

The last heist revisited: reimagining Hollywood genre in contemporary Argentine crime film

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In the context of a resurgence in film production in Argentina over the past decade, the internationally acclaimed art house films by *nuevo cine argentino* (New Argentine Cinema) directors such as Lucrecia Martel and Pablo Trapero have been overshadowed at the domestic box office by releases which reenvision Hollywood-style crime genre narratives in a local context. Many of the local productions that have had the greatest popular success – Fabián Bielinsky’s intricately plotted *Nueve reinas/ Nine Queens* (2000), for example, and Marcelo Piñeyro’s graphically violent *Plata quemada/Burnt Money* (2000) – capitalize on the dizzying plot twists, dynamic action sequences and highly colloquial dialogues of the heist film and neo-noir genres,¹ drawing on the styles cultivated by directors such as Bryan Singer, Christopher Nolan and Quentin Tarantino in Hollywood during the 1990s and early 2000s.

This diverse group of recent Argentine crime films, which I will collectively refer to as the ‘new policiales’,² has given a new twist to conventional narrative tropes such as the ‘perfect crime’, ‘the last job’, and ‘the big score’. Bielinsky’s *Nine Queens* and his 2005 follow-up *El aura/The Aura* focus respectively on an intricate scam and an elaborate casino heist in which the protagonist (played in both cases by Ricardo Darín) participates without fully comprehending the true stakes of the game; crime functions both as moral conundrum and intellectual puzzle. In *Pizza, birra, faso/Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes* (Adrián Caetano and Bruno Stagnaro, 1998) a group of petty criminals’ idea of a big score – the inept

1 See Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: a Map of Neo-Noir* (New York, NY: Limelight, 1999), and Ronald Schwartz, *Neo-Noir: the New Film Noir Style from Psycho to Collateral* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2005).

2 The term implies a police procedural, but is often used to refer to a broad range of mystery films and thrillers.

and bloody robbery of a dance club at which they have been refused entry – reflects their desperate position on the social margins. *Burnt Money* narrates a real-life 1965 payroll heist, planned with the complicity of local authorities, that culminated in the cornered criminals' decision to torch the spoils rather than surrender, suggesting an ambiguous relationship between criminality and the state which has been explored in many recent Argentine crime films.

In evoking well-worn crime genre conventions, the new *policiales* make themselves culturally legible to audiences, both in Argentina and elsewhere, which are accustomed to the Hollywood cinema that continues to dominate global screens. Yet contemporary Argentine crime films diverge sharply from the US thrillers that feature graphic yet casually presented violence and self-reflexive citations of other films and eras, a phenomenon famously described by Fredric Jameson as pastiche or 'blank parody' and associated with the lack of historical consciousness manifest in the retro-aesthetic of the 'nostalgia film'.³ These works can be more productively read in terms of recent critical reflections on pastiche that challenge Jameson's characterization of the mode as affectless and reactionary. Writing in the context of the neo-noir genre, Richard Dyer insists that 'pastiche noir is able to capture and mobilize the structure of feeling it perceives to have been caught by classic noir', thus sensitizing spectators to 'the historicity of our feelings' even as it activates nostalgia for extinct filmmaking styles.⁴ In a similar vein, Ingeborg Hoesterey has suggested that by 'exhibiting [and] foregrounding the structures of mediation of older art', pastiche takes on 'emancipatory potential' by displaying the ideological work of aesthetic convention.⁵ Far from being straightforward imitations of the Hollywood crime films that have been central to debates over postmodernism in cinema, the new *policiales* combine a use of selfconscious cinematic citation with a keen attention to the rhythms of daily life and the realities of social exclusion that define contemporary Argentina.

This tendency towards observational realism, often trained on geographically or socially marginalized subjects, is also a key characteristic of the New Argentine Cinema. Yet despite their shared focus on harsh social realities, many discussions of contemporary Argentine film rigidly differentiate between popular film (referred to as *cine taquillero*, literally 'box-office cinema') and New Argentine Cinema's narrative experiments,⁶ pitting 'independent' filmmakers such as Adrián Caetano and Pablo Trapero against 'industry auteurs', including Piñeyro and Bielinsky, who have directed projects for studios associated with multinational media conglomerates.⁷ Although both Caetano and Trapero have moved from low-budget films to more polished productions – such as Caetano's *Un oso rojo*/*A Red Bear* (2002) and Trapero's *El bonaerense* (2002)⁸ – works considered to be New Argentine Cinema are still rarely discussed alongside more 'commercial' productions.

This division between art and popular cinema can be mapped onto longstanding national debates over cultural colonization by Europe and

- 3 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 17. Joanna Page's *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009) argues for Jameson's relevance to analysis of contemporary Argentine crime films.
- 4 Richard Dyer, *Pastiche: Knowing Imitation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 4.
- 5 Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 29.
- 6 Deborah Shaw notes the persistent distinction between art and genre cinema in contemporary Argentine film criticism, in 'Playing Hollywood at its own game? Bielinski's [sic] "Nueve reinas"', in Shaw (ed.), *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), p. 68.
- 7 Horacio Bernades, Diego Lerer and Sergio Wolf, 'From industry to independent cinema: are there "industry auteurs"?', *New Argentine Cinema: Themes, Auteurs and Trends of Innovation* (Buenos Aires: FIPRESCI/Editiones Tatanka, 2002), pp. 119–32.
- 8 The US release of the film used the original Spanish title, which refers to a member of the municipal police force of Buenos Aires or, more broadly, any resident of the capital.

the USA, and implicitly privileges a locally developed mode of experimental realism over productions that appropriate the conventions of US genre film. Some ‘independent’ directors, most vocally Trapero, have expressed suspicion of films that apparently forsake the New Argentine Cinema’s search for innovative cinematic forms suited to the depiction of neglected aspects of ‘national reality’, an aesthetic project whose roots can be traced to the radical manifestos of the New Latin American Cinema movements of the 1960s. Yet I will argue that the new *policiales* manifest a cross-pollination of narrative and visual strategies between the New Argentine Cinema and more conventional commercial productions and a shared dialogue with Hollywood genre (as well as other types of global cinema) that foregrounds their precarious position within the international audiovisual economy.⁹

Far from being in stark opposition to each other, contemporary crime thrillers and the New Argentine Cinema movement can even be considered to have a joint point of origin in a single film, namely Caetano and Stagnaro’s *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes*, which was completed on a \$300,000 budget provided by INCAA (Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales, a state film agency) and the Hubert Bals Fund associated with the Rotterdam Film Festival.¹⁰ Released in 1998, the critical acclaim garnered by the film’s gritty portrayal of the Buenos Aires underclass following its premiere at the Mar del Plata Film Festival helped to launch the New Argentine Cinema movement.¹¹ *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes*’s reviewers celebrated its naturalist depiction of socially marginal characters: critic Claudio España, for example, found it an uncomfortably accurate rendering of the contemporary situation, and praised the film’s ‘anthropologically detailed’ slang and its portrayal of the ‘social disorder we fear falling into each day when venturing out on the street’.¹²

Like the hapless antihero of many a heist film, the protagonist El Cordobés (Héctor Anglada) is fatally wounded in the commission of ‘one last job’, after which he had planned to run away to Uruguay with his pregnant girlfriend Sandra (Pamela Jordán). The uneven pacing of the film’s increasingly violent crimes make this development seem at once inevitable and random, in a manner antithetical to the climactic narratives characteristic of Hollywood genre film. *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes* also cites US cinema directly, when Sidney Lumet’s 1975 *Dog Day Afternoon* is shown briefly on television.¹³ The small-time crooks treat the Hollywood film as a training manual – Pablo (Jorge Sesán) tells El Cordobés, ‘watch it, you’ll learn something’ – and it directly inspires their criminal plans for ‘something big’ (*algo grosso*, in the Italian-inflected local slang *lunfardo*), namely the disastrous assault on the dance club.

In contrast to the contemporaneous Argentine blockbuster *Comodines/Cops* (Jorge Nisco, 1997), which is punctuated by spectacularly bloody shoot-outs and dramatic explosions, *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes* develops new narrative rhythms to depict an aimless existence punctuated by explosions of violence, without disavowing its relationship to the conventions of US crime film. *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes*’ small budget,

9 This line of argument has been previously sketched in Shaw, ‘Playing Hollywood at its own game’, although this limits its scope to Bielinsky’s *Nine Queens*.

10 Tamara Falicov, *The Cinematic Tango: Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (London: Wallflower, 2006), p. 119.

11 Bernades discusses the film’s galvanizing effect in his introduction to *New Argentine Cinema*, pp. 10–11.

12 ‘Con realismo’, *La nación*, 15 January 1998, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/85494-con-realismo>> accessed 6 September 2012. All translations are mine, except where otherwise noted.

13 Gonzalo Aguilar, *Otros mundos: un ensayo sobre el nuevo cine argentino* (Buenos Aires: Santiago Arcos Editor, 2006), p. 147.

14 Falicov, *The Cinematic Tango*, p.162.

15 Nestor García Canclini, 'Will there be Latin American cinema in the year 2000? Visual culture in a post-national era', trans. Adriana X. Tatum and Ann Marie Stock, in Ann Marie Stock (ed.), *Framing Latin American Cinema: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 246–58.

16 Shaw, 'Playing Hollywood at its own game', p. 70.

17 David Desser, 'Global noir: genre film in the age of transnationalism', in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader III* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 520.

18 Stephen Crofts, 'Reconceptualising national cinemas', in Paul Willemen and Valentina Vitali (eds), *Theorising National Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2006), p. 54.

19 Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland, *Film Noir: Hard-boiled Modernity and the Cultures of Globalization* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), p. 109.

lack of commercial financing and limited initial audience (an estimated 100,000 spectators)¹⁴ clearly distinguish its mode of production and exhibition from productions such as the internationally successful *Nine Queens*, released by the Patagonik studio, which forms a branch of a larger multimedia conglomerate. Nevertheless, considering *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes*' affinities with crime films that are more polished, expensive and popular can help illuminate the place of genre in Argentine cinema, as well as the latter's positioning within transnational media economies and local debates about the politics of film aesthetics. In the following pages I shall argue for the productive possibilities of the new *policiales*' strategic cultural mixing, which works both to foreground and to combat the condition of audiovisual globalization and economic constraint under which Argentine cinema operates.

The hybrid strategies of the Argentine crime thrillers illustrate the complexity of the issues posed by Nestor García Canclini in his well-known 1997 essay 'Will there be Latin American cinema in the year 2000?', which sounded an alarm over the accelerating privatization and deterritorialization of audiovisual public spheres in the region.¹⁵ In academic film studies the very concept of 'national cinema' has been challenged in recent decades, with some critics suggesting that the economics of contemporary transnational media industries have rendered the category all but irrelevant, and others arguing that it can be a key site of mobilization against both hegemonic nationalisms and the processes of cultural levelling and homogenization brought about by globalization. Deborah Shaw, for example, argues that '*Nueve reinas* ... demonstrates that the traffic in film distribution and exhibition, while unequal, is not unidirectional'.¹⁶ In a similar vein, David Desser suggests in his consideration of noir as a global genre that the recent success of foreign-made crime films in the USA is an indication not only of crime genres' enduring appeal but also of the complexities of transnational cultural circulation.¹⁷ If 'Hollywood's domination of world film markets renders most national cinemas profoundly unstable market entities, marginalized in most domestic and all export markets',¹⁸ as Stephen Crofts has argued, the strategies of the new *policiales* both register and attempt to alter this situation through their dual allegiance to domestic and international audiences.

Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland have recently noted in the context of film noir (a category at once broader and more specific than the crime genre appropriations I am addressing here), that

appearing in national cinemas around the world, films noir at once critique modernization (as Americanization) and articulate more local conditions of being, or resisting being, modern. But even as they do so, they themselves compete within global cinematic markets dominated by Hollywood.¹⁹

If their often measured cinematic style and focus on the local articulate the specificities of the contemporary moment as lived in Argentina, the most

- 20 Diego Battle, 'Cine de exportación', *La Nación*, 22 October 2002, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/442780-cine-de-exportacion>> accessed 6 September 2012.
- 21 Falicov, *The Cinematic Tango*, p. 143.
- 22 'El cine local vendió un 26% más de entradas', *La Nación*, 25 May 2010, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1268285-el-cine-local-vendio-un-26-mas-de-entradas>> accessed 6 September 2012.
- 23 Diego Battle, 'Marcelo Piñeyro: Entre el amor y la furia', *La Nación*, 10 May 2000, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/16227-entre-el-amor-y-la-furia>> accessed 6 September 2012; 'Piñeyro va a Venecia', *La Nación*, 26 July 2000, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/26304-pineyro-va-a-venecia>> accessed 6 September 2012.
- 24 Diego Battle, '2001: El año del cine', *La Nación* supplement, 30 December 2001, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/212340-2001-el-ano-del-cine>> accessed 6 September 2012.
- 25 Claudio D. Minghetti, 'Lo que dejó 2005: Un muy buen año para el cine nacional', *La Nación*, 31 December 2005, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/768940-un-muy-buen-ano-para-el-cine-nacional>> accessed 6 September 2012.
- 26 'El cine local vendió un 26% más de entradas'.
- 27 Horacio Bernades, 'Cómo fabricar otras "Nueve reinas"', *Página/12*, 26 July 2005, <<http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/espectaculos/6-54149-2005-07-26.html>> accessed 6 September 2012.
- 28 Falicov, *The Cinematic Tango*, p. 139.

successful films among the new *policiales* have proved formidable competition for US films in the domestic market and have also found audiences abroad. *Nine Queens*, which was produced for less than 1.5 million pesos, added handsome profits abroad to its earnings of seven million dollars in Argentina,²⁰ where it attracted more than 1.2 million spectators.²¹ The most successful Argentine crime film to date, Juan José Campanella's *El secreto de sus ojos/The Secret in their Eyes* (2009), drew over 2.3 million domestic spectators and won the 2010 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.²²

The domestic audiences drawn by the new *policiales* as a group have been impressive for national releases, if relatively modest in terms of Hollywood's overall market share. *Burnt Money*, a coproduction with Spain, France and Uruguay, broke attendance records when it premiered, with the newspaper *La Nación* reporting 111,000 tickets sold in the first four days of release and an eventual total of more than 620,000 spectators in Argentina.²³ The film reached an international audience as well, becoming one of the fifty most-seen films of 2000 in the USA.²⁴ Argentine thrillers released in the second half of the last decade have also reported respectable box-office figures. In 2005, 600,000 Argentines saw Bielinsky's *The Aura*, which was completed before the director's unexpected death in 2006.²⁵ More recently, the 2009 release *Las viudas de los jueves/Thursday Widows*, by *Burnt Money* director Piñeyro, drew half a million in audiences.²⁶ These successes suggest that the new *policiales*'s strategies could provide a promising avenue for navigating an intricate local production model based on commercial financing, state subsidies and international coproduction funds (sources on which both 'independent' and 'commercial' films rely to differing degrees). A 2005 newspaper article on the Patagonik studio's development department was tellingly titled 'How to make more *Nine Queens*'.²⁷

Such optimism is only partially justified; the establishment of a reliable home-grown audience, and thus a reliable revenue stream, for national productions has been slow in coming. In 2004, Hollywood films continued to account for eighty-five per cent of profits in the domestic market.²⁸ As the standard of production values for Argentine films has increased, so have budgets and risk, especially in cases of expensive coproductions that require foreign profits to recover their costs. The adoption of genre conventions continues to be viewed as a potentially decisive strategy for achieving the delicate financial equilibrium required by the Argentine film industry. Pablo Bossi, who produced the two-million-dollar Spanish–Argentine coproduction *La señal/The Signal* (Ricardo Darín and Martín Hodara, 2007), a nostalgic noir set in the 1950s, states that

I believe we have to rehabilitate genre somewhat in our cinema. Obviously, give it an auteurist stamp. There are certain rules that can be maintained or deliberately violated. But it's necessary to know that they

29 Quoted in Julia Montesoro, 'Los desafíos de hacer películas para el gran público', *La Nación*, 26 January 2008, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/981915-los-desafios-de-hacer-peliculas-para-el-gran-publico>> accessed 6 September 2012.

30 Pablo O. Scholz, 'Lo que no se traiciona', *Clarín*, 11 May 2000, <<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2000/05/11/c-00905.htm>> accessed 6 September 2012.

31 Diego Battle, 'Impactante film con un Darín prodigioso', *La Nación*, 15 September 2005, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/738772-impactante-film-con-un-darin-prodigioso>> accessed 6 September 2012.

32 Diego Lerer, 'Perros de la calle', *Clarín*, 31 August 2000, <<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2000/08/31/c-00905.htm>> accessed 6 September 2012.

33 Diana Fernández Irusta, 'En el exterior se habla de un boom: Muchos premios con poca plata', *La Nación*, 27 December 2001, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/362131-muchos-premios-con-poca-plata>> accessed 6 September 2012.

exist, and that people expect certain things of a story told cinematically.²⁹

Combined with the increasing name recognition of directors such as Piñeyro or Caetano, with their runs of box-office hits, genre is increasingly hailed as a means to marketability.

Film producers and critics alike have celebrated the financial and artistic possibilities of 'auteur cinema with a popular flavour' (a description applied to *Burnt Money*)³⁰ or productions 'with an intimately cinephilic vocation and, at the same time, with a genuine popular aspiration', a set of characteristics praised in *The Aura*.³¹ Similarly, *Nine Queens* has been praised not only as a profitable model, but as a sort of aesthetic compromise between Hollywood genre and the emerging local art cinema. Critic Diego Lerer comments that *Nine Queens* 'permits us to imagine the possibility of a cinema equidistant from industrial pastiche and the efforts of the youngest [directors]', in short, 'a professional cinema'.³² By juxtaposing conventional plot devices and themes with the elliptical narratives of marginality characteristic of the independent New Argentine Cinema, contemporary Argentine crime films make a strategic bid for both the national market and international festival and art-house circuits.

This latter set of exhibition channels, which offer cultural prestige but are a secondary market in economic terms, are the customary outlets for 'commercial' and 'independent' Argentine productions alike; it is rare for either to be exhibited in US multiplexes. The New York exhibition of Argentine crime films of the last decade as reported in the *New York Times* is revealing: *Nine Queens* premiered in the Film Society of the Lincoln Center's New Directors/New Films Series on 31 March 2001, as did Caetano's *A Red Bear*, first showing on 31 March 2002; *Burnt Money* was released at the Quad, an independent cinema, on 19 October 2001; Bielinsky's *The Aura*, by contrast, received a wide commercial release from 17 November 2006. However, recent Argentine crime films have made significant profits in other Spanish-speaking countries, especially Spain, and are for the most part available on home video in the USA. While local audiences have at times been slow to warm to the New Argentine Cinema's deviations from conventional plot structures and editing codes, foreign spectators have come to expect – and demand – formally innovative cinema from Argentine directors.³³

The new *policiales* manage to appeal simultaneously to art-house audiences and local spectators by their aforementioned juxtaposition of crime genre conventions with an often nihilistic strain of social critique, and with narrative and stylistic strategies developed by the New Argentine Cinema movement: dialogues heavy with local slang; settings that are socially or geographically peripheral; slow, often uneven, narrative pacing. The remote or marginal settings of films like *The Aura*, which takes place at a casino deep in the forests of the southern province of Río Negro, or *A Red Bear*, which unfolds in the slums of greater Buenos Aires,

recall the depictions of marginal spaces in critically acclaimed works of New Argentine Cinema: Trapero's *Mundo grúa/Crane World* (1995) and *El bonaerense*, with their focus on economically depressed Buenos Aires neighbourhoods; Lucrecia Martel's explorations of the northwest province of Salta in *La ciénaga/The Swamp* (2000), *La niña santa/The Holy Girl* (2004) and *La mujer sin cabeza/The Headless Woman* (2008); and the films of Lisandro Alonso which are set at the extremes of the country – the jungle of Misiones in *Los muertos/The Dead* (2004) and the frozen regions of Patagonia in *Liverpool* (2008).

Furthermore, the new *policiales* privilege the exploration of what local critics often refer to as *tiempos muertos* ('dead times', or uneventful moments), which are so important in New Argentine Cinema, for the forward motion of a climactic plot. Using strikingly similar language, Thomas Elsaesser discusses this strategy in relation to Wim Wenders's appropriation and critique of US genre film, suggesting that 'only a cinema of *temps morts*, of observation, could respond to the hectic business of a certain Hollywood cinema of car chases and smash-ups'.³⁴ In keeping with this aesthetic, much of *Burnt Money* is devoted to periods of tense waiting, as the fugitive criminals attempt to evade detection in a series of hideouts. Similarly, *The Aura* includes only three brief action scenes in its 138 minutes. When violence does erupt, its contrast with the more subdued moments is explosive. In *A Red Bear* and *The Aura*, isolated action sequences display the fluid choreography and cinematography, and the utter disregard for verisimilitude, that are characteristic of contemporary international action cinema. (The genre's foregrounding of exaggerated visual virtuosity can itself be considered a pastiche of classical genre codes.³⁵) These aberrant moments in *The Aura* and *A Red Bear* cite the visual logic of the action and thriller genres; their marked contrast to the films' dominant tone emphasizes the way Hollywood visual conventions are markedly 'misplaced' in the context of Argentine cinema.³⁶

In an age of globalized media, a 'misplaced' cinematic code cannot be reduced to an act of pastiche lacking political resonance, nor to an unequivocal sign of US cultural imperialism. As stated previously, cultural critics have recently attempted to make more nuanced evaluations of such appropriations; Dyer suggests, for example, that 'cultural shifts and dislocations are liable to make one aware of the particularity of a convention that one adopts, thus making the option of pastiche more readily apparent'.³⁷ Similarly, Desser has identified in contemporary 'global noir' an 'impulse towards cinephilia – that is, the ability and necessity of acknowledging the intertextual chain of references, borrowings, and re-workings'.³⁸ Elsaesser suggests that the 'love of cinema', 'wherever it is practiced around the globe, is always already caught in several kinds of deferral: a detour in place and space, a shift in register and a delay in time'.³⁹ Argentine crime films make strategic use of these dynamics of dislocation and deferral. By alluding to classic noir and the French New Wave rather than to contemporary US cinema, the new

34 Thomas Elsaesser, 'American friends: Hollywood echoes in the New German Cinema', in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Steven Ricci (eds), *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity, 1945–1995* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), p. 149.

35 Richard Dyer, for example, argues that the rapid and often disorienting editing of shoot-out sequences in the Italian 'spaghetti Western' constitutes a pastiche of the genre as classically defined; these films 'take a standard formal procedure of the Western and then exaggerate and intensify it, to the point that it is carrying most of the force'. Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 105.

36 Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, ed. John Gledson (New York, NY: Verso, 1992).

37 Dyer, *Pastiche*, pp. 117, 179.

38 Desser, 'Global noir', p. 528.

39 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Cinephilia, or the uses of disenchantment', in Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (eds), *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), p. 30.

policiales displace Hollywood as a point of cultural reference, enacting a selfconscious dialogue with the history of the global circulation of genres. Engaging with US cinema at a temporal or geographic lag, recent Argentine crime films at once mirror contemporary US films' fondness for cinematic citation, and challenge Hollywood's place as the source and arbiter of genre codes.

Having suggested the economic, cultural and aesthetic stakes of the new *policiales*' hybrid strategies, I would like to explore further two intertwined issues: the relationship between genre pastiche and national politics in the new *policiales*, and the local critical debates regarding their genre appropriations. I will first discuss the dynamics of citation and appropriation, exploring the distinct ways that generic themes can take on political resonances. Moving to explore the domestic debates regarding the economic advantages and aesthetic dangers of genre convention through the work of Caetano and Trapero, I conclude with an analysis of the virtuoso action sequences of Bielinsky's *The Aura* and Caetano's *A Red Bear*, which simultaneously manifest both a cinephilic and a critical attitude towards Hollywood.

The most openly political film amongst the new *policiales* is probably also the one best known to an English-language audience: the Academy Award-winning *The Secret in their Eyes*.⁴⁰ It is also the film whose style and narrative structure most closely resemble that of contemporary US thrillers. The film's climactic interrogation scene, in which the rapist and murderer of a young woman (Javier Godino) defiantly exposes his genitals to a female court officer (Soledad Villamil) who is attempting to goad him into a confession, would not be out of place in one of the *Law and Order* franchises, for which Campanella has in fact directed several episodes. Yet in its focus on the pursuit of a criminal who enjoys impunity as an employee of the military police, *The Secret in their Eyes* directly links individual criminality to state-sponsored violence. The film thereby openly invokes an allegorical message that critics have read as implicit in other recent Argentine thrillers: crime as symptom of a shattered social contract, the legacy of state-sponsored political violence and destructive neoliberal economic policies.⁴¹

In contrast to much scholarship on recent Argentine crime films, this essay does not interpret them primarily as national allegories,⁴² an approach that has tended to restrict previous work to detailed analyses of single films, with the exception of a chapter in Page's *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*.⁴³ Although I do not read the new *policiales* exclusively as allegorical texts, I do want to explore their grounding in local economic and social crises as a means of distinguishing their logic of genre citation and appropriation from that of recent Hollywood films. Using tropes from a diverse tradition of crime films – including nationally produced ones – to comment on the contemporary state of the nation, the new *policiales* share the pessimism of Hollywood neo-noir without assuming the affectless and apolitical mode of pastiche condemned by Jameson.

40 Reflecting persistent foreign interest in Argentina's turbulent political past, a focus on the last military dictatorship has previously been judged worthy of an Oscar: the 1985 prize for Best Foreign Language Film went to Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial/The Official Story*.

41 See Carolina Rocha, 'Crímen/es irresuelt/os en Cenizas del paraíso de Marcelo Piñeyro', *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, no. 41 (2007), pp. 117–34; Gabriela Coperarti, 'Nine Queens: a dark day of simulation and justice', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2005), pp. 279–93; Ana Amado, *La imagen justa: Cine argentino y política, 1980–2007* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Colihue, 2009).

42 See Fredric Jameson, 'Third-world literature in the age of multinational capitalism', *Social Text*, no. 15 (1986), pp. 65–88, and Aijaz Ahmad's response, 'Jameson's rhetoric of otherness and the "national allegory"', *Social Text*, no. 17 (1987), pp. 3–25, for initial discussions of this formulation.

43 See Rocha, 'Crímen/es irresuelt/os'; Coperarti, 'Nine Queens'; Shaw, 'Playing Hollywood at its own game'.

I would argue that this is the case even in the recent Argentine crime film that most closely resembles what Jameson calls the ‘nostalgia film’: *The Signal*, a production codirected by Ricardo Darín, one of Argentina’s most prominent actors and the star of five of the eight crime thrillers I focus on here. Based on the eponymous novel by Eduardo Mignogna and set in the Buenos Aires area during the tumultuous period of Eva Perón’s illness and death in 1952, the film makes clear visual reference to mid-century Hollywood crime films. The most notable instance is a starkly lit scene showing the private-eye protagonist (played by Darín) and the femme fatale (Julieta Díaz) driving on a suburban highway late at night. The desaturated colour palette used throughout the film is exaggerated, yielding a near black-and-white image that strongly recalls the late-night drives of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947) and countless other works of classic noir. In its evocation of the remoteness and isolation of the Buenos Aires suburbs, the film also recalls the idiosyncratic crime novels of Roberto Arlt, including *Los siete locos/The Seven Madmen*, adapted to the screen by Leopoldo Torre Nilsson in 1973.

Yet *The Signal*’s literary affinities are less with Arlt’s apocalyptic tales of social and psychological breakdown than with the US crime fiction continually evoked in Mignogna’s novel. It is worth noting that the ending of the film adaptation hews more closely to pulp conventions than to its literary source; while the book closes with a cautious rapprochement between the protagonist and the femme fatale, now stripped of her mystique, the film concludes with his betrayal and death at her hands. *The Signal* misses few opportunities to announce its influences: the detectives’ office boasts a frosted glass office door advertising their ‘North American methods’ (figure 1), while the protagonist’s partner (Diego Perretti) often punctuates his colloquial Spanish with English phrases, including the film’s last line, ‘So long, my friend’, addressed to the hero’s corpse on an autopsy table, while a radio broadcast announcing Evita’s death can be heard faintly in the background. By setting the familiar narrative of a private detective’s descent into a fatal sexual obsession at the historical moment at which popular support for the Perón regime began to decline, *The Signal* ultimately links personal and social collapse. Both subjects are treated more with visual flair than affective intensity; one critic referred to the film as an ‘empty shell’.⁴⁴ The cursory nature of the film’s engagement with its historical period may account for a box-office success more modest than that of previous crime films: it attracted 350,000 spectators,⁴⁵ slightly less than half the number who saw *Burnt Money*, and less than a third of the box-office draw of *Nine Queens*, though more than twice that of *A Red Bear* or *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes*, generally grouped among works of the New Argentine Cinema.

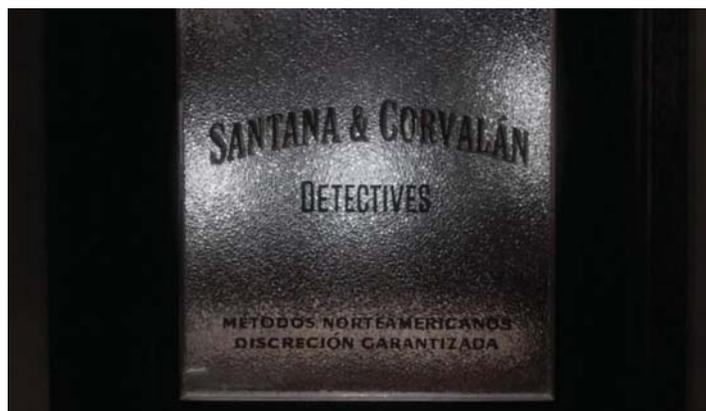
In a more incisive manner than *The Signal*, which deals with Argentine history in a somewhat reductive fashion, *Nine Queens* and *Burnt Money* critique the state of the nation by depicting a generalized criminality that fails to respect even the code of ‘honour among thieves’,⁴⁶ which has

44 Javier Porta Fouz, ‘La cáscara’, *El amante: cine*, no. 185 (2007), p. 21.

45 Montesoro, ‘Los desafíos de hacer películas’.

46 In *Burnt Money*, the heist’s mastermind, Fontana, assures his accomplice El Nene that ‘there are codes’; El Nene responds, ‘Just one: ‘save your own skin at any cost’.

Fig. 1. *La señal/The Signal* (Patagonik Film Group/Wanda Films SA, 2007) announces its pulp influences.



47 This ending echoes Fernando Ayala's *Plata dulce/Easy Money* (1982), in which the protagonist is caught in a web of speculation that ends with his company's abrupt bankruptcy and his imprisonment as the one responsible.

48 Diego Batlle, 'Logrado western urbano de Caetano', *La Nación*, 3 October 2002, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/436990-logrado-western-urbano-de-caetano>> accessed 6 September 2012.

49 Page refers to the moment when El Oso drives a knife through the hand of crime boss El Turco, in *Crisis and Capitalism*, p. 97.

allegorical resonances in a nation with a history of violent authoritarian regimes and economic crises. *Nine Queens* takes financial instability as its explicit theme: the elaborate scam revealed at its conclusion turns on the sudden closure of a bank. Having been forewarned of its collapse, rookie conman Juan (Gastón Pauls) convinces the more experienced Marcos (Darín) to accept a cashier's cheque as payment for the nine forged stamps of the title, the final link in a chain of deception not revealed to the viewer until the end of the film. The bank's closure renders the cheque worthless, prefiguring the fate of many Argentines' savings during the financial crisis of 2001, the year following the film's release.⁴⁷ The palpable sense of economic insecurity instilled by *Nine Queens* is compounded by the ubiquity of con men and thieves, emphasized throughout the film. Pestered by a corrupt stamp appraiser for his cut of the deal, Marcos exclaims, 'Is it like this everywhere? We're screwed [here].' The conclusion of *Nine Queens* takes this sense of pervasive corruption to delirious heights. In the final scene, Juan divides his takings with nearly all the characters who have previously appeared in the film and who are only now shown to be his accomplices. *Nine Queens* is light in tone, relying on rapid-fire narrative reversals rather than violence; but the precariousness of its characters' fortunes keenly evokes the uncertainty of local conditions.

In sharp contrast to *Nine Queens*'s elegant (and bloodlessly executed) plot twists, in *Burnt Money* and *A Red Bear* portrayals of anarchic violence and casual amorality fuel a nihilistic strain of social criticism. The new *policiales* ground their antiheroes' struggles in political abuses and economic hardships specific to the national context. In *A Red Bear*'s climactic sequence, the Argentine state itself becomes the object of a spectacularly unsubtle critique. In a scene one reviewer compared to the infamous juxtaposition of baptism and massacre in *The Godfather*,⁴⁸ (this film is also cited in *A Red Bear*'s final action sequence, as Page has pointed out⁴⁹), crosscutting links the eponymous protagonist's (Julio Chávez) participation in an assault on a factory payroll with a patriotic

recital at the school attended by his daughter Alicia (Agostina Lage), while the voices of children singing the national anthem remain constant on the soundtrack. Film scholar Ana Amado describes the scene's 'simultaneity of ferocious robbery and commemoration, of institution and crime' as a 'provocative update of the notion of "imagined community" (Anderson) in its local version', suggesting the legacy of ruptured social contracts in the wake of the Dirty War (1976–83) and the wave of privatizations in the era of president Carlos Menem (1989–99).⁵⁰ Emerging alive but emotionally defeated from his accomplices' attempt to eliminate him after the heist, on orders from his former criminal boss, El Oso leaves the spoils with a family that no longer includes him. When his wife's new lover Sergio (Luis Machín) expresses suspicions about this windfall, El Oso responds 'All money is stolen', before disappearing from their lives permanently.

A similar anticapitalist sentiment informs *Burnt Money*. Ricardo Piglia's novel of the same name, on which the film is based, opens with an epigraph by Bertolt Brecht: 'What's robbing a bank compared with founding one?'.⁵¹ Taking its cue from Piglia's semifictional account, the film portrays its protagonists as doubly outcast. The pair of robbers referred to as 'the twins' – El Nene (long-time Piñeyro collaborator Leonardo Sbaraglia) and Ángel (Spanish actor Eduardo Noriega, whose presence was a precondition of Spanish coproduction funds)⁵² – are not only hardened criminals but also lovers. Piñeyro has discussed *Burnt Money*'s erotic content as a means of 'making explicit the latent sexuality of masculine genres like the *film noir*, adventure films, and, especially, the western', suggesting that his film at once breaks with and extends these genre conventions.⁵³

The film's popularity may be partly due to the opportunities provided by the narrative, which features marginal characters in extreme situations, to showcase physically exuberant and often graphically sexual performances by Sbaraglia and by soap star Pablo Echarri in the role of El Cuervo. However, it is worth noting that *Burnt Money*'s explicit scenes show only heterosexual pairings (with the exception of a disturbing sequence in which El Nene forces a stranger to engage in oral sex with him at gunpoint). This is consistent with the plot of the novel, in which the character corresponding to Ángel suffers from a mental illness that leads him to refuse sexual contact; yet flashbacks in the film to an earlier moment in the men's relationship also have little erotic content. Ultimately, this circumspect treatment of queer love renders the film moderately provocative, without alienating mainstream audiences who might feel threatened by the prospect of graphically depicted homosexual sex.⁵⁴

Critic Diego Batlle has suggested that while the focus of the film is on the amoral behaviour of the robbers and the tumultuous relationship between El Nene and Ángel, the film adheres to a 'structure characteristic of the crime film (assembly of the band, planning of the heist, the assault, the getaway, the betrayals and the final standoff)'.⁵⁵ *Burnt Money*'s

50 Ana Amado, 'Cine argentino. Cuando todo es margen', *Pensamiento de los confines*, no. 11 (2002), p. 90.

51 Ricardo Piglia, *Plata quemada* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1997), p. 10.

52 Marcelo Piñeyro and Marcelo Figueras, *Plata quemada. La película* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2000), p. 24.

53 Quoted in Batlle, 'Marcelo Piñeyro'.

54 *Burnt Money* was restricted to spectators over the age of eighteen, with its 'excessive violence, promiscuity, recurring homosexual scenes, and criminal milieu', given as justification. Quoted in Javier Porta Pouz, 'Calificación, criterios y presiones', *El amante: cine*, no. 104 (2000), pp. 18–22.

55 Batlle, 'Marcelo Piñeyro'.

climax is the unthinkable act referred to in the title: the criminals' burning of the spoils during the authorities' siege of their hideout across the border in Uruguay. Unlike Piñeyro's previous *Caballos salvajes/Wild Horses* (1995), a semicomical heist film in which a character played by Leonardo Sbaraglia takes himself hostage to demand the return of savings that the bank has devalued and refuses to let him withdraw, *Burnt Money* makes no extensive exploration of the political implications of this 'nihilist act' and 'example of pure terrorism', as it is described by some of Piglia's more conservative characters.⁵⁶

Furthermore, despite the implicit concern with the national involved in its depiction of corrupt politicians and police, *Burnt Money's* production and reception were haunted by the spectre of the most prominent deconstructor of Hollywood genres, Quentin Tarantino. The unrestrained violence of Piglia's novel seems to have rendered the US director inevitable as a point of reference for the film adaptation, even before shooting began. Scriptwriter Marcelo Figueras dramatizes this concern as he describes the project's genesis in a 'shooting diary' included in the published script. 'Will Piñeyro have the fantasy of a creole-style⁵⁷ *Reservoir Dogs*?', asks Figueras rhetorically. 'The very idea makes me lose sleep.' Subsequently he and the director agree quickly on the need to 'distance oneself from the Tarantino temptation'.⁵⁸

With its period setting and passionate same-sex romance, *Burnt Money* circumvents the ironic mode of many contemporary US crime films, instead seeking inspiration in the French New Wave and its contemporaries. Figueras's account and the film's visual citations of the New Wave and film noir suggest an impulse to rewrite its generic genealogy in a detour around contemporary crime film in its local and Hollywood incarnations. Publicly declaring his influences, he has stated that '*Burnt Money* is more *Jules and Jim* than *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes*. ... Its creatures are akin to the marginal types of *Midnight Cowboy*, not the "cool" gangsters of Tarantino.'⁵⁹ In emphasizing the period setting, Figueras rhetorically downplays the film's affinities with contemporary Hollywood's visual codes, though this did not prevent critics from making the connection of their own accord. For example, while Figueras insisted that the men's costumes were inspired by Jean-Pierre Melville's 1969 film *Le Samourai* (a film for which Tarantino has also expressed his admiration),⁶⁰ A. O. Scott's review of *Burnt Money* in the *New York Times* describes the robbers in 'narrow-lapelled suits, dark ties and sunglasses, looking for all the world like the stars of a brooding Spanish-language remake of *Reservoir Dogs* or *Ocean's Eleven*'.⁶¹ Other reviewers saw Piñeyro's film as an uneasy hybrid that does not sufficiently distance itself from contemporary Hollywood, 'a cross between films from the late sixties and early seventies and neo-noir from the nineties', that includes 'some overly obvious citations of Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* and of *Pulp Fiction* ... (there are not one, but two scenes where the twist is danced)'.⁶²

56 Piglia, *Plata quemada*, p. 97.

57 The term *criollo* indicates a person of peninsular Spanish origin born in the colonies; as an adjective, it is frequently applied to uniquely national forms of mixed cultural provenance.

58 Figueras and Piñeyro, *Plata quemada. La película*, pp. 15, 22.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

60 Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways*, p. 267.

61 A. O. Scott, 'After the heist, it's time to worry', *New York Times*, 19 October 2001, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/19/movies/19BURN.html?scp=1&sq=%22after%20the%20heist,%20it%27s%20time%20to%20worry%22&st=cse>> accessed 6 September 2012.

62 'El amor en tiempos violentos', *La Nación*, 11 May 2000, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/16343-el-amor-en-tiempos-violentos>> accessed 6 September 2012.

As with *Burnt Money*'s stylish costumes, the scenes to which this quote refers simultaneously recall recent US crime film and seek to break with it, tracing an alternative generic lineage and moving into a different affective register. This strategy is notable in a scene that begins on a light note, as El Cuervo joins a group of wealthy teenagers dancing on a beach to the sounds of a record player. The situation abruptly turns violent when a chance remark by El Cuervo reveals that El Nene has been unfaithful to Ángel; El Nene then shoots the record player in a fit of guilt and confusion. The sequence has no immediate antecedent in Piglia's novel; its pedigree is purely cinematic, recalling the floating record player and synchronized dancers glimpsed briefly in Godard's *Pierrot le fou*, between the assaults and torture that Jean-Paul Belmondo's character suffers at the hands of the menacing associates of Marianne (Anna Karina). Figueras's comment that actress Leticia Brédice resembles Karina in Godard's early films when glimpsed from a distance at the Montevideo location suggests that *Pierrot le fou* was a conscious influence.⁶³

⁶³ Figueras and Piñeyro, *Plata quemada. La película*, p. 55.

This scene also evokes a seaside dance party in a film from the European-influenced Argentine *nueva ola* (new wave), *Los jóvenes viejos/The Old Youths* (Rodolfo Kuhn, 1962), which depicts the lives of alienated bourgeois teenagers in the seaside resort town of Mar del Plata with an earnestness quite distinct from French New Wave's self-reflexivity and irony. It is interesting that Figueras refers explicitly to Godard and Truffaut without invoking the crime-themed films of the *nueva ola*, such as Fernando Ayala's 1960 *El Jefe/The Boss*, a critical depiction of a petty gangster's destructive influence on his followers, or the similarly themed, though significantly darker, *Alias Gardelito*, directed by Lautaro Murúa in the same year. In this case it appears that 'cultural colonization' has merely taken a detour around contemporary Hollywood, finding an anchor in French art cinema, long a favoured point of cultural reference for intellectuals in Argentina.

Instead of taking its cue from Godard's irreverent interpretation of US genre traditions, *Burnt Money* presents violence with deadly seriousness, distancing itself in the process from Tarantino's cynicism. The film's combination of knowing allusions to genre convention with expressions of the robbers' fierce marginality is most evident in a sequence set in the criminals' hideout in Uruguay, where they are waiting for the false documents which will enable them to leave the country. As Billie Holiday's 'Ill Wind' plays on the soundtrack, the criminals' virtual imprisonment is emphasized in a succession of images that rewrite noir conventions. A slow tilt up and dolly out on the heist mastermind Fontana (Ricardo Bartis) depicts him as a less than vigilant Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade, dropping a glass of whisky to the floor as he drifts off with a revolver in his lap (figure 2); the next shot depicts El Nene snorting cocaine off a magazine cover as a neon light changes colours behind a Venetian blind. The setting resembles the cheap hotel rooms of classic noir, but sordid doings only hinted at under the Production Code are here displayed openly, coinciding with the film's most obvious declaration of

marginal identity. Throughout the sequence, El Nene reflects on past imprisonments in a voiceover closely adapted from Piglia's novel, declaring 'In jail I became a queer, an addict, a gambler, a Peronist'. While the sequence's visuals and offscreen narration evoke the codes of Hollywood noir, the undesirable identities avowed by El Nene are inextricable from the Argentine context. The scene's tonal eclecticism, which combines a visual play with genre codes with an earnest exploration of marginal characters, exemplifies the hybrid strategies of the new *policiales*.

Just as critics identified diverse antecedents for *Burnt Money*, depending on their cultural location, contemporary reviews trace differing points of origin for the new *policiales*, with some commentators emphasizing the influence of Hollywood genre film and others the links with nationally produced works. The films of Adolfo Aristarain are the most frequent point of reference, namely his trio of crime films released during and shortly after the last military dictatorship (1976–83). Néstor García Canclini argues that Aristarain's 're-readings between *policíacas* [another term for crime films] and politics in Argentine history'⁶⁴ participate in a counter-current to the homogenizing forces of globalization; the new *policiales* could thus be seen as their heirs in more ways than one.

It is Bielinsky's films that show the clearest affinities to Aristarain's crime thrillers. The ethically ambiguous position of a taxidermist whose daydreams of a perfect crime are fulfilled when he discovers a robbery plot in *The Aura* can be seen as a reimagining of Aristarain's *La parte del león/The Lion's Share* (1978). The latter focuses on a perpetual loser (Julio de Grazia) who happens upon the spoils of a heist hidden in a water tank after he notices the robbers fleeing through his apartment building. This windfall, transparently linked to the protagonist's frustrated desires for class mobility, leads to his rapid moral deterioration. By the end of the film, greed has led him to leave his best friend to die after a shootout and to abandon his estranged wife and daughter to the hands of the robbers.⁶⁵ While the parallel is less exact, the intricate reversals of Aristarain's *Los últimos días de la víctima/Last Days of the Victim* (1982), in which

64 Canclini, 'Will there be Latin American cinema?', pp. 255–56.

65 The film features a very young Julio Chávez, principal actor of *A Red Bear*, as one of the criminals.



Fig. 2. A less than vigilant Fontana, in *Plata quemada/Burnt Money* (Oscar Kramer S.A./Cuatro Cabezas Films, 2000).

watcher and watched switch roles in a manner recalling Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), also have resonances with *Nine Queens*.

Prefiguring the production strategies of the numerous new *policiales* based on Argentine literary works (*The Secret in their Eyes*, *Thursday Widows*, *The Signal*, *Burnt Money*), Aristarain's film adapts a novel by José Pablo Feinmann. Depicting the daily routine of a hired assassin (Federico Luppi) who is ignorant of the fact that his target has also been hired to eliminate him, the film invokes the New Hollywood thrillers of the 1970s, with their visual flair and intensely paranoid narratives. The complexity of such cultural exchanges is foregrounded by the fact that, even as *Last Days of the Victim* recalls Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1971) in its obsession with photographic surveillance and its mise-en-scene of grey, coldly metallic interiors alternated with scenes shot in brilliant jewel tones (including an striking scene in which the protagonist shoots a blonde woman in a hallway lined with vibrantly red doors), one should not forget that Antonioni's meditation on epistemological uncertainty was in turn based upon a short story by Argentine expatriate Julio Cortázar.

While local critics have been quick to point out links to Aristarain, in interviews Bielinsky focused on the influence of the US genre films that dominated his childhood viewing experience, emphasizing his particular affection for the *policial negro*, or film noir, in its many incarnations; he cited David Mamet's 1987 *House of Games* as a primary inspiration for *Nine Queens*.⁶⁶ Diego Lerer calls the latter film 'an example of narrative classicism ... whose root is found in the work of Howard Hawks', but notes that it adds to its carefully crafted plot 'the streetwise dialogues of a *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes* or a *Crane World*'.⁶⁷ Similarly, Sergio Wolf describes the scene in *Nine Queens* in which professional con man Marcos calls the attention of his protege Juan to the ubiquity and diversity of petty criminals as an 'independent cinema sequence' inserted in a genre film.⁶⁸ As Marcos lists the criminal types in voice-off using a colourful, emphatically local lexicon,⁶⁹ brief shots of suspicious figures seemingly caught on the fly in the urban street appear in a semi-documentary interlude.

Champions of the New Argentine Cinema have remained suspicious of the manner in which the appropriation of Hollywood codes makes national films not only aesthetically but also politically complicit with US cultural influences. Trapero stated shortly after the release of Bielinsky's debut: 'I like *Nine Queens*, but it ceases to interest me precisely when it becomes a genre film, which is what happens at the end. The rest is the story of two guys which I'm not sure you can pigeonhole within a genre.'⁷⁰ Trapero's artistic and critical trajectory – from apparent suspicion about the use of crime genre conventions to a greater engagement with those very tropes in his later films – is instructive in terms of the cultural discourses mobilized in discussions of the new *policiales*. Trapero's career initially polarized but more recently has blurred the critical distinctions drawn in Argentina between art cinema and commercial film, and between intimate dramas and genre narratives.

66 Horacio Bernades, 'Los estafadores son fascinantes', *Página/12*, 31 August 2000, <<http://www.pagina12.com.ar/2000/00-08/00-08-31/pag27.htm>> accessed 6 September 2012.

67 Lerer, 'Perros de la calle'.

68 Bernades et. al., *New Argentine Cinema*, p. 126.

69 According to Bielinsky, the vocabulary used is not drawn from contemporary usage, but was derived in part from outdated police dictionaries. Sergio Wolf, Gustavo J. Castagna and Quintín, 'Los inconvenientes del éxito', *El amante: cine*, no. 103 (2000), p. 34.

70 Quoted in Juan Villegas, 'Entrevista a Pablo Trapero. Estilo, realismo y supervivencia', *El amante: cine*, no. 126 (2002), p. 8.

71 Pablo Sirvén, 'El cine local tiene que dar el estirón', *La Nación*, 23 May 2010, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1267722-el-cine-local-tiene-que-dar-el-estiron>> accessed 6 September 2012.

72 Diego Lerer, 'Calles salvajes', *Clarín*, 6 May 2010, <<http://edant.clarin.com/diario/2010/05/06/espectaculos/c-02191779.htm>> accessed 6 September 2012.

73 Sirvén, 'El cine local tiene que dar el estirón'.

Like Caetano, Trapero made the transition from an artisanal filmmaking practice to a more commercial mode of production, following up the low-budget *Crane World*, shot on gritty black-and-white stock, with the more polished *El bonaerense* in 2002. The projects he directed subsequently have been coproduced by Patagonik, which also produced *Nine Queens*.⁷¹ Trapero has continued to defend the New Argentine Cinema's search for narrative models specific to the national context, and several of his recent films have explored distinctly noirish themes while only rarely resorting to conventional genre elements. His 2008 feature *La leonera/The Lion's Den* features a heroine caught in a dilemma reminiscent of Fritz Lang's *The Blue Gardenia* (1953): Julia (Martina Gusmán, Trapero's wife and longtime executive producer) is accused of the murder of her boyfriend's male lover, a crime of which she has no memory. Instead of systematically unravelling the truth of this incident as the narrative economy of the 'whodunnit' demands, *The Lion's Den* depicts Julia's pregnancy, her imprisonment in a special ward for mothers with young children, and her slow emotional recovery as she learns to care for her son and becomes romantically involved with a fellow prisoner (Laura García).

Trapero's 2010 release *Carancho/Vulture* relates the sordid activities of personal injury lawyers who stage accidents for profit, using beatings and intimidation against each other when their interests conflict, without limiting itself to a noir register. To a much greater extent than his previous work, *Vulture* repurposes genre conventions, a shift much commented upon by local critics. Diego Lerer notes that *Vulture* melds 'stylization of the script (the "rules" of the genre)' and 'observation of the world (various neorealisms)'.⁷² Using rhetoric almost identical to that previously employed with respect to Piñero's and Bielinsky's films, *La Nación* critic Pablo Sirvén holds up *Vulture* as an example of 'a possible path: auteurist cinema with an industrial vocation', suggesting that Trapero's social critique is integrated into 'an electrifying story stirred by the rhythm of a thriller'. Sirvén dismisses those who express concern about the cultural politics of recent genre films as 'elitist lovers of the minor', suggesting that 'success, even if noble and acquired with dignified, genuine tools, instantly causes them to break out in hives'.⁷³

Despite the film's careful compositions and artfully murky cinematography, *Carancho* dwells on the depiction of graphic violence. In two striking scenes, the protagonist Sosa (Ricardo Darín), the 'vulture' most troubled by his conscience, gives a willing victim of a staged accident a preparatory axe blow to the knee; later, he savagely beats one of his partners to death with a filing cabinet drawer. These acts propel the plot forward rather than being incidental to it, as might be argued in the case of *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes*. In the first case the victim dies, leading Sosa to a moral awakening which puts him at odds with his unscrupulous partners; he gives the deceased's family money earmarked for his criminal boss (Carlos Weber). The second incident, revenge for an assault against his lover Luján (Martina Gusmán), moves the film into its endgame, putting Sosa directly under the control of the boss, who uses his

connections with the police to cover up the incident. These scenes are inserted without foreshadowing and are not primarily deployed to suspenseful or climactic effect. Rather, the film's narrative is driven by the developing romance between Sosa and Luján, a disillusioned, heroin-addicted doctor whom he meets at an accident scene. Despite the sensitive portrayal of their tentative relationship, *Carancho's* ending is pure noir – as in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the protagonists outwit those scheming against them, only to be brought down, with a keen sense of irony, by the impersonal force of a narrative destiny. After surviving a crash which he had planned to kill his boss, without realizing he would be travelling in the same vehicle, Sosa makes it into the getaway car with Luján, dodging bullets from his would-be victims. Seconds later the two are struck by another vehicle as they drive off. Ending with a still shot of the debris-strewn ground and the sounds of paramedics' radio communications as they respond to the accident,⁷⁴ which echo the film's opening images of accident photographs accompanied by faint sirens, *Vulture* takes on a circular logic and powerful sense of fatalism.

Trapero's later films complicate his erstwhile negative attitude towards generic codes, even if earlier comments in interviews exemplify his opposition to US cultural colonization consistently asserted by Argentina's left-leaning artists and intellectuals. Upon the release of *El bonaerense* in 2002, Trapero explained in the film magazine *El amante: cine* why his film about police corruption has so little in common with the genre of the *policial*:

Genre film is a tradition that was basically constructed in Hollywood. It depends on the culture that generates it, it's not born out of nothing. If you try to translate those codes to Argentina's reality, it won't work for you. And it's not a question of budgets, but rather that it will always be an imitation of an American film, because the code on which it's based depends on a culture which is not ours.⁷⁵

Trapero's rhetoric carries faint echoes of the revolutionary ethos of the New Latin American Cinema, which in Argentina took the form of Fernando Birri's call for a 'cinema of underdevelopment' and Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's championing of 'Third Cinema', whose form, content and mode of production would combat cultural colonization by responding to the specificity of local conditions.⁷⁶

This politicized approach towards filmmaking contrasts with Caetano's statements following the release of *A Red Bear* in 2002, which were in keeping with the critics' optimism about the commercial and artistic possibilities of appropriating Hollywood genres in local productions. Caetano's producer, industry veteran Lita Stantic, had expressed confidence that *A Red Bear* would conquer both local and international festival audiences, given that Caetano's work was 'more related to the narratives of the American cinema than those of the European'.⁷⁷ Stantic's prediction proved overly optimistic, as *A Red Bear* ultimately drew a modest if respectable 170,000 domestic spectators.⁷⁸ Beyond being good

74 *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes* ends with an almost identical auditory device, when the spectator is informed of the two wounded criminals' deaths through police radio communications on the soundtrack.

75 Quoted in Villegas, 'Entrevista a Pablo Trapero', p. 8.

76 English translations of Birri's 'Cinema and underdevelopment' and Solanas and Getino's 'Towards a Third Cinema' are included in Michael Martin (ed.), *New Latin American Cinema: Theory, Practices and Transcontinental Articulations* (Detroit, IL: Wayne State University Press, 1997), pp. 86–94, 33–58.

77 Quoted in Diana Fernández Irueta, 'En el exterior se habla de un boom'.

78 Diego Batlle, 'Cartelera bien diversificada', *La nación*, 15 December 2002, <<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/458620-cartelera-bien-diversificada>> accessed 6 September 2012.

box office, Caetano implies that the disconnect between genre codes and the local context can mitigate the documentary quality that inevitably emerges in depictions of an ‘underdeveloped’ national reality, expanding the available range of aesthetic options and empowering marginal characters through the conventional logic of genre film.⁷⁹

A Red Bear romanticizes the sprawling slums of Greater Buenos Aires through an analogy with the lawless American frontier, made explicit in dialogue by crime boss El Turco (René Lavand), who compares it to the ‘Far West’ (using the English expression) because of the frequency of shoot-outs there. Caetano suggests that rather than simply mythologizing marginality, recognizable genre codes lend narrative force to characters where a more naturalistic register would only emphasize their helplessness:

I go there, put the camera here, put the camera there, and Gran Buenos Aires appears. ... Reality comes forward by itself. I wanted to escape everything that would make [the film] come out like a documentary. I didn’t want to recount the life of some pathetic guy. I like to give dignity to characters. And genre dignifies them a lot, puts them in a very decisive position.⁸⁰

Caetano’s statement – and his film – suggest a desire to temper the ‘raw’ reality of economic abjection with the artificiality of generic universes. The violent scenes that conclude *A Red Bear* constitute a fantasy of empowerment, which is marked as fantasy by its citation of the anti-realistic, purely conventional logic of genre. By foregrounding the disjunction between dominant cinematic codes originating in Hollywood and the divergent narrative pace and visual style appropriate to local conditions, the film simultaneously appropriates and critiques genre conventions.

This hybrid strategy is not necessarily incompatible with the escapist impulse so often associated with genre cinema, and has been criticized accordingly. David Oubiña suggests that rather than critically rereading genre, Caetano’s project in *A Red Bear* ‘is to go backwards, attacking [cinematic] modernity through a *re-establishment* of genres’.⁸¹ The alleged reactionary impulse is compounded by what Oubiña sees as the film’s unredeemed nihilism, which he suggests is a violation of the generic rules of the Western (at least in classical Hollywood): ‘El Oso is simply violent. ... There can be no Western without an ethical code’; or more precisely, such a film would sacrifice the genre’s mythic structures.⁸² What Oubiña does not entertain, however, is the possibility that the film’s lack of mythical resonance may precisely constitute part of its critical force, and that its relation to genre film may be more complex than simply amounting to a regressive imitation. The formal heterogeneity of *A Red Bear* suggests that a wholesale replication of Hollywood genre forms is financially and culturally unfeasible for contemporary Argentine film. The selectivity of *A Red Bear*’s allusions to the heist film and the Western

79 For an alternative reading of this film’s political dimensions, see Gustavo A. Remedi, ‘De Juan Moreira a *Un oso rojo*: crisis del modelo neoliberal y estética gauchesca’, in Mabel Moraña and Javier Campos (eds), *Ideologías y literatura: Homenaje a Hernán Vidal* (Pittsburgh, PA: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, University of Pittsburgh, 2006), pp. 147–65.

80 Juan Villegas, ‘Entrevista a Adrián Caetano. El Oso cumple, el género dignifica’, *El amante: cine*, no. 127 (2002), p. 16.

81 Oubiña, ‘El espectáculo y sus márgenes. Sobre Adrián Caetano y el nuevo cine argentino’, *Punto de vista*, no. 76 (2003), p. 30.

82 Oubiña, ‘El espectáculo y sus márgenes’, p. 32. Such a strategy is not without precedents. Dimitris Eleftheriotis notes that a significant element of the Italian spaghetti Western involves ‘the disengagement of the mise-en-scène from the ideological and iconographic values of the American western’, in ‘Spaghetti Western, genre criticism and national cinema: redefining the frame of reference’, in Yvonne Tasker (ed.), *Action and Adventure Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 318. I thank Tim Bergfelder for directing my attention to this affinity.

are at once a reflection of local economic conditions and an assertion of cinematic utopianism.

A Red Bear depicts the protagonist's attempts to remake his life after his release from prison with a measured pace and quotidian tone. While the film includes several violent moments, such as El Oso aggressively mugging a businessman, tearing at his clothing in search of concealed money, it primarily explores the texture of everyday events: the cramped spaces and muffled sounds of the cheap hotel where he finds lodging; the simultaneously routine and fraught act of driving his daughter to school contrary to the wishes of his estranged wife (Soledad Villamil); the long moment for which the latter pauses before a mirror in a house where she works as a maid, fingering the worn neckline of her dress.

The film's climactic sequences diverge sharply from preceding scenes in terms of both cinematography and tone. After the violent payroll heist intercut with the patriotic school performance, discussed above, a striking sequence depicts El Oso surviving an attempt on his life by his three accomplices. A lengthy travelling shot taken through the windshield of the getaway car, in keeping with the use of relatively long takes throughout the film, suddenly gives way to a series of short, disorienting shots. One of the criminals grabs El Oso's gun, only to have his brains splattered on the car's side window by El Oso's second hidden weapon in less than three seconds of screen time; the remaining two accomplices are eliminated within another ten. After presenting the money to his wife's new lover Sergio, in the scene referred to above, El Oso confronts his former boss, El Turco ('the Turk') in a bar full of thugs. First immobilizing his enemy by driving a knife through his hand (an action broken down into twelve shots showing El Oso's movements from multiple angles, intercut with reaction shots showing his victim's horrified expression), the protagonist confronts no fewer than seven armed men. He dispatches three of them in as many seconds, with these skilful eliminations depicted in repetitive shot/reverse-shot patterns, and then seeks refuge from a hail of bullets behind a post, where two of his opponents attempt to creep up on him. Dropping all but one of his remaining rounds on the floor to create a distraction, El Oso fells the last two thugs using a single bullet, with a surreal facility that has prompted comparisons to directors of international action cinema. One critic describes this scene as an 'epic, almost unreal denouement, filmed in the stylized and bombastic mode of the Hong Kong director John Woo',⁸³ while Amado likens the film's strategic use of 'inexpressiveness, up until the explosions of accumulated violence' to the work of Takeshi Kitano.⁸⁴ In *A Red Bear*'s concluding action sequences, two ephemeral moments of mastery coincide. At the level of the plot, a man who is powerless to improve his family situation becomes physically unstoppable; in terms of style, *A Red Bear* fleetingly assumes the identity of an international action film before returning to the semi-documentary register that, as Caetano believes, the local context inevitably produces.

In a comparable fashion, Bielinsky's *The Aura* inserts brief, explosive action sequences into a slow-paced plot, selectively appropriating genre

⁸³ Batlle, 'Logrado western urbano de Caetano'.

⁸⁴ Amado, 'Cine argentino: cuando todo es margen', p. 90.

85 James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, rev. edn (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), p. 291. Camera movement is used in a virtuoso fashion throughout *The Aura*, most notably in circular travelling shots which convey a sense of the protagonist's disorientation during his epileptic seizures. Dona Kercher refers to these moments as 'aura shots', comparing them to Hitchcock's famous combination of a 360-degree pan with a rotating dolly motion in *Vertigo*. See Kercher, 'The aura of Hitchcock in Fabián Bielinsky's films', paper presented at Cine-Lit IV Conference, Portland, OR, 23 February 2007.

86 Page, *Crisis and Capitalism*, p. 94.

conventions without assimilating them into its overall visual and narrative logic. Early in the film the protagonist, an epileptic taxidermist played by Ricardo Darín (who remains nameless throughout, though the credits identify him as Espinoza) daydreams aloud about a flawless robbery, which is presented to the viewer as an implicitly cinematic fantasy. As Espinoza waits to cash his pay packet with his colleague Sontag (Alejandro Awada), he explains how the crime might be executed in the bank precisely and without violence. As if responding to the character's voiceover directions, already present extras spring into action as accomplices and the camera assumes a vertiginous mobility as fluid panning and travelling shots follow the hypothetical robbers' movements and the path of their escape. Such displays of virtuosity in the use of Steadicam have become increasingly frequent in Hollywood neo-noirs, as James Naremore has noted.⁸⁵ Throughout the brief sequence, interspersed with closeups that illustrate the robbers' precisely timed actions, the taxidermist remains motionless alongside Sontag, implicitly acting as the director of the unfolding events (figure 3).

Noting this unusual melding of a fantasy sequence with diegetic events presented as 'real', Page reads this scene as a moment of demystification that, in refusing to 'use camerawork or editing to erect boundaries between the real and the imagined, immediately suggests the collusion of cinematography in simulation and producing the perfect crime'.⁸⁶ However, I would argue that this implicit critique of cinematic illusionism might easily be overwhelmed by the scene's dynamic, expertly choreographed visuals, which feel out of place in a film consistently photographed with slow (though similarly fluid) camera movements and abundant long takes. In depicting the robbery as controlled by Espinoza's imaginings down to the last detail, the scene links his character's fantasy to the production of a technically virtuosic cinematic discourse. As in *A Red Bear*, the use of hyperbolic visual strategies that evoke international generic templates is associated with a fantasy of empowerment, one that might be extended to the local spectator. The placement of these sequences in the two films, however, is vastly divergent: in *A Red Bear* they mark the character's spectacular exit from a grim reality; in *The Aura* they constitute a criminal fantasy of which the protagonist will be painfully disabused.



Fig. 3. Extras spring into action, in *El aura/The Aura* (Patagonik Film Group/Tornasol Films/Davis Films Productions, 2005).

Deciding to accompany Sontag on a hunting trip to a remote area after his wife unexpectedly (and wordlessly) leaves him, Espinoza stumbles on an opportunity to commit the perfect crime when he accidentally shoots Dietrich (Manuel Rodal), a violent and abusive man who has hatched a plot to rob a local casino. Espinoza reconstructs the details of the heist from Dietrich's voicemails and cryptic notes, which lead him to a series of ambiguous encounters with his co-conspirators. However, he fails to realize that a criminal who is killed by the police before his eyes is in fact an 'inside man' vital to the plot. After Espinoza is prevented from informing his accomplices of the impending disaster by one of his epileptic seizures (the warning aura of which gives the film its title), he quickly learns that crime is less photogenic than he imagined. The stark presentation of the violence inflicted by his accomplices marks the distance between the protagonist's daydreams and the gruesome reality of crime, but also the distance between the meditative film and the genre codes on which it plays.

Speaking of his ambition in *The Aura* to escape the postmodern phenomenon of cycles of 'self-referential violence that refers to other cinematic violence that refers to other cinematic violence', Bielinsky has commented: 'I wanted to approach this from a place distanced from the [genre] code. So, when violence appears, it is minimal, clumsy, heavy-handed.'⁸⁷ Page suggests that these moments in *The Aura* 'stag[e] the unwelcome and messy intrusion of reality into the neatness of fiction', without interfering with the film's comprehension by an international audience.⁸⁸ I would qualify her implication that *The Aura* directly shows the harsh 'reality' of crime, and thereby makes a more rigorous critique of the capitalist system than *Nine Queens*, in which the audience is encouraged to sympathize with the character who most effectively exploits and deceives others.⁸⁹ In contrast to Page's assertion that *The Aura*'s violent sequences give the viewer visual access to an unpleasant truth concealed by the glossy surfaces of capitalism (and by its cultural products), it would be more accurate to say that *The Aura* juxtaposes the highly conventionalized narrative codes of the heist film with the observational realism of the New Argentine Cinema, thus foregrounding the film's positioning in global cultural flows. Appearing abruptly in productions whose overall pace and tone are quite distinct, the fleeting Hollywood-style action sequences of *The Aura* and *A Red Bear* signal both a mastery of crime genres' visual codes and the impossibility (and undesirability) of sustaining them for the duration of an entire nationally produced film.

In conclusion, while the new *policiales* to some extent share the urgency of social critique and the search for new cinematic models manifest in the New Argentine Cinema, their heterogeneous narrative strategies more accurately give expression to the exigencies of a cinematic market that requires them to function as simultaneously local and global products. In the precarious economic conditions of current film production in Argentina, the new *policiales*' dialogue with US cinema is

⁸⁷ Quoted in Gustavo Noriega and Marcelo Panozzo, 'Cine de autor: Charlando sobre el gran salto', *El amante: cine*, no. 160 (2005), p. 7.

⁸⁸ Page, *Crisis and Capitalism*, p. 95.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

quite literally serious business; yet reimaginings of genre conventions in recent crime films have also catalysed social critique and stylistic innovation. While it would be irresponsible to embrace uncritically Caetano's position on *A Red Bear*, which equates genre appropriation with empowerment of marginality, the economic and aesthetic strategies of contemporary Argentine crime films complicate recent discourses of media globalization and older polemics against cultural imperialism. Not content with challenging Hollywood's market share, the strategies of the new *policiales* implicitly dispute its assumed position at the centre of cultural production.

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