

*Despite all adversities: Spanish-American Queer Cinema.* Eds. Andrés Lema-Hincapié and Debra A. Castillo. SUNY Genders in the Global South Series. Albany: State Univ. of New York P., 2015. 307 + ix. ISBN: 978-1-4384-5911-0 (hardcover), 978-1-4384-5912-7 (e-book).

Review by Herbert J. Brant, 2017

There can be little doubt that Spanish-American cinema has made significant contributions to the world's understanding of LGBTIQ issues by means of a growing list of films that give voice and image to the socio-cultural, psychological, and artistic realities of non-heteronormative people in Hispanic America. Groundbreaking films such as Ripstein's *El lugar sin límites* (1977), Bemberg's *Señora de nadie* (1982), and Hermsillo's *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* (1985), as well as more contemporary works like Hernández's *Mil nubes de paz cercan el cielo* (2004), Berneri's *Un año sin amor* (2005), and Puenzo's *XXY* (2007) have deservedly sparked the interest of audiences, scholars, and artists beyond the borders of the countries where they were first distributed. As a result, a book that brings together a collection of critical essays on seventeen different Spanish-American films that treat LGBTIQ topics is not only timely, but also of significant value for scholars and researchers. This is an important volume of essays, highly recommended, but as I will indicate later, not without several weaknesses.

The editors have created a handsome volume of essays by some of the most well-respected experts in the discipline —David William Foster, Paul Julian Smith, Daniel Balderston, Chris Perriam, and Dieter Ingenschay—, as well as by scholars less familiar to some readers. The studies focus on a variety of films dating from the late 1960s to the end of the first decade of the 21st Century, made by directors from Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, and Argentina. The essay chapters are grouped in four broad categories that assist in providing a thematic context for the reader: “Queer Subjectivity, Desire, and Eroticism,” “Gay Authorship —Queer Agency and Spectatorship,” “Bisexuality Experiences and Lesbian Identities,” and “Queer Relations with Families, Government, and Nation.” The volume concludes with several very useful indices of names, concepts and titles.

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Despite some exceptional works of scholarship which anchor most sections with at least one powerful study, the overall quality of the volume is noticeably weakened by its introductory essay. In some volumes with contributions by various authors, the introduction itself can a strong and impactful piece of writing (Lillian Manzor-Coats' introduction to Foster's *Latin American Writers on Gay and Lesbian Themes* is an excellent example that jumps immediately to mind), but the introduction for *Despite All Adversities* fails to provide a clear and precise definition of the parameters of the collection, or the foundational concepts and assumptions that bind the contributions together —what the editors consider “queer” in cinematic terms, for example. Beyond the lack of a well-articulated grounding for the collection, the introduction is further marred by a number of rather inexplicable errors of fact, such as identifying Manuel Puig as a Spanish writer (9), or Leonardo Sbaraglia as a Spanish actor (12), and an unacceptably high number of linguistic, stylistic, and typographical errors, some of which appear to be the result of a less than competent translation of the text from Spanish to English.

Related to the issue of translation of the original Spanish versions of the introduction and several of the essays, I think that it is important to comment on the editors' unfortunate decision to publish a volume on Spanish-American queer film exclusively in English. The editors note that the original idea for the volume came about as a result of one of them teaching a course on queer cinema for advanced undergraduate students, and that the edited volume, therefore, serves the need for a textbook, explicitly intended for use by students in “courses on Spanish-American cinema, as well as survey courses on Latina American literature and culture” (5). As much as one might understand an editorial decision to make a newly edited book more accessible to as wide a readership as possible, I question the wisdom of a reader for advanced students of Spanish that is entirely in English. Due to the fact that the volume is not in Spanish, its value as a course textbook is greatly diminished for me, and, I suspect, for most faculty who teach advanced students of Spanish at the college or university level. The volume indeed may serve the purposes of scholars in the field, but the needs of students of Spanish are different than those of

teachers and researchers, and therefore, the editors' choice of language has, in my opinion, rendered the book much less useful for use in the classroom.

In addition to the problems listed above, I find the final section of the introduction quite troubling as the editors attempt to explain a very important issue for volumes on LGBTIQ themes: the lack of representation in the collection of specifically lesbian-focused works. While the dearth of feature films that explore the experiences of lesbians is certainly a troublesome concern—and one that has been analyzed at length for many years—the editors offer no meaningful insights into the question, and simply characterize the problem as one in which “[l]esbians continue to strive in an oppressive filmic silence, which turns into a muffled scream because there are only a few films of aesthetic value to serve as points of reference and inspiration” (13). In an attempt to explain the unfortunate situation, they simply employ a quote by Santiago García, director of *Lesbianas de Buenos Aires* (2000), in which he concludes that it is a lack of lesbian cinematic heroines that is the principal reason why films featuring lesbians tend not to be made (13). Without further analysis on their part, the editors end their discussion of the issue as if that one simple idea could adequately summarize such a highly complex problem.

In spite of the disappointing introduction to the volume, I must reiterate that the overall quality of the sixteen essays included in the volume is indeed excellent, and should be of enormous value to English-speaking researchers on Spanish-American culture and cinema. In all but a few cases, the chapters are well-crafted works of scholarship that examine a single film, and how that film contributes to our ever-changing understanding of LGBTIQ culture. For me, the most successful chapters are those written by Foster (*Señora de nadie*), Venegas (*Fresa y chocolate*), Tobin (*Un año sin amor*), Smith (*Mil nubes de paz cercan el cielo*), Perriam (*En la ciudad sin límites*), and Ingenschay (*Ronda nocturna*) because of the way in which the authors' insightful critical commentary elegantly focuses on the complex interplay of numerous factors, such as the aesthetic cinematic features of the film as an artistic creation and how it fits into the larger scope of the filmmaker's overall cinematic production; the visual and textual content of the film

and how it connects to analyses of the social, political, and artistic realities of the time period and the cultural environment in which the film was made; and the examination of the theory and practice of non-heteronormative sexuality in Spanish American context, and how that sexuality is shaped and delineated by personal and collective, psychological and cultural factors.

Considering the scholarly sophistication and depth of most of the chapters, the wide range of regional and LGBTIQ cultures represented, and the view of the development of queer cinema in Spanish America over the past five decades, it is a pleasure to be able to recommend this collection highly. Scholars and researchers on Spanish American cinema, literature, and culture, as well as on gender and sexuality studies will find the majority of the chapters in this volume to be enriching critical studies of some of the most intriguing films that Spanish America has to offer.