**Conning all over the world: Latin American variations of an American film genre**

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This essay examines the ways in which two ‘con game films’ produced in two Latin American countries, Nueve Reinas/Nine Queens (Fabián Bielinsky, Argentina, 2000) and Doble Juego/Con Game (Albert Durant, Peru, 2004), mobilize the discourse of corruption as the key structural principle of their generic composition. This discourse is constructed in each film as a national characteristic, a signifier of each nation’s complete and utter engulfment in a culture that manifests as people’s constant efforts to swindle other people. Regardless of the fact that the films were produced and take place in Argentina and Peru, respectively, these discursive constructions will be seen as a product of regional, Latin American appropriations of the con game film genre that differ fundamentally from US examples of the same genre. In the latter, corruption never assumes a national character and is always defined in individualistic terms, primarily in the form of personal greed that is motivated psychologically in the films’ characters. By always constructing corruption in social/national/regional terms, it is clear that Latin American con game films are much more political than their US counterparts. This is because such a mobilization of the discourse of corruption engages with concrete political and economic structures that regulate the social order and exert a framing influence on social consciousness, compared to the US titles where the same discourse is brought into play with little or no effort to connect it to the actions of political institutions and their agents.

In pursuing this theory, however, I am faced with an interesting problem. Although the production and release of films featuring con artists as central characters and confidence games as key structural components of their narratives have been prominent both in the USA and elsewhere, the con artist/con game film as a distinct genre,[[1]](#endnote-1) cycle or any other kind of film classification system has barely registered in academic circles.[[2]](#endnote-2) The main reason behind such inattention is arguably the con artist film’s perceived absence of generic specificity and its links with other more established genres, such as the crime thriller, or with critically conceived classificatory labels, such as the film noir. As a result, despite ample critical and commercial success and plenty of academic interest in such well-known con artist films as *The Sting* (George Roy Hill, 1973), *Paper Moon* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1973), *House of Games* (David Mamet, 1987), *The Grifters* (Stephen Frears, 1990), *The Spanish Prisoner* (David Mamet, 1997), *The Talented Mr Ripley* (Anthony Minghella, 1999), *Catch Me If You Can* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), *Confidence* (James Foley, 2003), *Matchstick Men* (Ridley Scott, 2003), *Criminal* (Gregory Jacobs, 2004), *I Love You Philip Morris* (Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, 2009), *Focus* (Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, 2015), and many others, rarely have these films been *seen* as con artist/con game films. Reviewers and critics have instead been quick to attach to them broader generic labels such as ‘crime caper’, ‘thriller’ and ‘noir’, while film scholars have accepted these labels in their own more in-depth examinations, often unproblematically.

Consider, for instance, *Variety*’s reviews of *Confidence*, which it calls ‘a stylish compelling crime caper full of smoothly navigated plot twists’,[[3]](#endnote-3) and *The Spanish Prisoner*, described as both a ‘daunting, satisfying thriller’ and ‘a beautifully crafted noir […] sure to sate any audience that wants to be engaged, challenged and surprised’.[[4]](#endnote-4) A similar approach can be detected in academic studies of such films. Writing specifically about *Nine Queens*, Joanna Page starts her analysis by calling the film ‘a highly successful crime thriller’,[[5]](#endnote-5) while R. Hernandez-Rodriguez labels it ‘an excellent thriller’.[[6]](#endnote-6) Rielle Navitski suggests that the film combines elements from ‘the heist film and the neo-noir genres’ before arguing for the more specific and locally determined generic category of the ‘new *policialies*’, which, despite its origins in the police procedural genre, is used for ‘a broad range of mystery films and thrillers’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Ana Laura Lusnich similarly identifies the thriller, the noir and the police drama as generic categories that the film reworks together with the ‘costumbrist’ comedy, which helps it maintain strong links with Argentine cinema traditions.[[8]](#endnote-8) Gabriela Copertati comes a bit closer in her labelling of the same film as a ‘grifter thriller’,[[9]](#endnote-9) while Deborah Shaw seems to hit the nail on the head by arguing that *Nine Queens* is ‘rooted in the internationally recognisable genre of the scam movie’,before moving to equate that genre category with the ‘crime thriller’.[[10]](#endnote-10) Although labels such as crime film and crime thriller do not necessarily do a disservice to these films’ generic composition, they nonetheless lack the accuracy and nuance of the more narrowly specific label of con game film that bestows these films with a more precise set of generic characteristics, distinguishing them from other crime and thriller films. As I shall argue, following Steve Neale’s pioneering work on film genre,[[11]](#endnote-11) as films belonging to a distinct generic group, con artist and con game films mobilize different discourses than crime films and thrillers. They tend, therefore, to produce meaning in ways that differ from films of other genres.

The rest of this essay is organized into two parts. Drawing on earlier work I have done on the con artist film and its con game film subcategory,[[12]](#endnote-12) in the first part I discuss the ways in which it differs from other genres, paying particular attention to its differences from the crime films and thriller labels that are well established in industrial and critical circles. The examples I provide in this section come primarily from US cinema, especially as there has been a long-established discourse about con artists and swindles that is strongly related to US culture.[[13]](#endnote-13) Once the generic specificity of the con artist and con game film is established, I discuss how this genre mobilizes the discourse of corruption, arguing that, in the US examples, it is invariably in individualistic terms that do not allow such films to provide strong political commentary or critique.

In the second section I turn my focus on *Nine Queens* and *Con Game*, paying particular attention to their narrative structure and mode of narration, arguing against accounts that are invested in them being significantly different in those aspects to their US counterparts, before examining the ways in which they mobilize the discourse of corruption. It is on this particular aspect that these films differ from their US relatives, as in their appropriation of the genre’s conventions they arguably mobilize the discourse of corruption as a national signifier, as endemic to Argentina, Peru and by extension to Latin America as a geopolitical region. Despite the fact that *Nine Queens* and *Con Game* were products of different national film industries, were made under dissimilar industrial and institutional arrangements, and drew on distinct cinematic traditions, the two share a number of elements that help explain their almost identical appropriation of the conventions of the con game film. Both films were credited with utilizing new narrative structures and styles that brought in fresh perspectives to the cinemas of their respective nations,[[14]](#endnote-14) and both attracted the attention of US film institutions, with *Nine Queens* becoming the first Argentine film to be remade by a US filmmaker (as *Criminal*) and *Con Game* the first Peruvian film to be accepted at the Sundance Film Festival.[[15]](#endnote-15) And of course both films were produced at an opportune time for Latin American cinema more broadly, when, according to Shaw, a number of directors and producers became more aware of the international market and adept at ‘rais[ing] funds, creat[ing] more audience friendly films and market[ing] their finished products’.[[16]](#endnote-16) Part of this process entailed the often extensive borrowing of genre formats from Hollywood cinema, which became assimilated into more local/national/regional expressions of filmmaking. It is that assimilation and especially the ways in which the discourse of corruption is mobilized that distinguishes these Latin American con game films from their US counterparts.

Although the con artist and con game films listed above come from the past few decades, there has been no shortage of similar titles throughout the history of US cinema.[[17]](#endnote-17) Indeed such films can be found right back at the origins of Hollywood, with one of the earliest titles being *Green Goods Man; or Josiah and Samanthy’s Experience with the Original ‘American Confidence Game’*, a 1905 short film made by Vitagraph and dealing with a couple’s encounter with a conman when they head from their home village to the city. Despite a number of these films being marketed openly as con artist films, which suggests that the US film industry has at times been aware of their generic specificity, this has rarely been noticed by the critics. Posters for some of the films have, however, drawn attention to this angle, with taglines such as ‘It’s the oldest con in the book’ (*The Spanish Prisoner*), ‘Another con. Another sting. Another day’ (*Where the Money Is* [Marek Kanievska, 2000]) or ‘Swindlers. Scammers. Con-men. As American as apple-pie’ (*Traveller* [Jack Green, 1997]), with the latter also supporting the point about the strong roots of confidence games, hustlers and swindlers in US culture. Why then, in light of such evidence, has the critical and scholarly community been so reluctant to accept them as examples of a distinct genre corpus?

As I discuss in detail in my book *The Spanish Prisoner*,[[18]](#endnote-18) the biggest problem in critically establishing a distinctive categorical identity for the con artist film lies in its ties with other genres, especially the crime film and the (suspense) thriller, with Amy Sargeant calling the ‘con’, within a film genre studies context, ‘a minor subcategory’ of the crime genre.[[19]](#endnote-19) This problem expresses itself here mainly in the commonsense view that con artists are indeed criminals and that con tricks constitute a form of crime, *irrespective* of the fact that the perpetrator of the con does not resort to violence or any other form of physical force to achieve their objective, which in most cases is the acquisition of material wealth belonging to someone else. Using false pretences to extract material wealth from unsuspecting people as a profession is in most cases illegal and therefore a crime, despite the fact that the exact same premise is acceptable (and rarely qualifies for legal punishment) when it takes place in a nonprofessional context, as part of everyday life, or even in certain professional contexts, especially those related to sales. For instance, if a salesperson used persuasive or hard-sell techniques to sell a product or a service that one might not necessarily need, and profited from that transaction, it is very easy to see the similarities with what is considered criminal activity in other contexts. Indeed, in his study of the impact of Bernard Madoff’s Ponzi scheme on his victims, Lionel S. Lewis remarks that ‘sometimes, the conman does nothing illegal; he has simply used lies and manipulation to get the victim to hand over his or her money’,[[20]](#endnote-20) which once again demonstrates the complex relationship of confidence games to crime.

It is this complexity, I argue, that has not allowed con artist films to be identified as such and to be perennially perceived as examples of much broader genres, especially the crime film and the thriller.[[21]](#endnote-21) As Neale suggests, however, generic specificity is not a question of particular and exclusive elements, however defined, but of exclusive and particular combinations and articulations of elements, of the exclusive and particular weight given in any one genre to elements that it in fact shares with other genres.[[22]](#endnote-22) The question, then, is which of the exclusive and particular combinations of elements it shares with other genres are chracteristic of the con artist film, and how are these articulated. Neale provides a way to answer this, arguing that ‘genres are modes of [Hollywood’s] narrative system’ and that their specificity can be determined by the ways in which they regulate the system’s potentiality. Different genres articulate, specify and represent equilibrium and disruption in different and differential ways, bringing into play ‘a particular combination of particular types or categories of discourse’. By looking at how the equilibrium of a particular narrative order is disrupted, the critic is in a position to start determining the marks of generic specificity as those are articulated ‘in terms of conjunctions and disjunctions between a set of discursive categories and operations’.[[23]](#endnote-23)

In Neale’s view, the Western, gangster, detective and crime films are examples of genres where the disruption of equilibrium is ‘always figured literally – as physical violence’, which also becomes the ‘means’ by which the disequilibrium will give way to a restored equilibrium, when (social) order is re-established. For this reason, Neale continues, both equilibrium and disequilibrium ‘are signified specifically in terms of Law, in terms of the absence/presence, effectiveness/ineffectiveness of legal institutions and their agents’. Consequently the discourses brought into play by the genres cited above are discourses about ‘crime, legality, justice, social order, civilisation, private property, civic responsibility and so on’. The difference between these genres, then, exists in the ‘*precise weight* given to the discourses they have in common, in the inscription of these discourses across more *specific* generic elements and their imbrication across codes specific to cinema’.[[24]](#endnote-24) As I shall demonstrate, it is this loose understanding or lack of precision by critics of how these films utilize particular generic elements they share with other genre films that has prevented the con artist film from becoming more established as a film genre in its own right.

Following Neale, I have examined elsewhere the disruption of narrative equilibrium in a number of recent US films that revolved around confidence games, and found that violence is not responsible for the disruption of the equilibrium in any of the films of my corpus.[[25]](#endnote-25) While in a couple of films violence is present in the scenes that lead to equilibrium disruption, especially in the films *The Sting* and *Confidence*, its contribution to narrative events is rather peripheral (with the violence that disrupts the equilibrium in *Confidence* quickly turning out to be staged by a crew of conmen). Instead it is the failure in one or more characters’ cognitive abilities to recognize the truth behind appearances, to distinguish between substance and effect, to know the difference between performance and reality, that sets the disruption of equilibrium in motion. In this respect, although violence does lurk underneath the shadowy transactions of the con artists with their potential victims, it expresses itself only occasionally and does not necessarily impinge on the trajectory of the narrative.[[26]](#endnote-26)

If failure to recognize the truth behind appearances is the main mechanism that disrupts narrative equilibrium, then not surprisingly it is the character’s ability to finally locate the truth – which often leads to another, larger, truth amidst a web of lies and deceit – that brings a new equilibrium in con artist film narratives. In other words, it is the re-establishment of the proper function of a character’s cognitive skills that acquires a primary role in the resolution of the narrative, often to the detriment of other structurally important narrative components, such as recovering their money/goods or punishing the perpetrators of the con. In this respect, violence may be present once again but it still remains incidental or peripheral to the action.

If the disruption and the restoration of equilibrium in con artist films are not marked by acts of physical violence – as is the case in Western, gangster, detective and crime films – it is clear that we are dealing with a generically different category of film. It is also clear that con artist films would mobilize discourses that are different from those identified by Neale in the above genres and which include crime, legality, justice and social order, among others. As I have argued previously, the main discourse brought in to play in con artist films is that of human nature, with particular emphasis on the psychology of the human mind and the ways it is motivated, particularly by greed.[[27]](#endnote-27) Discourses about crime, justice and legality are also invoked by these films but tend to assume a secondary role. Legal institutions and their agents are largely absent from such films, or if they are present they tend also to be greedy, pretending to be law agents when they are actually con artists or simply peripheral to the narrative events and therefore minor contributors to any equilibrium restoration. This explains why these discursive categories are not mobilized with any force and sometimes not mobilized at all, while also raising questions about Navitski’s application of the term ‘new *policiales*’ to a film such as *Nine Queens*, in which legal institutions are almost completely absent.

Before moving to examine in what ways these two Latin American films can participate in these debates, this section finishes with a brief discussion of the distinction between con artist films and con game films. As there are far fewer examples of the latter, I have chosen to treat them as an important subcategory of the former, given that they have a number of significant differences, especially in terms of narrative structure. More specifically, the narrative in con artist films is usually structured around a swindler or a group of swindlers, who apply the tricks of their trade to unsuspecting characters with the main objective of acquiring material wealth. The placing of such characters in the position of the protagonist, whose psychological motivations and actions drive the narrative forward, however, constitutes an important aesthetic choice. By locating the swindler(s) at the epicentre of action, con artist films actively seek the spectator’s complicity in at least some aspects (planning, execution, erasing traces of the crime) of the con they commit. To this end, it is the job of the narration to keep the spectator in doubt as to the outcome of the con(s) by withholding crucial information from the beginning. Films such as *The Sting*, *Traveller*, *The Grifters*, *Confidence* and *American Hustle* (David O. Russell, 2013) are good examples of con artist films.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Conversely, the narrative of a small number of films such as *House of Games*, *The Spanish Prisoner* and *Matchstick Men* is structured around a protagonist who assumes the role of the victim in what turns out to be an elaborate con rather than the perpetrator of it. This means that emphasis here lies on the actual trick, scheme or swindle, and in particular on the moment of recognition by protagonist and spectator alike that they have been ‘played’ from the very beginning. This means that all the narrative events were in actual fact building blocks towards an elaborate con game that is not revealed as such until the very end of the film.[[29]](#endnote-29) In some extreme examples, the protagonist-victim is also a con artist by profession, which makes the moment of recognition even more poignant. *Matchstick Men* is the key such example in US cinema and *Nine Queens* also belongs to this group.

With the narrative emphasis on fooling both protagonist and spectator, it is not surprising that con game films are characterized by a mode of narration whose job is to conceal as well as it can any information that would lead the spectator to suspect if, and to what form and extent, a con is taking place. The organization of the narrative structure of the con game film around the story of a character who ends up being the ‘mark’ of a con ensures that the spectator occupies a similar position to the protagonist: the spectator also becomes a ‘mark’ to be fooled by the unfolding of the story. Having a false sense of security that he or she controls the narrative through the psychologically motivated actions of a protagonist who also (falsely) believes that they are in control of all events and transactions, the spectator comes in for a shock when they realize at the end of the film that neither the protagonist nor they ‘had a clue’ about the real nature of the narrative events.[[30]](#endnote-30)

To achieve the above objective effectively, narration in con game films presents an unusual degree of restrictedness to the actions of the main character, who will end up being the victim. The protagonists are present in virtually every single scene, which allows the unfolding of the story to be filtered solely through their individual perspectives. These perspectives are always presented by the narration as reliable and steadfast, since in the initial stages of such narratives the protagonists are represented as ‘knowledgeable’ individuals who are very good at what they do. As a result, the spectator has no reason not to invest in the credibility of the protagonists as intelligent characters, more likely to be the perpetrators than the actual marks of the expected con (Marcos, the master conman in *Nine Queens* who ends up being swindled, is an excellent case in point). For this reason, part of the surprise or shock experienced by the spectator at the end of those films is due to the investment they have made in the credibility of the protagonist’s knowledge.Such a use of narration is designed to have a more dramatic impact on the spectator than the narration in the con artist films, which tends to have a greater omniscience and aims to create suspense rather than shock or surprise.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Despite the extreme extent of the narration’s restrictedness in con game films, the spectator is always afforded certain clues and, if alert and vigilant, can obtain information not accessible to the central character. These clues can take several forms, such as rare omniscient moments, frames specifically composed to convey information only to the spectator, meanings conveyed by the juxtaposition of shots, and other techniques associated with a film’s mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing and sound. But in order for spectators to be successful in this pursuit of superior knowledge (to that of the protagonist), they must question from the start the protagonist’s perception and intelligence, as these are never as adequate as the narration would have them appear. Even in this case, however, the audience often has to deal with a narration that can and does resort to unreliability at critical stages during the course of the narrative. In certain films, even the most alert of spectators has no alternative means at their disposal to anticipate the specifics of the outcome of the narrative trajectory. This is the moment the spectator realizes that, just like the protagonist, he or she was set up by the narration to occupy the position of the mark.

I now move on to examine how this particular subcategory of the con artist film manifests in the two Latin American titles. As already mentioned, *Nine Queens* is one of a handful of con game films in which the protagonist–victim is also a con artist. *Con Game*, on the other hand, is unusual in that the protagonist–victim is not one person but a group of people, who all fail to see that the Spanish millionaire promising them wealth is a conman, thus its narration is not restricted but filtered through a number of perspectives. Whatever their differences in terms of the use of narration, the two films appropriate the genre conventions in very similar ways and, equally importantly, mobilize the same discourses. As I go on to argue, it is at this point where these Latin American con game films diverge significantly from their US counterparts, as the discourses brought into play are articulated in social/national rather than individualistic terms, which makes the former more political than the latter. This is because both *Nine Queens* and *Con Game* mobilize these discourses as part of fictional narratives that nevertheless are linked to real historical events associated with corruption in their respective countries: the collapse of the economy in Argentina in the late 1990s, and the Fujimori government corruption hearings in Peru, respectively. In other words, these Latin American con game films avoid making their stories completely fictional, as is the case with all contemporary US titles,[[32]](#endnote-32) and locate the source of this corruption in the state and its institutions during specific historical moments. As a result they are able to mount critiques of particular political and ideological formations that are missing from their US counterparts.

From the two films under examination, *Nine Queens* has attracted the most critical and scholarly attention by far. Released in Argentina in August 2000, the film recorded an exceptional performance at the box office. On the back of this success it played at a number of high-profile international film festivals and secured commercial distribution in several countries, including the USA, where it was released by studio speciality film division Sony Pictures Classics. This visibility put *Nine Queens* on the radar of several mainstream critics and reviewers, who almost unanimously praised the film, with *The Guardian*’sJoe Queenan giving it his ‘stamp of approval’ and stating that it ‘puts to shame most motion pictures by contemporary Hollywood directors’,[[33]](#endnote-33) and *The Independent*’s Jonathan Romneycalling it a ‘superbly entertaining film’ and correctly predicting its potential for remake in the USA (which happened a few years later, in 2004).[[34]](#endnote-34)

Not surprisingly the film was also discussed extensively by scholars, especially as it was released during a period when a number of Latin American films had found significant critical and commercial success in the USA and Europe, which attracted the attention of a well-established academic community with an interest in Latin American cinema.[[35]](#endnote-35) In my discussion of *Nine Queens* as an example of a con game film, I engage specifically with the work of Gabriela Copertari, Deborah Shaw and Rielle Navitski as they make concrete references to its generic qualities, while also drawing on certain approaches to the film made by Stephen M. Hart, Joanna Page and Amy Sargeant.

In the introduction to her collection *Contemporary Latin American Cinema*,Shaw argues that the film can be viewed either as a generic scam movie or as an Argentine film rooted in a national tradition and concerned with contemporary sociopolitical issues,[[36]](#endnote-36) praising its ability to be a commercial genre film but without sacrificing elements that link it to a more politicized tradition of Argentine and Latin American cinema. However, in her actual chapter on the film in the same collection, Shaw seems either to equate the ‘scam movie’ with the ‘crime thriller’ or to use the terms interchangeably, suggesting a common specificity to what are, as I argue, two different genres. As she writes, *Nine Queens*

is concerned with local issues that have resonance in the social-political landscape of contemporary Argentina, while also being a film rooted in the internationally recognisable genre of *the scam movie or crime thriller*, with a plot-driven narrative and an ingenuous twist that viewers can enjoy without any knowledge of Argentina.[[37]](#endnote-37)

A brief discussion of the ways in which narrative equilibrium is disrupted in the film will demonstrate how it departs from the violence-determined crime film and fits perfectly in the con artist/con game film canon as summarized above. In the opening sequence we witness Marcos helping Juan, who has been careless while performing a con trick in a petrol station in Buenos Aires, with a view to recruiting him as an assistant for his own more sophisticated swindles and potentially conning him out of his own money. But Marcos fails to see that Juan is not the novice conman he pretends to be, but is instead the frontman for a con gang that includes Marcos’s brother and sister, all the members of which have been conned or mistreated in some way by Marcos. Violence is absent from the moment the disequilibrium starts taking shape, and it is almost nonexistent for the duration of the narrative. Indeed, while on a couple of occasions Marcos or other characters appear threatening or are ready to use a gun, it quickly transpires that this is all performance, part of the small schemes operated by Marcos or the larger scheme led by Juan.

Not surprisingly, the restoration of equilibrium takes place in a very similar way, with violence once again at the narrative periphery. Marcos finds out that the cheque he received from the businessman Gandolfo in exchange for the original *Nueve reinas* stamps is not worth the paper it was printed on, as the bank underwriting the cheque has just declared bankruptcy. This means that Marcos has lost almost $200,000 dollars of the money he spent on the original stamps in anticipation of selling them for a good profit to Gandolfo for $500,000. As it turns out, the sum Marcos loses is the money he made by conning his two siblings out of an inheritance deal. This money eventually reaches Marcos’s sister, who is revealed to be the other key organizer of an elaborate con, involving a set of ‘valuable stamps’, designed to make Marcos pay.

The narrative is not even curious about Marcos’s fate. The last time we see him, he is pushing his way into the bank trying to figure out what happened – in other words, trying to re-establish the healthy function of his cognitive skills that have proved so deficient – and to see if there is any way he can save even a fraction of his money. After this scene, the camera follows Juan as he makes his way to the gang’s headquarters, where we discover the details of the master con. We see Juan and the rest of the players celebrating the successful execution of the scheme, not the fact that he fooled Marcos. The other members of the gang make comments about the nature of the swindle and what they will do with the money; as the spectator tries to piece together the details, Marcos is the last thought on anyone’s mind. This is another difference between the US con game films and the appropriation of the genre’s conventions by *Nine Queens*: in films such as *House of Games*, *The Spanish Prisoner* and *Matchstick Men*, the narrative stays with the victim and ends with a focus on them.

This generically specific analysis goes against Shaw’s argument that *Nine Queens* ultimately reveals itself as a ‘retribution, in which a community of honourable thieves (and Marcos’s sister) work together to take revenge against one amoral individual’.[[38]](#endnote-38) Although revenge certainly is a strong motivation – everyone involved in the con has experienced Marcos’s devious ways – the final scene greatly downplays the notion of ‘justice being done’. Instead it invites the audience to enjoy the formation/unification of the heterosexual couple as Juan gives Marcos’s sister, Valeria, a ring (figure 1), while the rest of the group are immersed in their game of poker and utter only an occasional comment on the con and its execution. In many ways the end of *Nine Queens* resembles that of the archetypal con artist film *The Sting* when the initial narrative motivation of revenge has subsided, lost amidst the intricacies of well-executed swindles and the con artists’ success in fooling their victim.

Given the film’s close adherence to fundamental rules of the genre (with the exception of showing no interest in the fate of the victim), it is not surprising that its narrative structure and mode are also very similar to US examples of the genre. Like the two David Mamet films, *House of Games* and *The Spanish Prisoner*, to which it has often been compared,[[39]](#endnote-39) *Nine Queens* draws its power from restricting its narration to Marcos’s perspective, presenting him from the beginning as ultra-confident, quick on his feet and ready for everything, a conman whose ability cannot be questioned by the spectator. This makes the final revelation that he has been fooled all along even more shocking, and the narration works hard to keep the spectator almost completely in the dark about the real nature of events. Of course for the ultra-alert spectator, one whose cognitive skills are fine-tuned and who has seen many con game films, there are some clues interspersed throughout the narration. For instance, Copertari discusses in some detail how mise-en-scene, cinematography and music combine to provide clues for the benefit of the spectator, while Hart correctly identifies certain scenes as so obviously staged that they allow spectators to understand that a con is underway, at the same time disguising a second, larger con.[[40]](#endnote-40) In terms of omniscience, however, there is only one such moment, when the camera leaves Marcos and follows Juan, as he goes to pick up his own savings to contribute to the sum of money needed to buy the stamps. Despite the camera lingering on him for some time, no clues are provided to Juan’s identity as the real mastermind of the con.

With *Nine Queens* continuing to ‘behave’ as a US con game film in terms of narrative organization and mode of narration, and by not using violence in the disruption and restoration of its narrative equilibrium, one wonders how it manages also to assert its identity as an Argentine film, part of the New Argentine Cinema, for which it attracted a lot of praise.[[41]](#endnote-41) According to Copertari, the film’s main theme is ‘demand for justice’, which allows it to connect to ‘broader social demand for justice existing in Argentine society as a response to the deception and disillusionment produced by the “promise of globalization”’.[[42]](#endnote-42) She argues, however, that the satisfying end to the film is actually itself deceptive, as behind the truth about the deceit that the spectator learns at the end of the film there is a second ‘disquieting truth’. That is the idea that the ‘reparation’ that took place following the punishment of Marcos (who stands as a metaphor for ‘the wholesale deception that defrauded Argentine society in the 1990s with the illusory promise of wealth and welfare’) materialized through the exact same means – deception. If efforts for social restitution depend and are enacted on actions of fraud and deception, Copertari continues, then the film’s last disquieting truth is that Argentina does not (and cannot) fight for reparation through ‘communitarian rearticulations’, as there are no community structures, just ‘pure simulation’.[[43]](#endnote-43)

My interest in this position lies in the fact that, for Copertari, this surprising and disquieting final revelation ‘disappoints the expectations of the genre’, which she calls ‘the grifter thriller’.[[44]](#endnote-44) She does not outline what these expectations are, but I would argue that *Nine Queens* disappoints the genre’s expectations only if the critic locates these within the thriller, another genre that has its own ‘exclusive and particular combinations and articulations of elements’, in Neale’s words. Indeed, in his more recent work on genre and Hollywood cinema, Neale locates the ‘suspense thriller’ together with the gangster and detective film as subcategories of a broader, more encompassing ‘crime film’ genre,[[45]](#endnote-45) which suggests that the thriller too is defined by how violence is articulated and the discourses such articulation mobilizes. Under the umbrella of the crime film genre, the thriller has been built on long-established conventions that want good to triumph over evil, crime and violence to be punished, the law to be asserted and order to be restored, clearly pointing to the kind of ‘soothing ends’ Copertari expects such films to produce.[[46]](#endnote-46)

The expectations of the con artist and con game film genre, however, are different. With its relative absence of violence and legal institutions, and its emphasis on truth being at odds with appearances and people being unable to see right from wrong until this is restored at the end of the film, often with dire consequences, this genre cultivates a different horizon of expectations. The films cue the protagonists and spectators to receive a shocking truth at the very end, which, as I noted in the previous section, leads to another, broader and even more significant truth about themselves, society, the world: a truth that rarely is soothing, a truth that *is* disquieting. For instance, in *House of Games* the con triggers a sort of psychic liberation for the film’s protagonist, which encourages her to follow her instincts, including living as a thief. In the *Spanish Prisoner* the protagonist Joe Ross manages to expose an elaborate con only to find himself completely alone in the world, without friends, family, partner, job and money, demonstrating the crushing and total alienation of corporate capitalism. It is clear, then, that the disquieting truth of the final scene in *Nine Queens* discussed by Copertari does not disappoint the expectations of this genre. If anything, it fully confirms these expectations, if the location of the genre is correctly identified; indeed, the idea that Argentine society ‘is not and was not an innocent victim’ is certainly a ‘truth’ that the film does not shy away from.

However, arguably the strongest indicator of *Nine Queens*’ generic specificity as a con game film and as different from the US examples of the genre can be seen in the kinds of discourses that it mobilizes. As I discussed in the previous section, the main discourses mobilized by US con artist and con game films are ones that have to do with human nature, psychology and greed, always articulated in individualistic terms. *Confidence* is perhaps the best example to make this point, with its main character and narrator – master conman Jake Vig – describing the susceptibility of some people to confidence tricks as an ‘itch’ they develop from proximity and exposure to wealth that does not belong to them. This ‘itch’, however, is construed always as the product of a twisted individual psychology and therefore never identified as a characteristic of the US nation. In this respect, although the whole of the film’s microcosmos consists of corrupt individuals, this cannot be taken as representative of the real world, of a contemporary USA. Corruption never becomes an emblematic discourse of the US con artist film and its presence tends to be undermined by other much more visible discourses, such as those concerning human greed.

*Nine Queens* as a con game film, however, articulates the discourses of the psychology of the human mind and greed not in individualistic terms but in social/national terms and within what we could call ‘the master discourse of corruption’, which assumes a much more prominent and visible role in the film than in the US examples of the genre. Nowhere in *Nine Queens* is this clearer than in a celebrated montage sequence in which Marcos shows Juan how the whole world around him is corrupt. At the beginning of this sequence the film continues with its naturalistic aesthetic, as Marcos starts his diatribe about how everyone around them (and by extension in Argentina) has only one objective in mind, which is to fleece the person standing next to them. Discreetly he points out to Juan some (rapidly edited) street scenes in which certain people look like they are getting ready to hit a mark (figures 2 and 3):

Do you want to see thieves? Come. Those two are … waiting for someone with a briefcase on the street side. That one, sizing up loaded victims. They are there, but you can’t see them. That’s what it’s all about. They’re there, but they aren’t. So mind your briefcase, your case, your door ... your window, your car, your savings. Mind your ass. Because they’re there and they’ll always be.

But once Juan interrupts him, uttering the word ‘thieves’, the film eschews its naturalism. The ambient street sounds of Buenos Aires that have accompanied the film to that point are muted, while Marcos ‘jumps out’ of the diegesis and assumes the role of extratextual narrator (even though in theory he is supposed to be talking to Juan). Meanwhile the montage sequence becomes even faster as it continues to show large numbers of people ready to make a move on a mark, while others check their pockets, purses and wallets to ensure that they still have their money. Marcos continues:

No ... that’s what everybody calls them. They are spitters, breakers, skin workers, blind fronts ... hoisters, hooks, stalls, petermans, night raiders, spitters ... mustard chuckers, fences, operators, swindlers ...

The film then returns to its naturalistic aesthetics, making it clear that the montage sequence was a direct statement about the complete and utter corruption that has engulfed Argentina, which of course explains why at the end of the film ‘justice is done’ by a group of individuals who are also corrupt and who cannot provide an alternative model for building Argentina’s social structure in a sound and stable manner, as Copertari argues. The generically motivated mobilization of the master discourse of corruption as a national signifier makes *Nine Queens* far more politicized than the US examples of the genre, in which nothing is articulated in national terms and there is no finger-pointing at US society as a whole. This is not to say that US con artist and con game films do not critique capitalism and its devastating effects on individual characters (as is the case, for instance, in *The Spanish Prisoner*); rather they avoid making explicit the foundational links between capitalism and American society and thus do not target any political, economic or other national institutions for critique. *Nine Queens*, on the other hand, clearly states that corruption in Argentina was not simply the product of a few bad apples with an itch for greed, but resulted from a nation guilty of defrauding itself and making fraud the structuring, organizational principle of its society.

The film’s strongly politicized views can also be seen explicitly in its penultimate sequence, in which Marcos goes to cash the cheque he was given by the millionaire Gandolfo, only to find himself faced with the bank’s closure, the Argentine banking system’s collapse and the country’s bankruptcy (figure 4). In this scene, where fiction meets a condensed version of ‘a historical and political local reality’[[47]](#endnote-47) (the country’s dire impoverishment under President Carlos Menem’s [1989–99] neoliberal reforms, which brought Argentina to a financial collapse in 2001 and caused scenes outsides banks similar to those shown in the film a year earlier),[[48]](#endnote-48) *Nine Queens* departs from the safe confines of a generically determined narrative and makes a strong statement about how Argentine society was led to economic disaster. As Hart suggests: ‘we can read this film as a story of national malaise, the bankruptcy of the Argentine economy […] along with the moral bankruptcy of the Argentine president who presided over this demise’.[[49]](#endnote-49) The explicit link between corruption and the state allows the film to assert an identity that sees it as ‘rooted in a national tradition and concerned with contemporary socio political issues’,[[50]](#endnote-50) while also continuing to provide generic pleasures with the successful execution of the con and the formation of the couple.

On the other hand, *Nine Queens* refrains from making its indictment more extreme by ignoring the issue of structural, state-sponsored violence addressed by other New Argentine Cinema titles, such as *El secreto de sus ojos*/*The Secret in their Eyes* (Juan José Campanella, 2009).[[51]](#endnote-51) Page has criticized *Nine Queens*’ lack of violence at a time when violence in Buenos Aires was escalating rapidly, calling it ‘an anachronistic exercise in displacement’.[[52]](#endnote-52) However, Page’s critique is once again for a film she identifies as a ‘crime thriller’, a film genre with violence at its core. Within the confines of a con game film, violence is not part of the genre’s horizon of expectations, which suggests that *Nine Queens*’ political critique is generically motivated.

Although this last point may suggest that the film’s political agenda was not as ambitious as it might have been, a brief comparison with the film’s US remake *Criminal* shows that they were miles apart in terms of addressing political issues. While *Criminal* follows closely the plot of *Nine Queens*, relocating the story to Los Angeles and making its two protagonists a white American (Richard, the ‘Marcos character’) and a Mexican American (Rodrigo, the ‘Juan character’), it departs radically at the point when Richard goes to the bank to cash his cheque. Instead of exploring the possibility for social critique by linking this to historical events, *Criminal* has its master conman Richard arrested inside a bank for trying to cash in what turns out to be a counterfeit cheque. If anything, *Criminal* suggests that the US banking system is extremely robust, with its employees vigilant enough to spot the rotten elements of society and help put them away (figures 5 and 6). The implication is – at the time of the film’s release under the extreme rightwing administration of George W. Bush – that there is nothing wrong with US society as a whole or with the corporate capitalist system upon which it is organized. In this respect, even though the rest of *Criminal* unfolds in very similar ways to its Argentine counterpart, it is clear that it mobilizes the discourse of corruption in individualistic terms.

Although *Nine Queens* attracted significant critical attention and therefore became my main case study in demonstrating the benefits of approaching it as a generically specific example of the con game film, this was not the case with *Con Game*. Despite screening at numerous festivals, it received very limited distribution outside Latin America. As a result it has hardly featured in any critical or scholarly account of Latin American cinema and is only briefly mentioned in the recent *History of Latin American Cinema*, in the biography of its director Albert Durant.[[53]](#endnote-53) As my discussion will show, *Con Game* is organized generically in very similar ways to its US con game film relatives but, *like Nine Queens*, brings into play as a master discourse the complete and total corruption of its native country. And it similarly showcases its political intent by linking its narrative fiction to real political events from Peru’s recent past.

The film’s narrative deals with the interactions of seven Peruvians in dire economic straits with a Spanish man, Salvador, who professes to be a millionaire and, over the course of two days, promises everyone wealth in the form of a new job. As it turns out, Salvador is a conman exploiting the insecurities and aspirations of these people as these become known to his hairdresser girlfriend, who has some of them as her clients. In a deeply self-reflexive tone, which shows exactly how the genre operates, the film opens with brief shots of the seven Peruvians going about their lives as they all complain about lack of money or opportunity and about being trapped in relationships of convenience in order to survive. The narrative then follows one of the characters, aspiring filmmaker Rafo, who also assumes the role of extradiegetic narrator (figures 7 and 8):

I used to think these stories only happened to others, until that Monday when I was coming out of the market with Laura and I encountered this situation that I should have recognized as a sign of things to come. But of course, I did not pick up on it.

What follows is an unsuccessful attempt at a short con on Rafo, who escapes being swindled as he has no money to spare. But as his narration made clear a few seconds earlier, what is important is that he did *not recognize* that encounter as a con or as a sign of the bigger con to which he and the other six people will soon be subject. It is clear that the film locates itself immediately within the con artist film genre, where characters’ cognitive abilities to recognize the truth amidst the lies is the key structural component of the film, and it paves the way for the disruption of the equilibrium. Once again violence has nothing to do with this process and is in fact completely absent from all narrative events. The film finishes with everyone recognizing their role as pawns in an elaborate con game and with the hairdresser finding a new potential mark for her partner, so it is evident that this film also produces a disquieting truth behind the one that accompanies the narrative resolution. However, while in *Nine Queens* that deeper truth was that as a result of the massive failings of the political system, its institutions and its agents, Argentine society had no alternative to corruption and fraud, in *Con Game* this truth is articulated in slighter different terms:that there is no way out of systemic poverty and corruption, and that the people of Peru are condemned to a life of compromise in order to survive. This can be seen in the little coda to the film that informs us what happened to each character, with all but one deserting their aspirations and goals, and accepting compromised lives.

Although *Con Game* is typical of its genre in this respect, like *Nine Queens* it does not sacrifice political critique. The key discourse it mobilizes is once more that of corruption, articulated as an all-encompassing shadow that determines everyone’s life in modern Peru. With the exception of young apartment superintendent Wilson, who is last seen snatching a woman’s bag before disappearing, all the other characters who become victims of the Spanish millionaire are presented as fundamentally decent people caught in difficult financial circumstances. As a result they have to resort to corruption to survive, whether stealing from their parents (Rafo), prostituting themselves (Carmen) or attempting small cons on the side of their normal occupation (Jaime). In the narrative world of *Con Game*, corruption in modern-day Peru is unavoidable, and master conman Salvador has the nerve to tell Rafo and his girlfriend, as he is about to swindle $850 dollars from them, that ‘the problem of Peru is corruption’ and that ‘if Peru gets rid of it the country’s problems will be resolved’. As in *Nine Queens*, though, this level of corruption is directly linked to the country’s political elite, with the film’s fictional narrative taking place in the shadow of the major political scandal that shook Peru following the resignation and self-exile of its President Alberto Fujimori after leading the country throughout the 1990s. Like Menem in Argentina, Fujimori was also an advocate of strong neoliberal reforms, which he started implementing from the beginning of his tenure, with *The New York Times* referring to his economic and political approach as ‘“Fuji shock” austerity’.[[54]](#endnote-54) With revelations about his involvement in human rights abuses, death squads, bribes and other criminal offences, the 2000s saw Peru dealing with the aftermath of his administration, which involved trials and hearings of a very large number of people associated with his regime.

Rather than making this major historical sequence of events part of the diegesis, as was the case in *Nine Queens* when Marcos literally ‘bumped into’ Argentina’s economic crash and it became an active agent in his punishment, *Con Game* stages its fiction in the shadow of the Fujimori scandal. In a number of scenes we hear the news on the radio as it informs the nation of political developments. There are at least two examples of these broadcasts that link the corruption represented in the film’s narrative to that in Peru’s government. The first one takes place in the opening minutes of the film, functioning clearly as a context within which the spectator is invited to understand the unfolding narrative. While Jaime is driving his taxi we hear on the radio, ‘Now we learn the details of the video showing government corruption has just been made public. This video you are going to see …’, effectively introducing the details of this political corruption as played out by everyday people. Two thirds of the way into the film, and again from Jaime’s car radio, the news becomes more detailed:

Breaking news: a Congressman revealed that President Alberto Fujimori will not return to Peru. The Congressman confirmed that the President will ask for asylum in an Asian country. The same Congressman added that the President is on his way to Asia taking with him thirty suitcases.

Although this news acts as context and interpretative framework through which to understand the interactions between people in the narrative, it never becomes the subject of conversation for the characters, and otherwise remains outside the diegesis. Furthermore, no character offers comment or reveals their views on either the Fujimori scandal or any other political aspect of contemporary Peru. However, this disconnect is addressed towards the end of the film when we see Salvador trying to fleece a group of Japanese delegates at a conference on globalization. He pretends to work in the hotel where the conference takes place, and takes their passports and credit cards with the excuse that he needs them to open their room accounts (figure 9). Recognizing him as a swindler, Rafo stops him from executing this scheme but in the ensuing commotion Salvador escapes.

The scene fits rather awkwardly into the narrative, as the Japanese delegates are not part of the group of victims originally identified by the conman’s girlfriend (although the scene is motivated by earlier events in the narrative) and are therefore not linked directly with the interactions between Salvador and the seven key characters. It is clear that, just like the montage sequence in *Nine Queens*, this scene tries to make a point about Peru’s all-engulfing corruption in a more ‘presentational’ way, while the conference’s focus on globalization is a direct effort to link this corruption to the sweeping forces of globalization and neoliberalism as implemented by the Fujimori regime. Indeed, when we see Salvador holding a bunch of Japanese passports and credit cards in his hands, the film is making a very thinly disguised comment on Fujimori’s corruption and his fleeing to Japan, the Asian state that granted him political asylum. It looks like the president left the county but his legacy, the advent of globalization and neoliberalism, is there to stay, as the conference suggests. And if the equation of Fujimori with master conman Salvador is still just implied in this scene, no matter how strong the metaphor, *Con Game* saves its last shot for a piece of dialogue that makes this equation unequivocal. After informing us about the fate of most of the characters/victims, the coda ends with the con artist’s fate: ‘Salvador was last seen leaving Peru with a Japanese passport’ (figure 10). Once again a Latin American example of the con game film genre decides to place corruption as indicative of a whole nation and to link it directly to the film’s political operatives and the practice of politics and economics in the country.

In attempting to locate the generic specificity of two popular Latin American films that deal with swindles in the underdiscussed generic category of the con game film, I have explored here how the Argentine *Nine Queens* and Peruvian *Con Game* participate in that genre. Both films share a number of elements with key US examples of the genre, from the way their narrative is organized, to the role that narration plays in preparing their protagonists for the role of con victim, to the unsettling truths they reveal about particular issues. However, where they differ from US films are the ways in which they implicate political concerns that are specific to their respective countries and, arguably, to Latin America as a whole. In terms of that aspect, both films mobilize the master discourse of corruption, presenting it as totalizing, unavoidable and all-encompassing – the end product of particular systems and policies associated with neoliberalism. While the two narratives demonstrate corruption’s presence and catastrophic impact in fictional stories about con artists and swindles, they nonetheless do not miss an opportunity to link it directly with real political events that shook the foundations of their respective countries in recent years. As a result, alongside the pleasures they offer as part of their generic composition, *Nine Queens* and *Con Game* maintain their links with long-established interests of Latin American cinema in social and economic issues, and the ways these determine life in South America. Writing specifically about *Nine Queens* – but also applicable to *Con Game* – Shaw argues that the film ‘has at its heart national preoccupations of crime and corruption’, despite being rooted in a strongly generic tradition.[[55]](#endnote-55)

On the other hand, it is important not to overstate the extent to which these two films are able to represent the whole of the South America continent, especially when it comes to the ways in which they mobilize corruption and foreground it as a key national signifier. Produced around the same time in two different Latin American countries that were experiencing the immediate aftermath of catastrophic neoliberal policies, *Nine Queens* and *Con Game* may well represent a very particular picture of Argentina and Peru, respectively, or even more specifically a picture of their large capital cities, Buenos Aires and Lima. Indeed, one wonders whether smaller towns and rural areas in the two countries (and elsewhere in Latin America) are in a position to provide the setting for elaborate swindles or the means through which they could take place. What is more, if such confidence games cannot easily take place in smaller locations, one wonders whether the events depicted in the two films are largely associated with *porteño*s (literally ‘people of the port’, but more broadly a term associated with the people of Buenos Aires, Valparaiso and other major cities) who have proximity to wealth, can create opportunities to access it and can maintain anonymity within sprawling urban landscapes. In this respect it would be instructive to examine the generic specificity of these films not only in relation to their US counterparts but also to other films from these countries that represent everyday life in metropolitan centres during that particular historical period. Such an examination would allow an exploration of the extent to which these films also mobilize the discourse of corruption as a structuring principle of the various genres to which they might participate, or if this discourse remains central only to the con game film.

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1. As I will explain in detail later in the essay, for the purposes of critical examination I have called the genre ‘the con artist film’, which also includes an important and distinct subcategory, the ‘con game film’. The Latin American films I discuss both belong to this subcategory. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The only study dedicated entirely to the genre is Amy Sargeant, *Screen Hustles, Grifts and Stings* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2016), which approaches the topic from a cultural-historical perspective. My own work, Yannis Tzioumakis *The Spanish Prisoner* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), used David Mamet’s *The Spanish Prisoner* (1998) as an entry point to introducing the genre, drawing particularly on the work of Steve Neale, *Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1980). Lloyd Michaels, ‘The confidence man in modern film’, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 62, no 3 (1993), pp. 375–87, is the earliest effort to map the genre, but despite a robust analysis of examples such as *House of Games* and *The Magician* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966), the account is not theoretically informed. Rodanthi Tzanelli, Majid Yar and Martin O’Brien, ‘“Con me if you can”: exploring crime in American cinematic imagination’, *Theoretical Criminology*, vol. 9, no 1 (2005), pp. 97–117, discusses how the discourse of crime is used in one film (*Catch Me If You Can* [Steven Spielberg, 2002]) but is limited in the way it connects it primarily to other discourses about family and gender. Finally Ronald Geerts, ‘“The grift has a gentle touch” … or maybe not?’, in Johan Callens (ed.), *Crossings: David Mamet’s Work in Different Genres and Media* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 19–31, makes an interesting case for the existence of the genre by looking at its semantic and syntactic arrangement, though it also uses the term loosely, often referring to the con film as being the same as the confidence thriller, which in my view is characterized by different generic specificities. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. David Rooney ‘*Confidence*’, *Variety*, 27 April 2003, <http://variety.com/2003/film/reviews/confidence-1200542026> accessed 28 June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Leonard Klady ‘*The Spanish Prisoner*’, *Variety*, 21 September 1997, <http://variety.com/1997/film/reviews/the-spanish-prisoner-1117329519> accessed 28 June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Joanna Page, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. R. Hernandez-Rodriguez, *Splendors of Latin American Cinema* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), p. 134. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Rielle Navitski, ‘The last heist revisited: reimagining Hollywood genre in contemporary Argentine crime film’, *Screen*, vol. 53, no. 4 (2012), p. 359. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ana Laura Lusnich, ‘Electoral normality, social abnormality: the *Nueve reinas/Nine Queens* paradigm and reformulated Argentine cinema, 1989–2001’, in Cecilda Rêgo and Carolina Rocha (eds), *New Trends in Argentine and Brazilian Cinema* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), p. 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Gabriela Copertari,‘*Nine Queens*: a dark day for simulation and justice’, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Traversia*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2005), p. 280. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Deborah Shaw, ‘Playing Hollywood at its own game? Bielinsky’s *Nueve reina*s’, in Shaw (ed.), *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), p. 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Neale, *Genre*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Tzioumakis, *The Spanish Prisoner*, pp. 88–122. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See, in particular, Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (London: Constable, 1923 [1857]), considered one of the early instances when the term ‘confidence man’ was used. See also David W. Maurer, *The American Confidence Man* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1974), and William Goldhurst, *Our Own Confidence Man: A Study of His Origins and Developments in Our National Literature* (Gainsville, FL: Mister Print, 1979), which clearly show the presence of such tradition. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Jeffrey Middents, *Writing National Cinema: Film Journals and Film Culture in Peru* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009), p. 191. For a similar point on *Nine Queens*, see Shaw, ‘Playing Hollywood’, p. 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Middents, *Writing National Cinema*, p 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Deborah Shaw ‘Introduction’, in Shaw (ed.) *Contemporary Latin American Cinema*, p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Unless otherwise stated, and for the purposes of brevity, when I talk about the con artist film genre in this section, I also include in my discussion its con game film subcategory. Later in the same section I talk about the con game film more specifically. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Yannis Tzioumakis, *The Spanish Prisoner* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Sargeant, *Screen Hustles, Grifts and Stings*, p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Lionel. S. Lewis, *Con Game: Bernard Madoff and His Victims* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2012), p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Tzioumakis, *The Spanish Prisoner*, p. 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Neale, *Genre*, pp. 22–23. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., pp. 20–21. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. (my emphasis). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Tzioumakis, *The Spanish Prisoner*, pp. 102–04. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., p.102. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., p. 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., pp.108–09. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., p. 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., p. 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *Catch Me If You Can* is an exception here, as it is an adaptation of a partly fictionalized biography and is therefore based on real events. However, rather than these events being linked to specific political circumstances in the period covered by the film’s narrative (the 1960s), the film opts to steer clear of such references and focus almost exclusively on personal relations, an important choice given that films with a strong biopic focus frequently narrate a personal story within the context of political events that are vividly represented and often intersect with the narrative. *Catch Me If You Can* does not employ this convention. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Joe Queenan, ‘Stamp of approval’, *The* *Guardian*, 13 July 2002, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/jul/13/features.joequeenan> accessed 28 June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Jonathan Romney, ‘*Nine Queens*: beware of mustard chuckers’, *The Independent*, 14 July 2002, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/nine-queens-15-184585.html> accessed 28 June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Shaw, ‘Playing Hollywood’, pp. 67–85; Hernandez-Rodriguez, *Splendors of Latin American Cinema*; Page, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, pp. 86–96; Lusnich, ‘Electoral normality, social abnormality’, pp. 117–29; Copertari, ‘*Nine Queens*: a dark day for simulation and justice’, pp. 27–93; Navitski, ‘The last heist revisited’, pp. 359–80; Jens Andermann, *New Argentine Cinema* (London: IB Tauris, 2012), pp. 150–54. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Shaw, ‘Introduction’, p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Shaw, ‘Playing Hollywood’, p. 68 (my emphasis). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., p 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Tamara L. Falicov, *The Cinematic Tango: Contemporary Argentine Film* (London: Wallflower, 2007), p. 143, and Shaw, ‘Playing Hollywood’, p. 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Copertari, ‘*Nine Queens*: a dark day for simulation and justice’, pp. 282–84, and Stephen M. Hart, *Latin American Cinema* (London: Reaktion, 2015), p. 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. See Page, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, p. 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Copertari, ‘*Nine Queens*: a dark day for simulation and justice’, p. 280. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., pp. 281–82. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., p 280. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 71–85. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Copertari, ‘*Nine Queens*: a dark day for simulation and justice’, p. 290. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Lusnich, ‘Electoral normality, social abnormality’, p. 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Although, for Lusnich, this condensed version of history commences with the first efforts to deregulate the economy and annihilate the state, which she locates with the 1976 military coup. Ibid., p. 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Hart, *Latin American Cinema*, p. 114 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Shaw, ‘Introduction’, p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Navitski, ‘The last heist revisited’, p. 366. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Page, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, p. 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Peter H. Rist, *Historical Dictionary of South American Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), p. 228. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. James Brooke, ‘Peru’s poor feel hardship of “Fuji Shock” austerity’, *The New York Times*, 12 August 1990, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/12/world/peru-s-poor-feel-hardship-of-fuji-shock-austerity.html> accessed 28 June 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Shaw, ‘Introduction’, p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)