

# New Latin American film: Addressing the negative culturescapes and glocalising transnational problems<sup>\*†</sup>

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Film has been an integral part of revolution, change and aspirations for a more just world in Latin America. During the 1960-70's the documentation of repression during the years of dictatorship produced a very potent form of cinematic critique. This has laid the foundations for the continuing role of film in documenting and interpreting the cotemporary social inequality and violence. Film has become an important vehicle for witnessing, especially within the human rights tradition and a vehicle of glocalisation –in being able to reveal and interpret local experience and everyday lives in terms of the global economic and political processes.

Within the film production the Latin American documentaries of the 1970's have been considered one of the most essential grounds of political and cultural struggle, perhaps the most 'developed' field of modernity in Latin America. Even if we disagree with this statement we have to admit that the Latin American documentary is the most committed film genre regarding human rights issues.

Classic examples such as *La batalla de Chile* (The Battle of Chile) (1973) by Patricio Guzmán immediately come to mind. How can we forget that shocking scene where an officer executes the cameraman who is filming his own execution? This is protest cinema at its best, it burns into your psyche forever and makes your senses remain on edge every time you remember this juxtaposed scene where victimhood and repression so clearly fill the lens and explodes into the transnational space, politicizing the screen by absorbing the spectator into the vortex of transgression and trauma by making us experience the scene as if we were the subjects of the injustice. By deterritorializing violence it emerges as the new agglutinating factor that will globalise local identities and glocalise global ones.

*Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment) (1968) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea brings similar arresting memories to our mind: another excellent combination of documentary and fiction, that volatile mixture taken to the peak in literature by Eduardo Galeano in his *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* (*Open Veins of Latin America*) (1971) and his trilogy *Memorias del fuego* (*Memories of Fire*) ["Los nacimientos" (The births) (1982), "Las caras y las Máscaras" (The faces and masks)

\*This paper, in a different form, was previously submitted to the session 'Politics, Identities and Urban Violence in Latin America: a global perspective', in the *International Association for Philosophy and Literature Conference*, Tainan, 23-29 May 2011.

†Nota de Edición: La autora de este artículo fue invitada a escribir en este número por Crítica Contemporánea

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(1984) and “El siglo del viento” (The Century of Wind) (1986)]. All these works have certainly provided the right genealogy and seeding ground by treating historical truth as a stepping stone towards artistic and denunciatory creation. And it is indeed the denunciatory character of the Latin American film industry that makes this field so controversial. Latin American film insists on its independence and pursues its artistic and political goals even if the product is not as polished as one might like.

‘It is neither a ‘dependent’ cinema nor a cinema struggling to become developed but one that rejects the entrapment of conventional developmentalist logic and aggressively asserts its own underdevelopment—its hunger, imperfection, violence, and poverty -as an empowering or transformational device’ (López 2000, p. 52).

Latin American film has been described as being grim, serious, political, demanding, or difficult; as portraying an aesthetics of hunger, a cinema of poverty, an imperfect cinema, a third cinema, an aesthetics of garbage, a medium that exposes diverse forms of violence, capital flows, political fragmentation, regimes of social control and security. Is the exposure of these inequalities through film one of the roads available to change the polarity of the culturescape<sup>1</sup> we are trapped in Latin America at the moment? Will the strategy of the glocalisation<sup>2</sup> of problems through film offer solutions or only cosmetic changes?

This paper will attempt to answer some of these questions by looking at films that present ‘a new politicized, ideologically laden version of reality’, films that use a revolutionary language which turns against Hollywood (Hart 2004, 12) to give us the alternative stories of a continent that has been culturally and economically colonised since its discovery by the European hordes. Decolonisation did not produce independence but ushered in a new cultural and political imperialism that we are still trying to shake off our shoulders. And it is precisely by turning against Hollywood that these films want to make us see the world not through American eyes but through the problematized perception of ‘the other’, ‘the victim’, ‘the underdeveloped’. Latin American cinema and some of the new films about Latin America, are so powerful precisely because they reveal the truth of contemporary life and the impact of global capitalism in the periphery and the emergence of new political actors and social movements.

Three recent films contribute to the cinematic tradition and introduce us to the Latin American visceral/glocal nature of emerging Latin American identities and the ‘new violence’ providing a viewers penetrating insights into the prevailing culturescape of the region and the effects globalization on everyday life lived at the local level: *In the shadow of the raid*; *El traspatio (Backyard)* and *La zona (The Zone)*. The different glocalised perspectives about the violence and fragmentation of the social that they aggressively portray, hopefully will complement each other to provide us with a coherent picture of our present reality and open up new possibilities of ways of being that could quaver

<sup>1</sup>I am using the term ‘culturescape’ in the original sense assigned by Appadurai, as something ‘man made’, as opposed to a ‘landscape’ which is an element of nature.

<sup>2</sup>I am using ‘glocalisation’ as the local display of global problems; a combination of the concept of globalisation –understood here as the integration of local markets into the world economy and its spatial reorganisation of production and consumption across the different states- and its effects on local communities.

the status quo by providing us with an experience and insight to engender new social imaginaries.

In the film *In the shadow of the raid*,<sup>3</sup> a 2010 finalist for the prestigious London Rory Peck Awards for freelance video journalism, the perennial phenomenon of labour migration –internal and external- is explored. Modernity has accelerated this ancient phenomenon through new forms of transport, shortening the journeys and facilitating the movement of ever larger numbers of migrants. The wealth of the North has become a magnet for the poor of the South. But the North increasingly pushes them back in an attempt to control that human tide, refusing to understand that a tighter border controls, internal security and harsh punishment of those who arrive illegally will not be a long lasting solution to global inequality.

The film exposes the fragility and contingency of illegal migration and its extended gamut of vulnerable victims in the opening scenes with a raid conducted in 2008 by the American Immigration Department, in Postville, a small town in Iowa, USA, in the kosher meatpacking plant of Agriprocessors Inc. As a result of this raid, 389 workers were detained and deported back to Guatemala. Their wives and children are left behind in Postville to cope on their own as best they can, their ankles tagged with electronic security bracelets, like dangerous criminals who needed to be kept under surveillance.

This film epitomises the transnational configuration of violence and pictures immigration as a ‘culturescape’ where governments and enterprises manage the identities of people and their urban spaces, creating regulated cities for the middle and upper classes by tagging ‘the Other’, the illegals, the poor, with electronic surveillance devices, so they can live in a fictitious safe bubble. Furthermore, the raid reveals the interconnected global processes that underlay these population flows. The connectivity and motion of everything from immigrants to the practices of capitalism, the integration of global and local forces defined by glocalization become transparent and absurd, denouncing not only the geographical interdependency of labour migration but also the resistance and resentment of the unemployed Americans in Postville towards those illegal migrant workers, despite that they are only taking the jobs they do not want to occupy and despite that their own dependence on the presence of this cheap labour for the viability of the town. The structural violence of poverty in the South is confronted with the physical violence of the journey and vulnerability to deportations and separation from the family that they experience in the North.

The victims of the raid are not just the illegal migrants and their immediate families: the film pans first to Postville where shop owners reveal the impact on their own businesses with no customers to consume their goods and then it flies to Guatemala. The synchronicity of glocalisation – something happening here has immediate effects in another part of the world – is revealed in the geographical leap into the two Guatemalan villages receiving back the expelled workers of the meat packing plant. The documentary follows one of the workers, William Toj, back to his village in the mountain where his cancer-ridden mother urgently needs his economic support to have a critical operation that could save her life.

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<sup>3</sup>Jennifer Szymaszek and Greg Brosnan are a multimedia production team based in Mexico City that has dedicated many of their films to depict the postmodern problems affecting Latin America. Although this film is in English I consider it part of the film of denunciation of Latin American inherit problems as I am discussing in this paper.

Back home, deported William not only has to suffer the painful experience of seeing his mother consumed by her illness helpless to stop her slow death because the massive debt incurred by his U\$S 7,000 trip to USA. He had been deported before he was able to earn a cent. Soon we realize that the dimensions of the tragedy amplified in their home towns where their extended families are now deprived of financial support and hope to live more dignified lives. They won't be able now to care for their ailing parents with the income that labour migration would have permitted.

The glocalisation of the international experience of immigration confronts us with the interdependency between first and third worlds, an interdependency that the rich countries fail to perceive, let alone to acknowledge or help alleviate. Furthermore, that negative USA 'alien' culturescape where the 'Latinos' are needed to do the jobs that white Americans refuse to take, but, at the same time, deny these migrants any human rights, not even the dignity of working to help their families.

This reality has recently been exposed at international level. The predicament of the illegal worker has been exacerbated in Arizona where a proposed punitive immigration law threatened to consolidate the culturescape of the dangerous and/or unentitled 'alien worker' by allowing police officers to investigate the immigration status of any person they suspect to be an illegal migrant. The U.S. Department of Justice eventually sued to block the Arizona law and won the legal battle.

After the episode of xenophobia in Arizona everybody was expecting a wave of similar tough laws to be implemented to police illegal immigration in other states in USA. However, the response has varied with even examples of compassion - e.g. in early 2011 Maryland passed a law that provides in-state college tuition to the illegal migrants, totally changing the polarity of the legislative measures. A recent report informs us that:

'President Obama travelled to El Paso, Texas, to deliver a speech... on immigration reform. He talked about the economic benefits of immigration overhaul and about increasing the number of border guards from the days of the Bush Administration. Of course, he stopped short of talking specific immigration legislation.' (Cafferty 2011).

Films such as *In the shadow of the raid* that show the glocalising effect of these cruel policies can educate audiences about the human consequences of these laws and hopefully contribute to changing public attitudes and government policies. One of the websites dedicated to this film suggests it has had just this affect: 'With its eye-opening findings on this controversial raid, the film has become a part of the American debate on immigration policy' (Rory Peck Trust 2011). Whether these harsh policing laws are reviewed and changed is still to be decided but it takes films like *In the shadow of the raid* to raise popular awareness and shape public opinion compelling their governments to respond in a more humanitarian manner and to denaturalise the negative culturescape around illegal migration. Presenting 'the other' as human, with the same family responsibilities as any American but with huge economic burdens that can only be solved by migrating to richer countries, is an attempt to denaturalise the 'hate-the-alien' culturescape and to open up the possibility of the much needed intercultural dialogue among unequals.

The film *El traspatio (Backyard)* exposes another kind of violence by exploring the

raw wounds of the victims of foreign investment, transnational narco-trafficking and femicide on the USA/Mexican border through a hard hitting plot looking into the controversial role of the media and to the government's reluctance to combat crime and human rights violations.

This film falls into the genre of "border cinema" which has evolved in the last decade around the theme of violence in the Mexican/USA border. As *Gender violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border* explains, the representation of border violence in film concentrates on three issues: a) who are the killers, b) how are the victims portrayed -what role they represent in the drama- and c) how does the system fail to represent or help the victim (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Corona, 150-152).

While *El traspasío* follows this recipe quite closely its main focus is the huge problem of femicide in Juárez in a very different manner, sharing with us the process of normalization of the murder of women in the 'frontera' and exploring avenues to de-normalize it. This is a very confronting film that takes the spectator out of their comfort zone through intimate encounters with the tragic stories of women who are the victims of drug gang violence on the one hand and corrupt police and judiciary on the other.. Although fictional the film draws heavily on real events and cases.

From 1996 foreign owned 'maquiladora' -manufacturing centres- attracted women workers from all over Mexico. These women quickly became easy targets of predatory sexual violence, rape and murder, their bodies left to rot in the sands of the border desert, as symbols of the system decadence and corruption.

The film draws heavily on the history of Ciudad Juárez achieving that magical blend of historical memory and the present reality that has shaped the most memorable Latin American films. We experience Ciudad Juárez from the perspective of a police woman detective -Blanca Bravo- sent to Juárez to solve the mystery of these violent deaths. Through her investigations she learns about the culturescape of this place: the corruption of her own institution -the police department- and government officials; the role of the powerful global corporations and government institutions generating forms of spatial segregation and discrimination; the function of the media in the normalization of these tragedies; the denial of the 'unaffected' people about these crimes and the power of entrepreneurs such as Mickey Santos who globalises the role of the multinationals in the city.

In *El traspasío* the role of the media is paramount. The radio journalist who positions himself as the voice of the city -the good city, the one that wants to change the circumstances, de-normalize the violence and reign it- who informs us in a rather matter-of-fact way of the grim reality of Juárez. He uses the microphone as his weapon to challenge the inequalities of the system by exposing them to the public. That is why, when he dedicates a 'ranchera' entitled "Los tigres del norte" to the last victim of femicide, he is not trivializing the problem but cynically denouncing the origin of this endemic violence without having to compromise his position or naming names. Everybody who lives in Juárez knows about the inequalities of the 'maquiladoras', foreign owned factories that settle in the 'frontera' to facilitate the transportation of assembled goods to USA and that employ a disproportionate number of women because of the cheap labour they provide, leaving the men alienated from any source of labour, totally dependent on what the drug cartels can provide for subsistence. These crimes

are not just the expression of gender hate but also the symbol of the culturoscape of violence that neoliberalism has brought about to many societies, where the source of production is completely sabotaged by foreign capital, leaving the workers totally disempowered, ready to take their bottled up frustrations into their sexually strangled lives. Jameson talks precisely about this late-capitalism and postmodern culture and on the relationship of economy and culture, "... indeed, mass cultural production and consumption itself -at one with globalization and the new information technology- are as profoundly economic as the other productive areas of late capitalism and as fully a part of the latter's generalized commodity system" (Jameson 1997, 252). Nothing escapes the economy of capitalism, certainly not the lives of its subordinates or their sexuality. Violence is very much part of the neo-liberal apparatus and is translated in every aspect of society, glocalising its specimen in different localities and victims.

The ability to capture some of the complexities of the identities constructed in this border town in representational terms is perhaps the explanation of the success of this film. The characters grow and transform themselves in front of us, the violence of this culturoscape touches them all. Even Blanca, the police woman, the hero of this film, ends up an assassin by taking justice in her own hands when confronted by the depth of the corruption that has brutalised the poor and destituted her own future and career in the same labyrinth of terror and hate. Government and the protection of the law contracts to the socially privileged: the upper classes, the wealthy, the industrialists, the representatives of global business, the politicians. The poor are left unprotected, outside the realm of state's care and security, ungovernable and falling through the cracks of the state.

In the culturoscape of violence which characterises today's media representations of Mexico, films like this help to glocalise the story, de-normalize it by giving the victims real faces, real voices revealing the complexities of their own lives. We see people not just as victims of a culturoscape but as actors trying to change that culture and reverse the polarity of victimhood. There is certainly an attempt to de-naturalize and de-glamorise violence in this film and this is indeed part of its great success and appeal with international audiences: they are not horrified or detached from these crimes but empathise and reflect on the drama in which its characters are embedded. To challenge the endemic nature of the violence that characterizes Juárez culturoscape and effectively glocalising the abject violence instead of essentialising it is indeed no small achievement. To provide a lens into the lives of the women workers in the 'maquiladoras' and their brutal physical exploitation is to glocalise an international problem, to make it more comprehensible and human to all, helping us to understand the mechanisms of dependency, the simplification of gender violence and the way both media and government are implicated in silencing or naturalizing these atrocities so nobody cares about changing the logic that enables this violence.

How difficult is it to represent violence that engages and informs rather than horrifies or makes voyeurs of the audience? How can we keep an audience listening or watching and at the same time make them realize that they are not just watching a spectacle but a mode of representation that encourages people to reflect and engage with the issues? It is indeed a difficult tension to maintain. The power of the media in this film was the ability to help people to listen to each other. We are so used to the power of the media

as a spectacle that perceiving this role change is refreshing and enlightening, opening the imagination to different possibilities of growth and compassion.

One of the particular stories that come out of this film is that as audiences, we engage more when we listen than when we watch, when we do not get distracted or desensitized by the imagery and we hear the voices of the people that are involved in these dramas. The role of the radio announcer, the main hero who holds the power of the story telling, is to act as interpreter of the atrocities and tragedies for the entire town, and the film audience, and reveal the power and interests which create an inertia towards any real change.

*El traspasio* questions the role of the media in the representation of extreme violence, what it can do to represent the plight of the victim in a sympathetic way. The radio announcer is inspiring the listeners not only to reflect on but to act. How does he manage to move the listeners out of their comfort zone, de-naturalize their culturescape and make them think critically about the problems that are affecting so many victims in Juárez? How can he challenge their apathy and their denial? It is in this grey zone where a good and a bad journalist are differentiated, it is here where we can tell the prize winners from the losers. Journalism can be a committed profession or a totally corrupted one. A radio journalist can just speak through the voice of the system to perpetuate the injustices and the inequalities and safe his skin or take the risk of letting the light of truth and justice shine through their microphones, helping the audience construct memory and write a different story, opening the imagination to a possible better world.

The social alienation of Ciudad Juárez entrapped in a world of censored media and government repression does not bring any hope for the victims nor does it offer the rest of the population any strategy to protect themselves against this violence. The censored media makes the population feel that they will not be touched by this violence, that it belongs to someone else, to "the other", the criminals, the undeserving. This way of thinking remind us of the dictatorship years in Latin America where the middle classes who did not have any close victims in their families had the idea that the victims of state violence were the culprits –'algo habrán hecho'–, they surely must have done something to deserve torture and disappearance. David Viñas would have read this denial as a defensive class consciousness, a position opted by those who do not want to believe they will be touched by a tragedy they unconsciously perceive as belonging to lower classes than theirs (Viñas 1965, 64).

In this culturescape of national paranoia and transnational crime, the middle and upper classes aim to protect themselves either by denial -self convincing themselves of their invulnerability- or by putting in place new forms of discrimination, criminalization and separation. Our next film, *La zona (The Zone)* clearly exposes a new form of social control and security: the protected neighbourhoods, 'new castles' where the wealthy can effectively ignore poverty and all social injustices by creating an artificial bubble of their own with a parallel culturescape that operates outside the realm of the state's sovereignty. Due to the increasing economic and spatial distancing of the rich from the poor, new options are open now to the privileged few than ever before (Eagleton 2002).

This film centres on the reaction of an entire 'protected neighbourhood' when their castle walls erected against the slums –poverty is the worst sort of violence- become

vulnerable to the penetration of 'the other', the poor of the city.

Three young men from the 'outside' are able to penetrate their fortress once a section of their border walls collapse in a storm. These poor children go around this protected neighbourhood looking for items to steal and in the process they accidentally kill an old woman. As soon as the residents realize they have been 'penetrated' by intruders their 'militia' organizes itself to literally 'hunt' for these 'aliens' and at the same time to hide all traces of their own crimes, throwing their bodies in a rubbish bin, like the flotsam of society. They know that their privileged status of a 'parallel' institution where they can create and apply their own laws would be compromised the minute the police learn there is a breach of security and law enforcement rules in their protected neighbourhood. They do not want to lose their independence, their protectorate, privatised zone, where the central(city?) government cannot apply their sovereignty. They behave in fact as the citizens of a mini independent state, the walls of this protected suburb are their borders, their inhabitants their own immigration controllers and law enforcers. As Bachelard would have put it, the inside and the outside offer very different realms of comfort and protection, it is like talking about 'being' and 'nothingness':

'Philosophers, when confronted with outside and inside, think in terms of being and non-being. Thus profound metaphysics is rooted in an implicit geometry which –whether we will or no- confers spatiality upon a thought. . . Open and closed, for him, are thoughts. They are metaphors that he attaches to everything, even to his systems (Bachelard 1994, 212).

Everything is concrete, structured and regulated in the 'inside' but the outside is vast, unregulated and unlimited. The terms do not represent symmetrical realities but dialectical extremes that need to achieve a synthesis if we ever aim to have a dialogical relationship between them.

The crimes committed by the inhabitants of this mini state are covered up by the entire community. The crisis of the robbery and murder and search for the intruder unite them against the police, demonstrating they all live in a culturescape of appearances and deception, within a solidarity born out of the fear of becoming another victim of 'the Others', the ones outside their walls. Only one of the families rebels against their tyrannical draconic rules and decides to leave. The entire community isolate them and push them out of their 'zone'.

Alejandro, one of the teenagers who live in this compound accidentally encounters and confronts the third 'alien', Miguel, who is hiding in the basement of his own house. They share their youth and an unspoken understanding and compassion for each other's plight. Alejandro feeds and helps Miguel but is incapable of saving him from the private militia that, despite the police demands to intervene and Miguel's mother claims for her son, are determined to kill this child and offer him up as an example of the punishment any 'alien' would suffer if they dare trespass the boundaries of their 'kingdom'.

Now, we can see more clearly the drama of the 'aliens' and the 'frontera' portrayed in the previous films. The violence of the 'zone' is blown up by the fear of 'the other', that 'other' that only Alejandro comes to feel and approach, realizing that their human dimension should be respected and dignified. Alejandro does not find a place for himself



within the culturoscape of the 'zone', that glocalised space where all the global problems are lived and felt in an overblown dimension. Poverty, securitisation, violence and persecution are all 'the others' have to live by, like the immigrants in USA, like the poor dwellers of Ciudad Juárez. Yet, Alejandro does not want to be part of the controlled, unhumanised inside world of his family, where justice and human rights are not part of the regulations applied to the poor of the world, the deprived, the persecuted, the 'outsiders'.

These models of governmental management of identities and urban spaces, where only the middle and upper classes have a legal space and the 'aliens' and the poor fall through the cracks of society into the unregulated and illegal spaces need urgently to be restructured if we are to construct a more compassionate and just world.

At the beginning of the XXI Century, the globalising world that we had imagined as becoming more transparent and egalitarian, is constantly re-inventing itself as a more restrictive framework of intersecting rules that are not only ignoring the world's inequalities in the treatment of the poor, women and indigenous people but enhancing and criminalizing them to a higher order. By generating forms of spatial separation, we are maintaining the differences and curtailing any possibility of political transformation.

Marcuse's prospect of a 'libidinous civilization' where Eros would prevail and men would be liberated by industrialization lifting the work rules that repressed workers' capacities, has been denied by the pressures of globalisation and neoliberalism. Work has not become joyful and fulfilling in this restricted capitalist environment (Marcuse 1964); the vicious circle of increasing production and increasing repression has not been broken, quite the contrary: it has been strengthened under the international mobility of neoliberalism that escapes the constraints of more expensive production by restructuring the relationship of capital and labour. Not only has Marcuse's theory proven utopian but Freud's has consolidated his claims about the 'death instinct' being paramount in understanding our post-modern world. The economic crises faced in this century are depriving us not only of that creative work that modernity had promised us, but industrialization has failed even to provide real work for the worker, the magical tool that was going to render our poor more malleable to the social order.

Furthermore, the economic crisis that neoliberalism has brought about at a global level has been glocalised in different forms across the world as the analysed films has so eloquently showed us. Furthermore, the present economic vacuum is eating away not only the prospect of employment but has also eroded the environment of the necessary creativity to sublimate that death instinct -dwelling wild in the 'frontera', in 'the zone', in the migration 'raid'- that could transform into artistic expressions that can trigger positive changes in our imagination and our future. And, as the same Marcuse found out later in his life that industrialization rather than providing a creative outlet has created a one-dimensional way of thought and behavior which decreased opposition towards capitalism (Marcuse 1964), dooming the entire world in a never ending consumer cycle.

Should we pessimistically conclude here that the reality of a culturoscape increasingly stratified and securitized would only bring inescapable tragedy, the tragedy that Eagleton so well has described that dwells in the lives of ordinary people and from which we cannot really escape? Or should we, together with Alejandro, symbolically

leave behind these destructive culturescapes and build new stories imagining possible worlds where equality and compassion would guide our lives? We could then conclude, following Eagleton's advice that we should not 'settle for that set of shabby fantasies known as reality, but cling to [our] faith that the deathly emptiness of the dispossessed is the only source from which a more jubilant, self-delighting existence can ultimately spring' (Eagleton 2002, 296). In this decade of economic, ecological and ethical crisis

'... how could [we] endure to be a man, if man were not also poet and reader of riddles and the redeemer of chance!' (Nietzsche 2006, 275)

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