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## **Cinema in Latin America**

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### COLONIAL BEGINNINGS

MOVING pictures first reached Latin America with representatives of the Lumière brothers, who sent out teams around the world on planned itineraries designed to sweep up on the fascination which the new invention created everywhere; two teams went to Latin America, one to Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo and Buenos Aires, the other to Mexico and Havana. The Lumière cinematograph served as both projector and camera and men like Gabriel Veyre, who arrived in Mexico in the middle of 1896 and Cuba the following January, were also briefed to bring back scenes from the countries they visited. Hard on their heels came the Biograph men from New York and other adventurers, both gringo and European. The North Americans tended not to penetrate very far south, where European immigration was at its height, and in Argentina and Brazil the pioneers were French and Belgian, Austrian and Italian. The earliest moving images of Latin America were thus mostly taken by European immigrants or residents, possessing both the minimum expertise needed to set up a film business and the contacts in the Old World to ensure a supply for films for exhibition. The varying dates of these first films 1896 in Mexico, 1897 in Cuba, Argentina and Venezuela, 1898 in Brazil and Uruguay, 1902 in Chile, 1905 in Colombia, 1906 in Bolivia, 1911 in Peru bespeak the progressive penetration of film across the continent, for they usually follow the dates of first exhibition fairly quickly.

The scenes that were shot follow the expectable trends: they picture official ceremonies and presidents, with their families and entourages; military parades and naval manoeuvres; traditional festivities and tourist scenes, including views of city architecture, picturesque landscapes and preColumbian ruins. The Brazilian film historian Salles Gomes (1980) reckoned that the work of the first Latin American *cineastas* was roughly divided between depicting 'the splendid cradle of nature' and 'the ritual of power'. A good proportion consisted in the kind of exotic scenes popularised by nineteenth century photographers; in the words of Susan Sontag, 'the view of reality as an exotic prize...tracked down and captured by the diligent hunterwithacamera'. Adopting the point of view of the outsider, who gazes on other people's reality with curiosity, detachment and professionalism, the photographer behaves as if the captured view transcended class interests, 'as if its perspective is universal' (Sontag, 1977). In the condition of dependency which characterises an underdeveloped continent like Latin America, this not only served to gratify the audience which in Latin America was initially the upper and middle classes with flattering images, but also to secure finance by advancing the cause of publicity. And if, in Mexico newspapers sponsored free film shows which they financed by including colourslides carrying advertisements, in Havana in 1906 an entertainment park commissioned the Cuban film pioneer Enrique Díaz Quesada to make a film for its publicity campaign in the United States. Early attempts at narrative often followed in

the same ideological mould by taking up safe patriotic subjects, like the Argentinian film El fusilamiento de Dorrego ('The Shooting of Dorrego') of 1908.

There is no necessary connection, however, between these early endeavours and subsequent developments. Cuba, Venezuela, Uruguay, Chile, Colombia and Bolivia saw no significant film production for several decades, only a few sporadic attempts. In the smallest countries, like Uruguay, Paraguay, Ecuador and those of Central America, there is still no significant production of featurelength fiction today, though documentary and video production are now in evidence. A continuous history of production with significant contributions in successive periods can only be found in the larger countries Mexico, Argentina and Brazil for only these have sufficiently large internal markets to provide an audience big enough for production costs, if low enough, to be covered at home. But if rockbottom production costs are one of the constants of Latin American cinema, until the coming of sound this was no great disadvantage, and a modest level of film production was able to develop in several countries.

The early audience was essentially an urban one, limited to cities connected by the railways. Even in Mexico, where film spread rapidly to rural districts with the itinerant showmen known as *comicos de la legua*, they only reached a little beyond the railway network. In this too film is associated with economic colonialism: in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the novel by Gabriel García Marquez, film arrives in the town of Macondo with the same trains that bring the United Fruit Company.

However, local conditions and national histories varied, with assorted results. In Cuba the War of Independence arrived at its final stages with the intervention of the USA against Spain in 1898. Cameramen from North America arrived with the troops (as they were also to do in Southern Africa the following year with the Second Boer War) When they failed to bring back any real battle scenes among their footage, they had no compunction in faking them, relying, as one of them wrote in his autobiography, on the imperfection of early film and lenses to conceal the crudity of their efforts. These films Albert E. Smith claims in *Two Reels and a Crank* (1952) as 'the forerunner of the elaborate "special effects" techniques of modern picturemaking'.

The same ready dissimulation occurred during the Mexican Revolution, which served as a school for filmmaking equivalent to the First World War in Europe. Indeed, the Mexican film historian Aurelio de los Reyes (1983) reckons that around 1910-1913 the skill of Mexican film makers in structuring a documentary narrative were in advance of the North Americans. North of the border the films inspired by Mexican events went from tales of arms smuggling (like Mexican Filibusters of 1911) to simplistic stories (like The Aztec Treasure of 1914) which generally extolled the superiority of white skinned heroes among the violent, irresponsible and treacherous latino, whether bandit, revolutionary or greaser. Such developments betray the patriotic populism, the thrall for the American Dream and its doctrine of 'manifest destiny', in which North American cinema was gripped from the very start an ideological servility which inevitably distorted their lensing of the Latin South. The assassination of Madero and the threat of US intervention not only prompted a number of North American films clearly designed to justify US action, on the grounds that Mexicans alone were incapable of bringing peace, order, justice and progress to their country, but also drew more North American cameras across the Rio Grande.

Pancho Villa became a film star when he signed an exclusive contract with the Mutual Film Corporation. For a fee of \$25,000 he agreed to keep other film companies from the scene of his battles, to fight in daylight whenever possible, and to reconstruct the battle scenes if satisfactory pictures were not obtained in the heat of conflict. In fact the best battle scenes in Mutual's The Life of General Villa (1914), on which Raoul Walsh cut his teeth, were studio reconstructions, but the dawn executions were real: Walsh, future director of more than a hundred Hollywood movies, himself he tells us asked Villa to delay his summary administration of justice, which used to occur at four in the morning, until there was enough light to film with (King, 1990).

It is no accident that Mexicans become the first to protest the misrepresentation of their reality by Hollywood. A declaration to the newspapers by two film makers in 1917 condemned 'that savagery, that backwardness which is used to depict us in false movies' (King, 1990). Three years later, provoked to fury by a Gloria Swanson movie, Her Husband's Trademark, in which the heroine is all but raped by a gang of desperadoes while her husband is doing business with the Mexican oil industry, the Mexican government imposed a (temporary) embargo on all films of the Famous Players Lasky Corporation (Paramount). But the problem persisted. Despite the Good Neighbour policy of the 30s, when Washington was trying to defuse the revolutionary nationalism abroad in Latin America from Cuba to Chile, and advised the studios to tone things down, nevertheless Hollywood seemed incapable of *not* offending Latin American sensibilities. The founder of university film studies in Cuba in the 1940s, J.M.Valdés Rodríguez, wrote of a film of the time, Under the Texas Moon, as 'openly offensive to Mexican women, the projection of which in a moviehouse in the Latin section of New York City provoked a terrible tumult' caused by the enraged protests of some Mexican and Cuban students, in which one of them was killed (Chanan, 1985).

#### INDIGENOUS FILM-MAKING

IN Brazil, according to Salles Gomes (1980), if cinema did not take root for about a decade after its introduction, 'it was due to our underdevelopment in electricity. Once energy was industrialised in Rio de Janeiro, exhibition halls proliferated like mushrooms' and production soon reached a hundred films a year. A foretaste of things to come was the success in 1910 of a satirical musical review called Paz de Amor ('Peace and Love', Alberto Botelho), perhaps the first film to engage the Brazilian vocation for the carnivalesque. But films like this, projected in theatres with appropriate musical accompaniment, were limited to audiences of the betteroff. By the time cinema reached the popular classes, North American distributors had begun to move in, turning the growing Brazilian market into a tropical appendage of Hollywood. Indeed, cashing in on the decline in European production due to the war, and following a general shift in US trade, from the end of 1915 onwards American firms adopted a new strategy of direct dealing by opening more subsidiaries outside Europe (and not only in Latin America). By 1919, Fox, Paramount, the distribution arm of Famous PlayersLasky, and Samuel Goldwyn, were operating between them in virtually every Latin American country, displacing local distributors and local films. By the 1920s, Argentina and Brazil had become Hollywood's third and fourth largest

export markets after Britain and Australia; In Brazil they had an 80% market share while Brazilian production itself could only manage 4%.

Given that these were indeed growing markets and that film making was still artisanal and cheap, Brazil's peculiarity was that while the vast size of the country prevented the national organisation of film distribution, it allowed a number of regional centres of production to develop. There were 'regional cycles' in half a dozen provincial capitals, prominent among them Recife, where thirteen films were made in the course of eight years by a community of some thirty film technicians. Here, in films like Tancredo Seabra's *Filho sem mãe* (1925), emerged one of the first indigenous fictional genres of Latin America, where landscape plays a preponderant role and the central protagonists are rural characters and *cangaçeiros*, the 'bandits' of the sertão.

The *cangaçeiro* is cousin to the Argentine *gaucho* film, which first appeared around 1915 with *Nobleza gaucha*. Based on an episode from the popular nineteenth century epic *Martin Fierro* by José Hernández, in which a peasant girl is raped, taken to Buenos Aires by force as the landowner's mistress, and rescued by a *gaucho* from the estate whom the *patrón* falsely accuses of cattle rustling, the story, says the Argentine film historian J.A. Mahieu, may be simple and ingenuous but the filmic rhythm is effective and its scenes of almost feudal exploitation make it the first film to portray the oppression of the rural classes in Argentina (Mahieu, 1966). At just the moment when new European films were scarce and the North Americans had not yet captured the market, this film, which cost 20,000 pesos to make and earned more than 600,000, was a major boxoffice hit showing simultaneously in twenty theatres. As striking a demonstration as one could wish that Latin America could not only command its own narratives, but they had an import which gave the lie to the sanitised representations preferred by commercial and state interests. There was even, a year later, a film shot in the province of Santa Fe by an anthropologist called Alcides Greca, *El último malón* (The Last Indian Uprising), which Mahieu describes as a kind of documentary reconstruction of an uprising that took place at the beginning of the century, filmed in the authentic locations with the Indians as protagonists of their own story.

It is almost as if a pattern is at work in which the most original of films are always made in the most marginal of circumstances, where film making was at its most basic but there was room for maverick initiatives outside the generic themes of the commercial industry. There are also examples in Mexico, like *El hombre sin patria* ('The Man Without A Country', Miguel Conteras Torres, 1922), the first film to address the theme of Mexican workers in the USA; and even in Bolivia, where two films of the 1920s, *Corazón aymara* and *La profecía del lago* ('Aymara Heart' and 'The Prophecy of the Lake') dealt with indigenous themes (though they ran into censorship problems). A film of 1929, Mario Peixoto's *Limite* ('The Boundary') is a landmark of the Brazilian avant garde, an experiment in multiple narration Eisenstein, no less, remarked on its 'genius' when he saw it in London in 1932 (Johnson & Stam, 1982).

But if these are isolated examples, they belong to an unknown history. It is a history recently evoked by the Venezuelan director Alfredo J. Anzola in his feature documentary *El misterio de los ojos escarlata* ('The Mystery of the Scarlet Eyes',

1993), which provides a rare glimpse of unseen images of Venezuela in the 1920s and 30s. The footage is that of his father, Edgar Anzola, who made documentaries and two silent feature films, now lost, in the 1920s, and then acquired a 16mm camera and filmed mostly documentary footage throughout the 30s and 40s. His efforts of the 20s had not led him to a career in film, and these 16mm films were not made for public viewing; they were the work of an aficionado. Anzola earned his living as righthand man to a local gringo entrepreneur, who among other things, opened Venezuela's first radio station, Radio Caracas, in 1930, of which Anzola became the director; a radio serial written and produced by Anzola père provides the title of his son's film about him. How many others among the allbutnameless Latin American filmmakers of the early years had similar careers? And may have left undiscovered archives? And how many of these aficionados have not even left their names behind? And one other thing: Anzola, as portrayed by his son, was clearly no intellectual, but he was a keen cineaste who took his camera with him to events where he had entry as a radio producer. The point of view is uncritical and marked by his social class. But aficionados of the same class in succeeding decades were the very people whose first filmmaking efforts represent the initial stirrings of the powerful new movement in Latin American cinema which emerged in the late 50s.

#### THE SOUND PERIOD

The coming of the talkies at the end of the 20s was both a boon and a disaster for Latin American production. Sound offered the promise of films featuring popular singers and comedians, singing and performing adaptations and fusions of the musical genres of popular culture: the *tanguera* in Argentina, the *chanchada* in Brazil, the *ranchera* in Mexico. But the dependent state of distribution and the increased costs of production took their toll, and film production remained a risky business which barely kept its head above water.

To force the conversion of Latin American cinemas to sound, at a time before the technical development of either dubbing or subtitling (which is not much use for a largely illiterate audience anyway), Hollywood began producing factorymade Spanish language versions of selected productions in California, on which many apprentice film makers from south of the Rio Grande learnt their trade. In Europe, meanwhile, Paramount set up a studio complex in the Paris suburb of Joinville for foreign language versioning and low budget production, where the great Argentine tango singer Carlos Gardel made a number of films in 1931<sup>32</sup>, together with other Argentine touring artistes. Hugely successful throughout Latin America, Gardel made four more films for Paramount out of New York before he was killed in an air crash in Colombia in 1935. He was the first international Latin American musical film star, and the influence in Argentina and elsewhere of his urbane macho image was enormous.

The Brazilian *chanchada* was partially modelled on North American musicals but with roots also in Brazilian comic theatre and Carnival, of which Salles Gomes wrote that while the universe constructed by North American films was distant and abstract, the derisive fragments of Brazil in these films at least described a world lived by the spectators. Hollywood cinema prompted superficial identification with the

behaviour and fashions of an occupying culture; in contrast, popular enthusiasm for the rascals, scoundrels and loafers of the *chanchada* suggested the polemic of the occupied against the occupier.

The most significant single film maker of this period was Humberto Mauro, who will later be cited by Glauber Rocha as a precursor of Cinema Novo. Mauro's originality is a prime example of what Salles Gomes (1980) called the Brazilian's 'creative incapacity for copying'. A product of Brazil's regional film movements, his first films, made in Minas Gerais before he migrated to Rio de Janeiro, 'creatively copied' models ranging from Thomas Ince westerns to Ruttman's Berlin, Die Symphonie Einer Grosstadt (Berlin, Symphony of a Great City, 1927). Best known for Ganga Bruta ('Brutal Gang', 1933), he later teamed up with the leading Brazilian cinematographer Edgar Brasil; the French film historian Sadoul praises his 'remarkable feeling for images and backgrounds, a highly original conception of filmic space, and an impassioned feeling for people and the landscapes of his country' (Sadoul, 1972).

In Mexico, where Eisenstein filmed his abortive portrait of Mexican culture Que viva Mexico in 1931, his artistic example was followed in 1935 by the group who made Redes ('Nets') at the invitation of radical Mexican government officials: the New York photographer Paul Strand and the young Austrian director Fred Zinnemann, assisted by the Mexican Emilio Gómez Muriel, and with a marvellous orchestral score by Mexico's most original composer Silvestre Revueltas. The first of an uncompleted series of films on Mexican life, Redes portrays the struggle of Vera Cruz fishermen against exploitation and explicitly argues for collectivisation a rare early instance of what will later (in the 1960s) become a major tendency of politically committed film making in every corner of Latin America. A rare example, too, of cooperation between North and South as a collaboration between equals, it was also (as Sadoul observed) one of the first successes of the New York school of the 30s.

For the most part, however, Mexican cinema consisted in numerous *rancheras*, and the varieties of melodrama tragic, sentimental, and costume. Tragic melodrama in Mexican cinema goes back to Santa (Luis G. Peredo) of 1919, about an innocent girl from the provinces forced into prostitution in the big city and finding redemption only in death, first of a long line of Mexican films romanticising the prostitute, down to the *cabaretera* or brothel films of the 50s. Add descriptive phrase cf. Ana M. Lopez. La sangre manda (José Bohr) of 1933 initiated a cycle of sentimental middle class melodramas, which later mutated into the costume melodrama, like En tiempos de Don Porfirio of 1939, nostalgic and reactionary evocations of a world before revolution. The *ranchera* was born in 1936 with a singing cowboy film, Alla en el Rancho Grande by Fernando de Fuentes, a comedy which added a pastoral fantasy to the Gene Autry/Roy Rogers formula, says the Mexican cultural critic Carlos Monsivais, whose success both in Mexico and the rest of Latin America was so extraordinary that it changed the direction of Mexican cinema. This rural idyll was very different from the reality of the years of Agrarian Reform, and this cinema is fundamentally escapist.

The expansion of Mexican cinema began in the midthirties, when the leftist president Lázaro Cárdenas provided funds for new studios. Not quite the first government intervention on behalf of cinema in Latin America an honour which goes

to the Brazilian President Getulia Vargas with a fairly innocuous decree of 1932 imposing minimal exhibition quotas for Brazilian films. But the Mexican industry was stronger, and saw the formation of the first film union in Latin America in 1934. By 1937, with fewer films coming from Spain as a result of the Civil War, Mexican production reached 38 films in one year and growing, and overtook that of Argentina. It was boosted again in 1943 when the United States, angered by Argentina's neutrality in the war and suspicious of their links with fascism, took measures which included cutting off their supplies of virgin film stock in favour of Mexico. Hollywood, moreover, angled much of its wartime output towards propaganda genres, leaving space in Latin America for Mexican producers to fill the gap with new variations of established genres by a new generation of film makers. The 'golden age' of Mexican cinema is the period of the actor-turned-director Emilio ('El Indio') Fernández, once described as Mexico's John Ford; the cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa; and of stars like Maria Felix, Dolores del Rio, the comedian Cantinflas and several more. Some of these films are individually pleasing, like the exemplary María Candelaria of 1943, which gives the theme of the fallen woman an Indianist treatment, the work of Fernández and Figueroa, starring Dolores del Rio (who had risen to fame in Hollywood before Fernández brought her back to Mexico). But by the 50s, there is nothing of any lasting value in Mexican cinema except the work of Buñuel (including several of his most distinguished films as well as some of the least successful).

The gradual recovery of Argentinian cinema after the war coincided with the rise of Juan Perón, who both before and after becoming president in 1946 sponsored various measures to support the film industry, like quotas and state bank production loans funded by a tax on admissions, as well as restrictions on the repatriation of profits by foreign distributors. On the other hand, Perón, who carefully cultivated his Carlos Gardel film star looks, and his minor film star wife Evita, were both intensely conscious of the power of imagery, and maintained a subsecretariat to keep a close eye on the content of the movies, with expectable results. Nor was government support a great success economically, being either weakened in response to bullying by Washington, or else ineffectively policed. If these conditions produced films largely angled to safe urban bourgeois sensibilities, the period boasted its one distinguished stream of work in the films of Leopoldo Torre Nilson, a staunch anti-Peronist, who stylishly dissected the social psychology of the Argentine ruling classes in a mode that was readily recognised, at home and abroad, as a national version of auteur cinema; the International Press Prize at Cannes in 1961 went to his Lo mano en la trampa ('The Hand in the Trap').

Brazil had come up with another Cannes prizewinner a few years earlier. Lima Barreto's O Cangaço (1953), which revived the old theme of the bandits of the sertão in the guise of a western but shot in São Paulo, where the landscape was hardly authentic was a worldwide success distributed in some 22 countries, though not exactly Brazilian cinema at its most original. The production company responsible for this film was the shortlived Vera Cruz film company, set up in 1949 with backing by São Paulo's industrial bourgeoisie in 1949 and bankrupted in 1954. São Paulo's attempt, says Salles Gomes, to create a more ambitious cinema both industrially and artistically, the *paulistas* dismissed the popular virtues of *carioca* cinema (that of Rio) and tried to give their films the look of First World movies, usually with a European *miseenscène*. When they finally rediscovered the cangaço genre, or turned for

inspiration to radio comedies, it was already too late. The project was a disaster not only culturally but also economically. While the company invested huge sums in production, it overlooked the question of distribution. Thus, in handing over distribution of *O Cangaceiro* to Columbia Pictures in order to reach the international market, the millions earned by the first worldwide success in the history of Brazilian cinema went to fill the coffers of Hollywood. Nothing demonstrates more clearly the ramifications of a cinema of underdevelopment in the years before it awoke to a new vocation.

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