Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas, and Latin America (review)

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Florida (1605)” explores how the author combines the story of Vitacucho with a moment of autobiographical self-defense. Marrero-Fente’s reading of legal issues in the Royal Commentaries in “Reading the Specter in the Law: Colonialism and Culture in the Royal Commentaries (1609)” begins as an extended response to Trimborn’s ideas about the development of Andean law and moves into a defense of Inca Garcilaso’s representation of Inca law as a fragmented and complex cultural product.

The final two chapters continue the focus on legal discourse. Chapter ten, “The Afterlife of Colonial Legal Texts: Spanish Legal Imperialism and the Conquest of America,” proposes that “legal texts can be read as narratives of justification and resistance” (91). Tracing the protocols of conquest from the Siete Partidas through the mediation of canon law, Marrero-Fente provides the reader with a detailed and nuanced example of the contribution that colonial and postcolonial legal studies can make to our understanding of the devastating effects of conquest. In the final chapter, which might be read as a sort of conclusion, the author turns to contemporary questions of pedagogy. “Human Rights and Academic Discourse: Teaching Las Casas-Sepúlveda Debate in the Times of the Iraq War” offers a model for using colonial texts as a point of departure for teaching about human rights as they relate to contemporary issues.

Issues of canon formation provide a backdrop for many of the essays, and I found the author’s reflections on these issues to be very suggestive—for example, why anonymity is generally seen as suspect in the wake of Romantic preoccupation with authorship or why the lack of an early printed edition of a particular work gives rise to a critical environment of secrecy. In this context, Marrero-Fente offers relevant background on the editorial interventions that over time shape our understanding (or obliviousness) with regard to certain works in the canon.

The volume would have benefited from additional editorial oversight with an eye to minimizing repetition among the individual chapters (which vary considerably in length), relegating some comments to footnotes, reorganizing paragraphs, and correcting typographical and stylistic errors. However, this minor caveat does not in any way lessen the importance of this collection of essays, which will be of interest to scholars of Spanish American colonial studies and Hispanists more generally.

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The common object of scrutiny of the seventeen essays that comprise this welcome addition to the critical literature on Latin-American popular cinema is the kind of film so often disdained by critics for their absurdly low budgets, actors of often dubious talents and a dedication to largely debased genres of exploitation cinema that the editors have labeled “Latsploitation.” These are usually not the kinds of
films that invite conceptual or theoretic reflection by serious scholars. Yet, as Ruétalo, Tierney and their fellow scholars handily demonstrate, there are productive ways to read beneath the literalness of bad acting, clichéd plots and poor production values that generally characterize these works to uncover subversive forms of cultural resistance to the established order of Latin America’s largely derivative popular film forms.

Through an array of often ingenious reading strategies, the various authors challenge the facile assumption that what we are talking about is simply trash and bad taste. Their approach, as the editors say in their introduction, is to “reinvent the frame” (1), that is, to contextualize exploitation genres in light of the larger picture of film production, exhibition and circulation by Latin-American filmmakers, especially as these films circulate across borders and even regions. It is precisely the international circulation of these works, perhaps enhanced by their heavy dose of violence, gore and sex, that the volume effectively tracks as a series of transnational cinematic tropes that apparently appeal to global audiences.

Two critical objectives clearly motivate the various authors. The first is to expand the space of critical discourse around Latsploitation cinema so as to provide a scholarly frame of reference within which to read these films as a more sizeable section of Latin American film production than one might otherwise have imagined. As one of the volume’s authors, Sergio de la Mora, observes of Mexican cinema, “genre boundaries between exploitation, mainstream and art cinema are porous . . . , with some films simultaneously residing in more than one of these categories” (248). The same may said of film forms throughout the Spanish-speaking world where popular and art-house forms often enjoy a curiously intimate reciprocity. The second goal, underscored in the ways in which Ruétalo and Tierney have organized the collection, is the effort to legitimate these works within groupings that mirror the aesthetic categories of conventional Latin-American film histories (auteurism, genre studies, the star system).

The volume is introduced by a forward from Eric Schaeffer, a trailblazing scholar of US exploitation cinema, who assures us that writing about debased movie genres and lurid subject-matter is more than merely critics indulging in their own guilty pleasures. Rather, it is an important and illuminating way to understand the dynamic interplay between local and global film cultures. His defense of the broad category of Latsploitation is further expanded by a historical introduction coauthored by the two editors which serves to identify the various chapters and genres within national and transnational contexts, thereby helping readers navigate through what might otherwise seem a collection of random views of regional exploitation cinema.

Their introduction is followed by what appears to be a third prologue, a chapter by noted Latin-American film scholar Ana M. López who writes on the origins of popular cinema production in Mexico in the early sound period. Her discussion of three Mexican precursors of the exploitation genres—Juan Orol, José Bohr and Ramón Peón. López effectively rehearses the key arguments to follow about industry, cinematic populism, national cinema and auteur exploitation, thus providing a useful historical framework to the anthology’s four sections, each
of which is organized around a different subgenre of Latin-Exploitation: 1) Transnational circulation (Latsploitation beyond Borders); 2) Auteurs; 3) Politicizing Latsploitation; 4) Sexploitation. As a globalizing overview, this division works well to suggest but not exhaust the parameters of the field. The volume concludes with an epilogue by Gabriela Alemán which balances López’s earlier historical view with a contemporary update on Ecuadorian exploitation film and the expansion of cinematic piracy through technologies of audiovisual reproduction. The chapter also reprises one of the volume’s principle themes, that of the tension between elite and popular notions of Latin American cinema.

The volume includes several splendid examinations of the subversive rewriting of genre (Stephanie Dennison’s witty discussion of Brazilian “Pornochanchadas,” Adan Avalos’s treatment of Mexican border cinema) and profiles of two exploitation stars, Argentina’s Isabel Sarli (Ruétalo) and Mexico’s Isela Vega (Sergio de la Mora). This focus on stars and genres is conceptually juxtaposed against a thought-provoking section on an array of transnational Latsploitation auteurs that includes detailed treatment of the works of Chilean Alejandro Jodorosky, Argentine Emilio Vieyra, Brazilian José Mojica Marins, Mexican René Cardona Jr. and Argentine exile Leon Klimovsky. Rounding out this list is a spotlight on US filmmaker Roger Corman, who qualifies as the unique example of the exploitation producer as auteur.

The scholarly impact of the anthology is at times diminished by the failure to balance purely descriptive material with substantive critical commentary. Given the unfamiliarity of readers with many of the films discussed, this may be an unavoidable side-effect of demarginalizing exploitation cinema. Still, there are a number of strong chapters and several in fact that help make a strong case for the volume’s central argument. Among the most noteworthy are Jeffrey Middents’s chapter on Roger Corman’s US-Peruvian coproductions, Gerard Dapena’s discussion of Argentine horror master Emilio Vieyra, Jossetxo Cerdán and Miguel Fernández Labayen’s illuminating look at the cinema of Chilean cult auteur Alejandro Jodorowsky and, finally, Sergio de la Mora’s review of the career of Mexican soft-porn star Isela Vega. There is, at times, a productive overlap in focus and theme among the various chapters, suggesting a dialogue among scholars whose interest in this type of cinema cuts across borders, genres and time periods. This does much to dispel the impression that the collection is simply a loose grouping of similarly themed essays and underscores the seriousness of analyses and diversity of subject matter of the volume as a whole.

Through the resourceful critical readings by film scholars who are able to attend to the geopolitics of Latin America, Latsploitation becomes a valuable complement to the predominant picture historians and critics have given of the region. Through the treatment of a range of genres, periods and filmmakers, combined with an extensive bibliography, the volume provides a valuable updating and corrective to contemporary scholarship on cinema and its audiences in Latin America.

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