

**About Gunckel, Colin. *Mexico on Main Street: Transnational Film Culture in Los Angeles before World War II***

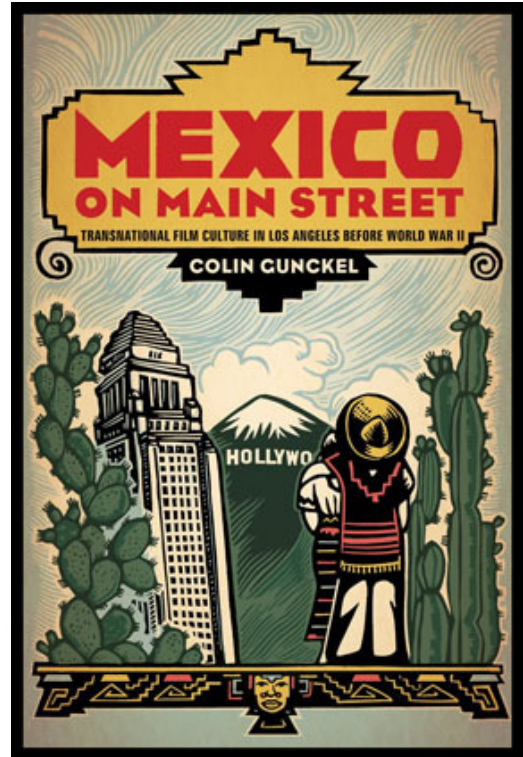
New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015, 264 pp., ISBN 978-0813570754

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Recently, a wave of new scholarship has been published in Latin American film studies that challenges our understandings of local film cultures through historical approaches.

Along with works in a similar vein—Laura Isabel Serna’s *Making Cinelandia: American Films and Mexican Film Culture before the Golden Age*<sup>1</sup> and Rielle Navitski’s *Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil*<sup>2</sup> are two terrific examples—Colin Gunckel’s generative *Mexico on Main Street* teases out ways in which a local film culture was enmeshed within broader cultural, economic, and social structures. Uncovering a lost history whose spaces and places were erased in post-World War II Los Angeles through ostensible urban redevelopment, Gunckel also recovers an important site of Spanish-language film culture in the silent and early sound periods. *Mexico on Main Street*<sup>3</sup> is, quite simply, an excellent book, one that has already started to inspire additional research.

A strength of Gunckel’s research, broadly speaking, is his ability to associate detailed, historical research with the near past and the present. While the majority of what



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<sup>1</sup> SERNA, Laura Isabel. *Making Cinelandia: American Films and Mexican Film Culture before the Golden Age*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> NAVITSKI, Rielle. *Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> GUNCKEL, Colin. *Mexico on Main Street. Transnational Film Culture in Los Angeles before World War II*. Londres: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

follows is dedicated to giving an overview of *Mexico on Main Street*—it is slightly more detailed than a traditional review so as to make the book's contributions more accessible to readers in places where the text is not readily available—its chapters are followed by generative codas that extend their arguments beyond World War II. Delving briefly and fascinatingly into topics like the exhibit *Calle Principal: Main Street Los Angeles, 1920s*, the ethnographic works of Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, and the demolition of the California Theater, these codas remind us that what Gunckel explores in his work endures, that meaning lingers into different historical contexts.

In the book's first chapter, "Constructing Mexican Los Angeles: Competing Visions of an Immigrant Population," Gunckel not only details transformations in the city's physical geography caused by explosive demographic and economic growth, but also the new ways in which its cultural geography was conceptualized by its Mexican community. A physical site, located on Main Street nearly the Plaza (which, coincidentally, was the location of the original Spanish settlement), became the locus for Mexican commerce, culture, and criticism. After an excellent section that examines the ever-changing dynamics of urban space, focusing on both the built environment (depicted wonderfully in one of Daniel González's excellent maps and several useful images) and discriminatory discourse of Anglo "reformists," Gunckel brings the reader from the street into the cinema from the street. Drawing from Ramírez-Berg, among other critics, Gunckel shows the reader prejudicial discursive formations and representational conventions in the 1910s that, regrettably, are still projected onto our many screens today. In one of the most compelling sections of the book, Gunckel examines how the Mexican community reacted to these "reformists" through its own reformational discourse, one that legitimized Main Street as respectable (while making invisible undesirable people and places). He argues, "At any rate, Mexican workers radicalized as nonwhite in Los Angeles were simultaneously positioned as problematic by two competing constructions of Mexicanness, two distinct yet overlapping conceptions of race. Although the Mexican press of the city protested stereotypes and re-presented its constituency in the process, its discourse at times intersected

uncomfortably with mainstream discourse, despite being motivated by a set of investments”.<sup>4</sup> To get at the complex identitary discourse emerging from important institutions in Los Angeles’ Mexican community at the time, the chapter concludes with the exploration of representations of *mexicanidad* in the daily *El Herald de México*.

The section chapter, “Spectacles of High Morality and Culture: Theatrical Culture and Constructions of the Mexican Community in the 1920s,” centers on the importance of another physical and representational space: the theater. Like other places on the margins of media industries, Mexican Los Angeles enjoyed the theater as a stage for entertainment, which, due to economic development, became accessible to increasingly large audiences. Provoking deeper thought into the complex relationships between media industries, Gunckel argues that the theater effectively substituted national cinema that had yet to become viable in Mexico and, perhaps, was impossible in the *México de afuera*, the expatriate community. He states, “The inability of Mexicans (in Los Angeles and beyond) to create a stable transnational cinema that would provide an alternative to Hollywood actually fueled the brief renaissance of theatrical culture”.<sup>5</sup> In many ways, this is analogous to exhibition practices and media cultures seen in the period in other parts of the world such as Latin America. Becoming central to the cultural formation of a transnational Mexican community, the theater ambivalently engaged popular culture, especially Hollywood films. This *mexicanidad* exhibited in theaters like Teatro Novel and in vaudevillian performances like those of the *pelado* negotiated a cultural, economic, and identitary in-betweenness and, thus, created a new audience. Consuming mainstream and marginal media and popular culture, as Gunckel shows, this audience came together and fell apart during the course of the 1920s, usually due to fissures caused by class.

Shifting from the cultural geography of a Mexican Los Angeles, whose discourses and representations positioned the emergent community as unique, the third chapter

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

“The Audible and the Invisible: The Transition to Sound and the De-Mexicanization of Hollywood” explores the anxieties arising from cinema’s transition to sound. Not only causing individuals like journalists to consider the (potential and perceived) deleterious effects of English-speaking Hollywood on its community, whose use of Spanish was understood as a fundamental bond tying them together, it also forced them to confront their Mexican identity *vis-à-vis* a homogenized understanding of Hispanic or Latin American audiences. Much like local reactions in places like Buenos Aires and Mexico City, Los Angeles’ Mexican film culture was initially displaced by English-language movies or Spanish-language films produced by Hollywood studios. Two strategies emerged: multilinguals or Foreign Language Versions (movies produced in multiple languages using similar scripts, actors, sets, wardrobes, etc.) and original features. In both cases, so as to appeal to the broadest audience possible (and exploit available labor), these films were a kind of cultural hodgepodge. In what is arguably the best analysis of the representational leveling of identity to a transnational and non-specific *latinidad*, Gunckel examines the local Los Angeles’ Mexican community’s rejection of these films. Much like Lisa Jarvinen’s *The Rise of Spanish-Language Filmmaking: Out from Hollywood’s Shadow*,<sup>6</sup> Gunckel builds on Robert Dickson’s foundational work, especially *Cita en Hollywood*,<sup>7</sup> cowritten with Juan B. Heinink. In this fascinating chapter, Gunckel localizes local reactions to films starring such important figures as José Mojica, Catalina Bárcena, and Carlos Gardel.

As local audiences rejected the *films hispanos* produced by Hollywood studios, sound film industries in Mexico and, later, Argentina began to emerge. Relying on differentiation often tied to cultural nationalism and, as an extension, representational authenticity, these cinemas would eventually become projected onto the screens of Spanish-language movie theaters in Los Angeles. In “Fashionable Charros and Chinas Poblanas: Mexican Cinema and the Dilemma of the *Comedia*

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<sup>6</sup> JARVINEN, Lisa. *The rise of Spanish language filmmaking. Out from Hollywood’s shadow, 1929-1939*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> HEININK, Juan y Robert Dickson. *Cita en Hollywood: Antología de las películas norteamericanas habladas en castellano*. Bilbao: Mensajero, 1990.

*Ranchera*,” the fourth chapter, Gunckel examines the transnational (and intermedial) horizons of early Mexican sound film, especially that of the *comedia ranchera* and Fernando de Fuentes’ 1936 international blockbuster, *Allá en el Rancho Grande*. Gunckel proposes that “while the steadfastly national influences on the genre have been widely recognized and recognized by scholars, the less frequently documented transnational origins of this genre were nonetheless central to its conception and reception. If the *comedia ranchera* relied on a complex web of intermedial and transnational convergences that included yet extended beyond the cinematic text, it is only by considering these factors that we may understand its historical significance”.<sup>8</sup> In exploring the terms and the stakes of this transnational *mexicanidad*, which he argues was made possible through the genre’s intermedial flexibility, Gunckel uncovers a film culture that is largely forgotten in film historiography (for a multitude of reasons ranging from cultural prejudice to linguistic access to lost films).

“Now We Have Mexican Cinema? Navigating Transnational Mexicanidad in a Moment of Crisis” is the book’s final chapter. Partially precipitated by a crisis in the Mexican film industry after the success of *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, as well as greater access to Argentine films via more professional distribution, Mexican film culture in Los Angeles confronted its increasingly problematized nationalist orientation. In the introduction to the chapter, Gunckel states that, “this period marks the initial decline of the cultural nationalism that had governed critical discourse and Mexican cinema culture in Los Angeles since the 1910s. Furthermore, it acknowledged a degree of fragmentation, fluidity, and heterogeneity obscured by earlier constructions of the Mexican population”.<sup>9</sup> A localized experience of a broader condition, this fragmentation is an aftereffect of cinema’s transition to sound. With the establishment of national film industries like those of Mexico and Argentina, not to mention better distribution networks, local filmgoers confronted new perspectives through their consumption of transnational media. Watching the rerelease of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* is, as Gunckel

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<sup>8</sup> GUNCKEL, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

shows, quite different in 1938, as it is paired in Frank Fouce's California Theater with Luis Moglia Barth's 1937 *Melgarejo*, which starred the comic Florencio Parravicini. It is little surprising that the consumption of a wider variety of films led to the renegotiation of identity. Similar to other important centers of Latin American film culture, I would argue, Gunckel convincingly demonstrates (largely through the case study of Tito Guízar, a star whose career was always intermedial and transnational) that what resulted was a more heterogeneous and transnational conceptualization of *mexicanidad*. Ultimately, the decline of the discourse of *México de afuera* led into the beginnings of World War II, which saw the emergence of the so-called *Época de Oro* of Mexican cinema (supported, as a matter of geopolitical policy, by the US' Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs or OCIAA).

*Mexico on Main Street* is an engaging and thought provoking text that makes major contributions to overlapping areas of film studies. Its flaws (e.g., description of the Chilean actor, director, and performer José Bohr as Argentine, which is understandable given his transnational upbringing, connections to tango culture, and nickname "El Che Bohr") are few and generally outside of the scope of the work (e.g., a greater exploration of the connections between the Ignacio Lozano owned dailies *La Opinión* in Los Angeles and *La Prensa* in San Antonio reveals close connections in their film criticism). Through recovering practices of Mexican film culture in Los Angeles from the 1910s to the 1940s, which were inextricably tied to broader social and cultural configurations, Gunckel's important book helps to reclaim an important site of Mexican and Mexican-American cultural heritage in the United States.

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**Date of reception:** 8<sup>th</sup> June 2017

**Date of acceptance:** 28<sup>th</sup> August 2017

**How to cite this review:**

POPPE, Nicolás. "About Gunckel, Colin. *Mexico on Main Street*. *Transnational Film Culture in Los Angeles before World War II*", *Vivomatografías. Revista de estudios sobre precine y cine silente en Latinoamérica*, n. 3, diciembre de 2017, pp. 228-234. Disponible en: <<http://www.vivomatografias.com/index.php/vmfs/article/view/113>> [Acceso dd.mm.aaaa].

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