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Authors	de la Garza, Armida
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Moving Histories: Performing Bolívar in Jorge Ali Triana's Film *Bolívar soy yo* (2002)

Armida de la Garza[1]

As a myth and a symbol, Simón Bolívar has ongoing relevance and indeed his name has become a surface for the inscription of a wide variety of meanings. A number of political parties, guerrillas, cultural policy initiatives, and social movements today all claim to be "Bolivarian," i.e. inspired by the ideas and dreams of Bolívar, which are taken to be broadly related to various notions of freedom (*El Libertador*) and struggles for social justice.

This relative open-endedness of Bolívar as a signifier is at the core of the film *Bolívar Soy Yo* (Figure 1), written and directed in 2002 by the Colombian director Jorge Ali Triana. The story revolves around an actor playing Bolívar for a soap opera, who becomes so deeply immersed in the part that at times he and others confuse him to be Bolívar. A variety of social actors ranging from the Colombian president, the media, and the guerrilla insurgents accommodate his delusion for the sake of co-opting, as it were, this incarnation of the symbol to advance their own—not always compatible—agendas, with dire consequences. The film has been read in different ways: as a witty commentary on and criticism of highly relevant contemporary social issues, national foundational narratives, and the society of spectacle. The film has also been praised for its postmodern use of reflexivity and its forms of hybridity that are at once Latin American and global (Kantaris 2007). It has also been read as an allegory of a populist "humanization" of the

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Latin American heroes amidst a growing disenchantment with globalization and pessimism towards the future (Tal 2010).

As fantastical as this narrative may seem, its origins were rooted in Jorge Ali Triana's experience directing the television series, *Bolívar, el hombre de las dificultades* (1982), written in collaboration with Carlos José Reyes Posada. This ambitious series of 43 weekly episodes for the program *Revivamos nuestra historia* inaugurated color television in Colombia. The series enlisted the majority of theater and television actors working at that time in Colombia, along with entire towns, in order to represent the countless characters involved in the forty-seven years of Bolívar's existence. The Colombian armed forces represented the armies gathered throughout Bolívar's epic journey through South America, all the while they were fighting the various guerrilla groups that soon after (in 1987) organized under the umbrella group *Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar* (Melo 2010). The television episodes were filmed in difficult and diverse terrains that served as sets for marches and battles, including entire villages on the Magdalena River banks, the Andean range, the Llanos Orientales bordering Venezuela, and on-site battlefields. Throughout their travels spectators offered gifts and petitioned favors, responding to the character Bolívar and not the protagonist actor Pedro Montoya (1948-2004). Montoya identified so profoundly with his character that he was unable to take off his uniform after recordings ended, consequently suffering a psychological breakdown (Reyes Posada 2012).

Triana seized upon this identity crisis and transformed it into a metaphor for Colombian and Latin American societies. This article focuses on the performative dimension of the film as it revolves around the actor playing the role of Bolívar and

reactions to his presence. This article considers the epistemological, aesthetic, and ontological dimensions of performance as a way to turn experience into knowledge, as an alternative way of transmitting versions of history and cultural heritage that highlight the role of the body in its construction, as communicative display, and as specifying ways of being in the world. In focusing on specific scenes when the actor performs Bolívar, I ask, in each case: what does it mean to "be" Bolívar. To do so, I begin by analyzing three strategies that foreground performativity: costume, acting methods, and music/choreography. I then consider the various ways in which the people/audience may enact their engagement with "Bolívar," including composing songs and staging dances for him. The conclusion, as depicted on the film, is that what "Bolívar" means today is above all the birth—or refusal to die—of a consciousness or a growing awareness that the nation-states that followed independence — rather than the sub-continental state — continue to be the fundamental problem of the region. It is this sub-continental state or Gran Colombia that some have today called a "civilization-state" (Jacques 2011) and that Bolívar and others sought to create. As a performance-centered approach to culture attentive to the film's re-occurring themes and motifs, this article "finds in the unstable aesthetics of repetition an ethics and politics of possibility" (Pollock 2008, 122). Apart from understanding the film as commentary or criticism, or as a pessimistic complaint, it can also be understood as an invitation to action and a celebration of action, a coming together to attempt to perform, as it were, a happier ending.

Performing Bolívar

There are several strands of research on the social role and meaning of performance, seeking to bridge the humanities and the social sciences. These range from John L. Austin's speech-act theories (Austin, 1962), focused on the way language can sometimes have effects equivalent to action, to Marxist notions of praxis and everyday life—notably Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1977) and Judith Butler's theories on gender (Butler 2006)—to Mikhail Bakhtin's studies of the subversive potential of the carnival (Bakhtin 1984). Indeed, the latter strand (on performativity and carnival) goes back to at least Plato, who forcefully condemned theater for the way it could bring the constructed nature of power into sharp relief, when the structures that sustain power tend to naturalize it. As French philosopher Jacques Rancière writes: "From the Platonic point of view, the stage, which is simultaneously a locus of public activity and the exhibition-space for 'fantasies,' disturbs the clear partition of identities, activities and spaces" (Rancière 2004, 13). Thus for Plato, theater was "dangerous" inasmuch as it could bring other times and spaces into the time-space of the performance, suspending, albeit temporarily, the social order of "reality."

Mixing theatrical and cinematic performances, the plot of *Bolívar Soy Yo* all but confirms Plato's anxieties. A brief plot summary is pertinent here. The film opens with a nineteenth century firing squad about to fire on a prisoner in military uniform who has been identified as Bolívar. Indeed, as a last wish, the prisoner has just been addressing the audience by reciting a speech by Bolívar in order to explain the meaning of his actions and how these were all for the good of the people. However, just as the platoon is about to shoot, "Bolívar" suddenly shouts: "Cut! Bolívar did not die like this. I refuse to kill Bolívar like this or in any other way." At that point "Bolívar" is revealed as an actor

named Santiago Miranda (played by Robinson Díaz), co-starring with his girlfriend Alejandra (played by Amparo Grisales), who in turn plays the role of Manuelita Sáenz in a soap opera entitled *Los Amores del Libertador*. Visibly upset, Miranda leaves the set and returns to Bogotá. In this way, the film employs the "film within the film" device—or rather, the soap opera within the film—to turn the whole of Colombia into a stage where a set of reflections on the history and the hopes for the future of Latin America, loosely termed "Bolívar," come "back from the grave" or, in the words of Miranda, try to fulfill the Bolívarian dream of Latin American unification. Producers initiate a search all over Bogotá to bring Miranda back, a search that is as frantic as the Colombian President's efforts to take advantage of Bolívar's presence in the capital by recruiting "Bolívar" to attend military parades and political meetings.

The narrative thus largely revolves around both the media and the government's efforts to contain their creation, which has managed to develop a charismatic life of its own. Their strategies for containing the uncooperative Bolívar go as far as pronouncing him mad and attempting to have him confined or simply arrested. The psychiatrist employed to treat Miranda is tasked not so much with curing him but with persuading him to finish the soap opera. Significantly, however, it is Miranda who ends up kidnapping the president, hijacking a boat and reversing the journey down the Magdalena River that had taken Bolívar to the Quinta de San Pedro Alejandrino where he died. In the film voyage, Miranda flows upstream from the Atlantic coast towards the capital, insisting on a meeting with the presidents of all the Bolivarian nations in order to recreate the Gran Colombia. Recalling Triana and Montoya's experience in the eighties, the people along the coastal towns rise joyously to welcome him as a savior. In the midst of

his travels on the barge, a guerrilla group enters the scene, they identify themselves as the *Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar* and intervene or rather join the president's kidnapping and placing themselves under the orders of "El General Bolívar." In a clear allusion to the M-19, the guerrillas attempt to "return" to Miranda Bolívar's sword, which they had earlier stolen from the Quinta de Bolívar, but Miranda eventually rejects them (See Gómez Pernia and Reyes in this volume). Confusion about who is in charge satirizes the authorial voice of the past that Miranda embodies. As Miranda and the guerrillas, now joined by Manuela Sáenz / Alejandra negotiate a meeting with the presidents of the Bolivarian nations at the Quinta de Bolívar in exchange for the Colombian President's release. Soon after it becomes apparent that the objectives of the guerrillas, Miranda, and the historical Bolívar do not line up. Rather than the tragic ending in a botched operation (recalling the Palace of Justice tragedy of 1984) where all is lost in a fratricidal bloodbath, Triana blocks this finale. In an act of self-referentiality, the crew announces the film's directorial "Cut," thus leaving the end open for interpretation and imaginary reconstruction. The boundaries between the past and the present and reality and fiction are skillfully blurred by various strategies, so that the continued relevance of Bolívar's ideals is highlighted. We now turn to the three strategies I identified earlier.

Dressing the Part of Bolívar

The first one of these is costume: Bolívar's image, as frequently depicted in history books, paintings and statues, is first and foremost a man in arms. Most costumes, when successful, are naturalized as part of the fiction world without alluding to the reality outside the story (Collins and Nisbet 2010). But a uniform worn by an actor can bring the

"real" world to bear upon the fiction world by inter-textually referencing both an historic army and a contemporary one. Roland Barthes contended there are "two kinds of history: an intelligent history which rediscovers the profound tensions, the specific conflicts of the past; and a superficial history which mechanically reconstructs certain anecdotic details" (Barthes 1979). Barthes calls attention to the fact that costume has "long been a favorite realm for the exercise of the latter." In *Bolívar soy yo* the character of Miranda is largely believable as Bolívar due to the authenticity of his costuming, which in turn serves to revive the whole historical era. The cut and shape of the uniform Miranda seem to summon up the codes of behavior of that historical period, codes that directly affect his posture and movements. When reciting the script for his role in the soap opera, Miranda becomes even more the virile hero when dressed the part. The epaulettes adorning his shoulders make them broader, the high collar extends his neck longer and the gilded laurels ornamenting the uniform puff up his chest, all of which is crucial to the iconography of military ritual. It is this image that gives him the authority to pronounce some of Bolívar's most famous speeches.

Maurice Bloch contends that language in rituals is, by its very nature, constrained and thus constraining (Bloch 1975, 59), since what can be said on such occasions is limited to a pre-existing repertoire. However, I argue that ritual is not mainly verbal, but is also constituted by its ability to enable participation. Bloch failed to take this very important aspect into account. In other words, performance not only constructs a symbolic reality through verbal argumentation, but also creates a situation for participants to experience symbolic meanings. *Bolívar soy yo* calls attention to both the ritual invocation of Bolívar's words and the audience's participatory choices, for example, in

the opening scene described earlier. Bolívar's body before the firing squad is a symbolic body, dressed in a uniform whose bright red, yellow, and blue are now so closely associated with the Colombian, Venezuelan, and Ecuadoran flags. About to be executed, Bolívar utters fragments from a speech published in 1830, which according to historian John J. Johnson, represent the heart of his thinking, namely a concern with the four priorities of unity, control, stability, and security (Johnson 1992). The famous speech from Bolívar's final year is quoted in the film:

> Colombian people: as I am about to leave you, I am guided by my love for you when considering my last will. The sole glory to which I aspire is the consolidation of Colombia. Everyone must work for the precious good that unity is. People: obey the present government to rid yourselves of anarchy. Ministers: raise your prayers to heaven. And soldiers: raise your swords to protect individual freedom. Colombian people: you have witnessed my efforts in trying to bring freedom where tyranny reigned before. [. . .]
>
> Colombian people: my last vows are for the motherland's happiness. If my death contributes to the end of Parties and the consolidation of the Union, I shall gladly descend to my grave (Bolívar 2007, 310).

The first performance of Bolívar (in the film) is thus only accomplished in a ritual that highly engages its audience, that is, the ritual invocation of Bolívar's famous call to unity reiterated by politicians in all sorts of ceremonial contexts. This Bolívar, made authentic through costuming, finally achieves a moment of unity: the soldiers assigned to kill him are moved to tears, as are the set staff and crew, and the execution is thwarted.

Later in the film, costume is also employed to blur the boundaries between the past and the present by establishing parallels with Bolívar's friends and enemies who are given contemporary roles as guerrilla leaders (General José Antonio Páez) or museum caretakers (General Antonio José de Sucre). Even the president of Colombia morphs into Francisco de Paula Santander. Arriving at the Quinta de Bolívar, the actor Miranda at first sees a museum and its caretaker but as Bolívar, he recognizes Sucre and their costumes revert to military uniforms (Figures 2 and 3).

The film further blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction by having Miranda utter speeches and quotations from letters and texts written by Bolívar both within the fictional world of the soap opera and the "real" world of Miranda's daily life. Bolívar's words are juxtaposed into contemporary situations and so made to be completely appropriate. Thus, having been betrayed even by his partner Alejandra/Manuelita and disappointed at having his attempt to revive Bolívar hijacked by the guerrilla and the media, Miranda reads: "There is no good faith in America, neither amongst people, nor amongst nations. In America, treaties are paper, constitutions - books; elections are combats; freedom is anarchy, and life is a torment" (Bolívar 1929, 72).

Acting Methods: Identification with, or Alienation from, Bolívar

The film also benefits from drawing upon two opposite but complementary traditions of acting. On the one hand, Western traditions have long relied on naturalism to produce suspension of disbelief, with the actor mimetically representing a role and the drama largely unfolding through character development. Famously, both Constantin

Stanislavski (2013 [1926]) and later Lee Strasberg (1987) pioneered methods for acting that required the actor to identify with the character, such as creating a score of psychological actions in response to a script text so that the actor seems to merge with the character. Ironically, in *Bolívar*, the soap opera producer comments on the way Miranda had no interest in history and knows nothing about Bolívar before learning his part. Instead, performing Bolívar has the effect of a "reverse method." Miranda does merge with Bolívar, but became Bolívar's "score," that is, the spirit of Bolívar appropriates Miranda's body, life and emotions; this is yet another important way in which Bolívar refuses to die. This "reverse method" occurs when Miranda, running away from the producers, takes refuge with his mother, only to have neighbors and friends come to petition Bolívar for favors. When they ask his intervention in obtaining scholarships for their children and lighting on the streets, Miranda pitches his responses in the ways he assumes Bolívar would have reacted. Here, performing Bolívar means fulfilling the cultic role of Saints and Virgins in the Catholic tradition, hearing the needs and requests of the faithful and promising to comfort them. The actor's name, Santiago Miranda, is highly loaded with references, religious as well as historical. Santiago, Patron Saint of Spain for his role as *Matamoros* in the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula and then as *Mataindios* in the conquest of the Americas. He thus serves as a reference to the re-conquest of a Catholic Colombia during the conservative regime of Laureano Gómez (1950-53) during *la Violencia*. Moreover, Francisco Miranda was a Venezuelan revolutionary whose ideals of liberty and Spanish American unity are considered forerunner to Bolívar's. Thus, even the character's name serves here as a vehicle to invoke multiple pasts to bear upon the present, adding to both the cult and contested dimensions of Bolívar.

On the other hand, traditions of acting that followed Berthold Brecht's alienation effect required the opposite (1978) of identification with characters, that is, distancing the audience from emotional involvement in the play by drawing attention to its artificiality. This was in part achieved through the actors maintaining a distance from their character by various means, such as speaking of themselves in the third person and directly addressing the audience. The aim was to break down the barrier between actors and audiences, to drive the audience into active engagement, questioning and participation. The film clearly draws from this tradition as well, particularly in those scenes when Miranda, as he enters and leaves the Bolívar character, proposes new ways of interpreting what Bolívar means. These interventions strongly recall Brecht's *The Three Penny Opera* (1928) both in the way they stress agency on the part of the audience, i.e. that the ending can be changed, and in its innovative use of music. Triana cleverly interrupts the film's finale and calls attention to its artificiality with a directorial "Cut" of the *Bolívar Soy Yo* film, thus intervening in the tragic end. This gesture recalls the opening scene when Miranda / Bolívar refused to die by firing squad, a scene that signaled the film's reoccurring invitation to the spectator to imagine an alternative ending.

Furthermore, the song, "Final Feliz" (Happy Ending), by the contemporary Colombian pop group Aterciopelados plays while the credits are rolling—credits to Bolívar and Manuelita, and not to Miranda and Alejandra—insist on the capacity of the audience to transform the ending. In this case, the song's lyrics play on rhyme and linguistic innovation to invoke new meanings and transform horror to beauty. The simple transformation of a single letter in a word completely changes its meaning, rendering, for instance, death as luck and bullets as wings: "En vez de muerte yo quiero suerte, en vez

de llanto, canto. En vez de balas yo quiero alas. En vez de trágico que sea mágico… un final feliz" [Instead of death I want luck, instead of tears, song. Instead of bullets, I want wings. Instead of tragedy, magic… a happy ending] (Aterciopelados, 2002). Indeed, music is in the film a third and very important way in which a situation is created where the performance of Bolívar can occur. So it is to this use of music that we now turn.

Music and the Call to Action

As mentioned earlier, contrary to Bloch's contention, the effectiveness of ritual lies less in the spoken language than in the kind of participation the ritual allows or constrains. In *Bolívar soy yo*, music, song and dance are privileged ways to hold attention, create mood and pathos, and enable participation. "Audiences" all over Colombia are shown reacting to Miranda's attempt at reviving Bolívar with glee. They dance and improvise songs that interpellate him as "Santiago Miranda, who will soon come back as Simón Bolívar, [bringing] freedom" (Ovalle 2001). These "audiences" do not interrupt official or state-sponsored rituals. Rather, they create their own ritual by means of music and dance. At the same time, the film audience watching *Bolívar soy yo* is placed in a position parallel to that of the "audience" in the film. Both the film audience and the depicted audience are participants in a shared ritual through sound. Since hearing is three dimensional, it creates an acoustic space shared by the imagined and "real" audiences. This imagined shared space is what Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener have called the "imaginary topography" of cinema (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 130).

The song that the audiences sing in greeting Miranda / Bolívar is *Canto a Bolívar*, a Colombian *Vallenato* sung and composed by Iván Ovalle, a star of the genre. (Both the song and Pablo Neruda's poem of the same name are, like Bolívar's final speeches about unity, ritually invoked in many official ceremonial contexts.) The vallenato is a genre that may have originated with Spanish minstrels, West African griots, or travelling singers as a means of telling stories and spreading news. In the film, it is the news of Bolívar's return that this vallenato celebrates. At the same time, it calls for dancing. In this context, what Halifu Osumare has said of hip-hop is also applicable to the "audiences" dancing in *Bolívar soy yo*; dance is a way of mapping identity into the muscles, producing socio-cultural bodies, and moving in often subversive ways. To Osumare, the movement of the hip-hop dancer, and I think the vallenato dancer of the film, "transcends nation-states and generates a global Intercultural body that we are only beginning to fathom" (Osumare 2013). This transnational body, the film suggests, may well be Latin America, as the popularity of Vallenato is today high not only in Colombia, but also Panamá, Venezuela, Ecuador and even Mexico. Indeed, when Plato forcefully condemned theater for the reasons explained above, he contrasted it with what in his view was a *good* form of art: dance. As Rancière interprets Plato, it is in the choreographic where the community "sings and dances *its own proper unity*" (Rancière 2004, 14, emphasis added). The potential of singing and dancing to inscribe community through participation is in this way a central part of the way Bolivarian ideals are performed in the twenty first century.

Conclusion: Bolívar and Latin American Unity Today

Let us now conclude by taking a closer look at the issue of Latin American unity, since this ends up being the film's proposed meaning for Bolívar, or in other words, the way the film attempts to anchor this up to now open signifier. For while costume, script and music are central to reviving Bolívar in *Bolívar soy yo*, it is Bolívar's insistence on the need for Latin American unity that stands out as practically synonymous with his name today. Unity is the re-occurring theme from the first speech in the opening scene to the climax of the film when Miranda kidnaps the Colombian president to the end when Miranda demands that the Bolivarian presidents meet to reintegrate Gran Colombia. Unity is, as claimed by the psychiatrist in the film, "the key and ongoing, permanent obsession of the character." Miranda puts it thus:

> I have risen from the grave because the continent deserves another opportunity. I came to call you back to reintegrating Gran Colombia. The only possibility for our countries to overcome the underdevelopment in which they still find themselves is to unite into one great nation. Everything else is a lie, ready-made phrases for occasions such as this.

It is the relevance of this idea that I wish to explore here since, especially in light of recent history, it has become clear that the development of capitalism has continued to have profound effects on the size and nature of the polities that are regarded as legitimate and sustainable units for self-governance.

To theorists of the nation such as Ernest Gellner or Benedict Anderson, the misnamed nation-states we presently inhabit are the polities resulting from

modernization, entailing the formation of vernacular languages, the downward-spreading of a "high" culture and vice versa, and the engagement of various elites and intelligentsias in nation and state-building through a variety of institutions—not least of which is the cinema (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1983 [1991]). Ideology, imparted mainly by the educational system as well as other institutions such as the family, has played a large role in the formation of the soldier-citizens that the nation-state requires. Nationalism becomes, as it were, a religion suitable for secular times, a call for awareness of the "community of history and destiny" (Smith, 1991) that is the nation. What gives life meaning no longer resides in the after life but in the connected fate of ancestors and descendants. It has also become commonplace to note, however, post-modern transformations in capitalism, such as what David Harvey characterizes as a metamorphoses of the multi-national corporation into a transnational entity that engages in "flexible accumulation" (Harvey, 1991). Such transnational entities have rendered nation-states obsolete in their relentless drive towards ever-larger markets and more efficient means of production, and the soldier-citizen has been replaced with the consumer-customer of a globalized era. In accounts such as this, the Fordist model of the mass society of industrialization has given way to fragmented and dispersed forms of production. Importantly, production itself has been marginalized as the key means of accumulation and supplanted especially by financial and information services and plain speculation. With a focus on the social consequences of these developments, Zygmunt Bauman has called the period leading to globalization "liquid modernity" (2007), as institutions, including the state, cannot keep their form for too long. Older forms of solidarity are giving way to extreme individualism.

Whatever one thinks of Bolívar and contemporary Latin American politics, it is impossible not to ponder the possibilities—and the limitations—that a Bolivarian civilization-state would afford. One interpretation could be ~~It may be~~ that, during our era of globalization, the relevance of Bolívar's dream of sub-continental unity has lost its luster and indeed seems more of a nightmare. In the final scene of the film, Miranda's eyes bleed as a montage of victims of the Colombian armed conflict flashes in and out of the frame. The Bolivarian vision of Spanish American unity seems delusional, Quixotesque as Miranda implies in the opening scene, amidst the current bloody unraveling. As Santiago Miranda agonizes, he utters his last breath: "Corten" or "Cut." The director's clapboard — in a self-referential gesture not to the soap opera but to another film—reads "Bolivar yo soy," inverting the words of the film's title and thus emphasizing the mise-en-abime: the narrative's inconclusive, artificial, and performative character. It invites the viewer to respond as Miranda did at the beginning of the film by refusing to accept the story's ending and rather embarking on a quest to re-script an alternative path.

Alternative interpretations in which it is globalization that the film is critiquing, inviting the viewer to side with the Bolivarian dream of Miranda's are possible too. But what is undeniable is that b~~B~~y foregrounding the performativity of "Bolívar," *Bolívar soy yo* raises questions that are not limited to the Colombian context. What story of "unity" or "nation" or "people" will bind the collective psyche and retrieve it from the madness of self-destruction and violence? What myths, cults, and rituals organize and inhibit our social imaginary? What metamorphoses in embodiment, in identification with, and

alienation from an/other need to take place in order for the poetics of possibility to transform our social order?

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