

# Serializing *Ramona*

## Provincializing Early Cinema Spectatorship in Cuba

Nilo Couret\*

**Abstract:** This video essay uses my family's anecdotes of moviegoing in rural Cuba to fashion a speculative account of the early cinema experience outside the cinema spectatorship, this video essay is also a meditation on historiographic method and the challenges of an object of study with a periphrastic form and a periphrastic material circulation.

**Keywords:** film history, early cinema, reception, spectator theory, audience, region, rural studies, Cuba, distribution.metropolitan center of Havana. More than a speculative imagining of early

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### Serializando *Ramona*. La provincialización del cine temprano en Cuba

**Resumen:** Este video ensayo utiliza anécdotas familiares sobre el cine temprano en las provincias rurales cubanas para forjar una crónica especulativa de la experiencia cinematográfica fuera de la metrópolis de La Habana. Más allá de una figuración especulativa de la experiencia del espectador del cine temprano, el video ensayo es también una meditación sobre el método historiográfico y los desafíos de estudiar un objeto de estudio con una forma perifrástica y una circulación material también perifrástica.

**Palabras clave:** historia de cine, cine temprano, recepción, espectador, regionalismo, estudios rurales, Cuba, distribución

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### *Ramona* Seriada: A Provincialização do Cinema Silencioso em Cuba

**Resumo:** Este vídeo-ensaio usa anedotas familiares sobre o cinema silencioso nas províncias rurais cubanas para forjar uma crônica especulativa da experiência cinematográfica fora da metrópole de La Habana. Além de uma figuração especulativa da experiência do espectador do cinema silencioso, o vídeo-ensaio é também uma meditação sobre o método historiográfico e os desafios de estudar um objeto de estudo com uma forma perifrástica e uma circulação material também perifrástica.

**Palavras-chave:** história de cinema, cinema silencioso, recepção, espectador, regionalismo, estúdios rurais, Cuba, distribuição



*Ramona* (Edward Carewe, 1928). The Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive

In her foundational essay, “Early Cinema and Modernity in Latin America,” Ana López brought the modernity thesis in film studies to Latin America. López argues that early cinema must be understood within a broader discourse of modernity, but that the region’s experience of modernity was shaped by a modernization that was necessarily fragmentary, decentered, and uneven.<sup>1</sup> Since then, silent film scholarship in Latin America has embraced modernity over and above national frameworks in ways that threaten to reduce and homogenize the differentiated experiences of modernity. From empirical reception studies that consider the massification of moviegoing audiences to historical surveys of periodicals, these studies often forget how López cautioned that early cinema’s

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<sup>1</sup> LÓPEZ, Ana. “Early Cinema and Modernity in Latin America”. In: *Cinema Journal*, vol. 40, n. 1, 2000, p. 49

development in Latin America was *not* directly linked to “large-scale transformations of daily experience resulting from industrialization, rationality, and the technological transformation of modern life.”<sup>2</sup>

How do we think cinema and modernity without presuming that cinema practices are inherently modern? In order to shift our historiographic and geographic perspective, I want to underscore how most silent Latin American film scholarship reconstructs local cinema practices in metropolitan centers. As Ben Singer argues, the experience of early cinema is inextricably tied to the experience of metropolitan modernity.<sup>3</sup> And yet, even in the American context, most Americans in 1910 lived in rural and not urban settings.<sup>4</sup> In Latin America, most Latin Americans lived in rural settings in the first decades of the twentieth century. The demographic shift toward urban areas began in earnest in the 1930s, with urban residents outnumbering rural residents only by the 1950s.<sup>5</sup>

Still, the metropolitan experience of moviegoing remains at the center of the historical map of Latin America. Relocating Latin American film history exacerbates the methodological challenges that already make early cinema scholarship a daunting enterprise. Recovering unintegrated regions, spaces, and audiences may require approaches that move beyond the empirical case study that identifies local practices homologous to global film practices. To that end, this video essay uses my family’s anecdotes of moviegoing in rural Cuba to fashion a speculative account of the early cinema experience outside the metropolitan center of Havana.

This video essay provides neither a guided lecture nor a close formal reading; instead, it performs a speculative historiography, where the succession of plot and historical

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> SINGER, Ben. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, pp. 108-9

<sup>4</sup> ALLEN, Robert C. “Relocating American Film History”. In: *Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, n. 1, 2006. p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> DUFOUR, Darna L. and Barbara A. Piperata, “Rural-to-Urban Migration in Latin America: An Update and Thoughts on the Model”. En: *American Journal of Human Biology*, n. 16, 2004, p. 396.

time is undermined by the periphrastic structure characteristic of the serial form (and arguably serial print culture). As the viewer follows events in both linear and historical linear chronology, the time falls out of joint through the operations of the grid. The seriality of the grid operates against a historicist reconstruction of the past because its structure is both horizontal (or sequential) and vertical, so that the sequence is not definitively clarified or resolved. The grid then produces a resonant field that relativizes the image and asks viewers to toggle between historical moments to conjunct narrative order. The video essay, then is both a speculative imagining of the early cinema spectatorship as well as a meditation on historiographic method and the challenges of an object of study with a periphrastic form and a periphrastic material circulation.

My Cuban family is resolutely provincial, hailing from Pinar del Río, Santa Clara, and Ciego de Ávila. If Havana had fifty movie theaters by 1930,<sup>6</sup> Pinar del Río counted with one main movie theater - the Teatro Milanés - in its capital, the city of Pinar del Río.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in 1931, Havana had over 33 radio stations and Pinar del Río had one radio station.<sup>8</sup> In this context, my grandmother lived in Puerta de Golpe, a town 15km outside the city of Pinar del Río. Her fondest memory of early cinema was frequenting a makeshift establishment to go see *Ramona*. *Ramona* was a popular American novel from 1884 written by Helen Hunt Jackson set in Southern California after the Mexican-American War. The melodramatic plot revolves around a young orphan girl who falls in love with a Native American sheep shearer, Alessandro, and learns she is part Native

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<sup>6</sup> ZARDOYA LOUREDA, María Victoria and Marisol Marrero Oliva, “Los primeros cines de La Habana”. En: *Arquitectura y Urbanismo*, vol. 35, n. 2, 2014, p. 48.

<sup>7</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, the Teatro Pedro Saldén operated sporadically as a cinema, the Cine Aida (now Cine Praga) opened in 1939, and the Cine Riesgo (now Cine Zayden) wouldn't debut until 1947. Smaller bordering towns had their own cinemas built later: Los Palacios had its Cine Liceo (later Cine de Ciriaco and Cine Tuxpan), Sandino had its Cine Segovia, and Matahambre its Cine Xiomara (now Cine Minas) before 1960. After the Cuban Revolution we can add Viñales and its Cine Viñales in 1967, Mantua's Cine Invasión in 1963; La Palma's Cine Martí became a cinema in 1964; and San Luis and Guane got their Cine Girón and Cine Guane, respectively, in 1970.

<sup>8</sup> “State and City Index.” In: *Radio Digest* (New York, NY), December 1931, pp. 82-3.

American. They marry, make a home and have a baby only to be dispossessed by settlers and endure misery and hardship before Alessandro is killed.

The novel was adapted for film several times in the first decades of the twentieth century. A 1910 version by D.W. Griffith features Mary Pickford in the leading role. The 14-reel 1916 version, produced by W.H. Clune, attempted to replicate the success of *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915). After its release, the film appeared in shorter versions of 12, 10, 7 and even 5 reels. The 1936 version with Loretta Young and Don Ameche was one of the earliest Technicolor films. Arguably, the most well-known version is the 1928 Edward Carewe version, which starred Dolores del Rio. The 1928 film was the second highest earning film released that year, and this box-office success sparked a collaboration (and reported off-screen affair) between director and star, who also made *Revenge* (1928) and *Resurrection* (1927). This *Ramona* was “the most advertised film” in Hollywood at the time. Ahead of the film’s premiere, United Artists bought 376 window displays in the Los Angeles area, canvassed radio stations with the “Ramona waltz,” re-released the serialized novel in Los Angeles newspapers for 21 days, and mailed more than 50,000 heralds to clients.<sup>9</sup>

My grandmother never could recall which version made its way to that space in provincial Cuba, but she remembered that the feature-length film could only be watched week-to-week. The independent exhibitor could only procure one reel at a time, and she and her siblings would go to the movies every week to watch the film in installments. For a film whose source material was originally a weekly serial in the *Christian Union*, this de facto serialized cinema experience seems fitting. This anecdote, however, complicates understandings of the transition from early to classical cinema, founded on the feature-length paradigm. Already, the many versions of the 1916 Clune production speak to the ways the feature-length film could be rearranged according to the exigencies of the distributor and exhibitor.

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<sup>9</sup> “Blanket Campaign Breaks House Record.” In: *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World* 91, n. 4A (Chicago, IL), April 28, 1928, pp. 89, 91.

The availability of the feature-length film experience required a certain concatenation of producer, distributor and exhibitor and a large number of copies in circulation, a factor that is especially relevant in the margins and terminals of distribution networks. Scholars have typically presumed the feature-length film circulated as an integral text, imagining a hub-and-spoke model of circulation with films in the periphery on a time lag or what Dudley Andrew calls *décalage*.<sup>10</sup> What this anecdote suggests is that the feature-length was more a post facto horizon and the rationalization of time presumed in accounts of early cinema must contend with both delay and the ways distributors and exhibitors mitigated and capitalized on delay. The video essay attempts to give form to *décalage*, but understands that this “jet lag” is less a lagging behind than a *mélange* of temporal regimes: premodern and modern, agricultural and industrial, clock time and seasonal or cyclical time, succession and remanence.

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Link to the video essay:

<https://vimeo.com/304982550>

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