

FROM THE AESTHETIC OF LATIN AMERICAN HYPER-VIOLENCE TOWARDS A LUMPEN FILM NOIR

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INTRODUCTION

This article is the product of a research project in progress whose purpose is to identify the main aesthetic features of what I define as a film genre that first emerged in the 1990s in Latin American cinema, in parallel with the transformations triggered by the globalising effects of neoliberal modernisation¹ (Harvey, 2007; Klein, 2010; Rojas Villagra, 2015). This genre would be linked to the aesthetic development of the different national versions of New Latin American Cinema, through its aesthetic reformulation of violence. Thus, around the late 1980s and early 1990s, certain filmmakers began developing an aesthetic of hyper-violence based on processes of criminalisation of the Latin American working classes.

The aim of this study is to examine these issues in their aesthetic dimension, i.e., to understand violence not as a social problem whereby cinema operates as a repository of social imagineries in constant transformation, but as a signifier

that enables it to construct its narratives with a social objective. My intention here is not to negate or elide the commitment that these filmmakers made to the Latin American social reality as the inspiration for their productions, but to examine that commitment through a series of aesthetic questions. Specifically, what I propose is to analyse these productions in relation to two key issues of Latin American Cinema: the project of the aesthetic construction of the *new man*, and violence as a specific aesthetic feature of that project and the dialogue this establishes with films produced since the 1990s. On this basis, I will highlight one of the main genre identifiers that justifies the label “Lumpen Film Noir” for these productions. I use the term “genre identifiers” here to refer to elements that appear to be shared by a group of films; paraphrasing Ludwig Wittgenstein, they are the “family resemblances” that sustain cinematic credibility.

The rise in Latin America film theory was directly associated with the appearance of “Cinema

Novo” from the mid-1950s in Brazil, expressed both in films and in a number of institutional initiatives: festivals, publications, and associations which, on the one hand, sought to define a Latin American specificity in a series of manifestos, testing out particular aesthetic forms related to economic precarity and underdevelopment³⁴ what could be defined as a *regional cinematic consciousness*. On the other hand, they also explored the socio-political processes that different Latin American societies were undergoing in search of signs of the construction of the “new man of socialism” constituted by the *sujeito popular* (Gallardo, 1992) or working class subject, a figure that could be defined as the new man’s “minimum aesthetic signifier”. This project was cut short largely by a wave of military dictatorships, the consequent collapse of the revolutionary processes, the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, and the neoliberal socioeconomic transformations in the region (each country with its own peculiarities and specific processes).

The structural violence against these societies was also a symbolic violence against this aesthetic project, and all that survived was a kind of idea that something existed that could be called “Latin American cinema” (it is no coincidence that it was in 1979 that the first edition of the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema took place in Havana), associated with the remains of that physically, discursively and symbolically shattered “working class subject”, aesthetic debris that survived in films and was gradually re-articulated, resulting in what I have provisionally labelled “Lumpen Film Noir”. This is a genre that emerged out of the profound neoliberal transformations to Latin American societies and to the nature of film production itself, which embarked on a search for the aesthetic traces of that *sujeito popular*, a search that differentiates it from other similar practices in the United States, France, Italy, or the United Kingdom. I use film noir here in the broader sense originally given to the concept by the film critic Nino Frank (Simsolo, 2007), further developed by

Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton in their 1955 book *A Panorama of American Film Noir (1941-1953)* (2002), and finally canonised by Paul Schrader in his “Notes on Film Noir” (1972). This broader sense will serve to compare a diverse group of films that place crime in poor or socially marginalised sectors at their narrative axis, in an aesthetic context marked by neoliberal hyper-violence.

LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA, NEOLIBERALISM AND THE CRIMINALISATION OF THE SUJETO POPULAR

What we now understand conceptually as Latin American cinema grew out of socioeconomic processes in certain Latin American countries that prioritised the development of modernising nationalist projects in the middle of the last century. It is worth highlighting that national film industries of varying dimensions were created in the early twentieth century in Mexico, Argentina and Brazil, to name the most developed production centres. However, these different centres did not constitute a coherently regional cinematic project. In the first half of the twentieth century, this burgeoning Latin American production began developing film genres in constant dialogue with the forms produced by the hegemonic centres of Western filmmaking. Of particular note for the purposes of this article is the Argentine film noir of the 1950s, which reinterpreted the aesthetics of the organic process of American films. However, the regional identity that emerged out of the different national versions of New Latin American Cinema took shape in the dying days of these projects, breaking the channels of communication that would otherwise have been able to feed the phenomenon that will be described below.

The regional cinematic consciousness was directly related to the appearance of a series of manifestos and texts that conceived of a political aesthetic of cinema in the context of economic underdevelopment: Fernando Birri’s “Cinema and

Underdevelopment" (1998), first published in 1962, Glauber Rocha's "Aesthetics of Hunger" (2004), published in 1965, Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas' "Towards a Third Cinema" (2010) published in 1969, and Julio García Espinosa's "For an Imperfect Cinema" (2010), published in 1969, all represented a movement that found full expression in the Viña del Mar Film Festival in Chile of 1969, the only edition of this event that had a truly regional scope. Its precursor was the first Latin American Filmmakers' Encounter in Montevideo, Uruguay in 1958, at which the Latin American Association of Independent Filmmakers (ALACI) was created. These were ideas that developed in the context of dependency theory (Cardoso and Faletto, 1969; Sunkel and Paz, 1975; Frank, 1976; Marini, 1977) and the "philosophy of liberation" (Ardiles et al., 1973; Dussel, 1996), and in parallel with the people's movements, guerrilla groups and student rebellions that swept the region, along with the general theories of Frantz Fanon (1983).²

This proposal placed two issues at the heart of the debate. The first was how to consider underdevelopment aesthetically from a materialist perspective: the material conditions of existence could not be separated from the aesthetic forms that these societies should be projecting on their screens, as a direct criticism of the evolution of cinema in Latin American countries, which until then had attempted to emulate the forms of studio production with Hollywood as their model. The second was how to identify in the signs of the present—within this aesthetic of underdevelop-

ment—the political program for the social transformation that Latin American societies were undergoing; what narratives, sensibilities and discourses could guide the process of social and/or revolutionary transformation on the audiovisual level; as the Manifesto of the Popular Unity Filmmakers declares: "we understand revolutionary art to be that which is born out of the joint production of the artist and the people united by a common objective: liberation. One, the people, as motivator of the action and essentially the creator, and the other, the filmmaker, as their instrument of communication" (Mouesca, 1988: 71). And the subject of history that would construct the "new man of Latin American socialism" imagined by Che Guevara (1977) was contained in the concept of the *sujeito popular*.

The concept of the working class subject in Latin America, read first from Marxist and later from culturalist perspectives, refers to the configuration of a specific historical subject produced by the hybrid forms of colonial-imperial modernisation in Latin American societies, who possesses the revolutionary capacity to overcome capitalism (according to the Marxist approach) and/or a shared symbolic imaginary (according to the culturalist approach). This *sujeito popular* is not synonymous with the European notion of the working class, but fuses a working class that is not fully developed and a peasant class that has seen deficient rural industrialisation into a single revolutionary consciousness. The objective and historical imperative of the *sujeito popular* was the construction of the "new man" (Pérez, 2003). However, the definition of the working class has not been monolithic in the Latin American context, nor has it been the property of a specific discipline or a particular place on the political spectrum. Its status as a multiple signifier has allowed it to be re-signified, shifting from a kind of romanticism of the agrarian-traditional to the minimal cultural condition that guarantees social *racialis-*tion, and finally to the abstract subject that gives

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symbolic identity to a nation-State with a populist bent (García-Canclini, 2004), a concept that was the subject of constant debate throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in Latin America.

Since the military dictatorships of the 1960s and the widespread reaction of the conservative and liberal political classes throughout the region, Latin American societies have progressed through a violent restructuring which, with the exception of Brazil and to a certain extent Mexico, has precipitated the dismantling of all signs of developmentalist modernisation with the implementation of a neoliberal capitalist socioeconomic program (Rojas Villagra, 2015). Many of the filmmakers who embraced this political-aesthetic project in dictatorial contexts were exiled; in the case of Brazil, some adapted to the situation of an industry that was centralised and controlled by the dictatorship, while others found a place in Cuba, and in some cases Mexico, to continue pursuing the project of a regional identity (Schumann, 1987).

Among the wide spectrum of processes associated with the transformations to Latin American societies that have been described in recent years on a global scale by David Harvey (2007) and Naomi Klein (2010), of particular interest for this study is the phenomenon that Zygmunt Bauman has linked directly to the development of post-modernity in its neoliberal phase: the criminalisation of the working class, which has been a central element in the rise of consumer capitalism. The Latin American working classes have undergone an intense process of criminalisation, transforming them into the inner demons of neoliberalism trapped in the prison industry. In other words, they are symptomatic of a deregulated and privatised society that has transformed them into something like defective consumers who, while being segregated in ghettos and criminalised in political-media discourses, pursue the forms of social validation offered by the consumer culture through criminal activity. In this way, "[t]he cri-

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minalized margins serve as *soi-disant* tools of sanitation: the sewers into which the inevitable but poisonous effluvia of consumerist seduction are drained off" (Bauman, 2007: 39).

Along with the structural violence of the Latin American dictatorships and the neoliberalism they have introduced into the social fabric of the working classes and the State, this emergence of a privatised and privative modernity founded on the individualisation of social relations also directly affected the models of film production in Latin America. The production structures associated with the import substitution model were violently transformed, and since the mid-1990s have given way to a complex process of regional co-productions, given full expression in the IBERMEDIA program. This process was an organic by-product of the widespread transnationalisation and denationalisation of production around the world (Durovicová and Newman, 2009).

THE SIGNIFIER OF VIOLENCE IN NEW LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

The different varieties of New Latin American Cinema articulated a representational structural violence that was expressed in the ideas of Rocha, who depicted the working class subject eating dirt and roots, stealing, killing, and fleeing; miserable characters inhabiting dark, dirty and ugly spaces: "only a culture of hunger, drenched in its own structures, can take a qualitative leap. And the noblest cultural manifestation of hunger is violence" (Rocha, 2004: 54). Only in forms of violence could

the mental and symbolic scheme of colonised and coloniser be broken. Rocha thus did not conceive of it as an early or revolutionary stage of development, but as the very *essence* of Latin American life; violence is the aesthetic form of hunger and, consequently, it is the aesthetic form of the truth about Latin America, which could be summed up in the equation: *hunger plus violence*. Therefore, for Rocha, *Cinema Novo* renounces all forms of melodrama, because hunger does not allow for love, but instead leads everything systematically to doom or destruction.

VIOLENCE IS THE AESTHETIC FORM OF HUNGER AND, CONSEQUENTLY, IT IS THE AESTHETIC FORM OF THE TRUTH ABOUT LATIN AMERICA

Violence is also found in the aesthetic negativity posited by Birri as the duty of the Latin American documentary filmmaker, a potential expression of development for a culture of underdevelopment, an *under-cinema* that is the product of an *underbelly* resulting from nationalism and imperialism, which at the same time had to extol the revolutionary consciousness of the *sujeto popular*, positively appraising the strengths, achievements, joys, struggles and dreams of the working class in order to disturb, frighten and weaken the reactionary consciousness that imposed its cultural hegemony through Latin America's oligarchies. It is the violence of denial of those unrealistic aesthetics of commercial cinema that were assumed to be synonymous with popular culture and with those elitist forms classified under the "cult film" trope. For Birri, it was the violence of the *under-reality* of underdevelopment that would break away from the complicit models of representation that were bandied about as the expression of Latin American national film styles. And this reality of underdevelopment was also what conditioned

the aesthetic forms of structural poverty in Latin American societies (Birri, 1998).

These forms had to be the result of the revolutionary consciousness to create a cinematic model made by the masses and not for the masses, films made by the people and not to enlighten the people. Julio García Espinosa thus proposed that the subject of art should not be the neurotic, but—quoting Rocha—the lucid. Art should not be synonymous with a sick, suffering individual who uses it as a pretext for his or her personal psychological healing, which would essentially be the clinical expression of "art for art's sake". The subject of art had to be the fighters, and art itself needed to be transformed into a weapon for the identification of real social conflicts. For García Espinosa, "a film which denounces those who struggle against the evil deeds of an official who should be executed would be an excellent example of this kind of film-denunciation" (García Espinosa, 2010: n.p.). Thus, the imperfect also attacks the aesthetic canons of *quality* imposed by commercial cinema and also by the "cult film"; imperfect cinema needed to be transferred horizontally across all film genres³—fiction, documentary, animation, and experimental⁴—regardless of format or style, as it was simply a vehicle for transformation.

The violence of the imperfect crystallised into the potential of Getino and Solanas' Third Cinema (a series of ideas typed out and passed around by hand at the Viña del Mar Festival in 1969), where the frontiers of Latin American identity would open up to forms of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle in different parts of the world, a struggle that steered clear of the single polarity between the USSR and the USA. This was a cinema of subversion against the dominant poles, *by and for us*, as Getino and Solanas proposed: "I make revolution, therefore I am. From this point, fantasy and phantom dissolve to give way to the living man. The construction of a throbbing, living reality, recovering the truth in any of its expressions" (Getino and Solanas, 2010: n.p.). The

phantoms and fantasies, those fictions, languages in code, signs and whispered messages, emerged from the neo-colonialism of Western capitalism led by Hollywood. Only the revolutionary destruction of the images would make the construction of the “new man” and liberation possible.

The cinema-action of Third Cinema was underpinned entirely by a faith in reality, in the richness of its dialectical contradictions, in the throbbing violence of the revolutionary potential of the masses, in the forms of the pamphlet, the instructional, the report, or the essay, in the degree to which activism could be articulated in the metaphors of images, in an effect of linguistic experimentation and montage that renounced testimony or mere communication. The renunciation of the bourgeois forms of fantasy and their theorists would break the inhibitions of colonised filmmakers. This guerrilla filmmaking practice would involve the proletarianisation of the filmmaker, in the aesthetic tool of the militants and commanders of the people; thus, they argue: “the camera is the tireless expropriator of munition-images; the projector is a weapon capable of firing 24 frames a second” (Getino and Solanas, 2010: n.p.).

CINEMATIC HYPER-VIOLENCE

Christian León was one of the first to attempt a regional systematisation of filmmaking practices centred on themes of crime under the concept of *cine de la marginalidad* (“cinema of marginalisation”), which reveals “a continuous transubstantiation of the topological polarities that compose every story: the private and the public, the home and the street, the family and the gang, the citizen and the criminal, the moral and the immoral. Marginalisation is thus represented as the production of a visuality that exposes the mechanisms of exclusion, based on which social institutions are internally structured” (2005: 14). From this perspective, cinema becomes a repository for forms of exclusion, a mirror of the strategies for

criminalising the working classes. However, León does not explore the configuration of the forms of an aesthetic as a theoretical problem related to the evolution of Latin American cinema, precisely where the symbolic frameworks in the narratives that imagine them are connected. In other words, it does not identify this shift that can establish a bridge of continuity and discontinuity, the transmutations of the aesthetic forms that cinema uses to imagine/suffers the social through a representationally ambiguous relationship with reality.

Recently, Andrés Vélez Cuervo has tracked the development of a film noir movement in Colombian cinema since the year 2000 as a reflection of the social violence that has afflicted Colombia since the mid-20th century, constituting a theme-product of “a [social] scar [of violence], of a mere trace of something that healed and did not just leave an anti-aesthetic and bothersome mark, but an unhealed wound that opens time and again with new infectious manifestations” (2015: 84). Meanwhile, Claudio Salinas Muñoz (2015) has offered a reading of a significant number of these productions on the basis of the cultural foundation of Latin American melodrama (Martín-Barbero, 1998), exposing the relationships between marginalisation, violence and the breakdown of the social fabric, where violence is related to a basic scheme of emotions: fear, enthusiasm, shame and laughter, through which the working class culture produces, appropriates and re-signifies the socio-existential conflicts of living in a capitalist world. In Salinas Muñoz’s reading, hyper-violence could not be separated from this basic scheme of recognition to effectively account for the structural transformations of Latin American societies. Violence would thus be an organic way of inhabiting what are referred to as the “melodramatic cities”.

Following this line of thought, Carlos Ossa has suggested a possible transition between the political cinema of the 1960s and 1970s and the forms of Lumpen Film Noir. “The visual politics of

WHERE VIOLENCE IS RELATED TO A BASIC SCHEME OF EMOTIONS: FEAR, ENTHUSIASM, SHAME AND LAUGHTER, THROUGH WHICH THE WORKING CLASS CULTURE PRODUCES, APPROPRIATES AND RE-SIGNIFIES THE SOCIO-EXISTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF LIVING IN A CAPITALIST WORLD

Largo Viaje [A Long Journey] (1967), *Las banderas del pueblo* [The Flags of the People] (1964), *Valparaíso, mi amor* [Valparaíso, My Love] (1969), and *El zapato chino* [The Chinese Shoe] (1979) could be accused of being *costumbrista*, philanthropic, or sociological, and yet they describe the brutality that modernisation has unleashed upon the marginalised and give the films mentioned a place in the action model. Meanwhile, *Mundo grúa* [Crane World] (1999), *Pizza, birra y faso* [Pizza, Beer, and Cigarettes] (1998), *Bolivia* (2001), and *El bonaerense* (2002) testify to the deterioration of the humanist view, proposing a dirty realism in which the marginalised run in circles around themselves and their defeat, as is characteristic of the model of powerlessness" (2013: 133). Notable here is the idea of connecting two corpora of films that at first glance do not seem to share anything other than the object of their gaze: in this case, the Latin American working classes.

Using a semiotic model, Stephen Prince (2003) made a classification of two types of violence in Hollywood cinema from 1930 to 1968, depending on its forms, duration and intensity, in a model that would enable us to identify directly how they fit into the narrative structures: whether they operate within a causal justification of the events, are the results of a struggle between good and evil, or are required by the type of genre, among other possibilities. This model has been reformulated by Lauro Zavala, who argues that there is a substantial difference between the ultra-violence

that he associates with modern cinema and the hyper-violence that he associates with post-modern cinema: ultra-violence is part of the gratuitous nature of the violent acts, articulated as a significant excess within the narrative framework in the construction of a style, while hyper-violence is presented as an ironic hyperbole towards the dramatic and the cruel that ultimately neutralises the violence in its own signifying depiction, thereby neutralising its shock effect as well (2012: 6-8). Both authors thus approach the question from a very different perspective from that of Olivier Mongin, who attempts to pick apart the discursive pretext inhabited by the space of representation outside the materiality of things: "whether or not it is considered the unexpected manifestation of a 'never seen', the violence on the screen is understood spontaneously as a phenomenon that only affects the order of representation and of fiction, as if the historical evolution of our society had very little to do with them" (Mongin, 1999: 15).

From the perspective of Prince and Zavala, violence is developed as a signifier and not as an ethical/moral effect of the discourse of the narrative, and it allows us to conceive of this signifier precisely as a substantial part of the construction of Lumpen Film Noir, which has made use of this hyper-violence to redevelop the *hunger plus violence* equation of New Latin American Cinema: a cinema which, in its quest to construct social narratives, has ended up spectacularising the structural marginalisation of the neoliberal social transformations that have turned the working class social fabric into a space of shattered remains as a result of the social prison industry.

**LUMPEN FILM NOIR:
GODS, DOGS, AND ASSASSINS**

Since the 1990s, there have been an increasing number of films that place the Latin American crime world at their centre. Among these are the Chilean films *Caluga o menta* [Candy or Mint]

(Gonzalo Justiniano, 1990), *Johnny 100 Pesos* (Gustavo Graef-Marino, 1993), *Cielo ciego* [Blind Sky] (Nicolás Acuña, 1998), *Paraíso B* [Paradise B] (Nicolás Acuña, 2003), *Taxi para tres* [A Cab for Three] (Orlando Lübbert, 2001), *Los debutantes* [The Debutantes] (Andrés Waissbluth, 2003), and *Mala leche* (León Errázuriz, 2004), the Brazilian-French co-production *Cidade de Deus* [City of God] (Fernando Meirelles and Katia Lund, 2002), the Brazilian-Argentine film *Carandiru* (Héctor Babenco, 2003), the Brazilian films *Elite Squad* (Tropa de Elite, José Padilha, 2007) and *Elite Squad: The Enemy Within* (Tropa de Elite 2: O Inimigo Agora é Outro, José Padilha, 2010), the French-Brazilian picture *Madame Satã* (Karim Aïnou, 2003), the Mexican productions *Amores perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000), *Herod's Law* (La Ley de Herodes, Luis Estrada, 1999) and *El infierno* [Hell] (Luis Estrada, 2010), and *Miss Bala* (Gerardo Naranjo, 2011), and the Mexican-US co-production *Sin Nombre* (Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2009). To these we could add the Colombian-Spanish-French co-production *La virgen de los sicarios* [Our Lady of the Assassins] (Barbet Schroeder, 1999), the Colombian-US film *Maria Full of Grace* (Maria, llena eres de gracia, Joshua Marston, 2004), the Colombian-Mexican production *Rosario Tijeras* (Emilio Maillé, 2005), and the Colombian film *Rodrigo D.: No Future* (Rodrigo D: No futuro, Víctor Gaviria, 1990). Other titles include the Ecuadoran *Ratas, ratones, rateros* [Rats, Mice, Thieves] (Sebastián Cordero, 1999), the Argentine film *Pizza, birra, faso* (Bruno Stagnaro and Adrián Caetano, 1998), and the Argentine-Spanish-French co-production *Un oso rojo* [A Red Bear] (Adrián Caetano, 2002).

The labels for films like these differ depending on their country of origin: in Brazil, they have been called *cine negro afavelado*; in Chile, *cine negro callampa* or *cine negro poblacional*; in Mexico, *cine negro de la vecindad* or *narco-cine*; in Colombia, *cine negro sicario*; in Argentina, *cine negro villero*, etc. However, I would argue that the concept of the “lumpen”, in addition to labelling the

space of social marginalisation, renders visible a political dimension which was at the heart of the debates over the international working class—in which the *lumpenproletariat* fulfilled a function of structural social violence against forms of bourgeois domination, as a systemic symptom of its hegemony and, therefore, part of the process of working class consciousness—and which these filmmakers seek to depict, to give a political-social dimension to the overall discourse of their films. Nevertheless, the socio-political context is absent in the narratives of the films analysed here, so that the representation of the *sujeto popular* emerges as an anachronistic and over-stylised signifier of the former social fabric of the “working class” that fought for historicity, a kind of aesthetic fossil of Guevara’s now long-gone “new man of socialism”.

One way of defining film genres is through Wittgenstein’s concept of “family resemblances” (2008), which posits a view of relationships between a series of concepts, phrases, sentences and words that are read as part of the same class of objects, issues or concepts and not in their etymological essence. Film genres fit into this concept well, as they are constructed on the basis of the possible relationships between different films and audiovisual pieces without this necessarily meaning that they all share exactly the same features. For example, three or more films may not fully share any of the same features, but film A shares two characteristics with film B, but at the same time film B shares another two with film C that they do not share with film A, while A and C share one that is not found in B. We may thus develop an additive categorisation that makes it possible to link together all the features expressed and identify the “family resemblances” of this group, thereby leading to the identification of a genre.

In more general terms, it is possible to determine certain elements that establish these “family resemblances” in Latin American Lumpen Film Noir: 1) a shared referential or contextual world: Latin American spaces of social marginalisation;

2) a particular form of aesthetic treatment of this contextual world: the spectacularisation of violence; 3) a basic narrative ritual or scheme: a denouement that condemns the characters, who cannot escape the circle of criminality; and 4) an aesthetic-object *fetishisation* in psychoanalytical terms: firearms or drug use. Based on these, I have developed a set of genre identifiers that make it possible to define the differential core in relation to films from other regions that work with similar themes and referential worlds.

The most important of these genre identifiers is the “promise of salvation”, which is directly linked to the political-social ideology inherited from the different versions of New Latin American Cinema and which serves to support the aesthetic reformulation of the *hunger plus violence* equation. This entails a narrative moment in which the characters have the chance to escape the space of social condemnation. In some cases, it is a plan concocted by the characters themselves to break out of their ordinary lives, a plan that usually depends on a criminal act, and that is specifically associated with amorous relationships that become the narrative centre of the melodrama. In other cases, it is the emotional balance that holds back the contextual forces of condemnation, usually the presence of a relative or a circle of friends, which constrains the destructive force of the main characters. The “promise of salvation” projects a future scenario in which the conflicts of the present are eliminated, in a kind of individual utopia.

One example of the “promise of salvation” can be found in the story of Octavio (Gael García Ber-

nal) and his Rottweiler dog, Cofi, in *Amores perros*. This young man, who balances on the tightrope of precarity in Mexico City, comes up with a plan to use dog-fighting as his ticket out of poverty, and he hopes to take Susana (Vanessa Bauche) with him. Susana, meanwhile, is in an abusive relationship with Octavio’s elder brother, Ramiro (Marco Pérez), a violent youth who robs banks to support his wife and son. Both Octavio and Ramiro engage in illegal activity in an effort to change their lives, but the difference between them lies in the fact that Octavio is pursuing the promise of salvation in the hope of building a better life for himself, Susana and her son in Ciudad Juárez.² The difference is marginal but substantial on the narrative level, because it is articulated in the melodramatic framework of Latin American narratives, as Claudio Salinas Muñoz has suggested: Octavio is morally superior to his brother in emotional terms, even though both want to provide Susana and her child with material support.

Fulfilling the same role, albeit in a different way, is the character of Bené (Phellipe Haagen-sen) in *Cidade de Deus*, one of the young drug dealers who controls a *favela* in Rio de Janeiro, in the early stages of intense processes of segregation, criminalisation and social precarisation of vast sectors of Rio society in the 1980s. Bené, together with Zé Pequenho (Leandro Firmino), inherits control of criminal activity in the *favela* from the “Tender Trio”, the gang that had previously governed the neighbourhood in the 1970s, and who established a stable community parallel to the State, bringing about a period of peace for the local residents thanks to the gang’s control of all internal trade and weapons. The two men have a relationship of absolute fidelity that is almost amorous, and only Bené is able to control Zé Pequenho’s violent impulses. In this way, Bené is established as the agent of humanisation, the emotional pillar that allows the community of criminals to prosper and to prove themselves to the larger community of the *favela*. This balance will be broken when Bené

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begins a romantic relationship with Angélica (Alice Braga), at which point he decides to leave the *favela* in search of a better life. Hence comes the moment when the emotional bond between Bené and Zé Pequenho is undermined and the control they hold over the *favela* begins to crumble, as other gangs looking to seize power move in. Tensions escalate to the point where Bené ends up being killed and the neighbourhood descends into a maelstrom of criminal violence, as Zé Pequenho not only wants vengeance, but also seeks to consolidate his power inside the *favela* by militarising his drug gang. While Bené was present, he represented a chance of criminal redemption that was also based on his moral superiority.

La virgen de los sicarios takes quite a different approach to this idea of an emotional bond as a vehicle for salvation and, at the same time, it more obviously exposes the betrayal of the Latin American revolutionary promise: in this case, the bond is the romantic relationship between Fernando (played by Germán Jaramillo), a writer who has returned to Medellín from Europe, and Alexis (played by Anderson Ballesteros), a 16 year-old boy who belongs to a gang of hitmen that was recently almost wiped out, and who has a price on his head. If we consider it in Marxist terms, their relationship is a metaphor for the pact between the progressive or left-leaning petit bourgeois intellectual class and the Latin American working class subject. From this perspective, the film offers two readings on the same relationship: the first is the modern ideological reading represented by Fernando, who tries to awaken Alexis' self-awareness; the second is represented in Alexis' exploitation of Fernando to improve his hand-to-mouth existence. The promise of salvation is expressed in the plan to leave Medellín in order to pursue their relationship far away from the dangers that Alexis faces. In the end, the plan cannot be carried out because Alexis is murdered by the rival gang of killers, at which point Fernando tries to repeat

the romantic experiment with another teenager, who also ends up dead.

In all three films we find that the "promise of salvation" shapes an affective core of episodic consciousness in the characters, who manage a partial understanding of the social fate to which they are condemned—i.e., their material conditions of existence in a context of extreme social segregation—and in response concoct an escape plan. However, within the narrative they fail to grasp the social and structural complexity in which they live, where the relationships of subjection are never fully understood or made clear. Read in this way, the intellectual in *La virgen de los sicarios* does not even help Alexis to understand that salvation cannot be attained individually; this is expressed, for example, in the gift of the washing machine, which Fernando at first doesn't want to buy, as he believes that Alexis may be exploiting their amorous relationship, while Alexis is thinking that this object could improve his mother's material living conditions. In the end, the crisis is triggered by this gift, because it is when Alexis takes it to his mother that he is trapped by the rival gang and killed. The libidinous desire for consumer goods—Fernando gives Alexis a series of gifts during their relationship—is related to the structure of social criminalisation.

IN ALL THREE FILMS WE FIND THAT THE "PROMISE OF SALVATION" SHAPES AN AFFECTIVE CORE OF EPISODIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE CHARACTERS, WHO MANAGE A PARTIAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE SOCIAL FATE TO WHICH THEY ARE CONDEMNED— I.E., THEIR MATERIAL CONDITIONS OF EXISTENCE IN A CONTEXT OF EXTREME SOCIAL SEGREGATION—AND IN RESPONSE CONCOCT AN ESCAPE PLAN

The key element is that all these characters are trapped in the logic of a market of death. Their strategies to survive, or even to find social salvation, are not substantially differentiated from the logic of the market society that has created the structures for their criminalisation. To put it bluntly, none of these characters will become a social activist or reclaim the old structures of the modern State: education, for example, as a means of escaping the “virtuous” circle of criminal violence. This is because the narrative development of salvation will focus on the extraordinary powers of one or two individuals in a specific social context. It is the independent individual who can escape, as the past does not condemn them: for example, Buscapé (Alexandre Rodrigues), the young amateur photographer in *Cidade de Deus*, who was never directly involved in criminal activity but took advantage of his proximity to photograph them and make the front page of the newspapers.

The “promise of salvation” necessarily ends in tragedy. The structural violence of the criminal world, in the everyday life characteristic of a *hyperindividualised* world subject to the rules of competition in a merciless market, always thwarts the characters’ chances of redemption, along with any chance of transformation of the social context itself. It is impossible for them to escape their own doom, because according to one of the popular maxims of film noir, “the past always condemns you”, or “the past always catches up with you.” This tragedy thus exposes the impossible nature of building and reformulating the signifier of the “new man” as a subject conscious of his own material conditions of existence and as a revolutionary promise to rise above underdevelopment; in the end, all that emerges is the wreckage of the Latin American *sujeto popular*.

In conclusion, what we find in these films is a reformulation of the aesthetic project of Latin American New Cinema: *hunger plus violence*, which offers an image of what remains of the *sujeto popular* in urban landscapes resulting from

the neoliberal transformations to Latin American societies, constructing in that image an aesthetic of hyper-violence as a driving force for a cinematic form which, by accumulation, has come to constitute a film genre that finds its “natural” exhibition space in the global production networks of the contemporary transnationalisation of cinema. ■

NOTES

- 1 Fondecyt Post-doctoral project, Chile, No. 3170198 (2017-2019).
- 2 Paulo Antonio Paranagua (2003) has questioned this project of a regional identity in a region with film industries as diverse as those of Latin America.
- 3 It is paradoxical that the screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga and Alejandro González Iñárritu should have chosen Ciudad Juárez as the space of salvation for the couple, when in the *extra-cinematic* reality this city has been home to the largest number of systematic disappearances of women in modern Mexican history, a reality exposed in Lourdes Portillo’s documentary *Señorita extraviada* (2001). It is likely that the reference to this city was intended to convey the idea to the Mexican audience that the characters would be on their way to the United States, given that Ciudad Juárez is located on the border opposite El Paso, Texas.

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THE LATIN-AMERICAN HYPER-VIOLENCE AESTHETIC TOWARDS CINEMA LUMPEN NOIR

Abstract

In the corpus of what we still refer to as Latin American cinema, a significant group of films have focused on stories about the Latin American crime world. Among these are *La virgen de los sicarios* (1999), *Amores perros* (2000) and *Cidade de Deus* (2002). Such productions have become increasingly common since the 1990s, coinciding with the final stage of neoliberal capitalist modernisation. These films have generally been analysed from a "cinema and society" perspective, i.e., exploring how they have reflected the processes of criminalisation of the working class subject and the socioeconomic transformations in Latin America (for example, in the work of Christian León or Andrés Vélaz Cuervo). Conversely, this article examines them in terms of their aesthetic dimension, to show how they have developed a film genre that is unique to Latin American cinema, in dialogue with the social focus of the so-called Latin American New Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s.

Key words

Neoliberalism; Latin American working class subject; Latin American cinema; Aesthetic hyper-violence; Film genre; Lumpen Film Noir.

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DE LA ESTÉTICA DE LA HÍPER-VIOLENCIA LATINOAMERICANA HACIA UN CINE NEGRO LUMPEN

Resumen

En el corpus de lo que aún entendemos por cine latinoamericano, un grupo importante de películas se ha centrado en generar narrativas del mundo delincriminal latinoamericano. Por ejemplo, *La virgen de los sicarios* (1999), *Amores perros* (2000) o *Ciudad de Dios* (2002). Estas producciones aumentaron a partir de los años noventa, coincidiendo con el último proceso de modernización capitalista neoliberal. Estas producciones generalmente han sido trabajadas desde el enfoque cine y sociedad, es decir, observando cómo han sido huellas de los procesos de criminalización del sujeto popular y las transformaciones socioeconómicas latinoamericanas —por ejemplo, en el trabajo de Christian León o Andrés Vélaz Cuervo—. Por el contrario, en este artículo se las interroga a partir de su dimensión estética, para mostrar cómo estas han devenido en un género cinematográfico propio del cine latinoamericano, en diálogo con el cine social del llamado Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano de los años sesenta y setenta.

Palabras clave

Neoliberalismo; sujeto popular latinoamericano; cine latinoamericano; hiper-violencia estética; géneros cinematográficos; Cine Negro Lumpen.

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