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Special Issue Introduction: Historical Reflections/Cinematic Projections of Latin American Film

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Looking for Latin American history: to interrogate the ideas of “history”¹ and to “look” at and through cinema is an appropriate way to address this first of two special issues of *Film & History*^{34.1} devoted to Latin American film and history. We stand amidst profound debates over the modernity and postmodernity of Latin America and *La Patria Grande*—the Great Motherlands of the Americas—and their inhabitants, *La Raza Cósmica*.² To look at the complex hybridization and, at times, contradictory and abrupt oppositionalities of the traditional and “modern” aspects of the Latin American-Caribbean global region and its nation-states requires interdisciplinarity;³ it requires an awareness of certain hazards and potential pitfalls; it requires reflecting on the past and projecting the future.

Approaches to this mediated subject must contend against universalized or overdetermined definitions of film that purport meaning in form alone, but rather they can adopt the practical application of cinema within cultural, social, political, economic, and historical contexts of Latin America itself.⁴ Such approaches can redirect the typical route of similar studies from peripheralizing Latin America into an “area study.”⁵ This debate over “modern” Latin America, then, as Claudia Ferman, Roy Armes, among others aptly point out, has gravitated on two formidable and controversial issues: first, transnationalized cultural-expressive productions; and, second, the aesthetic-cultural correlation within national and transnational socio-political expressions (Ferman vii; Armes 21-50). The essays collected in this special issue, similarly, can be categorized along these lines as they enter into and carry forward this significant debate.

The first two essays in this special issue confront the issues involved in the production of Latin American messages. **Tamara Falicov**, in her essay, “U.S.-Argentine Coproductions, 1982-1990: Roger Corman, Aries Productions, ‘Schlockbuster’ Movies, and the International Market,” examines the phenomenon of the international co-production and their viability as expressions of culture and politics in Latin America. Falicov finds that United States-Argentine co-productions, although oftentimes filmed in

Argentina, either erase or distort the representation of Argentina. Taking Roger Corman and Héctor Olivera’s team-productions—from “sword and sorcery” films to *Two to Tango/Matar Es Morir un Poco* (1988)—as her case study, Falicov argues that their production is markedly different from typical art-house co-productions in that typically they were not meant for international-festival audiences or marketed in both U.S. and Argentine markets and they were ultimately misrepresentations of Argentine society. At the root of these differences, as Falicov demonstrates, is the historically situated circumstance of international markets toward the end of the 20th century and, more specifically, the economic inequalities bound into the United States and Latin American film industries.

“Contemporary (Hi)stories of Mexico: Fictional Re-creation of Collective Past on Television” by **María de los Ángeles Rodríguez Cadena** similarly looks at the issues of production of Latin America media, in this case through the culturally expressive form of historical *telenovelas*. Contemporary Mexican historical soap operas such as *El Vuelo del Águila* (1994) and *Send a Gloria* (1988) represent a specific period of collective knowledge, according to Rodríguez Cadena; as such, they foster an integration among their spectators and allow them to identify with the romantic heroes typically depicted in them. These soap operas, rooted in the past and burgeoning in the future, act as what Rodríguez Cadena classifies as “historical kinetic murals,” advancing the ideas of equality in Mexican tradition, verifying at times and contesting at other times official versions of Latin American history. Looking at contemporary televised historically oriented melodramas provides examples of how the production of Latin American media is influenced by national and international factors.

A second group of essays tackle more directly the issues of aesthetics of cultural expressions and their socio-political ramifications, especially in regard to reflections of the past and projections of the future in Latin America. **Tzvi Tal**, in the essay, “San Martín, from Bronze to Celluloid: Argentina’s Liberator as Film

Character,” surveys the history and film history of Argentina, spotlighting the characterization of one of the country’s greatest historical figures, General José de San Martín. At first neglected by both history and film treatments, later recovered by Peronism, and then ultimately reconfigured with the cynicism of a stalled neo-liberalism, characterizations of San Martín in filmic treatments, as Tal’s argument reveals, elucidates nationalistic shifts in discourse, policy, and socio-politics. Pointing to the character based on the man Eva Perón referred to as Argentina’s greatest national hero and who earned the sobriquet “the Liberator,” the essay analyzes *La Hora de los Hornos/The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) by co-directors Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, *El Santo de la Espada* (1970), also known as *The Knight of the Sword*, directed by Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, *Tangos—El Exilio de Gardel/Tangos—Gardel’s Exile* (1985) and *El Viaje/The Journey* (1992) directed by Fernando Solanas, and *La Fiebre del General/The General’s fever* (1990) directed by Jorge Coscia. In its historical breadth and range, Tal’s essay shows how Argentina’s national history and cultural identity can be compared to the ebb-and-flow of San Martín’s popularity.

Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz similarly ties a significant thread from film treatments to national character; “Sex, Class, and Mexico in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Y Tu Mamá También*” begins in the context of late-capitalist, post-modern Mexico. Like several other commercially successful, non-U.S. films released in the last decade, *Y Tu Mamá También* (2002) directed by Alfonso Cuarón reveals what Acevedo-Muñoz proves to be a “crisis” of national character at odds with the globalization of film language. At once, a close textual reading scores the cool, vernacular surface of the film’s story and seemingly inane leading trio and reveals a psychic transformative purpose behind the film’s code on the orders of class distinction, gender construction, sexual orientation, and *Mexicanidad*/Mexican nationalism. Most crucially, this essay reveals, the historical puns in the names of characters and the journey at the center of their bildungsroman, which transition the post-modern setting to Mexico’s past. Rather than concede to the general consensus that this film is for and about male-adolescent sensationalism, Acevedo-Muñoz argues persuasively that the film deconstructs *La Malinche* myth in an attack on Mexico’s patriarchal national discourse and the effects of globalization on Mexico.

“Manifesting *La Historia*: Systems of ‘Development’ and the New Latin American Cinema Manifesto” by Scott L. Baugh picks up this thread of cultural treatments and national character, especially in light of the issues of development and dependency. Using contemporary social theories from sociology, anthropology, and history, “Manifesting *La Historia*” re-reads the principal manifestoes written by leading filmmakers of the New Latin American Cinema project from 1965 to 1976 and argues that their conceptualization of Latin America broaches a dialogue among official and subverted discourses in Latin American-Caribbean nations, throughout the global region, and across the Americas.

Close readings of the terms of the manifestoes—Glauber Rocha’s “aesthetics of hunger,” Fernando Birri’s “underdevelopment,” Jorge Sanjinés’ “revolutionary cinema,” Julio García Espinosa’s “Imperfect Cinema,” and Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino’s “Third Cinema”—unmask the deconstructive and transformative function of the political-artistic statements. These manifestoes valorize revolutionary cinema through their decentralization of culture, social politics, economy, and nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s and presage the advance of democratization in Latin America today.

Where “Manifesting *La Historia*” reveals the impulse for democratic inclusion in the 1960s and 1970s, **Hector A. Torres** in his interview with Chicana filmmaker, **Lourdes Portillo**, spotlights one extraordinary example of that impulse that ties our two lines of debate, production and aesthetic-cultural expression, momentarily together. In filmmaking since the 1970s, Portillo’s work is expansive and dynamic, transversing the conventional modes of discourse in the Americas. Her work defies typical categorization, as it fuses film genres and transfigures conventions; its seemingly boundless creative vision strikes pointedly at social and political controversies. In “A Conversation with Lourdes Portillo,” Torres and Portillo exchange perspectives on aesthetic, socio-political, and cinematic-technical issues; and Torres provides a coda that is all at once a scholarly filmography, a theoretical encapsulation of Portillo’s “politics of love” and cinematic “erasure,” and a poetic musing on her Chicana voice. Not only does this historically situate Portillo’s *oeuvre*, but it reflects on its historical influences, which, like the other essays collected in this special issue, should prove valuable to film scholars and historians interested in Latin America into the future.

In closing, we would like to thank the contributors for entering their voices into this debate and to the readers of *Film & History* for their participation and interest in this subject. We would like to show our appreciation and give *con fuerte un abrazo cariñoso* to Peter Rollins, chief editor-of-chief editors, for the support he has lent us throughout the process of putting this special issue together. We would equally like to thank the staff of *Film & History*, especially associate editor Deborah Carmichael, for technical support in bringing this issue to realization.

Notes

- 1 *Looking For History: Dispatches from Latin America*, Alma Guillermoprieto’s collection of provocative essays, renders “the more hidden and enigmatic aspects of Latin American history and conflict” as the “cataclysm and/or salvation” of American post-modernity draws near (ix).
- 2 José Vasconcelos proposes that the “mixtures” of the Americas will result in “the definitive race, the synthetical race, the integral race, made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples and, for that reason, more capable of true brotherhood and a truly universal vision” (20).
- 3 Consider Néstor García Canclini’s excellent search for these answers to the oppositions between the traditional, the modern, and the postmodern in Latin America’s hybrid culture.

- 4 Teshome Gabriel spells out clearly this approach to Third World film (6).
5 This is an obstacle that Ella Shohat and Robert Stam point out in their introduction (6) and to which their *Unthinking Eurocentrism* goes a long way in overcoming through their polycentric-multicultural approach.

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