

❖ Argentine Workers' Documentaries as Counter-Information: Implications for Alternative Media

Kathryn Lehman - University of Auckland
k.lehman@auckland.ac.nz

Abstract

This article reviews a diverse series of documentary videos, films, and related internet sites about the Argentinean crisis of 2001 and its aftermath, made by producers in Argentina and abroad. It suggests that alternative media coverage has followed a three-stage process in interpreting worker movements since 2001, focusing on two examples of economic negotiations that have taken place between these movements and the state, in the 'piquetero' and recovered factory movements. Alternative media which advocate for workers by making the power relations between the state and workers movement transparent, has been described as "counter-information". The article also describes a time-lag now evident in the production and circulation of audiovisual material in comparison with print and internet, and a location gap between material produced in Argentina and abroad. The article concludes by suggesting some implications of these lags and gaps for the interpretation of alternative media as counter-information.

The year 2001 is generally remembered for the attack against the US and resultant securing of its borders, the subsequent modification of orthodox free trade policies, and the introduction of "militarised globalisation" (Mittelman, 2004, 225). For those in global justice or anti-globalisation movements however, 2001 was the year that the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil served as a space from which to organise alternatives to commercial networks for the dissemination of information and interpretation of global events. Importantly for this same group, 2001 ended with the collapse of the Argentinean economy, an event that provided indisputable evidence that free trade policies mandated by the IMF and World Bank for developing nations to pay off debt had actually increased poverty, not lessened it.

Argentina has been incorporated internationally into alternative media discourse as a symbol of what went wrong in the 1990s free trade or neoliberal era when the Washington Consensus consolidated elite approaches to economic discourse. Previously touted a model of IMF success in implementing severe structural adjustment policies, Argentina witnessed a mass uprising on 19 December 2001 that held the IMF accountable, along with the Argentinean Government, for factory closures, high unemployment, hunger, food riots, and mounting debt amidst reports of unprecedented levels of government corruption. Social justice activists have been attracted to Argentina because a resurgent workers' movement seemed to offer alternatives to business as usual in several different spheres. The dramatic protest action by 'piqueteros' (unemployed workers who construct road blocks), and the intransigence of the workers who occupied factories to control production, serve as two icons of this movement which have drawn international attention to new possibilities for workers' action in the future. For a while, middle classes joined workers, shared views about government failure to respond to citizen needs and demands, and supported relatively radical protest action, often joining workers in street protests and neighbourhood assemblies. This temporary cross-class alliance mainstreamed workers' movements, enabling a large segment of the population to critically interpret commercial media positions on the crisis, which empowered several movements to force the state to make some concessions to worker demands. While worker movements have shown considerable success in some limited areas, the cross-class alliance shows signs of breaking down and other pressures are increasing on worker movements.

Three trends in media representation of these events have framed alternative media approaches to understanding the crisis and its aftermath. First, a new praxis emerged in some alternative media, which focused on changing power relations between workers and the state. These approaches foregrounded the attempt by workers to reinterpret the state's social responsibility and its relations with capital more generally, but they do not self-identify with any specific Marxist, socialist, or other leftist political party. These media groups advocate for workers by making power relations transparent. I will refer to this trend in alternative media as providing 'counter-information', because there are some forms of alternative (non-commercial) media which do not share this approach. Second, as a result of outrage at commercial media coverage of the popular uprising, a very diverse set of media collectives began to work together to provide counter-information to viewers in a way that helped set in motion a change of rules under which cultural communication takes place. Third, as we analyse the crisis from abroad through print and visual media, we find that there is a time-lag between what has been represented and circulated visually and what we know is happening through print and internet, the latter of which offer more updated, detailed and historicised description of events. I will suggest that there is also a location gap between audiovisual interpretations emerging from within Argentina and those from abroad. On one hand, this gap entails greater historicisation of the crisis in material produced in Argentina along with specific kinds of nuances about worker action, left politics and the state, and on the other, it also means that some local aspects of political negotiations are not discussed locally but are raised in documentaries produced abroad. Print and internet material offer important background information to locate more specifically the leaders of workers' groups introduced in documentaries. The implications of these two gaps for alternative media more generally will be suggested.

Phase I – *Piquetes*, Road Blocks and Militant Documentary Film 2001-3

Video, film and related internet documentaries that came out of the Argentinean popular uprising of 2001 exploded onto the international scene in 2002 when they circulated abroad through global justice, trade union, and leftist political party networks and were later screened in alternative, documentary, and human rights film festivals. Videos with provocative titles such as *Crónicas de libertad. (Organizando la resistencia)* (Chronicles of Freedom, Organising the Resistance, Grupo Alavío, 2002), *Argentinazo. Comienzo la Revolución* (The Battle of Argentina, The Revolution Begins, Ojo Obrero, 2002) and *Matanza* (the name of the city where *piqueteros* held mass protests, Grupo Documental Primero de Mayo, 2001), were filmed in the streets, factories, city centres, and working class neighbourhoods by workers in the Unemployed Worker Movement, students, leftist political parties and documentary makers. Most of these early non-broadcast video documentaries included scenes with powerfully striking images of direct action beginning on 19 December 2001 when a mass movement filled the main downtown government square, the Plaza de Mayo, and stayed for two days until President Fernando de la Rúa resigned. Although police tried to enforce a curfew, people remained city centres, and when the first efforts to disperse them failed, police began to use live ammunition, causing the deaths of more than two dozen people across the nation, but the crowds still refused to leave. Over the next three weeks, three presidents were nominated and resigned in the wake of protests until former Vice President, Eduardo Duhalde, was named president for a year until elections brought Santa Cruz Governor Néstor Kirchner to the presidency in May, 2003.

These videos are striking because the camera is located on the side of the protesters facing police, filming individuals being beaten and sometimes shot, and at times police arms are pointed directly at the camera. There are interviews with workers who issue articulate, militant statements on national sovereignty and the failure of IMF policies. For many viewers, this kind of discourse recalled militant documentaries of the 1960s and 1970s, which had not been widely heard since the years before the Dirty War of 1976-1983. The dictatorship's 'anti-subversive' campaign, assisted and funded by the CIA, sent militant movements underground and used state terror to cause 30,000 people, largely workers, to disappear. With the emergence of electoral politics in 1983, socialist thought largely stayed out of the public realm, remaining restricted to some worker organisations and specialised academic journals.

The main focus of the early videos was the '*piqueteros*' and unemployed workers' organisations (Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados, MTD, the Movement of Unemployed Workers), whose speeches and '*escraches*' (protests outside the homes of politicians) articulated a clear attack against the IMF and local government. What was new in Argentinean history were the high numbers of middle class protesters who joined workers in attacking the system itself, and who participated in assemblies in middle and working class neighbourhoods to implement democratic decision-making. Some of these deliberations are caught on film.

This video production quickly circulated abroad, stimulating interest in what appeared to be spontaneous, new forms of protest, discourse about workers' rights, alternative ways of relating to the state, and cross class alliances. What appeared to be spontaneous was actually the culmination of several years of organising and experience in using documentary video which had circulated internally among unemployed workers. (Dodaro, 2003, 7-10) Economic studies carried out in Argentina had predicted that the neoliberal model was unsustainable at least as early as 1994, and more professionally-skilled documentary makers began contributing to alternative media around 1996, and example of which is the Movimiento de Documentalistas. (<http://www.documentalistas.org.ar>)

The ubiquitous phrase that best characterised the first phase after 2001 was "*que se vayan todos*", translated as "*throw them all out*" – which implied a rejection of traditional party politics. Only in the second phase did it become evident to viewers abroad that this phrase also referred to union bosses who had reached agreements with the Government of President Carlos Menem (1989-1999) and Fernando de la Rúa (2000-2001) to accept compensation payments for workers facing mass dismissals when state-owned enterprises became privatised. An inversion of this idea resounded in the Plaza de Mayo in the phrase "no se va, el pueblo no se va" or "we're not leaving, the people are not leaving", which was used to maintain pressure on government in this first phase. These two vague phrases are clear shorthand for the need to restructure the state's relationship to the people, and in most documentaries the people are framed as unionised or unemployed workers. The intentional focus on the productivity of the people as workers is a direct negation of the neoliberal model, which had successfully reduced the representation of citizens to their role as consumers rather than producers. Although the discourse of those filmed sounded revolutionary at the time, close analysis reveals a marked divergence from the strident rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s because faith in leftist political rhetoric had also waned over time, for many reasons. The first wave of Peronism (1946-52) organised workers, was aligned with and formed its base from the left, but was always a party of mixed ideological positions. Perón returned and governed for one year in 1973, when he denounced the left-wing, and after his death and a subsequent military coup, the armed campaign against the left escalated to target anyone against dictatorship. However, many of the economic structures established by Perón's first government were only reversed under Peronist President Menem. This history helps to account for the focus on the immediate problem of IMF control and government corruption in a vaguely collectivist rhetoric that tended to avoid phrases identified with an ideologically orthodox left.

Early videos enabled viewers abroad to feel that they had immediate access to images that formed a cultural field known among some Argentine media analysts as "counter-information" to what was being broadcast about Argentina by commercial media in the country and abroad (Vinelli & Esperón, 2004). Counter-information is more than presenting the correct facts or alternative interpretations of specific events publicised by mass media. Instead, this phrase refers to the ways many groups positioned themselves through public acts to force an awareness of the need to restructure the state, which was acting in collusion with economic conglomerates and using public funding for private debt, targeting workers as enemies of the state. (Vinelli & Esperón, 2004, 11-27). It is in the second and third stages of documentary production that the characteristics of counter-information become more clearly marked within the narrative of workers themselves.

Two events are important in the first phase because they introduced this positioning. When people returned home to watch televised reports of the uprising, what was reported was almost unrecognisable: middle class participants were not shown, the focus was on sensational acts of violence, and the event was described as a "skirmish", "brawl", or "outburst" rather than a popular uprising. As was common since the mid 1990s when the first block roads were used, the *piqueteros* were portrayed as lawless, dirty, and violent. Most citizens, including many who did not identify as workers, were aware that this was a multiclass uprising. Having witnessed the reduction of their savings to one third their original value when bank accounts were frozen, and having an awareness of reports that banks had spirited millions or billions of dollars out of the country, middle classes denounced the entire political class and participated in assemblies. This phenomenon is caught on film when well dressed middle-aged men and women bang pans and hammer walls of major banks in what is known throughout Latin America as a *cacerolazo*. For a few years after 2001, middle and working class protesters would meet one or two days per week, going from bank to bank to hammer on windows and walls to show their outrage at corruption of financial institutions, while blue uniformed police stood quietly by.

A few months into 2002, major figures of the *piquetero* movement were shot by police, but most media reported this repression as if the *piqueteros* were fighting among themselves. Although documentary makers

had long been aware of the need for alternative media, these events stimulated collaboration among diverse political, worker, and alternative media organisations for the first time. Dodaro, Marino and Rodríguez (2003) believe that this first phase, 2002-2004, produced not only a change in the field of cultural communication but also in the rules that regulate cultural politics and perhaps even in the formation of the identities of the participants in cultural production (2). One example of this change is that the national film board, INCAA (Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía y Artes Audiovisuales) was forced to open its funding to more democratic decision-making procedures and to fund documentaries for the first time (6).

Phase II – Recovered Factores: Occupy. Resist. Produce. 2004

By 2004, footage shot in 2001 and 2002 had been edited professionally, intercutting archival footage with interviews and voiceovers in broadcast documentaries from Argentina and abroad. This work located the popular uprising within a longer history, and explained Argentina's situation in relation to globalisation more generally. Interest focused on the role of occupied factories as the most significant outcome of the uprising and traditional unions such as the CGT (Central General de Trabajadores) were denounced for having given too many concessions to Menem. Although the role of *piqueteros* in these documentaries was less visible, road blocks continued to pressure the state to respond to worker demands for subsidies. Alternative media that produced counter-information, identified ways in which commercial media had acted on behalf of transnational and local conglomerate interests rather than those of the majority of citizens, thus specifically defending the need for non-commercial media.

The backdrop to the crisis is outlined briefly and effectively in the documentary *The Take* (2004), directed by Avi Lewis with script by Naomi Klein, whose slogan "Occupy. Resist. Produce.", summarises the process. The co-directors open this documentary with a focus on the media representation of global justice movements. They decided to show themselves as part of the anti-globalisation movement, being interviewed on the BBC about what positive proposals they were offering beyond criticising the international economic order. To offer a viable alternative, they decided to make a documentary on the Argentinean Movement of Recovered Companies, showing how 30 unemployed autoparts workers planned to recover the Forja factory and keep it under worker control. This process is filmed over the backdrop of upcoming 2003 elections in which Carlos Menem plans a return to power. The combined narrative of these two intertwined stories offers a dramatic tension that is palpable because the viewer is aware that a return by Menem will destroy the workers' hopes to recover their factory.

By including the elections, the film is also able to portray a generational difference between a mother, who is actively involved in party politics, and her daughter, who refuses participation in any political party, echoing her generation's cynicism of 2001 regarding politicians. Offering statistics to back their statement that "the rules of capitalism had been broken", the film follows the six-month process by which the workers plan and successfully obtain rights to start up the factory, effectively participating in a new capitalist process. There are gripping and humorous sequences and interviews with workers in successfully recovered companies, in particular the women of the Buenos Aires Brukman garment factory, who faced a violent eviction and managed to keep control, explaining that they did not understand why the factory went into debt when it was just a matter of "adding and subtracting". The workers' description of their enormous sacrifice and temporary success in retaining control of Neuquén based Zanón Ceramics, later known as Fasinpat (Factory without Owners), rests on community support. Expressions of unity, solidarity with the community, and idealistic aspirations are juxtaposed with previous owner Luigi Zanón's comment that the factory "is mine" and "the government will give it back to me". The choice of local music by Mercedes Sosa and Bersuit Vergarabat adds effective feeling to many sequences, linking a familiar voice of the 1970s with new rock music. The ending of the documentary is intentionally ambiguous, since the political structures remain unchanged and the occupations were still considered illegal over the longer term.

Outside the frame, a visit to the official website shows the number of links that this film has made with many ongoing movements to recover companies internationally. In the Auckland Film Festival, Director Avi Lewis explained that he took the completed film back to Buenos Aires and screened it in an open area where a crowd of those filmed could see their story projected (<http://thetake.org>). This process is an example of ways in which this kind of counter-information in documentary film contributes to the recovery of human subjectivity, eroded under neoliberalism when workers were reduced to consumers who no longer had the ability to consume and were supposed to just "disappear". This was discussed in a study of worker identity in the *piquetero* movement by Ferrara (2003). It also suggests the important link that has been established between documentary and internet sites, which offer viewers internationally an opportunity to become

informed about other movements, to offer support, and also to acquire updates on changes taking place regularly because there is always a lag between the release of a documentary and events taking place.

In the same year, Fernando Pino Solanas released *Memoria del saqueo*, literally "Memoire of Plunder" released under the English title *Social Genocide*. Solanas returned to documentary after several years of feature films. His best known documentary work is *Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), a classic of *Cine Liberación*, militant or third cinema. In his current work, Solanas set himself the task of returning to the role of chronicler or historian of social history, "committed to his country and contributing to change" (additional material in the DVD). Using two basic types of camera style, Solanas moves the viewer from the majestic interiors of the centres of power in Buenos Aires to the streets and provinces most affected by the reforms. For the first 'objective' style, he uses a wide angle lens with an almost stationary camera that moves slowly forward through the chandelier-lit, elegant, empty chambers of government buildings as he describes in a voice-over the decisions and policies made by officials in these luxurious red-carpeted rooms. For the second 'subjective' style, he uses a participatory handheld camera that walks alongside people as they describe their experiences, such as the family living in a flooded housing development where they had paid for a sewage system when local authorities stole the money and left the neighbourhood in ruins. In another example, he moves to schools where teachers describe students who arrive without having eaten because their parents are unemployed, and in the most harrowing sequence, he has the viewer enter a hospital where we observe a baby dying of malnutrition as the attending doctors describe their frustration at trying to save lives that are being needlessly lost. Scenes of starvation in what was once a breadbasket for many nations, a country that made loans and sent wheat and meat to a devastated Europe after WWII, is astonishing.

Returning to the chapter structure of *La hora de los hornos*, this documentary also feels like an essay, with headings that explain the genesis of the debt under military dictatorship, progressing chronologically through the Menem years of structural adjustments and austerity measures, introduced by Menem's now infamous quotation that "[n]othing belonging to the State will remain in its hands." The film documents just how devastating the seven major privatisations had been – state companies that required decades of citizen tax contributions. The privatisations of television, radio, and telephone companies, highways, railway concessions, and national airlines, today form a list of former state assets that provided hundreds of thousands of secure jobs that kept capital in the country. Solanas explains that sold for a fraction of their true value, the state assumed responsibility for layoff payments, increasing the debt instead of decreasing it. For this reason, the sale of telephone company ENTEL for one fifth of its value still left a 6 billion dollar debt with the state. After privatisation, former state companies were asset stripped, prices increased, and no new investment was made. The film asserts that the European consortium Suez y Vivendí left 800,000 Buenos Aires customers without drinking water, and 1 million without sewers. Solanas provides evidence that what served as government in 1990s Argentina was a "mafioscracia", a phrase that links corrupt government officials to corrupt international financial institutions and corrupt union leaders. This comprehensive explanation of the diverse actors who contributed to the crisis is the best example of how counter-information offers an alternative approach to understanding state-worker relations in a national and global context.

Each chapter also has subheadings that lead viewers through staggering statistics regarding unprecedented national and international collusion and corruption necessary to dismantle a thriving economy with a huge middle class that produced 95% of what it consumed. Two privatizations compete as the greatest fraud: the railroad network was reduced from 36,000 km to 8,000 km, shrinking the workforce from 95,000 jobs to 15,000, and saddling the state with 1.4 billion dollars in debt. At the centre of the documentary is the privatisation of petroleum. Here, Solanas enters the frame (infrequent in this film), as he discusses the sale of YPF, the State-owned Argentinean Petroleum Company that was privatised in 1996, and he explains in detail the process of that privatisation in dialogue with engineers who had previously worked in the company. A model of local production, there was no need for privatisation, and Solanas suggests that it could still be nationalised. In view of recent nationalisations of primary resources in neighbouring countries, today this proposal sounds less idealistic than it might have seemed in 2004.

Solanas also includes criticism of the major unions such as the CGT (Central General de Trabajadores) for having granted too many concessions to Government, and the Supreme Court for having taken no role in limiting presidential power. As he has done with all his work, Solanas attends screenings with school students and other members of the public to discuss the film, in order to educate a new generation about the past. This activity is a continuation of his lifelong belief, identified with *Cine Liberación*, that film must participate in promoting social change, and is another way of returning subjectivity to the people.

Unlike militant third cinema of the 1960s, even the most revolutionary documentaries no longer promote armed struggle. The other major difference between Solanas's classic *Cine Liberación* documentary and *Memoria del saqueo* is the relative lack of visual experimentation and in the presentation of information. I believe this difference is due to the fact that the 1990s were an era when politicians took every opportunity to use the media to entertain citizens, and the media avoided serious discussion of economic issues by converting politics into a form of entertainment. This phenomenon should not be surprising, because in 1989 major national media assets were privatised. The commercial approach by the media is directly addressed in Solanas's work with clips of politicians who appeared on variety shows with entertainers who made jokes about the privatisation process, ridiculing those who raised important questions. By returning to a traditional and less visually entertaining narrative style, Solanas is attempting to challenge the dominant media portrayal of politics. Quevedo (2004, 14-15) suggests that this is also the way in which President Néstor Kirchner has distanced himself from Carlos Menem in terms of media presentation. Where both Menem and de la Rúa had used sophisticated media campaigns to promote their image, Kirchner relies on simplicity and directness, which earned him some measure of authenticity.

A third film released in 2004 with major distribution in Argentina but less circulated abroad, is *Deuda*, directed by Jorge Lanata and Andrés Schaer. Using a visual style similar to that of Michael Moore in which the director occupies the frame for a proportionately large segment of the film as he walks to new locations, Lanata speaks to the camera directly or in voice-over in an attempt to personalise the crisis by covering the story of eight-year-old Barbarita Flores, a girl from Tucumán who made headlines when she cried of hunger on national television. Similar to Solanas, Lanata attempts to link her personal story with IMF policies in a series of juxtapositions with interviews, and like Moore, he ambushes officials such as IMF First Deputy Managing Director Anne Krueger with questions such as "How do you sleep at night?" A journalist and media personality, Lanata is entertaining and offers a feel of the everyday in his documentary.

Unlike Solanas, Lanata and Schaer often omit essential historical information, such as the origin of the debt under military dictatorship, the increase of the debt through privatisations that should have lowered it, the financial corruption that made private debt become public debt, corruption of union leadership, and the increased power of economic conglomerates. Where *Memoria del saqueo* named names and included photos of authorities he considered responsible for these crimes, Lanata instead focuses on the IMF and local hunger, blaming all politicians as well as all citizens for the crisis. In view of the other documentaries, the impression that all are *equally* responsible for this tragedy is not convincing. *Deuda* might be considered an example of a documentary which is non-commercial and alternative but does not fit the category of counter-information as discussed by Vinelli and Esperón (2004) because it does not make transparent the relations between the state and workers.

Phase III – Piqueteros and Recovered Factories: Seeking Stability in a Hostile Environment 2005-2006

Beginning in 2005, several documentaries described in detail the process whereby workers have managed to retain control of businesses over several years and are now attempting to gain legal recognition. Four very different documentaries highlight trends taking place since 2004, circulated in documentaries beginning in 2005. Two broadcast quality documentaries show very different aspects of workers' lives.

In 2005, Solanas released a companion to his first documentary, titled *La dignidad de los nadie*s (Dignity of the Nobodies). The chapter format once again organises this documentary as Solanas follows the story of 11 individuals or groups who have found ways to survive under the most difficult conditions of the crisis by organising soup kitchens, raising children despite having no income, managing to provide health care with few resources, and remembering a martyr, Dario Santillán, a community organiser targeted and killed by police. Solanas attempts to capture on film what he considers to be two basic characteristics of survivors: courage and dignity. Often using tango as an audio cue to evoke a shared social history, the film focuses on examples of how solidarity allows the communities to survive and form an alternative ethic to the savagery of 1990s neoliberalism. "Nunca está todo perdido si hay decisión de luchar." (All is not lost if one makes the decision to struggle). To some degree, this film attempts a more difficult task than *Memoria del saqueo*, because if the objective is to offer the viewer examples of courage and dignity, the stories of the most marginalised people in society require that their longer history (which cannot be filmed) be told well, and these individuals do not appear as heroic as workers in organised struggles.

Unlike the previous documentaries described, the viewer comes away from this film with the impression that

the camera always enters these worlds from outside, usually intruding, rather than emerging from them. This is particularly the case with the poorest families who have had little access to education and find it difficult to express themselves in a language middle class viewers recognise. The amazing fact that an illiterate woman with several children should have survived with no income at all elicits tremendous compassion along with a cringe at the film's capture of her image as the ultimate victim. The film pushes the viewer to ask why she had so many children, and because no historical context is offered, it leaves us wondering whether she was most responsible for her predicament. Placing us as viewers outside the events depicted, offering us no historical background of her plight, and raising us above the "victim" tends to elicit pity rather than admiration, and it is difficult to understand their courage, let alone their dignity in this portrayal. This is the same problem posed by *Deuda*, which is sometimes difficult to distinguish from more sensationalist commercial media. I offer alternative explanations for this viewer response in the conclusion.

Fasinpat. Fábrica sin patrón. (2005 68 min) is a professional production in Spanish, made in Argentina by Italian documentary maker Daniele Incalcaterra. This film opens by drawing a direct link between the Argentine military under dictatorship and Italian factory owner Luigi Zanón in archival footage of his speech during the dictatorship. Zanón states that the "security and tranquility of the Armed Forces" ... "have made our dream come true." In another scene, Zanón thanks President Menem for government funding of the factory, and Governor Jorge Sobisch of the Province of Neuquén is also mentioned by workers as having used taxpayer funding to support Zanón, later approving use of the police to evict workers. From the outset, then, viewers locate the state on the side of dictatorship and factory owners, using public funding for private profit and identifying workers as the enemy.

Although it is not made explicit in this film, the reason that Zanón argued that he had to lower wages to stay in business was that Menem's "free trade" policies opened Argentine businesses to intense competition with goods produced in low-wage economies such as China. Believing he could no longer turn a profit, Zanón forced workers to agree to lower wages and benefits, and when they refused, he closed the factory. The workers, however, returned to occupy the factory and successfully kept production going, returning profits to the factory. They have been able to hire an additional 170 workers as a result.

Apart from the background narrative in voiceover, the documentary largely allows workers to tell their story in their own words, and it is in their deliberations and discussions that we find subtle and important aspects that were not as obvious in previous documentaries. Here it is clear that the occupation of the factory put workers and their families at risk, like the *piqueteros*, when they state that instead of risking their lives on the highway for 150 pesos, they risk their lives working in the factory. In an outdoor assembly, a speaker locates their struggle in the longer history of political repression and mentions the 30,000 disappeared in the Dirty War, whose work the current generation is carrying on. Near the end of the film, the workers mention death threats and the fact that some have had to separate from their families. In view of previous declarations that the reason for occupying the factory was to provide a living for their families, this is one of the most troubling statements. Two years after the documentary was released, in April 2007, Carlos Fuentealba, a teacher who participated in a roadblock protest for higher teachers' wages was killed by police when they threw a teargas canister into his car. Sargeant Daniel Poblete, previously convicted twice for brutality, had never spent time in jail for these crimes. After news of Fuentealba's death was widely circulated, Governor Sobisch defended police actions as necessary, and the public outcry resulted in Sobisch losing the backing of Peronist party leaders in his candidacy for President, and he later lost the election.

B.A.U.E.N. Hotel Recuperado. In 2005, Grupo Alavío released a series of six shorts on the recovered Buenos Aires hotel Bauen. This hotel, like the ceramic factory Zanón, was originally associated with dictatorship because it was constructed in 1978 under military government, when the National Development Bank lent five million dollars to Marcelo Iurcovich to build the 20 storey hotel. Never meeting safety codes or paying back the loan, Iurcovich sold it to Solari S.A. which made no improvements and declared bankruptcy in 2001. In 2003, 40 workers occupied the hotel, spent nearly a year refurbishing it, and managed to create jobs for 150 employees. It has become a popular icon and meeting place in the city for workers' organisations, concerts, protests, and other forms of organising. The shorts each offer a segment in which workers explain the difficulties faced they faced in gaining control, making improvements with little capital, and maintaining democratic relations over time. As was the case with *Fasinpat*, the hotel depends on community support and there are several scenes of musical performances in the street and in the hotel designed to raise awareness and funds. Just as *Forja* had received advice from *Fasinpat*, so too *B.A.U.E.N.* was advised by workers from recovered printing business Chilavert, among others. By the end of the filming, the hotel had been operating

for two years without legal authorisation.

Filed by one of the most interesting collectives to have emerged from the 2001 crisis, Grupo Alavío is known by the slogan "action, organisation and struggle for a new subjectivity for the working class," and has successfully produced a series of videos on recovered factories such as the printing factory Chilavert, the ceramics factory Zanón, and Hotel Bauen. Its website lists nine shorts from 2002, 11 from 2003, 21 in 2004, and 13 in 2005. <http://www.revolutionvideo.org/alavio/>, as well as a number of documents about the relations between workers' organisations and film. The first BAUEN short can be viewed at <http://www.agorativ.org>. In June 2007, right-wing candidate for Mayor of Buenos Aires, Mauricio Macri campaigned on a platform to shut down illegal occupations, and that month an eviction order was sent to the hotel, the first received. In August, 2000 people protested the order, another protest took place in September; the eviction order was temporarily suspended. As of December, when Mayor Macri took office, they had not yet been evicted, but the new political atmosphere is not conducive to further occupations and increases the already heavy pressures workers are facing.

In the two documentaries discussed, information provided in print and internet updates what is suggested in the films. This lag can be addressed by visits to internet sites, but not all documentaries or movements have such sites. In personal communication with B.A.U.E.N. workers, I was told that they cannot possibly maintain a website and that they have never made a documentary themselves because they are too busy keeping their hotel going. I have found this to be the case with other worker groups as well.

In October 2005, Michael Albert and Lydia Sargent of US based *Z Magazine* filmed interviews of leaders of occupied factories, with additional contextual explanations provided by Ezequiel Adamovsky (a writer for *Z Magazine*, identified here as translator), Eduardo Murúa of the "Latin American Network of Occupied Factories", and Economist Pablo Levin of the University of Buenos Aires, who offers strategic planning for Zanón. In the 55 minute non-broadcast video *Argentina's Occupied Factories*, Albert appears on screen several times, and poses interesting questions about the experience from his perspective as a journal editor interested in how workers organise. Not always easy to follow due to technical problems with sound and clumsy editing of still frames with statistics (out of sequence with what is explained in the voice-over), the film also suffers from confusing intercutting of footage from other documentaries about recovered factories which have no dates or indication of the relation to what is being discussed in voice-over. Nevertheless, this documentary raises important questions that are not addressed in any other documentary. Combined with other material, one comes away with another important perspective on the movement.

A viewer with little background on Argentina can easily come away with a somewhat distorted image of Argentina and of what has happened in the country. For example, describing the takeover of factories as having resulted from "high unemployment and bankruptcies", Albert makes it obvious from the outset that he does not have a clear understanding of the unique characteristics of the Argentine crisis or of the important economic differences between Argentina and most other Latin American countries. This leads Albert to give the viewer the impression that it was quite common for illiterate factory workers to assume accounting tasks after takeovers. For those familiar with Argentina's low illiteracy rate, it seems unusual that a factory worker would be illiterate in the first place, and even more unusual that he or she would be easily able to assume accounting tasks after the takeover. In later discussions, it appears they were identifying one individual case. Albert also underestimates the ongoing legacy of dictatorship and the severe class divisions operating in Argentinean society as he attempts to interpret worker management, yet perhaps because of this limited awareness, he also manages to introduce topics and elicit responses not seen in other video material.

Albert wants to find out what kind of changes workers introduced after the takeover, perhaps to see whether his own theories about worker management have any relation to Argentinean reality. An assumption he makes is that worker management should make improvements in safety, in pay equity among workers, in pay changes relevant to the danger and tedium of certain tasks (division of labour payment), and in relations to other workers in society more generally. He also wants to know how much workers participate in decision-making and whether the examples of occupied factories have increased the likelihood that other workers across the country join in the movement.

What all workers and commentators stress in this video is that the takeover of factories occurred in a climate of crisis (although the severity of the crisis and its historical importance remain unstated). The takeovers were at first defensive measures – in other words, in the first instances, workers simply found occupation a practical solution to their unemployed status, and few felt that this act would represent a direct challenge to

the state over a long period. The next point made by all is that once the workers were in the position of making the factory or hotel work, they gained confidence in their ability to work together and make it a longer-term solution.

Another important point made throughout the video which, in other documentaries is simply assumed rather than made explicit, is that workers became committed to more democratic forms of decision making because of the process through which they were forced to relate to the state after the takeover. What becomes clear in this series of questions and answers is that these workers learned after the takeover that they were now committed to a very different set of worker relations, (not by choice but by circumstance), because the state viewed them differently than it viewed other workers. In other words, workers in occupied factories began to realise that the state itself was opposed to their position as decision-makers, and this set workers in opposition to many powerful interests in the nation which were in collusion with state actors, including police and former members of the dictatorship. Once workers find themselves in this position, they adopt a new set of rhetorical strategies to define themselves and their relations to other workers and to the state, and this rhetoric tends to be socialist, in some cases anarchist. This change is described more generally as a change in subjectivity. The other documentaries suggest that this awareness is voluntary and natural, but *Argentina's Occupied Factories* enables us to see that it is in their defensive posture toward the state that workers are forced in to a new set of worker-state relations, and therefore a new subjectivity.

There are several examples of this information emerging in what appear to be naïve questions on Albert's part. Murúa had explained that there is no one model for all 186 recovered factories, and therefore not all factories mandated equal salaries for all workers. However, when Albert asks what would happen of some workers wanted much higher wages than others, the workers burst out laughing, as if this were impossible, one making a gesture as if slitting his throat to suggest that workers would not tolerate a great disparity in income. Murúa does offer some examples reiterated by other workers, that safety improved in all factories, that workplace rules were also altered and improved for all so that they could have more rest and less repetitive tasks, and that all major decisions are made in assemblies in which all workers participate and vote. However, when Albert asks whether 20% of workers have managerial positions and 80% continue to do manual labour, Murúa responds that this distribution of labour hasn't radically changed.

Perhaps the most important point made in this documentary, which does not appear in others, is that these factories are isolated cases of worker management, rather than the norm. Because other documentaries have the goal of attracting support for occupied factories and making a strong case for these positive changes, they tend to understate how unusual the phenomenon is within Argentina itself, how difficult it has been, the personal sacrifices continually faced by these workers, and the precarious nature of the action. This point is made when Albert asks whether other workers would consider joining the occupied factory movement even if the factory had not yet gone bankrupt. The answer is clearly not, because workers whose jobs are secure in a context of high unemployment would never risk losing their job. When he asks whether workers would leave a recovered factory to accept higher wages in traditional business, they state that they could not do that because of what they had been through in securing the occupation of this factory. In other words, these questions and responses about worker occupation enable the viewer to identify this process as so unusual, and requiring such sacrifice, that the workers' lives are changed permanently and other workers would not take such a risk if they did not have to do so. In this way, the documentary relativises the occupation for the viewer who sets this statement in the context of information presented in other film. When Albert returns to his question as to whether workers' salaries and the division of labour will be more equal in five years, Murúa is honest in responding that such a change depends upon the individual factory and workers. He confesses that even among the 186 factories and 10,000 workers, not all of them have the same level of consciousness or view their experience as a struggle against capital.

Two important aspects of these comments lead us outside the documentary to seek contextual information, and writers for progressive or socialist internet sites began to include this information around 2004. In 2002, a national umbrella organisation was formed to coordinate the dissemination of information and advice, planning, and joint direct action among some 150-180 businesses, including BAUEN Hotel and Chilavert printing factory. The Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas (National Movement of Recovered Businesses, MNER) is led by Peronist Eduardo Murúa. This organisation is politically aligned with leftist and socialist organisations, views worker occupation as part of a larger worker struggle against capitalism, takes clear positions with respect to the IMF, is against Argentine participation in the FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas), and they have outlined specific legislation that would enable the recovered factories to

continue to operate in a more supportive environment. The following year a smaller, alternative umbrella organisation split off, which organises factories in the Buenos Aires region. The *Movimiento Nacional de Fábricas Recuperadas por los Trabajadores* (National Movement of Worker Recovered Factories MNFRT), is led by Luis Alberto Caro, a nationalist of the Christian Democratic Party who has made explicit his understanding that recovered factories are legally within the capitalist system and that they must find ways to cut costs within that system and remain competitive, rather than attempting to change the system, which will never happen. (Ranis, Trigona) The most famous factory that forms part of this organisation is Brukman, now renamed the *Cooperativa de Trabajo 18 de Diciembre*, (the 18 December Cooperative). In recent years, Brukman has issued statements that it no longer wants to be used by political groups and will not march with others because it wants to focus on work.

What is surprising to outsiders is to learn that the movement of recovered factories or businesses is not supported by unions or by leftist political parties for different reasons. For Argentines, there are many historical reasons that these worker movements have developed in this way, and a lengthy summary is beyond the scope of this article. In the video *Argentina's Occupied Factories*, Albert asks his translator if there had been clear political direction in the early days of the takeovers by a leftist party, might that party have united workers such that they could force the state to adopt different relations, and at that point could workers have controlled the state? Ezequiel Adamovsky responds that the left was so divided among themselves, (Trotskyist, Communist Party, and Maoist Parties), that they were not only incapable of providing leadership, they served to destroy the unity that had existed in the early days as they struggled over control of the councils and assemblies. Therefore, according to Adamovsky, Argentina needs a new form of political party, different from the current political leadership, which tends toward factionalism. Albert's concluding statements summarise his experience by suggesting that the workers appear to be proud and successful, and have adopted cooperative strategies among themselves but have been forced to continue working in a competitive market environment that is unlikely to become more favourable toward them. Outside the frame of this video during the same dates, the first international meeting of recovered factories took place in Venezuela, gathering 263 self-managed companies. This event is not mentioned in the documentary.

Another interesting media praxis is emerging on internet. The filmmakers of the excellent documentary *Raymundo* (2002) are completing the editing of a documentary on Fasinpat entitled "Corazón de fábrica" or Heart of the Factory. Virna Molina and Ernesto Ardito include a section on their website for advance orders which will enable them to complete the editing. <http://www.filmraymundo.com.ar/default.htm>. While this may be common practice in some circles, in the context of alternative media, this relationship with potential viewers maintains links in an effective way so that filmmakers do not have to rely on funders who might alter the way the film is made.

What is emerging in the documentaries produced in 2005 and 2006 is a stronger analysis of the link between the history of dictatorship and ownership of factories, with loss of worker protection in the 1990s, and the explicit recognition by workers filmed in recovered factories that they are carrying on a tradition first initiated by those who disappeared under the dictatorship. While this connection may have been discussed in voice-overs in earlier documentaries, it is stated by workers themselves in these documentaries, and what becomes apparent is that while workers have faced some amount of success on the political side, which is what media abroad tend to emphasise, this success has provoked a reaction from the state and non-state actors supported by the police or politicians to take extra-institutional means to undermine them. Workers are currently facing violent reprisals including death threats from individuals likely to be former military personnel currently clandestinely employed by government or police officials. They also face a return to political office of right-wing politicians who have promised to end factory occupations. The umbrella movement which might otherwise have unified these groups has split, one challenging capitalism directly and the other attempting to work within the changing rules of capitalism without engaging with others in a larger movement.

Because it is difficult to offer a narrative of the *piqueteros* as compelling as that of the workers in recovered factories, this part of the movement has receded from recent documentaries, although *piquetes* still take place. The original support that they received from middle classes has given way to complaints about arriving late to work when the roads are blocked rather than expressions of solidarity with the *piqueteros*.

Returning to Solanas' film about the "dignity of the nobodies", we find that it addresses an important issue about current social movements, alternative media, and counter-information in Argentina. In video and

documentary made in Argentina and outside, most have chosen to focus on the success stories of those few factories which have been able to continue production and hire more workers under worker management. While the focus is rightly placed on what this many mean for worker movements more generally, in media terms it is much harder to make a compelling film about unemployed, unorganised workers, or what Marxists call the Lumpen, those former workers or marginalised people who have never had formal paid work, are illiterate, struggle to feed themselves and their children in soup kitchens, and whose behaviour is at odds with what might enable them to survive and would enable the viewer to feel sympathy. Those who have more children than anyone could reasonably feed, or adopt other self-defeating behaviours, don't fit into the narratives that workers or middle class viewers abroad want to see of heroic struggles. It is in this context that Solanas's *La dignidad de los nadie*s has contributed images and experiences not shown in other documentaries, and his work provides evidence as to how difficult such a project is.

In conclusion, global justice activists are correct in asserting that Argentinean workers have introduced extraordinary forms of protest and worker action which have the potential to initiate a new era in relations between capital and workers inside that nation. Whether workers will be successful over the longer term in Argentina however, is contingent upon the relatively fragile and contentious relations between factories, communities, unions, political parties, and the state. Documentaries about Argentina from abroad have made a clear and convincing argument that the potential for major change exists but we see in documentaries made in Argentina that these changes take place only through considerable sacrifice of the workers themselves, who exist in a precarious situation with respect to the state. As time passes, their ability to situate this struggle in a longer history is offering them a narrative that strengthens their resolve. The questions Argentineans are addressing are similar to those posed by foreigners who seek answers to their own questions about the nature of capital and labour in the 21st century. However, the complexity of the Argentinean socio-political context makes it impossible to predict how long these movements will continue.

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Footnotes:

1 A public document available as a report by the Argentinean Congress on corrupt practices specifies the names of individuals most responsible for money laundering and related activities: Carlos Menem and Domingo Cavallo are the most frequently cited. A summary is currently available at <http://www.e-libro.net/E-libro-viejo/gratis/resumenejecutivo.pdf>, last accessed 15 February 2008. Domingo Cavallo is currently teaching at Harvard University, perhaps the best example of the contrast between elite and popular understanding of the Argentine crisis.