Hijacking the Machine:  
Ricardo Piglia’s Reconceptualization of the Argentine Intellectual 
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Chris Schulenburg  
University of Wisconsin-Platteville  

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Among the legions of professionals, an intellectual’s task is a relatively difficult one to illuminate. Thinking and analyzing are primary concerns of the intelligentsia, yet even their discursive yields lack the overt practicality of a concrete product or service. Indeed, the case of Latin America’s intellectuals thrusts this compelling vocation into a considerably more dramatic light. Beginning with the limited circle of Spanish colonial functionaries who designed Latin America’s urban hubs, and originally chronicled in Ángel Rama’s *The Lettered City*, the texts generated by the continent’s intellectuals were almost invariably offered in place of the majority populace’s voice. Furthermore, while humanitarian or political motivations for intellectuals like Bartolomé de las Casas or José Carlos Mariátegui may truly be intrinsic in nature, their canonical works still “speak” without incorporating direct indigenous contributions. Latin America’s so-called novelistic “explosion” onto the world stage, the Boom of the 1960’s and early ‘70’s, only perpetuated this idea of the intellectual-as-representative; its members were exclusively male and thoroughly cosmopolitan in their backgrounds. Thus, Latin American intellectuals are forced to mount a vigorous self-defense on two fronts: a general justification of humanity’s need to reflect on its existence, and a more region-specific obligation to re-examine the situation of a literate few articulating the thoughts of many. Around the turn of the millennium, this debate regarding the intellectual’s role only gained in ferocity and momentum.

In a postmodern Latin American society whose metanarratives, according to Jean-François Lyotard, generate at least as much suspicion as trust, its intellectuals encounter these
issues on both a theoretical and practical level. As Jean Franco demonstrates, the skyrocketing popularity of, and generalized access to, a variety of mass media discourses necessitates a complete re-assessment of the intellectual’s space in the public sphere itself (“What’s Left” 202). Moreover, the Internet’s ubiquitous presence in cyber cafés of Latin America’s metropolis highlights the notion that intellectuals currently find themselves in a pitched competition with a multitude of discourses (music, movies, social networking sites, etc.) for the attention of its public. The position of Argentine intellectuals in the postdictatorial social and cultural context of the 1980’s and ‘90’s merits particular critical attention in light of this discursive proliferation due to the centrality of Buenos Aires in Latin America’s image of its own modernity. Whether it is the urban confusion and potential of the 1920’s introduced in Jorge Luis Borges’s *Fervor en Buenos Aires* or the extended association of Buenos Aires with the European capital of modernity, Paris, in Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela*, Argentina’s metropolis stands as a key metaphorical touchstone in their intellectuals’ imaginations. In Ricardo Piglia’s novelistic elaboration of Buenos Aires in *La ciudad ausente* (1992), however, this immense urban space goes from constituting the locus of intellectual creation to a veritable echo chamber of voices and stories. Instead of presenting the recognizable metropolitan setting of Buenos Aires awaited by Latin America’s intelligentsia, Piglia’s novel emphasizes an erudite search that proceeds in reverse, toward the “Machine” that generates discourses in the first place. Oral and written, “low” culture and “high,” the discourses diffused by this “Machine” are revealing for their variety and commentary on the changing cultural status of Latin American intellectuals themselves. Since this isolated, feminine source of discourse is ultimately a mechanical metaphor, its tangible products clearly go a long way in defining the “Machine” in *La ciudad ausente*. And yet, it is the actual functioning and process of creating as well as circulating
discourses that ultimately begins to inform the reader as to the nature of this otherwise nebulous “Machine” that stands at the end of the reporter Junior’s journey of intellectual discovery.

**Intellectual as Outsider**

Ties, both official and unofficial, are of primary importance when considering the current role of the Western intellectual. National, linguistic, economic, and institutional links all influence mightily the day-to-day goals devised by the intellectual. For an intellectual is nothing if not oppositional, and in this inherent lack of approbation lies the ambiguous nature of this vocation. That is, intellectuals must interrogate the values and overall direction proposed by society while simultaneously depending on often ridiculed institutions and organizations for their material sustenance. With the postmodern multiplicity of “expert” voices featured on Internet blogs, privately-financed think tanks, and more traditional media (television, newspapers, journals), the intellectual’s current plight comes clearly into focus. Namely: How does the intelligentsia compete against other lettered entities far more easily molded by private financial support? Has the intellectual’s critical mission been permanently altered by this discursive proliferation and the public’s resulting confusion regarding the relative value when compared with one another? These questions inevitably return to the heart of what factors influence the intellectual’s task in the first place.

Power both stimulates and problematizes the very cultural existence of the intellectual. Always fleeing the material trappings that power affords, members of the intelligentsia embrace positions of social “others” in order to maintain a theoretically disinterested and critical perspective. Nevertheless, the emergence of subaltern discourses in the form of *testimonios* demonstrates that present intellectual incarnations in Latin America cannot reasonably assume
this representative role for social others: “the masses no longer need him to gain knowledge: they know perfectly well, without illusion; they know far better than he and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves” (Foucault 207). Thus, intellectuals discover an epistemological void in their most fundamental of duties: even society’s once-dismissed others are well-equipped to produce their own discursive answers to power. Increasing isolation, however, suits the intelligentsia quite nicely. According to Edward Said, for one, the intellectual’s status of disconnection is most analogous to the “no man’s land” of exile: “The pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider is best exemplified by the condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted […] Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others” (53). Still, this idea of not belonging to a national or social group and accepting a constant sensation of existential drift remains an absolutely essential situation for intellectuals in the sense that it bestows a critical distance impossible for those who “belong.” True scrutiny of social institutions, cultural phenomena, or power dynamics remains painfully out of reach without accepting this frequently uncomfortable personal separation. On the other hand, the resulting estranged point of view only constitutes a part of the process of securing the integrity of his or her critical work. In the end, the question of intellectual use and function becomes paramount as well for its impact upon this vocation’s future itself.

Although the intelligentsia’s role urgently requires this social alienation to stay viable, it is also important to reconcile this lack of connection with the overall concept of “use value.” Specifically, one of the common ways of hypothesizing the intellectual tends to resort to a lexicon of instrumentation or machinery in order to come to grips with a social role that does not readily yield itself to facile analysis. On one side, there is the nagging preoccupation with
governments or private interests taking advantage of, or “using,” the intellectual to further political or economic interests. Voledia Teitelboim, for example, recognizes the potential for this corruption in a Latin American context due to the increasingly cozy bond linking culture and faceless multinational corporations. From her perspective, it is the proximity between Latin America’s evolving cultural apparatus and these monstrously influential, multi-billion dollar organizations that constitutes the root of a persistent worry about future critical integrity: “El imperialismo maneja el lavado cerebral como parte esencial de su política de control de las mentes. La industria cultural, el monopolio y el bloqueo de la información, el aparato manipulatorio de los mass media […] están al servicio de esa finalidad” (emphasis mine, 7). Part and parcel of the political and economic power exerted by these corporations upon Latin America, Teitelboim conceives its resulting cultural creation in markedly mechanized terms; this dehumanized characterization suggests the perilously thin professional wire on which the intellectual walks. To wit, there is a need to inscribe and diffuse discourses of the intelligentsia through this massive “industria cultural” in order to circulate their critiques, but intellectuals must still remain vigilant to the constant temptation to sacrifice this oppositional mission to be subsequently utilized by powerful interests.

Another aspect of the theoretical allergy to connecting this labor with metaphors of machinery is glimpsed by Jacques Derrida in polar tendencies within the intellectual. Once again, there is an almost irresistible temptation to justify a rapidly changing intellectual role in terms of the concrete product that results from one’s often internal and invisible efforts. Conversely, Derrida approaches this question from the angle of one who advocates for a clear personal division between the practical and impractical, the useful and useless: “Now this ‘someone’ who doesn’t ‘function’ or even ‘work’ (or doesn’t work, doesn’t let himself work,
doesn’t make himself work except in a nonfunctional sense of the word), this ‘someone’ who feels he is both irresponsible with regard to this function and, from another point of view, hyper-responsible” (35). Not coincidently, Derrida employs a vocabulary of machinery to describe this “non-productive” half of the intellectual. Intrinsically-motivated to interrogate, oppose, and resist power in its endless manifestations, the intellectual does indeed “generate” discourses to this effect, yet Derrida repeatedly inserts the verb “to function” in this passage to underline a certain sense of professional “uselessness” as well. For in the final analysis, the activities of thinking, writing, analyzing, and speaking (among others in the intellectual’s repertoire) represent tasks that never really arrive at a definitive, finished “product,” but rather, are in the process of exploring issues without resolution. Moreover, the increasingly-mechanized nature of cultural discourse accentuates this need to defend the seemingly less utilitarian, yet perhaps more fundamental, work of contemplation against the ever-pressing public appetite for its tangible endpoint to be read, viewed, and consumed. This ongoing battle over the intellectual’s role in Argentina beginning in the 1980’s in particular reaches important theoretical dimensions in the sense that the literary metaphor of the machine garners new postdictatorial, neoliberal significance.

With the end of Argentina’s military dictatorship in 1983, a shift in the character of the nation, and region’s, intellectual existence was inevitable. Above all, critics have posited the Southern Cone’s open embrace of neoliberalism as a key point of departure for this transformation. To illustrate, Franco charts the rise of a more professionalized intellectual apt to depend on private sources of revenue rather than public institutions, with this abrupt change of funding sources creating cultural products reflecting different priorities as well: “New kinds of discourse began to circulate that stressed efficiency, transparency, and results but that made
limited reference to the immediate past or repression and civil war” (*Decline and Fall* 182). Franco’s focus on the concept of “efficiency” echoes loudly in relation to the ambiguous metaphor of machinery that encloses both promise and peril for Latin American intellectuals of the present. Of course, the brutal transnational whims of Argentina’s quickly developing neoliberal market of the 1980’s and ‘90’s only exaggerated this drumbeat of demand for streamlining discourses, with an eye primarily to their value-as-product.

The critical perspective likening the discursive work of many current Latin American intellectuals to that of a sort of functionary is taken a step further by Beatriz Sarlo. For while Franco acknowledges that the intelligentsia does indeed reflect an increasing influence by international publishing houses and the mass media’s manifold discourses, Sarlo regards this machine-like specialization of Argentina’s intellectuals as ultimately damaging to their oppositional, wide-angle view of society. Consequently, she characterizes the intelligentsia’s mission as reduced to a fragmented set of uses rather than a coherent, holistic social or cultural perspective: “The figure of the intellectual-as-artist, philosopher, or thinker-produced by classical modernity, has now entered terminal decline. But there is still a call for some of the functions that such figures considered their own” (Sarlo 146). Defined by isolated skills, Argentina’s intellectuals, from Sarlo’s point of view, produce a narrow, frequently extrinsic discourse that brazenly betrays the independent and solitary critical voice required by society. This polemical center of the present debate over the role of Argentina’s intellectuals assumes primary importance throughout Piglia’s *La ciudad ausente* in the familiar metaphorical form of the machine. However, the protagonist Junior’s pursuit of this mechanized source of stories and other discourses through the ghostly metropolis of Buenos Aires develops a metaphorical elaboration of the new responsibilities being revealed to Argentina’s postdictatorial intellectuals.
Journey Toward Understanding

From the novel’s beginning, Junior displays numerous intellectual traits and concerns. Son of a British engineer, Junior works for the newspaper El Mundo in Buenos Aires, and is immediately charged with the job of obtaining information from a mysterious character named Fuyita in a nearby hotel. Nevertheless, it is significant that Junior’s responsibilities are primarily associated with the machine that represents the ultimate goal of his future wanderings: “A los dos meses era el hombre de confianza del director y estaba a cargo de las investigaciones especiales. Cuando se quisieron acordar, él solo controlaba todas las noticias de la máquina” (Piglia 10). As a reporter, his post naturally requires both his boss’s trust and a notable lettered understanding. Yet the key part of this passage for our purposes lies in the initial ambiguity surrounding this machine. That is: Does Junior have a special access to the news from the machine or about it? Of course, the preposition “de” in Spanish is capable of denoting both meanings, and this early hesitation in regard to the machine encourages readers to connect Junior with a formidable, if uncertain, discursive power. He affirms a unique ability to interpret the lettered output of El Mundo’s press and/or embarks on an investigation of a yet-to-be-identified machine in another location. In either case, Junior stands as a person of authority early in his career at the newspaper; discourse-producing machines become his special professional target.

It is certainly essential that Junior himself step forward as this featured manipulator of mechanized discourse at his newspaper. Arriving from afar, Junior’s status as outsider endows him with a more wide-angled perspective that an Argentine ensconced in the nation’s institutional and power structures could not dream of adopting. It is this disinterested critical point of view that proves to be an especially valuable asset during his epistemological journey. In addition, Junior’s name itself suggests a fresh injection of intellectual vigor into Argentina’s
lettered circles. His youth is apparent in his name, as is a patent lack of Argentine essence; Junior will offer a truly transatlantic approach to the matter of the metaphorical machine of the intellectual. Finally, this journalist’s English name betrays a profound sense of separation both frightening and liberating for its future possibilities. For although “Junior” does indeed indicate that he has received his father’s name, there is a gaping hole where this original name should be. In other words: The protagonist is the “Junior” of whom? Geographically isolated from the English motherland and nominally alone as well, Junior enjoys a rootlessness prized for the critical intellectual energy that this distance is apt to generate. Moreover, Junior’s relative youth encapsulated in his name underlines a new kind of postmodern discursive orientation to his intellectual wanderings in pursuit of this machine.

Significantly enough, Junior’s point of departure in his journey toward a new metaphorical elaboration of Argentina’s intellectual “machinery” is the thoroughly traditional lettered source of the newspaper. Still, Junior quickly demonstrates an ability to consider a wide range of discourses besides erudite written ones in his search. For one, Junior possesses a marked propensity for literary scrutiny when referencing the Argentine novelist Macedonio Fernández’s past mechanical and discursive contributions in the museum. However, the experimental remnants of the latter’s papers prove not to be the primary discursive factor guiding Junior’s wanderings. In order to arrive at the museum, which encloses the sought-after machine, Junior primarily follows a series of unidentified relatos: “Entraba y salía de los relatos, se movía por la ciudad, buscaba orientarse en esa trama de esperas y de postergaciones de la que ya no podía salir. Era difícil creer lo que estaba viendo, pero encontraba los efectos en la realidad. Parecía una red, como el mapa de un subte” (Piglia 87). Thus, this discursive path is far from direct in
arriving at its ultimate destination; interruptions and dead-ends provide important possible
digressions for Junior to evaluate, and eventually, experience.

Identified with an invisible, sprawling network of tales, this meandering route through
Buenos Aires, however, offers a menacing side as well. Even on a rooftop, theoretically
affording Junior a panoramic glimpse of this virtual urban path from above, one of the
postmodern explosion of discourses that this protagonist employs to orient himself also
demonstrates the peril of this path: “El ascensor era una jaula y el techo estaba lleno de
inscripciones y graffitis. ‘El lenguaje mata,’ leyó Junior […] le pareció que estaba atrapado en
una telaraña” (Piglia 21). The messages that Junior uncovers are indicative of the revolutionary
nature of the discursive path that this intellectual has chosen to follow. First, it is composed in an
imminently temporary form that directly challenges the rules governing social discourse. Graffiti
may always be erased by agents of authority, and yet, it is capable of re-appearing
instantaneously in the most central and provocative of locations. In addition, the actual content of
this illicit message highlights the fact that the linguistic building blocks of Junior’s relatos are
apt to not only delay his uncovering of the machine, but eliminate this protagonist altogether.
Junior realizes that his journey through these discourses of “high” and “low” culture lacks a
direct, “functional” character. Like a virtual network or a spider web, he must elect between
infinite paths of stories without relying on a clear, definitive exit. Conversely, a postmodern mix
of written discourses represents only a part of the relatos that serve to motivate and enrich
Junior’s long epistemological search.

Another fundamental aspect contributing to Junior’s uncertain road toward his
metaphorical, mechanized goal is strictly oral in nature. For while Macedonio’s lettered products
and anonymous urban graffiti alike leave behind a visual fingerprint to guide their readers, oral
discourses created by the machine offer their own possibilities in terms of Junior’s blurry path. Of course, a metropolitan area living under the watchful gaze of its police and unofficial agents responsible for wholesale disappearances is bound to cultivate rapid discourses without recognizable, traceable authors. In that sense, word-of-mouth constitutes a unique register that does not depend upon a lettered audience for its successful consumption. While travelling to the mysterious museum for the first time, Junior reviews a tape that contains information given by an eye-witness and subsequently diffused impersonally throughout the city: “Era el último relato conocido de la máquina. Un testimonio, la voz de un testigo que contaba lo que había visto. Los hechos sucedían en el presente, en el borde del mundo, los signos de horror marcados en la tierra. La historia circulaba de mano en mano en copias y reproducciones y se conseguía en las librerías de Corriente y en los bares del Bajo” (Piglia 30). Two levels of resistant discourses are revealed in the course of this passage. The machine has indeed generated this extremely personal, first-person account of past events, with the anonymous voice being shared in both the lettered circles of bookstores as well as the more oral venues of porteño bars. Without a written text to consume, this clandestine story can presumably reach a more widespread audience that defies erudite requirements of institutional belonging or “expert” status.

Moreover, this carefully-protected testimonial duplicates itself on the truly humble, peripheral “text” of the earth itself. Ambiguous in terms of what forms of “signs” appear in this marginal area, this different discursive reference opens-up the possibilities of who will be the actual “reader” of this terrestrial text. Whether they are pictorial signs such as the Cave of Altamira or lettered remnants of this eye-witness’s experience, the ambiguity of these signs seems to suggest a truly postmodern questioning of the metaphorical intellectual machinery’s proposed audience. In place of Rama’s lettered functionaries and writers, the readily-reproduced,
oral nature of this machine-produced testimonio invites the ear of the popular consumer.

Furthermore, the discursive manifestations of this “horrific” event appear in two registers, oral and earthly, that encourage very divergent interpretations. The marginal, ever-moving destinations for this relato are truly appropriate in terms of their intellectual ramifications for Junior and machine alike. For although Junior’s journey ultimately is fixed upon the machine that creates these manifold discourses, in the end, it is the actual process of reaching the machine that underscores the Argentine intellectual’s rapidly changing social and cultural roles.

When Junior finally finds this machine, its location “En la orilla” seems quite fitting indeed. Not in Buenos Aires’s downtown, but rather, in a deserted, marginal space, this machine and its anti-climactic discovery by Junior assure a difficult transition for Argentine intellectuals. As noted by Cristina Iglesia, the detective-like Junior is a protagonist who discovers his epistemological journey for what it really is: a dizzying multiplication of truths in a society in dire need of more versions than “La historia oficial.” Yet Junior’s arrival at the museum and a first-person elaboration of the machine’s character combine to suggest other intellectual directions as well. For one, the machine is also referred to as Elena, a creation of Macedonio to immortalize his deceased loved-one. Isolated, female, and completely unheeded by the Public, Junior’s journey of discovery finds a machine emblematic of the new-found promise and fears confronted by this metaphorical manifestation of the Argentine intellectual. Distant from the male-dominated “lettered city” that inscribes itself in the center of Latin America’s power structures, this new machine affords an essential female intellectual perspective that, in turn, is revealed in a profoundly oral discourse: “Estoy llena de historias, no puedo parar […] Soy la cantora, la que canta, estoy en la arena, cerca de la bahía, en el filo del agua. Puedo aún recordar las viejas voces perdidas, estoy sola al sol, nadie se acerca, nadie viene, pero voy a seguir”
(Piglia 168). Literally a voice in the wilderness, the climax of Junior’s exploration highlights a machine that exists solely to create. Whether appearing on tapes, earthly tableaus, or exclusively in the air, the machine’s discourses vigorously resist the written permanence of Junior’s newspaper and Argentina’s lettered elites. Improvisational, elusive, yet still revealing in terms of the forgotten voices that it presents, this ongoing song that closes *La ciudad ausente* ultimately demonstrates the importance of process over product in Junior’s intellectual search. Surely the metaphorical machine of the intellectual will continue producing this musical discourse for a swelling public to critically consume and interpret. Although the machine is temporarily alone, the ongoing nature of her solitary concert leaves room, and hope, for other Argentines to eventually join this imminently important intellectual performance.
Notes


