

Today, and despite no wins last night at the Oscars, Mediático is delighted to present a post by regular contributor [Natália Pinazza](#) Lecturer in Lusophone and Latin American Culture at the University of Exeter on Brazilian filmmaker Fernando Meirelles' [The Two Popes](#) (2019). Pinazza's post explores how the film imagines the real life encounter between the then Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, and Pope Benedict and how it tackles the confrontation between the two men's differing ideas of the future of the Catholic Church as well as the failings in the two men's personal and professional histories: Bergoglio's controversial actions during the military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983) and Ratzinger's failure to properly deal with criminal sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Follow Dr Pinazza on Twitter [@DrNPinazza](#)

The Two Popes (Fernando Meirelles 2019): Down Argentina Way

By Natália Pinazza

Alongside news of Iran and the USA approaching the brink of war and the Sussexes stepping back as senior members of the Royal family, 2020 kicked off with images of Pope Francis [slapping the hand of a woman](#) who tried to hang on to him. Simultaneously considered a progressive leader worldwide and a divisive figure in his native Argentina, Pope Francis has recently been the subject of the Netflix drama *The Two Popes*, which received four Golden Globe and three Academy Award nominations. "Based on real events" the film narrates a meeting between Pope Benedict and his successor Pope Francis, played by Anthony Hopkins and Jonathan Pryce respectively.

Amid the child abuse scandals and the resulting crisis in the Catholic Church, Jorge Bergoglio, a Beatles fan who casually whistles Abba's 'Dancing Queen,' presents a clear rupture with his predecessors. The film plays around with these binaries of the 'old' and the 'new' to explore the markedly different approaches adopted by the German Pope Benedict

and his Argentine successor while at the same reaffirming certain stereotypes about their respective national identities. Bergoglio also emerges as an essential player in the Church's attempt to reverse the continuing decline of Catholicism in Latin America. The framing of the Pope as the non-European 'other' is perpetuated and even celebrated in *The Two Popes*.

In his [first speech](#) as Pope, Francis asserted that "brother Cardinals have gone almost to the ends of the earth" to give a bishop to Rome. Here, "ends of the earth" refers to South America, the region from which the film's director, Fernando Meirelles hails. A renowned Brazilian filmmaker, Meirelles is perhaps best known for *City of God* (2001). In the film, Bergoglio's status as a South American is gestured towards when the supportive Brazilian Cardinal tells Pope Francis after his election "no se olvide de los pobres" ("don't forget the poor"). Also indicating his regional provenance and allegiance, alongside Gramsci, Bergoglio lists *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire as one of the books he has read.

The film also foregrounds Pope Francis' 'otherness' through its many markers of national identity. We are first introduced to tango-loving football fan Bergoglio in a scene where he drinks yerba mate while walking down the streets of Buenos Aires. Bergoglio explains to Pope Benedict that "tango and football" are compulsory in Argentina. At the same time, Pope Benedict offers him a Bavarian meal and has a cultural repertoire drawn from the German-speaking world. Even the sense of humor of the Popes is associated with their national backgrounds. Bergoglio jokes about the stereotypical Argentine's big ego. Benedict, on the other hand, says that German jokes don't have "to be funny". The film's approach to differentiating the popes through markers of national identity is increased by the centrality of football to the narrative, which imparts the nationalism inherent in events such as the World Cup. The nationality of the Pope and his global relevance is imparted both at a formal and discursive level. Pryce's Spanish dialogues were dubbed into a distinctly Argentine accent, the edited compilation of real footage from news coverage from different countries juxtaposes languages and accents, and various national flags are present in the crowd gathered at St Peter's Square. Although the dialogues are mostly in English - with Pryce

and Hopkins putting on the relevant accents of the popes they play- the film shows members of the clergy switching between languages, including Latin and their own, which draws attention to the multi-nationality of the Vatican. However, more powerful than the multilingualism of the clergy is the silence created by the extra-diegetic muting of the dialogue when Ratzinger, expressing why he wishes to resign as Pope, confesses to Bergoglio his role in the cover-up of the sexual abuse of one of the [Catholic Church's most notorious predators](#) Rev. Marcial Maciel. Although the soundtrack mutes the details, the scale of Maciel's crimes are voiced when diegetic sound returns and Bergoglio, outraged, quotes parts of Ratzinger's confession back at him. But not even cultural differences stop the two Popes from attempting to dance tango at the end of Bergoglio's visit.

Silence is also at the heart in the film's depiction of Pope Francis' personal history, who has been accused of complicity with the Military Dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983. Through voice-over narration and black-and-white flashbacks, we are first transported to the moment Bergoglio received the call to the priesthood. The use of voice-over is also employed to give Bergoglio's account of the events that unfolded during the dictatorship, and the events as they've been subsequently told (voiced by Ratzinger recounting the contents of Bergoglio's "file"). Flashback and voice-over devices are combined with documentary/news footage of images of the Madres of the Plaza the Mayo, as well as recreations of executions, and the *vuelos de la muerte* (death flights, a form of extrajudicial killing where victims of the military were thrown to their deaths from aircraft into the sea). The film blurs the line between fictional and documentary, giving the dictatorship an immediacy in the present day of the film. In alignment with the church's discourse on mercy and sin, the film revisits Bergoglio's past in a humanistic way, including his choice to be silent during the dictatorship, to not publically denounce the crimes of the military junta, and to discipline priests who chose to continue social work that drew the ire of the dictatorship. In the film Bergoglio's regret for his actions, and how he acted out of fear for the larger community of priests he presided over, is expressed against the background of Michaelangelo's work in the Sistine Chapel - impressively recreated by Netflix for the film.

Although the dictatorship is the most crucial and contentious moment of Bergoglio's life memories as they are represented in the film, there is also mention of ongoing problems in democratic Argentina. Bergoglio's criticism of banks and deregulation echoes his experience of neoliberal practices in Argentina, which have ushered in economic instability and mass unemployment. However, in line with the stereotypes perpetuated by the film, *The Two Popes* ends in a 'South American' fashion with religion and football casting other important matters into shadow - as the two watch the 2014 World Cup final (Germany vs. Argentina) together.

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