On September 18, 1960, the Mexican comedian Mario “Cantinflas” Moreno appeared on the American television game show *What’s My Line?* as the mystery celebrity to promote his upcoming holiday film *Pepe* (George Sidney, 1960). The film would prove to be a critical and commercial failure for Columbia Pictures in the United States and marked a turning point in critical estimations and industrial support of the comedian in his native country. During the show, a panel of celebrity judges asks Cantinflas a series of yes or no questions to discover his identity. After he signs his name on a chalkboard, the blindfolded judges begin with broad questions in an effort to situate the guest (e.g., “Are you well-known in motion pictures?” or “Have you ever appeared on the legitimate stage in New York?”). The comedian answers the questions honestly but must attempt to dissimulate his identity and obfuscate his recognizable traits in order to prolong the enigma. Because his accent is difficult to mask, Cantinflas answers yes and no in different languages (sí, nyet, oui.) Eventually, the panelists discern his accent and ask, “Are you an American?” After discovering that he was not born in the United States, a panelist asks one final question: “Are you a gentleman who is considered the greatest actor in Mexico?” Other than his monosyllabic answers, the comedian had said nothing else during this segment. He is identified, the blindfolds come off, and the mystery is solved.

This appearance by Cantinflas on American television opens onto many of this book’s larger concerns. The segment speaks to the material...
exchanges and discursive relations between Hollywood and Latin America. These are relations of both dependency and exchange that have a long-standing history in the continent: from the importation of European and American film technologies at the turn of the twentieth century to the market dominance of Hollywood cinema through the present day. Further, the segment hinges on conceiving of the comedian as representative of Mexico, a logic that underscores how the discursive legibility of non-Anglo-European culture within the Anglo-European sphere privileges, if not necessitates, representative figures that metonymically stand in for their origin. Finally, the resolution of the mystery turns less on the gradual process of situating him within discursive categories than on his body: his accented voice provides the key to identifying the man. What he does and even who he is seem less important than where he is from. The accessibility of Cantinflas’s body and the unintelligibility of his speech suggest that a discussion of a non-Anglo-European practice, particularly one as linguistically situated and contextually specific as comedy, must contend with the linguistic and cognitive as well as the embodied and affective registers of the cinema experience. In other

Figure 1. “The greatest actor in Mexico?” Mario “Cantinflas” Moreno on What’s My Line?
words, this book not only discusses where the comedy is from but also what it says and what it does.

The growing availability and cultural presence of popular cinemas has affected world cinema scholarship in the past two decades. Popular cinemas complicate the production of a national cinema, often conceived as part of an art cinema tradition, in that they underscore the discursive divide between art/popular as well as national/Hollywood categories. If regional cinemas often get constructed along political, auteurist, or movement-based axes, then popular genre cinema has forced a reconsideration of how international film history is written. The inclusion of commercial cinemas in world cinema contexts for metropolitan Western audiences has resulted in a newfound dilemma for scholars of international film. As Walter Armbrust discusses in his attempts to program a retrospective screening series of Egyptian cinema, international film scholars are caught between “the desire to solve the problem of foreignness by overcoming difference” and “to communicate foreignness by revealing difference.” Because the goal is neither to make everything the same nor to keep everything radically incompatible, *Mock Classicism* explores and preserves the tension between these two tendencies in global media studies: more particularly, how do specific comedic practices circumscribed to local and regional spheres complicate a shared continental Latin American project or a global transnational cinema?

Rather than map Latin American cinema according to radical politics, film directors, or film movements as do conventional film histories, I trace the continued popularity and cultural significance of film comedies. Why do comedies always seem lost in translation? Why must key examples of national and regional cinemas always focus on serious and dramatic art cinema? This project analyzes how these enormously popular films negotiate local and global cultural influences, even though comedies are alleged not to travel well, and argues that these comedies function as peripheral responses to modernization. The construction of Latin American cinema as a continental project is predominantly mapped along Western frameworks that structure and inform the production and reception of these texts, privileging certain films by certain directors at certain historical moments. The films that tend to be privileged are exalted as representative of a particular nation or region and, particularly after the 1960s, as art cinema. In the context of film studies, comedies have been either relegated to the margins of regional film histories in the shadow of the New Latin American Cinema or articulated to the broader socializing and nationalistic function of earlier commercial
Mock Classicism shifts the historical periodization of Latin American cinema in light of the increasing contemporary interest in early cinema and modernity in order to demonstrate how comedian comedies functioned as peripheral responses to modernization and prefigured the more explicitly political New Latin American Cinema of the 1960s.

This project, however, is not merely a history of film comedy; instead, it draws on diverse critical traditions to demonstrate how these comedies represent ambivalent and divergent responses to modernity that are produced, circulated, and understood in redrawn peripheral spaces. Mock Classicism addresses the impasse in film studies regarding how to speak about local cultural practice in nonessentialist terms and avoids producing world cinema either as defensive authentic cultural expression or as derivative of foreign (i.e., Hollywood) models. The humor is contingent on thinking within a particular historical context and “in the language,” suggesting that these comedies represent a response to modernity that is noncirculatory. Mock Classicism capitalizes on both the verb and adjectival form of the word mock. The Latin American comedies in the study both poke fun at classical Hollywood and produce a mock-classical cinema that is particular to the Latin American context. To that end, each chapter presents one way that classical Hollywood was constructed within Anglo-European film studies and demonstrates how the ways cinema became classical in Hollywood did not occur identically in Latin America. This means that Latin American cinema from the period cannot be readily aligned with classical Hollywood but that its peculiar classicism, this difference from Hollywood, should not be read as a sign of resistance.

In broad strokes, classical (Hollywood) cinema is a concept with film studies roots, derived from rigorous formalist analysis to designate a film style with historical determinants and a narrative modality determined by an industrial mode of production. The empirical turn has taught us that classical Hollywood is more than mere narrative pattern or industrial style, figuring film less as text than as commodity. Such knowledge, Thomas Elsaesser reminds us, is insufficient for approaching the social and historical role of the cinema. If new film history encourages us to view classical cinema as a process of making film a better commodity, I want to ask what makes for a better commodity in Latin America. For Hollywood studios, making the film a better commodity meant standardizing the film as product, text, and experience in order to wrest control from exhibitors. Hollywood cinema became classical by making the screen less dependent on the theater, and develop-
ments such as continuity editing, the feature-length film, and the sonic
vraisemblable can be partly explained by this impulse to remove contin-
gencies at the site of exhibition. Simply put, Hollywood became classi-
cal by building a discrete diegesis and cultivating a fictional sensibility
in its spectators. Does the same logic hold in the case of Latin American
cinema? To answer this question requires understanding how condi-
tions of exchange are determined by politics, articulating industrial his-
tories and technological analyses to reception histories and theories of
spectatorship and consumption, redefining the relation between film
and other media, and returning to the film text, “but not to its material
existence [but as] evidence of a cultural imaginary.” Each chapter
braids empirical research, close reading, film theory, and Latin Ameri-
can studies to argue that Latin American cinema from the studio period
became classical in “phenomenally distinct but structurally kin” ways
from Hollywood.

MODERNISM OUT OF PLACE

The use of the term modernism is fraught in the Latin American context
because the term does not translate between English, Spanish, and Por-
tuguese. In Spanish America, the vanguardia (avant-garde) designates
the experimental artistic movements associated with the European
modernism of Anglo-European visual studies; in fact, Spanish modern-
ismo refers to aesthete poetry movements from the late nineteenth cen-
tury against which the vanguardia rebelled. Meanwhile, the parallel
contemporaneous movement to the vanguardia in Brazil is called mod-
ernismo. As Esther Gabara notes, the appearance, iterations, and circu-
lations of these terms within and without the continent have made the
terms “errant.” The rearticulation of modernismo to include the van-
guardias has been due in large part to discursive constraints, compara-
tive analyses as well as the widespread use of the postmodernismo in
both Spanish and Portuguese. The period of modernist experimentation
in Latin America has been consigned mostly to what Daryle Williams in
the Brazilian context has termed the period of “culture wars” at the
turn of the twentieth century through the mid-1930s, the period preced-
ing the consolidation of political power and the officialization of the
cultural sphere. The turn from the culture wars to the period of
officialism during the Second World War and the postwar period is
characterized by statist plans for modernization and the articulation of
modernism to nationalism, a turn Gabara characterizes as one from
critical nationalism born in the regional expressions of artistic practice to cultural nationalism born from administrative intervention in the capital cities. Miriam Hansen’s rearticulation of modernism allows us to redraw the boundaries of cultural practice to include expressions of mass culture often aligned unproblematically with state cultural apparatuses. Hansen offers a rejoinder to this alignment precisely by interrogating and then provincializing classical Hollywood cinema, which she argues is the first “industrially produced, mass-based” universalized aesthetic form of modernity because it produced and globalized a new sensorium. Hansen’s modernism returns to mainstream cinema to distinguish the classical Hollywood norm from the nonclassical traces that endure, foregrounding how these films mediated modernity and were received in heterogeneous ways in local and translocal contexts.

In her inflection of modernism, Hansen rearticulates the term to encompass a broader range of practices that respond to modernization and reflect upon the experience of modernity, discovering in modes of mass and popular culture moments of “vernacular” modernism. Modernist reflexivity does not necessitate a distanced and cognitive aesthetic experience; it also consists of the production of a sensorium, a process in which these commercial films served an integral function “asymmetrically related to modernist practices in the traditional arts.” The success of classical Hollywood had less to do with narrative organization than with the ability of its films to provide to mass audiences with an affective-sensory dimension that allowed spectators to confront the ambivalence of modernity. For Hansen, departing from Siegfried Kracauer, slapstick comedy is a key example of the affective-aesthetic experience provided by generic cultural practice, commercially successful particularly during the silent period not because of critical reason “but the films’ propulsion of their viewer’s body into laughter.” For Kracauer, slapstick films highlighted the failures of Fordist mass culture and suggested the latent anarchic excess potentially produced by the same rationalizing industrial impulse, what Americanist literary scholar William Solomon refers to as slapstick modernism.

Hansen’s later work focuses on the term vernacular as an alternative to the overdetermined popular, insisting on the former as articulating questions of everyday life to questions of idiom and dialect as well as circulation and translatability. Vernacular becomes a theoretical metaphor that offers a dynamic model of cultural circulation. The vernacular is not merely on the side of a particular local or an ahistoric traditional but part of the interactions that produce local and global. Hansen
emphasizes the circulatory aspect of the vernacular, highlighting “the fluctuating, open-ended, and relational character of vernacular practices in different cultural contexts.” Despite her acknowledgment that film objects can function differently in different film traditions and can have different affective charges in different reception contexts, Hansen stresses the way these common concerns gesture toward a modernist aesthetics of contingency—material everyday objects are mobilized to make our responses to modernity sensually graspable. Furthermore, despite the possible multivalence of filmic representation, their circulation can provide comparative sites between diverse contexts responding to local and global forms of modernity. Hansen privileges circulation and translation through star systems and generic homology (e.g., in the context of 1930s Shanghai cinema, she considers Ruan Ling-Yu and the progressive melodrama of the New Woman).

Hansen’s approach has provided a useful framework for studies of non-Western cinemas, although uptake of her work has been mostly isolated to recent attempts at reassessing the early cinemas of Asia, particularly those in the Chinese (Zhang Zhen’s *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*), Japanese (Aaron Gerow’s *Visions of Japanese Modernity*), and Indian (Neepa Majumdar’s *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!* contexts. Through Hansen, these histories figure how local debates on cinema were shaped by the encounter with Hollywood as well as pre- and paracinematic performance contexts. More particularly, as Majumdar notes, vernacular modernism proves particularly helpful in shifting discussion of early cinema from a focus on national identity toward a flexible understanding of the experience of local film culture: “a project of radically restoring historical and local specificity to multiple ‘vernacular’ cinemas, relativizing and thus expanding the variable and sometimes anachronistic local meanings of the ‘early’ in ‘early cinema.’” If Majumdar finds the case of Indian stardom from the 1930s to the 1950s as a rejoinder to vernacular modernism in the differentiated articulation of stardom, modernity, nationhood, and gender, then I argue that the inability of comedy to travel well complicates the circulatory dynamics of the vernacular in vernacular modernism and problematizes its transnational and comparative frame. The transition to sound and the emergence of Latin American film comedy make the genre a more ambivalent site. As Franco Moretti notes, comedy relies on “short circuits between signifier and signified [that] are weakened by translation.” The declining international box office returns of Hollywood comedies, Moretti argues, are due in part to the way humor arises
out of tacit assumptions with particular cultural associations. Taking comedy seriously puts pressure on the vernacular in Hansen’s project. Hansen’s approach may provincialize Hollywood cinema and may historicize classical narrative and continuity editing, but when used in a transnational and comparative spirit, it threatens to occlude culturally specific film practices that prove less circulatory and less translatable.

Vernacular modernism allows us to think beyond frameworks defined by “high” cosmopolitan modernism (i.e., experimental film practices that emerged within avant-garde movements in the fine arts or modernist international art cinema) in opposition to a local authentic popular culture. *Mock Classicism* studies the commercial cinema from the 1930s to the 1950s without relying on an essentialist popular identity and beyond what Ana López dubs the “nationness” of the film texts—both categories often a retroactive historico-aesthetic telos. Despite the usefulness of getting away from the nationness of early cinema in the periphery through the concept of vernacular modernism, these early cinema histories have also found that the reformulation of local cinematic practices as vernacular has come with a tendency to flatten distinctions between and within local cinematic discourses and their effects. Rielle Navitski makes a similar point in her analysis of the intermedial horizons of reception of the early cinemas of Brazil and Mexico when she faults vernacular modernism for reducing processes of cultural exchange and centering Hollywood. I share these histories’ concerns but disagree with their characterization of vernacular modernism, one that struggles to reconcile agreement with Hansen’s more expansive understanding of modernism and the sensory experience of the cinema with disagreement about the role of classical Hollywood. These histories respond by either pluralizing vernacular modernism or dismissing the term because of the ostensible centrality of Hollywood. They forget that vernacular modernism meant to rethink the classicism of Hollywood cinema, or “provincialize Hollywood.” The use of vernacular modernism in other contexts has not quite worked in the same way, reducing vernacular modernism to difference from Hollywood rather than difference from or in classicism. Its use out of place has supposed an alignment of non-Hollywood commercial cinema with classical Hollywood in order to argue for nonclassical moments as modernist gestures. I want to suggest reassessing the alignment of non-Hollywood commercial cinema with classical Hollywood, particularly in terms of the cinema experience and the spectator. We need to provincialize classicism rather than identify difference-from-Hollywood as a criterion for...
cultural distinction or modernist expression. Rather than ask what exhibits the aesthetics of high modernism outside the West, I want to suggest that a vernacular modernist framework must first mock classicism, not only celebrating cosmopolitan film cultures but also tracing how film culture became classical elsewhere. In other words, what Hansen’s vernacular modernism encourages is not simply the recovery of marginalized figures or cultural spaces but a reexamination of fundamental disciplinary questions such as the relation of film history and theory, the status of classical Hollywood as normative popular cinema and the models of film spectatorship it presupposes, the nature of historical documentation, and the heuristic limitations of the discursive categories often overused in regional film studies.

THE IDEA OF LATIN AMERICA IN FILM HISTORY

Rewriting Latin American film history means interrogating the problematic periodization that presumes discontinuity, that is, fundamental incompatibilities with both golden age film (1930s–1950s) and politically engaged cinemas of resistance (1960s onward). Mock Classicism attributes this ostensible discontinuity and the marginalization of comedy to the discursive construction of this continental project along Western frameworks: New Latin American Cinema becomes unproblematically aligned with European countercinemas, and golden age film with classical Hollywood cinema. This narrative supposes political modernism as a filmmaking standard that is both aspirational and a historical fulcrum. Earlier films are disparaged as symptoms of a culturally nationalist alignment of mass culture with state cultural apparatuses, redeemable only in progressive moments of heightened realism (see, for example, Matthew Karush’s Culture of Class or Charles Ramírez Berg’s The Classical Mexican Cinema\(^{20}\)), and later films are celebrated for their anti-illusionistic devices and explicit political content. Mock Classicism underscores how both positions presume a spectator politicized only through explicit content (and an image that is transparent) and/or critical distance from the text. Moving away from this figuration of political modernism, I take up Latin Americanist debates on transculturation and posthegemony in order to argue for a politics of spectatorship that makes the experience of modernity sensuously graspable but avoids a reconciliation with all social forms of organization tied to modernization.

Articulating these theories to ongoing debates in film studies allows me to consider not only how to write comparatively but also how to
write theoretically from a historical and geopolitical location. Posthegemony challenges film studies on several counts. First, it compels film studies to be more than “a mere expansion of the textual corpus within aesthetic-historicist postulates for the sake of the construction and strengthening of the national-popular state and against monopoly capital”—that is, more than simply adding films to the texts we can read in order to understand pregiven forms of social organization.21 Equating a given social formation with a hermeneutic circle makes the latter a “circle of hegemony,” and, too often, the project of Latin American film studies quickly reduces the question of a hermeneutic circle to pregiven forms of social power or social organization (e.g., the nation-state, the market, the local).22 This type of locational thinking that alters the reach of the hermeneutic circle without questioning the (im)possibility of the hermeneutic or the very conditions of sense making comes under fire in posthegemony. In this way, processes such as transculturation and hybridity must be challenged because, Alberto Moreiras claims, they redraw the hermeneutic circle without questioning the conditions of meaning. Moreiras locates a telos in the trans-: “it ultimately implies the acceptance of modernization as ideological truth and world destiny.”23 Transculturation, for Moreiras, is an overdetermined process, always already incorporating a certain goal complicit with modernity. Transculturation reads the Latin American text, characterized by temporal heterogeneity and noncontemporaneity of material, as a symptom of an as yet unfinished modernity. For Moreiras, this “modernity” overdetermines and undermines claims of political resistance.

To that end, posthegemony compels us to revisit the modernity thesis, where modernity threatens to become the new paradigm over and above national identity.24 Modernity threatens to become “a teleological tool or set of tools for the instrumental rationalization of the world.”25 Posthegemony, however, does not merely recover the specificity of the (Latin American) alternative modernity because that would rely on the “outdated concepts of identity and difference”—that is, cultural difference as constitutive of Latin America’s identity.26 Posthegemony does not want to think alternative modernity so much as to think modernity alternatively, to identify the impact of capitalism without reproducing historiographic categories that would preserve forms of social organization.27 Film studies offers the possibility of razing aesthetic-historicist paradigms by complicating the equation of a given social formation with a hermeneutic circle. If we can explore the nature of the hermeneutic circle as epistemological limit rather than as closed
circle yoked to territorialized forms of social power, then we might undo “the inside-outside polarity on which all aesthetic historicisms and all culturalist theories of modernity rest.” If the hermeneutic circle draws boundaries, reterritorializes, and telescopes culture and social power, then Moreiras suggests focusing on irruptive possibilities and deterritorializing flows. By thinking reception studies in light of posthegemony, Mock Classicism avoids casting media as either a cultural apparatus of hegemony (and pregiven social formations) or a counterhegemonic practice of resistance. Comedy provides an excellent topos for Latin Americanist study in this vein. Comedy not only designates a genre where a differentiated hermeneutic can yield varied social forms disarticulated from pregiven territorial formations, but it also compels us to reflect on the conditions of possibility of signification within the semiotic and social field. The untranslatability of comedy points to a hermeneutic circle that can never be foreclosed, where forces intrinsic and extrinsic to this circle are continually shaping the horizon of reception. By thinking about the ways comedies succeed and fail on multiple fronts—as eliciting audience laughter, as generic text, as commodity, as enduring comic remanence, and as representative of the nation-state—Mock Classicism finds in comedy the possibility of a less conciliatory and more disjunctive semiotic and social field. In fact, the challenging conditions for the academic study of Latin American film comedy—with few contemporaneous accounts of reception, little exhibition statistical data, and only limited publicity and paracinematic material—further complicates how this circle can be drawn. The deterritorializing pulse of film comedy form works in lockstep with the deterritorializing experience of film comedy spectatorship and the deterritorializing conditions of film comedy study. Using an approach that encompasses both textual analysis as well as a range of practices from the film experience such as stardom, trade and popular publications, and broadcast media, Mock Classicism explores how synchronous sound may have accentuated the nonsynchronicity of the global horizon of film culture.

In lieu of positioning Latin American specificity merely in its difference from Hollywood, this book uses classicism to assess the impact of capitalism on social formations. Mock Classicism identifies a critical potentiality in forms of cultural production conventionally figured monolithically, foregrounding how temporal play, spatial practice, and antisubjectivism necessarily complicate both the classical Hollywood cinema as well as the cultural nationalism of interwar and postwar Latin American literary and visual culture, respectively. In this vein, my
argument about classical cinema shares much in spirit with Mariano Siskind’s account of the globalization of the novel form. Siskind rereads turn-of-the-century Latin American literature through the lens of contemporary world literature debates. Instead of opposing regionalism to modernismo, Siskind argues that Latin American literature articulates the possibility of a cosmopolitan modernity, where cosmopolitanism does not refer to an elite literary practice but a world-making discourse, and modernity is “a global relation and set of aesthetic procedures that mediate a broadened transcultural network of uneven cultural exchanges.” This cosmopolitan discourse was an escape from nationalist cultural formations and opened a horizon for the realization of new forms of subjectivity. Siskind argues against simply aligning cosmopolitanism with abstract universality or European hegemony because this cosmopolitanism was a “radical universalism,” founded on the contradiction between universality and the marginal conditions of enunciation. Siskind reminds us that cosmopolitanism does not aspire to be or become center but rather to assert a lateral geocultural positionality.

I want to conceive a classicism that operates in a similar way, a product of neither the homogenizing tendencies of globalization nor the nativist insistence on difference. In other words, classicism need not be figured within a field of relations governed by a juridic-discursive model of power with a negative relation; to mock classicism is to assert that the margin also matters.

Siskind recounts the globalization of the novel form, arriving in Latin America and offering “the opportunity to grasp an experience of modernity that was not available to the reading Creole class in its everyday life.” The novel was the first universalized aesthetic form of modernity, not because of a universal impulse to narrate as cognitivist narratology might suppose but because “the novel form was the historical outcome of the formation (through colonialism, trade, and promises of emancipation) of a world.” This recalls similar debates about classical Hollywood cinema as universal pattern or deep narrative structure. If Hollywood classical style is indebted to the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel, then perhaps classicism in film studies can be reread in light of world literary discourse. Eric Hayot compels us to think this debt not in terms of realism but in terms of a shared idea of the world manifest as a (diegetic) self-contained unity. World literary discourse, then, would highlight that both narrative-cognitive and aesthetic-affective approaches to classical Hollywood found Hollywood’s success on the production of a world as a global cultural totality at the material, aesthetic, and discur-
sive levels. Put simply, more than mere narrative patterning or sensory training, classical Hollywood provided a way to apprehend, categorize, and represent the world as totality. The discrete diegesis of the classical Hollywood style produced an image of the world as a reconciled and available modern world, and studying the aesthetic formation of the diegesis—and the marginal forms of the diegesis—might render the process of globalization visible. Furthermore, Siskind reminds us that the idea of the world is different in a region occupying a marginal position. The world is figured differently in Latin America vis-à-vis the worlds produced in metropolitan locations, and studying how the world is rendered in Latin America allows us “to work through the tension between the desire to join the global order of modernism and the anxiety provoked by the experience of exclusion and the anticipation of the exclusion to come.” The diegetic totality cannot be a self-contained unity in a region figuring the world within a network of uneven cultural exchanges. I want to suggest that using classicism in Latin America should neither graft Hollywood industrial structures and aesthetic style onto the region nor delimit cultural production in existing institutions of national sovereignty. Instead, I propose thinking classicism as a discourse that mediates and renders the world, looking at the construction of the aesthetic world as diegetic totality and the circulation of the texts and objects in global circuits of economic exchange.

MAKING LATIN AMERICA GENERIC

An investment in the bodily effects of the film experience articulated to the heterogeneity of Latin American cultural production can be found in the tradition of genre studies and the more recent uptake of affect in Latin American film studies. In her recent book *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*, Laura Podalsky discusses the aesthetics of sensation in contemporary Latin American cinema and advocates a similar move away from approaches that symptomatically diagnose film narrative in an allegorical mode or semantically decode the image, turning away from certain semiotic and psychoanalytic approaches and toward an approach that examines the affective dimension of the cinema experience: “Instead of examining how films organize or fix the spectator’s visual apprehension of the profilmic space or how they deploy moral distinctions to align us with particular characters rather than others, we need to acknowledge and account for the myriad touch-points through which films and situated
audiences encounter each other.”37 Drawing on the affective turn identified by Michael Hardt, Podalsky locates the body as a potential site for “alternative” epistemologies. Articulating the work of Hardt to the work of Gilles Deleuze, Podalsky sees socially inscribed and codified emotions and the deterritorializing flows and punctuating intensities of affect working together to produce alternative subjectivities and alternative ways of knowing.38 Following Laura Marks,39 she historically situates the cognitive potential of affect in the late twentieth century at a moment of epistemological crisis wherein the visual record is rendered unreliable if not insufficient. While I agree with Podalsky on the importance of considering affect in the field of Latin American cinema, I diverge from her project on a number of points. First, my study is situated in a different historical period. The epistemological crisis she identifies with the declining currency of the photographic record is not exclusive to the contemporary moment. I trace this epistemological crisis and the concomitant ontological restlessness to the early and transition cinema of the region as well as the theoretical discourses that coincided and at times preceded these film practices both in Latin America and abroad. Second, I oppose her characterization of Deleuze’s film theory as one that finds in the film experience the potential for an alternative epistemology. Deleuze does not treat cinema as an art representing an external reality but as an ontological practice that creates different ways of organizing movement and time.40 What cinema affords is not alternative ways of knowing but alternative ways of becoming and acting in the world. Ultimately, I move away from cognition and critical reason (as critical distance) that affirms what Alberto Moreiras calls an “identitarian space-in-resistance.”41 As such, this book models how to think critical reason beyond the reification of alternative forms or the identification of counterhegemonic resistance by exploring the slippages and disjunctures between the history of capital and the history of social power. If film and media technologies suggest the further interlocking of capital and power in lockstep, then comedies’ parodic textuality, intermedial production, variable circulation in space, and specific reception in and across time offer possible sites of disjunction within an apparatus considered paradigmatically to articulate the nation-state.

Most studies of comedy in film studies have focused on the slapstick comedies of the silent era and classical Hollywood comedy types, particularly the musical comedy, screwball comedy, and comedian comedy. These early semiotic studies of comedy showcase how comedic narrative operations and performance styles disrupt the structure of the classical
illusionistic fiction film. In his article on Ealing studio comedies, John Ellis identifies two major types of comedy: the screwball or social comedy, which uses natural language and deals with social disruption and its restoration, and the crazy comedy, which displays an awareness of language and convention and works through deconstruction and recombination. This typology is founded on the adherence of the comedic film to the principles of classical dramatic film. Rather than a classical definition of comedy founded on the restoration of order and the avowal of hierarchies, these studies designate comedy in the excesses that temporarily suspend the narrative and locate generic pleasure in the movement between disruption and reordering. The linguistic play and generic deconstruction of the crazy comedy finds its paradigmatic example in what Steve Seidman has termed the “comedian comedy.” These films are organized around a particular type of star, a comedian with an extradiagnostic and often paracinematic presence. The comedian usually occupies a privileged status relative to the other characters, less fictionally integrated and therefore disruptive of the diegesis. The eventual fictional incorporation of the comedian often characterizes the narrative operations of these films: the disorder externalized in the social comedy becomes internalized in the comedian’s body and figured in the comedian’s problematic location within the diegesis.

These semiotic analyses provide valuable insight, particularly in their demand that we interrogate the “tautology of genre recognition”—“it’s a comedy because it makes me laugh!”—and acknowledge how classical Hollywood narrative presupposes dramatic structures. However, these early studies often fail to examine how comedy functions as a body genre that registers its effects on the bodies of spectators. In order to move away from a semantic decoding of the representational field and the models of identification articulated to this approach, I will refer to Henri Bergson’s essay on laughter and la mécanisation de la vie. Although they are usually understood in terms of the incommensurability of the mechanic and the natural, I articulate these categories to his discussion of time and duration as well as perception and memory in Matter and Memory and Creative Evolution. The mechanic designates habitual behavior and a relationship to an absent past; the natural refers to the perceived present that interrupts this force of habit. His understanding of time and duration informs his contradefinitional approach: Bergson avoids making his a nominative endeavor, preferring to imagine the comic as dynamic and infinitely variable, processual, and relational. What happens to thought when its object is not treated as an
abstract concept to be grasped but as a living thing affected by and consti-
tuted through our engagement? To delimit its mechanics would be to
treat it as a thing incapable of becoming. Laughter relies on the recogni-
tion of habit and habit out of place, being and becoming, articulating a
new relation to the world that forces an awareness of the possibilities
existing in the world. The comic spirit is a way of being-in-the-world
that privileges “practical, intimate acquaintance” as opposed to instru-
mentalist abstraction, a relation to the world that affords fleeting
moments of lucidity—throwing light on the workings of the inhabited
world. Furthermore, Bergson claims that laughter requires a disinterest-
ed spectator, a spectator beside himself, not absorbed but not
removed.48 Laughter produces a sensory incoherence or stepping aside
that I argue positions the spectator differently. Rather than locating the
spectator as either proximate to or distant from the image, comedy’s
bodily effects are, as Frank Krutnik observes, a function of “the play
between engagement and distantiatisation.”49 He claims that the pleasure
from the comedian comedy derives from the movement between
diegetic absorption and filmic recognition.50 Much like Miriam Hansen’s
later discussion of female spectatorship and the star text of Rudolph
Valentino, the presence of the comedian dissociates the narrative (iden-
tification with a character) and the scopic (the recognition of a particu-
lar object), forcing any study of the comedian comedy to consider how
identification and subjectivity are organized differently.51 In the spirit of
Linda Williams’s revision of melodrama, this project offers less a semi-
totic decoding than an exploration of this metaleptic playfulness and its
effects on the spatial and temporal relations between screen, theater,
and narrative space.52 Further, Williams characterizes melodrama less as
a discrete genre than a mode, a notion that Agustín Zarzosa supports
because the mode is less a category within a particular medium than “a
set of affinities unencumbered by medium.”53 Latin American film stud-
ies has drawn on this language in its own analyses of melodrama in the
region. From Silvia Oroz’s landmark comparative study to Elena Lahr-
Vivaz’s recent monograph on Mexican melodrama, melodrama has
long been considered a “metagenre” that hybridizes with other generic
categories.54 Unfortunately, melodrama in Latin American film studies
often indexes the nation. For instance, despite her continental scope and
comparative approach, Oroz argues that melodrama fashions a particu-
lar rhetoric based on narratives that are allegorical of the nation and
images that depict the nation.55 I return to the language of mode because
it refers less to a taxonomic project than a formal project, “a strategy to
solve practically problems of experience.”56 Following Thomas Elsaesser on melodrama, comedy is a mode of social expression and a mode of aesthetic expression;57 however, if the melodrama attempts to make the moral good legible in an increasingly secular world, I argue that comedy attempts to make the world significant under a regime of economic symbolization.58 In his canonic discussion of melodrama, Peter Brooks speculates that different kinds of drama have corresponding sense deprivations: blindness for tragedy, muteness for melodrama, and deafness for comedy.59 The melodramatic narrative is a text of muteness, driven by the desire for expression; comedy, on the other hand, is driven by a desire to exchange. If Williams argues that the melodrama is the predominant mode of popular American cinema,60 Mock Classicism argues that comedy is the predominant mode of Latin American cinema.

UNDERWRITING THE NATION

Though this project attempts to think within and beyond the geographic frameworks of conventional regional film histories, it is delimited by the archival and material limitations of study in the region. Ana López has pointed out the challenges of scholarship on early and transition cinema in Latin America, noting that the more prolific output and more sustained infrastructure of Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico have allowed for a larger scholarly field, adding that film texts and paratexts produce a necessary matrix through which to conceive the cinema experience in these contexts. López laments, however, that these material constraints have bounded the material by “nationness” with few attempts at comparative studies across national contexts.61 The arrival of sound, in particular, meant a seismic shift in the mediascape, resulting in the American penetration of sound recording and projection technology as well as classical Hollywood film distribution and exhibition alongside a limited space for national producers oftentimes buttressed by interventionist statist policies: “Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil . . . invented, adapted, and experimented, producing a different yet resonant version of early cinema.”62

The successes and failures of comedy are never punctual textual instants but ongoing processes of reading and rereading within synchronic pregnant moments and along diachronic experiences of remembrance. Mock Classicism avoids using genre in the taxonomic tradition or the later empirical turn in film studies. The latter tends to reproduce industrial categories, and the former supposes a fixed identity (at worst) or an ontogenetic approach (at best). Instead, I draw on the genre-based
paradigms of comparative literature, figured in opposition to older
nation-based models. As Wai Chee Dimock argues, genre allows us to
speculate what political community or hermeneutic circle comes into
being when “measured in duration rather than extension.” This kind
of map would force us to write a different kind of film history, one that
does not appeal to the clock and calendar of national chronology as its
time frame and also forces us to reckon with film as time-based medium.
“The importance of genres comes not from their fixed identity but from
the impossibility of such a thing,” and comedy is particularly suited to
this approach because of the ways its narratives foil designation and
determination. To that end, Mock Classicism avoids chronology,
examining the formal and narrative operations of these transition-cin-
ema comedies and their delimited and particularized circulation within
and between diverse national contexts in order to telescope local,
regional, national, and continental geographic frameworks.

In lieu of studying figures such as Tin Tan or Pepe Arias, championed
for the ways they oppose or subvert the nation either in liberal frame-
works that want a more representative national imaginary or in (neolib-
eral) frameworks that dismiss the national as anachronistic category,
this book follows comedic figures and tropes conventionally aligned
with the nation. I use these national comedic icons in a deconstructive
spirit, following Homi Bhabha, who doubles down on the nation
because of its interrupted address. The nation tells itself but cannot help
that somewhere else it is told. “This narrative inversion or circulation
makes untenable any supremacist or nationalist claims to cultural mas-
tery [and] the position of narrative control.” The very finitude of the
nation is productive for Bhabha because it emphasizes the failures, if
not impossibility, of history: it “demands a time of narrative disavowed
in the discourse of historicism.” In a historical period overdetermined
by cultural nationalism, Bhabha’s challenge bears on how we think film
histories underwritten by a prefigurative self-generating nation.

First, Mexican comedies of the 1940s and 1950s are often discussed
as paradigmatically conservative: the restoration of order during the
film’s resolution dovetails with the socializing function of a cinema
implicated in a resurgent nationalistic project after the ambiguous legacy
of the Mexican Revolution. Chapter 1, “Cantinflismo and Relajo’s
Peripheral Vision,” revisits the popular comedies of Mario “Cantinflas”
Moreno from the golden age of Mexican cinema and argues that these
films are not simply escapist and ideologically suspect but represent
peripheral spaces of subversive difference that in their cultural and his-
Introduction

Historical specificity cannot be easily co-opted by a cultural-imperialist center. Cantinflas’s humor is characterized by his linguistic contortionism, or cantinflismo, in which he says plenty without saying anything, a verbal nonsense that sidesteps narrative registers and affords a bodily engagement through laughter that relies on particular cultural codes and learned structures of feeling. I provincialize classical Hollywood cinema by arguing for a peripheral vision modeled on the comedic practice of the relajo, which plays with the classical spatial arrangement of screen and theater space. Starting with Cantinflas’s first successful film, Ahí está el detalle (Juan Bustillo Oro, 1941), my analysis examines the comedian’s quick verbal play in addition to formal devices, editing techniques, and doubled narrative structures that “sidestep” on multiple levels.

In the Argentine context, the golden age period of the late 1930s and 1940s is often discussed in relation to the forces contributing to the rise of Peronism in the 1940s. Cinema and mass culture are implicated in the intertwined emergence of an integrative nationalist rhetoric and polarizing class stratification that was conducive to the rise of Juan Perón. Film comedies are again described as reactionary, providing through their farcical narratives of upward mobility an imagined (if temporary) solution to the ambivalent tendencies underpinning populist rhetoric. The second chapter, “The Call of the Screen: Niní Marshall and the Radiophonic Stardom of Argentine Cinema,” broadens our understanding of the mediascape during the golden age period by examining the film and radio stardom of Marina Esther Traverso, “Niní Marshall,” as a case of aural stardom that challenges image-based star studies and provides a framework to consider the particularities of popular Argentine cinema, where radio furnished the framework for the development of its industry and star system. Star-contract disputes from studio archives and evolving sound conventions in film texts are ventriloquial gambits that rearticulate the relationship between voice and body in a shifting organization of the senses.

Remaining in the Argentine context, the modernization of an increasingly urban and industrial Argentina and the effect of modernity on the experience of time provide a backdrop for my discussion of the films of Luis Sandrini in the third chapter, “Timing Is Everything: Sandrini’s Stutter and the Representability of Time.” More specifically, Sandrini’s films rely on the comedian’s stutter that literally disrupts the temporal continuum that film records. This chapter uses the stutter heuristically, figuring it within film texts, material film practice, spectatorial experience, and historiography. Radio sound aesthetics and sound technologies
played an important role during the transition to sound, not only determining technological developments that affected film production but also providing the material base for the nation’s nascent studios. Additionally, by focusing on Sandrini’s physical slapstick, I discuss his films as staging a confrontation with standardized time both in terms of the reification of time in modernity and the standardization of film through the registration gate.

The Brazilian *chanchada*, or musical comedy, is a popular genre from the golden age of Brazilian cinema with a substantial Portuguese-language academic literature. These comedies date from the early sound period and persist through the 1940s at the height of the Atlântida studio system and into the 1970s and the emergence of the cheaply and quickly made *porno-chanchada*. The literature on the chanchada understands these films as hybrid cultural objects, borrowing liberally from classical Hollywood musicals, Portuguese *fado*, Afro-Brazilian music, and Brazilian popular theater. Instead of retreading these ontogenetic arguments, the fourth chapter, “Fictions of the Real: The Currency of the Brazilian *Chanchada*,” argues the transition from *musicarnavalesco* to chanchada in light of the Estado Novo implementation of centralized monetary policy and the currency conversion to the cruzeiro. As money changes, there is less agreement on evaluative criteria, auguring a crisis of valuation that subtends debates around the value of the genre. Making film a better commodity in a *desmedida* (unmeasured or excessive) economy undergoing a crisis of value presents challenges at levels both material (currency restrictions shaped the development of the industry) and aesthetic (money as a form of economic symbolization coincides with the rise of fictionality). Classicism is mocked once more, now discussed in relation to the rise of fictionality rather than the codification of the classical realist text. Hollywood classical cinema attempted to separate the past-present-future regime of temporal chronology (i.e., screen time) from the pregnant moment of scenic display and the present tense of the spectator (i.e., theater time). The chanchada designates a certain intensification of fictionality where we actively feel the tension between the narrativized diegesis, the singularity of the comedic effect, and the present tense of the spectator.

The final chapter, “Comedy Circulates Circuitously: Toward an Odographic Film History of Latin America,” examines the international production and distribution networks in Latin America in order to argue for the cinemas of the golden age period beyond national frameworks. More particularly, I consider the circulation both of and in Mexican, Argentine, and Brazilian comedies in order to engage with the concept of cir-
culation in multiple ways, relating film as narrative, film as commodity, and film as spatial practice or architectonics. Circulation by definition entails traversing, (re)organizing, and (re)coordinating space and time, and this chapter takes advantage of the delimited and particularized circulation of comedy within and between diverse national contexts to telescope local, regional, national, and continental geographic frameworks. The identification of networks of film and media exchange prior to the 1960s challenges the diffusionist and center/periphery models that overdetermine understandings of cinema in the period. Circulation invites us to ask why do certain things travel? How quickly? How far? How long? This would mean writing a film history that considers how the circulation of cultural forms and the forms of circulation produce the region in what I call an odographic turn. The unevenness and variability of intra-continental distribution mock classicism, not in necessarily a resistant practice in the mold of European modernism but through a different form of territorialization dictated by the horizon of reception. This (de)territorialization occurs courtesy of techniques that control or reconfigure time and space—that is, techniques of circulation.

Taken together, these parallel examples of comedic practice demonstrate how Latin American film comedies produce a classical mode of spectatorship different from classicism figured in Hollywood. I engage the classical as a framework for the practice of power, but one that is never fully successful in being everywhere the same. Classicism is a category worth recovering (and mocking) in Latin American film studies because of the ways it indexes diverse forms of territorialization, from global Hollywood to cultural nationalism. The transition to sound and the emergence of film comedy provides an endogenous and nonsynchronous rejoinder to the cosmopolitanism of the former and the nationalism of the latter. Rather than simply relocating culture within ever more particular sites of reception or ever broader flows of transnationalism, mock classicism capitalizes on the limits of different forms of territorialization, figured through industrial practices, narrative spatiotemporal configuration, and aesthetic symbolization.