

THE AESTHETICS OF DISAFFECTION IN THE LATIN AMERICAN FESTIVAL FILM

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CONTEXT

The study of Latin American cinema from a transnational perspective has led to the emergence of new analytical categories. One of these categories is the so-called festival film. Festival films are certainly not exclusive to contemporary Latin American cinema but appear in other geographical areas and other periods of film history as well¹. What all festival films share, however, is an ambition to reach a wide international audience of cinephiles, who are interested in consuming what has come to be known as Global Art Cinema. According to Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (2010: 6), global art cinema can be recognized by an “overt engagement with the aesthetic, an unrestrained formalism, and a mode of narration that is pleasurable but loosened from classical structures and distanced from its representations” (2010: 6).

This article argues that another feature of global art cinema is its relationship to what I

would like to call an “aesthetics of disaffection”. This term is inspired by the feelings of disaffection, lack of enthusiasm and even apathy which the protagonists of many festival films convey or seem to convey. The first scholar to have called attention to this phenomenon is Paul Julian Smith. Pointing at the “consistently blank and affectless acting style” in many Latin American festival films (Smith, 2012: 72), the British scholar adds a range of other, minimalist features with which this acting style generally combines: “[Festival films tend to] employ little camera movement and extended takes without edits; they tell casual or oblique stories, often elliptical and inconclusive and they often cast non-professionals [...]. ‘Festival films’ may well be shot in black and white and will certainly lack a conventional musical score”². The use of non-professional actors, mentioned in this definition, is often related to a desire to highlight the realist dimension of the stories depicted, which also explains why many of these festival

films show similarities with the genre of the documentary, in spite of being fictional in nature.

In order to illustrate his ideas, Smith refers to films such as *Liverpool* (Lisandro Alonso, 2008), *Japón* (Carlos Reygadas, 2002) and *Lake Tahoe* (Fernando Eimbcke, 2008). The mixed geographical origin of these films (the first proceeds from Argentina, the second and third from Mexico) already reveals the transnational dimension of the aesthetics of disaffection. In all three films, the main character is an introverted person who remains rather enigmatic to the audience. Equally enigmatic are the titles of the films, which are deliberately disorienting: neither of the three films takes place in the country or town referred to in the title and only towards the end of the stories does the viewer receive some interpretative clues regarding the toponymical references³. Many successful films in the past decade use similar disorienting strategies as part of their aesthetics of disaffection. It is important to remark that the presence of feelings of disaffection does not necessarily imply that the protagonists of these films remain spared from difficult and traumatic experiences: in *Heli* (Amat Escalante, 2013) and *La Jaula de Oro* (Diego Quemada-Díez, 2013), for instance, we witness the terrible consequences of drug trafficking and undocumented migration on the daily lives of ordinary citizens. Here, the “aesthetics of disaffection” signals a difference with respect to commercial genres such as the adventure film or the melodrama, in which strong feelings of identification with the main characters are aroused, but only for the time of the viewing. Films such as *Heli* and *La jaula de oro*, on the contrary, rather seem to imply a mode of “unsentimentality”, characterized by an “attention to painful suffering without emotional display” which is supposed to facilitate clinical observation and analysis of what happens (Nelson 2017: 5). In a recent article on these kinds of films, Laura Podalsky has underscored the similarities, but also the fundamental differences of this style with respect to earlier periods in film his-

tory: “Such films [like *Heli* and *Lake Tahoe*] mimic certain conventions of the form of ‘psychological realism’ that David Bordwell has associated with post-World War II (European) art cinema, including characters who appear somewhat impassive and whose motivations appear unclear. Yet, the contemporary Latin American films differ quite markedly in terms of modes of address. Whereas the European films made the characters’ psychic state and affective apprehensions discernable by the spectator in an embodied way (via camera-work or narration – i.e. the plot’s distribution of story information), films by Eimbcke, Escalante and others attenuate that assurance of knowability” (Podalsky 2016: 239-240).

As the minimalist form of the aesthetics of disaffection has already been commented upon by Paul Julian Smith (2012) and in a more elaborate way by Laura Podalsky (2016), this article centers on what might be considered a particular variant of the aesthetics of disaffection. In proposing this variant, I take my clue from Vania’s Barraza’s analysis of recent tendencies in the filmmaking of the *Novísimos*. This label is used to refer to a generation of Chilean filmmakers who center on personal and intimate stories rather than on political and collective experiences. Some names frequently associated with this movement are Alberto Fuguet (who is also a writer), Alicia Scherson, Sebastián Lelio and Matías Bize (Cavallo & Maza, 2011). Similar to the filmmakers examined by Smith and Podalsky, the *Novísimos* tell stories about individuals and their everyday life in contemporary society. In the Chilean context, this means that these filmmakers generally turn their back on the explicit treatment of the dictatorship and other, more political topics, which was a characteristic of the previous generation of the *New Latin American Cinema*; hence also the word “novísimos” (“newest”) instead of “nuevo” (“new”).

Besides denoting an interest in contemporary society, the films analyzed by Barraza share with the ones previously discussed a depiction of char-

acters whose acting style suggests indifference and apathy. At the same time, the filmmakers of the second variant shy away from the minimalist, austere, slow and even documentary-kind of style which characterized the work of filmmakers such as Eimbcke and Alonso. Instead, they use many colors or an aestheticized black and white, make profusive use of music (of different styles and kinds), and often opt for a mobile camera rather than a static one. The use of a mobile camera is directly related to the fact that the films of the *Novísimos* foreground mobility: their characters walk, cycle or drive through urban environments, thereby reviving the figure of the *flâneur* (Barraza, 2015). There are then a number of differences between the two variants, but in both cases an aesthetics of disaffection is at stake in the sense that all of these films deal with characters manifesting feelings of depression or apathy. Moreover, this aesthetics is widely shared in Latin America. A quick glance at Latin American festival films screened in the past fifteen years reveals the presence of the features mentioned by Barraza in no less than eleven films: *El abrazo partido* (Daniel Burman, 2004, Arg.), *El cielito* (María Victoria Menis, 2004, Arg.), *Play* (Alicia Scherson, 2005, Chile), *Velódromo* (Alberto Fuguet, 2010, Chile), *Música campesina* (Alberto Fuguet, 2011, Chile), *El asaltante* (Pablo Fendrik, 2007, Arg.), *Huacho* (Alejandro Fernández Almenaras, 2009, Chile), *Personal Belongings* (Alejandro Brugués, 2009, Cuba), *Medianeras* (Gustavo Taretto, 2011, Arg.), *Pescador* (Sebastián Cordero, 2013), and *Güeros* (Alonso Ruizpalacios, 2015, Mexico). The transnational quality of the aesthetics commented upon is demonstrated by the fact that

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the examples of this second variant are originary from Argentina, Mexico, Cuba, and Ecuador, besides from Chile. In this second variant, the feeling of disaffection seems to fulfill another role than in the minimalist variant, in which it prevented the audience from identifying with the characters and helped them approach a situation of suffering in a cool and unsentimental way. Rather, the second variant uses the feeling of disaffection as a “transnational affect”, which activates the cinephile background of the international audience targeted (cf. e.g. Podalsky’s references to the European art cinema) and thereby favors the international distribution of these films. Tapping into the emotional repertoire of “transnational communities of feeling” (Podalsky, 2011: 157)⁴, the feeling of disaffection can also be related to the “waning of affect”, which Fredric Jameson has associated with postmodern art (Jameson, 1996: 10), or with the desire to “disappear from oneself”, which French philosopher David Le Breton considers to be key to contemporary society (2015). According to Le Breton, the desire to disappear from oneself is present when one “does no longer want to communicate, nor to exchange ideas, nor to project oneself in time” (Le Breton, 2015: 19)⁵.

In the following pages, I will present three films from different countries in Latin America in order to exemplify this second variant of “the aesthetics of disaffection”: *Play* (2004), a Chilean film by Alicia Scherson; *Medianeras* (2010), an Argentine film by Gustavo Taretto; and *Güeros* (2015), a Mexican film written and directed by Alonso Ruizpalacios. All three films were very successful in the festival circuit, where they garnered important awards⁶. Scherson’s title – *Play* – immediately suggests the more cheerful take on disaffection in these three films: they approach it as material to play with in an artistic way, instead of something to be considered with a certain distance and even disapproval. Moreover, the three films foreground their condition as works of fiction in an explicit and almost therapeutic manner, as if the only kind of disaffec-



From left to right. Figure 1. Tristán, *Play*'s main character. Figure 2: Failed encounters in *Medianeras*

tion of interest were the one inspiring new works of art or new stories. In the case of *Play*, the story is entirely situated in Santiago de Chile, while *Medianeras* and *Güeros* transport us to Buenos Aires and Mexico City, respectively. In the three cases, then, the stories are situated in the capital of a particular country, which is in line with global art cinema's preferred sites for international distribution. The Anglophone songs in *Play* and *Medianeras*, and the piano music of Chopin in *Güeros* (besides other musical styles) also help these works slip into the cosmopolitan culture they would like to belong to. We will now first take a closer look at how the feelings of disaffection are concretely represented in each one of these films, and then at how they give way to an aesthetic mode based on the idea of play and irony. The ambition of this article is not to give a comprehensive account of the phenomenon of the aesthetics of disaffection, but instead to offer a point of departure for further research on the topic.

PERSONIFYING DISAFFECTION

In *Play*, a film written and directed by a *Novísimos*-filmmaker, the feeling of disaffection is embodied by a character whose name immediately evokes his depressed state of mind: Tristán. Tristán

is a thirty-something good looking architect, who has everything he could wish for: a nice house, a relationship, a well paid job; and yet, he feels inexplicably sad. He drops out of work, loses interest in everything that surrounds him, and starts roaming the streets of Santiago de Chile until he is found lying on the ground, heavily wounded; he has fallen off a high building (or thrown himself from it, as a suicide attempt); fortunately he is taken to the hospital immediately and survives. The main character of *Medianeras*, who also provides the voice over in the film, is Martín. He is a designer of websites, suffering from neuroses and depressions. His fear of other people and public spaces prevents him from leaving his apartment for almost two years. A psychiatrist prescribes him daily walks as a form of therapy. Martín faithfully carries out this prescription, always carrying along a backpack filled with antidepressants and tranquilizers against his frequent panic attacks. If he weren't obliged to go out, he would simply stay put before his computer screen – his favorite remedy against insomnia. Ironically, he is totally unaware of the fact that, at the other side of his apartment, just separated by a sidewall or "medianera", another person is suffering from the same symptoms as he is. Mariana is an unemployed architect who has just come out



Figure 3. Apathy in *Güeros*

of a long-lasting relationship and suffers from a fear for elevators. Several scenes depict how these two lost souls, living in the same street, pass each other during their walks without noticing one another. A lack of courage and energy shows in their hasty and furtive steps as well as in the motif of the failed encounter (figure 2). Only towards the end do we catch a glimpse of a happy future, when the two finally bump into each other, but this is also where the film stops. In *Güeros*, finally, the disaffection takes the form of total apathy on behalf of the Mexican students, who are waiting for a tediously long students' strike to end (figure 3). The strike is based on a historical strike that took place at the UNAM (Mexico's main public university) in 1999; it lasted for several months and was supported by the great majority of students⁷. Two students nicknamed Sombra and Santos, however, prefer not to take part in the strike for reasons that are never explained; they just spend their time doing nothing in their miserable apartment. Similar to Martín in *Medianeras*, Sombra suffers from panic attacks. Their state of depression and apathy is temporarily suspended when Tomás, the younger brother of Sombra (Federico), arrives to

stay with him, and reads in the newspaper about the imminent death of a rockstar he greatly admires, Epigmenio Cruz. Tomás more or less obliges Sombra and roommate Santos to accompany him on a whimsical journey for this legendary singer through Mexico City. In the end of the film, they finally bump into the rockstar in a deserted pulquería bar, but Epigmenio Cruz is too sick and tired to talk to them; he even falls asleep while Tomás and his brother express their admiration for him in a moving speech. Clearly, Epigmenio Cruz constitutes the ultimate example of disaffection: all he wants is to be left alone; if he could, he would simply "disappear from himself" (cf. supra, Le Breton 2015).

The urban setting of the three films seems appropriate to stimulate feelings of disaffection: the immensity of the city in *Güeros* explains why people often get lost while looking for something, and in the Chilean capital in *Play*, people even deliberately try to get lost. But even when people share the same neighborhood, as is the case in *Medianeras*, it is not very likely that they would meet: a feeling of anonymity permeates everyday life in the big city, finding a symbolic counterpart in the sidewalks – the "blind" sides of adjacent buildings. Disaffection appears as a disease caused by modern city life, although the epigraph of Scherson's film – "Times were hard but modern" – also expresses the ambivalence of this modernity through the adversative conjunction "but". City

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life is not only associated with emotional pathologies, but can yield positive results as well. In the three films we're discussing, indeed, an initial feeling of emptiness gives way to some form of creative activity. David Le Breton (2015: 194) refers in this context to a state of "blancheur" (whiteness) in which the mind goes blank: "The state of whiteness places the actual world between brackets for a temporary or definite period of time, but it also presents itself as a condition of endless virtuality and a source of renewal, even if finding yourself in this state may be a painful experience for yourself or the people that surround you. However, it is not a state that equals nothingness nor a big void – it is another way of being in the world, which emerges from discretion, slowness, and disappearance"⁸. The fact that disaffection and creativity are closely related –which constitutes another difference with respect to "minimalist" films – is symbolized by two particular objects that attract the attention

From top to bottom. Figure 4. The drawing tablet in *Play*.
Figure 5. A mannequin is Mariana's roommate in *Medianeras*



THE WORD "DISAFFECTION" ATTRACTS THE ONE OF "DETACHMENT", WHICH CAN REFER TO SOMETHING NEGATIVE (A LACK OF INTEREST) AS WELL AS TO SOMETHING POSITIVE (A FORM OF NEUTRALITY AND THEREFORE OBJECTIVITY)

(and even affection) of the protagonists of *Play* and *Medianeras*: a magical drawing tablet which had belonged to Tristán as a boy, and which he rediscovers during a visit to his parental place (figure 4), and the mannequins that Mariana creatively uses during her temporary job as a window dresser; one of these mannequins even keeps her company in her small apartment (figure 5). In this particular context, the word "disaffection" attracts the one of "detachment", which can refer to something negative (a lack of interest) as well as to something positive (a form of neutrality and therefore objectivity). It is this "neutral" state of mind which, in the films under examination, operates as a condition for creativity and explains how disaffection can transform into a truly aesthetic practice in these films. "Detachment" is also the word used by Laura Podalsky in her comments on the aesthetic qualities of films such as *Heli* and *Lake Tahoe*, that center on negative aspects of neoliberal societies, such as violence and the disintegration of family life. While the films she refers to relate to the negative dimension of detachment (depression, apathy, mourning), the films presented in this article rather highlight the ambivalence and dynamic character of the term, and propose an artistic response to the sociological context in which the films are, of course, also embedded.

DISAFFECTION AS AESTHETIC PRACTICE

In order to illustrate the aesthetic side of disaffection, I will present three procedures that can be discovered in the films here examined. The first

is the emphasis placed on the idea of looking and seeing, the second relates to the motif of play, and the third consists in the deliberate blurring of the realist dimension of the stories evoked. The first procedure is a direct result of the idea of neutrality which comes with the word “detachment”. As explained before, the attitude of detachment does not always imply the idea of depression; it can simply refer to the absence of personal interests and intense emotions which allows one to look attentively, in an objective way, and even with a special interest in details. In *Play*, this is exemplified by the behavior of Cristina – a character who starts spying on Tristán after finding his briefcase. She is a female version of the voyeur, profoundly enjoying her game of spying on others without being noticed herself (figure 6). As someone who comes from the South and is of mapuche origin, she remains an outsider in the big city of Santiago de Chile, where she takes care of an old man. Her ability to make herself invisible during her humble task as a housemaid is a strategic advantage she has when spying on others during her spare time (Wright, 2013: 232)⁹. The attention to vision and the visual is also suggested through the opposite figure: Tristán’s mother in *Play* is blind and only recognizes her son by touching his face.

The figure of the outsider also applies to *Güeros*. Indeed, the point of view from which we perceive the events in the story is granted by Tomás, Sombra’s younger brother who lives in Veracruz until he is sent away by his mother to go and live for a while with his brother in Mexico City; his mother had become tired of his pranks as a rebellious teenager. Being of lighter complexion than his brother Federico (whose nickname Sombra, “shadow”, is significant in this respect), Tomás is the character to which the word “güeros” applies most directly. The specific meanings of this typically Mexican word are recalled in the beginning of the film¹⁰. It is Tomás who looks at the Mexican capital in wonder and amazement during his search for the dying rock star. Not surprisingly,

he carries along a photography camera and the importance of this prop is indicated by the fact that the film’s last shot coincides with a picture taken by Tomás. The emphasis on the visual aspect also shows in the frequent allusions to the television program *Big Brother* in the Mexican festival film; the program is screened on televisions that we see in the background of several scenes. Finally, a reference to vision pops up during the speech of admiration addressed to Epigmenio Cruz before he falls asleep: the rock star is praised for his ability “to see what lies behind the surface of things”. In *Medianeras*, a film containing several photographic pictures of Buenos Aires, the camera is an ingredient of the story itself: similar to Tomás in *Güeros*, Martín carries a photography camera during his daily walks, and his pictures are shown in the film. The character of Mariana, finally, symbolizes the importance of looking and seeing through her job as a window dresser.

The foregrounding of looking and seeing also impacts on the narration of the films. In *Play*, the camera mimics the voyeurism of Cristina when it starts exploring the surroundings of the place where she is busy taking care of the old man. In this part of the film, the camera “detaches” itself from Cristina and glances through the window where we perceive a nice park with other people in it. In *Medianeras* some pictures are inserted that

Figure 6. Voyeurism in *Play*



seem to proceed from Martín's camera during his daily walks, and in *Güeros* the camera starts roaming the corridors of a hospital to which Sombra is taken after one of his panic attacks. The way in which the mobility of the characters (and especially their movements through the city) affects the story itself recalls the intimate relationship which Michel De Certeau posited between "walking" and "narrating"; see his essay "Walking the City" (1984: 156-163). The more intense qualities of the gaze, moreover, are echoed by an increased attention to other sensorial aspects. This is especially clear in *Play* and *Güeros*, where characters carry a Walkman and listen to music. Touching and smelling are important senses as well. In *Play*, for instance, Cristina discretely tries to capture the specific smell of Tristán while sitting behind him on the bus; in *Medianeras*, some scenes are shot in a swimming pool; in *Güeros*, a kiss is shown in great detail. In the multisensorial and haptic¹¹ cinema of the three films, the absence of strong emotions seems to be compensated by an increased attention to the body.

The second procedure consists in introducing a ludic dimension in the films. As mentioned before, the title of Scherson's film already highlights the centrality of the concept of "play" for the entire story. The play is not only there in the detec-

tive-like game which Cristina engages in while following Tristán, but also in her obsession with videogames such as *Street Fighter II*. In *Medianeras*, a film characterized by a "creative and ludic participation in an aesthetic of intermediality" (Page, 2016: 86), the notion of "play" especially applies to Mariana, who is fond of the book series *Where's Waldo?*. In this series, the readers are challenged to find a character named Waldo, who is hidden in a large group of people, but can be identified with some effort by his red-and-white-striped shirt, bobble hat, and glasses. Here again, as well as in the *video-game*, the visual dimension stands out as the readers of the book of illustrations really have to look for the specific character on the different pages. In *Güeros*, finally, the idea of play is present in the allusions to Big Brother: a television program in which the participants have to close all kinds of pacts in order to defend their place in a house where they are filmed continuously.

Similar to what happened with the first procedure, the one of the play at times affects the narration of the story itself. In *Play*, the film shifts into a videogame-kind of style when Cristina imagines herself taking the defense of a child punished by his mother and transforms into a cartoonish street fighter herself. In *Medianeras*, the last encounter between Mariana and Martín adopts the graphic style of *Where's Waldo?*, with Martín wearing the outfit of Waldo; in *Güeros*, the failed encounter between Tomás and his idol coincides with the expulsion on the television screen of one of the candidates from the Big Brother-residence. The lines between play and reality in the film become fuzzy, and this brings us to the third procedure: the relativization of the borders of reality and fiction. This last strategy is first of all displayed through the inclusion of graphic and textual materials in the stories of the films. In *Güeros*, the cityscape is divided into different areas; whenever the characters enter a new zone, this is indicated by a close-up of a drawing in which the name of the specific zone is mentioned

Figure 7. Drawings indicate different areas of the cityscape in *Güeros*



(e.g. Center, University Campus...) (figure 7). In *Play*, the credits are inserted in the opening images of the film, and follow the rhythm of the steps of the people walking by. In *Medianeras*, several buildings are depicted twice: as “real” building in the film, and as buildings being drawn and imagined by architects. *Play* even contains a scene of magical realism depicting how Tristán, who is still under the effect of a severe depression, believes he sees a butterfly leaving the mouth of his ex-wife. The most frequent device of relativizing the distinction between reality in fiction, however, is the metalepsis: the deliberate transgression of levels of reality. The clearest example of a metalepsis is provided at the end of Taretto’s film: the hand of an anonymous person selects a site on Youtube, showing Martín and Mariano sing the duet “Ain’t no mountain high enough” in Martín’s apartment (figure 8). When we search for the site on the internet, we notice that it really exists. *Güeros* contains several ironic self-references to the festival circuit, which are already metaleptic, but another, important example can be found in the scene of the failed encounter with the rock star. Indeed, we catch a glimpse of the title of the tape of Epigmenio Cruz’s music, which Tomás had carried along during their collective search for the rock star: the title of the tape coincides with

the title of the Mexican festival film itself: *Güeros*. The distinction between Ruizpalacios, as director of the film, and Epigmenio Cruz, as a character he invented, is blurred. Not surprisingly, the drawings that visually separated the different zones in Mexico City on an extradiegetic level turn out to be similar to the ones that Epigmenio Cruz likes to draw while consuming pulque in his bar.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

In the past few years we have witnessed a strong academic interest in the increased transnational character of Latin American cinema, and particularly in the influence that the circuit of film festivals throughout the world is exerting on the stories told by Latin American filmmakers. This has led to a new discipline, “festival studies”, which has rightfully put the study of the festival circuit on the academic agenda. Until now, however, “festival studies” have approached festival films in a predominantly sociological way. By this I mean that most attention is paid to the way in which festival films are selected, subsidized, screened and distributed through the festival circuit. This article has attempted to offer a somewhat different approach to the festival film, by redirecting attention to the aesthetic dimension and showing

Figure 8. The final Youtube scene in *Medianeras*



the diversity of styles that can be found among these kinds of films. More concretely, I distinguished within the encompassing category of an aesthetics of disaffection, a minimalist variant of festival films, on the one hand, and on the other, a more colorful and playful one. While the minimalist style is already receiving attention in Latin American scholarship on the festival film, the other variant seems to have remained rather unnoticed, in spite of its appearance in many festival films that receive international recognition as well.

Without a doubt, the eleven films I mentioned before passing onto an analysis of three of them are not all completely similar. Films such as *Huacho* or *El cielito*, for instance, are much less self-referential and playful than the three films we have discussed. Nevertheless, all eleven films draw upon the figure of mobility in urban settings, which constitutes a considerable difference with respect to the “slow cinema” that characterizes the first group of films. At the same time, both variants – the minimalist one, and the playful one – center on disaffected characters, which shows in their acting style, the psychological problems they are facing, and even the rather cool and distanced way in which the stories are told. Of course, it is quite possible that other feelings and emotions play a role as well in facilitating the international circulation of these festival films. It is striking, however, that “disaffection” appears as a key emotion (or non-emotion) in many of them, perhaps because it is so clearly different from the strong sentiments that more commercial films draw upon. For this reason, the distinction between festival cinema and *mainstream* cinema should not only depend on stylistic and formalist criteria (which are the ones most often cited in definitions of festival films); it should also take into account the affective and emotional registers which these films imply. This article, then, presents itself as an invitation to further inquire into the affective layers of Latin American cinema, expanding the domain of research from the more commercially

FINALLY, IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO EXAMINE UP TO WHICH POINT THE VARIANT OF THE “AESTHETICS OF DISAFFECTION” DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE IS PART OF A WIDER TRANSFORMATION IN TRANSNATIONAL LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

inspired films and genres such as the melodrama or the horror film, to the less explored domain of the global art cinema and the festival film.

Finally, it would be interesting to examine up to which point the variant of the “aesthetics of disaffection” presented in this article is part of a wider transformation in transnational Latin American cinema. In the same way in which Scherson’s film has been associated with a transformation of Chilean cinema (cf. the label *Novísimos*), *Medianeras* and *Güeros* have both been associated with something new in Argentine and Mexican cinema. The move away from a portrayal of Buenos Aires as “inhuman city” to Buenos Aires as post-human city in *Medianeras* (Page, 2016) and *Güeros*’s break with a minimalist style of filmmaking that had been favored by other Mexican festival filmmakers (Smith, 2015) are two important aspects that have been presented by Latin American scholars as innovative in a broader context. By presenting the three films together, in a synoptic and comparative way, this article has highlighted the transnational character of the aesthetics these films display, as well as the possibly transnational character of the changes with which they have been associated.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 The concept of the festival film is clearly related to the one of “European art cinema”, as defined by Bordwell (2009) and Neale (1981). That said, it is highly problematic to simply transpose the concept of “art cinema” to the Latin American context. As Couret (2018) argues, Latin American cinema maintains a complex relationship with both European and US-cinemas (contrary to the European art cinema of the 1960s, which was basically defined by a dual relationship to the US), and has a tradition of “art cinema” of its own, which even predates the one in Europe.
- 2 Smith’s definition of the festival film is certainly not the only one. For an excellent overview of current definitions, see Falicov (2016). Two more recent contributions to the topic are Muñoz Fernández (2017), who

studies “post-narrative cinema”, and Couret (2018), who coins the term “aesthetics of endurance”. We prefer to draw upon Smith in this article because of the special attention he pays to the aspect of disaffection, as well as the wide currency his definition enjoys in scholarly literature.

- 3 In *Liverpool*, the place name is mentioned on a key-chain which is a gift of the main character to his sister in Ushuaia before his final departure. In *Lake Tahoe*, the title refers to the place which a family was hoping to visit during holidays before the father was killed in an accident. In *Japón*, no explanation for this country is given in the film; in the added materials on the DVD, Reygadas ironically provides several, and often mutually contradictory explanations for the title.
- 4 Podalsky refers to Arjun Appadurai for this notion. Another interesting concept in this context is “detached proximity” (Kathleen Newman); it is used by Podalsky to explain how disaffected characters can still arouse feelings of sympathy in the viewer (2016: 246).
- 5 Cf. “Il ne souhaite plus communiquer, ni échanger, ni se projeter dans le temps, ni même participer au présent, il est sans désir, il n’a rien à dire”.
- 6 Some examples: *Play* received an award at the Montréal World Film Festival (2005) and the IndieLisboa International Independent Film Festival (2006); *Medianeras* won two awards at the Gramado Film Festival in 2011; *Güeros* received no less than five Mexican Ariel-awards in 2015, and was Best First Feature Film at the International Fimfestspiele in Berlin in the same year.
- 7 For a detailed account of the strike, see Moreno & Amador (1999).
- 8 Cf. “Si elle suspend le monde de manière provisoire ou durable, la blancheur est aussi une virtualité infinie, elle est une source de renouvellement même si elle est douloureuse pour soi et pour l’entourage. Elle n’est pas le rien, le vide, mais une autre modalité de l’existence tramée dans la discrétion, la lenteur, l’effacement”.
- 9 For a detailed analysis of the *flânerie* in *Play*, see Barraza Toledo (2012), Wright (2013) and Page & Lie (2016).
- 10 In the opening images of the film *Güeros*, the following definitions are provided: “güero: from *huero* meaning

non-fertilised egg/pale, sickly man. 1. With blond hair (golden or yellowish color); 2. With light skin (short dictionary of Mexicanisms – Academy of Spanish language)”.

- 11 Term introduced by Laura Marks: “While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetic, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality.” (2000: 163).

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THE AESTHETICS OF DISAFFECTION IN THE LATIN AMERICAN FESTIVAL FILM

Abstract

The increasingly transnational character of contemporary Latin American cinema has led to the emergence of new analytical categories for its study. This article centers on the so-called festival film and argues that more attention should be paid to its aesthetic styles. By proposing the concept of “aesthetics of disaffection”, the author summarizes and revises current definitions of the festival film, drawing attention to the affective economies on which festival films rely to reach an international audience. Three films are discussed: *Play* (Alicia Scherson, 2004), *Medianeras* (Gustavo Taretto, 2010), and *Güeros* (Alonso Ruizpalacios, 2015). Being representative of a wider tendency in contemporary Latin American cinema, these three films center on “disaffection” as a key feeling of late modernity, while simultaneously transcending this feeling through a playful and partially anti-realist aesthetics.

Key words

Festival film; Aesthetics; Disaffection; Detachment; Novísimos; Minimalism; Transnationalism.

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LA ESTÉTICA DEL DESAPEGO EN EL CINE DE FESTIVAL LATINOAMERICANO

Resumen

La transnacionalización acelerada del cine latinoamericano contemporáneo ha provocado la aparición de nuevas categorías analíticas para su estudio. Esta contribución se centra en la llamada «película de festival», y la aborda desde la óptica de sus estilos estéticos. Al introducir la noción de la «estética del desapego», el artículo sintetiza definiciones existentes basadas generalmente en características sueltas, realzando las nuevas economías afectivas que implican para llegar al público internacional. Se discuten tres casos que proyectan la «estética del desapego» sobre contextos urbanos: *Play* (Alicia Scherson, 2004), *Medianeras* (Gustavo Taretto, 2010), y *Güeros* (Alonso Ruizpalacios, 2015). Ilustrando una tendencia más amplia en el cine latinoamericano contemporáneo, estas «películas de festival» presentan el desapego como sentimiento típico de la época de la modernidad tardía, trascendiéndolo simultáneamente mediante una estética lúdica y, en parte, antirrealista.

Palabras clave

Película de festival; estética; desapego; Novísimos; minimalismo; transnacionalidad.

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