

# LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY

GOES TO THE

# MOVIES

UNDERSTANDING LATIN AMERICA'S PAST THROUGH FILM

STEWART BREWER

ROUTLEDGE

# LATIN AMERICAN HISTORY GOES TO THE MOVIES

*Latin American History Goes to the Movies* combines the study of the rich history of Latin America with the medium of feature film. In this concise and accessible book, author Stewart Brewer helps readers understand key themes and issues in Latin American history, from pre-Columbian times to the present, by examining how they have been treated in a variety of films. Moving chronologically across Latin American history, and pairing historical background with explorations of selected films, the chapters cover vital topics including the Spanish conquest and colonialism, revolution, religion, women, US–Latin American relations, and more. Through films such as *City of God*, *Frida*, and *Che*, Brewer shows how history is retold, and what that retelling means for public memory.

From *Apocalypto* to *Selena*, and from Christopher Columbus to the slave trade, *Latin American History Goes to the Movies* sets the record straight between the realities of history and cinematic depictions, and gives readers a solid foundation for using film to understand the complexities of Latin America's rich and vibrant history.

**Stewart Brewer** is Professor of History at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, Nebraska.

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Understanding Latin America's  
Past through Film

*Stewart Brewer*

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For Shannon and Brooke, Kim and Sue

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea for this book began many years ago when I taught briefly at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. One of the professors there, Dr. Michael LaRosa, frequently taught a course called Latin American History through Film. I was very intrigued by this idea, and over the next several years, I developed my own course based on this concept. While teaching at Dana College in Blair, Nebraska, I offered a course on this topic for many years. The class was well-received and students generally enjoyed it, even if they occasionally grumbled about their daily writing assignments that corresponded with the films.

However, one of my largest frustrations while teaching this course was the absence of a text on Latin American history and filmography that I could have my students use in class. I was left to cobble together readings from various sources, or assign textbooks that were only marginally related to the daily topics. My search took me to numerous books on Latin American cinema, but finding a book that blended Latin American history with films about that history was difficult. I read Donald F. Stevens' book *Based on a True Story: Latin American History at the Movies* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), which approached what I was looking for, but I still wanted something that blended more history with more viewing options. I decided that the field needed a book that focused specifically on Latin American history as portrayed on film: a text that delivered the background historical knowledge needed to understand the topics in the films, and a text that also provided instructors with options for classroom viewing instead of tying professors to just one film per topic. I pondered this idea in my mind for a while, but my involvement in other projects and classes meant that my thoughts stayed on the backburner.

Then, one January while attending the annual conference of the American Historical Association, a colleague of mine, Dr. Iain Anderson, casually mentioned

## x Acknowledgments

to me that he had met someone who might be interested in my book idea; this was Kimberly Guinta, then senior editor in history at Routledge. As she and I communicated about the idea over the next several months, it solidified into a formal proposal and then eventually a contracted book. Work continued, and what began as a general, imprecise idea evolved into this book that I am now very gratified to contribute to the field of literature on this topic.

This project would not have happened without the reassurance and enthusiasm of a few key individuals. I am grateful to Genevieve Aoki, senior editorial assistant at Routledge, and Margo Irvin, Commissioning Editor on US History, also at Routledge, who have been very supportive in the final stages of this project and seeing it through to completion. I am also exceptionally appreciative of Sue Williamson, who cheered, coaxed, and commended me as this project proceeded. She read each chapter as I wrote them, and reinvigorated me throughout the writing and editing process. But ultimately, this book would have never come to completion without the kind and thoughtful efforts of Kim Guinta. Her support, enthusiasm, and fervor for this book were the most important reasons for its completion. I am indebted to her for her tenacity and persistence in reassuring me to drive this project forward to conclusion.

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# 1

## STEREOTYPES OF LATIN AMERICA

It seems unlikely that there could be any other region of the earth in which nature and human behavior could have combined to produce a more unhappy and hopeless background for the conduct of human life than in Latin America.

*George F. Kennan, United States ambassador*

### Introduction

What is a stereotype? Stereotypes are attempts to normalize or oversimplify a society or culture based on the actions of only some of the members of that society. Stereotyping takes place both from inside and outside of a society or culture. For these reasons, cultures and groups that find themselves the object of stereotyping often deem the results to be offensive because stereotyping tends to focus on the ridiculous, negative, sensational, and outrageous elements of the culture in question. The quote that begins this chapter is a disturbing example of how stereotyping a culture or region can have negative repercussions. In this instance, United States ambassador George F. Kennan made this derogatory comment in 1950 after visiting several Latin American countries. His report (*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Volume II, pp. 598–624*) contains harsh statements, accusations, and comparisons between Latin America and the United States, where he finds Latin America wanting in every way. His visit seems to have had a negative effect on his perceptions of Latin America as a whole, even though he acknowledged that his views were “shots in the dark, based mainly on instinct and general experience.” But these kinds of judgments are exactly what people who desire to learn about the history of Latin America need to avoid.

## 2 Stereotypes of Latin America

For example, for people in Latin America, Europe, Asia, or other places in the world, individuals in the United States might be viewed as loud, fat, prudish, fried-food-eating, gun-packing cowboys. Few Americans would find this assessment accurate or pleasant. But there it is. How do you argue with a stereotype? George F. Kennan's attitudes about the peoples of Latin America were not new in 1950, and these opinions have existed since the beginnings of relations between the peoples of North and South America.

Stereotyping usually involves both ethnocentrism (the idea that one's own culture and way of life is superior to that of another), and the practice of intolerance (treating people in other societies as inferior). Author Charles Ramírez Berg has argued that the way to fight against prejudice is through knowledge, both about what stereotyping is, and also knowledge about the culture being judged. He states: "The first beneficial result of learning about the process of stereotyping is that this knowledge makes it easy to detect stereotypes" (Ramírez Berg 2002: 23).

Stereotypes are likely to categorize individuals into neat little boxes. Stereotypes about most cultures, including Latin Americans, tend to focus on several key associations such as race, behavior, morality, and other areas. Racially, Latin Americans are frequently portrayed as dark-skinned and dark-haired. They are depicted behaviorally as violent, passionate, and devious. Finally, Latin Americans are occasionally illustrated to have low, or no, morals, and to even undermine the moral fabric of society in general. Ramírez Berg goes on to identify several stereotypes that define Latin American characters in American films. These include characters such as bandits, prostitutes, buffoons, and male and female seducers (Ramírez Berg 2002: 66). In many of the films discussed in this book, these characteristic stereotypes are evident and often blatant.

### Perceptions of Latin America

In 1992, historian Fredrick Pike wrote a book on Latin American stereotypes under the broad umbrella of US–Latin American relations. He argued, that based on the perceptions of the early inhabitants of North America, Latin Americans appeared to be more comfortable living in nature instead of manipulating and controlling nature as Americans and Europeans did. Continuing on, Pike continued by positing that Latin Americans were often judged to be more feminine and less masculine because of this relationship with the natural world around them. Some might wonder about Pike's inclusion of gender in his argument; what could gender have to do with nature? Pike argued that stereotyping along gender lines was an apt comparison from which to define the realities of US–Latin American relations: the US took the role of the male—controlling, dominant, and overriding—while Latin America took the part of the female—submissive, accepting, compliant, and yielding. The problem with this analogy is that it is

based on the stereotypical assumptions of US culture as well as its relationship with Latin American nations through time.

Anthropologists and sociologists, along with historians, all use the concept of The Other to understand the phenomenon that occurs when two cultures bump up against each other. Misunderstandings are bound to happen, and this is where stereotypes are born. Looking at history, society, culture, and lifestyle from the perspective of some other group or individual is difficult but necessary if we are to truly understand what we experience, and if we desire to avoid making stereotypical mistakes in judging other people and cultures.

How and where did stereotypes of Latin American culture emerge? The early years of the nineteenth century saw the first long-term interactions between the Spanish colonies in Latin America and the United States. They had experienced brief exchanges prior to the turn of the century, but after 1800 these relations increased. In 1803, the US purchased the Louisiana Territory from France, which gave the US and Latin America their first long-distance border in North America. This border ran from the Mississippi River in the Gulf of Mexico, all the way to the Canadian border, encompassing the future US states between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. In 1823, US president James Monroe issued his famous Monroe Doctrine speech that would shape US policy in the Western Hemisphere for the next 150 years. This speech (which was actually his annual State of the Union Address) became the keystone of American political attitudes toward Latin America and it attempted to relegate Latin America to the position of a subordinate to the dominance of the United States. In the speech, President Monroe states:

We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and [Europe] to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system [of government] to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety. With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power we have not interfered and shall not interfere, but with the Governments [sic] who have declared their independence and maintained it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.

*(President James Monroe, Washington, DC, December 2, 1823)*

The “Governments” he refers to are the newly created independent nations of Latin America that won their independence from Spain over more than a decade, beginning with Mexico, whose independence movement began in 1810, to Bolivia and Peru, who won their freedom by 1825. In effect, President Monroe

#### 4 Stereotypes of Latin America

stated that the future of the Western Hemisphere would be determined by the United States and its interactions with the new countries of Latin America.

Early contacts with the newly formed Latin American nations were brief and mostly political in nature. It was not until the 1840s and the Mexican War that individual, one-on-one relationships between Americans and Latin Americans began to take place much more frequently in places such as Texas and California. From these locations and others inside Mexico, the seeds of Latin American stereotyping were born. And as with all stereotypes, one must ask, how representative were Texas and California for the whole of Latin America in the hemisphere? The answer makes it clear that perceptions about Latin Americans as a whole were based on a small percentage of the population, in one corner of the Latin American territory. Furthermore, the populations of Texas and California, while similar in some ways to the culture and society of Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, and other countries, were themselves a separate microcosm of those cultures because of their sparse population, their distance from settled urban centers such as Mexico City, and the harsh terrain and climate that they lived in. In other words, how closely did the populations of Texas and California represent Latin America? The answer is obvious and from interactions between Americans and Latin Americans in these locations, negative stereotypes were born.

It seems that even though the years of the nineteenth century brought Americans and Latin Americans into closer contact with each other, this contact did not engender a greater sensitivity to Latin American culture on the part of the United States. In fact, the opposite seems to have occurred, where the US became more and more critical of life south of its border, and the Latin American population bore the brunt of American disregard.

Stereotyping is destructive to cultural sensitivity. When one subscribes to a stereotype about another culture, group, or society, they never get below the surface to see what lies beneath. Stereotypes damage cultural relations between groups because they prevent individuals and societies from viewing other groups in their rich, native colors, and instead pass off other cultures in terms of their inferiority to the original group, thus preventing any further understanding from taking place.

### Filmography

Among the multitudes of films that could have been included in this chapter, three seem to embody the qualities and stereotypes that are found in numerous films about Latin American history and society. *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, *¡Three Amigos!*, and *Bananas* are all outlandish and excessive in their portrayals of Latin American culture in general, Latin Americans in particular, and they play upon the preconceived notions that American audiences have already acquired about Latin America through the media. Nevertheless, they all contain multiple stereotypical characters and settings that are easy to see and are accessible to

criticism and analysis. The purpose of including these films here isn't so much to show real history, but to illustrate the practice of stereotyping in an obvious manner; the plot becomes somewhat irrelevant and the films become a vehicle for studying how Latin America is frequently portrayed on the screen.

### **Once Upon a Time in Mexico (2003)**

*Once Upon a Time In Mexico* (2003) is the story of an individual named Mariachi, which in itself is a stereotype, since his name is also the name of a widespread Latin dance and style of music. This individual, Mariachi, is a very accomplished guitar player and gunslinger. The purpose of the film is pure entertainment set against a Mexican backdrop. It is full of stereotypes from start to finish, from the quintessential Mexican gunman and his friends, to the American CIA agent, to the ambitious calculating female character, to the over-the-top action and violence. And while there is no historical significance to the film at all, it does serve in an academic sense to prepare students of Latin American history through film to observe, notice, and deconstruct stereotypes in film. It should be noted that *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* is the third film in the *Mexico Trilogy* (preceded by *El Mariachi* (1992) and *Desperado* (1995)), directed and produced by Robert Rodriguez.

At the beginning of the film, Mariachi lives in a small village that supports itself making and selling guitars. Eventually, the stereotypical “bad guys” come to get Mariachi and he decides to go with them if they agree not to harm the people of the village. Mariachi, played by Antonio Banderas, is approached by Sheldon Sands (Johnny Depp), a CIA agent, to carry out a plot to kill a high-ranking military officer, General Marquez, who in turn is attempting to assassinate the president of Mexico in a military coup. Once Mariachi agrees to help kill General Marquez, many thugs and bandits attempt to kill him on several occasions. He enters a church to meet with Sands, who is also involved in the plot against Marquez. But thugs try to kill Mariachi inside the church. With machine guns they shoot up the church and never manage to hit Mariachi, instead destroying much of the interior of the building; they destroy pews and riddle the walls with bullet holes. Mariachi scales the walls of the church interior and then reveals that his guitar has a secret compartment, where he conceals his own gun. He takes his gun out of the guitar and starts killing everyone in sight. And whereas the bad guys could never hit him, he manages to kill several of them with his superior aim. In one of the more ridiculous moments in the film, an old woman continues to pray in the church while bullets fly and mayhem continues all around her. When she finishes with her prayers, she rises to leave the church. All of the fighters cease their shooting and wait for her to leave, and then continue to kill each other when she is gone. The stereotype here is obviously playing on the notion that Mexicans are all extremely religious and extremely fierce. In one scene, the filmmakers manage to pull both of these stereotypes into one long melee of piousness and violence.

## 6 Stereotypes of Latin America

Meanwhile, the CIA agent Mariachi was supposed to meet in the church, hires another former CIA agent to help him. Depp's role in the film is murky at best. He seems to have been cast in the film to typify the American stereotype—the gringo who is oblivious to his surroundings, but has his own agenda, and is also dangerous in seeking his own ends.

Mariachi eventually seeks out some old friends who will help him with the job he has been hired to do. His two friends are also stereotypical: the young, enthusiastic but ignorant Mexican, and the older, habitually drunk Mexican. Mariachi fills his guitar case with all kinds of weapons, and then they set out to take their positions in the presidential palace where the attempted coup will take place. They play their instruments during a state dinner, posing as sideline musicians. Then, in another shootout, Mariachi kills all the present bad guys in the town square. This is followed by the obligatory chase scene, where the characters race motorcycles through a cactus field.

While these events have been taking place, Depp's character is captured by a female agent named Ajedrez (played by Eva Mendes), who was his acquaintance in the past. On the *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), Mendes has Depp's eyes put out so that he can no longer fight. However, he uses a stereotypical street urchin boy, who sells *chicle* (gum) for a living, to help him shoot the people who are trying to kill him.

Meanwhile, Mariachi prepares for the final battle. He and his friends use remote control weapons, disguised as musical instruments, to kill people who are trying to take the president of Mexico hostage. As the climax concludes, Mariachi manages to kill General Marquez, foiling his attempted takeover of Mexico, and Depp kills Mendes's character with the help of the *chicle* boy.

The film ends in blatant stereotypical fashion; Mariachi and his friends walk down the road in slow motion, with the president of Mexico, and their instrument cases filled with money. Mariachi wears a banner displaying the flag of Mexico across his chest, and as he walks it flutters in the wind. The film concludes as Mariachi returns to his village and plays the guitar.

### ¡Three Amigos! (1986)

*¡Three Amigos!* (1986) is, put simply, quite silly. Again, there is absolutely no historical significance to the film, but its value for this chapter is, again, to observe stereotypes and how they are used in film to portray typical Americans and Mexicans on screen. The film takes place in Mexico in 1916. A Mexican lady rides a burro past men wearing sombreros and women in dresses. The woman enters the *Cantina del Borracho* (the Bar of the Drunk) in search of a hero. She is there searching for someone to help her and her village fight of the depredations of a Mexican bandit named *El Guapo* (The Handsome Man). The Mexican men in the bar are all very dirty and mean. They don't want to help and instead make fun of her and make sexual advances toward her.

She leaves and enters a church where she views a silent film proclaiming the deft and daring escapades of three men dressed like fancy Mexican rancheros. In the film, they deal with the bad guys and save villages. So she sends them a telegram telling them to come to Mexico and help her village deal with El Guapo. These men, who are really just actors, eventually make their way to her village, where they are welcomed with a traditional feast of rice, beans, and tortillas. Meanwhile, a German in a flight jacket shows up in the same town and shoots up the Cantina del Boracho where the woman originally went for help. He is dressed like a traditional German flying ace and he is a very accomplished sharp shooter.

El Guapo's men are dirty and they wear traditional Mexican bandit attire. They are introduced sitting on horses drinking tequila. When their alcohol runs out, they decide to go to the nearby village to get more. They bully the town into giving them tequila. By this time, the Three Amigos have arrived, but they don't realize they have been invited to fight real bandits—they think they are there to put on a show like they do in the movies. They chase the Mexican bandits off after commenting that the bandits “looked a little too cliché.” Thinking that their job is over, they relax while El Guapo's men tell him about the Amigos.

Soon El Guapo returns with 50 men. The Amigos go out and put on the same show, but one of the bandits shoots Steve Martin's character in the arm, and they realize that the bandits are real and that this is not a show. At this point they run away and the bandits shoot up the town. But the Amigos soon decide to return and fight. The stereotypes come fast and furious at this point. El Guapo has a birthday party that is full of piñatas, and his compound is full of Mexican prostitutes.

After much silly fighting and interaction between Guapo's men and the Amigos, the Amigos defeat the bandits—with the help of the villagers, and then



FIGURE 1.1 *¡Three Amigos!* (1986, Orion Pictures).