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Book review

Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema

written by Joanna Page, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2009

In the introduction to her book *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, Joanna Page summarises the vicissitudes of the Argentine film industry from the 1990s until now and establishes the theoretical framework of her research. By highlighting the relationship between Argentina's economic and political situation and its film industry, Page sets out to explore how Argentine cinema helped to construct different 'modes of subjectivity relating to Argentina's experience of capitalism, neoliberalism and economic crisis' (p. 3). This study draws on Frederic Jameson's theorisation on the intrinsically *allegorical* nature of third world cultural manifestations and Deleuze's notion that all films which generally refer to money within their narrative can be considered to be *reflexive* because they implicitly comment on their own process of production. The figures of allegory and reflexivity are present in all film analyses throughout the book.

The study of Argentine films is preceded by a critique of the wide and allegedly uncritical embrace of 'transnationality' as the model of choice in contemporary film studies. This gives the author the opportunity to defend the validity of nation as a viable framework with which to analyse contemporary Argentine cinema, which accounts for 'the public role of culture within a national context' (p. 9) against accusations of it being a narrative of the past, an echo of old-age nationalism. In a bold (but partial) discussion on the status quo of academic film studies, the reader is alerted to the neoliberal ideology veiled behind discourses of transnationality within film studies, while simultaneously negotiating a conception of 'nation' that moves away from post-colonial nationalist discourses.

By rebranding nation as a 'porous entity' and as 'unfinished project' the author provides the foundation to her study of Argentine cinema within a national context. Focusing on an analysis that marks a transition between previous Argentine film traditions and contemporary cinema, Page traces the shifts of stylistic choices and narrative devices, for example the transition from a prominent use of voice-over and explanatory monologue in the films of Fernando Solanas and Eliseo Subiela to its total rejection in contemporary cinema. Page argues that New Argentine Cinema, a 'plethora of independent, collaborative projects on shoestring budgets' (p. 33), appears as a reaction to its immediate predecessor, in particular to its manifest political agenda expressed through didactic cinematic narratives.

Third cinema, a movement best known for the social documentaries of the 1960s in Argentina and a close relationship with Imperfect cinema in Cuba and *Cinéma nôvo* in Brasil, has often been associated with Italian Neorealism as a source

of inspiration. According to the author some of these traits still reverberate in contemporary Argentine cinema, particularly a certain sense of ‘rawness and newness’ in the image together with a portrayal of the country as an ‘uncharted territory’ in need of ‘social knowledge’ (p. 35). The author studies this proximity in three new Argentine films: Stagnaro and Caetano’s *Pizza, birra y faso* (Pizza, Beer and Smokes), Poliak’s *La fe del volcán* (The Faith of the Volcano) and Trapero’s *Mundo grúa* (Crane World).

The analysis of these films, described as a sort of postmodern neorealism, is a successful extrapolation of Deleuze’s theory of cinema’s shift from the Movement-image (which dominated world cinema prior to the birth of Italian Neorealism) to the Time-image (where time is set free from the constraints of a sensory-motor schema). Through an anti-explanatory narrative populated by wandering characters and aided by dissociative editing which sabotages temporal continuity, these new Argentine films create what the author calls an ‘autoethnographic’ gaze – Argentine cinema’s self-representation for an imagined first and third world audience. The author highlights the apparent paradox in which new Argentine cinema places itself, i.e. the assumption of the role of ‘producer of social knowledge’ followed by an uncompromising refusal to provide such knowledge either for a local audience, in avoiding new monolithic discourses of what the nation is or should be, or for a first world audience, so as to resist their ‘epistophilia’ (p. 56).

This paradox also acts as Argentine cinema’s platform for the treatment of issues related to the world of labour; in particular, the narratives born as a result of the economic uncertainty in the years that preceded and followed the financial crisis of 2001 and the consequent rise in unemployment and ‘casualised’ work. In line with her theory that Argentine cinema’s politicised nature stems from its inherent reflexivity, the author focuses on the analysis of the topic of labour in contemporary Argentine films and particularly in the oeuvre of Martín Rejtman. Marx’s theory of the ‘role of the worker “in the production and reproduction of capital”’ (p. 72) together with David Harvey’s re-appropriation of the Marxist notion of the commodification of ‘labor power’ (p. 73) provide the framework for the analysis of Rejtman’s films, in particular his depiction of people as an exchangeable, dispensable workforce and of their bodies as the momentary hosts of an ever-circulating capital. Arguably, given that Argentine cinema constantly manifests its symptomatic reflexivity, Rejtman’s interest in the filming of labour becomes, according to Page, a comment on the ‘labour of film’ itself (p. 59). Similarly, in the analysis of Lisandro Alonso’s films, the characters’ extreme marginality becomes an allegory of the films’ own placement in the culture industry. The author focuses on ‘the filmmaker’s exploration of precisely such a position of extreme marginality in relation to the market, both for his characters and for the films themselves as cultural artifacts’ (p. 64).

It comes as no surprise that the topic of labour is followed by that of crime, their importance made apparent in the narratives of a national cinema marked by economic crisis. In fact, the author states, 'crime remains a powerful tool in articulating the conflict between national and international economic interests and in imagining the relationship between the individual and the capitalist state in a globalized world' (p. 82). The extension of Josefina Ludmer's study of criminality in Argentine literature to the realm of cinema adds a historical dimension to the issues of 'criminal state' and 'economic injustice' present in films like Bielinsky's *Nueve reinas* (Nine Queens) and *El aura* (The Aura). The recurrence of these topics in key Argentine literary works in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly José Hernández's *La Vuelta de Martín Fierro* (The Return of Martín Fierro [1879]) and Roberto Arlt's *El juguete rabioso* (Mad Toy [1926]) and *Los siete locos* (The Seven Madmen [1929]), would prove their presence in the Argentine imagination since the early days of the nation.

The reflexive element of these films lies, according to Page, in their format. The re-appropriation of classic film genres such as the noir, thriller, and western acts as an allegory for Argentine cinema's own peripheral position in the global network of film production and distribution, in keeping with Jameson's theory of postmodern third world culture as acting out its own commodification. Jameson argues that 'in the postmodern, autoreferentiality can be initially detected in the way in which culture acts out its own commodification. From the generic standpoint, what interests us here is the way in which the former genres (thrillers, spy films, social exposés, science fiction, and so on) now conflate in a movement that re-enacts the dedifferentiation of the social levels, and by way of their own allegorization: so that the new post-generic genre films are allegories of each other, and of the impossible representation of the social totality itself' (p. 108). Although the chapter maps out in detail the way in which several Argentine films re-appropriate international codes (classic film genres), endowing them with local meanings 'rooted in the socioeconomic climate of pre- and post-Crisis Argentina' (p. 86), it is not clear how such re-appropriation results in an allegory (understood in a loose sense and not as a narrative structure, although this is not specified) of the film's own position in the international film market, unless we previously accept Jameson's idea that 'culture acts out its own commodification'.

Throughout her work Page attempts to highlight the mechanisms used by contemporary Argentine cinema to break down historically crystallised conceptions rooted in Argentina's national imagination. In Chapter 5 the author focuses on discourses of nationhood and national identity, in particular the dichotomy between the urban depicted as the positivist space of modernisation and the rural portrayed as the realm of national authenticity, immune to the avatars of capitalism and unaffected by the passing of time. The re-appropriation of these narratives by contemporary Argentine cinema is marked by the real experience of underdevel-

opment and crisis, resulting in contrasting films which either challenge such discourses (such as Sorín's *Historias mínimas* [Minimal Stories]) or reinforce them (as in the case of Mignona's *Cleopatra*).

Drawing on Bhabha's observations on the constructed nature of the 'simplified' national subject at the expense of historical complexity, Page studies the topic of national identity in the narratives of films which tell stories of migration: Caetano's *Bolivia*, Gachassin's *Vladimir en Buenos Aires* (*Vladimir in Buenos Aires*) and Burman's *El Abrazo Partido* (*Lost Embrace*). These narratives of migration are interpreted as further expressions of contemporary Argentine cinema's 'reflexive meditations on the position of Argentine culture within the world' (p. 115), as already pointed out in previous chapters with regards to films about labour and crime.

The survival of old discourses in a given culture could be seen as a direct result of their uncritical acceptance, eased by the satisfaction provided by a gapless version of the past. Undoubtedly this is why Page sets out to explore the processes of memory through films that relate to the experience of post-dictatorship in Argentina. Chapter 6 focuses on two films which 'depart from the theme of justice and the testimonial impetus that have governed the majority of post-dictatorship films' (p. 153), concentrating instead on historicising memory itself. As a result these films simultaneously pose a critique to the crystallised constructions of 'collective memory' and act as a 'corrective' to post-dictatorship memory in Argentina. Films such as Carri's *Los rubios* (*The Blondes*) and D'Angiolillo's *Potestad* highlight the fragility of individual memory under the weight of collective memory, prompting the spectator to revise the mechanisms of memory itself rather than forcing his compliance with a collection of certainties about the past.

All the films discussed in the first six chapters of the book seem to provide a social commentary either on unemployment, crime, migration, or a portrait of pre and post-crisis Argentine society. However, Lucrecia Martel's minimal stories of middle class families which take place mostly in domestic spaces are an exponent of more subtle forms of politicisation. Although her films *La Ciénaga* (*The Swamp*) and *La niña santa* (*The Holy Girl*) seem to shy away from politics in their narrative and refuse allegorical readings that would align them to a clear political program, their ultimate engagement with politics, claims the author, refers specifically to their treatment of the processes of perception and attribution of meaning. Paradoxically, Page justifies this argument with an allegoric reading of a series of 'clues' within the films, e.g. a character who has trouble hearing, a doctor concerned with accurately interpreting what a patient says, a girl who becomes famous for seeing something everyone else fails to see.

The political dimension of Martel's films is also to be found in their narrative, which depicts characters withdrawn from the public space into the realm of the private and the domestic. According to the author this suggests a 'political gesture'

itself which signals ‘the primacy of biological life [over public, political life] in times of severe economic crisis’ (p. 193). The conclusion to the book, anticipated in chapter 2, posits contemporary Argentine cinema as the most important arena for the discussion and ‘critical reflection on the role of culture’ (p. 200) in a country where citizens face the choice between an agonising public sphere or the safety of their private space.

This work represents an important contribution to Latin American film studies, bringing a largely neglected film industry into the English-speaking academic world. By doing so the book proposes a ‘third way’ in cultural studies, in tension with both transnational and post-colonial, nationalist approaches. The book also succeeds in raising awareness about the repercussions of Argentina’s economy on its film industry. Also, it presents an opportunity for further elaboration on some vital matters, for example a meticulous dialogue between the claims of both national and transnational approaches to film studies beyond a general claim for the latter’s allegiance with neoliberal discourse. The methodology deployed in the analysis of films appears to be in conflict with the claimed aesthetic standpoint of such films. In this respect it is arguable whether an allegorical reading of a purportedly anti-allegorical cinema is effective or if other methods of analysis should be sought.

Perhaps more importantly, this work opens up a space for further inquiry, particularly regarding the consequences of understanding cinema through the theoretical framework chosen by the author. What are the limitations of understanding politicisation in Argentine cinema in terms of an almost exclusive self-commentary on the Argentine film industry’s position within the international culture market? In other words, how can we understand Argentine cinema as ‘political’ beyond the limits imposed by Jameson’s model of peripheral culture? Does new Argentine cinema progress from an initial reflection on its own form and procedures? This book provides the opportunity to seek other possible frameworks that will engage with politics, aesthetics, and cinema while helping to challenge and eventually overcome stagnant models of center/periphery and the consequent inscription of culture at the borders as mere reflexive commentary.

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