Editors’ introduction

The significance of technological change has been a central issue of Latin American film scholarship, evident in accounts of cinema’s earliest years (see Navitski, Chapter 2 and Cuarterolo, Chapter 19), as well as those dealing with the repercussions of television (see Cerdán and Fernández Labayen, Chapter 23) and, most recently, of digital technologies. Such interrogations often entail two interrelated questions: (i) What do technical innovations mean for audiovisual production and circulation within the region? (ii) What (if anything) distinguishes those transformations within Latin American from analogous shifts occurring elsewhere in the world?

In this chapter, Gonzalo Aguilar and Mariana Lacunza respond to those queries, in part by showcasing how professional filmmakers in Chile and Bolivia utilize digital capture to turn their attention to the contemporary reconfiguration of collectivities and subjectivities. Lacunza detects a similar tendency in the work of TAFA, a filmmaking collective whose efforts provide an interesting counterpoint to the audiovisual productions by indigenous and community-based organizations discussed by the authors in Chapter 14.

Even as the authors recognize the opportunities made possible by digital technologies, their contributions caution us against viewing the new horizon as the realization of Julio García Espinosa’s dream of audiovisual production as a truly democratic practice. The economic and geopolitical frameworks that always have influenced regional media industries are still present. Niamh Thornton’s contribution reminds us that even as (certain) Latin American producers have forged agreements with Netflix and other online platforms, the circulation of Latin American films is still constrained.

Since the early 2000s, digital technologies have transformed motion picture production, distribution, and reception worldwide. Unlike other technological innovations, which have been slow to be incorporated in Latin America, the so-called “digital revolution”
arrived quickly to the region and became an essential part of film culture. Digital filmmaking inspired and empowered a generation of younger filmmakers by providing them low-cost access to the means of quality film production. In Mexico, for instance, much of the art house cinema of filmmakers such as Carlos Reygadas, Michel Franco, and Nicolás Pereda has been produced by low-budget digital technology and widely distributed through the Internet. With the advent of streaming, film viewing has become increasingly mobile; instead of being tied to public exhibition venues or domestic spaces, spectators can now watch films on their cell phones while traveling on the subway.

While suggesting a new golden age for film production and consumption, scholars, film historians, and social commentators have been moved to reflect on the political, social, and aesthetic impact of the rapid dispersion of digital technologies across all aspects of audiovisual culture in the region. This chapter provides three interrogations of the implications of digital transformation of film culture. Gonzalo Aguilars takes the long view by placing the digital within a much wider context of radical transformations in human perception linked to capitalist imperatives and the reconfiguration of the political. In particular, he examines the impact of digital technologies on the politics of representation, by interrogating how contemporary Chilean filmmakers deploy the digital to reject the notion of a collective subject: “el pueblo.” Mariana Lacunza analyzes the impact on production in a small national cinema, that of Bolivia, by tracking the differential uses of digital technologies by young auteurs, new documentarians, and community-based collectives. Her contribution places particular attention on the ways in which all of those filmmakers take advantage of the aesthetic possibilities of the digital format. Finally, Niamh Thornton, considering the underlying politics of the image–culture relationship first raised by Aguilars, looks at the digital technologies involved in online streaming. She focuses on the “curatorial” role of online commercial providers who serve as gatekeepers circumscribing viewers’ access to films. In so doing, she exposes the underlying geopolitics of the digital, a theme that, as Lacunza demonstrates in the case of Bolivian filmmaking, continues to have ramifications for small and presumed peripheral film cultures.

Analogue pueblo/digital pueblo: the contemporary image confronts today’s politics

GONZALO AGUILAR

In critiquing the notion of representation, I want to argue that film is a technological apparatus that produces a people, rather than one that simply makes them visible as seemed to be the case in the Latin American cinemas of the 1960s. Since the 1980s, cinema’s interface with politics has changed given the increased power of television. In order to better understand this new logic, we must acknowledge two points of departure. First, we must forgo a more traditional notion of film in favor of a more capacious object of study: the circulation of images, which spurred the conceptualization of what I have called elsewhere the “bioimage,” a notion directly tied to the impact of digital technologies:

The desperate proliferation of biopics (Leonardo DiCaprio is growing out his beard in preparation for his latest role as Lenin) is a traumatic, digressive response to that ambivalent desire to link together the image with the real and the living. Reality shows (in which everyday life is captured to allow its protagonists to live through the image), the biodrama, the boom of the documentary and diverse home
movies that circulate on the internet – indeed, our coexistence with the internet’s ever-available flow of images of everyday life, or momentous events such as birth and death, are no longer fictional, but full of life. In this context, first-person and even third-person accounts are nothing less than a struggle by live organisms to leave behind a trace or mark: the camera itself is transformed into an organism or prosthesis because life doesn’t exist outside the image.

(Aguilar 2015: 77–78)

This leads to my second point, about the transformations wrought by digital production. One of the most successful recent films in Argentina, *El secreto de sus ojos* (*The Secret in Their Eyes*, Juan José Campanella, 2009) includes a sequence shot that opens in a packed soccer stadium and ends with a police chase. Filmed with a Red One digital camera, the sequence depends upon digital effects that go beyond the usual color corrections or image adjustments. The filmmakers did not merely erase particular objects, but also created digital multitudes: 42,000 soccer fans that appeared as real as those shown on the nightly newscast (Messuti 2016: 49).

Does that mean that there is a digital “pueblo”? Or that digital technologies “create” new groupings, and allow for the circulation on the Internet of collectivities and community networks that have not yet defined themselves, making rhizomatic connections that have not yet been consolidated? Are we witnessing a struggle between such rhizomatic interfaces and the huge, arboreal corporations that oblige us to navigate through Google, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter? How does the digital image influence the new ways in which politics are constituted? And finally, how does the cinematic gaze manifest itself in postglobal capitalism and shape politics? What new nodal points can the cinema forge and how might it invent other circuitries that produce alternatives, resistances, and counter-narratives?

I want to amplify the scope of these questions by focusing on Jonathan Beller’s argument in the *Cinematic Mode of Production* (2006), when he posits a reading of the “gaze” as a mode of production in capitalism. His book speaks of the gaze in filmic terms; here, I want to address this concept more broadly in terms of our everyday habits. Academics and other adult professionals generally sit in front of the computer screen to work, but this labor has unique features; it is conjoined with moments of distraction, as we surf the Net according to our eyes’ journeys that themselves participate in the reproduction of economic value: publicity flyers, posts that are little more than paid ads, trolls employed by a company or a political party, links that take us to sites asking us for our credit card numbers. On our screens, numerous smaller boxes vie for our attention and encourage us to click, a type of new coin that once again demonstrates the triumph of the optic over the haptic.

If we were to trace a genealogy of the gaze as capitalist hieroglyph, there would be a first qualitative leap with the appearance of broadcasting and the network era of radio and television that programmed our consumption but also entered our homes, producing a crisis between the intimacy of private life and the performativity of public life. This cohabitation with images (seen on television as we eat, before we go to bed, together with our families) comes close, according to Hannah Arendt’s celebrated formula, to labor (i.e. necessity) more than to work (Arendt 2005: 98–106).

In another qualitative leap in the history of the gaze as merchandise, the Internet made home-based work grow, and this can be verified in the acquisition of communications devices (most notably, starting with 3D printers). Work on the computer is mixed together in an intrinsic way with the eye’s labor, a process whereby an act of production can slide easily into leisure. In the process of sending an email, a quick glance at our inbox allows us to take in the ads showcased on the sides of the screen.
The commercialization of the act of looking becomes more associated with consumption than with production. But it comes at a cost, just like the banners on our computer screens. In other words, rather than being tied to an apparatus of production, our gaze is trapped in the world of consumption, becoming our point of access to global capitalism. The means to get our attention, to detain our eye on the image, have reached a paroxysm with cellular devices. But more than anything else, we hold in our hand a community—a virtual one that nonetheless can be contacted, composed of friends but also of contacts with indeterminate status. Is each cell phone a potential pueblo?

As an institution, the cinema has not been untouched by these transformations and has incorporated them in films themselves, as well as in modes of distribution and consumption. Digitalization has quickly become a dominant presence in theaters and satellite transmission is not far off—a situation that places the special relationship between film and theaters in crisis, as those venues are now able to host the transmission of all sorts of events. Film aesthetics have also changed. Mainstream films have doubled down on spectacular special effects while the indies have slowed down time, bolstering the sensuous nature of the image over its informational potential. In some cases, independent filmmakers have turned away from the theatrical film to work elsewhere. With museum installations, important directors such as Chantal Ackerman, Abbas Kiarostami, Pedro Costa, and Harun Farocki, as well as Albertina Carri and Lisandro Alonso, among Latin American artists, have spatialized and reterritorialized filmic images in relation to the spectator’s body in nontraditional locations.

But what can be said about el pueblo, or the masses? Has el pueblo changed or been eclipsed in this world of digital convergence? How have the many been made visible, and how do the masses see themselves within this new scenario? Two footnotes in Walter Benjamin’s celebrated and much-cited essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” offer some insights:

1. In response to advertisements, Benjamin affirms that:

   [i]n big parades and monster rallies, in sports events, and in war, all of which nowadays are captured by camera and sound recording, the masses are brought face to face with themselves. . . . Mass movements are usually discerned more clearly by a camera than by the naked eye.

   (Benjamin 2009: 684)

2. In the opposition between the magician-painter and the surgeon-filmmaker, Benjamin affirms that while the former places his hands on the body, the latter penetrates it (we should remember that Benjamin is contemporaneous with the appearance of the stethoscope, the ophthalmoscope, the laryngoscope, and X-rays). In otolaryngology, during the “so-called endonasal perspective procedure,” the surgeon must carry out “acrobatic tricks”—according to Benjamin—that depend upon mirrors and his corporal agility (Benjamin 2009: 678).

   When Benjamin wrote those footnotes, drones did not exist, nor did endoscopic procedures that use fiber optics to film the body from within. There were no selfies that, like a figurative endoscopy, captured a street demonstration from within through the insinuating camerawork of a single participant subsumed within the multitude.

The bioimage, in all of its manifestations, modifies the place of cinema as well as the forms of collectivity. In this new moment, some films can help us to reflect on the new status of the image and el pueblo—among them, Patricio Guzmán’s Nostalgia de la luz (Nostalgia for the Light, 2010) and Pablo Larraín’s No (2012).
Guzmán’s film begs the question: How do you populate a desert? In the film, the dialectical relationship and interaction between the one and the many emerges in an absence of cosmic dimensions. The desert is not only a geographical space, but also the image itself, marked by absence and lack. No human figure appears in the first 10 minutes, and the first face (of Gaspar Galaz) appears on screen in the fourteenth minute. Quite intentionally, the people who show up in interviews are limited to groups of two or three. The film privileges vacant spaces in which the human never arrives on time. The only “many” who appear in the film are in archival footage of miners or a mural lined with photographs of those who disappeared during the Pinochet dictatorship, in images that have withered with the passage of time. In a melancholic vision, in a present marked by the pain of those who are not there (of those who never returned), as suggested by the very etymology of “nostalgia,” el pueblo is the past. And yet, through elusive means, Nostalgia de la luz evokes the many, and gestures toward the future possibility of a multitude, a community, in the agglomeration of particles, the clouds of residue and the dust of stars. The incommensurability of that stardust contrasts with the astronomers’ obsessive measurements of space, whose work is akin to that of the architect imprisoned in Pinochet’s concentration camp who now meticulously sketches those cells from his own apartment. As Irene Depetris Chauvin argues in “Una comunidad de melancólicos,” “There is, in the scalar play of Nostalgia de la luz, a way of producing relationships of proximity and distance; and establishing new affective bonds” (Depetris Chauvin 2015). But what sort of technological apparatus makes this scalar play (and its potential for fostering affective bonds) possible? “Why do we want bones?” asks Violeta Berríos, who searches for the remains of family members buried in the desert, in one of the film’s most moving testimonies. It’s the nexus between the horrors of the past, the pain of the present, and—because of the shared element of calcium—the stars in the sky. The ideal camera or optical device, according to Guzmán, is the telescope, not only because it reminds him of his youth, or because of Chile’s renowned starry sky, but also because the telescope allows us to see the past. The powerful lenses of the Hubble and James Webb telescopes in space can advance our knowledge of the origin of the universe. I turn again to Berríos, who says in the film:

I wish the telescopes could look at something besides the sky, that they could pierce through the layers of the earth to find the bones. It would be like sweeping away the dirt with a telescope and later, thanking the stars for having found them. That’s my dream.

In Nostalgia de la luz, the telescope—just like the drone and the endoscope—peers down at us from above and penetrates the earth, making possible a stereoscope of the past and the present, even though the bodies are ghosts, the space is a desert, and it is all only a dream.

Guzmán’s strategy of “emptying out” contrasts sharply with that of “saturation” deployed in Pablo Larraín’s No. In her 2014 essay on the film, Franco-Chilean critic Nelly Richard contests the film’s conception of historical time that seems more “mimetic-contemplative” than “critical-transformative” because of its use of U-matic video. She offers a corollary critique, arguing that No replaces “the macro-narrative of the [collective] revolution with individual micro-fantasies of private consumption.” The consequence of this shift is the disavowal of historicity. For her, what Larraín’s film ultimately does is “flatten the volume and density of the anti-dictatorial struggles of the past as well as today’s citizen-activism in order to offer us up a replica of the past that freezes that present as a simulacrum of memory.”
Latin American film in the digital age

(my emphasis). The term “simulacrum” is not incidental; it synthesizes a chain of attributes that for Richard define marketing and have infected film. In other words, “the appearances of ‘publicity’ (its stylistic repertoire promoting the visual consumption of images) trump the underlying kernel and the representational content of ‘ideology’ (the antagonisms of power and domination; the disputes over hegemony and social struggles)” (original emphasis). I ask myself whether it is possible to sustain such a categorical differentiation between publicity and ideology, between appearances and depth, between consumption and struggle.

In light of such critical anxiety, I prefer to see No as an exercise with digital forms and their ability to instantiate the conditions for the emergence of el pueblo or of new collectivities. Because what the film’s protagonist does is not a matter of de-ideologizing his position or renouncing his convictions. If his journey demonstrates anything, it is the impossibility of hiding ideology behind fancy packaging or touch-ups, and that commercialization is the very condition of possibility of the ideological statement.

Before Saavedra (Gael García Bernal) joins the “No” campaign, the opposition to the dictatorship makes a publicity short that exemplifies how el pueblo has traditionally appeared on film through a dialectic between the one and the many (although in this case the inspiring leader is absent), the collective choreographies—of repression unleashed against fiery rebellion and organized protest, and the majestic plural (in this case, through the use of Inti Illimani’s song “Vuelvo”). In contrast, in Saavedra’s alternate short (“happiness is on the way”), the editing mimics the video clip and the inspiration comes from a Coca-Cola ad. Certainly, there is something lost in that shift, in the idea that the short film has to “sell” a political position. Nonetheless, what is most powerful is that the “No” side wins the election, something that would have been impossible using more traditional techniques for representing el pueblo (or so the film suggests). Indeed, the film insists that such tactics are not without cost, and in this way its historicity acquires a critical edge.

Similar to Guzmán’s film, Larraín’s No does not erase the present, but rather reveals its technological dimension by performing an archaeological study of the technical underpinnings of the microwave, video games, and even electric trains. It is not a matter of simply using U-matic, but also a whole series of throwback elements, including poor-quality images, others that are overexposed, live-action shots, and other digital archives. In his essay about Larraín’s oeuvre, critic Wolfgang Bongers notes that “the images manage to trick us about temporal change, but not about the traces of bodies,” arguing for the need to interpret the casting of García Bernal as “an indicator of fictionality” (Bongers 2016: 96). The actor is the body of global spectacle (which includes Latin America, and particularly Mexico), the one to whom the many must refer in order to conceive the means of their own visibility.

Despite the notable differences in what they say, the two films share something: in the desert of el pueblo (or the people as deserted), the goal is inventing new collectivities within existing conditions. El pueblo can only be reanimated through a gaze that has already been commercialized, and yet through this process stops being a collective. The films offer two responses to this commercialization of the gaze in capitalist globalization—two modes of thinking about the new situation: through a hollowing out or through a saturation of image(s).

In 1895, the Lumière brothers exhibited a pioneering film: Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory. Today, we can say that what the camera’s lens registered then was something more than the departure at the end of the workday. The workers had abandoned the factory in favor of another form of work that would gradually become dominant: the work of the eye.
Unlike Mexico, Argentina, or Brazil, Bolivia has a small film industry that was never consolidated, owing to the lack of state support. As a result, very few domestic films could ever reach a wide national audience. The absence of screen quotas made it impossible for filmmakers to recover their investments, particularly after having to pay almost 50 percent to exhibitors and additional screening taxes. Since the mid-2000s, filmmakers and others involved in the audiovisual sector have tried, without much success, to create legislation that would provide greater support for the country's audiovisual production. Surprisingly, despite these underlying conditions, the production of Bolivian films increased notably in the early 2000s to the point that, for a time, people began to speak about a second “boom” of Bolivian film (following the one in 1995 associated with directors such as Marcos Loayza and Juan Carlos Valdivia). The growth was spurred by new digital technologies employed by a younger generation of filmmakers, and developed along three main axes: (a) auteur fictional cinema; (b) documentary cinema; and (c) films made by and from marginal communities in collaboration with the filmmaking collective Taller Ambulante de Formación Audiovisual (TAFA), which works outside the limits of the official industry. The following discussion illustrates how new aesthetic currents are emerging from these three groups of digital films in their attempt to explore cultural identity.

Between 2003 and 2008, production totaled 28 feature-length films, or approximately five per year. Of those, only six were shot on celluloid; the rest were on digital, with four transferred to 35 mm for exhibition on international circuits. It is noteworthy that 15 of the 22 films shot through digital capture during this period were operas primas (Espinoza and Laguna 2009: 190–191). Between 2008 and 2009 alone, there were a significant number of digital premieres, including four feature-length films in 2008 and 10 medium- and feature-length films in 2009. Unfortunately, this growth in production did not always equate with artistic merit nor guarantee box-office success. Although regional critics celebrated the quality of films such as Zona Sur (South District, Juan Carlos Valdivia), El ascensor (The Elevator, Tomás Bascopé), Hospital Obrero (Working Class Hospital, Germán Monje), La chirola (The Prison, Diego Mondaca), and Rojo, amarillo y verde (Red, Yellow, Green, Rodrigo Bellot, Martín Boulocoq and Sergio Bastani) in 2009, the following year witnessed a surprising lack of quality productions. Sixteen features (both fiction and documentary) premiered in mainstream theaters that year, but with little commercial success (La Razón 2010). Between 2010 and 2015, digital shorts and documentaries have shown the greatest level of artistic growth, as evidenced by their inclusion in international festivals. These achievements demonstrate that digital filmmaking has been commercially successful within domestic circuits and has become the preferred format for new filmmakers.

A new auteurist cinema has recently taken advantage of digital technologies to distinguish itself from the thematics of the militant cinema of the 1960s by exploring the subjectivities of white elites as well as those in Bolivia’s provinces. Operating within a globalized framework and making a strong mark on the international festival circuit, this new auteurist cinema is personalist, and represents an effort to break with the status quo (Lacunza 2011: 52). Auteurist cinema in Bolivia is part of a larger Latin American filmmaking effort to distinguish itself from Hollywood by not using digital technologies for special effects, but instead developing new types of narratives, as evident in films from many other countries in the region, including the Cuban films Video de familia (Family Video, Humberto
Padrón, 2001) and Suite Habana (Fernando Pérez, 2003), the Mexican Así es la vida (Such is Life, Arturo Ripstein, 2000), and the Argentine Fuckland (José Luis Márquez, 2001). As with digital productions in Mexico, Argentina, and Cuba, these films use digital filming practices to develop a targeted aesthetic, a subjective vision, and a strong perspective.

This “subjective vision” emerges in part as a recurrent concern for mapping the subjectivities of the protagonists on-screen. In this sense, digital technologies are used to further explore a subjective language that traces personal narratives, emotions, mental states, etc. within and through the filmic image. Like those other recent Latin American films, contemporary Bolivian cinema links an authorial project with new technologies in ways that explore digital’s potential as a language and aesthetic.

In the Bolivian context, auteurist cinema is dismantling and deconstructing older notions through the use of a digital language to make visible personal dynamics involving sexuality, friendship, love, and the family. It takes particular aim at dominant discourses and social hierarchies. For example, trapped women have become a recurrent trope of this new cinema. In Rodrigo Bellot’s Dependencia Sexual (Sexual Dependency, 2003), one of the most tension-filled sequences includes a split screen (Figure 24.1). The left side features the male characters eating their dinner and talking about the women who are in the kitchen. Whereas in a more traditional film the two women would be off-screen, in Bellot’s film they appear on the right side of the screen. And, unlike the more traditional use of split screen in classic Hollywood cinema, wherein both sides were the same size, in Dependencia sexual the left screen expands during the sequence, minimizing the “female space” on the right, in order to comment critically on the oppressive force of patriarchal norms.

In another break with established norms, Boulocq and Bellot’s films interpelate the spectator in ways that challenge the “male gaze” that dominated classic Hollywood. Bellot’s particular use of the split screen undermines the male gaze by making the spectator aware of his or her own positioning; rather than merely aligning us with the male character’s perspective, the sequence destabilizes this sight line by confronting us with another (female) gaze. Rather than privileging a male gaze, the film foregrounds multiple gazes/perspectives; akin to a computer screen, the film frame offers us multiple “windows” in order to perceive social dynamics in new ways. The two “windows” amplify the audience’s field of vision increasing the amount of information in terms of what is narrated.

Figure 24.1 The split screen in Dependencia Sexual (2003) showcases the place of overpowering machismo in Bolivian society.
At times, the juxtaposed screens complement each other, one narrating what the other one is missing. At others, they offer sharp contrasts to challenge and complicate meaning. Such moments highlight a polyphony and dissidence that distinguish the juxtaposed “windows” in digital films such as Dependencia sexual, from the split screen technique used in older (analogue) productions.

While the new authorial cinema has interrogated upper-class characters, Bolivian independent documentary has privileged the exploration of other subjectivities, in particular those living on the margins of urban life. These digital documentaries offer microhistories that reconstruct marginalized subjectivities and transform them into sites of power and resistance. In some cases, the films articulate a counter-hegemonic discourse of national identity in opposition to an internal foe (the administration of President Evo Morales) or an external one (Western culture). La chirola (2008), director Diego Mondaca’s opera prima, is a case in point. The film’s themes and formal structure—a long monologue that oscillates between the confession of ex-guerrilla Pedro Cajías and the reconstruction of certain events—signal a break with the dominant currents of Bolivian documentary associated with Jorge Ruiz’s work in the 1960s about indigenous peoples as collectives. Mondaca has noted how his team had to work differently with the digital camera because of its particular apprehension of lighting conditions, the flatter depth of field, and the different texture of the image. The digital camera allowed them to play with diverse elements, including what was out of focus and slow-motion capture at 60 frames/second; create high contrasts with light and shadow; and utilize color to achieve a greater level of texture/density of the image, even when the final film would appear in black and white (Mondaca 2010).

In La chirola, Mondaca captures Cajías’ body moving through the crowd using high contrast to make him look more like a specter than a living being (Figures 24.2 and 24.3). The lighting and composition express Cajías’ feelings of abandonment as neither the state, family, nor religion cares for him any longer. The contrastive monochrome photography, silhouetting, and lack of focus seem to explore a subjectivity that prefers to remain at the

![Figure 24.2](image-url) High-contrast lighting in La chirola (2008).
margins of society and that resists being framed, absorbed, and appropriated. These visual techniques resonate with Cajías’ final, cynical reflection at the end of the film: freedom is the ability to choose your own jail. This thought, and his determination to leave the city-space and find a piece of land in the countryside, represent his empowerment in the marginal space in which he has chosen to live. On an allegorical level, Cajías’ assertion of agency echoes the counter-hegemonic project of Bolivia’s new digital documentary, claiming a space on the margins of the industry.

In a different way, documentaries such as *El corral y el viento* (Miguel Hilari, 2014) challenge the older, *indigenista* documentaries and those that explored the indigenous as collectives. In the film’s opening, a 12-year-old Aymara boy tortures a cat in a small room. This portrait of violence allows the film to break with the romanticized and paternalist representations of indigenous subjects present in earlier documentaries, and to distance itself from the attributes associated with ethnographic film. At the same time, the tensions between innocence and violence and between civilization and barbarism are present throughout the film in the on-screen coexistence of children and animals, and of the boy with a girl. In a self-conscious gesture of performativity, the children act in front of the camera. “Are you filming, Miguel?” asks the boy on numerous occasions, addressing the filmmaker directly (Figure 24.4).

In thinking about such exchanges between filmmaker and subject, Hilari notes that filming is a violent act, especially in places such as the countryside, and that it is important to capture people’s responses to being filmed (Lacunza 2016). This is particularly so in a tight space with little light, such as the scene mentioned above, where the digital camera’s presence affects the natural flow of everyday life. In the second half of the film, Hilari’s uncle approaches the camera and asks, “It’s a camera, right?” to which the director responds, “Yes, it is” and keeps on filming. He then shows his uncle his captured image on screen, and we see the older gentleman’s surprised smile. “It’s like a photo, but filmed,” Hilari tells him. In this way, the scene showcases how people respond to being filmed, and at the same time underscores filmmaking as “gaze-making,” as establishing a particular distance (or proximity) between the camera and the filmed subject.

![The use of lack of focus in La chirola (2008).](image-url)
Finally, there are several community-based filmmaking projects in Bolivia that have taken advantage of the new digital technologies and circulate through alternative distribution and exhibition networks. Created in 2008, TAFA, for example, works with youth from marginalized communities, utilizing digital cameras to explore Bolivian identity in new ways that differ from the older binaries (rich vs. poor, white vs. indigenous, man vs. woman, eastern vs. western provinces) in order to underscore the country’s cultural diversity. Through the audiovisual exercises carried out by their young collaborators, TAFA enables the exploration of youthful subjectivities shaped less by class issues than by questions of ethnicity and gender difference.

The animated fiction *Quri Tunqu* (*Gold Corn*), produced with the Cha’lla community, is an example of how digital technologies serve as a vehicle to raise awareness and educate children in the civic principles of recycling and waste classification. During the 1–1.5 weeks of filming, the crew and their collaborators gathered 500 kg of plastic bottles for recycling. In a more general sense, the project helped to reanimate and reconfigure indigenous identity and the community’s relation with the local environment. At first glance, the short seems to fit into the modern-urban superhero genre. In the narrative, defenseless children acquire superpowers in the manner of Clark Kent or Spider-Man. Special garments with powers are granted to them by the sun and transform fearful and average children into superheroes. The clothes, however, are not Superman’s cape or Batman’s mask, but rather indigenous garments: the *aguayo* (mantle), *chulo* (hat), and *cinto* (belt) (Figures 24.5 and 24.6). Thus, the film resemanticizes the figure of the superhero, locating the source of special powers in ancestral tradition.

While the authorial cinema frames marginality as a condition from which one must escape, most of the “marginal” subjectivities that appear in TAFA’s films do not present themselves as imprisoned; rather, they exercise agency by paving their own pathway. Whereas authorial cinema invites us to gaze at and get to know “the subaltern” within the space of dominant culture, TAFA’s more subjective filmic exercises

![Figure 24.4 Performativity in *El corral y el viento* (2014).](image-url)
do not recognize this subordinate position. The youthful subjects-as-directors do not rely on comparisons with the dominant culture, nor do they create their films for other audiences. Instead, they take advantage of the portability of the digital camera to create autobiographical portraits in intimate environments (bedrooms, hallways, etc.) (Figure 24.7).

For these reasons, digital filmmaking in Bolivia undermines John Belton's (1999) contention that the new format has not instantiated a technological revolution. Both the authorial and community-based projects carry out reflexive aesthetic exercises that encourage us to “see” and “perceive” cinema (and the world around us) in new ways.
Online distribution and access: the case of Netflix

Niamh Thornton

As a result of new technologies for delivering (amateur and professional) films for home viewing, digital distribution forces us to consider new ways of conceptualizing the curatorship and categorization of film. Streaming services, such as Netflix, MUBI, Amazon Prime, and Curzon Home Cinema, provide distinct selections of Latin American films, under categories that challenge scholarly labels for national and transnational cinema and its consumption. MUBI and Curzon Home Cinema show a carefully curated selection of films aimed at those who, in earlier eras, would have attended art house cinemas, but now can access films outside of the cosmopolitan centers where these theaters are located. Another key player is Amazon Prime, which has a growing market share and is a direct competitor with Netflix.

These services provide a limited and ever-changing offering based on their own, often oblique and usually well-guarded, decisions about what the market desires. In the case of Netflix, the company determines what can be seen based on geographic location due to territorial rights and their perception of market demand. Therefore, Netflix in the US has a healthy range of Latin American films available, yet in the UK and Ireland it is quite narrow. Given the growth in these services and the shrinking DVD market, what they show, where it gets seen, and how this determines the viewers’ understanding of Latin American film, makes this a particularly fecund area for new research.

I wish to explore the application of digital technologies built around streaming services as they highlight geopolitical positioning and, as we shall see, are built around the specific commercial practice associated with geo-blocking. This section will focus more narrowly on the availability of Latin American film on Netflix across two territories—the UK

Figure 24.7 An Afro-Bolivian teen in her room.
and Ireland (legally one territory) and Argentina—to explore how this streaming service challenges academic labels for national and transnational cinema.

Of the above-mentioned streaming services, Netflix is the one with the most aggressive corporate policy, dividing territories by licensing agreements and employing geo-blocking to restrict access to content according to geographical location, which is often determined by territorial rights. The company also targets “unblockers” (i.e. individuals or devices that transgress territorial licenses). In January 2016, Netflix threatened “to bring the hammer down on people who circumvent country-based content licensing restrictions” using these tools (Spangler 2016). David Glance has suggested that punishing unblockers would be difficult and would be more likely to harm the streaming service’s brand and push viewers either to other services or to torrent sites (Glance 2016). Glance is writing from an Australian perspective, where this debate has been a particularly live one due to the limited content available on Netflix there compared to other territories. His speculation on the consequences may not come to fruition; however, what is interesting in the geo-blocking debate is that it is not just a topic of interest to area specialists and academics, but to a wider viewership.

To discuss Latin American film in the light of its commercial distribution through streaming services calls into question how we talk about this region and group the multiple differentiated large and small cinema-producing countries into a single category. Much discussion has taken place among scholars such as Deborah Shaw (2007) and Stephanie Dennison (2013) regarding the value of using Latin America as a label in recent years. Both make strong arguments for its validity by carefully qualifying their decisions. In the light of the growing work on the transnational flows of finance and talent, their interventions are helpful in reminding researchers of the need to frame the discussion carefully. In addition, what my research on streaming services shows is that the human- and machine-generated algorithms further complicate the category (Wu 2015).

Netflix is well known for its unusual categories and “complex ecosystem of algorithms” (Vanderbilt 2013). These can be a mix of the generic, “Popular on Netflix”, “Trending Now”, and “Recently Added”; to the specific, “Top Picks for”; to those that are particular to Netflix, such as “Dark US TV Dramas”, “Witty Comedies”, or “Independent Films Featuring a Strong Female Lead.” In the UK and Ireland, under the site’s browse function, there is an “International Movies” category with “Latin American Films” as a searchable subcategory under the “Subgenre” field. Only 18 films were available between January and February 2016. In another study (Thornton 2018), I focused on Mexican and Cuban films across the different platforms. Of the 18, none was Cuban and four were “Mexican”: Días de gracia (Days of Grace, Everardo Valerio Grout, 2011), a fiction film about three violent kidnappings during pivotal football World Cup games; Miss Bala (Gerardo Naranjo, 2011), a story of a beauty pageant winner caught up in drug violence; a horror, Ahí va el diablo (Here Comes the Devil, Adrián García Bogliano, 2012), which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival; and No se aceptan devoluciones (Instructions Not Included, Eugenio Derbez, 2013), a comedy that has had the biggest box-office earnings in Mexico to date and is currently the highest-grossing foreign language film in the US (Cervantes 2013). Miss Bala and Ahí va el diablo both got festival and art house distribution. Of these, Miss Bala had some academic attention, while the rest, as with many genre films from Mexico, have been largely overlooked. This disparity reveals the hierarchical nature of knowledge consumption and the tendency by academics to write about films that are likely to appear on curricula, few of which are conventional or high-grossing genre films. At the same time, these genre films are the ones available to see and study on streaming services,
and may challenge academics to rethink what they include on their curricula as exemplary works of “Mexican” or “Latin American” cinema?

Netflix takes a more conventional approach to country ascription than do MUBI and Curzon Home Cinema. The broader hemispheric Latin America label goes some way to explaining this. But it does offer a very small selection of films that go beyond the typical art house offering, with an emphasis on genre films, in particular horror, action, war, and comedy. There are films available during this time on Netflix that are excluded from this “Latin American” category. For example, _Babel_ (2006) by the Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu is not included, even though one of its four narratives is set in Mexico. Likewise, _Narco Cultura_ (2013) by the Israeli documentary filmmaker Shaul Schwarz is not labeled as “Latin American,” although it is specifically examining drug gangs in Mexico. The labels are not comprehensive, and fail to flag the (trans)national boundaries that often determine how film is researched.

There is a general predominance of English-language offering across UK and Irish Netflix, although there is some variation, particularly under TV, with the increased popularity of Scandi-Noir, such as the Danish version of _The Killing_ (2007–2012) and the Danish–Swedish _The Bridge_ (2011–). On the Argentine Netflix, there is a considerable range of English-language film and TV available, but there is a greater mix, and, Spanish-language film and TV is unevenly marked by language. For example, there are categories such as “Dark Spanish-language Drama” and “Spanish-language TV Dramas”, and yet under other categories there is a mix of film and TV in Spanish and other languages that are not labeled according to language. Language is not a defining category, and may work more as an invitation to browse than a delimiter.

In the browse function on Argentine Netflix, there are distinct subcategories. Some of these that bear closest comparison to that of the UK and Irish Netflix and are of interest to those studying Latin American film are “Argentinian Film” and a separate “Latin American” category. There is also an “International” section. This is similar to the categorization of films in the few DVD shops in Buenos Aires, or the more frequently found bookshops, where there are “Argentine,” “Latin American,” and “Universal” categories. Although I have given little space to the study of TV in this analysis, it is worth noting that there is a “Telenovelas” section that is separate from the “Spanish-language TV Dramas” section, between which there are some overlaps.

Under the Argentinian section, there are 50 films. These are varied and include: children’s animated features such as _La canción del Zoo_ (2013); three documentaries on the Argentine-born Pope Francis; art house favorites that are absent from UK and Irish Netflix: _El aura_ (Aura, Fabián Bielinsky, 2005), _La ciénega_ (The Swamp, Lucrecia Martel, 2001), and _Historias mínimas_ (Intimate Stories, Carlos Sorín, 2002); and a selection of genre films. In Argentina, “Argentinian” is a broad category that includes films of Argentine interest (some of the Pope films and a selection of nature documentaries), as well as films made in Argentina of all types.

Under “International,” there is a preponderance of Spanish-language films, most of which are made or set in Spain, including films by Pedro Almodóvar; the hit romantic comedy, _Ochos apellido vascos_ (The Spanish Affair, Emilio Martínez Lázaro, 2014); and the transnational film set during the large tsunami in 2004, _The Impossible_ (J.A. Bayona, 2012). These films by “Spanish” directors sit alongside kung fu films, genre thrillers, and romantic comedies. Where “International” is more suggestive of art house in the UK and Ireland Netflix, it has a broader meaning in Argentinian Netflix.
Under “Latin American,” there are 228 films with a further drop-down menu entitled “Sub-genres”: “Mexican” (163 films), “Brazilian” (16 films), “Venezuelan” (11 films), and “Colombian” (16 films). These are varied from documentaries, such as *Gimme the Power* (Enrique Renteria, 2012); children’s animated features; a number of 1970s and 1980s Mexican films largely dismissed by academics and difficult to obtain elsewhere, such as *Paraíso* (Paradise, Luis Alcoriza, 1970) and *Huevos rancheros* (René Cardona Jr., 1982); a number of sex comedies; and a large range of genre and art house films, such as *El Ataúd del vampiro* (The Vampire’s Coffin, Fernando Méndez, 1958) and the difficult to source *Tlatelolco: verano del 68* (Tlatelolco, Summer of 68, Carlos Bolado, 2013). The last of these touches on a controversial topic, and I was unable to find it in any brick-and-mortar shop in Mexico or in any of the usual online stores. These examples are all of Mexican films, which is the majority source country for films.

As demonstrated above, Netflix’s curatorship suggests certain trends and choices. It is equally important to think about how subscribers respond to those guidelines, even though it is difficult to do so. Given that the company does not release viewing figures, it is impossible to know what is watched, although comments and ratings can give some indication. For example, *Tlatelolco: verano del 68* has three stars and, as yet, no reviews, while *El Ataúd del vampiro* has four stars and six reviews. This may say as much about genre viewers’ inclination to comment as about the viewers’ responses to the film.

Netflix is a private company that both responds to and determines local markets. Of concern to scholars is that what is available to screen is being determined more and more by online curatorship that lacks transparency or apparent recourse to current academic categories in its decision-making process. All of these issues bring to the fore questions that complicate the conventional interpretations of distribution and access as read through film festivals or production companies, and shifts it towards a need to source and understand algorithms and human preconceptions that are beginning to determine content on streaming services.

While there is no expectation that streaming services are required to follow scholarly labels in their curatorial decisions, nor for academics to take up their (sometimes eccentric) categories, there is potential for a global conversation about location and what that means for audiences. It brings to the fore issues of access that have always been present in the consumption of film and have been studied in relation to cinema spaces, their quality, cost, and offering (e.g. see McKee Irwin et al. 2013; Sánchez Prado 2014), but now requires new research into what online audiences can view, how streaming services are determining what is being seen, and the potential effects of content curation on scholarship and curricula.

Note

1 The sections authored by Gonzalo Aguilar and Mariana Lacunza were translated by Laura Podalsky.

References


