

Cynthia Tomkins, *Experimental Latin American Cinema: History and Aesthetics*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013, 294 pp.

Latin American film studies has become a significant force since the turn of the millennium, a point that coincided with the emergence of a more commercial approach to fiction cinema from the region in large part due to significant changes in the funding and infrastructural support made available to many Latin American film-makers from the late 1990s onwards, as well as the much greater accessibility of their films due to changes in technology and online developments. Before then there were important tomes from the likes of Robert Stam, John King, Julianne Burton and Michael T. Martin¹, to name a few, but from 2000 the explosion of academic writing on cinemas to emerge from Latin America has been impossible to ignore. While this is largely very welcome for the increased diversity of voices and approaches that such interest and activity bring, it also makes it far harder for those working in the field to stand out.

Since 2000 it has also been noticeable that studies of films from a specific part of the world have made considerable efforts to move away from paradigms that privilege the national and towards others that take an inter/trans/pan-national approach, whether concerned with genre, reception, industrial contexts of theme-based. For Latin American however, the desire to locate a film style that connects the region's film-makers remains strong, with Sophie McLennen arguing in 2013 that arguments put forward by critics such as Néstor García Canclini and Jesús Martín-Barbero in the 1990s that suggested we should understand 'Latin American media as hybrid mediations, where local practices of reading intertwined with extra-national cultural products' continue to be relevant.²

Tomkins's considerable and intriguing monograph takes a broadly transnational stance and applies Deleuzian theories of cinema and the time-image, and in particular those concerned with the use of montage techniques to suggest rupture with causality, time and repetition, to a comparative study of individual Latin American films. While this text is respectful of the national sociohistorical provenance and context of each work, and a section of the main introduction is concerned with outlining the development of national cinematic traditions, it takes an original approach in that it synthesizes discussion of nationality, era and technique.

The author has selected films that she argues fit within a definition of the 'experimental' that stems from Umberto Eco's work. For Tomkins, drawing on Eco, what is important is that experimentalism is described and understood in terms of innovation and critique that 'occur from within an established tradition' (p.2) rather than outside it. She is concerned with influences, aesthetics and techniques and with the subversion of canonical interpretations.

The text offers a detailed analysis of seventeen films produced since 1995 by eleven different film-makers from countries as diverse as Peru, Paraguay, Cuba and Brazil that Tomkins considers to be experimental in their form and in their 'antihegemonic stance regarding the industrial, Hollywood model' (p.1). It is organised into six sections that are designed to make a nod to generic conventions while at the same time subverting and disrupting our understanding of those formats. The discussion is concerned with each film-maker's treatment of time and with the response of the characters in each film to the people and events around them; for Tomkins, these characters appear often to be rendered inert and powerless by their circumstances and lack the wherewithal to enact change.

The reference to this text as ‘intriguing’ above is in part due to the selection of films, several of which might not at first glance be considered under the rubric of ‘experimental’ and might therefore result in some skepticism regarding the contrivance or otherwise of the choices. *Central do Brasil* (1998) for example, by Brazilian Walter Salles, is without doubt the most commercially successful films from Latin American of recent times and adopts many of the generic conventions of the road movie, with its narrative structured by the considerable physical and symbolic journey taken by its two protagonists. Tomkins’ analysis (chapter four, pp. 91-105) however focuses on the affective power of the close-up as used in interview segments of the film and the ways that those compelling sequences disruptively draw upon an ‘alluring’ blend of documentary and melodrama.

More intriguing still is the inclusion of a chapter on the Peruvian feature by first-time director Josué Méndez, *Días de Santiago* (2004) which offers a highly detailed discussion of the formal measures used to present the trauma of a young military man returning to civilian life after at least three years of military service. Some indication is given of the sociopolitical context of the period of Peruvian history under scrutiny (the 1990s aftermath of the conflict with Shining Path and border clashes with Ecuador), but the focus is on the choices made by the director in terms of his ‘eclectic visual style’ and ‘experimental aesthetics’ (p. 148) in his cinematic articulation of his protagonist’s attempt to search for meaning in his life. What is missing from this chapter is a sense of the commercial success and popular reception of this film that delighted critics, festival and regular cinema audiences alike in its home country. Nevertheless, it draws attention to another key theme that links several of the films in this book to a broader transnational panorama – that of trauma, and subsequent efforts of psychosocial recovery.

What Tomkins is arguing then, with her tightly focused discussion of an eclectic mix of films, is that contemporary Latin American cinema should be measured not by the way it harks back to neo-realism and the more explicit political engagement of pre-2000, but by the way it has broken down the antagonism of entertainment versus social critique that had constrained Latin American approaches to filmmaking prior to the start of the new millennium. Her reference points are instead the first and second avant-garde periods of European, American, and Latin American cinema, characterized by formal innovation and in particular the range of possibilities for rupture that are provided by montage techniques. This original contribution to the fields of Latin American film studies and transnational cinema studies encourages its readers to think more deeply about the formal connections that are possible through the paradigms of experimentalism.

¹ For example: Stam’s *Brazilian Cinema* (1982); King’s *Magical Reels* (1990, 2000); Burton’s *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America* (1986); Martin’s *New Latin American Cinema* (1997).

² McClennen S.A. (2011) From the Aesthetics of Hunger to the Cosmetics of hunger in Brazilian cinema. *Symploke* (19.1-2: 73-84), p. 103.