

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil by RIELLE NAVITSKI

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RIELLE NAVITSKI. *Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 325 pp.

Rielle Navitski's *Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth Century Mexico and Brazil* begins with an observation: the most popular silent films in both Mexico and Brazil were those that represented violent crimes. What did cinema have to offer a public, she asks, already attuned to the dangers of the city, doubtful about the state's powers to police violence, and enmeshed in the inequality engendered by early twentieth-century urbanization and industrialization? Navitski asserts that cinema and other visual technologies, using the moral language of melodrama, turned the vicissitudes of everyday modern life into both pleasurable spectacle and object of critique. The divergent historical trajectories and shared social characteristics of the national film cultures of Mexico and Brazil – two of the most important nations for filmmaking in the hemisphere – make reading these two contexts alongside each other generative. But to say that the book is comparative is to give short shrift to its contributions regarding our understanding of the global circulation of media during the silent period and its localization in specific national, regional, and even local contexts.

Spectacles of Violence is divided into two parts. The first, comprised of two chapters, examines the Mexican context. In the first of these, Navitski offers a fresh and compelling analysis of Mexico's first popular box office success, the serial crime drama *El automóvil gris* (Rosas, 1919). Navitski surpasses previous readings of the film by contextualizing it in the visual culture of violence and crime that emerged during the Porfiriato (1876-1910) and, perhaps most intriguingly, a re-assessment of revolutionary era actualities, which she argues spectacularized the conflict as much as it made truth claims about its unfolding. She also analyses a set of no-longer extant films, some of which focus on women in the public sphere, to demonstrate the way that "violent actualities" became "sensational" narrative films during the 1920s. The second chapter in the section turns to "adventure melodramas," films shot outside of Mexico City. While these films recast the negative portrayal of Mexico and Mexicans offered by Hollywood films, they also, she argues, put the contradictions of Mexico's post-revolutionary national project on display.

The second half of the book shifts to focus on Brazil. In chapters three and four, Navitski underscores the disparate ways in which public violence was mediated in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. In the first, she examines the dialogue between filmed re-enactments of real life crimes and the illustrated press. In the second, she studies the influence of European and

North American serials on local production practices. In the tension between documenting the local and elaborating spectacularity in the form of stunts and special effects, she locates the “generative potential of serial forms” (168). In both cases, local film production “openly acknowledged the social stratification ... that accompanied modernization in early twentieth-century Brazil” (166). The final chapter explores regional film production, which Navitski argues, fused action and adventure modes with attention to the local. In this conflation she finds contestation between the metropole, Brazil’s major cities, and rural areas perceived as less developed.

Methodologically, Navitski brings together films (where they exist), the popular press, the trade press, and other archival materials such as film stills, developing a rich source base to support her analysis of an important strand of filmmaking in Latin America during this period. The details of the film production and reception that each chapter offers are compelling on their own but together contribute to a larger, conceptual intervention. Navitski argues that the “sensational mode” – “cultural forms that elicit powerful, sensuous, and moral responses” that were topical in their subject matter and circulated amongst a mass audience – was uniquely suited to representing life in early twentieth-century Brazil and Mexico, particularly in urban areas (2). Filmmakers in Brazil and Mexico, Navitski shows, borrowed from but did not merely copy representational strategies put into circulation by European and American visual culture and serial films. Rather, they adapted them to the local environment, including local contexts of film exhibition, production, and criticism. Navitski suggests that the experience of these two countries might indicate larger patterns in Latin America, a suggestion that begs for more site-specific research.

In addition to this larger argument, several other threads are woven throughout. In each of the chapters, Navitski makes a strong case for the fundamental intermediality of this mode of cinematic representation – hence the inclusion of journalism in the title. She also makes claims about locally specific understandings of the nature of cinematic representation and its unique capacity to represent modern life. Building on Ana M. López’s insights about modernity’s distinct temporality in Latin America, she argues that cinema “worked to actively construct experiences of time as distinctly modern, in that it was characterized by a rapid flow of unpredictable, contingent, and disruptive events” (15). Finally, Navitski demonstrates the ways that national, regional, local, and transnational contexts operate in dialogue or conflict with each other.

Scholars of silent cinema in Latin America will find Navitski’s study indispensable and exemplary in its imaginative use of archives that can be maddeningly incomplete. But the claims made here deserve a wide readership among those interested in seriality and the global circulation of

popular culture. Imaginative instructors teaching courses on contemporary media depictions of violence could also usefully incorporate it into their syllabi as a means of sparking discussion about continuity and change in representational strategies and their political resonance. In both Mexico and Brazil violence remains highly, even hyper visible, reverberating across communities, regions, and nations. This book reminds us that this has long been the case.

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JUAN G. RAMOS AND TARA DALY, EDS. *Decolonial Approaches to Latin American Literatures and Cultures*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 235 pp.

Since the “decolonial turn” as a concept was proposed by Nelson Maldonado-Torres at a 2005 conference he organized at the University of California, Berkeley, numerous literary critics have engaged with its project and applied its theory. A decade after its conceptualization, Juan G. Ramos and Tara Daly have assembled *Decolonial Approaches to Latin American Literatures and Cultures*, an innovative volume that invites Literature and Cultural Studies scholars to share their renewed applications of decolonial theory while opening further avenues of inquiry and debate. Central to the book is a rearticulation of the geo-cultural idea of Latin America, one more inclusive of its diverse subjectivities and textualities. The essays consider a wide range of perspectives, from Nahua cosmology and Maya literatures, to a Bolivian novel of *encholamiento*, and the reemergence of the Charrúa. *Decolonial Approaches* also redefines the idea of textuality itself by considering weaving, artifacts, and even the land, alongside written texts such as novels and chronicles. While Ramos and Daly emphasize the essays’ use of decolonial theory to reformulate the idea of Latin America and its cultural manifestations in ways more inclusive of a variety of world views, it is through their acknowledgement of the translational limitations of the theory, when used to engage interculturally with non-Western and non-Eurocentric languages and textualities, that each collaborator begins interrogating the decolonial approach.

Complementing the introduction, Sarah Castro-Klarén’s and Horacio Legrás’s essays expand on the volume’s underlying topic of untranslatability. The debatable degree of fluency attained by students completing Spanish programs and the impossibility of fully translating other cultures and knowledges lead Castro-Klarén to call for departments to move away from language-based programs, towards Spanish majors that