Translating *Talkies* in Modernist Mexico The Language of Cinemas and the Politics of the Sound Film Industry

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Abstract: During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the first 'talkies' appeared in Mexico, and many new cinemas were built or adapted from older buildings in order to accommodate this paradigmatically modern entertainment technology. Until the 1920s movies were mostly screened in makeshift spaces –in private houses, old theaters, circuses and even churches. Then, in the early 1920s, the first 'cinema palaces' started to appear, and by the late 1930s there were around fifty new or newly adapted movie theaters specialized in featuring talkies in Mexico City. These movie houses were an emblem of spectacular modernity. They are also, as I argue, a clear example of 'translation spaces' in their many-layered complexity. I discuss a relatively wide range of translation practices, from dubbing and the politics of film translation in early foreign sound films in Mexico, to the role that the first movie theaters played as stone and concrete 'translators' of the modern experience of sound films, to the appropriation of old spaces and their repurposing for the new technologies, to the way that theaters that were built in particular 'languages,' such as the International Style and the Streamline modern, constituted a form of 'temporal' translation.

1. Movie theaters in the age of sound: an introduction

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the first "talkies" appeared in Mexico, and many new cinemas were built or adapted from older buildings in order to accommodate this paradigmatically modern entertainment technology. Until the 1920s, movies were mostly screened in makeshift spaces—in private houses, old theaters, circuses, and even churches. Then, in the early 1920s, the first "cinema palaces" started to appear, and by the late 1930s there were around fifty new or newly adapted movie theaters specialized in featuring talkies in Mexico City (Hershfield 2006, 265).[1] These

[1] Perhaps part of the problem is the lack of material evidence in magazines and newspapers regarding the construction of theaters, as compared to the great amount of information regarding films and actors. Among news such as "Tarzan has divorced his wife" and "Chaplin is in love

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movie houses, as the architectural historian Fernanda Canales has written, were "an emblem of spectacular modernity" (Hershfield 2006, 180). The first sound movie theaters are also, as I shall argue, a clear example of translation spaces in their many-layered complexity.

Research on cinemas both from the perspective of architectural as well as cultural history remains scarce in relation to other areas of focus in both film studies and architectural history. Often, film historians ignore the spaces in which films were screened, and architectural historians tend to disregard the history of film when they deal with movie theaters. Although film criticism does not fall within the purview this paper, and I will not focus on any film in particular, I do want to place my architectural analysis and discussion of movie theaters within the specific context of the arrival of sound film technology in order to discuss the relationship between the modern architectural language of movie theaters and some of the dominating cultural politics of the burgeoning sound film industry in Mexico. I am particularly interested in the question of whether these two things worked in consonance or, on the contrary, were in dissonance in relation to the discourse of modernity or in creating a "sense" of being modern. Considering the spaces that were created with the arrival of sound film from an architectural perspective, and focusing on a small group of movie theaters, I intend to discuss the various senses in which translation practices took place within these new spaces, and how such practices contributed to a wider discourse of modernity. Did both cinemas and the film industry have a parallel evolution in terms of how they subscribed parameters of modernism? Did they play a similar social and cultural role in their contribution to the formation of ideas of modernity?

I will discuss a relatively wide range of translation practices, from dubbing and the politics of film translation in early foreign sound films in Mexico, to the role that the first movie theaters played as stone-and-concrete "translators" of the modern

again" (*Cinelandia*, December 1932), as well as propaganda for new equipment for the new film theaters, advertisements which sell cheap and reliable English lessons, ads for new Kodak cameras and new Clarion radios, and so on, propaganda for film theaters or news about them is, with few exceptions, notably absent from magazines when the inauguration of theaters are announced.

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experience of sound films, to the appropriation of old spaces and their repurposing for the new technologies, to the way theaters that were built in particular architectural "languages," such as the International Style and the Streamline modern, constituted a form of temporal translation.[2] The way I approach these different practices and spaces, in turn, encompasses a hermeneutical approach to cultural practices, a phenomenological reading of building typology, and a more distant reading of buildings within the cityscape.

My approach to translation, moreover, is tied to the quintessentially modernist distinction between foreignization and domestication. Modernist translation practices must be distinguished from what is conceived more generally as translation. The 1920s and 1930s were decades of experimentation with composition and translation. As the critic Lawrence Venuti writes, modernist translation practices, which had their philosophical root in nineteenth-century philosophy, treated translation as an art and a source of innovation:

> The main trends in translation theory during [modernism] are rooted in German literary and philosophical traditions, in Romanticism, hermeneutics, and existential phenomenology […] Nineteenth-century theorists and practitioners like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm von Humboldt treated translation as a creative force in which specific translation strategies might serve a variety of cultural and social functions, building languages, literatures, and nations. At the start of the twentieth century, these ideas are rethought from the vantage point of modernist movements which prize experiments with literary form as a way of revitalizing culture. Translation is a focus of theoretical speculation and formal innovation. (Venuti 2000, 11)

Far from being a means of passively importing foreign literatures and adapting foreign languages to local ones, modernist translation as "formal innovation" constituted a form of active

[2] Although the term "International Style" started to be used more frequently in the 1930s, it usually refers to the language that architecture started using in the 1920s, and which became the emblematic style of modernism in architecture. Buildings designed according to the principles of the International Style are typically devoid of unnecessary ornamentation, are rectilinear, conceive exteriors as a result of interiors, and rationalize form and function. The Streamline Moderne style, which became widespread in the 1930s, draws on fundamental principles of the International style but merges it with Art Deco elements, such as the use of curved lines, horizontal planes, and references to nautical and aerial shapes.

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foreignization of the domestic (vis-à-vis domesticizing the foreign), by which the foreign "contaminated" the domestic and thus pushed its limits further, while at the same time blurring the boundaries between the so-called "foreign" and the "domestic." Seen in this light, modernist translation practices are ones in which translation was not merely conceived as an accurate rendering of a source language into a target language or a vehicle for explaining the foreign or making it more accessible or palatable to the local readership, but as a way of appropriating new forms and thus a creative locus of innovation. The term "translation practice", moreover, in the context of Mexican cultural history can help us move beyond the passive categories of "reception" or "influence," common to canonic literary and cultural studies, and allow us to focus on modernist cultural production in terms of exchanges.

2. Subtitles, dubbing, versions, and talkies: a hermeneutical approach to the horizon of a new soundscape

Translation and dubbing were a fundamental part of the beginnings of the sound film industry. By the end of the 1920s, the film industry had entered into a crisis and sound film was initially not being received enthusiastically around the world by leading figures in the industry. Chaplin had said that talkies were "ruining the great beauty of silence", (Maland 1989, 113) and Luigi Pirandello wrote in his well-known essay, "Will the Talkies do Away with Theater?", that American's "cheerful arrogance" regarding the advent of sound films was not something to really be worried about, because talkies were nothing but a "poor reproduction of theater" (Bassnett and Lorch, 156). But beyond its reception among prominent intellectuals and public figures, the crisis was also economic, and related to the world financial crisis. In 1932, the magazine *Cinelandia*, which was simultaneously published in Mexico and Hollywood, featured a piece titled "La gran crisis del cine" [The Great Crisis in Film] discussing the crisis in the industry and adjudicating the reasons for such crisis to the advent of talkies. The piece recounts, in a rather alarmist tone:

> Hollywood producers are receiving, from all over the world, definite data confirming the reduction of income from ticket sales in all the cinemas in every city, in every country in the world. To tell the truth, we must add that the downward trend in pop-

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> ular interest for the cinematographic spectacle did not start with the world financial crisis: it is older than that and goes back to the exact moment in which sound and spoken film first came onto the international market. (Reyes de la Maza 1973, 17)[3]

With the arrival of sound films in Hollywood in the late 1920s one of the many problems the American film industry faced was preserving its cultural and economic hegemony over the rest of the world. Governments were enforcing protectionist laws guarding against linguistic "invasion." Countries such as Argentina immediately banned movies spoken in English. Even in the UK, audiences started to protest against movies being spoken in "American." In Mexico, one of the most influential newspapers, *El Universal*, gave rise to an aggressive campaign against the new movies spoken in English, calling the governments throughout the Spanish American continent to ban movies in English. By the end of the 1920s, 90% of the silent films screened in Mexico were made in the US, and the Latin American audiences could not understand the new sound films (see Hershfield 2006, 264). The working classes did not speak English, and the elites mostly spoke French as a second language, not English. A good part of the Mexican elites as well as columnists and journalists supported the campaign in the vast majority of national print media. They seemed to agree that English would overtake Spanish if Hollywood's "pacific invasion" was not stopped by banning movies in English, and they contended that Spanish would soon become a dead language if the masses started identifying English as the language of entertainment. Although a few publications, such as the monthly *Continental*, responded aggressively to *El Universal*'s campaign, this anti-English movement was initially quite successful, at least among the elites and public intellectuals (see Reyes de la Maza 1973).

When the negative reaction to sound film became a universal response, Hollywood entrepreneurs finally decided that they had to do something about it. The first solution they attempted was to make silent versions of the new sound films, strictly for foreign ex-

[3] This quote, as well as much of the information regarding the late silent and early talkie eras, is taken from Reyes de la Mazas 1973, which is a compendium of articles from leading Mexican publications in 1929–1932. I will be quoting many articles from this compendium; all translations into English of the original articles are mine.

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port. This proved to be a complete failure in the entire world (Mora 1989, 31) as audiences wanted to partake in new technological advances and silent films were seen as a thing of the past. The second solution was to subtitle films, but countries had demands that were sometimes difficult to meet, as well as particular, local demographic realities. The Mexican president Emilio Portes Gil, for example, ordered that there should be "absolute Castilian purity in the language and subtitles of foreign films" (Garcia Riera 1992, 13), which was impossible as the people involved in subtitling were Spanish speakers from different Spanish-speaking countries now living in Los Angeles, and there was no way to conserve the Spanish "purity" demanded by Portes Gil. Moreover, in 1930, the percentage of analphabetism in Mexico was 65% (Vidal 2010, 20), so the majority of the population was unable to read film subtitles.

The third entrepreneurial strategy was to dub original Hollywood films. This, likewise, proved inadequate, as many spectators detested the monstrous disembodiment that the still precarious methods of dubbing entailed. Finally, at least in the case of films destined for the Spanish-speaking world, it was decided that Hollywood would produce "versions" of the original films, using actors that could speak Spanish fluently. They imported writers, technicians, directors and, of course, actors from Spain and Latin America to play the parts of the English-speaking "originals." These actors were called the Hollywood Hispanics—and were virtually linguistic stunt doubles. Or, perhaps, these Spanish-speaking actors can be seen as full-fledged dubbers: they not only leant their voice to the "original" but their entire body. A truly remarkable translation feat of sorts: Hispanic cinema became Hollywood's Spanish-language copy or version of itself.

From their beginnings, Hispanic films failed to convince audiences—as if their particular form of translation proved to be too simplistic and unsophisticated for modern spectators. The audience was perhaps aware that either they were not watching an entirely original film and that the actors they were seeing were most often not part of the venerable star-system. In fact, a Spanish newspaper published a sarcastic note "thanking" Hollywood for ridding them of so many untalented, unemployed actors and taking them over to the USA (Reyes de la Maza 1973, 23). The film critic Luz Alba wrote a piece titled "Growls in Spanish" where she stat-

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ed that the voices of the actors were “so emphatic and what they say is so stupid that one has the impression of being in a tent drama, where one could at least recur to the final resource of throwing the chairs at the actors—something impossible to do at the cinema Olimpia because the chairs are glued to the floor” (cited in Reyes de la Maza 1973, 180). Moreover, people were disgusted with the myriad Spanish accents, vocabulary, and idiomatic twists on the screen, where Mexicans, Spaniards, Argentineans, and Cubans played roles not necessarily corresponding to their accents. Before Hispanic sound films even arrived in Mexico, a film critic using the pseudonym of Don Q, who worked for the Spanish-language, New York-based magazine *Cine Mundial*, stated in 1929 that

> the diversity of nationalities and even races to which those improvised actors belong is such that their films will look like salads, mixing a variety of accents and ethnicities—something that could be tolerated in scenes that can lend themselves to a cosmopolitan interpretation, but which will lead to more than a few flops. (Reyes de la Maza 1973, 191)

Indeed, Hispanic films only lasted a few years, soon proving to be an absolute commercial flop.[3] Metro Goldwyn Mayer’s last attempt to keep hold of the Latin American and Spanish market was to get Hollywood’s best actors to speak a little Spanish. Laurel and Hardy, as well as Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, all made shorts in Spanish and, though these fared better with educated audiences—at least in Mexico—than the movies featuring Hollywood Hispanics, they did not do not well enough for entrepreneurs to persist in this last, rather eccentric endeavor (Reyes de la Maza 1973, 25).

The theaters these subtitled, then dubbed, and then remade versions were screened in were originally designed for silent films, and were, in turn, often older buildings—churches, convents, or old theaters—sometimes precariously and sometimes creatively “translated” or repurposed for cinema. One of the most emblematic spaces for film screenings in the early 1920s was a former sixteenth-century convent, which, in 1922, reopened with the rather bombastic name Progreso Mundial (World Progress). The old courtyard, typical of colonial architecture, was used as the primary

[3] By 1939, after approximately 175 talkies, Hispanic films ceased to be produced (García Riera 1992, 14).

sitting space, and the original stone arcade, traditionally plain and unadorned, was heavily clad with ornamentation. A second story had to be built to fit more spectators, for which slim iron pillars had to be placed between the seats (Alfaro 1997, 55).

Progreso Mundial circa 1922.

Most of these theaters had to be refurbished once again at the in the late 1920s and early 1930s, this time to accommodate new sound film technology. The Teatro-cinema Olimpia was the first cinema in Mexico to screen a talkie in 1929—eight years after its inauguration.[4] Before this, in the early 1920s, it had been used simultaneously for plays and silent films. The talkie that was shown was *The Singing Fool*. Before it played, the theater screened a short showing the Mexican consul in New York directly addressing Mexicans and congratulating Warner Brothers for their invention. Then, before the main screening, both the Orquesta Típica Mexicana and the New York Symphonic Orchestra were shown

[4] Previously, the sound film (but not talkie) *The Submarine* had been screened in the Teatro Imperial, in April 1929. An ad in the *Universal* read: "The Teatro Imperial, conscious of its program in constant progress and keeping ahead of its competition, will offer for the first time this great advance of human invention [...] Come to listen to the clamor and feel the anguish of a sinking submarine. Listen to the sounds of the depths of the ocean. Today, two shows, one at four and the other at eight" (Reyes de la Maza 1973, 76).

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playing a selection of musical pieces. The directors of the Olimpia, in conjunction with Warner Brothers, had also produced a free magazine with information about the "wonders of the new form of entertainment" as well as a translated transcription of the movie's dialogues (Reyes de la Maza 1973, 80). The premiere, apparently, was such a success that soon the campaign launched by *El Universal* was drowned by the clamors of "the masses".[5]

The Olimpia was designed by one of the most important early cinema architects, Carlos Crombé.[6] It was built inside the shell of an old hotel, which had, in turn, been built in a vegetable garden on the grounds of the first Franciscan convent built in Mexico City in the 16th century. Its interiors were originally designed according to the elegant neoclassical eighteenth-century Adamesque style, which had seen a revival among the middle classes in the late nineteenth century and up to the 1920s.[7] There were two dancing salons, one smoking room, and two vestibules (Alfaro 1997, 25). The elegant and often opulent interiors of movie theaters were a common denominator at the time. The logic behind this was to give the upper middle classes as immersive an experience for their money as possible, and help them forget their mundane, everyday life for a few hours. As a description of the movie theater in the magazine *Cine Mundial* read: "The Aristocratic Cinema Olimpia, refuge for families when on cold winter afternoons tedium stabs with its sharp blade, enchanting retreat [...] has come to fill a vacuum which had long been felt in Mexico's good society" (Cine Silente Mexicano/Mexican Silent Cinema, translation mine).

[5] It is interesting to note, reading the different articles about movies published at the time, that the opinion of intellectuals was almost always in contrast to what seemed to be the response of the "masses" to innovations and entertainment.

[6] Carlos Crombé was a rather prolific cinema architect by the standards of the time in Mexico. In the 1920s he built several teatro-cinemas, in varied "conservative" architectural styles, ranging from Beaux-Arts façades typical of the Porfirian era such as his famous Cine Odeon, to Adamesque interiors, and even Churrigueresque exteriors (a Mexican adaptation of Baroque) in his well known *Teatro Colonial* (1940). His later cinemas, such as the Cine Alameda (1936) and his modernization of his own earlier Cine Olimpa (1941) were very different to those of the 1920s. The Cosmos, Crombé's last project, which burnt down in 1946 just before its official inauguration, was closer to art deco and was perhaps meant to signal another version of modernity, perhaps closer to functionalism, in its sobriety. It was certainly the most modern of Crombé's cinemas—it was closer, at least, to International Modernism—but it was the last he designed, as he died shortly after it burned down.

[7] The Adamesque style, developed by the Adam brothers in England, became fashionable in the mid- to late-eighteenth century and is usually considered an offshoot of neoclassical design and architecture. It simplified baroque and rococo, but was still heavily ornamental.

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Teatro-Cinema Olimpia circa 1921.

There are various translation practices at work in the example of the Olimpia's screening of *The Singing Fool*. Even if the movie itself was not subtitled—a translation practice that, as I said earlier, had been banned by presidential orders—or dubbed, even if it was not a Hispanic "version" of an "original," several interesting and rather inventive translational strategies were being used to bring the first talkie closer to its non English-speaking audience. First, the film's dialogue was printed out and distributed free to patrons, which would seem to imply that it was expected to be read *after* the show, as a sort of consecutive or "delayed" translation. Then, there was the initial appearance of the Mexican consul in New York, who, in his role of cultural and diplomatic translator, was attempting to both bridge the two cultures that were about to engage in a possibly alienating encounter and also to fully sanction—politically, that is—the screening of a movie in a language that was treated by many with great suspicion. Further, and most importantly in architectural terms, the movie was being premiered in one of the oldest, most elegant and well-established movie the-

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aters—a choice of setting which perhaps sought to convey an aura of traditional legitimacy and normality for the public. Through all these different practices or strategies, the Olimpia was to all extents functioning here as a translation space.

But how was the Olimpia's role as a translation space interpreted by others? In the *Revista de Revistas*, a highly popular publication of those times, the critic Peinbert refers to the Olimpia as "one of our best salons" and says that through these salons "Mexico will be irremediably invaded by talkies in just a few months" (Reyes de la Maza 1973, 86). Similarly, in the *Universal* the editor and critic Carlos Noriega Hope wrote that "Yesterday it was the Olimpia that was paving the way; tomorrow it will be all the cinemas in Mexico [...] Not a month will pass before mute films are inexorably exiled to the *barrios*. Everything will be filled with cries, musical synchronizations, and words in English" (Reyes de la Maza 1973, 137). Another critic, Eugene Gaudry, complained about the screening at the Olimpia saying that it would inaugurate a time of great cultural confusion where eventually "the foreigners that come to Mexico will not know what the national language is, because they will be seeing movies in English, French, German, Italian, Denmarkese [sic], and so on, with no Spanish translations" (Reyes de la Maza 1973, 171).

Gaudry was of course exaggerating, but his complaints and concerns must have been shared by many, because a year later, in 1930, the managers at the Olimpia devised a mechanism which allowed for the insertion of explanatory Spanish text or titles between scenes in foreign movies. The Olimpia was famous for its endeavors in translating as much as possible for their audiences. The critic Luz Alba noted in an article that "talkies at the Olimpia have many titles, more than those strictly necessary to understand the general issue, and just enough to understand the details—something that does not occur in talkies at other theaters, which only have enough titles to understand generalities" (Reyes de la Maza 1973, 200).

Indeed, movie theaters such as the Olimpia were the sites that were helping translate or carry over a new modern experience to the Mexican audience, and this modern experience went beyond the technology of sound in film: it was also the experience of foreign languages and voices coming into the city's soundscape,

Teatro-Cinema Olimpia circa late 1920s.

through the screens of these movie theaters. Whether viewed as enablers of a new invention or as “traitors” that would allow the talkies to come in and take over, these translators made of concrete and stone functioned as the material portals for foreign languages to come in and “foreignize” the soundscape of Mexican movie theaters.

3. Translation, tradition, and entertainment: a phenomenological approach

After an initial period of resistance on the part of the Mexico City elite, in which many columnists and critics voiced their concerns and hesitations regarding sound film technology, it was clear that the talkies had come to stay. In the early 1930s, the Mexican film industry consolidated and producers started to invest funds and human capital in new technologies and, of course, in producing Spanish-language talkies.

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One of the first optical sound devices for film was in fact invented by a young Mexican man who was living in Los Angeles with his family at the time. His name, like the names of many remote national icons, has an almost cinematographic ring to it: José de Jesús "El Joselito" Rodriguez. In the back room of the bakery his parents owned he had been working for two years on a sound-on-film device that would adapt to any camera and be easy to transport. He finally completed the last adjustments to the Rodriguez Sound Recording System in 1929. It weighed less than twelve pounds and was purportedly adaptable to any camera circulating in the industry. As the story goes, he sat his family around a projector and activated it. To his family's surprise, a horrifying, cacophonic, almost diabolical melody gushed out, in synchrony with the image of a few people moving their mouths rhythmically on the home-made screen. Joselito then stopped the mechanism, made a few adjustments, and tried again. What came out the second time around was the Mexican national anthem. Apparently, in the first try, he had set the mechanism the wrong way around, and what his family heard was the national anthem being sung backwards.

Early sound films relied on a sound-on-disc technology, in which the sound heard during a film screening had been recorded onto a phonograph record that was physically separate from the film. The technology was flimsy and unreliable: not only did the two components—sound and image—seem disconnected, but they would often desynchronize completely, producing mass confusion and irritation in early spectators. The decisive technological step for the sound film industry was the fusion of both the sound and visual components of the movie in an optical sound device, later called sound-on-film technology. Although initial experiments with the new technology took place in the early 1920s, the first full feature film with integrated sound was *The Jazz Singer* (1927). It was in that same year that Joselito Rodriguez began to develop his new device, which he imagined could be used in the burgeoning Mexican sound film industry and thus set Mexico at the forefront of international talkies.

At the same time as Joselito was working on his device, in around 1930 a Mexican producer put together a crew and began working on a project that would lead to the first Mexican opti-

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cal sound film, *Santa*. Joselito, who probably knew he stood slim chances of getting a proper interview with film magnates, stalked the film's producer, Juan de la Cruz Alarcón, at Los Angeles airport. Alarcón was on his way back to Mexico, returning empty handed, after an unsuccessful trip to Hollywood in which he tried to acquire a sound-on-film technology device: they were all too costly and impossible to transport. Accompanied by his brother, Joselito approached Alarcón and secretly filmed and recorded their brief airport conversation, in which he told the producer of his latest invention. He was unsuccessful in settling any deal with him, but he at least managed to get his contact information down and record the whole encounter. A few days later, he mailed the reel to Alarcón back in Mexico. The recording met and surpassed Alarcón's expectations. It was a done deal. Just a couple of weeks later, Joselito and his brother, Roberto, were repatriated and began working on *Santa* in the newly built studios of the Compania Nacional Productora de Peliculas.

Santa was premiered in 1932, in Mexico City's newly renovated Cine Palacio. The Palacio was finished in 1924 and renovated in the late 1920s to screen sound films. But what did this renovation consist in? Did sound film technology affect the architectural language or style of movie theaters beyond the necessary adjustments to their interiors? Interestingly, the renovations to the Palacio were also external: the theater perhaps had to send the message to its audiences that they were fully committed to modernity and they were as modern as the technology they housed.

In a comparison of the two façades it is possible to notice some of the typical changes that architecture underwent during the decade. In the renovated cinema, the straight lines that once met the pinnacles framing the center façade were replaced by a stepped rooftop, more typical of the art deco style of the late 1920s in Mexico, making the building look taller and, especially, differentiating it from the straight-line horizontal façades of both neocolonial and Porfirean art nouveau architecture. The exteriors of the Cine Palacio were also conditioned for the more striking form of film propaganda that started to flourish towards the end of the 1920s, which often made use of vertical edge-lit signs and likewise used the marquee for placing film posters.

There is, unfortunately, little published material about the the-

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ater's interior transformation or on what adaptations the film's technicians had to do in order to screen *Santa* in a theater that was not initially built for talkies. The only mention in publications to its interior is that it was "modernized"—which probably means that the art nouveau ornamentation was "upgrade" to art deco (see,

Cine Palacio circa 1924.

Cine Palacio late 1920s.

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for example, García 2002). In short: a new technology demanded a new appearance, internal and external. Modernity demanded an integral makeover, a full translation of a space into its modern version.

An urban melodrama of sorts, *Santa* was based on a best-selling novel written at the close of the nineteenth century by the Mexican writer Federico Gamboa. It tells the story of a woman from the countryside who arrives in Mexico City and is forced into prostitution. Modern Mexico city is portrayed as a threatening, cruel space, where well-intentioned people are treated harshlly. As the critic Joanne Hershfield writes regarding *Santa*, "the film affirmed the conservative discourse that idealized tradition [...] and criticized the modern paradigm of progress" (Hershfield 2006, 268). It is somewhat interesting, in this light, that the storyline chosen to inaugurate the Mexican talkie—a format using technology that was spearheading modernity and progress—should come from a conservative nineteenth-century novel. It is also interesting that this conservative film was screened in a newly renovated, modern, art-deco movie theater. What can we make of the apparent *décalage* between a movie and the theater that screened it?

It must be noted that the example of the conservative *Santa* screened in the modern Palacio is by no means an exception. Most commercial movies made in Mexico during the 1930s—and well into the 1950s, the period in which the country entered its cinematographic Golden Age—were no less conservative and traditionalist. As Hershfield notes, "whether they were set in historical or contemporary contexts, these films exalted traditional values of patriarchy, the family, the macho hero, and virtuous, submissive femininity" (Hershfield 2006, 269). The fundamental reason for this is that the State was deeply involved in film production and distribution in Mexico, and therefore also had a "say" in its content.[8] The same is not true of the relationship between the State and movie theaters themselves.[9] Theaters were seen as lucrative

[8] As Susan Dever writes regarding the film industry and the star system, "Within Mexico these stars negotiated a relationship between spectators and the State, indoctrinating viewers in the rights and duties of Mexican citizenship. (Given the Mexican Government's subsidy of the film industry, making the State the producer of Golden Age cinema, this relationship was particularly well defined)" (Dever 2003, 12).

[9] There is no evidence whatsoever that most film theaters received money from the State, as op-

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spaces of entertainment, not places destined to educate the Mexican population.

While successful films at the box office were usually the most conservative ones, Mexican cinemas in the early 1930s tended toward a gradually increasing radical modernity. They were more experimental than their content (that is, than the films they showed), more forward-looking and more committed to a sense of modernity—however they interpreted this. In other words, if cinemas in the 1930s pointed toward the future, the content they screened mostly pointed toward the past. How, then, should we read the resulting tension? Can it be read as a tension between form and function? That is, a tension between modernity in form and conservatism in function? Or perhaps their function was not at all to conserve values through conservative movies, but simply to entertain and make money. In that case, how did their form contribute to the parameters and box office exigencies and how was this, in turn, gauged against the State's own exigencies regarding the pedagogic, civilizing purpose of Mexican commercial films?

The phenomenological assumption regarding the interrelatedness of an aesthetic experience and the physical aspect of the space in which such an experience takes place may or may not be entirely accepted—the *degree* of the interrelatedness can certainly be questioned in a space such as a theater, which disappears as soon as the lights go off and the show begins—but what is unquestionable is the fact that the architects of movie houses made stylistic choices which were necessarily tied to a taste informed by a preconception of what a space such as a cinema should "say" to its patrons.

In his lecture "Of Other Spaces," Foucault describes the movie theater as a space that encloses within it a multiplicity of spaces. He explains the multiplicity of spaces enclosed in a movie theater

posed to hospitals, schools, public housing, stadiums, universities, and public buildings. There were powerful families in the construction business—the Espinosa brothers, the Alarcóns, and of course, the controversial American tycoon William Jenkins—who had ties with the government and who would eventually hold a monopoly on Mexican film theaters. There were also politicians involved in theater construction and ownership, such as former president Abelardo Rodríguez. But none of this means that there was no public money, or at least honestly invested public money, in the business. Many reasons may explain the absence of the government in film theater construction and management. The short answer, however, is that theaters simply did not need it. As opposed to national film *production*, theaters had plenty of material to screen and plenty of patrons to entertain—a simple matter of supply and demand.

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through the figure of the heterotopia: “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces […] thus it is that the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space” (Foucault 1984, 6). But what Foucault fails to do is to see the “very odd rectangular room” as anything more than just a box in which the experience takes place. He does not, in other words, regard the physical space of the theater as anything more than a sort of container. Cinemas, however, are much more complex in terms of their production of space than an “odd rectangular room.” The spaces in which films were seen provided a setting in which the viewers received their dose of entertainment within the bracket or “slices in time” (Foucault 1984, 6) which the experience of movie-going entailed.

Palacio Chino late 1930s.

Perhaps the clearest historical example of a conscious stylistic choice is that of the atmospheric cinemas, which were in vogue in movie theater architecture in the United States in the 1920s and which sought to recreate exotic spaces. Such was the case of the

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Palacio Chino (built in the late 1930s and inaugurated in 1940), which featured pagodas, Buddhas, and golden dragons in its particular rendering of the atmospheric style. It was built in an old ball court, and designed by Luis de la Mora and Alfredo Olagaray. The critic Luis Helguera describes its interiors as built in "atmospheric style, with pagodas, temples, and gold Buddha statues amid gardens. The ceiling was vault-like, not flat but very arched, and of course was painted deep blue. The screen was protected by a heavy black curtain, with Chinese motifs painted upon it. The screen arch was very heavily decorated, with dragons appearing here and there" (Heguera).

Mexican architects of the atmospheric style followed the precept conceptualized by Charles Lee—"the show starts on the sidewalk." They had attractive marquees, striking façades, and, in short, designed spaces that would bolster the "illusion" of the cinema, where the mind, leaving the real behind, was finally free to gambol and became more receptive to entertainment. Movie theaters, as spaces, can then perhaps be seen as a medium that, due to its "otherness," helped *transmit* the illusion of cinema to its viewers. Whether this otherness was just a gleaming modernity, as in the case of the Cine Palacio, or whether it was set as an entire illusion, as in the case of the Palacio Chino, the point was that movie theaters were much more than just "odd rectangular rooms."

Going back to the question of form and function posed earlier, how can we read the coexistence or juxtaposition of Mexican movies—conservative, and mostly realist and traditionalist—in these modern, "other" spaces? Perhaps by rephrasing this apparent dichotomy in terms of how movie theaters function as translation spaces we can make better sense of it. In a "foreign" space of sorts, in a space that was utterly "other"—due to its modernity, its ornamental exuberance, or its atmospheric illusions—what people went to see was themselves; or even an older, more traditional version of themselves. A space "outside of time" and "outside of space"—a modern space of entertainment and illusion—thus functioned, paradoxically, as a sort of mirror of reality. In other words, a space that was foreign made the domestic visible.

The patron or viewer, upon entering the other or foreign space of the movie theater, became a translator. A translator of what, exactly? A translator of him or herself *for* him or herself. The movie

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theater, inasmuch as it created an illusion or sense of being elsewhere, estranged the patron from his reality and from himself: he was in a foreign space of sorts. Then, the movie itself—a movie such as *Santa*, which in turn realistically depicted the reality "outside" the space of the movies—made the patron face him-/herself. Translation spaces such as movie theaters were not just gateways for foreign languages and cultures, as I explained in the example of the Olimpia's foreign talkie screenings, but also functioned as mirrors—spaces in which viewers come to see themselves reflected in that other "version" of themselves in the context or against the backdrop of a space that was foreign and other, much like the translator who is always "strabismically" looking simultaneously at the foreign text and at her or his own. Moviegoers thus travels outside themselves and outside their domestic, local reality to return to themselves.

4. New monumentality in the cityscape: building typologies and the urban layout

By the mid 1930s, the Mexican film sound industry had entered its Golden Age. The number of films produced in the country had increased exponentially (see Mora 1989).The same was happening in many other parts of the world, as the advent of sound film and the language/translation problems it had created were partially resolved by countries creating and investing in their own film industries and producing films in their national languages.

Paradoxically, however, while the film industry was becoming more and more fragmented into linguistic regions, the "international language" of theater architecture became more and more consolidated and unified. As the national film industry grew in Mexico in the 1930s, Spanish-language films were being screened in spaces that were increasingly trans- or international in terms of their architectural languages and styles. In this sense, it could perhaps be said that cinemas internationalized their content, however "local" it may have been. Spectators seeing a movie about the most local of themes—be it the Mexican Revolution, Mexican urban poverty, or the Aztec past—were doing so in an interior that could just as easily be in Vienna, Buenos Aires, or Chicago.

But what about the relationship of these movie theaters to their surroundings? That is, how can movie theaters be understood as

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translation spaces within the urban space they occupied and how can this relationship shine a different light upon their cultural and social role? In the 1930s, monumental sound movie theaters began to be built. These were not just adaptations of older buildings, but constructions whose function was, from the outset, to house sound films. Beyond their bold architecture, which contrasted with the older and more sober buildings in Mexico City and thus set them apart as grand palaces of entertainment, their monumental size also marked a dramatic shift in the appearance of the city, which had always been horizontally low-rise. One of the most interesting examples of modern cinema monumentality was Juan Segura's Cine Hipódromo, housed within the Ermita building.

Ermita building circa 1931.

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Cine Hipodromo, Ermita building.

Ermita building circa 1931.

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The Ermita was a dramatic intervention in the cityscape. It was the first "skyscraper," albeit only an eight-story one. Seen from the acute angle where Revolución and Avenida Jalisco meet, the building resembles a large ship sailing north. On its ground level are spaces for small businesses, integrating the street-life into the building. Along its southern façade, a big entranceway, which makes resourceful use of the building's triangular shape, opens into a cinema. On top of the cinema are three stories of apartments. Since Segura could not use columns inside the cinema, he had to think of a way of making sure the structure would support the three stories above. He therefore opted for structural steel and constructed an innovative steel structure around the cinema in order to secure it from the weight above, as well as to sound-proof it. He also used reinforced concrete in beam designs and roofs, as well as for minimal cladding purposes and ornaments—all of which were an integral part of the building (Toca 1997, 170). Although the Ermita was finished by 1931, the Hipódromo, did not open until 1936. Its inauguration poster depicted "the masses" crowding around the new, towering building.

Teatro Cine Hipodromo inauguration poster, 1936.

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Other examples of modernist monumentality were Francisco J. Serrano's projects. He designed and modernized at least ten cinemas in the 1930s, some of which, in his own words "left behind their *jacal* [hut-like] appearance and became modern spaces" (Alfaro 1998, 58). One of his most important buildings, the Cine Encanto, was inaugurated in 1937, and loomed high above the surrounding buildings of the San Rafael neighborhood. Its art deco façade featured a heavily lit marquee, an enormous portico, and a striking sign at the top with the theater's name written in deco typography. The vertical cement walls, forming a right angle with the central area of the façade, accentuate the height of the construction and the stretched glass-block vertical windows through which the light from the interior shone outwards, thus accentuating the chiaroscuro suggested by the walls.

The interiors of the Cine Encanto were modern and spare compared to the more lavishly ornamented theaters of the early 1920s.

Cine Encanto circa 1937.

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The Streamline Moderne vestibule, with its curving forms, long horizontal lines, and round ship-like windows can be seen as a reaction to the earlier sumptuous interiors of movie palaces and atmospherics, and a natural reflection of modern architecture's tendency towards simplicity and economy of space and materials. Its vestibule, moreover, played with the ambiguous border between the inside and the outside, by integrating an interior garden and

Cine Encanto (interiors) circa 1937.

Cine Encanto (vestibule).

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using openings in the roof to allow plenty of natural light to flow in during the day or for the night sky to be seen from inside.

One of the most interesting aspects of both Juan Segura's and Francisco Serrano's work is precisely that it raises the question of how modernity was being interpreted by these "independent" architects of the new film theaters.[10] Segura and Serrano designed two of the first cinemas constructed specifically as sound cinemas. These movie theaters were no longer adaptations of constructions dating from an earlier period, they were not mere "upgrades" from art nouveau to art deco, and they were certainly not like the opulent, lavishly ornamented atmospheric palaces. Indeed, in the mid and late 1930s, movie theater architects would draw more and more on this interpretation of modernity and modernism and move towards more sober, less eclectic forms, building cinemas devoid of superficial ornamentation and maintaining a tighter relationship between form and function.[11]

But these movie theaters were also imposing new monuments to modernity, towering high above the city's older buildings. They were as much places destined for seeing something (a movie) as places made to *be seen*. They were visible from afar; they loomed large, like the admonition of a possible future city, from below. These new buildings introduced a new time: the time of the "now" as a "future." The time of the thoroughly, universally modern.

If modernist translation practices were a form of foreignization of the domestic, those new movie theaters, in the local context where they appeared, must have seemed utterly foreign or other—not by virtue of bringing in elements from a particular foreign country or region, as International Modernism and the Streamline modern style were in essence extraterritorial, but by virtue of introducing a foreign time into the city's traditional time. Their "otherness" was a "futureness." If translation is a transportation, a transference, a carrying over, what these monuments to modernism translated was not any particular content, but the sense of time itself.

[10] By independent, I mean that their work was not, as was the case with so many realms of architectural and artistic production—film certainly among them—funded by the Mexican State.

[11] As Maggie Valentine explains, "seemingly anachronistic ornate architecture and design disappeared from the buildings. Both [film and film theater architecture] were stripped of their artificial decoration in favor of a more honest [...]) examination of life" (Valentine 1994, 6).

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