

**(Dis)Affection and Recognition in Millennial Urban
Melodrama: *Transnational Perspectives by Women Filmmakers***

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Abstract

This essay explores new directions taken by urban social melodrama directed by women in Brazil, Mexico, Iran, and Switzerland at the turn of the 21st century, a period marked by the sudden state divestment of film agencies and distribution (in Brazil and Mexico), coupled with economic instability, political scandals, and attempts at reform. Each of these countries continues to host a robust art cinema in which serious questions are posed regarding the future of the nation-state, gender relations, and the fate of those left behind, or impaired by a neoliberal development model. Rather than cast these questions in epic proportions, or bold social allegories writ large, several cineastes – Tata Amaral, Maricarmen de Lara, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, and Stina Werenfels – have chosen to focus instead on disaffection and alternative sources of recognition within intimate relationships unfolding among the working and aspiring middle classes. My comparison of their films focuses on formal attributes, characterization, uses of architecture and domestic space, and intermediality, all of which contribute to the reworking of screen melodrama while creating opportunities for new subjectivities to emerge.

Keywords: feminismo, melodrama, transnacional

This essay is an attempt to delineate and assess the interventions made by women's filmmaking at the turn of the millennium in the arenas of screen melodrama, urban representation, and global modernity, especially as it has affected ethical conduct and vectors of affect. The specific films I will be considering, tracing a line of comparison from Latin America, to Europe, to the Middle East, are *Um céu de estrelas*, dir. Tata Amaral (Brazil, 1996), *En el país de no pasa nada*, dir. Mari Carmen de Lara (Mexico, 2000), *Nachbeben (Going Private)*, dir. Stina Wehrenfels (Switzerland, 2006), and *Under the Skin of the City*, dir. Rakhshan Bani-Etemad (Iran, 2004). Much like the spate of dystopian urban films that burst onto the international scene, such as *Amores perros* (dir. Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000), *Cidade de Deus* (dir. Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, 2002), *Taxi* (dir. Carlos Saura, 1996), *Terra estrangeira* (dir. Walter Salles, 1997), *Juventude em marcha* (dir. Pedro Costa, 2006), these lesser known films convey a sense of disenchantment with the ways in which modernity has played out in developing economies, commenting on what, for the most part, are neoliberal policies as they are experienced in day-to-day life. They also highlight the ways in which cities usually considered to be on the periphery have been transformed into "global cities," either by capital investment and trade, (e)migration, or imaginary processes fueled by the circulation of popular cultural forms, or all three. And they share a preoccupation with the psychosocial future of the next generation.

Following a pattern of implosion (and true to melodramatic form), the effects of violence and instability in the sociopolitical sphere tend to be expressed as violence and disaffection within the family and intimate relationships. Yet unlike several male-directed urban dramas, these films point to a place where affect and hope can be rekindled. Following Stuart Cunningham's discussion of melodramatic violence, violence takes a personal rather than impersonal form, and tends toward disintegrative-integrative possibilities in plot resolution.² The probing of domestic space and intimate relationships leads to observations and interventions that are refracted outward into the still restrictive public sphere.

² See Stuart Cunningham, "The 'Force-Field' of Melodrama," in Robert Stam and Toby Miller, eds., *Film and Theory: An Anthology* (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 198-99.

My purpose in comparing these films is not necessarily to arrive at a new millennial concept of feminine cinematic aesthetics (echoing the efforts of the eighties)³, nor even at a definition of melodrama as a transnational genre. Contemporary film melodrama hardly has the cohesive discursive profile or audience following of, for example, a genre such as the horror film; and its current transnational iteration is best located in the *telenovela*, as many studies have shown.⁴ Instead, I wish to foreground the ways in which women directors and their feminine protagonists, availing themselves of the shifting sociodynamics of the urban sphere and referencing the global, have intervened by dramatizing patriarchal structures of complicity and subjugation and narrating masculine failure, while creating spaces where oppositional voices can be heard. All of these films make reference and appeal to melodrama as a feature of popular sensibility and as an effective tool for exposing rifts and tensions in the socius as a result of the expansion of global capital and labor migration. Yet, as I aim to show, the mode itself, especially in its televisual manifestations, can be transformed into an object of critique, beginning with the refusal to adhere to conventional resolutions of plot conflicts, yet also through innovative uses of dramatic space, intermediality, and generic hybridity. My hope is that, in adopting a transnational, contemporaneous frame with which to consider these films, a dynamic of “mediation” (in the sense conceived by Irigaray) can be introduced, whereby a “space of horizontal engagement between women” can be forged, a “space in which differences between women might also be explored.”⁵ Specifically, I will be tracing the ways in which states of (dis)affection in relation to the patriarchal bind are counterbalanced by actions and interpellations promoting recognition among female characters, and in turn, between film subjects and film viewers.

³ See for example, Teresa de Lauretis, “Rethinking Women’s Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory,” 127-148 in *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

⁴ See for example, Robert C. Allen, ed. *To be continued... Soap Operas Around the World* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Diana Ríos and Mari Castañeda, eds., *Soap Operas and Telenovelas in the Digital Age: Global Industries and New Audiences* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011); Ilan Stavens, ed. *Telenovelas* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010), and Catherine L. Benamou, “Televisual Melodrama in an Era of Transnational Migration,” 139-171 in Darlene J. Sadlier, ed., *Latin American Melodrama* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

⁵ Caroline Bainbridge, *A Feminine Cinematics: Luce Irigaray, Women and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 47.

(Recognition involves an acknowledgment of familiarity or shared experience that assists in the construction of identity, and it can occur “prior” to alignment or identification with screen subjects in the viewing process.)⁶

A rapidly evolving context: While a few general patterns can be observed in global cities, such as the feminization of labor, the displacement and decline of working-class neighborhoods, and the proliferation of what Arjun Appadurai has called mediascapes that take different cultural and linguistic forms⁷ as a result of transnational migration and global media flows, the processes associated with globalization and its dominant ideological correlate, neoliberalism, have affected each of these countries in different ways, differences that are reflected in the dramatic conflicts of the films themselves. Concurrent with the most recent wave of global transformation, there have been important changes in film policy, especially in Mexico and Brazil. The early 1990s witnessed a period of sharp disinvestment by the state in film production and distribution, followed by a “mixed” model involving some state-funded coproductions or, in Brazil, productions funded through tax incentives given to private enterprise. In Mexico, following the deregulation of ticket prices and reduction of screen quotas in 1992 (which, added to the dissolution of the national theatrical distribution network, increased the presence of foreign, and especially U.S. cinema), two state funds, IMCINE’s FOPROCINE and FIDECINE were created in the late 1990s to support art and commercial cinema, respectively; whereas in 1995 only 31.2% of films were produced with state support, by 2000 this had risen to 60.7%⁸. These state initiatives have

⁶ For an interesting discussion of recognition in relation to casting and protagonism on television, see Marie-France Malonga, “Les stratégies identitaires des minorités noires face à la télévision française,” 57-71 in Tristan Mattelart, ed. *Médias, migrations et cultures transnationales* (Brussels: Éditions De Boeck Université, 2007).

⁷ “Mediascapes refer both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information... which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media.” Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 35.

⁸ For an excellent discussion of Mexico’s fluctuating film policy under several presidential sexenios leading up to and beyond the new millennium, see Misha Maclaird, *Aesthetics and Politics in the Mexican Film Industry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 22-23, 27-33. See also Michael T. Martin and Bruce Paddington, “Mexican Cinema and the “Generation of the 1990s” Filmmakers: A Conversation with Francisco Athié,” *Framework* 45/1 (Spring 2004): 118.

been paralleled by privately financed productions as directors such as the “three amigos” (Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón, and Alejandro González Iñárritu) began to work in Hollywood. In Brazil, following the dissolution of the state film agency Embrafilme by presidential decree in March 1990, the creation of a new Audio-visual Law (Lei do Audiovisual) in 1993 led to a resurgence or *retomada* of Brazilian cinema from 1994 onward by encouraging private investment, and in 1999 direct investment of the state was restored through the Programa Mais Cinema. From an internal market share of only 3% in 1995-1996, Brazilian cinema recovered a share of 10% in 2000⁹. The deficit suffered by the cinema in Brazil and Mexico in the early 1990s led not only to an influx of foreign product but to the fortification of television and related media, which contributed, in both contexts, to an expanded role of television in film production (exemplified by Televisine in Mexico and Globo Filmes in Brazil). On the other hand, state initiatives in these countries led to a type of globalization through the introduction of the Ibermedia coproduction program in 1997, which not only opened Portugal and Spain as potential distribution markets, but led to the recruitment and inclusion of Iberian (especially Spanish) talent in films coproduced in Latin America. Together, these trends – television as a distribution vehicle and source of funding, and an expanded transatlantic Hispanophone and Lusophone circuit – have posed complex questions for what is meant by “national cinema” in Brazil and Mexico¹⁰. It is worth noting that, during this period, women’s formal participation in politics also grew: women’s share of seats in single or lower houses of parliament in Latin America increased from around 9% in 1990 to 13% in 2000, and in the upper house in Mexico and Brazil by 2010, it had reached 32.8% and 16% respectively.¹¹

⁹ For an exposition and analysis of Brazilian film policy since the Collor presidency, see José Álvaro Moisés, “A New Policy for Brazilian Cinema,” in Lúcia Nagib, ed., *The New Brazilian Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 10-17.

¹⁰ On this point, see Eduardo Valente, “Temos local na aldeia global?” in Eduardo Valente, João Luiz Vieira, and Ruy Gardnier, eds., *Cinema Brasileiro Anos 90: 9 Questões* (Rio de Janeiro: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, 2001), 81-82.

¹¹ See Mala Htun and Jennifer Piscopo, “Women and Politics and Policy in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum Working Papers on Women in Politics*, No. 2, New York: Social Science Research Council, 2014, 7-8.

For its part, the Swiss film industry has been steadily growing since the new millennium, in spite of a trilingual market and competition from elsewhere in Europe: whereas the domestic market share in the 1990s was only between 1 and 3%, it rose above 5% in 2003.¹² As of 2012, the Swiss industry was producing twenty-five feature films and forty documentaries per year, not including 60 documentaries produced in cooperation with Swiss television SRG SSR.¹³ Switzerland's coproductions with other Francophone, Germanophone, and Italoophone countries in Europe and with Canada¹⁴ echo the efforts of Ibermedia to utilize language as a platform for global distribution. I am less able to comment on the state of filmmaking in Iran, although as Hamid Naficy and other have shown, the growth of exilic filmmaking has helped to foster a transnational perspective, one that is reflected implicitly in the work of Rakshan Bani-Etemad, and that, along with television production, has been beneficial to women's filmmaking in general.

What effect, if any, have these trends had on women's filmmaking?

While women have been steadily producing cinema in Brazil since the 1970s, the *retomada* injected new energy into women's filmmaking, as analyzed at a specially organized conference, *Mulheres da Retomada*, held at the Roger Thayer Stone Center at Tulane University in New Orleans (2011) and in several recent publications. By the end of the *retomada* (around 2000), women directors were contributing to nearly a fifth of Brazilian film production and 45 women directed feature-length films between 1990 and 2010¹⁵. Tata Amaral was among the new generation of women directors that emerged during the *retomada*, and her film *Um Céu de estrelas* (*Starry Sky*) was her first feature-length work. The film, adapted from the homonymous novel by São Paulo bard Fernando Bonassi, effectively spans the distance between 1991 (the year the novel was published),

¹² Micha Schiwow, "Editorial," *Swiss Audiovisual Guide* 06/07, 1, http://www.swiss-audiovisualguide.ch/libraries.files/sag_2006_2.pdf, accessed 3/14/15.

¹³ Ivo Kummer, "Editorial," *Swiss Audiovisual Guide* 2013/14, 1, http://www.swiss-audiovisualguide.ch/libraries.files/SAG_2013_web.pdf, accessed 3/14/15.

¹⁴ "Filming in Switzerland: Production Service Companies," *Swiss Audiovisual Guide* 2013/14, 7.

¹⁵ Catherine L. Benamou and Leslie L. Marsh, "Women Filmmakers and Citizenship in Brazil, from *Bossa Nova* to the *retomada*," in Parvati Nair and Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla, eds. *Hispanic and Lusophone Women Filmmakers* (Manchester University Press, 2013), 65.

and a general climate of disillusionment during the highly inflationary years of the Collor presidency, and the mid-1990s when new economic and cultural policies were beginning to take effect under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Although we obtain an overview of the neighborhood through the short *Mooca* (dir. Francisco Cesar Filho) that was joined to Amaral's film upon its release, Amaral, following Bonassi, confines the action to the modest dwelling that Dalva, the protagonist, shares with her mother. The decline of the neighborhood following de- and re-industrialization,¹⁶ is echoed implicitly in the progressive decline of the household that we are about to witness. The 16mm shooting style and rough editing in patches, along with the *bregue* décor and gritty sounds of the city offscreen (which, as Charlotte Gleghorn has noted, form a "sound bridge" with Cesar Filho's short)¹⁷ evoke the hardboiled language and spare descriptions of the setting in Bonassi's novel. Unlike Bonassi, however, Amaral shifts the focalization of the narrative from the male protagonist, simply known as "Ele" in Bonassi's novel, to the female protagonist, Dalva, and the protagonists are also immediately named. This is an astute move in narrative strategy, given the central theme of a woman trying to emigrate and vectors of gendered violence in the film, not to mention the broadening of possibilities of recognition for women spectators. In the opening scene, we see the young hairdresser, Dalva (Leona Cavalli), packing her suitcase to be able to leave for Miami, escaping a lack of career opportunity, her filial obligations to her mother, and what has the makings of an abusive relationship to her fiancé Vítor (Paulo Vespúcio) in São Paulo. The claustrophobic configuration of dramatic space, *chiaroscuro* lighting, and palpable tensions arising from a frustrated relationship between the characters do not bode well for these plans. From the standpoint of masculine protagonism, *Um Céu de estrelas* follows a pattern in contemporary Brazilian cinema, as Ismail Xavier has noted, of "characters who have their minds set in the past and are obsessed by long-lasting plans of revenge and aggressive ruminations."¹⁸ When

¹⁶ See Charlotte Gleghorn, "The Dystopian City: Gendered Interpretations of the Urban in *Um céu de estrelas/A Starry Sky* (Tata Amaral, 1996) and *Vagón Fumador/Smokers Only* (Véronica Chen, 2001), 228.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁸ Ismail Xavier, "Brazilian Cinema in the 1990s: The Unexpected Encounter and the Resentful Character," in Lúcia Nagib, ed., *The New Brazilian Cinema*, 55.

Vítor, an unemployed steelworker, arrives on Dalva's doorstep, purportedly in search of reconciliation after an estrangement, he reacts strongly to Dalva's travel preparations, first trying to assert his masculine authority (she tries to placate him by cooking an egg for him), and then, raises the stakes on her show of devotion by turning a gun on himself. Even as the protagonists seem to be caught in a static limbo of despondence and disaffection, we are aware of time passing as the rooms begin to darken and the sounds of traffic continue outside. After arriving home, Dalva's mother eventually cowers in the bathroom, where she is fatally shot as Vítor goes into a fit of rage. Alarmed at what they have noticed as a scuffle inside the house, the neighbors alert the police, who try to draw Vítor outside to defuse the confrontation. A local news team has also gathered in response, and the television, turned on, allows Vítor and Dalva to witness the scene live, from outside the house. Before anyone can emerge unscathed, however, the course of events implodes as Dalva's mother (television actress Néa Simões) expires and Dalva turns the gun on Vítor. The spectator is left to contemplate the mismatch between two imperatives, that of intervening in a domestic dispute, entangled with that of reporting violent incidents as they unfold, and that of restoring and undoing intimate relations by force. As Dalva stumbles into the field of the TV camera's vision, we become painfully aware of the lack of a public sphere in which she may pursue her aspirations, narrate her grief. There is thus a noticeable contrast between the optics and social yield of this film and the nationally oriented cinema of Leon Hirzman in *Eles não usam black tie* (1981), a family melodrama set in a neighborhood like Mooca in which intergenerational tensions regarding participation in a metalworkers' strike are subsumed under the pull of collective action, on the one hand, and the globally oriented visitations (whether prurient or sympathetic) of deeply, yet inexplicably conflicted households in the *cinema da favela* (*Cidade de Deus*, or Carlos Diegues' *Orfeu*, 1999), on the other.

As in Brazil, the reinjection of state support in film production on the heels of the NAFTA-related decline in Mexico fostered the emergence of a new generation of women filmmakers¹⁹, while providing various sources of

¹⁹ Among the new directors are Yulene Olaizola, Paula Markovitch, Elisa Miller, Iria Gómez, Natalia Almada, and Mariana Chenilla; see "Destacan mujeres cineastas en México: Schneider," 22 July, 2012, <http://www.informador.com.mx/entretenimiento/2012/391637/6/destacan-mujeres-cineastas-en-mexico-schneider.htm> accessed 3/11/15.

support for the productions of seasoned directors such as María Novaro, who completed *El jardín de Eden* in 1994 and *Sin dejar huella* in 2000, Maryse Sistach (*Perfume de violetas*, 2001), and Maricarmen de Lara, who directed *En el País de no pasa nada*, 2000 after a series of shorts and documentaries, all of whom began their careers in the eighties. *En el País de no pasa nada*, de Lara's first fictional feature-length film, begins as a melodrama, and ends by placing a twist on romantic comedy, a genre that acquired considerable popularity in Mexico in the 1990s as an attempt was made to appeal to film-going middle-class audiences in the wake of the genre's recent success in the United States.²⁰ Rather than slip into hetero-normative social conformity that might accompany such a generic shift, de Lara retains the dramatic edge of the film until the finish line, thereby providing the possibility of a metacritique of melodramatic codes that is fueled by discursive hybridity, as pathos is juxtaposed with fantasy and satire. Interpersonal and creative performativity, rather than asynchronous sound-image relations (as in *Um céu*) becomes the vehicle through which these codes are both invoked and defused. Like *Amores perros*, released the same year, the film navigates urban streets to reveal an accident and an uncanny coincidence: a failed carjacking of a highly placed executive, Enrique Laguardia (Fernando Luján) in Mexican international trade leads to a stray bullet puncturing the tire of a taxi driven by the husband, Pedro (Álvaro Guerrero), of a cabaret performer, Yadir (Carmen Delgado), leading in turn to the total damage of the vehicle. This scene establishes the degree of social inequality that will fuel conflicts and paths of resistance among some of the characters: as Enrique drives on to fetch his wife, Elena (Julieta Egurrola) for a social event, the actual (working-class) victims of the shooting are questioned, rather than helped by the police. Enrique does not get off easily, however: his abuses (selling contaminated milk for export) and excesses (absences caused by an extramarital affair) are investigated by his secretary, Luisa (Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez) and Gerardo (Arturo Ríos), a disgruntled IT expert who has just been laid off. Luisa unveils an embezzlement scheme, which is eventually leaked

²⁰ See Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism: Transforming Mexican Cinema 1988-2012* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), 67-104.

to the press, Gerardo delivers compromising video footage of Enrique with a Spanish performer, Rita (María Isasi), outside the cabaret to Elena, who initially mistakes the tape for one of her virtual reality “empowerment” videos. Elena seeks out Rita, only to become intoxicated during a visit with Rita’s fellow rock band members. Meanwhile, Yadir and Pedro carry out a plot to kidnap Enrique in an attempt to resolve their economic difficulties, and take him to the outskirts of Mexico City, where he is held hostage in the shack of a former guerrilla fighter. In his absence, Rita escorts the giddy Elena, whom, she discovers is the daughter of a major music producer, through the city center to her home. Enrique’s boss sends the company henchman to locate the kidnappers’ hideout. In the scuffle that ensues, it is the henchman who dies, and Enrique decides to dispose of the body in such a way that it will appear as if he himself has been killed. After witnessing his own funeral, Enrique attempts to contact Elena, to no avail: he is alive, but has lost his job and his identity. Elena has transformed her home into a recording studio, and is now producing recordings of Rita’s musical performances with her band. The film thus proclaims a (momentary) triumph of feminine solidarity and an ethics of mutual empowerment over corrupt, self-serving, and exploitative patriarchal structures. Concomitantly, the plot resolution portends a new, more constructive type of transnationalism – a techno-savvy transnationalism authored by women – over the corrupt and fraudulent trade deals that can only damage Mexico’s international image as purveyor of basic goods.

Reconfigurations of urban and domestic space: Whereas Dalva in *Um céu* is shown doubly entrapped within a dwelling she is trying to leave behind – first by those closest to her and then by the media and the Law, with the opportunities and travails of the city beyond reach, public urban space in *En el país de no pasa nada* is portrayed as compromised by intrigues, interpersonal crime, accidents, swindles (as when a poor mother is given some of the contaminated milk for her family as “charity”), until the moment that Elena, savoring her freedom from self-imposed confinement, rides aimlessly with Rita in a rickshaw through the streets of downtown Mexico City. Urban transitivity seems to be contingent not upon a transcendent, roving camera eye (*Cidade de Deus*, *Orfeu*, *Bus 174*, dir. José Padilha and Felipe Lacerda, 2002), but upon the

devir, or emergent subjectivity (Guattari)²¹, of the female protagonist(s). Of equal interest is the way in which this devir seems attached to the reconfiguration of domestic space: if the living room is a site of encroachment by the forces that constrain Dalva (it's where the resentful Vítor disrupts her departure and the television set places their dispute in the public eye), the foyer in Elena's more privileged home is a stage where she can symbolically tear Enrique to shreds by pitching his cutup clothes from the second floor. In both films, the bathroom is a site of conflict and strife (as in Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's *Intimidades de un cuarto de baño* (1991), the bedroom is a safe haven where personal fantasies (rather than sex) can take flight, and the kitchen, a place of possible conciliation in *Um céu...* (the frying of an egg), is curiously absent from the *mise-en-scène* in *En el país...*, relegated to the toils of Elena's maid Rogelia (Elena Olivares), who brings nourishment and home remedies to Elena's bedroom after her deception by Enrique. Thus, while both films rely, like most film melodrama, on domestic space as a signifying space as well as the locale for most of the action, the starkly dystopian figuration in *Um céu...* and the irreverent, increasingly mediated use in *En el país...* favor a distancing from the diegesis and a disruption in the performance of gendered subjectivity, a disruption that isn't fully articulated, and hence isn't "resolved," in either film. In all four films, there is a blurring of the boundaries of public and domestic space, intensifying the possibilities for social critique and opening the way to historical representation.

Intermediality and remediation: Just as importantly, in these films, the commentary on the fragility of social relations and the exclusionary (or at least the very elusive) dynamic of the globalized economy is closely tied to a self-reflexive portrayal of the influence of electronic media on both the cinema and the construction of gendered subjectivity, an apparatic intervention that makes it impossible to divorce the consideration of the textual (diegetic) universe from the wider sociopolitical context. The cinema that binds the text cohabits the frame – at times collides – with electronic media, some of which are used

²¹ Félix Guattari, with Suely Rolnik. *Micropolítica: Cartografias do Desejo*. Petrópolis, RJ: Editora Vozes, 1986.

for surveillance purposes. While this intermedial copresence introduces the possibility of multiple temporalities and navigations of diegetic space; it also poses the question of the gendering of spectatorship in relation to each of these media. At key points in the plot, electronic and digital media (a television monitor showing live news in *Um céu* and *Under the Skin of the City*, CGI and handheld amateur video in *En el país*, and a webcam in *Nachbeben*) make intrusions into the *mise-en-scène*, refocusing our attention, if not on a separate spatiotemporal realm, an exit into the public sphere, on the limits of characters' consciousness, designating a meaningful blind spot.

One way or another, the women protagonists of these films have broken out of the existential – and by extension, narrative – bind they initially found themselves in, yet there are lingering questions regarding available and chosen means of communication and cultural production and consumption: how are the neighborhood and city mediated, and for whom? How reliable can telephones be if there is no sustaining fiber in intimate relations? How gratifying can video be as a medium for building a surrogate self? As Abril Trigo has observed, “consumption, and particularly the consumption of symbolic goods and cultural services, has become the engine of the economy as well as its main indicator.”²² With the transition to the new millennium, this aspect of global urban life is brought physically and psychically to the cinematic foreground in Stina Werenfels' *Nachbeben*. As in *Um céu de estrelas*, *Nachbeben* follows the Aristotelian formula of having the action – the exposure of simmering conflicts (of interest) and consequent eruption of violence – within a 24-hour period. Set in a suburban split-level home on the outskirts of Zürich, the narrative follows a crisis experienced an investment banker, HP (Michael Neuenschwander) and his wife, Karin (Susanne-Marie Wrage) as they host a dinner party at which HP's boss, Philipp (Georg Scharegg), his wife Sue (Bettina Stucky), and infant daughter are present, as well as Gutzeler (Leonardo Nigro), a new hire and, it is gradually revealed, HP's personal and professional rival. Nothing is materially lacking at this gathering – champagne, wine and hard liquor flow freely, there

²² Abril Trigo, “Afterword,” in Richard Young and Amanda Holmes, eds., *Cultures of the City: Mediating Identities in Urban Latin/o America* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 200.

are more than enough shish-kebabs for the grill, and the characters play with wind-up toys to a soundtrack of French disco, hip hop, and American R&B; yet it is soon evident that the temporarily expanded menagerie is in disarray. HP, on the verge of closing negotiations for a large and difficult account, is physically collapsing under the stress, and isolated from his wife and son owing to the added pressure of social performance. There is disaffection between Karin and HP, as well as between Philipp and Sue, exacerbated by the flirtation of the younger, spryer Gutzeler with Karin, an aspiring graphic artist, and the sudden revelation of an affair between Philipp and HP and Karin's Danish *au pair* Birthe (Olivia Frolich), whose next step is to work with a NGO in São Paulo. After efforts to catch Philipp's attention by telephone fail, Birthe threatens to present his wife Sue with the facts, to which Philippe responds with the offer of cash for her silence. Repulsed by the suggestion of a mercenary relationship, Birthe publicly confronts and slaps Philippe, while HP and Philippe end up in fisticuffs. The proceedings have been recorded on the webcam of HP and Karin's solitary teenage son, Max (Mikki Levy), who has gained access via electronic eavesdropping to Birthe's anguish and his parents' estrangement. Aside from corporate agism (HP is a mid-level executive whose displacement by the motorcycle riding Gutzeler marks a career reversal), and the shift from "traditional" business ethics, whereby company loyalty is rewarded, to a fluid and elusive, neoliberal "all options are on the table" model, the film underscores the results of interpellation by, and ingestion of, global corporate culture and aspirations: social alienation (HP, Max) and human interchangeability (HP, Birthe), rather than agency and fulfillment. Although Werenfels does not address migration to the same degree as other European-based filmmakers (Fassbinder, Armendáriz, Saura, Costa, Frears, Allouache), her inclusion of the *au pair*, English as a *lingua franca*, and a Romansh actor (Negri), speaks to the ways in which the global and heightened awareness of pluricultural environments are leaving their imprint in and through Switzerland, even as the film industry attempts to address the nation's own cultural diversity. As the Locarno film festival directors have stated, the public piazza screenings at that festival are designed to reflect the degree to which Switzerland has "at least

three or four souls and a plurality of cultures.”²³ By repopulating the extended domestic space, Werenfels disallows a retreat from this wider sphere, which suburban life might stand for.²⁴

As in *Um céu* and *En el país*, the small screen weaves its way into the *mise-en-scène* both as an object of popular consumption, and a means of remediation: portions of the film’s plot are only available to us through electronic footage, whether live television broadcast (*Um céu*), handi-cam (*En el país*), or webcam (*Nachbeben*), which distracts us from the primary diegesis and heightens our awareness of the voyeuristic positioning of the TV crew (*Um céu*), Rosales, as former employee of Enrique (*En el país*), and Max (*Nachbeben*). Paradoxically, this remediation and the gap in representation created by intermediality provides us with social insight even as the aesthetic incommensurability of film and video (for example, the webcam images in *Nachbeben* are composited to the point of distortion in color and form, even abstraction) deters us from fixating (as we might habitually be prone to do) on the electronic media. While the crew outside of Dalva’s home is a familiar scene to the Brazilian television viewer, its juxtaposition with the slower pace of distressing scenes inside the house provokes reflection on how young women like Dalva are ill-served by these media, which only visit neighborhoods like Mooca in the wake of misfortune and disaster. Essential to the tragedy of this film is that Dalva’s own drama becomes unwittingly coopted by local television. Indeed an important marker of Enrique and Elena’s social privilege in *En el país* is that they are able to create parallel lives when the lives they have built for themselves prove too constraining or oppressive as evidenced in the virtual reality videos Elena subscribes to, which provides her with an illusion of individual power and a source of sublimation. And while Max, in *Nachbeben*, has clearly mastered all the skills needed to navigate the digital universe, he is only able to communicate through the act of *recording*, rather than speaking or writing.

²³ Carlo Chatrian, “Line-up” Program for the 66th Festival del film Locarno, 7-17 August, 2013, Locarno, Switzerland.

²⁴ On suburbs as “defensive, possessive” spaces exclusive of “strangers,” see David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 129.

The Partition and the Façade: Beyond gesturing towards cultural and linguistic plurality in her film, Werenfels provides us with a microcosmic view of cultural and international inequities within Europe. She achieves this through the use of partitions – unlike Max who is able to “see” into the party while remaining at a comfortable distance from adult tensions and violence, Birthe’s retreat to her room means that she is only able to communicate (ineffectively) with the world via telephone. These images, composited and in soft focus, contrast with Piotr Jaxa’s pristine cinematography and crisp sound focus in scenes where we see HP walking in glass-walled structures at work, or in extreme fisheye close-up as he washes his face and comes up for air at the party. The fisheye shot is the first piercing of the façade found both at the workplace and erected in the backyard, leading to the violent outburst with Philipp in the game room, and the early morning scene where he nearly takes his own life. These same concepts, the partition and the façade are endowed with different symbolism, but nonetheless similar implications for the construction of gendered subjectivity in Rakhshan Bani-Etemad’s *Under the Skin of the City* (2004), which portrays a working-class family struggling to make ends meet in Tehran. Unlike the other films, which confine the action to tightly delimited spaces and casts,²⁵ Bani-Etemad utilizes a neo-realist style to depict daily life in Tehran, which each of her main characters transits according to the arcs of their intersecting dramas. Tuba (Golab Adineh) is a mother and grandmother who works long hours in a textile factory, which has given her a debilitating cough. Her eldest son, Abbas (Mohammad Reza Forutan), is a messenger for a law firm, who is trying to get a visa to work in Europe so that he can better support his mother and give his siblings a better future. His adolescent sister Mahboubeh (Baran Kosari) is plugged into transnational youth culture while studying at school. The stakes placed on Mahboubeh’s

²⁵ Hamid Naficy has called attention to how “a sense of claustrophobia pervades the worldview, mise-en-scène, shot composition, and plot development of many transnational films;” however, my own analysis of the uses of these claustrophobic spaces in the films above departs from Naficy’s reading of this claustrophobia as a sign of “retrenchment;” see Hamid Naficy, “Independent Transnational Genre,” in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, eds., *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 213.

ability to study are raised when we discover that one of her sisters is a victim of domestic violence, while another, Hamideh (Homeira Riazi) is being given away in an arranged marriage. In his effort to gain passage to a better material life and a shot at marriage with a young woman who works in Nasser Khan's (Alireza Oosivand) office, Abbas convinces his father Mahmoud (Mohsen Ghazi Moradi) to sell the house to pay for the visa. In the meantime, the young neighbor Masoumeh's (Meraveh Sharifinia) decision to attend an afternoon rock concert with Mahboubeh leads to Masoumeh's severe beating by her older brother who constantly stands vigil over her conduct. The beating, which is overheard by Tuba, Mahmoud, and Maboubeh is so severe that Masoumeh leaves home, and when Maboubeh finally finds her, destitute in a park, they are rounded up by police with some delinquent young men. When Tuba goes for the house title to get Maboubeh out of jail, she discovers that her husband and son have taken it and is unable to get it back from the new owner. When Tuba and her family are on the verge of eviction, Abbas goes to the "travel agency" to fetch his visa, only to discover that the business was a scam. A plan to smuggle drugs for Nasser Kahn to buy the house back goes awry. Tuba decides to save her son's life by giving him the rest of the proceeds of the house so that he can finally leave. The last scene of the film introduces a form of convergence through an impression of remediation: Tuba speaks in direct address to a documentary crew (heard offscreen) to ask them to whom they will show the documentary. The placement of the protagonists of this film ideologically and practically between the *façade* (the fraudulent travel agency, which, apart from a dream, sells globally symbolic goods to Abbas), and the partition, or stone wall of personal tragedy and sacrifice deriving from conformity to state ideology, encourages the metaphoric interpretation of these architectural devices within a transnational context of globalization, or as Abril Trigo has aptly characterized it, "global exploitation: the asynchrony between expectations and possibilities suffered by the locally excluded, condemned to a systematic unevenness between the slow or even regressive pace of socioeconomic integration and their accelerated ideological integration to

the global market of desires and symbolic consumption.”²⁶ This is indeed the dilemma of Dalva, Pedro and Yadir in *En el país*, and Abbas in *Under the Skin*.

Rechanneling Affect: Affect, of course, resides at the center of the *mise-en-scène* and plot turns of melodrama, whether cinematic, televised, or videotaped. I began this essay by pointing to disaffection as a salient characteristic of the intimate relationships portrayed in *Um céu*, *En el país*, and *Nachbeben*, and it is more than clear that the frustration of affect leads to forms of violence in all four films (Abbas’ profound disappointment at the loss of opportunity leads him to beat his own brother). Equally significant, however, is the shift in the vectors of affect away from romantic relationships and towards relationships based on the recognition afforded by friendship (Rita and Elena, Maboubeh and Masoumeh), as well as filiation and virtual motherhood. The loss of Dalva’s mother to Vítor’s bullet is the most irreparably tragic and disturbing moment in *Um céu*. Rogélia’s attentions to Elena following the shock of Enrique’s latest deception, Karin’s mothering of Sue’s infant and her motherly effort to save HP from himself, and Tuba’s extraordinary courage in facing homelessness to extricate her children from trouble should not go unnoticed by either the critic, or the viewer. Whether through the dramatic implosion of the state and commercial televisual apparatus into private life (*Um céu*), generic hybridity and the tracking of urban networks of power and affect (*En el país*), remediation as a portal to understanding psychosocial alienation (*Nachbeben*), or character-based transitivity and indeterminacy between the partition and the façade (*Under the Skin*), each of these films helps the viewer to find a footing in the precarious, fractured, and open-ended space of the global city.

²⁶ Trigo, “Afterword,” 200-201.

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