

# Bringing Latin America to Life with Films in the Classroom

Harry E. Vanden



**Mark Twain often observed that we,** Americans, are not too aware of other cultures. A war critic, he reserved some of his best barbs for American ignorance of foreign languages and cultures and the imperial endeavors of his day. Upon returning from traveling in Europe, he wrote, in *The Innocents Abroad*, “In Paris they just simply opened their eyes and stared when we spoke to them in French! We never did succeed in making those idiots understand their own language.” Twain was especially critical of U.S. imperial involvement in the Philippines and attempts to suppress the Philippine Insurrection, writing in *A Pen Warmed Up in Hell*, “I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land.”<sup>1</sup>

One would hope that we as educators could provide our students with a better understanding of other countries and cultures than was the case when Mark Twain was pricking the national consciousness. Yet this task is not a simple one. In three decades of teaching, I have found that most of our students have a genuine ignorance of the conditions in which our fellow citizens of the Americas live. Telling personal anecdotes or colorful stories is one good way to bridge this gap and can establish the personal links that help to make the material more relevant to students. But the world is diverse and few of us can tell tales of all the lands we want to teach about.

Frustrated at times in my attempts to educate my students about the Latin America I have grown to love, I have often turned to film and video as a way of exposing my charges to the world beyond our borders. Indeed, I first thought that if I just show some films,

such as *Like Water for Chocolate* or (Pancho) *Villa*, the Latin American reality would spring into their consciousness and give them a means of connecting to a little known reality. Would that it were so easy. There is, I found, little danger that the art of teaching (as practiced by the teacher) can be so easily replaced by a few videos. Each film, each director, each epoch, each take, is but a small part of the reality we wish to bring to our classrooms. As educators, we must select the films and videos, prepare the students for what they are to see, give background and history, and pose the important questions that highlight the plot even before we darken the room. That is, it is up to us to provide the context in which the action occurs, tease out the main themes and then connect them to the subject at hand and the reality that our students are living.

With this in mind, when I teach my Latin America Through Film course, I begin by showing *Micro Chip al Chip*

and cuts from the *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*) the first day. The former is a brilliant Chilean-made short that I happened upon in the Museum of Modern Art on a visit to New York. It skillfully examines the reduction of modern life to the smallest unit—the silicon microchip and the reduction of Chile’s old growth forests to one more exportable commodity—the wood chip. These two “chips” are gracefully tied to the external exploitation (the first chip is strongly associated with Japan’s modernization and the second fuels that country’s insatiable appetite for more wood-based paper products) that has marked Latin America’s insertion into the world economy. The film’s perky futuristic beat also suggests the modern Latin America that is emerging. The second film is an exquisitely made full-length Brazilian film that explores the violence and desperation of youth in a Brazilian housing project turned slum, the “City of God.” It is reminiscent of Spike Lee’s incursions into the violence and desperation of life in inner city neighborhoods and can offer a fascinating way of connecting life there to life here through the common desperation of so many youth in both places.

Such films and videos probably offer the best means (save a field trip to the region) of bringing Latin American reality to life for our students. Feature-length films shown on large screens with

Actress Salma Hayek, dressed in a traditional blouse used by the indigenous women of Juchitan and favored by Mexican icon Frida Kahlo, holds a pistol during the filming of the movie *Frida* in Puebla, Mexico, April 9, 2001. (AP Photo/Pablo Spencer)



good sound are particularly effective. Scenes of graphic sex and violence can be omitted (and sanitarly summarized by the teacher) to avoid parental or administrative discomfort.

After providing context and chronology, the teacher can begin by using a more traditional means of augmenting text reading, class lecture, discussion, and homework assignments—the documentary. Most are familiar with the offerings found in the catalogs sent out by Films for the Humanities and Sciences. Other distributors like Bull Frog Films, New Day Films, Facets World Cinema and the Filmmakers Library offer a wider mixture of documentaries and foreign films on VHS and DVD formats. By mixing documentaries, lecture, and discussion with feature films, important aspects of foreign cultures and their historic realities are made to come alive. An excellent documentary series is the five-part PBS-based video set *Buried Mirror*, narrated by the well-known Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes. It relates the dynamic series of events that have transpired in the Americas from the arrival of the Spaniards in the fifteenth century to the present. But even the best of documentaries pale in comparison to stunning feature-length films like *The Mission*, *El Norte*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, or *The Battle of Chile*. Even black and white classics like the Mexican adaptation of Romulo Gallegos's great Venezuelan novel *Doña Bárbara* seem to captivate



## A Link To The Past: Engaging Students In The Study Of History

Michael M. Yell, Geoffrey Scheurman,  
with Keith Reynolds  
*NCSS Bulletin 102, 93 pp., 2004*

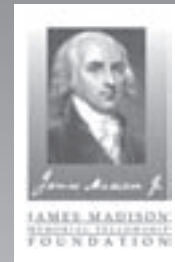
Teachers will benefit from these powerful, tried and tested strategies for getting students involved in the study of history. The authors offer tips for all stages of a history unit:

introducing the topic; involving students in discussion; enhancing writing and reading skills; teaching big ideas; and organizing and evaluating effective projects. The book offers useful lesson plans and a selection of valuable resources for teaching history. Its practical tips will help teachers who seek to interest students in history in ways that assist in fulfilling the requirements of a standards-based history curriculum. Author Michael Yell points out that “strategies that get students discussing, thinking and interacting with the content are invaluable for helping them learn and understand that content.”

040102

Price \$22.00/NCSS members \$14.00

Order toll free 9am–5pm ET: **1 800 683-0812**



**JAMES MADISON  
GRADUATE FELLOWSHIPS  
AVAILABLE UP TO  
\$24,000**

Available to secondary school teachers of American history, American government or social studies to undertake a master's degree program emphasizing the roots, principles, framing and development of the U.S. Constitution.

Fellowships pay the actual cost of tuition, fees, books, and room and board.

For information and to download an application, visit

**[www.jamesmadison.gov](http://www.jamesmadison.gov)**

General inquiries can be sent to [madison@act.org](mailto:madison@act.org), or call, 1-800-525-6928

James Madison Memorial Fellowship Foundation

## Books on Latin American Film

Susan Denver, *Celluloid Nationalism and Other Melodramas: From Post Revolutionary Mexico to Fin de Siglo Mexamérica*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2003.

Stephen Hart, *A Companion to Latin American Film*. Woodbridge, UK; Rochester, N.Y.: Tamesis, 2004. (Contains excellent critical synopses of major Latin American films.)

Joanne Herschfield and David R. Maciel, eds., *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Film Makers*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1999.

John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America*, 2nd ed. London and New York: Verso, 2000. (An excellent introduction and basic text on Latin American cinema.)

Michael T. Martin, ed. *New Latin American Cinema*. Detroit, Ill.: Wayne State University Press, 1997.

Chon A. Noriega, ed. *Visible Nations: Latin American Cinema and Video*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Ann Marie Stock, ed., *Framing Latin American Cinema: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

student audiences and stimulate animated questions and discussion. The outpouring of world-class films from Latin America in recent years and their availability in the United States provide excellent sources. *Central Station*, *Pijote* and the previously mentioned *City of God* are recent productions from Brazil, depicting daily struggle in Brazilian cities, that have met with considerable success in U.S. theaters, as have Cuban productions like the depiction of a gay man in Havana in *Strawberries and Chocolate*. *The Official Story* from Argentina chronicles that country's military rule and the Dirty War through the eyes of a mother who unknowingly adopted the daughter of a young woman the military had "disappeared." It complements the U.S. film *Missing* (starring Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek), the story of a young American fatally caught in the bloody September 11, 1973, coup in Chile.

To increase knowledge and understanding of Latin American cinema and the films it has produced, educators can consult several

## EISENHOWER ACADEMY

### An Institute for Teachers • July 8–13, 2007

The week long academy is held at Gettysburg College in historic Gettysburg, PA. Professional Education credits and three graduate credits are available for attending.

The Eisenhower Academy for teachers focuses on 1950s America and the Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. It includes:

- Field trips, lecture, and discussion on the 1950s including the Cold War, civil rights, economics, and popular culture.
- Effective strategies for teaching the Cold War era in the classroom.
- New scholarship on the Eisenhower Presidency.
- A visit to the Eisenhower National Historic Site for an intimate glimpse into Eisenhower's life and times.
- Opportunities to learn about and use primary source documents, film, video, and the Internet as research tools.
- Interviews with Eisenhower friends and family members.

For more information contact:

**(717) 338-9114 ext.10 john\_joyce@nps.gov**

Sponsored by  
The National Park Service, Gettysburg  
College, and Mount St. Mary's University

Eisenhower Academy, 250 Eisenhower Farm Lane, Gettysburg, PA 17325 • [www.nps.gov/eise](http://www.nps.gov/eise)



# Latin American Films and Videos

*The Battle of Chile.* Chile, 1976. Tells the story of the brutal U.S.-backed military coup of September 11, 1973, in Chile. VHS; First Run Icarus Films ([www.frif.com](http://www.frif.com)).

*Bye, Bye Brazil.* Brazil, 1980. A madcap introduction to Brazil as it modernizes and moves into the Amazon and its new capital, Brasilia. (Contains some graphic sex scenes.) DVD; Home video vendors (i.e., [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), etc.).

*The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain in the New World, Part Two: The Conflict of the Gods.* U.S. 1991. Video version of Carlos Fuentes's insightful commentary on the indigenous world conquered by Spain and the transposition of the new belief system. One of the five-part *Buried Mirror* set. Out of print; VHS—limited availability through Amazon Marketplace ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)).

*Central Station.* Brazil, 1998. An excellent story of a young boy befriended by a former school teacher turned typist who works from a small table set up in Rio's central bus station. Distributor Sony Pictures Home Entertainment. DVD available through home video vendors.

*Cidade de Deus/City of God.* Brazil, 2003. Modern classic on (very) violent gang activity in largest slum in Rio de Janeiro. Distributor Miramax Films. DVD available through home video vendors.

*Details of a Duel: a Question of Honor.* Chile/Cuba, 1988. A whimsical exploration of male honor. VHS; Facets Multimedia ([www.facets.org](http://www.facets.org)).

*The Double Day.* U.S., 1975. A documentary that explores the double workday that so many Latin American women endure as they work outside the home. VHS; Facets Multimedia ([www.facets.org](http://www.facets.org)).

*Eles não usam Black Tie.* Brazil, 1980. Chronicles a working class family's economic and political struggles. Limited availability—DVD; Filmes Raros ([www.filmesraros.com](http://www.filmesraros.com)).

*Evita.* U.S., 1997. The story of Argentina's Juan and Eva Perón, as played by Antonio Banderas and Madonna. DVD; Home video vendors (i.e., [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), etc.).

*Like Water For Chocolate.* Mexico, 1992. Excellent portrait of Mexican family, food, and the daughter who stays at home to care for her mother. Distributor, Buena Vista Worldwide Home Entertainment. DVD available through home video vendors.

*Lucia.* Cuba, 1968 A first rate Cuban film that explores the evolving consciousness of Cuban women through three historic epochs. DVD; Facets Multimedia ([www.facets.org](http://www.facets.org))—release date 05/29/07.

*Mexican Bus Ride.* Mexico, 1951. Classic film by Spanish director Luis Buñuel on life in Mexico and the institution of the bus in Mexico and Latin America. DVD; Facets Multimedia ([www.facets.org](http://www.facets.org)).

*The Mission.* U.S. 1986. An excellent feature-length film starring Robert De Niro; graphically depicts the colonization process among indigenous peoples above the Iguassú Falls in southern Brazil. Distributor, Warner Brothers. DVD; Home video vendors (i.e., [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), etc.).

*Missing.* U.S., 1983. The spellbinding story of the disappearance of a young American in the September 11, 1973, U.S.-supported Chilean military coup that overthrew elected president Salvador Allende. Directed by Costa Gravas, stars Sissy Spacek and Jack Lemmon. Distributor, Universal Pictures. DVD; Home video vendors (i.e., [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), etc.).

*La Muralla Verde/The Green Wall.* Peru, 1970 (video, 1990). An excellent film about a young Lima family that fights the bureaucracy and the jungle's green wall to colonize the Peruvian Amazon. VHS; Facets Multimedia ([www.facets.org](http://www.facets.org)).

*The Official Story.* Argentina, 1985. (See text). Distributor Almi Pictures. DVD; Home video vendors (i.e., [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), etc.).

*Pixote.* Brazil, 1981. Gives a glimpse of the life of street children in a large Brazilian city. For more general city life, *Central Station*, Brazil, 1998. DVD; Facets Multimedia ([www.facets.org](http://www.facets.org)).

*Que Viva Mexico.* Russia/USSR, 1931. Classic, unfinished celebration of post-revolutionary Mexico by brilliant Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. DVD; Facets Multimedia ([www.facets.org](http://www.facets.org)).

*Reed: Mexico Insurgente.* Mexico, 1971. VHS; Amazon Marketplace ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)).

*Romero.* U.S., 1989. Dramatic story of events surrounding the assassination of El Salvador's outspoken bishop, Oscar Romero. Vidmark Entertainment. DVD; Amazon Marketplace ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)).

*The Spanish Conquest of Mexico.* U.S. 1999. Tells the story of how the Aztec empire was conquered. DVD/VHS; Films Media Group (formerly Films for the Humanities) [www.films.com](http://www.films.com).

*State of Siege.* U.S., 1972. Costa Gravas tale of a brutal military takeover. VHS available through Learn Media ([www.learnmedia.ca](http://www.learnmedia.ca)) and limited availability through Amazon marketplace ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

*Xica.* Brazil, 1976. The embellished story of Xica da Silva, a beautiful Brazilian slave who was treated like a Queen by her wealthy miner lover. VHS; [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)



Children walk by a pool of raw sewage in Cidade de Deus (City of God), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, February 18, 2004. The despair of life in the slum is depicted in the movie *City of God*, which was nominated for four Academy Awards. (AP Photo/Victor R. Caivano)

excellent books about Latin American film (see box), starting with John King's introductory work *Magical Reels*.

Films from and about Latin America are in abundance, and teachers can pick visual images to examine specific themes like military intervention and suppression (e.g., *State of Siege*, *The Battle of Chile*, *Missing*, *The Official Story*) or different aspects of a national reality. (Focusing on Mexico, one could begin with Juárez and move to Villa, clips from Sergei Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico*, Luis Buñuel's *Mexican Bus Ride*, *El Profe* or other "Cantinflas" films, *Frida*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, *A Place Called Chiapas*, and end with *Traffic* or, on a softer note, one of the new documentaries on Mexico City).

It would be impossible to even list all the best documentaries and Latin

American films that may be useful in class. The following are a few of those that I have used in different classes. An excellent annotated listing of Latin American and Caribbean related videos and DVDs in the media collection at the University of South Florida<sup>2</sup> can be found on the web at [www.lib.usf.edu/index.cfm?Pg=LatinAmericanCaribbeanVideos](http://www.lib.usf.edu/index.cfm?Pg=LatinAmericanCaribbeanVideos).

Cinematography allows us to make the Latin American reality come to life for students in the United States. As we integrate the visual images it provides with more traditional materials, we can invite the students to the type of visual encounter they are becoming so used to, yet we can do so in a directed learning environment that allows us and them to process and integrate what they have seen, read, and heard. On a good day they will not only learn about the subject at hand,

but perhaps also acquire some critical viewing skills that will serve them well in our increasingly visual world. 🌐

#### Notes

1. To that end, Mark Twain was caustic in his criticism of the American occupation of the Philippines and the brutal suppression of the Philippine people (see "Incident in the Philippines").
2. This listing was compiled by University Librarian Rue McKenzie.

**HARRY E. VANDEN** was the founding director of the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Center at the University of South Florida where he has been teaching since the seventies. A former Fulbright Scholar in Peru, he has traveled throughout Latin America and has published more than thirty scholarly articles and seven books, including *Politics of Latin America: the Power Game* (Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 2006). Current research interests focus on new social movements, especially the Landless Movement (M.S.T.) in Brazil. He will continue to research this topic in Brazil on a second Fulbright in fall 2007.