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San Martín, from Bronze to Celluloid: Argentina's Liberator as Film Character

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National history has always been a major theme in Argentine cinema. *El fusilamiento de Dorrego* ("The Execution of Dorrego", Mario Gallo, 1910), Argentina's first narrative film, portrayed an incident reflecting the internal political conflict that had prevailed since independence. Recognizing the potential of the historical genre, Gallo went on to make *La Revolución de Mayo* ("The May Revolution") and *La Batalla de Maipú* ("The Battle of Maipú").¹ Historical films performed an integrative function at a time when industrialization was attracting farm workers to the cities and the state was promoting mass immigration from Europe.

For the most part, narrative films with historical themes disseminated basic myths of national identity and presented versions of the past reflecting the history produced by the oligarchical-liberal rulers of the country. Yet, interestingly, very few films depicted the image of General José de San Martín, the soldier who had led native forces to victory against Spanish armies between 1812 and 1822 before going into exile in France until his death in 1850—even though his memory was enshrined in the national imaginary under the title "the Father of our country," and "the Liberator".

San Martín's memory was appropriated and monopolized by the state. The Instituto Nacional Sanmartiniano (San Martín Society), established in 1933, proclaimed itself as a private, apolitical, essentially nationalist professional institution for the preservation of national memory; but it was founded at the *Círculo Militar* (Military Club), at a time when the army was involved in politics. In 1944 the Instituto was nationalized by the military dictatorship and put under the control of the War Ministry. In 1950 the centennial of San Martín's death was exploited by President Juan Domingo Perón's regime to glorify the president's image, and ceremonies commemorating San Martín were incorporated into Argentina's "civil religion".² This sanctification of San Martín was a deterrent to representing him in movies. Most filmmakers and businessmen preferred to avoid a subject that was controlled by the National Academy of History or the Instituto Sanmartiniano and regulated by censorship laws that penalized any perceived attack on the "fundamental values of the nation".³

This article analyzes representations of the Liberator General José de San Martín in films produced during different periods and national moods: the military dictatorship instituted in 1966; the popular resistance and rise of revolutionary guerrilla warfare in the late 1960s and early 1970s; the eagerness for national rebirth with the return to democracy in 1984; and the disillusion generated by the imposition of neo-liberalism—with its implicit political and economic corruption—by Carlos Menem's presidency after 1989. My analysis points up the different uses of historiography and iconography by filmmakers. During the military dictatorship (1966-1973), the hegemonic discourse disseminated through official history, civil rituals and the media, waged a battle over symbols with revolutionary discourses that included possession of the national myth of the Liberator in films. After 1984, this battle subsided, opening the door to portrayals of imagined aspects of San Martín's private life—a subject never addressed before. The globalization of the Argentine economy and its cultural consequences have resulted in a humanization and weakening of San Martín's image in later films, expressing shifts in national identity discourse.

Historic Heroes and Symbolic Conflicts

The biographies and images of national heroes offer objects of identification in various respects, reinforcing social cohesion and obscuring social disparities. Dreams and desires are vicariously realized by almost superhuman patriots who transcend the normal human horizons, as San Martín's image was inculcated to children and citizens throughout the years. National heroes lead justified war, and the hero's name becomes a metaphor for the ideal of the national character. San Martín's "*Precepts for my daughter*" were incorporated to formal studies and decorum, while the hero's image, transformed into an icon, is an index of morality, patriotism, and sacrifice, marking internal or external "Others". The hero's deeds and moral qualities are placed above

social contradictions, while the education system, the state institutions, and the media inculcate the national myths, contributing significantly to the construction of the “imagined community”.⁴ Those myths are, in fact, narrative constructions that help overcome the discrepancy between knowledge and belief, creating an ideological image of the past and the present.⁵

Biographies are a popular genre in history, literature, and cinema, where they reinforce the social status quo by disseminating the established views, as San Martín's life was represented in literature and educational texts. The guardians of that status quo often become fanatically protective of the images of national heroes when changing social relations give rise to new views of the “founding fathers” that challenge the conventional representations, as revisionist historiography did in Argentina. Interpretations of the nation as an imagined community built through the narrative process, wherein different subjects tell alternative versions of the past, permit a comparative study of the way heroes have been represented through time, while textual analysis reveals the political significance of those representations.⁶

Historical films integrate current political interests with local discourses and historiography, as well as cinematographic traditions inspired by universal aesthetic trends. In the sixties the Argentine military dictatorship exploited the emotional and intellectual influence of this complex interweaving of discourse and aesthetics, reinforcing the collective and individual sense of belonging to the nation.⁷

Film is a product of negotiation between the identity of the creative subjects and social discourses and forces. Whether a film's producers are economically independent or dependent on official and institutional subsidies can have a crucial influence on the way the image of the past is constructed, especially in countries, like Argentina, where the film industry has difficulty surviving without state support.⁸ Current censorship laws or other forms of ideological control affect the script, as do changes in the balance of power between discourses, which permit new interpretations. The conquest of screens by commercial modes of representation reduced the creative freedom of Argentine filmmakers seeking a wide audience. Only clandestine or experimental filmmakers can ignore the conditioning factors affecting the market for symbolic products.⁹

From Glory to Oblivion

José de San Martín, born in 1778, was the Creole son of the Spanish governor at the little town of Yapeyú. Present-day researchers claim that he was the product of a liaison between his father and an indigenous woman. His mestizo appearance earned him the sobriquets of “*El Cholo*” and “*El Tape de las misiones*” (“mission Indian”). When the family returned to Spain in 1784, José was destined for the military profession, at that time the only road to social improvement. He had endured chronically poor health, suffering from rheumatism, stomach ulcers, asthma, hem-

orrhoids, and cholera. For years he took opium, one of the few palliatives known at the time, and he often fell prey to pains and illnesses.¹⁰

The young San Martín participated in battles against Arab and French armies, and served under English officers, Spain's new allies in its confrontations with Napoleon. His meteoric ascension through military ranks attested to his leadership and strategic abilities. When King Fernando VII restored the old regime, civil war broke out all over Spain, while in the American colonies liberal Creoles battled royalist forces. San Martín resigned his military commission and joined a group of Americans planning to seek independence from the Spanish crown with English support. In March, 1812, San Martín disembarked in Buenos Aires, where the government charged him with the task of organizing a regiment that was victorious against the Spaniards in its first battle, in February, 1813. During this period he married Remedios, the 15-year-old daughter of the wealthy Escalada family.

Appointed commander of the army destined to liberate Peru, San Martín devised an ingenious strategy: to cross the Andes, liberate Chile, and surprise the Spaniards in Peru from the sea. Serving as governor of Cuyo, at the foot of the Andes, he spent three years forming an army, despite constant friction with the political leadership in Buenos Aires. In January 1817 his forces liberated Chile, where he declined the position of Chilean head of state. The campaign for Peru's liberation lasted from August 1820 to June 1822. Ships were provided by the English navy. On 25 July 1822, Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín met at Guayaquil. Some interpretations suggest conflicts between the two men: San Martín was a constitutional royalist while Bolívar, educated in the French tradition, was a republican. Nor did they have equal political strength, since Bolívar enjoyed the support of the state of Greater Colombia (present-day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama), whereas San Martín had no backing from the Argentine government. Traditional accounts of their meeting emphasize San Martín's willingness to sacrifice his own interests.

San Martín handed Peru over to Bolívar in September 1822 and retired to Argentina, while politicians accused him of cowardice. His wife passed away in 1823. Reluctant to involve himself in civil wars, he went into exile in Europe in 1824, with his daughter Mercedes. In 1829 he tried to return to Argentina, but remained in Europe until passing away at Boulogne-sur-Mer on 17 August 1850. In 1877, at President Nicholas Avellaneda's initiative, San Martín's remains were repatriated to Argentina and interred in the Cathedral of Buenos Aires.

From Exile to the National Pantheon

The consolidation of the Argentine state in the 1880s necessitated a national identity based on an ethos of national unity, patriotism, sacrifice, order, discipline, internal peace, and

Eurocentrism, at a time when oligarchic landowners were leading the nation into neocolonial patterns of dependency. European immigrants were required to replace exterminated Indian and *gauchos* who had proved unamenable to the capitalistic exploitation of agriculture.¹¹ Official history disseminated a narrative that focused on nation-building by patriotic heroes, leaving little room in the national myths for any memory of grassroots mobilization. Notable in this respect were the writings of Bartolomé Mitre, the intellectual general who had established the port city's control over the country and was elected president for the term of 1862-1868. His classic *Historia de San Martín y de la emancipación sud-americana* was first published in 1875 and has been reprinted many times. During Mitre's presidency Buenos Aires erected its most imposing statue of San Martín.

To his contemporaries, Mitre was telling national history as a romance, but one true in every fact. To modern critics, Mitre was the founding father of a national memory made up of heroes and demons, constructed through a process involving intentional choices, censorship, forgetting, myth-making and sanctification. His version resembled an "ideological novel", didactically designed to validate his own concept of Argentina.

While Argentinean intellectuals, such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Vicente Fidel López, and Juan Bautista Alberdi held ambivalent views on San Martín, Mitre's San Martín was "a historical force" responding to a "fatal impulse". He was an "undeciphered enigma", and his statues were "bronze Sphinxes keeping the secret of his life". He was "a Titan" doing a "Cyclopean job". The public schools' inculcation of Mitre's version of history made any alternative view of history a criminal assault on the nation.¹²

Revisionist historiography criticized from the late 1880s the liberal-oligarchic version of national history as an edifice built on lies and falsifications concealing the complicity of landowners and politicians with English imperialist interests.¹³ The revisionist school focused on the government and politics of Juan Manuel de Rosas (1829-1832, 1835-1852), inverting previous assessments of Argentine presidents, military men, and politicians. "A traitor to national interests" was the usual accusation revisionists leveled at well-remembered leaders from the past; but San Martín's ascendancy in the national pantheon did not change significantly.¹⁴

President Juan Perón's administration (1946-1955) promoted parallels between Perón and San Martín, and 1950 was designated as "the year of the Liberator General San Martín", reverting his image to an almost exclusively military emphasis.¹⁵ Revisionist nationalist historians supported Perón, but revisionist historiography was adopted as the "official" Peronist view of the past only after

Perón had been deposed. Peronist school textbooks introduced in 1953 presented San Martín and Perón as equivalent Liberators but did not mention Juan Manuel de Rosas at all, thereby avoiding unnecessary conflict with the liberal opposition. The anti-Rosas intellectual Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888), a liberal exiled during the Rosas dictatorship and elected president after Mitre for the years 1862 to 1868, was mentioned exclusively as "Father of the Classroom".¹⁶

A stable democratic system was impossible after the anti-Peronist purge that followed Perón's overthrow in 1955 as long as half of the Argentine population felt like "internal exiles".¹⁷ Political and economic exclusion reached an extreme under the military dictatorship imposed in 1966, introducing a conservative nationalist-Catholic-liberal discourse and reinforcing the traditional national pantheon. No important changes in the gallery of bygone heroes were attempted during the short democracy of 1973-76. Politics and cultural struggles came to an end when the army took over the government in 1976. Intellectuals and artists as well as political activists and guerrillas were killed or disappeared, went into exile, kept quiet, or simply tried to survive. State terror reduced cultural life, and the expression of subversive ideas awaited the return of democracy.¹⁸ During Raul Alfonsín's presidency (1983-1989) and Carlos Menem's two presidential terms (1989-1999), the Argentine economy embarked on globalization. Little changed during the radical Fernando de la Rúa's brief presidency, which was terminated by popular demand at the end of 2001.

Post-modern cynicism and mistrust of politicians had a very real basis in Argentineans' frustrated hopes and awareness of the corruption that was endemic in their culture, economy, and politics. This mood was apparent in a new literary trend focusing on national heroes and liberated from any constraint exercised by facts, proof, documentation, or historical method; instead, it expressed "a legitimate collective desire... to discover the real, believable man so long hidden behind the stone effigy." The marketing interest led writers to replace the old historical novels' deification of heroes with a kind of nihilism that infused the historical narrative with "banality and gossip," according to Patricia Pasquali, a member of the National History Academy.¹⁹ At the same time, academic research and a new trend of literary production on San Martín expressed the search for explanations of the past, necessary in order to adapt Argentine identity to the challenges posed by the changes in economics and politics. Historiographic conflicts have become less political and violent, although social powers are still trying to control San Martín's public images, while others aspire to exploit his memory for economic gain, for



President Juan Perón's administration promoted parallels between Perón and San Martín.

Courtesy of Photo Archive.

example the plans to transform his birthplace into a pilgrimage center.

From Bronze to Celluloid

A chronic lack of funds keeps the Argentine film industry dependent on state support, even in neo-liberal times. Given the status of San Martín's image in the national discourse and the inevitable intervention of the Instituto Nacional Sanmartiniano in any project involving it, only a few films have attempted any portrayal of the national liberator.²⁰ These films took historiographic texts as referents, but not at any time is their polemic nature of the filmic image clear to spectators ignorant of the controversy over its interpretation. By reinventing the image of San Martín, filmmakers construct an identity that can express resistance to social injustice or exclusion and to the "McDonaldization" of the culture in recent times.²¹

Left-wing intellectuals' reconsideration of working-class support for Peronism and the rise of Third-Worldism in the 1960s provided a favorable breeding ground for new subversion in politics and the arts. Historical revisionism was bolstered by a profusion of Marxist-nationalist historiography, reflected by engaged filmmaking, while the military regime imposed in 1966 reinforced the patriotic ethos and supported the Catholic religion. General Onganía, elected president in 1966 by the military *junta*, promulgated new laws in 1968 reinforcing film censorship but offering support for films that focused on traditional identity and the positive aspects of national heroes' lives.²² Dissident filmmakers eschewed both canonical treatments of sacred themes and state subsidies. The most prolific of these dissidents was the Peronist left-wing Grupo Cine Liberación (Liberation Cinema Group). The films of this group were conceived as the ideological weapons of "organic intellectuals" converting from traditional left to the national movement. They portrayed working-class and Peronist struggles as the axis of national history, appropriating San Martín's memory to support their view.²³

La hora de los hornos/ The Hour of Furnaces

Grupo Cine Liberación produced *La hora de los hornos* ("The Hour of Furnaces", Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 1968), a four-hour "cinematic essay" about Argentina under neocolonialism which proposed armed socialist-Peronist revolution as the only path to social justice, independence, and development. This clandestine film was distributed through labor unions, Peronist groups, student movements, and even churches. Almost 300,000 people watched it under these conditions until legal public screenings began in 1973. This was an era of armed struggle, popular mobilization, and political negotiations between an unpopular military regime and a growing opposition front under Perón's leadership.

While Peronism in power (1946-1955) had been hostile to liberal and leftist artists and intellectuals, like Jorge Luis Borges, Victoria Ocampo and Bernardo Houssay, Perón had been in exile long enough for his image to be drained of any clear significance, and excluded social groups, including those who had opposed him in the past, could now appropriate him as a symbol to which new meanings could be attached.²⁴ The film expressed a Peronist-Marxist-revisionist view of Argentina's history that was associated with Third-World discourse and an indo-americanist exhortation to guerrilla warfare based on Che Guevara's theory of revolutionary focus. It called on anti-bureaucratic workers, anti-imperialist intellectuals, and left-nationalist students to lead the national liberation movement while attacking the venerated liberal-oligarchic vision, pointing out traitors and betrayals throughout the history of Argentina. Political discourse in the film reflected the rise of a combative Peronist Left that was later destroyed by the army during the "Dirty War" (1976-1979). Leftist Peronism excluded every position but its own from "Argentine-ness". The Group practiced in this film what Amos Fukenstein has described as "the historiographical genre of contra-history": polemical writing that systematically uses sources of the Enemy to distort his identity and collective memory.²⁵ The extremist application of contra-history negates all positive aspects of the identity and self-image of "the Other." Consequently, anyone who constructs his own identity by means of this discursive strategy destroys himself while destroying the Other, as happened during the "Dirty War" between 1976 and 1979.

Although the film did not show San Martín's physical image, it twice exhibited a facsimile of the order he had issued on the day his army began the campaign to liberate Chile and Perú (January 1817). San Martín had called on his troops to fight to the death in a popular language that was not appropriate to the moralistic mood imposed by General Onganía's government: "if we run out of ammunition and uniforms, we'll fight in our balls [naked], like our cousins the Indians". The reference to naked fighters evoked the "*descamisados*" (without shirts), as Evita Perón called the Peronist workers. Perón and San Martín were equated, as they had been in the Peronist state's discourse.

The text was presented on screen instead of San Martín's iconographic image and without a voice-over reading. The film diffused the verbal message and gave the viewers opportunity to read by themselves, appropriate the spirit of freedom involved in it and re-create the call for a national liberation struggle. Thus, *La hora de los hornos* appropriated San Martín's official memory and the historic document known to Argentineans from school in order to redeem Perón's leadership and to describe the Peronist masses' struggle as a continuation of the nation's Liberator tradition—a second war of national liberation.

El santo de la espada

New laws in 1968 reinforced film censorship but offered support for films that focused on traditional identity and the positive aspects of national heroes' lives. The result was a revitalization of the historical genre and the "gaucho film". In the ensuing years the Argentine film industry produced *Martín Fierro* (Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, 1968), *Don Segundo Sombra* (Manuel Antín, 1969), *El santo de la espada* ("The Knight of the Sword", Torre Nilsson, 1970), *Santos Vega* (Carlos Borcosque, Jr., 1971), *Güemes, la tierra en armas* ("Guemes, the Country up in Arms", Torre Nilsson, 1971), and *Argentino hasta la muerte!* ("An Argentine to the Death!" Fernando Ayala, 1971). A mild revisionism entered Argentine cinema with *El último montonero* ("The Last Montonero," Catriano Catriani, 1971), based on historian Félix Luna's biography of caudillo Chacho Peñaloza, and *Juan Manuel de Rosas* (Antín, 1972), for which the revisionist historian José María Rosa was a consultant.²⁶

El santo de la espada was a blockbuster box-office hit, financed by a US producer with support from the Argentine military government.²⁷ Director Torre Nilsson, well known for French New-Wave-style psychological dramas, saw himself as a professional who would not leave the country or stop working because of censorship laws. Normally, a film character's relations with the psychological processes considered to be characteristic of his culture express the connections between fantasies and the possibility of implementing them in real life.²⁸ The film was strongly influenced by the counsels of a representative of the Instituto Sanmartiniano, whose presence was imposed as a condition for state support and authorization. As a result, the repressive nature of Argentine culture at that time was reflected in the elimination of any aspect that might humanize the image of the Hero, as references to the characters' private lives and moral dilemmas.

The film illustrated Ricardo Rojas's biography of the Liberator, with additional material taken from Bartolomé Mitre's *Vida de San Martín* and books by other historians. Rojas (1882-1957), historian, poet, and university professor, considered literature to be an excellent vehicle of social integration, producing a national identity that melded different races and origins. In 1933, he published *El santo de la espada: Vida de San Martín* ("The Saint of the Sword: The Life of San Martín"), a romanticized biography of the Liberator that endorsed Mitre's version of history, but emphasized San Martín's moral qualities rather than his military abilities.²⁹ This ideological novel became a best-seller, bringing the national myth out of scholarly texts.³⁰ Part of its success must be attributed to widespread



In *El Santo de la espada* many scenes reproduced iconographic paintings from national museums.

Courtesy of Photo Archive.

disappointment in the political system and a growing desire for a new kind of "clean", nationalist government of army officers, which, it was hoped, would lead the country to a better future. This wish was fulfilled in 1943 when the government was taken over by a group of military men—one of whom was Colonel Juan Domingo Perón.

The actors were television and repertoire-theater stars such as Alfredo Alcón and Evangelina Salazar, whose popularity was used to inject some humanity into characters who were basically reciting lines from history books.³¹ The music of the soundtrack was composed and conducted by Ariel Ramírez, famous all over the world for his *Misa Criolla*. Since the cinematic language accorded with the popular commercial style and audiences had been familiar with the story since elementary school, the film was unlikely to surprise or disturb the audience. It reinforced the social and political status quo, recycling sacred myths concerning personal sacrifice, patriotism, and decorum. Although Argentina was in a state of turbulence following widespread popular protest demonstrations against the dictatorship in 1969 and 1970, the film transmitted a message of obedience and respect for the military. Although women's status in the family and the workplace was improving, the film reinforced the traditional view of the hero's wife as a quiet, supportive helpmeet.³² No sign of any human relationship between the couple was shown on screen and no mention was made of San Martín's love affairs during his years away from home. Scenes of San Martín crying over fallen soldiers and taking medicine were cut out because "heroes don't cry" and "heroes are not weak".³³ The moralizing influence was so great that the phrase about fighting "in our balls" was excised from San Martín's order to the army, even though the aim was maximum faithfulness to historiography, documents and official iconography. To this end many scenes reproduced iconographic paintings from national museums that were familiar to everyone from schoolrooms, textbooks, magazines, and other sources.

While *La hora de los hornos* portrayed a popular general with whom people identified, and focused on the continuation of his struggles, *El santo de la espada* promoted respect for the military and obedience to authority. An epic narrative, panoramic shots of Argentine soldiers battling Spaniards, and export-oriented music and TV stars all worked to construct an image of national identity that was attractive to the masses. Schools organized "educational" screenings, making the film a huge success. Thus, official history and canonic texts were used to construct a cinematic illustration of myth for military dictatorship aims.

Tangos—El exilio de Gardel/ Tangos—Gardel's Exile

The filming of *Tangos—El exilio de Gardel* (“Tangos—Gardel’s Exile”, Fernando Solanas, 1985) was begun in Paris during the political exile of the director and completed in Buenos Aires after the restoration of democracy. It was a great success in Argentina and at international film festivals, despite its elaborate language and disjointed narrative. The plot focuses on a group of exiled Argentines in Paris who attempt to stage a “*tanguedia*”, a musical spectacle combining tango and tragedy. The film is strongly symbolic, the unfinished spectacle serving as a metaphor for the never-ending “national liberation project” in which the Peronist Left was engaged. The French who support the Argentineans in their endeavor do not understand their aesthetics, reflecting Europe’s incomprehension of Latin American history and issues.

The film presents scenes of surrealism and magical realism. While the surrealism is an expression of individual consciousness, in the scenes of magical realism the characters perceive unnatural events as natural in the diegetic world. In contrast to surrealism, an aesthetic effect produced by European rationalism, magical realism is a device used by Latin American intellectuals reacting to Eurocentrism.³⁴ Surreal scenes in this film express processes in the characters’ consciousness and ideology, whereas scenes of magical realism portray the conflict of Argentine identity with exile and the national myths. Towards the end of the film, Gerardo, a character who represents the revisionist historians of FORJA³⁵ and works at a library, the symbolic place of history and memory, meets the ghosts of San Martín and Carlos Gardel (1890-1935), a famous tango-singer nicknamed “the Creole Nightingale”. Gardel had been a hit in Paris and other European capitals from 1928 on, becoming a national symbol and Argentine myth—amid unending debates concerning his true nationality. He was the son of a poor immigrant woman, lived as a bohemian, succeeded in Europe, and died in a plane crash when young—a colorful background in marked contrast to the patrician lineage and severe image of some of the heroes of the national pantheon. Gardel’s integrative myth proves to people that the marginal and exploited members of society also contribute to the country’s greatness.

The three Argentines in *Tangos* are old, sick, and tired. San Martín’s elderly image is that of the official iconography, leaning on a cane and complaining about present-day generals, who were “not good enough patriots” and had “forgotten to pay his retired officer’s pension”. In civilian clothes, he resembles a kindly grandfather, the Father of the Patria. His weariness symbolizes the failure of the liberation plan. As in *La hora de los hornos*, here, too, San Martín’s image was appropriated to attack the military, although in a democratic rather than left-wing Peronist mode. Here there was a recognition that Argentines could elect another party

to the government, as they had elected the Radical Alfonsín in 1983. The discussion among the old men is the embodiment of a fantasy fostered by the educational system in assignments requiring pupils to write essays on “What would you say to...[San Martín, Sarmiento, etc.]?” While the imagined dialogue between the pupils and the hero reinforces the inclusion of the individual in hegemonic ideology, the subject is upset by the conversation in the film, which denounces the military regime’s betrayal of the patriotic tradition and social justice. Completing the decadent picture, Gardel announces that he can no longer sing and plays an old recording, symbolizing the wishes of the people, who have been deprived of a voice and must settle for nostalgia.

In an earlier scene, filmed on location, Gerardo and two Argentineans visit San Martín’s exile house in Boulogne-sur-Mer, where they read his testament calling on the military to respect the people’s decisions. Later they stand on a cliff above a tormented sea, looking west into the clouds towards Argentina, in the same pose in which iconographic paintings portrayed the old general—the message being that every exile, like San Martín (who in 1829 rejected the idea of returning because he did not want to be involved in civil war), personally pays the price of internal disputes over the national project. In the film, San Martín judges the situation from the wise, experienced perspective of the elders of traditional cultures—another way of criticizing the consequences of constructing the national state on the European model. Thus, the film invoked official iconography, historic document, traditional image of the Hero’s last years and integrative myth to construct a disjunctive vision of recent past, as well as the memory of politically engaged revisionist historians.

La fiebre del general/ The General's Fever

La fiebre del general (“The General’s Fever”, Jorge Coscia, 1990) presents a flesh-and-blood San Martín—sick, delirious, fearful, suffering from Oedipal trauma, coincident with the new trends in literary representations of San Martín. The plot by the director and Julio Fernández Baraibar describes San Martín’s visit to a friend’s ranch in Córdoba during the winter of 1815, for the purpose of mending his broken health. Mitre’s biography devotes little space to this interlude, while other historians merely mention a few of San Martín’s activities and visitors.

The idea of focusing on San Martín’s personal life had arisen in a conversation between Baraibar and well-known Marxist-revisionist historian Jorge Abelardo Ramos at a screening of *El santo de la espada* in 1970.³⁶ Ramos maintained that the hero’s marriage to a 15-year-old adolescent was a way of obtaining funding for his projects from the wealthy Escalada family.³⁷ Constructing an alternative image of San Martín during the presidency of Carlos Menem was part of the struggle for a cultural paradigm alternative to neo-liberal consumerism. Although the

filmmakers admired Gabriel García Márquez's novel *El general en su laberinto* (1990; *The General in His Labyrinth*), which tells the story of an expedition down the Magdalena River during which Simón Bolívar, sick, defeated, and betrayed, seeks consolation in erotic adventures, their own San Martín recovers in order to fight for liberation, expressing the optimism and Latin Americanism of the national Left.

The film received state support, which would normally compel review by the Instituto Nacional Sanmartiniano. To avoid this, the name of the hero is not uttered at any point in the film; he is called simply "General". The director of the Instituto expressed dissatisfaction with the project, but his institution did not try to prevent filming. Thus, in contrast to Torre Nilsson's experience in making *El santo de la espada*, any limitation here was the choice of the filmmakers; various state and private bodies extended aid as a way of showing patriotism. The musical score was composed by Jorge Marziali, including parts by José Luis Castiñeira de Dios, who also composed for *Tangos, el Exilio de Gardel* and other films related to Peronist discourse.

El general y la fiebre portrays a San Martín ill with tuberculosis, a disease that aesthetically accommodated fevers and delirium. Tuberculosis had a stigma associated with artists and bohemians, unsuitable for the hallowed image of the Liberator. The Instituto Sanmartiniano rejected it, claiming that the Hero suffered from stomach problems. Members of the Instituto Sanmartiniano later criticized the depiction of San Martín's dreams in the film, insisting that the Liberator's moral integrity and spiritual strength would not permit oneiric fantasies of this nature.

The film deconstructs the conventions of representing the Liberator on screen: The Indian servant Milagros who waited on San Martín during his visit in 1815 describes that visit to General Facundo Quiroga, who is staying in the same place in 1835, hours before being assassinated. In this way the story of the liberation is intercut with the civil wars and Buenos Aires's "betrayal" of the interior provinces according to the revisionist version of history; at the same time the subordinate female is given voice and valorized, in opposition to the gendered tradition embodied in the image of Remedios Escalada de San Martín in *El santo de la espada*. The narrative is interrupted by the general's dreams and hallucinations, deconstructing the normative chronological order of official history.

San Martín's delirious hallucinations are presented in a different color and lighting, in a way that suggests a sickly, deformed interior world, unacceptable to official historiography. San Martín imagines that he is engaged in battles against enemies whom he fears, who capture or kill him. His family image in the dreams is quite different from official history: the father condemns his service in the Latin American cause and calls him a traitor; his mother is distant and mute. These circumstances invite compassion for the Liberator, relegated to military life while still a child. When Milagros asks what combat is, San Martín describes disorder,

shouting, blood—the view of a human rather than a strategist. Historians maintain that San Martín put into practice a continental strategy that coincided with the interests of the English government, which offered him information and logistic support; but the film shows the crossing of the Andes as having been planned in an acute feverish state reflecting the "madness" of genius.³⁸

However, San Martín expresses a contempt for politicians, traitors, and "carneros" ("sheep"—cowards and stooges) that are rooted in left-wing nationalism: When he serves first local, then French wines to high-society guests, the guests praise the unsurpassable European quality, but San Martín reveals that with Milagros's complicity he has served the same national wine both times. The comic spirit of his action contradicts his traditional image of seriousness and frugality at a time when Latin American class-consciousness interprets austerity as the work of national governments, implemented by banks and international agencies.³⁹ The gibe at imported goods is a criticism of the neoliberal policy that opened Argentina's borders indiscriminately to imports, destroying national industry; and the contempt for "sheep" is a reference to the politicians who followed the dictates of the International Monetary Fund. At another point San Martín shows empathy for the oppressed, a relevant issue in contemporary Argentina.

Towards the end of the film, San Martín recovers and prepares to cross the Andes. Instead of the famous order mentioned in the previous films, the scene shows indigenous soldiers who assure him, in the Quechuan language that evokes Tupac Amaru⁴⁰ of their support and willingness to fight for liberation: "Overcome or die!" they exclaim, and San Martín echoes them hesitantly. Instead of the mythological Hero reclaiming people to go after his charisma, he is a leader who expresses the will of the oppressed masses, just like Perón was traditionally interpreted by the discourse of the national Left, and in contrast to Menem's telegenic, media-friendly neo-populist charisma.

El general y la fiebre was a critical success but attracted meager audiences, less than 5000 spectators during its first year in Buenos Aires city.⁴¹ In the euphoria generated by the announcement of a new currency convertibility law and an imagined future of intensive consumerism (which proved ephemeral), the general's agonies were of no interest to the public. Thus, the film does not appropriate the official history but proposes a subversive aesthetic incursion into a void in official narrative to construct a human vision of a wicked hero. It was made for commercial distribution, instead of the revolutionary uses of "*La hora de los Hornos*, involving identity negotiation of filmmakers. Financial help from business and institutions legitimated the weak image of the Hero, and did not destroy the official story but complemented it.

El viaje/The Journey

The new weakness of San Martín's image came to be associated even with patriotic monuments. *El viaje* ("The Journey",

Fernando Solanas, 1992) is a story of maturation that depicts Latin America 500 years after the European conquest. President Menem was to many Argentines a traitor who had promised redemption by means of a traditional Peronist social-justice program but who, once in charge, implemented policies that were quite the opposite. The “*grotesco*” style invented by Solanas expresses the grotesque consequences of neo-liberal policies and the pathetic performance of the political elites invoking a sovereignty that they distort in practice.⁴² The film shows Tierra del Fuego shaken by gales, suggesting that Argentina is adrift in the globalizing economic storm. The narrative follows an adolescent as he journeys over the continent in a futile search for his lost father, who symbolizes the populism that exploited the Oedipal relation between the masses and the caudillo. The protagonist realizes that he must devise a plan in which personal desires do not conflict with aspirations to social justice, or demand personal sacrifice as revolutionary foquism did in the past.

The narrative is interspersed with *historietas* (“little stories” in comic-strip form), animated by camera and editing, which transmit the story of the people’s struggles that has been forgotten by official history. The people in the comics appear later in the flesh, an effect of magic realism suggesting that resistance to globalization constitutes a continuation of liberation struggles. The *historieta* genre privileges visual language, a popular alternative to the verbal texts privileged in official history. The expressionist drawings of the alternative narrative are a counterbalance to the grotesque parody of the neo-liberal politicians, suggesting that the people’s struggles are the social reality and the regimes in power are a pathetic spectacle.⁴³

In a brief scene of magical realism, the bronze equestrian statue of the Liberator—similar to that erected during Mitre’s presidency—has been stolen by corrupt Menemist public officials who trade in metal. During the solemn ceremony inaugurating a replacement statue donated by commercial enterprises, a strong wind whisks it away, revealing that it is made of plastic: The glorious image of the Father of the Country, cast in noble bronze, has been sullied by the greed and immorality generated by anti-patriotic neo-liberalism and globalization, causing pupils to laugh at the amazing event. The meager screen time devoted to the occasion, despite the epic dimension of the film, suggests that the myths of official history had lost their importance.

Creative freedom carries risks. The director of *El viaje* was shot during the final stages of production by thugs who were never found but were widely believed to have been hired by Carlos Menem in order to intimidate him. Solanas was seriously wounded and the film’s premiere was delayed for months. Twenty years earlier, Solanas had asserted that the risks filmmakers assumed were the only proof of their revolutionary action.⁴⁴

Although *El viaje* won prizes at international festivals, it never attracted large audiences in Argentina: only 77800 spectators in its first year at Buenos Aires.⁴⁵ The prophetic allegory that

showed Buenos Aires flooded by sewage water and the president as a gangster with frog legs, suitable for maneuvering in the corrupted medium could not be an object of identification for the masses just when the Menemist economy was enjoying its greatest triumphs. Thus, the film does not evoke specific historiographic text, but the iconic image of the Liberator and the traditional patriotic discourse generated by official history, is in a parodic style that subverts their relevancy.

Conclusion

Images of the Liberator in Argentine films related to historiography. Historical texts are points of reference for the construction of the film images that help make up the collective imagery, even when the film refrains from quoting them directly. State institutional and financial mechanisms exert ideological control over commercial film, while disjunctive versions are also threatened with political and physical sanctions. A comparison between *El santo de la espada* and *El general y la fiebre* illustrates the changes that have taken place in control mechanisms throughout the twenty years. Although both received subsidies, the education system made the first film required viewing for pupils, ensuring its commercial success, but ignored the second film, dooming it to failure—a fitting sanction for the new age, in which profitability is all.

Police harassment of *La hora de los hornos* during the 1960s and 1970s and the attack on the director of *El viaje* in 1991 exemplify the intolerance shown to those who criticize the myths of the reigning system. Although San Martín’s image is not the main theme of these two films, the appropriation of that image separates the accepted vision of the past from the discourse that gave rise to it, demolishing one of the bases of national identity. In the same director’s *Tangos—El exilio de Gardel*, an aged San Martín expressed a democratic anti-military discourse widely accepted and no repressive action was taken. The civilian neo-liberal elite is more tolerant of dissident filmic visions than the military regimes were, but it will not abide attacks on the regime’s image of respectability.

Whereas the hegemony of the 1960s disseminated the ethos of sacrifice for one’s country, discipline, and obedience to the constituted authorities, the anti-hegemonic discourse of the Peronist Left preached analogous foquist voluntarism and sacrifice for the sake of the revolution. *El santo de la espada* and *La hora de los hornos* reflect these two alternatives.

El viaje confirms the out-datedness of the Peronist enterprise and the irrelevance of the traditional patriotic discourse in globalization times. It gives a voice to those who supported Menem’s election and felt betrayed by his power politics. In contrast, *El general y la fiebre* condemns neo-liberal policy, leaving open the option of a new encounter between the national leadership and the popular will. Both films express divergent post-Peronist political practices. Fernando Solanas abandoned Peronism

in 1990 and was among the founders of the coalition that put the unsuccessful De la Rúa in power, but abandoned it before the elections. Jorge Coscia, the director of *El general y la fiebre*, was appointed director of the National Film Institute in 2002 by the administration of Peronist president Eduardo Duhalde. Rubén Stella, who plays San Martín in the film, was designated Argentine secretary of culture at the same time.

Beyond the differences in the filmic visions of San Martín, the manipulations of his image in fact testify to the unifying power that the various discourses attribute to it. The last frames of *El general y la fiebre* show the troops crossing the Andes, to the strains of “Argentine”-type music reminiscent of Ariel Ramírez’s score for *El santo de la espada*. The film does not break completely with the traditional vision, but presents a “behind the scenes” revelation by portraying a historical figure with human weaknesses—already seen in *Tangos—El exilio de Gardel*—who identifies with the suffering and fears of the common people, transmitting the desire for national liberation and social justice that is postulated in *La hora de los hornos* but never made concrete. The “Argentinazo” and “Cacerolazos” that shook the country in December, 2001, demonstrated that the desire for liberation and justice felt by *los de abajo* (“the downtrodden”), like the soldiers who promised to overcome or die in *El general y la fiebre*, is expressed in class struggle, which is still the engine of history. Argentina must confront the bad winds denounced in *El viaje* in its never-ending quest for a country for all.

Notes

- 1 Coucelo, Jorge Miguel (1992), “El período mudo”, in idem, (ed.) *Historia del cine argentino*, Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, pp. 11-46
- 2 The phrase “civil religion” refers to a system of beliefs and practices serving to legitimize the social order, integrate the population around a set of shared values, and mobilize citizens to perform social duties. Such beliefs and practices are expressed through the medium of special sacred symbols that evoke a sense of awe and in some way link those who venerate them to questions of ultimate meaning. See Liebman, Charles S. (1978), “Myth, Traditions and Values in Israeli Society”, *Midstream* 1: 44-53.
- 3 Avellaneda, Andrés (1986), *Censura, autoritarismo y cultura: Argentina 1960-1983*, Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, p. 41.
- 4 Makolkin, Anna (1992), *Name, Hero, Icon—Semiotics of Nationalism through Heroic Biography*, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 3-7; Norman, Dorothy (1990), *The Hero: Myth/Image/Symbol*, New York: Anchor Books, pp. 3-7.
- 5 Levi-Strauss, Claude (1963), “The Myth and the Structural Study of the Myth”, *Structural Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books; Barthes, Roland (1998), “Myth Today”, in: *Mythologies*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1998 (first ed. 1957).
- 6 Identity-building is a never-ending process of reconstructing the past in search of present understanding and future projects. See: Hall, Stuart (1996), “Introduction: Who Needs Identity” in Hall, Stuart and Du Gay, Paul, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London: SAGE, pp. 1-17.
- 7 Lincon, Bruce (1989), *Discourse and the Construction of Society—Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual and Classification*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 3-11.
- 8 For an understanding of cinematography in neo-colonial countries, see: Burton, Julianne (1997), “Film Artisans and Film Industries in Latin America, 1956-1980”, in *New Latin American Cinema*, ed. Michael Martin, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 157-181; Getino, Octavio (1992), *Cine y Dependencia—el Cine en Argentina*, Buenos Aires: Puntosur Editores; idem (1998), *Cine argentino—entre lo posible y lo deseable*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Ciccus.
- 9 Bahbha, Homi (1990), “Introduction: Narrating the Nation”, in: idem (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge, pp. 1-7; Shohat, Ella and Stam, Robert (1994), “The Thirdworldist Film”, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism—Multiculturalism and the Media*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 248-291.
- 10 “La salud de San Martín—El fantasma de las enfermedades,” *Clarín digital*, Suplemento especial San Martín, at <http://www.clarin.com/diario/2000-08-17/s-00701.htm>.
- 11 See: Rock, David (1985), *Argentina, 1516-1982: from Spanish colonization to the Falklands War*, Berkeley: University of California Press, passim.
- 12 The quotes were taken from: Pomer, León (1998), *ibidem*.
- 13 D’Atri, Norberto, “El revisionismo histórico y su Historiografía”, in Jauretche, Arturo (1974, first 1959) *Política nacional y revisionismo histórico*, Buenos Aires: Peña Lillo, pp. 109-164.
- 14 For example: “The failure of liberal democracy, the fraud of oligarchy and the submission of the country to foreign interests awoke the army officers’ longing for economic independence...” (my translation. TT). Hernández Arregui, Juan José (1960), *La formación de la conciencia nacional*, Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, p. 51.
- 15 Rein, Raanan (1996), “Latin América’s Search for Identity: Peronist Argentina’s Case”, in: Paldon-Eliav, Miri (ed.), *After Columbus: America 1492-1992* [Hebrew], Jerusalem: Shazar Centre for Israel History, pp. 339-353; Rein, Raanan (1998), *Peronismo, populismo y política: Argentina 1943-1955*, Buenos Aires: Editorial de Belgrano, pp. 106-109.
- 16 Peronism promoted a revolution in education. See: Rein, Mónica Esti (1998), *Politics and Education in Argentina 1946-1962*, Armonk, NY, and London: M.E. Sharpe, pp. 29-31.
- 17 Hodges, Donald (1976), *Argentina 1943-1976 - The National Revolution and the Resistance*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, passim; Rock, idem, pp. 320-366; James, Daniel (1988), *Resistance and Integration—Peronism and the Argentine Working Class*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, passim.
- 18 Jordán, Alberto (1993), *El Proceso: 1976-1983*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, passim; Brocato, Carlos (1985), *La Argentina que quisieron*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, passim; James, Daniel (1978), “The Peronist Left, 1955—1975”, *Journal of Latin America Studies*, 2: 273-296.
- 19 Juana Libedinsky, “El auge literario de su figura,” *La Nación On-line*, http://www.lanacion.com.ar/especiales/san_martin/01/150despues/literatura.asp; and Patricia Pasquali, “Los abusos de la novela—La humanización de los próceres y el significado de San Martín,” *Página 12 On-Line*, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/2000/suple/smartin/pago5.htm>. For the historians’ polemic on San Martín, see <http://www.desmemoria.8m.com>. See also Patricia Pasquali, *San Martín. La fuerza de la misión y la soledad de la gloria* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1999); and idem, *San Martín confidencial. La correspondencia personal del Libertador con su amigo Tomás Guido. 1816-1849* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2000).
- 20 Among them, though not of the period under consideration here, was *Nuestra tierra de Paz* (“Our Peacefull Country”, Arturo Mom, 1939), a technically

- accurate film that “correctly” represented the Liberator myth, and that was made the year the Instituto Nacional Sanmartiniano was founded. See Di Núbila, Domingo (1960), *Historia del Cine Argentino*, Buenos Aires: Cruz de Malta, Vol. 1, p. 227
- 21 Staiger, Janet (2002), “A Neo-Marxist Approach: World Film Trade and Global Culture Flows”, in *Film and Nationalism*, ed. Alan Williams, New Brunswick and London: Routledge, pp. 230-248. For an understanding of postmodern historical films, see: Rosenstone, Robert A. (1996), “The Future of the Past—Film and Beginnings of Postmodern History”, in: *The Persistence of History—Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack, New York and London: Routledge, pp. 201-218.
- 22 For an understanding of cultural processes in Argentina in the 1960s, see Longoni, Ana and Mestman, Mariano (2000), *Del Di Tella a “Tucumán Arde”—Vanguardia y política en “el 68 argentino”*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones El Cielo por Asalto; Terán, Oscar (1991), *Nuestros años sesenta*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Puntosur; Sigal, Silvia (1991), *Intelectuales y poder en la década del sesenta*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Puntosur.
- 23 For Argentine political film history and analysis, see Tal, Tzvi (2002), “Cinema, Cultural Colonization and Political Struggle: National Identity Construction in Argentina and Brazil”, Ph.D. dissertation, Tel Aviv University; idem (1997), “History, Politics and Aesthetics in the Films of Fernando Solanas: Cinematic Representation of Changes in Argentina’s National Left Discourse, 1968-1992”, MA dissertation, Tel Aviv University.
- 24 Laclau, Ernesto (1996), *Emancipación y diferencia*, Buenos Aires: Airel/Espasa Calpe, pp. 99-102.
- 25 Amos Fukenstein, “History, Contra-history and Narrative [Hebrew],” 2000 4 (1991): 210-223.
- 26 Coucelo, Jorge Miguel (1992), idem, pp. 109-148.
- 27 Incoming records or spectators numbers are not known, but the success is well remembered by Argentineans.
- 28 Wolfenstein, Martha (2002), “Movie Analyses in the Study of Culture”, in *Film and Nationalism*, ed. Alan Williams, New Brunswick and London: Routledge, pp. 68-86.
- 29 Rojas, Ricardo (1933), *El Santo de la Espada—Vida de San Martín*, Buenos Aires: Anaconda.
- 30 Mizraje, María Gabriela, “Vida y obra de Ricardo Rojas—El inventor de la memoria,” *Clarín Digital* (29 July 2001), <http://ar.clarin.com/suplementos/cultura/2001-07-29/u-00611.htm>.
- 31 See Coucelo, José Miguel (1985), *Torre Nilsson por Torre Nilsson*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Fraterna, pp. 179-181.
- 32 Feijóo, María del Carmen and Nari, Marcela (1996), “Women in Argentina during the 1960s”, *Latin American Perspectives* 1: 7-26.
- 33 See the interview with Alfredo Alcón, who played San Martín, in *Clarín Digital*, 17 Aug. 2000.
- 34 Latin American magical realism is also described as a product of the cultural break that occurs in the transition from a traditional production system to a capitalistic one. See Chanady, Amaryll (1995), “The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms”, in Parkinson Zamora, Lois and Faris, Wendy (eds), *Magical Realism—Theory, History, Community*, London and Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 124-144; Jameson, Frederick (1986), “On Magic Realism in Film”, *Critical Inquiry* 12: 301-326.
- 35 “Fuerza de Orientación Radical de la Joven Argentina”, a group of young nationalist intellectuals active in the Unión Cívica Radical Party in the 1930s.
- 36 Abelardo Ramos (1921-1994), a Marxist revisionist Latin Americanist historian. He organized political parties, established publishing houses, worked as a journalist, and ran for president in 1973 and 1983.
- 37 Communicated by Julio Fernandez Baraibar by electronic mail, 8 and 20 May 1999. Baraibar was a political exile during the military dictatorship. He also collaborated with Coscia on *Cipayos* (1989), a futuristic drama based on the memory of the English invasions of 1806/7.
- 38 Terragno, Rodolfo (1998), *Maitland & San Martín*, Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes.
- 39 Walton, John (1989) “Debt, Protest and the State in Latin America”, *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 317-318.
- 40 This “homage” to Tupac Amaru was explained by the screenwriter Baraibar. Tupac Amaru’s memory was recuperated by left-wing movements all over Latin America, like “Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Tupamaros” in Uruguay during the sixties and early seventies.
- 41 Statistics provided by Sindicato de la Industria Cinematográfica Argentina, <prensa@sicacine.com.ar>.
- 42 Petras, James and Vieux, Steve (1994), “The Transition to Authoritarian Electoral Regimes in Latin America”, *Latin American Perspectives* 4: 5-20; Sznajder, Mariano (1993), “Legitimidad y poder político frente a las herencias autoritarias: Transición y consolidación democrática en América Latina,” *E.I.A.L.* 1: 27-53.
- 43 For an understanding of this comic-strip form, see: Foster, David William (1989), *From Mafalda to Los Supermachos—Latin American Graphic Humor as Popular Culture*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers; Rubenstein, Anne (1998), *Bad Language, Naked Ladies and Other Threats to the Nation—A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico*, Durham and London: Duke University Press; Baker, Martin (1989), *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- 44 Solanas, Fernando and Getino, Octavio (1973), *Cine, Cultura y Descolonización*, Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores.
- 45 SICA, <prensa@sicacine.com.ar>.



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