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Cinematic Jewish Women in Rural Argentina and the Representation of *Argentinidad*

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From the outset, Argentine cinema has played a significant role in the question of *argentinidad*. The historical account of how Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe settled in the Argentine interior and became Argentines rooted in the land has not escaped Argentine film. Although period films portray Jewish female characters as nation builders alongside their male counterparts, the study of Jewish women in Argentine cinema has received little scholarly attention. In an attempt to remedy that, this article shows that the examination of the Jewish female onscreen can shed light on the controversial question of *argentinidad*. It examines the representation of two cinematic Jewish women in the Jewish agricultural colonies of the north-eastern province of Entre Ríos, Argentina, in the early twentieth century. Through the analysis of Miriam's story in Juan José Jusid's *Los gauchos judíos* [The Jewish gauchos] (1975) and Gertrudis's story in María Victoria Menis's *La cámara oscura* [Camera obscura] (2008), the article argues that Argentine cinema advocates the acculturation of the Jewish woman in Argentine society, and asserts that national cinema is on the side of the integration of different ethnicities as a desirable development for Argentine society. However, the stories of these women demonstrate that integration provokes a clash between tradition and assimilation. Placing the Jewish woman at the centre of the study reveals that these women have to break with their identity groups in order to integrate into their host country, a process that comes at a considerable cost. The article concludes that these cinematic females' agency mirrors the proactive roles which Jewish women have had in building their host nation, and thereby, *argentinidad*.

Throughout its history, Argentine cinema has contributed profoundly to the question of *argentinidad* or what it is to be an Argentine. Since its beginning, the national cinema of Argentina has drawn on historical events to inform its narratives, thus making a significant contribution to the discourse of national identity. For instance, the first documentary ever filmed in Argentina was Eugenio Py's *La bandera argentina* [The Argentine flag] in 1897. In the 1920s and early 1930s, however, José Agustín Ferreyra, the most prominent director of the time, portrayed *argentinidad* through the representation of marginal urban characters. In a similar vein, during the following two decades, directors Mario Soffici and Leopoldo Torres Ríos dealt with the configuration of national identity by drawing on rural and urban themes respectively. In the 1950s and 1960s, *argentinidad* was mainly explored in social-realist films. By 1974, Argentine cinema had entered a period of decline caused by the political turmoil that hit the country and thus *argentinidad* was scarcely represented (Getino 2005, 17-80). The advent of democracy in 1983 marked a new era in Argentine cinema, and this resulted in

the notable representation of *argentinidad* in the post-dictatorship cinema of the 1980s and 1990s. As Constanza Burucúa explains, “At a time when national identity was in need of reshaping, and a new and more egalitarian array of social habits needed to be promoted, film became a privileged arena in which to give image and voice to a new national project” (2009, 1). Mindful of the link that exists between *argentinidad* and film, this article intends to examine the representation of two cinematic Jewish women in the Jewish agricultural colonies of the Argentine interior at the beginning of the twentieth century in order to interrogate the discourse of *argentinidad*. Ever since the first Argentine film depicting a Jewish character was made in 1948, the image of the Jewish woman in Argentine cinema has been defined by her absence or by secondary roles. *Pelota de trapo* [Ragged football] (1948)—the film that first introduced the Jew onto the screens of the national cinema of Argentina—portrays the lives of a Jewish father and his son in a Buenos Aires neighbourhood but no Jewish female is represented in the plot. However, Argentine cinema does not constitute an isolated example: the marginal position of the female Jewish character in other film industries, such as the American or the British, has been noted by Nathan Abrams:

Strangely, given the growth of women’s and gender studies, little has been written about Jewish female representation in contemporary cinema, especially when compared with television. Perhaps this is explained by the fact that the Jewish woman on film suffered from consistent under-representation, being relegated to a limited number of secondary roles. (Abrams 2012, 43)

In the case of Argentine cinema, the situation has been partly remedied by the following film productions: *Los gauchos judíos* [The Jewish gauchos] (1975), *Un lugar en el mundo* [A place in the world] (1992), *Sol de otoño* [Autumn sun] (1996), and *La cámara oscura* [Camera obscura] (2008), in which the Jewish woman plays a significant role. Nonetheless, there is more research to be done regarding the representation of the Jewish woman in film. As a consequence of her relegated position on screen, the study of the Jewish woman in Argentine cinema has not been widely explored in academia. This is unfortunate since the examination of the Jewish female on screen can shed light on the controversial question of *argentinidad*. Through the analysis of Miriam’s story in Juan José Jusid’s *Los gauchos judíos* and Gertrudis’s story in María Victoria Menis’s *La cámara oscura*, this article argues that Argentine cinema advocates the acculturation of the Jewish woman in Argentine society. Furthermore, national cinema is on the side of the integration of different ethnicities as a desirable development for Argentine society.

Both films are set in the Jewish colonies of the north-eastern province of Entre Ríos in the early twentieth-century, the period of mass immigration to Argentina, when the country’s national identity was being reshaped. Among the newly arrived immigrants were Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe. Due to a thirty-three-year gap between their respective releases, *La cámara oscura* shows that Argentine cinema has gravitated

towards the normalisation of the Jews' *argentinidad*. It should be noted that normalisation in the present context means to downplay the representation of Jews as the *other*. In *Los gauchos judíos*, the plot includes a series of events that display the gradual assimilation of the Jewish newcomers to their new environment, and the title of the film speaks of merging Jewish with *gaucho* traditions. Although the Jewish characters progressively incorporate *gaucho* skills like the cultivation of the land in their novel rural life, the first generation especially continues to observe its own traditions. In *La cámara oscura*, on the other hand, the Jewish characters appear totally integrated into the rural environment. One of the most conspicuous elements that stresses the distinction between the Jewish characters in both films is costume. Whilst the Jewish characters' dress and long beards in *Los gauchos judíos* mark them as the *other* in relation to the natives of Entre Ríos, the lack of long beards and the traditional *gaucho* dress worn by the characters in *La cámara oscura* downplay their *otherness*. In order to understand the connection between *argentinidad* and the presence of the Jewish immigrant in the Argentine countryside, it is necessary to provide an overview of certain features of Argentine history.

The term *argentinidad* was coined in 1910, not by an Argentine, but by the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno in his article, "Sobre la argentinidad", published in the prestigious Argentine newspaper, *La Nación*. In this concise article, Unamuno, who was a correspondent for *La Nación* from 1901 to 1914, extolled the book, *La restauración nacionalista* (1909), by Argentine writer Ricardo Rojas and overtly expressed his agreement with Rojas's position, which advocated the *argentinización*, or complete assimilation, of the different groups of immigrants arriving in large numbers in those days (Unamuno 1941, 53-59). The relevance of Unamuno's article was enhanced by the historical context in which it appeared; in other words, a commemoration and an historical event provided its framework. Firstly, the article was penned the same year as Argentina commemorated the centenary of the May Revolution—a significant event that marked the overthrow of the Spanish king's delegate in the Viceroyalty of the River Plate and the establishment of the first national government, or *Primera Junta*. Secondly, Unamuno's article was precipitated by the impact of mass immigration on the demographic configuration of the country and the subsequent need for reshaping Argentina's national identity. The genesis of the discourse of *argentinidad*, however, dates back to the early days of nation-building. In 1845, statesman, writer and intellectual Domingo F. Sarmiento wrote a book that would leave an indelible mark on national identity, namely *Facundo o civilización y barbarie en las pampas argentinas*. As the title suggests, the book examines the dichotomy between civilisation and barbarism in nineteenth-century Argentina. According to Sarmiento, the vast, empty pampas, combined with the indomitable spirit of the *gaucho*, embodied barbarism, which in turn hindered progress and civilisation. Like his contemporary, lawyer Juan Bautista Alberdi,

Sarmiento believed that Anglo-Saxon immigration would bring civilisation to the country by helping transform the work habits and customs of the native population. Thus, in 1853, the Argentine Confederation, constituted by the provinces of Entre Ríos, Corrientes, San Juan, San Luis, Santiago del Estero, Salta, Jujuy, Córdoba, La Rioja, Tucumán, Catamarca, Mendoza and Santa Fe, approved a National Constitution largely inspired by Alberdi's 1852 *Bases y puntos de partida para la organización de la República Argentina* (Luna 2000, 85-86). As Félix Luna explains, "In this work Alberdi put forward a draft Constitution and laid the theoretical foundations of the new country that was beginning to take shape" (2000, 86). According to Alberdi, whose injunction was *gobernar es poblar* (to govern is to populate), fostering European immigration to Argentina was the answer to enhancing the development of the vast territory of the Argentine Republic, which lacked basic infrastructure and was in the hands of *caudillos*. Furthermore, Alberdi firmly believed that Europeans had to come to Argentina not merely to bring civilisation to the country, but also to mould a new kind of Argentine (Schulman 1948, 3-17). Between the years 1860 and 1880, moderate numbers of European immigrants started to arrive in Argentina. These Europeans, however, were not the Anglo-Saxons that both Alberdi and Sarmiento had expected. "Where possible, [Alberdi and Sarmiento] wanted Anglo-Saxons with the same mentality they had seen in the United States: self-sufficient, politically self-determining smallholders who did not rely on handouts from the government" (Luna 2000, 92). Protected by the preamble of the 1853 Constitution which provided rights and guarantees to *todos los hombres del mundo que quieran habitar en el suelo argentino* (all the men of the world who wish to live on Argentine soil), the newcomers were not turned away; on the contrary, they contributed to the development of the budding nation.

Julio A. Roca was inaugurated president of Argentina in 1880 and during his presidency the country witnessed the initiation of mass immigration, propelled by the Immigration Law of 1876, which fomented a type of émigré willing to farm the land. Furthering Alberdi's ideas, this law represents perhaps the most eloquent example of the 1853 Constitution. Among those immigrants who established themselves in Argentina were Russian Jews. By August 1889, the first organised group of Russian Jewish immigrants arrived on board the vessel *SS Weser*, and after the year 1891 successive groups of Russian Jews entered Argentina (Weisbrot 1979, 42). In fact, Jewish immigration from Russia was mainly due to the merging of three historical events: first, a year after he took office, president Roca issued a decree that encouraged Russian Jews to settle in Argentina, and also sent an emissary, José María Bustos, to Russia to recruit Jews (Weisbrot 1979, 43). Second, in Tsarist Russia, Jews were victims of pogroms and escalating violence—only a limited number of Jews had access to education and they were deprived of owning land (Feierstein 2006, 61-62). Third, in 1891, Baron Maurice de Hirsch, a wealthy Jewish banker, founded the Jewish Colonisation Association (JCA), with

the intention of helping Russian Jews find a new home where they could work the land as farmers, despite the fact that Jews were not acquainted with farming in Russia. Assessing the options for settlement, Maurice de Hirsch wrote:

I made a study, therefore, of different countries, and after careful examination I have become convinced that the Argentine Republic, Canada, and Australia, above all others, offer the surest guarantee for the accomplishment of the plan. I expect to begin with the Argentine Republic, and arrangements for the purchase of certain lands for the settlement are now being made. (Hirsch 1891, 4)

Hirsch believed that in order for Jews to achieve redemption and put an end to Jewish persecutions, they had to go back to farming the land as they had done in Biblical times, hence the reason why land was acquired in Argentina. One of the provinces in which the JCA purchased most land was Entre Ríos. In his study of the Jewish agricultural colonies, Morton Winsberg points out that these purchases led to the establishment of several colonies in that province, among which was the colony of Villa Clara, where the story of *La cámara oscura* is set (1968a, 287).

In 1895, the total population of Argentina amounted to approximately 4,000,000 people, but owing to the large influx of immigrants, nineteen years later it had doubled. So out of a population of roughly 8,000,000 the census of 1914 reveals that more than 2,000,000 people were foreign nationals (Rein 2010, 33). This means that immigration policy had changed dramatically the demographics of Argentina, hence the need to *argentinizar* the newly-arrived immigrants, as proposed by Rojas and supported by Unamuno. The term *argentinizar* in this context entailed the integration of the immigrants into the national community, but without disrupting the existing hierarchy or political practices in Argentine society (García Fanlo 2010a, 63-89). Thus, mass immigration had not only altered the demographic composition of the nation but also shifted the way in which national identity had been conceived. By the opening decades of the twentieth century, then, the question of *argentinidad* had been transformed from a positivist discourse that had endorsed European civilisation and whose goal had been to conquer Argentine barbarism to a cultural nationalist discourse that eulogised the *gaucho* figure, Hispanic traditions and *la Argentina profunda*, a concept that rejected the cosmopolitanism of Buenos Aires in favour of the spirituality found in the traditional values of the Argentine provinces (García Fanlo 2010b, 27). Film was instrumental in carrying out the *argentinización* of the newcomers because it helped edify the cultural nationalist discourse of *argentinidad* through documentaries portraying national emblems and topics, and fictional films that praised the *gaucho*. One of the most successful films of the time was *Nobleza gaucha* [Gaucho nobility] (1915), an account that praised the courage of the *gaucho* and depicted the dichotomy between urban and rural Argentina (King 2000, 11). Released in 1975 and 2008 respectively, *Los gauchos judíos* and *La cámara oscura* re-enact the period of mass immigration, focusing on

newly-arrived Ashkenazi Jews who have to appropriate, apart from a new language, Argentine customs and traditions. That is, the films portray and extol the successful accomplishment of the Jews' *argentinización*, which has rendered them a highly assimilable immigrant group on screen.

Los gauchos judíos, directed by Juan José Jusid, is the first Argentine film to portray Jews as a community. It is based on the eponymous book by Jewish Argentine writer Alberto Gerchunoff. Published in 1910 as a commemoration for the centenary of the May Revolution, *Los gauchos judíos* ties in neatly with the cultural nationalist discourse of *argentinidad* for it legitimises the assimilation of the newcomers in the Argentine interior. As Edna Aizenberg puts it, "The title and the book were a conscious effort by Gerchunoff to reposition 'Jews' alongside 'gauchos', and in so doing earn the right for his co-religionists to be respected and, even more importantly, to belong" (2002, 19). The book, which occupies a prominent place in the Argentine as well as the Jewish literary canon, is a collection of twenty-four short stories narrating the experiences of a group of Jewish immigrants in the Entre Ríos agricultural colony of Rajil. Because the film extrapolates the narrative structure of the book, the end result is a fragmented account that consists of parallel stories narrating the settlers' experiences. Although the film gives prominence to several stories involving Jewish female characters, Miriam's story stands out from the rest. The importance of her story stems from the fact that she falls in love with a Gentile—a person of non-Jewish faith—and, in doing so, she crosses a boundary set by her ethnic community. Featuring prominent Argentine actors, *Los gauchos judíos* received national acclaim when released in 1975, and it is one of the few films of the time that engages with *argentinidad*. Like *Los gauchos judíos*, *La cámara oscura* is an adaptation of an eponymous short story from 1983 written by Jewish Argentine writer Angélica Gorodischer. In contrast to the narrative structure of *Los gauchos judíos*, *La cámara oscura* centres around a Jewish female character, Gertrudis, who lives in the colony of Villa Clara from her early childhood in 1897 until she elopes in 1929. The plot, which is told retrospectively, commences the day after her escape and then shifts back in time to show the events that had led to her elopement. Unlike *Los gauchos judíos*, *La cámara oscura*, which is a co-production between Argentina and France, directed by Argentine director María Victoria Menis, does not list prominent Argentine actors. Nevertheless, *La Nación's* film critic Diego Batlle has praised the film as, "Una pequeña gran película, de esas que permanecen en la retina, en la memoria y en el corazón mucho tiempo después de que terminan los créditos finales y se prenden las luces de la sala" (A great little film that would remain on the retina, in the memory and in the heart a long time after the closing credits have stopped rolling and the theatre lights have been raised) (Batlle 2008). As mentioned above, these films are literary adaptations, and as such, they have infused new life into the literary works that have inspired them. For example, Angélica Gorodischer's short story was reprinted

alongside others in a book with a still from the film adaptation on its cover. More importantly, these films have not only enabled Jewish Argentine literature to become more visible, but have also brought the Jewish female into mainstream Argentine society.

In both films, one of the conflicts that the Jews have to face in their new country is the struggle between tradition and assimilation, and one of the cinematic themes that provides a clear picture of this struggle is the position of the Jewish female in relation to marriage. In *Los gauchos judíos* as well as in *La cámara oscura*, the action takes place in the microcosm of the rural colony, a locus peopled almost exclusively by Jews, which strengthens the marriage bond among co-religionists. Nonetheless, the presence of the Gentile, albeit slight, opens up an avenue for intermingling, a fact that is not devoid of consequences for the Jewish community and Argentine identity. It is worth noting that the Gentiles that live in the colonies are males that help in farm work, and their presence entails a wider array of potential partners for the Jewish females, as will be seen in one particular narrative from *Los gauchos judíos*, namely Miriam's story.

The collective narrative structure in *Los gauchos judíos* generates parallel storylines that merge in instances of common celebrations. This narrative model is rich in medium and long shots of several characters together, which goes to develop the central idea of the film: with everybody's help it is possible to make progress in the new country. However, this concept of uniting efforts does not refer exclusively to the members of the immigrant community but to the collaboration between them and the *criollos*—the descendants of the Spaniards in Argentina. This is confirmed in the 25th May celebration where the setting mixes Jews and *criollos*. Nevertheless, this union does not transcend the marriage bond between people of different ethnicity; therefore elopement becomes the only viable solution.

Abrams notes that in films prior to 1990 “the Jewish woman presents a threat to the dominant culture, as the children of any relationship, whether with Jew or Gentile, are *halachically* Jewish [i.e., being born of a Jewish mother], and the husband and children may become more culturally Jewish, as a result” (2012, 80). In *Los gauchos judíos*, in contrast, the Jewish woman proves to be a worthy and desirable partner for the Gentile. One of the storylines of the film is the romance between Miriam, a newly-arrived young Jewish woman, and Rogelio, a farm worker in the colony. Jusid places his tale of intermingling within the confinement of the colony but, at the same time, secluded from the community. Miriam and Rogelio's first encounter, for instance, is set at night in one of the stables. Miriam goes into the stable carrying some farm tools to put away, but her intent serves as an excuse to meet Rogelio, who is already inside the stable helping a mare to foal. The point-of-view shots that correspond to Miriam's gaze directed towards Rogelio's back, together with the sound of soft music and the intimacy of the place,

anticipate the development of a romance, not merely between two people, but between two people from different ethnic groups. After assisting Rogelio in the mare's labour, Miriam says, "Bueno, me tengo que ir. Mis padres no saben dónde estoy" (Well, I have to leave now. My parents don't know where I am). This utterance discloses two facts about Miriam: she is there of her own free will, and she is breaking a rule because had she told her parents where she was going, they would probably not have approved. Concerning this, both *Los gauchos judíos* and *La cámara oscura* make evident that the norm in the colonies is arranged marriages between co-religionists. When Miriam leaves the stable, Rogelio, who has to remain with the horses, sends his loyal dog Cambá to walk Miriam home. It is worth noting that Cambá and Rogelio are inseparable, so sending his dog with Miriam can be construed as sending a part of him with her, thus highlighting their (imminent) union.

The second time we see Miriam and Rogelio together they are in a palm forest on their own. The tone between them has changed slightly as Miriam now addresses Rogelio employing the familiar *vos* instead of the formal *usted* used by both of them in their first meeting. Rogelio, however, still addresses Miriam as *usted*. Whilst Rogelio's *usted* displays the respect he shows for Miriam, Miriam's *vos* reveals her openness towards Rogelio. The same soft music is played again, thereby becoming a motif of Miriam and Rogelio's love. In this scene, they discuss their relationship and for the first time they kiss and embrace each other in the *diegesis* of the film, but it is Miriam who takes the initiative. The kiss synthesises the union between the Jewish woman and the *criollo*, and testifies to what Werner Sollors calls "melting pot love", which he defines as "a marital union or a love relationship across boundaries that are considered significant, and often in defiance of parental desires and old descent antagonisms" (1986, 72). Their way of talking and reacting shows that the characters of Miriam and Rogelio are constructed as two opposites: while Miriam is the adventurous one, Rogelio is the cautious type. Although his *gaucho* dress and his skills in farm work indicate that Rogelio is indeed a *gaucho* or as he calls himself, a *paisano*, he does not behave as a *gaucho* in Sarmiento's terms. On the contrary, Rogelio is a cultured *gaucho* who has a job and honourable intentions since he wants to marry Miriam. As he puts it, "Yo soy un hombre trabajador y honrado" (I am a hard-working and honest man). Rogelio symbolises, in fact, the archetype of the *gaucho* as envisioned by the cultural nationalist discourse of *argentinidad*. Miriam, on the other hand, is the newcomer who has fallen in love with the *gaucho*, and by extension, with her new country. However, the love she professes is devoid of parental consent not merely because Rogelio is not Jewish, but also because romantic love does not seem to be the cultural norm in the colony. This is illustrated in the arranged marriage between the parents of two young Jewish settlers, Raquel and Pascual, who do not love each other, but whose marriage has been arranged by their parents. Due to social and religious constraints, Miriam is willing to give up her parents,

her community and her traditions for Rogelio. As she explains to him, they cannot get married so their only hope of staying together is to elope. Rogelio's negative reaction to Miriam's proposal is enacted verbally and physically when he lets go of Miriam's hand admonishing her, "¡Déjese de decir bolazos, quiere!" (Will you stop talking nonsense!). This utterance underscores once more Rogelio's righteousness. But after pondering, he bends down and entrusts his dog Cambá with a message to Miriam, who is sitting under a palm tree, "Vaya y dígale a esa moza que loca y todo este paisano la quiere" (Go and tell that lady that however crazy she may be this *paisano* loves her). Significantly, Rogelio identifies himself as a *paisano* and not as a *gaucho*.¹ This subtle difference conforms to the transformation the *gaucho* had undergone by the early twentieth century, namely from being a free rider of the pampas to becoming a farm worker who has settled down. Obediently, Cambá approaches Miriam and delivers his message by means of barking. In a similar fashion, Miriam asks Cambá to tell Rogelio, "Para querer a las locas hacen falta agallas" (It takes guts to love crazy women). The point-of-view shots and the camera height at Miriam and Rogelio's eye level align viewers with Rogelio and Miriam's dilemma.

During the scene of 25th May celebration, the most emblematic national holiday in Argentina, *criollos* and Jews alike meet to celebrate together, a clear sign of Jewish acculturation and integration into the host society. In the scene prior to the celebration, the adult Jewish males, who are holding a meeting in the local synagogue, are informed by their local representative that there will be a day of national celebration. Subsequently, one of the men exclaims, "Si es una fiesta argentina, es fiesta nuestra también" (If it is an Argentine holiday, it is also our holiday). This utterance articulates the Jews' willingness to become part of broader Argentine society. On the day of the celebration, the *mise-en-scène* merges the Jew and the *criollo* as participants of the *gaucho* games and partners in the *chamamé* dance—a folk music genre from north-eastern Argentina. Moreover, the editing of the scene, which intersperses a band playing *chamamé* with dance and *gaucho* games, reflects once again the acculturation of the Jewish community: Jew and *criollo* alike are the protagonists of the celebration of *argentinidad*. The entire celebration amounts to a national nuptial moment whose climax is the elopement of Miriam and Rogelio. Miriam is framed laughing with her friend Raquel, but the arrival of Cambá announces her departure. The camera tilts down and isolates Miriam from Raquel; instead, she is framed with Cambá. The next shot confirms Miriam's imminent future as Rogelio arrives on horseback. While in tears, Miriam departs from Raquel and Rogelio takes leave with Cambá. This parallelism shows that elopement entails cutting cultural ties: Miriam abandons her kin and Rogelio has to start anew somewhere else. The slicing of the bond that joins Miriam to her Jewish community occurs at the same time as the band finishes interpreting an allegorical *chamamé* about the *criollos* that have built the Argentine nation—another illustration of

the cultural national discourse of *argentinidad*. The end of the song marks the end of the relationship between Miriam and her community but indicates the beginning of a new anticipatory era of Argentina's future in which the different ethnicities mix in a *crisol de razas*—the fusion of immigrants and Argentines into a homogenous Argentine race. Hence, the new generation challenges the previous one to configure a new country and a new integrated identity. Put another way, Miriam and Rogelio's elopement is the synthesis of assimilation and can be metaphorically equated with the new Argentine race.

The scene following the celebration represents the condemnation of Miriam and Rogelio's escape since, from the perspective of Miriam's parents, Miriam has taken part in an act of treason. Sitting on the floor inside her house, Miriam's mother prays to God and blames herself for her daughter's elopement. Similarly, shattered by the news, Miriam's father equates Miriam's escape with her death. Nonetheless, Jusid portrays the condemnation in a world that belongs to the past, thus taking Miriam's side. Her parents do voice their loss but this is done in a *mise-en-scène* that positions them in darkness: the interior of their house is dimly lit, their clothing signals their Judaism and they invoke God as the ultimate authority. Her parents' parochial views contrast sharply with Miriam's outlook on life. Whilst they stand for the replication of the values brought from their home country, she represents the adventurous newcomer who is ready to embrace her new country. This difference, of course, enhances the gap that exists between the two generations.

As I pointed out in the introduction, *La cámara oscura* is one of the few Argentine films whose protagonist is a Jewish woman. Whereas Jewish characters have become more visible on screen since the 1990s, most of the films depicting Jews focus on the Jewish male. María Victoria Menis is one of the few film directors who have put the Jewish female at the centre of the narrative by making a film about a Jewish woman who becomes the subject of a French photographer's gaze upon his arrival in the agricultural colony where she lives. The character representation of the protagonist encapsulates, to some extent, the invisibility of the Jewish female on film up until now. This is due to the fact that both the protagonist of *La cámara oscura* and the cinematic Jewish woman have suffered from consistent relegation before being able to achieve prominence.

As well as the film style, the narrative structure of *La cámara oscura* differs greatly from that of *Los gauchos judíos* because it centres on the leading character of the story, Gertrudis. To reinforce her prominence, Menis frequently employs medium shots and close-ups of Gertrudis. Paradoxically, even though Gertrudis is given cinematographic prominence, her family pays her little attention. Because she goes unnoticed in the eyes of others, Gertrudis becomes marginalised, thus emphasising the theme of the film: the beauty that nobody sees. But her invisibility is linked to her own identity as an Argentine

Jewish female settled in a rural area. In her insightful book on Argentine Jewish women, Sandra McGee Deutsch observes that

Jewish women who settled in the countryside inhabited a frontier zone. [...] Women who suffered from poverty and discrimination were outsiders, the ones who lived on the edges. Their sex and minority-group status seemingly made all Jewish women outsiders. (McGee Deutsch 2010, 5)

Indeed, it is this discrimination that is articulated in the story of Gertrudis, whose *argentinidad* constitutes a point of controversy from the moment she is born. Owing to the fact that Gertrudis's mother gives birth to her on the gangplank of the vessel that has brought her family to Argentina, Gertrudis cannot become an Argentine citizen. Upon the family's arrival in Argentina the immigration authorities notify her parents that she has to be registered as German or Russian. Whilst the former alludes to the nationality of the ship, the latter refers to her parents' citizenship. Yet the name she is given is Argentine not because it is her parents' wish, but because the immigration officer suggests it. As her parents do not have a name for their newborn daughter, the immigration officer proposes, "Podrían ponerle Gertrudis, es lindo nombre. Mi novia se llama así. Es bien de acá" (You could name her Gertrudis, it's a nice name. My girlfriend is called like that. It's a very Argentine name). So from the beginning of her life her identity has been questioned in terms of both her citizenship and her ethnic group belonging. On the one hand, her name, which symbolises integration into mainstream Argentine society, reveals that she has been partly accepted by her host country. In this regard, partly accepted should be understood *vis-à-vis* fully accepted as she has not been granted Argentine citizenship. On the other hand, the fact that her parents do not have a name for her, coupled with her brother's first comment about her, "Oyb zi is a mies!" (How ugly she looks!), manifests her exclusion from her own family. This exclusion is also seen in the first scene representing her childhood.

The key motif of photography, which in the film is associated with group belonging and group identity, marks Gertrudis as the *other*. The first scene that illustrates Gertrudis's childhood is the portrayal of her family by a photographer. Five years have passed since she was born and she is now one of five children, but, unlike the rest of her siblings, she has a squint and is thereby different (or ugly, as her brother puts it). Just before the family photograph is taken, her mother reminds her, "Acordate que cuando mires a la cámara tenés que bajar la cabeza para que no se note el desvío del ojito" (Remember to look down when he takes the picture; that way, your squint won't be noticeable). Gertrudis goes one step further than her mother's recommendation and covers her face with a doll, thus stressing her *otherness*. Her first picture foreshadows what becomes of Gertrudis, an invisible person that does not belong to her identity group. The two shots after the family picture is taken mirror Gertrudis's isolation and invisibility, respectively. The first is a medium shot that enhances Gertrudis's isolation by framing her alone,

hiding behind the doll whereas the second is a long shot of the entire family, which accentuates Gertrudis's invisibility since it is the doll that takes precedence over her. Hence, Gertrudis cannot be seen. The next time a group picture is taken Gertrudis is in primary school, together with her classmates. Standing in the back row, Gertrudis runs away the moment the photograph is being taken so that a blurred image is all that is seen of her in the picture. The wish to hide herself from the gaze of the camera whenever a group picture is taken is replicated several times in the film. Furthermore, the power that the gaze of the camera exercises demarcates her as an outsider. Her *otherness* in relation to her classmates, however, is also observed in the classroom scene which precedes the taking of the school photograph. It is probably the first years of the new century and Gertrudis attends a Jewish school, a fact that is conveyed by her teacher, who speaks Spanish with Yiddish accent and talks about Moses and how God saved "nuestro pueblo" (our people). In his article on the Entre Ríos colonies, Winsberg explains that "the JCA sponsored a network of educational facilities with the Entre Ríos colonies" and this seems to be the case here (1968b, 425). Gertrudis's *otherness* is illustrated, first, by being the only one who is able to answer the teacher's question about the presence of God in the quotidian, and second, by her classmates' laughing at her when she actually provides the answer. Aside from Gertrudis's discrimination, the scene enacts a noticeable signal of acculturation in the *mise-en-scène*, namely the integration of what Saúl Sosnowski calls "two languages", when discussing Jewish and Argentine identities:

There are, in fact, two languages with their respective cultural code that signal different messages to those who have to opt for one or strive to integrate some elements of each into a more global concept of self-identification and of one's role in society. (Sosnowski 1978, 4)

So while the teacher is talking about Moses and God, the point-of-view shot, which corresponds to what Gertrudis and her classmates can see, discloses the words "1810, 25 de mayo, Primer Gobierno Patrio" (1810, 25th May, First National Government) written on the blackboard. Also, on the teacher's desk a model of the Buenos Aires *Cabildo* (City Council), the building where the first national government was proclaimed on 25th May 1810, is exhibited. While the pupils learn about their Jewish roots, they are exposed to Argentine history. This is consonant with Rojas's view on education, which emphasised the importance of Argentine history and literature in education in order to further acculturation (DeLaney 2002, 631). The *mise-en-scène* thus underscores both the process of acculturation to which the second generation of Jewish immigrants is being exposed, and the place where that acculturation takes place, namely the school. The result is vividly demonstrated in the impeccable Argentine Spanish that Gertrudis speaks in comparison with the accented Spanish her parents and her teacher speak.

As depicted in *Los gauchos judíos* and *La cámara oscura*, arranged marriage seemed to be the cultural norm in the Entre Ríos colonies. McGee Deutsch's study provides a reason for this: "Guarding women's morality also maintained borders, in that it helped guarantee the reproduction of a minority group by insuring that Jews married among themselves and raised children within their community" (2010, 124). This is indeed the case with Gertrudis, whose arranged marriage to Cohen, a prosperous widower from the colony, results in her having five children. The marriage proposal scene unveils three aspects of marriage in the Jewish colonies: firstly, young women were not free to select a spouse without parental consent. It is Gertrudis's parents who speak on her behalf while she is framed alone in the kitchen overhearing Cohen asking her father for her hand in marriage and her father's consent. Secondly, women did not usually leave the intimate domestic space inasmuch as doing that denoted not complying with the precepts of a good Jewish wife. On seeing Gertrudis, Cohen recalls his late wife, and by means of a flashback viewers gain access to an episode in which Cohen reprimands her, "No me hagas pasar vergüenza. Sos mi esposa. No vayas otra vez sola al pueblo. La gente va a comentar. Solo vas para ir al almacén de Aaron [...]. A ver, ¿qué te falta hoy? ¿Harina te falta? ¿Mate te falta? ¿Té acaso?" (Don't shame me. You're my wife. Don't go to the village alone. They'll gossip. You go to Aaron's shop every day [...]. What do you need today? Flour? Maté? Tea maybe?). Cohen's late wife, in fact, has crossed the geographical border of the colony, and by doing so, she has transgressed a cultural boundary from which women are supposed to shy away. Thirdly, the eldest daughter was to marry first. Being the eldest daughter of the family, Gertrudis has to marry before her sisters. The *mise-en-scène* of the marriage proposal underlines not only Gertrudis's *otherness*—she is dressed in black, wears glasses and hardly utters a word—but also her *imprisonment* in a situation where she has no voice. As a matter of fact, all that she says in the entire scene is, "Buenas tardes" (Good afternoon).

After the wedding celebration, an empty frame in the film signifies the passage of twenty years of marriage. The unfilled frame is followed by an establishing shot of the interior of Cohen's house in which an informative title reads "20 años más tarde" (20 years later). The temporal ellipsis may suggest that Gertrudis has lived an ordinary and predictable life. She is now in a relationship that reflects McGee Deutsch's findings:

As long as marital partners fulfilled their duties, even if they cared little for each other, they generally remained together. Women were supposed to maintain a clean home, cook adequate meals, and raise the children, whether or not they worked for wages; men would provide most of the income and abstain from beating their wives. They would have sexual relations and accord each other a minimum of respect. Infringing these boundaries was ground for ending a marriage. (McGee Deutsch 2010, 137)

In the eyes of the cultural nationalists such as Rojas, Gertrudis's family has succeeded in integrating their Jewishness and their *argentinidad* in an unproblematic way: dressed in

gaucho clothes, her husband and sons work the land together with the other *paisanos*, share their food and their table with them, play Yiddish songs alongside Argentine folk songs, her youngest son attends a public primary school, and one of her daughters is a primary school teacher. McGee Deutsch states that schools “fostered a sense of *argentinidad*” and she adds that school was indeed the place where Jewish and Gentile students mingled, learned about Argentina and, some of them, acquired the Spanish language (2010, 23). Becoming a primary school teacher, on the other hand, signified three things: being part of the liberal project introduced by Sarmiento, upward mobility for Jewish women and the acceptance of these women in mainstream Argentine society. Considering all this, it can be argued that the Cohens incarnate the assimilation policy that the discourse of *argentinidad* advocated in the early twentieth century. Gertrudis, for her part, is the *alma mater* of a seemingly well-functioning family: she dresses and feeds her family, inculcates good school habits into her children, cleans the house and tends to the garden. She has also been able to marry Jewishness and *argentinidad* in her daily life. Her cuisine manifests her Ashkenazi Jewish roots, especially when she serves gefilte fish for her family and their French guest, photographer Jean Baptiste, and her self-sacrificing mother role is in accordance with the role of Argentine rural women at the beginning of the twentieth century. In general terms, as is the case with Gertrudis, women had very limited freedom in Argentina at the time. Accordingly, her world is confined to the domestic sphere which, in the *diegesis* of the film, she never transcends. Despite her total devotion to her family, Gertrudis does not form part of the intra-diegetic gaze of the film characters. This is conspicuous at meal times when the family enjoy their meals without Gertrudis. On these occasions Menis highlights that it is father and children who form the nuclear family by juxtaposing Gertrudis in the kitchen and the rest of the family in the dining-room, and if she steps into the dining-room, nobody looks at her. As when she was a child, Gertrudis is also excluded from the family she herself has raised.

Up to this point it can be noted that Gertrudis’s story is a far cry from Miriam’s in *Los gauchos judíos*. However, the arrival of Jean Baptiste, a French photographer touring Argentina, becomes the turning point of the tale. Invited by Gertrudis’s husband to portray his family and the work on the farm, Jean Baptiste enters the colony, the Cohens’ home and Gertrudis’s heart. His gaze incorporates her into his universe to such an extent that she runs away with him when he leaves the farm. The last shot of Gertrudis is depicted as a metonymy that invokes her departure. Sitting down with her back turned away from the domestic space but facing instead the garden door, Gertrudis is prompted to transcend the boundary of the colony. Both Miriam and Gertrudis break with their families but the nature of Gertrudis’s break with her family differs from that of Miriam. In the case of Gertrudis, the break is implied in the dirty crockery and the empty and half-empty bottles towards which she is turning her back, an image that can

be read as an act of insubordination. Like Miriam, Gertrudis has also understood that in order to overturn the hierarchy of the patriarchal society in which she lives, she needs to break the prevailing rules. But Gertrudis's *argentinidad* goes beyond the cultural nationalist discourse in that she does not elope with a *criollo* but with a Frenchman. Therefore she embraces the transcultural character of Argentine society which started to dominate the discourse of *argentinidad* in the 1960s. This new vision of national identity includes the *gaucho*, the Indian and the immigrant on equal terms (García Fanlo 2010b, 25-28).

To conclude, the study of cinematic Jewish women has been little explored due to the under-representation of the Jewish woman in cinema. However, putting her at the centre of a study can yield new insights into cultural phenomena such as *argentinidad*. Both films praise the integration of the Jewish community into its host society by means of farming the land where Jews and *criollos* work together, the attendance at public primary school where Jews learn about Argentine history and literature and mingle with peers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and the 25th May celebration during which Jews and *criollos* mix. Nevertheless, shifting the focus to the newly-arrived Jewish woman or the marginalised Jewish woman, both living in rural communities at the turn of the last century, gives a different picture. Miriam and Gertrudis are subservient to their parents and husbands respectively and live in strict compliance with the cultural norms of the colony, which means, for instance, accepting arranged marriages. The struggle between tradition and assimilation, which for Jewish males or Gertrudis's children seems unproblematic, becomes contentious when marginalised women decide to be the architects of their own future. These women, who are on the margins of an on-the-margins group, have to break with their identity groups in order to integrate into their host society. The ideology of both films holds that the seemingly natural and idyllic homogenous life of the colony can be questioned and overturned. In doing so, both Miriam and Gertrudis resist the authority of parents and husbands and thus challenge the patriarchal community that has relegated them to the fringes of society. Their escape from the Jewish colonies supports the underlying ideology of the films: it is desirable for the national identity of Argentina that people intermingle instead of secluding themselves within the boundaries of their communities. Furthermore, this ideology is consonant with the assimilation policy preached by cultural nationalists, who envisioned the new Argentine race as a *crisol de razas*. What is most notable is the fact that by breaking their "fetters of descent" (Sollors 1986, 260), these cinematic Jewish women are assimilated, but the process of assimilation comes at a considerable cost because they have to leave behind their Jewish identity in order to construct a new hybrid identity. Ultimately, their agency mirrors the proactive roles which Jewish females have had in building their host nation, and thereby, *argentinidad*.

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Notes

¹In *Una excursion a los indios ranqueles* (1949), Lucio V. Mansilla makes a clear distinction between the terms *gaucho* and *paisano*. The former lives a nomadic lifestyle, is a gambler and breaks the law; the latter has a fixed residence, holds a job and complies with the law.