

Regionalism, and Latin American Cinema as a Source of Hope, Renewal and Inspiration

Anna Karin Jytte Holmqvist, Segmento Magazine, Australia

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Abstract

We have entered a 21st century where people, rather than uniting across borders and daring to feel an affinity with the other, bridging ethnic and national differences, are now increasingly vulnerable, exposed to fragmenting movements often set in motion by leaders driven by egocentric values and self-interests pursued at the expense of the well-being of minorities and those occupying a lower level in the social hierarchy. While regionalism, nationalism and authoritarianism appear to be rising divisive movements triggered by such destabilising socio-political trends, within regionalism we can find examples of positive collaborations. Such is the case with Latin America today; a region which demonstrates a people coming together in a spirit of solidarity and creativity. Regionalism can in this case be inwardly advantageous. In a world often characterised by personal disengagement and apathy, Latin America along with its indigenous communities uphold national values in a spirit of mutual comprehension on a communal level. Throughout history, these nations have been subjected to totalitarian regimes and hostile policies that disrupt societal structures. As a result, Latin American communities have developed resilience and a sense of hope deeply embedded in regional values. Its rich and diverse cinema reflects nations that despite all their uncertainties, differences, struggles and discontents have been showing the way forward. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Richard A. Falk, this paper explores Latin American cinema within a regional framework, looking at regionalism as a model for collective cooperation in the midst of a highly volatile world.

Keywords: Latin American cinema, regionalism, hope

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Introduction

The world as we know it is different from the world as we knew it. While nations have traditionally been distinct and differentiable; linguistically, culturally and socio-politically, over past decades cross-nationally homogenizing political and economic and partly also culturally streamlining forums, platforms and organisations like the European Union have, although the BREXIT presents a very poor alternative—in a way—erased cultural and ethnic differences that once reflected rich national histories and traditions. We are now part of one globalised larger society where economic and political collaboration across borders, although beneficial, has triggered assimilative trends that are sometimes counteractive to cultural diversity. Gone are, in part, individualistic traits that allowed us to celebrate national differences and, instead, minorities are now forced to cave in to the powers that be. Our current world order is one characterised by constant change, fluidity and mobility leading to much uncertainty. In our increasingly open, accessible and borderless society we live through times of seemingly immense possibilities but in the midst of this freedom we run the risk of losing our identity and also our footing with regard to where we belong, who we are, and where we are heading. The negative aspects of globalisation become apparent as the cracks beneath the glossy surface are beginning to show. In the words of the late Zygmunt Bauman, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Leeds University and philosopher and postmodern expert par excellence who astutely sheds light on also the dystopic aspects of our global existence,

[T]he openness of our open society has acquired a new gloss these days... No longer a precious yet frail product of brave though stressful, self-assertive efforts, it has become instead an irresistible fate brought about by the pressures of formidable extraneous forces; a side effect of negative globalisation that is the highly selective globalisation of trade and capital, surveillance and information, coercion and weapons, crime and terrorism, all now disdaining territorial sovereignty and respecting no state boundary (*Bauman*, 2013: chapter 4 introduction).

This paper takes as a point of departure Bauman's rather sombre and dystopic theories on our fluctuating and fluid times of uncertainty, with a society made up of *precarious* suffering from "existential uncertainty" (Bauman, 2017: 47), and refers to his notion of people "walking on quicksand" or on a "mine field"—as explained in a 2016 interview between the Polish sociologist and Al Jazeera—similarly understood as a "floating insecurity".¹ These concepts are applied to an analysis of Latin American cinema today.

Also making up the theoretical framework of the paper is British-born American philosopher, novelist and defender of a return to *cosmopolitanism* and its interconnecting qualities Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Richard Falk, Emeritus Professor in International Law at Princeton University, who talks of a new geopolitical power shift or a new geopolitics and who, similarly to Bauman,

¹ Bauman, Z. (July 23, 2016). Behind the world's crisis of humanity. Talk to Al Jazeera. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EG63MkQb1r4>

highlights the precarious state of the world today and the times we live in. Falk's 2017 volume of essays *Power Shift: On the New Global Order* looks at the negatives of globalisation and speaks of poverty and climate change—increasingly in focus today, also through the media hype surrounding Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg who has set in motion environmental movements across the board. Falk's book analyses “recent developments in the world order, criticizes their deficiencies, and discusses the chances to overcome them”.² The Professor argues that US militarism is a trigger for the many “shifting relations on the world stage” and calls for “cooperative and humanitarian solutions to contemporary threats”.³ Falk advocates soft power as a way to break down barriers, foster a climate of meaningful cooperation, and achieve “the goals of peoples and the objectives of national governments and international institutions” (from “Geopolitics is Changing”, in *On the New Global Order*).

Thought leader Kwame Anthony Appiah, in turn, promotes a return or adherence to *cosmopolitanism* at a time when globalisation is still a catch phrase and *cosmopolitanism* can come across as a somewhat passé concept. It is, in fact, all the more important and timely, as reflected in the National Humanities Medal awarded to Appiah in 2011—with former President Barack Obama establishing that Appiah's work “sheds light on the individual in a time of globalisation”.⁴ Appiah himself defines *cosmopolitanism* as the ability to engage in a moral global conversation, and to, more specifically, share “a feeling of responsibility to all humankind, valuing life even if it's the life of a stranger and having the curiosity to want to know the specifics of that person's culture”. He ultimately equals cosmopolitanism to “a universal concern and respect for other people” (“Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers” – printed article).

Body

Bauman, Falk, and Appiah are relevant in a discourse surrounding Latin American cinema today as all three coincide in their understanding and assessment of our contemporary reality. They point to the importance of unification and strength in collectiveness and highlight the need for citizens today to seek to find solid ground in an era defined by uncertainty and fluidity. Never shying away from the inherent problematics of globalisation as we understand the concept today the three scholars tackle issues head-on, providing both philosophical and astute explanations and reflections that serve as guidelines in our assessment and understanding of the many complexities of our 21st century, worldwide. Their theories can be applied to a current Latin American cinematic context, a cinema that has often operated in the margins of the mainstream; one that is in many ways opposed to the grandiose and somewhat

² Zurn, M. (September, 2017). *Power Shift: On the New Global Order* by Richard Falk. EIA: Ethics & International Affairs. Retrieved from <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2017/power-shift-new-global-order/>

³ Varin, C. (2016). Book Review: *Power Shift: On the New Global Order* by Richard Falk. LSE London School of Economics and Political Science. LSE Review of Books. Retrieved from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2016/07/26/book-review-power-shift-on-the-new-global-order-by-richard-falk/>

⁴ President Obama presents National Humanities medal to PEN president Anthony Appiah. The Freedom to Write. (February 13, 2012). Retrieved from <https://pen.org/president-obama-presents-national-humanities-medal-to-pen-president-anthony-appiah/>

plastic and glossy narratives of the Hollywood blockbusters. This is a cinema which, to borrow a term from Appiah, highlights “the importance of elsewhere” and is intimate yet globally aware, regionalistic yet multiethnic, and positively collectivist while it often focuses on one or a few individuals who become symbolic of a larger cultural group. This cinema can be analysed from the lens of a “New Regionalism”, defined as

“a process of transformation of the world order”, a restructuring “of the social, political, and economic aspects of regions”, ... and a reversal “of the effects of globalization through the processes of regionalism”.⁵

Latin American directors today, while they are most definitely influenced by the globalising movement, steer away from stereotypes and talk of hard truths and grim realities, defending authenticity with regard to cross-cultural/cross-ethnic and intergenerational communication within their own region/s. Highlighted in their cinema, as well, is the stoic handling by Latin American people (nationally different but culturally sharing similar values) of external pressure, totalitarianism, corruption, military intervention, hyperinflation, an often crippling neoliberalism, political dependency, etc.

“We need to talk about Latin American cinema” declares Carlos Gutiérrez, co-founder of the promotional cultural institution Cinema Tropical, in a much visited TED talk from 2017 where he talks of a “major cinematic renaissance in Latin America” over past decades that contrasts with the suffering cinema production in the 1980s, which was at a “record low” as a result of “dictatorships, civil wars and a perennial economic crisis”⁶. Gutiérrez speaks of a new generation of filmmakers who in the 1990s revived Latin American cinema by breaking away from heavy political allegories and instead focused on more independent, intimate and minimal stories. This narrative shift has since been accompanied by a parallel regional shift, which, according to Gutiérrez, has served to fuel notions of cultural and identity policies.

There is, says Gutiérrez by way of continuation, today an eclectic production style in Latin American cinema which includes hybrid models of production (private and public, national and international) and fluid co-productions between Latin America and Europe – resulting in almost total freedom to the filmmakers, both within independent and mainstream cinema, and in more risk-taking filmmakers who challenge narrative and thematic conventions and embrace diversity also with regard to screened gender representations.

Directorially, the success of Latin American cinema today, also on the international stage, is largely due to filmmaker heavyweights Alejandro González Iñárritu, Alfonso Cuarón, and Guillermo del Toro (collectively known as the “three amigos” for their Oscar-winning abilities). The directors have secured Oscars for Best Director for three consecutive years: 2013-2015 (for *Gravity*, *Birdman*, and *The Revenant*), in 2017 (*The Shape of Water*), and in 2018 (*Roma*). Cuarón has won twice—his Netflix blockbuster *Roma*, a contemporary neorealist classic about social injustice and inequality and a

⁵ Buzdugan, S. (2019). New regionalism. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/new-regionalism>

⁶ Gutiérrez, C. (June 2, 2017). We Need to Talk About Latin American Cinema. TEDxIndianapolis. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwjq0erMhyA>

personal story with autobiographical elements, set in Mexico City in the 1970s – securing awards for Best Foreign Language Film and Best Cinematography at the 91st Academy Awards. Other noteworthy multi-award-winning films hailed as cinematic masterpieces during this decade almost gone are Iñárritu’s bold and visceral Mexican social drama mystery *Amores perros* (2000) which further catapulted actor, director and social activist Gael García Bernal to also international stardom, socially engaged *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God*, 2002), set in the favelas or shantytown outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, del Toro’s 2006 drama/fantasy *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan’s Labyrinth*), narrated against the backdrop of World War II, and tight Argentinian thriller/mystery drama *El secreto de sus ojos* (*The Secret in Their Eyes*, 2009), featuring prolific actor Ricardo Darín. Finally highlighted in this winning category is Sebastian Lelio’s transgender narrative and universally relevant *Una mujer fantástica* (*A Fantastic Woman*, 2017), set in Chile and with magic realist undertones, and epic tragedy *Pájaros del verano* (*Birds of Passage*, 2018) about the Colombian drug trade. The film has been described as a “breathtaking, moody, elegiac piece of work, from the directors of *Embrace of the Serpent*”.⁷

Roma, and visually and thematically similar *Song Without a Name* (*Canción sin nombre*, by Melina León, 2019), a collaboration between the US, Peru and Spain and screened at the Cannes Film Festival earlier this year, highlight an important geopolitical and cinematic shift from the region to the centre and the importance of personal storytelling to drive major points home and to deliver a social commentary to both national and international audiences. Michael Lazarra (2016) defines this as an “identity-based first-person cinema” which “tends to smaller stories, about single characters, or about mundane, everyday issues related to isolated characters...” (in Sandberg and Rocha, 2018:13). *Canción sin nombre*, set in 1988, is shot entirely in black and white and with a “Noirish cinematography” – with “low-key lighting, in frame obstructions, multiple corridors, shadows”, and nocturnal scenes which trap “the characters all the more”.⁸ The film tragically covers a child trafficking case in Lima and, according to a Cannes Film Festival review, “evokes similar, more widely publicized stolen-children cases from Franco-era Spain and Pinochet-era Chile”⁹, but in its regional story-telling this film opens up and becomes a reflection and stark assessment of a larger Latin American narrative about its stolen or disappeared children.

And yet, Latin American people today and throughout time – forcefully subjected to one totalitarian regime after another particularly from the dictatorial 1960s and 1970s onwards – have impressively managed to find a sense of purpose, joy and togetherness in the midst of political instability, internal fragmentation, and chaos. Fast-forward to 2017 and a World Happiness Report cites “social capital” as a reason why “the region has higher levels of wellbeing than its GDP would predict” and importantly asserts that despite socio-political challenges, “some Latin American

⁷ Byrnes, P. (October 2, 2019). *Birds of Passage* a devastating portrait of the drug trade. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/movies/birds-of-passage-a-devastating-portrait-of-the-drug-trade-20190930-p52w7w.html>

⁸ Hopewell, J. (April 26, 2019). Watch Trailer for Cannes Directors’ Fortnight Entry ‘Song Without a Name’ (EXCLUSIVE). *Variety*. Retrieved from <https://variety.com/2019/film/global/trailer-cannes-directors-fortnight-song-without-a-name-1203198638/>

⁹ Lodge, G. (May 18, 2019). Film Review: ‘Song Without a Name’. *Variety*. Retrieved from <https://variety.com/2019/film/reviews/song-without-a-name-review-cancion-sin-nombre-1203219363/>

countries have a higher happiness index than developed nations from Western Europe”.¹⁰

The resilience among Latin American people and their ability to navigate challenges and complexities while they are simultaneously influenced by global trends affecting their own regions, and to defend local and national values, is reflected in themes highlighted in socially aware national and international film festivals such as the Cartagena Film Festival (FICCI: Festival Internacional de Cine de Cartagena de Indias) which focal point is to “market Latin America and its ‘gigantic market of 6,000,000 people’ through festivals”. The 53 films screened at the festival, where common themes are “Latin America’s troubled history and the struggle to define its identity”¹¹, serve peace-building purposes. Director Diana Bustamante explains that “[i]t’s the festival’s duty to remember the country’s brutal history” and she argues that “we cannot have a long-lasting peace if we don’t know what’s happened to us”. Other film festivals serving Latin American interests are the annual *BAFICI* Buenos Aires Festival of Independent Cinema (Buenos Aires Festival Internacional de Cine Independiente), which draws large crowds and promotes local and international directors alike, the Mar de Plata International Film Festival, and, in Australia, the Sydney Latin American Film Festival which this year featured a number of female directors and shone “light on social injustice”¹², as well as the Latin American Film Festival at the University of Melbourne, which – now in its 15th consecutive year – opened 17 October, 2019, and is organised by Doctor Claudia Sandberg and the School of Languages and Linguistics. Both historically informed and contemporarily engaged, the festival highlights the power of the visual medium to create social change and reshape our reality, using as a catch phrase Mexican actor Diego Luna’s declaration that “Cinema is a mirror that can change the world.” SLAFF festival programmer Giselle Gallego, in turn, explains that “this year the festival focuses on migration and the individuals and communities ... impacted by a wide range of social justice issues. There are many stories in the program that look at the individual experience of these communities [including racial, gender and existentialist issues], and what it means to live in the world we live in today”.¹³ Worth mentioning, finally, is Jef Benoit’s trilingual documentary *L’issue*, which departs from Canada and is set in Colombia, Ecuador and Brazil. Benoit’s moving film with an evocative soundtrack that becomes a character in its own right, takes us through a shifting socio-political Latin American landscape, moves across US borders where media flashbacks uncomfortably present us with the controversial 2016 US elections, and ends on a much calmer note. The film is, while concerned with environmental degradation, poverty and shortage of education opportunities, ultimately a celebration of regional strength, collective achievements that unite members of local communities, and persistence leading to a sense of hope and strength in the face of adversity.

¹⁰ Conci, P. (April 19, 2017). Why Are Latin Americans Happier than Their GDP Would Suggest? *Ideas Matter*. Retrieved from https://blogs.iadb.org/ideas-matter/en/latin-americans-happier-gdp-suggest/?fbclid=IwAR2ecvVKfJVEZRaqUyznvPc_kMB5dXqlMsOM373JQ90QmjFbMdnwic3w28g

¹¹ Latin America’s films struggle to make mark at home. (March 13, 2015). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmKv4RLTbjY>

¹² 13th Sydney Latin American Film Festival shines light on social justice. (August 28, 2018). *Cultural Pulse*. Retrieved from

<https://www.culturalpulse.com.au/latin-and-americas/13th-sydney-latin-american-film-festival/>

¹³ Sydney Latin American Film Festival announces program. 2019. *Filmink*. Retrieved from <https://www.filmink.com.au/public-notice/sydney-latin-american-film-festival-announces-program-2/>

At a time when, according to Bauman “No one is in control. That is the major source of contemporary fear”¹⁴, Latin American people have learnt to navigate complexities, celebrate life and come together in a community spirit, realising that instability and uncertainty is an unavoidable part of life. While people in the more consistently developed world grapple with “existential uncertainty” (Bauman, 2017: 47) and experience separatist and extreme right wing movements partially due to the constant influx of a new type of refugees who Bauman calls “the human waste of the global frontier-land” and the “outsiders incarnate” (in Davis and Tester, 2010:20), precisely because Latin American countries are inherently multiethnic and interracial, welcoming of people also from outside, they apparently do not feel the same deep fear of the Other (in stark contrast to what we are witnessing politically in the US where in a style of Divide and Conquer, a leader driven by fear clinically separates “Us” from “Them” – as in the case of Trump’s preposterous idea of building a wall to keep Mexicans out, triggering a climate of fear, hostility and fragmentation rather than allowing for cross-national inclusion).

Rather, the South American continent as well as Central America and their various interconnected regions welcome the Other into their both cultural and artistic narratives in what Falk advocates as a “vertically conceived dialogic process which involves representatives of indigenous people”.¹⁵ Culturally and ethnically rich, Latin American cinema serves up a colourful mix of stories and narrative possibilities “that challenge the idea of Hollywood as the centre of cinema production” (Gutiérrez, TED) and that at times verges on magic realism. Inherent in this approach to life is a worldview that is less globalised and more cosmopolitan in approach – in that there is an acceptance of diversity. As argued by Appiah, no one has to be the same in order for the world to go well and right. At the height of globalisation it is essential that we look to the regions and the minorities for alternative insights and solutions, that we value regional cooperation, peacekeeping efforts, mutual solidarity and strength in diversity, and the move away from the mainstream while we, like people in Latin America, learn to live with the inherent uncertainty of our global times. We must, in Appiah’s words, engage with the cultural, literary, artistic and poetic life of other societies”.¹⁶

Conclusions

I conclude by concurring with Carlos Gutiérrez who argues that “under the current political context [in the US] ... more than ever we need to look South for insight and inspiration, and what better way to do it than through cinema, because the present and the future is in the South” (TED). It is time to welcome a new world order, to move those in the periphery to the centre, and to regard, in this case, Latin American directors and documentary filmmakers as players to be reckoned with on the cinematic world stage. With this, we open up for a global dialogue, embrace cultural

¹⁴ Bauman, Z. (September 11, 2016). ‘No one is in control. That is the major source of contemporary fear.’ Retrieved from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73Nmv-4jvSc>

¹⁵ Falk, R. (October 10, 2016). Geopolitics is changing. *ZED*. Retrieved from <https://www.zedbooks.net/blog/posts/world-politics-is-changing/>

¹⁶ Thought Leader Kwame Anthony Appiah. (July 10, 2012). Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs. Retrieved from <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/thought-leaders/leaders/appiah-kwame-anthony>

and linguistic diversity, and inject new life blood into a Western world in much need of revitalisation. Cinema is indeed a mirror that can change the world and the more socially engaged cinema becomes across the globe, the better.

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Contact email: kastanjett@gmail.com