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Cartographies of Mexican Cinema in the 21st Century

Ana M. López[1]

[1] *Ana M. López is Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs, Director of the Cuban and Caribbean Studies Institute, and Professor of Communication at Tulane University in New Orleans.*
E-mail: lopez@tulane.edu

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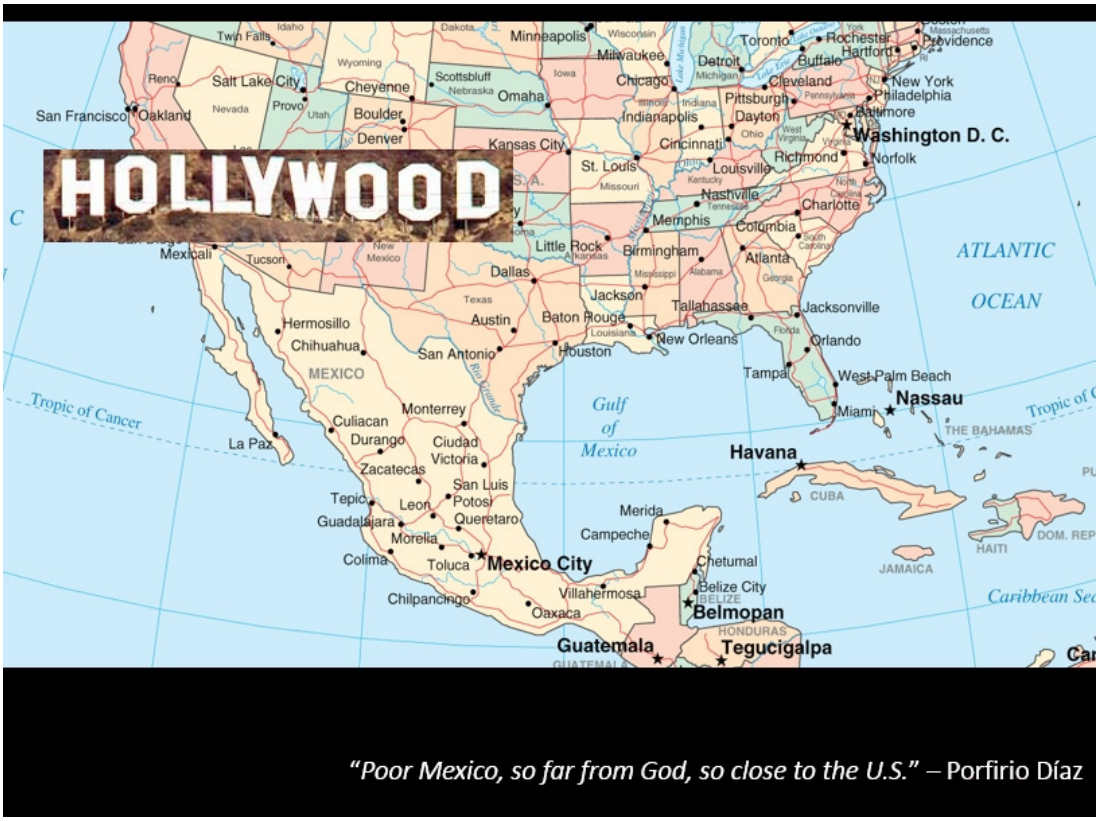
Abstract

This paper provides a map of the historical shifts in Hollywood-Mexico relations, arguing that these changes have also shifted the representational paradigms of contemporary Mexican films. It traces the decentering of the geographic centers that delimited Hollywood-Mexico cinematic relations and its impact on the representational work of recent films from Mexico by Carlos Reygadas, Israel Cardenas and Laura Amelia Guzmán, and Enrique Rivero.

Keywords: Mexico, Hollywood, Reygadas, Cardenas, Guzmán, Rivero



"Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the U.S." – Porfirio Díaz

As Porfirio Díaz remarked and as we all know, Mexico is remarkably close to the United States and, more specifically, to Hollywood: in the 115 years since the invention of cinema there has been constant traffic between Hollywood and Mexico. Although we know that the first film equipment to arrive in Mexico was the Lumière Cinématographe, via Paris, most of the cinematic traffic for decades occurred North-South.

Most of the arrows point south to mark the transfer of technology, expertise, talent and films, but there is an up arrow as well, since Mexico was a major contributor to Hollywood's "international" aspirations in the silent and early sound cinemas. For example, we must always take into account the prominent role of Mexican actors, actresses, and other talents in the multilingual films of the early sound period. Even during the classic Hollywood studio years, Mexico, with what we now call its Golden-age cinema, made inroads up north with films like those of Emilio "El Indio" Fernández and those featuring popular actors like Dolores Del Rio, Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante, and Cantinflas, whose films crossed borders as frequently as people did.

Thus far, I have described nothing but the standard "tale" of north/south cinematic relations, a status quo that remained constant roughly until the late 1990s and into the new millennium. Hollywood retained and, in fact,

augmented its centrality as the hub of all film production and its products flowed seamlessly throughout the world, Mexico included. Within Mexico, Mexico City was the national hub, as it was the home for most production facilities. Mexico City was also the imaginary core of all Mexican cinema, even when it attempted regional representation. That is to say, even portraying other regions and especially their folklore, the classic Mexican cinema's primary impetus was to gather those regions under the mantle of post-revolutionary nationness—and that nationness was imagined not as the authenticity of the regional, but as urban modernity, that is, Mexico City.[2] That that magnificent modernity also had its not-so attractive and not-so-genteel flip side was underscored by Luis Buñuel in his memorable *Los Olvidados* (1950). Its famous prologue equates New York, Paris, London and Mexico City – acknowledging and giving a nod to the prevailing wisdom about Mexico's status as a modern nation, only to violently undermine it through its depiction of the seedy unseen back lot of modernity, the liminal zones where poverty and raw emotions dangerously comingle.

Jump cut to the year 2000 or to 2010. What has changed? How has the map changed? For one thing, we know that the centrality of "Hollywood" -- as location – has decreased significantly. Most literally, few "Hollywood" movies are now shot in Hollywood, California: tax incentives, non-unionized labor and lower production costs have decentralized Hollywood production significantly, nationally and internationally. In my own state, Louisiana and especially in New Orleans, a very generous tax incentive program has enticed dozens of "Hollywood" productions – film and television -- since Hurricane Katrina (in 2005) alone (the tax incentive program precedes Katrina), most notably *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), the TV series *Treme* (2010-2013) and *NCIS New Orleans* (2014), among many others. This is my local example, but it is replicated all over the world. Already in 2001 (and much highlighted in the 2005 version of *Global Hollywood 2*), Toby Miller and others argued convincingly that "Hollywood's" globality – like that of all multinational

[2] As an aside, one could articulate a similar argument about the centrality of regional music for the articulation of the national in roughly the same period, 1930s-50s.

corporations – necessitated decentralization in order to exploit the cultural work force elsewhere and the new markets of developing countries.[3] Cinema today is in fact transnational and global, while remaining linked to a place. In this new scenario, what has happened to Hollywood-Mexico relations?

Luisela Alvaray has convincingly mapped the national, regional and global waves reconfiguring the patterns of production and distribution of films in Mexico and Latin America since the early 1990s in an essay published in *Cinema Journal*, and in a subsequent essay in *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas.*[4] Indeed the context in which "Mexican" films are produced today is very different from that of the Golden Age or even from that of the 1970s and 80s (Charles Ramírez Berg's "Cinema of Solitude"[5]). This essay traces the decentering of the geographic centers that delimited Hollywood-Mexico cinematic relations and its impact on the representational work of recent films from Mexico.

Shifting Geographies of Representation

If we were to redraw the map of North-South cinematic relations, the lines would now be multiple, crisscrossing and multi-directional. Of course, to the degree that "Hollywood" continues to exert a gravitational pull we would still have to have South-to-North arrows, that is, movement from Mexico to the U.S. However, that trajectory is no longer primarily unidirectional. Consider, for example, the famous case of the "three amigos," which move seamlessly, in both directions. Directors Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo Del Toro have demonstrated the fluidity of transnational cinematic flows and exchanges with a body of work – from *Amores Perros* (2000) to *Birdman* (2014) and beyond -- that is alternatively "Hollywood," "Mexican," and

[3] Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John Mc Murria, Richarrd Maxwell and Tim Wangs (eds), *Global Hollywood 2* (London: British Film Institute, 2004).

[4] Luisela Alvaray, "National, Regional and Global: New Waves of Latin American Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 47, No. 3 (Spring 2008): 48-65 and "Are we global yet? New challenges to defining Latin American cinema', *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas* 8: 1 (2011): 69–86.

[5] Charles Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967-1983* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1992).

"global" and, more often than not, all three. As Laura Podalsky, Luisela Alvaray, Deborah Shaw and other have argued, these new transnational productions have established new paradigms for locality, establishing in many instances a geography of sentiment that exceeds the national, hybridizes the transnational and produces a new glocality.[6] Furthermore, there is also a bilateral exchange in place between these "big-name" Mexican director superstars and popular "indie" directors in the U.S. who work with similar budgets and intellectual cachet. Moreover, they move among the three top "talent" categories, writing, directing and producing a body of work that ranges from "arty" films to big budget Hollywood epics and genre films and from the narrowly local to the explicitly global. They also attempted to establish themselves as producers through their company Cha Cha Chá Films. Created in 2007 in partnership with Universal Pictures and Focus Features (who put up $100 million for a five-picture deal), Cha Cha Chá only produced one film, *Rudo y cursi* (2008), directed by Carlos Cuarón (Guillermo's brother). *Rudo y Cursi* became the third top grossing Mexican film of all time in 2009,[7] and went on to earn almost $12 million in worldwide sales.[8] Unfortunately, the company went bankrupt in 2013. As Del Toro put it, "La abrimos, hicimos *Rudo y cursi*, se cayó la bolsa de valores, se fueron los jefes de la Universal, y se acabó."[9] This has not stopped the three amigos or impeded their highly successful transnational exchanges: Cuarón directed the Oscar-winning *Gravity* (2013), Del Toro *Pacific Rim* (2013) and Iñarritu *Birdman* (2014). With a slightly different bent, actors Diego Luna and Gael García Bernal have also enacted their own transnational and transfunctional flows, especially since they created the production company

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[6] Laura Podalsky, *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011); Deborah Shaw, "Playing Hollywood at its own game?: Bielinski's *Nueve Reinas*", in Deborah Shaw (ed.), *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 67–85.

[7] James Young, "Mexican market grows, ups output," *Variety* March 12, 2009: http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118001175.html?categoryid=3569&cs=1 Accessed April 13, 2014.

[8] "Rudo y Cursi," Box Office Mojo: http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=rudoycursi.htm Accessed April 13, 2014.

[9] Juan Manuel Badillo, "Quebró la productora Cha Cha Chá, de los "Tres amigos" del cine mexicano," *Corre Camara.* http://www.correcamara.com.mx/inicio/int.php?mod=noticias_detalle&id_noticia=4310 Accessed February 10, 2015.

Canana Films in 2005 with the mission "to develop projects that will open doors to Latin-American talent, while telling stories that respect the current context and entity of the country."[10] As of 2015, they had produced 18 feature films and 9 TV serials in collaboration with Canal Once TV.

In addition, we have also witnessed the emergence in Mexico of what we might call more radically independent filmmakers who have established themselves as "niche" directors and are further complicating and or side-stepping this model. I will construct a small, somewhat artificial "corpus" of some of these filmmakers in order to outline how we might begin to chart this differential atlas of contemporary Mexican cinema. This corpus includes, for example, Carlos Reygadas. From *Japón* to *Stellet Licht/Luz Silenciosa* (2007) and *Post tenebras lux* (2012), Reygadas has struck out on a singular art cinema path with extraordinary critical success: *Stellet Licht* won the top awards at some of the most prestigious international film festivals in 2007 and *Post tenebras lux* won the best director award at Cannes in 2013. It also includes Israel Cardenas and Laura Amelia Guzmán, who adopted a radically different, naturalistic and almost documentary approach for their "rural drama" *Cochochi* in 2007 (produced by Canana films). Enrique Rivero is a relative newcomer whose opera prima, Parque Via (2008,) won the Golden Leopard at the Locarno film festival in 2008 and his second film, Mai morire (2012) a special jury prize at Huelva.[11]

In terms of production strategies, these filmmakers have sought resources from a plethora of sources ranging from official Mexican tax credits and financing from domestic independent producers like Canana Films, to international co-production deals with "art house" and commercial backers (the Hubert Bals fund of the Rotterdam Film Festival and Spanish and French television, for example). Overall, these are relatively low-budget films produced with limited technical resources. Nevertheless, these filmmakers have discovered different

[10] http://canana.net/about/sobre-canana/ Accessed February 10, 2015.

[11] In a longer version of this essay, I would also discuss the films of other filmmakers like Amat Escalante (*Heli*, 2013), Pedro Aguilera (who travels between Spain and Mexico), Gerardo Naranjo (*Miss Bala*, 2011), Kyzza Terras (*El lenguaje de los machetes*, 2011), Armando Bo (*El ultimo Elvis*, 2012), and Julián Hernández (*Yo soy la felicidad de este mundo*, 2014).

routes for accessing global markets, albeit with different degrees of success. In the art house market, for example, Reygadas' *Japón* is much better known than the mega-production *Arráncame la vida*l (2008, D. Roberto Sneider), one of the most expensive films ever produced in Mexico. Thematically, they explore worlds that are far from the cinematic clichés of urban violence, chronic corruption, historical exegesis, or lighthearted romantic comedies typical of "mainstream" productions.

Each of these filmmakers and films could constitute a singular trajectory on the cinematic circulation maps, but they illustrate what I am calling, echoing Robert Ray, a "certain tendency"[12] of this other face of the Mexican cinema. This tendency displaces the national center from Mexico City while simultaneously thrusting Mexico into the world, intensely negotiating the intersections of the national and the global. What are the characteristics of this "certain tendency"? I will outline three "tendencies" evidenced within this corpus.

a. **A Certain Tendency towards the Figure of the Director**. There is a persistent aura of self-conscious authoriality surrounding the work of these directors that is strikingly different from that of the "super star" directors (that is, the "three amigos") although all could be considered "global auteurs."[13] Whether film-school trained (mostly at the CUEC but also at the International Film School in Cuba) or the product of career changes (Reygadas was a lawyer, Rivera an engineer), all have generated a vision of themselves as "auteurs" in dialogue with global cinema. In countless interviews, web sites, blogs and DVD "extras," they speak with authority about their influences -- Bresson, Tarkovsky, and Dryer, in the case of Reygadas, for example. What is striking is that they simultaneously manage to articulate themselves as the "source" for the material – the "story" and how it is approached/filmed-- as well as to place it in relation to slices of cinematic history. As a corollary,

[12] Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema: 1930-1980* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1985).
[13] Brian Michael Goss, "*Global Auteurs: Politics in the Films of Almodovar, von Trier, and Winterbottom*. New York: Peter Lang, 2009.

the films of these "auteurs" are also aggressively stylized, that is they assert style as signature and strategy. There is no stylistic choice that is neutral, transparent, or subservient to the narrative. Whether opting for painful verisimilitude, as in Cochochi, a minimalist framing aesthetic, as in Parque Vía, or scintillating lightscapes, as in Stellet Licht, these choices are explicit, sustained and underlined. Furthermore, the style adopted by these films could not be more different from the paradigmatic urban hipness of Amores perros or the interwoven complex storylines of Babel. These are slow, often excruciatingly slow, films with singular locations and narrowly defined characters.

b. **A Certain Tendency towards Actors**: Given how ubiquitous the faces of Diego Luna and Gael García Bernal have become in the "super" Mexican transnational cinema and the constant presence of *telenovela* stars in the commercial cinema, the almost complete absence of professional actors is remarkable within this corpus. Using non-actors in fiction films is, of course, not new. Since the silent cinema there has been a tendency among directors wishing to tell stories with "social dimensions" as Kracauer put it, to seek recourse to non-actors and their aura of authenticity. For Eisenstein it was "typage," for Rossellini and De Sica in post-war Italian Neorealism, it was the "common man," any man. In the New Latin-American cinema non-actors were abundantly used, for example, by Jorge Sanjines and the Grupo Ukamau in Bolivia, among others, especially as witnesses of urgent social problems and as agents of historical memory. However, the use of non-actors is quite different within this corpus. Although they are socially relevant, these films do not explicitly aspire to social change or revolution. Their focus is exploration and contemplation rather than denunciation.

In *Cochochi*, for example, filmmakers Israel Cardenas and Laura Amelia Guzmán "discovered" an indigenous community in the Sierra Tarahumara in northwest Mexico almost by chance (they were in the region for another film shoot) and decided to work with them to try to develop a film project. They visited often,

and based on their observations and growing relationship with the villagers "organically," they developed the story alongside the people who would play themselves as "characters" in an explicit – a visible -- act of fictionalization.[14] Thus, real-life brothers Antonio Lerma Batista and Evaristo Lerma Batista play the two Raramuri brothers and are surrounded by their own friends and family who act, according to the filmmakers, "as they would normally." The filmmakers asked the boys: "What would happen if you lost your grandfather's horse?" Pushing the corporeality of the non-actor to its limits, the film "documents" the process of fictionalization itself and, as I will discuss later, this becomes even more vibrant because of the use of language. However, the filmmakers leave no visible vestige of themselves or of the production process on screen.

In *Parque Via,* the non-actor is Nolberto Coira, a taciturn indigenous man, who plays Beto, the lonely caretaker of an empty mansion in Mexico City that has been empty for a decade and is now for sale. Certainly, he could have been selected for his somewhat stereotypical indigenous looks, but what the film also tells us via a title in its opening sequence, is that the story is actually inspired by Coira's own life. Thus from the outset we know that the non-actor is acting himself, his very own life story, which becomes very problematic. After a slow moving 80 minutes or so, which are reminiscent of Chantal Ackerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) given the emphasis on the unrelenting monotony of housework and the solitude of this

[14] The filmmakers maintained a pictorial blog during the production. See http://cochochidramarural.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2006-01-01T00:00:00-08:00&updated-max=2007-01-01T00:00:00-08:00&max-results=50 Accessed February 19, 2015.

man's life, the film throws us a curveball ending that puts into question the certainties through which we related to Beto/Nolberto.

In Carlos Reygadas' *Japón* the interplay among actor, character and audience is even more complex. There is only one professional actor in the film (Alejandro Ferretis) and we never learn the name of his character. He drives from Mexico City to the rural countryside in the state of Hidalgo with the intention of committing suicide.

For the first half of the film the camera occupies his physical space, literally making us identify with his physical presence: we see, hear, and walk through/with him. The camera is him, therefore, we are him too; when he limps, the camera limps; what he knows, sees, and hears is all we know, see and

hear. When he listens to classical music with a portable music player with headphones, the music is also all that we hear. This is a very extreme subjective camera, not in a flaky way like the film noir classic *Lady in the Classic*, but in a profoundly unsettling way since, after all, we quickly learn that this is a character who plans to kill himself.

Everyone else in the film is a non-professional actor. However, these are not non-actors who have been carefully trained to "act" (as in the case of Beto in *Parque Via*, or the children in *Cochochi*). They are so non-professional that they stare at the camera/the protagonist, say hello to it and even comment about the filmmakers while being filmed ("they didn't bring us anything to eat and drink"). The other central protagonist is Ascen, an octogenarian played by real villager Magdalena Flores. In a DVD extra Reygadas explains that he knew Ascen had to be played by Magdalena when he first met her, so there was a certain typage involved in the "casting." However, what is most remarkable is that he convinced

this octogenarian villager (and her adult children) to participate in the film with full knowledge that there would be scenes with complete nudity and explicit sex. The protagonist's growing sexual fascination with Ascen is what begins and finally ruptures the relationship between spectator and protagonist. The intimacy previously established becomes uncomfortable when he transforms the act of cleaning a gun into masturbation and even more so when we witness his erotic dreams about Ascen. The ultimate rupture between protagonist and viewer occurs at the inevitable moment when he asks Ascen for sex. As if sensing the outrageousness of the proposal, the narrative/camera leaves the protagonist to focus on Ascen's daily rituals omnisciently. When we witness the

inevitable staging of their sexual encounter, it is with acute embarrassment, shared by all, omniscient camera included.

Japón constantly reminds us that the characters on screen are played by people and that even actors are "people." Even the protagonist reluctantly looks directly at the camera during the sex scene, acting like a non-actor. In a telling interview, Reygadas explained the filming of the sex scene:

> I knew Magdalena would be struggling not to do it, and I knew he would struggle to get her in position and, when he thought he was going to penetrate her, would be very nervous. Of course my plan was that when they were come together I would say, 'Cut, that's enough.'
>
> But why make them go through all that?
>
> Because I wanted that struggle to exist onscreen between the characters.[15]

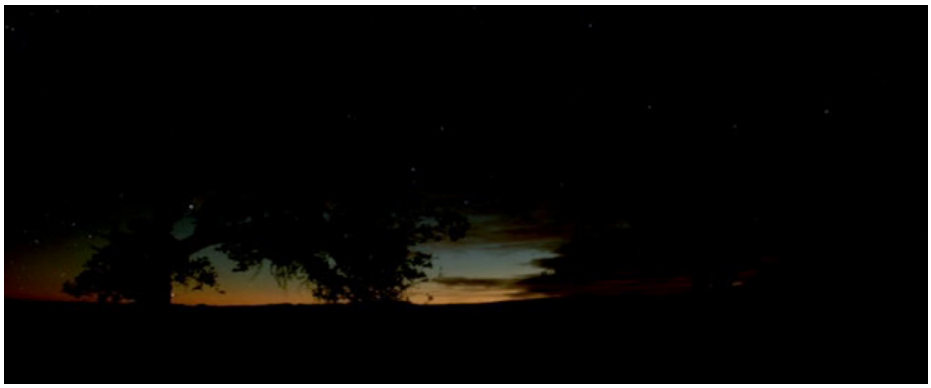
What Reygadas enacts in *Japón* through this complex interplay of being and acting is a profound disturbance of the mimetic value of the representation: after starting out as a fiction shot like a documentary, he crisscrosses modes of representations and expectations to end up with a complex disruption of the process of documenting the production of a fiction.

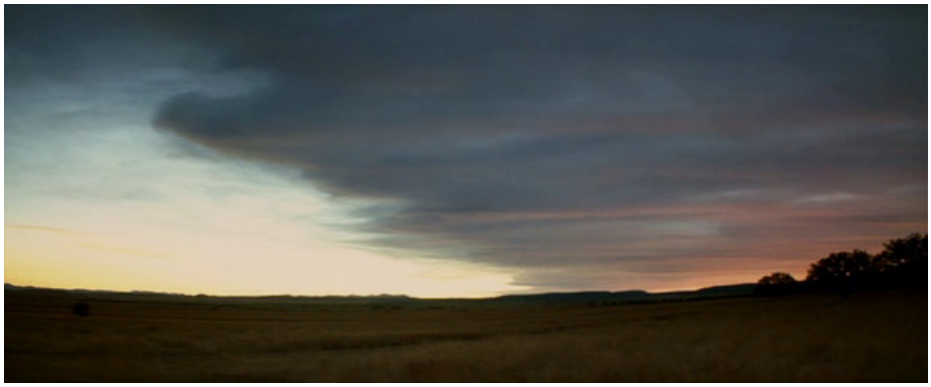
c. **A Certain Tendency towards Place**: Within this heuristic corpus of films and filmmakers, it is striking to note the reformulation of the regional as place rather than landscape. Golden-age Mexican cinema used the regional amply, but typically as landscape and local color– in other words as a backdrop for narratives and actions that often could have taken place elsewhere. Cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa certainly produced the most iconic images of a cinematic "Mexico" of puffy clouds and maguey cacti. To the degree that regional specificity played a narrative role in the Golden-age cinema, it tended to be folkloric: the *jarabe tapatío* in *comedias rancheras*, for example. Instead, in these films the regional becomes the privi-

[15] Demetrios Matheau, "A Good Place to Die," *Sight and Sound*, 13, no. 2 (2003): 12.

leged space for the deployment of very place-specific narratives and subjectivities. In fact, their aberrant and insistent locality is what in turns seems to guarantee their globality. Were we to map these locations we would need place markers throughout the national territory, from Matamoros to Hidalgo, Chihuahua and Yucatán. These markers would also need to signify not only a physical locale, but also the communities within them. Centripetally, these films unveil other facets, faces, and narrative voices for a nation imagined outside of the typical parameters of "Mexicanidad." Consider, for example, the villagers in *Cochochi*, who speak Raramuri almost exclusively among themselves. The film subtitles their conversations, but in a doubling movement, as we read the subtitles and hear the characters utter sounds that are beautifully strange (in other words, as we absorb the grain if the voices), we can also see that the children hesitate before speaking: they too are "translating" from the Spanish script to Raramuri. Both the characters and the spectators are inscribed in an explicit moment of the production of a difference.

Stellet Licht presents us with yet another set of faces, voices, and worldviews of this re-territorialized nation. The film is set in a Mennonite community of German descendants who speak Plattdeutsche (a 16th century German dialect). In typical Reygadas style, however, things are not as simple as they seem to be in the surface. This particular community in Chihuahua does exist, but not all the people who appear in the film are originally from there: several of the non-actors were "imported" from other Mennonite communities in Canada, Germany, and other parts of Mexico. Some of the non-actors are related, but not all. Despite the attention to an almost documentary verisimilitude (language, costumes, settings), this is neither an ethnographic record of a "strange" community within the nation or a neorealist experiment, but a complex psychodrama that echoes through space. *Stellet Licht* underscores the community's otherness within the nation by framing its narrative with excruciatingly beautiful four-minute long takes of a slow dawn and gradual dusk, establishing this space almost as a separate, timeless world ruled by different forces.





Whereas in *Cochochi* the community is inscribed in the larger territory beyond its own blurry border by the radio (used to convey and receive messages from other villages), in *Stellet Licht* that function is, paradoxically,

served by television. Officially not allowed in the Mennonite community, TV is watched clandestinely with extraordinarily silent relish (including a bizarre performance by Belgian-French singer Jacques Brel). Indeed, silence in *Cochochi* and *Stellet Licht* is as important and evocative as the deliberate voices and "foreign" languages.

Another characteristic of this certain tendency is that, beyond the regionalization of the national imaginary, even those films that are set in the megalopolis of Mexico City move away from the streets and its crowds and violence to interior spaces. In *Parque Via*, for example, the empty mansion that Beto takes care of is in Mexico City, but it is as foreign and isolated a space as the Sierra Tarahumara in *Cochochi* or the Mennonite community in Cuauhtemoc, Chihuaha in *Stellet licht*. With regards to place, then, the representational centrality of Mexico City is displaced and decentered within this corpus and the resulting imagined community seems to be being built out of molecular blocks rather than the hegemonizing pull of the metropolis.

This small corpus of films problematizes the typical parameters of globalization arguments, unveiling a Mexican "other" cinema that is insistently local in form and content, and that begins to redefine the boundaries of the Mexican imagined community. At the same time, these are films that have found alternative routes to new global markets and to other interlocutors outside the nation state. Instead of pointing to globality within the circumscribed nation, it is their aggressive locality that has allowed these films to circulate globally too.

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