



Between the National and the Transnational: Commercial and Industrial Links Between Chile and Argentina's Leading Film Companies over the Second World War

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Center-periphery perspectives have been challenged recently by transnational studies that provided more nuanced perspectives beyond Hollywood's predominance in the international market. Shifting the focus to the transnational interactions within other regions opens up a multipolar and decentralized story of Latin American cinema, a region that was distant from the WWII scenario, with its internal dynamics and exchanges, and where the Cold War's impact was delayed. This article looks into one of these cases by examining the commercial and industrial ties between Argentina and Chile in the 1940s and 1950s, focusing on the relations between their leading studios, Argentina Sono Film and Chile Films. It examines the commercial and industrial links between Chilean and Argentine cinemas, not just economically but as a space where modernization and nationalism ideologies conditioned the emergence and sustainability of their film industries. The article shows how film production in Latin America's Southern Cone generated its center-periphery dynamics, beyond Hollywood's undisputed dominance, challenging standardized periodizations and calling for a multiperspective that acknowledges global asynchronicities.

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In 1936, Uruguayan cinema produced its first sound film, *Dos destinos*, directed by Juan Etchebehere. The initial credits presented a plaque that read, "This film is the initiation of the film industry in Uruguay. It is up to the public to make the country proud to see the triumphant opening of a new expression of the Uruguayan soul." Behind this legend, the national flag was proudly flying.

This initial image condenses some of the main features of the studio era in most Latin American countries. Although many of them produced movies during the silent period, with different levels of development, the irruption of sound meant a turning point for Latin American cinemas. Local audiences, fascinated

by the technological novelty, demanded films in their native language (Spanish and Portuguese), which propelled further institutionalization of local industries. Making sound films implied larger investments than the existing ongoing amateur organization of film production.

This context led most Latin American countries to try, throughout the 1930s and 1940s, to create their film industry. These processes were marked by nationalist discourses, as seen in the Uruguayan case, which promoted an equation between industrialization, modernization, and nation. This motivation, often led not only by film entrepreneurs but also by artists, intellectuals, and politicians, was articulated by national states' emphasis on economic autonomy and development, which helped to promote the desire for an industry of their own. Despite these dreams, however, most national industries were truncated for several reasons. Uruguay, for example, beyond this proclamation of intentions, did not manage until the 1960s to make more than two films per year at most, limited by lack of resources and its proximity to the much stronger Argentine film industry.

The technological transformations of the film industry of the 1930s changed the local level of production and circulation dynamics of Latin American films within the region. To an extent, Latin America replicated some of the power dynamics of the global film scene. As Paulo Antonio Paranaguá (2003) points out, its countries can be divided into three levels in terms of production. First, those that managed to develop local industries and maintain constant production over the decades were Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. A second level comprises those with what Paranaguá calls *production spurts*, i.e., moments of high activity interspersed with others of stagnation: *mid-tier* industries such as Chile, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, and Cuba. Finally, we can find the rest of the countries that struggled for a long time to create a national film industry.

These different production levels meant that Latin America—a region in itself peripheral to the global production centres in Hollywood and, to a lesser extent, Europe—reconfigured its film map with its internal hierarchies and local peripheries. Two *centres* arose: Mexico and Argentina.¹ Both countries had the highest production levels and were the only ones that managed to develop an industrial model with serial output, a stable system of genres and stars, and sustained success over time. Thus, they became the predominant Spanish-speaking industry in the regional market.

Argentina and Mexico alternated in their dominance of the Latin American film market, each representing a distinct popular aesthetic: Argentina offered a more cosmopolitan and urban style, while Mexico emphasized traditional, rural themes and characters. Toward the end of the 1930s, Argentina gained the upper hand by showcasing a diverse range of urban-set films. These included tango melodramas (*Ayúdame a vivir*, José Agustín Ferreyra, 1936), popular

¹ Brazil managed to develop a strong film industry, but as the only Portuguese-speaking country in a predominantly Spanish-speaking region, it remained something of an outsider in Latin American film circulation.

comedies (*Mujeres que trabajan*, Manuel Romero, 1938), crime films (*La fuga*, Luis Saslavsky, 1937), and bourgeois family dramas (*Así es la vida*, Francisco Mugica, 1939). By 1939, Argentine productions had become the most popular non-Hollywood films in Latin American movie theatres.

The advent of the Second World War, however, meant a sudden change of direction. Although the war did not take place in Latin American territory and it was the geographically furthest region from the conflict, the echoes of war impacted its economic development. Within the cinematic field, the intervention of the United States in the region under the Good Neighbour policy deeply impacted the industrialization process of Argentine and Mexican cinemas.² The constant suspicion of the U.S. State Department about Argentina's allegiance during the war, and the country's sustained neutrality until March 1945, led to a growing tension and a constant fear of a possible infiltration of Nazi agents into its industrial and economic field. This led to the U.S. blocking the import of celluloid into Argentina and providing financial, technological, and logistical support to the less-suspicious Mexican industry.³

At the same time, far from the uncertainties of war, other South American countries were also working to develop their national film industries. One example is Chilean cinema, which, in an effort to turn a fragile local industry into a competitive international player, established the state-private partnership *Chile Films* in 1942, an ambitious but failed attempt to create a *local Hollywood*. Despite being conceived as a national political initiative to stimulate economic development, its implementation relied on international collaboration. From early on, the company's executives sought the expertise of foreign film professionals, hiring many prominent Argentines from across the Andes. In addition to directors, stars, screenwriters, and technicians, Chile Films' main trans-Andean partner was *Argentina Sono Film* (ASF), Argentina's leading production studio, which had been severely affected by a U.S.-led embargo on raw film stock imports. While Chile Films aspired to strengthen its industry through Argentine collaboration, we will see that this alliance did not end very well for the Chilean industry. On the other hand, the partnership offered ASF a lifeline, helping it avoid bankruptcy and opening the door to business expansion at a time when Argentina's film industry was plunging into a crisis from which it would never fully recover.

This article explores the relationship between ASF and Chile Films during the 1940s and 1950s, focusing on the commercial and industrial ties between Argentina and Chile. While acknowledging the influence of the United States

2 The Good Neighbor policy was the foreign policy enacted by the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration in the US towards Latin America. It was based initially on a non-interventionist stance that positioned the United States as a friendly ally for the region. With the start of World War II this policy shifted towards a more active soft power strategy promoting activities that ranged from health campaigns to cultural diplomacy to ensure the allegiance of Latin American countries and to block any presence of Axis agents within the region.

3 For detailed accounts of the impact of World War II on Latin American cinema, see Usabel (1982), Bender (2002), and Peredo Castro (2004).

on this relationship, the article emphasizes the significance of each country's position within the international arena, particularly in the context of Latin America's internal power dynamics. The fact that Argentina and Chile were the two principal players gave this collaboration a unique character, shaped by a shared history of rivalry and interdependence, distinguishing it from other Latin American experiences.⁴ We will see that the space of collaboration between Chile Films and ASF was enabled by specific material conditions and mobilized by modernization and nationalism ideologies, which constrained the emergence and sustainability of both film industries. Addressing this relationship throughout the 1940s allows us to understand a map of commercial, industrial, and cultural relations that challenges the single centre-periphery views that tend to dominate the study of global cinema. We suggest that this map of relations is an exponent of a regional system that questions traditional frames of reference and periodizations. Chile Films and ASF developed a collaboration which, although conditioned by external war conditions, responded mainly to a complex shared history and Latin American own cultural dynamics, with high levels of autonomy from the global sphere.

This article is based on joint research into the case of Chile Films, drawing on the limited archival material available in both Chile and Argentina. Most of the sources on the company's fate are found in the press of both countries: *El Mercurio*, *La Hora*, *La Nación*, *Ecran*, *Ercilla*, *Vea*, *Boletín Cinematográfico* in Chile; and *La Nación*, *La Prensa*, *El Heraldo del Cinematografista*, *Film*, *Radio-landia*, *Sintonia*, and *Set* in Argentina. Given the disappearance of the company's original archives, except for some company reports (from Chilefilms S.A. and the Chilean Economic Development Agency, CORFO), we also revised the parliamentary sessions on the company's operations (National Congress Session Diaries at the Library of the Chilean National Congress). Likewise, Argentina Sono Film's archives are not currently accessible to researchers.

RE-MAPPING LATIN AMERICAN CINEMAS

Transnational studies of global film *peripheries*—often considering regions such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Elena 1999; Iordanova, Martin-Jones, and Vidal 2010) and commonly referred to as the “Global South”—have demonstrated the existence of vibrant dynamics within these regions, articulating both global and local trends that go beyond and across national borders. Highlighting international connections, movements, and interactions between agents, films, ideas, and institutions (Hjort 2009; Higbee and Lim 2010), captures cine-

⁴ The historical rivalry between Chile and Argentina has been marked by territorial disputes and ongoing tensions, particularly throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Their relationship has been shaped by several border conflicts (including the dispute over Eastern Patagonia and the Beagle Channel crisis), although these periods of friction have also been interspersed with moments of cooperation and diplomatic resolution.

ma's global nature, beyond the reductive frameworks of a single country and the sweeping predominance of one single international agent. Worldwide, cinema was shaped by multiple cultural exchanges and overlapping international power structures, negotiated in specific local contexts. The increasing incorporation of transnational perspectives into the field of film history has not only contributed to shedding light on previously overlooked relationships but has also demonstrated the need to reconsider the geopolitical mappings that guided discourses on global cinema.

Latin America, in particular, challenges some of the dominant assumptions about postcolonial regions, as its historical trajectory and relationship with core countries differ from those of Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia. Unlike these regions, which remained under colonial rule well into the mid-20th century, most Latin American countries had gained independence by the early 19th century. By the time cinema arrived in 1896, they had already spent nearly a century constructing their nation-states. This earlier autonomy—socio-politically distinct from the U.S.-Europe dynamic—enabled Latin American countries to begin developing independent cultural industries relatively early. As a result, much like other politically sovereign nations at the time, the arrival and evolution of cinema during the first half of the 20th century were not solely shaped by colonial influence. Instead, they were deeply tied to national projects of affirmation and progress. Cinema emerged within broader local processes of modernity and modernization, entangled with debates over national identity, international recognition, and the pursuit of economic development grounded in industrial ambitions and cultural independence.

Despite these developments and ambitions, Latin American film industries have traditionally been regarded as peripheral to a global centre dominated by Hollywood, and of limited significance to “world” film history—at least until the rise of politically engaged Latin American cinemas in the 1960s. This U.S.-centred perspective has been perpetuated not only by global film historiography but also by local scholars, who have often viewed Latin America's golden age of industrial production (1930s–1960s) as a self-contained period, largely characterized by imitations of Hollywood. As a result, Latin American cinema has frequently been studied (King 1990; Schumann 1987), with an emphasis on the apparent imitation of Hollywood practices, or on the influence and direct involvement of American companies in shaping the region's industries. However, recent scholarship has shown that Latin American film production generated its own centre-periphery dynamics, independent of Hollywood's undisputed dominance in regional film culture (Purcell 2015; Miskell 2016; Schroeder-Rodríguez 2016; Falicov 2019). Newer studies of the golden age have highlighted the diverse transnational connections between Latin American film industries and underscored the popularity and cultural significance of local cinemas, especially before the 1960s (Lusnich, Aisenberg, and Cuarterolo 2017). Research has also pointed to a longstanding regional engagement with international cinema and the presence of cosmopolitan narratives that extended beyond Hollywood's stronghold in local markets (Navitski and Poppe 2017).

While these transnational studies have challenged the traditional centre-periphery model, they have largely concentrated on relationships involving Latin America's dominant Spanish-speaking industries (Mexico and Argentina), which were relatively equal players in the region. As a result, mid-tier countries have often been overlooked. We argue that examining international relationships involving a broader range of national players can offer a more nuanced understanding of the region's industrial dynamics. In this spirit, we propose a re-mapping of Latin American film history, inspired by Tim Bergfelder's (2000) revision of European cinema. Bergfelder suggests that the rise of international co-productions and popular cinema in the 1950s and 1960s was driven by two simultaneous yet diverging forces: the economic necessity of international cooperation and the ideological drive to define distinct national cinemas. This cartographic rethinking is especially productive for analysing Latin American film industries, where local development unfolded amid seemingly contradictory forces—economic dependency, nationalism, and uneven forms of international collaboration. Drawing on Bergfelder's dual framework, we advocate for a re-evaluation of Latin America's industrial dynamics that includes mid-tier cinemas. Though smaller in scale, these industries played a crucial role in efforts to forge national identities while also navigating the economic imperative for transnational partnerships. Refocusing attention on these players and their interactions with the region's unstable centres, such as Mexico and Argentina, opens the door to a more decentralized, multipolar narrative of Latin American cinema that extends beyond the dominant influence of Hollywood.

Latin America can thus be understood as a region with its own map of international film collaborations. While the broader regional landscape was shaped by modern aspirations of industrialization, mirroring Hollywood's expansion since the 1910s, segments of the internal market continued to favour Spanish-language films produced in the region, which resonated strongly with local audiences. In addition, national cinema was seen not only as a commercial product but also as a politically valuable tool, embraced by nation-states as a symbol of autonomy and cultural advancement. Within this context, Mexico and Argentina emerged as dominant players, both in terms of industrial strength and in shaping shared regional imaginaries. Their competition for market leadership and for setting the commercial terms of the region reached a peak in the early 1940s, when external forces disrupted the existing balance and new regional actors began to challenge their hegemony. The case of Chile Films and Argentina Sono Film exemplifies these dynamics.

AN IMPOSSIBLE COLLABORATION? CHILE FILMS AND ARGENTINA SONO FILM

Argentina Sono Film (ASF) was founded in October 1932 by Italian producer Ángel Mentasti and Argentine director Luis Moglia Barth. One year later, they released their first film, *¡Tango!* (1933) directed by Moglia Barth, the first Argentine film with optical sound technologies. During the 1930s, ASF would consolidate itself as one of the leading studios in the country with movies set in low-

er-class scenarios, storylines about show business—in a multimedia strategy to sell records—and leading figures from popular theatre and the music industry, like Libertad Lamarque and Pepe Arias.

ASF became what Nicolas Poppe calls “Latin America’s first industrial studio” (2021, 208), marking the way for the formation and consolidation of a national film industry. By 1938, the studio had taken the lead in Argentina’s international film distribution efforts. Spanish-speaking countries became its primary market, where competition was minimal aside from a few Mexican and Spanish productions. ASF began opening offices in major Latin American and European capitals, including in Portuguese-speaking Brazil. At the same time, ASF’s mogul, Ángel Mentasti, expanded his reach toward Hollywood, making frequent trips to forge commercial agreements with its leading studios. In the early 1940s, the company reached an agreement with Disney to dub its feature films in Argentina, and in the following years, films such as *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Dumbo* (1941) had Argentine voices in their Latin American distribution.

It is not surprising, then, that when Chilean officials began organizing the Chile Films project, their first point of contact was Argentina Sono Film (ASF). In 1941, Chile’s Economic Development Agency (CORFO) launched an industrialization program aimed at strengthening the national economy. At the time, Chilean film production was limited to sporadic efforts by a handful of independent filmmakers and private companies, such as V.D.B. and Estudios Santa Elena. CORFO proposed the creation of a joint-stock company with the purpose of “building and operating film studios, producing films, leasing facilities, partnering with other producers, and, more broadly, engaging in the commercial activities related to the film industry” (CORFO 1943, 236). Through Chile Films, the Chilean state aimed to increase the volume and consistency of national film production. In line with the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) strategy and the economic policy of the centre-left Radical Party governments (part of the Popular Front), Chile Films was envisioned as a step toward deeper industrialization and economic independence. One of its goals was to replace the import of Spanish-language films (mainly from other Latin American countries) with Chilean productions. However, state involvement was limited to supporting the industry through credit mechanisms, stopping short of direct state control over production.

The project adopted a mixed model inspired by the Mexican and Argentinian film industries (Gobantes 2014, 93–94), aiming to encourage and protect private investment without resorting to full nationalization. From 1941 to 1949, Chile Films operated as a partially state-owned production company, with CORFO as its principal shareholder. This gave CORFO the authority to appoint three representatives to the company’s board of directors. The remaining shares were distributed among private individuals and strategic institutions in exchange for key contributions. One of the most significant of these was Argentina Sono Film (ASF). An agreement signed prior to the company’s launch granted ASF 3,000 shares in return for providing technical advisory services. As a result, the Argentine firm played an active role in Chile Films’ management from the outset and was consulted on all major decisions during its early years (Gobantes 2014, 97).

In fact, Ángel Mentasti, president of ASF, appointed a representative to attend Chile Films' first board meeting on January 21, 1942, and established a dedicated division within ASF to oversee its operations in Chile (Bossay 2008, 55).

Chile Films' mission was to develop a national film industry capable of appealing to both domestic audiences and the broader Spanish-speaking market. To support this goal, large studios were constructed in Santiago, envisioned as the most modern and largest in South America, providing the necessary infrastructure for sustained production. Chile Films' general plan (including the construction plan for the studios and the purchase of the first equipment) followed the indications of Emilio Rodríguez Remy, the technical director of ASF until early 1943 (España 1984, 90). The creation of Chile Films sparked high expectations in the national media, hailed as a "foundational" moment, with the company described as "a collective asset and a matter of national interest", reflecting a spirit of modernizing optimism (Kelly-Hopfenblatt and Peirano 2020, 32). The company came to symbolize the defence of the national industry, rooted in the belief that protecting cinema also meant safeguarding national identity, "...our cinema—bad, good, so-so, or terrible—interprets the national soul against an imported one, even if it comes from the most admirable [foreign country] in the world" (Rivas 1945).

One of the main challenges the project faced, however, was the lack of technical expertise required to operate under an industrial model. Although Chilean filmmakers such as José Bohr and Jorge "Coke" Délano had substantial experience in the field, there simply weren't enough trained professionals to lead such an ambitious initiative. To address this, Chile Films launched an international recruitment program aimed at professionalizing the sector by training local technicians, with strong support from ASF. As a result, most of these international hires came from Argentina, such as the first cinematographers and sound technicians, Fulvio Testi, Antonio Merayo, and Jorge di Lauro. Most noticeably, when Chile Films began operations in mid-1943, the aforementioned Luis Moglia Barth was appointed technical director of the studios and sole head of production. Although this role was not originally part of the agreement, he also directed the company's first film, the epic melodrama *Romance de medio siglo* (1944).

Chile Films' decision to collaborate with ASF reflected a deliberate preference for Latin American professionals over those from Hollywood, a choice intended to ensure the *quality* of Chilean film production. Writing about the company in 1946, *Sight and Sound's* correspondent in Chile, Raymond del Castillo, argued that

While the [Hollywood] studios are equipped with the most modern film-making appliances obtainable in the States, the company refused to import technicians from Hollywood on the grounds that, in the long run, it was more profitable to train Chileans. This policy has averted the labour troubles agitating the film communities in Buenos Aires and Mexico City at various times, when the appearance of American technicians, not always the best, has led to prolonged and extremely bitter disputes... (del Castillo 1946, 121).

However, the hiring of Argentinians was not without controversy. Moglia Barth's appointment created a direct conflict with the duties of the Chilean technical manager, Chilean filmmaker Armando Rojas Castro, who had initially been responsible for all technical decisions. The disagreement culminated in Rojas Castro's resignation in December 1943. Between 1943 and 1944, the company's internationalization practices became a target of media criticism, as they were seen as contradicting Chile Films' stated goal of creating a *national* cinema. The press accused the company of discriminating against talented Chilean professionals and technicians in favour of Argentinians. Local journalists warned of what they described as a dangerous *foreignization*, claiming, for example, that "Chilean cinema will no longer be Chilean. It will have a foreign tinge, a different accent to ours" (Rivas 1945). Criticism also extended to the content of the films, which were perceived as lacking authentic national character. Since Chile Films aimed to produce movies with *universal* plots suitable for international markets, it often abandoned local themes in favour of a kind of vernacular cosmopolitanism. This, in turn, reinforced the perception that the company lacked a genuine national identity.

Underlying the press criticism over the company's transnational production strategy was the suspicion that Chile Films was tailor-made for second-class Argentinian professionals who would have taken advantage of local inexperience. Chilean media distrusted ASF's "sudden interest" in Chile and its "hidden motives", which consisted of benefiting from Chilean resources without bearing the costs of production: "... cinema turns out to be a splendid business for those who come from outside and an eternal sacrifice for those who have been trained in Chile" (Rivas 1944, 15), "Chile Films is the greatest hope for an industrial future of Chilean cinema: it would be regrettable if it were to become only a continuation in our country of an Argentine company" (*Ecran* 1944).

This criticism was fuelled by growing disappointment with the company. Despite the high expectations placed on Chile Films, it never achieved the success that had been anticipated. *Romance de medio siglo* (1944) suffered money losses, and Chile Films managed to produce only two other films, four years after its creation: the melodramas *Amarga Verdad* (1945) by Chilean director Carlos Borcosque, and *La Casa está Vacía* (1945) by the Argentinian Carlos Schlieper. These films did not perform well enough at the box office to cover their production costs, prompting an internal restructuring within the company. The board replaced all the company's managers with Chileans, including filmmakers Jorge Délano and José Bohr.⁵ Since mid-1946, Chile Films produced more commercially successful films, most notably the hit comedy *El Padre Pitillo* (1946), which helped restore public and institutional confidence in the company. The Chilean press reported enthusiastically on upcoming productions, the emergence of new local stars, and international distribution deals. However, despite

⁵ For a detailed account of the internal restructuring and several controversies surrounding Chilefilms' local administration between 1946 and 1947, see Gobantes (2014).

this renewed optimism, the Chilean economic crisis of 1947 had a significant impact on the film industry, particularly on the importation of celluloid. By then, amidst the dawn of the Cold War, Chile Films' longstanding financial crisis became public, causing a national scandal (*Ercilla* 1947b, 4 and 31). The company's board was accused of unpatriotic attitudes, and CORFO was urged to intervene again and supervise this *patriotic work* (Pistolas 1947). The inability to overcome this crisis ultimately led to the company's closure in 1949.

The failure of both the ASF–Chile Films partnership and Chile Films itself can be understood as the result of a combination of national and international factors. Firstly, Chile Films was unable to achieve long-term economic sustainability. Secondly, the nationalist tensions were sparked by the increasing exchange of professionals between Chile and Argentina. Lastly, the impact of the Second World War on South America—particularly the global shortage of raw film stock—further strained relations with its main international partner, ASF.

WWII: STOCK SCARCITY AND GROWING TENSIONS

Chile Films was established at a time when the world was entering the most intense years of World War II. Both Argentina and Chile maintained neutrality until the final stages of the conflict, yet they were closely monitored and infiltrated by both Axis and Allied powers, each seeking to sway their international alignments. In this context, the United States' rationing of virgin materials for film production and distribution became a powerful geopolitical tool. The U.S. frequently threatened these South American nations with boycotts and trade blockades as a means of exerting pressure. The blockade of Argentina began in 1941 and soon had a significant impact on its film industry. The country's output dropped dramatically, from over fifty films in 1942 to barely fifteen in 1945. Argentine cinema entered a period of deep decline, marked by the loss of international markets and a wave of emigration by stars and directors, many of whom sought refuge in Chile. Faced with a critical shortage of raw film stock, some Argentine production companies were forced to shut down entirely. Others resorted to desperate measures, including reusing celluloid from old films and, reportedly, smuggling materials from neighbouring countries.⁶

Therefore, for Argentine producers, the emergence of the new trans-Andean film industry represented a valuable professional opportunity during a time of crisis. ASF, in particular, saw strategic value in this unusual collaboration with its neighbouring country. In statements to the Argentine press, Ángel Mentasti emphasized the importance of the partnership, stating that

⁶ For a detailed account of the celluloid crisis in 1940's Argentina, see Kelly-Hopfenblatt (forthcoming).

The official Chilean invitation means, certainly, a public and impartial recognition of the importance that our company has achieved through tenacious work, in which we have demonstrated our technical capacity and economic solidity. But I believe even more. I consider that the honour given to our company should be a great satisfaction for all Argentine cinema, since it is reflected without distinction on it, with the consequent benefits of moral order (*Film* 1941, 3) [our translation].

ASF saw an ideal opportunity in Chile Films since, at the time, Chile was not suffering from such a strong lack of raw film stock. Argentine Jorge Carlos Lemos was hired to organize the Chile Films laboratories in 1943, which he created in 1944 (Maranghello 2000). ASF, together with other Argentine studios, used these laboratories to develop new prints of their movies, which they distributed in Latin American markets, in an unsuccessful attempt to avoid losing regional primacy to the growing Mexican industry.

The American government, trying to ensure Argentina's ban, followed closely these operations. In February 1944, at the meeting of the Argentina Motion Picture Sub-committee of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, a member of the organization informed that

Carlos Cunio Santini (*sic*) of the Laboratorios Alex, Buenos Aires, had just arranged for the purchase of 500 cans of raw stock, which apparently was in the possession of some Chilean company. The secretary explained that the facts together with other details had been forwarded in a memorandum to Mr Burrows of the Embassy and that Mr Burrows had immediately telegraphed Santiago requesting that no permissions be granted for the export of such film into Argentina.⁷

In August 1944, Chile Films requested a larger quota of film stock from the American Embassy in Chile. They argued that this was needed to help the Argentines develop new prints of their movies for Latin American distribution. In a letter sent by the American ambassador in Santiago to the State Department, he informed that

Since the beginning of 1944, Argentine motion picture companies have been attempting to overcome the inadequacy of positive film supplies in their own country by shipping to Chile one negative copy of each feature picture and having reproductions made here from raw positive film obtained in the Chilean market.⁸

This had led to a faster depletion of Chilean celluloid than expected, which is why they were requesting new deliveries. The American Ambassador pointed out

7 "Minutes: Motion Picture Sub-Committee Meeting No. 73", Feb 7, 1944, Folder "Motion Picture Sub-Committee - Minutes of Meetings (1943-1944)", Box 1248, RG 229 Office of Inter-American Affairs - General Records - Central Files, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, MD, USA. In fact, two weeks later it was stated that this operation had been stopped.

8 "Motion Picture Film Shipments", letter from Merwin L. Bohan, Counselor for American Affairs at the Embassy of the United States of America in Argentina to the Honorable Secretary of State, Aug 22, 1944, Microfilm 1322, Roll 26 - Argentina 1940s, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, MD, USA.

that the main Argentine company interested in this request was ASF, which had proposed to Chile Films that it "undertake to produce copies of Sono Films features for distribution in countries on the West Coast of South America, other than Chile." He also pointed out that "the fact that Sono Films is a stockholder in Chile Films and has loaned the latter organization production equipment and technical personnel for filming its first full-length feature, which is nearing completion [*Romance de Medio Siglo*] are conditions giving rise to the present proposal." The Embassy closed its letter by stating its agreement with Chile Films' request, but at the same time, leaving the final decision to the Washington offices.

By 1945, reports of these dealings began to appear in the American press. In January, *The Film Daily* reported that

The use of American raw stock under Chile's quota is understood to have been made part of a co-producing agreement between Argentine Films and Chile Films, whereby both companies will exchange actors, and studio equipment, and make films in their respective countries. [...]. A recent investigation as to the source of Argentina's adequate supply of prints revealed that local laboratories were printing on Chilean quota (FD 1945).

Two months later, *Variety* stated that "Chile is understood to have turned over part of her raw stock to Argentina, but not sufficient to meet requirement" (*Variety* 1945). Finally, in November 1945, the United States decided to act on it and penalize the Chileans, reducing by 66% the quota of film stock destined for Chile. The official argument was that the supply far exceeded the needs of the Chilean industry, but the press on both sides of the Andes quickly deduced that this was linked to the actions of the Argentines. In Argentina, *Film* magazine stated that

This measure is due to frequently verified reports of large-scale smuggling of blank film from Chile to Argentina. It places the Chilean film industry in a difficult situation, having had to suspend the shooting of several productions, including the newsreel *Chile al día* (*Film* 1945) [our translation].

We can see that the effect of collaborating with a bigger player in the region allowed Chile to set up for production but also worked against its interest. This penalization from the U.S. affected even further the already fragile film industry, which was also going through a difficult period. The international economic crisis had led to a growing shortage of dollars and an annual inflation rate of around 20%. Consequently, the costs of production increased considerably, and, at the end of 1947, the government decided to limit the use of dollar reserves only to imports of essential goods. This situation further affected the import of celluloid, and during the following years, it had to be rationed among the different film productions (Pistolas 1946). This and other factors, such as the increased costs of production and the internal management and investment errors (Gobantes 2014, 91-138), led Chile Films to an economic crisis after only three years of full operation.

Faced with this shortage of celluloid, Chilean specialized press did not, however, mention any of the U.S. impositions. Instead, it turned directly against

the company's administration and the Argentinians. The main Chilean film fan magazine, *Ecran*, stressed that the police had arrested "well-known characters," presumably working at Chile films, for smuggling celluloid to Argentina; however, these allegations were never verified, nor was it specified who these detainees were (*Ecran* 1946). Faced with rising production costs, the press accused Chile Films of irresponsible squandering "There is no celluloid, but some people waste it and throw it away with open hands" (*Ercilla* 1946). This led to a series of political accusations about corruption in the company, alluding to board members who were not aligned with the Chilean pro-U.S. government of Gabriel González Videla. They were also accused of being communists, amidst the government's anti-communist policy.

The issue of celluloid only reinforced the nationalistic tensions and mistrust that persisted in the company's international collaborations with Argentina. The political reading of the Chile Films' economic crisis also touched upon the idea that, ultimately, the company failed in the hands of foreign interests. In 1947, the new company director Hernán García Valenzuela vigorously defended the patriotic nature of saving Chile Films from bankruptcy saying "I put the Nazis at bay in the South. Be assured that I will never allow our film industry to cease to be Chilean [...] Chile Films was managed as a private business, forgetting that it was as national as our roads" (*Ercilla* 1947b). The reference to Nazis in García's statement was not coincidental, given the longstanding mistrust toward Argentina, particularly the unfounded fear of a trans-Andean invasion and the idea of a fifth column linked to a so-called Fourth Reich. These anxieties were rooted in Argentina's controversial reputation for neutrality during World War II (Nocera 2005).

Despite the negative press surrounding Argentina, after 1947 Chile Films sought to overcome its economic difficulties through a new collaborative model: direct co-productions with Argentine partners. This approach culminated in the company's final production, which was made under this new arrangement, *Esperanza* (1949), co-produced with the Argentine company *Sur Cinematográfica Argentina*. Despite these final efforts, the industrial project turned into a failure. Local revenue never got to cover its production costs, films were never widely distributed internationally as originally expected, and the company kept experiencing a downturn in the following years. Finally, Chile Films declared bankruptcy in 1949, and the studios were leased to private Chilean companies (the Taulis brothers) in 1950.⁹ During the 1940s, the company produced 9 films, co-produced 4 films with different Argentine companies, and 6 other films were filmed inside its studios, which was not enough to build a sustainable national industry (Peirano and Gobantes 2014, 253-273).¹⁰ Eventually, the exchange

9 In 1966, Chilean historian Mario Godoy goes even further, blaming Chile Films failure on a sort of trans-Andean plot: "Chile Films would be an excellent field of experimentation for those who, instead of coming to help us, would come to harm us. After all, how could Argentine filmmakers come to help Chilean cinema to progress, if we were going to compete with their own productions? [...] They should have gone to any country but Argentina for advisors." (Godoy Quezada 1966, 118) [our translation].

10 Interestingly, none of the co-productions with Argentine producers were with

with ASF paid back only to local professionals who effectively learned from the international exchange—Chilean technicians and filmmakers who started their careers in the company and who built the national field in the following decades (like Andrés Martorell, Patricio Kaulen, Nieves Yankovic, and Naum Kramarenco) and Argentinians who remained working in Chile, like Jorge di Lauro. After its closure, there was no other systematic attempt to create a large national industrial project, and Chilean professionals continued to work independently. It was not until the mid-1960s that the company returned to the state's administration and began to produce documentary films. The company was eventually privatized by Pinochet's dictatorship in the 1980s.

Meanwhile, on the Argentine side, the end of the Second War allowed celluloid imports from France and Belgium, but it was not until the end of the decade that Argentina recovered its production levels. However, once the winds changed, ASF focused its efforts on recovering its production in Argentina and gradually retreated from any international collaboration, including Chile Films. National protectionism and state funding for film production, screen quotas, and other legal measures taken by Juan Domingo Peron's government helped this process, although several studios still went bankrupt. The only major studio that survived this process was Argentina Sono Film, which became closely identified with the Peronist movement. When a military coup overthrew Peron in 1955, the leading producers and directors of the studio were arrested as part of the de-peronization policies of the new regime.

Despite this turmoil, in the following decades, ASF was able to remain the country's leading industrial film company by producing mostly family entertainment and avoiding political conflicts with the various democratic and dictatorial regimes. During the 1960s and 1970s it resumed its international intentions and embarked on a series of co-productions like *En la selva no hay estrellas* (Armando Robles Godoy, Argentina-Peru, 1967), *Amor en el aire* (Luis César Amadori, Argentina-Spain, 1967), and *La mamá de la novia* (Enrique Carreras, Argentina-Mexico, 1978). These included even the Spain-Chile-Argentina collaboration *La pérgola de las Flores* (Román Viñoly Barreto, 1965). The nature of these later co-productions was not as unbalanced as the Chile Films experience, following the global models of post-WWII international co-productions based on financial collaboration, location shooting, and cosmopolitan topics.

Argentina Sono Film. They were rather with independent, mostly ad-hoc companies such as the aforementioned Sur Cinematográfica, or Sur Cinematográfica Del Carril for *Surcos de Sangre* (Hugo del Caril, 1950). Although there is no documentation explaining ASF's absence, we can speculate that, since it was already an established brand, the Argentine producers chose not to associate their name directly with Chile Films' output, and instead kept the collaboration purely technical and financial.

DE-CENTRING AND RE-PERIODIZING CINEMA HISTORIES

Focusing on relevant actors from the Global South and working towards a multi-perspective requires an acknowledgment of global asynchronicities and the nuances of international interactions, unfolding some of the historical complexities of cinema as a transnational phenomenon. Though there exists in recent scholarship a spirit of challenge towards the centralization of global cinema history, peripheral interactions like those within Latin America have often been overlooked.

These interactions not only exist outside traditional frameworks but also challenge them. We can consider this case as an in-between of other instances of international collaborations in global cinema. On the one hand, it fits into the 1920s proto-industrialization approach of projects like Film Europe; on the other hand, it predates the multipolar model that guided post-war co-productions. Thus, the Chile Films-ASF case strains traditional periodizations of global cinema exchanges.

Likewise, the conventional Hollywood-Latin America narrative typically frames the region's cinema as a reaction to, or consequence of decisions made by the Hollywood industry and its predominance in the market, but we have seen that this perspective is not fully accurate. While American decisions did play a role in fostering internal collaborations within South America, these were driven by political motives from the State Department, not Hollywood itself. Furthermore, despite Chile Films and ASF aiming to emulate Hollywood's industrial model, these initiatives were homegrown and independent, with no direct influence or collaboration from major American studios. Both countries ended up partnering with each other while focusing on their own national and regional market, with Hollywood only being in the background of these endeavours.

After the transition to sound, film studios became a synonym of progress and an evolutionary ideal for many Latin American countries, while, as this case shows, their development was shaped by local and external factors that highlight some of the material, cultural and political complexities that framed the region during this period. While Chile Films is often viewed as a failure due to its internationalism and failed state intervention, ASF is considered a prime example of populist audience-serving production and business-savvy flexibility. Both their histories are more complex because their commercial possibilities were strongly framed by their overlapping international links. We have seen that commercial and industrial links between Chile Films and ASF were built in a social and cultural space where ideologies of modernization and nationalism conditioned the emergence of these local film industries, but also often obstructed their continuity.

By focusing on the internal interactions of the Southern Cone, we have looked into a region that was distant from the WWII battlefields. While these global scenarios impacted the development of Argentine and Chilean cinemas, a close analysis demonstrates that they did so in quite a different way from the rest of the world. Instead of war narratives of destruction and reconstruction, ASF

and Chile Films present stories of industrial shortages, modernization programs, business strategies, and nationalist quarrels that coexisted with the global turmoil. And whereas the political and cultural entanglements of this industrial venture were indirectly linked to broader international issues (such as Nazism and Communism), they mostly reflect the internal conditions of each country and, over and above, the tense relationship between a regional centre and a neighbouring periphery, and between two countries with a competitive historical past.

A similar perspective guided the post-war scenario. While most European cinemas reorganized themselves after WWII, deeply influenced by the postwar economic and cultural world reorganization, Latin American cinemas faced these years as a moment of crisis, which only gradually turned into a strong political positioning. The Cold War was initially an indirect background for local cinemas, whereas the national and regional dynamics were shaped more by the failure of numerous national industrial projects than by the Cold War climate. The main impact of the Global North came with the decline of the U.S backing of the Mexican industry after the war, by which, as Seth Fein has suggested, "the United States betrayed its rhetoric of free trade and open markets to undermine the competitiveness of the global cultural market" (1996, 578). The direct insertion of Latin American cinemas in the Cold War dispute would not manifest strongly until the 1960s, and it would be only because of a redefining event that forced the world to look towards the region: the Cuban revolution (1959).

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