Hispania Guest Editorial: Pending Matters

David William Foster

Hispania 98.3 (2015): 385–87
Hispania Guest Editorial
Pending Matters

David William Foster
Arizona State University

Necessarily—and, indeed, almost as an imperative—one takes advantage of writing a note such as this to promote an intellectual agenda. Our selection process for these essays on film has been an interesting and rather anomalous one, since we each examined a range of possible contributions, without knowing what the overall pool of topics might be beyond just those each of us saw individually. This made it difficult for any one of us to favor a particular range of submissions—that is, to nudge the selection process towards any one individual’s intellectual agenda. Of course, I might have favored the essays I did see that matched that agenda, but the process was complex and anonymous enough for me to have been of little influence in that regard. As a consequence, I recognize that the final list of essays accepted was highly aleatory, even if it was designed to result in an overarching consensus as regards a selection of the very best, no matter how they distributed themselves thematically or intellectually.

Ours is a conjunctive organization, Spanish and Portuguese, and it is possible to debate what the implications of that conjunction are. For those of us working in Brazilian studies (and I am fully aware of the way in which I am an unabashed interloper, not having been fully trained as a Brazilianist and counting myself primarily as an Argentinist), the conjunction here has served always to mark a fundamental disjunction: one was either a Hispanist or one was a Luso-Brazilianist. Hispanists and Brazilianists were brought together in the same organization for geohistorical reasons, but not because their research agendas overlapped, and it has been, with few exceptions, only in recent years that doctoral students—at least in research extensive universities where Portuguese is likely to be taught—are emerging with a solid grounding in both areas, or, at least, with a decent familiarity across the conjunction. Integrated projects, of the sort envisioned by the Beyond Tordesillas initiative, still are quite lacking, although one is confident that they will eventually prosper.

It is, therefore, with regret that I note the lack of a substantial set of essays on Brazilian film in our final roster: only one deals with Brazil. I do not know what Brazilian film submissions were examined and, in the end, rejected, although I am willing to be firmly convinced that rejections were for reasons of critical deficiency and not out of any desire to slight Brazil (or Portugal)!

While the Portuguese film industry remains modest (especially in comparison to Spain), there can be no doubting the vigor of film in Brazil. And unlike Mexico, where it is difficult to view a Mexican film in general because commercial and art house bookings favor a heavy preponderance of foreign films (e.g., US films in the former case), almost any Cineplex in Brazil’s major cities includes national titles. To be sure, the Brazilian film industry is uniquely different—but, then, so are the Argentine, the Mexican, the Cuban ones—and glitzy commercial productions (very much as part of a continuum with the television industry; the so-called O Globo network phenomenon) figure prominently, and these are not usually likely to attract serious critical analyses except within a sociology of culture context. Although Mexico has a certain amount
of such titles—mostly recently, something like Pedro Pablo Ibarra's *A la mala* (2015)—they have largely faded into the background in Argentina, with the very vigorous putatively serious filmmaking now coming out of that country, and, of course, they have not existed in Cuba since the Revolution. But serious filmmaking is thriving in Brazil, and it merits the same level of interpretive scrutiny as the Hispanic materials that rose to the top of our complex selection process.

Another gap in our final inventory—and here, I can legitimately claim a position of disciplinary centrality—concerns queer filmmaking. I don't mean just films in which theme and characters are manifestly queer-centered, but rather, the application of queer film theory to the entire corpus: I am much more interested in a queer analysis of the Mexican legendary actress Sara García's films than I am in continuing to focus on the gay aura of Héctor Babenco's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* or Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Fresa y chocolate* (as important as both were in their moment). The queering of all sexual life, such as we find in the films of Argentina's Marco Berger, is a particularly exciting and original perspective for Latin American film. And one cannot help but mention the systematic undermining of patriarchal heteronormativity that is a constant thread in Spanish Pedro Almodóvar's filmmaking, which has had so much influence in Latin America. This thread is not quite the same thing as his parallel pursuit of the representation of post-Franco gay culture in Spain. Indeed, I am very much committed to downplaying lesbigay or queer filmmaking as a niche market, while fully recognizing its importance in Spain, Portugal, and Latin America in the struggle for dignity and full human rights as the first two emerged from long-standing and violent fascist regimes and as many countries in Latin America have struggled to leave behind neofascist and authoritarian regimes. All of them have struggled to overcome centuries of ingrained homophobia. The so-called current Pink Tide (Marea Rosada) of left-of-center democracies in South America, moreover, has brought with it a distinctive commitment to the rights of sexual diversity: there is no one really good term to employ here, since it is more than just a question of lesbigay rights as iconized by the legalization of gay marriage (and gay adoption and gays in the military) in Spain, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil (almost, since legalization is on hold for the moment), not to mention in parts of Mexico, where we find gay marriage, for example, in the Distrito Federal, but not in the country as a whole and no program for the inclusion of open gays in the military.

Certainly, *Hispania* now has a good track record of publishing articles on lesbian and gay culture (although perhaps not so much on the other categories that are now part of the highly politicized litany), as well as queer approaches that cut across the canon in the way I mention above with reference to film. The last two of my sixteen articles (not counting reviews) published by *Hispania* over the years deal with queer issues, the first a decade and a half ago, in 2001. *Hispania* is simply changing with the profession, which is perforce changing with the social and political landscape of America and, more importantly, that of the Spanish and Portuguese-language cultural production it was established to represent. It is hardly likely to be any other way. Yet this does not come through in the Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian film research represented here.

One might argue that teaching queer issues is very much of a dicey affair in the pre-university American classroom, although perhaps less in private schools than in public ones, and it is certainly not a problem in Spain and in some areas of Latin America. It should not be a problem at the university level in general, but one would not be surprised to find that there are campuses where it (still) is. Of course, I have no idea—nor any personal experience—in how to include queer cultural perspective in the pre-university classroom, although I would like to be confident in the belief that it is being done in a positive and intellectually enriching fashion and, perhaps, as a growing trend. But what I do know for certain is that to speak of any cultural production without referencing that which deals with homoaffective relations or to elide queer perspectives from the discussion of being human in the world is to seriously distort what the perceived parameters of our lived experience, collective and personal, now encompass.
One does, nevertheless, recognize the extraordinary visual power of film and its ability to maximize affect to the breaking point, which is why some spectators may have no problem in reading steamy sexual scenes but are unable to tolerate seeing them represented on the big screen. None of the foregoing is meant to insinuate that the queer is limited to what the porn industry calls the money shot; it is only the far end of what is problematical about anything having to do with sex, actual or implied, on the screen, and this includes anything that can set in motion in the mind of the moviegoer the semantic chain that extends from a verbal reference to gender difference/diversity/resistance/defiance to the in-the-flesh enactment of sexual practices of any nature. The enormous affective impact of film means that one can never quite be sure what is likely to be problematical to any given student. I once had a male student of a conservative religious commitment complain very energetically about having to see Norma Bengal’s ground-breaking film *Eternamente Pagu* on the Brazilian political activist, Patrícia Galvão, the first female political prisoner in Brazil, in the 1930s. But what he found objectionable were not the two moments in the film in which there is a clear suggestion of lesbian desire (one played by Bengal herself, the first woman to appear nude in a Brazilian film), but rather the way in which the film applauded unconventional motherhood, specifically when Galvão leaves her young son behind in his father’s care to go to protest the rise of Nazism in Europe; he made no complaint about the matter of lesbianism, which is important in the film because of Galvão’s conflicts with the Brazilian Communist Party.

Film production in Latin America presents various other dimensions that need to enrich any representative critical inventory such as the one presented here. The inclusion of indigenous topics in Latin American film has a fascinating history (see the Brazilian Sylvio Back’s documentary *Yndio do Brasil* on the representation of indigenous culture in film), and there are some distinguished contemporary revisions of first people’s lives that ought to be part of our inventory but are not. By contrast, the complex issues relating to immigration show up in some of the studies, an immigration that the film record has focused on in terms not only of non-Hispanic or non-Portuguese immigration to Latin America, but also immigration between the Peninsula and Latin America in both directions, as well as immigration between the Latin American republics and immigration (especially Mexican) to the United States. My own commitment in this regard is to a resulting Jewish cultural presence in Latin America (and it could extend to a new Jewish cultural presence in Spain as the consequence of Latin American, mostly Argentine, immigration to that country) for the ways in which breaks with the alleged Spanish and Portuguese-origin Latin Catholic stereotype for Latin America, which the abiding presence of pre-Columbian religions has always challenged (the Mexican Anita Brenner’s *Idols behind Altars* paradigm). Yet such a challenge does not get sufficiently acknowledged in the cultural criticism record, which it is not acknowledged in the inventory of studies included here.

Let me be absolutely clear about this: my comments here are not meant to be a criticism of the selection process. I am myself one of those directly responsible for the final roster. Rather, what I am doing is pointing out some of the areas of film studies—and the overall pattern of cultural studies of which it is a part—that are apparently not being sufficiently pursued in our scholarly community to rise to the top in the extensive and rigorous selection process we have engaged in. The problem does not lie with *Hispania* nor with the selection process. It would seem to be a matter of the dissonance between the cultural production that is taking place and what the best scholars among us (that is, in the AATSP community) are choosing to research and write about.