

BOOK REVIEWS

Jessica Stites Mor, *Transition Cinema: Political filmmaking and the Argentine left since 1968* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012). 305 pp. \$31.25 Softcover.

Watching Fernando Solanas' legendary 1968 film *La hora de los hornos* (The Hour of the Furnaces) almost 50 years after its release provides an indication of how much filmmaking as well politics have changed, both in Argentina and internationally, during the intervening half century. *La hora de los hornos* is a remarkable and impassioned examination of the roots of neo-colonialism that still provides a touchstone for political filmmaking. Yet, its four-hour run time, direct pedagogical engagement with its audience, and closing montage "violence and liberation" that emotionally argues for need for armed struggle is far removed from contemporary filmmaking and political sensibilities. Even with subsequent innovations in filmmaking and Latin America's current swing to the left, this type of innovative and overtly politicized film would not be made today.

In *Transition Cinema*, historian Jessica Stites Mor effectively uses film to chart political and cultural changes in Argentina from 1968 through 2004. Those years provide bookends for two pieces of innovative legislation that opened significant political space for cinema in Argentina. In this and many other ways, Stites Mor effectively demonstrates how politics do not so much provide a backdrop for filmmaking in Argentina as those films and the people who made them are part of political struggles. Rather than focusing on cinematography, Stites Mor examines how filmmakers were an integral aspect of mobilization and activism that transformed Argentina's political landscape. Filmmaking was a political act, and films became a central part of debates concerning the country's direction. Activist filmmaking, as Stites Mor argues, provided a mode of political communication and engagement that was closely tied to social movements and the political left. Socially conscious cinema became a key site of political debate in Argentina.

Stites Mor organizes her examination of Argentine cinema into three periods. The first stretches from 1968 to the 1976 military coup. The year 1968, of course, was one of tremendous political upheaval. While *La hora de los hornos* has received much attention, Stites Mor takes her discussion far beyond this one film. In particular, she focuses on political events such as the May 1969 popular rebellion known as the "Cordobazo" and how the birth of radical filmmaking was intimately linked to social justice struggles. Argentina was a key site of the

Third Cinema movement that was closely allied with and influenced by the Cuban revolution and other national liberation struggles in Africa and Asia.

The 1976 military coup brought political filmmaking to a standstill, and the military government killed some of the movement's key leaders such as Raymundo Gleyzer. While films associated with Cine Liberación and Cine de la Base were the first ones to be censored in 1976, they were also the first to be resurrected after the 1983 return to civilian rule. These political openings in 1983 provide the second phase of Stites Mor's study. This period is best known for activist films such as Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial* (The Official Story) and María Luisa Bemberg's *Camila*. Fernando Solanas returned from exile in Europe, still engaged with politics and cinema. Rather than engaging with "cinema as gun" as depicted in *La hora de los hornos*, Solanas now exhibited a commitment to democratic pluralism and personally engaged in electoral campaigns. His direct challenges to Carlos Menem's neoliberal government led to a May 1991 assassination attempt.

The third generation of political filmmaking in Argentina begins with an explosion of political documentaries after 1989 that followed in the path that Solanos, Gleyzer, and Fernando Birri had earlier blazed. Technological innovations significantly democratized access to cinema, with those now making political documentaries extending well beyond trained professionals. This was a period of "cine piquetero" in which documentary filmmakers told the story of famed factory occupations at Brukman and Zanón. Even Solanos joined this movement with low budget productions, even as many of these new documentaries made reference to his landmark *La hora de los hornos*. Similar to how the explicitly insurrectionary films from the first period were only circulated clandestinely, these new filmmakers also had problems accessing commercial or international spaces to screen their work. The 2004 legislation that closes this book required theaters to screen Argentine films, which in part solved this problem of access.

Cinema engaged politics differently in each of these three periods, and Stites Mor effectively illustrates how in each Argentine filmmakers remained in dialogue with current issues of the day. Unlike other countries, in Argentina film activism and film intellectualism operated on a complementary basis. In *Transition Cinema*, Stites Mor provides a compelling examination of how film can provide a medium to advance political struggles.

Marc Becker
Truman State University