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***Film & Making Other History: Counterhegemonic Narratives for a Cinema of the Subaltern*. Alejandro Pedregal. Helsinki: Aalto University, 2015 (222 pages). ISBN: 978-952-60-6098-9.**

A Review by David Brancaleone, Limerick Institute of Technology

In an age when postmodernism and idealism, disguised as anti-essentialist metaphysics, have given way to what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls "liquid modernity", a new wave of scholarship is beginning to replace critiques of essence or studies of identity with a renewed interest in social relations. One is reminded of how Marx's anti-idealist *Theses on Feuerbach* marked a turn away from contemplation and towards practice, human sensuous activity, and practical-critical praxis which he understood as a revolutionary activity (28).

If there is such a cultural turn, then Alejandro Pedregal's book fits into it. Originally a practice-based doctoral dissertation, it combines a proposal for critical filmmaking with a tangible object, an original screenplay, *Me Llaman Rodolfo Walsh* (*They Call Me Rodolfo Walsh*), an excerpt from which is included in an appendix. Rodolfo Walsh (1927–1977), the central focus of the screenplay for a biopic, is seen by the author as an exemplary "organic intellectual" (Gramsci 452–53). Virtually unknown in the English-speaking world until very recently, Walsh was a pioneer of the Latin American testimonial novel, a particular type of nonfiction that could be mistaken for fiction. After publishing and editing crime fiction in his native Argentina, beginning with the short stories collected in *Variaciones en rojo* (1953), Walsh turned to investigative journalism with *Operation Massacre* (*Operación Masacre*, 1957), about an atrocity committed by Buenos Aires police. He managed to track down and interview the survivors, publishing their story first in a periodical, then in an award-winning book. Walsh's work was groundbreaking in Latin America for giving oral communication a legitimacy it had hitherto lacked in mainstream culture. Walsh, the detective story writer, became a journalist investigating social and political crime, but without relinquishing his established narrative techniques. And yet he allowed the voices of those normally excluded in society to be heard through a series of interviews which gave testimony to their plight. He cofounded Prensa Latina, the Cuban news agency, in 1959, together with Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Ricardo Masetti, but eventually returned to Argentina to pursue his career as a writer. Walsh's literary fame vies with his renown as political martyr, for, after the 1976 military coup, he joined the armed struggle, becoming an intelligence officer for the Montoneros guerrillas. He was shot dead in 1977, but not before posting his "Open Letter of a Writer to the Military Junta" ("Carta abierta de un escritor a la Junta Militar") denouncing the dictatorship and attacking its adoption of Chicago School economics. The tone of Walsh's open letter is unmistakable: "Nothing can stop us, neither jail nor death. Because you can't jail or kill a whole people and because the vast majority of Argentinians know that only the people will save the people" (qtd. in McCaughan 182).

The problems *Film & Making Other History* addresses as a whole can perhaps be best expressed as three main questions: could alternative perceptions of history employ dominant forms of representation to convey subaltern narratives, but do so without legitimating hegemony? Could a mainstream popular genre such as a biopic be hijacked in order to highlight the needs of the subaltern? Finally, could the biopic be transformed to such a point that it might become a vehicle for "alternative conceptions of the world" (178)?

The book is structured in two parts: the first, "Historytelling and Cinema", establishes the author's key concepts: the link between history and narrative, a survey of recent trends in historiography towards history as narrative, serving to defend his project from postmodernist attacks on history and drawing the distinction between hegemonic history and untold subaltern history. These ideas are then applied to historical narratives in cinema and, strategically, to a mainstream genre (the biopic), elevated to the task of historical representation when combined with allegory to expand it from an account of individual greatness and one-dimensional heroes to a genre capable of conveying a broader and more nuanced story of social complexities. In the second part of the book, "Counterhegemonic Cultural Practices and Narratives of the Subaltern", Antonio Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, the subaltern, and the organic intellectual are applied to Latin American culture, its testimonial literature, and to Third Cinema, serving also to contextualise the protagonist of the screenplay, Rodolfo Walsh, before proceeding to an analysis of the popular biopic *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992), the story of how a small-time crook grew into someone capable of challenging racism in the United States, in a film which borrows the conventions of the genre to put them to an unconventional use: to include Malcolm X, a charismatic if marginalised figure, in canonical American history.

Each chapter tackles a separate body of knowledge, progressively establishing the author's argument in defence of his screenplay proposal with such a density of references to frame the discussion that this reader was prompted to read a number of the sources directly. The approach is at once pragmatic and strategic. When, however, Pedregal—to frame First Cinema—invokes the Frankfurt School's concept of "culture industry" (54), in other words the phenomenon of the reification of culture brought about by capitalism, he ignores the rest of Theodor Adorno's argument, which dismisses commitment in art. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno assumes a neo-Kantian stance, for example when he unequivocally states that "[t]he function of art in the totally functional world is its functionlessness; it is pure superstition to believe that art could intervene directly or lead to an intervention" (404). Adorno's conception of autonomous art as a self-contained form of human expression conveys the very limited extent to which he is willing to countenance emancipation in art, constrained, on his account, to an idealist resistance of the commodification of society (1–20). Adorno's critique of the culture industry is inseparable from what he considers a failure of the avant-garde to mingle art with life. In this respect, by calling for a revival of Third Cinema in film practice today, Pedregal is closer to an influential advocate of artistic commitment who was also Adorno's prime target, Jean-Paul Sartre, who, in *What is Literature?*, far from embracing the autonomy of art as disinterestedness, proposed by Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, avows that the work of art can be committed.

Is such a problematics out of date today? While Alain Badiou replicates Adorno's arguments—deploying the concept of mathematical "subtraction" (55) to champion Samuel Beckett, Stéphane Mallarmé and Kazimir Malevich (56)—Jacques Rancière defends commitment. For, in what he classifies as the contemporary "aesthetic regime", there are

ways in which art and politics combine (115–33). Rancière has developed a nuanced politics of aesthetics in which there is a "tension by which a politics of art and a poetics of politics tend towards each other, but cannot meet without suppressing themselves" (183). This current critical discourse is at odds with much contemporary cinema theory, in which the screen *is* the real. Rancière's theory of an aesthetic regime is closer to the political idea of cinema defended by Teshome Gabriel, Paul Willemen, Mike Wayne, and now Pedregal, for whom, to cite the anticapitalist social movements, another world is possible, and also for whom a political form of cinema, even an impure one which does not hesitate to borrow from the genres of First Cinema, could contribute to challenging the contradictions of cultural hegemony where it matters (154).

Pedregal argues that *Malcolm X* functions as a historical allegory which enacts the three stages of collective political growth or *prise de conscience* of a colonised people, as theorised by Frantz Fanon: first, the assimilation of the hegemonic culture by the colonised (corresponding to Antonio Gramsci's "common sense"); second, their rebellion against it, through the reinterpretation of the people's memory (eliciting Gramscian "good sense"); and, third, their fight against it to establish their own distinctive culture (human agency, the outcome of "good sense") (Pedregal 161; Gramsci, *Selections*). Pedregal does not go so far as to claim that *Malcolm X* is Third Cinema or, even, "flawed Third Cinema", which is how Mike Wayne describes the Hollywood musical *Evita* (Alan Parker, 1996) (136–7); but cogently defends the film's value in his project to renew Third Cinema, as a demonstration of how a biopic's bourgeois particularism and its obsession with individuality can be transcended; politically charged, but without becoming, one might add, a boring Lukácsian universalist typology.[1]

A realist, critical and popular cinema, to cite Fernando Birri's canonical manifesto, is not so different from the kind of cinema Pedregal has in mind; Birri's prototype was his Neo-realist feature *Flooded Out* (*Los inundados*, 1961), which combines the specifically Latin American picaresque genre with black comedy to produce a film that is, paradoxically, both edifying and entertaining. Years later, Birri explained in "Cinema and Underdevelopment" that "our purpose is to create a new person, a new society, a new history and therefore a new art and a new cinema. Urgently" (87).

As has been noted above, Pedregal's Marxism, however, draws on Gramscian Marxism, not on Sartrean voluntarism. Pedregal argues that cinema can develop narratives to replace "common sense" with "good sense", and to bridge the chasm between high and low culture for emancipatory ends. In his distinction between common sense and good sense, Gramsci theorises a revolutionary struggle that is not workerist,[2] but that relates to the subaltern; he further argues for the strategic importance of popular culture in "developing a national-popular collective will" (130). Pedregal's position would have benefitted from a clarification of the particular meaning of "common sense" in Gramsci's thought, and from an elaboration of the concept of "good sense". Gramsci is clear that "common sense" is "il folklore filosofico" (268), that is, "the folklore of philosophy" (362n5), or "a fragmentary collection of ideas and opinions" (328). On the other hand, "good sense" expresses an "organic quality of thought" (330); it is, indeed, a philosophy, where "philosophy is a criticism and the superseding of religion and 'common sense'. In this sense, it coincides with 'good' as opposed to 'common' sense" (326). Importantly, Gramsci also equates "good sense" with "the philosophy of praxis", or his euphemism in the *Notebooks* for Marxism, "superseding the existing mode of thinking and of existing concrete thought (the existing cultural world)" (330).

What is compelling in Pedregal's book is that he combines the biopic with the Latin American *testimonio* tradition, in which authors refuse the role of auteur to become intermediaries between authentic voice and lived events witnessed by the subaltern. The figure of Rodolfo Walsh is reconstructed from documentary sources and writings, but also, significantly, through new interviews conducted by Pedregal with witnesses. Pedregal also seems to inject the ethos of the literary *testimonio* aesthetic, with its roots partly in investigative journalism, and partly in ethnographic field studies, into his proposed film. The advantage of his orientation towards a practical outcome is that the theory serves the purpose of testing the feasibility of Willemen's and Wayne's conception of cinema as a revolutionary practice in what is the supporting theoretical work for his completed screenplay. This requires not only a revisiting of key bodies of knowledge, but also adding to them and combining them in multidisciplinary fashion. But one would have also liked to read at least the story and treatment, rather than the brief extract of the completed screenplay included in the volume.

Pedregal's argument on revolutionary cinema relies on Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa's "Imperfect Cinema", in which Espinosa observed that, for as long as the "wretched of the earth" still inhabit the world,[3] there is a need for an engaged cinema (138). Espinosa's later clarifications of the misunderstandings of imperfect cinema, in "Meditations on Imperfect Cinema Fifteen Years Later", also tackled the challenges of such a film practice, presented in terms of a dilemma between making an art cinema that estranges the general public and one that doesn't (83). Espinosa also clarified that his concept of imperfection referred to his view that it would be nice if cinema could be a disinterested pursuit, but that in certain conditions it cannot afford to be, and needs to adopt a different approach instead.

Since those days, Third Cinema has largely been relegated to history by most critics who view it as a self-contained phenomenon of the past, represented by a number of canonical films and manifestos which belong to a distant era. But Pedregal picks up where Willemen, Gabriel and Wayne left off, for all of whom "placing the Other at the centre of the screen" (108) is more than an academic concern. Wayne, especially, discards the dichotomy between Second and Third Cinema and even First and Third Cinema, taking *Evita*, as we saw, as an example, if flawed, of what might constitute contemporary Third Cinema. Pedregal explores this strategy further, by theorising the potential of the biopic, seeking in Gabriel, Willemen and Wayne the possible basis for the development of Third Cinema as a critical film practice, but one which, while considering as central a rewriting of history from the point of view of the subaltern, also suggests going beyond Gabriel's memorialisation, to the point of putting forward a model of cinema that elicits human agency, not through persuasion, but an audiovisual raising of conscience. This is not a process Pedregal dwells on, though he mentions in passing the Brazilian Paulo Freire who called it *conscientização*, explained as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire17). In this way, Pedregal adds his voice to a re-politicising of Third Cinema, by returning it to its original purpose and ideological roots, after carefully reconstructing the debate to overcome the dead end of the 1970s film theory of Stephen Heath, among others, who attacked realism by equating political cinema with Brechtian *Verfremdung* or alienation theory and formal experimentalism (91–9). In this respect, *Film & Making Other History* also marks an opposition to such neo-Kantian approaches to cinema and the visual (Michael Fried's absorption theory, Stanley Cavell's autonomy in art and on the screen and, ultimately, Adorno's neo-Kantian stance, however justified as resistance to the spectacle). It is clear, even from his rallying title, that Pedregal aims to reaffirm the project of committed cinema,

with a view to developing Third Cinema in a new direction, appropriating Hollywood genres and their narrative techniques to subvert First Cinema for the purpose of political liberation, towards a political film practice that is neither elitist nor populist, but popular.

This positions Pedregal, and Wayne before him, in the category Richard Rushton and others have quarantined using the label "political modernists", whose rhetoric is still active to this day; although cinema has, supposedly, now outgrown it, just as it has outlived a dialectical method characterised by its reductionism, according to Rushton (22), leaving this reader to wonder the extent to which such film theory is inimical towards a cinema intent on what Freire calls a process of developing a critical form of thinking about the world (20–41).

Pedregal makes a convincing case for a film practice that is alternative without being elitist, deploying narrative to memorialise, but without falling into didacticism. There are precedents even within Second Cinema: *The Battle of Algiers* (*La battaglia di Algeri*, Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), acclaimed by Luca Barattoni as one of the most important examples of political film (61–2), one which Spike Lee, whose *Malcolm X* is Pedregal's model for practice, recognised as a formative influence. A little-known precursor is *The Children of Sanchez* (1978), which combines *testimonio* with narrative filmmaking to record lived history, offering a collective biography of a subaltern family. The screenplay was written by one of the acclaimed fathers of Neo-realism, Cesare Zavattini, who dramatised the ethnographic research carried out in Mexico by anthropologist Oscar Lewis. His research was published as a testimonial book based on taped interviews with a Mexican family living in poverty whom Lewis had gradually got to know in the 1950s. More recently, Rachel Gabara has put forward an argument for a lineage of specifically African Third Cinema, notably in the work of Abderrahmane Sissako defined by his "filmic first-person voice" (322) in which the filmmaker himself becomes the *testimonio*, the witness.[4]

In conclusion, a revised version of the book, which, as mentioned, is a PhD dissertation, would be welcome, with more space dedicated to the fascinating *testimonio* and with the inclusion of a critical biography of Rodolfo Walsh to contextualise the script and the treatment. In this respect, the screenplay and proposal aspect of the book are less significant than what underpins it: Pedregal's expanded concept of Third Cinema, defended as fictional *cine-testimonio*, in so far as in the twenty-first century Third Cinema no longer equates with Pan Latin Americanism, nationalism, or Third Worldism, at a time when "uneven geographic development" (Harvey 23–6) on a global scale is the central issue of the era of the networked society and of global capitalist economic and cultural flows (see Castells). However, Pedregal's book is a welcome addition to a new wave of film scholarship concerned with social relations. Its multidisciplinary approach leads to the construction of a model of what Pedregal calls the "testimonial biopic" (178), bringing together First World genre with a defining aspect of Latin American literature in order to combat existing common-sense conceptions of the world in the cinema, precisely where they are most influential. He conveys in an academic context the same sense of political and ethical urgency invoked by Birri. Pedregal theorises a historical method that primarily seeks to establish the connection between now and a historical moment, but also (in common with Walter Benjamin's theory of history), requires the filmmaker to "grasp the constellation which his own era has formed with an earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now'" (Benjamin 255). The practice of memorialisation in Pedregal's model of testimonial cinema serves a partisan, political and historical narrative of the subaltern which connects past and present and proposes a challenge to official history, while rescuing the potential and breadth of historical research from the limitations of postmodern micronarratives and microhistories.

Notes

[1] The reference is to a practice of didactic realism of the worst kind or Soviet realism, in which characters act out the behaviour of idealised types. For typology in Lukács see Aitken.

[2] 1960s Italian *operaismo*, as theorised by Mario Tronti, Raniero Panzieri and Toni Negri, which considered the factory as the principal site for struggle. For Gramsci, the rural south is crucial and therefore cannot be ignored. See Wright.

[3] Espinosa's intertextual reference is to Frantz Fanon's seminal *The Wretched of the Earth*.

[4] This kind of first-person narrative overlaps Sissako's personal experience with the shared experiences of his African friends, framing the everyday in such a way that it also becomes epic as frozen time, rather than epic in the Brechtian sense of epic theatre, dear to 1970s enemies of engaged realism.

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Biography and Selected Writings by screenwriter and theorist Cesare Zavattini (Bloomsbury Academic).