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## BOOK REVIEWS

**QUEER MEXICO: CINEMA AND TELEVISION SINCE 2000, PAUL JULIAN SMITH (2017)**

Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 176 pp., ISBN 9-780-81434-274-9, p/bk, \$35.99

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Paul Julian Smith continues his thematic studies of the Mexican audio-visual landscape with *Queer Mexico: Cinema and Television Since 2000*, a monograph surveying the rise of LGBT-themed media productions in Mexico since the turn of the century. As in *Mexican Screen Fictions* (Smith 2010), Smith draws on his vast knowledge of Mexican cinema and his connections to cinematic institutions within the country as well as others' scholarly treatments of the national film scene. In *Queer Mexico*, the author provides a much-needed corrective to the study of contemporary Mexican media by centring queer features and players. Through a mix of industrial history, close textual readings, discourse analysis and interviews with creatives, the book stands as a generative starting point for further inquiries into the intersections of queer studies and Mexican cinemas.

*Queer Mexico* consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 opens with a look at three distinct areas of queer audio-visual production and distribution: a web series, a film festival and a porn studio. Chapter 2 focuses on film director Julián Hernández, whom Smith describes as 'the only filmmaker *tout court* in the country to consistently treat queer themes' (33). Chapters 3 and 4 each consist of a comparative study between a trio of films, whether independent documentaries in the former or mainstream fiction films in the latter. Chapter 5 centres on television production company Argos and its productions across broadcast and cable networks. A short conclusion and an appendix round out the book at just under 150 pages. Smith's writing is clear and precise, and his close readings reveal a cinephilic fascination with the objects of his study. Each individual chapter provides enough detail for understanding the media under analysis in its social, historical and political contexts. Whenever theoretical concepts are introduced, these are succinctly defined and remain grounded in textual examples. As such, this study can be taught in undergraduate and graduate classes alike. The book would prove a welcome addition to survey courses in Mexican or Latin American cinemas, and individual chapters provide useful topics case studies for courses in transnational film or television.

Despite its subtitle, *Queer Mexico* is hardly medium-specific and at times even unabashedly transmedial. Its chapters discuss not only film and television but also film festivals, webseries, advertisements, gossip magazines and straight-to-video pornography – all of which, Smith argues, account for 'the audiovisual consciousness of queers in Mexico' (31). He grounds and complements his close textual analyses of audio-visual media by accounting for the existence of these features within a transmedial ecosystem that brings together disparate publics. For instance, the author notes that porn actors discussed in one chapter appear in the art house fare discussed in another; why select independent producers must function as nodes for mainstream and marginal cinematic distribution; and how global aesthetic trends resonate within documentaries, telenovelas and web series alike. Likewise, the constant references to the popular entertainment magazine *TVyNovelas* in several chapters

function as evidence of the changing morals within mainstream entertainment at the same time that these instances index the increasing reach of erstwhile niche media productions. The result is a multifaceted study that remains attendant to the changing technological conditions of audio-visual productions and to the residual institutional structures that maintain these productions.

Indeed, the book's most astute observations detail the affordances and pitfalls of emerging media formations as alternatives to the long lasting monopolies that have become representative of Mexico's media ecosystem. Chapter 1 addresses the potential of a web series like *Al final del arcoiris* (2008–2009) to depict everyday life and reach viewers directly, even if ultimately the lack of financial support resulted in a short-lived run. In contrast, porn production studio Mecos mobilized its straight-to-video and low budget origins to reach niche audiences and eventually expand transnationally. Likewise, Chapter 4 tracks television production company Argos's history of producing telenovelas with LGBT characters. Smith details the textual changes to queer representation in Argos's productions while at the same time tracing the company's shift from creating fare for mainstream broadcast television to developing original content for cable television. As a whole, the examples that the author analyses throughout *Queer Mexico* reveal a constant in much audio-visual production worldwide: the rise of market segmentation and niche content as both beneficial to marginal stories and precarious in its economic sustainability.

Smith's analysis reveals, perhaps implicitly, the fraught and fractured ways in which 'queer' can be imported into a posthegemonic society such as Mexico's. In Chapter 1, the author attends to the function of places such as La Zona Rosa in Mexico City as a node of convergence for gay male creatives. Chapters 3 and 4 sketch the disparate publics engaging with trans film festival fare and homonormative mainstream features, particularly in terms of the restricted circulation of the former. These observations signal not only the potential of non-normative sexual practices for engendering forms of communal belonging but also the strong material restrictions faced by these affiliations. Throughout the book, then, 'queer' ends up functioning primarily as a practical grouping for analysis. The paucity of LGBT-themed media productions from Mexico at present prevents in-depth studies dedicated exclusively to lesbian, bisexual or trans issues, yet by bringing these different productions into conversation, Smith is able to argue for the importance of current representational breakthroughs as well as make visible the significant areas for improvement.

For example, a conceptual through line across the chapters of *Queer Mexico* is that of the auteur, which Smith characterizes as capacious enough to encompass not only film directors but also porn producers, film festival organizers, and television production companies. Arturo Castelán, Armando Silva Baena and Mecos's El Diablo are described as auteur-entrepreneurs for trekking into untapped queer media avenues. In Chapter 5, Argos emerges as a creative brand in its own right whose productions stretch across various distribution networks. The films of Julián Hernández warrant their own chapter and an extended interview in the Appendix. Smith foregrounds these creatives' artistic visions as both emergent from an underdeveloped environment for Mexican queer media and resilient in spite of it. In the end, however, these many singular, auterist visions also betray the fact that there exists little infrastructure for a robust queer cinematic collective scene.

Although the book's thematic resonances and conceptual through lines stitch the chapters together, it is less consistent as a sustained theoretical argument. Smith often brings in several fields of inquiry into each chapter, but the issues drawn from these fields rarely recur across the book. In the penultimate chapter, the author engages with one of Jon Murray-Beasley's pointed arguments about posthegemony – that hegemonic articulation across Latin America can be best theorized through affect and habit, not political agency. When discussing mainstream fiction films, Smith draws on this provocation to propose that although homosexuality might function as 'a new focus for consensus in modern Mexican cultural production' (88), at present the films analysed depict lesbian, gay male and transgender lives as 'wholly separate from each other', speaking to the posthegemonic concern that 'alliances against common enemies prove difficult to realize' (106). Though intriguing, these conclusions are dwarfed by being constrained to one chapter instead of complicating the observations expressed in others, such as the possibility for social critique in *Mecos's* features or the ability of producers like Roberto Fiesco and Argos to foster minority representation through their institutional backings. Thus, the book's theoretical breadth sometimes ends up betraying its potential for incisiveness.

Still, *Queer Mexico* manages to stake its claim in an emerging field of queer studies within a global framework. It also remains a welcome and much needed addition to the study of contemporary Mexican cinemas. The book successfully traces the highs and lows of current Mexican audio-visual productions, persuasively argues for the continued promise of LGBT-themed media productions and, ultimately, reminds us that there still are many areas to attend to in transnational queer and cinema studies.

## REFERENCES

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