

# LATIN AMERICAN SILENT CINEMA

## Triangulation and the Politics of Criollo Aesthetics

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*Abstract: Despite its important role in the construction of imagined communities throughout the region, the study of silent cinema in Latin America has barely gone beyond an initial stage of unearthing national and regional cinemas to a more comparative and critical study of trends and ideologies from a transnational perspective. This essay outlines such a comparative history by using the spatiotemporal metaphor of triangulation as a framework for theorizing the politics of criollo aesthetics, and by combining a diachronic examination of major trends with synchronic close readings of paradigmatic films. The periodization and selection of films respond, in turn, to a broader consideration of how ideology, aesthetics, and economics intersect in the evolution of filmic practices in Latin America during the silent era. Finally, in the conclusion, I argue that the most important legacy of this period of Latin American cinema on subsequent filmmaking in the region is not so much the elaboration of a criollo aesthetics, which would not survive beyond the silent period, but rather the development of the strategy of triangulation, whereby Latin American filmmakers navigated a global cinematic landscape from a position of marginality.*

### INTRODUCTION: DEFINITION OF TERMS

The Spanish term *criollo* has a variegated history. It comes from the Portuguese *crioulo*, which was first applied in the fifteenth century to Portuguese people born in Africa and soon afterward to African slaves born in Brazil.<sup>1</sup> In Spanish America, the earliest use of *criollo* kept its root meaning (from *criar*, which means “to raise”) but applied first to Africans born in the New World and only afterward to Spaniards born there as well (Arrom 1951). By the seventeenth century, the term’s meaning narrowed to refer only to the direct descendants of Spaniards, while after independence it broadened to designate a Eurocentric understanding of national histories and identities. In effect, by the middle of the nineteenth century, *criollo* was widely used as a stand-in for national hegemonic cultures throughout Spanish America. In Brazil, on the other hand, *crioulo* devolved, among other things, into a racial slur for descendants of Africans, and the French term *créole* came to refer to the African-inflected

1. For a summary of the various theories put forth to explain the etymologies of *crioulo* and *criollo*, see Eckkrammer (2003, 86–95).

cultures and languages that emerged throughout the Francophone Caribbean Basin.<sup>2</sup>

Given the confusion that may arise from the polysemy of the term *criollo* and its cognates, I will limit my use of the term to refer to Europeanized cultures throughout Latin America, including Brazil. Such use is widely accepted to this day in music, where *criollo* is applied to local variants of European forms popular throughout the nineteenth century, for example the Peruvian *vals* or the Puerto Rican *danza*. In theater, *criollo* is also widely used to describe dramas that use Spanish or Portuguese forms, such as the *sainete* or the *autos sacramentales*, but that are infused with local inflections of language, gestures, costume, and customs. Finally, in literature, the term was in wide circulation during the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth to describe a heterogeneous body of regionalist narratives that combined elements of realism, naturalism, *costumbrismo*, and romanticism, and set the action in very local, and usually rural, contexts. The best-known example of such usage is the literature of the gaucho in Argentina and Uruguay. At the dawn of cinema, then, a *criollo* sensibility in Latin America did not negate non-European cultures or their role in the construction of the national imaginary, but rather grafted them (to use José Martí's organic metaphor) into a privileged, Eurocentric trunk.

Following these examples, we could say that in the silent cinema of Latin America, a *criollo* aesthetic is one whose visual and narrative structures are metropolitan but whose atmospheres, concerns, and characters are local, national, or regional. This approach can lead to productive readings of *El último malón* (1916) as an Argentinean Western, of *El automóvil gris* (1919) as a Mexican crime serial, and of *Warawara* (1930) as "a sort of *Intolerance*, only one set in one of the poorest countries in Latin America [Bolivia]" (Gumicio-Dagrón 1996, 85). Yet as productive as such readings may be, this approach by itself can easily lead to a mechanical application of foreign models and perspectives to interpret local cinematic production. What is needed, in addition to identifying formal influences and sources, is a broader theoretical framework that acknowledges the aforementioned but also considers factors such as intended audiences, exhibition and marketing practices, filmmakers' agency, and ultimately, the relationship between all these and ideology—in short, a framework for theorizing the politics of *criollo* aesthetics that defines Latin American silent cinema. To this end I will use a spatiotemporal metaphor: triangulation.

An overview of the evolution of silent cinema in Latin America reveals two outstanding features: that the variety of form and content between

2. In this essay I focus on *criollo* as it was used in Spanish America during the silent cinema period. For a thorough discussion of the academic theorization of the French term *créole* and its variants, see Malmié (2006).

and within films increases over time, and that this increase is directly tied to what Paulo Antonio Paranaguá (2003, 94) has perceptively identified as Latin America's "permanent tripolar circulation" with Europe and the United States. However, rather than thinking in terms of circulation, which would imply the existence of a free-flowing and equal exchange of influences and products, Paranaguá's insight on the cinematic interconnectedness among Latin America, Hollywood, and Europe can be more productively theorized as an act of triangulation, whereby Latin American filmmakers navigated a global cinematic landscape from a position of marginality.

Like the term *criollo*, the term *triangulation* has several meanings. According to the Free Dictionary ([www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com)), in trigonometry, triangulation is a "method of determining the position of a fixed point from the angles to it from two fixed points a known distance apart." The best-known application of triangulation is in the surveying of land, whereby angles and distances on the ground are measured to accurately plot positions on a map. However, for the purposes of this essay, I will use triangulation in a way that is closer to the way it is understood and practiced in the sport of orienteering, where the objective is to physically reach as many points marked on a map as possible, with only the use of a map and a compass. In this sport, triangulation is the process of locating one's position when at least two prominent landmarks are visible. The more landmarks and the farther apart they are the better, as this increases the chances of accurately plotting one's location on the map and ultimately one's chances of navigating toward the desired objective.

Like orienteers, Latin American filmmakers of the silent period were adventurous spirits in search of fame, fun, and fortune, all the while advancing the worldview of their own emerging (middle) class. Concretely, Latin American filmmakers sought to find audiences, financing, and success as artists and businessmen and women by navigating a cinematic landscape whose three most prominent referents, at the level of visual and narrative practices, were European cinema (in particular, *films d'art*, super-spectacles, and crime serials), Hollywood cinema (especially comedies; adventure films; and in terms of form, the development of feature-length films and the psychological dimensions of continuity editing), and Latin American documentary practices (in particular, the very important newsreel production). The weight that any of these three referent points carries in a filmmaker's calculations will vary according to specifics such as the filmmaker's interests and objectives, historical circumstances, the country or region of production, and audiences' knowledge of said referents, among others. But what is relatively stable is the simultaneous presence of all three referents, to a greater or lesser degree, throughout the silent period. Therefore, when speaking of triangulation in this context, I refer to a filmmaker's self-positioning (metaphorically speaking) somewhere in be-

tween these three prominent referents, depending on the factors outlined previously. Individually, the resultant films will be visibly closer to one of these three referents than to others, but as a group, the characterizing feature of Latin American silent cinema, regardless of this or that particular film's aesthetic proximity to any one referent, is the incorporation (to a greater or lesser degree) of elements from all three referents.

The main benefit of comparing Latin American filmmakers to orienteers is that it overcomes the tendency to reduce Latin American cinema to watered-down versions or reflections of foreign models, and it instead reveals Latin American filmmakers as active constructors of their own representations who adjusted their sights as the contours of the cinematic landscape changed over time. From this perspective, the question is not whether Latin American filmmakers adopt and adapt global as well as local models and practices, but how they do so and for what purposes. The short answer is that the criollo aesthetic that pervades and defines Latin American silent cinema is directly linked to the political project of inserting the young republics into a Euro-American modernity that was at times liberal and at times conservative (the two principal ideologies of the ruling classes), but always patriarchal, heteronormative, and ethnoracially whitewashed.

#### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

Despite its important role in the construction of imagined communities throughout the region, the study of silent cinema in Latin America has barely gone beyond an initial stage of unearthing (and in a few cases critically assessing)<sup>3</sup> national and regional cinemas, to a more comparative and critical study of trends and ideologies from a transnational perspective.<sup>4</sup> The first attempt to sketch a comparative and continental overview of this cinema was part of Paulo Antonio Paranaguá's 1984 book, *Cinema na America Latina: Longe de Deus e perto de Hollywood*. In the first two chapters of this germinal text, he outlines what he calls the prehistory of cinema in Latin America and then presents an impressive catalog of silent film titles arranged in five categories: (1) transition from documentary to fiction, (2) conformist nationalist and indigenist films, (3) socially committed films, (4) films that reflect the transition from European to North Ameri-

3. Two studies are especially worthy of mention: de los Reyes (1996) and Salles Gomes (1974).

4. Even as important a publication as the Fundación del Cine Latinoamericano's *Cine latinoamericano: 1896–1930* (1992), the most ambitious if somewhat uneven work on the subject, takes the traditional approach of critically analyzing (in the better essays) or simply cataloging the national histories of silent film production.

can hegemony, and (5) regional and Catholic films. Twenty years later, in *Tradición y modernidad en el cine de América Latina*, Paranaguá takes the next logical step by focusing on a limited number of films. “The selection of specific examples,” he writes, “avoids titles or personalities that have been studied extensively, in benefit of others that merit revision and revalorization” (Paranaguá 2003, 13). The only other scholar who has taken a comparative approach to the study of silent cinema in Latin America is Ana M. López (2002), in a recent article where she focuses on the filmic constructions of national identity from 1896 to 1920.

The objective of this essay is to outline a comparative history of silent cinema in Latin America that combines Paranaguá’s synchronic categorization of silent films with López’s diachronic analysis of early silent cinema. In the process I will rethink Paranaguá’s five categories through a periodization that extends López’s analysis beyond 1920, to the end of the silent period, and discuss paradigmatic films from each of these periods and categories. The periodization and the selection of films will, in turn, respond to a broader consideration of how ideology, aesthetics, and economics intersect in the evolution of filmic practices in Latin America during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Finally, in the conclusion, I argue that the most important legacy of this period of Latin American cinema on subsequent filmmaking in the region is the development of the strategy of triangulation with the cinemas of Europe and Hollywood, as well as with national and regional production.

Many of the films I discuss in this essay have recently become available to a wider audience for the first time, thanks to their release in video or DVD form. Of special note are the release in video form of the pan-Latin American collection *Tesouros do Cinema Latinoamericano*;<sup>5</sup> the release, also in video form, of *Cine mudo argentino: Una selección de films 1905–1925*,<sup>6</sup> a collection of Argentine silent films that complements the *Tesouros* collection; and the release in DVD form of several features by Brazil’s most prominent silent-era filmmaker, Humberto Mauro.<sup>7</sup> I should also note here that, like most critics and historians of silent cinema in Latin America, I

5. The collection was produced by the Brazilian Ministry of Culture in conjunction with Funarte Decine-CTA-v, and the collaboration of Filmoteca de la Universidad Autónoma de México, Fundación Cinemateca Nacional de Venezuela, Museo del Cine Pablo C. Dueros Hicken in Argentina, Filmoteca de Lima/Museo de Arte EDUBANCO, and Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográfica. Contact and sales information: Departamento de cinema e video DECINE, Avenida Brasil 2482 CEP 20930-040, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil (tel.: 55(21) 580-3631, fax: 55(21) 580-6147, e-mail: decine@funarte.gov.br).

6. Buenos Aires: Bemovies, S.A. (n.d.).

7. *100 anos Humberto Mauro*. Rio de Janeiro: DECINE/Funarte, 2002 (e-mail: video.decine@funarte.gov.br). The collection includes *Thesouro perdido* (1927), *Sangue mineira* (1929), and *O canto da saudade* (1952).

have not seen all of the films I will mention, though I have made a point to discuss only those films that I have been able to see.<sup>8</sup>

#### GENERAL OVERVIEW: A CINEMA BY AND FOR CRIOLLOS

The silent period in Latin American cinema coincided with the height of the region's export-import growth, when Latin America exported raw materials such as beef, wheat, coffee, sugar, tobacco, henequen, copper, nitrates, rubber, and bananas, and in turn imported manufactured goods such as textiles, machines, and luxury items. At a basic level, then, film in Latin America began as another imported manufactured good, for not only were the cameras and film stock produced in Europe and the United States but also the first to film and screen moving pictures in the region were representatives of the Lumière and Edison companies (López 2000, 49–50).

Soon enough, however, local politicians realized the power of film as a tool for propaganda, and enterprising businessmen and women set out to maximize film's huge potential for profits. In terms of the number of films produced, silent cinema in Latin America was in fact defined by these two recent arrivals to the socioeconomic scene. In particular, professional politicians were responsible for financing the official national and regional newsreels that thrived into the forties and fifties, and the criollo bourgeoisie that emerged to support the expanding export economies was responsible for financing most of the narrative films of the region until the transition to sound forced producers to seek financial subsidies from the state. From this perspective, then, Latin American narrative silent cinema is predominantly a cinema made by an emerging criollo bourgeoisie espousing a Eurocentric worldview and with a correspondingly Europeanized aesthetics. This sensibility applied to national filmmakers as well as to European itinerant and immigrant filmmakers who played a leading role in the development of silent cinema in Latin America. Thus, the Italian Pedro Sambarino was active in Bolivia and Peru filming and/or directing features with criollo themes, and another Italian, Gilberto Rossi, had a successful career in Brazil as producer of official newsreels (Rossi *Actualidades*, 1921–1931) and as producer for José Medina, the most commercially successful silent feature director in São Paulo.

In addition, a criollo sensibility of the time was not only Eurocentric vis-à-vis other cultures in the Americas but also thoroughly patriarchal.

8. The exceptions are the Brazilian films *A vida de João Cândido* and *Paz e amor*, both disappeared; *Warawara*, a recently rediscovered Bolivian film not yet rereleased; and *El fusilamiento de Dorrego*, a film that is only available in Argentina. In the end, I decided to discuss them on the basis of what others have written because of their relevance in mapping out a continental history of this mostly uncharted cinema.

This explains why all of the films of the period (with the exception of *Limite*) are androcentric and oftentimes misogynistic; and why, outside of acting, only two women ventured into film production and direction, and only after stints as actresses: Carmen Santos in Brazil and Mimi Derba in Mexico. Finally, in terms of political economy, criollos during the first decades of the twentieth century believed wholeheartedly in positivism. This aspect of criollo ideology, however, would be shaken by the Mexican Revolution and especially by the world economic collapse of 1929, and it helps to explain the qualitative difference between silent cinema and subsequent studio cinema in Latin America.

Significantly, two of the major social players of the previous century—the landed elite and the rural proletariat—did not leave their mark on silent cinema; the landed elite because they considered film a lowbrow form of entertainment, and the rural masses because they lacked the resources to make film. However, the third key player during the nineteenth century—the Catholic Church—did get involved with filmmaking during the silent period, and its participation is particularly evident in the regional cycles of the second half of the 1920s.

The class origins of these early producers and filmmakers may explain why there are only a handful of filmic narratives told from the perspective of the growing urban working classes; for example, *Juan sin ropa* (Georges Benoit, 1919), about the government repression of the anarchist insurrection in Buenos Aires in 1919 (an event known as the “Tragic Week”); *A vida de João Candido* (director unknown, 1912), about the Revolta da Chibata, a 1910 mutiny led by a black corporal aboard a Brazilian Navy ship; and the silent films of José Agustín Ferreyra, which grow out of and reflect life in the working-class suburbs south of Buenos Aires.

#### PERIODIZATION

Our knowledge of early cinema in Latin America is literally full of silences. To begin with, many films have spontaneously combusted or been burned on purpose, either as a form of censorship or to use the celluloid to manufacture consumer goods such as combs.<sup>9</sup> Many others have been forgotten, and only sometimes rediscovered in a dusty basement or trunk.<sup>10</sup>

9. Nitrate film, the film stock used during the silent period and much of the studio period until acetate film replaced it, is highly combustible. In 1957, many films burned in a fire at the Cinemateca Brasileira in São Paulo. In 1982, a fire destroyed many of the holdings of the Cineteca Nacional in Mexico. *La profecía del lago* (José María Velasco Maidana, Bolivia, 1925) was ordered to be burned by municipal authorities in La Paz. Many of José Agustín Ferreyra’s films were burned down to make combs as part of a creditor’s attempts to collect part of a debt.

10. Consider these three examples: (1) a few reels believed to be part of *La profecía del lago* were found among the belongings of the director’s first wife in 1988, (2) an incomplete

Other silences persist beyond the silent cinema period, imposed by a market and distribution system that privileges north-to-south consumption at the expense of south-to-north and south-to-south exchanges. Notwithstanding these limitations, we can still make some broad claims about early Latin American cinema, beginning with the general observation that silent film production developed in three distinct stages: (1) actualities (1897–1907), (2) proto-narrative cinema (1908–1915), and feature narrative cinema (1915–1930).

The first stage lasted roughly from 1897 to 1907 and consisted of one or at most two reels (at one to fifteen minutes per reel) of unstaged events called “actualities,” with little editing and narration and hardly any thought to *mise-en-scène*. This was followed by a period (1908–1915) of short- and medium-length proto-narrative films that sought to attract larger and more differentiated audiences with entertainment in various forms: reconstructed crimes, comedies, skits, plays, filmed songs (with live or recorded accompaniment), and literary adaptations, among others. These films were not so much cinematographic as theatrical, in that there was little use of filmic devices like close-ups, crosscutting, or subjective points of view. Instead, cameras tended to remain in place, as one would in a theater, while the acting and *mise-en-scène* also revealed a strong theatrical influence. Finally, beginning in 1915 and lasting for a few years beyond the introduction of sound, silent cinema acquired the outlines of today’s films, sans sound: Aristotelian narrative form, feature-lengths of sixty to ninety minutes (and in a few cases surpassing two hours), and the elaboration of genres and techniques that were first developed during the second period. Significantly, this periodization mirrors the development of silent film in Europe and North America, a fact that underscores Latin America’s active cinematic dialogue with the dominant film-producing centers.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Actualities (1897–1907)*

For its first ten years, film in Latin America did not evolve beyond very short actualities; that is, mostly unedited shots of unstaged action that sought to present rather than represent, to show rather than narrate. In addition, early movie cameras were lightweight and relatively inexpensive, which allowed for a lot of experimentation by artists not yet beholden to any over-determination in their choice of genre, acting style, or sometimes

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copy of *Garras de oro* (P. P. Jambrina, Colombia, 1925) was found in 1986, and (3) a copy of *Warawara* (José María Velasco Maidana, Bolivia, 1930) was discovered in a trunk in 1995.

11. Compare this periodization of Latin American silent cinema with, for example, Thompson (1985) and Pearson (1996).

even subject matter. In effect, what characterizes early Latin American silent cinema is how transparently it reflects the air of self-sufficiency of the early pioneers, as if they were looking at themselves and liked what they saw. The titles of that first decade speak for themselves: *Un célebre especialista sacando muelas en el Gran Hotel Europa* (*A Celebrated Specialist Pulling Molars at the Gran Hotel Europa*; directors Guillermo and Manuel Trujillo Durán, Venezuela, 1897), and *Carrera de bicicletas en el velódromo de Arroyo Seco* (*Bicycle Race at the Arroyo Seco Cycle Track*; director Félix Oliver, Uruguay, 1898).

The fascination with technology and movement that explains the production and reception of films like the Lumières' *L'arrivée d'un train en gare à La Ciotat* (France, 1896) also explains the production and reception of the earliest nonnarrative films in Latin America. As in many a Lumière film, the important thing was to astonish an impressionable audience by recording movement. This was done first with what amounted to moving photographs: sports events, people leaving a factory or a church, national leaders in official functions and travels, and the vast rural landscapes of the interior. Shortly thereafter, actualities evolved into short entertainment in the form of attractions, newsreels, and even songs, whereby audiences would see a performer on screen and hear the song from either a live person or a phonograph recording. The production and exhibition of these early one-reelers was usually done by the same person, often-times an itinerant European who in many cases also imported and exhibited films from Europe and to a lesser extent from the United States. As Paranaguá (2003) has noted, the introduction of film in Latin America is a story of mimetism (especially of the Lumière model) and of who did what first.

### *Transition (1908–1915)*

The emergence, around 1908, of profitable short- and medium-length spectacles is linked to the creation of large, stable, and differentiated audiences. This is the period, for example, when the first permanent movie palaces were built in major cities like Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Mexico City, and Havana, and when the marketing of films, through radio and newspapers, became an industry. It is also the period when exhibition expanded beyond urban centers to include rural areas, a development that would have repercussions in the representation of the dichotomy between city and countryside.

In terms of production, Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico experienced what some historians retrospectively call the belle époque, or golden age, of their respective silent film histories. In Brazil, production went from an average of 12 films (mostly documentaries) per year until 1907, to sud-

denly having an average of 169 films (again, mostly documentaries) per year between 1908 and 1911. Similar bursts of production occurred in Argentina between 1916 and 1919, and in Mexico between 1918 and 1923, a delay that can be attributed to the disruption of production caused by the revolution. In terms of aesthetics, the term *belle époque* is also a fitting qualifier of the films of this period because, as a rule, they privilege the European elements of local criollo culture.

Compared to the films of the first period, the proto-narrative films of the second period were longer (full reels or in some cases two reels) and had more extensive use of editing. For example, songs became staged operettas, actualities became dramatized recreations of real events such as sensational crimes, and attractions (say, a view of Buenos Aires or of the Mexican countryside), which cannot by definition be made into a narrative, were absorbed into the new proto-narrative films as part of the *mise-en-scène*. The language of cinema, moreover, was still very primitive in that there was little use of editing within scenes (in the case of filmed plays or operettas) or within sequences (in the case of narrative films).

Most of the films produced during the second period were documentaries, as was the case in the previous period, but what sets them and the fictions apart from earlier ones is that now we see the beginnings of representation, with all its attendant politics. For example, *El fusilamiento de Dorrego* (Mario Gallo, Italian, Argentina, 1908) tells the story of the rise and fall of the first governor of Buenos Aires from an official (i.e., nationalist and romantic) point of view. In Brazil, the most popular film of this period was *Paz e amor* (Alberto Botelho, 1910), a political satire that poked fun at then president Nilo Peçanha, who had campaigned under the slogan “a government of peace and love” (Paranaguá 1981, 98). That same year an even more controversial film was made: *A vida de João Cândido* (director unknown, Brazil, 1910). The film was based on the Revolta da Chibata (literally, the whip revolt), in which a large number of sailors, led by a black corporal by the name of João Cândido, took possession of the principal navy vessels after one of their own was almost whipped to death. After five days of tense negotiations during which the mutinied sailors pointed the guns of their vessels toward Rio de Janeiro, the president kept true to his slogan of peace and love by granting amnesty to the mutinied sailors and by abolishing the use of whips as a form of punishment in the navy. However, João Cândido and many of his followers were later imprisoned or sent to internal exile in the Amazon, and the film made about his feats became the first film to be censored in Brazil.

Finally, in Mexico, the revolution had shaken the official certitudes to the point that a documentary like *Revolución orozquista* (directors Salvador, Guillermo, and Eduardo Alva, Mexico, 1912) espoused a radical relativism. The first part intercuts between the advancing troops of two warring factions—those under Victoriano Huerta and those under Pascual

Orozco—and culminates with battle scenes from the point of view of each faction (López 2000). Gone is the single privileged point of view, and even the outcome is omitted, as if the positivist ideology that posited only one scientifically predetermined path to the future had been thoroughly undermined by the outbreak of the revolution—or at the very least, as if narrative closure were impossible in a period of frequent and dramatic reversals of fortune. As we will see in the next section, however, the narrative complexity and ideological ambiguity evidenced in this documentary did not take hold, as Mexican filmmakers increasingly and decisively reflected the interests of the victorious criollo bourgeoisie.

### *Feature Narrative Cinema (1915–1930)*

By 1915, audiences had become more sophisticated, demanding more complex and longer fictional narratives. Filmmakers adjusted their production accordingly, and as a result, some of the major developments of the period include the adoption of feature-length as the standard for fiction and the production of local dramas with higher production values. Much of this development is directly attributable to the popularity of Italian super-spectacles and French films d'art among Latin American audiences. For example, the first French blockbuster—*Queen Elizabeth* (1912), starring Sarah Bernhardt—made a splash throughout Latin America, while the Italians began a streak of blockbusters and very popular melodramas with *Quo vadis?* (1913) and *Cabiria* (1914).

Hollywood's influence was more pronounced in the areas of exhibition and distribution. Already in 1914, European film imports began to decline because of the war, and beginning in 1916, Hollywood's major studios implemented the practice of block booking (i.e., selling multiple films to a theater as a unit) and of underselling their own film production in Latin America. These "dumped" films were initially distributed and exhibited by local entrepreneurs, who in many cases had abandoned production after having realized that they could make more money by simply distributing and exhibiting European and U.S. films (Schnitman 1984, 19).<sup>12</sup> As if to add insult to injury, by the end of the silent period, Hollywood had succeeded in virtually monopolizing even the distribution market

12. The most prominent distributors/exhibitors during the second half of the silent period were Max Glücksmann in the Southern Cone, Francisco Serrador Carbonell in Brazil, and in Mexico, William O. Jenkins, in partnership with Gabriel Alarcón and Manuel Espinosa Iglesias. This means that in the three major markets in Latin America, exhibition and a good part of distribution were in the hands of foreign-born entrepreneurs. Francisco Serrador Carbonell, born in Valencia, Spain, arrived in Brazil in 1887 at the age of fourteen. Glücksmann, born in Chernowitz, then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, arrived in Buenos Aires in 1890 at the age of fifteen. William O. Jenkins, born in Tennessee, arrived in Mexico in 1905 at the age of twenty-seven.

through its own local representatives, leaving the less lucrative and riskier business of exhibition to local entrepreneurs.

Notwithstanding the intensity of this first Hollywood invasion, production in Latin America continued, in part because of the introduction of economical cameras for the amateur film market. Many of these cameras served both as recording devices and as projectors, a technological feature that made possible the emergence of regional cycles in the late 1920s and the continuation of an artisan cinema produced by studios and amateurs everywhere. Regional cycles also emerged to fill a void created by the limits of film distribution in Latin America, which privileged major cities. Some of the more important regional cycles include Orizaba, in the Mexican state of Veracruz (*El tren fantasma* and *El puño de hierro*, Gabriel García Moreno, 1927); Barquisimeto, in the state of Lara, Venezuela (*Los milagros de la Divina Pastora*, Amábilis Cordero, 1928); Recife (*Aitaré da praia*, Gentil Roiz, 1925, and *A filha do advogado*, Jota Soares, 1926); and most famously, Cataguases, in the state of Minas Gerais, where Humberto Mauro began his career with films like *Thesouro perdido* (1927), *Braza dormida* (1928), and *Sangue mineiro* (1929). However, the distribution and exhibition structures were such that regional films were almost never seen outside their countries of origin, and sometimes not even beyond their region of origin.

Production in Latin America also continued thanks to the practice of projecting locally made newsreels before screening a feature presentation. As I noted earlier, besides European and Hollywood cinema, the third major influence in Latin American fictional cinema during the silent period was the extensive local production of documentaries. Newsreel production in particular provided the only schooling for many budding filmmakers and the only form of continuous practice for experienced ones. Given the important ideological role of newsreels in promoting official versions of reality, it is not surprising that they alone received the kind of state support needed for stable and continuous output. The price for this stability and continuity was, according to Paranaguá (2003, 35), a double submission: "formally, to the *Pathé Journal* model [i.e., short news reports based on a single subject and told from a single perspective], and ideologically, to the dominant interests." The prevalence of the *Pathé-Journal* as a model does help to explain the European accent of Latin American film production throughout the second half of the silent period. And yet Latin American cinema developed, from very early on, as a triangulated cinema in simultaneous dialogue with North America, Europe, and an autochthonous film production that was primarily documentary but not always indebted to the *Pathé* model, as the examples *Revolución orozquista*, *El fusilamiento de Borrego*, and *A vida de João Cândido* demonstrate. The nature and intensity of this "trialogue" has changed depending on historical circumstances, but it has never ceased. This is especially evident when one

considers the major forms of narrative film production during the third period: films d'art, religious films, and popular entertainment films.

*Films d'art* / As in France, where film d'art began, film d'art in Latin America sought to raise the status of film from lowbrow entertainment to a respectable seventh art through filmed plays and through adaptations of literary classics and especially national romances like *Amalia*, *O Guarany*, *Iracema*, *Santa*, *María*, *Amnesia*, and *Aura o las violetas* (Paranaguá 2003, 39). The conservatism inherent in the hierarchical outcomes of these foundational narratives was oftentimes mitigated by the romantic convention that love conquers all, including racial, class, and ethnic differences between the lovers in question.<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, these films were part of a broader liberal project that sought to create, through allegory, inclusive national identities in what were still very young and culturally heterodox republics.

One of the most interesting examples in film of these national allegories is *Warawara* (José María Velasco Maidana, Bolivia, 1930), adapted by Antonio Díaz Villamil from his own novel *La voz de la quena*. Recently restored by the Cinemateca Boliviana, though not yet exhibited in its restored version, *Warawara* tells the story of frustrated love between an Aymara princess and a Spanish conqueror. Alfonso Gumicio-Dagrón, the foremost historian of Bolivian cinema, has written of the film:

[The director] embarked on the country's first "superproduction," initially entitled *El ocaso de la tierra del sol* but eventually exhibited as *Warawara*, which means "star" in the native language of Aymara and is the name of the female lead in the film. The result was a monumental work, a sort of *Intolerance*, only one set in one of the poorest countries in Latin America. . . . With *Warawara* special sets were designed for a film's production for the first time in Bolivia. Artists and architects themselves built a recreation of the Aymara palace. Velasco Maidana's home in La Paz was filled with women sewing costumes for the actors. In a makeshift laboratory, Raúl Montalvo and José Jiménez developed the film by hand while Velasco Maidana played violin in the next room to entertain the crew. The only modern equipment used in the production was the Ernemans [*sic*] camera Velasco Maidana had brought from Buenos Aires. Editing was done by the naked eye with a small [M]oviola and a pair of scissors. . . . By the time it premiered in January 1930 at the Teatro Princesa in La Paz, accompanied by live music composed by César Garcés B., it was already famous. (Gumicio-Dragón 1996, 85–86)

Besides the beautiful evocation of what must have been a very creative atmosphere, this passage also reveals the precariousness and improvisation that characterized silent film production in Latin America. At the same time, although *Warawara* doubtless had a more colorful production his-

13. For a discussion of how similar dynamics were represented in nineteenth-century Latin American novels, see Sommer (1991, 6).

tory than most other literary adaptations, it shares with all of them the foundational impulse of their models; that is, the desire (and in the case of Bolivia in the 1920s, the audacity) to imagine a national identity that includes the non-criollo “other,” even as it continues to espouse a Eurocentric, aristocratic, and patriarchal order.

*Religious Films* / As noted earlier, of all the major social players in the nineteenth century, only the church participated in film production during the silent period. Today, when people think about the Catholic Church in the history of film, most people think of its role as censor, as when it participated in the implementation of the Hays Code in the United States in 1934. However, the church has been involved in film production since the beginning of cinema, and in Latin America, it has continued to play an active role in media production through institutions like Chile’s Channel 13, run by that country’s Pontificia Universidad Católica.

Religious films during the silent period celebrate the role of the church in maintaining an idealized patriarchal order, using as a model medieval mystery and morality plays set invariably in a pastoral countryside that in many ways represents the *locus amoenus* of the criollo nation. Films that fit this description include *Los milagros de la Divina Pastora* (Amábilis Cordero, Venezuela, 1928), about a young boy who decides to become a priest in a town saved from flooding by the Virgin’s intercession; *La Virgen de la Caridad* (Ramón Peón, Cuba, 1930), a family melodrama that relies on the Virgin’s intercession for ethical guidance and narrative closure; and *Canção de primavera* (Cyprien Ségur and Igino Bonfioli, Brazil, 1923), another family melodrama, in which the priest substitutes the saints and virgins of lore as intercessor between (in this case) a tyrannical patriarch and his two young daughters.

The most important of these religious films, at least in terms of its impact on subsequent filmmaking, may be *Tepeyac* (José Manuel Ramos, Carlos E. González, and Fernando Sáyago, Mexico, 1917), about the apparition of Tonantzin as the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Paranaguá (2003, 46–47) has wittingly summarized its contradictions, many of which would define Mexican cinema during the sound period: “*Tepeyac* is a kind of primitive scene of Mexican cinema: here we find the Mexican Revolution put in parenthesis, domestic matriarchy counterbalanced with institutional paternalism, the poor rewarded for their resignation (Juan Diego and Cantinflas, the same heart!), the trinkets of modernity in no contradiction with the perpetuation of tradition, the evolution of customs without a change in mentalities, mimetic cosmopolitanism at the service of official nationalism, and the fine arts, filled with public solemnity, opposed to a popular culture that is reduced to private decor.”

With their primitive mise-en-scènes and editing, and their narrative simplicity, religious films like *Tepeyac* are not of great consequence in terms of the evolution of cinematic form in Latin America, but they are very revealing of how a major institution co-opted a thoroughly modern medium for very conservative ends. This practice would flourish during the classical period under the aegis of the state and in many cases in conjunction with the church.

*Popular Entertainment Films* / Popular entertainment films of the second half of the silent period included comedies, musicals (with musicians and/or singers live in the theater), action dramas, re-creations of crimes (known as *posados* in Brazil), and melodramas, which already showed signs of becoming the metagenre they would in fact become during the studio period. Irrespective of their genre, popular entertainment films tended to be explorations of urban life, both middle and working class in the present and the recent past, a reflection no doubt of the very audience sector for which the films were made. Because of this emphasis on contemporary urban life, with its variety of characters and lifestyles, they have the feel of the literature of customs and manners (*costumbrismo*), with which they also share the ideology of reformism and its attendant didacticism by teaching viewers how to navigate the new social and urban landscapes emerging at the time throughout Latin America. Compared to religious films, however, popular entertainment films show a more complex sense of morality, and the question of what is being taught is not as self-evident as in religious films. On the other hand, compared to films d'art, which very clearly reveal the filmmakers' quest to identify their own work and class with the interests of the national aristocracies, popular entertainment films reveal the contradictory aspirations and desires of an emerging bourgeoisie, most notably in the ambiguity with which they represent workers, immigrants, and indigenous populations.

After documentaries, popular entertainment films were the most watched form of locally produced films in Latin America. Some often-cited examples of comedy are *Don Leandro el inefable* (Lucas Manzano, Venezuela, 1918) and *La borrachera del tango* (Edmo Cominetti, Argentina, 1929); of action dramas, *Nobleza gaucha* (Eduardo Martínez de la Pera, Ernesto Gunche, and Huberto Cairo, Argentina, 1915), *El último malón* (Alcides Greco, Argentina, 1916), *El húsar de la muerte* (Pedro Sienna, Chile, 1924), *El tren fantasma* (Gabriel García Moreno, Mexico, 1927), and *Thesouro Perdido* (Humberto Mauro, Brazil, 1927); of crime recreations, *El automóvil gris* (Enrique Rosas, Joaquín Coss, and Juan Canals de Homes, Mexico, 1919) and *El pequeño héroe del Arroyo de Oro* (Carlos Alonso, Uruguay, 1930); and of melodramas, *Perdón, viejita* (José Agustín Ferreyra, Argentina, 1927) and *Sangue Mineiro* (Humberto Mauro, Brazil, 1929).

## REVIEWS OF POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT FILMS

*Nobleza gaucha*

*Nobleza gaucha* (1915) was the first Latin American feature film to achieve box-office success outside its country of origin,<sup>14</sup> and so marks the feasibility of making films locally for a transnational market. Its popularity can be attributed to the film's successful incorporation of comedic and melodramatic elements typically associated with Italian commedia dell'arte and melodrama, into an action-driven plot structure typically associated with Hollywood productions. The film tells the story of the kidnapping (by a vulgar landowner) and subsequent rescue (by a noble gaucho) of a young country maid. At first the gaucho fails in his rescue attempt because his horse is too slow for the landowner's automobile. The gaucho then decides to enlist his neighbor, an Italian peasant who provides comic relief through his representation as a country bumpkin. After they arrive to the gates of the mansion where the landowner has imprisoned the young woman, however, the immigrant backs out and returns to the countryside. The gaucho, alone but determined to free his object of desire, succeeds in this second rescue attempt. The landowner then retaliates by falsely accusing the gaucho of stealing cattle, but in a final chase on horseback, the landowner dies at the hands of the gaucho (Barnard 1996, 7).<sup>15</sup>

Given the centrality of the conflict between landowner and peasant, and the film's emphasis on the contrast between city and countryside, it is not surprising that many critics have focused on these two interrelated themes. However, the film revisits the theme of the gaucho and its associated discourse of civilization versus barbarism at a time when (1) class struggle was no longer rural but urban, (2) poor European immigrants were loathed as the new barbarians, and (3) gauchos survived as a social force only in the popular imagination. If we take these anachronisms into account, the reading of *Nobleza gaucha* changes dramatically from that of a progressive redemption of the gaucho against tyrannical landowners to that of a reactionary update of nineteenth-century criollo liberalism, with its exclusionist notions of nationality, particularly with its distrust of new urban sectors borne of immigration, represented in the film by the unreliable immigrant who abandons the gaucho in his hour of need (Paranaguá 2003, 24). In its divergent readings, then, *Nobleza gaucha* is a perfect

14. The film reputedly earned a return of 600,000 Argentinean pesos on an investment of only 20,000, thanks in part to sales outside Argentina.

15. The sequences in which the landlord falsely accuses the gaucho and the final chase on horseback are missing in the copy I have seen. I owe this part of the synopsis to Barnard's (1996) review.

example of the contradictory impulses of the emerging criollo bourgeoisie in Argentina, torn as it was between reaping the economic rewards of a growing export-import economy that benefited principally the landowning elite and claiming political power away from this elite through the Radical Party headed by Hipólito Yrigoyen.<sup>16</sup>

*El último malón*

*El último malón* tried to generate, with some success, the audience response and box-office revenue of *Nobleza gaucha*, through an action-filled plot that in the main follows the outlines of a Hollywood Western (a central conflict between Native Americans and Euro-Americans set in the borderlands, with the eventual triumph of modernizing forces over traditional ones), but is bracketed in the beginning by an ethnographic documentary of indigenous life and in the end by a melodramatic happy ending for the two indigenous leads. The film is about the last *malón*, or uprising, of native people in Argentina, which took place near Santa Fe in 1904. The film's prologue, "Civilization and the Indian," begins with a man pointing to the location of the uprising on a map of Argentina, continues with shots of newspaper clippings on the uprising, and proclaims that what is to follow is a "historical reconstruction." What follows, however, is an ethnographic documentary on contemporary Mocovi life that begins with establishing shots of the community and proceeds to introduce some of its real-life noteworthy members: Petrona and her offspring, the old cacique Mariano López, the rebel cacique Salvador López (the only one not to stay put for the camera), and even the tribe's fool, Juan Saldón. The documentary continues with a survey of native customs—fishing, hunting, cattle herding, and drinking—and an intertitle even explains that "the Whites teach them to drink" to subdue them. Then, with a shot of an actor now playing the old cacique who "lived comfortably in the lands given to him by the Government," the film transitions to a fictional action drama centered on a love triangle between Rosa (a brown-faced mestizo woman); the old cacique, renamed Bernardo López (whose power rests with the whites); and his rebellious young brother, renamed Jesús Salvador. During the uprising, Rosa, who seems to be the old cacique's wife but who has publicly supported Jesús Salvador's plans for an uprising, is held captive by the old cacique. After the uprising fails, Jesús Salvador frees her and

16. Hipólito Yrigoyen was elected president in 1916, only a year after the release of *Nobleza gaucha*. In 1919, the country's powerful unions called for a general strike to protest rising prices and stagnant wages. Yrigoyen and his Radical Party sided with the conservatives to repress not only the demonstrations but also the whole syndicalist and anarchist movement.

both successfully escape to the jungles of northern Argentina. The film ends with the two lovers kissing, followed by an inter-title that explains how they learned this custom from the whites. Such melodramatic excess, whereby a complex social and economic reality is reduced to an emotional narrative between two lovebirds, may very well explain the popularity of the film at the time of its release, but it nevertheless undermines the film's thesis, elaborated through the ethnographic introduction, that Mocovis are the victims of the Euro-Argentineans' civilizing mission. Moreover, the melodramatic imperative that drives the drama to a return to the status quo, coupled with the Western's inherent Manichaenism and Eurocentrism, effectively cancels any claims that the introduction may have made for the film as an objective and even sympathetic representation of the plight of the Mocovis. Despite these limitations, *El último malón* is so out of the ordinary in its dialectical incorporation of documentary footage into a fictional narrative that Fernando Birri, the acknowledged father of the new Latin American cinema, regularly screened it at his documentary film school in Santa Fe in the late 1950s (Barnard 1996).

### *El automóvil gris*

In contrast to the ambivalent liberalism of *El último malón* and *Nobleza gaucha*, *El automóvil gris*, based on the exploits of a gang of robbers that terrorizes Mexican high society until it is finally caught, is openly reactionary. For example, Charles Ramírez Berg (2000, 9) has noted how the film blames the brief Emiliano Zapata regime of early 1915 for the gang's first escape from prison. More dramatically, the film plays on criollo fears of the Mexican Revolution as an out-of-control struggle against their racial and class privileges. The film achieves this in two steps. First, it makes the viewer identify with the bandits because they are young and good looking, and three of them are in love with beautiful women. Then, after the bandits are finally caught and jailed, the film closes with documentary footage of the real bandits being shot by a firing squad. However, these real-life bandits do not look anything like the ones played by actors. Rather, they look like indigenous-mestizo Zapatistas with their wide-rim hats and their tight pants, but they are dehumanized by the way the event is shot and edited to show only the moment of death from a full-shot perspective. What we see are not individuals but a faceless, indistinct pattern of falling bodies. The effect of this closing montage is that the viewer's previous identification with the bandits is severed, criollo fears of losing their privileges and properties are effectively allayed, and revolutionary activity is subliminally equated with banditry.

Although *El automóvil gris* is local in its politics, it is very cosmopolitan in its aesthetics and a good example of the triangulated dialogue that Latin American films have continuously had with European and Holly-

wood cinemas. Again, Charles Ramírez Berg (2000, 4): “[*El automóvil gris* blends] four national filmmaking models: (1) Mexico’s rich documentary tradition that thrived for twenty years by feeding its audience’s appetite for Mexican images; (2) Italian cinema, known for its attention to period detail and its mobile camera; (3) French cinema, especially . . . the crime serials . . . with their extensive use of location shooting, their fast-paced cops-and-robbers narratives, and their characters’ reliance on disguises; and (4) the emerging Hollywood paradigm, with its goal-driven protagonist, its causally linked narrative, and its rules of editing, lighting, and shooting based on character psychology.”

Ideologically, *El automóvil gris* is also important for popularizing an understanding of the Mexican Revolution as necessary yet futile.<sup>17</sup> This take on the Mexican Revolution would survive well into the studio period as one of the two major themes of Mexican cinema, the other being family dramas of the kind foreshadowed by *Tepeyac*.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, a discussion of *El automóvil gris*, and of Mexican cinema in general, must address the effect on national productions of Hollywood’s negative stereotyping of Mexicans. In Hollywood silent cinema, the most persistent Latino stereotype was that of the Mexican bandit, who traces his historical origins to the regional caudillos that emerged to fill the power vacuum left by the expulsion of Spain from the Americas. After the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848, when the United States invaded Mexico in a monumental land grab that netted more than half of the Mexican territory, and especially after the Mexican Revolution, those caudillos were transformed, in the popular imagination of the Anglo-Americans living in these newly occupied territories, into bandits who robbed, murdered, pillaged, raped, cheated, gambled, lied, you-name-it: if it was bad, he did it.<sup>19</sup>

In 1922, the post-revolution government of Álvaro Obregón reacted to Hollywood’s constant negative stereotyping of Mexicans as bandits by threatening to ban all films from any company that perpetuated that stereotype. Hollywood responded by changing Mexican settings to thinly

17. Ramírez Berg (2000, 4) points out that *El automóvil gris* “contains an early expression of twin themes—the corruption of revolutionary ideals and the accompanying remorse over the loss of the unique opportunity the revolution afforded—that would haunt the nation’s cinema for the next seven decades.”

18. López (1993, 150) writes that “two basic melodramatic tendencies developed between 1930 and 1960: family melodramas focused on the problems of love, sexuality, and parenting, and epic melodramas that reworked national history, especially the events of the Mexican revolution.”

19. Just as Hollywood would portray Native Americans as the bad guys in countless Westerns, even though it was the settlers who were actually stealing the Native Americans’ lands, in the case of Mexicans, their representation in a Eurocentric industry like Hollywood suffered long-lasting effects that persist to this day.

veiled stand-ins like *Costa Roja* or *El Dorado*. This did not end the stereotyping, and ten years later, the Mexican government, under General Plutarco Calles, renewed its threat, this time with the backing of several Latin American countries. The new international censorship strategy worked, if only temporarily, and a convenient substitute for the bandit was found in another stereotype, the Latin lover.<sup>20</sup>

Parallel to their governments' censorship strategy, Latin American filmmakers developed a strategy of countering Hollywood's negative stereotypes with positive stereotypes of their own. The following quote, from the founders of the longest-running film magazine in Brazil (*Cinearte*, 1926–1942), exemplifies an attitude shared by many Latin American filmmakers of the second half of the silent period: "The making of films in Brazil should be an act of purification of our reality, through the selection of things that deserve to be portrayed on screen: our progress, the work of modern genius, our beautiful Whites, our nature" (Behring and Gonzaga, qtd. in Paranaguá 1981, 115).

Needless to say, this racist prescription led to "sanitized," yet equally shallow, misrepresentations, such as the whitewashing (*Warawara*) or brown-facing (*El último malón*) of indigenous cultures. In the case of blacks, misrepresentation took the form of an absence. As Robert Stam (1993, 177) has noted, "while blacks were a frequently (if much abused) presence in North American silent cinema, they form a kind of 'structuring absence' within silent Brazilian cinema, the exceptions being an adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1910), of Azevedo's *Mulato* (1917), and of *A Escrava Isaura* (*The Slave Isaura*, 1919)." In other Latin American countries with important black and mulatto populations, such as those in the Caribbean Basin, exceptions to this "structuring absence" are even harder to find.

### *Perdón, viejita*

In the late 1920s, silent cinema in Latin America saw a shift away from action-based plots, such as those of *Nobleza gaucha* and *El automóvil gris*, to plots that explore, however superficially and externally, psychological conflict. Among the best directors who participate in this shift are José Agustín Ferreyra (1889–1943) and Humberto Mauro. Ferreyra was the most consistently productive director of the silent period in Latin Amer-

20. Neither the bandit nor his more degenerate version, the greaser, disappeared from Hollywood productions. In 1934, for example, *Viva Villa* depicted the Mexican revolutionary as a mixture of clown and greaser, while the 1935 film *Bordertown* served as a warning to Latinos who wanted to succeed in the Anglo world not to even try. Needless to say, a discussion of the evolution of Latino stereotypes in Hollywood cinema is beyond the scope of this article. For a detailed discussion, see Woll (1980).

ica, and one of only a handful who succeeded in making the transition to sound after 1930. Nicknamed "El Negro," he grew up in the working-class suburb of Buenos Aires called Constitución, in a household made up of himself, his Afro-Argentine mother, his itinerant Euro-Argentine father, and his mother's extended family in nearby homes. It is this world, where economic necessity joins with the kind of longing, passion, and pain that the tango expresses so well, that Ferreyra brought to life in the vast majority of his films, twenty-five of which were silent, two hybrid, and fifteen with synchronous sound. Of his silent films, *Perdón, viejita* is both his last, and according to Jorge Miguel Consuelo (2001, 56), author of a book-length study on Ferreyra that is itself a relic of times past, his most representative: "Historical perspective redeems the film's candor and veracity. In its overall unity nothing is out of place, and even though characters are superficially sketched, they ooze authenticity. . . . [The street is] both their backdrop and their atmosphere. In a short scene, the uniform facades of the homes in the train-depot neighborhood of Nueva Pompeya create a sense of humble enchantment, with kids playing in the background while grown-ups in the foreground talk about their problems."

The film tells the story of Carlos and Nora (played by María Turgénova, Ferreyra's wife between 1924 and 1931), two wayward young adults who decide to bury their criminal past and begin a new life together with Doña Camila, Carlos's mother, and Elena, his younger sister. Everything seems to be going well until Elena is seduced by a pimp named El Gavilán, and whose gift of a stolen ring serves first as bait for the impressionable Elena, then as incriminatory evidence against Nora (who had forced Elena to give her the ring in order to protect her), and finally as incriminatory evidence against El Gavilán, whereupon Nora's name is cleared and everyone lives happily ever after. This happy ending, however, is very different from the happy endings of Hollywood, for what prevails is a sense of precariousness, of living in a world where luck is much more fleeting than tragedy. In this and in other films by Ferreyra, we are firmly in the world of the tango, where melodrama and tragedy support each other to "keep alive the illusion of happiness while knowing that happiness is an illusion" (Consuelo 2001, 50). The title of the film, in fact, came from a famous tango recorded by Carlos Gardel (among others), and its use here foreshadows the central role that music (and its privileged medium, radio) would play in the development of Latin American cinema during the studio period.

After *Perdón, viejita*, Ferreyra traveled throughout Latin America, Europe, and the United States to promote his films. He returned without having succeeded but energized by the possibility of filming with synchronous sound. In this new ball game, Ferreyra, like many of the protagonists in his films, charged ahead in the face of daunting odds, fueled

by the hope of material success as much as by circumstance, and in fact succeeded in breaking the silence that the advent of sound momentarily created among Argentine filmmakers.

*Sangue mineiro*

A native of the state of Minas Gerais, Humberto Mauro (1897–1983) directed more than ninety films, including six silent features (five in Cataguses and one in Rio), six features with sound (all in Rio, between 1933 and 1952), and more than three hundred documentary shorts for Brazil's National Institute of Educational Cinema, between 1936 and 1964 (Schwarzman 2003, 15–16). *Sangue mineiro*, the most critically acclaimed of Mauro's Cataguses regional cycle and among the best of all of Brazilian silent cinema, plays with narrative conventions by replacing an initial love triangle between a man and two sisters, with another love triangle between one of those sisters (Carmem, played by Carmen Santos) and two male cousins. In the end, the man in the first triangle chooses the legitimate daughter over Carmem (who is adopted and therefore will not likely inherit any of her industrialist father's fortune), while Carmem chooses the rich and European-looking cousin over the indebted mestizo one. The film's melodramatic closure therefore reinforces social hierarchies of gender, class, and race, without hinting at any possibility of change.

Having said that, the film breaks new ground in several areas. For one, it beautifully captures the region's natural splendor, not only as a backdrop to the action, but as a telluric presence that facilitates the expression of feelings such as lust and envy, and ultimately, of love, redemption, and forgiveness, all between sharply dressed characters with plenty of money to spare. Another is the quality of acting, which is no longer theatrical but cinematic, in that characters' emotions and intentions are explored through nuanced facial expressions shot in close-ups. In addition, the editing is rhythmic, successfully interposing action sequences with more introspective ones. Finally, Edgar Brasil's camera work poeticizes the play of light and shadow in a way that few other Latin American films of the silent period achieve, while here and there, metonymic shots of hands, feet, and furniture prefigure his work in the avant-garde films *Limite* (Mario Peixoto, Brazil, 1931) and *Ganga bruta* (Humberto Mauro, Brazil, 1933).

In José Agustín Ferreyra and Humberto Mauro one finds the most sustained attempts to create a popular cinema in Latin America during the silent period. Their relative success was in part due to their mastery over the language and syntax of cinema and in part to their search, at the narrative and ideological levels, for solutions to social and political problems through the conventions of the family melodrama—a genre inflected in Ferreyra's case by the reversals and ruptures typical of the tango, and in Mauro's, by the desire for the continuity of a rural lifestyle.

## CONCLUSIONS: BEYOND SILENCE

In its current positioning among a new Hollywood characterized by independent production schemes tied to monopolized distribution systems, a European cinema characterized by state subsidies for the arts (e.g., Ibermedia), and local audiovisual production controlled by national and transnational television conglomerates, Latin American cinema today survives in no small measure thanks to filmmakers' strategic self-positioning somewhere among the three referents. And just as the filmmakers of the silent period adjusted their sights according to the specifics of both local and global forces, filmmakers in Latin America today continue to appropriate dominant forms from the metropolis for their own ends. The forms have changed, as have the ends of appropriation, but the strategy itself has not and may very well characterize all of Latin American cultural production not as separate from or opposed to metropolitan production but as marginal to and sometimes subversive of that production. Robert Stam (1998) suggests as much when he writes that: "Cultural discourse in Latin America and the Caribbean has been fecund in neologistic aesthetics, both literary and cinematic: '*lo real maravilloso americano*' (Carpentier), the 'aesthetics of hunger' (Glauber Rocha), '*Cine imperfecto*' (Julio García Espinosa), 'the creative incapacity for copying' (Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes), the 'aesthetics of garbage' (Rogerio Sganzerla), the 'salamander' (as opposed to the Hollywood dinosaur) aesthetic (Paul Leduc), 'termite terrorism' (Gilhermo del Toro), 'anthropophagy' (the Brazilian Modernists), '*Tropicalia*' (Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso), '*rasquachismo*' (Tomás-Ibarra Frausto), and *santería* aesthetics (Arturo Lindsay)."

Stam (1998) goes on to note, "Most of these alternative aesthetics valorize, by inversion, what had formerly been seen as negative, especially within colonialist discourse." Clearly, this is not the case with Latin American silent cinema, whose Eurocentric criollo aesthetics extended the valorization of colonialist discourse into the new media that was then silent cinema. Notwithstanding these ideological limits, Latin American silent cinema nevertheless succeeded in establishing national cinematic landscapes characterized by repeated attempts to transform their subordination to dominant centers of production and distribution by recourse to (1) local modes of production that were artisan in nature, (2) distribution networks that focused on the regional and national audiences not served by the global cinematic industries of Europe and Hollywood, and (3) modes of representation closely linked to documentary practices.

The elaboration of triangulation as a conscious or unconscious strategy during Latin American cinema's formative silent period is arguably its most important legacy on subsequent filmmaking practices in the region. During the transition to sound, for example, it gave rise to a number of highly heterogeneous features, some silent, some not. However, their

combination of formal experimentalism, progressive politics, and cosmopolitanism breaks with the criollo sensibility that characterized all of the other films of the silent period, and for these reasons, I think they should be studied separately as Latin America's first cinematic avant-garde. Specifically, those I consider to be in direct dialogue with European avant-garde cinema are *Limite* (Mario Peixoto, Brazil, 1931) and *¡Qué viva México!* (Sergei Eisenstein, Soviet Union/United States/Mexico, 1932), while those I consider to be in direct dialogue with the emerging sound cinema are *Ganga bruta* (Humberto Mauro, Brazil, 1933) and *La mujer del puerto* (Arcady Boytler, Mexico, 1933). In addition, I would also consider the case of *Redes* (Fred Zinnemann, United States/Mexico, 1934), a documentary that sits squarely between these two tendencies and as such underlines the fact that, in reality, we face an eminently heterogeneous cinema whose strength lies precisely in its ability to adopt and adapt simultaneously from dissimilar sources.

Extending the triangulation analogy beyond this avant-garde, we could then proceed to understand sound cinema as the period of Hollywood's greatest influence over Latin American film practices, insofar as many of Hollywood's strategies and values were thoroughly incorporated by the region's filmmakers as standards of practice. This was followed by a transition period when Italian neorealism opened the doors wide for many Latin American filmmakers, by pointing to different ways to exploit new, inexpensive technologies. With the emergence of the new Latin American cinema in the 1960s, fueled as much by the French new wave as by local emancipatory movements in Cuba, Argentina, and Brazil, Hollywood was temporarily overshadowed, even as new influences, this time from Asia and Africa, were added to the predominant influences from the North Atlantic. Most recently, and after a relative decline ushered in by the conservative backlash in the 1970s and augmented by the economic crisis in the 1980s (only Brazil escaped this decline), cinema in Latin America has begun a modest recovery through coproductions characterized by their simultaneous engagement with European, North American, and Latin American cinemas; by their insertion in the global film festival circuits; and by their economic subordination to a now-dominant television production.<sup>21</sup>

In this century-old cinematic dialogue, Latin American film production has almost always been at the margins of a Hollywood-dominated

21. I have identified eight overlapping periods in the history of Latin American cinema: silent cinema (1890s–1930s), avant-garde cinema (late 1920s to early 1930s), studio cinema (1930s–1940s), neorealism and cinema *d'auteur* (1950s), new Latin American cinema (1960s), underground cinema (1970s), cinema of reconciliation (1980s to mid-1990s), and globalization (mid-1990s to the present). This periodization will be the basis of a book-length study of the history of Latin American cinema, of which the present article will be a part.

market. However, to paraphrase Paulo Antonio Paranaguá (2003, 10), being at the margins of the market does not justify staying at the margins of cinema's historiography. Ultimately, my hope is that a triangulated approach such as the one I have developed in this essay will help to correct this imbalance by situating Latin American cinema firmly within the evolution of cinema across the globe.

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