REGIMES OF REPRESENTATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY BUENOS AIRES
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Thomas F. Reese, Deputy Director

The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities


BUENOS AIRES 1910: EL IMAGINARIO DE UNA GRAN CAPITAL

Fundación Mapfre, Buenos Aires
In this paper, I will, first, introduce the seminar which we have entitled “Imaging the City in the Americas: The Formation and Display of Urban Identity around 1910.” Second, I will present some of the larger methodological and historical issues that animate our inquiry. And, third, I will propose some interpretive categories that I hope might be useful in thinking about classes of objects and evidence that will be at the heart of tomorrow’s presentations and that might be helpful in considering materials for an exhibition about Buenos Aires of 1910. I will discuss the maintenance or construction of relationships between the present and the past in terms of three realms of representation: (1) things or objects that are material, (2) acts or performances that are ephemeral, and (3) images or simulacra that record both of the above. Since time is short, I will present only a selection of examples from my matrix of categories to demonstrate their utility to our project “Imaging the City.”

We established the long-term seminar “Imaging the City” in 1994 at the Getty Center for the History of
Art and the Humanities in Santa Monica, California. The project now has co-sponsors in Washington, D.C., Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Montreal. The Getty Research Center fosters the advancement of interdisciplinary research on the meaning of art and artifacts within past and present cultures, as well as the development of library, archival, and visual resources. The Getty Center also seeks to promote access to and preservation of such resources. “Imaging the City” shares these goals.

We created the multi-year program “Imaging the City” to encourage interdisciplinary and comparative research around the theme of the construction of national and urban identities in the Americas in the period between 1890 and 1915. In this period of massive migration, highly mobile international capital, and emerging concerns about indigenous rights—when many began to reflect not only on the meaning of national pasts, but also on the possibility of Pan-American and international futures—the question “Whose nation?” came prominently to the fore. Today, the age of NAFTA beckons us to revisit this
transformative moment in urban and international cultures from a comparative perspective.

One of the goals of “Imaging the City” in relation to Buenos Aires has been to examine some of the ways in which a collective identity was forged here in 1910, particularly through the festivities marking the celebration of the centennial of Argentine independence from Spain. Never before had the state undertaken such a systematic effort to create a national tradition and identity for its citizens—most of whom were immigrants—whose national identity had to be created rather than discovered. For Argentina, then, 1910 represented a moment in which many of her national traditions were “invented,” to use a phrase of Eric Hobsbawm’s. But if, nationalism “invents nations where they do not exist,” nationalism may assimilate to “imagining and creation” rather than to “fabrication and falsity.” And it is important to note that all communities, including nations, are imagined. The verbal play between imagining and imaging is important, and, we hope, evoked in part by our use of the Spanish term “imaginario.”
Our investigation starts from the position that the special, collective urban identity of Buenos Aires was not coterminous with Argentine national identity. We understand metropolitan identity, as in the case of other capitals, as the principal site in which national identity can be fully experienced and celebrated. But beyond that, we believe that the city projected a unique aura of cosmopolitanism—as a place that produced wonder and excitement. Within city life c. 1910, bourgeois images of progress and plenty dominated, but images of cosmopolitan variety also contributed to the metropolitan experience.

The central questions for the seminar “Imaging the City” are these: what was the nature of a given city’s identity at the turn of the century? How was it formed? How was it communicated? How was it understood by different groups? Our particular focus is on “images” and “representations”; both are invoked simultaneously in English by the gerund “imaging.” The images on which we have focused were generally developed to communicate ideas and
to transform behavior. They could serve ready-made constituencies by fulfilling existing needs and desires, or they could contribute to the construction of new identities—whether the result was unifying, as in national or metropolitan identities, or divisive, as in class-, gender-, or ethnicity-based identities. In all cases, these images constructed imaginary worlds, which they promoted as coherent and real. We believe that the territory of images allows us to explore how different kinds of representations communicate in distinctive ways—objects, performances, and simulacra, for example, or in the last category, the verbal, the textual, the ocular, the aural, etc. The method we have adopted is comparative in that we wish to understand the specific nature of different “imaging” spheres by looking at the way in which the form and content of the communication are shaped by the technologies, materials, and social organization required for its production and its consumption or use. In other words, communication technologies or discourses construct objects, their own communities and professional values, and communities of consumers.
We are interested in charting the specific ways in which concrete meanings were created in each new communication media and technology and in their rapid expansion in relationship to early twentieth century ideas about “progress,” “capital,” and “modernity.” Nevertheless, to speak of the “cultures of images,” “regimes of representation,” or “technologies of communication” in turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires is not to speak of a monolithic, national “culture of images,” but rather of many sets of “image-cultures,” some adopted from other national traditions and deployed by individuals and groups for different purposes. One must distinguish between autochthonous, imported, and, finally, transplanted, transformed, and transformative traditions and values. Hence, cartooning and caricature in the mass media drew heavily on precedents from Spain; monuments in the urban landscape, on France and Italy; commercial albums, on Germany, England, and the United States; and so on. Second, the ideas and products unleashed in the wake of the explosion of new technologies could not remain in the exclusive
control of those who created them and sought to profit by them.

Of course, simulacra are not merely transparent frames through which history can be observed. Images are always transmitted to us through distinct media and conventions of representation that are highly mediated by the intentions of makers and those who construct contexts for their redeployment for new interpretive ends. In other words, they are not windows, but membranes with their own transformative character, and they are highly mediated by the selectivity of the “recorder” and the interpretive context provided by their “deployers” and/or “users.” Our work focuses on understanding the development of the internal representational codes within specific genres, whether monuments or medals, art photography or photo journalism. Historians must cultivate a special sensitivity to the producer’s rhetorical and visual strategies, for there is a relationship between the way a text or image is produced and its aesthetic form. Indeed, the producers shape and set the boundaries of the
potential meaning of their products, and they frequently embed power relations within them.iii There always exist dialogic relationships among those who make images, those who display or deploy them, and those who behold and use them.

Historians must analyze what users make or do with the representations they receive, for they often use them in ways foreign to the system to which they originally belonged. Consumer strategies often involve resistance, whether through political acts or through those idiosyncrasies of play that allow the creative and even subversive reinterpretation, rejection, and reinvention of images. Local communities and groups seeking to create identities that countered dominant constructions of national and metropolitan identity appropriated objects, performances, and images. These “other” communities, which might be held together by class, age, ethnicity, religion, place of work, place of origin, or innumerable other affiliations, generally developed expressive forms that became symbols of solidarity and resistance for their subculture. As Barbara
Kirshenblatt-Gimblett noted, “The city is . . . a crucible in which expressive behavior is forged.” All had access to this human resource, so we must ask, as she did, “How do people use expressive behavior to personalize and humanize the urban environment? How do they insert themselves into the larger power structures, or find ways in which to exercise choice and control? How do they appropriate and rework mass-produced commodities? . . . How do the inhabitants of a city form images of the larger whole and their place in it?” In other words, we must study communication strategies both from the “top-down” and from the “bottom-up.” We must study “authoritative images of the city and perspectives shaped by a set of oppositional values.”

We believe that the best way to introduce the larger subject of our particular approach to the analysis of historical representations is to ask these questions: How do we enter the past? How can we recapture the past and understand its meaning? As an “ideal,” we would, of course, like to be able to recapture the qualities and textures of lived
experience through the full range of society, valuing all lives and all sensory experiences as vital to our understanding of the nature of the past. But we immediately encounter a series of very distinct vehicles of access.

We will address three modes of access—objects, performances, and simulacra—although, as we will see, each participates in dimensions of the other. No one exists alone. They are all interactive fields that might be best explored through “hypertextual” reference fields. But they are also not identical. There is a different stress on any “representation” that occupies one of these particular fields—things, acts, or images. *Things* are material, *acts* are ephemeral, and *images* are illusory. *Things* are physical; *acts*, social; and *images*, mental or cognitive. *Things* are related to professional practices that create “representations of space”; *acts*, to the “spatial practices” of everyday life; and *images*, to “representational spaces” and the symbolic meanings they enact.iii *Images* also allow us to relate types of artifacts, forms of representation, and technologies of
diffusion and communication. They are designed to help us distinguish between languages of communication (say, textual, visual, performative), genres of expression (say, poetry, fiction, history), and the roles of scarcity and abundance in their effect (say, a unique original vs. reproduced multiples). Historically, each of these representational regimens constructed audiences through readership or spectatorship, and each had its unique status and appeal to different audiences. But by the turn of the twentieth century the character of languages, genres, and audiences had become so complex and variegated that typological purity and exclusivity disappeared—the textual invaded the graphic and the graphic invaded the textual; the boundaries between elite and popular, as well as those between originals and replicas, blurred.

Let us now return to these forms of representation—things, acts, and images. First, *material objects*. In certain cases, we can visit the sites of lived-experience of the past—natural, architectural, or urban. We can actually touch or
contemplate objects that existed in the past and that still function in the present as physical and mnemonic relays through time. There is something palpable about such experience because material objects can activate a broad range of our sensory imaginations in a quest to recapture the past. Even when we cannot physically touch these objects like clothing or furniture from the past, for example, they can provoke kinesthetic effects in our bodies that allow us—through analogy—to imagine being “in them.” They can function as “time objects” that mediate between the past and the present, simultaneously representing both temporal positions. They are related to the functions played by souvenirs and mementos, which are preserved prospectively to serve as reminders of an ephemeral experience or absent person and to authenticate the past.

Second, performance. All of the objects or material sites in the first category (things) carry deep within their genetic codings a key relationship to performative acts that gave them form, whether prospectively (in cases where they were designed to
stage certain actions or performances) or retrospectively (in cases where they reflected or were transformed by practices of use—directed or undirected, celebratory or quotidian). In other words, almost every object or space enacts, reflects, or transforms expressive behavior, both in the past and the present. Unfortunately, these performances, whether they are crafted spectacles or the simple rituals of everyday life, are ephemeral by their very nature and their traces do not pass easily through time. The historian constantly attempts to reconcile things with actions—objects with performances. The “picturesque” had its origins in this desire to reconstruct these performances and to picture them. There has been a long tradition of utilizing material sites and objects from the past to create stage sets for the imaginative reenactment of past events and significations. But how do we reconstruct the nature, form, and content of these past performative acts?

This brings us to our third category of representation—*images* or *simulacra*. Of course, like our first category, they too are carried through the
material form of objects—so they can also share the qualities of representations in that category. For example, they can be souvenirs by virtue of the fact that they were made at the very moment in the past they record—the postcard is the classic type-specimen here. But, they can be also be simulations, which are retrospective recreations of the past—in other words, a present representation of a past action and context rather than a past representation of a present event. They express their signification in distinctive representational languages that communicate verbally, textually, visually, aurally, or in some combination thereof. They do so through singular and unique objects or through the technologies of mass reproduction. In sum, then, the first two categories can only be reconciled and known through the symbolic content of the third.

Our matrix proposes these three categories of representation that aid us in entering the past—things, acts, and images. So far, however, I have not spoken of the nature of the concrete sub-categories in each of these larger fields. Under things, we include
symbols, urban places, architecture, monuments and historic buildings, public sculpture, medals and stamps, and commercial goods. Each represents institutions shaped by acts and rituals—functional, symbolic, and communitarian. Under acts, education, work, politics, leisure and recreation, commerce and consumption, and home and neighborhood define the spheres of life where ritual activity is concentrated and created, but not the performative or theatrical forms they take. These would include not only rituals associated with disciplined learning, correctional instruction, and even professional exchange, for example, in congresses (in the educational sphere); work, production, and voluntary associations (in the labor sphere); and political oratory and concerted action, like labor rallies or strike meetings (in the political sphere); but also rituals associated with leisure and recreation, which were increasingly organized by governments, elites, or subcultures, and increasingly favored ceremonial mass gatherings, spectacle, and display. These rituals would include (1) theater, opera, symphonic music, and exhibitions of canonical collections, as in museums, zoos, and
botanical gardens; (2) pageantry, parades, and civic festivities; (3) organized exercise, sports, and competitions; (4) and myriad forms of popular entertainment—street performance, saloons, dancehalls, cabaret, circuses, amusement parks, movie theaters, hot air balloons, social dance, singing, gambling, and recreational escape—to the country, for example. But the rituals associated with leisure at the turn of the century were increasingly intertwined with the democratization of desire and the pursuit of goods, constructed by, and in the service of, commercial capitalism, notably in the new rituals of shopping, dining, travel, and other forms of consumption, and in attendance and participation in national and international expositions and trade fairs of agriculture, livestock, transportation, industry, hygiene, and fine arts—to name only those held during the centennial celebrations of 1910 in Buenos Aires. Shopping and the expositions helped construct increasing nationalized and internationalized markets for commercialized leisure. And, finally, there exist the very significant rituals of everyday life centered around the home and neighborhood: foodways, rites
of passage, play, humor, verbal art, songs, music, festivals, domestic objects, dress, and many many more.

Some of these ritual forms were constructed as demonstrations of the links that bound citizens of the national state together, say through civic celebration or national competitions. Schools also played a fundamental role in this process of the political socialization of citizens. These rituals of identity were especially important in turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires, where many were Argentines not by birth but by immigration. For this reason, the centennial celebrations of 1910 played a fundamental role in the invention of Argentina and of Buenos Aires as the capital city through commemoration and the construction of memory in a city of immigrants with few concrete memories and no nostalgia for the historical moment of origins for the Argentine nation. We signal this year’s events, because, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has pointed out, ceremonial activity in the form of “dedications, rededications, centennials, and other celebrations of time are
opportunities to reconstruct the past in relation to the present and in relation to the consciousness that makes the separation between the two possible.\textsuperscript{xix}

We have stressed above, in the view of Eric Hobsbawm, the \textit{acts, performances, and rituals} associated with the “invention of the tradition of the nation-state.” But other rituals played equally important roles in building a sense of identity and solidarity among members of the multiple and overlapping subcultures of the city mentioned earlier. These rituals allowed them to resist or subvert hegemonic structures of identity. Although, as Hobsbawm has noted, social practices in the period 1870-1914 generally filtered socially downward from aristocracy to bourgeoisie and from bourgeoisie to working classes, the \textit{tango} culture of Buenos Aires was a significant exception that needs to be examined in terms of whether it was an “invented tradition.”\textsuperscript{xx}

Finally, under \textit{images}, the sub-categories of the textual and the ocular dominate. In the first are travel accounts, guidebooks, and almanacs; political
memoirs and autobiography; poetry and fiction; facsimiles and anthologies; essays, history, and textbooks; official reports; literary prizes. In the second are maps, models, and overviews; architectural and urban drawings; sketchbooks; paintings and the city; photographs of the city; stereographs, lantern slides, and cinema. The new industries of mass media and mass reproduction provided major new markets for the textual and the visual. In these “flows” not only were these images recontextualized, but they assumed, as Walter Benjamin long ago observed, different “auras.” The new mass media included albums and almanacs; the popular press with a plethora of expressive and technical modes (journalistic illustration, photo essays, photographic reconstruction, cartoons and caricatures, illustrations, and advertising); pamphlets; popular prints; posters and handbills; stationary; packaging; postcards; and games.

In conclusion, our attempt to map the media and genres in each of the three major categories of representation is undertaken in order to focus
attention on the unique character of each technology of communication as instruments of identity formation and as vehicles of access to the past. These “lists” allow us to focus on a number of distinctions about the linguistic and expressive nature of each class, the modulations of “dialect” adopted in each for distinct audiences, the variegated nature of their reception, and the subversive misprisions and appropriations that often become tools of resistance. Our goal in creating this list is also to demonstrate the diversity of the means of communication and of representation in the period between 1870 and 1915 and to challenge us to think about the ways in which each “imaging” class can be theorized in terms of its unique structural qualities and its ability to communicate and construct identity. Our goal is to avoid regarding representations, whether things, acts, or images, solely as “historical documents” or “aesthetic objects.” Rather, we regard them as highly mediated instruments of power, which was exercised by those who commissioned, executed, edited, displayed, sold, marketed, consumed, viewed, criticized, or even rescued and reutilized them. Our task is to
understand the various contexts and meanings that they had in the moment of their creation and utilization and how each functioned to create, preserve, transform, or obliterate historical and social memory.
CLASSES OF REPRESENTATION

THINGS
(Material Objects)

SYMBOLS

URBAN PLACES.

ARCHITECTURE.

MONUMENTS AND HISTORIC BUILDINGS

PUBLIC SCULPTURE

MEDALS AND STAMPS

SOUVENIRS, MEMENTOS, AND MEMORY OBJECTS

COMMERCIAL GOODS

COMPANIONS, COLLECTIBLES, ENSEMBLES, PROJECTS, MINIATURES

ACTS
(Expressive Behavior/Ephemeral Performances)

EDUCATION

Schools, Institutes, Correctional Facilities

Religion

Organized Play

Conferences

WORK

The Workplace

Voluntary Associations: Clubs, Labor Unions, Craft Organizations, Causes (Suffrage Movement; Philanthropic), Mutual Aid Societies, Political
Organizations, Volunteer Fire Brigades, Street Gangs, Ethnic Brotherhods

POLITICS

Political Oratory and Theater

Concerted Action.
LEISURE AND RECREATION: MASS
GATHERINGS, SPECTACLE, AND DISPLAY

Theater, Opera, and Symphonic Music

Displays of Collections that become “canonical” in
Museums or Botanical and Zoological Gardens

Pageantry and Parades

Sports, Exercise, and Green Space

Popular Entertainment: Street Performance,
Saloons, Dancehalls, Cabaret, Circuses,
Amusement Parks, Movie Theaters, Hot Air
Balloons, Social Dance, Singing, and Gambling

COMMERCE AND CONSUMPTION

Shopping, Traveling, and the Pursuit of Goods

Expositions and Trade Shows: Agriculture and
Livestock, Transportation, Industry, Science,
Hygiene, Fine Arts

HOME AND NEIGHBORHOOD

Foodways

Play, Humor, Verbal Art

Songs, Music, and Festivals

Dress

Domestic Objects

IMAGES
(Simulacra)

THE VERBAL

THE TEXTUAL

Travel Accounts, Guidebooks, and Almanacs
Political Memoirs and Autobiography

Poetry and Fiction

Facsimiles and Anthologies
Essays, History, and Textbooks

Official Reports

Literary Prizes

THE OCULAR

Maps and Models

Architectural and Urban Drawings

Painting and the City

Photographs and the City

Projected Images and the City: Stereographs, Lantern Slides, and Cinema

Pictures of the Past--Picturing the Past

THE AURAL

Sound Recordings

MASS MEDIA/ MASS REPRODUCTION

Albums and Almanacs

The Popular Press

Print, Layout, and Illustration

Journalistic Illustration

Photo Essays

Photographic Reconstructions

Cartoons and Caricatures

Illustrations.

Advertising

Pamphlets and Catalogues
Popular Historical Prints

Posters, Handbills, Fliers, and Placards

Greeting Cards, Menus, and “Small Prints”
Stationery
Packaging
Postcards
Games

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v Ibid., 185.

vi Ibid., 189.


