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A Different Kind of Lexicon for a Different Kind of Cinema

Rist, Peter H. Historical Dictionary of South American Cinema. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. pp. 701.

Not just another dictionary in the well-known Rowman & Littlefield “Historical Dictionaries” series – South American Cinema is a special kind of book for anyone delving into the broad field of national and regional cinema encompassed by the term South American. Author Peter H. Rist is a professor at Concordia University in Montreal and his PhD thesis dealt with the early films of John Ford. Rist is better known within film circles as the author of several papers on experimental Japanese cinema, so his solo venture into South American cinema is quite unexpected. It is even more surprising that he has produced a 701 page book of this stature on his own – definitely a huge task.

What is quite different about this book is evident right from the title – South American – not Latin American, Hispano-American, or any other expected paradigm based on the language or the hyper-cultural context. Rist, as he notes in the preface, tried to envision a book bordered by the notion of the whole continent of South America. This rather unusual approach (where almost all other titles on the subject focus on Latin or Hispanic) broadens the horizon with an exotic array that includes Surinamese, French Guianese, and Guyanese cinema. Rarely are these nations even noted in serious books, so entries with their names, brief as they are, make a difference. This is also discussion on the cinema of small Hispanic nations such as Ecuador and Paraguay. On another level, the South American context includes French, English and Dutch language cinema alongside prevailing Spanish and Portuguese, albeit the output of these films is negligible in comparison with the bigger and traditionally more important films of Brazil or Argentina.

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As he admits in the preface, it took the author eleven years to complete a book of this size and character. Where most historical dictionaries are co-written by dozens of contributors, Rist opted for a solo effort and it proved to be the right choice for a number of reasons. Firstly, it gave him the freedom of selection and to enlarge the spectrum of documentary films, experimental films, and indigenous films from the region. Secondly, it means that every entry is written in relation to its topic or poetic sibling, with the same stylistic and scientific accuracy. Rist did not just copy and paste well-known entries from dozens of readers, companions, and introductions to Third World Cinema or Latin American Cinema, he wrote entirely new entries keeping in mind the changing attitude towards the importance of South American cinema on the academic and cultural scale.

The dictionary is organized from A to Z with over a thousand entries, including national cinema entries such as from Peru or Bolivia, directorial entries such as Alea or Solanas, actor/actress entries such as Zeze Motta or Oscarito, topical entries such as documentary films or pornochanchada, and various film crew entries varying from Jorge Luis Borges to Oscar Soria. The titles of the films are in their original language, such as La teta asustada (The Milk of Sorrow) or Terra em Transe (Land in Anguish), with English titles provided (but not bolded) in the text of the entry. This is an anti-hegemonic approach that gives the reader used to English titles quite a task to locate the films and it is precisely this notion that drives one to read the book as a web of well-written and well-organized entries freed from the Western driven narrowness that is usually offered.

Before the dictionary section of the book, Rist offers the reader a 25-page chronology of South American film history that begins with the first Kinetoscope showing in Rio de Janeiro in 1894 and ends in 2013 with the death of Hugo Chavez. Following the dictionary section, the bibliography section offers 40 pages of carefully selected and scholarly important titles that encompass South American film and cinema culture. The bibliography is further subdivided into national entries, which further highlights the thoroughness of the work done by Rist.

To give an example of a national cinema entry, let’s take Argentina: Rist first notes the demographics of the country and its film infrastructure; then he recounts the history of Argentine cinema with special attention given to silent films (tango film was especially interesting with music performed live during projections) and later to auteur filmmakers and avant-garde movements like

Grupo Cine Liberacion. Bolded text in each entry leads to another entry, making the dictionary an entwined web that ultimately creates a whole circle. The entries dealing with specific film titles, for example, La Hora de Los Hornos (The Hour of Furnaces), prove that Rist read all the necessary bibliography on the subject. Entries offer more than an encyclopedic notion; they describe the essential qualities of a film. The entries concerning actors/actresses are lesser in numbers and only the great heroes/heroines of the screen are given sole entries, such as Oscarito, Grande Otelo, and Carmen Miranda.

Historical Dictionary of South American Cinema is a gem of a book, both for ardent students of non-Western cinema and for scholars in that field. It is a new found best companion that will always keep the facts and figures safe and within reach. With a great chronology section, a dictionary with a fully entwined web of entries, a brilliant bibliography section structured by countries, Historical Dictionary of South American Cinema has all the right ingredients one would expect from such a title. Peter H. Rist and his eleven years of work on this book prove that sometimes it is better to work meticulously and alone to achieve a great work on the subject of film history.

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