

From Postmodernity to Post-Identity

Latin American Film after the Great Divide

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Introduction: Film, Modernity and the Great Divide

Cinema was born with modernity and contains all the contradictions of the modern. As a technological apparatus, the moving image offered the promise of both heightened verisimilitude and totality of representation, such that for its early practitioners it was a virtual canvas capable of fusing intense realism with the representational promises of cubism, Dadaism, futurism and, of course, surrealism. This is why Walter Benjamin was able, still in the 1930s, to laud film not for its fetishism of the spectacle, but precisely for its ability to defetishize the everyday, to embody the hitherto separated realms of science and art, and to liberate us from our routine imprisonment in space-time:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. (Benjamin 1968, 236)

Film optics are caught in a dialectic which Benjamin hoped could be productive of revolutionary change in the consciousness of the masses even as fascism was organizing war into the supreme technological spectacle. It is a dialectic that somehow defines the contradictions at work within modernity: on the one hand, film has the technological power to delve into the everyday and to explode systematically the traditions, mythologies, and habits that structure it, disembedding such belief systems from their “organic” rootedness in everyday life, their *habitus*, under the guise of rational or scientific Enlightenment; on the other hand, film reinscribes the local into a higher set of ideological discourses and national and supra-national narratives bounded by the ongoing production of hegemony *within* the nation-state and the geopolitical competition for hegemony *amongst* nation-states.

Coeval with industrial modernization and mass urbanization, film and the rise of the cinema-going experience (as mass entertainment) are thus fully embedded in this “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” and nowhere more so than in the Golden Age of cinema in Latin America

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from the 1930s to the 1950s, where the role played by Mexican (and to a lesser extent Argentine and Brazilian) cinema in the formation of a modern, *urbane* citizenry is paradigmatic. Indeed, for Mexican cultural commentator Carlos Monsiváis, the social function of this cinema was highly equivocal, involving a dual process of “mystification” and “destruction”: on the one hand a primary investiture similar to commodity fetishism, and on the other the dissolution of traditions, religious frameworks, and community ties in a process which he calls “secularization” (2000, 78, 160). Here Monsiváis does not merely reproduce a simplistic narrative of national identity formation, but instead points towards cinema’s effective and affective disarticulation of older social hierarchies, be they of family, religion, or gender. Rather than affirming a nation (as is often claimed in studies of the phenomenon), Mexican cinema of the Golden Age, he argues, *disarticulated* identities, disembedded peasant culture from its “organic” rootedness in the rhythms of the countryside and agricultural production, and conjoined it both to increasing urbanization (with its attendant industrialization) and to the forms and formats of an incipient transnational visual imaginary dominated largely (but not exclusively) by Hollywood:

el cine elige muchísimas tradiciones que se suponían inamovibles, las perfecciona alegóricamente y destruye su credibilidad situándolas como meros paisajes melodramáticos o costumbristas. Dos o tres veces por semana las películas incorporan a un conocimiento global (rudimentario y fantástico, pero irreversible) a comunidades aisladas que se modernizan a través de la imitación sincerísima o la asimilación a contracorriente. (Monsiváis 2000, 160)

the cinema picks out many traditions that were presumed to be immovable, perfects them allegorically and destroys their credibility by reducing them to *folkish* or melodramatic backdrops. Two or three times a week, films introduce some piece of global knowledge (crude and fanciful, but irreversible) to isolated communities which become modernized through naïve imitation or unusual modes of assimilation. (My translation)

This tight binding between film and the contradictions of capitalist modernity, especially during its urban consolidation in the burgeoning migrant-filled cities of post-World War II Latin America, together with the national frame into which cinema is largely locked in the era of sound (which is not to negate the international reach of Hollywood or the regional reach of Mexican film throughout Latin America and Spain), greatly complicates the task of providing any systematic characterization of a putative *postmodern* Latin American cinema. Cinema in the era of postmodernity is pulled by powerful riptides that flow in opposing directions: on the one hand, with the decline of the “lettered city” (Franco 2002) and the rise of television and the mass media, it is called upon to take over one of the traditional functions of literature in the production of identitarian narratives – to be a form of “tribal or national dreaming” (García Canclini 2002, 180) and a repository of local cultural memory against the homogenizing imaginaries of transnational capital. On the other, it clearly participates in the processes that make such dreams flow globally, commingling and hybridizing them with new imagistic and virtual technologies whose containment fields and transport protocols rarely coincide, in shape or form, with national boundaries. The former phenomenon – which we might term “centripetal” – is in many ways a compensation mechanism for the latter – which we might term “centrifugal” – since the more that flows of finance, commodities, information, languages, and images traverse localities, the more indigenous cultural forms are called on to play a protectionist role vis-à-vis the entropic forces that continually erode the fragile boundaries of those localities.

Film, then, for cultures that at least partially operate in a centripetal, protective mode, becomes permeated with residual locality: it is television’s “serious,” aesthetic parent, propelled into the

role of cultural ambassador even as it tours international film festivals, and is charged with the responsibility to preserve and contest national cultural memory.¹ While all audiovisual industries in the era of globalization are cross-cut with conflicting centripetal and centrifugal forces, a number of “national” cinemas in Latin America have operated predominantly in a protective mode since the late 1980s, particularly in those countries where the rise of a “new” national cinema (Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, Venezuela, Chile after redemocratization) can be understood as a cultural reaction to the widespread imposition of neoliberal “structural adjustment” policies with their attendant immiseration – a kind of *de facto* financial dictatorship – during the “lost decade” induced by the enormous regional debt crisis of the 1980s. Cuban cinema, as we shall see below, also operates in this mode, but in response to a different ideological and financial crisis that paradoxically makes its (institutional, state-produced) cinema highly receptive to postmodern aesthetics in the 1990s. Brazil’s cinema is diverse enough to have films that are predominantly centripetal and other films that are predominantly centrifugal, while Mexican and Colombian filmmaking is caught in such powerful global riptides that the “nation” can no longer operate as a repository for a set of protective cultural values, and either disappears as the privileged signifier of a putative “national cinema,” or is portrayed as little more than a ruse enacted by the predatory local clients of global systems of wealth extraction.

Assuming that we can nevertheless detect a distributed postmodern sensibility in amongst these contradictory cultural forces, how might we characterize it? For many commentators, postmodernism does not represent an absolute break with modernist cultural concerns, but an intensification of them on the one hand and, paradoxically, a reflexive framing of them on the other.² Jean-François Lyotard, for example, has famously repudiated the standard understanding of *postmodernism* as a periodizing concept, since the various historical moments when culture has held a self-regarding sense of its own vanguard status with regard to social change and technological development have inevitably spawned critique and dissent from the modern paradigm: “the postmodern [...] is undoubtedly a part of the modern. [...] A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant” (1984, 79). For Andreas Huyssen, the “Great Divide” that distinguishes modernism and postmodernism is not (purely) a historical frontier, but one represented by their differential relationship to mass culture. Since much modernist culture sets itself up as a refuge from the “degeneration” represented by the demands, tastes and economic activity of the “masses,” from Ortega y Gasset to Victoria Ocampo and Borges (to give some Hispanic examples instead of the usual roll-call of Pound, Woolf, and Eliot), it follows that the postmodernists of the 1970s onwards are the inheritors of the more radical, anti-aesthetic practices of what Peter Bürger (1984) terms the “Historical Avant-Garde.” This was the avant-garde that engaged with the energies and transformative possibilities of the popular and the mass, from Dada, (political) surrealism and their latter-day interpreter, Benjamin, to rather more lonely figures in Latin America forced into such a stance by historical circumstances, such as the later César Vallejo, Roberto Arlt, or Mariano Azuela (whose work, not coincidentally, is often described as episodic and cinematic), even where such writers end up consumed by their own cynicism and pessimism.

However, this radical reading of postmodernism’s political alignments, derived from the historical avant-garde, seems overly optimistic today, even if it served, in the 1980s, as a corrective to the institutionalization of poststructuralist language games within Anglo-American and Latin American academia as the supposedly “radical” face of postmodern thought.³ In Latin America, at least, a different political reading of postmodernism is possible, for the demise of the grand narratives of social transformation associated with populisms and, in their wake, the Marxist and

Maoist armed struggles of the 1960s and 1970s – snuffed out by dictatorship and genocide in the Southern Cone, Peru, and Central America, and more recently overrun by the violent drugs trade in Colombia and Mexico – marks an often brutal frontier. As is often said with regard to literature, the sweeping, Utopian (and dystopian) narratives of the 1960s literary Boom representing Latin America's own cultural *grands récits* are no longer sustainable with the onset of dictatorship and the snuffing out of student movements with the Tlatelolco massacre (October 1968) or the military occupation of national universities in Colombia (1966–1971),⁴ Venezuela (1969–1970), and Peru. Postmodern cultural forms (often aligned with the “post-Boom” in Latin American literary history) are forced to confront their own social horizons even as they distance themselves from direct ideological engagement or from any attempt to effect social change.⁵

Yet film lags these broader cultural innovations in literature (and smaller-scale visual arts) due to its collective nature and, in Latin America, its broad historical dependency on direct or indirect state financing until the late 1980s. This delays substantial filmic innovation until the return to democracy in the Southern Cone, while the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of state socialism in eastern Europe and Russia, and its knock-on effect on Cuba, produce a loosening of strongly invested political dualisms here and elsewhere, as I shall suggest below. This loosening of grand (political) narratives broadly associated with the end of the Cold War combines with the aforementioned pressure on film to act as national-cultural archive in the face of global “market” forces that seemed, in the 1990s and 2000s, to be continuing the work of the dictators in dismantling the old dreams of national autonomy and popular control of the productive forces. The result is that “postmodern” film in Latin America is a complex phenomenon that does indeed appear to engage with an intensification of “modern” cultural concerns and, simultaneously, with their repudiation. If, as Arjun Appadurai memorably put it, “one man's imagined community is another man's political prison” (1996, 32), does contemporary film have that ability, claimed by Benjamin, to “burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second,” so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we may calmly and adventurously go travelling?

Beyond the much-discussed “politics of postmodernism” (Hutcheon 1989), the application of this term to cinema would seem to impel us irrevocably towards the *post-cinematic* and the *post-national*, as the embeddedness of film within the dialectics of (national) identity constitution explodes into the fragmented, post-identitarian realm of television, video, and the audiovisual cultures of the Internet. This is a heated terrain of debate in the literature on Latin American film, with critics torn between, on the one hand, the affirmation of film's continued role as a filter of national imaginaries, gaining its intelligibility largely from its critical relationship to national hegemonic processes and their periodic crises (even where these are impelled by geopolitical machinations), and those who prefer to emphasize the centrifugal forces that rupture the neat circle of aesthetic reflection and critique even as they remain critical of film's complicity with the form and logic of the commodity. Such accounts prioritize the transnational circuits of production and, above all, reception of even the most staunchly national films (co-production, international arthouse festivals, critical elaboration in northern universities), i.e. the way in which film, despite its national thematics and modernist aesthetics, is put into circulation and made to flow globally.

Like most dichotomies, this academic dispute is largely false, and a small shift of perspective is enough to realize that both sides of the argument are performative, and serve entrenched academic and national politico-cultural interests. The discourses of academic specialism for example (and this includes the national apparatuses of film criticism, selection, and state financing, where these exist, as well as the interests of national and international university departments that

facilitate the study of Latin American film) demand the construction of a uniquely specific set of objects, carved out of postcolonial national imaginaries, that can be differentiated one from the other and around which specialist knowledge can be constructed. Moreover, for academics trained originally in literary analysis, and whose “specializations” are vested in the affirmation of (national) cultural difference, film is most easily read within the “modern(ist)” frame of national specificity. The transnational or post-national approach, on the other hand, often corresponds to a comparativist “World Cinema” agenda that is more susceptible to the vocabulary of a “post-modern” cultural studies, itself something of a paradoxical approach in that it largely eschews the neo-Marxist (post-Gramscian) analytical tools of cultural studies proper⁶ in favour of a celebratory affirmation of “culture-as-resistance-to-hegemony.” Arguably, this amounts to little more than notional resistance to the formal subsumption of culture at the very point of its material subsumption into the “liberating” dynamics of global digital capitalism.⁷

Postmodernism in Latin American Film

Despite the conceptual difficulties posed by the renewed “Great Divide” outlined above, film produced in Latin America at least since the 1980s has often had a highly reflexive relationship to these very processes, welding the historical hybridity of Latin American cultures – incorporated into official national cultural discourse in many countries under modernity – to new forms of post-identitarian, (mass-)mediated imaginaries. As Latin American film now predominantly circulates, is consumed and framed within *other* screens, these frames have increasingly become its content as well as constituting a space of reflexive potentiality, whether on politics, identity, or the society of the spectacle itself.⁸ One of the first mentions of postmodernism in Latin American film occurs in Fernando Solanas’ “foundational” post-dictatorship film *Sur/The South* (1988), when the protagonist Floreal, wandering the night-time streets of Buenos Aires after his release as a political prisoner, encounters a stray, broken-down military tank. His spectral guide, El Negro, tells him that it is “un tanque urbano. Pos-moderno” (“an urban tank. Postmodern”). This “postmodern” neighbourhood tank makes a series of mechanical noises and from time to time reels off a set of automatic phrases in a smooth-talking female voice:

Comunicado Número Uno: Vecinos, el Enemigo está infiltrado en todas partes. Desconfie. No exponga la seguridad de los suyos. Denuncie a su tanque amigo cualquier anormalidad. “Proteger es querer.” [...] “Los argentinos somos derechos y humanos.” “Por favor, circulen.”

Communiqué Number One: Neighbours, the Enemy is everywhere. Be on your guard. Do not risk your family’s safety. Report anything out of the ordinary to your friendly neighbourhood tank. “Protection is love.” [...] “Argentines are humane and right.” “Please move along.”

Made towards the end of the Alfonsín mandate, but set in 1983, *Sur* is clearly here staging for its audience something like an epistemic clash between two different regimes or modalities of power that are paradigmatic of the shift associated (in literary studies) with the “post-Boom,” mentioned above. The shift is clearest in those countries, such as Argentina, which emerged from authoritarian rule at the point of ascendancy of global “free market” ideology, and has been variously theorized as a transition from “State” to “Market” (Thayer, cited in Avelar 1999, 58–59), or as a shift from a society of “discipline” towards a society of “control,” i.e., a shift from those disciplinary institutions that Foucault recognized as lying at the core of modern social organization and state hegemony mechanisms, such as the school, the police, the army, the penitentiary,

and the asylum, towards the institutions and mechanisms of “flexible accumulation,” such as global markets, mass media, debt, financialization, consumerism, and the Network (Deleuze 1992). The figure of the postmodern tank, like the Chicago-boys-inspired dictatorships of the Southern Cone themselves, conflates these regimes, signalling at once repression or discipline and the diffuse, decentred, libidinal operations of the immense desiring machine of globalized capital and its micropolitical networks of social control.¹⁰ Having said this, it would be very difficult to consider *Sur* itself to be a postmodern film, governed as it is by a Brechtian aesthetics of estrangement, a modernist fascination with artifice, framing, and *mise-en-scène*, a patriarchal mapping of woman (Floreal’s wife Rosi) onto nation, the restoration of an interrupted family romance, and nostalgic grand narratives of industrial modernization and collective projects for social transformation (the “Proyecto Nacional Sur”).¹¹ Although the (nostalgic) framing of modernity can itself be a postmodern gesture, *Sur* frames everything but its own political modernism. We have, instead, to turn to a Mexican film made five years after *Sur* for a different mode of production of Latin American cinematic postmodernity.

Guillermo del Toro’s *opera prima*, *Cronos*, appeared in 1993, less than a year before Mexico’s entry into the North American Free Trade Agreement. The film is an urban vampire movie in which the vampire coexists with the figure of the cyborg in a spatial dimension simultaneously infused with time and bereft of temporal difference. The film concerns an Argentine antiques dealer in Mexico City, Jesús Gris (clearly a corruption of Jesús Cristo) who accidentally injects himself with the Chronos device, a clockwork machine that looks like a highly ornate, baroque golden scarab, invented, we are told, around 1536 by an alchemist and watchmaker and hidden for many years in a hollow statue of an angel. But the device is not just a machine: at its very core, in amongst its intricate mechanical cogs, lies a blood-sucking insect that confers an eternal half-life (that of the living dead) on the person injected by it, but only if the user of the device also acquires and consumes a regular supply of fresh human blood. Such a machine, part mechanism, part organism, evokes, in a powerful evocation of temporal compression, a pre-modern prototype cyborg adrift in a completely irresolvable postmodern timeframe. The Chronos device seems to telescope narratives as apparently distinct as colonization, drugs, and AIDS hysteria (Jesús’ body decomposes the more he “injects” himself), the earliest forms of mechanization (clockwork devices and automata), contemporary techno-organic kinship, and biotechnology and genetic engineering (Jesús slowly mutates into something resembling a giant insect). The film plays on a disturbing symbology of transfusions, the pollution of cultural frontiers, and anxieties surrounding the “vampirization” of the Mexican economy by its richer North American neighbour, symbolized by a dying millionaire, Dieter de la Guardia, willing to kill to obtain the Chronos device, who has gained his industrial fortune in the U.S.A. by, it is implied, the brutally enforced extraction of surplus value from Mexico. Yet, despite its thematic framing of the loss of Mexican economic and cultural autonomy as some kind of “fallen” morality play, complete with Christ, demons, and angels, the film was consciously designed from the outset for a globalized audience, being co-produced by Mexican Iguana Productions and Los Angeles-based Ventana Films, containing a mixture of Spanish and English as well as a peculiar diegetic focus on multilingual signposting, and using an international cast of Argentine, Mexican, and Hollywood actors (Ron Perlman in the role of Dieter’s thoroughly Americanized nephew). As Ann Marie Stock argues, “Neither Del Toro nor *Cronos* is ‘obsessed’ with authentic national culture. In fact, they flaunt their migrancy and hybridity” (1997, xxvi).

Just like the vampire figure itself, then, which in the film is decidedly domesticated by the devotion of Jesús’ utterly fearless granddaughter Aurora, the cultural “anxiety” played on by the film’s cross-cut narratives of “pre-modern” colonization and “postmodern” loss of national sovereignty in supra-national market-based alliances such as NAFTA, is ultimately neutralized by

the film's abundant use of pastiche filmic citation. The film freely vampirizes the stock repertoire of horror movies both within Mexico and internationally, including *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922), *El vampiro/The Vampire* (Fernando Méndez, 1957), Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), Cronenberg's remake of *The Fly* (1986), and *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg, 1983). Furthermore, Jesús' undead status clearly works over (and sends up) a rich Mexican popular and cinematic symbology of conviviality with the dead, as in a much-cited sequence where Jesús' (undead) corpse is being prettified in the funeral parlour accompanied by one of the few uses of "typical" Mexican popular music in the film.¹² Overall, the simulated nature of the proliferating vampire analogues in the film makes it into a startling postmodern comment on, and performance of, the disembedding of local cultural practice in the face of an undifferentiated onslaught of global filmic cultural references in which richly cited local traditions and compulsively cited global ones lose their attachment to any residual notion of cultural authenticity.

Cronos in many ways initiated the full-scale denationalization and "globalization" of Mexican cinema, with many of its most promising directors, such as Toro himself, launching their careers in Mexico, dynamiting the "prison-world" of locality and cultural nationalism (as they saw it), in order that they may "calmly and adventurously go travelling" (mostly to Hollywood). Yet the consolidation of a postmodern thematic was flourishing elsewhere on the subcontinent, sometimes in the most unlikely of places. In the same year as *Cronos*, 1993, there appeared two landmark films with a broadly postmodern thematic, if not with the same flamboyance of cultural pastiche that we find in *Cronos*. These are the Cuban film *Fresa y chocolate/Strawberry and Chocolate* (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío, 1993), which achieved wide international distribution, and the Colombian film *La estrategia del caracol/The Strategy of the Snail* (Sergio Cabrera, 1993), which broke national box-office records for a local production in its home country. The former was directed by an establishment insider and veteran filmmaker, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, based on a short novel by Senel Paz, and was produced during the euphemistic "Special Period in Time of Peace" that followed in the aftermath of the collapse of the former Soviet Union's support for the Cuban economy. The latter was directed by a former member of the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) communist guerrilla movement in Colombia, which had demobilized and been granted amnesty two years earlier. In both cases the films argue for a rethinking of party-line left-wing ideology, hegemonic on the socialist island and clandestine in the plutocratic capitalist economy of Colombia, with the loosening of the old, more rigid socialist doctrine to be accompanied by a decoupling of social agency from fixed paradigms of class and gender and a "tolerance" for the new micro-politics of personal identity that would have been condemned as individualist and petty bourgeois under the old ideologies. Both films engage with a distinctly postmodern identity politics, with the Cuban film acting as a corrective to the ostracization of (male) homosexuality in the aftermath of the revolution (with many sent to the infamous UMAP work camps),¹³ and the Colombian film promoting both a performative identity politics and the deployment of "performative" strategies (the *estrategia* of the title) as a way of intervening in and disrupting the predatory rent-seeking activities of the Colombian oligarchy. The common political context for both – an ideological crisis linked more or less directly to the end of the Cold War and hence the decline of a linked set of *grands récits* – provides a paradigmatic, if counterintuitive, postmodern thematic. It is counterintuitive for those of us accustomed to thinking of postmodernism as "the cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson 1991), or as a phenomenon associated with mass-media-driven consumption. The fact that one of the principal examples of sustained postmodern filmmaking in Latin America occurred in the continent's only Marxist-Leninist communist state, in the early 1990s, with films such as *Adorables mentiras/Adorable Lies* (Gerardo Chijona, 1992), *Fresa y chocolate* (1993), *El elefante y la bicicleta/The Elephant and the Bicycle* (Juan Carlos Tabío, 1994) and *Un paraíso bajo las estrellas/A Paradise Under*



Figure 9.1 Life becomes cinema: Marina Soledad and El Isleño illuminated by lightning in *El elefante y la bicicleta*/*The Elephant and the Bicycle* (Juan Carlos Tabío, 1994). Reproduced with permission of Juan Carlos Tabío, 1994.

the Stars (Gerardo Chijona, 1999), is fairly stunning and suggests that postmodernism's apoliticism (*pace* Hutcheon), or its ideology of the end of ideologies, becomes a perfect vehicle for "harmless" critique – one that renounces Utopian political projects and, in Žižek's words, accepts that "freedom is possible only on the basis of a certain fundamental 'alienation'" (1991, 142).

A couple of less well known films from Cuba and Colombia can be taken as the culmination of this strand of postmodernism in Latin American cinema: *El elefante y la bicicleta* and *Bolívar soy yo*/*Bolívar Is Me* (Jorge Alí Triana, 2002). Both films self-reflexively frame their own relationship to the epistemic weakening of Marxist-Leninist ideology in Cuba and Colombia, at least *de facto* if not *de jure* in the former case. *El elefante y la bicicleta* (Figure 9.1) is a dual vignette on intertwined histories: that of the island of Santa Fe (a thinly veiled allegory for Cuba) and the parallel history of cinema on the subcontinent. It begins with a lesson taking place in an informal island school run by the blind schoolmistress Doña Iluminada.¹⁴ At the end of the lesson, she asks the pupils what they would like to do, and they enthusiastically ask her to let them play the cloud game, which involves describing all the shapes they can see in the clouds. Some see an elephant and others see a bicycle (for example) in the same cloud, which, much like the famous Rorschach inkblot tests, alludes to the way in which the visual patterns we see on some screen (whether that of cinema or that of the social world we "interpret" every day) do not hold any inherent or objective meaning, but are reflective of our own psychological and social engagement with the world.

This prototypical unpinning of signifiers and referents – the destabilization of signifiers that we associate theoretically with the various structuralisms and their aftermath – is the frame of the entire film, in which the history of Cuba from the 1930s through the dictatorship of Batista and the revolution to the present day is reflected through the evolution of film spectatorship on the island. An embedded love-story between ex-convict El Isleño ("The Islander") and his sweetheart Marina Soledad ("Marina Solitude"), who had been abducted and raped by the island's evil dictator, Don Francisco Gavilán, is interwoven with repeated screenings of a silent film,

Robin Hood, which El Isleño has brought to the small town with a horse-pulled cinematograph. As the love story evolves, the film is re-run each night, but oddly, the second time it has sound, and seems now to be a hybrid of *Robin Hood* and an epic of the conquest of the Americas, with an indigenous Maid Marian/Malinche, while the cast of the film are all members of the Santa Fe community (the same people who are watching the film). At the next screening, the abduction and rape of Marian/Marina by a version of Gavilán is graphically portrayed. The film evolves, in repeated screenings, through Golden Age Mexican cinema of the revolution, Brazilian epic, Christian, and slave-emancipation fables, newsreel-style footage of the Gavilán/Batista dictatorship, a cartoon depiction of the Cuban Revolution, to a post-revolutionary propaganda musical extolling the virtues of liberated labour and the New Cuban Man/Woman. It is not just that self-reflexivity is a powerful characteristic (albeit by no means unique) of postmodern aesthetics; of particular interest is the fact that the film frames not only entire aesthetic modes in film, but reimagines the most significant modern historical event in Cuba (the revolution) as an *effect* of cinema's decoding and recoding of affect. Politics, in this film, is portrayed as an effect of cinema, and the revolution is an act of revenge by the townsfolk against the abduction and rape of Marina. The film(s) also has the effect of slowly changing the attitudes of the townsfolk towards questions of feminine virtue and purity, modernizing their perspectives and acting as a "revolutionary" force in its own right. Not only, then, does the "medium become the message," but cinema itself, far from being relegated to some ideological superstructure, is projected directly into the base, becoming something akin to what Jonathan Beller dubs "the cinematic mode of production" (2002, 64), a modality in which the flow of mediatic images and information is profoundly integrated into the economic forces that produce and reproduce the social. That the commodification and transmission of affect through this mediatic image economy is a powerfully disruptive force in its own right allows us to link this (parody) of Cuban filmic "biopolitics" to the commerce of affect that now besets our (capitalist) biosocial networks, as I shall further examine below.¹⁵

The Colombian film *Bolívar soy yo* goes even further down this road of media self-reflexivity. It concerns a soap-opera dramatization of the life and love affairs of the great nineteenth-century liberator of Latin America, Simón Bolívar, whose deluded actor, Santiago Miranda, comes to believe that he *is* Bolívar and sets about trying to re-establish the dream of a united Greater Colombia. The film begins in the style of a *dramatizado* or television costume drama, with a sequence portraying the execution by firing squad of "Simón Bolívar" at the Quinta de San Pedro Alejandrino near Santa Marta (the place where the real Bolívar died from illness in 1830) preceded by the farewell between his mistress, Manuelita Sáenz, and himself. Since most local spectators would know that Simón Bolívar did not die by firing squad, and that Manuelita Saenz was not with him when he died, these apparent flaws in verisimilitude act as estranging devices which puncture the film's mode of representation. However, just as the firing squad is preparing to shoot, Bolívar raises his hands and, gesticulating wildly, shouts "¡Corten, corten, corten, cor-ten! Bolívar no murió así. ¡Bolívar no murió así! ¡Yo no mato a Bolívar así ni de ninguna otra manera!" ("Cut, cut, CUT! Bolívar didn't die this way. Bolívar didn't die this way! I refuse to kill Bolívar in this or any other way!"). The literal interruption of continuity and of the illusionistic narrative mode propels the film into the dimension of self-reflexivity, as its referent is no longer history, the life and death of Bolívar, but the discursive process, the modes and procedures of filming. While this is a source of some humour in the opening sequences, the film rapidly moves into a more complex use of self-reflexivity, aided by the foundational role of the historical Bolívar in the formation of Colombia and his continued importance for the self-image of the state and its various institutions. The willingness of the producers of the *telenovela* to rewrite history in order to make it more dramatic – "este final es más impactante" ("this ending is more dramatic") – emphasizing

the primacy of representation, is matched by the absurd way in which the president's office exploits the charisma of Santiago in his role as Bolívar, inviting him to take part in a military parade in Bolívar's honour and asking him to give a speech in full nineteenth-century military uniform at an international summit of Bolivarian presidents. Additionally, at a later point in the film, the Colombian guerrilla factions get involved, wishing to claim Bolívar's "revolutionary" credentials for themselves by claiming the actor as a mascot for their own movement. The film thus plays skilfully with the performative dimensions of the social (in general) and of politics (in particular), depicting the histrionics of everyday life, the state and other armed "actors."

National foundational narratives, along with a violent ideological struggle that has beset Colombia since the 1940s, are thus thoroughly "postmodernized" in this film, i.e., subjected to the logic of the commodity and of the mass media, which are capable of extending this logic both upwards into the mechanisms of state power (and its contestation), and outwards into the whole populus. What begins as the delusion of one actor, becomes through such mediation a mass delusion which threatens to overwhelm the state and even destabilize the politics of the entire region (with obvious allusions to Hugo Chávez's manipulation of Bolivarian history in the neighbouring country of Venezuela). More and more people begin to take up "Bolívar's" cause, and crowds take over public squares demanding the implementation of Bolívar's political programme for repudiating foreign debt and uniting the Bolivarian republics in a single, powerful nation that could stand up to the United States. This Bolívar fever is aided and abetted by the news media's continual reportage of Bolívar's exploits and of the misinformed reactions of the U.S. government, which predictably sees Bolívar's political demands as an instance of narco-terrorism. The film thus acts self-reflexively as a comment on the power of television and the mass media to fuse the fetishistic logic of the spectacle with forms of populism, whether revolutionary, nationalistic, clandestine, or demagogic, unwittingly creating new political forces which threaten to bypass traditional political structures and ideological mappings.¹⁶

Post-Ideological Frames and Post-Identitarian Dreams

The full subjection of political processes to the logic of the spectacle, as portrayed in *Bolívar soy yo*, allegorically marks, perhaps, the final collapse of Latin America's grand "modern" political narratives. By the turn of the millennium, having lost any semblance of ideological investment, the Colombian guerrillas take big-time to kidnapping and drugs trafficking, while the state plays a putative "post-ideological" role as the administrative arm of global finance capitalism and its predatory client oligarchies through much of the 2000s.

Elsewhere in Latin America the picture is mixed as regards the persistence of a postmodern aesthetic in film, or its evolution into some new aesthetic constellation. Due to its belated nature (vis-à-vis literature and other visual arts), it tends to emerge somewhat sporadically, vying for place with the powerful impulse (inherited from the long tradition of neorealism in Latin American cinema) to register in film the ravages of economic deregulation, mass urbanization, corruption, the extension of criminal economies often linked to the drugs trade, and the unleashing of "wild" capitalism throughout the region. These processes may appear to be stemmed by the mediatic neo-populisms of the so-called Pink Tide in Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil,¹⁷ but impoverishment persists for marginalized populations throughout the continent, and even the most "benevolent" states, or their state apparatuses, end up resorting to authoritarian tactics against the demands of a vast underclass. This is strongly suggested by an Argentine film directed by Pablo Trapero in 2012, *Elefante blanco* / *White Elephant*, set in the villa popularly



Figure 9.2 Buscapé “shoots” his camera in *Cidade de Deus/City of God* (Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, 2002).

termed *Ciudad Oculta* (Hidden City), which acts as a critique of the various cycles of state- and Church-led populisms. For the forgotten slum-dwellers (many of whom feature in the film), these have amounted, historically, to little more than the eponymous “white elephant,” represented as a huge, abandoned, half-constructed hospital right at the heart of the *villa*.

A couple of films from Brazil, produced within a year of each other, can be used to illustrate these competing trends of neorealism and mediatic postmodernism: *Cidade de Deus/City of God* (Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, 2002; Figure 9.2) and *O Homem que Copiava/The Man Who Copied* (Jorge Furtado, 2003). *Cidade de Deus* is perhaps still the standard-bearer for Brazilian film’s presence on the international stage: based on the homonymous “true-story” novel by Paulo Lins, it portrays with a somewhat controversial *Goodfellas*-type aesthetic, the growth of the planned housing development, *Cidade de Deus*, originally established to relocate victims of flooding and homeless people removed from demolished shanty areas in central Rio de Janeiro, into a lawless *favela* dominated by rival drug gangs. Young black slum inhabitant Buscapé grows up observing the changes, muggings, brutal acts of violence, revenge killings, rapes, and massacres, commenting on them at key points in the film for the benefit of the cinema audience and, later, documenting them with his camera as he aspires to be a photo-journalist. On the one hand, this film follows the aforementioned neorealist imperative by using a number of non-professional slum-dwellers in its cast, while on the other, its stylized and highly edited cinematography, with use of narrative-style voiceover, self-conscious story-telling, and Hollywood-style spectacularization of gunfighting, would seem to obviate whatever (neo)realist intentions might have lain behind this aesthetic choice.

The contrast between the film’s virtuoso cinematography, its narrative conventionality (the use of the motif of the “survivor” who tells his story in the first person using chronological flashback), and its engagement with the violent lives of the marginalized, created a fair amount of controversy amongst Brazilian critics upon its initial release (e.g., Bentes 2002; Eduardo 2002): it was accused of representing a “cosmetics of hunger” rather than the angry, revolutionary “aesthetics of hunger” called for by legendary Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha in his famous manifesto. *Cidade de Deus* has in common with its similar predecessor in Mexico, *Amores perros/Love’s a Bitch* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000), the fact that its independent filmmakers

apprenticed in the television advertising industry, reflected in a racy tempo, a fetishizing gaze, the use of contemporary rock music and related genres, visual experimentation, and a predominance of stylized editing. In many of these elements we can recognize the classic symptoms of what Terry Eagleton sees as postmodernism's parody of the artistic innovations of the historical avant-garde, for whereas the latter attacked, with revolutionary intentions, the conservative institutional role played by the notion of aesthetic autonomy, the former also abolishes the distinction between art and life, but in the inverse direction: life is now so pervaded by commodification, advertising, and image production that even a vague (neo)realist intention ends up reflecting little more than the "depthless [...] dehistoricized, decontexted surfaces" (Eagleton 1992, 132) that are everywhere generated by the society of the spectacle. Accordingly, the film's focus on Buscapé's own visual practice – his incipient photojournalism – ends up, like the film itself, folded into the logic of commodification. The slum is not portrayed as the product of socio-economic inequality in Brazil, where violence could be understood as systemic, fuelled by the hedonistic appetite for drugs of its upper middle classes. Instead, it is depicted as a separate, lawless, exotic realm – an autonomous world of sex, drugs, carnival, and gang warfare – whose "fourth wall" is firmly and inescapably sealed off with celluloid.

O Homem que Copiava is perhaps more representative of the mainstream absorption of post-modern thematics within the mass media, often seen in television dramas, soaps, reality TV, and romantic comedies such as this production. The film concerns a young man, André Marciel, who works as the operator of a photocopying machine in a shop in Porto Alegre. Fancying a girl called Silvia who is his neighbour and who works in a lingerie store, he realizes that romantic success will require more money than he can earn, whereupon he hits on the idea of photocopying bank notes with the copier. Thus begins a comedy of manners in which all the values of lower-middle-class *arrivismo* issue from the logic of the simulacrum (the copy of a copy that has no original), ranging from the obsession with fashion impelled by the demands of seduction, dating, and romance as a form of social advancement or "gold-digging," to the pull of easy money obtained through swindling and crime. In terms of thematics, this film, perhaps with less virtuosity, has several links to an international blockbuster, released in Argentina three years earlier, *Nueve reinas/Nine Queens* (Fabián Bielinsky, 2000). In both films, the entire social order is revealed to be based on forgery, not just because both films begin with an act of forging money or valuable stamps, but because money itself is revealed in both productions to be the fundamental fiction (a piece of "fiat" paper with a vague promise to pay its own value to the bearer) that "produces" the real (social/symbolic) order as the simulacrum's most powerful effect. Given the nature of the genre, one value is necessarily saved from the proliferation of simulacra: the relationship between André and Silvia is strengthened by the various trials of their encounters with the urban underworld, and is of course established as the (honest) motivation for the protagonists' engagement with forgery, robbery, and even murder. If marriage and the need to provide for spouse and family are the very basis of the bourgeois property order, we can speculate that the social function of such films of extended courtship, in the era of postmodernity, is essentially that of the decoy. Much fun can be produced by revealing to audiences the simulacral nature of money and the rules of social mobility, so long as the fun is finally directed, as a feedback loop, back into the reproduction of the social order in family romance. We can thus, in Metz's Freudian terminology, "know full well" that the socio-economic order is based on a fundamental fiction, but we can nevertheless deploy this postmodern, cynical knowledge in our everyday actions, so as to reinforce the final order produced by the game.

To the extent that such postmodern concerns have become mainstream, whereby personal and social identities are reflexively and routinely understood and promulgated as performative or as an effect of the (photo)copy or simulacrum, we may now speculate that "postmodernity" in

Latin American film comes fully into view only as its era begins to draw to a close. For if the grand paradigm for collective identity construction has, since the nineteenth century in Latin America, revolved around the Nation with its hegemonic, disciplinary politics, the shift that we observe in the films analysed above suggests not only the shattering of collective identitarian projects into myriad micro-identitarian, performative particularisms, but also, more recently, a marked loosening of all such paradigms of identity-as-difference as the self is increasingly fascinated by, and absorbed in, its own construction and dissemination through mediatic, televisual, and informational networks. A sci-fi film made in Mexico (and in Spanish) by Alex Rivera, a U.S. filmmaker of Latino origin, can be used to illustrate this final phase, or shift, in our paradigm, and I shall use the analysis of this film as my conclusion.

Sleep Dealer (Alex Rivera, 2008) concerns a dystopian future in which the border between Mexico and the U.S.A. has been sealed against migration northwards, but in which the U.S. is able to satisfy its demand for migrant labour through a series of giant *infomaquillas*¹⁸ on the Mexican side of the border, where cheap migrant workers operate robotic machines in the U.S. by remote control, over a vast network of interconnected, virtual bodies. The protagonist of the film, Memo, is the son of a peasant farmer in Oaxaca whose *milpa* is rapidly turning into a dustbowl due to the privatization and damming of the region's water resources by a giant U.S. utilities conglomerate. Memo is not satisfied with his confinement to the land in a far-flung corner of Mexico, and he spends his evenings using ham radio to listen in to global social networks, to the world of teleworkers, and to the interactions of distant drone pilots (from the U.S.) undertaking bombing raids against global bands of "aquaterrorists." His unwitting interception of a drone network brings about a calamity, as his "terrorist" intercept aerial becomes a target for a drone bombing which kills his father in full view of the world's media, since the drone bombings are televised as entertainment, with the presenter promising to show videogame-type live-action streams of the remotely operated drones "blowing the hell out of the bad guys." Memo, in great distress that his hacking activities have destroyed his family's meagre subsistence, and feeling responsible for the death of his father, sets off for Tijuana to look for work in the *infomaquillas* or "sleep dealers." On his way to Tijuana, Memo meets Luz, a former student of "biomedia" studies, and now a writer from Mexico City. Memo notices the plugs, or nodes, she has inserted into her forearms, and asks her where she obtained them. These are needed for the teleworking he wishes to undertake in the *infomaquillas*, as the nodes are used to provide a direct interface between the nervous systems of the so-called *cybraceros* and the computer interface which remotely operates the machines.

Although Luz describes herself as a writer, we subsequently see that her storytelling also involves interfacing her body directly with a large social network, called "TruNode" (Figure 9.3), in order to authenticate biologically the reality of her experiences, and also to record her somatic responses and affective states while experiencing the adventures she recounts. She sets about uploading the experiences gleaned from Memo in the hope that someone will buy her story. Memo gets his nodes, with Luz's help, and for a while his fortunes seem to look up. He gets paid for his job, and manages to start sending money back regularly to his family at home. His love life is also looking up, as Luz and Memo strike up an intimate relationship, which is genuine on her part, though she continues to sell his stories without telling him. There is, however, a downside to the work in the *maquillas*, which is that the longer a person remains connected to the teleworking machines, the more their bioenergy is depleted. It becomes clear that as well as the classic extraction of surplus value from labour, and as a literalization of some of Marx's more colourful metaphors along with Eduardo Galeano's famous metaphor of "the open veins of Latin America," the *infomaquillas* are also, vampire-like, draining the workers' veins of energy and vitality and piping it off elsewhere, just like the water. The appropriation of the commons thus extends from



Figure 9.3 Luz plugs her body into TruNode in *Sleep Dealer* (Alex Rivera, 2008).

water to the human body itself, its intimate biology and energy transmission networks, which capitalism is now commoditizing in its desperate need to expand its frontiers into different spaces and open up new, previously untapped markets. Luz's "writing" is in fact closer to a multi-sensory video stream than to a textual technology, and Rivera has his "Emma Bovary c'est moi" moment in his film commentary when he admits that some of the short memory sequences she shows Memo on her biomedica screen are taken from his own documentary filmmaking practice. For Luz is also commodifying and uploading Memo's vital experiences, selling affect in much the same way as the *infomaquilas* distribute the bodies and vital energies of the teleworkers across the vast, global network of nodes.

Cinema has always been a technology for the capture and commodification of affect, as we saw in *El elefante y la bicicleta*. But the technological administration of affect has now spilt over far beyond the confines of cinema and television, reaching into those increasingly biosocial networks that are commodifying our most intimate, private, interpersonal relationships, communications, and feelings. It is this final mutation in the cinematic plot of postmodernity that, I believe, signals its shift into a new paradigm, one which propels us into a definitively post-cinematic order. The hallmarks of postmodernity that I have explored in this chapter – the decline of (ideological) metanarratives, the explosion of performative identities, the commodification of aesthetics, and the ungrounding of the real by the logic of the simulacrum – are all still present in the bioaffective memory streams of TruNode. But they are present as echoes or ghosts of a rapidly fading social order in which polarities such as the "national" and the "global," the "original" and the "copy," together with the various macro- and micro-political regimes of "identity," cease to be the motors of our collective imaginaries. Even the film's hacktivist-inspired "network struggle," which seems, albeit temporarily, to disrupt the appropriation of the commons by a privatized military-industrial complex, is itself one more memory uploaded to TruNode, as is made clear by the framing of the opening and final sequences of the film (employing the same oneiric aesthetic as is used for the other TruNode memory fragments). It is thus possible to glimpse, in this film, something like a new reconfiguration of the Great Divide, one which is still blurred, and for which we only have fragmentary theories and conceptual tools. This shift is not just a reorientation

from Nation as the final referent of literary and filmic culture to what Castells (1996) terms the "Network Society": it is a fundamental reconfiguration of the very topology of our forms of cultural expression. Instead of autonomy, representation, commodification, and power, for example, cultural forms will need to contend with connection and disconnection, with distributed agency, with the direction of flow and control. But, much like the shift from modernity to postmodernity, we can be sure that, in Latin America as much as elsewhere, this new digital topography will reorientate the entire terrain of (televisual) aesthetics, its patterns of consumption, and its framing *within* the informational flows of the Network Society,

Notes

- 1 This cancelling-and-preserving (*Aufhebung*/upheaving) is generally characteristic of what Jacques Rancière terms the "aesthetic regime" of art (2010, 115ff).
- 2 Andreas Huyssen discusses the "very conventional thought pattern" by which postmodernism is declared either to be continuous with modernism or a radical rupture, and sets his own work against such dichotomous thinking (1986, 182–183). In the social sciences, Anthony Giddens studiously avoids the word "postmodernity," insisting instead on the term "radicalised modernity," which he sees as correcting the poststructuralist underpinnings of the former concept (1990, 149–150).
- 3 Huyssen argues that poststructuralism is in fact a theory of modernist narrative and poetic practice (1986, 207–208), and broadly agrees with Habermas' famous characterization of Derrida and Foucault, at least insofar as their thought was taken up within U.S. academia, as representing a neoconservative backlash against the radical aspirations of 1968.
- 4 For further details, see Burbano 2007, 97.
- 5 For a reading of the interface between postmodernism and social critique in Argentine film in the aftermath of dictatorship, see Page 2001.
- 6 i.e., as originally formulated by Stuart Hall and others under the influence of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985).
- 7 On the distinction between formal subsumption and material or real subsumption (as applied to labour under capitalism), see Marx 1976, 1019–1038.
- 8 Giddens argues that such reflexivity is in fact constitutive of contemporary life, of the way in which knowledge about life is constructed reflexively for (post)modern subjects in and through the media, a process characterized by "the emergence of internally referential systems of knowledge and power" (1991, 144).
- 9 The expression "Los argentinos somos derechos y humanos" was a propagandistic slogan devised by the military regime as a retort to the official visit of Amnesty International (U.K.) to Argentina in October 1976. On the fraught nature of this visit, see Guest 1990, 76–86.
- 10 For further discussion of *Sur*'s relationship to such geopolitical imaginaries, see Kantaris 1996.
- 11 This National Project of the South is a nostalgic placeholder in the film for a largely defeated (at the time of filming) left-wing nationalism predating Peronism. However, Solanas went on to found a short-lived political party, Proyecto Sur, in 2007, which won one seat in the Argentine Congress that year.
- 12 Enrique Grau pays direct homage to this (already pastiche) sequence in his horror film *Somos lo que hay*/ *We Are What We Are* (2010).
- 13 The camps known as UMAP (Military Units to Aid Production) were labour camps used as correctional centres for men whose beliefs or lifestyle were seen as contrary to revolutionary values, including Christians, professionals who wanted to leave the island, and, notoriously, homosexuals.
- 14 Her name means "Miss Illuminated," signalling a dialectic of blindness and vision running through much of the film.
- 15 For more on (Mexican) cinema as a labour of affect, see Kantaris 2013.
- 16 For a full analysis of this film, see Kantaris 2007.

- 17 The “Pink Tide” refers to the rise of democratically elected left-wing governments in several Latin American countries from the mid 2000s.
- 18 The *maquilas* or *maquiladoras* are manufacturing facilities in Mexico, mostly on the border between Mexico and the U.S. and located in “free-trade” zones. The film plays on this by adding the prefix “info,” ambiguously situating them between manufacturing and information-processing.

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