Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas, and Latin America

Edited by

Victoria Ruétalo and Dolores Tierney

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Foreword

Eric Schaefer

Call them what you wish: exploitation movies, badfilms, paracinema, trash, psychotronic films, or cult movies. The appellations are as diverse as the films themselves. But they all share certain attributes: low budgets, lurid subject matter, affiliation with the most debased genres, and a subsistence at the margins of industry and culture. Perhaps incongruously, they have come to exert a growing fascination for academics. The ramparts of the Ivory Tower are now beset by flesh-eating zombies, pimps and prostitutes, satanic cults, biker gangs, primitive cannibals, and assorted other goons and thugs who populate exploitation movies. Fifteen years ago it would have been difficult to imagine that a wealth of scholarly literature would develop around the most impoverished segment of cinema. Yet we see histories of the exploitation film in the United States emerging, theories of reception being promoted, and astute critical analyses appearing in the pages of journals and anthologies. A literature on exploitation cinema in Europe and Asia is starting to come forward. And this volume represents the first serious step in cultivating the history and criticism of exploitation movies from, or set in, Latin America. The barrios, jungles, and cities of Central and South America represent the newest frontier of exploitation studies: latsploitation.

The first film I ever saw in a theater could be classified as "latsploitation." I was five or six years old when my parents, knowing of my fascination with monsters and through some misguided sense of parental duty, took me to see K. Gordon Murray's 1965 release of *Little Red Riding Hood and the Monsters/Caperucita y Pulgarcito contra los monstrous* (Roberto Rodríguez, 1962). Murray, known as the King of the Kiddie Matinee, had purchased a number of cheap Mexican fairy-tale films, dubbed them into English, and released them to unsuspecting suburban families in the 1960s. Just as most of the exploitation films that played to adults in grindhouses and drive-ins were both marginal and disposable, so too were these films, banished to another fringe of exhibition, the Saturday matinee. Their patrons were bored parents and their rug rat charges, most less interested in what was happening on the screen than they were in scoring a massive Milk Dud–fueled sugar rush at the candy counter. I wasn't keen on the sweets, or the treacly Red and her sidekick, a child-size skunk named Stinky. But for a young horror aficionado, there was plenty to revel in: Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, an evil queen, a papier-mâché pinhead, monkey children in Mittle-European garb, and various generic goonies, all playing in flea-bitten costumes against a stage-bound, nightmare landscape. Chases, beatings, and torture were thrown in for good measure. Seeing an undubbed gray market DVD of the film recently—for the first time in forty-odd years—the accuracy of my memory of the film surprised me. Down to the framing, I had vividly recalled a scene in which Red gets tripped up in a rib cage jutting from the forest floor as she is threatened by a tin-can robot. The scene has haunted me for decades. And that illustrates the power of exploitation. It is not only Art, the kind with a capital *A*, which can affect one in profound or troubling ways. Even the shabbiest dreck can take hold of the imagination in an elemental manner.

It is that primal attraction of exploitation films—their sensuality and shock, the chaos of their narratives, their ragged, fevered construction—that first exerts a pull on scholars. But once that initial magnetism begins to fade (and it often does), we are left with the true riches these movies hold. This consists of the cults, communities, and reading strategies that accrete around the films and the resistance they often pose to the established order of things. It also includes the world that is revealed when we consider their original production and reception within the context of the times and places where they were made and seen or procured: the hungry filmmakers and bargain-basement studios, the rundown urban theaters, neighborhood midnight shows, and the low shelves at the back of mom-and-pop video stores. And when it comes to the study of exploitation movies, we're not just looking at an esoteric corner of the field of film studies, but a lively junction where cultural, industrial and economic studies, sociology, political science, identity studies, and regional and national difference converge.

As the essays in this collection suggest, exploitation is one of those cinematic practices that transcends national borders, cultural differences, and linguistic variety. Sleaze is global, trash transnational, and bad taste has no boundaries. The Latin American exploitation scene has certainly been influenced to some degree by Anglo-American and European culture and their film industries, which can be seen as part of a revealing legacy of colonialism, economic exploitation, and religious inculcation. But "latsploitation" has drawn on homegrown mythologies and popular culture as well, which were developed within discrete systems of production, and were subject to unique political pressures and censorship restrictions. The films and filmmakers discussed here, whether from Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, or other countries, will, on one level, be familiar to those who have even a passing acquaintance with exploitation. But they are also distinctive—as anyone who has ever watched *The Brainiac/El barón del terror* (Chano

Urueta, 1962), *lucha libre* films, or a movie made by José Mojica Marins or René Cardona, Jr., can attest.

With *Latspoitation, Exploitation Cinemas, and Latin America*, editors Victoria Ruétalo and Dolores Tierney and their authors help illuminate movies that were often made outside of the mainstream industry in their nations of origin. At times, as is the case with some coproductions, they even lacked a firm footing in any single country, operating as "international" productions adrift in a "global" marketplace. Virtually all of the films in this book have continued to exist outside the critical and academic establishment, especially in those places where the overtly political has been privileged over the covertly political or the politically incorrect. *Latspoitation* brings them into the conversation on exploitation movies at the international level. But more importantly, it draws these movies into our broader understanding of global film history and criticism. Welcome.

Acknowledgments

Victoria Ruétalo and Dolores Tierney

Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas, and Latin America is the product of several years of research and the editors' keen feeling that there was a gap in existing scholarship on Latin American cinema. We hope that the pages of this anthology will go some way to filling this lacuna and also to providing fresh avenues of research for young scholars.

There are a number of people whose work has inspired us and whose help has been vital in bringing this project to fruition. We would like to thank Ana López (whose extensive film library in all its varied contents first provided us with hard-to-come-by exploitation movies) for her mentorship and scholarly training. We would also like to thank Eric Schaefer and Andy Medhurst for their encouragement of this project. We wish particularly to thank the contributors to this anthology for their hard work, scholarly discipline, and enthusiasm for the project. We are also indebted to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which provided funds for a workshop that brought all our contributors together in Edmonton, Alberta, in June 2007, and the graduate students Argelia Gónzalez, Lilian Perezcruz Pintos, Delma Gil Wilson, and Marco Katz, whose video presentations entertained us during the symposium.

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We are very grateful to the University of Alberta and the University of Sussex for providing research support and institutional assistance on this project and also to our research assistants Colette Duke and Lilian Shandro. We are also grateful to our editor Erica Wetter for all of her assistance. Lastly we would like to thank our families (Tony and Rachel, Eddie and Nancy) for their patience, support, and for allowing us time away from them while we completed the project.

Introduction

Reinventing the Frame: Exploitation and Latin America

Victoria Ruétalo and Dolores Tierney

Latin American exploitation cinema has a rich heritage spanning many decades and many genres. It reaches back to the gangster films Juan Orol made in Mexico in the 1950s (*El sindicato del crimen*/Crime Syndicate, 1954),[1] to the Argentinean 'sexploits' of Armando Bó and Isabel Sarli from the 1950s through the 1970s (*El trueno entre las hojas*/*Thunder Among the Leaves*, 1957, *Fiebre*/*Fever* 1970), and to the Mexican *narcofronteriza* videos of the 1980s and 1990s. And yet this is a cinema that has been starved until recently of critical attention with most major continental and national histories, at worst ignoring and at best offering a few derisory comments on various exploitation cinemas. Initial work in this nascent research area by the editors (2004) and others (Syder and Tierney, 2005; Alemán, 2004) has rehearsed the reasons for such a lack of critical attention suggesting that, for a critical elite (those who historically define the parameters of national culture) anxious to emphasize the prestige of their own national cinema, these often badly made, 'low'-culture genre films (fantasy, horror, wrestling, sexploitation, gore) provide little cultural capital. This work has also suggested that, for the same arbiters of national culture, the hybridity of these films (i.e., genre borrowings from Hollywood and recut, redubbed English-language versions) can seem problematic with respect to postcolonialist discourses (which seek to emphasize the function and viability of a nationalist cinema in the face of the aesthetic, economic, and ideological hegemony of the Hollywood industry) and subsequently threaten national artistic autonomy (Syder and Tierney, 2005: 38–39). And finally, this work has argued that critics eschew exploitation cinema because—with their exaggerated plots and liberal doses of mysticism, fantasy, sex, and gore—these cinemas threaten to frame Latin American cinema through colonialist stereotypes of the weird, the wonderful, and the 'savage.' Hence, most accounts of Latin American cinema, which seek to dignify its production, either omit exploitation cinema altogether or denigrate it as the product of periods of artistic and industrial decline.[2] Stephanie Dennison and Lisa Shaw's recent *Popular Cinema in Brazil* is exceptional as a survey of a Latin American national cinema in that it does devote at least a few pages both to horror auteur José Mojica Marins and to the *pornochancha* films that proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s (2004: 140–43, 149–78).

Latsploitation, *Exploitation Cinemas, and Latin America* takes its cue from the groundbreaking work of U.S. and UK scholars (Schaefer, 1999; Hawkins, 2000a; Sconce, 1995, 2007; Jancovich et al., 2003) writing on the similarly once marginal but now increasingly critically accepted U.S. and European exploitation, trash, cult, and paracinemas; exploring the histories, texts, and contexts of different exploitation films made both *by* Latin Americans and by foreign film producers *in* Latin America. The anthology argues that this much neglected area makes an important aesthetic and social contribution to the large body of Latin American cinema, and that the critical focus on it also contributes to the field of Latin American film studies itself. By making such an argument, *Latsploitation* wishes to situate itself at the center of existing currents on Latin American film scholarship as well as suggesting new areas of study in the field. One of the central vectors of contemporary Latin American film scholarship, for instance, is a shift in focus *away* from 1960s New Latin American paradigms of cultural dependency (which preached resistance against the imitation or reproduction of Western cultural norms) *towards* a consideration of Latin America's increasingly globalized and transnational mediascapes (Alvaray: 2008). That many exploitation cinemas embodied globalization or what Arjun Appadurai calls "cultural flows" (1996: 27–44) *avant la lettre* (for instance, the Mexican *lucha libre* [wrestling] films of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, which not only reworked Hollywood horror and superhero films but were also subsequently imported [back] into the United States by minimogul K. Gordon Murray) makes the argument that these cinemas can reconfigure the way we think about contemporary practices in Latin American Cinema.

To begin with, however, this introduction wants to outline a few of the difficulties that a project such as this one presents. As such a diverse cinema, or group of cinemas, ranging vastly across eras, genres, styles, levels of technical competency, formats (from 35 mm to straight to video *narco-fronteriza* films or pirated Ecuadorian DVDs), viewing circuits (U.S. Hispanic market, New York's 1970s 'midnight movie' phenomena, the Latin American continental circuits, domestic markets and home video consumption) and production categories (amateur video to fully industrial films), we may wonder how it/they can be brought together without homogenizing what are essentially different cinemas and without simplifying their complex cultural politics. The answer, we feel, is to propose the category of *latsploitation* as an umbrella term that embraces a range of different production, generic, and textual strategies under some overarching shared characteristics and considerations.

Firstly, the term latsploitation is intended to underline the *difference* of Latin American exploitation cinema to the already quite elastic concept of exploitation cinema as it is understood (principally) in U.S. terms and to suggest that this difference has to do with the very different industrial organization and history of Latin American cinemas. By separating out the category of latsploitation from the more generic exploitation, we emphasize that the history of Latin American exploitation cinemas is marked, as is the continent, by uneven economic development, neoimperialist penetration (including dominance of Hollywood products in most domestic markets), and the struggle to come to terms with modernity and that this has had particular implications for the establishment and continued viability (or in many cases the impossibility of the establishment and lack of viability) of national filmmaking endeavors across the continent. Despite such a different context, there is still much in the scholarship on (principally) U.S. exploitation of Schaefer (1999), Sconce (1995, 2007), Hawkins (2000a), and others to aid our understanding of exploitation cinema in Latin America (a fact to which the pages of this anthology attest). However, at the same time Latin American exploitation cinema or latsploitation cannot be simply classified according to the same textual attributes (low budget, amateurism, etc.) as U.S. exploitation and its related fields (trash, cult, paracinema). We have to rethink the category and defining features of exploitation—in its different manifestations, because, as Schaefer argues, the term has changed over time from a historically circumscribed and unique genre to a range of youth-oriented and B-movie subgenres—(1999: 4) for Latin America. For example, a major defining feature of exploitation in the United States is a failure to meet basic levels of technical competency, for instance, the films of Edward D. Wood Jr. (*Glen or Glenda*, 1953; *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, 1959). However, in Latin America, such a basic feature would not in and of itself define exploitation. Although Latin America has produced and is capable of producing technically accomplished films (see, for instance, classical Mexican director Emilio Fernández's 1940s masterpieces *Flor silvestre/Wild Flower, María Candelaria*, and *Río Escondido/Hidden River*, or the influential works of Argentine director Leopoldo Torre Nilsson's *La mano en la trampa/The Hand in the Trap* [1961] or *La casa del ángel/The House of the Angel* [1957]), levels of technical competency within its various national filmmaking endeavors, and its three major national industries (Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico) have varied over time as a result of a lack of established infrastructure, periodic glitches in funding (due to economic crises or changing cultural imperatives of different national governments), and a lack of institutional support. Therefore, although an industrial melodrama like *Cuando los hijos se van/When the Children Leave* (Julián Soler, 1969)—made during a period of aesthetic and institutional crisis in the Mexican industry—could be described as demonstrating poor production values and a lack of basic filmmaking craftsmanship (Ramírez Berg, 1992: 31) it is by no means an exploitation film or in any way similar to the contemporaneous (and also technically poor) exploitation film *Santo el enmascarado de plata vs. la invasión de los marcianos/Santo vs. the Martians* (Alfredo B. Crevanna, 1967). Another major defining feature of exploitation, according to Schaefer and others, is its 'low' budget. But in

Latin America, where filmmaking operates on a vastly different economics of scale, defining just what constitutes a low budget is much more complex. (Indeed, the relatively low cost of filmmaking on this developing continent is part of what attracted outside filmmakers [Roger Corman, Michael and Roberta Findlay, Joe D'Amato, Ruggero Deodato, and others] to work here [see Andrew Syder's, Glenn Ward's, and Jeffrey Middents's chapters]). If low budget was taken as a marker of exploitation status, then many mainstream industrial productions and indeed many 'new cinema' films of the 1960s and 1970s would be classified as exploitation.

U.S. exploitation also occupies an aesthetic, generic, thematic, and exhibition 'alternative' to the firmly established mainstream industry (Hollywood) (Schaefer, 1999: 2).[3] Whilst Latin American exploitation cinemas are critically segregated from both the popular and canonical Latin American cinemas in continental and national film histories and do represent in many ways an 'alternative' to official ideologies (see Stephanie Dennison's chapter on the *pornochanchada*), there are three main reasons why it is problematic to talk about them as always representing a similarly alternative space 'to a mainstream industry.' More frequently than not, as in the case of Ecuador in the 1960s (Alemán, 2004), no mainstream national industry (nor indeed even a viable art cinema) existed in these countries. Therefore, the exploitation films made in Ecuador (*S.O.S. conspiración bikini*/The Bikini Conspiracy, René Cardona Jr., 1966) and coproduced with Mexico represented the country's only significant filmmaking output of the period. Equally, many exploitation movies were often made within certain national industries themselves (e.g., the Mexican wrestling movies of the 1960s and 1970s) or by jobbing industrial directors (e.g., Argentinean Emilio Vieyra, who mostly worked for the domestic mainstream industry but made some low-budget horror movies for the Hispanic market in the United States; see Gerard Dapena's chapter) or put on general release and distributed by the state-run production and distribution agency (see Dennison's chapter on the *pornochanchada*). What is also different in a Latin American context is the absence of a production category called exploitation (which is why, as Sergio de la Mora points out, the term has never been used by Mexican critics) and how this can be attributed again to industrial differences. Whereas in the United States, exploitation became a separate category in the 1920s largely as a result of the self-regulatory codes and bodies implemented in Hollywood (i.e., the "Do's and Don'ts" of the 1920s and the later Production Code Administration [1934–1968], which effectively excluded exploitation from the mainstream industry [Schaefer, 1999:5]), the requisite industrial infrastructure (for self-regulation) formed much later in those Latin American countries which did develop industries, and as a result subsequent self-regulation on the prescriptive level of the PCA never really existed. Although censorship did exist (but mostly, in the case of Mexico at least, of subject matter that could damage or offend governments and their representative individuals), the lack of a set of defined rules of what subject matters were and were not allowable meant relative freedom (in relation to Hollywood) to depict whatever. Mexican industry genre films of the 1940s/1950s were therefore free to show or allude directly to such PCA-banned subject matter as mixed-race marriages (*Angelitos negros*/ Little Black Angels, Joselito Rodríguez, 1948), nudity (*María Candelaria*), pre- or extramarital sex (*Trotacalles*/*Street Walker,* Matilde Landeta, 1951), prostitution (*Aventurera*/*Adventuress,* Alberto Gout, 1949), and infanticide (*Víctimas del pecado*/*Victims of Sin*, Emilio Fernández, 1950). Although having said that, in keeping with a conservative agenda, many of these films ended with the punishment of the perpetrators of such 'moral' violations (*Aventurera* is a notable exception). It is therefore difficult to talk about latsploitation as a production category or clear-cut alternative separated off from the main industry through censorship.

Secondly, although we acknowledge that the term latsploitation (similar to the U.S. exploitation terms *sexploitation* and *blaxploitation*) may suggest an implied degradation of Latin America (and indeed this anthology recognizes that many of these films do exploit Latin American locales and continental and national stereotypes; see Ruétalo's chapter on Isabel Sarli) and as such could be interpreted as the continent's internalization of the image of itself held by its colonial oppressors (Freire, 1971), at the same time, by coining the term *latsploitation* we seek to recuperate elements within some of these films which emphasize what could be considered positive assertions of national or local self-image. For instance, Gabriela Alemán's chapter suggests that the ultra-low-budget hitmen films and the *Kichwa* melodramas—that only circulate on pirated DVDs and are consumed in mostly domestic contexts—represent a vital manifestation of Ecuadorian attitudes, desires, and pleasures in the face of a national cinematic culture dominated by multiplexes and Hollywood releases, that is inaccessible to the working class. Equally, Adán Avalos argues that the *fronteriza* (border) films reflect back to migrant workers otherwise inaccessible images of their experiences and economic struggles along the U.S./Mexico border. Similarly, we also want to emphasize (along with another main vector of Latin American film scholarship) how Latin American exploitation cinemas (like the new cinemas of the 1960s and 1970s and some U.S. exploitation cinema) *may* represent a form of contestation and resistance not just to dominant (i.e., Hollywood-derived classicism's) stylistic aesthetic and narrative norms, for example, Alejandro Jodorowsky's 'cinema of cruelty' approach in *El topo* (1969) (see Josexto Cerdán and Miguel Fernández Labayen's chapter) but also to the bourgeois art cinema models that many of the New Latin American Cinemas (despite their rhetoric) ultimately aspired to (see Tierney's chapter on José Mojica Marins).

However, we do not wish to argue that we *must* value these films because they (or exploitation) are *all* automatically or uniformly transgressive. We maintain that, although transgression has been a key unifying trope and mobilizing discourse in the study of exploitation and its related fields—

particularly the 'cult film' (Telotte, 1991: 6)—it is problematic to insist on the necessary transgressiveness of exploitation cinema as Xavier Mendik and Graeme Harper (2000: 11) do because it can result in the oversimplification or in some cases the simple disregard for the actual production context and politics of these films (see Andrew Willis's chapter on León Klimovsky's 'Francoist' cinema). Indeed, we take Barry K. Grant's view that exploitation or cult films can sometimes be simultaneously transgressive and "recuperative," that is, "they reclaim the [dominant cultural values] they seem to violate" (2000:19).

We suggest, therefore, that latsploitation is a more fluid category than the generic term *exploitation*, especially when posited against canonical Latin American films or even its industrial mainstream cinema (even though it can exist inside the industry), that encapsulates both (relatively) big budgeted projects (i.e., Roger Corman's Peruvian films) and small, local artisan-like projects (the hitmen from Manabí series). We also suggest that latsploitation is fluid in relation to its geospatial boundaries 'diluting' national borders in the days before globalization was a recognized process (Alvaray, 2008: 57). Latsploitation can refer to the continental and sometimes hemispheric sweep of these films (playing both U.S. and Latin American markets) or to a transnational model of production (coproductions between Mexico and Ecuador, the United States and Peru) or even to transatlantic flows between Latin America and Spain (i.e., the Spanish films of Argentinean Klimovsky).

Finally, because we are championing Latin American exploitation cinemas as marginal, it is important to remember that, unlike U.S. exploitation, the dominant against which we sometimes define these cinemas but which is also a marginal cinema in world cinema terms, Latin American exploitation cinema is *doubly* marginalized, firstly as the product of the developing, or 'Third World' (or 'emerging market' as it is now euphemistically referred to), and secondly as disreputable material. Hence, when it comes to latsploitation we are dealing not just with a peripheral cinema but a cinema that is at the *periphery* of the periphery.

Through an array of approaches the essays in *Latsploitation* raise a range of historical, industrial, political, and aesthetic questions which suggest new avenues of research in Latin American film studies. The greater amount of essays on Mexico (two of which are in fact situated on the Mexico-U.S. border) rather than any other national cinema is a deliberate reflection of regional film history. The Mexican industry has for a number of reasons dominated exploitation production in Latin America ever since the decline of its classical cinema in the late 1950s. At the same time, *Latsploitation* illustrates a clearly marked shift in the production of exploitation in the 1960s to other parts of Latin America. Essays not focused on Mexico cover the most northern (the zombie infested Carribean) and southern (the snuff-producing Southern Cone) parts of the region. *Latsploitation* begins and ends with two framing chapters that frame the book with the chronological past(s) and future(s) of Latin American exploitation cinemas. While the past in this volume commences in 1930s Mexico, before the consolidation of the national film industry, the future is situated paradoxically and quite consciously in twenty-first-century Ecuador, at the “margin of the margins.” The rest of the chapters in the volume are divided thematically into four sections (“Latsploitation beyond Borders,” “Latsploitation Auteurs,” “Politicizing Latsploitation,” and “Sex, Sex, and More Sex”) to explore key and common critical points in the study of ‘lowbrow’ genres—although many of the essays are flexible enough to correspond with more than one of these categories.

Ana López’s analysis of the early work of Juan Orol, José Bohr, and Ramón Peón provides a fitting entry to this anthology pondering the ‘proto-exploitation’ practices of these three directors in early 1930s Mexico. López argues that cinema in Latin America would develop “at a different pace and under different kinds of contextual pressures” than its counterpart in the United States and for this reason exploitation cinemas could not even surface until much later, namely, the 1940s and 1950s, when Mexican cinema consolidated its hegemony over the region. Within this context, exploitation practices would emerge both in Mexico and throughout the region as an alternative to the classical style and mode of production of the Mexican Golden Age. By turning to the period immediately following the introduction of sound, López finds in these three filmmakers the experimentation with narrative, themes, style, and genre that would lay the groundwork for both the Mexican national industry to come and future exploitation cinemas throughout the region.

The first section, “Latsploitation beyond Borders,” explores the transnational relationships inherent in exploitation cinemas due to their global and commercial appeal. On the one hand, cross-border associations aid in better defining and understanding the nation, its politics, and its cinemas; on the other hand, they provide a mirror from which the nation can see reflected its own desires and fears of foreign Others. As a site for both foreign and local exploitation production, “perverse” Latin America encourages audiences abroad to provide new ways of rethinking its cinema within the history of global exchange.

In “‘Perversa América Latina’: The Reception of Latin American Exploitation Cinema in Spanish Subcultures,” Antonio Lázaro-Reboll examines the circulation and cultural meanings of Latin American exploitation cinemas in contemporary Spanish fan sites of reception, namely, the Semana de cine fantástico y de terror de San Sebastián (Horror and Fantasy Film Festival) and the fanzine *2000 maniacos*. The chapter argues that fans and critics of ‘paracinema’ share similar reading strategies and tread analogous critical positions, all of which must be considered in the reconfiguration of exploitation studies and particularly as these begin to enter new histories of Spanish and Latin American film studies.

Jeffrey Middents considers two productions (*Hour of the Assassin/Misión en los Andes* and *Crime Zone/Calles peligrosas*) directed by Peruvian Luis Llosa made in conjunction with Roger Corman's Concorde Pictures (like many of Corman's Latin American productions) primarily for the U.S. video market (though these two were subsequently theatrically released in Peru). Challenging national and regional critics, who have argued that there is little to outwardly connect these Llosa/Corman films to Peru, Middents recuperates *Misión en los Andes* as part of Peruvian national cinema, arguing that its specific markers of national identity (easily readable for Peruvian audiences) expand and enrich a narrow definition of Peruvian 'national cinema.'

In "'I Wonder Who the Real Cannibals Are': Latin America and Colonialism in European Exploitation Cinema," Andrew Syder reviews the Italian cannibal and zombie films made between 1977 and 1985 rationalizing the different representations of Latin America within the contemporary imperatives of the Italian film industry. The chapter explores the reason for shifts in the representation of Latin America in Italian cinema from the urban, chic, carnival continent of the 1960s to the green inferno of cannibals of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Syder suggests that what takes place in films like *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) and *Zombi 2* (Lucio Fulci, 1979) is the displaced return (and denial) of Italy's own repressed (and horrific) colonial past in Africa.

The next section, "Latsploitation Auteurs," focuses on case studies of transnational directors working both inside and outside Latin America to provide concrete and contextualized examples of the conception and reception of the auteur's inventive play with generic conventions, taboo-breaking themes, unconventional approach to style, and vexed relationship to standard notions of authorship. While challenging elitist cultural standards implicit in the idea of the auteur, the essays in this section also question the obvious exclusion of these figures from national cinematic histories, arguing that they too, along with others from the same generation of filmmakers, engage directly with contemporary social and political issues, but acknowledging that they do not always provide a 'transgressive' politics in their work.

Gerard Dapena's chapter demonstrates how, in the late 1960s, Argentine director Emilio Vieyra collaborated with producer Orestes Trucco to perfect a filmmaking model ripe for the international market, particularly U.S. audiences at drive-ins and grindhouses. Within a problematic construction of the auteur, Dapena suggests that Vieyra offers a nonpolitical position on the emerging youth culture, what would distance him greatly from the political 1960s national cinemas which regarded youth culture as yet another neocolonial invasion. Dapena reminds us, however, that this obvious inclusion of the emerging youth culture further detached Vieyra from the political repressive milieu in Argentina which rejected the rebellious nature of this subculture.

Josetxo Cerdán and Miguel Fernández Labayen read the work of director Alejandro Jodorowsky as one that straddles several categories ranging from exploitation and underground cinema, at the 'low' end of the cultural hierarchy, to avant-garde and auteur cinema, at the 'high' end. The authors place Jodorowsky's work within both a Mexican and a worldwide context to see how he exploits references of local and global culture and argue that Jodorowsky's ability to adapt to new models of film consumption from the 'midnight movie' circuit to home video rental has allowed him to more easily infiltrate different markets and has thus encouraged reception at such diverse levels, thereby establishing his cult status worldwide.

"José Mojica Marins and the Cultural Politics of Marginality in 'Third World' Film Criticism" explores the place of Brazilian exploitation horror director José Mojica Marins in Brazilian film history. Dolores Tierney challenges assumptions about the opposition made between avant-garde film and trash cinema by suggesting that, like Brazil's avant-garde *cinema novo* movement, Mojica's films also reveal a Brazilian reality of underdevelopment, poverty, hunger, and racial tension and do so using many of the same techniques and aesthetic strategies (shocking bourgeois sensibility, bricolage-like reusing of the cultural detritus of the 'First World'). By questioning the politics behind Latin American film criticism, Tierney complicates the construction of film canons showing the political reasons behind the erasure of certain directors and not others.

Andrew Willis considers the career of Argentine émigré director León Klimovsky in Spain. By placing Klimovsky within the political and social contexts of both Argentina and Spain at the time of his involvement in these industries, Willis questions the assumption that all exploitation cinemas are necessarily 'progressive.' In fact, his nuanced analysis of Klimovsky's films made in Spain proves otherwise. Klimovsky, Willis suggests, displays a consistent reactionary worldview across his exploitation films. Willis makes a much needed and poignant argument for a contextualized look at exploitation cinema given what he suggests is the slippery nature of these genres.

While politics is not exclusive to the chapters found in "Politicizing Latsploitation," surfacing in almost every chapter of the book, this section chiefly takes exploitation as a venue for the exploration of social, political, and 'real' issues. Snuff, reality-based, and border/"naco" films are sites for both exposing social and political issues (colonialism, politics of place, censorship, class, gender, and immigration) and sites for refracting such 'reality.'

Glenn Ward's chapter inspects Roberta and Michael Findlay's 1976 film *Snuff*, to think about contending ideas of 'South America' in the discourses within and surrounding the film. While there have been many studies centered on this film, few have actually placed *Snuff* within the social and political contexts of the countries in which it was filmed/set (Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile). Likewise, Ward is interested in how the film develops what he calls "competing notions" of both place and space to produce a problematic representation of the Other, in this case the Southern Cone, one that is not easily contained within generic stereotypes of the region. He argues that, while one can easily read *Snuff* through a neocolonial gaze, the many gaps that exist within the film for the audience can only suggest a cultural politics of "unintelligibility."

"Based on a True Story: Reality-Based Exploitation Cinema in Mexico" explores Mexico's reality-based exploitation (rbe) movies—films based on actual events or people—which surfaced in the 1970s and 1980s in Mexico. David Wilt's chapter traces the emergence and flourishing of rbe films to the increased popularization of the *nota roja* (crime or 'bloody' news) and the presidency of Luis Echeverría (1970–1976), an open period when social and political topics were more tolerated and less censored. Wilt shows how these "based-on-a-true-story" exploitation films often blur the dividing line between reality and cinema, sometimes reflecting and distorting the "facts." Furthermore, Wilt suggests that through their study one can trace a history of censorship and a reflection of contemporary popular tastes.

Catherine Benamou centers on the public and screen personae of Mexican actress Rosa Gloria Chagoyán and her performance in border films and beyond to interrogate gender and national representations. Benamou asserts that Chagoyán represents a "woman warrior . . . capable of carrying the nation's burden on her shoulders." Through roles played in the trilogy *Lola la Trailera*/Lola the Semi-Truck Driver, other screen performances, and her public appearances, Benamou emphasizes both the aesthetic and sociocultural dimension of her status, as she contextualizes Chagoyán within the debt crisis of the 1970s and 1980s in Mexico, part of a larger transformative process involving sociogeographic displacement, media consumption, and intensified e/migration

Adán Avalos also looks at the historically contested region of the U.S.-Mexico border to explore what he calls "naco" cinema. Produced by the private sector and made quickly, cheaply, and primarily for profit, this "naco" (low-class, rural, and uneducated) cinema is packed with car chases, gun battles, and migrants' aspirational struggles against an oppressive capitalist system. Avalos argues that these films resonate with the experiences and concerns of their primary audiences: working-class migrant families and their attempts to deal with issues of displacement. In tracing the development of naco cinema, Avalos claims that *La banda del carro rojo* (Ruben Galindo, 1978) is a pivotal film that solidified the genre and provides a model for future border cinema in its references to the unique experiences of recent immigrants.

The final section, "Sex, Sex, and More Sex," surveys the various subgenres of Latin American sexploitation. Some of these subgenres are autonomous to Latin America, such as the *pornochanchadas* (sexy comedies) in Brazil and the 'nature' sexploitation found in René Cardona Jr.'s films—with the references to the ocean and its predators—and the Isabel Sarli and Armando Bó productions—with the relationship between star and landscape. While the emphasis is on sexploitation, this section nonetheless includes star and auteur studies.

Victoria Ruétalo scrutinizes director Armando Bó's construction of star Isabel Sarli, his most 'prized' commodity. By rehashing the myths constructed around Sarli's star persona, within and beyond the films, Ruétalo exposes some of the ideological, historical, and aesthetic contradictions found within these myths. Sarli is unable to move beyond the lumpenproletariat and gender roles which initially define her because, as Ruétalo suggests, she reflects the anxieties and needs of a stifling 1960s/1970s Argentina.

Misha MacLaird delves into René Cardona Jr.'s films of the 1960s and 1970s as examples of the exploitation of female sexuality. MacLaird reads Cardona Jr.'s obsession with the ocean, finding a recurring diptych in his films: the seductive female figure and the powerful and menacing image of the shark. Through the framing, positioning, and interaction between female and predator, this diptych exposes the threat of these 'natural' elements to the patriarchal paradigm in what is, MacLaird suggests, a reworking of the vampire and monster tropes associated with the horror genre.

Stephanie Dennison investigates Brazil's highly popular *pornochanchadas* (state-sponsored sexy comedies) that emerged in the context of the late 1960s/early 1970s military dictatorship. Dennison situates the genre of pornochanchadas within the history of international sexploitation. By doing so, the author provides a different perspective from which to approach the genre which distances her reading from the general consensus found in Brazilian film studies. Dennison contends that the pornochanchada was a site for alternative filmmaking strategies expressing topics of interest that did not necessarily coincide with the military government's worldview.

"'Tus pinches leyes yo me las paso por los huevos': Isela Vega and Mexican Dirty Movies" looks at the career of Mexican actress Isela Vega, which has successfully bridged both commercially successful sexploitation and critically acclaimed 'art' films. Acting in the volatile Mexican film industry with its economic ups and downs, Vega has had to be flexible in the roles she plays across genres. Despite this versatility, Sergio de la Mora argues that Vega has consciously constructed her own 'bad-girl' image outside her work, which will influence the roles she plays in films across genres and boundaries of taste.

This volume ends with a look into the future(s) of exploitation cinemas in Latin America, a trajectory that has witnessed shifting modes of production, exhibition, and distribution of exploitation: from film to 'midnight movies' to 'straight to video' to film festivals and fanzines, and finally to pirate copies. In the anthology's final chapter, Gabriela Alemán explores the circumstances and production methods of contemporary Ecuadorian exploitation films, hinting at the future direction of the genre(s). She suggests that with the breakdown of 'traditional' methods of distribution and exhibition (i.e., the closure of the country's 150 cinemas in the 1990s), alternative patterns of distribution, such as piracy, have arisen to fill in the gap. Her chapter focuses in particular on the production of low-budget hit men from Manabí series, the documentary/gore film, and the *Kichwa* melodrama. She argues that the appeal of these video shot, low-budget films lies in the local pleasures they offer to a disenfranchized audience and that as such these films represent an intensely localized subculture which redefines the expression of 'exploitation' cinemas in the twenty-first century. Alemán identifies a need to continually reinvent the frame from which to think and approach new areas in latsploitation.

NOTES

1. Throughout this book titles appear in original language followed by a translation. In the cases when the film is released in English the translation will appear in italics. When there was no such release then the translation appears in Roman script.
2. Jorge Ayala Blanco, an esteemed and institutional critic of Mexican cinema, is characteristically dismissive of most horror films in the Mexican film industry. He credits this rather late flourishing of the horror genre in Mexico to the decadence of the Mexican film industry's mythic "Golden Age" resulting in the increasing hybridization of national genres and climaxing in low-grade horror as an aberrant stopgap in a struggling industry (1993: 157–8).
3. Of course, even the alterity of exploitation in relation to the U.S. mainstream industry is something that shifted over time. Schaefer is very clear in his book (1999) to distinguish the 'classical exploitation' made in the 1920s through the 1950s by small-time producer-distributors (individual exploiteers like Dwain Esper and Samuel Cummins) from the 'teen pics' made by small industrial outfits like AIP from the late 1950s onwards. He also points out how from the mid-1950s onwards it became more and more difficult to make the distinction between exploitation and the mainstream as the studios started to *also* make films about juvenile delinquency, backstreet abortions, and other subject matter previously relegated (because of a strictly enforced Production Code) to the exploitation circuit (1999: 327–29).

1 Before Exploitation

Three Men of the Cinema in Mexico

Ana M. López

"Yo tengo que vivir del público."

Juan Orol

Eric Schaefer (1999) argues that exploitation film emerged as a discernible category in the United States around 1919–20. Chronicling the public controversy over sex hygiene/anti-venereal disease films in this period, he argues that these films crystallized the possibility of an alternative film space at a moment when the mainstream industry had consolidated its industrial base in Hollywood, established a firm mode of production, and developed a stylistic system anchored in narrative and stylistic transparency. In Latin America, however, filmmaking developed at a different pace and under different kinds of contextual pressures. An exploitation cinema akin to that outlined by Schaefer could not even begin to emerge as an alternative filmic practice grounded in spectacle until the late 1940s–1950s, when the Mexican cinema had become established as *the* cinema for the continent (López, 1994). However, what emerged earlier, especially in the effervescent experimental period after the arrival of sound, were multiple alternative cinematic practices that, attempting to find the 'magic' formulas for box-office success and audience satisfaction, laid the groundwork for both the mainstream 'national' cinema and future exploitation practices.

Focusing on Mexico in the period immediately after the coming of sound, this essay looks at the work of three filmmakers who arrived in Mexico and/or to the new medium in 1930–31 and participated eagerly and with almost innocent glee in the rush to define a national cinema and establish an autochthonous mass audience: Juan Orol, José Bohr, and Ramón Peón. Originally from Spain, but in Mexico since young, Orol had been a race-car driver, boxer, actor, bullfighter, policeman, and artistic director for a radio station before taking up filmmaking with *Sagrario*/Sanctuary (1933). Peón had been making films in his native Cuba (including the famous *La virgen de la Caridad*/*Our Lady of Charity*, 1930) and had spent time in Hollywood before resettling in Mexico. He was assistant director for five films before directing his first Mexican feature, *La Llorona*/The Weeping Woman (1934). Bohr had a long international career as a singer/composer and had worked on Spanish-language films in the United States; his first Mexican film was *La sangre manda*/Blood Rules (1934). Eager for box-office success and engaged in the collective exercise of establishing a 'national' industry, all three directors (a few times in collaboration with each other) adopted a freewheeling syncretic style: they adapted and combined generic strands popularized by Hollywood with national themes and folklore and experimented with new formal strategies for storytelling. In the 1930s their work contributed significantly to the general experimentation and ebullience of a film industry attempting to find (and define) its audience.

THE CONTEXT FOR FILMMAKING IN MEXICO

As I have argued elsewhere (López, 2000), the diffusion of the cinema throughout the continent was defined by its status as an import emblematic of modernity and by the technological infrastructure, political stability, industrialization, and economic activities at national and regional levels. By the late 1920s the larger nations of Latin America had developed cinematic vernaculars and fairly solid production infrastructures, albeit with limited resources, and, above all, had captured national and regional audiences despite the constant competition from U.S. and European imports. Latin American silent cinema inscribed the medium in national histories while simultaneously recognizing it as the embodiment of differential dreams of modernity.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, the introduction of sound technology abruptly cut off this trajectory and, especially in Mexico, subtly shifted the terms of the cinema's main representational paradigms. Aggressively marketed, sound films from the United States quickly took over the exhibition and distribution sectors, while national producers scrambled for capital, technology, and know-how. In Mexico, the transition to sound took place at the end of the first decade of postrevolutionary state building, during which the nation engaged in complex negotiations to sustain governance over disparate and needy populations and to secure its place in the post–World War I international order. The end of the decade coincided with the end of Plutarco Elias Calles's official term as president (1928) and the end of the Cristero Rebellion (1926–29). Unwilling to give up power after president-elect Alvaro Obregón was assassinated in 1927, Calles managed to secure his stronghold over national politics as the 'Jefe Máximo' by appointing three interim puppet presidents over the next six years, a period known as the 'Maximato' sexenio (1928–34). This was also the period when Mexican artists and intellectuals, rallied by José Vasconcelos's exaltation of the mestizo as the future "cosmic race," the culmination of human evolution and the embodiment of Mexican cultural identity (Vasconcelos, 1925), were also deeply engaged in the project of building the cultural capital of the newly emerging nation. In the late 1920s and 1930s, cultural nationalism reigned supreme (Vaughan and Lewis, 2006: 14).

It is important to note that the late 1920s to early 1930s also witnessed the blossoming of other mass media that quickly captured the public imagination. Primary among them was radio, marked by the launch of station XEW-AM in Mexico City in September 1930. Owned by Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta (also president of the Mexican Music Company, a record and sheet music distributor affiliated with RCA in the United States), XEW launched as “the voice of Latin America from Mexico.” It was the first Latin American radio station powerful enough to reach a mass audience and featured an extensive publicity machine and varied programming that easily captured audiences.[1] Above all, music was the centerpiece of programming: in the 1930s. Mexican radio (led by XEW) codified, standardized, and institutionalized an ‘official’ repertoire of ‘Mexican’ popular music (mariachis, boleros, rancheras) and created national ‘stars,’ which became very important for the cinema. Second only to music, serial dramas, later known as *radionovelas,* also quickly grew in popularity. Drawing their talent from literature and theater—the very same pool that nourished the cinema[2]—radio dramas became popular in the 1930s and ubiquitous after 1940 (XEW aired as many as five different ones per day). Above all, as in other parts of Latin America, radio dramas were notorious for their melodramatic and emotional excesses. Sentimental melodramas punctuated by extreme pathos and enveloped in music became a narrative lingua franca for the mass media in general. As poet Salvador Novo described it in the 1950s, it was “spiritual tequila in everybody’s throat” (1951: 171).

The arrival of sound to the cinema in this context of national high and popular cultural effervescence energized intellectuals and filmmakers. Even before the screening of the first sonorized film in April 1929 (Frank Capra’s *Submarine*), the impact of sound on the medium and national culture was hotly debated in the press. As Luis Reyes de la Maza chronicles, the cultural intelligentsia presented a united front against the possibility that film would become an English-only medium, resisted Hollywood’s inept efforts to produce Spanish-language films, clamored for a national cinema, and debated what it should embody (1973). By late 1930, Hollywood’s Spanish-language productions had demonstrated their flaws, among them, problems with mixing accents and nationalities and the lack of convincing star power. Critics like Baltasar Fernández Cue argued in the pages of *El Ilustrado* that only Mexico was in a position to take over the Spanish-language market (Reyes de la Maza, 1973: 246).

As if heeding the critics, President Pascual Ortiz Rubio included film in his 1931 *Campaña Nacionalista* (Nationalist Campaign): import duties were increased by almost 1,000 percent in July 1931 and, within three months, the exhibition sector was in crisis, since U.S. distributors refused to pay the additional fees and stopped sending films (De los Reyes, 1987: 118; de Usabel, 1982: 93). This protectionist move was short-lived: Rubio Ortiz rescinded the protectionist tariffs in late October 1931 since, as exhibitors rightly argued, there just weren’t enough Mexican films to show in place of the imports.

By this time, the Mexican exhibition sector was well-established. In 1930 there were 830 movie theaters, 136 already outfitted for sound (De los Reyes, 1987: 118). In Mexico City, between three and six major movie theaters were inaugurated yearly between 1930 and 1935. Whereas total capacity in Mexico City was only 32,888 seats in 1922, by 1937 the total number of seats had grown to almost 125,000 (Alfaro Salazar and Ochoa Vega, 1997: 221–24). This growth paralleled the tremendous urbanization of Mexico City.[3] In the early 1920s the city's growth was concentrated in the old center, but in the 1930s its territory and population grew exponentially alongside the services and consumer options available to citizens. The larger and most elegant theaters remained in the *centro*, but after the implementation of the 1933 planning and rezoning law, the widening and lengthening of the city's main arteries led to the complete or partial demolition of many of the older theaters. Most were rebuilt throughout the 1930s and the exhibition sector developed a distinctly elegant and modern visage. The *colonias,* or planned neighborhoods, whether traditional or modern, also acquired their own theaters, often consonant with their own architectural vernaculars. Working-class *barrios* also had a cinematic infrastructure, though still much more precarious and associated with the *carpa* (tent-theater) tradition (Pilcher, 2001: 23–39). All that was needed to have an industry were Mexican films. . . .

FOREIGNERS, ADVENTURERS. AND ENTREPRENEURS

Mexico had always been a haven for foreign and foreign-trained film entrepreneurs and directors, even in the silent period (Ramírez Berg, 1992; Orellana, 2003). But in the early 1930s it was a mecca. Eisenstein's famous 1930–31 sojourn in Mexico set the stage, although it was *sui generis*: unlike others landing in Mexico in the early 1930s, Eisenstein had no desire to join and/or influence an industry and, as has been well chronicled elsewhere, his pursuits were instead intellectual and artistic (Nesbet, 2003), although his visit left a lasting imprint on the cinema the future Mexican industry engendered (De los Reyes, 1987: 96–116).

Many Mexicans had gone to Hollywood in the 1920s to become familiar with the U.S. industry. Indeed, many had achieved success acting (Ramón Novarro, Lupita Tovar, Dolores Del Rio, Lupe Veléz, Gilbert Roland) while others worked as technicians or as extras or learned the trade as assistants (Miguel Contreras Torres, Raphael J. Sevilla, Miguel Zacarías, Emilio Fernández, Chano Urueta). Many of the European and North Americans that landed in Mexico after 1931 also came via Hollywood, for example, directors John Auer, David Kirkland, and Arcady Boytler (even Eisenstein himself) and cinematographers Alex Phillips and Ross Fisher. The three filmmakers considered here stand out from the rest insofar as they were native Spanish speakers and comfortable inhabitants of Spanish/Latin

American culture. But what is most fascinating about this period is the incredible cross-fertilizations and collaborations that occurred across all job titles. Before the establishment of a tightly regimented 'closed' union system in 1945, there were no limits to what anyone could do and/or contribute to the final product: every film was a collaborative experiment to see what would 'take' and filmic authorship is even more problematic than usual to assert.

OROL-BOHR-PEÓN: FIRST FILMS

Orol, Bohr, and Peón made their first films in Mexico in 1933, a year notable for a significant increase in national production: whereas only six films had been released in 1932, there were twenty-one in 1933. Bohr and Peón were recent arrivals to Mexico City; Orol had been in and out of the city for several years. All had spent time in Hollywood, learning about sound filmmaking and, in the case of Bohr, already an accomplished actor/singer, participating in Hollywood's Spanish-language productions. Witnessing its ebullience, they entered the Mexican film business in search of experience and financial success. Although none directed what were considered to be the 'best' films of this period either by contemporary or later critics,[4] their films opened up new directions for the medium in Mexico and were often very well-received by the public. In subsequent decades, the strands they wove in the 1930s led to the latsploitation cinema analyzed in other essays in this volume. Most importantly, there were deep interconnections among them and between them and others in the nascent film business. Particularly in this period (though the same would be true for the 'classical' post-1943 period as well; see Tierney, 2007), film production was a team effort and teams were fluid and collaborative in their endeavors to overcome production obstacles and achieve popular success.

Peón, with more filmmaking experience under his belt, was the first to direct and his *La Llorona* was the new industry's first attempt to establish a Mexican horror genre. A free adaptation of the popular myth of La Llorona—a woman who is rejected by her husband/lover and kills her children and then herself, either by stabbing or drowning—the film begins in the present as a well-off family celebrates the son's (Juanito) fourth birthday with an elaborate party. After the party, the grandfather warns the father, Ricardo, of a curse on the family that has caused the death of all their firstborn sons on their fourth birthday. The curse is explained via two long flashbacks. In the colonial period, an Indian princess was betrayed by a noble and killed herself and the son he wouldn't legitimize. When she falls to the ground, her spirit rises, spectacularly accompanied by a piercing wail that, literally, stops a sword fight cold. In the present, a masked intruder kills the grandfather and threatens Juanito. Through another flashback we learn that the curse goes back to the Conquest, when Cortez took away

Malinche's son. She went mad and in a fit of despair killed herself with a dagger. As her spirit also rises spectacularly with a long wail, her faithful servant vows to avenge her death for the rest of time. Returning to the present, the masked intruder drags Juanito to an Aztec temple–secret room and is ready to stab him when Ricardo and the police rush in, shoot the masked intruder and eventually discover that she is the boy's caretaker: all the family's servants have been in their employ for generations and have carried out the legendary curse. Her spirit also rises with a long wail and the film ends with the nuclear family united and safe, but without dispelling the legend.

Peón's film is simultaneously heavily indebted to the silent cinema, especially in its pacing, as well as marvelously inventive in its mise-en-scène and editing. *La Llorona* begins by asserting its nationness by announcing that it is "a modern version of the popular Mexican legend." The rest of the credits unfold in front of dimly lit close-ups of Aztec-looking stone carvings, masks, and vessels that continue to assert Mexicanness as well as establish an apt mood for horror. The first scene (a prelude to the story proper) opens with a long shot of a city street at night. A well-dressed man walks towards the right and briefly stops to light a cigarette. Midframe, he gasps suddenly and falls to the ground. Cut to a close-up of his face; his eyes are open and the lit cigarette is still in his mouth, but he is clearly dead. Then the camera pans across his body to his hand as it clenches into a rigor mortis fist. A dissolve on the clenched fist leads to a different space, where a sheet is placed over the fist (see Figure 1.1). As the camera pans left, and tilts up, we discover we are in a hospital or morgue, where a handsome doctor in scrubs proclaims to the medical students surrounding him that the dead man is an example of a victim of a "typical" heart attack. This first scene economically establishes the horror scenario (mystery-death-ghosts), a contemporary setting ostensibly ruled by scientific rationality and proclaims a unique style that Peón will sustain throughout the film: an attention to visual detail and a surprising emphasis on complex transitions that constantly call attention to themselves as artifice. Eschewing the parameters of invisible style editing, Peón's transitions catapult the spectator into a strange/estranging narrative universe and (perhaps unwittingly) greatly enhances the horror effect (which otherwise is fairly tame). As stated previously, very often the transitions between scenes occur on close-ups rather than the standard establishing shots and disorient and unsettle. When they do not, they are marked by spectacular diagonal wipes that call attention to themselves such as, for example, the transition between the hospital scene and Juanito's birthday party (see Figure 1.2).

The birthday party scene also illustrates a unique—and disconcerting—attention to mise-en-scène: the oddly shaped clover leaf design on the floor, echoing the clover leaves on the back of each chair to suggest a very modern setting and somewhat of an obsession with luck. Peón emphasizes these elements with a disturbingly long and measured 360-degree pan around the table focusing on each child at the party. Yet, we later see that the home is