The Coming of Sound
1930–1939

From the very inception of the cinema, the synchronization of sound with the screen image had been a cherished dream. We need only recall Luis G. Urbina’s musings on the subject after attending a performance at the Cinematógrafo Lumière in the late 1890s: “It . . . lacks something . . . Perhaps with time it will acquire sound.” 1 Experimentation with sound had started early although such attempts invariably failed. In Mexico the first public demonstration of synchronization of sound with film occurred at the Colón Theater in June 1912, an experiment mounted by one of M. León Gaumont’s assistants—or at least it was thus reported. The French filmmaker had preferred not to display his untried chronophone in Paris just yet and supposedly arranged to have it tested in Mexico instead. It was no more than a phonograph record synchronized with the film and it was a complete failure, not only because the supposed Gaumont assistant was not really what he pretended to be but also because he was inept at operating the equipment. He was incapable of correctly synchronizing the record with the screen images and only succeeded in eliciting some “frightful noises which had nothing in common with what was being seen on the screen.” The cronófono, as it was called in Mexico, was kept in the Colón’s storage room until 1927 when a second unsuccessful attempt was made to work it. 2

The coming of sound, in Eric Rhode’s telling words, was to release “energies that had long been suppressed.” 3 As this chapter will describe, the energies generated by the Mexican Revolution sought expression through the new medium of sound films and resulted, toward the end of the decade, in the establishment of a sophisticated industry. The movies produced by Mexican studios in these years reflected a variety of societal, cultural, and political concerns. They also provided an outlet for the ambitions of some members of the new entrepreneurial class created by the Revolution. A number of producers were revolutionary officers or cronies of influential políticos. Foreign influences also played a major role in the development of the Mexican film industry and the two major sources will be discussed: the artistic and intellectual ferment of interwar Europe, and the techniques and styles of Hollywood. The latter’s ill-fated attempt to make “Hispanic” films for the international Spanish-speaking market was especially important, providing a training ground for directors and performers who later went to Mexico. Although Mexico was in the process of recovering from a destructive civil war and developing ways of continuing and institutionalizing its revolution, it was also caught up in the complexities of the postwar world.

The intellectual and political reactions to the revolutionary changes taking place both in the Old and New Worlds were reflected in the new art of the cinema. The “talkies” were to acquire great importance in many countries as a medium for expressing vague national anxieties. The world was in turmoil, and social and political change was occurring faster than most people could come to terms with it. The Belle Époque of prewar days had signified the end of an era of smug self-complacency in Western and Western-affiliated cultures. The World War shattered the security of the middle classes and tragically demonstrated the fatal flaws in the sacred double pillars of European claims to superiority: capitalism and nationalism. Imperialism, the manifestation of this system in Asia and Africa, had also been dealt a death blow although its weakened structure was not to collapse completely until after 1945.

The “roaring twenties” exemplified the general rejection of traditional social restraints in the West. What was known in the Anglo-Saxon countries as Victorian morality had been rent asunder by the brutal stresses of total war. The rejection of prewar ethical and sexual standards resulted in a more or less “liberated” among the elites at least. Another kind of liberation—and much more ominous to many—was represented by the Bolshevik triumph in Russia and the founding of Comintern-affiliated Communist parties throughout the world. The middle and upper classes in capitalist countries lived in fear of what they considered a proletariat subverted by Bolshevik agents.

Perhaps the cinema could be ideally adapted to further the interaction of social change and art. Working from this premise, Lev Kuleshov, at the Moscow State School of Cinematography, came to believe that editing was the basic tool for adapting the cinema to artistic or social purposes. He worked out a theory of montage which a short time later would be taken up by Sergei Eisenstein, a filmmaker who was to have a profound effect on the Mexican cinema.

The struggle to understand and express the social and technological changes which were taking place assumed many forms. The Futurist movement, for example, attempted to find artistic inspiration in the industrialized urbanism of the twentieth century, and its influence soon spread to film. This group of artists was the first willing to cooperate with the Bolsheviks, who accepted for a time the Futurists’ views as official policy. 4

The Futurists’ restlessness and preference for the bizarre was one attempt aesthetically to come to terms with and respond to the multifaceted uncertainties of postwar life. In painting, surrealism and cubism reflected this intellectual restlessness. These forms found their way into the cinema in such films as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920), for which the presurrealist Alfred Kubin, “who . . . made eerie phantoms invade harmless scenery and visions of torture emerge from the subconscious,” 5 designed the sets. The Futurist style was also incorporated in the
work of French avant-garde filmmakers: in Louis Feuillade’s Fantômas (1913) the main character “pierces a white wall and blood gushes out of it... and five men in identical masks and black tights pursue each other at a ball.” Louis Delluc, in his use of objects to convey his central characters’ mental states, especially in the lost film Le Silence (1920), strongly influenced both Jean Epstein and the Spaniard Luis Buñuel. In fact, Delluc’s techniques can be said to have reached their fullest expression in the 1960s, in Alain Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad (1961) and Buñuel’s Belle de jour (1966). Buñuel, along with his fellow Spaniards Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí, was intimately associated with prewar and postwar Parisian artistic circles. Buñuel and Dalí collaborated in the classic but bizarre surrealist experiment Un Chien andalou (The Andalusian Dog) (1928). Its imagery “includes hands and armpits covered by ants, soiled bodies, an emphasis on buttocks and the usual apparatus of sadistic practice.” In L’Age d’or (The Golden Age) (1930) Buñuel further developed these symbols:

Less brittle and more wide-ranging than its predecessor, L’Age d’or brings this anality even more into the open: lovers roll ecstatically in mud beneath the shocked gaze of some dignitaries; later the woman dreams about her lover as she sits on the lavatory. From its opening sequence—a documentary in the manner of Painlevé about the death rites of scorpions—to its concluding quotation from de Sade’s 140 Days in Sodom, in which various noblemen dressed in robes imitative of figures from the past, including Christ, totter from their debauchery in the snow, L’Age d’or extends caustically over many notions of civilization and style, including the manners of polite society, the corruption and suicide of a minister and even the founding of Rome.

Diego Rivera, who along with David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco was to found the Mexican muralist movement under the sponsorship of Vasconcelos, was also a part of this European artistic and intellectual maestrom. He was in Europe during the war and in the immediate postwar years “joined the Cubist movement, became a friend of Picasso (‘I have never believed in God,’ he said, ‘but in Picasso, yes.’), fraternized with Apollinaire, quarreled with and made up with Modigliani... He stayed a long time in Italy studying the frescoes of the Renaissance. He glowed with enthusiasm for the new Russia that was emerging from the revolution.”

Rivera participated in and absorbed the intellectual excitement of the European avant-garde and returned to his native Mexico to create a muralist genre that received inspiration from both pre-Columbian fresco painting and Old World traditional and revolutionary concepts. Simultaneously, Luis Buñuel was developing his unorthodox film techniques and antibourgeois posture in silent films—a style he was to bring to fruition in Mexico during the 1940s and 1950s.

Nationalists in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America were concerned that the advent of sound films represented “the most powerful weapon” in the American “peaceful invasion” of their countries. If all films henceforth were to be made in the English language, they worried, the Latin American publics would “by force have to learn that tongue if they wished to be entertained and after a few years Castilian would be forgotten, passing into the category of dead languages.” The newspaper El Universal launched a campaign to convince all Latin American governments to prohibit the showing of English-language films, an objective which most other Mexican newspapers and magazines enthusiastically supported. One exception was the monthly magazine Continental which attacked El Universal’s position and defended the screening of movies in any language, especially English, since it would help “Mexicans learn that language which was indispensable in the business world.” The magazine’s spirited defense of foreign-made “talkies” (as they were also called in Mexico at this time) might very well have been based on the fact that foreign film distributors regularly bought twelve pages of advertising in Continental; in addition, the editors displayed rather bad timing in publishing, in the very same issue in which they stated their pro-English-language “talkies” position, a letter from Paramount Films de México, S.A. congratulating them on the editorial.

Sound films were not greeted with enthusiasm elsewhere in the world either: Chaplin felt they were unsuitable to his sophisticated comedy style of mime and characterization; and the Soviet directors, Eisenstein among them, felt that sound introduced additional technical and marketing difficulties. The advent of sound ended the careers of some boxoffice idols, notably Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. Many foreign artists in Hollywood were unable to handle dialogue adequately, although, as has been seen, Dolores del Río, whose English was certainly almost nonexistent in the 1920s, did make the transition quite successfully to the talkies, as did Greta Garbo. However, other performers, such as Emil Jannings, Pola Negri, and Conrad Veidt, returned to Europe.

As pointed out in chapter 1, Mexican filmmaking was practically at a standstill by the end of the silent film era. The only moviemakers of any consequence were the ex-revolutionary fighter, Miguel Contreras Torres, who cultivated a super-patriotic genre, and Jorge Stahl, who had run the gamut from pioneer cameraman a la Toscanio to distributor and studio owner. Both Contreras Torres and Stahl were to achieve greater prominence after the production of Mexican sound films began. Other directors, producers, and performers of the early 1930s were to arrive in Mexico by way of Hollywood’s Spanish-language film production. The major American companies, in an effort to retain and widen their lucrative Latin American markets, and undoubtedly concerned about the implications of campaigns against English-language films such as the one waged by El Universal, imported stage actors and directors from Spain and Latin America. Initially, the films were simply Spanish-language versions of English-dialogue originals or sound remakes of silent originals. Toward the end of Hispanic movie production, especially at Fox, some films were produced in Spanish only.

By 1929 all of Hollywood’s production facilities had converted to sound but American films could obviously only be marketed in English-speaking countries. Therefore the large studios began simultaneously to produce silent versions of their films for foreign consumption. This ploy was a resounding failure in countries like France, Germany, and the Soviet Union that were already making their own sound films. Movie production in Spain and Latin America, on the other hand, was incapable of supplying a market of one hundred million people who
demanded films in Spanish. Movies with Spanish subtitles were unsatisfactory because of the high illiteracy rate generally throughout Latin America. In addition, the Mexican government, as did others in Latin America, demanded "absolute Castilian purity in the subtitles of foreign films." Hollywood thus began the production of features in Spanish, French, and German but soon found that European audiences much preferred seeing the original versions starring popular American stars.

Only film production in Spanish, however, became established in Hollywood. In spite of these "Hispanic" pictures' general unpopularity with Latin American audiences, more than 113 were made between 1930 and 1938. Strangely enough, Hollywood never utilized its best-known Latin American stars, Dolores del Río and Lupe Vélez, in Spanish-language films, although Ramón Novarro did appear in a few. Marlene Dietrich and Emil Jannings also never made Hollywood films in their native tongue, while Greta Garbo and Maurice Chevalier did.

There seem to have been two principal reasons for the nonacceptance by the Latin American publics of these Hollywood Spanish-language films. First, there was the jumble of accents—Spanish, Cuban, Mexican, Argentine, Chilean, and others—which imbued these movies with an air of unreality. For the first time, through the medium of sound films, the average person of one country came to realize how his language was spoken in another. Though Spanish theatrical companies had for generations been touring throughout Spanish America, the legitimate theater was usually restricted to a relatively well-educated elite who expected national and regional variances in the spoken language. But the cinema exposed mass audiences to a sort of collective culture shock; they heard their own language emerging from the screen images’ lips, but a language that sounded bizarre and alien—even if understandable. Part of the problem was the American producers' assumptions—even if they knew a little Spanish—that the so-called Castilian Spanish, the language as spoken in the central plain of Spain, was acceptable everywhere in the Western Hemisphere. The immediate result of this linguistic confusion was that Argentina declared that she would not permit the importation of the multiaccented films or those in "Castilian." Spain, for its part, stated that its moviegoers "could not bear to listen to the irritating Latin American accents" and that if the "c" or "z" were not "orthographically pronounced," the American studios "need not bother" sending their films. Lest it be assumed that all of this bickering over language was simply an isolated case of Hispanic xenophobia, it should be pointed out that in Britain at this time, movie audiences began to complain of pictures in "American" and that there were demands that actors should speak English "correctly.

The second factor that rendered Hollywood Hispanic films unacceptable to their intended audiences was the same one that doomed the making of American pictures in French, German, or Italian: the Latin American audiences enjoyed seeing American stars and "would not easily accept their substitution by José Crespo or Luana Alcániz." On the surface, the two factors would seem to contradict each other since the linguistic dispute was ultimately an expression of a particularly strident nationalism that was emerging throughout the world in the 1930s. Yet this xenophobia was transcended by Hollywood's "dream factories" which had already established the American movie as the favorite entertainment of millions throughout the world irrespective of nationality or ideology.

A rather interesting film that was made after the regular production of Hispanic films ended was Columbia's Verbená trágica (Tragic Festivity) (1938). It starred the eminent Mexican actor, Fernando Soler, playing the role of Mateo Vargas, a Spanish immigrant in New York. As the film begins, we are shown a, or perhaps the, Hispanic neighborhood in Manhattan, whose multiracial residents are making preparations to celebrate El día de la raza—Columbus Day. This small, improbable neighborhood is a paean to Pan-Americanism since the inhabitants seem to represent every Latin American country. However, the principal characters are Spaniards and as the fiesta celebrations—more reminiscent of a typical Little Italy street festa—proceed, we see Mateo just released from a short stint in jail for hitting a policeman. Mateo is a boxer and neighborhood hero and his return is eagerly awaited by everyone except his wife Blanca (Luana de Alcañiz). This is because she happens to be a couple of months pregnant, and since Mateo has been in prison for eight months it does not take him long to realize that something has been going on in his absence. Blanca's lover is Claudio (Juan Torena), Mateo's best friend and fiancé of Blanca's half-sister, Lola (Cecilia Callejo).

It is soon evident that the basic problem with all these emigré Spaniards (they are not refugees from the Civil War raging at that time; in fact references to Spain make the country appear completely normal) is their difficulty in adapting to life in New York. Claudio is disgusted because he cannot find a job and has no money to marry Lola; Mateo's problems, as reflected in his unexplained act of hitting a policeman, stem from his homesickness and his unhappiness with American ways—the "noise," the "bluff," the "hypocrisy." The rest of the film is a melodramatic account of Mateo's finally realizing that it is Claudio who is Blanca's lover; with the street festivities as a backdrop, Mateo pursues Claudio, catches up with him on a fire escape, and punches him, causing Claudio to fall to his death in the street below. This time Mateo's temper and his exaggerated sense of honor have brought him serious trouble.

Verbená trágica is interesting in that it seems to be a last-ditch attempt by Hollywood to find some formula that would appeal to Latin American audiences. Although it is difficult to know what kind of distribution the film had in Latin America, it probably was not extensive. By 1938–1939, Mexican filmmaking was well established and expanding rapidly; it was well on its way toward exploiting the Latin American markets that Hollywood had failed to reach with its Spanish-language productions. It is difficult to tell whether Verbená trágica was designed to utilize Columbia's remaining Spanish production facilities in an attempt to find a market among Hispanics in the United States. Employing an already-familiar actor like Fernando Soler with a back-up cast of leftovers from Hollywood's Hispanic heyday would seem to indicate some such intent. In the late 1930s, the major Hispanic group would have been the Mexican-Americans of the Southwest. This was before the great Puerto Rican influx of the late 1940s and
1950s that was to make New York City a major foreign market for the Mexican film industry, it also predated the much larger immigration, both legal and illegal (of Mexicans, Dominicans, South Americans), of recent decades. The Cuban population of Florida, centered at this time in the Tampa area, was minimal and unimportant as a motion picture market. In any event, Fernando Soler recalls that when he went to Hollywood in 1938 to make La verdosa trágica and El caudal de los hijos (The Fortune of Children) he was “unimpressed” with either film; the experience served only to corroborate his opinion that in Mexico they “performed technical miracles.” Yet, whether the Columbia studio executives’ intention was to appeal to Latin American audiences or United States Hispanic audiences, their choice of an aggressively Spanish group of principal characters in Verben a trágica seems to betray a basic misconception of their market. The imagined problems of Spanish immigrants in New York would presumably hold little interest for movie audiences in Bogotá or Lima and perhaps even less for a Mexican-American public in Los Angeles or San Antonio, even if one ignores the fact that Spanish immigration to the United States has always been statistically insignificant. It is true that throughout the film other obvious national types make brief appearances—Argentines, Mexicans, and a black man who is supposed to be either Cuban or Puerto Rican. Yet such obvious contrivances imbue the entire film with an air of unreality, and Verben a trágica serves as a fitting epitaph to Hollywood’s ill-conceived and ill-fated attempt to make movies in Spanish for Latin America.

The sound era in Mexico began on July 6, 1929, when The Jazz Singer starring Al Jolson was premiered at the Olimpia Theater. It was the first film with a complete sound track although for some years incidental sound effects or background music had been included in some movies, one of numerous examples being the metallic sound of gold coins being dropped on a table in the scene where Judas is being induced to betray Jesus in Cecil B. DeMille’s otherwise silent King of Kings (1927). It is also at this time that Luz Alba (pseudonym of the journalist Cibe Bonifant) began writing her highly regarded film reviews in El Universal Ilustrado. Jorge Ayala Blanco considers her, along with Xavier Villaurrutia, the only writer in this period who foresaw and sensed the rudiments of a specifically cinematic culture. In her reviews Luz Alba was one of the first in Mexico to take always into account the “decisive participation” of the director. Fittingly, the premiere of The Jazz Singer was favorably chronicled in Luz Alba’s movie column.

The excitement caused by the novelty of sound soon led to the various international controversies already described and Hollywood’s failed venture into foreign-language motion picture production, especially in Spanish. The way was now clear for the rebirth of a Mexican film industry which was symbolized by the 1931 production of Santa, a remake of the 1918 silent film based on the Federico Gamboa novel. The Compañía Nacional Productora de Películas was formed on the initiative of a wealthy film distributor and ex-revolutionary associate of Madero, Juan de la Cruz Alarcón, the journalist Carlos Noriega Hope, and the veteran cineast Gustavo Sáenz de Sicilia. Antonio Moreno was brought from Hollywood to direct Mexico’s first sound movie. From the United States also came Lupita Tovar (to play the title role), Donald Reed (professional name of Ernesto Guillen), and Alex Phillips to supervise the filming. Among other significant names associated with Santa were: Roberto and Joselito Rodriguez who devised an original sound system for the film; Agustín Lara, who wrote the music; and Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, musical director. Shooting began on November 3, 1931, in the Nacional Productora studios; on March 30, 1932, Santa was premiered at the Palacio Theater. It cost 45,000 pesos to make and ran for eighty-one minutes.

Santa is a humble country girl who lives happily with her family in Chimalistac until she is seduced and abandoned by the army officer Marcelino (Donald Reed). Her brothers, learning of the dishonor she has brought on the family, cast her out. Santa makes her way to Mexico City where she finds work at a brothel run by doña Elvira (Mimi Derba) and where Hipólito (Carlos Orellana), a blind piano-player, is also employed. Both Hipólito and the bullfighter El Jaramete (Juan José Martinez Casado) fall in love with Santa who has by this time become quite renowned in her trade. She goes to live with El Jaramete but when he surprises her one day with Marcelino he throws her out of his house. Santa sinks to the lowest depths and develops cancer; Hipólito arranges for an operation but she dies during surgery. He has her buried in Chimalistac.

García Riera says that Santa is “mysteriously lacking in the poetry that time tends to attach to the worst of films.” Yet, as Salvador Elizondo comments, the film represents a “peculiar condition” that occupies a “preeminent place in the Mexican soul; the idealization, through moralizing, of the prostitute, that irresistibly attractive yet veiled being. . . . Teror of the mother [the opposing and
Santa and her brothers, right to left—Lupita Tovar, Antonio R. Frausto, and an unidentified actor. (Cineteca)

equally prevailing symbol of Mexican popular culture]
drives us with ever-increasing fury into the arms of the prostitute.”

Another significant event for the future of Mexican cinema was the arrival in the country in late 1930 of Sergei Eisenstein, the eminent Soviet director, accompanied by his collaborators Grigori Alexandrov and the cameraman Eduard Tissé. Eisenstein had been traveling through Western Europe and the United States studying the latest cinematic technology, especially that of sound. He was under contract to Paramount to film Theodore Dreiser’s An American Tragedy, but the restrictions placed upon him by the studio executives prompted him to leave in disgust. Eisenstein had already agreed to carry out a filmmaking assignment for the Japanese government when he met Upton Sinclair and Diego Rivera. The latter tempted the Russian with beguiling descriptions of the stark beauty of Mexico and Sinclair assured him of financial backing if he would undertake a film project in that country.

Eisenstein and his crew traveled throughout Mexico filming the land and the people, and most of his actors were picked from the peasants and average villagers—a technique that was to be adopted by the postwar Italian neorealists. The Russian cineaste immersed himself in the culture and life of revolutionary Mexico; he sought out the countryside and the people in order to study Mexican history and customs. Eisenstein also made contact with Mexican writers and artists, including poet Isabel Villarreal who played the role of Maria in the second episode of Eisenstein’s projected epic which he was going to call ¡Que viva México! There were also Agustín Aragón Leiva, and the painter Adolfo Best Maugard, who had been instrumental in starting Dolores del Río on her Hollywood career.

Difficulties, however, soon emerged. A manager, Sinclair’s relative, was imposed on Eisenstein and he proceeded to hinder and delay the filming. After thirteen months of work, the Russian cineast left Mexico with eighty thousand meters of unedited film; at Laredo, Texas, he was obliged to wait almost two months for authorization to reenter the United States and, because of contractual commitments, he had to go directly from there to the Soviet Union.

¡Que viva México! was never released in any form approved by Eisenstein. Sinclair sold Sol Lesser (producer of the Tarzan pictures) the authorization to use whatever stock he needed for his feature, Thunder Over Mexico. Somewhat later, Marie Seton, Eisenstein’s biographer, utilized some of this film for her picture, Time in the Sun. All this resulted in a good deal of controversy in the United States, but the most tragic aspect of the affair was that Eisenstein himself was never given the opportunity to fashion the film on Mexico that he had originally envisioned. 34

Still, his unrealized film was to have an important influence, even if indirect, on subsequent Mexican filmmakers who were to develop a “national” style of cinema, especially Emilio “El Indio” Fernández. 35 García Riera comments that Eisenstein’s work in Mexico permitted various Mexican cineasts more or less solidarize with populist currents to create a style which would be characterized by meticulous camerawork (concentrating on clouds and magüey plants) and would gratuitously pay tribute to a hieratism by which they pretended to attain a national essence. 36

Although 1932, the year in which Santa was released, saw only six films produced, it was significant in that it witnessed the debut of two directors who would soon make valuable contributions to their country’s cinema. These were Fernando de Fuentes who made El anónimo (The Anonymous One) and Arcady Boytler, a pre-Bolshevik Russian filmmaker who studied under Stanislavsky and, in Mexico, met Eisenstein. 38 He directed Mano a mano (Hand to Hand), the first charro sound film. Boytler’s cameraman was Alex Phillips, a Canadian who had met Mary Pickford in Europe while he was serving in his Canadian unit in World War I; she later helped him get a start in Hollywood from where he went to Mexico to photograph Santa. Phillips made Mexico his home and was to become one of the industry’s leading cameramen. 39

In 1933 Mexican film production was at the forefront of Spanish-language moviemaking with twenty-five feature films, among them these important works: Fernando de Fuentes’s El compadre Méndez (Godfather Méndez) and El prisionero trece (Prisoner Number Thirteen) and Arcady Boytler’s La mujer del puerto (The Woman of the Port). The industrial infrastructure behind this spurt in
production consisted of two studios: those of Nacional Productora with three sound stages, and Jorge Stahl's México-Films studios with three sound stages. By the end of the year, the Industrial Cinematográfica, S.A. studios were also in operation. The average cost of making a film at this time was between twenty thousand and thirty thousand pesos (between $5,700 and $8,500 in 1933 dollars); the director usually earned fifteen hundred pesos ($425) and the "star" between five hundred and a thousand (between $140 and $285). The total number of personnel in the industry came to somewhere between two hundred and three hundred, none as yet unionized.40

Arcady Boytler's La mujer del puerto was described by Luz Alba as "the first national movie which truly deserves the qualification of excellent." An uneven film, it did not elicit unqualified praise from all critics when it first appeared. Yet, later students of the film have continued to find merit in it: according to Carlos Monsiváis, "Boytler realizes the first singular Mexican film, absolutely personal...[it] possesses atmosphere and personages, it is endowed with a certain unusual intensity." Tomás Pérez Turrent, a contemporary Mexican critic and cineaste, says of it: "Much has been said of the influence of German expressionism on Boytler. In effect, it exists, but it is not the only influence; present also are Jacques Feyder...Lacombe...except that Boytler surpasses them all." And Georges Sadoul thought it had a "captivating and sensitive atmosphere."41

The story of La mujer del puerto, based on a short story by Guy de Maupassant, was a sordid one of betrayal, prostitution, and incest. In Veracruz, Rosario (Andrea Palma) cares for her gravely ill father. She learns that her fiancé is having an affair with another woman; when her father confronts the fiancé with this, the latter hurries the old man down a flight of stairs, killing him. Rosario buries her father while the joyous sounds of the carnival reverberate in the background. Time passes and she has become a prostitute. Alberto (Domingo Soler), a sailor on a Honduran freighter, visits the cabaret in which she works. Rosario takes Alberto to her room where they have sex. Afterwards, as they talk, they realize that they are brother and sister, having lost contact long before (although this is never fully explained). Rosario, horror-stricken, hurls herself from the sea-wall and drowns in spite of Alberto's efforts to stop her.42

Another significant film is Fernando de Fuentes's El compadre Mendoza, adapted by De Fuentes from an idea by Mauricio Magdaleno and Juan Bustillo Oro. During the Revolution, the landowner Mendoza (Alfredo del Diestro) works out a modus vivendi with both the zapatistas and the huertistas. When one or another band rides up to his hacienda, he displays pictures of either Huerta or Zapata, as appropriate, and throws a party for his guests. On one of his trips Mendoza marries Dolores (Carmen Guerrero). While he is away, the zapatistas surprise a band of federal troops partying in Mendoza's house; on his return they detain and are going to shoot him but General Felipe Nieto (Antonio R. Frausto) spares Mendoza's life. In gratitude, he asks Nieto to be his son's godfather and makes him his compadre. Nieto, on his frequent visits to the hacienda, falls in love with Dolores and grows very fond of her son. Meanwhile, after the revolutionaries capture a wheat-laden train that Mendoza was sending to the capital, he finds himself in severe economic difficulties. He is forced to accept a deal from the huertistas to betray Nieto. While his compadre is being assassinated, Mendoza hurries from the hacienda with his wife and child.43

El compadre Mendoza is a film of rare sensitivity, insight, and dramatic power. It has and continues to draw praise from Mexican critics like García Riera, Ayala Blanco, and Tomás Pérez Turrent, who tend to be hypercritical of their country's cinema. Georges Sadoul, who was largely responsible for the rediscovery of De Fuentes by young Mexican critics, says of the film in his Dictionnaire des Films that El compadre Mendoza "is one of the great accomplishments of the Mexican cinema during the rich 1932–1952 period. The satire is carried along with enthusiasm, good humor, a vivid sense of observation, and the memories of the
Mexican Revolution (still quite recent) contribute to make of the ‘compadre’ a true social type.’’

*El compadre Mendoza* is an important film that escaped international notice when it was released in 1933. The reason for this is clear enough: Mexico, with the rest of Latin America, was outside the mainstream of Western culture—and so it remains today. Western intellectuals, and by “Western” here is meant the United States, Britain, France, Italy, and Germany, had tended to dismiss, if not disparage, the culture of Latin America by characterizing it as simply an “extension” of Spain and Portugal. For many years Latin American literature was unknown to Western audiences, until critics and publishers in first Europe and then the United States “discovered” Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, and more recently Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, and Manuel Puig, among others. It must be said, however, that French and Italian intellectuals tended more than the Anglo-Saxons to follow and appreciate the literature of Latin America. To a lesser extent the same is true of Latin American films. The French especially have generally been more aware of them perhaps as a result of the Cannes Film Festival. Since World War II, Mexicans and other Latin Americans have always participated at Cannes, and at Venice as well. This being the case, a good many French film critics and scholars have tended to be more aware of Latin American cinema than have their American or British counterparts. Mexico’s past isolation from world film audiences explains why *El compadre Mendoza* originally passed unnoticed by international cineasts and why in more recent years both the film and its director have begun to receive the credit due them.

Like the contemporaneous literary movement referred to as the “Novel of the Mexican Revolution,” the significance of *El compadre Mendoza* lies in its expression of a feeling of disillusionment at the corrupted ideals of the Revolution. The hacendado Mendoza, in his cynical manipulation of both sides, represents the newly emerging postrevolutionary bourgeoisie that replaced the Porfirian aristocracy but which in its principles differed little from the deposed elite.

The following year, 1934, marked the inauguration of President Lázaro Cárdenas who was to usher in the most radical political climate that Mexico had experienced since the epic phase of the Revolution. During his six-year administration, the distribution of land was to be dramatically stepped up and Communist influence in labor and education circles was to reach its peak; however, the dramatic highlight of the Cárdenas years was the expropriation of the American and British oil fields in 1938, which many Mexicans came to look upon as the “economic emancipation” of their country. As if auguring cardenismo, there was in 1934 briefly a cinema of “contenido social,” as García Riera terms it, expressed through two films, *Redes (Nets)* and *Janititzio*.

*Redes* was produced by the Ministry of Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública), the first time since before 1920 that the government had financed a full-length feature film. The project had its origins in 1932 when the New York photographer, Paul Strand, arrived in Mexico with the intention of putting together a book of photographs on the country. In this he was supported by the distinguished conductor and composer, Carlos Chávez, and a prominent Marxist, Narciso Bassols, who was then Minister of Education. The three concocted an idea to make government-financed films “with the people and for the people.” The critic and art historian, Agustín Velázquez, joined the group and they soon had a script for a full-length film and a director in the person of a young Austrian, Fred Zinnemann.

The story of *Redes* concerns a young fisherman, Miro (Silvio Hernández), who organizes his fellow workers against the monopolist (David Valle González) who buys their catch at very low prices. The monopolist bribes a local politician to seed discord among the fishermen who then quarrel among themselves; when the police are called in to quell the disturbance, the politician takes advantage of the confusion to shoot Miro. His death, however, serves to unite the fishermen and they carry Miro’s corpse to the city in a demonstration of labor solidarity.

*Redes* expressed for the first time the elements considered by the country’s intellectuals as “ideal for a good national cinema”:

> a combative social content, good photography that reveals the beauty of native faces and the on-location filming, an accomplishment and montage inspired by Eisenstein’s example. With all this, a linkage was attempted with the themes and forms of the most advanced currents of plasticity, music, and the other Mexican arts which came together in a necessity to revindicate and uplift the Indian in the picture of national culture.

Continuing in this short-lived vein of “social content” cinema was *Janititzio* directed by Carlos Navarro and written by Luis Márquez who based the story on an Indian legend from the Pátzcuaro area. The plot was based on a true incident that transpired on the island of Janititzio: an Indian girl had become the mistress of an outsider—a Spaniard who lived in Pátzcuaro and who was already resented by the Indians because he bought their fish catch at a low price and sold it at a large profit. The girl, on her return to Janititzio, was stoned by the islanders and banished from the community. The cast included Emilio “El Indio” Fernández who was to enjoy a long career as performer and director. He later wrote and directed two films based on *Janititzio*: the famous *María Candelaria* (1943) and *Macondiap* (1948).

According to Ayala Blanco, the “fundamental influences” on Navarro and cameraman Jack Draper were the photography of *Thunder Over Mexico* (Eisenstein’s cannibalized footage from his projected *¡Que viva México!*), Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* (1928), and F. W. Murnau’s *Tabu* (1928—1931). Of *Janititzio* he says: “By means of elaborate images and a very slow interior rhythm, we come into contact with the primitive paradise of the Rousseauan savage who lives in harmony with nature, but an imperfect paradise since tabus exist and the white man mars it.” In the screenplay for *Janititzio*, the story of the Indian girl who was disgraced for loving a white man is essentially retained. Her lover is not a Spanish buyer but an engineer (Gilberto González) who arranges to imprison the fisherman Zirahuén (Emilio Fernández) so he may seduce his fiancée Eréndira (María Teresa Orozco). Ayala Blanco considers the film’s principal attributes to be the images of the “fisherman’s butterfly-like nets floating over the lake and the innocence of the native characters.”

*Redes* and *Janititzio* can be considered as superior films that served to initiate an
signaling active official participation in the movie industry and, as some feared, its possible nationalization. Certainly there was sufficient precedence for such a step, at least in the minds of the independent producers. In Germany from the time of World War I, the government had exercised control over filmmaking by buying out the largest private producers and acquiring ownership over all studio facilities; now, under Adolf Hitler, German filmmakers were totally at the disposal of the State. In Italy also the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini had stepped in to build Cinecitta, the great studio complex outside of Rome and thereby to take a commanding role in film production. In the Soviet Union the process had been completed even earlier. Another leading film producer, Japan, was experiencing a similar evolution under the increasing political power of the militarists.59

The Mexican government largely subsidized the construction of the new CLASA (Cinematográfica Latino Americana, S.A.) studios which were equipped with the latest equipment and were up to date as any Hollywood or European facility. For the first time in Mexico, a movie studio was supplied with Mitchell cameras, re-recording (or synchronization) equipment, a "gamma" processing laboratory, and "back-projection" equipment, among other of the latest advances. The first film to be made at these studios was Fernando de Fuentes's Vámonos con Pancho Villa (Let's Go with Pancho Villa) (1935); the government was generous with assistance to the similarly named production company, CLASA Films. It made available a complete military train, a regiment of regular army troops, ordnance, artillery, uniforms, horses, and assorted military equipment. When CLASA, after the film was completed, declared bankruptcy (the movie had cost one million pesos), the government subsidized it for the same amount thus saving the company. However, in spite of these developments which seemed to presage a state cinema industry, filming was to remain a private enterprise preserve in which investors placed their money in order to realize a profit in the shortest time possible. Without a rational system of financing and credit, lacking an effective distribution system, and with no foreign markets to speak of, Mexican production went from crisis to crisis. In 1935 twenty-two films were produced, one fewer than the year before. By contrast, Spain almost doubled its production over the previous year's forty-four thus placing her first among Spanish-speaking countries. Argentina slowly expanded its film industry by releasing thirteen full-length features. In the same year, Hollywood produced eight Hispanic movies, the most important of which were Paramount's El día que me quieras (The Day That You Love Me) and Tango Bar with Carlos Gardel, the Argentine singing idol who was to perish that same year in a tragic plane crash in Medellin, Colombia while on a tour of Latin America.51

The second of Fernando de Fuentes's great trilogy of films, Vámonos con Pancho Villa, was completed in 1935, although because of CLASA's financial difficulties its premiere was delayed until 1936, after Fuentes' third and most popular picture, Allá en el Rancho Grande (Out at Big Ranch), had been released. In Vámonos con Pancho Villa, De Fuentes views the Revolution as a cataclysmic event that sweeps away its uncomprehending participants; he portrays the disillusionment that arises from the dichotomy 'between the Revolution understood as
the time is 1914. Miguel Angel (Ramón Vallarino), a deserter from the federal army, rejoins his friends Tiburcio (Antonio R. Frausto), Meliton (Manuel Tamés), Martín (Rafael F. Muñoz), and the Perea brothers, Maximo (Raúl de Anda) and Rodrigo (Carlos López “Chafín”), a group of adventurous ranchers who dub themselves “los leones de San Pablo.” They decide to join the forces of Pancho Villa (Domingo Soler) whom they find distributing corn to the troops from a train. The film consists of a series of episodes in which either one of the leones or another individual is killed. Miguel Angel and Tiburcio, the only survivors of the group, are on route to Zacatecas on a villista train when a cholera epidemic breaks out. When Miguel Angel falls ill, Tiburcio is forced to kill him and cremate the body. In the face of Villa’s fear of the epidemic, Tiburcio leaves the train and returns, disillusioned, to his village.

Vámonos con Pancho Villa is a remarkable film which looks back on the still-recent events that constituted a traumatic part of the lives of most Mexicans of the time, and coldly demythologizes them, revealing the Revolution for what it was in a multitude of major and minor details. That this could have come about in a time of renewed radical activity, and that the government, while heavily supporting the film, made no attempt to influence the theme, speaks highly of the open

De Fuentes’s Vámonos con Pancho Villa! (1935) with (left to right) Rafael F. Muñoz, Antonio R. Frausto, Ramon Vallarino, and Manuel Tamés. (Cineteca)

political climate of the time. Vámonos con Pancho Villa was the last Mexican motion picture to deal honestly with the country’s recent past. What seemed to be the auspicious beginnings of a serious national cinema, however, were soon to be overwhelmed by a commercialist trend given impetus by events in the world beyond Mexico’s borders. Ironically, it was Fernando de Fuentes himself who was to powerfully influence this development of the cinema with his next film.

Allá en el Rancho Grande (1936) “opened to Mexico all of the markets of Latin America and changed the course of the industry.” It demonstrated to Mexican filmmakers that the Latin American publics expected of them “Mexican” movies—that is, “films that would be vehicles for the unique ‘national color’ of Mexico.” They were not interested in Mexican movies that were simply duplications of Hollywood Hispanic films. The majority of the country’s production had been “family melodramas” such as the Spaniard Juan Oro’s Madre querida (1935), a tear-jerking, shamelessly sentimental paean to motherhood which was rushed through production so as to be premiered on Mother’s Day. It was a great hit at the boxoffice in Mexico and its success inspired other producers to emulate it—a phenomenon of the mass entertainment business with which we are quite familiar in the United States. Outside of the country, however, such films were not popular enough to establish a firm foothold for the Mexican cinema.

From left to right, Lorenzo Barcelata, Esther Fernández, and Tito Guizar in Fernando de Fuentes’s Allá en el Rancho Grande (1936). (Azteca Films, Los Angeles)
horse like his American counterpart and be dressed in what appears to resemble the cowboy’s dress but there the similarity ends. The Yankee cowboy costume is that of a working man—plain, homespun with no fancy frills (with the possible exception of the costumes that Gene Autry and, particularly, Roy Rogers wore). The charro is magnificently attired in an embroidered riding suit that bespeaks a hoary tradition of rural aristocracy. His environment is not a wild frontier area but a minutely ordered feudal society in which the hacienda presides with paternalistic yet firm authority over his socioeconomic inferiors—the hacienda’s employees, tenants, and, of course, women. The charro glories in his masculinity and he exercises it not so much to right a wrong but rather to enhance his male self-esteem and social prerogatives. It is the idealization of an attitude firmly rooted not only in the Porfrian past but in Mexico’s colonial tradition and can be said to reflect a powerful conservative tendency in the society. In other words, the charro or ranchero was generally not trying to initiate social change but rather to maintain the status quo. He came to represent the traditional and Catholic values in defiance of the leftist, modernizing tendencies emanating from the cities.  

Allá en el Rancho Grande brought to life just such a traditional society but tellingly placed it in contemporary Mexico at a time when the Cardenas government was making it very clear that its objective was to extirpate all traces of prerevolutionary institutions and create a “classless” society. Fernando de Fuentes rejected such “socialistic” pretensions by exalting the traditional _patrón-peón_ and male-female relationships, and by so doing he struck a responsive chord in the Mexican middle class which was fearful of the “spread” of communism under the leftist Cardenas. The Mexican film industry in fact reflected the conservative forces that were in power and influence and which were to displace the left-wing reformists in 1940 with the inauguration of President Manuel Avila Camacho (1940–1946). De Fuentes, who had himself given strong impetus to the development of a political “message” cinema with _El compadre Mendoza_ and _Vámonos con Pancho Villa_, reversed the trend (and in the process rejected his own incisive probings into the Mexican condition as epitomized in these two films) and put Mexican cinema on a solidly commercial, _petit bourgeois_ track. In _El compadre Mendoza_, De Fuentes was first critical of the apolitical, opportunistic class that went along with the Revolution as long as its interests were not threatened, yet readily turned against it to maintain its economic position. In _Vámonos con Pancho Villa_ he then examined the Revolution and saw it as a cataclysm which sucked in helpless individuals and destroyed them, and which in the end did not really improve conditions. Finally, in _Allá en el Rancho Grande_, he rejected the uncertainties and perils of revolutionary change and opted for an idealized prerevolutionary social order in which individuals of different classes each knew their place and were the happier for it.  

On a less socially symbolic level, _Allá en el Rancho Grande_ was the prototype for the most enduring genre of the Mexican cinema—the musical _comedia ranchera_. It established its star, Tito Guizar, as a favorite of millions throughout the hemisphere; he eventually became quite well known in the United States and for a number of years was to be the “typical” Latin American in a number of American
films. Allá en el Rancho Grande made music de rigueur for all subsequent ranch comedies and it helped to establish the mariachi, those stringed instrument and vocal groups originally from the state of Jalisco, as what in effect have become the national musical ensemble. In fact the latter is a good example of what Carlos Monsiváis describes as the development by the Mexican establishment of an "official" yet spurious folklore which has been useful not only in attracting tourism but, much more importantly, in blurring regional differences so as to create a more integrated society.

The resounding success of Allá en el Rancho Grande inspired the "entire Mexican cinema to move to that very productive Rancho which had also given it its first figure of international prestige, Tito Guizar. Of the thirty-eight films made in 1937, more than half were based on folkloric or nationalistic themes. The civil war in Spain reduced that country's production to only ten motion pictures while Argentina's output rose to twenty-eight. Some details of interest in an otherwise undistinguished roster of films that year were: the first Mexican color film was made, Roberto A. Morales' production of Novillero (Novice Bullfighter) directed by Boris Maicon and photographed by Ross Fisher (the color process used was "cine-color"); the debut of Alejandro Galindo, who was to become one of the most important and prolific of his country's filmmakers, directing Almas rebeldes (Rebel Souls) which was produced by Raúl de Anda; the inauspicious debut of Jorge Negrete, the future box-office idol and singing charro par excellence, in La madrinda del diablo (The Devil's Godmother); and the first Mexican film directed by a woman (there were to be precious few), La mujer de nadie (Nobody's Woman) directed by Adela Sequeyro. This year also saw the film debut of Mario Moreno "Cantinflas" in a minor supporting role in Miguel Contreras' No te engañes corazón (Don't Deceive Yourself, My Heart). Fernando de Fuentes enticed Lupe Vélez from Hollywood to appear in La Zandunga, a folkloric comedy set in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. In spite of her participation, the film was a commercial and artistic failure. The reluctance of the other Mexican Hollywood star, Dolores del Río, to appear in one of her own country's films did not endear her to many of her countrymen; she justified her absence from Mexican screens by arguing that the national industry was not as yet "of sufficient solidity."

Dolores del Río was certainly accurate in her assessment of Mexico's film industry, especially since she was viewing it from the standpoint of the huge American industry—huge not only physically but in capitalization, investment, distribution, and profits. Put in the simplest terms, the moguls of Hollywood were not only hard-nosed businessmen but also dedicated filmmakers; they plowed their profits back into the movie business. In Mexico, on the other hand, producers were often businessmen out to make a quick profit who had little interest in building a solidly based production company. Thus directors were hampered in their efforts to make quality films by a strong commercialist imperative: the producers were reluctant to invest large sums of money in an industry in which they had little faith, and when they did they expected monetary returns as quickly as possible. Thus shooting schedules were impressibly short—two to three weeks on the average—and budgets as restricted as could be gotten away with. The possibilities of a state cinema were demonstrated by the success of De Fuentes' Vámonos con Pancho Villa which had enjoyed the Cárdenas government's generous support and was produced in the modern and largely officially financed CLASA studios. Yet the specter of "socialism" thoroughly frightened both petty bourgeois investors and filmmakers even though the administration's measures stopped far short of nationalization. The most radical actions taken by the government were in its encouragement of unionization in the film industry as well as in other Mexican industries. Another measure taken by the Cárdenas was that all theaters show a minimum number of Mexican films, a reflection of the difficulty of competing with Hollywood and its well-organized distribution systems. Another unsettling development was the entrance of American capital into Mexican filmmaking as exemplified by RKO's direct participation in the production of national films.

When compared with the problems that, say, French and Italian cinema had experienced after World War I, the organization, or rather lack of it, that characterized the Mexican industry was far from unique. Most film production was carried out by small companies, some of which were formed solely for the purpose of making one film and then dissolved; studios, like those of CLASA and Estudios Azteca, were privately owned and the facilities rented to filmmakers. The movie industry was indeed on a shaky footing in spite of the 1936 success of Allá en el Rancho Grande; the popularity of that film demonstrated the potential, and the need for, international markets. Unfortunately, in 1937 the commercialism and lack of creativity of most producers led them to try to capitalize on De Fuentes' triumph by churning out more than twenty "Rancho Grandes," that is, musical melodramas based on folkloric or nationalistic themes. During 1939 only thirty-seven films were made, twenty less than the previous year, even though the membership of UTECM had grown steadily every year since its founding until it numbered over 410. Another indication of the "crisis" was Argentina's production, surpassing Mexico's for the first time with fifty films in 1939, making it the largest producer in the world of Spanish-language movies.

The last years of the decade of the 1930s were tumultuous and significant ones for Mexico. Lazaro Cárdenas had injected a new vitality into the Revolution, an energy that was to be quickly dissipated after 1940. Mexico had defied the great capitalist powers—the United States and Great Britain—by expropriating their oil properties in 1938 after a prolonged and bitter labor dispute. In addition, the Cárdenas government had extended open and full support (as far as Mexico's limited means allowed it) to the beleaguered Spanish Republic. After Franco's victory in 1939, Mexico opened its doors to thousands of Spanish refugees. This sudden inflow of immigrants constituted in its majority an elite of Spanish society—writers, artists, intellectuals, political activists. Among this number were many filmmakers and performers whose names in a few years were to become standards of the Mexican movie industry. Angel Garasa, Jose Baviera, Emilio Tuero, Emilia Guiú, and Luis Alcoriza.

Yet these dramatic events were not reflected at all in the Mexican cinema of the period—it was the beginning of the "detachment from reality" that was to
characterize the greater part of the filmmaking of the 1940—1965 era. For instance, Alejandro Galindo’s *Refugiados en Madrid* (Refugees in Madrid) (1938), although set in the Spain of the Civil War and concerning a group of presumably anti-Franco Spaniards taking refuge in a Latin American embassy in Madrid, managed to avoid all reference to the condescending factions and convert the subject into a stock melodrama. *El indio* (The Indian), made that same year, was based on the prize-winning novel of the same name by Gregorio López y Fuentes. Obviously a cinematic effort to parallel the “Indianist” literary genre, it instead presented an idealized and exotic view of the Mexican Indian. Alejandro Galindo, although blatantly inspired by the Hollywood gangster film, made a technically competent movie, *Mientras México duerme* (While Mexico Sleeps) (1938), which established him as one of the more talented Mexican directors working at the time. It starred Arturo de Córdova and was photographed by Gabriel Figueroa.

As if to symbolize the declining days of the Cárdenas regime and the desire of the country’s bourgeoisie for “normalcy,” Juan Bustillo Oro’s 1939 production of *En tiempos de don Porfirio* (In the Times of Don Porfirio) was that year’s most successful film at the box-office. The nostalgia it evoked of a simpler and more peaceful epoch could also be interpreted as a rejection by the middle class of the more socialistic aspects of the Revolution. The appearance in the film of such popular actors as Fernando Soler, the Spanish immigrant Emilio Tuero, and the fine comic actor Joaquín Pardavé were also potent factors in the movie’s success. Another historical note of importance is the formation of Posa Films which featured the popular *carpa* (tent show) comic, Cantinflas, in two short features, *Siempre listo en las tinieblas* (Always Ready in the Darkness) and *Jengibre contra dinamita* (Ginger versus Dynamite).

Just as 1939 signified the end of the civil war in Spain, this fateful year was to see the long-awaited and feared outbreak of war in Europe. The effects of the world conflict on Mexico—not only on its film industry but in almost all aspects of the economy—were to be fortuitous indeed. The ambitious rising entrepreneurial class, anxiously awaiting the welcome end of Lazaro Cárdenas’s presidential term, looked forward to a regime that would place its greatest priority on the expansion of the Mexican economy rather than on unsettling and even dangerous notions of “social justice” and “class struggle.” It was the attitudes of this *nouveau riche* petty bourgeoisie, ambitious yet unsure of itself and identifying somewhat with Porfirismo, that were to set the tone for Mexican movie production of the following decades. With the official denouement of *cardenismo*, the danger (if ever it existed) of a nationalized film industry was safely past; the cinema was firmly in private hands and was to remain so during the boom years of the 1940s and 1950s, and well into the crisis-ridden 1960s.

Bolstering the Mexican middle class’ identification with international democracy (and the business opportunities inherent in such an alignment), Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “Good Neighbor” policy sought to emphasize to Latin America that the nations of the area were full and equal partners in the struggle against fascism. An important part of this campaign was the effort to “improve” the Latin image in Hollywood films. To the United States’s favorite Latin American, Tito Guizar, was now added Arturo de Córdova who appeared in an English-language film, *Miracle on Main Street* as well as in the Hispanic feature, *El caudal de los hijos.* Even Miguel Contreras Torres wrote, produced, and directed an English-language feature, *The Mad Empress*, for Vitagraph. However, the principal example of Hollywood’s response to Washington’s new Latin American policy was Warner Brothers’ major production of *Juárez* with Paul Muni in the title role. Bette Davis played Carlotta, Brian Aherne was Maximilian, and John Garfield—of all people—portrayed the young Porfirio Díaz. Perhaps one of the most incongruous scenes in all film history (and there are many) is the sight of Díaz (Garfield) kneeling at Juárez’s feet (Muni) and asking the deliberately Lincoln-esque president to explain democracy to him. The movie never went on to reassure its viewers as to how well Juárez’s definition of this elusive political art had been absorbed by his eager protegé. *Juárez* nonetheless was given first-class treatment in Mexico, being premiered at the Palace of Fine Arts by decree of Lázaro Cárdenas himself.

Such an auspicious event was a fitting demonstration of the increased respect in which the Latin American “partners” were to be held, even though some cynics might have pointed out that the formerly scoffed-at nations south of the Rio Grande were practically the only friends the United States had left in the world who were not directly threatened by Axis military might. Whatever Hollywood did or did not do to bolster the Good Neighbor policy, events beyond its control were to facilitate the growth of a major and competing movie industry right on its doorstep.