

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

*Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.*

**Overview** Latin American films have been widely recognized for their rich diversity, innovative themes, and ability to move audiences. While almost all nations have had filmmakers who have developed works in many genres, the bulk of Latin American filmmaking has been concentrated in Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. All have experienced varying degrees of influence from social, political, and economic movements, and they also incorporate national and regional culture and folklore. The result has been a film tradition is identifiable and richly satisfying.

**Origins** The first filmmaking efforts in Latin America were inspired by the Lumieres Brothers in France, and they tended to focus on capturing objects in motion. For example, the first Argentine film was *La Bandera Argentina* (*The Argentine Flag*), which involved a large Argentine flag waving in the breeze of the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. In Mexico, the short films were those documenting battles of the Mexican Revolution. In Brazil, the first short films were inspired by the Lumiere brothers as well as Thomas Edison, and showed such things as the arrival of trains, young people dancing, and passengers disembarking.

**Genres** Latin American cinema has been instrumental in helping develop its own versions of classic genres such as documentaries, musicals, and romances. Musicals that feature folklore and regional music were not only popular in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, but found enthusiastic audiences throughout the world. The often harsh explorations of poverty, social inequality, and political corruption have also been a feature of Latin American cinema. The very popular long-running telenovelas (Latin American soap operas) resulted in a new form of consciously and often rather ironically melodramatic romance.

## MEXICO

**Mexican Cinema** Mexico's rich cinematic tradition when audiences flocked to see Mexican screenings of Thomas Edison's one-minute kinoscope films such as *Arrival of a Train*. Salvador Toscano Barragan is generally considered to be the first Mexican filmmaker. He created a film version of the novel, *Don Juan Tenorio*, and then went on to film battles during the Mexican Revolution. Inspired by European film-makers, Mexican directors and film studios received a huge boost when U.S. and European film-makers had to severely curtail their activities due to rationing of celluloid and other materials. Mexican studios, which had no such restrictions, were able to produce films, and they found an enthusiastic global export market. The Mexican studios, as in Hollywood, focused on creating bankable stars and screenplays with wide appeal. What resulted was the "Golden Age," launched by Maria Candelaria, and followed by hundreds of high-quality movies produced by well-funded studios who relied on a domestic network of movie theaters and a well-developed export market. After decades of pre-eminence the Mexican film industry declined in the 1970s, but experienced a resurgence in the 1990s and 2000s with films that probed the human condition, made great satirical statements about politics and "progress," and took intellectual and aesthetic risks to parallel the literary world. Standouts include *Amores Perros* and *Pan's Labyrinth*.

**Mexico's "Epoca de Oro" (Golden Age): 1933 – 1964** Because of the relative paucity of U.S. and European output during the late 1930s and 1940s, Mexican films were embraced by enthusiastic audiences who enjoyed the studios' output, which ranged from adaptations of famous films (for example, Ramon Gallegos's *Dona Barbara*), comedy (such as the films of Cantinflas), romance (Maria Candelaria), and musicals that featured rancheras (*Siempre Tuya*). Many of the films explored social issues such as the problems of rural poverty and systemic prejudice against indigenous peoples. The studio system generated a number of well-liked stars, which included Dolores Del Rio, Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, Maria Felix, and Cantinflas.

**Maria Candelaria** (dir. Emilio Fernandez, 1944) Starring Dolores del Rio and Pedro Armendariz, Maria Candelaria explores issues of true love, romance, social inequality, prejudices against the indigenous peoples of Mexico, and the natural beauty of the Mexican countryside. It was the first Mexican film to win the First Prize (Palme d'Or) at Cannes.

**Cantinflas** (Mario Moreno) (1911 – 1993) The comical "Everyman" of the underclass, Cantinflas often played the quick-witted scamp from society's underclass who exposed "polite society" as pompous, and whose activities

often made him a champion of the underdog. He was well-known for his costume (sagging pants, frayed shirt, ragged towel over his shoulder) and for his way of speaking quickly but saying nothing, and for his comical dancing. Cantinflas made more than 50 films, primarily working with the director Miguel M. Delgado.

**Maria Felix** (1913 – 2002) Maria Felix achieved great fame and recognition during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. Known as a fascinating femme fatale, Maria Felix was often referred to as “La Dona” after her character in “Dona Barbara” (1943). With a total of 47 films, many of which were distributed in multiple countries around the world,

**Pedro Infante** (1917 – 1957) When it was announced that Pedro Infante had died in a tragic plane crash near Merida, Yucatan, the entire nation plunged into mourning for their beloved actor and singer. He often portrayed a hero in his more than 60 films, and as such, he embodied the qualities that Mexican (and indeed, global) audiences admired: a loyal and courageous friend, a devoted family member, and a passionate and impassioned lover. His range of songs made him very popular as well, and many of his recordings continue to be considered standards even today.

**Jorge Negrete** (1911 – 1953) Born in the historic mining town of Guanajuato, Jorge Negrete entered a prestigious military academy when he was a young teenager. There, he distinguished himself not only for his academic excellence but for his musical talent. Negrete trained as an operatic singer, where he met his initial success. Negrete later began singing music of mariachis. He also embraced acting, where he often acted the part of heroes who could also sing. He appeared in more than 40 movies, and helped develop the “charro” (Mexican cowboy) singing tradition. When he died from complications of a sudden illness, his fans were devastated.

**Dolores Del Rio** (1904 – 1983) Dolores Del Rio was born in Durango to parents who had been wealthy during the time of Porfirio Diaz, but who lost everything during the Mexican Civil War. Dolores fled with her mother to Mexico City, where she received an education in a Catholic private school. Del Rio was unusual among Mexican actresses in that she first achieved fame and fortune in the U.S. in Hollywood. Later, she returned to Mexico, where she acted in numerous films in genres that included romance, adventure, musical, and comedy. Del Rio was considered one of the all-time beauties of the cinema. She made more than 50 films.

## ARGENTINE

**Argentine Cinema** Historically, Argentina has been considered one of the top three countries in Latin America for cinema, along with Mexico and Brazil. The first Argentine movies were silent shorts, made in the manner of the Lumiere Brothers. Later, Argentine film-making blossomed during Argentina’s “Golden Age” which extended from the 1930s and into the 1950s. In the 1960s, the French “New Wave” (Nouvelle Vague) emphasized an art-house sensibility and explored the way the camera could reflect and problematize identity and reality. During the military dictatorship, most filmmakers found it safest to focus on comedy. However, after the return to democracy in 1983, filmmakers began to probe the themes that had been off-limits, with a resulting surge in movies that addressed political atrocities (torture, the “disappeared”), as well as social problems. At the same time, film adaptations of literature of the “greats” such as Cortazar and Borges were made. Argentine cinema continues to be highly respected, and to receive prestigious awards.

**Argentina’s “Third Cinema”** (1950s and 1960s) For many, the “First Cinema” consisted of escapist spectacles, and the “Second Cinema” was focused on self-absorbed “auteur” works. However, a “Third Cinema” followed on the heels, and even though they were not commercially as successful as the first and second phases, they were important. During the 1960s and 1970s, a Latin American film movement emerged that had as its core mission to expose the evils of neocolonialism and capitalism. While its core values may have been political, the resulting works are most known for their exploration of psychological conditions, and the consequences of exile and estrangement. One of the most influential of the “Third Cinema” directors is Fernando Solanas, whose works are often overtly political.

## BRAZIL

**Brazilian Cinema** The early development of Brazilian cinema was slow, and the dominant genre, the chanchada (burlesque musical comedies), were popular, but not considered serious art. Later, in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, the

chanchadas achieved even more popularity, and their emblematic star, Carmen Miranda, was adored by many. In the 1960s and 1970s, the “Cinema Novo” emerged as a more “serious” movement. Cinema Novo changed the focus of Brazilian cinema from entertainment, to works that explore social inequality in Brazil, neorealism, working class / middle class. The song, “The Girl from Ipanema” (written by Antonio Carlos Jobim and performed by Astrud Gilberto and Stan Getz) captures the emotional elements of beauty and sadness, an anticipation of nostalgia.

### **Carmen Miranda (1909 – 1955)**

Carmen Miranda, born in Portugal but relocated to Rio de Janeiro when her parents emigrated to Brazil. Miranda embraced opera and music, despite her parents’ disapproval. Miranda entered show business as a singer, but quickly showed her flexibility by acting and dancing for “chanchada” movies, and for participating in Carnival (Mardi Gras). Her most famous films featured Miranda in all the roles she loved: singing, poetry, and dancing. Miranda quickly became well-known as a “Brazilian Bombshell” instantly recognizable by her tall headdress replete with tropical fruits.

**Brazilian “Cinema Novo” Movement (1960s and 1970s)** Influenced by the French New Wave, Italian Neorealism, and Soviet cinema of the 1960s, the Brazilian Cinema Novo (New Cinema) changed the focus of films from big-budget musicals, comedies, and adventure to one that encouraged a freedom of aesthetic, political, and ideological expression. Led by director Glauber Rocha, the movement probed rural poverty and social inequality with a style that was resolutely avant-garde. His development of an “aesthetics of hunger” brought together the literal and the metaphorical. Rocha’s film, *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol (God and the Devil in the Land of the Sun)* (1964), follows the fate of people in rural areas during a time of drought. The film is characterized by a combination of realism and symbolism, and seeks to encourage the audience to question the prevailing cultural values. The film’s use of hand-held cameras and its disturbing violence gave it authenticity, and also encouraged other filmmakers to take risks.

### Discussion/Questions

1. While the first cinematic experiments took place in France and in the United States, where the focus was often on whimsical explorations of science fiction, such as in the case of *Voyage to the Moon*, in Mexico, film was used to chronicle important aspects of its history. What are some of the ways in which Mexican filmmakers sought to use film to chronicle their unique history as a nation, and also to make people aware of the heroes of the Mexican Revolution?
2. Mexico’s Golden Age was fueled by a time of relative peace and prosperity following the Mexican Revolution and also a surge in demand for their films, due to the fact that American and European filmmakers were not able to continue during World War II due to rationing of film and other supplies. The Golden Age made international stars of many Mexican actors. Who were some of the main actors and actresses in Mexico’s Golden Age? What were they known for?
3. Brazilian and Argentine filmmakers have long been lauded for their willingness to tackle very difficult social issues. In Brazil, the influence of 1960s French filmmaking (*nouvelle vague*) was very intense, and it resulted in films that featured rather unlikely heroes who were often of the underclass. In Argentina, films exposed the military dictatorship and the disappearance of youth who dissented. Describe films that explored social issues and evaluate their impact.

### Readings

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