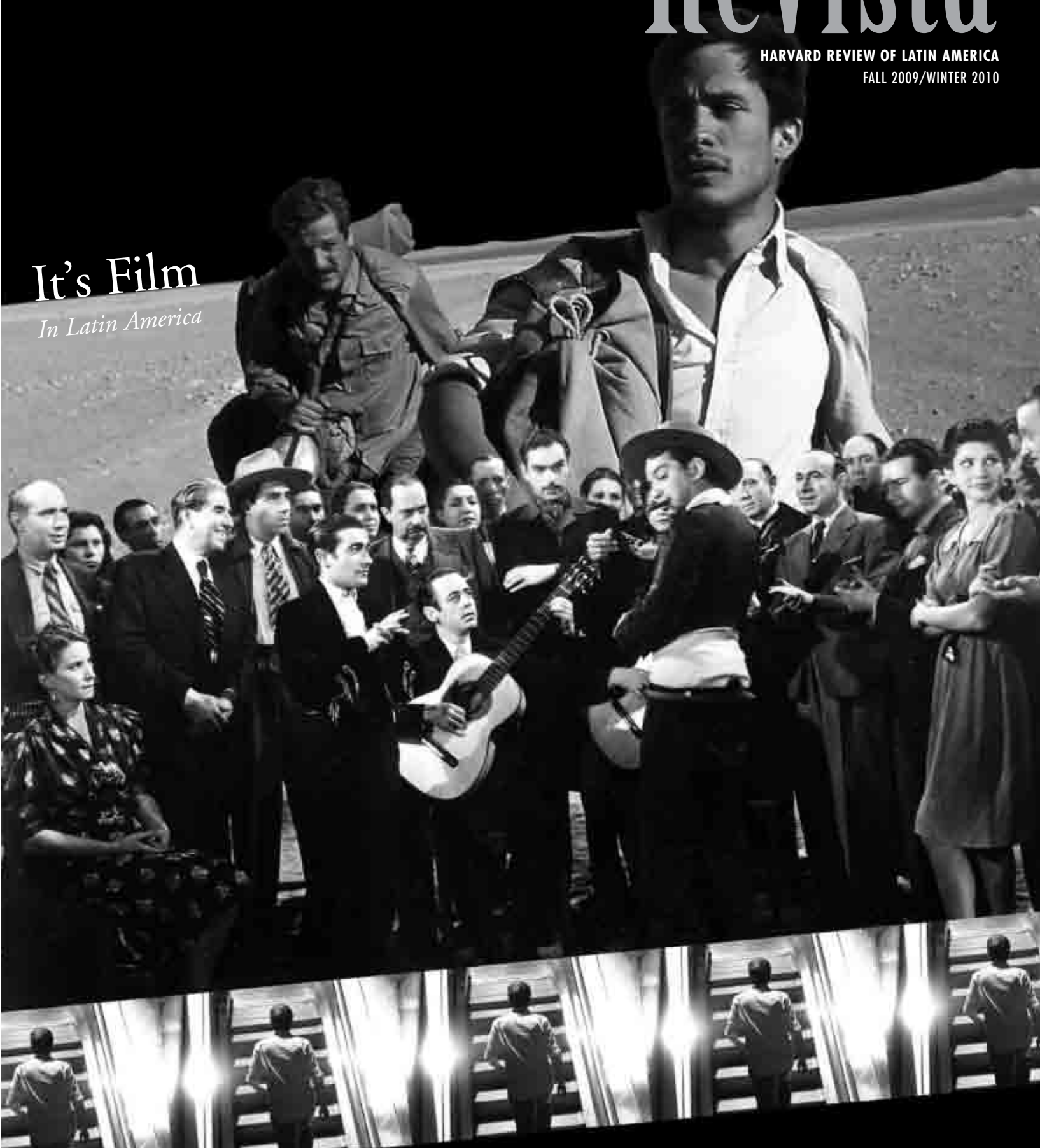


ReVista

HARVARD REVIEW OF LATIN AMERICA
FALL 2009/WINTER 2010

It's Film
In Latin America



EDITOR'S LETTER

For me, movies are magic. And movie going is an emotional experience or maybe I should say, two types of emotional experience. I love to go to a film by myself, curl up in the seat and lose myself in the darkness to the big screen. I also delight in going with friends, passing the popcorn and engaging in the lively debate of a shared experience afterwards. Both experiences are a form of transformation, whether collective or personal, even if I've seen the film several times before.

I expected a flood of responses to my request for people to write about their favorite film (the short articles you will find scattered through these pages). So I was surprised when my question seemed to produce anxiety beyond the fact of one more thing to do in always hectic lives. "Let me think about it," "But I'm not a film expert..." "Just one film?" were some of the answers. Was this not such a simple task?

So I decided to try the exercise on myself.

In the process of developing this issue on film, we—myself and my guiding lights Harvard Film Archive Director Haden Guest and Harvard Romance Languages and Literatures Professor Brad Epps—had decided to limit the issue to film in Latin America, rather than including film from Spain and Latino films (a good excuse for another film issue!). That made choosing a lot more difficult.

I reread my own little query to my readers. It included films that make us see Latin America in a different light, even if they are not Latin American or about Latin America. And I realized that the two most important films for me in that sense fell into that category. The first was the 1952 *Mexican Bus Ride, Subida al Cielo*, directed by Luis Buñuel, a Spanish-born filmmaker. I was surprised just now on researching the film that it is billed as a comedy, because I remembered it as a tragedy, as a young man on his wedding night who is prevented by Mexico's rickety buses and accompanying mishaps from reaching his mother's deathbed.

The other film has everything and nothing to do with Latin America. The 1966 movie *Battle of Algiers*, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, takes place in North Africa and depicts the Algerian War against French colonial rule. I've seen the film at least a dozen times, and it helped me understand the wars I covered in Central America—both the liberation struggles and the counterinsurgency.

But then I began to fret about my two choices. I try to remember all those magical moments, second guess my decision; my lists grow longer and longer. Indeed, this entire issue of *ReVista*—not just the personal blurbs about film—has been an exercise in limitation. We've chosen here to focus on five countries: Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Cuba. Again, a delightful excuse for another film issue!

This issue has blended perspectives from filmmakers and film-goers, Latin Americans and Latin Americanists, providing glimpses of film trends past and present. But as I write this letter, I'm reminded of the moment when one leaves the theatre and the reality of harsh daylight or blaring car horns shatters the mood.

One of the reasons we struggled so hard to limit the scope of this issue was to ensure that we could keep publishing *ReVista* this academic year, business as usual. But despite our efforts and your generous donations, we will only publish twice in 2009-10 because of the current economic situation. We hope this is a temporary measure.

Meanwhile, use the new comment function on the online version of *ReVista* <<http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/publications>> to let *ReVista* readers know more about the Latin American films that have had an impact on your life.

See you at the movies!



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top, *Motorcycle Diaries* (2004),
photo by Paula Prandini, courtesy
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Cantinflas in *Ni sangre ni arena*
(1941), photo courtesy of Filmo-
teca UNAM Collection, Mexico;
bottom, *Castro*, directed by Alejo
Moguillansky, Argentina, 2009.

Mexico's National Museum of Cinema

Filmmaking and Identity

BY CLAUDIA ARROYO QUIROZ

MEXICO HAS A LONG HISTORY OF filmmaking, from the silent era to the present, with some particularly prolific periods that have been stimulated by state sponsorship and international recognition. Appreciation of the results that began in the 1940s, when Mexican films won prizes at European festivals such as Cannes, has continued more recently with the success of directors such as Alfonso Cuarón (*Y tu mamá también*, 2001/*And Your Mother, Too*), Alejandro González Iñárritu (*Amores perros*, 2000/*Love's a Bitch*; *Babel*, 2006) and Guillermo del Toro (*El laberinto del fauno*, 2006/*Pan's Labyrinth*). The National Museum of Cinema seeks to broaden Mexico's collective knowledge about its national film history, but first I'd like to provide a little bit of it here.

During the silent period, cinema served as both entertainment and a source of information through fiction features, very

much influenced by European and American films, and through documentaries that registered the final phase of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship (1876-1910) and the avatars of the Revolution (1910-17). In the 1920s, film production was not so abundant in part because the newly formed state focused on sponsoring other projects such as public education and mural art. It was not until the mid-1930s that the post-revolutionary state invested in cinema on a large scale, which led to the formation of a film industry that in the 1940s dominated the market of the Spanish-speaking world (Latin America, Spain and the United States). This period, known as the Golden Age (1935-55), saw the emergence of new genres, directors with distinctive styles and a local star system that helped to assure a massive audience. Characterized by the predominance of a nationalist discourse and a melodramatic narrative, Golden Age

cinema gained international recognition particularly through the success of director Emilio Fernández and his cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa.

In the 1960s, a new generation of filmmakers and film critics began to reject the 1940s popular cinema. Their attempts to form a new film culture, along with state funding in the early 1970s, contributed to the development of a kind of *auteur* cinema led by directors like Felipe Cazals and Arturo Ripstein. In the early 1990s, Mexico's cultural scene came to be refreshed by a new corpus of films produced by younger directors, which would come to be known, both locally and abroad, as the New Mexican Cinema. While several of these directors have continued to consolidate their careers, with some of them now settled in the international arena, in recent years other new filmmakers have managed to produce their first feature films, despite the finan-



cial difficulties aggravated by Hollywood's supremacy in the country's movie theatres, and to a large extent thanks to the support provided by local annual festivals such as those in Guadalajara and Morelia.

Unlike the *auteur* cinema produced from the 1960s to the present, which has been viewed and praised mainly by the middle classes, the more popular, industrial and melodramatic cinema (Golden Age films and successful genres of subsequent decades such as wrestler and *fichera* films) is very much cherished by a large part of Mexico's population. Love of these older films has been fuelled by the state and by media companies that have promoted this film heritage through retrospectives, commercial DVD editions and constant TV reruns. In particular, Golden Age cinema has been widely celebrated by official discourse and the mass media as a key component of the nation's cultural heritage, for instance through homages dedicated to directors and stars.

Mexico's long tradition of preserving its film heritage is maintained at present by institutions like Cineteca Nacional (Education Ministry) and the Filmoteca UNAM (National Autonomous University), film studios (Estudios Churubusco) and private

collectors; all of them have preserved not only the films themselves but also a wide range of still images, sound material and all sorts of objects related to cinematographic production.

Such preservation work has led to the creation of the National Museum of Cinema, a project sponsored by the Mexican Institute of Cinematography (IMCINE), the official entity in charge of promoting the development of the country's cinematographic activities. President Felipe Calderón announced the creation of the museum in 2008 during the celebrations of the centennial of the birth of the cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa. The document outlining the project highlights the cultural and educational function assigned to the museum, stating that it will be "a dynamic and interactive space that will illustrate the history of our cinema and the contributions made by Mexican cinema's images and filmmakers to both our culture and our collective imaginings." The document also envisages that the museum will take part in the reconfiguration of the national identity, stating that the project aims "to draw the new generations to the cultural referents of our cinema in the process of constructing our national

identity for the 21st century."

The initial stage of the project has involved the formation of a multidisciplinary working group that includes film scholars, collectors, museographers, scriptwriters, architects and visual artists. This group is currently working on the museum's inaugural exhibition, entitled *Cinema and the Mexican Revolution*, which will open in the second half of 2010 at the Antigua Colegio de San Ildefonso during the commemoration of the centenary of the beginning of the Revolution. Conceived as the official "letter of presentation" of the museum, the exhibition will explore how cinema, both national and foreign, documentary and fiction, has represented the Mexican Revolution from the outbreak of that war to the present day.

Housed in nine rooms, the exhibition will treat the following themes: the sociopolitical and cultural context of pre-revolutionary Mexico; the documentaries produced during the Revolution; the representation of the revolutionary leaders (*caudillos*) in fiction films; the genealogy of the representation of the Revolution in Mexico's visual culture in the 1920s and 1930s; the construction of natural and



Shown here are posters for many popular Mexican films.

artificial spaces in the *mise-en-scène* of the films; the representation of the physical and social mobilizations caused by the civil war; the characterization of violence and death during the war; the construction of gender identities in fiction films; and finally, the representation of the Revolution in Hollywood and European cinema. The design of these rooms will be based on both the research carried out by film historians and the proposals made by museographers and artists. In addition, there will be outdoor public exhibitions that will include installations and activities such as film screenings, a collective book with research articles that will be based on the exhibition; and a television series produced by TV UNAM using some of the research findings.

The creation of this museum is inscribed within a long tradition of administering cultural heritage that was implemented in Mexico from the beginning of the post-revolutionary period. Given the nationalist orientation of its post-revolutionary policy, Mexico has invested a great deal in both preserving its cultural heritage and integrating it into an extensive system of museums, more than any other country in Latin America. As UAM anthropology professor

Néstor García Canclini indicates in *Culturas híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (México: Grijalbo, 1990), museums have constituted the scene for the classification and assessment of cultural goods in Mexico along with schooling and the mass media.

Since the heritage to be exhibited is film, the National Museum of Cinema could prove to be at once advantageous and sensitive, as it will be maneuvering a corpus of cultural goods that hold a special place in the collective imagination. In this sense, it

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will be interesting to see how the museum addresses the visitor as a citizen in relation to his/her country's history of filmmaking. In "Muralism and the People: Culture, Popular Citizenship, and Government in Post-Revolutionary Mexico" (*The Communication Review*, 5:7-38, 2002), Dartmouth College art history professor Mary K. Coffey describes the museum visitor as a "citizen-

addressee' who is hailed by the museum as a subject and offered 'a position in history and a relationship to that history.'" In addition to noting this function, we will also witness to what extent the museum mobilizes a discourse regarding its potential contribution to a process of reconfiguring the national identity, as the document presenting the project suggests.

In displaying the history of the film representation of the Revolution, the exhibition will allow the viewer to see how this representation has changed over time, in accordance

with discursive formations and the political necessities of the various historical periods. The exhibition will carry out a conceptual and spatial organization of film materials that will guide, in one way or another, the interpretations of the visitor/citizen about cinema's construction of the Revolution. In the context of Coffey's analysis, this is related to the fact that the meaning of any visual culture is always contingent upon contextualization; an idea that can be developed further through the following questions: where is the piece of visual culture located? What are the rituals governing interpretation in that site? How is it framed or positioned?

Through this exhibition and subsequent ones, the National Museum of Cinema will provide novel and unique ways of displaying and socializing Mexico's film culture. This will allow the public to reflect upon the significance of this crucial aspect of the country's cultural history and, consequently, also on the role of audiovisual culture in the construction of collective imaginings and identities.

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Many Mexican films told the story of revolutionary heroes, as seen in these posters.