but infinitely wise words that interrogate the rationality of politics predicated on order and containment, words that ask us to ponder whether those labeled monstrous, not needing to be cured, but simply understood, in the end are not all that monstrous either.

## Notes

1. Arguably, the move from the barbaric (presumably the lack of thought before action, an "irrational" enjoyment of violence and "insane" lack of regard for human life) to the mad conceptually is a very small step.
2. The difference between psychoanalysis and psychiatry in Plotkin's study is largely marked by the emergence of Freud's writings, which underscored an introspective analysis of the psyche rather than the institutional basis and somatic treatments characteristic of psychiatry at the time.
3. "Esta combinación entre liberalismo económico y nacionalismo con *pedigree* fascista en lo político promovió una represión social sin precedente" (Finchelstein 150) (This combination between economic liberalism and nationalism with a fascist pedigree in politics promoted unprecedented social repression).
4. For an extended analysis this relationship between madness and the development of the nation-state as it occurred in Peru (especially the representation of this relationship in literature), see Chauca.
5. These programs continued to be predicated on notions of acceptable biology and threats of contamination posed by abnormal physiologies: "Las ideas biologicistas abundaban en la ideología de la dictadura pues si la nación era pensada como una presencia física, los enemigos, 'la subversión internacional,' eran presentadas como un virus, un bacilo que había que eliminar" (Finchelstein 153) (Biologist ideas abounded in the ideology of the dictatorship since, if the nation was thought of as a

physical presence, the enemies, the “international subversion,” was presented as a virus, a bacillus that had to be eliminated).

6. See Diana Taylor’s analysis in *Disappearing Acts*.
7. The dismissal of specifically female subjects using the rhetoric of madness as a means by which to silence and contain has a long history. Although not immediately dismissed as “crazy” on the basis of a lack of rationality, but rather on the basis of immorality (i.e., as prostitutes), the use of the rhetoric of madness to attempt to silence the Madres is telling. It points to the way in which patriarchal forces have historically used irrationality to dictate proper moral comportment and to control action in the public (and private) spheres. The defiance shown by the Madres and the subsequent use of the junta’s rhetoric to endearingly refer to the Madres, rather than to continue to dismiss them, points to a dual power of madness: as both a means of social control and as a way of rebelling against that control. This strategy recalls the literary strategy employed by female authors, analyzed by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.
8. Taylor’s statement is perhaps a bit overemphatic, yet from the perspective of the present the rationality of the mothers’ requests to know the whereabouts of their children cannot be denied. Thus, the junta’s use of the label of “locas” employs the engrained distrust of the mad to avoid the threat to expose the irrationality of its own inhumane actions, thereby avoiding the request for explanation.
9. The back cover of Bosquet’s text augments this turn, citing Eduardo Varela-Cid and accusing the dictatorship itself of being psychotic: “El autoritarismo y la prepotencia de los militares argentinos no es más que el síntoma de un estado psicótico general, es el estado psíquico morboso el que conduce al delirio político. La doctrina de la seguridad nacional, organiza el malestar mental, el hombre intoxicado ideológicamente está preparado para cualquier atrocidad. En el siglo XVI los trastornos de la conciencia conducían a otras sistematizaciones y concreciones doctrinales: esquizofrenia religiosa, o psicosis paranoica fijada en el miedo a las brujas” (Authoritarianism and the preponderance of the Argentine military is nothing more than the symptom of a general psychotic state, it is the morbid psychic state that leads to political delirium. The doctrine of national security organizes the mental unwellness, the ideologically intoxicated man is prepared for whatever atrocity. In the sixteenth century the the disruptions of the conscious led to other sytematizations and doctrinal consecrations: religious schizophrenia, or paranoid psychosis fixated on the fear of witches).
10. The hospital featured in the film is the prominent (and largest) psychiatric hospital in Argentina, El Hospital Interdisciplinario Psicoasistencial José Tiburcio Borda (The Municipal Hospital of José Tiburcio Borda), or simply “El Borda” as it is commonly known. Founded in 1863 and located in the city of Buenos Aires, the hospital’s distinctive entrance is markedly recognizable in the film.
11. For an extended analysis of the genre of the film, including its discursive play in potentially moving between genres, see Verdesio.
12. Foster classifies the film as “analytical counter cinema” (13).
13. For more on these reactions, see Kantaris.
14. In *¿Extranjero en tierra extra? El género de la ciencia ficción en América Latina*, Antonio Córdoba Cornejo states that science ciction “es un intento de imaginar nuevos espacios físicos, nuevos entornos materiales y nuevas capacidades humanas, y trata de explorar de qué manera los individuos (en forma de personajes y/o lectores) reaccionan a estos desplazamientos” (26) (is an attempt to imagine new physical spaces, new material environments and new human capacities, and it tries to explore in what way individuals [in the form of characters and/or readers] react to

these displacements). He concludes the introduction to his text stating that Latin American Science Fiction finds itself at “una encrucijada entre centro y periferia(s), entre future, pasado y presente” (45) (a crossroads between center and periphery(ies), between future, past and present). The use of the term “encrucijada” (crossroads) for scholars of the post-dictatorship period will probably bring to mind John Beverley’s well-known essay “El testimonio en la encrucijada,” indeed, Córdoba’s argument is that science fiction has the power to illuminate social realities, envisioning them from an in-between space, demonstrating to the reader the gray zones that exist between reality and irreality. Such an argument is bound to have a resonance with scholars familiar with the debates around testimonial writings. Following Córdoba’s observations, the sci-fi genre possesses an ability that is of utmost utility in remembering the impossible to remember, in representing the non-representable, in approaching these complexities that complicate telling in the wake of the dictatorship.

15. Indeed, as noted by Jonathan D. Ablard, the Borda hospital was supposedly used as a place to house/incarcerate some detenidos/desaparecidos (193) (detained/disappeared peoples) during the dictatorship.
16. Ablard observes “Like the character Rantés in the film *Man Facing Southeast*, there were even reported cases of individuals living on hospital grounds whose identity and provenance were unknown to administrators” (195).
17. Here, one must take note that Beatriz herself is presented throughout the film as an abnormal individual: she leaks blue fluid when she feels strong emotion, and in the end reveals to Dr. Denis that she too is from another planet, just like Rantés.
18. Rantés’s influence even extends to a moment in which Dr. Denis, the representative of the repressive mechanisms of the state, “sufre un repentino cambio al conocer a Rantés” (Arredondo 124) (suffers a sudden change upon meeting Rantés). Although this change eventually gives way to the doctor’s maintenance of the status quo, the doctor’s sincere melancholy after Rantés’s death remains evidence to the profound effect the madman has had on him.
19. “Propone la otra verdad frente a la verdad unívoca institucional. Por ello [el discurso] las imágenes y las reflexiones desenmascaran las contradicciones de la sociedad y proponen un discurso alternativo donde el amor, la igualdad, la honestidad, la libertad son componentes primordiales de un espacio ideal” (Arredondo 95) (Proposes the other truth in the face of a univocal institutional truth. Through it [the discourse] the images and reflections unmask the contradictions of society and propose an alternative discourse where love, equality, honesty, liberty are primordial components of an ideal space).
20. This model has been replicated in other countries around the world, as explored in the documentary.

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