

INTRODUCTION

■ **“I WILL CONFESS, NOT WITHOUT BLUSHING,** that I enjoy cinema more than theater,” stated one of the writers of the Chilean cinema magazine *El Film* in early 1919. The reason the writer gives for this preference was that cinema “knew no boundaries,” and so “as soon as the lights of the auditorium go out, and the machine begins to murmur its spell, the world of reality and the world of dreams become entangled in our sight and in our mind.” Furthermore, cinema provided a break from the “material and moral agitation of this terrible epilepsy that is called modern life.”¹

This quote gives an idea of some of the reasons that motivated audiences to attend the cinematographic spaces that began to appear in Santiago and Buenos Aires in the early 1900s. It also introduces the main themes of this book, as it brings forward the paradox of cinema being an escape from modern life, while being a modern technology itself. To understand this tension, this book investigates how cinema buildings evolved from a shared entertainment space to a space built particularly for projecting movies, the role that technology played in the experience of going to the movies, and what attracted people to the cinema and what people experienced once they were sitting down. In other words, how did moviegoing become a part of people’s everyday lives?

With these questions in mind, this book examines the practice of going to the movies in Santiago and Buenos Aires as a way of understanding how people experienced modernity in everyday life. By attending the cinema, moviegoers were exposed to both the content and form of what was thought to be modern.² Moreover,

going to the cinema was also an activity that became part of weekly (or even day-to-day) routines. One of the main characteristics that people writing in cinema magazines attributed to cinema was cosmopolitanism, because it was an apparatus that allowed viewers to see other realities of the world (both cultural and geographic). Cinema's cosmopolitan aspect was its universality: the experience of going to the movies was supposed to be the same for all spectators around the world. This proclaimed universality was very modern in itself, since moviegoing was an entertainment meant for everyone regardless of class, gender, or politics.

This book highlights the spaces of dialogue that cinema and the practice of cinema-going opened up in a comparative and transnational context and within the cities of Santiago (Chile) and Buenos Aires (Argentina). Dominant histories have presented Buenos Aires as an exceptional case within the region when focusing on modernity discourses and the cinema. The Argentine capital's port was one of the most important in Latin America, which impacted the circulation of goods and people, as well as ideas. This transformed Buenos Aires into a referent of a city that was modern and an example to follow within Latin America, a sort of "provincial modernity" or what Beatriz Sarlo calls "peripheral modernity."³ Santiago, on the other hand, was more rural, smaller, and set next to the Andes, which made it seem like a city that was less in contact with the world. Santiago was also perceived as more conservative than Buenos Aires. In comparing these two seemingly incomparable capitals, it is not their obvious differences, but rather their surprising number of similarities that add complexity to how scholars understand these two cities and the concept of modernity in Latin America. This comparison also provides insights on the social experiences that were intertwined with how to be modern in the beginning of the twentieth century, which comprised actions such as going to the movies.

Chile and Argentina's political organization established them as the spaces where national debates took place and where decisions were taken for the nation as a whole. Through the study of these two capitals, this book offers an understanding of national processes and the way they worked in dialogue with the other countries in the region as well as with each other. The comparison of these two cities allows me to pinpoint ideas about cinema that went beyond the capital city space and local national realities, such as the universal character of cinema. At the same time, I suggest that this universality played a different role in Santiago and Buenos Aires. *Modernity at the Movies* builds from these two case studies in order to shed light on tendencies at large and historical processes at work in the development of mass culture and consumer society. By using a comparative approach, this book helps to illuminate the experiences of the audiences in both cities, understanding how cinema became a part of everyday life of *santiaguinos* and *porteños*—the people of Santiago and Buenos Aires respectively—in a modern context.

Each city appropriated cinema as entertainment differently, which in turn had an impact on ideas of what it meant to be modern. A transnational character arises

from the mutual exchange that the two capitals had through the press and specialized media. In this sense, many articles and photographic spreads in magazines, such as *Zig-Zag* or *Pacífico Magazine*, documented Buenos Aires's modernization and the beauty of its streets and neighborhoods. On the other hand, specialized magazines often reported news and decisions from the porteño cinema industry. However, Buenos Aires magazines also reported on Santiago's industry and the city, showing that there were exchanges of ideas not only between the santiaguino and porteño cinema industries, but also between the cities.

The debates that emerged from everyday cinema-going allows further understanding of audiences and practices surrounding that activity, as well as the manipulation of users who consumed culture and reappropriated it.⁴ Consumers were not passive actors, but producers of meaning that could be traced through the analysis of their discursive practices. These were reproduced through the different specialized magazines, particularly those dedicated to cinema, that began to appear from the 1910s onward. Cinema magazines in Santiago and Buenos Aires regularly engaged with major topics of debate within society such as the modernization of the city, morals, behaviors, and language. These publications played an important role in helping to bring the experience of cinema closer to the everyday life of the cinematographic audiences. These periodicals allowed their readers to experience films, as well as the life of movie stars, beyond the cinema auditoriums. This is the experience *Modernity at the Movies* wants to reveal: how moviegoing became an everyday activity in two capital cities of Latin America, which uncovers how ideas around leisure spaces, as well as practices inside those spaces, were changing. This book, thus, focuses on cinema's reception, shifting the focus from the production of films to the experience of going to the cinema. By shedding light on the audience instead of the films, I uncover how cinema-going—an activity that was considered modern—was incorporated into the everyday life of santiaguinos and porteños. Through a comparative method, this book explores how each city appropriated cinema in its own way, illuminating how each public uniquely experienced a supposedly universal modern medium. The comparison also helps readers to understand how cinema went from being considered a technical curiosity (or a modern wonder) to an art of its own right in the first half of the twentieth century.

I consider modernity a twofold process in which the idea and the experience of it come together through specific historical processes of adaptation, not simply imitation. In other words, in a European or US context, modernity was not understood or experienced in the same way as it was in Latin America. In these processes of appropriation, reinvention, and dialogue, mass culture helped to introduce and develop a particular experience of modernity through “modern wonders” such as cinema and topical specialized magazines.

Most of the existing literature on the history of cinema in Argentina and Chile tends to focus on the films themselves (what will be referred to as production) or

on the development of the industry, leaving the audiences aside.⁵ The few authors who have dealt with cinema reception chose wider approaches, situating cinema within a broader culture of entertainment that began to change in the 1910s and 1920s,⁶ or studied the discourses regarding cinema from an aesthetic and literary perspective.⁷ Recently, scholars have begun to focus on the intersection between cinema and national narratives, as well as the development of particular styles, like melodrama and what Nilo Couret has called “mock classicism.”⁸ Finally, some studies have explored the effects of cinema in Chilean society, focusing on the social history of cinema’s introduction.⁹ Other works have engaged with cinema’s transnational character, mainly focusing on Argentine or Chilean relations with the United States.¹⁰ When it comes to reception and audience studies, the most extensive and comprehensive studies have been with the United States as a geographical focus, and Mexico for the case of Latin America.¹¹ Although some of these studies incorporate the concept of modernity, they do so from the perspective of cinema as part of a wider process of modernization instead of thinking about it as a modern technology in itself.

Modernity at the Movies links the concepts of technology and modernity to the study of cinema-going in the Latin American context by looking at how cinema magazines were describing and informing the practice of going to the movies and, in their discourse, linking it to ideas of how to be modern and what that meant. In his work, Bernhard Rieger has approached the problem of technology from a social standpoint, examining how society related to it on a daily basis.¹² By integrating the concept of modernity into his analysis, Rieger is able to understand how society experienced technological innovation, especially when thinking about the different meanings attached to modern technologies. In this sense, social practices become relevant. Through a focus on an activity that everyone in society regardless of income, race, and gender enjoyed, *Modernity at the Movies* sets out to look at how *lo moderno*—what is modern—was experienced by a wide range of people, and to consider its effects on everyday life and sociability.¹³ Cinema, then, presents a combination of the universal aspiration and the particular adaptation that each city made of the experience of going to the movies. This is why cinema presents a unique tool for understanding experiences of modernity, and cinema magazines are a key source to explore cinema-going.

APPROACHING THE CONCEPT OF MODERNITY IN THE LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXT

One of the very first elements to consider when thinking about modernity is the problem of awareness, to be conscious of time and the particularities of one’s own time.¹⁴ In this sense, it is the subjective experience of being conscious of time, history, and the role people can play in modernity through this awareness that becomes relevant. Building on the idea of consciousness, Reinhart Koselleck states