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## COPRODUCING IBEROAMERICAN CULTURE: *SÓLO DIOS SABE'S* TRANSCONTINENTAL JOURNEY

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*The principal aim of supporting coproduction in [the Ibermedia] program is to promote Latin American cultural identities. While it is still too soon to tell, the interest of Ibermedia will be determined by how that stipulation of cultural identity can be translated into a progressive mode of identity politics and how it survives the practical problems of the Latin American market.*

—Film scholar Teresa Hoefort de Turégano, 2004

*...[[I]t is true, perhaps we [Spaniards] are trying to redeem ourselves for historical debts we owe to the region [of Latin America].*

— Ibermedia administrator Víctor Sánchez (cited in Falicov, 2007)

In the simplest terms and in reference to cinema, *coproduction* is the collaboration between two or more agencies in the process of financing and producing a film. *International* coproduction can refer to any film with producers based in different countries, but more frequently is a collaboration between two or more national film institutes or trusts, offering a shared financial risk and with expectations of a broader audience. As state-backed productions, often between European cultural institutions or television stations and producers from nations with less developed film industries or struggling economies, coproductions take on the onus of representing (both symbolically and performatively) the cultural heritage of two or more nations. For that reason, these films have become a matter of international cultural policy, in which quotas for representing the investing nations must be filled. Actors, directors, production units, and locations carry varying weight in fulfilling heritage standards. In fiction film, these regulations can easily result in distinguishable national identity (such as accents or participation in historical events) becoming the primary definition of characters and their motivations, or in plots that bring said characters up against a particular nation's topographical, infrastructural, or cultural idiosyncrasies.

Mexican director Carlos Bolado's 2006 feature film *Sólo Dios sabe* is a transcontinental road movie, at once romantic and tragic, with an emphasis on the universalities of life, death, love, and family. Conceived as a Brazil—Mexico coproduction, with a funding award from Spain's Programa Ibermedia, the story draws parallels between two nation's folklores, religions,

and cultural productions while the cinematography puts into relief the contrasting landscapes of north and south. The film's easily marketable cast (Diego Luna and Alice Braga) and soundtrack (Julieta Venegas and Otto) are the product of combined artistic choices, personal connections with the filmmakers, and the demands of the various state and private financiers. This essay considers the film as a case study of what is being produced through official trans-hemispheric/transatlantic collaborations, using the particulars of the narrative and the production process to trace the overlap between this artistically complex film's ideal viewer and the broader continental market sought by its producers.

The film's thematic focus on religious syncretism in both countries suggests a certain Latin American solidarity based on the historical responses to Iberian colonization. Yet ambivalent readings can be made of coproduction in general and of Ibermedia's mission to foster Iberoamerican culture (as in the opening citations). This production model is presented as a sharing of financial burden in order to make films that can go up against Hollywood imperialism in the global market, while highlighting nationalistic "cultural identities." Some see this as part of Spain's audiovisual re-Conquest of the Latin American market,<sup>1</sup> while others see it as the need to ease a guilty historical conscience by developing what it once pillaged. The films themselves—both the filmmakers and the characters—seem to be constantly working through these political concerns.

### **Coproduction as Cultural Policy**

Coproduction as a practice, along with international casting, was a part of Latin American cinema throughout most of the twentieth century, and helped to build the Spanish-language market during the first decades of sound cinema with its transnational appeal. One of the principal examples is Mexican cinema's consolidation of the Spanish-language market during WWII, which includes collaborations with Spain, Cuba, and Argentina (López 10). In recent years, coproduction has been officially sanctioned as a model of financing, seen as one solution to the negative impact economic crisis has had on state-subsidized film industries. Since the mid 1980s, Spain's film institute (under the Ministry of Culture), its policies for aiding international development, and Televisión Española (TVE) have all been geared toward supporting the development of the audiovisual industries in Latin America, increasing aid and investment, and allowing coproductions to qualify for state subsidies (Hoefert 17). In 1989, the major Iberoamerican film institutes agreed to the *Convenio de Integración Cinematográfica Iberoamericana*, which included the idea to establish a multilateral production fund. In 1997, the *Cumbre Iberoamericana de Jefes de Estado y de Gobierno* approved Programa Ibermedia, which pools contributions from its members and, through a selection process, awards funding in four categories (training, development, distribution, and coproduction) to filmmakers in its member nations. While Spain is the principal contributor to this fund—and therefore holds more decision-making power—Ibermedia's members comprise 14 Spanish-speaking Latin American nations, Brazil, and Portugal.

Awardees of coproduction funding may choose their collaborating countries and the subsequent joint investments take two primary forms: technical-artistic and purely financial (Falicov 23).<sup>2</sup> The former category takes a cultural-protectionist approach. In order to maintain

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1. See Hoefert de Turégano for an elaborate outline of Spanish telecommunications conglomerates and their control of Latin American audiovisual content.

2. The latter category is sometimes referred to as *cofinancing* rather than *coproduction*.

multiple *national* origins (for quotas, for subsidies, and to qualify for foreign-film awards categories), and as a promotion of 'cultural identity,' lead actors, directors, and producers from different nations are balanced. This may lead to changes in the script to accommodate casting requirements, which are themselves based on the legal citizenship of the actors. For this reason, actors who hold dual citizenship in Spain and Latin America are wild cards for fulfilling requirements. A subcategory of the technical-artistic coproductions is the *natural* coproduction, which has already incorporated a multinational plot into the project at the time of financing. When this is not the case, otherness often ends up underscored by clumsy or arbitrary incorporations of foreign characters into the plot.

Spain's role as the primary investor in Latin American cinema is ambiguous, and questioned as paternalistic, if not imperialistic by some. Teresa Hoefert de Turégano writes that Spain's relationship with Latin American film industries "is dominated by the implicit recognition of mutual needs, which appears to have an equilibrating effect among these economically and politically unequal partners and yet is framed in an imperial triangle with the United States" (15). Spain is the second largest investor in Latin America after the United States, and the block set up at the Iberoamerican Summit is intended to challenge Hollywood's dominance of the global film market by creating collaborative production and new chains of distribution between countries. Spain's contributions to the Ibermedia fund, 50% of the total, are provided by the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional (AECI) as part of its foreign policy to "maintain good relations with other countries, including former colonies" (Falicov 27).

### **Globalization, National 'Authenticity,' and Migratory Filmmaking**

The movement of coproduction into the realm of official cultural policy coincides with economic shifts throughout Latin America in the late 1980s and early '90s, worldwide technological advances, and the acceptance of *globalization* into common parlance. Its policies interact with certain political and academic discourses of the time period, such as concerns with identity and visibility politics, especially with groups that are continually under- or misrepresented by the media industries. Films depicting national heroes or landscapes were criticized when 'falsifying' these people and places through representation, as when a European actor portrayed a Latin American. In the United States, issues surrounding negative stereotyping overlapped with those of film-industry under-employment for racial minorities and made the question of performing racial identity a double offense, all at a time when affirmative action was being challenged and the backlash against *political correctness* was used to discredit progressive educational policy. In the rest of the world, concerns were focused on protecting national specificity from the impending homogenization of culture under new free-trade policies.

In response to a certain impasse in these debates and to an overabundance in the media to accusations of 'inauthentic' filmmaking, and recognizing coproduction as intrinsic to the survival of Latin American film industries, film scholar Ann Marie Stock's introduction to *Framing Latin American Cinema*—published in 1997, the same year as the aforementioned summit—makes a call for a new "praxis" regarding critical response to audiovisual production, one that moves away from concerns with authenticity. She points out that academic work to that point on the development of national film industries and region/continental movements has been "tremendously valuable in documenting specific cultural traditions;" nonetheless,

located as they are within geopolitical frameworks, [these studies] cannot adequately account for the ways in which cinema has participated in the ongoing construction of geopolitical identity within and beyond the region. Nor do they acknowledge the actual practices of making and viewing films that defy rather than reinforce national categories. (xxiii)

Stock calls for a recognition of "migration" as an essential element of Latin American filmmaking, both in the fictional stories and the real production practices. The book concludes with a translation of an essay by Nestor García Canclini, "Will There be a Latin American Cinema in the Year 2000?" which speaks of a new "regionalization" and "reterritorialization" in the face of globalization, and affirms that the "*mestización* of consumption engenders difference and diverse forms of local rootedness" (256). This parallels Hoefert de Turégano's theorization of coproduction, in which she utilizes the work of Stuart Hall to explain that "globalisation and transnationalism need the collaboration of nations to thrive" and that they, paradoxically, foster an assertion of national autonomy. "[W]ithin this desire to incorporate difference, but not to eliminate it, ... coproductions reveal the complexities of negotiating identities in transnational and globalised contexts" (16). Hoefert de Turégano's work on pre-Ibermedia independent coproductions finds that they favor auteur directors who are recognized national figures but with connections to the pan-Latin American anti-imperialism of the New Latin American Cinema movements, whereas Tamara Falicov's research on Ibermedia outlines a pattern of character foils based on the pejorative treatment of the Spaniard (a requisite character when balancing casts) as a foreigner on Latin American soil.

In the late 1990s, alternatives to state coproductions became more prevalent, including private investment and corporate sponsorship. Though this model appears to be more motivated to seek a global commercial market and greater financial returns, it has been touted as being more open to artistic freedom and innovation than traditional state productions. García Canclini sees this as a clear division of labor, with the state seeking "legitimacy and consensus in appearing as representatives of national history" while corporations "seek to obtain money and, through high, renovating culture, to construct a 'disinterested' image of their economic expansion" (*Hybrid Cultures* 59). On the other hand, explaining the elements of unofficial Mexico-Spain coproductions *Amores perros* (2000) and *Y tu mamá también* (2001), Paul Julian Smith sees a certain displacement of nation-legitimizing onto private film productions such as these. An example of this informal cultural policy is the participation of lead Spanish actresses who are "spectacularly visible" and yet "covertly undercut in the narrative," following that the "fetish of Europeanness stands in for a globalization of the audiovisual industries which cannot be directly represented in films whose claim to authenticity is based on national specificity" (398). Smith points out a general shift in production paradigm from the state protectionist model to the US-inspired promotion-innovation model, and yet both, for different reasons, seek to preserve the film's cultural value. Recent coproductions tend to be hybrids of these models and too often fail to escape conservative representations of national heritage, despite aesthetic innovations or critiques of social injustice.

In addition to Smith, other scholars who have written about Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* seem to agree that it constructs a rather conservative ideology, first with its superficial incorporation of a folkloric Mexico into its narrative and second, because it ends the story by suppressing transgressive behavior with death, conservative values, and nostalgic nationalism.<sup>3</sup> And yet the picturesque aspects are reframed by a voiceover narration's overt

critique of uneven development. The conflicted political positioning is enabled by the cinematic conventions of the road movie genre, pointing to a trait common to several coproductions that have been flagged as emblematic of this same-but-different treatment of nationhood, with physical journeys across geopolitical terrain often rendering ambiguous visual representations of the nation.<sup>4</sup> The camera's tourist gaze frames landscape, geographical landmarks, and regional characteristics in the same way that foreign actors mark character development: through difference.

### ***Sólo Dios sabe* as a 'Natural' Coproduction**

Carlos Bolado's *Sólo Dios sabe* received support from Programa Ibermedia at a moment when the number of required coproducers was reduced from three to two countries and it therefore does not incorporate Spain or any other sense of "Europeanness" into the story. However, the parallels it draws between its two Latin American locations might be seen to respond inadvertently to both historical imperialism and official notions of cultural identity. From its inception, the film was planned as a transcontinental project, as a collaboration between Bolado and Brazilian producer Sara Silveira. The two secured funding from Ibermedia, the Mexican Film Institute, Brazil's Petrobras Cinema funding, and several private producers in both countries. Bolado moved to Brazil while writing the script, admittedly in order to bring his familiarity with the country's language and the traditions beyond Jorge Amado's folkloric depictions.<sup>5</sup> This *natural coproduction* actually took many years to cohere its binational elements. In the end, *Sólo Dios sabe* is a quite realistic example of how the economics of global financing in this high-cost medium are inextricable from the aesthetic and narrative results.

Following bilingual Spanish-Portuguese opening credits, the story begins with a border-crossing, from San Diego into Tijuana. After losing her passport, Brazilian art student Dolores (Braga) is unable to re-enter the U.S. and is directed by border agents to the embassy in Mexico City. A young Mexican journalist, Damián (Luna), has meanwhile become infatuated with Dolores since seeing her in a nightclub and offers her a ride to the capital. The road trip provides a chance for their romance to bloom while the cinematography showcases the landscapes of northwest Mexico and Baja California with panoramic shots, pit stops at quaint motels and eateries, and a religious festival in a Purépecha town near the base of the Parícutín volcano in Michoacán. The couple's arrival in Mexico City is a stepping stone from which the story quickly leaps (by plane) to São Paulo. The latter half of the film shows Dolores's confrontation with mortality and her exploration of spirituality as she learns about the rites of her late grandmother's religion, Candomblé. This leads to a second trip, from São Paulo to a more rural and idyllic northeast, on a lushly verdant coastal Bahía, with both ocean and running creeks, a landscape to contrast Mexico's desertic northern states.

The film's binational qualities surface on several different planes, which can be mapped out as 1) the filmmaker's personal connections and his international professional network of actors and producers;<sup>6</sup> 2) the transnational circulation of capital through the state and private bodies that provided financing, including the cultural policy that dictates casting and

3. See Andrea Noble's "Seeing the Other through Film" in *Mexican National Cinema* (Routledge, 2006); Hester Baer and Ryan Long's "Transnational Cinema and the Mexican State in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tú mamá también*" in *South Central Review* 23.1 (Fall 2004), 150-168; and Francisco Sánchez's *Luz en la oscuridad: crónica del cine mexicano, 1896-2002* (Conaculta, 2002).

4. For example, Fernando Solanas' *El viaje*, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Guantanamera*, María Novaro's *Sin dejar huella*, and Walter Salles' *Los diarios de motocicleta*.

5. Interview with author, December 2007.

production requirements; and 3) the characters and locations explored within the diegesis as geographical and cultural markers. The links between these planes—between personal, professional, and artistic interests, or between global economics and filmic storytelling convention—are what nuance the film's reading and make it difficult to see any production choice as solely artistic, commercial, or policy related. For example, Luna was in mind for this role from before the script was written, as he and Bolado both wanted to tell a story of what it meant to be an orphan. Braga was later chosen for her likeness to the late Cuban performance/visual artist Ana Mendieta, whose name and work are woven into this story through Braga's character. Furthermore, the script called for shooting in both countries, which incorporated production units in both places. Bolado notes that while Ibermedia's funding award was based on approving the original script and production plan, private investors such as Miravista had a much larger presence throughout production and ultimately more influence over the final product.<sup>7</sup>

The film's thematic emphasis on biological bloodlines, geopolitical origins, animist religious practices, and Earthworks artists (such as Mendieta) all naturalize the relationship between cultural/racial identity and geographic location, the latter made palpable by the photography's emphasis on the topography of its locations, whether urban or rural. Commenting on the relationship of the cinematography's aerial views and the characters' traversal of the landscape with the story's take on spirituality and fate, one critic notes that "Todo esto nos hace sentir que ellos son pequeños elementos de un diseño mayor."<sup>8</sup> This seemingly creationist comment is in fact more appropriately connected to Bolado's interest in environmental art, worked into the film's aesthetic by way of the road movie's scenic stopovers and through the likening of these artistic practices to religious rituals. Bolado comments that:

La película explora manifestaciones del impulso espiritual y religioso, que es también el principio del arte. He estado interesado siempre en las religiones primarias, y busqué hacer resonar—de manera que espero trascienda como respetuosa—símbolos específicos del catolicismo y el candomblé. Oxum, el orixá (como un ángel o una diosa) del agua dulce que se convierte en una fuerza-guía en la vida de Dolores, está presente a lo largo de la película.<sup>9</sup>

Bolado's prior research on Afro-Cuban religious syncretism overlaps with the artistic inspiration from artists such as Mendieta, as well as his contemporaries Erika Harrsch and Tatiana Parceró. The focus of Mendieta, Harrsch, and Parceró on the female body is not handled in film as blatantly political, but rather as another site of convergence (in reproduction) between biological and cultural identities. Land (nature, landscape, cartographies) and bodies are explored through their similarities and through their mutual imprints on one another. Mendieta's work is mimicked explicitly when Damián traces Dolores's figure in the sand after a conversation about the artist, and more subtly when Dolores's face presses up against the window during sex in Damián's car.<sup>10</sup> Dolores's dream sequences throughout the film take

6. Bolado, originally from Mexico City, has worked extensively as an editor in its film industry, including on *Como agua para chocolate* (1992). He has been a resident of California for more than 10 years and has worked on several international productions, including co-directing a documentary on Israeli--Palestinian relations.

7. Bolado, interview with the author, December 2007.

8. Casa América online event calendar, accessed Jan. 15, 2008. <http://www.casamerica.es/es/casa-de-america-madrid/agenda/cine/solo-dios-sabe>

9. Commentaries by Bolado in Casa América online calendar, accessed Jan. 15, 2008. <http://www.casamerica.es/es/casa-de-america-madrid/agenda/cine/solo-dios-sabe>

place at the river where her Candomblé initiation occurred and where she spent time with her grandmother as a child. A grainy film stock cues the images as both flashbacks and premonitions, and home-video camerawork marks them as visual documentation of Dolores's youth. Floating flowers reference rites of devotion to Oxum, while the images of Dolores's body in the river fuse the homage to Mendieta's photographic work with a canonical European work, Millais's *Ophelia*, both of which are prescient of the film's tragic ending.

The continental leap midway through the movie triggers the change in genre, from romance to tragedy. The narrative structure then further emphasizes the parallels between these two Latin American cultures. The couple's life together, a continuation of their earlier voyage, is modeled as a temporal trajectory (using traveling as a theme and clocks as a leitmotif), and the film's narrative traces where their two paths coincide. This trajectory is split by in two by the transition between North and South America, and by parallel events and images, a structural and thematic doubling that joins form with content. Another leitmotif, the mirror or reflection, repeatedly shows Dolores and Damián contemplating their own inverted "self" as the two of them become a pair, watching their own images while also looking indirectly at their partner.

This pairing of a binational couple is framed by mirroring events that interrupt their journey, such as indigenous and African religious rituals. Several elements of these events call our attention back to the debates around coproduction's construction of cultural identities, here cultural groups celebrated by national discourse but marginalized by the historic economic realities of racial stratification. Both are religious ceremonies that emphasize the syncretism that occurred as a response to the spiritual conquest of Iberian Christianity over African and indigenous belief systems. The comparison, while suggesting an anti-colonial solidarity, is between practices that have already, for many decades, been incorporated into nationalistic discourses and iconographies.

In both the romantic and tragic storylines, the characters work through their own relationships to religion, presented first as superstitious rituals with holy water, impromptu altars, and buying holy cards, and later as critical life decisions hinging upon the couple's relative valorization of destiny and free will. Dolores's Candomblé practices are compared to Damián's ritualistic Catholicism, and eventually, both have their connections to these practices legitimized through biological/geographical origin. At the festival in Michoacán, Damián is greeted in Purépecha by a local and immediately comments that the man reminds him of his father, giving him an imagined indigenous bloodline.<sup>11</sup> Later, Dolores discovers a part of her identity concealed by her mother, that she is the great granddaughter of an Afro-Bahian high priestess of Candomblé. Dolores's biological lineage is used to explain her new attraction to these religious practices, while her mother's disregard for them is a result of her desire to 'pass.'

The cultural parallels are not limited to the traditional. Contemporary pop culture enters the film via the soundtrack, an element of marketing that is essential to the promotion production model and inevitably joins media-consumer reality with the internal world of the film. Brazil's *mangue beat* musician Otto teamed up with Mexico's Grammy-winning singer/

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10. For a discussion of Mendieta's *Glass on Body or Siluetas* series, see Jane Blocker's *Where is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile*, (Duke University Press, 1999).

11. At the same festival, Damián points out the costumed "moros" on horseback, reminding us that the religious conquest of Mexico and the syncretic practices that arose are themselves the result of complex reinterpretations of historical accounts of Spain's own *Reconquista*.



songwriter Julieta Venegas. Though both musicians embody the geographic complexity of borders—Otto being of Dutch descent and Julieta having grown up in Tijuana—their participation in the soundtrack was incorporated as the gender-nationality inverse of the romantic leads, a duet between a Mexican woman and Brazilian male, and they recorded a soundtrack with songs mixing the two languages.<sup>12</sup>

What is at stake in this mirroring of traditional and contemporary cultural production becomes even more complex when factoring in casting. As part of the mystical aspect of the film and an homage to the 1959 film *Orfeu negro*, Mexican actor Damián Alcázar, the lead in Bolado's first film, was cast as a personified *presagio de la muerte* who touches Dolores three times throughout the film: dressed in drag in the Tijuana nightclub, dressed as a veiled Moor in the indigenous festival in Mexico, and wearing darkening make-up to appear African in a Candomblé ceremony in Bahía. While the director himself leans away from a political reading of the film and sees his casting choices to be among the many artistic idiosyncrasies of his body of work, the fact that one of Mexico's most recognized contemporary actors is literally *disguised* for his personification of three historically marginalized groups immediately recalls debates on identity and visibility politics. On the one hand, this triptych role is a repetition of the theme of performance that highlights traditional and contemporary music and dance cultures in both countries, while on the other, the performative impersonation of these identities rejects the story's authentication of heritage with land and bloodlines, and furthermore, on some level, responds to cultural protectionism's notion that race cannot or should not be performed. At the same time, the centrality of mainstream, racially non-descript actors in lead roles and the relegation of visible racial difference to extras indicates that commercial viability and realistic representations of Latin American identity are still clearly at odds.

## Conclusion

In the case of *Sólo Dios sabe*, Ibermedia collaborated with private producers in its promotion of Latin American identities. The story looks at religion as an origin for national customs and seeks to update the ties to these traditions by presenting both a need for spiritual introspection in 21<sup>st</sup>-century existential crises and a place for tangible, ceremonial reconnections to geographical and biological origins. While aesthetic homage to environmental art locates the filmmaker within an international network of migratory and exiled visual artists, whose work builds on tensions between ephemeral and permanent traces of existence, the film also reiterates simplistic nationalistic notions of heritage and identity that are still prevalent in contemporary cinema and further highlighted by coproduction policy and road-movie conventions. At the same time, the emphasis on performable aspects of race and sexuality—as inadvertent as it may be—complicate the essentialist ideology. The primary fission is between the story, which works through social implications of religion and race (as a conflated identity), and the casting, which shows a sharp contrast between the racially 'neutral' leads and the otherness of the extras. If this film is to be taken as an example of international policy's protection of culture from neo-imperialism, we must recognize it as an insufficient means of representing Latin American identities if commercial investors continue to demand a downplayed racial visibility onscreen and national film institutes continue to ignore the infinitely diverse and complex perspectives on identity within their borders. Unfortunately, the results of coproduction bode poorly for García Canclini's hopes of regionalization in cinema. The

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12. Bolado, interview with the author, December 2007.

feared homogenization may not result from a re-Conquest by Iberian telecommunications nor by the Spanish government's paternalistic attitude towards film production, but by the failure of Latin America's national industries to recognize the richness of its own cultures beyond a fleeting glimpse from a moving car.

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