



Public spectacles of violence: sensational cinema and journalism in early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil

by Rielle Navitski, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2017, 325 pp., \$28.95, ISBN 978-0-8223-6975-2

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BOOK REVIEW

Public spectacles of violence: sensational cinema and journalism in early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil, by Rielle Navitski, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2017, 325 pp., \$28.95, ISBN 978-0-8223-6975-2

The study of early cinema beyond Europe and North America is still sufficiently underdeveloped to make Rielle Navitski's *Public Spectacles of Violence* a welcome addition. But it should also be of wider interest than merely among Latin Americanists or Mexican and Brazilian specialists, since its core subject – the 'true crime' drama – was an international phenomenon that played a crucial part in creating popular cinema audiences. If indigenous production made a sensational debut in Brazil as early as 1908, with *The Stranglers/Os estranguladores* (Francisco Marzullo), based on a notorious still-recent case of murderous burglary in Rio de Janeiro, this formed part of a 'crime wave' that was already attracting record attendances across the world.

Although some of the earliest European films had reproduced the exploits of historic or generic criminals, what was new in the early 1900s was setting modern stories in familiar, even identifiable settings. The English producers Frank Mottershaw, Walter Haggard and Robert Paul pointed the way, but the most elaborate, and originally longest of these was Charles Tait's *Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906), which chronicled the Australian bushranger Ned Kelly's exploits in authentic locations just twenty-five years after his capture and execution. However, with its international reach, the Pathé company's specialisation in crime dramas between 1905 and 1908 undoubtedly did most to popularise the genre.

But it was not only the evident popularity of such films that led to *The Stranglers* and its many successors in Brazil's emerging production industry. As Navitski shows, the 1906 'crime of Carioca street' in Rio featured for days in local newspapers, with a wide range of illustrations showing not only the crime scene but also 'curious onlookers, images of the victims on the autopsy tables, and portraits of detectives and suspects' (123). It was soon portrayed on stage, and even in musical revues, before Antônio Leal made his film two years later. Navitski's point, and the great merit of her study, is to demonstrate that the 'true crime' films became part of an already existing popular culture of sensationalism. Although this seems to have been originally inspired by earlier French journalistic models, which had a strong influence on Brazilian culture, it had acquired a perverse dynamic of its own, with the phrase '*grandes crimes*' used in the Brazilian press to refer to 'intriguingly mysterious, gruesome, or perverse criminal acts of the of the type committed in U.S. and European cities' (127). Films such as *The Case of the Strongboxes/O caso dos caixotes* (Candido Castro, 1912) and the murder reconstruction titled simply *A Sensational Crime/Um crime sensacional* (Luiz Rocha, 1913) had become proud markers, or symptoms, of Brazilian modernity.

Navitski does not invoke Bolter and Grusin's concept of 'remediation', which might plausibly explain how film built on and intensified the print-based culture of sensationalism. But she draws on a wide range of studies of Latin American modernisation, including Jeffrey Nedell's *A Tropical Belle Epoque* (1987) and Jean Franco's *Cruel Modernity* (2013), to identify the particular economic and social tensions that were reflected in these lurid melodramas. The fact that only 31% of Brazil's population was literate in 1900 undoubtedly helped feed an appetite for sensational films, as part of 'a public sphere conditioned by violence and economic inequality' (128).

Unlike Brazil, Mexico's path to modernity lay through a bloody revolution and civil war, lasting from 1910 until at least the constitution proclaimed in 1917. During this period,

indigenous production was dominated by coverage of the war and remained subject to strict political censorship. Navitski's treatment of what is widely considered the founding film of Mexican fiction cinema provides a fascinating comparison with her account of Brazilian sensationalism. *The Grey Automobile/El automovil gris* (Enrique Rosas, 1919) dramatized a 'true crime' case from 1914 to 1915, when a series of violent robberies had been committed by a gang disguised as soldiers during Mexico City's military occupation. Tantalisingly, the film's climax appeared to show historic footage of the actual execution by a military firing squad of some members of the gang, although it was other members dying in prison that had prompted its production – and indeed a rival film version in the same year.

Post-revolutionary Mexican cinema's embrace of sensational melodrama came after the success of a new genre of crime-centred drama, originating in France. Éclair's *Zigomar*, pitting this protean master criminal against detective Nick Carter, paved the way in 1911 for the worldwide popularity of Gaumont's *Fantômas* serial in 1913–14. Although these pioneered the technique of often bizarre cliff-hanger climaxes, their settings were largely mundane suburbs, as were those of the Nordisk dramas that also became international successes before 1914. All these were available as templates for the development of distinctive 'adventure melodramas' in Mexico during the 1920s. But as Navitski shows, the journalistic context surrounding this genre was at least as important as the films themselves. The process of filmmaking itself, with its off-screen dramas involving new stars and the implied dangers involved in filming sensational events, became a significant theme in Mexican media. And in the shadow of American production, asserting both the indigenous qualities and the 'heroism' of Mexican filmmakers struck a patriotic chord.

Early film history was long hampered by an obsession with 'firstness', identifying the earliest indigenous production in specific countries as landmarks, and then devoting excessive textual attention to these landmark films. What Navitski has achieved, drawing on the new resource of extensive digitised print material, is to place early film in Brazil and Mexico in much richer and more historically authentic contexts. Granting its novelty in dramatizing the high levels of sensational crime of these very different societies, and showing this in recognisable locations, early film nonetheless entered media cultures already attuned to 'spectacles of violence'. And given the wide topographic contrasts of both countries, embracing the remotely rural as well as the hectic modernity of their cities, she also reveals how genres other than crime melodrama, such as the Western, were locally adapted.

Quite apart from the book's significance for Latin American film and media history, there is much that early media historians of other regions can learn from this exemplary study. Film history can and should aspire to being 'real history', and Rielle Navitski ably shows how it can illuminate important and continuing aspects of the 'shock of modernisation' in these two major countries.

References

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