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History of Latin American Cinema

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It Came From Mexico! Mexican Horror Cinema and National Identity

As a longtime fan of the horror film genre, I enjoy discovering international trends in horror film for myself. While horror films do not often receive intensive critical analysis or praise, most are most definitely worthy of the former if not the latter, in my opinion. When my “History of Latin American Cinema” course presented me with a choice of research paper topic, I knew that I would write about a topic pertaining to genre film, and because I knew little about horror film in Latin America, I decided to write about that in particular. Specifically, I chose to focus on horror film of *Mexican* origin because, as American horror films are so prominent globally and Mexico has such a close relationship with the United States geographically, politically, and socially, I wanted to see how Mexican horror film is similar but different from American horror film given the strong relationship between the two countries. With each horror film that I have viewed and critically analyzed over the past decade, I have been able to identify a unique regional flair, and the case is no different with Mexican horror film. From my research for this paper, I have found that Mexican horror film, though it heavily draws from American horror film conventions, is intrinsically *Mexican*, unmistakable for horror film of any other national origin. My topic is one that I realized late into the research process: an examination of Mexican horror film in relation to Mexican national identity. My thesis is that Mexican horror film is inseparable from Mexican national identity due to its history and the conventions of which it makes use.

This research paper contains three key sections. The first section concerns the history of Mexican horror film in relation to the history of Mexico itself. The second section concerns the specific traits of Mexican horror film that strongly link it to Mexican culture and, therefore, national identity. The third and final section concerns the future of Mexican national identity within Mexican horror cinema based on recent films from Mexican directors. All three of these sections lead to the conclusion that Mexican horror film and Mexican national identity are inseparable from one another.

The history of horror film in Mexico is indelibly tied to Mexico's own history. Horror film has been prominent in Mexico since Universal Studios' beat-for-beat Spanish-language remake of *Dracula*, directed by George Medford, in 1931. Mexican-produced horror films through the 1930s and 1940s – during the “Golden Age” of Mexican cinema – had undeniable influence from Hollywood horror conventions; however, the Mexican horror films' strong focus on monsters and mad scientists preyed upon the fear of conflict between science and religion in a predominantly Catholic country undergoing social change due to modernization.¹ From the late 1950s onward, in the wake of political uncertainty in Mexico and various shake-ups within the Mexican film industry, a category of quickly- and cheaply-produced Mexican science fiction and horror cinema – affectionately, *mexploitation* cinema² – flourished and took on a life of its own. One of the first classic *mexploitation* horror films was the seminal *The Vampire (El Vampiro)* from director Fernando Méndez in 1957, spawning numerous sequels and films in a similar vein,

¹ Doyle Greene, *Mexploitation Cinema: A Critical History of Mexican Vampire, Wrestler, Ape-Man, and Similar Films, 1957-1977* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2005), 7-8.

² The term *mexploitation* from the 1980s into the present usually refers to *narco-cinema*, films that deal with more grounded real-world issues such as drug trafficking, but in a sensationalized manner. A prominent example of the modern *mexploitation* film is 1992's *El Mariachi*, directed by Robert Rodriguez in his feature film debut. For more on *this* kind of *mexploitation*, see “Exploring Mexican Narco Cinema” from *The VICE Guide to Film* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3aS2LPpiIw>).

many from producers Abel Salazar and Guillermo Calderón Stell.³ A noticeable trend in Mexican horror cinema arose because of the popularity of *lucha libre* and the Mexican government's ban on televised *lucha libre* matches beginning in the mid-1950s: Mexican horror films often featured popular *luchadores* as central characters and, sometimes, gratuitous *lucha libre* matches that may or may not have had actual relevance to the plot.⁴

In the 1960s, the film industry experienced further changes, and as such, censorship in films became less prevalent, allowing for more violence and sexual content. In the wake of the 1968 Tlateloco massacre, an event that drastically altered the Mexican political and social consciousness, old-fashioned *mexploitation* horror films, notably those featuring elements of *lucha libre*, made way for more complex, daring, and experimental horror films, such as the works of directors Alejandro Jodorowsky (though Chilean-born, his filmography includes Mexican productions), Juan López Moctezuma, and René Cardona, Jr. (the son of noted *mexploitation* director René Cardona).⁵ By the late 1970s, Mexican horror films became even more lurid and shocking. Exploitation films such as René Cardona's *Survive! (Los Supervivientes de los Andes, 1975)* and René Cardona, Jr.'s *Guyana: Cult of the Damned (Guyana, el Crimen del Siglo, 1978)* even went so far as to take gruesome stories *directly* from news headlines. *Survive!* tackles the aftermath 1972 Andes flight disaster – in which the survivors of the crash resorted to cannibalism to survive – through a sensationalist lens, while *Cult of the Damned* is a transparent – and, some might say, rather tasteless – fictionalization of the Jonestown massacre in Guyana (for example, the titular cult's leader is named *James Johnson*), which occurred only a year prior to the film's

³ Greene, *Mexploitation Cinema*, 8-9

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 166-168; Doyle Greene, *The Mexican Cinema of Darkness: A Critical Study of Six Landmark Horror and Exploitation Films, 1969-1988* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007), 3-5.

premiere.⁶ The late 1970s through 1980s also saw a number of Mexican horror films clearly influenced by major Hollywood horror films, such as René Cardona, Jr.'s *Tiger Shark!* (*Tintorera*, 1977, a riff on 1975's *Jaws*) and *Birds of Prey* (*Ataque de los Pájaros*, 1986, a riff on 1963's *The Birds*).⁷ In 1992, two years before the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) laws went into effect, the feature-length debut of renowned filmmaker Guillermo Del Toro, *Cronos*, simultaneously presented a cosmopolitan, transnational near-future whilst preying upon the cultural anxieties of Mexicans in response to NAFTA.⁸

Next is an examination of the specific traits of Mexican horror cinema that define it as uniquely *Mexican* in character.⁹ As mentioned in the previous segment, Mexican-produced horror films in the Golden Age most frequently featured monsters and mad scientists, plot elements that represented anxieties about scientific progress in a changing country that was and still is predominantly Catholic. Even though the cinematic tropes on display took influence from those in the American horror film genre, they strongly resonated with Mexican audiences for the aforementioned reason. But, as author Doyle Greene writes, the *mexploitation* cinema following the Golden Age films has elements that majorly affirm Mexican national identity or *mexicanidad* (literally, "Mexicanness"). A key indication of the *mexicanidad* aspect in many *mexploitation* films is the use of both modern European villains and "ancient" villains such as vampires, mummies, and demons. Much in the same way that American science fiction and horror films of

⁶ Greene, *Cinema of Darkness*, 94-96.

⁷ Greene, *Cinema of Darkness*, 116.

⁸ Deborah Shaw, "Cronos: Introducing Guillermo Del Toro," *The Three Amigos: The Transnational Filmmaking of Guillermo Del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Alfonso Cuarón* (Manchester, New York: Manchester UP, 2013), 24.

⁹ This section does not detail the minuscule budgets and rushed production schedules of many Mexican horror films, as I would like to focus on the thematic content of the films rather than what happened behind the scenes. However, keeping the behind-the-scenes factors in mind is nonetheless important from a critical perspective. For more, read Greene's *Mexploitation Cinema*.

the 1950s onward used invasion by hostile extraterrestrial beings as a metaphor for the encroaching threat of communism at home and abroad, *mexploitation* cinema often used its European characters to represent European fascism or colonial power as a threat to *mexicanidad*. Perhaps the most blatant example of this trope comes from the *Aztec Mummy (La Momia Azteca)* trilogy from director Rafael Portillo, in which the lead human villain, the diabolical Dr. Krupp, hails from a prestigious German family who directly financed Adolf Hitler's regime. Various other examples of Germanic villains abound, but names from Greek and Roman antiquity appear frequently as well, suggesting a less-than-amicable relationship with Europe as a whole, rather than just Nazi Germany or other fascist states. Given Mexico's history with European colonialism, this is not surprising. In an analysis of *El Vampiro*, Carmen Serrano writes:

In the case of the film *El vampiro*, it is a white, foreign, aristocratic, and perverse body that threatens Mexican identity. Given the violent past of conquest and colonization, Spain would seem like the most likely candidate for representation by an invading body. Or, if not Spain, perhaps this film articulates fears of a US invasion through the vampire figure. Mexico has had a contentious relationship with the United States that is akin to the vampire relationship: one of seduction and consumption.¹⁰

However, also in the *Aztec Mummy* series, the titular character is not a hero or an antihero in contrast to Dr. Krupp, but instead a villain itself. In other *mexploitation* films with overt references to Aztecs such as Chano Urueta's 1963 effort *The Living Head (La Cabeza Viviente)*, Aztec civilization and its culture are villainous forces, representative of primitiveness and a violent nature from a bygone era. Non-Aztec villains, aside from the aforementioned European ones, are often resurrected creatures from pre-modern times who seek to destroy the inhabitants and influence of present-day civilization. In *mexploitation* films, according to Greene, modernity is essential to

¹⁰ Carmen Serrano, "Revamping Dracula on the Mexican Silver Screen: Fernando Méndez's *El Vampiro*," *Vampires and Zombies: Transcultural Migrations and Transnational Interpretations*, edited by Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Monika Mueller (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 156-157.

mexicanidad, and thus old superstitions and “barbaric” traditions, and anything else that stands in the way of perceived economic, political, or social progress in modern Mexico become something villainous; on the surface, these films seem to have the message that only by being *modern* can one be truly *Mexican*. Greene appropriately suggests, however, given the prominence of Catholic imagery and themes in many *mexploitation* films (particularly in the films starring the famous *luchador* El Santo), that modernity and tradition are not entirely at odds with one another, and that both are both able to bring good as well as disaster. Villains of a scientific background (such as Dr. Krupp and his ilk) are just as present as ancient supernatural villains in *mexploitation* cinema. Ultimately, the message of many of the films seems to be that valuing tradition too much over modernity and vice-versa is dangerous.¹¹ The conflict between progress and tradition may be far from uniquely Mexican, but the presence of the theme *along with* frequent Aztec and Catholic iconography are key identifiers of *mexploitation* films.

Post-1968, Mexican horror films, even the normally more reserved *lucha libre* films, notably became far more violent and cynical in nature, reflecting the sociopolitical turmoil in the wake of the Tlateloco massacre, an event which made Mexicans question the efficacy of their very political system. Frequently, Mexican horror films of the 1970s onward incorporated then-current events – or, otherwise, references or allusions to then-current events – as seen with the aforementioned René Cardona, Jr. films and Del Toro’s *Cronos*. As well, the films became more experimental in nature, largely due to the influence of the films of Jodorowsky and López Moctezuma, the latter of whom experienced tremendous success with the “*avant-garde exploitation*” films *Mansion of Madness* (*La Mansión de la Locura*, 1971) and *Alucarda* (1975).¹² An

¹¹ Greene, *Mexploitation Cinema*, 20-26.

¹² Greene, *Mexploitation Cinema*, 166-169.

unorthodox Mexican film (though technically a crime thriller film, it has enough horrific elements to satisfy the requirement for “horror film,” especially given the influence from the works of horror filmmaker Dario Argento) from the post-1968 era is 1996’s *Deep Crimson* (*Profundo Carmesí*), directed by Mexican filmmaker Arturo Ripstein, former assistant director to the late surrealist master Luis Buñuel. A road movie *cum* slasher film based on true events, *Deep Crimson* concerns a male gigolo and a nurse, partners in crime, who set out on a murdering spree. The movie is uniquely Mexican, however, in that it deals with Mexican class prejudices as part of the legacy of Spanish colonialism. Marcia Landy writes on the film:

Deep Crimson is not monumental history or a conventional melodrama but an anti-melodrama presented as a counter-history of Mexican culture, offering clues to an ensemble of events for rethinking the past as well as present. The form of naturalism that it adopts connects to a historical world: the memory of colonialism via the Spanish conquistadores and its aftermath, the Catholic cult of the Madonna, and the minority status of the Jew.¹³

Largely, this describes modern Mexican horror cinema’s affinity with exploring and occasionally deconstructing Mexican culture, whether traditional or modern, as well as the uniquely Mexican sociopolitical climate.

Finally is the topic of the future of Mexican national identity within horror film in Mexico. From my research, I can conclude that Mexican horror cinema will continue to endure in a meaningful capacity, especially considering the ease by which filmmakers can produce and distribute their content in the modern day, due to increasingly cheaper filmmaking technology and the global spread of Internet. This means that more Mexican artists, regardless of background, can lend their own unique *Mexican* voices to projects which might not have been accessible to them in

¹³ Marcia Landy, “History Growling at the Door: Horror and Naturalism,” *Cinema and Counter-History* (Indiana UP, 2015), 57.

the past, and can distribute their finished work without having to conform to strictly Hollywood – or, in more polite terms, “accessible” – standards. Certain Mexican horror films from both studio and independent filmmakers in the past decade (as of December 2017) have proven both critically and commercially successful abroad; in particular, writer-director Jorge Michael Grau’s *We Are What We Are* (*Somos Lo Que Hay*, 2010), a film about a small family of cannibals living in present-day Mexico City, was successful enough to spawn an American remake of the same name in 2013, directed by Jim Mickle. But while the remake adapts certain elements in an American context, the original film is definitively a Mexican story from a Mexican artist. Guillermo Del Toro meanwhile continues to make internationally successful films, many of which are in the horror genre, and young and aspiring artists from Mexico will no doubt draw influence from Del Toro’s works in their own, whilst adding their own artistic imprints.

In researching Mexican horror film for this paper, I came across information that not only strongly supported my initial argument – namely, that Mexican horror film intrinsically indicates Mexican national identity – but also personally intrigued me and made me wish to delve into further research outside of my Latin American Cinema course. In particular, I heartily enjoyed learning just how varied Mexican horror cinema is, and how delightfully *weird* it is in various aspects. Ultimately, I can easily say that Mexican horror film is, though similar to American horror film in many respects, its own wacky, wonderful, and inherently *Mexican* beast, inseparable from its national origin. I firmly believe that Mexican horror cinema will continue to flourish in the decades to come, and for that, I am thankful, because every film culture deserves to survive – especially films involving Spanish-speaking vampires fighting *luchadores* and Aztec mummies fighting robots.

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