

Review / Reseña

Kelly Hopfenblatt, Alejandro. *Modernidad y teléfonos blancos: La comedia burguesa en el cine argentino de los años 40*. Buenos Aires: Fundación CICCUS; Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires; Escuela Nacional de Experimentación y Realización Cinematográfica, 2019.

Matt Losada

University of Kentucky

Alejandro Kelly Hopfenblatt's *Modernidad y teléfonos blancos: La comedia burguesa en el cine argentino de los años 40* is an impressive and original contribution to film studies' turn toward the less-explored corners of the Latin American cinematic archive. Continuing the move away from an idea of political cinema based on models developed in the 1960s or on the denunciation of classical Peronism's malevolence, it analyzes the cinema of the 1940s in its cultural context, and in doing so not only recuperates the "comedia burguesa," but also contributes enormously to the ongoing revision of historiography on classical Argentine cinema.

The publication of *Modernidad y teléfonos blancos* resulted from Kelly Hopfenblatt's manuscript winning a yearly competition conducted by the Biblioteca de la Escuela Nacional de Experimentación y Realización Cinematográfica (ENERC), from which two studies are chosen for an award and publication. In its three years, the competition has already produced several essential books for scholars of Argentine cinema, among them Fernando Ramírez Llorens' *Noches de sano esparcimiento: Estado, católicos y empresarios en la censura al cine en Argentina 1955-1973* (2016) and

Nicolás Suárez' *Obra y vida de Sarmiento en el cine* (2017). Kelly Hopfenblatt's book joins this list not only as the first comprehensive study of classical Argentine comedy, but also for its thorough archival research that deeply explores 1940s intermedialities of cinema, radio, comic strips, theater and the recording industry, its careful attention to genre conventions and form in its analysis of individual films and, not least, its author's smart but accessible writing.

Much has been written about the Argentine film industry's cultivation of a popular audience, but the films made by the same studios for a more economically comfortable public have inspired less scholarship. The gradual opening of terrain for the latter after 1940 is a response, according to Kelly Hopfenblatt, to a shift in the makeup of social classes—the emergence, that is, of a middle class that took its cultural cues and models from the United States. The industry looked to the dreams and aspirations of this middle class to populate and furnish the universe of its “comedia burguesa”, defined by the author as “películas de tono cómico que toman como escenario el mundo burgués de los sectores industriales o profesionales en ascenso durante la primera mitad del siglo XX, diferente de las élites tradicionales, de las clases medias y de los sectores populares” (24). Kelly Hopfenblatt attributes the appearance of the bourgeois comedy to a strategy of diversification by the industry—the exploration of diverse genres to cater to different social sectors both in Argentina and throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

Chapter 1 describes the conditions that led to the rise of the bourgeois comedy. In the 1930s, as the author writes, Argentine cinema was focused on the representation of the popular sectors to themselves. The cinema of that decade was closely integrated with other forms of popular spectacle, cross-pollinating with the theater, recording and broadcasting industries. Many important figures—actors, singers, playwrights, directors and songwriters—wore several hats and the entire culture industry boomed. But the studios were only serving up their product to part of the national market. Amid calls to expand their offerings to the internal market, they began to create fictions of bourgeois worlds of luxury and comfort toward which wider sectors of the population might aspire. These fictions took the form of the “sophisticated comedy,” after the Hollywood comedy à la Ernst Lubitsch. Kelly Hopfenblatt closes the chapter with an account of an early success, *Así es la vida* (Francisco Mugica, 1939) in which tradition is confronted with modernity and the latter is finally accepted, marking the way for the bourgeois spaces to enter into the cinema in the decade to follow.

Así es la vida was taken as a model for the new mode of filmmaking and viewing, but its appeal to the local filmgoing public was still limited. The solution was found with the introduction of the figure of the *ingenua*, the “muchacha adolescente, bella, pura, generosa, virginal, que todavía no ha entrado en contacto con la esfera pública” (48-49). The “cine de ingenuas” is discussed in chapter 2. Its stars were María Duval and, starting with the key 1941 film *Los martes, orquídeas*, Mirta Legrand. Despite making up an important percentage of the national production in the 1940s, the *cine de ingenuas* has been dismissed by historians as false. Kelly Hopfenblatt compellingly revises this account, writing that these films’ innovations:

impactaron directamente en la forma en que el cine argentino representaba el mundo y generaba imaginarios. Alteraron así radicalmente la conformación de los espacios y la relación entre lo público y lo privado, los modelos de familia propuestos, los roles sexuales, los valores exaltados y defendidos en sus relatos y la relación con la modernidad y las tradiciones. (50)

Though revolutionary within the industry’s image-making, these films’ fictional universes were conservative. The guarantor of the purity of the *ingenua* was an economically comfortable family that mediated the effects of modernity on her innocence, insuring a secure present and a prosperous future.

Los martes, orquídeas was a major hit that impacted subsequent national production and inspired a Hollywood remake the following year, *You Were Never Lovelier*, starring none less than Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth. Locally, an important impact of the new genre was its introduction of some of the Argentine cinema’s brightest future stars, among them Zully Moreno and Olga Zubarry. But the *ingenua* genre also offered twists such as the *ingenuo*: “muchachos jóvenes aprendiendo a ser adultos” (73), figures often played by the boyish Angel Magaña. This masculine learning process involved resolving the tension between desiring and resisting the temptations of the modern world by learning to navigate the new urban reality and even ascend socially. The *cine de ingenuas* entered into decline by the mid-decade, according to Kelly Hopfenblatt, in part due to the physical maturation of the stars it depended on, who were no longer convincingly virginal, but especially due to its conventional rejection of modernization that trapped it in a cycle of repetitiveness.

The industry learned to embrace Argentina’s rapid modernization with the films of Carlos Schlieper and Carlos Hugo Christensen, who put the virginity of the *ingenua* in danger and took advantage of the resulting possibilities to play with star texts. Chapter 3 covers this mid-40s renewal Kelly Hopfenblatt calls the “comedia de fiesta”. Instead of choosing tradition, these films embraced the whirlwind of

modernity and “las ingenuas crecieron y salieron de su hogar protector” (79). These characters “no son sujetos replegados ni a la defensiva, sino que se entregan por completo a las nuevas posibilidades y experiencias poniendo en crisis sus identidades tradicionales. La incertidumbre y el desconcierto son componentes fundamentales del mundo en ebullición...” (94). Kelly Hopfenblatt explores how this new euphoric worldview accompanied a spreading prosperity as Peronism set its redistributionist project in action.

With the move to the “comedia de fiesta” there was some continuity in terms of the stars, but in the case of the directors a changing of the guard took the films in innovative directions. Of Christensen, Kelly Hopfenblatt writes that “la puesta en crisis de la identidad femenina frente a la sexualidad es uno de los grandes temas que recorre [su] obra” (87). The author discusses an early film by Christensen that starred Legrand, *La pequeña señora de Pérez* (Christensen, 1944), as a critical reflection by way of ridicule directed toward the conventional representation that limited women to traditional domestic roles. *Adán y la serpiente* (1946) is analyzed as possibly the foremost example of how Christensen plays with his protagonist’s identity crisis, which results from a modernization process setting her social possibilities and conventional role into flux.

Of Schlieper’s films, Kelly Hopfenblatt writes that “el personaje femenino es formulado en torno a los textos estrella de las actrices y se juega en torno a las expectativas que los espectadores depositan en ellas” (90). Gender roles being relational, this sets masculinities in flux as well. The fragile man, disoriented by modernity, is, according to the author, again best incarnated by Magaña, who is believably confounded by strong feminine figures in several roles.

Kelly Hopfenblatt’s vast knowledge of cinema history and perceptive eyes and ears result in a chapter rich in sharp, surprising observations, such as when he contrasts the *cine de ingenuas* with the *comedia de fiesta*:

La orfandad de la comedia de fiesta presenta un claro contraste con el cine de ingenuas. Allí, la carencia de una familia era la marca de la tristeza y los sueños de los personajes de María Duval, quien buscaba padres y madres que la cobijaran y le dieran sentido dentro de un mundo en crisis. En los jóvenes burgueses de la comedia de fiesta la ausencia de los padres refuerza la liberación de ese pasado y los empuja a salir a disfrutar el terreno incierto de la ciudad cosmopolita. (96)

Of the particular use of dialogue to create a frenetic climate by Schlieper, Kelly Hopfenblatt writes that the director “apelaba al *overlapping*, una forma de construir los

diálogos de tal modo que se superponen en todos momentos. Se privilegiaba así el uso del lenguaje como expresión de las pulsiones de los personajes más que como herramienta de información y progresión narrativa” (98). Of the use of urban space and location shooting in the *comedia de fiesta* “se deja de lado la mesa familiar para ir en dos direcciones: al dormitorio conyugal y a las calles de la ciudad moderna” (99), specifically the prosperous northern neighborhoods of Retiro, Recoleta and Belgrano. Here, street spaces have nothing to do with those of their critical use by their neorealist contemporaries, but are instead dominated by “una velocidad ligada a la aventura y el goce del ocio y el entretenimiento” (99). Kelly Hopfenblatt closes Chapter 3 with a revealing account of the endings of these films, citing several examples that break completely with the accepted versions of the ending as a device of reconciliatory closure, to instead render unstable such guarantors of bourgeois normalcy as matrimony and fatherhood. The author compellingly shows that the *comedia de fiesta* was a high point of the classical cinema and leaves his reader with a long list of titles to watch.

In Chapter 4 Kelly Hopfenblatt turns to the ways popular comedians weathered the storm of modernity and their resulting need to expand their appeal beyond a popular audience. Comedians like Luis Sandrini, Pepe Arias, Niní Marshall and Paulina Singerman became known in the 1930s for playing working-class roles or ridiculed aristocrats, and had usually been cast in films built around their star texts or comic routines, so this shift presented an enormous challenge that was compounded by the large salaries they commanded. To tell this part of the story, the author starts with the 1930s screwball comedies directed by Manuel Romero and starring Singerman, who played the poor little rich girl who found herself in conflict, then love, with a working-class man and forsook her own class to join his. While they were able to overcome class barriers, beyond the couple social classes were not so easily reconciled. But this shifted with cinema’s search for self-legitimation and “aburguesamiento”, and in Romero’s films of the early 1940s the class tensions had dissolved and, as Kelly Hopfenblatt writes, “la movilidad descendente...como única vía de concreción de la pareja fue dejando lugar a la aparición de escenarios intermedios donde el ascenso social se tornara positivo” (120). He goes on to closely examine the careers of several other figures well-known throughout the continent, among them Sandrini, Marshall and Libertad Lamarque, finding that while Sandrini’s trajectory moved toward class reconciliation, Marshall’s characters maintained a strong working-class pride and refused to make peace with the wealthy, and this

stubbornness functioned as a source of humor. Such close attention to the actors' star texts is an enormously productive critical strategy for Kelly Hopfenblatt, and is especially incisive in his account of Lamarque and *Eclipse de sol* (Luis Saslavsky, 1942), where the star's alternating use of dark and blond wigs reveals much about the contact between shifting generic conventions and audience expectations. With these examples the author shows how, by the end of the 1940s, the comedians had modified their star texts, shedding their earlier populism in response to the cinema-wide incorporation of the bourgeois world.

But the *comedia burguesa* was not to last, as Kelly Hopfenblatt writes in Chapter 5. In the 1950s, "la comedia burguesa, con sus estrellas glamorosas, sus escenarios fastuosos, sus universos idealizados y sus relatos armónicos pasó a compartir espacios con actores modernos, escenarios costumbristas, universos realistas y relatos discordantes" (139). The author identifies intermedial connections here between the cinema and comic strips, radio serials and theater, demonstrating how the consumption habits of the wider middle class imposed a more conformist tone on comedy from the 1950s on. These films depicted a more suburban middle class in a *costumbrista* key, replacing bourgeois aspirations with an apparent normalcy with which the spectator was invited to identify. The author shows how the decline of the industry paralleled this decline in quality of its comedies after the peak of the *comedia burguesa*. The depth of the eclipse is identified in the films of Enrique Carreras in the 1950s, but even the directors of the age of comedy splendor entered into decline. Describing one of Schlieper's later films, Kelly Hopfenblatt observes that "ya no prima entonces el torbellino del consumo y el entretenimiento sino que son films con aprendizaje y moraleja de orden social" (154). As it shifted its gaze from the dynamic world of the high bourgeoisie to the more conformist middle class, the comedy turned to the kind of moralizing that is not easily compatible with humor.

As Kelly Hopfenblatt writes in his epilogue, this decline would continue into the 1960s and beyond. Commercial tie-ins would populate screens with singers generated by the culture industry—the pop star Palito Ortega is the most known—and with comedians relying more on slapstick gimmickry than talent or charisma. As the stars of the '40s aged into other roles, many migrated to television, where Legrand has long hosted celebrities in drawing-room conversations. One of the low points are the films starring Alberto Olmedo. Comparing the '40s bourgeois comedy with these, the author perceptively writes that "mientras que aquella representaba la alegría del mundo moderno y el futuro abierto a lo desconocido, aquí la figura principal pasa a

ser el oficinista de clase media para quien sus aventuras románticas ya no son parte de la experiencia lúdica de la ciudad moderna, sino vías de escape de la rutina y el conformismo de la vida cotidiana” (159). This disheartening thought, which eloquently captures a key difference between the heights of the ‘40s comedies and the bulk of the commercial cinema of the following decades, is one of many sharp conclusions in Kelly Hopfenblatt’s surprising study that manages to bring forth the singularity of the bourgeois comedy “como un momento único de exaltación e incertidumbre” (161).

The critical tradition has historically been dismissive of culture made for the bourgeoisie, but by insisting on his object of study, bringing to bear extensive archival research, wide knowledge of the work of scholars and theorists, and a sharp critical sense, Kelly has produced compelling research. *Modernidad y teléfonos blancos* is one of the few authoritative texts on Argentine classical cinema and will no doubt become a key reference on the period and on the comedic film more generally.