

http://www.ithaca.edu/fleff10/blogs/open_spaces/

Tags: [cinema studies](#), [film theory](#), [Lauro Zavala](#), [Mexican film](#), [Sepancine](#)

Thursday, November 5, 2009

Mexico, Film Theory, and Dr. Lauro Zavala

Posted by Patricia Zimmermann at 11:33AM | [1 comment](#)



Dr. Lauro Zavala, Universidad Metropolitana, Mexico City, Mexico

Help Reroute the Vectors: Join the Conversation

Whether your first language is Spanish or English, or another language, whether you are film theorist or film student, whether you are a cinephile or cinephobe, join the conversation. It's simple to do commentary on this Open Spaces blog:

- ask a simple question
- ask for explanation of an idea
- provide comments
- agree
- disagree
- amplify
- engage
- share your own experiences and thoughts

Be sure to return to this blog next week for Part II of my interview with Dr. Lauro Zavala.

Until then, I will see you in the blogosphere of Open Space.

Blog Written by [Patricia Zimmermann](#), codirector of [FLEFF](#) and professor, Cinema, Photography and Media Arts, Ithaca College

Rerouting Our Vectors

The Sepancine Film Theory and Analysis Conference at the Morelia International Film Festival in Mexico underscored for me in very bold and startling ways just how euro-centric and global north-located so much of what we consider film theory has become, despite its embrace of interrogations of :

- globalization
- transnational flows
- difference
- diversity
- hybridities
- cosmopolitanisms

While sitting in the Palacio Clavijero lecture hall with the elegant, sweeping, baroque fountain sprouting water outside the door, I heard brilliant analyses about films I didn't know about. I listened to debates that never migrate el norte. I met passionate scholars mining the theoretical complexities of Mexican and Latin American cinemas beyond the confines of national identity formation. It was exhilarating. I loved being thrown into a place where I didn't have any of the usual coordinates.

Larger Conversations beyond El Norte

Sitting there drinking endless *limonadas* (a mix of freshly squeezed lemon, seltzer, salt and some sugar—organic, non-corporate Gatorade!) to fortify myself against the high altitude and dry desert climate, I realized how vitally important it is to reroute our vectors as intellectuals, programmers and cultural activists to enter into larger conversation.

This strategy is especially urgent when we as film theorists and historians are located deep in the intestines of the most powerful transnational film industry the globe has ever seen. It rules the world through the soft occupations of this mega-industry called:

- export where 95% of screens outside the US show Hollywood product
- copyright protection
- marketing campaigns exceeding the cost of production
- fights against import quotas
- offshore production in countries with tax incentives and devalued currencies
- cannibalizing talent from across the globe to import them to Hollywood for artistic revitalization
- (Yes, that's Hollywood in its global hydra-headed mutation).

In the open air café where strolling guitarists played at my table while I furiously typed notes and ideas on my blue Asus netbook, I thought about how urgent it is at the current moment of panic and fear to open our own spaces to debates and ideas beyond our own training and comfort zones.

Meet Dr. Lauro Zavala, Universidad Metropolitana (UAM), Mexico City and Sepancine

And I wondered, who is behind this gathering bringing together film scholars from Mexico with scholars from the United States, Europe, Asia and Africa? Someone had the vision to pull this off.

I searched. The answer: [Lauro Zavala](#).

So I contacted Dr. Zavala in the hopes he would share his ideas about Mexican film theory with a North American audience, so that those vectors could bend, shift, and maybe point in another direction. And open up space for some transnational dialogue between scholars, film programmers, and students.

Lauro Zavala is the intellectual volcanic force behind Sepancine. He's also one of the most prominent figures in Mexican and Latin American film theory.

Dr. Zavala is on the faculty at Universidad Metropolitana (UAM) at Mexico City, where, since 1984, he has worked on intertextual semiotics. He is the author of the only textbook on film analysis in Latin America, *Elementos del discurso cinematográfico*, which won the Textbook Award at UAM, and has been reprinted several times. Of Universidad Metropolitana (UAM) is the second most important university in Mexico, after the National University. He holds a Ph.D. in literary theory from El Colegio de México. He serves as editor of *El Cuento en Red*, a refereed scholarly journal focused on short story theory, created 10 years ago. <http://cuentoenred.xoc.uam.mx>

Incredibly prolific, Dr. Zavala has written a dozen books on narratology in film and literature. He's also written a dozen books on other subjects such as semiotics, scholarly publishing, museum theory. And, he has served as editor of a dozen literary anthologies, published in different universities. These are significant achievements since scholarly publishing in Mexico is extremely difficult.

In 1998, Dr. Zavala initiated the International Conference on Short Short Fiction (Minificción). This compelling conference is held every other year in European and Latin American universities. Minifiction is the most recent genre in literary history, and its extraordinary growth in Latin America (in the writings of Borges, Cortázar, Arreola, etc.) has produced the first literary theory in the Spanish language. As an extension of this theorizing, he is also working on a semiotics of audiovisual minifiction (trailers, spots, credits, videoclips, etc.).

Dr. Zavala's research interests focus on producing models of analysis in narrative theory, aesthetics of film and related fields. Some of his books are devoted to the theory and analysis of irony, metafiction, short fiction, post-modern narrative (from a formalist perspective), and intersemiotic translation. As measure of his influence, he has supervised over 200 dissertations on film and literary analysis.

The Interview, Part I

PRZ: Can you describe and explain Sepancine? Why was it formed? What purpose does it serve in the development of Mexican film theory and? What are its goals?

LZ: Sepancine is the Mexican Society for Film Theory and Analysis. Its name means Seminario Permanente de Análisis Cinematográfico. It was created last year (2008) with the purpose of promoting the construction of a strong humanistic scholarly tradition on film theory and analysis in Mexican universities. Whereas the prevailing approach in cinema studies in Latin America is focused on social sciences, Sepancine holds a humanistic approach, focused on the viewer and his/her aesthetic experience.

The main goal of Sepancine is contributing to the creation of film theory and analysis in the region. This means the creation of graduate programs, scholarly journals, international conferences, collective books, public film archives, digital video discs with simultaneous comments from experts, and other similar projects.

Sepancine holds a permanent seminar for the discussion of film theory, which meets every month since 4 years ago. So far we have produced three journal issues, four collective books, and five scholarly conferences. Also, we have been participating in institutional projects, such as the creation of the National Museum of Film (Museo Nacional de Cine en México, to be opened in 2010), and the creation of a national and international net of research groups, especially with our colleagues in Argentina (ASAECA), Brazil (SOCINE), Spain (AEHC), and France (AFECCA).

During the Morelia conference (held in October 2009), we presented the translation into Spanish of the most recent book by Robert Stam, *The Theory and Practice of Adaptation* (a coedition between Mexico National University and Sepancine). Now we are translating the most recent book by Michel Marie, about cinema studies in France. Last year we had Warren Buckland as our conference keynote speaker, and we produced a subtitled DVD with his lecture and film clips.

PRZ: What has been your role in the organization of Sepancine?

LZ: I am the founder of Sepancine, and have been the president since its creation. Of course, there is also a directive committee, and we have an assembly every year. I usually make the calendar of activities for the following year, and I organize the working sessions at the international conference. At this moment there are over 50 active members of Sepancine, most of them holding a Ph.D., or preparing a dissertation on cinema studies.

In 1996 I organized a national conference on film teaching and research, as a celebration for the first 100 years since film arrived in Mexico. Ten years later I created a national conference on film theory and analysis, which has been held every year since then. Last year (2008) the conference became international. In 2009 we had papers from a dozen countries.

PRZ: What are the major debates in film theory/analysis in Mexico and Latin America? How do these debates and their contexts differ from the debates in film theory/analysis in Europe and the United States?

The main debates in film theory and analysis in Latin America are related to the overall project of having cinema studies acknowledged as a relevant field worth being taught from elementary to grad school. I understand this is not necessarily so in the US or in Europe, or even in some Asian universities. We are involved in what we call an audiovisual alphabetization process, which enables every citizen of a democracy to be able to read critically the products of audiovisual media. And this involves not only the perspective of social sciences, but the semiotic, philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of watching a movie. This is the main debate.

Another important difference with film research in Europe and the US are our working conditions. There is no Mexican university holding a Department of Cinema Studies. There is no Mexican (or Latin American) Institute of Film Analysis, or even a scholarly journal devoted to cinema studies. In contrast with this, every university in Latin America holds a Department of Literature, and there are magnificent centers for literary research. Many of us hold a Ph.D. on Literature (or on any other field), because there are no graduate programs on Cinema Studies in any Latin American university.

Finally, film research is based on film archives. Here we have an important difference too. There is an urgent need to promote the creation of public film archives available in every city in Latin America, and a need to have access to films that are being produced. We do not have access to films produced in the rest of Latin

America at all. Over 90% of all Mexican screens are showing US movies. This was stated by [Sepancine](#) during the recent Iberoamerican Cultural Summit, held in Mexico in October 2008.

Tags: [cinema theory](#), [film theory](#), [Lauro Zavala](#), [Mexican film](#), [Mexico](#), [Morelia International Film Festival](#), [Sepancine](#), [Universidad Metropolitana](#)



Open Spaces

Speculations on Openings, Closings, and Thresholds in International Public Media

Monday, November 9, 2009

Cinema Studies in Mexico, Part II: Interview with Lauro Zavala

Posted by Patricia Zimmermann at 1:05AM | [0 comments](#)



Dr. Lauro Zavala, Universidad Metropolitana, Mexico City and Sepancine

Up Next

Next blog: [Ten Must-See Mexican Films, selected by Lauro Zavala.](#)

Stay tuned--and join the conversation in the commentary section of this blog.

Blog post written by [Patricia Zimmermann](#), codirector of [FLEFF](#) and professor of cinema, photography and media arts at Ithaca College

More on Film Theory in Mexico

As several commentators both on this blog (thanks, Ruby, for reminding us about the importance and urgency of conversations beyond borders)and in private emails have pointed out, the discipline of cinema studies in the US could be enriched and truly internationalized through exchanges and dialogues with scholars in the rest of the world--especially Mexico and Latin America.

To continue the conversation, this blog features Part II of my interview with Dr. Lauro Zavala, where he further explains some of the issues in cinema studies in Mexico.

Meet Dr. Lauro Zavala

Dr. Zavala is on the faculty at Universidad Metropolitana (UAM) at Mexico City, where, since 1984, he has worked on intertextual semiotics. He is the author of the only textbook on film analysis in Latin America, *Elementos del discurso cinematográfico*, which won the Textbook Award at UAM, and has been reprinted several times. Universidad Metropolitana (UAM) is the second most important university in Mexico, after the National University. Incredibly prolific, Dr. Zavala has written a dozen books on narratology in film and literature. He's also written a dozen books on other subjects such as semiotics, scholarly publishing, museum theory. And, he has served as editor of a dozen literary anthologies, published in different universities. These are significant achievements since scholarly publishing in Mexico is extremely difficult. Dr. Zavala's research interests focus on producing models of analysis in narrative theory, aesthetics of film and related fields.

The Interview: Part II

Patricia: What is the role of film theory and analysis in Mexican universities? How is it developing? How is film education in film theory and analysis organized for graduate students and undergraduates in Mexico?

Lauro: In Mexico and the rest of Latin America, cinema studies have been a small field that belongs in communication studies, which in its turn belong in the social sciences. That is why cinema studies have been oriented here only towards the study of film as a cultural industry and as a tool for History, Anthropology or Psychoanalysis. Therefore, there is not a strong tradition in the humanistic approach to cinema studies, that is, in studying film from the perspective of semiotics, aesthetics, or philosophy.

Sepancine is creating the first graduate program in Latin America that will be devoted to film theory and analysis. It will be held at Metropolitan University (UAM), Xochimilco campus, and we hope it will start in a year or two. By the way, it will be the first academic program in Humanities in our campus.

I think what is at stake in cinema studies, both locally in Mexico and globally, is establishing its relevance to humanities, considering the place of audiovisual language in traditional and digital media. In Sepancine we are focused on Formal Analysis (that is, the analysis of film as film, as V. F. Perkins would say), but we are well aware of the relevance of Instrumental Analysis (that is, the use of cinema for pursuing any personal, disciplinary or professional ends). We believe both kinds of analysis should not necessarily be opposed to each other, but they might have a productive dialogue, as it is the case in the historical approach to cinema studies in France and the US.

Also, in Sepancine we are aware that 85% of all humanities freshmen have the intention to study film during their career, but practically none is able to do so, simply because there are not enough researchers in their campus (if any). We hope that in the near future film theory and analysis become as important in the main universities in Latin American cities as they are now in Paris, Madrid, London, San Francisco, or New York. We hope our specialized libraries on cinema become as complete and actualized as those at NYU, Stanford, the BFI, Cinématèque Française, or Filmoteca Española.

Patricia: How is film theory and analysis in Mexico distinct from film theory and analysis as it has developed in Europe and the United States over the last four decades? What are the major theoretical models? What films and topics have emerged as important areas of inquiry? (please specify so our readers can learn more about these ideas and specific works)

Lauro: Film theory and analysis in Mexico is a very young field of study. In the past four decades there has been a prevailing interest in film history. In this period there have been published near 500 books on film, of which only 5 titles are related to film theory and analysis (all of them published in the past 5 years). Therefore, we do not have any pre-established agenda about studying specific theories. We give absolute priority to films themselves, and to our questions towards them.

Also, we are still in awe when we discover this or that theoretical debate, most especially when we are able to study some canonical films that have never been screened and studied here before. Being newcomers is also a guarantee of having a new look at things, and I hope in the long run this becomes also a fresh look at film theory, and the production of new models of film analysis.

Traditionally, the international community has identified film scholarship in Mexico only as the field of film historians, and historians who use films to illustrate Mexican history. Therefore, whenever there is a museum exhibit of pre-Columbian art, foreign institutions invite a Mexican historian to give a series of talks about the presence of Pyramids in Mexican cinema. But Mexican scholarship about film is not reduced to what historians do. As we are entering the international community of scholars, we want to emphasize our interest in fields other than history and social sciences in general. This is why Sepancine is oriented to the humanities.

Another very important difference with European or US film scholars is that all of us (film scholars in Mexico) are not only working on cinema studies. Considering our personal background, and also the institutional absence of Cinema Studies in our universities, all of us are also working on literary theory, philosophical theory, media theory, translation theory, or image theory. Film theory, to us, is a field of synthesis, dialogue, translation and encounter with many other theories.

I think this approach to film theory and analysis (that is, this inter, multi, and transdisciplinary approach) is the main profile of Mexican film scholarship. This is its distinctive voice.

Patricia: What is the relationship of film theory and analysis in Mexico in relationship to what many scholars and programmer's have called "the Mexican new wave" of exciting new cinematic works emerging in documentary and narrative film in Mexico in the last ten years?

Lauro: None. In Mexico, universities and industry have been completely away from each other. Film production and cinema studies are two professional fields that have never had any connection between them. University research on film has always existed with no relation to any institution (or person) in film production or film schools. For example, the members of Sepancine belong in the Departments of Philosophy, Literature or Communication, and basically we relate to our colleagues in these Departments, here and abroad.

Patricia: As a film scholar, can you share with us historical movements or works in Mexican cinema we should know more about to expand our knowledge of Mexican cinema? What new and emerging works in documentary, narrative and experimental film interest you at the moment as works that are provoking new questions in Mexican film theory/analysis?

Lauro: Most observers of contemporary Latin American cinema are aware of a sort of tendency to produce a very modern film language during the past ten years or so. When studying these films (either documentary, narrative or experimental), we find in them a radical distance from what Rudolf Arnheim would call the power of the centre, that is, a transparent, classic, and stable story.

This new cinema belongs in what Paul Julian Smith, in Cambridge, ironically calls Mexican Festival Films. These films are provoking questions about the formal stakes of this kind of postmodern aesthetics, where narration seems to be at once didactic and dissolved (that is, at once direct and disguised). It is an Aesthetics of Paradox, well worth noticing (not only in feature films, but also in short and short short films).

Patricia: Why was Sepancine connected to the Morelia International Film Festival? What were the advantages of connecting the conference to the festival? (this is highly unusual in the world, and for me, quite wonderful and eye opening)

Lauro: The Morelia Film Festival is now one of the most important film festivals in Latin America. We are proud that last year they (the Festival organizers) approached us (Sepancine) to have this collaboration. The obvious advantage of this connection is the amazing national and international resonance that a prestigious festival has, which is something no scholarly conference will ever have, no matter what field it belongs to.

Nevertheless, all the educational and cultural institutions that would otherwise collaborate with us for free, as soon as they learned that we were connected to the Festival, immediately tried to take a financial advantage that we, as a scholarly association, were absolutely unable to satisfy. I think this explains why there is no film festival connected to any film conference in the world. In our case, this experience has been unique in metaphorical and literal terms.

Tags: cinema studies, film theory, Lauro Zavala, Mexican film, Sepancine