

They Say We Are Birds of a Feather

Walt Disney gets a lot of credit for things he didn't do alone. He's colloquially known as the creator of Mickey Mouse, even though colleague Ub Iwerks was actually responsible.¹ He put his name before every one of his films despite them being the work of a team of skilled animators which by 1945 considered themselves so indispensable that they demanded 20% of revenue from theatrical re-releases and television broadcasts.² I think about this "cult of Disney" a lot, and wonder how such prestige came to be constructed. So you can imagine that when I hear about how Disney's *Saludos Amigos* (1942) and *The Three Caballeros* (1944) were responsible for tearing Latin America from the brink of fascism and seducing them into joining the allied forces, I'm both skeptical and intrigued.

Even scholars tend to accentuate Disney's role. Alfred Charles Richard Jr., in his oft-referenced reference book, *Censorship and Hollywood's Hispanic Image*, refers to him as "chief propagandist for the Good Neighbor policy" and to the films as "the two most successful inter-Hemispheric ambassadors to come out of Tinsel Town during the Good Neighbor era."³ Dale Adams quotes both of Richard's statements in his outline of Hollywood's involvement in Good Neighbor politics actually titled *Saludos Amigos*, though he notes that the policy's effectiveness came from the "aggregate impact" of many different Hollywood films.⁴

¹ Koehler, Robert. "Film Reviews: THE HAND BEHIND THE MOUSE," p. 46.

² Ramsaye, Terry, "Participations," p. 7

³ Richard, Alfred Charles, *Censorship and Hollywood's Hispanic Image*, pp. 273 – 274

⁴ Adams, Dale. *Saludos Amigos*, p. 293–294

My interest in this paper is not to debunk the privileged importance historians place on *Saludos* and *Caballeros*.⁵ I will, at the end of the essay, briefly note some failings of the films in their intended mission and how these failings call into question the reliability of my “primary” journalistic sources as secondary or tertiary relayers of Latin American spectatorship. However, the bulk of my project is devoted to understanding the means by which Disney’s films became mythologized in the popular imagination. Based on this question, I present a framework by which elements of reception and promotion for these films supported, demonstrated, and perpetuated participatory modes of spectatorship which transformed the viewing of *Saludos* (more-so than *Caballeros*) into an act of patriotism.⁶

A Very Brief History

The Good Neighbor Policy was enacted when various advocates warned FDR of a rise in fascist sympathies in Latin America. Consequently, he appointed one of those advocates, Nelson Rockefeller, as Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA — an acronym which also came to refer to his office in the government). Rockefeller then set to, among other things, building infrastructure so the government could liaison with Hollywood for the purposes of promoting more positive Latin American representation, or as Richard describes it, to “put together the most successful propaganda campaign ever conceived for Mexico, the Caribbean region, [and] Central

⁵ For starters, I don’t speak Spanish. But even with help, the digitized Latin American newspaper archives I examined turned out to be poorly search-optimized. USC has an archive of an Argentinian trade, *Heraldo del Cinematografista*, but I found out about it too late to make the trip. Collecting usable primary research for this paper ended up involving the extensive use of ProQuest’s Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive, ProQuest’s Historical Newspaper archives, Archive.org’s archive of *Motion Picture Herald*, and a specially curated set of reviews digitized by the Margaret Herrick Library. Secondary research was found in the UCSB Library.

⁶ In conceiving of “modes of spectatorship,” I draw partly from Shohat and Stam’s concept of an “ethnography of spectatorship.” I won’t be applying their definition all at once upon a single audience, but wherever one of their “multiple registers” is relevant, I’ll leave a record in the footnotes.

and South America.”⁷ Hollywood reached back to the CIAA via the Motion Picture Society for the Americas (MPSA), of which Walt Disney was a director.⁸ The CIAA then funded tours for various Hollywood figures, including Disney, which in some cases became the basis for films directly appealing to Latin America. Disney made *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros*, and began touring to research a third film about Cuba but later abandoned the project.⁹

If this were an essay on the government loyalty of Walt Disney, we might here go into his struggles against striking workers, the many, many war films which the government commissioned from him, and the studio system at large’s forestalling of government intervention against oligopolistic business practices. Instead, this being an essay on spectatorship, we’ll leave broader context behind for now and start by looking at some spectators.

Trades Parade Neighborly Ways

The American trade journals were completely behind *Saludos Amigos*. *Daily Variety* called it “craftsmanship of the highest Disney standard,” and *The Hollywood Reporter* declared that “all who had hands in its creation deserve highest praise.”¹⁰ This high aesthetic regard is not particularly surprising, though the focusing of that praise on Walt Disney’s team interestingly echoes the animators’ contemporary struggle for recognition. It also serves as an example of an awareness of the collective nature of production which is characteristic of trade critics. I explicitly place that awareness within the critics themselves, as opposed to merely the articles they produce. Of course, there are *interest-related motives* behind a trade publication’s printing

⁷ Richard, Alfred Charles, *Censorship and Hollywood’s Hispanic Image*, p. xxix

⁸ Weaver, William R, “Society for Americas May Continue,” p. 33. (I can’t figure out whether the title Richard gave Disney, “chief propagandist for the Good Neighbor Policy,” is a superlative or a real position.) (See Note 3.)

⁹ Adams, Dale, *Saludos Amigos*, p. 289–295. ; Anon, “Calling Disney,” p. 9.

¹⁰ Williams, Roscoe, “Reviews: Saludos Amigos.” ; Anon, “Disney’s Charm.”

of detailed production credits — names are selling points to exhibitors, after all — but it also stands to reason that building a habit of noticing such things would influence an individual reviewer's mode of spectatorship, of which the contents of their texts would be an *expression*.¹¹ Thus, in finding common threads between trade critics, we can begin mapping out a shared mode of spectatorship from which they approached this film.¹²

By far the most notable part of these critics' arguments, far overshadowing the aforementioned nods to aesthetics, is the continued, implicit reference to the film's function (and apparent success) as a piece of Good Neighbor diplomacy. Of the four American trade reviews I have in front of me, every single one celebrates *Saludos Amigos*' purported success as a builder of good-will between the hemispheres from their opening sentences onwards.¹³ One might interpret this as merely referencing Latin America as a kind of "test" market, thereby satisfying the *interest-related motive* of giving exhibitors an idea of how well the picture would sell. However, if we instead consider it as an *expression* of these critics' genuine enthusiasm, then that opens up a view of the Good Neighbor Policy as an *attraction*, fed by eager support of its values.

Why would these critics consider the Good Neighbor Policy in this way? In other words, why would their mode of spectatorship incorporate pleasure into assisting this government initiative? One explanation is that said pleasure is merely a product of ambient discourses.¹⁴ By

¹¹ "spectator as fashioned by institutional contexts": Shohat, Ella and Stam, Robert *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, p. 350.

¹² I'm including quotes from *Motion Picture Daily* in this sketch although its position drifts from the "labor-aware" mold a little bit. Its *Saludos Amigos* review, for example, gives full credit for the film to Walt Disney and the CIAA. *MPD* was known for focusing on corporate coverage, being New York-based alongside studio management. (See: Williams, "Reviews: Saludos Amigos." ; Hoyt, Description of *Motion Picture Daily*.)

¹³ Anon. "Disney's Charm" (*Hollywood Reporter*) ; Anon. "Saludos Amigos." (*Daily Variety*) ; Ray, "Film Reviews: Saludos," p. 8 (*Variety*) ; Williams, "Reviews: Saludos Amigos." (*Motion Picture Daily*)

¹⁴ "spectator as fashioned by ambient discourses": Shohat, Ella and Stam, Robert *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, p. 350.

this logic, the Good Neighbor Policy had sway as a cultural initiative along the lines of the moon landing, investing the country at large. This is an interesting idea, but it would be difficult to prove, and the degree to which it holds water is beyond the scope of this paper. We may, alternatively, consider explicit efforts to induce interest in inter-hemispheric relations. Note the timing of these reviews. One comes from the film's premiere in Buenos Aires, while the other three came from press screenings held within the US less than a week later.¹⁵ There is no doubt in my mind that holding a press screening at this time was a strategic move by Disney/RKO to achieve exactly this ideological effect. It would be two more months before the official domestic release.¹⁶

Having satisfied the question of motive as best as we can, let us now consider how the critics provide justification for *Saludos Amigos* in particular as an effective piece of "good-will." Firstly, we must acknowledge that, as *Daily Variety* puts it, "the title means 'hello, friends,' and it's addressed both to North and South Americans."¹⁷ To support prevailing "good-will" from North to South, the trades unanimously cite the impressive Latin American box office draw as evidence.¹⁸ Most then interpret this financial return as the film's being "endorsed by test as a document of authenticity," as *Motion Picture Daily* put it.¹⁹ As an example of the tenuous way in which this line is drawn, consider *Daily Variety*'s remark that "Disney took great care to treat the humor and culture of the South Americans with great respect and admiration, and *Amigos* was

¹⁵ Anon., "Disney's Charm" (*Hollywood Reporter*) ; Anon., "Saludos Amigos." (*Daily Variety*) ; Ray, "Film Reviews: Saludos," p. 8 (*Variety*) ; Williams, "Reviews: Saludos Amigos." (*Motion Picture Daily*) ; Anon., "Pictures...OK in English Dialog Too," p. 23.

¹⁶ Lusk, Norbert, "Walt Disney's 'Amigos' Well 'Received in East," p. A8

¹⁷ Anon., "Saludos Amigos." (*Daily Variety*)

¹⁸ Anon., "Disney's Charm" (*Hollywood Reporter*) ; Anon., "Saludos Amigos." (*Daily Variety*) ; Ray, "Film Reviews: Saludos," p. 8 (*Variety*) ; Williams, "Reviews: Saludos Amigos." (*Motion Picture Daily*)

¹⁹ Williams, "Reviews: Saludos Amigos." (*Motion Picture Daily*)

shown first in Latin-America, where it is reported to have cracked theatre records.”²⁰ A direct correlation is not outright stated, but the pairing of the clauses still implies that the second statement justifies the first. This authenticity is thus used as a selling point, lending evidence to a projected “good-will” appeal from South to North once the film is screened in the states. *The Hollywood Reporter*, for example, makes the bold claim that “[Saludos Amigos] will do more to promote friendly understanding of South America in the United States than dozens of weightier tomes.”²¹

Box office doesn’t necessarily correlate with proper representation. In fact, there is solid evidence within these very reviews that specific groups of Latin Americans took issue with the film. (More on that at the end of the paper.) But even as these papers reach conclusions based on flawed logic, their choice to derive meaning from Latin American reception at all further demonstrates that the importance of doing a service to the southern hemisphere is embedded in their mode of spectatorship.

This completely changed over the next two years. The Good Neighbor elements all but disappear from the major trades’ pieces on *The Three Caballeros*, with attention instead placed on technological advances and live-action stars (such as Aurora Miranda) incorporated into the picture.²² Part of this is certainly due to the choice to hold the trade showing *before* the Latin American opening this time.²³ But these critics hardly even begin to *speculate* on Latin American tastes, which is a shift considering how much stock they put into “authenticity” beforehand. *The Hollywood Reporter* even opened its review of *The Three Caballeros* calling it “essentially a

²⁰ Anon, “Saludos Amigos.” (*Daily Variety*)

²¹ Anon, “Disney’s Charm” (*Hollywood Reporter*)

²² Abel, “3 Caballeros” (*Variety*) ; Anon, “Disney ‘Caballeros’ Spotty” (*The Hollywood Reporter*) ; Anon, “Trade Showing: The Three Caballeros” (*Daily Variety*) ; Ryweck, “The Three Caballeros” (*Motion Picture Daily*)

²³ Anon, “Hollywood and Mexico,” 12.

technicolor patchwork entertainment designed to further the Good Neighbor policy,” which almost sounds dismissive.²⁴ It would appear that the excitement for transnational understandings had somewhat worn off stateside. To these critics, *The Three Caballeros* was really just a movie.

Now the Papers Have Their Say

The newspapers’ responses to *The Three Caballeros* weren’t bad, but just like the trades, they weren’t very concerned with the film’s diplomatic value. *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post* both praised the film but made no mention of its Good Neighbor purpose.²⁵ Instead, like the trades, they fixated on praising the new technology. Meanwhile, the *New York Times* leaned hard into the technological angle in order to decry *The Three Caballeros*’ “flashy” advances as low culture.²⁶ In 1945, Bosley Crowther published a particularly damning piece called “Dizzy Disney,” with the telling subtitle of “‘*The Three Caballeros*’ Shows Brilliant Technique — But Is It Art?.” In it, he praises the film’s technological advances but decries its lack of structure. “They have tossed all their colorists’ tricks in one big animated splurge,” he claims, “And have passed it along to the public without a shred of artistic dignity.”²⁷

Here’s the amazing thing: two years prior, that same author wrote a piece called “Howdy, Neighbors!” which explicitly makes the complaint that Good Neighbor films *weren’t* working because people *weren’t* putting thought into making films on Latin Americans’ terms! According to *that* piece, “[Hollywood] producers want to shape [Latin Americans] to [their] own image — and that, of course, brings from the Latins outraged cries of pain.” Then he cites *Saludos Amigos*

²⁴ Anon, “Disney ‘Caballeros’ Spotty” (*The Hollywood Reporter*)

²⁵ Schallert, “Disney Magic.” ; Bell, Nelson B, “The Three Caballeros.”

²⁶ Lusk, “Disney Film ‘Firecracker,’” A3

²⁷ Crowther, “Dizzy Disney,” p. X1.

(which he describes in “Dizzy Disney” as “lacking real artistic grasp”) as the perfect example of the kind of film which would have a “salubrious effect” in South America.²⁸ And yet his article on *The Three Caballeros* two years later makes *absolutely no reference to the diplomatic project*. The degree to which the optimistic Latin-American awareness (or pseudo-awareness) written all over *Saludos*’ reviews completely evaporated as *Caballeros* arrived is nothing short of tragic. It adds credence to the theory that the huff about *Saludos Amigos* was the short-term result of crafty publicity, rather than indicative of a broader humanism. Or can advertising be humanistic, too?

Promoting the Parrot (and Duck)

The promotion of *Saludos Amigos*’ domestic release tells us a great deal about various entities’ visions for the film. Explicit newspaper advertising for *Saludos* was virtually nonexistent, especially compared to Disney’s United Artists-distributed feature propaganda *Victory Through Air Power*.²⁹ One wonders what it is that kept RKO and the exhibitors from publicizing more: a lack of faith in short compilation films, a lack of faith in Disney films, a lack of faith in Good Neighbor films, or another circumstance of timing and finances. Trade advertising was also sparse, at least for the film’s stateside debut.³⁰ The one advertisement which *Variety* carried during the 1943 release was for Ary Barroso’s “Aquarela do Brasil,” a well known piece of music long before *Saludos* which happened to associated with critics’ favorite scene in the movie.³¹ *The Billboard* ran the same copy.³² That’ll show you the importance of

²⁸ Crowther, Bosley, “Howdy, Neighbors!,” p. X3.

²⁹ Walt Disney’s *Victory Through Air Power*. Various advertisements in *New York Times*. See bibliography.

³⁰ A search in ProQuest’s Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive only yielded the advertisements noted in this paper.

³¹ Brazil by Ary Barroso. Advertisement in *Variety*, p. 192 ; Anon. “Saludos.”

secondary markets, though admittedly it doesn't accomplish much in terms of priming modes of spectatorship.



I did find one two-page spread in *The Film Daily*.³³ In it, Donald and José (the protagonists of *Saludos*) are seen dancing (or perhaps parading) with Carmen Miranda, holding signs that show off critical reception from various newspapers, all of which is focused on the fun of the theatrical event. Ethnic symbols are mostly decoration as “Broadway Goes Latin-American!”, and a picture of a massive crowd around The Globe is captioned “New York Lines Up For the Fun Fiesta!” This advertisement actually goes a great deal towards orienting the spectator. It plays off of the bandwagon effect, encouraging readers to join the mass of New Yorkers — and Carmen and Donald and José — by coming to see the show. The same imagery is actually evoked in both the trades and in the newspapers, as each share the tendency to refer to Donald, José, and Panchito as “ambassadors.” This extra-narrative framing works to reinforce

³² Brazil by Ary Barroso. Advertisement in *The Billboard*, p. 29.

³³ *Saludos Amigos*. Advertisement. pp. 8–9.

the characters as performers of Good Neighbor diplomacy, and to invite the reader to be a part of this performance.³⁴

But it's not all about partying. A few weeks before *Saludos Amigos* entered wide release in the United States, *Motion Picture Herald* published a series of "selling points" for exhibitors along with a description of the press kit.³⁵ Three themes emerge from this document. First, we see a push to emphasize the Good Neighbor policy explicitly. The "exploitable" potential of Disney characters is brought up (especially José Carioca), but only for a few sentences of a lengthy paragraph, compared to a continually reiterated push towards the South American theme. To that point, the second theme found here is a desire to market to schools. Maps of the continent, a description of the Samba, coloring books, and discussion guides are all included in the kit, to be "used in schools to call attention to the picture and the Good Neighbor theme." Beyond its commercial advantage, one wonders whether this move is also purposed to cozy up to the Roosevelt Administration, which was also pushing for schools to address Latin America through the elevation of "Pan-American Day."³⁶ Finally, the briefing proposes inviting "Latin American consuls or other officials." It also adds the telling remark that "this picture will overcome any prejudice carrying over from earlier attempts," which lines up with Crowther's assertion of *Saludos*' relative success among the Good Neighbor films.³⁷

Thus, we have seen how publicity played a role in shaping Americans' modes of spectatorship for this movie to align with the needs of the policy by emphasizing adventure and

³⁴ "spectator as fashioned by the text itself": Shohat, Ella and Stam, Robert *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, p. 350.

³⁵ Anon [RKO "exploiteers"], "Selling Points," 60. ; Lusk, Norbert. "Walt Disney's 'Amigos,'" p. A8.

³⁶ Adams, Dale, "Saludos Amigos," pp. 289–295.

³⁷ Crowther, Bosley, "Howdy, Neighbors!," p. X3.

didactic value, and we have seen how (at least for *Saludos*) that value was exhibited and amplified by the press.

Cracks in the Myth

I mentioned in the section on trade criticism that most major trade reviewers praised *Saludos Amigos*' authenticity, highlighting this as an attraction for American audiences. However, one critic in my sample was reluctant to jump the gun on the movie's stateside appeal. This is the one reporting directly from Buenos Aires. "Whether it'll have the same interest in the states is hard to tell," they note, "Since audiences here, in Brazil and in Chile have been particularly interested in seeing their own native scenes and customs through the eyes of Disney and crew."³⁸

I deliberately played this source down because it was so different, but it actually goes to remarkable lengths to try to record honest reactions of Latin American citizens by country. Thus, *this is the closest I can get to studying Latin American spectatorship using the evidence I have*. As it turns out, different nationalities had different objections. For example: the *Variety* article notes that Chileans were irritated with their portion of *Saludos Amigos*, which involves a little plane crossing the Andes to deliver mail, because it "doesn't show anything truly Chilean."³⁹ This may not seem like a big deal, but note how the *Daily Variety* review mentions every other segment but completely forgets about Chile.⁴⁰ If you're going to construct new foreign relations from the world behind a silver screen, then anyone left out is at quite a disadvantage.

³⁸ Ray, "Film Reviews: *Saludos*," p. 8 (*Variety*)

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Anon, "*Saludos Amigos*." (*Daily Variety*)

Or consider, alternatively, how the *Variety* article notes that “through the film... Norteamericanos...become the fall guys.”⁴¹ This was an example of industry policy at work, preventing negative hispanic stereotypes by refusing to cast them as the comic relief. I don’t meant to complain about casting North Americans as comic relief; the power dynamic there is completely different. However, using industry policy to promote positive stereotypes leads to its own problems, as when Latin American countries began pressuring Hollywood (well, a probably quite willing Hollywood) into portraying all of their women as light skinned.⁴² And so, in *The Three Caballeros*, Donald lands on the whitest beach in Mexico.

Recall how the trades derived “authenticity” from box office results?⁴³ As you can see, that logical leap oversimplifies a lot and doesn’t work out in practice. This is one more reason why it’s a shame that reception for *The Three Caballeros* paid more attention to the film’s flashy construction than to the people who were supposed to be its subjects. In what is perhaps the most haunting gesture of them all, the *Variety* article for *The Three Caballeros* refers to the film’s explanation of Mexican tradition (Las Posadas) and the film’s Mexican characters (one of whose name it got wrong) only in the context of how “the toy market should boom plenty from these.”⁴⁴ Thus vanishes the last hint of good-will behind the “good-will”.

As a final note, consider this: it isn’t much of a stretch to call Disney’s research tour “promotional.” After all, his star power won him an “Order of the Southern Cross” from the Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs. It sounds like a genuine honor, but in another sense it’s also a cultural transaction between governments, which does achieve promotional ends for both

⁴¹ Ray, “Film Reviews: Saludos,” p. 8 (*Variety*)

⁴² Adams, Dale. *Saludos Amigos*.

⁴³ Williams, “Reviews; Saludos Amigos”

⁴⁴ Abel, “3 Caballeros” (*Variety*)

sides. If I knew more about the history between Brazil and the United States, I could say more about this.⁴⁵ And if I knew more about Argentina, I might have something more to say about *Saludos Amigos*' "special honors" bestowed by the Argentine Academy of Cinematographic Arts and Sciences.⁴⁶ My point is that there's more research to be done here, especially regarding Latin American spectatorship of these films and how *that* was arranged by Disney and/or RKO and/or various governments. I detailed my sources in a footnote in the third paragraph, as well as a few which I couldn't access due to time and the lack of a full-time translator. I hope this research gets continued, as it would seem that no matter how you swing it, this film means a lot to a lot of people, and those people deserve to know its full context.

⁴⁵ Anon, "Brazil Decorates Disney," p. 44.

⁴⁶ Bruski, "'Gaucho War'," p. 30.

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