

***Medianeras* or the Loneliness of the City ***

Marisol Barrientos Lima
 Universitat de Barcelona
 barrientoslima@gmail.com

Abstract

The subject of urban loneliness is not new for the cinema. What is new is its presentation in a contemporary society where the use of new communication media, especially the Internet, monopolises many interpersonal relationships. In this paper we do a visual analysis of the film *Medianeras* (Argentina, Gustavo Taretto, 2011), studying how this feeling of loneliness is represented and the role of the communication media in the relationships between the characters. Owing to the special connection with the architecture of the city, the visual narration becomes a key to placing the main characters in a hostile environment, which can only be relieved by human contact.

Keywords: urban loneliness, cine, architecture, new technologies, communication, *Medianeras*, Taretto

Resumen: *Medianeras* o la soledad de la ciudad

La soledad urbana tratada en el cine no es un tema nuevo. Lo es su presentación en una sociedad contemporánea donde el uso de nuevos medios de comunicación, especialmente internet, copan gran parte de las relaciones interpersonales. Nuestro estudio está centrado en el análisis visual del film *Medianeras* (Argentina, Gustavo Taretto, 2011), cómo se presenta este sentimiento de soledad urbana y cuál es el rol que juegan los medios de comunicación en las relaciones que se establecen entre los personajes. La especial vinculación con la arquitectura de la ciudad hace de la narración visual una pieza clave para situar a los protagonistas en un entorno hostil que sólo puede aliviarse a través del contacto humano.

Palabras clave: soledad urbana, cine, arquitectura, nuevas tecnologías, comunicación, *Medianeras*, Taretto

Resum: *Medianeras* o la soledat de la ciutat

La soledat urbana tractada en el cinema no és un tema nou. Ho és la seva presentació en una societat contemporània on l'ús de nous mitjans de comunicació, especialment internet, acapara gran part de les relacions interpersonals. El nostre estudi se centra en l'anàlisi visual del film *Medianeras* (Argentina, Gustavo Taretto, 2011), com es presenta aquest sentiment de soledat urbana i quin és el rol que juguen els mitjans de comunicació en les relacions que s'estableixen entre els personatges. L'especial vinculació amb l'arquitectura de la ciutat fa de la narració visual una peça clau per situar els protagonistes en un entorn hostil que només pot alleujar-se a través del contacte humà.

Paraules clau: soledat urbana, cine, arquitectura, noves tecnologies, comunicació, *Medianeras*, Taretto

* This text was originally written in German for the course *Kulturgeschichte des euro-atlantischen Raumes im globalen Kontext* (History of culture in the Euro-Atlantic space in a global context) under the direction of Prof. Univ. Frank Stern at the University of Vienna in the Summer Semester 2013.

Introduction

Medianeras is the first feature film of the Argentinian publicist, photographer and musician Gustavo Taretto. The German-Spanish-Argentinian co-production premiered in the 61st International Film Festival of Berlin –*Berlinale* 2011 (*Medianeras*. Pressbook). This film was one of the most successful of the event (Orta 2013) and won the audience award in the *Encuentros de Cine Latinoamericano* in Toulouse (Varea 2013).

There is a short film with the same title (Argentina, 2005, 28 minutes), directed by Taretto, that was presented in different film festivals and got some awards (Naderzad 2011, Orta 2013)¹ this one represents the first idea for the long version where we can find the foundations of the story: a young woman and a young man who have a very common city illness, loneliness. It is a fable, a love story ‘in times of virtual love’ (*Medianeras*. Pressbook), that follows the model of the US American comedies (Lerer 2011).

People’s lives are related to the architectural constructions of the city, since ‘behind the window lives a human being in search of a meaningful connection’ (Naderzad 2011). Even the title *Medianeras* is related to an architectural concept,² the walls in the film representing the connection between the human beings in the city.

With regard to the film’s form and style, the clear structure of the introduction is especially prominent: following a ‘presentation’ of the city, the main characters (Martin and Mariana) are introduced. After that we are spectators of their personal stories and of some casual amusing encounters. In this sense photography plays a very important role, and some graphic elements and animations emphasize or build the meaning of some scenes. It is important to point out the connection to the visual advertising language that one can observe, something that even the director himself recognised (Obarrio/Scaroni 2013).³

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the visual representation of the feeling of loneliness in the film and to discuss the role of new media in personal communication.

Loneliness and New Technologies

How can we define the feeling of loneliness? Putzl proposes to define it as ‘a feeling that is based in a subjective experience of the individual in his/her natural environment.’⁴

¹ In the short film we can find already not only the beginning but also the end and the parallel montage that were all used or not modified in the long version of the story (Orta 2013).

² According to the definition of the Real Academia Española (RAE) *medianeras* are the common walls of two houses (online in <http://www.rae.es/rae.html>). In a broad sense, this is a reference to the forgotten and ugly walls of the buildings we can find in all big cities, and in the specific case of Buenos Aires, the ones used to build windows illegally to get a little bit of light in the apartments.

³ On the relationship between publicity and films, see Lipovetsky/Serres (2009:258). The authors emphasize the blurring of boundaries between different audio-visual works and genres (advertisement, films, video-clips, author cinema, commercial cinema, etc.) in the 4th era of the history of film (2009:21-22, 27).

⁴ “ein Gefühl basierend auf dem subjektiven Erleben des Individuums in seiner natürlichen Umwelt” (Putzl 2011:8).

The author recognizes that it is 'conceptually difficult to describe because it appears related to the individual in a synchronic and synthetic way.'⁵

From the point of view of human evolution, loneliness is defined as a feeling that has 'a regulatory function that leads to the creation of some conditions, generating a certain advantage for the organism'⁶. The 'relationship between sensorial experiences, social acts and individuals, has consequences for our physiological balance.'⁷

From a socio-cultural perspective we observe the human being as a social being, 'who is defined through links and relationships'⁸ and is influenced by other individuals with whom he/she lives. Therefore, when these reference systems are missing, we can talk about social isolation. In this sense we can refer to three different types of loneliness experiences: that related to the interaction field, that related to the social interaction itself and that related to the consequences of this interaction (self-esteem, feeling of self-confidence) (Putzl 2011:12).

In a technologically-advanced society where the communication possibilities allow constant communication with anyone regardless of location, the isolation problem should have disappeared a long time ago. But this is not the case in our society. From a historical perspective, since the 1950s we have experienced an exponential increase of electronic devices and 'screens' in our everyday life. After the spread of the television, there followed the computer, then the videogame console, the mobile phone and other digital devices such as digital cameras or GPS (Lipovetsky/Serroy 2009:10). These new communication and entertainment media re-contextualise communication, and although they have not replaced direct verbal communication, they are overlapping and linking with it. As a consequence they are changing the everyday life of individuals and their connection to the world (Rasmussen 1997:1-2).

Internet, as the most significant communication revolution of recent years, is considered as a 'space for communication', accessible through different electronic devices, where different types of interaction are taking place (Llorca 2005:22). This virtual space offers new relationship and identity possibilities that are built within the new media. In this context we find a flowing, open and performative concept of identity. Especially remarkable is the new spatiality that Internet creates because it constructs a net of connections. In this sense not only the physical space but also the physical body lose their meaning in virtual space (Slater 2002:533-536).

According to a research of 2002⁹ the increasing number of Internet users is directly connected to the spreading of the feeling of loneliness. Internet is considered not only the cause but also

⁵ "begrifflich schwer beschreibbar, da es sich auf synchrone und synthetische Art und Weise mit dem Individuum zu verbinden scheint" (Putzl 2011:8).

⁶ "eine regulatorische Funktion und zur Entstehung von Umständen [führt] [und] in einem gewissen Vorteil für den Organismus steh[t]" (Putzl 2011:15).

⁷ "sensorische Erfahrung im Austausch mit dem sozialen Wirken und deren Verbindung zum nächsten Individuum hat demnach eine Auswirkung auf unser physiologisches Gleichgewicht" (Putzl 2011:16).

⁸ "welches sich über Bindungen als auch Beziehungen definiert" (Putzl 2011:9).

⁹ Putzl (2011:13) quotes the study of Amichai-Hamburger Y.; Ben-Artzi E. (2003), «Loneliness and Internet use», *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 19, p. 71-80.



the consequence of loneliness. That is why, when we ask the question 'In what way are the new technology media helpful or harmful with regard to the feeling of loneliness?', we should take into account that the medial consumption behaviour has nowadays an increasing influence on the emotional state of the individual (Putzl 2011:22). But new studies about isolation and new media report that there is a direct connection between the use of Internet or mobile phones and the number of personal connections. This means: the more human relationships or contacts, the more intense use of Internet or mobile phones (Hampton/Sessions/Ja Er 2011:133).

Medianeras

The film begins with a series of images of the Argentinian metropolis Buenos Aires. The narrator – later recognised as the main character – points out the link between the buildings and the life of the people.¹⁰ The absence of urban planning, the stylistic differences of buildings situated side by side, and the various categories of flats are shown through medium, American and full shots. Reflections and details draw the attention of the spectator to the disorder, the magnificence and the influence of the city on its inhabitants.¹¹ Photography is very important in the outdoor shots and the use of fix shots and symmetrical forms is in line with the architectural construction of the film (Varea 2013).

'Screens' and the new media are always present in the film: computers, mobile phones and television are part of the film's images and of the main characters' lives. The director himself recognized 'it is naturally assumed that we communicate with each other through e-mails, SMS, etc.',¹² and he shows this type of communication very consciously as part of daily life.

In the case of Martin the relationship with his computer is very important because this electronic device is his connection to the world: work, food, entertainment, sex, he can get all of these through the Internet, and has hardly any human contact. In addition he follows a psychological therapy to overcome his phobia for the city and part of his therapy is to take photos of the city.¹³ Remarkable are the scarce dialogues in his relationship with the girl who walks his dog,¹⁴ and

¹⁰ The voice of the narrator is decisive during the film to explain another 'story' that cannot be shown by images, a frightened voice that adds another atmosphere to the film (Lerer 2011). That is why some authors (Varea 2013) have seen parallels with the works of Mariano Llinás (*Historias Extraordinarias*, Argentina, 2008; *Balnearios*, Argentina, 2002).

¹¹ Taretto recognized that the film was thought of as a building and he even attended architecture courses. That is why architecture has an important role throughout the film (Orta 2013).

¹² "Ya está perfectamente asumido que nos comunicamos con mails, mensajes de texto, etc." (Obarrio/Scaroni 2013).

¹³ Situation related to the director's biography (Boetti 2013). About the relationship between fiction and reality in the cinema, we would like to make reference to the play 'Cineastas' (Text and production: Mariano Pensotti, Argentina, 2013), presented in the Wiener Festwochen 2013, where not only could we find the city of Buenos Aires as background and as the universal city (in the play there are some references about filming in the city as if it was Paris or New York) but also how far the personal experiences of the filmmakers can have an influence over the films they're directing or producing (Pensotti, 2013).

¹⁴ Martin comment: 'in fact you hardly spoke to me all night' ["de hecho no me hablaste en casi toda la noche"]. Although Taretto affirms that he does not aim to question the role of the new media (Orta 2013; Varea 2013; Amondaray 2012), he has a clear position showing a relationship with a lack of communication: when they are together the girl listens to music on her iPod and receives SMS at any time, and even the theatre play which she is preparing has an evident absence of human contacts, since she suggests that the spectators should listen to

the distant attitude to the messenger who rings the doorbell -he wears a helmet and there are only few seconds of eye contact because the helmet's visor closes at that moment-. His meetings through a dating site are also unsuccessful: the director, by means of montage, shows different images of the site and the online personality of the possible candidates. He meets different women but none of them seem to suit him. One of these relationships, with a psychologist who is multilingual but with whom he cannot really communicate, ends up in a scene illuminated by neon lights with both Martin and his lover sitting down on the bed, silent, with an image of the Paris skyline as background. The communication and the isolation problems are again there.

Mariana, like Martin, lives alone after her separation from her partner.¹⁵ She is an unsuccessful architect –another allusion to the connection with the city– who works as a store window designer. She is given the dramatic role in the film: an easy, vulnerable and quiet girl, stuck in a crisis (Russo 2011). She has an almost human relationship with a male mannequin. Her attitude manifests a total lack of communication, she is trying to hold real conversations and she is even seeking to have sexual contact with it. The music is also an important element in the story of the character: she has a new pianist neighbour whose practising she listens to. In this case there is also no visual contact: neither she nor the spectator knows who this person is.

She had a relationship with a man, presented in part through the number of photos on her computer: from the hundreds taken during their first year together to the four taken in the last year. She wants to forget this man and to overcome the break-up: her mood is visually shown through the deleting of the photos on the computer; she rubs him out of her life. Like Martin, she, too, has no success with potential candidates in starting a new relationship. She stood a work colleague up in a restaurant, not only because she has a lift-phobia – the restaurant is located on the 20th floor –, but also because she is afraid of a new relationship. She also has an affair with a psychologist whom she met in the swimming pool but their sexual encounter won't be successful, since he has impotence problems.¹⁶

Mariana cannot find her place in the city and feels lost. The director uses a friendly metaphor to show her fear, the oppression towards the multitude: it is the game 'Where's Wally?'. He plays with the recognition of the comic by the spectator.¹⁷ In fact, this comic becomes the key to the final meeting of the main characters. This reinforces the idea of blind coincidences and common destiny which is also shown at the very beginning of the film: the encounters of Martin and Mariana in the street (emphasised by the animated drawing of a heart¹⁸); their witnessing

the thoughts of the main character through headphones. In addition the unsuccessful attempt of Mariana and Martin to communicate by chatting in the Internet is related to the director's objection to technology: there is no need of media to find each other.

¹⁵ Not only failed destinies, which is the case in this film, but also globalisation processes, demographic development, individualisation or the increasing use of technology lead to a rise of emotional problems (Putzl 2011:10).

¹⁶ He is part of the dysfunctional but humanized 'beings' that appear in the film (Obarrio/Scaroni 2013).

¹⁷ Everybody in our culture understands these references to a mass-culture comic. The boundaries between visual genres are therefore blurring (Lipovetsky/Serres 2009:137).

¹⁸ The use of graphic elements in films has become common in recent years. See *(500) Days of Summer* (USA, Marc Webb, 2009), a film that was compared to *Medianeras* (Orta 2013), or *Scott Pilgrim vs. the world* (USA/UK/Canada/Japan, Edgar Wright, 2010) that clearly employs the language of video games.

of an accident that would later appear in the news on the Internet; buying candles after a power cut; watching the same film on television (*Manhattan*, Woody Allen);¹⁹ hearing the same music on the radio (*True Love Will Find You in the End*, Daniel Johnston).

The spectator is the only one who realizes that this is about a love story and who knows that the protagonists are going to end up together. The director is constantly engaging the viewer in a game, giving or hiding information during the whole film.

Conclusion

Individualism is a characteristic of our society that is experienced as the worship of the autonomy of the body, of psychology and of relationships. However, this autonomy and freedom have a negative consequence as well: the weakening of the 'I', which is the origin of a number of psychological disorders such as panic attacks, depression or even suicide. The individual is disoriented, unsure and weak, and the cinema makes the personal crisis and the problematic private life the subject of discussion in a funny and cheerful way. A clear example of this is the Woody Allen comedies (Lipovetsky/Serres 2009:206,210).²⁰ But, as Carmona (2011) affirms in *Medianeras*, the spirit of Woody Allen is missing and the film presents a light and funny romantic comedy that has a certain quality thanks to its self-parody. In addition, the role of the media in Taretto's film is something essential, and the director manifests a clear message: there is still a hope of overcoming loneliness and there is no need of the media in order to fall in love. The location of the events in the city of Buenos Aires appears to be only an excuse to show the modern metropolis, since the director aims to present a universal story. The happy ending with a Youtube video where the couple dance to the song *Ain't no Mountain High Enough* by Marvin Gaye, showing their happiness, becomes the conclusion of an easy but visually successful story.²¹ It is no surprise that in 2013 two re-makes are being prepared, one in China and one in the USA (Obarrio/Scaroni 2013).

In recent years a number of Argentinian filmmakers have dealt with this subject: the life of the individual in the city and/or the role of the media in this urban environment. For example *La vieja de atrás* (Argentina, Pablo José Meza, 2011), where the loneliness in the city and the generation-gap conflict are presented by using mainly full shots; the media in this case are represented by a television that is never shown but is heard by the spectator. In *El hombre de al lado* (Argentina, Mariano Cohn, 2009), we are spectators of the conflicts between different social classes living in the same city. There are also other, so-called 'light' films such as *Solos en la ciudad* (Argentina, Diego Corsini, 2009) in which the city is used only as the background to the love problems of a couple. Here the aesthetics of the film are comparable to those of *Medianeras*: images with clearly-marked borders and colours, people integrated in the architecture, and accurate production.

¹⁹ The quotation of Woody Allen helps the development of the story and it is something more than pure recognition, a characteristic of the new film era. In addition, the spectator can enjoy recognising these quotations (Lipovetsky/Serres 2009:130, 266).

²⁰ Taretto recognised his interest for the Woody Allen of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s, Wes Anderson and Jacques Tati (Varea 2013, Orta 2013).

²¹ The director described the film as '(...) light essay on modern life in the big cities and the technological disorders' ['(...) ensayo ligero sobre la vida moderna en las grandes ciudades y los trastornos tecnológicos'] (Boetti 2012).

In Taretto's work the strong social criticism that we can find in the above mentioned films (especially the first two) is missing.

Concluding, we should not forget that the film presents a current problem of the city, the debate about the new individual lifestyle and the role of the media in daily life. Because 'the cinema doesn't live and has never lived outside its time. Essentially a modern art, it has never ceased to make the big events and the current problems of modernity a subject of discussion.'²²

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hampton, K. N.; Sessions, L. F.; Her E. J. (2011), «Core Networks, Social Isolation, and New Media. How Internet and Mobile Phone Use Is Related to Network Size and Diversity», *Information, Communication & Society*, 14/1, p. 130–155.

Leonhard, J.-F. (2002), *Medienwissenschaft: ein Handbuch zur Entwicklung der Medien und Kommunikationsformen*. 3. Berlin (et. al.): de Gruyter.

Lipovetsky, G.; Serroy, J. (2009), *La Pantalla Global: Cultura Mediática y Cine En La Era Hipermoderna*. Barcelona: Anagrama [Spanish translation of: *L'écran global: culture-médias et cinéma à l'âge hypermoderne*. Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2007].

Llorca Abad, G. (2005), «Comunicación interpersonal y comunicación de masas en Internet. Emisor y receptor en el entorno virtual», *El ecosistema digital: Modelos de comunicación, nuevos medios y público en Internet*. València: Servei de Publicacions de la Universitat de València, p. 21-29.

Putzl, M. A. (2011), *Einsamkeit, Gesellschaftliche Ursachen, Gesundheit und Prävention*. Unpublished Bachelor Thesis. Innsbruck: Medizinische Universität Innsbruck.

Rasmussen, T. (1997), «Social Interaction and the New Media. The Construction of Communicative Contexts», *Nordicom Review*, 18/2, p. 63–75.

Slater, D. (2002), «Social Relationships and Identity Online and Offline», *Handbook of new media: social shaping and consequences of ICTs*. London: Sage Publications, p. 533–546.

Torres San Martín, P. (2006), «La memoria del cine como extensión de la memoria cultural», *Culturales*, II/4, p. 50–79.

DIGITAL SOURCES

Amondaray, M. (2012), «El cine bajo la mirada de... Gustavo Taretto», *Cinescalas*, online access <<http://blogs.lanacion.com.ar/cine/el-cine-bajo-la-mirada-de/el-cine-bajo-la-mirada-degustavo-taretto/>> [20 April 2013].

²² «El cine no vive ni ha vivido nunca al margen de su época. Arte esencialmente moderno, en ningún momento ha dejado de convertir en tema los más grandes acontecimientos y problemas coyunturales de la modernidad» (Lipovetsky/Serres 2009:183).

Boetti, E. (2012), «Contra la pared», *HaciendoCine*, online access <<http://www.haciendocine.com.ar/article/contr-la-pared>> [20 April 2013].

Carmona, Z. (2011), «Medianeras. Gustavo Taretto», *NoTodo.com*, online access <http://www.notodo.com/cine/comedia/2946_medianeras_gustavo_taretto.html> [20 April 2013].

Diccionario de la Lengua Española, Real Academia Española, online access <<http://www.rae.es/rae.html>> [8 June 2013].

Lerer, D. (2011), «Medianeras, de Gustavo Taretto», *Cine Cosmos-UBA*, online access <<http://cosmosuba.wordpress.com/2011/12/08/medianeras-de-gustavo-taretto/>> [20 April 2013].

Naderzad, A. (2011), «Gustavo Taretto. Interviews», *Screen Comment*, online access <<http://screencomment.com/2011/06/interview-medianeras-director-gustavo-taretto/>> [20 April 2013].

Obarrio, D.; Scaroni C. (2013), «Entrevista a Gustavo Taretto», *Cinemarama*, online access <<http://cinemarama.wordpress.com/2013/01/21/entrevista-a-gustavo-taretto/>> [20 April 2013].

Orta, M., «Entrevista a Gustavo Taretto», *A sala llena*, online access <<http://www.asalallenaonline.com.ar/entrevistas/51-directores/3246-entrevista-a-gustavo-taretto.html>> [20 April 2013].

Russo, J. P. (2011), «Gustavo Taretto: “En el corto se ve la luna redonda pero ahora necesitaba mostrar el otro lado, el lado oscuro de la luna”», *Escribiendo Cine. La otra crítica de cine*, online access <<http://www.escribiendocine.com/entrevistas/gustavo-taretto-%E2%80%9CEn-el-corto-se-ve-la-luna-redonda-pero-ahora-necesitaba-mostrar-el-otro%9Cen-el-corto-se-ve-la-luna-redonda-pero-ahora-necesitaba-mostrar-el-otro%9C>> [20 April 2013].

Varea, F. (2011), «Gustavo Taretto: “La contradicción es parte importante de mi película”», *Espacio Cine*, online access <<http://espaciocine.wordpress.com/2011/09/17/gustavo-taretto/>> [20 April 2013].

AUDIOVISUAL SOURCES

Taretto, G. (2011), *Medianeras*. Film. Produced by Rizoma, Pandora Filmproduktion (Germany); Eddie Saeta (Spain); Zarlek (Argentina).

Medianeras. Buenos Aires in Times of Virtual Love. Pressbook. Berlinale. 61. Internationale Filmspiele Berlin. Berlin, 2011.

Pensotti, M., *Cineastas*. *Filmemacher*. Theatre piece. Wiener Festwochen 2013. (Vienna, 2013 [Premiere: Brussels, 16 May 2013]).