

## **Self-Referentiality and Neoliberalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema**

**Natália Pinazza, University of Exeter (Department of Modern Languages,  
University of Exeter, UK).**

### Abstract

This chapter examines ways in which filmmaking becomes a self-referential theme in Argentine films in the neoliberal era. Three films will be referred to: Adolfo Aristarain's *Martín (hache)* from 1997; Daniel Burak's *Bar El Chino* from 2003, and Alejo Flah's *Sexo fácil, películas tristes* from 2014. These films all depict the making of international film co-productions primarily between Argentina and Spain and are explicitly concerned with the figure of the Argentine filmmaker, who in the process of filmmaking experiences neoliberalism from the margins of the world economy and more often than not succumbs to its international demands. This body of films criticizes while simultaneously testifying to neoliberal filmmaking practices of the last two decades. The films thus raise meta-critical questions about both their cinematic context and the prevailing economic system in contemporary Argentina to which they belong.

Keywords: neoliberalism, Latin American cinema, Argentine cinema, genre, romantic comedy

Gilles Deleuze argues 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” (2005, 75). In line with Deleuze’s thinking, this chapter examines ways in which filmmaking becomes a self-referential theme in Argentine films in the neoliberal era. Three films will be referred to: Adolfo Aristarain’s *Martín (hache)* from 1997; Daniel Burak’s *Bar El Chino* from 2003, and Alejo Flah’s *Sexo fácil, películas tristes* from 2014. These films all depict the making of international film co-productions primarily between Argentina and Spain and are explicitly concerned with the figure of the Argentine filmmaker, who in the process of filmmaking experiences neoliberalism from the margins of the world economy and more often than not succumbs to its international demands. This body of films criticizes while simultaneously testifying to neoliberal filmmaking practices of the last two decades. The films thus raise meta-critical questions about both their cinematic context and the prevailing economic system in contemporary Argentina to which they belong.

In fact, it is precisely the self-awareness of this body of Argentine films that renders them a unique contribution to the global phenomenon of smart indie filmmaking. In contrast to the meta-movies of, say, 1960s art cinema, such as *8 ½* (Federico Fellini, 1963), *La Ricotta* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1962), *La Nuit* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1961) or *Le Mépris* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963), the films analyzed here do not stand out for their experimental techniques or narratives. Instead self-reflexivity here is part of a more conventional dramatic narrative and these films occupy the market position of being exportable both in terms of artistic quality and

commercial visibility. Well-known Hollywood meta-movies such as the classic *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze, written by Charlie Kaufman, 2002) and *Birdman* (Alejandro Iñárritu, 2014) focus primarily on the psychological issues informing the tensions between filmmaker/artist with the film industry. By contrast, these three Argentine meta-movies appear more preoccupied with the socio-economic issues behind these conflicts, more precisely the so-considered “Third World” landscape where the Argentine filmmaker strives to make a film. Therefore, the films analyzed in this chapter use self-referentiality to stage tensions between culture and the market, which inform their own making and global situatedness.

At the heart of these filmic narratives is dissatisfaction with neoliberal measures adopted by the Argentine government, which has engendered a number of protests since the establishment of democracy in Argentina. The military government in Argentina (1976–84) engendered a period marked by the murder, torture and disappearance of citizens, amongst which 37% were shop stewards or trade-union officials (Williamson 1992, 477). Like the military governments in neighboring countries such as Brazil and Chile, the armed forces in Argentina combined the repression of the left with neoliberal economic policies.

The débâcle of the Malvinas destroyed the credibility of the armed forces as the ultimate guardians of the nation’s interests. By this time the economy was in an appalling state: inflation exceeded 200 per cent, the peso had plummeted, and the ratio of export earnings to interest payments on the external debt had risen to over 54 per cent. (Williamson 1992, 479).

While the end of the dictatorship in 1983 brought the numerous human rights violations to an end, leading Argentines to profess the words “never again,” the country has never fully recovered from the legacies of this period. In fact, the consolidation of democracy was marked by political and economic instability. In this context, a “Ley de Cine” (“Cinema Law”) was sanctioned in 1994, which created new funding mechanisms promoted by the INCAA (Argentine National Film Board). This prompted stable growth in national film production: from 14 feature films premiering in 1994 (Page, 2009, 1) to 220 in 2017 (INCAA, 2018, 5) – these national film production numbers also including international film co-productions such as the ones analyzed in this chapter. However, the re-emergence of Argentine cinema was concomitant with a period of hyperinflation, a significant increase in public debt, and privatization. This resulted in a double-edged-sword association between the boom in Argentine national film production and the severe crisis. As Gonzalo Aguilar sums up this situation: “many directors of the new cinema managed to make two or more films, even amid devastating economic crisis” (2008, 7).

Drawing both on the specificities of context and on theoretical work on the relationship between economic determinants and culture, I will focus on self-referential elements such as the figure of the Argentine filmmaker; the figure of the Spanish producer, which is a recurring motif in international film co-productions between Argentina and Spain; the presence of cameras and equipment in the *mise-en-scène*; and the presence of meta-criticism. I will thereby show how self-referentiality constitutes a fresh approach to the well-worn themes in Argentine cinema of economic crisis and the impact of capitalism.

### **Commodifications of Genre in Meta-Movies**

In the boom in Argentine film production in the mid-1990s, Argentine filmmakers were posed with the challenge of making commercially viable films while endeavoring to achieve artistic merit. As a consequence, an increasing number of Argentine films started to appropriate Hollywood genre and global aesthetics while incorporating local elements (i.e. actors, language, location, and socioeconomic climate). Nonetheless, adopting the standards of international film industries, in particular Hollywood, can prove very difficult to the Argentine filmmaker who is in a much less resourceful context. It is within this understanding that *Sexo fácil, películas tristes* charts the very impossibility of the Argentine filmmaker fully adhering to a traditional Hollywood genre and uses self-referentiality to create humor while at the same time criticize the state of filmmaking in Argentina.

*Sexo fácil, películas tristes* is a romantic comedy set in Spain, France and Argentina. It centers on the life of Pablo, an Argentine screenwriter who is trying to write a film amid personal and economic difficulties. The narrative is split into two: Pablo's life in Buenos Aires, and the story in his film script, namely a romance between Marina and Victor in Spain, which unfolds as he imagines it and is narrated by his voice. The film playfully explores the connections and disconnections between the romantic comedy genre and the narrative of Pablo's life. [FIGURE 1, 2, 3] Pablo, who is also a university lecturer, writes his script from a small office in the apartment he shares with his partner, a piano teacher who gives private piano lessons in the living room. The disruptive noise from the lessons both displays his increasingly difficult relationship with his partner and comments on the precarious conditions faced by the Argentine filmmaker. By juxtaposing there (Spain) and then (Pablo's film) to here (Argentina) and now (his struggles to write a film amidst financial precarity and a relationship breakup), the spectator sees the challenges facing film

production in contemporary Argentina. Here, Frederik Jameson's concept of "post-generic genre film" is highly apt to describe playful self-awareness. Jameson argues that the new post-generic genre films "are allegories of each other, and of the impossible representation of the social totality itself" (Jameson 1995, 5).

Although *Sexo fácil, películas tristes* remains in the realm of entertainment, its self-referentiality fragments the narrative, and the film's self-reflexive struggle to adhere to the romantic comedy genre becomes part of an allegorizing process. The critical detachment created by the scriptwriter's first-person narration allows the self-conscious reworking of the romantic comedy genre. Of course, the spectator's awareness of the genre is also assumed a priori. For instance, the fact that the bookshop is a privileged location of well-known rom-coms such as *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999) and *You've Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1999) as Pablo's explains in voice-over of the choice of location: "In a bookshop like those that always appear in romantic comedies." [FIGURE 4] The bookshop setting foregrounds self-referentiality when adopting the rom com genre.

The humor lies in the temporal and spatial gap between Pablo's rom-com set in Europe and his reality in Argentina, allowing the spectator to witness how the scriptwriter incorporates his own experiences into the film. This sense of detachment from the romance between Marina and Victor in Madrid is exacerbated by Pablo's discussions with the producer and his first-person voice-over narration, who constantly informs the spectators about his ideas, struggles and progress: "These are the main elements of the story. Now...I just have to write it." For instance, amid his creative process, Pablo is faced with a request by the producer to set some scenes in Paris so that a French company might finance the film. The producer says, "every romantic comedy has got Paris in it". Then in the following sequence, the spectator

witnesses how the producer's demand is shaping the plot of the film, as a great career opportunity in Paris emerges in Marina's life, which complicates the character's relationship. On the one hand, the film makes the spectator aware of the tensions between the financial struggle and the screenwriter's attempt to respond to demands to comply with the genre conventions of a romantic comedy; on the other, it creates a comic tension of incongruity between commerce, convention and the ideology of romance. Such a process demystifies the mythologies both of love and art through a workmanlike commercial approach.

"It has to be light-hearted, people don't want to be depressed, and the city has to look like Paris or New York," the producer says, rejecting the city of Buenos Aires, which could evoke "depressing" themes. In *Sexo fácil, películas tristes*, Buenos Aires is the background to the life of a filmmaker in difficulty while Madrid and Paris are the set of the romantic comedy. The producer's requirements suggest that Argentina is not suitable for romantic comedy conventions. The rom-com, and genre cinema in general, are frequently perceived as foreign to Argentinians, with Argentinian film – and culture generally – often positioned as inferior.

This notion of the foreignness of the rom-com has important implications for the politics of genre cinema, and needs to be understood light of the performance of Argentine film production in its own market. In 2015 Argentina reached a record of 52 million spectators but out of this number only 7,553,166 were spectators of Argentine cinema and 43,994,577 spectators of foreign cinema. According to INCAA, in terms of production, 428 films were released in the Argentinean film market in 2015, "182 of which had been locally produced or co-produced, and 246 of them were foreign films; thus the share of locally produced films stands at 42.52% of all films on offer" (INCAA, 2016, 14). Although there is an overall increase in the presence of

Argentine films in the domestic market, most of the top ten films are foreign.

Amongst the top ten films with most box office sales in 2015, only one, *Clan*, is from Argentina, coming in 4<sup>th</sup>, while nine are from the USA. In 2016, nine of the top ten are American and one is Argentine, *Me Case con un Boludo*, which also comes in 4<sup>th</sup> (INCAA, 2017, 60). Similarly in 2017, only one Argentine film, *Mama Se Fue de Viaje* made the top 10 – the other nine films also being from the USA (INCAA, 2018, 61). This situation recalls Jameson's argument that "the free movement of American movies sounds the death knell for national cinemas everywhere, or even for their existence as 'distinct species'" (1998, 61). For this reason, protectionist measures have ongoing importance in securing the production and distribution of national cinemas. In a context where a large share of the domestic market is dominated by foreign films, screen quotas play an important role in securing the home market share for Argentine cinema.

This establishes genre cinema in general as a foreign rather than domestic invention, at least in the minds of Argentine audiences. *Sexo facil, películas tristes* thus explicitly engages with the well-established perception of genre film as foreign. Susan Hayward argues that Third World Cinema "is treated as if it were a subaltern, the shadow cinema of the "real" cinema of North America and Europe" (2006, 424); the film depicts this state of affairs from a position of ironic distanciation, calling it into question. It also calls into the question the way that, in a globalized context where divisions between First, Second and Third world are not as clear cut, to place Argentine cinema as the 'other' in the way described by Hayward is an increasingly complicated task. Nonetheless some contemporary films, including the ones analyzed in this article, continue to explicitly engage with the historical notion of the Third World in order to address the geopolitical positioning of Argentine cinema. This



treatment of Argentine cinema as the “other” also dismisses the polycentric and multicultural aspect of cinema, which Ella Shohat and Robert Stam define as “reciprocal, dialogical” (1994, 49). This approach is particularly relevant as it takes into consideration the insertion of Argentine filmmakers in the global market, including Argentine filmmakers influencing the predominant mainstream culture from within. For instance, the blockbuster horror movie *IT* (2017) was directed by Andrés Muschietti, American television series *30 Rock* and *Law and Order* were directed by Juan José Campanella, and the composer Gustavo Santaolalla received Academy Awards for Best Original Music Score for both *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) and *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006).

The US remake of the Argentine film *Nine Queens* (Fabián Bielinsky, 2000), an Argentine buddy and heist movie, is an example of how easily recent Argentine genre production can be inserted into the US film industry, because the original already adheres to the genre conventions. The very rare incorporation of an Argentine product into the dominant market (as a remake) reverts the usual pattern of influence. This remake represents a counter-hegemonic strategy insofar as it shows how Argentina's national industry has tried to resist domination by Hollywood imports by producing its own genre films.

Drawing on the work of García Canclini (1995) and Jesús Martín-Barbero (1993), Shaw (2007) assesses whether *Nine Queens* is a paradigm of the “Americanization” of national cinemas or instead a hybrid cultural product that cannot be fitted into the “model or copy formula,” arguing that Argentine cinema is “playing Hollywood at its own game.” The argument here however, is that films like *Sexo Fácil*, *películas tristes* portray precisely the difficulty of playing “the game” in a precarious context and the impossibility of fully adhering to genre conventions that

would help the film break into the global market. The precedent of this debate includes Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes' famous argument for Brazilian cinema's "incapacity to copy"<sup>1</sup> and Julio García Espinosa's rubrics of "Imperfect Cinema":

We maintain that imperfect cinema must above all show the process which generates the problems. It is thus the opposite of a cinema principally dedicated to celebrating results, the opposite of a self-sufficient and contemplative cinema, the opposite of a cinema which "beautifully illustrates" ideas or concepts which we already possess (Espinosa in Martin, 1997: 81).

By self-reflexively incorporating the glitches and imperfections of the screenwriter's reality into the romantic comedy, *Sexo Fácil, películas tristes* imparts the difficulties of achieving well-established schemas such as genre film in precarious conditions. But the result is also a distinctive Argentine rom-com, which is colored with local elements, including the "unsuitable" Buenos Aires. The argument that romantic comedy should be set abroad also alludes to a recurring theme in all three self-referential films analyzed in this chapter: the pressure to reject the national in order to succeed in the international market or comply with film coproduction practices. Both of these elements shape both Pablo's film-within-the-film and the actual film, signaling the asymmetry of power between the European producer and the Argentine filmmaker, whose creation is shaped by international market demands. Self-referentiality in this context poses questions regarding the extent to which the very film we are watching is a symptom of these marketing demands and Argentina's relationship with neoliberalism – a foreign system which has been adopted despite criticisms and protests across the nation. Significantly, *Sexo fácil, películas tristes* was originally titled *El amor y otras historias* in Argentina; the title was changed

because the distribution companies, which include Walt Disney Studio Motion, opted for another title. Given the subordination of Argentine films to market force, *Sexo fácil, películas tristes*' uses of self-reflexivity reveals the subordination of the national filmmaker to the foreign producer, which is depicted as inherent to international film co-production practices. The reliance on international distribution companies such as Disney allows the Argentine film producer, who lacks funds to market the films and invest in campaigns, to secure a space in the exhibition sector both nationally and internationally. In other words, in a neoliberal context, the films' potential to be seen by wider audiences and break into the global market is often dictated by major distribution companies, which dominate the distribution sector.

### **Co-Production Requirements and Neocolonial Practices**

Like *Sexo fácil, películas tristes*, *Bar El Chino* is a film about filmmaking in neoliberal Argentina. *Bar El Chino* charts the struggles of two filmmakers, Jorge and Martina, who have to juggle immigration to Spain, unemployment, and market demands, all while making a documentary about a famous tango bar in Buenos Aires during the peak of the economic crisis in 2001. Because it interweaves fictional narrative with testimonials, the film resists classification in terms of categories of fiction and documentary. In this sense, the film does not engage with well-established genre conventions and is made for a different market to the intentionally viable “smart” rom-com *Sexo fácil, películas tristes*.

*Bar El Chino* operates on the border of fiction and documentary through a number of self-reflexive devices, including the presence of cameras, screen and editing software [FIGURE]. This self-reflexive approach is established in the opening sequence by a close up of an editing program, showing footage of interviews. These

interviews grow in size and what first appears to be editing footage becomes an integral part of the actual film. Through a close up on the footage being edited, the spectator sees the title 'Bar El Chino' – thus the documentary made by the characters has the same title as the film we are watching. In other words, the film establishes that *Bar El Chino* is both a fictive construct and a documentary and at times it is hard to distinguish one from the other. For instance, in the sequence where Beto, a cameraman, is framed capturing footage of the tango bar, there is an alternation between Beto holding a camera on screen and the images that he is capturing. Sequences like this one and the one with the interviews in the editing software allows the spectator to simultaneously watch the making of the documentary and its final product.

The semidocumentary *Bar El Chino* depicts strategies often adopted by filmmakers to keep working on national cinema: the protagonists edit advertisements for Spanish multinational companies in order to finance a documentary film about a traditional tango bar, the ultimate Argentine national symbol. The tension between national culture and financial struggle is accomplished visually; Jorge and Martina are editing the advert while watching the breaking news of civil unrest during El Corralito, when bank deposits were frozen in Argentina in 2001. In this chaotic scenario, the Argentine political system plunged into crisis, seeing a succession of five presidents within a period of two weeks. The filmmakers are then in front of three screens: the documentary project, the Spanish advertisement job, and the news of social unrest during El Corralito. The sequence in question epitomises the threefold negotiation faced by the Argentine filmmaker in this period: the economic and political crisis, the struggle to make films in Argentina, and foreign (Spanish) requirements. The advertisement, which is the main source of their income, is for a

Spanish multinational which owns Argentine motorways as a consequence of the wholesale privatising of Argentine national industries.

On the one hand, *Bar El Chino* portrays a sort of guerilla filmmaking, rejecting commercial formulae in order to reassert the role of cinema in promoting national culture. On the other hand, the incorporation of fictional elements into its narrative, including the romance between two filmmakers during El Corralito, is in itself a strategy to appeal to a wider audience. In charting the struggles of filmmakers to make a documentary about national culture, *Bar El Chino* also raises questions about the role of the state in ensuring that films are not only made for commercial purposes but also because cinema is part of the national cultural patrimony. Of course, avant-garde Argentinian films of the 1960s and 1970s, which prompted the “New Latin American Cinema” movement, were denouncing the oppressive State. However, it is much harder to pin down the “enemy” of the films made during democracy, as power in this global system is much more dispersed: multinational shareholders, FMI, bankers, etc. Moreover, with the devaluation of the peso and the differences in currency exchange rate, multinationals capitalized on the fact that labor was considerably cheaper in Argentina. This situation is echoed in the sequence in *Bar El Chino* when Martina does not know who was responsible for firing her from the TV channel. The film is set in 2001, a year marked by new levels of unemployment rates – from 18.3% in October 2001 to 21.5% in May in 2002 – while poverty rates increased in 2002 to 54.3% and only decreased to 40% in the second semester of 2004 – still remaining much higher than rates in the 1990s. (Svampa 2006, p. 35). *Bar el Chino* was made during a time when dramatic transformations in modes of labor were taking place; the film depicts the structural reform programs adopted in post-dictatorship Argentina, in particular the casualization of work, had an impact on

filmmakers. Indeed, in both *Bar El Chino* and *Sexo Fácil, películas tristes*, Argentine filmmakers experience precarious production arrangements, having to work from home, and filmmaking is a moonlight activity instead of their main source of income.

The marked absence of the state in these three films is symptomatic of the processes of de-regulation and the destabilization of the autonomy of nation-states in globalized times. In the films here analyzed, international forces dictate the life of the filmmaker even though Argentine national film industry remains largely dependent on a State body, INCAA – the Argentine National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts. In fact, all the three films analyzed in this chapter were partly financed by INCAA even if it was through co-production mechanisms. The increase in transnational practices also informed the filmic context as the adoption of a neoliberal economic model in a post-dictatorship Argentina paved the way for a number of international film-coproduction agreements and protocols. One of the most important is *Programa Ibermedia*, a film funding pool set up in 1998 sponsored by Spain, Portugal and 19 member countries in Latin America. International co-productions contribute to the increase in national film production. For instance, in 2017, 38 out of 220 Argentine films released were international co-productions – mostly with Brazil, Spain and Chile (INCAA, 2018).

However, it is problematic to naturalize co-production practices given the inequalities within this transnational exchange. Falicov argues that “Ibermedia administrators do not think it is problematic that Spain has more decision-making power due to its monetary contribution to the fund” (2013, 83). She also identifies a sub-category of coproduction within the Ibermedia Program, namely “technical-artistic”: “the amount a country invests determines the percentage of actors and/ or technicians that will work on a film” and “attempts to integrate actors from the co-

producing countries into the narrative” (2013, 71). As a consequence, co-productions requirements often lead to an over-representation of Spanish characters.

In *Bar El Chino*, the Spanish producer, Jesús, is introduced by Jorge as a “friend and client,” which implies the economic interests behind any sort of amicable relations. Falicov also identified four common tropes of Spaniards in coproduced films: “the sympathetic Spaniard, the Spaniard anarchist, the evil or racist Spaniard and the Spanish tourist” (2013, 73). Depicted as a sexist character, Jesús fits the “evil/racist” trope. Jesús walks in Jorge’s house when he is not there, pries into Martina’s life, and observes her working. After saying that she is “fast, efficient and beautiful,” Jesús asks, “isn’t it too much for a woman?” Both Jesús and the Spanish highway company stand for the neocolonial practices that have marked Argentina’s recent history. This critique is echoed when Beto overtly evokes the *conquista* in one of his lines: “The Spanish are always trying to conquer Latin America.” In fact, negotiating the legacies of the colonial past and the impact of neocolonial relations on contemporary society provide material for a number of film co-productions between Spain and Argentina, and more generally Latin America.

Similarly, *Sexo Fácil, películas tristes* – a co-production between Spain and Argentina, which is set both in Spain and Argentina and features both Argentine and Spanish actors – testifies to the practices that still govern international film co-productions. The film shows how co-productions can overdetermine the content and aesthetics of the film. For instance, the film producer asks Victor’s nationality, insisting that “It has to be a co-production. We have to hire both Argentinean and Spanish actors.” Significantly, Ernesto Alterio, the actor who plays the protagonist in *Sexo fácil, películas tristes*, is an Argentinean-born actor who has worked for most of his career in Spain and who is known for being able to do both Argentine and Spanish

accents. He says “I am no longer 100% Argentinean nor 100% Spanish. And I take advantage of it”(Zucchi, 2014). This is addressed in a scene, where his character reassures the producer, saying “I lived in Madrid for a long time. I know the city, how they talk, everything. Don’t worry about that.” This familiarity with both Buenos Aires and Madrid also relates to director Alejo Flah’s own experience as a filmmaker. On the Ibermedia website, Flah is quoted as saying, “I wake up in the middle of the night without knowing well where I am. In Madrid or Buenos Aires? I suppose it is normal. In the last years, I have come and gone nonstop. Between raising funding, doing casting, pre-production, filming and postproduction, the distance between the two cities seems to have shortened” (Flah, 2015).

Time and spatial distance are shortened in bi-national narratives, which incorporates actors and technicians from all the co-producing countries due to co-production requirements. According to Falicov, “The bi-national narrative works as a natural bridge between the two countries and thus results as a credible co-production plot” (2013, 71; see also Pinazza 2017). *Martín (Hache)* is another example of a co-production that in order to comply with coproduction requirements adopt a bi-national narrative. The film charts the life of Martín, an Argentine filmmaker, who has left his son, Hache, in Buenos Aires in order to work in Madrid. Here the Argentine filmmaker does not experience precarity because he is living in Spain. Nonetheless, Martín is constantly reminded of Argentina, either by his accent or direct mentions to his nationality. By focusing on the problems between father and son, the film explores the consequences of the filmmaker’s immigration to Spain. Likewise, in *Bar El Chino*, Martina ends her relationship and leaves Buenos Aires for Spain in search of better career opportunities. As with the other films, the recurring theme of working abroad and its impact on the Argentine filmmaker’s career and personal life reflects



real life, as the director Daniel Burak lived abroad in Israel.

### **Immigration and “Third World” status**

Coproductions are often considered a gateway for Argentine filmmakers to be able to work in Spain. This notion is echoed in *Bar El Chino*, when Martina says, “The main thing is to set foot in Europe.” Therefore, filmmaking and immigration issues are often intertwined in these bi-national narratives. Because many Argentine filmmakers moved to Spain when employment in Argentina was scarce, the theme of immigration has a self-reflexive role in these narratives. The theme plays also an important role in negotiating national identity as Argentina experienced the transition from being a country of immigrants to a country of emigrants at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Emigration has received increasing academic and political attention in the last few decades, especially since the 1990s when the numbers rose and the characteristics of flows changed. While in the past emigration was considered a temporary problem, mostly linked to political instability and persecution, it is now seen as a constant and heterogeneous trend, related to the deteriorating political and economic situation (Margheritis 2005, 91)

If the reason to emigrate was due to political exile and safety during the military years, one of the principal motors for emigration in democratic Argentina has been economic. This is expressed in the scene in *Martín (Hache)* when Martín draws a parallel between the two different periods: “Argentina is not a country, it is a trap. [...] The military killed 30,000 people and democracy comes and there’s no money.” In the context of emigration to Europe and the increase in international collaboration,

Spain becomes a point of reference for the Argentine filmmaker who is negotiating national culture and identity from the margins of the world system. In *Martín (Hache)*, the symbiotic relationship between the characters and the two countries is established in the opening sequence where Hache is framed walking through the streets of Buenos Aires, while Martín drives through an urbanized and developed Madrid. Buenos Aires, by contrast to Madrid, is imbued with images of tagged walls, crowded small apartments and old cars. This juxtaposition foregrounds Argentina's economic backwardness in comparison to the long shots of the avenues in Madrid and the attractive settings in Spain, ranging from expensive restaurants to a villa by a Spanish beach. However, when the young Argentine protagonist Hache goes to Spain, he gets homesick and claims that he prefers the "ugly" rooftops of Buenos Aires and rejects Madrid. The choice to portray Spain as an attractive place only to reject it in favor of a bleak Argentina can be understood as a re-assertion of the nation – one also present in *Sexo Facil, Películas Tristes*, where the supposedly "depressing" Buenos Aires is incorporated into a rom-com through a self-referential re-working of the genre.

In *Bar El Chino*, the distance between Madrid and Buenos Aires is treated as significant because of the impact it has on Jorge's life. Both his son and girlfriend have moved to Spain, and even though he lived in Spain in the past, Jorge rejects the possibility of moving to Spain, claiming that living without crisis is "boring." *Bar El Chino* is a celebration of Argentine identity and culture even in times of crisis. When Jorge is talking to his son about tango, the son – who is now settled in Spain – declares, "Tango is a constant moan"; Jorge's friend replies, "wait a minute! I'd like to see a Spaniard endure for just a single month what we did."

*Bar El Chino* reasserts Argentine values such as “friendship, solidarity, loyalty and affection,” which are the opposite of neoliberal competition and individualism, and adopts a complementary approach to the Argentine crisis. The film ends with Jorge filming and a bird’s eye view of the tango, followed by documentary footage showing El Chino, the bar owner, singing. The close up on Jorge sticking a label “Bar El Chino” over the Argentine highways label on a VHS suggests the ultimate triumph of Argentina’s culture and patrimony over Spanish commercial interests, creating a visual trope of resistance. Despite the celebratory approach, however, the film also engages in a self-reflexive critique of the imbalances in transnational filmmaking practices. In one sequence, Beto and Martina are in the car surrounded by scenes of the Argentine crisis: someone juggling in front of the car to get some money and people eating from the garbage. Then Beto says, “What about a video about poverty and kids eating out of the garbage? That sells in Europe.” This poignant commentary reflects criticism of the paternalist gaze of spectators of developed countries, which consumes poverty instead of denouncing it. Grimson and Kessler argue that “The Argentine crisis, images of which went around the world in 2001 and 2002, marked the collapse of an economic and social model and also the eclipse of a set of social images and narratives regarding the place of Argentina in the world” (2005, 3). It is precisely the self-awareness of the impact of such “images of crises” on the foreign gaze that allows these meta-movies to address or criticize the strategies and ethics – or lack thereof – used by Argentinean filmmakers to insert their work in global networks of distribution. Beto’s line in *Bar El Chino* finds its echo in Glauber Rocha’s *Aesthetic of Hunger*:

“For the European observer, the process of artistic creation in the underdeveloped world is of interest only in so far as it satisfies his nostalgia

for primitivism. This primitivism is generally presented as a hybrid form, disguised under the belated heritage of the “civilized” world and poorly understood since it is imposed by colonial conditioning. Undeniably, Latin America remains a colony.”

Rocha’s argument foregrounds the pan-continental aspect of the Third Worldist film ideology of the 1960s and 1970s, which was also in critical dialogue with more so-considered “bourgeois” European realism and New Waves. Another seminal text that is central to the critique embedded in Beto’s line is the constant need for validation from developed countries, as García Espinosa argues: “When it comes to artistic culture, isn't European recognition equivalent to worldwide recognition?” (Espinosa 1997, 71). Although none of the three films adopts the aesthetics of the revolutionary filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s, they update some historical issues regarding the precarity experienced by the Latin American filmmaker. In *Bar El Chino*, filmmakers work in a makeshift studio at home. Similarly, in *Sexo fácil, películas tristes*, the scriptwriter’s creative process is constantly disrupted by his partner’s piano lessons. Framing the filmmaker working in the domestic sphere not only comments on the precarity of the working space but it is also portrays the impacts on this career choice on the protagonists’ personal lives.

## **Conclusion**

In arguing for the importance of the nation as a framework for the analysis of Argentine cinema in a globalized era, Joanna Page identified a tendency in scholarship to overlook the continuing dependence of Argentine filmmakers on state funding in order to focus on the role played by international funding:

The ready replacement in criticism of the national with the transnational not

only presents globalization as inevitable and natural but in the context of Latin American cinema even outstrips globalization's own erosion of frontiers in its eagerness to proclaim the death of the nation (Page 2009, 15).

At first, international film co-productions and bi-national narratives could make a case for a postnational reading. However, in accordance with Page's argument, these films have showed that nationalities are in fact emphasized. Spain appears as a recurring location in self-referential Argentine films either physically – i.e. some scenes of *Sexo fácil, películas tristes* and *Martín (Hache)* are set in Spain – or discursively, as in *Bar El Chino*, through the figure of the Spanish producer and Martina's choice to emigrate. There are two main reasons for the significant presence of Spain. Firstly, the narratives are symptomatic of the wave of emigration of Argentine filmmakers and actors to the country. Secondly, the presence of Spain either physically or discursively reflects the role that the country has played in recent Argentine cinema, in particular due to film co-productions between Argentina and Spain.

A “reciprocal and dialogical” approach would posit that Argentine and more generally Latin American films are integral to the development of cinema, which differs from the notion of “other” cinema portrayed in *Sexo Fácil, películas tristes*. In contrast to epochal hopes of a borderless world, these films show that resistance to neoliberalism can be asserted via national culture. In portraying the imbalances of power in the transnational exchange in international film co-production practices, the films analyzed here challenge the naturalization of discourses that indicate adherence to market demands as the only viable route for Argentine cinema. The significance for film studies more generally is that transnationalism does not preclude the nation as a framework for the analysis of a film in a neoliberal context.

## Bibliography

Aguilar, G. 2008. *Otros mundos: Un ensayo sobre el nuevo cine argentino*. Buenos Aires: Santiagos Arcos Editor.

Deleuze, G. 2005. *Cinema 2: The Time- Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. London: Continuum.

Espinosa, Julio García. 1997. "For an Imperfect Cinema." In *New Latin American Cinema: Theory, Practices, and Transcontinental Articulations, Volume 1*, edited by Michael T. Martin, 71-82. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Falicov, T. 2007. *The Cinematic Tango: Contemporary Argentine Film*. New York: Wallflower Press.

Falicov, T. 2013. "Ibero-Latin American Co-productions: Transnational Cinema, Spain's Public Relations Venture or Both." In *Contemporary Hispanic Cinema: Interrogating the Transnational in Spanish and Latin American Film*, edited by Stephanie Dennison, 67-88. Woodbridge: Tamesis.

Flah, Alejo. 2015. "Reflexiones de un director: Alejo Flah, de 'Sexo Fácil, Películas tristes.'" *Programaibermedia.com*, May 3<sup>rd</sup>.

<http://www.programaibermedia.com/nuestras-cronicas/reflexiones-de-un-director-alejo-flah-de-sexo-facil-peliculas-tristes/>

Grimson, A., and Kessler, G. 2005. *On Argentina and the Southern Cone: Neoliberalism and National Imaginations*. Oxon: Routledge.

Hayward, S. 2004. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge.

INCAA. 2016. “Anuario 2015 de la Industria Cinematográfica y Audiovisual Argentina”. Accessed 15 December 2018.

[http://fiscalizacion.incaa.gov.ar/images/Anuarios/Anuario\\_2016.pdf](http://fiscalizacion.incaa.gov.ar/images/Anuarios/Anuario_2016.pdf)

INCAA. 2017. “Anuario 2016 de la Industria Cinematográfica y Audiovisual Argentina”. Accessed 15 December 2018.

[http://fiscalizacion.incaa.gov.ar/images/Anuarios/Anuario\\_2016.pdf](http://fiscalizacion.incaa.gov.ar/images/Anuarios/Anuario_2016.pdf)

INCAA. 2018. “Anuario 2016 de la Industria Cinematográfica y Audiovisual Argentina”. Accessed 15 December 2018.

[http://fiscalizacion.incaa.gov.ar/Anuario\\_2017.pdf](http://fiscalizacion.incaa.gov.ar/Anuario_2017.pdf)

Jameson, F. 1995. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Jameson, F. 1998. “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue.” In *The Cultures of Globalization*, edited by Frederic Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, 54-80. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Margheritis, A. 2007. "State-Led Transnationalism and Migration: Reaching Out to the Argentine Community in Spain." *Global Networks* 7(1): 87–106.

Page, J. 2009. *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Pinazza, N. 2017. "Luso-Brazilian Coproductions: Rescue and Expansion." *Portugal's Global Cinema: Industry, History and Culture*, edited by M. Liz. 239 – 255. London: I.B. Tauris.

Rocha, G. 2005. "Esthetics of Hunger." Translated by R. Johnson and B. Hollyman. In *Brazilian Cinema*, edited by Randal Johnson and Robert Stam, 68-71. New York: Columbia University Press.

Shaw, D. 2007. *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.

Shohat, E., and Stam, R. 1994. *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. London: Routledge.

Svampa, M. 2006. *La sociedad excluyente: La Argentina bajo el signo del neoliberalism*. Buenos Aires: Tauros.

Williamson, E. 1993. *Penguin History of Latin America*. London: Penguin.



Zucchi, M. 2014. "Ernesto Alterio: 'Soy más yo cuando soy otro'." *Clarín*, October 25, 2014.

---

<sup>i</sup> We are neither Europeans nor North Americans. Lacking an original culture, nothing is foreign to us because everything is. The painful construction of ourselves develops within the rarefied dialectic of not being or being someone else. Brazilian film participates in this mechanism and alters it through our creative incapacity of copying (Salles Gomes in Johnson and Stam, 1995: 245)