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Cinema and Latin American Studies: Sites of Interdisciplinary, Transnational Enquiry

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Abstract

New Area Studies points to the need to understand increasing complexity across the globe. One route into this enquiry is through the creative arts; cinema specifically has provided a platform since the late twentieth century for the sharing of locally based stories on a global scale. This has coincided with a turn to transnational perspectives in cinema studies, with many different regional filmmaking practices, products and their places of production becoming better known as a result. This essay highlights the connections between cinema, storytelling and place-making in Latin America where there has been an increase in commercial, indigenous, experimental, art and independent films that have travelled the world through the mainstream, prestige and alternative festival circuits. It draws attention to the fundamental shift in the ways Latin America has been expressed and perceived over the last twenty years, in large part due to the multitude of stories and perspectives that its filmmakers have created and shared with the world.

As Susan Hodgett and Patrick James have argued, New Area Studies points to the need to understand "increasing complexity around a shrinking globe" (2018), one that has seen new connections forged through the blurring of borders and apparent diminution of space through radical shifts in technology, travel

and trade.[1] One route into this enquiry is through the creative arts; indeed cinema, specifically, has provided a platform for the creation and sharing of locally based stories on a global scale. While this has been the case since the early days of cinema production and spectatorship and throughout the twentieth century, the advent of new digital technologies and the proliferation of exhibition opportunities (from community-based events to international festivals and online platforms) in the last two decades have given rise to an intensification of the experiences of global cinema. This industrial trend has coincided with a turn to transnational perspectives in cinema studies since the turn of the millennium, with many different regional filmmaking practices, products and their places of production becoming better known as a result.[2] As Deborah Shaw and Armida de la Garza noted in their editorial to the launch issue of *Transnational Cinemas*, scholars were "embracing the challenges of the opening up of borders within academia and within film-making, and […] at the same time, casting an historical eye back to the transnational practices that have often characterized film-making in both textual and industrial terms" (2010: 3).

This discussion aims to highlight the strong connections between cinema and Latin American Studies, with their shared emphases on interdisciplinary enquiry, on place-making and storytelling, and with parallel trajectories in terms of modernity and nation-building. While the region languished for many decades in the shadows of Hollywood in terms of film production and exhibition, the many technological innovations and political changes of the twenty-first century have given rise to an increase in commercial, indigenous, experimental, art and independent filmmaking, with products and people who have made their mark through the mainstream, prestige and alternative exhibition circuits. After briefly outlining the development of

[1] See also John Tomlinson, "Globalization as complex connectivity", *Globalization and Culture*, 1999, Cambridge: Polity, pp.1-3.

[2] Note that the ground-breaking journal *Transnational Screens*, formerly known as *Transnational Cinemas*, edited by Deborah Shaw, Ruth Doughty and Armida de la Garza, celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2020.

Latin American Studies as a discrete discipline, I focus on the increasing interest in the connections between Latin American culture and politics and on the development of Latin American cinema as a subject of study in its own right, as part of that attention to region. I argue then that there has been a significant shift in how Latin America is expressed and perceived, with a multitude of stories and perspectives that filmmakers have created and shared with the world. Although this shift has been embraced by the formal discipline of Latin American Studies, equally interesting and inclusive spaces for interdisciplinary debate are being opened up through cultural events. By way of example of cinema as site of enquiry, with the capacity for diverse representation of images, places and peoples that problematise notions of nation and region, this essay includes a short discussion of one film that has been prominent through 2019 and 2020: *By the Name of Tania* (Mary Jiménez and Bénédicte Liénard, 2019), an outstanding hybrid docu-fiction film that draws on testimonies collected by the directors to depict stories of exploitation in the Amazon.

Latin American Studies: from expansionism to diversity

Like cinema, which was born in 1895, Latin American Studies has enjoyed considerable and dynamic interdisciplinary engagement over more than a century; a summary of key moments of its development as a discipline reveals some of the political motivations for this academic endeavour. In her book, *Looking South* (2008), Helen Delpar claims that after a period of development spurred on by dynamic individuals (much like cinema's own early days that relied on significant entrepreneurs), an extraordinary expansion in the study of Latin America took place, mainly in the United States, from the mid-1930s to World War Two. This is notably the period when policymakers began to see the importance of the region in terms of national security and sought to establish more friendly relations with the countries to the south. Latin Americanists found jobs within the government, while funding avenues continued to expand. Yet even with these financial opportunities and the burgeoning interest in the region, advances at this time were limited to the disciplines

of anthropology, history, and geography, while economics, political science, and sociology seemed to be of less interest. As Sonia Alvarez, Arturo Arias and Charles R. Hale have noted in their discussion of the subject area, Latin American Studies came into its own in the 1950s and 1960s, in the context of the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution and "rapidly became the largest, most well-funded and most prestigious of the area studies fields" (2011: 225).[3] Indeed, it has been claimed that the expertise of Latin Americanists developed in tandem with the expansionist political and economic ambitions of the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century. It has also been argued that these early academics served largely as agents of US imperialism and went on to propagate the racist assumptions of government policymakers. Others, such as Delpar, indicate that while a number of early Latin Americanists worked for the US government between 1895 and 1935, only a handful were actively employed at any given time. Some of those researchers spoke out against US policy, asserting the need for a more Latin American viewpoint in diplomatic and economic matters. Meanwhile, the US government and private associations began to fund cultural organizations in Latin America during the Cold War: examples include the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a political project designed to bridge the divide between the two regions and to temper the threat of US hegemony in the global south, although also often perceived as a new kind of disciplinary colonialism (Iber, 2015: 110).

Since the 1960s, Latin American Studies has become an established interdisciplinary academic and research subfield of Area Studies; it is now composed of numerous disciplines from economics, sociology, history, international relations, political science and geography, to gender studies, literature and—most recently—cultural studies. In the UK in 1966, five "Parry Centres" were established in Oxford, London, Cambridge, Glasgow and Liverpool following the report of the Parliamentary

[3] Significant funding to develop this area of study in the US came from the likes of the Rockefeller philanthropies, the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Institution of Washington.

Committee on Latin American Studies, chaired by Dr J. H. Parry (1962-64), with the aim of promoting research and teaching on Latin America in Higher Education. These centres place great value on their institutional and personal links with the academic community in Latin America with significant programmes of fellowships, visiting scholarships, exchange programmes and cultural partnership projects. In broad terms, on a global scale, the discipline now encompasses the critical examination of the history, culture, international relations, and politics of Latin America from many international perspectives, with academic programmes tending to take approaches arising either from the social sciences, with an emphasis on the economics, politics, and development of the region, or from the arts and humanities, with the language, culture, and history of Latin America as a central component. Others may include the study of the environment and ecology of the region and research projects, especially those that are challenge-led, linked to UN Sustainable Development Goals, and funded by programmes such as the UK's Global Challenge Research Fund, increasingly cut across all of these in a multi-dimensional fashion.[4]

Despite global expansion of the field, the UK and US continue to be centres for the study of Latin America and, increasingly, of its cultural practices. The annual conferences of the UK-based Society for Latin American Studies (SLAS) and the US-based Latin America Studies Association (LASA) have provided stimulating and rigorous environments for research and debate about the region for over fifty years bringing together experts on Latin America from all disciplines and diverse

[4] The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) was announced by the UK Government in late 2015 as an interdisciplinary initiative to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by so-called developing countries and forms part of the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) commitment. Its aims have been to: promote challenge-led disciplinary and interdisciplinary research, including the participation of researchers who may not previously have considered the applicability of their work to development issues; strengthen capacity for research, innovation and knowledge exchange in the UK and developing countries through partnership with excellent UK research and researchers; provide an agile response to emergencies where there is an urgent research need.

occupations, across the globe.[5] For many years, the focus of both organisations was primarily from the perspective of the social sciences with less attention paid to arts and culture. Over the past decade or so, however, that perspective had broadened and shifted to acknowledge the role and impact of disciplines such as film, literature, performance, visual arts in enhancing our understanding of the region and of engaging with it and its people more profoundly, with specific sections dedicated to 'Film Studies', 'Mass Media and Popular Culture', and so on, whose profile is enhanced by high quality events that are aimed at the whole membership.

While controversy has been sparked over the years due to the relatively high cost of participation in the annual conferences ($247 was the initial advertised cost for LASA members in 2020), and a scan of the list of LASA Presidents suggests that access to the positions of power and decision-making have been quite restricted to those from the more prestigious institutions, mitigating tactics such as bursaries and travel grants ring-fenced for new scholars and those from Latin America are well established. Moreover, with the Covid-19 pandemic threatening to disrupt the LASA event set to take place in Guadalajara in May 2020, a new approach was taken that enabled many more people to participate. Rather than cancel (as was unfortunately the case for SLAS 2020), or maintain the high cost of registration, presentations and the film festival strand were hosted online and registration was on a 'pay what you can' basis, with any fees regarded more as donations towards saving the association from financial collapse. Indeed, this new approach has now followed through to the annual

[5] The Latin American Studies Association is the largest association for scholars of Latin American studies. It has around 13,000 members, 60 percent of whom reside outside the United States (around 36 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean). It was founded in 1966 following a meeting sponsored by the Joint Committee on Latin American Studies (composed of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), held at the Hispanic Foundation (now the Hispanic Division) of the Library of Congress. Its mission is "to foster intellectual discussion, research, and teaching on Latin America, the Caribbean, and its people throughout the Americas, promote the interests of its diverse membership, and encourage civic engagement through network building and public debate." (https://lasaweb.org/)

subscription fee for 2020/21, signalling recognition of the urgent need to make a radical shift in terms of embracing a more inclusive paradigm.

Latin American Studies and Cinema

This inclusive approach has long been adopted through the curatorial and programming policy of the LASA Film Festival which has been a major attraction of the organisation's Congresses since the establishment of the festival event in 1983. Indeed, since 2017 it has explicitly sought to emphasise plurality with a mission statement that sets out its intention to:

> … exhibit audio-visual materials from around the world related to the multiple and diverse perspectives encompassing Latin America: its history, its socio-political and cultural development, the ongoing reality of its inhabitants, and the discourses that bound its nations and the region in general (LASA online, 2020).

Moreover, the Film Festival provides a respected, non-commercial platform for the dissemination of fictional and documentary Latin American audio-visual production. It has been established as a way of promoting the study of Latin American Cinema in universities around the world and encourages LASA members from different disciplines to participate in the film screenings and associated filmmaker-led discussions, offering a site for further multi-disciplinary knowledge exchange on Latin America. Given the explicitly educational intention of the Festival, the majority of the films shown tend to be documentary. Nevertheless, within that genre, a wide range of cinematic approaches are included that allow for an appreciation of film as art as well as film as communicative tool about issues of interest to LASA members, with an ethos of human rights and activism, along with a frequent focus on indigeneity. It is

led by academics, filmmakers and film festival professionals with a commitment to showcasing the very best of Latin American cinema in optimal environments, whether in cinema spaces or online, as was the case with the virtual festival of 2020. The programme, curated by María Eugenia Ulfe (PUCP, Lima) along with Susana M. Kaiser (University of San Francisco), Fernando Vílchez Rodríguez (FILMADRID) and Gabriela Zamorano Villarreal (Colegio de Michoacán), included short and feature length documentaries, experimental works, essay films and fictions from over ten different countries from the region, several of which incorporated dialogue in indigenous languages such as Aymara, Quechua, Kichwa, Tsotsil and Zapoteco.

The trajectory and importance of the LASA Film Festival can be measured by the permanent presence of its annual awards in many important national and international film catalogues. The winners of the 2020 awards were no exception, with Best Film prize going to a cinematically distinctive documentary-fiction feature, *By the Name of Tania* (Mary Jiménez and Bénédicte Liénard, Peru, Belgium and Netherlands, 2019), that has achieved outstanding success on the international festival and arts cinema circuits. The Best Short Documentary was awarded to *Limbo* (Alexander L. Fattal, Colombia and United States, 2019), a dream-like account of the harrowing experiences of a former FARC guerrilla. The Special Achievement Award went to Chilean veteran Patricio Guzmán for *The Cordillera of Dreams* (Chile and France, 2019) which completed his contemplative cinematic trilogy on the relationship between historical memory, political trauma, and the landscape of Chile, and which acknowledges the sense of alienation Guzmán still experiences as an expatriate artist (Chang, 2020).[6]

[6] *The Cordillera of Dreams* "centers on the imposing landscape of the Andes that run the length of the country's Eastern border. At once protective and isolating, magisterial and indifferent, the Cordillera serves as an enigmatic focal point around which Guzmán contemplates the enduring legacy of the 1973 military coup d'etat. Along the way, Guzmán interviews artists, writers, and documentarians, drawing out their conflicted feelings towards the Cordillera and its relationship to Chilean national identity and history. Unflinching in its presentation of contemporary Chile, *The Cordillera of Dreams* moves beyond

Given its boundary-breaking content, format and origins, it seems worth contemplating the relevance of the Best Film winner further in the context of its nature as a work of educative impact and cinematic art, and as exemplar as a site for interdisciplinary, transnational enquiry. Like so many of the contemporary films from Latin America that have found global audiences fascinated by the images and stories of the region, *By the Name of Tania* emphasises the importance of human connectivity as a way out of tragedy and sacrifice. Directed by Peruvian Mary Jiménez with Belgian Bénédicte Liénard, their third film together is presented as a hybrid documentary-fiction film with a distinctive narrative bias. The 'Tania' of the title, portrayed by debut, non-professional actor Tanit Lidia Coquiche Cenepo, is a young indigenous Peruvian woman in search of a better future, who wants to escape the restricted destiny her small village promises her, but finds herself forced into prostitution in the gold mining areas of Peru, before being held captive and abused. Her words, spoken as voice-over, begin the film's presentation of her tragic journey that takes her from the Amazon jungle to Peru's mining region, from her house, where her grandmother died, to the cage of prostitution at the very heart of her sexual exploitation. The story of her journey is told in the first person but relates to and represents a destiny shared by many women like Tania, sacrificed by greed and machismo in this particular area of Peru.

Based on numerous true testimonies collected by the directors while filming their second film, *Sobre las brasas* [*Glowing Embers*] (2019) also set in Amazonian Peru, *By*

despair and looks towards the possibilities of political change by linking the ideological struggles of the past with the inequalities of the present."
(https://lasaweb.org/en/news/film/festival/winners/lasa2020/)

the Name of Tania depicts the suffering of a generation of young women.[7] These testimonies re-emerge and are given voice and face through Tania, herself a hybrid, composite woman whose story represents the many facets of the tragic destinies of otherwise voiceless and faceless women who are unprotected by the state. As Jiménez described in an interview published during the film's initial release campaign, 'Tania' is a "fictitious character who portrays in a highly structured fashion—as dictated by our story—the process by which a slave is produced; the need to earn money, exile, their alienation from their loved ones, the confiscation of their identity documents, prostitution, impossible debts to repay" (Engelen 2019). While the voice-over recounts personal stories. Tania's voice, which recounts many personal stories, is the driving force of this story, embodying those whose names and faces we have forgotten. Her voice, her face and her body serve as a connection between the introspective scenes, the group scenes that place Tania's fate within a larger context and community setting, and those that see her report her ordeal to the police station, an ordeal that has been experienced by so many others. As she speaks, the images fill out the story: the camera of cinematographer Virginie Surdej guides the viewer through the landscapes of the Amazon, with vast swathes of jungle punctuated by floating shantytowns which form the setting of this local yet global story of poverty, sacrifice and exploitation. As such, the perennial themes the film probes, that's to say those that "bring into focus subject matter that resonates across historical and cultural boundaries" (Hjort 2000, 106), include gender, violence and exploitation. And yet, with its clear focus on a specific set of issues in contemporary Latin America, the film also serves as a clear intervention "in debates that are ongoing within a given community … linked to local, [regional] or national politics." (2000, 106)

Cinema, politics and place-making in Latin America

[7] Their first co-directed film was *Le Chant des Hommes* [*Rising Voices*] (2015), a European-set fiction about migrants who occupy a church and start a hunger strike and through pain develop a sense of their common humanity.

Other examples of globally-feted filmmakers from Latin America who have embraced the local, the political and the transnational as mutually interdependent features of both their films and their industrial practices include Fernando Meirelles (Brazil), Claudia Llosa (Peru) and Andrés Wood (Chile), amongst many others.[8] Their work has made a significant virtue of intersectionality, with beautifully crafted films that are often both intimate (in terms of character-based storytelling) and expansive (in terms of tackling themes that resonate beyond borders). They transcend limits and boundaries that are spatial and non-spatial while at the same time remaining fixed on a desire to interpret local stories for global screens. As such, with self-assured works that delight, entertain and provoke their spectators, their success and recognition have resulted in the esteem and appreciation that, according to Dina Iordanova, is essential to the wellbeing and flourishing of a national or regional film ecology (2014: 213-220).

In an earlier article, I explored how the concept of transnational cinematographic connectivity helps to identify and understand some of the distinctive features of cultural encounter and identity as found in many films from Latin America, drawing on some of the most prominent scholarship to note the more significant trends (Barrow 2020: 432-445). For example, as Marvin D'Lugo, Ana Lopez and Laura Podalsky noted in the introduction to their comprehensive companion to Latin American cinema, the dominant arguments about the medium's national and/or transnational tendencies have largely recognized cinema as "local(ized) practice and/or as an art and industry that connects across broader territories" (2018: 3). They

[8] Meirelles became known first through the festival and arts cinema circuit for the film he co-directed with Katia Lund, *City of God* (2002), set in the poverty-stricken favelas of Rio de Janeiro in the 1970s. Llosa drew attention with *Madeinusa* (2005), set in the Peruvian Andes, followed in 2009 with Berlin prize-winner *Milk of Sorrow*, with a story about the impact of violence from the perspective of a tormented young woman. Wood's debut film, *Machuca* (2004) presents the September 1973 military coup in Chile through the eyes of a sensitive 11-year-old boy from a rich family and his friend from the shantytown.

suggest that new efforts might be made to understand the cinema of the region and its link to an understanding of place, emphasizing the need to consider diversity from multiple, intersecting perspectives. Moreover, in terms of cinema and place-making in Latin America, they ask how film’s various modes of address might “encourage the formation of imagined communities, whether class-based, nation-based, or transnational” (2018: 3). I would add to this proposition, echoing Susan Hayward’s deliberations on the framing of national cinema, that such films as those mentioned in this short essay that are given space for screening and debate as part of broader interdisciplinary academic and critical enquiries, serve to “problematise a nation—by exposing [and exploding] its masquerade of unity” (2000, 101). To conclude, these works of national and regional cinema help create new senses of space and place, and play an important role within the sphere of activism that has long been at the heart of the study of Latin America as a region. No wonder, then, that the model of the human rights-focused film and film festival have flourished as key features of Latin American studies worldwide, as sites of influential interdisciplinary and transnational enquiry in their own right.

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