

FAST FRAMES:  
Insights into Mexican, Latin American,  
and Brazilian Cinema

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*CONTEMPORARY CINEMA OF LATIN AMERICA: TEN KEY FILMS.* By Deborah Shaw. (New York: Continuum, 2003. Pp. 206. \$89.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper).

*NELSON PEREIRA DOS SANTOS.* By Darlene J. Sadlier (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003. Pp. xii+180. \$34.95 cloth; \$16.95 paper).

*BUNUEL AND MEXICO: THE CRISIS OF NATIONAL CINEMA.* By Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. Pp. xii+202. \$60.00 cloth).

Most film students in the United States see films from Latin America only sporadically, when a movie of great power such as *Pixote*, or wide popular appeal such as *Like Water for Chocolate*, cannot be ignored. These films are seen, however, with limited awareness of their cultural or historical context, so that appreciation of their impact is based on one dimension of the texts, such as the level of plot or acting performances. The three critical works discussed here provide sufficient cultural/historical background and textual analysis to enlarge informed viewers' understanding of the multiple levels of meaning of films from Latin America in general, and more specifically Mexico and Brazil. My discussion of these critical works points out some of their critical insights, as well as noting briefly some of the most imaginative films in world cinema.

Deborah Shaw organizes her study of ten Latin American films by including in each of five chapters two films from the same country which complement or contradict each other. She makes clear that her purpose is not to offer definitive readings of her selections but instead what she hopes is a contribution "to the growing field of Latin American film studies" (7). Thus her readings are grounded in social and political contexts of the respective countries, as well as the current status of their

national film industries. She chooses films from countries whose film industries are distinguished, and her criteria for selection are choices from the 1980s and 1990s that gained national and transnational attention. Shaw seeks to explain how and why these films have achieved international recognition.

Shaw begins her analyses with one of the strongest national cinemas in Latin America, that of Cuba. Its most renowned director, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea was one of the founders of ICAIC, the Cuban Institute of Art and Industry which was, Shaw points out, itself part of the revolution. Shaw discusses Gutiérrez Alea's 1968 *Memories of Underdevelopment*, based on Edmundo Desnoes's novel of the same title. This film, now a classic view of early post-revolutionary Cuban society, was voted best third world film of the 1968–78 decade.<sup>1</sup> It focuses on Sergio, a handsome but idle intellectual aesthete who observes the struggles of the revolution. Sergio views selections of documentary footage of the Bay of Pigs invasion with a detachment suggesting that Cuba, suddenly changed, is no longer his country. As his friends abandon Havana for Miami, Sergio remains, complacent in his comfortable but isolated life in Cuba. The shot of Sergio surveying the city below through a telescope from his balcony defines visually the distance between Sergio and other bourgeois intellectuals like him from the changes in post-revolution Cuba.

By 1993, the Cuban Revolution had become totalitarian and repressive. Gutiérrez Alea's disappointment and alarm with Castro's disregard for human rights is the topic of *Strawberry and Chocolate*, a film that, like *Memories of Underdevelopment*, explores the relation of intellectuals and high culture to the revolution. The intellectual in *Strawberry* is a talented, cultured young man whose homosexuality brings out the homophobia of Castro's Cuba and the cultural isolation of the revolution. Castro's remark in an interview to the effect that a homosexual can never be a revolutionary echoes the rhetoric of Francisco Franco's dictatorship in Spain in which tolerance and cultural openness were to a great extent criminalized (29). Shaw points out the silent dialogue between the images of hope in the 1968 *Memories*, and those of loss in *Strawberry* twenty-five years later.

If Gutiérrez Alea's two films span the hopes and disappointment of a quarter century of the Cuban revolution, two of Mexico's most commercially successful films are just as diametrically distant from each other. *Like Water for Chocolate*, based on Laura Esquivel's 1989 novel of the same title, was the highest grossing foreign-language film in the United States in 1993. The screenplay, written by the novelist, and the

1. John Mraz, "Absolved by History: On the Aesthetics and Ideology of History in the Cuban Film Institute," *Film-Historia* 3, no.3 (1993): 385.

film, directed by her then husband, Alfonso Arau, resulted in what Shaw calls a “tourist friendly” view of Mexico, whose representations of female characters are nostalgic and disappointingly traditional. There is no attempt in this period film to deal with real problems of women. That its antifeminist subtext marks an apex of Mexican commercial cinema is disturbing.

The other internationally successful recent Mexican film is also disturbing. *Amores perros* (2000) directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, is a critique of violence, materialism, and machismo in Mexico. The narrative is based on the film’s three “chapters” or segments, all of which result from a car crash that impacts all characters in the film. Violence continues throughout the film in the form of dog fighting, a grisly exploitation of animals that two brothers operate for money. Their corrupt underworld can exist within in a larger society that lacks an effective government. The plot is shared by three characters, all male, in a film devoid of credible female roles. Shaw notes the dismal representation of women in both these internationally recognized Mexican contributions.

Cinema has always drawn from literature and history for its subject matter, and Chile’s political trauma under the dictator Augusto Pinochet provides ample filmic opportunities. In 1978 the dictator passed the amnesty law, which granted amnesty to those who committed political crimes after 1973, and called for the nation to forget five years of political persecution, disappearances, and torture. So the crimes of the Pinochet regime went unpunished, and the burden of prosecuting them was left to the victims who suffered loss. Gonzalo Justiniano’s *Amnesia* (1994) is an example of the director’s dexterity in juxtaposing past memories with present denials. The protagonist, Ramírez, suffering from mental illness, is unable to lead a normal life. Flashbacks of the horror of past killings are juxtaposed with segments in the narrative present until Ramírez confronts his traumas and can put closure on memories that robbed him of his mental stability.

Ricardo Larraín’s *La frontera* (1991) is another film that attests to the Chilean capacity to cope with adversity. Among Pinochet’s means of dealing with political dissidents was to exile them to inhospitable regions of the country, such as offshore islands subject to tidal waves. Internal exile produces the paradox of being both in, but cut off from, one’s own country. Those lost at sea in tidal waves are, metaphorically, those who have disappeared, mysteriously swallowed up by the regime, seen as the equivalent of a great natural disaster. Survivors exiled to these hostile regions learn to work together in harmony with extreme ecological conditions as they strive to build a better community for themselves.

Latin American filmmakers are generally much more eager to address political issues than those of Europe today, or than Hollywood

has ever been. Among Argentina's best directors is Fernando Solanas, whose epic film, *El viaje* (1991), critiques the country's political and cultural identity. With the panoramic *El viaje*, Shaw contrasts María Luisa Bemberg's intimate portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *I The Worst of All*, which narrates the life of Mexico's baroque poet, emphasizing her difficult personal relationships and her ultimate sacrifice of her genius to the church.

Fernando Solana, a trained musician and film theorist, conceived of *El viaje* as an opera in three movements (110) in which Martín, whose name recalls that of Argentina's folk hero, Martín Fierro, journeys through five Latin American countries in search of his father and his identity. The film's opulent cinematography contrasts with the encounter of some of Latin America's enduring problems: exile of indigenous populations, resistance of urban masses, and negative authority figures. Satire and parody of politicians, from President Carlos Menem of Argentina to State Department members of the Organization of American States, to the first President Bush, create a cartoonish quality in this extensive search for identity in Latin America. Martín never finds his father, but finds himself in a community of male characters.

In almost complete opposition to the focus on a male hero who travels throughout Latin America is María Luisa Bemberg's *I, The Worst of All* (1990) a film biography of Mexico's seventeenth-century female baroque poet, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Bemberg, who directed the enormously successful *Camila* (1984), mastered in that film the strategies of narrating a period piece from a contemporary point of view. So her portrayal of Sor Juana is that of a female Renaissance radical embroiled in a constant power struggle with the church hierarchy between enlightenment and obscurantism, and against the misogyny and totalitarianism of an autocratic patriarchy. Cloistered convent spaces provide an inquisitorial mise-en-scène, and the scenes between Sor Juana and her benefactor, Vice Regent María Luisa Manrique de Lara, are tense with the romantic emotions of some of Sor Juana's poems. Shaw points out how the fascist cinematography of this film links the inquisitorial character of colonialism with the brutal dictatorships Latin America has suffered in more recent times. For her historical data, Bemberg relied upon Octavio Paz's biography of Sor Juana, but elaborates this narrative with a compelling cinematography all her own.

Shaw completes her study by turning to two Brazilian filmmakers whose images of the lives of abandoned children translate into commentary on twentieth-century Brazilian society. The first of these filmmakers is Hector Babenco whose *Pixote* (1981) shocked international audiences with its brutality and neorealism. With its hint of documentary style, use of street kids as well as professional actors, and unrelenting series of horrific encounters in a hostile world, the images of this

film imprint indelibly in viewers' minds the life of a modern Brazilian picaro. *Pixote* is a homeless but crafty ten-year-old orphan boy who, with a gang of others like him, manages to survive harrowing encounters with police and reform school. Life in the urban jungle, however, he did not survive: *Pixote* was shot dead by police in 1987.

Pale in comparison to *Pixote*, and much more optimistic, is the allegorical, *Central Station* (1998) in which the nine-year-old orphan, Josué, is rescued by an older woman before the innocence of childhood is lost to him. Josué and his maternal surrogate, Dora, return to the rural *sertão*, which, in spite of its abysmal poverty, is seen as a more promising place than the city to grow up in. The director, Walter Salles, won the Sundance Institute International award for the screenplay of *Central Station*, a film that plays the urban jungle of Rio against the drought-stricken but more humane *sertão*, and the mothering instincts of a prostitute, Dora, against *Pixote's* lack of family relationships.

Shaw's discussion of *Pixote* and *Central Station* makes it clear that Brazilian film is a national art form that has reached heights of brilliance in the works of some renowned cinema directors. Among these, none is more key to understanding Brazilian cinema than Nelson Pereira dos Santos, precursor of, and participator in, Brazil's innovative *cinema novo*. He is the subject of Darlene J. Sadlier's critical biography published in the University of Illinois' series of Contemporary Film Directors.

Pereira (São Paulo, 1928) was among the first Brazilian directors to rescue Brazilian film from the fake Hollywood visions of holidays in Rio enacted by such figures as Carmen Miranda. As a young man he hoped to make movies that included people from all classes of Brazilian life, not just the wealthy, and to deal with social problems that never reached the Hollywood-dominated Brazilian film screens. His first film, *Rio, 40 graus* (*Rio, 100 Degrees*) (1955) reflects the director's concern with the lives and language of the poor so stridently that even the Communist Party, of which he was a member, removed him from his position on one of its local committees. The following discussion focuses on two of Pereira's masterpieces, *Barren Lives* (1963) and *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* (1970).

The first of these two renowned films is based on Brazilian novelist Graciliano Ramos's best-known work of 1938, *Vidas secas*, a tale of drought and poverty in the *sertão* region of northeastern Brazil. A migrant worker, Fabiano, his wife, Senhá Vitória, and their two sons try to survive in the drought-stricken backlands, moving from town to town with their dog, Baleia, and a pet parrot. Baleia hunts cavy, a native short-tailed rodent, and brings them to the family to eat, so she is one of the most productive members of the family. The parrot, whose contribution to the family is less substantial, soon becomes dinner.

In a long introductory sequence of the film, shot on black and white film stock, cinematographer Luiz Carlos Barreto suggests the unbearable

conditions endured by animals and humans by removing the filters from his camera lens to overexpose shots of the blinding sunlight of the *sertão*. An accompanying soundtrack of the irritating squeak of a wagon wheel creates discomfort for viewers as a hint of that endured by Fabiano and his family. Along with the grating sound and blinding light that contribute to the scorched-earth world of *Barren Lives* is the lack of dialogue, suggesting exhaustion and the inability to expend the energy to speak. The characters rarely talk to each other, and when they do they are seen from afar, backs to the camera, so that their dialogue appears distant, often inaudible. The most vocal family member is Baleia, whose barks punctuate the silence of this film and to which the family readily responds.

Resulting from an encounter with a wandering soldier, Fabiano finds himself in jail for no reason, a reference to a capricious local government. But a gang of *cangaceiros*, or bandits, roars through town and demands that the town authorities release Fabiano and another prisoner. Fabiano and his family resume their trek as a result of this unexplained action. Not only do the laborers exist at the mercy of a hostile environment, but also at the whim of vigilantes whose caprice signals that Fabiano's existence and that of his family is fragile, often out of his control.

From the stark black and white images of *Barren Lives*, in 1972, Pereira filmed *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* in an opposite extreme, using outrageous color film stock. In what Sadlier terms one of "the most talked about movies in the history of Brazilian cinema" (74), Pereira constructs a comic horror film in which sixteenth-century intertexts are read as current events in an analogy of colonialism with global capitalism. This film is Pereira's response to Brazil's building of the Trans-Amazon Highway, in the course of which contact with indigenous communities was made that threatened them with near extinction. The current destruction of habitat and native populations recalled to Pereira the traumas of colonization, and he began his film based on several historical texts of sixteenth-century explorers in Brazil. In his film, these texts are treated as current news reports of events occurring between the foreign explorers and the Tupinambá, an indigenous tribe that practiced cannibalism. The ingesting of foreign invaders thus becomes for Pereira a metaphor for indigenous resistance to global capitalism, the most recent form of economic colonization.

The basic horror of *My Little Frenchman*, located in the encounter between Europe and indigenous populations, is conveyed in comic mode. Sixteenth-century Europeans, like the audiences of 1972, were scandalized by the nudity of tribal peoples. In the film, Europeans hurry to put clothes on tribal women from whom, in private, they solicit sexual favors. Pereira justified his filming of tribal nudity by respecting not only historical sources but the tribal culture as well, insisting that the

indigenous people simply went about their rather mundane lives except when having to fight invaders. European authorities of the 1970s as well as Brazilian censors, however, were not impressed by the film's "archaeological" value and banned it not only at home but at the Cannes Film Festival where it was rejected. While modern culture has by now achieved a degree of acceptance of nudity since Pereira made this film, general indifference to the possible annihilation of an indigenous tribe has changed little since colonial times.

The Tupinambá take one of the French explorers captive and provide him with a comfortable life and a wife to boot, until they decide to eat him. The idea of ingesting the European is seen as a defensive response in hopes that by eating him, the tribe would acquire the foreigner's attributes and thus be better able to repel him. The explorers responded to cannibalism with overkill. The Portuguese governor general of Brazil wrote in 1557 of the European reaction to indigenous cannibalism: "There I fought on the sea, so that no Tupiniquim remained alive. The dead stretched rigidly along the shoreline covering nearly a league."<sup>2</sup> The metaphor of Brazil's assuming massive foreign debt in order to build projects such as the Trans-Amazon Highway and thus better compete against foreign investors is one of the central metaphors of *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*.

That Luis Buñuel, one of film history's greatest directors, served Mexican cinema in much the same way as Pereira dos Santos in Brazil, as inspiration and renovator of stale genre films is emphasized by Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz in *Buñuel and Mexico: The Crisis of National Cinema*. As Pereira made it impossible for film goers to ignore the slums of Rio's *favelas*, Buñuel brought the shacks of Mexico City's periphery into sharp focus, igniting the ire of some who chose to ignore them.

Acevedo-Muñoz describes the decline into which Mexico's film industry had fallen. Mexican films of the 1940s were dominated by stale genres such as the *comedia ranchera*, the *cabaretera* films that titillated the public with lives of prostitutes and "marginal" women, and comedies starring the famous comedian, Cantinflas and Tin-Tán. Emilio Fernández was one of the few directors who made films concerned with Mexico's modernization, as in *Río Escondido* (1947). His most famous movie, *María Candelaria* (1943), starring Dolores del Río, explored the relationship of Mexico's indigenous population to the national identity, or *mexicanidad*. It was largely an escapist national cinema in which Buñuel began to work when he arrived in Mexico in 1946. Buñuel immersed himself in the realities of making films in what was for him a new culture and an unfamiliar film studio system. His first two films,

2. Governor-general Mem de Sá, quoted in Shaw, 70.



*El gran casino* (1946) and *La gran calavera* (1949), were both potboilers and gave rise to articles by his European observers lamenting that Buñuel had “sold out” in Mexico.

Buñuel’s next film, however, *Los olvidados*, rose above the *arrabalera*, or urban street drama, and landed like a bomb tossed at both the film-going public and the industry. *Los olvidados* made clear that Buñuel had lost none of his power to critique Mexican society for lacking a social system that was even remotely capable of dealing with its indigent youth, and that he was unafraid to inject stale film genres with the kind of caustic, satiric irony that had gotten his film of poverty in Spain, *Las Hurdes, tierra sin pan*, banned in 1932. Following Charles Ramírez Berg’s example, in *Cinema of Solitude*, of reading Mexican film through Octavio Paz’s famous essay analyzing Mexican identity, Acevedo-Muñoz entitles his discussion of *Los olvidados* “The Labyrinth” (61).<sup>3</sup>

Acevedo-Muñoz locates the decade of films Buñuel made from 1946 to 1956 in Mexico within the context of the Mexican film industry, which he describes as constrained by lack of funding and embedded within a society whose modernization was halting and sporadic. Setting his study of negligent “auteur criticism” (2) and what he takes as “critical prejudice” (4) against Buñuel’s Mexican films in prior studies of Buñuel’s cinema, Acevedo-Muñoz undertakes the thankless task of analyzing what, not just critics but Buñuel himself, recognized as some of his most negligible films. His purpose is to detail the social, cultural, and political context of the Mexican film industry of the 1930s and 1940s so that study of what he himself calls “the studio pot-boilers (*Gran casino*), the conventional pictures (*Una mujer sin amor*), the flamboyant melodramas (*Susana*), and the socially aware satires (*Subida al cielo*, *La ilusión viaja en tranvía*)” when seen in the context of the Mexican film industry “can give us a more complete view of the career of Luis Buñuel” (11). But when Acevedo-Muñoz himself labels one of what he calls the “minor” films (*Una mujer sin amor*) as “the most Mexican of [Buñuel’s] movies . . . truly unrecognizable as a ‘Buñuel film’” (101), he seems to echo the auteurist view that the “master’s” most minor films, including the Mexican products Buñuel disowned, “contribute to a deeper, richer understanding of his work” (1).

The most intriguing chapter of *Buñuel and Mexico* is the last in which the author delves into what he calls the “macho-dramas.” Again Charles Ramírez Berg’s chapter 6, “The Macho and the State,” comes to mind in Acevedo-Muñoz’s analogy of Mexican machismo with national identity. In this chapter new ground is covered when we learn that Buñuel, with the irony typical of his mindset, cast the movie icon of Mexican

3. Charles Ramírez Berg, *The Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967–1983*. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1992.)



manliness, Pedro Armendáriz, as “El bruto,” the butcher whom an aging landlord hires to frighten unwanted tenants from property he prefers to sell to developers. Conflict between social class and masculinity is underscored when the landlord’s young wife tries to seduce the butcher, but when he refuses, she has him jailed. When the landlord confronts the butcher with his imagined crime, El bruto kills him. As the police arrive to arrest El bruto there is no question that the aging landowner has manipulated El bruto’s image of masculinity for his own purposes.

In the same ironic casting, Buñuel persuaded another Mexican matinee idol, Fernando Soler, to play the role of a paranoid man whose marriage plans fall apart when he begins to prevent his fiancée from normal social contacts because of his extreme jealousy. Based on the Spanish novel by Mercedes Pinto, *El* ranks with *Nazarín*, *Diary of a Chambermaid*, and *Tristana* as among Buñuel’s more meticulous character studies.

Completing this chapter is discussion of another of Buñuel’s explorations of male pathology in *Ensayo de un crimen: La vida de Archibaldo de la Cruz*. Archi is the son of a wealthy family who as a boy witnessed turbulent action during the Mexican Revolution when his governess was killed by a stray bullet. He has grown up with the lasting erotic image of her bleeding leg in his mind, which develops into his overwhelming urge to kill women. Again, a pathological personality is explored with humor, enacted by an elegant but smarmy actor from soap-opera melodramas who excels in the role of a confused but potentially murderous Mexican male. Unsuccessful at killing a number of female targets, Archi finally succeeds at burning a manikin of his girlfriend, Lavinia. This immolation somehow cures his homicidal connection of murder with erotic desire, and he is able to marry Lavinia. These three films are reminders that Buñuel’s interest in the irrational mind, which he explored with the surrealists, remained with him in Mexico.

Was Buñuel’s imprint on the Mexican film industry a lasting one? Acevedo-Muñoz’s assessment goes beyond that of Carlos J. Mora, for whom “the effect of Buñuel’s work on the Mexican film industry was negligible. His only protégé was Luis Alcoriza who collaborated on *Los olvidados* and several other Buñuel films. But few Mexican directors sought to emulate the Buñuel style, although his colleagues have been justifiably proud that the “master’s art matured in Mexico . . .”<sup>4</sup> But Acevedo-Muñoz’s assertion that “auteur criticism can take Buñuel out of Mexico but it cannot take Mexico out of Buñuel” (4) contrasts with the observation by Víctor Fuentes, that “Buñuel tried to continue in Mexico what he began in Republican Spain at Filmófono Studios: to

4. Carlos J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896–1988*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 91.

make a popular commercial cinema, but with cultural dignity."<sup>5</sup> Fuentes's conclusion that "In spite of his success, Buñuel never completely ceased to be an exile working within the Mexican cinematographic institution" (164) explains why "In spite of his success, by 1956, the doors to the Mexican film industry had already practically closed on him" (165). Fuentes considers the three great Mexican films, *Nazarín* (1958), *Simón del desierto* (1965), and *El ángel exterminador* (1962) to be part of "an apotheosis of a cinema of exile redeemed" and *Viridiana*, the film that marks Buñuel's return to filming in Spain, to be "the apex of the cinema of exile" (166). Analysis of none of these "three great Mexican films" is included in *Buñuel and Mexico*.

These three volumes are invaluable sources of information about Latin American, and specifically Brazilian cinema, and will help educate a public whose interest in these films is increasing. Concluding the information contained in them, two thoughts predominated: The first is the dearth of positive female characters in cinema from Brazil and Latin America. Deborah Shaw is correct when she remarks that if the only revolutionary female represented in the ten films she discusses is the seventeenth-century poet, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, they reveal a disturbing lack of attention to exciting, more contemporary female roles (182).

The reader of these volumes is also struck by a consistent use of documentary in Latin American and Brazilian films. From Buñuel's *Los olvidados* of 1950, that repeats topics of sociological interest evident in his 1932 ethnographic documentary, *Las Hurdes, Tierra sin Pan*, to Pereira dos Santos's extraordinary mock-documentary in *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* of 1972, to Hector Babenco's *Pixote* of 1981 whose central character was a homeless boy of the streets, the desire to make films that give testimony, perhaps rooted in the early conception of cinema as a new medium for copying reality in motion, recurs in these films. As Pereira dos Santos remarked in a 1995 interview, "the camera has a quasi-documentary distance" (Sadlier, 126) and it is this making real of another, largely unfamiliar reality of Latin America and Brazil that the films discussed in these volumes achieve. The authors of the volumes discussed make these films much more coherent and accessible to English-speaking students of Latin American and Brazilian culture.

5. Víctor Fuentes, "The Constant of Exile in Buñuel," in *Luis Buñuel: New Readings*, edited by Peter William Evans and Isabel Santaolalla (London: The British Film Institute, 2004), 164.