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FRAMING LATIN
AMERICAN CINEMA

CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL
PERSPECTIVES

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♦
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◆ Chapter 12
 Will There Be Latin American Cinema
 in the Year 2000? Visual Culture in a
 Postnational Era

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(translated by Adriana X. Tatam and Ann Marie Stock)

Who is going to narrate identity? Identity is a construct that is narrated. Founding events—almost always referring to the appropriation of a territory by a group of people or to the independence achieved in confrontations with strangers—are established. Tales accumulate about those inhabitants who defend the territory, solve internal conflicts, and establish ways that differentiate these people from others. Scholarly books and museums, civil rituals and political discourse were for a long time the elements with which the Identity (with a capital “I”) was formulated and its rhetorical narrative constructed.

Radio and film contributed to the organization of narratives of identity in national societies during the first half of this century. Both amassed heroic epics and great collective events into a chronicle of daily vicissitudes: common habits and tastes, styles of dress, and dialects that distinguished one place from another. According to the analyses of Carlos Monsiváis and Jesús Martín Barbero, radio programs enabled diverse regional groups—once distant and disconnected—to recognize one another as parts of a whole (“Notas sobre la cultura”, *De los medios*, 180–83). *Noticieros* or news-reels that initiated communication between distant zones made

possible new syntheses of this changing national identity, much like the movies that taught migrants how to adapt to city life and deal with intercultural conflicts.

Mexican and Argentine cinema, which situated the narration of identity within visual mass culture in the 1940s and 1950s, reorganized their function in the 1970s when, aligned with the incipient television industry, they structured the imaginary of developing modernization. The mass media were agents of technological innovation; they helped us grow accustomed to relying on electronic appliances in domestic life, and they liberalized our customs with a more cosmopolitan horizon. At the same time they unified consumers under a common national vision. Because these media were supported predominantly by national capital and adhered to an ideology of development that entrusted modernization to each country’s substitution of imports and industrialization, even the more internationally recognized actors—television and advertising—encouraged us to buy national products and disseminated information about them.

Up until twenty years ago, part of an artistic and cultural style defined national identities. Even when the early twentieth-century avant-garde movements moved beyond their homelands, they continued to be identified with particular societies: Italian futurism, Russian constructivism, and Mexican muralism. The names associated with many artistic movements in the second half of this century suggest that national profiles continued to define innovation. One talked of Italian neorealism, the French New Wave, and the New German Cinema.

We want to analyze the contradiction between this manner of characterizing artistic movements and the transnational conditions of the 1990s in which art and communication are produced, circulated, and received. What remains of national identities in a time of globalization and interculturalism, of multinational coproduction and the Chain of the Americas, of free trade agreements and regional integration? What remains when information, artists, and capital constantly cross borders?

We live in a time characterized by the intersection of territories and distinct cultural codes. Some films come to mind that address this phenomenon of *multiculturalidad*: for example, Wim Wenders’s *The State of Things*, which begins more or less as a metaphysical

drama filmed in Europe and culminates as a thriller set in Los Angeles's multiracial streets. In view of this multinational hybridization, which also blends various genres and techniques, one must ask if—aside from art and mass communication—there exist scenarios of national identity?

Private versus Public: Rediscussing Vices and Virtues

In order to assess the impact of these changes in the relationship of artistic practices to national cultures, one needs to take into account two great transformations related to the private and public spheres that occurred in the same period. First, the relegating of culture to the home, increasing private culture (radio, TV, video) and decreasing attendance at movie houses, theaters, concerts, and other spectacles that rely on the collective use of urban space. Second, the transferring from the state to the private sector of the responsibility for the production, financing, and diffusion of cultural expression. I will outline recent research findings that address these processes in Mexico. Although the information applies to Mexico's situation, I intend to situate the argument within a broader reflection on the future of visual and electronic cultures in Latin America.

The first process, the displacement of cinema from the public arena to the home, involves not only changes in patterns of consumption but also changes in the production and financing of the offering. While movie theaters were closing in large numbers (more than two hundred disappeared in 1992 in Mexico), the purchases of television sets and videocassette recorders increased dramatically. Of 16 million Mexican households, more than 13 million have televisions and more than 5 million own VCRs. Videovisión, the former leader in the field, now linked to Televisa, has already established 722 outlets in the country, primarily in well-populated areas but also in rural villages. There are 674 video stores and 278 shops and supermarkets that reserve store space for video rentals.¹ Thus, the closing of movie theaters and the reduction in box-office receipts do not imply that people watch fewer movies, only that they now watch them at home.

Have ways of looking at cinema changed? Yes, and so have film production and communication. At least three changes should be

emphasized in relation to cinema's function in the development of national cultures. First, the importance of films, which are now seen in greater numbers due to the convenience of home viewing, has decreased in the process of becoming linked with a more diverse and far-reaching system of audiovisual programming.

Second, despite Televisa's control over the Mexican video market, the vast majority of material offered through rental and purchasing centers comes from Hollywood Pictures, Paramount, RCA, Columbia, Touchstone, Turner, Universal, and Walt Disney; Mexican films take up very little catalog space and Latin American and European titles are absent altogether, unless they happen to be distributed by a U.S. company. In a survey of moviegoers conducted in Mexico City, 57.6 percent of those interviewed said they generally watch movies on TV or on video. This percentage will increase, taking into account the age of the population; the historical tendency is for a constant increase in the viewing of films in the domestic environment. This preference for watching movies at home is in direct contrast with the limited availability of Mexican films on video. When asked where they had seen the movies they considered to be the most important, 33.8 percent responded in the cinema, 37.4 percent answered on television, and only 2.1 percent said on the VCR. The low usage of video in the national film industry explains in part the scant offerings of Mexican movies in video stores. The difficulty of access to national cinema is compounded if one considers that the period least represented in video catalogs, the 1940s and 1950s, is the one preferred by the majority of those surveyed (García Canclini and Módena).

Third, the radical change in supply and demand is accompanied by a radical change in investment and financial strategies for film production. Whereas thirty years ago a film attempted to recover its costs through national and international screenings, it must now negotiate a range of channels: public and especially private television, other national networks, cable television services, video satellites, laser disc, and so on. It is no secret that in these avenues of advanced technology, financial and programming control rests in the hands of large transnational enterprises. The ability of national film, television, and video production decreases as the complexity and innovation of technology increases.

Mexico, like most Latin American countries, does not have a mechanism in place for regular investment in up-to-date innovations in the exchange of information, nor in the training of national personnel to effectively manage such equipment. We import from the United States almost all the electronic equipment used for cable television: signal codifiers and decoders; converters for VHF channels; specialized equipment to control signals purchased by subscribers; computing equipment specialized to control services and subscriptions; equipment for video recording, copying, editing, monitors, cassettes, and so on.

These tendencies—combined with the transnationalization of cinematographic offerings and the privatization of their consumption—are accentuated by the state's reduced role in culture industries and mass communication. The Latin American states, which through neoliberal politics have impoverished culture budgets, still maintain a greater presence in the administration of those forms of culture bound to territorial identity: archaeological sites, museums, the promotion of arts and national crafts. The audiovisual industry is relegated to the private sector. In other words, the most dynamic sectors of cultural expression, which produce the most innovative work, suffer the greatest repercussions. The private sphere, where transnationalization and deterritorialization prevail, has almost exclusive control over the voices and images.

What will happen to national cultures if television, video, and other related forms of technoculture are left in the hands of those with commercial and transnational objectives? How to avoid increasing dependency on foreign communication while television channels continue to merge and no policy for acquiring cultural technologies exists? In the case of Mexico, facilitating the investment and expansion of foreign enterprises may reduce Televisa's monopoly, thereby encouraging, through competition, the improvement of quality. Nevertheless, the expansion of television offerings by means of the arrival of *Multivisión*—a Turner channel—opens the industry only to U.S. programming and reduces the matter to one of marketing alone. This would not help to diversify or promote the cultural enrichment of our national screens.

It is true that Mexican cinema seems to be recuperating, and that other announced actions—such as dedicating channel 22 to independent culture and information—give reason to hope. Yet,

what is the good of an isolated impulse toward national cinema if the vast majority of audiovisual space continues to be considered only a collection of settings that permit large corporations to hunt for clients? There is no reason to expect that the most powerful media will enable us to look at ourselves and to recognize our own cultural and regional diversity in order to consider our identity.

These recent changes, and their foreseeable escalation by NAFTA, provide another perspective for questions crucial to the identity debate—for example, the confrontation between tradition and modernity. The principal problem is no longer whether we should opt for one or the other; rather, it involves knowing if, with this most recent modernizing impulse, NAFTA, the key zones of cultural development—both traditional and modern—will be reorganized in terms of market value only.

It is common knowledge that the most dynamic and influential cultural activities require high investments, so private enterprises logically occupy that space and reap the financial benefits. But the question remains as to whether a society's sociocultural sense of itself can be produced like merchandise and accumulated like capital. Isn't supporting certain areas of culture and social welfare also a triumph of modern cultural development? Human rights, aesthetic innovation, scientific investigation, and the collective construction of a sense of history—being, in the public interest—cannot be privatized or subjected to the rules of pragmatism and economic gain.

If we do not wish to renounce this, we must revise the state's function in and responsibility for education and culture. This does not involve a return to the state's idealized perception of itself as the seat of telluric nationalism, or as an agent of populist donations. (Television and video programming performance indicates that there is no reason to confer exclusive control to private enterprises.) What it does involve is to reconsider the state as a locus of public interest, as arbiter or guarantor of the collective need for information, recreation, and innovation, and not to subordinate these needs under commercial viability. In this scenario, the state or collaborative groups involving the government, private foundations, and independent associations must continue to subsidize many programs—public education, libraries, museums,

regional and national television, experimental and cultural programming—to prevent the subordination of public interests to market forces.²

Rethinking national identities today supposes a questioning of the ways the state represents these identities. At the same time it is necessary to refute the neoliberals' swift transfer of the responsibility for narrating history and identity to enterprising monopolies and reducing the circulation of those narratives to consumption in homes. The weakening of the nation-state should open up the possibility for diverse voices and images—both local and transnational—to create many public scenarios in order to discuss the ways in which we wish to change and the directions for achieving that: radio stations, television channels, and independent video circuits that are able to compete for public funding, with the only conditions being the quality and collective interest or aesthetic experimentation of their programming.

From Cinema, TV, and Video to Audiovisual Space

If we consider the four principal cinema industries in Latin America—those of Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico—we find that the first three have suffered a production decline of 60 to 90 percent in recent years. In Mexico, state-supported films, which represented 26.5 percent of the country's film production between 1971 and 1976, dropped to 7 percent between 1985 and 1988. From 1989 until the present, there has been a slight turnaround. The rejuvenation of cinema is very precarious, however, in that it does not extend to video stores or find an outlet in Televisa's channels, which cater to 88 percent of TV audiences (García Canclini and Piccini).³

The shift in spectators' preference from public theaters to their homes accounts for only part of the increasing difficulties of the Latin American film industry. One must also consider the disabling of cinema's industrial infrastructure in our countries, the lack of investment in technology for film production and even for the maintenance of auditoriums. The deterioration of the quality of films and their projections coupled with the rapid improvement of video quality and the televisual image (which will be boosted even more with the expansion of high-resolution televi-

sion) increases the comparative advantages of the "cultura al domicilio" or "at-home culture."

In many European countries, and to a lesser extent in the United States and Canada, cinema is attempting to save itself by drawing upon television and video techniques so as to lower production costs. In the process of European integration, these diverse media—cinema, TV, video—are conceived as part of a similar paradigm under the rubric of audiovisual space. This unified perception of the diverse media is justified as much by the integration of production techniques in the three systems as by their aesthetic and cultural interrelations, and also because consumers tend to consider them together.

How do we situate ourselves in this process? In a study carried out recently on the possible effects that NAFTA will have on Mexican cinema and on foreign films projected in Mexico, we found few foreseeable changes in *production*. Few Mexican movies are filmed in the United States. As for foreign producers who want to film in Mexico, they may import almost everything they use (animals, film, cosmetics, and even technical equipment) without paying taxes. Equipment considered nonessential, currently assessed a 20 percent duty, may be freed from this stipulation by NAFTA. With respect to *distribution*, the changes under NAFTA will benefit the U.S. more than Mexico. Presently there are no duties on exports of foreign films to the United States; they do exist in Mexico but they will be abolished by the agreement so U.S. films will enter more easily. A recent estimate by the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (Mexican Film Institute) indicates that U.S. cinema accounts for 62 percent of the films released in Mexico: some cineasts and critics predict that the number will soon reach 80 percent. Mexico's *Ley de Cinematografía* (cinema law) until recently required that Mexican films hand over 50 percent of all screen earnings. (Compañía Operadora de Teatros, S.A., the only company that has complied with the policy in the last few years, is now in the process of privatizing.) The elimination of this requirement will also contribute to an increased proportion of U.S. films.

Upcoming changes to international distribution and exhibition must be added to the conditions already mentioned. When U.S. chains begin in three or four years to transmit movies via

satellite to the entire continent—projecting them on large hi-fi video screens installed in medium-sized viewing rooms—they will benefit from reduced circulation and exhibition costs.

Such changes confirm the need for global policies that integrate solutions for the film industry with those aimed at television and video. Within this framework, the NAFTA agreement will facilitate the generation of better facilities for the entry of U.S. and, to a lesser extent, Canadian filmmaking groups that want to use Mexican landscapes and historical monuments. But it can only happen by acknowledging the reconfiguration of the audiovisual market that has been taking place over the past few decades; in not assessing these changes, Mexican and Latin American cultural industries have fallen behind.

From this perspective, the question as to who will narrate our identity does not seem to offer a globalized response. A look to the foreseeable future of Latin American electronic and audiovisual production, or even just a glance at the list of film and video advertisements in our cities, reveals that more than moving from the national to the global, there is an increasing dependence on a single country. A transformation imagined by a group of comedians seems appropriate to this discussion. In conjecturing as to what history books would say about Mexico in the twenty-first century: "Mexico is bordered on the north by the U.S., on the south by the U.S., on the east and west by the U.S., and even on the inside, by the U.S."

From the Last Film to the Last Polemic

Perhaps the future is not quite so bleak if we consider some recent European debates about the future of cinema and about audiovisual spaces. There exist, on the one hand, those who promote a Hollywood-style tactic that would consist of relocating the production toward countries where the costs are lower and the markets are less saturated. Such new "Hollywood countries," including Singapore, Hong Kong, India, Mexico, and Egypt, could furnish locations, cheap labor, and untapped publics (Michelet, 156–61). On the other hand, there are those who foresee a *cine-mundo* or "cinema world" that would purportedly strive to use more sophisticated technology and marketing strategies in order

to become incorporated into a world-scale market. Coppola, Spielberg, and Lucas, for example, construct spectacular narratives independent of culture, level of education, national history, economic development, or political regime. *Cinemundo*, says Charles-Albert Michelet, "is closer to Claude Lévi-Strauss than to John Ford" (159). It deals with fabricating a spectacle dazzling enough to persuade television viewers that once or twice a year it is worth leaving the sofa at home in order to occupy a less comfortable seat in the dark theater.

Can these tactics arrest the decline of cinema? Neither the neo-Hollywood nor the *cinemundo* model occasions innovations that renew the language or the social and narrative role of cinema. It is difficult to conceive of how cinema will sustain itself—not to mention resolve the crisis—without artistic innovation that transcends the occasional dazzle of special effects.

Perhaps it would be easier, Michelet suggests, to change the conception of cinema from being a distraction to being an instrument of a mass media that today organizes the communication industry. In the past it produced terminal benefits, but in the future it should generate intermediate benefits, programs for the networks, and serve as an industry subcontractor. Although it would lose in creative independence, it would gain in security of serving the needs of the television programmers and video distributors. Of course, cinema must adapt itself to the more frivolous tastes of television audiences; there will remain very few movie houses for those nostalgia buffs interested in history, national identity, and ethnicity.⁴

It pays to ask, however, whether a product as culturally complex and fertile as cinema plays with its destiny only under the rules of standardization and globalization of the economic rationale. Some recent Latin American films with considerable public and critical success or with a short-term repercussion in television and in video would not enter easily in an apocalyptic vision. Brazilian cinema of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, which, thanks to the combination of testimony about identity and the internationalization of the culture in that country with an imaginative and parodic representation style, seduced audiences inside and outside of Brazil: from *Macunaima* to *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* to *Xica da Silva*. I am thinking of the rereadings be-

tween *policíacos* and politics in Argentine history made by Adolfo Aristarain; in the narrations of the history of daily intimacy proposed in Mexico by *Rojo amanecer* (*Red Dawn*) and *Como agua para chocolate* (*Like Water for Chocolate*). This last film, viewed by more than 1.5 million spectators in Mexico in just a few months, may seem to be nothing more than a *telenovela*, perhaps better made than most. Yet, it is connected to other less conventional Mexican films—*La tarra* (*The Homework*), *La mujer de Benjamín* (*Benjamin's Woman*), *El builtó*—that rework the crisis of personal identity and political projects with irony and irreverence and without complacent nostalgia.

These and other films, well received by heterogeneous publics, reveal that identity and history—including local and national identities—fit in the cultural industries even with their need for high financial yield. Along with the deterritorialization of the arts, there are strong movements of reterritorialization. These are represented by social movements that affirm the local, and also by mass-media processes such as regional radio and television, and the creation of micromarkets of music and folk elements; the “de-massification” and *mestización* of consumption engenders difference and diverse forms of local rootedness.⁵

Nations and ethnicities continue to exist. The key problem seems not to be the risk that globalization will erase them but rather to understand how ethnic, regional, and national identities reconstitute themselves through processes of intercultural hybridization. If we conceive of nations as multidetermined scenarios, where diverse symbolic systems intersect and interpenetrate, the question is what kind of cinema and television narrates heterogeneity and the coexistence of various codes in a single group, and even in a single subject.

We need an electronic iconology that corresponds to the current redefinition of identity. By constituting itself not only in relation to a territory but also in the middle of international webs of information, we must work with a definition of identity that is not only *sociospacial* but *sociocommunicational* as well; that is, a definition that articulates the local, national, and postnational cultures that play an increasingly significant role in configuring identities everywhere and in restructuring the significance of local or regional qualities emanating from distinct territorial experiences.

If identity conforms in relation to multiple contexts, then the mass media associated with the transcultural relocation of communication, including cinema, will not be ill prepared to act.

Multimedia and multicontextuality are two key notions for redefining the social role of cinema and other communication systems. The extent to which cinema is revived depends on our relocation of it in a multimedia audiovisual space; national and local identities can persist if we resituate them in a communication that is multicontextual. Identity, made more dynamic through this process, will not be only a ritualized narration, the monotonous repetition of outmoded principles. Identity, as a narrative we constantly reconstruct with others, is also a coproduction.

Notes

This essay first appeared in Mexico City in Spanish, published in “La jornada,” *Nueva Época* 193 (21 February 1993): 27–33.

1. Report by Deborah Holtz for research in the course “Cinema, Television and Video: Habits of Audiovisual Consumption in Mexico,” carried out under the auspices of the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía⁶ under the coordination of Néstor García Canclini, Ella F. Quintal, Enrique Sánchez Rutz, and José Manuel Valenzuela Arce. The total number of cinema closings and the increase of televisions and videocassette recorders correspond to the year 1997.

2. For a more fully developed discussion of this point, see Gilberto Guevara Niebla and Néstor García Canclini (coordinators), *La educación y la cultura ante el Tratado de Libre Comercio* (Mexico City: Nueva Imagen, 1992), especially in the chapters of María y Campos, García Canclini, and Carlos Monsiváis.

3. The figure of 88 percent of the audience tuning in to Televisa channels corresponds to our 1989 survey of cultural consumption carried out in Mexico City. Given the reduced coverage of the other channels in the country, we suppose that national statistics would give a greater rating to Televisa.

4. Bernardo Miegge treats the related debate in his article “L'industrialisation de l'audiovisuel,” in *CinemaAction* (1988): 162–65.

5. Two critics have recently addressed this question: Armand Mattelart (“La communication-monde” [Paris: La Découverte, 1992]) and Stuart Hall (“The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” in Anthony D. King, ed., *Culture, Globalization and the World System* [Binghamton: State Univ. of New York, 1991]).

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