

offering distinctly theoretical and historical explorations of climate change and the endangerment of the natural world. Peterson looks at archival nature films from a deliberately anachronistic perspective, asking how these films—which display once-thriving species, now endangered—unintentionally take on new meanings in light of the contemporary climate catastrophe. Specifically, Peterson traces the affective sense of “endangerment” that these films arouse, a “way of understanding the world through an attitude attuned to loss, disappearance, and preservation” (55). Mining the theoretical implications of this orientation toward film as archive, Cahill’s chapter weaves together two central metaphors of photographic media—“garbage” and “ghosts”—as they manifest themselves in the writings of Siegfried Krauer and Georges Bataille. While Cahill largely examines the figurative dimensions of garbage (photography’s contingencies, the waste on the cutting-room floor) and ghosts (cinema’s uncanniness, its illusory sense of presence), he also, importantly, considers their more literal status as the industrial by-products of both analog and digital film that quietly accumulate over time.

While these chapters largely touch upon associative links and affective charges conjured by the “ends of cinema,” others forge new pathways through more familiar terrain. Mark Paul Meyer’s chapter examines what’s been lost in the digital turn from the perspective of a film archivist trained in the careful physical inspection of celluloid film. Meyer considers the often-overlooked ways in which the materiality of film stock bears the traces of artistic and industrial history, such as the discernible difference between a splice made intentionally by the editor and one made as censorship. And as the entry’s dazzling array of color plates demonstrates, many forms of color processing—tinting, stenciling, Technicolor, hand-coloring—are discernible from the visual and tactile qualities of the filmstrip.

André Gaudreault’s entry also enters into familiar debates. Gaudreault relays the story of the 2018 conflict between Netflix and Cannes, when the film festival refused entry to any Netflix-produced films, including Orson Welles’s resurrected *The Other Side of the Wind* (2018). Gaudreault’s bigger aim with this anecdote is to examine the language that surrounds it: that many in France who supported the Cannes decision do not recognize Netflix films as “films,” that Orson Welles disliked the word “cinema” (and “motion picture” for that matter), and that the French language doesn’t quite have its own version of the medium-agnostic term “moving image.” In this thoughtful piece, Gaudreault traces a history of the word *cinema* and

its synonyms, its manifold connotations, and the persistence of its use in the face of the transformations of the cinematic medium.

Amy Villarejo’s chapter, titled “& Mediation: Television’s Partial Visions,” similarly concerns the nuances of language surrounding the ends of cinema discourse, but instead of tracing the history of “cinema” or interrogating the logic of “ends,” her entry begins by focusing on the ampersand—the mark of punctuation that slowly found its way into the names of film studies departments and journals over the last thirty years. Focusing on the ampersand triggers a refreshing discovery: the “death” of a medium is often simply a negative reframing of a conceptual expansion, a blurring of boundaries. The “and” is a nonhierarchical tool for signaling that expansion by joining one idea or concept to another: so, if something of cinema has indeed ended, this is just an opportunity for new linkages to be made.

Clearly reminiscent of André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion’s *The End of Cinema?* (2015), Grusin and Szczepaniak-Gillece’s *Ends of Cinema* discards the question mark of that previous book. *Ends of Cinema* is not quite an attempt to question the dogma of cinema’s recent “death” by challenging its claims to historical uniqueness. That is well-trodden territory. Rather, *Ends of Cinema* uses the rhetoric of cinema’s finality as a generative framing device, a way of linking together disparate fields of research that are rarely put into conversation.

BOOK DATA Richard Grusin and Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece, eds., *Ends of Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. \$112 cloth, \$28 paper, \$26.60 e-book. 248 pages.

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## KOEL BANERJEE

### *Struggles for Recognition: Melodrama and Visibility in Latin American Silent Film*, by Juan Sebastián

#### Ospina León

Juan Sebastián Ospina León’s *Struggles for Recognition: Melodrama and Visibility in Latin American Silent Cinema* historicizes Latin American silent cinema by tracing film melodrama’s northbound journey from Buenos Aires to Los Angeles. Echoing Linda Williams’s influential reading of melodrama as “the fundamental mode” of popular American cinema, Ospina León makes a case for melodrama as the “dominant mode” that made visible the experiences of modernity in early-twentieth-century

Latin America. The melodramatic mode's notoriously protean nature—what Christine Gledhill calls its “historical genericity”—enables the book's ambitious comparative study of Argentine, Colombian, and Mexican cinema that is both rooted in archival research and attentive to close textual analysis. *Struggles for Recognition* adopts a comparative approach to film history that is sensitive to the local and global inflections of this intermedial and industrial art form.

*Struggles for Recognition* argues that melodrama is always political because it seeks to change the world. At the same time, Ospina León emphasizes that the melodramatic worldview, though suffused with what seems to be a universal sense of justice, should not be taken to be atemporal. Indeed, he contends that melodrama's contrast between “how things are” and “how things ought to be” is historically and culturally specific.

In pursuing this line of inquiry, the book departs from some of the key assumptions about the mode proposed by Peter Brooks in his seminal study, *The Melodramatic Imagination*. Following Brooks, *Struggles for Recognition* acknowledges that melodrama is a mode of recognition. However, unlike Brooks, Ospina León asserts that melodrama's recognition is not limited to moral recognition. Instead, he argues that melodramatic recognition operates at several levels, including personal-emotional, legal, and social (17). The book neither demonizes melodrama as manipulation nor valorizes it uncritically. Melodrama, rather, is a contested site of recognition; a mode known to generate pathos for the powerless, it is not always “objectively just” as it renders some sociocultural struggles visible while erasing other injustices.

Ospina León situates melodrama as a “traveling theory” by examining its local articulations in cinematic texts, film cultures, and trade journals as well as its global exchanges. *Struggles for Recognition* traces the uneven development of cinema industries in Latin America, highlighting the connections, conflicts, and negotiations between organized capital and independent endeavors, and connecting these various national film industrial contexts by focusing on the production, circulation, and reception of melodrama. Ospina León makes a noteworthy distinction between what he terms the melodramatic “regime” and the melodramatic mode, the latter having long been the focus of melodrama scholarship. This shift in emphasis is in keeping with the book's preoccupation with the relationship between the sights of film melodrama and the sites of Latin American urban modernity. Using moving-image melodrama as a structuring device enables Ospina León

to explore the industrial, social, technological, and urban experiences of modernity. This allows him to sidestep a teleological account of modernity, especially theories that posit Latin American modernity as “incomplete,” and instead to approach modernity as “felt experience” (9).

*Struggles for Recognition* explores film melodrama's cross-cultural dissemination to shed light on the cultural politics of location. The dialectic between the national and the global dimensions of the melodramatic mode is not the book's main focus, and Ospina León explains why he is not interested in the question of national cinema. Although the book acknowledges the struggle between various urban film centers for national dominance, it nevertheless argues that such contests do not confirm the presence of national film cultures. This disavowal of the national, however, leaves the reader with more questions than answers. Indeed, during periods of postcolonial emergence, melodrama, one could argue, sought to fulfill what Timothy Brennan calls the “national longing for form.”

The first chapter, “‘Filmdom’ before and during the Great War,” maps the global circulation of cinema and the rising popularity of film melodrama in Latin America before and during World War I. Tracing the global travels of melodrama, it highlights the “cinematic colonization of the planet” by charting Latin America's emergence as a viable market for European cinema (26). It explores how the Great War affected film industries and their global markets by redrawing the center/periphery of the cinematic world. While it points out the rising popularity of Hollywood films in Latin America during the war, especially when the European industries could not meet local demands, the chapter makes the case that this transition cannot be completely attributed to cultural imperialism and passive consumption. Instead, drawing on filmic cartographies and polemics of trade journals, it argues that Latin American distributors and exhibitors played an important role in this reconfiguration. In so doing, the chapter highlights the many film cultures that emerged in the region during this period and the ways that global film practices, particularly melodramatic cultures, came to suffuse everyday life.

The second chapter, “Buenos Aires Shadows: Urban Space, Fallen Women, and Destitute Men,” focuses on *cine-drama porteño* (“porteño cinedrama”), city films that competed with and even surpassed the nationalistic gaucho films in popularity. While the gaucho films responded to modernization by valorizing Argentine cowboys, porteño cinedramas' reaction to the changes brought about by modernization was bleak. Primarily set in Buenos Aires, these films responded

to rapid urbanization and its resulting mass immigration by featuring the trope of the fallen barrio woman in urban-specific settings, such as department stores and cabarets. Porteño cinedramas struck a cautionary note against moral decadence, the perils of consumerism, and aspirations for class mobility by appealing to the audience's "sentiment, status anxiety, and moral self-consciousness" (57).

For Ospina León, the popularity of porteño cinedrama demonstrates the ways that melodrama rendered visible the sociocultural tensions unleashed by modernization. The pathos that they generate, he suggests, is almost Brooksonian in that they imbue everyday life in a postsacred world with moral legibility. However, the next set of films that *Struggles for Recognition* focuses on marks a significant departure from this model.

The films that Ospina León analyzes in his third chapter, "Bogotá and Medellín: A Tale of Two Cities and Conservative Progress," do not take place in a world that has lost the "traditional Sacred." Rather, Bogotá's narrative cinema is, he notes, an "officially progressive—and holy—endeavor" (80). He makes the case that its religion and religious imagery form a part of the melodramatic imagery, especially in the form of the tableau. As he points out, Colombian patriarchal family melodrama is not tasked with resacralizing a postsacred world. Instead, he demonstrates that, during the period of "conservative hegemony," religion continued to be at the heart of this iteration of the melodramatic imagination, cohabiting with the processes of modernization. Modernity, in this case, is not a rupture but a continuation. This argument, scaffolded by close readings of family melodramas, advances Ospina León's overall claim that Latin American modernity is different but not deferred.

Chapter 4, "Orizaba, Veracruz: Yesterday's Melodrama Today," focuses on *El tren fantasma* (*The Ghost Train*, 1926) and *El puño de hierro* (1927), two surviving Mexican feature-length films, both directed by Gabriel García Moreno, that have been "reconstructed" in the archive by film preservationists. Melodrama, here, is more than text; current-day preoccupations, aesthetics, and even a melodramatic "horizon of expectation" can be projected onto its texts during their restoration in the archive (110). Thus, the current version of both films invokes what Walter Benjamin called "dialectical images," as the chapter argues, "wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (110). The chapter examines the linkages between curatorial work, film preservation, and anxieties about appropriation. Through its close textual analysis, it concludes that melodrama is a polyphonic and unending "sense-making enterprise" and as such, the site of a ceaseless struggle for representation (136).

The fifth chapter, "South to North: Latin American Modernities," concludes the book's northbound journey. Ospina León examines how transnational exchanges affect local film cultures. In its final chapter, *Struggles for Recognition* revisits some of the concerns it had raised in the first chapter—in particular, the question of cultural imperialism. It interrogates the popular understanding of the "one-way" influence of American cinema over Latin American film cultures, illuminates the complex networks of Latin American film cultures across the Americas, and highlights the cultural reciprocity between Hollywood and Latin American film industries.

Ospina León focuses on Julian de Ajuria's ambitious *Una nueva y gloriosa nación* (*The Charge of the Gauchos*, Albert H. Kelley, 1928), which experimented with melodramatic conventions to appeal to both American and Argentine audiences. The narrative impulse behind *The Charge of the Gauchos* is an amalgamation of authorial ambition, nationalism, patriotic enthusiasm, and cinephilia. However, as Ospina León points out, its aesthetic is equally shaped by the demands of transnational finances. Seeking to cater to both domestic and international markets, the film eschews historical accuracy in favor of cinematic spectacle. The chapter highlights the film's ultimate inability to cater to national and nonnational audiences: its attempt to forge a "universal" narrative language was subject to local misreadings.

Ospina León argues that the Colombian film *Garras de oro* (*The Dawn of Justice*, P.P. Jambrina, 1926), unlike *Charge*, exhibits an unequivocally anti-US sentiment both in its narrative and in its visual aesthetics. By constellating the two films, the chapter highlights the complexities of transnational cultural exchange during the silent era.

*Struggles for Recognition*, given its subject, scope, and method, will be of interest to melodrama scholars; film scholars, particularly historians; and scholars of Latin American cultural studies. It joins a growing body of melodrama scholarship, cinematic and literary, that no longer tasks itself with "rescuing" melodrama from allegations of excess. In its closing remarks, the book departs from its historical preoccupation to consider the current state of the melodramatic field. It brings to the foreground the more pressing stakes of contemporary melodrama studies by returning to the politics of representation. Turning its historical lens onto the present, *Struggles for Recognition* reminds its readers that melodrama can be (and has been) used for liberal and illiberal ends. However, Ospina León poignantly notes that scholars, instead of getting caught up in skepticism

or euphoria, must be mindful of textual and contextual mediations as they engage with melodrama's sense-making possibilities in reel and real life.

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## BRANDY MONK-PAYTON

### ***The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom*, by Alfred L. Martin Jr.**

Black-cast sitcoms are back. During July 2020, streaming giant Netflix put programs like *Moesha* (UPN, 1996–2001), *Sister, Sister* (ABC, 1994–95; The WB, 1995–99), *Half & Half* (UPN, 2002–6), *Girlfriends* (UPN, 2000–6; The CW, 2006–8), *The Game* (The CW, 2006–9; BET, 2006–15), and more on the roster. In a similar but different vein, HBO Max premiered a reunion special of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC, 1990–96) on November 19, 2020. Both lucrative programming moves capitalized on black nostalgia for the beloved situation comedies of the 1990s and early 2000s in the midst of global Black Lives Matter protests and calls for Hollywood to commit to diversity, equity, and inclusion. These series, some of which might not have aged well, still provide joy and laughter to Black audiences. The renewed popular interest in such television fare on the part of the entertainment industry perfectly aligns with the release of Alfred L. Martin Jr.'s extensive academic look at some of these programs in his book *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom*. Importantly, Martin interrogates how and why the television medium (dis)engages with black gayness through the Black-cast sitcom.

*The Generic Closet* is an exciting and vital entry into on media-industries scholarship, a field that is also at the intersection of queer TV studies and Black TV studies. At the heart of the book is Martin's conceptualization of "the generic closet." The generic closet refers to both the status of queer subjectivity and the role of genre. When considered in conjunction with the Black-cast sitcom, the hegemony of the generic closet becomes an efficient and effective industrial strategy to manage black gayness on television through

marketing, scheduling, and other commercial imperatives of the medium.

The book's introduction provides its theoretical scaffolding. In these pages, Martin intervenes in the whiteness of gay 1990s television culture and criticism by examining the mediating influence of black gayness on Black-cast sitcoms. The relative scarcity of sustained black gay stories on TV confirms that they are always already seen as risky endeavors. He argues that during episodes in which Black gay characters actually do appear in Black-cast sitcoms, their trajectories follow a three-act structure of detection, discovery/declaration, and discarding (15). Moreover, Martin attests that the television industry erroneously understands the Black audience as a homophobic monolith. As he suggests, "the precarity of Black-cast series coupled with the imagined conservatism of Black audiences rebuilds the generic closet over and over again" (56).

*The Generic Closet* focuses on specific episodes of five different Black-cast sitcoms that premiered on both small networks and basic cable: *Moesha*, *Good News* (UPN 1997–98), *All of Us* (UPN, 2003–7), *Let's Stay Together* (BET, 2011–14), and *Are We There Yet?* (TBS, 2010–12). Each chapter discusses these programs from different angles, going beyond the realm of representation to issues of production and reception. Indeed, while attentive to textual analysis (specifically in the third chapter's close reading of the use of the laugh track), Martin is more interested in approaching the study of the Black-cast sitcom through detailed examinations of both industry and audience. Thus, methodologically, he supplements his discursive account of Black television by including in-depth interviews with media workers like *Moesha* showrunner Ralph Farquhar and *Good News* creator Edward "Ed." Weinberger, as well as an array of Black gay TV viewers. As Martin remains grounded in the material realities of production and reception, the insights from these creatives and fans enhances the book's argument on the generic closet.

The first chapter begins by deftly describing historical developments in the television industry with respect to Black-cast sitcoms in the postnetwork era. Martin situates their emergence on-screen within industry lore that imagines the viewing demographic of Black audiences as anti-gay, based on religion and music. Indeed, one interesting observation is that the emergence of hip-hop and a particular brand of heterosexual patriarchal masculinity pervaded black television productions and curtailed the conditions of possibility for Black gayness to appear on-screen in alternative and generative ways. Martin combines trade press reports and his own frank conversations with industry