
Poetics of Residue: Global Mass Culture and Technology in Roberto Arlt

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Abstract

Roberto Arlt is regarded as the founder of the Latin American urban novel and is considered the continent's first modern writer. His *Aguafuertes* newspaper series and his novels *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas* highlighted the objects of an incipient modern mass culture: boxing rings, ocean liners, *el cinematógrafo*, automobiles, airplanes, gramophones, Kodak cameras, radios, laboratories. While addressing the serial form in Arlt's writing, I am interested in the ways in which the technologies of the visual raise questions about the nature of the residual and the unconsumed, and also about fulfilling and foiling expectations, especially with regard to the ideological functioning of mass culture and technology in society. While examining Arlt's ambiguous stance, I focus on both the fascination *and* the reluctance that the Argentine author expressed with regard to these objects of modernity and technological progress. As I look at the poetics of residue in the "máquina polifacética de Arlt," I address questions surrounding the ideological production and sociocultural negotiation of value in, through, and around these serial forms of modernity. Arlt visualized a technological dystopia in *Los siete locos* and repeatedly warned in his newspaper columns against fascist war machinery in the making (and the horrific advent of World War II). Overall, my aim is not only to reposition Roberto Arlt for a twenty-first-century readership, but also to reflect on ideological seriality (composed of historical oxymoronic serials) and simultaneity (conceiving of these differing ideological positions simultaneously) as social phenomena engrained in residues of mass culture turning global.

Keywords

Roberto Arlt; Argentine literature; modernity; seriality; technology; mass culture; dystopia; *Los siete locos*; *Los lanzallamas*; *Las aguafuertes porteñas*

Roberto Arlt (1900–1942) received an invitation from Elías Castelnuovo on Sunday, February 1, 1931, to travel with him, first on a transatlantic liner to Germany, then by train to the Soviet Union. That same day in Buenos Aires, earlier in the morning, Arlt had gone to the *Las Heras* prison on a journalistic assignment. He was sent by the newspaper *El Mundo* to cover the public execution of the anarchist Severino di Giovanni. Still visibly shaken hours after the execution, Arlt refused Castelnuovo's offer. On another occasion, five years earlier, Arlt had gone to Castelnuovo with the manuscript of his first novel, then called *La vida puerca*. Castelnuovo writes in his memoir about meeting with Arlt:

Le dije, finalmente, que así como estaba *La vida puerca* no se podía publicar. Que era menester arreglar y pasar en limpio los originales. Pese a las objeciones que le hacía, no se resignaba con el rechazo de su novela, ni tampoco aceptaba de manera alguna la devolución. (Memorias, 134)

Arlt finally managed to publish his first novel in 1926, though its title had by then changed from *La vida puerca* to *El juguete rabioso*, following Ricardo Güiraldes's advice. The first installment of *La vida puerca* had been published in the journal *Proa* earlier that same year (in segments entitled "El Rengo" and "El poeta parroquial"). In the following years, Arlt took on journalistic assignments and rapidly made a name for himself: first as a crime reporter for *Crítica* and later as a journalist for *El Mundo*. His Buenos Aires urban chronicles, *Aguafuertes porteñas*, became *El Mundo*'s trademark, published regularly on page six for the next fourteen years. For a long time, Arlt's was the only news article series with a signature—all others in the paper were anonymous. As modernity rapidly unfolded, seriality as a mode of representation and production became crucial to Arlt, who, working tirelessly by typewriter, became one of the most well-known journalists in Argentina and also a writer of short stories, plays, and novels.¹

A *series* is a stringing-together or collation of elements that are all on the same hierarchical level. However, as Deleuze understood it, the elements need not be the same.² Seriality, I argue, is a central and multifaceted but largely neglected dimension in criticism on Arlt. While addressing the serial form in Arlt's writing (as one of the modernist residues dating back to the nineteenth-century practice of serialization), I am interested in the ways in which the serial raises questions about the nature of beginnings and endings (including the residue and the aftermath), and also about fulfilling and foiling expectations, especially with regard to the ideological functioning of mass culture and technology in society. The *Aguafuertes* series and Arlt's narratives relied on the nineteenth-century serial forms but also highlighted the codes of an incipient modern mass culture and new technological developments, such as ocean liners, soccer stadiums, *el cinematógrafo*, automobiles, airplanes, gramophones, Kodak cameras, laboratories, and radios. While examining Arlt's ambiguous stance on mass culture and technology through the use of seriality and serial forms of production, I focus on the poetics of residue through both the fascination *and* the reluctance that Arlt expressed in his writing with regard to these objects of modernity. As I look at the "máquina polifacética de Arlt," I focus on questions surrounding the ideological production

and sociocultural negotiation of value in, through, and around these serial forms of modernity.³



Fig. 1. Arlt en Dos. Locópolis

Arlt is today regarded as the founder of the Latin American urban novel and is considered the continent's first modern writer. Recent years have witnessed a rapid growth of interest in Roberto Arlt (predominantly in Argentine and hispanophone academic and cultural circles), with special emphasis on the connections between literature and visual media. They have also seen the growing popularity of intermediality in the larger context of shifting positions in global art and literature markets. Such developments represent an important attempt not only to reposition Roberto Arlt for a twenty-first-century readership, but also to venture beyond questions of local taste, literary establishment preferences, and underlying cultural politics. In Argentina, for example, Arlt has become appropriated by a pop artist, his work featured on both state-sponsored and

alternative media, while internationally, to give but one example of the translation of his work to world languages, Aleksandra Mancic translated *Los siete locos* into Serbian (2007).

In 2012, following the year in which Buenos Aires was declared *Capital mundial del libro*, 250 artists were invited to illustrate *Aguafuertes porteñas*. Continuing with the Arltian cultural renaissance, at the *Museo del Libro y de la Lengua*, an Argentine cultural institution adjacent to the National Library, a multimedia exhibit was held from April to October 2013 under the title *Arlt en dos. Locópolis*. Arlt's association with mass culture and seriality has had yet another recent manifestation in visual form as, following a US trend, several alternative Argentine publishers, such as *Literatura Clase B*, have launched "pulp" adaptations of classic novels. One of these volumes is *El juguete rabioso y radioactivo*, Nico Saraintaris' adaptation of Arlt's first novel. Its front page has a portrait of Roberto Arlt as a cyborg with illustrations by Fernando Martinez Ruppel. Even the then-anti-establishment publishing house *La eterna cadencia* has participated in the Arlt revival by publishing a reprint of *Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt*, a 1965 study by Oscar Masotta.

Serial form

What began as a nineteenth-century publishing practice (Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* began serial publication in January 1868) is seeing a resurgence in the twenty-first century thanks to new media and digital technology. In 2015, *Página 12* published Arlt's *Los siete locos* and its sequel, *Los lanzallamas*, as serial novels with illustrations by Daniel Santoro and a prologue by Guillermo Saccomanno. These *fascículos semanales coleccionables* resembled the format of *folletines*, the very same form popular in Arlt's time by which a single larger narrative work is published in sequential installments. Like their North American counterpart, dime novels were published in installments in the immensely popular *Colección intriga*. This and other penny press productions were widely circulated in Argentine cities where they were often read on trains, streetcars, and other means of public transportation. Rocambole, the bandit protagonist of an enormously popular nineteenth-century serialized novels called *Los caballeros del claro de luna*, is used by Arlt as the favorite literary character of Silvio Astier, the protagonist of his first novel, *El juguete rabioso*. In another nod to this series, Arlt's protagonist Silvio names his gang *El Club de los caballeros de la media noche*. Viscount Pierre Alexis (1829–1871) was the French author of this forty-two-volume Rocambole crime series that Arlt read in a Spanish translation that had arrived to Buenos Aires from Barcelona. Alexis wrote under the pseudonym Ponson du Terrail and, along with Charles Dickens (1812–1870), was among the most popular writers of newspaper serials and serial novels of the time. Arlt admired the Rocambole series for its narrative suspense but also because it gave Ponson du Terrail the status of a professional writer and a career by which he could make a living. Rocambole and seriality

reappear in Arlt's first play, *Trescientos millones* (1932). This play was produced recently in the Argentine capital at the *Teatro del Pueblo* and *En la Sombra de la Cúpula* (*Studio Caracol* at the *Edificio Bencich*, 2016–2017 season).

While reading fiction and writing short stories and novels (when he was not at work in his own laboratory), Arlt was also immersed in producing a journalistic reportage series called *Aguafuertes porteñas*. These urban sketches and metropolitan street texts that Arlt created on a daily basis were followed by a broad range of eager readers. Indeed, being linked to both the journalistic and the literary marketplaces, it would not be far-fetched to claim that aesthetics of serialization and seriality were some of the elements at the core of Arlt's *métier*. Although some are written as stand-alone episodes with independent themes, many *Aguafuertes porteñas* follow a serial form and arrangement. To give but one important example from these urban vignettes (that, among other things, helped establish the incipient mass culture and mass media in Argentina), Arlt denounced deplorable Buenos Aires hospital conditions in a series of widely-discussed *Aguafuertes*. In doing so, Arlt made Buenos Aires visible in new ways.

Arlt's novels have been televised (in serial form) and put on the big screen, and he has become a much-revered figure in the world of Argentine theater: his plays are "a must" for acting classes in theater departments and a frequent choice for recent theater productions. At the *Teatro San Martín* (where *Teatro del Pueblo* once stood), for example, there was a production of *El fabricante de fantasmas* in 2011 that ran for thirteen months.⁴ Furthermore, Arlt's most important novels, *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*, were serialized on Argentine *TV Pública*: via live digital streaming, the series unfolded in 30 episodes that could be watched globally from April 21 to June 10, 2015.



Fig. 2. TV Pública “Los Siete Locos”

Ricardo Piglia (1941–2017) adapted Arlt’s novels for *TV pública* and also served as a literary and historical consultant on set. The directors of the series were Fernando Spiner and Ana Piterbarg. Although critics have noted elements of aestheticization in the TV adaptation of Arlt’s novels (Sylvia Sáitta notably asking about the loss of “*la vida puerca*” in *Transposiciones* roundtable at the Buenos Aires 2015 Book Fair), judging by press reports, the *TV pública* series was well received, with Diego Velásquez and Carlos Velloso taking on the main roles of Remo Erdosain and El Astrólogo.⁵

Mass culture

TV Pública emphasizes the use of mass transit in its *Los siete locos* series by including digital montage, an assembly of mixed media based on archival and vintage photographs as well as photomontage and documentary footage capturing modes of transport: electric street cars, trains,

and automobiles.⁶ Adapted through the expert eye of Ricardo Piglia, the series convincingly depicts the time period and follows the text of the novels rather closely. In visually relying on the uses of mass transit, it often portrays Arlt's protagonist Remo Erdosain in motion while riding on suburban trains or Buenos Aires trolleys:

El tren eléctrico cruzaba ahora por Villa Luro. Entre montes de carbón y gasómetros velados por la neblina relucían tristemente los arcos voltaicos. Grandes huecos negros se abrían en los galpones de las locomotoras... Los automóviles se deslizaban por la calle Corrientes centelleando bajo el sol, pasaba mucha gente que se dirigía a su trabajo. (Arlt 1997, 315)

While they go beyond the scope of this essay, the parallels between mass culture and mass transit, between Arlt's era and our globalized post-modern world, are multiple and multifaceted. They represent a cross section of visual and narrative media, including fiction, film, radio, and visual arts. The term "intermediality," although very much a twenty-first-century critical term, may be productively applied to Arlt, I would argue, because he was fascinated by the new technologies and the emerging visual culture of the modern era. The visual, indeed, was a medium in which the Uruguayan printmaker Guillermo Facio Hebequer played an important role in the 1930s. However, while Castelnuevo and Hebequer propagated "*una cultura de masas*" (a culture for the masses, the proletariat and the precariat), Arlt, as we shall see, often showed an ambivalent view and distanced himself from such visions of culture. While examining the larger context of modernism, Laura Marcus has shown that "the railway acts as an embodiment of both the progressive and the destructive aspects of industrialism" (*Dreams of Modernity*, 2).

A strategy of critical distancing vis-à-vis mass culture was also employed, although on quite different terms, by the intellectuals of the elite classes during this time. In 1935, for example, on the occasion of the institution's fiftieth anniversary, the president of the most socially exclusive club in Buenos Aires, *El Círculo de Armas*, reacted to a colossal change that he was observing in the city of Buenos Aires: "The new diversions, the interest in outdoor sports, the thrill of speed and heights, the lure of the most intense and less innocent pleasures, have done away forever with the solemn refined ways of our traditional salons, with the witty debates and lively conversations that our elders delighted in"⁷ (AA.VV., 18). If salons were exclusive spaces for the select few that the generations of the 1880s, the *Centenario*, and subsequent elites occupied, the spaces of Arlt's urban narratives are those of the street and the multitudes. These spaces are positioned vis-à-vis anguished and tormented individuals, such as Remo Erdosain. The term "masses" assumed early on a strong negative connotation, evoking dangers if not outright disasters: masses are terrifying and catastrophic, uprooted and amorphous, irrational and primitive, corruptible and corrupting, violent

and destructive. The Nietzschean “loss of God” and Ortega y Gasset’s concept of “*el hombre masa*” were philosophical trends that resulted in a search for a group of elite individuals who would be able to save the nation, as manifested in Mallea, Martínez Estrada, Murena, Scalabrini Ortiz, and other Argentine intellectuals of the time.

In her insightful analysis of the complex interrelations between the cultural and the political, Graciela Montaldo reminds us that the connotations of the word “*masa*” in Spanish are of quantity, referring to “a lot of people,” but even more so, of quality, suggesting “that they are ordinary, vulgar, typical of those who ‘make up the masses’” (2006, 222). Masses are those that disturb the political order, Montaldo points out while examining Argentina’s early twentieth century; they are forces that propel the spread of utopias, and, as in Arlt’s novels, collective dystopias.

Nevertheless, Arlt was mesmerized by the new developments in modern technology and the new means of mass travel: shortly after the first commercial routes were established between Argentina and Brazil, he was excited to fly on an airplane for the first time. In those early years of mass transit and mass travel, Roberto Arlt visited Brazil, Spain, Morocco, and Chile, as well as Patagonia and other Argentine provinces. His 1935–1936 narrative account of a visit to Spain and its peripheral territories is focused on travel’s engagement not only with displacement, mobility, observation, and storytelling, but also, and most importantly, with the traveler’s gains at home. At home in Buenos Aires, prior to his trip to Spain and North Africa, Arlt was an avid reader of translations of Dostoyevsky—but also of famed Orientalist texts, such as Flaubert’s *Salambó*.⁸

Inspired by his Moroccan travels, Arlt continued to write Orientalist short stories long after his visit to Africa. His stories are mostly set in Morocco, but they also include references to other African countries, and to other colonized nations from the East. The story “*Acuérdate de Azerbaiján*,” for example, begins in Ceylon and ends in Tangier. Araceli Tinajero points out that Hispanic authors often demonstrate a sympathy for the Orient that reveals a certain consciousness of their marginal position of enunciation vis-à-vis the colonial powers (*Orientalismo*). Following Tinajero, I would argue that Arlt is no exception, for his narrator has “*los ojos del entendido*” for the cosmopolitan mix of people and languages that he encounters in the British-colonized Ceylon of the 1930s.⁹

A self-confessed technophile (he held a patent for reinforced rubber), Arlt traveled with Kodak camera in hand, fascinated by modernity and its early mass-produced objects. An avid interest in technology and mass culture runs throughout his journalism, short stories, and novels. Indeed, Arlt’s focus on mass culture is multifaceted: it includes the latest technological advances of the time but also the popular pseudosciences and spiritualism that date back to the first text he ever published, “*Las ciencias ocultas en la ciudad de Buenos Aires*.”¹⁰ Ever since he published this piece

as a 19-year-old journalist, Arlt engaged with popular pseudosciences and alternative circuits of knowledge, while also following scientific inventions of internationally-recognized scientists such as Edison and his rival, Tesla. In *El juguete rabioso* (1926), he calls Tesla “El mago de la electricidad.” Interestingly, Tesla held spiritualist stage shows to sell his early technological inventions. As manifested throughout his work, this mix between scientific rationalism and spiritist, occultist, and hypnotist practices was also appealing to Arlt.¹¹

Uses of technology, East and West

The map of the United States figures prominently in the first meetings of the *sociedad secreta* in *Los siete locos* (1929). Here Erdosain claims, “Un Ford o un Edison tienen mil probabilidades más de provocar una revolución que un político” (Arlt 1997, 189). Arlt goes on to write about social revolution and what he conceives as “industrial mysticism” by claiming that “los futuros dictadores serán reyes del petróleo, del acero, del trigo” (ibid). In the section of the novel that focuses on the “Discurso del Astrólogo,” who has been read as the most Nietzschean of Arlt’s characters (but also as a parody of Lugones),¹² there is a further reference to Ford: “...Henry Ford con su fortuna podía comprar la suficiente cantidad de explosivo como para hacer saltar en pedazos un planeta como la luna” (ibid, 269).¹³

Ricardo Piglia, Beatriz Sarlo, Sylvia Sáitta, Josefina Ludmer, and Fernando Rosenberg have all pointed out the complex and often clashing ideological nuances in Arlt’s novels. Within the realm of the real, Severino di Giovanni’s assassination made a profound impact on Arlt.¹⁴ Within the realm of literature, through Erdosain’s feverish activities as an inventor at work in his lab, Arlt points out that power can be achieved thanks to a chemical formula or the construction of a machine. These technological advances can bring about a revolution, to be carried out by a secret society: El Buscador de Oro will organize the revolutionary cells and also the gold extraction in the mines of the Argentine Chaco. El Rufián Melancólico will organize the network of brothels that will provide society with the money necessary for the realization of their dystopian plans. The mayor will be responsible for the infiltration of revolutionary plans in the Argentine army. This whole vision, however, is just a plan, a simulacrum of power.



Fig. 3. TV Pública “Los siete locos”

The secret society begins to fall apart when Rufián is murdered and El Buscador de Oro reveals that there is no gold in the plains. El Astrólogo and Hipólita flee, while Erdosain commits suicide in a train car, as a fugitive running from the police for murdering Bizca. According to Beatriz Sarlo, the deeply troubled modernity of Arlt’s characters, such as Erdosain and the members of the secret society, is peripheral because they confuse practical, self-taught knowledge with the real acquisition of technology and technological knowledge. The technique that fascinates Erdosain and El Astrólogo does not point to the technological power of the modern cities but to the residual knowledge and the *simulacrum* of technological modernization, in a peripheral, semi-industrialized country such as Argentina of the 1930s.¹⁵

In another manifestation of residual knowledge and a poetics of residue and bric-à-brac, the beliefs of the secret society are described as a global mix between Eastern and Western elements. This global mix of modernist residues relies on anarchist political strategies and serial practice. It will be disseminated by venues of serial press and sensationalist journalism. Furthermore, the secret society will propel its propaganda through the various forms of the emerging mass media,

such as photography and cinema. Its seriality and its materiality, film rolls and studio sets included, is palpable in Arlt's novel:

Podemos imprimir una cinta cinematográfica con el templo de cartón en el fondo del bosque, el dios conversando con el espíritu de la tierra... y elegiremos un término medio entre Krishnamurti y Rodolfo Valentino...pero más místico, una criatura que tenga un rostro extraño simbolizando el sufrimiento del mundo. Nuestras cintas se exhibirán en los barrios pobres, en el arrabal. (Arlt 1997, 275)

Arlt mentions two celebrities in this advertisement sounding passage from his 1929 novel, thus anticipating not only Krishnamurti's unprecedentedly successful 1935 tour but also the early rise of global mass celebrity culture. Mary Lutyens, in her book *Krishnamurti: The Years of Fulfillment*, details how Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti was invited on a speaking tour of Latin America in 1935 and visited Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Mexico. In Argentina, Krishnamurti appeared not only in Buenos Aires, where at the *Teatro Coliseo* he gave four standing-room-only lectures in July 1935, but also in La Plata, Rosario, and Mendoza, contributing to a total of twenty-five speaking engagements across the continent. Although he spoke in English, a language many in the audience could not understand, they were reportedly entranced. In Buenos Aires, he was obviously received as a global celebrity. His talks were transmitted live by radio, with loudspeakers mounted in different parts of the city. While the reactionary Catholic press protested not only in Buenos Aires but also throughout the continent, Krishnamurti went on with his tour and crossed the Andes on a Douglas bimotor airplane, unafraid of what many considered to be the most dangerous commercial flight at the time. On July 18, 1935, the Buenos Aires daily *Crítica* put Krishnamurti on the cover page with a large photograph and the following headline: "No es un místico, no enseña ningún sistema religioso, ni político ni filosófico. Es el verdadero individualista

que ha hallado la manera de poner en palabras claras la concepción de la libertad humana.”¹⁶



Fig. 4. Krishnamurti

Salvadora Medina Onrubia, the wife of the owner of *Crítica*, allowed Krishnamurti to use her car and provided a chauffeur. Krishnamurti was also invited to Victoria Ocampo's famous gatherings at her villa in San Isidro (she had met Krishnamurti in California on an earlier trip to the US). While Krishnamurti attracted thousands at his talks across Argentina and received great publicity and global acclaim, Gardel's film *El día que me quieras* was showing at the *Broadway* movie theater in Buenos Aires, as the adored silent movie star Rudolph Valentino (who had died in 1926) was still fondly remembered.¹⁷

Rita Gnutzmann points out that Arlt was probably the first Argentine writer to understand the effect of the film industry on the masses, making *El Astrólogo* exploit media in his revolutionary project for the secret society: “Cinematógrafo aplicado a la propaganda revolucionaria” (Arlt 1997, 357). Most importantly, Arlt was exposed to a repertoire of films that in the Buenos Aires of the 1920s and 30s was eclectic, global-minded, and cosmopolitan. At one point, there were 157 movie theaters in Buenos Aires alone and more in the provinces. They were showing a great deal of Hollywood films but also European films and early Soviet cinema, such as *Tempestad en Asia*, a 1928 silent film by Podvorkin. The *Metropolis* discovery in Buenos Aires was followed by a discovery four years later, also in Buenos Aires, of one of the greatest examples of “lyrical cinema,” Chervyiakov's *My Son* (1928). While these gems of silent cinema were readily available to Arlt in movie theaters that proliferated throughout the city (and especially in working class neighborhoods such as La Boca and Flores), had Arlt lived in Britain or Spain he would have not been able to see these films due to the censorship laws existing there at the time.¹⁸



Fig. 5. Horacio Coppola photo Buenos Aires (1936)

The cosmopolitan repertoire in Buenos Aires was wide open, offering multiple possibilities and competing ideological discourses from the East and the West that co-existed simultaneously and often in the same movie theater. The latest Hollywood hit was shown next to a piece of Soviet cinema, Krishnamurti next to Rudolf Valentino. One may ponder whether the puzzling ideological mix in *Los siete locos*, when El Astrólogo famously says, “seremos bolcheviques, católicos, fascistas, ateos, militaristas, en diversos grados de iniciación” (Arlt 1997, 276), has to do in some ways with

this ideological seriality (composed of historical oxymoronic serials) and simultaneity (conceiving of these differing ideological positions simultaneously) as social phenomena engrained in mass culture turning global.¹⁹ To what extent was Arlt the journalist and writer capturing the *zeitgeist*, and by what measure was he creating or reflecting a dystopia in the present, or one yet to come?

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's *1926: Living at the Edge of Time* is called "an essay on historical simultaneity." But why did Gumbrecht focus on 1926? Although it was the publication year of Martin Heidegger's polemic book *Being and Time*, among other texts, the American-based academic says he chose the year 1926 largely for its unremarkable nature. In Argentina, in contrast, it was a rather remarkable year, as a study (documenting prolific and multifaceted cultural production) by the Argentine cultural historian Guillermo Gasió attests. Indeed, Roberto Arlt, immersed in this new cultural climate of the 1920s and 30s and armed with the knowledge of technological artifacts, introduced new themes of modern mass culture, such as radio and sports.

Sport and radio

Rubén Gallo tells the fascinating story of modernity (Mexico's "other revolution") by focusing on five artifacts that left a deep mark on the literature and the arts of the 1920s and 30s: the camera, the typewriter, radio, cement architecture, and the stadium. While Gallo studies the deployment of stadiums to examine the political spectacle of the Mexican nation, in what follows, I examine Roberto Arlt's involvement with sports in his famous short piece "Ayer vi ganar los argentinos" and his short story "Clase de box." In "Clase de box," published on January 30, 1931, in *El Hogar*, Simoens ("El telegrafista") fights in a two-minute round with "El profesor de box," a boxing coach. Interestingly, this brief story, consisting of rather graphic scenes portraying internally-conflicted masculinity in a boxing ring, was published in a journal read by middle-class Argentine ladies. In "Ayer vi ganar los argentinos," Arlt describes in large detail the first soccer match he ever saw; it was in 1929 at the *San Lorenzo de Almagro* soccer stadium:

Las gradas están negras de espectadores. Sobre estos cuarenta mil porteños, de continuo una mano misteriosa vuelca volantes que caen entre el aire y el sol con resplandores de hojas de plata. Se apelotonan jugadores uruguayos y argentinos en torno de un jugador estirado en el suelo. Fue una patada en la nuca. No hay vuelta; los deportes son saludables. Otra naranja podrida revienta en el cráneo del mismo lonyi. Ferreyra gambetea que es un contento. No hay vuelta, es el mejor jugador del equipo, con Evaristo. ¡Ferreyra solo!, gritan las tribunas, y otro: "Ahí lo tienen al juego científico." (Arlt 2012, n.p.)

Argentina won 2-0 and while Arlt observes at the end that the Uruguayan team was actually better, it was enthusiasm that ultimately played in favor of the Argentines.²⁰ Although Arlt's narrative voice in this *aguafuerte* very much resembles that of a radio sports broadcaster, his involvement with the actual medium was rather short-lived.²¹

In March 1932, Arlt was invited by *Radio El Mundo* to do a radio show once a week, every Thursday. Arlt, however, spoke on the radio only three times. He received a lot of fan mail, though, primarily from women. Women represented the majority of radio listeners at the time because while confined to domestic space, they found in radio a popular entertainment they could enjoy and feel connected to the outside world through—without leaving the house. While men and hegemonic masculinity dominated the national scene, radio, whose first-world broadcasting was transmitted from Buenos Aires in 1920, was by the early 1930s a form of mass culture popularized by women. However, the role of women vis-à-vis the consumption of mass-produced goods such as popular radio shows did not meet with Arlt's approval: “esta es la escucha de los burros, los brutos, no quiero saber nada con la radio;” and he shortly concluded, “no puedo perder tiempo con semejante clientela” (in Saítta 2008, 124). Furthermore, Arlt was appalled by the letters he received from his fans; he decided to leave the world of radio broadcasting precisely because of its mass appeal.

Arlt quickly moved on to the next project, this time in the world of theater. Argentine critic and cultural historian Sylvia Saítta argues that Arlt wrote journalism with mass appeal, but she points out that he did not write literature for the masses: “Él tenía a todos los lectores del diario *El mundo* en el bolsillo, eran lectores posibles, pero no escribe para ellos... la novelística de Arlt no está pensada para un público popular” (in Damiano 2014, n.p.).²² Although detailed examination of the distinction between Arlt's serial journalism (a popular medium for the masses) and his literature (“good literature” as a form of “high art” was not meant for mass consumption) goes beyond the scope of this essay, it is interesting to note that despite Arlt's awareness of the rift between popular and high art, these distinctions become blurred if we are to take into consideration, among other factors, the popularity not only of Arlt's journalism but also of some of his novels.

What happens next?

Around the same time, in 1933, it was two other Latin American celebrities, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, who were invited by Henry Ford to Detroit. While Kahlo disliked the experience and would take any opportunity to escape from Michigan to New York, Rivera had been commissioned to paint the *Detroit Industry Murals* that most critics today consider among his best works. The ambiguous relationship between the discourses of scientific rationalism, technology, and totalitarian utopias is apparent in the scenes on the side panels of the north wall: “The left

panel shows a frightening scene with insect-like figures in gas masks manufacturing gas weapons, probably bromide or chloride. Canisters of gas and an actual bomb hanging behind the figures add to the ominous quality, which is literalized by the small panel below illustrating cells suffocated by poisonous gas” (Sullivan 4). On the right panel, technology and medicine are depicted as used for the good of mankind—and also for the opposite. Modern dreams of scientific progress have generated destruction and ruin. Rivera visually displays this paradox/dichotomy in the mural with the two pieces of science (good/bad) put on opposite sides of the room. Arlt has a somewhat similar dichotomy at play in *Los siete locos*, although the dystopian effects of science prevail, especially with Erdosain’s growing obsession with the gas phosgene (a tool for mass destruction and killing first used in WWI).



Fig. 6. Diego Rivera mural courtesy Detroit Institute of Arts

Castelnuovo writes in his memoir that Arlt refused his offer to accompany him to the Soviet Union by saying, “no quiero morir fusilado” (1974, 45).²³ Indeed, Roberto Arlt the journalist witnessed much political violence in Argentina (about which he was advised by *El Mundo* not to write). He also closely followed alarming news coming from Europe and especially paid attention to war armaments for which old iron was imported from Cuba and Venezuela. In the late 1930s, Arlt repeatedly warned in his newspaper columns against war machinery in the making and the horrific advent of World War II.

The texts that Arlt published in the columns “Tiempo presente” and “Al margen del cable” (1937–1941) as well as his play *La fiesta del hierro* (1940) were decidedly written against the technologies of war, and especially the gruesome reality he saw in the build-up of war weaponry. In fact,

Arlt's repeated warnings against the war culminated in *La fiesta del hierro*, a play that premiered on July 18, 1940, at the *Teatro del pueblo*. The play's ending includes the arrival of telegrams announcing WWII. Arlt died in 1942 as war was raging in Europe. While "El paisaje en las nubes" appeared posthumously, his last published newspaper piece was reporting (by relying on telegraphed news) on the Croatian fascist Ante Pavelic; meanwhile, WWII turned into a global catastrophe of unprecedented scale and consequences.

The seriality of mass-produced weapons (such as ominous gas poison in *Los siete locos*) and the serial press with which the novel ends (reporting Erdosain's suicide from the newsroom) seem to imply precisely the same dichotomy—the good and bad uses of science and technology—as seen in Rivera's *Detroit Industry Murals*. What Rivera depicted visually Arlt put into words (and also occasional images, such as those portraying *El aparato* in *Los lanzallamas*). Arlt denounced war by implying that depending on the use, technology could be a positive asset or a horrific force leading to mass destruction and war.

Sarah Ann Wells makes in *Media Laboratories* a compelling argument for the disillusionment in novelty and technology during the late modernist period (1929–1946). She develops the concept of the "media laboratory" as a type of laboratory that foregrounds literature "as the site of use and practice over invention, habituation over emergence, the 'meanwhile' over rupture, and the residual or obsolescent over novelty" (11). Wells asks, "[W]hat possibilities emerge when the enthusiasm for new media has been replaced by anxiety over their potentially pernicious effects in a globalizing, yet vastly unequal, world?" (xii). Sharing in some of the disenchantment with modernity as professed in late modernism, Arlt seemed to constantly ponder whether technology (if used perniciously) and modernization (if unchecked) would become technocratic and thus easily subsumed into a totalitarian regime.

Concluding remarks

In "Culture for the Masses," chapter four of *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Susan Buck-Morss suggests that the construction of a mass utopia, on both capitalist and socialist fronts, was the main twentieth-century fantasy. Walter Benjamin saw mass culture as a potential site of resistance, from which left-leaning artists like Charlie Chaplin could transmit subversive signals. Alex Ross argues that Benjamin's dream of a radicalized mass culture emerged, in part, from his conversations with Bertolt Brecht, who believed that popular media could be used to revolutionary ends. In light of Benjamin's thinking, other critics have suggested how messages of dissent can emanate from the heart of "the culture industry," particularly in giving voice to oppressed or marginalized groups. "Adorno and Horkheimer," as Alex Ross points out,

“viewed pop culture as an instrument of economic and political control, enforcing conformity behind a permissive screen” (n/p).

Sylvia Sáitta underscores that within the Argentine context, Arlt professed a rather apocalyptic view of mass culture: “De alguna manera, Arlt coincide con las visiones más apocalípticas sobre la cultura de masas, para las cuales el lector se deja atrapar por las tramas folletinescas sin ningún tipo de distancia crítica y con el ánimo de evadirse de sus problemas reales. Pero, al mismo tiempo, Arlt exhibe los límites del éxito de esa consolación” (2008, 21). Whether Arlt’s writing stands in line with Benjamin, Adorno, or Kracauer with regard to mass culture is debatable.²⁴ Some of his ideas may well be closest to the thinking of another member of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse criticized the same technological rationality that enthralled other leftist thinkers, such as Gramsci. He saw in the manipulation of technology one of the pillars of the Nazi regime.

If early twentieth-century modernity was characterized by self-awareness and changes in the conception of time (including the idea that the future *can* be radically different from the present and the past), then this implies a faith in the human ability to transform the world through science and technology, the very foundation that enabled the serial production of the mass culture emerging in Arlt’s time. Seriality is at the core of a wide range of modern industrial, media, and print practices. It was crucial to Arlt’s work not only in the journalistic medium but in literature as well. Mass culture, however, was obviously not Arlt’s cultural ideal. His female radio show consumers were not his desired audience, though all the while he was hoping for the mass production of his reinforced rubber invention. Arlt also bitterly disagreed with Leonidas Barletta, who wanted to convey a clear mass appeal to working classes in the productions staged at the *Teatro del pueblo* in the late 1930s. Roberto Arlt’s approach, although increasingly more radicalized, socially conscious, and left-leaning over the years, would remain nonpartisan and ironic.

Notas

¹ When thinking about Arlt as one of the most prolific journalists in the interwar period an image comes to mind: Otto Umbehr’s 1926 photomontage titled *The Racing Reporter* (Egon Erwin Kisch). See *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Culture* (38).

² Deleuze stresses the difference between seriality and regularity, whereby seriality consists of a series of elements where every element belongs to the same system but obeys different rules. See Deleuze 1994.

³ “¿No es, acaso, un apellido elegante, sustancioso, digno de un conde o de un barón? ¿No es un apellido digno de figurar en chapita de bronce en una locomotora o en una de esas máquinas raras, que ostentan el agregado de ‘Máquina polifacética de Arlt’? [...] Yo no tengo la culpa,” (Arlt 2012). For an elaboration on the theme of “máquina,” see Pauls 1997.

⁴ This was the first staging since 1936, the year Arlt wrote *El fabricante de fantasmas* and the year it premiered at the

Teatro del Pueblo.

⁵ See “Transposiciones: la adaptación televisiva de Roberto Arlt” on youtube.

⁶ See Reati 2011.

⁷ The translation is mine.

⁸ Flaubert’s novel had two translations into Spanish that were circulating at the time on both sides of the Atlantic: one by Augusto Riera (Barcelona, 1901) and another by Ciro Bayo (Madrid, 1921).

⁹ See Tinajero 2004; see Gasquet 2007 for a comprehensive history of Orientalism in Argentine literature.

¹⁰ For further discussion of the scientific theme in Arlt’s writing, see Sarlo 1992 and 1996, Brown 2005, and Page 2014.

¹¹ Towards the end of his life, Tesla was living in New York at the New Yorker Hotel on 34th Street. The celebrated inventor of alternate current died in early January 1943, six months after Arlt’s fatal heart attack in Buenos Aires. Had Arlt lived to fulfill his dream of being sent as a newspaper correspondent to the United States, no doubt he would he have wanted to visit and interview Tesla in New York City.

¹² According to María Pia López, the director of *El Museo del Libro y de la Lengua* and one of the producers of TV pública’s *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*, Arlt’s character El Astrólogo is a picaresque version of Leopoldo Lugones from the 1920s.

¹³ On Nietzsche and Arlt, see Robert S. Wells 2013.

¹⁴ On anarchism and Arlt, see Close 2000.

¹⁵ See Sarlo 1996.

¹⁶ See <http://www.fkhispanoamericana.org/KenLatinoamerica.htm> for more information on Krishnamurti’s 1935 Latin American tour and global celebrity status.

¹⁷ See Navitski and Poppe 2017.

¹⁸ See Karush 2012.

¹⁹ On the connections between German expressionism and Roberto Arlt’s work, see Amicola 1984 and 2008. See also Kailuweit et al. 2015.

²⁰ See Borge 2009.

²¹ For a discussion of the Argentine *novela radioteatral*, a serialized radio drama that reinterpreted 19th-century Argentina and “repackaged” it for a 1930s mass audience, see Rea 2013.

²² Saítta goes so far as to suggest that Borges was more populist than Arlt. In this regard, she states, “Arlt es cero populista ... Siempre es la tecnología puesta al servicio de las comunicaciones o, lo que aparece en *Los lanzallamas* sobre todo, la tecnología al servicio de la muerte, de un Estado que mata con mayor eficacia” (ibid).

²³ See Castelnuevo 1932 and 1935.

²⁴ Siegfried Kracauer’s *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany* (originally published in 1930) would be an interesting point of reference for the analysis of Arlt’s characters against a backdrop of a rapidly modernizing Buenos Aires of the 1930s. At the time, the white-collar workers sought refuge in entertainment (or the “distraction industries,” as Kracauer called it); however, in Germany shortly thereafter the very same masses were to be seduced by fascism, and in Argentina, by Peronism. The term “culture industry” was later coined by Kracauer’s disciple Theodor Adorno and his colleague Max Horkheimer in “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” a chapter in the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). According to their analysis, popular culture (similar to a factory producing standardized cultural commodities such as films, radio, magazines, etc.) is used to manipulate mass society into compliance, inaction, and passivity. Another point of reference is Kracauer’s *The Mass Ornament*, a selection of essays that were almost all first published in the 1920s in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* newspaper. For a further reference to Kracauer see Andermann 2000.

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