

Alton's Paradox

Writing in mid-1934 from Buenos Aires for the Hollywood-published monthly *International Photographer*, the cinematographer John Alton examines recent industrial developments in “Motion Picture Production in South America,” paradoxically arguing that “[t]he possibilities are enormous, but not until foreign technicians will take the matter in their hands and with foreign organization will there be local industry.”¹ Alton’s concern was not born merely out of self-interest, as he had been working in Argentina since contributing to the launch of the Lumiton studios in 1932, but it was also of professional relevance for the magazine’s readership, which consisted of film technicians in Hollywood and beyond. Initially using as its epigraph the Abraham Lincoln (mis)quote, “Capital is the fruit of labor, and could not exist if labor had not first existed. Labor, therefore, deserves much the higher consideration,” *International Photographer* served as Los Angeles house bulletin of the International Photographers of the Motion Picture Industries. It was “a voice of an ENTIRE CRAFT.”² With pieces on aesthetics and technology, but also, at least initially, Hollywood’s abusive labor practices, *International Photographer* also kept its readers up to date on members’ work throughout the globe.³ Alton—one such cosmopolitan figure, whose own convoluted personal history led him to live in Argentina for much of the 1930s before moving back to Los Angeles, where he would later become known as the visual stylist of film noir, a quintessentially American film genre of the 1940s and 1950s that would quickly become internationalized—insists that national cinemas like that of Argentina should mirror other forms of industrial development through relying on foreign capital, both human and monetary.

By signaling the complex interrelation between “local” and “foreign,” Alton alludes to a central tension of the early sound period in world cinema, particularly in Latin America. The arrival of sound film technologies transformed how cinema was practiced in production, distribution, and exhibition. Drastically reshaping film markets—not only was production severed for years, if not decades, after its introduction in places such as Bolivia, Venezuela, and Colombia, but distribution and exhibition in countries throughout Latin America were fundamentally reorganized—sound film did little, however, to challenge the dominance of Hollywood and, to a lesser extent, European cinemas. Working with established, well-organized distribution networks, particularly those of U.S. studios with their own agencies in metropolises such as Havana, Mexico City, Santiago, Buenos Aires, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro, but also smaller cities such as Panama City, Lima, and Caracas, local exhibitors worked with foreign companies like Western Electric and RCA to wire their theaters in order to continue to show the latest popular releases.⁴ Local filmmakers, for their part, were forced to acquire (or imitate) imported advanced technologies such as cameras, microphones, and sound-on-film systems; to learn how to use new, frequently intricate sound film equipment; and to revamp the ways in which they told their cinematic stories. If local filmmakers were to adjust to the new world of the talkie and (re)establish national cinemas, they had to constantly interact with distinct foreign entities. Thus, they were obliged to confront Alton's paradox: in order to create national film industries that not only competed with Hollywood, but also produced films that resonated meaningfully with local audiences, they needed to learn how to employ and incorporate foreign capital.

“The cinema appears in Latin America as another foreign import,” as Paulo Antônio Paranaguá states.⁵ Later expanded upon by a number of scholars, but most notably by Ana M. López, the cinema has always been inextricably enmeshed within transnational flows of capital.⁶ Along with the cinematic apparatus itself, technicians, representatives, and an assemblage of other workers arrived in Latin America as part of broader processes of industrialization and modernization that were entangled with the cinema from its very beginnings. Initially tied to exhibitions such as the Lumière's Cinématographe in Rio de Janeiro (July 8, 1896) or Edison's Vitascope in Buenos Aires (July 20, 1896), these foreign workers imported economic, cultural, and social capital.⁷ Appropriated materially through the importation of cinematic technology and symbolically through contracting technological and technical experts, foreign capital has always

marked Latin American cinema. Despite these contributions, foreign film workers have been largely overlooked by traditional film historiographies, whose approaches are excessively bound by nationness. National cinema in Latin America, as a notion expressed in film periodicals from the 1930s, initial critical approximations in the 1940s and 1950s, and scholarly interventions today, is often construed as both being structured (by shared cultural, historical, political, and social understandings) and structuring (particularly of national identity, usually in opposition to Hollywood). Rather than playing protagonists in film histories, even those less interested in presenting totalizing narratives of national cinema than in recovering its *petites histoires*, foreign film workers play at the margins of the frame, if they are on screen at all. Genesis amnesia also clouds our understanding of their function in film history.⁸ The national cinemas of Latin America have come to be understood as almost natural, even organic, having developed in specific ways according to some underlying local logic or order. Their uncertain origins have been forgotten. The



Figure 1.1. John Alton shooting a scene for *Los tres berretines*. Luis Arata, one of the film's stars, sits upon a ladder. Courtesy of the Museo del Cine Pablo Ducrós Hicken.

contingency and incoherence of history is eschewed, often for thematic or ostensibly theoretical approaches that cannot account for the heterogeneity of Latin American cinema of the 1930s and early 1940s. Foreigners, of course, are often among the first to be lost to oblivion. Hardly ever the focus of critical attention, these foreign film workers nonetheless played important roles in the history of Latin American cinema, as well as the stories of Latin American cinemas.

One such secondary character was John Alton. Initially reported by the *porteño* trade publication *Revista del Exhibidor*, Alton arrived in Argentina on the steamship *L'Atlantico* on April 20, 1932.⁹ The report states, "He will remain in our country, according to the contract signed to the effect, for a space of six months, if the contract is not extended. He will direct two or three films in said time." Several months later, *International Photographer* echoed these words, asserting, "Word from John J. Alton, now in Buenos Aires, brings the interesting information that he has signed a six months' contract with Dr. Enrique Sussini [*sic*] of the S. A. Lumiton Studios of the making of motion pictures in the Argentine."¹⁰ Contracted for his experience not as a director but as a cameraman, Alton helped to shoot the production company's first feature, *Los tres berretines* (*The Three Whims*, dir. Equipo Lumiton, 1933). His experience working in difficult conditions was surely an asset, as Domingo Di Núbila later described the transition to sound in his landmark national film history: "In order to clearly appreciate the evolution of Argentine cinema through its films, it is necessary to remember that the starting line, from the point of view of cinematographic arts, was kilometer zero."¹¹ Like other Latin American countries, Argentine film production had not yet become fully modernized. Still preindustrial, its sporadic films were improvisational in their production, as well as their distribution and exhibition. Referring to the place from which distance is measured in a country, and as many local sources argued in the 1930s, Argentine filmmakers needed foreign film workers such as John Alton to operate the technology purchased abroad; to adapt to difficult, effectively preindustrial conditions; to apply aesthetic and diegetic techniques practiced in Hollywood and European cinemas; and to train local film workers, among many other responsibilities.¹² Through employing his cultural and social capital, Alton helped to make possible what may not have otherwise come to fruition, such as Mario Soffici's 1938 social folkloric drama *Kilómetro 111*.¹³ Argentine cinema traveled quite a distance in the 1930s.



Figure 1.2. Alton supervises the makeup of Miguel Ángel Lauri during the filming of *Los tres berretines*. Courtesy of the Museo del Cine Pablo Ducrós Hicken.

After his first three years in Argentina, a period of experimentation and expression, Alton became the technical director of what was becoming the country's most important film studio, Argentina Sono Film.¹⁴ In addition to applying his technical expertise, Alton oversaw the acquisition of new technologies by Argentina Sono Film and the installation of the studio's new, modern laboratory and, in so doing, aided in its transformation into Latin America's first industrial film studio.¹⁵ Situated in specific conditions paralleling but not fully corresponding to each other, Latin American filmmakers reassessed how they understood and practiced their craft after the arrival of sound film technologies. With production costs precipitously rising, and distribution networks yet to be established that would more immediately and lastingly benefit production companies, local filmmakers were forced to invest in film technologies (and heavily so) in order to compete with imports from Hollywood and Europe. These technologies ranged from film stock to processing equipment, lenses for 35 mm cameras to incandescent lamps, microphones to

Moviolas, among other equipment and goods, which sometimes led to the rise of companies whose locally made products sought to substitute for more expensive, or difficult to acquire, foreign technologies. Levels of technological capitalization varied, and were tied to processes such as broader industrialization of the economy and involvement by the state. Throughout Latin America, each incipient industry reacted differently, but each was obliged to do business with firms from Europe and the United States.

The technological changes caused by the arrival of sound precipitated structural shifts in Latin American film industries, but also, more narrowly, in their modes of production. If silent films in the period were generally financed by producers closely tied to the project, usually without a strategic plan for distribution or additional future projects, the substantial new costs of sound film were prohibitive. Effectuated

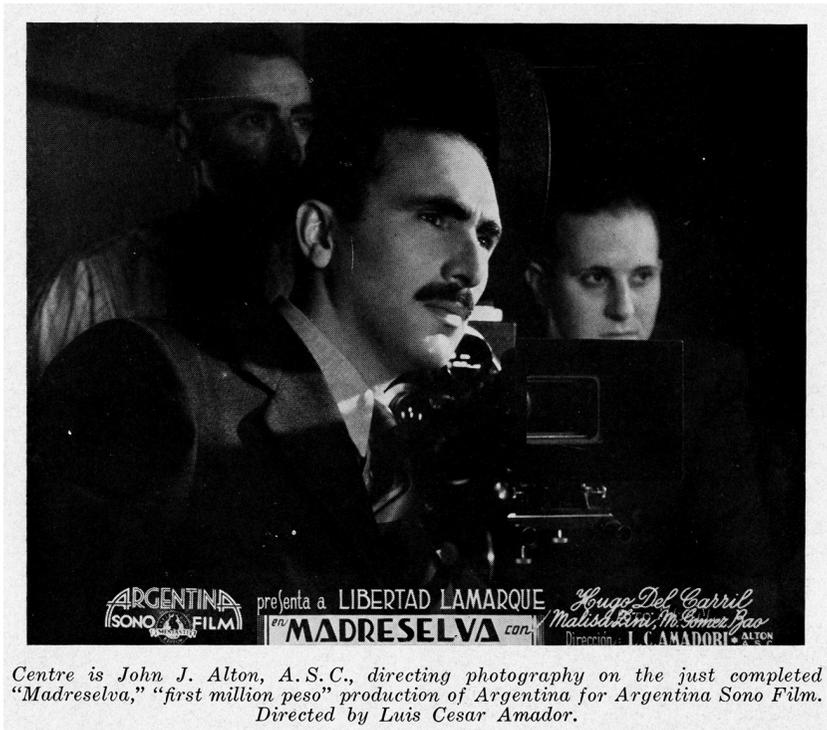


Figure 1.3. From the American Society of Cinematographers collection of the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

by the demand for greater capitalization, particularly from investors not directly associated with the production of a film, local filmmaking became increasingly modernized and industrialized. Following the lead of Hollywood studios, but in distinctive ways depending on local contexts, Latin American film industries moved toward the producer-unit system, in which labor serving a studio became ever more specialized in order to produce more, and higher quality, films year by year. Similar to Hollywood, but in quite different ways from Argentina to Mexico, for example, labor force activities and financing reinforced and challenged emergent production systems. Leading to more production efficiency, as the number of films in these countries grew steadily, but always tethered to the use of available technologies, unit production allowed Latin American studios, especially those in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, to produce commercial films that were able to compete with Hollywood's.¹⁶ Although there is perhaps greater continuity in Latin America from the silent period to classical cinema in terms of film style and narrative than is generally acknowledged, industrialization resulted in greater commercialization of the film diegesis. This is not to say that producers of silent films did not hope that their films would become huge hits, but rather that labor specialization allowed production companies to cultivate the commercial potential of a film's storyworld from script development to recutting after a sneak preview or initial screening.

Through their knowledge of more advanced technologies and progressively specialized roles—whether they were glamor lighting strategies or ways to narratively structure a gag—foreign film workers contributed to the assembling of the films on which they worked. Traced initially in contemporaneous film periodicals and later inscribed in national film histories, special emphasis in Latin American film historiography has been given to those used to sell the movies: stars and directors. Even though they are central to how we experience movies, stars and directors were not the sole creators of Latin American cinema in the early sound period. It has proven easier to discuss the comic genius of Pepe Arias in *El pobre Pérez* (*Poor Pérez*, 1937) or the melodramatic directing style of Luis César Amadori in *Madreselva* (*Honeysuckle*, 1938) than the cinematography of John Alton in those two Argentina Sono Film productions, but his genre lighting of both helped establish spectators' experience of their diegeses. Enmeshed within actors' performances and directors' authorship is the labor of countless other workers like Alton whose contributions, however big or small, are projected onto screen. Ignored in marketing to



Figure 1.4. Opening sequence of *Madreselva*. Courtesy of the Museo del Cine Pablo Ducrós Hicken.

differentiate national films, and folded into readings used to differentiate and distinguish national cinema of the classical period, the recovery of these contributions allows us to better understand the complexities of commercial cinemas too frequently disregarded by critics, despite their long-lasting popularity in Latin America and beyond.¹⁷

The transition to sound also altered local and regional film cultures by changing spectators' relationships to the moving image and, newly, sound. Structured by Hollywood, whose control over these markets was largely unaffected due to the strength of its distribution networks and the power and popularity of its stars, these film cultures were constituted by moviegoers whose complex relationships to their own emerging cinemas revealed cultural, economic, and social anxieties. Transformed, often in nuanced ways, these film cultures were forced to renegotiate their relationships with the films they loved (and hated and were indifferent toward). Further estranged by language—no longer were production companies and distributors able to adapt intertitles, and possibly even the narrative

structure of a film, to better appeal to the taste of a local market—spectators watched their favorite stars in English (a language most did not speak) or in translation (subtitling and, later, dubbing were common by the mid-1930s), or they encountered (trans)national stars from other forms of mass media, especially the radio, on-screen for the first time. The reactions of local and regional film cultures to the new identity and language politics instigated by sound cinema would shape the emergence (and disappearance) of the first three major industries in Latin America: Hollywood's Spanish-language production, Mexico, and Argentina.

Alton's paradox invites us to rethink the organization of Latin American film industries from the transition to sound to the early classical period. By focusing attention on the contributions of specific workers, my aim is not to argue that the various film industries throughout the region would not exist if it were not for foreign labor, but rather that what came to be known as national cinemas incorporated foreign film workers who employed capital necessary for these industries to emerge. Whether contracted for a determined time to perform a specific task or employed much more incidentally and indeterminately, these foreign film workers plied their trade within contexts specific to different levels of industrial development in different nations. John Alton was not necessary to the rise of Argentine national cinema, but, at the risk of being overly reductive, he was there. Had he worked in Brazil, his contributions to Latin American cinema would have been vastly different. My approach is at once historical and theoretical, trying to recover traces left behind by foreign film workers inscribed within national cinemas, while questioning the meaning of these marks, which, contradictorily, seem at once to be indelible and evanescent. Like capital—or, perhaps, as an expression and form of capital—national cinema is the fruit of this labor; consequently, this labor deserves more consideration. To approach the role of foreign labor in this particular expression of industrial development, as well as its relationship to forms of foreign capital, I discuss the contours of labor markets as well as the participation of individual foreign film workers. My approach is also dialogic and formal, as I examine the ways in which these foreigners and their work were written about in periodicals, especially in daily newspapers and specialized film magazines, and how their work is imprinted within their films. By doing so, I posit the establishment of an uneven and disjointed interconnectedness of Latin American commercial cinemas, which to this day exist somewhere between the national and transnational.

Alton's Paradox begins with the world's first large-scale Spanish-language film industry: Hollywood. Shot primarily in Los Angeles, New York, and Joinville (France), I argue that Hollywood's Spanish-language film production represented the first, albeit largely incoherent, expression of Latin American industrial cinema. The *films hispanos*, as they were sometimes called, began as multilinguals (also known as multiple language versions [MLVs] or foreign language versions [FLVs]) and eventually became original features. Initially, I introduce the complex labor market in which these films were produced by U.S. studios in order to monologically replicate their industrial model and, by extension, maintain their pre-sound dominance of Latin American film markets. By the late 1930s, these productions had been abandoned by Hollywood studios due to their high costs, which were particularly onerous in comparison with the costs of subtitling and dubbing, and their lack of commercial success, in no small part due to their cultural and linguistic heterogeneity. With studios' focus on talent, especially performers already working within other forms of mass media and popular entertainment, I examine the work of a star. Nearly forgotten today, in no small part due to his films being almost totally inaccessible, the Mexican baritone José Mojica was one of the most famous performers in Latin America in the 1930s. Through formal analysis of his work for Fox Film, especially *El rey de los gitanos* (*King of the Gypsies*, dir. Frank Strayer, 1933) and *La cruz y la espada* (*The Cross and the Sword*, dir. Strayer, 1934), I show how Mojica was audiovisually fashioned into a transnational star designed to appeal to audiences from California to Chile. Even though most of Mojica's films are presumed lost, I use materials from a wide array of critical sources to paratextually reconstruct textures of his work and star text.

Focusing on Mexico, which by 1943 had become the dominant regional film industry in Latin America, the book's second section studies the ways in which film workers from abroad shaped modes of production that were entangled within distribution and exhibition practices. In addition to an introductory section detailing the distinct industrial and labor dynamics in which these foreign workers plied their trades, and how they were caught up in transnational flows of labor that included Mexicans who had previously been working abroad, I closely examine films of cinematographer Alex Phillips and the director Juan Orol in the early sound period. As the Mexican film industry emerged due to increased capitalization and, more notably, the intervention of the state, the professional obligations of workers' roles were consolidated and defined.

I examine how these two roles (cinematographer and director), specifically, reflected the structure of the Mexican film industry and structured cinematically what spectators came to know as the *Época de oro*. Through studying the Canadian Russian cinematographer Alex Phillips's collaborations with the directors Arcady Boytler and Fernando de Fuentes, in analyses of films such as *La mujer del puerto* (*Woman of the Port*, 1933) and *Doña Bárbara* (1943), I argue that Phillips's films reveal tendencies that were present—and in tension—throughout the early sound period: the use of lighting strategies serving generic conventions that had been established primarily (but not exclusively) in Hollywood, as well as the implementation of his own, personal style within narrative and professional constraints. I detail Phillips's style (or, really, styles) within the framework of these collaborations, and also within the specific limitations of the role of the cinematographer in the emerging Mexican film industry of the 1930s and early 1940s. Continuing to eschew the more auteurist approach of critics such as Charles Ramírez Berg, I explore the explicit and implicit heterogeneity of the films of Juan Orol, a peripatetic figure born in Spain and partially raised in Cuba, who would eventually become the “*Rey del churro* (King of the B-movie)” and subject of Sebastián del Amo's 2012 biopic *El fantástico mundo de Juan Orol* (*The Fantastic World of Juan Orol*).¹⁸ Although Orol was known as a kind of “one man orchestra” in his films, assuming numerous roles in their production, I focus on his work as the director of melodramas that contributed greatly to the emergence of one of the most important cinematic modes of the *Época de oro* of Mexican cinema. I am especially interested in the ways Orolian melodrama, which was ostensibly targeted at female audiences, but which also frequently used to draw men into the cinema, structures narrative excess in six films of the mid-1930s.

I also examine the emergence of the sound film industry in Argentina. Within its distinctive context, as reflected in film production, distribution, and exhibition, those attempting to create the Argentine film industry incorporated foreign film workers in very different ways during the early sound period. So as to approach how industrial and labor conditions there differed from those in the United States and Mexico, I examine two very different kinds of foreign film workers in Argentina: a studio head and a working filmmaker. After founding Argentina Sono Film in 1932, a studio that would dominate the domestic industry for four decades, the Italian immigrant Ángel Mentasti acted as studio head until his death in 1937, producing many of the most important films of the early sound period.



Figure 1.5. Between scenes on the set of *Loco lindo*. From left: Agustín Irusta, Luis Sandrini, John Alton, Anita Jordán, Miguel Paulino Tato (Néstor), Gumer Barreiros, and Arturo S. Mom. Mentasti might not be in the photograph, but his presence would have been undeniable. Courtesy of the Museo del Cine Pablo Ducrós Hicken.

In so doing, Mentasti not only shaped new modes of production and new distribution strategies, but indelibly marked the images and sounds forming the narratives of Argentine national cinema. Unlike Mentasti, who came to be known to wield great power within the industry, the next chapter centers on a jack of all trades, the Chilean actor, director, and screenwriter Tito Davison, and examines his time in Argentina. With experience in Hollywood, where he participated in Spanish-language film production and wrote for magazines such as *Cine-Mundial* (distributed monthly throughout the Spanish-speaking world) and *Ecran* (the most important Chilean film magazine of the time), Davison's credits in Argentina ranged widely (dialogue director, director, editor, and writer). Focusing primarily on his writing and directing, I argue that Davison's contributions to the Argentine film industry are intertwined within broader economic factors. If Davison arrived in Buenos Aires as the industry was in sharp ascent due

to success in domestic and international markets, his exit was precipitated by the effects of Argentina's uncertain geopolitical situation as a neutral country in World War II. He would then make his way to Mexico City where, eventually, he would become a prolific director.

The book's coda returns to Alton's paradox both to illuminate the role of foreign workers in other Latin American film industries during their early sound periods and to challenge competing notions of both national and transnational cinema. Moving beyond Hollywood, Mexico, and Argentina, the coda delineates the distinctive labor forces in Latin American film industries that led to the emergence of individual, uneven national cinemas. Examining the diverse artistic, cultural, and industrial forces at work in countries such as Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay, I show that interrelated but nationally distinct labor networks led to the negotiation of different cinematic, industrial, and organizational strategies. Through these negotiations with different forms of capital, foreign and local filmmakers created commercial films that were distributed and exhibited domestically, regionally, and, at times, globally. Using these Latin American networks as a point of departure, I return to Alton's paradox to question how we can move beyond reading the period simultaneously through the lenses of national rootedness and transnational detachment in order to account for each industry's peculiarities.

By contextualizing the incorporation of foreign workers into emergent local film industries and, more specifically, examining the diverse ways in which individual foreign workers contributed to distinct incipient national cinemas, I hope not to retrace ordered lines of inquiry, but rather to follow scrawls, however faint, that were left behind. Caught within broader processes of industrialization in Latin America, which incorporated other mass media forms as well (including the radio and recording industries), the cinema (wherever and whatever it was) was merely one sector in which foreign workers in Latin America confronted Alton's paradox. It was, however, a central space for shaping new subjective experiences and anxieties from the 1930s and 1940s to today. Because of this, it is necessary to seek out nuances in the ways in which we have come to understand it. It is not that I do not engage those notions of classical cinema that define it as the systematization of industrial processes that creates neatly packaged commercial movies (or national cinema) to elicit a reflective and refracting idea of nationhood, but rather that I want to examine the films produced by specific workers, textually and historically, both in terms of their initial release and their subsequent critical recep-

tion. Through a chronological rather than thematic approach, I uncover some of the particularities of a rich period that is underrepresented in Latin American film history. Leveled later into an *Época de oro*, if not totally forgotten, the films of the early sound period helped to create the enduring uneven and disjointed interconnectedness of Latin American commercial cinemas.