1/23/2017 3:39:10 PM Regular

University of Kansas KKU
In Process Date:

Odyssey

ILL Number: -11439322

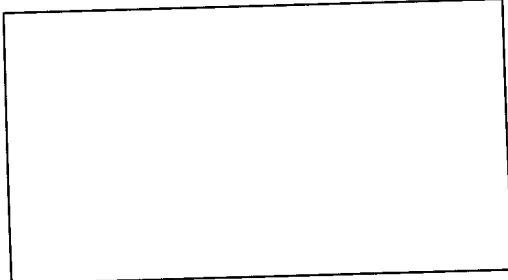
Odyssey: **130.74.92.7**

Email:

EMAIL:

Maxcost:

KKU Billing: **Exempt**



Paging notes:
___Call # NOS ___Call #≠ Title
Book/Volume/Issue/Series NOS
(Circle)
Year ______ ≠ Volume ______
___Article not found as cited –
Why?______________________
___
Initials______

Staff notes:
OCLC#: 33089273
ISSN#: 1356-9325

Lending String:

Lending Articles

Borrower: RAPID:MUM

Call #: **F1408.3 .T73**

Location: **Watson Library Stacks - 1 1/2 Center Stacks Stacks Map**

Journal Title: **Journal of Latin American cultural studies, travesbia**

Volume: **14** Issue: **3**

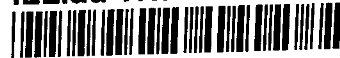
Month/Year: **2005**

Pages: **279-293**

Article Author: **Copertari, Gabriela**

Article Title: **Nine Queens: A Dark Day Of Simulation And Justice**

ILLiad TN: 1703653



Shipping Address:
NEW: Main Library
rapid

Gabriela Copertari

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

NINE QUEENS: A DARK DAY OF SIMULATION AND JUSTICE

> Having accomplished his task of justice, now he was nobody. Or rather, he was the other: he had no destiny on earth and he had killed a man. (Borges, 1974: 521)[1]

'*Crunchy*, made in Greece. This country is going to hell',[2] Marcos declares while reading the wrapper of a chocolate bar he has just stolen. Marcos's declaration, which is uttered in one of the first scenes of the Argentine film *Nine Queens* (2000), Fabián Bielinsky's *opera prima*, is highly ironic coming from a character – a con artist – who is as much a victim as an accomplice of the process of national disintegration he decries. His remark accurately signals, however, the historical backdrop that is explored and articulated by the group of Argentine films and filmmakers of the turn of the last century that has been dubbed the 'new Argentine cinema'; namely, the devastating effects of neo-liberal globalization in the *menemista* Argentina of the 1990s, which culminated in the general crisis of December 2001.

If anything can be said to characterize the heterogeneous corpus of films and aesthetic projects that constitute the so-called 'new Argentine cinema' it is that they all stage narratives of disintegration (communitarian, political, social, economic, cultural, familial and personal).[3] These narratives articulate a social experience of *loss*. And it is well known that this social experience of loss is related to a very concrete process: the virtual vanishing of the state as a product of the neo-liberal policies that transformed Argentina during the 1990s and the correlated erosion of the national community in those representations that have interpreted or imagined Argentina. Paradoxically, this sense of loss was rendered all the more acute by a sense of disillusionment felt by a large part of Argentine society at the disappointment of the expectations of progress and welfare set in motion by the very policies of neo-liberal globalization, particularly by the parity of the Argentine peso with the US dollar – the 'fiction of the 1 = 1, the imaginary inclusion of Argentina in the club of the world's powerful nations' (Vezzetti, 2002: 35) – all of which in fact only widened the economic divide by contributing to the concentration of wealth and the process of general impoverishment.

In this context, Argentine cinema at the turn of the century provides an exceptional vehicle for studying the emergence of a new cultural configuration in the 1990s (and which has its roots in the past): a set of representations, values and imaginaries which are both a product of, and contributed to the political, economic, social and cultural transformations of the last decade.

In this essay, I will analyse the way in which one film in particular – Fabián Bielinsky's *Nine Queens* – interprets the experience of loss of the 1990s in Argentina

Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies, Vol. 14, No. 3 December 2005, pp. 279-293
ISSN 1356-9325/print 1469-9575 online © 2005 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/13569320500382534

by responding to and satisfying a demand for justice. The demand for justice staged in the film's plot synecdochically represents the broader social demand for justice existing in Argentine society as a response to the deception or disillusionment produced by 'the promise of globalization'.

Nine Queens occupies a peculiar place in the panorama of the 'new Argentine cinema'. As observed by a critic in the year of the film's release in Argentina, the film successfully 'bridged apparently irreconcilable domains: it was an *opera prima* ([the] debut of Fabián Bielinsky) and was financed by the most powerful local production companies; it gained the audience's favour and also the critics'' (Battle, 2000: 1).[4] Having won multiple awards and been largely acclaimed by critics, the film was also a huge box office hit in Argentina.[5] It travelled the circuit of international film festivals,[6] and also rapidly conquered the international markets, becoming one of the Argentine films with the widest distribution in Europe and the United States of recent years, finally achieving the 'highest recognition': the questionable accolade of an American remake, *Criminal* (Gregory Jacobs, 2004).

Despite the excellent reviews that *Nine Queens* received in Argentina, it is nonetheless typically excluded from what seems to have now become the official canon of the 'new Argentine cinema'. The very terms in which the film has been praised seem to offer an explanation for both the film's unique position in recent Argentine cinema and its exclusion from the canon of the 'new Argentine cinema'. It has been qualified as a great film *in spite of* its 'industrial' pedigree.[7] It is beyond the scope of this essay to analyse the reasons for this exclusion, or, for that matter, the ideological and aesthetic assumptions at the core of the canonization of the new Argentine cinema as such. I allude to the film's reception to call attention to its simultaneously central and marginal position in the recent 'explosion' of Argentine cinema. But I would like to suggest a more productive way of reading the paradoxical nature of the film which, I will argue, is at the core of the film itself.

In one of the very few negative critiques that the film has received, Raúl Beceyro states that 'the last swindle of *Nine Queens* is not one of the many perpetrated by . . . [its characters], but one that the film itself perpetrates on the critics. . . . In making them believe that *Nine Queens* is, simultaneously, "miraculously" . . . an industrial product and a great film. . .' (2000: 3), and he concludes that '*Nine Queens*, being, as it is, a brutal instance of market cinema, has as its primary concern to leave the spectators soothed, once the screening is over' (2000: 3, translation mine). I would like to suggest, however, that the *soothing* effect that Beceyro attributes to the film, as a by-product of its 'industrial' quality, is but an easy misreading. As I intend to show in this essay, *Nine Queens* produces a compensatory effect and a symbolic reparation for the social experience of loss it depicts but, at the same time, renders that effect unstable, undecidable and ultimately states the radical impossibility of that reparation. Or, to put it in Beceyro's terms, the film *satisfies* the spectators, but leaves them uneasy by showing a collective social complicity in the process of national disintegration that is the film's historical and narrative context.

It is my contention that the film articulates one of the predominant narratives through which the experience of the 1990s in Argentina has been interpreted, and ultimately draws attention to the compensatory and soothing quality of that interpretation. *Nine Queens* is, therefore, a doubly deluding film. It is blatantly deceptive since the very genre of the grifter thriller requires that nothing be what

it seems (critics have compared *Nine Queens* to *House of Games*, by David Mamet), and it disappoints the expectations of the genre with its surprising final revelation when the spectator learns both the *truth* behind the deceit he has been the object of and the disquieting truth that, behind this artfully staged deceit, there is nothing but simulation.[8]

Let us briefly recall the film's plot. Two grifters, Marcos and Juan, meet apparently by accident while Juan is pulling off a small-time scam on the clerk of a gas station convenience store. Marcos witnesses the scam and persuades Juan to become his partner for the day, pulling scams in the streets of Buenos Aires. Marcos and Juan hear of the existence of a set of forgeries of some supposedly very valuable stamps called the 'Nine Queens' made by an ex-partner of Marcos. Marcos and Juan take on the task of selling the forgeries to a Spanish businessman (and amateur philatelist), who happens to be staying at the international hotel where Marcos's sister, Valeria, works. Marcos and his sister Valeria have had a bitter falling out after Marcos stole their grandparents' inheritance. After agreeing on a price for the stamps with the Spanish businessman and setting an appointment for the sale, Marcos and Juan are robbed of the forgeries in the street. As a result of this unexpected mishap, they decide nonetheless to conclude the deal by buying the 'original' set of stamps that happen to be in the possession of the wealthy sister of the man who had made the forgeries. Marcos and Juan pool their savings ($50,000 from Juan, and $200,000 from Marcos – the money of the stolen family inheritance). The deal is concluded with Valeria acting as 'mediator' – a stipulation made by the Spanish businessman as a condition for the sale – but when Marcos and Juan arrive at the bank to cash the check that they have received in payment for the stamps, they discover it has closed because the board of directors has run off with all the bank's funds. In the final scene, which takes place in what resembles a theatrical or funfair prop room, we learn that all of the apparent 'coincidences' in the film were no such thing and that nothing we have seen was in fact what it seemed: Juan's name is actually Sebastián; he is actually Valeria's boyfriend; and with her help and the help of others, possibly friends, possibly actors, possibly fellow swindlers, and even some of Marcos's disgruntled former partners, he has performed an elaborate scam, on Valeria's behalf and at Marcos's expense, to recuperate the money of the stolen inheritance, and to exact revenge against the unsuspecting Marcos. It is particularly significant that Marcos ends up being the object of the same kind of swindle that he has made it his 'profession' to carry out against others, and without ever discovering that he has been the object of a private act of revenge. The revenge has transformed him into yet another victim of a 'country [that] is going to hell'. In the meantime, the spectator, who has been made to believe throughout that the story of the 'Nine Queens' was a swindle fabricated by Marcos to deceive the innocent Juan, has been no less the victim of a scam than Marcos. As Bielinsky states, '[t]o construct this movie's plot I used structures proper to the swindle. The fact that I can use these elements as a cinematic form, compels us to reflect on what cinema is and how close it is to a swindle, to making someone believe things that are not' (2004: 2).

In this sense, the film is also deceptive in a more disquieting way. The elaborate plot designed to deceive Marcos (and us as spectators) provides, I will argue, a metaphorical condensation of the notion of a wholesale deception that defrauded Argentine society in the 1990s with the illusory promise of wealth and welfare, and, by punishing the emblematic culprit of that deception, stages an apparent symbolic

reparation for that loss. The key to intelligibility of that interpretation and the symbolic reparation ostensibly produced in the film are put into question, however, by the end of the film in which all is revealed to be pure simulation. The fact that the reparation is effected by means of a deception produces a model of restitution whose referent is pure simulation. Moreover, the fact that the end of the film suggests a new simulation also casts doubt on the very possibility of the communitarian rearticulation ostensibly produced in the film's final scene.

In what follows, I will examine the film's literal and metaphoric framing of the plot to exact justice against Marcos, with particular attention to the physical spaces selected to stage the scenes of the plot. I will then analyse how the film's ending re-inflects the metaphor and its attendant effects of social reparation and communitarian reintegration. First, I will focus briefly on a few scenes in which the film offers formal, visual clues that contradict the diegetic progression of the plot, and suggest the real nature of the deception that is being staged, and framed.

The scene in which the swindlers first team up is worth noting as it visually announces that the story that is about to unfold is a representation, a fiction within another fiction. After Marcos saves Juan from his clumsy swindling attempt in the opening scene, the two men walk to an empty parking lot, where Marcos proposes to Juan that they work together for the day – to which Juan eventually agrees. In this scene, we are shown different shots of Marcos and Juan talking, mostly against the backdrop of a brick wall. When Marcos offers to teach Juan a 'couple of tricks', and the latter responds by saying: 'Try telling me the truth', the camera begins to dolly, to *dance*, around them, in a circular travelling shot while Marcos gives his reply: 'I work with another guy, a partner, Turco. He disappeared a week ago, completely. The thing is, I need a partner. I don't know how to work on my own, I can't. I saw you at the gas station and I thought: perhaps.'

The circular travelling shot while Marcos is speaking suggests that Marcos's words – and the plot that will ensue – will encircle Juan, and that Juan is being visually and verbally framed. However, it is significant that the sudden dance of the camera in this shot is performed against the backdrop of a brick wall, suggesting another point of reference for the visual framing that is being staged. The brick wall is not incidental in this scene. The scene provides a literal point of reference, a visual translation of the title of a song that Juan will try to remember throughout the entire film – 'Il ballo del mattone' ('The Dance of the Brick'). Juan's faulty memory in this regard becomes a site of undecidability as to his authenticity. Juan asks almost everyone he meets during his wanderings with Marcos across the city if they remember this song by Rita Pavone. When it is revealed at the end of the film that Juan's behaviour throughout has been an elaborately staged performance, his preoccupation with the song might appear to be a mere effect of that performance. When he asks the same question of his partners after the plot has been resolved and revealed, however, the song and his attempt to remember it become the only potential cipher to the authentic character and past of the real Sebastián. Then again, it could simply indicate that Sebastián is also a role to be played. In any case, the 'dance' of the camera in front of the brick wall and Juan's repeated inquiry about 'Il ballo del mattone' as a leitmotif of his performance suggest that it is Juan calling the shots, not Marcos, that Marcos is in fact dancing to the tune played by Juan in this elaborately staged scam. The word brick in Italian, 'mattone', also carries the figurative meaning of 'an unbearable person, ultimately, something

hard to swallow' (FVL, 2003: 2), and it is not hard to imagine who the 'brick' is intended to be in the film.

In another scene in which they pull off a minor scam in a café and Juan reveals to Marcos that he has $50,000 in savings, Juan steps out into the street after playing his part in the scam and sits on the sill of the open window of the café through which we can see Marcos seated at a table. Juan addresses Marcos through the open window and tells him his 'life story':

> Juan: I need money.
>
> Marcos: That's original.
>
> Juan: No, I need money, now. Lots of it. That's why I'm on the streets.
>
> Marcos: You feel ambitious today?
>
> Juan: No, it's my father. I'm gathering money for him.
>
> Marcos: How much?
>
> Juan: A lot.
>
> Marcos: Come on, how much?
>
> Juan: Seventy grand.

This dialogue constitutes the narrative beginning of Juan's story. The visual framing of the dialogue juxtaposes the men in relation to the frame of the open window, Juan on the outside and Marcos inside the café, *framed* by the open window. Visually, the shot suggests that Marcos is the one being *framed* by Juan's narrative of disclosure, his story.

What is the motivation for giving Marcos such a hard time, for constructing such an elaborate plot to con him? A metaphorical reading of this plot will provide an answer to that question.

The event that triggers the plot for revenge against Marcos, the need to bring him to justice, is Marcos's theft of his Italian grandparents' estate, through which he has deprived his sister Valeria and his younger brother Federico of their share of the inheritance. Although Valeria has taken legal measures to sue Marcos for the theft, the plot of the film revolves around an alternative approach to exacting justice: by conning the con man. The demand for justice is generated, and ultimately satisfied, within the boundaries of family. It is a conflict between brother and sister over a family inheritance of which one has deprived the others. A metaphorical reading of the plot of familial betrayal staged in the film enables us to see the revenge against Marcos as an exemplary lesson of what happens to those who transgress the 'first law' of 'the nation'. I am referring, of course, to the book that would become the 'national epic poem' of Argentina in whose verses that law is inscribed.[9] 'Brothers, be united,/Because this is the first law;/be truly united/at all times no matter what,/because brothers who fight/are devoured by outsiders' (Hernández, 1975: 289).

This paternal dictum is Martin Fierro's advice to his sons in a text, *La vuelta de Martín Fierro*, which Josefina Ludmer has stated 'represents juridical and political unification [of the nation-state in 1880] in the fiesta of the encounter...' (2002: 231). When transposed to the disintegration of the nation-state in the 1990s, the question begged by this dictum is what is now the 'outside' that threatens to devour the siblings who fight among themselves, this new parentless family that synecdochically represents

the nation in its current state of disintegration? And what does the object of contention between the siblings, the stolen inheritance, represent, and who is guilty of its appropriation?

To provide an answer to these questions, we must return to the exemplary lesson crafted by the team of avenging swindlers and, particularly, to the various settings chosen for staging the settling of accounts, that is, to the spaces in which the drama unfolds.

The primary setting for the action, the one that encompasses all the others and that is dictated by the characters' peculiar occupation, is the city of Buenos Aires, across whose streets the grifters roam. The city appears to be overrun by all kinds of criminals, thieves and swindlers, as Marcos is quick to demonstrate to Juan in a rapid succession of shots that reveals the delinquent activities that Marcos enumerates:

> Those two are waiting for someone with a briefcase on the street side. That one, sizing up loaded victims. They are there, but you can't see them. That's what it's all about. They are there, but they aren't. So mind your briefcase, your case, your door, your window, your car, your savings. Mind your ass. Because they're there and they'll always be... They are spitters, breakers, skin workers, blind fronts, hoisters, hooks, stalls, petermans, night raiders, spitters, mustard chuckers, fences, operators, swindlers.

With its proliferation of citizens who are all potential enemies, swindlers and thieves, the city seems to have been rendered illegible. The city has become an instance of the 'unimaginable community', Jean Franco's term for the new Latin American 'megalopolis' (2002: 189):

> The ideal order that had made the city such a powerful symbol for the national community and for civic conduct, even if it never really coincided with the real city, is now impossible to reclaim. Indeed, one could argue that the vibrancy, the ephemeral encounters, the vertiginous changes, the infinite ruses of survival have made the city the trope of disorder, of spontaneity and chance though without (because of the international style of contemporary architecture) the fresh shock experienced by Benjamin's *flâneur* since everything seems familiar because it looks like everywhere else, so that even local color – a market, a mosque, whatever – is often the obligatory variation required by the tourist industry. And though cities are still administrative centers, real power is concentrated in the anonymous modern buildings that house high-tech communities, insurance firms, and banks or in the shopping malls. (Franco, 2002: 191)

The different spaces that are traversed in Marcos and Juan's wanderings – the locations that set the stage for the duping of Marcos – the urban and human landscapes that the film constructs underscore the characteristic features of the 1990s: the trappings of Argentina's passage to the 'first world', the global megalopolis where 'everything seems familiar because it looks like everywhere else...' (Franco, 2002: 191). In the film these 'familiar' spaces include the gas station convenience store where the initial set-up takes place, the international hotel where the Spanish millionaire businessman is a guest, and the bank looted by its board of directors. In traversing these spaces the film

draws an itinerary that corresponds to a 'global' Argentina – one in which Marcos will *get lost* or 'go to hell', just as the country is, according to Marcos's assessment of the imported chocolate bar at the beginning of the film.

What is immediately apparent in the image of the city that the film creates is the virtual absence of any trace of the world of work, of paid labour, except for those employed in the service economy, an economy moreover that sustains the 'familiar' locales of the international hotel and the gas station, among others. Instead, the city is inhabited by swindlers, opportunists and foreign investors. More importantly, there is no vestige of the 'developmentalist' Argentina, of Argentina's era of industrial 'development'. In this regard it is worth briefly recalling the film *Plata dulce* (Fernando Ayala, 1982), which just as *Nine Queens* is to the 1990s, was a sign of the times of the economic, social and moral changes wrought by the last military dictatorship (1976–83).

The correlation between the two films is not incidental: *Plata dulce* represents the beginning of a process whose culmination is taken up in *Nine Queens*. As the title suggests, *Plata dulce* ('Sweet Cash', 'Easy Money') represents the beginning of financial speculation in Argentina, that is, the beginning of the attempt to implement a neo-liberal economic model during the last military dictatorship. As Alberto Ciria has affirmed about the film, *Plata dulce* represents 'the contrast and conflict between traditional ideas about productive work and new ideas in favour of financial speculation and magical schemes for overcoming poverty' (1995: 92–3). It is precisely this contrast and conflict that seem to have disappeared in *Nine Queens*. In *Plata dulce* we still see traces of the developmentalist paradigm represented by a family business that is threatened, and finally ruined, by the competition of cheap imported products, and by the accumulation of wealth through financial speculation, to the detriment of the country's productive structure and, consequently, of its social structure as well. The thrust of the film is precisely the loss of values associated with a culture of productive labour and thus, according to the moral perspective provided by the film, the loss of family values related to networks of social solidarity.

In *Nine Queens,* this process of loss has been utterly consummated. The emblematic object of loss, the catalyst that refers us back to this process of disintegration and towards a demand for restitution in *Nine Queens*, is the *stolen inheritance* of Valeria's immigrant grandparents – the legacy of a former generation founded on values of work, family and social and communitarian solidarity, all of which seem to have vanished in the Argentina of the 1990s. It is the loss of this inheritance, and the values it represents, which prompts a demand for justice, for the restitution of that inheritance and the exemplary punishment of the culprit. In the family drama of *Nine Queens*, where the family stands in for the nation, the culprit is the deceitful Marcos, who persuades with his seductive rhetoric and swindles a generation of its rightful inheritance.

In *An Atlas of the European Novel*, Franco Moretti analyses how, in the period of the constitution of nation-states, 'the nation-state initially was: an unexpected coercion, quite unlike previous power relations; a wider, more abstract, more enigmatic dominion – *that needed a new symbolic form in order to be understood*' (1998: 17). This 'symbolic form' was to be the novel (1998: 17). Moreover, Moretti asks: 'how did novels "read" cities? By what narrative mechanisms did they make them "legible", and turn urban noise into information?' (1998: 79). By borrowing Moretti's terms, we could ask: what happens when those nation-states have begun to disintegrate, when

neo-liberal globalization not only threatens their sovereignty but also provokes the disappearance of the state as a horizon of social inclusion and perhaps even in some cases as an arbiter of justice? How do symbolic forms give legibility to these conditions? How does *Nine Queens*, for instance, render 'legible' the disintegration of the nation-state or of that space which, according to Franco, once constituted 'a powerful symbol for the national community and for civic conduct' (Franco, 2002: 191): the city, transformed now into a 'trope of disorder' (2002: 191), the very essence of illegibility, of meaning rent by chaos, a generalized state of struggle of each against everyone? The elaborate fiction designed to bring Marcos to justice provides a key to intelligibility, and order, which although a simulation (or precisely because it is one) establishes a clear causality and assignment of guilt for the current state of disorder and distrust. This is the *story* that will ostensibly come to repair the state of social fragmentation and produce a code of legibility according to which culprits are punished and a community is restored through a private and familial form of social justice, which compensates for the lack of any provided by the state.

It is significant that the place where Marcos is definitively lost in the plot to defraud him of his ill-earned gains is the international hotel, where the prospect of a profitable sale transforms him from grifter into investor. He legitimately acquires what he believes to be a set of rare stamps with the savings he has accumulated as a result of his thieving, with the expectation of turning a tidy profit. It is not coincidental that the object of his speculative investment is itself a form of paper 'currency', which by its rarefied nature has acquired an inflated value.

Hotels like the one in Puerto Madero (probably 'the most *globalized* spot today of the metropolis' [FVL, 2003: 5, translation mine]) where Marcos is going to get lost in the plot, with their archetypally postmodern design of American influence, and the impersonal look and feel of an airport lobby or a shopping mall, became the symbol of Argentina's 'passage to the first world', since they essentially cater to the management class of a globalized economy. The space where Marcos *gets lost* is thus, not coincidentally, one of the privileged spaces of the flow of capital and foreign investors, embodied in the film by the 'Spanish businessman', Vidal Gandolfo, archetypal symbol of a privatized Argentina.

It should be noted that the international hotel is not the only building in the film in which wealth finds its accommodation. The 'owner' of the 'original' Nine Queens stamps, the wealthy sister of the forger, lives in the Kavanagh – a traditional hotel for old money that thus contrasts starkly with the international hotel that houses the new 'aristocracy' of world finance. The identification of the 'valuable' collection of stamps with family property, which the wealthy sister is nonetheless persuaded to sell, invests the stamps with a role akin to that of 'family jewels', of a legacy that is analogous to the one that Marcos has stolen from his siblings, the family inheritance. Marcos's eagerness to sell the stamps to the 'Spanish businessman' for a quick profit, regardless of their real or potential value, further establishes the stamps as emblematic of a larger legacy that was sold off during the period of intensive state privatization – the sale of public and service companies to transnational capital during the 1990s. Marcos's opportunism and moral turpitude are further confirmed when he consents to the Spanish businessman's condition that his sister be part of the transaction. He is made to demonstrate his willingness to sell out his sister a second time, in effect, to repeat his previous betrayal.

If, as I have shown, the stolen family inheritance can be read as a metaphor for the values associated with work and family lost during the 1990s, the exemplary lesson staged for Marcos in the film resignifies the inheritance as a metaphor for the national heritage sold out to transnational capital in the privatization of the state, and posits Marcos, by extension, as the agent of that betrayal. In the transaction that is staged to bring Marcos to justice, both the stamps and the sister whom he sells with the stamps synecdochically represent the *stolen family inheritance* and, emblematically, the national heritage.

The fact that Marcos is responsible for the theft of the 'family inheritance', and then, in the framed plot, for the sale of his sister as 'middleman' in the sale of the stamps (the 'family jewels'), suggests that Marcos can be metaphorically read as a figuration of the representatives of the state who sold out the national heritage through the corrupt privatization of the state, the de-industrialization of the economy and the wholesale larceny of people's savings. If the demand for justice to which the film responds in the exemplary punishment of Marcos originates in a 'swindle' perpetrated against civil society by the state through the persuasive rhetoric of Argentina's promised 'passage to the first world', a swindle achieved by *legal* means, it is fitting that the satisfaction of the demand for justice in the film come from civil society. It is fitting that although Valeria is suing Marcos in the hope of regaining her inheritance through legal channels, she ultimately opts for an alternative form of justice that is not mediated by the state. It is all the more fitting that Marcos is never made aware that he has been the object of a private vengeance, that the punishment – and the *symbolic compensation* that the film provides – consist in transforming Marcos the swindler into one more victim of the bankruptcy of the state, one more victim of economic speculation, of the corruption and opportunism he himself represents.

The conning of Marcos takes place when he invests his savings to purchase the stamps. The lesson he is taught consists, however, in the fact that, when he is unable to cash the cheque he has earned with the investment of his savings, he is rendered indistinguishable from the rest of the crowd gathered in protest outside the bank clamouring for the return of their savings.

In the last scene of the plot to con Marcos, the camera sweeps above Marcos and Juan outside the bank, and gives us a bird's-eye view of the crowd of irate customers at the closed doors of the bank and of Marcos joining the crowd to push his way to the door. The camera's framing of Marcos from above serves as a visual leveller, rendering Marcos equal to the rest of the swindled bank customers, one more social victim of generalized corruption, sealing the final triumph of a justice that has transformed Marcos from swindler to swindled. The camera's gaze from above endows the retribution against Marcos with a quality of divine justice, which renders men and women equal in a country where the impunity of state corruption makes manifest the absence of equality before the law.

The bank, like the international hotel, is another one of those 'anonymous modern buildings' where, in Franco's terms, 'real power is concentrated' in the new global megalopolis (2002: 191). Both spaces represent the privatized and corrupt global Argentina of the 1990s: from the Spanish businessman about to be deported to the bank's board of directors who escape with the bank's funds.[10] Both spaces represent, therefore, the first and the last link in the plot of retribution that the film stages for those who are willing and capable of robbing the 'family inheritance', of selling

the 'family jewels' or selling out their own sister. The hotel is where first Marcos is transformed from grifter into investor, and the bank later transforms him from investor into the victim of a swindle.

The film's interpretation of the process of national disintegration that can be read in the articulation of the plot to bring Marcos to justice can be summarized as follows: the illusory promise of Argentina's incorporation into the first world augured by globalization in the1990s ended up being no more than a state-sanctioned swindle, consisting in the sale of the nation and its assets to transnational capital, and in the dissolution of the values that constituted the legacy of the immigrant grandparents and, ultimately, in the disintegration of the national community itself. It is in the sense provided by this metaphorical reading of the plot that Marcos's punishment implies a satisfaction, a symbolic reparation in administering a private, 'familial' justice for the delinquent behaviour Marcos represents.

The final image of Marcos, when he emerges from the rush of bank customers who have succeeded in pushing open the bank doors and knocking Marcos down in their path, offers a literal rendition of the expression 'to sweat blood' that seems to have been the objective of the exemplary lesson Marcos has been the object of: a drop of blood trickles across his forehead as he stares mutely at Juan. The image has clear religious connotations, which are taken up in the following scene. Juan walks off to the subway and gets on the train. A street kid peddling religious cards places one on Juan's leg. A point-of-view close-up of the card reveals that it carries the image of Saint George, a paradigmatic avenger in the Catholic imaginary. The identification with Juan is clear. He has taken on the role of avenger, the task of 'slaying the dragon', an identification that legitimizes his mode of revenge by giving it a divine quality in the absence of earthly justice.

The symbolic reparation that the film has offered through Marcos's exemplary punishment becomes unstable, however, in the closing scene of the film. The final sequence, in which the 'invisible hand' of justice is revealed, shows us Juan entering a storage space that resembles the prop room of a theatre; a cluttered storeroom of heterogeneous scene fragments that contrasts with the orderly space of the international hotel. Here, we meet again the assorted characters who each played a role in the elaborate fiction to which we as spectators have also been an audience: the Spanish businessman, who is neither Spanish nor a businessman but an actor; the two motorcycle 'thieves' who stole the 'counterfeit' stamps; Berta the wealthy widow who sold them the 'real' stamps; her brother Sandler the forger; the expert philatelist; the Spanish businessman's bodyguards; and finally, Marcos's sister Valeria, who it turns out is Juan's girlfriend. Juan's real name, we discover, is Sebastián.

'Nine Queens', the name given to the rare stamps in the plot we now discover, is actually the brand of cigars that Sebastián's father smokes, and a number of the assembled group are playing cards in this scene, using chips stored in an empty box of 'Nine Queens' cigars. Are they actors, acquaintances, just friends, a group of Marcos's past victims, or swindlers by profession? Or are they all these things? It does not really matter. It is clear that this community presented at the end of the film is not founded on the values of productive labour and sincerity. The values that appear to have been restored in the community that constitutes itself through the expulsion of the 'exemplary' culprit are the values of solidarity and loyalty among friends and partners, the values of friendship and family affection. Marcos is clearly depicted as a swindler

for whom any honour or code of behaviour, even among partners or family, is relative, and for whom solidarity is of no consequence. He has ripped off every partner he has ever worked with, as he also tried to do with Sebastián, and he has robbed his brother and sister.

The reconstitution of community is crystallized in the last scene, when Sebastián gives Valeria a bag containing the recovered money as a 'gift' for their 'first anniversary'. 'It's yours', he tells her, to which Valeria replies: 'And yours.' Sebastián's joking retort, 'Minus expenses', is an expression typical of Marcos, which Valeria does not understand. He then takes a ring from his pocket and gives it to her. This ring has a history in the film, one that differs from the version Sebastián tells Valeria in this final act of conjugation. It is unclear, however, which version is the true one. The first history of the ring is the one Sebastián told Marcos when they first teamed up: an old lady whom Marcos had conned by pretending to be her nephew allegedly gave it to Sebastián asking that her presumed nephew please return it to her sister. Sebastián gives Marcos the ring, but later recovers it by winning a bet that demonstrates both his ability as teller of tales and the trust he inspires in others. The version he tells Valeria when he offers her the ring is very different: 'It belonged to my mother', he claims, 'My grandmother gave it to her. It's been in the family for . . . [he hesitates] a hundred years'. If it is uncertain which of the two versions that would account for Sebastián's possession of the ring is true, Sebastián's hesitation before telling Valeria how long the ring has been in his family, in addition to the fact that he takes the ring from his pocket after repeating Marcos's expression ('minus expenses'), suggests that the real history of the ring is not the one he tells Valeria. In either case, the ring demonstrates Sebastián's gift as a storyteller, his ability to become someone and something else. To put it in the words of the epigraph at the beginning of this essay, the final lines of Borges's 'El fin', '[h]aving accomplished his task of justice, now he was nobody. Or rather, he was the other. . .' (1974: 521). The task of justice seems literally to have transformed Sebastián into Marcos (or was he already like him?), into a swindler. If the ring is the very sign of his ability as a teller of tales, it is no less true that it has the significance, as Sebastián himself makes apparent, of a 'family jewel'. It refers therefore to a legacy through which, if sold, one runs the risk of eroding the foundation on which the community is based. Even though the ring is the product of a ruse and its history is probably apocryphal, it is nonetheless the symbol that seals the association between Sebastián and Valeria, the *promise of community*. It is precisely for that reason that it can become the symbol of a tradition, which by its very nature is a fiction, one that secures the continuity of values that give cohesion to community.

After giving Valeria the ring and telling her the story of its origins, Sebastián suddenly remembers the song by Rita Pavone, whose recollection has haunted him throughout the film and which apparently reminds him of his childhood and his mother: 'Il ballo del mattone'. The film cuts to the final credits with this song in the background, which now acquires its full significance as a cultural reference.

The song that Sebastián has tried to recall refers, both in its content and in its evocation of an epoch, to an imaginary of the 1960s (the decade when Pavone's music was popular in Argentina): the social and economic prosperity of the middle class with immigrant origins, the atmosphere of playfulness and carefree dancing alluded to in the song. This is the familial and social image that Sebastián vainly yearns for in the song he cannot remember: a semantic field of affect (family cohesion, middle-class prosperity)

that seemed to have been lost in the consumerist mirage that reached its apotheosis in the 1990s. This is why he can only remember the song, and thus can only recover the image that the song represents, as a prospect for the future, when he in turn 'becomes' a swindler, when he decides that the *simulation* required for exacting justice is also necessary to guarantee the cohesion of the community; when he decides that a 'family jewel' is necessary – a legacy, a tradition and certain values – to found the kind of community the end of the film reinstates. In what sense, however, is this reinstated community different in its functioning, its foundation, from the national community? Is it not also erected upon a *simulation*, upon an 'invented tradition'?

In the words of Stuart Hall:

> It has been the main function of national cultures which ... are systems of representations, to *represent* what is in fact the ethnic hotch-potch of modern nationality as the primordial unity of 'one people'; and of their invented traditions to project the ruptures and conquests, which are their real history, backwards in an apparently seamless and unbroken continuity towards pure, mythic time. (1993: 356)

Is it not true that this new and reconstituted community is, just like the disintegrated community at the beginning of the film, a synecdochical representation of the national community? It is fitting, then, that the symbol of articulation of community is in itself a simulation whose truth or falseness is undecidable.

The fact that the film underscores at its closure, in its resolution of the conflicts it has sought to suture, the undecidable authenticity of the 'family jewel' that seals the reconstitution of community calls attention to the nature of the community whose initial disintegration Marcos decries *and* contributes to, but which he is also a product of. It is significant that his exclusion from the new community does not seem to have excluded the deceitful behaviour he represents. Sebastián's lie, or simulation, reinstitutes the possibility of the conflicts and antagonisms that the justice against Marcos sought to correct, while making manifest society's complicity in the simulation that had been ascribed to the state in the process of national disintegration the film represents. The doubly surprising revelation at the end of the film thus calls into question the comforting interpretation of the experience of the 1990s in Argentina offered by the plot to exact justice against Marcos, in which he and what he figuratively embodies are represented as sole culprit.

The symbolic reparation produced is thus profoundly unstable, since it is founded on the very thing the plot seeks to punish: simulation. Simulation is simultaneously the cause and the means of punishment, and the condition of possibility for the rearticulation of community proposed at the end of the film. A simulation that ultimately undermines the stability of that reconstitution.

If, by its very genre, the film encodes simulation as the means of engaging and deceiving the spectator until the very last moment, in doing so it renders visible the simulation through which justice is made and through which the symbolic suture and rearticulation of community are produced. In other words, the film does not construct an outside to the simulation it erects, suggesting thereby that the culprits and the victims are less different than they might appear, that society is not and was not an innocent victim. It is not, after all, a very soothing ending.

Notes

The preparation of this article benefited from a conversation with Fabián Bielinsky. I would also like to thank Alexandra Habershon for her insightful help with the translation of this article.

1 All translations from the Spanish are mine.
2 All translations of dialogue from the film come from the English subtitles that accompanied the release of *Nine Queens* on DVD.
3 'It is not possible for now to identify a collective programme or homogeneous aesthetic: the vitality of these films derives, precisely, from their variety and difference. But when placed side by side, they form a devastated map of *menemista* Argentina' (Oubiña, 2002: 194–5). The most interesting analysis of the new Argentine cinema can be found in Aguilar, Amado, Bernini and Oubiña's essays. On the subject of new Argentine cinema, see also the book edited by Bernades, Lerer and Wolf (2002); the Introduction (to the 1990s) in the book edited by Peña (2003); and the debate between Beceyro, Filipelli, Oubiña and Pauls (2000).
4 The film's script, written towards the end of 1996 and the beginning of 1997, finally obtained financing in 1998 when it won the contest 'Nuevos Talentos Cinematográficos', organized by a group of companies (Patagonik Film Group, Industrias Audiovisuales Argentinas, Kodak Argentina, FX Sound, and J.Z. y Asociados), obtaining as its award the making of the film (Schettini, 2000: 2).
5 The numerous awards won by the film include seven 'Cóndor de Plata' awards by the Asociación de Cronistas Cinematográficos de la Argentina in 2000 (Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Original Script, Best Supporting Actress, Best Cinematography, Best Editing), the award for Best Argentine Film 2000 by FIPRESCI Argentina, the ADF-Best Cinematography award in the 16 Festival Internacional de Cine de Mar del Plata (Argentina, 2001), the Best Actor award: Ricardo Darín and Gastón Pauls (shared) in the Festival des Cinémas et Cultures de l'Amérique Latine à Biarritz (France, 2001), the Best Script award in the Latin American Film Festival at Trieste (Italy, 2001), the Audience Award and the Best Director Award in the Mostra de Cinema Latinoamericano de Lleida (Spain, 2000).
6 Among the festivals for which the film was selected, in addition to those mentioned above (see note 3), are the 26th Toronto International Film Festival (Canada, 2001), the 37th Chicago International Film Festival (USA, 2001), the London Film Festival (England, 2001), the American Film Institute Festival (Los Angeles, USA, 2001), and the Miami International Film Festival (USA, 2002).
7 See Quintín (2000) and Castagna (2000). 'Industrial' is the term that Argentine critics use to qualify the cinema produced within traditional circuits of production and distribution, in contrast to the cinema typically considered 'independent'. The concept of 'independent' in this context refers to alternative modes of production, albeit with the acknowledgement that 'the American studio system that generated that definition does not exist in Argentina' (Bernades *et al.*, 2002: 10).
8 Throughout this essay, I use the term 'simulation' to refer to the 'deceptions' or 'representations' staged in the film in allusion to the title of a TV show: *Los simuladores* (Damián Szifrom, 2002), which is constructed on a scheme similar to the one in *Nine Queens* (the process of exacting justice through a representation or a lie). What is particularly interesting about simulation as a concept, in addition to the notion of deception or representation it conveys, is its quality of undecidability in terms of truth

or falseness that Jean Baudrillard has extensively theorized: 'pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false", the "real" and the "imaginary"' (1994:3). It is this notion of simulation that applies to various instances of 'deception' that I analyse, particularly in the film's conclusion.

9 See Altamirano (1983).

10 The closure of the bank, FVL affirms, is a 'phenomenon for which we have to credit globalization.... A *fictional globalisation*, in this case...' 2003: 5).

References

Aguilar, Gonzalo. 2001. Los precarios órdenes del azar. *Milpalabras* 1: 14–24.

Altamirano, Carlos. 1983. La fundación de la literatura argentina. In *Ensayos argentinos: De Sarmiento a la vanguardia*, edited by Carlos Altamirano, and Beatriz Sarlo. Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 109–15.

Amado, Ana. 2002. Cine argentino. Cuando todo es margen. *Pensamiento de los confines* 11: 87–94.

Battle, Diego. 2000. Buen año para films argentinos. *La nación*, 29 December. Available at http://buscador.lanacion.com.ar/ Nota.asp?nota_id=46657&high=bielinsky; INTERNET.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulacra and Simulation*. translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Beceyro, Raúl. 2000. *Nueve reinas*: la última estafa. *El amante* 103: 2–3.

Beceyro, Raúl, Rafael Filipelli, David Oubiña, and Alan Pauls. 2000. Estética del cine, nuevos realismos, representación. *Punto de vista* 67: 1–9.

Bernades Horacio, Diego Lerer, and Sergio Wolf, eds. 2002. *El nuevo cine argentino: Temas, autores y estilos de una renovación*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Tatanka/Fipresci.

Bernini, Emilio. 2003. Un proyecto inconcluso. Aspectos del cine contemporáneo argentino. *Kilómetro 111* 4: 87–106.

Bielinsky, Fabián. Entrevista. 2004. El ilusionista del millón. *HolaCine*. 12 September. Available at http://www.holacine.com.ar/interview/interview.asp?interview=2; INTERNET.

Borges, JorgeLuis. 1974. El fin. In *Obras completas: 1923–1972*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 519–21.

Castagna, GustavoJ. 2000. Un milagro argentino. *El amante*, 10 September. Available at http://www.elamante.com/nota/0/0576.shtml; INTERNET.

Ciria, Alberto. 1995. *Más allá de la pantalla: Cine argentino, historia y política*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor.

Franco, Jean. 2002. *The decline and fall of the lettered city: Latin America in the cold war*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

FVL. 2003. Figuras englobantes. *Otrocampo.com*. Available at http://www.otrocampo.com/criticas/9reinas.htm; INTERNET.

Hall, Stuart. 1993. Culture, community, nation. *Cultural Studies* 7: 349–63.

Hernández, José. 1975. *Martín Fierro*. Zaragoza: Ebro.

Ludmer, Josefina. 2002. *The gaucho genre: A treatise on the motherland*, translated by Molly Weigel. Durham: Duke University Press.
Moretti, Franco. 1998. *An Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900*. London: Verso.
Oubiña, David. 2003. El espectáculo y sus márgenes. Sobre Adrián Caetano y el nuevo cine Argentino. *Punto de vista* 76: 28–34.
Ibid. 2002. Un mapa arrasado. Nuevo cine argentino de los '90'. *Nueva sociedad* 20/21: 193–205.
Peña, Fernando Martín, ed. 2003. *60/90 generaciones: Cine argentino independiente*. Buenos Aires: MALBA Colección Constantini.
Quintín [Eduardo Antín]. 2000. Ahora y entonces. *El amante*, 10 September. Available at http://www.elamante.com/nota/0/0577.shtml; INTERNET.
Schettini, Adriana. 2000. Una película argentina que promete. *La nación*, 30 August. Available at http://buscador.lanacion.com.ar/Nota.asp?nota_id=30845&high = bielinsky; INTERNET.
Vezzetti, Hugo. 2002. Escenas de la crisis. *Punto de vista* 72: 32–7.

Gabriela Copertari is Assistant Professor of Spanish at Case Western Reserve University. Her areas of specialization are Latin American film, literature, and cultural studies. She is currently working on a book-length manuscript on contemporary Argentine cinema.