

Transnational Latin American Cinemas

Katy Perry's 2011 music video, "The One That Got Away," features Mexican actor Diego Luna as— you guessed it— the one. Silly as it may be, this particular piece of pure art pointed thirteen-year-old me in the direction of another Diego Luna hit: Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001) — the first Mexican film I ever saw, which today remains one of my favorite films. I became interested in Mexican cinema, as well as the cinema of the rest of Latin America. And while I wish I could say I didn't owe this to Katy Perry, it's important that I do, because it serves as a reminder of the outsider spectator position that I inhabit. This position, in combination with my interest in Latin American cinema, lead me to the decision to research transnational cinema originating from Latin American countries, and therefore to look at the relationship between Latin American cinemas and U.S. audiences. My goal was to learn how U.S. audiences interact with and receive Latin American films and to understand why certain Latin American films go beyond their home country while others do not. While perhaps not all that I have learned about this topic has been necessarily positive, I am pleased to say that Katy Perry is noticeably absent from the research.

Latin American films are made available to international audiences through mechanisms of transnational cinema: coproduction, distribution, and international film festival screenings. Why some films do better than others, once they arrive at the proverbial doorstep of international audiences, is a question whose answer is more ambiguous. While established international star power within a given film points toward a higher likelihood of popularity, less quantifiable — though widely recognized as true in some degree — is how Latin American films that travel are specifically designed for international appeal, and more specifically for Western European and U.S. appeal. They are conditioned, in a way, to fit aesthetic guidelines and narrative choices that

are determined by the hegemonic cinema of Hollywood and the international film festival circuits of the U.S. and Western Europe. In this essay I will explore answers to these questions in depth. First I will define transnational cinema and how it relates to the concept of national cinema, specifically in Latin American contexts. Second, I will map out the development of contemporary transnational cinema in Latin America in order to examine the aforementioned mechanisms of transnational cinema— coproduction, distribution, and film festivals. In the third and final section of my essay, I will take a look at various popular hypotheses as to why certain Latin American films are made transnational and offer my own hypothesis as a counterpoint.

Transnational Cinema Defined

The spread of globalization and technology has made the border crossing of cinemas more prevalent than ever, as well as more complicated. This transnationalism is increasingly affecting the analysis of cinema studies and is therefore essential to understanding the interaction between cinemas and international audiences. In “Transnational Cinema: An Introduction,” Steven Rawle cites anthropologist Aihwa Ong, who defines transnationality as a “condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space,” that has been “intensified under late capitalism” (2). Rawle explains that there are a myriad of forms that transnational cinema can take, from modes of distribution to transnational star power to the cinema of globalization, i.e. cinema whose actual content focuses on the effects of transnationalization and the increasing ease with which people all over the world can connect. Transnational cinema encompasses “films that can’t be explained or analysed only in relation to a single national context” (2). By this logic, transnational cinema must be examined in terms of multiple national contexts in addition to, rather than instead of, singular national contexts.

The New Latin American cinema of the 1950s and 1960s was built on the concept of a pan-Latin American unity, a single ‘nation’ made up of all the distinct countries of the region, fighting for freedom against oppression and colonialism. A primary goal of the movement was to “define, construct and preserve national cinemas” (López 314). New Latin American cinema therefore served to unite admittedly unique national cinemas together through oppression and struggle. This unification, however, remains different from a *single* cinema. It is the confluence of multiple cinemas toward shared radical ends. The notion of *national* cinema is therefore a necessary subject of analysis within transnational cinema studies. Rawle argues that national cinema is relevant “for a transnational frame of interpretation and study” because, even in transnational cinema, “the national retains its prominence in terms of cultural policy, identity, economics and ideology” (3). Nationhood is, in fact, of great importance in many of the most prominent Latin American transnational films, such as *Y tu mamá también* and *Cidade de Deus* (Fernando Meirelles & Kátia Lund, 2002). In “An ‘Other’ History: The New Latin American Cinema,” Latin American film scholar Ana M. López explains: “in Latin America, the national cinema question has been hotly debated almost since the importation of the medium at the turn of the century” (314). While “the developed-colonizing nations have an unquestionably hegemonic national culture...the underdeveloped-colonized must struggle with national culture as a problem, needing definition, recuperation, protection” (314). Colonization has made the need to define nationality through cinema in Latin America a site of constant struggle. Despite this struggle, or perhaps because of it, national identity in Latin American cinema histories is “one place from which to speak one’s own culture” and a place from which to “produce a critical understanding of social reality,” a reality of “underdevelopment, dependence, and colonialism” (314).

Social, political, cultural, linguistic, national and international pressures carve out definitions of cinema as identity. And because nationhood within Latin American cinemas is difficult to define, so too is transnational cinema from the region. But understanding national identities is integral to understanding Latin American cinema writ large. One flawed perception of internationally successful cinema is that such films contain a ‘universality’ that untethers them from their country of origin. But to understand why some films travel across borders better than others, one must understand how those films exist first within the context of their country and then in the context of the continent and its diaspora. Rather than assuming that all Latin American cinema is the same in the globalized era— a perception no doubt influenced by xenophobia — a full-bodied analysis must look at the different environments out of which the film is created.

In the decades following the political filmmaking of 1960s Latin America, the rise of neoliberal business and politics from the U.S. and Western Europe began to spread globally. Particularly beginning in the 1990s, the privatized and deregulated nature of global business began to interfere in Latin American industries, and became one of the primary facilitators of contemporary transnational Latin American cinemas. For Latin America, this was a tumultuous decade, as a result of changing dynamics in all industries, including cinema. According to Luisela Alvaray’s “National, Regional, and Global: New Waves of Latin American Cinema,” a “rapid expansion of the world economy during the 1990s” transformed Latin American industries, including cinema industries, into “emerging markets”; while film industries in countries like Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil were initially devastated by a shift from “almost-absolute state control to a situation in which the government had a less direct role,” this shift from public to private cinema industries increased production and profits for Latin American

cinemas and facilitated transnationalism. In spreading neoliberal market policies, the U.S. and Western Europe were able to become active participants in the transnationalism of Latin American cinema. Three mechanisms of transnational cinema have emerged as key to the traveling of Latin American cinema— coproduction, distribution, and film festival screenings. In the following section, I will address each of these in detail.

Mechanisms of Transnational Cinema

Latin American transnational cinemas are often U.S. and Western European (co)products. Coproduction efforts by the Motion Picture Association of the U.S. or Spain's media conglomeration Telefonica Media have, since the 1990s, increased "both the number of works and the exposure of regional cinemas into the extensive global arena" (Alvaray 55). Films that are made, at least in part, by production companies from the U.S. are more likely to be advertised and pushed in the U.S. Some of the most famous Latin American films, such as *Amores perros* (Iñárritu 2000), *Roma* (Cuarón 2018), *Diarios de motocicleta* (Salles 2004), and *Maria Full of Grace* (Marston 2004) are all coproductions of U.S. and Western European companies. Additionally, according to film scholar Jeffrey Middents, the Latin American films that are screened at prestigious film festivals— one of the primary sites in which Latin American films are able to gain international recognition— are often "co-productions with significant funds coming from European or American sources" (155). U.S. production credits on Latin American films helps them to gain the attention of film festival coordinators and international film distribution companies. In this way, coproduction functions as the first step in the transnationalization of Latin American cinemas.

Even with U.S. and Western European coproduction efforts, Latin American films are not guaranteed to be internationally recognized. They depend on international distribution

companies— often specifically U.S.-based distribution companies— for international recognition, and sometimes even for national and intercontinental recognition. Alvaray explains, “since the United States has a strong and consolidated industry, other countries with less developed infrastructures have a hard time distributing features outside of their borders. And they are even less likely to place it within the almost-sealed U.S. market” (52). In “In Search of an Audience: Latin American Cinema,” Samuel Silva puts this bluntly: “for a Latin American film to be seen beyond its borders, it has to be bought and distributed in the United States, which then allows, in some cases, for it to be seen in other Latin American countries. It’s incredible but true: Latin America can’t see movies made in Latin America” (5). Indeed, the role of distribution in facilitating transnational Latin American cinemas is vital and even more telling of the success of Latin American cinema in the U.S. than coproduction interactions. *Y tu mamá también*, for example, was not coproduced by any U.S. or Western European production companies. However, it was— as all Latin American films successful in the U.S. are— distributed by U.S. companies. It makes sense: while a film being made in part by U.S. production companies has a greater chance at being popular in the U.S., it won’t be seen if it isn’t distributed.

A final factor of the transnationalizing of Latin American cinemas is the international film festival circuit. According to Elizabeth Barrios in “The Chicago Latino film festival: shaping Latin American/Latino cinema in the United States,” international film festivals play “a decisive role in determining whether much of today’s cinematic production will be viewed, and in shaping how individual films will be identified, marketed, and even interpreted” (212). In the same vein, “film festivals...are acting as vigorous supporters of [Latin American] filmmakers while serving as agents for distribution” (60). Scholars of transnational film agree that film festival circuits and the screening of Latin American films at prestigious international festivals

such as Cannes, Toronto, or Sundance are major factors in Latin American films gaining recognition and popularity in the U.S. and elsewhere internationally. In Alvaray's piece, she offers a table of the top ten most successful Latin American and Latino films in the U.S. and global box offices. All ten were featured at prominent international film festivals, and all but two at Toronto.

Coproduction, distribution, and the international film festival circuit are major factors in the transnationalizing of Latin American cinemas, and they are all connected: film festivals facilitate distribution, while U.S. distributors are more likely to be aware of films that already have connections— through coproduction efforts— to the U.S. It's clear how Latin American cinema is made available through these processes, and how these processes work together to establish the route that Latin American cinemas take in order to become transnational.

Hypotheses of Success

The question of why some films from Latin America are chosen to be distributed, coproduced, and screened at film festivals while others are not— the question of what makes for a popular Latin American transnational film— is more opaque. This inquiry delves into questions of personal and cultural tastes and preferences, aesthetics, and narrative choice. While box office numbers and business statistics can reveal a lot about which films are internationally recognized and popular and who made them, they cannot necessarily reveal why one film was successful while another flopped, despite coming from the same country or region. Despite this lack of quantifiability, scholars suggest that conditioning and star power are the clearest reasons for the transnational success of specific films from Latin America.

One hypothesis suggests that transnational films are the product, to some extent, of mechanisms of 'conditioning' that involve making films that appeal to outside, international

audiences. This conditioning is possible at every step of the transnational process in different forms, from aesthetic and narrative choices in production, to censorship in distribution, to gatekeeping in film festival programming decisions. At the level of coproduction, Alvaray asserts that “the transnational nature of coproduction, certainly, conditions narratives and styles” and that “some critics talk about ‘cosmetics’ instead of ‘aesthetics,’” implying that there is something almost unnatural and purposefully designed about films from Latin America that travel and do well internationally (56). It is likely that what Alvaray calls conditioning happens, to some extent, in coproductions between the U.S. and Western Europe and Latin American countries; when a film is being primarily funded by a U.S. or Western European company, it would be surprising if that company didn’t have influence on the final product. One could even hypothesize that the almost jarring lack of explicitly communist themes in *Diarios de motocicleta*, a film about the famed Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara, is a product of the influence of U.K. production company, FilmFour, that helped fund the film. This is hard to verify, and just how influential U.S. and Western European companies are on the aesthetics of the Latin American films they fund remains mysterious. Further, it is hard to quantify what problems might arise due to ‘conditioning.’ The film *La mujer de mi hermano* (De Montreuil 2005) was “filmed in Chile with a cast from Colombia, Venezuela, Uruguay, Peru, Chile, and Mexico,” seemingly as an effort to condition the film for international audience. But Middents argues that it features an “aesthetic that seems more attuned to Ikea than Iquitos,” which is problematic in that “all sense of national identity [is] seemingly intentionally washed out to make a generically Latin American film.” And yet, the attempts to fit the transnational criteria failed; the film was a “critical disaster.” (Middents 161). While this film exemplifies conditioning in Latin American transnational cinema, its failure provides little information about how

problematic conditioning could be in examples of transnational films that are taken seriously. If successful transnational cinema contains conditioning, it is likely much subtler, more finessed, than in *La mujer*. Because of this, conditioning is an element of transnational cinema that is difficult to define, and equally as difficult to prove.

Easier to define, in the form of censorship, is how conditioning arises in the U.S. distribution of Latin American films. In “Sex versus the small screen: home video censorship and *Y tu mamá también*,” Caitlin Benson-Allot explains how director Alfonso Cuarón “had to cede to MGM’s demand for a family-friendly video version of *Y tu* in order to secure any U.S. distribution for his film.” By cutting about five minutes of the original film, U.S. distributors butchered the meaning of *Y tu mamá también*: “losing the culmination of the boys’ sexual narrative garbles Cuarón’s critique of government corruption and economic exploitation in Mexico.” (Benson-Allot). The example of *Y tu mamá también* becoming the “subject of the same transnational neoliberal forces that it seeks to critique” shows the harmful implications of a dependency on U.S. funding and distribution, as well as of U.S. censorship and ‘conditioning’ of transnational cinemas from Latin America (Benson-Allot), in that this dependency can leave directors and filmmakers with no choice but to comply with U.S. demands.

Conditioning at the level of film festivals is also a factor that could potentially point towards what kinds of films from Latin America the U.S. wants to see, and this is especially problematic because of the notion of a ‘real’ Latin America, according to international film festival coordinators and programmers. In “Whose Latin American Cinema?” Manuel Betancourt describes Brazilian director Vera Egito’s (*Amores urbanos*) issues when it came to having her film played at international film festivals: “‘they told me the film is not the Brazil they would like to show or it’s not the Brazil they were expecting.’” Betancourt further says that

“inherent in programming choices...are broader cultural questions about the image of the region that is created when filtered through the eyes of American critics and moviegoers.” Betancourt, along with Middents, suggest that the Latin American films that U.S. audiences see— and therefore the ones that become popular— are chosen specifically for showcasing a recognizable Latin America, according to Euro-American audiences. Considering the ambiguous nature of this claim, and the multitude of possible ideas about what exactly is recognizable as Latin American to U.S. audiences, it is hard to confirm or deny it— though scholars seem to agree that some element of gatekeeping and conditioning is involved in the journey of Latin American films across borders.

Another possible reason why some Latin American films travel better than others is star power. Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón directed the Oscar-nominated U.S. production *A Little Princess* (1995) as well as *Great Expectations* (1998), starring big U.S. names like Gwyneth Paltrow, Ethan Hawke, and Robert De Niro. In doing so, Cuarón established himself in Hollywood and internationally, which allowed his more independent, Mexican-produced film *Y tu mamá también* to gain international attention from festival programmers and U.S. distributors. Additionally, Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal has become an internationally celebrated talent, and while his star power was not yet established when *Amores perros* gained international recognition, his fame due to this Oscar-nominated film likely also contributed to the success of *Y tu mamá también*, as well as other notable transnational films such as *El crimen del Padre Amaro* (Carrera 2002), *Diarios de motocicletas*, and *También la lluvia* (Bollaín 2010). While it makes sense to suggest that films travel well the more internationally known the cast and producers/directors/writers are, this line of reasoning begs the question: how did they get there in the first place?

Concluding Remarks

Because of the ambiguity in determining why some Latin American transnational films travel better than others, I will end with my own hypothesis for success. In *Roma*, *Y tu mamá también*, *También la lluvia*, *Diarios de motocicleta*, and *Cidade de Deus*, all successful transnational films from Latin America, a distinct theme arises: specific political context and the importance of nation. These films all directly address issues that U.S. audiences commonly associate with Latin America: poverty, class disparity, and political strife are all central themes to these films. This is not to say that the only films being made in Latin America are of a distinctly political nature, but rather that distributors, production companies, and film festival coordinators from the U.S. and Western Europe seem determined to push an idea of Latin American cinema as “aesthetic responses to the political turmoil of the latter half of the twentieth century” (Betancourt). Because of this, and because of the political filmmaking of the 1960s in Latin America from which contemporary Latin American cinema has grown, the nature of transnational film from Latin America is often grounded in recognizable political climates. Not only does this suggest that U.S. audiences are limited in their ability to see a nuanced Latin America through cinema, but it suggests that there is little that can change this so long as the U.S. and Western Europe have such domineering control over the spread of transnational cinema.

In cinema, as in most industries, globalization and late capitalism dominate. Transnational cinema is not an unbiased journey of cinema from one country to the next, but rather a product of complex international politics and dynamics. Because of this, what we see of Latin American cinema in the U.S. is not all there is to see. What ends up being exported to the U.S., through coproduction, distribution, and film festivals, is not the result of audience tastes

and preferences, but possibly, and more likely, the result of biases and outsider ideas about which Latin America should be seen in cinema. While this Latin America is often one of poverty, pain, and strife, we must remember that while these struggles can unify the region of Latin America, they can also be repurposed by the U.S. and used to generalize and stereotype.

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