Hard Yards, Vulnerable Bodies: Tenderness in Two Recent Prison Films from Argentina and Chile

Introduction

Prison literature from Latin America has been a topic of growing interest for literary scholars of and from the region in recent years.[i] This reflects wider attention in cultural studies dedicated to "heterotopias" or "other spaces", while building on the work of sociologists who have studied prisons and prison reform in countries there. Less has been written, however, about films set in penitentiaries, and this is surprising given, firstly, the volume of material on the prison film genre in the Anglophone world; secondly, the role that filmic depictions of prison life play in public perceptions of the carceral system and penal policy; and, thirdly, the importance of this policy in political debates in recent years, particularly as levels of incarceration have grown worldwide and in many countries prisons have become increasingly cruel and dangerous places.

The relationship between prison and cultural production has long been of interest to researchers. In the 1980s, John Bender argued that eighteenth-century novels not only depicted the rise of the prison, but contributed to shaping their "institutional formation"; the prisons that emerged during this period adopted forms of "narrative" to "re-present the fiction of self conceived as real"; and prisons, like novels, told stories about people and society (1987: 38). As David Wilson and Sean O'Sullivan point out, even trivial prison-based entertainment contributes to the wider perception of prison and the society in which it exists; they suggest that "there is a need to take seriously the possibility that representations of prison in film and TV drama are an important source of people's implicit and commonsense understandings of prison" (2004: 8).

In the Latin American case, we can cite Joey Whitfield's book length study of prison writing, looking at works by the likes of José María Arguedas and others. Oliver Wilson-Nunn has also written on prison writing, for example Reinaldo Arenas's depiction of incarceration and escapism in memoir and fiction (2022b). Elsewhere, Wilson-Nunn notes the importance of affect in prison films (2022a: 906), to recognise, following the work of Laura Podalsky (and her influential 2011 study of affect in contemporary Latin American cinema), "the public and political charge of intimate and personal cinematic affect" (906), later in the same piece nuancing this as the "intimacy, deep interpersonal relationships, and corporeality" (911) that can be found in some prison films (documentaries, in his study). Intimacy, relationships, and feelings are the focus in this article, in particular with the link from sentiment to corporality, a central feature of the experience of tenderness, that strange feeling that incorporates the mental and the physical, emotional love and bodily vulnerability, at once

conforming to affect theory's ideas about non-personal, non-subject-based feelings (which often cannot be defined precisely, or at all, in language) while at the same time being an emotion – in English and in Spanish, as *ternura* – with a name and a person to which it can be ascribed. It is a term simultaneously associated with the individual and that which exceeds her; with the self and its *extension* (with which tenderness shares etymologically roots). We see this in two prison films from the Southern Cone – one fictional, *El Príncipe* (Sebastián Muñoz, Chile, 2019), and one documentary, *Rancho* (Pedro Speroni, Argentina, 2021). In both, feelings traverse the body-mind divide and cross between people, while portrayed with what we shall argue is a form of filmic tenderness. Furthermore, as shall be argued, the depiction of tenderness in these films underscores their potency as social critiques, pointing the viewer beyond prison reform towards wider social change.

The Prison Film

In a study from 1989, Bruce Crowther calculated that there were already at least 3,000 prison films in existence, the genre having emerged in the 1930s as an offshoot of the gangster movie (1989: 3). The prison film, however, is not simply entertainment. Dawn Cecil has examined the links between cinematic and televisual representations of prison and carceral policy (in particular in the US), linking the growth of certain more spectacular and sensationalist depictions with "penal populism" (2015: 3). Cecil argues that, "[l]atent lessons about masculinity are contained within nearly every type of prison imagery (2015: 16). Yet prison films can also serve as "propaganda" in favour of prison reform, which Cecil contrasts to televisual depictions, which tend towards "emotional manipulation, negative imagery, and violence" (2015: 15).

Michelle Brown has written extensively on visual depictions of prison, as well as editing a major collection of essays on the subject. She notes that, "The prison [...] epitomizes what it is to position people in fundamentally unequal structures. However, what prisoners, prison workers, and those who care about them share is an extreme sense of difference and isolation from society" (Brown 2009: 3). Brown coins the term "penal subjectivity" to describe the way in which such depictions allow viewers to "step into or out of self-conscious modes of awareness as moral spectators and deliberative citizens" (2009: 5). What is missing, however, in many of these depictions, is a central element of punishment today: "its infliction of pain" (9). Given the prevalence of prison in films, television, and other media, especially forms of entertainment (including video games), "the contemporary experience of punishment is far more dominating (but not without ambivalence), wide-ranging, and deeply embedded in social life than previous studies of penal imagery or practice have permitted" (15). Brown concludes that, "cinema has served as a prolific and active site for the complex cultural enactment of punishment and the prison a persistent resource for narrative drama" (58). Films can function as a "primer [...] in prison sociology, introducing their viewers to the

mechanical daily routines and bureaucratic processes of imprisonment typically through the entry of a central character into the overwhelming subculture of the institution" (58) – something we see in the two films under analysis.

As Dario Llinares notes, a "fundamental paradox" besets the prison film: the boredom and repetition of forced incarceration is at odds with the entertainment and excitement that audiences demand of a commercial product.[ii] Many films thus offer "the spectacle of the masculine body punishing or being violently punished" (Llinares 2015: 207). With some notable exceptions, "the generic constraints of prison films have traditionally not allowed for a more self-reflexive deconstruction of masculinity" (2015: 212); in *El Príncipe* and *Rancho*, however, such "deconstructions" are present, as shall be explored. In a brief piece, Inez Hedges assesses the many ways in which prison films can address their subject – from sensationalism and reaction, to a genuine interest in rehabilitation and education (2014: 204), including films in which we "identify with and care about the fate of a prisoner" (2014: 206); this latter aspect features strongly in the films under discussion.

Violence is a central element of the prison movie, especially in the depiction of relationships between men. Sabo, Kupers and London assert that, "Prison violence reflects [...] everyday violence" (2001: 12). Like many commentators, they address specifically sexual violence in jail; though, as they put it, "[r]ape is by no means the whole story of male sexuality in prison" (2001: 11). As Ricciardelli and Bartlett observe, "prison challenges masculinities, shapes masculinities, and is shaped by masculinities – all at the hands of those living and working inside such spaces" (2023: 221). In depictions of prison, there is also the risk of sensationalism: Loïc Wacquant has written of the growth under neoliberalism of "penal pornography", spectacular entertainment based around the prison (2009: xi-xii). Wacquant highlights the racialized nature of the penal system; he also sketches a political conjuncture in which the state withdraws socially and economically but with a "massive expansion of its penal fist" (4). Societies at the turn of the century take a "resolutely punitive turn" (11), alongside a "new government of social insecurity" and "the penalization of poverty" (12). And yet, for Wacquant, "The criminal produces [...] art, literature, novels and the tragic drama" (29-30), and thus is a central figure in cultural production today. In the Southern Cone context, the writer, editor and activist Nicolás Almeida has written of the "estado punitivista" (2023) supported by broad sectors of society, with its twin imposition of "tortura" and "olvido" on incarcerated persons, the vast majority from the poorest and most disadvantaged sectors of society, discriminated against on racial and class lines, and whose sentences affect not just individuals but also families and communities linked to them. For Andrés Antillano and Luis Duno-Gottberg, Latin American prisons are sites of "abandonment", of perceived "surplus population, discarded and contained" (2021: 385).

In *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Angela Davis makes a stirring case for prison abolition, questioning society's ability to "take prison for granted" (2003: 15), even in the age of the "prison industrial complex" (16). Prison, for Davis, is a racist institution (26), in the US and beyond; it is also one structured by gender (61). Davis is just one of a number of abolitionist scholars. As David Scott argues, prison "performs a key function in the maintenance of blatantly unequal societies through the control of the poor, marginalised and disproportionately BME male lawbreakers" (Scott 2018: 216); in another piece, he proposes that the worldwide increase in imprisonment "has more to do with its role in the control of certain identifiable groups of people rather than as a rational response to crime" (Scott 2013: 2). Davis highlights the role of film and television in normalisation, in creating a "sense of familiarity" with prison. Yet few prison films are plainly abolitionist; reformism is the norm. One might cite Daniel Monzón's surprise hit *Celda 211* (Spain, 2009), starring Luis Tosar, but in general prison films do not seem minded to smash the system they portray. Both *El Príncipe* and *Rancho*, however, while never didactic, oblige viewers to think beyond the status quo, and, particularly in the case of the Argentine film, beyond simply improving the current system.

Prison in Latin America: fact and fiction

In the Southern Cone context, Máximo Sozzo has traced the recent history of "penal populism" in both the political classes and wider society, with "punitiveness" becoming a "pseudo-commodity" on the electoral market (2016: 310). Prison in Latin America is highly racialized; as Rita Segato, argues, and Wacquant would surely agree, the "colour" of the prison population is a legacy of colonial domination that continues to this day (Segato 2007: 142). Elsewhere, Segato has spoken in favour of prison reform (rather than abolition), and about the role of activism to restore a voice to those in jail ("El sistema penal"). Sozzo has also noted the role of prisoners in self-organisation, playing a key role in prison governance (2016); Jennifer Peirce explores, on the basis of extensive fieldwork, such prisoner-led organisation of life in Latin American jails, itself a side-effect of overcrowding and under-resourcing. She calls these "co-governance" arrangements (2023: 47).[iii] This extends to interpersonal relations, from the limited and strategic use of violence and threat, to the "version of masculinities much more akin to a paternal figure than a thug or gangster" (62). This "fatherly quality" is also noted, particularly among "lifers", by Ricciardelli and Bartlett (2023: 223). The films analysed below feature such quasi-familial relationships, with paternal and avuncular figures.

In his study of prison literature in Latin America, Joey Whitfield makes four central points: firstly (following Segato, Aníbal Quijano, and others), that the contemporary prison is a feature of continued coloniality; secondly, prison literature "undermines any notion that prison serves to rehabilitate or reform"; thirdly, that imprisonment has not become any less harmful over time; and, finally, that attempts at reform, especially by adopting standards and practices from the USA, should

be viewed with suspicion (2018: 182-83). A moment in his analysis provides an entry point for the study in hand. In a section on the Cuban writer Ángel Santiesteban's short story "La puerca", Whitfield relates how characters respond to an incident of sexual violence in jail; although Whitfield uses the term "affection" in his translation, the original term to describe the gaze between an "alpha male" and his new partner is "ternura" (Whitfield 2018: 103). While Whitfield's translation is not incorrect, it is the intention of this paper to turn attention toward *ternura*, to tenderness, more specifically, and to explore the cinematic and wider social consequences of its depiction in these films.

As Gonzalo Aguilar points out, the prison has been a potent symbol in the history of Latin American cinema, films often reflecting less real conditions than the "imaginario social" (2007: 165). In films such as *Deshonra* (1952, dir. Daniel Tinayre), there is a strong tendency towards melodrama in the depiction of apparent threats to the social order, such as women's liberty or sexual freedoms (2007: 165). Aguilar notes, too, that the culture industry discovered, at some stage during the twentieth century, that fictional depictions of jail could be "un gran negocio" (2007: 172). Prison films often find themselves trapped between state-drive populism and media-industry demands (2007: 178). In the latter case, we might cite the enormously successful Televisión Pública/Netflix series, *El marginal*, starring (for four of its five series) Juan Minujín, and its combination of suspenseful thriller, *Grand Guignol*, and graphic, often sexual/ized, violence. More progressive models do exist, in the classics of cinema and more recently: Miguel Littín's highly realist story of senseless murder and failed rehabilitation, based on real events, *El Chacal de Nahualtoro* (Chile, 1969); or Leonardo Favio's critically lauded *Crónica de un niño solo* (Argentina, 1965), a denunciation of child poverty and the *reformatorio* (borstal) system. We might also cite Héctor Babenco's adaptation of Manuel Puig's novel, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985, Brazil / USA), exploring the conjunction of queer life and left-wing politics in a dictatorial prison cell, transplanted by the director from Argentina to Brazil. We have, too, Pablo Trapero's version of the "woman-in-jail" plot, *Leonera* (2008), a commercially and critically successful venture into prison drama for a director previously renowned for low-budget social cinema. The recent Paraguayan LGBTQI+ drama, *Las herederas* (Marcelo Martinessi, 2018), features a "fish-out-of-water" subplot, one half of an older female couple jailed for fraud, forcing the other to forge a new life and identity. David Scott has argued for "fostering informed public opinion beyond the restrictive remit of mainstream media" (Scott 2018: 221). Politically progressive prison films tend to foreground emotion; one can often find tenderness and affection in these Latin American examples. One review of *Imperdonable* (Marlén Viñayo, El Salvador, 2020, in English known as *Unforgiveable*), a documentary centred on gay former gang members jailed in El Salvador, points to the difficult coexistence of great tenderness and extreme violence *(Economist*). Brett Story

has written of the risks of a "humanizing" prison cinema (2017: 455) that evades questions about policy and politics through a focus on individual stories. Can film promote serious reflection about the merits of incarceration while telling a compelling story, creating what Brown (above) called "penal subjectivities"? To answer this question, this article addresses the presence of tenderness in two prison films from the Southern Cone. Both, it shall be argued, in their nuanced cinematic approaches to the difficult and knotty question of feelings and relationships behind bars, provoke viewers to look beyond reformist solutions within jails themselves and to wider social questions, including sexual rights and socio-legal attitudes towards the pool and marginalised in the region.

The Colt and the Prince

From Chile, and the director Sebastián Muñoz, comes a radical take on the genre, foregrounding the prison as a gay and/or queer space, and offering an at times highly stylised aesthetic. *El Príncipe* (2019), is a prison drama based on a cult underground novel by Mario Cruz. Set in early the 1970s, during the presidency of Salvador Allende, it tells the story of a young man, Jaime (Juan Carlos Maldonado), jailed for a violent "crime of passion", the nature and motives of which are hinted at and then shockingly revealed over the length of the movie. Behind bars he strikes up an intense and conflictive sexual relationship/friendship with an older man, "El Potro" (the colt), played by Alfredo Castro.

The director of *El Príncipe* found the novel on which it is based in a second-hand book stall in Santiago (Reyes Gil 2022: 93). As Sebastián Reyes Gil observes, its focus is "una homosexualidad popular y urbana, asociada a la cultura juvenil, donde las relaciones sexuales entre hombres son explícitas, y donde aparecen también elementos de estética *camp*" (94). It is not an experimental novel, nor one notable for the typical techniques of 1970s Latin American fiction (self-referentiality, metalepsis, parody and pastiche, for example); there is some distance to, for example, Puig's *Beso de la mujer araña*. It is, though, a story of "amores heterotópicos, donde el espacio es determinante para el surgimiento de relaciones homoeróticas" (2022: 96); it is set in a jail that illustrates quite aptly, at times shockingly, Antillano and Duno-Gottberg's assertion that in many Latin American systems the authorities are unable "to offer security, maintain peace, or even to guarantee the basic minimums for subsistence" (2021: 393).

The narrative arc of the film (flashbacks aside – see below), can be summarised as the process by which Jaime, nicknamed "El Príncipe" (the prince) for his rather aloof manner on arrival in the jail, comes to succeed El Potro as the head man of both his cell and, it seems, the wing. A series of repetitions, of what initially seem like trivial details, makes this clear: the offer of a cigarette to an incarcerated young man, Danny "El Rucio", with the same words that El Potro had used to him on his

arrival, “te va a hacer bien”; the banging on the door with fist and forearm in protest and defiance against the prison authorities; the final, front-on group shot, with El Príncipe at the head of the gang, finely dressed in neckerchief and suit coat, cigarette in hand, staring down the camera and the viewer. *El Príncipe* is also the story of love and loss between men: after El Potro’s death, Jaime tells the older man’s ex-wife that “Ricardo era mi mejor amigo” (the use of the name and, by his wife, the diminutive, Ricardito is something of a shock to the viewer – the character has been called “El Potro” throughout). El Príncipe kisses the passport photo of his dead friend/lover; after a series of shots of significant objects around the cell, we then see other men lining up to offer formal condolences, as if El Príncipe were a grieving husband or wife. A new *recluso* arrives, Mauro, and as El Potro did with him, El Príncipe tells him where to sleep and insists he get a “chapa”, or prison nickname. “The Prince”, of course, was his own, given to him by El Potro. On the radio we hear a speech by Salvador Allende; the toy cat that El Príncipe had been making for El Potro, a stand-in for the real cat (Platón), likely murdered by another inmate, “Che Pibe” (Gastón Pauls), sits on the desk. Politics, brutality, and almost childish tenderness mix in this final sequence. By the end of the film, El Príncipe has constructed for himself a liveable life; what he would do on the outside, though, remains an open question; as Reyes Gil puts it in an analysis of Cruz’s novel, “La amistad y el amor pasional solo pueden ser, para estos personajes, en la penitenciaría” (Reyes Gil 2022: 108). Indeed, El Príncipe is only able to live out his homosexual desire – lethally frustrated on the outside – in jail. Thus a relationship that begins framed by violence and coercion morphs, over the course of the film, into something deeply touching; acting and framing make it clear that El Príncipe is bereft on El Potro’s death. And yet, we never forget the physical constraints on the relationship, nor that it began with violence, and that violence is never far away – and hence El Potro’s violent death: two bloody stabbings punctuate the story.

Fig. 1. Promotional photo, *El Príncipe*: Ricardo “El Potro” (Castro), Jaime “El Príncipe (Maldonado), “Che Pibe” (Pauls).

El Príncipe’s distinctive narrative arc is based around a “dato escondido”: what motivated the crime that opens the film, and sees the protagonist sent to jail. This is revealed over a series of flashbacks to before and around the time of the crime, starting with the very first scene. *El Príncipe* opens with a graphic, bloody shot – a gaping scar on a neck, in close up, before the camera makes a slow pan following the blood flowing across the floor; we hear the gasps and eventual death-rattle of someone agonising on the floor: the first of many vulnerable bodies in the film. We cut to a shocked circle of observers, and in the middle the presumed culprit, broken bottle in hand, before he staggers to the Wurlitzer and, with his bloody fingers, chooses a track. This and other sentimental songs (pop, bolero, tango) will feature throughout the film, and are central to our introduction to

Jaime, a character who displays at once an immature fascination with fame and celebrity, and a stunning capacity for violence. For Reyes Gil, El Príncipe's crime is an act of "homosexual panic" (2022: 94); the film, however, seems to frame it more as a moment of drunken jealousy, as the protagonist sees his friend, El Gitano, who has just denied that he would have sex with another man, flirting and dancing with an older male, known by the nickname "El Tropical". Maldonado's performance captures the character's naivety but also his latent threat.

Fig. 2. *El Príncipe* – the men in their cell.

Fig. 3. *El Príncipe* – the men in the yard.

Sex in the film appears, initially, to recreate binaries based on "activity", "masculinity" and the exercise of power in the prison; but as Reyes Gil observes about the novel, and is true about the film, "En distintas escenas de la novela, los binomios macho/activo *versus* feminino/pasivo se diluyen en posiciones intercambiables" (104) – perhaps most strikingly in the passionate love scene between El Príncipe and El Potro in which we first see the younger man anally penetrate his friend. One of the most moving scenes involves the brutalization and violation of El Potro by three of the guards, an attempt to bully a powerful member of the imprisoned community and to put him in his place in the prison hierarchy. Two guards pin Castro's character on all fours, another violates him with a broom handle, which all three guards have, with sadistic glee, "lubricated" with saliva. A strange cut shows Castro's buttocks immediately prior to the rape, but (for practical, as well as aesthetic reasons, one imagines), the act itself is shown in a group shot from almost ground-level – Castro's eye-line as he howls in pain. Once the guards have left, and El Potro composes himself, while the cell's other couple take to their bunk, hugging and crying in sympathy and fear, El Príncipe offers some comfort, which is angrily rejected, and the men return to their usual places. Beyond the strength of the acting, what is most striking, though, is again the painterly composition of this shot, like many others in the film, a sort of dirty Caravaggio with Hockney-esque male bodies.

As Reyes Gil notes, the source novel is marked by a pulpy, camp aesthetic; references to popular music and film, an obsession with fashion (a red leather jacket, especially), are present in the film, but it does not share the aesthetic of the cultural products it and its characters reference and admire. Unlike the novel, one could not call the film "gay pulp" (Reyes Gil 2022: 98). The novel draws on film aesthetics, as Reyes Gil notes, full of allusions to cinema and popular song (2022: 99): "la películas representan las fantasías de los reos" (100); for modern readers, the result is a sort of "retro-camp" (100), which in fact in its look and stylings the film does share with the novel. Clothes, fashion, stardom (through film, music, and sport), though, are obsessions for the men in the film, and El Príncipe perhaps first among them.

Beyond its study of violence, power, and desire, the film identifies tiny touches of tenderness in an environment seemingly designed to deny fellow-feeling between men; as Reyes Gil puts it, "La empatía y ternura entre hombres se señala también cuando se usa la palabra 'cariño' [in the novel]" (2022: 105). Movies, of course, use words differently to novels, but Reyes Gil's observation is key to understanding how *El Príncipe* works as a film. Tenderness is at the heart of the portrayal of the relationship between El Potro and El Príncipe (and also in other relationships – the couple Julio and Miguel, Che Pibe and Danny "El Rucio", and between El Potro and his beloved cat, Platón). This is, like so much in the film, morally complicated: the seemingly tender caress by El Potro after he rapes Jaime on his first night in the cell; in the top bunk, the two other men quietly embrace before, as Jaime examines himself in the mirror, they start to have sex, in consensual and seemingly loving fashion. Violence and tenderness are almost inseparable here, but the film hints at nuances or gradations in relationships within a generalised context of violence; but also that a seemingly tender gesture can form part of a coercive or violent relationship. This is the case between Jaime and El Potro, initially, but not it would seem between their cellmates. Jaime and El Potro's relationship develops, to become more equal and mutual, and it is noteworthy that Jaime orders the newcomer to the cell at the end of the film to sleep on the floor, not in his bed.

The knottiness of these relationships is found too in the film's approach to genre. What sort of film is *El Príncipe*? At the most basic level, it is simply a prison film. It is also a (sort of) love story, and this complicates scenes such as those assessed above. So too does its intense, queer eroticism, in which beautiful male bodies are framed in ugly, oppressive surroundings. In its plotting and pacing, its characterisation, and its distinctively dirty but beautiful aesthetic, it is all of these and none, an approach to filmic genre that is turned violent and tender in its conception. Similar transgressions appear in an otherwise quite different film, the Argentine documentary *Rancho*.

Rancho: violence and masculinity behind bars

The production of Pedro Speroni's multi-award-winning documentary film *Rancho* (2021) relied on an extraordinarily committed approach to immersive filming. In an interview with Sofia Serbin de Skalon (2021), Speroni talked about the genesis of the project. After the relative success of his *opera prima*, the short film *Peregrinación*, about the wives of prisoners, Speroni decided to film inside a maximum-security prison. He was introduced to a judge, and then the director of the prison in question. Aged 26, Speroni walked into the jail to start researching and filming. He spent two years visiting on an almost daily basis, including periods when he slept at the jail, even catching tuberculosis in the process.[iv] On his motivation, Speroni observed, "[w]hat interested me was recognising that these guys might be thieves or murderers or whatever, but to show something more human, their feelings, their thoughts. […] I wanted to make a film about them, about them as

people" (Serbin de Skalon 2021). Speroni has framed his film within a wider critique of the prison system: "The system is worse than the prisoners. Prison is a reflection of the crazy world we live in. […] If you give a prisoner good treatment – love to call it something – he will come out a better person and society will benefit from that too" (Serbin de Skalon 2021). The result of this process is a film that is at once cinematically compelling and emotionally moving; a documentary with strong narrative elements and characters; politically engaged without proselytising; and an important contribution both to the aesthetics of prison films and the ongoing debate about penal policy in Argentina and beyond. *Rancho* screened at the Buenos Aires International Film Festival (BAFICI) and was invited to several international festivals including the Sheffield DocFest in the UK.

Rancho opens with a title screen showing standard and colloquial definitions of the titular word, which links shelter, food, criminality and friendship in one complex and nuanced lexical item. "Rancho" as a term is most often heard from the documentary's subjects as a term of endearment – "rancho" as a behind-bars alternative for "mate" or "friend". The word foregrounds the material conditions of imprisonment, especially the almost impossibly tight spaces of the overcrowded cells; the legal trajectories of the men in question (many of whom are in jail for robbery or burglary); and the importance of emotional connections within and beyond the facility that houses them.

Fig. 4. *Rancho*, opening intertitle.

Despite the obvious human connection with his subjects, Speroni does not idealise or prettify his subject matter: as viewers, we are left in no doubt that many of the men in this penitentiary have violent pasts behind and – perhaps more tragically – violent futures ahead of them. One could argue that, following Scott, the director shows himself willing to get "hands dirty", engaging directly with "penal realities" (Scott 2018: 218). In the interview, cited above, Speroni recalled one occasion, during a mass knife fight, in which one of the men, the boxer Iván Bilbao, saved him from injury or worse by dragging him into a cell. We are told in no uncertain terms, by the men themselves, in conversations with each other or in one scene the prison psychiatrist, of their crimes. These include murder, assault, burglary, theft, although a particular scorn is reserved among the men, especially the nearest we have to a protagonist, Bilbao, for drug dealers, partner abusers, and rapists, called "violines" (literally violins, but slang for *violador*) throughout the film. Speroni dedicates significant screen time, in what is not a long film (just over 70 minutes), to accounts of violent crimes and crimes of violence. These range in scale: the possible killing of a police officer by an ex-offender; a lengthy monologue in which Bilbao recounts threatening, beating, burning and humiliating a former friend who stole from him; and a moving and morally complex story in which a young man in the jail recounts the murder of his mother's partner, whom he stabbed while the former was attempting to

strangle her. This sequence captures some of the distinctive political and cinematic features of *Rancho*, a film critical of the system and that wants viewers to consider imprisoned persons as human beings.

The details of the young man's crime are laced through the film, and begin with a night-time conversation in a cell between two men.[v] Both are lying in their beds, filmed from disconcertingly close, in the tight confines of their living and sleeping space. The camera moves between the two, both at awkward angles, sometimes panning between them, occasionally cutting. Levels of brightness also vary, a mark of the relatively basic digital technology being used. From the start of the exchange, the violent context, and the vulnerability of the human body, is apparent: one of the men has his forearm in a large cast. No explanation is ever presented. But the subject of the exchange is the action of the other, younger man, who, it is revealed, has committed murder, rather to the delight of his cellmate, who feels that some sort of poetic justice has been meted out. The tone of the exchange is light, jocular even; the young man who has committed murder acknowledges that he was fortunate to receive a short sentence. At first we might be struck by the casual approach to violence. *Rancho's* narrative arc and its distinctive attitude to the (mostly) men being filmed, however, allow us to see the complexity of these criminal histories over the course of the movie. Twenty minutes later, we see a shot from behind of a man plucking his eyebrows. Again the camera is very close, the space confined, and pans between the first man and the younger man who we saw earlier, admitting his violent crime. This exchange, however, explains the context: the murdered man was his stepfather (or his mother's partner). His own father had been murdered by a jealous girlfriend. The context is one of long-term partner abuse and violence, and we discover that the murder for which he has been jailed was in large part an attempt to defend his mother from an attack. She too, in keeping with the caprices and arbitrariness of the legal system that we see throughout, also was jailed, leaving his siblings / her children, on the street.

The details of these cycles of violence are, at times, vague; we hear of a shooting, beatings, an attempted strangulation, and a stabbing. Speroni allows the men to tell enough so that we are under no illusions about the violent experiences they carry with them. But this particular sequence transmits an emotional weight through small details and the technicalities of filming. The young man in question is filmed mostly in profile or 3/4s profile. He speaks thoughtfully and with moments of reflection and self-criticism, understanding that to his stepfather's orphan children he is just as hated, viewed with the same "rencor" he held for the "mina" (young woman) who killed his father. The most striking moment comes when he looks back at his own personal history of violence: killing a "paloma" (dove or pigeon) with a stone from a catapult when a boy, then tearfully confessing to his mother. This, for him, is an example of how one can become hardened to violence: that he cried

for his killing of the bird, but as a young adult has now killed a human. He makes, and Speroni shows us in close up, a cupped-hand gesture, as he cradles an imaginary dove. In context, the shot might be read as a secular prayer for peace.

Figs. 5 and 6. Screen shots, *Rancho*.

In fiction films, casting can play an important role in the framing of certain figures as major or central characters; so too can narrative. Martina Guzmán is quite obviously out of place (for her social class, her skin colour) in an Argentine woman's jail – and the story of *Leonera* plays with this misplacement.[vi] In comparison, Laura García, as Marta in the same film, is a far more plausible *reclusa*, alongside the real-life prisoners and guards cast, and her prison savvy and criminal connections are central to the believability of the film's otherwise implausible denouement. Prison documentaries, however, must work differently, with the materials (people and their stories) at their disposal. The central figure in the documentary *Rancho* – underscored by his subsequent protagonism in Speroni's sophomore feature, *Los Bilbao* (2023) – is the boxer Iván Bilbao. But there are other characters, secondary and minor, who emerge, not least the older and experienced Artaza, who has taken on many of the organisational and, for want of a better word, managerial roles within the mostly autonomous transitional ("tratamental") block of the jail – running the carpentry workshop, organising cleaning rotas, and coaching various sports, including the boxing that Bilbao and he hope will take the younger man back to a lucrative and rewarding life on the "outside" – "en la calle". The cleaning scene, like the tasks in the workshop, is one of a number in the film that show coordinated and collective effort. The shot, like so many in the film, is slow-moving with the camera quite still; there is almost an abstract quality to the image, as we see the water run over the floor. It has the look of an experimental or contemplative film – by Gustavo Fontán, for example – though we cannot forget that we are viewing events inside a jail.

Artaza, a talkative, dynamic and, it is clear, much admired figure in the jail is at once a mentor and father figure for many of the younger men, and one of the saddest and most paradoxical characters in the film. Although it is never quite explained why he has spent so very long in jail, a long history of repeated offending is mentioned. He also, as others jokingly, at times mockingly, imply, is almost addicted to being behind bars: on the outside, he becomes "nostalgic", he misses ("extrañ[a]") jail and, they suspect, may even have committed some crimes to be sent back inside: "Para vos", observes another, jail "es la casa". Artaza has an animal-like energy to him, prowling and coaxing while Bilbao boxes; stalking the yard encouraging the men to play sports with more effort; at rest, basking rather like a lizard in the sun; one man calls him a "sapo" (toad), and others often refer to him as a "gato" (literally a cat; colloquially a term of abuse with meanings close to "pimp" or "ponce"

and subtitled as “old dog”). We see Artaza explaining the rules and routines to a new resident of the wing, a tight three-shot in which the confines of the cell mean that there is never quite enough room for the three men and the camera. He rattles through instructions and is treated with deference (“usted”, “señor”) by both the new arrival and the longstanding cellmate, and example of what Sacha Darke calls the “codes of conduct relating to inmate solidarity and dealings with staff” (Darke 2018: loc.656). But what is clear from this and other exchanges is that while experience and capability are important factors to his de facto leadership, the emotional connection from the other men, their fondness for him – as one lengthy exchange among a close huddle of cellmates reveals – is determinant. Such scenes as these support an observation made by Scott: “that the vast majority if prisoners are not ‘dangerous’, at least not when first imprisoned” (2013: 13); rather, they suffer health problems, impoverished social backgrounds or “have perpetrated relatively minor property offences” (2013: 13).

This sequence, among others, illustrates the distinctive filming style of Speroni, which combines traditional documentary techniques with others more akin to fiction films (thrillers, sports films, action movies), all visibly marked by the conditions of shooting and the physical constraints of space; but also the importance of emotions, of feelings, in the film. Filming is, as one would expect, handheld and digital, two common features in low- or no-budget films, from Argentina and beyond. But camera movement is limited; even in action scenes (Iván boxing, the men playing football or *padel* in the yard) the “hyperkinetic” camera work that Joanna Page (2009) and others have associated with contemporary Argentine cinema, and in particular its depiction of delinquency, is absent. There are then, in *Rancho*’s depiction of characters, moments that we might call contemplative.

It is worth at this stage focussing on camera positioning. Only one sequence, an interview between an imprisoned man and the prison psychologist, adopts a traditional shot-reverse shot / 180°-rule composition; notably, this is the one formal or institutional dialogue in the movie, as if to depict the official working of the prison, the director had to adopt a more conservative filmic style. Throughout the film, dialogue is filmed in two-shot, with a single-camera. Often the camera is relatively static, given that there is little space and men tend to stand close to each other – intimately, even uncomfortably. At times it moves between the two speakers, and its proximity means that we can never forget that Speroni was also in the room – the cell, the wing or *pabellón* – with the men. Careful editing means that only occasionally do we have fourth-wall breaks, in which men look directly at or speak to the camera or the director – with perhaps one important exception, discussed below. The result is a permitted intrusion, an intense sharing, what Laura Marks (2000) called “haptic” cinema, a cinema of touch.

Rancho is lit wholly with diegetic natural or ambient light; the nature of the filming would scarcely permit otherwise (Speroni and Santiago Tróccoli are credited with cinematography, but in practice it is hard to imagine a crew of more than one in many shots). A result of this is that, as in a home movie, we see level-correction in the shot, in particular during some of the night-time sequences within the cell. Again, the circumstances of filming are marked on screen; a certain quantum of immediacy is gained. That is to say, filming registers the difficulties of filming; in turn the filming shares in the conditions in which these men live: this is a fact of the production (Speroni reporting daily to the prison to film) and also an ethical position on the part of the filmmaker. The natural lighting also creates some striking visual, indeed picturesque effects; if the light comes and goes during the prisoner's confession scene, above, the scarcity of light creates a chiaroscuro effect in other sequences. In these, the film takes on a contemplative air: we watch men thinking, and must think with them. This aspect of the film is linked closely to its great dependence on close-ups and extreme close-ups. The close-up, of course, is the method of choice in the history of commercial and other cinemas for creating protagonism; in documentary filmmaking, the close-up is nearly inseparable from the "talking-head" of interview responses. But *Rancho* adds two complications: firstly, many of these close ups are from odd angles: side-on, canted, slightly from above or below. Again, this reinforces the physical context, the confined space, the claustrophobia even, of filming. Secondly, the close-up often turns into the extreme close-up: not the face of the Hollywood star, but the warts-and-all face of men in prison.

Fig. 7. *Rancho*, screenshot.

Speroni adds further depth to this particular aspect of his filming. In these close-ups and extreme-close-ups, what we see is often related to perception and self-image. Indeed the English-language poster for the film is an oil-painted version of precisely one of these shots, as we see a heavily tattooed man plucking his eyebrows in front of a small, handheld mirror. In the sequence itself, he comments on the good "calibration" of the tweezers in question. At other moments, we see men having their hair cut (a toothbrush is used as an improvised barber's brush); men shaving; a tattoo being applied with precarious implements; and, before a family visit, men adjusting and checking their own and each other's appearance, with admiring comments on dress, hair, etc: "estás lindo, Marce", one man says to another as he dusts down the shoulders of his friend's jacket. Related to this are a number of scenes in which we see the men taking care of their domestic arrangements: changing and folding sheets, making beds, or airing and spraying down their blankets in the corridor.

Fig. 8. *Rancho*, promotional poster, painting by Deborah Pruden.

Rancho touches on, though only tangentially, the subject of sex between men in jail. In great contrast to *El marginal* and other fiction films, including *El Príncipe*, and no doubt in part a result of the conditions of filming, there are no depictions or even references to sexual crimes. There is particular ire reserved for "violines" (rapists); in the showers men quip about having spent years "cuidandose el culo" (looking after their ass/arseholes); and Artaza jokes about another man missing his "pija" (cock). But the shower scene and Artaza's joke both display another, perhaps more important feature of *Rancho*: men in close proximity to each other, at ease with one another's physicality, filmed from very close by a camera that is deeply immersed in this particular setting.

Alongside the more obviously documentary aesthetic of *Rancho*, we see a variety of shots and sequences that may well remind viewers of the longer prison movie tradition, and in particular the prison drama in the Argentine cinema tradition (including *Leonera*): static shots of walls, building exteriors, barbed wire, fences, corridors either empty or with people passing. At times, the aesthetic is reminiscent of the thriller; one sequence shows Iván, in medium-close up, topless, on a prison telephone, discussing his case – like a scene from a 1970s US thriller (notably, many of the men have mobile phones, legal in Argentine jails since 2020). A further feature is the "nuca" tracking shot, the camera close to and following the nape of the man's neck as he moves between one and another enclosed space. At one stage the camera (and implicitly Speroni) takes part in the line-up, as men are counted by the guards. One or two of them look directly at the lens or the director/cinematographer, but mostly they ignore it, as they ignore others being registered by the prison authorities.

This physical presence of the camera, its proximity to the rest of the men in this jail, foregrounds both the sense of claustrophobia and something else: the importance of the human body in this film – with its strength, vulnerability, and role in intimacy, too. This is perhaps most striking in the boxing sequences. There is an extended sequence showing Iván training, urged on by Artaza. The scene is dominated by Bilbao's muscular and sweaty torso, with Artaza's encouragement and instructions, sometimes from out of shot. For many viewers, this will recall famous boxing films, from *Raging Bull* (USA, 1980) or *Rocky* (USA, 1976) and its sequels, through to Leonardo Favio's *Gatica, el Mono* (Argentina, 1993). In contrast to the sub-genre of prison boxing/martial arts films (*Undisputed* [USA, 2002], *A Prayer before Dawn* [USA, UK, France, China, 2017]) or prison sports films (*The Longest Yard* [USA, 1974]), absent from *Rancho* is an actual fight or contest, even if the prison heavy bag takes quite a beating; it seems to demonstrate what Almeida has called "[la] disciplina de lucha" (2023). Boxing appears, too, in conversation: in tight two-shot, Artaza (and others, from off), encourage Iván to focus on his boxing: to get out, to fight professionally, to earn money, and escape the life of crime, to be, as Artaza puts it, "el boxidanga", a joke about Bilbao's proletarian origins and perhaps

an ironic nod to the mismatch between his so-far second-rate career and his sporting potential.[vii] But boxing as both bound and free motif hints at an ambivalence within the film: as well as the scenes of Iván training, there are close-ups of his gloves and he has a tattoo of a pair on his neck; these, though, recall the importance of hands in the film's early scenes: the hands as if in prayer, holding an imaginary dead dove; and the broken hand or wrist in a heavy plaster case. Boxing is strength, success, but also vulnerability in *Rancho*. There is at once something rather terrifying and distinctly tender about the big man "boxidanga" Bilbao – he is the devoted but absent father seen cuddling his wife and daughters during a prison visit, and he is the local tough guy who beat, burnt, and pissed on a former friend who made the mistake of crossing him. Viewers may well see a parallel to "El Potro", a man capable of both great violence and great tenderness, occasionally almost at the same time.

If sex between men is only mentioned jokingly, and moments of affection that might hint at more significant physical relationships and interactions only fleeting in *Rancho*, the question of conjugal encounters is referenced explicitly. Two men joke about the possibilities of sex with their respective wives during a visit, with various possibilities discussed and entertained or rejected; the main obstacle, they note, is the presence of children – if the kids sleep, then some sort of activity is possible. When the visit does occur, there is one scene of passionate kissing between a couple; another pair stand up and rather deliberately leave the room – it is not made clear to where, and the camera, understandably, does not follow them. But mostly, despite the talk and the film's hints and winks, what we see are scenes of affectionate family life, of couples briefly together after long and seemingly painful separations, of fathers with their children.[viii] A man skips with his daughter; another dances with his; while a third hands over the dolls' house that he has made in the carpentry workshop. There are one or two medium close-up shots but in general Speroni maintains a certain distance. In part this is practical: the family room is bigger than the cells and corridors. But one might also suspect that this is an aspect of the film's ethical stance – to portray but also, through filmed distance, to respect fleeting and rare moments of intimacy and happiness.

Alongside these reunited families, *Rancho* portrays groups that look rather like makeshift or alternative families. We see this during a dinner scene: one man cooks, mentioning that he enjoys this particular chore or task; another shares out cutlery. These actions are filmed from very close, often at awkward angles, a result of the lack of space for an extra body (and camera) in the room. As the men dish out the food and eat, the camera is in amongst them. Framing is never neat; the camera is rather too close; it is not clear quite how many men are sitting around the table. And yet, the atmosphere is cordial and light-hearted; there is mention of a choir and other daily activities of work and leisure. Later in the film we see another imprisoned man rising early to collect a catering-sized bag of bread, which he delivers in near silence to each cell. Again, the collective element of

prison life and the importance of self-organisation are foregrounded: there is no scrum or competition; in each cell one man receives the delivery for the rest of his companions. Another scene early in the film shows men sharing *mate* (Paraguayan herbal tea); Artaza as ever is a ball of energy; other men come and go. The camera shares their closeness and intimacy. The subject of the conversation is jail and a life of crime or behind bars, and the setting is a crumbling space within the prison (paint is very visibly peeling, with bare electrical cabling in sight). But if we forget this, the humour and quick wit of the men could take place in almost any sort of communal all-male setting. These scenes suggest that in the jail there is something like an alternative family.

Rancho captures, too, the repetition and tedium of life in jail. After a static long-shot scene of men communing in the hall, with music, one apart from the main, seated group, dancing energetically in front of a TV screen (whose content we cannot see), we cut to a quiet night-time scene in the cell, as men watch television (a wildlife documentary), scroll on their mobiles, or simply sleep. There is much of this sequence, stripped of the confines of a jail, that feels like everyday life outside of jail. And yet, the exclusively male cast, the closeness of walls and beds, all reminds us where we are. That tension between ordinary life and the reality of jail is one *Rancho* never abandons, the particular "prison subjectivity" that Speroni creates for viewers.

A sequence which demonstrates what might be called the affective potential of jail occurs at the very end of *Rancho*, as Iván reaches the day of his release. Like the evening meals, the cleaning effort, or the games in the yard, this sequence demonstrates the jail as a collective, united – as in the line-up sequence – by forced proximity but also by emotional ties. We see Bilbao gathering his possessions and dressing for outside, boxing boots slung around his neck (the *nuca* shot to track him is once again employed), as he goes from man to man embracing, thanking, teasing and being teased, and wishing his soon-to-be former prison-mates well. The men spontaneously cheer and sing in response, before we follow Iván, applause echoing around the halls, as he heads through one gate after another, and then out. It is worth noting his interaction with the guards, whom he thanks, shaking hands with at least two, and who also wish him – it seems with no irony – good luck for the future. The sequence includes too a metaleptical frame break, as Iván says goodbye – "chau" – to "Pedro", looking at or just beyond the camera (like the men in the line-up), wishing the director well. This ending – with Iván's "fourth-wall break" – is the first time the director is clearly interpellated. In contrast to the line-up, of course, here Iván is on his way out. The sequence, and the film itself, ends with Iván's release, heading to the bus, walking away into the night while the camera stays static behind the prison door, as if reversing the director and the ex-offender's roles, while also underscoring Speroni's commitment to immersion in the jail. Bilbao very carefully shuts the low gate to the street on his way out. The gesture, one can only imagine, is genuine – Bilbao's neatness in

appearance, his self-discipline, his code of honour, have all been clear throughout. It is also a final irony in a film about confinement and how one (re)creates a liveable life.

Fig. 9. *Rancho*, screenshot: Iván is released.

Here Speroni draws on both documentary and fiction, with Bilbao turning into something like a protagonist, whom we follow out of this film and into Speroni's next, *Los Bilbao*, as he tries to rebuild his life on the outside, faced with the obstacles, at times implicit, at others explicit in this film, that make life in communities at once marginalised and disciplined along class and racial lines, so very difficult.

Conclusion

Both *Rancho* and *El Príncipe*, with their varying degrees of realism and varying degrees of reformism, in part via the creation of what Brown calls "penal subjectivities", depict the prison not just as a site of punishment, violence, and suffering, even if – in particular in *El Príncipe* – that seems the intention of the authorities. Jaime, El Príncipe, over the course of the film, turns into a leader within the jail and is able to form something that resembles a loving, mutually satisfying relationship with another man. How long such relationships can last in jail, and whether they are possible outside the prison, is left unanswered, but there is little cause for optimism in the film. For Bilbao, in *Rancho*, we are left to ask ourselves as viewers how he might get by on the outside, how to meld tenderness and strength into his own liveable life.

These films frequently turn viewers' attention away from what one would expect from a prison film and towards, instead, the moments of beauty and camaraderie that can be found. Scott has written of the need to "promot[e] interventions that aim to meet human need alongside aiming to foster values of care, lover, kindness, forgiveness and solidarity" (Scott 2018: 217). Jail here is also a site of communal organisation, intimate relationships, unlikely feelings, attempts at creating liveable lives and, perhaps above all, tenderness. This is found, too, in the way that the films are composed and structured, with the interpenetration between different moods, modes, and models of filmmaking: cinematic tenderness behind bars.

At the same time, however, they pose questions that can only be answered by viewers away from the films themselves. Is a satisfying, emotionally full life possible for Jaime outside of jail, or life within jail not based on coercion and threats? The latter is at least hinted at as a possibility; the former seems rather more distant. In *Rancho*, how to address the cycles of poverty and

criminalization that beset so many of the men we see on screen? Neither film is explicitly abolitionist, for neither film is didactic, leaving viewers to reach their own conclusions. But the implications of the need, alongside improving conditions in jail, for wider social reform, of the type argued for by Scott, Almeida, and others, are clear.

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Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflict of interest to declare.

Notes

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[ii] A notable exception would be Steve McQueen's film about the final days of the Irish political prisoner and hunger striker, Bobby Sands (played by Michael Fassbender), *Hunger* (2008).

[iii] For more on what such forms of self-government or governance in Latin American prisons, what Antillano and Duno-Gottberg call the "delegating" of "the control of many facilities to inmates […] who operate with diverse levels of autonomy" (2021: 390), see Sacha Darke (2021) and Nicolás Almeida (2023). Almeida highlights the particular importance of boxing, alongside *cartonera* publishing, to the forms of autonomous organisation in jail with which he is involved.

[iv] This illustrates a point made by Antillano and Duno-Gottberg on the "porosity" of the Latin American jail (2021: 394).

[v] Although a list of names is given in the credits, with one or two exceptions (Iván Bilbao and Artaza), the men in the jail are almost never referred to by name in the film, a choice on the part of the director that I have chosen to respect here.

[vi] See e.g. Telles (2014) on "pigmentocracies" in Latin America.

[vii] I am grateful to Alejandra Crosta for her insights into this term.

[viii] Almeida (2023) has written on the damaging effect that frequent transfers, often at short or with no notice, and the mistreatment of those visiting prisons, can have on the lives of incarcerated people and their families / home communities.