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Coming to Latin America: Moving Image Encounters, Non–Latin American Practitioners

Editorial

Lawrence Alexander and Javier Pérez-Osorio

Latin America has long been a region marked by the arrival of foreign actors. Especially since the landing of Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the whole continent has been in a constant process of redefining itself in assimilation or rejection of external influences while holding tight to what remains autochthonous. Cinema has not been an exception in this process of exchange. The arrival of the Lumière brothers—“another foreign import” from Europe (López 48)—is intimately connected to this history of external influences that have recursively shaped Latin American visual culture over many centuries. Many of the earliest practitioners on the continent were European or European-descended projectionists turned filmmakers: the French Gabriel Veyre in Mexico and Eugène Py in Argentina, the Italian Di Domenico brothers in Colombia, and Affonso Segreto in Brazil. Undoubtedly, this entanglement of a foreign gaze with how the region is represented has been a persistent feature throughout the history of cinema in Latin America. However, these fundamental dynamics have not yet been explored from a critical perspective in which the external view of the continent—whether stereotypical or innovative, romanticised or vilified, fetishised or demystified—becomes a productive locus not only to examine the nuances of the continent’s projected image but also to rethink film, and moving image practice broadly speaking, as a medium.

Such critical dialogue is what we aim to initiate with the project of “Coming to Latin America”. This expression describes the geographic and symbolic relocation of moving image practitioners from beyond the continent who produce work in and about Latin America. In this movement, art cinema, in particular, has often been a site of confluence between local narratives and international funding—mostly from the Global North—creating possibilities for more creative exchanges that challenge the predominantly unilateral financial, intellectual, and aesthetic flows that have historically characterised moving image works about the continent. Some work by filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein, Agnès Varda, and Luis Buñuel, for instance, has occupied cultural and geographical positions that exist simultaneously within Latin American hegemonic production systems—due to their international recognition and funding sources—while operating in a space marked as peripheral within global cinema. Following this trajectory, our focus on Latin America as a ground for such intermedial and transnational investigations figures the continent’s transition from periphery to “centre” in contemporary moving image production and scholarship, positioning it as a place where more multilateral and less hierarchical exchanges take place. Evaluating these shifts in terrain invites us to

consider how these developments continue to be shaped by the convergence of traditional cinema with digital media, installation art, and new forms of transnational collaboration.

“Coming to Latin America” is also an invitation to come to this different epistemological place such that our approach to moving image work by non–Latin American practitioners inevitably requires a decolonial perspective, as will be apparent in most of the issue’s articles. A critical examination of the knowledge production frameworks that have historically been used to study and understand the region also requires questioning the politics of representation and the persistent asymmetries in who controls the means of visual production. However, while foreign filmmakers have arrived with cameras and theoretical apparatus forged elsewhere, their encounters with Latin American realities generate a paradoxical opportunity: the potential to reveal unexplored realities that have been rendered invisible by Eurocentric frameworks, including those aspects that may escape local observation.

This issue interrogates the foreign gaze not because it is more important than that of practitioners from the continent but because, rather than simply reproducing extractive cinematic practices, we believe these works can become a catalyst for new epistemic pathways. It is the dialogue between imported visual grammars and local worldviews that interests us the most; these processes of adaptation and contestation, agreement or opposition from which new possibilities arise on and off screen. How might the very presence of the outsider’s camera activate forms of knowledge that challenge both foreign and domestic assumptions about Latin American distinctiveness? Can the discomfort of crosscultural encounter generate what Pedro Gomes-Pereira envisions as a “dislocation of theories” that allows alternative logics and ontologies to emerge (64)? Rather than dismissing foreign engagement as inherently colonial, these contributions aim to explore how the friction between external representation and internal reality might produce new forms of visual thinking that exceed the limitations of both imported theories and regional blind spots, suggesting that decolonial cinema emerges not from a native “purity” but from the productive tensions of intercultural exchange.



Figure 1: Jessica (Tilda Swinton), a Scot living and working in Colombia, cuts a contemplative figure in Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Memoria*. Kick the Machine, 2021.

As editors, we must account for the potentials and pitfalls inherent in our own positions as British and Colombian scholars, both currently living and working in the United Kingdom, trained at a university with a conspicuous colonial legacy, and writing scholarship mostly in English. Our collaboration brings together diverse personal backgrounds and academic perspectives on Latin American visual culture, yet we remain mindful that our institutional positioning risks reproducing the very paradigms of knowledge production—or worse, “discovery”—that we seek to critique. In a similar vein, we have intentionally curated contributions from both Latin American and non-Latin American scholars and practitioners, some of whom are active on the continent and elsewhere in the Global South, while others work in Europe and North America. This diverse authorship aims to generate a more dialogical approach to the questions of representation and cultural exchange that define our project.

Sexuality and Queerness

Within a transnational framework such as the one underpinning the continent’s filmmaking practices, questions of sexuality and gender emerge as particularly fertile sites for reconsidering how Latin American cinema navigates between local and global epistemologies and forms of queer representation. Latin American Indigenous articulations of sexual and gender dissidence have long resisted the imported categories and identity politics that dominate Anglo-American queer theory, instead developing an “anthropophagic” (Pelúcio 38) approach that “devours” and transforms foreign theoretical frameworks into distinctly Latin American modes of understanding nonnormative desires and identities (Pérez-Osorio). But what happens when non-Latin American filmmakers turn their cameras toward the region’s queer experiences? Do these external gazes inevitably reproduce the theoretical colonisation that decolonial queer scholars have worked to dismantle, or might they offer unexpected opportunities for dialogue and transformation?

Three contributions included in this issue explore the nuances of such foreign gazes on queer subjectivities rooted in Latin America, highlighting not only the transnational character of cinema but also the representational frameworks through which lived queerness is articulated in the region. Juan Camilo Velásquez examines the provocative and little-known case of the film *Kalt in Kolumbien* (*Cold in Colombia*, 1985) by the German director Dieter Schidor. Through an intermedial approach that draws on archival documents, interviews, and fictionalised accounts of the film’s production, Velásquez traces the complex cultural exchanges between German and Colombian film industries during the “golden age” of the Cartagena International Film Festival (FICCI). The article reveals how Schidor’s relocation of New German Cinema aesthetics—its icy austerity, queer desires, and cruel humour—into the Colombian Caribbean creates a work that is at once self-aware and exploitative, brutally comic toward both locals and foreigners while highlighting the very inequalities that enabled the director’s privileged position as a foreign artist in Cartagena. Velásquez also points out how transnational filmmaking can become a document of neocolonial leisure, exposing the power dynamics that continue to position Latin America as a “peripheral, romanticised source of inspiration” for European cultural centres, even as it complicates any straightforward reading of such encounters through its intermedial critique of the filmmaking process itself.

Following another German production, Henrique Rodrigues Marques examines Jochen Hick’s *Via Appia* (1989), interrogating how the filmmaker’s portrayal of the AIDS crisis in Brazil rehearses foreign discourses and imaginaries about the epidemic, thus questioning whether external gazes can transcend the moral panic and othering that characterised

international responses to HIV/AIDS in Latin America. While his analysis reveals how the film both reinforces and contests tropes of hypersexualisation, violence, and sex work in homosexual practices in Brazil, Rodrigues Marques's reading of *Via Appia* also highlights its—sometimes overlooked—subversive potential. In the construction of the otherness present in Brazilian hustlers through the foreign gaze, the author traces how the local subjects resist the documentary's imposed gaze through acts of transgression and abandonment. Despite its limitations as a representation of Brazil's AIDS crisis, Rodrigues Marques suggests how the refusal of narrative closure and the symbolic stealing of the camera by a Brazilian hustler at the end of the film offer a queer perspective on HIV-positive experience that remains relevant for contemporary audiences.

Meanwhile, Karol Valderrama-Burgos and Georgia Fielding analyse Spanish filmmaker Ruth Caudeli's work in Colombia, exploring how her films *Porque no.* (2016) and *Petit Mal* (2022) navigate lesbian desire and intimacy through transnational feminist perspectives. Their article reveals the complex negotiations between documentary aesthetics, melodramatic conventions, and the lived experiences of queer women in Latin American contexts. Drawing on Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim's critical framework, the authors interrogate whether Caudeli's liminal position as a Spanish-born filmmaker working in the South American country enables her work to transcend fixed national cultural discourses, ultimately offering feminist alternatives to lesbian representation that challenge both local patriarchal structures and transnational cinematic conventions.

Ethnographic Encounters and Indigenous Knowledge

Another crucial point of reflection in the existing filmography about Latin America is the encounter between native Indigenous and incoming populations. Mostly coming from Europe, the arrival of foreign actors has predominantly been mediated by a violent “epistemicide” (Sousa Santos) that has almost completely obliterated forms of knowledge and ways of being. This clash has had longstanding consequences in the way we perceive Indigenous cultures from the continent. Since its arrival to the continent, cinema has played a key role in the creation of the images and sounds that determine how Latin American Indigenous communities are imagined at a regional and global scale, and consequently the way we relate to them and their own systems of knowledge. Even though recent years have seen an increase in works created by Indigenous filmmakers and visual artists (González Rodríguez), the works of non-Latin American practitioners also allow us to question whether these representations ever serve decolonial purposes or if they inevitably reproduce the very epistemicide they sometimes attempt to document.

In the first article on this topic, Rodrigo Brum and Ana G. Coutinho examine the pioneering ethnographic filmmaking of Claude Lévi-Strauss and his wife at the time, Dina Dreyfus, during their 1934 expedition to Brazil. The article highlights the understudied role of Dreyfus in the groundbreaking visual documentation of Indigenous life. Invited by Brazilian modernist Mário de Andrade, Dreyfus developed ethnographic methods that positioned film as the ideal medium for capturing “perfect notes” in fieldwork, thus establishing a multimodal research approach that integrated moving images with photographs, articles, lectures, and correspondence. Brum and Coutinho analyse the filmic records through the lens of this methodological innovation, demonstrating how their visual work—characterised by fragmentation, ambivalence, and embodied presence—enacted a relational mode of ethnography that transcended the limitations of purely textual representation. By examining

how image-making, observation, and unscripted encounters became entangled in the production of anthropological knowledge, the authors demonstrate the lasting integration of documentary filmmaking as a transformative ethnographic methodology that at once placed Latin American Indigenous thought at the forefront of scientific inquiry and anticipated later developments in visual anthropology.

Shifting to a more contemporary form of moving image art, Dennis Hippe examines Swiss video artist Ursula Biemann's innovative documentary practice through her collaborative works *Forest Law* (2014) and *Forest Mind* (2021), created with Indigenous Kichwa and Inga communities in Ecuador and Colombia. Hippe develops the concept of "metabolic documentary" to analyse how Biemann's aesthetic approach facilitates encounters between disparate cosmological worldviews, exploring the particular convergence between Indigenous knowledge systems and contemporary neuroscience. The author also probes how Biemann's ecocentric cinema moves beyond traditional extractive documentary practices by working with communities who already participate in international ecopolitical forums, thus challenging the pervasive dynamics of "giving voice" to marginalised subjects. The article thus reveals how these works envision interconnected relationships between all living beings and foreground Indigenous epistemologies that have traditionally been ignored or erased in Global North historical discourses.

Lastly, Maria Fernanda Miño Puga offers the first scholarly analysis of Jan Pester's 1994 Scottish Gaelic documentary *Gleanntan Ecuador*. Her article examines how the film portrays Catholic priest Colin MacInnes's twenty-year mission in Comité del Pueblo, a shantytown on the outskirts of Quito. Drawing from architecture, urban development, anthropology, and religious studies, Miño Puga analyses how the documentary chronicles MacInnes' community development efforts, including his work to secure funding for water supply projects through transnational solidarity networks connecting Scotland and Ecuador. The article reveals how the film, despite documenting genuine grassroots initiatives, inadvertently reinforces colonial "civilisation and progress" narratives by positioning MacInnes as the primary spokesperson for local communities. Furthermore, Miño Puga demonstrates how *Gleanntan Ecuador* suggests problematic visual binaries between the precarity of the Ecuadorian township and the idyllic Scottish Highlands, while emphasising Scottish charitable donations and portraying local communist leaders as hostile antagonists. This critical reading sheds light on how even well-intentioned missionary documentaries can perpetuate paternalistic frameworks that reflect broader geopolitical tensions in the postcommunist era.

Displacements, Layovers, Experiments

One of the challenges in approaching "Coming to Latin America" is undoubtedly to track the material, cultural, and intellectual trajectories made by external practitioners arriving to the continent without reinforcing reductive and binaristic centre-periphery dynamics that sustain the epistemological frameworks of the Global North. This project therefore demands that we question the need for paradigmatic and discursive centres. Instead, contributions to this issue have considered the imbrication of perspectives that are coconstitutive while nonetheless shaped by material conditions of aesthetic production, circulation, and consumption, that are unevenly distributed. To this effect, a methodological attitude shared by certain authors in this issue emerges in the troubling and challenging of spatial and geographic paradigms, real and imagined, that have shaped—and been shaped by—these external perspectives and equally

formed the region's self-image. These articles upset the simplistic or conventional directions of travel "familiar" from more dominant narratives and present modes of conceptual, experiential, and practical dislocation through various means of triangulation, destabilisation, asymmetry, and experimentation.

Cinéma vérité's promise of objectivity provides another recurring theme in the approach of foreign filmmakers to the Latin American continent. In his article on "the other *Chronicle of a Summer*", Pedro Noel Doreste Rodríguez situates Latin America as a collaborator rather than a recipient in the distribution and development of "global" vérité. He thus challenges the trajectory of a cinematic or documentary import from the Global North to reorient the "triangulation of cinematic new waves between North America, Europe, and Latin America" in his account of the collaboration between the Canadian National Film Board and the Puerto Rican Division of Community Education.

Mapping and remapping the foreign perspectives that have constructed images of the continent from the Renaissance to the present day, Fábio Andrade approaches contemporary moving image practice as a vehicle for the displacement of hegemonic modes of looking in video works made in Brazil. His work traces a "genealogy of the mechanisms of otherness" starting from the Lines of Amity to consider the ways in which Latin America has been framed—"actually or metaphorically" by Europeans' "juridical and cartographical slicing of the world". From the street level to the bird's-eye view, Andrade's reading of these moving image works makes the case for a radical destabilisation of perception and representation that is itself constitutive of experience in Brazil and, in turn, opens up new possibilities for cinematic production.

In their article, Núria Araüna Baró and David Archibald consider the related potentials of feminist filmmaking and unfinished thinking. They reflect on a filmmaking project that brings together feminist activists across Cuba, Catalunya, and Scotland. This experimental approach seeks to foster solidarity and collaboration across radical networks and between Global North and South. Moreover, the imperative to imagine and foster a "common world" through radical filmmaking and collective community, using diffractive and dialogical methods, is one that has wider and urgent political implications in the contemporary moment.

Excavation and Memory

The engagement of foreign practitioners with contested memory cultures across the continent provides a further area of focus in the analysis of moving image "encounters". These external perspectives also prompt attention to conditions of extraction that have received necessary critical scrutiny in film and media studies and the humanities more broadly in recent years (Jaikumar and Grieveson; Jacobson). In this light, histories of the planet and the extraction of its natural resources must necessarily include histories of media and the raw materials that sustain their development and consumption. While the apparatus of the cinematograph may have been "imported" to Latin America from Europe, the material base for the development of photographic reproduction originated in the natural resources (not least silver) taken from the continent by colonial powers (Azoulay; Angus). By situating cultural production on the continent in relation to the conditions of material, aesthetic, and epistemological extractivism, we might also ponder media archaeology's relationship to Latin America as a means of revising the straightforward notion of an apparatus and technology imported wholesale in favour of a more dynamic picture.

This issue examines moving image practices that place these dynamics in tentative dialogue as the violence of conquest and colonisation resonates with the more recent and living memory of civil and guerrilla conflict as well as the deep, geological time of the natural environment. Examining these multiple and mutually imbricated layers of history and memory broaches a tension between silence and listening—as well as looking—out for the traces of environmental and colonial violence. Javier Pérez-Osorio’s analysis of the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Memoria* (2021), the first of his films made outside of Thailand and co-created alongside the Scot Tilda Swinton who plays the film’s protagonist, parses the transnational production context of the film’s contemplation of Colombia’s “violent soundscapes”. This reading approaches Apichatpong’s resistance to dominant or stereotypical narratives of Colombia’s recent and deeper histories in favour of oblique visions and more importantly, contemplative auditory perception.

A further example of this conjuncture of moving image contemplation, excavation, and memory, is Lawrence Alexander’s reading of *The Silver and the Cross* (2010), a two-channel video installation produced by the late German practitioner Harun Farocki for the exhibition *The Potosí Principle*. The overlap between media history as archaeology and actually existing sites of excavation—whether for silver mining or forensic investigations into the mass graves of workers—provides a further productive tension in Farocki’s work that juxtaposes the surface of an eighteenth-century painting of the Cerro Rico mountain with contemporary footage of the same region in present-day Bolivia. Alexander contends that Farocki deploys the techniques of cinematography to perform a forensic investigation of superficial representation. More specifically, the “cross influence” of the two video channels in Farocki’s moving image practice allows multiple, embedded layers of media genealogy and traumatic cultural memory to be held in a dynamic relationship with each other.

Conclusion

The ground trodden in the articles to follow is, then, manifold and varied. There are many ways to come to Latin America, and we hope the critical conversations curated across this special issue are just the beginning. It is also our wish that the scholarly impulse to take seriously Latin America as a complex constellation of sites for moving image practices that disrupt and destabilise only to reorient is one that finds fellow feeling among the issue’s readers and spurs further engagement with the nuanced combination of perspectives featured in these articles. It is a cliché, perhaps, to suggest these articles mark an arrival while also offering points of departure. Nevertheless, it’s our conviction that much more can be said about South–South connections than can be found in this issue, for instance, representing a further pathway for investigations in the spirit of our project. And yet, from the dislocations of representing queer experience, to the interaction of ethnographic and Indigenous modes of knowledge production, and the displacement of conventional paradigms and practices for approaching filmmaking and the region, to the complex imbrication of extractive industries—including film—and multilayered memorial excavations, these contributions indicate the rich and varied potential for thinking about what happens when practitioners from beyond the continent make moving image artworks in and about Latin America.

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