

# A **Contra** corriente

*Una revista de estudios latinoamericanos*

Vol. 16, Num. 2 (Winter 2019): 297-301

## **Reseña / Review**

Mafud, Lucio. *La imagen ausente. El cine mudo argentino en publicaciones gráficas. Catálogo. El cine de ficción (1914-1923)*. Buenos Aires: Teseo, 2016.

### **Lost and Found: Argentine Silent Film in Print Publications**

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Lucio Mafud's *La imagen ausente* recreates, from secondary print sources, a world lost to the intersection of neglect, time and the fragility of nitrocellulose film. The lost world is that of the several hundred feature-length fiction films made in Argentina between 1914 and 1923, of which a mere handful still exist, mostly in fragmentary form. In an eight-year effort that benefitted from his deep knowledge of the period, Mafud conducted archival research into the print publications of the time to piece together a surprisingly complete and admirably complex representation of a cinema that, in terms of production models, filmmakers and thematics, could be justifiably called prelapsarian: of a richness and variety that was lost with the 1930s configuration of a wide audience and an industry that catered to its expectations. This first of the two Spanish-language tomes, reviewed here, covers the period of 1914 to 1923, and a second will cover 1924 to 1932. The exhaustive research was carried out

thanks to a grant from Argentina's Biblioteca Nacional, in a positive example of the constructive and necessary role state institutions can play to counter the market's ignorance and even destruction of large swaths of cultural history.

In research conducted in Buenos Aires and Rosario, Mafud consulted a wide variety of print publications, but two, *Excelsior* and *La Película*, were central sources of his findings. These were founded around the time the first Argentine feature films were being made and they were published for a specialized audience of film producers and distributors, and thus contain a wealth of information unavailable elsewhere. Mafud also consulted the more well-known wide-circulation magazines *Caras y Caretas*, *PBT* and *Fray Mocho*, among others, along with many daily newspapers. The use of sources with such varied readerships and purposes allowed him to compile such an impressive amount of data—along with a dossier of striking images included at the end of his book—that his ongoing research represents in many ways a refoundation of the study of Argentine silent film. *La imagen ausente* presents his findings in an impressively complete yet easily accessible package.

The book is very sensibly organized. It opens with a brief but invaluable introduction that summarizes the criticism and scholarship on Argentina silent film, offering a very complete summary of writings on the period from throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present, with a useful bibliography. Mafud follows this with a description of his own project, an account of the specialized magazines he consulted, where they are housed and a wealth of other information that forms, in a generous gesture on the part of the author, an indispensable guide for scholars seeking to research the period.

The bulk of the book takes the form of a catalog, organized chronologically, with an entry for each of the 163 films made during the period studied. These are ordered chronologically and each is constructed in a way that, in addition to creating a very easy-to-consult guide, accomplishes very well Mafud's stated goal, since the book "permite una inmediata contextualización histórica de las películas y facilita el análisis de la cambiante producción nacional...de un año a otro" (16-17). Each entry is very detailed, providing a wealth of information that includes the title, date, day of the week, hour, and theater where it premiered and was first shown privately (information from which can be deduced the intended audience, the level of commercial importance accorded to each film by distributors and theater owners and more), year of production, producer, director, scriptwriter, intertitle maker, photographer and cameraperson, information on color tinting, laboratory, studio, music, distributor,

duration and more. Mafud also includes in each entry a synopsis of the film's plot (compiled from the press accounts that he often quotes directly), information on location filming (when this applies), and a commentary section that, given his knowledge of film culture of the time, contains many insightful observations. Depending on the film, this commentary section offers further information on the production and direction, on national and/or international distribution, as well as serving as a kind of grab bag where Mafud includes varied, often fascinating findings, such as, for example, the fact that *Blanco y negro*, directed by Elena Sansinena and Victoria Ocampo (yes, that Victoria Ocampo) in 1919, was financed by members of the right-wing anti-labor Liga Patriótica, and screened in benefit functions to collect contributions for the same organization, which played a central role in the violent repression of worker's movements in Patagonia, Buenos Aires and elsewhere. This section also includes, where applicable, information on extant copies of the films and their holders. Finally, each section concludes with an account, invaluable for any researcher, of where Mafud's findings contradict or confirm the existing bibliography's accounts of the films. Two indices, one listing proper names and the other film titles, help make the book very convenient to consult.

After the introduction, in a twenty-page "Panorama del cine mudo argentino (1914-1923)," Mafud shares extensive knowledge of silent film in Argentina during the period covered, beginning with the first fiction feature, *Amalia* (1914), a film conceived, produced and performed by members of the Buenos Aires aristocracy, a cultural milieu that brought a remnant symbolic value to the medium. With close attention to conditions of production, Mafud reveals that *Amalia* was not expensive to make and thus earned funds as a benefit for the philanthropic Asociación del Divino Rostro. The film in turn inspired filmmakers of other social origins who began to envision the medium as a means to generate income in a field previously dominated by imported films, and a brief boom in local production of fiction features soon followed.

Mafud describes how *Nobleza gaucha* (1916), the first nationally produced blockbuster, opened the door to productions with local characters and themes and thus a more popular appeal than that of historical dramas or patriotic epics centered on Argentina's founding fathers. His research confirms the ensuing local boom and he describes in great detail the widely varied models of production that were implemented in this pre-industrial period. He explores how some of this early production was closely tied to the local popular theater, with producers, writers and

actors crossing over to work in the new medium, which soon displaced the theater in popularity, in part perhaps due to its novelty, but, as Mafud describes, also to the lower priced tickets and the easier access on neighborhood screens, as opposed to the theatrical milieu's concentration in city centers.

While in 1914 the sole feature made in Argentina was *Amalia*, just two years later twenty-six films were made. This brief boom, however, was silenced by the flow of films from the United States whose modern production values and originality made them more attractive than both European and local productions. Mafud's exploration of the dynamics of exhibition involving national and foreign production is fascinating. In order to explain the brevity of the above-described boom in Argentine production, he discusses the significance of screening films on certain days of the week as opposed to others, Argentina's reliance on foreign imports of celluloid film stock that were subject to major world events, and the reluctance of the state to protect national film production. Mafud goes on to detail the responses of local production to the new dilemma—one that has persisted for the ensuing hundred-plus years—presented by the preference of many Argentine distributors and audiences for North American films. Some producers, in a proto-studio mode, attempted a model in which the production values—actors, directors, sets, etc.—might rival imported films, though this model soon proved economically inviable, while others opted for more artisanal production. Both models produced some of the most highly regarded Argentine silent films. Yet other producers adapted popular novels, such as *La vendedora de Harrods* (1921), in a model that combined low production costs with popular appeal and proved commercially viable. By the early 1920s, film producers were often collaborating with other existing media, such as the theater or the music industry, resulting in the appearance of the tango-film genre, which proved commercially successful and would persist for decades. Thanks in large part to such genres, but also to the cheap quickies made by Julio Irigoyen, by the early 1920s production recovered and print publications formed mutually beneficial relations with the cinema, contributing to development of a local star system. At this point in the story Mafud's account in this volume ends. Despite the precarious nature of much of the film production of the time, or maybe because of it—the key fact here is the absence of the hegemonic industry that would quickly learn to cater to audience expectations—the period covered in this tome produced some of the most surprising films, in terms of themes, location shooting and politics, of the entire history of the national cinema, including *Nobleza gaucha*, *Juan Sin Ropa* (1918) and *El último malón* (1918).

An examination of the book makes clear both the intelligence of its approach and the expertise and efforts of its author. The consultation of such a wide variety of periodical sources results in not only bountiful entries on individual films, but forms by far the most complete account of the cinema of the time, making it the necessary foundation of any study of Argentine silent film and establishing intriguing through-lines to the study of the more industrial cinema of the 1930s and beyond. Mafud himself has been expanding on his findings in subsequent articles on varied topics, such as the presence of anarchism and social protest in film, early women filmmakers, and the close connections between philanthropy, film production and politics. Such insights from Mafud, as well as the wealth of solid data *La imagen ausente* contains, make it an indispensable source that marks a before-and-after event in the study of the history of Argentine cinema.