

Review of *Making Cinelandia: American Films and Mexican Film Culture before the Golden Age*. By Laura Isabel Serna. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014. 317 pp.

Laura Isabel Serna's study inserts itself within the longstanding discussion concerning the relationship between Mexican cinema and national subjectivity. Many scholars have focused on Mexican cinema's Golden Age (from the early 1930's through the late 1950's) as a privileged site for understanding the nationalization of spectators because of the period's high level of domestic film production. Serna's book invites readers to shift their perspective by arguing that although US film dominated Mexican screens during the latter part of the silent period, Mexican audiences were already being nationalized through film culture and exhibition practices, which effectively created a fertile terrain for the production-led national film culture that developed more fully in the late 1930's and early 1940's. By unearthing the experience of the spectator during the silent period through the rigorous treatment of a variety of materials including newspaper articles, magazines, personal correspondence, theses, and film, her study is a model of how the national can be interrogated "at the site of consumption as much as at the site of production" (Higson, 36).<sup>1</sup>

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which focuses on film culture and practices in Mexico itself. Chapter 1 discusses how US film came to be prominent in Mexican cinemas, highlighting that although US representatives of the film industry sought to impose their formula for reaping box office profits, they were forced to contend with local tastes, values, politics and business practices. Chapter 2 examines how the movie-going experience was put in the service of Mexico's post revolutionary nation-building project through the exhibition of public health information and patriotic celebrations, the delineation of appropriate behavior in theatres, and the construction of the family as the ideal spectator.

Chapter 3 addresses how the popular press in Mexico constituted a space in which Hollywood was translated and adapted for the Mexican reader/spectator. In particular, the chapter illustrates the ways in which these publications foregrounded “mexicanness” as the common lens through which US mass media was understood and made available to local audiences.

The second half of the book deals with the cross-border exchanges through which the movement of people, texts and the film generated a common film culture throughout greater Mexico. In Chapter 4, Serna looks at the ways in which the models of US femininity in film incited local manifestations of modern womanhood, leading to debates about the place of women in post revolutionary Mexico. In particular, the emergence of “la pelona” (a name used to refer to women who had cut their hair short) represented one type of emancipated woman and proved to be source of anxiety regarding gender and class distinctions. Chapter 5 considers how Mexican spectators on both sides of the border reacted to Hollywood’s unflattering portrayal of Mexican people, showing how this common indignation points to a shared experience of spectatorship rooted in national identity. The book’s final chapter argues that the cinematic experience was a significant way in which Mexican communities living in the US understood themselves and maintained a sense of national belonging to their country of origin. Through the careful selection of quotes and images from varied archival materials, Serna elegantly demonstrates how the cinematic experience was already intimately intertwined with a sense of Mexican nationhood in the silent period, regardless of the national origin of the films themselves.

In the elaboration of her claims, the author makes several important contributions. By locating the national in the filter through which cultural production is interpreted, and providing an example of how this understanding of the national can be examined, the study broadens the way in which the relationship between cinema and nationalism can be conceived. The name she gives to this liminal space of interpretation, adaptation, and translation, “cinelandia” is a productive term that I believe can be used by scholars discussing negotiated reading on the part of spectators in other periods and contexts. Crucially, this approach to the national is the basis for the studies’ examination of film culture on both sides of the border, given that this interpretative lens does not depend on one’s geographical location in the

present. The book's cross-border look at spectatorship and reception is a valuable one because it speaks more accurately to the complexity of spectatorship than an understanding of national spectatorship that is geographically determined.

With regards to Mexican film history in particular, the book adds texture and richness to the understanding of the Golden Age period by showing how the explicit and implicit national discourses of its films were received by a public that had already been rehearsing national belonging through their participation in film culture for several decades. Serna's study also illuminates early cinema history as a productive place to interrogate racial constructs and race relations within and beyond the films themselves.

*Making Cinelandia* is fascinating and meticulously executed scholarly contribution. The study will certainly be of interest not only to historians, but to film scholars, and those interested in Latin American Cultural Studies, Border Studies, Gender Studies, as well as Race and Ethnicity Studies.

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**Note**

<sup>1</sup> Higson, Andrew. "The concept of national cinema." *Screen* 30.4 (1989): 36-46.