The poet as screenwriter: Landscape and protagonism in Papu Curotto's *Esteros*

Abstract

Gerardo 'Papu' Curotto's debut feature *Esteros* (*Estuaries,* Argentina, 2016) tells a story of young love and second chances in Argentina's northern Corrientes province. With its lush settings, endearing performances and positive denouement, it echoes recent LGBTQ+ themed Argentine successes on the international festival circuit. But *Esteros* can also be viewed from another angle, that of adaptation studies. A focus on the screenwriter Andi Nachon's contribution reveals the subtle politics of a film that touches on land ownership, farming methods and environmentalism. By highlighting the screenwriter's role, alongside that of the director, a number of apparently otiose leitmotifs and passing comments come to make sense as part of a broader comment on environmental politics in Argentina. Thus a study of *Esteros* that assesses the links between the film and Nachon's poetry opens up the movie as a work of political critique and enriches our understanding of the screenwriter's role in adaptations.

Keywords: Film, poetry, adaptation, new queer cinema, Garardo Curotto, Andi Nachon, *Esteros*.

A superficial viewing might suggest that Gerardo 'Papu' Curotto's debut feature, *Esteros* (Argentina 2016), follows what is becoming a well-worn path.[1] It is a story of young love and second chances in Argentina's northern Corrientes province. With its lush settings,

endearing performances and positive denouement, it echoes aspects of recent LGBTQ+ themed Argentine successes on the international festival circuit, such as *Plan B* (Berger, 2009), *El último verano de la boyita* (Solomonoff, 2009) or *XXY* (Puenzo, 2007). This is not to denigrate a film that has been warmly received by critics and audiences alike: there is much to be said for making an engaging issues-based movie, with strong aesthetic values, that transcends national and generic boundaries.[2] *Esteros* thus builds on a growing tradition of what might be called, following B. Ruby Rich (2013), New Queer Cinema in Latin America. But *Esteros* can also be assessed from another angle, that of adaptation studies. The script was penned by the Argentine poet and filmmaker Andi Nachon, and although it is ostensibly a love story and a coming-out tale, a focus on Nachon's contribution reveals the subtle politics of a film that touches on land ownership, farming methods and environmentalism in Argentina's agricultural north. Nachon's poetry is politically engaged in subtle and oblique ways, attempting to reclaim public space from the ongoing processes of privatization that marked urban development in the 1990s and 2000s in Argentina.[3] In the screenplay of *Esteros*, she turns her gaze to rural Argentina. By highlighting the screenwriter's role, alongside that of the director Curotto, a number of apparently otiose leitmotifs and passing remarks come to make sense as part of a broader comment on environmental politics in Argentina. Similarly the role of the setting takes on greater significance. This relates particularly to changes in agriculture in Argentina and how it has affected the Esteros, or wetlands, in the Corrientes province, in which the film is set. The Esteros, it shall be argued, come to take on a protagonism that is equal to, in places, that of the two male leads. While the role of the countryside and other peripheral regions, in particular the coast, in queer cinema from Argentina has been highlighted by a number of writers (Venkatesh 2016; Castillo 2015; Oubiña 2015), few such films have directly incorporated environmental

concerns into their thematics and aesthetics. Thus a study of *Esteros* that assesses its links to Nachon's poetry opens up the movie as a work of political critique and enriches our understanding of the screenwriter's role in adaptations.[4]

Esteros is a reworking of Curotto's earlier short firm, also penned by Nachon, *Matías y Jerónimo* (2015), in which the two young friends – the same characters, but played by different child actors – witness a transvestite man being assaulted by homophobic thugs during a carnival performance.[5] The short was written and produced after an early draught of the script won the Raymundo Gleyzer Prize, awarded by INCAA in 2012, for works in development. The subsequent full-length film tells the story of two young men, Matías (Ignacio Rogers) and Jerónimo (Esteban Masturini), both from the town of Paso de los Libres, in Corrientes province. Close friends as boys, sharing an idyllic and playful existence in the countryside around Jero's parents' farm, their burgeoning intimacy is broken when Matías's father accepts a job in Brazil. Some fifteen years later, the boys are now in their mid-20s: Matías is a successful bioengineer, working on transgenic seeds for agriculture, while Jero is a bohemian artist and something of a drifter, toying with special effects (model-making, stage makeup) but clearly not fulfilling his artistic talent. He is also gay, and out, as is signalled with a close-up five minutes into the film of his rainbow wrist band.[6] Matías, meanwhile, is in a stable if rather cold relationship with a Brazilian woman, Rochi (Renata Calmon). A series of coincidences bring Matías and Jero together, and they are drawn to each other emotionally and sexually. Importantly, their relationship develops out in the wetlands where they played together in their youth, and where they reminisce and explore their mutual feelings away from other human beings. It is at Jero's parents' shambling old house, outside the city and on the edge of the Esteros, that they consummate their relationship. In a rapid final reel, one that eschews the melodrama that characterized

the mood and aesthetics of earlier tales of more or less illicit gay love, such as *Otra historia de amor* (1986, Ortiz de Zárate), Matías splits with Rochi, seeks out Jero and the two seal their reunion with a passionate kiss, in the quirky t-shirt and model shop that stands, alongside Jero's kitschy, rundown townhouse, as the most obvious gay-friendly urban place in the film. Intriguingly, it is the countryside, both the open spaces of the wetlands and the ramshackle farmhouse of Jero's parents, that provides the stage for their desire; it is the city in which their relationship is formalized, both with Matías's split from Rochi and in the public kiss in the shop. In the denouement, we see what Venkatesh calls, with reference to Marco Berger's *Plan B*, the 'possibility of a new Maricón poetics in the urban' (2016: 171).[7] The Esteros stand, it seems, for desire, whereas the city is where relationships take place.

Critical responses to *Esteros* frame it as an accessible and enjoyable gay-themed film, and it was well received at both the Mar del Plata Film Festival and the Festival Asterisco, an LGBTIQ event in Buenos Aires. Diego Broderson (2017) calls the film a 'nueva demostración de la vitalidad del cine con temática GLBT [*sic*] en nuestro país'. Boetti (2017) says it is at its best when the actors 'respiran y reconstruyen progresivamente su vínculo, y la cámara se pone al servicio de sus sentimientos contradictorios y de varios silencios que dicen más que muchas palabras', with 'narración convencional pero atenta a los detalles'.

Much of its international acclaim came as a result of its presence in festivals, in some cases LGBTQ+-themed events, such as the Los Angeles Outfest or Toronto's Inside Out LGBT Film Festival. It won a special jury prize and the audience prize at the Brazilian Gramado Film Festival. Gary Goldstein (2016) of the *Los Angeles Times* speaks of 'The Argentine import "Esteros" (Spanish for "marshes" or "estuaries") [as] a lovely, lyrical drama that follows the reunion of two young men who shared their sexual awakening as boyhood friends', with a

'tender script' by Andi Nachon. Rebecca Pahle (2016) writes of the film as a 'pick-me-up' for American moviegoers wanting to escape from political reality in the wake of the 2016 presidential elections, a 'modest, sweetly affecting romance', without melodrama: 'though *Esteros*' story isn't particularly original, it's told in an assured, compelling fashion, bolstered by gorgeous lensing of the Argentinian countryside from cinematographer Eric Elizondo'. Frank Scheck (2016) calls the film 'a familiar tale told with lyricism and sensitivity', praising 'Curotto's assured direction and Andi Nachon's economical, non-melodramatic script', and Elizondo's cinematography, which 'beautifully captures the glories of the Argentinian countryside'. Such reviews steer perilously close to labelling *Esteros* as what B. Ruby Rich called 'happy-ending popcorn movies', or, quoting Stephen Holder, 'Giddy Gay Lite' (2013: xxiii).

Critics, then, have mostly been happy to set *Esteros* in and in contrast to a longer tradition of Argentine and Latin American LGBTQ+ films, often explicitly issues-based and in particular related to the question of coming out. In 2003, David William Foster could remark that Argentina 'has very little to offer in the way of specifically marked queer production' (2003: 130); nevertheless, this production, or tradition, is growing and of relevance for our analysis.

Gay characters appeared but did not always fare well in Argentine cinema of the 1980s; earlier censorship under the post-1976 dictatorship and other regimes had prohibited the non-critical portrayal of homosexuality. An early example is found in María Luisa Bemberg's divorce drama, *Señora de nadie* (1982), released in the last days of the military dictatorship. It is the unhappy fate of the protagonist's gay friend, Pablo, played by Julio Chávez, to be cheated on and exploited by his Brazilian boyfriend, and then beaten up in the final reel of the film. For Rich, however, the character's 'open homosexuality suggests a larger scope of

freedom and liberation from social constraints' (2013: 152). He offers too, for Foster, a 'vivid contrast to the unsavoury machismo of Fernando (the protagonist's husband)' (2015: 26).

Mentioned by Paula Jiménez España in direct relation to *Esteros*, *Adiós, Roberto* (Dawi, 1985), is a melodrama, albeit with surrealist touches, about the crisis experienced by a separated father after a drunken tryst with a gay friend. It was, as Gus Subero states, 'one of the very first films to address quite openly issues of same sex desire' (2014: 89) in Latin America. Subero goes on to say that the film 'portrays the gay man as an artificial subject, a product of his own creation and a site of gender ambivalence' (2014: 52). The final scene seems to leave an open ending, with an overhead longshot that sees the protagonist embracing his young son, while the friend, Marcelo, walks away, and Roberto's wife looks on from a taxi. The focus – in terms of narrative and filming – is very much on the married man's dilemma, to which the gay character plays a secondary role.

Otra historia de amor (1986), directed by Américo Ortiz de Zárate based on a script by Juan Carlos Brown, tells the story of a young office worker who falls in love with his married male boss, who up until that point has shown little or no overt sign of desiring other men. Like *Adiós, Roberto*, the film shows what Subero calls a 'predilection for this type of stereotypical *maricón*' (2014: 52). Another melodrama, it nevertheless allows the protagonist, Jorge Castro (played by Mario Pasik) an impassioned speech in defence of equal rights in love and relationships, and an upbeat, if contrived, conclusion, as the two men decide to set up home together. Its filmic language is wholly conventional, its characterizations now somewhat dated, with much in common with Sergio Renan's 1974 Oscar-nominated inter-generational office romance *La tregua*.

Part of the problem with 1980s cinema was generic, with gay characters confined to melodramas or crass comedies; Michael Green observes that '[t]he issue of genre highlights yet another problematic issue surrounding queer cinema, which is that even indie queer films tend to focus on sexuality as a subject, and like 'women's pictures' of Hollywood's past, they tend to be confined to a few genres such as melodrama and romantic comedy' (2013: 33). Vinodh Venkatesh, drawing a contrast between what he calls earlier 'Maricón cinema' and more recent works, notes that early gay-themed films kept 'sexual and gender difference at a polite distance from the viewer' (2016: 5).

In recent years there has been a notable upsurge of Argentine films that sympathetically draw queer characters, and movies that treat with sensitivity complex issues around gender and sexuality.[8] Rich sees an important predecessor in the 1985 Brazilian-US production of Héctor Babenco's 1985 adaptation of Manuel Puig's novel, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (Puig 1976), with its 'unprecedented fusion of a radical politics of sex with a sexual politics of revolution' (2013: 154). Rich describes the emergence of '[a] cinema of nuance and feeling […], a moody landscape of longing and heartbreak, with figures who daydreamed and pursued desire wherever it might be found, who upset expectation and invaded pop culture' (2013: 167). Venkatesh suggests that there occurred a 'turn-of-the-century boom' in which 'queer cinema moves away from the purely visual […] toward a cinema of sensation' (2016: 6), 'a polysensorial, haptic interaction with the moving image' (Venkatesh 2016: 7), with films that are increasingly tactile, rather than merely scopic or visual (Venkatesh 2016: 10). These films aspire to 'provoke […] positive emotions, namely empathy, around gender and sex difference' (Venkatesh 2016: 14).

Examples of this emergent tradition would include Anahí Berneri's *Un año sin amor*, based on a novel-memoir of the same name by the writer Pablo Pérez, which tells the story of a lonely writer, struggling to deal with his HIV diagnosis, who discovers self-fulfilment in the leather/BDSM scene in Buenos Aires. Robert Deam Tobin notes the film's 'sober […] nonmelodramatic view' (2015: 74) and the relative silence of the film on contemporary political matters (Tobin 2015: 73). Edgardo Cozarinsky's *Ronda nocturna* (2005) depicts the life of a male prostitute, and the risks of his work on the streets of Buenos Aires. Dieter Ingenschay calls it '[a] homage to Buenos Aires' (2015: 263) in which 'the night and the city converge […] into a special kind of film aesthetics' (Ingenschay 2015: 268), one that draws overtly on Wong Kar-wai's 1987 romance *Happy Together*.

XXY (Puenzo 2007) deals with the difficult adolescence of a character, Alex, growing up intersex in a small Uruguayan coastal town. For Debra Castillo, it is 'a radical Argentine reinterpretation of the familiar B-movie genre of the angst-ridden teeny-bopper romance' (2015: 162). Of particular importance are its liminal settings, in which borders are both 'absolute and crossable' (Castillo 2015: 155). Uruguay functions as the 'symbolic location of the *borderline* "mundo raro"' (Castillo 2015: 166). Venkatesh notes that the family in the film 'moved from Buenos Aires to escape the perceived problems of rearing an intersexed child' in the city (2016: 114), what he goes on to call the pitfall of '(urban) gender hegemony' (Venkatesh 2016: 118). Instead, the coast and the sea 'gesture towards the queer and the plural possibilities of leaving heteronormativity behind' (Venkatesh 2016: 119). Yet it is on the coast that the protagonist, Alex, is sexually assaulted by local teenagers, and the film's albeit ambiguous ending implies that the family leave their seaside home partly as a result. The director's next film, *El niño pez* (2009), explores a romance between a wealthy Argentine young woman and her Paraguayan maid. Venkatesh highlights the

importance of the 'peripheral/rural' in this film (2016: 131) and the prominent role played by aquatic spaces in the development of the relationship between the two leads (Venkatesh 2016: 133).

In an interview with Manuel Betancourt, Nachon cites *El último verano de la boyita* (Solomonoff 2009) as an inspiration for *Esteros*. Solomonoff's film is a coming-of-age story dealing with gender assignment. It is notable not only for the strong performances of its non-professional leads, but also for the striking backdrops of the Argentine pampas, an environment revealed in a series of long- and wide-angle shots to be at once breathtaking and harsh. Venkatesh notes that *Boyita* is one of a number of recent queer-themed films that 'use nonurban spaces' (2016: 16); 'through an intimate relationship with the marine and the natural […] the principal characters emerge as queer bodies' (Venkatesh 2016: 16). The river is central, in particular its 'fluidity […] as an audile-tactile [*sic*] space' (Venkatesh 2016: 96). The film thus 'uses the natural as a semantic precursor of the queer' (Venkatesh 2016: 107). Mario, the intersex character whose difficult adolescence provides the main drama of the film, achieves their most notable moment of self-fulfilment and freedom when escaping on a stolen horse. Jorgelina, the juvenile focalizer, and Mario, experience moments of emotional intimacy, alone together by the river, where Mario hides to escape his brutal father and unsympathetic neighbours.

Also noteworthy is Lucrecia Martel's *La Ciénaga* (2001), with its depiction of frustrated lesbian desire in rural Salta. Rich notes the centrality of the 'northern' setting for Martel and other Queer New Latin American Cinema practitioners (2013: xxv). For Rich, Martel is 'grounded in the north of the country' (Rich 2013: 179). From Martel's earlier experiments with home movie cameras through to her first feature, 'a very queer vision emerged: gazing

wide-eyed and unapologetically at absolutely everything and listening without judgment to all that is said' (Rich 2013: 179). The film makes ample use of what Oubiña calls 'ambiguous boundaries' (2015: 237), both between individuals and in the natural and manmade landscape of its settings.

These films bear witness to a shift from the urban to the rural in setting for dramas about queer characters, often explicitly presenting the countryside or the coast, in particular when free of other people, as a more permissive and even erotic space than the city.[9] Venkatesh highlights the importance of such landscapes for dealing with sexuality; writing of *XXY*, he states that 'the aquatic [is] a metaphor for gender' (2016: 130). In *Plan B*, the coast near Buenos Aires and the noise of water on the soundtrack are key to the men's growing attraction (Venkatesh 2016: 162, 164). One can see echoes of this attempt to set questions of sexuality and adolescence against striking natural backdrops in *Esteros*.[10] The choice of Corrientes province – sandwiched between rivers, flanked by Paraguay and Brazil, and with a strong influence from the language and culture of these neighbours, in particular Guaraní – as a setting, would be revealing, then. Characters cross borders, be they geographical, linguistic or identitarian.

In its narrative arc, and in the generally muted aesthetic of its urban (as opposed to rural) scenes, *Esteros* has no little in common with the films of Marco Berger. Venkatesh says of Berger's *Plan B*, there are 'no crises of identity, affirmations of sexuality, or a broader politics of desire' (2016: 154). Berger's aim is 'escaping identitarianism in favour of intimate, nonpolitical [*sic*] explorations of desire' (Venkatesh 2016: 169). Curotto's film, also like Berger's, features characters who fit the new tendency for a depiction of what Foster calls 'masculine-looking' gay characters. Although Jero, as mentioned above, is clearly signalled

as gay, and describes himself thus, he is played with restraint by a non-gay actor. A key precursor in this respect would be Marcelo Piñeyro's heist thriller *Plata quemada* (2000), based on Ricardo Piglia's novel of the same name, with its portrayal of the lovers El nene and Ángel, played by Leonardo Sbaraglia and Eduardo Noriega, respectively. Subero writes that *Plata quemada* 'naturalised the homosexual relationship between two very masculine gays' (2014: 289). Lema-Hincapié states that 'the protagonists' eroticism eludes any rigid or ultimate definition' (2015: 53).

Esteros is also part of a growing international tradition of 'coming-out' movies. Venkatesh writes of *XXY*, for example, as 'an exercise in the politics of coming out' (2016: 129). In an interview with Jiménez España, Nachon cites Hettie MacDonald's *Beautiful Thing* (1996) as an influence. This British picture tells the story of the relationship between two teenagers living on a south London council estate, overcoming prejudices from their families and classmates. In its memorable closing scene, Jamie and Ste slow-dance together in public to Mama Cass Elliot's song 'Dream a Little Dream', accompanied by Jamie's mother, who dances with a female friend. As the camera circles round the young men, with the sun setting bright in the background, we cut to reaction shots of their neighbours on the estate, some bemused, others offended. This dance routine is reworked in *Esteros*, as analysed below. Nachon's screenplay also shares structural features with the earlier British film: two contrasting families, with one character (Jamie, Jero) more clearly marked as gay than the other (Ste, Matías), the former with a supportive mother, the latter with a critical, unsympathetic father. One might suggest, though, that *Esteros* lacks what Perriam calls the film's 'dramatic-didactic intentions' (2013: 49).

The reworking in *Esteros* of this scene, however, is also evocative of a sequence in another film dealing with homoerotic desire, Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (Mexico, 2001). In an oft-analysed sequence, the two male leads, Julio (Gael García Bernal) and Tenoch (Diego Luna) dance with Tenoch's cousin by marriage, Luisa (Maribel Verdú). The three kiss, before Luisa kneels down to fellate the boys. The camera moves in to a medium two shot, and then a close-up, and the boys kiss, the realization of Luisa's claim earlier that the boys' bravado is merely a cover for their mutual desire to screw each other. The next morning the boys wake up in bed together, Luisa is gone and the implicit events of the night before spark a crisis that will end their friendship. This is very visually illustrated with Tenoch vomiting outside their hut. Venkatesh calls the sequence 'a step in the reterritorialization of the Maricón in the coast/nonurban setting' (2016: 140), and notes that after the boys (implicitly) have sex, they return to the city as if nothing had happened (Venkatesh 2016: 146). As Rich states, with its ending, 'the myth of heteronormative masculinity is restored' (2013: 177). Yet it is worth recalling an important feature of the Mexican work. Throughout Cuarón's film, an extra-diegetic voice interrupts the narrative to comment on, among other things, politics and environmentalism, all issues that the teenage 'buddy' or road movie – the ostensible genre to which the film belongs – usually omit from their plotting, but that are present in Curotto's film.

Some 35 minutes into *Esteros*, we see the young Jero and Matías dancing to a classic romantic *cumbia* track, Los charros' 'Amores como el nuestro' (also known as 'Como los unicornios'), with Jero's mother, before a questioning gaze from his father (Pablo Cura, as Roberto) makes Matías abandon the trio. Jero dances with his mother, then alone, before Matías rejoins him for some horseplay, watched this time more approvingly by his father. These scenes are interspersed, through cross cutting, with a relatively static, low-angle

handheld two-shot of a conversation between the two fathers about their work. The camera position and movement, which occasionally leaves Jero's father (Esteban, played by Marcelo Subiotto) out of focus, or blocked by a movement from another character (Matías's mother, clearing the table, for example), creates intimacy and a certain complicity with the men. Matías' father – married to a Brazilian – is contemplating the job offer that will take him to Brazil. He explicitly presents the decision as practical, not ideological. It is not, he says, in response to teasing from Jero's father, that he wants to work in 'privatizaciones' – an important reality of Argentine economic policy during the Menem years – but simply that what interests him is 'guita' or cash. Jero's father jokes to Matías that his 'viejo' (old man, father) must be a 'troglodita', a caveman. Whereas in Cuarón's earlier film, a three-way dance will lead to the erotic – yet traumatic – denouement of the love triangle, Curotto's use of the same set-up reveals Jero's parents' sympathetic and understanding approach to their son's nascent sexuality, in contrast to the rather disapproving attitude of Matías's parents, especially his father. Perhaps more importantly for our reading of the film, it also hints at the economic context of neo-liberalism and middle-class aspiration, very visually inscribed by the Lacoste polo shirt that Matías's father wears (Matías also wears a polo shirt, although unbranded). With Jero's father, he toasts to 'los últimos baqueanos del Iberá' (translated in the subtitles as 'the last farmers of the Iberá'): the lifestyle, and the rural farming idyll, of Jero's family, is fated to disappear. Matías's father wants to get out while he can. Nascent sexual desire is therefore portrayed against a backdrop of economic policy and environmental concerns.

Both the director and the screenwriter of *Esteros* stated in a number of interviews that they wished the film to escape clichés about sexuality, and also for it not to be labelled as just of gay interest. *Esteros* uses no little subtlety to deal with sexual matters. Given the youth of

the actors, Joaquín Parada (young Matías) and Blas Finardi Niz (young Jero), two non-professionals chosen in a local open casting, certain scenes are of necessity portrayed with discretion.[11] We witness only a medium shot from an elevated angle in a low-lit room during what, according to Nachon and Curotto, the young actors referred to as 'la escena de la paja' (the wanking or jerking off scene). The next day, in natural light, a chaste kiss on the lips is shown in two-shot close-up. Sex scenes between the two adult men are longer, filmed from close-up but avoiding explicit details, although it becomes apparent that there is fluidity in the 'roles' that they adopt. Tellingly, they are set in Jero's parents' farm, and in one case in the same bed in which they were first intimate. In an interview with Sandro (2016), Curotto stated that 'me gustan las películas que usan lo LGBT no como algo central, sino para hablar de otras cosas'. While *Esteros* shares certain features with other recent LGBT-themed films – its lack of melodrama; its non-voyeuristic, sympathetic and understated portrayal of characters' sexuality; the presence of 'masculine' gay characters; and its lush rural setting – in other aspects, it differs. These differences hint at the 'otras cosas' the film speaks about. What then would be the 'other things' that this film investigates?

The clue to the 'other story' that *Esteros* tells is found in a series of seemingly otiose sections of dialogue in the screenplay. It is important to acknowledge that these are few, and they are not central to the narrative. But in that sense, they stand out in the film, like the 'punctum' in Roland Barthes' theory of photography – the discordant or anomalous feature that comes to catch and hold the viewer's attention. These references point to the landscape of the Esteros de Iberá as central to the film's concerns, and explain its presence as the work's title. One might even venture to call the Esteros the protagonist of the film, or at least another lead, alongside Matías and Jero. This is apparent in the great amount of

screen time dedicated to shots of nature and the outdoors, in particular the estuaries and their flora and fauna. Many of the images of water, sky or trees are neither point-of-view nor establishing shots, nor are they background, and they do not advance the narrative: the landscape plays a role in this film and is devoted screen time accordingly. In answer to a question about the importance of landscape, and in particular that of the Esteros, Curotto stated that it was 'sumamente determinante' (Sandro 2016), both in terms of the framework to the story and to some of the practicalities of filmmaking, in particular, the shots in the wetlands themselves. Elsewhere, he spoke of casting two locals because of their 'contacto con la naturaleza' and the tone of their voices (Jiménez España 2017). Nachon herself spoke of the Esteros as having 'esa cosa de latencia que por un lado es la calma y de golpe miras y ahí está el yacaré' (Jiménez España 2017). The Esteros, with what Jiménez España calls their 'paisaje imperdible' and their 'cosa de latencia', in Nachon's words in the same interview, are more a character than they are simply setting. Importantly, whereas in the films mentioned above, such as *La león*, *El último verano de la boyita* and *XXY*, nature, and in particular fluvial or coastal landscapes, plays a key role, there is no expression, no matter how tacit, of environmental or related socio-political concerns. In *Esteros* there is, and it chimes strongly with Nachon's interests in her poetry. As such, it is important to look in detail at those sections in which the screenplay, especially dialogue, asks the spectator to consider political aspects of the landscape.

The first important exchange occurs early in the script. Soon after their reencounter, Jero asks Matías about his work. A biologist, he replies that he works on seeds. Jero snaps back a question, '¿Transgénicas?' to which Matías replies, again rather curtly, 'Simplemente son mejores'. The conversation is not developed; yet the reference hangs in the air, and seems to colour their initial wariness towards each other. The scene is echoed later, before the two

make love, when they pretend to be meeting for the first time, as if in a disco, and make small talk about jobs. Jero asks Matías what he does: 'Biólogo en los Esteros', he replies. Jero's profession, he states with a laugh, is 'Gay'. A hand-held camera, similar to the one that filmed the earlier, childhood dancing scene, close to the actors, creates intimacy, in contrast to the more conventional and distanced framing of the earlier exchange. What is presented as a potential fissure between the two becomes the subject of humour. But it also raises, in passing, the question of GMOs in agriculture in Argentina, and why a local resident, and specifically a local who has been brought up surrounded by traditional farming methods, would resent the imposition of more technologically complex methods by outsiders, even an outsider with strong links to the area.

The second is the scene in which the boys dance, mentioned above, as their fathers discuss work. For the purposes of the story, it is just enough for Matías's family to move away from the region. For the development of character, Matías's father, Roberto's interest in money might well be enough. But the mention of privatization, and the end of traditional farming in the region, adds flesh to a picture of increasing economic pressure on the environment of the region. That Matías goes on to work in biotech is yet more revealing of the film's environmental concerns, although the detail is not strictly necessary for the film's story.

Third, during a trip to the Esteros, as the young men revisit the places of their youth, Matías recites a list of animal names, most of them words drawn from Guaraní. The scene is prefaced by a walk through the woods; at one stage Matías picks up a stick and runs it through the leaves. The camera position, in a Steadicam shot, which follows them two leads at a short distance, in medium and three-quarters, seems to draw on the way in which Terrence Malick's films, in particular *The Thin Red Line*, depict the interaction between

characters and setting. There are shots of spiders' webs, glinting in the light. Lens flare and out-of-focus shots blur the scene. Branches and leaves obscure the characters, until they walk away from the camera (a thick branch seems to block its path). Diegetic birdsong takes over the soundtrack. Interrupting the movement of our leads, we see a nine-second full-body close-up of a capybara, an almost comic vision of the solid, expressionless animal, shaking itself dry. This is followed by a similar-length shot of a group of *huelleras* or cocoi herons. None of these, logically, appear to be point-of-view shots. There is something almost documentary about them, especially that of the capybara. Then there is short static shot of the surface of the water. The shot of the water is interrupted by the sound of Jero lighting a spliff off-screen. Moments later, the dialogue starts up again, as Jero notes that *achiras*, or *canna indica* (sometimes known in English as 'Indian shot' because of the fruit's resemblance to shotgun pellets), are growing on the surface of the water, despite what his mother, Marilú, has suggested. Matías asks if a bird they can see is a *carabus*, or limpkin, to which Jero agrees – look at its little legs ('patitas') he states. Matías then begins, as he shares Jero's joint, to recite names of flora and fauna, all common to the region, most with their etymologies in Guaraní, and some at greater or lesser risk of extinction: 'aguará popé' (crab-eating raccoon); 'capybara'; 'aguará guazú' (maned wolf); 'curiyú' (yellow anaconda); 'urunday' (*astronium balansae*, a type of cashew tree); 'carabiyú' (*eugenia pungens*, a type of myrtle); and others. Jero responds approvingly, as the close-up camera moves from one head to the other, the two characters sitting facing each other in a boat on the waters of the Iberá. Except, he adds, that Matías forgot the piranhas. We then cut to a long shot, the two leads together, facing each other, in a boat that looks small against the aquatic background, even vulnerable. Importantly, there is no other human presence, nor even any evidence of previous human presences. The two begin to discuss the alligators or *yacarés* in the water.[12]

This replays a conversation from their youth, and the sequence is clearly aimed, in part, to show them picking up their relationship where it was broken off many years earlier. But, simultaneously, the time dedicated both to shots of nature and to the recounting of the area's remarkable biodiversity is far from central to the development of story or character. After the men's horseplay in the water, some twenty seconds are dedicated to three long takes of trees, insects, water and plants; the camera moves, as if on the water. The setting sun blurs outlines, and there is more lens flare, before a long close-up of an achira plant, as mentioned earlier in Matías's speech. The sequence shows the men's growing re-found intimacy. But it is no exaggeration to state that we have an observation about biodiversity too. This is what is at risk, the film seems to suggest, with the arrival of the modern farming that Matías is promoting.

These three sequences, not essential to the narrative or the story, hint at a larger concern, to do with environmental and economic pressures on the region, and the wider political context in which the story takes place. This is exemplified not just in the attractive shots of wildlife, but in a particular relationship between the leads and the setting. Often, Matías and Jero are dwarfed, filmed in panoramic wide-angle longshots that leave them as small, toy-like figures on the horizon or against the landscape.[13] At other times, as in the scenes of Matías and Jero in the boat, or the echoed scenes of the boys, and later the men, floating top to toe in the water, we see them physically immersed in and moved by the land and water around them. The beautiful countryside, these open, watery spaces are signalled as a site of sexual possibility. The filming – and the framing and camera position, in particular – highlights the absence of other human beings. They are not watched, either by parents or by Rochi, as they are at other potential moments of intimacy, set indoors or in the city.

In an interview with Manuel Betancourt, Curotto cited Terrence Malick as an important influence in their research for the film in terms of his skill at 'capturing nature'. In the same piece, Nachon puts it as follows:

> [W]hen it comes to Argentinean films, I think it's also crucial to move away from the urban world, exploring different areas outside of the city. And that the landscape was very important – it's almost part of the characters. […] The setting may seem rather plain, but it's so vibrant and alive, and it's something the film conveys really well.

The importance of the Esteros de Iberá region in the film should not be underestimated, and it seems clear that these references, with the shots of the wetlands and their extraordinary biodiversity, are part of the screenplay's venture into environmental matters. Cozar Cabañas describes the region as 'one of the most extensive […] and singular wetlands in South America' (2003). Canziani notes that 'The isolation and the inaccessibility of the wetland region have, up to now, helped its preservation' (in Canziani et al. 2006: 5). It is in this environment that the position of Jero's parents as traditional farmers in the region is stressed. The isolation of their farmhouse is important. It is empty when Matías and Jero arrive, with difficulty, during a storm. A number of sequences show difficulties with gates, or doors, perhaps a 'closet' metaphor, but also a simple demonstration of the rural isolation in which Jero's parents live. Matías and Jero argue about a broken fridge door, for Matías a sign of stubborn technological backwardness in their lifestyle; the film, however, strives to preserve this, the house conjuring up happy memories from his youth in flashbacks.

Furthermore, the time and space that the film dedicates to lush exteriors, in which local animals and the distinctive aquatic landscape take momentary precedence over the characters and the narrative, works like a visual plea on behalf of the preservation of this environment. The specific question of transgenic, or genetically modified, seeds in farming in Argentina, however, is a curious one for the film to pick up. Whereas the matter is today not uncontroversial in Europe, there has been little of the opposition to their use in agriculture in popular circles that has been encountered elsewhere. Part of Matías's dilemma is not just coming out or leaving his girlfriend. He works for her father's company. It is implicit that abandoning her, and in particular under such circumstances, would be fatal for his career.

What is the particular political and environmental conjuncture at which this film hints and why? Peter Newell (2009) has coined the term 'bio-hegemony' to describe the power of large agri-businesses in governing land and fertilizer/seed use, precisely the activity that Matías is involved in. 'Argentina is the second most significant cultivator of GM crops in the world', having 'embraced the technology on the grounds of its export potential' (Newell 253–54). 'The hegemonic discourse regarding agricultural biotechnology is that it represents an important, economically significant, socially beneficial, safe, and environmentally benign technology', he continues (Newell 2009: 275). Strong state support and compliant media have meant that, unlike in Europe, in Argentina GM is a 'nonissue' (Newell 2009: 277). Amalia Leguizamón (2013) argues though that 'the GM soy-based agro-export model as currently configured in Argentina is a socially and ecologically unsustainable model of national development'. She refers to what some researchers have called the transgenic treadmill, by which agrochemical use and GM crop use cause each other mutually to escalate; with the growth of glyphosate ('Round Up') resistant weeds, ever higher doses of

chemicals are required. Elsewhere, Sven Lütticken writes of 'the contemporary agro industry and its reconfiguration and patenting of living organisms DNA – a New Wave of privatization and exploitation that would not have surprised Marx' (2017: 115).[14]

Norma Giarraca and Tomás Palmisano note the 'desplazamiento de la producción familiar' in favour of large companies (2011: 279–80). They write of 'los problemas de los agricultores que pasaron a la soja, los campesinos a quienes se les arrebata la tierra, los trabajadores rurales mal pagos, el trabajo infantil' (Giarraca and Palmisano 2011: 286). Miguel Teubal notes in particular the loss of biodiversity (2008a: 74). The intensity, industrialization and seeming efficiency of the model mean that 'El sector se transforma cada vez más en un negocio de unos pocos […]; rápidamente se transforma en una *agricultura sin agricultores'* (Teubal 2008a: 86). Elsewhere, he too refers to 'la desaparición de gran parte de la agricultura familiar' (Teubal 2008b: 7) – precisely the dilemma that the boys' families face in *Esteros*, especially Jero's. This has been described by Lorraine Leu (2017), in a slightly different context, as 'the struggle to stay'.

This then is the reality to which *Esteros* is hinting: one of increased pressure on the land and a particular model of farming, to which Jero's family seem to be attempting to cling on. Matías's decision is not just a choice of partner or to reassess his sexuality. In seemingly idle remarks in the script, we see hints that he must also abandon the economic model on which his successful career depends. *Esteros* does not tell us what Matías will do after his reunion with Jero. But it does celebrate both traditional farming, depicted as an idyll that gave the backdrop to the boys' youth, and the unique landscape and wildlife of the Esteros.

Moreover, *Esteros*'s environmental concerns chime with Nachon's poetry, and this provides further insight into both the aesthetics and the ethics of the film.[15] In an interview with Paula Jiménez España, Nachon spoke of the process of writing:

> Fue un proceso largo, con muchas versiones de guión [*sic*] y para escribirlo pensé en mi propia experiencia de infancia, en mis fines de semana de quinta con amigas, pero más allá de eso creo que es algo que todos tenemos: ese momento en que no sos ni niñx ni adolescente y todo es posibilidad y algún aliadx tuviste.

What of Nachon's own writing is present in this film? Scheck (2016) praises Nachon's screenplay, and Goldstein (2016) writes of its tenderness. But for those familiar with her poetry, what obvious links can be found? The first is merely biographical: Jero's dog is called Iván, the name of Nachon's now-deceased pet, to whom a section is dedicated in the collection *Taiga* (2000), and who features in drawings on the front covers of *Goa* (2003) and *Villa Ballesta-Ñuñork* (2003).

Nachon's poetry is extraordinarily filmic, with many of her poems having the feel of cinematic sequences or even something approaching a film treatment. 'Una segunda oportunidad' (Nachon 2003b: 31) relates a more or less trivial exchange in a bar as a series of unsuccessful film shots, its language full of references to cinematic techniques: 'se filma igual'; 'pasar de la secuencia errada / al plano previo'. The poem 'Las fiestas del mañana' traces a bus ride through Buenos Aires, examining both the speeding scene outside the vehicle and the glances exchanged among passengers (Nachon 2000: 14–15). The poem

highlights the visual aspect, perhaps paradoxically, through a mention of the addressee's astigmatism; we follow the bus's journey in a poetic travelling shot, interspersed with point-of-view shots from the second-person who is apostrophized in the poem. 'Surf'. found in the same collection, examines the moment that the addressee – seemingly in a fit of pique – smashes a fish-tank, with predictable and eye-catching results (Nachon 2000: 20–21). The poem is framed as an exasperated monologue, with flashbacks to the tank before its destruction. The ekphrastic effects would lend themselves to filming, and the sequence is rather reminiscent of contemporary music videos. It also shares the tone of the more pointed exchanges between Jero and Matías, such as the moment in which Matías accuses Jero of being a 'chico bonsai' who has never grown up. In both 'Surf' and 'Las fiestas' – and much of Nachon's work from the late 1990s and the early 2000s – the gaze, shifting between elements within a wider scene, like close-ups picking up details, employing a grammar similar to that of classical montage (Eisenstein, Vertov), is accompanied by the very visual form of the poem, with long, drifting lines that cover the page and force the reader's physical eye to wander, while the mental eye pictures the scene. The scale of the poems is reproduced in the grand exteriors of *Esteros.*

In terms of plotting, *Esteros* makes use of a series of flashbacks. Movements in time, especially analepsis and prolepsis, are central to Nachon's latest poetry, not least the collection *La III Guerra Mundial* (2014), in which two lyric voices, seemingly the same person separated in time, between childhood and adulthood, enter into dialogue across several decades, from the military dictatorship and the lyric voice's childhood, to the present day. In *Esteros*, events in the present – the reencounter between the boys, a visit to Jero's parents' farm – spark memories of their happy childhood together, and specifically the last summer

before finishing elementary/primary school, when the boys experienced their first and only sexual liaison.

The next feature is visual, specifically the link between *Esteros*'s *mise-en-scène* and Nachon's poetry. The first example is found in the interior of adult Jero's house. Full of kitsch objects, in particular the film character models – werewolves, aliens and monsters – that he makes and sells, it seems with no great success, the setting is reminiscent of much of Nachon's poetry. Witness her use of cartoons and cartoon references: throughout the collection *Taiga* we see *anime*-style drawings, by Gastón Pérsico; the collection *Goa* includes the poems 'Digimon' and 'Peppermint Patty', named after cartoon characters; and the poem 'Haida' in the same collection references the 'conejito duracell' [*sic*] (Nachon 2003: 50).

The second example is the presence of science-fiction and fantasy. Jero first reencounters Matías in his role as a make-up artist, turning his old friend and Rochi into zombies for a carnival fancy-dress party. References to fantasy fiction, science-fiction and what might be called other 'B' genres abound in Nachon's work (Bollig 2016: 157–60, 165–70). In the collection *36 movimientos hasta* she begins a poem with the phrase, 'Lo hacés o no. Pero intentarlo / nunca' (Nachon 2005: 63). This a translation of the Jedi master Yoda's phrase 'Do. Or do not. There is no try', from the 1983 sci-fi epic *Return of the Jedi*. Her recent collection, *La III Guerra Mundial*, riffs openly on elements from Orson Scott Card's 'Ender' series of novels*. Plaza Real* (2003) is prefaced with an epigraph from the science-fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson, specifically a citation from *Blue Mars* (1996), a novel in part about an exodus from Earth in the wake of environmental catastrophe.

If Nachon is, in her better-known collections and poems – *Taiga*, or her frequently anthologized 'Surf' – very much an urban poet, other collections, including her most recent work, have seen her explore spaces away from her native Buenos Aires. *Goa* included travelogue poems from around the world. *Volumen I* (2010) includes photographs of landscapes, rural open spaces and flora, some of which were taken during a journey around Europe. Two shots in particular would not look out of place in *Esteros*: the image of clouds through trees at sunrise or sunset and a picture of a blue sky, the bottom left corner of the frame occupied by the top of a tree, with the vapour trail of a distant plane in the far background. *La III Guerra Mundial* takes us to the wide open spaces of the Argentine south following a family seemingly fleeing either political violence or some other unspecified, perhaps environmental, catastrophe. In this sense, while the specific Corrientes setting of *Esteros* is new to Nachon, it constitutes a coherent move within her *oeuvre.*

Furthermore, the environmental concerns of the film tally with her very personal approach to the lyric form, including her use of the second person, her shifts between lyric voices and the general erasure of an authoritative figure of the poet in verse: the creation, in short, 'of a space to be shared by all' (Bollig 2016: 171). Nachon's poetry and her practices as a performer of poetry create shared, non-individualized spaces, part of a protest against the privatization of the commons in Argentina and beyond: 'to write the experience of commonality' (Bollig 2016: 155) – and to promote and protect it too, one might add. It is this commonality that *Esteros* seeks to defend.

In conclusion, *Esteros*'s 'screen idea' (Macdonald 2013: 1) is strongly linked to the thematics of Andi Nachon's poetry. A focus on aspects of the script not strictly necessary for the film to function as a 'coming-out' drama shows its wider concerns, alongside its links to

contemporary trends in Latin American New Queer Cinema. While critics have viewed *Esteros* as an enjoyable and well-shot issues-based film, if one acknowledges and explores the role of the screenwriter, and her collaboration with the director, then it becomes clear that the environmental references, which might otherwise be passed over or seen as unnecessary, are in fact central to wider observations about the risks of privatization and new agricultural technologies. Knowledge of Nachon's poetry allows greater understanding of the film's themes and aesthetics, and its very particular contribution to the growing tradition of New Queer Cinema in Argentina. Like Nachon's poetry, this movie is a subtle plea against the privatization of the commons and in defence of non-violent being with the other – the landscape and its non-human inhabitants in particular. The collaborative approach, her partnership with Curotto, is very much in keeping with the ethics of her writing and the film, an ethics of openness and generosity towards the other. *Esteros* represents a call for what Leo Bersani referred to as 'a nonviolent relation to the world that doesn't seek to exterminate difference' (2010: 43). Difference here is not just that of sex, gender or even culture: it is of the human and the non-human too.

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[2] On the role of the screenwriter in 'social issue movies', see Beker (2013).

[3] On Nachon's poetry see e.g. Bollig (2016, chapter 4).

[4] For a summary of recent work on film adaptation, in particular in relation to Latin American 'film-poetry' and poetic films, see Bollig and Wood (2014).

[5] Paso de los Libres, close to the borders with Brazil and Uruguay, is one of the few towns in Argentina well known for its carnival celebrations.

[6] This is just one of a number of close-ups of hands and especially wrists. Matías and Jero, both as boys and men, wear plastic digital watches, adult Jero's being an eye-catching red. Other than a kitsch detail and the development of the boys' colour palettes, it is also perhaps worth noting that the Argentine company Mistral supplied their timepieces for the film, and these play an appropriately prominent role. Such quirks are almost inevitable for those making independent films, and rather more forgivable than the outrageous product placement in many blockbusters: e.g. see http://www.bbc.co.uk/culture/story/20151001-does-bonds-product-placement-go-too-far.

[7] There is also, one might suggest, a certain similarity in story to Berger's later film, *Hawaii* (2013), in which two former childhood acquaintances meet after years apart, in a similarly rural setting, and discover a mutual attraction.

[8] On the debate around the use of the term 'queer' to describe contemporary Hispanic cinema, and characters therein, see Perriam (2013: 4–10); on the broader issue of the use of the term in a Spanish-(or Portuguese-)speaking context, see Epps (2008). On the term 'New Queer Cinema' see Rich (2013: 167-82), and for its application in a Latin American context.

[9] One exception might be Santiago Otheguy's 2007 *La león*, a slow, highly reflexive film set in a village on the Paraná delta, but one in which homophobia and violence against the sexually different are very much the norm. According to Subero, it depicts 'masculine-looking' homosexual or queer characters and 'challenges preconceptions of rural masculinity' (2014: 73); the rural setting, however, is far from idyllic, and is filmed in a harsh and unrelenting black and white, in which details are often obscured, like the ill-expressed desires of the antagonist, El Turu.

[10] One may also be reminded of Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), a tragic love story set in Wyoming, based on Annie Proulx's short story. See Rich (2013: 186ff). *Esteros* lacks the underlying violence and melodramatic tone of the earlier film, although one might argue that the former is certainly present in the earlier short, *Matías y Jerónimo*, formative in the production of *Esteros*.

[11] See the interview with Betancourt (2016).

[12] These are not, of course, the crocodiles on Roberto's polo shirts, but a native species.

[13] Here one is reminded of Mariano Llinás's 2008 epic, *Historias extraordinarias*, and in particular the sequence following a character, 'H', tasked to travel a river looking for the obelisks marking an abandoned engineering project.

[14] In the recent film *El ciudadano ilustre* (Cohn and Duprat 2016) there is an extended joke about an amateur painting of an idyllic rural scene, but using a box of glysophate pesticide as a canvas. This is a rare reference to such concerns in fictional cinema from Argentina.

[15] Several recent studies focus on the role of the screenwriter in the filmmaking process. As Craig Batty puts it, '[t]he invisible hand of the screenwriter […] physically guides an audience through an emotional journey, where action is purposely used to manipulate feeling' (2011: 96). Ian Macdonald, in a work on what he calls 'screenwriting poetics', coins the term 'the screen idea' (2013: 1) to refer to 'what you [*sic*], as the writer, think you're writing on' (Macdonald 2013: 4). The answer to that question comes to describe 'what lies behind what is on screen' (Macdonald 2013: 6).