



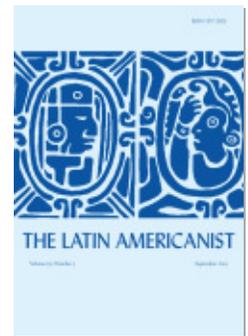
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*Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and
Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil* by
Rielle Navitski (review)

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The Latin Americanist, Volume 63, Number 3, September 2019, pp. 356-357
(Review)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press



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***Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil.* By Rielle Navitski. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, p. 325, \$28.95.**

The author argues that the use of sensational depictions of violence in early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil served to mark their uneven transitions into modernity, while also forming the basis of a national mass culture for the largely illiterate populations of each respective country. She identifies phases that both countries experience, albeit at different times. In the first phase, cinema is closely tied to journalism as filmmakers attempt to capture what the author terms “violent actualities” – stories based on real-life events, characterized by the inclusion of actual footage or the re-enactment of events shot on location where violent acts were committed, and the screening of films as soon as possible (sometimes in as little as two weeks) after actual events have occurred. In a second phase, “sensational fictions” come into style. In this phase, films portray fictional events but retain their emphasis on spectacular displays of violence, including “death, bodily peril, and technological catastrophe” (6).

During the period under study, both Mexico and Brazil framed their national cinema in opposition to the influence of imported American films. For Mexico in particular, counteracting the Americans’ negative portrayal of Mexican stereotypes during and just after the Revolution became a priority for the film industry and, indeed, for the nationalism project in general. As the author makes clear through her exhaustive research of contemporary newspaper articles and film critics’ reviews, both countries explicitly associated the existence of crime and violence – especially in urban areas – as a sign of modernity and a feature that united them with global paradigms of modernization such as Paris, London, and New York. In each country, there was a close relationship between cinema and journalism. As mentioned, many early films attempted to inject “actuality” by reenacting scenes as described in police blotters and by filming on locations that were linked to the crimes. The newspapers, in turn, advertised the films and at times even borrowed photo stills from films in order to illustrate their factual stories.

The book is based on archival research of films, film scripts and summaries, and film stills, as well as the individual archives of dozens of newspapers. Although billed as a comparative study on cinema and journalism from the two countries, the book is divided into distinct “Mexico” and “Brazil” sections that are largely independent. Also, the arguments are far more focused on cinema than on journalism, which is mainly discussed in terms of its impact on and relationship with the actuality films and the serialization of certain narratives.

Overall, the author has provided new insights into the perception of sensational violence as a mark of modernization, and into the close

relationship between journalism and film. This book will be of interest to students and researchers working on early Latin American cinema; the relationship between American and Latin American film; and film and cinema as an expression of Latin American nationalism. For readers outside of film studies who are interested in spectacles of violence, the book presents invaluable research on the roots of the sensational public treatment of violence that we continue to see in Latin American media today.

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