Review/Reseña


Latin America’s Cinema
and the Art of Genre Cross-Pollination

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Throughout the twentieth century, and during the first decade of the twenty-first, Latin American filmmakers have shown an extraordinary ingenuity and flexibility in their representation of reality. Long before North American and European academics start paying attention to documentary alongside fiction, in an effort to better understand and theorize about the parallels or dissimilarities between these two genres,
Latin American filmmakers were already experimenting methodologically and aesthetically with cross-pollination. In several cases filmmakers were purposely blending documentary with fiction to enhance the real through the fictional and to make the fictional more real, and many continue to do so. The result was more interesting and wholesome representations of the complexities and contradictions of Latin America’s societies, cultures, histories, and political realities.

Although scholarly attention to Latin American cinema is not new, what is a novelty in Miriam Haddu and Joanna Page’s edited volume entitled *Visual Synergies in Fiction and Documentary Film From Latin America* (2009) is its sharp lens focusing on the undeniable synergy existent between both genres. Particularly important is the analyses of this cross-pollination as it is manifested in so many Latin American productions from the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first. Without doubt this is a significant addition to the ongoing conversations about the relationship between fiction and documentary works and their construction of the “real.” Equally significant is the contribution to the existent body of knowledge on Latin American cinema. However, one cannot help but notice that the book as a whole falls short in shedding light on the cinema from small countries and that of less known directors to western audiences as the different authors and the majority of chapters center their analyses on the usual studied countries (Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and Cuba), except for one chapter that addresses Chile. The focus is primarily on well-known directors and films that form part of the Latin American canon circulating in international markets and academic circles.

*Visual Synergies in Fiction and Documentary Film from Latin America* is an anthology consisting of 15 chapters, which are well organized in five parts. Each part is fitting specific themes either reflecting the content of the analyzed films or the argument advanced by the different contributors to each section. The five parts are: “Latin American Perspectives,” “Revolution and Its Specters,” “Crossing Borders, Crossing Genres,” “Performance and Reflexivity in the Contemporary Documentary,” and “Questions of Reference.” The international lineup of contributors assembled by Miriam Haddu and Joanna Page is an excellent testimony of
the world relevance Latin American cinema has achieved and the interest it captures not only in different countries where the contributors reside but across various disciplines as well.

Joanna Page opens the first section with her introduction, providing a good general insight on the ongoing debates and theorization around the tensions, similarities and differences between fiction and documentary films. She draws a brief summary of the various and contentious arguments on the topic, signaling some of the theoreticians who have made a mark on this line of enquiry such as Bill Nichols, Michael Renov, Carl Plantinga, Noël Carroll, and Stella Bruzzi. These scholars are the theoretical source of influence for several of the authors contributing to this volume. It is important to notice, as Page does, that despite the growing scholarship on the relationship and many times blurry margins between documentary and fiction, scholars have failed to include Latin American cinema as a site of study. The neglect of this cinema seems an oddity because this is such a fertile ground for the analysis of the phenomena in question. This volume fills such scholarly void.

Page’s introduction also discusses the five parts in a concise manner, explaining the contributions made by early and contemporary Latin American filmmakers to cross-genre experimentation; the use of documentary techniques in fictional films as an important aspect of both the rise and demise of socialism in Latin America; the cross-generic creations as expressions of culture hybridization and border awareness; the incursion of fiction into documentary to create oppositional cultural politics while reflexively addressing performance; and lastly, the referentiality of documentary challenging the notion of the “real.”

Following the introduction is Michael Chanan’s chapter, a real tour de force. As a way of outlining a genealogy, he masterfully revisits the theories, the Latin American cinematic canon, and their directors about which he has written before in other volumes. However, this time he clearly exposes the tension, space, and blurriness between fiction and documentary calling attention to the different films from the 1950s and well beyond the 1980s (including those of the New Latin American Cinema and Cinema Novo) that have made use of “a strong realist mise-en-scène,
and the incorporation of non-professional actors into narratives taken from their own everyday lifeworld” (15).

Chanan rightfully remind us that films like *Rio 40* (Brazil, 1955), *Kukuli* (Peru, 1961), *The Hour of the Furnaces* (Argentina, 1968), and *Rodrigo D: No Future* (Colombia, 1990), among many others, have been historically placed as part of peripheral cinema due to their origins, style, and technological difference in relation to industrial Hollywood and European cinemas. However, he asserts that if we turn the focus to the history of experimentation on bending the lines that supposedly separate documentary and fiction, then the history of Latin American cinema as underdeveloped or in need to catch up is somewhat misleading. Latin American cinema under this new lens and history is “quite as fertile a site of experiment as the countries of the metropolis” (22). Chanan also suggests in his conclusion that what is at issue is not the “antimony between fiction and documentary, but between a cinema of escapism and a cinema of conscience” (23). No doubt that these thoughts indeed reflect the spirit of those who create films to move audiences to action, and not to amuse spectators to the point of inaction allowing them to be passive consumers-observers of crude realities and social disparities.

Dylon Robbins contributes the first chapter to the second part—“Revolution and Its Specters.” His essay examines three early Revolutionary Cuban films. The films in question are Sabá Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez Leal’s *P.M.* (1961), Tomás Gutierrez Alea’s *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment, 1968), and Nicolás Guillén Landrián’s *Desde la Habana 1969! recordar (From Havana 1969! Remember. 1969)*. Robbins explores how the social transformation of Cuba gets to shape Revolutionary cultural production. He focuses on the formal tensions between fiction and documentary alongside historical tensions where marginal subjects come, one way or another, to center stage.

Alejandra Anderson’s chapter uses material from a round-table held in Havana in 2006 and interviews she conducted with different Cuban filmmakers weaving an interesting analysis of the rise and decline of Cuban documentary and its dialogical relation with political reality. She gives more emphasis to the decline of documentary production suggesting that
this is possibly the result of institutional failure and “the theoretical positioning of documentary within the main frame of the Revolution” (p. 50). Important to note is that while Anderson effectively discusses such decline, she also brings to the fore the blossoming of independent documentary in recent years through the analysis of two documentary videos: Humberto Padrón’s *Los zapaticos me aprietan* (1999) and Haori Chiong’s *Re-jau-la* (2006). This is crucial for understanding contemporary Cuban cultural production—especially that which is critical of the Revolution, the impact of censorship, and the role of those holding institutional power and tight control over Cuban’s film industry, namely the *Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográfica* or ICAIC [Cuban Institute of Art and Cinematographic Industry].

Following is Edgardo Dieleke’s essay on contemporary Brazilian cinema also known as the *Retomada*, which is considered from the mid-to-late 1990s to the present. His analysis centers on the reformulation of the relationship between cinema and politics as well as the tensions between documentary and fiction in relation to the construction of reality in general and violence in particular. Dieleke’s argument discusses contemporary representations of violence in contrast with those representations from past films belonging to the *Cinema Novo* era. Dieleke suggests that contemporary Brazilian cinema should not be analyzed with the same tools that were used to understand *Cinema Novo* because the political, social, and economic contexts in which these films are being produced are not the same as that of the 1960s or 1970s. Thus *Retomada* films need to be read within their present context.

Dieleke discusses *City of God* (2002), *Central Station* (1998), *Madame Satã* (2002), and *City of Men* (2007) among others. In his analysis of these films he suggests that the *Retomada* is responding to reality by representing violence in a more “real” manner by way of a documentary-like method, even when the risk is to create dysphoric narratives. According to Dieleke, the method of these fictional representations creates two reactions on the audience: one is that of distance between the spectator and the story unfolded due to aesthetic choices (glossy film, perfect shots, rapid editing, an overall sense of “this is
a movie”), and the other is that of debating the painful and controversial issues of poverty and violence based on how “real” these fictional representations appear to be due to the documentary method (non-actors acting their lives, actual locations, and an overall sense that “this is as gloomy as the real life is”).

The first chapter on the third section, “Crossing Borders, Crossing Genres,” is by Alejandra Rodríguez-Remedi whose contribution focuses on Chile, making this the only chapter in the book covering the cinema of a country not usually studied. She addresses Raúl Ruiz, one of the most prolific Chilean filmmakers whose long trajectory dates back to the early 1960s. Ruiz’s early work was fairly experimental and usually linked to poetry, and in this chapter Rodríguez-Remedi probes the essay-film Cofralandes, Chilean Rhapsody (2002) also known as Impressions of Chile. Rodríguez-Remedi does not analyze Cofralandes as a work separated from the body of films that Ruiz possesses, and she does not draw a divide between Ruiz’s “fiction” and Ruiz’s “documentary” films either. She is primarily looking at how Ruiz is provoking with Cofralandes (and his overall body of work) a “meaningful dialogue and reflection on historically traumatic, self-contradictory Chilean society and, through its universality, encourage other societies to engage” (87).

Indeed the essay is not so much a theoretical discussion of what Cofralandes represents but a profound and gentle acercamiento or approximation to Ruiz’s overall work and approach to reality through fiction and documentary, and his study of memory and the shortcomings of it as it is presented in this low-budget video with four feature-length parts described by Ruiz as a “spiritual autobiography” (92). In probing Cofralandes, Rodríguez-Remedi discusses how this director explores the forgetting of certain cultural referents and the implication of this loss of memory for identity construction. Rodríguez-Remedi proposes that Cofralandes provides, in a free and spontaneous form, the possibility for Chileans (and anyone else) to be able to look inward and rescue cultural referents that can help us (re)invent history, culture, language, and national identity.
Maximiliano Maza Pérez deals with Maria Novaro’s *El jardín del Edén* (1994). This is a mostly descriptive essay pointing out at Novaro’s ability to narrate the border through a cast of characters both male and female whose stories are set in Tijuana. Maza Pérez suggests that Novaro successfully intertwines the stories of these people along with all the internal feelings that are born from experiencing life in such transitory geographical frontier. Novaro, Maza Pérez asserts, has constructed a traditional dramatic narrative making use of documentary techniques, which are mixed with devices more commonly use in fictional narratives. In addition he reads this film not necessarily as another Novaro’s feminist text, but as a film where both male and female characters have almost equal footing and point of view in the film. He points to three core elements in the story’s plot: first, the feminine gaze, suggesting that “If in Novaro’s films the masculine gaze captures reality, the feminine gaze possesses the gift of transforming it” (110); second, some type of record in order for the characters not to forget the past or to perpetuate the present. Here, Novaro is clearly dealing with memory, especially that of those who cross the border; and third, the territory of Tijuana and its surroundings. However, the film is briefly discussed because to get to it, Maza Pérez spends most of his essay providing background information on the history of border representations in Mexican cinema. Albeit interesting and relevant to the topic of Novaro’s film, it could have been shorter to allow for more introspection on the film in question.

The following chapter by Armida De la Garza focuses on the subgenre of mockumentary, analyzing Sergio Arau’s *A day without a Mexican* in its two length versions—the 25 minutes short (1998) and the feature film (2004). The simple plot of this mockumentary is “the sudden and inexplicable disappearance of all Latino immigrants from the state of California” (119). Indicating that perhaps the seriousness of the documentary form could have been more suitable for a discussion on immigration, De la Garza questions why Arau may have chose instead to use mockumentary. After historicizing the Mexican film industry, and persuasively explaining the significance of film in the project of modernization and development of the nation-state, De la Garza
establishes that cinema has been part of Mexico since its arrival in 1896. She also explains how it has helped to create a collective imaginary of what it means to be a Mexican, and then argues that because the intense border crossing plus the political and economic transformations in which Mexico has become closely tied to the United States and Canada through NAFTA, there is an inevitable hybridization of the Mexican. Then, ‘mockumentary’ as a hybrid form serves Arau quite well to “represent hybridity or the remaking of the hybrid (Mexican/American) identity” (126). De la Garza indicates that mockumentary is a reworking of its original form: the documentary. This traditional genre as a product of modernity fits better with the formation of the nation-state or the Mexico of the Revolution and up to the 1980s. However, the intensification of the transnational, translocalities, and lives touched by a diasporic or itinerant media ask for a different form of expression and create a more suitable environment for the existence of the mockumentary. The author, however, delivers the main idea in the last paragraph or what can be read as the conclusion. Although the idea is plausible, it would have helped to propose it earlier in order to further develop it. This could have provided a more convincing answer to the question of why Arau used mockumentary for his film on immigration instead of the documentary form.

Part four, “Performance and Reflexivity in the Contemporary Documentary,” starts with Mariana A.C. da Cunha’s essay on two films by Brazilian documentary maker Eduardo Coutinho: Boca de lixo (The Scavengers, 1992) and Babilónia 2000 (Babylon 2000, 2001). Da Cunha focuses on the existing relationship between the produced images and the multi-layered discourses that make Coutinho’s films sites of heterogeneous spaces and identities. Reflecting as well on Coutinho’s style she points out the two main characteristics of his work. First, his use of defined locations, such as for example in Boca de lixo, filmed in one single location—a dump. The second characteristic is the way Coutinho constructs the story based on spontaneous conversations he has with his character(s), revealing through these the different discourses and narratives representative of everyday folks. According to da Cunha, the work of Coutinho shows an ideological evolution that responds to the passing of time and domestic and global
political changes. His work is no longer nationalist or anti-imperialist as it was back in the 1960s when he began his career and the trend of these discourses was in vogue. Coutinho’s films now integrate that political consciousness by still focusing on the representation of marginal people, but along with the complexities of a nation that has become to recognize its diversity, hybrid nature, and contradictions. Those in peripheral positions reject the stereotype and marginality allocated to them in mainstream media constructing their own discourses that challenge those stereotypes.

Cristina Cervantes writes the next essay in which she addresses three Mexican documentaries: El abuelo Cheno y otras historias by Juan Carlos Rulfo (Grandfather Cheno and other Stories, 1994), Los últimos Zapatistas, héroes olvidados by Francisco Taboada (The Last Zapatistas, Forgotten Heroes, 2002), and De nadie by Hector Cadena (Tin Dirdamal, 2005). Cervantes provides an introductory explanation of the documentary tradition in Mexico and then addresses the contributions of the early fathers of filmmaking language such as Sergei Eisentein and D.W. Griffith, who gave us the understanding of “how cinema may engage the audience’s emotions and thereby convey ideologies” (151) through the language of cinema, which structurally borrows from theater and literature. The way Cervantes has framed her analysis is interesting because she is analyzing the narrative structure of these three documentaries using pedagogical tools normally applied when teaching production. Ultimately Cervantes analysis demonstrates how conflict is essential to the structure of the documentary as much as it is to the dramatic structure of fiction. The main characters appearing as witnesses and victims in the three documentaries are taking similar performative functions normally associated with fictional characters. They do this in order to act for the camera pulling the audience toward their point of view. The directors, concludes Cervantes, proposed conflict as the core of the narrative structure but, unlike fictional films, documentary’s ending is not “necessarily one in which conflict is resolved or happiness is achieved” (159).

Miriam Haddu’s essay focuses on the Spanish-Mexican co-production En la mente del asesino (Aro Tolbukhin: In the Mind of a Killer, 2002) by directors Isaac-Pierre Racine, Agustín Villaronga, and
Lydia Zimmerman. This film is an interesting work that escapes traditional ways of making films in Mexico. It is unique in that the directorship is shared among three people and it uses different media formats (film, television clips, and newspaper clips) to reconstruct and tell the story of Aro Tolbukhin, a Hungarian merchant who in the 1980s was found guilty of killing seven people in a small hospital in Guatemala. It uses a clear crossover between fiction and documentary inserting fictional scenes in combination with “factual” texts and interviews. Haddu suggests that “the film deliberately plays with concepts of fiction and reality and the parallels between these in order to pave the way for an exploration of an invented world” (163). Tolbukhin’s confession and admission of these and other killings has been called into question based on new information and testimonial accounts, thus the film looks into this as well as into the mind of the killer who may have exaggerated his mental illness by inventing or attributing to himself more killings than the ones he actually committed. Haddu’s analysis of the narrative structure in this film is well done, calling to our attention the use of a cinematic framework, which is organized on the basis of certain principles of psychodynamic analysis.

Part five, “Questions of Reference,” starts with Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla’s essay on Luis Buñuel’s Él (Strange Passion, 1952), a film based on Mercedes Pinto’s novel Pensamientos (1926) and set in the conservative Spain of the 1920s. In the novel the main character is trying to divorce from his paranoid husband who has inflicted suffering to her due to his unhealthy behavior. The novel blurs the line between fiction and a real account by inserting medical articles and other documents written by experts on this mental illness in the “real” world. Gutiérrez-Albilla’s reading of Buñuel’s film is solidly grounded on psychoanalysis. He uses for the most part Freud and Lacan to interpret Buñuel’s adaptation and fictional rendition of the story and that of paranoia linked to repressed homosexual desire. Gutiérrez-Albilla’s highly theoretical and psychoanalytical approach for analyzing the film becomes arcane at moments. The most valuable aspect of this essay is his suggestion that the film Él, while a fictional account, is also a work that serves the function of documenting psychiatric and psychoanalytic discourses. It provides a view
into the world of mental and social illness as a documentary could; in this regard, the fictional has a direct reference to reality.

The following chapter by Joanna Page centers on the study of digital mimicry and the intertextuality between digital and analog film while visually referencing to photography and painting. Page analyzes the works of three Argentinean directors: Gustavo Fontan’s El árbol (The Tree, 2006) and La orilla que se abisma (2008), Albertina Carri’s Los Rubios (The Blonds, 2003), and Fernando Spiner’s La sonámbula (The Sleepwalker, 1998). This is a clearly written essay that provides us with superb understanding and insight about the films in question and how the directors utilize visual technologies not only as tools to produce their films, but also as visual strategies to cite or reference time—from the past to the present and from the old to the new. Page’s core argument is that the analyzed films are experiments of different types of representations in which the directors are exploring, in reflexive mode, issues of temporality, history, and modernity in the Latin American context as well as within cinema itself. The analysis addresses more than the actual content of the movies in term of story, the different aesthetic strategies deployed in each film on a contrasting set of images and formats where the directors have purposely used a mix of analogue and digital, documentary and fiction, indexical and simulated narratives while also engaging in another temporal narrative to reflect on the historicity and development of cinema.

Geoffrey Kantaris’s essay focuses on two films by Carlos Marcovich—Quién diablos es Juliette? (Who the Hell is Juliette?, 1997) and Cuatro labios (Four Lips, 2006). The essay shows an attempt to innovate the way in which one analyzes the blurriness between fiction and documentary, and Kantaris introduces the usage of the term “dereferencing,” a term borrowed from digital or computer programming. This term reflects in great part what is at stake in his discussion of the two films, particularly to explain the suspension “of a floating referent” and how it is tied to “real life” or grounded in “nature” (228). These two films, according to Kantaris, “produce something akin to a complex visual metadiscourse on the nature of documentary reference” (219). His analysis is quite to the point, exploring how the director uses different filmic and
editing techniques to ultimately deliver challenging films that blur the genres while also challenging a power structure created by those behind the camera and those in front of the camera; those who can represent others and those who are represented. Kantaris suggests that these films subvert or challenge that power. For example, in Quién diablos es Juliette?, the film opens with the main character—Juliette—correcting how her name should be spell in a non-Europeanized way—Yuliet. His argument also brings up issues of culture and territoriality, and how these may be placed in a flow of mediated realities where there is a “shuffling of identities, whether personal or national, impelled by mass media representations” (221). The usage of the concept of dereferencing does not really affect the depth of the overall analysis of the films, but it gives it perhaps more nuance, providing something interesting to think about as a possible new tool for diving into the different issues of representational paradoxes where the referent of the documentary is in itself a mediation.

James Cisneros’s is the last chapter in this section and in the book. His essay deals with representations of urban space in both fiction and documentary, focusing on Buenos Aires and contemporary Argentinean productions such as Pablo Trapero’s El bonaerense (2002), Alejandro Agresti’s Buenos Aires viceversa (1996), and Daniel Burak’s Bar “El Chino” (2003). Although Cisneros mentions several movies, the bulk of his analysis is that of Trapero’s. In order to analyze the film, he first provides an in-depth and clear presentation of recent theoretical understanding and new readings of urban spaces in the context of political and economic changes where the city’s imaginary or physical dimensions become altered.

The book as a whole is an important collection of essays bringing a novel view of Latin American cinema, and pointing us to the contemporary study of documentary and fiction as non-stable forms that are absolutely malleable in the hands of creative minds.