Replicating Home: Inside the Gated Communities of Argentina

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Abstract
This article examines the gated community as it has been represented in contemporary Argentine cinema through Jean Baudrillard’s notion of simulation. Lucrecia Martel’s short film, “La ciudad que huye” [The City that Runs Away] (2004), demonstrates how the walls of the enclaves foster divisiveness; Una semana solos [A Week Alone] (Celina Murga, 2007) focuses on the negative impact of living in imitation in the gated community; Betibú (Miguel Cohan, 2014) interprets the exclusivity of the country as fomenting violence; and Las viudas de los jueves [The Thursday Widows] (Marcelo Piñeyro, 2009) presents the country as a more dangerous site than the exterior. Through a reading of these films, this paper seeks to understand the significance of elite enclosures in Argentina, their isolation and the inevitable production of new segregated cultures within their walls. These works critique the gated community lifestyle for failing to develop beyond the hyperreal, for functioning rather “entirely in the realm of simulation” (Baudrillard).

In 2005, there were 350 gated communities or closed housing developments in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, covering 300km² of land, 100km² more than the area of the city itself (Thuillier). In 2014, this number increased to 1000 in Argentina, 800 in Buenos Aires (Peregil). These include barrios privados (private neighborhoods), clubes de chacra (literally, “farm clubs,” with larger areas of land per resident), countries (full-time residences with all the amenities of a country club) and mega-emprendimientos (huge, master-planned communities with semi-public services such as shopping centers and universities). Since the mid-1990s, two major newspapers in Buenos Aires, Clarín and La Nación, have published weekly sections on country real estate. Surrounded by imposing walls, and heavily guarded entrance gates, these communities are like independent cities for the elite, complete with private security, schools and leisure facilities such as cinemas and shopping areas.

In contemporary Argentine films, these exclusive residential enclaves are represented as defined by simulation: the lifestyle “imitates” community residence and “replicates” neighborly relationships. These communities function within the sphere of the “hyperreal” as Jean Baudrillard defines it in Symbolic Exchange and Death. According to the philosopher, “reality itself founders in hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real” (144). Like the dangers implicit in Freud’s uncanny Doppelgänger,1 for Baudrillard, this duplication points to “the real” that:

is volatilized, becoming an allegory of death. But it is also, in a

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1 Sigmund Freud explains in his well-known article, “The Uncanny” (1919), that the Doppelgänger becomes the ghastly “harbinger of death” (234); the familiar childhood game of seeing oneself reflected in a doll becomes unfamiliar in adulthood when one recognizes oneself in the Other.
sense, reinforced through its own destruction. It becomes reality for its own sake, the fetishism of the lost object: no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal. (Baudrillard 144-45)

For postmodernist thinkers, simulated reality characterizes the contemporary era, especially in U.S. cities like Las Vegas with its hotel buildings that explicitly copy sites from across the globe. In this way, fiction begins to lose its distinction from reality as lives are pursued in imitative spaces. This confusion of boundaries between reality and fiction is exemplified brilliantly by the Hollywood film, The Truman Show (Peter Weir, 1998), in which the protagonist is unwittingly raised on a movie set. While not as extreme as in this filmic example, residents of gated communities establish a lifestyle that tries to remain isolated from the population outside the walls; they live as if part of a fiction, in a simulated reality.

The four films I analyze here, in which Argentine gated communities feature prominently, critique the hyperreality of this lifestyle. Lucrecia Martel’s short film, “La ciudad que huye” (2004), demonstrates how the walls of the enclaves foster divisiveness; Una semana solos (Celina Murga, 2007) focuses on the negative impact of living in imitation in the gated community; Betibú (Miguel Cohan, 2014) interprets the exclusivity of the country as fomenting violence; and Las viudas de los jueves (Marcelo Piñeyro, 2009) presents the country as a more dangerous site than the exterior. These films censure the gated community lifestyle for failing to develop beyond the hyperreal, for functioning rather “entirely in the realm of simulation” (Baudrillard 146).

The country housing strategy developed not only from the appeal of the North American suburban lifestyle, but also from Argentine models in the nineteenth century that were influenced by the English merchants who figured centrally in industry and trade (Thuillier 256). Prototypes of the gated community emerged first with the introduction of elaborate country homes, or quintas, second residences for the wealthy urban porteño, and sports clubs with outdoor facilities that privileged past-times such as football, polo, golf, cricket and rowing “as an imitation of the British way of life” (Thuillier 256). The growth of new forms of transportation such as the railroad and the automobile somewhat democratized the country experience and small, cheap country homes such as chalets and bungalows (also called quintas) were constructed on the outskirts of the city. In 1932, the first leisure-oriented housing compound or country club, Tortugas, was founded, 38 km northwest of the city of Buenos Aires.

While during the military dictatorship in the 1970s the upper classes started to settle permanently in their country clubs, the outcome of the global economy in the 1990s led to the real boom of gated communities in Metropolitan Buenos Aires. Those who achieved “easy money” in this economy financed the desire, promoted by an intense marketing campaign, for a new North American suburban lifestyle (Thuillier 256-258). Homes in the gated communities on the outskirts of the city cost the same price as a small apartment in Recoleta, Belgrano or Palermo; these houses included a secure environment with a yard and, in the wealthier communities, also a golf course, artificial lake and polo court. A life “closer to nature” was made possible also by the vast improvements in the suburban motorways, extended during the final three decades of the twentieth century.

Scholars have highlighted other aspects of gated communities as represented in films. Lior Zylberman analyzes the mercantilization of social relationships as exemplified in Argentine films set in gated communities—Una semana solos, Las viudas de los jueves and Cara de queso (Arturo Winograd, 2006). Mercedes Alonso contrasts two generic treatments of the country, the documentary (“La ciudad que huye”) and the chronicle (Mundo privado. Historias de vida en countries, barrios privados y ciudades cerradas (2007) by Patricia Rojas), to underscore the capacity of these genres to mediate the gated community lifestyle.
Lack of government enforcement of urban construction regulations in Argentina allowed gated community residents to control urban design and community behavior. Guy Thuillier argues that “attempts at total control and transparency” in the rules and regulations of gated communities “appear as a desperate proposition to fight against the city’s chaos and unpredictability, and as a project, finally, to rebuild the meaning of (city) life” (263). Country residents have fought against paying municipal taxes for projects outside of the walls even though these gated communities have grown mostly in the midst of poverty-stricken neighborhoods. As emphasized in Lucrecia Martel’s short documentary film (4 minutes, 50 seconds), the contrast is striking between the guarded and enclosed upper class country lifestyle and the impoverished community outside.

Martel’s “La ciudad que huye” (2006) focuses uncannily on the wall from outside the country. As is typical in Martel’s films, both the cinematographic techniques and sound mixing create a disquieting mise-en-scene. While the film crew is restricted from entering the enclave, they capture the perception of this community from the exterior. The high-speed tracking shot alongside the stationary wall of the country emphasizes the imposition of this structure. To enhance this further, the screen segments into various parts—at its busiest, it divides into twelve moving images—and the image sizes shift between full and partial screens. Dizzying and oppressive, these layouts complement the swift camera movement to capture both the imposition of the wall and the unnerving response this structure elicits. Contrasting shots compare opposing landscapes; the apparent vibrancy of community life is juxtaposed with the aggression and exclusivity signaled by a wall of this type. The short film ends with a blurry slow-motion sequence of schoolchildren walking alongside the wall—a contrast between child innocence and the segregated community. Finally, the soundtrack emphasizes danger. An ominous combination of a quiet high-pitched whistling sound interspersed with bird chirps develops in the first minute. The sound of traffic blends with that of a phone off the hook and the soft clicking sounds of a counter; a care in mixing the sounds to enhance the squeaking of the opening gate or the static of the microphone arouse sentiments of fear and unease in the viewer.

Still from “La ciudad que huye”

As the title of Martel’s film indicates, the city is fleeing; while well-endowed citizens seek to assuage their fear of the lower classes by locking themselves behind walls, they decimate both urban and rural communities. The gated community imposes class-driven boundaries in both these spaces. By leaving the city, the country residents contribute to emptying out the urban centers and further entrenching the divisions between economic classes. By establishing the gated community in the midst of an already-existing rural community, the country clearly separates
the upper classes from the surrounding neighborhood.

Life inside the community is characterized as a simulation of reality in Celina Murga’s feature-length fiction film, *Una semana solos* (2007). The film is shot inside a gated community and imagines the impact of this lifestyle on the children. Siblings and cousins from two families are left with the housekeeper for a week while their parents are on vacation. Privileged and entitled in their “prisión de lujo” [luxury prison] (Raso 31), the youth break into empty houses in the community just to look around. At first, they watch TV and study photographs, but as the week advances, this activity augments to serving themselves food from the kitchen of an unwitting neighbor. The film culminates in an incident that causes the children and the housekeeper to question their morality: the adolescents vandalize their neighbor’s home by smearing the walls with ketchup, ripping up the clothes, flooding the bathroom, and writing messages on different pieces of furniture in the property. The housekeeper’s adolescent brother is a reluctant accomplice in this activity and the affluent boys try to blame the incident on him. In the final scene, the children and the housekeeper sit around the dining room table staring vacantly apparently reflecting on their ethics, lack of self-control, classism and parental neglect.3

The community environment underlines this incriminating portrait of the family. The children seem to wallow in privilege: they sit around the house watching TV and playing video games or they lounge around the pool. The girls worry about their appearance— which clothes to wear or the right application of nail polish—or they listen to music and perfect their dance moves. The housekeeper cleans for them, organizes their rooms and cooks their meals. The oldest daughter, the adolescent, María, is left in charge, but she readily engages in the trespassing, even instigates it. The boys scoff at the idea of including the housekeeper’s brother in their activities, clearly finding it beneath them to interact with a boy of a lower class. The gated community security patrol, called “Copycops” by the kids, bear only minimal authority over the community residents; besides trespassing, the underage boys drive a car around the community and show no concern when they pass the security detail. In a sign of disrespect, María corrects the cop’s grammar when he stops by the house to report her brothers’ and cousins’ behavior.

As Laura Elina Raso has observed in her analysis of the film, both Esther (the housekeeper) and Ximena Triquell argues that while a first viewing of the film might lead to the interpretation that the adolescents do not comprehend the meaning of their actions, the actions of the adolescents indicate a moral awareness: “la cámara esquisse une image lointaine de l’incompréhension, non seulement vis-à-vis du comportement étrange de ces adolescents élevés au sein d’une bulle sociale, mais aussi vis-à-vis de l’adolescence en général” [the camera sketches an image that is far from incomprehensible, not only regarding the strange behavior of these adolescents who have been raised in a social bubble, but also regarding adolescence generally] (Par. 16).
and Juan are not perceived as persons by the privileged children, but rather as “piezas en juego” [pieces in a game] (32). The scholar argues that the youth “se los cosifica, se los reduce a roles estereotipados englobados bajo un rótulo” [objectify them, they reduce them to clearly labelled stereotypical roles] (32). Especially with respect to Juan, the children practice segregation; to them, Juan “es el ‘otro’ no domesticado, venido de un afuera lejano y peligroso” [is the undomesticated “other,” who comes from a distant dangerous place outside the community] (Raso 32). In contrast to the behavior of the affluent residents, the working class emerge in the film as upstanding, respectful, conscientious and caring. Esther, her brother and the country security all work hard in their service to the wealthy youth. Esther spends time with the younger children, she plays cards with them, sings to them, and even lets Sofia sleep in her room with her for a few nights. She seems to fully expect them to incorporate her brother into their group and reminds them to invite him to join their activities. When the children are caught trespassing and vandalizing the neighbor’s house, Esther tries to understand how this could have happened. The boys’ reaction to blame her brother—clearly a scapegoat—causes a profound rift between the family and Esther: it seems to upend her previously-held belief in the upstanding qualities of the privileged youth.

While Martel emphasizes the wall in her characterization of the gated community, Murga underlines the imitation inherent in this lifestyle. The name of the security, “copycops,” can be applied further to the entire gated community: a simulation of a North American way of life. Not only does the setting clearly replicate U.S. suburbia with its houses isolated by large lawns, and its country club facilities, but the deficient social roles enacted by the children and housekeeper also underscore this idea of the copy. The children and housekeeper attempt to fill the family roles left vacant by the mother and father on vacation; however, the immaturity of the children and the lack of authority of the housekeeper fail to fill this void. In the face of imitated social roles, appropriate social behavior gives way to delinquency. In this sense, parental neglect reinforces the idea that the isolated and privileged country lifestyle remains only a copy of reality, and that, despite their attempt to protect themselves from it, the “real world” outside the enclave will eventually find them.

The divisiveness represented in Martel’s short film and the apathy evoked by living a simulated lifestyle depicted in Una semana solos are characteristics that unleash the violence in Betibú. This 2014 film directed by Miguel Cohan is based on a novel of the same title by Claudia Piñeiro. A murder inside the gated community, “La Maravillosa,” comes to the attention of a group of journalists who try to solve the crime. The protagonist, Nurit, who has the nickname, Betibú, moves into one of the houses in the country to be closer to the investigation; she has been asked by the newspaper editor to record her impressions of the case in her prose style as a literary author. Eventually, the journalists decipher certain aspects of the crime (now a series of crimes)—that it was a revenge for childhood bullying for sexual orientation—but are in turn bullied to silence. Ultimately, it remains unclear if their version of the events is correct, and the film concludes with an open ending (much to the dismay of some of the film critics).

In the film’s opening sequence of the crime scene, the country’s elitism and its imitation of wealthy U.S. lifestyles juxtaposes with the violence of murder. The camera pans a living area of the upscale house—wooden shelves with books and collectibles, the back of an easy chair and liquor bottles—while the background of the repeating static sound of an LP record crescendos. As the camera closes in on the record player, the music starts again, and the spectator hears

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4 Sven Pötting also underscores the socioeconomic contrasts in Una semana solos. For this scholar, the film highlights the upper class’s fear of the Other.
Benny Goodman’s lively piece, “Sing, Sing, Sing.” In a camera angle shot out of a small corner of the window, as if clandestine, the arrival of the cleaning lady is captured. A little hesitant by the sound of the music, and unaware of the murder, the cleaning lady enters the darkened house to start her workday. She leaves her purse on the dining room table and walks upstairs to present herself to her boss. As she paces a little uneasily to the house’s second level, the music continues to play in the background. Finally, the camera captures her shock as she discovers her employer’s corpse in the armchair, and the opening credits continue to roll.

Betibú offers a scathing critique of the country lifestyle. Like the other two films, the entrance to the country is presented as particularly shocking. Reminiscent of U.S. border crossings, the guard at the community’s imposing entrance gate questions Betibú and keeps her from entering at first. (Similar experiences are suffered by the film crew in Martel’s short and the housekeeper’s brother in Una semana solos.) When Betibú cannot provide sufficient proof that she has permission to enter the establishment, she is told to back up the car. She continues to offend, however, by the placement of the hired car in front of the gate in a spot that is prohibited, not by the city, but by the gated community. The power play of this sequence underscores the exclusivity of the country.

The journalist’s description of the country in her newspaper column underlines the ironies:

She closes with a blistering characterization of the residents’ humanity: “¿Qué será más perturbador para los habitantes de este country? ¿Pensar que viven con alguien capaz de matar o confirmar que el muro que creían infranqueable no lo era tanto?” [What would be more disturbing for these country residents? To think that they live with someone capable of murder or to find out that the wall that they thought was impassable was in fact not that secure?] Would murder by one of their own shock them more than knowledge that the Other could penetrate their haven? The title of her column, “La Maravillosa, ausencias que interpelan” [La Maravillosa, absences that raise questions] again emphasizes the incongruities.
The lesson for the protagonists of Las viudas de los jueves (2009) is that the “real world” cannot be avoided. This final filmic example of the gated community demonstrates that economic and political realities penetrate the country, transform the lives of the residents, and even make life in the enclave less desirable than the realities outside. This film, based on a book by the same title by Claudia Piñeiro, tells the story of four families who live in a gated community, Altos de la Cascada, outside of Buenos Aires. While the four men gather on Thursday evenings to play poker and spend time talking and drinking, their wives also go out together. On one of these Thursdays, the men are found dead in the pool, electrocuted by the defective sound system that falls into the water while they are swimming. The film recounts the circumstances that lead to this tragedy.

The political backdrop to the storyline is the economic crisis of 2001 in which large-scale corruption led to the theft of bank assets, and Argentines lost their savings. This financial disaster spiraled to affect Argentine employment possibilities, and dramatically increased poverty levels in the country. Despite their affluent lifestyle, and their attempts to remain isolated from everyday Argentine realities, the protagonists of Las viudas de los jueves are affected by this economic crisis.5 Martin has lost his job and has gradually spent all his savings. Ronnie’s wife, a real estate agent, earns the family income, while he is unemployed. Tano has turned to his second means of money-making, an insipid plan to gain financially from the death of loved ones who have bought the life insurance that he sells. Finally, Gustavo has become emotionally unstable and is violent with his wife. Ronnie’s adolescent son, Juan, and Martin’s adolescent daughter, Trina, have both rejected the lifestyle of the enclave; they rebel by buying drugs, being disruptive in school and disrespecting their parents and other authorities.

When, on a Thursday evening around the pool, Tano suggests the idea of a collective suicide to his friends, he convinces them that their wives will collect the life insurance because it will appear to be an accident rather than a suicide. Ronnie chooses not to participate in the plan, but Martin and Gustavo stay at the pool with Tano. When Ronnie shares his knowledge about the suicides with the men’s wives, he is shocked to discover that they would prefer to remain ignorant to collect the life insurance (which would not be offered to them in the case of a suicide). At the close of this scene, Ronnie’s son realizes his allegiance to his own family, and convinces his parents to leave the country because “no somos como esa gente” [we are not like those people]. The final scene shows Ronnie’s family driving out of the gated community with his son and with Martin’s daughter. They have been informed by the security that the roads to Buenos Aires have been blocked because of widespread unrest, but the family still chooses to continue. Their values do not coincide with those of the inhabitants of the community; they can no longer live the life of escape offered them by the country.

In Las viudas de los jueves, the copied lifestyle becomes both unsustainable and undesirable. As Lior Zylberman argues, the lifestyle privileges economic advancement over harmonious social relationships, “la vida en el paraíso parece sólo estar asociada con el desarrollo económico” [life in paradise seems to only be associated with economic development] (Zylberman par. 16). Indeed, social relationships are also “mercantilized”; social hierarchies are supported not only by the things people own, but also by the characteristics of the neighborhood and the construction norms (Zylberman par. 17). The residents are forced to acknowledge the realities of the

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5 Liliana López Levi describes this contrast spatially in her analysis of the film: “La historia nos muestra que no hay correspondencia entre el espacio soñado que ofrecen las inmobiliarias y el espacio vivido” [the story shows us that there is no correspondence between the dream space offered by the real estate agents and the lived space] (69).
nation that houses their gated community. At one point, the protagonist who has lost his job, Martin, considers moving abroad but insists that it must be to a place without any problems, with economic security. However, he never confides this thought with others; rather, he is filmed talking to himself about it, rehearsing what he might say to his wife should he be obliged to tell her their predicament. Of course, Martin and the other husbands’ frustrations at their financial and emotional instability reach such a disturbed level that they choose to kill themselves.

Like in Una semana solos, the adolescents reflect the profound deficiencies of the country. Trina feels so restricted and isolated that she breeches the barrier of the enclave to smuggle in drugs. To do this, she interacts with and uses the security guard who benefits from his ability to traverse the boundary without question. The figure of the security guard in Las viudas de los jueves differs from that the other films; instead of responsibly assisting the upper classes, this security guard brings corruption to the community. Trina treats him in the same patronizing way as do the children in Una semana solos, only in this film, the security guard maintains the upper hand, assists in the smuggling of drugs and finally rapes her. As he cruelly reminds her in the violent scene, Trina is helpless to fight against him because of her own criminal activity. Ultimately, the protagonists are forced to acknowledge that they have been living a dream and that there is no escape from the “real” Argentina.

Divided from exterior communities as Martel highlights in her short documentary, the country develops from the simulation of U.S. lifestyles, underscored in Una semana solos. In this context, delinquency and crime remove the layer of superficiality from the way of life; the raw reality of trespassing (in Una semana solos) and murder (in Betibú and Las viudas de los jueves) has the power to arouse real emotions in the country residents, exemplified in the final scene of Una semana solos. Betibú’s critique is more scathing, in this sense. The residents of “La Maravillosa” and their elite group of friends seem to remain unmoved at the murders that have occurred there, content to feel as they live, inside a copy. Finally, Las viudas de los jueves results in the opposite reaction: the family chooses to leave the imitation to experience the real.
Works Cited


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