

Voice, Music, and the Experience of the Neutral in Martín Rejtman's Fictions

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Almost all of Martín Rejtman's films and short stories follow the lives of apathetic middle-class youths pauperized as a result of the Argentine economic crisis. From the silent teenagers of *Rapado* (1991) and the twenty-something late adolescents of *Silvia Prieto* (1998) and *Velcro y yo* (1996), to the thirty-something adults in *Los guantes mágicos* (2003) who neither want to stop being young nor know what to do with their lives, the protagonists of Rejtman's fictions live in a somewhat childish state of uncertainty and indolence.

Beyond its thematic elaboration, ambiguity is a distinctive aspect of Rejtman's literary and cinematic aesthetics. The plots of his short stories and films are constructed out of a random circulation of objects that create strange connections with, and among, characters that are similarly exchangeable themselves. Certainly, the representation of youth cultures that are deeply entrenched in the consumption of objects and signs is a recurrent element in an important number of narratives and films produced in the last two decades in the Southern Cone, but the detached gaze that Rejtman imposes on these indifferent youths makes him the initiator of slacker cinema in Argentina.¹ The redefinition of the interactions between economy and affect, along with the exploration of silence and the commonplaces of language, are trademarks of his innovative first three films and have laid the groundwork for a trend within the so-called "New Argentine Cinema," as evidenced by the works of young filmmakers such as Ezequiel Acuña (*Nadar solo, Como un avión estrellado*), Diego Lerman (*Tan de repente, Mientras tanto*), Juan Villegas (*Sábado*), and Diego Kaplan (*¿Sabés nadar?*).

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But Rejtman's style has found detractors as well as adherents. When it was released, *Rapado* was labeled a "non-interesting film" by the National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts (INCAA). The film was said to portray a young generation without a future or ideals and, therefore, a non-Argentine youth. In addition to this succinctly unenthusiastic reaction to the slacker theme by the INCAA, the irresolution and neutrality of Rejtman's filmic language has also met with rejection by audiences and provoked a number of negative critical reviews (Ravaschino, Martínez, Castagna). On many occasions, *El Amante*, the film magazine with the largest circulation in Argentina, unfavorably reviewed Martín Rejtman's films, establishing an opposition between his cinema "about void and nothingness" and "the formal complexity" of Lucrecia Martel's films (15, 31, 87). As Gonzalo Aguilar has suggested, Rejtman articulates his distant and feeble stance by constantly using obsessively composed static medium shots and avoiding any kind of narrative emphasis.² It is in this refusal to emphasize that Rejtman's detractors perceive an absence of both opinion and meaning that precludes his cinema from establishing a significant relation with reality. Nevertheless, recently film scholars have claimed that the random circulation—of objects, animals and people—characteristic of the plots in Rejtman's fictions reveals an original reflection on the market economy (Aguilar, Bernini, Page). In fact, in his films and short stories, the logic of chance produces an estrangement that leads to a critical reconsideration of the mechanism of interchange, the production of value and the flow of desires required by the market economy.

Bearing in mind this dissident view on the economy, in this essay I will reconsider the critical potential of Rejtman's cinematic language by analyzing not images but soundtracks. I argue that while, on the one hand, Rejtman's ambiguous plots and visual aesthetic expose the arbitrary logic of both language and the commodity form in the market economy, on the other hand, his exploration of the dimension of sound suggests the possibility of a new form of experience. In particular, a closer look at the characters's voices and the function of music in his films and short stories leads me to conclude that, far from being merely expressions of a lack of affect, Rejtman's detached aesthetics and the apathetic behavior of the youths portrayed in his fictions are in fact an alternative form of expression that proposes "neutrality" as a non-paradigmatic intensity.³

Uses of Cliché and the Weariness of Language

According to Gonzalo Aguilar, in contrast to Argentine cinema produced before the 1990s, virtually all films of the "New Argentine Cinema" treat sound as a significant and relatively autonomous feature that endows images

with new dimensions of meaning (21). When analyzing the soundtracks of Rejtman's films, one of the most prominent characteristics is that all sources of sound (voices, music, and noises) appear visually on the screen. This does not imply a careless treatment of the soundtrack; instead, it carefully directs the operations of "denaturalization" of sound to the diegetic level.⁴ With regard to that particular strategy, it is noticeable that the treatment of the human voice varies from film to film. Rejtman utilizes a broad range of possibilities, from the silence and the laconic discourse of *Rapado* to María Fernanda Aldana's guttural outbursts (the vocalist of the rock band El Otro Yo that appears in *Silvia Prieto*). And he finds, between the two extremes, a medium register in the unemotional speech of actors such as Rosario Bléfari (*Silvia Prieto*) and Gabriel "Vicentico" Fernández Capello (*Los guantes mágicos*).

In this section I will show how the speech dysfunctions of Rejtman's characters—silence, lack of emphasis, glossolalia—are part of a verbal strategy that, by pushing expression to its limits, makes a statement about the "fascism" of language.⁵ It is also noticeable that the repetition that informs the logic of circulation of objects at the level of the plot also organizes the circulation of language within the fictions. Clearly, Rejtman's narratives are constructed using ready-made elements:⁶ in his movies, characters seem to suffer from echolalia because they speak by repeating ready-made phrases and clichés in a monotonous tone.⁷ On the one hand, I argue that this disaffected repetition of clichés points toward a weariness of language that, within these fictions, helps to undermine the fetishism associated with the sign values of brands and the flow of desire that sustain a market economy. On the other, I suggest that the intentional disaffection also functions as an exploration of new forms of expression in terms of what Roland Barthes understood by the "neutral."

Martín Rejtman's first long film, *Rapado* (1991), tells the story of Lucio, a middle-class adolescent living with his parents. When someone steals his motorcycle, Lucio shaves his head. After several attempts to steal a motorcycle to replace the one he lost, he gets himself a moped. When it was released, *Rapado* was rejected by audiences who were uncomfortable with the film's lengthy panoramic shots, absence of non-diegetic music and scarcity of dialogue. The pace of the film is also lethargic, like that of its characters. In Lucio's apathetic family, silences and contrived performances diminish the already flat plot. The words, when enunciated, become superfluous because the conversations are banal or because nothing of what is said is emphasized. The same disaffected tone characterizes dialogue lines such as "Grandmother died," "Somebody stole my motorcycle," "In 45 minutes I will meet you at the supermarket," or ready-made phrases like "This is going to change your life," "In the Northern Hemisphere the swirl of water goes the other way," or "Winters in Canada are terrible." As a response to the banality of these phrases, Lucio appears silent and

unexpressive. The few shots that show his face do not allow a glimpse of anything very defined. The camera follows him wandering through the city and shows commonplaces—almost clichés—of the life of a young person: there is the motorcycle, the videogames, the music store, the get-togethers with friends at the square at night, the escape from home, the visit to the salon where he gets his head shaved. However, the film shows all these moments from a cautious distance that avoids emphasizing any of them in particular.

As Beker and del Coto have suggested, in *Rapado* what is more important than actions are the character's speculations about the possibilities of acting (8). Faced with the question of what he would do if he met the person who stole his motorcycle, Lucio delays in answering by saying without emphasis that he would look at him. Clearly, the speed of Lucio's speech is that of the refrain, a rhythm that withdraws from sonority and takes refuge in silence. However, absolute silence in this case is not an alternative to the cliché or to the ready-made phrase. In his study on the neutral, Roland Barthes claims that dogmatic silence, the absolute mute, is a sign in itself and proposes the minimal expenditure of a speech act to neutralize silence as a sign (*Neutral* 74). In the scene, Lucio says little to avoid saying nothing and, in this way, rejects systematic words. On the other hand, the chatter of Damián, Lucio's best friend, is a discourse of pure contingency that functions as another form of silence, insofar as it outplays words.

Gradually, in the few dialogues found in *Rapado*, Martín Rejtman introduces into Argentine cinema the so-called "white voices" of Bressonian models. Similar to the French director Robert Bresson, Rejtman seeks a performance style that avoids the theatrical effects of gestures, attitudes, and conventional affect on voices. His desire for absolute control of what is said is transferred onto the voice itself, as if the actors were puppets and the script impeded the manifestation of emotions. Rejtman's interpreters Rosario Bléfari (*Silvia Prieto*) and Gabriel "Vicentico" Fernández Capello (*Silvia Prieto* and *Los guantes mágicos*) do not surrender to the temptation of "acting" their lines. With amazing earnestness, they go through lean or simply impossible dialogues without ever forcing emotions into their performances.⁸ The monotonous and clean tones of these actors reflect the dryness of a world in which things "simply happen." To prevent the dialogues from being interpreted as in traditional films, Bresson and Rejtman ask the actors to speak without inflections or emphasis, as if they were listening to the words said by someone else. Thus, the dialogues lose the value of direct speech and acquire the value of free indirect speech (Deleuze, *Cinema I* 109). It seems as if the actors, while speaking, were reading a book. With free indirect speech being highly uncharacteristic of spoken language, the dialogues of Rejtman's characters turn out to be not only literary but also particularly sonorous.⁹ As opposed to Bresson's

narratives, however, those of Rejtman lack any sense of depth or tragic abyss; his stories are like dialogued adventures in nothingness.

In his second long film, *Silvia Prieto* (1998), Martín Rejtman uses decisively-Bressonian white voices as the form of expression for all of his actors. Who is Silvia Prieto? Silvia is a young Argentine woman who on her 27th birthday resolves to make some changes in her life: she finds a job as a waitress, buys a canary that does not sing, and quits smoking marijuana. In contrast to the silent universe portrayed in *Rapado*, Silvia Prieto is a story full of events. The characters speak all the time, but they make use of ready-made phrases uttered without the slightest inflection in their voices, or they speak about banalities or tragic events with the same automatic and monotonous tone. In one scene Brite meets Marcelo, Silvia's ex-husband, and tells him that her co-worker has died after being hit by a car and that people clambered over the woman's body to steal the free samples she distributed. Marcelo replies to her: "What a pity," and with the same tone of voice, invites her to have dinner at a new Chinese restaurant. The other characters also do not hesitate to repeat clichés such as: "I do not feel prepared to start a new life," "a woman is a woman," "men should take the first initiative," or "my youth was slipping through my fingers." In the latter case, the use of the ready-made phrase is followed by a visual cliché. Rejtman's camera abandons the distant shot and, by zooming in on Silvia's television set, reveals a segment of a matchmaking television program where Marcelo's friend, Garbuglia, goes to find a girlfriend. The television camera registers a close-up of Garbuglia's face, as if requesting the spectator's empathy. According to Deleuze, "there is no close-up of the face, the face is in itself close-up, the close-up is by itself face and both are affect, affection-image" (*Cinema I* 90); however, in the film, the shot fails as an "affection image," since the closing in of the camera does not say anything about that particular face, and the disaffected enunciation of the ready-made phrase cancels out the affect of the close-up.

Needless to say, the white voices of the characters in *Silvia Prieto* and *Los guantes mágicos* frustrate the average audience, generally more comfortable with the acting style of TV series, but these films also provoke annoyance for deeper reasons. In his study on the voice, Roland Barthes claims that "there is no neutral voice, and if occasionally this neuter, this whiteness of the voice appears, it is a great terror for us, as if we were to fearfully discover a frozen world, where desire is dead" (*Image* 247). In this way, the monotonous voices fulfill at least two functions: on the one hand, they expose a material or sonorous aspect of the discourse that arouses our attention; on the other hand, via their literary nature, white voices suggest that what is said does not refer to any specific subject. On the contrary, the speaker falls into an undefined space, appearing to be "beside" or "out of himself." The relation between the form of speech and an alienated subjectivity is also presented through glossolalia. In a scene from *Silvia*

Prieto, a character goes to a concert by a rock band named El Otro Yo (My other self). The singer utters unintelligible sounds, as if she were lacking conscious control of speech. Here the conversion of the human voice to mere noise makes it impossible to identify the gender of the speaker and thus points to the lack of a fixed subjectivity.

The dialogues in Rejtman's next film *Los guantes mágicos* (2003), also explore the motifs of disaffection and repetition. In terms of the latter, it seems as if the director wanted to try all of the possible combinations between characters and utterances, repeating the same line in different contexts. Just like the objects in *Silvia Prieto*, in *Los guantes mágicos*, phrases circulate by word of mouth because characters suffer from echolalia. Thus, what is said not only lacks deep meaning but also constitutes a repetition of what another character has already said. In this vein, the recurrence of ready-made phrases and commonplaces in Rejtman's films can be understood as a use of cliché, which in turn provides a way to view the relationship between speech and the larger economic logic that the film portrays. In French, the word "cliché" originally referred to the typographic plates used to make multiple copies of pages. Already in the nineteenth century the term "cliché" was employed to designate a "ready-made phrase" or a repeated and banal idea, thus establishing an analogy between the mass reproduction of texts and the mechanical use of language.¹⁰

Roland Barthes (*Mythologies*) and Jean Baudrillard extend the analysis of fetishism by examining the forms by which commodities function as signs.¹¹ *Silvia Prieto's* universe is circumscribed by an aimless circulation of people and objects—an Armani jacket (which belongs to an Italian named Armani), a china doll souvenir (named Silvia Prieto), a whisky bottle lamp (which is Gabriel's alias), and free samples of laundry detergent of the brand *Brite* (distributed by a young woman also named Brite). At first sight, the multiplication of brand names (and the fact that characters are referred to as objects) seems to insinuate a reproduction of the logic of the sign-value (Oubiña). What is more, the repetition of the cliché and of ready-made phrases suggests the broader repetition of sameness that dominates the world of commodities. And yet Rejtman's narrative exposes the economic mechanisms through which that same fetishism functions. If cliché is, by definition, repetition without difference, Rejtman subverts the notion of cliché by exaggerating its repetitive nature as well as by using clichés literally and self-consciously. In this case, literality is not exposed through the use of hyperbolic language or by means of a grotesque context; rather, Rejtman achieves literality through an impersonal use of the cliché made possible by the white voice.

The connection between disaffection, literality, and the dissolution of commodity fetishism is evident when brands are mentioned in the film. At one point, Silvia goes to a pharmacy because she needs to buy shampoo. The fixed medium shot highlights the flatness of the products exhibited in the

store. Shown as pure surface, the pastiche of brand names undermines the reproduction of the political economy of the sign-value because their two-dimensionality erodes the motivation to participate in consumer culture. To help Silvia choose a product, the saleswoman disaffectedly recites all the brand names. Due to its mechanical nature, the saleswoman's recitation becomes a form of speech devoid of the communicative function of language. This is made clear when Silvia finally asks for the largest bottle, rather than for a specific brand. Here, as much as the words uttered by the characters, brand names are reduced to the status of an alienated objectivity. The disaffection produces literality and brands are converted into empty signifiers.

Silvia Prieto also reinforces the literality of proper names. Specifically, the conflict in the film is that Silvia realizes that there is another woman named Silvia Prieto. Thus, proper names also submit to serial circulation and they fail in their identifying function. The act of naming becomes an action emptied of speech and devoid of value. In Rejtman's cinema in general, the problem of literality is central to the consideration of the weariness of language. The final moments of *Silvia Prieto* constitute a documentary that shows all the real Silvia Prietos speaking of themselves. What they say does not contain a deeper meaning than what the fictional characters have already said, and they also make use of clichés or ready-made phrases. When one of the Silvia Prietos, who studies linguistics at the University of Buenos Aires, starts talking about names, she says: "Victorias are difficult, Silvias are more laid-back" A younger Silvia Prieto submerges herself in literality when she says she has decided to study graphic design because she likes the name of that career.¹²

In his inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France*, Barthes affirmed that in speech there inevitably appears the authority of assertion and the gregariousness of repetition. According to Barthes,

Language is legislation, speech is its code. We do not see the power which is in speech because we forget that all speech is a classification, and that all classifications are oppressive [. . .] To utter a discourse is not, as is too often repeated, to communicate; it is to subjugate [. . .] Language—the performance of a language system—is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist; for fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech. (460-461)

In *Rapado*, *Silvia Prieto* and *Los guantes mágicos* the use of cliché constitutes a verbal strategy. The disaffected coldness of the 'white voices' reinforces the literality of words; together with exaggerated repetition it exposes the arbitrary logic of both language and the commodity form. Clearly, in his showing of commonplaces and the grammar of situations, Rejtman enacts the fascism of language. The combination of a lack of

emphasis and the exhibition of the absurd literality of language allows him to capture words and turn them against themselves as a way to escape from the tyranny of meaning. To put it differently, in his films the limitation of expression of the voices paradoxically becomes highly significant: voices cannot locate the functionality (clarity, expressiveness, communication) of language, but they can locate its “truth”—the radical inadequacy in the connection between language and the world.

Rejtman’s weariness and alienation of speech destabilizes the productivity and the imperative to enjoy and consume demanded by a spectacular economy. On the other hand, his pronouncement on the “fascism of language” does not preclude his attempt to explore other means of expression, as much as the premeditated disaffection does not imply an absence of affect but, more likely, a regulation of it. In the search for an impossible outside of language, Rejtman finds disaffection, delay and restraint as expressions of the neutral, a non-paradigmatic intensity. In addition, to escape from the systematic obligation that adheres to language, Barthes and Rejtman return to the art that evades representation: music. It is precisely within music where the characters of Rejtman’s short stories and films find a new sense of experience.

Difference and Repetition: Music and the Return of Experience

According to Roland Barthes, music awakens us from indifference: there is an imaginary in music whose function is to reassure, to constitute the uniqueness of the subject hearing it (*Image* 263). In fact, for Barthes, only some music produces such an effect on the listener. When considering voice, he proposes the concept of “grain of the voice” or “genosong” to apprehend the corporal connotation of the voice, which also supposes the existence of voices “without grain,” that is, voices that in their very utterances cancel the material implications of their production and do not generate any physical empathy in the listener. Thus the “grain of the voice,” besides being a metaphor, is a theoretical category that refers to the voice that, with its own materiality, without “representing” or “expressing,” brings forth in itself the “significance.” The “voice without grain” is technically perfect, a demonstration of a clear art that transmits emotion and meaning. In contrast, the “voice with grain” is a sort of “language-music,” says Barthes, in which the voice works directly on the voluptuousness of the significant sounds; its materiality manages to identify itself with the meaning and awaken the listener from apathy (260-81). The insistence on the materiality of the sensation that music produces is related to its “affect” as well: music has an effect on us inasmuch as music is a collection of sound waves that travel

through matter until they reach our body. Music functions as a series of sensations that we register in our bodies, and which change our bodies from one experiential state to another. This is particularly clear when we think about music in relation to dance. In dance, music is a becoming, a certain type of affect at different degrees of intensity; it is not a thing or substance or subject but rather a mode of individuation that consists “entirely of relations of movement and rest, between molecules and particles, capacities to affect and be affected” (Deleuze and Guattari 261).

For Barthes and Deleuze, then, music is primarily about affect and sensation, more than meaning and representation. Both the exploration of the dimension of music that escapes representation and the relations among music, affect and subjectivity are crucial elements in Martín Rejtman’s films and short stories. In his study on the creative interactions between literature and film, the critic Emilio Bernini subtly indicates that the neutral tone of Rejtman’s stories is both a consequence of the influence of Raymond Carver’s literature and a result of the very dynamics of writing scripts. If the stories published in *Rapado* were conceived in the brainstorming process for making a film, the short stories will later establish a model for a cinema that translates the stinging tone of the literary prose into a cinematic aesthetic of the surface (Bernini 13). But Martín Rejtman’s narrative style not only is a result of the productive intermediality between literature and cinema; as I will show in this section, the presence of music is central to understanding the structure of the plots.¹³ In particular, considering the forms of repetition and the experience of time within a musical context offers a way to understand Rejtman’s narrative intermediality with music. The stories not only make intertextual references to songs; the very notion of “loop,” widely used in electronic music, influences the rhythmic organization of the plot. In other words, intermediality in Rejtman’s fiction consists of a transposition of musical time onto a narrative that proposes an alternative form of conceiving time and subjectivity.

Rejtman’s short stories and films read temporality through musical form and present a heterogeneous rhythmicity that combines moments of *accelerando* and *ritardando*. The very narrative construction of the film *Rapado* involves a presentation of the passing of time. Through long fixed shots, the camera registers from beginning to end particular actions and submits time to the figure of suspension. Compared to the slow pace of *Rapado*, *Silvia Prieto* and *Los guantes mágicos* combine very fast and very slow moments, very active and very quiet characters. It is notable that if in *Rapado* the camera distantly follows a complete action, in *Silvia Prieto* the camera registers entire dialogues or monologues. In this last movie there is an evident counterpoint between the slow rhythm imposed by the fixed plan and the voice of Silvia that, at the speed of any of Truffaut’s first-person narrators, appears in the soundtrack, relating without any emphasis the dull progress of the plot. The structure of Rejtman’s fictions is based on the

enumeration of situations, and the stories grow on themselves, interchanging and repeating a few elements. In the films, even the editing is minimal: the shots are not part of a cause and effect chain, they only happen, one after the other, suggesting a logic of accumulation that makes of the final result something similar to the serialism of minimalistic music.

In *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*, Werner Wolf argues that intermediality between literature and music is more likely to happen in non-mimetic narratives. According to the author,

as opposed to ‘thematization’ as a main form of covert intermediality, there is a form in which an equally non-dominant ‘other’ medium informs (a part of) a work, its signifiers and/or the structure of its signifieds in a more substantial, though still indirect way: so that this work or a part of it, while retaining the typical aspect of its dominant medium is iconically related to the non-dominant one and gives the impression of representing it mimetically, as far as that is possible. The result in this case is a seeming ‘imitation’ or ‘dramatization’ of the non-dominant medium, its quality, structure or typical effects, in the mode of implicit ‘showing.’ (44–45)

Although there are certainly limitations to transposing music into literature, in Rejtman’s stories we can find some elements that suggest intermediality. In the collections *Rapado* (1992) and *Velcro y Yo* (1996), the stories have imprecise limits; what they elide is not justified within the text. The omissions are not demanded by the narrative, but rather respond to a logic of remix. This becomes clear when there are two “versions” of the same story in the volume. For example, the short story “Música disco extended version” not only does not take up where “Música disco” left off, but likewise lacks a conclusive end. In both stories, there is minimal action and events occur as an uninterrupted flow, marked by repetition of elements that are irrelevant to the narrative. In the first version of the story, Lucas goes to a disco and sees at the entrance “tres chicas vestidas casi igual” (34) (three girls dressed almost the same); when the night ends, he sees other girls “vestidas casi igual” (35) (dressed almost the same). In the extended version of the story, he again sees “personas vestidas igual” (158) (people dressed the same). Rejtman thus offers us a reconfiguration of the same elements, even if the second short story does not develop the same tale as the first. In “Música disco extended version,” repetition with variation combines with a logic of accumulation that causes all elements to acquire a slightly greater intensity. We clearly see this when a character posits that he wants “que todo fuera dos veces más rápido, dos veces más intenso” (162) (everything to be twice intense and faster).

The mechanism of repetition is central in most of the stories, but the characters perceive it in different ways: while the majority of them surrender to repetition and indeterminacy, others perceive repetition negatively and attempt to control the flow of time. In “Música disco,” Lucas sees a type of presence or contemporaneity in repetition because he is in a certain place at a certain time, without a present or a future, while at the same time the recurrence offers him the promise of something new, an instant in which “everything would be more intense and faster.”¹⁴ The link between repetition and intensity as the singularity of the experience of music is also clear for the protagonist painter of the short story “House plan with rain drops” who wants to speak about songs in the paintings and be able to express the same intensities (55). By contrast, other characters get depressed or frustrated when they perceive repetition. In “Mi estado físico,” the protagonist establishes a link between repetition and reproduction when, upon following a fitness class in a videotape, he realizes that he already had done the same series in a previous class:

Eso me perturba. Puedo notar las repeticiones del trainer cuando dice, ‘y uno y dos arriba hop.’ Es la inisina secuencia, el mismo intervalo entre una flexión y otra. El problema no es tanto el tiempo que se repite sino que yo me di cuenta y ahora estoy demasiado pendiente. (33)

(That disturbs me. I notice the repetitions of the trainer when he says, ‘and one, and two, up, hop.’ It is the umpteenth sequence, the same interval between an inflection and another. The problem is not so much the time that is repeated, but that I realized it and now I am too conscious.)

It is interesting to note that in the story the character compares that frustration with how he felt while listening to his girlfriend playing scales on the piano, since that assessment of repetition is separable only for a one-dimensional perception of the musical space. In other words, seeing repetition in that way, the character relegates it to *representation*, but in that operation he denies the fact of the very presence of repetition because he reduces difference, the rhythmic repetition of difference, to sameness, a mere repetition of the same.

In Rejtman’s stories, the use of the present tense in short sentences that accumulate actions not qualified by description contributes to the cleanness of the style. This description of facts on the surface, the idiocy in the literature of Rejtman, can also be understood in connection with a new sense of temporality.¹⁵ In narratives in which characters lack a notion of project, the observance of the ephemeral broadens the texture of the present. Rejtman’s stories challenge the logic of cause and effect, settling themselves in repetition; this does not mean a simple reproduction of what was given

before, but rather these narratives explore what Deleuze understood as dynamic repetitions, a repetition of an act or the process of differing. In this sense, the loop enables us to understand the relationship between repetition and difference in Rejtman's fiction. With Deleuze's hypothesis as the starting point, the idea that "it is only possible to speak of repetition by considering the difference that the repetition produces in those individuals who are experiencing it" (*Difference* 13), we can perceive the articulation of a narrative using loop techniques, which opens the discursive possibility of the non-linear.

Widely used in electronic music, a loop is an audio file that is repeated within a piece, so that the beginning and end of a sequence end up at the same point. This occurrence does not necessarily indicate a circular and closed process. A loop deterritorializes music because a sample always acts to reassign meaning within a new set. On the other hand, although the loop introduces difference through repetition, the fact that it is capable of reproducing itself ad infinitum signifies a constant present, pure contemporaneity. In *Personas en Loop*, Diedrich Diederichsen argues that moving in circles and losing one's way are the forms that people in today's society adopt as their trajectories, which differ from the linear trajectory of progress, the quintessential positive sign of modernity (21). It is precisely possible to read the lack of project in Rejtman's fiction in terms of circularity, which has the same structural function in his texts as the loop does in music. In the film *Rapado*, young Lucio flees from home but his motorcycle breaks down and he has to return. However, the failure of his getaway does not mean that his trajectory concludes in a perfect circle. Upon returning, Lucio meets Pablo, with whom he spends the night, and the end of the film subtly suggests that the characters have established some type of relationship. In other words, Lucio may *be* in the same place, but his person differs from who he was before. A number of times throughout the film, the camera follows other characters's circular walks and fortuitous encounters. Moreover, the influence of the loop mechanism on the structuring of the film's narrative is also aurally reinforced. On several occasions, the same sound sequences are repeated: the sound of Lucio's mother's vacuum, the sound of Pablo's younger brother skating around with his rollerblades on their balcony.

In Rejtman's films, since upward social mobility is not a possibility, the only recourse that the middle-class youth appear to have is to wander around without direction, which, like the loop, can be read from a musical perspective. From the perspective of what it is like to live in the loop, Silvia's and Alejandro's journeys in *Silvia Prieto* and in *Los guantes mágicos* give an account of the limitations and possibilities that come with a lack of project. Silvia resigns herself to two elements of the middle class dream: having a good job and being a mother. Even the lackadaisical behavior of Silvia supposes a distance respective of the energy that the path

of the line offers as a promise. *Los guantes mágicos* repeats the path of flight and return already presented in *Rapado* with Lucio. Alejandro does not have a job and has to convert his old Renault 12 into a cab to take passengers to the international airport. The car, his most precious possession, which is supposed to carry him somewhere, only serves to repeatedly take him to and from the same place.

Rejtman's fiction also explores the connection among music, body and subjectivity. Experiencing the relationship between movement and rest in music's "molecules"—the difference introduced by the repetition of rhythm—means we must approach music as affect, as an intensity that leads to an ability to affect and be affected. This latter is true above all when one experiences music through dance. Although music is never presented as an extradiegetic element, a careful examination of the relationship between music and the characters in Rejtman's work will reinforce the idea that dance is an escape through disappearance and detachment. In Rejtman's short stories and films, when characters dance, positive rhythmic repetitions and continuous movement break down the barrier between the self and the music.¹⁶ One of the most important scenes in *Silvia Prieto* is the one when the protagonist by the same name goes to a discotheque to dance. Beatriz Sarlo claimed that, like all other spaces in the film, the disco in *Silvia Prieto* is a "space without attributes" (300). The background only shows a white wall with moving colored lights, and the characters dance alone to electronic music, with no extras around them in the scene. This minimalist presentation, along with the fixed shot, reinforces the superficiality of the image, which could suggest a lack of importance of music and dance in Rejtman's narrative. Clearly, in this scene, being in a disco does not mean participating in a collective act; it just means dancing. However, dancing is something significant in itself. In Silvia's particular experience of music, music implies a sense of dance in which a feeling of trance prevails over the romance that typically characterizes the pop music experience. According to Steve Redhead, "The trance-dance moves the body beyond the spectacle of the 'pose' and the sexuality ('romance') of the look, into a 'cyberspace' of musical sound, where one attempts to implode (get into) and disappear" (33). In other words, electronic music is based on the absence of an original subject, the "soul" in pop discourse, insofar as the presence of a primordial voice is sacrificed to and subsumed by the wall of digital sounds. Therefore, the experience of electronic music collapses pop music's traditional sense of spectacle and expression, in which the "user" attempts to express himself through dance, since now it is the materiality of the musical signifier that forms a space of oblivion, and the individual who dances disappears in sound.

In a suggestive article, Mariana Sanjurjo says that in all of Rejtman's films the body is told and traversed by language (144). This perspective, however, does not consider the particular effects of the music on the bodies.

Certainly, in *Silvia Prieto*, bodies do not appear: they do not produce (because the characters do not have jobs), and they do not desire (scenes of sex are not shown). Nevertheless, on the surface of the screen, the body of Silvia is dancing.¹⁷ The very presence of music adds a third dimension to the bi-dimensionality of the screen; the sound creates a space. If Silvia does disappear as a result of the trance imposed by dancing, this line of flight is suggested in a previous scene in the film. Before leaving to go dancing, Silvia goes to the doctor and when she reads the results of her blood tests, she comments:

Los resultados están bien. Lo único raro es que tengo menos de todo; pero las proporciones son las que tienen que ser. Menos pulso, menos presión, menos glóbulos rojos, menos glóbulos blancos, todo menos. Me siento más liviana. Es como si no estuviera atada a la tierra, como si me estuviera preparando para levitar.

(The tests results are fine. The only strange thing is that I have less of everything but the percentages are normal. Less blood pressure, less pulse, less white and red blood cells, less of everything. I also feel lighter. It is as if I were less tied down to earth, as if I were getting ready to levitate)

In a completely different relationship from what one has when one listens to music, Silvia achieves a sort of incorporeality when she dances, leaving herself behind, but corporealizing herself *in* the music. Dance provides a means for carrying out the process of abandonment, and the dissolution of being is completed when Silvia loses her identity documents in the disco and tells the police in the following scene that she forgot her personal I.D. number and her name is Luisa Ciccone. This obliteration of her identity and the appropriation of the singer Madonna's real name point to Silvia's resistance to being interpellated either by the state authority or by pop music's system of spectacle. On the contrary, in *Silvia Prieto* subjectivity is presented as a first-person experience of music that *resists* the articulation and representation implied in the category of subject. The subjectivity, more than the position of the "I," articulates a form of experience where the "I" and the world are difficult to distinguish.

In a similar way, in *Los guantes mágicos*, music is central to the conception of the characters's subjectivities. As Gonzalo Aguilar points out, Alejandro, like other Rejtman characters, does not own a house and thus is in a state of perpetual movement (55). Even so, from my perspective, the experience of music gives him a "home." There is not a moment in which the character feels happier than when he takes his beloved Renault 12 for a ride and listens to house music at a very high volume, turning the car into a type of moving discotheque. The music critic Barry Edward analyzes how

repeated movements of the body, and in particular a short journey or movement through space enacted many times, sketches out a “texture” in space. As a physical phenomenon of waves of air that reach bodies and objects, testing surfaces and producing spaces, every sound codifies dynamics of positioning, time and movement. I would extend this point to elucidate the general process through which territories come to be constructed within a terrain, indicating the centrality of repetition—in sound or movement—to the composition of lived places. In other words, sound can build a space that we can inhabit. This constructed environment, with virtual walls where all the “bricks are sonorous,” makes possible a communication freed from the normal parameters of speech, inasmuch as ambient noise in the disco makes normal speaking almost unviable. In films where most of the characters fail to communicate with each other, Alejandro and his girlfriend, Valeria, can understand each other while dancing, precisely because they are not able to hear.

Although the music especially affects the bodies of the characters, the relations that all the characters establish with music are not univocal. In *Los guantes mágicos*, Cecilia (Alejandro’s ex-girlfriend) discovers her song when the documentary film “Rock hasta que se ponga el sol” (“Rock Until the Sun Goes Down”) is showed on TV and she listens to León Gieco singing “Hombres de hierro” (“Iron Men”). This musical reference functions to let her know that she is part of a generation whose youth is already lost; such an awareness depresses her. According to Roland Barthes, in order for music to burst into language, a sort of physical capacity of the singer’s voice is necessary (*Image* 246). Only in such cases can the voice take on the corporeality of the performer. It is something beyond (or before) the meaning of words, something that is directly related to the singer’s body. In *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, Simon Frith takes up again this idea of the connection between voice and body and uses it to understand dance not only as a sensual body response to sounding signifiers, but also as a practice that, vicariously, reinstalls the voice in the body of the dancer, allowing him to experience the same pleasure that interpreters experience when they produce music (193).¹⁸

In contrast with Cecilia, who does not appropriate any song, Alejandro removes music from the order of generality and puts it in the order of difference, appropriating music through dance. Living in a stripped-down world, Alejandro, like other Martín Rejtman characters, knows how to experience, briefly, what Barthes understands as the quality of the language of music: the element that is not said or articulated, that “obtuse sense” in which resides enjoyment, tenderness, delicacy, satisfaction, and all the most delicate values of the Imaginary (*Image* 276).¹⁹

A Cinema of Neutrality

In his 1978 lectures at the Collège de France, Barthes defined the neutral as that which undoes the implacable binarism of the paradigm (*The Neutral* 51). Within Argentine cinema, Martín Rejtman's oeuvre opts for the neutral. If we consider all of his works, it is possible to identify a logical progression that goes from the sonorous and visual asceticism of *Rapado* to some kind of excess of plot in the comedy *Los guantes mágicos*; from the silences in *Rapado* to more developed dialogue, a voice in off, and strange deviations of the plot in *Silvia Prieto*. From one film to the next, there are also changes in narrative rhythm and in the speed in which characters speak. Nevertheless, the general aesthetic continues to be minimalist because Rejtman continues being obsessively committed to equilibrium and a lack of emphasis.

As part of a group of young filmmakers that began filming in the 1990s, Rejtman employs asceticism as a conscious effort to escape from the rhetoric of Argentine cinema from the 1980s: The absence of "big problems" in his movies was, for Rejtman, part of

una batalla más general [...] en la Argentina, que es un país problemático y hecho de problemáticas, donde lo único que se hace es analizar la problemática de nuestras vidas o de la sociedad. Y al ser ese análisis tan consciente, la vida y la sociedad quedan de lado; lo único que queda es la problemática. (S. Wolf 12)

(a more general battle [...] in Argentina, which is a problematic country and made of problems, where all points toward analyzing the problems of our lives or of society. And this analysis being so conscious, life and society are put aside; the only thing left is the problem.)

The disagreement of the new generation of filmmakers with the local film language was of such importance that in 1994, in a collective interview, the critic Sergio Wolf defined the group as a "generation of orphans" (13). On that occasion, referring to *Rapado*, Rejtman says:

Cuando empecé a filmar me di cuenta que tenía que darle yo mismo valor a cada uno de los elementos con los que iba a trabajar. Veía que, en ese momento, ninguno de todos esos elementos tenía valor. Ni los planos (que estaban banalizados), ni los actores (que actuaban otra cosa, nunca actuaban la película), ni los guiones y los diálogos (que eran un vehículo para la poética o la ideología de los directores). (S. Wolf)

(When I began filming I realized that I had to give value to the elements I was working with. I saw that, at that moment, any of those elements had a given value. Neither the plans [that were banalized], nor the actors [who worked on another project, they never acted in the film], nor the dialogues [that were a mere vehicle for director's poetics or ideologies].)

Seen from this perspective, the programmatic nature of Rejtman's minimalism becomes evident. Total control over the filmic language and the incorporation of elements from film to film comply with a strategy of reappropriation of the code of representation. What Rejtman does is to atomize the elements of the filmic discourse, allowing the establishment of new relations between them and, in doing so, giving them a new use value.

But Rejtman's minimalism of expression goes beyond a rejection of the rhetoric of the Argentine cinema of the 1980s. The silence of the adolescents in *Rapado*, the guttural voice of the singer of "El Otro Yo" (The Other Me), the desire of *Silvia Prieto* to buy a "canary that does not sing" are also modest attempts to articulate a discourse that escapes from established forms of speech. In his analyses of different expressions of contemporary culture, Giorgio Agamben delineates spaces in which representation culminates in exhibiting the "implacable character of the gesture," where it leaves nothing else to be seen but the fact that it is making itself seen (68). The coldness of the "white voices" can be seen, in this vein, as the obliteration of any possible link between experience and expression. However, even when neutral voices do not express anything and let themselves be seen as an unexpressed space within the landscape of expression, Rejtman's exploration of the neutral goes beyond a discourse of alienation. In his films the neutral is a wrinkle that destabilizes the system of oppositions, a means to leave the confinement of that language. The double movement that indicates both the impossibility and the possibility of experience is made clear in the links Rejtman's cinema establishes between language and economy. In his fictions, the youth appear increasingly interpellated by the consumption not only of products but also of brand names and logos. Within this logic of circulation of objects and signs, Rejtman's use of repetition and disaffection serves to point toward the triviality of both the ideology of the market economy and language. In other words, in Rejtman's fictions the weariness of speech destabilizes the imperative to enjoy and consume demanded by a spectacular economy, at the same time that, through the exploration of the neutral, the characters find a new notion of experience.

As a way to elude the tyranny of language and escape from the inevitable advance of the logic of the market, the fictions of Rejtman focus on the non-linguistic force of music and explore the critical possibilities of the experience of dancing. In *Silvia Prieto*, "Música Disco," "Literatura" and "House plan with rain drops," Rejtman uses music both as a criticism of the ideology of representation and as an alternative mode of subjectivization:

while the notion of the loop that informs the short stories allows us to conceive experience in terms of a “present in progress,” the films present dance as an escape through self-disappearance and detachment.²⁰ Even in the more “flat” dimensions of meaning, the young characters capture glimpses of experience in which music incarnates as dance and thus they escape from the obvious senses to feel, intense and briefly, “significance.”

This “desire of the neutral” that looks for the suspension of the discourses of urgent opposition can be seen as apolitical, but, as I have shown, by means of a careful treatment of sound, Rejtman conceives a minimalistic aesthetics that illustrates the critical possibilities of neutrality in rejecting the dominant doxa. Even though his cinema literally quotes banalities, Rejtman’s use of the neutral is not banal. His films situate themselves at the surface to show the triviality of identitarian discourses, while at the same time they show some deviances, some glimpses of experience, and present subjectivities still without a project.

Notes

1. Following the success of *Slacker* (1991), an American independent film directed by Richard Linklater, the term “slacker” started to be extensively used to refer to the lack of motivation, the laziness, and the apathy recurrent in many youths during the 1990s. But the term not only tells of the attitudes of the new generation; it also refers to the distant and disaffected look through which filmmakers and writers such as Linklater and Douglas Coupland (*Generación X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, 1991; *Shampoo Planet*, 1992) portray the youths in their fictions. Rejtman’s style shares this distant perspective; nevertheless, while the speech of Coupland’s and Linklater’s slackers shows an addiction to TV, a compulsive mention of brands, verbosity and cynicism, Martín Rejtman’s slackers are more inclined to silence and repetition. For an analysis of slacker cinema and literature and its relation to the economy in the American context, see Radwan.
2. In this vein, Aguilar illustrates how Rejtman’s shots evade privileging any particular character in terms of his/her physical position within the frame. In *Los guantes mágicos*, Rejtman avoids even the use of shot-reverse-shots for dialogue scenes; instead, he employs static medium shots that show the characters on the same horizontal line (106).
3. In his translator’s introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Brian Massumi defines affect as “a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (xvi). I also understand neutrality in terms of affect following Roland Barthes who, in his course at the College de France (1977–1978), defined the neutral as those intensities that outplay the paradigm and its system of binary oppositions.
4. In his analysis of recent Argentine films, Gonzalo Aguilar (2006) uses a Deleuzian terminology to define the tone of Rejtman’s soundtracks as a “smooth space,” as opposed to the “striated spaces” of films with “noises” and dissonances like Adrián Caetano’s *Pizza, birra y faso* (1998) or *Bolivia* (2001). In addition, it is interesting to note that within the “New Argentina Cinema” Lucrecia Martel, usually placed in

- opposition to Rejtman by critics because of her “complex poetics,” is the filmmaker who most extensively uses acousmatic sound—sounds that are located in an ambiguous region within the diegesis and the extradiegesis. Both *La Ciénaga* (2001) and *La niña santa* (2004) disturbs spectators by means of visual ellipsis that hides the origins of the sounds heard at the diegesis.
5. Glossolalia is a repetitive and nonmeaningful speech, especially such speech associated with a trance state.
 6. According to Ana Amado, as opposed to the “critical realism” of Adrián Israel Caetano and Lucrecia Martel’s films, the directors of the “New Argentine Cinema” who follow the lives of apathetic middle class youth represent the “artifice.” The Argentine critic reads Martín Rejtman’s *Silvia Prieto*, Juan Villegas’s *Sábado*, Sergio Bizzio’s *Animalada*, and Diego Lerman’s *Tan de repente* as realistic alternatives to the simulacrum: just like pop art, these films take their materials not from the world but from its images (2002, 94).
 7. Echolalia is speech disorder characterized by the immediate and involuntary repetition of words or phrases just spoken by others. On the other hand, following Ruth Amossy and Anne Herschberg Pierrot’s study, I understand “cliché” as a prefabricated idea or expression used repetitively. In this broad sense, cliché is not only an overused figure of speech but, as I will show in my analysis of Rejtman’s films, a more general narrative gesture.
 8. Similarly to Robert Bresson, Rejtman avoids the use of professional actors for the leading roles in his films. The ability of these non-actors to reproduce the rhythm and the tone of the ‘white voices’ relates to the fact that his ‘models’ are musicians. Rosario Bléfari (*Silvia Prieto*) was the singer in the Argentine alternative pop band Suarez and Gabriel Fernández Capello (Alejandro in *Los guantes mágicos*), under the name of Vicentico, led the Argentine rock band Los Fabulous Cadillacs during the 1980s and 1990s.
 9. The absence of subjectivity, which is depicted in the films through the use of a neutral voice, shows the literary origin of speech that is uttered “as it was spoken by others,” which is also evident in Martín Rejtman’s literary narratives. The short stories collected in *Rapado, Velcro y Yo* and *Literatura y otros cuentos* are present-time narrations where it is more what the characters do (although their adventures are banal) than what they say. In fact, they seem to be alienated when they speak “as if it is said by another.” In the short story “Literatura,” a novice writer situates himself in the ground of literality: his story is also entitled “Literatura” and avoids any psychologism (his girlfriend remarks: “your characters are like robots”). At the same time, this characteristic of the short-story genre, which does not intend to explain but to show, is transposed again onto the films, which reproduce the stingy tone of prose in terms of a visual aesthetic of the surface.
 10. According to Ruth Amossy and Anne Herschberg Pierrot, during the last third of the nineteenth century, writers and cultural critics became aware of the fatigue of language. Technical terms borrowed from design arts and the printing press, such as “poncif,” “cliché” and “stereotype,” began to acquire a figurative sense that pejoratively pointed toward the exhaustion of verbal expression (12).
 11. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard introduces the concept of the “sign-value” of a commodity as a display of prestige or identity of the owner or consumer. Further on, he states that contemporary society is dominated by an excess of prefabricated signs that through the mass media gain as much realism as the material objects they represent (143–64).
 12. In an interview with *Radar!Página/12* (“La importancia de llamarse Silvia Prieto”), Martín Rejtman reveals this interest in exploring the absurdity not only of reality but

- also of the real produced by television, when he says that his dream was that the talk show *Causa Común* would produce a special program with all the Silvia Prietos.
13. Beyond his films, Martín Rejtman's interest in music is also evident in his participation in the series of "Micro-óperas" at the Teatro Colón's center for musical experimentation. As part of this project, in October 2005 Rejtman premiered "La zapatera prodigiosa," a thirty-minute-long opera with only three characters, the music of Marcelo Delgado and the stage management of Susana Yasán and Pablo Maritano.
 14. In *The Logic of Sense*, Gilles Deleuze suggests thinking of events in terms of Aión—a notion of time different from the classic Cronos—a time with neither past nor future, a time that consists of constantly dividing the present instant. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze conceives repetition as the pure form of time, going beyond Nietzsche to maintain the eternal return of the difference and the impossibility of the return of the same; that is, the return of a cycle with a difference understood in terms of intensities (126). In terms of Deleuze's conception of time, we can think of the loop not as a simple repetition, but as a flow that implies a difference from and an extension of the dimension of the present.
 15. Following the ideas of Clement Rosset on the idiocy of reality, Graciela Speranza distinguishes in Martín Rejtman's literature an alternative realism that tries to approach the real in its both insignificant and singular character, monotonous and silent, determined and fortuitous, idiotic. The realism—of surfaces—would be, for Speranza, a minimalism of perception that operates by means of a disaffected sensibility: things and people, suddenly estranged in a real world where meaning has been completely removed, do not result in absurdity but in a reality governed by casual connections and disconnections, by useless and unintended passions (26).
 16. Danceable music is that made for the body, in which the musical potentiality of sensations reigns over meanings. The short story "Literatura" begins by describing the specific effects music has on the body. The protagonist is dancing in a disco and the continuous movement breaks down the barrier between himself and the music. At the end of the night, the euphoric dissolution causes the characters to also forget their circumstances: "Me doy cuenta de que no me acuerdo cómo volví a mi casa [. . .] De lo último que me acuerdo es de mi pie derecho siguiendo el ritmo de la música y de estar temblando frenéticamente. No me acuerdo del momento en que dejé de temblar, ni de nada de lo que pasó después" (48) (I realize I don't remember how I got home [. . .] The last thing I remember is my right foot following the rhythm of the music and shaking frenetically. I can't recall the moment when I stopped shaking, nor anything that happened afterwards).
 17. Following Birgit Richard and Heinz Krüger's study on dance culture in the context of the raves that took place in abandoned factories during the late 1980s, it is possible to think that Silvia, while dancing, does work. Nevertheless, this dance is a provocative form of expression because it does *not* produce any economic profit.
 18. For Simon Frith, listening and dancing to music are in themselves performative acts, since dancing is not only a "form of enhanced listening," but also "an ideological way of listening, it draws our attention to arguments about its own meaning" (224).
 19. Communication, as much as meaning, says Barthes, produces obvious signs, fixed, stereotyped, symbols whose clarity is culturally constructed. It is more important to look for obtuse senses, those almost-signs that hide among the most unpredictable folds of discourse that hit the body more than the mind of the reader. The obtuse sense originates, as a signifier with no specific signified, from the very materiality of music, as something that it is beyond sense or nonsense, but at the level of significance (*Lo obvio*).

20. In *Silvia Prieto*, dancing is a form of first-person experience that resists articulation or representation in the category of the subject. The process of abandonment and disappearance that results from dancing shows that subjectivity, more than the position of the self, articulates a form of experience in which the self and the world are difficult to distinguish. In this particular experience of music, subjectivity is the life of the subject conceived as a potentiality for producing an internal criticism of the category of the subject, understood as an identity linked to representation.

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