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## Deviations and Displacements of Motherhood: On Ana Katz's *Mi amiga del parque* (2015)

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### Abstract:

Drawing upon gender studies, feminist theory, and film analysis, we examine *Mi amiga del parque* (Ana Katz, 2015) with the aim of investigating how film genres are questioned as part of a critique of class and gender relations. We argue that the feminist mark of Katz's cinema brings about an attitude which is akin to the act of listening: it does not promote a lecture-like verbiage, but amplifies a keen perception of social repetition processes. The film's anticipatory position not only rejects univocal, closed, self-contained or propaganda-like rhetoric, but also contributes to the extremely vital presentation of structural and ideological conflicts expressed in family and social contradictions, starting with the relationships between women. Our conclusions show the profound innovation regarding genres linked to the positing of new gender relations that resist patriarchal capitalist ties.

### Keywords:

Contemporary Argentine Cinema; Gender; Motherhood; Comedy; Friendship

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### Unnerving weirdness

In one of his 'chronicles of the crossing', Paul B. Preciado imagines the world as a gigantic theatre company in which we all play pre-established roles in a single, ludicrous play:

Some call the acceptance of the staging that was assigned to us faith or approval of the divine plan, others call it social determinism or human nature, neo-liberalism speaks of the law of free market as if it was a weather index, and the psychology of the self turns identity into a quantifiable object which would lead every actor or actress to posit as true, authentic and irreplaceable his or her role in the set.

(2020a: 194)

On that stage of sorts in which the time of performance matches life and where actors are the audience, no one directs the play: God, human nature, the market, and identity are nothing but fictions crafted over the ongoing exercise of collective theatricalization. However, even though the roles may appear immutable, there are deviations.

Some films —either due to their sensual intensity, their articulation of the plot, their staging, or the configuration of their characters— refuse to accept the established formulas in the unequal distribution of material, symbolic, and erotic powers and goods, unraveling the eerie traits which undermine reality. Lucrecia Martel's cinema explores this line of the weird masterfully.<sup>1</sup> Other contemporary works also manage to challenge the theatre of the world, opening up parentheses between the lines of our everyday script, with its inertias and unconscious dynamics. Ana Katz's cinema can be studied along these lines.<sup>2</sup> While, to borrow Sigmund Freud's term, the *unheimlich* reveals that which was destined to remain secret or hidden, her fictions rewrite the uncanny into the familiar. In contrast with a theory based on

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<sup>1</sup> Studies of contemporary Argentine cinema have focused mainly on the discussion of the works of Lucrecia Martel, as well as other directors which comprise the core of what has been termed 'New Argentine Cinema' and their predecessors, Pablo Trapero, Adrián Caetano, Bruno Stagnaro, Martín Rejtman; or on the widely revisited works of Albertina Carri. By contrast, Ana Katz's filmography has been seldom explored so far. As regards *Mi amiga del parque*, in particular, see Mariano Dagatti's and Julia Kratje's (2015) essay, which focuses on the way in which the park represents a community of equals based on class and gender differences. This recently emerged community tries to achieve an alliance to counter the problem of loneliness through collective support for the act of parenting. Thus, it differs, at least partially, from state- or family-related institutions and the market, that lay down universal rules and precepts regarding what motherhood is expected to be. This work, which aims to discuss or supplement that line of interpretation which highlights the harmonious or utopian hues of fiction, addresses the structural problems which pervade public and private spaces.

<sup>2</sup> According to Mark Fisher, 'a failure of absence or a failure of presence' (2018: 75) constitutes the eerie, which is related to the unknown which, once discovered, disappears; while the weird refers to a presence, more or less exorbitant, 'which does not belong' (2018: 76), and that is why it creates an experience of thresholds.

the analysis of E. T. A. Hoffmann's story *The Sandman*, which is —not only, but also— a reimagining of the myth of Pygmalion (that is, the creation of a woman from male desire, and aimed at satisfying that desire) Katz's films show what is normally disguised, and juxtaposes ways of life, gestures, and phrases whose coexistence is, at least, awkward. Thus, they produce a kind of disturbance linked to the 'weird', defined by Mark Fisher as something which 'denaturalizes all worlds exposing their instability, their openness to the outside' (2018, 36). Just as in the case of the grotesque, rooted in the ambivalence of the comedic and that which is not compatible with laughter, the feeling of the weird points to that which is out of place.

Indeed, the weird and the grotesque represent categories of the body which suggest an excess relative to the normal or to norms, and, like every deviation, threaten all established forms. Mary Russo (1995), in her study of the grotesque based on Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival theory and Freud's concept of the sinister, posits that the word itself evokes a cavernous physiognomy ('*the grotto-esque*'): low, hidden, earthly, dark, material, immanent, visceral, anatomically close to representations of the female body. Katz's filmography implies, in this sense, a painstaking scrutiny of common sense, challenged from a poetics in which the weird and the grotesque are mediated by humor. Shortly after the 2001 economic crisis, she premiered her first feature film, *El juego de la silla* (2003), whose starting point, as in all of her movies, is a minute story, against the background of a family, shown from an unusual and frankly incisive angle. In her subsequent films, *Una novia errante* (2006), *Los Marziano* (2011), *Mi amiga del parque* (2015), *Sueño Florianópolis* (2018) and *El perro que no calla* (2021), the scripts deploy those witty and extravagant traits, drawing attention to certain circumstances of everyday life which prove unexpected and, just as they overturn the character's lives, create a sense of awkwardness in the viewers. That disturbance, which blooms as a hiatus amid more or less common situations, grows dramatically in her fourth feature film, which is the focus of this essay.

*Mi amiga del parque* tells the story of Liz (Julieta Zylberberg), a first-time mother who has just moved with her baby into a new house. As her husband (Daniel Hendler) is shooting a documentary on a volcano, they communicate sporadically via Skype. Liz appears to be somewhat lost. She is alone. Her father leaves messages on her answering machine with quotes by the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra, his grandson's namesake. She clearly needs help, and that is why she hires a nanny, Jazmina (Mirella Pascual)<sup>3</sup>, who will make it possible for her to resume her activities and her work at a publishing house. To enjoy the winter sun, she takes Nicanor to the park, where a group of mothers and the occasional father convenes to share confessions, insecurities, experiences, and points of view as regards parenting and care. There, Liz meets two sisters, Rosa (Ana Katz) and Renata (Maricel Álvarez), 'the R sisters' —from Cora's (Malena Figó) disapproving point of view—, with whom she establishes a special friendship.

Following Marcela Visconti (2021), in the last few years, Argentine cinema has shown a shift in terms of representations of motherhood: films such as *Alanis* (Anahí Berneri, 2017), *Desmadre, fragmentos de una relación* (Sabrina Farji, 2018), *Niña mama* (Andrea Testa, 2019), *Hogar* (Maura Delpero, 2019), *Mala madre* (Amparo Aguilar, 2019), *Mamá, mamá, mamá* (Sol Barruezo, 2020), and *Las motitos* (Gabriela Vidal and Inés María Barrionuevo, 2020), among others, take apart the traditional and idealized portrayal in open reference to the discussions which took place in the public arena and in the media as regards girls, teenagers, and women who go through pregnancies, deliveries, and forced or unwanted motherhood or which take place in contexts of economic vulnerability. In this sense, it should be pointed out that Katz's film is contemporary to the women's movement which, under the wing of the first edition of the 2015 'Ni Una Menos' demonstrations, renovated the drive of feminist activism

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<sup>3</sup> According to the credits, the name that Liz pronounces 'Yazmina' is spelled 'Jazmina'.

and of women and sexual dissidence collectives, after decades of collective struggles aimed at conquering fundamental rights, such as the Law of Access to the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy, ultimately passed in December 2020. *Mi amiga del parque* emerges, thus, as a trailblazing endeavor, highly original and disconcerting, which manages to channel certain structures of feeling, deeply-rooted in the context of the second wave of feminism, and which find a large-scale resonance chamber, articulated around the struggle for legalizing abortion throughout the country.<sup>4</sup> ‘The subject of abortion should be in every home, because it has to do with solidarity and it has to do with freedom’, says a character during one of the parenting meetings. The feminist mark of Katz’s cinema brings about an attitude which is akin to the act of listening: it does not promote a lecture-like verbiage, but amplifies a keen perception of social repetition processes. The film’s anticipatory position, which following Raymond Williams (1980) could be classified as ‘emerging’, not only rejects univocal, closed, self-contained or propaganda-like rhetoric, but also contributes to the extremely vital presentation of structural and ideological conflicts expressed in family and social contradictions, starting with the relationships between women.<sup>5</sup>

### Urban dislocations

The word is sign, but also sound, practice, and dispute. By focusing on the multiple heterogeneous and conflicting fabrics which make up subjectivities and social bonds, *Mi amiga del parque* manages to disrupt the semiotic structure surrounding motherhood. What does it mean to be a mother? Is there a meaning, a mission, a single narrative? How many ways of exercising motherhood fit into a movie or even a single character? Katz’s work leads one to wonder what motherhood is, to shift the borders enclosing motherhood, what it includes and what it excludes, unfurling a series of non-exclusive possibilities: overwhelmed mothers, mothers in motion, lesbian mothers, adoptive mothers, single mothers, mothers without vocation. Absurd and outrageous, their paths upset the ideal prescribed by the hegemonic order of sexual reproduction. The film works as a magnifying glass which reveals the habits and behaviors, the routines and rituals surrounding motherhood. In a challenge to the patriarchal economy, over the course of its 86 minutes of runtime the film covers several shortcuts of the myth.

The delineation of a claustrophobic topography which isolates the protagonist mother, (from a well-off middle-class background) together with her son, within four walls, coexists with the outdoor adventures of other relatives, friends, and community relationships. One late Autumn morning, by the toddler swings, two very different women meet (their first appearance heralds this difference: Liz sports a blazer in neutral tones, matching her warm and sober wool sweater, which marks a contrast with an oversized knit mustard-colored scarf, which in turn matches her straight auburn hair; in the polar opposite of casual style, with an overflow of curls and an asymmetrically-shaved style which makes her large earrings stand out, Rosa finds

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4 In Argentina, particularly as regards feminism in Buenos Aires, the second wave refers to the experiences which took place between the 1970s and the 1990s, which, following the genealogy researched by Mónica Tarducci, Catalina Trebisacce and Karin Grammatico (2019), have lines of continuity with current struggles. Against that backdrop, since the first demonstration, in 2015, Ni Una Menos has become, as explained by Florencia Angilletta, ‘the grammar adopted by the movement of women and sexual dissidences when juxtaposing historical memories and the fight against gender-based violence, first; the re-discussion of work; second; and the implementation of comprehensive sexual education and the legalization of the voluntary interruption of pregnancy as means to transform the production, reproduction, and care of life’ (2021: 19).

<sup>5</sup> When we say ‘women’ we refer to a fictional, plural construction, politically able to make visible multiple social and subjective positions, and to relate with other collectives and sexual identities in a mosaic of consensuses and contradictions.

warmth in a practical, fitted turquoise turtleneck and a bright-colored puffer jacket which do not match, and also clash with an out-of-fashion denim skirt over long socks). Notwithstanding their clothes, which speak volumes by themselves, the park takes the center stage. Announced in the title, it describes the bond between the protagonists, who are not only friends, but “park friends.”

Against the despotic and alienating rhythm of the working city, cafés and particularly parks appear as the quintessential spaces for reflection and introspection, and in turn encourage non-alienated interpersonal relationships, unlike the regular movement across the city, in which public space is used as a tube, opaque and deaf, connecting two places. Perceptions are stimulated in the civilizing green,<sup>6</sup> to borrow a concept from Domingo F. Sarmiento, in a recreational space, opposed to the noisy, chaotic and colorful means of transportation, avenues and streets leading with one-way effectiveness towards a destination. In the less-crowded spaces, those opposed to the dual rationale of work and consumption, the *public* space of leisure, not a private one, is brought to the foreground as the dominant space for bonds overdetermined by the economic structure of society, but partially protected from urban hyper-rationality. A walk, a stroll through the park, involves a relationship with the space in which random, unforeseen events can be multiplied. ‘Anachronic in the contemporary world, which favors speed, utility, performance, effectiveness, the walk is an act of resistance which favors slowness, availability, conversation, silence, curiosity, friendship, the useless’, writes David Le Breton (2014, 14). A walk of this nature has no regard for the destination, because time is set free from the ceaseless pendulum which marks the progression (an experience of time which, incidentally, resembles the circularity of the post-partum period, the repetitive cadence of reproduction and care, though a day out, a stroll, makes it possible to experience new rhythms and itineraries not defined by the closed bond between the mother and her baby).

As proven by researchers from anthropology and human geography (cf. Massey 1998; Segato 2003; Smith 2008), spaces cannot be dissociated from a gender and class structure which establishes the rules of circulation and defines both social and territorial boundaries. The social distribution of spaces works as a regulation of gender relationships and of more-or-less prescribed, more-or-less allowed, more-or-less punished movements of bodies. Thus, the urban space expresses the social processes by which gender rules are assigned. For that reason, it is almost unnecessary to point out that the organization and the operation of spaces largely stem from the differentiation of the productive and reproductive aspects of societies. Naturally, within that framework, relaxing spaces such as parks and squares are designed for practices related to care and leisure.

The park, an agora of sorts for private relationships, which are now eminently political, is also a space open to the unknown, to alterity, and also one of the select environments in which a convergence of different economic and social classes is to a certain degree possible.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> As Diego Armus (2007) indicates, three images of urban green were recurrent between the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th: green as a lung, civilizing green, and green for recreation (2007: 48). These ideas were linked to a regenerationist program: In the last third of the 19th century, some associated this civilizing green with a democratic setting. Sarmiento, in particular, was enthusiastic about the idea of a great Central Park in Buenos Aires, there because he wanted to see one of the places where the refunding discourse of nationality was linked to an educational program for the masses and to an incipient social right. Thus, he observed that ‘in a society that is made up of many superimposed societies but without a cohesive bond, [...] only in a vast, artistic and accessible park people will be a people: only here there will be neither foreigners, nor nationals, nor commoners’ and that both the natives and the Europeans of the city, very few frequenters of the park, should be reeducated in order to learn to use ‘that rural atmosphere to exercise and fill the lungs with air.’ Guillermo Rawson also based the need for green and open spaces in the urban fabric as a right of the city dweller, whatever their condition, and stated that ‘before light and air, all [were] equal and it is necessary to give them in abundance to all’ (Armus, 2007: 53-54).

<sup>7</sup> From the “kindergarten” to the “Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo”, an arc of metaphors could be outlined around the green environment, from the recreational establishment to the political reappropriations in a feminine/feminist

As a space for the meeting of women (and of children), the park *can* (but need not) be the stage for a feminine (not necessarily feminist, and perhaps even male chauvinist) alliance, where some forms of everyday life are shared, transformed, and reinvented. The park encourages meeting other women who are not relatives (mother, sisters, aunts, grandmothers) or workmates or (at least not yet) friends: other women who could spend time with a new mother. And Liz is indeed alone. She does not lack money (quite the contrary, as the film would appear to suggest when it adopts Rosa's point of view), but she lacks a supportive network; more precisely, a female supportive network: her only friend—at least the only friend shown to us in the film—is a man, Lucho (Mariano Sayavedra), a rather self-centered theatre director who does not question his male privileges. The park, then, is the stage upon which certain supportive and knowing bonds are weaved which ultimately lead to an incipient friendship based on a feminine alliance of women from different social classes.

Leaving the comfort of our home and going to the park to receive the weak rays of the sun and let the cold wind wake us, encourages a connection to nature: the lush vegetation, a survivor of the city's domestication or suppression of green spaces, frames Liz's stroll along a magnificent palm tree-lined avenue. It also frames Liz's, Rosa's and Renata's playful shared walk, when they visit 'a beautiful place, with trees'—as Rosa says when she invites Liz—to share a day out, where they are the ones playing in the woods and having fun exchanging clothes. The park, with its imposing trees, feeds the fictional universe: opposed to the imagery which defines boundaries between indoor and outdoor spaces, it enables the emergence of inter-subjective and community experiences which dodge the rigorous separation of social spaces; a third space of sorts, a land of indetermination, capable of challenging, suspending or redefining rigid individual identities, without necessarily celebrating their simple integration. A space for dispute, but also for leisure, this urban garden frames a space suitable for bodies, relations, and individual and social contradictions to be put into motion. The park is a contact zone in which the parenting experience escapes its groove.

### Counterpoints of motherhood

An ear trained in disassembling assumptions and mandates enables a sense of wonder to emerge, and that wonder leads to questioning: facing automatic behaviors which are rendered invisible by their naturalization, the script, jointly written by Ana Katz and Inés Bortagaray, makes it possible to glimpse details, gestures and phrases which synthesize widespread and powerful platitudes which in everyday life may be assimilated or ignored, but prove problematic in the film.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to the work's organization, certain phrases uttered in passing, certain jokes made lightly, and certain dialogues which are seemingly irrelevant receive enough attention to reveal codes crystallized through asymmetric power relationships. Having said that, the film makes a point of not stressing those formulas: its ingenuity and sensitivity lie precisely in the skill with which it negotiates the threshold of affectation thanks to a sense of humor

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key. Along with this chain of associations, the square and the park constitute public spaces that enable numerous women to build communities among peers, in contrast to their jobs in private homes. Following Pappas-DeLuca's observations on the experience of domestic workers migrating from Chile's rural areas to Santiago (in Silvia Federici, 2020) having a presence in the public space, occupying public space has proven a very effective way of organizing.

<sup>8</sup> Some specific details of daily life represented in the film are indicated by Michael Karrer (2017) in a theoretical analysis that opposes the tradition of film genres to a cinema-feminist and made by women that focuses on daily aspects and plots. In his article, Karrer discusses three films by Milagros Mumenthaler (*Abrir puertas y ventanas*), Ana Katz (*Mi amiga del parque*) and Julia Pesce (*Nosotras Ellas*). Regarding Katz's film, Karrer indicates that, although the director works in this film within the framework of the comedy genre, she incorporates aspects of the tradition of modern cinema, that represent everyday life.

which keeps at bay artificial solemnity (thus avoiding the pitfall of a melodramatic style or an overacting of individual drama).<sup>9</sup> *Mi amiga del parque* captures prefabricated gestures: confronting a hurtful message, the film does not disguise (or highlight) its (classist and sexist) motivations, but rather steps around the saying, formula or platitude with a halo of weirdness. Like the drop of water which slowly but surely scars a rock, as the story moves forward, these minor statements—which are customarily overlooked as mere figures of speech, things that are given, messages which do not justify scrutiny—are no longer innocent nor irrelevant. Words bounce and reveal their true nature. It is no longer possible to avoid them by playing the fool. Fears and insecurities, inherent to motherhood, inseparable from lack of experience, from isolation, from the position in society or, why not, from the right to not know everything or to an uncertain desire, are underestimated, contested, denied or annulled by those who claim a supervisory position for themselves.<sup>10</sup> Jazmina's rhetorical interrogation, for instance, is at times admonishing, patronizing and condescending: 'Do you smoke, Liz? Did you sleep on the couch?', or 'You should save a day for grocery shopping. I bring up groceries because you look a bit thin. As does Nica.' 'Nicanor is the only important thing here', says Darío (played by Diego De Paula), an international publisher. During Liz's consultation with the pediatrician (Tomás Newkirk), who kindly explains the responsibilities of a supportive mother with the paternal and proverbial language of medical advice, when she asks whether she can take her son to the park in spite of the cold, the doctor jokingly replies that 'children in Patagonia would never go out otherwise.' These phrases reverberate sharply, thanks to the editing which immediately cuts these dialogues short and moves on to a different scene.

Dialogues are rife with platitudes, recriminations or patronizing statements, and, in general, mannerisms marked by class positions and gender inequalities which lead to misunderstandings and, in turn, reveal premises and assumptions surrounding the expectations of motherhood. 'I don't know what I thought, what association I made', Liz says when she realizes that it was Renata, and not Rosa, who gave birth to Clarisa. The association is very clear, because the viewer infers the same thing: if a young woman is at a park with a toddler and treats him with familiarity, she *must be* the mother. To dispel that misunderstanding, which stems from automatic inferences, relations are spelled out to an almost absurd degree: 'Rosa, aunt Rosa, aunt Rosa, now you know. From now on, I'm aunt Rosa'. But the topic returns, because, from the protagonist's point of view, Renata's and Rosa's dual motherhood creates awkward ambiguity and displacement. In fact, at one point, when dealing with Renata's plan to move to the town of Saladillo, Liz voices out her reservations: 'You're like her mom, but you're not her mom', is her objection. To which Rosa replies with thinly-veiled irony: 'Oh, I see you understand it perfectly.' These miscommunications and misunderstandings are a paradigmatic mark of the film, which can be traced in almost all of the relations portrayed. Means of communication, thus, are full of these misunderstandings and the instances in which they are made explicit.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This play with genre conventions is deepened further below.

<sup>10</sup> 'And how's breast-feeding coming along?', asks Lucho. 'Well... I couldn't breastfeed him, because I had no milk, so it was the bottle for him [...] It kills me, I swear', says Liz before bursting into tears. The female body becomes a matter of opinion and judgment for others, and motherhood exacerbates that behavior. The experience of being a mother amplifies the cultural norms which define the imperatives ruling over the lives of women.

<sup>11</sup> These misunderstandings can be seen, for instance, when Rosa and Liz first meet: Rosa asks Liz whether she has a partner: 'Yes, but he's in Chile, working, so it's just the two of us.' Rosa quickly classifies Liz as a single mother, and when Liz says she is not in fact single, Rosa replies: 'Well, I mean... faraway husband. Single mom... husband away, you know.' Something similar happens regarding the car and the rest of the mothers and fathers in the park, in a tense scene in which they try to ascertain what happened to Seba's (Daniel Katz) car. 'I honestly feel we're not communicating. This doesn't work for me', Liz says to Gustavo. Along the same lines: 'You and me, we don't understand each other' (Rosa to Liz), 'I think we're not understanding each other, it doesn't work

Requests for help are also widespread.<sup>12</sup> Renata and Rosa ask for help time and again, they try to forge alliances and appear to be the most aware of that need of mutual support. They are also the ones most willing to help. The car is presented as an ally, as a symbol of female independence, and as a vehicle for alliances. Movement, circulation and exchanges which are not commercial in nature, but affectionate and material, characterize the bonds between Rosa, Renata, and Liz, and they tentatively place a question mark next to the ideas of property and possession, and that includes the bonds between mother and son: *my* baby, *my* son. ‘Did you tell her that Clarisa was yours?’, Renata asks Rosa. By the end of the film, Rosa, who is not Clarisa’s mother but *like* her mother, as Liz translates with innocence and cruelty, keeps Clarisa.

That disposition towards listening, which hints at a capacity for wonder, bring Katz’s cinema closer to the universe of childhood: beyond the plot, specific expressions, and the inclusion of games, laughter, and mischief between Liz, Rosa, and Renata, the soundtrack written by Leo Maslíah instills an affectionate climate which creates empathy and awkwardness, a progressive rarefaction of the world of motherhood and childhood. A simple melody, performed in light percussive instruments, which reminds us of mobiles and merry-go-rounds, crystallizes the climate of unease. The music creates suspense at the place in which the diegetic and the extradiegetic meet, as if it was an acoustic membrane capable of capturing and conveying Liz’s mood: the cyclical, circular, recursive and hypnotic effects which flutter in her head mingle with bittersweet emotions (and that is why the arpeggio which mimics a cradle toy finishes in the leading tone of the chord, precisely a note that creates awkwardness and tension, which is why nursery rhymes tend to avoid it; and that is why the triple time signature typical of merry-go-rounds is highlighted, but with a metallic, tinny sound, as if the inner mechanism was broken).

### **Distrust, disinterest, disregard**

In a recent interview, Katz summarized one of the central conflicts of the plot as ‘a meeting of classes.’<sup>13</sup> This formulation modifies and reinterprets, without avoiding, the central concept of class struggle as a major issue in society. At the center of the question about that meeting, about that dispute and about that alliance, lies the issue of how each character views motherhood and solidarity, or, perhaps, motherhood as an expression of solidarity towards those in need, a social solidarity, not natural, but constructed. Liz is devoted to reproductive care; so is Rosa, but she is not Clarisa’s biological mother. Rosa works (she is an operator at a cardboard factory), and so does Liz (at a publishing house, where she writes ‘some things’, as she tells Rosa), though

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this way’ (Jazmina to Liz), ‘We’re not understanding each other’ (Gustavo to Liz), ‘We clearly don’t understand each other’ (Liz to Gustavo).

<sup>12</sup> Liz tells Jazmina: ‘What I need is someone to help me. I’m a bit overwhelmed. I moved here recently and... perhaps someone who can help with the house? Someone who can help me, organize my day a bit’. The tone she uses for that request for ‘help’ reveals a certain tension in the relationship with Jazmina. Her speech mixes a clear necessity for ‘help’ with a view of domestic work as a type of ‘help’, which works as a mitigating, euphemistic mark of speech, widely used among women who employ other women; women from different social strata who, based on the traditional and persistent sexual division of labor, are in charge of managing the household economy, which includes the hiring of staff and nannies. Jazmina replies: ‘I think we’ll do well. Besides, you don’t have your mom, and you look rather lonely’. ‘Do you want me to help?’ is the first thing Rosa says to Liz when they meet at the swings, noticing that Liz is unable to properly place Nicanor in the swing chair. ‘I think we can help each other, Liz. I have a proposition for you’, says Rosa straightforwardly when they are leaving the pizza restaurant. Assertiveness, on the one hand, and circumvention, on the other, are clues which suggest the clashing ways of thinking about the possibilities of material and symbolic exchange between women from different classes.

<sup>13</sup> See: ‘Directoras contemporáneas 1 - Ana Katz entrevistada por Julia Kratje’, March 31, 2021. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tu7wYoX5nw>



she is not working at the time. It would appear she does not need to work to maintain her standard of living, whereas Rosa must work and sell bread at the park to make ends meet. Rosa has no access, at least partially, to the park as a place for recreation, precisely because it is a place for work. This suggests that, for women from more vulnerable backgrounds, there are no spaces (or times) which can be fully devoted to leisure and entertainment. This difference is central when analyzing the feminine (and perhaps, just perhaps, feminist) alliance. ‘Sisterhood with those who are exactly like me is cheating’, the director pointed out very seriously and not without controversy (2021).

There are many elements which speak of the class differences between Liz, a writer (who does not currently write), and Rosa, a street vendor and factory operator. With utter candor and just as utter poor taste, Cora (styled *Monotema* [single-minded] by Rosa) tells Liz that ‘the R sisters’ are ‘not like you and me’. Even if Cora fails to know it or to acknowledge it, ‘like you and me’ means ‘proper’, well-off middle-class women, most likely homeowners, more or less progressive in their views, more or less *hippie chic* in terms of style. And though Liz does not want to accept that statement, she also shares in this class-related worldview (despite the fact that she is the least prejudiced and the most caring among these progressive mothers).

Liz shares Cora’s worldview and, most importantly, her privileges. It is interesting to focus on the way in which the circulation of clothes, money, and food is portrayed, also organized around gender and class. These series of transfers could be linked to the exchange of objects in the narrative of Martín Rejtman’s cinema, where the intense movement of clothing over different bodies is a mark of the author which, according to Emilio Bernini (2008), follows rationales of progress and accumulation. Though similar, the dynamics of the movement of clothes in *Mi amiga del parque* is not the same. Liz and Rosa exchange their coats, and Rosa then gives Liz’s to Renata. The viewer could expect the free movement of clothes in the market of bodies to continue indefinitely, as in *Silvia Prieto* (1999), but it does not. Katz crafts an extremely keen variation on that motif. The flow is cut short. Liz demands for the exchange to be undone.<sup>14</sup> Renata passes Rosa the coat, who gives it back to Liz, who then returns Rosa’s coat. The exchanges are rewound for a very simple reason: Liz likes her elegant coat better than Rosa’s badly-worn one. As *habitus*, clothing also structures economic and cultural differences and inequalities, in this case, surrounding a taste stemming from class choices and behaviors which Liz does not want (at least not yet) to mix up.<sup>15</sup> As David Viñas has said, it is easier to change your sex than your social class.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Following the study by Emilio Bernini, in Rejtman’s cinema, by contrast, ‘when that which the characters do (their unforeseen decisions) is devoid of content, when it does not stem from precise causes, a path opens up towards an indefinite series of unmotivated actions. The stories move forward as a result of these; and, in the longest among those stories, they cause a weird, albeit light, forgetting of the beginning, as actions only work as ties in the story’s continuity, and, thus, are less based on the characters’ psychology, their inner world or their private sphere’ (2008: 36-37). If Rejtman’s rationale of accumulation causes characters to lack depth or elaboration—David Oubiña (2005), in fact, points out that situations lack continuity in Rejtman, saying that ‘they leave no wake’—, similarly to what Erich Auerbach (1983) says about Ulysses in *Mimesis*, the spiral logic of Katz weaves phrases, objects, inter-subjective bonds and situations which propel the characters’ development forward, so that the characters acquire the weight and depth of their own stories, never returning to their starting points, but undergoing a transformation.

<sup>15</sup> In relation to this line of analysis, Bourdieu’s notion can be taken up again: “The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor” (Bourdieu, 1992: 53)→

<sup>16</sup> This phrase was said by David Viñas in a conference at the University of Buenos Aires in 1998.

Along those lines, Rosa and Jazmina point out their class difference relative to Liz. When speaking of Liz's problems, Jazmina gives her an abridged account of her life and tells her, with unrequested frankness, that she is 'just bellyaching.' Rosa, instead, downplaying the schedule Liz tries to keep with Nicanor, says out loud: 'And what if he won't sleep? It's not like he's got work tomorrow.' Liz does not have work tomorrow either, the viewer may add. Thus, the movie shows that Liz's problems, while real (as real as her loneliness and her lack of a supportive network) are petty bourgeois problems, or, to borrow the concept from the days of President Menem, the concerns of rich boys who feel sad (incidentally, the Menemist discourse showed a complete disregard for gender issues). In effect, Liz faces no economic hardships, but she does suffer the consequences of the gender-based divide in her household's economy. We could say this refers to issues linked with what Betty Friedan, in her now-classic *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), called 'the problem that has no name', because Liz's problem is closely related to the fact that she finds no fulfillment in her role as mother and partner to Gustavo (who, it should be pointed out, is absent as a partner and as a father), but would prefer to work, write, do what she likes, as she clearly says to Gustavo: 'I could be working too; I work, too, when you let me'<sup>17</sup>.

To achieve an alliance spanning clear class differences, Liz has to walk a long path of class suspicions, challenging the model put forward by Cora, who champions a feminine (but not feminist), male chauvinist and classist solidarity.<sup>18</sup> Cora states: 'If we don't help each other...', leaving the end of the phrase unsaid. That 'we' includes only those who are 'like you and me', never 'the R sisters.' The film is subtle and sharp because Liz achieves but a weak solidarity after a long struggle. Though Liz, as we said, is the most progressive among the group of progressive mothers who take their children to the park, the most sensitive and the least prejudiced, she cannot help herself. Her mistrust towards women from other classes is pervasive: she leaves the bathroom door ajar to spy on Jazmina, and she goes through Rosa's and Renata's purses. In several passages, this lack of trust fuels the fears of Liz, who based on her prejudices blames Rosa and Renata and views them as a threat: this happens, for instance, when they first meet, and Liz dares not leave Nicanor with Rosa (to the point of taking the stroller with her to the restroom in the pizza restaurant). We can also see it when she takes for a real weapon the toy gun she finds in Renata's purse. We confirm that these misinterpretations stem from her class affiliation and class-based fear when Jazmina, taking the toy gun in her hands, immediately knows it is harmless. The viewers share Liz's misunderstanding because they share (or tend to share) her point of view. The viewers, then, must also use a new signifier to designate that replica they took for a real gun. In the last of her real fears rooted in imaginary causes, Liz assaults Rosa, who has just asked Renata to take Nicanor to the park. This mistrust of the lower classes is a key trait of Liz's character and an element which the movie painstakingly covers. It is a fear linked to encroachment and invasion of private life and

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<sup>17</sup> The Alliance between women from different classes can take place, but not miraculously, as in the highly-criticized ending of *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927) or in the prior Argentine film *Juan sin ropa* (Georges Benoît, 1919), where the alliance dissolves the conflict and reinstates the original role of classes in relations of production. In *Mi amiga del parque*, by contrast, the conflict is never fully dissolved, and the alliance takes place inverting the preexisting relations of production.

<sup>18</sup> Cora would appear to be against abortion, or, at least, against the issue being discussed in that circumstance: 'This is not the time', she says, with an ambiguity which would appear to refer to her immediate context, her home, and in front of the children, and simultaneously to the historical context (it should be remembered that, in the political realm, 'this is not the time' was the argument used by a significant part of Kirchnerist activists to postpone the treatment of the law enabling the voluntary interruption of pregnancy in parliament, with the goal of prioritizing party cohesion or election objectives). We follow bell hooks (2017) in her idea that there is no feminism tailored to each woman, that you cannot be a feminist in whichever way you choose, because there are issues which directly affect the rights of all women and make up the historical struggle of feminism, which include the right to voluntarily interrupt pregnancy.

property, which could very well be shared by all the other young, progressive mothers and fathers in the park.

### **Genre and gender reformulations**

By challenging common sense and hegemonic normative practices, Katz's cinema opens up a place in which to think about or discover a new film genre, which cannot be restricted to conventional historical frameworks. The worldview regarding motherhood has undergone transformations in the light of a horizon shaped by the feminist wave. This makes it possible to imagine and crystallize other bonds different from the ones prescribed, and also to portray them. This is about changing the script of one's own life, mobilizing an existing state of affairs towards a different one. It is a 'worrying comedy', as its producer Nicolás Avruj tried to define it, and it is necessary to delve into the reasons behind the choice of adjective.

'The invention of the social figure of the biological-domestic mother, which goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the definition of the mother-son bond as the only truly constitutive one has forced us to erase the significance of other relations', argues Preciado (2020b: 201). This rejects other ways of exercising motherhood and, at the same time, chains the mother to the family household. The bond between the mother and the home is thus naturalized, and the bond between the mother and the child is sacralized. However, the modern mother is but a mask behind which other mothers, to whom recognition of their bond has been denied, are hidden<sup>19</sup>. Constantly haunted by the guilt of neglecting the household, the biological mother has the simultaneous obligation of supervising the caring of her children when she is not available, and of suppressing, affectively and politically, the presence of the substitute (Preciado, 2020b: 201). This argument resonates with the study by Rita Segato (2013) of the various bonds established between the mother, the nanny and the baby or child, conditioned by class and race inequalities. The bond with the baby, thus, opens up a place of ambivalence. Is the nanny a 'caring machine', simple labor with whom the biological mother cannot forge an alliance overcoming rivalry, suspicion, and mistrust? Can we only have, by fact and by law, one mother?

'When certain freedoms appear in certain scenarios, fear emerges', said Katz in the aforementioned interview. Perhaps, then, this is a 'worrying' movie on account of its focus on the fear of a radical change, of its positing a question centered on danger. Or rather, we can see an openness to danger in the innovative ways of discussing motherhood and feminine alliances oriented towards a future society, embodied in children. The role models of motherhood (and the supposedly exemplary mothers) are erased as a constructive principle. You are not born a mother, but become one, and all mothers in the film (eminently, Liz, Renata, and Rosa, but also laterally Cora, Jazmina, and the rest of the mothers in the park) must become mothers based on their own experiences and subjectivities, and not based on a preceding role model (or based on a mother-image which works as example or mandate). The seed of the friendship

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<sup>19</sup> Following Nora Domínguez, 'motherhood can be considered a social relation in that it creates bonds, practices, and desires, builds identities, circulates values, bodies, and discourses, produces belief and is in turn produced by belief. Being a mother does not mean only conceiving and giving birth to a child, but following a series of practices and actions which regulate a specific sentimental production. Motherhood is not only the place of a cause, but also the place of multiple social effects. Motherhood has its own laws, its own materiality, and its own regime, power, and economy' (2007: 39). In the social order which resonates in Katz's film, the mother is no longer exclusively responsible and loving, sexually passive, needy in terms of male affection and protection, as crystallized in the 'Woman = Mother' idea which over decades organized the fabric of domestic prescriptions. Rather, everyday life in the context of the capitalist domestic environment would appear to be regulated by other directives: being a cool, relaxed and neat mother, a professional and domestic woman, a faithful and desiring wife.

between Liz and Renata friendship lies precisely in the shared reality that of their mothers have recently passed away.

Reflecting on classic Hollywood cinema and its links with the advancement of women's rights in the context of private life during the 1930s and 1940s, in contrast with the achievement of the right to vote in 1920, Stanley Cavell makes a distinction between the 'melodrama of the unknown woman' and the 'comedy of remarriage' as genres. In the latter, the father or father figure contributes to the fulfillment of the daughter's wishes; the mother figure, however, is absent. The protagonist of the main couple is not portrayed as a full-fledged mother, precisely because the traditional role of woman (as a mother, among others) is challenged. These are women who are at a crossroads in their lives, linked to the forging of an identity. In that context, motherhood is but a possibility. Against that theme, in the melodrama of the unknown woman, in which the protagonist has no chance to talk to her partner to build herself into a new woman, 'her mother is always present (or the search for or loss of or the competition with a mother is always present), and she is always shown as a mother (or her relation to a child is explicit)' (Cavell, 2008: 110). Thus, in the melodrama, the woman portrayed is anchored in the traditional gender figure, largely determined by the feminine figures of the past and doomed by that past, with her back to the future, into which, by contrast, the comedy opens up.

In this sense, *Mi amiga del parquet* can be analyzed in consonance with the comedy of remarriage, due to that openness to the future, but also due to the presence of the 'green world', which Cavell posits is a space for leisure and reflection which makes that openness possible (2008: 110), far from the world of the past in the melodrama, which dooms woman to lack of knowledge and seeks to bar her transformation.<sup>20</sup> The film enables us to imagine the creation of a new woman based on the park as a space for meeting and openness towards others. It also incorporates a father figure —besides being dedicated to the director's father— who, though absent, would appear to promote the protagonist's happiness. However, unlike the comedies analyzed by Cavell, the construction of a new identity does not, in this case, take place through dialogue with her partner, but through her relationship with other women, in plural and in their plurality. Thus, the construction of a new woman, the introduction of a radical change in Liz's identity, is fueled by her bonds with her park friends, which fill her with dread, though —or rather, because— they also enable a quantum leap, an existential deviation, an adventure.

## Beyond the tears

Let us go back to the beginning. In the opening sequence, Liz, blinded by the rays of the sun shining through the trees, takes her baby out for a stroll. The eerie undertones of the music rarefy the charming images. The slightly sinister nature of nursery tunes, a frequently-used resource in horror movies, can in this case be retrospectively linked to the solitude Liz finds herself in, plagued by frequent crying spells, but much more clearly to her relationship to the outside world. The outside world works, thus, as a threat to her baby, deeply related to society's class structure. When Liz gets home after the stroll, she finds a phrase by Nicanor Parra that her father has left on her answering machine. The verses fly in from the past: because they come through the machine's technology, because they come from the previous generation, her father's, and because they are by Parra (who, while still alive when the movie premiered, in September, 2015, had just turned 101). The phrase is: 'Let's see if we all really get together

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<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the subgenre called 'mother melodrama', whose protagonists surrender unconditionally to their role as victims of fate or chance, enthrones the faithful, honest and caring wife, as can be seen in classic Argentine cinema (with its lines of continuity with the current day). This subgenre celebrates, predictably, the figure of the home-bound mother.

one day, fierce like chickens fighting for their chicks'. Now, is this getting together closer to what Cora proposes or to what happens by the end of the film? Is it an urban, civilized alliance with the mothers and *the* father of the park, or rather the act of taking the rugged and daring road with the 'R sisters', with all its clashes with established conventions and weak awareness of private property and its 'logic'? The film disturbs the foreseen or foreseeable paths.

Let us jump to the ending. Once in the car, the return trip shows the intimate and inter-subjective mutations condensed on Liz's face, who smiles bright-eyed at a horizon towards which she moves with determination. As Renata is not there, we can surmise that 'aunt Rosa', is now Clarisa's mother, no longer *like her mother*, if those classifications still matter at this point. The forging of a new social and family alliance can thus be seen in the meeting of classes, which heralds a new way of 'getting together.' In the quote by Parra recorded by Liz's father, the keyword is 'all' and not exclusively those who are 'like you and me', as Cora would prefer. That is how, in the final seconds, the music manages to crystallize the possibility of a new grouping, when it drifts away from the monotony of the mobile and the steady regularity of the merry-go-round through the inclusion of an irregular beat: the triplet, which in this case is formed by a group of three similar notes which have the same duration as two notes of the same type, thereby enabling a break in time signature based on equal subdivisions. Played on an electric guitar, the quintessential rock instrument, the triplets work like a trick, a delusion which enriches the score. Thus, childhood and motherhood become unlocked, customs are jolted, friendships are renewed: the atmosphere itself, in sum, becomes more rock 'n' roll.

However, unlike the community put forward by Parra, at the beginning of the film Liz finds herself in the city as a mother who has been pushed off a cliff, without a safety net. We see her overwhelmed, unable to cope, and it would seem she does not even have a friend she can turn to. However, she does have money, so she hires Jazmina. And her son has a father (a fact which could be source of relief relative to the 'single mother' figure Rosa mistakenly assigns to her throughout the film), even though that father is distant, both physically and affectively, uninterested in parenting, shooting a documentary on a frozen region.<sup>21</sup> Liz's strongest bonds are present or absent via technology: her partner, through a computer; her father, through an answering machine. These communication channels are flawed, intermittent, asynchronous. In sum: there are connection issues. Even the lack of support from her friends is quite noticeable (we only see acquaintances or recent park friends, who are not even as close as Rosa, or her workmates from the publishing world, who mistake Rosa for Jazmina when they see her with Liz, looking after Nicanor during a meeting).

The closing shot heralds an alliance between women from different classes, which includes the children under their care, as if there was hope for the phrase by the Chilean poet to come to fruition. To that effect, as we have explained throughout this essay, the preexisting roles of the characters in relations of production based on their class membership have been at least partially and temporarily inverted: as a driver for Rosa, Renata, and Clarisa, Liz undergoes a process of deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices as well as a process of self-affirmation free from guardians, both male and female (such as Jazmina). The true alliance, in any event, would appear to lie in the concrete practice of cooperation between women based on a solidarity which spans class differences. Moreover, it introduces a variant in the view of the future which characterized New Argentine Cinema. Many of the most representative films of the renewal of Argentine cinema end with new future-oriented family associations which take the male father figure out of the traditional family picture. The endings of *Pizza, birra, faso* (Bruno Stagnaro and Israel Adrián Caetano, 1997), *Tan de repente* (Diego Lerman, 2002) and *Leonera* (Pablo Trapero, 2008) suggest escapes towards a better future and a re-founding

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<sup>21</sup> This picture illustrates an oxymoron of sorts: a remote paternity, which leaves the full burden of care on Liz's shoulders: 'The volcano is inactive, so we're good. The lava is calm', says an eager Gustavo from the glacier.

of the family. These cases speak of creating a new home without the pernicious figure of the man.<sup>22</sup>

Fathers have a fundamental relevance in Ana Katz's film, but it is based on their absence: her father on the answering machine; Gustavo on the computer; the nonexistent 'daddies' in the parenting meeting. These men take on an ironic, almost spectral presence in the song of the woman who guides the children's introduction in the meeting: 'And now all the daddies say hello', she says, while a close panning shot shows that the group comprises only 'mommies', without a single father to be seen. *Mi amiga del parquet* could be described, then, as a 'comedy of the unknown woman.' In spite of the mandate of motherhood, in spite of the disregard of the male partner, in spite of a society which dooms the woman, trying to place her back into her traditional role, a new formation of the affective fabric and new subjective, social, and family conformation take place based on the openness towards a new green, public, urban space. This happens thanks to the economic, political and cultural changes which have taken place in the last few decades: that is, a certain harmony can be seen between these genre variations and the transformations in society. The latter make it possible for the ignored nature of the woman (that is, the lack of recognition or reciprocity from her 'partner' and his detachment) to not turn into a melodrama; because there are paths now available which, in that situation, enable the process of comedy (something that begins badly and ends well). This can also be seen in the film's differences from the comedy of remarriage. The father supports the woman's wishes, but these wishes do not entail marriage, but a collective alliance linked to parenting, and he supports her in an absent fashion, from afar, without getting involved. And that is why the happy ending can also do away with the reconciliation with the man and the reestablishment of a marriage bond.

That change in *the pursuit of happiness* —to borrow from the title of the book by Cavell about the comedy of remarriage— finds in the movie a particular correlation with the turning point in the plot, a drastic change in the course of events which lies in Liz's realization. After a fierce clash with Rosa in the park, Liz returns home, but she achieves a deep understanding just before opening the door. All movement stops for a few seconds and, rather than go inside, she runs back to the park. We thus see how Liz understands something new at the door of her house, becomes aware of something, most likely, of what she should not have said during her recent fight with Rosa: 'You're not even a mother', to which a deeply-hurt Rosa replies: 'You went too far there, it'll take a lot to make that right.' The echo of that admonition causes a short circuit, as if Liz herself, minutes after uttering that hurtful phrase, was able to listen to herself channeling an oppressive and unthinking common sense in which she no longer wants to see herself reflected, which she has managed —or is managing— to leave behind (because it also reaches her as an independent, desiring woman, not only as a partner or a mother or a daughter). Something in her perception of her everyday environment becomes dislodged and leads her to move a few pieces around. Liz would appear to realize that the solution, perhaps, is not to return home and undertake a reorganization within her private, domestic realm, but to seek alliances which are formed between women in the public space. Approaching her at the factory where she works, Liz apologizes to Rosa. She does not speak of what happened between them, but of Nicanor and her mother, and tells Rosa: 'I need you to help me.' They hug and laugh a

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<sup>22</sup> Some peculiar variations of this trait can be seen in *Fase 7* (Nicolás Goldbart, 2011) and *Un oso rojo* (Israel Adrián Caetano, 2002); in *Fase 7*, the journey towards the future and the new family configuration are undertaken, once all Christians are dead, by the alliance between a Chinese man and a Jewish man, which includes, incidentally, all domestic animals. (A palingenesis of sorts is thus suggested, even with a modern and minimal version of Noah's Ark.) *Un oso rojo*, by contrast, closes with a new family configuration which does not fully reject the father figure. One of the last images of the film is, precisely, the classic family portrait: the biological mother and father, and the daughter. See Román Setton (2011).

little together. There is in that moment a change in Liz's orientation regarding her pursuit of happiness, a movement which goes from traditional love in a (heterosexual) couple to friendship and bonds of solidarity between women (it should be remembered that, during their fight, Rosa says that 'friendship is something else' for her). From that moment, she begins attending the parenting meetings with Nicanor, Rosa, and Clarisa. This new family grouping in some ways foreshadows the film's ending. Though the film has a subtly ironic view of these meetings, which is clear when the person who leads the gathering asks "the daddies" ("los papis") to sing and the camera pans all the people there showing that there are only "mommies". In spite of that, these are alternative parenting meetings where mothers can talk and exchange experiences. They can all speak up and voice their concerns and discuss their issues. The 'words for a conversation' (Cavell, 1999: 11) are also set there, a conversation which can lead to a new female consciousness, to the invention of a new woman, and to happiness. With other modulations, *Una novia errante* and *Sueño Florianópolis* —in which the separation of the starring couple is at the center of the plot— can also be analyzed as comedies of the unknown woman. In those films, too, female protagonists find a path to well-being and happiness, and we witness the creation of a new identity, after facing disregard and the failures of conversation. In place of supportive female bonds, we find in *Mi amiga del parque* that new spaces and exchanges with new communities and new subjectivities are the key elements enabling transformation.

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