THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

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2

SILENT AND EARLY SOUND CINEMA IN LATIN AMERICA

Local, national, and transnational perspectives

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Editors’ introduction

As new audiovisual technologies have emerged over the past three decades, film historians have increasingly turned their attention to the early twentieth century, a moment when cinema and recorded sound sparked equally profound transformations of popular culture. In the context of this so-called “historical turn,” research on silent and early sound cinema in Latin America has been shaped by persistent challenges as well as new opportunities. Due to the discontinuous character of film production in the region and other obstacles to film preservation, only a small percentage of Latin American silent films have survived, and many early sound features have also been lost, making print publications the primary source for early film histories. The growing availability of digitized newspapers and magazines, along with the rediscovery, restoration, and video/digital release of silent and early sound films, has opened up new avenues for exploring cinema’s profound impact in early twentieth-century Latin America.

Providing an overview of key developments in Latin American film culture between 1896 and 1936, Navitski’s essay also interrogates dominant critical tendencies in Latin American film historiography—in particular, the use of “national cinema” as an organizing framework and a focus on production (especially of fiction features) to the detriment of other aspects of film culture. Throughout, she emphasizes the potential of engaging more deeply with distribution, exhibition, and fan culture, and highlights some of the insights yielded by studies that adopt a geographic scope above or below the level of the nation, ranging from a focus on a single city to complex networks of cross-border exchange.
Beginning with the first surveys published in the late 1950s (Di Núñez 1959; Viany 1959; García Riera 1969), most historians of Latin American cinema have focused on analyzing—or recovering the traces of—film production within the borders of a single nation. These accounts have implicitly framed filmmaking as an affirmation of cultural identity in the face of North American and European cinema’s dominance of local screens. Recuperating histories of production took on particular urgency in the case of the silent and early sound eras, given the dismal survival rate for Latin American films produced in the absence of self-sustaining industries or government policies to foster preservation. Yet recent scholarship on Latin American film culture, rather than treating imported cinema solely as an agent of cultural colonization, has begun to offer more nuanced accounts of how audiences, industry workers, critics, and exhibitors, as well as filmmakers, reacted to its presence on local screens (Serna 2014a). By shifting focus to the site-specific (and often overlooked) practices of distribution, exhibition, and fan culture, these histories open up fresh approaches that attend not only to the social meanings inscribed within a film text at the site of production, but also to the renegotiation of these meanings in the course of a film’s circulation within and beyond national borders. In this vein, scholars have highlighted the complexities of intra-regional exchanges—such as the significant presence of Mexican cinema throughout Latin America and beyond from the 1930s through the 1950s (Castro Ricalde and McKee Irwin 2011, 2013)—as well as the variety of film cultures outside national capitals, which tends to be obscured by the “national cinema” framework. At the same time, nationalist imaginaries undeniably shaped filmmaking across the region in the first decades of the twentieth century. Providing an overview of key developments in Latin American film culture between 1896 (when moving images were first projected for audiences in the region) and 1936 (often viewed as the end of a period of experimentation with sound film, as it marks the consolidation of Mexico’s sound film industry with the sweeping success of Fernando de Fuentes’ Allá en el Rancho Grande [Over at the Big Ranch]), this essay outlines the possibilities and limitations of national, local, regional, and transnational approaches to Latin American cinema.

While the past two decades have witnessed an explosion of critical interest in the transnational dimensions of moving-image production and consumption, in Latin American cultural criticism, local and national experiences have long been interpreted through a continental framework. Scholars have debated the extent to which the region’s diverse countries share a common relationship to (neo)colonial powers and Euro-American models of modernity. Néstor García Canclini has argued that Latin American nations possess “hybrid cultures” marked by “multitemporal heterogeneity,” an uneasy coexistence of modernity and tradition (García Canclini 1995: 3). This emphasis on the multiplicity of experiences of modernization productively highlights disparities within and between nations. Films were screened in Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo only six months after the first public exhibition of the Lumière Cinématographe in Paris in December 1895, with other major cities in the region close behind, yet the first confirmed screenings in Bolivia did not occur until 1904 (Paranagua 1984: 11). Fairly complex narrative films were being produced in Argentina and Brazil by 1908 and 1909, while no fiction features were shot in Bolivia or Peru until the latter half of the 1920s (López 2000: 65). The transition to sound widened the gaps between the filmic output of Latin American nations; Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil established profitable industries in the early 1930s, while sound features were not made in Peru until 1937 with the founding of Amauta Films (Bedoya 2009b: 33).

Arguing that silent-era filmmakers across the region shared a common practice of navigating between local cultural referents and international trends in film style and narrative, Paul Schroeder Rodríguez proposes a periodization for Latin American silent film that
mirrors developments in the United States and Western Europe (Schroeder Rodríguez 2008: 40-44). He distinguishes between a period dominated by actualities (short, topical nonfiction films), which corresponds closely to the early cinema period as defined in the United States (1897-1907), a transitional era (1908-1915) characterized by experiments with narrative film formats, and a period marked by the dominance of feature-length fiction films (1915-1930). While useful as a guide, this periodization does not address the lasting significance of nonfiction filmmaking in early twentieth-century Latin America. It also minimizes the sheer heterogeneity of genres and styles evident between and even within individual films. For example, Juan Sebastián Ospina León (2013) notes the use of both static, tableau-style framing associated with early cinema, and the internationally dominant continuity editing conventions forged in Hollywood, in the Colombian melodrama Alma provinciana (Provincial Soul, Félix J. Rodríguez, 1926). Elements of what Tom Gunning calls the "view aesthetic" of early cinema, which "capture[s] and preserv[e] a look or vantage point" on a seemingly unstaged subject (Gunning 1997: 14), persist in both non-fiction and fiction films made in Latin America through the end of the silent era, allowing spectators to contemplate familiar locales and events on-screen.

In her influential essay "Early Cinema and Modernity in Latin America," Ana M. López cautions against "any attempt to directly superimpose the developmental grid of U.S. and European early film history (albeit with its own discontinuities and heterogeneity) on the Latin American experience," emphasizing that "the history of filmmaking in Latin America is too profoundly marked by differences in global position, forms of social infrastructure, economic status, and technical infrastructure" (López 2000: 50). Instead, López recasts Euro-American accounts of silent cinema’s development by attending to local conditions of reception and production. She argues that upon cinema’s initial reception in the region, a fascination with cinematic technology and its images of modern life positioned audience members as both “voyeurs” of imported modernity and avid consumers of “whatever forms of modernity... were available locally” (p. 53). While imported films continued to dominate, filmmakers also produced their own visions of local modernization and narratives that exalted national identities.

In his analysis of early fiction features, Schroeder Rodríguez critiques nationalistic narratives aligned with dominant ideals of modernization, suggesting these films embody a “criollo aesthetic... directly linked to the political project of inserting the young republics into a Euro-American modernity” (Schroeder Rodríguez 2008: 38). He attributes this “Eurocentric worldview and... correspondingly Europeanized aesthetics” to the upwardly mobile ambitions of filmmakers, most of whom were members of the emerging middle classes, European immigrants eager to align themselves with their adopted country, or both. Yet many filmmakers moved frequently across national borders, complicating the issue of national allegiances. Italian immigrant Pedro Sambarino worked in Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru, Cuban filmmaker Ramón Peón in Mexico, and Chilean Alberto Santana in his home country, in Ecuador, in Peru (where he directed the silent wartime drama Yo perdí mi corazón en Lima [I Lost My Heart in Lima] in 1933), and later in Colombia, Paraguay, Costa Rica, and Panama. Schroeder Rodríguez’s analysis also glosses over the complexities of film financing prior to the emergence of industries. Funding schemes ranged from private investment in fiction features to sponsorship of nonfiction films by government or business interests, such as Silvino Santos’ No pas des Amazonas (In the Land of the Amazon, Brazil, 1922) and a group of comparable films highlighting the “civilizing” efforts of wealthy landowners and Catholic missionaries in the rubber-producing regions of Peru (Bedoya 2009a: 150-152).

Cinema was thus linked to a diverse series of modernizing projects, both local and national in scope. For example, the working-class filmmakers active in the city of Recife
in the Brazilian Northeast in the 1920s were arguably more invested in using filmmaking to demonstrate the modernity of their city and region—increasingly imagined as drought-stricken, impoverished, and decadent (Cunha Filho 2010: 160–170; Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. 2014)—than in fulfilling the ambitions for a Hollywood-style national cinema articulated by Rio de Janeiro fan magazines such as Cinearte, Selecta, and Para Todos. On the opposite extreme of the class spectrum, elite women's organizations in Uruguay produced feature-length documentary and fiction films promoting social hygiene in the late 1920s, asserting the relevance of their charity efforts in the context of an expanding welfare state (Ehrick 2006). Cinema's initial presence in Latin America was certainly marked by close links to state power, as the presence of presidents Porfirio Díaz of Mexico and Nicolás de Piérola of Peru at early film screenings suggests (de los Reyes 1995: 123; Bedoya 2009a: 26). Yet the ideological projects that shaped filmmaking were diverse and sometimes conflicting, complicating their relationship to hegemonic nationalism and positivist notions of progress.

As Paranaguá (1984: 9) and others have noted, moving-image technology arrived in Latin America as a foreign import, rather than an outgrowth of broader technological and economic shifts. Since the Lumière Cinématographe (one among several competing apparatuses) could be used both to capture and to project moving images, the Lumière agents filmed actualities that were then added to the company's catalog. Gabriel Veyre produced the earliest films made in Mexico, including a number of actualities featuring Díaz. He then traveled to Cuba, where he shot the first known film produced there, the 1897 Simulacro de un incendio (Simulacrum of a Fire), a document of training exercises by local firefighters, before moving on to Venezuela and Colombia. Veyre, like other exhibitors of imported film technologies, holds an uneasy place in national film histories as a representative of the foreign companies that dominated Latin American screens from cinema's earliest days. Earlier Latin American film scholars often presented the interests of filmmakers and exhibitors as diametrically opposed, with the latter viewed as complicit with foreign interests (Salles Gomes 1995). Indeed, after 1910, when permanent movie theaters were well established in many large Latin American cities, impresarios came to rely on steady supplies of European and later North American productions. Yet, as noted in more recent histories addressing the activities of film exhibitor-producers in Mexico and Brazil, production and exhibition remained closely intertwined throughout the silent era (de los Reyes 1983; Miquel 1997; Melo Souza 2003).

During the so-called “bela época” of Brazilian cinema (1908–1911) in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, film exhibitors were pivotal in film production, producing short, topical “local films” (Jung 2002) that showed the elites engaging in leisure activities or at public events, offering these spectators the pleasure of recognizing themselves and their social world on screen (Melo Souza 2003: 154). Producer-exhibitors such as Antônio Leal and Júlio Ferret also made short comedies, reconstructions of sensational crimes, and filmes falados e cantantes (talking and singing films). Accompanied by live performances by actors behind the screen, these locally made adaptations of operettas and the teatro de revista (musical revue) attained incredible popularity. A film based on the satirical musical Paz e amor (Peace and Love), financed by impresario William Auler and filmed by Alberto Botelho, was screened over 1,000 times in Rio in 1910 (Melo Souza 2003: 291). In Havana, behind-the-screen performances were used at screenings of imported films as early as 1906 and as late as 1920, helping to ground imported images in their exhibition context, often through locally specific humor (Agramonte and Castillo 2011: 82–87).

Brazilian producer-exhibitors' success was short-lived, especially as the powerful distribution and exhibition company owned by Spanish immigrant Francisco Serrador crowded out other theater owners beginning in 1911. Yet exhibitors continued to play an important
role in film production across Latin America. The Buenos Aires-based distribution/exhibition network owned by Austrian immigrant Max Glucksman produced most of Uruguay’s actualities between 1913 and 1931 (López 2000: 66), while in Peru, a rivalry between the Teatros y Cinemas and Compañía Cinematográfica Mundial companies prompted them to produce competing newsreels between 1923 and 1926 (Bedoya 2009a: 229–234). In Colombia, the Italian-born di Doménico family, whose exhibition and distribution empire stretched across Venezuela, Central America, and the Caribbean, ventured into production in 1915 with El drama del 15 de octubre (The Drama of the 15th of October), which reconstructed the assassination of politician Rafael Uribe Uribe and documented its aftermath. Although the film provoked controversy and proved a commercial disappointment, the di Doménicos went on to produce four fiction features in the 1920s.

As exhibitors experimented with production, other enterprising filmmakers sought to tap into nationalistic sentiments. In Argentina, Italian immigrant Mario Gallo dramatized national history in films such as La revolución de mayo (The May Revolution, 1909) and El fusilamiento de Dorrego (The Execution of Dorrego, 1910). In Cuba, Enrique Díaz Quesada directed adventure films set during national independence struggles, including Manuel García o el Rey de los campos de Cuba (Manuel García or the King of the Cuban Countryside, 1913) and El capitán mambí o libertadores y guerrilleros (The Revolutionary Captain or Liberators and Guerrillas, 1914). Mexico’s earliest known fiction feature, 1810 o los libertadores (1810 or the Liberators, Carlos Martínez Atredondo, 1917), filmed in Mérida, Yucatán, also capitalized on patriotic themes, while El húsar de la muerte (The Husar of Death, Pedro Sienna, 1925) narrated the exploits of Manuel Rodríguez, a hero of Chile’s
El hogar del "film", en Buenos Aires

In immigrant impresarios whose business spanned national borders, such as the Doménico family in Colombia and the Circum-Caribbean, and Max Gluckmann (pictured) in Argentina and the Southern Cone, played a pivotal role in the development of film exhibition, distribution, and production in Latin America. Caras y Caretas (Buenos Aires), January 3, 1914.

wars of independence. Other silent-era features invoked national patron saints: Tepeyac (Carlos E. González, Mexico, 1917) and La Virgen de la caridad (The Virgin of Charity, Ramón Peón, Cuba, 1930).

Beyond overtly nationalistic themes, Latin American silent cinema displayed and affirmed emerging urban modernity, often in counterpoint to rural life. This strategy was perhaps exploited most successfully in Nobleza gaucha (Gaucho Nobility, Humberto Cairo,
Eduardo Martínez de la Pera, and Ernesto Gunche, 1915). The film's plot—a gaucho rescues his innocent love interest after she is kidnapped by a wealthy, unscrupulous city dweller—framed the countryside as a space of purity. At the same time, the film displayed Buenos Aires' broad avenues, historic buildings, and modern public transportation system. After reportedly being seen by over 50,000 spectators in Buenos Aires in 1915 (La Prensa 1915: 18), Nobleza gaucha screened in Barcelona (Batlle 1916: 395), Rio de Janeiro (Fon-Fon 1916), and Santiago de Chile (El Mercurio 1917: 6). Yielding a $200,000 profit in its first year of release (Ortega 1917: 437), Nobleza gaucha was exhibited into the late 1910s, playing in Lima three years after its premiere (Derteano 1918: 582).

In the wake of Nobleza gaucha, Gunche and Martínez de la Pera directed Hasta después de muerta (Until after Her Death, 1916), one of several Argentine melodramas that explored the ultramodern yet corrupting environment of rapidly growing cities. The prolific Afro-Argentine director José Agustín “El Negro” Ferreyra explored related themes into the sound era. In a similar vein, the 1918 adaptation of Federico Gamboa's naturalist novel Santa (Luis G. Peredo) linked Mexico City's modernization with moral decay through the tale of an innocent country girl who becomes a high-class courtesan. Other early features drew on what Doris Sommer (1991) calls “foundational fictions”—literary works that allegorized national unification through the formation of heterosexual couples across political parties, ethnicities, and regional groups—including Amalia (Enrique García Velloso, Argentina, 1914), based on José Mármol's novel, and the multiple silent-era versions of José de Alencar's O guarani.

Figure 2.3 The display of urban space and modern transportation technologies take center stage in a fragment from the 1918 version of Santa, whose title character's transformation from innocent village girl to courtesan allegorizes the temptations of big-city life. Actress Elena Sánchez Valenzuela crosses an avenue in Mexico City's upscale western districts, with Chapultepec Castle in the background.
O guanani, which portrays the chaste love between the young white settler Cecilia and her indigenous protector Peri, exemplifies a region-wide fascination with romanticized images of indigenous peoples, decimated by the Conquest and marginalized within Latin American societies. In Argentina, El último malón (The Last Indian Attack, Alcides Greca, 1916) documented the dismal living conditions of the Mocovi tribe in an ethnographic mode, while consigning them to the nation’s past (Tomkins 2014: 104–105). In Chile, La agenta del Arauco (The Agony of the Arauco, Gabriela von Bissenius and Salvador Giambastiani, 1917) lamented the impending disappearance of the Mapuche tribe, while also trivializing it through parallels to the suffering of a grieving mother from the city (Donoso 1994: 34). In Bolivia, Corazón aymara (Aymara Heart, Pedro Sambarino, 1925) portrayed a virtuous native woman victimized by the supposedly rigid sexual morality of indigenous communities, while José María Velasco Maidana’s La profecía del lago (The Prophecy of the Lake, 1925) and Wara Wara (1929) depict troubled romances between white and indigenous characters (Gumucio Dargon 1983: 63–68, 104–119).

In contrast to the dominance of the fiction feature in Argentina, Brazil, and Cuba beginning in the early 1910s, filmmaking in Mexico was shaped by a collective fascination with the violent events of the Revolution (1910–1920). Cameramen such as Enrique Rosas, Salvador Toscano, Jesús H. Abitia, the Alva Brothers, and others documented the final years of Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorship, the uprising led by defeated presidential candidate Francisco I. Madero, and the bitter struggles between military factions that marked the later phases of the conflict. Very few fiction films were produced before 1917, when enthusiasts such as actor and actress Minfrú Derba, together with Rosas, began to focus high-society melodramas. These were modeled on popular Italian “diva films,” which starred celebrated actresses such as Pina Menichelli and Francesca Bertini.

Mexico’s distinctive tradition of nonfiction filmmaking fostered unique exhibition practices, as camera operators combined their footage with images shot by others in compilation films that reviewed recent events. These images were often repurposed in later years: Rosas incorporated a scene showing the 1915 execution of members of the infamous “Gray Automobile Gang” into his 1919 crime serial El automóvil gris (The Gray Automobile). From the 1910s through the 1930s, Toscano assembled multiple versions of Historia completa de la Revolución Mexicana, 1910–1920 (Complete History of the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920) and Los últimos treinta años en México (The Last Thirty Years in Mexico) (Miguel 2010). In the 1930s, Félix Padilla, an itinerant exhibitor active in the US-Mexico borderlands, combined U.S. and Mexican newsreels, original footage, and images from U.S. serials to create La venganza de Pancho Villa (Pancho Villa’s Revenge), which contested both racist Hollywood images of Mexicans and official versions of revolutionary history (Serna 2012: 12–13). Rooted in representational practices linked to the Revolution, the cases of Padilla and Toscano suggest the rich afterlives of moving images in their circulation across time and space, underlining the “multitemporal heterogeneity” of Latin American cultural formations.

The “delayed” circulation of imported films also proved generative for filmmaking outside major cities across Latin America. In 1920s Brazil, where films were exhibited in the North and Northeast months and even years after their releases in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Hollywood westerns and crime serials of the 1910s inspired dynamic adventure films that showcased local transportation infrastructure and industry, including Retribuição (Retribution, Gentil Roiz, 1925), made in Recife, and Tesouro perdido (Lost Treasure, 1927), made in Cataguases, Minas Gerais, by Humberto Mauro, later a pivotal figure of Brazil’s early sound cinema. A similar fascination with physical action and modern transportation technologies is evident in the adventure films El tren fantasma (The Ghost Train, 1927) and El puño de
Silent and early sound cinema

hierno (The Iron Fist, 1928), directed by Gabriel García Moreno in Orizaba in the Mexican state of Veracruz. The Colombian regional productions Bajo el cielo antioqueño (Beneath the Skies of Antioquia, Arturo Acevedo, 1925) and Alma provinciana (Provincial Soul, Félix J. Rodríguez, 1926) showcased both agriculture and industry through scenes that displayed coffee plantations and cigarette factories, testifying to the productivity of local economies.

The multiplicity of local production practices is paralleled by the heterogeneity of film audiences in Latin America. Far from constituting a unified national public, spectators were segmented by geographic location, ethnicity, and class. Given elites’ early embrace of the cinema, working-class spectators were barred from early exhibitions of Edison’s Vitascope in Lima (Bedoya 2009a: 29). In turn-of-the-century Rio de Janeiro, a society columnist advocated for “soirées da moda” (“fashionable screenings”) intended for the affluent (Melo Souza 2003: 143). Ticket prices that varied by seating area reinforced internal divisions within exhibition spaces, and in capitals such as Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City, neighborhood venues catering to working-class spectators emerged quickly (de los Reyes 1983: 31–32, 66–67; Gonzaga 1996: 90, 102; Serna 2014a: 58–67). Yet class-segregated venues failed to quell the anxieties generated by the new medium, including concerns that movie theaters’ dark environment encouraged pickpocketing and sexual advances (both welcome and uninvited). Critics’ descriptions of “unruly” film audiences also indicate they were far from passive in the face of imported films. Particularly in neighborhood theaters, spectators read intertitles aloud for the benefit of illiterate audience members and reacted to the on-screen action with aplomb (El Universal 1920: 16).

Attempting to account for the unique dynamics of spectatorship outside Euro-American contexts, Hamid Naficy (1996) argues that rather than being “hailed” by imported films (recognizing themselves as subjects within the ideological order established by these texts), “Third World” spectators engage in “haggling,” asserting their ability to produce meaning at the site of consumption through oral commentary and other practices. This negotiation with the purveyors of imported images took on literal form in some cases. Juan Sebastián Ospina León (2017) notes that the tradition of the raja (“extra gift”—a film added to the program at the audience’s request—prevailed in Colombian movie theaters in the 1910s, signaling an active exchange between spectators and exhibitors. Vocal protests by audience members who stamped or whistled to express their displeasure could also influence a key aspect of the moviegoing experience: musical accompaniment. Ranging from full orchestras in movie palaces to lone piano players in neighborhood theaters, film music drew on Latin American genres such as marimba, danzón, and tango, as well as North American rhythms such as foxtrot and jazz (El Universal 1920: 16; Serna 2014a: 15, 60). Film music could complement projected images with familiar melodies, or render it thrillingly cosmopolitan.

Many of the strategies used to domesticate imported films for local consumption, including musical accompaniment, would be eliminated by the sweeping changes wrought by the transition to sound. Debuting in major cities in 1929, synchronized sound established new barriers to the international distribution of films, which had previously required relatively inexpensive—though often transformative—adjustments such as the translation of intertitles (Serna 2014b: 122–123). Initially, Hollywood studios tried to cater to the lucrative Spanish-speaking market, among others, by producing multiple-language versions. Usually, remakes of English-language productions shot with actors fluent in Spanish, multiple-language versions generated controversy among Latin American critics and spectators. Many objected to the studios’ choice of a Castilian accent as the standard for Spanish-language dialogue, as well as to casting practices that combined actors from multiple countries with varying accents in a single film (Gunckel 2008: 333–334). Foreign-language
versions also disappointed audiences accustomed to the high production values and recognizable stars of English-language productions (Vasey 1997: 96). Yet Lisa Jarvinen (2012: 10) suggests that critics’ negative reception of Hollywood Spanish-language versions overshadowed their considerable success with audiences. Furthermore, Hollywood productions that proved popular with Latin American spectators—in particular, the seven Paramount films starring tango legend Carlos Gardel (D’Lugo 2008; Navitski 2011)—provided a model for Latin American sound film industries: a “basic combination of comedy, melodrama, and good songs” (King 2000: 37). Although improvements in dubbing and subtitling allowed Hollywood studios to recapture and even increase their global market share, Argentina and Mexico proved powerful competitors in Spanish-language markets.

Early Latin American sound films capitalized on the continent-wide popularity of musical genres increasingly viewed as embodying national identity: the Argentine tango, Brazilian samba, and Mexican ranchera. Following the early successes of Tango! (directed by Luis Moglia Barth for Argentina Sono Film) and Las tres heréticas (The Three Amateurs, directed collectively by the Lumitón studio’s founders) in 1933, Argentina’s industry developed melodramatic formulas that dramatized class conflict, exemplified by the series of films starring tango singer Libertad Lamarque (Karush 2012: 108–118). Early Brazilian sound films also capitalized on radio performers’ popularity in Carnival-themed chamadas such as Alô, Alô Brasil (Hello, Hello Brasil, Wallace Downey, João de Barro, and Alberto Ribeiro, 1935) and Alô, Alô Carnaval (Hello, Hello Carnaval, Adhemar Gonzaga, 1936). In Mexico, the pessimistic tone of fallen-woman films such as Santa (Antonio Moreno, 1931) and La mujer del puerto (The Woman of the Port, ArceRed Boyer, 1934) and revolutionary dramas such as Fernando de Fuentes’ El prisionero 13 (Prisoner Number 13, 1933), El compadre Mendoza (Godfather Mendoza, 1934), and Vámonos con Pancho Villa (Let’s Go with Pancho Villa, 1936) gave way to the light-hearted comedia ranchera Allí en el Rancho Grande (Over at the Big Ranch, Fernando de Fuentes, 1936), a huge hit in Mexico and beyond. Latin American industries increasingly resorted to “exaggerating the national,” packaging popular customs and music to appeal to domestic and overseas markets alike (Jarvinen 2012: 139).

While sound cinema fostered industries in Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil, its increased cost and technological complexity also prolonged silent filmmaking and gave rise to creative exhibition practices. Arguably the only Latin American examples of modernist silent cinema premiered in Brazil after sound cinema’s debut in local movie theaters: São Paulo, sinfonia da metrópole (São Paulo, Symphony of the Metropolis, Rodolfo Lustig and Adalberto Kemeny, 1929) and Mário Peixoto’s Limité (Limit, 1931). Other filmmakers and exhibitors improvised solutions in the absence of sync-sound equipment. Unable to afford the costs of conversion, some movie theater owners used phonograph records to loosely “synchronize” film screenings (Freire 2011). In 1930, filmmaker Jota Soares accompanied showings of his silent film No cenário da vida (On the Stage of Life, co-directed with Luiz Maranhão) with prerecorded sound effects (Cunha Filho 2006: 33). Also in Brazil, Antônio Tibiriçá recorded sound-on-disc accompaniment for his 1926 film Vício e beleza (Vice and Beauty) (Cinemateca Brasileira 1930). Even Acabaram-se os otários (No More Suckers, Luiz de Barros, 1929), considered the first Brazilian sync-sound feature, used existing phonograph records as the basis for musical scenes (Freire 2013: 109), while in Ecuador, Guayaquil de mis amores (Guayaquil of My Loves, Francisco Diunenjo, 1930) was accompanied live with the popular title song. The transition to sound thus fostered production and exhibition practices that, while ephemeral, challenge any straightforward account of Hollywood dominance tested then quickly reaffirmed.
Figure 2.4 An announcement of the temporary closure of Rio de Janeiro’s Cinema Pathé for the installation of Western Electric sound equipment in August 1929. Less prosperous exhibitors in the city often improvised cheaper alternatives to imported sound technologies. Arquivo Nacional (Brasil), Coleção Família Ferret. Reference number FF_FMF_6_1_0_7_4.

As the examples discussed above suggest, Latin American film cultures of the silent and early sound period diverge from linear accounts of stylistic and industrial change developed in other contexts, as well as the stark opposition between moving-image producers and consumers that structure many previous histories of Latin American cinema. The medium’s complex trajectories in the region also confound clear divisions between early and classical cinema and between fictional and nonfictional modes. Furthermore, practices that blur the distinction between production and exhibition—the conjunction of film projection with vocal performances or ad hoc “synchronization” with recorded sound in Brazil and Cuba, the continual reworking of the compilation films that circulated through Mexico and its borderlands—challenge the notion of the cinematic text as a fixed, bounded entity that can be understood in isolation from the context of its reception. These insights help highlight the impact of distributors, exhibitors, fans, and critics—along with individuals whose activities exceed these retrospectively defined roles—in negotiating the range of meanings and values attached to cinema in early twentieth-century Latin America. Film production and consumption articulated the interests of foreign film companies, local impresarios, filmmakers, government representatives, elites, intellectuals, and audience members in configurations that defy binary oppositions between neocolonial powers and national interests. Filmmaking was linked with nation-building projects (both in its iconographies and
themes, and in public discourses that framed it as a marker of modernity and progress), but
the circulation and consumption of cinema intersected with heterogeneous experiences
and ideals of modernization inflicted by regional, racial, and class differences. Attending to
cinema’s links to national imaginaries, as well as to the circulation of filmmakers and films
on local, regional, and transnational scales, generates fresh perspectives on the politics of
the moving image in early twentieth-century Latin America.

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42
Silent and early sound cinema


La Prensa (1915) August 23, p. 18.


