

Reviews of Books

'Nationbuilding' en el cine mexicano desde la Época de Oro hasta el presente. Editado por Friedhelm Schmidt-Welle y Christian Wehr. Madrid: Iberoamericana/Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert/México D. F.: Bonilla Artigas Editores. 2015. 289 pp.

The seventeen chapters of this edited collection engage with how films consider national concerns, broadly defined, in films from the 1910s up to the early 2000s. There are many strong contributions by both well-established and lesser-known names in Mexican film studies from Europe (France, Germany, Austria, UK and Spain) and the Americas (the US, Canada and Mexico). Given the distinct academic traditions across these nation spaces, there are necessarily varying approaches in the analyses. In addition, the different disciplinary backgrounds of the authors also lead to variety in styles and *foci*. This broad sweep and range is unusual and welcome.

The editors have collected an excellent range of writing on Mexican cinema, but the book lacks a clear structure. There are themes and patterns that emerge from reading it, but these are not signalled in the very brief Introduction. Co-written by the editors, the Introduction nods to theories of cultural nationalism through a mention of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (London/New York: Verso, 1991), without exploring fully how it has influenced their text, nor do the editors discuss the more recent critiques that have emerged since its publication. The Introduction mentions significant periods, genres and archetypal figures, as well as naming stars and directors, without making reference to the considerable body of writing on Mexican cinema or introducing the chapters that follow. Therefore, the reader is left without any clear theoretical frame or explanation for the more or less chronological structure that was chosen.

From the outset the aims and structure are unclear. The first chapter by the eminent Mexican film historian Aurelio de los Reyes examines the stylistic commonalities between Mariano Azuela and Soviet montage in his revisions of the novel *Los de abajo*, originally serialized in 1915 and published in book form in the 1920s. The next by Kurt Hahn considers the eponymous recurring figure of the fallen woman in the 1903 novel *Santa* by Federico Gamboa and the subsequent adaptations of the same name between 1918 and 1932. Both of these fall beyond the remit of the title, if we are to take the boom period at the height of the studio productions, that is commonly called the Golden Age of Mexican cinema (1936–1959), as the starting point for this chronological analysis. Both are excellent chapters, but, in the absence of a clear introduction, the inclusion of both of these is puzzling.

Many chapters consider genre, with melodrama emerging time and again. Hahn references melodrama and so too does Gastón Lillo in his analysis of a selection of Luis Buñuel's Mexican films. Neither Hahn nor Lillo signal this in their titles, but they are strong components in their discussions. Other chapters do mention melodrama in their titles, such as Patricia Torres San Martín's innovative exploration of the genre in *El callejón de los milagros* (Jorge Fons, 1995) and *Amores perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000), seeing the latter as a reinvention of the genre. Similarly novel is Dolores Tierney's assertion that commonalities can be found in the apparently disparate *Enamorada* (Emilio Fernández, 1946) and *Y tú mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001). She convincingly argues that such a comparatist approach can reinvent our understanding of both films. Melodrama could have been a subsection to help structure the book and would have allowed for productive comparisons.

The chapters cover considerable ground in looking at how nation-state politics and representation intersect with identity, sexuality, class, religion and gender, as well as with production and distribution. There are many ways that the chapters could have been linked, patterns could have been drawn out, and a clearer structure could have been given, but the order as it stands is confusing. For example, two chapters that consider Luis Buñuel are followed by another three on Arturo Ripstein. The first on Buñuel is Lillo's, while the next is a fascinating exploration based on careful archival research by Julia Tuñón Pablos of the controversy over Mexico's decision to put forward the big-budget revolutionary melodrama *La cucaracha* (Ismael Rodríguez, 1959), instead of Buñuel's *Nazarín* (1959) for an award at the Cannes film festival. These are chronological, but the next three on Ripstein are not. First, Sergio de la Mora carries out a compelling queer reading of Ripstein's biopic *La reina de la noche* (1994), which tells the story of the performer Lucha Reyes. He examines how Ripstein and his collaborator and scriptwriter, Paz Alicia Garciadiego, struggled to encompass a life that refused clear definitions, and plots out why this might be in the light of the particular place these artists have in Mexico. This is followed by Jochen Mecke on time and the Western genre in *Tiempo de morir* (1965) and Dieter Ingenschay on the different meanings of transvestism in Mexico and Chile in an adaptation of a Chilean novel by José Donoso, *El lugar sin límites* (1977). These individual chapters are strong and tell us something new about each of the films. However, there is no apparent logic to the shift in chronology nor any explanation as to why Ripstein should get so much space in this book.

There is some unevenness in the quality of the chapters, but for the most part they are compelling and novel approaches to films that form part of a canon of Mexican cinema. All of the chapters are in Spanish and, when translated from English, the translator is credited. Any quotations from another language are left in the original. This is a practice common in comparative studies and an approach appropriate for polyglots who read French, English and German.

The weakness of the book lies in its all too brief Introduction that lacks signalling and a theoretical frame. Its considerable strength is in the range of scholarly approaches that bring new readings to canonical films, which would be useful for students and scholars of Mexican cinema keen to garner insights into the individual films and film-makers.

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CHARLES RAMÍREZ BERG, *The Classical Mexican Cinema: Poetics of the Exceptional Golden Age Films*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 2015. xi + 240 pp.

As indicated by the reference to poetics, the methodology of Charles Ramírez Berg's new book on the Golden Age period of Mexican film centres on textual analysis. Berg states in the Introduction that his approach is neo-formalist and neo-auteurist and his readings of the films remain true to this definition throughout. In chapters devoted to Fernando de Fuentes, the Emilio Fernández 'unit', Luis Buñuel and one on three stand-out films from the 1930s, he offers a wealth of insights into the poetics of the directors whilst historicizing his formal analyses alongside the industrial and wider cultural contexts. Berg's theoretical frame defines his corpus as the kernel of films that represent the 'Classical Mexican Cinema' ('CMC'), a category he places in opposition to the 'Mainstream Mexican Cinema' ('MMC'). To underpin his discussion of the poetics of the 'CMC', Berg begins with chapters on José Guadalupe Posada, Enrique Rosas' *El automóvil gris* (1919) and the transition to sound cinema in Mexico. For Berg, the first two are essential in understanding the exceptional Mexican combination of themes and aesthetics