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James L. Richie IV
University of Louisville

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Chilean Cinema in the 21st Century World (Review)

Vania Barraza and Carl Fischer, eds. (2020)

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What matters more: reaching an international audience or artistic authenticity? Chilean filmmakers have clearly reached the attention of international filmgoers and critics, with the success of films by Pablo Larraín and Sebastián Lelio receiving international recognition and awards (including nominations and victories in the Oscars). Nonetheless, Vania Barraza and Carl Fischer, the editors of *Chilean Cinema in the 21st Century World* (2020), establish the central question of the book in its introduction: can directors reach a wider audience by presenting a more globalized narrative of Chilean local issues in their films, and is doing so authentic or ethical? This collection of fifteen essays in six sections (including the introduction) responds to the international success of films from the region with writing on diverse topics in the field of Chilean cinema studies in order to navigate the entanglements between the national media industries and the international film community. The skepticism toward external actors displayed by authors in this book is warranted, especially if we consider the historical role of external influence in the region such as the United States' involvement in the Pinochet dictatorship.

Co-editor, Spanish professor at Fordham University, Carl Fischer, has written on the unique position of Chilean culture in his previous book *Queering the Chilean Way: Cultures of Exceptionalism and Sexual Dissidence (1653-2015)* (2015), and with the popularity of recent Chilean films that explore queer topics such as Lelio's Oscar-winning *Una mujer fantástica* (2017), Fischer's expertise is a welcome contribution. The other co-editor is Spanish professor at

the University of Memphis, Vania Barraza, who has written on the topic of Chilean cinema before, with her book *El cine en Chile (2005–2015): Políticas y poéticas del nuevo siglo* (2015). Both Barraza and Fischer have worked previously to convey the uniqueness of the relevant national media trends, and their expertise allows them to put forth an engaging argument for contemporary films as a topic of study.

In the introduction, the editors articulate how the Chilean film industry has globalized since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship. The editors identify four major trends in 21st Century Chilean cinema: genre film, the *Novísimo* generation, personal (subjective) responses to political or social events in fiction film, and documentaries that address political issues (8). The introduction provides an overview of relevant historical context that informs issues of national and global cinema. Moreover, the editors make a case for examining the film industry of a particular nation, as Barraza and Fischer argue that Chile is often used as a model of national development, meaning that “the globalization of its cinema is relevant for other national cinemas, and for cinema studies as a whole” (15). The introduction provides the necessary background information for readers who may be unfamiliar with the region’s socio-political past, and the introduction puts forth a compelling justification for studying this national film industry.

The sections following the introduction are essays, which are grouped by their topics. The first section applies social sciences concerning “the market for, distribution of, exhibition of, and consumption of Chilean film at the regional and global level” (17). These macro-level studies provide theoretical frameworks, which can inform the readings of films in the later sections. The second section explores the topic of genre film, specifically horror and martial arts film within the Chilean context. The third section details translational and transmedia production, regarding how “Chilean filmic texts have taken on ‘lives of their own’ in adaptation, beyond

Chile and beyond the medium of film itself.” (18). The fourth section deals with issues of gender and subversions of gender norms. The final section of the book details films that represent both personal and political memory with topics ranging from historical memories of the Pinochet dictatorship to films centered on personal struggles with loss and grief.

The volume’s first section, “Mapping Theories of Chilean Cinema on the World,” examines Chile’s film industry from theoretical frameworks in the social sciences. In “Learning to be global” María Paz Peirano offers us her ethnographic study (based on her collection of interviews) of Chile’s position within international film festivals. In “Centrifugal Cinema,” Carolina Urrita Neno, revisits the category of centrifugal cinema, or films with challenging approaches to the functions of space and memory (54), in order to describe a new narrative development within this type of film including “more and greater complexities in the films’ relationship with the social realm and with the political demands of Chilean citizens” (51). Lastly for this section, “Political and Affective Shifts in the Contemporary Chilean Documentary” by Paulo Lagos Labbé charts the shift from objective to subjective presentation of materials in Chilean documentaries in the post dictatorship period. The placement of this section early in the book is helpful, as these applications of social theory provide perspectives for the critical analyses of individual films in the subsequent sections.

The second section, “On the Margins of Hollywood: Chilean Genre Flicks” explores what the name implies, genre films produced within the Chilean film industry. Fans of genre films might be a bit disheartened that there are only two essays in this section. “The Reach of Horror” by Jonathan Risner explores the trajectory of Chile’s horror film industry noting that Chilean horror films follow similar international paths to distribution as Chile’s arthouse or “festival” films. Moisés Park’s “The Latin Dragon Going Global” details the career of Chile’s

greatest martial arts film star, Marko Zaror, from a variety of perspectives including postcolonialism and sex appeal. While horror and martial arts films may not receive as much critical attention as other genres, the essays in this chapter make a strong case for their inclusion, especially in the Chilean context.

The essays of the third Section, “Other Texts and Other Lands,” explore adaptations and transmedia approaches. The chapter “*Il futuro* by Alicia Scherson” peels back the layers of international meaning in the film adaptation of Roberto Bolaño’s novel, *Una novelita lumpen* (2002), which is set in Italy and produced between Spanish, Chilean, Italian, and German production companies. The other chapter of this section “Video Built the Cinema Star” by Aurturo Márquez-Gómez examines the function of music video aesthetics in sequences in Alex Antwander’s film, *Nunca vas a estar solo* (2016), a film which also touches on violence toward the members of the LGBTQ+ community. Another film by Scherson is discussed in the essay “Intimacies and Global Aesthetics in *Vida de familia* (2017) by Alicia Scherson and Cristián Jiménez,” as co-editor, Vania Barraza, contextualizes the film in relation to the McOndo urban literary movement (since *Vida de familia* is an adaptation of a short story from this particular movement). The essays of this section overlap with other recurring themes of discussion in the book, including LGBTQ+ topics and the role of the international community in Chilean film production.

In the fourth section “Migrations of Gender and Genre,” the two essays respond to films centering on LGBTQ+ topics. “A House without Limits” by Mónica Ramón Ríos is a formal and ethical analysis of the documentary *Casa Roshell* (2017), which finds that the film’s veering away from traditional documentary aesthetics is exactly what gives potency to the work’s argument. The contribution from co-editor, Carl Fischer, “The International (Un)Intelligibility of

Chilean Trans* Film” compares and contrasts two films on trans identity in Chile: the more global-friendly *Una Mujer Fantástica* (2017) and the more activist-driven *Naomi Campbell* (2015). In the essay, Fischer contemplates to what extent the nuances of local Chilean LGBTQ+ issues can be communicated to international audiences. The essays in this section provide readers with many perspectives to consider films that handle LGBTQ+ topics in the region including, formal (or aesthetic), ethical, genre, political, and rhetorical considerations.

The final section of the book, “Politicized Intimacies, Translational Affects: Debating (Post)Memory and History” focuses on works that reckon with the legacy and national trauma of the Pinochet regime. “Filmmakers to the Rescue of Chilean Memory” by Claudia Bossay covers several approaches by different contemporary documentary filmmakers to engage with Chile’s traumatic past. “The Life of Things” analyzes the use of stop-motion animation techniques in the documentary *Atrapados en Japón* (2015) by exiled filmmaker Vivienne Barry. “Displacement, Emplacement, and the Politics of Exilic Childhood in Sergio Castilla’s *Gringuito* (1998)” by Camilo Trumper considers one of the earliest post-dictatorship films through themes of exile and return as they are experienced through the lens of the child protagonist of the film. The final essay “Films on Loss and Mourning” by María Helena Rueda examines Larraín’s *El Club* (2015) and Lelio’s *Una mujer fantástica* as films about processing grief, and adopting this perspective allows Rueda to offer the most sympathetic take on the works of Larraín and Lelio in this book.

The core debate between local and global orientations is generative enough to allow for engagement with a wide variety of films and theoretical perspectives, and this breadth of subjects is the greatest strength of this collection. The essays included cover topics including genre films, LGBTQ+ issues, and social documentaries. The particular films, genres, and themes chosen for

analysis are apt, especially given the historical importance of documentaries in the history of Latin American film, the underdiscussed status of genre films, and the urgency of issues related to LGBTQ+ rights in the country. The theoretical and critical approaches are also varied, with essays employing formal analysis, ethnography, genre studies, historical contextualization, empirical industry data, postcolonialism, and post-structural theory. This diversity allows the book to comment on the interests of film scholars, Latin Americanists, genre enthusiasts, activists, and historians. Despite the range of subject matter and approaches across the essays, the core dilemma in this work, grappling with issues of Chile's international entanglements, is present in the argument of every author included in the collection.

While the competing forces of domestic and international interests make for an interesting theme, this dichotomization sometimes leads to reductionism in the book. For instance, three out of the four essays that analyze *Una mujer fantástica* posit the film as a stodgy melodrama, such as how Fischer describes Lelio's film as having "a classical, melodramatic narrative" (252). After framing *Una mujer fantástica* as a conventional melodrama, some authors in this collection contrast Lelio's film with more formally experimental films in their argument that the so-called experimental films achieve something that Lelio's film does not. However, these broad categorizations belie the surreal sequences in Lelio's film such as the avant-garde dance scene. Overlooking this formal aspect of the film seems amiss in cases in which the authors are trying to make formal comparisons between *Una mujer fantástica* and other films, which they consider to be more radical, both politically and aesthetically.

That said, Barraza and Fischer have assembled a collection of essays that not only makes a case for Chilean cinema as a subject of study, but for the specific study of the competing

interests of global and local themes in Chilean cinema as being an issue within a larger field with enough substance to sustain an entire book as well as having ripe potential for future projects.