

**LUISELA ALVARAY**  
DePaul University

# Are we global yet? New challenges to defining Latin American cinema

## ABSTRACT

*A proliferation of exchanges between film industries in the United States, Europe and Latin America are redefining the Latin American film industry in the twenty-first century. This article considers how these cross-border and cross-cultural flows may inform new ways for understanding national and regional cinemas. In the following discussion, I analyse emerging industrial practices and producers' responses to the new transnational alliances. I follow this by examining the critical debates over the effects that such structural changes may be having on the diversification of narratives and their contribution in the articulation of transforming national and regional identities.*

## KEYWORDS

Latin American cinema  
film industries  
co-productions  
globalization  
deterritorialization  
transculturalism  
hybridization  
national and regional  
identities

In 2007, Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo Del Toro, playfully referred in the media as the 'three amigos', were standing as contenders for Academy Awards. As never before, Mexico was competing in sixteen categories with the films that the trio made, and the three film-makers soon became the new face of Latin American cinema to the rest of the world. Their films had been a product of transnational co-production and distribution deals of which one constant was the involvement of a major Hollywood company. Together their films had collected more than \$247 million – something no other Latin American film-makers had ever done.<sup>1</sup>

1. Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2005) was co-produced by France, United States and Mexico and distributed by Paramount. Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) was co-produced by Mexico, Spain and United States and distributed by Warner Bros. And

Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) was co-produced by United Kingdom and United States and distributed by Universal Pictures.

The trend of internationally celebrated Latin American films and filmmakers continues, as does their success with audiences around the world. Among 2009 releases, for instance, Uruguayan Adrián Biniez's *Gigante!*, Peruvian Claudia Llosa's *La teta asustada/The Milk of Sorrow* and Julián Hernández's *Rabioso sol, rabioso cielo/Enraged Sun, Enraged Sky* won prizes at the Berlin Film Festival. In the same year, Brazilian Walter Salles received the honorary Bresson Award at the Venice film festival. A year later, Juan José Campanella's *El secreto de sus ojos/The Secret in Their Eyes* won an Academy Award. These examples are illustrative of a much longer list of international prizes and recognitions to the new regional cinema.

Not without motivation, the press, critics and public began referring to the 'Hollywoodization' of Latin American cinema, or to its turn to commercialism. The great majority of the films that are making inroads in the international marketplace and have crossed over to broader and diverse audiences have also been co-produced or picked up by transnational media corporations. Such corporations have benefitted from this particular trade, but the fact is that local industries have also benefitted from such transactions. The growth that larger industries, like the Argentine and Brazilian, and smaller ones, like the Chilean, Peruvian and Uruguayan, have shown is due to a large extent to the alliances and exchanges made with other industries around the world.

In a previous article, I attempted to map the national, regional and global waves reconfiguring the patterns of production and distribution of films in Latin America since the early 1990s (Alvaray 2008). My intention here is to attempt to understand the consequences of the intensification of the free flow of films, talent and funding between the film industries in the United States, Europe and Latin America and to discuss how this may be affecting the role of cinema in the articulation of national, regional and cultural identities. Even though the idea of 'nation' has been destabilized by cross-border currents, certainly national frameworks still exist from industrial and critical perspectives to comprehend the rapid changes of the media industries. It seems important, therefore, to trace how the new structures of cultural interaction and exchange are affecting film narratives as much as how the national and the regional are being re-inscribed in the new transnational geography.

The contentious debate about the strategy of co-production in Latin America sometimes revolves around the idea that films with international appeal are 'selling out' to commercial trends and are becoming disengaged from national topics. Many of these films have repeatedly utilized a hybrid style that some have qualified as merely copying commercial cinema produced in the North. In the following discussion, I will trace some recent critical trends in Latin American cinema scholarship that insightfully examines box office successes and offer alternative perspectives.

## **GLOBALIZATION, THE NATIONAL AND THE REGIONAL**

The idea of the national and the pan-regional was at the very centre of the theories of cinema that defined the kinds of films needed in the revolutionary decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Setting aside popularity and pleasure, the films of the New Latin American Cinema movement delivered a politically committed message whose purpose was to contribute to the independence of Latin American societies from neo-colonialist powers. Dependence was thought of in terms of economics (First vs. Third World), culture (US culture in Hollywood films vs. revolutionary films) and class (the bourgeoisie vs. the

proletariat). Thus, national and regional identities and the discourses around them were set against a clear and discrete dominant paradigm.

Nonetheless, politics and economics shifted during the 1980s and 1990s, making radical positions seem dispensable and struggle over representation appear less urgent than in the previous decades. The new forms of organization of the film industries in the twenty-first century raise questions about the transforming national and regional imaginaries. From a diversity of perspectives, film continues to be considered in Latin America as a medium that serves to articulate a national experience. It tends to provide national communities with material to debate their own realities. In fact, much of current criticism uses such a demand as an implicit parameter for assessing the validity of a particular oeuvre. Multidirectional and transnational communication networks, however, set the documentation and articulation of the national contexts against more readily available regional and global contexts. Henry Jenkins has sustained that a new form of 'global consciousness' is inspired by the transcultural flows of popular culture (Jenkins 2006: 156). In other words, the unbounded circulation of culture is repositioning our own idiosyncratic sense of locality at all levels. National and regional differences are permanently reformulated. Hence, it seems reasonable to consider the negotiation between different forms of (local and global) consciousness when constructing the new geography of Latin American film.

Co-production has given rise to discussions that mirror the most general and debated controversies around globalization and culture. Certainly, the infrastructures that are now sustaining the cinema of the subcontinent are associated with the new forms of the economy that expanded worldwide after the fall of the Berlin wall. Thus, a free trade, deregulated economy has prevailed over the alliances that from Europe and the United States have stimulated the growth of Latin American cinema. But another important factor to consider is the changing roles of Latin American governments in promoting, protecting and stimulating the making of films in a national and regional context. Previous state-run national cinemas gave way to new forms of state-regulated industries. The initial disengagement of some of the governments from supporting their national production at the beginning of the 1990s – namely, Mexico and Brazil – left gaps opened for private local companies and foreign investors to step in and become the primary funding sources for national cinemas, a situation that continues to the present. Therefore, the question of who controls the images of the nation and how this is affecting national and cultural identities comes to the fore. It seems paramount to attempt to understand the implications of leaving the creation of filmic national imaginaries to private local and transnational interests. Such a question is, however, complicated by the fact that the intergovernmental institution Ibermedia now has a prominent participation in co-productions all over the subcontinent. In this way, not everything is left to the private world.<sup>2</sup> The authority behind a film is hence diffused between public and private hands, as well as among different nations. This is globalization and transnationalism at their best.

Accordingly, a political economy of cinema in Latin America comprises networks run by governments and judicial systems as much as the flows in the economy. And such a diverse set of agents and circumstances are creating more fluid interactions across cultures and nations. Deterritorialization has been conceptualized as the cultural condition of globalization (Appadurai 1996: 37–39; García Canclini 1995: 228–41; Tomlinson 1999: 106–49). Due to the flow of transnational economic transactions, the movement of peoples

2. Ibermedia is a collective fund financed by a group of Latin American nations plus Spain and Portugal. It provides funding for production, distribution and training of film personnel. Currently, Ibermedia's member nations are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, Spain, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela. For more information about Ibermedia, see Falicov (2007).

3. In one of the clauses defining the necessary conditions to apply for Ibermedia's funding, the application form says,

The Film Director should be from Ibero-America or resident of a member-state of the [Ibermedia] Program – exceptions need to be justified. The screenwriter(s), the music composer, the principal cast and crew members... should be either from Ibero-America or residents in Ibero-America – exceptions need to be justified. (Programa Ibermedia website, accessed 2 February 2010, translation added)

4. Paul Julian Smith (2003) deals with the issue of mixed nationalities of performers. Falicov (2007) creates categories of Spanish characters in co-productions between Spain and Latin America.

around the world and the rapid traffic of images, dissolution of borders and the creation of hybrid, liminal spaces have become quite common in most spheres. As Arjun Appadurai remarks:

Neither images nor viewers fit into circuits or audiences that are easily bound within local, national or regional spaces. Of course, many viewers may not themselves migrate. And many mass-mediated events are highly local in scope [...] but few important films, news broadcasts, or television spectacles are entirely unaffected by other media events that come from further afield.

(1996: 4)

Fundamentally, globalization is changing our relationship with the place we consider nation; it is relocalizing our imaginary associations to the regional and domestic cultural practices and experiences. The transforming financial landscape and regulatory policies of the Latin America film industries require new forms of engaging with these issues. National identity is not necessarily constrained inside set national borders or fixed forms of the imagination, although it is certainly within these premises where most debates develop.

Simple accounts and formulas of the percentages of control or the influence that each sponsor should have in the final product have been raised in many cases as forms of preserving cultural and national identity. Ibermedia requires funded co-production recipients to manage certain percentages of participation when other sponsors are involved.<sup>3</sup> In the same manner, agreements signed between European and Latin American production companies numerically negotiate the involvement of their talent. Consequently, cast and crew are typically from different national origins, following producers' agreements.<sup>4</sup> Although questionable or controversial in many cases, the place of origin of performers and technical personnel has had a part in binding together the imaginary nation. Or, at least, it has appeased some of the fear of the foreign that may come from the unavoidable deterritorialization of media images.

But more importantly, the struggle over national and regional identity is primarily located on the grounds of representation itself. In what follows, I intend to analyse two perspectives that open up the idea of nation and representation in different ways. First, I will consider both the emerging production practices and the stated intentions of local producers regarding existing alliances among companies. Such movements in the industry are redefining the locus of production of domestic narratives. Then, I will explore the evaluation that some Latin American film scholars have made of critically and box office successful films, which represent a new balance in the negotiation of local, regional and global forces for twenty-first-century Latin American cinema.

## WHAT PRODUCERS ARE DOING: AN INDUSTRIAL RESPONSE

There is clear evidence that during the last two decades some Latin American film industries have become strengthened by the interaction and alliances between foreign and local film companies. Such interactions do not necessarily impede addressing national and regional issues through their cinematic endeavours. The case of Mexico is one worth looking into with some detail.

Since the government's implementation of neo-liberal policies in the 1990s, a series of privatizing regulations minimized long-standing protectionist

legislation and state participation in the film industry (Martínez, García and Menchaca 2007: 37). The cost of this move was a radical drop in film production throughout the decade. In 2006, the government of Fernando Calderón proposed new tax incentives for companies to invest in the film industry and stimulate its growth, in the manner that the Brazilian and Argentine governments had done since the 1990s. Even so, the tax-incentive regulation, commonly known as 'Article 226', was in jeopardy several times during Calderón's own presidential term.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it has been particularly pressing in the Mexican context for film-makers and producers to find alternatives to continue to work.

Several film production companies have emerged in the last decade, Altavista, Cha Cha Cha, Canana, Argos Cine, Lemon Films, Mantarraya producciones, just to name a few.<sup>6</sup> The most common avenue for many of these companies has been not to depend, financially or otherwise, on governmental stimuli or on any governmental institution. It is also important to note that in many cases, these independent companies draw from contemporary national events and culture for the topics of their films, yet making them available to regional and international audiences.

Canana, the film company created by famous actors Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna, along with producer Pablo Cruz, is a particularly interesting example to observe. Founded in 2005, it is today, according to some critics, at the centre of the Mexican new wave of cinema. In 2007, *The Hollywood Reporter* stated that 'While some production companies here focus on shooting Hollywood-style features, Canana is keeping it real with socially minded stories that offer an authentic take on Mexico' (Hecht 2007). With this company, García Bernal and Luna tried their directorial skills for the first time, but have also supported films that are, indeed, stepping on alternative grounds and dealing with unique cultural matters. For example, *Cochochi* (Israel Cárdenas and Laura Amelia Guzmán, 2007) focuses on a tale of indigenous people in the northwestern Sierra Tarahumara. The cast is from the area,

5. Even though the fiscal monetary stimulus for film production was approved in 2006, the funds were slow in coming and, by 2009, the administration itself, under the pressure of the Motion Picture Association of America, was attempting to eliminate it. A stronghold of workers of the film industry contributed to its continuous implementation.
6. Launched in 2007, Cha Cha Cha is the independent company created by Alfonso Cuarón, González Iñárritu and Guillermo del Toro. The company originally allied with Universal Pictures to produce five features. Even though it is also a company that believes in independent directorial perspectives, I decided to examine Canana Producciones in more detail. Rather, I find the latter to be more interesting in terms of what I am studying here – the changing structures of the Latin American film industries and their relationship to their national and regional cultures.



Figure 1: Canana producers Diego Luna, Gael García Bernal and Pablo Cruz.

7. In 2008, Canana released several debut films, including Aaron Fernandez' *Partes Usadas/Used Parts* (2007), Laura Amelia Guzmán and Israel Cárdenas' *Cochochi* (2007) and Jonás Cuarón's *Año uña/The Year of the Nail* (2007).



Figure 2: *Cochochi*, a film about contemporary indigenous life.

and in the story, they speak their local dialect. Since Emilio Fernández's films of the Golden Age, this has been a topic unquestionably linked to Mexican identity – something that seems to have been in the producers' minds. 'We want productions that give the world an insight into *our reality*', affirmed Pablo Cruz in 2007 (Quoted in Arroyo 2007, emphasis added). It is important to note that Cruz' remark underscores a recurrent need on the part of many producers to create filmic discourses fundamentally relevant to their culture and society.

Canana is also supporting the production of films in South America. Its first co-production deal was with Paraguayan film-maker Marcelo Tolces to complete his debut film *18 cigarrillos y medio/18 and a Half Cigarettes*. In 2007, the company started distributing Mexican films that no other distributor wanted to pick up. The latter is the case of Francisco Vargas' *El violín* (2005). Even after winning more than twenty awards in the international festival circuit, no local distributors in Mexico wanted to take the risk of showing a black-and-white drama (O'Boyle 2007). From that point onwards, the distribution arm of Canana has become an established channel for first-time film-makers.<sup>7</sup> These facts, as much as other risk-taking decisions, most certainly show the company's commitment to promote innovation, yet with national and regional ties.

It is also interesting to note, however, that, since its foundation, Canana has been allied with Focus Features – a subsidiary of Universal Pictures. That is probably why producer Pablo Cruz explains that the company 'wants[s] to develop films and programmes with local talent that have an international appeal' (Arroyo 2007). Counting on such a partnership has been a way for Canana to financially support more films, as well as to give them more exposure to regional and international audiences. Here is an infrastructural node that may be implicitly contributing to the re-articulation of locality in the new global arena.

Lacking substantial support from the government, the alliances with companies from the United States and Europe (especially from Spain) have been particularly advantageous for independent Mexican film producers. Quite logically, these producers do not feel threatened; rather, they feel empowered by such alliances. As Diego Luna himself states,

In our country, the projects which receive financial backing [from the government] are those which try to imitate American formats, projects which are guaranteed to be a universal hit. Canana gives directors the freedom to make their own films, and does not try to intervene in the creative process.

(Arroyo 2007)

Certainly, in the last decade, the state has supported genre films that have been commercial successes, for example, the record-breaking feature by Gabriel and Rodolfo Riva Palacio, *Una película de huevos* (2006), its sequel *Otra película de huevos y un pollo* (2009), and the equally successful *Efectos secundarios* (Issa López, 2006), just to name a few. But it is also true that IMCINE, the government's film support agency, has backed authors, such as Carlos Reygadas, Julián Hernández and Gerardo Tort, among others, whose work is mostly distributed in festival circuits. Although Luna's appreciation of the role of the government has to be qualified, it is worth noting that from his perspective, independent producers see themselves as an alternative to the state in terms of assisting culturally relevant film production. Mexican Gabriel Ripstein, head of Columbia's local production office, tells the same story with a different and more managerial spin while stating that, 'It's hard to compete if you don't have the muscle of a major' (O'Boyle 2008). The negotiation between creative processes, national narratives and foreign support continues to be part of an ongoing debate.

While the idea of the national traditionally resided in Mexico with a publicly controlled film industry, the Mexican government's sway between giving and eliminating support has made it an unstable partner to the development of the medium. Public funds have been curtailed and, as mentioned before, even tax incentives have been questioned by some as legitimate sources to fund film-making. By contrast, the alliances of local producers with foreign producers and distributors have been an indispensable pillar for the industry in the last two decades.

Another noteworthy industrial response to examine in the Latin American context is that of recently founded 'The Latin American Film Company', an enterprise run by Argentinean Eduardo Costantini. In 2006, Costantini created Costa Films as a joint venture with The Weinstein Company (based in the United States) to produce and distribute films in Latin America. The partnership (called 'The Latin American Film Company' soon thereafter) allied with production companies in Brazil and Mexico aiming, in Costantini's words, '[t]o create a large Latin America[n] producer, based out of the three countries, targeting international markets with the best talent and stories' (Hopewell 2009). Currently, Brazil's Otero Group and Bananeira Films, along with Mexico's Argos Producciones and producer Alex García, have joined Costa Films to form probably the most financially sound pan-regional production company to date. With a fund of \$50 million to spend over three years, the scope of Costantini's initiative is far more powerful than that of Ibermedia, whose fund amounts to less than \$5 million a year.<sup>8</sup> The comparison is

8. For Costantini's budget see Goodridge (2008). For Ibermedia's funds see Falicov (2007).

worth noting. After all, both organizations work within a regional landscape, support domestic production, and affirm the desire to protect or develop Latin American cultures as part of their goals. And the implications are obvious: reliable finances give Costa Films a more powerful and unconstrained leverage than that of the alliance of Ibero-American governments to develop and promote particular views of the subcontinent.

The Latin American Film Company has the clear aim of producing features centred on different aspects of Latin America. According to Harvey Weinstein, the company is 'a step forward for Latin American cinema to further Latin American culture' (Mohr and Hopewell 2006). As the company website reads, 'Costa Films is producing a slate of Latin American movies from talented filmmakers who are always exploring new languages and aesthetics. Those works are joined by common interests and themes and captured regional features and conflicts' (Costa Films 2010). The company has hired Latin American film-makers and personnel to make films based on such regional content. In this spirit, it has produced critical and box office successes, such as *Tropa de Elite/Elite Squad* (José Padilha, 2007), which became the highest grossing Brazilian film in 2008 and won a Golden Bear in Berlin the same year; *The Burning Plain* (Guillermo Arriaga, 2008); *Lula, O filho do Brasil/Lula, Brazil's Son* (Fábio Barreto and Marcelo Santiago, 2009), which also became an immediate box office hit in Brazil, only surpassed by James Cameron's blockbuster *Avatar* (2009); and more recently, *Verano maldito/Death in Midsummer* (Luis Ortega, 2011).

Several issues come to the fore when analysing this case. First, that the Weinstein brothers were fundamental in the resurgence and popularity of independent films in the United States in the 1990s is telling of their unique effort to foment innovative film-making, yet without abandoning a profit-oriented perspective. The alliance with Costa Films came shortly after the brothers founded their own company in 2005 (after Disney bought out Miramax completely). Now that they have opened a front in Latin America, it is interesting to see the connotations of their label in some of the films coming from the region. Clearly, Costantini is reproducing a strategy that seemed profitable for the Weinsteins. That is, one of the aims of The Latin American Film Company, as stated above, is to produce films with recognizable Latin American elements, casts and crews, and its production to date is evidence of that fact. Thus far, however, the company has financed people and stories who are themselves an *a priori* guarantee of success. For instance, José Padilha had produced *Bus 174* (which became the most successful Brazilian documentary after its release), before embarking on making *Tropa de Elite*. Guillermo Arriaga had been the screenwriter of successful films, such as *Amores perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2001) and *21 Grams* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003), before directing his debut film. Fábio Barreto had been the director of *O Quatrilho* (1995), the first Brazilian nomination for an Academy Award since 1962. And Luis Ortega comes from a family of talent linked to the Argentine entertainment world and had previously directed *Caja negra/Black Box* (2002), which received numerous national and international awards. The Latin American Film Company is indeed opening spaces for Latin American stories to be told and to circulate around the globe. But unlike Canana Producciones, or Ibermedia for that matter, the company has less of a policy of opening up spaces for new voices and perspectives than guaranteeing prestige and financial success, while conveying some form of 'Latin Americanness'.



Figure 3: Lula, Brazil's Son a Brazilian box office success.

Second, Costa Films has also made great strides in distribution by opening up TheAuteurs.com, a website that Costantini calls a 'virtual cinematheque'. Since 2007, it streams films from different parts of the world and has partnered with Celluloid Dreams, The Criterion Collection and Martin Scorsese's World Cinema Foundation to make restored classics available online. TheAuteurs.com is generating a geography of 'quality films' of which the productions of The Latin American Film Company are indirectly benefitting, and which unquestionably fits within the label that the Weinsteins provided. Finally, it should be noted that this new company, based on a co-production business scheme,

9. A term used by Octavio Paz, it was taken by Johnson (1993) to refer to the role of the state in terms of the Latin American film industry.
10. During the 1950s, a new commercial cinema of Latin America was helping to construct a regional identity based on common cultures and sensibilities. In the 1960s, the New Latin American cinema was forging political alliances throughout the subcontinent.
11. The companies of the Motion Picture Association (MPA) are Buena Vista International, Inc., Columbia TriStar Film Distributors International, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc., Paramount Pictures Corporation, Twentieth Century Fox International Corporation, Universal International Films, Inc. and Warner Bros. International Theatrical Distribution.

is unprecedented in the Latin American region. Like Hollywood producers, it is a profit-making enterprise but, unlike Hollywood, a specific concern about quality is blended with an appreciation for regional culture, even to the point of organizing non-profit events around it (Costa Films 2010).

The examples of both Canana Producciones and The Latin American Film Company suggest two different models of film co-production and distribution – with support from domestic and transnational sponsors – which contribute to the re-drawn geography of Latin American cinema. Both companies have resisted basing their production on governmental support, which had been the traditional model for Latin American film industries up until the early 1990s. They do not seem, nowadays, uncommon or ‘out of place’ within the region. In this way, many film-makers and producers have avoided the difficult relationship between cinema and state that has historically troubled cultural production in Latin America.

In 1993, Randal Johnson argued that the participation of the state was paramount in continuing the production of culturally relevant films in Latin America, as it was happening in other parts of the world. He affirmed that ‘stable national film industries cannot exist without state support and that, given the way they are often conceived and carried out, state policies towards national film industries may ultimately have an effect diametrically opposed to their original intent’ (Johnson 1993: 206). The latter paradoxical effect certainly became a potent reality towards the end of the twentieth century, as producers and film-makers were pushed to find alternatives to the figure of the paternalistic ‘ogre’ that the state had embodied for decades.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, while Latin American cinema had been conceived in the past under pan-regional constellations, transcending borders has become a more common trope in the production of culture in the twenty-first century.<sup>10</sup>

There are certainly various forces, equivalent or even more powerful than states, which became undeniable players in building national and regional imaginaries for new generations born in a world with diffused borders. While Ibermedia stands now as a regional representation of national states, production and distribution companies like the ones referred to above are re-inscribing in new systems our concerns for national and regional cultures in filmic representations.

By presenting these examples, I am not suggesting normative forms that co-production in Latin America should take. Nor do I want to suggest that other models of production and co-production and of engagement with the state are secondary to understanding the changing structures of the Latin American film industries and their relationship to their cultures. Currently, the forms of cinematic production in Latin America are varied and abundant, and the states have distinct levels of participation to control the production and circulation of national and regional images. New technologies have also facilitated spaces for inexpensive creations, unconstrained by any state regulations or by the marketplace.

## WHAT CRITICS ARE SAYING: AN AESTHETIC RESPONSE

The cultural and ideological dependence theories of the past continue to linger in many interpretations of contemporary films. From some perspectives, the participation of Motion Picture Association affiliates<sup>11</sup> in the Latin American industry continues to be seen as deleterious to national cultures. The cosmopolitanism of some of the film-makers, such as the Mexican trio mentioned at

the beginning of this essay, is interpreted as a 'selling out' to foreign influences. Paulo Antonio Paranaguá observes that such critical tendency has long been recurrent in the writings about Latin American cinema. From Hollywood's undisputable control of world screens, critics perform what he deems a '*mortal jump*' from commerce to aesthetics to condemn Hollywood's influence [on Latin-American cinema] as ill-fated' (Paranaguá 2001: 12, translation and emphasis added). In effect, a rhetoric that interprets the privatization of the film industry as a blow to indigenous cultural developments seems to be naturalized in much current critical discourse. In his article 'Culture Industries: Between Protectionism and Self-Sufficiency', Octavio Getino sustains that recent globalizing policies, from both governments and private interests, are but a variation on the imperialistic intent of different monarchic powers throughout history. Such a view considers contemporary regional cultures in peril due to the homogenizing and standardizing forces of globalizing powers and opposes the richness of diverse cultures to the forces of transnationalization (Getino 2003). Without doubt, Getino's stance is consistent with the influential line of thought that he and Fernando Solanas developed in the 1960s and 1970s. In this view, cultural diversity would be a product of indispensable protectionist policies of nation states and would run contrary to any contact with the Hollywood film industry. I agree with Getino's ideal of a culturally diverse audiovisual mediascape in Latin America as a way of fulfilling cinema's social role in the region. Such diversity, however, is, in effect, not a constraint to productions made necessarily under governments' umbrellas and needs not be aesthetically separated from – nor should it be obligatorily connected to – any foreign influence. In other words, diversity and hybridization in the Latin American audiovisual world are currently, and inevitably, a product of multidirectional influences that transcend cultural, financial and geopolitical borders.

In the same vein, in a more recent work by Buquet, Schiwy and Miller, which traces current governmental policies regarding national cinemas, the authors argue for the strengthening of the role of governments in promoting national cinemas and mention co-productions between Ibero-American nations and Europe as part of current developments. It is worth noting that, despite the increasing numbers, and co-productions with Hollywood major studios, these projects are not mentioned at all in this work (Buquet, Schiwy and Miller 2009). Such an omission, once more, makes implicit the notion that Hollywood's film practice and products are an unwanted influence on regional cinemas.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to these views (which are linked by thematic proximity to the cultural imperialism thesis that dominated much of the intellectual thought developed from the 1960s onwards), I agree with Paranaguá in that it seems more realistic to investigate the complex cultural imbrications that are actually occurring among film industries in the United States, Europe and Latin America (Paranaguá 2001: 13). The former views tend to characterize culture in homogeneous ways and have been countered in many of the interpretations that other contemporary critics are making of some of the most popular features that have come out in the last decade (e.g. *Nine Queens*, *Y tu mamá también*, *City of God* and *Babel*). The spaces of the national and the transnational in these films are not exclusive, but seem to coexist, instead, in complementary, and sometimes contradictory, juxtaposition.

Deborah Shaw reminds us that the predominant critical debates around Argentine cinema occur under the essentialist assumption that commercial

12. Examples of this position abound. In the Mexican scene, for instance, Martínez, García and Menchaca agree with various authors, including Javier Esteinou, Delia Crovi and Enrique Sánchez Ruiz, in their view that Mexican cinema's decline in production versus Hollywood's climbing numbers implies an imminent cultural decline (see Martínez, García and Menchaca 2007: 38, 43, 43). Johnson (2005) has extensively analysed such polemical stances in the Brazilian context.

13. During the first half of the twentieth century, the classical philosophy and theory of cinema was devoted to the question of determining whether cinema was an art form or an industrial practice. This strategic separation of art and industry was paramount for the Auteur Theory developed by the critics of the French New Wave and continues to be canonically taught in many Latin American film schools.

films avoid national and artistic issues, whereas non-commercial films, contrarily (because the makers are not trying to please an audience) are *de facto* culturally relevant. In Shaw's words:

Debates dominating writings on Argentine cinema are frequently formulated in terms of dichotomies; critics have written of the battle between commercial and artistic production, of the clash between a cinema that has national, political and social concerns and creates its own cinematic language, and cinema that is little more than a copy of action/adventure Hollywood models.

(2007: 68)

Such a reductive opposition lingers on from earlier film criticism, which also tended to conceive of cinema within terms of 'art' and 'industry', that is, as two opposing and competing forces.<sup>13</sup> We might also relate it to the revolutionary views of film-makers and critics of the 1960s and 1970s, which saw in Hollywood (and industrial cinema, in general) the 'principal enemy' to be defeated.

The film *Nueve reinas/Nine Queens* (Fabián Bielinsky, 1999), produced by Patagonik, would be located on the pole of the imitative Hollywood films. Since Patagonik is a joint venture of Disney (through Buena Vista International), Argentina's Artear and Spain's telecommunications giant, Telefónica, it would seem coherent to relate the aesthetic of the film to a mere copy of conventional, commercial genres, with all the pejorative charge that such an assessment carries in the Argentine critical context. This is also a way of affirming that the ideology behind this film is basically that of its producers. Shaw, however, alternatively proposes two simultaneous readings coexisting in *Nine Queens* – a 'transnational' and a 'national' reading, thereby dismantling the polarized and exclusive categorization of artistic versus commercial films, or qualities of the national in opposition to the transnational.

Similarly, Gabriela Copertari furnishes an interpretation that positions *Nine Queens* at the centre of the Argentine experience by the end of the 1990s, thus addressing national issues that were relevant for Argentine audiences, while acknowledging that it plays with an imagery that reproduces the landscapes of globalization, where 'everything seems familiar because it looks like everywhere else' (Jean Franco quoted in Copertari 2005: 284). Her reading, however, also constitutes a challenge to the critically constructed reduction that opposes the commercial versus the national/artistic. *Nine Queens* functions, according to Copertari, as a kind of symbolic reparation for Argentine audiences immersed in the effects of corrupt and unreliable economic and political milieus.

Ernesto Acevedo Muñoz, referring to the film *Y tu mamá también*, also counters the argument that contends that recent Latin American films are imitative attempts to capture the formulaic success of Hollywood or mainstream films. Acevedo Muñoz argues, however, that the film develops nationally specific topics through some unique, if not absolutely bold, formal resolutions. He contends that although it seems that *Y tu mamá también* is a hybrid product with characteristics of well-known, commercial film genres, it actually plays with and criticizes notions of violence and sexuality that have been traditionally linked to the idea of Mexican national identity. In this reading, the film becomes a rebellious text, one that reveals the decline of traditional Mexican values, or the inappropriateness of older values, to define contemporary Mexican society (Acevedo Muñoz 2004).

Two years after the release of *Amores perros*, Brazilian *Cidade de Deus/City of God* (Fernando Meirelles, 2002) was also marvelling audiences around the world. Even though some critics were quick to compare *City of God* to Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, for instance, some did also acknowledge the debt to the political commitment that characterized Third Cinema. 'With *City of God*, Meirelles joins a distinguished tradition of social criticism and engagement in Brazilian and Latin American cinema that's now being revitalized' (Leite Neto 2002: 11). Clearly, the film had also been a commercial sensation. After a week in the 2002 Cannes Film Festival, Meirelles 'had closed distribution deals in virtually every territory in the world' (Gant 2002). Its transnational success called attention to the fact that *City of God* was a Brazilian film made for Brazilian audiences, and yet it had a global reach. Against numerous critiques coming out from Brazil and elsewhere, which positioned *City of God* as a mere copy of Hollywood genre films, Arnaldo Jabor contended that more than a film, it was a social event that unsettled the sense of normalcy in Brazilian society. It generated debates at all levels around life in the *favelas*, the government's loss of social control, and police corruption. Thus, more than many other cultural artifacts, the film became a point of departure for due public debates (Jabor in Vieira 2005: iii).

To close the circle, I would like to return to the Mexican trio. Alejandro González Iñárritu, along with Guillermo del Toro and Alfonso Cuarón, all of whom have spent long time living and working outside of Mexico and together draw a cosmopolitan face for what we could call a 'transnational' Mexican cinema, or a Mexican cinema 'without borders'.<sup>14</sup> As paradoxical as it sounds, the three continue to actively promote the making of Mexican films (with Cha Cha Cha, their production company) as much as to investigate the idea of Mexico in an interconnected world. In this way, *Babel* (González Iñárritu, 2006) is situated at an even more troublesome node of transnationalism (if compared to the commercially successful films mentioned above), both in terms of its textual tropes and its strategies of co-production.<sup>15</sup>

Produced through the collaboration of companies in France, Mexico and the United States, and distributed primarily by Paramount, *Babel* weaves four stories set in different parts of the world: urban Tokyo, the Moroccan countryside, and the US-Mexican border. Chance and misunderstandings, generated by characters who communicate in different languages, with distinct cultural assumptions and prejudices, make all the characters victims of despair and distress. While no one acts with bad intentions or with any level of cruelty, the actions in one part of the world have dramatic effects for characters in another. A game (with tragic consequences, however) between Moroccan country boys is framed as a terrorist attack by the US government and international media; a US father in distress in Morocco is incapable of understanding the familial requests and desires of Amelia, a Mexican nanny; US migration guards are blind to the nanny's noble intentions; and a Japanese deaf teenager is misunderstood by her father and by society at large. Geographical and cultural distances, mediated by the emotional intensities of each story, portray a world of presumably interconnected people. A phone call, a gunshot, a television news clip and a photograph are metaphors for those connections; yet, there are insurmountable barriers that do not allow these individuals to truly connect. Indeed, the question of nation is posed as one of those barriers. Amelia's story is one in which the literal frontier between the United States and Mexico becomes a useful allegory for the misunderstandings between cultures. For the purposes of this essay, it is the story on which I will mostly focus.

14. Tierney (2009) has used the term to refer to the work of González Iñárritu.

15. Tierney (2009) has investigated how González Iñárritu's films do not lose their authorial style or cultural connection even after he has been working within the Hollywood system.

16. Much has been written on this topic. Some selected sources: Frank and Wildsmith (2005); Heymann, Flores-Macias, Hayes et al. (2009); and Dreby (2010).
17. The terms 'being' and 'becoming' make a direct reference to Stuart Hall's theoretical proposition on how identities are construed. See Hall (1994).
18. *Tú me acostumbrate* is a famous bolero written by Frank Domínguez in 1957 and known all over Latin America after having been recorded by famous singers, such as Olga Guillot, Pedro Vargas and Chavela Vargas, among many others.
19. Podalsky also cites the work of Olga Nájera-Ramírez, who investigates the dynamics through which music and lyrics resonate with audiences in Mexico, p. 54.
20. *Babel* was nominated for seven Academy Awards in 2007.

The decision to depict the Mexican story in the context of the complicated relationship between the two neighbouring nations is already significant in the setting of this film. With roughly 10 per cent of the Mexican people living in the United States, the migratory issue is one that has affected most of the Mexican population and virtually all families. The sense of loss and discontinuity after the rooting of Mexican citizens in the United States is continually present in Mexican life, as much as a travelling sense of nationality that moves across geopolitical borders.<sup>16</sup> 'Being Mexican', or participating in a national imaginary, is framed as a permanent process of 'becoming' in this film; it is a form of relating to nation that blurs discrete boundaries.<sup>17</sup> In a provocative essay, Ramírez-Pimienta (2010) proposes that paradigmatic Mexican identity has been displaced from the imaginary geographic centre (the central and the Bajío regions in Mexico) to one located north of the border. Accordingly, the story of Amelia is one of a divided self. Her life has roots and affections here and there, and she ends up as a broken and fragmented self, when border agents prohibit her from going back to her home in San Diego. With Amelia's frustration there emerges an implicit questioning of borders, as much as a sense, as Ramírez-Pimienta suggests, that the idea Mexico goes well beyond the geopolitical territory that bears its name.

In another sequence, the ritual of a wedding in Tijuana is extra-diegetically adorned with the unique voice of Chavela Vargas singing *Tú me acostumbrate*.<sup>18</sup> The confluence of images and soundtrack brings out a geography of sentiment – or a structure of feeling, following Raymond Williams' notion (1977: 128–35) – connected not only to a Mexican but, more widely, to a Latin American affective landscape. The sequence, evoking love at different levels (love amongst people, love of culture, love of Mexico), is just one node where the Mexican imagined community is free to create new forms of identification. Laura Podalsky has insightfully argued that *Babel* pushes non-Mexican viewers to appropriate particular structures of feeling, thus, encouraging the formation of 'transnational communities of sentiment' (2010: 49).<sup>19</sup> At the same time, she goes on to suggest that *Babel's* fragmented narrative may be serving 'to reconcile tensions [in Mexico and Latin America] that have emerged between national traditions and global flows' (2010: 56). Podalsky is thus sustaining the idea of a reconfiguration of transnational and transcultural connections through structures of feeling, which I believe is in accordance with *Babel's* travelling formation of national imaginaries, as proposed in this essay.

Finally, I would like to suggest that *Babel* constructs visual associations between different parts of the world, thereby subtly supporting an imaginary interconnectedness. Dirt roads in Mexico and Morocco engulf life in villages where a bond to nature and community seems to prevail. However culturally specific life in the populated and fast-paced urban Japan is, all places are hosts to people whose needs and desires we can identify and relate. In sum, the film constructs a space that we may approximate to the sense of global-local, which Jenkins comprises under the idea of a global consciousness.

While *Babel* was co-produced by three countries and had performers from many more, it was presented and publicized as a Mexican film. Thus, the several nominations for the Academy Awards were initially celebrated as an accomplishment of the Mexican film industry.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, *Babel* is an ideal illustration of the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that are redefining national imaginaries, and which, in turn, make of some contemporary films a crossroads of identities in formation.



Figure 4: The filmic space in *Babel* oscillates between the global and the local.

In this section, I have explained some of the perspectives on films, which contradict the somewhat simplistic premise that opposes commercialism to cultural relevancy. *Nine Queens*, *Y tu mamá también*, *City of God*, and *Babel* are examples of films that, on a closer look, undoubtedly engage as much as permanently re-create national realities. Here, again, hybridization of film language becomes not only valid but a necessary strategy to construct national narratives, as much as to make them travel beyond borders.

The critical voices through which I referred to some of these films also implicitly counter some of the precepts of Third Cinema, in particular those which valued cinematic political efforts that would stand against Hollywood and European cultural forces by accounting for popular genres and for entertainment values, on the one hand, and by breaking the inherent dichotomy (political vs. entertainment; committed vs. uncommitted) that ruled critical grounds in Latin America since the 1960s, on the other. Notwithstanding, they acknowledge the political and social commentary that these films do manifest.

The paradigmatic shift that Latin American cinema has undergone since the early 1990s can be traced both in terms of industrial practices and to the treatment of topics in the films themselves. It is certainly a shift that compels us to rethink notions of national and regional cinemas as they are affected by unprecedented flows of images, funds and people. Notions of deterritorialization and hybridization might help us map the new transnational geography pervasive in this and other film industries around the world. This work is a contribution to those ends.

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### **CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Luisela Alvaray specializes in Latin American and transnational cinemas. She teaches courses on Latin American cinema, global media, documentary studies, film history, and media and cultural studies. Her articles have appeared in *Cinema Journal*, *Film & History*, *Emergences*, *Objeto Visual* (Caracas), *Cinemas* (Rio de Janeiro) and *Film-Historia* (Barcelona). She is a contributor to the book *Latin American Melodrama* (Darlene Sadlier, ed., 2009) and the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World* (2008) and has published two books in Spanish – *A la luz del proyector: Itinerario de una espectadora* (2002) and *Las versiones fílmicas: los discursos que se miran* (1994).

Contact: College of Communication, DePaul University, 1 E Jackson Blvd., Chicago, IL 60604. USA.

E-mail: lalvaray@depaul.edu

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