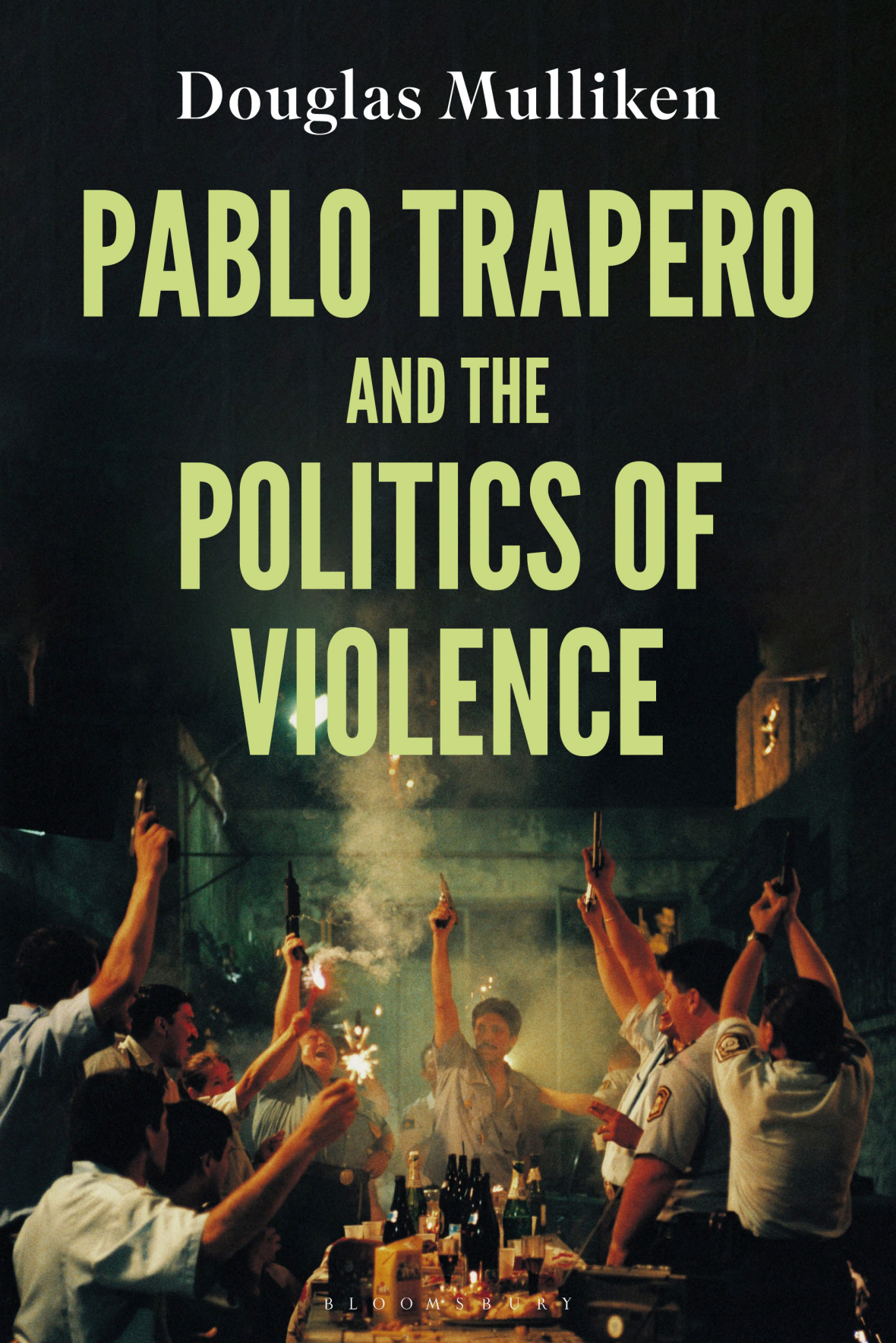
Douglas Mulliken

PABLO TRAPERO AND THE POLITICS OF VIOLENCE



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For my parents. And for Inge.

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A note on translation: where a source was not available in English, I have chosen to include the original passage as well as my translation, in order to allow Spanish- and Portuguese-speakers to compare their understanding of the information with my own. The only exception to this is the interview I conducted with Trapero, which can be found in Interview with Pablo Trapero. Though the interview was conducted in Spanish, I have included only my own English translation of it.

Introduction

In May 2014, the Argentine Episcopal Conference—the collection of Catholic bishops in the country—published a document in which it claimed that Argentina was "*enferma de violencia*"—ill from violence—and that corruption had become a "*cáncer social*"—a societal cancer. A few days after the document was made public, an article ran in the Buenos Aires–based newspaper *La Nación* in which José Ottavis, vice-president of the Buenos Aires Provincial *Cámara de Diputados*, rejected the claim, stating "la Argentina no está enferma de violencia. Sí vivimos una Argentina enferma de violencia en 1955, 1976, 1989 y 2001" ("Argentina is not ill from violence. We did, however, live through an Argentina ill from violence in 1955, 1976, 1989, and 2001.") (De Vedia, 2014). The bishops' document does not cite any statistical facts regarding crime or violence, yet it is telling that Ottavis would immediately turn to four of the most significant years in Argentina's history for his rebuttal. The four years Ottavis mentions in his response were each marked by significant and long-lasting acts of violence—1955 saw the *Revolución Libertadora*, a military-led campaign against the presidency of Juan Perón which included the bombing of the Plaza de Mayo by the Navy and Air Force and ended with Perón forced into exile; 1976 is, famously, the year that the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* began; and 1989 saw the collapse of the Alfonsín presidency, a decline precipitated by rampant inflation and food riots throughout the country that were so violent the government was forced to declare a state of emergency.

It is the final year Ottavis refers to, however, that has the most bearing for this study, and indeed for the current state of Argentina. The year 2001 was when the Argentine economy took the final step from threatening to collapse, as it had on numerous occasions (including 1976 and 1989), to actually doing so. Due in no small part to the visceral, immediate images, transmitted worldwide, of large swathes of the Argentine population engaging in *cacerolazos*—mass protests in which the public made their anger known by banging on their

kitchen pots—the events surrounding the *corralito* of 2001–02 are, rightly, considered to be the central moment of the economic crisis Argentina suffered in the years following Carlos Menem's presidency. However, the *corralito*—a shorthand term for the measures, including bank account freezes, put in place by the government to prevent a widespread banking collapse—was in actual fact little more than a panic measure, a reaction to events which had been building for years. What ended up becoming Argentina's Great Depression, the most significant economic crisis in the history of the country, began in 1999 as a recession.

Coincidentally, that year was a significant one in the recent history of Argentine film. Juan José Campanella's *El mismo amor, la misma lluvia/Same Love, Same Rain* (1999), the first of his (so far) four collaborations with actor Ricardo Darín, was released to widespread critical and commercial success; Martín Rejtman, considered one of the precursors of the New Argentine Cinema which would emerge in the late 1990s (Andermann, 2012, p. 17), released *Silvia Prieto* (1998), the follow-up to his groundbreaking debut *Rapado* (1992); and Marco Bechis received international acclaim for his frank depiction of torture during the Dirty War with his film *Garage Olimpo/Olympic Garage* (1999). Perhaps no film from that year, however, more accurately captures the realities of quotidian life in Argentina in the post-Menem era than *Mundo grúa*, the debut feature-length film of Pablo Trapero.

Born into a middle-class family in 1971 and raised in the *partido* (county or district) of La Matanza, situated on the border between the city and province which share the name Buenos Aires, Trapero was a member of the first-ever graduating class at the *Fundación Universidad del Cine*, a private film school founded in 1991 by Manuel Antín, the influential filmmaker and former director of the *Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales* (INCAA). *Mundo grúa*, made when Trapero was only in his mid-twenties, is a portrait of average people living average lives and has become emblematic of the *Nuevo Cine Argentino* movement, which emerged toward the end of the 1990s. Where Campanella's and Bechis's works carried on the practice of using cinema to examine and confront the effects of the *Proceso* dictatorship on Argentine society (something which had begun even before the dictatorship finally collapsed in the wake of defeat in the Falklands/Malvinas conflict), Trapero (similar to Rejtman) was more concerned with Argentina's present. *Mundo grúa* in particular, filmed on grainy black-and-white 16-mm film and

with a modest budget, speaks directly to the challenges facing working-class Argentines during and immediately after the Menem years, challenges that would soon spread to all classes of Argentine society. Upon its release, *Mundo grúa* was an enormous critical success—Trapero won the best director award at the first Buenos Aires International Independent Film Festival (BAFICI), a triumph described by Diego Batlle as "la reivindicación de una nueva forma de pensar y hacer cine. La consagración de la austeridad, de la credibilidad, de lo auténtico y de lo artesanal" ("the vindication of a new way of thinking about and making cinema. The recognition of austerity, of credibility, of the authentic and the artisanal") (2008, p. 150)—and the film heralded the start of a significant career, one that continues well into the second decade of the twenty-first century. Trapero has been remarkably consistent in his output ever since, averaging a new film nearly every two years. (2018's *La quietud* is his ninth film in nineteen years.) While his films have evolved considerably since the late 1990s, the events leading up to and following on from the 2001 collapse have had an enormous impact on his work and the lasting effects of that period continue to be expressed in his films. The thread that runs throughout Trapero's career, which connects films as disparate as the gritty *Mundo grúa* and the beautiful *La quietud*, is the central role violence plays in propelling his films' narratives. By following this thread throughout Trapero's body of work, it becomes clear that his oeuvre as a whole can be understood as a profoundly political statement on the state of Argentina in the opening decades of the twenty-first century.

New Argentine Cinema and Defining the Political

The evolution of Pablo Trapero's career is significant because, in many ways, he is representative of Argentine cinema generally. Hugo Hortiguera and Carolina Rocha find that, during the period when Argentina explicitly embraced neoliberalism, "the tension between local and global, past and present, reshaped the aesthetics of artistic expression and the role of mass media and other forms of cultural production" (2007, p. 3). Trapero's corpus demonstrates that many of those same tensions remained even after the nation turned away from Menem-era economic policies. The director's first film, *Mundo grúa*, was heavily dependent on two main funding sources, one

domestic, one foreign—the INCAA and the Hubert Bals Fund. His second work, *El bonaerense*, was filmed at the height of the economic crisis and was so beset by financial problems that several members of the crew were forced to quit, and the director had to rely on personal loans from family members in order to finish the film. At the other end of the funding spectrum, *Elefante blanco*, released in 2012, was supported by a diverse range of sources both domestic and foreign—Patagonik; France's Canal+; Germany's ARTE; and Spain's TVE, to name just a few.

As has been noted in several studies, one of the primary subject matters of many Argentine films both before and after the crisis has been the impact neoliberalism has had on society (Page, 2009; Andermann, 2012). Trapero's oeuvre is no different, and this study will show that the violence of neoliberalism is, perhaps, the filmmaker's most central topic. Consequently, Trapero's films are inherently political in nature. Trapero is far from the first Argentine artist to focus on violence—indeed, much of the nation's cultural output has focused on the subject, from the nineteenth-century prose and poetry of Esteban Echevarría's *El matadero* or José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* to the films of Mario Soffici in the 1930s and 1940s. The Third Cinema movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, spearheaded by Fernando "Pino" Solanas and Octavio Getino, made explicit the connection between politics and violence, and the trend has continued through to the present day, particularly in the wake of the *Proceso* dictatorship. One of the outcomes of the Argentine cultural sphere's focus on violence has been the prevalence, and importance, of the political within the country's film industry. Throughout the history of the country's cinema, stretching back to the silent film era, cinema has been used as a means of social commentary and critique; Argentine political films have, at times, foreshadowed events to come—as *Juan sin ropa* (1919) did in foretelling the events of the *Semana Trágica*—while they are more often used to reflect on the repercussions of an action or event—as any number of films produced in the 1980s did with regard to the *Proceso* dictatorship. As a result of this, political cinema in the Argentine context could, prior to the 1990s, be relatively easily defined. The archetypal political film—ranging from documentaries such as *Tire dié* (1960) or *La hora de los hornos/The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) to feature films like *Tiempo de revancha/Time for Revenge* (1981), *La historia oficial/The Official Story* (1985), or *Sur/South* (1988)—featured a narrative whose politics were made explicit from the outset, a protagonist (in the case

of feature films) who experienced some form of psychological metamorphosis or enlightenment, and offered, if not a solution, at least a semblance of denouement. Even period pieces, such as María Luisa Bemberg's *Camila* (1984) and *Miss Mary* (1986), functioned as allegories examining state oppression and social upheaval.

Although the emphasis on these types of political films continued into the 1990s, a generation emerged during that decade who offered a different perspective in their cinema. This group, which included filmmakers such as Trapero, Martín Rejtman, Lucrecia Martel, and Israel Adrián Caetano (a director whose work is frequently compared with Trapero's), is often referred to as the New Argentine Cinema. As with any cinematic trend, the understanding of what New Argentine Cinema consists of is broad, but there are certain uniformities—technically, the films were often very low budget, utilizing grainy black-and-white or 16-mm filmstock, while thematically, film narratives were characterized by a rejection of the political and allegorical retrospection that defined Argentine cinema of the 1980s (Andermann, 2012; Page, 2009). Generally considered, as a group, to have taken a less explicit approach to political commentary, Trapero goes against the general trend in this regard. Although the director's work is fundamental to any understanding of New Argentine Cinema, far from rejecting the political imperative, his films engage with. Understanding Trapero as a political filmmaker differentiates him from his colleagues in the New Argentine Cinema movement because it implies that there is a level of allegory working within his films that is generally considered to be absent from the typical New Argentine narrative. Despite Joanna Page's contention that "New Argentine Cinema often resists symbolic or allegorical interpretations" (2009, pp. 26–7), even Trapero's earliest films serve as explicit political statements, drawing direct correlations between violence, in both its subjective and objective forms, the failed economic policies of consecutive Argentine governments, and the overarching influence of neoliberalism.

Trapero's cinema, then, can be understood as political in the sense that corresponds to Mike Wayne's conception of the term. For Wayne, any film that "[addresses] unequal access to and distribution of material and cultural resources, and the hierarchies of legitimacy and status accorded to those differentials" can be considered a political film (2001, p. 1). The terms "political cinema," "radical cinema," and "revolutionary cinema" are rarely so

straightforward, however, and can often mean significantly different things depending on the context of their use. In some circumstances, radical or revolutionary cinema can refer to a purely formalistic radicalism. In other circumstances, it can refer to a film that contains radical or revolutionary political content while ignoring the concept of form entirely (or, at least, significantly marginalizing it).

These two ideas are not mutually exclusive; some of the most important films from the first half of the twentieth century were important precisely because of their radicalism in both form and substance. The type of political cinema that Trapero engages with, however, is more along the lines of what Tatiana Heise and Andrew Tudor describe as "reformist cinema":

> Where a film is politically radical in its subject matter but uses the traditional cinematic apparatus of representation, we have "reformist cinema." This category encompasses most of what are traditionally counted as "political films," whether in fictional formats as in conventional "political thrillers" . . . documentary style reconstructions . . . or orthodox documentaries themselves. (2013, p. 86)

Although there was some experimentation with formal radicalism in the 1970s (Wolkowicz, 2014), much of what might be called "political cinema" in the Argentine context is focused less on making political statements through form and more on making those statements through content, with a particular emphasis on depicting issues and situations affecting society in as realistic a manner as possible. As such, it is important to clarify that, without denying the numerous other forms of political cinema which exist (indeed, Heise and Tudor examine seven different definitions of the term), within this study the use of the term "political cinema" will refer generally to this "reformist cinema" category.

Long Neoliberalism

Like many of his contemporaries, Trapero has focused most of his narratives around individuals—his films usually examine one protagonist's experiences and the notable exception to this pattern, the ensemble piece *Familia rodante*, nevertheless presents the entire family as one unit in which all the members

are undergoing similar experiences at different stages of life. Political films of the 1970s and 1980s tended to provide some sort of denouement that established to the viewer that things were getting better. Trapero's films, as a rule, do not have satisfying conclusions, let alone the possibility of happy endings, and they rarely suggest that the circumstances which caused or contributed to the trauma presented in the film are going to change at any point in the future. In this way Trapero's corpus closely resembles that of his contemporaries. Yet, Trapero's films engage with the periphery in a way that does seem to carry some sort of allegorical meaning. Sometimes, these marginalized communities are presented as secondary narratives which influence the main narrative—as in the case of *Nacido y criado* or *Elefante blanco* (which examines indigenous and immigrant communities, respectively)—while other times they form the basis of the film's plot, as we see in *Leonera*, which tracks the gradual marginalization of a middle-class Argentine of European descent.

To be sure, Trapero's work is not actively political in the manner of, for example, the *cine piquetero* documentary films. Those works are heavily invested in the social movements they are documenting, whereas Trapero's films, in contrast, remain detached—indeed during *El bonaerense* Zapa comes across a *piquetero* march and simply ignores it—and his characters are far more concerned with their own person than with affecting any sort of broad-based social change. It is through the narratives themselves, however, that Trapero's films engage with the political. Jens Andermann finds that Trapero's films "uncover a deeply ingrained, corporate structure of affect guided by unofficial networks of favor and loyalty" (2012, p. 150). This is a pattern which holds throughout Trapero's career—he rarely makes bold political statements, instead letting the obvious critical implications gradually rise to the surface over the course of a film. Trapero is conscious of this, explaining,

> I view the political as one of cinema's aims, that is, for me it's intrinsic to cinema. But I don't believe in militant cinema. I think that militant cinema only speaks to a group of people who already know what they are going to hear, or only hear what they want to hear from what they are watching without any critical value, [and] probably with less aesthetic value because the ideas are more important than the aesthetic value. . . . I like political cinema, but the political that I can do is by way of an aesthetics of the political, a politics of the poetics of a film, if you will. (Interview with Pablo Trapero)

As such, Trapero's films might be considered a new form of political cinema, one which lacks the urgency of documentary film or the explicitness of Argentine fiction films of the past, but which nevertheless examines, often with a damningly critical eye, the problems affecting Argentine society in the post-Menem era.

The political nature of Trapero's films becomes especially clear when considered against the backdrop of what has been happening in Argentina since the mid-1990s. The Argentine middle class, once both a source of pride and a marker of difference from the rest of Latin America, has suffered greatly since the mid-1980s. The gradual descent of the Argentine middle class into poverty, which took place over the course of two decades, has fundamentally "altered the social structure of the country, as well as the image of it held by Argentines" (Grimson and Kessler, 2012, p. 87). This is due to a number of reasons, many of which are not relevant to this study, but the essential cause can be explained by the fact that "the interests of the middle and lower classes ceased to be the axis around which domestic policies were planned and carried out" (Rocha and Montes Garces, 2010, p. xiv). Reflecting the sense of alienation so often experienced by the protagonists of Trapero's films, the decline of the country's middle class has been "experienced simultaneously as personal dislocation and also as the disorganization of the world around" (Grimson and Kessler, 2012, p. 88). The experience of lower- and middle-class Argentines living through the neoliberal policies of the late 1990s and early 2000s was a violent one, characterized by alienation, social isolation, and exclusion, and, perhaps most significantly, a general loss of identity. This loss of identity affected not only individuals within society—Beatriz Sarlo has commented on the difficulty facing contemporary Argentines to construct any sense of self through work (2003, p. 128)—but also the foundational myth upon which the nation's identity was created. As is the case with many countries with large immigrant populations, Argentina's inhabitants had always seen the country as a place of opportunity. That belief began to crack during the 1990s and was shattered completely by 2002—

> the overriding tendency [in Argentina] was always upward and onward to such a degree that "progress" and "future" were synonymous. . . . In a society characterized by economic, political, and social instability, the mythical tale of collective progress functioned as a kind of collective glue: a series of generally agreed upon, stable principles that, until now, seemed to hold

> things together no matter what. It goes without saying that without the inevitability of progress, this ideological nucleus falls apart. (Grimson and Kessler, 2012, p. 90)

While there were relatively isolated incidents of direct violence between citizens and the government around the time of the collapse in 2001, for the most part it is this violation of the sense of self, rather than any sort of physical violence, which most damaged the country and its inhabitants during the heyday of neoliberalism.

Although this study examines how Trapero's films contest an imposing, inherent neoliberal hegemony that permeates Argentine society, it is true that neoliberalism has only been the nation's driving political and economic model for some parts of the director's career. Trapero's early films engage directly with the then-ruling government's embrace of neoliberalist policies of the 1990s and early 2000s; however, virtually every other film in the director's corpus was made during a period dominated by the explicit rejection of neoliberalism that characterized the Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner presidencies. While the government during this period enacted various domestic economic policies aimed at repairing many of the social fissures that emerged as a result of the neoliberalism of the Menem/de la Rúa period, the fundamental nature of the international economic system as it exists in the twenty-first century is such that even as various Latin American nations embraced a new leftism—the so-called Pink Tide, of which Argentina was a key player—the region "remains marked by economic models interwoven in global capitalism . . . and social models continuously reproducing hierarchical lifeworlds and social orders" (Strønen and Ystanes, 2018, p. 5). In the specific context of Argentina, this influence was manifested in various ways—from regional issues such as a three-way conflict with Chile and Bolivia over the sale and distribution of natural gas or a highly contentious and long-running disagreement with Uruguay regarding the construction of paper mills to international economic disputes regarding sovereign debt with the so-called Vulture Funds. These external pressures often led to domestic resistance, perhaps most visibly in a pushback by the agricultural, industrial, and media sectors against Fernández de Kirchner government's protectionist policies. Anabella Busso explains that these confrontations "became a vehicle for [opposition] to the government by the urban middle classes. Thus . . . a middle-class sector

emerged with claims about security, inflation, and institutionality" (2016, p. 117). Trapero's films of this period reflect many of those same preoccupations; while they may have been made during a period when the government did not embrace neoliberalism, it is not accurate to say that his work does not engage with neoliberalism and its attendant (Deleuzo-Guattarian) desires. For it was these desires that drove opposition to Kirchnerism in the 2015 presidential elections won by neoliberal candidate Mauricio Macri. Similarly, the election of Alberto Fernández in 2019—marking yet another turn away from neoliberalism—serves to emphasize that Trapero's films confront not so much the specific policy decisions of a given government but, rather, what Cornel Ban has called "embedded neoliberalism," the combination of "transnational resources and domestic institutions [through which] neoliberalism ultimately becomes a contradictory, yet effectively pervasive and structural, force" (2016, p. 4).

A Hauntology of Violence

On first viewing, Trapero's work is, perhaps, not obviously political in the manner of a Solanas or a Bemberg. Writing about New Argentine Cinema generally, Gonzalo Aguilar suggests that this is not out of sync with recent films, many of which have rejected Lenin's famous question (via Chernyshevsky) of "what is to be done?" Describing contemporary Argentine cinema's approach to politics, Aguilar states "these movies show us . . . how a world operates. . . . Between indeterminacy and the recording of an operation, the new cinema establishes a different possibility of thinking the political" (2008b, pp. 123–4). Trapero's way of "thinking the political," however, shares as much with political filmmakers of the 1970s as it does with his contemporaries and, while not offering solutions necessarily, his films nevertheless share the same anger that defined so much of Argentina's political cinema historically. Indeed, it can be argued that Trapero's career represents an evolution of that concept to better fit with the contemporary sociopolitical climate. This is, perhaps, most visible in his 2012 film *Elefante blanco*. That film took place and was filmed in the slum of Ciudad Oculta, one of the numerous *villas miserias* on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. Although the building has since been demolished, in the film (as in real life) Ciudad Oculta is loomed over by the White Elephant,

the enormous, abandoned husk of a building that was, when its construction began in the 1930s, originally planned as the largest hospital in Latin America. Not only does the building serve as a twelve-story testament to the political instability and economic profligacy that have characterized Argentina for decades, but by providing a haven for drug-users, gang members, and the homeless it also functions as a much more palpable reminder of the challenges facing contemporary Argentine society.

The building calls to mind the concepts of haunting and hauntology introduced by Jacques Derrida and expanded upon by Mark Fisher (among others). Where Derrida relates hauntology to the sense of "time out of joint," Fisher engages further with the concept, explaining that "[h]auntology itself can be thought of as fundamentally about forces which act at a distance—that which . . . insists (has causal effects) without (physically) existing" (2012, p. 20). Fisher goes on to explain that we are haunted by the disappearance of the future, a disappearance which results in

> the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live. It [means] the acceptance of a situation in which culture would continue without really changing, and where politics [is] reduced to the administration of an already established (capitalist) system. (2012, p. 12)

In Fisher's conception, then, the present is haunted by "the failure of the future": our collective failure to live up to the imaginations and ideals of our past (2012, p. 12). In the most literal sense, the White Elephant that dominates the Ciudad Oculta *villa* serves as a physical manifestation of this concept (Figure 0.1).

It is also possible to view Trapero's films within the framework of hauntology, especially as it concerns the emergence of the multiform violence that has come to dominate Argentine society since (at the very least) the mid-1990s. Having made nine films over nearly two decades, Trapero's body of work documents some of the most unique moments in Argentina's history, moments that have resulted in a legacy of violence. While this violence can explode into life on occasion—the nationwide protests following the suspicious death of federal prosecutor Alberto Nisman in 2015 being one example, the occasionally violent protests in 2018 and 2020 surrounding the debate about the legalization of abortion being another—more often than not

Figure 0.1 *Carancho* (2010). The failure of the future is mediated through the White Elephant itself.

it merely simmers in the background, "insisting without existing." It is with this that Trapero's films engage: a hauntology of the failure of the future, the most immediate effect of which is the specter of violence that overshadows contemporary Argentina. By engaging with violence in this way, Trapero is making a form of political cinema that critiques the increasingly devastating effects that both national and international neoliberal economic and social policies have had on Argentine society. As such, his work stands at (or, indeed, has even created) an intersection of sorts, at the point where the observational nature of the New Argentine Cinema of the late 1990s and early 2000s converges with the committed political advocacy of Argentine cinema of the 1970s and 1980s.

Defining Violence

As mentioned previously, Trapero serves as writer, director, and producer for all of his feature films. However, it should be pointed out that Trapero is only credited as the sole writer of two films, *Mundo grúa* and *Familia rodante*, and from the very start of his career he has worked with a series of producers and co-producers. Nevertheless, Trapero serves such a central role in the creation of his works—in addition to writing, directing, and producing, he has also been involved in the editing of every film he has made since *Nacido y criado*—that, in many ways, this examination approaches Trapero's films