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Neoliberalism and Material Realities in Latin American Film: An Analysis of Güeros, También La Lluvia, and Y Tu Mamá También

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Abstract

Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between neoliberalism and film in Latin America utilizing 3 Latin American films. While neoliberal policy was touted as the most prosperous economic model, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, neoliberal policies have successfully gutted social welfare services in the name of capitalistic efficiency. While Latin American governments were muzzled in their capacity to provide adequate social services, the most marginalized were the most gravely affected by neoliberal policies. Rapid urbanization led to the exodus of poor, especially Indigenous, people from their rural homelands to urban centers (McCann and Auyero 2014). Neoliberalism combines deregulation and austerity to violently strip people of social safety nets and empower the private sector to continue its exploitation.

Film is an important medium for storytelling and nation building in Latin America. In some cases, Latin American film is synonymous with revolutionary fervor and liberation (Solanas and Getino 1970). However, today's Latin American cinema has experienced radical changes since the implementation of neoliberal policies. Latin American film was most prominent in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina due to the large amount of state support. Mexican cinema in particular served as a significant tool to shape a rejuvenated nation after the Mexican Revolution. Contemporary Latin American cinema has become international in production and consumption. These films are internationally produced and consumed and often muddle the identity of Latin America. For this project, I chose to examine *Y tu mamá también* (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 1999), *Güeros* (dir. Alonso Ruizpalacios, 2014), and *También la lluvia* (dir. Icíar Bollaín, 2010). These films exemplify the Latin American film in the age of neoliberalism. Perhaps Latin American cinema here could be considered a misnomer. *Güeros* and *Y tu mamá también* are Mexican films starring Mexican actors and directed by Mexican directors. Meanwhile, *También la lluvia* is heralded as an “international

film” because of the multinational cast, crew, and production. Nevertheless, *También la lluvia* tells a Latin American story, set in Bolivia during the Cochabamba water riots. *También la lluvia* is perhaps the best example of the new neoliberal, international film because it is not firmly grounded nationally in production or story, but still represents a regional narrative.

All three of these films also directly engage with neoliberalism as either a driving force in the narrative or as an elusive, but ominous force. Realizing the constraints of a Senior capstone, I am unable to incorporate more films that would create a more vivid picture of cinema and neoliberalism in Latin America. However, these films serve as an introduction to how neoliberalism has impacted Latin American cinema on material and representational levels. I utilize a sociological foundation of globalization and neoliberalism to analyze the films in context of global trends.

“The Pillage of a Continent”

The history of Latin America is that of constant conquest, exploitation, and plunder. Eduardo Galeano best summed up this torrid history in his influential book, *The Open Veins of Latin America*. There, Galeano uncovers the centuries of ‘losing’ and foreign enrichment by extractive means. Latin America is an extraordinarily rich region when it comes to natural resources. Corporations and empires alike have fought to gain control of the precious resources and people native to the Americas. Control over Latin America has shifted throughout the centuries since Europeans colonized and massacred millions of Native Americans. Spanish and Portuguese invaders were the first to establish colonies in the ‘New World.’ Their rule began with Native extermination and eventually changed to Native subjugation. The Spanish and Portuguese exploited Native Americans until the Native population became decimated. Once Native labor was depleted, the Europeans began to participate in the African slave trade more profusely.

While the expeditions of Christopher Columbus were originally started for the discovery of new trade routes to Asia, European finding America led to a new economic frontier. Instead of developing the colonies, Europeans focused on cash crops and mining to enrich the empire. This focus on primary goods sets the foundation of the mono-economies that plague Latin America and so many other Global South nations today. The Native and African population in the Americas were designated to work the fields and mines while the Spanish ruling class reaped the benefits of colonialism.

Although Latin American independence led to political self-determination for much of the Western Hemisphere, independence and sovereignty have arguably never been achieved. This is exemplified in the phrase, “*el último día de despotismo y el primero de lo mismo,*” the last day of despotism and the first day of the same (Cueva 1972). Although the Latin American people successfully ousted most of the direct European presence on the continent, foreign influence and despotic rule prevail. Revolutionary movements across Latin America have attempted to rid their country of *Yanqui* and European imperialism.

The Bretton Woods system solidified the United States’ role as a financial and monetary superpower after World War II. Soon, the world would be divided between American allies and satellites against the communist sphere. Britain’s steep decline as hegemon ushered American superiority. The Bretton Woods system encapsulated the non-communist world in a single economic block. While in the previous gold standard in which all nations pegged their currency to the price of gold, the post-war economic system was designed by American and British economists, primarily John Maynard Keynes and Harry Dexter White of the United States and United Kingdom, respectively. All participating countries would tie their currency to the value of the dollar meaning the United States would be deeply ingrained with the global economy. By

reshaping the global economy to be centered around the dollar, non-communist nations became indebted to the dollar as the US dollar became international reserve currency.

In the aftermath of WWII, globalization has pierced nearly every nation on earth, spurring an era of interdependence. Like many other hegemonic ideologies, globalization is “a dynamic and open process that is subject to influence and change” (Giddens 2001:62). Globalization led countries to become interconnected in open trade and diplomacy. Before globalization, countries would typically practice isolationist economic policy. Countries well-endowed with capital, European powers and the United States, began exporting their capital to gain economic control of periphery countries (Lenin 2011).

Although development and modernization had been considered state-centered for much of the 20th century, the rise of conservatism in the Global North led to a rapid change in economic development ideology. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher of the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, ushered in an era of conservatism that would change the political and economic landscape of the world.

The New Latin American Film: Liberalization and the End of the Paternal State

Latin American cinema has primarily been produced as an industry in three countries: Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. Mexican cinema as an industry was specifically curated and funded to produce cinema for Mexicans. This meant representing Mexican national imagery and myth into films such as *Nosotros los pobres* (dir. Ismael Rodríguez, 1948) and *María Candelaria* (dir. Emilio Fernández, 1944) which highlighted *indigenismo* and an admiration for a poor and pure lifestyle (Hill 2009; Pérez 2010).

Revolutionary cinema was defined by Latin American film makers in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution. “Toward a Third Cinema” (Solanas and Getino 1970) outlined the principals of Revolutionary film especially focusing on a cinema made by and for the proletariat. Although the state support of Latin American film in the mid-twentieth century allowed a wide audience to participate in national culture, state-supported film inevitably meant state influence over films. It should be noted that Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino were both based in Argentina. The political and geographic conditions of Argentina are responsible for a revolutionary film school of thought to form. Cinema Novo, the Brazilian counterpart to the Argentine Grupo Cine Liberación, also enjoyed a progressive government that allowed Revolutionary Brazilian film to flourish. The Mexican government, throughout the twentieth century, has been excluded from the Leftism and progressivism in Argentina and Brazil, respectively. The *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, which ruled Mexico for 70 years until 2000, has been heavily influenced by the United States, and the US’s geopolitical interests (Fein 1998). Mexican cinema uplifted anticommunist rhetoric and stories while still maintaining national narratives.

International Audience

Neoliberalism has changed the ways policies and social programs have been funded and executed. Generally, Latin American social welfare programs have extended from not only the health care sector, but also to state-funded media. Film was of paramount importance because of the close ties the film industry had with the state. In some cases, the film industry would be the mouthpiece of state public service announcements or even propaganda. However, national cinema became international cinema due to potential profits from abroad and deepening austerity for national film industries. Claudia Sandberg (2018) explains the coupling of neoliberal economic policies with the shift of Latin American cinema to the international markets with the following:

The neoliberal economic policies were simultaneously aimed to protect the indigenous film industry and to maximize income from filmmaking activities by attracting foreign funds to flow into the Latin American domestic film market. This supported alliances and mergers with European, United States and Latin American companies, inevitably inviting globally operating and domineering media conglomerates into local markets. (Sandberg 2018:7)

Latin American cinema has become a highly lucrative and often prestigious market that has been extraordinarily successful in foreign markets. The intended audience of Latin American films are no longer Latin American films but are instead well-to-do international viewers with expendable income who can afford to purchase and view auteur cinema from Latin America.

Y tu mamá también: The Periphery Violence of Neoliberalism

Y tu mamá también consistently shows neoliberalism through a periphery lens. The narrative is visually focused on the adventures of Tenoch (Diego Luna), Julio (Gael García Bernal), and Luisa (Maribel Verdú). Tenoch is the son of a Mexican government official and is part of the ruling class. Meanwhile, Tenoch's best friend Julio is from a working-class family. The two best friends ask Luisa to join them on a road trip to the mythical *Boca del Cielo* beach. This film, on face value, is a raunchy, coming of age, road trip comedy. While the film is filled with inappropriate jokes and slurs, Alfonso Cuarón is intentional with what is shown and heard. Cuarón subverts the raunchy narrative with a disconnected yet omniscient narrator (Daniel Giménez Cacho) who reveals details about the protagonists, setting, and minor characters.

The film is set in Mexico during the turn of the 20th century. Mexico recently went through an important political transformation after the ruling party, the PRI, lost for the first time in 71 years. Vicente Fox, who replaced the PRI with his win in the year 2000, ushered in right-wing politics which went hand in hand with the growing neoliberalization. Nevertheless, the PRI still

initiated right-wing policies such as the significant NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) which went into effect in the mid-90s.

Y tu mamá también shows neoliberalization throughout the Mexican countryside as the protagonists travel to the mythical *Boca del Cielo*. Interestingly, an important factor for increasing neoliberalization is an increased military presence. Due to neoliberalism's unpopular policies, a violent force of subjugation is necessary to quell any resistance. As social welfare policies are gutted, the most vulnerable face continued violence and exploitation.



Figure 1: Tenoch (Left), Luisa (Center), and Julio (Right) dine in a restaurant while ignoring a beggar who asks for spare change.

When Julio, Tenoch, and Luisa first begin their road trip, they decide to spend the night in a local inn and eat dinner in a small restaurant. Figure 1 displays the three friends enjoying their dinner when a beggar asks for money. None of the three acknowledge the old man verbally. Tenoch, the richest of the three, donates money while Julio awkwardly ignores the man and Luisa

briefly acknowledges him as he is leaving. This an important example of how poverty is relegated to a periphery position. Tenoch is representative of the paternal state which the Mexican government has prided itself to be. Although Tenoch is the only one who gives the old man money, this scene is also emblematic of the failure of the paternal state.



Figure 2: Tenoch, Luisa, and Julio drive through rural Mexico on their way to *Boca del Cielo*. A militarized police truck speeds past to apprehend campesinos walking along the road.

The neoliberal state is significantly weakened compared to welfare states. However, the weakening of the state is only salient in terms of social services. Repression, especially violent repression, is key to the survival of the neoliberal state. This means that funds are allocated to military and police expenditures. Figure 2 shows a police truck determined to agitate campesinos along the side of the road. Because of Mexico's close relationship with the United States, Mexico is often delegated to do the work of immigration and drug control. Although Luisa, Tenoch, and

Julio are the ones who are actively using and trafficking drugs, their status as mestizo/ white and visibly middle-class exempts them from the violence of the state.



Figure 3: The police, armed with military-grade weapons, apprehend campesinos peacefully walking along the rural road.

Figure 3 shows the scene just seconds after Figure 2. The motion blur is highly prevalent because Cuarón only briefly shows this state-sanctioned violence. The camera quickly pans as the friends' car drives by. The campesinos are dressed in traditional clothes. The campesinos are noticeably darker-skinned than the protagonists which signals continued state-oppression of people of indigenous descent. To Julio, Tenoch, Luisa, and the intended audience, the violence of neoliberalism is obscured from view. The systemic violence enhanced by neoliberalism is trivial to the viewer and protagonists alike. Similar to the performative, discursive protest that is prevalent in *También la lluvia*, Figure 3 shows a small anarchist sticker that directly contrasts ideological idealism with material action.

***También la lluvia*: Discursive Resistance and Material Revolution**

También la lluvia (2010) was directed by Icíar Bollaín and tells the story of Mexican film director Sebastián (Gael García Bernal), a Spanish producer, Costa (Luis Tosar), and an international crew's attempt to create a film about Christopher Columbus's occupation of Hispaniola. Paradoxically, the film is set in Bolivia, near the city of Cochabamba even though Columbus landed in the Caribbean. The film follows the film crew's attempt to make a powerful film in the face of budget and political restraints. Sebastián and Costa decide to find someone 'real' to play Hatuey, the Taino chief that leads a rebellion against Columbus. Sebastián and Costa decide that they cannot hold auditions to everyone, even after advertising "*todos tienen la oportunidad*" ("everyone gets a chance) (00:04:20). Daniel (Juan Carlos Aduviri), one of the many Quechuans who have waited hours to get a chance to audition, protests Sebastián's decision to tell everyone in line to go home. Sebastián decides that Daniel would be the perfect fit for the role of Hatuey because Daniel's act of defiance.

Due to budget constraints, the crew is not able to film on location, but Costa admits that he believes that audiences will not be able to tell the difference "between fifteenth-century Tainos and twenty-first century Quechuas (Martínez-Expósito 2018:29). Costa explains that "*...sabe que esto está lleno de hambrientos y eso significa extra, miles de extra*" ("understand that this place is full of starving people and this means extras, thousands of extras") (00:06:18). The indigenous people the film crew hope to use is limited to aesthetics. The indigenous extras are meant to be seen and not heard. Even outside the fictitious film, in *También la lluvia*, many of the indigenous characters are rendered silent aside from Daniel. Daniel represents a revolutionary figure both in *También la lluvia* and the fictitious film within it.

The film tells parallel narratives of the struggles of the film crew and the struggles of the residents of Cochabamba. The film crew's budget constraints pale in comparison to the plight of the Cochabamba people. Interestingly, the character of Hatuey is celebrated for his bravery against Columbus. However, Daniel's involvement in the water protests are met with scolding and threats. The film crew sets out to create an accurate portrayal of Christopher Columbus's expedition. Sebastián is incessant that the film portrays the real horrors and crimes of Columbus's occupation of Hispaniola. Costa and Sebastián's vision for Columbus's biopic is constantly challenged by the material realities of the Quechuan actors. Sebastián insists that the women pretend to drown their own children because Tainos were forced to do this to have their children escape from oppression and colonization. However, the visual representation of the conquest lowers the importance of the history to visual aesthetics.



Figure 4: A Helicopter soars over the Bolivian jungle carrying a large cross to be used for the climax of the fictitious film.

The opening credits are accompanied by the powerful imagery of a huge wooden cross being carried by helicopter over the Bolivian jungle. Figure 4 highlights shows a stark contrast between the pristine and lush jungle and the helicopter, a split between nature and a violent

modernity. This scene represents a second conquest as the international film crew of mestizo and white film crew seek to take advantage of an impoverished community to use in their film. The use of powerful, scenic imagery blurs the line between oppression and visual pleasure. In the finale of Sebastián's film, Daniel as Hatuey and other Tainos are crucified analogizing the justified indigenous resistance to Jesus's baseless crucifixion. Sebastián, much like Pontius Pilate, absolves himself of Daniel's supposed crimes and turns Daniel over the authorities for Daniel's involvement in the Cochabamba water riots. Sebastián commits a sin omission and complacency. These channels of oppression are hidden and do not often lead to a single person to blame. Nevertheless, neoliberalism permeates institutionally and makes those who uphold it culpable for the deaths and oppression the marginalized face.

Although the film seeks to speak to the realities of indigenous, the main narrative is still of the non-indigenous film crew. This is emblematic of indigenous erasure that persists across Latin America. Indigenismo is often coopted into the national identity of Latin American nations without distributing material wealth to indigenous communities. The Quechuan actors are paid a meager amount of money for their role in the film. Sebastián believes that his film could be an eye-opener for audiences about Columbus's horrible cruelty. However, Sebastián and the rest of the film crew consistently exploit the Quechuan people.

Colonialism is rendered into an individual experience as opposed to an ongoing system that systematically oppresses. Another extension of neoliberalism manifests in how people consume films. For example, the cinema used to be a communal experience in which the audience would converse and argue about the film during the screening and after the credits. However, neoliberalism's trend of efficiency replaced cinema palaces with multiplexes designed to profit off every aspect of the movie going experience. This change was supplemented with increasing

individualized experiences that distorted experiences of class and communal solidarity.
Neoliberalism's effect on Latin America's cinema

While Sebastián consistently presents himself as a caring person when it comes to the welfare of the Quechuan people, it is revealed that Sebastián's whimpers of resistance were performative. Sebastián, along with the rest of the film crew, decide to leave Bolivia because the situation is too dangerous for the film crew. Cochabamba erupts in riots, with Daniel leading the resistance. Despite Costa's racist disregard for indigenous people's well-being throughout the film, Costa is the only person from the film crew to stay in Cochabamba. Costa helps save Daniel's daughter. Nevertheless, Costa's heroic deed is an isolated incident because he will no longer help the Quechuan people.

The failure of action is emblematic of neoliberal policy and ideology. There is a prevalent illusion of choice in a capitalist system. Neoliberalism has extended private business into nearly every aspect of life. For example, in the United States, opponents of Medicare for all will argue that a government-funded health care system would eliminate people's choice in health care. However, the illusion of choice is maintained while thousands die each year because they lack even the access to health care (Tanne 2008). Neoliberalism's attack on social services ensures that the growth of capital will be at the expense of worker's lives.

También la lluvia presents a dialectic between discursive action and material action. Sebastián, throughout the film, verbally protests other character's discriminatory remarks. However, when the people of Cochabamba are attacked by the police and private security forces, the film crew flees the country. Daniel leads the indigenous resistance in both the fictitious film and in Cochabamba. A faceless corporation privatizes the water supply in Cochabamba at

egregious rates. Although this policy is extremely unpopular, this policy was mandated by the International Monetary Fund and raised water rates by as much as 35% (Finnegan 2002).

También la lluvia is a complicated film that attempts to encapsulate a history of exploitation and colonization into a film within a film. The film has a solid foundation in social justice, especially in trying to raise awareness of the Cochabamba water wars. However, just as the characters in *También la lluvia* fail to act, *También la lluvia* also fails to enact material change for those who are exploited.

***Güeros*: Failure of Modernity**

Güeros primarily follows three protagonists, Sombra (Tenoch Huerta), Tomás (Sebastián Aguirre), and Santos (Leonardo Ortizgris) on their way to find their favorite musician who is on his death bed. Just as with *Y tu mamá también*, *Güeros* is set during the turn of the 20th century which marked an especially turbulent political era for Mexico. Sombra and Santos are students at UNAM, *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (Autonomous National University of Mexico). Tomás, Sombra's younger brother, is sent to live with Sombra because their mother is tired of Tomás's bad behavior. The students at UNAM are actively striking against tuition hikes that were implemented along with other neoliberal policies.

Mexico has consistently sought to become "modern" in terms of infrastructure and culture. Mexico's status as a periphery state has ensured the extraction of Mexican labor and production. Nevertheless, Mexican leaders have promised to launch Mexico into modernity through revolutionary and traditional avenues. The long reign of Porfirio Díaz, from 1877 to 1911, represented a time of unbridled growth for the nation. However, Díaz's rule was oppressive and sparked a national revolution. Although the success of the Mexican Revolution which began in

1910 is controversial, the Revolution ushered in a new era of politics and paternalism under the PRI. Nevertheless, the PRI's single rule over Mexican politics spurred corruption and stagnancy.



Figure 5: Tomás and Sombra sit in an unfinished construction zone. The unfinished promise of luxury and modernity is reminiscent of the setting of *Los Olvidados* (dir. Luis Buñuel. 1952)

Figure 5 shows how the failure of the promise of modernity continues. Luxury apartments are built while students and workers alike struggle to survive. An imagined reality is created by politicians to subvert the material conditions of the Mexican people. When Tomás first comes to Sombra's apartment the elevator no longer works. Even though the elevator is a sign of modern technology, the elevator is a hollow representation of promised ideals and failed action.

Discussion

Although these three films provide a solid foundation of analysis of Latin American film during the era of neoliberalism, there is still work to be done to create a more general and clearer picture of the reality of Latin America. First, two of the three films are Mexican in production, actors, and directors. While Mexico has also been significantly impacted by neoliberal policies, Mexico's experience, and the films I have selected do not portray the experiences of non-Mexicans in Latin America. Also, these films primarily capture the cis-heteronormative experience while all other people are limited to side characters or not given any representation.

To have a wider analysis, I would incorporate analysis of films from across Latin America. I originally hoped to utilize *Aquarius* (2016) and *City of God* (2002) to have a more thorough analysis of neoliberalism in Latin America. Nevertheless, I believe that film is an important institution to analyze in the context of neoliberalism. Film in Latin America has been synonymous with national pride and nation building. However, neoliberalism stripped many subsidies which significantly weakened the film industries. Nevertheless, these films still provide a glimpse into the effects of neoliberalism. However, as national film becomes international, it is impossible to analyze film without a globalized perspective.

Conclusion

Neoliberalism is a highly controversial subject. In many academic and political contexts, neoliberalism is promoted and celebrated for its supposed successes. However, neoliberalism in practice continues the exploitation under capitalism in a highly efficient ways. These films were born out of the training grounds of neoliberalism. Sweeping economic changes which were supported by the International Monetary Fund ushered in a new era of Latin America. The Latin American debt crisis signaled to the Global North that import substitution industrialization was a

failure. Also, the fall of the Soviet Union signaled to many western leaders that communism was also a failed ideology. Therefore, neoliberalism became the dominant ideology.

Güeros, *Y tu mamá también*, and *También la lluvia* are all films that represent the material effects of neoliberalism. Although *Güeros* and *Y tu mamá también* mitigated neoliberalism to a periphery and background role, neoliberalism has become the setting for Latin America. Calculated economic violence manifests into austerity and the loss of social welfare services. Just in the past year, protests have emerged all throughout Latin America in response to increasing neoliberalism. Lenín Moreno, the president of Ecuador, announced cuts to fuel subsidies following an agreement with the International Monetary Fund worth about four million dollars (Barría 2019). Price hikes such as this makes even living unaffordable. *También la lluvia* showed to an international audience the realities of austerity and neoliberalism. Protests erupted throughout South America as citizens revolted against their government in Haiti, Chile, and Bolivia.

While these films were celebrated for their artistic achievement, these films are far from revolutionary. Instead of being produced to incite revolution like the third cinema, these films fall into the second cinema in which the artistic value is preferred over revolutionary intent (Solanas and Getino 1970). These films are ultimately meant to be consumed by a primarily middle class, international audience. Although revolutionary apathy is a constant theme in these films, the films fall into the same pitfalls they ridicule. Because these films are produced through a neoliberal system, they are ultimately neoliberal as film. *Güeros*, *Y tu mamá también*, and *También la lluvia* fall into the paradox of discourse over material action.

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