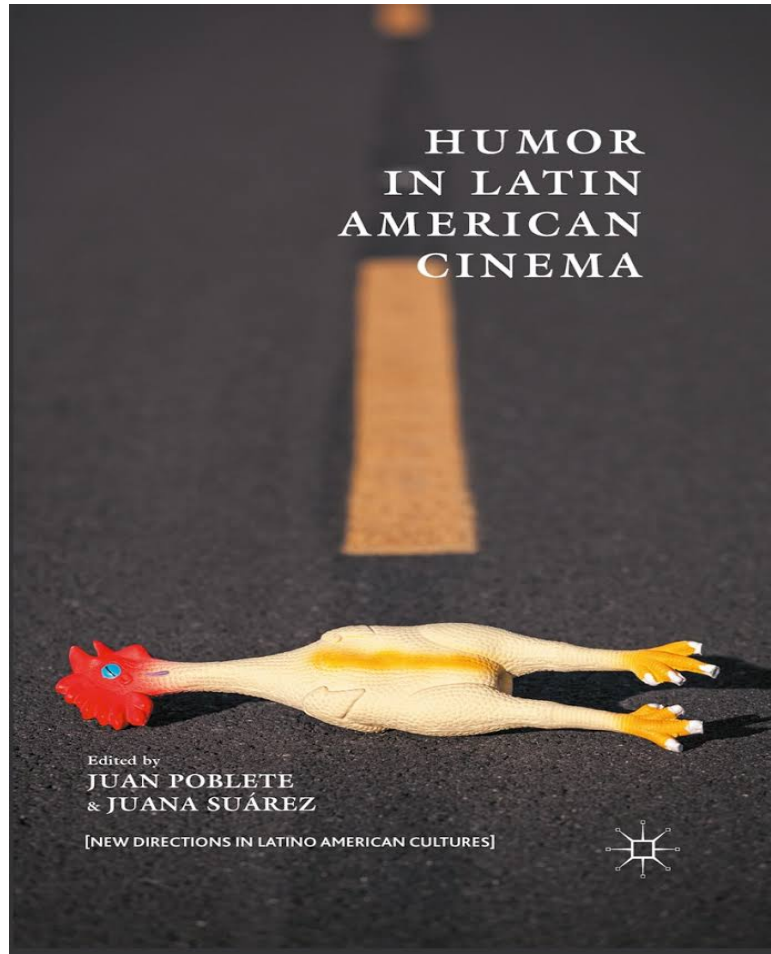


## Book Review/Reseña



*Humor in Latin American Cinema*. Edited by Juan Poblete and Juana Suárez. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 279 p.

Students and scholars of Spanish-language film are indebted to Palgrave Macmillan for the space it has opened in recent years for the study of this area of Hispanic culture whose research, curricular, and

popular appeal continues to beg for that space. The present volume is one more in the growing list of Palgrave Macmillan's titles that identify it as an important venue for Hispanic film scholarship. That said, the publisher must be called to account for a failing of this and other recent titles on cinema in the Hispanic world. Film is a visual medium, and frequent use is necessarily made of screen shots in order to elucidate or punctuate analyses. And, while the use of black and white images may be understandable from a cost-of-printing standpoint, compromise on the quality, clarity and contrast of images cannot be an option. This is precisely an issue with *Humor in Latin American Cinema*. Where the volume's contributing authors have thought prudent the inclusion of images from the films they analyze, the visual quality of those images is so poor as to so frustrate the reader that she loses interest. With modern technologies come the possibility and the expectation of quality visuals; quality film scholarship should demand them.

A collection of eleven essays brought together by editors Juan Poblete and Juana Suárez, *Humor in Latin American Cinema* purports to examine a fair number of Latin American films that belong to different cinematic periods and traditions. In its scope it is true to its title 'Latin American,' as it includes references to filmic productions like from Brazil and indigenous media. At the same time, most attention is directed toward filmic products from more prominent Latin American cinematic traditions like Mexico, Argentina, and Chile.

Editor Poblete himself writes the introductory essay, which seems to create for the reader a promise of what is to come. In a very straightforward and organized fashion, he explains classical and modern, as well as modernist, theories of humor. His references include Aristotle, Plato, Hobbes, Freud, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard. The Aristotelian median social type as comic butt, Bakhtin's carnivalesque, the medieval fool, the societal other are some of the humoristic classifications that Poblete lists, explains, and analyzes clearly and concisely. This introduction proceeds with an outline of the different cinematographic traditions present in Latin America from the classical period to the present day. This outline offers the novice reader an easily digestible, yet comprehensive, overview of the Latin American experience, as it, then moves to a brief outline of the entire volume.

Contrary to the book's title and to the introduction's early promise,

what is most lacking in most of the essays is a study of humor in Latina American cinema. The lack of fulfillment of the early promise is evident immediately. The first chapter, written by Nilo Fernando Couret, speaks to Luis Sandrini's humoristic filmic presence in early Argentine cinema. The 30s' Chaplinesque Argentine comic giant's linguistic skills and gags in some of his most known films have been dissected and critiqued. Here, critical realism, mimesis, Bergsonian comedy are brought to bear, though briefly, in the explication of a group of representative films accompanied by black and white stills taken from them. But what the reader most notes is a lack of implementation or contextualization with the theories of humor offered up in Poblete's introduction. Are these films humorous? Why are they humorous? What kinds of humor does a viewer find there? What theories about humor help us understand these films' humor? What does the humor in these films tell the viewer about the time and place they were made? This essay, and most of the rest do not manage to address what would seem to be crucial questions for a volume titled *Humor in Latin American Cinema*.

A casual reader or a serious scholar who is looking for essays that confront these questions in a search for manifestations of humor and associated philosophies and applications in cinema, will find this collection lacking. This comes across as a serious lack in what then must be perceived as the publication of a series of quasi-independent essays, rather than a coherent, cohesive, organic whole. A connection between Poblete's propitious introduction and the collection of articles is only a suggestion, and any issue of humor in Latin American cinema is one that was decided before this volume came into existence. For some, this lack penned by distinct authors seems adrift, and the reading becomes cumbersome that loses cogency and validity at one point.

Just because he authored the introduction does not mean the Poblete escapes blame here. He is as well the author of the volume's last essay, one on Chilean film. *Humor in Latin American Cinema's* last chapter takes up sense of humor and society in *Taxi para tres*, *Sexo con amor*, and *Todo Chile adentro*. The analysis of the three films is articulate, and it offers readers an understanding of how the three successful movies reflect Chilean social realities. That is, after reading this essay, the reader better understands the three films in question in terms of their relationship to the context that produced and consumed them.

But, what the reader does not know after reading this essay, like most of the other essays of the collection, is what is humorous about the films, what kinds of humor they employ, and to what effect.

Nevertheless, there are chapters that are worth mentioning: the ones written by Gareth Williams on Cantinflas, the comic icon of the Golden Age Mexican cinema; the essay by Paula Inés Laguarda on Niní Marshall, the classic Argentine comic whose performativity challenges gender norms; the chapter on Mazzaropi and his rustic-yet-modernist comic style from early Brazilian film history (chapter 5, Mauricio de Bragança); and, Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste's contribution on contemporary Mexican cinema and the figure of *nacos*.

Of these chapters, the ones dedicated to Cantinflas and contemporary Mexican cinema stand out. Taken together, they provide a comparison and contrast in the evolution of the national butt of cinematic humor, the evolution from *peladito* to *naco*. According to the essays, the social violence and chaotic modernity that confronted Mexico in the 1940s and 1950s are represented by the language full of harangue and malapropism that dominates *peladito* discourse. In most Cantinflas films, the urban underdog struggling cunningly for survival as the fittest in the bourgeois world becomes hero and clown simultaneously.

This characteristic evolution compares with that of *nacos*, a contemporary phenomenon (appearing in the 1990s). *Nacos* represent urban resistance to the acceptance of cultures and customs associated with the lower social status, with less privileged members of the society. Humor, that has been the customary carrier of social messages and criticism through the *peladito* now acts as the tool of resistance for the *naco*. The latter defies the societal rigidity and goes against the established norms and order. The parallelism in the cinematic traditions together with the changing functions of humor provides the reader with an important lesson about humor in Mexican film, this form of satire takes on darker tones when *naco* morphs toward *na(r)co*.

Argentina's Niní Marshall portrays the urban woman immigrant in the Buenos Aires who ridicules the classic and stereotypical societal views about women's roles. Niní offers has a strange resemblance to the popular Spanish comic character created by José Escobar Saliente with *Petra, criada para todo*. This gender-challenging character questions the antiquated ideas and visions of performativity, all of which makes

Marshall lively and distinct on screen. Urbanism/urbanity contrasted with the ruralness creates humor in the form of satire that at times turns rebellious and grotesque, as for example in Marshalls' popular characters of *Cándida* and *Catita*. Her characterizations can be seen as ahead of their time in confronting stereotypes and questioning gender norms of early- and mid-twentieth century Argentine society.

Mazzaropi and his rustic-yet-modernist style in Brazilian cinema from the 1950s to the 1980s is incarnate in the popular *caipira* character that blends comedy, moralist melodrama, and humanist discourse. The modernization of Brazil and the popular rural-urban conflicts constitute the core of Mazzaropi's works. It is notable that his 'cosmic body' is considered as the seed for humorous discourse in a Bakhtinian sense. His is the 'incorrect' body that always contrasts with the 'healthy' and 'productive' bodies of the city, which often provokes laughter in the audience. Mockery, satire, and irony occur on screen owing to the frequently referenced clashes between the urban, modernized mores and rural culture.

*Humor in Latin American Cinema*, a 2016 publication, can be a source of information and an example of research trends for the readers with interest in cultural and popular studies because it confronts various cinematic phenomena and Latin American filmic heritage in terms of humor. It, then, contributes to Latin American studies as well as Film Studies. The socio-politico-cultural discourses alluded to throughout add insightful dimension. There is some gender-related introspection as well that can be of particular interest to readers with Women and Gender Studies agendas. At best, *Humor...* might be deemed as a useful general interdisciplinary read.

However, for the specialist or one interested in humor, particularly filmic humor, and how it works, this volume is probably much less attractive. It lacks a detailed bibliography, although each essay cites amply. The chief deficit, though, lies in the fact that theories and philosophies of humor are neither implemented, applied, nor queried by the essays, in spite of the promising introductory exposition. Why are these films humorous? What does their humor tell us? Why should we take humor seriously? Why should we take a volume titled *Humor in Latin American Cinema* seriously, if it does not address these questions?