





## ARTICLES



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## Movie theaters, audiences, and film programming in Merida, Mexico (1952)

 Maricruz Castro Ricalde  
[maricruz.castro@tec.mx](mailto:maricruz.castro@tec.mx)  
 Tecnológico de Monterrey  


 José Carlos Lozano Rendón  
[carlos.lozano@tamiu.edu](mailto:carlos.lozano@tamiu.edu)  
 Texas A&M International University  


**ABSTRACT:** Grounded in the New History of Cinema, this paper examines the social experience of moviegoing in Mérida, Mexico, in 1952, focusing on cinema infrastructure, film programming, and regional identity's impact on national film reception. By analyzing data from 2,698 film screenings over 52 Saturdays, we assess the popularity of this cultural industry among Mérida's cinema-goers and the significant presence of domestic and Hollywood productions. Despite Mérida's geographic and economic challenges, its cinema culture mirrored that of Mexico's metropolitan areas. This study broadens the traditional scope of cinema history in Mexico by providing insights into film programming and theaters outside Mexico City in the early 1950s.

**KEYWORDS:** Cinema Attendance; Film Industry; Cultural Consumers; History of Cinema; Mexico.

## Salas de cine, audiencias y exhibición cinematográfica en Mérida, México (1952)

**RESUMEN:** Basado en la Nueva Historia del Cine, este artículo examina la experiencia social de asistir a las salas cinematográficas en Mérida, México, en 1952. Se centra en la descripción, el análisis de la infraestructura cinematográfica, la programación de películas y el impacto de la identidad regional en la recepción del cine nacional. Mediante el análisis de 2,698 proyecciones de películas durante 52 sábados, evaluamos la popularidad de esta industria cultural entre las audiencias de Mérida y la presencia de producciones nacionales y de Hollywood. A pesar de la distancia geográfica y características económicas de Mérida, su cultura cinematográfica es más cercana a las áreas metropolitanas de México que, de los comportamientos registrados en otras regiones del país. Este estudio amplía el alcance tradicional de la historia del cine en México al proporcionar información sobre la programación de películas y teatros fuera de la Ciudad de México, a principios de 1950.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Asistencia al cine; industria cinematográfica; historia del cine; consumidor cultural; México.

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## Introduction

This study examines the movie theaters operating in 1952 in Mérida, the capital of the Mexican state of Yucatán, and their film programming patterns. During this time, Mexico had a thriving film industry, with numerous films being shown in national and international markets. Mexican productions were successful both among Mexican and Latin American audiences seeking entertainment and among sophisticated cinemagoers who preferred acclaimed films with prizes in Cannes, Venice, or Locarno (Castro & Irwin, 2011) although Hollywood films were also prevalent in the region (García, 1993). The success of Mexican cinema led to the expansion of movie theaters throughout the country. National cinemagoers supported Mexican films enthusiastically, contributing to develop a media ecosystem, encompassing music records, radio programming, and live entertainment. Famous film stars traveled the country in “artistic caravans,” providing live musical and comedy shows.

By 1952, Mexico had multiplied the number of movie theaters and national films occupied a significant percentage of screen time in many areas of the country. Despite the relevance and uniqueness of this boom in the context of cinema history at large, research on Mexican movie theaters and their programming during this period has been dramatically scarce, particularly outside Mexico City (Lozano *et al.*, 2024). Recently, however, some studies have provided empirical information on film venues, film programming, and cinemagoing in several Mexican provincial towns, such as León (González *et al.*, 2019), Monterrey (Lozano *et al.*, 2012), Tampico, Ciudad Madero (Nieto *et al.*, 2020b), Saltillo (Muñoz *et al.*, 2021), Torreón (Chong *et al.*, 2014; Chong *et al.*, 2016), Veracruz (Nieto *et al.*, 2020a), and Zacatecas (García, 2023a; García, 2023b). These studies have documented unique patterns in the history of movie theaters and screen culture in Mexican cities in the north, northeast, center, and east of Mexico. However, data on locations in the south and southeast of the country, traditionally considered areas with endemic poverty and significant isolation from the rest of the country, is almost non-existent (Dávila *et al.*, 2002).

Responding to this scarcity of information about Mexico’s Southern region, this paper focuses on the exhibition infrastructure prevalent in Mérida in 1952, examining its most significant features and identifying the patterns of film programming and the audiences they catered to. The article adopts a multidisciplinary approach, known as the New Cinema History (or the Social History of Cinema), an approach combining history, politics, economics, anthropology, and cultural studies to understand screen culture in specific geographic locations at a particular time (Maltby, 2011). This approach, which investigates the relationship between film distribution, exhibition, programming, and consumption, is still relatively scarce in Mexico, especially regarding the history of cinemas and cinemagoing in provincial areas, although several studies have been conducted recently in this line (Lozano, 2017;

Lozano *et al.*, 2017; Lozano *et al.*, 2023; Rosas, 2000; Sifuentes, 2022). While the experience of going to the cinema in Mexico City had diverse yet predictable forms until the 1980s (Repoll *et al.*, 2014), documentation of cinemagoing patterns in the provinces of this country is less common and comprehensive. Interpreting the history of Mexican cinema based solely on Mexico City is insufficient and biased (Fuentes-Navarro & Sánchez-Ruiz, 1992), highlighting the need for researchers to undertake more research on cinemas and cinemagoing at the regional level, using triangulated methodologies.

This research allows for comparisons between the history of movie theaters and film programming in Mexico City and some industrialized cities in the north, and a small and isolated city in the country's southern region, characterized by different social and geographical contexts. It could be hypothesized that there was a more limited film programming available in Mérida due to its remote location and the challenges involved in transporting film materials. Additionally, it may be assumed that cinema attendance was lower than in cities with better connectivity and higher per capita incomes, due to its residents' demographic and economic characteristics.

### Methodology

This paper is based on the theoretical assumptions and methodological approaches of the New Cinema History perspective (Allen, 1990; Maltby, 2006; Meers *et al.*, 2014). Scholarly approaches that connect film themes with actual historical events and the tendency to explore the production contexts have remained popular. The New History of Cinema contributes to the ongoing debate by highlighting the role of cinema in shaping urban and regional cultures and communities often distant from major population centers. It brings a fresh perspective to traditional film studies while aligning itself with the contemporary trend of explaining phenomena from a multidisciplinary approach.

Another distinctive feature of the New History of Cinema is its combination of empirical methodology with archival research and the examination of primary sources. Documents from a particular historical period are located and reviewed to contextualize the social meaning of cinema, such as the construction of movie theaters in specific locations, their costs, architectural design, equipment, and how they were introduced to potential audiences. This approach combines research practices typical of contemporary historiography with those less commonly explored by film scholars, such as the interrelation between infrastructure, audiences, and film exhibition.

In summary, this approach prioritizes the social experience of going to the cinema for viewers. Cinemas are considered space in the broadest sense, as public routines are developed and differentiated within them based on social class, age, or gender

(Pušnik, 2015). Therefore, cinema is not merely entertainment, beginning and ending with the film itself, but also a key element in the social history of audiences (Allen, 2011; Maltby, 2006). Its influence extends to children's games, the fashion of young people and adults, cultural references, and everyday conversations.

This research replicates the methodology proposed by the Mexican "Screen Culture" research project which emulates the pioneering studies of Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers in Flanders, Belgium, "The Enlightened City," done between 2007 and 2012. Our project covers three thematic moments that provide an overview of the social history of cinema in this specific part of Mexico and in the specific period of the early 1950s. The first stage provides a historical inventory of existing movie theaters, their geographical distribution, their connections with commercial circuits, and their characterization based on the social groups that attended them. The second phase, based on case studies, examines the programming and exhibition of films diachronically and at a micro level. Finally, the third stage focuses on the cinemagoers' experiences exploring their history as an audience, their film consumption, and their experiences in cinemas within the framework of a leisure culture (Meers *et al.*, 2008). In 2008, the Mexican version of the Belgian project started in Monterrey (Lozano *et al.*, 2012), expanding in the following years to many other Mexican towns, replicating the same Belgian methodology in each case. Recently, findings of the Screen Culture network on the programming of films during 1952 in León, Monterrey, Saltillo, Tampico, Torreón, and Veracruz were released (Lozano *et al.*, 2024).

This article discusses findings about the first and second stages of the project (exhibitors and programming) and emphasizes the strong correspondence between the screening spaces and the film offerings. The factors analyzed here, such as the geographical location of the movie theaters, age of the venues, spatial conditions, projection, and audio technologies, as well as the national origin of the films, their production year, main actors, and genres, all are relevant and necessary to look into the audiences' memories, the focus of the third stage of the project.

This study used qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Archival research was conducted in the city of Mérida, Yucatán, including the General Archive of the State of Yucatán, the Municipal Historical Archive of Mérida, the Institute of Patrimonial Legal Security of Yucatán (through its cadastral collections), and the Fund Reserve from the Yucatan Library. This detailed documentation aimed to record the interaction between urbanization processes and the growth of movie theaters, their names, locations, number of seats, owners, and their general characteristics. A list of the existing movie theaters in Mérida in 1952 was obtained by identifying them on the movie listings in local newspapers. While we are aware that there were other types of places where Mérida's inhabitants could watch films at the time (neighborhood locales, churches, social clubs, etc.), only formal spaces that primarily functioned as

movie theaters, with fixed screening days, and whose programming was published in at least one local newspaper were considered. To determine the movie offerings in Mérida, data from the 52 Saturdays of 1952 was obtained, following the methodology of the “Screen Culture” project. Although Sundays were when the weekly billing changed in first-class cinemas in Mérida, the information was systematized based on Saturdays for comparative purposes. If a Saturday edition was not available, we used the movie listings of the previous day.

The movie listings were taken from two leading daily newspapers on the Yucatan peninsula: *Diario de Yucatán* and *Diario del Sureste*. The former was established in 1925, with a distinct Catholic and conservative affiliation. Carlos R. Menéndez served as its inaugural director and held the position for an extended period, leading it to become the most influential print medium in the region (Casares, 1998). *Diario del Sureste*, on the other hand, emerged in 1931 under the patronage of the State of Yucatán government and its governor, Bartolomé García Correa. Its purpose was to counterbalance the uncontested influence of *Diario de Yucatán*. The Menéndez family primarily published movie listings as paid inserts to promote cinema attendance plus colorful stories and feature articles about Hollywood stars sourced from international agencies such as UPI or AP. This newspaper served as the primary source for promoting the film offerings. Significant dates, including the opening of movie theaters, visits by movie stars to Mérida, and significant film events, were also referenced in the *Diario del Sureste*.

We chose to analyze 1952 for several reasons. One of them was that in that year, the Mexican film industry had reached the zenith of its local and international penetration. Spanish-speaking markets paid in advance for films that had not been shot but were guaranteed profitable returns. Its major stars (Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante, Cantinflas, Dolores del Río, or Ninón Sevilla) continued to garner box office success. This successful situation led to the Mexican magazine *El Cine Gráfico* assertions, proclaiming “Mexican cinema is indestructible, invincible, immortal” (Castro & Irwin, 2011, p. 208). It was also the year with more released films in Mexico (471) during the Golden Age, 111 of which were Mexican (IMCINE, 2011).

Research questions guiding this paper were:

- a) What movie theaters existed in Mérida in 1952? Where were they situated within the socio-geographic spaces of the city, and what were some of their distinguishable features?
- b) How many films were screened in the theaters of Mérida in 52 Saturdays of 1952, by origin and genre? Which Mexican and Hollywood actors were more popular in the screenings?
- c) How did the film programming in Mérida compare to other cities that were more closely connected to Mexico City, the primary distribution center of the country?

The content analysis of the film offerings considered variables such as the film title, main actors, director, country of origin, production year, screening cinema, showtimes, ticket prices, and general observations. The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) information was a reference point to ensure data standardization.

### Mérida, a case study

Mérida represents a compelling case study for examining film exhibition in Mexico. As the capital of the state of Yucatán, located in the southeastern region of Mexico, it is characterized by significant marginalization (París, 2003). In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Yucatán had just over 516 thousand inhabitants out of the nearly 26 million Mexicans. It ranked as the ninth least populated among the 31 entities (including a territory and the Federal District). Regarding the labor force, Yucatán ranked in the last third with 167,380 people, over one hundred thousand of whom were engaged in agriculture and fishing (Secretaría de Economía, 1953). Illiteracy affected over thirty percent of the population between 1950 and 1970 (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2003).

Traditionally, Mérida has been the city in the Yucatecan peninsula with the most significant economic strength, acting as the cultural and educational center of the region (the states of Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Yucatan). These entities, along with Tabasco, Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Guerrero, form the southeastern region of Mexico. Ramírez (1980) has conducted pioneering work on the history of Mérida's cinemas during the silent era while Laura Isabel Serna has analyzed *Revista del Cinema*, a Yucatecan publication exemplifying "the vibrant film culture that bloomed in Yucatán in the late teens" (2017, pp. 1-29). Castro (2022), in addition, explored film productions shot in Yucatán during the so-called Golden Age of Mexican cinema. However, no published research seems to exist on mid-20<sup>th</sup> century movie theaters and film programming across this extensive region. This initial exploration aims to shed light on the social history of cinema in this area during that important period.

The geographic distance separating Mérida from the nation's capital had significant repercussions on the socio-political and cultural spheres, extending well beyond the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. For centuries, Mérida remained isolated from the rest of the country, lacking land connections with other major cities. It was not until 1950 that rail networks provided slightly improved communication with central Mexico (García, 2006). The inhabitants of Yucatán had to travel to Mérida or Campeche on Friday nights to be able to take the Ferrocarril del Sureste and arrived in Mexico City by Monday morning. Direct land communication was only established a decade later when the federal highway along the Gulf of Mexico finally reached Mérida.

Since the 1930s, various attempts were made to connect by air Progreso, the primary port of Yucatán, with other essential destinations such as Veracruz and Tamau-

lipas. Although regular commercial flights were established, these flights could only accommodate a dozen passengers and required multiple stops before reaching Mexico City (Moreno, 2018). The high cost restricted the proportion of Yucatecans who could travel to other regions within the country and vice versa.

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked cinema's zenith as an entertainment industry. While it previously shared popularity with other public activities such as theater, fairs, musical caravans, and sports, the 1950s witnessed cinema attendance solidify as the most affordable form of entertainment suitable for diverse audiences (Aveyard & Moran, 2001). However, this era also saw the emergence of three significant threats that ultimately undermined its immense popularity. Without attempting to rank them, the first threat was the decline of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema (Paxman, 2018). The second was the gradual expansion and diversification of recreational options. In Mérida, the most evident example was the failure of the cinema Maya, which opened in 1955 in the newly established Colonia Alemán in the northeastern part of the city. Urban development led to a decline in the attendance of the middle and upper classes in the city center, resulting in the neglect of movie theaters and their film offerings. The third threat was the slow but relentless advance of television viewership. Although the first Yucatecan television transmitter was inaugurated in January 1963, the sale of domestic television sets had already occurred several years prior, driven by the delayed broadcast of television programs. These broadcasts attracted passersby who gathered in front of commercial displays. The first of these broadcasts took place in March 1952 in Mérida.

### Movie theaters in Mérida in 1952

Between 1942 and 1952, movie theaters, as defined in this research, almost doubled in Mérida. The urban layout managed to preserve the boroughs consolidated in the 18th century: Santa Lucía, San Juan, San Cristóbal, Santiago, Mejorada, San Sebastián, and Santa Ana (Gutiérrez & Rivero, 2013). All of them were contiguous to the core of the historic center, consisting of the Plaza Grande, which surrounded the Cathedral, the Government Palace, the Municipal Palace, and the house of the conquistadors Francisco de Montejo, father and son. The most distant points between the neighborhoods did not exceed 1,500 meters.

Table 1 provides insight into the coexistence of theaters established half a century ago and those inaugurated in 1952. It shows the enduring appeal of cinema as a favored form of entertainment for the Mérida public, fully integrated into their leisure routines. It also reflects the confidence of local entrepreneurs in this economic activity, as evidenced by their investments in new venues or the modernization of existing, still-popular locations.

The appearance of movie listings in the *Diario de Yucatán* and the *Diario del Sureste* represented a significant source of income for these print media outlets, particularly

for the *Diario de Yucatán*, which dedicated three to four pages on Sundays to advertise the movies of the day. However, the activities of the film exhibitors or distributors did not seem to hold much journalistic interest. Except for a few inaugurations of the main movie theaters, there were practically no news articles or reports informing the Yucatecan audiences which were the owners of these entertainment venues or the distributors of the films in Yucatán.

**Table 1.** Movie theaters in Mérida, 1952.

Theater	Opened	Location	Notes
<i>Alcázar</i>	1926	Mejorada borough	Formerly Cine Odeón
<i>Cantarell</i>	1936	Historical downtown	
<i>Cine Apolo</i>	1952	Santa Lucía borough	
<i>Cine Fantasio</i>	1952	Historical downtown	
<i>Cine Gálvez</i>	1952	Lourdes borough	
<i>Cine Ideal</i>	1952	Santa Ana borough	
<i>Cine Mérida</i>	1949	Historical downtown	Opened as Teatro Mérida
<i>Cinema Santa Rosa</i>	1952	Santa Rosa borough	Re-opening
<i>Cine Teatro Yucatán</i>	1952	Historical downtown	
<i>Cinema Lido</i>	1952	San Sebastián borough	
<i>Cinema Rex</i>	1949	Santiago borough	Formerly Salón Apolo, Cine Palacio & Rívoli
<i>Colonial</i>	1939	Historical downtown	Formerly Teatro Colonial
<i>Encanto</i>	1935	Santa Ana borough	
<i>Esmeralda</i>	1920	San Cristóbal borough	
<i>Novedades</i>	1931	Historical downtown	Also known as Nuevo Novedades
<i>Peón Contreras</i>	1940	Historical downtown	Since 1908
<i>Principal</i>	1935	Historical downtown	Formerly Salón Jardín
<i>Rialto</i>	1924	Santiago borough	Formerly Salón Frontera
<i>San Juan</i>	1934	San Juan borough	

Source: Own.

However, *Diario de Yucatán* published a significant journalistic article on January 1, 1939. It included an interview with three of the future most influential film entrepreneurs in Yucatán over almost two decades. They were Primo Aguilar Anduce, Manuel J. Peón Bolio, and Gastón Cantarell Arce. Each owned at least one highly reputed cinema in the historical center of Mérida: The Principal, the Novedades, and the Cantarell movie theaters, respectively. The reporter asked the three businessmen: “What was the best film of 1938?”. Aguilar Anduce stated it was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937); Peón Bolio said it was *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Norman Taurog,

1938); and Cantarell Arce did not hesitate to affirm that it was *The Buccaneer* (Cecil B. de Mille, 1938) (La Fuente, 1939). Of course, these films had been screened in their cinemas. Their answers reveal aspects of great interest. For example, there was no considerable time lag between the film releases in the United States and Yucatan. All three chose significant Hollywood films intended for family enjoyment. Mexican cinema had yet to reach the peak of the Golden Age, and neither mentioned anything about national movies. Nevertheless, Ney Peón announced that *The Night of the Mayas* would be shot in Yucatan, and the undisputed star Dolores del Río “was mad” to star in it. The protagonist was not Del Río but Stella Inda. Peón Bolio was not wrong in his prediction since that film contributed significantly to a nationalist approach to Mexican cinema and its international prestige. Indeed, he actively participated in the film’s production because his father-in-law, the esteemed writer and politician Antonio Mediz Bolio, was the screenwriter and a staunch advocate for it to be made in Yucatán (Castro, 2022).

Since the mid-1940s, Mérida’s movie theaters have also witnessed the rise of the mogul entrepreneur William Jenkins’ power through two companies in which he was a partner. One of these was COTSA, along with Manuel Espinosa Yglesias. The other was Cadena de Oro, in partnership with Gabriel Alarcón (Paxman, 2018). Over time, Mérida’s principal movie theaters became part of the Cadena de Oro. By the end of 1952, the Cadena de Oro has already incorporated more than half of the movie theaters in Merida: Cantarell, Colonial, Peón Contreras, Rex, Novedades, Principal, Rialto, Encanto, Esmeralda, San Juan, and Alcázar movie theaters. Cinemas in the city’s historic center, such as the luxurious Mérida; medium-sized ones like Yucatán, Fantasio, and Apolo; and others in the suburbs like Ideal, Lido, and Gálvez, still operated independently.

On December 9, 1949, the Yucatecan entrepreneur of Lebanese origin, Tufic Charruf, inaugurated Mérida Theater. It stands out as the last grand construction resembling a film palace with an Art Deco style. Its opening was a significant social event. Boasting a seating capacity of 2,300 cushioned seats, it emerged as the most significant screening space in Yucatán, surpassing the capacity of the old and magnificent *Peón Contreras* theater by a hundred seats and that of another esteemed venue by nearly 300: the *Novedades* (Rangel & Portas, 1957). Nevertheless, Mérida never witnessed the establishment of a theater comparable in size to those in Monterrey with their 4,650 seats (Lozano *et al.*, 2012), the *Royal* in Torreón with 4,000 seats (Lozano *et al.*, 2024), or the *Renacimiento*, located in nearby Campeche, boasting 3,000 seats (Alfaro & Ochoa, 1998).

The opening of seven new cinemas in 1952, more than a third of the existing infrastructure, underscores the city’s central role for audiences. Equally significant is determining the composition of their audiences along with their historical signifi-

cance prior to their refashioning as movie houses (Meers *et al.*, 2008). Two venues were located less than a hundred meters from the Plaza Grande. The transformation of theaters into movie houses accentuated this form of entertainment consolidation. Such is the case with *Cine Teatro Yucatán* and *Teatro Fantasio*, initially staging national and local theatrical productions, with film screenings gaining preference within months. Nearly half of the film offerings in Merida could be found in these establishments.

The expansion of Mérida's film exhibition infrastructure was slow in contrast to what happened in European or American urban metropolis that, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, experienced an evident migration of residents and cinemas from the historical downtown area to the suburbs. The concentration of entertainment venues in the city center in the case of Merida is striking. Traditional neighborhoods like Santiago and Santa Ana, each with two theaters, experienced a renewed liveliness during the 1940s and 1950s with the increased interest of working-class residents to enjoy movies. This boom of neighborhood cinemas represented a significant shift in film audiences and exhibition practices in Mérida.

#### Film audiences and exhibition in Mérida, Yucatán (1952)

The 1950s were characterized in Mexico by a decline in national film production and a corresponding rise in the programming of Hollywood films in the country's cinemas. This decline was also observed in the Argentine and Spanish film industries. In 1950, Mexico produced 123 films, while in 1951 and 1952, the number decreased to 101.49 Argentina released 57, 53, and 35 films during the same period, while Spain released 49, 41, and 41, respectively (García, 1993). Thus, five years after the end of World War II, the dominance of American cinema in international markets became increasingly evident.

According to the Mexican census, Mérida had a population of 159,410 in 1950. At that year, Monterrey, the third most populous city in the country, had a population of 339,292. With less than half that population, Mérida resembled smaller cities in our Screen Culture network such as León, Guanajuato, with 157,342 inhabitants, and Torreón, Coahuila, with 147,233 inhabitants (Secretaría de Economía, 1953).

Table 2 reveals that despite having a substantially smaller population than Monterrey, Mérida's cinema infrastructure resembled that of a larger metropolis. Merida's number of theaters, and consequently the total number of screenings during 1952, far exceeded other locations in the north, center, and eastern coast with similar populations. One might assume that this enthusiastic response to the silver screen resulted from a lack of other entertainment alternatives due to Mérida's geographical isolation. However, the city boasted a vibrant entertainment scene, encompassing boxing matches, bullfights, baseball games, large fairs, regional theater productions, and performances by foreign theater companies. Additionally, dances in local ball-

rooms were popular, featuring renowned orchestras and nightclubs with live music. Notable exhibitions included showcases by numerous local piano, ballet, declamation, and singing schools, along with amateur competitions held in neighborhood movie theaters between screenings.

**Table 2.** Comparative approach. Movie theaters & screenings in Mexico (1952).

City	Population 1950	Number of theaters	Screenings
León, Guanajuato	157,343	4	327
Mérida, Yucatán	159,410	19	2698
Monterrey, Nuevo León	339,292	21	2310
Saltillo, Coahuila	98,603	3	1310
Tampico, Tamaulipas	96,541	10	809
Torreón, Coahuila	147,233	8	970
Veracruz, Veracruz	107,434	6	411

Source: Own.

In 1952, musical caravans led by movie stars arrived in the city. One caravan featured the Yucatecan tenor Nicolás Urcelay and the famous child actress Tucita. Urcelay participated in two films screened in Mérida: *Deseada* (Roberto Gavaldón, 1951) and *The Port of Seven Vices* (Eduardo Ugarte, 1952). Tucita, alongside Pedro Infante, starred in the highly popular *Dicen que soy mujeriego* (Roberto Rodríguez, 1949). The allure of *rumberas* cinema was capitalized upon by its leading figures, and the Yucatecan audience had the opportunity to witness Yolanda Montes, known as “Tongolele,” perform at the *Circo Teatro Yucateco*. Two “Tongolele” films were shown in Mérida: *Mátenme porque me muero* (Ismael Rodríguez, 1951) and *Chucho El Remendado* (Gilberto Martínez Solares, 1952). Rosita Quintana and Fernando Soto “Mantequilla,” along with a caravan of film and theater stars, also performed in *Plaza Mérida*. Quintana appeared in four film titles that year, while “Mantequilla” featured in five. Given their warm reception, this selection represents a tiny example of the allure that distant Mérida held for Mexican cinema figures. Consequently, the results in [Table 5](#) are no surprise and provide a basis for discussing the information presented in [Table 3](#).

[Table 3](#) highlights the prevalence of Hollywood cinema on the screens of Mérida. Nearly 58 % of the Saturday film offerings originated from the United States, while only 35.29 % were of Mexican origin. This pattern mirrors the percentages observed in Mexico City, where Hollywood films accounted for 62 % of the offerings in the early 1950s (Amador & Ayala Blanco, 1985). These findings contrast significantly with the predominance of Mexican films in other provincial cities in the country such as Tam-

**Table 3.** Percentage and number of films screened in 52 weeks in Merida (México), according to country of origin, 1952.<sup>1</sup>

Country of origin	Number of films	%
United States	1563	57.93 %
México	952	35.29 %
United Kingdom	85	3.15 %
Italy	30	1.11 %
Spain	29	1.07 %
France	14	0.52 %
Argentina	11	0.41 %
Venezuela	6	0.22 %
Australia	2	0.07 %
Japan	2	0.07 %
Norway	2	0.07 %
Thailand	2	0.07 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>2698</b>	<b>100 %</b>

Source: Own.

pico, Torreón, Veracruz and León. The latter clearly favored national films, accounting for 58.4 % of its screenings. Although a relatively significant number of titles from the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, Italy and Spain were also included in Merida’s film programming, it would be inaccurate to claim that the local cinemas actively promoted geographical diversity. The results presented in Table 3 can be attributed to the abundance of available productions rather than a genuine preference for one type of cinema over another. Or it could be explained by distributors pushing and imposing US films on exhibitors regardless of the audiences’ tastes.

The most expensive tickets came from the Cantarell, Colonial, Mérida, Novedades, Peón Contreras, and Rex movie theaters. Except for the latter, all were in the historic center. To compete, they set different prices for children. For example, in 1952 they all charged an average of \$2.50 for the adult public. However, the cost for children could vary between \$1.00 and \$1.50. Another way to attract audiences to the theaters was to offer lower prices to teachers, students, and conscripts, as the Mérida movie theater did. Alternatively, to encourage morning attendance at three screenings for \$1.00, as advertised by the Cantarell movie theater. Also, the upper floor was cheaper, depending on the movie theater size. Theaters like all those mentioned, but also others with cheaper prices like the Principal, offered the “balcony” for \$1.50 or \$1.00. The use of English terms such as “balcony” or the “vermouth” hour (5:30 p.m.) shows the illusion of cosmopolitanism that the use of foreign words brought with it

<sup>1</sup> Table based partly on Lozano *et al.* (2024).

among Mexican audiences. However, remember that this isolated Mexican city had active links with American cities such as New Orleans and other Caribbean cities such as Havana.

Almost all the more expensive movie theaters showed Hollywood films, as seen in Table 4. The Cantarell and Rex cinemas have 189 and 180 screenings, respectively, during the 52 days of the sample. The latter did not show any Mexican films, nor did the Apolo cinema, which opened in 1952 (July 18), and alternated film screenings with various entertainment shows. Four of the five movie theaters that exhibited the most American films correspond to the highest category (Cantarell, Rex, Mérida, and Novedades). Only one medium-cost movie theater, the Rialto, stands out for its inclination to program Hollywood films. The Encanto cinema in the Santa Ana neighborhood stands out for the 141 screenings of Mexican films. However, there is no clear differentiation in the public’s preferences for film productions of one or another nationality, depending on whether they were first, second, or third-category cinema theaters. Nor is there any differentiation in terms of geographic location. Yucatecan audiences were offered films from both countries, regardless of whether the venue was in the historic center or neighborhoods or whether the ticket cost.

**Table 4.** Percentage and number of films screened, according to country of origin per theatre, 1952.

Movie Theater	Argentina	Australia	Spain	USA	France	Italy	Japan	México	Norway	UK	Thailand	Venezuela	Total	%
Alcázar				104				74		6			184	6.82 %
Cantarell				181		4	2	29		4			220	8.15 %
Apolo				87	2					4			93	3.45 %
Fantasio				22				35					57	2.11 %
Galvez				1				1					2	0.07 %
Ideal			2	32		2		41		1			78	2.89 %
Mérida	6		4	131	4	4		38		9			196	7.26 %
Yucatán			4	18		2		26		2			52	1.93 %
Lido	1			12				35					48	1.78 %
Rex			2	180		4				16			202	7.49 %
Colonial	2	2	2	99	4	2		72		15		4	202	7.49 %
Encanto			4	53		2		141		1			201	7.45 %
Esmeralda			4	102		2		68		10			186	6.89 %
Nuevo novedades	2			123				83		3			211	7.82 %
Peón Contreras			2	114	2	6		64	2	4	2	2	198	7.34 %
Principal			4	79	2	2		110		2			199	7.38 %
Rialto				135				50		4			189	7.01 %
San Juan			1	90				85		4			180	6.67 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>1563</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>952</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2698</b>	<b>100.00 %</b>

Source: Own.

Likewise, the behavior of the movie listings in Mérida is like other Mexican cities in terms of the tendency of movie theaters to offer mixed programs of Hollywood and Mexican films. This coincides with Andrea Noble’s finding on the propensity of first-

class theaters to prefer programming American films (Noble, 2010). So, Yucatecan audiences with greater purchasing power consumed more Hollywood films but they were not reluctant to watch Mexican movies. What is clear is that first-class theaters located in the historic downtown area showed a tendency to project films from multiple nationalities, such as the beautiful palace Peón Contreras and Colonial (from nine different countries) or the fashionable art-deco style cinema Mérida (with films from seven different nationalities).

However, it is relevant to note that the number of films of non-Mexican or American origin was much lower. Tables 3 and 4 show that less than 7 % of the screenings were from other countries. This type of programming was so exceptional that, for example, in April 1952, the Mérida cinema paid for an advertisement to announce that, for the first time, an Arab film would be screened in the city. As a curious fact, the film was Egyptian, not Arab. It was *Afrak* (Niazi Mostafa, 1950).

Although, according to Tables 3 and Table 4, the projections of films from the United States almost doubled those from Mexico, Table 5 shows that actors in films screened the most were overwhelmingly Mexican and not American. The only foreign actor in the top 10 of the most screened was Stewart Granger, a London-born actor. In 1952, Mérida showcased seven films starring Granger, including *Saraband for Dead Lovers* (Basil Dearden, 1948), a production from the United Kingdom, *Adam and Evelyne* (Harold French, 1949), *Soldiers Three* (Tay Garnett, 1951), *King Solomon's Mines* (Compton Bennett and Andrew Marton, 1950), *The Light Touch Picture* (Richard Brooks, 1951), *The White North* (Andrew Marton, 1952), and *Scaramouche* (George Sidney, 1952), all produced in the United States. Granger's transition from the UK to the US reflects the allure of Hollywood, as well as the appeal of films featuring prominent stars for exhibitors. A similar phenomenon can be observed within the Mexican film industry, which became a Mecca for the Latin American sector. For instance, Jorge Mistral, Libertad Lamarque, Marga López, Rosa Carmina, and María Antonieta Pons, although hailing from Spain, Argentina, and Cuba, respectively, experienced their breakthroughs or consolidations in Mexican cinema (Irwin & Castro Ricalde, 2013).

The data above also sheds light on the diverse range of dates for films exhibited during this period, from titles released in 1948 to the latest premieres of 1952. Table 5 evidences the immense popularity of Mexican cinema, exemplified by the number of screenings of movies starred by national actors and actresses. Pedro Infante reigned supreme with 66 Saturday screenings in 1952. With an extraordinary repertoire of fourteen films, ranging from *Si me han de matar mañana* (Miguel Zacarías, 1947) to the six premieres of 1952, this beloved actor captivated the audience in Yucatán. Infante had constructed a grand recreational residence in Mérida during the late 1940s, and by 1952, he had become a love partner of the actress Irma Dorantes, a city na-

tive. Public veneration for the singer also led to the emergence of impersonators who performed in public shows throughout the city. The diverse selection of films in which Infante starred, spanning comedies such as *Dicen que soy mujeriego* (Roberto Rodríguez, 1949), melodramas like *Angelitos Negros* (Joselito Rodríguez, 1948), and *rancheras* such as *Ahí viene Martín Corona!* (Miguel Zacarías, 1952), reinforces the notion that the decision to exhibit these films was not solely based on specific genres but on the stars themselves.

The results in [Table 5](#) are notable due to the diverse range of performers showcased, which do not necessarily align with the most frequently exhibited films but rather with the many titles in which they were involved. This includes renowned stars like Cantinflas, Jorge Negrete, Tin Tan, and Pedro Armendáriz, and notable rumba dancers like Rosa Carmina and María Antonieta Pons. Once again, the prominence of the Mexican star system is glaring, surpassing the influence of specific genres, as many of the featured stars on the table acted in comedies, melodramas, musicals, and even a Melodrama noir film like *La noche avanza* (Roberto Gavaldón, 1952).

**Table 5.** Stars with more national screenings in 52 weeks of 1952 in Mérida (México), 1952.

Movie star	Country	Screenings
Pedro Infante	MX	66
Rosa Carmina	MX	34
Jorge Mistral	MX/Esp	33
Stewart Granger	RU	30
Cantinflas	MX	31
Jorge Negrete	MX	29
Fernando Soler	MX	27
Libertad Lamarque	AR/MX	26
Dagoberto Rodríguez	MX	26
Arturo de Córdova	MX	23
Tin Tan	MX	24
Marga López	ARG/MX	24
Luis Aguilar	MX	23
Pedro Armendáriz	MX	23
María Antonieta Pons	MX	21

Source: Own.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Dagoberto Rodríguez in [Table 5](#) foreshadows a shift in genres that would be consolidated in the following decade. Mexican-style Westerns, such as *El Lobo Solitario*, *La Justicia del Lobo* y *Vuelve el Lobo*, all directed by Vicente Oróná in 1952 and starred by Rodríguez. Like other Mexican cities (González Chávez *et al.*, 2019), national films were projected in various types of theaters from

first-run to second or third-run. However, what stands out is the tremendous acceptance of films like the Mexican westerns starring Rodríguez, presumably targeting lower-income audiences. In Mérida, these saga films were screened at the *Peón Contreras*, *Colonial*, *Novedades*, *Principal*, *Alcázar*, *Encanto*, and *San Juan* theaters, with ticket prices ranging from 2.50 to 1.50 pesos. This reveals that viewers from different parts of the city could choose their preferred theater based on geographical proximity or economic capabilities. These findings confirm the existence at the time of “spectators who value and consume Mexican productions, even in the face of limited options” (Hinojosa, 2012, p. 16), irrespective of Hollywood cinema’s quality, themes, or number of available productions.

### Conclusions

This study demonstrates Mérida’s population interest in attending cinemas in Mérida, Yucatán, in 1952. With 19 theaters in operation, this city stands on par with Mexican metropolises much larger in population size. The number of movie houses and of screenings shows an even bigger popularity of cinema among Mérida’s inhabitants than in many other Mexican cities in the same period, reflecting a strong screen culture. While cinemas were primarily concentrated in the historic center and surrounding neighborhoods, there was also a growing trend to expand film exhibition towards working-class sectors of the city. However, urban growth and modernization progressed slowly, explaining the persistence of the concentration of theaters in existing areas rather than their dispersal in suburban or peripheral areas.

Out of the 2,698 screenings that took place during the 52 Saturdays of 1952, nearly 58 % featured Hollywood films, and 35 % national films, like the distribution of screenings observed in Mexico City, where Hollywood films were more popular than national ones. While in term of U.S. and Mexican screenings Mérida was different from the other provincial cities studied in our screen culture network, the fact that 14 out of the 15 actors with the higher number of screenings in the city starred in Mexican films, shows that audiences preferences in this town were indeed similar than the ones in other small and medium-size locations. This could be attributed to the effectiveness of the existing media ecosystem, manifested in Mérida through live performances by actors and singers, radio hits, and a range of public activities centered around the world of cinema. The inclusion of well-known names, driven by the Mexican star system, played a decisive role in shaping the city’s film offerings, overshadowing genre considerations or how recent or old the films were. Mérida’s distance from Mexico City, the country’s central hub for film distribution, did not seem to hinder the programming of national productions.

The identification of the most frequently screened film stars in Mérida’s theaters, as presented in [Table 5](#), provides a basis for developing a line of study not included in

this paper: the examination of film genres and their exhibition. We could better understand the preferences of the Yucatecan audience generating information about that topic. Besides that, it may be possible to relate with greater certainty whether the film genre was a variable of greater or lesser importance about the star system. The period studied (1952) invites exploration of this topic in a future article, considering that the films produced at that time tended to display characteristics that classified them into specific film genres (as opposed to a contemporary trend of genre hybridization).

By focusing our research on cinema infrastructure and film offerings in Mérida, we have underscored the importance of studying the social history of cinema in regional contexts. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of this period in cinema history moving from the main metropolis of a country to provincial locations with significant differences and dynamics in the exhibition and programming of films. Furthermore, it invites us to reevaluate widely accepted assumptions and categories stemming from the social history of cinema based mostly on big cities in the industrialized world.

The behavior of Yucatecan audiences, who exhibit a higher consumption of Hollywood cinema compared to a preference for national cinema, can be explained by several factors that are not explored in this article. One of these factors is the strong sense of regional identity, which is firmly rooted in their differentiation from the country's central region. Another major factor in examining the social history of cinema in Mérida is the concept of "Yucatecness." This term (related to the name of the state: Yucatán) allows us to understand the regional narrative shaped by a distinct timeline and influenced by various cultural features, including archaeological remains, historical events, prominent figures, musical and culinary traditions, literary works, and famous sayings (Taracena, 2007). "Yucatecness" represents a local identity that has persevered "despite the post-revolutionary PRI government's efforts to forge a national identity through traditional Mexican nationalism" (Figueroa, 2013, pp. 511-550). Nevertheless, political, economic, and social centralism resulted in a partial or total rejection of cultural products with which the Yucatecans did not identify. Therefore, it remains to be explored in future research how the particularities of the region influenced the social practices of Yucatecan cinema audiences.

Exploring contrasting geographical areas with varying population sizes and levels of urbanization challenges generalized characterizations of audiences and the social experience of attending cinemas. In the case of the social history of cinema in Mexico, it is still necessary to expand the increasing scholarship on formal theaters and movie houses into other alternative but important venues for film screenings, like churches, public parks, social and mutualist organizations, and fairs. Identifying and documenting these alternative spaces of film consumption would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how different audiences in different places experienced cinema.

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## Authors' Contribution to the Article:

a) Conceptualization: Original idea, problematization, and study objectives. MC and JCL, b) Data Selection: Selection and classification of the base information for the study. MCR, c) Analysis: Analysis and interpretation of the base information and data for the study. MCR, d) Research: Theoretical and methodological foundation of the study. MC and JCL, e) Methodology: Techniques and tools used for the collection and obtaining of information and data. MC and JCL, f) Visualization: Creation and presentation of the research through images, tables, graphs, among others. MCR, g) Writing, Reviewing, and Editing: Writing, reviewing, and editing the manuscript at different stages. MC and JCL.

## Responsible Declaration of AI Usage:

No AI was used at any stage of the article.

## Conflict of Interest:

The authors of the article "Movie theaters, audiences, and film programming in Merida, Mexico (1952)", Maricruz Castro Ricalde (Tecnológico de Monterrey) and José Carlos Lozano Rendón (Texas A&M) declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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### MARICRUZ CASTRO RICALDE

Mexican. Is a professor and researcher at Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico, since 1990. PhD in Modern Literature, she has received several awards, including the Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez Medal (Government of the State of Mexico, 2010) for gender equity, the Culture of Mexico Chair (Brown University and the National Fund for Culture and the Arts, 2013), and the Latin America Chair (Université de Toulouse Jean Jaurés, 2019-2020). She directed the “Desbordar el canon” collection, awarded by the National Fund for Culture and the Arts in 2006 and 2009. She is a member of the Mexican Academy of Sciences, and the Mexican National System of Researchers. Her most recent books are *La invención iconográfica. Identidades regionales y nación en el cine mexicano de la edad de oro* (2022), and *Detrás de las sombras: Escritoras cinematográficas en el cambio de siglo en México* (with Diego Sheinbaum, UNAM, 2024).

### JOSE CARLOS LOZANO-RENDÓN

Mexican. Is a professor and researcher at Texas A&M International University, in Laredo, Texas (United States) since 2012, and Research Fellow at the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, Mexico since 2020. He has a M.A. in Media Studies from Leicester University, England, and a PhD in Media and International Communication at University of Texas at Austin. He is a member of the Mexican Academy of Sciences, and the Mexican National System of Researchers at Level 3. He studies media contents and audiences as well as the social history of exhibition and cinema going in Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico border.