Megan Feeney, *Hollywood in Havana: US Cinema and Revolutionary Nationalism in Cuba before 1959*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. viii + 299 pp. (Paper US\$35.00)

Megan Feeney's chronological study of the reception of Hollywood cinema and its accompanying values in Cuba, 1897–1958, is diligently researched and intelligently articulated. This span of years covers the entire period that Washington and Havana maintained “ties of singular intimacy” in all aspects, including—of course—the cultural. The book therefore starts pretty much from the point that Cuba was transformed from a Spanish colony to a U.S. neocolony, and ends 60 years later when the Fidel Castro-led Cuban Revolution swept it away.

Two world wars and the ups and downs of the troubled and delicate U.S.-Cuban relationship paralleled the boom in Hollywood movie production and Cuba's consumption of it. *Hollywood in Havana* traces developments in cinema-going in Havana, as well as the idiosyncrasies of local audiences. Cuban film fans, far from passive consumers, absorbed movies with a critical eye all their own. Feeney describes how they interacted vocally with the on-screen product, both positively and negatively. They particularly reacted to content that touched on Latin American themes, especially on Cubans themselves.

An interesting side theme to the book's main analysis is its overview of the growth of cinema in Cuba. There was a large spike in new movie theater openings during the period in question. By the end of 1941, for example, Havana boasted 110 cinemas, more than some advanced European countries. Furthermore, Hollywood's influence appeared not just on screens, but all over Havana “on marquees and posters, in newspapers and magazines, in hairstyles and fashion” (p. 48). Feeney evidently undertook significant picture research; her text is accompanied by many outstanding examples of film posters, Havana cinemas (interiors and exteriors), and cinema magazine covers.

The book is also a study of the Cuban national psyche, volatile and sensitive due to the island's longstanding and ultimately frustrated struggle to obtain its full independence, first from Spain and then from the United States. Feeney describes how there were inherent tensions in close U.S.-Cuban economic/political/cultural ties. On the one hand, Americanization brought tangible economic benefits to Cuba, but it was also fatally injurious to the island's sense of nationhood. Cuban consumption of and reaction to Hollywood films therefore acts as a case study of the way one set of hemispheric neighbors digested U.S. soft power. Its central question is whether Hollywood cinema may have shaped and even fomented revolutionary Cuban nationalism.

Feeney identifies a definite cultural mismatch between, on the one hand, U.S. core beliefs and intentions and, on the other, Cuban core beliefs and reac-

tions. She also follows the development of film criticism in the island, and the way it influenced a whole generation of critics and filmmakers. She shows that while, from the U.S. point of view, cinema was a tool for hemispheric understanding and harmony, some Cuban critics saw Hollywood cinema as an amnesiac, a force intended to dull their nationalist impulses.

While Cubans loved the movies as entertainment, they were less convinced by their inherent messages. Indeed, movies had the potential, according to Feeney, to cause Cubans to react in the opposite fashion to that intended. One of her key assertions is that “Cubans sutured norms of heroic masculinity from US cinema onto revolutionary Cuban nationalism, even as U.S. imperial hegemony increasingly became a target of their revolt, figured as a major source of Cuba’s past and present woes” (p. 202).

The book makes the case that due to their own experiences at the sharp end of U.S. foreign policy and their own U.S.-backed politicians, Cubans were apt to process Hollywood ethics quite differently from the way the films and their U.S. promoters had intended. For example, they were skeptical about the films’ promotion of democracy in their hemisphere. In fact, Cuban sentiment grew more anti-imperialist and antidictatorial when Batista trashed Cuba’s democratic credentials with his military coup in 1952 to rule as a strongman in boots for the second time.

Furthermore, productions such as the 1955 Marlon Brando vehicle *Guys and Dolls* and the 1957 B-noir *The Big Boodle* (with Errol Flynn) deeply offended Cubans with their portrayals of Havana as a vice mecca, all gangsters, brothels, and seedy nightclubs. While for locals it was U.S. influence that had first debased their island, it appeared that Hollywood now wanted to portray Cubans as the purveyors of vice (p. 203). Feeney’s conclusion is therefore that Cubans often viewed as hollow the overt and subliminal promotion of democracy, and virtue versus evil, contained within Hollywood films. Instead of aping supposed U.S. moral and ethical purity, new generations of Cubans imbibed and processed filmic messages to suit their own unique circumstances.

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