

When Spanish-language cinema flourished in Los Angeles

A project looks at how Latin America and the US were intertwined through film



It is impossible to tell from the outside, but the Downtown Independent movie theatre on Main Street in Los Angeles was once called the Azteca – a nod to the Spanish-language films it used to play in the 1940s.

It was not the only such venue. Across the city, a network of more than 60 playhouses – including the Million Dollar Theatre, today a national landmark – regularly screened movies for Latin American audiences, many of whom emigrated from Mexico or fled from the Mexican Revolution (1910-20). In 1939, more than 200 films were shown in Los Angeles for Spanish speakers.

“From the 1930s through the 1950s, there was a vibrant Spanish-language film culture in the city that’s largely forgotten,” says Jan-Christopher Horak, the director of the UCLA Film and Television Archive, which is exploring this history in its Pacific Standard Time (PST) contribution, *Recuerdos de un cine en español: Latin American Cinema in Los Angeles, 1930-60*, which is organised by Horak, Colin Gunckel, María Elena de las Carreras and Alejandra Espasand-Bouza.

The programme includes screenings of around 40 movies that once drew major crowds – and not only in Los Angeles. At their peak, Spanish-language production companies were distributing films to 500 theatres across the US. Some were even shot in Los Angeles, including *La Cruz y La Espada* (1934), which was



produced by the Fox Film Corporation.

“If you want to study Latin American cinema, you can’t leave the US out of the equation,” says Gunckel, who wrote the 2015 book *Mexico on Main Street*, which looks at the film culture of Los Angeles’s Mexican immigrant community in the years before the Second World War.

“There is overwhelming evidence that Los Angeles was a node of Mexican cinema,” Gunckel says. “And there is also evidence that Mexican producers used Los Angeles as a way to gauge the tastes of their audiences.” One Los Angeles record store belonged to Mau-

The Argentine noir *Los tallos amargos* (1956). *Romance Tropical* (1934), the first Puerto Rican feature—long believed to be lost—was found in an archive

ricio Calderón, whose brothers, José and Rafael, ran a major studio called Calderón Productions. Mauricio would provide his brothers with sales figures from the shop to help them decide how to market and produce their films.

“The terms of Mexican identity were hotly contested in this period,” Gunckel says. “In the US, the question was whether Mexicans living here could remain Mexican.” In the years following the Mexican Revolution, the country’s government “undertook a project to create a national image for a nation that had been fragmented. It wanted to convince Mexicans that the country belonged to them,” he says, adding: “From its inception, Mexican cinema has been transnational.”

The UCLA programme also looks beyond Mexico, to movies from Cuba and Argentina, reflecting the diversity of the period. In part because producers wanted their films to appeal to wide audiences, actors from all over Latin America were employed. “The films were spoken in an odd uniform Spanish – ‘Hispano,’” Horak says. In the movie *La Vida Bohemia* (1938), which takes place in a Puerto Rican community in New York but was shot in Los Angeles, actors from at least four countries were involved.

PST BY NUMBERS

More than \$16m awarded in grants
\$655,000 for education programmes
\$600,000 for a performance art festival (11-21 January 2018)
More than 70 shows and programmes
More than 1,100 artists included
45 countries represented
More than 45 publications due

at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Lacma) and the 18th Street Arts Center, will primarily present newly commissioned work, which blurs the lines.

“For us, implementation was happening immediately,” says Anuradha Vikram, the artistic director at 18th Street. “We got comments from people that we were a test case for PST as a whole because we were doing things as others were thinking about what to do.”

For the show, 16 artists from around the world took up residencies of various

lengths at 18th Street. A total grant of \$160,000, supplemented by an additional grant to Lacma (where much of the work will be shown), was used in part to hire a research assistant to help artists organise trips around Los Angeles and gain access to various sites.

“Travel was hugely important to begin negotiating loans”

The Getty’s role, after awarding grants, is to oversee and promote the events. “PST is somewhat decentralised, but the Getty is at the centre of it,” Weinstein says. “Most of the knowledge about the various exhibitions is here.”

So has this second, larger edition garnered the same enthusiasm for yet another PST? Asked at a press conference in New York in April, James Cuno, the head of the J. Paul Getty Trust said: “Yes, we’re already thinking about it.”

Pac Pobric

PST REFRAMES FILM AND VIDEO HISTORY

Hollywood goes Havana and Disney in Latin America

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (which is most famous for presenting the Academy Awards) complements the UCLA Film and Television Archive with a programme titled **From Latin America to Hollywood: Latino Film Culture in Los Angeles, 1967-2017** (23 September-18 January 2018).

With the aid of a \$250,000 Getty grant, the documentary filmmaker Lourdes Portillo is organising a series of screenings, discussion panels and the publication of a new book detailing the work of filmmakers from Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, among other countries. “This was a moment when Latin America found its voice in cinema,” Portillo says.

Meanwhile, at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, the exhibition **Hollywood in Havana: Five Decades of Cuban Posters Promoting US Films** (20 August-7 January 2018) looks at how the Cuban Revolution shaped the country’s perceptions of US movies. Shortly after the revolution in 1959, Fidel Castro’s new government organised “cines móviles”—mobile projection units—to bring movies like Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) to the countryside.

“Modern Times is not only a fabulous film, it’s also a critique of capitalist industrial society,” says the show’s curator, Carol Wells, who is the director of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics. She notes that the film’s



Posters depicting US movies in Cuba are the subject of **Hollywood in Havana**

popularity also stemmed from the fact that it appealed to a largely illiterate audience.

Walt Disney’s forays into Latin America—and how artists have interpreted his legacy—are the focus of **How to Read El Pato Pascual** (9 September-16 December) at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture and the Luckman Gallery at California State University.

The show, which is funded by a \$390,000 Getty grant, begins with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “good neighbour policy” towards

Latin America, for which Disney travelled south of the US border to meet animators. In one film inspired by his trip, *The Three Caballeros* (1944), Donald Duck is joined by a Mexican rooster and a Brazilian parrot as they travel through South America.

More than 100 works are included in the show, which looks at how “Latin American artists have quoted Disney from pointed political perspectives”, says the show’s curator, Jesse Lerner.

Ism, Ism, Ism: Experimental Film in Latin America (September-January 2018) at the Los Angeles Filmforum looks at filmmakers from Argentina, Chile, Colombia and beyond. With the aid of a \$150,000 research grant (plus another \$200,000 to implement the programme), organisers sent nine researchers throughout Latin America to meet filmmakers and track down materials. One aim of the project is to “understand the constellation of influence” that traces from south to north and vice versa, says the co-organiser, Luciano Piazza. An accompanying publication includes new essays. **P.P.**

have been used to restore movies such as *Enamorada* (1946), set in the Mexican Revolution. In a rare opportunity, conservators have been able to restore the original camera negatives of the film.

Horak is especially excited to present *Romance Tropical* (1934), the first feature-length Puerto Rican film, which was long believed to have been lost. A copy was found in the holdings of the Packard Humanities Institute, which is at the UCLA Film and Television Archive.

Although the programme looks back, it also reflects current events. Shortly after the then US president Barack Obama announced a softer position on Cuba in 2014, the director of the country’s film archive came to Los Angeles to discuss the project and the restoration of the film *Casta de Roble* (1954). Such conversations may prove more difficult in the future: in June, President Donald Trump announced plans to make travel between the US and Cuba more difficult.

But for now, the curators are focusing on their work, which shines a light on a rich chapter in US and Latin American cultural history. For Horak, it’s part of a larger mission to expand the narrative of cinema. “As soon as you start scratching the surface of film history,” he says, “you realise there are more white spots than there are ones that are coloured in.”

Pac Pobric

• For more information on screenings and events, visit pacificstandardtime.org

do presentations and look at Huntington materials to see what we were missing from our perspective,” she says.

The money was also used to organise an advisory committee and fund travel. “The travel was hugely important because we needed not only to identify where the best material was but also to begin the process of negotiating loans,” Hess says.

Not every project has such a clear distinction between research and implementation. A Universal History of Infamy (20 August-18 February 2018), an exhibition