



Starring Ricardo Darín: National Identity and Masculinity in Films by Juan José Campanella and Pablo Trapero

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ABSTRACT

Ricardo Darín has become the somewhat unlikely middle-aged poster boy of Argentine cinema of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. In the Argentine context, this same period is marked by the economic crisis of 2001 and the celebrations of the country's bicentenary in 2010, both of which raise important questions about national identity. This article will examine the films Darín made with Juan José Campanella and Pablo Trapero in order to consider the ways in which his star status is used as a way to reflect or comment upon certain questions that seem to occupy the national psyche and to engage with forms of masculinity, whether that be to represent them, reify them, or indeed do both simultaneously. In the four films he made with Campanella, Darín plays an affable middle-class man who is somehow an outsider. The fact that by the end of the films all four characters have found some closure and experience a sense of a new beginning attests to the strength of middle-class masculinity as an identity category. Both his characters die at the end of the two films with Trapero. These characters are also outsiders, but Trapero uses Darín's star status to draw attention to broader social issues within Argentine society. Ultimately, both directors rely upon Darín's off-screen persona to aid characterization and link their protagonists to national issues and questions of national identities.

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Since the national and international success of *Nueve reinas* in 2000, Ricardo Darín has become the somewhat unlikely middle-aged poster boy of Argentine cinema, making more than twenty-five films in the last twenty years. Darín had been a recognizable face from Argentine TV, stage and even cinema, but the definitive moment for his career came with the release of *Nueve reinas*, which uncannily seemed to foresee the Argentine economic crisis of 2001 (Hines). The upward and more international trajectory of his star status post-2000 coincides with the Kirchner and Fernández de Kirchner administrations, and many of the films in which he appears touch on key concerns—economic hardship, inequalities and injustice—that marked their presidencies. Moreover, this period of his career also overlapped with the preparations for and celebrations marking the bicentennial of Argentine independence in 2010. In this article, I want to look at the films Darín made with directors Juan José Campanella and Pablo Trapero in order to consider the ways in which his star status is used to pose certain questions that seemed to occupy the national psyche in the first decade of the new century and to engage with forms of masculinity, whether that be to represent them, reify them or indeed do both simultaneously. Dolores Tierney, Victoria Ruétalto and Roberto Carlos Ortiz have already noted that Darín’s “star text is defined as representative of a new era of Argentine masculinity” (174); I will bring together work on star studies as well as the study of nationalisms in order to analyse how Darín comes to embody some sort of Argentine everyman for the twenty-first century, for audiences both at home and abroad, in the films he makes with Campanella and Trapero.¹

Darín has made four films with Campanella: *El mismo amor, la misma lluvia* (1999), *El hijo de la novia* (2001), *Luna de Avellaneda* (2004) and *El secreto de sus ojos* (2009). As Maria Delgado and Cecilia Sosa point out, all of these “featured actor Ricardo Darín as a middle-class everyman, negotiating dissent” (252). The average Argentine man, as defined through the characters in these films, is a middle-class working man, whose labour or leisure is under threat and who struggles with his personal relationships with women, but has the support of a male friend. Darín’s age and his unconventional looks further support this characterization, but his star status sets him apart and marks him and the stories his characters represent as an embodiment of some kind of Argentine experience—albeit from a straight white cis-male middle-class perspective. As a director, Campanella’s films “regresan al cine clásico y revitalizan a partir de 1999, el año de la apertura del BAFICI, el melodrama de los años 1940” (Chappuzeau 261), making them feel nostalgic and somehow familiar.

Trapero is a director whose films have a much sharper political edge. He is one of the names associated with New Argentine Cinema, and Joanna Page notes that the “the grainy, un-fished ‘ad hoc’ nature of these low-budget, independent films expresses with greater eloquence the fissures and imperfections of the present” (34). Whereas Campanella’s work has a more nostalgic feel to it, Trapero does not shy away from difficult social issues and his films deal with the endemic violence and corruption in Argentine society. Darín starred in two films written, directed and produced by the filmmaker: *Carancho* (2010) and *Elefante blanco* (2012). The characters he plays are far from the affable figures of Campanella’s films; instead they are both outsiders, caught within an imperfect system that they are trying to escape (Sosa in *Carancho*) or change (Padre Julián in *Elefante blanco*). Both Sosa and Julián die at the end of Trapero’s films, which eschew the more positive endings shown in Campanella’s works in favour of a gritty realism. What unites the six films made by Trapero and Campanella is that they all rely in some way on Darín’s star status.

The phenomenon of the film star was initially considered through the lens of Hollywood film productions. Yet Sabrina Qiong Yu remarks that “the film star is a culturally and historically contingent notion, rejecting any homogenous or fixed definition” (12) and she explores the ways in which stardom in different contexts “is not necessarily influenced by the Hollywood star system” (16). While Yu problematizes the idea of the nation-state in relation to star studies in some geographical areas, she advocates placing stars in a translocal context, which is helpful for thinking about the ways in which Darín’s star status functions within national and international markets. As Leah Kemp’s nuanced framework (37–39) for approaching stars in Spanish-American cinema shows, stardom operates at multiple levels to form “a network of

1 I have very deliberately used the term ‘everyman’ here as I want to argue that the sense of what defines any kind of national being still revolves around a straight white man. Leah Kemp (46) notes that Darín’s everyman status can also be attributed to his decision to eschew Hollywood and English-language productions and work in Spanish.

national, regional, and transnational possibilities for the trajectories of Hispanic American stars present and future” (49). This means that the identification of Darín as the embodiment of a form of Argentine masculinity operates both within and beyond the nation because of the ways in which Hispanic American stardom functions in the wider Spanish-language film market as well as in other international contexts. As such, he contributes to a regional construction of masculinity more broadly, as well as fostering a more general idea at an international level of what a typical Argentine man might be like. The ways in which those ideas about masculinity are conceived will depend on the viewer, and Darín can simultaneously allow an Argentine viewer to think about how masculinities are constructed within the country, while for others, he may come to represent some typical—and even stereotypical—image of the Argentine man.

Darín’s star persona, created out of the roles he played as well as his prominence in the Argentine media, is used by both directors and influences the ways his characters function within the films. In her study of French stars, Ginette Vincendeau offers the following useful outline for thinking about the star persona:

Simply put, by *stars*, I mean celebrated film performers who develop a ‘persona’ or ‘myth’, composed of an amalgam of their screen image and private identities, which the audience recognizes and expects from film to film, and which in turn determines the parts they play. The star’s persona is a commodity, positioning the performer and his/her work in the market-place and attracting finance: the name in huge letters on the posters and the marquee. The importance of stars is economic, cultural and ideological. (viii)

The idea of the star building a sense of identity “from film to film” as well as through the myths and stories that exist about their private life is important here because of the focus on Darín’s work with specific directors, as both director and star address political issues across the films in question. In his seminal text on the subject, Richard Dyer notes that the star is not “without political significance” (7), which is certainly relevant when thinking about how the characters played by Darín might be read as a reflection of some sort of embodiment of the typical Argentine man.

Academic studies of the representations of Latin American masculinities on screen have tended to start from a queer perspective, before undertaking a more rigorous questioning of hegemonic masculinities. Paul Julian Smith notes that it is the queer cultural field “that makes itself felt, necessarily, within the broader, allegedly unmarked field of mainstream Mexican cultural production, which alternately marginalizes and promotes it” (3). Moreover, Sergio de la Mora has called attention to the “absence of in-depth critical analysis of the politics of visual representations of the male body, desire, and power, most notably in Mexico” (x). While both of these insights are focused on Mexican society, the premises can be extended to Argentina and point more broadly to the treatment of masculinity as the unmarked gender. Through my analysis of Darín’s characters, I will explore the ways in which he is representative of a normative form of Argentine masculinity. In relation to Argentine cinema in particular, Carolina Rocha studies the ways in which the male characters in a range of films from the 1990s show “the demise of a normative middle-class masculinity that prevailed in Argentina for most of the twentieth century—a masculinity that abruptly changed during the last decade of the century” (*Masculinity in Contemporary Argentine Popular Cinema* 1). Here I propose to use Rocha’s framework to think mostly about Campanella’s films and I extend her comprehensive exploration of how middle-class masculinity evolved by considering a body of work produced in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a new timeframe that addresses the effects of the economic crisis of 2001. Despite arguing that the forms of masculinity embodied by Darín in the films in question operate as a hegemonic model for groups of middle-class men, I acknowledge that they are not linked to “institutional power” (Connell 77), which is something that R.W. Connell notes is normally the case with hegemonic forms of masculinity. In her work on Argentine cinema and the economic crisis of 2001, Page observes a focus on the failure of the state (6), which is why this connection to “institutional power” (Connell 77) is absent and why the characters Darín plays form part of a national vision of masculinity that is in conflict with the state itself.

While the economic crisis in 2001 created a strain, the bicentennial of the country in 2010 “would then be concerned with national identity, a reflection on values, the past and future of the nation, and social transformation” (Dinardi 224). Catriona McAllister has shown that around the time of the bicentennial, the texts she studies offer “historical reimaginings in relation to politicised configurations of the nation’s foundational narrative”. A similar pattern can be found in these films from that period, with the significant difference that they only engage with the nation in a tangential way, often focusing ostensibly upon other themes. Yet the tropes they draw upon are clearly indebted to older models for Argentine masculinities and serve as way to help make “the abstract more concrete” (Archetti xiii). In their films, Campanella and Trapero draw upon the viewer’s perception of Darín as an embodiment of the national character thanks to his much-lauded role in *Nueve reinas* and further reinforce this idea through recourse to the figure of the gaucho as well as to the notion of *viveza criolla*, which is a key part of his characterization in that film. In this way, these twenty-first century films re-engage with nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary and cultural models and point towards the recurrence of certain tropes in discourses around Argentine identity across time periods and in different media. It is striking that the films explore contemporary economic and social situations, yet draw upon these older models of masculinities to do so, revealing just how pervasive and persistent gendered identities can become.

The films themselves may not always be ostensibly political, yet the fact that they are made and released around the bicentennial means that they can be viewed as addressing national identity on some level. Fiction is a well-established means through which national identities might be explored and Doris Sommer discusses the central role literature played in the formation of nations in the nineteenth century: “By assuming a certain kind of translatability between romantic and republican desires, writers and readers of Latin America’s canon of national novels have in fact been assuming what amounts to an allegorical relationship between personal and political narratives” (41). Building on this link between culture and national identity, Rocha (*Argentine Cinema and National Identity* 3) notes that through the political turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s “Argentine cinema was entrusted with the responsibility of representing the nation”, so it is no surprise that a preoccupation with national identity has remained visible in these later films even though they are no longer state funded.² The focus on the nation is not intended to dismiss the transnational production or success of the films in question, it is rather a way of paying attention to the possibility that Darín simultaneously “remains frozen in the local imagination even as he coexists and becomes a star in transnational markets” (Tierney, Ruétalto and Ortiz, 177).

One of the texts that played a foundational role in reimagining an Argentine national masculine identity was José Hernández’s epic poem published in two parts: *Martín Fierro* (1872) and *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* (1879). The poem recounts the life of a gaucho, “una figura paradigmática en la construcción de la masculinidad y de la nacionalidad”, who embodies “valores tales como el coraje, la lealtad con los amigos y la propensión a la lucha para defender el honor”, which, as Adrián Melo and Marcelo Raffin note, “son preponderantes para caracterizar la masculinidad hegemónica y sentar las bases de la dominación masculina” (301). These same traits can be seen in the characters Darín plays in the films studied here, and crucially, like the gaucho, his characters exist on the margins of society, which is sometimes signalled by where they live (Julián in *Elefante blanco*), their occupation (Sosa in *Carancho*) or their social status (Espósito in *El secreto de sus ojos*).

In Carolina Soria’s article on *Carancho*, Darín’s character is described as an antihero and Soria suggests that “if asked to identify a common element in all of Darín’s interpretations, the figure of an enigmatic outsider with a vague past would immediately come to mind”. In particular, the troubled relationship the gaucho has with official figures and structures—such as the police—his strong sense of honour and his propensity to help those in a lower position than him are all characteristics seen in the outsiders that Darín plays. Melo and Raffin (304) point out that as well as embodying a sense of Argentine masculinity, the gaucho transgresses the

² De la Mora also notes the importance of cinema as both “a vehicle for the circulation of narratives of Mexican identity” and how these “intersect with gendered and sexualized narratives”, underscoring the role cinema plays in presenting representations of gendered national identities (1). In this article, I draw upon de la Mora’s points (11–12) about the need to read the forms of masculinity shown on screen through the national lens.

norms of the state, but, as Gustavo Geirola argues, in the case of Martín Fierro, that rebellion ultimately ends in submission:

the view of the gaucho in the first part, with his rebellion, his social criticism of hegemonic institutions and agents, and his idealization of the Indian, is converted in the second part into resignation and compliance with an established order at odds with the indigenous Utopia. (317)

This blend of rebellion and submission is important to an understanding of the films being considered here, as the characters Darin plays either die (in both of Trapero's films) or find ways to break rules to some degree, but ultimately live within the larger norms set by the state (in the case of the films he made with Campanella).

In Campanella's films, it is Darin as protagonist who, like the gaucho, challenges figures of authority, be they church or state. In *El hijo de la novia*, Rafael pleads with the priest to allow his parents to marry in church despite his mother's Alzheimer's, which precludes that possibility. His arrangement of an alternative ceremony, with his actor friend Juan Carlos assuming the role of priest, provides a comic yet satisfying solution to the problem. Gabriela Copertari notes the allusions to *Martín Fierro* in the new wedding vows and points out that "no puede ser mera casualidad que se recurra a esa zona de la cultura popular, precisamente al *Martín Fierro*, a la hora de construir y legitimar una legalidad y una justicia alternativas" (*Desintegración y justicia* 106). She also invokes the re-evaluation of *Martín Fierro* at the turn of the twentieth century as one of the reasons the poem is able to be used in relation to national identity in this way. Furthermore, the fact that it is Rafael's friend Juan Carlos who helps him enact the false wedding ceremony highlights the importance of homosocial relationships in this minor challenge to authority, again echoing the relationship between Martín Fierro and Cruz, the policeman he ends up befriending.

The fact that both directors turn towards this figure as a means of addressing *argentinidad* attests to the centrality of the gaucho within the national imaginary.³ It needs to be highlighted that any move towards a definition of a national identity in the twenty-first century is still being undertaken by a man, using a masculinist model of the nation as a fraternal space (Anderson 16; Nagel 243) and focusing on homosocial relationships. Darin, the man who embodies Argentine masculinity on screen, relies upon being identified as a typical Argentine man, whatever that may be. Constanza Burucúa goes some way to define what this means in the Argentine context and connects Darin's star status with his embodiment of a hegemonic masculine identity:

Su estatus de estrella, bien establecido entre las audiencias argentinas (menos entre las hispanohablantes y mucho menos entre las internacionales), se construyó principalmente en torno al estereotipo del porteño: hombre -macho- sentimental que se las sabe todas y con un agudo sentido del humor.

This would suggest that his guy-next-door appeal and his identity as a star are based upon his perceived embodiment of national traits that centre around urban life in the capital and overlap with images of the gaucho and include *viveza criolla*. It is clear that Darin himself, as well as Campanella and Trapero, play upon his reputation in order to explore questions of national identity in their creative works.

Darin's role as the trickster Marcos in *Nueve reinas* combined his affability with certain national stereotypes with the result that "articula una de las narrativas centrales a través de las cuales fue conceptualizada la experiencia de los años noventa en la Argentina" (Copertari, *Desintegración y justicia* 78). While Marcos was his "first role as the antihero" (Kemp 42), the fact that the film was a financial success and popular with audiences and reviewers means it is no surprise that in the films that followed, an expectation has arisen that he play characters who somehow address national issues even if the film can also be read transnationally (Shaw).

³ Rocha (2018) notes the importance of Leopoldo Torre Nilsson's 1968 adaption of *Martín Fierro* in "putting an end to that absence of Argentine-ness in Argentine films" (4), so it is not surprising that these films contain traces of the text in their approach to the question of *argentinidad*. Also see pp. 76–81 for a succinct overview of the significance of works in the *gauchesque* genre to ideas about Argentine national identity more broadly. Matt Losada (2–5) gives a clear sense of the ways in which Lugones folded *Martín Fierro* into his discussions of national identity around the 1910 centenary and also gives an overview (27–29) of how the figure of the gaucho was later used in films.

This is not to say that his films project some stable singular national identity but is rather a suggestion that they add to the construction of a discourse around what it means to live in Argentina post-2000.⁴ Darin's films adhere to Alan Williams's assertion that "if they cannot by themselves mobilize nations and give them a new direction, [films] can, apparently, *reflect* and *keep in circulation* values and behaviours associated with a particular nation" (8 emphasis in original). In this case, the ways in which the gaucho is used as a means of framing Argentine masculinities is an important trope that is kept alive through these films.

The first three films directed by Campanella that feature Darin deal with a man's experience of changing social dynamics. Each of these films concentrates on the relationship between the protagonist (Darin) and his best friend (Eduardo Blanco) and even though the focus of the fourth is a male-female relationship (Darin and Soledad Villamil), the male double act also features prominently (Darin and Guillermo Francella). In relation to Hollywood cinema, Fuchs finds that "the buddy film negotiates crises of masculine identity centred on questions of class, race, and sexual orientation, by affirming dominant cultural and institutional apparatus" (195). Although questions of sexual orientation and race are absent from these films, it is the question of class, particularly the ways in which society is changing for middle-class men, that sits at the centre of them. In line with what Page observes about the tensions between ideas of state and nation in the early 2000s, the "institutional apparatus" are shown to have failed the male protagonists of these films, leaving them to reassert their position within the social order. The use of a pair of male friends to explore the place of a certain type of masculinity within the nation is precisely the model used by Hernández in *Martín Fierro*, in which Fierro's initially antagonistic and then fraternal relationship with Cruz is the focus of much of the poem. By situating themselves at odds with the state, Darin's characters and their male buddies take up a similar position to Fierro and Cruz, although the negotiation of their place within the nation is effected within an urban, rather than rural, space.

Darin and Campanella's first film together, *El mismo amor, la misma lluvia* (1999), had limited success at the box office (Chandler), but is very much in a similar vein to their final film, *El secreto de sus ojos* (2009), as both chart a love story against the backdrop of changes in Argentine society. *El mismo amor, la misma lluvia* focuses on Jorge's (Darin) difficulties in sustaining a personal relationship, beginning in 1980 and ending in the 1990s. The film opens by introducing Jorge through a close-up on Darin's instantly recognizable blue eyes before zooming out to the rest of his face, thus deliberately exploiting Darin's reputation as the "estrella argentina de ojos claros" (Campos), which effectively uses the actor's features to create an affective relationship with the protagonist and is a technique Campanella would employ in the openings of three of his four films with Darin.⁵ Like the characters in the three other collaborations between them, Jorge is depicted as an average man; he is a writer working for a magazine and is not particularly wealthy or remarkable. The film begins during the military dictatorship, and indicates the return of democracy in 1983 and democratic presidential elections in 1988 as moments to mark the key parts of the narrative, but it does not delve into the political significance of these events. Rather, like Darin himself, Jorge is only mildly inconvenienced by the dictatorship, and does not seem to face imminent danger. *Cosas*, the magazine he works for, self-censors and does not print anything controversial thanks to the intervention of Jorge's friend and boss Roberto (Blanco). In this film the friendship between them means that Roberto's intervention can be interpreted as an action that protects his friend and, like the homosocial relationships in Campanella's other films, is a source of humour. Any reference to the political situation remains largely incidental. For example, his love interest Laura (Soledad Villamil) forgets her identity card in one scene and both Jorge and she spend a night in police custody, where they chat freely through the bars of the cells. Their release is simply glossed over by a cut to a scene of Laura back at work in the restaurant. The violence of the dictatorship is acknowledged by the fact that Jorge's friend Mastronardi, who has been blacklisted by the regime, is killed. Jorge writes an article about him, which he does not publish, and eventually authors a play based on him—yet when Mastronardi's son confronts Jorge and asks what he

⁴ Andrew Higson (36) describes this as a text-based approach to the exploration of national identity in cinema.

⁵ See also Fantone, Tierney, Ruétalto and Ortiz (176–77) also draw attention to the way in which Darin's eyes are used by a number of directors, including Campanella and Trapero. Kemp (47) mentions the focus on Darin's blue eyes as part of his star status too.

did for his father, Jorge indicates the period with the epithet: “fue una época muy difícil”. Even if this type of attitude perhaps characterizes the official drive to forget the past in the Argentina of the late 1980s and early 1990s, it does not reflect the more complex or nuanced approach to Argentine history that would emerge in the late 1990s, which was the context in which the film was released.⁶ The use of significant historical events as background to the love story is again seen in *El secreto de sus ojos* and is a cautious way of dealing with difficult themes, though whether this caution is shared equally by director and star is difficult to tell.⁷

El hijo de la novia, the second film he made with Campanella, enjoyed box office success and “featured iconic actors Norma Aleandro and Héctor Alterio (their first paring since *La historia oficial*)” (Falicov 144) alongside Darin. Like *El mismo amor, la misma lluvia*, the film opens with the use of Darin’s star status through a focus on his eyes. Tierney, Ruétalto and Ortiz posit that in contrast to male stars of the 1990s, Darin’s face and eyes “express a masculinity that is more thoughtful and analytical than that of male stars of previous generations” (175), hence the strategic decision to use his eyes as a way into the film, while also signalling the importance of masculinity within it. The film opens with a childhood memory and the transition from past to present is effected through a close-up shot of the young boy’s eyes before these morph into Darin’s blue eyes. It also creates an almost instantly favourable predisposition on the part of the audience to the character through the star’s reputation and encourages his problems to be seen through the framework of the nation. This link between the protagonist, Rafael, and the nation is made even more explicit as the camera zooms out from Darin’s eyes and shows Rafael trying to deal with multiple difficulties within a few minutes, including problems with his ex-wife and business, especially financial strains and pressures. Within this initial scene, the idea of selling the family restaurant comes up, with Rafael referring to the volatility of the Argentine economy by asking “¿cuándo no hubo crisis acá?” The fact that the film was released the same year as the Argentine banking crisis, alongside the very clear references to the economy in this opening scene, encourage viewing Rafael’s predicament through the national lens.

Further references to the nation come through Argentine culture and historical figures in a recognition of their potency in building a sense of national identity, and an example of how the film is “implicated in a dual effort to chart the decline of the state and to question its legitimacy while reasserting national identity and rebuilding a sense of community mobilized around the idea of nation” (Page 17). One instance of such an allusion comes when, in an argument about their relationship and a desire for greater freedom, Rafael and his partner Nati mention San Martín, drawing a facile, but comic parallel between their relationship and the fight for independence from Spanish Colonial rule. Another example of this recourse to a shared national experience comes in the touching scene where Rafael encourages his mother Norma, who is suffering from Alzheimer’s, to recall Baldomero Fernández Moreno’s popular poem “Setenta balcones y ninguna flor”, which may well also evoke a nostalgic memory of the well-known poem within the Argentine viewer.

The characterization of Darin in *El hijo de la novia* as an embodiment of Argentine masculinity can be extended to *Luna de Avellaneda* because of the fact it is also directed by Campanella and again stars Darin alongside Eduardo Blanco as his friend. While Rafael and Román—the roles Darin plays in these films—are two very different individuals, they are both negotiating their place in society against a backdrop of change, and the connections between the two films aids this characterization. Moreover, both *El hijo de la novia* and *Luna de Avellaneda* share common themes and offer a “depiction of Argentine society in which former traditional bonds and customs are no longer viable due to the reduction of the middle class” (Rocha “Middle-Class Masculinities” 191). In other words, Darin here represents an identity that is perceived to be under threat, hence the consolidation and reinforcement of that character at the end of both films. As Jens Andermann remarks: “[t]he political allegory carved out in both is hardly subtle: in reconnecting with the plight of others (‘the poor’), the self-estranged middle-class hero rediscovers his mission in life, which is none other than to save the couple, the family and

6 I acknowledge that this is a very broad-brush approach to memory politics in Argentina, but I hope that it explains, to some degree, why the film might gloss over the past, without excusing Campanella for doing so. A more detailed and nuanced discussion of these broad approaches can be found in Marguerite Feitlowitz, 173–298.

7 Darin has since starred in *Kóblitz* (2016), which deals more directly with the dictatorship. The film 1985 is due to start filming in 2021 and is reported to be more focused on the dictatorship (“Ricardo Darin y Peter Lanzani”).

the nation through love, trust and patriotism. This re-entitlement of the hero is simultaneously a re-empowerment of cinema itself to speak for and on behalf of the nation” (42).⁸

In *Luna de Avellaneda* there are numerous references to the waning state of the country, which is mirrored by the deteriorating building of the titular club. Examples of ways in which people’s lives are perceived to have become more difficult include the fact that Dalma’s family cannot afford enough food, so she comes to the club hungry (Lee 33) and the feelings that Argentina no longer offers a prosperous future that are expressed by Róman’s son, Dario, who is leaving for Spain at the end of the film. These challenges are not necessarily a direct result of the 2001 crisis but are undoubtedly made more acute because of it. Instead, they are framed within a greater narrative about deindustrialization in the neighbourhood, which is invoked through Alejandro’s speech at the end in which he makes direct references to the former factories of Avellaneda. The opening scene, which shows the club at the height of its success, is the first indication of a narrative that paints a romantic vision of the past glory of the club, and, by extension, the prosperity of the nation. Within the narrative timeframe of the film, reminders of that past glory and the opening scene come in the stories told by Don Aquiles, one of the founding members of the club. It is against this backdrop of a diminished club that questions of contemporary *argentinidad* are posed through the figures of the men and women who make up the club in the present.

At the end of the film, a question on the future of the club is put to its membership. It is Darín’s character, Román, who stands up against the closure of the social club, while Alejandro, a club member who works in the *municipalidad* favours selling to developers. The two men “incarnate two opposing types of masculinity” (Rocha “Middle-Class Masculinities” 200), and it is no surprise that Darín’s character speaks against the structures of power and appeals to protect the memory of a time gone by. When his more idealistic proposal is defeated, it seems all may be lost. However, his reconnection with his family (by getting back together with his wife) and the recovery of his past (through standing up for the club and finding the little book that granted him lifelong membership) are coupled with the positive question he poses to his friend Amadeo (Blanco) at the end of the film: “¿Cómo se hace un club nuevo?” This final proposition is accentuated by the warm smiles exchanged between friends Amadeo and Román and the change from nostalgic background music to the rousing milonga, “Sigue el baile”, which closes the film. The viewer is left with the clear message that the structures of the past may have been sold out and destroyed by the new neoliberal bureaucrats but there remains an indomitable spirit, an imprint of a national character, within every Argentine, which cannot be erased by economic imperatives.

Darín’s character Espósito in *El secreto de sus ojos*, his Oscar-winning collaboration with Campanella, is even more of an outsider than those in the previous three films. Even his name suggests his marginal status as it is the term traditionally used for abandoned children. Espósito is an individual with no family reputation to protect him, a fact underlined in the film by Romano who reminds him: “ella es rica, vos pobre. Ella es Menéndez-Hastings, vos sos Espósito, o sea nada. Ella es intocable, vos no.” The social stratification obvious within this statement is a reminder of the ways in which people of distinct social classes have very different experiences of Argentine society, and it connects Espósito to characters like Rafael and Róman, who are also seen to be struggling against bureaucratic structures. However, this time questions of justice are the focus of the film. Whereas in *Luna de Avellaneda* and *El hijo de la novia* the focus was on one man’s struggle against the economic difficulties of middle-class life in Argentina, *El secreto de sus ojos* picks up on the themes of punishment, retribution, justice and memorialization. Like *El mismo amor, la misma lluvia*, *El secreto de sus ojos* chronicles a love story against the backdrop of events in Argentine history and again eschews any direct engagement with the dictatorship, relegating it firmly to the background through a focus on the present of the film. *El secreto de sus ojos* avoids giving any details of the violence that characterized that period by stating that Espósito spent that time in Jujuy, only returning to Buenos Aires in 1985, thus allowing the dictatorship period to be glossed over within the narrative arc of the film.

⁸ It is important to note that Andermann goes on to point out that “the only self-proclaimed capacity of Campanella’s films to allegorically represent the nation’s plight sustains itself precisely on the *occlusion* of the margins and the poor” (42 emphasis in original).

El secreto de sus ojos deals directly with the levels of corruption and brutality within Isabel Perón's regime, and it engages with the issues of justice and memory that have been a national concern for Argentina since the dictatorship and which gained renewed political currency under the Kirchners' presidencies (Ros 21–24). Campanella specifically refers to his decision to set some of the action of the film in the mid-1970s, stating that this period was chosen as it represents “una época que es como una herida tapada pero no cicatrizada” (Alfieri 130)—hence the use of television footage and the greater signalling of the period through more political references than was evident in *El mismo amor, la misma lluvia*. This focus on the past is a particular concern within Argentina; as Page notes, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the military coup coupled with the 2001 crisis meant that “a number of prominent intellectuals [...] called for a greater depth of engagement and diversification of voices to challenge the sins of omission and repetition into which memory had lapsed” (152). Thus, the film is addressing an “omission” by looking at the violence and corruption that characterized Isabel Perón's term in office, which is seen through Darín's eyes.

As the film works across time periods, with the characters narrating the events of the early and mid-1970s, which also have an impact upon their present, it demonstrates that cultural memory is “neither remnant, document, nor relic of the past, nor floating in a present cut off from the past, cultural memory, for better or for worse, links the past to the present and future” (Bal vii). Indeed, the key aspect of the film that allows it to become a synecdoche for the Argentine nation is its focus on the way one murder (or period in history) affects so many people in different ways. Lilita Colotto's murder was for Espósito a case that was silently dropped by his superiors; it became the *raison d'être* for Morales; while Irene had completely forgotten it. The degree to which these differing angles can be mapped onto some of the ways in which certain people and groups approach the dictatorship that followed Isabel Perón's presidency has emerged in works related to the film. Copertari argues that “todo parece indicar que se trata de una película ejemplar sobre cómo hablar de la dictadura sin nombrarla nunca. Y sin embargo, la película no trata, ni directa ni alegóricamente, sobre la dictadura” (“Violencia de Estado” 31). Yet Delgado and Sosa see it as “a feature film that engages very directly with the ‘packaging’ of memory politics promoted by Kirchnerism” (251). Like the characters in the film, critics take different approaches, emphasizing the diverse ways in which the film might be viewed. The relatively indirect references to the past and the focus on violence and corruption before the dictatorship allow a more circumspect interpretation of the degree to which this film deals with the dictatorship itself, which is an approach that Campanella carries over from *El mismo amor, la misma lluvia* and softens any political edge it might be perceived to contain.

Espósito's characterization in *El secreto de sus ojos* again relies in part on his friendship with another man. This time, his co-worker Sandoval (played by another Argentine star, Guillermo Francella) forms part of the male double act. As with the relationships between men shown in the previous films Campanella made with Darín, humour is key and their childish jokes, such as answering the phone in the court with the wrong name, provide some light relief. Yet this is not the only function the relationship serves, as it is through their understanding of a particular aspect of masculinity (unwavering loyalty to a specific football team), which they seem to take to be almost universal, that they manage to track down Gómez, the man who killed Lilita. In a subplot derived from the detective genre, the assistant (Sandoval in this case) gives the detective (Espósito) a clue that moves the plot forward and allows them to catch their suspect. In this way, the male friendship is critical to the case. The depth of their feeling for each other is hinted at through acts of kindness, such as Espósito allowing Sandoval to stay with him or paying his bar bill, and reaches its zenith in the memory of the noble death that Espósito creates for his friend, which is the only version of his murder that is seen. The fact that this is presented within the narrative frame of the film without any clear signal that it is a fictional reimagining signals the power and persistence of memory, but also indicates the value Espósito attached to their relationship and, more generally, alludes to the significance of homosocial relationships.

In *El secreto de sus ojos*, Darín's character is again the Argentine everyman whose life is negatively affected by society and stymied by a corrupt and overly bureaucratic system. Yet, as was the case in the other films Darín made with Campanella, it ends with a sense of hope. In a sentimental act, Espósito's possible declaration of love to Irene, no matter how late it comes,

gives him a different future. Just as *El mismo amor, la misma lluvia* ends with a hint that Jorge and Laura will rekindle their relationship, and Román is hopeful that he could found a new club at the end of *Luna de Avellaneda*, and Rafael's future lies in the new restaurant he opens at the end of *El hijo de la novia*, so too Espósito, after finally discovering what happened to Morales and Gómez, seems to have found the courage to declare his love for Irene, thus finding some form of closure on the past and a way to move forward.

In his four collaborations with Campanella, the characters Darín plays all offer a sense of hope for the future by suggesting that in challenging state institutions and structures, the middle-class Argentine man can triumph, no matter how difficult the circumstances. Darín himself embodies this sense of hope in the world outside his films through his own engagement with social issues. Dyer warns against dismissing the political significance of a star and cautions that “because a star cannot become a crucial decision-maker (and remain a star), this does not mean that s/he is without political significance” (7). Darín’s “political significance” is rooted in his work, and nowhere more so than in his collaborations with director Pablo Trapero. Both *Carancho* and *Elefante blanco* have had significant political impact, with the passing of an ‘anti-carancho’ law and Darín’s conscious-raising interviews about life in slums in Buenos Aires (Urraca, 356). There is no softening of the political edges in Trapero’s work, which deal with more tangible problems in Argentine society than Darín’s previous films. Whereas Campanella used Darín’s appeal as a type of everyman, Trapero draws upon his reputation for playing the outsider as well as his commitment to social issues. Of course, what unites both of these approaches is that Darín’s reputation is being employed within each of the films to add an extra element to the works themselves.

Carancho (2010) deals with insurance fraud and the lawyers who, like birds of prey, circle the victims of accidents, agreeing to represent them pro bono only in order to take the large part of any agreed settlement. The film begins with still black-and-white photographs depicting debris and bodies at the sites of car crashes intercut with the opening credits giving the names of the production companies and actors involved in the film. Immediately following the title, which is given in white with added blood spatter, a simple and forceful message opens the film:

22 muertos por día. 683 por mes. Más de 8.000 por año.
100.000 muertes en la última década.

En Argentina los accidentes de tránsito
son la principal causa de muerte en menores de 35 años.

Esto sostiene un millonario negocio en indemnizaciones.

The typographical layout and logical flow of information connects those twenty-two deaths every day with the booming insurance industry and shows “neoliberal capitalism at its most brutal” (Clancy 229). This, alongside the opening credits that intersperse the fiction of the film with the real world, encourage any viewer unfamiliar with the director Trapero’s well-known focus on people’s everyday life to make the link between fiction and reality themselves.

Sosa (Darín) is a lawyer who has lost his license and is now tasked with signing people up to his corrupt law firm as part of an insurance fraud. In the scene that follows the opening text, he is attacked for turning up at a funeral—presumably trying to ensure his firm represents the dead man’s family. In the poorly lit scene, Darín is barely visible as the man lying on the ground, placing the star in an antiheroic role and establishing him once again as an outsider, although here Sosa is far from the affable characters used by Campanella and is closer to Marcos, Darín’s trickster character in *Nueve reinas*, but in a much darker incarnation of the roguish figure. Like Marcos, Sosa is humanized through his relationship with other characters, although in *Carancho*, it is not through a male friendship that this humanization takes place. His girlfriend Luján, a doctor and paramedic, struggles to cope with the demands of her own career and is seen injecting drugs. Her presence in the film and her relationship with Sosa shows him outside his working environment, and his plan to leave with her at the end of the film hints at the fact that he wants a different life. Darín’s star status is also used to humanize the character, as his affable personality seen in other films as well as off-camera is invoked on screen through his good-humoured and charismatic engagement with medical staff and clients. Furthermore, he appears trapped in his role within the corrupt firm; he is not a *carancho* out of choice, but out of

necessity. He is depicted as a low-level functionary, a position highlighted in his relationship to Casal, his immediate boss, and El perro, who seems to run the whole operation. Sosa occupies the outer office; he is the face of the firm and is spatially trapped between the clients in front of him and Casal putting pressure on him from behind, which is depicted physically in that Casal occupies the back office. Later, his lowly position is again emphasized in his dealings with El perro, who is a menacing presence throughout.

Sosa is thus portrayed as another victim of the system in which he works. It is in fact a scheme he attempts to subvert by agreeing to help his friend Vega stage an accident to get compensation; however, Vega dies, and Sosa is beaten up for giving the compensation money to his widow. After this incident, Sosa, at Luján's behest, helps a grieving family with their claim. In response to these small acts of mercy that further humanize Sosa, Casal, his boss, then threatens Luján in order to stop Sosa working on his own and Sosa subsequently kills Casal. Rather than liberate him, this act of extreme violence simply sees him come into direct contact with Casal's boss, El perro, who also threatens him and uses his police contacts to exert further pressure on Sosa. It would seem that no matter how much Sosa changes, he is so far embedded within this corrupt system that he cannot escape and is seen as a victim. For example, in the scene where he and Luján try to flee her apartment block, the camera angles adopt Sosa's perspective as he is arrested by a corrupt police officer. The tension during the arrest scene is further heightened by the sense that Sosa is trapped within the building, with nowhere to go.

In *Carancho*, the manipulation of Darín's star status creates a dynamic within the film which humanizes Sosa and directs the viewer to see him as embodying the difficulties of living within a corrupt system where self-interest is more important than community values. This interpretation of the film is reinforced by Darín's roles in both *El hijo de la novia* and *Luna de Avellaneda*, regarding the latter of which Andermann states:

it is precisely the larger-scale, socio-economic crisis of Argentine society as a whole which precipitates the Darín character's personal crisis, pushing it to its dramatic climax and subsequent resolution. Darín—and the audience with him—has to hit rock bottom in order to reconnect with the 'true values' of love, friendship, truthfulness and so forth, which he had forsaken in his increasingly desperate, daily struggle to 'be someone' in the hectic, competitive consumer society of the 1990s. (40)

Carancho functions in a similar way in that Darín's character is in crisis, but this time it is due to a situation that is the product of Argentine neoliberal policies that have handed power to large companies and precipitated economic collapse. Yet in *Carancho* he is neither victim nor perpetrator, but somewhere between the two, occupying a morally ambiguous space in which he appears to be trapped. Although "the 'true values' of love [and] friendship" seem to have won out at the end of the film, where Sosa stages a car accident to allow him to escape from El perro, steal some of his money and run off with Luján; in true poetic fashion, the lovers' escape is thwarted by an aptly timed car accident and thus Trapero denies the viewer the happy ending of Campanella's films. By casting Darín in the lead role and killing him off at the end, Trapero is using his star status to draw attention to the injustices of insurance claims, but also to show the way an individual can be trapped within such a world. The choice of Darín for the role of Sosa ensures a more nuanced and sympathetic view towards the character than might otherwise be the case, which in turn directs criticism away from the individuals engaging in such acts and instead turns towards the shadowy, more controlling figures like El perro, who remain invisible but who ultimately profit most from such corruption.

Darín's second film with Trapero, *Elefante blanco*, was released in 2012 and focuses on the difficulties of life in a slum. As Geoffrey Kantaris notes, "[t]he historical repetition shown in this film, which is set in 2011 but fruitlessly repeats a story from the 1970s, has the inevitable effect of framing the history of populism in Argentina, putting it in quotation marks and forcing us to confront its contradictions" (100). As was the case with *Carancho*, this film considers wider structural issues within Argentine society (Piña) and again uses Darín as the focal point. In the film, Julián (Darín) is the modern-day embodiment of Padre Carlos Mugica, the activist Argentine priest who was assassinated in the 1970s, and he ends up being shot in an attempt

to save Monito, a young boy who lives in the *villa* or shantytown.⁹ In her article on the film, Beatriz Urraca makes a link between Darín the star, the role he plays, and the real-life priest:

Performing as Father Julián, Darín imbues his character with the aura of his own stardom, adding his personal charisma to that of Mugica to portray an ordinary man who is undergoing a deep personal crisis, but who is also endowed with nearly superhuman powers when it comes to confronting collective ills. (360)

Indeed, the combination of Darín (with his propensity to discuss social issues in interviews), Trapero (with his reputation for tackling gritty problems) and the figure of Padre Mugica ensured much media attention was given to the issue of the economic divisions in Argentine society when the film came out (Urraca 355–60). His character might well be considered secondary within the narrative as the focus is on the relationship between Nicolás and Luciana, yet as Urraca remarks: “the special prominence given to Darín in publicity materials has the effect of slightly distorting the narrative by conditioning the viewer’s expectations” (354). The use of the star in this way was highly effective and *Elefante blanco* attracted audiences in excess of 700,000 in Argentina during its first two months.

By casting Darín, Trapero draws upon his star persona and his roles from other films in order to help establish the marginal position of Padre Julián and, by extension, the *villa* in relation to the church. Although he is a priest within the institution, he acts as a mediator between the people and the broader church. On two occasions he asks the church authorities for help. The first time he is seen in this context, he is playing his role within the church hierarchy, standing next to the bishop during a photo opportunity to promote a new housing project—but he fast becomes the outspoken priest who interrupts the bishop at a meeting and follows up with his complaints in the next scene. The close-up tracking shot that pursues him and the bishop as they walk down a corridor is used to underscore Julián’s insistence that the bishop intercede with the municipal authorities by bringing the viewer into the conversation. This exchange highlights the ways in which Julián uses his status within the church to try to change practices. His second visit to the church authorities is intercut with scenes of Padre Nicolás and Luciana supporting the illegal occupation of the now-abandoned building site. Julián directly challenges the bishop and the contrasts between him and the church authorities are emphasized in the dialogue and through costume: he is seen in a grey shirt with his sleeves rolled up, while the rest of the priests sit around the table dressed in black. The role of Padre Julián again plays upon Darín’s reputation, adding to the characterization at work within the film itself and adhering to the type of character favoured by the actor, given Julián’s marginal status within the church. He is not the outsider that Sosa was in *Carancho*, but his willingness to challenge authoritative hierarchies casts him in a very similar role to many of Darín’s other characters.

Although Darín’s standing as an Argentine everyman is used by both Campanella and Trapero, the characters he plays avoid lapsing into stereotypes precisely because of his star status. As Dyer notes: “no star could be just a type, since all stars play central characters. (It may even be a rule that where the central character in a film is constructed by all other means as just a type, then the ‘individuality’ of the star masks this just as it does his/her image’s typicality)” (104). In this way the directors Darín works with rely upon his ‘individuality’ to create what Sommer terms “an allegorical relationship between personal and political narratives” (41). The lives of the characters he plays come to say something about the nation, whether that is commenting on the economic difficulties of the middle class (*Luna de Avellaneda*) or deriding neoliberal business practices (*Carancho*). The characters themselves may avoid becoming stereotypes thanks to Darín’s stardom, yet the fact that they are engaging with ideas about national identity through very traditional tropes shows that such discourses are still inextricably bound to foundational fictions such as *Martin Fierro*.

The films I have explored here all have some form of political significance because of who made them and when they were made. Campanella and Trapero are two of the most renowned

⁹ Losada (63–65) gives a brief overview of the use of the *villa* in three films from the 1950s and notes that what is “most important is their shift in attitude toward the national space, their will to thematize and document marginal spaces and marginalized people that had been ignored by the industrial cinema, and by doing so spur the spectator to inquire about what lies behind the metaphoric ‘largo muro’ that had framed the national culture’s field of representability” (70). Such representations of this marginalized space have a long history in Argentine cinema.

contemporary Argentine directors, and Darín is the best known Argentine star of the early twenty-first century. The films they made together all fall within a thirteen-year period that saw the economy collapse and witnessed preparations for and the celebration of the country's bicentennial. The films do not necessarily address these events overtly, but they do engage with the effects of the economic crisis, and the fact that they were produced around the bicentennial links them to wider questions that were circulating consciously or subconsciously about Argentina's past and present. Even if Campanella's films eschew direct engagement with some of the dominant political discussions that have marked Argentine society in the twenty-first century, the ways in which the films are viewed—thanks in part to Darín's off-screen star status and a narrative that builds across his films—link them to what was happening in the country when they were released. The hopeful endings that all four of Darín's protagonists enjoy at the end of Campanella's films show that the middle-class men he plays will prevail. In his work with Trapero, where the political dimension is brought into much sharper focus, Darín's star status draws attention to the characters he plays, both of whom are individuals caught within an imperfect system, although the ways they navigate that arrangement are very different. Darín's performances as Argentine everyman imbue each of his characters with political significance and his universal appeal is based upon his creative re-engagement with well-established tropes that have been taken to constitute the national character.

Through this focus on the nation and masculinity, Rocha's work on middle-class men in Argentine cinema of the 1990s has been extended here to study the works of two very different filmmakers. The extension of her critical framework has shown that films made in the country in the early twenty-first century were responding to new social issues that arose in the wake of the 2001 economic crisis, but that they still do so from the perspective of a white, middle-class male subject. By honing in on films starring Darín, I have been able to examine the ways in which certain traits and ideas are linked to national identity through his star persona. His characters all rely on the notion that middle-class masculinity is somehow in crisis or under threat, but his star persona is such that in his work with Campanella his characters offer reassurance that those men will prevail, while in the two films he made with Trapero he is able to effect political change and draw attention to specific social issues.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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