

Perception of Hollywood Movies by the Peruvian Journal *Amauta* (1926-1930)

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In September of 1926 *Amauta*, an ideological journal under the direction of one of the most acknowledged Peruvian intellectuals, José Carlos Mariátegui, appeared in Perú. *Amauta* has 32 issues that appeared from September 1926 to September 1930. Mariátegui died in 1930 leaving his work in *Amauta* unfinished. At that time the president of Perú was the dictator Augusto B. Leguía, who governed Perú from 1919 to 1930. This government is considered by historians (Collier & Collier 136) as an oligarchy which made a big effort discrediting left oriented political movements, including working class movements that started growing in Perú as an answer to the development of industrialism and foreign investments in the country. According to Collier & Collier, there is evidence that suggest that British and American investors provided financial aid to support Leguía's presidential campaign. Leguía's government is also recognized as one that brought "modernity" to Perú, promoting external investments. Giancarlo Carbone says that the 1920s was a time of great effervescence in Perú. Leguía's government produced many transformations, among them bringing in North American's investors and granting then U.S. dominion over Peru's productive apparatus (Carbone 87). In this political environment, *Amauta* was opposed to Leguía's government and gave support to the working class movements. It is interesting that this journal did not separate ideological ideals from art expression but it also helped to develop an avant-garde intellectual movement, which included all expressions of art even cinema.

Intellectuals who wrote in *Amauta*, because of their political ideology, considered the journal as part of a more ambitious national project for changing Peruvian society. *Amauta* was a cosmopolitan journal, it was not only a source of expression for Peruvian intellectuals and artists but also for international collaborators and it paid attention to avant-garde movements around the world. It is probably for this reason that the figure of Charlie Chaplin was enthusiastically commented on in this journal and celebrated for going against Hollywood's main stream productions.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the perception of Hollywood cinema by the intellectuals who wrote in *Amauta*. Generally speaking, the intellectuals who participated in *Amauta* were liberals against any kind of "imperialistic" artistic expressions. The Hollywood industry was interpreted by this intellectual circle as "typical American;" it meant, for them, more capitalistic orientation than artistic orientation. Thus, Waldo Frank, an American collaborator, who also published in Spanish, writes "los estudios de Hollywood dedican su precisión y su conciencia a los problemas de la mecánica y el dinero. Son monumentos de vaguedad estética, nulidad intelectual y azar artístico" [the precision and consciousness of Hollywood

studios are dedicated to mechanical and monetary problems. They are aesthetic vague monuments, intellectually nullified and artistically hazardous] (*Amauta* issue 26 p.34)¹

The argument of my paper is that, beyond this judgment about the Hollywood industry which the intellectuals of *Amauta* shared, at the end, the magic of Hollywood was stronger than any ideological preconception. Even though it is true that most of the articles written in *Amauta* are dedicated to Charlie Chaplin, who was an exception to the Hollywood industry tendency and who also had an ideological message in his movies which could easily empathize with the “anti-imperialistic” tendency of *Amauta*; there are also other kinds of movies and Hollywood stars –such as Greta Garbo (*Amauta* issue 24), which are commented on in this journal. For example, in issue 12 of *Amauta*, María Wiese, after warning about the risk for people’s minds being influenced by the Hollywood industry –“inyectándoles el veneno azucarado de la cursilería” [injecting over them the sweet poison of bad taste] –; she is also fascinated by the quality of some movies such as *The Big Parade* or *Two Arabian Nights* which she considers poetic and capable of moving people’s sensitivities (*Amauta* issue 12 p. 24-25).

Before going into a deeper analysis of *Amauta*’s articles, I want to present a panorama of the historical frame in which Hollywood movies were shown in Perú before and during the 1920s. Movies arrived in Perú in 1897 as a continuity of many other discoveries exported from Europe and the United States. After two failed attempts, the Lumiere cinematograph was shown in Lima. Peruvians could see the films about President McKinley filmed in the United States. In 1899, the first frames filmed in Perú were shown (Bedoya 29). In 1908, the first movie theater was inaugurated in Lima, which was a canvas tent with a capacity for 580 people. In 1913 some coffee shops and ice-cream shops offered free movie shows to their clients. When other movie theaters appeared, they competed for attracting clients and promoted their movies by writing the summary of the movie’s plot in flyers and newspapers. This was the start of movie criticism (Núñez Gorriti 25). Bedoya points out that during this time the first companies which had the exclusive rights of foreign film producer companies appeared in Lima. Thus, the Cooperative Film Co. arrived in Lima in 1917 and the Max Glucksmann Co. opened a branch in 1917. This company had the rights for distribution of the Metro Film Company and Universal World. It is considered that the year 1919 constitutes a hinge between the “aristocratic republic” and the “new Leguía’s nation.” Modernization that occurred during the 1920s also allowed the production of habits of liberalization and the creation of a favorable atmosphere for the arrival of cinema, which had social and political effects in Peruvian society. Peruvian people started to be interested in cinema as a new form of entertainment (Carbone 42).

Angela Ramos, a Peruvian writer who worked in theater and journalism during the 1920s’, mentions in her testimony that, at that time, there were in Lima (Perú) different theaters which promoted their movies’ exhibitions for different audiences (Carbone 102). Thus, there were four main theaters; each one had a specific targeted audience. For example, “Teatro Fémina” (Feminine Theater) was targeted for women and “Cine del Pueblo” (Popular Theater) was targeted for people of low social classes as its prices were cheaper than other theaters. However, the movies shown were the same; what was different were the strategies for attracting different audiences. Most of the American movies that arrived during this period were Westerns and serial movies like the ones starring Pearl White (103), who is described by David Robinson as “an athletic and recognizable heroine” (Robinson 149). Ramos points out that in the early 1920’s people in Lima were not interested in going to the movies. People were used to going to the theater to watch a play, opera or zarzuela. For this reason, the work of journalists was to promote the movies. They needed to create an expectation and interest in the audiences to motivate them to go to the movies and to create a new habit of entertainment.

¹ I will write the citations both, in Spanish and English. The citations in Spanish are between quotation marks and the English translations are between brackets.

Before World War I, most of the movies that arrived in Perú were from Europe. Hollywood's movie commercialization changed after 1915. Before the war, South America was not a good market for United States' movies. By 1914, there was only one major exchange of American Films in Lima, Perú, which dealt in a few Tom Mix Westerns (Thomson 42). Tom Mix is described by Koszarski as one who offered "action and excitement spiced with a boyish sense of fun" (Koszarski 290). It was those kind of movie that easily attracted an audience, therefore, they were easy to export. Thomson also points out that the American film industry became interested in South American markets as soon as the war began (54). This happened because South American markets were seriously affected by the suspension of European companies during the war. In *Variety* of January 20th, 1926, an article titled: "25' Film Exports Increased in Millions" shows a change in film business of exportation during the 1920s; Latin America was part of this increasing market for exportations.

During Leguía's government, because of his support of foreign investments, more Hollywood movies arrived in Perú. The 1920s signaled the definitive arrival of American productions. Universal Pictures was the first important American film company that had a branch in Lima in 1922; Fox Film arrived in Perú in 1926 and Paramount Films in 1927 (Bedoya 41). Later on, in Lima, during the 1930s, the offices of Metro and RKO opened for movie distribution (Carbone 148). The twenties were also the beginning of national cinema production. The historian Manuel Burga mentions that during this time there was an increasing interest in producing national heroes in Peruvian cinema (Carbone 44).

The twenties was an age of revolution in communications around the world, especially in America. The United States was considered as a paradigm of technological development and industrialization, including the movie industry (Robinson 15). It was the time of silent movies and, as was mentioned before, the Peruvian market was more open to Hollywood movies. Bedoya points out that the Peruvian president Leguía, after watching *Beau Geste*, gave direct support to Paramount's manager in Perú. Leguía considered American cinematographic companies' investments in Perú as an example of the development of new economic areas in the country (Bedoya 48). Angela Ramos remembers that during Leguía's government, July 4th was celebrated as a national holiday in Perú even though it is an American nationality day. She considers this anecdote as an example of Leguía's servility to the United States (Carbone 114). President Leguía also established cinematographic censorship in 1926; a Peruvian film *Páginas Heroicas* [Heroic Pages], which was about the war between Chile and Perú in 1879, was censored (Bedoya 51).

Later on, with the arrival of sound cinema to Latin America, people became more interested in seeing Hollywood productions. Allen L. Wall writes "Latin American audiences generally favored the new talkies and often greeted them rapturously"(30). However, the same author mentions that this attitude changed after some cautious reflection, and by 1931 the new films gradually came to be seen as "invaders destroying the purity of the Spanish Language"(ibid). According to this opinion, José Gimenez Borja wrote in the Peruvian newspaper *Mercurio Peruano* in 1930: "Con el film sonoro (...) cobra la prédica imperialista una violencia inusitada (...) Desde la frontera Norte de México hasta Cabo de Hornos se multiplica día a día, en millares de salas, un espectáculo anti-nacional, que impregna el espíritu de un continente, imponiéndole el deslumbramiento de la metrópoli extraña y la obligación de aprender su idioma" [With the arrival of sound film (...) the imperialistic discourse acquires an unusual violence (...) From the north frontier of México to Cabo de Hornos, day by day, an anti-national spectacle has multiplied in millions of movie-theaters and has saturated the spirit of a Continent, imposing over it the glare of a foreign metropolis and the obligation of learning its language](317). Opinions like this show us that there was an extended feeling in Latin America in regard to the effects American cinema might have over Latin American culture. However, beyond these warnings given by intellectuals, just as today, people in Latin America consumed a great quantity of American media productions.

After presenting this historical context, let's consider what intellectuals wrote in *Amauta* in regard to Hollywood cinema. Intellectuals who wrote in *Amauta* did not have the intention to promote films as other journalists had when they wrote in magazines or newspapers. On the contrary, they wanted to present a critical view of the films and appreciate them as artistic pieces. I found that in *Amauta* there are basically four intellectuals who write articles related to cinema: José Carlos Mariátegui, Xavier Abril, Waldo Frank and María Wiese. María Wiese is the only one who writes with regularity, and she is in charge of one section in the journal titled "Notas sobre algunos fims" [Notes about some films], in which she expresses her opinion about films shown in Lima at that time. It is interesting what María Wiese writes in her *Amauta*'s article titled "*Señales de Nuestro Tiempo*" [Signs of Our Time]: "El ritmo precipitado y, quizás un poco inarmónico de la vida moderna concuerda perfectamente con el ritmo intenso y nervioso del cinema. Esta es la época de la imagen, que triunfa sobre la palabra" [The accelerated, and perhaps a little disharmonic rhythm of modern life accords perfectly with the nervous and intense rhythm of cinema. This is the time of image, which triumphs over word] (*Amauta* issue 4 p.11). In this article, Wiese is not concerned about the increasing popularity that movies were gaining because she considers cinema as an artistic work. She is concerned, however, about the kind of movie industry which produces bad quality art. Even though in this article she does not mention any movie industry explicitly, in many other articles we can recognize that she is a severe critic of the Hollywood industry, which she considers a producer of commercial movies lacking artistic quality.

María Wiese's critical opinion about the Hollywood industry can be noticed explicitly in her article titled "Los Problemas del Cinema" [The Problems of Cinema] in which she portrays Hollywood as a big and dangerous business machine capable only of producing "stars" and "meters of film" without taking into account artistic quality. Wiese warns in this article about the industrialization of movie art where "el productor cinematográfico ya casi no se preocupa de hacer una cinta hermosa, sino una película que tenga pronta y fácil salida en el Mercado" [the movie producer is not worried anymore about making a beautiful movie but only about making a movie easy to sell in the market] (*Amauta* issue 12 p. 24). She considers the case of Dolores del Rio as an example of how a "star" is produced in this process of film industrialization. Wiese says that in *The Loves of Carmen*, Dolores del Rio loses all her appeal and the artistic quality she had in *Resurrection* (produced by Edwin Carewe Company and where Dolores del Rio plays the magisterial role of Katusha Maslova). It is interesting to notice that even though both films were produced in the United States, the fact that *The Loves of Carmen* was produced by FOX, one of the big Hollywood companies, induces Wiese to say in her article that Dolores del Rio "is in the process of becoming a Yankee". It is important to mention, though, that Dolores del Rio had a great success in the United States. Robinson mentions that the Mexican actress was brought to Hollywood by First National and by 1927 had achieved a popularity which for a brief period competed with Garbo's (162).

Wiese is even more critical about FOX productions when she writes: "La FOX ha tenido la osadía de poner las manos sobre la *Divina Comedia*" [FOX has had the audacity of putting its hands on *Divine Comedy*] (*Amauta* issue 12 p. 24) making reference to the movie, *Dante's Inferno* directed by Henry Otto in 1924. Wiese does not believe in adaptations of literary pieces and prefers original scripts. For this reason she values Charlie Chaplin's work, because he not only acts but also writes and directs his movies. Chaplin represents for Wiese and the other intellectuals who wrote in *Amauta* the ideal film producer because he was an artist, film producer, and ideologist at the same time.

When Wiese values Chaplin's artistic qualities she has only words of admiration. For example, she says in regard to Chaplin's face: "esa fina máscara un poco melancólica en la que intervienen elementos de latinidad y que iluminan dos claras pupilas soñadoras" [that fine mask, a little melancholic which has "Latin elements" and illuminates two clear dreamer pupils] revealing in this way a fascination for Chaplin and

finding in him Latin elements that probably explain his finest sensitivity. American critics would not have emphasized Chaplin's Latin roots. They pay attention to other of Chaplin's characteristics. For example, Koszarski, quoting an opinion of Robert Sklar in regard to Chaplin, writes he: "is the man who made comedy and pathos out of working class people's lives and dreams" (Koszarski 265). Here it is emphasized that a difference in class separated Chaplin's art from other Hollywood producers. This argument coincides with the Amauta intellectuals' political position regarding class. However, in her articles about Chaplin, Wiese is more interested in his artistic qualities which make it possible to produce real cinema art. In the same article, Wiese claims that a movie should serve educative and artistic purposes. She believes that there must be artistic censorship, not just a moral censorship. She points out that only in this way would it be possible to guarantee good artistic quality in movie production (*Amauta* issue 12, p. 24-25).

Although María Wiese's concern about Hollywood industry is totally understandable, it seems that sometimes she has a pre-conception about the Hollywood industry which makes her excessively critical when she dislikes a Hollywood production and over cautious when she likes one. She notoriously prefers European productions rather than Hollywood productions. Thus, in issue 18 of *Amauta*, María Wiese praises *Varieté* a film directed by the German E. André Dupont. Wiese writes in regard to this movie: "*Varieté* nos muestra lo que es el cine explotado por un artista y no por un industrial" [*Varieté* show us a movie made by an artist and not for an industry]. In contrast, she is very severe in regard to *Ramona*, another movie starring Dolores del Río and directed by Edwin Carewe and produced by United Artists. *Ramona* was a great success in the United States; in the magazine *Variety* there is an advertisement for *Ramona* that occupies an entire page, which says: "*Ramona*, the picture millions have been waiting for. From the story millions have read. With Dolores del Río, today's new sensational box-office star."² In this *Variety* issue a comment about *Ramona* appears which says: "*Ramona* got away to an excellent start at the St. Francis, setting a new house record for night business on opening day by topping the previous high set a few weeks ago by *Gauche*" (*Variety* March 14th 1928). However for Wiese, *Ramona* is below her expectations.

Wiese also has a strong criticism for *Don Juan*, a Paramount production: "la película toda carece de ambiente y de carácter histórico y artístico" [the whole movie lacks of historical and artistic character] (*Amauta* issue 18 p. 95). In another note Wiese is content with *The Way of All Flesh*, also a Paramount production of 1927 directed by Victor Fleming. However, she attributes this movie's success most of all to the participation of Emil Jannings, a Swiss actor. Wiese values the power of the images in this movie, but she doesn't mention explicitly the achievements of the director or the Hollywood production (*Amauta* issue 19 p.98). Something similar happen with *Beau Geste*, which Wiese considers a "magnificent movie" but she does not mention that it is a Paramount production.

In the case of *The Mysterious Lady*, produced by Metro-Golden-Mayer in 1928, Wiese gives all her prizes to Greta Garbo saying: "Esa muchacha sueca de claros cabellos, mirada soñadora y finas manos transparentes, que se llama Greta Garbo, posee tan marcada personalidad que, a pesar de haber caído en las usinas de Hollywood, imprime a las películas en las que actúa un carácter verdaderamente artístico, un encanto singular" [That Swedish girl with clear hair, dreamer eyes, and fine transparent hands, whose name is Greta Garbo, possesses such a strong personality that even trapped by the Hollywood factory, she stamps a truly artistic character and a unique charm on the movies in which she acts] (*Amauta* issue 24 p.96). This comment agrees with Robinson's description of Greta Garbo: "Greta Garbo is legend—inexplicable and beyond analysis. She possessed a rare photogenic quality. (...) As an actress she never made a move or delivered a line which seemed false or miscalculated" (164). Independently of the comments Wiese has for Garbo's performance, once again, her opinion about the Hollywood industry as a "factory" without artistic

² *Variety* March 14th 1928.

sensitivity is clear. According to Wiese, if it were not for Garbo's qualities, the entire movie would have failed.

Wiese also has good comments for *The Last Warning* directed by the German Paul Leni and produced by Universal Pictures; once again all the positive comments make reference to the European director and not to the Hollywood production, which she considers guilty of having decided to use one of its "stars," Laura Le Plante, in this movie with poor results (*Amauta*, issue 25 p.93). In this same *Amauta* issue, Wiese comments on the movie *Good Morning Judge*, a comedy released in 1928 by Universal Pictures and directed by William A. Seiter. Wiese writes in regard to this movie: "Esta es una pequeña comedia –de esas que saben hacer los americanos; en cambio no aciertan ni con la película histórica ni con el drama" [This is a small comedy –one of that kind which Americans know how to do; however, they always fail in historical or dramatic movies] (*Amauta* issue 25 p. 93). This contradicts, however, her enthusiasm for the *Big Parade*, *Beau Geste* and *Two Arabian Nights* which are historical and dramatic movies (*Amauta* issue 12); these were successful American productions³ and Wiese has good comments for them, although she does not go deeply in her analysis of these movies. Probably, one of Wiese's arguments for being in favor of these movies would be that only one of these productions has an American director (King Vidor in the *Big Parade*) but the other two are European. Wiese's resistance to admit explicitly that an American Hollywood production can be indeed an artistic production too is remarkable. When she finds a good Hollywood production, she always attributes its success as an artistic piece to the participation of a specific actor or director. The point is, however, that she liked the final product.

As was mentioned before, Charlie Chaplin was enthusiastically celebrated in *Amauta* and his movies were not considered as typical Hollywood productions. Waldo Frank writes how Chaplin was aware of Hollywood productions' deficiencies: "Hollywood es el perfecto espejo del buen éxito Americano. Las almas ordinarias tienen sueños extraordinarios, a la manera de las almas ordinarias. Y en Hollywood, los sueños se realizan. Hay aquí incontable dinero, encantamiento y una exacta producción mecánica del ideal para el cual el éxito es un espectáculo. Y Chaplin mira con los ojos horrorizados este mundo que ha sido su hogar desde que tenía veinticuatro años" [Hollywood is the perfect mirror of American success. Ordinary souls have extraordinary dreams, such as any ordinary soul has. Dreams come true in Hollywood. There are uncountable quantities of money, enchantment, and an exact mechanical production for the ideal in which success means spectacle. Chaplin sees with horrified eyes this world which has been his home since he has twenty four years old] (*Amauta* issue 26 p.29). Thus, Chaplin is considered an extraordinary exception in Hollywood's world, a critical witness who does not want to be part of Hollywood machinery and decides to impose a new style for doing cinema.

José Carlos Mariátegui, editor of *Amauta*, also has an exhaustive article about Chaplin titled "Esquema de una Explicación de Chaplin" [Chaplin's Explanation Scheme] (*Amauta* issue 18) in which he considers that Chaplin's fame is both, aristocratic and democratic at the same time. Mariátegui writes "Chaplin es un verdadero tipo de elite, para todos los que no olvidamos que élite quiere decir electa" [Chaplin is a true elite guy, for all of us who do not forget that elite means selected]. In the same article Mariátegui says: "Pero los Estados Unidos no se han asimilado espiritualmente a Chaplin. La tragedia de Chaplin, el humorismo de Chaplin, obtienen su intensidad de un íntimo conflicto entre el artista y Norte América. La salud, la energía, el élan de Norte América retienen y excitan al artista; pero su puerilidad burguesa, su prosaísmo arribista, repugnan al bohemio, romántico en el fondo" [But the United States has not been spiritually assimilated to Chaplin. The tragedy of Chaplin and his humor obtain their intensity from

³ In Variety Dec. 16 and Dec 25 of 1925 appear two articles related to "Big Parade" which shows the success of this movie. One informs about the incomes this movie was producing (\$21,600) and the other informs that the President of the United States and his family watched the movie in the White House.

an intimate conflict between the artist and North America. The health, energy and élan of North America retain and excite the artist; but its puerile bourgeoisie, its prosaic greediness disgusts the bohemian, the romantic who is inside] (*Amauta* issue 18). We can see that intellectuals who write in *Amauta* admire Chaplin, not only because of his artistic talent but also because of the ideological message that is behind his productions. Chaplin represents, for these intellectuals, a paradigmatic case that absorbs the enthusiasm and energy of American culture maintaining his freedom and artistic individuality. Therefore, Jason Borge, points out that Mariátegui emphasizes the “Charlot” character as subversive because it did not fit with the main stream Hollywood production (35).

Xavier Abril is the other Peruvian intellectual who writes about Chaplin in *Amauta*. He refers to Chaplin as capable of taking people’s souls and transforming them: “La sensibilidad de Chaplin tiene las propiedades de los rayos X. Sus ojos suben de su corazón y perforan realidades penumbradas en las ciudades (Nueva York, París, Londres) en que los ascensores se llevan buena parte de la visión sólo económica de sus hombres standard. Chaplin es un ascensor que sube las almas de los más complicados y lejanos cuerpos del mundo [Chaplin’s sensitivity has X ray properties. His eyes go up to the heart and perforate penumbral realities in the cities (Nueva York, París, Londres) in which elevators take with them an important part of the economical vision of their standard men. Chaplin is an elevator that takes up the souls of the more complicated and distant bodies of the world] (*Amauta* issue 28). In summary, all intellectuals who wrote in *Amauta* about Charlie Chaplin consider him as a character who goes beyond American modernity, Chaplin is a true artist; he does not belong to an specific time or space. Chaplin is universal

We have seen how those intellectuals who write in *Amauta* are conscientiously and explicitly against Hollywood industry. However, it is possible to read these authors “between the lines” and notice that sometimes they enjoy Hollywood productions, but they do not give their praise to the whole production. They prefer instead to praise the individuals, artists or directors, who are not American. Although *Amauta* critics consider European movies as more artistic than Hollywood productions, it is not possible to deny the big impact Hollywood movies had not only on popular minds but also in the minds of sophisticated Peruvian intellectuals like the ones who wrote in *Amauta*. In the end, they abandoned –for a moment and even unconsciously –their political ideologies and succumbed to analyzing Hollywood movies as art pieces.

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