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Karen Sztajnberg

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15664/fcj.v21.i0.2705>



Frames Cinema Journal

ISSN 2053-8812

Issue 21 (2023)

<http://www.framescinemajournal.com>



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Close But No Cigar: Latin American Films Awarded, Produced, But Considered?

By Karen Sztajnberg

Introduction

“But will they get it abroad?”

This question was posed to Argentine director Lucrecia Martel while pitching a film concept to her producers (2023). If the result of Sight and Sound [S&S]2022’s survey, which did not include a single Latin American film, is any evidence the answer is a resounding no.

In an online lecture titled “Images, Sound, Tourism and War “(2023), she answers that her one conviction is that one should make films for one’s neighbors, and secondly that, to her, it makes no sense to primarily cater to those who” will not suffer the floods, or energy cuts.” She likens the films prioritizing global audiences to tourism pamphlets, which oversimplify the full reality of the region. Forty years earlier, Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene (*AfroSocialists*, 2022[1983]) was posed the same question and took the opportunity to vigorously condemn the enforcement of a tropism, whereby all heads are supposed to turn in the European direction. Such tropism is acutely evident in a research short film by the University of Leeds’s *Soft Power, Cinema, and the BRICS* (2019), where Prof. Richard A. Sanders, explains BRICS as a Western nomenclature for countries “that are not us, but are trying to be like us,” effectively qualifying the ambition to be “like us” as the only imaginable aspiration. In a certain sense, belonging to the canon, legitimizes Sanders’ affirmation.

Given where transnational production and cinephilia stand today, can Latin American filmmakers afford not to issue pamphlets, in this sense? This question warrants its own essay, but mine will concern itself with what happens with when Latin America indulges in this stripe of

illustrative cinema, as a condition to funnel through the transnational festival circuit and achieve global art house distribution. Occasionally, filmmakers from this region muster up the resources to produce non-pamphletarian cinema and instead promote discussions over aesthetics or even the human condition. In such cases, what are their chances of having their ideas being genuinely engaged with on a par with productions from the ideational center, mostly the Global North, and not just included for what I am calling representative capital?

These lines of questioning were catapulted by the glaring exclusion of the S&S 2022 poll which seems counter sensical in light of the region's expressive festival inclusion and transnational production funding wins (Falicov, 2011; Ross, 2011; De Valck, 2016; Vallejo & Peirano, 2022) since the late nineties. S&S's increased relevance is due to the fact that a lot of revenue, from streamers' selections, for example, will be informed by it, supported by viral gestures of fandom, as illustrated below.

Every 10 years, the British Film Institute pulls together critics from around the world to vote on its ["Sight and Sound" poll](#) to determine the best films ever made. This year, traditional heavy-hitters like ["Vertigo"](#) and ["Citizen Kane"](#) were pushed aside as a new film was crowned the greatest.

According to the critics, the best film ever made is ["Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Brussels"](#) from 1975. You can catch this classic with a [7-day free trial of HBO Max](#). In fact, a whopping 45 films from this list can be found on HBO Max.

Fig.1 Caption from Bowman, 2022 – The Streamable

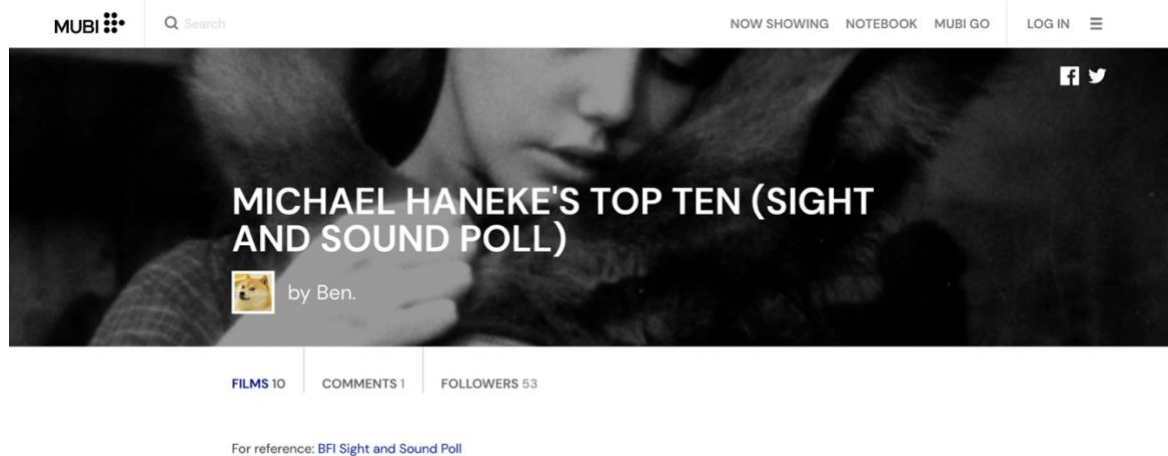


Fig.2 Caption from Mubi.com <https://mubi.com/lists/michael-hanekes-top-ten-sight-and-sound-poll>

Consequently, an exclusion from the list can arguably result in hindered film visibility and filmmaker viability.

Long before these films can stand the chance of being canonized, they must obtain production funding, secure a preferably A-list festival premiere, gather reviews that will generate a marketing context for them, and, finally, attain a distribution or licensing deal in order to circulate. Festival going audiences are a smaller, select group, while streamers and press readers largely outnumber them, which compounds the stakes of the S&S 100 exclusion.

Extending the range to the 250 films in the poll, the topmost five Latin American films attest to a female bias (Paiva, 2022) –three of them by Lucrecia Martel (*Zama*, 2017; *La Cienega*, 2001 and *La Mujer Sin Cabeza* [The Headless Woman], 2008), and one by Sara Gomez (*De Cierta Manera* [One Way or Another], 1977). While there have been strong intentions to be more inclusive in 2022's poll (Brody, 2022; Jacobsen, 2022; Petkovic, 2022), somehow Latin America did not quite make the 100 cut.

The gap separating festival and funding favor from canonical inclusion, merits a twofold debate: first, to inquire under what auspices this regional production is being embraced within

the festival and art-house circuit, and second, to articulate how inclusion and representation of Latin American filmmakers does not equate with actively contributing to central artistic dialogs. Latin America remains in the ideational periphery, even as it occupies more global screens, perhaps precisely because of the terms in which it secures its entry and plays into “the trap of representation.¹” (Bird 2022)

Similarly to Martel’s hypothetical tourist, Manuel Betancourt speaks of a “cartographic impetus” (2011:263) on the part of festivals, as ideational centers, seeking out new territories and accumulating representative capital for their own benefit. Reinstating autonomy for filmmakers from “the Rest,” is a first step towards improving the terms of global inclusion. In considering curatorial and poll exclusions, we might outline the pitfalls of a reformist, symbolic inclusion, that is to say, representative capital amassing. The antidote would be a promotion of ideational horizontality, an extension of Robert Stam and Ella Shohat’s (1994) polycentrism: an acknowledgement of multiple centers, instead of endowing some with parameters-setting privileges, while others are forced to adequate themselves.

A recent call for “provincializing” the hegemonic center (Chakrabarty, 2009) emphasizes the need to give the West some of its own medicine. Chakrabarty’s call, though well merited, stands in sharp contrast to where the film industry is headed, given the widening dominion of mainstream content producers (Leal, 2023), and their cultural insensitivity. Case in point, the 2023 summer release conflation of *Barbenheimer* (Dooley 2023), which minimized the real-life human toll suffered by Japan, in rolling up *Oppenheimer* (Nolan 2023) with the glibness of the Mattel intellectual property vehicle (*Barbie*, Gerwig 2023)—the latter, released days after the 78th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. To give a better sense of scale of this hegemony, Claudio Leal (2023) laments that out of 3.401 Brazilian screens, *Barbie* alone

occupied 2.056 in its opening weekend. Aided by the rescinding of national quotas, such releases amount to “scandalous concentration” and a “colonization of the imagination.” (2023 translations my own [TMO]). Independent productions have no such power to overwhelm the distribution circuit in this scale, in Brazil and elsewhere, yet, they are also playing a part towards Leal’s global colonization of the aesthetic imagination, through means which I will continue to explore in this article.

While the desire to be inclusive is patent in the 2022’s poll, the exclusion of Latin America provides indications for needed decolonial work ahead. Before delving into this symptomatic exclusion, it seems pertinent to inquire into what gets projected onto lists, and what their shortcomings might be. Nicolas Prividera (2022) reminds us that every selection implies exclusions, and that the measuring stick used ought to be more transparent. Indulging in list-making seems like a harmless exercise, mostly serving fandom clamor. However, in addition to my earlier mention of streaming revenue and circulation, Elena Gorfinkel (2019), critiques lists by claiming they only perpetuate an uneven playing field. I highlight a few lines from *Against Lists*, which seem particularly relevant to this essay:

“Lists are attentional real estate for the fatigued, enervated, click-hungry.”

“Lists aggregate the already known and consolidate power.”

“But in this hyper-mediated moment, the recirculated compulsory form of the list – list as desiderata of consumption, a grocery receipt of your watching – has become an instrument of commodity fetishism, of algorithmic capture, of priapic, indulgent self-exposure. Look closely. Who exactly produces this flurry of lists? “

Gorfinkel frames such lists as another stage for hegemonic forces, which seizes global theaters and the ideational field, to play out. In addition to muting peripheric voices, lists set in motion the shallowest form of engagement: list comparisons. When S&S released the voter ballots, claiming the spirit of transparency, a furore of comments followed (Edelman 2022, Tobias 2022), making it clear that while some took this as an opportunity to push certain agendas, they are far outnumbered by those who listed to attest to a pedigree of sorts, to reassure themselves and others that they were drinking from the good sources.

The omission of Latin American films not only fails to fetch more viewers, but suggests that their inclusion, beyond the 100 top films, might not necessarily merited, but a gesture of good will on the part of the center. In the captures below, researcher Sebastian Gonzalez Itier and film critic Carlos Aguiar, comment on the Eurocentrism inherent in this poll exclusion. Itier employs an implicatory tone while Aguiar lets on a wistful affect. Both “provincialize” and problematize European incuriosity and point to the misguided benevolence.



Fig. 3. Sebastián Gonzalez Itier's Twitter posting, following the publishing of the Sight and Sound Poll, Dec 2, 2022.

“There’s lots to be discussed and thought about this, but the omission of Latino filmmakers and films speaks of an ignorance on the part of European cinephilia, which @SightSoundmag and @cahierscinema, among others, proudly promote.” (TMO)



Fig.4 Carlos Aguilar Twitter posting, following the publishing of the Sight and Sound Poll, Dec 2, 2022.

For context, the British Film Institute has indeed made efforts to amplify their voter base: in 2002, it consisted of 145 lists by critics, in 2012, 1000 lists by “critics, programmers, academics, distributors, writers and other cinephiles “(James 2021), and in 2022 it grew to 1600 lists, aired out by hired consultant Girish Shambu (Ruimy 2022) to be a more inclusive voting poll.

Despite these efforts, a more radical problem emerges: the ballots of many Latin American critics and directors reveals that they seldom include regional contributions and seem poised to look North for filmmaking excellency. While it is unquestionable that Europe and the

U.S.A. have meaningfully contributed to the canon, as this poll has historically attested, inquiring into the low count of Latin American films by nominated participants from the region might be read in three ways: as internalized Eurocentrism, as proof of weak intra-Latin American filmic circulation (Gutiérrez, 2017), and as a symptom of the transnational funding mechanisms. My inquiry probes the latter and will start by analyzing the film festival circuit, its associated funding schemes, and their criteria, as the primary instance of gatekeeping which leads to circulation in arthouses and beyond.

In addition to validating new productions and filmmakers, festivals also help solidify the canon by celebrating film classics and archives. The canon, as it finds expression in surveys like S&S's, will compete for "attentional real estate" in an increasingly fragmented contemporaneity. From specialized streaming services like Mubi to tracking and notating apps like Letterboxd, tastemakers have the ample permeability of social media at their fingertips, giving the canon increased reach.

Canon Building: Festivals, Funds, and their Stakes

Festivals, as the point of ingress to the public, have been described as: "reducts of cinephilia" (Ikeda, 2021:188), "the exposure system of the film industry" (Campos 2015:106), a site for the writing of film history (Stringer 2001) while some go as far as to call it the "festival industrial complex" (Shellenberger 2022). Another relevant aspect, which Brazilian researcher Marcelo Ikeda brings up, is that while festivals "compete among themselves for visibility, with the presence of films and personalities, and for financing of such events, they also have come to form a coherent network with its own implicit rules." (2021: 187, TMO).

Miriam Ross affirms this network cannot be circumvented by Latin American filmmakers insofar as, even when they dispense with festival production funds, they simply cannot afford to sidestep the visibility and distribution contacts that festivals enable. Festival buzz is in a capacity to generate “indie blockbusters” (Elsaesser 2005) giving festivals the power to add value to a film, effectively creating an injunction to “enter into transcultural contracts that are determined by the power that festivals hold over the global film circuit.” (Ross 2010:14).

Federico Adorno’s opinionated editorial “Talk to Me About Colonialism! Notes from a Place of Resentment” (2022, TMO) provides one concrete example of how this unfolds for Latin American filmmakers, like himself. Paying multiple submission fees in euros, money hard earned in Paraguayan currency, is a hard endeavor that calls for resources (command of English included) and resolve. The eventual standardized letter of rejection arrives, stating they’d be happy to see his future work. Adorno quips that there won’t be a future film unless he can secure a decent international premiere for the current one. Besides, he reports that the film’s link was not accessed on his Vimeo account, according to regional traffic data reports, which contributes the resentment in the title of his piece. This op-ed attests to how flawed the submission process is and what the hurdles before peripheral filmmakers are. To succeed, they need significant funds, personal connections and to adhere to certain curatorial precepts, which I will address in my discussion of funding criteria, as the two seem closely matched.

It would be shallow to portray this costly, pro forma submission as the outcome of malicious intent on the part of festivals, most are currently underfunded and understaffed². Along with the consequences of labor precarity, currency disadvantages not being accounted for in the application process disproportionately affects filmmakers from the Global South and deepen the divide.

Having made themselves powerful and unavoidable, these networks keep expanding in directions that call for a thorough reevaluation of their methods and procedures, which have backfired in the form of scam festivals (de Valck, 2023; Kilkenny 2022)³, and abuses of curatorial power (Felizardo, 2020)⁴.

On a more positive note, festivals have also come to cater to niches audiences, and responded vigorously to world events such as the 2020 pandemic, providing a sense of community to many. The plasticity of festivals attests to their need to adapt to stay relevant. One such evolution is their role with makers from the Global South on two fronts: funding schemes and professional formation mechanisms. Both often require English fluency, come with several strings attached and require projects to pass through their selection criteria. Such criteria is inevitably traversed by power dynamics and undercurrents of the dominant acculturation agents, as is the case with film selection.

As a first instance of value attribution, film festivals are neither a neutral, nor transparent forum, much like canon drafting. Going back to the effort to make sense of the S&S 100 exclusion of Latin America, it's important to highlight how this exclusion clashes against Marijke de Valck's findings that upwards of 45% of the Hubert Bals fund (henceforth HBF) goes to Latin America (2013:52). Taken together, festival funding abundance and canonical irrelevance, arguably amount to a performative patronage: an inclusion of representations of the region that does not cohere with consideration as expressive aesthetic proponents. This inconsideration suggests that rhetorical decolonial gestures are made, but still leave peripheral players at the margin of ideational dialogs.

Out of a belief that the voters were genuine within, not so much their field of vision, but certainly their field of valorization I reject the term *tokenism* here. Instead, I favor Adam Phillips

(2019) nesting concept that acculturation organizes our desire, and desire organizes our attention. Therefore, it behooves us to remain aware of how the dominant culture shapes global taste, and the desires and demands it generates. Such strictures get reflected into our canons and festival accolades. I also risk the hypothesis that this circuit demands representation and inclusion, while desiring centrality and stake holding. This disconnect between representative politics and reinstatement of ideational centrality is the crux that the project of “provincializing” Europe should take on if it is to abet the situation for peripheric filmmakers, by affirming polycentrism.

Cornering Authenticity as Colonial Praxis

Scholarship on film festivals has expanded considerably and one of its most consequential findings is that “the industry has replaced the filmmaker as the festival’s premiere stakeholder.” (de Valck: 2013:40) This industry, centered in the dominant acculturation agent of the Global North, dictates that to even stand the chance of securing domestic and theatrical distribution (Campos 2015) Latin American cinema must first land in this circuit. Many productions don’t and come to constitute a “festival film” which only recovers some of its costs through screening fees and awards gained in this circuit. To maximize festival participation, it is fundamental that these productions “comply with cosmopolitan standards” (Falicov 2010:5).

These standards have encroached upon this cinematic productions’ very incipience, in the form of production funds, script and directing labs. Spreading their manifold area of influence into how global art films are made (De Valck 2013:42), effectively forming a “parallel industry” (Oubiña 2009:18), they frequently demand the triptych of “authenticity,” “local roots” (de Valck 2014) and that these films be shot in the region, as if filming outside of the director’s native soil

escaped the filmmaker's mastery. The latter criterium going against global trends of migration and erasure of boundaries.

The Sundance Labs, the Berlinale Talents Program, the Locarno Industry Academy, and other training events, are heavily attended by Latin American filmmakers, and form a circuit of knowledge sharing and networking opportunities (Falicov 2010, Ostrowska 2010, Ross 2011). Participating increase chances of festival inclusion, besides, as an industrial art form, film necessitates resources that are currently mostly available through transnational co-productions, so sitting out this circuit is detrimental.

A less conducive outcome is that pre-production involvement in transnational films confines authorial voice, to appeal to global audiences, by making them more universally palatable and understandable to a large potential market (De Valck, 2013, Falicov 2010). Sembene dealt with the need to be understood abroad in reception, Adorno in securing festival entry and Martel in pre-production, as stated earlier.

The problematic assignation of "local roots," by an Eurocentric gaze, is elusive, and not just for Latin America. Carina Bernasconi's study (2023) reports how Iranian cinema was framed and propped up by the festival circuit. Ali Abassi, the Iranian director of *Holy Spider* (2022) and Danish resident, raised the majority of the funding for this production in Scandinavia, and nevertheless, his film ended up labelled of Iranian origin. When announcing it as a Cannes selection, the head of the festival Thierry Frémaux referred to Abassi as a "Swedish-Iranian" director, possibly harking back to the fact that Abassi's prior film *Border* (2018), was shot in Sweden. "The implications of a decentered gaze are not discussed," (2023:3) Bernasconi remarks. She makes a strong case for how the "Iranianess" of this film became a selling point towards festival inclusion and plaudit. Abassi distanced himself from Iranian cinema at the

Cannes press conference thusly: “cinematically speaking I don’t feel at home in Iranian cinema and that’s because everything is so fucking(sic) metaphoric.” (Bernasconi, 2023:4) At the end of the screening, Abassi exclaimed “It’s a great day for Iranian Cinema!” (Bernasconi 2023:4).

Director and audience are aware of what is expected of him, and he chooses to perform the Iranian director, or not, taking on the *burden of representation*⁵ to his advantage. Ostensible national discourses are hence produced at and for Cannes. After all, Bernasconi claims that *Holy Spider* is ultimately intended for the Western spectator (2023:5), and evokes Andrew Higson’s central question “What is a national cinema if it doesn’t have a national audience?” (1989:36) Unlike the Iranian situation where films, such as *Holy Spider*, featuring overt violence and sexuality wouldn’t be screened, what prevents Latin American films from being more widely seen at home is the market economy of hegemonic dominance. The astonishing fact that the *Barbie* release occupied approximately 80% of Brazilian screens, justifies Leal’s call for more quotas for national cinema. While he condemns such colonialist hegemonic imports, I’d like exploring how exports are equally vulnerable to a very resilient incuriosity and cunning colonialism. Mark Fisher (2009) and Ani Maitra (2020) use “cunning” when referring to a capitalism that thrives in co-opting counterculture (as independent productions were once considered) to remain firmly in place. Selection criteria, therefore, constitutes a vehicle for colonial reinstatement.

Without selling multiple territories these small films cannot break even, so they must reach wide as the film market is not exempt from the market logic of profit. Ariella Aisha Azulay (2019), however, defends a resistance to voracious imperialist expansionism. This defense supports the need for a divestment from ample distribution horizons as proof of relevance, for peripheric filmmakers. Martel’s encouragement to make films for one’s neighbors, not for a

whole empire, aligns with such a directive. Together, streaming viewership tendencies, canonical recognition, festival, and funding schemes coincide in favoring a certain stripe of Latin American production, artifacts with ample spectatorial reach, which complicates how the periphery self-assigns artistic autonomy. Providing glocal commodities⁶ constitutes a double bind, first pointed out by de Valck (2013:46): peripheric filmmakers must present locally rooted, production location restricted films, that are considered “authentic,” as dictated by selection committees from the dominant acculturating center.

Before expanding on the verifiability of such an “authenticity”, I will address shooting location within the birth country of the filmmaker, as criterium. Lucio Castro’s *Fin de Siglo* (2019), where an Argentine filmmaker places a story in Barcelona, or Brazilian Karim Aïnouz’ Algeria based *Mariner of the Mountains* (2021) are ruled out of HBF funding, for example. Uprootedness and migration have long been a pillar of the Global South’s experience and having those stories foreclosed comprises another instance of erasure and incuriosity. Global South filmmakers end up confined to the pedagogical mission of providing the center with images and narratives of the periphery. But only those that fit their mold of authenticity, frequently one that reassures the center about its better developed state.

Regional shooting requirements might trickle down funds to more local industry professionals. Yet, I fail to see how an increasingly mobile and boundary fluid world, shouldn’t be mirrored in funding policy. Which is how a film like Castro’s, about two errant characters, ends up being self-funded. Even the stated intention to invigorate Southern media industries, does not entirely hold up, as many co-production funds require that a certain percentage of the budget be spent in the country of co-production. Hence, these ostensible forms of foreign aid⁷ directly benefit the European film industry (Campos 2015:101).

While *Fin de Siglo* does little to illustrate Argentina's colonial past, or dictatorship, nor displays the dazzling landscapes of Patagonia or the Pampa regions, it is a riveting drama broaching topic of universal reach: the short-shelf life of erotic desire, and the conflicting drives to err and to belong. Wide-spanning themes aside, Castro's film employs an unorthodox temporal structure which upends narrative conventions in riveting ways. Numerous positive reviews (Dry, 2019; Aguillar, 2019; Goldstein, 2019; Kenny, 2019; Uhlich, 2019) frame his formal irreverence as poignantly subversive. Still, its modest circulation in the festival and art-house circuit, might be credited to how poorly it accounts for Argentina.

I'll further problematize "authenticity" with one illustrative anecdote which highlights the consequences of Martel's mediatic tourism. Brazilian filmmaker Andrea Seligmann Silva⁸ showed her awarded short film, *Aonde São Paulo Acaba* [Where São Paulo Ends] (1995)—about an aspiring hip hop singer from the outskirts of São Paulo—to her instructor Spike Lee in class at New York University. She was dealt a thorough scolding for, according to him, Brazilians should make films about samba, their legitimate musical production, and not copycat from the U.S.A. This episode confines the filmmaker to one admissible cultural production, samba, and enforces that peripheric filmmakers are not welcome to join non-territory specific discussions. Further, Lee's reprimand ignores the fact that it is not only individuals who have become more mobile, but artistic productions as well. Rather than be curious about how hip hop got reconfigured in Brazil, Lee instead, discounts Brazilians as incapable of ingenious transformation, to frame them as mere copycats.

Separately, Lee's comment glosses over the fact that Brazil has a myriad of musical traditions, all of them harking back to some immigrant or foreign influence: samba (Western Africa), maxixe (Polish Polka), forró (African Lundu and first nations Tupi Guarani). Cultural

critic Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes' repeated assertion that "In Brazil, nothing is foreign, because everything is foreign," (Silva, 1990) arguably tears Lee's critique asunder, and complicates any purist notion of authenticity, such as those upheld by festival funds. Like Brazil, many other countries from the Global South often have their myriad cultural productions boiled down to one salient manifestation, whichever got the most international projection. This inconsideration of their variety, range, and richness, all of which collectively endow the region with generative potency and creative capital, seems disingenuous. The extent to which recognition of polyphony is denied (Stam and Shohat 1994), in a failure to represent peripheral groups in all their breadth, its productions are kept in the register of allegory, where narrow representations are expected:

The view of the nation as unitary muffles the "polyphony" of social and ethnic voices within heteroglot cultures [...] the precise nature of the national "essence" to be recovered is elusive and chimerical [...] national identity is mediated, textualized, constructed, 'imagined,' just as the traditions valorized by nationalism are "invented." (Shohat and Stam 1994:286)

The arbitrary construction of national traits and the elusiveness of essence chimes with Argentine writer and filmmaker Cesar Gonzalez (2021) assertion that marginal characters are seldom endowed with more subtle affects like ambivalence, desire, envy, and instead are often reduced to one layer, a single story-serving purpose, and I add, to produce a construction that attends to the demands of dominant acculturation.

Stephanie Dennison states that while there are many films that create heightened national allegories, with positive and negative connotations, peripheral countries have more to lose as they simply do not have enough positive representation and recognition at large. That is to say, while James Bond standing in for *Cool Britannia*, is as reductive as Borat standing in for

Kazakhstan (Charles 2006), in an unlevelled playing field, “reputation management” (Dennison 2021:42) is more consequential to the periphery.

This incuriosity into the complexities of the Global South’s cultural productions, reducing them to easily identifiable categories, “samba” for one, resonates with Phillips (2013) reminder that curiosity is never evenly spread out across a whole landscape of possibilities. It isn’t any different in the geopolitics of transnational cinema. Curiosity is topographically invested into the peaks, upon which Western self-assigned centrality seems installed, leaving entire valleys abandoned to incuriosity. This arbitrariness of authenticity implicates the film festival fund benefactor, as Brazilian critic Fabio Andrade (2023) reminds us, we have yet to hear of what comprises an *authentically* white or European film.

Reckoning with the historic-political dimensions to the asymmetry of the benefactor-beneficiary relationship in the chain of festival-funding, inclusion and distribution is bound to give us a better understanding of Latin America’s canonical irrelevance. This is after all” a decision-making flow, initiated by the first world and accepted by the third world, a flow which characterizes many postcolonial relations” (Ross 2011:266). The effect of the burden of representation (of authenticity) befalls on the periphery and is enforced by the demands of the ideational center.

Prurient Illustration as Price of Admission

It must be acknowledged that Latin America was put on the festival map by a history of overtly political film movements, like *Cinema Novo*, *Third Cinema* and associated new waves, flaunting Latin America’s “poverty.” What followed this boom is categorized by Paul

Rodriguez's (2012) as melorealism— "no longer epic, spectacular, or revolutionary, but rather intimate, realist and ultimately, reformist [...]" (2012:108). Counter to Rodriguez' description, Latin American filmmakers and scholars argue for a cinema that continues to be political by other means:

We do not believe reality is already constructed and that there is nothing else for us to do but accept it.[...] This focus on perception, on trying to see and discover little details of reality, that has nothing to do with an intimate and personal world, instead it is a lot closer to a political posture towards reality, seen as something that can be transformed (...) Film gives filmmakers and fieldworkers the chance to use audio-visual narratives as a tool to deconstruct perception and this is a political action.

Lucrecia Martel⁹

Critiquing notions of what is authentic or political, is essential towards the goal to invigorate autonomous ideation in the periphery. Filmmakers who go against pedagogical tendencies, like Martel, or the members of the El Pampero collective, unsettle traditional political categorization, yet Alejandro G. Iñárritu affirms, distribution has yet to evolve to meet this level of talent (Gutierrez 2017:89). Circulation does not warrant the recognition of ideational legitimacy. Iñárritu's statement speaks to my question about the grounds upon which Latin American films can be considered canon-worthy and by whom. We know the S&S's voter pool to be diverse in composition, but within the range of professional curators, directors, and critics. Betancourt soberly defends that existing "outside of the cinephile echo chamber of festivals and film journals will depend on more attention being paid to the role of audiences" (2016:15), to define Latin American cinema outside of a system that would" [...] limit it to curiosity worth

dissecting, a new colonial window into the region.” (Betancourt 2016:15). While being more inclusive of audiences bears no guarantee of canonical inclusivity, framing publications, and festivals as an echo chamber, where a single belief system gets affirmed, is coherent with the Global North’s industry being the primary stake holder of this confining demand for “authenticity.” The cunning lies in being inclusive to keep the North’s place of ideational centrality intact.

While it is reasonable that “sociopolitical issues which transcend the cinematographic field.” (Ikeda 2021: 187) – immigration, clandestine drug trade, unemployment, poverty, child labor and prostitution (Jenkins 2018) — must find cinematic expression, their restrictive association with a supposed Global South authenticity turns coercive, the minute it becomes a condition for entering the filmic circuit. Martel does not problematize the existence of Hollywood, but its ravenous hegemony (Rua 2020), similarly, I do not problematize the existence of social realist films but question their prominent projection. Look no further than the curiously indexical recent titles *Argentina, 1985* (Mitre 2022) and *Chile '76* (Martinelli 2023), mining abject chapters of the dictatorship in both countries, as they adhere to established formulas of cinematic storytelling and remain firmly anchored in the personal trajectories of their protagonists.

This over representation of social issues comprises, in Bordieuan terms, a “universe of belief” (1996), which bleeds over surveys like S&S 100, and affirms underdevelopment as unsurpassable. Gonzalez’ coinage of *marginality fetishism* (2021) is predicated on two notions: that marginality is a commodity and that “poverty seduces and ultimately, proves the ideal scenario upon which other actors can project the phantoms that harass them daily.” (2021:6,

TMO) Marginality fetishism denotes an implicatory projection in the West's demands for a prurient "authenticity".

The strings attached to festival funds reinforce a "developing world mode of being" (Ross 2011:264): an expectation that poverty and precarious conditions always be associated with this cinematic production (Gutierrez 2017, Betancourt 2016) when the reality is far more nuanced. Brazilian economist Edmar Bacha coined the term *Belíndia* "a tiny, rich Belgium surrounded by a vast, poor India" (The Americas 2017) to describe Brazil, which highlights the potential and capacity for prosperity. Yet the "Belgian" facet of the region simply does not gather much traction on transnational screens. Proof is in the fact the vast majority of the S&S 250's selections displays some "Indian" aspects of this descriptor. As polyphony gets muffled in the name of salient representations (of underdevelopment), the periphery dims out. Left to festival funds policies, this will continue to be the case, as its criteria rejects films that are simply not interested in overtly social, economic, and political dimensions, but may have a wealth of psychological, aesthetic, or philosophical propositions, in sum, the films that reject the burden of representation.

In addition to these burden-enforcing criteria, de Valck's case study of the Rotterdam Film Festival (2013) raises another under-acknowledged aspect of this transnational circuit: she rightfully points to a two-way flux for Latin American filmmakers. They benefit from the support of the HBF, the development award hosted by Rotterdam, but also endow it with a certain level of festival prestige:" Artistically, the fund desires to operate autonomously and to pick the most promising projects — many of which originate from Latin America, the region that helped establish its reputation" (2013:55). The under exploration of this aspect—a two-way flow where Latin American filmmakers conferred prestige to a now reputable festival and are not just

passive recipients—seems to unfold into the S&S 100's exclusion: gaining little credit for their role in the evolution of cinematic forms and festival culture.

In offering the coinage representative capital – whereby Latin Americans confer value upon the festival with productions that uphold its inclusiveness and relevance – to complement Manuel Betancourt's idea of a cartographic impetus, I concede that this seems less important in canon drafting than it does in festival inclusiveness. This may trace back to the afore mentioned association between festival funding as foreign aid (de Valck, 2007), an incumbence which does not befall on S&S's poll.

Towards a Decolonization of Distribution and Reception

While festivals have never been a pure forum of aesthetic debates, they “stimulate a reverberation of the films among opinion formers” (Ikeda 2021: 186, TMO), generating buzz and ancillary promotional media for social platforms¹⁰. Some writers claim their consecration is not necessarily tied to their commercial viability (de Valck 2007, Elsasser 2005), which Ikeda, writing from the perspective of a South American, sees differently: “[...] debates about aesthetic matters end up having repercussion on commercial aspects, given that the films which resonate the most within the festival event have the higher probability to reach a larger number of markets.” (Ikeda 2021: 186, TMO). The time gap between articles (2005, 2007-2021) may well signal a change in the commercialization of art-house films, yet it seems easier for European researchers to validate art for art's sake, than it is for a Brazilian writer or Paraguayan filmmaker to disregard commercial distribution and critical reach, aided by festival endorsement.

Premières are another strategic aspect of a film's commercial career; thus, many festival funds also require privileges (Ross 2011:266, Campos 2015:102), and discourage debuts from happening at possibly more prestigious events, in another instance of festival self-validation. Ross adds that "it is hard to escape the view that third-world countries are producing cultural artifacts for their first world benefactors" (2011:267).

Domestically, Augustin Mango and John Hecht (2016) articulate the paradox of the Latin American film industry which simply cannot compete with Hollywood productions at the box office, even after it manages to somehow thrive in the festival circuit. These cultural artifacts start looking like extractivist proceeds from this angle, given the asymmetry of the transaction. Except what these commodities provide is not intrinsic value, it is representative capital, conferring the celebratory gloss of inclusivity upon festivals and their funds.

There is, however, cause for optimism in a rising wave of alternative models for bridging Latin America to the global art-house market: from Pablo Larraín's or Iñárritu's alternance between American and home-based projects, to cooperatives like Brazil's Filmes de Plástico or Argentina's El Pampero. The latter has produced uncompromising films that reject the call of tropism, on multiple levels. Take for instance *Trenque Lauquen* (Citarella, 2022) or *La Flor* (Llinás 2018), both offer entirely divergent narrative paradigms by taking huge liberties within genre convention, but also, by the very nature of their sprawling four- and fourteen-hours duration, respectively. Such running times pose a challenge to an already struggling art-house circuit, at a post-pandemic moment.

Whether using duration to affirm creative autonomy or to invite viewers to dedicate a meaningful span of time to a contemplative state, El Pampero invites a very different experience from the sightseeing in and out, to use Martel's analogy. Rethinking their pathways towards

reception, they forged a relationship with Buenos Aires' MALBA Museum which welcomed screenings of work that was bound to be rejected theatrically or circulate very limitedly, within the arthouse circuit.

Counter to imperialist expansionism of *Barbie* scale, El Pampero achieves a far more sustainable scheme as described by filmmaker Matias Piñero: "They're no box office blowouts, but each film allows for the next one to be made. They maintain a certain stability, a kind of ecology. As a filmmaker, how do you measure success? For me, it's the ability to keep making films." (Brodsky 2023) El Pampero sees honing one's voice as a filmmaker as no different than being an athlete, one must practice regularly. Rather than spend years going through the mill of lab-fundraising-production-festival-circuit, they have opted for stringent budgets, always secured with no strings attached. Laura Citarella is adamant: "We do not submit to funds that are going to give us conditions or changes to the project, I'm not going to get tutored by someone I don't know on my own script." (Brodsky 2023)

El Pampero does not ignore the transnational arthouse circuit, as once proposed by Third Cinema, which might seem isolationist and not entirely feasible today, but they set a viable example for a more scrupulous engagement between center and periphery, and in so doing, open avenues for more self-ideation in the South, and for lessening the asymmetry of agency.

Conclusion

While representative capital ostensibly displayed may secure festival's funding as a form of foreign aid, on the other hand, its role in canon building remains slippery. This decade's poll gender and racial balance progress does not offset the conspicuous absence of a cinematic

production which has consistently fetched awards and funds in the festival circuit and leaves us to conclude that the ideational sphere has never been so vertical. At least in its conception of itself.

The persistence of the question posed to Sembene and Martel — Are your films understood in Europe? — remains symptomatic of transnational dynamics that get routinely affirmed. Conversely, there are a theoretical and practical resistances to such dynamics. Robert Stam and Ella Shohat's polycentrism opposes tropism, down to the abolishment of the terminology World Cinema, which in fact involves a discreet omission— (rest of the) World Cinema—that necessarily affirms a single Euro-centrality. Meanwhile filmmakers, like Citarella, are finding ways to engage with this circuit on new, less asymmetrical terms.

Martel could have easily settled into being fêted by this circuit, and instead she remains firm in her suggestion that filmmakers divest from pasteurizing their art to the point of it being universally fetching as pamphleterian commodities and compete with the ideational center's amassing of representative capital. The lopsidedness of being conditionally included without necessarily being contended with, is explicitly present in arbitrary, colonial-minded, criteria for funding and festival inclusion, and more diffusely on this survey's exclusion. Vaster transnational reach becomes hampered, as a consequence. While concerning oneself with the distribution of representative capital can be generally benevolent towards promoting more equity, stopping at that is indeed prejudicial. Such practices benefit the includer more than it affirms ideational horizontality to the included.

In order to deprogram Euro-tropism, decolonial labor is in order, so we can collectively undo the echo chamber effect, from festival cultures to canonical appraisal. A genuinely more inclusive circuit might involve decolonial practices, from within and without, such as El

Pampero's modus operandi, in the hopes of dispensing with shallow, simplified visions of what Latin America ought to be. This may start with acknowledging hip hop protagonists from the outskirts of São Paulo as legitimate reconfigurations in a transnational, de-centered world, and entirely abolishing a narrow conception of "authenticity" for Global South productions, since no one ever required, for instance, that every English film displays genuine proof of Britishness.

The S&S 2022 poll has proven changes are not only attainable, but desirable towards an ideationally affluent cinema. While I concede that any list or canon will necessarily make exclusions, hopefully the next decade will allow more room for non-pamphleterian cinema from the Global South.

BIOGRAPHY

Karen Sztajnberg is a Brazilian doctoral candidate at the University of Amsterdam and working artist who first graduated from Bard College (Film, B.A, 1997), then Columbia University (Film M.F.A, 2006).

Her research topic is audience engagement events of South American films in a transnational festival and arthouse context. Recent conferences include NECS, Oslo (2023), Screen Journal, Glasgow (2023), and HoMER, Mataró (2023). She has also contributed articles to *Mistral Journal*, *Free State Review* and *MAI Feminism*.

Credited as director, editor, screenwriter, and video artist, her work has been screened at the Rotterdam Film Festival, Lincoln Center Film Society, DocFeed, HotDocs, Visions du Reel, and in many art galleries, culminating in a solo exhibition in Lisbon, Portugal.

¹ Elena Lasic first coined this term, arguing that “increased presence on screens does not necessarily translate into larger creative power or salaries in front of and behind the camera, and in fact may hurt the fight for these rights as it dulls the motivation to fight for them.” Bird, Daniel. “The Representation Trap” *Animus*, June 29, 2022
<https://animusmagazine.com/2022/06/29/the-representation-trap/>

² Independent film programmer Herb Shellenberger posts about work precarity in film festivals on twitter. Shellenberger. Herb [htshell]. Twitter, <https://twitter.com/htshell>

³ There are a number of scam festivals today, that collect submission fees, do not take place, and occasionally issue worthless lists of winners. Mentioned by Marijke de Valck at *20th NECS Graduate Workshop, Festival Cultures: New Ways to Study Networks, Circulation and Canon Production*, February 15, 2023, Filmuniversität Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF, Berlin.

Kilkenny, Katie, and Alex Ritman. “People Can Be Exploited”: How Below-the-Radar Film Festivals Prey on Struggling Filmmakers, *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 31, 2019
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/how-below-radar-film-festivals-can-prey-struggling-filmmakers-1250714/> Accessed February 1, 2022

⁴ Gatekeeping seats of power, like any other instances of oversized power, open the door for abuse, as has been the unfortunate case of Brazilian programmer Gustavo Beck (Felizardo, 2020). He worked with the Rotterdam, Vienna and Bafici Film Festivals and was accused by 18 women of sexual harassment and usurping his position with promises of festival inclusion. While festivals responded strongly and swiftly to these accusations (IFFR, 2020), Policies to prevent a curator from working on so many festivals, creating a conflict of interest and an unwarranted accumulation of curatorial power, have yet to go into effect. Such abuses prove particularly hurtful to peripheral cinematic productions as accumulation of representative capital by festivals becomes de rigueur, in the current climate.

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⁵ Term coined by Gil Branston to mean instances where artists are made to “stand in for their community and represent it in a certain way” Branston, Gill. *Cinema and Cultural Modernity*, Open University Press, March 2, 2001.

⁶ Paul Rodriguez defines glocal commodities as productions that are local in social landscapes, and global, by dealing in known genres, while remaining caught up in the flow of the dominant European and North American productions, like *City of God* (2002), or *Identifying Features* (2020).

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⁷ De Valck wrote on how the budget for the Hubert Bals Fund is derivative of the Dutch Foreign Relations office (2007). De Valck, Marijke. --. *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*. Amsterdam University Press, 2007.

⁸ As told to me in person on September 12th, 2022.

⁹ Originally in Spanish, translation my own. Gutiérrez, Carlos. ‘Cómo Latinoamérica pasó a ser un epicentro olvidado del cine internacional’. *De Latinoamérica a Hollywood: Cultura cinematográfica latina en Los Ángeles, 1967-2017*. Academia de Artes y Ciencias Cinematográficas, 2017:87.

¹⁰ Festivals are generating media for archival and self-promotional ends which ranges from red carpet walks, Q&A’s, and press collectives. Shared over social media these exponentially raise a film’s potential for exposure.

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