

PART ONE

Silent Cinema

Conventional Silent Cinema

A CINEMA BY AND FOR CRIOLLOS

Latin American silent cinema was a cinema by and for *criollos*. The term *criollo* comes from the Portuguese *crioulo*, which was first applied in the fifteenth century to Portuguese peoples born in Africa, and soon afterward to African slaves born in Brazil.¹ In Spanish America, the earliest use of *criollo* kept its root meaning (from *criar*, which means “to raise”) but was applied first to Africans born in the Americas, and only afterward to Spaniards born there as well.² By the seventeenth century, the term’s meaning in Spanish had narrowed to refer only to the descendants of Spaniards in the Americas, but after independence it broadened to refer to a Eurocentric understanding of national histories and identities. In effect, by the middle of the nineteenth century, *criollo* was widely used as a stand-in for national hegemonic cultures throughout Spanish America. In Brazil, on the other hand, *crioulo* devolved, among other things, into a racial slur for descendants of Africans, while the French term *créole* came to refer to the African-inflected cultures and languages that emerged throughout the Francophone Caribbean Basin.³

Given the confusion that can arise from the polysemy of *criollo* and its cognates, I will limit my use of the term to refer to Europeanized cultures throughout Latin America, including Brazil. Such use is widely accepted to this day in music, where *criollo* is applied to local variants of European forms popular throughout the nineteenth century, for

example the Peruvian *vals* or the Puerto Rican *danza*. In theater, *criollo* is also widely used to describe dramas that use Spanish or Portuguese forms, such as the *sainete* or the *autos sacramentales*, but are infused with local inflections of language, gesture, costume, and customs. Finally, in literature, the term was in wide circulation during the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth to describe a heterogeneous body of regionalist narratives that combined elements of realism, naturalism, *costumbrismo*, and romanticism, and that set the action in very local, usually rural, contexts. The best-known example of such usage is the literature of the gaucho in Argentina and Uruguay. At the dawn of cinema, then, a criollo sensibility in Latin America did not negate non-European cultures or their role in the construction of the national imaginary, but rather grafted them (to use José Martí's organic metaphor) into a privileged, Eurocentric trunk. In the silent cinema of Latin America, then, a criollo aesthetic is one whose visual language and narrative structures are metropolitan but whose atmospheres, concerns, and characters are local, national, or regional.

The silent period in Latin American cinema coincided with the height of the region's export-import growth and its political expression, oligarchic liberalism (1870–1930). This was a period of exponential economic growth and political stability, when Latin America's economic and political elites belonged to the same socioeconomic group: a Europeanized, criollo oligarchy that became fabulously wealthy by exporting raw materials such as beef, wheat, coffee, sugar, tobacco, henequen, copper, nitrates, rubber, and bananas, and in turn imported manufactured goods such as textiles, machines, and luxury items. At a basic level, then, film in Latin America began as another imported manufactured good, for not only were the cameras and film stock produced in Europe and the United States, but the first to film and screen moving pictures in the region were representatives of the Lumière and Edison companies.⁴

Silent cinema in Latin America was not defined, however, by national oligarchies but by middle- and upper-middle-class politicians and businesspeople who set out to maximize film's huge potential for profits and propaganda. In particular, professional politicians were responsible for financing the official national and regional newsreels that thrived into the 1950s, while the criollo petit-bourgeoisie that emerged to support the expanding export economies adapted to cinema the artisanal and mercantile business model it was already familiar with. From this perspective, then, Latin American narrative silent cinema was predominantly a cinema made by an emerging criollo bourgeoisie using a small-

scale, artisanal approach to production, distribution, and exhibition, and espousing a Eurocentric worldview with correspondingly Europeanized aesthetics. This sensibility applied to national filmmakers as well as to European itinerant and immigrant filmmakers who played a leading role in the development of silent cinema in Latin America. Thus, the Italian Pedro Sambarino was active in Bolivia and Peru filming and/or directing features with criollo themes, while another Italian, Gilberto Rossi, had a successful career in Brazil as a producer of official newsreels (Rossi Actualidades, 1921–31) and as a producer for José Medina, the most commercially successful silent feature director in São Paulo.

The criollo sensibility of the time was not only Eurocentric but also thoroughly patriarchal. This explains why all of the films of the period are androcentric and oftentimes misogynistic, and why, outside of acting, only two women ventured into film production and direction, and only after stints as actresses: Carmen Santos in Brazil and Mimí Derba in Mexico. Finally, in terms of political economy, criollos during the first decades of the twentieth century believed wholeheartedly in Positivism. This aspect of criollo ideology, however, would be shaken by the Mexican Revolution and especially by the world economic collapse of 1929, and helps to explain the qualitative difference between silent cinema and subsequent studio cinema in Latin America.

Significantly, two of the major social players of the previous century—the landed elite and the rural proletariat—did not leave their mark on silent cinema: the landed elite because they considered film a lowbrow form of entertainment, and the rural masses because they lacked the resources to make films. However, the third key social actor during the nineteenth century—the Catholic Church—did get involved with filmmaking during the silent period, and its participation is particularly evident in the regional cycles of the second half of the 1920s.

The class origins of these early producers and filmmakers may explain why there are only a handful of filmic narratives told from the perspective of the growing urban working classes: for example *Juan sin ropa* (Juan Without Clothes; Georges Benoît and Héctor Quiroga, Argentina, 1919), about the government repression of the anarchist insurrection in Buenos Aires in 1919, an event known as “The Tragic Week”; *A Vida de João Cândido* (The Life of João Cândido; dir. unknown, Brazil, 1912), about the Chibata Revolt, a 1910 mutiny led by a black corporal aboard a Brazilian navy ship; and the silent films of José Agustín Ferreyra, which grew out of and reflected life in the working-class suburbs south of Buenos Aires.

PERIODIZATION

Our knowledge of the early cinema in Latin America is literally full of silences. To begin with, many films have burned through spontaneous combustion or on purpose, whether as a form of censorship or to recycle them as combs.⁵ Many others have been forgotten, and only sometimes rediscovered in a dusty basement or trunk.⁶ Other silences persist beyond the silent cinema period, imposed by a market and distribution system that privileges North-to-South consumption at the expense of South-to-North and South-to-South exchanges. Notwithstanding these limitations, we can still make some broad claims about early Latin American cinema, beginning with the general observation that silent film production developed in three distinct stages: (1) actualities (roughly 1897–1907), proto-narrative cinema (1908–15), and feature narrative cinema (1915–30). Actualities consisted of one or at most two reels (at one to fifteen minutes per reel) of unstaged events, with little editing and narration, and hardly any thought to *mise-en-scène*. This was followed by a period (1908–15) of short- and medium-length films that sought to attract larger and more differentiated audiences with entertainment in various forms: reconstructed crimes, comedies, skits, plays, filmed songs (with live or recorded accompaniment), and literary adaptations, among others. These films are not so much cinematographic as theatrical, in that there is little use of filmic devices such as close-ups, crosscutting, or subjective points of view. Instead, cameras tend to remain in place, as one would in a theater, while the acting and *mise-en-scène* also reveal a strong theatrical influence. Finally, beginning in 1915 and lasting for a few years beyond the introduction of sound, silent cinema acquired the outlines of today's films, sans sound: Aristotelian narrative form, feature lengths of sixty to ninety minutes (in a few cases surpassing two hours), and the elaboration of genres and techniques that were first developed during the previous period of proto-narrative cinema.

Significantly, this periodization mirrors the evolution of silent film in Europe and North America, evidence that Latin American cinema was a triangulated practice from its very beginnings,⁷ the result of what Paulo Antonio Paranaguá calls Latin America's "permanent tripolar circulation" with Europe and the United States.⁸ This tripolar circulation has never been one of free-flowing exchanges of influences and products between equals, but more like an active process of triangulation whereby Latin American filmmakers navigate a global cinematic landscape from a position of marginality. The best-known application

of triangulation is in the surveying of land, whereby angles and distances on the ground are measured to accurately plot positions on a map. In this book, however, I will use triangulation in a way that is closer to how it is understood and practiced in the sport of orienteering, where the objective is to physically reach as many points marked on a map as possible, using only a map and a compass. Here, triangulation is the process of locating one's position when at least two prominent landmarks are visible. The more landmarks and the farther apart they are, the better, as this increases the chances of accurately plotting one's location on the map and ultimately one's chances of navigating toward the desired objective.

Like orienteers, Latin American filmmakers have always been adventurous spirits who seek out audiences, financing, and success as artists and businesspeople by navigating a cinematic landscape whose three most prominent referents, at the level of visual and narrative practices, are European cinema, Hollywood cinema, and Latin American documentary practices. The weight that any of these three reference points carries in a filmmaker's calculations varies according to specifics such as the filmmaker's interests and objectives, historical circumstances, the country or region of production, and audiences' knowledge of said referents, among others. But what is relatively stable is the simultaneous presence of all three referents, to a greater or lesser degree, throughout the silent period, and indeed throughout the history of Latin American cinema. Therefore, when speaking of triangulation in this context, I refer to a filmmaker's self-positioning (metaphorically speaking) somewhere in between these three prominent referents, and in response to the factors just outlined. Individually, the resultant films will be visibly closer to one of these three referents than to the others, but as a group, the characterizing feature of Latin American cinema, regardless of this or that particular film's aesthetic proximity to any one referent, is the incorporation (to a greater or lesser degree) of elements from all three referents. A singular benefit of comparing Latin American filmmakers to orienteers is that it overcomes the tendency to reduce Latin American cinema to watered-down versions or reflections of foreign models, and instead reveals Latin American filmmakers as active constructors of their own representations who adjusted their sights as the contours of the cinematic and ideological landscape shifted over time. From this perspective, the question is not whether Latin American filmmakers adopt and adapt global as well as local models and practices, but how they do so and for what purposes.

ACTUALITIES (1897–1907)

For its first ten years, film in Latin America did not evolve beyond *vistas* (literally, “views”). These were very short actualities of mostly unedited shots of unstaged action that sought to present rather than represent, and show rather than narrate. These *vistas* were shot with early movie cameras that were lightweight and relatively inexpensive, which allowed for a lot of experimentation by artists not yet beholden to any over-determination in their choice of genre, acting style, or sometimes even subject matter. In effect, what characterizes early Latin American silent cinema is how transparently it reflects the air of self-sufficiency of the early pioneers, as if they were looking at themselves and liked what they saw. The titles of that first decade speak for themselves: *Un célebre especialista sacando muelas en el Gran Hotel Europa* (A Celebrated Specialist Pulling Molars at the Gran Hotel Europa; Guillermo and Manuel Trujillo Durán, Venezuela, 1897), *Carrera de bicicletas en el velódromo de Arroyo Seco* (Bicycle Race at the Arroyo Seco Cycle Track; Félix Oliver, Uruguay, 1898), or *Fiestas presidenciales en Mérida* (Presidential Festivities in Mérida; Enrique Rosas, Mexico, 1906). The fascination with technology and movement that explains the production and reception of films such as *L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* (Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat; Auguste and Louis Lumière, France, 1895) also explains the production and reception of these earliest nonnarrative films in Latin America. As in many a Lumière film, the important thing was to astonish an impressionable audience by recording movement in what amounted to moving photographs: sports events, people leaving a factory or a church, national leaders in official functions and travels (fig. 1.1), and panning shots of the vast rural landscapes of the interior.

Shortly thereafter, actualities evolved into newsreels and short entertainments in the form of songs, in which case audiences would see a performer on-screen and hear the song either from a live person or a phonograph recording, and attractions, a form of actualities that were staged and edited for effect.⁹ The production and exhibition of these early one-reelers was usually done by the same person, oftentimes an itinerant European who in many cases also imported and exhibited films from Europe and to a lesser extent from the United States. As Paranaguá has noted, the introduction of film in Latin American is a story of mimetism (especially of the Lumière model) and of who did what first.¹⁰

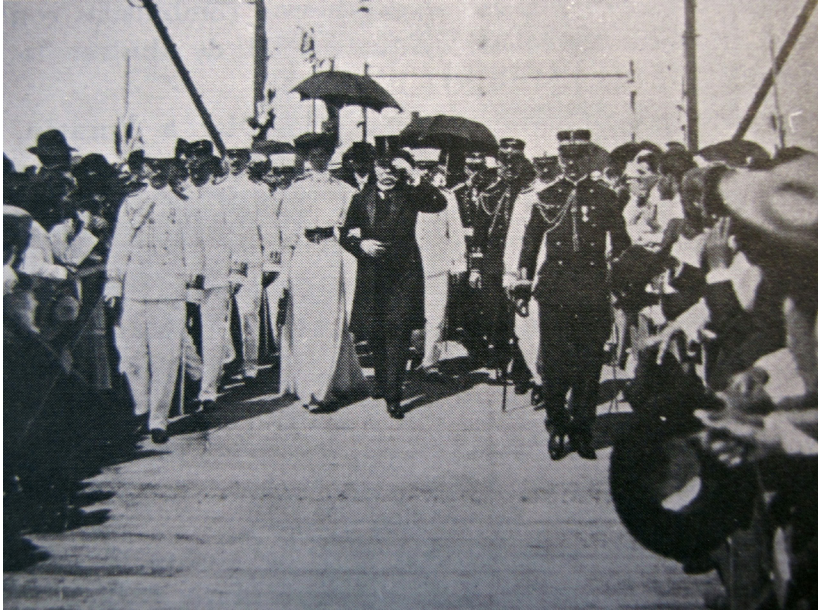


FIGURE 1.1 Porfirio Díaz arrives in the Yucatán in the documentary *Fiestas presidenciales en Mérida* (Presidential Festivities in Mérida; Enrique Rosas, Mexico, 1906)

TRANSITION (1908–15)

The emergence around 1908 of profitable short- and medium-length spectacles is linked to the creation of large, stable, and differentiated audiences. This is the period, for example, when the first permanent “movie palaces” were built in major cities such as Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Mexico City, and Havana, and when the marketing of films through radio and newspapers became an industry. It is also the period when exhibition expanded beyond urban centers to include rural areas, a development that would have repercussions in the representation of the dichotomy between city and countryside. In terms of production, Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico experienced what some historians retrospectively call the *belle époque*, or golden age, of their respective silent film histories. In Brazil, for example, production went from an average of twelve films (mostly documentaries) per year until 1907, to suddenly an average of 169 films (again, mostly documentaries) per year between 1908 and 1911. Similar bursts of production occurred in Argentina between 1916 and 1919, and in Mexico between 1918 and

1923, a delay that can be attributed to the disruption in production caused by the Revolution. In terms of aesthetics, the term *belle époque* is also a fitting qualifier of the films of this period, as they often emulate what Giorgio Bertellini calls, in reference to the extremely popular Italian films of the time, a “symbolist film culture that relied on melodramatic acting styles, archaic settings, decadent *mise-en-scène*, and liberty-style art decorations.”¹¹

Compared to the films of the first period, the films of the second period were longer (full reels or in some cases two reels) and had more extensive use of editing. For example, songs became staged operettas, while actualities and attractions were absorbed into staged re-creations of newsworthy events or sensational crimes. The language of cinema, moreover, was still very limited in that there was little use of editing within scenes (in the case of filmed plays or operettas) or within sequences (in the case of narrative films). Most of the films produced during the second period were documentaries, as was the case in the previous period, but what sets them and the fictions apart from earlier ones is that now we see the beginnings of representation, with all its attendant politics. For example, *La Revolución de Mayo* (The May Revolution; Mario Gallo, Argentina, 1910) uses theatrical sets and acting to re-create the 1810 removal of the viceroy of Buenos Aires by local criollos, and their subsequent establishment of a local government, all from an official (that is, nationalist and romantic) point of view (fig. 1.2). In Brazil, the most popular film of this period was *Paz e Amor* (Peace and Love; Alberto Botelho, 1910), a political satire that poked fun at then-president Nilo Peçanha, who had campaigned under the slogan “a government of peace and love.”¹² Two years later, an even more controversial film was made, the aforementioned *A Vida de João Cândido*. The film was based on the Revolta da Chibata (literally, the Whip Revolt), in which a large number of sailors, led by a black corporal by the name of João Cândido, took possession of the principal navy vessels after one of their own was almost whipped to death. After five days of tense negotiations during which the mutinous sailors pointed the guns of their vessels toward Rio de Janeiro, the president kept true to his slogan of peace and love by granting them amnesty and by abolishing the use of whips as a form of punishment in the navy. Cândido and many of his followers were later imprisoned or sent to internal exile in the Amazon, however, and the film made about his feats became the first film to be censored in Brazil.



FIGURE 1.2 Theatricality in *La Revolución de Mayo* (The May Revolution; Mario Gallo, Argentina, 1910). Courtesy Cinemateca Argentina

Finally, in Mexico, the Revolution had shaken official certitudes to the point that a documentary such as *Revolución orozquista* (The Orozco Revolution; Salvador, Guillermo, and Eduardo Alva, Mexico, 1912) espoused a radical relativism. The first part intercuts between the advancing troops of two warring factions—those under Victoriano Huerta and those under Pascual Orozco—and culminates with battle scenes from the point of view of each faction.¹³ Gone is the single privileged point of view, as evidenced in figure 1.3, where a visual of the heavy artillery used by the federal army follows an intertitle that speaks of the rebels' perspective: “85-millimeter cannon used by the federal army, baptized by the rebels as ‘the kid.’” Just as important, a narrative outcome is omitted, as if the Positivist ideology that presumes only one scientifically predetermined path to the future had been thoroughly undermined by the outbreak of the Revolution—or at the very least, as if narrative closure were impossible in a period of frequent and dramatic reversals of fortune. The narrative complexity and ideological ambiguity evidenced in this documentary did not take hold, as Mexican



FIGURE 1.3 Ideological ambiguity in *Revolución oroquista* (The Orozco Revolution; Salvador, Guillermo, and Eduardo Alva, Mexico, 1912)

filmmakers increasingly and decisively reflected the interests of the victorious criollo bourgeoisie.

FEATURE NARRATIVE CINEMA (1915–30)

Around 1915, feature-length films with higher production values became a global standard in narrative cinema, and Latin American audiences became enthusiastic consumers of Italian superspectacles and French *films d'art*. For example, the first French blockbuster—*La reine Élisabeth* (*Queen Elizabeth*; Henri Desfontaines and Louis Marcanton, 1912), starring Sarah Bernhardt—made a splash throughout Latin America, while the Italians began a streak of blockbusters and very popular melodramas with *Quo vadis?* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1913) and *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, a.k.a. Piero Fosco, 1914). Hollywood's influence was more pronounced in the areas of exhibition and distribution. Already in 1914, European film imports began to decline because of the war, and beginning in 1916, Hollywood's major studios implemented the practice of block booking (selling multiple films to a theater as a unit) and of underselling their own film production in Latin America. These “dumped” films were initially distributed and exhibited by local entrepreneurs, who in many cases had abandoned production after having realized they could make more money by simply distributing and exhibiting European and U.S. films.¹⁴ As if adding insult to injury, by the end of the silent period Hollywood had succeeded in virtually monopolizing even the distribution market through their own local representatives, leaving the less lucrative and riskier business of exhibition to local entrepreneurs.

Notwithstanding the intensity of this first Hollywood invasion, production in Latin America continued, in part due to the introduction of economical cameras for the amateur film market. Many of these cameras served both as recording devices and as projectors, a technological innovation that made possible the emergence of regional cycles in the late 1920s and the continuation of an artisanal cinema produced by studios and amateurs everywhere. Regional cycles also emerged to fill a void created by the limits of film distribution in Latin America, which privileged major cities. Some of the more important regional cycles include Orizaba, in the Mexican state of Veracruz; Barquisimeto, in the state of Lara, Venezuela; Recife, Brazil; and Cataguases, in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Noteworthy titles include, in Orizaba, *El tren fantasma* (The Ghost Train; Gabriel García Moreno, 1927); in Barquisimeto, *Los*

milagros de la Divina Pastora (The Miracles of the Divine Shepherdess; Amábilis Cordero, 1928); in Recife, *Aitaré da Praia* (Aitaré of the Beach; Gentil Roiz, 1925), and *A Filha do Advogado* (The Lawyer's Daughter; Jota Soares, 1926); and in Catagüeses, the early films of Humberto Mauro, Brazil's most important filmmaker of the first half of the twentieth century: *Thesouro Perdido* (Lost Treasure; 1927), *Braza Dormida* (Sleeping Ember; 1928), and *Sangue Mineiro* (Mineiro Blood; 1929). Despite the quality of these films, the distribution and exhibition structures were such that regional films were almost never seen outside their country of origin, and sometimes not even beyond their region of origin.

Production in Latin America also continued thanks to the practice of projecting local newsreels before feature presentations. As a result, newsreel production provided the only schooling for many budding filmmakers and the only form of continuous practice for experienced ones. Given the important ideological role played by newsreels in promoting official versions of reality, it is not surprising that it alone received the kind of state support needed for stable and continuous output. The price for this stability and continuity was, according to Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, a double submission: "formally, to the *Pathé Journal* model [i.e., short news reports based on a single subject and told from a single perspective], and ideologically, to the dominant interests [i.e., oligarchic liberalism]."¹⁵ The prevalence of the *Pathé Journal* as a formal model helps to explain the European accent of Latin American film production throughout the second half of the silent period. And yet Latin American cinema developed, from very early on, as a triangulated cinema in simultaneous dialogue with North America, Europe, and an autochthonous film production that was primarily documentary but not always indebted to the *Pathé* model, as the examples *Revolución orozquista* and *La Revolución de Mayo* demonstrate. The nature and intensity of this "trialogue" changed depending on historical circumstances, but it never ceased. This is especially evident when one considers the three major forms of narrative film production between 1915 and 1930: *films d'art*, religious films, and popular entertainment films.

Film d'art

As in France, where *film d'art* began, *film d'art* in Latin America sought to raise the status of film from lowbrow entertainment to a respectable seventh art through filmed plays and adaptations of literary classics, especially national romances such as José Mármol's *Amalia* (Enrique

García Velloso, Argentina, 1914), José de Alencar's *Iracema* (Vittorio Capellaro, Brazil, 1917), Federico Gamboa's *Santa* (Luis G. Peredo, Mexico, 1918), and Jorge Isaacs's *María* (Máximo Calvo and Alfredo del Diestro, Colombia, 1922).¹⁶ The conservatism inherent in the hierarchical outcomes of these foundational narratives was oftentimes mitigated by the romantic convention that love conquers all, including racial, class, and ethnic differences between the lovers in question.¹⁷ From this perspective, art films were part of a broader liberal project that sought to create, through allegory, Europeanized national identities in what were still very young and culturally heterodox republics.

Wara Wara (1930)

One of the most interesting examples in film of these national allegories is *Wara Wara* (José María Velasco Maidana, Bolivia, 1930), based on Antonio Díaz Villamil's play *La voz de la quena* (The Voice of the Quena Flute, 1922). Recently restored by the Cinemateca Boliviana, *Wara Wara* tells the story of frustrated love between an Aymara princess and a Spanish conqueror (fig. 1.4). Alfonso Gumicio Dagrón, the foremost historian of Bolivian cinema, has written of the film:

[Velasco Maidana] embarked on the country's first "superproduction," initially entitled *El ocaso de la tierra del sol* but eventually exhibited as *Wara Wara*, which means "star" in the native language of Aymara and is the name of the female lead in the film. The result was a monumental work, a sort of *Intolerance*, only one set in one of the poorest countries in Latin America. . . . With *Wara Wara* special sets were designed for a film's production for the first time in Bolivia. Artists and architects themselves built a recreation of the Aymara palace. Velasco Maidana's home in La Paz was filled with women sewing costumes for the actors. In a makeshift laboratory, Raúl Montalvo and José Jiménez developed the film by hand while Velasco Maidana played violin in the next room to entertain the crew. The only modern equipment used in the production was the Ernemans [*sic*] camera Velasco Maidana had brought from Buenos Aires. Editing was done by the naked eye with a small [M]oviola and a pair of scissors. . . . By the time it premiered in January 1930 at the Teatro Princesa in La Paz, accompanied by live music composed by César Garcés B., it was already famous.¹⁸

Besides the beautiful evocation of what must have been a very creative atmosphere, this passage also reveals the precariousness and improvisation that characterized silent film production in Latin America. At the same time, although *Wara Wara* doubtless had a more colorful production history than most other literary adaptations, it shares with all of



FIGURE 1.4 Juanita Taillansier as the Inca princess in *Wara Wara* (José María Velasco Maidana, Bolivia, 1930)

them the foundational impulse of their models—that is, the desire (and in the case of Bolivia in the 1920s, the audacity) to imagine a national identity that included the non-criollo “other” even as it continued to espouse a Eurocentric, aristocratic, patriarchal order.

Religious Films

As noted earlier, of all the major social actors in the nineteenth century, only the Church participated in film production during the silent period. Today, when asked about the Catholic Church in the history of film, most people think of its role as a censor, as when it participated in the implementation of the Hays Code in the United States in 1934. But the Church has been involved in film production since the beginning of cinema, and in Latin America it has continued to play an active role in media production through institutions such as Chile’s Channel 13, run by that country’s Catholic University. Religious films during the silent period celebrate the role of the Church in maintaining an idealized patriarchal order, using as a model medieval mystery and morality plays, set invariably in a pastoral countryside that in many ways represents the *locus amoenus* of the criollo nation. Films that fit this description include the aforementioned *Los milagros de la Divina Pastora*, about a young boy who decides to become a priest in a town saved from



FIGURE 1.5 The Virgin of Guadalupe (Beatriz de Córdova) appears to Juan Diego (Gabriel Montiel) in *Tepeyac* (José Manuel Ramos, Carlos E. González, and Fernando Sáyo, Mexico, 1917)

flooding by the Virgin's intercession; *La Virgen de la Caridad* (Our Lady of Charity; Ramón Peón, Cuba, 1930), a family melodrama that relies on the Virgin's intercession for ethical guidance and narrative closure; and *Canção de Primavera* (Spring Song; Cyprien Ségur and Igino Bonfioli, Brazil, 1923), another family melodrama, where a priest serves as a saintly intercessor between a tyrannical patriarch and his two young daughters.

Tepeyac (1917)

The most important of these religious films, at least in terms of its impact on subsequent filmmaking, may be *Tepeyac* (José Manuel Ramos, Carlos E. González, and Fernando Sáyo, Mexico, 1917). The film, ostensibly framed by the First World War as opposed to the Mexican Revolution, tells the story of a young criollo couple that is reunited through the intervention of the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose apparition to the Indian Juan Diego in 1531 is told in a long, didactic flashback (fig. 1.5). As Paranaguá has noted, the film embodies many of the contradictions that would define Mexican cinema during the studio era: "*Tepeyac* is a kind

of primitive scene of Mexican cinema: here we find the Mexican Revolution put in parenthesis, domestic matriarchy counterbalanced with institutional paternalism, the poor rewarded for their resignation . . . , the trinkets of modernity in no contradiction with the perpetuation of tradition, the evolution of customs without a change in mentalities, mimetic cosmopolitanism at the service of official nationalism, and the fine arts, filled with public solemnity, opposed to a popular culture that is reduced to private decor.”¹⁹

With its theatrical *mise-en-scènes*, primitive editing, and narrative simplicity, *Tepeyac* is not of great consequence in terms of the evolution of cinematic form in Latin America. Nevertheless, it and other religious films of the period are very revealing of how a major institution co-opted a thoroughly modern medium for very conservative ends, namely, the celebration of traditional family, gender, race, and class values. This practice would flourish during the studio era under the aegis of the state and in many cases in conjunction with the Church.

Popular Entertainment Films

Popular entertainment films of the second half of the silent period included comedies, musicals (with musicians and/or singers live in the theater), action dramas, re-creations of crimes (known as *posados* in Brazil), and melodramas; the melodrama already showed signs of becoming the meta-genre it would in fact become during the studio period. Irrespective of their genre, popular entertainment films tended to be explorations of urban life, both middle- and working class, in the present and the recent past, a reflection no doubt of the audience sector for which these films were made. Because of this emphasis on contemporary urban life, with its variety of characters and lifestyles, they have the feel of the literature of customs and manners (*costumbrismo*), with which they also share the ideology of reformism and its attendant didacticism by teaching viewers how to navigate the new social and urban landscapes emerging at the time throughout Latin America. Compared to religious films, however, popular entertainment films show a more complex sense of morality, and the question of what is being taught is not as self-evident as in religious films. On the other hand, compared to *films d'art*, which very clearly reveal the filmmakers' quest to identify their own work and class with the interests of the national aristocracies, popular entertainment films reveal the contradictory aspirations and desires of an emerging bourgeoisie, most notably

in the ambiguity with which they represent workers, immigrants, and indigenous populations.

After documentaries, popular entertainment films were the most watched form of locally produced films in Latin America. Some oft-cited examples of comedy are *Don Leandro el inefable* (Don Leandro the Ineffable; Lucas Manzano, Venezuela, 1918) and *La borrachera del tango* (The Tango Drunken Spree; Edmo Cominetti, Argentina, 1929); of action dramas, *Nobleza gaucha* (Gacho Nobility; Eduardo Martínez de la Pera, Ernesto Gunche, and Huberto Cairo, Argentina, 1915), *El último malón* (The Last Indian Uprising; Alcides Greco, Argentina, 1916), *El húsar de la muerte* (The Hussar of the Death; Pedro Sienna, Chile, 1924), *El tren fantasma* (The Ghost Train; Gabriel García Moreno, Mexico, 1927), and *Thesouro Perdido* (Lost Treasure; Humberto Mauro, Brazil, 1927); of crime re-creations, *El automóvil gris* (The Gray Automobile; Enrique Rosas, Joaquín Coss, and Juan Canals de Homs, Mexico, 1919) and *El pequeño héroe del Arroyo de Oro* (The Small Hero of Golden Creek; Carlos Alonso, Uruguay, 1930); and of melodramas, *Perdón, viejita* (Forgive Me, Mother; José Agustín Ferrera, Argentina, 1927) and *Sangue Mineiro* (Mineiro Blood; Humberto Mauro, Brazil, 1929). Of these I will discuss five that have stood the test of time better than most: *Nobleza gaucha*; *El último malón*; *El automóvil gris*; *Perdón, viejita*; and *Sangue Mineiro*.

Nobleza gaucha (1915)

Nobleza gaucha was the first Latin American feature film to achieve box-office success outside its country of origin,²⁰ and so marked the feasibility of making films locally for a transnational market. Its popularity can be attributed to the film's skillful incorporation of comedic and melodramatic elements typically associated with Italian commedia dell'arte and melodrama into an action-driven plot structure typically associated with Hollywood productions. The film tells the story of the kidnapping (by a vulgar landowner) and subsequent rescue (by a noble gacho) of a young country maid (fig. 1.6). At first the gacho fails in his rescue attempt because his horse is too slow for the landowner's automobile. The gacho then decides to enlist his neighbor, an Italian peasant who provides comic relief through his representation as a country bumpkin. After they arrive at the gates of the mansion where the landowner has imprisoned the young woman, however, the immigrant backs out and returns to the countryside. The gacho, alone but



FIGURE 1.6 The gaucho Juan (Julio Scarcella) saves La Criollita (María Padín) in the Western *Nobleza gaucha* (Gaucho Nobility; Eduardo Martínez de la Pera, Ernesto Gunche, and Huberto Cairo, Argentina, 1915)

determined to free the object of his desire, succeeds in this second rescue attempt. The landowner retaliates by falsely accusing the gaucho of stealing cattle, but in a final chase on horseback, the landowner dies at the hands of the gaucho.²¹

Given the centrality of the conflict between landowner and peasant, and the film's emphasis on the contrast between city and countryside, it is not surprising that many critics have focused on these two interrelated themes. But the film revisited the theme of the gaucho and its associated discourse of civilization versus barbarism at a time when (1) class struggle was no longer rural but urban, (2) poor European immigrants were loathed as the new barbarians, and (3) gauchos survived as a social force only in the popular imagination. If we take these anachronisms into account, the reading of *Nobleza gaucha* changes dramatically from that of a progressive redemption of the gaucho against tyrannical landowners to that of a reactionary update of nineteenth-century criollo nationalism, particularly with its distrust of new urban sectors born of immigration, represented in the film by the unreliable immigrant who abandons the gaucho in his hour of need.²² In its divergent readings, then, *Nobleza*

gaucha is a perfect example of the contradictory impulses of the emerging criollo bourgeoisie in Argentina, torn as it was between reaping the economic rewards of a growing export-import economy that benefited principally the landowning elite, and claiming political power away from this elite through the Radical Party headed by Hipólito Yrigoyen.²³

El último malón (1916)

El último malón (The Last Indian Uprising; Alcides Greco, Argentina, 1916) tried to generate, with some success, the audience response and box-office revenue of *Nobleza gaucha* through an action-filled plot that in the main follows the outlines of a Hollywood Western (a central conflict between Native Americans and Euro-Americans set in the borderlands, with the eventual triumph of European culture over indigenous ones), but is bracketed in the beginning by an ethnographic documentary of indigenous life and in the end by a melodramatic happy ending for the two indigenous leads. The film is about the last *malón*, or uprising, of native peoples in Argentina, which took place near Santa Fe in 1904. The film's prologue, "Civilization and the Indian," begins with a man pointing to the location of the uprising on a map of Argentina, continues with shots of newspaper clippings of stories about the uprising, and proclaims that what is to follow is a "historical reconstruction." What follows, however, is an ethnographic documentary on contemporary Mocoví life that begins with establishing shots of the community and introductions to four of its real-life noteworthy members: the old cacique Mariano López, his wife Petrona and their offspring, the rebel cacique Salvador López (the only one not to stay put for the camera), and the tribe's fool, Juan Saldón. The documentary continues with a survey of native customs—fishing, hunting, cattle herding, drinking—and an intertitle even explains that "the whites teach them to drink" in order to subdue them (fig. 1.7).

Suddenly, the film transforms Petrona, Mariano López, and Salvador López into fictional characters caught in a love triangle: Rosa (played by a white actress in brownface); the old cacique, renamed Bernardo López; and his rebellious young brother, renamed Jesús Salvador (fig. 1.8). Rosa, who has publicly supported Jesús Salvador's plans for an uprising, is held captive by the old cacique. After the uprising fails, Jesús Salvador frees her, and they both successfully escape to the jungles of northern Argentina. The film ends with the two lovers kissing, followed by an intertitle that explains how they learned this custom from the



FIGURE 1.7 *El último malón* (The Last Indian Uprising; Alcides Greco, Argentina, 1916) as an ethnographic documentary



FIGURE 1.8 *El último malón* as a fictional love triangle between the Mocoví cacique Mariano López (as himself), Rosa (Rosa Volpe), and the rebel Jesús Salvador (Salvador López, as himself)

whites. Such melodramatic excess, whereby a complex social and economic reality is reduced to an emotional narrative between two love-birds, may very well explain the popularity of the film at the time of its release, but it nevertheless undermines the film's thesis, elaborated through the ethnographic introduction, that the Mocovís are the victims of the Euro-Argentineans' civilizing mission. Moreover, the melodramatic imperative that impels the narrative toward a return to the status quo ante, coupled with the Western's inherent Manichaeism and Eurocentric liberalism, effectively cancels any claims that the introduction may have made for the film as an objective and even sympathetic representation of the plight of the Mocovís. Despite these limitations, *El último malón* is so out of the ordinary in its dialectical incorporation of documentary footage into a fictional narrative that Fernando Birri, the acknowledged father of the New Latin American Cinema, regularly screened it at his documentary film school in Santa Fe in the late 1950s.²⁴

El automóvil gris (1919)

In contrast to the ambivalent progressiveness of *Nobleza gaucha* and *El último malón*, *El automóvil gris* (The Gray Automobile; Enrique Rosas, Joaquín Coss, and Juan Canals de Homs, Mexico, 1919) is openly reactionary. The twelve-episode film fictionalizes a series of high-profile robberies that targeted Mexico City's upper classes in 1915, and attempts by the police to capture the gang of robbers dressed as federal soldiers, all in the tradition of France's popular *Fantômas* series (fig. 1.9). In an uncanny attempt to document as well as rewrite history, the film cast Juan Manuel Cabrera, the police detective responsible for the capture of the gang, as himself, but with the name of Pablo González, the name of a Carrancista general with presidential ambitions and close ties to the film's producers. A subplot has the leader of the gang (Higinio Granda, played by codirector Juan Canals de Homs) and two of his accomplices fall in love with beautiful women, possibly prostitutes, and in the end Granda is the only one to escape capture. The other members of the gang are sentenced to death, but at the last minute, Pablo González pardons four of the ten.²⁵

Charles Ramírez Berg has noted how the film blames the brief Emiliano Zapata regime of early 1915 for the gang's initial impunity by setting the action during Zapata's rule, by blaming the gang's initial escape from prison on the ineptitude of Zapatista soldiers, and by glossing over the crimes of the subsequent Carrancista regime, all of which helped to polish the public image of the just-declared presidential candidate



FIGURE 1.9 A gang of robbers, dressed as federal soldiers, loads a stolen safe into their car in *El automóvil gris* (The Gray Automobile; Enrique Rosas, Joaquín Coss, and Juan Canals de Homs, Mexico, 1919)

General Pablo González.²⁶ More ominously, the film plays on criollo fears of the Mexican Revolution as an out-of-control struggle against their racial and class privileges. The film achieves this in two steps. First, it aligns spectators' identification with the bandits because they are at the center of a narrative trajectory, and also because they are all young, good-looking, and in love with beautiful women. Then, after most of the bandits are finally caught and jailed, the film closes with documentary footage of the real bandits being shot by a firing squad. These real-life bandits, however, do not look anything like the ones played by European-looking actors in European-looking clothes, but rather like indigenous and mestizo Zapatistas in their signature wide-rim hats and tight pants. In addition, they are dehumanized by the way the execution is filmed and edited to show only the moment of death from a full-shot perspective. Viewers are thus positioned to see not the likable individuals who robbed for love and glory, but a faceless, indistinct mass of falling bodies. The effect of this closing montage is that the spectatorial alignment with the fictionalized bandits is severed, criollo fears of losing

their privileges and properties are allayed, and revolutionary activity is subliminally equated with banditry.

While *El automóvil gris* is local in its politics, it is very cosmopolitan in its aesthetics, and a good example of the kind of triangulated dialogue that Latin American films have continuously had with European and Hollywood cinemas. As Ramírez Berg notes, the film's references and influences include: "(1) Mexico's rich documentary tradition, [which] thrived for twenty years by feeding its audience's appetite for Mexican images; (2) Italian cinema, known for its attention to period detail and its mobile camera; (3) French cinema, especially . . . the crime serials . . . with their extensive use of location shooting, their fast-paced cops-and-robbers narratives, and their characters' reliance on disguises; and (4) the emerging Hollywood paradigm, with its goal-driven protagonist, its causally linked narrative, and its rules of editing, lighting, and shooting based on character psychology."²⁷

Ideologically, *El automóvil gris* is also important for popularizing an understanding of the Mexican Revolution as necessary yet futile.²⁸ This take on the Revolution did in fact become one of the two major themes of Mexican cinema during the studio period, the other being the sanctity of the nuclear family foreshadowed by *Tepeyac*.²⁹

Any discussion of *El automóvil gris*, and of Mexican cinema in general at the time, must address the effect of Hollywood's negative stereotyping of Mexicans on national productions. In Hollywood silent cinema, the most persistent Latino stereotype was that of the Mexican bandit. The stereotype turned vicious after the Mexican Revolution, with bandits who robbed, murdered, pillaged, raped, cheated, gambled, and lied with an intensity never seen before, and seldom since.³⁰ In 1922, the government of Álvaro Obregón reacted to Hollywood's constant negative stereotyping of Mexicans as bandits by threatening to ban all films from any company that perpetuated that stereotype. Hollywood responded by changing Mexican settings to thinly veiled stand-ins like "Costa Roja" or "El Dorado." This did not end the stereotyping, and ten years later, the Mexican government, under General Plutarco Calles, renewed its threat, this time with the backing of several Latin American countries. The new international censorship strategy worked, if only temporarily, and a convenient substitute for the bandit was found in another stereotype, the Latin Lover.³¹

Parallel to their governments' censorship strategy, Latin American filmmakers developed a strategy of countering Hollywood's negative stereotypes with positive stereotypes of their own. This quote from the

founders of the longest-running film magazine in Brazil (*Cinearte*, 1926–42) exemplifies an attitude shared by many Latin American filmmakers of the second half of the silent period: “The making of films in Brazil should be an act of purification of our reality through the selection of things that deserve to be portrayed on screen: our progress, the work of modern genius, our beautiful whites, our nature.”³² Needless to say, this racist prescription led to “sanitized,” yet equally shallow, misrepresentations, such as the whitewashing (*Wara Wara*) or brown-facing (*El último malón*) of indigenous cultures. In the case of blacks, misrepresentation took the form of absence. As Robert Stam has noted, “While blacks were a frequently (if much abused) presence in North American silent cinema, they form a kind of ‘structuring absence’ within silent Brazilian cinema, the exceptions being an adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1910), of Azevedo’s *Mulato* (1917), and of *A Escrava Isaura* (*The Slave Isaura*, 1919).”³³ In other Latin American countries with important black and mulatto populations, such as those in the Caribbean basin, exceptions to this “structuring absence” are even harder to find.

To my knowledge, the only film of this period that did not base its positive stereotyping of Latin Americans on Eurocentric liberal values is *La venganza de Pancho Villa* (*The Vengeance of Pancho Villa*; Edmundo Padilla, United States, 1936). It is what we would today call a found-footage film. It takes fragments from North American films such as *The Life of General Villa* (William Christy Cabanné, 1914) and *Liberty, A Daughter of the U.S.A.* (Jacques Jaccard, 1916), which represent Mexicans in a negative light, and combines them with fragments of the Mexican documentary *Historia de la Revolución Mexicana* (History of the Mexican Revolution; Julio Lamadrid, 1928) and dramatic sequences of Pancho Villa’s life re-created by the El Paso-based Padilla family. The result is a positive rendering of Pancho Villa’s struggles for social justice on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. The film was made by the Padilla family to complement the offerings of Mexican and North American films that they screened throughout the border region as part of their itinerant film exhibition business, and is calculated to have been seen by more than twelve thousand spectators, sometimes to the cries of “¡Viva Villa! ¡Mueran los gringos!”³⁴

Perdón, viejita [1927]

In the late 1920s, silent cinema in Latin America saw a shift away from action-based plots such as those of *Nobleza gaucha* and *El automóvil*

gris to plots that explored, however superficially and externally, psychological conflict. Among the best directors who participated in this shift were José Agustín Ferreyra (1889–1943) and Humberto Mauro (1897–1983). Ferreyra was the most consistently productive director of the silent period in Latin America, and one of only a handful who succeeded in making the transition to sound after 1930. Nicknamed “el Negro,” he grew up in the working-class suburb of Buenos Aires called Constitución, in a household made up of himself, his Afro-Argentine mother, his itinerant Euro-Argentine father, and his mother’s extended family in nearby homes. It is this world, where economic necessity joins with the kind of longing, passion, and pain that the tango expresses so well, that Ferreyra brought to life in the vast majority of his films, twenty-five of which were silent, two hybrid, and fifteen with synchronous sound. Of his silent films, *Perdón, viejita* (Forgive Me, Mother; 1927) is both his last, and, according to Jorge Miguel Consuelo, his most representative: “Historical perspective redeems the film’s candor and veracity. In its overall unity nothing is out of place, and even though characters are superficially sketched, they ooze authenticity. . . . [The street is] both their backdrop and their atmosphere. In a short scene, the uniform facades of the homes in the train-depot neighborhood of Nueva Pompeya create a sense of humble enchantment, with kids playing in the background while grown-ups in the foreground talk about their problems.”³⁵

Perdón, viejita tells the story of Carlos (Ermete Meliante) and Nora (played by María Turganova, Ferreyra’s wife between 1924 and 1931), two wayward young adults who decide to bury their criminal past and begin a new life together with Doña Camila (Florice! Vidal), Carlos’s mother, and Elena (Stella Maris), his younger sister. Everything seems to be going well until Elena is seduced by a pimp named El Gavilán, and whose gift of a stolen ring serves first as bait for the impressionable Elena, then as incriminatory evidence against Nora (who had forced Elena to give her the ring in order to protect her), and finally as incriminatory evidence against El Gavilán, whereupon Nora’s name is cleared and everyone lives happily ever after. This happy ending, however, is very different from the happy endings of Hollywood, for what prevails is a sense of precariousness, of living in a world where luck is fleeting and tragedy is not. In this and in other films by Ferreyra, we are firmly in the world of the tango, where melodrama and tragedy support each other to “keep alive the illusion of happiness while knowing that happiness is an illusion.”³⁶ The title of the film, in fact, came from a famous tango recorded by a group that included Carlos Gardel, and its use here

foreshadows the central role that music (and its privileged medium, radio) would play in the development of Latin American cinema during the studio period. After *Perdón, viejita*, Ferreyra traveled throughout Latin America, Europe, and the United States to promote his films. He returned without having succeeded, yet energized by the possibility of filming with synchronous sound. In this new ballgame, Ferreyra, like many of the protagonists in his films, charged ahead in the face of daunting odds, fueled by the hope of material success as much as by circumstance. To his credit, he succeeded in breaking the silence that the advent of sound momentarily created among Argentinean filmmakers.

Sangue Mineiro (1929)

A native of the state of Minas Gerais, Humberto Mauro directed more than ninety films, including six silent features (five in Cataguases and one in Rio), six features with sound (all in Rio, between 1933 and 1952), and more than three hundred documentary shorts for INCE, Brazil's National Institute of Educational Cinema, between 1936 and 1964.³⁷ *Sangue Mineiro* (Mineiro Blood; 1929), the most critically acclaimed of Mauro's Cataguases regional cycle and among the best of all of Brazilian silent cinema, plays with narrative conventions by replacing an initial love triangle between a man and two sisters with another love triangle between one of those sisters (Carmem, played by Carmen Santos) and two male cousins. In the end, the man in the first triangle chooses the legitimate daughter over Carmem (who is adopted and therefore will not likely inherit any of her industrialist father's fortune), while in the second triangle, Carmem chooses the rich and European-looking cousin over the indebted mestizo one (fig. 1.10). The film's melodramatic closure therefore reinforces social hierarchies of gender, class, and race without hinting at any possibility of change.

Having said that, it breaks new ground in several areas. For one, it beautifully captures the region's natural splendor, not only as a backdrop to the action, but as a telluric presence that facilitates the expression of feelings such as lust and envy, and, ultimately, of love, redemption, and forgiveness, all between sharply dressed characters with plenty of money to spare. Another is the quality of the acting, which is no longer theatrical but cinematic, in that characters' emotions and intentions are explored through nuanced facial expressions shot in close-up. In addition, the editing is rhythmic, successfully interposing action sequences with more introspective ones. Finally, Edgar Brasil's camer-



FIGURE 1.10 Carmem (Carmen Santos) chooses the rich white suitor over the poor mestizo one in the melodrama *Sangue Mineiro* (Mineiro Blood; Humberto Mauro, Brazil, 1929). Courtesy Cinemateca Brasileira

awork poeticizes the play of light and shadow in a way that few other Latin American films of the silent period achieve, while here and there, metonymic shots of hands, feet, and furniture prefigure his work in the avant-garde films *Limite* (Limit; Mário Peixoto, Brazil, 1929) and *Ganga Bruta* (Raw Ganguê; Humberto Mauro, Brazil, 1933).

In José Agustín Ferreyra and Humberto Mauro one finds the most sustained attempts to create a popular cinema in Latin America during the silent period. Their relative success was in part due to their mastery of the language and syntax of cinema, but also to their search, at the narrative and ideological levels, for solutions to social and political problems through the conventions of the family melodrama, a genre inflected in Ferreyra's case by the reversals and ruptures typical of the tango, and in Mauro's case by the desire for the continuity of a rural lifestyle.

The Legacy of the Silent Period

Just as the filmmakers of the silent period adjusted their modes of production and representation according to the specifics of both local and

global forces, filmmakers in Latin America today continue to appropriate dominant forms from the metropolis for their own ends. The forms have changed, as have the ends of that appropriation, but the strategy itself has not, and may very well characterize all of Latin American cultural production, not as separate from or opposed to metropolitan production, but as marginal to and sometimes subversive of that production. Robert Stam suggests as much when he writes that “cultural discourse in Latin America and the Caribbean has been fecund in neologistic aesthetics, both literary and cinematic: ‘*lo real maravilloso americano*’ (Alejo Carpentier), the ‘aesthetics of hunger’ (Glauber Rocha), ‘*Cine imperfecto*’ (Julio García Espinosa), ‘the creative incapacity for copying’ (Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes), the ‘aesthetics of garbage’ (Rogério Sganzerla), the ‘salamander’ (as opposed to the Hollywood dinosaur) aesthetic (Paul Leduc), ‘termite terrorism’ (Guillermo del Toro), ‘anthropophagy’ (the Brazilian modernists), ‘*Tropicalia*’ (Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso), ‘*rasquachismo*’ (Tomás Ybarra-Frausto), and *santería* aesthetics (Arturo Lindsay).”³⁸

Stam goes on to note that “most of these alternative aesthetics revalorize by inversion what had formerly been seen as negative, especially within colonialist discourse.”³⁹ Clearly, this is not the case with Latin American silent cinema, whose Eurocentric criollo aesthetics extended the valorization of colonialist discourse into the new medium that was then cinema. Notwithstanding these ideological limits, Latin American silent cinema nevertheless succeeded in establishing national cinematic landscapes characterized by repeated attempts to transform their subordination to dominant centers of production and distribution by recourse to (1) local modes of production that were artisanal in nature, (2) distribution networks that focused on the regional and national audiences not served by the global cinematic industries of Europe and Hollywood, and (3) modes of representation closely linked to documentary practices. The elaboration of triangulation as a conscious or unconscious strategy during Latin American cinema’s formative silent period is arguably its most important legacy for subsequent filmmaking practices in the region. It also explains the successful attempts made by a small number of filmmakers to break with the criollo sensibility of Latin America’s silent cinema by closely calibrating their sights with that of the global cinematic avant-gardes. The next chapter takes a close look at their films.