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## ➤ Introduction

Latin America is a construct, an invention built around layers of tropes, histories and narratives. But like all imagined communities Latin America is constantly being re-invented, incorporated or rejected at particular historical moments and from diverse perspectives. Sometimes Latin Americans take on the mantle of Latin America as a means of building political resistance; sometimes, those perceived to be Latin Americans reject Latin America as an imposed, Western identity that collapses manifold identities and myths.

This dossier asks what happens when different Latin America(n)s are put on screen; it does not seek to establish what Latin America is, so much as highlight how multiple Latin America(n)s are put to use. For that reason, the articles presented here engage with how Latin America is stereotyped, not to point out how films produce ‘false’ images but rather to consider the motivations and consequences of building and perpetuating sets of images in particular ways. The stereotype has, in any case, always had a precarious relationship to truth: on the one hand it is a falsehood, a skewed image of a particular identity; on the other, it appears to be a truth so universally shared that it becomes untrustworthy. The stereotype’s inability to incorporate difference is what makes its truth so unpalatable, so ‘untrue’ and, indeed, so dangerous. But at the same time, the particular mobilisations and manipulations of the stereotype gives culture the means to challenge and engage with the politics of representation.

A similar difficulty confronts us when considering screen histories, another recurring theme in this dossier, which presents a corpus of films that taps into several different periods in the history of the Americas. When watching history on screen we are happy enough to acknowledge that ‘it’s just a story’ but we are uncomfortable when that story takes ‘real’ history and manipulates truth. Cinema is not history; or rather, cinema *is* history since it is too a narrative of incidents, with all the slanted and myriad viewpoints that implies.

Analysis of the way Latin America has been portrayed at the cinema is not a new undertaking – but it remains an undeveloped field. Many articles published about representations of Latin America, like many reflections on depictions of Latin America in general, demonstrate the ignorance, artificiality or greed of Western, frequently Holly-

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wood, motion pictures. Such analyses are often shrewd interpretations of film, dismantling screen histories to throw light on the shortcomings of the Western gaze; excellent examples of this approach can be found in *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, edited by John King, Ana M. López and Manuel Alvarado and published in the wake of the 500-year anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the New World. Describing the articles in the volume as a map of visual encounters that flag up "different ways of seeing and being seen" (1993: xix), the authors highlight how the marvellous that accompanied the original encounter returns in the cinematic imaginary.

Other studies, ones that have tapped into the growing acknowledgment that culture has played a key role in U.S. expansionism, have also played on the trope of the 'encounter', seeing in these meeting points both affiliation and antagonism (Joseph 1998: 7). Using the 'encounter' to build an easily recognisable 'other', Hollywood's ventures south of the border have been essential to building U.S. national identity and to protecting its foreign interests in Latin America. Latin America during the course of the twentieth century has been, as Greg Grandin (2006) has shown, the testing ground for U.S. foreign policy, part of the "seeming 'necessity' for North Americans, alternately, to intervene, survey, display, civilize, contain, reform, democratize, and integrate Latin America" (Joseph 1998: 22). As Seth Fein has pointed out in the case of Mexico, Latin America has not just simply rejected the cultural incursions of its northern neighbour but has also variously engaged with imported film methods and practices as part of this cinematic encounter:

Mexican cinema during its so-called Golden Age – when it challenged Hollywood hegemony throughout the Western Hemisphere – emerged through collaboration and convergence, competition, but not confrontation, with the U.S. industry and U.S. foreign policy. It was a national but not (as conventionally credited) nationalist film industry; it emulated Hollywood even as it competed with it. It projected different genres, different stars, different narratives than did Hollywood, but it did not challenge the U.S. industry's audio-visual grammar, economic organization, or discursive logi (Fein 2003: 3).

Readings such as Fein's are indicative of wider shifts in film studies over the past two decades, not least in the growth of interest in Latin America cinema following the recent boom of 'new Latin American cinema' and in the growing appreciation of the impact of transnational flows.

Studies of transnational cinema still tend, however, to be overly reliant on the multinational nature of cinematic production as a means of establishing transnationality. The filmography of the so-called 'three amigos', Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro and Alejandro Iñárritu, for example, are all transnational in very different ways; only in *Babel* (dir. Iñárritu, 2006) does the transnational appear as the film's very *raison d'être*. Indeed, analysis of transnational production is, I would argue, at its most meaningful when placed alongside an analysis of the national, global, regional and local within the film world itself. We need not only to acknowledge that "the transnational comprises both globalization [...] and the counterhegemonic responses of filmmakers from former colonial and Third World countries" (Ezra/Rowden: 2007: 1), but also to ask what kinds of cross-border interactions are being cultivated or discouraged: in essence, what kind of transnationalism is on display? The articles presented here not only consider transnationality both within and beyond the film world, highlighting how cinema has always been

transnational, but further hint that the cinematic relationship between the Americas has been the bedrock of transnational film. Given Latin America's proximity to Hollywood, it is unsurprising that cinematic Latin America(n)s have been a constant presence in the history of cinema, and Jon Beasley-Murray's blog *Projections: What Latin America Tells us at the Movies*<sup>1</sup> is a useful introduction to the vast number of films that have taken Latin America as their subject or setting from the birth of cinema to the new millennium, a cinematic century of looking south.

In his article, Philip Swanson looks at two cinematic depictions of the events surrounding the 1836 Battle of the Alamo. Departing from the widely-acknowledged theoretical line in film studies that portraits of Latin America are investigations of the U.S. 'in disguise', Swanson considers how *The Alamo* (dir. John Wayne, 1960) and *Viva Max!* (dir. Jerry Paris, 1969) displace onto Latin America a wider set of concerns over Vietnam, the burgeoning sexual freedoms of the 1960s, racial conflict, and the U.S. concepts of freedom, all within the context of the film genre of the Western. Not just highlighting ways these films, for all their paternal and stereotyped visions, display an affinity for and camaraderie with Latin Americans, Swanson also stresses the mythic nature of cinematic renditions of history. Indeed, as he points out, the Alamo is as much about the relationship between nationhood, history and myth as anything else. Latin America, it seems, is not just an ideal locale for exploring the boundaries of the U.S. political framework but also for examining the very relationship between history and myth.

In a similar line to Swanson's article, I analyse the constant presence of El Dorado in imaginings of Latin America. Following Swanson – and the argumentative thrust of Beasley-Murray's *Projections* – I highlight that these films about the lost city of gold are rife with concerns over the places they originate from, in this case, with the very process of film production. I not only think about Hollywood film production in the Indiana Jones franchise and the DreamWorks' animation *The Road to El Dorado* (dir. Bibi Bergeron and Will Finn, 2000), however, but also compare those motion pictures to a European film, *Aguirre: Wrath of God* (dir. Werner Herzog, 1972). Despite their differences, I argue, they are all equally obsessed with the production process itself, an obsession that highlights how Latin America is not just transposed, transfigured and stereotyped in these films, but also how it *animates* cinema.

If, as these articles suggest, placing Latin America on screen is to engage with the notion of a cinematic encounter, then Deborah Shaw's article offers a slightly different viewpoint for considering that cultural interaction. Taking two Mexican films that forefront the question of nationhood, namely *Y tu mamá también* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2001) and *Japón* (dir. Carlos Reygadas, 2002), Shaw argues that both films are created within a transnational cinematic context; that is, their landscapes are both shaped by incorporating and responding to certain kinds of global filmic gazes. Whereas in the case of *Y tu mamá también* that act of seeing is driven by a tourist gaze and global commercial revenue, *Japón* strives to place itself within international concepts of auteur and art-house cinema. It is certainly true that "the politics of U.S. continental and international expansion, conflict, and resistance have shaped the history of American culture just as much as the cultures of those the United States has dominated" (Joseph 1998: 6), but Shaw's arti-

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<sup>1</sup> See <<http://www.screened.blogspot.com/>>.

cle also demonstrates how Latin America sometimes willingly engages with and refashions itself in the light of global cultural flows.

The articles in this dossier engage, therefore, with the way that Latin America is put on screen. They do not stress the untruth of what we are seeing but rather consider the consequences and impact of the relationships and imaginaries established between different viewers, actors and producers from beyond and within Latin America. They highlight the different kinds of truths particular frames of reference produce, reminding us that visions of Latin America have always been a key part of the cinematic unconscious.

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