

Joanna Page, **Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema**, Duke University Press, 2009, 233 pp., \$79.97 (hardcover), \$22.95 (paperback).

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Various studies on Argentine contemporary film have focused on the events of December 2001, the subsequent political rebellions that usurped five presidents, and the political possibilities that found their way through the still-buckling cracks of global neoliberalism that emerged in the crisis' wake. Yet representations of such political activism, exemplified by extraordinary examples of anti-capitalist organization and the resistance that gained international notoriety during this time, only speak for a portion of the population injured by Argentina's economic crisis. Joanna Page's book, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema* offers us a parallel analysis of crisis-era Argentina (1995-2005) through a study of fictional cinema, an area that lay previously and significantly under-examined in the English-language world. She ultimately provides an important foray into work on subjectivity vis-à-vis the state, globalization, and national identity through the lens of daily life in Argentine fictional film.



Argentina's crisis cannot be explained as a single event, a fact Page rightfully addresses in her analysis of the 10 years that surround the tumultuous months of protest in 2001-2002. Her approach thus reaps the rewards of being able to look at the rise and fall of a crisis period, an epochal strategy that uses analytical breadth to assess Argentina's film industry, beginning with its neoliberal origins and ending with the state's pleading attempt to use film to help structure and construct a new form of national identity. A similar approach is also employed in her use of a wide variety of case studies that dot Argentina's national film landscape, populating her argument with examples from different genres, time periods, and themes. Her work takes Argentine adaptations of neorealism and melds them with analyses of film noir. She chronicles how late 1990s examples of old-guard Argentine film heavyweights (Pino Solanas and Eliseo Subiela) can blur into fresh observations of the low-budget and experimental wings within New Argentine Cinema (Albertini Carri and Luis Cèsar D'Angiolillo). She also writes chapters on important but overlooked topics, such as crime, that do well to supplement her analysis alongside chapters on memory (an Argentine staple), labor and capital circulation, and national identity.

Moreover, Page's approach is initially simple. Fictional film in crisis-era Argentina has significantly shifted from older, pre-crisis types of film. The nation — in the contemporary Argentine context, as opposed to traditional forms of the nation as a tool for state power — has become a vehicle for anti-state and anti-capitalist resistance, injured and vengeful after the decades of neoliberal policies that robbed Argentine banks, depreciated the Argentine peso, and wrecked the Argentine economy. She elaborates, suggesting that this new national vantage point actually permits us to more effectively see the complex identity-negotiations that a country like Argentina, wrecked by neoliberalism, endures as it struggles to

reposition itself within a globalizing world. Page points out that despite dichotomizing global/local globalization rhetoric, cultural identity is "always already the product of cultural mixture . . . [that can] move beyond a simple dichotomy between the local and the global" and that Argentina's history is populated by a long list of hybridities (p. 149). The country resides in the netherspace between the First and Third Worlds. It lies on the global periphery but still remains industrially potent. While it culturally identifies itself as Latin but strains, it strains desperately to align itself within the currents of European style.

Of consequences to this new cultural identity is the way it creates a division between the older, literary, and moralizing pre-crisis Argentine film and New Argentina Cinema, a cinema that speaks about and to daily life without the immediate and intentional political tones. It's a cinema that believes finds traditional narratives too limiting, financial obstacles overcome by creative production and innovative aesthetic choices, and the unfinished product of Argentine national identity impossible to be built or sustained by one film alone. She sees the old as exemplified by the work of the perfectly-porteño storyteller, Pino Solanas, whose narrative-voice speaks for, and to, the nation in an unambiguous political message. The new, influenced by the chaos of Italian neorealism, is a movement away from Solanas's viewpoint and toward a post-structural unease with both narration and unitary definition. Instead, it tells stories through images. Words escape this new form of cinema that instead discovers subjects in their everyday lives. It insists on a material reality in the now, in the context of the crisis. When Page quotes Argentine critic Quintín's observation that "people don't fly anymore in Argentine films," she references the shift away from Latin magic realism, especially from nostalgia and science fiction, and towards a focus on the Argentine lives wrecked by capitalism (p. 32). Films that talk about unemployed people have nothing to do with flying. This suggestively ethical but anti-moralizing turn sets the mood for her analysis. It is even indirectly offered that this body of work is real, almost more real than previous stages of Argentine film, as it fits better with the changes in the forces that global neoliberalism has made to restructure everyday life.

Significant to note, then, is neorealism's role in this realignment toward reality. The Italian movement of the 1960s has been appropriated and rehashed into a contemporary Argentine context, providing a particularly poignant perspective of the political economy, as well as its aesthetic dependence on these realities, as portrayed in film. Neorealism's appeal in a crisis world, with its low financial threshold and deliberate break from aesthetic perfection and industry standards, is applied to the context of Argentina as it is mixed with a sense of postmodern skepticism of the social role of art and the political possibility art offers. No meaning-making climax defines the arc of the films Page discusses. There is no "aha" or "Rosebud" moment. But going even further, there seems to be no predetermined narrative, a far cry from the "frozen time" of the dictatorship or the modernist linearity that Menem's neoliberal 1990s heralded (p. 39). Instead of the rising value of the peso, the constant inflow of foreign direct investment, and the seemingly one-way journey of Argentina into their proper home among other First World countries, we see what we might label as "crisis time." Much like the character of the crisis, where economies collapse at unprecedented speeds, and illegitimate political regimes rise and fall without rhythm, narrative finds no comfort, flow, or even significant historical referent in New Argentina Cinema. This crisis time rejects steady ground from which to launch explicit denunciations of the president, the dictatorship, or even the system that has ransacked their country and effectively reshaped the world in

which film's characters now live.

But what Page does offer us is a perspective toward a new crisis-era cinema, a cinema where opacity is encouraged and the image is intentionally made illegible. An excess of meaning erupts as traditional narrative's police beat sit unable to patrol the films of New Argentine Cinema. Characters act through gesture, positioning, and passivity. Individuals are individuals, not representations for something more, emphasizing the everyday of the actual person and the actual story. Meta-themes like unemployment are made into a particular condition of everyday life. Characters thus happen to be unemployed, much like a quarter of the country was at the time. We cannot read these texts as allegory, but neither can we read them as apolitical nor assume their content to be a result of pure circumstance or happenstance.

Owing to its rejection of traditional narrative structures and political themes, we encounter in New Argentine Cinema the more nuanced and divisive conditions of global neoliberalism through examples like crime, which helps tell stories "entirely in the absence of the disciplining — much less the nurturing — functions of the state. Punishment is more likely to be meted out by other individuals or by all-powerful supranational corporations" (p. 85). A new vulnerability arises in Argentina away from dictatorship politics and the constant fear of state power. Rather, audience members are shown a world that has been abandoned, but is still regulated, by capitalism. Like an abusive but truant father, capitalism acts upon Argentina in seemingly random and disconnected blows to individual dignity. Unemployment, shown in *Pizza, bira, faso* (1998), presses youths toward petty robbery; the absence of state law creates a new form of "urban western" justice in *Un oso rojo* (2001); and the circulation of capital and employment leads to violence against immigrants in *Bolivia* (2001).

Cinema, for Page, offers a space through which the specificity of these problems is being addressed. Fiction film offers a political space that is markedly different from the recent upsurge of documentary film — exemplified by the more protest-oriented cine piquetero — with its immediate, direct, and unapologetically political approach. Instead, the quotidian form of Argentine neorealism troubles many critics to find any sort of politics in its films. Page's point isn't that New Argentine Cinema isn't political, but that it's a more nuanced, and at times more thoughtful, type of politics. It's a politics of change within structures. It's a type of cinema that is political precisely because it is reflexive rather than didactic and moralizing. It is political because it helps us understand the multi-layered negotiation that Argentine identity has undergone in its own particular context. National identity thus becomes a space from which the complexities of life under capitalism, especially the capitalism that defined Argentina's neoliberal era, can develop a brand of politics that speaks with the nuance necessary to live in a world of global neoliberalism.

Above all, Page continues to reassure those of us who want revenge, to discover or develop an ideological movement — an answer to the violence of capitalism and crisis — that indeed, through film, we can locate a powerful form of politics. But the complexity of these politics, that mutes Solanas's voice and refuses the political appeal of media representations of piqueteros and the destitute, is the shift Page wants us to assess. She argues that New Argentine Cinema's "retreat into private spaces does not primarily reflect a shying away from politics but is symptomatic of certain shift within politics that demand

a revision of the critical categories we use when discussing political cinema" (p. 182). But we do encounter a sense of fatalism in this approach, of acknowledging that existing categories and alternatives are "already," that is, "already narrated, already patterned, and ordered" (p. 104). One move away from fatalism, to enact the revision, is anti-symbolism. Page's anti-symbolism unties experiences from conceptual devices that are immobile or at best syrupy and slow to change. We also see a hesitation to any claim of collective memory, of refusing to tell a story that lumps together and simplifies experiences under dominant forms of the "collective." And we find the atomization of life, a form of realism that explores the consequences of global neoliberalism that is reflexive but with a biting tongue, understanding that no film will be "it" and no film can say everything.

The project Page undertakes is to defend these critical devices — those that can help "denaturalize the discourses and practices of neoliberal capitalism and thereby to support the activity of a public sphere" (p. 200). In a world where the public sphere is being flanked by both state power and capitalism, defense of a public realm for critical reflection must be both intelligent and specific. For Page, the films she uses in her book do that work, and her analysis aims to better understand what she calls the "beleaguered and contradictory" relationship between the public and private (p. 199). But despite the precision given to contextualizing the particular situations of neoliberal capitalism in Argentina as they relate to individual crisis-era films, her book sacrifices greatly without an analysis — or even reference — of Peronism and its great influence on not just contemporary political movements of the center and left, but also the appeal New Argentine Cinema has in speaking against that particular Argentine brand of populist nationalism.

Page concludes her book with a comment by then-president Nestor Kirchner, who called for the continuing of state financing of cinema as projects of "national growth and identity," leading her to determine that, "if contemporary cinema has been intent on narrating the collapse of the nation-state, therefore, it is paradoxically also part of its reconstruction" (p. 199). This way of seeing such a paradox of culture intertwined in the movement for national development is a productive move forward, and Page's scholarship enjoys a deserved place in helping us understand these complexities better and more fruitfully.