

EXPERIMENTAL LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA: HISTORY AND AESTHETICS, CYNTHIA TOMPKINS (2013)

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Reviewed by Rielle Navitski, University of Georgia

Cynthia Tompkins' *Experimental Latin American Cinema: History and Aesthetics* is a broad-ranging analysis of the 'New' New Latin American cinemas that have emerged in the past two decades as global art cinema has gained broader diffusion and generated increasing critical interest.¹ The book's title suggests that it will add to the scant bibliography on avant-garde film and video from Latin America.² Yet rather than examining works that reject the parameters of narrative cinema, such as feature length and the privileging of photographic representation over abstraction, Tompkins focuses on recent fiction features from Latin America that enact the 'inscription and subversion' (45) of genre conventions and canonical texts of film history, such as Fabián Bielinsky's contemplative neo-noir *El aura/The Aura* (Argentina, 2006) and Carlos Reygadas' *Stellet licht/Silent Light* (Mexico, 2007), with its visual and narrative citations of Carl Th. Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955).

Tompkins argues that much of contemporary Latin American cinema is thus experimental in Umberto Eco's sense; that is, it mediates between established aesthetic conventions and the openly oppositional stance of the avant-garde. According to the author, in Latin American films as diverse as Walter Salles' *Central do Brasil/Central Station* (1998) and Paz Encina's *Hamaca paraguaya/Paraguayan Hammock* (2008), 'innovation and critique occur from within an established tradition, with the intent of becoming the norm' (2). Indeed, one might argue that ostensibly unconventional narrative and visual strategies like elliptical plot structures and static long takes have already become normative for Latin American films distributed on the global festival circuit. Although the author does not address this question, one wonders at what point art cinema conventions should in fact be considered hegemonic in certain contexts.

Tompkins draws her examples from nations where film production has been fairly prolific, but nevertheless precarious (Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Cuba), as well as countries where it has been sporadic at best (Peru and Paraguay). After providing an overview of aesthetic and political questions in Latin American film history, she accounts for non-classical tendencies in contemporary productions using Gilles Deleuze's influential theorization of a post-war cinema of the 'time image', which renders pure duration visible on-screen by rejecting cinematic temporalities defined by action and clear causality. Tompkins compares traits shared by recent Latin American films to the characteristics of the time image as defined by Deleuze, including neorealist strategies like the blurring of documentary and fiction (as in Fernando Pérez Valdez's *Suite Habana* [Cuba, 2003]) and the inclusion of characters, often children, who observe but cannot take action (e.g., the young son in Inés de Oliveira Cézár's *Como pasan las horas/The Hours Go By* [Argentina, 2005]). Other markers of the time-image include the disjunctive use of montage and the attenuation of narrative causality, as in Reygadas' *Batalla en el cielo/Battle in Heaven* (Mexico, 2005), which is composed of a series of grotesque, loosely connected episodes.

1. For critical debates on the 'newness' of these recent films, see Jeff Menne (2007), Luisela Alvaray (2008), and Paul Schroeder Rodríguez (2012).
2. For an overview and bibliographic references in Portuguese and Spanish, see Arlindo Machado (2010). Most English-language scholarship in the area has focused on Argentine experimental filmmakers who began working in the 1960s and 1970s. On Narcisca Hirsch, see Andrea Giunti (2013) and Andrea Torres (2010). On Leandro Katz, see Jesse Lerner (2005), Jeffrey Skoller (2005), and John Hess (2000).

Tompkins argues that these characteristics coexist with and subvert conventions of film genre. This premise provides the organizing logic for the book's first three sections, each comprised of two to three chapter-length case studies. The first section of the book addresses the neo-noir, analysing Bielinsky's *El aura* and two Brazilian films, Jorge Furtado's *O homem que copiou/The Man Who Copied* (2003) and Heitor Dhalia's *O cheiro do ralo/Drained* (2007). Drawing on Deleuze's conception of the cinematic journey as a means of deterritorialization, Tompkins devotes the second section to road movies, including *Central do Brasil* and Carlos Sorín's *El camino de San Diego/The Road to San Diego* (Argentina, 2006). The third section examines the drama (which would benefit from a more precise definition) and includes chapters on *Como pasan las horas* and Josué Menéndez's *Días de Santiago/Days of Santiago* (Peru, 2004). A fourth segment focuses on works by the Mexican director Carlos Reygadas; a fifth examines films that hew closely to filmic or literary intertexts, functioning as loose adaptations or remakes; and the closing section of the book analyses fictions that draw on documentary strategies.

While the auteurist methodology of the section on Reygadas at first seems out of place, multiple chapters on Oliveira César and Pérez Valdes bridge the sections on intertextuality and documentary-influenced fictions. The attention to the films of Oliveira César, known for her re-imaginings of Greek tragedy, is particularly welcome. Unlike many of the other works Tompkins discusses, her films have received little critical attention. Beginning with genre films that both evoke and subvert the regime of the action-image, in Deleuze's terms, the book moves towards individual directors' engagements with cultural intertexts that gesture towards alternate temporalities and aesthetic possibilities.

The regional scope of *Experimental Latin American Cinema* is a departure for Latin American film studies, a context in which most monographs take national cinema as their rubric. Similarly, the book is a rare example of sustained engagement with film theory in the subfield, which is dominated by historical and industrial modes of analysis. Two notable exceptions that also use Deleuzian frameworks are Gonzalo Aguilar's *Other Worlds* (2006, English translation 2008), which focuses on Argentine cinema, and Laura Podalsky's *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (2011), whose scope is region-wide. Yet with its broad aims, Tompkins' study risks losing specificity. Greater contextualization of the case studies within recent work on film policy, co-productions and global distribution would be helpful, as would more explicitness regarding the criteria used to select films. While its theorization of regional aesthetic tendencies is an admirable goal, *Experimental Latin American Cinema* also reproduces persistent gaps in Latin American film scholarship, including scholarly neglect of the avant-garde cinema evoked in its title, but for this reason it also productively signals areas of enquiry that the field has yet to adequately address.

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- E-mail: mavitsk@uga.edu

SPAIN ON-SCREEN: DEVELOPMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY SPANISH CINEMA, ANN DAVIES (ED.) (2011)

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Reviewed by Dean Allbritton, Colby College

In the opening pages of *Spain On-Screen: Developments in Contemporary Spanish Cinema*, editor Ann Davies asks a pivotal question: 'Is a film a film if nobody watches it?' (2). In this moment, she is making reference to a particularly intriguing phenomenon – lacklustre box office sales and dwindling movie-going habits in Spain accompanied by the expanding and still relatively new academic field of Spanish film studies. It is an irony not lost to Davies, or to any contributor in the anthology, that Spanish film studies often finds itself in the position of reifying the concept of national cinema even while the majority of the Spanish public becomes increasingly distanced from such a cinema. Thus, the question of *exactly what* Spanish cinema signifies is one that informs the whole of *Spain On-Screen*. At its heart, the contributing chapters are unified by a concern with genre: from a definitional aspect that applies to the whole of Spanish cinema to an analysis of specific cinematic genres and the effects that gender has on genre and Spanish cinema.

The anthology initially seems to be a fairly aleatory collection of studies on culture and recent Spanish cinema, with contributions that run from Barry Jordan's take on the subsidizing of the Spanish film industry to Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albillá's psychoanalytic study on trauma and memory in *Los niños de Rusia* (Camino, 2001). A closer inspection reveals more subtle linkages between the chapters, bound by differing takes on what constitutes national