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U.S. EDITION Monday, August 12, 2013 As of 7:53 PM EDT

U.S. EDITION Friday, August 9, 2013 As of 10:31 PM EDT

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## Hollywood Takes Spanish Lessons As Latinos Stream to the Movies

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By [BEN FRITZ](#)

LOS ANGELES—In a small room on the Paramount Pictures lot here, postproduction work is under way on a movie that sounds as derivative as they come: the fourth sequel to "Paranormal Activity."

But flickering on an editor's monitor are the types of scenes rarely seen in Hollywood: Characters are shown visiting *botanicas*—storefronts where witchcraft is practiced. One woman tries to cure her possessed grandson by ritualistically rubbing a raw egg on him. Much of the dialogue is in Spanish, with no subtitles.

The four previous "Paranormal Activity" films grossed a total of more than \$350 million, thanks in large part to packed theaters in Hispanic neighborhoods. Now, with the next installment, "Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones," some of the series' most fervent fans will see people who look and speak like them on screen.

Watch clips from some of the 2013 movies most popular with Hispanic audiences.

The bilingual film, from [Viacom Inc.'s](#) VIAB -0.70% Paramount division, marks the first time a big studio has taken a mainstream franchise and spun it into one about Latino characters and culture.



Enlarge Image

Getty Images

Movies by director Robert Rodriguez, shown here, have been buoyed by Latinos.

"Reflecting a regular Latino family, where some people speak only Spanish and some don't know any and some are in between is so real," says the movie's director, Christopher Landon, a self-described "gringo." But it was "something I felt I hadn't really seen in a movie."

In the past few years, Hispanics have become some of Hollywood's best customers. Though 15% of Americans over the age of 12 are Latino, they

accounted for 25% of all movie tickets sold in the U.S. in 2012, according to a Nielsen Co. study. The average Hispanic moviegoer went to nearly 10 films in the year, compared with just over six for whites, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans.

Now, the Latino fan base is beginning to change the way Hollywood spends its money, from production to marketing and even theater renovations.



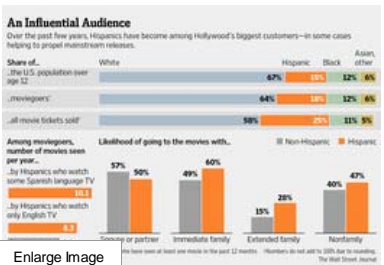
WireImage

Génesis Rodríguez had a role written into 'Identity Thief' to appeal to Hispanics.

The new industry focus comes at a critical time for the movie business, which is desperate for good news in the domestic market. Attendance at theaters has declined 10% in the past decade, according to industry data, while home entertainment spending is off more than 17% from its 2004 peak.

"The U.S. is a mature theatrical market," says John Fithian, chief executive of the National Association of Theatre Owners trade group. "But unlike any other, we have a growing population and the fastest-growing part of that population, Hispanics, also happen to be the most enthusiastic moviegoers. That's good news for the future of our business."

While reasons for the disparity in viewership aren't clear, Nielsen's study offers a few clues. Hispanics are significantly more likely than members of other ethnic groups to go to the movies in groups of four or more, Nielsen found. They are also nearly twice as likely as other ethnic groups to watch a movie with extended-family members.



Enlarge Image

"It's like family time—we're together, but we can escape," said 43-year-old Adrian Carazco after watching "Iron Man 3" on its opening weekend in South Gate, Calif. He attended with his brother Julio and their children.

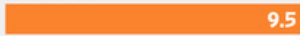
Robert Rodriguez, the director of "Spy Kids" and "Sin City" who was one of the first Hispanic filmmakers to gain Hollywood's attention thanks to his 1992 independent hit "El Mariachi," says movies were an integral part of his childhood in San Antonio. "We had a family of 10 kids, and we would all march into the theater together and enjoy the communal experience of it," he recalls.

Latino viewers are largely credited with the success of the "Fast & Furious" franchise, which features an unusually diverse cast and was originally set in predominantly Hispanic East Los Angeles. Over Memorial Day weekend, "Fast & Furious 6" opened at No. 1 at the box office, taking in \$117 million—more than the holiday's two other new films combined. Thirty-three percent of ticket buyers were Hispanic, according to exit-poll data from distributor Universal Pictures

## Screen Grab

Average number of movies seen in 2012, by ethnicity\*

### Hispanic



Asian



Black



White



\*Among those who see at least one movie a year

Source: Nielsen The Wall Street Journal

—higher than any other group of attendees.

With "Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones," which is expected to have its release in January, Paramount is betting it can retain the appeal of its most profitable series while energizing a passionate fan base.

Adam Goodman, president of Paramount's film group, said the studio's decision to make the fifth "Paranormal" was inspired by interviews with Hispanic fans in focus groups.

Mr. Goodman said in an email that the movie "is set in a multicultural and bilingual world that we believe will resonate in an authentic way for Hispanic and non-Hispanic

audiences alike." (The Spanish dialogue won't be translated when it is distributed globally.)

While the number of Latino-themed projects is growing, it remains small, as does the number of Hispanic actors in leading roles. "Fast & Furious 6," which featured Michelle Rodriguez and Gina Carano, and July's animated "Turbo," whose voice-over cast included Michael Peña and Luis Guzmán, are exceptions.

Several movies with a heavy Latino slant are currently in the works at studios. Will and Jada Pinkett Smith's production company, Overbrook Entertainment, is developing two such projects in which Ms. Pinkett Smith would star. One is "Scribe," a bilingual remake of a Colombian film about a reporter; another is "Salsa," which would also feature actor William Levy, from the Mexican telenovela "Triunfo del Amor."

Independent studio Relativity Media LLC is negotiating to acquire rights to a biopic of Colombian drug kingpin Pablo Escobar, starring Guatemalan-born actor and singer Oscar Isaac.

According to the Nielsen study, action-adventure movies are the most popular with Hispanics, while horror and family-friendly animation also rate highly.

Other types of films don't necessarily cut it.

"Movies based on books or old characters like 'Harry Potter,' 'Twilight' and James Bond don't do well here," says Mohamed Shakhshir, general manager of Regal Entertainment Group's Edwards Theaters South Gate Stadium 20 multiplex, which draws primarily Hispanic crowds.

Theater owners—whose screening choices significantly impact a movie's success—are paying close attention to the growing audience. AMC Entertainment Holdings Inc., the second-largest cinema chain in the U.S. by locations, uses local Hispanic-population statistics as one of its criteria when selecting theaters for multimillion-dollar renovations. One such venue, with new seats, screens and a bar, is currently under way in San Antonio.

"Your certainty of return on your investment is greater in a Hispanic-populated area than anywhere else," says AMC Chief Executive Gerry Lopez, whose company is owned by China's Dalian Wanda Group Corp.

The industry is tinkering with different ways to attract Latino filmgoers. Some are betting that Hispanic actors will draw loyal crowds; some are relying on bankable Anglo stars for Spanish-language movies. Then there's Paramount's "Paranormal" strategy—taking a known franchise and giving it an entirely new cultural spin.

Making movies specifically tailored to Latinos is tricky, and some believe the

strategy can backfire. "Yes, Latinos are avid moviegoers, but we are savvy and hate being pandered to," says Umberto González, a writer for the film news and reviews website [latino-review.com](http://latino-review.com). Rather than movies about Latino culture, Mr. González says, his readers prefer action movies in which Hispanics are integral to the story line—and are also prominently featured in advertisements.

As of yet, no formula is a shoo-in. And to be sure, studio executives who have hoped that Hispanic-centric films can cross over to a broader market have seen a few disappointments.

Mr. Rodriguez's 2010 movie "Machete," about a former Mexican *federale* seeking revenge on an anti-immigrant Texas politician, drew a disproportionately Hispanic audience, according to exit polls. Still, the film grossed a modest \$26.6 million in 2010. The director says DVD sales were strong, and the sequel to be released in October will be "bigger and more mainstream." New cast members not in the original include Charlie Sheen, Mel Gibson, Antonio Banderas and Lady Gaga.

Pantelion Films is a joint venture founded in 2010 by Lions Gate Entertainment Corp. and Mexico's Grupo Televisa that makes movies for the Hispanic audience, some of which are in Spanish. Its most successful release since launching two years ago, "Case de mi Padre" starring Will Ferrell, grossed only \$5.9 million.

The company's releases have all been inexpensive, however, and Pantelion is now focusing on "films that incorporate Latino talent and Latino themes but have universal appeal and can resonate with a broad commercial audience," says Chief Executive Paul Presburger.

The ranks of Hollywood's overwhelmingly white executive suites are beginning to recognize the publicity value of actors popular in the Hispanic community. For its February comedy "Identity Thief," Universal's casting department worked with multicultural marketing executives to select Génesis Rodríguez, a telenovela actress and the daughter of a popular Venezuelan singer, for a role not originally written for a Latina. The studio organized a press day for Spanish-language media around her.

Studios typically spend about 5% of marketing budgets on Spanish-language media, up from about 1% a decade ago. For lower-budget movies aimed primarily at Latino audiences, such as the horror hit "Mama," produced by Guillermo Del Toro and released in January, that amount can double.

To promote the recent science fiction movie "After Earth," Mr. Smith and his son and co-star Jaden appeared on two Univision programs, where the older actor conducted an interview in his passable Spanish. Vin Diesel and Michelle Rodriguez, promoting "Fast & Furious 6," presented an award at the Billboard Latin Music Awards, which aired on Telemundo in April. They were the first movie stars to hand out an award on the show, according to a spokeswoman for the [Comcast CMCSA +0.36%](#) Corp.-owned Spanish language network.

Hispanics are more likely than other groups to use smartphones to look up movie information, according to the Nielsen study. Homing in on that habit, marketing firm ThinkLatino worked with Paramount to create an app for the horror film "The Devil Inside." The app rated users to see if they are "possessed."

Some studios have invested heavily in building out Latino marketing capabilities in-house. "We support 75% to 80% of our movies with Hispanic outreach," says Fabian Castro, vice president of multicultural marketing for Comcast's Universal. Certain films, such as the comedy "Ted" featured no Hispanic actors or obvious hooks. But Mr. Castro's group created material focusing on physical comedy scenes to air on Spanish language TV networks, where slapstick comedy is a staple. For younger Latinos, Universal produced online videos in which an actor wished his teddy bear "Carlito" would come to life like the movie's title character.

All the attention on the Latino audience is a far cry from when Santiago Pozo first noticed Hispanics' taste for moviegoing in 1987 while an intern at Universal. As part of a fifth-anniversary rerelease of "E.T.," he persuaded his bosses to play a Spanish-language print from Mexico in downtown Los Angeles, which is heavily Hispanic. It turned out to be a gigantic hit.

The next year, in 1988, he started a consulting firm, Arenas Group, that markets entertainment to Hispanics. At first, the studios' interest was minimal. "Spanish language campaigns used to consist of translating the press kit, bringing two Latino [reporters] to the junket, and then you could check the box," recalls Mr. Pozo. "For many years, that's how I made a living."

Today, insiders estimate more than 20 consulting firms work with studios on Hispanic advertising and publicity campaigns.

In some cases they help design specific material, as Arenas did for Walt Disney Co.'s "Toy Story 3" with a commercial highlighting a scene in which the Buzz Lightyear character speaks Spanish. In the movie, the toy, voiced by Tim Allen, is malfunctioning. But the voice-over had a newly tuned message: "This summer Buzz is back with an upgrade in Spanish."

### **Corrections & Amplifications**

Justin Lin directed "Fast & Furious 6." A caption in an earlier version of this article incorrectly identified Robert Rodriguez as the director of the film.

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*A version of this article appeared August 9, 2013, on page A1 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Hollywood Takes Spanish Lessons As Latinos Stream to the Movies.*

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