

PART 2

New Challenges in Literature

Transnational Cinema: Representations of Latin American Geopolitical Struggles in Contemporary Anglo-American Films

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The process of transnationalization of economies, cultures, and societies has affected film production in different ways and has posed new challenges in our ways of understanding the relationship between national and transnational film production. From a Brazilian perspective, transnational cinema can be seen from aesthetic, economic and political terms in which the discussion around national and international elements in recent films like *City of God*, the *Motorcycle Diaries* and *Central Station* can be associated with the dismantling of the national cultures and identities within a globalized world that obeys the laws of the market economy rather than those of national States.¹ Although these films present a conjunction of factors defined by local elements, such as *mise-en-scène*, social themes and characters that are identified as national or regional, they also present a narrative close to that of an international cinema that tends to follow the conventions of the classic, logical and linear Hollywood narrative, thus offering little resistance to readings by different audiences, independently

¹ For a discussion of the interrelationship between national and international in cinema see Andrew Higison's "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema". In *Cinema & Nation*. Eds. Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie. London: Routledge, 2002. p.63-74.

of the nationality of this or that group of spectators². The globalization or transnationalization of cinema can also be thought of as a two-way street as we observe that the national allegory, as a political narrative form historically associated with third world countries, or parody, so commonly associated with postmodern cinema, are not privileged forms of this or that national cinema, but transit freely in contemporary productions. I mention here, as examples, two postmodern films that utilize pastiche and allegory to weave together a sharp critique of the course of national and international politics: Carla Camurati's *Carlota Joaquina*, which criticizes colonial Brazil from a contemporary perspective, and Alex Cox's *Walker*, which allegorizes the power relationships between the USA and Nicaragua up to the present day³. In this case, it can be argued that the transnationalization of aesthetic and narrative categories does not imply, necessarily, an emptying of the national and political content of contemporary cultural productions.

Transnationalization can also be defined in economic terms, as, since the mid 80s there has been a rash of major cross-media mergers such as "Disney and ABC Capital Cities; Turner and Time-Warner; Westinghouse and CBS; and Sony and Columbia", with "operations and distribution spanning every continent and nearly every technology"⁴ (Hess and Zimmerman 1). Documentaries and historical fictional films, which are also part of international co-productions, can be seen as forms capable of criticizing hegemonic power relations involving different countries and the unequal forces that contend within the fluidity of transnational

² Fredric Jameson discusses the question of the national and the global in post-modern cinema in *Espaço e Imagem: teorias do pós-moderno e outros ensaios de Fredric Jameson*. 3.ed. Org. and Trans. Ana Lucia Almeida Gazzola. Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 2004. See also Ivana Bentes for a discussion of the Aesthetization of Hunger in "Da Estética à Cosmética da Fome". *Jornal do Brasil*, 08/07/2001.

³ For an analysis of these two films see Anelise R. Corseuil, "Estudos Culturais e a hibridização da paródia e do alegórico no filme histórico contemporâneo: confrontos e transbordamentos." In *Palco, Página e Tela*. Anelise R. Corseuil and John Caughie, orgs. Florianópolis: Insular, 2000.

⁴ See Hamid Naficy for a discussion of transnationalization and "accented cinema", p.126.

capital. This paper analyses, as cases in point, *A Place Called Chiapas*, a Canadian documentary, released in 1998, and two historical fictional films, *Salvador* (1986), directed by Oliver Stone, and *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), films produced with funds and subsidies from a variety of sources: governmental and private, national and international. Besides employing people from various nationalities, the transnational process of production and distribution of these films illustrate the difficulties in separating national and international processes of film production nowadays. Beyond the issue of film production, as Robert Stam points out, “if the nationalist discourse of the 1960s drew sharp lines between First and Third World, oppressor and oppressed, post-nationalist discourse replaces such binarisms with a more nuanced spectrum of subtle differentiations, in a new global regime where First and Third world are mutually imbricated” (Stam 32). *A Place Called Chiapas*, directed by Nettie Wild, involved subsidies from CBC, NFB, Téléfilm Canada, Canada Wild Production, among other companies; *Salvador* was produced by Hemdale Film Corporation and was distributed by 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, Polygram video, MGM/UA among others; and *The Motorcycle Diaries*, co-produced by Robert Redford, includes the following production companies: Film Four, South Fork Pictures, Tu Vais Voir, Inca Films S.A. among other international partners. In spite of the internationalism associated with the processes of production and distribution of these films, which could indicate a certain effacing of the specificity of local elements of Latin American histories and political struggles that the films represent, I argue that these films reinscribe Latin American geopolitical struggles within a transnational context. As the films offer a critique of the role played by international media networks in their representation of political struggles in Latin America, as they reveal the unequal relation of power among the nations involved in these conflicts, and the flow of transnational capital in its crossing of national borders, the audience is capable of perceiving the inclusion of the local within a broader political map. The aesthetics used in these films tend to oscillate between an international classic style and a more parodic, fragmented, metalinguistic language that reveals the various places from which these films speak: North America and Europe, and their perspective on Latin America. In what follows I will discuss the importance of political films in a transnational scenario of film production.

The term defined by Alison Landsbergh as *prosthetic memory*, used to describe how popular memory can be shaped by mass technologies that allow the spectator to incorporate as individual experience non-experienced historical events (quoted in Burgoyne, 105)⁵, aptly summarizes the influence that icons and images can exert in the collective imaginary. Within this context, various film practices come into play—not only the Hollywood blockbuster but also political films and other alternative film incorporating their own alternative practices, which fit Hamid Naficy’s definition of “accented cinema”, for a cinema of exiled, diasporic and emergent modes of film making, as an alternative to dominant forms of narrative. According to Naficy, alternative cinema is produced in the “interstitial spaces” of society and mainstream film industry. Even though this alternative cinema is not strongly motivated by money, it “is nevertheless enabled by capital—in a peculiar mixed economy consisting of market forces within media industries; personal, private, public, and philanthropic funding sources; and ethnic and exilic economies. As a result, the alternatives are never entirely free from capital, nor should they be reduced to it” (Naficy 132-33). At the same time that documentaries and political films are not part of major Hollywood transnational companies, neither are they completely outside the market. They can be measured against blockbusters, as differentiated spaces that offer a very rich texture from which we can understand “otherness”. In these films Latin American geopolitical struggles are located within a broader perspective, since politics, class struggle and the relationship between the State and the media are seen as evolving within an international perspective. The films analysed in this paper represent a Latin America composed, predominantly, of a population of indigenous peoples displaced from the centre of power, as much in relation to Latin America itself, as in relation to Europe and the USA. *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Salvador* and *A Place Called Chiapas* are not only representations of political, social and historical issues related to Latin America but they also allow a reflection on the uses of language and discourses that historically have been used to define Latin America—colonialist, liberalist and democratic discourses.

⁵ Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

A Place Called Chiapas

This film, awarded the prize for best documentary produced in Canada in 1998, and the recipient of the Genie Award in 1999, presents the uprising of the “Zapatist” Army for National Liberation, led by the sub-commander Marcos, against and the president of Mexico, Zedillo. The conflict happens in consequence of the implantation of NAFTA (the North America Free Trade Agreement) in Mexico, in 1994. The narrative in off explains that NAFTA facilitated the suppression, on the part of the Mexican government, of the Mayan Indians’ settlement in small subsistence farms, as well as favoring the boycott of the corn production by Mayan Indians, since the corn consumed in Mexico was being imported from the U.S. at a price inferior to that of corn produced by the Indians. Members of the Catholic Church tried to mediate the conflict as the Indian population, whose members are interviewed in the film, were victimized by the action of paramilitary groups, *zapatistas* and landowners. The documentary can be qualified as “politically correct” in its attempt to present to different audiences an external gaze at the Chiapas conflict. Nettie Wild positions herself as a foreigner who presents the political problem in Chiapas from a personal perspective. In the initial sequence, her narrative in off draws a political panorama of Chiapas, offering a particular reading of it by her as a Canadian. The subsequent scenes depict Nettie’s group trying to penetrate into the Chiapas territory. Nettie is then seen in middle plane, inside her pick-up truck, arguing with the guards about the need to show them a passport, since she is already on Mexican territory, where there should not be frontiers. The film raises a question about Chiapas—“What place is this?”—to later answer it with a sequence of images where a map of Mexico presents some spots in red, small Chiapas villages that, according to the narrative in off, are “frontiers within frontiers,” determining internal differences in the Mexican territory itself. That is, the purpose of the documentary is to represent these internal differences in Mexico, instead of homogenizing the diverse ethnicities and interests.

The sequence in voice-off, explaining on the map the trajectory of Nettie Wild’s group, continues to inform viewers that from the small village of La Realidad there are no more roads. The subtext of the visit suggests a problem of representation since the place cannot be represented in terms of cartography, thus bringing to memory the various migration

currents of cartographers that came to the Americas during the 18th and 19th centuries. The absence of roads to represent the Chiapas space can be understood as a parodic reading of colonialist-historical texts and explorers' travel writings. Authors like Humboldt, for example, "reinvented" South America's nature in a dramatic and grandiose tone, converting what was already common knowledge among the local inhabitants into European knowledge, national and continental (Pratt 120). Various other sequences in the film reiterate the documentarist's conscious posture regarding the process of representation in hegemonic discourses that attribute to themselves a certain authority to speak of a specific and distinct historical reality. In the sequence in which Nettie begins her interview with commander Marcos, the audience is allowed to listen to Nettie's questions, while framing Marcos, and keeping Nettie off-screen. The inversion of the roles of interviewed and interviewer, is revealed when Marcos asks how long she has been in Chiapas. He then comments that eight months is a very short time to understand Chiapas, explaining soon after that he has been there for twelve years and "only now . . . is starting to understand the place better." We can read the inversion of roles as a way of inverting the positions of interviewed and interviewer, revealing once more that Nettie democratically accepts Marcos's criticism as it places her in the position of an external observer whose understanding of Chiapas is rather restricted, a position that undermines the very authority of an "author" of documentaries.

Salvador

Similarly to *A Place Called Chiapas*, Oliver Stone's *Salvador* presents a critical perspective of its own discourse as it questions the journalistic coverage of the Civil war in El Salvador between 1980 and 1981—the murder of Archbishop Romero, the ambush and the brutal death of various women missionaries, and Reagan's reelection. In this chaos, Boyle, a cold and detached journalist who, for anything better being offered, ends up covering the Salvadorian war, falls in love with Maria (Elpedia Carrillo) and takes a more ethical stand about the North-American interference in the conflict. The film goes beyond the romance between Maria and Boyle to place him as an eye-witness to various historical atrocities committed in El Salvador, the manicheism of the political discourse preached by

Reagan, and the manipulations by the media. The film presents the political events in El Salvador as a consequence of the North-American interference in the war, illustrated by the presence of the CIA officials and the North-American army in El Salvador, and by Reagan's reports on television during the development of the civil war. In this context, Boyle's inability to understand the reality of terror implanted in El Salvador transforms him into an allegory of the rupture between North-American popular and democratic ideals and the military practice of oppression sustained or justified by the democratic ideals themselves. Amid political discourses, half truths and historical atrocities, Boyle stands between the violence of the war and the democratic discourse preached by Reagan.

In this way, at the same time Stone uses a realist narrative associated with Latin America, especially with background poverty, such as the garbage dump where the bodies of political prisoners are cast off, he also problematizes the construction of the real in war journalism. By juxtaposing the realism of photography and the meta-narrative provided by montage, the film duplicates on an aesthetic level the problematization of the connection between the North-American military force and the liberal discourse of Reagan.

Salvador problematizes the relation between the U.S. and El Salvador by revealing the coexistence of the various discourses that permeate the film. Not even Boyle could save El Salvador or Maria. His laconic return to the U.S. reveals the impotence of old discourses and forms of representation imposed on the reality of an "other" who cannot be shaped easily and demands a redimensioning of places, positions, perspectives and forms of representation.

The Motorcycle Diaries

The Motorcycle Diaries can be divided into two major parts, before and after young Guevara's involvement with social and political struggles, the dividing point being his encounter with a couple of miners in the copper mines of Chile. As in a rite of passage, once Guevara, not yet "Che" Guevara, is exposed to the exploitation of the copper miners and the silencing of the communists in Chile, the film narrative loses its focus on the young bourgeois medical student, whose fortune could have been

enlarged had he married his promised fiancée, to engage itself on Guevara's growing awareness of the process of exclusion and oppression imposed on the indigenous Latin American population.

Parallel to the process of sentimentalization and linearity of the narrative, very close to Hollywood classic standards, there are elements in the film that allow a certain distancing between the audience and the story lived by Guevara. Such elements are presented in more panoramic shots in which the camera distances itself from the motorcycle, from a low angle and with an objective point of view, to reveal the landscapes from the Pampas to the Andes. In the credits sequence there is also a number of cuts that show shots in black and white of the characters that appeared during the film. In this sequence the process of the construction of the narrative becomes more visible as the medium-length and close-up shots of the characters that participated in the film, as a kind of portraiture in black and white, repositions them in a universe that is more real and more documentary-like. It is as if the film, about to end, makes a kind of permanency possible for these people/characters, not as nostalgic elements in black and white photos, but as elements that move independently of the constructed narrative and that are therefore real. In these sequences there exists an opening up of the filmic text that redefines the role of the audience as possible interpreters and conductors of the narrative.

The films analysed here propose, at the same time, a local and a transnational reading of social struggles. For audiences, independently of their nationality, social class, and political engagements, are able to transcend their space toward an understanding of other subjects and other cultures that are inextricably linked to each other within a world in which genres, cultural frontiers and political borders are constantly being blurred. In this sense, Guevara (played by Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal) could be read as the ideal audience, the one capable of transcending his own self. In the same way that Walter Salles transcends Brazil as he looks at Latin America, perhaps one of the first Brazilian directors to make a movie about Latin America. In similar ways, Rick Boyle is also reformulating his vision of the world, as Nettie Wild redraws her perspective of the virtual and real relations between North America and Mexico. From the physical map of Latin America, we, the audiences, go through a process of interculturality, being transformed by these different journeys (from Canada to Chiapas;

from the US to El Salvador and from Argentina to Venezuela), displaced from our own place of origin for the understanding of another political and social I.

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