

CRISIS AND CAPITALISM
IN CONTEMPORARY
ARGENTINE CINEMA



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To my mother, who taught me to read

Money is the obverse of all the images that the cinema shows and sets in place, so that films about money are already, if implicitly, films within the film or about the film.

GILLES DELEUZE, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 75

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INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s, Argentine filmmaking has experienced a boom in production that at the time of writing shows no signs of abating. Critics and film festivals worldwide have not been slow to herald a renaissance in Argentine cinema, and accolades, prizes and other sources of funding have secured access for a number of these films to screens around the world. That national production should show such a dramatic increase—from fourteen feature films in 1994 to sixty-six in 2004—is remarkable; that it should do so at a time of severe economic crisis is quite extraordinary.¹

In December 2001 Argentina's economic recession had reached the point at which the state's policy of convertibility, under which the peso had been pegged to the dollar throughout the 1990s, became impossible to sustain. Financial investors withdrew, and there was a run on banks (*el corralito*), which reacted by freezing deposits, preventing individuals from accessing their savings. A measure of the depth of the Crisis is given by a comparison of GDP levels, which show a drop of almost 20 percent between 1998 and 2002, the sharpest fall experienced by any capitalist country of some significance at least since World War II and "the gravest economic event ever in a country known for the recurrence of crises."² The rapid devaluation of the peso and the subsequent "pesification" of savings accounts was accompanied by wide-scale protests and food riots. Argentina had no fewer than five presidents within a period of less than two weeks at the end of December 2001. As a number of commentators have noted, the slogan chanted over and over again during this period—"que se vayan

todos” (all the politicians should go)—testifies to the crisis of an entire political system. Marcus Klein echoes the sentiment of many within the country and abroad during the worst weeks of social unrest when he states that “given the depth of the crisis, and the public disparagement of, and hostility towards, the political elite and the political institutions that it caused, it was (and still is) remarkable that Argentine democracy survived at all.”³

Devaluation also had a significant impact on the financial costs of filmmaking: because film stock and equipment are largely imported, and therefore payable in dollars, many of the costs associated with production virtually tripled overnight. Funds allocated to the Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales (INCAA), which had been relatively high between 1995 and 1998, were to suffer cuts of up to 50 percent as the crisis deepened.⁴ A number of directors relied on funds given in the form of prizes through international film festivals (the Hubert Bals Fund in particular), while a few were able to secure contracts with private investors or to enter into transnational coproduction agreements. The major success of films made during the Crisis lay, however, in their ability to make aesthetic virtue out of economic necessity. Many of the most celebrated films of this period were made on extremely low budgets, using cheaper film stock and nonstandard equipment: 16-mm, black-and-white, Beta, or (increasingly) digital video cameras. Their styles flaunted the roughness and the informality of their production, made as they were “on the hoof,” wherever locations could be found, whenever funds permitted, and with whomever could be persuaded to act or to provide technical assistance for little or no pay. As Quintín suggests, in these films “la pobreza no es un fuera de campo horroroso ni la postal turística de la villa miseria sino la materia misma de las películas” (poverty is not an offscreen horror nor a touristy postcard of the shantytown but the very material from which these films are made).⁵ In this respect they demonstrate a clear affinity with cinematic productions of the 1960s in Latin America, which, as Ismail Xavier states, turned poverty “into a signifier” in their representation of underdevelopment and inequality.⁶

This book does not set out to “explain” the boom in filmmaking that, having begun in the mid-1990s, only gathers pace during the Crisis and its aftermath: this task has already been undertaken by others. Critics coincide in referring to the “Ley de Cine” (Cinema Law), which came into force in 1995, as a crucial factor in the growth of Argentine cinema. The new law granted a degree of protection to the national film industry in terms of exhibition and provided significant funds for filmmaking, administered through the INCAA.⁷ Diego Batlle also cites as one of the principal motors of

growth the explosion of new film schools, from which a number of New Argentine Cinema's most successful directors have emerged.⁸ Sergio Wolf points to the importance of the revival of international film festivals held in the country.⁹ The Mar del Plata Festival was held in 1996 for the first time in twenty-six years; both this event and the Buenos Aires Festival de Cine Independiente (BAFICI), inaugurated in 1999, have provided a significant space for the exhibition of less commercially viable local films. In addition to these factors, Gonzalo Aguilar draws attention to the rise in film criticism in Argentina during the 1990s, both in film journalism and in academic studies, and particularly the major contribution made by film journals such as *El amante cine* and *Haciendo cine*.¹⁰

I see no reason not to concur with the majority of critics in their view that Argentina's boom in filmmaking also marks a radical shift from previous filmmaking aesthetics. The role played by film criticism itself in the creation of the phenomenon of "New Argentine Cinema" should not, however, be overlooked. The influential *El amante* enthusiastically proclaimed the advent of a new generation and a wholesale rupture with the old. The predisposition of critics toward the new has resulted in a number of self-fulfilled prophecies: for example, a number of critics went beyond supporting the new directors in written reviews, actively intervening to secure the inclusion of their films in festivals.¹¹ That the films selected for this study date from the mid-1990s does, however, recognize clear shifts in aesthetics at this time; more importantly for my purposes, from this point onward films began to testify in earnest to the impact of growing unemployment, rising crime, and the expansion of the informal economy. The Crisis of 2001 was the culmination of a longer period of economic troubles and civil unrest, and for this reason I do not create artificial distinctions between pre-Crisis and post-Crisis films, most often reading them together as part of a corpus of texts charting the economic decline of the nation, and its social consequences, over several years.

My central purpose is to explore how cinema has registered, and indeed helped to construct, certain modes of subjectivity relating to Argentina's experience of capitalism, neoliberalism, and economic crisis. Thematic introductions precede the analyses of films presented in this book; to repeat this material here would be redundant, but some words about the range of texts selected, and approaches taken, may be of use. Significant space is dedicated to the films that have become widely associated with the label of New Argentine Cinema. Chapters 2 and 3, in particular, discuss a number of the major productions associated with this corpus of films (too hetero-

geneous to be called a movement), interrogating the ways in which the themes of the Crisis—unemployment, poverty, debt, and marginalization—are given expression in the forms and styles of these films. Other chapters include discussion of films that do not “fit” the criteria attached by critical consensus to New Argentine Cinema, in an effort to complicate schemas already established: genre films, for example, made against a trend toward “independent” styles, or highly experimental films that do not conform to the minimalism and naturalism most often associated with New Argentine Cinema. Alongside films that have received wide international distribution and recognition, I have consciously sought to include films that have not traveled much outside Argentina but that I consider to have made an important contribution to cultural debates within the country or that are otherwise worthy of more attention than they have received. What unites all of the films examined, including those focused on postdictatorship memory in chapter 6, is their attention to shifts in subjectivity and representation provoked by specific political or economic structures and events. For reasons of space and focus, I have chosen to limit the scope of this book to fiction film, leaving aside the important contribution of documentary film in recent years. I have, however, included a number of films that operate on the border between fiction and documentary, and I return in my conclusion to suggest some important differences between the roles of fiction and documentary film (and video) in representing the Crisis.

Moving beyond the analysis of Argentine film’s explicit engagement with economic and political crisis, I explore how—and what—these films can be understood to signify through experimentation with form and genre and with respect to their status as cultural artifacts and commodities with a global industry. What meanings, and conflicts between meanings, are generated by mounting a critique of neoliberalism within a medium produced and distributed in the context of a world market dominated by neoliberal policies and practices? Cinema does not occupy a space external to the events that it registers but is very much part of the economic system, the social relations, and the cultural milieu it might be supposed to depict. This raises important issues for criticism. Fredric Jameson proposes that “far more dramatically than in the sociology of literature, the study of film seems to pose a stark incompatibility between intrinsic and extrinsic analyses, between superstructural and infrastructural codes, between formal readings and just such accounts of the economic and technological determinants of these cultural artifacts.” In the theories of film practitioners in the

Third World (particularly those associated with Third Cinema), “technology, or its underdevelopment, is then explicitly drawn back inside the aesthetic message in order to function henceforth as an intrinsic meaning, rather than an extrinsic accident or causal determinant.”¹² The analyses presented in this study center on the continuities and the contradictions that emerge in the relationship between “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” meanings in recent Argentine films. Gilles Deleuze considers that “money is the obverse of all the images that the cinema shows and sets in place, so that films about money are already, if implicitly, films within the film or about the film.”¹³ Films of the Argentine Crisis, often focusing explicitly on the experience of neoliberalism at the periphery of the world economy, provide an ideal corpus for the investigation of the particular kind of reflexivity suggested by Deleuze.

Indeed, money emerges as the universal theme of contemporary Argentine cinema, in which it is commonly owed (*Un oso rojo*), forged (*Una de dos*), swindled (*Nueve reinas*), stolen (*Mala época, Sólo por hoy*), lost (*Rosarigasinós*), extorted through kidnapping (*No quiero volver a casa*), or squandered in desperate and ill-advised enterprises (*Los guantes mágicos*). The analyses I offer here attempt to mediate between these films’ discursive engagement with the themes of the Crisis and another—sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory—set of meanings associated with their status as commodities within the same market that is subject to explicit investigation within the texts.

In line with the reflexive or symptomatic readings I develop in this book, a study of the social issues raised in the films is embedded within an exploration of the metacritical questions they pose for the analysis of film and of cultural texts more generally. Thus the analysis of genre films in chapter 4 leads to questions relating to the politics of genre appropriation from the periphery and to the argument—drawing on Jameson—that these films can be read as allegories of commodification. Similarly, the discussion of post-dictatorship films in chapter 6 engages with theories of subjectivity and spectatorship in order to explore these texts’ contribution to memory, a theme that has lost none of its urgency in contemporary Argentine cultural debates. Questions of national and postnational identity addressed in these films are framed within a broader set of metacritical issues concerning the relative importance of national or transnational approaches to film analysis, and the discussion of the collapse of distinctions between public and private spheres in chapter 7 suggests ways in which traditional modes of analysis

with respect to political cinema need to be modified to take account of significant shifts in the political sphere, reflected and encoded in the structures of meaning developed in contemporary film.

A critical focus on the nation may seem retrograde in a globalized era in which the frontiers of the state are increasingly eroded and trends in criticism and theory are firmly set toward exploring the transnational and the global and toward deconstructing the center/periphery model along with other “old” binarisms. Many Argentine sociologists concur, however, in pointing to the resurgence of nationalist discourses within popular protests as a result of the Crisis. Crucially, the nation is not associated here with the state but is most often invoked in *criticism* of a state in cahoots with global neoliberalism, which has sold off the country’s assets and burdened it with intolerable levels of debt. Alejandro Grimson notes the widespread use of the national flag during antigovernment demonstrations, a phenomenon that, as both he and Maristella Svampa observe, is all the more remarkable given the strong association of nationalist symbols and discourses with the military regime only two decades previously.¹⁴ In the context of the Crisis, a rearticulation of the national became a contestatory exercise, both denouncing the failure of the state and resisting the rhetoric of globalization. Indeed, the Crisis effectively brought about the disarticulation of the “opportunities-for-all” discourses of neoliberalism and globalization, exposing the vulnerability of Argentina as a capitalist country on the periphery of a global economy, where, unlike in Europe, institutions lacked the stability needed to regulate the wholesale restructuring of society under neoliberalism.¹⁵ The Crisis delivered a hefty blow to Argentina’s First World aspirations, reinforcing at the same time the specificity of national experience. As Michiel Baud reminds us, “the Argentine crisis did not have very strong repercussions in the rest of the continent, showing simultaneously its exclusive domestic character as well as the decreased and very restricted importance of the Argentine economy on a world or even regional scale.”¹⁶

Svampa argues that a significant effect of the Crisis was its “efecto desnaturalizador” (denaturalizing effect), confronting the country with the consequences of the neoliberal policies aggressively pursued during the 1990s and provoking a revelation that “la brecha social que se había abierto durante los 90 era profundamente ilegítima” (the social rift that had opened up during the 1990s was profoundly illegitimate).¹⁷ The radical critique of neoliberalism that has ensued involves a reassertion of the nation as a strategy of resistance, although exactly how the nation is to be imagined—given the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, brutally exacerbated

under neoliberalism—is a dilemma registered in different ways by many of the films discussed in this book.¹⁸ Partly in response to these films' concern with the national, I construct an argument in chapter 1 for the continued importance of national frameworks in the analysis of Argentine film, drawing both on the specificities of context and on theoretical work on the relationship between culture and the public sphere. The second half of the chapter presents two paradigmatic films produced in this period by “veteran” directors, Fernando Solanas and Eliseo Subiela. One consequence of *El amante*'s scathing rejection of the old in favor of the new, with New Argentine filmmakers often presented as an “orphaned” generation, cut loose from past influences, has been a persistent blind spot concerning several important continuities that link contemporary film to previous periods of filmmaking in Argentina. My analysis demonstrates some of the contrasts between filmmaking of the 1980s and early 1990s and the more recent period that is the focus of this book, while suggesting ways in which these rejections and repositionings nevertheless reveal a deep engagement with questions of national culture that represents a significant continuity between the two periods. If, however, the nation is the key theme that unites these films, in contemporary cinema it is—as I argue in chapter 5—not the nation constructed with an appeal to any essentialist categories but most often one that is “extroverted” in the sense explored by Doreen Massey, finding its identity in the particularity of the links it maintains to the outside world.¹⁹

My conclusion comments specifically on the role of Argentine cinema within the national imaginary, in an era in which culture and politics are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish. As Jameson contends, in our postmodern era “everything is mediated by culture, to the point where even the political and the ideological ‘levels’ have initially to be disentangled from their primary mode of representation which is cultural.”²⁰ This is no less the case in post-Menemist Argentina. These films' engagement with their political and economic context is therefore to be found—paradoxically perhaps—in their self-reflexivity: a turning-in on themselves, or on the practices of culture and its industries, that represents an acknowledgment of the already-mediatised realm of politics, as well as a sobering critique of the rapid disappearance of the public sphere. A paradox emerges: whereas much Argentine film has focused on representing the poverty and the suffering associated with Argentina's “Third World” status, such films, and their success on international screens, become fully associated with Argentina's First World aspirations. Although I take issue in some respects with

Jameson's arguments concerning Third World texts as "national allegories," it is clear that, however much these films eschew a national perspective and chart the disintegration of the state, they are always overdetermined as national cultural products made at the periphery of a global culture industry. The contradictions arising from such overdeterminations have been of paramount interest to me in my research into this period of filmmaking. The range of theoretical frameworks appropriated in my analyses of these films—from cultural geography, anthropology, sociology, political philosophy, cultural studies, film studies, and critical theory—reflects an understanding of the cultural, the social, the economic, and the political as fundamentally interdependent spheres whose complex relationships are continually being redefined, both in practice and in our critical approaches to them.



NATION, STATE, AND FILMMAKING IN CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINA

THE POLITICS OF NATIONAL FILM STUDIES: THE ARGENTINE CASE

Following the recent leap to prominence within world distribution networks of a few international coproductions from Latin America—and in view of current theories of globalization, which emphasize the flow of ideas, information, and goods across rapidly disappearing national boundaries—it is becoming de rigueur to argue that the nation presents an obsolete framework for the analysis of Latin American film. Although prioritizing the transnational and the global dimensions of filmmaking has undeniable value in combating essentialist notions of the nation, and in challenging the inflexible application of national boundaries in what has always been a global industry, in this chapter I draw attention to some of the limitations of transnational approaches to film criticism. In the case of Argentina it becomes clear that a critical focus on international coproductions often masks the real conditions of film production at a time when this form of funding is not available to (or sought by) the majority of filmmakers and when the state is becoming increasingly involved in the financing and promotion of national cinema. It may also obscure some of the inequalities that still govern transnational exchange in the film industry, in spite of the moderate success of certain international funding schemes such as Ibermedia. I also argue that transnational approaches to film criticism frequently fail to account for the public role of culture within a national context. My objective throughout is to emphasize the inescapably political nature of transnational or global-

ized approaches within film studies, which can often appear disingenuously to respond merely to an existing set of economic conditions or to the impact of inevitable trends toward greater globalization. That this veiling of ideology beneath a discourse of economic inevitability is also a characteristic of neoliberal discourses should alert us to the very real stakes at play in criticism, especially given the particular importance of the critical (including academic) reception of Latin American films for distribution possibilities abroad.

An emphasis on the extraordinary entry of a handful of recent Latin American films into worldwide distribution networks, and on the cross-border trajectories of their directors and stars, effectively masks the asymmetries of exchange that still limit production and distribution for all but a very few of the continent's films. Among the most celebratory of recent accounts is Stephen Hart's *A Companion to Latin American Film*, in which Hart argues that the international commercial success of *Central Station* (Brazil, 1998), *Amores perros* (Mexico, 2000), *Y tu mamá también* (Mexico, 2001), and *City of God* (Brazil, 2002)—presented as the pinnacle of the continent's achievements in filmmaking—"demonstrated to the world that Latin American cinema had finally come into its own." This occurred, according to Hart, when Latin American cinema began to compete without favors in international distribution networks and in the Oscars; his evident approval of the shift toward private capital in funding, together with the fact that several of the films he presents as evidence of Latin America's "international acceptance," and demonstration of the fact that it has "come of age," are coproductions with Europe and the United States, confirms that the "coming-of-age" he describes really means "opening up to international capital."¹ John King is surely correct to suggest that the extraordinary success of a handful of Latin American directors in recent years tends "to disguise rather than illustrate the very real obstacles that most filmmakers have always encountered in the region."² The overwhelming critical attention accorded in recent years to these four films, while they are certainly worthy of extensive analysis, has the unfortunate effect of casting into shadow many other films of merit and drawing a veil over the inequalities of production and distribution that have prevented their greater visibility. Hart cites the Mexican director of *Amores perros*, Alejandro González Iñárritu, who "loathe[s] the government-financed movie-making that seems to operate by the maxim: 'If nobody understands or nobody goes to see a movie, that it must mean it's a masterpiece.'" ³ Underpinning Hart's apoliticized survey is not this particular myth but another: that of the market as a level playing

field, as the sole impartial judge of quality, which raises up those films deserving of private finance and international audiences and condemns to obscurity those made only for academic film critics. “Parece innecesario decirlo,” writes Beatriz Sarlo: “*el mercado cultural no pone en escena una comunidad de libres consumidores y productores*” (It seems unnecessary to say this: the cultural market does not create a community of free consumers and producers).⁴ Perhaps the task of insisting on the inequalities of transnational exchange is not, after all, so unnecessary.

I have already outlined in my introduction some of the production difficulties encountered by contemporary Argentine filmmakers. Equally significant, however, is the fact that the *exhibition* of Argentine films has proven to be a continual struggle in recent years, partly alleviated by changes in state policy. The past two decades have seen the closure of hundreds of independent movie theaters across Argentina. Octavio Getino charts the vertiginous decline of the number of cinema screens in the country from 1,500 in 1975 to just 420 in 1995.⁵ Cinemagoing in Buenos Aires and other cities has been dominated since the late 1990s by the presence of new and lavish megaplexes owned by North American and Australian companies, chiefly Hoyts General Cinemas and Warner Village. Their location within ultramodern shopping malls is symbolic of cinema’s transformation into a middle-class leisure activity, becoming increasingly associated with the First World aspirations of wealthy Argentines. The entrances to such malls, defended by armed security guards, mark the boundaries between these islands of prosperity and the urban decay and poverty that encircle them, dividing cracked pavements from gleaming marble floors and separating immigrant vendors of fake watches and cheap leatherware from the quiet glamour of designer clothes shops. Often cocooned at the heart of these centers, the new multiplexes are laid with luxuriously plush carpets and boast the latest in audiovisual quality and spectator comfort. Pretrailer advertisements feature exclusive restaurants and plastic surgery clinics, while usherettes with candy-striped uniforms and matching baseball caps sell chewing gum, Coca-Cola, and M&Ms before the film—almost always a Hollywood import—begins.

By contrast, until very recently, the only cinema committed to screening local productions was a run-down city-center theater with ageing technology, where quiet or intimate scenes are still accompanied by the rumble of underground trains below or the clatter of rain on the roof. Aggressive U.S. distribution practices have often all but eclipsed the exhibition of other films in Argentina. Big-budget publicity campaigns prepare the way for each Hollywood blockbuster, and distribution companies flood the country with

hundreds of copies of one film at the same time, undercutting the rental prices of the one or two copies typically available of Argentine films. Foreign films are subject to very low import duties, which results, in the words of Jorge Coscia, in “una suerte de dumping frente a nuestra industria cinematográfica” (a kind of dumping vis-à-vis our film industry), which has to compete with films that have already recovered their costs, while Argentine films must often attempt to do so solely within the national market.⁶ There is little evidence to suggest, either to Argentine filmmakers or to cinema-goers, that the globalization of the film industry means anything other than its Americanization; nor is there indication of the much-vaunted potential for globalization to erode divisions between center and periphery, producing relationships of mutual dependency rather than domination.

The international coproduction might seem to offer an instance of precisely such transnational dialogue and reciprocity, but coproductions enjoy a position of dominance in the literature that they do not actually occupy in national production across the continent. Ann Marie Stock asserts the “prevalence of coproduction” in Latin American filmmaking, which “has become increasingly transnational”;⁷ Kathleen Newman likewise observes that “many of the recent feature films considered to be Latin American . . . are co-productions with European companies or institutions.”⁸ Again, for Marvin D’Lugo, coproductions with European producers and state agencies “have increasingly dominated much Latin American film production.”⁹ King, in his survey of changing trends in Argentine cinema during the 1990s, claims that coproduction became “the dominant viable route for film-makers” in this period.¹⁰ Michael Chanan refers to “the foreign coproducer, without whom, in Argentina, few films are nowadays made.”¹¹ At least in the case of Argentina, however, current figures simply do not bear out these claims. Although an increase in coproductions is notable during the 1980s, figures in more recent years do not show significant or sustained rises. International coproductions account for only 23 percent of the Argentine films on general release in the country between 1995 and 2006; expressed as a proportion of films *produced* in Argentina, many of which are never screened commercially, this figure would be smaller still.¹²

What is clearly the case, of course, is that those Argentine films that have been widely distributed internationally have been produced with external funding, often Spanish: *El hijo de la novia* (Juan José Campanella, 2001) was coproduced with Spain, and *Nueve reinas* (Fabián Bielinsky, 2000) was financed on the basis of a script-writing competition launched by Patagonik, a multinational production company with significant Spanish interests. To