

Karush, Matthew B. *Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina, 1920-1946*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012.

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In *Culture of Class*, Matthew B. Karush, an associate professor of history at George Mason University, posits that American mass culture commodities shaped Argentina's domestic cultural production in crucial ways in the 1920s and 1930s. Movies, recordings, and radio programs reveal how Argentine capitalists seeking to turn a profit tried to elevate their offerings to appeal to consumers seduced by North American modernity—mainly represented in Hollywood cinema and jazz. Karush states that in Argentina, influence of and comparison with US cultural production was a crucial factor in the construction of national mythmaking via film and radio. Exposing the population to a common national culture produced in Buenos Aires had, as a result, a paradoxical society characterized by ethnic integration, a decline of orthodox left-wing ideologies, but also a society that contained the seeds of the Perón populist explosion and the class-based polarization that followed. The book reassesses 1920s and 1930s mass culture in order to understand this paradox, considering forms of “mass cultural melodrama” that appealed at the same time to class pride and class envy, “encouraging viewers to look down on the rich even as they fantasized about being rich” (132). Karush stresses that the cultural production he examines constructed an image of Argentina that did not accurately reflect reality, and yet contributed to the construction of a “divided Argentina,” as his title suggests.

Indeed, by the mid-1920s Argentina was a dynamic mobile society. Relatively new technologies—in Karush's account, the phonograph, the radio, and the cinema—disseminated foreign cultural products and ideological messages, but also “repackaged” local popular forms for the domestic market. In order to compete with Hollywood cinema and jazz, local producers responded with films and radio programs borrowing from tango lyrics and the *sainete* (shot comic plays). Films and radio conveyed conformism, escapism, and fantasies of upward mobility. The product was “a deeply melodramatic mass culture that extolled the dignity and solidarity of the working poor” as true representatives of the nation,

“while denigrating the rich as selfish and immoral” (3); in other words, versions of national identity that reproduced and intensified class divisions. Producers generated polarizing imagery and narratives that later provided the discursive raw material from which the Peróns would build their mass movement. Nevertheless, Karush considers mass cultural commodities as enabling oppositional readings in particular ways, as they are “inherently polysemic” (5). Drawing upon Jürgen Habermas, Miriam Hansen’s seminal work on American silent film and alternative public spheres, and Beatriz Sarlo’s conception of a *modernidad periférica*, Karush forwards the notion of “alternative modernisms”; that is to say, local-cosmopolitan hybrids that do not result from top-down projects but from the disorderly capitalist marketplace and consumers’ appropriation practices.

The first chapter examines the dynamic process of class formation in the expanding *barrios* of Buenos Aires during the period. Diverse *barrio* associations and competing tendencies toward egalitarianism and local distinction demonstrate how class identity was very much in flux when the new mass culture was forged. Chapter two looks into the advent of phonograph, radio, and cinema technologies. Karush highlights how immigrants, epitomized in the figure of Max Glücksmann, were those who came to dominate the incipient cultural industries within the context of a transnational marketplace. They emulated North American standards of mass cultural modernity, while also offering consumers an alternative modernism based on existing popular culture. In this vein, *criollismo*, the refurbishing of *criollista* literature and circus, and *porteño* culture came to be effective commercial trends. Chapter three explores the role of melodrama in shaping Argentine mass culture’s “form and content” (85). Karush considers melodrama a “language” rather than a genre, “that shaped virtually all mass cultural products in this period” (17). Finally, chapters four and five explore cultural anxieties regarding national identity in the 1930s, political appropriations of mass cultural images, and narratives of national identity after the coup of 1943. Iterative representation of basic divisions in the national community created a series of irreconcilable oppositions such as country/city, tradition/modernity, authenticity/cosmopolitanism, and rich/poor.

Karush’s book belongs to a branch of Latin American history dedicated to exploring connections between culture and power in the Gramscian tradition. His approach considers culture as shaped by economic, social, and political processes, as well as a key factor in

shaping those very processes. Appositely, *Culture of Class* contributes to the growing body of literature within Latin American studies that considers melodrama a key heuristic framework for analysis. Karush characterizes melodrama as premised on a profoundly fatalistic view in which individuals are victimized by fate in a Manichean world. In such a world, poverty functions as a guarantor of virtue and authenticity. This language compellingly informed an imagery of Argentina conceived as an irreconcilably divided nation. Of course, Karush's work does not exhaust the definition of melodrama nor its relation to modernity in Latin America. His book provides a ripe but still incipient dialogue between groundbreaking American and Latin American scholars such as Peter Brooks, Ben Singer, Christine Gledhill, Linda Williams, Beatriz Sarlo, and Jesús Martín-Barbero, all of whom have tackled this question in separate fields and media.

*Culture of Class* leaves certain avenues of inquiry to be addressed. Karush focuses solely on the influence of US mass media products in Argentine cultural production. Despite the considerable decline of European imports after the Great War and the American overtaking of distribution markets, one is left to wonder what influence other film industries had in shaping an Argentine melodramatic language. Karush oversees that in Argentina, and throughout Latin America, early French and Italian cinemas first saturated the exhibition market—an axiom in Latin American film scholarship. In the same vein, the book considers production and consumption of Argentine cultural products within the transnational context of the 1920s and 1930s. In such a context, a notion of national cinema considered as only homegrown products is still to be contested. How Argentineans appropriated Italian historical dramas as their own dramas, or how they appropriated American serial queen melodramas to address local concerns can be a factor worthy of analysis in shaping a national melodramatic language. Lastly, Karush does not linger on close-readings. Even if Karush suggests from the beginning of his book a Bordwellian interest in film style analysis, *Culture of Class* carries the disclaimer that its author writes about film like a historian (x). *Pace* Karush, meticulous examination is still needed in the study of melodrama as a shaping force in Latin American cultural products—in both textual and audiovisual registers.