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"FIRST DEGREE FRIENDSHIP: CINEMATOGRAPHIC ASPECTS OF FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT'S GOOD NEIGHBOR POLICY TOWARDS LATIN AMERICA" BY ANDRÁS LÉNÁRT

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András Lénárt is senior assistant professor at the Department of Hispanic Studies, University of Szeged, Hungary. He holds a PhD in Cotemporary History. His research interests include Spanish and Latin American history and cinema, the relation between film studies and universal history, as well as Inter-American studies. Lénárt is the author of two books and the co-editor of several volumes. His book chapters, essays and articles have appeared in Spanish, Hungarian, British, Italian, Mexican, German and Canadian journals, volumes of essays and books, and also on the website of the US Library of Congress, National Film Registry. He is currently the president of the International Federation of Latin American and Caribbean Studies (FIEALC) and is member of various international research groups and associations, such as the Association for Spanish Film Historians, the Association for European Historians of Latin America (AHILA), and also of the General Assembly of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He is also founding member of the Inter-American Research Centre at the University of Szeged. Email: lenarta@hist.u-szeged.hu

Abstract: Cultural policy, including film policy, has played a crucial role in strengthening a country's domestic and foreign policy. The United States of America's attitude towards Latin America has been changed several times throughout the 20th century, depending on the current international situation. The aim of my article is to present the cinematographic aspects of this policy in the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s, within the framework of the Good Neighbor Policy, formulated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In this mission special offices, departments and directors had a key role, with the support of several famous filmmakers.

Keywords: Good Neighbor Policy, Inter-American Cinema, Stereotypes, Nelson D. Rockefeller, Walt Disney

According to the historian John Henry Coatsworth, between 1898 (the Spanish-American War) and the beginning of the 21st century the United States of America successfully intervened in forty-one changes of government in Latin America (excluding the failed attempts): seventeen times acted directly and twenty-four times used indirect interference (Coatsworth 2005). The guiding principle was the Monroe Doctrine, announced in 1823 within the framework of the North American isolationism. According to this doctrine, any European states' intervention in the life course of the American continent was deemed unacceptable. Meanwhile, the United States would guarantee the security and peace in the New World. Hence, the political, economic, cultural and military influence of the United States was reinforced throughout the hemisphere: the ideology of the Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine's corollaries prompted US hegemony over Latin America and the Caribbean region, exploiting arguments such as the vital expansion of civilization and the prevention of possible threats

that could come from other countries. Upon entering the First World War in 1917, the US principle of isolationism was temporarily suspended and although in the interwar period the country returned to its previous stance, after the Second World War the US has been present as a predominant global superpower.

1. THE BIRTH OF THE GOOD NEIGHBOR POLICY

In the 1930s, in line with the transformation of the international circumstances, the Monroe Doctrine's role was slowly diminishing and thus in 1933 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt announced the Good Neighbor Policy. This policy's objective was the development of a Pan-American solidarity against external threats by taking into account the political and social shifts that were taking place in Europe throughout this decade. Just before the outbreak of the Second World War, it was clear that the US would need several allies and it seemed obvious that its neighbors might logical be its partners as well. It was also probable that Fascism and Nazism, considering their increasing popularity in Europe, would have followers among Latin American governments. And indeed, during World War II, these nations were an essential support for the USA: in some countries (like Nicaragua or Guatemala) even right-wing dictatorships were installed to go along with the White House's goals. A crucial detail of this policy was the abrogation of the Platt Amendment in 1934, an appendix that the northern 'neighbor' had added to the constitution of Cuba in 1901 in order to restrict Cubans' independence. In addition, during the same year US troops left Haiti that was occupied in 1915 during the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, who feared that European interests would diminish the influence of the United States both in that country and throughout the whole Caribbean region (Danticat 9-10).

Roosevelt sought to replace American interventionism with a call for cooperation among all the nations of the Americas. On March 4, 1933, the thirty-second president of the United States of America proclaimed in his inaugural address the following:

In the field of world policy, I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbor, the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others – the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors. (Houck 111)

This new attitude was incompatible with the use of military force in Latin America and in the Caribbean. Both the president and the members of his government emphasized in their public speeches that the White House desisted from armed intervention in these regions. In order to make this purpose clear, the US government signed two agreements in 1933: one in Montevideo and the other in Buenos Aires, in which the parties stated that: "no country has the right to intervene directly or indirectly in the internal or external affairs of another" (Selser 597).

The new approach towards Latin America brought about social and cultural transformations as well. It was indispensable to make a series of readjustments regarding the perception of the participating countries and the peoples of the American continent. Subsequently, cultural diplomacy played a crucial role in this mission: its sphere of action included both the domestic and the foreign policy. International research on the cultural dimensions involving the relations between the United States and Latin America – carried out in archives and film archives of American countries and also in film studios – has uncovered new possibilities for analysis about the confluences between politics, economy, society and that of cultural identity. These new researches constitute today, and in this article, a fundamental component of the interdisciplinary field of Inter-American studies.

2. TOWARDS A NEW INTER-AMERICAN FILM POLICY

In August 1940, President Roosevelt established the *Office for Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations Between the American Republics* (OCCCRBAR), which in 1941 adopted the name *Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs* (OCIAA). Subsequently, from 1945 this organ was known as *Office of Inter-American Affairs* (OIAA). In historiography the latter denomination is used most frequently, even if the reference is made to the predecessor entities. The main task of

the OIAA was to oppose the German and Italian influences on the American continent and to improve the image of the USA in Latin America and vice versa. This Office was created

to assist in the preparation and coordination of policies to stabilize the Latin American economies, to secure and deepen U.S. influence in the region, and to combat Axis inroads into the hemisphere, particularly in the commercial and cultural spheres. (Cramer – Prutsch 786)

The coordinator of the Office was the philanthropist businessman Nelson A. Rockefeller. The OIAA's scope of action covered the fields of trade, communication, press, radio, cinema, education, culture and, as an integral element of all activities, propaganda. The OIAA could rely on the cooperation of the most important and influential representatives of these areas. In Latin American countries the Office's subsidiaries operated under the supervision of the American embassies and received the unconditional support of those company executives that had a far-reaching network of interests in the target regions. The activity of the OIAA sought to control all spheres of life where any kind of relationship between the American countries could be detected. Cultural duties formed a distinguished element in this organization's mission through various instruments. For example, these included the appointment of goodwill ambassadors or the financing of cultural events and tours in Latin America. Walt Disney, Orson Welles, Bing Crosby, John Ford and the American Ballet dance company, among many others, were part of a wide range of collaborators spreading American culture across the Americas (Benamou 244-245).

One of the OIAA's most notable divisions was the *Motion Picture Division* under the direction of John Hay Whitney. He travelled to several Latin American countries in search of reliable partners and promoters in order to spread the democratic ideas among these societies by means of the movies – and so, trying to counteract also the influence of Nazism. The Division's foreign offices, located in major Latin American cities, explored the conditions and possibilities of a new film policy conducted from the United States. The related committees reviewed films that were to be exported to this region trying to predict which topics could have best reception in these societies. In all cases it was necessary to consult various departments and ministries of the Latin American countries, and also the censoring entities in order to avoid the exportation of movies that might hurt the sensibility of a given nation. Therefore, the OIAA's Motion Picture Division had to plan all stages and, at the same time, take precautions to prevent possible conflicts that could arise from the filmmaker's negligence. Although this meticulous preparation was prevalent in all areas of the American media's expansion to Latin America, cinema was a prominent factor. Whitney elaborated his *Plan to Stimulate the Cinematographic Production of the Mexican Industry in Support of the War Efforts*. The main purpose of this strategy was to develop film industries in all major Latin American countries. Mexico was chosen as the ideal place to elaborate this prototype because had a relatively well-developed film industry and, last but not least, the two governments maintained favorable diplomatic relations. According to the Plan signed by both parties in 1942, the objectives were to aid the Mexican cinematography in the production of films serving war propaganda purposes against the influence of the Axis powers and furthermore, to establish adequate conditions so that such an activity could also be carried out in other countries of the region. According to a number of historians, this agreement between the US and Mexico was the main reason why the Nazi Germany's film industry was unable to impose its will on Mexican cinema and, consequently, on the Spanish-speaking cinema of the Americas (Jarvinen – Peredo Castro 53-54; Rankin 90-93).

The development of a cultural-cinematographic nexus between the heterogeneous regions of America offered the promise of achieving the inter-American objectives in several areas. Besides pursuing a satisfactory solution to deal with the White House's greatest concern (that is, to neutralize the European extreme right's Latin American expansion), the flow of American films offered the possibility of garnering more complex results that were beneficiary on the long run. Through Hollywood movies and the widely known film stars the Latin American societies – that often lived under terrible economic conditions and, in some cases, tormented by an oppressive political system – came to know the so-called American way of life, the traditions and the everyday life of the United States of America, a seemingly distant and, apparently, fabulous world of these films that offered an extremely positive image of the US. By keeping the Latin American film market under US control, the moviegoers thus became "Americanized" in their own cinemas. Eventually, within the framework of the new Good Neighbor Policy, the ideal image formulated about the US Americans was complemented with a new approach towards Latin Americans. The film project was therefore suitable to play a double role in the Inter-American mission: on one hand, to shape a favorable impression in Latin Americans' mind about

the United States; on the other hand, to propagate the idea of Inter-Americanism and Pan-American friendship.

3. THE GOOD NEIGHBOR POLICY AND ITS MOVIES

The Motion Picture Division's activity was the prolongation of a trend that had begun in the first half of the 1930s to transform the stereotypes projected by Hollywood films about Latin Americans. American cinema had no intention to depict Hispanics in an offensive way (however, with some exceptions, this happened), but the image they conveyed about the other American nations was rather superficial and unbalanced, adequate to sometimes even ridicule Latin American societies. Some well-established clichés provided the basis for several filmmakers to model their creative work during the preparatory phase of the shooting. According to these stereotypical representations, most Latin Americans were vague, violent, driven only by their basic instincts; their life was guided by old-fashioned traditions and retrograde thinking. Movies like *The Cuban Love Song* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1931) or *Girl of the Rio* (Herbert Brenon, 1932) were so offensive to Cuba and Mexico, that the respective governments demanded their complete prohibition, but the feature films shot just after the birth of the Good Neighbor Policy, like *Flying Down to Rio* (Thornton Freeland, 1933), *In Caliente / Viva Seorita!* (Lloyd Bacon, 1935), *Rumba* (Marion Gering, 1935) and *Down Argentine Way* (Irving Cummings, 1940), also exploited some of those visual narrative stereotypes (Sadlier 37). The Latin rhythms, the extreme sensuality and the easy-going lifestyle were the characteristic features that appeared associated with the Latin American characters. In most cases, especially in the pictures filmed after the emergence of President Roosevelt's new attitude in 1933, these clichés had no evil roots; they only kept on the surface the simplified characterization of these region's peoples. Through its movies, Hollywood became a certain type of ethnographer regarding the Latin American societies with the help of which American filmmakers defined and then redefined the characteristic features of the "other" and their own approach towards these peoples, still exotic according to this imagery, which later entered the collective memory (López 67-70). This biased judgement could not be separated from the reminiscence of the colonial legacy, that preserved the 19th century European and exclusively white attitude, even if efforts were indeed made to get rid of the obsolete commonplaces.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, an increasing number of Latin American characters appeared in the major film studios' movies, played usually by Spanish-speaking artists. Not only unknown actors, but also singers and dancers were present on the silver screen. Latin American cinema's most famous stars, such as the Mexican Dolores del Río and the Cuban Desi Arnaz, among several Spaniards also were enlisted during the years of the Good Neighbor Policy to play Latin American characters on the screen. Mexican, Brazilian, Argentine and Cuban actors and actresses arrived in large masses in Hollywood, but the directors and producers did not allow them to play characters of their countries of origin. Instead, it was common for a Mexican to play the role of an Argentine, for a Cuban to act as a Peruvian, even Brazilians appeared as Mexicans, without paying attention to substantial differences in language or dialect. Some of these Latinas and Latinos had already worked in Hollywood in the 1920s, when film's double versions (the Spanish version of an American movie shot in the studio in parallel with the original, but usually with a different team) had their heyday, but then the so-called "war of accents," the worldwide outrage for the lack of linguistic and dialectal concern, caused immense troubles and setbacks in the film industry's inter-American links (Lénárt 2013). However, throughout the 1940s Latin American actors continued to play their customary roles that did not take into account their origin. In their effort to achieve enhanced authenticity, the producers hired Latin American advisors, even consulted politicians and the consuls of the specific countries, trying to avoid a possible false representation of the characters. In the 1940s when Good Neighbor Policy gained its maximum strength, some studios even had to withdraw ready films from the program or movies in the post-production phase, banning the release of some movies because in some scenes Latin Americans' representation was controversial (Sadlier 40-41). Although the Motion Picture Division financially supported many films, shooting was commissioned by the major studios or by some independent producers; therefore, the (largely propagandistic) goals of Roosevelt's new policy could not prevail completely since filmmakers' personal vision contributed the additional component of a real artistic-cinematographic value. Nevertheless, the OIAA and its Division kept the productions under strict control, fulfilling the US government's political and cultural purposes concerning Latin America.

The Division accomplished one of its greatest achievements in the early 1940s. John Hay Whitney suggested to Walt Disney a trip to Latin America in order to strengthen the cultural dimensions of the Good Neighbor Policy. This project was quite important, because – according to Whitney – the high

number of Italian and German immigrants in South America increased the sympathy towards the Axis powers. Although the USA was not a belligerent country yet at that time, it still aimed to stop the advance of Nazism and Fascism on the continent. Disney first rejected the proposal, because he didn't want to take part in a protocolled propagandistic mission; however, when the Division mentioned the possibility of shooting some movies during the journey, he changed his mind. After hiring a team of professionals (directors, draughtsmen, scriptwriters, a composer and also consultants who knew the region), he started the trip. The Disney group wanted to acquire personal and direct experience about the flora and fauna of the Latin American regions, the coasts, the jungles, the traditions and the societies of those parts of the world so that the films they were making would be close to authentic.

Disney was very popular in all segments of the Latin American society, the Brazilian president Getulio Vargas even offered him a gala dinner. During the Disney group's trip through South America, the president and his team toured several countries and regions, and the result was a vast amount of ideas, sketches, drawings and scripts. The cultural and inter-American consequence of this journey was even more remarkable. Until the arrival of Disney, within the framework of the Good Neighbor Policy, mostly politicians and propagandists arrived in Latin America. This time they were visited by an internationally known artist, who was interested in their country, region and their customs. Instead of planned short films, Disney's crew made two animated musical package films (*Saludos Amigos* and *Los tres caballeros*, premiered in 1942 and 1944, respectively) that met with success throughout the American continent, from Alaska to Argentina, creating a true bridge between different parts of the Americas. In these two films the filmmakers combined real images with animated ones, with several Latin American stars (like the dancer Carmen Molina) appearing along with Donald Duck and other cartoon figures in adventures set in Latin America, thus making use of the material filmed during the trip. The cultural mission of the Disney group had both propagandistic and cultural results, paving the way for new and similar projects (Thomas 151-154, Watts 243-248) in the following decades.

The Good Neighbor Policy called for film genres that attracted the public in all parts of the American continent, without ruling out the possibility that these films would be exportable even to Europe. By taking into account the preferences of the public in the 1930s, it seemed that especially musical comedies along with melodramas pleased wider audiences. Throughout the history of filmmaking, these genres, together with adventure films, were capable to attract public's attention, immersing them in a world of dreams. In these movies the cabaret served as quintessential place for civilized social interaction, and also as a metaphor for the encounters of all peoples and societies of the American continent. Although this vision of the cabaret came from the US perspective, this setting was widespread in the Americas becoming accepted trope of the new inter-American relations. The cycle of this type of movies began with Roosevelt's new policy and with the romantic musical *Flying Down to Rio* (Thornton Freeland, 1933).

This movie film was produced by the RKO studio, a company that actively participated in the representation and defense of the political and financial interests of the United States. With the Mexican-born Dolores del Río as main character, in secondary roles also were (for the first time together) Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The film's plot epitomizes a hemispheric utopia, albeit with US imperialist aims, including a melting pot of ancient ideologies recalling Latin American intellectuals such as Simón Bolívar, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and José Martí that shaped transnational pluralism. The intradiegetic narrative begins in the United States, but the protagonist soon arrives in Brazil, and the viewers receive a new vision on this place. This Portuguese-speaking country has in this movie a generalized interpretation that seems to be valid for all parts of Latin America in that decade. In accordance with the film's point of view, Latin Americans are friendly and generally trustworthy people, although some stereotypes, unfortunately still remained.

Flying Down to Rio was a turning point in the history of Inter-American cinematographic relations; here, the filmmakers introduced the first elements that modified the American attitude towards Latin America and also the representation of its inhabitants. Obviously, the causes of this metamorphosis were not merely altruistic ones but had political and propagandistic foundations in order to serve President Roosevelt's objectives (Pérez Melgosa 17-40). Since the *Office for Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations Between the American Republics* (the first variant of the OIAA) did not exist at that point, its director, Thornton Freeland, can be seen as a pioneer on the path that led to the reformulation of inter-American relations in films. This strategy was still present even in the 1940s with titles such as the aforementioned *Down Argentine Way* (Irving Cummings, 1940) and *Pan-*

Americana (John H. Auer, 1945), but also appeared in the Mexican feature films *La liga de las canciones* (Chano Urueta, 1941) and *Calabacitas tiernas* (Gilberto Martínez Solares, 1949), displaying more proper aspects of Pan-Americanism (Pérez Melgosa 42).

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW APPROACH TOWARDS LATIN AMERICA

When evaluating the success of the cultural (more precisely, the cinematographic) aspect of the Good Neighbor Policy, we cannot dissociate it from the main objectives of the American foreign policy of the time. The improvement of inter-American relations had two purposes. On one hand, the goal driven by the political reality, that is, European events that threatened also the American continent. On the other hand, only a few years had passed since the outbreak of the Great Depression in 1929 and the US urged a balanced relationship with all regions of the Americas in order to secure its former markets and to generate new ones. For this reason, it was necessary to win the sympathy and confidence of the Latin American and the Caribbean countries also at the cultural level. At the sociopolitical and economic levels, the new points of view had some conspicuous achievements but at the cultural level, the new inter-American cinematographic policy – although retaining some evident traces of the stereotypes used in the earlier filmic representations – attempted to contribute to the mutual knowledge of the different American nations. Hollywood’s “good neighbor films” were imbued with Latin-American themes, and its characters also served as propaganda tools, through which the values and the lifestyle of the United States was to be made familiar and even attractive for all the countries of the American continent. At the same time, these films had to transmit a positive image about Latin America to justify the Good Neighbor Policy for the American society, in parallel with the dismantling of the old stereotypes shaped by the very same Hollywood.

This new policy had its triumphs, although only in the short and medium term. After the end of World War II, two superpowers faced each other during the Cold War period: the United States of America and the Soviet Union. In accordance with the demands of the new balance of forces, the USA modified its international policy and, therefore, had to revisit its attitude towards many countries. This political transformation led to the re-evaluation of the Good Neighbor Policy, pondering the advantages and disadvantages that Roosevelt’s inter-American policy brought forth in the 1930s and 1940s. In the new international situation, the White House’s main objective was to protect the Western hemisphere from the Soviet influence at any cost. These were contradictory to the fundamental principle of non-interventionism, proclaimed more than 15 years earlier, and led to a new wave of US involvements in Latin American affairs. Therefore, in subsequent decades, the inter-American influence in cinema – together with the political and economic power exercised over national and foreign societies by Hollywood film studios – would return more to the service of domestic policy of the United States of America.

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