

# Garras De Oro (The Dawn of Justice—Alborada De Justicia): The Intriguing Orphan of Colombian Silent Films.

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 ***Garras De Oro (The Dawn of Justice—Alborada De Justicia):***  
**The Intriguing Orphan of Colombian Silent Films**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

***Garras De Oro (The Dawn of Justice—Alborada De Justicia)***

**The Intriguing Orphan of Colombian Silent Films**

*Juana Suárez (bio) and Ramiro Arbeláez (bio)*

**[Begin Page 54]**

## *Garras De Oro* as an Orphan Film

In 1985 the existence of a silent-era Colombian film entitled *Garras de oro* (*The Dawn of Justice—Alborada de justicia*) came to light within a small circle of historians of Colombian cinema. Filmed in 1926 during the economic boom known as the *danza de los millones*, it focused mainly on the circumstances surrounding Panama's separation from Colombia and also referenced a polemic between newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer and President Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>1</sup> *Garras de oro* (literally, Claws of Gold) tells the story of a supposed New York daily newspaper editor anxious to locate supporting documents that could vindicate him in a libel suit. In his columns, the newspaperman has maintained that Roosevelt should **[End Page 55]** not be reelected, given that he violated an international treaty. While the treaty in question allowed for the development of an interoceanic waterway across the isthmus, it included a commitment to maintain the territorial integrity of what was then Colombia.

The anti-U.S. tenor of the film, the impossibility of connecting it to other Colombian film productions from the period, and the bizarre circumstances of its reappearance in the 1980s heightened interest in the film.

In 1982, historian Jorge Orlando Melo came across clues of the existence of the film in the National Archives in Washington, DC. A 1988 news bulletin from the Fundación Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano (Colombian Film Heritage Foundation) records that “in going through the indices of books of correspondence from the State Department in Washington, he came across an annotation regarding documents that recounted efforts to block the screening throughout the Americas of the film *The Dawn of Justice*, made in Cali in 1926, for being libelous towards the United

States.”<sup>2</sup>

Coincident with Melo’s research, in 1986 the scholar Rodrigo Vidal handed over a 35mm nitrate print of *Garras de oro* to Bogotá’s Cinemateca Distrital. A year earlier Vidal had rescued it from the Teatro Isaacs in Cali, following indications from an unidentified informant who let him know where the copy had lain hidden for so many years.<sup>3</sup> The Cinemateca Distrital subsequently gave the print to the Fundación Patrimonio Fílmico Colombiano to be preserved in partnership with the film department of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.<sup>4</sup> Then, in 1996, Mexico’s Goethe Institute contributed a copy of *Garras de oro*, one that included eight minutes of footage that were (temporarily) missing from the print that Vidal gave the Cinemateca.<sup>5</sup> The current version runs approximately fiftysix minutes. Presumably, this corresponds to 85 or 90 percent of the original duration. The incompleteness of the extant film, however, does not affect comprehension of the plot. There are multiple reasons to consider *Garras de oro* an orphan film: its censorship, lengthy disappearance, incompleteness, and indefinite origins.

For example, to date, no script or production records have been located, and research has relied on the intertitles and scant press coverage from the period. As Ana María López has pointed out, the majority of Latin American films produced between 1896 and 1930 have disappeared and research on the period is widely based on “secondary materials, especially press coverage.”<sup>6</sup> In the case of *Garras de oro*, the limited and scattered material that is available cannot resolve questions about the film’s ostracism. Who ordered its censorship? Was it local or national? Did the U.S. government request it? What role did Colombian authorities play in obstructing the film’s screening and promotion? **[End Page 56]**

In this regard, we have found consular documents at the U.S. National Archives that reveal a move to suppress the film. If we take the eight documents in chronological order, that move seems to have initiated

with a directive on October 9, 1926. Addressed to American Diplomatic and Consular Officers in Latin America, it simply said: “Film entitled ‘The Death of Justice’: instructing to prevent exhibition of.”<sup>7</sup> More than...

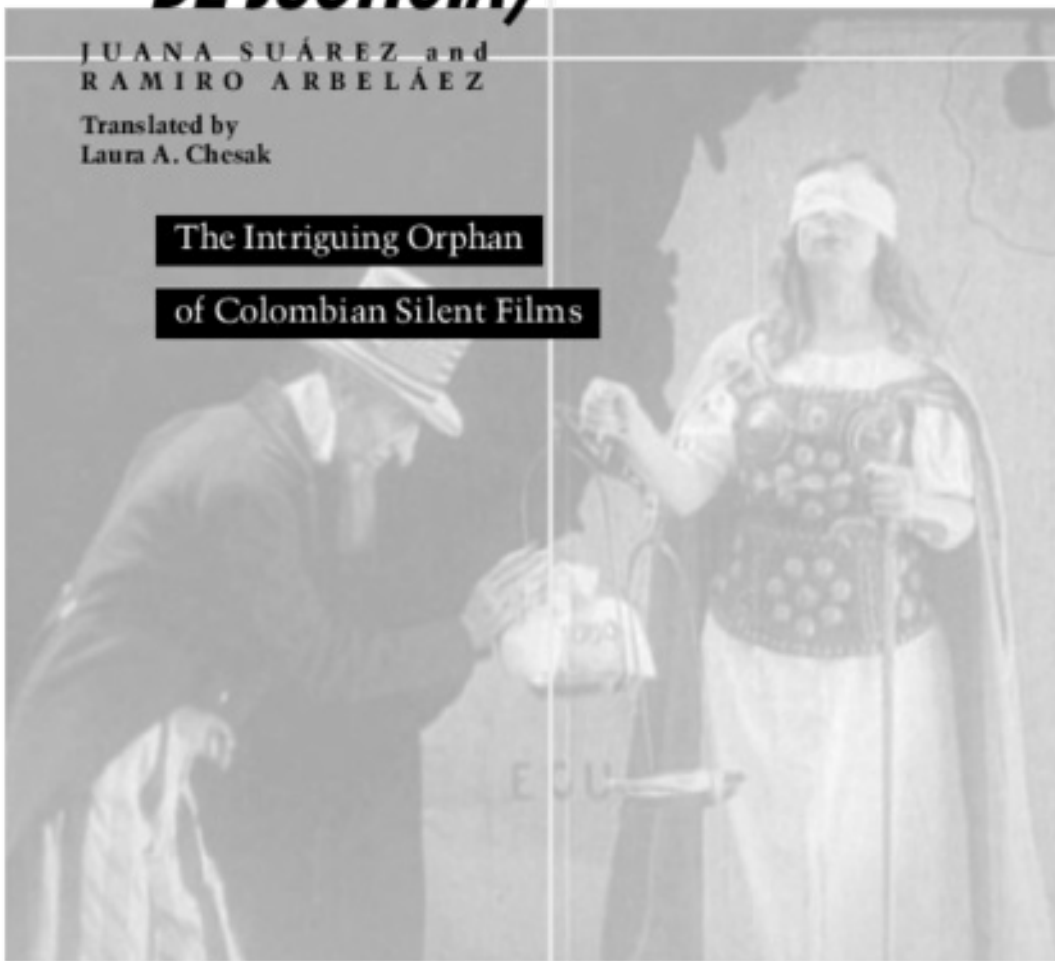
# ***GARRAS DE ORO (THE DAWN OF JUSTICE—ALBORADA DE JUSTICIA)***

JUANA SUÁREZ and  
RAMIRO ARBELÁEZ

Translated by  
Laura A. Chesak

**The Intriguing Orphan**

**of Colombian Silent Films**





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