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Review/Reseña

Ana Laura Lusnich y Pablo Piedras, eds. *Una historia del cine político y social en Argentina (1896-1969)*. Buenos Aires: Nueva Librería, 2009.

Politics, Society and Film in Argentina

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As lost or unavailable films are recovered, distributed in cinemas, on DVD and through other channels, the notion that cinema in Latin America before the 1960s was an entirely commercial, apolitical, or at least non-oppositional undertaking is refuted. Scholarship in both North and South America has slowly been turning its critical gaze toward the extensive corpus of films of the period, which has begun to reveal a surprising diversity of themes and styles, and, at least in the silent cinema of the 1910s and '20s, a degree of authorial autonomy not seen again until the 1960s. The renewal of this sector of film studies is furthered by the appearance of *Una historia del cine político y social en Argentina (1896-1969)*, a volume

of solid, if traditional and mostly historiographical scholarship that combines the formidable expertise of a group of scholars affiliated with the University of Buenos Aires with the editorial rigor of Ana Laura Lusnich and Pablo Piedras, the directors of the Centro de Investigación y Nuevos Estudios sobre Cine (CIyNE) and coeditors of the volume. Lusnich has also recently edited the volumes *Civilización y barbarie: En el cine argentino y latinoamericano* (2005) and *El drama social-folklórico: El universo rural en el cine argentino* (2007), collections that feature pieces by many of the contributors to the present volume. With its most recent publication, the group led by Lusnich consolidates its status as the leading source of scholarship on Argentine film history.

The volume contains twenty-two articles covering a wide variety of themes and periods, from theoretical debates to scriptwriting to censorship, from artisanal silent film to the industrial studio system to the modernist and militant independents of the 1960s. After a fiery prologue by Fernando Birri—widely considered the founder of Argentine and Latin American oppositional cinema by virtue of his *Tire dié* (1956-1960) and *Los inundados* (1961)—the book opens with an introduction by Lusnich in which she defines the project’s analytically rigorous methodology (which explains its typological eagerness), summarizes the rather scarce previous scholarship, and in a brief historical survey identifies those filmmakers who before 1958 “otorgaron visibilidad a problemas de orden político y social.” This is supplemented by Piedras’ further exposition of the methodology of the project and a brief typology of political cinemas in Argentina. The latter concentrates on denunciations of class-based exploitation and political corruption, testimony and militancy, showing the realm of what the project’s directors consider political to be rather restrictive if viewed from the perspective of the North American academy.

The next four essays delve specifically into the historical debates that surrounded the cinema of each period, by examining the writings of the filmmakers themselves. The first, by Andrea Cuarterolo, revisits the period from the cinema’s arrival through the early-1920s, when the most palpating questions were the dominance of North American cinema and the need to define the new medium’s role in society, which spurred calls for

state protection of the national product, for “civilizing” uses of the medium, and for a greater realism. Lusnich then contributes an article on “dissident” filmmakers of the classical studio period of 1933 to 1956, in which she discusses Mario Soffici, Hugo del Carril and Lucas Demare, who for widely divergent reasons never fit easily into the constraints of commercial film production. These reasons are made evident in their writings, which touch on themes similar to those dominant in the previous period: calls for an authentically national cinema and proposals on the role of the cinema in the greater national culture. While Demare’s writings are minimal here, Soffici’s underline somewhat predictably his status as an auteur of a social cinema, while del Carril’s Peronist imperative dominates. The following piece, by Jorge Sala, provides a clear account of the debates on modernist aesthetics and politically-committed filmmaking in the Generación del 60, debates that have again become relevant for contemporary filmmakers. In the final entry in this section Lusnich briefly surveys the prolific writings of the late-1950s through the ‘60s, the period in which collectives and groups produced the most radicalized and widely-known political and militant filmographies. The writings around Birri’s Escuela Documental de Santa Fe and Fernando “Pino” Solanas and Octavio Getino’s Grupo Cine Liberación stress an imperative to break with past Argentine cinema, to establish alternative modes of production and distribution, and to respond to national realities. Lusnich’s piece convincingly locates these attempts by Birri at the origin of Solanas and Getino’s more famous theorization of a “third cinema” a decade later.

Moving from historical debates to more specific themes, the volume contains several articles on the late-‘60s militant cinema: Marcos Adrián Pérez Llahí discusses two short films on which collaborated Raymundo Gleyzer and Jorge Prelorán, two filmmakers excluded from wide circulation for very different reasons. The former later became one of the most important militant filmmakers before being murdered by the military government in 1976, while the latter went to recognition as a pioneer of ethnographic film. Their collaborations, *Quilino* (1966) and *Ocurrido en Hualfin* (1967), are closely analyzed as successful instances of films that bring to light people and places excluded from the hegemonic national

cinema. Jimena Trombetta and Paula Wolkowicz analyze Solanas and Getino's *La hora de los hornos* as an essay film, a formally free work that argues a thesis, first and foremost political in this case. They describe the specific ideological influences on the two filmmakers, which they couple with a close analysis of how the film fashions a coherent message out of its heterogeneous materials. The following study, by Silvana Flores, explores the work of three lesser-known representatives of late-'60s militant cinema, Humberto Ríos, Enrique Juárez and Nemesio Juárez. Ríos' short *Faena* (1960), is one of the earliest modern examples of explicitly oppositional cinema in Argentina, and was quoted in *La hora de los hornos*. Nemesio Juárez made *Los que trabajan* in 1964, and his brother Enrique was closely linked to the Grupo Cine Liberación when he made *Ya es tiempo de violencia* in 1969. Flores considers various ways in which these films function as political documents, from the filmmakers' aesthetic choices to the representation of the Cordobazo student-worker uprisings, before moving on to discuss the figure of the bandit-hero in Ríos' 1969 fiction feature *Eloy*. Javier Campo delves into the association in 1969 of several militant filmmakers to form the Grupo Realizadores de Mayo, which made *Argentina, mayo de 1969: los caminos de la liberación*, a portmanteau film consisting of ten shorts on the collective struggle for national liberation. The most notable of the contributions to the film seems to have been Eliseo Subiela's sequence showing how to build a molotov cocktail. Campo's article provides a very valuable account of this long-lost but recently rediscovered film and its directors. While these pieces are valuable contributions to the already-abundant scholarship on militant cinema of the 1960s, the most novel research in this volume covers the earlier periods, those of the silent films, the classical studio age of 1933 to 1956, and the seldom-studied filmmakers of the subsequent years.

On the latter period, especially interesting is a detailed study by María Aimaretti, Lorena Bordigoni and Campo on the Escuela Documental de Santa Fe (at the "origin" of the Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano, with Birri's *Tire dié*), which features the particularly valuable resource of individual descriptions of the Escuela's "most representative films." Sala then evaluates three examples of what Lusnich characterizes elsewhere as the

“drama social-folklórico”—*El trueno entre las hojas* (Armando Bo, 1958), *Sabaleros* (Bo, 1959) and *Shunko* (Lautaro Murúa, 1960)—as moments of a (rather schematically characterized) transition from the older, industrial model to the modernist cinema. Sala manages admirably to link this transition to the political dimension of the films. Pamela C. Gionco examines films by Demare, Fernando Ayala and Leopoldo Torre Nilsson made soon after the 1955 overthrow of Perón, scrutinizing the three anti-Peronist directors’ interpretations of the intensely conflictual politics of their time.

Two very interesting contributions cover the Generación del 60, which, despite producing some of the most aesthetically creative and challenging films in Argentine cinema history and thus contributing to the formation of a sophisticated film-going public, has seldom been an object of scholarly study, especially in North America. The first, by Sala, describes the radicalization of Rodolfo Kuhn, who began his career in the late-1950s as a modernist auteur relatively unconcerned with social issues, and finished as a testimonial (and even militant, in *Argentina, mayo de 1969...*) filmmaker a decade later. In this study of one of Argentine cinema’s most interesting and underappreciated filmmakers, Sala parses the political dimensions of his early films and traces the transformations these undergo in later films. Marcelo Cerdá contributes an extensive study of the Generación del 60, in which he interrogates the common rejection of these filmmakers as “Europhile” *auteurs*. While Cerdá points out many ways in which they were critical of Argentina’s status quo, he eventually stresses the limitations of their works as contributions to social change, in a diagnosis authorized by Solanas and Getino’s manifesto “Por un tercer cine,” which points out the failure of auteur cinema to address the collective popular subject needed to bring about lasting social change.

Several articles cover the years that were dominated by the studio system. Alejandro Kelly Hopfenblatt and Trombetta address censorship, finding that special care was taken to suppress representations of national identity in ways contrary to those approved by power, first that of conservative interests, then of Perón. Since for each regime the ideal nation was different, censorship followed accordingly, causing negative portrayals

of “argentinidad” to be targeted by the former, while unflattering portrayals of the “pueblo peronista” were prohibited by the latter. Pérez Llahí then puts together an impressively researched account of the individual film studios by sifting through the industrial cinema for seeds of the political cinema that bloomed in the 1960s. He finds that instead of a monolithic studio system à la Hollywood, Argentina’s classical films were rather individual projects of a heterogeneous group of studios whose common interest was above all profitability. Complementing these conclusions is a study by Lucía Rud that explores how several scriptwriters during the classical period were able to fill the role of political *auteurs*, injecting social content into the otherwise apolitical studio films. Marta Casale and Hopfenblatt address the role of the formulation of space in four films that challenged the institutional model during the classical period, specifically *Prisioneros de la tierra* (Soffici, 1939), *Pelota de trapo* (Leopoldo Torres Ríos, 1948), *Los isleros* (Demare, 1951) and *Las aguas bajan turbias* (del Carril, 1952). In these fiction features a heightened “referential impulse” resulted in location filming, the inclusion of documentary footage and the suppression of painterly landscapes, along with the de-glamorization of characters as the relationship between them and rural and urban space was given greater dramatic importance. Due to the inclusion of marginalized people and places and the greater use of film’s documentary capacity, these films engaged national reality on ways that the industrial cinema tended to suppress. Alicia Aisemberg studies a wider corpus of films of the same period, tracing ways in which isolated films destabilized the hegemonic generic conventions, primarily through the representation of characters in ways that resisted the sainetesque caricatures dominant in the popular cinema that tended to depoliticize the thematics of marginalization and poverty.

Due to its more artisanal production, the silent period is a time of surprising authorial autonomy, a fact coming to light with the recent recovery and edition on DVD of several films from the 1910s and ‘20s. Cuarterolo, a leading scholar on the period, discusses several films that, by shifting the emphasis to class inequalities, successfully resisted the nationalist and positivist imperatives of the time, forcefully denouncing

social injustice and questioning the dominant distorted images of rural and urban space. This valuable piece of scholarship is supplemented by another from Gionco, in which she discusses the politics of animated film in the same period, discussing works by Quirino Cristiani and Andrés Decaud.

Una historia del cine político y social en Argentina (1896-1969) is the latest of Lusnich and Co.'s important contributions to scholarship on the less-studied periods of Argentine film history. It acknowledges and extends the invaluable work of past critics such as Jorge Miguel Couselo, Domingo Di Núbila and Claudio España. While its status as a closely-directed group narrows the theoretical approach and excludes other possible critical strategies, it provides a wealth of information and represents a key contribution to—and in the case of silent film, a foundation for—future scholarship. The focusing of critical attention on the first seven decades of Argentine cinema—enabled in part by recent work by Fernando Martín Peña and others to recover and bring to light lost older films—shows them to be of surprising richness and centrality to any study of 20th-century Argentine culture.