



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Carmen Miranda: Bananas Is My Business. by David Meyer; Helena Solberg
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of fascism, led by Milošević, Serbs allied with him, and to a lesser extent Tadjman's Croats, versus the multinational and hence anti-fascist forces of the Bosnian government, led by Alija Izetbegović.

Bosna! is a sincere, heart-wrenching plea for Western intervention on behalf of the Bosnian forces. It is supported with extremely graphic images of Serbian and Croatian atrocities. While the film's strident posture is problematic, it is thought provoking. The film suggests that attempts to portray the war in detached, even if critical, terms, as in *Death of a Nation*, provide unwitting support for war criminals and fascists. Indeed, *Bosna!* attacks the "do-nothing" policies of the West (filming was completed prior to Western intervention in 1995 leading to the Dayton peace agreement) nearly as severely as the policies of the Serbian and Croatian aggressors.

The principled and desperate cry for support and Western intervention on behalf of Bosnia's "anti-fascist" "Resistance fighters" unfortunately yields a film with multiple internal contradictions. Most important, Levi argues that Bosnia, and Sarajevo in particular, was an environment in which various ethnic identities coexisted so harmoniously that a unified identity transcended ethnicity. He stresses that Western observers usually mislabeled the forces fighting on behalf of the Bosnian government as "Muslim," when in fact they came from all three of Bosnia's ethnic groups. Having made this point, however, the film fails to reconcile this multinational solidarity with the barbarous behavior of Bosnia's own citizens. Graphic pictures presented in *Bosna!* testify that Muslim men died in Bosnia at the hands of other "Bosnians" after being forced to show that they were circumcised. Clearly, the multinational "harmony" that Levi sees in Bosnia, the "Balkan Switzerland," to the extent that it existed, was fragile. Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat "fascists" were just as much a part of the Bosnian landscape as the ethnically transcendent "Bosnians" celebrated in Levi's film.

All three films, therefore, leave the viewer wondering about the social origins of the war and the bestial atrocities ordinary Yugoslavs committed. While we need to illuminate the existence and maintenance of multinational, transnational, and anti-national identities in the former Yugoslavia, as *Vukovar* and *Bosna!* do, and while we cannot forget the pivotal role that national leaders have played in arousing nationalism, as *Death of a Nation* reminds us, films and books on the former Yugoslavia need to begin to explain the dark forces of the conflict in towns and villages, not just in the halls of power.

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LATIN AMERICA

Carmen Miranda: Bananas Is My Business. Produced by David Meyer with Helena Solberg; written and directed by Helena Solberg. 1994; black & white and color; 90 minutes. Distributor: Noon Pictures, 611 Broadway, No. 742, New York, N.Y. 10012 (212) 254-4118.

In 1939, Carmen Miranda stepped onto American soil, albeit in platform shoes, to showcase Brazilian music in Lee Shubert's Broadway revue *On the Streets of Paris*. She left Brazil as a cultural ambassador with the blessing of Brazilian President Getúlio Vargas, but, for many Americans, she became the "Brazilian bombshell" with the tutti-frutti hat and the funny accent, trademarks that would catapult her to a movie career in Hollywood, highlighted by blockbuster

films such as *Down Argentine Way* (1940), *That Night in Rio* (1941), and *The Gang's All Here* (1943). Her dual role gave rise to a complex sense of identity as Miranda tried to please her American audience and simultaneously represent Brazil.

In *Carmen Miranda: Bananas Is My Business*, an unusual but compelling docudrama, Brazilian filmmaker Helena Solberg digs through the fruits and costumes to search for the “real” Carmen and to claim her for Brazil. Solberg has not created a typical historical documentary, nor does she make any claims of neutrality. Instead, she has opted for a personal approach, deconstructing Miranda the myth and paying critical attention to issues such as female and colonial identities and national pride. Although the film often emphasizes that Miranda was not a tragic figure, it is tragedy that brings her home in 1955. The opening scene of the film recreates the moment when she suffered a heart attack in her Beverly Hills home on August 5, 1955. As she falls to the ground, the mirror clenched in her hand shatters, indicating that her Hollywood existence has finally come to an end. Solberg then cuts to actual footage of Miranda’s funeral in Rio de Janeiro, showing masses of Brazilians mourning her death, thereby establishing the principal themes of return and reconciliation with Brazil.

This well-edited film relies on careful placement of reenacted historical sequences, actual images and footage from the era, and interviews from the 1990s. Several of the reenactments are the director’s personal dream sequences, as she attempts to pose and answer questions that have no definite answers: Who was Carmen Miranda? Why did she make such a lasting impression? What would happen to her in the hands of a foreign power? Solberg often answers these questions by making full use of sounds and images in a rather subversive manner. She relies on the performance of Brazilian Miranda impersonator Erik Barreto, for example, and frequently uses the music of Bizet’s opera *Carmen* (1875) to create various moods.

Many scholars have rightly criticized Hollywood for its exploitation and stereotyping of Latin American women (see George Black, *The Good Neighbor: How the U.S. Wrote the History of Central America and the Caribbean* [New York, 1988]; Allen L. Woll, *The Latin Image in American Film* [Los Angeles, 1980]; Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* [London, 1994]), and Solberg drives this point home with several sequences that indicate limitations placed on Miranda’s roles, including a song in which she sings, “I make my money from bananas” and Barreto performs dressed as a human banana. An interview with actress Rita Moreno provides a personal testimony on the same subject of stereotyping. At the same time, Solberg indicates that Miranda, a white woman born in Portugal but raised in Brazil, developed her own persona, drawing from a host of Afro-Brazilian popular forms and exaggerating them for the stage, long before coming to the United States. In essence, the film restores Miranda’s complexity, arguing that she was a strong-willed individual who was willing to play the “bombshell” but who also parodied herself, as films such as *Nancy Goes to Hollywood* (1950) attest. (Playing Nancy, she was supposed to refuse to “act like Carmen.”)

Miranda’s popularity soared in part as a result of the “Good Neighbor Policy” in American foreign relations with Latin America (1933–1947). She became an important American icon, along with Disney’s parrot Joe Carioca, both of whom represented a “South American Way,” albeit constructed by Hollywood and influenced by the special Motion Picture Section of the State Department’s Office of Coordination of Inter-American Affairs. John Hay Whitney, director of the Motion Picture section, often consulted Latin American experts such as Jorginho Guinlo, whom Solberg interviews in the film, to avoid creating offensive images. Whitney’s success was limited at best, since many Latin American countries protested and in some cases even censored Miranda’s movies. (See, for example, Martha Gil-Montero, *Brazilian Bombshell: The Biography of Carmen Miranda* [New York, 1989]).

In reclaiming Carmen Miranda for Brazil, Solberg emphasizes that Miranda was most happy when she was in Brazil or around Brazilians. It comes as no surprise that the film’s major strength lies in its ability to take the viewer back to Brazil with Miranda in order to understand her history. Before moving to the United States, she already enjoyed megastar status as a performer on radio, records, and in film. She relished the Brazilian public’s attention even while in Hollywood, being most hurt when critics accused her of becoming “Americanized.”

These strengths notwithstanding, Solberg’s film avoids several details of Miranda’s life widely

reported in the U.S. press of the time, including Miranda's miscarriage and her plastic surgery to remodel her nose, and it treats her addiction to prescription drugs only briefly. Yet the film manages to chronicle Miranda's transformation by amassing and using a myriad of sources, particularly in the period prior to her arrival in the United States. Solberg and co-producer David Meyer have unearthed clips from one of Miranda's early films (an incredible feat, given the difficulty of locating images from films made prior to 1940 in Brazil), home-movie footage, still photographs, and other footage in Brazil and the United States. Equally impressive are the interviews, which provide firsthand accounts from a diverse group of experts and journalists from the United States and Brazil; Miranda's fellow actors at Twentieth Century-Fox, Cesar Romero and Alice Faye; her sister Aurora, who performed with her in the early days in Brazil; and Brazilian friends and performers, Aloysio de Oliveira, her band leader for many years, and musicians Sinval Silva and Laurindo Almeida.

There are two drawbacks to this film. Many sequences lack important labels (dates and places, for example), which would place the scenes in historical context and help viewers distinguish between actual footage, interviews, and reenactments. While the subtitling is superb, the names and titles of the interviewees are often difficult to make out because the lettering is too small and appears on screen too quickly. This is nonetheless an important production. Solberg, a Brazilian woman and a celebrity in her own right, has previously created several masterpieces on female identity in Latin America (*The Double Day*, 1975, and *Simplemente Jenny*, 1977). In *Carmen Miranda: Bananas Is My Business*, Solberg narrates and guides the viewer through Miranda's life, while carefully interjecting elements of her own life into the narrative, thereby establishing a personal rapport with her subject. In so doing, Solberg has created our most intimate portrait of Miranda to date.

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Tango Feroz: La leyenda de tanguito. Produced by Claudio Pustelnik and Katrina Bayonas; directed by Marcelo Piñeyro; screenplay by Aída Bortnik and Marcello Piñeyro. 1993; color; 125 minutes. Distributor: Tara Releasing, 125 Belvedere, Suite 5, San Rafael, Calif. 94901.

Tango—the music, dance, and song form most associated with Argentina—anchors this compelling film. Like tangos popularized by singer Carlos Gardel in the 1920s and 1930s, *Tango Feroz* cherishes the tragic romance of a principal character and, through him, that of a nation in turmoil. But this is the Argentina of the late 1960s and early 1970s, not of the 1930s; the film substitutes a “ferocious” darkness, reflecting Argentina's descent to military rule, in place of the happy and optimistic endings of Gardel's Hollywood films—an optimism that suggested what Argentines believed was a time of brighter prospects for the nation.

This is the story of “Tango,” a rock singer whose given name we do not learn until late in the movie—his nickname thus designates him as an Argentine everyman. Just as many Argentines remember the 1930s as a time of industrial growth, prosperity, and innocence, free of the grinding problems Argentina faced in the post-World War II years, so, too, Piñeyro's *Tango Feroz* offers up a rose-colored vision of pre-1974 Argentina (in cinematographic yellows) before the death squads, the mass torture, the disappearances. Tango's life is one of protest. Whereas the students around him do battle with the police and plaster the walls of the University of Buenos Aires with the posters of radical political movements, Tango is apolitical. His free spirit is ultimately destroyed by the creeping authoritarianism and commercialism that would later overwhelm the nation.