

Reviewed by Paul A. Schroeder Rodríguez

## *Latin American Film Industries*

by **Tamara L. Falicov**

British Film Institute.

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In terms of sheer output, Latin American cinema in the twenty-first century has surpassed the previous record set in the 1940s and 1950s, during the so-called Golden Age of cinema in Mexico and Argentina. In terms of reception, contemporary Latin American cinema is at least on par with the kind of critical acclaim enjoyed by the New Latin American Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. How has this unprecedented convergence of sustained high output and critical acclaim been possible? In this long-awaited volume, Tamara L. Falicov argues that a key factor has been the emergence and growth of various public-private partnerships with enough flexibility to adjust rapidly to ever-changing conditions. The book's central thesis is that in the twenty-first century, state and private initiatives are so intertwined that to separate the two would be a "false dichotomy, as it is often state legislation that promotes and incentivizes the private sector into participating in film production."<sup>1</sup> This has been studied before at the national level, and to a lesser extent at the transnational level, but Falicov's book is the first to provide ample and detailed evidence that state and private partnerships play a major role in not just film production but also exhibition and distribution.

*Latin American Film Industries* is the first book of its kind to be published since 1984, when Jorge Schnitman published *Film Industries in Latin America: Dependency and Development*.<sup>2</sup> Just as Schnitman's book summarized much of what we knew about Latin American film industries during the so-called Golden Age of the 1940s and 1950s, as well as during the New Latin American Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s,

1 Tamara L. Falicov, *Latin American Film Industries* (London: British Film Institute, 2019), 65.

2 Jorge Schnitman, *Film Industries in Latin America: Dependency and Development* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1984).

Falicov's book summarizes much of what we know about Latin American film industries in the twenty-first century. Yet unlike Schnitman, who clearly privileges strong state intervention as the best way to break with what he saw as Latin American cinema's dependency on capitalist models of production and representation, Falicov avoids privileging any one mode of production, distribution, exhibition, or legislation over others. Instead, she describes a wide range of real-world interactions between private and public sectors in a number of national industries over the past two decades, leaving it up to the readers to make their own judgments based on the vast amount of information provided in five areas: state funding; private funding; distribution networks; the role of exhibitors; and the impact of legislation, screen quotas, and piracy on all of the above. She dedicates one chapter to each of these areas, framing them with an introduction plus a first chapter on the history of film studios on one end and with a conclusion that summarizes the book's main arguments on the other.

In chapter 2, "State Film Funding," Falicov notes that "in the case of most Latin American film industries (with the exception of Mexico), the state remains the main purveyor of essential funding and support for filmmakers in their respective countries to produce cinema and circulate it nationally and globally."<sup>3</sup> Much of the chapter is devoted to what she calls "film institutes," state agencies whose role varies widely by country but nevertheless share an overarching goal to develop, protect, and promote national cinema at home and abroad; one example is through the highly successful Program Ibermedia.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Brazil, Falicov traces the country's long experience with said institutes, including the National Institute for Educational Cinema (INCE), the National Film Institute (INC), the Brazilian Film Enterprise (EMRAFILME), and the National Film Agency (ANCINE). In the case of Mexico, she briefly discusses the Department of Radio, Television and Cinema (RTC) and the Mexican Film Institute (IMCINE) as well as a number of tax incentives. Finally, for Argentina, Falicov discusses the National Film Institute (INC, later the National Institute for Cinema and Audiovisual Arts, or INCAA) and the city-supported Buenos Aires International Independent Film Festival (BAFICI). Unlike in the twentieth century, when these institutes focused primarily on increasing production of films without much attention to exhibition and distribution, in the twenty-first century, the vision of these institutes has shifted to one in which production, distribution, and exhibition strategies are considered from the very beginning of a film's project time line and always with an eye on both national and transnational markets.

Chapter 3 addresses the increased role of private capital in co-productions, as state financing keeps dwindling because of ideological shifts or economic decline. Many governments, Falicov notes, address lack of state funds for filmmaking by passing industry-friendly film legislation that promotes state-private partnerships. She briefly discusses the case of Brazil's Globo Filmes but also co-productions made in local languages with transnational media conglomerates; state-private partnerships like those used by the Colombian production company 64-A Films; private television financing of the kind supported by Spain's Telefónica; financing by private equity firms from the United States, Europe, and Latin America; and creative financing such as crowdfunding and even auctions. The chapter includes three case studies

3 Falicov, *Latin American Film Industries*, 34.

4 Falicov, 39.

of films co-produced under different kinds of public-private partnerships, yet the relationship between modes of production and modes of representation is never developed, a missed opportunity here as elsewhere in the book.

The fourth chapter begins by acknowledging and providing evidence for the claim that “the United States’ distribution companies, owned by the major studios, still dominate the entire region. The smaller the national film industry, the larger the portion of the distribution ‘pie’ taken by the US majors.”<sup>5</sup> Concretely, US multinationals buy distribution rights to the more profitable films “with appealing stars, bigger budgets and ‘name’ directors,”<sup>6</sup> whereas national distributors, for the most part, pick up less profitable films like comedies with limited (because national) appeal. The chapter also covers windowing platforms such as home video, DVDs, over the top (OTT) media services, and video on demand (VOD) platforms; the statist model used to distribute films in Cuba; pan-Latin American distribution networks such as the privately funded LARED and the publicly funded Retina Latina; independent film distributors like Colombia’s Cineplex; and companies that distribute Latin American films in the United States (Cinema Tropical, the Global Film Initiative, and PRAGDA’s Spanish Film Club). The chapter includes two case studies that exemplify how co-production agreements and the use of transnational film stars have been successfully leveraged to achieve better international distribution, clearly the Achilles’ heel of Latin American film industries.

Chapter 5 covers a range of exhibition models with very different strategies and market penetration. Falicov begins with the recent phenomenon of multiplex expansion in Latin America, led by Cinépolis but also practiced by national firms like Cinemex and Cine Colombia and by transnational firms like Cinemark. At least two factors account for the exponential growth of multiplexes in the region. The first is the development of low-cost digital technologies that made it possible for exhibitors to turn from analog to digital with relative ease. The second is a strategy that Juan Llamas-Rodríguez, in a recent essay in this journal, theorized as the experience modular cosmopolitanism: “a privileged form of global belonging that is transposed around the world through a set of standard technologies and practices.”<sup>7</sup> Moving on to Espacios INCAA, a state-owned theater chain run by the Argentine Film Institute, Falicov details its beginnings in the mid-1990s, “when the INCAA invested in a few urban movie theaters to create a dedicated space for Argentine cinema.” She concludes that as of 2015, the INCAA runs fifty-five theaters throughout the country, with more than 18,000 seats, ninety film festivals, mobile cinemas, and film competitions.<sup>8</sup> Other exhibition models she enumerates include a similar initiative in Brazil, where the city of Rio de Janeiro built a state-of-the-art theater in a favela and remodeled a 1950s movie theater in a middle-class neighborhood; mobile cinema initiatives in Cuba, Nicaragua, Peru, Venezuela, and Mexico; and film festivals that sometimes include screenings in prisons and public parks. Exhibition, it is clear, also runs the gamut of public-private partnerships.

Chapter 6, “Film Legislation, Screen Quotas and Piracy,” closes the study by addressing these three topics separately. “Historically,” writes Falicov, “film legisla-

5 Falicov, 82.

6 Falicov, 83.

7 Juan Llamas-Rodríguez, “A Global Cinematic Experience: Cinépolis, Film Exhibition, and Luxury Branding,” *JCMS* 58, no. 3 (2019): 49–71.

8 Falicov, *Latin American Film Industries*, 113–114.

tion has had a dual thrust: it has both supported the production of domestic film through state funding mechanisms, and has facilitated transnational links . . . [via] co-production treaties with Spain and other Latin American nations. In the 1990s, accords were [also] signed between Latin American, European and other countries, such as Canada and China.”<sup>9</sup> Falicov then hones in on Colombia as an example of the disconnect between these two approaches, with incentives for national production focused on short documentaries for local consumption, and incentives for co-productions focused on commercial films for the international market. On the topic of screen quotas, Falicov focuses on the effects of Argentina’s most recent screen quota instituted in 2004. This restrictive measure, she concludes, “is becoming ineffective, given that changes in technology are undercutting cultural policy tools.”<sup>10</sup> Finally, on piracy, Falicov addresses the roots of the practice and some of the laws passed to curb it and discusses two case studies that support a more nuanced understanding of piracy. She examines one instance in which piracy worked to the advantage of the film, namely *Tropa de elite* (*Elite Squad*, José Padilha, 2007), and then turns to the operations of bootleggers in Bolivia and Ecuador, who “have cultivated strong circuits of distribution that are useful for national filmmakers . . . [who] do not have large marketing budgets at their disposal and few distributors . . . willing to purchase the rights to their films.”<sup>11</sup>

*Latin American Film Industries* leaves one with the feeling of having seen many trees but only hints of a forest. In this way, it calls attention to the need for further research into the relationships between state and private funding, distribution, exhibition, and legislation and how these relationships impact aesthetics and ultimately ideology in Latin American cinema. Put another way, what are the major patterns that stand out in modes of representation, given that the privileged mode of production is that of the public-private partnership? Are the case studies included examples or exceptions to these patterns? In addition, the book would have benefited greatly from tables and charts to visually summarize the vast amount of numerical data presented or, alternatively, from more careful editing to avoid overwhelming readers with numbers that more often than not encumber the narrative. That said, there is no denying that Falicov has done her research. The result is an ambitious and timely elucidation of contemporary Latin American cinema as a complex and highly varied set of interconnected national industries that alternatively compete and collaborate for space and recognition in the international film market.

**Paul A. Schroeder Rodríguez** is Professor of Spanish at Amherst College. He is author *Latin American Cinema: A Comparative History* (University of California Press, 2016); *Una historia comparada del cine latinoamericano*, Iberoamericana Ver-vuert, 2020), and “A Borderlands History of Latinx Cinema,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Latino Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

9 Falicov, 122.

10 Falicov, 131.

11 Falicov, 136.