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The Digital Option: Interpreting Independence in Latin American Cinema Today

By Armida de la Garza

In a time of 'flexible accumulation of capital' (Harvey, 1991) led by transnational corporations operating across borders, the very idea of national independence may seem anachronistic. The social and historical context that gave rise to aspirations of autarchy, freedom and self-determination in Latin America has been radically transformed. The Other is now understood as constitutive of the self, through difference (Derrida, 1976), and independence has thus been recast as, at best, interdependence. Rather than seeking to uphold the continuity and stability of authority and rights over a given territory that industrial production required over the past two centuries, states are now, as Arjun Appadurai puts it, 'arbiters among other arbiters of various forms of global flow, whereas before they were guarantors of the territorial organisation of markets, livelihoods and identities' (Appadurai, 2003, p. 334). In what Zygmunt Bauman calls 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000) independence makes little sense.

In the realm of cinema in Latin America, this process has been experienced as a decline in the national productions, now usually co-productions, and a tendency towards the self-exoticising, as films, distributed by the Hollywood conglomerates, cater for a global rather than a national audience. Similarly, theatrical exhibition takes place in one of a handful of the global multiplex complexes, and it is only occasionally that the film screened is Latin American. Moreover, whether national or foreign, feature film itself has long been regarded as inherently 'dependent', that is, dependent on the conservative sectors that have provided its finance, with the word 'independent' referring to features made outside the censorship and constraints imposed by the state or studio financing.

However, and without denying this state of affairs, I would like to suggest that the very same processes that have so curtailed the role of the nation-state world wide and that have allowed for such an unprecedented corporate control

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of these film industries paradoxically have also spawned a parallel network of local, national and regional filmmaking, distribution and exhibition through digital media that has greatly advanced three of the key principles that were behind the wars for Latin American independence two hundred years ago. For the Creole elites that started the wars sought, first, to overturn the hierarchies of domination whereby a privileged group, 'peninsulares', were solely entitled to hold control of the Americas; second, to broaden citizenship so as to include mestizos, indigenous and black peoples; and third, to unify what had been the Spanish empire into a single Latin American nation, *la patria grande*. During the twentieth century, with the United States replacing Spain in the hierarchies of domination, the national cinemas of Latin American countries might have helped to advance some of these goals with varying degrees of success. Affordable and 'respectable', as opposed to its predecessors, theatre and vaudeville respectively, and not requiring literacy, cinema became a leisure activity that cut across class and gender cleavages, and the narratives sometimes put forward representations of a national 'we' that included indigenous and black peoples, albeit within a framework of assimilation rather than multiculturalism. Although arguably dependent on Hollywood for genres that were nonetheless soon appropriated and hybridised, Latin American cinema also developed aesthetics of its own, for instance imperfect cinema and cinema nôvo. Moreover, a large part of what is labelled 'Mexican' cinema, the most prolific in the region, often included actors, crews, music and plots from Cuba and Argentina, and the films from Mexico and Argentina also often circulated across the subcontinent and indeed, even among the Latin American diasporas in the United States, a fact that has allowed Marvyn D'Lugo to trace 'the beginnings of an aural bonding of a Hispanic transnational community' in the tango film and the *comedia ranchera* during the first half of the twentieth century (D'Lugo, 2010, p. 163). And as Laura Mulvey has noted of much Latin American cinema of the 1960s, 'belief in the cinema merge[d] with belief in radical political change', a utopian ideal of the sort that had inspired the struggle for independence. 'So, a commitment to social transformation [...] and a commitment to the cinema's place in enabling that transformation [...] work[ed] together' (Mulvey, 2003, p. 263). But I would like to suggest however that it is thanks to the globalisation processes that have

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thwarted independence of the states in Latin America that the possibility for an independent cinema is more radical at present, if independence is understood as mentioned above, namely overturning, or at least circumventing, traditional hierarchies of domination, enfranchising ever larger segments of 'the people' and even attempting to bring into existence a shared Latin American media space.

Let us start with the issue of hierarchies and enfranchisement. Glenn Willmott has suggested that to understand the impact of digital technology not just on cinema but on society at large, it can be useful to think of it in terms of, as McLuhan would have it, 'deep media' (Willmott, 2007). 'Deep media' underlie

> the production and existence of other media. When a deep media is dominant in a society we have 'the 'oral' or 'print' cultures described by McLuhan, the 'gift' or 'commodity' cultures described by Mauss, or the 'artisanal' and feudal versus 'industrial' and 'capitalist' described by Marx. Their function has always been grounded in symbolic exchange and the reproduction of values […] that is the revolutionary interest of the digital— not as a special or new medium but as a newly containing or enabling medium […] to create new foundations for us (Willmott, 2007, pp. 211-212).

These foundations are often thought of as starting with production, not only because the digital is now a containing medium for formerly separate media such as cinema, television, mobile phones and so on, but also because the technology required for filmmaking has become significantly cheaper, allowing for a qualitatively different way to undertake symbolic exchange and reproduce value. Writing in Cuba in the late 1960s, Julio García Espinosa had lamented that film was what he called 'the most elitist of all the contemporary arts' (García Espinosa, [2000] 2007, p. 291) 'Film today' he said, 'no matter where, is made by a small minority for the masses, […] a public reduced to the sole role of spectator and consumer' (García Espinosa, [2000] 2007, p. 291) and he added 'we should contribute to the liberation of the private means of artistic production' (García Espinosa, [2000] 2007, p. 294). With High Definition Video cameras starting at USD$1,500, digital filmmaking is cheap enough today that in Latin America too filmmakers can own their means of production, describing their experience in

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terms reminiscent of concepts associated with independence. As put by Mexican director Maria Novaro: 'Rehearsals can now be filmed, and filming can be continuous, less interrupted, more spontaneous. *We can now have the kind of freedom* they have enjoyed in Hollywood for so long' (Novaro, 2007, p. 54). Digital filmmaking has also been understood as enhancing artistic freedom in that it has become possible to work on a film for much longer, even after postproduction, modifying it in substantial ways.

But the hierarchy whereby those with access to expensive technology and film stock, read Hollywood, predominated, is not the only one that can be subverted by resorting to digital means. As the role of planning, assembling and synthesising gains prominence in digital filmmaking, an issue related to the de-skilling and de-professionalization of the workforce more generally, but which can have a positive impact, the creative balance has tended to tilt away from the director and across the production team, often comprised of young people who are conversant with digital technology, a relatively large percentage of the population in Latin America.[1] Further, now it is possible for widely different material as regards its technical sophistication to co-exist in the same document: 'a digital palimpsest is fashioned where overwriting does not entail writing out' (Uwemedino & Oppenheimer, 2007, p. 186). Home videos or participatory videos from indigenous communities and professional footage can be placed together (Mikelajáuregui, 2007, p. 24), opening cinema to a Baktinian polyphony and dialogism potentially more radical than the one incorporated in narratives of the sort of the indigenista films of Emilio Fernández in Mexico. In this vein, Mexican director Juan Mora Cattlet juxtaposed material filmed in 35mm and digital animation to attempt to render an alternative, non-realist aesthetic to tell

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[1] As recent research has shown, ownership is not a requirement for using digital technology among the young in Latin America. Familiarity is gained at school or in public places such as Internet cafés. See Castellanos Ribot, A. (2008). Estadísticas Básicas de la Cultura en México. In F. Toledo, E. Florescano, & J. Woldenberg (Eds.), *Cultura Mexicana: Revisión y Prospectiva* (pp. 367-400). Mexico: Taurus and Winocour, R. (2009). Extranjeros digitales y mediáticos: el extrañamiento en la comunicación. In N. García Canclini (Ed.), *Extranjeros en la tecnología y en la cultura* (pp. 29-37). Buenos Aires: Ariel.

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his *Eréndira Ikukanari*, based on an indigenous legend of a woman warrior, from an indigenous point of view. More importantly, digital filmmaking has also allowed indigenous peoples themselves some scope for self-representation. Although directors such as Jorge Sanjinés were already in the 1970s attempting to 'invent a new form of cinema that represented a Bolivian indigenous perspective' (Wood, 2008, p. 201) the Andean people he aspired to represent can now control the digital cameras themselves. Referring to digital films made for therapeutic purposes by victims of traumatic events, Uwemedino & Oppenheimer have said: 'Each screening is a mnemo-technique thriller trigger, that allows survivors to imaginatively infiltrate the history from which they have been excluded [...] perhaps it is a first stage towards justice' (Uwemedino & Oppenheimer, 2007, p. 184). The same might be said of indigenous peoples.

Lastly, dedicated Internet sites, blogging and social networking have tilted the balance in favour of 'the amateur as arbiter' too (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2010, p. 176). While some decry this development, perhaps due to a deep-seated ambivalence towards the idea of 'the people', regarded alternatively as either 'demos' or 'the mob', others have celebrated 'the decline of an older generation of gatekeepers' (Tryon, 2009, p. 125) pointing to the way 'the networked elements of blogs help to foster something not unlike a peer-review system, in which bloggers develop a reputation' (Tryon, 2009, p. 130). The quality of critical engagement is thus not necessarily compromised by what can be termed its democratisation. Some blogs have made a point of promoting local film production, suggesting their potential for cultivating what Tryon calls 'a local subjectivity [based] around shared interests in film culture' (Tryon, 2009, p. 131). Recent research on audience reception focused on blogs indicates a growing critical attention to what is often labelled 'world cinema', including Latin American cinema. Dina Iordanova has summarised the content of some of these blogs in the following terms: 'with the viewing of these films, the authors admit, their understanding of—and fascination with—the underlying moral philosophy and attitudes of [other] cultures grow tremendously'. They end up celebrating the 'shed[ing] off layers of limitations that their Western education and upbringing has confined them to' (Iordanova, 2010). Be that as it may, and even allowing for a number of successful bloggers that are co-opted by

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transnational corporations, thereby containing much of the radical potential of blogging, these developments open up the possibility of a filmmaking and film criticism in which the hitherto standing hierarchies of domination can be significantly eroded.

But important as production and critical reception are, it is in distribution and exhibition where digital filmmaking offers the greatest potential for an independent Latin American cinema, if independent is understood as freedom from state and corporate interests. More importantly, while enfranchising indigenous and ethnic minorities and women might in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries have been conceived in terms of extending citizenship and inclusion, as large sections of the state in some Latin American countries have been curtailed or effectively privatised alternative means are being sought to restore agency and empower people. The so-called air-screens that measure 40 x 20m and can be placed in the open air, so common in festivals these days, aptly encapsulate the way digital technologies are fostering independence in Latin American cinema. 'In countries such as Peru, Colombia, Venezuela and Argentina […] we have helped [through circuits comprised by such strategically placed screens] to promote 'small' but high quality national films', since Hollywood have taken the cinemas. 'It is like a brand-new theatre that can be taken even to places where there is no electricity, allowing for important social work to take place this way' (Kremer & García, 2010, p. 28 and 27).

The Internet has of course added another important window for distribution and exhibition. Websites such as the YouTube 'Screening Room' are growing in popularity as marketing and distribution sites (López, 2010, pp. 22-25), and in 2006 at the Festival de Cine de Guadalajara, distribution consultant Peter Broderick was advising young Mexican directors to opt for Internet-based networks as this would allow for the sort of niche-mining—even across national boundaries—that could make their filmmaking financially feasible while also keeping artistic control and rights over the films (Broderick, 2007).[2] The circulation strategy afforded by digital means is somewhat reminiscent of the

[2] It is estimated that while some 13,000 films are screened in festivals each year, only 500 receive theatrical distribution of any sort (Tryon 2009, 97).

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militancy and activism of Third Cinema, including screenings at clubs, trade union premises, churches, people's homes and so on, to which social networking sites have now been added, all with a view to promoting engagement, participation and discussion.[3] It is in this way that the 'Cine Piquetero' circulates in Argentina. Described by Uruguayan filmmaker Alejandra Guzzo as 'the other face of the New Argentine cinema, which shows young people overwhelmed by the world around them, rambling about the city' (my translation)[4] cine piquetero shows instead images of resistance and struggle. So called because it started amidst the road blocks or *piquetes* that were part of the protests that brought down the government of Fernando de la Rua, cine piquetero has been devoted to telling alternative stories, stories not related, as Guzzo puts it, to the neoliberal ideal of consuming as the only means for participation.

> If a factory in Lanus is closed down, the camera tells about the life of that factory worker who, until recently, used to have a job. But they are not only denunciation stories. They are also stories of love, of happiness, of the way a new social actor is born (Gentile, 2002).[5]

Other forms of circulation facilitated by digital media are related to the informal networks often labelled as piracy. Jim Davies and Michael Stack had noted that the replicability of digital products tended to depreciate 'whatever commodity value or profit margin inheres' (Willmott, 2007, p. 213) in them, this being a

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[3] By way of comparison, it has been pointed that while a Hollywood blockbuster typically opens on about 4,000 screens—albeit 4 times a day for several weeks—internet-based distribution made it possible for a documentary film to be screened simultaneously at 2,600 locations on 7 December 2003 (Tryon 2009, 100).

[4] 'Son la otra cara del denominado "nuevo cine argentino" que suele mostrar jóvenes superados por la realidad que los circunda, deambulando de aquí para allá en la ciudad' Guzzo in Gentile 2002 (all translations are mine).

[5] 'Se cerró una fábrica en Lanús, entonces la cámara cuenta, día a día, la vida de ese hombre que hasta hacía poco tenía un trabajo y podía mantenerse. [...] Pero no son sólo historias de denuncia [...] son historias de amor, de alegría, de cómo nace un nuevo actor social Guzzo in Gentile 2002.

crucial reason why piracy has long been regarded as a threat to national cinemas. But to Peruvian director Alberto Durand piracy stimulates cine-philia as audiences become acquainted with some films in this way and then seek more through theatrical distribution. This has been quoted as the reason why audiences for cinema in Peru have kept growing—reaching 20 million in 2009. Other Latin American directors have considered what they call self-piracy, namely seeking deals with the extremely fast and efficient pirate networks operating at a broad range of venues to help them reach audiences for their work, bypassing theatrical exhibition all together (Gamarra & Davelouis, 2010). Indeed, some have conceptualised piracy as a form in which the savvy 'prosumers' of today—as opposed to the formerly supposedly more passive consumers—resist some of the Majors's entrenched and old-fashion exploitation practices (Román, 2010, p. 46).

Nevertheless, even the horizons for theatrical exhibition have been expanded by digital alternatives in Latin America and I do not necessarily mean here the state of the art halls in multiplexes that are capable of delivering CGI graphics and audio special effects in immersive environments, including 3D. Rather, I am here referring to the itinerant cinemas project developed by Luis Kelly in Mexico in 2005, called *Mi Cine*. *Mi Cine* sought to bring cinema to a number of small villages where there was a high youth population and little in the way of infrastructure for cultural and educational activities. Provided that there were at least 3,000 households with a monthly income equivalent to 8 times the minimum wage, a community would become eligible for a digitally operated 4 screen *Mi Cine* prefabricated theatre, aiming to show 2 new films every two weeks, one Latin American and one foreign. The programming includes local news, 'Mi Municipio', followed by shorts, trailers and sports. Marketing works via flyers and posters, and tie-ins with local newspapers and media. All *Mi Cines* include a videogames hall, DVD shop and a sweet shop, just as Multiplexes do, but while a ticket for the latter would cost $45MXN—about £2.00—, at *Mi Cine* it is $23—£1.00. As put by Kelly

> the intention is to generate income for local producers and distributors at a
> low cost without affecting other release windows, promoting the production

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of digital cinema [not least through the *Mi Municipio* short films] and contributing to the growth of film culture in Mexico (Kelly, 2007, p. 52).[6]

With an initial investment of 7 million pesos, some £350,000, *Mi Cine* started with 10 venues in the state of Morelos in 2005, and it was planned that it would expand operations into 10 states more within the following 5 years (Cárdenas Ochoa, 2004). It may seem odd to remark upon the physical impact of digital cinema on the urban landscape of small villages, when its very essence is about virtuality. Nevertheless, if, as Jaques Ranciére would have it, in an age in which the visual is so prevalent, politics consists in transforming the space of circulation 'into the space of the manifestation of a subject: be it the people, workers, citizens [...] reconfiguring that space, what there is to do there, what there is to see or to name' the relevance of digital technology for the ability to 'dispute [...] what is perceptible to the senses' is paramount (Rancière, 2002, pp. 176-7).

Elsewhere in Latin America, the range of alternatives for theatrical exhibition has been broadening. In Brazil, a digital screen network with around 200 interconnected venues in 63 cities across the country, called RAIN, 'enables art house distributors to bypass costly 35mm prints and release films widely in markets throughout the country' (Guerini, 2010, p. 40). Their distribution branch, moviemobz, promotes cinema on demand by allowing registered users to indicate which films they want to see playing at their nearby theatres. There are plans to extend this to other popular events such as concerts and sports events (Matamoros Durán, 2010, p. 21). By August 2010, RAIN had released 510 films theatrically in this way, at a rate of 3 new films per week.

In sum, national independence in the terms proposed in the 1800s may be an unfeasible and untenable, even a pointless concept, but it would be a narrow understanding of the aspirations that animated it if it were to refer exclusively to the nation-state. Mulvey contends the problem is one of bridging a gap between

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[6] La intención es generar ingresos para productores y distribuidores locales a bajo costo sin afectar otras ventanas de distribución, promoviendo la producción de cine digital y contribuyendo al desarrollo de la cultura cinematográfica en México.

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what she calls 'then', or modernity, a time of utopian beliefs in historical progress, and 'now', be it called globalisation, neoliberalism, postfordism or so on, and she maintains that digital cinema in Latin America can have a role bridging this gap: 'If the cinema of the 60s offered a framework or metaphor for contemporary radical aspiration, it is logical, perhaps, to try to consider whether its hybrid descendent might offer a metaphor within which the problem of historical loss and discontinuity might be thought or imagined' (Mulvey, 2003, p. 267). A way of 'working through the rubble of history' (Mulvey, 2003, p. 266). Others have been more sceptic. To Garrett Stewart filmic cinema is 'temporal change indexed by segments, then remobilised frame by frame' during projection, whereas digital cinema, with its array of pixels turning on and off to produce images '[is] time seeming to stand still for internal mutation' (Stewart, 2007, p. 3). In other words, while time in the filmic cinema of the of nation-building epoch seemed to be moving forward, the time of the digital cinema of transnationalism seems to stay static, to lead nowhere. The position I have tried to argue for here is perhaps a middle one. Some digital cinema offers the possibility, perhaps not exactly to reconnect with history in the modern sense, but to address the pressing issues of social justice that were behind the wars for independence in their present, changed context, by subverting hierarchies of domination and enfranchising not through inclusion and membership of citizenship, but through restoring agency. And the need for ever-larger markets that lies at the heart of late capitalism also holds the promise of a shared cultural and visual Latin American, even Hispanic, space, a virtual *patria grande* of sorts.

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