

ON THE PROFESSION

Latin American Film Scholarship in the UK
Mapping the Field

NEWMAN continued...

by JOHN KING | University of Warwick | aysar@ice.csv.warwick.uk

en Video y Cine (CIEVYC) in Buenos Aires acquired a copy of *Excelsior*, a trade journal first published in the second decade of the twentieth century, which reveals both the extent of Argentine film production and of the importation of foreign film in the silent period. The revision of the modernism currently underway in Latin American Literary Studies has found useful material in the subdiscipline of sound studies within film studies and in intermedia investigations of the relation between records, radio, and film sound. Likewise, comparative studies of the “Golden Ages” of national cinemas, genre films, and the current set of “new cinemas” (by generations of directors coming to the fore in the 1990s and in this decade) in Latin America are reshaping our understanding of the various trajectories of film production, distribution, and reception in the region.

Finally, there are moments of great excitement in the field and new research possibilities. Just this last year, in Buenos Aires, Paula Félix-Didier, Director of the Museo Pablo Ducrós Hicken, and Fernando M. Peña, the head film programmer for MALBA and past director of the Buenos Aires Festival Internacional de Cine Independiente (BAFICI), discovered a print of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, brought to Argentina from Germany in 1928, that contains footage thought lost to the world. The footage revises our understanding of the representation of the struggle between the workers and the corporate powers in the film. Since it is a print that showed many times over the years in *cine-clubs* in Buenos Aires, this discovery makes it possible for film scholars to review what impact, if any, this film might have had on Argentine political cinema and political culture, and to examine how such transnational exchanges shape film history. ■

The academic study of Latin American cinema in British universities has grown considerably in the past twenty years and is now one of the major areas of interest for staff and students in the broad field of literary and cultural studies. Most universities today offer courses, normally located in departments of Spanish and Latin American Studies, on aspects of cinema, and a number of faculty members publish articles, book chapters and monographs across a range of topics.

Before trying to define the main contours of this field, some brief comments on the reception of Latin American cinema in the UK might help orient the discussion. The biggest change in recent years, which facilitates research and teaching, is the availability of a number of Latin American films on DVD, many with English translation available. In the 1980s it was very difficult to find material in this country. Few movies received commercial release. Television would show some films from Latin America, which we would avidly video and recycle. The London Film Festival and the National Film Theatre in London would organize country-based programmes with the help of Embassies in the UK, but in order just to see most movies, even once, it would be necessary to travel to Latin America, to different film festivals, such as the Havana festival, or to work in the different national *Cinematecas* and film archives, since it was rare to find many Latin American films being exhibited even in their countries of origin.

The situation today is quite different. Apart from DVD access and the continuing stalwarts of Latin American film exhibition—the National Film Theatre in London, the different regional film theatres and the activities of Embassies (in particular the Mexican and the Brazilian Embassies)—contemporary Latin American cinema has

become part of the viewing experience of a broader public, not just the almost secret fascination of initiates. This has been helped, of course, by the extraordinary visibility of certain Mexican ‘crossover’ directors, in particular Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo Del Toro and Alejandro González Iñárritu, and, of course, Mexican film stars: the face of Gael García Bernal is instantly recognised by many. There is also a strong interest in Brazilian directors like Walter Salles and Fernando Meirelles, and the ‘new wave’ of Argentine directors such as Lucrecia Martel, Pablo Trapero, Fabián Bielinsky and Adrián Caetano. Film festivals, such as the ‘Discovering Latin America’ festival in London, also screen a wide range of documentaries and fictional films from less ‘visible’ countries. This interest and activity helps to create a market for academic publication: mainstream commercial publishers as well as university presses are willing to consider books on Latin American cinema, and journals—both ‘mainstream’ film journals and also ‘Latin American Studies’ journals—are receptive to this burgeoning film scholarship.

I am not suggesting that scholarship here is necessarily market-led: interest in Latin American film studies had been increasing before the recent focus on contemporary cinema of the last ten to fifteen years. Nor am I implying that the problem of access to films has been solved: DVD can offer only a small fraction of production, the most commercially viable films. The most significant independent producer of contemporary Argentine cinema, Lita Stantic, for example, has yet to put her own remarkable film about the disappeared in Argentina, *Un muro de silencio* (1993), onto DVD. If scholars with no knowledge of Spanish or Portuguese wanted to develop studies of Latin American stars to add to the rich literature on stars and society in the Euro American tradition, they would be able

to write about García Bernal or Salma Hayek, to take the case of Mexico, but not about Dolores del Río or María Félix, because the films of even these most famous of 'Golden Age' stars are not readily available in subtitled versions. Work on stardom in Brazilian cinema—which is a very strong feature of UK film studies—can be found in the Centre for Brazilian Film Studies at Leeds. One of the most committed and successful producers of recent Latin American cinema, the British academic turned producer, Don Ranvaud—who has produced the work of Salles, Trapero, Meirelles and many other younger directors—is currently engaged on a project, through his company Ondamax films, of bringing to DVD some of the most important films of the sixties, directed by Jorge Sanjinés in Bolivia, amongst others. Even these films, that occupy a central position in debates on sixties cinema, are in danger of being lost from sight. The work of film preservation and then distribution remains one of the perennial problems of the field. Most work in the UK on Latin American film still comes from inside area studies or language departments rather than from film studies departments, although in recent years we find more scholars with Latin American expertise based in Film Studies departments. These scholars are often contributing to courses and publications on world cinema. But wherever they are housed, researchers look to mediate between research carried out in Latin America and the dominant interests of the Euro American film studies tradition.

If we look to classify this work, we find that most recent publications consider contemporary 'national' and 'transnational' cinemas. National and transnational are not seen as exclusive, oppositional categories. Nobody working in Latin American film offers an essentialist reading of national cinemas, since there is a

clear awareness that these cinemas, from their inception, long before debates about globalisation became fashionable, are a blend of national and transnational elements. The nation remains the bedrock for film production and distribution in Latin America and the state still plays a significant role in a number of countries. It is also far too simplistic to see film production from the nineties as being exclusively 'transnational', and to wave farewell to the national project, despite the obvious attraction of crossover star directors such as Cuarón, Salles and Del Toro, who are the exceptions rather than the rule. Stephanie Dennison (Leeds) and Lisa Shaw (Liverpool) have co-written the volume on Brazil for the Routledge national cinema series (Shaw and Dennison, 2007), whilst Andrea Noble (Durham) wrote the volume on Mexican cinema for the same series, concentrating on a close reading of representative films (Noble, 2005). Several scholars have looked at contemporary film movements from within a national framework: Lúcia Nagib (Leeds) has explored recent Brazilian cinema (Nagib, 2003, 2007), Miriam Haddu (Royal Holloway, London), has focused on Mexican cinema in the nineties (Haddu, 2007), while Joanna Page (Cambridge) has analysed Argentine film of the last decade (Page, 2009). Jens Andermann and colleagues at Birkbeck are looking at what they term the 'recovery of the real' in contemporary Argentine and Brazilian film, and Catherine Grant (Sussex) has published several significant articles on post dictatorship Argentine cinema. Geoffrey Kantaris in Cambridge is completing a major monograph study of urban cinema since the eighties, in Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Brazil, exploring how place and identity are reshaped by local and transnational forces. Lúcia Sa in Manchester is also working on images of the city in Brazil and Mexico (Sa, 2007). Paul Julian Smith at Cambridge regularly reviews Latin American

films and has written a guide to *Amores perros* (Smith, 2003), while Else Vieira has analysed another internationally successful film, *City of God* (Vieira, 2005). Smith's focus on the transnational in cinema finds its echo in much recent research. Deborah Shaw (Portsmouth) has offered key readings of contemporary films (Shaw 2003) and has also edited a book that features a number of essays that concentrate specifically on the global market (Shaw, 2007). Armida de la Garza (Nottingham) is also preparing for publication the symposium papers of a conference held at Puebla in 2008 on transnational cinema. The proceedings of another major conference held at Cambridge, edited by Page and Haddu, also offer a perspective on debates over the national and the transnational in fiction film and documentary (Haddu and Page, 2009).

In the main, the focus of UK-based research is on the 'big three' industries of Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. Some attention is being paid to contemporary cinema in Peru (Sarah Barrow, Anglia Ruskin) and Uruguay (Keith Richards, Sheffield), with examples of their work in Shaw and Dennison (2005), while Rory O'Bryen (Cambridge) has explored cinematic and literary representations of *La Violencia* in Colombia (O'Bryen, 2008). Cuba no longer receives the critical attention as in the heyday of discussions about 'imperfect' or 'third' cinema that the directors themselves led in the sixties and early seventies, though Michael Chanan (Roehampton) has updated his seminal book on Cuba to include developments into the twenty first century (Chanan, 2004). Stephen Hart has approached a century of filmmaking in the continent in his *Companion to Latin American Film* through a close reading of key film texts (Hart, 2004) and he is active in encouraging work with the International Film School in Havana. Survey books on national cinemas cover the pre 1960s period to some extent, and

KING continued...

Dolores Tierney (Sussex) has published an analysis of the work of the Mexican 'Golden Age' director, Emilio Fernández, which locates itself specifically in debates concerning transcultural and transnational perspectives (Tierney 2007). A discussion of popular cinema in Brazil can be found in the work of Shaw and Dennison (2004), while Tierney and Ruétalo have edited a collection of papers dealing with exploitation movies in Latin America (Tierney and Ruétalo, 2009). I have concentrated my focus here on book publication, but many other researchers throughout the country are publishing regularly on cinema in specialist and non specialist journals based in the UK and throughout the Americas.

The significant number of recent titles, outlined above, the work in progress, and the numbers of postgraduates that are focusing on film-related topics, all point to an area of study that is now firmly established in the UK, and where scholars are forging productive working relationships with filmmakers in Latin America and with critics throughout the Americas and in Europe.

[I would like to thank Stephanie Dennison, Geoffrey Kantaris, Toni Kapcia, Andrea Noble and Deborah Shaw for providing me with bibliographical information. I would also refer the reader to an excellent article by David Wood which gives an illuminating theoretical account of the challenges and the pitfalls that await the 'foreign' critic: 'With Foreign Eyes: English Language Criticism on Latin American Film', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, Vol.17, 2, August 2008, pp. 245-259.]

Works Cited

- Chanan, Michael, *Cuban Cinema*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004
- Haddu, Miriam, *Contemporary Mexican Cinema (1989-1999): History, Space and Identity*, Edwin Mellon, Lewiston, NJ, 2007
- Haddu, Miriam and Joanna Page, eds., *Visual Synergies: Fiction and Documentary Filmmaking in Latin America*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009
- Hart, Steven, *Companion to Latin American Film*, Tamesis, London, 2004
- Kantaris, Geoffrey, *Latin American Cinema: The Urban Paradigm*, forthcoming
- Nagib, Lúcia, *Brazil on Screen: Cinema Novo, New Cinema, Utopia*, I.B.Tauris, London and New York, 2007
- Nagib, Lúcia, ed., *The New Brazilian Cinema*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2003
- Noble, Andrea, *Mexican National Cinema*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2005
- O'Bryen, Rory, *Literature, Testimony and Cinema in Contemporary Colombian Culture: Spectres of 'la Violencia'*, Tamesis, London, 2008
- Page, Joanna, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*, Duke University Press, 2009
- Sa, Lucia, *Life in the Megalopolis: Mexico City and São Paulo*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2007
- Shaw, Deborah, *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Ten Key Films*, Continuum, London and New York, 2003
- Shaw, Deborah, ed., *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market*, Rowman and Littlefield, London, 2007
- Shaw, Lisa and Stephanie Dennison, *Brazilian National Cinema*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2007
- Shaw, Lisa and Stephanie Dennison, *Popular Cinema in Brazil*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 2004
- Shaw, Lisa and Stephanie Dennison eds., *Latin American Cinema: Essays on Modernity, Gender and National Identity*, McFarland, Jefferson NC and London, 2005
- Smith, Paul Julian, *Amores perros*, BFI Modern Classics, London, 2003
- Tierney, Dolores, *Emilio Fernández: Pictures in the Margins*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 2007
- Tierney, Dolores and Victoria Ruétalo, eds., *Latsploitation: Latin American Exploitation, Trash and Cult Cinema*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2009
- Vieira, Else, *'City of God' in Several Voices: Brazilian Social Cinema as Action*, Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, London, 2005 ■