

Who Killed the Mexican Film Industry? The Decline of the Golden Age, 1946-1960

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Abstract

During the Second World War, a convergence of local acting and directing talent and rising production levels gave birth to the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, a phenomenon facilitated by reduced competition from Hollywood, Argentina, and Europe. However, as of 1946, high output masked a growing malaise within Mexico's film industry, manifest in a decline in cinematic originality and a dependence on cheaply-made genre pictures. Traditionally, the slow demise of the Golden Age has been blamed on two factors: first, the influence of William Jenkins, an expatriate U.S. investor who developed a near-monopoly of theaters that privileged Hollywood fare at upmarket screens and financed local production in a way that kept budgets low; second, the creative stagnation of Mexico's directors, whose union admitted few new members. This article explores those allegations while also considering other key factors of the decline: the risk-averse role of producers, the populist media policies of the Mexican state, and international trends such as the resurgence of competing film industries. The article therefore offers a holistic, business-conscious history of the Golden Age fade-out.

Keywords: Golden Age, Mexican cinema, *Cine de Oro*, William Jenkins, Hollywood, Miguel Alemán, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, Adolfo López Mateos

Resumen

Durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial, la convergencia de talentosos actores y directores y crecientes niveles de producción dieron lugar a la Época de Oro del cine mexicano, un fenómeno facilitado por una competencia reducida de Hollywood, Argentina y Europa. Sin embargo, a partir de 1946, la alta producción disfrazó un creciente malestar dentro de la industria cinematográfica mexicana, visto en el declive en la originalidad

filmica y una dependencia en baratas películas de género. Tradicionalmente se ha culpado el lento cierre de la Época de Oro en dos factores: primero, la influencia de William Jenkins, un expatriado inversor estadounidense que cultivó un cuasi monopolio de cines que favorecía el producto hollywoodense en sus salas de primera y financiaba la producción local de tal manera que los presupuestos se mantuvieron reducidos; segundo, el estancamiento creativo de los directores, cuyo sindicato admitió pocos miembros nuevos. Este artículo explora esos alegatos y también considera otros factores clave del declive: la conducta de bajo riesgo de los productores, las populistas políticas de medios del Estado mexicano y las tendencias internacionales, entre ellas el resurgimiento de industrias cinematográficas rivales. Así, el artículo ofrece una historia holística y atenta a lo empresarial del fundido a negro de la Época de Oro.

Palabras Clave: Época de oro, cine mexicano, William Jenkins, Hollywood, Miguel Alemán, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, Adolfo López Mateos

Recent years have registered a boom in Mexican cinema, but comparisons to the Golden Age of the 1940s and 50s, when local films accounted for close to half of all tickets sold, fall significantly short.¹ In 2015, Mexico logged an output of 140 features, breaking a record that had stood since 1958, but as the majority of productions lacked adequate distribution and exhibition (and were produced on slim budgets), their share of national box-office revenue totaled a meager 6.5 percent.² Further, in another frequently touted yet misleading measure of Mexico's filmic health, the critical, commercial, and Oscar-winning success achieved in recent years by directors Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro G. Iñárritu, and Guillermo del Toro belies the fact that in the neoliberal era, filmmaking has largely been a matter not of large-scale, studio-based production but irregular artisanship, with successful directors quick to relocate to Hollywood.³

To the historian, the encouraging but economically limited revival—along with often specious comparisons to the Golden Age—prompts two big questions about the earlier era: What occurred in the 1940s and 50s that enabled Mexico to boast the world's third-largest film industry and prizewinners at prestigious European festivals? And what caused the Golden Age to fade out? This article concerns the latter question, which has received much less attention than the former from film historians; it looks into the multiple causes of a qualitative decline, which was somewhat masked by then-record output, but characterized by a proliferation of cheap formula pictures that catered to lower-income audiences (who paid less to see them), a consequent contraction in overseas market demand, and a general loss of domestic and foreign prestige.

Rather than offering a textual evaluation of films or genres, this approach takes the death of the Golden Age as a given, as attested to by multiple historians and critics, and dwells on the marginalized subject of film economics

and its intersection with state policy. An industrial focus is merited because a comprehensive business history of Mexican cinema has yet to be written, either in English or in Spanish, nor does one appear to be in the pipeline.⁴ The lacuna owes much to the traditional concern of film scholarship with textual analysis. Ana M. López has noted that recent work on Mexican and South American film has paid more attention to historical and social context, long the special concern of Latin America's film historians. The business history of production, distribution, and exhibition remains largely uncharted territory.⁵

Two explanations for the decline of the *Cine de Oro* are commonly cited, both originating in works published in 1960. The year is significant because it saw the effective nationalization of the film industry, as the state took over the country's two leading movie theater operations, which were also key sources of film finance, in a bold but vain attempt to reverse the sector's decay. In *El libro negro del cine mexicano*, the disaffected producer-director Miguel Contreras Torres hurled the blame at William O. Jenkins, a US expatriate businessman. Along with two Mexican partners, Jenkins controlled both of the leading exhibition chains, and Contreras Torres claimed that the Jenkins Group had attained a de facto monopoly through all kinds of anti-competitive practices; worse, it granted greater screen access to Hollywood product and hindered the flow of credit to Mexican producers, insisting on a high volume of genre pictures produced on skimpy budgets. That same year, critic Emilio García Riera attributed the demise in part to government censorship and in part to the conservatism of the financiers, but more so to another monopoly: an aging generation of complacent directors whose union refused new entrants.⁶

For half a century, histories of Mexican cinema have commonly—and for the most part unquestioningly—attributed the death of the Golden Age to a combination of Jenkins's alleged machinations and the industry's creative complacency. However, a more holistic and economically sensitive understanding of the sector's decline finds cause not only in the rent-seeking activities of the Jenkins Group and the artistic stagnation of filmmakers but also in the rightward drift of the Mexican state after 1940 and the impact of global media trends, notably a ramping up of output by competing film industries upon the close of World War II.

A caveat regarding sources: as is common in Hollywood historiography, Mexican film history must be written without access to company archives, which are almost entirely closed to researchers. Tracing Jenkins's role is further complicated by the fact that his own archive was burned by his chief associate after his death. This article therefore draws chiefly on the trade publication *Variety*, which had a Mexico correspondent since at least the 1930s; the Mexican national press; the oral archive at Mexico City's Instituto Mora, which includes many

late-in-life interviews with Golden Age players; and the presidential series at the Archivo General de la Nación, whose files include missives from industry groups petitioning against Jenkins's influence.

What and When was the Golden Age?

Popular and scholarly notions of the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema vary greatly, ranging from a celebration of such icons of nationalism as Pedro Infante, Dolores del Río, María Félix, and Cantinflas, to a questioning as to whether a *Cine de Oro* truly existed. Consider the issue of its duration. A glossy history of the era traces a 30-year span, from 1936 (year of the rural musical-comedy *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, a genre-establishing hit) until 1965.⁷ Most definitions are less liberal. Film histories often define the Age as starting around 1936 and ending in the late 1950s,⁸ or they equate it with the 1940s.⁹ Film historian Carl Mora delimited the Age further, to 1946-52, simultaneous with the high-output era during President Miguel Alemán's administration. Veteran producer Salvador Elizondo, morosely reflecting in the hindsight of retirement, reduced it to a mere four years, those of US engagement in World War II. This judgment was shared by García Riera: "It's usual to talk of a Golden Age of Mexican cinema with greater nostalgia than chronological accuracy. If that age actually existed, it was that of the years of the Second World War: 1941-1945."¹⁰ To fully account for the decline, the present article uses a fairly generous periodization: the 1940s and 1950s.

The multiplicity of periodizations owes much to a conceptual vagueness as to what exactly was Golden about the Age. In terms of output, certainly, Mexico hosted the world's third-largest film industry by 1950, after the United States and India. Yet there is a tendency to conflate the growth of the film sector as a whole, including theater chains, with the success of Mexican production. "The national cinema evolved and matured into the nation's third-largest industry," says one historian.¹¹ As well as failing to qualify the measurement, the claim forgets that roughly half of the gross revenues of this "national" industry was generated by films from Hollywood and Europe.¹² Further, while the term "Golden Age" is often used to refer to an advanced level of both quantity and quality in local production, those values did not always coincide. Some of the era's high output, which rose from 24 features in 1936 to a staggering 123 in 1950, was of such a low standard that exhibitors refused to screen it.¹³ Production companies lurched along in boom-and-bust fashion, unable to attain a Hollywood-like mode of efficient, creative, and self-financing output. Economic consistency was something, by contrast, at which Mexico's TV industry would prove adept.¹⁴

Years of great activity and creative innovation (1936-1938, 1942-1945, and 1948-1950) alternated with stretches of financial scarcity and depressed production. Output would stabilize at an annual 100 or so features in the 1950s and remain high until the 1980s, but these quantities were sustained by a reliance on tired formulas and small budgets.

Overall attendance is another matter. The middle third of the century saw an upsurge in moviegoing *per se*, making it by far Mexico's favorite form of paid entertainment. By 1946, Mexicans were spending eight times as much going to the movies as going to the bullfights, the second-most popular draw.¹⁵ However, the main beneficiary of the box-office peso was the theater owner, who typically retained half, while state and municipal governments often took 15 percent in taxes.¹⁶ Of the remaining 35 or 40 centavos, the distribution company (typically a third party, as most production companies lacked the critical mass to negotiate with exhibitors) might well keep 20 centavos. That left, at most, a fifth of the ticket price to the filmmakers. Forced to compete with the Hollywood production line and its entrenched distribution networks, local producers only occasionally turned a profit, especially after the war; most relied on state subsidies.¹⁷ That rival production line was indeed impressive. In 1949, when Mexican producers mustered a new record of 107 releases, they had to compete with 246 from Hollywood and another 88 from elsewhere, mostly Western Europe.¹⁸

As a result, the vast majority of Golden Age wealth either left the country or entered the pockets of exhibitors, above all those of William Jenkins. (The American did not repatriate profits but plowed them into theater expansion and venture-capital projects.¹⁹) Since Jenkins's archive was burned after he died, we cannot know how much of his fortune flowed from the box offices, but witnesses attest that exhibition was the most lucrative of his various businesses. Not for nothing did a 1953 profile of the man's film interests bear the title "Jenkins, The Emperor."²⁰

This division of profit constitutes the "dirty secret" of the Golden Age, however periodized. Most accounts have fêted (or critiqued) the creative side of the industry, which was unquestionably rich: the films and their prizes at Cannes, Venice, and elsewhere; the enduring stars; the directors, writers, and cinematographers.²¹ As noted above, these versions have paid much less attention to film as a business—that is, an enterprise involving the jostling interests of producers, distributors, exhibitors, financiers, unions, and the state. Apart from some useful passages in the preamble to each chapter of his eighteen-volume *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, such is the case in the vast oeuvre of García Riera. This absence is also notable in the work of Mexico's senior living film historian, Aurelio de los Reyes, and Mexican cinema's best-known contemporary critic, Jorge Ayala Blanco.²² The chief exceptions to this trend are

found in the culturally focused but economically aware scholarship of Charles Ramírez Berg, Seth Fein, and Francisco Peredo.²³

The most insightful analysis of Golden Age economics appears in Berg's *Cinema of Solitude*, which includes two astute passages on the shaky underpinnings of the *Cine de Oro*.²⁴ For Berg, the seeds of its premature decline were sewn in the formative years, the mid-1930s to mid-1940s. He describes an "elite band of private-sector film entrepreneurs," initially powerful in exhibition and distribution, who moved into production and favored screen access for their own films over the product of independent companies. As producers, this elite hogged financing from the state film bank (taking advantage of a system designed to nurture producers and sustain the industry), sometimes cut costs by hiring non-union workers, and often profited by padding their budgets. The problem of profiteering was exacerbated as studio owners failed to upgrade their equipment, and in 1945 the directors' guild instituted a twenty-year policy of shutting out younger talent. Altogether, these decisions resulted in "an aging, inbred industry that produced unimaginative, low-quality movies."²⁵ Berg's sketch of how cinema was financed and controlled raises important questions about why the Mexican state permitted such monopolistic practices.

Jenkins: The Monopolist

There is a great disparity between Jenkins's dominance within the Golden Age film industry and the paucity of research into his activities.²⁶ This is not entirely surprising, given that most film historians focus on cinema as a cultural artifact; in Mexico, where *auteur* theory has predominated, this is much the case.²⁷ Mexican business history, post-1940, is under-researched as a whole, and Jenkins has not lent himself to scrutiny: few business papers survive and he never spoke to the press. Further, he operated his theaters through hands-on partners, chiefly Manuel Espinosa Yglesias and Gabriel Alarcón, and as a safeguard against expropriation and the US Internal Revenue Service, he held his assets under the names of these and other associates.²⁸

The Jenkins Group, a catch-all term for a collection of alliances that dated from 1938, faced three kinds of criticism, regarding exhibition, distribution, and finally production. As early as 1944, some rivals began to find themselves squeezed by its monopolistic practices. Vicente Villasana, who dominated exhibition in the Tampico area with eight or nine theaters, placed an open letter in the Mexico City press, attacking Jenkins for bullying distributors into favoring him with their films in Tampico by threatening to boycott them at all of his 60-plus theaters.²⁹ As provincial exhibitors lacked geographically broad circuits

with which to convince distributors to treat them on equal terms, they gradually succumbed and sold out to the Jenkins Group. Even the Villasana family would sell their chain, in 1955, to Jenkins's partner Alarcón.³⁰

According to Contreras Torres (and the circumstantial evidence supports his claim), it was through such exertion that Jenkins forced Emilio Azcárraga, Mexico's leading radio and film mogul, to part with his 20-venue Cadena de Oro in Mexico City. Jenkins's partner Espinosa told both Mexican and Hollywood distributors that if they continued to supply films to Azcárraga's flagship Teatro Alameda, he would refuse to screen their product at his theaters in the capital and other major cities where he dominated; he also pledged them an extra five percent of box-office revenues if they agreed to the boycott. In consequence, Azcárraga was reduced to showing second-rate Mexican films and Hollywood reruns. After a period of losses, Azcárraga sold stakes in six of his largest theaters to Jenkins and Alarcón in 1949.³¹ Two years later, shifting his focus for good onto the TV industry, then in its infancy, Azcárraga would surrender the Cadena de Oro.³²

The collateral damage in Jenkins's war upon rival exhibitors seems to have been borne chiefly by Mexican cinema, for archival evidence suggests that it was Mexican distributors (rather than their stronger Hollywood counterparts) who were most often used as pawns. In February 1949, northern theater owners lobbied President Alemán, claiming that Jenkins and Alarcón were hurting them by pressing Películas Nacionales, the leading distributor of Mexican pictures, to withhold product.³³ Lack of access to Mexican films, which afforded close to half of the national box-office take, threatened their theaters with closure—or a forced sale. By April, when the northern exhibitors secured an audience with Alemán, theater owners in Mexico City were voicing similar protests.³⁴ Hence, between 1944 and 1958, as the Jenkins Group rose from owning about 60 screens to operating 1,600, Mexican distributors likely found their revenue streams repeatedly, if temporarily, diminished by such monopolistic power plays.

Furthermore, starting in 1945, Espinosa used his exhibition muscle in Mexico City to forge supply deals with the Hollywood majors.³⁵ As these gradually tied up many of the first-run theaters, Mexican producers had to compete among themselves and with Europe for shrinking screen space. For the Jenkins Group this was strictly business: Hollywood's high-output studio system, oiled by a global distribution-cum-PR machine, offered safer returns.

In an October 1949 broadside in leading newsmagazine *Hoy*, screenwriter José Revueltas accused Jenkins and partners not only of conspiring to keep Mexican product from rivals but also of deliberately "burning" local films, by giving them the briefest of first-run engagements, regardless of their popularity. This was neither spite nor a Hollywood-backed plot, just a manipulation of standard industry economics: when movies opened they earned for their pro-

ducers a relatively high percentage of the box-office peso; when the same films were re-released in second-run venues, theater owners kept more of the take, as the risk of showing a picture released a week or more earlier was, supposedly, greater. Distributors unwilling to play by these rules, who opted to deal with independent exhibitors, risked a boycott of all of their films in cities (like Puebla and Torreón) where the Jenkins Group's control was total. Those who did sign deals with Espinosa or Alarcón had to abstain from contracts with any other exhibitor, even in cities (like those of the northwest) where the Group as yet had no presence. Revueltas feared that these practices might result in Jenkins's dominion over the entire production side of the industry.³⁶

There was a direct relationship between exhibition and production because, since the 1930s (if not earlier), Mexican producers had obtained part of their financing from theater owners: producers gained an advance on anticipated revenues, in return for which exhibitors gained first-run or exclusive rights to their films.³⁷ The Jenkins Group used the promise of funding, together with the threat of boycotts, as a carrot-and-stick approach to gaining a hold over production. In the World War II era, however, its interest in production had been inconsistent. In December 1941, Jenkins co-founded the Film Bank (Banco Cinematográfico), a public-private partnership; largely backed by the private sector, it was probably the largest single source of film finance during the 1940s. In the spring of 1944, Jenkins and Espinosa Yglesias engineered its takeover, but their main interest was in acquiring the bank's stake in the exhibition chain COTSA; that autumn, Jenkins sold not only his shares in the bank but also the stake he had gained through it in leading production house CLASA Films.³⁸ Presumably still he considered film production too risky. In 1942 the Film Bank had loaned a million pesos to newly-formed Grovas S.A., promoting it as "the most powerful film company in Latin America," and Espinosa had taken a seat on its board. Grovas made a relatively prolific eight productions that year but failed to turn a profit, leaving the Film Bank to absorb the loss.³⁹

The Jenkins Group's involvement in production became more consistent in the Alemán era, as film finance evolved. As World War II ended, and with it the competitively favorable climate that had let the Golden Age blossom, Mexico's private banks curtailed their lending. They were alarmed by poor returns and the tardiness of producers in repaying credit; a tendency among them to inflate their budgets and pocket the difference surely sowed further distrust.⁴⁰ In 1947, Alemán nationalized the Film Bank—rendering it the Banco *Nacional* Cinematográfico—and boosted its budget. However, producers were still expected to find much of their coin elsewhere.⁴¹ They therefore approached exhibitors, securing advances on box-office returns in exchange for exclusive screen rights. Exhibitors had reason to secure product in advance: by 1948, a decade-long

construction boom brought about a surplus of theaters.⁴² Even after public demand caught up with supply, the rivalry that Jenkins had cultivated between his two partners remained. Although Espinosa and Alarcón had the same backer, neither would have wished to let the other scoop the next Dolores del Río drama or Pedro Infante musical.

In some cases, the Jenkins Group buoyed established producers. They took a majority stake in Sam Wishñack's Filmex, which between 1944 and 1960 turned out 120 features, and they reunited with Grovas. Alarcón took the more personal interest in production, co-founding two companies, Intercontinental and Reforma Films, which together produced 35 movies from 1950 to 1962. Alarcón frequently worked with Raúl de Anda, who parlayed his early screen-idol status into a career as a writer and producer that spanned 130 pictures. He also employed Salvador Elizondo, former manager and co-owner of CLASA. Espinosa kept a lower profile but worked with another prolific producer, Gregorio Walerstein, who managed Wishñack's Filmex for a decade before setting out on his own. Espinosa later recalled that he and Jenkins financed about 400 films.⁴³ A 1953 exposé claimed that Jenkins (or his Group) supplied 80 percent of film finance.⁴⁴ The figure is fanciful, for it minimizes the role of the Film Bank, but it gives a sense of the American's dominance in the imagination of industry personnel.

Evidence of Jenkins's personal involvement is anecdotal. The old man—he was 60 when he first invested in theaters, around 70 when he gained prominence in film finance—was an avid moviegoer, with a preference for comedy, and a friend claimed that after seeing films in which he had a stake he would phone either Espinosa or Alarcón from the box office to give his opinion.⁴⁵ In the early 1950s, he recruited Salvador Elizondo to partner in a production company with a simple question: “Why don't you make some films for me?” Later he had his chauffeur deliver Elizondo a check for 4 million pesos (around \$450,000). He had attached a handwritten note: “Salvador, I'm sending you the check for four million. I put it in your name because I don't know what your company is called.”⁴⁶ Jenkins's language on both occasions is telling: what mattered most was that producers deliver a regular stream of content to his theaters (the down-market ones). If the pictures he financed fared poorly, his producers likely ensured that the Film Bank took most of the hit.⁴⁷

Moreover, the implicit emphasis on quantity rather than quality matches industry allegations that Jenkins deliberately kept production budgets small.⁴⁸ It is reasonable to infer that Jenkins recognized the difficulty facing Mexican cinema in keeping up with US standards of production, with its post-war move into color production, widescreen formats, escalating budgets, and so forth. The surest route to continued profits at his theaters would be to let Hollywood cater to Mexico's more upscale audiences, while Mexican producers dashed off

low-budget genre pictures for the masses, featuring “fallen” cabaret girls and urban gangsters.

Creative Stagnation and the Role of Unions

To take Contreras Torres’s line and blame the death of the *Cine de Oro* squarely upon the Jenkins Group is simplistic. For one thing, to gain his degree of industry dominance, Jenkins needed willing accomplices beyond the exhibition sector, including a complicit government. For another, the history of world film is replete with examples of sustained creative achievement forged with scant resources; the cinemas of Denmark and Iran in recent decades, for instance.

Another major problem with Golden Age cinema, which originated during its creative zenith, was the near-complete closing of the directors’ union to new entrants. Whereas the union welcomed fourteen members in 1944, it admitted only one a year later. This closed-door policy persisted until the early 1960s, so the accusations of Contreras Torres and other directors about Jenkins’s monopolistic practices were hypocritical. In contrast to Hollywood, the Mexican industry deprived itself of younger talents who could have kept filmmaking fresh, taking genre pictures in new and exciting directions. Instead, matters worsened: during 1956-60, two-thirds of Mexico’s 570 productions were shot by 20 directors. The well-connected cineaste churned out three or four films each year, spending a mere three weeks on the average shoot.⁴⁹

That directors were not merely subject to the strictures of the Jenkins Group is evidenced by the continued ability of certain directors to make great films. Luis Buñuel and Roberto Gavaldón, two of the rare directors who began making movies after their union shut its doors, achieved some of their greatest artistic successes in the 1950s. Their films excelled commercially, as well. Gavaldón’s noirish folktale *Macario* (1959) ran in Mexico City for sixteen weeks.⁵⁰

In 1960, García Riera summarized the general problem: “at the moment we find ourselves with thirty old directors conveniently installed, with no artistic sense or ambition whatsoever, protected by union rights and happily supported by their producers, in this way shutting the doors to an eager and newer generation.” Former Film Bank chief Federico Heuer opined similarly in 1964: “for 20 years now, [producers] have been hiring the same directors and the same screenwriters . . . , with the same artists who generally sing the same compositions and perform the same roles as leading men and starlets that they did 20 years ago.”⁵¹

Producers were indeed at fault. In 1946, as the wartime economic boom ended (more on which below), they scaled back their budgets. At first glance, it may appear that they also made fewer pictures, the total falling from 82 in 1945 to

57 in 1947. But those years were outliers. In fact, the recession-era (1946-48) average of 69 productions was higher than the wartime (1941-45) average of 62.⁵² In other words, rather than reducing output to a level conducive to quality amid straitened circumstances, Mexico's producers opted to keep output relatively high. They managed to do so by readily embracing low-budget formula pictures in urban settings (frequently cabarets and brothels), which would become the most voluminous genre of Mexican cinema for many years to come, even after the economy recovered. As astute a voice as Emilio Azcárraga, Mexico's pre-eminent entertainment mogul, declared in 1947 that the producers' policy of keeping budgets under \$100,000 was a mistake; quality pictures required an investment of \$200,000, while the current policy had contributed to a diminution of screen time for Mexican films, both at home and in South America.⁵³ Producers also declined to reinvest much of their profits, either in technological upgrades (in the case of those that owned studios) or in improved budgets for subsequent productions.⁵⁴

By 1950, Contreras Torres, Revueltas, and others were blaming the Jenkins Group for keeping budgets too thin to allow for quality, but they also complained that the Film Bank favored Jenkins's affiliated producers. So, were the likes of Walerstein, Elizondo, Grovas, and De Anda cash-poor or cash-rich? Their prolific filmographies suggest the latter, but one finds within them so few films of merit, one may surmise that these men shared responsibility for the general decline. Easy access to finance, with little pressure to repay state lenders, may well have eroded their zeal for quality (a problem that would arguably plague Mexican cinema until around 1990). Further, critics ignored how Espinosa and Alarcón, while both partnered with Jenkins, competed as bitter rivals.⁵⁵ Although they divided much of the republic between them, with Alarcón dominant in the north and Espinosa in the west, they faced off in Mexico City—where the average film took half of its box-office revenue—, as did they in Puebla and other central cities. Savvy producers with promising projects might encourage them to bid against each other, thereby improving their budgets. But their tendency to ally themselves with one or the other suggests a preference for cozy exchanges of favor over adventurous filmmaking.

Majority financing from the Film Bank, to quote film historian Gustavo García, "encouraged mediocrity."⁵⁶ This in turn raises the issue of government responsibility for the Golden Age's demise—that is, whether the state too was more interested in quantity rather than quality. Another indication that this was the case is that it tolerated the closed-door policy of the directors' union, which was part of the *Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica* (STPC). Led by actors and directors, and under the protection of President Manuel Ávila Camacho, the STPC broke away in 1945 from the *Sindicato de*

Trabajadores de la Industria Cinematográfica (STIC), a large union dominated by movie theater employees. However, the STIC raised such a stink at being shut out of the production side of the industry that the President forged a compromise, allowing its workers to make movies of their own as long as they were not full-length features.⁵⁷ The ungainly offspring of this accord—which typified the corporatist accommodations with labor made by Mexico’s single-party state—was the episodic or serial film: a feature-length movie comprised of four or five 20-minute segments. Shot on a shoe-string and largely devoid of artistic merit, such episodics constituted 20 percent of all production by 1959.⁵⁸

State Policy: Laissez-Faire Economics and Symbolic Politics

Complaints about the Jenkins Group’s adverse impact upon the film industry reached a critical mass in 1949, as illustrated above. Revueltas capped his protest in *Hoy* by calling for a united front and for state assistance against “American capital.”⁵⁹ By this time Jenkins, Espinosa, and Alarcón together controlled around 300 of Mexico’s 1,200 theaters; this was not a monopoly (nor a monopsony) *per se*, but it allowed the Jenkins Group to dominate exhibition in Mexico City, Monterrey, and Puebla, and by extension to press distributors into granting favorable terms nationwide and to press smaller exhibitors into selling out.⁶⁰

President Alemán had little choice but to act. There was the evidence itself—Revueltas’s critique, like the complaints from northern Mexico, contained specific examples of theaters facing ruin—and there was the President’s own image to protect. Since his inauguration, Alemán had projected himself as a patron of the nation’s arts. He liked to be seen with movie stars, and to trot them out for PR purposes.⁶¹ That autumn, congress wrote Mexico’s first cinema legislation, which promised the film community a variety of boosts and protections, including long-sought “screen quotas” that would guarantee Mexican films a minimum annual number of dates at all theaters.⁶² But the Film Industry Law of December 1949 was less than half the battle. As was customary in the issuance of Mexican policy, it needed to be complemented by regulating legislation and departmental edicts, and then by enforcement. A lack of political will was evident at once: the Interior Ministry’s Film Directorate declared that all one-theater towns be subject to a 50-percent screen quota. Since Mexican pictures already outdrew foreign fare in small towns, the rule was mere tokenism.⁶³

In August 1951, the state finally issued its regulating legislation. It looked promising: the 50-percent screen quota would apply nationwide. There was even a clause threatening non-compliant distributors and exhibitors with nationalization.⁶⁴ Hollywood was prepared for such a battle. The majors had experience

resisting quotas elsewhere, in nations such as France and Britain. Allied with the Jenkins Group, they adopted a twin-pronged strategy. Having consulted with the State Department, the Hollywood studios let it be known that protectionist limits would be met with restrictions on Mexican films in the United States; this was a tough counterpunch, for Mexico's producers reaped a far higher fraction of their revenues north of the Rio Grande than did Hollywood south of it.⁶⁵ At the same time, 50 Mexican theater owners obtained an injunction against the screen quota, on grounds that it was unconstitutional. Alemán surely knew Hollywood well enough to have predicted this outcome. He had made his symbolic, nationalistic stand. Now, for appearance's sake, he let the quota remain on the books without attempting to enforce it. In late 1952, in the final months of his tenure, congress approved a revised version of the 1949 Law, which retained the quota; after all, the Supreme Court had yet to rule on the matter. Alemán's successor, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, could decide if he wished to enforce it.⁶⁶

But Ruiz Cortines would not do so, despite ample pretext. In February 1953, the third month of the President's term, Jenkins suffered a daily barrage of industry criticism in the Mexico City press after he had responded to a 25-percent rise in advertising rates with a boycott, withdrawing all of his theaters' display ads.⁶⁷ Ruiz Cortines himself fed the fire when he told a delegation of producers that he would destroy Jenkins's monopoly. Or at least, that is what they claimed he had said; were his statement unequivocal, surely the news would have merited a front-page headline.⁶⁸ The next day Jenkins was assailed by name at the annual convention of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), in a vehement and controversial speech by Senator Jacinto B. Treviño, who claimed the Revolution had lost its way.⁶⁹ A few days later, Eduardo Garduño, Ruiz Cortines's appointee as head of the National Film Bank, announced: "the existence of monopolies is disastrous for the development of the industry ... they convert producers into mere appendages of their organizations."⁷⁰

Together, the declarations seemed to signal governmental resolve to rein Jenkins in. But soon it was clear that the whole assault had been an exercise in escape-valve populism. The newspapers (presumably failing to garner state support) backed down over the advertising dispute, and in April the Supreme Court ruled against the legality of the screen quota.⁷¹

Ruiz Cortines had other opportunities to constrain the Jenkins Group to the benefit of Mexico's filmmakers. In August 1954, Jenkins's partner Alarcón was fingered as the mastermind behind the assassination of an activist member of the STIC, Alfonso Mascarúa. Ruiz Cortines's office received hundreds of complaints from union locals.⁷² Alarcón, who managed to elude an arrest warrant, was found guilty and handed a 20-year sentence in September 1955, but three months later a higher court overturned the conviction.⁷³ Finally, in 1957, Jenkins's sole

remaining rival in the exhibition sector, former president Abelardo Rodríguez, sold his theater circuits to the Jenkins Group. There were no longer grounds for pretense that the Group was anything other than a monopolistic giant, yet Ruiz Cortines still did nothing. After Rodríguez surrendered, other independent exhibitors were evidently inspired to give up too, because a *Variety* profile of the Jenkins Group in December 1958 elucidated just how large their empire had grown. Espinosa's COTSA and affiliated companies owned or leased 900 theaters and grossed an annual \$16 million; Alarcón's Cadena de Oro and its affiliates owned or leased around 700. That left 400 to 500 independent theaters, a mere fifth of the national total.⁷⁴

On any of the three occasions dating back to 1953, Ruiz Cortines could have enforced the screen quota or even nationalized Jenkins's business and enjoyed vocal support from press and public. The President's reluctance to move against the film monopoly, and his willingness to tolerate the qualitative—not quantitative—demise of the industry, had much in common with the laissez-faire reasoning of his predecessors. First, the Jenkins Group was providing a public service and doing so efficiently. Overall, they had contributed to a huge boom in moviegoing: in Mexico City, theaters doubled from 67 in 1938 to 133 in 1958; nationwide, those years saw the total grow from 863—, with less than half in regular operation—, to some 2,100.⁷⁵ Of those, the Jenkins Group is believed to have built 200 to 300 (mostly upscale) theaters; it probably refurbished several hundred others upon acquiring them.⁷⁶

The Jenkins Group's hundreds of theaters entertained the burgeoning, restless urban millions. And in the view of the state, at least, it *contained* them. An early example of governmental belief in the socially beneficial effects of cinema emerged in 1943; when honoring Hollywood studio heads Walt Disney and Louis B. Mayer for their contributions to bilateral relations, Foreign Minister Ezequiel Padilla declared that film was able to penetrate “directly into the heart of the masses.” Three years later, President Ávila Camacho submitted a bill to congress proposing a commission to promote the film industry, and his preamble noted the ability of Mexico's cinema to promote “feelings of unity and cohesion.”⁷⁷ What audiences saw once they had paid their few pesos (or as little as 25 centavos for a provincial balcony seat)—that is, whether the features were Mexican, US, or European—mattered much less to the state than the fact that they were regularly attending and that they were being kept informed of government accomplishments by the state-subsidized newsreels included in each program.⁷⁸

Second, a major move against such a high-profile US businessman would have sent the wrong message at a time when the state, under the program of Import Substitution Industrialization, was encouraging foreign companies to set up manufacturing plants. Third, whatever Ruiz Cortines might say, he was no

opponent of monopoly. In 1955 he allowed a merger between the three infant TV networks, thus godfathering Telesistema Mexicano (TSM), predecessor of today's media giant Televisa.⁷⁹ Fourth, the American's controversial profile made for a useful lightning rod for leftist and nationalist discontent; witness Senator Treviño's speech at the PRI's 1953 convention. Finally, while hard evidence is lacking, it is likely that senior politicians and even the President himself held covert stakes in Jenkins's holdings.⁸⁰

This is not to say that the Ruiz Cortines administration abandoned the film industry to the fate of market forces. Like his two predecessors, he channeled to Mexico's producers a significant quantity of loans (often subsidies, since much of the credit was never repaid). But his boldest move in support of the industry proved largely symbolic. The 1953 Plan Garduño, named for the National Film Bank chief, pumped yet more subsidies into filmmaking and loosened the rules on what a movie could depict. Hitherto the Film Bank had contributed 50 or 60 percent of an approved budget; that amount could now reach 85 percent. In some respects, Mexico began to close the "gloss gap" with Hollywood, filming in color and even wide-screen formats.

But the Plan Garduño failed on two key fronts. Most producers opted to carry on making the cheap fare that appealed to lower-income audiences; they continued to receive state support and also to pad their budgets. The favored genres expanded to include horror, Westerns, and melodramas starring masked wrestlers, but most such films were just as shoddily produced as the genre pictures of before. Second, to fund his expanded activities, Garduño issued new shares in the state-backed distributor Películas Nacionales, only to find that Jenkins's representatives had purchased many of them. By late 1953, Jenkins's producers were again enjoying Film Bank credit and it was clear that Garduño's plan to bolster independent production had been compromised. A cartoon in *El Universal* captured the paradox: identifying Jenkins as the "Film Monopoly," it showed him receiving both a stern rebuke and a bagful of cash from Garduño.⁸¹

Another policy introduced under Ruiz Cortines that had an adverse effect on quality was the introduction of price caps on tickets, which were set at 4 pesos for upscale venues. The cap was a populist regulation first instituted in December 1952 by Mexico City mayor Ernesto P. Uruchurtu, who rigidly enforced it. As such, it sustained a high frequency of moviegoing for two decades. But, as production costs continued to rise (especially with the peso devaluation of 1954), it also gave producers a further disincentive to make quality features. Owing to these controls and continued urbanization, by the mid-1960s Mexico had the world's joint-highest attendance rate (along with Israel), according to *Variety*; its correspondent added: "cheap film entertainment for the masses is deemed a

must to offset inequities of income. ... The analogy to 'bread and circuses' has often been made."⁸²

Only in November 1960 did the state take decisive action, when the regime of Adolfo López Mateos decreed the nationalization of the Jenkins Group's core movie theaters. It is hard to say how much the President's action was motivated by another wave of public criticism of the American; as well as the publication of Contreras Torres's vitriolic *El libro negro del cine mexicano*, the year saw a series of attacks upon Jenkins in the confrontational magazine *Política* and a well-publicized speech against him by former president Lázaro Cárdenas.⁸³ Certainly, this kind of outrage suggested how popular the expropriation would be, which in turn raises the possibility that López Mateos had encouraged the flak, first to build public expectation and then to reap greater political capital. In all, 365 theaters were taken, at a taxpayer's cost of \$26 million. These were fewer than a quarter of what the Jenkins Group controlled, but they were the cream of the crop, the big-city COTSA and Cadena de Oro venues. The newspapers were delighted.⁸⁴

But the expropriation was an anticlimax. The state's control of the best theaters—in addition to the Churubusco Studios, the largest sound-stage complex, which it had bought two years before—did little to alter the trajectory of Mexican cinema or Hollywood's dominance. Talk of an industry in crisis continued. During the 1960s, the same creatively atrophied corps of producers, directors, and writers dominated the nation's output, and the contrast between Mexican and US fare was never so great. Although a new generation of directors started to earn critical praise and win back middle-class audiences at the end of the decade, the standard fare of cheap bedroom farces, derivative Westerns, and masked-wrestler adventures was overshadowed by literate epics, the American New Wave, and a newly vigorous cinema from Europe.⁸⁵ The nationalization of the film industry was ultimately a symbolic act.

Global Pressures and Television

For all the shortcomings of state film policy, the Golden Age fade-out—like its 1941-45 ascent, in fact—owed something to global trends. It was the cutback in Hollywood output and the near-disappearance of European competition that gave Mexican cinema space in which to flourish in the first place. US wartime policies, including technical support for Mexico's film industry and a prohibition on the export of film stock to Nazi-tolerant Argentina, further boosted the quality and exportability of the *Cine de Oro*.⁸⁶

Similarly, it was no coincidence that Golden Age cinema encountered its first economic crisis in 1946. Hollywood was ramping up after its wartime scaledown, and so was regional rival Argentina. That the crisis persisted for another two years owed to another extraneous factor: the three-year post-war recession. The rebirth of Europe also played a (sometimes unappreciated) role. As of 1946, the British, French, and Italians started to revive their war-damaged industries, heightening the competition for theaters, and all the more so during their creative boom of the mid-1950s though late 1960s. Indeed, recent research on exhibition in Monterrey has shown that while European features accounted for 5.5 percent of films exhibited in 1952, their portion increased to 21.5 percent in 1962, while Mexican fare shrank from 38.7 percent to 29.8 percent and Hollywood, too, lost ground.⁸⁷

Mexican cinema also had to contend with the global rise of television, albeit with a delayed impact relative to trends in the United States and Europe. While Mexico was the first Latin American nation to establish a TV industry—which began regular broadcasts in August 1950—the growth of TV sets per household proceeded very slowly during the early years. By 1960, there were still fewer than a million sets in the country, meaning that only 10 percent of homes had them. (Film industry complaints about the adverse effects of television, which began to be voiced in the early 1950s, should not necessarily be taken at face value.)⁸⁸

However, under López Mateos, while the film subsidy mechanism of the National Film Bank persisted, the state moved more concertedly to support television, presumably identifying it as an industry more capable of sustaining itself in the long run than cinema and more efficient and malleable as a propaganda arm of the PRI.⁸⁹ In 1959, the state began the construction of a Nationwide Microwave Network, for the relay of telephone and then TV signals. This network placed transmitters across the vast tracts of territory where the stations of Emilio Azcárraga's TSM could not reach and where smaller cities could not support viable stations of their own. The network constituted a huge subsidy to Azcárraga, who was spending large amounts of capital on expansion. In 1961 he sold most of his shares in his market-leading radio business, so as to further invest in TSM, which was a visionary move because radio still ruled the airwaves, scooping 36 percent of ad spend against 6 percent for TV. Owing to Azcárraga's capital realignment and state's regional transmitters, by 1968, when the microwave network was finished and Mexico hosted the Olympics, television overtook radio as the most popular and lucrative medium in the country.⁹⁰ With close to half of Mexican households now owning a TV set, moviegoing indeed felt an impact, but by then the Golden Age was long over.

Conclusion

So who killed the Golden Age? Was the perpetrator indeed William Jenkins, as Contreras Torres, Revueltas, and others once alleged, a claim often accepted to some extent since?

In the arena of film production, the fundamental problem was commonly held to be inadequate finance. The Jenkins Group preferred lean budgets and was more interested in quantities of Mexican pictures than the quality of each, and in these respects it definitely contributed to a downmarket shift in Mexican cinema, an orientation towards predictable genre fare that appeared to satisfy the urban masses, along with their migrant cousins in Texas and California, but held little appeal for middle- and upper-income Mexicans and none in South America or Europe.⁹¹ But the low-budget trend began in 1946, before Jenkins gained monopoly power and became a dominant source of funding; he exacerbated the problem, rather than caused it. Between the late 1940s and 1960, the Jenkins Group indeed profited, and the film industry indeed declined, but there were additional guilty parties.

Equally to blame was the state, and not only for its complicity in the growth of the Jenkins monopoly. From as early as 1947, when Alemán nationalized the Film Bank and increased its budget without insisting on sufficient quality controls, cultural policy privileged the imperative of containing the masses over support for native artistry. This approach was seen explicitly in the 1952 introduction of the price cap, which would stay in place until the early 1970s, and implicitly in the subsidizing of episodic B-movies made by the STIC union; the nationalizing of the Film Bank, whose increasingly generous credits could be treated as handouts rather than debts; and the gradual climbdown over screen quotas.

Also at fault was the industry itself, notably Mexico's producers, most of whom happily did the same thing year after year, while enriching themselves with generous shavings of subsidy silver. (One industry insider has claimed that budget inflation as a means to pocket-lining remains evident among contemporary Mexican producers.)⁹² The short-sighted directors' union, privileging job security and comradeship over artistry and innovation, was culpable too.

Finally, there is the obvious villain of Hollywood, though here its role may have been less noxious than in other countries. As was their global custom, the major studios flexed their muscle via diplomatic lobbying, as seen in their response to Alemán's film law, and via their habit of "block booking": forcing theaters to take several B-pictures for every blockbuster, thereby reducing screen time for Mexican fare. However, the Jenkins Group's near-monolithic stature as exhibitors surely acted as a brake on block-booking (hence the marginalizing of local films was more a policy of its own). Further, the post-war squeeze on

screen time owed increasingly to cutting-edge competition from Europe, whose distribution mechanisms were more fragmented than Hollywood's; this trend again suggests the importance to middle- and upper-income Mexican audiences of cinematic originality.

There are questions remaining to be answered that would bring the matter of cause more sharply into focus, which is a worthwhile matter, not least for its implications for Mexican cultural policy in years to come. Four lines of questioning come to mind, and there may be others. First, to what extent were producers' hands really tied by the Jenkins Group, including with respect to greenlighting of individual pictures and limits on budgets? Only examination of the archives of several production companies would satisfactorily answer that question.⁹³ Second, how much did diminishing creativity have to do with screenwriters, whether the retreat of talented wordsmiths from the industry, the complacency of those who stayed, the hiring of cheaper hacks, or other related factors. Along with producers and directors, screenwriters are the most important contributors to a film's artistic merit (and often to its commercial success), yet we know very little about the scribes of the Golden Age.⁹⁴

Third, how much evidence is there that the Jenkins Group indeed favored Hollywood fare and engaged in the "burning" of Mexican films, allowing them only very brief premieres and then consigning them to inferior theaters. A key tool to help answer this question is in place, thanks to the series of compendia *Cartelera cinematográfica*, but a quantitative analysis is wanting.⁹⁵ Finally, what did Italy, France, or India do right that Mexico did wrong? Each of the former had flourishing film industries by the 1960s, but a comparative analysis has yet to be attempted.⁹⁶

Notes

- 1 Such comparisons are legion but typified by "Mexico's cinema industry hopes for a new golden age", BBC.com, 22 Feb. 2012, www.bbc.com/news/world-radio-and-tv-17112066.
- 2 "Mexican Film Institute Imcine Reports Record 2015 Film Output", *Variety*, 7 Mar. 2016. In 2016, the record fell again, with 162 productions; "Statistical Yearbook of Mexican Cinema 2016", Festival Internacional del Cine de Morelia, 13 Mar. 2017, <https://moreliafilmfest.com/en/anuario-estadistico-de-cine-mexicano-2016/>.
- 3 Since 1988, directors who have scored hits in Mexico and promptly tried their hand in Los Angeles include Luis Mandoki, Alfonso Arau, Roberto Sneider, Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, and Alejandro G. Iñárritu.
- 4 The ProQuest database of North American and European doctoral dissertations includes some 200 works on Mexican film but only a handful that concentrate on cinema as an economic enterprise, none of which focuses on the Golden Age.
- 5 Ana M. López, "The State of Things: New Directions in Latin American Film History", *The Americas*, 63:2 (Oct. 2006), pp. 197-203. A recent exception to the lack of business-

- minded history is Laura Isabel Serna, *Making Cinelandia: American Films and Mexican Film Culture Before the Golden Age* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2014).
- 6 Emilio García Riera, "Medio Siglo de Cine Mexicano", *Artes de México* 31, 1960. Over the next three decades, García Riera would be Mexico's most influential film critic.
 - 7 Gustavo García and Rafael Aviña, *Época de oro del cine mexicano* (Mexico City: Clío, 1997).
 - 8 See, e.g., Charles Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967-1983* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1992), pp. 12-15; "The Golden Age", in J. Hershfield and D. Maciel (eds.), *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1999), pp. 33-36.
 - 9 See, e.g., Paulo Antonio Paranaguá (ed.), *Mexican Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), p. 1; Seth Fein, "Hollywood and United States-Mexican Relations in the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema", Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Texas at Austin, 1996, p. 298; Andrea Noble, *Mexican National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 2.
 - 10 Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1980* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), p. 75; interview with Salvador Elizondo, June 18, 1975, Instituto Mora, Mexico City, Archivo de la Palabra (hereafter, Mora-Palabra), PHO2/27, p. 16; García Riera, *Breve historia del cine mexicano* (Zapopan, Jalisco: Mapa, 1998), p. 120. Those agreeing with García Riera include: Eduardo de la Vega, "Origins, Development and Crisis of the Sound Cinema", in Paranaguá (ed.), *Mexican Cinema*, p. 89; John King, *Magical Reels* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 47.
 - 11 Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*, p. 5; the "third-largest" claim is unsourced, as is Aurelio de los Reyes's even more dubious assertion that by 1938 the industry was the country's second largest, after oil, in *Un medio siglo de cine mexicano (1896-1947)* (Mexico City: Trillas, 1987), p. 153. Neither claim specifies its basis for measurement (revenue, workforce, exports, or other). A 1947 Mexican government report ranked the film industry third "in economic importance"; again, it failed to specify the basis, but it mentioned a total workforce of 32,000 and export earnings of 14 million pesos (\$3 million); Merwin Bohan to State Dept., Mexico City, November 6, 1947, Records of the U.S. Department of State (hereafter, RDS), 812.4061-MP/11-647, pp. 3-5.
 - 12 In the 1940s, Mexican box office revenue (b.o.) appeared in print only erratically. Fragmentary evidence suggests that local films gained parity with imports by 1943-45 and lost ground thereafter. For example, in 1941, local producers captured a 30% national b.o. share (*Variety*, June 2, 1943, p. 12); for January-May 1943, Mexican films gained a 40% b.o. share in Mexico City (*Variety*, July 7, 1943, p. 19); by 1944, domestic films accounted for over 50% of Mexico City screen time (Fein, "Hollywood", p. 337); between 1946 and 1948, that share held at 41-42%, and for first half of 1949, Mexican films took 37.5% of the Mexico City b.o. (*ibid.*, p. 563). Given that Mexican films enjoyed more screen time in the provinces than the capital (*ibid.*, pp. 338-42), one must assume a somewhat higher portion of the b.o. for Mexican films on a nationwide basis.
 - 13 García Riera, *Breve historia*, pp. 102, 150f; *Variety*, June 19, 1940, p. 12; July 10, 1946, p. 17. In 1950, *Variety* reported that of the 885 films produced between 1932 and 1949, 10 percent (85 films) had never been exhibited; June 7, 1950, p. 15. Cf. Alexandra Pineda and Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, "Mexico and its Cinema", in Paranaguá (ed.), *Mexican Cinema*, pp. 29-38; Eduardo de la Vega, "The Decline of the Golden Age and the Making of the Crisis", in J. Hershfield and D. Maciel (eds.), *Mexico's Cinema*, pp. 165-91.
 - 14 See Claudia Fernández and Andrew Paxman, *El Tigre: Emilio Azcárraga y su imperio Televisa* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2013), chap. 5.

- 15 For Mexico City (population 1.75 million), b.o. for films in 1939 and 1940 totaled \$3.6 million per annum, 72% of a total ticketed entertainment expenditure of \$5 million; *Variety*, January 8, 1941, p. 74. Nationwide, by 1946 expenditure stood at \$20 million, 80% of that at movie theaters; Herbert Cerwin, *These are the Mexicans* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947), p. 274.
- 16 *Variety*, August 28, 1946, p. 23; January 29, 1947, p. 17.
- 17 The pages of *Variety* offer ample evidence of poor b.o. In the first half of 1946, 38 local releases yielded just three hits; July 10, 1946, p. 16. In 1948, Mexican producers took a net loss of \$1 million on 82 films; March 9, 1949, p. 62. Despite renewed industry calls for quality over quantity, 1949 proved no better: "Of the 110 issued last year, only a few drew good returns"; June 7, 1950, p. 15.
- 18 María Luisa Amador and Jorge Ayala Blanco, *Cartelera cinematográfica, 1940-1949* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1982), p. 377.
- 19 Andrew Paxman, *Jenkins of Mexico: How a Southern Farm Boy Became a Mexican Magnate Mexico* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), pp. 233-240.
- 20 Manuel Espinosa Yglesias, "Preface" to *Mary Street Jenkins Foundation*, ed. B. Trueblood (Puebla: MSJF, 1988), p. 18; "Jenkins, El Emperador," *Siempre!*, August 8, 1953, pp. 14, 74; interview with William A. Jenkins (Jenkins's grandson), Mexico City, July 15, 2003.
- 21 For a list of festival awards reaped by Mexican films during the Golden Age (a list padded with minor prizes for 1959-63), see Federico Heuer, *La industria cinematográfica mexicana* (Mexico City: n.p., 1964), pp. 419-21.
- 22 García Riera, *Historia documental del cine mexicano* (Guadalajara: Univ. de Guadalajara, 1992); see also De los Reyes, *Un medio siglo de cine mexicano (1896-1947)* (Mexico City: Trillas, 1987), and Ayala Blanco, *La aventura del cine mexicano* (Mexico City: Era, 1968). On Riera and Ayala Blanco and their influence, see J. Hershfield and D. Maciel (eds.), *Mexico's Cinema*, p. xiii.
- 23 Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*; Fein, "Hollywood," chaps. 5 and 7; Francisco Peredo Castro, *Cine y propaganda para Latinoamérica: México y Estados Unidos en la encrucijada de los años cuarenta* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2011).
- 24 Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*, pp. 12-15, 37-41.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 5f; see also pp. 39-41.
- 26 Paranaguá's *Mexican Cinema* contains several useful essays, notably Tomás Pérez Turrent's profile of production houses. De la Vega's "Decline of the Golden Age" (*op. cit.*) focuses on creative exhaustion.
- 27 Most Mexican critics and historians, including García Riera and Ayala Blanco, have followed French *auteur* theory, which privileges the director as a film's true author; cf. Paranaguá, *Mexican Cinema*, p. 43.
- 28 Paxman, *Jenkins of Mexico*, pp. 235f, 238, 289, 344-5.
- 29 Thomas McEnelly to State Dept., Tampico, July 12, 1943, RDS, 812.4061-MP/297; *El Universal*, Sept. 13, 1944, p. 13.
- 30 Mora, *Mexican Cinema*, p. 77; Fein, "Hollywood", p. 352; Registro Público de la Propiedad y del Comercio, Puebla (hereafter cited as RPP-P), Libro 1 de Comercio, T. 17, no. 52, and L. 3, T. 55, no. 57.
- 31 Although it was Espinosa who brought this pressure to bear, Alarcón was indeed its beneficiary. Evidently, Jenkins wanted to foster greater parity between his two lieutenants, given that Espinosa already ran the big COTSA chain.

- 32 Miguel Contreras Torres, *El libro negro del cine mexicano* (Mexico City: n.p., 1960), p. 53; *La Opinión* (Puebla), October 14, 1949, p. 1; *Tiempo*, February 27, 1953, p. 42. Azcárraga quit by degrees, first joining Jenkins and Alarcón in a production company, then combining his operations with Alarcón's, selling a majority stake in 1951, and exiting altogether in 1955, although he retained control of the Teatro Alameda; cf. *Variety*, December 1, 1948, p. 13; RPP-P, Libro 3 de Comercio, Tomo 54, no. 82.
- 33 Founded in 1947 by a consortium of producers and the National Film Bank, Películas Nacionales eased distribution problems by offering bundles of films in negotiations with exhibitors. Still, producers often preferred to secure screen time in one of two ways: those that made pictures with exhibitor financing could rely on direct access to that company's theaters, while a small minority (like Cantinflas' Posa Films) obtained output deals with Hollywood distributors; Mora, *Mexican Cinema*, p. 78; Fein, "Hollywood", p. 580.
- 34 Various correspondence, February 17 to May 21, 1949, Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter, AGN), Presidential files of Miguel Alemán Valdés, Exp. 523.3/54.
- 35 *Variety*, April 11, 1945, p. 16; November 26, 1947, p. 15.
- 36 *Hoy*, October 29, 1949, pp. 12f.
- 37 Indeed, Espinosa later claimed to have chipped in to help finance *Allá en el Rancho Grande*; Marcos T. Águila, Martí Soler and Roberto Suárez, *Trabajo, Fortuna y Poder: Manuel Espinosa Yglesias, un empresario mexicano del siglo XX* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Espinosa Yglesias, 2007), pp. 53f.
- 38 *Anuario Financiero de México, 1942* (Mexico City: Asociación de Banqueros de México, 1943), pp. 381f; Manuel Espinosa Yglesias, *Bancomer: Logro y destrucción de un ideal* (Mexico City: Planeta, 2000), pp. 19-22, 35-7; García Riera, *Historia documental*, Vol. 2, pp. 236-8; *Variety*, January 28, 1942, p. 13.
- 39 *Variety*, December 2, 1942, p. 12; October 11, 1944, p. 13.
- 40 Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*, p. 40; *Variety*, October 23, 1946, p. 18; January 8, 1947, p. 179; June 11, 16; interview with Eugenia Meyer (daughter of producer Gregorio Walerstein), Mexico City, August 8, 2007.
- 41 One estimate, provided within a critique of protectionist practices, claims the BNC funded 70% of films, with an average 60% of their budgets, implying a total outlay of around 42% of film expenditure; *Variety*, October 26, 1949, p. 17.
- 42 *Variety*, June 30, 1948, p. 16; October 26, 1949, p. 17; June 28, 1950, p. 13; December 20, p. 53.
- 43 De la Vega, "Decline of the Golden Age", pp. 175-8; Marcos Águila, et al., *Trabajo, Fortuna y Poder: Manuel Espinosa Yglesias, un empresario mexicano del siglo XX* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Espinosa Yglesias, 2007), p. 127; *Variety*, December 8, 1948, p. 54; Elizondo interview, Mora-Palabra PHO2/27, pp. 10, 48-50; Meyer interview, August 8, 2007.
- 44 *Siempre!*, August 8, 1953, p. 14.
- 45 Interviews with Ana María and Carmen Díaz Rubín de la Hidalga, Mexico City, Aug. 1, 2001; Bertha Cobel, Puebla, March 25, 2006.
- 46 Elizondo interview, Mora-Palabra PHO2/27, pp. 37f, 48f.
- 47 By around 1950, producers generally assumed that Film Bank credit need not be repaid; Gustavo García, *La década perdida. Imagen 24 x 1* (Mexico City: UAM-Azcapotzalco, 1986), p. 18.
- 48 *Hoy*, October 29, 1949, 12f; Gabriel Ramírez, *Miguel Contreras Torres, 1899-1981* (Guadalajara: Univ. de Guadalajara, 1994), pp. 91, 93.

- 49 García Riera, *Historia documental*, Vol. 3, pp. 109f, 220; De la Vega, "Origins, Development", p. 91; Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*, pp. 37, 41. On Hollywood's ability to keep genre pictures innovative: Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System* (New York: Pantheon, 1988). A point in the directors' defense is the incursion of state censors, especially with respect to political themes; cf. García Riera, *Historia documental*, Vol. 5, pp. 15f; David Maciel, "La Sombra del Caudillo: El cine mexicano y el Estado en la década de los sesenta," in C. Carmona Álvarez (ed.), *El Estado y la imagen en movimiento* (Mexico City: IMCINE, 2012), pp. 197-215.
- 50 De la Vega, "Origins, Development", p. 90; Pineda and Paranaguá, "Mexico and its Cinema", p. 42; Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz, *Buñuel and Mexico: The Crisis Of National Cinema* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2003).
- 51 García Riera, "Medio Siglo", p. 22; Heuer, *La industria*, p. 210 (for his complete argument, see pp. 199-213).
- 52 For production figures, see García Riera, *Breve historia*, pp. 121, 150.
- 53 De la Vega, "Decline of the Golden Age", pp. 166-9; *Variety*, July 16, 1947, p. 16.
- 54 Heuer, *La industria*, pp. 176-81; Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*, p. 41.
- 55 Paxman, *Jenkins of Mexico*, pp. 236f, 255f, 295.
- 56 García, *La década perdida*, p. 18.
- 57 Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, pp. 340-2; *Variety*, February 21, 1945, p. 13; March 21, p. 7.
- 58 Pineda and Paranaguá, "Mexico and its Cinema", p. 42; conversations with director Tony Wakefield Murillo, 2013-2015.
- 59 *Hoy*, October 29, 1949, p. 13.
- 60 The 300 figure includes a probable 100 that the Jenkins Group leased from small operators; *Variety*, October 4, 1950, p. 15; cf. *New York Times*, February 8, 1953, p. 76.
- 61 Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, pp. 49f, 160.
- 62 Fein, "Hollywood", pp. 600-604; cf. *Variety*, October 23, 1946, p. 18.
- 63 Fein, "Hollywood", p. 605.
- 64 *Ibid.*, pp. 607f.
- 65 Even in 1944, when the European market was dormant, Hollywood was making only 2% of its revenues in Mexico, while Mexican producers relied on US distribution for 15% to 25% of their budgets, through pre-sale of rights; Guy Ray to State Dept., Mexico City, October 6, 1944, RDS, 812.4061-MP/10-644, pp. 4f.
- 66 Fein, "Hollywood", pp. 608-15. On Hollywood battles with European quotas: Thomas Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America since 1945* (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1969), chap. 2.
- 67 *El Universal*, February 3 to 9, 1953; *Excélsior*, February 4 to 9; *New York Times*, February 8, p. 76.
- 68 *Excélsior*, February 7, 1953, p. 1.
- 69 *Excélsior*, February 8, 1953, pp. 1, 6, 9; Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, p. 237.
- 70 *Tiempo*, February 13, 1953, p. 45.
- 71 Harvie Branscomb to Jenkins, Nashville, May 7, 1953, Branscomb Papers (RG300), Vanderbilt Univ. Box 362, File 1; Fein, "Hollywood", p. 617.
- 72 *La Opinión*, August 12, 1954, p. 1; various documents, May-Aug. 1954, AGN, Presidential files of Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, Exp. 111/2855. The telegrams to Ruiz Cortines, persisting until July 1955, fill most of two boxes.
- 73 *La Opinión*, October 3, 1954, p. 1; December 7, p. 1; December 15, 1955, p. 1; see also, Víctor Velásquez, *El caso Alarcón* (Mexico City: n.p., 1955).

- 74 *Variety*, December 3, 1958, p. 11. COTSA's gross omits concession sales (popcorn, drinks, etc.); estimating those and extrapolating Cadena de Oro revenues, I estimate that the Jenkins Group grossed around \$40 million per year.
- 75 *Variety*, August 17, 1938, p. 25; November 16, 1938, p. 123; December 3, 1958, p. 11.
- 76 Interview with Raúl de Anda, November 27-28, 1975, Mora-Palabra PHO2/48, pp. 29f.
- 77 Michael Nelson Miller, *Red, White, and Green: The Maturing of Mexicanidad, 1940-1946* (El Paso: Texas Western, 1998), p. 97; Ávila Camacho to Congress, "Ley que crea la Comisión para el Fomento de la Cinematografía Nacional", January 17, 1946, AGN, Presidential files of Manuel Ávila Camacho, Exp. 201.1/5.
- 78 On newsreels, see: Ricardo Pérez Montfort, "El discurso moral en los noticieros fílmicos de 1940 a 1960", in Alicia Olivera de Bonfil (ed.), *Los archivos de la memoria* (Mexico City: INAH, 1999).
- 79 Fernández and Paxman, *El Tigre*, pp. 72-82.
- 80 Allegations of such holdings are rife. Ávila Camacho's brother Maximino, Minister of Communications (1941-45), was widely said to be a partner in Jenkins's Puebla theaters; Manuel himself is an obvious suspect, for he reportedly died a very rich man, leaving his widow a billion-peso fortune; Alemán enriched himself notoriously and shared several business interests with Jenkins; Ruiz Cortines was alleged to have protected the Jenkins Group in exchange for an interest in the film business. For more on Maximino, see: Armando Romano Moreno, *Anecdotario estudiantil, Vol. 1* (Puebla: Univ. Autónoma de Puebla, 1985), p. 205; De la Vega, "Origins, Development", p. 91; cf. Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, pp. 283-7. Re. Manuel Ávila Camacho, see: *Opinión Pública*, September 15, 1962, p. 9; cf. Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, pp. 289f. Re. Alemán, see: Paxman, *Jenkins of Mexico*, pp. 273, 298f; cf. Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, pp. 290f. Re. Ruiz Cortines, see: Don Verdades, "Corrido del cine mexicano" (Mexico City: n.p., [1959]), AGN, Presidential files of Adolfo López Mateos, Exp. 136.3/831.
- 81 Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La condición del cine mexicano, 1973-1985* (Mexico City: Posada, 1986), pp. 516f; García Riera, *Historia documental*, Vol. 7, pp. 7-10; Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*, p. 5f; De la Vega, "Decline of the Golden Age", pp. 177-9; *El Universal*, August 29, 1953, p. 1; December 3, p. 4.
- 82 *Excélsior*, December 10, 1952, pp. 17, 20; December 11, pp. 1, 12; *Variety*, June 1, 1966, p. 21; January 5, 1972, p. 70; María Luisa Amador and Jorge Ayala Blanco, *Cartelera cinematográfica, 1950-1959* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1985), pp. 388-99, and *1960-1969* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1986), pp. 476-89; García Riera, *Breve historia*, pp. 255, 279; Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, p. 299; Seth Fein, "From Collaboration to Containment", in Hershfield and Maciel (eds.), *Mexico's Cinema*, p. 155. That the cap was a tactic for the "containment of the masses," rather than (as stated at the time) an anti-inflation initiative, is affirmed by the fact that while inflation indeed remained generally low during the era in which the cap persisted, the real-terms Mexico City minimum wage more than doubled; Kevin Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1995), p. 215. By the late 1960s, Mexico City theaters were charging less than a quarter of the price charged in Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro; Arturo Garmendia, "Del monopolio de la exhibición a la estatización (ineficiente) de la industria," in C. Carmona Álvarez (ed.), *El Estado y la imagen en movimiento*, 153f.
- 83 *Política*, June 1, 1960, pp. 27-9; June 12, p. 9; July 1, p. 9; August 1, pp. 11f; *Excélsior*, June 8, 1960, p. 1; June 9, pp. 1, 6.

- 84 *El Universal*, December 1, 1960, pp. 11, 29, 35; December 3, p. 3; *Time*, December 26, 1960, pp. 25f; interview with Oscar Alarcón (Gabriel's son), Mexico City, August 15, 2007.
- 85 Salvador Elizondo, "El cine mexicano y la crisis", in *Hojas de cine* (Mexico City: SEP, 1988), pp. II:37-46; Mora, *Mexican Cinema*, p. 110; García Riera, *Breve historia*, p. 211. On the post-1967 resurgence, see: Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*.
- 86 Fein, "Hollywood", chap. 5.
- 87 Amador and Ayala Blanco, *Cartelera cinematográfica, 1940-1949*, pp. 375-7, 1950-1959, pp. 355-64, and 1960-1969, pp. 425-38; José Carlos Lozano Rendón, et al., "Exhibición y programación cinematográfica en Monterrey, México de 1922 a 1962", *Global Media Journal México*, 9:18 (otoño 2012), p. 85.
- 88 Fernández and Paxman, *El Tigre*, p. 78; "Mexico", *International TV Almanac* (New York: Quigley, 1961); cf. *El Nacional*, January 14, 1953, p. II-1, in which the STIC claims that television has caused a 30% drop in b.o. admissions.
- 89 Paxman, "Cooling to Cinema and Warming to Television: State Mass Media Policy from 1940 to 1964", in P. Gillingham and B. Smith (eds.), *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938- 1968* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2014).
- 90 Fernández and Paxman, *El Tigre*, pp. 115-8.
- 91 On the collapse of export markets, which chiefly occurred between 1955 and 1970, see Alejandro Flores García, *Cinecompendio 1971-1972* (Mexico City: A Posta, 1972), pp. 38-43; Rogelio Agradán Sánchez, *Mexican Movies in the United States* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), pp. 63-8, 105-7, 131-8, 159f.
- 92 Conversations with Wakefield Murillo, 2013-2015.
- 93 Golden Age companies that are still in business include Alameda Films and Cinematografía Calderón; part of the latter's archive has recently been opened to researchers at the Permanencia Voluntaria Film Archive in Tepoztlán.
- 94 An exception is José Revueltas; see Francisco Peredo and Carlos Narro (eds.), *José Revueltas: Obra cinematográfica (1943-1976)* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2015).
- 95 Amador and Ayala Blanco, *Cartelera cinematográfica, 1940-1949, 1950-1959*, and 1960-1969.
- 96 My thanks to Mauricio Tenorio, Eric Zolov, and the anonymous reviewer for their comments. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Tony Wakefield Murillo (1960-2015).