



# Fear, Estrangement and the Sublime Moment in Hugo Santiago's *Invasión* (Argentina, 1969).

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‘Readers of sf [...] expect to feel as if they are witnessing phenomena beyond normal limits of perception and thought that people have not been able to witness before, or perhaps even to imagine. This sense of liberation from the mundane has an established pedigree in art, in two related ways of feeling and expression: the sublime and the grotesque.’

– Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*.

In science fiction film, the sublime – ‘a response to a shock of expansive imagination’ (Csicsery-R. 146) – is most obviously expressed in special effects that convey overwhelming magnitudes of space, time, and complexity.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay suggests that ‘Capturing, reproducing and foregrounding the violence of the sublime and the grotesque shocks has become one of the main purposes of f/x technology’ (146). More generally speaking, Cornel Robu argues that science fiction, in its many forms, is ‘the best positioned to generate, capture and communicate the millennial aesthetic of the sublime’, and suggests that the latter has often been expressed and experienced in science fiction as a ‘sense of wonder’ (29). However, wonder – ‘the power of the object [...] to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention’ (Greenblatt 228) – has a generally positive connotation, whereas many forms of the sublime relate to a darker experience, associated by Edmund Burke in particular to overpowering, fearsome forces operating ‘in a manner analogous to terror’ (13).

The sublime, therefore, is a powerful component of dystopian films that alienate the viewer with little or no recourse to literal representations of technology. *Invasión* (Santiago, 1969) falls under this category, to the extent that its lack of genre-specific visual iconography, combined with uncertainty regarding the ontological context of the narrative, renders its status as science fiction uncertain. It does, however, exhibit a sublime aesthetic that is specific to science fiction to a degree ‘matched only by tragedy’ (Westfahl 761). The film’s dystopian tones, alienating landscape and unstoppable invaders convey the experience of terror referred to by Burke, while a Kantian approach to the film’s sublime aesthetic provides grounds for discussion of the film’s cognitive effect on the viewer. In the essay that follows, I examine how different aspects of the sublime combine with science fiction tropes in *Invasión* to articulate an estrangement and a dislocation associated with the threat of oppression, while addressing the limits of representation.

The script of *Invasión*, Hugo Santiago’s first feature film, was co-written by Jorge Luis Borges and based on an idea he developed with Adolfo Bioy Casares, author among other notable works of the 1940 science fiction novel *La invención de Morel*. The film stands out both for its oblique critical approach at a time of openly revolutionary political cinema in Latin America, and because it set a new trend within the Argentine fantastic genre. Fusing

film noir – the product of Santiago’s seven year apprenticeship with Robert Bresson – and allegorical fantasy, *Invasión* is viewed by Andrea Cuarterolo as Argentina’s first original science-fiction production, a film that paved the way for the following decade:

Este film [no puede] ser ignorado a la hora de delinear una historia del cine de ciencia ficción en nuestro país. [Es] un ineludible – y por más de una década – solitario antecedente que traza diversas líneas que [...] serán transitadas por la mayoría de las películas de ciencia ficción a partir de fines de la década del ochenta. [E]stos caminos abiertos por el film de Santiago permitirán [...] el surgimiento de una versión vernacula del género con identidad propia. (83)

In spite of this reading, the film’s status as a work of science fiction remains ambiguous. Borges viewed *Invasión* as a new form, deemed fantastic primarily because it is set in an alternative version of Buenos Aires (Aquilea), and on the basis of its premise: the relentless struggle between a mysterious, powerful group of invaders whose motives are unknown, and a besieged group of resistant fighters led by an old *criollo*, Don Porfirio. *Invasión* is not clearly futuristic; neither does it centre on the discourse of science. In fact, although it does reference technological and industrial progress, and resembles Buenos Aires at the end of the nineteen sixties, the date provided in the opening scenes sets the action in the past, in the year 1957.<sup>2</sup> Visually and narratively, *Invasión* falls into the film noir category of science fiction described by Vivian Sobchack:

Quietly and grayly, [these films] turn the familiar into the alien, visually subvert the known and comfortable, and alter the world we take for granted into something we mistrust. Using a minimum of special effects, if any, the films evoke wonder in their visual ability to alienate us from Earth’s landscape and from human activity and from the people next door. (109)

For David Oubiña, the ambiguous narrative register ‘[es] propicio para la oscilación de lo fantástico’: the allegorical space of Aquilea, named after a besieged Roman city, ‘parecería quedar en otro planeta’ (2000: 213) while Marcel Martín asks: ‘¿Sus invasores vienen de otro mundo o de los abismos de nuestro inconsciente?’ (Marcel: 1971). Perhaps in order to distinguish and distance *Invasión* from a pre-existing tradition, Borges stated:

No se trata de una ficción científica a la manera de Wells o de Bradbury. Tampoco hay elementos sobrenaturales. Los invasores no llegan de otro mundo; y tampoco es psicológicamente fantástico: los personajes no actúan —como suele ocurrir en las obras de Henry

James o de Kafka— de un modo contrario a la conducta general de los hombres. (Sorrentino: 1966)

In fact, the lack of any clues that might hint at the invaders' motives or enable the viewer to apprehend the broader diegetic context leaves the text open to a wide range of readings, not all situated within the register of science fiction. This perhaps explains why *Invasión* has been overlooked by critics in the field, notably in the English-speaking world.<sup>3</sup> Oubiña sums up the text's susceptibility to diverse readings thus:

Se trata de un film en estado de disponibilidad [...] que se ofrece a todas las versiones, [...] una película-medium que se deja hablar por otras voces, una imagen vicaria que presta su cuerpo para alojar diferentes discursos. (2008: 25)

This quality reflects Robert Bresson's approach to film: 'Para el director francés, la imagen fílmica no debía expresar algo nitidamente o generar una interpretación en sí misma': to impose a reading through the image would be to constrain and thus compromise the freedom of the cinematographic whole as a site of artistic resistance. Leaving the interpretation open enables the film to function beyond what can be immediately apprehended intellectually: 'más allá de los sentidos que se comprenden fácilmente, de las ideas cerradas y de lo esperado' (Costantini 7). *Invasión* is purposefully crafted so as to encourage the viewer to construct meaning through sensual as well as intellectual apprehension. This is expressed in its most concrete form in the soundtrack, a collection of contrapuntal sounds that were recorded from the urban and natural environment (footsteps, cawing magpie, creaking gate). These function as allegorical devices to be decoded by the viewer. The magpie's cawing takes on a particularly gothic hue as it haunts the image; invisible on-screen, it signals the proximity of death and implies an external point of observation that remains inaccessible. The sound of a creaking metal door recalls the entrance gate to a cemetery; doubly liminal, it signals the gateway to another world. It is both voice and object, omniscient and foreboding.

Narratively, *Invasión* instils a sense of pervasive threat by establishing a context of opposition and conflict centred on multiple dichotomies and dividing borders: most notably the borders of the city and the border between life and death. Both are increasingly transgressed throughout the film, building towards a climax where the city and its inhabitants succumb to the unstoppable onset of the invaders, prompting the start of a new cycle of resistance. However, it is the lack of a wider context and the absence of explained motives that most generates a sense of the uncanny, resonating with the Kantian sublime: uncertainty and the failure to grasp the whole holds sway over the imagination, which is confronted to its limits. This effect is enhanced by the dual, ambivalent quality of the film's setting. Aquilea, 'una ciudad imaginaria o real',<sup>4</sup> is the source both of resonance and alienation for the Argentine viewer, for whom the city is recognizable as Buenos Aires:

Su plano, varias veces mostrado, es una estilización del contorno de Buenos Aires. Su topografía visible es la de un Buenos Aires con vastas omisiones, cuyos restos aparecen agrupados en una orden y una vecindad imprevistos. [Suscita] en quienes conocen Buenos Aires un doble asombro de reconocimiento y extrañeza. (Cozarinsky 97)

The blurring of the lines between the cinematic representation of the city and the real city was further highlighted, at the time of the film's release, by the distribution of leaflets entitled 'Aviso a la población', warning *porteños* of an imminent invasion and calling them to action. For Oubiña, reaching out beyond the boundaries of the film's formal world in this way embodied the spirit of a period in which revolt and the threat of militarized political upheaval were close at hand. Although the year in which the events of the film are set was reportedly chosen because it was of no particular significance, it is hard to ignore the fact that Argentina had been subjected to repeated military coups and systematic political oppression since 1930, which intensified in the decades of the 50s and 60s.<sup>5</sup> The fictional events taking place within *Invasión* 'se deslizan subrepticamente fuera de su universo de ficción para sobreimprimirse a la realidad y transparentar sobre las cosas' (Oubiña 2008: 25). The permeability of the boundary between the fictional and non-fictional world implies that, conversely, the sense of threat experienced in the real world also leaves an imprint on the filmic text, as it would on the psyche. As such, *Invasión* is fertile ground for instances of the sublime, which are threaded through the film, eliciting an emotional, rather than a rational response.

The eeriness that pervades *Invasión* is not just generated by visual discrepancies in the geography of this city that is not quite Buenos Aires. Shots of Aquilea project a sense of desolation reflected on screen by dilapidated buildings and wastelands, and the near emptiness of the streets, void in particular of children and women. To this is added further unease generated by the plot. Aquilea is under threat from a group of mysterious invaders dressed in beige suits, whose motives and ultimate aims are unknown, while the city is defended by a group of men whose status, relationship and ulterior motives remain equally nebulous to the viewer throughout the film. Within this context of resonance, linked to Brechtian and Suvinian estrangement by virtue of a convergence of the familiar and the alienating, Santiago unfolds scenes that, to borrow Csicsery-Ronay's words, 'generate a shock of imaginative expansion' (147). Resonance combined with a sublime aesthetic generated by these scenes or 'visual objects' make it possible to identify *Invasión* as science fiction. While the sense of desolation and estrangement conveyed by the city does not single-handedly situate the film in terms of genre, the uncanny demeanour and behaviour of the invaders does. Indeed, while their numbers, activities and material resources would initially suggest traditional military operations, their bureaucratic dress code

and silent symmetry create a discrepancy which requires resolution by the viewer, given that the narrative provides no answers. This reaches a climax in the two sequences that are connotative of the invasion referred to in the film's title.

The first sequence, in which Herrera is finally murdered by the invaders in the stadium building, is striking due to its visual orchestration. The action in this scene is pre-empted in a series of shots that build up to a climax. On the ground floor of the edifice, Herrera opens a double door out onto the stadium (an ominous space in Argentine history); backlit and filmed from the rear, he stands out as a dark silhouette against a blinding white light that masks the background, save for a few steps leading upwards. The play with light is deliberate, emphasized by pauses in the action before and after the door is opened; this becomes dramatically construed as a metaphorical door to another plane, the white light and upward steps presaging death. Herrera eventually chooses a different path to the top floor of the building; as he ascends, the camera progressively reduces the viewer's peripheral vision. A sense of entrapment is conveyed through shots of long, increasingly narrow spaces; close-ups are filmed at angles that become disorienting. The effect is further reinforced by contrasted lighting and shrinking geometrical shapes. As Herrera reaches the top of the stairs, his face is fleetingly framed by a small, black square opening in a white wall. The *mise en scène* thus creates a claustrophobic atmosphere of estrangement and entrapment, which culminates in the last scenes of the sequence with the sudden arrival of the invaders.

Set to the constant, consistent electrical humming of the transmission station that Herrera is attempting to disable, the action in these scenes is otherwise discontinuous, the physical movement of the actors across the floor disjointed in time. In the first shot, a group of four invaders enter from the far end of the floor. Herrera panics and turns to hide behind one of the columns that line the space; he faces a second group entering from the opposite end. As he turns again toward the first group, their position has changed: each of the four men steps out from behind one of the columns, while a new group makes its entrance. When Herrera turns around a third time, the camera pans round to show that every column now has an invader stationed by it. The unnatural symmetrical effect is emphasized by further groups of invaders standing in regular geometrical configurations, all wearing similar clothing and colours. This, and the discrepancy between the real time of Herrera's actions as he is followed by the camera and the accelerated speed with which the invaders seem able to appear and position themselves around the space, create a strong sense of alienation. The sublime aesthetic of this scene is generated by the unclear status of these entities, the contradiction between their human exterior and their apparently supernatural abilities. For Robu, magnitude (of space, of time, of complexity) is 'the ultimate source of the sublime and sense of wonder' (29). More specifically, the sublime is generated by 'magnitudinal disparity', that is to say, the experience of an event, object or duration that is not commensurate with a human scale of perception. Here, the *mise en scène*

introduces a distortion to temporal isochrony, that is to say, it disrupts the rhythms or temporal intervals that are expected in relative terms; a disparity is experienced between a human capacity for speed and movement, embodied by Herrera, and that exhibited by the invaders. Uncertainty and fear are further elicited by the contrast between action and expression, since the invaders finally murder Herrera silently and emotionlessly. Cornel Robu refers to the source of such dislocations as ‘complexional infinity’, overwhelming ‘not by size or span, but by complexity, [...] by otherness and alienness, by proliferation and versatility, by psychic power and hostile intelligence’ (33).

In its final moments, the murder scene blends with the first scene of the following sequence, an invasion of apocalyptic proportions that marks the end of the film’s internal recursive cycle. The two processes (invasion of the body – invasion of the city) are linked by overlapping sound and image. The droning of the planes that appear in the first shot of the invasion sequence overlaps the humming soundtrack of the murder scene eight seconds before it ends, and the invaders move out of the frame, still hitting Herrera, while the camera remains static, filming the blank wall that progressively fills the frame with a white colour echoed in the following shot: a plane against a blank, white sky, moving in the same direction. The sequence that follows, a two minute stream consisting of thirty-nine alternating shots of planes, trucks, cavalry, cars and boats invading the city, is tied together by the sound of the plane which carries on throughout, becoming a unifying contrapuntal soundtrack that has a distancing effect: the sound is ominous, and removes the viewer from the real-time action. The invasion of the city shares some of the murder sequence’s qualities: an all-pervading beige colour scheme, a hyper-structured choreography, and a sense of endless repetition echoing the stream of invaders entering the top floor space and the flow of repetitive blows they land on Herrera. On one level, the assault on Aquilea echoes classical war film tropes, but the *mise en scène* prevents an interpretation of the sequence as mimetic (realistic) fiction. The images exhibit extreme symmetry: all the vehicles are the same colour and shape; the trucks all carry the exact same load, placed at exactly the same angle; equal distance is maintained continuously between the objects on the screen, and the sense of a constant flow, increasing in pace and intensity, is generated by the montage, which loops the images in a stream and accelerates the rhythm of the shots, while zooming in closer and closer. The length and style of the sequence hints at infinity and creates an ‘*on and on*’ effect which induces the sublime moment. This is Kant’s mathematical sublime, where repetition forms what Thomas Weiskel calls an ‘excess of substance’ in the signifiers – here, the objects on screen – which thereby become overwhelming, eluding meaning (Weiskel 23). For Robu, accumulation is one of the basic patterns of the sublime in science fiction; infinite accumulations in space and time are dislocated from the human scale of perception since ‘only a little segment of this scale can be perceived by man directly, intuitively’ (29). Both the sequences described above illustrate Robu’s suggestion that ‘magnitudinal disparity is proper to

generate that sense of wonder which signalizes the aesthetic emotion of the sublime in science fiction' (30).

Weiskel identifies three stages of the sublime moment, with a progression as follows. In stage one, there is no disruption; the mind has an unconscious, habitual relationship with its environment – that is to say, one that is consistent through time and where everyday expectations or norms are unchallenged. Stage two is an abrupt breakdown of this habitual relationship, triggered by an object or event that is both unexpected and ungraspable within normal boundaries:

We are reading along and suddenly occurs a text which exceeds comprehension, which seems to contain a residue of signifier which finds no reflected signified in our minds. Or a natural phenomenon catches us unprepared and unable to grasp its scale. Any excess on the part of the object cancels the representational efficacy of the mind which can only turn, for its new object, to itself. (24)

The final and third stage is a reactive or adaptive stage in which balance between mind and object is restored; the mind resolves the disruption by interpreting it as symbolically representing a relationship between itself and a higher, transcendent order; the sublime depends on this process of resolution. In the two invasion scenes – one an invasion of the body, the other of the city – the viewer is indeed faced with a breakdown in representation. The images on the screen can be described, but their overwhelming, unnatural quality prevents the viewer from immediately connecting them to a wider context, posing '[an obstacle] to the expansion of the imagination' (Csicsery-R. 151). The interpretive faculties of the mind cease to function in a straightforward manner: a disjunction occurs, since the images are graspable perceptually, but not conceptually. The sublime, 'a response to a shock of imaginative expansion, a complex recoil and recuperation of self-consciousness coping with phenomena suddenly perceived to be too great to be comprehended', takes root in this discontinuity (Csicsery-R. 146). In order for the images on the screen to make sense, and for the fictional narrative to remain believable, the mind must close the gap; by logical extension, the imagined solution must supersede 'the average complexional dimension of man' (Robu 33). There is a structural correlation between Weiskel's third stage of the sublime – which is a response to the need for resolution of a conceptual gap – and the process of cognitive estrangement that takes place in science fiction, where the mind strives to account rationally for the differences between the empirical world and the projected, estranged world presented in the text.

Where the scenes showing Herrera's murder and the final invasion are concerned, both the behaviour and the material and aesthetic qualities of the invaders could be rationally explained in a number of ways, within the framework of science fiction, illustrating Robu's complexional magnitude. For example, they could be due to the invaders' alienness – i.e. they do not behave

as humans because they are not human – or to a shift in technological capacities within human society, placing the narrative in a distinct temporal zone or parallel universe – e.g. the action is taking place in either the future or an alternative quantum reality, governments have access to mind-controlling drugs or cloning technologies, and shifts in geography have changed Buenos Aires. The sublime moment therefore provides a narrative gap that allows for an interpretation within the framework of science fiction, but also forces the viewer to shift from a receptive state of immersion in the narrative to a productive state that is detached from it. For Weiskel, the sublime is indeed ‘cognate with the experiential structure of alienation’, where alienation presupposes

[the] collapse of the signifying relations which make a social order. When the significance of things is no longer “natural” or *immediate*, when making sense requires the mediating intervention – as opposed to the assumed immanence – of a transcendent idea, the world is being understood rhetorically, at second remove. (36)

The concept of alienation can be interpreted literally here, depending on one’s point of view; the *mise en scène* of Herrera’s murder could suggest that the title refers to the invasion of an alien hive mind, rather than the human military invasion one might have expected at the start of the film. This sequence is in fact closer, structurally, to those scenes in the science fiction genre that overlap with the horror genre. The lack of empathy and unnaturally synchronised movements of Santiago’s invaders are reminiscent of, for example, the alien replacement of humans in science fiction horror crossover *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956). Lowenstein suggests that ‘the modern horror film may well be the genre of our time that registers most brutally the legacies of historical trauma’, the disconnection experienced during the latter echoed in the sublime moment (10).<sup>6</sup> Noting the simultaneous post World War II emergence of the art film and the modern horror film in North America and Europe, and the reliance of many art films on narratives of war as subject matter, and highlighting also a transition in that period within the horror genre which replaced ‘gothic, otherworldly monsters’ with ‘all-too-human threats’, Lowenstein asks:

Could this transition itself be construed in part as a response to, and an engagement with, the traumatic impact of war? Does the modern horror film, like the art film, draw on the war for the fiber of many of its representations? (7)

For Lowenstein, representation sits at the crossroads of art and history, ‘between experience and reflection’, promising the possibility of being able to communicate trauma (5). However, it has a complex relationship with history, in particular where issues of responsibility to historical factual accuracy are

concerned. Lang, speaking of representations of the Holocaust, places an emphasis on communicating the meaning and experience of trauma to an audience beyond a factual narrative; Lowenstein argues that 'subordinating artistic representation's potential for communication to its responsibility to history [...] defeats the possibility of making trauma matter to those beyond its immediate point of impact' (5). The allegorical moment of the horror film opens up a space that allows for alternative representations of historical trauma, empowering audiences to negotiate meaning and feeling through a diverse range of modes of representation that compete and contrast, while also providing points of convergence. Lowenstein's definition of the horror film's allegorical moment overlaps with that of the sublime, and is applicable to the sublime in *Invasión*:

[A] shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted and intertwined. These registers of space and time are distributed unevenly across the cinematic text, the film's audience, and the historical context. [...] [In the] allegorical moment's complex process of embodiment, [...] film, spectator and history compete and collaborate to produce forms of knowing not easily described by conventional delineations of bodily space and historical time. (2)

The elicitation of these 'forms of knowing' resonates with Bresson's philosophy, adopted by Santiago, which consists in drawing from the viewer feelings 'más allá de los sentidos que se comprenden fácilmente'. The 'shocking collision' referred to by Lowenstein is consistent with Burke's take on the romantic sublime. Burke believed terror to be the ruling principle of the sublime: images that are 'dark, uncertain, confused, terrible' are 'sublime to the last degree' (45). Interested mainly in the emotional states elicited by experiences of the sublime, Burke views the source of the latter in 'whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror' (Shaw 53). He places an emphasis on the subject's realization of their own physical limitations, which has an effect both in psychological and physiological terms. For Burke, the sublime object viewed 'at certain distances, and with certain modifications' is imbued with the dual quality of fear and attraction, pain and pleasure: the fear of being overwhelmed, and the pleasure of confronting the source of the fear (14). Distance and modification characterise artistic representation, and Robu reaffirms the ambivalent pain / pleasure principle of the sublime in science fiction:

[T]he minute and fragile human being, given the finitude of his/her body and the ephemerality of his/her life, is physically outrun and feels painfully overwhelmed by the unchallenging (sic) hugeness of the cosmic magnitudes: and this overwhelming is exactly the catalyst that

triggers the “sublimation” of the pain into pleasure, the specific trigger that the aesthetic pleasure of the sublime needs [...]. (30)

The murder scene in *Invasión* is marked by the realisation that Herrera cannot escape, and that he is physically in an inferior position; it is marked, also, by the certainty of death, bringing the narrative into the realm of tragedy. *Invasión* is tragic in the classical sense, since the characters are doomed, devoid of any hope of winning against the enemy. In fact, the boundaries that define the narrative spatially and conceptually exist only to be sustained over time, then ultimately violated:

De eso se trata: extremar las condiciones más allá de las cuales no hay supervivencia posible. En el largo plazo, el aislamiento se convierte en condena. Una muerte segura. No se trata de vencer o ser derrotado. El enfrentamiento se plantea en otros términos; es un ejercicio de perseverancia, una prueba de valor. Y si esto es así, lo verdaderamente trágico del argumento no es el resultado del combate sino la constatación de que no tiene fin. (Oubiña 2000: 207)

The epic quality of the text is conveyed by the overwhelming masculinity expressed in the relationships between the all-male group of protagonists at the centre of the narrative:

Su culto del coraje y de la amistad varonil, su modo estoico de enfrentar la muerte, sus modales caballerescos para con las mujeres, [...] las frases cortas y contundentes que intercambian [...], el perfecto sentido de la lealtad que los anima. (Schwarzböck 124)

These characteristics, in particular the lack of expressed emotion faced with death, stand in contrast with the behaviour typically exhibited by the script's overall less central female characters, none of which die or are wounded and who are more typically associated with emotion (they are shown to cry in response to death, for example, whereas the men are not). In this sense *Invasión* provides a textbook illustration of Burke's theory of a gendered sublime, in which the negative sublime is masculine, derives from the authority of the father. The latter is incarnated by Don Porfirio, who exhibits dual qualities associated with love and death in an Oedipal fashion: he both shows affection towards Herrera, and sends him to his demise in spite of Herrera's protest at the futility of his sacrifice: 'Quedamos solo nosotros dos, Don Porfirio. ¿Por qué seguir peleando? [...] ¿Por qué morir por gente que no quiere defenderse?' In the final scene of Herrera's death Don Porfirio stands over his bloodied corpse, uttering a statement that contradicts Herrera's failure to fulfil his mission and stop the invaders: 'Claro. Yo sabía que vos no fallás'. As the camera pans out from Don Porfirio sitting by Herrera, stroking his hair and body as a father would his son, one gets the sense that Herrera's true task

lay in fulfilling his inevitable death, inscribed in the tragic rules of the narrative and enabled by the father figure of Don Porfirio.

For Shaw, the Burkean sublime is not only negative, but masculine and constructed through 'authority associated with pain and terror', whereas the feminine realm is associated with beauty and positive emotion, the 'fondness and indulgence' of the mother' (Shaw 57). Although these concepts may appear outdated, they are conveyed within the dramatic and symbolic framework of *Invasión*, in which the female element is typically associated with life, emotion and the natural world. The young girl who inhabits the delta island that forms the north-east border ultimately seems ethereal, as though juxtaposed to the action taking place in the scene; while two groups of men engage in gun fight, burning down her hut and killing her male companion, she wanders by the river side through tall grasses, cradling a baby puma in her arms. Irene equally escapes unscathed from confrontations, despite leading a rebel faction, and the scene in which she verbalises her emotions – 'Yo sé que tengo para llorar; hoy o mañana da lo mismo' – takes place in an open field crossed by galloping horses. Conversely, the film's male characters appear static, devoid of sentiment. If Herrera exhibits an apparently emotionless curiosity as to the whereabouts of Irene, she is visibly distraught faced with his absence, a state of mind which become physically translated into nakedness. Frustrated in her search for him and knowing that he has chosen to walk to his death, she removes her clothes and lays face down on the bed while Herrera observes her, unseen and expressionless. In a separate scene, Lebendiger is led to his death by a young woman whose emotions on hearing the shot are translated physically: she is filmed from the rear so that her face cannot be seen, but her body starts and her shoulders hunch as she walks through a door that becomes symbolic of the passage from life to death. Meanwhile, both Lebendiger and his killer appear utterly impassive faced with what is about to take place. One could read this scene of emotionless confrontation with death within the framework of Kant's concept of the dynamical sublime. Kant, says Vanessa Ryan, seeks to distinguish 'positive empowerment from negative, freedom-denying violence', differentiating 'two polar possibilities of the sublime, namely its ability, on the one hand, to exert an overpowering force that dominates the self and, on the other hand, its status as a force that empowers the self' (268). The viewer is able to experience the latter, since Kant writes that 'When in an aesthetic judgment we consider nature as a might that has no dominance over us, then it is dynamically sublime' (260). In contrast, diegetically, the former is expressed. Although Lebendiger intimates that his *sang froid* is derived from a newly discovered bravery, the repetitive nature of death and the sense of the ineluctable, overall, appears to paralyse Don Porfirio's resistance fighters, at least in the sense that one by one they meet their death knowingly, without attempting to avert it.

The moment of Moon's death brings both the inexorability of the process and the helplessness of its victims to the fore. The scene is both symmetrical and metaphysical, shot against a black-and-white chequered

surface that resembles a chess-board, all the more so given that Moon is wearing the resistance fighters' black suit while his killer is dressed in a beige 'uniform', mimicking the colour scheme of opposing chess pieces. The *mise en scène* creates a mirroring effect; both men are filmed from the waist down as they enter the space through doors at opposite ends, the backlit shots causing a cinematic echo in the lines and hues of their legs in the doorways. The contrapuntal cawing of the magpie is heard for the last time in this scene; as Moon is shot, the bird's call echoes into the distance to the receding sound of flapping wings. The 'away' movement of sound through space, which creates a bridge between two planes of reality, is mirrored in inverted form by the physical movement of Moon's killer towards him, until both are touching in the centre of the screen. Just as the magpie signals an omniscient presence beyond the diegetic world of the film, the dialogue at this point both distances the characters from the plot, temporarily removing them from the diegetic sequence, and reveals the helplessness of being subjected to a script they do not control, like blind pawns in the inferred chess game. '¿No vio el revólver?' asks the killer. Moon, who at this point in the narrative is dead, answers: 'No. Yo era ciego.'

The acceptance of death and the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful, divisively correlated to gender, is perhaps more usefully informed by Kant's opposition between reason and self-interest and his discussion on sublime ethics. Within this framework, the sublime is viewed as a quality of the mind, not of nature; it is elicited by the triumph of reason, the recognition of a higher authority or cause that is worth foregoing self-interest and the natural world for, including love. In Kantian terms, the sublime occurs when the transcendence of the rational over the sensible is asserted, no matter how disturbing the implications: 'It is beautiful [...] to love our children more than we love ourselves; it is sublime to sacrifice one's child for the sake of the truth' (Shaw 85). Shaw's example here resonates strongly with *Invasión's* narrative, in particular the relationships between Don Porfirio and Herrera, and between Herrera and Irene. Self-preservation in the face of death and love, both filial and romantic, are among the individual desires that must 'submit to the categorical imperative, even to the point of death, lest ethics be reduced to a matter of taste' (Shaw 86). Viewing the text in these terms frees us from a restrictive binary approach whereby positive emotion belongs solely to the realm of the feminine. Despite initial appearances, male emotion is not absent from *Invasión's* filmic text. Repressed on the physical plane, it is however transferred to external elements and thus verbalised indirectly: Don Porfirio writes his fear onto a piece of paper, in the form of a letter; Silva recites a haunting tango foretelling the men's death and expressing their attachment to the world.<sup>7</sup> The camera work combined with the tango's understated lyrics generate a sublime moment as fragmented images seek, but fail, to represent a whole; that is to say, to condense within the space of one song the complex forces at play and the lives, identities, depth of feelings toward one another, and imminent deaths of the characters. The attempt at representing such

breadth hinges on the synecdochal: a shot of Vildrac mixing a chemical compound, dressed in a white lab coat, symbolises his life as a pharmacist. The shots are short and presented in quick succession, conveying a sense that the camera gives up nearly immediately on what it sets out to do. The visual evocation of Moon's identity places an emphasis on the works of art that cover the walls of his room; the camera lingers long enough for him to sit down and start drawing, only to interrupt the shot mid-line, as though the image has both fulfilled its objective, and reached the limits of what it is able to represent. In a sense this passage is the true culmination of the cinematic sublime in *Invasión*. It embodies the notion, developed by the Romantics in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that while the sublime is rooted in our sense perceptions, it is a product of correlations established in the mind, in the face of the limits of experience, knowledge, and/or representation, occurring when 'the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language', at the point of defeat of the capacity to express a thought or sensation (Shaw 3).<sup>8</sup> Here, the defeat is that of cinematic representation, and it transports the viewer beyond the film's formal boundaries.

In Santiago's *Invasión* the sublime, structurally essential to the dislocation inherent to Suvin's concept of estrangement and, to paraphrase Robu, intuitively experienced in science fiction as the 'sense of wonder', thus provides a space for the expression of the untranslatable. In so doing, it brings to the fore the sense of fear and estrangement that accompanies the disjunction of the traumatic experience. Meanwhile, the foregrounded limits of cinematic representation move the viewer towards an empowering construction and negotiation of meaning that occurs beyond words and images, in a masterful interpretation of Bresson's philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> These are the three infinities identified by Cornel Robu (2012: 29), the fictional manipulations of which generate the sublime.

<sup>2</sup> According to the film-makers, this date was chosen for its neutrality in political terms; in cultural terms, however, it is worth noting that 1957 was the year H.G. Oesterheld's first instalment of *El eternauta* was published.

<sup>3</sup> *Invasión* has received more attention in France, where the film was reconstituted from 35mm originals in 1999 after 8 of 12 reels of film were stolen from archives under the *junta*, in 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Extract from Borges's synopsis of the film: '*Invasión* es la leyenda de una ciudad, imaginaria o real, sitiada por fuertes enemigos y defendida por pocos hombres, que acaso no son héroes. Lucharán hasta el fin, sin sospechar que su batalla es infinita.' (D. Oubiña, ed., *Invasión: Borges/ Bioy Casares/ Santiago*, p. 21).

<sup>5</sup> The film was made in the context of General Onganía's 'Revolución Argentina' and subsequent leadership, from 1966 to 1973 of a new type of totalitarianism, what Guillermo O'Donnell famously called *el estado burocrático autoritario*, '[un régimen] no formalizado pero claramente vigente' (O'Donnell, p. 62).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on disconnection and traumatic events, see for example Herman, Judith, *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), pp. 51-73.

<sup>7</sup> 'La Milonga de Manuel Flores', written by Borges.

<sup>8</sup> Cornel Robu notes that 'Science fiction proves to be surprisingly adequate to illustrate the old concept of the sublime in its very core and also in all its conceptual articulations and

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ramifications, such as the “kinds” of sublime defined as early as the late eighteenth century.’  
(‘Revisiting the Sense of Wonder’, p. 31).

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