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# National history, allegory and the force of habit in the films of Matías Piñeiro

## ABSTRACT

*This article examines how Matías Piñeiro's films El hombre robado/The Stolen Man (2007) and Todos mienten/They all Lie (2009) critically redeploy foundational figures and rhetorical devices that structure the dominant narratives of Argentine national history. Both films take lesser-known writings of the nineteenth-century intellectual and statesman Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, best known for Facundo: Civilización y barbarie/Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism (1845) (1845), as the point of departure for intricate plots involving the romantic intrigues of young people in twenty-first century Buenos Aires. Contrary to the teleology integral to official versions of national history, which have been conspicuously on display during the Bicentennial celebrations of Latin American independence in recent years, Piñeiro's films posit a more porous and more unstable relationship between the present and history, in which the ruins of the latter persistently, if intermittently, and fragmentarily inform everyday life, and vice versa. Thus, through the insistent repetition of the basic components of foundational myths of Argentine identity, El hombre robado and Todos mienten redirect a force of habit to restore the polysemy of the commonplace tropes of national history.*

## KEYWORDS

Argentina  
Matías Piñeiro  
Domingo Faustino Sarmiento  
history  
allegory  
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1. Esteban Dipaola considers *Todos mienten* in a conference paper titled 'Todo se mueve: recorridos y complots en los films *Castro* y *Todos mienten*'. Gonzalo Aguilar dedicates about a page to a reading of *They All Lie* in the epilogue to the second edition of *Other Worlds* (2011), in which he contrasts the 'sense of national belonging' in *Rosa patria*/*Pink Fatherland*, Santiago Loza's biopic of poet Néstor Perlongher, to the aleatory subjectivities on display in *Todos mienten* (Aguilar 2011: 233–35). These are, to the best of my knowledge, the only sustained analyses of Piñeiro's first films.

Recently the Argentine director Matías Piñeiro (b. 1982) has garnered international acclaim for *Viola* (2012), *La princesa de Francia*/*The Princess of France* (2014), and *Hermia & Helena* (2016). These films construct intricate comedies that take Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as their respective points of departure. Each concerns a cast of young Argentine actors whose lives approximate the Shakespearean texts they perform. His feature-length debut *El hombre robado*/*The Stolen Man* (2007) and his second film *Todos mienten*/*They All Lie* (2009) also constitute intimate, essayistic engagements with literary sources, though in these cases they are works of the intellectual and statesman Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811–88), whose best-known work is *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie*/*Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (1845). In the case of *El hombre robado*, it is Sarmiento's *Campaña en el ejército grande*/*Campaign in the Great Army* ([1852] 2004), while *Todos mienten* integrates his collection of travel letters known as *Viajes en Europa, África i América*/*Travels in Europe, Africa, and America* (1851). These two films, which have received scant critical attention, offer a sustained reflection on the persistence of foundational myths, precisely at a time when globalized capitalism is undermining the legitimacy of the very republican nation state that Sarmiento and his fellow nineteenth-century intellectuals helped found.<sup>1</sup> In elaborating plots that rehearse and reconfigure the conventional devices of national history (rhetorical, narrative, and iconographic), they interrupt the teleology these figures have long underpinned. As such, instead of updating and reinforcing commonplace nationalist tropes, *El hombre robado* and *Todos mienten* reveal the force of habit that perpetuates them and, in doing so, signal their polysemy as necessary for imagining a post-national history.

The competing foundational narratives of Argentine identity deploy a basic cast of characters – a select group of soldiers, politicians, and intellectuals – who founded the modern nation through a protracted struggle between diametrically opposed forces. The best-known version of this basic myth is perhaps that which Sarmiento formulated in *Facundo*, which portrays a post-independence society locked in an epic battle between civilization and barbarism. In addition to literature, public education, cultural institutions, civic rituals and mass media are all responsible for transmitting representations of national history. Indeed, the intensity of this symbolic production has been most conspicuous in the years surrounding the 2010 Bicentennial celebrations. Beyond this programmatic *maintenance*, the names of train and subway lines and stations, streets, schools, provincial towns, plazas etc. also repeat, with a striking degree of redundancy, the protagonists, events and sites of the protracted struggle to consolidate a national order in the nineteenth century. These toponyms, repeated without regard for their specific referents, epitomize how *la historia patria* (national history) also persists through a series of gestures, received ideas and behaviours that are often unconscious or automatic to those who employ them in everyday life.

As Alejandro Grimson argues, the particular form of imagining national communities in Latin America emerged from the constant articulation and disarticulation of the concepts of nation and State, and this tensioned relation accounts for why 'a form of imagination historically constructed through state apparatuses can more than survive the transformation of these apparatuses' (Grimson 2004: 185). Though the State under neo-liberalism withdraws from various spheres of public activity (the regulation of markets and labour relations, the maintenance of a social safety net, education, culture etc.), the residue of its past presence constitutes, in Grimson's words, a 'sedimentation' that

'is not only knowledge; it is a feeling, cognitive parameter and, in this sense, symbolic coercion' (2004: 182). If '[in] the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative' (Bhabha 1994: 209), here one can detect another way of relating to the past, a structure of feeling that traverses the partition between linear and circular concepts of time.

There exists, then, a repertoire of embodied practices – in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, *habitus* – capable of securing a social order, even after the hegemonic project that instituted them in the first place is weakened or no longer present.<sup>2</sup> However, as Jon Beasley-Murray notes, though inertia and indifference can maintain the status quo, *habitus* may also offer a site of resistance, for 'when the dispositions shaped by history interact with the field in its current state, the inevitable slippage, however slight, between the two makes for unpredictable effects and so the possibility of a new history' (Beasley-Murray 2011: 197). It is within the interstices of anachronism and actuality that Beasley-Murray detects 'a time for strategy' (2011: 197). The potential site for a 'new history', then, is not a decisive rupture but a fissure, perhaps imperceptible at first. The translation from that which goes unsaid (*habitus*) to a new discourse (history) does not take place by jettisoning the imaginative mode historically constructed by the workings of the state (to echo Grimson's formulation), but through a conscientious and perhaps conspicuous repetition of the very habits that underpin the status quo. A new history, in this sense, is written by reiterating the constitutive parts of the old, not to affirm an essence or positive content, but by seizing the affective potential of well-worn mechanisms in order to expose the basic contingency of its conventional meanings. In the case of Argentina, we can understand the nineteenth century as an elaborate conceptual machine that 'articulates the sequence and the connections of various intellectual voices and of different voices of others, and produces a verbal latticework with different kinds of conjunctions, affiliations, integrations, and exclusions' (Ludmer 1995: 65). If so, then the possibility of a post-national history and, hence, a form of politics beyond hegemony cannot simply discard this machine, but, on the contrary, must set it into motion again and again, in order to undo its complex web of relations that continues to structure the present.

Through framing, cutting and sequencing, cinema has the potential to manipulate narrative time and expose these mechanisms of history. As David Martin-Jones argues, films can expose how '[i]n the gap, or "time lag" opened up by a deterritorialising of the national narrative in the present, it is sometimes possible to glimpse the performance of national identity as a repetition of difference' (2006: 35). As the qualified nature of Martin-Jones's statement suggests, such a glimpse is likely to be brief, provisional and infrequent. This may be especially true in Latin America, where filmmaking has a long history of dependency on state support.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, we might generalize Ignacio Sánchez Prado's assertion about Mexican cinema, that there is 'a constant tension between deterritorialization and reterritorialization in the neo-liberal period' (2014: 23); that is, there is nothing intrinsic to the language of cinema that can realize an immediate or definitive deconstruction of the larger social texts into which they are inscribed. As Jacques Rancière argues, cinema has the capacity to create 'little machineries of the heterogeneous' through the unexpected combinations of conventionally unrelated elements or by distancing those that are normally associated with one another, and it does so according

2. As Bourdieu details in *The Logic of Practice*, the *habitus* consists of

systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.

(1990: 53)

3. Tamara Falicov notes in her introduction to *The Cinematic Tango: Contemporary Argentine Film* that '[i]n the Latin American context, it is nearly impossible to produce films outside of a state-subsidy framework [...] (2007: 2). This is not to say that other modes of producing films are impossible, but simply serves to underscore the intimate relationship between cinema and the state as a general, historical condition that contrasts with the market-driven model of Hollywood.

to two, contradictory logics (2007: 57). Taking the montage of Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinema/History of Cinema* as representative of this process, he regards film as a site where one can 'organize a clash and construct a continuum' (Rancière 2007: 60). Yet this operation is not exclusive to cinema, for he insists that '[t]he space of these clashes and that of the continuum can even bear the same name: History. History can indeed be two contradictory things: the discontinuous line of revealing clashes or the continuum of co-presence' (Rancière 2007: 60). To put this in slightly different terms, the technical procedures specific to cinema gather and recombine diverse sounds and images and, in doing so, can expose the constitutive tensions of historical narratives.

Whatever the specific balance of these contradictory logics, a film that foregrounds this capacity and interrupts prevailing historical narratives acquires a political dimension because, as Rancière argues in *Disagreement*, the basic activity of politics consists of

interpreting, in the theatrical sense of the word, the gap between a place where the demos exists and a place where it does not [...] Politics consists in interpreting this relationship, which means first setting it up as theater, inventing the argument, in the double logical and dramatic sense of the term, connecting the unconnected.

(1999: 88)

In this respect, the political potential of film does not emerge from its representation of existing identities or from imagining wholly new subjectivities out of nothing, but by making a spectacle of the making of history, exposing alternative modes of reconfiguring and reconnecting the diverse elements that are common to it. As I will argue, it is this combinatorics, a conspicuous exposition of foundational tropes that informs the common project of Matías Piñeiro's first two films.

### 1. THE PURLOINED SARMIENTO IN *EL HOMBRE ROBADO*

Piñeiro's first film articulates a porous and unstable relationship between past and present through the conjugation of image and text, of cinema and literature, in which history persistently, if fragmentarily diverts everyday life – and vice versa. Throughout the course of the film, its protagonist Mercedes Montt fitfully reads Sarmiento's *Campaña en el ejército grande* ([1852] 2004), and close-ups of its pages serve as inter-titles that pace a story of museum employees in twenty-first-century Buenos Aires. As Piñeiro himself says, the fiction of *El hombre robado* is produced by 'a certain rapprochement between the sentimental skirmishes of young people at the beginning of the twenty-first century and the expressions of national conflicts of the nineteenth century' (2012: 675). In other words, it makes a spectacle of the conjugation of two temporalities and two registers, between past and present and between the monumental and the banal, that structure the *habitus*. All of the film's characters share a last name with an historical figure mentioned in *Campaña*, Sarmiento's first-hand, day-by-day account of his participation in the military campaign that succeeded in toppling Juan Manuel de Rosas, the long-time governor of Buenos Aires and de facto leader of the constitution-less Argentine Confederation. There are multiple shots of characters reading *Campaña* silently or aloud, including one take of Mercedes sitting beside Sarmiento's mausoleum in the Recoleta Cemetery. We also see characters reading other works by



Figure 1: A montage of Sarmiento's ubiquitous presence in *El hombre robado*/The Stolen Man. First row: Mercedes reads *Campaña* in various locations, including at Sarmiento's grave. Second row: Sarmiento's signature; a fifty-peso note. Third row: Rodin's sculpture of Sarmiento in the Bosque de Palermo. Leticia reads *Facundo* in the film's closing shot. M. Piñeiro (2007), *El hombre robado*, (all images courtesy of Matías Piñeiro).

Sarmiento, including an essay about the cemetery, *Vida de Dominguito* (1886), Sarmiento's biography of his adopted son, and, in the final shot of the film, *Facundo*. Moreover, iconography of Sarmiento appears throughout the film: at Leticia LaMadrid's workplace, the Museo Histórico Sarmiento; on a close-up of the 50 peso note; and in various shots of Rodin's sculpture of the *letrado*, located in the Bosque de Palermo. Yet in spite of this ubiquity, *El hombre robado* is less a homage or meditation on Sarmiento's legacy, than an act of theft, one that purloins Sarmiento's work in order to steal it away from the national literary canon and circulate it in a broader informal economy of goods and affects.

The opening image of the film announces the interrelated themes of literature and theft. It is an extreme close-up of a page of Macedonio Fernández's *Adriana Buenos Aires (Última novela mala)*, on which we can see, in all capitals, the phrase 'V. EL HOMBRE ROBADO', surrounded by the faint, blurry lines of text on its inverse. Though the borrowed title may refer to Sarmiento, it also alludes to Mercedes's scheme to steal Andrés Rademil, who works at the Jardín Botánico Carlos Thays, from Leticia. At the same time, Mercedes is involved in another plot with her current boyfriend Leandro López Jordan, who works at the Centro Nacional de la Música. In a lengthy sequence that takes place inside the Centre, located in the building that once housed the Biblioteca Nacional, Mercedes and Leandro explain to Leticia their 'system', which consists of pilfering items from her workplace, the Museo Larreta,

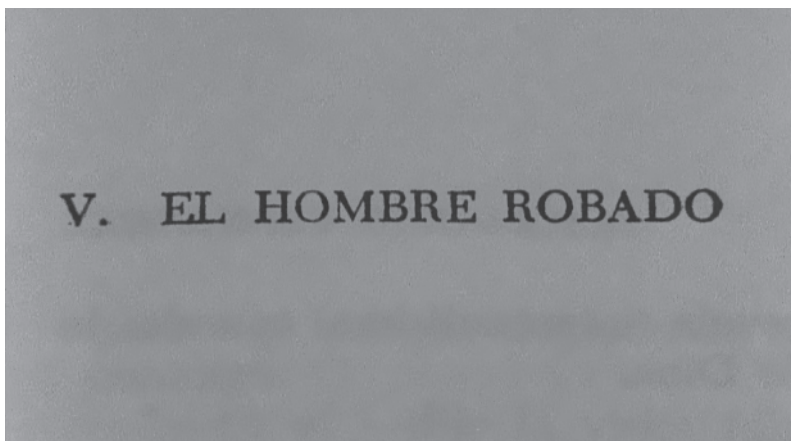


Figure 2: The opening image of *El hombre robado*: a page from Macedonio Fernández's novel *Adriana Buenos Aires* in *El hombre robado*.

selling them in antique stores around the city, and swapping them with props that Leandro takes from the warehouse of the opera.

The sequence opens with a close-up of a young woman playing the flute, as she prepares for a group rehearsal. It then cuts to Leandro and Mercedes kissing, with the discordant sounds of the ensemble echoing in the grand but empty central reading room of the former library. The camera pans slowly with the couple as they walk towards a large table, where Leticia is studying, then in the opposite direction as they pace the room, as Mercedes confesses that she confuses the museum artefacts with the fakes she puts in their place. Before Leandro ducks into another room, he invites his companions to 'contemplate the architecture'. After he disappears through a doorway in the background, a reverse shot reveals Mercedes and Leticia sitting in the midst of rows of unoccupied chairs, before the camera follows the women's gaze and cants upward, past the empty bookshelves and the second-floor balconies, to reveal the ornate ceiling of the domed hall. The scene then cuts again to the music rehearsal for a long, tightly cropped shot of two musicians. Filling the foreground on the right half of the frame is the blurry, shaggy head of a trombonist, who looks towards a female cellist whose face appears in sharp focus in the middle ground. On the one hand, the prolonged shot anticipates Leandro and Leticia's subsequent efforts to memorize passages from Shakespeare's *Othello* and Sarmiento's *Vida de Dominguito*, respectively, thus underscoring the essayistic feel of the film as a whole. On the other hand, the cramped takes of the anonymous musicians put into relief the emptiness of the setting. This is a quality echoed by Leticia's observation that there are no books to be seen anywhere, and Mercedes's quip that the office of its most famous director, Jorge Luis Borges, is locked because it remains empty. The notion is further reinforced by the conclusion of the sequence, when a shot tracks the film's protagonists as they traverse behind the second-floor balustrade, the bookless shelves rising up out of sight, beyond the frame of this shallow dramatic space. Mercedes pauses before a door labelled 'LETTERS' before the trio exits through another door. Before the cut, the camera pans up and pauses for several seconds on the sign above it: 'HISTORY'.



Figure 3: In the former Biblioteca Nacional (from top to bottom): Musicians rehearse; the empty central reading room; Mercedes explores a second-floor balcony in *El hombre robado*.

At this point, about a third of the way through the film, the dialogue, *mise-en-scène*, cinematography and editing thus emphatically call attention to the emptiness of the space and the ghostly traces of absent books. In grainy black-and-white, underemployed youth wander the repurposed library, stripped of its former contents and splendour, and discuss a small-time swindle in which they take objects from another rundown public institution for private gain. In this way, on a micro-political level, they emulate the neo-liberal policies that are in no small part responsible for the sorry state of the museums that employ them. Here we might tentatively advance a reading akin to Jens Andermann's interpretation of Lucrecia Martel's films: in exchanging props for historical artefacts, which are seemingly indistinguishable, *El hombre robado* 'incorporate[s] in [its] own composition, as a question of narrative temporality,

the crisis of historical experience that is also [its] subject' (Andermann 2011: 156). For Andermann, Martel's films signal the exhaustion of the 'historical narratives of nation-foundation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' and represent the experience of time at the so-called end of history as a process that 'befalls the subject from an enigmatic, opaque exterior, without any active intervention on his or her own part' (Andermann 2011: 164). An immediate difference with *El hombre robado* would be, then, that its characters are active if indifferent agents of their own 'historical disempowerment' (Andermann 2011: 165); they barter their heritage without concern for its legal or cultural consequences.

The remaining hour or so of Piñeiro's film, however, makes it difficult to maintain this somewhat moralistic interpretation for two reasons. First, quite simply, this storyline disappears from the film, save for an offhand comment made later by Mercedes, who mentions that one of her colleagues has been accused of the thefts and is being fired. The second is that inscriptions of the past, both material and textual, continue to figure prominently throughout the film. This runs counter to the notion of the 'end of history' that Andermann detects in his survey of New Argentine Cinema, in which the past becomes increasingly inaccessible as globalized late capitalism supplants nationalist teleologies. *El hombre robado* does not divest itself of foundational narratives, but rather conflates them with the actions of its present-day characters. It does not displace the linear time of the nation state with 'stagnation and repetition' that is 'the very temporality proper to the neo-liberal "end of history"' (Andermann 2011: 159) but instead presents a kind of *kairos*, an occasion that reveals 'not another time, but a contracted and abridged *chronos*' (Agamben 2002: 6). In other words, stagnation and repetition reveal themselves to be constitutive of the time of the nation; national history is at its end not because it is absent, but because proliferating signs of its past present announce without fully revealing the nature of its impending exhaustion.

The theme of theft makes visible the compression of time that occurs as the past persists in diffuse and diverse forms – symbolic, affective, material, gestural etc. About 50 minutes into the film, Mercedes is sitting outside the Museo Larreta with some of her colleagues and hands one of them, Delia Saravia, her copy of *Campaña*, concealed within the dust jacket of Enrique Larreta's poetry collection *La calle de la vida y de la muerte* (1943). With a downcast gaze, Delia flips the pages of the book, out of sight just beneath the frame, and comments, to no one in particular, '[i]t's all marked up'. As she lifts the book partially into view and swivels 90 degrees, revealing Mercedes in the background, she begins to read a passage aloud: '[t]hat night I went to Palermo, took a sheet of paper from Rosas's desk and one of his pens, and I wrote four words to my friends in Chile, with this date: *Palermo de San Benito, February 4, 1852*' (Sarmiento [1852] 2004: 222). She steps out of the frame as she reads, and the shot refocuses on Mercedes's face. Delia paces right to left and left to right, her blurry profile rhythmically entering and exiting the frame as she reads.

Mumbling with a mouthful of grapes, Mercedes tells her '[t]hat's my favourite part'. The passage, perhaps the most famous of *Campaña*, takes place in the aftermath Rosas's defeat at the Battle of Caseros. Sarmiento enters the dictator's mansion and uses his pen to make a 'symbolic gesture' that announces how 'from this moment on there will be almost no room, separation, or place for literature' (Piglia 1994: 127). Read as such, the full significance of the letter is only apparent in hindsight, as it prefigures Sarmiento's



Figure 4: Delia reads aloud a celebrated passage from *Campaña en el Ejército Grande* (2007) in *El hombre robado*.

rise to the presidency in 1868. Yet another reading of the episode, while it does not cancel out the one dependent on chronological time, alludes to a suspension that Sarmiento realizes with the gesture, one that Piñeiro's film more directly embodies. Gwen Kirkpatrick and Francine Masiello observe that Sarmiento and Rosas 'are here in this poignant setting merged as one in the scene of writing' (1994: 10). By taking Rosas's place, Sarmiento conflates literature and politics, self and other, momentarily arresting the divergent trajectories of the two embittered rivals. The moment of triumph, then, is attenuated by a hint of melancholy; the diary that has plotted, thus far, the advance of a military campaign pauses with the stroke of a pen, conjuring and mimicking the deposed caudillo at the same time that it confirms his absence.

The celebrated scene of Sarmiento momentarily replacing Rosas is thus a mere rehearsal, a simulated assumption of power that captures the ambivalence of *Campaña en el ejército grande/Campaign in the Great Army*, as a whole. For if the book offers a chronological account of the military campaign leading to Rosas's downfall, its hurried publication in three instalments in Rio de Janeiro and Santiago de Chile during the course of 1852, as Sarmiento found himself in exile once again, was occasioned by his conviction that the victorious General Urquiza promised to be little more than another caudillo. Ultimately, then, it is a story of failure that tries to explain Sarmiento's inability to secure any immediate authority or influence in a fluid political situation. Like Sarmiento's earlier and better-known *Facundo* (1845), his autobiography *Recuerdos de provincial/Recollections of a Provincial Past* (1850) and *Viajes en Europa, África i América* (1851), *Campaña* is an inchoate, difficult-to-classify work where Sarmiento's brilliant literary bricolage and his outsized ego are both on full display. Yet it is typically considered inferior to its predecessors, seen as a text 'which is, in essence, a political pamphlet' (Halperín Donghi 2004: 51) that marks the end of his literary career. To put this in a slightly more positive, though no less critical sense, we could say that, whereas *Facundo* and its subtitle of *Civilización y barbarie* have become axiomatic of Latin American culture writ large (and applied inexhaustibly if problematically to conjunctures, both large and small, throughout the region's history), the 'minor' literature of

*Campaña* remains rooted to its particular locus of enunciation. It captures less a moment of transition than of suspension, in which neither a cyclical interpretation of history nor a teleological narrative of modernity can ever gain the upper hand.

As if to reinforce the centrality of this work and its ambivalent temporality in *El hombre robado*, towards the end of the film Mercedes explains to Clara Virasoro that she reads the book

in my spare moments [...] bit by bit. And when I pick it up again, I go back two pages and start rereading. That's why it's been, I don't know, two weeks with the same book that I still haven't finished but that I've read twice.

Mercedes's mode of reading is at once linear and circular, consisting of a series of irregular loops that sustains and duplicates her encounter with the text. With this revelation, it becomes clear that the close-ups of passages from *Campaña*, which initiate and divide sequences of the film, do not correspond to specific moments in the lives of the film's characters. For example, the inter-title that precedes Delia's reading *Campaña* aloud is centred on the text 'Day 31 / Defeat of the Vanguard of Rosas', which is the heading for an entry of Sarmiento's diary written several months before the celebrated episode at Palermo. There is no one-to-one relationship between literary text and cinematic image, no simple, allegorical correspondence between a document from the so-called period of national organization and a fiction of heterosexual romance in the twenty-first century. Instead, film and literature together produce an image of a quotidian *desencuentro* (or mix-up) between what-has-been and the now. As such, it reminds us that, though the artefacts of the past may be purloined, privatized, substituted or counterfeited for any number of interests, social actors, like the characters in the film, continue to repeat, rehearse, and reconfigure the past in ways that always exceed their immediate intentions.

## 2. *TODOS MIENTEN* AND THE ENDS OF ALLEGORY AT THE END OF HISTORY

While *El hombre robado* ultimately subverts the possibility of establishing an allegory, Piñeiro's second film directly engages this rhetorical device, which continues to structure a dominant mode of reading nineteenth-century Latin American culture. The basic plot of *Todos mienten* is prefigured by a sequence in *El hombre robado*, when Mercedes reads aloud to Leticia as they wander through an antiquarian bookstore: 'my bloods now runs mixed with that of Facundo in his children, and his red blood cells have not been rejected because they were related' (Sarmiento 1900: 88). These words belong to Sarmiento: he says them to a descendent of Facundo Quiroga standing beside the caudillo's grave in the Cementerio de Recoleta, or so he imagines in 'Day of the dead', an article written by the former president in 1885, less than three years before his death. Sarmiento imagines an epilogue to his life's work, where the bloody conflicts between the forces of civilization and barbarism are resolved by the mingling of bloodlines, a romance consecrated as biological fact.

*Todos mienten* imagines the possibility of such a union taking place in an unspecified and anachronistic present. Late on a summer night, sitting in the empty swimming pool of a dilapidated country house, four young women and three young men pantomime the family history of Helena, one of the



Figure 5: Sarmiento's *Viajes* as pre-text: Iván reads and records a lengthy passage from *Viajes*; Mónica transcribes another passage on a typewriter in Matías Piñeiro's *Todos mienten/They all Lie* (2009) (All images courtesy of Matías Piñeiro).

women present. She begins her apocryphal tale with an episode drawn from a salacious entry in the expense log of Sarmiento's travels through Europe, Africa, and the United States: 'Venice April 29 [1847] *Orgie*' (Sarmiento 1900: 539). The result of this night is a daughter born of Sarmiento and a Jewish prostitute, the first in a line of women whose partners all face untimely deaths immediately following the birth of their daughters. For reasons never made clear, Helena believes it her duty to bring this cycle to a close. The women conspire to help her secure a partner and, as the men seek to discover the purpose of their scheming, we learn of another male character: the painter Joaquín Martín de Rosas, or JMR, a direct descendant of Sarmiento's nemesis Juan Manuel de Rosas. JMR appears first in a dream and, finally, at the country house in the closing moments of the film. After filling the country house with smoke bombs, the scion of Rosas carries Helena away on horseback.

Though the allegorical significance of the conclusion is unmistakable, the veracity and ultimate motives of the characters' conspiracy remain unclear. This is in part because, as its title suggests, everyone is always fabricating something in Piñeiro's second film. Throughout, characters take turn reading aloud passages from the letters that comprise Sarmiento's *Viajes en Europa, África i América* (1851) into a handheld cassette player and transcribe these recordings on a typewriter, with the possible objective of publishing the text as an original literary work. Another side plot involves counterfeiting, selling, and delivering blood-red geometric paintings signed by JMR, a project intended, at least in part, to lure him to the country house. In short, the characters of *Todos mienten* are all complicit, wittingly or not, in an elaborate game of invention and deception, whose possible outcome is the union between heirs of the foundational antagonism of Argentine national identity. Doris Sommer points to the centrality of mistruths in the literature and politics of nineteenth-century Latin America, when she advances the notion in *Foundational Fictions* that '[i]t is possible that the pretty lies of national romance are [...] strategies to contain the racial, regional, economic, and gender conflicts that threatened the development of new Latin American nations' (Sommer 1991: 29). In turn, I would contend that, when they all lie in *Todos mienten*, its protagonists engage in a ludic re-enactment of an allegory of national foundation at a time when racial, regional, economic, and gender conflicts announce the weakening and subsumption of those same political projects within an emerging, indeterminate post-national order. In other words, *Todos mienten* is a film about the ends of allegory at the so-called end of history, as a narrative that reuses the basic mechanisms of what Sommer refers to 'as the vehicle for time and dialectics' (1991: 42) in order to expose the essential contingency of the conventional mode of reading the narratives of national foundation, based on the association of politics and heterosexual coupling.

Before examining *Todos mienten* more closely, it warrants noting that there is something untimely about this hypothesis, given that several prominent studies coincide in asserting that a characteristic feature of the so-called New Argentine Cinema is its abandonment of allegory as a narrative strategy. In the conclusion to *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, Joanna Page observes that

[...] by staging the disappearance of the political, and by commenting [...] on their own position as cultural texts and commodities within a global market, these films do present possibilities for political readings, but ones that would be more properly regarded as reflexive than allegorical.

(2009: 196)

Gonzalo Aguilar opens *New Argentine Film: Other Worlds*, arguing along similar lines that

[o]ne of the definitive characteristics of the new cinema is its avoidance of allegorical stories. These films distance themselves from those that preceded them (for allegory had been the privileged mode by which Argentine cinema referred to context) [...] The films of the new cinema [...] insist upon the literal and tend to frustrate the possibility of an allegorical reading [...].

(2011: 16)

Jens Andermann cites this passage in the introduction to *New Argentine Cinema* and contends the emphasis on ethnographic topics can be seen as 'a formal statement about cinema's departure from the previous model of totalizing narrative or allegorical synthesis' (2011: 10). Nevertheless, Andermann detects allegory in several, more conventional films, including Pablo Trapero's *Familia rodante/Rolling Family* (2004), Juan José Campanella's *Luna de Avellaneda/Moon of Avellaneda* (2004), and Fabián Bielinsky's *Nueve Reinas/Nine Queens* (2000); Aguilar sees the anthology film *Mala época/Bad Times* (1998) as 'an example of the new cinema' whose four narratives 'are linked not by their novelty but by the desire to construct an allegory' (2011: 144); and Page proposes that Albertina Carri's *Géminis* (2005) 'can be read as an allegory of [...] a turning-in to the private and domestic space of the family' (2009: 181). In other instances, films present weak, derivative, or partial allegories. In spite of the general statements to the contrary, then, allegory appears with frequency in New Argentine Cinema.

To be clear, I am not questioning the observation that films made in recent years favour more subjective, more localized or less overtly political subject matter and eschew immediate correspondences between the stories they tell and established meta-narratives of national identity. I simply want to call attention to the fact that, in order to announce the waning of allegory, the term is repeatedly conjured, if only to be dismissed. This invocation doubtlessly refers to specific mechanisms linking different levels of signification within narrative structures, and, more often than not, the model these critics challenge is Frederic Jameson's rather narrow conception of the term. Yet it also serves a historiographical function: most immediately, 'allegory' is a marker of anteriority designating postdictatorial cultural production; more broadly, it serves as shorthand for the now-diminished, but durable hegemonic relation between culture and politics in which this rhetorical figure has played a central role, dating back to the consolidation of the nation state in the second half of the nineteenth century. At first glance, then, the consensus with regards to its diminished effectiveness might seem to posit a clear rupture with prior modes of filmmaking and, in doing so, paradoxically reinforces the linear temporality and the very totalizing narratives the films themselves resist. Yet, as evinced by its recurrence in the critical discourse that stakes out 'New Argentine Cinema' as an object of study, allegory inhabits this loose corpus with a strong, if ghostly presence that indicates the deeper historical continuities it shares with the aesthetic models of earlier films. If during the second half of the twentieth century, 'allegory spelled an epochal transmutation, parallel to and coextensive with a fundamental impossibility to represent the ultimate ground, a constitutive failure that installed the object of representation as a lost object' (Avelar 1999: 15), its re-appearance reminds us that the passage from one historical period to the next remains incomplete. Resisted or discarded, allegory nonetheless persists as a figure of its own ruin in contemporary cultural discourse, marking a pause in the unfinished transition from the liberal nation state to another order under global capitalism. If allegory previously inscribed 'the remainder that names the phantasmic persistence of unresolved mourning work' (Avelar 1999: 8), it now appears as a remainder of itself, a device that stays in motion even if it no longer mourns any lost object in particular, except perhaps for history itself. If a qualitative shift has occurred that distinguishes 'new' Argentine cinema, it is not a question of whether allegory is present or absent, or how or to what extent a given film is allegorical in comparison to earlier ones. Instead, we must ask, how does allegory persist

when it is no longer in the service of cultural production invested in constructing or critiquing a nationalist project? What happens to the long-privileged 'vehicle for time and dialectics' when it is, so to speak, left to its own devices?

*Todos mienten* constitutes a provisional response to these questions. Filmed over the course of two weeks on a shoestring budget, Piñeiro's film presents a stripped-down narrative that sets its conspiratorial plot into motion with little in the way of exposition. We know virtually nothing about the lives of its characters and, as Aguilar aptly points out, 'in a game whose rules are never entirely clear and whose meaning constantly escapes us [...] identities are contingent, fragile, and ephemeral' (2011: 234–35). Indeed, the film's characters illustrate Hegel's comment that 'in order that there may be congruity between subjectivity and the abstract meaning which it has, the allegorical being must make subjectivity so hollow that all specific individuality vanishes from it' (cited in Avelar 1999: 6). Yet however precarious or temporary these identities may be, within the confines of the dilapidated country house on the outskirts of the capital, its characters remain faithful to the rules of the game and lie and improvise by embodying, enacting and citing a common, limited repertoire drawn from world cinema and a national literary canon. Identities, references and associations may be discarded as nonchalantly as they are assumed, but the gestures and habits structuring these exchanges continue to condition the range of actions that occur within the enclosed dramatic space; the film offers no glimpse of an outside to its play of difference, no exteriority to ground or detain its rehearsal of foundational tropes. More subversively, it is not just that the characters and the film treat literary and cinematic canons with irreverence, but that its accumulating cultural references and historical referents become destabilized as the plot advances.

'Isabel's dream', the twelfth of the seventeen chapters announced with the blood red title cards that divide the film, epitomizes this process of conflation. In the previous sequence, titled 'All's Well That Ends Well', Iván reads aloud and records the story of a drowned sailor from the opening letter of Sarmiento's *Viajes* to Mónica, who lies on a bed while pretending to be in a state of catatonic shock. Isabel, the character responsible for producing identical



Figure 6: In a dream sequence, Isabel wanders the labyrinthine interior of the country house in *Todos mienten*.

counterfeits of JMR's abstract paintings, comes into the room, lies beside Iván and falls asleep. The title card then cuts to a medium long shot divided into vertical bands of a doorway and walls of varying colours and textures, repeating a common visual motif seen throughout the film. Iván shouts over the sound of a ringing phone, insisting that no one answers. Isabel appears backlit in the doorway, and Iván, out of sight, resumes his reading from *Viajes*. The camera pans, following Isabel as she walks into the kitchen and tries to serve herself a glass of water, but no water comes from the tap. A series of shots, maintaining the same perspective, follows Isabel as she passes through a series of thresholds in the seemingly labyrinthine interior space, before she exits the house and – still in *plain américain* – she pauses and gazes towards the garden. As she begins to walk again, a reverse long shot reveals the other six inhabitants of the house gathered in a circle at the base of a large tree. The remainder of the sequence is an uninterrupted take that lasts nearly three minutes. Off-screen, a male voice commands 'Isabel, come here', and, as she approaches, JMR steps into the frame for the first time, seen waist-up in rear profile. JMR orders the group to pick up clear buckets containing blood red paint and scale the tree, and pelts them with seed pods as he urges them to move quickly. As the last of them ascend the tree, the camera tilts upward, and the seven distribute the paint buckets to one another. JMR, with only the back of his head and shoulders visible but out of focus in the lower right corner of the frame, continues to throw objects at the characters as he directs them in a recitation of the compulsory slogans of his ancestor's regime. 'May the savage, vile, filthy Unitarians drop dead!' they exclaim in unison as the sequence ends.

At a glance, it may seem that, in prefiguring the arrival of JMR, the dream reveals that the elaborate game in which Isabel and her companions participate re-enacts a primal scene of national identity. After all, in a movie that constantly and explicitly engages literature, it seems hardly a stretch to consider this scene an allusion to the Wolf-Man Sergei Pankejeff's dream of six or seven white wolves sitting in a walnut tree outside his window. In his analysis of the Wolf-Man's dream, Freud links its contents with the fairy tale 'The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats'; similarly, we might reference the famous episode in



Figure 7: JMR orders the inhabitants of the country house to climb a tree and recite the slogans of his ancestor's regime in *Todos mienten*.

Sarmiento's *Facundo* when its protagonist takes shelter in a tree, as a man-eating tiger awaits him below, before he kills the beast and becomes 'the Tiger of the Plains'. Thus, as the Wolf Man's dream represents the castrating father, so Isabel's stands for the ordinary act of becoming beast and becoming sovereign. However, as Deleuze and Guattari remind us, such a readymade interpretation depends on a 'reductive procedure' consisting of 'free association on the level of the representation of things' that brings 'back the unity or identity of the person or the allegedly lost object' (1987: 28). Read in this way, the dream becomes an act of mourning, which 'displays a necessarily allegorical structure' (Avelar 1999: 5). Yet this allegory, nested within another, is also like the dream of wolves in that it presents 'different types of multiplicities that coexist, interpenetrate, and change places – machines, cogs, motors, and elements that are set in motion at a given moment, forming an assemblage productive of statements' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 36). In other words, neither the significance of the dream nor the larger plot of the film can be reduced to a single traumatic scene. When the characters of *Todos mienten* transcribe Sarmiento's *Viajes*, recite Federalist slogans, copy paintings, or conspire to bring the bloodlines of Rosas and Sarmiento together, they do not represent the positive content of a foundational event, instead they repeat the movements of conventional allegories through a feedback loop marked by short circuits, interruptions, and misdirection. There is no formal or aesthetic distinction between what the characters recite in Isabel's dream and what they perform in the diegetic reality of the film, but rather a secondary, unconscious reiteration of the same basic gestures.

In the chapter 'F for true' (a play on the title of Orson Welles's final film), Isabel explains that the procedure for producing counterfeit paintings signed by JMR consists of 'making the original false with counterfeits that are really originals, but which, when seen together, all become false when they are really originals'. The paintings are falsifications, in other words, not because they are derivations of a unique original, but because the original is multiple, itself a product of the procedure of copying. In contrast to the 'foundational novels' of the nineteenth century 'that try to pass for truth and to become the ground for political association' (Sommer 1991: 45), Isabel's statement of purpose underscores how *Todos mienten* makes no effort to pass as anything more than artifice. And unlike the allegories of defeat encoded in postdictatorial narratives, nor does it exhibit any concern for the impossibility of representing such an ultimate ground. Whereas the tension generated between plotlines and a unitary, if inscrutable object that circumscribed its narrative was the central source of conflict for earlier allegorical models, *Todos mienten* presents an inverse situation: the components of the larger history are conspicuously on display, but it is unclear what stakes there are, if any, for its young protagonists. Nevertheless, they persist in repeating – quoting, transcribing, retelling, reimagining – elements of a common history that are either mutually intelligible or at least sound familiar enough to keep them playing their assigned roles. There is no apparent larger hidden agenda behind its machinations, but instead a flattening or conflation of the double structure of the dialectical allegory. In this respect, *Todos mienten* could be seen as a deeply cynical film, for it suggests that we are stuck reiterating the familiar tropes of national history, incapable of imagining a politics not dependent on them or the identities they have engendered. Yet in its sparse, seemingly rote rehearsal of foundational narratives, Piñeiro's film not only demonstrates how these persist as embodied habits, independent of the state they helped construct, for it also points to the limits of intelligibility of its repertoire of received ideas and behaviours.

## CONCLUSION

In an article about the systematic crisis of Argentine culture, published in 1979, Ángel Rama observes that the struggles of the past were felt with a particular intensity in a moment marked by great uncertainty with respect to the concept of the nation. Drawing a comparison between his present and the period of national organization that followed Rosas's downfall, he comments that

[it is] as if in this 1980 we are at the moment of Caseros, although in a more complex instance because of the international conjuncture of the moment and for the accumulation, the enormous weight of the past gone by, which has impacted the current generations with a force that was lacking at the beginning of the [20<sup>th</sup>] century.

(Rama 1979: 2)

Nearly three decades later, Matías Piñeiro's *El hombre robado* dramatizes a variant of the peculiar historical experience described by Rama: as Mercedes Montt distractedly reads and rereads Sarmiento's autobiographical narrative about Rosas's defeat at Caseros, the distinction between that decisive moment of history and the present diminishes beneath the force of the former. Yet at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as the globalizing processes alluded to by Rama continue, that enormous mass is felt differently than it had been during the military dictatorship, when literature and film offered interpretations of the recent past centred on 'a hypothesis about violence as a constant of Argentine history, a sort of law that would have been in force, unchanged, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century' (Sarlo 2006: 2). It is not that the sense of national crisis described by Rama has abated, but that, to the contrary, it has normalized to the point that the turbulent foundational period of the mid-nineteenth century is equivalent not to a single current event or conjuncture, but the present generally speaking. The weight of this past is no longer felt with the same intensity, in large part because its relation to a specific form of state power has diminished. Nonetheless, as *El hombre robado* and *Todos mienten* remind us, the past persists as a kind of spectre whose presence is diffuse and whose force exceeds the efforts of the state or other social actors to make it an instrument it for specific ends.

To evoke the foundational myths of Argentine identity in this particular moment, as does Matías Piñeiro in his first two features, is to engage in an exercise that is inevitably marked by repetition and accumulation. The ubiquitous figure of Sarmiento, who is the motor for the plot of *El hombre robado*, appears neither as the architect of the nation state, nor as the prescient *letrado* whose formula of an epic clash between civilization and barbarism long served as the interpretive key for competing versions of the history of Argentine and Latin American modernity. Instead, the visage and the voice of the author of *Facundo* appear as the subject of multiple representations and reproductions that preside over a critical juncture, which distends without presenting any clear outcome. On the other hand, the Sarmiento of *Todos mienten* is a mere pretext, the starting point of a dubious genealogy and a conspiratorial plot whose aim is to bring the grand metanarrative he inaugurated to its definitive close. Yet, ironically, the very device employed to bring about epochal closure is an allegory, another privileged device of the foundational fictions of Latin American identity. Thus, at a glance, it might seem that *El hombre robado* and

*Todos mienten* do little more than restage the basic components of a national history that, divested of any political consequence, arbitrarily directs the romantic complications of underemployed or idle youths. These reiterations, however, are not as automated as they first seem, for, in relentlessly foregrounding the presence of the nineteenth century in the twenty-first, Piñeiro's films insist on the force of habit that makes the commonplaces of Argentine identity common. Constructing intricate narratives in the present out of the familiar elements of the past, *El hombre robado* and *Todos mienten* employ a procedure that was formerly used 'for linking heterogeneous elements that ensured dialectical conflict [...] to produce its exact opposite: the homogenous great layer of mystery, where all of yesterday's conflicts become expressions of intense co-presence' (Rancière 2007: 62). That is, whereas Sarmiento's works and allegory have long been central to interpretations of a national history centred on a fundamental clash between binary opposites as its generative force, the films of Matías Piñeiro emphasize how, through its incessant repetition, this accumulated history still constitutes a common condition of the present, even if it no longer produces new political subjectivities. The wager these films propose, then, is that a new history must emerge not by discarding the present one, but by repeating it until it is rendered senseless.

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