



Rielle Navitski. *Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. Illustrations. 344 pp. \$104.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8223-6963-9.

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Public Spectacles of Violence examines the production of popular sensationalism in Brazil and Mexico between 1896 and 1930. Like most early cinema scholars responding to the scarcity of surviving films, Rielle Navitski focuses on films' contexts and their intertexts. The author situates her cinematic subjects—actualities and melodramas—within the larger phenomena of what historian Vanessa Schwartz has called “spectacular realities” (*Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* [1998]), demonstrating how cinema and print culture worked together to normalize and popularize the spectacle of violence. As a result, Navitski concludes, motorcar chases, cunning heists, grisly murders, and all manners of crime came to be seen as indicative of, rather than the antithesis or obstacle to, Latin America's modernization.

Navitski's argument follows in the footsteps of Ana M. López, whose assertion that cinema was a modernizing force in Latin America has inspired a budding cohort of Latin Americanists.[1] At the time of López's writing, in 2000, relatively little was known about early film consumption and production in Latin America compared to other periods and places. Several monographs have since followed, the majority of which, such as Laura Isabel Serna's *Making Cinelandia: American Films and*

Mexican Film Culture before the Golden Age (2014) and Maite Conde's *Foundational Films: Early Cinema and Modernity in Brazil* (2018), explain how film culture contributed to the construction of a modern nationhood. Navitski is less interested in political projects or implications, choosing instead to analyze popular culture on its own terms. She digs deep into the archive, closely inspecting films, periodicals, and police blotters to understand how reality and fiction served to spectacularize one another. Navitski's move away from nation building is also a response to the historical specificities of Mexico and Brazil: she meticulously shows how, in the era before national distribution, local and regional settings affected film and print cultures.

To tackle this multiplicity of scales, Navitski divides the book along national lines. The first part (chapters 1 and 2) is dedicated to Mexico, the second (chapters 3-5) to Brazil. Within each part, chapters progress chronologically, allowing Navitski to contextualize spectacles of violence within broader social, political, and technological changes. Chapter 1 spans the arrival of the Lumière cinematograph in Mexico in 1896 through the end of the revolution, tracing the rise of public violence films during a particularly violent period in the nation's history. Navitski trains her lens not on images of military conflict but on crime films

and photographs, arguing that such spectacles helped viewers make sense of their increasingly violent reality. By focusing on public violence, Navitski additionally points out the continuities of Mexico's visual culture across the Porfirian and revolutionary periods. With a nod to Pablo Piccato (*City of Suspects: Crime in Mexico City, 1900–1931* [2001]), she innovatively juxtaposes mug shots from Porfirian periodicals like the *Gaceta de Policía* with domestic crime films like *El automóvil gris* (directed by Enrique Rosas, 1919) to illustrate (urban) Mexicans' anxieties about but also fascination with violence. Chapter 2 takes the reader into the postrevolutionary countryside, following the filming and critical reception of adventure melodramas. Navitski interprets these films as artifacts of national reconstruction that equated the rural landscape and violence with Mexican nationhood. Here, as in much of the book, the author is attentive to the place of Mexican filmmaking within global film circuits, noting the aesthetic influence of Hollywood as well as critics' ambivalence about the centrality of violence in Mexican films.

The third chapter thematically parallels the first: it examines the growing popularity of crime reenactments during Brazilian cinema's so-called belle époque (1906–12 or 1908–11, depending on whom you ask). During this period, Navitski persuasively argues, real life formed the stuff of spectacle, including the first Brazilian narrative feature, *Os estranguladores* (directed by Antônio Leal, 1908). *Crônicas* (journalistic commentaries), *revistas* (revues), and actualities (minutes-long films of events or landscapes) had already built an audience eager to consume reality. Filmmakers, who often doubled as exhibitors, took advantage of this market, hiring photojournalists as cameramen to bring a sensationalist, realistic angle to the silver screen. In the late 1910s, crime reenactments gave way to melodrama serials, the subject of chapter 4. Honing in on Rio de Janeiro, Navitski illuminates how fictional violence and news reporting conspired to “sensationalize everyday life,” borrowing from French stunts (*trucs*) and US plotlines and

bodies in their representations of public violence (p. 177). The final chapter, like chapter 2, moves outside the metropolis, except that here Navitski's concern expands beyond filmmaking to exhibition and reception. Indeed, Navitski compellingly shows, film production and consumption were intertwined: while melodrama serials and westerns fizzled in Rio and São Paulo after 1920, they continued to inspire film producers in smaller cities, such as Recife and Campinas. The resulting “regional films,” whose histories and stories Navitski impressively reconstructs, grounded Brazilian virtue in the countryside and emphasized regional difference.

From regionalism to nationalism and global capitalism, gender and criminality, urbanization and alternative modernities, the book insightfully extends across so many subfields that most historians of early twentieth-century Mexico or Brazil will discover a nugget of interest. The difficulty lies in the sifting. *Public Spectacles of Violence* is not for beginners; it assumes familiarity with cinematic terms and theories along with the broader strokes of Latin American history. Moreover, historians and their students, accustomed to streamlined narratives, may find the text disjointed. Time tends to disappear within each chapter (an appendix listing films' release dates would have been helpful), and certain analyses, although thoughtful, inexplicably stray from the argument at hand or repeat. The task of synthesizing often falls on the reader, while a few claims that intend to do that work, such as the assertion that popular sensationalism further divided society, are never substantiated. This is partly due to the ambitious pairing of Mexico and Brazil; the introduction and conclusion offer several points of comparison, but the two cases largely stand on their own. Equally ambitious is the scope of “public violence,” which forces Navitski to weave together disparate threads. Nonetheless, the resulting tapestry usefully and surprisingly unsettles characterizations of Latin America as an unusually violent region. It elucidates how local spectacles of violence am-

biguously linked violence to modernity while demonstrating that neither these spectacles nor their ambiguity was unique to Latin America. *Public Spectacles of Violence* reminds us that passion was significant to the experience of modernization and that new technologies prioritized and heightened emotions across the globe.

Note

[1]. Ana M. López, “Early Cinema and Modernity in Latin America,” *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 1 (2000): 48–78.

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