



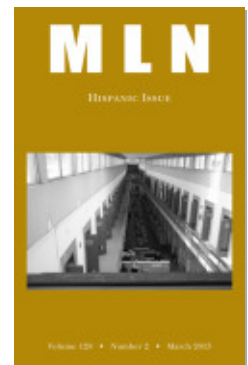
PROJECT MUSE®

A Year in Rewind, and Five Centuries of Continuity: El año del desierto's Dialectical Image

Zac Zimmer

MLN, Volume 128, Number 2, March 2013 (Hispanic Issue), pp. 373-383
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/mln.2013.0019](https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2013.0019)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mln/summary/v128/128.2.zimmer.html>

A Year in Rewind, and Five Centuries of Continuity: *El año del desierto's* Dialectical Image



Zac Zimmer

In the decade since Argentina's default on its international debt (and the subsequent economic and political crisis birthed by that default), we have seen *too big to fail* become the United States' explicit economic policy (and the implicit assumption driving its international diplomacy), we have seen European nations default on their own debt, we have learned a new vocabulary of global dissent (*los indignados*, the 99%, etc.), and we have felt the fissures splitting apart the European Economic Community and its unitary currency, the Euro.

That is to say: in light of current developments, some very particular narratives from Argentina are newly capable of resonating with contemporary global experiences. That is not because any of these narratives sacrifice specificity or particularity, but rather because in embracing those things, each one paints a specific local engagement with the ubiquitous reality of global capital and its whims.

The events surrounding the December 20, 2001 resignation of Argentine president Fernando de la Rúa have taken many names: the *crisis de diciembre*, *el Argentinazo*, *el 19 y 20 de diciembre*, *el corralito*; it has become best known globally, perhaps, by its anthem of uncompromising populist dissent, ¡*Que se vayan todos!* (figuratively: "Kick *all* the bums out!"). After the IMF refused to renegotiate Argentina's foreign debt in November 2001, the Argentine government, led by finance minister Domingo Cavallo, imposed withdraw limits on all national bank accounts. These limits, called the *corralito*, infuriated the population

and led to a series of massive protests across the country. The protests overwhelmed the capital on December 19, causing President De la Rúa to at first declare a state of emergency, and ultimately to resign the presidency. In the aftermath, Argentina defaulted on its foreign debt, devalued its currency, and experienced a series of political and economic leaders, each one rebuffed by popular dissent and direct action. Even today, the *Argentinazo* remains the primary reference point for the worst-case *what if* scenarios when discussing the possibility of default and currency devaluation in Europe.

It is not surprising, then, that the events of December 2001 and their aftermath have proved to be fertile imaginative ground for contemporary Argentine fiction. Some of those narratives, such as Claudia Piñeiro's 2005 *Las viudas de los jueves*, have even seen big-screen adaptations with international distribution. Yet none of these post-2001 works has adopted a broader historical canvas than Pedro Mairal's 2005 post-apocalyptic novel *El año del desierto* (*The Year of the Desert*). Mairal uses the events of 19–20 December as concrete references from which to depart, but his departure is dual, and the narrative spins out two distinct trajectories. The first is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the *Argentinazo*: the fictionalized events set into motion on December 19 cascade through ever-increasing levels of infernal disaster until the very fabric of Argentine society is torn asunder and all that remains is a post-apocalyptic scene of barbarism. As that narrative line advances, however, there is another temporal logic at work. María, the novel's twenty-three-year-old protagonist, lives through a sort of 'historical rewind' that condenses five centuries of events in the span of one year. In other words: the descent into post-apocalyptic barbarism is also a return journey through Argentina's history, told in reverse chronological order.

This narrative device does not, however improbably, appear heavy-handed; the rewind is an integral part of the novel and it is intimately connected to María's life and actions. Thus, if the historical rewind is the novel's backdrop, María's personal story—the most pressing aspect of the novel—becomes a rearound *bildungsroman*. Mairal, in turn, becomes an archeologist who begins his excavation too early, a coroner who starts the autopsy on a still-living body. It is precisely this anticipation—this untimeliness—that allows the author to reanimate the past and bring it to bear on the present.

The novel culminates in an image that can serve as an emblem not only for Argentina's 2001 economic and social crisis, but for our historical moment writ large (a moment that reads continuity between

the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the last decade's Latin American defaults, the 2008 US subprime mortgage market, the contemporary Eurozone crisis, and the international rise in student fees and debts . . .). That image articulates an emergent catastrophe with the long-term nightmare of history; it is a diagram mapping an acute crisis onto a national—and, ultimately, hemispheric—tragedy. The novel's environment consciousness (a weak yet subtly guiding force) comes into play here, as it is an unexplained and inconceivable ecological event, called the *intemperie*, that is the primary engine of the temporal inversion and the advancing barbarism. The path to the climactic image, through the condensed five-century rewind of Argentine history, is instructive in itself; we must retrace it in the following pages so as to arrive, as does María, to that final and devastating image. For it is in the very passage of the rewind that Mairal's narrative composes itself as a dialectical image.

As one would expect of any attempt to condense over five centuries of history into one single novel, references abound, both historical and literary. Many critics have already pointed out—in blogs and reviews—the most obvious: the plagiarism of “Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires” written by a depressed young poet while “everything goes to shit”; the references to Echeverría's “El matadero”; and the wink to Julio Cortázar during the State's literal take-over of María's family's house.¹

The ‘apartment taken-over’ incident does not exhaust the Cortázar references. The bridges built by the inhabitants during the “enclosure” (see below) are clear allusions—even if de-eroticized—to the famous bridge in *Hopscotch*.² Beyond these isolated quotations, the novel's entire temporal logic is a homage to “The Southern Throughway.” Although Cortázar does not use an inverted chronology in that story, he does construct a singular temporality that could have served as one of Mairal's models.³

With respect to Mairal's novel, the subtle movement from one temporal logic to another separates it from other contemporary examples

¹The references are, respectively, to Jorge Luis Borges' poem “Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires” (in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, 1923); “El matadero,” Esteban Echeverría's staging of the nineteenth century civilization/barbarism debate (written and circulated in manuscript form in 1839 but not published until 1871); and Julio Cortázar's “Casa tomada” (*Bestiario*, 1951).

²See *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*), chapter 41.

³The best-known literary examples of inverted chronology are Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* and Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*.

that employ inverted chronology. For Mairal, it is not about an innovative way to organize the telling of certain events that the protagonist lives (as is the case with several filmmakers who have used inverted chronology, principally Christopher Nolan in *Memento*, Gaspar Noé in *Irreversible* and François Ozon in *5x2*), but rather, María lives *the inversion itself*. Because of this, each narrative advance is, *at the same time*, a historical regression: the temporal logic of the *intemperie*.

That said, it is complicated to talk about the ‘*intemperie*’s logic’. The narrative is more focused on underlining the official negation of the phenomenon and its usage by various groups of protestors as an empty signifier. The *intemperie* vaguely points towards an ecological disaster, but it is also intimately connected—via a realistic representation of the events of 19–20 December—with the 2001 crisis. The beginning chapters never give us a direct view of the *intemperie*; on the contrary, we only see the political and social consequences within the Federal Capital. The protests, and the subsequent police repression, form the nucleus of the chapter “Suárez & Baitos,” and our visions of the wastelands left in the *intemperie*’s wake are mediated by flyers and the protestors’ chants denouncing a government conspiracy and cover-up.

On one side, then, a total absence of concrete information and the steady growth of rumors and accusations; on the other, official negation and the threat of state violence that, negatively, lends credence to the rumors. The reader can thus discern at least two registers in which the temporal logic of the *intemperie* operates: on the surface, a pure historical reenactment of the events of December 2001; but also State repression—without a doubt present during the Crisis—and above all the fear of being swept up by the police that gesture towards the fear inculcated in the population during the 1976–1983 military dictatorship. These, then, are the first steps of the rewind, already mixed with a verisimilar representation of a concrete moment in recent Argentine history. As such, any attempt to read this chapter in strictly historical terms, to search for a 1:1 correspondence between the plot and history, will not produce results *sensu stricto*. It is more appropriate to read history’s return in the extension (to its ultimate consequences) of the contemporary moment as an illumination of the past as much as of the present.

With that in mind, the reader who focuses only on the historical regression will lose sight of Mairal’s contemporary cultural critique, while the reader who ignores the chronological inversion, perhaps due to Mairal’s subtlety, omits a key part of the novel. If the reader main-

tains the two opposite movements in a state of tension, the narrative crystallizes into a devastating version of an American post-apocalypse.

Using broad strokes, we can divide the novel into five parts: the present moment, civilization versus barbarism, María's flight, barbarism's triumph, and utopia/apocalypse. The novel opens with a fragment from the narrator's present time that installs her in a purely post-apocalyptic temporality. Her language is already other; her old speech pertains to another epoch and simply no longer serves any purpose. The civilization with which she had identified also no longer exists. María is a survivor, a witness of the catastrophe, and the fragments that begin her narrative are pure foreshadowing. The narrator will maintain her omniscient position during the first parts of her story, and until she leaves her fortified apartment building, she will continue to insert splinters of narrative anticipation into her tale. Once she enters the desert, however, the comments that reveal her temporal and spatial location in her present narrative moment definitively disappear.

After this approximation of a prologue, the reader encounters María working at an investment company (and it is significant that the chapter that fictionalizes the Crisis, "Suárez & Baitos," bears the name of a financial services company as its title), and thus begins the second section. This section tells the story of the battle between civilization (which builds office towers—like the Garray Tower where María works—as flags raised over conquered lands) and the barbarism that the *intemperie* releases; it is here that the novel's against-the-grain temporal logic is most visible. Yet from the first day of her "desert year" onward, María will be cultivating the wastelands so as to give rise to the novel's iconic penultimate image: that same office tower rising from the vast, depopulated Plain with nothing more on the horizon than the ruins and remains of a defeated civilization.

That skyscraper inherently elevates itself: it rises to the abstract altitude of the global financial sector, as María so keenly observes. But yet, back on the national surface, "hay quilombo" (14). We see scenes of police repression at the anti-*intemperie* demonstrations, the reinstatement of the national military draft, hyperinflation; later: riots, curfews, and the bulldozing of shantytowns. Notwithstanding, business continues while *porteños* complain about "barrios de categoría" being converted into tenements.

Given that the suburbs—thanks to the *intemperie*—are being reduced to desert, María's bosses and their families see no other option than a wholesale move of their McMansions to the Garray Tower. This parody of the privatization of social life, the proliferation of verti-

cal clubs that signals the absurdity of contemporary enclosures into private neighborhoods, mixes with the first visible signs of torture.⁴ The McMansion/shantytown division finds its expression, once again, through a historical reappearance: those locked out of the downtown towers live the palpable risk of being “disappeared.” They thus construct elaborate closed systems of interconnected tunnels and bridges between buildings and city blocks so as to stay off of the streets. While this occurs, the State television system, no longer able to produce new programming, begins to work backwards through its archives. This is the rewind made literal: old programs return to the airwaves, the actors grow younger on the screen.

Soon enough, María leaves the enclosed buildings. At this point, Mairal focuses less on the extension of the contemporary (although this focus persists in the background), instead centering his attention on an excavation of the urban fabric. Released from her enclosure, María travels along the Capital’s surface streets; the many superficial changes—for example, street names that have reverted to earlier incarnations (Cangallo replaces Perón; Victoria replaces Hipólito Yrigoyen; Calle de la Piedad replaces Mitre)—are only a part of an enormous project of urban archeology (93, 105, 168).

The most developed of these reverse displacements is the *Hotel de Emigrantes*. María ends up there as she looks for work in the Bajo (now an export center for frozen meat).⁵ What is shocking is not the reference itself, but rather the way Mairal handles it (and inverts it): the *Hotel de Inmigrantes*, historically a welcoming space, with its promise of a better life in the shape of a bed and government subsidies for new arrivals, is now the *Hotel de Emigrantes*. For María, it is a hopeless workplace and a monument for the total failure of her native country. For Argentina itself, the scene does not only describe a moment from the national past, but it also carries the connotation of the endless lines in front of foreign embassies throughout the summer of 2001–2002: “Miles de personas trataban de organizarse, asustados y ansiosos por subirse a un barco y partir a buscar nuevas oportunidades en otros continentes. Familias enteras con abuelos, con bebés recién nacidos. Salían del Hotel y se iban ubicando en los muelles” (107).

⁴Piñeiro’s *Las viudas de los jueves* dramatizes the *Argentinazo* from within the fortified walls of private residential neighborhoods.

⁵The majority of the novel’s specific temporal references appear in this section: the tram car that crashes into the Riachuelo (12 July, 1930; p.112); the *Semana Trágica* (p.120); a rare snowy day in the Capital (22 June 1918; p.121); the passing of Halley’s comet (1910; p.129); among others.

But it is in the details where Mairal shines: the number of beds stays the same (4000 in both cases), but the Hotel's policies have changed. Instead of an open invitation to stay until finding a job, the guests at the *Hotel de Emigrantes* are faced with a much less hospitable situation: they can spend one miserable night at the hotel, and they must leave at dawn to board the departing boats. No longer the optimistic bustle of a busy port during the immigration-heavy first decades of the twentieth century, this is now its negative, inverted image, full of desperation, broken dreams and defeated departures.

The historical regression continues, and María soon finds herself working as a prostitute in a cabaret whose client base is mostly English sailors transporting contraband. Here, the novel takes a hard-boiled turn, and María the prostitute kills her pimp. As if María's fate were intertwined with that of her country, her crime and subsequent flight coincide with the barbarians' triumph, and we thus enter the novel's next section.

When María's escape leads her (along with some of her companions in the *mala vida*) to the intersection of Pueyrredón and Córdoba, the barbarian wave finally crashes up against the shores of the city. Beyond that crosswalk lies pure desert: "Ver el campo abierto así de golpe y empezar a meterse daba miedo. Era como entrar en el mar, como alejarse de la costa sin salvavidas" (176). And she continues on; María's first steps into barbarism are as definitive as the border crossing that closes *El gaucho Martín Fierro*: "Y siguiendo el fiel del rumbo / se entraron en el desierto" (2299–2300). The gaucho sings:

Y Yo, empujao por las mías,
quiero salir de este infierno.
Ya no soy pichón muy tierno
y sé manejar la lanza
y hasta los indios no alcanza
la facultá del gobierno.

Yo sé que allá los caciques
amparan a los cristianos,
y que los tratan de 'hermanos'
cuando se van por su gusto.
¿A qué andar pasando susto?
Alcemos el poncho y vamos.

(2185–2196)⁶

⁶José Hernández published his epic poem *Marín Fierro* in 1872 as an attempt to vindicate the figure of the *gaucho*—so savaged by Sarmiento in his *Facundo*—in Argentine literary and cultural history. It tells the story of a knife-fighting *gaucho* who 'goes native,' deserting the military in order to live amongst the Amerindians of the Pampas.

María also passes over to the other side; she carries a *Tramontina* steak knife instead of a lance, and she too will end up with an indigenous tribe, but not before a stay at an *estancia* and a stint as the captive of a group of *gauchos malos* and bandits.

After some time, she manages to escape the bandits' misogynistic world only to find herself in the midst of the *Ú*, a pre-Columbian society. Rather: an indigenous society contemporary with the Conquest, for the rewind has extended that far back into the South American past. The *Ú* have developed a transitory and flexible society that appears to coincide with Marx's celebrated formula for unalienated society: hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, herding cattle at night.

However, this indigenous community, for as much as they appear to be a mix of the ideals of a young Marx and the European "noble savage," do not live beyond the *intemperie*. On the contrary, they live *after* the *intemperie*, and like the myth of the Inuit with dozens of names for snow, the *Ú* have over fifteen words for mud to describe the wasteland they inhabit (*Desierto* 260). With María as interpreter, they decide to venture downstream and investigate the ruins of the Capital. It is this journey that gives rise to the novel's crucial image: the Gar-ray Tower, the only building among the rubble and ruins, inhabited by the now (truly) savage company men from Suárez & Baitos. This scene represents the cumulative moment of the inversion: "Todo el pasado y todo el futuro / ruina sobre ruina."⁷

The culmination, on the one hand; the continuity, on the other. The novel concludes with the image of María leaving the continent behind aboard a ship headed to Europe, the so-called Conquest itself in rewind. These two images, the rising office tower and the departing ship, emphasize the connection between the two objects; the chronological inversion explodes in this juxtaposition. Time's two arrows—one linear, the other inverted—displace each other, and the result is a historical Doppler effect: a compression, on one side, and an extension, on the other, of Argentina's past and that of the American continent. And, like a 'thought experiment' that attempts to demonstrate the theory of relativity through images of trains and observers in motion, Mairal's narrative makes clear History's relativity. Mairal does not do this in a postmodern sense; on the contrary, he animates the past, pushes it into the present. Once the narrative is set in motion, the reader can no longer maintain his static illusion.

⁷The lyrics are by Charly García; Elsa Drucaroff cites the song in her essential periodization of the novel.

The reader ends up passing through the entirety of Argentine history to arrive at this 'blank slate,' only to see that the beginning already carried the seeds of the end. The 'clean slate' is a slate that was *wiped* clean. Tabula rasa must always be imposed from without; in this case, the eraser is a ship off of the American coast.

This is the truly post-apocalyptic content of the novel: if we invert the already inverted chronology, María's ship, this time arriving to the American coast, is the originary apocalyptic moment. The extended narrative of the Crisis ends up at the beginning of the long American history. The climax, which is also a *first moment*, becomes the apocalyptic moment. According to this formulation, all post-Discovery American fiction is *implicitly* post-apocalyptic.

This final picture, that of a ship leaving the Garray Tower behind as it pulls away from the American coast—the only aftertaste of the American Utopia, converted into a living ruin—captures the essence of a dialectical image.⁸ The constellation of the American Apocalypse surges forth from this image, an image that has only recently (after the Crisis) become legible.⁹ The image lies at the intersection of two axes. The vertical axis (reinforced by the verticality of the tower) moves from the concrete (the mud) to the abstract. The tower, "la altura de la economía global" is now grounded in the mud, and at the precise location where we first met, in the opening pages of the novel, the protestors are so reminiscent of the 2001 *cacerolazos* (13). The horizontal axis—the historical axis, of course—finds its expression in the vast expanses of the Pampas that have reclaimed the Capital. In this moment, the novel's localism collapses: the ship not only refers to the middle/upper class flight in the wake of the Crisis, but also the inversion of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century migratory waves, Buenos Aires as a contraband port and, most importantly, the ur-image of a European ship landing on American soil. Mairal's betrayal of his

⁸I borrow my concept of the dialectical image from Susan Buck-Morss's reading of Walter Benjamin. In a passage that could very well describe the closing emblem of Mairal's novel, Buck-Morss states, "Dialectical images are a modern form of emblematics. [. . .] The debris of industrial culture teaches us not the necessity of submitting to historical catastrophe, but the fragility of the social order that tells us this catastrophe is necessary. The crumbling of the monuments that were built to signify the immortality of civilization becomes proof, rather, of its transiency. And the fleetingness of temporal power does not cause sadness; it informs political practice" (170). See also pp. 210–212 for Buck-Morss's diagram of the intersecting axes of the dialectical image.

⁹See Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, especially fragments N2a,3 and N3,1. That is not to say this is the *first*, nor the *only* moment in which this constellation has become visible.

localism (and the historical infidelity of transporting the site of the so-called Discovery to the River Plate) is significant: it is the advent of the “now of recognizability” (Benjamin, *Arcades* 463). This time, it is not the Angel of History blown about by the winds of progress,¹⁰ but rather María the non-virgin who flees from the scene of utopia’s immaculate conception in a ship whose course has been inverted.

Here the particularities of Argentina’s history, traditionally narrativized as the struggle between civilization and barbarism, form two converging trajectories that collide in a moment of ruin.¹¹ This collision reveals the play between the present and the past implicit in every moment, yet it is only in moments of catastrophe when such play erupts forth into the field of the visible. And so the soaring Garra tower becomes a tombstone, and a reminder that monuments, whatever form they take, will outlast the civilizations that erect them, and that the vast horizontal expanse of time can turn the most pretentious constructions into a quaint and precarious cairn.

Can this image—with its intersecting horizontal and vertical axis—also represent a developing consciousness of the geographic coordinates of global crisis? After all, Argentina’s gift to social movements in the wake of 2001 has been the development and popularization of the concept of *horizontalidad*.¹² Or does it gesture to something even more profound than the autonomous, anarchist and other new forms of social protagonisms that arose in the wake of the crisis?¹³ An expression of the ultimate nihilism of the Cartesian plane itself? Of our ultimate impotence in the face of the *intemperie*, of any climactic disturbance whatsoever?

Virginia Tech

WORKS CITED

- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999. Print.
- . “On the Concept of History.” *Selected Writings*. Ed. Howard Eiland and Walter Jennings. Vol. 4 (1938–1940). Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003. Print.
- Berger, James. *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Print.

¹⁰See Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History.”

¹¹Sarmiento’s 1845 *Facundo: Civilización o barbarie* remains the key reference. See also Julio Ramos, *Desencuentros de la modernidad*.

¹²See Marina Sitrin’s *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina*.

¹³See Colectivo Situaciones, *Notes for a New Social Protagonism*.

- Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Boston: MIT Press, 1991. Print.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "Fudación mítica de Buenos Aires." *Obras completas 1923-1949*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1993. Print.
- Colectivo situaciones. *Notes for a New Social Protagonism*. Trans. Nate Holdren and Sebastián Touza. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2010. Print.
- Cortázar, Julio. "Casa tomada." *Cuentos completos I*. Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2010. Print.
- . "La Autopista del sur." *Cuentos completos I*. Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2010. Print.
- . *Rayuela*. Ed. Andrés Amorós. Madrid: Cátedra, 2008. Print.
- Durcaroff, Elsa. "Narraciones de la intemperie." *El intérprete* 27 (2006): n. pag. Web. August 2012. <<http://www.interzonaeditora.com/prensa/prensa.php?idPrensa=373>>.
- Echeverría, Esteban. "El matadero." *Obras escogidas*. Ed. Beatriz Sarlo and Carlos Altamirano. Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1991. Print.
- Hernández, José. *Martín Fierro*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1997. Print.
- Mairal, Pedro. *El año del desierto*. Buenos Aires: Interzona, 2005. Print.
- Marx, Karl. *La ideología alemana*. N. pag. *Marxist Internet Archive*. Web. August 2012. <<http://www.marxists.org/espanol/m-e/1840s/feuerbach/2.htm>>.
- Ramos, Julio. *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989. Print.
- Sarmiento, Domingo F. *Facundo*. Buenos Aires: Losada, 1963. Print.
- Sitrin, Marina, ed. *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina*. Oakland: AK Press, 2006. Print.
- von Brunn, Albert. "Apocalipsis en Buenos Aires." *Librería García Cambeiro* (Argentina), 2007. *Pedromairal.blogspot.com*. Web. August 2012. <<http://pedromairal.blogspot.com/2007/05/apocalipsis-en-buenos-aires.html>>.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson. *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. Print.