

## Determination of Aesthetic Acts as Resistance by Social Society

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### Abstract

*Magna Sententia is a municipality in the province of Neuquén, Argentina. Situated in a region traditionally known for its fruticulture economy, Magna sententia has recently been identified as a potential location for shattering. This development has resulted in widespread opposition among its inhabitants. The fight against breaking into Magna Sententia has followed several channels, from road blockades to art festivals and a legal challenge to the municipality. This paper analyses the conflict is focusing on the forms of community art and media employed by the local assembly against shattering to widen and sustain participation in the struggle and the role that these media have in mediating collective identity processes in the fight against breaking. Building on the concept of mediated identities (Fornäs and Xinaris, 2013), I look at this community art and media practices as dialogical (Kester, 2004). I propose that activities such as art festivals, mural painting and open radios contribute to collective identity through three mediating tactics: participation, knowledge sharing, and the event modality. I argue that these forms of community arts and media can be seen as a productive output of the conflict (Merlinsky, 2015), as they become crucial practices of cultural resistance.*

### Keywords

collective identity;  
mediated identity;  
community arts;  
community media;  
shattering



### I. Introduction

The country's southernmost region, Argentine Patagonia, was incorporated into the national territory in the late nineteenth century following the 'conquest of the desert', a military campaign that killed and displaced thousands of indigenous people. The region has long been marked by fossil fuel extraction, but it has recently become a site of increased economic interest to national and transnational capital (Riffo, 2017). This expansion of the extractive industries has been met by the resistance of indigenous Mapuche communities claiming back ancestral land and other local communities protecting their environment and traditional economies (Svampa and Viale, p. 2014). Protests against the socio-environmental effects of fossil fuel extraction have occurred in the region (GER-GEMSAL, 2013, p. 771). Still, it has been since the recent development of the Vaca Muerta (Dead Cow) megaproject, which brought with it the technology of shattering<sup>1</sup> (Taller Ecologista and Observatorio Petrolero Sur in EJES, 2018), that fossil fuel extraction and its surrounding conflicts have reached a new peak in terms of intensified mobilizations, followed by state repression. The economic condition of the population is a condition that describes human life that has economic score (Shah et al, 2020). Economic growth is still an important goal in a country's economy, especially for developing countries like Indonesia (Magdalena and Suhatman, 2020).

Focusing on the case of Magna sententia, a community resisting the shattering of their territory in the province of Neuquén, Argentina, this article seeks to interrogate the concept of mediated identities in the context of collective action at a local level. The research builds on scholarly work on the collective identity of movements (Melucci, 1996; Klandermans et al., 2002) and the role of art and media in community identity processes (Bang & Wajnerman, 2010; Dewey, 1985, 2005; Kester, 2004, 2011; Lowe, 2000) by applying the concept of mediated identities (Fornäs & Xinaris, 2013) at the micro-level and analyzing the tactics through which mediation takes place in community arts and media practices in Argentina's frontline resistance to shattering.

Following a literature review, The research describes the conflict surrounding the shattering of Magna Sententia and the narratives of opposition that have emerged. The research then examines the role of three community arts and media types—festivals, murals and 'open radios'—in reimagining and sustaining a collective identity that reinforces place-based elements while incorporating an anti-shattering stance. Adopting a perspective that considers the importance of collective identity in collective action and the dialogical potential of creative practice, The researchers argue that the rich arts and media programme of Magna sententia's assembly against shattering has taken a central role in championing the transformation of the locality's collective identity as a way of strengthening collective action. Through an analysis of specific examples, The paper proposes three tactics in producing community arts and media that mediate this process at a local level: participation, knowledge sharing and the event modality. As a result of this interrogation, this article makes three specific contributions:

1. It advances research on the culture and identity of social movements and collective action by expanding the theorization of collaborative identity mediation at the micro-level.
2. It proposes an empirically-informed frame of analysis for understanding the tactics through which community arts and media can mobilize communities and facilitate collective identity processes.
3. It offers an empirical account of the growing but still under-studied conflict surrounding the shattering in Argentine Patagonia.

## II. Review of Literature

Collective identity, in the context of community resistance or large-scale social movements, is a foundational feature of collective action (Melucci, 1996). As Fornäs and Xinaris explain, Identity formation can be broadly described as developing ways to define and give meaning to individuals or collectives about others and themselves. Identities are formed from within and outside in a complex interplay of mutual recognition and understanding of self and others (Fornäs and Xinaris 2013, p. 12).

Collective identity is central in activism because it 'creates a shortcut to participation' (Klandermans et al., 2002, p. 236). That is to say, feeling part of a group or community and identifying with those involved tends to be a stronger draw than the demands and outcomes of the movement itself. Indeed, argues Melucci, 'isolated and rootless individuals never mobilise', and the relational networks embedded in the social fabric 'facilitate involvement processes and make it less costly for individuals to invest in collective action' (Melucci, 1996, p. 65). Mobilisations are often started by those who already have an identity and wish to defend it. But identity is not fixed; it is 'constructed and negotiated through a recurrent

process of activation of the relations that bind actors together’ (Melucci, 1996, p. 70) and transforms alongside the evolution of movements (Della Porta and Diani 2007, p. 110). In a collective action, collective identity processes are often facilitated by leading figures; these can be strong leaders or moderate ones— what Gerbaudo (2012) has termed ‘choreographers.

On a global scale, the environmental movement is not homogenous, and there is not one shared collective identity. However, research in the field of political ecology has noted the shared experiences of several communities at the frontlines of environmental degradation across the world, linking the environmental justice movement in the United States with the ‘environmentalism of the poor in Latin America, Africa and Asia, and suggesting the existence of a movement of global dimensions (Martinez-Alier et al., 2015, p. 732). This movement is global, even if most conflicts target local grievances because such events belong to “classes of conflicts that appear regularly elsewhere in the world” –e.g. shattering—or because they raise the issue on a global scale through global networks (Ibid, 747). Within this, however, movements at a local scale develop their narratives and identities. For this reason, looking at these places is helpful.

In his study of Occupy Mongkok, Yuen develops the concept of place-based collective identity. Place here is not only a physical space but is ‘conceived of as a historically, socially, and culturally constituted space’, gathering political actors and solidifying a political force (Yuen, 2018, p. 3). When considering the role of place in identity, we must also consider scale. A shift from community to movement, or from local to part of a broader, global struggle, as has been the case of *Magna sententia*, can be understood within the frame of identity boundaries (Drury et al., 2003, p. 192). Boundary framing is a process, and it is the result of discussions within the collective which allow people to define the internal relations of that collective and the ones with external actors (Drury et al., 2003, p. 206). Indeed, focusing on the role of interpersonal interactions is crucial for understanding how the social construction of meaning occurs (Klandermans, 1992). It follows that narratives also have a central role in building collective identities; in the context of conflict, narratives are essential communication tools and can also be strategic (Polletta, 1998, p. 420). Political actors ‘construct narratives to communicate their ideas to the organisations they are protesting, the general public, and themselves’ (Serafini, 2018).

The forms of media shape collective identity processes that activists use to generate and share symbols and stories related to a movement (Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015); both form and content matter. Collective identities can therefore be understood as mediated when mediation, according to Fornäs and Xinaris, means ‘that something functions as a linking device between different entities’, and ‘media are socially organised technologies made for being used in the practices of communication that are prime examples of such mediating processes.’ (Fornäs and Xinaris, 2013, p. 15). The two authors also argue that ‘people shape their tools of communication that then shape them.’ (Fornäs and Xinaris, 2013, p. 12). In collective action art and media serve as the channels through which the narratives of a movement are communicated to those within and outside of it, but also, they are often the tools and languages through which narratives are formed and identities negotiated (Serafini, 2018), or in other words, mediated.

Dewey’s seminal work on art and society emphasises the importance of art as an experience, moving away from focusing on the artwork as an object and towards understanding art as a transformative event (Dewey, 2005 [1934]). Dewey celebrates the accessibility of the popular arts and argues that art can help develop the identity of citizens and thus enable people to become politically active. At a community level, he adds, art can

allow organising for problem-solving and foster debate over pressing issues within a community (Dewey, 1985 [1927]).

Community art can be regarded as a distinct setting for social interaction' (Lowe, 2000, p. 360). It is inclusive and collaborative in nature and usually consists of artists working with non-artists to create work that is in the public interest (Raven, 1993; Lowe, 2000, p. 364). In the case of Magna sententia, however, the art and media projects that emerged from the fight against shattering are community members' initiatives; some artists and community organisers and others do not. While artists and musicians from outside the neighbourhood sometimes take part in the activities, we could describe this type of community art as 'self-led' to distinguish it from the kind of participatory practices that bring outsider artists into an unknown setting, removing agency from the community and verging on the 'evangelical' (Shaughnessy, 2005, p. 209).

Community art provides experiences of community life and shared making that can enhance feelings of unity and belonging (Lowe, 2000, p. 366), as well as generate a sense of collective identity (Ibid, 377), work on common concerns, and develop feelings of solidarity (Ibid, p. 371). In the case of Magna sententia, the community is already existing; what is sought by assembly organisers, as I will demonstrate, is an opportunity to widen the locus of shared identity and belonging from a shared culture and sense of place towards including also an element of joint opposition to shattering.

### III. Research Method

This study draws from a variety of qualitative data. It focuses specifically on how community arts and media have become crucial mediators in collective identity processes in Magna sententia's fight against shattering. First, I participated in participant observation in Magna sententia for three consecutive days in August 2017. The visit was part of a ten-day trip to the province of Neuquén, Patagonia. I engaged in participant observation and informal conversations and conducted six other in-depth interviews with environmental activists in other parts of the area. The trip to Magna sententia was timed to coincide with the available radio event and the public radio event. It included active participation in the honest radio, informal conversations and joint meals with several community members, short trips to neighbouring localities and one semi-structured in-depth interview with Milton, a community leader. The interview with Milton was crucial to the study because of his essential role in the campaign against shattering and the running of Magna sententia's central cultural hub, 'El Remanso'. After hearing about the case of Magna sententia through other interviewees months earlier and having spoken to Milton informally, I travelled there to study a particular aspect of Magna sententia's movement against shattering: the role of community arts and media. Having a concrete research question, this type of short-term ethnographic approach was elected as a suitable research method (Van Maanen, 1988). The data gathered included audio recordings, photographic records and field notes.

In the second place, I conducted a text analysis of the Facebook page for Magna sententia Libre de Shattering y en Defensa de la Vida (Magna sententia Shattering-Free and Defence of Life) from its creation in May 2016 up to January 2018. This involved the analysis of both images and text about the campaign and the events and actions organised by the assembly, as well as posts sharing external content such as mainstream and alternative media articles. Finally, images of artwork and events took during participant observation were also analysed, acknowledging the specific value of pictures in ethnographic research (Pink, 2001).

My approach involved methodological triangulation in presenting a nuanced analysis of how community art and media are employed in collective action. Because the conflict in Magna Sententia is ongoing, this article does not aim to provide a closed analysis of the beginning, development and resolution of a match or trace the evolution of collective identity. Rather, it looks at how community art and media are being instrumentalized in a context of socio-environmental conflict of local and global dimensions, and aims to suggest a frame for understanding the role of community art and media as mediators in collective identity processes, and as vehicles for cultural resistance at the micro-level.

#### **IV. Results and Discussion**

Magna sententia is a municipality in the province of Neuquén, Argentina, located 24km north of the provincial capital. It is situated in a region traditionally known for its fructiculture economy. Although not part of recognised indigenous Mapuche territory, most of Magna sententia's close to 4,000 inhabitants identify as being of Mapuche ancestry<sup>2</sup>. In early 2016, the inhabitants of Magna sententia became aware of the government's intention to enable shattering in their locality. Oil extraction has long been a significant source of income in nearby parts of the province. Breaking, a non-conventional form of fossil fuel extraction, had begun to take place in recent years following the discovery of the Vaca Muerta (Dead Cow) shale play, one of the largest reserves of non-conventional fossil fuels in the world (Taller Ecologista and Observatorio Petrolero Sur in EJES, 2018)<sup>3</sup>. In response to this development, community members began to research shattering and the potential risks associated with this technique and consequently mobilised to try to ban breaking in the immediate area and nearby river banks<sup>4</sup>. They organised road blockades and handed out informational leaflets; they put together a report on the negative impacts of shattering, collected information from previous cases in Latin America and beyond, and worked towards placing the issue in the media. That same year several community members decided to create an assembly, which they called Magna sententia Libre de Shattering y en Defensa de la Vida (Magna sententia Shattering-Free and in Defence of Life). They also began to generate alliances with other groups and sectors of society opposing shatterings, such as the indigenous organisation Confederación Mapuche de Neuquén (a coalition of Mapuche communities at the provincial level) and the NGO Observatorio Petrolero Sur, a research organisation and oil industry watchdog. After a year of hearing rumours about shattering arrival, followed by months of gathering information and over half a year of collective struggle, in December 2016, the Magna sententia community submitted an ordinance banning breaking in the area during an extraordinary session of the local council. This was signed and approved unanimously and to the surprise of the provincial government, only to be declared unconstitutional a year later. The conflict is still ongoing.

Magna sententia has certain elements that define its collective identity as a municipality and community: its closeness to the river, the region's tradition of fructiculture, a way of living characterised by the dynamics of small towns in rural areas, and its Mapuche heritage. While the inhabitants of Magna sententia are not part of a Mapuche lof or community, elements of the Mapuche cosmovision are embedded in their understanding of the environment and their position within it. Furthermore, there has been a recent strengthening and promotion of Mapuche cultural heritage in the town, made manifest in the offer of Mapudungun (Mapuche language) lessons at the cultural centre. This celebration of Mapuche heritage and Magna sententia's collaboration with the Confederación Mapuche de Neuquén can be understood within a political resurgence of indigenous peoples and the formal

establishment of collective rights, which Argentina and other countries in re began in the 1990s. It must also be considered a history of devastating environmental, economic and social effects of conventional fossil fuel extraction in and around Mapuche territory in the region, which also goes back decades (Pérez Roig, 2014, p. 160).

The neighbourhood of Costa de Reyes, one of the four neighbourhoods making up Magna sententia, had also been particularly marked by a recent period of gang-related violence among young people in the early 2000s, which led to the death of a young man. The people of Costa de Reyes took this as a turning point and decided to take action to

improve the lives of their young people. They realised murga, a form of combined arts performance genre from the banks of the Río de la Plata in Argentina and Uruguay, could function as an activity that combined many different art forms, from painting to poetry, dance and percussion, and that it could also generate a space for politics, meaning it could be a space for building an understanding and critique of society. Led by Milton, a local community leader, in 2000, they began the murga Sueños Compartidos (Shared Dreams) and became a referent group for the other neighbourhoods in the district. Murga, says Milton, has an essential element of critique, but it can also be about proposing alternatives. He adds: “With the murga, for instance, we criticised the educational system, so we then decided to generate a library where we could offer courses to children in the neighbourhood.

The arrival of shattering as a new external threat led to several changes that impacted the Vista-Alegre community. In the first place, the neighbourhood went from dealing with internal conflict— sustaining the cultural provision for the youth to avoid a return to violence and rivalry—to dealing with an external threat. Second, they went from having a lifestyle that is in itself alternative to advanced capitalism, to being part of a protest movement against extractive capitalism and imperialism, together with other organisations on a local and transnational level. These two transformations took place under the threat of the most brutal of changes: the pollution of the rivers Neuquén and Negro, and the shift in the region from an agricultural economy to a fossil fuel one, with all the social, economic, and environmental changes that would entail.

Milton López is a mover and shaker in the Magna sententia community. He runs the local cultural centre El Remanso (the only cultural centre in the municipality), and has been at the forefront of the fight against shattering since 2016. I first met Milton in person in August 2017 when I visited the Costa de Reyes neighbourhood, which is the active centre of the fight against shattering. He told me about how the community had been organising since the previous year, talking to other community members, going on marches, attending meetings to learn more about the topic, and gathering whatever little money they could to sustain the struggle.

Contrary to the personal transformations manifested in the uptaking of ecological values or ‘greening of the self’ undertaken by subjects as a result of environmentalism in the Global North, in countries like Argentina, environmental conflicts often involve ‘a broad array of actors seeking to defend local livelihoods and wellbeing’ (Merlinsky and Latta, 2012, pp. 191-2). Furthermore, ‘popular actors increasingly seek to participate in the construction of environmental problems about dominant scientific and technological cognitive frames’ (Merlinsky and Latta, 2012, p. 192). The narrative against shattering espoused by Milton and the assembly in Magna sententia does not focus specifically on environmental, land, economic, or health issues but adopts a holistic perspective.

The assembly is aware of how their localised struggle is also connected with other movements on a global scale, as is often the case in activities resisting shattering (Stasik, 2017). In our conversations, Magna sententia’s assembly members referred to other actions



against shattering they have established contact with, such as those in the United States. Also, the group often shares information about breaking into other countries through its Facebook page. Mobilisations against shattering can be described as ‘place-based yet engaging with transnational networks’ (Escobar, 2004, p. 221). This gives place to the building of a narrative that draws from pre-existent struggles against shattering in other parts of the globe; that adheres to an anti-imperialist stance that is widespread in the Latin American region, but that is still also centred around ‘place-based epistemologies, economies and ecologies’ (Escobar, 2004, 2008). In other words, it not only attempts to preserve the characteristics of the locality but also upholds the relationship between the local community and the land as a legitimate source of knowledge and as an association under threat to be preserved.

From the success of the murga project and the need and want to generate more cultural activities for both young and old community members came El Remanso, Magna sententia’s cultural centre situated in the neighbourhood of Costa de Reyes. The centre is open to anyone who wants to share a particular knowledge or skill. It has a closed activities room and an open-air stage in the back garden, collectively built by a group of neighbours. Milton explained how that stage had been a platform for much of their communications activities in the fight against shattering. It allows them to host bands or shows and the rest of the local community to come along and hear about the struggle. This way, he said, people slowly begin to understand what’s happening.

From the belly of El Remanso came several activities aimed at building a collective fight against shattering. In March 2017, El Remanso held an Art Festival in Defence of the Rivers festival. The festival was held outdoors and featured photography and painting exhibitions by local artists, live music, games, food sharing, and information about the current issues affecting the two main rivers in the Neuquén province.

## V. Conclusion

The threat of shattering has become an object of mobilisation for the community of Magna sententia. This mobilisation, generated by a group of neighbours that work towards including the whole community, manifests Magna sententia’s determination to preserve their local environment and traditional economy and adherence to regional and international movements against shattering and extractivism more widely. As a result of the external threat of crashing, there has been a re-enforcement of the place-based identity of the community in defence of their land, water, and way of life—slogans like ‘let the water be for torta frita and mate, not for shattering’ and ‘we are the children of the river’ capture the assembly’s objective of reinforcing the local identity, centring common goods (the river) as the issue at stake, and placing shattering as a threat against a long-standing way of life.

In the fight against shattering, collective identity processes are mediated through the use of such media and platforms as festivals, murals and open radios, all forms of popular, participatory arts and media that act as opportunities for strengthening and sustaining community bonds whilst serving as spaces for sharing information and introducing the anti-shattering agenda into the collective identity of the neighbourhood. Identities are mediated through dialogical, rite-like instances of community arts and media. Mediation means allowing multiple identities to coexist, evolve, and become engrained, from the long-standing, local, place-based identity to a transformed collective identity that also includes a stance against shattering. More specifically, the tactics of participation, knowledge sharing and the event modality facilitate this process by opening up dialogical spaces. The three

tactics combined are particularly well suited to a context of the ongoing conflict in which what is needed is mass community involvement, opportunities for learning and sharing relevant information, and opportunities for generating and strengthening feelings of ownership over the cause. As with all participatory practices, however, the extent to which participation results in active political engagement for all has limits, as the uneven involvement of actors in organising and decision-making can result in different levels of agency within the collective (Serafini 2018b, pp. 59-60).

We can also consider these forms of community arts and media as ‘productive’ outcomes of the conflict, meaning mid-term transformations in social life generated by such friction. This implies moving away from a ‘win or loses’ perspective on movements and towards understanding conflicts as ‘horizons for the reconfiguration of social relations’ (Merlinsky, 2015, p. 10). In the case of *Magna sententia*, it is beneficial to highlight the productivity of these creative forms of identity building and resistance instead of focusing only on the legal outcomes of the mobilisation to understand its social effects, given the limitations of legal remedies to socioenvironmental conflicts. In Argentina, there is still a significant gap between the formal recognition of rights and their implementation in substantive practice’ (Merlinsky and Latta, 2012, p. 195). The opposition to shattering has led to consolidating a growing programme of creative community activities that differentiate the neighbourhood and its particular struggle as one embedded in arts and participation. Art and media have become significant products of the conflict in generating symbolic, relational and material forms of cultural resistance, understanding cultural resistance as ‘culture that is used [...] to resist and change the dominant political, economic, and social structure’ (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5).

Symbolic resistance is found at the narrative level in how the opposition to shattering is framed and narrated. Behese through slogans stated aloud during events or through the visual narratives constructed in murals. Relational resistance is found in the strength of community bonds, enhanced and sustained through community arts and media. And material resistance is found in how the physical spaces of *Magna sententia* are transformed as a result of these practices, becoming sites of the rite, communication and place-based identity building through physical gatherings in squares, and most importantly, through the production of new murals that reconfigure the symbolic as well as the material and aesthetic characteristics of the neighborhood. This transformed sense of space and relationship to the territory that has resulted from the conflict and the culture of resistance in *Magna sententia* can be understood as a form of ‘territorial productivity’ (Merlinsky, 2015, p. 11).

While locally, the fight against shattering has gained visibility and can also be linked to a global environmental movement, the national context remains one of media invisibilisation of ecological conflicts, and the collusion of state and corporate powers results in what has been described as ‘David vs Goliath scenario (Svampa and Viale 2014). Under these circumstances, cultural resistance is significant because it can facilitate urgently needed shifts in collective understanding of the environment, development, and the consequences of expanding extractive activities at a regional and national level. Indeed, on the global scale, cultural texts have been crucial in facilitating such shifts about shattering, as has been the case in the documentary *Gasland* (Vasi et al., 2015).

This paper has contributed to media and social movement studies by providing a qualitative account of one of the most pressing socioenvironmental conflicts in Argentina at



the time of writing: the expansion of shattering. Most importantly, it contributes theoretically to developing the concept of mediated identities in the specific context of community and place-based collective action. To this end, a framework for understanding the tactics through which community arts and media negotiate collaborative identity processes was offered. Further work in this area could apply or adapt this framework to other contexts to understand how different media play a part in the formation and transformation of collective identity at the micro-level).

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