PUBLIC SPECTACLES OF VIOLENCE

Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil

RIELLE NAVITSKI

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Duke University Press
Durham and London 2017

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Heather Hensley
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Navitski, Rielle, author.
Title: Public spectacles of violence : sensational cinema and journalism in early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil / Rielle Navitski.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016054235 (print)
LCCN 2017001028 (ebook)
ISBN 9780822369639 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN 9780822369752 (pbk. : alk. paper)
ISBN 9780822372899 (e-book)
Subjects: LCSH: Motion pictures—Mexico—History—20th century. | Motion pictures—Brazil—History—20th century. | Sensationalism in motion pictures. | Violence in motion pictures.
Classification: LCC PN1993.5.M6 N385 2017 (print) | LCC PN1993.5.M6 (ebook) | DDC 791.43097209/04—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016054235

Cover art: Execution scene from *El automóvil gris*.

For my family

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A NOTE ON USAGE

All translations from Spanish and Portuguese, except where otherwise noted, are my own. For purposes of consistency, Portuguese spellings have been modernized in conformity with the Portuguese Language Orthographic Agreement of 1990, enacted in 2009.

Films mentioned in the text have been attributed to individuals rather than production companies. Although the figure of the film director did not exist as such in many of the contexts analyzed herein, production companies were highly precarious, so I have preferred to cite the individuals involved and clarify their roles, where possible, in the body of the text.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research and writing of this book were made possible by generous support from the Institute for International Education, the Graduate Division of the University of California, Berkeley, and the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts at the University of Georgia.

I am deeply indebted to archivists and librarians in Mexico and Brazil for facilitating access to materials and permissions to reproduce images. I would like to express my gratitude to the staffs of the following archives and libraries: the Archivo General de la Nación, Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Biblioteca Nacional and Hemeroteca Nacional, Cineteca Nacional, and Filmoteca de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (special thanks to Antonia Rojas Ávila, Nahún Calleros Carriles, and Víctor Manuel Romero Cervantes) in Mexico City; the Arquivo Geral da Cidade do Rio de Janeiro, Arquivo Nacional, Biblioteca Nacional (special thanks to Bruno Brasil for assistance with copyright matters), and Museu da Imagem e do Som in Rio de Janeiro; the Cinemateca Brasileira in São Paulo; and the Fundação Joaquim Nabuco in Recife. For assistance with and permission to reproduce images, I thank the staffs of the New York Public Library and the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin. (special thanks to Michael O. Hironymous, Juan Felipe Leal, and Blanca Sánchez of Juan Pablos Editor.) Thanks are also due to the efficient staff of the Interlibrary Loan Department at the University of Georgia.

This book began its life as a Ph.D. dissertation completed in the Department of Film and Media at the University of California, Berkeley. I am deeply grateful to my dissertation chair, Kristen Whissel, for her intellectual sharpness, generosity, and unwavering support in all areas of my professional

development, as well as to my committee members Natalia Brizuela (who first encouraged me to study Brazil), Mary Ann Doane, and Mark Sandberg for their invaluable guidance and insightful feedback. I was fortunate to study with many other distinguished thinkers at Berkeley beyond my committee; among them, the scholarship and pedagogy of Jennifer M. Bean, Anton Kaes, Francine Masiello, Candace Slater, and Linda Williams played an especially significant role in the development of this project. I would also like to express my thanks to the Society of Cinema and Media Studies Dissertation Award committee and the participants in the Visual Cultures Working Group at Berkeley.

Portions of chapter 1 were published in an earlier form as "Spectacles of Violence and Politics: *El automóvil gris* (1919) and Revolutionary Mexico's Sensational Visual Culture," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (2014): 133–52.

Earlier versions of parts of this work were presented at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, the Latin American Studies Association International Congress, the Seminar on the Origins and History of Cinema at the Museu del Cinema in Girona, Spain, Domitor, the Jornada Brasileira de Cinema Silencioso, the International Berkeley Conference on Silent Cinema, the Cinematic Times Symposium at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Congreso del Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana. I am grateful to audience members and fellow panelists for their feedback.

I am truly fortunate to be working with Duke University Press and with senior editor Courtney Berger. Her guidance, enthusiasm, and faith in this project have been transformative. I am deeply grateful to the manuscript's two anonymous readers for their thoughtful, detailed, and extremely useful comments. I would also like to thank editorial assistant Sandra Korn and project manager Danielle Houtz for their dedication.

Archival research abroad involves considerable logistical, intellectual, and emotional challenges, and I am deeply appreciative of the researchers based in Brazil and Mexico who helped guide me through these challenges. I thank Misha Maclaird for helping launch me on my first research trip to Mexico City, in 2008, and for her hospitality on recent visits. David M. J. Wood, Itzia Fernández, and Adilson Mendes were instrumental in helping me build connections with other researchers and institutions in Mexico City and São Paulo. Fabiana Díaz, Hernani Heffner, Pedro Lapera, Sheila Schvarzman, Carlos Roberto de Souza, and Esperanza Vázquez Bernal generously took time to share their knowledge and expertise, and Paulo Carneiro da Cunha

Filho made me the kind gift of a copy of his recently published book. Ronaldo Correia de Brito enlisted members of Recife's intellectual and artistic circles on behalf of my research, and he, Avelina Brandão, and Isabel Correia Brandão welcomed me into their home at a moment when I felt lost. I will always remember their kindness. Luciana Corrêa de Araújo and Rafael de Luna Freire shaped this book by sharing their own meticulous historical research, reading work in progress, and providing enormously helpful suggestions and sources, and have become valued friends. I am grateful for the camaraderie of fellow researchers Katherine Brodbeck, Leonardo Cardoso, Anne Megan Daniels, Evan Farr, Danny Gough, Aialä Levy, Sara Anne Potter, and Lena Suk during my time abroad (and beyond), as well as to Claudia Paz, Vanya Tsutsui, Oswaldo Mejía Mendiola, Patricia Méndez Obregón, Sonia de Otto, and Diana Restrepo Restrepo for their friendship.

This book took on its current form in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies at the University of Georgia. Fellow writing-group members Jonathan Baillehache, Shira Chess, Emily Sahakian, and Frans Weiser provided invaluable feedback and motivation that helped move this project forward. I also want to thank Antje Ascheid, Marla Carlson, Amma Y. Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin, Richard Neupert, David Saltz, and Christopher Sieving for their encouragement and support; I am particularly indebted to Richard for his extensive help with illustrations. I am also grateful for the work of the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Institute and its director, Richard Gordon. The friendship of Mark Anderson, María-Alejandra Calva, Khédija Gadhoum, Miriam Jacobson, Pablo Lapegna, Ari Lieberman, Cecilia Rodrigues, Roberta Salmi, Paola de Santo, Alberto Villate Isaza, and Ilya Winham has greatly enriched life in Athens.

I was fortunate to encounter a supportive intellectual community in graduate school, including Robert Alford, Juan Caballero, Emily Carpenter, Alenda Chang, Paul Dobryden, Robin Ellis, Patrick Ellis, Kris Fallon, Muna Güvenç, Laura Horak, Jen Malkowski, Dolores McElroy, Simon Porzak, Jennifer Pranolo, Alisa Sánchez, Maria Vendetti, and Damon Young. Juan Sebastián Ospina León's dedication to the study of Latin American silent film has made him an especially valued interlocutor, as well as a dear friend. I am grateful to a broader community of scholars, including Jerónimo Arellano, Luisela Alvaray, Gilberto Blasini, Giorgio Bertellini, Jason Borge, Andrea Cuarterolo, Maria Chiara D'Argenio, Aurelio de los Reyes, Tamara Falicov, Annie Fee, Allyson Nadia Field, Colin Gunckel, Tom Gunning, Margaret Hennefeld, Brian R. Jacobson, Anupama Kapse, Dona Kercher, Ana M. López, Leslie

Marsh, Nicolas Poppe, Yeidy Rivero, Irene Rozsa, Ignacio Sánchez Prado, Laura Isabel Serna, Kim Tomadjoglou, Sarah J. Townsend, João Luiz Vieira, Sarah Ann Wells, and Tami Williams, for encouragement, suggestions, and stimulating exchanges. Xiaojue Hu, Emily Stoddard, and Daniela Tijerina Benner have been treasured friends for more than a decade now, and I continue to rely on their support.

My family has made my intellectual pursuits possible and kept me afloat during trying times. My sister, Alanna Navitski, has given me a more inclusive and humane understanding of what it means to be an educator. My father, Al Navitski, helped instill a passion for the past and for reading with his devotion to breathing life into forgotten books by uniting them with new audiences. My mother, Regina Edmonds, embodies the model of a scholar deeply committed to bettering the lives of those around her through empathy and compassion; her influence is felt on each page of this book.

My life took a turn I never expected the day I met José Guadalupe Vázquez Zavala. His presence has opened up worlds previously unknown to me, and his energy, generous spirit, and support have kept me moving *puro pa' delante*.

INTRODUCTION

Films that restaged public spectacles of real-life violence became the first popular successes of both Mexican and Brazilian cinema. In 1908, *Os estranguladores* (*The Stranglers*), a filmed reenactment of a robbery and murder in Rio de Janeiro's Italian immigrant community that is considered Brazil's first feature, was advertised as screening more than 830 times over three months.[1] Produced by the exhibitor and cameraman Antônio Leal to capitalize on sensational newspaper coverage and theatrical productions based on the case, *Os estranguladores* triggered a local craze for screen adaptations of real-life crimes. These early experiments with narrative films based on topical events exemplified the significant if short-lived success of local film production in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo between 1908 and 1911. Through the teens and twenties, sensational subjects ranging from infamous criminal cases to railway accidents figured prominently in efforts to establish film production in Brazil's fastest-growing cities, as well as in regional capitals and even small towns, where the effects of modernization were slow to materialize.

More than a decade after the premiere of *Os estranguladores*, veteran Mexican cameraman Enrique Rosas produced *El automóvil gris* (*The Grey Automobile*, 1919), a multi-episode serial film that became one of Mexican cinema's earliest box-office hits. *El automóvil gris*, like *Os estranguladores*, was an early experiment with narrative film in its country of production, as Mexican cinema was dominated by nonfiction films that documented the events of the Revolution between 1910 and 1917. Building on investigative newspaper reports,

El automóvil gris made use of real-life locations and participants in its reconstruction of acts of robbery, kidnapping, and murder attributed to "The Grey Automobile Gang," a criminal group with murky links to high-ranking military officers. Skillfully adapting the conventions of popular French and American serial films, *El automóvil gris* reportedly attracted 40,233 spectators in Mexico City in a single day and went on to break box-office records outside the capital.[2] Whereas *El automóvil gris* highlighted a revolutionary-era crisis of state authority that blurred the distinction between military and criminal violence, by the early 1920s, the production of adventure films in rural settings intersected with emerging currents of postrevolutionary nationalism. Framing film production as a sign of national progress, early film critics fostered ambitions for a uniquely Mexican cinema that nevertheless drew heavily on the codes of imported film genres (such as crime films and westerns) and formats (particularly sensational serial films).

The enthusiastic reception of *Os estranguladores* and *El automóvil gris* signals the pivotal role of sensational subjects in the development of film production and the expansion of mass culture in Mexico and Brazil between 1900 and 1930, a moment of accelerated industrialization and urbanization. Through an examination of the sensational visual cultures of early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil, I contend in this volume that the sensational mode is uniquely revealing of the transformation of quotidian experience and public life under capitalist modernity, particularly in Latin American contexts, where modernization has often accentuated profound social divides. Popular sensationalism—which I define as cultural forms that elicit powerful sensuous, emotional, and moral responses, that provoke intense public interest by referencing topical events and pressing social problems, and that are disseminated on a wide scale—is a product of the modern era. Like the distinct but often overlapping mode of melodrama, it dramatizes dominant moral values and their transgression in a post-sacred era, resonating with the social and perceptual transformations accompanying modernization.[3] Mexico and Brazil both experienced rapid change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as their economies were increasingly integrated into global circuits of trade and finance capital, railway networks spread across national territory, and the population of major cities expanded. Yet popular sensationalism gave expression not to a wholesale liquidation of premodern social organization and experiences of time and space, but rather to a "multitemporal heterogeneity" marked by the coexistence of modernity and tradition

and the persistence of profound social inequality alongside liberal ideals and democratizing impulses.[4]

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, both countries faced low literacy rates (22 percent in Mexico and 31 percent in Brazil in 1900), high urban crime rates, and outbreaks of internal armed conflict.[5] In these social conditions, visual depictions of violence became the focus of intense public interest, contributing to the expansion of mass culture. Although there was very little direct contact between the two nations' film cultures in the first three decades of the twentieth century, Mexico and Brazil shared complex experiences of modernization as triumphant in some geographic locations and elusive in others, and as both accelerated and delayed relative to the trajectories of development that had made nations like the United States and Great Britain industrial powers.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Mexico and Brazil possessed Latin America's two most highly industrialized economies.[6] By the late 1930s, they boasted two of the region's most robust culture industries. Following the transition to sound cinema at the end of the 1920s, Mexico and Brazil, together with Argentina, became the region's most prolific film-producing countries, as popular films capitalized on the musical genres of the Brazilian samba and Mexican *ranchera*. Together with the Argentine tango, these popular rhythms were increasingly viewed as sonic expressions of national cultures imagined as unified.[7] In Argentina, silent films had enjoyed some success in forging cinematic icons of the nation that conquered domestic and even some international markets, most notably the heroic gaucho of *Nobleza gaucha* (*Gaucho Nobility*, Humberto Cairo, Ernesto Gunche, and Eduardo Martínez de la Pera), which screened not only in Buenos Aires, but also in Barcelona, Lima, Rio de Janeiro, and Santiago.[8] *Nobleza gaucha* juxtaposed scenes of rural life with images of a modernizing Buenos Aires, whose urban spaces were reimagined as territories defined by immigrant and class identities in the silent films of José Agustín "El Negro" Ferreyra and others.[9] In Mexico and Brazil, by contrast, silent-era "foundational fictions" and other overtly nationalistic narratives found comparatively little commercial success. The two nations' early film cultures thus cannot be fully explained using the framework of the national cinema, which has been critiqued in recent decades.[10] Although domestic productions were often called "national films" in both countries during the period under study, they must be interpreted in the light of the global circulation and local reception of forms of mass culture produced in highly

industrialized countries. In particular, I trace sensational cinema's dialogues with French and American sensational journalism, popular detective fiction, and suspenseful serial films, as well as melodramatic forms (particularly serial literature and popular theater) specific to local and national contexts.

In *Public Spectacles of Violence* I read Mexico and Brazil's sensational silent-era cinema through its close relationship with print culture—graphically illustrated police reportage, serial literature, and fan magazines—in order to demonstrate how early twentieth-century visual culture in the two nations addressed experiences of modernization and novel forms of public life that were shaped by pervasive violence. To use Guy Debord's terms, public spectacles of violence constituted "a social relation among people, mediated by images."[11] I develop my analysis through close readings of surviving films, partial reconstructions of lost works from press accounts and archival sources, and attention to the reception of sensational genres, which influenced film production as well as debates about cinema's social effects and unique qualities as a medium. My analysis at once builds on and shifts direction from previous critical studies of the impact of cinema and photography in Mexico and Brazil, which tend to place literary production, and modernist writing in particular, at the center of their inquiry.[12] Instead, I recuperate the ephemeral artifacts of popular visual culture.

Exploring cinema's role in the emergence of mass media in two rapidly modernizing and highly stratified societies, I chart intersections between local experiences of modernization and emerging configurations of "international-popular culture." (These intersections, of course, are not limited to sensational cinema, but encompass a wide range of films that addressed local, regional, and national experiences of modernization, from actualities, travelogues, and promotional films, to narrative films that adapted literary classics or events from national history.) Formulated by Monica Dall'Asta to address the "repetitions, imitations, and cross-breedings" between U.S. film producers and their European rivals in the 1910s, the term "international-popular culture" refers specifically to the capacity of serial cinema to perpetuate itself across national borders.[13] As in the case of the Italian serials analyzed by Dall'Asta, the forms of international-popular culture that emerged from encounters between Mexican and Brazilian publics and imported films were marked by clear power differentials. Film exports from Mexico and Brazil to the United States were rare in the period, although they did exist. The exchanges that defined international-popular culture were often indirect, mediated by a process that Paul Schroeder-Rodríguez calls "triangulation." He notes that Latin American

silent-film producers navigated between multiple reference points—the cinemas of major film-exporting nations (particularly the United States, France, and Italy) and emerging conceptions of national culture marked by exclusionary notions of citizenship.[14] Informed by these dynamics, the cinemas of early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil gave expression to accelerated modernization in societies marked by regional, ethnic, and class divides.

Tracing parallel trajectories in the visual cultures of Mexico and Brazil, I develop a comparative analysis across its two national case studies. I begin with the Mexican case, which to some extent rewards analysis through a conventional national cinema framework. As I detail below, the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) fostered the development of a sensational visual culture, and postrevolutionary nationalism actively shaped film production of the 1920s. In the book's second half, I turn to the Brazilian context, which demands close attention to the local and regional scales. Whereas in Mexico filmmaking was concentrated in the capital—though there was significant regional production as well, notably in the states of Yucatán and Veracruz—in Brazil filmmaking activities emerged in multiple cities and towns, none of which managed to dominate or centralize the nation's production during the first three decades of the twentieth century.[15]

In part I, I trace the reception and production of sensational film genres and their print intertexts in early twentieth-century Mexico, reading narrative films made between 1919 and 1927 alongside forms of visual culture that date from the turn of the century, while in part II, I chart parallel developments in Brazilian film production between 1906 and 1930. The differences in these chronologies signal the impact of historical events on the development of narrative film language in the two countries. Sensational subjects loomed large in local efforts to win popular success for Mexican productions following a turn to narrative film in the wake of the Revolution. In particular, they intersected with a vogue for serial films that was closely linked with Hollywood studios' aggressive expansion into Mexico in the late teens, extending the dominance of foreign markets achieved during the First World War, which hampered the production and export of European cinemas.[16] Conversely, reconstructions of real-life crimes played a key role in the development of complex narrative films in Brazil beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, prior to abortive experiments with the production of serials in the late teens. By the 1920s, fictional spectacles of violence—ranging from physical combat to technological disaster—were cultivated widely in both Mexican and Brazilian cinemas.

Across the book's two parts, I identify two principal modes of staging cinematic spectacles of violence. Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century and continuing through the late 1920s, what I call "violent actualities" both recorded and reconstructed real-life incidents of violence. Incorporating production practices like location shooting, reenactment, and onscreen appearances by participants in the events, these films adopted an ambiguous relationship to topical happenings that recalls the mode of actuality filmmaking prevalent in cinema's earliest years, which encompassed both unstaged and staged footage. Testifying to cinema's unique ability to capture—or to convincingly fake—acts of violence, violent actualities reenacted unpredictable events that escaped the camera's lens. As I explore in chapters 1 and 3, films produced in Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo between 1906 and 1922 framed real-life criminal acts as signs of the industrial modernity embodied by metropolises like Paris, London, and New York.

Beginning in the late teens and early twenties, the production of what I refer to as "sensational fictions" in Mexico and Brazil offered film audiences wholly fictional spectacles of death, bodily peril, and technological catastrophe. As I show in the study of the reception and production of crime films in Rio de Janeiro in chapter 4, sensational fictions initially capitalized on the popularity of imported serials and their novelizations, published in installments in local newspapers. Sensational adventure melodramas—an expansive term I use to refer to crime and adventure serials and westerns of varying lengths and formats, which were often grouped together by local critics and fans—were considered outdated in Brazil's major cities by the early 1920s. Yet they continued to be exhibited widely in second-run neighborhood movie theaters and more remote locations. Their conventions proved particularly fruitful for filmmakers working outside metropolitan areas in both Mexico and Brazil, where the hyperkinetic physical action and special effects of westerns and crime and adventure serials were perceived as uniquely cinematic. Adventure melodramas offered models of cost-effective forms of film production that allowed filmmakers to showcase local landscapes.

As I argue in chapters 2 and 5, in both Mexico and Brazil sensational fictions played a prominent role in films made outside major cities, which framed their sites of production as modern communities and offered film enthusiasts the thrill of an encounter with modern visual technologies. Referring to Colombian cinema of the 1920s, Juana Suárez observes that being captured by the camera was part of the appeal for participants in regional production: "Film, in this sense, was not used only to record modernity but to produce

it."[17] Drawing on narrative models from imported cinema to (re)stage topical events and display local spaces, violent actualities and sensational fictions were seen as quintessentially modern and cinematic, and figured prominently in early efforts at narrative filmmaking across Latin America and beyond.[18]

Although distinctions between fiction and nonfiction remained somewhat fluid even after the consolidation of continuity editing codes in Hollywood cinema around 1915, unusual combinations of narrative film language with elements of documentation appear in the silent cinemas of Mexico and Brazil. Repurposed actuality footage and images of local landscapes cultivated a "view aesthetic," "capturing and preserving a look or vantage point" on a locale or event not specifically prepared for filming.[19] Although they often fulfilled narrative functions, these elements also held the potential to function as semiautonomous attractions for spectators.[20] Elements of visual documentation—including location shooting and reenactment—were highlighted in publicity discourses, suggesting their special appeal for spectators. Articulations of fictional and nonfictional conventions thus register the process by which internationally dominant cinematic codes were reformulated in the staging of local modernities. Conceptions of genres developed in major film-exporting countries were reconfigured through their audience and critical reception and in the production of films that drew selectively on their semantic and syntactic elements (that is, aspects of plot, setting, and costuming associated with a particular genre, and underlying narrative structures and thematic oppositions).[21] In Mexico and Brazil, sensational cinema emerged in dialogue with understandings of film genres developed elsewhere and reflected locally specific conceptions of the ontology of the moving image, its relationship to the real, and its ability to capture the present.

The extant and lost films I analyze in this book share their drive to document and display local spaces, and to create a sense of timeliness and eventfulness, with an expanding illustrated press. Throughout the book, I examine the intersection between sensational cinema and print culture, tracing a shift from cinema's position as an element of highly intermedial visual and entertainment cultures, to the popularization of serial films in close connection with serial literature, to the emergence of specialized discourses on cinema in newspapers and magazines as the fiction feature became increasingly dominant.[22] In chapters 1 and 3, I analyze the print intertexts of violent actualities, particularly the illustrated police blotter, whose narrative uses of photography overlapped with early cinema in Mexico, Brazil, and elsewhere, as Andrea Cuarterolo has shown in the case of Argentina.[23] Even as major

film-exporting countries shifted from the presentational thrills of a "cinema of attractions" toward "classical" forms of narrative illusionism, spectacles of physical violence and peril continued to offer pleasurable forms of thrilling realism.[24] By the mid-1910s, as imported serial films gained popularity with audiences, the practice of publishing tie-in novelizations in local newspapers in Brazil gave rise to forms of fan consumption across media that fueled the production of locally made serial films and fictional narratives, practices that reconfigured elements of international-popular culture produced abroad for local uses. While tie-in novelizations never became widely popular in Mexico, critics interpreted serial films through the lens of the serial novel (*folletín*). Close connections between cinema and the popular press emerged partly in response to the obstacles facing film production: producers evoked existing forms of sensational print culture to appeal to local audiences, and critics presented filmmaking itself as a newsworthy public spectacle. In chapters 2, 4, and 5, I examine how the reception and production of sensational fictions shaped early film criticism, discussions of cinema's specificity as a medium, and debates about the genres and strategies that should be adopted in national film production.

By the early 1920s, emerging forms of film criticism and fan culture in Mexico and Brazil increasingly framed film production as an indicator of modernity (whether national, regional, or local). Press discourses arguably had a greater public impact than the films themselves, which often received a lukewarm reception from spectators, and in the case of regional productions in particular, had difficulties reaching a wide audience. Laura Isabel Serna argues that in the Mexican case, the novel social practices surrounding the local reception of Hollywood films, including moviegoing, fan culture, and criticism, had a potentially greater impact than the small number of domestically produced films.[25] By contrast, I emphasize the discursive—if not the economic—significance of Mexican film production as mediated by the illustrated press.

The rationale for employing an intermedial approach in this book is twofold, responding both to these intimate links between cinema and the illustrated press, and to the dismal survival rate of silent films from Mexico and Brazil.[26] While the scope of this study is shaped by a desire to address those films that have survived, it also responds to a growing body of scholarship that takes the absence of film texts as potentially generative, building on the influential work of Giuliana Bruno.[27] In her recent study of "uplift cinema" at the Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes, Allyson Nadia Field emphasizes "the

presence of absence," stressing the need to grapple with both gaps and significant traces in the archive.[28] Writing in the context of early twentieth-century Japan, Aaron Gerow affirms the value of a "discursive history" of cinema's cultural field of reception. He argues that the loss of nearly all pre-1925 Japanese films prompts a productive break with textual and auteurist approaches, focusing attention on the constitutive force of discourse in contexts of cultural exchange.[29] Rather than recuperating lost films as evidence of a national cinema that asserts itself against the dominance of imported film (particularly Hollywood), this study reads the sensational cinemas of early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil through their intertexts in print culture and popular entertainment, examining local horizons of film reception and production alongside region-wide affinities and international exchanges.

National Modernities, International-Popular Culture

The parallel trajectories of silent film cultures in Mexico and Brazil are particularly striking if we consider the two nations' divergent paths of historical development. Mexico, like most present-day Latin American nations, is a product of an independence movement triggered by the Napoleonic invasion of Spain. The forced abdication of the Bourbon monarch Carlos IV and the installation of Joseph Bonaparte on the Spanish throne in 1808 weakened the legitimacy of the colonial government, favoring a shift towards greater local autonomy that culminated in the declaration of Mexico's independence in 1810, achieved in 1821 after more than a decade of conflict. Internal conflicts between liberals and conservatives (The War of the Reform, 1858–1861) and foreign wars and interventions (including the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848 that resulted in the loss of over half of Mexico's territory and the French Intervention of 1862–1867) hampered the development of a strong nation-state prior to the regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911).[30] Seizing power in the Tuxtepec Rebellion, Díaz went on to serve as president for over three decades, enacting an aggressive program of political centralization alongside industrialization and modernization projects fueled largely by foreign capital.

Brazil's historical trajectory is more unusual within the Latin American context. A monarchy for much of the nineteenth century, Brazil became the seat of the Portuguese empire when the royal family fled from an invasion by Napoleonic forces in 1807 to establish its court in the New World. In 1820, liberals in favor of a limited monarchy triumphed in Portugal, demanded the return of João VI and later his son Pedro I, and moved to restore Brazil to its

status as a colony. Instead, Pedro I declared Brazil an independent empire in 1822. By the final quarter of the nineteenth century, internal political divisions linked to the abolitionist movement had weakened the empire. Shortly after the 1888 "Golden Law" emancipated enslaved Brazilians, a largely bloodless 1889 coup against the aging Pedro II, led by Manuel Deodoro da Fonseca, resulted in the proclamation of the First Republic. Although the coming of the republic held out the promise of increased political power for social sectors outside the traditional agrarian elite (access to the vote had been progressively restricted under the empire), in practice the full exercise of citizenship in Republican Brazil was sharply limited along racial, class, and regional lines.

In Mexico, social unrest generated by economic inequality and labor repression, among other factors, erupted into civil war in 1910. Campaigns against the reelection of Díaz, who triumphed over Francisco I. Madero with obviously fraudulent poll results, tapped into discontent fueled by the regime's anti-democratic methods and the destabilizing effects of its programs of capitalist modernization. Díaz's policies had heavily favored foreign interests (while also benefiting Mexican industry) and contributed to the widespread dismantling of communal forms of social organization and economic production. Military victories by revolutionary forces under Pascual Orozco helped ensure the elections that brought Madero to power in 1911, but he failed to deliver sweeping social reforms. Madero was overthrown and then assassinated on the orders of his former military commander Victoriano Huerta during the 1913 counterrevolution known as the Decena Trágica (Tragic Ten Days). After Huerta was deposed, bitter rivalries between military factions persisted, with the moderate Constitutionalists, including Venustiano Carranza and Álvaro Obregón, ultimately prevailing over Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, who advocated more radical agrarian and social reform.[31]

Although Brazil did not experience military conflict approaching the scale of the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century, the First Republic witnessed a series of revolts that "brought into sharp relief the latent violence in defining state authority, citizenship, and racial power under republicanism."[32] In the Canudos War of 1896–1897, the government waged a bloody military campaign against a millenarian religious community led by Antônio Conselheiro in the interior of the state of Bahía, viewed as a threat to the state's authority. In the 1904 Revolt of the Vaccine, Rio de Janeiro's working classes violently protested obligatory public health measures and, implicitly, the modernization programs that increasingly pushed them to the margins of the capital city. In the wake of rebellions against the government led by

army lieutenants (*tenentes*) in Rio de Janeiro in 1922 and in São Paulo in 1924, and at a moment of economic crisis, the republic fell in a military coup that brought the populist leader Getúlio Vargas to power in 1930.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, modernity's promised benefits failed to materialize for most of Mexico's and Brazil's citizens, as traditional landowning elites continued to enjoy disproportionate wealth and influence. The embrace of liberalism in both nations was belied by a political culture that favored loyalty less to state institutions than to charismatic leaders who often relied on physical force. Referred to as *caudillos* or *caciques* in Mexico and *coronéis* in Brazil, these figures were linked to clientelistic political networks that spanned the municipal, regional, and national levels.[33] As modernization outpaced democratization, elites initiated programs of social reform designed to institute "order and progress" by aggressively combating alcoholism, criminality, and disease. Emerging state institutions exercised expanded forms of social control without addressing the profound social inequalities that contributed to these ills.

Economic disparities frequently took on spatial dimensions in Mexico and Brazil's rapidly modernizing metropolises. Early twentieth-century urban reforms intended to beautify Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo, among other cities, worked to widen divides between social classes and city neighborhoods.[34] At the same time, economic growth, driven by the export of mineral resources from Mexico and agricultural products from both nations, tended to increase disparities between geographic regions. In particular, northern Mexico (with its close connections to the U.S. economy) and southeastern Brazil (where the then capital Rio de Janeiro and the industrial powerhouse São Paulo were located) prospered, while economic growth stagnated in other regions, most notably Brazil's northeast.

In early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil, sensational cinema and journalism at once highlighted and tentatively bridged these social and spatial divides, working to forge a mass public through the use of novel visual and print technologies. With the introduction of the rotary press and the halftone printing process that permitted the direct reproduction of photographs, illustrated newspapers like Mexico City's state-subsidized *El Imparcial* and Rio de Janeiro's *Gazeta de Notícias* achieved unprecedented circulation levels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[35] Working to extend the reach of an emergent mass culture to illiterate consumers, sensational cinema and journalism forged public spheres premised on the collective consumption of spectacles of violence. In his discussion of public spheres in Latin

America—which he argues must be understood through reference to Gramscian notions of hegemony as well as Habermas's model of the bourgeois public sphere—Pablo Piccato argues for "the central role of violence in the construction of Latin American polities," observing "the expressive function of violence [as] part of discursive public exchanges."[36]

Graphic and thrilling depictions of death, injury, and bodily peril in narrative films, illustrated newspapers and magazines, and popular theater spectacularized the social ills accompanying modernization, from industrial and railway accidents to the perceived rise in crime that accompanied the rapid growth of major cities.[37] Imported forms of yellow journalism, literature, and film forged strong associations between criminality and industrialized metropolises, and local journalists paradoxically hailed violent incidents as markers of modernity. In this manner, the sensational visual culture of early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil voiced profound desires for economic and technological development and an implicit acceptance of modernization's costs. Real-life narratives and fictional depictions of modernization's social toll ironically became a profitable and pleasurable means of affirming the modernity of one's city, region, and nation.

In giving expression to local desires for modernity, sensational visual cultures capitalized on the unique capacities of visual technologies and on international forms of popular culture that resonated with new forms of subjective experience. Miriam Hansen's concept of "vernacular modernism" has proved highly influential in efforts to conceptualize the relationship between mass culture and the senses and to chart global processes of cultural exchange. Hansen advocates a conception of modernism more expansive than high-modernist canons, a conception that encompasses "a whole range of cultural practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity" and that "situates artistic practices within a larger history and economy of sensory perception."[38] (It should be noted that the sensational visual cultures analyzed herein were contemporary with vibrant literary and artistic avant-gardes like *estridentismo* in Mexico and *modernismo* in Brazil, but rarely intersected with them directly.)[39] Resonating with industrialization, urbanization, shifting social relations, and the emergence of mass consumer culture, cinema "engaged the contradictions of modernity at the level of the senses, the level at which the impact of modern technology on human experience was most palpable and irreversible."[40] According to Hansen, in light of differential experiences of modernization

across the globe, the affective resonances of classical Hollywood cinema allowed it to function as "something like the first global vernacular."[41]

Yet Hansen's account of vernacular modernism threatens to reduce processes of cultural exchange with a high degree of complexity to "a dyadic pattern involving Hollywood with each of innumerable peripheral cinemas."[42] In centering the role of U.S. cinema, the concept of vernacular modernism tends to gloss over the heterogeneity of cultural products available in a given local market (in terms of both their national origin and their cultural register) and the manner in which power differentials within the "host" society define the terms of cultural exchange and conceptions of media themselves. Beyond Hansen's implication that "Hollywood occupies the center, and is the one to be translated," Gerow critiques models of transculturation in which "the ability to appropriate is taken as a given, is seen as inherent in the semiotic process; a notion such as this elides the often-contentious history of conflict over the extent and possession of this ability."[43] Although Hansen does stress that classical Hollywood's global reach can be attributed to its "key role in mediating competing cultural discourses on modernity and modernization," she does not consider the role of local conceptions of cinema's medium specificity in this process.[44]

In this study, I focus not only on intermedial horizons of reception, but also on historically and spatially situated understandings of the ontology of photographic and cinematic images. In early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil, mechanically reproduced depictions of violence attested to the ability of novel visual technologies to capture—or to convincingly stage—the rapid flow of events viewed as defining modern experience. Vanessa Schwartz has shown that in fin-de-siècle Paris, the emergence of mass entertainments was premised on the "visual representation of reality as spectacle."[45] Illustrated newspapers, early cinema, and other emerging forms of popular culture simultaneously documented and dramatized quotidian experience, presenting it as thrilling and extraordinary. Irreversible and often unpredictable events like deaths, injuries, and accidents were perceived as having a special affinity with the quintessentially modern technologies of cinema and photography, with their unique ability to register and preserve photochemical impressions of fleeting moments.[46]

Yet violent acts also pushed this capacity to record the ephemeral to its limits. Beyond social and legal restrictions on the direct recording of violence, its visual capture also presents practical and ethical obstacles. Real-life

acts of violence frequently eluded the camera's lens, could be dangerous to record, and could not be precisely recreated without causing physical harm. For this reason, depictions of violence were bound up with fictionalization and special effects from cinema's earliest days. A fascination with portraying real-life bodily violence gave rise to filmed reenactments—like the Edison Manufacturing Company's *Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (Edwin S. Porter, 1901), which combined a staged version of the electrocution of President William McKinley's assassin with exterior shots of the prison on the day of the execution—as well as visual effects like the camera stoppage used in the 1895 Edison film *Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (William Heise) to substitute a live actress with a dummy just before the moment of beheading.[47] At the same time, the socially disruptive force of violent happenings demanded containment within melodramatic narrative structures that offered moral legibility.[48] In the sensational visual cultures of early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil, elements of melodrama imbued violent acts with clear moral meanings, framing them within dominant discourses of modernization and political authority. Observing the radical uses of sensational visual culture in early twentieth-century anarchist and socialist movements spanning the U.S.-Mexico border, Shelley Streeby emphasizes its potential to "incite strong feelings, sentiments, and sensations that might lead to the overturning of existing hierarchies."[49] Yet in the contexts under study, public spectacles of violence and crime often served to reinforce social and spatial divisions.

Sensational cinema and journalism in early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil sought to make sense of the profound social costs of industrialization and urbanization by framing violence through a melodramatic cultural repertoire that was at once national and international in scope. Through a comparative analysis of the two nations' visual cultures, I explore how the global circulation of sensational cinema and print culture intersected with local responses to modernization, giving rise to distinct but parallel developments in silent-era film production that would later be overshadowed by the rise of national film industries. Highlighting the role of spectacles of violence in forging public spheres in early twentieth-century Latin America, these case studies also shed light on broader questions regarding three distinctly modern, and often interconnected, modes of cultural production—sensationalism, melodrama, and seriality—that resonate with profound transformations of daily experience and public life under industrial capitalism.

Sensationalism, Mass Culture, and Modern Public Spheres

In the past two decades, scholars of visual culture have posited popular sensationalism as a key category for charting the intersections between mass culture and sensuous experience in the wake of the Second Industrial Revolution. Ben Singer demonstrates how sensational journalism, stage melodrama, and cinema capitalized on the overwhelming sensory shocks of modern urban life, while Schwartz contends that "sensationalizing and literally spectacularizing became the means through which reality was commodified."[50] These scholars draw on an intellectual tradition that emerges from the work of cultural critics like Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, who claimed that industrial-capitalist modernity radically transformed not only daily life, but also the capacities of the senses. In their accounts, human perception itself was altered by the unprecedented growth of cities, which transformed metropolitan life into a series of anonymous encounters and fleeting impressions, and by new communication and transportation technologies like the railway, the automobile, the airplane, the telegraph, and the telephone, which transformed subjective experiences of time and space, giving rise to a sense of unprecedented speed and simultaneity.[51] Adherents to "the modernity thesis" (to use Singer's term) contend that the cinema in general, and sensational films like serials in particular, both mirrored and actively shaped these sweeping transformations of social life and perception.[52]

In *Public Spectacles of Violence*, I argue that in the early mass cultures of Mexico and Brazil, cinematic and photographic depictions of death, violence, and physical peril did not simply constitute mimetic responses to the experience of modernization. In contexts where industrial modernity had yet to be fully achieved, sensational cinema and journalism worked to actively construct experiences of time as distinctly modern, in that it was characterized by a rapid flow of unpredictable, contingent, and disruptive events. The visual cultures of early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil thus prompt a reevaluation of key components of the "modernity thesis," particularly the notion of "cinema as a *consequence* of modernity"—that is, an organic outgrowth of technological advances and the transformation of social life—and the "key formal and spectatorial resemblances between cinema . . . and the nature of metropolitan experience."[53] As Ana M. López observes, "in reference to Latin America, it is difficult to speak of the cinema and modernity as 'points of reflection and convergence,' as is the presumption in U.S. and European early cinema scholarship," given that "the development of early cinema in Latin

America was not directly linked to previous large-scale transformations of daily life resulting from industrialization, rationality, and the technological transformation of modern life."[54] Building on López's corrective, I investigate how sensational forms of mass culture took on a special resonance in locations where modernization was perceived as delayed, stagnant, or incomplete.

A quintessentially modern mode, sensationalism was pivotal in mediating the affective and moral dimensions of Latin American modernities. While the term was coined in the nineteenth century, sensationalism's roots can be traced to the early modern era, when sixteenth- and seventeenth-century pamphlets and ballads narrated real-life accounts of shocking crimes.[55] Joy Wiltenburg argues that these lurid texts solicited "both a visceral response to violence itself and the quasi-religious dilemma posed by transgression of core values," taking on the "ability to mold common responses to extreme violations of social norms" in an increasingly secular order, analogous to the social function of melodrama as "the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era" outlined by Peter Brooks.[56] In his discussion of the police blotter (*nota roja*), the Mexican cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis emphasizes the sensational mode's moral complexity, observing how the nota roja works "to simultaneously condemn and exalt 'the forbidden,'" functioning as "a (negotiable) manual of social mores."[57]

Through graphic depictions of violence and melodramatic moral polarities, sensationalism links individual sensuous and affective reactions to the enforcement of collective values in a public sphere shaped by mass culture. Monsiváis suggests the expiation of moral transgressions in the police blotter enacts a collapse between private and public, constituting a "conversion of intimacy into scandal, and of scandal into an intimacy shared by readers and listeners."[58] This description recalls Mark Seltzer's contention that modern mass media have forged a "pathological public sphere" through the dissemination of "shared and reproducible spectacles of pathological public violence."[59] While provocative in his claims that in late capitalism, networks of transportation and communication technologies produce subjective experience on a mass scale, Seltzer's mode of reading deliberately collapses national, racial, class, and gender differences, and thus proves of limited usefulness for making sense of differential experiences of modernization in Latin America. By contrast, I explore sensationalism as a structuring category of public discourse in modernizing, stratified societies, making my analysis adjacent to

the "affective turn" in studies of film and visual culture. In particular, I build on historically grounded works such as Weihong Bao's *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* and Laura Podalsky's *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*, which conceive of affect as an intersubjective and intermedial category that defines the terms of public engagement.

In staging an encounter between public and private spheres, popular sensationalism relies on media technologies—particularly mass-circulation newspapers and cinema—that have played a pivotal role in shaping collective forms of social life in the wake of the Second Industrial Revolution. As Benedict Anderson has influentially argued, the widespread practice of newspaper reading and the closely linked form of the novel worked to create a collective experience of temporal simultaneity that was pivotal in forging the "imagined communities" of emerging nineteenth-century nation-states.[60] In early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil, the reading public was sharply limited, and citizens' interaction with print culture was often limited to its visual content.[61] Publishing graphic, sensationalized news reportage became a key strategy for expanding the audience for newspapers and magazines, particularly as the printing of halftone photographs bolstered these periodicals' claims to quickly and accurately render topical events.

If the forms of nineteenth-century "print-capitalism" examined by Anderson tended to reinforce dominant forms of nationalism and normative understandings of the national community, the register of the visual holds the potential to construct a more inclusive, "broad-based nationality" beyond the lettered elites.[62] Hansen argues that early experiences of moviegoing in the United States helped forge an "alternative public sphere" within emerging institutions of mass culture that were not yet fully commodified, where both traditional and emerging social hierarchies and moral codes were provisionally suspended.[63] Spectatorship takes a divergent path in Mexico and Brazil, where early elite embrace of the cinema and the medium's close links to dominant discourses of national progress limited its potential as an alternative public sphere.[64] Yet sensational and melodramatic cultural forms nonetheless straddled stark class divides, preserving popular elements within expanding mass cultures. Signaling the pivotal role of melodrama in mediating cultural hegemonies in Latin America, Jesús Martín Barbero defines the mode as the "cultural matrix that feeds the popular [classes'] recognition of themselves within mass culture" by working to reconcile the lived time of experience with industrial-capitalist forms of production and social organization.[65]

Throughout the region, the sensational and melodramatic modes have often overlapped and are closely (though not exclusively) associated with serial formats, signaling the historically and geographically specific relationships between these three uniquely modern modes. In Latin American contexts, popular forms characterized by sensation, sentiment, and episodic structure work to negotiate heterogeneous configurations of modernity and tradition across multiple media. The "intermedial character of melodrama," Hermann Herlinghaus argues, "its versatility in traversing various genres and media of communication," allows it to stage encounters between erudite and popular cultural registers, and, I would add, between national imaginaries and imported cultural products.[66]

In Latin American nations, serial forms of melodrama proved particularly significant in mediating forms of popular culture that circulated on an international scale. In nineteenth-century Latin American newspapers, the space at the foot of the page reserved for the serial novel (*folletín* in Spanish, *folhetim* in Portuguese) would play host both to "foundational fictions"—sentimental narratives that allegorized nineteenth-century nation-building projects—and to translations of Italian and French serial novels characterized by narrative twists and turns.[67] Martín Barbero observes that across the region, "the newspaper serial brought the melodrama from the theater to the press. There, it expanded the reading public and inaugurated a new relationship between popular readers and writing. . . . The 'open structure' of a tale written day-by-day, carried out according to plan, but open to the influence of its readers' reactions, propitiated the (con)fusion of fiction and life."[68] In contexts where literacy was low, serial narratives were often consumed collectively through reading aloud.[69] The narrative conventions of serial literature and stage melodrama were successively transformed throughout the twentieth century by new media technologies that disseminated them on a mass scale. A precursor to hugely popular serial radio dramas and television soap operas (*radionovelas* and *telenovelas*), serial literature became a key point of reference for the popular reception and critical understandings of cinema in early twentieth-century Latin America.

Fueled by competition between established and emerging media, serial cinema and literature encouraged ongoing consumption, and recognizable characters like the detective Nick Carter and the French archvillain Fantômas gave rise to narratives that could be extended almost indefinitely across media.[70] Building on the popularity of serial literature and attaining a regularized and industrialized mode of production and global distribution, the

serial films of the 1910s arguably became "the most powerful vehicle in the emergence of a globalised, transnational culture."[71] Yet although serial narratives are heavily conditioned by the market demands and industrial scale of mass media, their unfolding in regular installments invites intense reader engagement, as the consumption of serial narrative becomes closely entangled with the rhythms of everyday life.[72] In early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil, sensational films and serial formats were read through the lens of preexisting melodramatic cultural repertoires.

The folhetim/folletín acted as a pivotal "trope of film reception" in the region, shaping early film critics' attempts to make sense of cinema's specific qualities and cross-class appeal.[73] References to the folletín often had a pejorative tone; a 1914 article in the Argentine magazine *El Hogar* defined cinema's cultural standing through reference to the prolific authors of French *feuilletons*, expressing concern that film would "extend the genre cultivated by the gentlemen [Xavier de] Montepin, [Pierre Alexis] Ponson du Terrail, and Maurice Leblanc, threatening morals and good taste."[74] Beyond the perceived challenge to aesthetic hierarchies and public morality posed by film and the folletín, critics noted their shared reliance on melodramatic situations and series of peripeties. In Mexico and Brazil, adventure melodramas—particularly crime films—were often viewed as the genres "most full of cinematic visuality," in the words of one Mexican critic, due to their emphasis on dynamic physical action over psychological interiority.[75] Drawing on their viewing of U.S. serial films like *The Million Dollar Mystery* (Howell Hansel, 1914), the Mexican intellectuals Alfonso Reyes and Martín Luis Guzmán noted serial literature and cinema's shared capacity to create "collective emotional states" through "the aesthetic inherent to action."[76] The critics nevertheless signaled a key distinction between the two that speaks to cinema's specificity: "In the folletín, action is accompanied by bad literature; whereas in the cinema, with the disappearance of the word, one gains distance from the problem of style and only the action remains."[77] Reyes and Guzmán imply that the cinema is an essentially visual medium, capable of offering the vertiginous action of the folletín while eliminating the clichéd verbal register associated with it. In their account, cinema has a unique capacity to reconfigure preexisting forms of popular melodrama, shedding their class associations in the process.

As late as 1931, Chilean literary critic Raúl Silva Castro compared Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights*, a sentimental tale of a tramp who helps a blind shopgirl regain her sight, to the melodramatic repertoire of the folletín, arguing that the film, "if translated into words, into a novel, could perfectly well occupy a

place beside the fantastic narrations of [Émile] Richebourg, [Paul] Féval, and Ponson du Terrail."[78] Arguing, in terms similar to Guzmán and Reyes, that cinema was an essentially visual medium that could redeem highly melodramatic content, Silva Castro suggests that when popular literature is adapted to the screen, "it is the cinema itself that manages to cleanse the most truculent plots of their folletín-esque content so that, once the film is made, it turns out to be tolerable or even worthy of admiration."[79] For Silva Castro, this transmutation signals a clear distinction between literary qualities and what he calls "cinematic values" (*valores cinescos*).[80] Significantly, the critic claims that cinema's audience goes beyond the "vehement reader of [Enrique] Pérez Escrich, of [Torcuato] Tárrago y Mateos, of M. Delly and Edgar Wallace," encompassing "demanding readers" as well as those "who are not readers of literature of any kind."[81] The critic implies that cinema's specific characteristics allow it to address an audience comprising both "lettered" intellectuals and illiterate or semi-literate spectators, suggesting how visual forms of mass culture might unsettle hierarchies premised on the written word, a point Ángel Rama leaves unaddressed in his influential *The Lettered City*.[82]

Addressing an emerging mass public through reference to familiar forms of popular melodrama, sensational cinema and journalism in Mexico and Brazil also highlighted social divides. In Mexico and Brazil, liberal principles of individual rights and the rule of law have long coexisted with forms of power based on networks of favor and patron-client relationships, and with the exercise of state violence heavily conditioned by class and race. While elites often enjoy impunity from criminal justice, police and judicial authority is disproportionately and often arbitrarily directed toward working-class, indigenous, and African-descended populations. As Josefina Ludmer asserts, crime functions as a "*cultural frontier* that separates culture from nonculture, which founds cultures, and which also separates lines in the interior of a culture. It serves to draw limits, to differentiate and exclude."[83] In early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil, elite anxieties about the incidence of crime and violence were invoked to police the racial and class boundaries of national citizenship and to exert control over urban spaces undergoing rapid transformation.[84]

Narratives of sensational crime simultaneously reflected and fostered anxieties about criminal acts and moral transgressions among the working classes, as major cities in Mexico and Brazil were reshaped by waves of internal migrants and, in the case of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, large numbers of European immigrants. As historians Pablo Piccato and Teresa A. Meade have

argued, respectively, elite-driven urban reforms in Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro constituted a struggle for control over public space.[85] Influenced by Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's transformation of Paris through the construction of broad boulevards, reforms in both cities aimed to eliminate spatial configurations dating from the colonial period and to discourage "disorderly" uses of the city. Working-class modes of sociability and even mere presence in public were criminalized; being recognized as a "known thief" or "vagrant" (anyone lacking an obvious occupation) became grounds for arrest.[86] Ongoing attempts to professionalize the police forces of Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and other major cities failed to stem complaints about the arbitrary use of force and the lack of due process.[87]

Narratives of crime, both fictional and factual, served to draw social distinctions in national contexts where modernization has often been framed as a struggle between "civilization and barbarism," a discourse that has helped legitimize pervasive public violence. Jean Franco observes that in twentieth-century Latin America, "the anxiety of modernity defined and represented by North America and Europe all too often set governments on the fast track that bypassed the arduous paths of democratic decision making while marginalizing indigenous and black peoples," enabling the exercise of state violence against "groups deemed subversive or alien to modernity."[88] At the same time, in much of the region, the state's monopoly on violence has historically been precarious, rendering clear-cut distinctions between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" uses of force difficult to sustain. Robert H. Holden argues that the concept of "public violence," which refers to violence exercised by various actors in the "social field" defined by the state (military and paramilitary forces, guerilla groups, participants in popular rebellions), most accurately captures the exercise of lethal force in Latin American nations since independence. Holden stresses that in "Latin America, public violence is dispersed, multidimensional, and subject to constant public observation; it is, above all, highly visible, habitually crossing the porous frontier between state and civil society."[89] Sensational forms of mass culture responded to and shaped experiences of public life marked by highly visible acts of violence.

Across the region, political instability and public violence actively shaped socially acceptable limits on the depiction of death in the first decades of the twentieth century, as violent actualities and sensational fictions played a key role in early efforts at film production through the end of the silent era. In Colombia, Vicenzo and Francesco di Domenico, members of an Italian immigrant family who controlled a thriving distribution and exhibition business,

produced *El drama del 15 de octubre* (*The Drama of October 15th*, 1915). The film depicted events surrounding the assassination of politician Rafael Uribe Uribe in October 1914 by the tradesmen Leovigildo Galarza and Jesús Carvajal. According to Francesco di Domenico's memoirs, he shot "the funeral of General Uribe Uribe, his autopsy, and the accused, hiding ourselves in all the corners of the Panopticon [prison] to take them in flagrante and not in a forced pose."[90] Newspaper accounts from the period claim that the filmmakers also resolved "to bring to the screen a reconstruction, however imperfect, of the crime. . . . In effect, they filmed the principal sites of the bloody drama, and gained the consent of some persons, doctors, etc., to take part in the plot," paying the two perpetrators the sum of fifty dollars to play themselves.[91] The film ended with an apotheosis (allegorical tableau) showing a female figure representing Liberty posing at Uribe Uribe's tomb.[92] This device, rooted in popular theater, offered narrative and ideological closure to a film that blurred the boundaries between fiction and actuality. While the apotheosis's highly legible meaning could help circumscribe audience interpretations of public violence, spectators' reactions to the film signal its failure to contain the disruptive force of this violence.

El drama del 15 de octubre's politically charged subject matter and the participation of the alleged perpetrators in the reconstruction of the killing sparked a public outcry led by the politician's family and the Bogotá newspaper *El Liberal*, fanning tensions between liberal and conservative factions that had given rise to the Thousand Days' War (1899–1902). A moviegoer in Girardot (a town roughly 150 kilometers from Bogotá) even reported that a shot was fired through the screen when Uribe Uribe's image appeared early in the film.[93] Although *El drama del 15 de octubre* was exhibited in some cities without objection, negative publicity apparently prevented it from reaching a wide release.[94] By contrast with the profitable packaging of criminal violence in *Os estranguladores* and *El automóvil gris*, the cinematic restaging of politicized violence proved too inflammatory for most Colombian audiences, and the di Domenicos' efforts at film production were temporarily frustrated.[95]

As in Mexico and Brazil, sensational adventure melodramas proved influential in Colombian fiction filmmaking of the 1920s, including production outside the capital, Bogotá. In 1926, the adventure film *Garras de oro: Alborada de justicia* (*Golden Claws: The Dawn of Justice*) was produced in Cali (or possibly shot abroad) by Alfonso Martínez Velasco in collaboration with a group of intellectuals and entrepreneurs.[96] *Garras de oro* lambasted the United States' 1902 declaration that the Isthmus of Panama (site of the planned canal) was

independent from Colombia in violation of an 1885 treaty between the countries. The film frames this conflict through a fictionalized version of a public feud about the matter between Theodore Roosevelt and Joseph Pulitzer, editor of the sensationalistic *New York World* (who is replaced with a character named James Moore in the film). To defend himself from a libel suit, Moore sends a detective to Colombia in search of documents that prove wrongdoing on the part of the U.S. government, resulting in a series of daring exploits that end with the vindication of Moore and Colombia's violated sovereignty. Along with features like *Garras de oro* that adapted serial conventions of fast-and-furious action, a handful of serials were produced in Latin America in the silent era, including, beyond those analyzed herein, the Cuban film pioneer Enrique Díaz Quesada's ten-episode *El genio del mal* (*The Spirit of Evil*, 1920), believed to be lost.

Filmmakers in the region continued to capitalize on acts of public violence into the late 1920s. In Uruguay, newspaper accounts of a shocking crime and an act of heroism—after being attacked by his stepfather, a young boy carried his younger sister several miles to safety before collapsing and dying—became the basis for Carlos Alonso's *El pequeño héroe del Arroyo de Oro (The Little Hero of Arroyo de Oro)*. Produced between 1929 and 1933, the film reconstructed the events in real-life locations.[97] In Bolivia, violent actualities that combined unstaged footage with reenactment were produced as late as 1928. In 1927, Alfredo Jáuregui was executed for the suspected assassination of the former president José Manuel Pando (who may have died of natural causes), after a judicial process that lasted a decade. Two competing films based on the events shot by Luis del Castillo and Arturo Posnansky were released shortly after. Castillo filmed Jaúregui's final moments and his execution by firing squad, incorporating them into *El fusilamiento de Jáuregui* (*The Execution of Jáuregui by Firing Squad*), also known as *El bolillo fatal o el emblema de la muerte* (*The Fatal Lot or the Emblem of Death*). These sequences were edited together with reconstructions of the alleged crime and of the trial, with some participants, including a judge, playing themselves.[98] For his part, Arturo Posnansky "reconstructed all of the scenes of the trial" for his film *La sombría tragedia de Kenko* (*The Dark Tragedy of Kenko*).[99] (Kenko, a small town outside La Paz, was the site where the former president's body was found.) Castillo's version, a great success with audiences, was banned by La Paz's mayor. It later became the object of a presidential decree that allowed it to be shown in the country but not abroad, due to concerns about its unflattering portrayal of criminal justice in Bolivia.[100] As in the case of *El drama*

del 15 de octubre, the two films depicting Jáuregui's trial and execution sparked debates regarding the political and ethical limits on the depiction of public violence that resonated across early twentieth-century Latin America.

In my analysis of the violent actualities and sensational fictions of silent-era cinema in Mexico and Brazil, I first turn to the Mexican case and the intersection of sensational visual culture with national modernization and international-popular culture. Tracing shifts and continuities in Mexican visual culture from the final years of the Díaz regime through the most active phase of the revolutionary conflict, I focus on depictions of public violence, which, following Holden, I define as acts of aggression that blurred the distinction between criminal and political uses of force. In early twentieth-century Mexico, mechanically reproduced images of crime, punishment, and military conflict both asserted state power (defined by the legitimate exercise of physical force) and demonstrated its crisis. As the illustrated press expanded in the final years of the nineteenth century, photographic images that captured or reconstructed assaults, murders, and executions fueled anxieties about criminality while also rendering the Díaz regime's expanded methods of social control spectacularly visible. After the outbreak of revolution in 1910, illustrated journalism and nonfiction films about the conflict worked to capture—and to ideologically manage—sabotage, combat, and murder. As nonfiction filmmaking declined after 1916, fictionalized narratives of public violence would play a pivotal role in efforts to establish profitable film production in Mexico City. Analyzing the surviving film *El automóvil gris* and traces of the lost films *La banda del automóvil* (*The Automobile Gang*, Ernesto Vollrath, 1919), based on the same events, and *Fanny o el robo de los veinte millones* (*Fanny or the Theft of the Twenty Millions*, Manuel Sánchez Valtierra, 1922), which referenced other military and political scandals, I contend that these productions framed public violence as popular entertainment, linking them to a cosmopolitan imaginary of crime that drew on imported literature and cinema. Mixing fictional strategies with reenactments and visual documents—most strikingly, seemingly unstaged images from the criminals' execution in *El automóvil gris*—these productions drew on the conventions of imported serials to frame criminality as a sign of Mexico City's burgeoning modernity.

The following chapter turns to the period of national reconstruction in the 1920s, when modernization programs promoting education, hygiene, and the expansion of transportation networks intersected with efforts to construct and disseminate a unified national culture in the visual arts and

popular press by showcasing rural customs and landscapes. Adventure melodramas filmed outside Mexico City emphasized scenic views while drawing on the kineticism of North American serials and westerns. Incorporating thrilling scenes of violence while attempting to skirt the racist images of Mexicans as "bad men" and bandits in Hollywood productions, adventure films shot on location figured prominently in emerging discourses of film criticism in the Mexico City press. Journalists framed film production as a sign of national progress and a newsworthy spectacle in itself by emphasizing physical exploits and dangerous stunts. Examining press discourses surrounding a series of lost adventure films by the director and actor Miguel Contreras Torres, including *El Zarco* (1920) and *El caporal* (*The Foreman*, 1921), I observe how they articulated the codes of imported adventure film with emerging national icons, particularly the figure of the *charro* (cattle wrangler). While the production of rural adventure melodramas had declined sharply by the mid-twenties, regional productions made later in the decade drew on the conventions of serial films to highlight the dark underside of modernization. In the city of Orizaba in the state of Veracruz, Gabriel García Moreno directed *El tren fantasma* (*The Ghost Train*, 1926) and *El puño de hierro* (*The Iron Fist*, 1927), which display the ambivalent effects of urbanization and expanding transportation networks. Incorporating elements of imported adventure melodramas in their display of local landscapes, García Moreno's adventure films signal the tensions and contradictions of postrevolutionary modernizing projects.

Part II develops local and regional approaches to sensational cinema in early twentieth-century Brazil. In chapter 3, I analyze the spectacles of real-life crime that unfolded across illustrated journalism, popular theater, and early narrative film in Brazil's burgeoning cities at the turn of the twentieth century. As elites sought to transform Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo by encouraging European immigration and implementing reforms that pushed poor and working-class residents out of city centers, the journalistic genres of the police blotter and the essayistic *crônica* charted the spatial and social divides of an urbanizing Brazil. Police reportage and early narrative films framed real-life acts of violence involving newly visible social actors, especially immigrants and young women, as thrilling signs of local modernity. Drawing explicit parallels with "grand crimes" committed in Paris, London, and New York, these sensational narratives acknowledged the human costs of rapid urbanization, even as they transformed criminality into a public spectacle with a powerful cross-class appeal. Building on this culture of popular sensationalism, film

producer-exhibitors in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo adapted real-life cases to the screen, resulting in a vogue for filmed reenactments of sensational crimes that included significant early experiments with narrative form. After production in Rio and São Paulo declined after 1911, as importers of foreign films increasingly cornered local exhibition markets, *O caso dos caixotes* (*The Case of the Strongboxes*, 1912) and *Um crime sensacional* (*A Sensational Crime*, 1913), adapted from criminal cases by the brothers Alberto and Paulino Botelho, sought to recapture audiences for locally made films. Reconstructing these lost works of early Brazilian cinema, I trace how violent topical events shaped emerging conceptions of filmic narrative, as filmed reenactments sensationalized the present and framed acts of violence in melodramatic and moralistic terms.

Turning to the film culture of Rio de Janeiro in the late 1910s, in chapter 4 I explore a local craze for French, Italian, and American serial films, analyzing how these cultural products fostered new practices of film consumption, novel conceptions of cinema's defining characteristics, and fresh ambitions for local film production. The popularity of the genre inspired a series of local productions that staged narratives of crime and adventure in iconic Rio locations, including *Os mistérios do Rio de Janeiro* (*The Mysteries of Rio de Janeiro*, Coelho Neto and Alfredo Musso, 1917) and *A quadrilha do esqueleto* (*The Skeleton Gang*, Eduardo Arouca and Carlos Comelli, 1917). While the latter film focused on the local criminal underworld, *Os mistérios do Rio de Janeiro* and *Le film du diable* (*The Devil's Film* [released with a French title], Louis Monfits and [first name unknown] Dillac, 1917), evoked an international imaginary of military conflict as Brazil's government contemplated entering the First World War. The reception and production of serials fostered new understandings of the links between cinema and other melodramatic forms, giving rise to the locally specific concept of the *truc*, a French loanword used interchangeably in Brazilian film criticism to refer to daring physical feats, cinematic special effects, and the *coups-de-thêatre* characteristic of serial literature. Emerging at the intersection between national literary traditions and imported cinema, the appeal of the cinematic truc was highlighted in later films that drew on the conventions of imported adventure films.

Tracing the persistence of sensational film genres in Brazil through the 1920s, in Chapter 5 I examine the production of adventure melodramas outside Rio and São Paulo at a moment when the dynamics of the Brazilian economy, particularly the coffee boom, fueled growing disparities between the urban southeast and other regions of the country. Patterns of film exhibition

in the period also show a marked geographic unevenness that shaped film production and fan discourse. Elegant venues in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo screened lavish Hollywood "superproductions," while crime and adventure serials and westerns continued to dominate movie screens outside the southeast and in smaller towns long after they were considered outdated in major cities. Semi-amateur filmmakers in regional capitals and small towns sought to appeal to local audiences through strategic use of these action-oriented genres' conventions, especially location shooting and daring stunts. The display of local landscapes, actors' physical virtuosity, and cinematographers' technical capacities became key audience attractions in serial-influenced films like *Tesouro perdido* (*Lost Treasure*, Humberto Mauro, 1927), made in the town of Cataguases in the state of Minas Gerais, and in productions that drew on the western, such as *Jurando vingar* (*Swearing Revenge*, Ary Severo, 1925), shot in the northeastern city of Recife. Regional productions sparked debate in Rio de Janeiro film magazines like *Cinearte*, *Selecta*, and *Para Todos . . .* , which called for the modernization of film exhibition and the creation of a national film industry on the model of Hollywood, often dismissing regional films as unmodern and uncinematic. Analyzing critical debates on film production in the 1920s, correspondence between journalists and filmmakers, and several lost films, as well as surviving films and fragments, I examine the pivotal role of sensational genres in forging cinematic visions of regional modernity that contested the privileged place of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in a modernizing Brazil.

The case studies that follow demonstrate how early mass culture in Mexico and Brazil combined a fascination with visual documentation with a tendency to frame everyday life in melodramatic terms, mixed moralistic discourses with sensational violence, and reinforced class and racial divisions while working to construct mass audiences. Emerging at the intersections of cinema and print culture, of melodramatic repertoires and serial forms, of national modernization and globalized forms of mass culture, sensational cinema and visual culture capitalized on new visual technologies' unique capacity to render spectacular the conflicts of modernization in early twentieth-century Mexico and Brazil.

NOTES

Introduction

1. *Correio da Manhã*, 12 November 1908, 10.
2. *Excélsior*, 15 January 1920, 8.
3. On sensationalism and melodrama as distinctly modern modes of cultural production, see Wiltenburg, "True Crime," 1378–80, and Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 14–17.
4. García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 1–3.
5. Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, *Estadísticas Históricas de México*, 90. Ministério da Agricultura, Indústria e Comércio, *Recenseamento do Brasil realizado em 1 de Setembro de 1920*, vol. IV, part IV, ix. Literacy rates tended to be considerably higher in urban areas. On crime statistics, see Piccato, *City of Suspects*, 52–55, 79, 221–36; and Bretas, *Ordem na cidade*, 69, 83–86.
6. Haber, "Financial Markets and Industrial Development," 147.
7. McCann, *Hello, Hello, Brazil*; Garramuño, *Primitive Modernities*.
8. Navitski, "Silent and Early Sound Cinema," forthcoming.
9. I thank Juan Sebastián Ospina León for his input on this point. On Argentine silent cinema, see Losada, "Allegories of Authenticity in Argentine Cinema of the 1910s"; Tucker, "*Páginas libres*," 132–36; Cuarterolo, *Del foto al fotograma*, 135–47.
10. For a sampling of key texts in this debate, see Vitali and Willemen, *Theorising National Cinemas* and Hjort and MacKenzie, *Cinema and Nation*.
11. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 2.
12. Gallo, *Mexican Modernity*; Borge, *Latin American Writers and the Rise of Hollywood Cinema*; Gabara, *Errant Modernism*; Conde, *Consuming Visions*.
13. Monica Dall'Asta, "Italian Serial Films and 'International-Popular Culture,'" 305.
14. Schroeder-Rodríguez, "Latin American Silent Cinema," 36. See also Paranaguá, *Tradición y modernidad*.
15. See Vega Alfaro, *Microhistorias del cine en México*; de los Reyes, *Cine y sociedad en México* 2:255–61; Ramírez, *El cine yucateco*; Tuñón, *Historia de un sueño*.

16. On U.S. film producers' expansion into Mexico, see Serna, *Making Cinelandia*, 19–46.
17. Suárez, *Critical Essays on Colombian Cinema and Culture*, 28. Suárez refers to the films *Bajo el cielo antioqueño* (*Beneath the Sky of Antioquia*, Arturo Acevedo Vallarino, 1925), set between Medellín and the countryside of the province of Antioquia, and *Alma provinciana* (*Provincial Soul*, Félix Joaquín Rodríguez, 1925), which moves between the capital city of Bogotá and rural areas in the department of Santander.
18. For a Chinese parallel, see Bao, *Fiery Cinema*, 49.
19. Gunning, "Before Documentary," 14.
20. See Lefebvre, "Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema," 22, on the distinction between setting (a representation of place subordinated to its narrative function) and landscape as "space freed from eventhood."
21. Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," 10–12.
22. On the impact of newspapers on U.S. film culture, see Abel, *Menus for Movieland*.
23. Cuarterolo traces the relationship between actualities and early narrative films and the visual strategies of illustrated magazines that used series of staged photographs to narrate topical, historical, and fictional events, in *De la foto al fotograma*, 191–222.
24. Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]"; Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*; Bean, "Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body."
25. Serna, *Making Cinelandia*, 6.
26. See Gaudreault and Marion, "The Cinema as a Model of the Genealogy of Media." On intermediality in Latin American visual culture, see López, "Calling for Intermediality."
27. See Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*.
28. Field, *Uplift Cinema*, 25. See also Bao, *Fiery Cinema*, 40.
29. Gerow, *Visions of Japanese Modernity*, 1, 3.
30. Díaz's close ally Manuel González held the presidency from 1880–1884.
31. The Constitutionalist movement takes its name from Carranza's 1913 "Plan de Guadalupe," announcing the formation of an army to oust Huerta and defend the constitutional principles violated by his seizure of power.
32. Daryle Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil*, 2.
33. For a comparative approach to Mexican and Brazilian patron-client networks, see Roniger, "Caciquismo and Coronelismo." The classic text on *coronelismo* in Brazil is Victor Nunes Leal's *Coronelismo*; see also Woodward, "Coronelismo in Theory and Practice."
34. On the impact of European models of urban planning in Latin America, see Jorge E. Hardoy, "Theory and Practice of Urban Planning in Europe." On the case of Mexico City, see Tenorio Trillo, "1910 Mexico City," 81–90; Tenenbaum, "Streetwise History." On Rio de Janeiro, see Needell, *A Tropical Belle Époque*, 22–51.

35. Nelson Werneck Sodré cites a circulation of 50,000 for Rio's *Jornal do Brasil* at the turn of the century in *Historia da imprensa no Brasil*, 313. Whereas the most widely read Mexican newspapers of the late nineteenth century had an average circulation of 20,000, *El Imparcial* topped 125,000 by 1907. Toussaint Alcaraz, *Escenario de la prensa en el Porfiriato*, 31–32.
36. Piccato, *Public Sphere in Latin America*, 187.
37. On anxieties surrounding crime in Rio de Janeiro, see Bretas, *Ordem na cidade*, 85–86. On the case of Mexico City in the late Porfiriato, see Piccato, *City of Suspects*, 52–53, 136; Castillo Troncoso, "El surgimiento del reportaje policíaco en México," 163.
38. Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses," 60.
39. An exception is the modernist group based in Cataguases, Brazil, whose members had social contact with filmmaker Humberto Mauro and published comments on his film *Tesouro perdido* in their magazine *Verde*. R.F., "Música e cinema," *Verde*, September 1927, 31; Salles Gomes, *Humberto Mauro, Cataguases, Cinearte*, 172–73.
40. Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses," 70.
41. Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses," 70.
42. Andrew, "An Atlas of World Cinema," 24.
43. Gerow, *Visions of Japanese Modernity*, 23.
44. Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses," 68.
45. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 6.
46. On conceptions of cinema as a storage medium for contingent moments, particularly the moment of death, see Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 140–71.
47. On the reenactment of battle in Edison films, see Whissel, *Picturing American Modernity*, 83–89; on *Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* and other early execution films, see Combs, *Deathwatch*, 27–64, especially 31–35.
48. On moral legibility in fictional melodrama, see Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 30.
49. Streeby, *Radical Sensations*, 18.
50. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 11.
51. The literature on this topic is vast. See, in particular, Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918*; Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*; Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*.
52. Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 101–30.
53. Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 102–3.
54. Ana M. López, "Early Cinema and Modernity in Latin America," 49.
55. Wiltenburg, "True Crime," 1378–79. These forms of early modern print culture have affinities with Brazilian *cordel* literature (illustrated pamphlets designed to be declaimed or sung aloud) and Mexican *corridos* (folk ballads based on real-life events).
56. Wiltenburg, "True Crime," 1379, 1378; Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination,* 15.
57. Monsiváis, *Los mil y un velorios*, 12.
58. Monsiváis, *Los mil y un velorios*, 13.
59. Mark Seltzer, "Wound Culture," 4. See also Seltzer, *True Crime*.

60. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 22–26, 33–36.
61. On literacy and visual elements in Mexican print culture, see Hershfield, *Imagining la Chica Moderna*, 12, 28.
62. Rick A. López, *Crafting Mexico*, 14.
63. Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 118, 90–125.
64. Ana M. López, "Early Cinema and Modernity," 61–62.
65. Martín Barbero, *De los medios a las mediaciones*, 243.
66. Herlinghaus, "La imaginación melodramática," 40. Christine Gledhill makes a similar argument for the U.S., U.K., and French contexts in "The Melodramatic Field," 37.
67. Sommer, *Foundational Fictions*. On the folletín in Latin America, see Rivera, *El folletín y la novela popular*; Barros Lémez, *Vidas de papel*. On the Brazilian case, see Meyer, *Folhetim*, 281–404.
68. Martín Barbero, "Memory and Form in the Latin American Soap Opera," 277.
69. Meyer, *Folhetim*, 341–42.
70. On serial form and competition between media, see Hagedorn, "Technological and Economic Exploitation." On the role of iconic characters in serial narratives' self-perpetuating structure, see Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu*; Abel, "The Thrills of *Grande Peur*."
71. Dall'Asta, "Italian Serial Films and 'International Popular Culture,'" 302. On the global circulation of serial films and serial stars such as Pearl White, see Canjels, *Distributing Silent Film Serials*; Dahlquist, *Exporting Perilous Pauline*.
72. On reader interaction in serial fiction by Charles Dickens, see Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures*, 21–83; on the participatory aspects of film serials, see Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls*, 102–75.
73. I use the term "trope of film reception" in the sense outlined by Yuri Tsivian in *Early Cinema in Russia*, 3.
74. F. Ortiga Anckermann, "Notas y comentarios de actualidad," *El Hogar*, 18 December 1914, quoted in Tucker, "*Páginas libres*," 129.
75. Marco-Aurelio Galindo, "Los estrenos cinematográficos: La mujer y el cadáver," *El Universal Ilustrado*, 15 September 1921, 1–2.
76. Fósforo [pseud. Alfonso Reyes and Martín Luis Guzmán], "El cine y el folletín," *España* (Madrid), 25 November 1915, reprinted in González Casanova, *El cine que vió Fósforo*, 135.
77. Fósforo [pseud. Alfonso Reyes and Martín Luis Guzmán], "El cine y el folletín," *España* (Madrid), 25 November 1915, reprinted in González Casanova, *El cine que vió Fósforo*, 135.
78. Raúl Silva Castro, "Entre el cine y el folletín," *Atenea* (Concepción, Chile), August 1931, reprinted in Borge, *Avances de Hollywood*, 92.
79. Castro, "Entre el cine y el folletín," *Atenea* (Concepción, Chile), August 1931, reprinted in Borge, *Avances de Hollywood*, 93.
80. Castro, "Entre el cine y el folletín," *Atenea* (Concepción, Chile), August 1931, reprinted in Borge, *Avances de Hollywood*, 94.

81. Castro, "Entre el cine y el folletín," *Atenea* (Concepción, Chile), August 1931, reprinted in Borge, *Avances de Hollywood*, 91. M. Delly is the shared pseudonym of the siblings Fréderic Henri Petitjean de la Rosière and Jeanne Marie Henriette Petitjean de la Rosière.
82. Ángel Rama discusses forms of power exercised by *letrados* (lettered elites) in Latin America in his influential book *The Lettered City*.
83. Ludmer, *The* Corpus Delicti, 5, emphasis in original.
84. On the role of race and class in defining the boundaries of citizenship in Mexico, see Buffington, *Criminal and Citizen in Modern Mexico*.
85. Piccato, *City of Suspects,* 34–49; Meade, *"Civilizing" Rio,* 33–37.
86. Bretas, *Ordem na cidade*, 70, 132–34; Piccato, *City of Suspects*, 17–49, 170–71.
87. Bretas, *Ordem na cidade*, 43–63, 206–7; Piccato, *City of Suspects*, 41–42; Santoni, "La policía de la Ciudad de México durante el Porfiriato," 104–11.
88. Franco, *Cruel Modernity*, 2.
89. Holden, *Armies without Nations*, 22.
90. Quoted in Nieto and Rojas, *Tiempos del Olympia*, 100.
91. *El Diario Nacional* (Bogotá), reprinted in "Galarza y Carvajal explotan su triste celebridad," *El Cine Gráfico* (Cúcuta), 12 May 1916, n.p. I thank Juan Sebastián Ospina León for sharing the materials from *El Cine Gráfico* cited here and below. A striking parallel case in Spain is *Asesinato y entierro de Don José Canalejas* (*Assassination and Burial of José Canalejas*, Enrique Blanco and Adelardo Fernández Arias, 1912), which combined a reenactment of the assassination of Spain's prime minister with actuality footage of his funeral.
92. The apotheosis is believed to be the only surviving fragment of the film. Nieto and Rojas, *Tiempos del Olympia*, 100–101.
93. "Consecuentes," *El Cine Gráfico*, 28 January 1916, n.p. In his memoir *El águila y la serpiente* (*The Eagle and the Serpent*), Martín Luis Guzmán reports a similar incident involving film images of Venustiano Carranza projected during the 1917 Constitutional Convention. Guzmán, *El águila y la serpiente*, 340; Guzmán, *The Eagle and the Serpent*, 291.
94. The debate about the film and its prohibition in several cities are recorded in "La película inmoral," *El Cine Gráfico*, 5 May 1916, n.p.
95. Martínez Pardo, *Historia del cine colombiano*, 39.
96. The film's credits attribute the direction to P. P. Jambrina, a pseudonym of Martínez Velasco. Suárez and Arbeláez, "*Garras de Oro*," 59.
97. Martínez Carril, "*El pequeño héroe del Arroyo de Oro*," 293. A version of the film without intertitles survives at the Cinemateca Uruguaya.
98. Gumucio Dagron, *Historia del cine boliviano*, 83. Portions of Castillo's film survive and have been restored recently by the Cinemateca Boliviana.
99. *La Razón* (La Paz), 30 November 1927, quoted in Gumucio Dagron, *Historia del cine boliviano*, 81.
100. Gumucio Dagron, *Historia del cine boliviano*, 83.