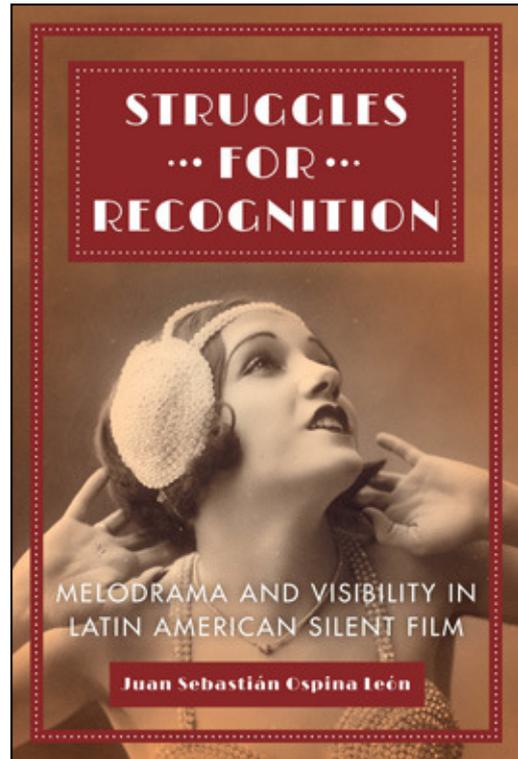


**On Ospina León, Juan Sebastián.
*Struggles for Recognition: Melodrama
and Visibility in Latin American
Silent Film***

Oakland: University of California Press,
2021, 250 pp., ISBN 9780520305434

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Historically maligned and dismissed by critics, over the past four decades melodrama—in a melodramatic reversal of fortune—has been recuperated and elevated to the status of a core concept and corpus for film studies and Latin American cultural studies. Despite robust interest in melodrama and its role in structuring experiences of modernity, debates surrounding melodrama in these two fields have rarely intersected. In *Struggles for Recognition: Melodrama and Visibility in Latin American Silent Film*, Juan Sebastián Ospina León argues that Latin America's melodramatic traditions should prompt us to reconsider prevailing assumptions about melodrama in the Anglo-American academy, such as Peter Brooks' influential claim that the mode emerged as a means of recovering guiding moral principles in a post-sacred world.¹ How can we account, Ospina León asks, for melodrama's links to developments that challenge standard accounts of Western modernity? For instance, the "sacralization of society"² that shaped film production in early twentieth-century Colombia complicates any neat equation of secularization with modernization. *Struggles for Recognition* delves into the particularities of Latin America modernities,



¹ BROOKS, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995 [1976].

² OSPINA LEÓN, Juan Sebastián. *Struggles for Recognition: Melodrama and Visibility in Latin American Silent Film*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021, p. 21.

arguing they should be considered constitutive of global modernity's colonial dimensions, rather than as deviations from a North Atlantic paradigm of the modern.

The book builds on one of Brooks' key insights: the pivotal role of visibility in the functioning of melodrama, which works to reveal individuals' moral essence via a public "recognition of virtue",³ as well as hidden forces that hint at vestiges of transcendent meaning beneath the surface of everyday life (the "moral occult"⁴). Rather than focusing on melodrama's links to the quasi-spiritual, Ospina León interrogates its capacity to "conceal or reveal social inequities"⁵ in Latin American societies undergoing rapid change in the early twentieth century. Melodrama's tendency to bring to light abuses and inequalities in a spectacular manner can distract us from the issues it leaves unexplored, while its narrative reconciliation of unresolved social tensions frequently undercuts its critiques. Incorporating and nuancing Jesús Martín Barbero's claim that melodrama offers the working classes a space for self-recognition within mass culture,⁶ Ospina León highlights how Latin American silent cinema lent visibility to emerging social actors.

Based on extensive archival research, *Struggles for Recognition* is regional in its scope while deftly moving between multiple spatial scales. The book opens with a panoramic look at the reception and production of film melodrama in Latin America in the 1910s and closes by examining the transnational reverberations of two feature-length melodramas of the late twenties, incorporating case studies from the Southern Cone (Argentina), the Andean region (Colombia), and North America (Mexico). Latin American modernities, Ospina León argues, must be understood not only in relation to nationalistic notions of progress or cross-border flows of cultural goods, but also on the level of urban geography.

³ BROOKS, *op. cit.*, p. 45

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵ OSPINA LEON, *op. cit.* p. 21.

⁶ BARBERO, Jesús Martín. *De los medios a las mediaciones: Comunicación, cultura y hegemonía*. México D.F.: Ediciones G. Gili, 1987, p. 243.

The study's first chapter explores the circulation and reception of imported cinema in Latin American capitals during major shifts in the global film trade during World War I, which hobbled European film industries and created an opening for US production companies to dominate Latin American markets. As these shifts altered the kinds of melodramatic film texts available locally, trade journals rhetorically pitted Italian "diva" films marked by sentimentality and expressive acting against US productions that embodied an alternate definition of melodrama more akin to the *folletín* (serial novel) in that they were marked by rapid-fire plot twists and an emphasis on bodily danger. The popularity of foreign melodrama helped fuel the filmmaking ambitions of recent immigrants and local elites, giving rise to adaptations of historical happenings (such as the 1917 film *Tepeyac*, a dramatization of the Virgin of Guadalupe's first appearance); sensational current events (as in Francesco and Vincenzo Di Domenico's 1915 film *El drama del 15 de octubre*; and "foundational fictions"⁷—to use Doris Sommer's influential formulation—including José Mármol's *Amalia* (adapted to the screen in 1914) and Jorge Isaac's *María*, brought to the screen in Mexico in 1918 and Colombia in 1922.

Yet as Ospina León goes on to argue in the following chapter on Argentina, focusing on nationalistic narratives gives an incomplete picture of how silent film melodrama in Latin America grappled with experiences of modernity. Rather than examining works like *Amalia* or the oft-analyzed *Nobleza gaucha* (Eduardo Martínez de la Pera and Ernesto Gunche, 1915), Ospina León instead highlights a distinctly urban genre dubbed *cinedrama porteño* by the local press in the period. For Ospina León, *cinedrama porteño* channeled anxieties surrounding threats to public morality in the modern city, most notably women's expanding presence in the workforce (under conditions that left them vulnerable to sexual exploitation) and the proliferation of new spaces of leisure like the *cabaret* and *garçonnière* (bachelor apartment). In *Hasta después de muerta* (Eduardo Martínez de la Pera and Ernesto Gunche, 1916) and *La chica de la calle de Florida* (José Agustín Ferreyra, 1922), virtuous shopgirls suffer or narrowly escape

⁷ SOMMER, Doris. *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

sexual harassment and assault, while in *La borrachera del tango* (Edmo Cominetti, 1928), the scion of a wealthy family ends up disinherited after he succumbs to the temptations of tango and commodified sexuality. These cautionary tales denounced the social forces that “corrupted” women while at the same time warning against class mixing in urban space.

The book’s third chapter takes a comparative look at how cinema mediated the city, examining melodramas shot in Bogotá and Medellín that embodied prevailing ideals of socially conservative economic progress. At a moment when the Conservative party dominated Colombian politics, domestically produced films staged dramas of virtue’s recognition, extending the regime of *la moral* (morality), in which religiously inflected notions of good conduct were enforced through public surveillance of strangers, as the satirical press of the period amply documented. Whereas *Alma provinciana* (Félix Joaquín Rodríguez, 1926) also highlighted sexual harassment in the workplace and the problems posed by cross-class romance, two films by Arturo Acevedo, *La tragedia del silencio* (1924) and *Bajo el cielo antioqueño* (1925) depicted the agony caused by misapprehensions (a false diagnosis of leprosy in the former case, a false accusation of robbery and murder in the latter). Both films incorporated religious imagery (crucifixes, a wounded Christ) to hammer home the spiritual overtones of the characters’ suffering and redemption.

Chapter 4 shifts focus from the ambiguity of melodramatic narratives, which often denounce and reinforce the social order simultaneously, to the impossibility of definitively grasping film texts that have survived only in a fragmentary fashion. This indeterminacy is exemplified by the history of Gabriel García Moreno’s adventure films *El tren fantasma* (1927) and *El puño de hierro* (1927). Only disorganized lengths of footage from the films were salvaged, leading to multiple attempts at reconstruction over the years. The existence of multiple versions of the films complicates any efforts to characterize their look at the dark side of modernity—criminals operating within the railway’s modern infrastructure in *El tren fantasma*, narcotics as a threat to the health of the social body in *El puño de hierro*—as critical or conservative.

Whereas each of the previous chapters establishes a local horizon of reception for silent film melodrama, *Struggles for Recognition's* final chapters instead charts a cross-cultural history of its production and circulation while exploring the affective dimensions of nationalistic sentiment. *Una nueva y gloriosa nación* (*The charge of the gauchos*, Albert H. Kelly, 1928), a epic of Argentine independence struggles that, ironically, was produced in Hollywood by Argentine producer Julián de Ajuria, generated both patriotic interest and suspicion in Argentine audiences due to its Anglo cast. For their part, US audiences unfamiliar with melodramatic conventions specific to Argentine cultural production struggled to assign the film a genre, hampering its marketing and consumption. By contrast, US officials had no difficulty classifying the film *Garras de oro: Alborada de justicia* (P. P. Jambrina, 1927) as a threat to the national reputation abroad. Offering a fictionalized account of the legal dispute between newspaper magnate Joseph Pulitzer and former president Theodore Roosevelt, sparked when Pulitzer published evidence of Roosevelt's financial interest in the purchase of the Panama Canal zone (which had been part of Colombia until Panama seceded in 1903 with US support), the film's production history is shrouded in mystery. While its concept is Colombian in origin, *Garras de oro* may have in fact been shot in Italy. Yet its exhibition history was certainly shaped by transnational forces: the US State Department attempted to suppress screenings in Colombia.

Struggles for Recognition makes a powerful argument for including Latin American cultural production in broader debates on melodrama, a sphere from which it has been largely excluded in English-language scholarship. Moving nimbly between national contexts and reflecting on how modernity was experienced not only in relation to national modernization projects, but also through urban life and transnational exchanges, the book offers stimulating insights that will interest scholars and students of gender studies and affect theory as well as silent cinema and Latin American cultural history.

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Date of reception: 10th November 2021

Date of acceptance: 1st December 2021

ARK CAICYT:

<http://id.caicyt.gov.ar/ark:/s24690767/9hg829gzd>

How to cite this article:

NAVITSKI, Rielle. "On Ospina León, Juan Sebastián. *Struggles for Recognition: Melodrama and Visibility in Latin American Silent Film*", *Vivomatografías. Revista de estudios sobre precine y cine silente en Latinoamérica*, n. 7, diciembre de 2021, pp. 174-179. Disponible en: <<http://www.vivomatografias.com/index.php/vmfs/article/view/391>> [Acceso dd.mm.aaaa]

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