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# DRACULA AS INTER-AMERICAN FILM ICON

## Universal Pictures and Cinematográfica ABSA

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### INTRODUCTION: THE MIGRANT VAMPIRE

In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Jonathan Harker and the Transylvanian count first come together over a piece of real estate. The purchase of Carfax Abbey is hardly an impulse-buy. An aspiring immigrant, Dracula has taken the time to educate himself on subjects "all relating to England and English life and customs and manners" (44). He plans to assimilate into a new society: "I long to go through the crowded streets of your mighty London, to be in the midst of the whirl and rush of humanity, to share its life, its change, its death, and all that makes it what it is" (45). Dracula's emphasis on the roar of London conveys his desire to abandon the Carpathian Mountains in favor of the modern metropolis. Transylvania will have the reverse effect on Harker: having left the industrial West, he nearly goes mad from his captivity in the East. Upon discovering the vampire lying in his coffin with "a mocking smile on the bloated face," Harker rages (prophetically, as it turns out): "This was the being I was helping to transfer to London, where, perhaps, for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless" (74). Indeed, despite the triumph of the vampire hunters in Stoker's novel, Dracula's enduring popularity with "the teeming millions" is proof that the monster has had the proverbial last laugh. The more he has died in literature, film, theater, and even

the ballet, the more he has set the stage for his own resurrection and the spawning of kindred "semi-demons." *Dracula* sells because of its embedded rationale for propagating undead variants, across the arts and the ages.

Perhaps it is little coincidence, then, that the 1897 publication of *Dracula* coincided with the birth of the motion pictures. As it turns out, the count's "mocking smile" forecasts how he would "satiate his lust for blood" as an icon of world cinema. Dracula's migration to London would transform him into a viral monster with a reach beyond the page. Despite the Victorian book's popularity as a lurid page-turner, screen adaptations consecrated *Dracula* for all time.

In what follows, I trace hemispheric circuits of culture by exploring a small piece of the "ever-widening circle" of *Dracula*–inspired films within Mexico's midcentury gothic cinema. Critics generally neglect these horror films which, according to Doyle Greene (*Mexploitation* 168–9), herald "not simply the sad decline of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema into a sorry B-movie Culture Industry, but the emergence of a Mexican cinema which resonated with a young audience and burgeoning popular culture in the 1950s and 1960s." In what follows, I examine the first offering from Cinematográfica ABSA, a producer of what Greene calls "mexploitation." The first Latin American vampire film, *El vampiro* [The Vampire] reveals the interplay between Hollywood monsters and Mexican reinventions that launched a youth wave of gothic cinema.

In order to establish a foundation for this trailblazing feature, I first turn to Universal Pictures and its joint production of *Dracula* and its lesser-known Spanish-language counterpart, *Drácula*. Their parallel manufacture in 1931 was part of a Hollywood strategy to survive the Great Depression. Aided by a policy of hemispheric cooperation that coincided with the new talking cinema, Hollywood exploited Latin American markets by hiring foreign nationals for Hispanic remakes of its films. Universal made *Drácula* for added revenue, but a comparative analysis proves that the film exceeds its cynical commercial origins. Both would eventually guide Mexico's vampire cinema, and its spinoffs. The point of my analysis is not to proclaim the Hispanic films better than the Anglophone. I argue instead that U.S.-Mexican bloodlines

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disrupt academic norms of Latin American national cinemas as freestanding and rabidly anti-Hollywood. The Mexican vampire cinema is of hemispheric provenance, and proportion.

## FROM UNIVERSAL TO HEMISPHERIC HORRORS

Paradoxically, Universal Pictures established its monopoly on horror films as the Great Depression ravaged the global economy. Producer Karl Laemmle, Jr. weathered the crisis by adhering to small budgets, coordinating with exhibitors to boost theater revenues, and recycling a tight-knit unit of writers, directors, producers, and actors on feature-length projects. Starting in 1931, Laemmle financed a series of talkies based upon a Universal formula that had turned the silent film star Lon Chaney—the titular monster in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925)—into a household name. This cycle would prove to be the most influential in horror film history. It began with *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* in 1931. Other archetypal entries followed, among them *The Mummy* (1932), *The Invisible Man* (1933), *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), and *Werewolf of London* (1935). Universal cashed in further by inventing the movie sequel and the monster marathon, as in *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), *Son of Frankenstein* (1939), and *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman* (1943). The horror genre got its gothic flavoring from German Expressionism, including the first adaptation of *Dracula*, F.W. Murneau's *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922). For its celluloid nightmares, Universal combined heavy make-up, chiaroscuro lighting, stylized performances, gothic set decor, and subjective cameras. Given its stylishness and accessibility to the working classes, the monster feature became a Universal trademark that lasted into the late 1940s. The studio made close to one-hundred such films during its classic period. We may think of these as orchestrating a cultural ritual of survival by summoning, and exorcizing, monsters that stood in for the Great Depression. Without addressing the 1929 market crash directly, Universal crystalized anxieties and offered antidotes against evil. David J. Skal sums up Universal's big success in 1931: "America's worst year of the century would be its best year ever for monsters" (*The Monster* 115).

The introduction of sound technology in the late 1920s complicated production further. Talking cinema magnified sensory appeal, but also threatened the international advantage of Hollywood as an exporter of silent images. During the early 1930s, many theaters lacked the equipment to screen sound prints. Nonetheless, audiences wanted to experience the magic of movies speaking in their native tongues. In what amounts to a blip in cinema history, Hollywood improvised by shooting parallel versions of domestic films for foreign markets (and for U.S. Spanish-language theaters). For instance, in 1929, MGM invested $2 million to produce features in Spanish, French, and German. That same year, Paramount Pictures spent $10 million on a studio in Joinville, France for manufacturing films in as many as five languages. From 1929–1939, Hollywood studios made around 175 Hispanic movies, including clones of Anglophone products, sound remakes of silent films, and even some standalone productions. Executives were especially keen on selling to Mexico, as their southern neighbor could also serve as a gateway to markets in South America and Spain. For these audiences, Hollywood hired foreign actors at bargain prices, and reused technical crews, sets, cameras, lighting equipment, and even footage. By all accounts, the Spanish versions were of a poorer quality than the domestic offerings. Due to missing film archives (over 90% of the movies are now lost), the scholarship on this age of polyglot Hollywood is incomplete, and relies heavily on production notes and press releases.[1]

With Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1933 declaration of U.S. "Good Neighbor" diplomacy, Hollywood studios gained further impetus for a business strategy that would revolutionize Latin American film production (particularly through Mexico, which became the "Hollywood" of the Spanish-speaking world in the 1940s).[2]

1. Hispanic Hollywood production remains an understudied field. For exceptions, see Jarvinen, and Agrasánchez. In 2017, the UCLA Film & Television Archive and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences organized the symposium "Hollywood Goes Latin: Spanish-Language Cinema in Los Angeles." The papers, representing the latest findings, are in Carreras and Horak.

2. The "Good Neighbor" policy led to the establishment of the Office for Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations between the American

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Like MGM and Paramount, Universal confronted the talking cinema with linguistic diversification. The case of *Dracula* and *Drácula* is the best-known example of multilateral production from this period. At an estimated additional cost of $66,000, *Drácula* required a portion of the $355,000 needed to make *Dracula*. The shoot took place over 22 nights instead of seven weeks. To save on copyright fees, Universal substituted Stoker's source text with the Hamilton Deane/John Balderston stage versions. Paul Kohner, head of foreign production, hired actors from Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, and Spain to work a graveyard shift on the same sets as the daytime crew. The Hispanic company worked with the dailies from the main production. Carlos Villarías, a Spanish stage actor, tried shadowing his Hungarian counterpart, Béla Lugosi. Kohner brought in George Melford as director and George Robinson as cinematographer, two Hollywood veterans who communicated with the cast through an interpreter. The duo had just collaborated on three Spanish-language remakes for Universal.[3]

The plot of the two films is nearly identical. Renfield (a screen surrogate for Stoker's Jonathan Harker) travels to Transylvania to meet the eccentric Count Dracula, who is completing his purchase of Carfax Abbey near London. With his three vampire brides in tow, Dracula attacks Renfield and turns him into his lunatic sidekick. Master and slave then board a vessel bound for England. Dracula decimates the ship's crew and escapes upon arrival; but Renfield winds up in an insane asylum run by Dr. Seward. In London, Dracula bites a flower girl before attending a performance of *Swan Lake*. At the concert hall, he meets two beautiful victims-to-be: Lucy and her friend Mina (Seward's daughter in the films). The vampire establishes his influence in the Seward family and bites Lucy

Republics (OCCCRBAR), which operated within the U.S. State Department from 1940–1946. Along with the Motion Picture Exports Association of America (MPEAA), it provided the nation with a cultural platform for economic penetration into Latin America. For a discussion of U.S. "Good Neighbor" film politics, and some of their unintended consequences, see Berg (*Cinema of Solitude*), pp. 37–9.

3. These are *La voluntad del muerto* (1930) (*The Cat Creeps*), *Oriente y occidente* (1930) (*East is West*), and *Don Juan diplomático* (1931) (*The Boudoir Diplomat*). Melford and Robinson would eventually collaborate on *Dracula's Daughter*.

in a guest-bedroom. She dies from her wounds and transforms into a child-stalking vamp. Perplexed, Seward summons the brilliant Professor Van Helsing, who discovers that Dracula is a vampire, and that he has designs on Mina. He and John Harker (Mina fiancé) rush to Dracula's lair for a final showdown just as the vampire murders Renfield. Van Helsing triumphs by driving a stake through Dracula's heart. Delivered from darkness, Mina snaps out of a trance and departs with John to the sound of church bells.

At 104 minutes, *Drácula* is a more satisfying production than the 75-minute *Dracula* directed by Tod Browning. The Hispanic version shows a deeper commitment to Stoker's original material, and adheres more closely to its storytelling. Melford even corrects several plot holes in the Anglophone original.[4] The subjective camerawork in *Drácula* conveys the mental states of characters in line with the novel's epistolary first-person design. The Hispanic film is more violent and erotic, themes central to the vampire's desecration of religion, scientific reason, and Victorian ideals of marriage and motherhood. *Dracula* features the cinematography of Karl Freund, a German émigré who had collaborated with Fritz Lang on *Metropolis* (1929). Nonetheless, *Drácula* retains a greater connection with the German Expressionist cinema. Through lighting and photography that surpass what Freund only hints at in *Dracula*, Robinson's chiaroscuro compositions and complex depth of field for *Drácula* creates an ambiance more typical of the Universal canon that would inspire horror producers from around the world.

*Dracula* was Universal's highest grossing film of 1931, but it received mixed reviews upon its New York City premiere on February 12. Meanwhile, *Drácula* opened to critical acclaim in Mexico City on April 4, 1931. The Mexican press lauded the film, especially the performances of Tovar and Villarías. On April 8, *Excélsior* called *Drácula* "el triunfo más grande del cine hablado en nuestro idioma" [the greatest triumph of the talking cinema in our language] (6). In an article from April 9 with the bold headline "*Drácula* asombrará a México" [*Drácula* Will Amaze Mexico], *El Universal* declared a "positivo triunfo" [positive triumph] and praised Tovar for "revelándose como una de las artistas más completas

4. See Skal (*Hollywood Gothic* 207–29) for differences between the two films.

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entre los elementos de nuestra raza" [revealing herself as one of the most complete actresses among our people] (6). A month later, *Drácula* premiered in Los Angeles and New York, where it met with favorable reviews from the Spanish-language press. The film continued to show throughout Latin America until the 1950s, also competing with the Browning/Lugosi version in several national markets. Besides foregrounding inter-American production, the divergent fates of the two films provide a lesson in the cruelties of canonization. The Anglophone movie would become the horror classic; *Drácula*, on the other hand, went missing before a chance discovery in 1992.[5] Still, Universal had just carved a hemispheric mold through its Hispanicized industrial practices. With the onset of the Cold War, genre cinema in the United States turned from gothic monsters to sci-fi creature features relaying atomic fears. Universal monsters soon left Hollywood, bound for Mexico City.

## FROM NATIONAL GOLD TO HEMISPHERIC TRASH

Despite the initial success of Hollywood's foreign division, the Spanish talkies failed by the early 1940s. Among the causes was the industry's cultural insensitivity. Many viewers felt that the infelicitous mélange of Hispanic accents confirmed an Anglophone presumption of little to no differences between Spanish-speaking countries. A so-called "war of the accents" took place on multiple fronts, with Hollywood taking heat from the Latin American press and even foreign dignitaries for its decision to adopt a Castilian standard. Furthermore, the shoestring budgets resulted in the casting of few stars, one of the major draws during the silent era. Once the public got past the novelty of sound, the productions revealed themselves as soulless Anglo products dressed up in Hispanic garbs.[6] To make up ground, Hollywood experimented with intertitles, subtitles, rescoring, and (most scandalously) dubbing. The Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges (284) wrote about the latter process in his 1945 essay "Sobre el doblaje" [On Dubbing],

5. In 1992, archivists assembled a complete print from reels found at a Universal storage facility in New Jersey, and at the Cuban Film Archives in Havana. Video and DVD releases followed.

6. For negative reception of Hollywood Hispanic talkies, see Borge (106–38).

in which he decries "un maligno artificio" [a perverse artifice] that ignores how "la mímica del inglés no es la del español" [gestures in Spanish are not the same as in English].

Thus, the new sound technology that had led to Hollywood's Hispanic cinema would now advance the development of Latin America's own talking films. Brian O'Neil (97) finds inter-American currents here: "at the same time Mexican critics were deriding the […] poisonous hybridity polluting Hollywood's Spanish-language films, the reality was that Hollywood and the Mexican film industry were becoming increasingly linked, both institutionally and culturally." Indeed, as the Great Depression had before it, hemispheric policy during World War II led to economic alignment. The establishment of the two biggest Mexican film distributors in the United States—Azteca Films (est. 1932) and Clasa-Mohme (est.1942) placed more than 2,000 national films into U.S. theaters by 1960. In turn, this economic partnership helped Hollywood make inroads into a pan-Hispanic market. While controversy exists over this cross-cultural cooperation, one of its unintended consequences is that Hollywood served as a training ground for founders of national cinemas in Latin America. For example, a year after appearing in *Drácula*, Lupita Tovar starred in *Santa* (1932), Mexico's first sound film. Lisa Jarvinen (101) rightly observes: "The cultural hybridity of foreign-language films and of films made by foreign nationals who had extensive Hollywood experience troubled critics who wished to stake claims for national cinemas." Like screen icon Dolores del Río, legendary director Emilio "El Indio" Fernández, and several other producers, writers, cinematographers, and technicians from the Good Neighbor era, Tovar contributed to *Cine de Oro* post-Hollywood. Jarvinen's "cultural hybridity" is one foundation for rethinking the nation-based paradigms of New World cinemas.

Most scholars trace the Mexican Golden Age cinema to Fernando de Fuentes's *Allá en el rancho grande* [Out on the Big Ranch], a 1936 *comedia ranchera* that blended melodrama and musical numbers. It established a typology of folklore, rural landscapes, colonial architecture, singing *charros*, and beautiful young starlets. The film was a commercial success throughout Latin America, and across U.S. Spanish-language theaters. It helped consolidate the Mexican industry and launched a mainstream boom that derailed a par-

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allel horror genre in the 1930s.[7] As Mexico underwent postwar modernization, however, a Hollywood-inspired mexploitation cinema filled the void. It invoked themes less typically "Mexican" as defined by state-funded *Cine de Oro*, but it often used studios, cast, and crew from those same productions. The scholarly consensus has been to ignore these films as being simple-minded, derivative, and/or reactionary betrayals of highbrow art cinemas.[8] In my view, however, studying Mexican horror discloses how lowbrow films enabled a recuperation of death, blood, and masks, all of them staples of pre-Hispanic traditions that the Golden Age filmmakers idealized or simply omitted. As such, mexploitation is a counter-narrative to Mexico's cultural elite, and its designation of "quality" cinema. The films do not name the economic "Milagro mexicano" [Mexican Miracle] that lasted from 1954–1970, nor the effects of industrialization, urbanization, consumerism, and the new forms of PRI government corruption taking shape. Yet, within mexploitation, the nation renegotiated its identity by returning to, and reinventing, Hollywood; the movement was not U.S. ventriloquism, but a popular dramatization of Mexican self-reflection. As is typical of the horror genre, that expression fluctuates between traditional and progressive critiques of modernity.

The foundation for modern horror in Mexico stems from the contradictions of its postwar society, including the sense of the past as a living entity (a cyclical view of history dating from before the Spanish arrival) and the conflict between science and religion in a modernizing nation with roots in blood sacrifices (both Catholic and pre-Hispanic). According to Edgar Martín del Campo (114), the bloodsucking witch *teyollohcuani* is a folkloric vampire that belongs to "one of the demonstrably earliest supernatural categories in Mesoamerica." In addition, pre-Hispanic Mexico possessed the most dazzling pantheons of monstrous deities in the world. These avatars worked to effect changes in the universe, often through violent means, as in the case of Greco-Roman gods.

7. For a critical summation of this cycle, see Rhodes.
8. For a recent example of this divide, see Berg (*The Classical*). Another example of scholarly neglect entails the Mexican films of "La India María," as discussed by Rohrer.

After the Conquest, this belief system absorbed Catholicism and created *mestizo* Mexico. The movies—as popular culture—continue the clash, ritual, and ceremonial display.

In *Mexploitation Cinema: A Critical History of Mexican Vampire, Wrestler, Ape-Man and Similar Films, 1957–1977* (2005), Greene (21) defines the mexploitation formula as: "an immortal or resurrected monster wreaking havoc on, and exacting revenge from, the present, a narrative motif which also serves as an important social and political metaphor of the dangers of Mexico's past (superstition, tradition, debauchery) and its potentially debilitating effect on the present (social, cultural, and economic modernization)." At the starting gate is Cinematográfica Calderón's "momia Azteca" trilogy (1957–1958), which ends by restoring modernity against Mexico's ancestral ghosts. The series blends mummy and Frankenstein horror subgenres into a Meso-Americanizing of Hollywood Egyptology. The "maldición" (curse) is equally a recurring theme in mexploitation, as signaled by *La maldición de la momia azteca* [The Curse of the Aztec Mummy], the second installment in the trilogy. Another example, *La maldición de La Llorona* [The Curse of the Crying Woman] (1963), reintroduces "La Llorona," a wailing spirit and child-murderer with roots in an Aztec account of the fall of Tenochtitlán (present-day Mexico City).

Mad scientists abound in mexploitation. Updated for the youth market, their laboratories sometimes feature groovy beakers and flasks, bubbling liquids, sci-fi consoles, and space age monitors, as in *Santo contra la hija de Frankenstein* [Santo vs. Frankenstein's Daughter] (1971). In *El espejo de la bruja* [The Witch's Mirror] (1962), a wife-killing doctor operates on his second bride after she suffers burns via the vengeful spirit of his first bride. The villain of the third mummy film *La momia azteca contra el robot humano* [The Robot vs. the Aztec Mummy] builds a "Robby the Robot" ripoff to destroy "Popoca," whose hieroglyphic armor holds the key to Aztec treasure. It was the first mexploitation movie to exploit the "contra" (x vs. y) formula, a staple of the *lucha libre*-horror hybrids starring the wrestler and superhero "El Santo," a modern incarnation of a masked Aztec warrior. When a benevolent patriarch in the mexploitation classic *Santo vs. las mujeres vampiro* [Samson vs the Vampire Women] (1962) warns that, according to an ancient codex, "nues-

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tra época sera propicia para la resurrección de los monstrous en la tierra" [our time will be ripe for the resurrection of monsters on earth], he lays bare the rationale of a Universal-inspired franchise operating in full swing. Even a cursory glance at this lineup demonstrates a vibrant recycling (and reworking) of Universal's repertoire to reflect on Mexico. Hollywood-based, mexploitation recalibrates a foreign idiom for local consumption. This cinema remains indebted to Hollywood, thus challenging post-colonialist paradigms that tend to supplant the intricacies (and unintended consequences) of capitalism with David and Goliath tales of national struggle. In my view, rather than gaining its value from how well it makes war on Hollywood, mexploitation is one part of an untold story of interconnected New World cinemas.

## "DRACULA...SET ON A MEXICAN HACIENDA"

Cinematográfica ABSA conflates syllables from the first and last name of its founder, Abel Salazar, who divided his career into acting, producing, and directing. Film historians remember Salazar today for his small-scale low-budget horror, and as "a founding father of mexploitation cinema" (Greene 9). The ABSA canon includes eight black and white films released between 1957 and 1963, seven of them shot at Estudios Churubusco-Azteca in Mexico City.[9] Among them, Salazar made a vampire trilogy consisting of *El vampiro* and its sequel *El ataúd del vampiro* [The Vampire's Coffin] (both directed by Fernando Méndez). To these he added *El mundo de los vampiros* [The World of the Vampires] by Alfonso Corona Blake. Salazar also produced three films by Chano Urueta: *El espejo de la bruja*, *El barón del terror* [The Brainiac] (1962), and *La cabeza viviente* [The Living Head] (1963). Urueta had kicked off mexploitation with *El monstruo resucitado* [Monster] (1952)—a blend of Universal storylines from *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Franken-*

9. Heading Trans-International Films, the exploitation producer K. Gordon Murray made hastily dubbed English-language versions of several ABSA films for television and drive-ins in the late 1960s. In 1968, *El vampiro* appeared on a Mexican double bill with *The Curse of the Doll People* (1961). With Murray repackaging mexploitation for a U.S. teen audience, his Anglo versions constitute a case of inter-American cultural convergence in the exploitation film arena.

*stein*, and *The Invisible Man*. Finally, actor-director Rafael Baledón contributed the Jekyll and Hyde-based *El hombre y el monstruo* [The Man and the Monster] (1959), and *La maldición de La Llorona*. By casting himself in six of his own films, Salazar became a fixture in a youth-oriented franchise exploiting the Mexican gothic.

In an interview from 1984, Salazar disclosed the Hollywood roots of *El vampiro*: "Me pregunté por qué la Universal tenía los ingresos que tenía" [I asked myself why Universal had the profits that it had]. The answer was its musicals and "las películas de monstruous, las películas de terror" [the monster films, the horror films]. He came to a decision that would forever change the Mexican national cinema: "Entonces había que hacer una película de terror y escogí *El vampiro*. Yo inicié prácticamente *Drácula* […] situada en la hacienda mexicana" [Therefore, I had to make a horror film and I chose *The Vampire*. I basically put forth *Dracula* […] set on a Mexican hacienda] (qtd. in Vega Alfaro, 109). The first vampire film produced in Latin America, *El vampiro* launched a Mexican horror boom that lasted well into the 1970s.[10]

Salazar hired Fernando Méndez, among the most versatile directors within the national industry. His career began as writer and production assistant on the 1932 Hispanic Hollywood crime film *Contrabando* (remade by Fox as *Contraband* in 1933). He later served as makeup artist and production assistant on *Maniac* (aka, *Sex Maniac*, 1934) and *Marihuana, Weed with Roots in Hell* (1936), two delirious exploitation films directed and distributed by the lowbrow cinema mogul Dwain Esper. Upon returning to Mexico in 1936, Méndez contributed to the screenplay for *El superloco* [The Super Madman] (1936), a horror comedy with Carlos Villarías (from *Drácula*) playing a mad scientist. Méndez began directing Mexican films in the 1940s, and completed thirty-two features at his creative peak in the 1950s. Throughout his career, he specialized in genres, among them westerns, action-adventures, melodramas, and urban crime films. Aside from his Golden Age existentialist crime film, *El suavecito* (1951), his horror filmography earns him the greatest recognition today. This includes one entry

10. Mexico would produce over thirty-six vampire films between 1957 and 1978 (the height of the genre's popularity). For an excellent history of Mexican vampire cinema, see Wilt.

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that is possibly mexploitation's greatest masterpiece, *Misterios de ultratumba* [The Black Pit of Dr. M] (1959).

Just months before filming *El vampiro*, Méndez directed *El ladrón de cadáveres* [The Body Snatcher] (1957) for Internacional Cinematográfica. Its blend of wrestlers, monsters, ape-men, and mad scientists established the mixed-genre basis for mexploitation. Macabre sets, blaring scores, and oblique camera angles became directorial signatures. For the role of Señor Duval, Salazar enlisted the Mexican character actor Carlos López Moctezuma. Salazar later paid out his contract and replaced him in imitation of Universal's casting of an unknown face in Béla Lugosi. Like Lugosi (whose birthplace matches Duval's Hungarian ethnicity), the Spanish stage performer Germán Robles soon became a horror icon with a foreign affectation, especially upon reprising his role in *El ataúd del vampiro* and playing a similar character in the marathon film *El castillo de los monstruos* (1958), and in Estudios América's "Nostradamus" cycle (1961–1962).[11]

The opening scene of *El vampiro* is a tour de force created with the aid of avant-garde painter Gunter Gerszo, the film's art director. It opens with a high-angle shot of a misty Spanish courtyard, a large well in the foreground. After fifteen seconds, the camera cuts to a tall figure surrounded by thick fog and peering into a bedroom in the main house. A bombastic score by ABSA horror composer Gustavo César Carrión complements the striking composition lit in low-key by cinematographer Rosalío Solano. Echoing Universal's hypnotic vampire stares, the camera cuts to a close-up of Duval's bulging eyes (Villarías) with pinpoint lighting (Lugosi). Duval soon turns into a giant bat via a startling jump cut, and swoops inside before resuming human form. In imitation of an innovation undertaken by Villarías in *Drácula*, Duval envelops his female victim in his cape. The camera cranes toward her limp body, the neck oozing blood. The encounter, and its visible aftermath, seems to almost mock the virginity of Duval's anxious, middle-aged prey. Eloísa will turn from frustrated "old maid" to free-flowing vampire bride.

11. Robles's fangs and aristocratic manner in El vampiro are rumored influences on the look and performance of Christopher Lee in the 1958 Hammer classic *Dracula* (aka, *Horror of Dracula*).

The story continues with the late train arrival of Marta González in Sierra Negra [Black Forest]. The young woman has come home to visit her sick aunt, María Teresa. Having missed her uncle at the station, she agrees to ride to Los Sicomoros estate in a carriage transporting a box of Hungarian earth. Marta accompanies Enrique Saldívar (played by Abel Salazar), a travel agent from Mexico City. With its emphasis on foggy exteriors and other ambient terrors, the sequence evokes Renfield's passage to Transylvania in the Universal films. Upon arrival, Marta learns that a fear of vampires has already killed her aunt. In the next scene, a high-angle tracking shot formally introduces us to Señor Duval, whose fingers-first exit from his coffin pays homage to Lugosi and Villarías. His black cape and broach copy the Universal uniform. Eloísa (now a vampire in a black gown) helps Duval plan the resurrection of his brother, Conde Karol Lavud ("Duval" in reverse—a nod to "Alucard"/"Dracula" from Universal's 1943 film *Son of Dracula*). We learn from a servant that Conde Lavud was a vampire and the founder of Los Sicomoros. Two mineworkers killed him one-hundred years earlier in response to a rash of vampire slayings. Afterwards, the townsfolk buried him in the hacienda's crypt. (There is an archive of the mine's operation inside the main residence, as well as a manuscript documenting the murder trial.)

We find out that, in the recent past, Eloísa has poisoned her sister María Teresa and buried her alive after she refused to sell Los Sicomoros to Duval (a twist on the sale of Carfax Abbey). Marta, however, runs into María Teresa clutching a large crucifix before a giant spider web. She has been protecting her niece and helping Enrique discover the plot (the latter is actually a doctor summoned in secret by Eloísa's brother, Emilio). Still, Duval manages to poison Marta and escape into a catacomb with her body. In the wild finale, Eloísa kills Emilio through a vampire bite as Enrique and the vampire engage in a makeshift sword fight. María Teresa then strangles Eloísa and drives a stake through Duval's heart. The coat of arms on Duval's coffin burns in close up, signaling the ending of the Lavud tyranny in Sierra Negra. In love, Marta and Enrique then head back to the train station. They seal the ending with a kiss.

The most significant aspect of *El vampiro* is its recasting of Stoker's story in Mexico. With its myriad cobwebs

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and crumbling Spanish architecture, the castle-turned-hacienda signals the hybridizing of the Hollywood gothic with a symbol of the nation's colonial past. It may appear that the Hollywood influence was hard to shake off here, yet the art of blending as survival has been central to Latin America since the Conquest. Mexico, in particular, embraces Spanish-indigenous syncretism in its cultural and religious practices. Mesoamerican art, literature, and architecture from the sixteenth century onward shows a baroque penchant for cultural combinations to include the vanquished rather than keep opposites unmixed. *El vampiro* manifests this sensibility through overabundant sights and sounds: hyper-aestheticized sets, house-of-horrors lighting, orchestral stabs, and exuberant performances are the result not of anti-Hollywood purification to bolster a freestanding *mexicanidad*, but of the sensual fusion of inter-American forms. An inventor of mexploitation, Méndez is a mad scientist who revives—and hybridizes unto extremes—Universal sets and monsters by pumping them full of local steroids.

*El vampiro* possesses an immediacy mostly missing from the Universal horror catalogue. Instead of dividing the self (modern urban citizen) from the "other" (ancient foreign monster), the film brings the two together through an uncanny recognition. The exact location of castles in Universal films is inconsequential; haciendas, on the other hand, are quintessentially Mexican. They date from when the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés became the Marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca and instituted a peonage system (*encomienda*) in one hacienda built for him in 1529. After Mexican independence in 1821, haciendas became a symbol of state landownership under the reign of Porfirio Díaz. By 1917, the Mexican Revolution overthrew Díaz, and the new regime abolished haciendas as putrid emblems of colonialism. In *El vampiro*, Los Sicomoros subverts the wholesome and anachronistic image of the hacienda from *comedias rancheras*, which had the *hacendado* (landowner) ruling kindly over a large household of *indios* (Indians), *criados* (servants), *campesinos* (peasants), and *charros* (horsemen). A horrible patriarch, Duval even murders a *campesino* child on screen, an act almost unthinkable within 1950s Hollywood. As Juan Rulfo had

in the Mexican proto-Boom novel, *Pedro Páramo* (1955), Méndez connects supernatural forces to the story of a family bleeding from self-inflicted wounds of the colonial past. A manifestation of Mexico's undead history, the centenary resurrection of the House of Lavud is the fulfillment of a curse generations in the making. *El vampiro* transforms Dracula from a satanic corruptor of Victorian angels into a bloodthirsty *cacique* who exploits Mexican lives in the present. This history explains why colonial vampires are rife in Mexican cinema.

Méndez taps into the dark psychology of the Mexican family, pouring life into a script by Ramón Obón, one of mexploitation's finest writers. Illness and decay propel the storyline; these elements plague the crumbling property as much as they do an heirless González clan made up of unmarried siblings that literally eat their own. In *El vampiro*, the Hungarian peasants from the Universal movies become the *mestizo* servants of the hacienda. While one of them tells Enrique of her father's death at the hands of Lavud, they keep secrets from the landowners. Embodying a perverse aristocracy, Eloísa carries out Duval's bidding as his willing concubine. Marta's childhood bedroom suggests a psychosexual trauma that the film exploits to uncanny effect through a spooky lullaby, and lingering point-of-view shots of a door. This forbidden place is the site of María Teresa's reemergence from the bowels of Los Sicomoros. Most of all, the estate enacts modernity's return of the repressed by linking family secrets to secret passageways. Defunct mining tunnels beneath the hacienda double as a catacomb in which the González family buries the past, including its vampire lineage. Duval's lair even connects to Los Sicomoros via these tunnels, forming part of its architectural skeleton. Méndez's film suggests that Mexico houses inner and underlying demons that threaten its prosperity. At least for the space of four critically successful weeks at the box office, the modern nation confronted its colonial legacy and exorcised its past, even if it repurposed Hollywood to do so.[12] As is usually the case with mexploitation, however, it amounts to flirtation; in the end, the romantic leads are poised

12. For critical reception of *El vampiro*, see Vega Alfaro (197–202).

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to leave Sierra Negra, escaping the nightmare of history the film uncovers. Still, vampires are hard to kill, and an ABSA sequel set in Mexico City (with Robles reprising his role) was months away.

## CONCLUSION: U.S.-MEXICAN BLOODLINES

Because it weds U.S. and Mexican film production, the horror genre provides a solid foundation for an inter-American approach to cinema. Cinematográfica ABSA, whose success came on the heels of Hollywood's technical ingenuity and Good Neighbor financing, straddled national boundaries. A new hemispheric direction, however, requires that scholars consider Latin American cinema beyond traditional critiques of U.S. imperialism, and the Hollywood industry that is its presumed handmaiden. Mexploitation does not emerge from Hollywood's shadow as DIY originality; rather, it looks northward in order to say the unsaid within the nation's cultural ranks. Ana M. López (71) is correct to blast "Hollywood's self-appointed mission as goodwill imperialist ethnographer of the Americas." At the same time, conventional approaches to hemispheric policy and production risk overlooking how U.S. economic expansion into the Americas stimulated Hispanic ingenuity. Instead of more narratives showing how Latin American cinemas counter movie stereotypes, we might examine neighboring industries that reconfigure Hollywood within transnational frameworks. I am under no illusion that these rely upon fair networks of exchange, or that the nation is not a useful category of resistance.[13] Still, as it pertains to Latin American and U.S. Latino filmmaking, Julianne Burton-Carvajal (197) argues (rightly, I think): "Simple models of 'national' cinema […] are complicated by transatlantic and trans-hemispheric migrations of talent, international co-productions, exile, and diasporic film production." Because Dracula is a world-class migrant, I would extend her claim to celluloid vampires that brought about a flowering of Mexican creativity in the late 1950s. As we have seen, these specters of modernity are of a peculiar type: lucrative, immortal, inter-American.

13. For the tension between national and transnational in Latin American cinema studies, see D'Lugo, López, and Podalsky (3–4).

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