

Behaving Badly at the Movies: Taste, Emotions, and Sociability in Buenos Aires' Cinemas (1940-1970)

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Abstract

Cinema has played a key role in the construction of nation and gender identities. While many studies have focused on women attending movie theatres, less attention has been directed towards men and the construction of masculinities in these spaces. The aim of this article is to analyse the experience of young men going to the cinema between 1940 and 1970 in Argentina, exploring the intricate interplay between taste, emotion, and sociability. To achieve our objectives, twenty-five interviews were conducted between 2017 and 2022. First, the article reviews the most relevant contributions on the relationship between cinema-going and cultural identities. It then analyses the characteristics of male cinema-goers, examining the differences between neighbourhood and downtown cinemas. The second section tackles a rather unexplored dimension: the noisy atmosphere of young male cinema-going, with its typical misbehaviour. The third and last part of the article examines genres preferred by men – action, adventure and cowboy films – as well as highlighting patterns of heterogeneity in masculine audiovisual preferences. Furthermore, we show that fandom and affective attachment with these objects also implied differences between men and women. In summary, this article constitutes a substantial contribution, enhancing our understanding of the gendered dimensions within Latin American audiences during the first half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Cinema, Audience, Masculinity, Sociability, Gender

Introduction

Since the first decades of the twentieth century, movie theatres have been key spaces for the construction of subjectivities, behaviours, fantasies, and imaginaries, including gender models. As Carlos Monsiváis (2006) shows in *Aires de familia*, cinemas became important locations where spectators learnt and incorporated certain ways of being in the public space and behaving appropriately. Moreover, as mass literacy was slow in Latin America, audiovisual media played a significant role in the construction of a shared popular and mass culture across the continent (Martín-Barbero, 1987). Cinema spectatorship is therefore a social practice where we can research rather elusive forms of sensibility, emotions, and social relations. Most film historiography, however, has thematised representation issues through analysis that focuses almost exclusively on films. Feminist film studies have made fundamental contributions showing how gender differences are elaborated through their projection on the screen. Psychoanalysis and critical theory, the analysis of films, their aesthetics and discourse, have demonstrated how the female figure is constructed as an object of desire for the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975; Kaplan, 1998; Oliver, 2017). Along these lines, in the case of Argentina, many studies have tackled how cinema has historically represented masculinity in various periods (Rocha, 2012), and also researched alternative sexual and gender identities among both directors and characters in films (Melo, 2008; Peña Zerpa, 2013). Other more specific studies address masculinity in a particular period or thematic scope: sexuality and the masculine position during the AIDS crisis (Aguirre, 2011), male figures in Malvinas war films (Ehrmantraut, 2009); gendered characters in the view of certain directors (Kokalov, 2015; Martinelli, 2015, among others). All these studies have used textual analysis and thus centred on masculinity as a topic of representation.

We will argue that gender identities and particularly masculinity are configured by the cinematic experience. Narratives, images, as well as experiences and practices of the spectators in the cinemas have built gender patterns throughout the history of film exhibition and reception. However, until recently most research on the subject has focused on investigating films from a strictly discursive point of view, by tackling how images and stories on the screen project or construct gender roles and stereotypes. Nevertheless, cinemas are themselves places of practices, encounters, and sociability; and as we know, cultural practice not only reflects or represents gender identities, but also shapes these positions and social roles (Hennion, 2010). This point in particular is where New Cinema History comes in hand to help us dismantle this exclusive focus on film narratives and complement it with the perspective of cultural sociology, bringing to the fore the experience and memories of the social actors.

In recent decades, New Cinema History has shifted the focus of analysis away from the films and towards spectators, with their practices, memories, and imaginaries. The work of Annette Kuhn (2002), Maltby et al. (2007), Biltereyst et al. (2019), Treveri Gennari et al. (2021) portray this new approach that seeks to trace a history from below, from the perspective of the social actors, taking into account the materiality of the cinema and the organisational forms of the film business.

In Latin America as well, a new perspective attentive to the experiences of the spectator and to the importance of the configuration of cultural spaces has been built, for example in the ethnography of film audiences in Mexico and the research on publics by Ana Rosas Mantecón (2017, 2023); the historical sociology of film exhibition and audience practices between 1914 and

1918 by Diana Paladino (2018), and the oral history of cinema memories in Buenos Aires (Gil Mariño et al., 2022), among others. All this previous research contributed to producing a broader and more complex conception of cinema as an object of social and cultural practice. Following a different historical path, Latin American scholarship has also been doing research on the reception and exhibition of films, beyond the films analysis (Luna Freire, 2023).

In this article, we engage with the theoretical and methodological foundations of the New Cinema History of cinema combined with cultural sociology and gender studies. We will leverage concepts and approaches inspired by New Cinema History such as doing history from below (Maltby and Stokes, 2007), which illuminates the perspectives of marginalised groups; the endeavour to recover the spectators' experience, providing insights into the lived realities of audiences; and an acknowledgment of cinema-going as a social experience, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of collective engagement with film culture (Kuhn, 2002). The perspectives of Georg Simmel (2014/1926), Norbert Elías (1987) and Richard Sennett (1978) on public and social interactions are fruitful to further understand the historical construction of the movie-going experience. Gender studies allow us to think about the modeling role that public experiences, such as movie-going, have on sexual and gender identities (Conde, 2009; Monsiváis, 2006; Sedgwick, 1985). Also, fandom studies provide tools to appreciate the rituals and ceremonies surrounding cinema-going and to better understand the gendered aspects of fandom (Morrissey, 2017; Spataro, 2013).

The objective of this article is to explore the cinematic experiences of young men (boys and adolescents) in the city of Buenos Aires and its surrounding areas over the course of three decades, between 1940 and 1970. This period roughly coincides with, and partially exceeds, the so-called 'golden age' of cinema in Argentina or 'classical period' (España, 2000), during which the country developed a film industry and saw great success of movie theatres in attracting spectators. In those years, the middle-class population used to attend the cinema weekly and this was one of its main entertainments. According to España (2000), films of the 'classical period' explicitly represent this recent Argentine middle class. The cinema provides a permanent place for social interaction and thus cinema-going becomes an important expression of middle urban classes, integrated mostly by immigrants (España, 2000: 22).

With regard to previous studies on the construction of gender identities in cinemas, Daniela Treveri Gennari et al. (2021) investigated Italian cinema audiences in the post-war period using qualitative methodologies, devoting a chapter to masculinities in relation to film actors. They find that male cinema-goers narrate specific scenes and relate to certain male characters. They also indicate that Italian audiences became progressively masculinised in the 1950s with the emergence of cinephilia, promoted by journalists and cineclubs as a male practice. In Argentina, Mariana Conde's (2009) doctoral thesis *Martes, día de damas. Mujeres y cine en la Argentina (1933-1955)* analyses the representations of women in the films of the period and the testimonies of a group of interviewees about their memories of attending the cinema. However, men's experience in this field has been less studied and we still do not have enough qualitative research addressing the following questions. What was the typical movie going experience for men? Who did they attend with and what was the cinema atmosphere like for them? What genres and types of films did they watch? In what ways and to what extent did they construct their gender identities in these experiences?

The methodology of our research is based on oral history, drawing from a comprehensive analysis of twenty-five in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with senior adults born between 1925 and 1950, who spent their childhood or youth in the metropolitan area. Among these interviewees, fifteen participants were men, and ten were women. Including the perspectives of women was deemed crucial to comprehend the female experiences and their contrast with masculine memories, enriching our understanding of cinema-going as a gendered practice. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that we worked with a flexible script that was open to emergent themes during the conversation. The topics addressed the first memories of cinema-going and the configuration of this practice. We asked with whom they went to the cinema, how frequently, what kind of films they usually watched. We asked about the price of the tickets, the clothes they wore, and how they arrived at the venues. Most of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the interviewees, public and private elder care homes located in Buenos Aires and its surroundings. Due to the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, some of the later interviews during 2020 and 2021 were conducted online.

In methodological terms, it is important to acknowledge that oral history research does not seek an objective past but rather explores how memories are elaborated in relation to the experiences of spectators (Kuhn et al., 2017). Remembering involves a reconstruction mediated by subjectivity and gender identity. We do not claim to have direct access to practices as they were. Instead, we can explore how movie-going is remembered today in contrast with the present and through a selective reconstruction. Aligned with the methodological framework carried on by prior insightful studies on cinema going (Conde, 2009; Treveri Gennari et al., 2021), our approach intends to offer a better understanding of participants' recollections and perspectives regarding cinema-going as a social practice. This research was conducted as part of a broader collective project entitled 'Cinema Audiences in Argentina during the classical era' under the supervision of Clara Kriger.¹

In this article, we seek to reveal the dominant forms of the male experience of cinema, while also attempting to record masculinities in the plural, recognising the heterogeneity of possibilities and experiences of being men, even at a time when social restrictions and sanctions weighed heavily on gender identity. We understand that both cinema-going practices and the film repertoires - genres, character archetypes, historical and cultural elements screened - were important sources for masculinity, considered as performative, ongoing, and non-fixed constructions (Waling, 2019). The first section of the article describes how boys and adolescents went to the cinema during the period (1940-1970), with whom they went and how often, according to the testimonies of the interviewees. The second section is devoted to characterising the atmosphere and environmental aspects wherein boys were enveloped in cinema theatres, as well as the practices that typically took place in neighbourhood cinemas. The third section reconstructs the repertoires of films that were programmed in these theatres, in particular

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cowboy films² and adventure series. We also explore the boundaries of what is socially accepted for men by examining certain restrictions within cinema-going practices, particularly regarding genres and fandom activities such as purchasing magazines and clipping out images, which were often perceived as feminine practices. Finally, in the conclusion, we present some reflections and questions that arose from this journey.

Movie going in Buenos Aires

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the international press dubbed Buenos Aires as the 'Paris of South America' due to the French-style architecture the city had been constructing for several years in order to celebrate the first centenary of Argentina's independence in 1910. Throughout the twentieth century, Buenos Aires' symbolic capital and regional leadership would expand to different realms, such as literature, visual arts, and cinema. This southern metropolis developed a leading film industry in Latin America that rivalled Mexico's and Brazil's, reaching its most outstanding period in the 1950s. Hugo del Carril, Delia Garcés or Libertad Lamarque, among others, were part of the regional star system. Many interviewees who lived in Buenos Aires during these times claim that if you were lucky, you could come across these film stars on the streets of the city's centre. During the 1930s and the 1940s, cinema was solidified as the main entertainment practice in the city of Buenos Aires. In those years, calculations suggest that there were more than 200 cinemas in the city, many of them in working-class neighbourhoods such as Pompeya and La Boca, where admission was affordable even for a worker's salary (Adamovsky, 2012: 66).

The centre-periphery scheme of Buenos Aires' urban layout is a key element to understanding the social and cultural experience of movie-going. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as in the following decades, the bustling centre of Buenos Aires was located along Corrientes Avenue, which concentrated not only cinemas, theatres, and restaurants, but also the typically small bohemian cafés where writers and artists would have their gatherings. In short, mass entertainment and intellectual circles from Buenos Aires shared the same urban corridors in the first decades, in contrast with other cities, such as Paris, for example, where the bohemian gatherings occurred far from downtown and its modern administrative centre (Ansolabehere, 2019). Films premiered in the central venues, and then circulated through the neighbourhood theatres. Tickets were cheap in the peripheral cinemas and allowed access to watch two or three films in a row. In all the interviews, differences between downtown theatres (*cines del centro*) and neighbourhood theatres (*cines de barrio*), which were located outside the city centre, were emphasised as sources of notably different experiences, especially by those who were working class children at the time and had limited access to the first-run venues.

As can be seen on the map below, at the end of the 1930s the central neighbourhood of San Nicolás was home to most of the venues, mostly along Corrientes Avenue, a major artery that runs from west to east. The surrounding districts of San Nicolás (Recoleta, Balvanera and

² Our interviewees used the expression 'películas de cowboys' which we translate as 'cowboy films', to refer to Western films. We prefer to use the native expression because it highlights a significant element of the films and their reception.

Montserrat) also counted many cinema theatres, as well as Flores and Palermo. In the presented map, we have included the districts where cinema theatres were concentrated, by indicating the number of venues for each, as well as those neighbourhoods where our interviewees lived and that will be mentioned throughout the article.

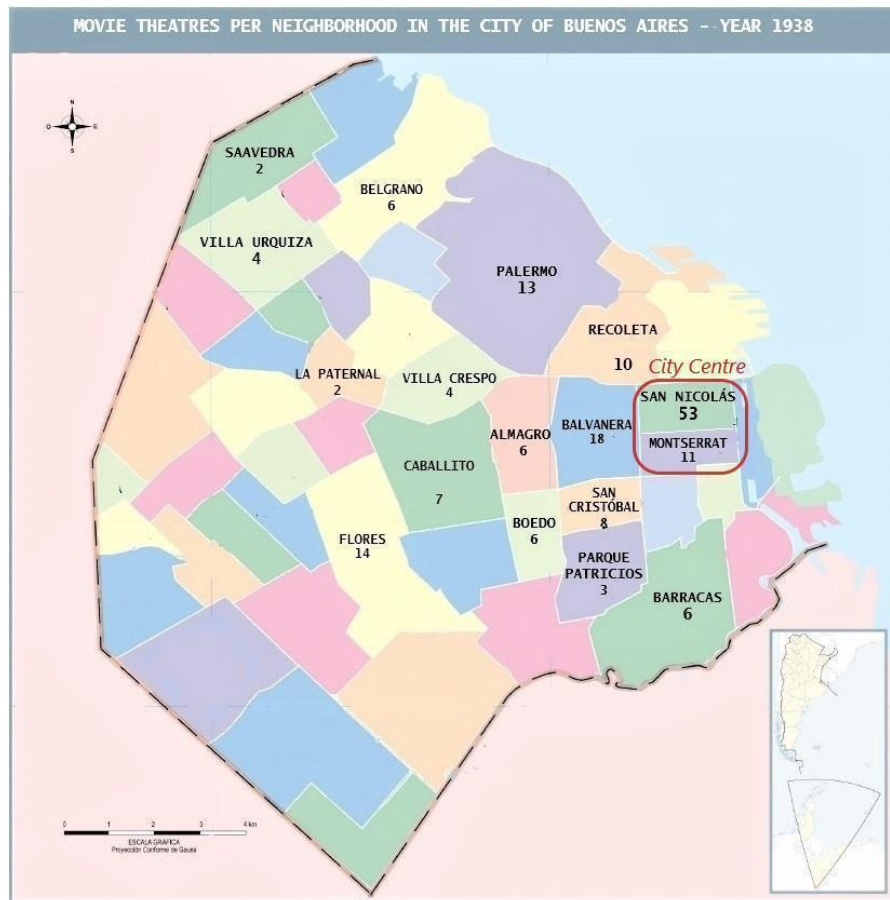


Figure 1. Buenos Aires' movie theatres per neighbourhood (selection, 1938)

Source: Authors' elaboration on *Anuario Cinematográfico 1938 de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Argentina* and map available at <https://www.qifex.com/>.

Between the 1930s and the 1950s, male children and adolescents were fairly regular cinema-goers of popular cinemas that had spread throughout numerous neighbourhoods in Buenos Aires. In most cases, interviewees recall going once a week: 'Everybody waited for Sunday to go to the cinema. I lived in the centre; I knew all the movie theatres. Sundays at the cinema were sacred',³ says Mario, born in 1924, in San Nicolás. Victoriano, who comes from a humble working-class family, remembers it in the same way:

³ The translation from Spanish to English of all the included quotes were made by the authors.

I remember that they paid me five pesos on Tuesdays at the winery and with that money, after I finished working, after bottling all the wines, I would go to the cinema, the one in my neighbourhood, which every Tuesday showed films for children. We would walk with all the kids from the neighbourhood. (Victoriano, b. 1943, Berazategui⁴)

Boys went out to the cinema with close relatives or friends from the neighbourhood, often of similar ages, usually to a nearby cinema. There were neighbourhood cinemas that were specifically designed for men as a preferential audience. They were 'homosocial spaces' (Sedgwick, 1985) meaning that they favoured social links between men with a non-sexualised character. Looking back at their childhood, as we will see in the next section, our interviewees' accounts reveal how boys-only screenings were important sites where films and friends converged, fostering significant experiences of sensing, and incorporating masculine attributes. While men do not seem to perceive the exclusion of women as problematic, more critical opinions appear in the feminine discourse, as they recognise that they were explicitly recommended not to attend those venues.

Attendance without adult supervision is a point where the male experience differs from the dominant feminine experience at the cinema. In the interviews, women state that they had to attend accompanied, usually by the mother or an older sister, and the outing was framed as a family event. For example, Anita recalls: 'My brothers went alone to see those cowboy movies, they wouldn't let me. I never went out alone, always with company. I went to the cinema with my mother and a friend, once in a while' (Anita, b. 1925, Balvanera). Permissions and parental limits about going out were different for men and women. Women recall this difference associated with the past and often emphasise that this has positively changed a lot nowadays.

So, if the typical (but not the only) experience for women was the family going together to the movies, cinemas were for men a space of greater autonomy. When recalling these experiences, men often say that they went 'alone', although that generally means that they went with friends of their own age, i.e. without adult supervision. For example, one of the interviewees remembers attending film theatres in the following way: 'We would go to *Radio City*, which showed adventure films in episodes, it was the ultimate entertainment because we could go alone. I was about eight or nine years old, I went with my friends' (Carlos, b. 1933, Boedo). Other male interviewees, when asked about their trips to the cinema, initially answer that they went alone, but later in the course of the interview they often recall a family experience.

In some accounts, in particular those of the interviewees who came from working class families, they recall the cinema sessions in the parish of the neighbourhood. These usually took place during the weekend, on Saturdays or Sundays, at a time set aside by the church exclusively for children. On these occasions, girls also attended. 'We had to attend mass in order to get the ticket', remembers Amalia (b. 1930) from Barracas. 'They were good commercial American movies. We would walk to the church with the whole family. It was two blocks away' (Amalia, b. 1930, Barracas). Alberto's memories are similar: 'I would assist the priest during the mass and

⁴ Berazategui is a district located in the south of Greater Buenos Aires or Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, outside the capital. For this reason, it does not appear on this map. Nevertheless, the people who lived in these communities frequently travelled to the Capital.

then get the entry. I had lunch at home and then went to the church's cinema. That's how we'd call it. They also had live shows. Church was the focal point where all the neighbourhood met' (Alberto, b. unknown, Saavedra).

In short, boys enjoyed neighbourhood cinemas as important homosocial spaces, but also shared some other spaces with girls, families and even had the opportunity to gain more sporadic outings to the cinemas located in the city centre, in the company of their parents. Interviewees tend to privilege the memory of the cinema as a space of autonomy and freedom attended on their own, even though they used to also go with families and neighbours. In the next section, we will look into the environmental factors of the venues, as well as the emotional experience of cinema going for male children and adolescents.

Noises in the Dark. The Rowdy Atmosphere of Neighbourhood Theatres

According to Richard Sennett (1978), a significant shift occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century in European capitals regarding the regulation of emotions in theatre. In contrast to the mid-eighteenth century, when actors could elicit applause or jeers by looking straight at the audience, these kinds of gestures would slowly begin to be replaced by a growing emphasis on self-restraint when attending spectacles, especially among the middle class, which sought to distinguish itself from the working class. The halls became darker, and attention was focused exclusively on the stage, promoting silence during the performance and restricting applause to specific moments. While silence became a practice in large cosmopolitan cities, provincial theatres remained noisier (Sennett, 1978: 256-257). In the same vein, Norbert Elias (1987: 240) highlights the 'ability to experience emotions through mere contemplation or even mere hearing' as a feature of 'civilized society'. Silence, bodily stillness, exclusive attention to the stage and self-control of emotions would become, over time, key features of the 'correct' way of attending theatre and cinema.

According to the memories of the interviewees, the pleasure of cinema-going for several young men was due to the hustle and bustle, and the mischief they could get up to in the darkness of the theatre. A main difference between the central and neighbourhood cinemas, apart from their buildings, was the silence and decorum that characterised the former. In contrast, neighbourhood theatres were characterised by shouting, stamping feet on the floor, as well as all kinds of joking and camaraderie among spectators. 'We were quite rowdy', Jorge recalls, 'we shouted when the Indians came (...) It didn't matter what film they were showing, we still shouted, we went crazy with the Sheriff' (Jorge, b. 1937, Villa Urquiza). To a large extent, the fun of going to the cinema came not only from the film, but also from the boisterous and collective atmosphere. For its part, Aníbal remembers going to the cinema on Sundays after lunch. 'They were mostly boys', he says, and the mezzanine upstairs was where the 'rowdiest' ones would sit:

In the hall, there was an open door leading to the courtyard on the side, and five minutes before the movie started, the man, an employee of the cinema, would come in to close it. When that man began to walk down the aisle, the rowdy group

in the upper section would go wild—shouting, whistling, as if the theatre was a football stadium. (Aníbal, b. 1938, Curuzú Cuatiá⁵)

In some way, the neighbourhood cinema was practically an extension of the street, where boys played and got into mischief. If, for Sennett, darkness favoured exclusive attention to the stage, the opposite was true in the cinemas we studied: darkness encouraged all kinds of mischief. In one of the testimonies, Jorge recalls that he could sometimes cross Constituyentes Avenue to attend the *Aconcagua* cinema, which belonged to another neighbourhood. Nevertheless, he insists that he preferred the *Supremo*, since it was located in his own territory. 'The Supremo was me, my neighbourhood. And my people were there. It was the suburbs, of course' (the emphasis is ours). It is evident that the proximity to and the camaraderie with close friends transformed the attendance to the movies. It did not have to do only with the narratives, images and sounds that came from the screen, but also with the creation of a special environment that favoured and intensified the emotions of the films. Jorge's memories are not only filled with the movies, but also with stories that condense the mood of that ritual:

In the part that was under the mezzanine, nobody wanted to sit down because they'd throw things at you... One day something fell down and they said: what is it? What happened? Is it a coat? It was a dead cat! (*he laughs*) I'm sorry guys, but it's the truth. We were happy kids. And the cat, as you can imagine, rolled all over the place. At the movies you were thrown with anything. (Jorge, b. 1937, Villa Urquiza)

For their part, the women's testimonies about this type of cinema correspond in pointing out that it was a dangerous environment for them, as can be seen in the following account, in this case referring to a cinema in the Boedo neighbourhood that was known as '*la piojera*' (the louse):

We women didn't go in there because it was dangerous. Anything could fall from the mezzanine into the stalls. Suddenly someone had put a sweet in his mouth, didn't like it and threw it down. So you ran certain risks, which is why we women didn't go there. (Alicia, b. 1941, Boedo)

At the end of the nineteenth century, theatres gradually began to demand a regime of silence and stillness of spectators (Butsch, 2007). Since crowds started to be feared for their potential for rioting and disturbance, regulations were introduced to penalise booing and whistling in theatres, and the long movable benches were replaced by individual seats fixed to the floor, preventing bodily contact and the mobility of the public. The theatre, and later the cinema, would seek to ensure that audiences do not behave as 'crowds', but as 'individuals'. This same fear of disturbances will be frequently used as an argument to recommend women not to attend the cinema venues (Butsch, 2007: 293-298).

⁵ Aníbal was born in Curuzú Cuatiá, a small village located in the Province of Corrientes, but then moved as a kid to Buenos Aires.

In the collected testimonies, neighbourhood cinemas' principal attraction for boys was, in fact, the possibility to act as a rowdy crowd. As Manuel (b. 1949, Parque Patricios) indicates, the cinema 'was really messy... when the film was cut, you could hear the stomping even in the middle of Parque Patricios'. In the popular cinemas, the male public expressed themselves and reacted physically in an open manner. Manuel recalls feeling sorry during the 'live number', an interlude of the film when actors or singers would deliver a brief performance. In the 1940s and 1950s, it was an obligatory interlude in cinemas, mandated by a law designed to enhance employment opportunities for live performers. 'The live act –remembers Manuel–, poor guy... In the Urquiza cinema he was treated well. But, in the other cinemas in the neighbourhood, they shouted at him. It was harsh'. Another great amusement at the cinema, as several testimonies recall, was to annoy the usher, who was shouted at and, taking advantage of the darkness, was obliged to run from one side to the other to find the culprit. When remembering the boisterous crowd at the Podestá cinema, Manuel indicates that 'no women went, we were only men', uncovering how collective behaviour and a rough atmosphere, more than the movies projected, come through as a key motive for the exclusion of women. Even the screenings that took place in churches or parishes on weekends could also be tumultuous, as Alberto recounts: 'When the film was cut, well... I wasn't one to make a mess, but there was a ruckus. They kicked. Once they tore the curtain, the nuns came. Well, it was pandemonium' (Alberto, b. 1943, Saavedra).

As Georg Simmel wrote, the spatial framework of the practices configures the experience. A spacious but crowded room, plunged in darkness, allows individuals to merge into the group. Simmel (2014: 556) writes: 'the darkness lends a particular stamp to the gathering, (...) it makes the effective limits disappear; thanks to the fantasy, the darkness offers exaggerated possibilities; man feels as if he is surrounded by a vague, indeterminate, fantastic framework'.

The typical practice of young men going to the movies in the popular theatres was at the antipodes of the civilised and self-controlled experience that, according to Sennett, Elias and Butsch, is developed in the elegant cinemas and becomes the hegemonic form of spectatorship. In contrast, the atmospheric aspects of the cinema, with the bustle, jokes, and defiant expressions of the spectators, show that these spaces were an important site of male socialisation in working-class neighbourhoods. In the interviews with women, in contrast, experiences of the cinema are quieter and no jokes, pranks or challenges to the cinema authorities are recalled. In the central cinemas, on the other hand, this kind of noise was unthinkable, not only because of the social hierarchy of the space, but also because it was more commonly attended by families:

When we went to the cinema, sometimes we went to Lavallo Street. You had to wear a hat, a suit. Lavallo Street was full, all the people dressed up to go to the cinema. My father wore a suit, the only one he had, and my mother wore a little dress, also the only one she had. (Jorge, b. 1943, Villa Urquiza)

In this way, the cinema promoted two different types of experience for boys: that of the 'serious cinemas', attended with families, and that of the 'rascal [*atorrantes*] cinemas, where the kids would go to make a mess', in the words of Gustavo (b. 1951, Paternal). The elegant neighbourhood in the centre of the city meant a different experience in terms of the silence, the elegance of the spectators, the technical quality of the projection, the novelty of the film shown.

The silence in the cinema was progressively accomplished as part of the entertainment pact and was also a form of social differentiation (Rosas Mantecón, 2017). At a time when life was essentially carried out in the neighbourhood, one interviewee stresses that:

Cinema was a religious ceremony, it was entering the world of fantasy. It was something you did once in a while. In my family, it was once a week. Saturday night was the big event, going to the cinema. (Gustavo, b. 1951, Paternal)

In this case, when movie-going is expressed as a sporadic experience, it is mostly related to going out at night with family and wearing elegant clothes. Interestingly, in the accounts of some interviewees, the boisterous experience of the cinema fades when childhood gets to an end, while adolescence brings along the possibility of marvelling silently with a film. As an example of this, one interviewee recalls that, while he was a kid, he was part of the noisy crowds of children, but as an adolescent he came to feel plunged in a 'magical moment, where I entered a world I didn't know. And suddenly you were surprised by things' (Osvaldo, b. 1943, Lanús). Only after leaving the venue, would he talk to his friends and ask if they had enjoyed the film. In this later experience, he recalls his discovery of actors like Burt Lancaster or Kirk Douglas. The process of ageing implies a transformation in movie-going, from a typical experience of going with friends to a more personal and introspective experience. In sum, the noisy and rowdy male attendance to the cinema appears to be mostly embedded in an early age and, although it vanishes as the years go by, the impact of this collective experience has a leading role in conversations, when interviewees are asked to re-construct and share their memories.

The Repertoires: Cowboys and Forbidden Movies

In the neighbourhood theatres attended by the boys, the repertoire consisted mainly of cowboy, adventure, or action films, and serial or episodic films, such as *Tarzan*, *Flash Gordon* or *Laurel & Hardy*⁶. The vast majority of these were American films. But a few testimonies also recall that they tried to sneak into restricted movies for adults.

The genre most often mentioned by men is the Western, which they refer to as 'cowboy films'. These were the most programmed films in neighbourhood cinemas, and a 'we' was built around this shared taste. For example, Osvaldo says that 'they showed adventure films, cowboy films, which was what *we* liked'. The plot and the characters were then used as scripts for children's games in the street, as the same interviewee recalls:

Well, in the beginning you liked cowboy movies, why? Because as kids, we watched cowboys, we actually called them "convoys", we read "convoy" magazines, we played "convoys". Each one had a revolver, you see, cup guns that

⁶ *Tarzan* and *Flash Gordon* are iconic comic characters that emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century, with very popular versions on cinema and TV in the following years. For their part, *Laurel & Hardy* are a well-known pair of American comedic actors whose films were vastly distributed in Latin America. These three massive productions correspond, respectively, to leading and widely spread genres of popular culture: adventure, science fiction and comedy.

would make a little explosion. We kids played that game on the street. (Osvaldo, b. 1943, Villa Crespo)

Some interviewees say that they identified with or fantasised about being like some of the male role models in these films: powerful, adventurous, brave characters. Figures such as Tarzan or Captain America, the heroes and even the villains of cowboy movies, are male figures that concentrate attributes of violence, physical prowess, and powers of all kinds. 'I wanted to be Tarzan', Jorge emphasised. 'He was my first idol. He used to grab crocodiles, throw them around, and eat lions. I always remember Tarzan. He could talk to animals when nobody else could, he was the only one' (Jorge, b. 1943, Villa Urquiza). Another interviewee tells a similar story:

I have always been a very adventurous person, just like Captain America. I always thought of myself as an explorer, that's why I was a scout. I had a good friend, we always said we would make it to the year 2000, he left me on 12 December 1999. We would go camping, backpack over our shoulders and go anywhere in the country. That's how I got to know places that are now touristic, but which were plain adventure at that time. We were scouts, the scout had that adventurous thing. And cinema was pure adventure, not only in cowboy films. Errol Flynn, that says it all. (Jorge, b. 1941, Belgrano)

Other figures invoked are actors such as Gary Cooper or John Wayne. On several occasions, both male and female interviewees perceive these repertoires as typically masculine:

Cowboy movies were for boys, I didn't like them, how are you going to watch boys' stuff? That's what they told you in those days and they wouldn't let me go. Besides, I didn't like them either, they were all pure shootings. I used to go to the *Soleil* cinema, it was the only one where I saw Libertad Lamarque⁷ films. I liked her a lot. (Anita, b. 1925, Abasto)

This relation that our male cinema-goers recall with male heroes or characters in the films they watched as adolescents not surprisingly matches the findings from Treveri Gennari et al. (2021). The idealisation process as well as the perception of a distance between the character and the reality appear to be building blocks for the development of masculinity. Strength, extraordinary powers, weapons, and horses as masculine attributes have an important place in men's memories of cinema.

The contrast between repertoires for men and those for women was built around film genres: adventure and action for men, comedy or drama for women. However, some of the men interviewed were also attracted to the female repertoire and their presence was not forbidden in the 'ladies' days'. Juan Carlos, who was not a fan of cowboy films, recalls that, although he attended these men's shows, he preferred the women's ones:

⁷ Libertad Lamarque (1908-2000) was a well-known actress and singer from Argentina, who was widely celebrated in Latin America in the 1930s. During Juan Domingo Peron's government, she was exiled to Mexico, where she lived and worked until her death.

I was always a bit weird about it. I didn't prefer cowboy films like all the other kids. I was attracted to drama films: Greta Garbo, Marie Antoinette, Mary Stuart. That's why I liked Ladies' Day, which I went to with my mum. I liked that kind of film, or Capra's films; the comedies, Ernst Lubitsch, I liked that guy since I was a kid. It was totally different (Juan Carlos, b. 1933, Saavedra).

The testimony of Juan Carlos, in which he describes himself as 'weird' because he did not like cowboy films, is eloquent about the close link between neighbourhood cinemas, repertoires and the construction of gender identity. It is important to mention that Juan Carlos would later become a cinephile with frequent attendance to film clubs. In some way, his proximity with 'ladies' days' is related to a certain way of watching films, characterised by silence and absorption, different from the noisy environment that was typical when projecting cowboy films.

The second genre of films mentioned as belonging to men's cinema are erotic or restricted films. We did not ask specifically about them in the interviews, but three men mentioned them as important during their adolescence. The memory they elaborate on refers to experiences of 'sneaking in' or bribing the manager to let them into films with erotic scenes. 'If you threw ten *guitas* at the manager you could see the forbidden films, which you know... They showed three kisses and that was it' (Jorge, b. 1943, Villa Urquiza). None of the women interviewed talked about erotic films.

There is a contrast between the exclusive character of certain male homosocial places such as the neighbourhood noisier screenings for boys or the erotic film cinemas, to which women could not attend; and the more inclusive character of women's screenings, such as ladies' days, to which male children would occasionally attend with their mothers. On the other hand, screenings in parishes and churches for children seem to have been meeting places attended by both boys and girls.

Another difference between men and women is traced in relation to fandom towards the stars. As Media Fandom literature has extensively shown, feminised fandom practices are usually stigmatised as improper, embarrassing, excessive or unproductive, portraying fans as hysterical, overly emotional, and unable to control desires (Morrissey, 2017). Among our interviewees, being fond of stars, collecting magazine clips, or following the lives of actors and actresses appears as a behaviour that is strongly associated with women, at odds with masculinity. As Spataro (2013) shows, feminine cultural attitudes and consumptions are usually diminished as less sophisticated or submissive, and become undesirable for men. In this sense, one interviewee, Jorge, was asked if he had ever thought of writing to a film star, and he answered that 'it was girls the ones who did that, we didn't, at least not my gang. We didn't pay attention to artists, they were taboo for us' (Jorge, b. 1937, Villa Urquiza). Among the memories of women interviewed, many of them recall being fans of certain celebrities and following their private lives. They recall this as infantile attitudes that they left behind later in life. Indeed, too much affection for an artist could be labelled as a deviation. If being too big a fan of artists' lives was disapproved of among women, it was rejected even more when it came to men.

In the interviews, film magazines are the objects that best condense this hobby, and it is striking that none of the men mentioned have ever bought these magazines on their own. If they were present in their homes, it was from the hand of a woman. 'In my house, my aunt would

borrow magazines with her friends. So at least ten or twelve magazines would arrive, and she in turn would buy some and get others back', recalls Aníbal (b. 1938), whose mother collected photographs of artists. Jorge and Fernando have similar memories: 'My mother used to buy *Intervalo*, that was the name of the magazine, and it brought back great novels. I didn't like it very much' (Jorge, b. 1937, Villa Urquiza), and Fernando says: 'I knew they bought that magazine, because my mother read it. But, if I went to the movies, I was always taken by what the newspaper said' (Fernando, b. 1941, Olivos).

Something similar happened with radio soap operas and gender identity, as they were considered more associated with the female world. For example, Alberto (b. 1943, Saavedra) mentions spending many afternoons listening to radio soap operas with his mother, emphasising that she listened, and he joined in, as if his mother's fondness enabled his own listening. The mother, as a close and trusted female figure, thus functions as a support for this cultural practice, just as the mother is also the support that enables entry to the ladies' days.

In short, fans' behaviour towards film stars appears to be frequently linked to the feminine and to some extent forbidden to men. Figures such as a mother or an aunt can be fanatical and bring into the domestic sphere the film magazine, the object that symbolises such a liking and is more restricted to the male world.

Conclusion

In the present article we analysed the construction of masculinity in the outings to the cinemas, by tackling rituals, the delimitation of spaces of male sociability with a specific physical atmosphere and a particular repertoire of characters and genres. The attendance to movie theatres opened a gate to inquire into emotions, social bonds, material aspects and even centre-periphery tensions linked to the urban texture. The article makes a decisive contribution to comprehend how the cinema, its images, stories, but also rituals of attendance, had a major role for the construction of male identities in the first half of twentieth century in Buenos Aires, enhancing evident differences and exclusions towards women.

The article examined the experiences of male attendance to the cinema in terms of three main dimensions: the type of trips to the cinema (alone, with friends, without adult company); the atmosphere of the theatre (noisy, filled with disturbances and without female presence) and the repertoire of films preferred (cowboys, adventure and, to a lesser extent, 'forbidden' films). We have seen how symbolic boundaries between men and women were built through certain repertoires, as well as spectatorial and fandom practices. The consumption of magazines and expressing affective attachment to film stars appear as a feminine practice, therefore forbidden for men, unless a familiar female figure acted as a support. Hence, early cinephilia in boys and adolescents may have been experienced as a threat or deviation to the dominant way of being male. In short, the affinity for certain films, as well as the ways of attending the cinema and relating to the stars, magazines, and other associated cultural products, implied a series of symbolic boundaries between men and women. Sometimes these boundaries appear to give men freedom, whereas in other times, they limit their actions, based on fear of deviant behaviour.

In childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, boys went out to the cinema alone or with friends, without adult supervision. In contrast, women's accounts never indicate going out

during their childhood without adult supervision, and even when they reach adolescence, there is no evidence of going out to the cinema alone. We thus verify the important role of the cinema as a zone of autonomy and non-control at different stages in the life trajectory of boys and male adolescents. The popular neighbourhood cinemas stand out as key spaces of male sociability, where the noise, misbehaviour and camaraderie are remembered above all, configuring codes of conduct such as the defiance of authority and the primacy of the group over the individual. At the same time, children's shows in neighbourhood cinemas hardly establish a boundary with the dynamics of neighbourhood games, and only in the luxurious, centrally located cinemas is the atmosphere of silence and attention recalled. Men's memories also bring to the surface the identification with certain figures: John Wayne, Tarzan, or Captain America, male heroes who are distinguished for their bravery when facing danger, their strength, their quasi-supernatural skills and their altruist transformative action in the world. In this way, too, masculine identities are embedded in narrative scripts that delimit correct ways of being male.

In the analysis, we have focused on the interviewees' accounts, always emphasising that we are dealing with their memories, with the way in which remembrance constructs a representation of the link with the cinema and their identity as men. Thus, this study opens up the possibility of observing the importance of cinema in the learning of identity scripts and socialisation within the male world. Examining the construction of masculinities in cinemas raises a number of questions that we hope can be addressed in future research. The intersectionality approach has shown the importance of complimenting gender studies with analyses of class, ethnicity, and territory. In the present report there are some indicators that allow us to think, as a hypothesis, that the way in which a male identity is constructed in cinemas is influenced by class position and place of residence.

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