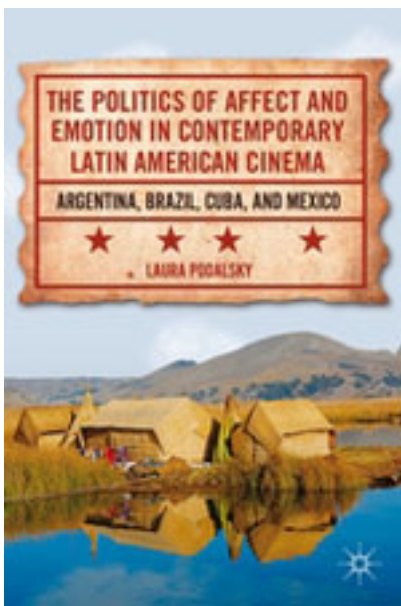


## ***The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico* by Laura Podalsky**

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Laura Podalsky's *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* opens important avenues for the study of post-1960s cinema in Latin America. Since the 1990s, the so-called “affective turn”—the multi-disciplinary interest in embodied experience and emotion as objects of inquiry—has generated numerous critical and cultural studies. Because the categories of emotion, feeling, and sensation are often used interchangeably, it is not always easy to grasp the field the term “affect” delimits or phenomena it describes. However, the growing number of fine work that draws theoretical and methodological inspiration from the turn to affect deserves attention; Podalsky’s study is amongst these. The book is composed of five chapters, more cogent as five distinct essays than as consecutive, interlocking parts to a whole book. Indeed, the overarching arguments that give coherence to the volume as a whole are less solid than the distinct points made in individual essays. The temporal and geographic markers—the “contemporary” in the title, as well as “Latin America” as a category of analysis—raise many questions, which I will address below. Nevertheless, the book’s strength lies in its nuanced formal analysis of film genres as well as the lucid articulations Podalsky, Associate Professor of Latin American Literature and Culture at Ohio State University, offers about cinema as a unique form of address.

The first chapter, “Of Passion, Aesthetics and Politics,” makes a significant contribution to scholarship on New Latin American Cinema, arguing that the affective provocation and sensorial appeal of the political films made during 1960s was crucial to their broader social agendas. In doing so, Podalsky maps out a different genealogy for this militant cinema, illuminating how impassioned cinematic appeals drew on the affective force of melodrama and Neo Realist sentimentality. The criticism and scholarship that surrounds Latin American cinema has largely ignored emotional forms of address; if acknowledged, they have usually been reviled or condemned as ideologically complicit. By short-circuiting established accounts that privilege the films’ cerebral, essayistic qualities, Podalsky re-orientes our understanding of this movement, while making an important contribution to Latin American historiography.

The second chapter, “Thrilling Histories: Replaying the Past in Genre Films,” examines mainstream productions to argue that genre structures, though they may favor plot formulas and conventions over historical complexity, can significantly evoke the past through their affective modes of address. For example, the thriller’s particular organization and distribution of critical information (suspenseful questions, careful calculation of uncertainty, the question of *who knows what when*) create a sense of epistemic urgency in ways that confront viewers with the question of what it actually means to understand the past. In these films, history is dynamically channeled through the urgent temporality that drives the desire to *know*. Podalsky’s arguments gather force as we think of the sensorial dimension of military dictatorships in Latin America and the inscription of these legacies of torment on the body through torture. Indeed, the most original arguments of the book are those that revolve around film genres: through these, Podalsky begins to pave an important path for new approaches to this severely under-researched area in Latin American film scholarship.

The third chapter, “Affecting Legacies and Contemporary Structures of Feeling,” raises questions about the validity of the terms “Latin America” and “contemporary cinema” as categories of analysis. In her reading of the Mexican blockbuster *Amores Perros*, Podalsky argues that the disintegration of the family depicted in the three episodes that unfold in the film, as well as its allegorical suggestion of the dysfunctional family as it correlates to the nation in crisis, is a characteristic trope in Mexican melodramas. However, Podalsky’s superb reading of *Amores Perros*, as well as her acute analysis of off-screen space would be critically amplified if it addressed the question of *why* Mexican narratives consistently recur to melodrama to articulate crises. In this sense, “Latin America” as an anchoring category fails to be convincing, as comparisons with other film industries—in Bombay or Hong Kong—would illuminate the broader social processes that film melodramas make tangible.

Podalsky alludes to some of these issues in the final chapter; however, the book as whole would be more coherent and the larger arguments more powerful if the complex transnational questions that subtend all the essays were brought to the forefront of the discussion, and addressed head on. In this sense, the intra-continental framework at

times seems arbitrary: is not González Iñárritu's *Amores Perros*—a product of cable TV, “world cinema,” and film festivals—closer in kin to Wong Kar Wai's work than to the Cuban film *Madagascar*, with which it is grouped here? Can a film from 1994 and another from the year 2000 be considered “contemporary” to each other, as well as to the readers that Podalsky's book addresses since its publication in 2011? Or is *contemporariness* another one of the affects that the films inscribe through their effects? Similarly, the general historical landmarks evoked throughout the book are at times presented in order to allow for vague correlations between “history” and the affective work performed by cinema. But historical claims demand historical work. If “affects of crisis” are to be causally linked to “neo-liberalism” as an explanatory framework, both the larger dimensions and the finer textures of this relation have to be rigorously researched. Similarly, the question of where exactly Cuba stands—still officially a Socialist Republic—vis-à-vis this overarching socio-economic framework is not addressed, to the detriment of Podalsky's argument.

Even though *The Politics of Affect* makes certain distinctions in an effort to distinguish between regions of Latin America—the films of Argentina, Chile, and Brazil are analyzed together as works that attempt to grapple with the past of military dictatorships, while the chapter on Mexican and Cuban cinema seems to address the failure of popular Revolutionary movements—an explanation of the logic behind these groupings would help forge a stronger argument about the threads that connect concrete histories to cinema. If the term “Latin America” is necessary as a rubric in academia (to sell books, to name courses and departments, to offer areas of specialization) our work needs to constantly question the conditions under which can we discuss this geographic region as a coherent space in our accounts of cinema and media histories, and whether undifferentiated lines of continuity in experience truly can be traced across the continent's borders.

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