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## **Review/Reseña**

Lisa Shaw and Stephanie Dennison (Editors), *Latin American Cinema: Essays on Modernity, Gender and National Identity*. (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2005)

## **New Readings of Past and Recent Latin American Cinema**

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In the past thirty years Latin American cinema has attracted the attention of scholars for its themes, aesthetics, and political particularities; however, the focus on this cinema has fluctuated almost as the industry itself, which is always going up and down in a constant struggle for development and survival. The situation of the film industry in Latin America has always been uneven, ranging from medium to very small national industries and from highly politicized intellectual movies to commercial ones. Most scholarly work in the past twenty five years has neglected not only smaller industries but also somewhat commercial, less artistic, and not as overtly politicized films, creating an image of an even and almost uniform Latin

American cinema opposed to the aesthetics of Hollywood, revolutionary or leftist in nature, and primarily directed by filmmakers subscribing to an *auteur* model of production.

The most widely known scholarly work about Latin American cinema tends to focus on the major regional industries and markets—Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and Cuba—or on a particular period that marked Latin American cinematography as revolutionary, that is, between the 1960s and the early 1980s. Some important examples of this are the edited volumes by Julianne Burton *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America: Conversations with Filmmakers* (1986) and *The Social Documentary in Latin America* (1990), John King's *Magic Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America* (1990), Michael Martin's edited volume *New Latin American Cinema* (1997),<sup>1</sup> among several others.

Hence, the recent volume edited by Lisa Shaw and Stephanie Dennison, *Latin American Cinema: Essays on Modernity, Gender and National Identity* (2005) is a refreshing work on the study of Latin American cinematography, since it departs from the previous trend. Although some chapters deal with the usual countries—Mexico, Argentina and Brazil—and with films from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, there is a conscious effort to include smaller markets and producing countries such as Peru and Uruguay. The editors have also made an effort to bring to light some of the commercially successful and less overtly politicized cinema produced in the region. The volume also offers a glimpse into twenty-first century films, assessing newer cultural policies and systems of co-production in light of neo-liberal policies and globalization, both of which have impacted state sponsorship. Government support seems crucial for aiding the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Martin's edited book is a two-volume compilation that is worth reading. It is a great introduction to New Latin American cinema and contains some of the most important manifestos by key Latin American filmmakers of that era. The manifestos are reprinted from original versions or other previous publications.

development of national cinema vis-à-vis the well-developed market seized by Hollywood distributors.

*Latin American Cinema: Essays on Modernity, Gender and National Identity* is an anthology consisting of an introduction and nine chapters. The chapters are arranged in three parts, fitting with the paradigms presented in the book—modernity, gender, and nation. The division of the book is neatly done: allocating three chapters per each part of the volume, namely, “Modernity and Globalization”, “Gender and Sexuality”, and “Nation and Identity”. Editors Lisa Shaw and Stephanie Dennison have assembled a lineup of contributors that illustrates a renewed interest in Latin American film industries and a new breed of scholars on this topic; almost all of the chapters contain photographs from the films being discussed, illustrating and enhancing the overall content of the book.

The introduction by Lisa Shaw and Stephanie Dennison clearly explains in a few pages the significance of a volume of this nature within the existent body of literature on Latin American cinema, addressing the need for moving on from the over-emphasized “arthouse, revolutionary projects of the 1960s and 1970s for which Latin American cinema is perhaps best known abroad,” but without making it irrelevant (1). Their discussion of the three sections of the volume is short and to the point, explaining the development and challenges of film industries within the uneven process of modernization that has characterized the Latin American region; the importance of re-reading films where women have a central role, whether symbolically or not; and the quest for national identity where mass media in general, and film in particular, were instrumental in the construction of national identities throughout the twentieth century.

The first section, “Modernity and Globalization”, begins with Randal Johnson’s essay on contemporary Brazilian cinema, where he addresses the different government policies regarding films from the

1930s to the present, and the controversies, tensions and achievements of cinematic production in the past ten years. This essay is highly informative in terms of the political economy and cultural development of Brazil's film industry, and the various efforts both in the past and in the present for creating a solid domestic market for its national cinema vis-à-vis foreign (mostly Hollywood) imports. At the same time, it is somewhat a critique of those independent filmmakers and film critics who attach themselves to an *auteur* model of production and dismiss the potential of entertainment and more commercially oriented films as a tool for social criticism and reflection.

Johnson's main argument is that the Manichean culture/commerce divide needs to end in order for Brazilian cinema to reach full growth, and to get a strong grip on its domestic market. This argument is of great significance because the pursuit of strictly intellectual, artistic and political films made in the past has, in a way, hindered the growth not only of the Brazilian film industry, but also of most Latin American national cinema. Unfortunately the great majority of audiences are well used to the entertainment of commercial cinema and the glossiness of Hollywood movies. This fact makes local audiences very critical of their national cinema and less commercial movies. Since the average viewer tends to compare local production values with those of the majority of films shown on the screens of the country, the market for locally produced films has to be fought over and cannot be taken for granted.

Brazilian cinema has been revitalized under their new film policies and a system of co-production, both of which are benefiting those filmmakers who are moving away from the "aesthetic and ideological legacy of Cinema Novo, and charted new directions for Brazilian cinema in consonance with the personal, political, and social issues confronting contemporary Brazil" (19). There is,

however, a lot yet to be done in order to secure a solid market in its own territory where state support continues to be a necessity.

Similarly, Sarah Barrow's chapter on the ongoing crisis suffered by the Peruvian film industry analyzes the economic and political forces that have influenced the development (or the lack of) of this national cinema. Barrow's historical essay discusses the Peruvian film industry and its never ending crisis, bringing us a clear image of a national cinema tied to different state modernization projects throughout the twentieth century.

After providing a brief but thorough background on the first attempts to modernize the nation under Pierola's regime (1895-1899) and Leguia's long presidency (1919-1930) when film was stimulated to suit the state's interests, Barrow's analysis centers on the two actual written and enacted cinema laws. The first cinema law was written in 1972 under the populist military regime of General Velasco Alvarado, and the second was written in 1994 under former President Alberto Fujimori. Barrow points out that none of these two laws has been able to help consolidate the development of the film industry in Peru. The 1972 law, which lasted until 1992, gave a good impulse to a non-existent industry, creating a relatively good market for some local directors. Film director Francisco Lombardi is one of few who survived the law's collapse, and the only one who steadily makes films thanks to international co-production agreements.

Barrow's conclusion echoes the feeling of many Peruvian filmmakers, who are not satisfied with the current cinema law written in 1994. The state has failed to comply with the financial support that it offered due to lack of funds and corruption. Currently, the Peruvian film industry has been abandoned financially, and a few younger producers and directors are using new technologies in their favor to fight for their domestic market and earn a place in the regional and global markets.

Conversely, Robert J. Miles's essay examines Luis Buñuel's film *El ángel exterminador* (1962) within the context of his overall work and life in Mexico and previous places of residence. This essay, more in line with a cultural studies approach, speaks of *El ángel exterminador* as Buñuel's truly post-modern work. Although an interesting essay with rich analysis and information it is, at times, a bit hard to follow because of an abundant use of quotes that break the flow of Miles's analysis.

Miles's major argument is that Buñuel, and this particular film, are the expression of a transnational experience where European psychoanalysis meets Latin American magical-realism. The author argues that Buñuel was aware of the Mexican nationalistic agenda, but that this awareness did not mean immediate sympathy for the cultural status quo. Buñuel always tended to challenge social and political norms, whether in Europe or Latin America. This essay would have been better placed under the last section, "Nation and Identity", given that Buñuel's life and his film *El ángel exterminador* lend themselves to diverse interpretations (some of which are brought up by Miles) where nation and identity are relevant matters to consider.

Ismael Xavier contributes the first chapter of the second section, "Gender and Sexuality". This essay presents an overview of playwright Nelson Rodrigues's and filmmaker Nelson Pereira dos Santos's work. Xavier compares and contrasts the play *Boca de Ouro*—drama originally written by Rodrigues—with the film do Santos made. Xavier's clearly written and straightforward essay explains that during the 1950s and 1960s a "new way of treating sexuality on screen" was emerging worldwide (93). Brazilian cinema adopted this new form of representing nudity and sexuality, particularly exposing women's bodies in forms that at that time were considered scandalous. *Boca de Ouro* belongs to that period, but Xavier contends that filmmaker Pereira dos Santos was careful not to

include bolder scenes that may have compromised the film's distribution.

Rodrigues wrote the play as a critique of "Brazilian patriarchal society and moral decadence" (95). According to Xavier, Rodrigues's work is concerned with resisting modernization and opposing the role of mass communication in a consumer society where human ambition leads to tragic consequences. On the other hand, Pereira dos Santos reworks Brazilian society, and places the characters in a more historical context where the human experience is represented less mythically. In contrast with Rodrigues's play, Pereira dos Santos's film suggests that the characters' traits and behavior—poor, corrupt, uneducated, and so on—must be understood within a historical and social dimension. Unlike Rodrigues, Pereira dos Santos believes that such conditions can be overcome.

Claire Taylor's chapter analyzes two major works by Argentinean director Maria Luisa Bemberg: *Camila* (1984) and *Yo la peor de todas* (1990), films based on historical events and real people. Both films directly address issues of gender and women's oppression in nineteenth-century Argentina and seventeenth-century Mexico. Camila O'Gorman (*Camila*) and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (*Yo la peor de todas*) are great examples of subversion against the patriarchal status quo of their times, and Bemberg captures in her pieces the process of construction of gender and the rebellion of women who were reworking existing societal codes.

Taylor argues that Bemberg's two films are constructed using citation and performativity. *Camila* is better explained with these two concepts, while *Yo la peor de todas* does not seem to fit as neatly. Taylor suggests that both films cite deliberately previously existing cinematic codes and, *Camila* in particular, engages in the citation of Buñuel's *Belle de jour* (1966), imitating the opening sequence and thus establishing in this manner an already existing romantic paradigm. On the other hand, *Yo la peor de todas* distances

itself aesthetically from her previous work, but still uses performativity and citation to construct gender identification throughout the film. Citation comes as reference to Sor Juana's own writings while performance is executed by going beyond the revelation of Sor Juana's sexuality. Taylor analyzes a scene where Sor Juana is taking her clothes off in front of the wife of the Viceroy as a scene of performative striptease. Clearly, Bemberg has mimicked the type of desire central to performance acts of stripping in front of the desiring gaze of others.

The last chapter in this section is authored by Stephanie Dennison, who discusses the adaptation of Nelson Rodrigues's play *O beijo no asfalto* (1961). This play was adapted to film twice: first in 1966 by filmmaker Flávio Tambellini, and second in 1981 by filmmaker Bruno Barreto. Rodrigues's plays have made of him Brazil's "most adapted writer for the big screen" (p.125), and different Brazilian filmmakers have turned about twenty of his plays into movies. Similar to what Ismael Xavier argued in the first essay of this section, Dennison also points out that Rodrigues's work is melodramatic and speaks of moral disintegration in Brazilian society. However, this particular play is somewhat different from his other work. In *O beijo no asfalto*, which is based on the true story of a reporter who gets run over by a bus in Rio, the main character has no deep or shameful secrets to hide, in other words this character, unlike most of Rodrigues's characters, is not morally bankrupt, as Dennison explains.

Nevertheless, Rodrigues carries out his usual social critique, including homophobia. The reporter who lays dying on the asphalt, asks a passer-by to give him a kiss. In the film he had asked a woman, but Rodrigues rewrites this and inserts a gay man, challenging in this manner what he saw as a hypocritical society. Tambellini's film adaptation seems to be inspired on a literary critique of Rodrigues's work. In Tambellini's *O beijo no asfalto* the

sociopolitical context is avoided and references to homosexuality and bisexuality are not present. By contrast, Barreto's film adaptation is more faithful to the play. Dennison concludes that Barreto's film, a more interesting adaptation of the play, depicts nudity, homosexuality, and politics in a manner that is not necessarily meant to subvert or inform but to entertain.

The section "Nation and Identity" is the third and last in the book, and it starts with Keith Richards's chapter on Uruguayan cinema. Richards's contribution is a succinct analysis of the lack of a well-developed film industry in Uruguay, and the cultural influence exerted by the two closest powerhouses that are Brazil and Argentina. There is an imperative for meeting the challenge to become part of a larger regional and global network of production and distribution, but at the same time, trying to avoid falling to the forces of global homogenization. Throughout the twentieth century, Uruguay has produced a number of films, which Richards looks at in order to discuss national cultural identity. His discussion includes recent films from the twenty-first century as well, indicating that the scarcity of resources for film production is challenging the very notion of national cinema since most films are internationally co-produced.

Uruguay is an interesting country that, during the first half of the twentieth century, achieved a high level of education and a well-developed artistic and literary culture. Uruguay has always been in the imaginary of other countries and foreign artists, in particular Argentineans, who have used Uruguay as scenery for their literature and their films. Like Argentina and Chile, Uruguay had a dark period in its history when a military dictatorship (1973-1985) crushed the political opposition, including intellectuals and artists. This period changed the social imaginary of the country causing fissures in the nation's self-perception, which are seldom treated in Uruguayan cinema. The number of films discussed in this essay is a good

representation of Uruguay's production and of the issues brought up by Richards with regards to national identity.

Allison Fraunhar's essay deals with Cuban cinema and its use of *mulata* women as a representational site for national allegory. Fraunhar clearly establishes the fact that *mulata* women have been, from colonial times to the present, part of the cultural, social and political imaginary in Cuban society. The *mulata* body is a site where complex erotic and nationalist desires are articulated. Four films are analyzed in order to understand how the *mulata* body is mobilized as the site of national identity. The movies in question are *Lucía* (1969), *El otro Francisco* (1974), *De cierta manera* (1977), and *Cecilia* (1982), although a few other films are mentioned for stylistic comparison purposes.

Fraunhar argues that "while in the colonial and republican cultural contexts the mulata body signifies, in a variety of configurations, the erotic, spirituality, and commodification, in early Third Cinema, she stands for the revolutionary zeitgeist" (163). Third Cinema was a conscious attempt to create a different cinema, particularly different from Hollywood, and it was virtually institutionalized in Cuba and well in use up until the late 1980s. Third Cinema is not the only cinematic style that has represented the *mulata* body making it into a signifier for different ideological ends. Perhaps, Third Cinema is the framework that has been more prevalent in post-revolutionary Cuba, articulating the struggles of women in pre-revolutionary times and embodying the objectives of the revolution simultaneously. The *mulata* has been central to this social and political imaginary, although in recent years due to global market pressure the *mulata* body is once again portrayed as signifying eroticism for the pleasure of the global gaze that fantasizes about Cuba as a destination for tropical sex.

This section and the book end with an essay by Lisa Shaw and Maite Conde on Hollywood films from the silent age up until

President Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy. Shaw and Conde discuss several films that have Brazil, its people, and its culture as subjects, whether as a central theme or as the backdrop. The authors examine the evolution of the Brazilian cinematic image created by Hollywood, and explain in detail how the different stereotypical, and in most cases erroneous, images of the Brazilian landscape, people and culture came to be adopted by Brazilians in order to sell their own cultural products and other artifacts locally and abroad.

During the silent era and then with the "talkies," Brazil was represented as a place of dangerous jungles, savage people, and libidinous women. However, during the Good Neighbor Policy era, President Roosevelt urged Hollywood, and the government film division, to produce films where Brazil and other Latin American nations were central to the plot. Several musicals, melodramas and even cartoons were made during that period, and the portrayal of Brazil changed somewhat, earning a slightly more positive and accurate image. Nevertheless, Brazil would still represent an "exotic" other, and Carmen Miranda would embody this otherness; stereotypes and clichés continued to appear in a more "civilized" environment. Brazilian producers went on to rework the *chanchadas* and to produce films with stylized *baianas*, borrowing from Hollywood the discourse it had created for representing Brazil.

*Latin American Cinema: Essays on Modernity, Gender, and National Identity* is a superb collection of scholarly essays. Shaw and Dennison have organized a well-crafted book, which will generate interest on the topic among newcomers while providing fresh insights for those who are already acquainted with Latin American cinema and more knowledgeable about this field. It is a book that brings a great deal of important information and in-depth analysis of both well-known and lesser-known films produced recently and throughout the twentieth century.

Although the book contains more essays on the production and markets of the usual big three (Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil) I must reiterate that the editors have consciously made the effort to include essays on smaller industries in Cuba, Peru, and Uruguay, broadening the study of Latin American cinema and opening the way for new scholarship. This book is an important and useful contribution to a field that is coming back to life as the newer generation of Latin American filmmakers struggle for the right to produce, distribute and gain a space in national and global markets.