Chapter 3

Filming the Bourgeoisie: Defining Identity with Violence in Eduardo Pavlovsky’s La mueca (1970)

Hoy no hay guión.
Eduardo Pavlovsky, La mueca

La mueca (1970) by the Argentine Eduardo Pavlovsky (b. 1933) portrays the tale of four intruders-filmmakers who decide to confront a bourgeois couple about their hypocrisies, and in the process bring to light the role of performance in the couple’s construction of identity. Whereas in Piñera’s Dos viejos pánicos violence was used to cover up a deep-rooted fear, Pavlovsky’s violence inspires fear in its victims in order to humiliate them and make them realize the precariousness of their situation. Violent gestures are used to define the characters and allow them, in turn, to define others. Violent laughter that interrupts actions or mocks another, for example, becomes a tool that permits the one who laughs a place of authority—an authority that is born from humiliation and made to break someone else. Violence, then, is used in La mueca to create and destroy relationships and to form identities and self-definitions through the use of force.

The self-construction of identity as well as the constructions of others’ identities is a central task of the characters in La mueca. Class is one of the tools through which the actors try to define themselves and others. Social class here is an instrument that plays a role in defining both one’s self and others as well as the subsequent relationship that will emerge between people—in other words, it creates identity. However, these identities that
are made are constantly called into question through the characters’ words and actions. Identity, then, becomes a fluid quality that the characters can transform depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves. Similarly, naming in *La mueca* mirrors the confusion found in identity in that Pavlovsky gives his characters names that attempt to define them socially to a certain role. However, like identity, they seem to slip away and Pavlovsky purposefully highlights their contradictions and failures to adhere to an identity. They are but distortions, and their names underline the lack of connection. Like the very title—*La mueca*, the grimace—the characters are distortions of what they ‘should’ be. Pavlovsky proposes that the role that each character takes on is a performance in the theatrical sense that tries to connect to an original but can never quite achieve it. That is, each character tries to play a part rather than portray his/her own personality. The hypocrisies, then, that are revealed throughout the play are inevitable in a world of pretending and simulation.

The role of performance that can be seen in the characters, and as a central theme in the play, highlights the role of metatheater in *La mueca*. Pavlovsky invites the play to turn against itself and question its surroundings. The seams of what makes theater are exposed by the playwright in an attempt to look at, and see how, the violent constructions that we push ourselves into ripple through our own actions. The fact that the play, in turn, concerns the making of a film underlines the desire to see more clearly the violent acts that construct our identities. The correlation between film and theater that are put forth highlights the role of voyeurism within the theatrical representation. As Matías Montes-Huidobro acknowledges, the play is about a voyeurist making a film with other voyeurs and finally turning the other characters and even the spectators into voyeurs.¹ These multiple layers show the level of performance that allows the examination of the intersections between the construction of identity and violent acts in theater. *La mueca* is not simply chronicling an intrusion, but endeavors to push the spectators to understand and question the role of performance in our own lives. The play both connects and transcends its geographical context, as will be seen.

Buenos Aires has long been considered a theatrical center in Latin America and Eduardo Pavlovsky is one of Argentina’s principal dramatists of the second half of the twentieth century. Born in 1933 in Buenos Aires, Pavlovsky studied to become a doctor, specializing in psychoanalysis, while he simultaneously pursued an interest in theater. His attraction to theater was originally limited to acting (and, in fact, he continues to act in most of his plays), though he quickly became involved with writing plays, starting with his 1962 *Somos*. In the 1960s, like many Latin American playwrights of the time period and especially Piñera and Gambaro, he was influenced