

The Progressive Imaginary: Platforms, Intellectuals, and Celebrities in Post-Crisis Argentina

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Abstract

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The Progressive Imaginary: Platforms, Intellectuals, and Celebrities in Post-Crisis Argentina, examines the way that broadcast, digital platforms, media ownership, and national policy shaped the rise of media icons in Argentine popular culture in the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis. This research focuses on how public personalities utilize contemporary broadcast television and digital video to contest the social and economic exclusions produced by neoliberal policies. Combining industrial and aesthetic analysis with geopolitical and historical contextualization, I examine the effects of media platforms in circulating figures who have been largely unexamined in both Northern and Southern academic circles. I anchor this project with key case studies—pop philosopher Darío Sztajnszrajber, feminist comedian Malena Pichot, and the serial biopics of Carlos Monzón, Carlos Tévez, Diego Maradona, and Eva Perón—that demonstrate the savvy use of state-owned and private media by emerging public figures who work to disseminate a progressive worldview, specifically focused on wealth redistribution, women's rights, and anti-authoritarianism. I argue that Argentina—both its history and contemporary politics—has been thoroughly reimagined as a protector and expander of human rights through this strategic use of digital media platforms. I show, ultimately, how contemporary media global streaming platforms functions to exploit the progressive worldview as commodity export for both domestic and foreign audiences.

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Introduction: The Progressive Imaginary

In May of 2010, Argentina celebrated two hundred years of independence—of the formation of its first national government, known as the Primera Junta. The presidential administration at the time, run by the Frente para la Victoria, organized several public ceremonies, concerts, parades, and other events to commemorate the Argentine bicentennial over the course of five days and across the country's major cities. Amongst the festivities, one media event stood out for its use of technology and space, as well as its deployment of national historical memory. On May 25th, the actual date the Primera Junta seized power, a video projection mapping was displayed over the façade of the Cabildo of Buenos Aires—the building that worked as the seat of the government for the Spanish colonial administration and, later, for the first independent governments. In a linear chronological fashion, the video narrates the history of Argentina starting from the resistance to the British Invasions of 1806 and 1807—the first independentist feats—all the way to the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the sitting president in 2010 (hereafter referred to as CFK). The video lasted only ten minutes and, thus, featured a selection of key moments of Argentina's history.

The very selection of media, however, predetermined a particular ideological reading of the country's history and, therefore, its future. This historical curation is significant for the moments deemed to be highlights of the nation; the longest sequence, for instance, is devoted to Argentina's 20th century history, an era marked by the alternation between democratic governments and military dictatorships. Highly telling, however, were the projection's historical gaps and omissions. For example, the period known as the “Infamous Decade” (1930-1943)—a time of reigning governmental corruption and political persecution—is simply not narrated. When the video hits the year 1930 (marked by a counter on the Cabildo tower) the projection

emulates an electrical short-circuit that makes the screen-building go dark, only to return with images of the rise of Juan Domingo Perón in 1945. Similarly, the 1955-1973 phase, where two short democratic administrations (1958-1962 and 1963-1966) were both preceded and succeeded by dictatorial processes, is hastily narrated, giving only the briefest of glimpses into that era's historical figures. Accompanied by an eerie electronic music score, the video shows a beam of yellow light that moves over the façade of the building briefly revealing the faces of presidents Arturo Frondizi and Arturo Illia—not aligned with the Frente para la Victoria—as well as those of the military leaders who presided over the country between those years. The quick, almost evasive, narration of historical processes clashes with the level of detail and positive representation received by others.

This is especially the case with the depiction of Perón's first two presidencies (1946-1955), probably the centerpiece of the public media event (Fig 1). In contrast to the timid portrayal of other heads of state, Perón's image is placed over the central arch of the building, dressed in military garments with a presidential sash in the colors of Argentina's flag underscoring his position as the great Argentine president. As Perón remains in the same spot throughout the entire segment, a series of graphic elements circulates around him, further characterizing his first two terms in office. Eva "Evita" Perón appears at Perón's left, together with various still and moving images of crowds cheering for the political couple. In addition, floating text appears, showing ideas associated with Perón's figure and his policies—e.g. "worker," "the people," "social justice," and "welfare." Accompanied by emotional music, the sequence emphasizes Perón and Evita's era—a central reference of the Frente para la Victoria liturgy—as a bright political period, one of prosperity, that enjoyed the support of large swaths



*Figure 1. Perón (center) and Evita (bottom right) on the façade of the Cabildo building.
Mapping: Bicentenario Argentina, 2010, NOS. Image: Vimeo*

of the population, specifically and significantly that of the working class. It is also worth noting the weighty depiction of the years 1973-1976, the interval between the last two Argentine dictatorships (the 1976-1983 being the longest and bloodiest). This period is significant for Perón's return to the country after almost twenty years in exile and for the prevalence of political violence perpetrated by the left-wing guerrilla and right-wing terrorist organizations, especially the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance lead by José López Rega, Perón's Minister of Social Security. These complex and contradictory years take up a notable amount of time in the video. At the same time, the video politically recuperates these years by emphasizing the more glamorous aspects of the era—the faces of renowned national artists and athletes—and by featuring images of the excited crowds going to celebrate Perón's arrival in Argentina.

The closing sequence of the projection mapping, ultimately, dispels any doubt regarding how the CFK administration is historicizing itself. As the video moves into the presidency of CFK's husband, Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007), three-dimensional white and blue cubes begin tracing the Cabildo's arches and towers. Footage of Kirchner commanding the removal of the portraits of military dictators from military college walls right after a black and white photograph of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo flashes over the building's front, which is, rather significantly, the only non-chronological image in the entire piece.¹ Immediately following the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, the center of the projection shows Kirchner passing the presidential baton to his wife, and the word "justice" can be read in big capital white letters at the bottom of the façade. The soundtrack plays the voice of CFK saying "we Argentines have done many things together." The image of CFK's presidential inauguration is both accompanied and later followed by moving images and still photographs of factories, cranes moving shipping containers, tractors harvesting fields, children in classrooms at computers, as well as the faces of select South American leaders of the 2000s—Lula da Silva, Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, and Fernando Lugo. The final segment of the video projection foregrounds the Kirchner presidencies as rebuilding the nation and heralding an era of technological and industrial development. The historical seeds of this project are planted by the depiction of 1970s human rights activism, which casts the Kirchner era as a moment of both social *and* economic justice. The Kirchners also presented themselves as being tightly bound to the political projects of the left-wing leaders of the region at the time.

The Cabildo's video projection's narration of Argentina's history is largely one of progress. It presents the history of the nation as one destined for social, economic, and political

¹ Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and Madres de Plaza de Mayo were organizations formed during the 1976-1983 military dictatorship with the goal of denouncing the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the army officers as well as finding the *desaparecidos* (those politically persecuted who were kidnapped and whose bodies were disappeared) and their children who were born and stolen in captivity.

improvement—a national saga of a people facing and overcoming serious obstacles. The country's clear path to advancement hinges upon the inclusion of the working-class and workers' movements in the country's politics (made possible by Peronism). It also draws deeply on the concept of a national character, here conceived as a decidedly anti-authoritarian spirit. Ending in an embrace with Chávez, Lula, and Correa, Argentina's successful developmental course is clearly charted as necessarily tied to the left of the political spectrum. The bicentennial video, however, is engaged in telling the story of another progression—that of the arts and media technologies. It starts with old maps charting the Buenos Aires region and 19th-century paintings of national heroes and independence battles, later making ample use of archival footage and photographs of various historical events and figures, going through copious televisual images, and ending with digital video. Digital media plays a central role in the audiovisual piece, first, by being its material substrate—the video is digital and all the different media represented were digitized—and, second, by insisting how widespread the digital had become in Argentina by 2010. This is further reinforced in the final moments of the projection, which features the entire façade of the Cabildo covered in webcam videos from citizens across Argentina, implying a unified and digitized political body (Fig 2).

Screened before a crowd that recorded the event on their smartphones and cheered the nation's successive historical achievements, the Cabildo's video-mapping symbolized a paradigmatic example of the *progressive imaginary* that became so prevalent in Argentina between the mid-2000s and until the end of the 2010s at least. This period is defined by an alignment of political discourse, popular culture, and media platforms, all of which worked



Figure 2. Webcam images of Argentines from various regions of the country on the Cabildo's façade. Mapping: Bicentenario Argentina, 2010, NOS. Image: Vimeo

together to foster the image of Argentina as deeply committed to social justice and the defense of human rights at large. Argentines thought of themselves as an eminently progressive people and were persistently persuaded of such belief by means of audiovisual media. In this dissertation, I examine this historical moment of the nation where this ambient sense of progressivism—what I define as the *progressive imaginary*—became hegemonic, both politically and ideologically. I argue that Argentina—both its recent history and contemporary politics—has been thoroughly reimagined as a protector and expander of human rights through a strategic use of media platforms. Particularly, I explore how platforms mobilized specific popular cultural icons—both old and new— in tandem with media ownership and policy in order to disseminate a progressive worldview, specially focused on wealth redistribution, women's rights, and anti-fascism. Furthermore, I contend that these progressive politics ushered Argentina's media transition from

broadcast and cable television to streaming content—from analogue to digital. This passage towards digital media as the norm also implied an aesthetic transformation that affected both public and private media content. Therefore, I argue that contemporary global subscription-based video streaming platforms exploit the progressive worldview as a commodity export for international audiences. Before these arguments, however, I will use the space of this introduction in order to contextualize Argentina within the larger South American region at the beginning of the 21st century. In this introduction, I will also define the key analytical categories that I explore in the three body chapters of the dissertation. I proceed to contextualize this project within the larger fields of studies on Latin American media, both in the Global North and South. Finally, I lay out the dissertation’s structure and explain its organizational rationale.

The Pink Tide and its Media Policies

As the bicentennial Cabildo video revealed, Argentina’s progressive political process was part of a larger phenomenon that characterized several Latin American nations, particularly those of South America. Between the late 1990s and early 2000s, the predominant political tendency in the region was the rise of a series of left-of-center governments that have been referred to by the name *pink tide* (Emerson 2018, 156). It is widely agreed upon that the beginning of the *pink tide* was inaugurated when Hugo Chávez was elected president of Venezuela in 1998, followed by the elections of Lula da Silva in Brazil in 2002, Néstor Kirchner in Argentina in 2003, Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay in 2004, Evo Morales in Bolivia in 2005, and Rafael Correa in 2007 among others (Levitsky and Roberts 2011, 1). The term *pink tide* seeks to capture the heterogeneity of the political trend, with some administrations being more leftist than others—some more “red” than others—but all sharing the “central programmatic objective, to reduce social and economic inequalities” (Levitsky and Roberts, 5). *Pink* also denotes that these governments were not as

radical as Latin America's revolutionary left-wing movements, as they ascended through electoral means rather than armed struggle and influenced relations of production without abolishing private property.

These left-leaning governments, notably, emerged against a set of economic policies backed by the U.S. Government, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) known as the Washington Consensus given that the headquarters of all the backing institutions resided in Washington DC (Panizza 2009, 10). This reform package was supposed to bring about an economic boom to Latin America after the low or stagnant growth rates and high inflation experienced in the region during the 1980s—a period often referred to as the “lost decade” (Sims and Romero 1999). Washington Consensus policies broadly implied free market and deregulatory economic framework that sought to reduce public expenditure, privatize state assets, lower import tax barriers, and increase foreign investment. In sum, the goal was to undermine economic nationalism and the role that the state had historically played in the region as guarantors of economic and social development (Emerson, 158). While these neoliberal policies were able to reduce inflation, the total debt in Latin America doubled and social inequality worsened across the region throughout the 1990s as poverty grew together with wealth concentration (Levitsky and Roberts, 9). The worsening of Latin American economies led to a series of crises between the mid-1990s and the beginning of the 21st century—e.g. Mexico (1995), Brazil (1999), and Argentina (2001). Given the region's level of market openness, these crashes were also motivated by other global financial downturns—Asia (1997) and Russia (1998)— and external economic factors like the US Federal Reserve's decision to raise short-term rates in 1994 (Cibils, Weisbrot, and Kar 2002, 2).

Argentina became perhaps the most paradigmatic case of the Latin American crises as the country faced a devastating economic collapse, defaulting its sovereign debt, devaluing the

national currency, and a GDP decline of almost twenty percent between 1998 and 2001 (Lynch 2021, 1). This situation resulted in the mass uprisings of December 19 and 20, 2001—known as the *Argentinazo*—when the middle- and lower-classes took to the streets to demand president Fernando de la Rúa’s resignation. After almost forty people were killed and thousands were arrested by the authorities, de la Rúa resigned. A ten-day period followed, during which Argentina had five different presidents until a moderate political stability—though fraught—was achieved.

The widespread context of crisis in Latin America helped the ascent of left-wing governments that sought to reverse the effects of orthodox liberal economics primarily by rehabilitating the role of the state to foster economic growth and guarantee social prosperity (Emerson, 164). Moreover, the global economic environment had changed for the better with the so-called “commodities boom” of the early 2000s that “generated high growth rates, dramatically improved fiscal and trade balances, and reduced Latin American dependence on US and international financial institutions, providing governments with greater policy latitude” (Levitsky and Roberts, 21). This sudden favorable macroeconomic scenario allowed the *pink tide* administrations to govern on the left. On the one hand, Latin America’s leftist governments pursued wealth redistribution through measures like increased public expenditure, the extension of social programs’ coverage, and strengthening worker’s rights and unions. On the other hand, various administrations passed legislation that aimed at expanding human rights and protecting historically marginalized social groups.

Argentina, in this sense, became an exemplary case. Néstor Kirchner resumed the trials for crimes against humanity of the officers that had collaborated in the 1976-1983 dictatorship, (previously halted in 1987). Under his presidency, the pardons given to military leaders by president Carlos Menem were also revoked and high-ranking officers were tried again and

imprisoned. During CFK's tenure as president, several laws were enacted to solidify LGBTQ+ rights in the country such as the same-sex marriage bill (2010) and the Gender Identity Law (2012) that allows transgender people to register their documentation according to their corresponding name and gender, and guarantees medical coverage for gender-transition treatments. Aside from these economic and social policies, *pink tide* governments recognized the importance of media's role in society and actively harnessed the power of the state to inform their media landscapes.

Washington Consensus market-oriented reforms, as communication scholar Philip Kitzberger (2017) asserts, profoundly transformed Latin America's media landscape in the 1990s, as the different nations of the region removed cross-media ownership and liberalized new media industries. The result was higher levels of concentration, conglomeration, and transnationalization, bolstering media conglomerates that turned into "powerful political instruments for private corporate interests" (233). Kitzberger notes that, given the media's great lobbying power to buttress or weaken politicians and policy, political elites chose to accommodate media conglomerates before the crisis of neoliberalism in the region (239). The "Left-Turn" in Latin America, however, represented a change "that destabilized the existing politics-media alignments" (Kitzberger, 240). This new dynamic took the form, in various countries, of direct confrontations between political administrations and establishment media—frequently critical of progressive legislation. Political leaders of countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina put their criticisms of media elites at the center of public debate, repudiating the economic interests behind allegedly neutral news reporting and denouncing the purchase that the media had over culture at large.

In addition to exchanging verbal attacks with legacy media, *pink tide* governments passed new laws in order to regulate the media broadly following the mandates of "media

democratization” or “communication rights” (Kitzberger 230). As Dênis de Moraes states (2011), media transformations in Latin America “emerge out of the reconstruction or the recovery of the State as an institutional and ethical-political space, with the disposition to adopt and implement public policy that contributes to democratizing information and culture” (15). This new regulatory agenda represented a counter-tendency “to the globally dominant market-driven orientation of media and telecommunications policies” (Kitzberger 230). Common media legislation across various nations included cross-ownership bans, limits to broadcasting licenses, market share caps, and subsidies to production and public broadcasting. This legislation even guaranteed “the provision of spectrum reserves for community broadcasting with no real precedent in other legal regimes” (Kitzberger 244). Altogether, these policies attempted to undermine the political and cultural influence of media conglomerates simultaneously as they also gave opportunities to new media players in different national contexts.

In this framework, Argentina stood out for its media legislation and for the vast deployment of media infrastructure and content. For example, the Audiovisual Communication Services Law passed under CFK in 2009 became a blueprint for other countries, like Uruguay that adopted some of its key provisions in their own media law passed in 2014 (Mauersberger 2011). Furthermore, media reform activists who were fundamental in lobbying for the passage of the 2009 law became closely watched by other countries in the region and travelled through South America to communicate the Argentine experience (Kitzberger 242). Despite its attempts to break media oligopolies in the country, the Argentine case was also significant since it did not take the extreme routes of Chávez and Correa, who went as far as trying to regulate the content of media outlets, those perceived to “distort” or “manipulate” information or simply “lie” to the public. As complacency with media conglomerates ended (especially after 2008), Argentina’s government bolstered media production and access at the same time as it fostered the transition to

media digitization. CFK's administration inaugurated various public television networks and subsidized the production of hundreds of new shows (discussed in Chapter One). The government also launched the program Televisión Digital Abierta (Open Digital Television or TDA) where set top boxes were provided free of charge to the population so they could access free-to-air channels through digital signals. The networks accessible through TDA included the popular commercial ones, new and old public broadcasting channels, as well as international news networks, namely, Telesur and Russia Today. New digital video platforms were also created to freely access much of the audiovisual content produced with state support and the majority of public television shows were uploaded to YouTube. Finally, the program Conectar Igualdad (Connecting Equality) gave elementary and secondary school students laptop computers, and the government also launched two satellites—ARSAT 1 and 2—that provided telecommunication services, such as transmitting the signals to receive TDA.

The salience of Argentina's social justice agenda, together with its remarkable support to media production and the impulse to democratize digital media's accessibility, makes the South American nation, thus, a critical case study to understand contemporary progressive politics in the Latin American region and the world more broadly. Analyzing Argentina's *progressive imaginary* since the 2000s—paying attention to the ways that policy, discourse, media platforms and popular culture helped to circulate it and naturalize it—also serves as a lesson in the struggle against the illiberal, even fascist, forces on the rise across the globe right now. So far, I have described how the Kirchner presidencies played a central role in strengthening progressive politics in Argentina and South America. The impetus to solidify the *progressive imaginary*, however, did not solely emanate from government officials and state-supported media content. It was mobilized as well by independent popular figures and other political movements gaining momentum throughout this period—notably, the feminist movement—two issues which I jointly

explore in depth in Chapter Two. Moreover, the vitality of this imaginary in Argentina would also guarantee its persistence throughout the 2010s and even during Mauricio Macri's center-right presidency (2015-2019), a topic discussed at length in Chapter Three. In the following section, I define the central terms of this dissertation, before providing a literature review and an comprehensive summary of my central objects of study.

Dissertation Keywords

Progressive is a ubiquitous yet ill-defined term in contemporary political parlance. This, it seems, has been the case for at least four decades, as Raymond Williams conveys the weighty vagueness of the term as early as 1976. It is worth quoting Williams's definition of progressive from *Keywords* at length, as he helpfully and precisely expresses the complexities of "progressive" and the associations evoked by the term,

Progressive is a difficult term in politics [...]. It can still be used as the the term opposite to *conservative*, that is, for one who welcomes or advocates change. In its most general and improving sense it is an adjective applied, by themselves, to virtually all proposals of all parties. There is an important complexity in that, on the one hand, the phrase is used generally of the Left (by parts of the Left) as in *progressive-minded people*, but, on the other hand, is used to distinguish supporters of 'moderate and orderly' change (as is EVOLUTION, opposed to REVOLUTION), where the sense of a steady step-by-step journe, in some general direction is called upon (245).

Progressive is, then, an ambiguous word in the realm of political thought. Yet it is often conceived in opposition to conservatism, in closer association with left-leaning politics that promise gradual rather than revolutionary transformations—in line with the kind of changes fostered by *pink tide* governments.

Progressivism, today, has become a widespread political position both in the Global North and the South. A clear example of the contemporary and global salience of progressive politics is the recent formation of the organization the Progressive International (PI). Formally launched in mid-2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PI is an international political front that seeks to “unite, organize, and mobilize progressive forces behind a shared vision of a world transformed” (Progressive International 2020). The PI brought together activists from different territories as well as from different political affiliations, though broadly from the left-of-center of the political spectrum. High-profile founding members included Naomi Klein (Canada/US), Noam Chomsky (US), Aruna Roy (India), Yanis Varoufakis (Greece), 2018 presidential candidate for Brazil’s Workers’ Party Fernando Haddad, and Elizabeth Gómez Alcorta, the former Argentine minister of Women, Gender and Diversity. In the second point of their online declaration, they define progressive in rather capacious terms “as the aspiration to a world that is: democratic, decolonized, just, egalitarian, liberated, feminist, ecological, peaceful, post-capitalist, prosperous, plural, and bound by radical love.” Although the PI openly proposes a “revolution,” they also speak of reclaiming and reshaping institutions, protecting democracy, and demanding a decent standard of living instead of supporting a radical overthrow of capitalism (openDemocracy 2020). Despite its clear signaling of leftist politics, there is no mention of socialism or communism. The PI, therefore, seems to continue the characteristics of progressivism suggested by Williams: a movement of capital reform rather than revolutionary anti-capitalism that is equivocal enough to appeal to a variety of political identities.

Regardless of its definitional complications, progressivism has a history of its own as a political movement, comprising politicians and intellectuals that helped to shape its policies and principles. This is particularly the case in the United States where it has fulfilled, since the beginning of the 20th century, the role of “the mainstream left in the American body politic,”

having its key historical referents in the former presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson (Woolner and Thompson 2016, xviii). US progressivism, since its conception, sought to develop a “third way between *laissez-faire* capitalism and socialism, a *via media* that dared to think of politics as promoting morality and social responsibility” as theorized by authors such as Herbert Croly, Richard Ely, and John Dewey (Johnston 2002, 78). Although Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson’s governments are part of the “Progressive Era,” it is perhaps Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal that attempted the most extensive deployment of progressive legislation. The New Deal was a remarkable set of political, economic, and social reforms that aimed to recover the US economy, protect workers, and generally assist Americans in the aftermath of the 1929 financial crash. It included expansive public works construction, strengthening unions, support for middle-class (primarily white) families to acquire land and homes, unemployment insurance, pensions for the elderly, aid to the disabled, and assistance to single mothers (Brinkly and Woolner 2016, 20-21). As historians Alan Brinkly and David B. Woolner assert, “the New Deal helped create the belief that government not only had the responsibility to create or sustain prosperity but that it could do so without intruding too directly into the affairs of the capitalist world” (23). In this sense, the goal of the New Deal was to save capitalism by keeping it in check, by helping those who had been its victims, and recovering people’s faith in the system—especially at a time when economic hardship was fuelling the rapid ascent of fascism. Progressive policies have been undermined in the US since the late 1970s and early 1980s with the rise of neoliberalism. Nevertheless, progressives still retain significant representation in US politics, especially within the Democratic Party’s progressive faction formed by high-profile figures such as Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Ed

Markey, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib.² Contemporary US progressive demands remain squarely centered around bolstering economic rights—e.g. universal healthcare, taxation of wealth, or recovering the power of unions—rather than explicitly bringing socialism to the United States.

Progressivism in Argentina has a different trajectory, one that is both shorter and less official than that of the US. In the recent *Progresistas fuimos todos* (We've All Been Progressive 2019), authors Eduardo Minutella and María Noel Álvarez trace the origins of progressivism and what it means to be a progressive in Argentina in what is still one of the few publications dedicated to the phenomenon in the Argentine context. Minutella and Álvarez note that until the 1980s Argentines identified primarily with classical—or “hard”—political ideologies. They “could identify as conservatives, Peronists, Radicals, socialists, communists, liberals, or Trotskyists, but no one would self-identify as ‘progressive’” (“La prensa contra el menemismo y el “giro progresista”).³ Throughout the 90s, however, the term gradually gained purchase in political parlance particularly across those historically associated with the left but who have grown disenchanted with traditional leftist thought and praxis. As Minutella and Álvarez claim, people who had originally identified as Marxist, socialist, or revolutionary were coming to terms with the “double defeat” of the left: on the one hand, the end of global socialism with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and, on the other, the end of the Latin American revolutionary movements. In the words of Minutella and Álvarez, “progressivism acted as a sensibility that liquefied the concept of socialism, incorporated part of the liberal repertoire on [personal] liberties and respect for institutions, and distanced itself from Marxist ideology at a time of crisis

² In fact, the Congressional Progressive Caucus is today the largest caucus within the Democratic Party.

³ Here, Radical is in reference to the traditional Unión Cívica Radical party, which is the closest representative of social democracy in Argentina.

of the grand narratives” (“La prensa contra el menemismo y el “giro progresista”). With the return to democratic rule in Argentina in the 1980s, activists and intellectuals who had supported or joined the guerrillas went through a process of critical reflection on the 70s armed struggle and had come to a renewed commitment with democracy.

An exemplary illustration of the radical left’s moderation can be found in Argentina’s audiovisual culture: the case of Fernando “Pino” Solanas. Between the 60s and 70s, Solanas—alongside Octavio Getino and Gerardo Vallejo—formed the Grupo Cine Liberación, the collective responsible for the creation of *La hora de los hornos* (Getino and Solanas, 1968), a film produced, distributed, and exhibited clandestinely. A three-part documentary, *La hora de los hornos* was an anti-capitalist and anti-colonial film manifesto that educated on Latin America’s neocolonial status and incited its viewers to join the resistance against Argentina’s military ruling. Solanas even had to go into exile in Europe as a result of political persecution, particularly during the 1976-1983 dictatorship. While he remained critical of capitalism and imperialism throughout his life, his films lost much of the propagandist nature of *La hora de los hornos*, turning primarily to fiction where his ideas were increasingly conveyed through metaphors and allegories rather than explicit messaging—e.g. *Tangos, the Exile of Gardel* (1986), *The South* (1988), or *The Journey* (1992). Furthermore, Solanas became actively involved in institutional politics since the 1990s, in opposition to Menem’s presidencies. His political career established him as a national congressman twice over and, in 2013, he was elected a national senator as part of the coalition Frente Amplio UNEN with the centrist Unión Cívica Radical and even the center-right party Coalición Cívica ARI.

The Argentine progressive consensus that emerged from the 90s onwards, charted by Minutella and Álvarez, revolved around the respect and defense of human rights, institutional transparency, and a critique of social inequalities. Progressives, therefore, mounted the

ideological opposition to Menem's government for his deployment of neoliberalism in Argentina and his reprehensible track record related to human rights. The Kirchners adopted various elements of the progressive agenda, exalting them, and promoting a specific brand of populist progressivism, which alienated many who rejected the more confrontational aspects of their discourse. After CFK, Macri's right-leaning coalition continued elements of progressive politics, such as the social safety nets and the focus on transparency and anti-corruption—although more in principle than in practice. Progressivism in Argentina, ultimately, became a broader left-leaning phenomenon that was more cultural than political. It was a political identity that could be detached from specific party politics and it could be also claimed by “apolitical” subjects (Minutella and Álvarez, “La prensa contra el menemismo y el “giro progresista”). Precisely, it is progressivism's status as weak or “thin” ideology—its versatility and capacity to attach itself to different political movements (Stanley 2008, 99)—that gave it its strength making progressivism so pervasive across individuals and groups with varying explicit or implicit political affiliations. It was its almost spectral quality that allowed it to define—or to haunt, for the non-believers—the Argentine imaginary for over a decade.

My use of the word “imaginary” is informed, primarily, by two prominent readings of the term in political theory and cultural studies. The first is Charles Taylor's (2007) notion of *social imaginary*, which he defines as “the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations” (171). Taylor's definition underscores the idea of a social imaginary as a common understanding that is shared by large groups of people—sometimes the whole of a society—and provides a strong sense of shared legitimacy. In addition, a social imaginary is often not clearly communicated through words; it can neither be put in theoretical terms nor expressed in explicit

doctrines, and is, instead, conveyed through other cultural expressions such as images, stories, and legends (Taylor, 172). Like progressivism in Argentina, the social imaginary operates as the largely held background understanding— “that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding” (Taylor 173)—of a specific time and place.

Similar to Taylor’s social imaginary, my deployment of the term is also close to Williams’s concept of *structure of feeling* (1961), which he uses to refer to the culture of a particular period. In Williams’s own words, the structure of feeling is “a particular community of experience hardly needing expression, through which the characteristics of our way of life that an external analyst could describe are in some way passed, giving them a particular and characteristic colour” (64). Like the social imaginary, the structure of feeling is widely shared by a community at precise geographical and chronological junctures, and makes communication and common understandings possible, sometimes in more conscious ways than others. The distinction between Taylor and Williams is the latter’s emphasis on the arts and cultural production as the crucial sites whereby structures of feeling are recorded and passed on. As he claims,

it is in this respect that the arts of a period, taking these to include characteristic approaches and tones in argument, are of major importance. For here, if anywhere, this characteristic is likely to be expressed; often not consciously, but by the fact that here, in the only examples we have of recorded communication that outlives its bearers, the actual living sense, the deep community that makes the communication possible, is naturally drawn upon (65).

Altogether, *the progressive imaginary* is at once the set of consciously and intuitively held beliefs shared by a large part of Argentines—both those who were progressives and those who were not—that Argentina was a hub of progressivism for the better part of the first two decades of the

21st century.⁴ The progressive imaginary was simultaneously openly proselytized by official political communications and media productions as well as more subtly expressed through other cultural products, even if media creators were not necessarily aligned with the tenets or the referents of Argentine progressivism. The key carriers of this imaginary, of this structure of feeling, were media platforms—specifically broadcast and digital ones—that elevated particular intellectual-celebrity figures.

By “platforms,” I am referring to *content platforms*, which, as Marc Steinberg (2019) asserts, is “the popular usage of the term in relation to social media sites, video up-loading sites, and user-generated content” (72). Platforms in my study are *intermediaries of content*: rather than producers, the term signals the sites that diffuse and transmit media content whereby the viewer-user accesses said content (Steinberg 70). In this study, “platform” mainly refers to television and video streaming sites/applications operated by users and professional media makers—e.g. YouTube as well as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, or HBO Max. I distinguish this understanding of “platform” from the other two major typologies that Steinberg recognizes in *The Platform Economy*: most significantly, platforms as hardware and, in the second place, platforms as intermediaries for financial transactions (6-7). I do not consider hardware,; rather my focus is on the way that specific media producers—individuals, the government, and private firms—utilize platforms to promote a progressive worldview. I also consider the aesthetic results of harnessing said platforms. While I consider business strategies of certain companies, I do not analyze the specific financial transactions that these platforms enable. Moreover, this dissertation focuses to a large extent on content that is not commercially driven (Chapter One and Two, specifically).

⁴ Along these lines, political journalist Martín Rodríguez recently said in an interview (2023) that the Kirchners’ left Argentina with “una estructura de sentimiento” (structure of feeling) (Stefanoni).

The reasons to use the term “platform” in this work are multiple. In the first place, it generally signals the ongoing process of digitization of media (and particularly audiovisual media). As Steinberg asserts, “platform” has become “the stand-in term for any media or device after the digital shift” (2). The majority of my examples are digital natives, especially those analyzed in Chapters Two and Three. Even in Chapter One’s discussion of public broadcasting, all of the shows references are accessible via various online platforms, forming part of the larger Kirchner project of digitizing Argentine media. Platform, thus, hints at the reality of the internet today: a network that is centrally organized around serving video (Sandvig 2015, 237). Second, most of the media content I investigate takes the shape of commissions, whether public or private, which emphasizes the idea that the outlets for audiovisual productions function as content platforms—platforms function mainly as transmitters rather than producers of images and sounds. The fact that several case studies are commissions further consolidates the connection between television and online video platforms. Steinberg points out an early instance in Japanese history in which platforms were discussed as a means to distribute content: a white paper where cable satellite (CS) broadcasting was defined as a platform. In contrast to traditional broadcasting, where stations financed and produced their own programs and broadcast them from their own facilities, CS broadcasting commissioned the entire process: the production and financing of their shows, the facilities to broadcast, and the accounting and marketing services (Steinberg, 89). This way, the idea of a platform not only stresses the connection between the internet and television; it also points to the hegemonic business model behind audiovisual production, both public and private.

Finally, as Tarleton Gillespie (2010) has claimed, platforms have been discursively constructed as already possessing a clear set of progressive features. Gillespie notes that a platform, in all its various understandings, always suggests a raised level surface designed to

facilitate an activity. A platform is “not just defined by height, but also by its level surface and its openness to those hoping to stand upon it” (Gillespie 351). A platform, therefore, is not just any vantage point, but rather one that is democratic and that allows many users to access it. Overall, the term platform—be it physical or virtual—“suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it” (Gillespie 350). This positive connotation of platforms has been, indeed, mobilized in Argentina during the period under examination in this dissertation as the title of the program to give laptops to students suggest: Connecting Equality. Similarly, a twenty-point manifesto released by educational public broadcasters in 2015 openly stated that they “work towards technological convergence” and “virtual platforms give us multiple possibilities: to experiment with new formats, to broaden and make dynamic the dialogue with audiences as well as providing other tool to work in the classroom” (*Manifesto*). All connotations of platforms, thus, refer to technological *and* social advancement.

In this study, I examine celebrities and intellectuals elevated by content platforms who became critical in the dissemination of the *progressive imaginary*. A caveat is necessary at this point: while celebrity and intellectual are distinct categories, I view my case studies as exhibiting crucial characteristics of both. I certainly consider different kinds of celebrities, with different media trajectories and impact levels. For instance, Chapter Three is dedicated to the fictionalization of the life of traditional Argentine stars, such as famed boxer and murderer Carlos Monzón, soccer player Diego Maradona, and Eva Perón. On the other hand, Chapters One and Two respectively focus on the educational television host, Darío Sztajnsznrajber, and the YouTuber-comedian, Malena Pichot. Despite their differences, all of these personalities satisfy celebrity features, as Sean Redmond (2014) defined them: they are “person[s] whose name[s], image[s], lifestyle[s], and opinions carry cultural and economic worth” (5). Furthermore, they

“accrue ‘attention capital’ via ‘self-promotion and exposure management’,” which represent salient celebrity traits as Anthea Taylor has noted (2016, 9). As I argue throughout the dissertation, these figures also fulfill particular cultural operations proper of the celebrity. Graeme Turner (2014), in this sense, has typified the specific social functions played by celebrities in contemporary society at large—mainly, their role in fostering and defining individuality as well as helping to interrogate and elaborate cultural identity. My case studies, first, articulate a variety of personality types for their audience—e.g. hipster populist, zany feminist, and working-class hero. They are also all sources for different kinds of political ideas—populism, feminism, and liberalism—that both shape and problematize progressivism in Argentina.

These figures can be, therefore, seen as fulfilling an intellectual function for their viewers and followers. I take a broad and inclusive approach to the idea of intellectual, inspired by Antonio Gramsci’s thinking. Gramsci (2000) affirmed that conceiving of intellectuals primarily as artists, philosophers, or, generally people of letters was a reductive and vulgar understanding (321). For him, all people had the capacity to become intellectuals, but not all of them fulfilled such a role (Gramsci 1971, 9). Becoming an intellectual depends, from Gramsci’s perspective, “[o]n active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator.” It is someone who “participates in a particular conception of the world [...], and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought” (2000, 321). Gramsci’s thoughts on intellectuals were later echoed by Edward Said (1996) who claimed that “the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, a philosophy of opinion to, as well as for, a public” (11). To be an intellectual, then, has less to do with theory

than with praxis, with the ability to work towards the dissemination and promotion of a particular conception of the world.

The celebrities I analyze operate precisely in this manner, circulating and helping to render into common sense the progressive ideals of the defense of human rights, equality between genders, and the fight against authoritarianism. They do so not simply by articulating these principles but also by promoting themselves and their lifestyles. This dissertation, thus, seeks to contribute to the body of work that explores the growing *celebritization* of society, how more and more spheres of social activity are expected to produce their own celebrities (Driessens 2012; Gamson 1994; McKernan 2011; Turner 2014). At the same time, it aims to show how it is not just discourse and political leaders, but rather a larger ecosystem formed by media, celebrities, and popular culture, that is responsible for shaping political imaginaries.

Before moving on to the next section, I wanted to clarify a point regarding this project's temporal coordinates. The “post-crisis period” means, namely, the time after Argentina's 2001 economic crisis. But I also take the 2008 global financial crisis as a reference. While the examples that I analyze seek to undo the legacy of neoliberal policy that culminated tragically in the 2001 crisis, the 2008 crisis was utilized by CFK to exemplify the failings of free market capitalism and to reaffirm the implementation of progressive legislation in Argentina—particularly, as Latin America remained resilient economically in comparison to the industrialized world (Emerson 2018).

Breaks and Continuities

The Progressive Imaginary is a scholarly endeavor that brings together political and media theory, and its methodology engages aesthetic and industrial analysis with careful geographical and historical contextualization to the analysis of contemporary Latin American

popular media, more specifically that of Argentina. Therefore, this project presents a series of continuities with and departures from previous scholarship. In this section, I chart the bibliography at the foundations of this dissertation, starting with the English-language literature and proceeding to Argentine-based scholarship focused on popular media.

This dissertation continues the efforts of scholars who have dedicated themselves to the study of non-Western television systems and explored the power of the medium in informing the cultural and political imaginaries in specific national contexts. For example, Arvind Rajagopal (2004) in *Politics after Television* examines the crucial role played by television and the 1980s successful epic serial *Ramayan* in bolstering the modern Hindu nationalist movement in India. In a similar vein, Yeidy M. Rivero (2015) demonstrates how television during the 1950s was centrally responsible for representing Cuba as a developed nation and how the idea of modernity promoted by the medium before the 1959 Revolution was adopted at the beginning of Fidel Castro's rule. Aniko Imre's *TV Socialism* (2016) historicizes the development of television in Eastern Europe during and even after the Cold War to show the central placement of TV in socialist culture, which, as Imre proves, was not as dissimilar as in the West. The differences between these publications and *The Progressive Imaginary* are, first, the latter's geographical focus. Moreover, the timespan of the studies cited so far focus primarily on broadcast television and stop before the internet and digital media revolutionized the medium. My work, on the contrary, explores cases from the post-broadcast era, when television, computers, and portable digital devices become more and more entangled. Thus, I consider examples that circulate on a variety of media platforms.

Thus, this dissertation distinguishes itself from publications on contemporary Latin American media (Pertierra and Turner 2012) that still focus on the region's persistent consumption of linear TV instead of its developing multi-platform media environment. The

objects of study comprised in this work represent another notable break from analysis of Latin American media, shifting attention away from the *telenovela* (Martín-Barbero and Muñoz 1992; López 1994; Carboni 2018), arguably the most paradigmatic televisual genre of the region. I examine, instead, under-theorized content such as public broadcasting, online video, and prestige Latin American streaming series. Although not centered around the Global South, I am indebted to McKenzie Wark's early work (1997; 1999) where she examines an eclectic number of objects—ranging from television shows, music, celebrities, magazines, and the nascent internet culture—to capture the *structure of feeling* of Australia in the late 90s, explaining the rise of right-wing populism, and laying out the challenges faced by progressive politics in the country. This dissertation extends Wark's transmedia approach to culture but does so in a different national setting and in the context of the web 2.0.

In the framework of Argentine media scholarship, *The Progressive Imaginary* is a pioneering work in terms of content and methodological approach. There has been an extensive literature on Argentine cinema—its history, its stylistic variety, and its relationship to broader social phenomena (Aguilar 2006; Falicov 2006; Page 2009; Andermann 2012; Karush 2012; Peña 2012; Thompson 2014). By contrast, there has been little focus on television and newer media forms—a gap felt particularly in the area of non-news media. In addition, the work that does exist on the matter usually presents a partial perspective; it either puts too much emphasis on the textual, disregarding the contextual, or it is centrally interested in political and economic processes, without seriously examining media content. There are scarce cases that do both. For example, Mirta Varela has been the vital historian of Argentine television. However, her work is primarily focused on the first two decades of the medium, roughly 1950-1970 (2005; 2017). Alina Mazzaferro (2018) has recently published one the first comprehensive accounts of Argentine celebrity culture, which, as she asserts, is “an object of study that—perhaps due to its

“banality”— has been practically ignored” (11). Encompassing the transformation from the cinema star to the television celebrity, Mazzaferro’s foundational historical study, nevertheless, stops at the end of the 1970s, leaving out later transformations motivated by globalization, cable television, and the digital revolution.

Scholarship on Argentina’s non-cinematic audiovisual culture has been dominated by two distinct theoretical frameworks. On the one hand, there is a bibliography that takes a semiotic approach inspired by the work of Eliseo Verón (Steimberg 1993; Soto and Aprea 1996; Kirchheimer 2013; Fraticelli 2019; Cossalter 2021). These works rely primarily on the textual analysis of diverse broadcast and digital media forms, categorize their salient traits, recognize commonalities, and, therefore, determine the existence of specific canons or languages (which results in a decided emphasis on genre). Referred to as a *sociosemiotic approach* (Fraticelli 2019, 22), this body of work nevertheless tends to downplay, or even dismiss, the influence of socio-cultural contexts and institutions on media content, as it primarily concerned with textual phenomena and formal transformations.

The other big school of thought of media analysis in Argentina is the political economy of communication. The central preoccupation of this framework is the exploration of how political and economic factors, policies, media ownership, and special interests influence the media landscape in specific national settings (Mastrini 2005; Waisbord and Jalfin 2010; Kitzberger 2016, Mastrini, Becerra and Bizberge 2021). The political economic approach frequently avoids engaging with the aesthetics and themes of precise media products produced in particular communication environments. In Argentina, the central focus of this approach remains the analysis of legacy media industries and, generally, tends to questions of how big business informs the editorial lines of news. This line of inquiry gained special recognition and fuelled public

debate over the last decade in Argentina as a result of recent governmental attempts to regulate and break media oligopolies.

The Progressive Imaginary adopts an interdisciplinary approach that places the careful formal examination of media texts and the construction of popular figures within the larger Argentine industrial and cultural media landscape. This project, then, offers a complex cultural analysis that brings together popular culture, media policy, media history, and political activism in order to fully understand the emergence of a dominant progressive mentality in Argentina in the first two decades of this century. It does so also by examining media content and personalities that, to this day, have received little to no scholarly attention, despite having helped to define the era due to their wide popularity within and beyond the country.

Dissertation Structure

The Progressive Imaginary is divided into three body chapters, each of which focuses on a different celebrity type, a specific media platform, and a particular set of politics—namely, populism, feminism, and liberalism. The organization of the chapters corresponds to the emergence of each media platform in Argentina, starting with broadcast television, moving into online video with YouTube, and ending with internet-distributed television or subscription video-on-demand platforms (SVODs) such as Netflix, Amazon, and HBO Max.

Chapter One is centered on the figure of Darío Sztajsznrajber (pronounced Shteinshraiber), a philosopher who was recruited by the public broadcaster Canal Encuentro to host a television program to popularize Western philosophy, *Mentira la verdad* (Truth Lies 2011). Sztajsznrajber and his show, together, represent a salient effort lead by CFK's government to transform the relationship between both intellectuals and public television with the larger public. According to this vision, intellectuals and public television should speak the language of “the

people” in order to help the broader culture war that CFK was waging against economic elites and media conglomerates. In this sense, I trace the celebrity traits fostered by Sztajsznrajber to appeal to a more popular taste and to build parasocial relations with his audience. Furthermore, I analyze the style and discourse of *Mentira la verdad*, a show that repeatedly promotes a message of inclusion and acceptance of “the Other,” while working according to a divisive populist logic, in line with the government’s political strategy.

In Chapter Two, I examine the online works of feminist comedian and agent-provocateur Malena Pichot, whose career began on YouTube. Pichot represents a key early example of internet fame in Argentina, and became a highly visible media figure in the contemporary Argentine feminist movement. I locate Pichot’s work in a longer history of Argentine television comedy, and her significant break with the male-dominated audiovisual tradition. I analyze her first media intervention, the YouTube series *La loca de mierda* (The Fucking Crazy Woman, 2008), where Pichot constructs her persona as a *killjoy feminist*—as theorized by Sara Ahmed—and where she mobilizes *killjoy humor* in order to challenge dominant, post-feminist portrayals of young women. I also examine the series *Cualca* (Whatever 2012), circulated both online and on television, where Pichot and her collaborators parody the daily problems faced by women in Argentina and poke fun at the widespread precariousness faced by young adults. Through *Cualca*, Pichot offers a capacious conception of feminism, tasked with expanding women’s rights as well as fighting for the improvement of labor and life conditions of society more broadly. As I demonstrate, this understanding is in line with the ethos of modern feminism in Argentina, an inclusive and firmly anti-neoliberal movement.

Lastly, Chapter Three investigates the impact of international SVODs in the Argentine context, paying special attention to the production of serialized biographical dramas—or biopics—of major national celebrities. I follow the establishment of streaming video firms in the

country and their early steps in commissioning Argentine programming. My analysis reveals a clear pattern of reproduction of already-existing narrative, thematic, and aesthetic audiovisual trends in Argentina, which are infused with stylistic traits associated with what Jason Mittell has called *complex TV*. This generic hybridization, therefore, seeks to satisfy the taste of both local and foreign audiences with the biopic becoming critical media content for SVOD firms as they revolve around stars of transnational fame. These biopics also become vehicles to disseminate the social justice ideals fostered during the last two decades in Argentina. As I demonstrate, these video streaming platforms appropriate public culture as well as public resources for the creation and circulation of audiovisual content, which results in a process of increased enclosure and privatization of the commons. Ultimately, this combination of progressive politics and SVODs' privatizing impulses are part and parcel of a trend in global streaming serialized content, which I call *prestige liberalism*.

Chapter 1—Darío Sztajnszrajber: Philosophy, Pop Culture, and Middlebrow Populism

Introduction

In 2010, the public television channel Canal Encuentro released a program called *Diálogos con Laclau* (Dialogues with Laclau), which consisted of a series of interviews between the Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau and a number of renowned left-wing intellectuals, including Stuart Hall, Chantal Mouffe, Antonio Negri, and Jacques Rancière. Each episode focused on a specific thinker whom Laclau visited in their home to converse about their work. Laclau treats all his interlocutors in a familiar manner, since they have been either his close collaborators and/or friends. He makes direct references to the bond that unites them, which, in addition to the domestic setting, helps to give the conversations a laidback and intimate atmosphere. The show persistently tries to undermine the aura of solemnity surrounding the personalities featured and the discussions they held. For example, the final credit sequence showcases behind the scenes moments like bloopers or the intellectuals joking with one another and the production crew. Along similar lines, the introductory sequence to each episode depicts Laclau in a bohemian light: strolling through public spaces in his theory friends' hometowns where he sits down to read or perform a seemingly intellectual exercise in preparation for his conversation. The audience can, for instance, witness Laclau writing his thoughts down in his notebook in a Parisian café or reading Gramsci in a British pub while having a glass of wine (Fig 1.1).

Diálogos con Laclau represents a staple of Argentine public broadcasting during Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's presidency (CFK, 2007-2015). It was a period that tried to foster a closer and more affective relationship between progressive intellectuals and popular audiences. These relationships could be defined as *parasocial*, a term that refers to the feelings of intimacy



Figure. 1.1 Laclau in a British pub before meeting with Stuart Hall in episode 9. *Diálogos con Laclau*, 2010. Image: Canal Encuentro.

and connection that the viewer shares with the people on the screen (Lamarre 2017, 301).

Diálogos con Laclau, however, did not receive widespread attention and lasted only a season despite the notoriety of the host and his guests, its production value, and the beauty of the urban settings offered by Laclau's tourist strolls. The reasons for the show flying under the radar could have been the result of its 8pm schedule on Sundays or the fact that Laclau's interviews retained a distinct academic tone potentially obscuring the audience's full comprehension, regardless of how much the program tried to keep the conversations light-hearted.

A year later, in 2011, Canal Encuentro broadcast for the first time *Mentira la verdad* (translated as Truth Lies), a show that took further the state's impulse to popularize political and philosophical thought. But, in contrast to *Diálogos con Laclau*, it became one of the prime television products of the government going on to last for four seasons, with a fifth one coming

out in 2022 after a six-year hiatus. *Mentira la verdad* established its host, Darío Sztajnszrajber, in the public sphere as a one of the youngest and most popular intellectual defenders of CFK's social policies (Fig 1.2). Sztajnszrajber also exploited the parasocial potentialities of television by buttressing a new kind of public intellectual figure as a result of: (a) not coming from academia, having worked previously as a philosophy teacher at the secondary and college level; (b) his knowledge of popular culture; and (c) an informal personal and rhetorical style. As a result of his media activity, Sztajnszrajber has been deemed an “intellectual rockstar” (Goldman 2018) who takes “philosophy out of the classroom and ma[kes] it fashionable” (Supervielle 2018).

In this chapter, I analyze the construction of philosopher Darío Sztajnszrajber as a media personality in order to trace the recent transformation of public television and the figure of the public intellectual in Argentina. Sztajnszrajber represents a paradigmatic case of both state-supported television under CFK's presidency and of a new style of public intellectuality. *Mentira la verdad*, was one of the most popular state-funded programs of its time, as well as one of the most prized—it received the prestigious Japan Prize award for educational media and was nominated for the International Emmy multiple times. As such, *Mentira la verdad* and Sztajnszrajber—as its host and recognizable face—stand as emblems of the aesthetics, debate, and ideals promoted by the government. Because of this popularity, moreover, Sztajnszrajber was able to continue his media career even after CFK stepped down from power, which signified drastic budget cuts for public television and the cancellation of his own show. Altogether, I demonstrate how public broadcasting is involved in the production of entertaining audiovisual content and personalities, complicating the preconceptions associated with educational television and intellectuals on TV, which are historically construed as patronizing and elitist. The analysis of Sztajnszrajber, as an icon of CFK's state media, also nurtures as well as problematizes the study of populism and its relationship with the media. In the first place,



Figure 1.2. Darío Sztajnszrajber. Image: Ministerio de Cultura Argentina.

Sztajnszrajber's example contradicts generalized notions of populist politics as both anti-intellectual and reactionary. Furthermore, this chapter extends the analysis of media and populism beyond political communication accounts which tend to focus primarily on the messaging of leaders and the circulation of party propaganda. Contrary to these notions, Sztajnszrajber's persona as well as his audiovisual pedagogy engage with elements of popular culture which, I argue, result in a populist aesthetics that package a clear set of progressive politics. As this aesthetics involve elements from high- and low-brow culture as well as it interpellates elements from the middle classes, I claim that Sztajnszrajber fosters a specific kind of style that I call *middlebrow populism*.

The chapter is divided in five sections plus a conclusion. The first two parts provide the political, economic, and cultural context for the emergence of Sztajnszrajber and *Mentira la verdad*. In particular, I describe the framework of culture wars and state media expansion that made this emergence possible and which clarifies the political aims pursued by Sztajnszrajber

and his show. In the third section, I analyze the earlier 2010 show *Filosofía aquí y ahora* (Philosophy Here and Now), hosted by the prominent philosopher José Pablo Feinmann, in order to both trace a lineage of intellectuals on Argentine public television and to illustrate a shift from the *talking head* to the *celebrity intellectual*, as in the case of Sztajnszrajber. In this part, I also focus on middlebrow culture—rejected by figures like Feinmann—and define what I mean by *middlebrow populism*, which characterizes the work of Sztajnszrajber as well as other contemporary intellectuals working on broadcast and digital platforms. The final two sections delve into crucial aspects of Sztajnszrajber’s personal style of and the aesthetics of *Mentira la verdad* that work as pillars of middlebrow populism. First, I show how the manufacturing of Sztajnszrajber as a celebrity implies a mixture of the ordinary and extraordinary, where the apparently factual is pervaded by the fictional, resulting in a constructed persona who also functions as a political leader—a populist icon—embodying the politics on which the show *Mentira la verdad* is itself built. Subsequently, building on Laclau’s conceptualization of populism as “the logic of the political,” I demonstrate how the progressive and antagonistic agenda of CFK structures *Mentira la verdad* in terms both of its form and content with Sztajnszrajber at its center.

Argentine Culture Wars

Sztajnszrajber made his break onto the public stage at a time of heightened political polarization in Argentina, which arguably had direct effects on the aims of his show and the construction of his persona. In March 2008, three years before *Mentira la verdad* was released, the *Peronist* and center-left government of CFK had been in a high profile conflict popularly known as *conflicto con el campo* (translated in English as the 2008 Argentine Agrarian Strike). The heads of the major agricultural companies dictated a farmer’s strike that lasted for four

months after an attempt to adjust taxes for soybean and sunflower products to world market prices through a policy called *Resolución 125* (Resolution 125) (Kitzberger 2016, 459). This confrontation also triggered internal strife within the ruling political coalition, *Frente para la Victoria*, that resulted in the resignation of both the minister of economy and CFK's chief of staff. Furthermore, the conflict marked the end of what had been a mutually beneficial relationship between the government and the biggest Argentine media conglomerate, Grupo Clarín, due to the perceived negative media coverage by Clarín and its allies of the economic policy and the resulting political confrontation.⁵ According to communication scholars Martín Becerra and Soledad Vanina López, Resolution 125 triggered a new period that “meant a break in the government's plans in terms of the political, economic, and social alliances fostering a radically different scenario to that previous to March of 2008” (2009, 11). This new political scenario for the Frente para la Victoria had profound consequences at both the level of political messaging and policy.

In the first place, as noted by historian Camila Perochena, the Kirchner discourse became more polarizing and increased its populist interpellations, redefining in the process who the ruling party represented and who was its opposition. As political theorist María Esperanza Casullo (2019) asserts, until 2008, the Kirchner governments (primarily under CFK's husband, Néstor Kirchner, 2003-2007) remained moderately populist—especially in comparison to other governments in the region such as Ecuador and Venezuela, under Rafael Correa and Hugo Chávez, respectively. The antagonists that the Kirchners had discursively constructed so far were

⁵ Grupo Clarín main assets include Clarín, the largest national newspaper, one of the biggest commercial television networks, El Trece, as well as the cable company multincal, and the internet service provider with the most subscriptions, Fibertel. The fact that Grupo Clarín sided with the agricultural producers was a predictable move since Clarín and La Nación (the second largest Argentine newspaper) are since 2006 the joint organizers of Expoagro, the biggest farmers fair in the country. For more on this see Becerra and López 2009.

primarily foreign and rather impersonal enemies like the IMF, the so-called vulture funds, the global financial system, or simply “neoliberalism” (Casullo 2019). Their stated political goals were, moreover, moderate ones, chiefly, attaining institutional and economic stability, which could be summarized in one of the phrases of Néstor Kirchner’s presidential inauguration speech, “to go back to being a normal country.” Ultimately, by adopting a centrist political position and a discursive strategy in which Argentines were facing together an external antagonist, between 2003 and 2008 the Kirchners tried to avoid a radical split within the national field of political representation.

After the 2008 farmers strike, which culminated with Resolution 125 failing in Congress with the vice-president casting the final negative vote, the political adversaries of the Frente para la Victoria were now to be found at home. They had more definable contours and familiar names. These were, on the hand, the major agricultural producers, organized under the Argentine Rural Confederations, referred to as *el campo*—the Spanish term for harvestable field—and, on the other hand, the anti-Kirchner media, namely, Grupo Clarín and La Nación, called thereafter *la corpo*—a shorthand for “the corporation.” At times even, the antagonist of the government even takes the form of a specific individual with a body and a name, Héctor Magnetto, CEO of Grupo Clarín, who was portrayed as a puppet master of sorts pulling strings behind the scenes. The Frente para la Victoria, with CFK as its main proponent, increasingly began self-referring as a *nacional y popular* (national-popular) invoking, thus, Gramsci’s idea of forming an “alliance of interests and feelings between different social agents which varies according to the structure of each national society” (Forgacs 1999, 217).⁶ The Argentine governing party began interpellating

⁶ The purchase of Gramsci’s ideas within the government’s supporters can be illustrated by looking at the Peronist and, at the time, pro-Kirchner press *La batalla cultural*, which in 2016 began editing its own magazine called *Hegemonía* (Hegemony) that dedicated its first issue to Gramsci’s ideas with a special focus on the national-popular concept.

not only the working-classes but also tried to go beyond the historical core base of *Peronist* politics interpellating as well parts of the Argentine middle and upper strata that identified with progressive politics and human rights causes (Wortman 2015).

Furthermore, the *Kirchnernist* discourse explicitly placed this forceful us-vs-them logic within a larger *batalla cultural* (culture war). *El campo, la corpo*, or Magnetto, according to CFK, formed part of a larger historical project of cultural colonization or subordination of Argentina (and Latin America) that prevented changes to the model of capital accumulation (Perochena 2020, 239-240). The Frente para la Victoria government, thus, proposed in almost strict *Gramscian* terms (Kitzberger 2016, 462) a hegemonic struggle in which the opponents of the national-popular project should be first and foremost defeated at the *superstructural* level in order to effectively transform the economic *base*. CFK put prime importance on the role of intellectuals in her overt plans to “reinvent” both Argentina and its cultural norms. She openly asked the intellectual class to abandon its supposed historical allegiance to the national economic elites and to stop replicating foreign thought categories. CFK imagined herself as giving intellectuals a historical opportunity to revalorize national identity and to conceptualize it from an exclusively Argentine conceptual framework (Perochena 2020, 240). In no uncertain terms, the president was asking intellectuals to be organic to the national-popular endeavour.

A sizeable group of intellectuals, under the name of Carta Abierta (Open Letter), had already expressed open support for the government during the *conflicto con el campo*. The group—which included high-profile personalities such as Ernesto Laclau, Néstor García Canclini, and Octavio Getino among others—considered that the joint efforts of the agricultural producers and the media to undermine government attempts to hike taxation fostered a *coup d'état* climate. As such, it represented a threat to the constitutional rights of the CFK administration to implement its government program (“Carta Abierta/1” 2008). Apart from this

expression of solidarity, CFK went on to give a platform to various public intellectual figures to promote the *Kirchnerist* principles through a reinvigorated public service broadcasting (PSB), which became a staple of her presidency and represented a departure from the previous presidential administrations' investment and planning of state-owned television.

The New Tele-Education

Throughout the 1990s, Argentina transitioned from a closed, state-controlled television industry to one that was fully privatized and liberalized (Waisbord and Jalfin 2010). The exception in this new model was that the Argentina Televisora Color (Now called TV Pública and popularly known as Canal 7), which remained the only publicly-owned national television network. As media journalist Natalí Schejtman recounts in her history of Canal 7 (2021), under Carlos Menem's neoliberal presidency (1989-1999), the network was characterized by a distinct lack of planning, trying to compete at times with commercial networks, and generally criticized for the low quality of its productions and for abandoning its public service mandate (211-237). The privatizing impulse during Menem's years was so strong that Canal 7 was almost sold to private capital at least twice. Fernando de la Rúa's administration (1999-2001), for the most part, continued Menem's economic plan but they were from historically opposed parties—Menem was a Peronist and de la Rúa came from the Unión Cívica Radical. This situation was reflected in the way that Canal 7 was managed. On the one hand, de la Rúa implemented strong budget cuts and began outsourcing Canal 7's productions to reduce the overhead costs of the network, which was described as a resources black hole. These cuts also followed an attempt to fight the corruption that supposedly took place in Canal 7. On the other hand, the Radical government defined a culturally uplifting and educational function for Canal 7, in an effort to leave behind the frivolous culture nurtured during Menem's years. In addition, the budget cuts had made impossible any

competition with commercial broadcasters. Finally, the network was also used as a propaganda outlet in order to stave off mounting criticism against the government (Schejtman 265-276). The first Kirchner administration, altogether, inherited a public broadcasting system that was already trying to provide a public service and was strongly politicized but which had been weakened as a result of austerity measures. Néstor Kirchner, first, and, later, CFK strengthened public television and made it a central element of both their political communication machinery and cultural policies.

Néstor Kirchner's administration ushered primarily in a technological renovation of Canal 7, investing in the acquisition of new production equipment and updating the channel's infrastructure. Canal 7's coverage was expanded, reaching for the first time in its history major Argentine cities like Córdoba and Mendoza, becoming, thus, a truly national network. The government also raised substantially its investments in state-owned broadcast media (television and radio) by more than doubling the budget of the National System of Public Media between 2003 and 2006 (Schejtman 291). The real change, however, came under CFK, especially in the context of the agrarian strike and the confrontation with Grupo Clarín.

After March 2008, the government intervened in the national media landscape in an attempt to break the hegemony of the major media oligopolies—with Grupo Clarín as its main target. As Rodríguez Miranda and Carboni (2018, 46-47) claim, “the regulation of audiovisual media became part of the government's agenda.” In 2009, a new law called the Audiovisual Communications Services Act (Ley 26.522 de Servicios de Comunicación Audiovisual, LSCA, or simply, Ley de medios) was enacted, limiting the accumulation of broadcasting licenses and forcing media conglomerates to divest part of their assets. The expected goal of the new policy was to both liberalize the national market and to weaken the power of legacy right-wing elements

in the media.⁷ To complement the LSCA, CFK made ample use of the State broadcasting system to disseminate propaganda. She regularly addressed the nation via television—interrupting other broadcasts—to talk about public works, bills she wanted Congress to pass, or even to address rumors and discredit her critics. Canal 7 also transmitted pro-government spots supporting new infrastructural developments and policies. Moreover, in 2009, Canal 7 released the polemic *678*, a journalistic debate show where its participants celebrated CFK’s presidency, made fun of the government opponents, and revealed the supposed hypocrisy of conglomerate media.

The State also made vital investments in the creation of new public television networks and content. Many of the new networks were directly dependent of different national ministries. The main institutions involved in this project were the Ministry of Education—which operated the channels Canal Encuentro (aimed at teenage and adult audiences) and Pakapaka (aimed at children from 2 to 12 years old)—and the newly formed Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, which owned TecTV. Canal Encuentro had started broadcasting via cable 2007 during Néstor Kirchner’s presidency but became accessible without subscription in 2010 with the implementation of the program Televisión Digital Abierta (TDA), which provided terrestrial and satellite broadcast services for new and previously free-to-air television networks. Pakapaka and TecTV were created under CFK and included in TDA’s channel roster. The programming of these newly-created networks included a diversity of shows that ranged from vocational training (*Oficios*, Canal Encuentro, 2011; *Vocaciones*, Canal Encuentro, 2013) passing through the exaltation of the national industry and the arts (*Pioneros*, Canal Encuentro, 2014; *Como se hace*,

⁷ This situation represented a reversal from Néstor Kirchner’s treatment of domestic media conglomerates. Under Néstor Kirchner, the government had favoured the concentration of media ownership in the hands of Grupo Clarín and other conglomerates, such as the Spanish Telefónica (Becerra 2017, 36). For example, Kirchner had allowed the merger of Grupo Clarín’s cable company, Cablevisión, with another Argentine cable giant, Multicanal.

TecTV, 2013; *Grandes de nuestra cultura*, Canal Encuentro, 2013) to open defenses of the government's economic policies (*El informe Kliskberg*, Canal Encuentro, 2013).

These public networks, all in all, were meant to inform and educate, as well as to foster both patriotism and the vaguely defined national-popular values.⁸ In this sense, Canal Encuentro, Pakapaka, and TecTV revived the ethos of traditional European PSB using television as “an instrument of positive propaganda” (Imre 2016, 17, 19). PSB under Cristina Kirchner has invited comparisons specifically with the media systems under the old socialist regimes of Eastern Europe in the way that the government harnessed both the educational system and the mass media in order to strengthen nationalistic feelings, national myths and ritual expressions, and also to praise and canonize the figure of the charismatic leader (Metral & Piva 2010, 109).⁹ This description, likewise, echoes Aniko Imre's characterization (2016) of television behind the iron curtain where “every program was imbued with the intention to educate” and “wrapped within an all-encompassing, anxious cultural nationalism” (41, 44). These televisual experiences, however, cannot be conflated, given their geographical and temporal distance. In addition, the national-popular turn taken by Kirchner's administration meant that the publicly-supported educational TV content had to entertain viewers in addition to simple education, thus, avoiding the condescending and pedagogical tone of socialist television.

⁸ Casullo (2019) states that, although the Kirchner political program was never made explicit, two principles stand out as its staple: i) a growth-oriented and socially-inclusive economic model and ii) supporting national human rights institutions like those of Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, which spearheaded the resistance against the 1976-83 dictatorship and which continue the search for the sons of the disappeared.

⁹ Metral and Piva also place Peronism (the political roots of the Kirchners) in line with Cuban and Yugoslavian socialism, Italian fascism, and Stalinism as, in their view, they are all political expressions that feature “a strong presence of the state [in social life]”, and “an economy controlled by the state (2010, 109).

It is in this framework of culture wars and state media expansion that Canal Encuentro began planning the first season of *Mentira la verdad*. The show was not only Sztajnszrajber's first television experience but also served as a paradigmatic example of state-funded television under Cristina Kirchner. *Mentira la verdad* was one of the most watched programs of Canal Encuentro and it illustrates the ways that Argentine PSB informed and defended the government's agenda while engaging with popular cultural forms and themes. The show attempted to change both the relationship between public broadcasting—a proxy for the government—and the public as well as the perception of intellectuals in the public sphere. Before turning to examining Sztajnszrajber's figure and *Mentira la verdad*, I analyze the case of the 2010 show *Filosofía aquí y ahora* (Philosophy Here and Now) hosted by an earlier prominent public intellectual, José Pablo Feinmann. I begin with this example in order to trace the transformation of both public broadcasting and the figure of the public intellectual that took place under CFK. I first examine Feinmann as an example of what can be conceived as a *talking head* and, in the subsequent section, move on to Sztajnszrajber as a celebrity intellectual.

The Southern Talking-Head

Filosofía aquí y ahora was Canal Encuentro's first major project dedicated to teaching philosophy to a mass audience and, alongside *Mentira la verdad*, it became one of the most popular shows of Encuentro. Its host, José Pablo Feinmann, was already a well-established Argentine public intellectual and he had been a vocal supporter of Cristina Kirchner and had a background as a political activist within the ranks of the Juventud Peronista (*Peronist Youths*). Feinmann also had a past in educational television having hosted two shows dedicated to cinema: *El cine por asalto* (2007)—roughly translated as “cinema by surprise”—and *Cine ConTexto*

(2008)—a play on words that in Spanish might mean either “cinema with text” or “cinema in context.” Both these programs had been broadcast by Canal 7.

Filosofía aquí y ahora served as a vehicle to defend CFK’s government’s ideology and policies, as well as to attack its enemies in rather overt ways. The program’s almost propagandistic mission is rendered crystal clear by looking at the themes of specific seasons. For example, the fourth season focused on the issue of philosophy and colonialism in Latin America reproducing many of CFK’s thoughts regarding the role of intellectuals in Argentina. In 2013, the show released a special commemorative short season dedicated to reviewing Argentine political history since the end of the last dictatorship (1983) during which Feinmann criticized the neoliberal administrations of Menem and de la Rúa and explicitly endorsed the Kirchners’ social and economic policies. Lastly, in its eighth and final season, *Filosofía aquí y ahora* was entirely devoted to a critique of the power of media, responding to CFK’s confrontation with Grupo Clarín. Despite the similarities between *Mentira la verdad* and *Filosofía aquí y ahora* in terms of their content, the programs would turn out to be very different in their mode of address as well as the individual presentation and rhetorical style of their presenters.

Filosofía aquí y ahora was entirely a non-fiction show of striking simplicity: all episodes featured Feinmann standing alone in front of a green screen directly addressing the audience by looking into the camera. The background consisted of graphs, images, videos, and words merely to illustrate or emphasize specific passages of Feinmann’s monologues. However, his speech did not seem scripted, coming across instead as extemporaneous, halting, and deliberative. *Filosofía aquí y ahora* was, all in all, nothing more than a series of recorded lectures which tried to avoid any form of entertainment or emotional engagement, despite Feinmann’s at times informal delivery and the background’s graphic elements—a sort of all-encompassing televisual PowerPoint presentation (Fig 1.3).



Figure 1.3. José Pablo Feinmann in the opening of episode 1, season 1, of *Filosofía Aquí y Ahora*. Image: Canal Encuentro.

The style of the show was deliberate and had particular pedagogical goals in mind as Feinmann revealed in what feels like a digression in the very first episode:

to philosophize ‘here’—in Argentina—and ‘now’ is necessary because this country needs to think. This country needs to push back against everything that distracts its citizens with frivolities and stupidity. I would like to be clear about this: television works to render people stupid. In general, the media works to [...] colonize individual subjectivity, that is to say, to *subject* subjects. [...] When a man returns from work and turns on the TV, television traps him with the never ending spectacle of idiocy.” (“¿Por qué hay algo y no más bien nada? (2010)

Here, Feinmann does not simply articulate a media critique (the first of many) in consonance with the Kirchner government, but he also performs an attack on television as a medium and an element of popular culture. Feinmann's declaration echoes and continues the widely-held elitist skepticism surrounding mass culture shared by both leftist and right-wing intellectuals that goes back to at least the mid-Twentieth Century. According to Andrew Ross (1989), despite their political differences, both members of the Frankfurt School as well as figures like T.S. Eliot and Ortega y Gasset (what Ross calls "the neo-aristocratic critique of mass culture") painted a picture "of a populace of dopes, dupes, and robots mechanically delivered into passivity and conformity by the monolithic channels of the mass media and the culture industries" (52).¹⁰ This position has also been historically robust in public broadcasters around the world which have tried, since the beginnings of television, to reform the medium in order to make it the house of "great" or "legitimate" culture (Ouellette 2001; McCarthy 2010; Hilmes 2012). The result of this mentality is programming that shies away from entertainment or engagements with popular culture, considered frivolous and detrimental to the cultivation of the human spirit. This is especially true for shows dedicated to disseminating the "great ideas and works of humankind" and hosted by respectable people (usually men) of letters, which have come to define a particular archetype of intellectuals on television.

Personalities such as Feinmann reproduce the idea of the intellectual on television as a *talking head*, as someone who is given screen time not because of how they look but for what they have to say, for their expertise in specific matters. A TV-specific term, the talking head

¹⁰ Mirta Varela (2016) noted how influential Ortega y Gasset and Adorno's works on mass media and culture industries were for Argentine intellectuals and their views on television since the arrival of the medium in the country in the 1950s. Varela's analysis reveals that the mainstream of Argentine intellectuality has been historically critical of television, attacking the medium for being a vehicle of foreign cultural imperialism and for its status "as a symbol of banal consumption and dumbing down mass audiences" (3).

refers to the human head and the intellect as severed from the body. As McKenzie Wark (1999) argues, “These heads are given time in which the top half of the head may hinge up and down relative to the bottom half, allowing sounds, emitted from the mouth, to form what talking heads qualified to speak about these matters call speech” (28-29). Moreover, the concept of the talking head also expresses another form of severance: that of popular culture as separate or severed from the realm of ideas—or the university in its most institutionalized form. As people whose credibility is primarily based on academic reputation, talking heads have a vested interest in the institutional and cultural hierarchies upon which their credibility rests, which may well explain the ever-present anxieties surrounding the mixing and matching across different registers of culture (Wark 1999, 110). Talking heads are a reminder of the belief that the mind is something separate from the image, the rare television occasion where substance should reign over style, and where we should disregard anything that distracts us, anything that is deemed frivolous and stupid—to use Feinmann’s words.

Talking heads, and educational television more broadly, have also been assigned as part of the middlebrow style by cultural neo-aristocrats. In his influential essay *Masscult & Midcult*, Dwight MacDonald (1962) defined *midcult*—his term for middlebrow culture—as an intermediate stage between legitimate and popular culture, which he regarded suspiciously since, in his own words, it “has the essential qualities of Masscult—the formula, the built-in reaction, the lack of any standard except popularity—but it decently covers them with cultural figleaf [...] it pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them” (37). MacDonald identifies as distinct midcult expressions various endeavors aimed at democratizing the high arts and culture such as the Book-Of-the-Month Club, NBC Radio’s “music appreciation” hours, the Great Book series, and the Ford Foundation’s cultural TV variety show *Omnibus* (CBS, 1952). While middlebrow figures like Feinmann have, at the

very least, contradictory feelings about the use of popular media to democratize elite cultural elements, other contemporary intellectuals embrace their role as middlebrow intermediators. This is certainly the case of Darío Sztajnszrajber whose work neatly fits within this definition of middlebrow as he attempts to disseminate complex philosophical thought through television, applying it to mundane situations, and engaging with popular culture. MacDonald also asserted that one of the central characteristics of midcult products is their universalist impulse in that they push for the idea of all humans being equal, or as having something in common regardless of their social and/or cultural differences. For example, he observes that certain middlebrow novels do not individualize their characters (MacDonald 39-45). This universalist and equalitarian ethos is likewise present in a show like *Mentira la verdad* where there are non-defined character roles, with actors changing characters from episode to episode, and where Sztajnszrajber repeatedly critiques any form of inequality or discrimination.

MacDonald, however, developed his theorization of the midcult in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States, far away from the national and temporal context of Sztajnszrajber. Moreover, MacDonald's treaty scorned middlebrow culture as it blurred the separations between folk/popular culture and elite culture which he wished to uphold. Ross's later rereading and critique of MacDonald's work helps us to understand the need to analyze the middlebrow as a distinct media strategy in Argentina in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Ross considers middlebrow culture to be very responsive and sensitive to the difference between various registers of culture as it engages with both popular and elite modes. This will lead to Ross to suggest the political potential of the middlebrow: it is "an exemplary model of containment. It contains references to legitimate culture as efficiently as it incorporates the accessible forms and narratives that characterize the more formulaic genres of popular taste" (1989, 60). In Ross's conceptualization, containment also implies a process of identification;

middlebrow art addresses “new audiences, new cultural identities, and new relations of respect and disrespect.” This double function of containment and identification works similarly to the role of the populist leader which represents the demands and opposition to the politico-economic system for a broad diversity of social identities that would be otherwise unrelated.

As these disparate identities become linked through the figure of the leader a new political subject, a new people, emerges. Sztajnszrajber, as a public intellectual and television host, operates following a middlebrow *and* populist logic: he seeks to open up philosophy as critical theory to a broader audience through popular audiovisual means with the hope that his audience will question different forms of oppression and marginalization. All middlebrow productions, however, are not necessarily populist in strict terms. Containment and identification are, ultimately, a general function of the art and the media. These types of cultural productions that mix popular and elitist elements, which I identify as *middlebrow populism*, also aim to foster a critical anti-status quo discourse that informs both form and content.

For the remainder of the chapter, I will elucidate how Sztajnszrajber actively develops a recognizable *middlebrow populist* pedagogical style. He does so by, on the one hand, cultivating himself as a celebrity at the same time as he engages with populism by buttressing his figure as that of a political leader and promoting an antagonistic discourse, which, ultimately also provides his television show with a defined populist aesthetics. In the next section, I analyze Sztajnszrajber’s conscious adoption of elements of celebrity culture, particularly the production of ordinariness, which enables an emotional identification and connection on behalf of the audience as a central component of his pedagogical approach.

The Realness

A young man posts an image on Twitter to celebrate his college graduation. The picture features him covered in foam and condiments, which forms part of the ritual of completing an undergrad degree in Argentina. He is also holding a hollow black cardboard rectangle that frames the boy's face and that has three placards pasted on it: one of them reads "teacher Gastón" and the other two are identifiable logos, those of Canal Encuentro and *Mentira la verdad*, Encuentro's show hosted by Sztajnszrajber (Fig 1.4). The props and their arrangement suggest that the graduate is on Canal Encuentro hosting the show that propelled Sztajnszrajber's media career. If there was any doubt left as to the intended references of the Tweet, the caption that accompanies it reads "@sztajnszrajber can I work with you already? I'm a philosophy teacher now!" Furthermore, to the graduate's pleasant surprise, Sztajnszrajber responds to the post congratulating him ("Esa" which translates roughly as "Right on"). As this example neatly encapsulates, Sztajnszrajber's figure fulfills the function of a cultural icon since he appears to be not simply widely recognizable but also capable of activating feelings of parasocial closeness and aspirational identification that characterize celebrities. As a young person finalizing his undergrad studies in 2021 (the year of the tweet), the student very likely grew up and came of age watching Sztajnszrajber on TV—as his picture indicates—which probably inspired him to study philosophy and even made him consider the possibility that this could develop into a career in the media. In other words, Sztajnszrajber nurtured a desire. But this desire was not generated solely by the Argentine philosopher's appearance on a screen; it was also the result of projecting an individuality, a selfhood, that made him, his job, and what he stands for appealing and possibly obtainable.

Wark reminds us that, although rare, intellectuals on television—even those that perform like talking heads—can function as celebrities (1999, 35). As such, they project images of



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@MarquezTongas

...

@sztajnszrajber ya puedo trabajar con vos? Ya soy profe de Filo!!!

[Translate Tweet](#)



Dario Sztajnszrajber

Figure 1.4. Twitter post and image of the graduation celebration. Image: Twitter.

personal styles and ways of behaving with which the public might identify, even though these identity traits might pass as unmarked—especially if the talking head is a white man. They also articulate general social desires and anxieties, while also providing their audience with the pleasures associated with seeing familiar figures on screen. This happens quite apart from the concepts or the ideas talking heads wish to convey and whether audiences accept these ideas or not. These “para-intellectual” elements of the work of talking heads are not simply a by-product of their labor but an essential part of it. According to Wark’s theorization of talking heads, “Intellectuals may bring with them into public life the authority of an institution [...] but what defines their celebrity is that they risk this legitimacy” (35). An intellectual on television will be able to reach a non-specialized audience by virtue of their literacy in perceived non-academic modes of communicating—i.e. speaking plainly or narrativizing ideas—and their capacity to affectively engage viewers.

In a more recent study, sociologists Eliran Bar-el and Patrick Baert (2021) observe—following Jeffrey Alexander’s theory of the celebrity-icon (2010)—that celebrities become role models for their audience, a phenomenon which can lead to a change in one’s one bodily appearance and behaviour “in accordance with the icon, which in turn is seen through idealization and objectification” (542). Alexander (2016) expands this framework to also include intellectuals and argues that analyses of intellectual interventions should consider a dramaturgical dimension, since performances and rituals have the power to not only give intellectuals a public status but also render them iconic. He contends that intellectuals “become iconic, condensed, simplified, and charismatic collective representations of the transformational models they themselves propose—contemporarily, in real time, or retrospectively, in memory” (343). In this sense, celebrity studies scholars have emphasized that the power of attraction of public personalities largely resides in their capacity to express mundane aspects of everyday life in addition to their

extraordinary features—like musical talent, acting skills, athletic prowess, or extensive knowledge to name just a few. Richard Dyer (1986) clearly articulates this in the following way:

We're fascinated by stars because they enact ways of making sense of the experience of being a person in a particular kind of social production (capitalism), with its particular organization of life into public and private spheres. [...] Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed. (15-16)

Echoing Dyer, Wark (1999) argues that “no matter how otherworldly they may appear, [celebrities] cannot but participate in the ordinary as well”; they are simultaneously those who broke from their community and those who “also [affirm] the capacity and identity of that community” (48). Social media also has dramatically enhanced the possibility for “out-of-face” encounters—when we accidentally meet celebrities in their everyday lives—, which are occurrences that inject significance and desire in our own everyday lives (Turner 2014, 9). In opposition to the elitist talking head, Sztajnszrajber accepts his position as a celebrity and consciously participates in the production of this status which allows him to “circulate with more ease across a broader range of media vectors, informing more parts of the public” (Wark, 76). One of the key ways that Sztajnszrajber has cemented his star power—particularly the way he builds parasociality— is connecting with his audience through the impression of ordinariness, which result from combining the careful cultivation of an everyman persona and the mobilization of everyday tropes in his media content.

This careful presentation of intellectuals as ordinary and their private lives as objects of interest to the public have their own media history. As early as 1967, a CBC/Radio-Canada documentary called *Simone de Beauvoir et Jean-Paul Sartre, le couple mythique de la littérature* (*Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, Literature's Mythical Couple*, Capocardo and

Lanzmann) provides an intimate cinéma vérité account of the French philosophers' lives. The film intersperses interviews Sartre and de Beauvoir's about their work and features images from inside their homes, depictions of their everyday routines strolling down the streets of Paris, as well as information about their romantic relationship and their childhoods. Slavoj Žižek offers both a more contemporary and paradigmatic case of an academic who, even in his writing, has attempted to pair "theoretical languages and those of everyday life" (1989, xiii), as Laclau asserted in the prologue to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Žižek has also *actively* and *knowingly* created a vast personal archive of images in quotidian settings where he, nonetheless, always finds the opportunity to elaborate on his scholarship. Such is the case of the documentary *Zizek!* (Taylor, 2005) where the audience can observe him travelling for work, watching television, spending time with his family, or discover that he stores his linen in his kitchen drawers. Similarly, in the film *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (Fiennes, 2006), Žižek can be seen perched on a toilet discussing the application of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory to film analysis. Žižek seems to have worked as a direct source of inspiration for Sztajnszrajber who has declared his admiration for the Slovenian theorist, particularly the way that he "explains concepts from the bed, or as he plays with his son, or philosophizes on toilet models," which "helps to revise both philosophy's content and the format in which it's packaged" (Kilstein 2013, 10).

From this perspective, Sztajnszrajber actively engages and builds on a media trajectory focused on the mundane humanizing habits of intellectuals, which serve both as vehicles for their ideas and objects of popular fascination. While figures like Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Žižek were first recognized by their scholarly work and their personal lives were only later captured by different media, Sztajnszrajber's public career was part of state project that, from the beginning, entailed a diligent and calculated media construction of his image and that sought out to attract larger audiences and even potential voters. In this sense, separating his work as a writer and a

media personality is inconceivable, with the latter being much more prolific than the former. Sztajnszrajber work is traversed by a media logic that touches upon a variety of pop culture elements and expands across different media forms to appeal to a non-academic public.

Sztajnszrajber's media presentation is a careful balance of scholarly elucidation and quotidian normality. First and foremost, his personal style is always informal: disheveled beard, ponytail, and an array of t-shirts that feature his favorite bands (The Ramones, David Bowie, or the local ultra-popular Patricio Rey y sus Redonditos de Ricota) or his soccer team (Estudiantes La Plata). Another recurrent motif of the t-shirts are the philosophers that he teaches and reveres—for example, Foucault, Nietzsche, and Marx.¹¹ Sztajnszrajber, thus, renders the images of these intellectuals into elements of popular culture, into literal commodities. Probably the starkest example of this is a print featuring the heads of Nietzsche and Marx on the body of the hitmen Jules Winnfield and Vincent Vega (played by Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta respectively) from Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) (Fig 1.5). In this way, the German philosophers are cast as men of action, as outlaws, within the Western philosophical canon as they are simultaneously transformed into a familiar object familiar of easy consumption such as the character of a pulp magazine.

Sztajnszrajber behaves casually in his public lectures, speaking colloquially and telling jokes. He also interlaces his classes with soccer remarks as well as with other details of his private life. Particularly, he likes to tell the story of how he grew up in a religious and seemingly apolitical and non-ideological household, and how he converted both to secularism and joined the Peronist movement. In fact, Sztajnszrajber insistently presents himself as a rebel and an outsider:

¹¹ Sztajnszrajber has even use t-shirts as a way to advertise specific designers—for example, the Spanish brand Filsofers which stamps clothes and stationery products with the faces and phrases of renowned Western thinkers.

he has rebelled against his family and traditional leftist politics by choosing Peronism;¹² he is an outsider to academic institutions by not having a doctorate (although he is still a university instructor); and he is an outsider to the lay public as a philosophy expert. This fluid and unruly persona that Sztajnszrajber projects can be associated with the figure of the hipster who, as Philip Ford (2002) notes, “discarded the identities given them by their social origins and inhabited new, self-invented personae” (52). Hipsters are subjects savvy in the art of the artifice, they consciously craft their personal style and identities without regards to their social conditions. In addition, hipsters are highly attuned to the culture of their time and its fluctuations. As Ross maintains, “hip is a mobile taste formation that closely registers shifts in respect/disrespect towards popular taste” (1989, 83). Ross also notes that, especially for the lower-class hipster, for those who feel like outsiders, knowledge of popular culture manifests itself through



Figure 1.5. Photograph of Sztajnszrajber wearing a t-shirt where the heads of Nietzsche and Marx are on the bodies of Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction*.

¹² Sztajnszrajber narrates that he came to Peronist politics after a trip with a girlfriend to Nicaragua in the 1980s to experience firsthand the Sandinista revolution. It is in Nicaragua that he realized that “transformational processes must be done hand in hand with *the people*, meaning, that the real social revolution should be of the people. All of that is synthesized in one word: Peronism” (Goldman 2018 emphasis mine).

overinformation—the hipster shows that he/she knows all about what is in vogue as well as what is not. Sztajnszrajber expresses this aspect by showing his proficiency not only of philosophers and their work but also by showing deep familiarity with popular music, films, sports, and other widespread cultural practices.

Consider his participation in the magazine *THC*, a monthly publication providing “cannabis culture” news and information, including cultivation techniques, different uses of the plant, its history, and a number of social issues associated with cannabis. The magazine frequently publishes features on Argentine celebrities who are interviewed and share their experiences with and perspectives on marijuana. Sztajnszrajber was invited to discuss the relationship between smoking “weed” and philosophy for the issue titled “Filosofaso” (a play on words that results from combining the word for philosopher in Spanish, “filósofo,” and “faso,” a slang term for joint). The cover of this particular issue features Sztajnszrajber dressed in a Grecian tunic while he looks inquisitively—touching his chin—at a cannabis bud that he is holding up. The bud is also surrounded by a halo of light that illuminates Sztajnszrajber’s face and hand suggesting that cannabis has a religious or mystical quality (Fig 1.6). Underneath the title, the cover text reads: “The mystery of knowledge, happiness, and the use of time. How does cannabis inform our way of seeing the world?” (*THC*, issue 63, March 2020). Ironic in nature like most of *THC* graphic art, the cover makes the connection between Sztajnszrajber and famous Greek philosophers where marijuana becomes an intriguing object in the world on which to reflect—in the same manner as Socrates and Plato, contemplating the cosmos and human nature. In the issue, Sztajnszrajber also builds a connection between getting high and doing philosophy, saying that smoking cannabis is a “useless” activity that breaks the contemporary cultural paradigm of carefully making use of time and being productive. Philosophizing is, thus, an activity that “disrupts the type of world that we live in and allows us to take a different path” just

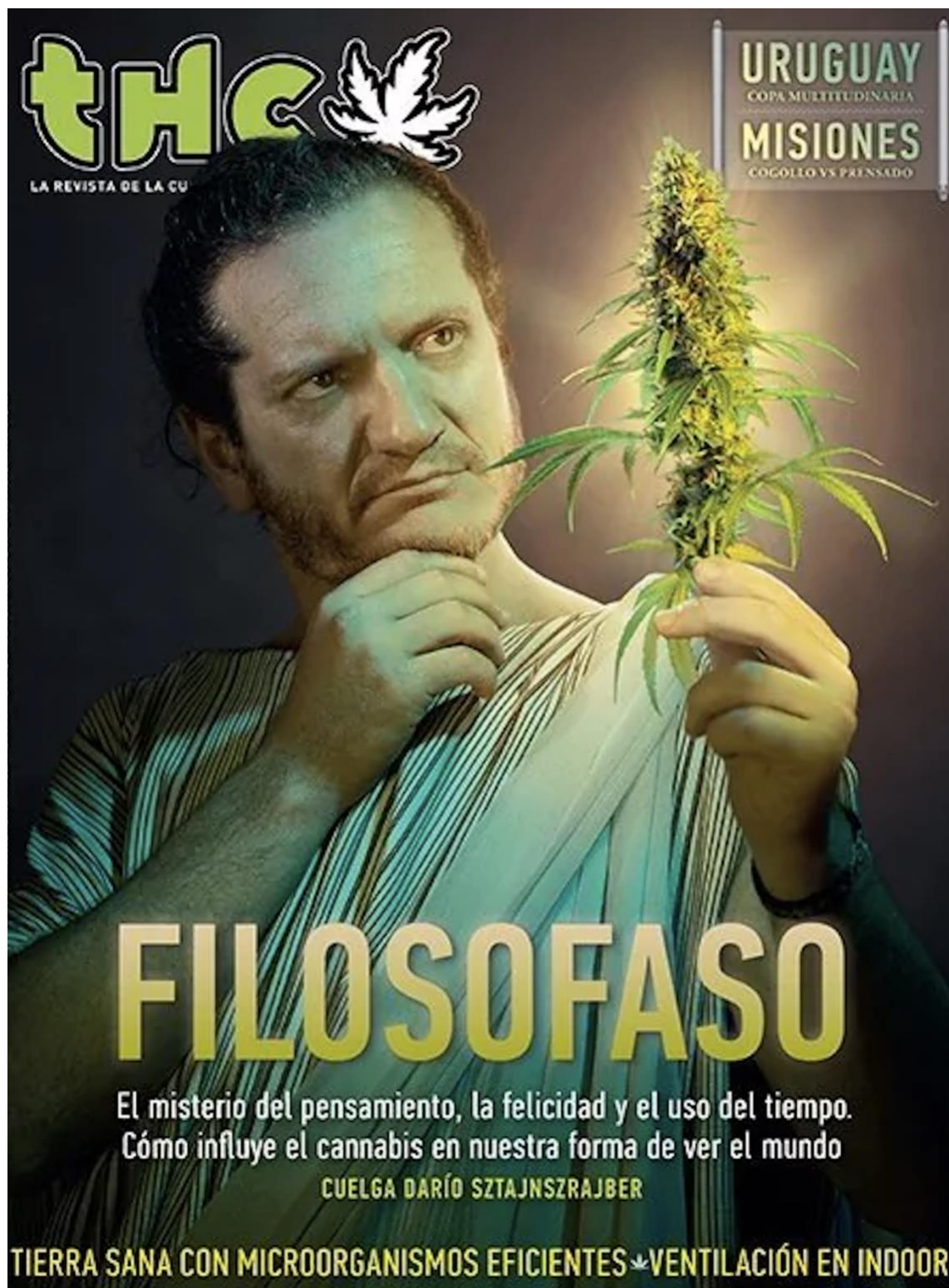


Figure 1.6. Cover of *THC* magazine, issue 63, March 2020. Image: tiendathc.com.

like recreational cannabis consumption. This print media intervention neatly captures both the public persona fostered by Sztajnszrajber and the pedagogical goals he pursues. *THC* presents him as a celebrity and an intellectual who brings his extended academic knowledge to bear on mundane and contemporary issues. As he does on issues like love, death, and friendship, Sztajnszrajber delivers a digestible take on drug use—an issue that might otherwise seem rather thorny—in order to demonstrate a democratization of information and philosophical thinking. Especially through the use of humor, Sztajnszrajber and *THC*'s collaboration puts forward the idea that philosophy should not be taken as a serious and distant practice, like a rigorous academic discipline. Philosophy is, rather, something that anybody can do. It is pleasurable and simple, like smoking a joint.

Sztajnszrajber's untidy look and leftist political inclination project the clear image of the 1970s New Peronist Youth. Alina Mazzaferro (2018) noted how, during the 70s, the celebrities associated with Peronism went from being the glamorous and elegant cinema stars of the 1950s to the young singers and actors who wore jeans and fashioned long straight hair (250). The 70s Peronist Youth openly sympathized with the left-wing Latin American guerrilla movements and became prominent public figures via television, rather than film—characteristics also shared by Sztajnszrajber. The philosopher was yet another instance of the Kirchner project to rehabilitate the image of the 1970s revolutionary and youthful Peronist activist, one that is rebellious and connected to pop culture and media. Sztajnszrajber, nevertheless, represents a Peronist activist that is both more globalized and commoditized with his liking for “imperial” popular culture and his t-shirts printed with the faces of canonical philosophers. These traits allow a critical understanding of Sztajnszrajber's media construction as the embodiment of the idea of the young progressive porteño (Buenos Aires resident), a middle-class cosmopolitan urbanite connected to both local and foreign cultures and who also likes to think that he, or they, can move swiftly

between elitist and popular cultural registers. In a city that consistently chooses conservative leaders, Sztajnszrajber addresses the sensibility of those more socially-minded who might want to vote against their families' political preferences. No wonder, then, that he participated in the Buenos Aires 2019 mayoral campaign of the Peronist candidate, Matías Lammens.

Mentira la verdad

Sztajnszrajber cemented much of his celebrity status and quotidian persona on the screen of Canal Encuentro, specifically in his first major television work, the educational show *Mentira la verdad*. In 2010, Canal Encuentro made an open call in search for a company that would produce *Mentira la verdad*. Canal Encuentro's chief of content at the time, Jessica Tritén, had been Sztajnszrajber's student at the Latin American Social Sciences Institute (FLACSO) and recruited him to lead a yet untitled television project (Smerling 2021, "Capítulo 12").

Sztajnszrajber had not been one of the signing intellectuals of Carta Abierta but he had publicly supported CFK's government in 2010 when he defended the same-sex marriage bill project on a televised debate before it was sanctioned by congress. The contract to produce the show was awarded to Mulata Films, a firm ideologically aligned with the Frente para la Victoria government, which had already provided production services for Canal Encuentro—e.g. *Oficios* and *Identidades Productivas*, 2010.

In the first three seasons, each episode revolves around one specific philosophical concept—e.g., love, death, beauty, and the like—that Sztajnszrajber discusses from the perspectives of multiple canonical Western philosophers going from the Pre-Socratics all the way to twentieth century figures like Foucault, Derrida, and Arendt. As he revealed when the show was released, however, he did not attempt to simply provide philosophy classes, but rather to philosophize on quotidian issues (Clarín 2011). In this sense, one of the show's main pedagogical

devices is the use of fictionally constructed everyday life scenarios that help to ground the issues that structure the episodes. For example, the episode “Identity” (“La Identidad” 2011) is centered around characters from different social backgrounds who go to a governmental agency to acquire a national Argentine ID. In “Beauty” (“La Belleza” 2011), the show recreates a visit to a museum where a guide exposes a group of visitors to different kinds of art. Sztajnszrajber is placed in these scenarios where he acts, for the most part, as a bystander, repeatedly breaking the diegesis to look at the camera, address the audience, and elucidate for them how it is that the fictional situations relate to larger philosophical problems.

Mentira la verdad’s third season changed substantially: instead of each episode having a self-contained story, where the situations, actions, and characters did not carry over, the show now featured a narrative arc that ran across the entire season. Episodes continued to be centered around particular concepts and Sztajnszrajber kept on delivering extra-diegetic explanations, but the fictional world came to play a larger structuring role. The storyline followed Sztajnszrajber (played by himself) struggling with his rise to fame and public exposure after *Mentira la verdad* was acquired by a multinational media conglomerate which changed the name of the show and placed it on a commercial network. The fictitious Sztajnszrajber was portrayed as rich and famous, much more than he was in reality. But the program remained focused on the mundane and intimate aspects of the philosopher’s life, emphasizing traits that constructed him as human and vulnerable, allowing for audience identification. In this sense, *Mentira la verdad* created a world with melodramatic tinges in which Sztajnszrajber had relationship problems with his girlfriend, recurrently argued with his ex-wife and daughter, and even had to deal with depression. The season also included semi-biographical references to Sztajnszrajber’s life. Such is the case of the second episode, “Religion” (“Lo Religioso” 2014), where Sztajnszrajber revisited scenes from his memories as a young boy growing up in a religious setting where a

secular-leaning uncle pushed him to question his faith and his family's Jewish orthodoxy. Moreover, various recurring characters were played by high-profile Argentine media personalities—for example, journalists Clemente Cancela, Julia Mengolini and Víctor Hugo Morales—who were by then Sztajnszrajber's collaborators outside of *Mentira la verdad*.

By the time the third season was released, Sztajnszrajber had already become a recognized public figure in Argentina. The show, therefore, not only endowed Sztajnszrajber's character with a multifaceted personal world—that consisted of fictional and factual details—but also provided a sense of realism by tracing his real-life ascension to celebrity status. The fourth season continued in this direction, although the format of the show, once again, underwent significant changes. *Mentira la verdad*, whose tagline was now “En la calle” (on the street), became a series of street lectures across Argentina. Even though these public classes were staged, the actual dwellers in the different towns and cities where they were taking place could attend them, stand a few meters away from Sztajnszrajber, and even interact with him. Furthermore, the fictional side was dropped almost entirely, except from excerpts from previous seasons, and episodes became organized around specific philosophers instead of concepts. The transformation of the program responded not only to the reduction of budgets allocated by the federal government to public television but also to Sztajnszrajber's career path; around that time, he had begun touring the country with his public lectures. The season also foreshadowed his book *Filosofía en 11 frases* (Philosophy in 11 Phrases) and his classes at Facultad Libre de Rosario (the Open University of Rosario), which were structured around the work of prominent Western thinkers rather than particular ideas.

Much of what Sztajnszrajber's image repeatedly offers is what John Corner (2004) has termed the “performance of the real” (61), which has been one of the dominant traits of the regime of televisual representation since the last decade of the twentieth century. Reality

television relentlessly renders all lifestyles and spheres of human activity imaginable into spectacles and media commodities. Corner has argued for the emergence of a pervasive “new documentary energy” that is informed by both traditional documentary practices and the codes of contemporary reality television, with their mandates to divert and entertain, as well as their focus on the personal (60). Although constructed on the basis of fiction, *Mentira la verdad* fulfills a clear documentary function, especially as it closely traces Sztajnszrajber’s professional development. Moreover, the viewer witnesses what Corner has called the process of *selving*, “whereby ‘true selves’ are seen to emerge (and develop) from underneath, and, indeed, through the ‘performed selves’ projected for us,” (45) as the philosopher is seen participating in ordinary situations and everyday routines, as well as enacting moments from private life. At the same time as *Mentira la verdad* buttressed Sztajnszrajber as an everyman, as ordinary, the program also constructed him as extraordinary. He was persistently singled out as different from the rest of the cast, whether that took the form of him becoming invisible to other characters or of his ability to break the fourth wall, whether he was presented as rich and at the center of the story, or whether he was simply the speaker in the middle of a circle of listeners who attended his lecture in a public square.

This tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary is central to star power as it implies the “embodiment of a subjectivity that unites the spectacular with the everyday” (Driessens 642, 2012). Another way to conceive of this contradiction, however, is that it is also what constitutes the essential aspect of the populist leader’s persona. According to Benjamin Moffitt’s theorization of populism as a political style (2016), “populist leaders must be able to present themselves as possessing outstanding leadership qualities—that is, extraordinary—as well as being of ‘the people’—that is, ordinary” (57). To negotiate this “precarious balance” (55),

Moffitt singles out the use of “bad manners” by populist leaders not necessarily to underscore politeness, but instead signaling “the apparent disregard for ‘appropriate’ ways of in acting in the political realm, and the deliberate flouting of expectations and practices” that are culturally specific (58). Although mild-mannered, Sztajnszrajber’s perceived ordinariness and bohemian personality become his “bad manners;” they are precisely what make him unusual as a philosopher and a teacher insofar as he undermines the hierarchies associated with academic thought, the etiquette expected of intellectuals, and even the format of educational television.

Instead of abstract ideas taught by a professor in a tweed jacket, Sztajnszrajber projects himself as a close friend speaking plainly, helping the viewer think through everyday matters on a seemingly level playing field— “he tells it like it is.” At the same time, it is crucial to think of Sztajnszrajber’s pedagogy in more strictly political terms. It responds directly to the Argentine political climate from which he emerges as well as the particular project that *Mentira la verdad* represents, directly funded by the government with the firm intention of disseminating Frente para la Victoria politics and translating such politics into the language and images of everyday struggle. In this context, Sztajnszrajber’s persona is not simply that of a celebrity, but that of a political leader. Following Moffitt, his style can be “conceptualised as the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life” (Moffitt 2016, 153). In addition to Sztajnszrajber’s carefully crafted persona, *Mentira la verdad* is not simply political. Rather, it is structured on the basis of populist politics. Laclau’s theory of populism as the very logic of the political is especially useful to understand these seemingly everyday, reasonable perspectives. It is the analysis of the show from the perspective of Laclau’s framework that I turn to in the next section.

Broadcasting Populism

When Canal Encuentro began planning the yet untitled TV show that would become *Mentira la verdad*, the call in search of a production company expressed clear pedagogical, even ideological goals, although the language itself was unclear and sloppy:

This series attempts to bring philosophy to the younger generations so they can question what they think, feel and value both about life and the society they form part of, in order to challenge the idea of a single ‘common sense.’ The series should be structured around the interaction of two narratives, an official one and another one of dissent, with a philosopher host who will serve as a guide. [Each episode] begins with the official narrative [regarding a particular problem] and, at some point, there is a break where the other narrative subverts the official one. To talk about official and dissident narratives with regard to philosophy implies thinking about what comes across as obvious or commonsensical and the possibility of developing a new point of view. (Ministerio de Educación [MDE] 2010)

This description captures the antagonistic spirit expressed by Cristina Kirchner and her call to fight in a larger culture war. The express goal of the show coincides with a clear political directive for the audience to understand and adopt a perspective on culture that stands against a blanket neoliberal status quo. Thus, the show aimed to demonstrate two distinct perspectives on a broad number of subjects, and to convince its audience that the counter-narrative should come out victorious. The “common sense” or “the official narrative” would often be aligned with the worldview of opponents of Frente para la Victoria, while the position of dissent or subversion, ironically, would represent that of the governing party. It can be argued that, since its conception, *Mentira la verdad* was defined by its divisive mentality or, rather, a *populist politics* that inform not only its content but also its form.

A definition of what I mean by populism is required here since, as Laclau (1977) asserts in one of his earliest accounts on the matter, “populism is a concept both elusive and recurrent. Few terms have been so widely used in contemporary political analysis, although few have been defined with less precision” (143). Despite the differences between the various schools of thought, there seems to be a consensus (at least an implicit one) that populist politics implies a division of society, or of the field of political representation at large, between the elite—construed as a treacherous and evil entity—and the people—that assumes positive and heroic attributes (Laclau 2005; Mudde 2007; Moffitt 2016). Furthermore, scholarly literature generally assigns a central role to the figure of the charismatic leader in populist politics, although with nuanced differences about the function that the leader actually fulfills. For example, Kurt Weyland (2001) describes populism as a mobilizing strategy devised by a leader who divides friends from foes, and makes use of the state apparatus in order to, first and foremost, accrue personal political power (11). Moffitt’s theory of populism as a political style does not fully share Weyland’s emphasis on individual ambition, but nevertheless gives the leader a central placement going as far as to claim that “it is the leader that should be our main focus when studying the phenomenon, given that they are the figures that ultimately ‘do’ populism” (51-52).

Finally, for Laclau (2005) the leader as a “popular symbol” performs a fundamental function in the constitution of “the people” by keeping together and giving identity to a part of society formed by an assemblage of heterogeneous (and otherwise unrelated) elements (99-100). In Laclau’s account, leaders, by virtue of their affective charge and by articulating a series of demands, bring together a diversity of social groups that will become identified as “the people.” Laclau’s conceptualization of populism incorporates the main principles associated with the phenomenon (namely, its antagonistic spirit and the centrality of the leader) but, at the same time, it supersedes other theories by positing populism as the *logic of the political*. Laclau shifts the

focus of the study of populism in its concrete historical manifestations, “from particular demands and strategy, the nitty-gritty aspects of political life” to conceive of populism as the logic whereby the political sphere itself is structured and society is instituted (Fidotta, Neves and Serpe 2020, 6-7). This approach, thus, allows one to move from the examination of populism in phenomena understood in strictly political terms (e.g., party and electoral politics) to other cultural formations—like the media and its content—and their capacity for populist world-making.

At a discursive level, the oppositional ethos of *Mentira la verdad* is not immediately apparent. While the show is devoted to establishing a firm progressive counter-narrative, the counter-narrative is never positioned in explicitly revolutionary terms. Rather, the arguments presented in the show seem clear and reasonable—often extending effortlessly from the generalized language of human rights. Sztajnszrajber approaches these topics as realms of friendly and peaceful inquiry, which sets *Mentira la verdad* quite dramatically apart from heated televised political debates. For example, in the episode titled “God” (“Dios” 2011), Sztajnszrajber explains that the biblical understanding of God was an attempt to make “the entire universe make sense” and for “men [to] live according to His commandments”. Against this view, he proposes a non-dogmatic idea of God that, instead of providing closure and imparting rules, problematizes our existence and acts as an “inspiration to make our world fairer, men freer, and our fulfillment more complete.” In “Modernity” (“Modernidad” 2011), the second episode of the season, Sztajnszrajber contends that common associations with the idea of modernity have reified into the concept of “capitalist modernity.” In this context, “modern” tends to be conflated with the advancement of science and technology in favor of improving the “quality of life” but without ever really questioning whose lives are being improved and what are the real consequences of modernity’s supposed progress. Furthermore, the effect of the cultural industries and

consumerism, Sztajnszrajber asserts, is the impossibility of thinking of alternatives outside of capitalism. He proposes, then, to revitalize the idea of modernity as rupture, as a project of emancipation from any dogma, from anything that is imposed. Sztajnszrajber concludes the episode by claiming that a modern attitude, therefore means, “to realize that the most precious thing is to coexist with our differences and that nothing is worthwhile if the end result is the negation of the Other.” Reflections like this last one are among the most repeated claims of *Mentira la verdad* episodes, with Sztajnszrajber calling for inclusivity and encouraging viewers to consider a particular issue from the perspective of a vaguely defined “Other.”

On the other hand, *Mentira la verdad*’s focus on quotidian scenarios offer a way to clearly target the government’s opponents, defend its policies, and, ultimately, advance its agenda. For example, in the episode on friendship, the show presents a group of friends who at the end of a party find themselves too drunk and candidly parroting conservative talking points: their disgust at immigrants using public hospitals or their annoyance at beggars ringing the doorbell asking for handouts (“La Amistad” 2011). The media—with Grupo Clarín as the subtext—is a recurrent target of the show, always represented as exaggerated and focused on scandal, as well as conservative-leaning while trying to maintain a neutral semblance. The first season provides a specific episode worth examining as it not simply attacks anti-Kirchner positions but also as it makes populism into an aesthetics.

In an episode titled “History” (“La Historia” 2011), Sztajnszrajber invites the viewer to consider the idea that history is traditionally “the narration of the great events of great men,” that is, almost always covering something up. The action takes place at the funeral wake of a fictitious wealthy man, Emilio Bianca, who is remembered by the guests as an exemplary individual of strong family and religious values, someone who continually “fought for a fairer and more rational society.” Sztajnszrajber narrates a series of facts to more fully portray who Bianca had

been in life: he had gone to the military academy, had been a successful financier, and had been awarded an honorary doctorate from John F. Kennedy University. As the episode unfolds, the gossiping of the guests reveals that Bianca was not as unimpeachable and honorable as he is meant to be remembered: he had had a long-term romantic affair with his housekeeper, he was an abusive husband and father, and he had embezzled money from his own business. Altogether, the episode pushes for the association between particular character traits—wealthy, powerful, and conservative—and a set of negative connotations: hypocritical, violent, and corrupt. The character of Emilio Bianca seems to specifically embody the institutions upheld by the last military dictatorship in Argentina: the national army, the international financial system, and the United States. Like Bianca, the military junta that led the coup d'état presented itself as benevolent and modern—calling the dictatorship the National Reorganization Process—when in reality they carried on bloody purges and bankrupted the country's economy. The character of the deceased becomes, thus, a signifier encompassing the various entities—both foreign and domestic—that, according to the Frente para la Victoria, had undermined Argentina's sovereignty.

Throughout the episode, the wake scene is edited in parallel to images of a group of marching people with serious expressions who are waving flags, thus, implying that they are taking part in a protest. A security guard working for the wake asks through a walkie-talkie “everything alright at the door?” indicating that the protest is happening right outside and possibly in response to the homage that is being paid to Bianca. This fictional situation fulfills two interrelated functions: on the one hand, it works as another reference to Argentina's political history, alluding to the marches that happened to repudiate the burials of former military dictators—like the ones that took place in 2003 against Leopoldo Galtieri. On the other hand, it embodies the dissident narrative of the episode, in this case, the underside of the idea of history

personified by Bianca who, in the words of Sztajnszrajber, represents the notion that “[i]n modern capitalist societies, progress relates to individual economic well-being.” In contrast to this, Sztajnszrajber introduces Marx’s well-known conceptualization of history as a perpetual class struggle which reveals how “some men have become enriched at the expense of the work of a large majority. Only a few manage to thrive in life, thanks to the exploitation of many others who do not progress,” and “remain below, buried” (“La Historia” 2011). It is this latter group of people that the protesters are representing: the oppressed, the underclass, or simply *the people*.

The formal construction of both sequences reinforces the opposition between both accounts of history. First, the protest is shot in color, in opposition to the black and white of the wake. Second, the space of the wake is a large room with a tall ceiling captured with medium and long shots that both reveal a few attendees and emphasize the distance between them (Fig 1.7). On the contrary, the demonstration is shot with medium and close frames creating the impression of a mass event (Fig 1.8). The editing of the protest is fast-paced featuring superimpositions of images of flags as well as light flares giving the scene a sense of heightened dynamism in contrast to the wake sequence which prioritizes continuity editing and unfolds in a slower fashion. Finally, Sztajnszrajber’s position in these two spaces and his interaction with the fictional characters introduces another significant distinction between the scenes. During Bianca’s vigil, Sztajnszrajber acts primarily as an external observer: he listens to the guests but he is not noticed by them, even when he is delivering his explanations. He, nonetheless, appears slightly resigned when eavesdropping on the guests’ more scandalous comments: e.g., apologizing for Bianca’s wife-beating and his corruption. Sztajnszrajber is a phantasmagoric—even God-like—figure. The only character who perceives him is Bianca, the corpse, who is sitting upright and looking at the philosopher during parts of his monologue. While he is presented as an outsider to Bianca’s environment, he appears to feel at home amongst the



Figure 1.7. Sztajnszrajber sitting amongst the attendees of Bianca's wake in episode 11, season 1, "La Historia," 2011. Image: Canal Encuentro.



Figure 1.8. Sztajnszrajber marching with protestors in episode 11, season 1, "La Historia," 2011. Image: Canal Encuentro.

protestors: Sztajnszrajber is not simply shown marching, but he is also depicted as ahead of the pack, as if he were the leader. The use of color further reinforces his affiliation to the demonstration: throughout the wake, Sztajnszrajber's explanatory sequences are the few occasions that the grayscale is broken by a full color palette. This begs the interpretation of Sztajnszrajber as not only a stranger in Bianca's milieu but potentially as an infiltrated demonstrator. At the end of the episode, the protest breaks into the room where the wake is taking place, dispersing Bianca's acquaintances and finally bringing color to the situation. Sztajnszrajber is shown both participating and celebrating the successful anti-fascist mobilization.

By means of the formal oppositions between the two sequences, *Mentira la verdad* represents Bianca's social world—and all that it represents—as one that is empty, full of evident contradictions, and even dying. Simultaneously, the people of the streets are alive and ready to take action. Moreover, the protestors or the activists are the agents of history who, as in Marx's account, will rise triumphant over their oppressors. Finally, the leader, in the figure of Sztajnszrajber, guides the true people to their destiny both morally and physically as he guides the demonstrations. Sztajnszrajber, thus, embodies “the radical fullness of the body of a leader in which the people may find a palpable image of their own substance” (Mazzarella 2019, 52).

Despite a certain variability and flexibility from episode to episode, one constant in *Mentira la verdad* is the final sequence in every episode, a formal staple during the first three seasons of the series which demonstrates most strongly the show's overt populist politics. During this segment, Sztajnszrajber delivers his final remarks on the topic of the episode, which he does by facing the camera directly, surrounded by the actors, crew, and production team (Fig 1.9). Everyone present in the scene looks into the camera with gravity and seriousness. The camera cuts back and forth constantly between shots that focus on Sztajnszrajber as he speaks and close-ups that briefly capture the faces of specific performers and behind-the-camera workers. Some

shots are still, and others feature slight forward camera movement that brings the audience closer to the faces of the subject in front of the camera. These final scenes are significant not only for the formal unity they provide the first three seasons; they also present *Mentira la verdad*'s cast and crew united as "the people," that is, a group of individuals with diverse identities traits in terms of their gender, age, race, and occupation all coalescing around the figure of a leader, fulfilled by Sztajnszrajber. Additionally, the sequence embodies an antagonistic spirit, as those depicted seem to confront the camera by virtue of their unflinching gaze and somber expression, inviting the viewer to consider seriously Sztajnszrajber's final words.

The formal identification and antagonism presented by this concluding sequence is further reinforced by Sztajnszrajber's messaging. It is during the final moments of episodes that the host delivers his most overtly ideologically-charged words, clearly conveying the show's populist discourse. Consider the ending of the second episode of the first season, titled "Order" ("El Orden" 2011), which won the Japan Prize and received an Emmy nomination. Sztajnszrajber states,

With globalization, we have started to talk about a new world order [...] Late capitalism legitimizes a certain order for some people and promotes a formal citizenship that does not take care of the massive demands of hunger and poverty. So, if we talk about a new order, we are also talking about a new disorder. That is why the question is to understand who are the new criminals? Who are those who, through their presence alone, reveal that, in this new world order, the vast majority of people are superfluous? As if hunger recognized borders. As if poverty were a choice. Once again, the question lies in defining who is on the inside and who is left outside.

In this passage, Sztajnszrajber provides an open critique of global capital and expresses a larger desire for social justice, suggesting that the contemporary world economic and political system—



Figure 1.9. Sztajnszrajber delivering the final remarks in episode 1, season 1, "El Orden," 2011. Image: Canal Encuentro.

the “new world disorder”—benefits a few at the expense of a majority of marginalized people.

Sztajnszrajber’s words, furthermore, openly articulate a series of affective social demands that appeal to his audience’s empathy. He asks them to take seriously the problems generated by wealth inequality and the discrimination perpetrated by the legal system. Finally, he also suggests how national borders might be an obstacle to the formation of larger social movements.

Sztajnszrajber’s final pleas might best be understood as an expression of Laclau’s *equivalential chain*—when disparate social demands that might interest different social groups are linked together discursively and given a shared identity by the very fact of being invoked together and by being identified with a leader figure. Sztajnszrajber also poses these demands in adversarial terms as he holds that capitalism separates those who are inside the system from those who remain outside of it. Beyond this, his argument points at yet another antagonism: those who care

for the social demands he brings forth and those who do not. These words are paired with a final long shot that features Sztajnszrajber surrounded by *Mentira la verdad*'s talent facing the camera, leaving the the viewer with an implicit choice: "whose side will you take?"

Conclusion

Sztajnszrajber's media work is a useful guide to Argentine post-crisis cultural politics, as it crystalizes much of the reformist spirit of the Kirchner years. His emergence as a public figure represents an attempt to reform Argentine media in two crucial ways. First, shows like *Mentira la verdad* counter the influence of Argentina's mainstream media apparatus by challenging its more conservative editorial directives and supporting the work of smaller independent producers. Secondly, the hipness of the television show and its host challenged the more traditional model of public broadcasting as an outlet for paternalistic content, which often finds itself in opposition to popular tastes. As I have argued, this challenge to long-established understandings of public television coincided with a strategic shift surrounding the figure of the intellectual and its deployment in Argentina's *progressive imaginary*. As part of her fight against media conglomerates and elite economic interests, CFK saw the role of intellectuals as key referents to assist her in rendering the national-popular into common sense. Intellectuals were charged with changing their status from individuals disconnected from their own culture, incapable of speaking in lay-terms or partaking in popular cultural forms. Rather, they were to become actively involved in defending national interests and shaping the politics of the people. The middlebrow, explicitly and implicitly reviled by the intellectual class throughout the twentieth century, became the style that worked best to address larger audiences and spread the government's progressive populist messaging.

Sztajnszrajber and *Mentira la verdad* harnessed popular culture to address the potential interests of viewers, seeking to show them how their own experiences and cultural consumption could help them understand the political nature of everyday life. It provided its audience with a more informed sense of the socio-political system they inhabited and, thus, afforded its viewership the possibility of critique. *Mentira la verdad* harnessed the concept of celebrity and Sztajnszrajber's cultural status as a convenient vehicle for progressive messaging and profiting off the parasocial potential of television's reality elements. Ultimately, the populist logic that pervaded CFK's governments also informed *Mentira la verdad*, a show that made antagonism—even in a muffled and friendly form—into a rhetorical and audiovisual style.

Beyond Argentina, middlebrow populism has become highly prevalent in the present moment, especially in user-generated content on Web 2.0 platforms. For example, YouTube creators Contrapoints and Philosophy Tube deliver critiques of conservative thought while attempting to entertain their audiences. As I will argue in the third chapter, the progressive imaginary hailed by public broadcasting is also being taken up and exploited for profit in private digital video streaming platforms. This is clearly the case with the newer Argentine public intellectual, Tamara Tenenbaum, who continues the work of Sztajnszrajber in popularizing Western philosophy on Canal Encuentro, and worked with Amazon to produce a series based on one of her feminist theory books. While the pedagogical spirit of Argentine public broadcasting continues on subscription video platforms, this content does not provide the same access that state-funded media strived to attain. Before this exploration of SVOD progressive politics, I turn to Argentine comedian Malena Pichot in the next chapter. Pichot began her media career on YouTube, becoming a local intellectual referent. Instead of engaging with populist discourse or addressing a wide array of social justice issues, however, Pichot worked against the Sztajnszrajber model and mobilized a clearly defined set of feminist politics. This next chapter

examines another crucial movement informing the *progressive imaginary*—that of feminist politics and the circulation of progressive ideals on digital media platforms.

Chapter 2—The Activist Comedy of Malena Pichot: Killjoy Laughter in the Age of the Precariat

Introduction

2016's Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres (the National Women's Gathering) was the biggest feminist and women's rights event in Argentina; it gathered unprecedented media attention partially because of its large attendance as well as its chosen annual theme: gender-based violence. This issue had become a pervasive public discussion since 2015, with the formation of Ni una menos (Not One Woman Less), a collective founded to denounce femicides and fight machista violence. By the end of the gathering, however, both local and national media outlets were more focused on images of vandalism and civil unrest that took place during the event; the most popular images stemmed from confrontations with police and right-wing groups, but they also featured quite prominently the feminist slogans painted on canvas as varied as storefronts, churches, and topless women. Against a loud chorus of voices attempting to discredit the mobilization for this imagery, a burst of tweets by comedian Malena Pichot went viral, in which she justified the defacing of public walls and the clashes that took place during the event. She explained that the incidents were not only the result of targeted provocations, but also the logical outcome of the daily abuse experienced by women. In her characteristic provocative style, Pichot fired off some of the following tweets: "Guys, don't cry for the gathering and the graffiti. [The event] was emotional and the church is dictatorial. Kisses," "I wish people were as outraged by rape as they are by some painted walls," and "[I am] absolutely for destroying everything until abortion is legalized"¹³ (Fig 2.1). The media republished many of

¹³ In 2016, Argentina still only allowed abortions in the case of rape, incest, or in the situation that the pregnancy posed a threat to the life of the mother.



malena pichot ✓

@malepichot

...

Chicos no me lloren con el encuentro y las pintadas. Fue emocionante y la iglesia es la dictadura. Basis

[Translate Tweet](#)

12:06 AM · Oct 10, 2016



malena pichot ✓

@malepichot

...

Ojalá las violaciones indignaran tanto a los vecinos como las paredes pintadas.

[Translate Tweet](#)

9:38 AM · Oct 10, 2016



malena pichot ✓

@malepichot

...

completamente a favor de romper todo hasta que legalicen el aborto

[Translate Tweet](#)

7:21 AM · Oct 10, 2016

Figure 2.1. Malena Pichot's Tweets during the National Women's Gathering, 2016. Image: Twitter.

Pichot's posts and individual interactions with Twitter users in an attempt to paint her as an unreasonable apologist for violence. Despite their clear intention to undermine the comedian, these media outlets simply disseminated Pichot's ideas and furthered the viral effect.

This anecdote reveals a likeness between Argentine political mobilization and the state of affairs in other geographies. Political unrest puts on display the active connection between

traditional on-the-ground protest and digital activism. It also exemplifies the global discussion between progressive and reactionary forces about what issues *really* matter in public debate, and whether or not private property is truly more important than the rights of people. At the same time, this opening example helpfully positions Pichot as both a national feminist referent and a prominent media figure. As Pichot's online intervention reveals, she knows both how to play social media's algorithm—which determines what becomes relevant content—and how to capture the attention of legacy media. In this sense, Pichot's provocations and professed outrage expose similarities in the logic that underlie the way that traditional and newer media platforms organize and rank information. Finally, Pichot's Twitter diatribe shows how committed she is to saying the things that are *not* popular, *not* funny, despite her status as a comedian. In short, she reveals herself to be a *killjoy*.

In this chapter, I explore the media productions of Malena Pichot, one of the most active content-creators in the contemporary Argentine media landscape. A stand-up comedian, writer, director, actress, radio host, and ubiquitous online presence, Pichot's work as an entertainer is both versatile and extensive, engaging with multiple genres and expanding across a wide array of media platforms. More pertinently, Pichot's work functions as a useful hinge in this dissertation's larger trajectory, which charts the Argentine transition from broadcast media (Chapter One) to online streaming services (Chapter Three). At the center of this chapter is an examination of how feminist politics and precarity inform both the content and the production structures of Pichot's comedy. For the purposes of this analysis, this chapter is centered on her early productions for user-generated media platforms—more specifically (although not exclusively) for YouTube. This means that I will not address her more recent theatrical presence, journalistic publications, daily radio show, and her prolific stand-up performances, though it is important to note her Netflix special, *Estupidez compleja* (Complex Stupidity, 2018), which is available for streaming with

subtitles worldwide. It is easy to get lost in the sheer abundance of Pichot's media oeuvre and, therefore, this limited focus allows a closer examination of the inner workings of the digital economy of Web 2.0, both in Argentina and beyond. Despite an established media presence and a reliable and prolific output of content, Pichot always seems to be mid-hustle, jumping from gig to gig. Aside from the stability of a daily radio show, Pichot's career is characterized by short-term contracts, crowd-funding, and ad hoc projects. Whether solo or ensemble, however, Pichot's work always features her at the center, performing multiple onscreen and offscreen roles—a zany circus ringmaster whose work as master of ceremonies is compounded by the business end of securing contracts.

Whatever the platform or genre, Pichot has expressed an immovable commitment to feminist principles, and constantly exposes the numerous forms of inequality and violence that women experience daily and systematically. In this sense, Pichot leans fully into the archetype of the angry feminist. The trademark of both her comedic productions and more serious interventions is an angry tone of denunciation—as it is rendered crystal clear by the title of her newspaper column *Enojate, Hermana* (Get Angry, Sister) and radio show *Furia Bebé* (Baby Rage). While her anger and provocations seek to affectively engage her audience, they also serve to generate a viral effect that further disseminates her discourse even beyond the online realm. Moreover, Pichot often speaks from a perspective informed by her own personal encounters with gender-based injustices. In this light, she clearly follows the tenets, set by Sara Ahmed, of how to “live a feminist life” (2017). Pichot's feminist perspective reveals the extent to which sexism is part and parcel of capitalist accumulation, and her work pushes against neoliberal versions of feminism while working within these same strictures. Pichot's media content brings into relief the current generalized state of precariousness under neoliberalism—a *precarious life*—which affects the quality of life across the gender spectrum and does not only target women. Ultimately,

this chapter argues that Pichot's comedy is characterized by *killjoy laughter*, a humorous expression of what is otherwise an unjust, abusive, or violent situation. Pichot's media work continues the trend of post-recessional female-centered media that counters predominant postfeminist portrayals of women as liberated, confident, fun, and highly adaptable in competitive economic environments with representations of women driven by anger and frustration as a direct result of economic, social, and bodily insecurity under neoliberal patriarchal structures (Shield Dobson and Kanai, 2019).

The analysis at the center of this chapter uses the framework for critiquing post-recessional female narratives and applies it to Argentina's political landscape during the decade leading up to the legalization of abortion (2020). An examination of Pichot's work shifts the focus from the Global North—specifically the United States—to the South, rendering the “post-recession” label inadequate. While Argentina certainly felt the consequences of the 2008 global financial crisis, the country has a longer history of economic crises and structural poverty, together with a recurring pattern of economic instability. For example, in 2008, just as Argentina began to recover from the effects of the December 2001 economic crisis, it entered a period of high inflation. This condition has flagged the country for more than a decade now and was again sharply magnified by the Covid-19 Pandemic. This conjuncture of economic hardship alongside the country's strong traditions of unionization and popular mobilizations, fosters a distinct national “grass-roots and anti-neoliberal feminism” (Gago 2019, 23). Ultimately, Pichot's comedy and media productions are informed by this particular Argentine feminist brand and are therefore useful to trace a progressive deployment of *killjoy laughter* that distinguishes itself from the liberal “girlboss” feminism that became prominent at the same time in the US.

In this chapter, I begin by tracing the recent trajectory of rapid growth and widespread visibility that Argentine feminism has gained over the last decade. I describe the emergence of

the Ni una menos mobilization, the International Women's Strike of 2017, and Marea Verde (The Green Wave), the movement that fought for the decriminalization of abortion. These events provide context for Pichot's ascent as a popular media personality whose rise parallels feminism's growing pervasiveness in Argentina's public sphere, including her own increasing involvement in the feminist movement as, first, an activist and, subsequently, a spokesperson. After laying out this framework, the chapter proceeds chronologically, focusing on specific media texts from Pichot's audiovisual repertoire. The third section is centered on her YouTube character *La Loca de Mierda* (The Fucking Crazy Woman, 2008), later acquired by MTV, which demonstrates Pichot's early implicit relation with feminist politics as she begins mobilizing her particular brand of *killjoy comedy* and *killjoy laughter*. I examine her subsequent web series *Cualca* (Whatever, 2012), where Pichot reframes her comedic focus in order to demonstrate the damage of precarity for young adult Argentines. While Pichot's political commitment to a critique of late capitalism is present at the level of content, it is reinforced by the zaniness of *Cualca*'s performances.

From the Picket Line to the Green Wave

During the northern summer of 2022, protests erupted across the US in response to the overturning of the landmark case *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court of the United States, which stripped people of their previously federally protected right to abortion. A common feature of these mobilizations was the use of the color green to express support for abortion rights. As Samantha Schmidt (2022) reported the events in *The Washington Post*, "From Washington to New York to Los Angeles, women and men marched and chanted with green bandanas around their necks. They carried green banners and released green smoke into the air." The use of green and the green bandanna, as Schmidt noted, was a direct reference to the universal symbol of the

pro-abortion rights struggle and its Latin American origins—more specifically Argentine.

Various other US outlets also turned to the story behind of the green bandana and the recent success of Argentina's feminist movement in legalizing abortion. At the same time, online users and public commentators highlighted the strength of Argentine feminism as examples to follow in the struggle for abortion as well as women's rights at large, with Judith Butler (Fontevicchia 2022) asserting that "Argentina is at the forefront [of feminism] and the Global North has much to learn from the Global South." However, this impression of a vigorous Argentine feminist movement was relatively new, and had only emerged during the last decade as a result of a series of high profile protests.

Argentina has a robust tradition of social mobilization and political demonstrations, including unions, human rights organizations, unemployed workers, students, middle class assemblies, and popular education organizations (Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela 2019, 398). Since the early 1980s, the country has experienced a large number of protests. They began in the wake of the military dictatorship in 1983 and continued throughout subsequent periods of economic instability. People specifically protested high inflation and the neoliberal policies implemented by the governments of Carlos Menem and Fernando de la Rúa in the 1990s, which culminated with the riots of the 2001 crisis. Much of the work and discussion around Argentina's social movements has focused, thus, on the work of human rights organizations and reactions against neoliberalism. This emphasis has repeatedly ignored the prominent role played by women and feminist organizations in national political struggles (Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela, 399).¹⁴ It was not until very recently that Verónica Gago (2019) examined the 2001 crisis from a feminist

¹⁴ The salient exception to this situation is the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo.

perspective, emphasizing the central part played by women as community organizers both within poor neighborhoods and the broader unemployed workers' movement (135).

Argentine feminist scholars generally agree that the 2010s were characterized by a renewed impulse toward feminist collectives that led to a more definite integration of feminism within Argentina's popular movements (Lenguita 2021, 50), as well as an increased media visibility about feminist issues (Fernández Hasan 2019, 54).¹⁵ The chief point of agreement amongst academics is that the Ni una menos movement was the starting point for this revitalization of feminism and its strong presence in the Argentine public stage. Ni una menos began in 2015 as a public demonstration and online campaign to protest and raise consciousness regarding violence specifically against women.¹⁶ The first event organized by Ni una menos was a reading marathon that took place in March of 2015 after the gruesome murder of Daiana García, a young woman who was found dead in a garbage bag. After a series of other high-profile gender-motivated killings—or *femicides*, to use the movement's term—journalist Marcela Ojeda made a call to mobilize via Twitter which went viral and became the trigger for the first mass Ni una menos protest, held on June 3rd, 2015. Between 150,000 and 300,000 people gathered for this event in Buenos Aires alone (Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela, 401).

Since its first demonstration, Ni una menos held annual marches, with the exception of 2020 and 2021 (as a result of Covid-19). The movement also played a critical role in encouraging and supporting the National Women's Strike of 2016 and the International Women's Strike of 2017 and 2018. The 2016 strike was called as a response to the rape and murder of teenager

¹⁵ This increased prominence of feminist popular discussion and debate also led to a larger trend of the appropriation of feminism by the culture industries. For more on this, Carolina Justo von Lurzer 2020.

¹⁶ The name "Ni una menos" is inspired by of Mexican feminist activist and poet Susana Chávez who used to say "¡Ni una más!" (Not one woman dead more) to denounce the systemic murder of women in Ciudad Juárez. Chávez was killed precisely because of her activism (Revilla Blanco 2019, 48).

Lucía Pérez during the yearly National Women's Gathering. It was also inspired by the All-Poland Women's Strike that took place in early October 2016 to protest an anti-abortion initiative being discussed in the parliament. The National Women's Strike was called for October 19th not only to condemn the femicide of Pérez but also to denounce the generalized disregard for female life and labor—especially in light of growing domestic economic instability. The strike's motto was “if my life is worthless, produce without me.” Strike organizers called upon women to cease all work activities, to disrupt their workplaces with noise at an appointed hour, and to gather for a march at the end of the day. Gago asserts the strike allowed Argentine feminism,

to connect and pragmatically crosscheck all forms of violence tied up with macho violence: the wage gap economic violence and the unrecognized and unpaid hours of domestic labor that go together with the disciplining that results from the lack of economic autonomy; the exploitation violence that becomes masculine impotence in the household and bursts into domestic violence; the violence of the dismantling of public services that produces the overloading of community work. (22)

The strike, therefore, called for attention to women's issues beyond physical violence, highlighting myriad forms of economic and social exploitation. Violence, nevertheless, remained a key issue.

In this context of renewed and mass feminist activism, the bill to legalize abortion—the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy Bill—was introduced onto the legislative agenda for the first time in 2018. The original draft of the bill was created in 2006 by the abortion rights organization Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal Seguro y Gratuito (National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe, and Free Abortion). The bill had been submitted to Congress multiple times, but had never reached the house floor (Justo von Lurzer 2020, 70). In February of 2018, president Mauricio Macri allowed Congress to debate the bill, despite his opposition to it. In doing so,

Macri seemed to have buckled under the pressure from feminist organizations and the growing coverage of abortion and other feminist issues in the media. Communication scholar Carolina Justo von Lurzer argues that the media—television in particular—has served as a key platform in Argentina for publicly debating gender and sexuality, including “contributing to the lobby to approve fundamental bills such as same-sex marriage and gender identity” (73).

A few weeks before Macri’s announcement, the popular daytime tabloid talk show *Intrusos en el espectáculo* (roughly translated as Showbiz Intruders) programmed an entire week dedicated to discussing feminist demands, particularly that of abortion. Every day, *Intrusos* invited a different prominent feminist media figure on its program, including journalist Julia Mengolini, public intellectual María Florencia Freijo, and Malena Pichot. As Justo von Lurzer argues, *Intrusos* engagement with gender issues was not novel. What was different this time was that there was a direct engagement with self-declared feminist figures and that abortion was discussed in terms of human rights and public health. This last point, according to Justo von Lurzer, marks an inflection point in Argentine celebrity activism, which prominently supported the right to voluntarily and freely terminate pregnancy (74). Furthermore, between April and the house vote of June of 2018, the Congress hosted more than 800 speaker presentations both for and against the legalization of abortion, which were broadcast across the country, streamed online, and were “massively and enthusiastically” shared through social media (Dackow 2020, 7). Media activism was concomitantly supported by mass multiple street mobilizations throughout the year whereby the green bandana was popularized as the symbol of the abortion rights movement and inspired the name *Marea verde* (Green Wave).¹⁷ The bill was, ultimately, rejected

¹⁷ The green bandanna was originally adopted as the abortion rights struggle in 2003 during the XVIII National Women’s Gathering in homage to the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo who wore white headscarves during their protests to symbolize the diapers of their disappeared children and grandchildren.

by the senate but it would, nonetheless, be fully passed by Congress in 2020 under the leadership of center-left president Alberto Fernández.

In the midst of this growing and increasingly mediatized feminist movement, then, Pichot became a significant referent as a feminist celebrity. Her work in this arena had begun years before, when she began establishing her connections to feminist thought and activism. Up until this point, popular women-centered comedy had avoided overt politicization, and had maintained relatively ambiguous ties to organizations fighting for women's rights. In the following section, I analyze Pichot's work as an Argentine pioneer in online comedy and her burgeoning associations with feminism through her webcamming practice.

La Loca de Mierda

In 2008, Pichot uploaded a video to YouTube that was shot in her living room and featured her looking and talking straight at the camera in a way that gave the impression that she was actually talking to herself alone (Fig 2.2). With jarring editing consisting primarily of jump cuts, the video repeatedly showed Pichot going through a range of emotional states—from relative calm to frenzy, from happiness to overt lamentation. For example, in the first few seconds, the viewer watches her go from saying “I’m much better now, I’m doing so much better,” to hitting her head frantically with a stress relief ball while claiming “I’m good, I’m good, I’m good,” to finally seeing her burst into tears, cry very loudly, and lying on the ground, disappearing from frame. Toward the end of the video, Pichot can be heard off-screen screaming “Oh baby, my God, I miss you!” hinting at the fact that a break-up had initiated this agitated emotional spiel. This two-minute and thirty-second clip became the first instalment of Pichot's video series *La loca de mierda* (The Fucking Crazy Woman), an early Argentine viral online phenomenon, in which she recorded herself going through the process of mourning after



Figure 2.2. Malena Pichot in the first episode of *La loca de mierda*, 2008. Image: YouTube.

separating from her boyfriend. The videos, however, only appeared on the surface to be sorrowful and heartfelt in tone. In reality, Pichot embarked on a series of self-parodies, as she enacted a post-separation depression. As a series, *La loca de mierda* explored and exaggerated popular clichés regarding women and their relationships with men (Alonso 2018, 120), and took on the gendered assumptions regarding common relationship pitfalls. Pichot represented the hesitation to contact an ex-boyfriend, the annoyances of casual sex, and the reliance on friends to distract oneself from grief. Pichot’s decision to title the video series *La loca de mierda* also underscores the habitual misogyny of the very language used to describe women who are perceived to be sad or emotionally unstable.

In a global framework, *La loca de mierda* belongs to what Aymar Jean Christian has described as “indie TV” (2020), a model of production in which independent producers work around legacy media strictures by producing entire series for small web TV distributors like

Vimeo and YouTube (347). Pichot's work is, thus, usefully compared to successful female-led US web series like *Broad City* (Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson, 2010) and *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* (Issa Rae, 2011), both of which began online and were later acquired by Comedy Central and HBO respectively. Similar to these US examples, *La loca de mierda* was picked up by MTV. But unlike the cases of *Broad City* and *Insecure* (the title of Issa Rae's HBO show), which shifted from short-form web videos to the half-hour television block, *La loca de mierda* was unchanged in its format by its new home on MTV.

La loca de mierda is notable, therefore, since it predates its US counterparts. The fact that the show was, in this regard, ahead of its time affected its potential development into a full-fledged comedy series. Compounded by Argentina's general lack of a distinct sitcom tradition, *La loca de mierda* boosted Pichot's career but did not lead her to any long-term development deals. For context, it is useful to give a brief description of *La loca de mierda*'s competition on Argentine YouTube, which can be boiled down primarily to two viral phenomena: *Peter Capusotto y sus videos* (2006) and *Reality Fort* (2009). Unlike *La loca de mierda*, both shows were male-centered and had solid financial backing. A comedy show, *Peter Capusotto*, for instance, began as a cable television program, and was later acquired by the public broadcaster, TV Pública, who uploaded all segments of the show to YouTube. *Reality Fort*, on the other hand, was an individual venture of the business mogul and socialite Ricardo Fort, who recorded scenes from his lavish lifestyle and uploaded them to YouTube. Fort was clearly hoping to get his foot in the door of Argentina's tabloid-television stardom. He succeeded when America TV took on the show's funding and distribution.

As a distinct and unique product in the Argentine audiovisual landscape, *La loca de mierda* stood out not simply for its form, but also for its feminist approach. Pichot's early work on YouTube is remarkable for its reorientation of female-centered comedy. Rather than laughing

at women (as so much comedy had done before), Pichot created a series designed to laugh *with* women at the daily difficulties they encounter and the intimate tropes of mundane reality. Pichot lamented this situation in a 2015 interview: “I have many American comedy referents. I really like the generation of people like Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Amy Schumer, and Kristen Wiig. From Argentina, almost nothing. [...] When I was a child, Juana Molina had a show for a very short time and it was great but after that there is not much else” (Domínguez 2015). Comedy in Argentina had been, in fact, historically dominated by men who also made a tradition out of a specific brand of sexist and sexualized humor, where women functioned both as the butt of the joke and the object of desire. Dating back to the 1976 dictatorship, the iconic comedic duo Alberto Olmedo and Jorge Porcel’s filmography “relied on a repetitive formula that combined double entendres with unfaithful men and objectified women in skimpy clothes” (Milanesio 2019, 103). With the return to democracy, these same comedians were able to extend and solidify this trend on television through the 80s and into the 90s, broadcasting “an unparalleled number of semi-naked women with sexist and sexual humor” (Milanesio 106). Even in programs where women had leading roles, female actors had to continue self-objectifying and making jokes at their own expense for the pleasure of straight male audiences.¹⁸

The few exceptions to this style of comedy were queer comedian Antonio Gasalla, who played female characters in drag without denigrating or sexualizing women and, as Pichot recalls, the short-lived sketch show *Juana y sus hermanas* (Canal 13, 1991) starring actress and musician Juana Molina. In *Juana y sus hermanas*, Molina played different characters in her sketches, and ridiculed gender norms and female archetypes. For example, she created the role of Ruth, who

¹⁸ Such was the case of the sketch show *Monumental Moria* (Canal 9, 1986) hosted by the vedette and actress Moria Casán who made her rise to fame working in Olmedo and Porcel’s sexually-charged films and shows.

turned the tables on representations of gender by presenting herself in masculine ways with her strong sexual appetite and perpetual public harassment of men. She also performed as the clueless blonde bombshell, Marcela Balsam, an actress and television presenter whose obsession with her appearance made her unable to interact with or even interview her guests successfully.

One final and paradigmatic example of female-centered—and even feminist—comedy that predates and informs Pichot’s work is to be found, however, outside of the realm of moving images: the work of cartoonist Maitena Burundarena (known simply as Maitena).¹⁹ Maitena became recognized for her comic strips *Mujeres Alteradas* (Women on the Edge) and *Superadas* (Striving Women), which focused on the problems faced by middle-class women in a supposed post-feminist society (Pérez-Sánchez 2011, 96). Her work satirizes the competing pressures put on women to be all things at once: exemplary mothers, accomplished professionals, and quiet victims of inequitable distribution of domestic workload—all while earning lower salaries than their male colleagues and being expected to perform all kinds of emotional labor in social and professional environments. *La loca de mierda* continued this comedy sub-genre of feminist satire, at the same time that it departed from it at the levels of form, content, and technology. These shifts had a series of key aesthetic as well as political consequences.

As self-representational media content, *La loca de mierda* placed Pichot as the subject of the video series, with all subject matter based on her own personal experience. The show even featured real-life friends and family members. Furthermore, *La loca de mierda* began as user-created content on YouTube, which, particularly in 2008, functioned largely as a platform for amateur creations that had neither the capital nor the polish of legacy media productions. In this

¹⁹ In a 2022, Maitena and Pichot had a public conversation as part of a retrospective of Maitena’s work where Pichot stated that the cartoonist was her “comedy mom” and that she found in her comic strips observations about gender, women, and maternity that “no one had ever truly made.” On her part, Maitena recognized that Pichot was an updated version of her work (Centro Cultural Kirchner 2022).

period, traditional mass media companies were distrustful of YouTube, seeing the platform as fertile ground for copyright infringement. Mark Andrejevic argued in 2009 that YouTube content was seen by commercial media and advertisers as not fitting “the dictates of advertising culture as closely as the forms of mainstream commercial media content that [had] evolved alongside advertising to meet its needs and reinforce its message” (414). *La loca de mierda* seemed to confirm legacy media’s fears about the popular video streaming platform beginning with its technical qualities. Pichot shot the video series on her computer’s webcam in her own apartment giving *La loca de mierda* a distinct amateur quality. The image track of each episode was heavily pixelated (with a low resolution of 320x240) and the home lighting equipment constantly produced stark, over- and under-exposed areas—chiefly, Pichot’s face, which is usually at the center of the frame. Other recurring features that denote *La loca de mierda*’s amateur style are persistent light flares, unbalanced framing, and slightly crooked camera angles. Videos also regularly included various pieces of licensed music as part of their soundtrack.

In this sense, *La loca de mierda* continues the internet trend that began in the late 1990s and early 2000s of *camgirls*—that is, “women who broadcast themselves over the Web for the general public, while trying to cultivate a measure of celebrity in the process” (Senft 2008, 1). Precisely, in the year that Pichot uploaded the first *La loca de mierda* videos, Theresa Senft published her foundational ethnographic and transnational study on early twenty-first century camgirls. Among Senft’s central concerns are the political implications of women delivering their images, gestures, and words via webcam. She is particularly interested in considering how Carol Hanisch’s concept of the “personal is political” played out in the online world for women. For Senft, it was not entirely clear that sharing personal lives via webcam had the same political stakes as it did in the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, where women would meet and share some of the challenges they faced daily, thus articulating common, shared problems. As

Senft argues, “the rise of webcams, blogs and media-generated ‘confession culture’ presents a real challenge to those who believe that sharing personal experience is still a political act. Now one concern is that women’s mediated sharing of life experiences [...] is less likely to alienate men than to titillate them” (3).

Seen from this view, camgirls certainly risk the “wrong” kind of attention, encouraging voyeur-like interest into women’s private spaces. Additionally, the work of camgirls in their pursuit of larger audiences and their performance of “authentic selves” also runs the risk of perpetuating female patterns of emotional labor—namely, the attempt to emotionally manage their audience by fostering positive feelings in their viewers. From Senft’s perspective, this cultural activity ultimately obscures the performative aspect of gender. Extending and complicating Senft’s observations, Nicole Erin Morse (2022) questions the “resistant potential” of Web 2.0’s self-representational media, arguing that this potential resistance is “always tempered by social media’s profound connections to capitalism” and that “self-representation has a long historical connection to self-marketing” (98). However, Morse notes “technology isn’t deterministic, resistance is produced by interactions between communities and technologies” (99). Counter-hegemonic political potential resides in the uses and practices that users and creators give to specific technologies.

La loca de mierda can be read as embodying precisely the risks pointed out by Senft and Morse. As social media self-representational content, Pichot’s work can be seen simultaneously as voyeuristic internet fodder or feminist manifesto. The latter reading is made slightly more complicated, however, by the fact that Pichot hesitated to use the feminist label to describe herself in 2008 (Pizarro 2011). To take up the former reading, *La loca de mierda* defined Pichot’s character in strict relationship to her ex-boyfriend as the show is presented to be the result of a breakup and romantic disillusionment. It could also be argued that Pichot’s YouTube series

pursued self-serving, navel-gazing therapeutic goals—drawing it closer to the consciousness-raising groups 1970s that drew ire for their political neutrality (Hanisch 2006). This view, however, does not take into consideration the profound reorientation of comedy and perspective demonstrated by the internet series. In an interview with the Spanish Newspaper *El País*, Pichot revealed that the express goal of *La loca de mierda* was to destabilize the idea of romantic love and women's identity as dependent on male subjectivity. According to Pichot, "The problem that us women face is that we are defined by the guy that we are with. I was so ashamed that that happened to me; it was so humiliating and shameful that I had to take it to an extreme by doing the videos" (Suárez 2015). As this quotation suggests, one of her main formal strategies was the used of exaggeration as form of parody and critique.

Pichot's comedy is frequently expressed through the use of black and/or blue humor. In other words, Pichot relies heavily on the shock factor of coarse jokes related to depression, suicidal ideation, sexual desire, solitude, or a combination of these issues. For example, the very first episode features a scene in which she pretends to be cutting her wrists with broken glass. In the third video ("The Old Advice"), white letters over a black background read that the best way to remove any feelings of loneliness is "whiskey, a big wank, and going to bed." This title is followed by a shot of Pichot in bed, waving at the camera with the hand that she was supposedly using to masturbate. Similarly, in the fifth episode ("Suicidal Tendencies"), Pichot plays with a prop gun pointing it at various parts of her body—mouth, neck, and chest—to finally point it at her genitals while Ray Charles's version of "Bye, Bye Love" plays in the background as extra-diegetic music (Fig 2.3). Alongside Pichot's recurrent consumption of marijuana and cigarettes, sequences like these break many YouTube guidelines for "advertiser-friendly content," thus risking monetization of the content uploaded to the platform. At the same time, these sequences



Figure 2.3. Malena Pichot in "Suicidal Tendencies," *La loca de mierda*, 2008. Image: YouTube. are the most signature of the series, as they present *La loca de mierda* in fierce opposition to gentle and positive representations of female subjectivity.

More specifically, Pichot's performances push against what has been recognized as a staple of contemporary post-feminist media and culture—namely, the portrayal of women as “can-do” girls, perpetually and overwhelmingly “positive, confident, and upbeat” (Dobson and Kanai 2018, 774). Angela McRobbie (2004) defines post-feminism as “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined” (255). For her, starting in the 1990s, the culture industries are actively involved in an insidious dismantling of feminism, at the same time as they promote themselves as producing a well-intentioned response to feminism. McRobbie argues that this undoing of feminism was motivated by popular culture's adoption of feminist issues and, most critically, by the media's reporting of stories of female success across a broad range of institutions—e.g. law, education, medicine, and the media itself—that were

defining themselves more and more “as modern and abreast with social change” (257). Female achievement is increasingly predicated not on feminism’s historical push for equality but on “female individualism,” rendering feminism seemingly obsolete (McRobbie 2004, 258).

Women’s accomplishments, therefore, should be considered exclusively the result of individual efforts of female subjects freely competing in a meritocratic society.

In this post-feminist context, Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2015) argue that the twenty-first century ushered in a cultural emphasis on confidence that has been pointedly directed at young women. Gill and Orgad build on Foucault’s concept of “technologies of the self” (1988), which refers to the practices or techniques that “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thought, conduct, and way of being so as to transform themselves to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (17). Gill and Orgad argue that “confidence has emerged as gendered technology of the self” (326). In other words, commercial media and contemporary advertising promote confidence as a feminist tool that women can freely adopt and that they can exert in all spheres of life—e.g. body, work, education, sex, or parenthood—while also making them responsible for any kind of gender-based injustices they might face. In opposition to this cultural confidence mandate, Pichot mobilizes grief and unhappiness as her own technology of the self as well as for her audience in *La loca de mierda*. First, the YouTube series functions as a cathartic mechanism for its creator and the viewers who identify with Pichot’s experiences and feelings.²⁰ Second, and most critically, *La loca de mierda* subverts

²⁰ *La loca de mierda* has helped its viewers, especially young women, navigate through breakups and depression as Pichot has commented in various interviews and as the fans express in YouTube’s comment section.

societal pressure on women to routinely project happiness and confidence, rendering sadness and insecurity into legitimate feminist modes to navigate social and professional lives.

Pichot's comedy is most pointed when it addresses how young women might actually feel when attaining the happiness they are expected to pursue. This focus on unhappiness and the comic lack of fulfillment is sharply on display in the episode "Don't Project," where Pichot addresses life milestones that should ostensibly provide a sense of achievement but, instead, generate anxiety and dejection. Like other episodes of *La loca de mierda*, "Don't Project" adopts a free association structure, connecting different moments thematically instead of following a cause-and-effect logic. The episode explores romanticized life situations that ultimately turn out to be disappointments. For Pichot, these situations include economic autonomy, pregnancy, and the pitfalls of an active sex life. The first scene opens with a close-up of Pichot looking at the camera with mascara running under her eyes—a clear signal of tears. She explains to the viewer that she recently moved to a new apartment and it did not turn out as expected: she says, "that excitement for a new home and new beginnings was supposed to catch up with me earlier, but it is not really happening" (Fig 2.4). She then confesses that "sometimes one thinks that things are going to go one way, but they go in a completely different direction." She is interrupted by a title card that reads: "or even worse... sometimes they work out exactly the way they are supposed to." The title cards cut back to the close-up of Pichot. Her cat crosses the frame from left to right, and Pichot says with a trembling voice: "When I was a kid, my only wish was to live alone with a cat. And it became a reality." Pichot's tone and expression denote sorrow for her lonely state, which is underscored, once again, by title cards that state "We recommend not projecting shit situations." The episode's pointed critique of female autonomy and dreams for the future is already well underway.



Figure 2.4. Malena Pichot in "No Proyectos," La loca de mierda, 2009. Image: YouTube.

The episode cuts to a new close-up of Pichot where she introduces a second “shit” scenario: the otherwise idyllic pregnancy and motherhood. She tells the audience that she has a recurring mental image of being nine months pregnant, alone, drinking Coca-Cola, and watching television. This confession is accompanied by a reenactment of her vision: Pichot appears in medium-shot on the sofa lit by flicker of the television and accompanied by an ominous orchestral score. This image appears again later in the episode, only this time Pichot is also smoking a cigarette and screaming over the phone: “I will repeat this until the day I die, dear: you promised to come on my face but you didn’t hear me when I said it, motherfucker” (Fig 2.5). The episode cuts to an extreme close-up of her openly addressing her viewers and, first, exclaiming “Guys, I can’t... That kid would not survive with me,” to then begging the audience, “You should all help me to not get pregnant.” Pichot, therefore, reveals in this short sequence that in this nightmare scenario she is evidently a single mother and her pregnancy is accidental. The



Figure 2.5. Malena Pichot pretending to be pregnant in "No Proyectos," La loca de mierda, 2009. Image: YouTube.

“loca” at the center of the show does not want to have children due to a profound distrust in her potential as a mother and her capacity to take care of someone else.

The episode’s last nightmare situation focuses on the frustrations of a bad sex life and the feminist challenge presented to women to perform according to male fantasy. In the same scene where she asks the audience for their support to avoid pregnancy, she also adds that this assistance should not veer to the opposite extreme: celibacy. A recurring fear in the series is the curse of a non-existent sex life. As she pleads to her audience, “Let’s not let it get to the point where people aren’t fucking me.” This is followed by a short insert of Pichot with runny mascara, again, facing the camera where she reassures herself in a trembling and unconvincing voice: “All in all, all is good... All in all, all is good,” a statement she bookends with a fake smile. The video cuts right away to a medium long-shot of Pichot in a different room where she directly

contradicts her previous assertion, “I’m not in a good place.” She explains that the reason for this state of affairs is that “Boys like the idea of being with me but they don’t like *really* being with me... So what happens then? They don’t get it up.” However, she continues, “I don’t really do much to change the situation. I’m not what is commonly known as a ‘slut’.”²¹ Pichot, thus, points to the difficulties surrounding sexual intimacy, hinting at how these issues can be exacerbated by fame and how her status can be intimidating to sexual partners. She takes no responsibility to soften that for the men she sleeps with. Moreover, she refuses to reclaim “slut” as an empowering term, rejecting the idea of pleasing men as feminist. In fact, she explicitly opposes this terminology adding, “I hate that word applied to women, slut [...] Horrible, disgusting. I prefer ‘asexual,’ ‘ice queen,’ or ‘frigid.’” In this sense, Pichot takes the opposite position of the slut as a confident and positive woman—the “can-do” woman—when it comes to having sex with men. Rather, the punchline of her joke involves veering toward to opposite extreme, opting for the derogatory term for women who refuse to be agreeable and sexualized.

In this episode, Pichot systematically unravels the concept of female fulfillment associated with specific life achievements and the pursuit of happiness. As Sara Ahmed (2010a) argues, “happiness functions as a promise that directs you toward certain objects, as if they provide you the necessary ingredients for a good life. Happiness involves a form of orientation: the very hope for happiness means we get directed in specific ways, as happiness is assumed to follow from some life choices and not others (54).” Pichot takes these particular moments—or objects—that are culturally related to happiness in the life of women and complicates their potential to produce real satisfaction. As she suggests from the beginning of the episode, it is not

²¹ Pichot uses the term “gauchita,” which is an Argentine slang term that derives from the word “gaucho,” which in English roughly translates as cowboy. Gauchita can refer to a woman that is fearless at the same time as it can mean a woman who is well predisposed to do sexual favors.

solely that projecting unhappy scenarios might render them a reality. Rather, those scenarios themselves can be a source of unhappiness. Life, she suggests, is not one size fits all.

Thus, Pichot embodies the *killjoy*, a figure Ahmed has described as deeply feminist. Ahmed (2010b) describes the *killjoy* as “an affect alien, estranged by happiness,” who destroys “something that is thought by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness.” (581). As Ahmed asserts, feminists bring others down, killing joy, by openly discussing unhappy issues like sexism and by challenging cultural narratives that are expected to produce happiness— e.g. marriage, motherhood, or wealth. These fantasies are further attacked as the *killjoy* exposes the labor and resources that go into sustaining happiness, ultimately revealing how happiness might actually oppress (582). Pichot undermines happiness as an appropriate affective response to ostensibly idealized landmarks in the lives of women. The promise of contentment offered by tradition and modern life (i.e. children, sexual maturity, independence, fame) is humorously deflated. This way, the comedian removes the pressure to experience happiness if women get close or reach those objects. Moreover, she challenges the need to desire those objects altogether. *La loca de mierda*, ultimately, constructs what Ahmed calls an “unhappy archive,” that is, an archive of feminist materials that are shaped “through the circulation of cultural objects that articulate unhappiness with the history of happiness” (573). This repository of experiences allows women to realize what they “are asked to give up for happiness,” to become conscious “of unhappiness as a mood that seems to surround them” (585), or, plainly, “[to] claim the freedom to be unhappy” (592).

Pichot’s *killjoy* attitude, however, does not expose the unhappiness in the lives of women in order to make her viewers unhappy. It is also engaged in the production of pleasure in at least two fundamental ways. In the first place, the show fosters the creation of a “community of feeling” (Ahmed 2010a), in which people forge social bonds because they share feelings about

the objects (56). *La loca de mierda* assembles those who might share similar feelings with regard to the various life experiences the show represents. For example, those viewers who similarly experience disappointment and alienation in major (and supposedly happy) life events might feel interpellated when watching Pichot's performances. In the second place, and perhaps more obviously, *La loca de mierda* seeks to produce laughter. There is a paradox at the core of Pichot's production: the political denunciation of the oppressive nature of female happiness kills joy *and* produces laughter by making fun of the sadness and pain that emanate from so-called female fulfillment. Pichot is invested in creating feminist humor as it "involve[s] the relief of being able to laugh when familiar patterns that are often obscured are revealed" as Ahmed (2017, 261) claims in "A Killjoy Manifesto."

This politically pointed comedy, then, should be read as a specific form of *killjoy humor*. *Killjoy humor* moves between feminist critique and entertainment. Rather than producing happiness, it results in a specific kind of joy: *killjoy laughter*. This last term does not refer to an unrestricted pleasure. *Killjoy laughter* is instead ambiguous. It is a nervous enjoyment that brings together tears of joy and sadness that result from laughing at a scenario that ultimately feels *too real*. Such scenarios reveal the futility and/or the pain produced by the amount of labor, patience, and dedication that it takes to arrive at a place to which one previously aspired. Akin to Lacan's *jouissance*, *killjoy laughter* is equivocal pleasure that simultaneously pushes a disruption of the individual sense of self and calls into question one's own material conditions of existence.

Seen through the prism of Pichot's work, feminist humor, or *killjoy humor*, need not be solely concerned with revealing the injustices experienced by women. It is not only about uncovering society's structural sexism and misogyny. *Killjoy humor* is also committed to laying bare the ways in which the oppression and violence directed towards women form part of a larger system of labor and economic exploitation, inherent to neo-liberal governance. This is

particularly the case for the Argentine context, as its feminist movements are marked by strong alliances with labor organizations and other human rights groups, the result of which is a distinct anti-capitalist feminism. Pichot's career after *La loca de mierda* works precisely in this direction, providing a feminist critique that connects the struggles of women to a generalized state of labor and emotional precariousness experienced by young adults across Argentina. In the following section, I focus on this aspect of Pichot's work by analyzing the webseries *Cualca*.

A Precarious and Zany Youth

Cualca consists of a series of comedy videos released in 2012 as a segment of the popular infotainment and political commentary show *Duro de Domar* (Hard to Tame), which was broadcast on the free-to-air network Canal 9. Due to the short length of the videos, however, *Cualca* became a web phenomenon primarily through YouTube and Vimeo (Alonso 141, 2018). Unlike *La loca de mierda*, *Cualca* was a collective project, and was written and performed by Pichot alongside comedians Charo López, Julián Kartun, Julián Lucero, and Julián Doregger. *Cualca* also lost the amateur style of *La loca de mierda* as the series was shot on DSLR high-definition cameras and had dedicated production and postproductions crews. These conditions gave *Cualca* the image and audio quality necessary for broadcast television. Nevertheless, the series would remain scantily funded throughout its existence.

The name of the series emerges from slang and is therefore somewhat difficult to translate. A shortened version of the word “cualquiera,” *cualca* can be translated in English as “any” or “whatever.” In Argentina, saying “cualquiera,” and especially “*cualca*,” are expressions of disapproval used to respond to any situation, action, or statement that is deemed scandalous, ridiculous, or simply wrong—something that feels out of place that needs to be corrected. *Cualca*'s logic expresses the meaning of “cualquiera/*cualca*” in two major ways. First, the series

is structured as sketches: each episode represents specific situations that do not carry over from episode to episode and, for the most part, the characters are nameless, with performers playing regularly more than one role in the same episode. In this sense, the actions, events, and characters portrayed could be anything/anyone, whatever, *cualquiera*. Second, and more critically, each episode comments on ordinary situations, customs, and attitudes that are clearly presented as negative. *Cualca* satirizes these scenarios at the same time as it demands for them to be corrected, overcome, or eradicated entirely.

Consider, for example, the sketch named “Piropos,” one of *Cualca*’s early and, arguably, most successful episodes, acquiring millions of views online across multiple platforms. The episode serves as a useful entry point to Pichot’s work and to Argentine feminism outside of the Spanish-speaking world.²² The title of the episode is a term that can be roughly translated as “compliment,” that usually carries a flirtatious connotation. Today, “piropo” is most commonly associated with the practice of catcalling—that is, the type of harassment that consists of unwelcome remarks people receive on the street. “Piropos” is the only episode on Pichot’s official YouTube channel which has been subtitled in English and, in fact, its title has been translated as “Street Harassment.” The sketch is a parody of public service announcements, and it begins with Pichot standing in front of a white background, directly addressing the camera (Fig 2.6). She explains that men think that women enjoy being called “things” on the street because there is a generalized belief that women are defined exclusively by men’s view of them. The opening is shot with a multi-camera set-up, thus echoing familiar television addresses. Pichot changes her address to face each camera, with each successive edit. Dressed in a suit jacket and wearing a small golden watch, she delivers all her lines with a patronizing tone and an inviting

²² To read more, check Garsd 2018: <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/10/637253043/for-abortion-activists-in-argentina-a-campaign-waged-online-faces-a-disconnect>.



Figure 2.6. Malena Pichot during the intro to "Piropos," Cualca, 2012.

smile. After this brief introduction, the episode cuts to a new scene featuring Pichot walking down the street by a red brick wall. In voiceover, she says: "Surely, to most of you our lives are something like this." Pichot's character immediately runs into a man who exclaims angrily at her: "I could fill your ass with jizz." Instead of reacting negatively to the aggressive encounter, Pichot smiles at the man, thanks him and tells him that he is very kind. She then breaks the fourth wall to look at the camera, still smiling, and says "[t]his guy, most likely, masturbates thinking about his sister. But, luckily, he also thinks I'm cute." The next scene continues the logic of the previous one, only now Pichot walks by a construction site where a male worker holding a safety yellow helmet screams at her "I could sharpen my dick with your pussy, cum eater." Again, Pichot responds calmly and perkily: "Thank you! You made my day." Once again, Pichot addresses the camera smiling and explains that construction worker most likely had been abused



Figure 2.7. Pichot responding happily to the construction worker's harassment. "Piropos," Cualca, 2012. Image: YouTube.

at some point in his life. She points out that the worker simply wants to continue the cycle of abuse, but ultimately his offensive sexual comment makes her feel like “a goddess” (Fig 2.7).

Both street scenes are accompanied by upbeat jazz that undercuts the violent nature of Pichot’s encounters, which keeps the sequence lighthearted and stresses the comic effect.

The episode cuts back to Pichot in front of the white background from the beginning of the sketch and she enthusiastically explains another commonplace experience for women: men revealing themselves in public spaces. A new street sequence begins, showing Pichot in three different public settings: outside a school, in a taxi, and on the street. In all three, men expose themselves to her and, just as she did in the catcalling scenes, she responds happily to the incidents rather than showing anger or fear. Pichot appears in the white void once again and tells the audience, “You may think of these as flattering, erotic, or stimulating situations but, every

time they happen to us, this is what we are wishing for...” The cheerful score stops abruptly and a montage sequence begins accompanied by trash metal music. Pichot is seen violently killing the harassers (2.8). The episode shows Pichot one last time in front of the white backdrop where she clarifies that *Cualca* is “totally against murder. Society is not OK with killing people.” However, she concludes, “society doesn’t seem to care about you showing me your dick or telling me that you want to break my ass [...] so keep doing it. Maybe one day you will muster up the courage to rape me.”

“Piropos,” on the whole, reproduces Pichot’s *killjoy* approach to comedy. In this instance, however, the joy that is being killed is exclusively male. The sketch continues the work toward a “a community of feeling,” initiated in *La loca de mierda*, as the video conveys the experience of public harassment from the perspective of a victim. The pseudo-PSA structure is both comic and accurate, as the sketch attempts to trigger reflection on the part of men who are suddenly invited to question the violence of these seemingly mundane and habitual acts. The messaging of “Piropos” is not exclusive to Pichot’s comedy but it can be seen as well as part of the larger societal debate that Argentine feminist organizations were spearheading at the time and that would shortly coalesce into the Ni una menos movement in 2015.²³

Cualca frequently represents other feminist struggles, placing feminist politics at the center of the series. For example, the sketch “Creativos” (Creative Copywriters) shows Pichot as an entry-level copywriter in an advertising agency. The only woman in the writer’s room, she listens as her male colleagues pitch sexist ideas for new commercials and dismiss all of Pichot’s suggestions, going as far as telling her to shut up when she tries to participate in brainstorming

²³ Although the year 2015 is the only more strongly associated with the beginning of Ni una menos, Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela (2019) trace the origins of the movement back to a number of pro-abortion and anti-macho violence mobilizations in 2012 (400) the same year the *Cualca* was released.



Figure 2.8. Pichot killing her street harassers. "Piropos," Cualca, 2012. Image: YouTube.

sessions. The episode “Negación” (Denial) deals with discrimination and violence, and places the emphasis on women who normalize this behavior. The sketch shows different scenarios where female characters condone the normalcy of unequal gendered expectations, ranging from uncomfortable clothes to body hair removal, eating disorders, and sexual harassment in the workplace. The episode playfully depicts the ubiquity of violence against women, and features a scene in which a woman (played by Charo López) denies to a reporter that her husband tried to set her on fire. Instead, she blames herself for her many injuries and lies about an incident involving a cigarette and liquor. In a similar vein, the episode “La violencia obstétrica” (Obstetric Violence), based on an undisclosed true case, portrays the abuse suffered by women at the hands of obstetricians. Pichot plays a woman who wants to go through natural birth for her firstborn. Instead her medical team drugs her, induces her labor, and performs a caesarian section against her will. The episode goes as far as naming the actual Argentine laws broken by the obstetrician.

In particular, these last two skits represent the kinds of gender-based and life-threatening violence that Ni una menos would later denounce. Ultimately, the shock-value of the sketches arrest any easy laughter; the sketches kill the joy of the viewers who are, instead forced to face the dire realities that are addressed by *Cualca*. These sketches are placed in between scenes or episodes that are more clearly comedic in nature. Thus, any pleasurable viewing experience is interrupted, inviting viewers to pause and contemplate the gravity of what is being represented.

In *Satiric TV in the Americas* (2018), Paul Alonso observes that *Cualca*'s brand of comedy frequently targets the social prejudices of the middle and upper-middle classes of city of Buenos Aires (141). In the case of *Cualca*, this focus on the urban middle social strata can also be seen as following the editorial line of the series' first home, *Duro de domar*, which was sympathetic to the Peronist and center-left government of CFK. *Duro de domar* regularly featured critiques of politicians, journalists, and other opponents to CFK's administration. In Buenos Aires, the middle classes have historically rejected Peronist candidates favoring rather more center-right and conservative politicians such as CFK's opponent and presidential successor, Mauricio Macri.

This context helps to explain sketches like "Mala Leche," a term that translates literally as "bad milk" which is used to refer to an individual who is ill-tempered and that acts motivated by resentment. In this episode, Pichot begins by wondering whether being a "mala leche" is the result of a generalized feeling of dissatisfaction that characterizes the "third-world's aspirational middle-class." After the introduction, the sketch goes on to show examples typical of spiteful middle-class behavior such as keying an expensive car out of envy, complaining about the city's lack of cleanliness while littering, spewing hateful rhetoric online (i.e. acting like a "troll"), or simply being unwilling to help a friend in need. This way, the urban middle-class is represented as self-obsessed, hypocritical, and hateful—characteristics that push its members to constantly act

in bad faith and prevent them from realizing the causes at the root of their unhappiness.

Nonetheless, not all of *Cualca*'s satiric portrayals of the middle-class are derogatory. The series also focus on the living conditions and the daily difficulties that middle-class Buenos Aires inhabitants face revealing a widespread state of precariousness that also affects the young, professional, and educated.

Cualca's critique of precariousness unfolds against a larger global backdrop that is increasingly characterized by the growing economic insecurity and social vulnerability that has become the norm for the contemporary late-capitalist world (Porrás Sánchez and Vilches 2023, 1). In other words, the precarious condition has become *the salient structure of feeling* under neoliberal governance worldwide. Across the globe, people experience a host of instabilities that affects their everyday patterns and prevents them from fulfilling the various social, economic, and political conditions that might allow them to sustain their lives (Butler 2010, 13). People are unevenly affected by discrimination, labor precarity, and forced geographical displacement, all of which contributes to a generalized vulnerability and anxiety surrounding personal autonomy. The precarious condition is often associated with the erosion of social safety nets that were often the responsibility of the welfare state characteristic of the twentieth century. In the Argentine case, the welfare state underwent a progressive process of restoration after the 2001 economic crisis, particularly under Néstor and Cristina Kirchner's administrations. Furthermore, Argentina has a vital trade union movement with laws protecting mobilizations and protests. Precariousness is, however, an endemic condition that results from the constant cycles of economic downturn (World Bank), in addition to an inflation that has not ceased to grow since 2012 (WorldData), a high percentage of labor informality (OIT), and poverty rates that have not gone below 25% of the entire population since the beginning of the twentieth century (Chequeado). While not

exclusive to Argentina, this context of generalized precarity fostered the emergence of a new class, which Guy Standing (2014) has termed the *precariat*.

In a landmark essay, “The Precariat,” Standing argues that the construction of the global market system that has taken place since the 1980s has resulted in a new global class structure different from the one that dominated the majority of the twentieth century (10). Standing notes that the world can now be broadly divided into four classes, at the top of which sit an international group of oligarchs who are not accountable to any nation state; a large elite of millionaires; a group of professionals that have either strong employment security or are small-scale business owners and entrepreneurs; and, at the bottom, the so-called *precariat*. This emerging group comes to challenge the more established notion of the proletariat, a historically homogenous male-dominated class that enjoyed stable, full-time employment, as well as a range of labor rights, which, according to Standing, are currently rapidly shrinking (10).

The precariat, by contrast, captures the experience of large swaths of the global working-class, particularly its flexibility, labor insecurity, and the diversity of its composition. In Standing’s conceptualization, the precariat refers to a working-class that is characterized by high levels of job contingency—such as temporary contracts and part-time positions—and the constant need to engage in what he calls work-for-labor activities—i.e. all sorts of trainings, networking, and periodic applications for new jobs. Furthermore, all these efforts very frequently lead towards positions that do not include non-wage benefits such as pensions, paid holidays, and medical coverage. This situation not only reaches “old working-class families and communities,” whose previous generations had employment security, pensions, and other labor rights (11). The Precariat is markedly diverse in its composition, including “migrants and ethnic minorities,” who “put up with insecurity focusing on survival;” more traditional working-class members who are often swayed by right-wing populist messaging; and urban and educated middle-class youth that

“aspire to create a ‘good society’ based on progressive values of equality, freedom, and ecological sustainability” (11). It is this third sub-division within the precariat that *Cualca* targets.

The episode that more directly deals with the contemporary experience of the *precariat* is the one titled “Negrear,” a verb with racist origins that has largely fallen into disuse. Aside from its obvious racist denotations, it also refers to the conspicuous exploitation of someone’s labor.²⁴ Like most of *Cualca*, this episode is a collection of smaller sketches, each one representing different forms of precarious work. The episode primarily presents scenarios of employees demanding slightly better working conditions, all of which are met with refusal on the part of the employers who reject the workers’ demands and even respond violently. For example, the episode begins with Pichot impersonating a corporate employee who kindly asks her boss if she can be hired as part of the permanent staff of the company since she has been in the three-months trial period for seven years. Her superior responds by slapping Pichot in the face. In another sequence, a waiter asks his boss if his working hours can be shortened or if he can be paid overtime since his “fourteen-hour shift” is becoming untenable. The boss reacts by calling the waiter an ingrate, since he is giving him a job and that they are united by “a bond.” Furthermore, the boss argues, they had a “verbal arrangement” that the waiter is breaking with his requests. The employer continues by telling his employee that he will not be paid that day because he owes money from a broken cup. The waiter can, however, have a drink at the end of his shift. These sketches focus particularly on employment informality, and should be read in the framework of CFK’s administration, which launched various programs and campaigns to encourage employment formalization. *Cualca* calls attention to the pervasive precarious conditions in both

²⁴ “Negrear” comes from the word “Negro” (Black) and it could be translated as rendering someone into a Black subject as a result of the exploitative circumstances of their work conditions.

skilled and unskilled labor. The sketch centers on certain strategies deployed by employers to perpetuate job insecurity, such as permanent trial periods or the shaming of employees when they demand better job conditions. *Cualca* also portrays the so-called “perks” that come to replace traditional non-waged benefits, such as gaining free access to the goods sold by workplace.

The episode “Boom Inmobiliario” (Real-Estate Boom) deals with the difficulties of the real-estate market and the obstacles faced by young people to access affordable and quality housing. In the episode, a fictional real-estate mogul by the ridiculous name Cornejo-Conejo is looking to name a successor for his company and tells his children that it will be decided based on who can make the most profits for the family business over the course of one week. The remainder of the episode is dedicated to portraying how the Cornejo-Conejo siblings try to reach the goal set by their father. Cornejo-Conejo’s son is seen filing the paperwork to rent out a property to two young women, but becomes reluctant to accept them as tenants given that they are freelancers and do not have a stable paycheck. He becomes further suspicious of the women because he suspects them to be gay; they mention that they will be roommates to which he mutters, “lesbians.” The son extends his paranoid tirade, asking them if they had been involved in any form of left-wing or revolutionary activities. He demands that they leave his office since he does not want anything to do with the “lesbianism plague” that, he claims, is taking place in the neighborhood.

In a later scene, Pichot plays as Cornejo-Conejo’s daughter as she shows an apartment unit to a couple of young adults who are looking to buy. The comedic effect of the scene is produced by how positively she describes a property that is very visibly awful and inconvenient in every single way (Fig 2.9). She starts by alluding to the location of the apartment as “Constitutown,” an anglicized made-up term meant to rebrand the neighborhood of Constitución,



Figure 2.9. Pichot as Cornejo-Conejo's daughter (on the right) showing an apartment to a young couple. "Boom Inmobiliario," Cualca, 2014.

traditionally a working-class and migrant area, which also has some of the highest crime rates in Buenos Aires. Moreover, she refers to the apartment as the “latest model” with cardboard walls and recycled cork floors and mentions that all appliances are electrical and that there is only one single outlet in the entire unit. This, she explains, is a “super ecological technology like in Australia, the very first world.” Cornejo-Conejo’s daughter ends her sales pitch by telling the couple that they will share all the building amenities (sauna, pool table, rooftop, and a card deck) with the other six hundred occupants of the building, so they will make a lot of friends. The couple finally expresses their desire to acquire the apartment after passively accepting every single item in the realtor’s description as normal in the housing market, even the monthly homeowner association fee of \$1800 in US currency. “Boom Inmobiliario,” thus, addresses the various forms of discrimination faced by renters, while also pointing out the exaggeratedly high

prices associated with acquiring deplorable properties, all of which has become commonplace as companies try to save costs and enlarge profits. This market logic is, ultimately, represented as the result of games and fights taking place at the heart of wealthy families dominating the real-estate sector.

Even *Cualca* episodes that do not strictly focus on work life and personal finances still reveal the ubiquity of the precarious condition amongst Argentine youth. This is the case of “El Arte de Respirar” (The Art of Breathing), which parodies the self-care industry, particularly yoga and meditation schools. The episode features a small group of people who attend a day-long workshop dictated by a guru who, from the beginning, is presented as a total con man. The guru, Srisri Srisricusi introduces himself as the “guru and CEO of the Art of Breathing.” He also wears a cheap, long, black wig, and walks around holding an exaggeratedly large tree branch as a cane, and smokes and drinks alcohol during his classes. Furthermore, the guru’s assistant is a thug that intimidates clients whenever it becomes too evident that the workshop is a racket (Fig 2.10). As the episode progresses, the participants of the event reveal that they are looking to remedy various personal problems. The solutions offered by the guru turn out to be humorously deficient or simply harmful. For example, in the second scene of the episode, Srisricusi leads a controlled breathing exercise “to steer clear from anger, frustration, and toxic emotions” by means of a deep long sigh. After all the attendees inhale and exhale together one time, the guru asks the group if they are feeling happier. One man responds, “sorry, but I actually feel worse. I’m thinking about real life and all of the issues that need my attention.” Srisricusi tries to convince the man of his approach of facing problems with “nothingness” but the man, unconvinced, replies that the breathing is insufficient to counter his mortgage and the children who hate him because he abandoned them. In response, the guru gestures to his assistant, who grabs the man by the hair



Figure 2.10. Guru Srisricusi (right) and his assistant (left). "El arte de respirar," *Cuaica*, 2014.

and drags him out of the room while screaming "you only have to breathe! Don't you know how to breathe?"

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the episodes portray wellness communities as breeding grounds for sexual harassment. Immediately following the man's removal from the class, Srisricusi suggests an exercise to the two remaining participants, both women: one of them should put her hands on the other's breasts and massage them. While the activity takes place, the guru gets close to the women giving detailed instructions about how the breasts have to be touched. The woman that is being groped starts crying, to which Srisricusi responds that she should remain calm and that she just needs to focus on her breathing. Overall, this episode critiques the self-care industry as one that ruthlessly exploits patrons who find themselves in vulnerable situations as a result of different societal pressures and who, consequently, will give money to anyone who promises to palliate their anguish.

Cualca's exploration of precarity, however, does not solely take place at the level of its subject matter; the actors' approach to their eccentric performances also demonstrate a politics of precariousness. In her compelling treatise on contemporary aesthetic categories, Sianne Ngai (2012) focuses on three concepts—the cute, the interesting, and the zany—that she claims “are the ones in our current repertoire best suited for grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism” (1). Each one of these three categories, according to Ngai, refers to crucial processes inherent to the reigning socio-political and economic system: consumption in the case of the cute, circulation (particularly of information) in the case of the interesting, and production in the case of the zany. While the cute and the interesting index more strongly our relations to objects, the category of the zany is used to designate specific subjects, especially as it refers to activities people perform and the characters they embody in their daily lives. In Ngai's words, “‘zany’ is the only aesthetic category in our repertoire that continues to be used as a noun, referring to the person charged with the affective task of activating our sense of humor by being, as it were, ‘a character’” (9). The zany is about performance, in particular someone playing a character whose intention is to produce laughter. Zanies are affectively hot, in that they have an emphasis on physicality and exhibit a combination of absurdity, excess, and a lack of control that makes them feel desperate.

Zaniness is, therefore, “an aesthetic of action pushed to strenuous and even precarious extremes” (Ngai 185). In this sense, zaniness reveals something critical about the nature of work, “a precariousness created specifically by the capitalist organization of work” (Ngai 188). Zany subjects are playful and dynamic, they are characters wanting too much and trying too hard. They

can be shapeshifters: they are seen taking on multiple roles and performing a variety of tasks.²⁵ This way, zanies put on display the blurring of distinctions between playing and working and, more generally, the mounting undefined nature of labor under capitalism that has been exacerbated “by the growing informality of late twentieth-century post-industrial work” (Ngai 9). The zany, thus, points to the extreme flexibility of contemporary workers—the *precariat* subject—who have to engage in perpetual cycles of waged and non-waged activities in search of some form of stability.

As good zanies, the characters and performances of *Cualca* are persistently exaggerated, constantly shouting and swearing, with actors also routinely covered in hard make-up and wearing ill-fitting wigs. In particular, *Cualca* features various characters in cheap and perfunctory drag, usually with the three bearded male actors resorting to wigs and dresses alone in order to play female characters. Although these aspects of the show are intended for comedic effect, they still reveal its low-budget production conditions. Furthermore, actors rarely repeat characters across episodes, even playing out different roles within the same sketch, rendering this performative flexibility into one of the defining features of the series. Together with the constant role changing, these unruly looks give the impression of behind-the-scenes frantic wardrobe and make-up changes, with a theatrical ambiance of actors rushing to go out on stage and interpret new characters—all to keep the show going.

²⁵ Ngai’s paradigmatic example of the zany is Lucille Ball as Lucy in the classic sitcom *I Love Lucy* (CBS 1951). Throughout the series, Lucy plays a bored housewife in search for excitement both inside and outside the home. This urge pushes her to try out different jobs. Although she typically fails at starting a new career, Ngai describes Lucy’s character as “a virtuosic performer utterly expert at quickly learning and adapting to new roles” (179). Lucy’s constant attempts at adopting multiple positions and, thus, acting like multiple people suggests, according to Ngai, “a new instability in the postindustrial United States between the activities of performing a role and working a job, including all the nonspecific jobs that seem to fall under the single role of housewife” (178).

Perhaps no other *Cualca* episode captures the hectic and fragile nature of the zany so extensively as “Gallos,” which depicts the desperate attempts of older women to remain sexual objects. Although the title of the episode translates as “roosters,” “gallos” is used here to refer to women in their late thirties and early forties, who try to behave and pass as younger people. I will describe this episode at length in order to convey the frantic and ridiculous comedy, mined from the pain of people who are rapidly aging out of their own commodification. While “Gallos” clearly laughs *at* particular women, the episode nevertheless depicts the vulnerabilities of women who are always in danger of some form of exploitation. The episode focuses on the comic duo, Marcela and Laura. Both characters are portrayed as upper-middle class and shallow; they are obsessed with their body image, making the running joke of the episode one in which Laura asks “how are you?” to Marcela, who replies “fat, how else am I gonna be”? They are also presented as thirsty for male attention, making clear and provocative advances to the episode’s men (all of whom are put off by the women’s rather desperate attitude). The episode repeatedly shows how the characters’ eagerness fosters a desire to create distance from them, to “block sympathy or identification as a subjective response” (Ngai 7).

The episode establishes that Marcela and Laura (played by López and Pichot respectively) are recently reunited, since Marcela is newly single and returned to Argentina after living abroad. Laura enthusiastically steps in to comfort her friend and, naturally, takes her to a bar so they can both distract themselves with male attention. The episode lampoons the women’s over-the-top flirting: Laura brags to a man that she learned to do the splits in her pole-dancing classes and is happy to show him her skill whenever he would like, and Marcela tells his friend that people call her Lola after the character in the novel *Lolita*, since she possesses a “teenage sexuality.” Neither impressed nor enticed—Marcela’s target chuckles and responds, “yes, the teenage sexuality of being forty”—the men extricate themselves from this cringeworthy situation quickly. Spurned by

this rejection, Marcela blames the situation on their weight, saying “we’re fat, that’s the problem,” and incorrectly spells the plural of the word “fat” in Spanish (*gordas*) to Laura, emphasizing the characters’ limited cognitive capabilities.

This leads to the next scene in a gym, a continuation of *Cualca*’s comedic critique of the harm of self-care industries. The gym in question is extremely sketchy; the trainer looks weak and, before the women enter the scene, he is seen punching a boxing bag and getting winded with every single hit. Moreover, the back wall of the set reveals the gym’s logo, “Omertá,”—the word for the secret oath taken by mafia members to never collaborate with authorities (Fig 2.11). The trainer greets Laura and Marcela in a perfunctory manner, saying “it’s great that you are here. You are very fat.” He then tells them that they are going to do a CrossFit routine together. Unconvinced by the trainer’s suggestion, Laura says that she was hoping to do some cardio—maybe a dance activity that might be similar to what she does in her pole-dancing practice. Once again, Laura’s flirting is rudely rebuffed, and the trainer suddenly pushes the women to the ground to begin their training. A frenzied montage sequence ensues in which the women are shown performing multiple exercises—abdominal crunches, jump rope, and pushing a bus tire—while the trainer insults and hits them. The sequence is accompanied by rapid techno music to emphasize the feeling of agitation. The women are worked to the brink of exhaustion. Laura is clearly unwell, with a fever and cold chills. Marcela is dizzy and bleeding from her nose (Fig 2.12). Their pleas for medical attention, however, are countered by the trainer’s insistence that their medical condition is simply the “body eliminating toxins.” If they do not want to be spinsters, he threatens, they should get back to working out.

Here, the sketch takes another ridiculous turn, descending into ever zanier depths in order to demonstrate how the women’s insecurities blind them from great bodily danger. While the women are exercising, a tall, slim man with dark glasses—named Rubén—enters, greets the



Figure 2.11. Marcela and Laura in the gym Omertá. "Gallos," *Cualca*, 2014. Image: YouTube.



Figure 2.12. Marcela and Laura lying exhausted on the gym's floor. "Gallos," *Cualca*, 2014. Image: YouTube

trainer in an amicable manner, and tells him that he needs help with a job for the “Juárez Cartel.” He asks, “who are the two most stupid people you have at hand?” The trainer points at Marcela and Laura, and convinces them that they must complete a brand new CrossFit workout. The women are explained that this workout will target their “triceps, biceps—all of your body.” In reality, the women are being set up to do the cartel’s dirty business—kidnapping a congressman who fights against drug-trafficking (“an undercover trainer” Rubén explains). The women are successful and, after fleeing the police—“more undercover trainers”—they are left in a dark room, awaiting Rubén. In the final scene, Rubén returns and enthusiastically congratulates Marcela and Laura for winning the CrossFit challenge. Their reward is a trip to Ciudad Juárez in Mexico, where they will receive a diploma for the “best CrossFit of the universe” (he says it in English). He gives them their new passports and tells them that they will be going to the airport in fifteen minutes, and leaves the room. While Marcela and Laura discuss how confused they are about the information that they have just received, Rubén returns quickly to the room and tells them “I forgot to tell you girls: you are looking like two sex symbols” (Fig 2.13). The women cheer and jump with a gleeful expression on their face as the frame freezes to conclude the episode.

“Gallos” provides, altogether, a multilayered reflection of the precarious condition especially as experienced by women through the zany characters of Marcela and Laura. They are both at a particularly fragile time in their lives: Marcela has just broken up a relationship with a stable partner and is moving countries. Both characters are experiencing the transition from young adulthood to middle age. The anxieties of this uncertain stage of life pair with pre-existing beauty pressures, ultimately turning the women into ridiculous “tryhards,” who will do anything in order to be accepted by men and to feel young and sexually appealing. Their intensely vulnerable state makes them go through a series of activities and scenarios where they jeopardize



Figure 2.13. Rubén praising Marcela and Laura for accomplishing their mission before departing for Ciudad Juárez. "Gallos," *Cualca*, 2014. Image: YouTube.

their dignity, physical health, and even their freedom. *Cualca*'s episode describes an increase in the amount of exposure and abuse that Laura and Marcela are subjected to by the male characters, stemming from their precarious subjectivity—from insults, to harmful physical activity and criminal acts, culminating in human trafficking. On the one hand, this narrative arc progressively grounds the comedy of the sketch in the types of concerns and denunciations at the center of Argentine feminist debates. Moreover, the episode refers to macho violence and illegal networks that abduct and trade women, and turns the women from young professionals into indentured workers.

At the same time, the succession of activities performed by Marcela and Laura reveals crucial aspects of the reality of labor in the framework of global late capitalism. Despite the characters' distinct clumsiness, they demonstrate an impressive degree of energy and versatility

in their search for self-affirmation. While they are derided, Marcela and Laura are nonetheless expert at adapting to constantly and rapidly changing situations, thus, expressing what French sociologists Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski (2005) called the “new network morality” of post-Fordist capitalism (463). For Chiapello and Boltanski, under this new economic paradigm the definitive way to measure someone’s worth is “activity,” plain and simple. As the French theorists claim: “To be doing something, to move, to change—this is what enjoys prestige, as against stability, which is often regarded as synonymous with inaction” (155). Moreover, the experiences that Laura and Marcela go through describe a journey where they seamlessly transition from leisure to work: they go from the bar to the gym (to work for or on themselves), to finally provide an unpaid service to the cartel. The blurring of boundaries between play and labor, as well as those between non-waged and waged tasks, is also a defining feature of the ambiguous nature of work today, where everything is subsumed under the category of “activity.” “Gallos” ties a localized critique of female exploitation together with a broader context of growing flexible labor practices and precarious working conditions, putting in conversation cultural and economic analyses, and moving back and forth between the national and the global.

Ultimately, *Cualca*’s focus on the pervasiveness of precariousness at work—in women’s lives and beyond—can be seen as a reflection of the show’s own production conditions and of the labor of its creators. The activities of artists and information workers have been singled out—particularly by neo-Marxist theorists—as paradigmatic examples of work under the post-Fordist regime (Ngai 189). They have been hailed as examples of what Maurizio Lazzarato (2006) calls “immaterial labor” or Paolo Virno’s “virtuosic labor” (2004). Broadly, these terms refer to forms of labor that Marx considered “unproductive,” where “the products are inseparable from the producer and/or her act of producing them” (Ngai 205). This is contrasted against “productive” labor, which produces material goods and, therefore, can generate surplus value. Lazzarato and

Virno argue that, in the post-Fordist stage of capitalism, there is a growing prevalence of activities that “are not normally recognized as ‘work’.” This is especially the case with cultural production and information management, which encompass “activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically public opinion,” which, ultimately, have come to define a new “mass intellectuality” (Lazzarato 132). In the context of the digital economy, many of the activities that the Italian New Left thinkers consider are common tasks performed by online platform users and creators that produce value for corporations but often go under- or unpaid. Tiziana Terranova (2000) describes these activities using the term of “free labor,” as they go from providing personal data, to participating in online communities like forums, to creating content for website and platforms.

Pichot and her *Cualca* colleagues embody the characteristics of immaterial or virtuosic labor, as well as those that describe the online free laborer. The comedians primarily operate via digital video platforms, and their work is an exercise of popular pedagogy as it exposes and calls into a question a set of social and economic strictures that render precarious the lives of the Argentine youth. *Cualca* has also had a fraught production history. After its only season on broadcast TV, it was taken up by the Cosmopolitan cable network and became a sitcom called *Por Ahora*, which was never renewed beyond its initial season. This situation made Pichot and the rest of the team reach out to the fans to crowdfund new *Cualca* episodes through the Argentine-based platform Ideame. Although the final amount they raised exceeded their expectations, the result was less than \$30,000 USD—insufficient to cover production and labor costs for the entire cast and the crew. *Cualca*’s second and final season was, therefore, much smaller than the first one—ten episodes by contrast with the original season’s forty-six. The second season was released on Pichot’s personal YouTube channel.

All in all, *Cualca* made the precarious condition into an aesthetic as well as a structuring principle stemming from its material conditions. Pichot extended this into her career with other projects that thematized precariousness, while also continuing to rely on contingent sources of funding such as grants and crowdfunding. Shortly after *Cualca* was released, TV Pública began broadcasting Pichot's limited-run series, *Jorge* (2013)—a comedy created using public funds from the National Cinema Institute and the Ministry of Social Development. *Jorge* follows the life of the young adult, Jorge Peker, who inherits a house after the death of his father. Initially, the show seemed to be a thematic departure for Pichot, leaving behind an emphasis on feminist politics. On closer examination, however, *Jorge* extended quite naturally from Pichot's growing focus on class issues and precariousness at large. Although he comes from an upper-middle class family, Jorge cannot afford to live in the property he has inherited, and must find roommates who can help him pay the bills. The series narrates the difficulties of surviving financially in Buenos Aires, showing Jorge working in a call center, despite having a law degree. His roommate, Ludovico, similarly struggles to find new freelance jobs as a designer, despite his education. *Jorge* also explores the question of precariousness experienced by immigrants and the differently abled. Jorge's other roommate, Julio César, is a Paraguayan student doing a literature degree in Argentina, and Ludovico uses a wheelchair. Although the eight-episode series was broadcast on public television, the show remains part of Pichot's online presence, with all episodes available for streaming on the YouTube channel of the Ministry of Social Development.

More recently, Pichot released her first feature-length film, *Finde* (Weekend, 2021), which she partially self-funded. While I do not analyze the film in depth in this chapter, a brief description makes clear the obvious affinities that can be traced from her webseries work to cinema. *Finde* focuses on a young couple, Agostina and Santiago, who live in a studio apartment in Buenos Aires. Agostina (played by Pichot) works for a travel agency and, as a result of the

Covid-19 pandemic, works from home. Because of the size of the apartment, she works with constant interruption, from Santiago's lockdown depression to her neighbors' noisy coitus. Given exacerbated Argentine inflation, Agostina's agency is looking to promote cheap and local getaways, and creates a competition for its employees who have to find the best and cheapest place in greater Buenos Aires (with the shiny reward of a Bluetooth speaker). The young couple finds a beautiful rural manor online that has a surprisingly low price, and they go there to spend the weekend. *Finde*, thus, continues Pichot's interest in the economic struggles of young Argentine professionals as well as it contemplates the compounding deleterious effects resulting from pandemic isolation. The film was shot in five days, and it was streamed through the website of Futurock, a radio station where Pichot hosts a show. Initially, the film was only available over the course of one weekend in order to create a sense of exclusivity and to boost ticket sales.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Pichot's comedy—both her individual work and her collective projects—fulfill a public intellectual function concerned with bringing attention to and denouncing a national framework characterized by structural sexism and economic disparity. Pichot engages in a form of humor that, in the words of comedy scholars Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt (2017), is “uniquely rhetorical and capable of engaging discourses of social change by calling into question dominant cultural practices and assumptions” (xxii). She does so in the midst of a highly active Argentine feminist movement that is informing more and more public debate and policy-making, as the recent approved abortion rights legislation demonstrates. Contemporary Argentine feminist discourse is also characterized by a marked anti-capitalist ethos that connects the misogyny and violence experienced by women to larger patterns of economic exploitation. First through *La loca de mierda* and later through content like *Cualca*, Pichot authors a specific

form of humor, a *killjoy comedy*, that illuminates the socially constructed norms and ordinary forms of oppression experienced by women. Pichot's comedy is also invested in revealing how the legacy and persistence of neoliberalism has turned the lives of young Argentines—even those from privileged social backgrounds—into a precarious existence. In this way, Pichot's work, following the tenets of the Argentine feminist movement, reflects upon the experience of economic exploitation and social inequities of people across the gender spectrum. Pichot's focus on precariousness, however, does not result solely from an ideological position; it also emerges from the reality of operating primarily through digital media, especially on corporate online platforms, which tend to exploit their content creators much more than what they are compensated. Pichot herself can be conceived as the ultimate zany in the digital age: she works tirelessly to take off the ground new projects that rarely—if ever—reach any stability. Pichot, thus, becomes a repository of content for multiple media platforms, which are perpetually avid for new productions but never compensate fairly the labor provided to them.

In the next chapter, I explore how global and private subscription video platforms, like Netflix, Amazon, and Disney+, enter into the Argentine media market precisely to harness and profit off the kinds of progressive ideals that were fostered under the CFK administrations and promoted by Argentine feminism. My contention is that these companies—in this process of cultural extraction—end up undermining both the culture of public access strengthened during the 2010s and its more politically radical ideas as they seek to create *for export* Argentine streaming content.

Chapter 3—Argentina for Export: Prestige Biopics and the Privatization of the Commons

Introduction

In September 2022, Amazon Prime Video released its first Argentine original feature-length film, *Argentina, 1985* (Mitre). The film was a landmark moment for Argentina's national cinema, not because the material had never been dealt with before but, rather, because it was the first fictionalized cinematic account of the 1985 trials. This meant that prosecutor Julio César Strassera, renowned in the country's history for leading the case against the military juntas that ran the last dictatorship in the country between 1976 and 1983, was played by star Ricardo Darín, arguably Argentina's most widely recognized actor. *Argentina, 1985* was met with significant media buzz given its sensitive topic, especially for a country whose modern filmography has centered on representations of the legacy of the dictatorship but never the trial itself. The buzz resulted from the film's high-profile cast as well as an unusual precedent in Amazon's release strategy, as major theater chains rejected Amazon's conditions of exhibition, which would have films run in theaters for three weeks before being available for streaming on Prime Video. Instead, the film was released in smaller, independent venues while larger chains refused to screen it. Nevertheless, the film fared extremely well upon its release, breaking box office records and receiving multiple international accolades and award nominations. This was particularly noteworthy in a post-pandemic context, as well as for the fact that an Argentine film had not attracted more than a million viewers in years. Among its award-season victories, *Argentina, 1985* won the FIPRESCI award at Venice, the Golden Globe for best non-English language motion picture, and earned a nomination for the Academy Award for best international feature film.

After winning the Golden Globe and with the Oscar nomination confirmed, the film sparked a sense of global recognition for this heroic and singular moment of Argentina's history, during which the country pursued a swift and successful campaign for human rights by trying, convicting, and imprisoning the heads of the bloody de-facto government. For example, a popular post on Twitter from an Argentine user expressed "If *Argentina, 1985* wins the Oscar, all of the three Argentine films that won will have been crisscrossed by [the legacy of the] dictatorship and state oppression in a total or partial manner. The struggle for human rights is the best example that we give to the world as a country." Another user emphatically tweeted "We won the [FIFA] world cup chanting that we will not forget about the boys who fought in the Malvinas War and we won the Golden Globe with a film that denounces the last dictatorship that our country suffered. A society with conscience and MEMORY is what ultimately makes us the best country in the world" (Fig 3.1). What both these widely-liked social media posts reveal is the existence of a national imaginary that associates Argentina with fighting valiantly for human rights. This impression surfaces in all sorts of cultural expressions, from cinema that directly addresses this subject to the songs of soccer fans supporting Argentina's national team in the politically dubious 2022 Qatar World Cup. While these tweets express a fervent patriotism and national pride, they clearly communicate the importance of this occurring on a global stage. As such, this national progressive imaginary is not exclusively meant for domestic consumption; rather, it is designed to circulate globally as a marker of Argentine culture abroad. In other words, Argentine conscience and memory, to quote the tweet, coalesce into an imaginary *for export*—one that strategically serves the producers of *Argentina, 1985* to attract international attention while maintain a strong affective bond from local subscribers.



Figure 3.1. Twitter posts celebrating Argentina, 1985's nominations and awards. 2023. Image: Twitter.

Argentina, 1985 constitutes a paradigmatic example of how Amazon Prime Video and other streaming subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services mobilize specific national content in order to enter into new territories. *Argentina, 1985* is a high-budget, glossy production that results from the partnership between a transnational digital video company and already well established local producers—in this case, Infinity Hill of producer and critic Axel Kuschevatsky, Ricardo Darín's firm Kenya Films, and Santiago Mitre's La Unión de los Ríos.²⁶ Furthermore, the film engages with a theme that is both deeply rooted in the local culture as well as highly

²⁶ Kuschevatsky is especially renowned for being behind a myriad high profile Argentine film projects including the recently academy award nominated *Wild Tales* (Szifrón, 2014) and the last Argentine Oscar winner *The Secret in Their Eyes* (Campanella, 2009).

recognizable outside of it.²⁷ Finally, the delicate and polemic nature of the film's subject matter contributes to the fanfare that transforms content into a cultural phenomenon, thereby bringing attention to itself as well as the platform. As Amanda Lotz has noted (2022), "[t]itles that attract buzz are valuable to these services as unpaid marketing, especially to newer services. Each feature article or discussion of the series [or film] on social media gets the name of the service in front of people and promotes subscription" (62).

In the context of Argentina's political and media landscape, SVOD platforms are able to dip into local, familiar stories in order to advertise themselves on a global scale. In exchange, these SVODs offer Argentina a platform in both the virtual and physical definitions of the term. Here, Gillespie's concept of the platform as a raised "level surface" is particularly useful (2010, 351): the platform gives Argentina a stage on which to perform itself as well as the distribution infrastructure that circulates these performances globally. It is significant that Argentina's most prominent exportable content has expressed the progressive imaginary, in which Argentina's history, trauma, and pursuit of justice is transformed into national resources ready for export. I argue the production of distinct "Argentine" content for SVOD streaming signals a particular process whereby international companies exploit and privatize a repository of national images, stories, and memories, and render them into on-demand content designed for global consumption.

In this chapter, I trace the introduction of international SVOD services in Argentina by analyzing the first commissioned fiction series. This analysis shows how global streaming platform strategies comingle with autochthonous stories and popular cultural themes of the nation's audiovisual tradition. This chapter explores both the earliest period of Argentine/SVOD

²⁷ Other authors have helped to trace this trend outside of Argentina's context, such as mobilizing bossa nova culture for Brazilian content, basing fiction stories on Indian popular literature (Tiwary 2023), or narrating the life of famous Mexican pop stars. For more see Lotz and Lobato 2023.

co-creations (mid-2010s) as well as the current explosion of history-based content, including biographical and historical dramas. On the surface, the SVOD content follows international patterns of what TV critics have variably referred to as quality- or prestige-TV—a slippery concept that I will discuss more concretely, following Jason Mittell, as *complex TV*. I contend, however, that SVODs amplify various narratives and tropes already at play in Argentine fiction cinema and television. Streaming services strategically build on the tropes and talent that emerged from New Argentine Cinema, a movement characterized by its low-budget social dramas and its incisive representation of the detrimental impact of neoliberal policies in the country during the 1990s. Given this historical context, I then trace how SVOD companies follow trends in Argentine audiovisual fiction that precede them and that were specifically fostered by state intervention during the Kirchner years. By this, I refer directly to the revival of nationalism through state-funded productions that fictionalized the lives of historical and popular Argentine figures.

This chapter's principal argument centers on the extent to which this negotiation of the local and the global is present in the production of biopics, which have become prime content for international SVODs. The lives of Eva Perón, Diego Maradona, and Carlos Monzón (to name but a few) are transformed into vehicles that enable generic experimentation and serve to cultivate a repository of national popular culture. Ultimately, I argue that this history-based content follows an aesthetic trend in SVOD content that I call *prestige liberalism*. Moreover, this content represents an extractive logic, by which global video streaming companies profit off Argentine imagery and narratives, only to remove them from public access and buttress themselves as dominant media players.

Before I address the shows themselves, it is crucial to provide a brief overview of the Argentine media context of the 2000s–2010s in order to gauge the full impact that SVODs have

had on the nation's television landscape. The Argentine subscription streaming market has changed dramatically in a short period of time, and certainly much of this is attributable to global streaming services that are now actively investing in the nation's producers. At the same time, this growth emerges from the specific national framework explored in greater depth in Chapter One—an era marked by major economic crises as well as strong confrontation between the government and the biggest media conglomerates. In the next section, I will trace the history of governmental shifts, which produced a series of legislative orders designed to break oligopolistic ownership, only to have these measures reversed under the following administration. In order to map out these transformations, this overview will introduce the major players in the Argentine industry, as well as the winners and losers of recent technological and market changes.

21st Century Argentine Television

By the beginning of the 2000s, the television market was concentrated in the two major commercial networks, *Telefé* (property of the Spanish telecommunications company *Telefónica* from 1999 until 2016 and *ViacomCBS* thereafter) and *El Trece* (owned by Argentina's biggest media conglomerate *Grupo Clarín*). After the 2001 economic crisis, television fiction production waned drastically. *Telefé* and *El Trece* were able, however, to maintain their dominant position because of their high rating share as well as the cutting of costs and personnel that resulted from outsourcing their productions (Carboni 2019a, 424). In the case of *El Trece*, almost of all of its fiction productions were provided by the self-owned *Pol-Ka Producciones* – also owned by *Grupo Clarín*. *Telefé* created its own production company, *Telefé Contenidos*, and established joint ventures with other production companies, such as *Ideas del Sur*, *Underground*, the *Cris Morena Group*, *Dori Media*, and *Endemol Argentina*. Halfway through the first decade of the

twenty-first century, the companies providing content for El Trece and Telefé dominated the Argentine market for television fiction production.

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's administration tried to break media conglomerates and diversify the Argentina media market with the 2009 Audiovisual Communications Services Act whose main target was Grupo Clarín, owner of El Trece and Clarín, the largest Argentine newspaper, as well as proprietor of the cable company, Cablevisión, and the internet service provider, Fibertel. The State also made important investments in both the creation of new networks and the production of television shows to fill out the schedules of the newly created outlets. Support for television production came, on the one hand, in the form of public biddings offered by different ministries seeking to support educational programs (e.g. *Mentira la verdad*, *La asombrosa excursión de Zamba*, and *Ver la historia*). Furthermore, the National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts (a.k.a INCAA) provided competitive grants to support the production of fiction shows (e.g. *Los pibes del puente*, *Cromo*, and *El pacto*).

The government-led effort to finance television content had two major effects. First, the independent production sector was strengthened, as public funds were largely devoted to small- and medium-sized companies, even fostering the formation of new ones. Second, television content was further diversified at both the level of aesthetics and narrative. In terms of fiction production, Argentina's primary television genre had, up to this point, historically been the telenovela, a genre characterized by its overtly melodramatic nature, low production values, and long seasons (usually more than a hundred episodes) with new episodes airing daily. While the major Argentine production companies remained invested in the lucrative and stable category of the telenovela, they also created shorter series that tapped into other genres – e.g. thrillers and murder mysteries – incorporating higher production values and emulating the aesthetic and narrative patterns of the drama productions of international cable and premium networks.

By contrast, publicly supported fiction production during CFK's presidencies focused almost exclusively on shorter serialized narratives that pushed against the telenovela's excessive melodrama. These programs adopted aesthetics closer to that of cinema thanks to the availability of cheap HD cameras such as the Canon 5D and 7D. In addition to technological shifts, the very strategies of production design underwent a radical change in accordance with the standardization of production; suddenly entire seasons needed to be written before the beginning of production, as opposed to the staid practices of telenovela production, where new scripts are delivered daily, featuring character arcs that correspond to audience measurement and commercial sponsorship (Carboni 2019b, 15). Despite State support, the audiovisual fiction market did not become a sustainable industry, as Ornela Carboni claims (2019a, 432). Most of the companies that were formed or strengthened throughout CFK's years were incapable of remaining in business without public funds.

With its conservative and pro-big business inclination, Mauricio Macri's government (2015–2019) forcefully undermined the previous administration's efforts to nurture audiovisual production. Macri annulled anti-oligopoly regulations, implemented drastic budget cuts to production funds, and even removed shows from circulation. The dominant trend of Argentine television fiction content remained that of the shorter series to the detriment of long telenovelas that, in the waning of local production, were increasingly imported from Brazil and Turkey to occupy the prime time slots of El Trece and Telefé. Major content producers such as Underground and Pol-Ka began focusing their capital and energies in the creation of shows in line with international patterns of what Jason Mittell (2006) calls *complex TV*: clearly defined story worlds and narrative arcs, with each episode having its own individual storyline while resisting narrative closure, and contributing to the larger story of the series (32). In order to secure funding for these series and reduce financial risks, Argentine production companies

applied for government grants or partnered with foreign networks such as TNT, HBO, and Disney, and sometimes a combination of the two (Carboni 2019a, 434).

Argentina remains to this day the third biggest media market in Latin America behind Brazil and Mexico, which are much bigger countries in terms of population. This assertion is supported by looking at Argentina's high penetration rates of television (97%), Pay-TV (77%), and internet (80%). Moreover, Argentina's SVOD market has grown exponentially over the last decade. For example, there were 850,000 estimated Netflix subscribers in 2017 and, at the beginning of 2020, that number had climbed to four and a half million, according to Reed Hastings declarations (Mármol, 2020). In an attempt to wrestle away a piece of Netflix's pie, various major international SVODs recently arrived in the country: Amazon in 2019, Disney+ in 2020, and both Paramount+ and HBO Max in 2021.

Global SVOD platforms entered into the Argentine market as producers in a framework that is characterized by strong political and industrial shifts, as well as ongoing tensions between the public and the private sectors. Today, the production of Argentine television fiction is in dire straits as a result of Macri's policies and the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁸ This situation renders video streaming platforms as key financial sources and exhibition windows for Argentine serial fiction. Companies like Netflix, Amazon, and HBO are progressively acquiring and commissioning Argentine fiction content as part of their strategies to attract domestic subscribers. These

²⁸ Between 2010 and 2014, the number of hours of newly released fictions averaged over 1000, whereas this number was reduced to half between 2015-2019. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Argentine audiovisual fiction market is reflected in the fact that in 2020 all free-to-air channels released together only five new fictions, and filled out its programming schedules with reruns. Moreover, there was a halt of 95% of fiction productions in television and cinema. For more, see Ezequiel Rivero, "La industria de la ficción nacional cayó casi 65% en diez años," *Letra P | Periodismo Político*, accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.lettrap.com.ar/nota/2020-11-2-11-9-0-la-industria-de-la-ficcion-nacional-cayo-casi-65-en-diez-anos>; Ornella Carboni, "Plan de Contenidos Argentinos: necesidad y urgencia," *Letra P | Periodismo Político*, accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.lettrap.com.ar/nota/2021-5-17-9-56-0-plan-de-contenidos-argentinos-necesidad-y-urgencia>.

platforms became business partners of the biggest domestic production firms and helped maintain the creation of Argentine television fiction. As production costs rose, only the big players were able to continue operating. For example, the standard production cost per episode of a prime-time telenovela is USD \$80,000, while the cost per episode of a “series of international quality” varies between USD \$300,000 to \$750,000 (Guevara, 2020). Costlier series encourage SVOD companies to invest in projects that will most surely attract Argentine audiences. Thus, the shows that fill online catalogues not only try themes and narratives that have proven successful in the country but very frequently they are also directed by renowned national talent – e.g., directors like Daniel Burman and Israel Adrián Caetano. Argentine SVOD commissions are, however, marked by a pull between the local and the global since they also have to appeal to international audiences. These pressures to fit into a global market may, at times, hinder the artistic potential of the shows and their possibilities of success. In the following section, I track the early years of SVOD commissions in Argentina (2016–2020) with a special focus on Netflix as the service that has been operating longest in the country. By providing this snapshot in time, my analysis will help to map out the strategies pursued by other streaming video platforms (Amazon, HBO, and Disney+) to insert and maintain themselves in the Argentine market.

Netflix Argentina: From the Runway to the Shanty

The first two Argentine Netflix exclusives were *Estocolmo: Identidad Perdida* (*Stockholm: Lost Identity*, 2016) and *Edha* (2018). *Estocolmo* was financed by the INCAA, and Netflix got involved at the post-production stage (Lamazares 2016), whereas Netflix funded the production of *Edha* as its first full Argentine commission (Jaafar 2016). Despite this distinction, there are three reasons for analyzing these two shows together: they represent Netflix’s first steps in supporting Argentine fiction series; they are comparable both in terms of genre and cast; and

finally, both *Estocolmo* and *Edha* present similar problems and were cancelled after their first season.

Estocolmo focuses on journalist, Rosario Santa Cruz, who investigates a human trafficking network only to discover her own dark family secrets. In *Edha*—named after the protagonist of the show—the main character is similarly embroiled in family and political intrigue when she, a successful fashion designer, must account for a tragedy that occurred in her family-owned sweatshop. In this way, the series are linked by their narrative strategy to entangle the main female protagonist (both played by Juana Viale) in a mystery whose threads go deeper into the social texture than they initially appear. The two series, then, are thrillers that present many of the characteristics audiences might associate with contemporary complex dramas: large casts, multiple and intersecting storylines, dead women, and explorations of political corruption. Indeed, *Estocolmo* and *Edha* might be favorably compared to Nordic noir dramas, and not simply in their photography, low-key lighting, predominance of blue, grey, and brown tones as well as overcast exteriors and dimly lit interiors (Waade 2017, 286). More significant, however, is the way both series graft personal tragedy on to character construction, following what Audun Engelstad (2018) has argued to be a staple of Nordic noir, where “main characters often struggle to keep their personal lives together, and the crimes they are involved in (as investigators or victims) throw a grim light on flaws in society that extend beyond the crime itself” (27). *Estocolmo*’s main character discovers that she is the daughter of a former sex slave who became the leader of the human trafficking network at the heart of the program’s mystery. Meanwhile, *Edha* falls in love with her new model, Teo (played by Spanish actor Andrés Velencoso), a Central American immigrant who is seeking revenge for his brother’s death caused by a fire in a sweatshop owned by *Edha*’s family.

Perhaps because of this transnational generic flexibility, both series struggle to articulate a coherent sense of national identity, with critics highlighting a certain lack of Argentine-ness in the universes built up by the shows. There is nothing about the fashion world in *Edha* that could help distinguish Buenos Aires from any other major cosmopolitan city. The same can be said for the show's grittier scenes, which take place in the type of public housing that can be found in North America or Europe, rather than the *villas miserias* (shanty towns) typical of Argentine metropolitan areas. Cultural and Hispanic studies scholar Ksenija Bilbija (2018) criticizes *Estocolmo* specifically for its consistent lack of national markers: "none of its 13 episodes offered the global public a single traditional icon associated with the country: no tango, no soccer, no [yerba] mate, no gauchos, no Che [Guevara], no Evita, no Maradona." (460). Bilbija's critique, however, is not entirely merited, as the first few episodes feature *both* a gaucho witness and a football stadium. One could also argue that these connections represent a superficial sense of Argentine identity (even though this national iconography is providing fertile ground for the SVOD biopics—more on this in the next section). After all, series that are more expressly devoted to soccer are not necessarily more successful (commercially or critically), as is the case with the canceled *Puerta 7* (2020). Nevertheless, Bilbija's point can be expanded and directed to the general treatment of the geographical locations where *Estocolmo* takes place—Buenos Aires and the Patagonia region—which function almost entirely as anonymous locales rather than specific settings.

This failure to express a distinctive national marking is particularly odd, since both shows revolve around issues that have enormous potential to resonate with an Argentine public. The forced disappearances of people, treated in *Estocolmo*, recall the horrors of the 1976 military dictatorship, just as the focus on human-trafficking could call to mind recent high-profile and unsolved cases—e.g. Marita Verón, María Cash, and Sofía Herrera. Despite these possible

references, *Estocolmo* does not make any real attempt to build connections with these real stories, so that any similarities to them are discerned only through the audience's pre-existing historical knowledge. The same goes for *Edha*: sweatshop labor was a recurrent journalistic topic during Mauricio Macri's presidency since his wife's children's clothes brand was suspected of running illegal sweatshops.²⁹ *Edha*'s diegetic world, however, is not sufficiently grounded in the Argentine textile industry, which is particularly striking since the show's director/creator, Daniel Burman, came up as a celebrated filmmaker precisely because of his personal treatment of the dynamics within the Jewish community and the textile market in the Once neighborhood of Buenos Aires. The cast of *Edha* was also a strange choice for Netflix's first Argentine commission. Viale is known for being the granddaughter of the biggest Argentine TV host – Mirtha Legrand – but as an actress she worked in supporting roles for most of her career. Furthermore, Velencoso's accent is off-putting to native Spanish speakers as it is unclear which nationality he is trying to imitate, a problem exacerbated by the actor who plays his brother, who is audibly Colombian. Central American migration is relatively uncommon in Argentina and especially irrelevant in the context of the considerable present-day influx of Venezuelans. Neither of the two series was renewed for a second season and *Estocolmo* was pulled from the catalogue after its contract with Netflix expired. The producers still hope to sell the show to another platform in order to produce an already-written second season (Guevara 2020).

Not all of Netflix's early Argentine projects resulted in one-off seasons. In tandem with these early experiments, Netflix made an investment that more clearly engaged with Argentina's

²⁹ In this sense, director Burman was able to bridge his own directorial comfort here, since he had also dealt with the textile industry in successful films such as *El abrazo partido* (The Broken Embrace, 2003) and *El rey del Once* (The Tenth Man, 2016) – the latter available on Netflix's catalogue in more than 30 countries.

audiovisual culture thereby helping to define the platform's fiction content profile in the country: the purchase of the distribution rights of the successful series *El Marginal* (2016), originally produced for TV Pública (Fig 3.2). The show tells the story of an undercover cop, Miguel Palacios (played by Juan Minujín), who infiltrates the fictional prison of San Onofre in order to rescue the daughter of a corrupt judge. It was created by Israel Adrián Caetano together with Sebastián Ortega, and produced by Underground (founded by Ortega and now owned by NBCUniversal), with capital coming from Underground and the INCAA. *El Marginal* represents a rare contemporary case of a successful network television program on public broadcasting competing neck-and-neck with the major commercial networks. Netflix bought the show's rights the same year as its release, putting it up on the catalogue after its network run and showcasing it as a staple of the nation's shows on the platform.

El Marginal follows a similar premise to other renowned foreign prison dramas available on Netflix's catalog like *Orange is the New Black* (2013) or the Spanish *Vis a Vis* (*Locked Up*, 2015), as the narrative focuses on an outsider who must quickly adapt to the social world of the penitentiary. Like *Orange* and *Vis as Vis*, the series uses the outsider as a pretext for entry into the prison, where the show then begins narrating the stories of other inmates and prison employees. In contrast to those series, which focus on female penitentiaries and provide a reflection on gender roles, *El Marginal* is a decidedly more macho product. The prison of San Onofre is a gruesome space where there is little place for compassion, and the moral corruption of most of its inhabitants is beyond salvation. The series has inspired comparisons with earlier shows centered on male prisons such as *Oz* (HBO, 1997) and *Prison Break* (Fox, 2006). However, these similarities were dismissed by Minujín himself, who claims that *El Marginal* aims to portray the living conditions of Argentine and Latin American prisons specifically

(Lenoir 2017). The series' tone and aesthetics support the argument that the series is influenced by a longer South American cinematic tradition of raw portrayals of social violence, marginality, and corruption – as seen in films such as *City of God* (Meirelles & Lund, 2002, Brazil), *Carandiru* (Babenco, 2003, Brazil), and *Leonera* (Trapero, 2008, Argentina).

Argentine communication scholars Gustavo Aprea and Mónica S. Kirchheimer (2019) claim that series like *El Marginal*, released under Macri's administration, continue a trend that emerged during CFK's presidency: that is, gritty limited run series produced by independent companies and supported by government funds with narratives that shy away from the excessive melodrama of telenovelas. As part of their analysis of Argentine television fiction series of the 2010s, however, Aprea and Kirchheimer distinguish *El Marginal* from other shows that were released during the Kirchner era for its exploitative and violent depiction of criminality. They speculate that, especially after Netflix's acquisition of the show, "the stereotypical nature of the characters [was] reinforced and the display of physical violence [was] intensified" (25). This perceived shift leads Aprea and Kirchheimer to conclude that major production firms (like Underground) appropriate both the style and themes of smaller productions in order to find their footing in the international video streaming market – and likewise to help companies like Netflix find theirs in the Argentine market (26).

This analysis, however, is arguably too generous to Kirchner-era cultural production, and neglects that the roots of fictions like *El Marginal* cannot be attributed solely to recent publicly funded television. Given its creators and style, *El Marginal* is visibly the heir of a major Argentine audiovisual current, that of the New Argentine Cinema (NAC). This movement emerged at the end of the 90s and the beginning of the 2000s and sought to represent the social devastation brought about by the neoliberal administrations of Carlos Menem (1989-1999) and Fernando de la Rúa (1999-2001) that culminated in the economic crisis of 2001. In the words of

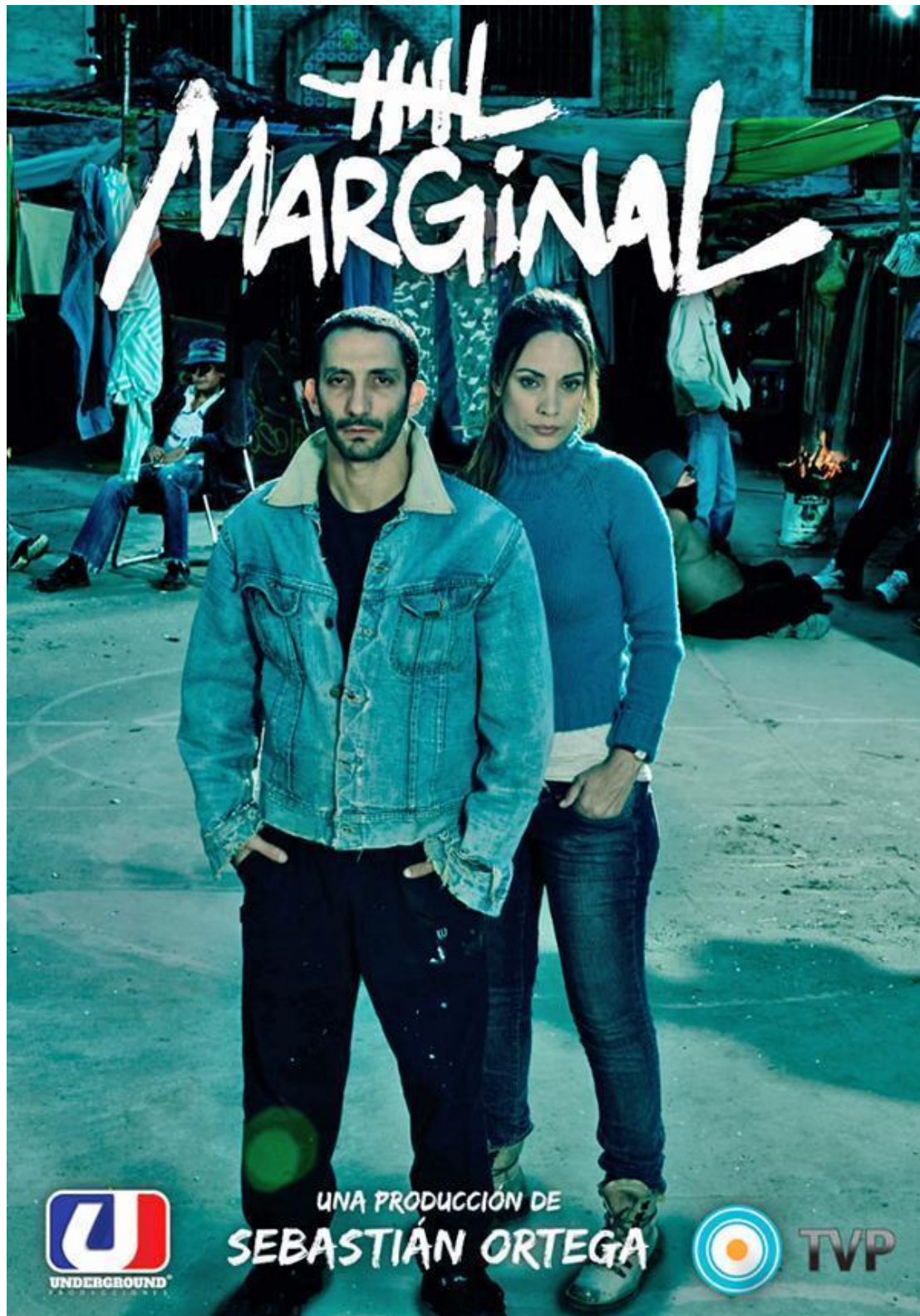


Figure 3.2. Poster of *El Marginal* (2016) with TV Pública's logo. Image: Film Affinity

Jens Andermann (2011), NAC was “a crop of young ‘independent’ film-makers identified, to varying degrees, by their shared preoccupation with the national present at a time of crisis, often encountered through neo-realist chronicles of the social and geographical margins” (xii). One of the most emblematic pieces from this period of Argentine films was *Pizza, birra, faso* (*Pizza, Beer, and Cigarettes*, 1998) co-directed by Caetano and Bruno Stagnaro. Originally planned for television, the film revolved around a group of delinquent youths, and was widely celebrated for its crude portrayal of life on the streets of Buenos Aires as well as for the way it accurately captured street slang. Due to the film’s critical acclaim and box office success, the now-dissolved production company Ideas del Sur seized the talents of both Caetano and Stagnaro to bring the spirit of NAC to the “small screen.” The result was two mini-series: *Okupas* (*Squatters*, 2000) and *Tumberos* (*Prisoners*, 2002). Directed by Stagnaro, *Okupas* is centered on a group of friends from diverse social backgrounds who squat together in a house in downtown Buenos Aires. Two years later, *Tumberos* was released, a series that foreshadows *El Marginal* in somewhat obvious ways, based on its title alone. The show follows a powerful lawyer who has been wrongly imprisoned and must adapt to life as an inmate and prove his innocence. *Tumberos* was produced almost by the exact same team that created *El Marginal*: Caetano and Ortega alongside Ideas del Sur’s owner, Marcelo Tinelli. Finally, both shows were shot in the same location: the non-operational Caseros prison, which has proven to be a cheap and useful location.

The life and influence of New Argentine Cinema has also been expanded on Netflix, especially with the re-release of Stagnaro’s *Okupas* in 2021. This was a significant cultural moment and revival of the series, which had been out of circulation since its original network run, otherwise only available through pirate copies. Netflix not only remastered the show, but it also changed the musical score, which had hitherto generated several copyright issues and prevented legal access to the series. *Okupas*’s HD release gave the program an entirely new life,

making it accessible to a new generation of viewers as well as an international audience. In addition to this, the re-release generated a wave of reviews and think-pieces from Argentine media outlets, which fostered reflection upon the crisis years and sparked a national conversation over the series' stunning relevance to present-day social inequities.³⁰ This is just one example of where SVODs have achieved particular success in the Argentine market: namely, the transformation of recent history into fiction content that provides both domestic and international spectators with a repository of national popular culture. In the next section, I will examine the forerunner of this type of streaming content: the serial biopic. Biographical dramas become strategic products for SVODs as they engage directly with Argentina's popular iconography and display tried and true generic traits for Argentina and foreign audiences.

Based on a True Story: Streaming Biopics

Beyond the Argentine context, biopics have already been operating as markers of emerging media markets, with different companies using specific national histories as they compete to establish themselves. This is true of markets in both the Global South *and* North. Jonathan Bignell (2019) recalls how, for example,

in the mid-2000s, economic, regulatory and aesthetic pressures in Britain and the United States led to a massive expansion of airtime that broadcasters wanted to fill, and the waning of some established genres and forms urgently required programme makers to

³⁰ To read some of the reflections triggered by Okupas re-release refer to the following articles (in Spanish): Tuñez, Gabriel. "Manuel Gaggero, figura oculta de Okupas: 'La marginalidad y la pobreza que relata la serie tiene más que ver con esta época que con aquella de hace 20 años.'" *elDiarioAR.com*, August 14, 2021. https://www.eldiarioar.com/sociedad/manuel-gaggero-figura-oculta-okupas-marginalidad-pobreza-relata-serie-ver-epoca-20-anos_128_8216337.html; Incaminato, Natalí. "La Amistad En Un Paisaje En Ruinas." *Online Magazine. Revista Anfibia*, July 20, 2021. <http://revistaanfibia.com/ensayo/okupas-la-amistad-en-un-paisaje-en-ruinas/>

find new stories and new ways of telling them. Fact-based drama of various kinds was one of the key responses to this demand. (48)

As SVOD platforms multiply and settle in new territories, these companies turn to biographical series to fill out their catalogues, hoping to attract subscribers from diverse nations. In this sense, the proliferation of Argentine serial biopics fits into a larger historical context in which recent events provide easy content to fill out SVOD catalogues.

Before streaming video companies began to commission and acquire Argentine fact-based content, the country had already been witness to a process of producing and releasing several biographical fiction audiovisual works of national heroes as well as pop culture figures. Under the Kirchners' nationalist populist project, as historian Michael Goebel (2011) maintains, various political actors "began to draw on historical events, symbols and figures to justify their political goals more frequently than had been the case during the 1990s" (216). Goebel also describes a growing public interest in Argentine national history during this period, which was manifest in numerous public debates and led by popular essayists rather than academic historians. Brigid Lynch has characterized this period as one of "'an explosion of memory,' in which narratives of the past [...] had become fully interwoven into the fabric of the present" (17). This widespread historicist impulse was the result of the Kirchners' combative human rights discourse that rendered the memory of the 1976 dictatorship "mandatory" (Sosa 2014, 19). Popular interest in Argentine history was also enhanced by the 2010 bicentennial celebrations, which were comprised of several public events and homages that fostered a generalized reflection on the country's past. As part of these bicentennial festivities, the government commemorated history-book heroes and events as well as the figures that contributed to Argentina's popular culture. CFK, for instance, opened a wing in the Casa Rosada (the seat of the executive branch) called

Gallery of Popular Idols, where more than eighty portraits of national athletes, musicians, performers, and other artists can be found.

Following this pattern, there was a series of film releases starting in 2010 that were based on the lives of military and political figures that the government either tried to appropriate symbolically or that were already politically associated with the Kirchners. This was the case with films such as *Revolución: El cruce de los Andes* (*Revolution: Crossing the Andes*, Ipiña, 2010), *Belgrano* (Pivotto, 2010), and *Puerta de Hierro, el exilio de Perón* (*Iron Door: Perón's Exile*, Laplace 2013). *Revolución* and *Belgrano*, for example, narrate events in the lives of two of Argentina's founding fathers, José de San Martín (the Argentine leader in its independence war) and Manuel Belgrano (the designer of the national flag). These films had direct governmental involvement, co-produced by the national cinema institute, the TV Pública channel, and Canal Encuentro (the ministry of education's broadcast network). *Puerta de Hierro* focuses on Argentine history abroad, portraying Juan Domingo Perón's time as an exile in Spain just before returning to Argentina after almost twenty years. This film not only was centered around the Kirchners' main political referent but was also directed and starred by Víctor Laplace who was—and remains to this day—an open supporter of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner.

In the second half of the 2010s, the trend of domestic biographical dramas was extended through the release of films and television programs focused on recent pop culture personalities, produced by both major firms as well as smaller independent companies. This second wave of biopics can be clearly divided into two subcategories: famous criminals and pop stars. The first category comprised works such as the film *El Clan* (*The Clan*, Trapero, 2015) and the limited-run series *Historia de un clan* (*The Story of a Clan*, Telefe, 2015), both based on the Puccio family, infamous for kidnapping and murdering multiple victims in the 80s. The creators of *Historia de un clan*—Underground Producciones with the direction of Sebastián Ortega's brother, Luis—

were also behind the production of the film *El Ángel* (*The Angel*, 2018) based on the young serial killer Carlos Robledo Puch, who was sentenced in 1972 to life in prison at twenty years of age. Biopics of Argentine musical talent primarily include Lorena Muñoz's films *Gilda: No me arrepiento de este amor* (*I'm Gilda* 2016) and *El Potro, lo mejor del amor* (*El Potro: Unstoppable*, 2018) respectively based on the lives of cumbia singer Myriam Bianchi—known by her artistic name Gilda—and quarteto star Rodrigo Bueno. In 2018, the television network Telefe released the limited-run series *Sandro de América* (also directed by Caetano) on the life and career of Roberto Sánchez—a.k.a. Sandro—who rose to fame between the 60s and 80s as “the Argentine Elvis.”

All biopics centered around historical heroes and popular personalities received state financial support, whether in the form of targeted investments or competitive grants. Furthermore, many of these works were exhibited through public broadcast networks (such as TV Pública and Canal Encuentro), the public streaming platforms for state-supported media (Cont.ar and Cine.Ar Play), and even the social media accounts from different government agencies. These biographical works are, therefore, representative of an effort to guarantee widespread public and open access to significant elements of Argentine history and popular culture, which strongly emerged under CFK and persisted during Macri's presidency. At the same time, these early state-supported biopics also served international SVOD services as an early content repository (for example, *El Potro* and *Historia de un clan* formed part of Netflix's catalog). Some of the producers of these films and shows became key partners with SVOD firms, particularly K&S Films—in addition, to Underground Producciones and Caetano. Founded and headed by pharmaceutical mogul Hugo Sigman, K&S Films, which co-produced *El Clan* and *El Ángel*, will later be in charge of creating the political drama *El Reino* (*The Kingdom*, 2022) and the police comedy *División Palermo* (*Community Squad*, 2023).

With the steady rollout of global video streaming companies into the Argentine context since 2019, it becomes easier to discern similarities between each company's business strategies. Common to the majority of these services is the biographical drama series of major national celebrities: *Monzón: A Knockout Blow* (Netflix, 2019), *Apache: The Life of Carlos Tévez* (Netflix, 2019), *Maradona: Blessed Dream* (Amazon, 2021), and *Santa Evita* (Disney, 2022). In 2022, Amazon Prime Video also released a series adapted from the life and work of journalist and public intellectual Tamara Tenenbaum, titled *The End of Love*. Lastly, two independent production companies, Mulata Films and Kapow (Estocolmo), are developing a biopic on Argentina's former president Carlos Menem, titled *¡Siganme!* (Follow Me!). Although *¡Siganme!* has been associated with Amazon, nothing has been formalized yet, and the series' producers are still hoping to place it on an SVOD. Accompanied as it often is by considerable media buzz, public conversation, and cultural debate, the biopic has emerged in Argentina as the spearhead product that distinguishes each SVOD in the market. According to Santiago Guevara (2020), line producer of *Maradona*, for example, Amazon was banking its entry into Argentina precisely on this series, to increased fanfare after the recent death of the soccer legend himself.

In what follows I will proceed with a discussion of these biopics in almost chronological order, starting with an introduction of *Monzón* and *Apache*, the first two biopics available on streaming—two texts that also focused on Argentina's sports heroes. I will place the rest into a broader framework relying on more recent examples, together with interviews conducted with the producers of *Monzón*, *Maradona*, and *¡Siganme!* The remainder of this section will focus on the strategic advantages of the biopic for SVODs (both in form and content), examining how Argentina has made use of the genre's transnational appeal, stylistic hybridity, and nostalgic allure. At the end of this section, I argue that Argentine SVOD biographical dramas represent a paradigmatic case of what I call *prestige liberalism*.



Figure 3.3. Poster of *Apache* (2019): young Tévez (played by Balthazar Murillo) in front of a background of his neighborhood's buildings and illustrations of bullets. Image: Netflix.

Netflix became the first platform to invest in Argentine biographical drama with the commissioning of *Apache*. Following the commercial success of *El Marginal*, Caetano collaborated with creator and showrunner, Leonardo de Pinto, on the series which follows the early life and career of acclaimed soccer player, Carlos Tévez. The series was produced by Torneos y Competencias—one of the biggest Argentine sports media companies, owned by DirectTV and a longtime commercial partner to Grupo Clarín—and was only made available through Netflix. Known in Argentina as “the people’s player,” Tévez had a personal life marked by the dramatic weight that makes it biopic material: his father died in a shootout before he was born, his mother abandoned him as a newborn after a domestic accident that scarred him for life, and he was raised by his uncle and aunt. In addition, Tévez grew up in the working-class

neighborhood Ejército de los Andes, popularly known as Fuerte Apache (Apache Fort), a discriminatory term meant to refer to its high crime rates and drug-related violence (Fig 3.3).

After *Apache*'s release, Netflix acquired the distribution rights to the biopic *Monzón: A Knockout Blow* that had performed well on cable network TNT and made it a platform exclusive. The series was a co-production between Disney and Pampa Films, a major film production company owned by Pablo Bossi, who had founded another of Argentina's paramount production firms, Patagonik Film Group. The show also received funding from INCAA through one of their grants. The series follows the life of 1970s middleweight world champion boxer Carlos Monzón, who became a notorious public figure because of his athletic prowess as well as his infamous personal life, marked by multiple allegations of domestic violence, including the murder of his third wife, Alicia Muñoz.

These series already present crucial characteristics that make biopics strategic media texts for global streaming video services. First is their capacity to bring together publics from various territories due to the weight of the name of their protagonists. At the most basic level, biopics narrativize the lives of famous people whose names already inspire interest or intrigue, and who potentially have an established fan base. The strategy pursued by SVOD companies is to invest in biographical fiction about figures of international fame, as they have to appeal to both specific local and global subscribers. SVOD platforms thus seek products that can be consumed in various countries, bypassing the need for glocalization—i.e., to adapt a show to specific local contexts—avoiding the production of multiple versions of the same content. In this sense, Maximiliano Lasansky (2021), Pampa Films's executive producer, reveals that when they presented the idea for *Monzón*, Disney was in search of a show that could be marketed for the Latin American region rather than Argentina alone. Likewise, in *Apache*'s case, Tévez is not simply a national hero owing to his time in Boca Juniors; he is also a globally recognized star

(highly recognizable also for the scars along his neck) after playing in major European clubs such as Manchester United, Manchester City, and Juventus. *Santa Evita* covers aspects of the life of the world renowned political figure Eva Duarte de Perón, popularly known as Evita, who was made internationally famous through Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice's stage musical *Evita* (1978) as well as its eponymous 1996 film adaptation starring Madonna. The limited-run series is also adapted from Tomás Eloy Martínez novel *Santa Evita* (1995), a domestic and an international best-selling book translated into more than thirty languages and which sold over ten million copies worldwide. This production, thus, harnesses Evita's fame together with that of prominent intellectual property for Argentine and foreign audiences.

In addition to catering to audiences from different territories, contemporary serial biopics also address consumers of diverse audiovisual genres, insofar as they present a recurring pattern of generic hybridization, as Aprea, Kirchheimer, and Rivero have claimed (2020, 78). Customarily, biopics are melodramatic texts at their core, since they tend to focus on the rise to distinction of righteous heroes who overcome multiple obstacles as a result of their positive qualities. For instance, Aprea et al point out how series like *Monzón* stand out for their ability to problematize these typified characteristics of the genre (78). The series displays characteristics of the melodrama – namely, the rags-to-riches story. At the same time, it exhibits aspects associated with noir narratives: the corrupt police investigation of Múniz's homicide and a morally ambiguous—or, in this case, reprehensible—protagonist. The focus on the investigation, moreover, as well as the series' insistent return to the murder scene (with Muñiz's naked corpse) all carry with them the air of true crime, a genre that does extremely well on Netflix. *Apache* deals with its central hero in a more traditional melodramatic manner—focusing on Tévez's positive traits as a hardworking hero, good friend, and son. The series nevertheless presents clear traits of genre blending since it not only makes use of elements of the New Argentina Cinema

found in Caetano's work but also engages with tropes typical of other Netflix *narcoseries* – e.g. *Narcos* or *El Chapo* (2017) – as the series narrates the drug gang wars that took place in Tévez's neighborhood.

Another salient commonality across these biopics is their multiplot structure, a trait that emerged with the Victorian novel, which has also been characterizing high-prestige narrative dramas since the 1990s. This feature can be described, in the words of Patrick Jagoda (2016), as “extensive branching that enables character inclusiveness, narrative multiplicity, and the dispersal of a reader's attention across a wide web of events” (114). In the case of Argentine biographical dramas, multiplot structures can either trace multiple timelines or multiple characters—and sometimes both simultaneously. *Monzón*, for example, explores the boxer's life in parallel stages: his childhood in abject poverty, his rise to fame, the beginnings of his excesses, his retirement, domestic scandals, and, lastly, his murder trial. *Apache* works according to the same multiplot logic, but does so by tracking multiple characters rather than timelines. The show follows the distinct yet interrelated life paths of Tévez, his friend Danilo—based on one of Tévez's childhood friends—who fell into drug addiction and criminality, and Tévez's parents' struggles to provide for their family. Finally, the story world of *Santa Evita* expands across multiple timelines and the actions of various characters. The series focuses on the mystery surrounding Evita's death whose embalmed body was seized and hidden by the leaders of the military regime that deposed Perón in 1955, later returned to an exiled Perón in 1971, and finally buried in Argentina in 1974. *Santa Evita* simultaneously narrates the events that took place between the early to mid-1950s and those that happen in the early to mid-1970s. The show also pays careful attention to the historical figures who were close to Evita at the time of her death—Perón, her assistants, and the doctor that embalmed her corpse—and the people involved in the investigation of the disappearance of her body, led by a fictional journalist character.

The producers of SVOD biopics also highlight their nostalgic character as an asset. For Guevara (2020), one of the reasons behind the wave of biopics is their nostalgic draw, enabling viewers to “recall historical moments that [they] might have lived through.” Lasansky (2021) observes in a similar vein that since biographical series are based on “historically and publicly relevant characters and events, they provide a universe that can attract viewers who are new to [them] or who might know about [them] but want to see how [they are] fictionalized.” Reflecting on the relationship between biographical drama and history, Guevara also asserts that contemporary biographical series seek to uncover the unacknowledged side of popular idols. In this regard, Guevara seems to confirm that contemporary biopics, even if set in the past, offer revisionist accounts, touching upon present-day hot-button issues. These serial biographical dramas, thus, operate following the principles Lotz (2007) has called *phenomenal television*, programming affirmed by hierarchies of artistic value *and* social importance—those programs imbued with what Pierre Bourdieu terms ‘cultural capital’— [...] television programming of specific aspiration and accomplishment—whether this be an ambitious period drama, a rigorous piece of investigative journalism, or a pointed political satire—might also distinguish itself as phenomenal because of its particular effort to enrich or expand cultural dialogue or thinking and to maximize the creative potential of the medium. (40, emphasis mine)

Of Argentine biopics that have been released so far, two major topics emerge most prominently: the history of Peronist politics and the defense of human rights (more recently focusing on women’s rights). By reflecting on the present from a historical perspective, biopics have a significant intergenerational appeal and, thus, are useful vehicles for the mobilization of public debate.

At the heart of *Maradona: Blessed Dream*, for example, is a clear impulse toward historical revisionism. The show dramatizes Maradona's life with its focus split between his early career in the late 1960s until his 1986 FIFA World Cup triumph, with both eras illustrated against a backdrop of Argentine political history. Throughout the first three episodes, more concretely, the show insists on providing the audience with clear markers of recent Argentine history, such as Perón's death, the 1976 military dictatorship, and the war between Argentina and Great Britain over the Falkland/Malvinas Islands in 1982.³¹ In addition to the series' dramatization of historical events, the ending of each episode provides written text that clarifies the context for the viewer. For example, the end of episode clarifies the historical context of Maradona's time in his first soccer club: "[I]n Argentina, the military dictatorship perpetrated crimes and disappeared thousands of people in clandestine concentration camps" ("Promise," 2022) (Fig 3.4). Similarly, episode two's textual explanatory sequence is partially dedicated to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo who "demanded the release of their children abducted by the dictatorship, alive" ("Dictation").

In the series, Maradona's character is no mere passive witness; rather, he is represented as an active agent in Argentina's history depicting him as a man of the people and always on the side of those in need. For instance, Maradona's parents—poor immigrants from the Corrientes province who established themselves in a shanty town in the outskirts of Buenos Aires—are portrayed as fervent supporters of Perón, the political leader of the working class. The first episode features a sequence narrating Perón's death, during which Maradona—then an elementary school student—returns home to see his mom crying next to a shrine featuring images

³¹ As it has been pointed out by various journalistic sources, one of the show's biggest historical inaccuracies is the year of Perón's death. In the series Perón dies when Maradona is nine years old, so anywhere between November 1969 and October 1970, however Perón died in 1974.



Figure 3.4. Maradona's (2022) credit sequence describing Argentina's conditions under the 1976-1983 military dictatorship. Image: Amazon Prime Video.

of Péron and Evita. Maradona is, then, shown going to the local bar to find his dad also weeping at the television news communicating the passing of Perón. Later, the same episode contains a heroic moment, when young Maradona's soccer skills are put to the test to defend innocent people from the forces of the dictatorship. Maradona and his dad are riding the bus back from a game when they are stopped at a military checkpoint. Before they descend from the vehicle to be searched by army officers, Maradona's dad instructs his son to keep his mouth shut and not to say that they are Peronists. The officers get aggressive with a young man with long hair because he does not carry his ID with him and threaten to detain him, which could signal the young man's apprehension and disappearance. Maradona reacts in defense of the young man and questions the potential detention. He also explains that everyone on the bus is travelling back home from attending a soccer match and that he can prove it because he is a player of the home



Figure 3.5. Maradona showing off his freestyle football skills in front of military officers. Maradona (2022). Image: Amazon Prime Video.

team (he is also carrying a soccer ball in the scene). One of the officers replies that if Maradona is indeed a player, he should demonstrate it by playing. Maradona responds by showing off his freestyle football skills (Fig 3.5). The sequence cuts abruptly to an empty seat on the bus—which is back in motion—then cuts to a close-up of Maradona resting his head on his father’s arm, suggesting father and son were released safely, although Maradona could not help the young man. Altogether, the episode’s representation of Perón’s death and the political usefulness of Maradona’s athletic prowess, suggest the centrality of Peronism as a formative element in soccer player’s upbringing. By supporting the movement so tied to the Argentine working class, Maradona becomes a working-class political hero by extension, opposing fascism and defending human rights even as a young child.

Monzón deals very directly with the issue of domestic abuse and gender-based violence, complicating, and even undoing, the reverence afforded to Monzón. The series begins and ends with the protagonist in the process of murdering his wife, and this emphasis on violence becomes predominant as a framing device of his longer career. The final episode is particularly telling of the series' critical stance, as it is the culmination of the series' lead-up to the night of the murder. The last third of the episode follows the escalation from a calm conversation to a gruesome display of physical violence: Monzón strips, beats, and chokes his wife to death. Afterwards, Monzón is seen covering up his crime, as he throws Múñiz's body off a balcony and, then, throws himself to make the scene look like an accident. The camera captures Monzón jumping in a long shot, thus displaying the entirety of the balcony window. Once the boxer is off-screen after jumping, white letters appear over the image reading "Carlos Monzón was found guilty of homicide and convicted to eleven years in prison. His trial was paradigmatic for making visible for the first time a case of domestic violence, which had never been debated on television" (Fig 3.6). The writing continues by revealing details of Monzón's life in prison and his subsequent death in a car accident. The series closes with the final words: "A monument to Monzón was erected in [the city of] Santa Fe. Its plaque read 'Carlos Monzón, world champion,' but, in 2018, was altered by artists to: 'Carlos Monzón, world champion and femicidal murderer'." When asked, Lasansky avoided assigning an open political position to the show— "we tried as hard as possible not to give [the series] a specific approach [...] we attempted [to tell] not only the bad and not only the good"—, *Monzón* removes any kind of ambiguity regarding the sexist violence perpetrated by its protagonist, the importance of the murder case to women's rights public discussions, how the perception of his persona changed over time, and how he is now remembered.

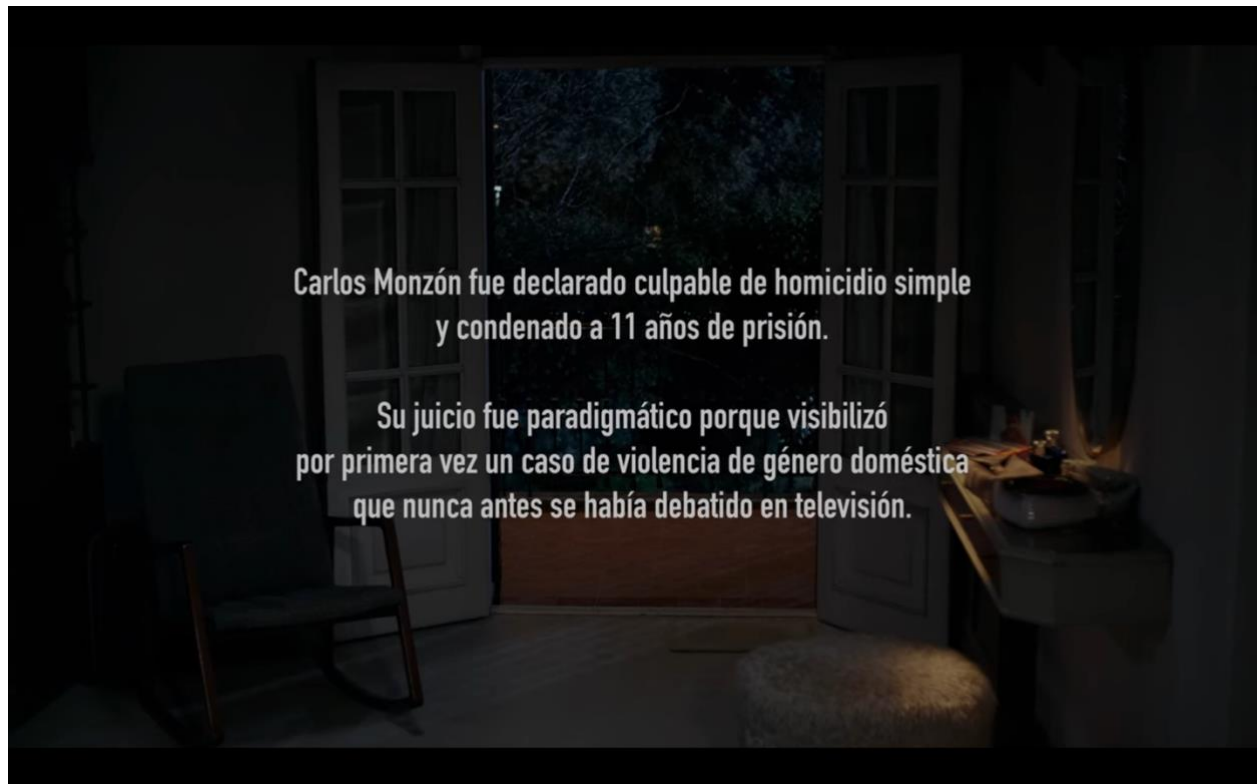


Figure 3.6. Text superimposed over long-shot of Monzón's balcony detailing the public significance of the boxer's trial. *Monzón*, 2019. Image: Netflix.

Set in current-day Argentina, the show *The End of Love* makes a claim to phenomenal television by addressing issues of gender and sexuality from an overt feminist perspective. The series is adapted from Tenenbaum's popular book *El fin del amor: querer y coger en el siglo XXI* (*The End of Love: Loving and Fucking in the Twenty-First Century*, 2019), a non-fiction treatise that seeks to challenge traditional notions associated with romantic love—especially heteronormativity, monogamy, and parenthood—encouraging the reader to consider, instead, less conventional relationship forms like polyamory, open relationships, or simply keeping a single life. Based on the life experiences of Tenenbaum herself (played by Argentine pop star Mariana “Lali” Espósito), the show explores her work as a journalist and university instructor as well as her background growing up in a very religious Jewish family in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Once. *The End of Love* contributes to public discourse by exploring the Orthodox Jewish

community, the conservation of its traditions, its treatment of women, as well as its relationship with the larger social and cultural fabric of a global metropolis like Buenos Aires. In this way, the series touches upon similar topics as other *phenomenal* streaming series, namely, Netflix's *Unorthodox* (2020), a biographical drama that narrates the story of a young woman who escapes New York's Hasidic community to live a secular life, obtain formal education, and follow an artistic career.

The focus on Tenenbaum's work and personal life helps to mobilize the narrative and illustrate the concepts of the book. *The End of Love*'s central storyline follows Tenenbaum as she simultaneously navigates the aftermath of breaking up with her long-term boyfriend and reconnects with her Orthodox Jewish roots, motivated by a surprise encounter with a childhood friend who remains a devout practicing Jew. The show expresses a strong didactic impulse reminiscent of public broadcasting's programming under CFK. The majority of scenes and of characters' interactions are opportunities for the viewer to learn about feminist debates or Orthodox Judaism. For example, the first scene of the entire series features the fictional Tenenbaum having an effusive discussion with a woman in a crowded nightclub about the club's sign—a neon outline of a vulva—which delves into the “symbolic resignification in pop culture,” Madonna's use Catholic iconography, and whether twerking can be empowering for women (Fig 3.7). Similarly, in the second episode, during her first post-breakup sexual encounter, Tenenbaum explains to her male sexual partner about the existence of the vaginal orgasm while he performs oral sex on her. In addition, *The End of Love* persistently introduces its audience to works of feminist scholarship, embedding them in the diegesis—e.g. the protagonist and her friends discuss going to a talk by Judith Butler, Tenenbaum carries Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), and she recommends to a neighbor *Pedagogies of Cruelty* (2018) by Argentine feminist author, Rita Segato. Ultimately, Tenenbaum's religious friend, Sara, functions as a



Figure 3.7. "Lali" Espósito playing Tamara Tenenbaum in *The End of Love* (2022). Image: Amazon Prime Video.

narrative device to take the viewer through a number of extant Orthodox Jewish traditions, as she explains phenomena such as arranged marriages, the separation of men and women during wedding ceremonies, and the mikveh, a ritual bath that women take to purify themselves after menstruation or childbirth.

Even though *¡Siganme!* is still in its planning stages, Mulata Films' owner and producer Maite Echave (2020) is open about the way that the show will contribute to pressing Argentine public debates. Through its focus on the not-too-distant past, Carlos Menem's series will comment explicitly on contemporary Argentine politics, especially on the complicated legacy of Menem's neoliberal policies, which he implemented despite his affiliation with the Partido Justicialista, founded by Perón himself. Echave also notes that issues of gender will be at the

center of the series, as its narrator will be the woman with whom Menem maintained a years-long extramarital affair and who also introduced him into Perón's party.

The analysis of Argentine biopics brings into relief a salient aesthetic and political perspective characteristic of contemporary SVOD serialized content, which I call *prestige liberalism*. Although strongly contested terminology in televisual critique, prestige is an opaque and a versatile word that has the capacity to capture both the tone and the storytelling modes that audiences associate with the shows streaming on SVOD platforms. Namely, prestige points to a narrative complexity, a multiplot or network structure (Jagoda 2016, 75), as well as it indicates a program's claim to being phenomenal—that is, to touch on high-profile, contemporary debates and stir public discussion, bringing attention to the show while positioning itself as an important cultural intervention. In these regards, the treatment of prestige subject matter takes a liberal political position that should be understood in two significantly interrelated ways. Liberalism, here, stands for “a more US-based, domestic understanding of the term” that “broadly promotes a combination of state- and market-based solutions to social problems, generally advocating for progressive civil-rights positions while not abandoning economic liberalism” (Elkins 2021, 151). Therefore, liberalism also refers to the “economic ideology based in free markets and lack of regulatory oversight [...] that involves the privatization of the digital commons, deregulation of technology and entertainment institutions, and cross border free trade” (151). The shows analyzed in this section bring prestige to themselves by their narrative qualities and by expressing a liberal-progressive position regarding a set of social and cultural issues. At the same time, they paper over a number of operations that SVOD companies perform in various geographical settings to deregulate and privatize pieces of national cultures. This paradox of SVODs liberal politics is what I explore in the next section.

The Liberal Paradox

SVOD biopics' explicit insistence on social-justice issues stem, firstly, from Argentina's own political context, mainly, the legacy of dictatorships and trials for crimes against humanity. Political resonance also emerges from the recent media visibility gained by women's rights, fueled by the mobilization of large feminist collectives like Ni una menos and Marea Verde. The level to which streaming biographical dramas are crisscrossed by Argentine political debate can be illustrated by a Twitter post by Malena Pichot in reaction to the announcement of the future release of *Monzón*. In these regards, Pichot (2018) tweeted "And now they are going to make the *Monzón* series and we are going to continue romanticizing domestic abusers [...] You better show *Monzón* as a drunkard, a wife beater, and murdering his wife. If you don't show that maybe tell another story okay? Okay." While *Monzón*'s producer did not confirm a connection to Pichot's expression, the show seems to be responding to the concerns of the national feminist movement.

On the other hand, SVODs politically liberal approach to topics such as human rights and feminist struggles follows from what, at this point, has become a global strategy of these companies to insert themselves into new markets and maintain their hegemonic status. Video streaming companies promote liberal-progressive values through their content simultaneously as they push for a liberal economic vision in various contexts that allow them to operate more easily, eliminate competition, and assert their market position. As Evan Elkins has claimed in relation to Netflix,

In its programming, branding strategies, and attempts to influence global media content, trade, and infrastructure policies, the entertainment platform promotes a broad vision of globalized cultural and economic liberalism geared towards humanistic principles,

cosmopolitan branding international free trade, technological disruption, and economic deregulation. (150)

Elkins notes how Netflix, for example, has espoused the cultural side of US liberalism through some of their highest-profile programs that advocate for feminist and anti-racist ideas. Netflix's content has also promoted Democratic Party politicians and values, and has even done business with key Democratic figures—most notably signing to distribute *American Factory* (Bognar and Reichert, 2019) produced by Higher Ground owned by Barack and Michelle Obama (Elkins 153). Beyond Netflix, simply typing “DEI” (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) followed by the name of a major SVOD platform on a search engine will lead the user to different corporate websites that reveal these companies' dedication to a very similar kind of US liberal institutional ethos. Particularly, these sites emphatically advertise these companies' intentions to create a workforce that includes individuals from varied backgrounds in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality that can better address a wide range of target audiences in the United States and abroad. Walt Disney's DEI webpage, “World of Belonging,” states that the company “is developing and retaining a diverse workforce, fostering a company culture that is welcoming and respectful, creating content and experiences that resonate with our global audiences, collaborating to make our industries more accessible to all.” Almost identically, Amazon's site “We Power: Inclusive Storytelling,” reads “Amazon Studios and Prime Video is a home for talent of all backgrounds, and we are working to tell stories that represent the joy, depth, complexity, and drama that exists across our world.” And, Warner Bros. Discovery's (the owners of HBO Max) “Access” expresses that “A diversity of voices, perspectives, and experience is critical to our business, our content, and a culture of innovation. That's why we're building a more inclusive home for world-class talent of all backgrounds—and clearing new paths to grow within and across our brands.”

At the same time as they preach for a more inclusive approach to representation and corporate structure, even going as far as suggesting more accessibility in their content, these firms lobby to protect their copyrighted materials and combat regulations that might foster more competitive and equitable media markets. Elkins demonstrates how Netflix has attempted to influence US policy directly by donating to politicians and political campaigns in order to defend its “pro-intellectual property, anti-video piracy agenda” and to push for technology policies, such as net neutrality (152). As a result of their global expansion, Netflix has continued its lobbying attempts in other territories, for instance, fighting tax policy in Latin America and European laws regulating streaming content quotas (Keegan, 2019). Ramon Lobato (2019) observes that Netflix “expends considerable energy lobbying for investment in internet infrastructure, both directly and indirectly through various intermediaries” (85).

In 2011, Reuters reported that, for example, Netflix’s arrival in Latin American was aimed at combatting piracy in the region with its “quality content” and accessible prices (Henao). This is a sticking point in Argentina, which has been in the Priority Watch List of the Special 301 Report, a document prepared annually by the Office of the United States Representative (USTR) that identifies the countries that do not strictly enforce intellectual property rights. As it was recently reported, inflation and the overabundance of SVOD services even stimulated the growth of piracy (Barros 2022). Discovery, nevertheless, was recently involved in what was deemed a surprise win for content providers: the closing of thirty illegal streaming websites following a lawsuit presented by the Alianza contra la Piratería Audiovisual (Alliance Against Audiovisual Piracy)—an association formed by DirectTV, SKY, and Turner Broadcasting System among others (Prensario 2023). In terms of direct regulations affecting video streaming services, SVOD and other over the top (OTT) platforms like Spotify began paying the 21% VAT (value added tax) in 2018. Policy makers have also been discussing other regulations that can be imposed on

SVODs. One of the most salient projects has been content quotas for domestic productions, and using part of the profits generated in the country to help subsidize Argentine content. The Argentine Chambers of Medium and Small-sized Audiovisual Production Companies (CAPPA) recommended in 2016 that digital video platforms allocate 20% of their billing to the purchase or production of national content, out of which 50% has to come from independent firms. In response, the Television Association of Programmers (TAP) and the Motion Picture Association (MPA)—associations that together represent the interests of Disney, Netflix, Paramount, Discovery and HBO Max—contested these plans and their feasibility (Serpe 2018). For instance, the president of TAP Latin America, Gustavo Pupo-Mayo (2016), claimed that any legal framework regulating media production and distribution should take into account that “in a democratic society, which aspires to a free-market economy, it is fundamental to avoid obstacles that prevent, limit, or censor content and the promotion of goods and services.” As such, content quotas should be eliminated since they are “discriminatory and protectionist practices that attempt against a competitive environment” and “they result in low quality productions that are only there to abide to the law” (Pupo-Mayo 2016).

A push to redistribute resources generated by SVOD companies towards smaller firms is a critical issue, since the cost of production has been rising making it increasingly challenging for independent producers to operate. Consider the biopic, one of the most primed content for video streaming platforms. For all their thematic and stylistic attraction, however, biopics present certain disadvantages that make them accessible almost exclusively to major production



Figure 3.8. Carlos Tévez introducing the first episode of *Apache* (2019). Image: Netflix.

companies. Period pieces already require high budgets for production design alone, since they have to recreate the spaces, the fashion, and the props typical of the time in which they took place. Furthermore, production companies need capital and personnel to face logistical and potential legal issues that result from portraying the lives of renowned (and often polemical) popular personalities. In this sense, *Apache* stands out from the rest of the shows, as it portrays a still-living hero, who is featured at the beginning of each episode, introducing moments of his life (Fig 3.8). As a result, the series seems to benefit from a type of stamp of authenticity. This is certainly not the case for many other biopics. For instance, Lasansky mentions that, for *Monzón*, they acquired the rights to both the biography *Monzón, secreto de sumario* (Staiolo 1991) and Monzón's life, which they obtained from his family. Pampa Films also conducted interviews with Monzón's family members and hired legal-, boxing-, and biographical consultants in order to produce a fair portrayal of the boxer. Finally, Pampa Films consulted the legal archives of Alicia

Muñiz's murder case. This thorough production process, nonetheless, did not prevent Monzón's family members or the author of his biography from expressing their discontent over perceived inaccuracies in the fictionalization of Monzón's life. Similarly, Maradona's ex-wife and his former manager have already suggested they will litigate over their portrayals in the upcoming biopic, even after Maradona himself approved his portrayal before his death.

In addition to fighting regulatory impulses, international SVOD companies are engaged in a process that can be characterized as the appropriation and privatization of Argentine public domain creations and distinct elements of the national culture. *El Marginal* presents a critical and paradigmatic case of what I am referring to here. As Ezequiel Rivero (2022) notes "the series, which started with the State as its main stakeholder, slipped out of the hands of the State until it was completely privatized behind Netflix's paywall, far from universal access." Initially a public-private collaboration, *El Marginal* was openly and freely available to Argentine audiences during its first three seasons through broadcast television and the public streaming platform Cont.ar. Once Netflix acquired its distribution rights in 2016, the streaming company began imposing limitations on access to the show. Cont.ar went from having all episodes available on its catalog to only being able to offer the last five episodes that had been broadcast. By its fourth season, the show became entirely a private venture between Netflix and Underground, meaning that it became exclusively available for Netflix subscribers as the government stopped having any involvement with its funding and production.

Beyond television, SVODs' participation in audiovisual creation is further curtailing the involvement of the state in the production and circulation of films, generating worrisome effects for the development of Argentina's cinema. Traditionally, Argentine films have almost always presented a degree of governmental involvement through the INCAA and its Cinema Development Fund (CDF). Obtaining this support implies that films are formally categorized as

part of Argentina's national heritage and makes mandatory for the producers to give copies of films to the national cinematheque and the national archive for their preservation and public availability. Furthermore, state-funded films have to be exhibited through the network of theaters run by the national cinema institute and they are expected to be streamed through INCAA's platform Cine.Ar Play. By contrast, films that are produced without any public funds—such as *Argentina, 1985*—do not bear these responsibilities intended to make works of cinema publicly available. This separation of the State and Argentine cinema can be perceived visually by the fact that films that do not receive the support of the CDF do not feature the official logo of the INCAA nor the one that simply reads “Cine Argentino.” The funds for the CDF come from taxing box-office tickets, physical film sales and rentals, as well as radio and television broadcasters. At this point, subscriptions to streaming video platforms are not taxed to contribute to the CDF. Therefore, subscribers watching Argentine films available through SVOD catalogs are not passively engaging in supporting national cinema production.

SVOD companies can be seen, thus, as enclosing and privatizing the commons, as undermining or closing off access to a resource that was envisioned for wider public use with the central goal of yielding a profit. The privatization of the commons is historically associated with a phenomenon at the root of modern capitalism: the enclosure and appropriation by individuals and corporations of communally-used lands in order to economically exploit them for “the promotion of private riches or exchange value” (Foster, Clark, and Holleman 2021, 1). This process of enclosing and privatizing, however, has been traced and updated to better understand contemporary capital accumulation, to the point that today “corporations are on the prowl to enclose or privatize anything that can be made profitable” (Brantlinger 2018, 15), including everything from natural resources to programs of the state. Drawing a parallel with the notion of the commons as land, corporations like Netflix or Amazon encircle and fence off specific

elements from Argentine audiovisual culture that were, in this national context, imagined for public consumption, and thus, corporations decide who gets to access this content.

How, then, does this logic function in the case of the recent success of *Argentina, 1985*, a film that narrates an unparalleled moment of Argentine history for global consumption? Unlike other Argentine films, *Argentina, 1985* has no contractual obligation either to stream on Cine.ar Play or to be stored in the national archives. Aside from its theatrical run, the film is exclusively available on Prime Video. For the fortieth anniversary of the return to democracy in Argentina, on March 24th 2023, Amazon Prime Video made the film available for free for the day to non-subscribers to the platform as a way to commemorate the date and to make publicly-available to Argentines a significant piece of the recent history. The next day the paywall was immediately restored. This gesture encapsulates precisely the meaning of prestige liberalism: Amazon seeks to stage itself as an ally to the defense of human rights while managing its own content as if it were a privatized natural resource. Access to Amazon Argentine content, memory, and public history can be switched off and on, like electricity.

Conclusion

Since the mid-2010s, global SVOD services have fostered narrative trends that were already present in the Argentine audiovisual industry. Subscription video streaming platforms, however, have helped to produce the first ever televisual fictionalization of significant Argentine icons. Beyond biopics, the tendency towards what Bignell calls “fact-based drama” seems to be a formula that will persist as several of the recently released and announced SVOD commissions are based on real-life accounts.³² Furthermore, the Argentine government advertised

³² *Iosi, el espía arrepentido* (*Iosi, the Regretful Spy*, 2021, Amazon Prime) is inspired by the story of a Jewish spy who collaborated with the 1994 terrorist attack to the Israelite Argentine Mutual Association;

in 2021 their new plan to subsidize audiovisual productions, *Renacer Audiovisual*, which features a special grant category for historical fiction. This way, SVODs can be seen as leading the trend to keep and extend an archive of Argentina's national culture. Furthermore, the insistent support to social justice struggles present in these biopics seeks to give a patina of respectability to the companies producing this content. At the same time, these productions function as a promotional strategy, contributing to emotionally charged political and cultural conversations in the national context. The progressive-liberal ethos promoted on these series, however, obscures a set of maneuvers performed by SVOD firms in Argentina that undermine industrial competition and equity. These operations include fighting regulations like content quotas and progressive taxation, and cutting off wider access to content, either by attacking piracy—a widespread practice for a country that struggles with inflation and payments in foreign currencies—or by placing audiovisual works behind paywalls, even if they were initially envisioned for public consumption. International SVOD companies have harnessed Argentina's progressive imaginary, using these resources as regional flair on a global platform. While this has benefited the country's media landscape in clear ways, there are also significant dangers for the foreseeable future, as this progressive imaginary is transformed from a public good into a global commodity. The operations of SVOD companies are not a new phenomenon, nor are they exclusive to Argentina. Yet the tendency to dramatize the life of popular and historical figures that preceded the entrance of digital streaming platforms in the country together with the culture of public media access

Maria Marta, El Crimen del Country (María Marta, the Country Club Crime, 2022, HBOMax) narrates the unsolved murder of María Marta García Belsunce in 2002; two new biopics are expected to be released in early 2023: *Ringo: Glory and Death* (Disney) and *Love After Music* (Netflix) based respectively on the lives of heavyweight boxer Oscar “Ringo” Bonavena and rock pianist and singer-songwriter Rodolfo “Fito” Páez.

fostered since the 2010s bring into stark relief the strategic interventions and market goals that SVOD firms pursue worldwide.

SVODs also continue the trend that existed before their irruption in the Argentine market: foreign companies forging alliances with major domestic production firms—some of which form part of multinational conglomerates (e.g. Underground). The vast majority of shows cited in this chapter were created by companies already established in the Argentine audiovisual industry and multinational firms (like BTF, producer of *Maradona* or Buena Vista International in the case of *Santa Evita*). In these regards, Echave (2020) describes a critical situation for mid-size and small producers: not only smaller companies (like Kapow and Mulata Films) need to partner up in order to afford the rising costs of productions, but large firms also band together in order to compete in the international platform market. Although SVODs are steadily investing in Argentine fiction content, the national industry will need, once again, the support of the State to subsist and to guarantee universal access to cultural productions. This will, however, require planning that transcends political administrations in order for any viable audiovisual industry to expand and prevail.

Conclusion: The Future (?) of the Progressive Imaginary

Throughout this thesis, I have presented, described, and analyzed the key media vectors whereby the progressive imaginary has been circulated and hegemonized in Argentina. Since the mid-2000s to the late 2010s, traditional and newer platforms created a vast media ecosystem where the defense and expansion of social justice was insistently promoted by emergent popular figures. This dissertation is composed of case studies, with each chapter tracking media figures and texts that appeared at a fertile time for the advent of progressive politics: the recent failure of the neoliberal model in the Latin America. This failure was compounded by the larger historical moment of economic bonanza, which allowed various governments in the region to legislate on the left —i.e. to deploy public resources to protect and support large parts of their populations. From the mid-2010s onwards, *pink tide* administrations entered a process of exhaustion motivated by economic downturn, institutional factors (mainly, allegations of corruption), and disguised coup d'états (Brazil in 2016 and Bolivia in 2019). This situation precipitated the passing of power from left-leaning governments to more conservative ones—Mauricio Macri in Argentina (2015), Lenin Moreno in Ecuador (2017), Sebastián Piñera in Chile (2018), Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2018), and Jeanine Áñez in Bolivia (2019).

In the particular case of Argentina, Macri was elected on the basis of his promise to reduce inflation, which had been mounting dramatically during Fernández de Kirchner's last years as president. If successful, Macri promised to reconnect the country back to the rest of the world, guaranteeing a freer global circulation of goods, services, as well as Argentines. Macri's presidency, nonetheless, worsened almost every single economic indicator. It heightened inflation, exacerbated poverty, reduced per capita income, eroded industrial production, and took the biggest loan in IMF's history (Ámbito 2020). The center-left coalition that succeeded Macri

(2019-2023), with Alberto Fernández as president and CFK as vice-president, rose to power on the basis of its promise to stabilize the Argentine economy and deliver on progressive social legislation, with the legalization of abortion as one of the central campaign promises. While Fernández attained a series of victories in the arena of social justice—the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy Bill, the recognition of non-binary people on national IDs, and a transgender job quota—his government could not improve the economic climate, reaching an interannual inflation above 100% by the beginning of 2023.

The national scenario of economic turmoil together with the growing disillusionment with major parties and their constant internal fighting are now fostering the rise of non-traditional illiberal and anti-system forces in Argentina. This is specially the case of the libertarian-conservative alliance La Libertad Avanza (Liberty Advances) lead by Javier Milei, an open follower of far-right figures like Trump and Bolsonaro. As sociologists Leandro Barttolotta and Ignacio Gago (2023) have recently asserted “Slowly and almost without wasting saliva, popular lives were pushed, day by day, step by step, towards the wide open and hungry mouth of a right-wing that is not graceful in the slightest”. The precariousness at the center of Pichot comedy from the early 2010s has only increased, particularly for those who work in conditions of informality. In this context, there is an exacerbation of what Gago (2017) recognizes as *neoliberalism from below*. For Gago, this type of neoliberalism can be understood as a deep-seated personal belief that the market and competition are the principal agents that must regulate all aspects of social, economic and political life. Moreover, this model sees all individuals as autonomous entrepreneurs, regardless of their social origins, who have to compete in a market, no matter how precarious and flexible. At the center of Gago’s argument is the claim that this conviction is not solely held by economic elites—those *above*—but it is also entrenched in the working-class segments of society—those *below*—and it is even sustained by subjects who are the most

dispossessed and are usually considered *the* victims of the global free market, informal, contingent, and migrant laborers.

As social scientists have been suggesting, then, *neoliberalism from below* has become particularly prominent across those adhering to the emerging Argentine far-right: the generations born at the end of 1990s and beginnings of the 2000s, whose adulthood has been characterized by a type of economic instability that seems to be both irreversible and inevitable (Semán and Welschinger 2023). Within the younger generations, anti-state sentiments have been especially ingrained in those working for the digital economy, software programmers, online sellers, and people working through food delivery apps who do not want to see their activities regulated. Thus, digital platforms not only intensify job precariousness and flexibility; they also further the belief in deregulation as harbinger of personal prosperity. This seems to confirm one of Gago's crucial tenets, that *neoliberalism from below*—and subjectivity in general—is the result of activities that people perform in their everyday and mundane lives. Therefore, consciousness does not play a privileged role in the formation of subjectivity (12).

As a buffer to this system, an entire digital media ecosystem of commentators who legitimize these anti-system sentiments has emerged, fostering conservative social ideals and scapegoating progressive policy as one of the central reasons for the deterioration of Argentina's economy. This is the case of conservative YouTubers Agustín Laje and Nicolás Márquez, or the Guatemalan libertarian activist Gloria Álvarez who travels Latin America spreading the gospel of free market and small government. As investigative journalism has only begun discovering, Argentina's new right as well as its media intellectual figures are part of a large international network of NGOs and think tanks aiming to popularize economic deregulation and social conservatism. *Neoliberalism from below* needs, then, its *above* counterpart. It is this network of institutions, digital platforms, and media figures that will require further investigation in order to

gauge more fully the potential of a future in Argentina, Latin America, and beyond that is more democratic, inclusive, and participatory, more progressive, or not.

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