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Introduction: Mapping digital practices in Hispanic cinemas

Belén Vidal

This dossier interrogates the ways in which cinemas from Latin America and Spain have engaged with digital practices in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The digital medium has brought into relief the negotiation between local knowledge and the desire for transnational circulation in new global scenarios.¹ This Introduction briefly situates the essays in the dossier in relation to aesthetic and political questions arising from digital cinematic practices; the different contributions explore significant ways in which moving image texts that engage the digital offer new understandings of both the flow of people, information and capital, and the processes by which we imagine the spaces and boundaries pertaining to the vexed category ‘Hispanic cinemas’.

From a historical perspective, the very idea of ‘Hispanic cinemas’ is a fraught one. As Marvin D’Lugo reminds us, the concept of transnational Hispanic cinemas derives from industrial practices that collapsed geocultural differences into a homogenous market model. The category *film hispano* was originally a mass-media construction that included a Hollywood-produced early sound cinema broadly aimed to Spanish-language audiences, regardless of specificities of location.² Later frameworks, such as the New Latin American Cinema, crystallised around the political aims of cinemas across a broad regional axis. Yet paradoxically, and despite autochthonous formulations (most famously, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino’s notion of Third Cinema, from 1969), the regional construction ‘Latin American cinema’ was due to the influence of outside perspectives (both European and North American) on the historiography of the cinemas of South and Central America.³ At the turn of the twenty-first century, with the foundations of historical, auteurist and identity studies firmly in place,⁴ the field shifted to a new wave of transnational studies partly prompted by

the boom of Latin American cinema after the global success of key millennial films such as *Amores perros/Love's a Bitch* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000) and *Y tu mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001).⁵ The field of Hispanic cinemas has been expanded by the incorporation of these and other Latin American filmmakers into the Anglophone, if decentered Hollywood dominated mainstream.⁶ Parallel to this, the flux of Latin American 'festival' cinema, often sustained (and co-opted) by European funding initiatives,⁷ and the development of a global cinema in Spanish (of which the most visible model may be Pedro and Agustín Almodóvar's *El Deseo*'s transnational co-productions) add further complexity to the mapping of the field.⁸ The above success stories have emerged as exemplary case studies in an ever growing body of scholarship. In contrast, this dossier seeks to expand this conversation into less consensual territory. It is our goal to bring centre stage lesser-known moving-image objects of study that actively intervene in broader political discourses and display a self-reflective approach to the question of Hispanic cinemas' place in the world.

The transnational articulation of Hispanic film studies coincides with the spatial turn in the humanities. As Kathleen Newman has put it, the spatial turn has adopted a two-pronged theoretical focus on 'decentered subjectivity and decentered capitalism',⁹ undoing binary assumptions about culture flowing from an (active) centre to (passive) peripheries (whether these may be located in Spain, Latin America, North America or Europe). A more complex map of spatial practices thus emerges; for example, in the redistribution of power along vertical lines in grassroots videoactivism that turns the surveillant gaze back at the state, or in performative documentaries that re-inscribe communities erased from hegemonic cartographies. Drawn from the case studies examined in this dossier, these instances foreground spatiality as, in the words of Ana López, 'a social product rather than as a predefined territorial container: power, discipline and resistance are spatially inscribed in filmic texts and into the spatial organization of film production and circulation'.¹⁰

The processes and material practices whereby, as López puts it, ‘Hispanic spaces and places are ordered and bordered’¹¹ lie at the centre of the inquiry into the digital cinematic practices archived in this dossier. As a technological constant that mediates our experience of space and place, the digital can also be mobilised as a form of cognitive mapping, in Fredric Jameson’s influential formulation. Jameson’s term, borrowed from urban planner Kevin Lynch, reads the practice of mental mapping in urban environments theorised by Lynch through an Althusserian approach to subjectivity. Cognitive mapping consists of a set of cultural responses geared towards perception of spatial relations in relation to the totality of class relations, inscribed through capitalism’s abstract systems in each one of its different eras.¹² Focusing on the cultural forms arising in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle remark that the aesthetic of cognitive mapping ‘enable[s] individuals and collectivities to render their place in a capitalist world-system intelligible’.¹³ Cognitive mapping is thus meant to restore the articulation of concrete experience in relation to the abstract systems that regulate the flow of capital and information.

The aesthetic of cognitive mapping, as formulated by Jameson, has been evoked in scholarly works concerned with geopolitics and cinema (such as Toscano and Kinkle’s *Cartographies of the Absolute*, cited above) and secondarily, through cinema’s cartographic imagination.¹⁴ Said aesthetic is identified in several of the case studies examined in this dossier, such as the installation *Places that do not exist (Goggle Earth 1.0) (sic)* (2009), which deploys digital video as a cartographic counter-practice. Other case studies, such as activist feature *Ciutat morta* (2013), or the digital paratexts that support and supplement human rights documentary engage in a critique of hegemonic topographies. The use of digital tools by filmmakers and video-makers thus enables new (perceptual, narrative) forms of cognitive mapping with distinct political effects.

Visuality and knowledge, surveillance and participation, migration and advocacy, and

relocation and disorientation are key themes discussed in this dossier manifestly connected with digital practices. These issues reveal themselves to a large extent as both symptomatic of a transition between different medium-based systems of knowledge, and specific to the conceptualisation of borders and movement, and the resulting power asymmetries arising in the cultural domain. In this regard, the first and last essays in the dossier specifically invoke the concept of the ‘Hispanic Atlantic’ in order to track and problematize the relationship between Spain and Latin America as a shared cultural space. This term seeks to function as a capacious concept for intercultural practices and encounters between cultural agents on both sides of the Atlantic. However, it also permits the critical tracking of hegemonic processes derived from past colonial histories and potentially reproduced in new power configurations internalised by institutions (for example, through transatlantic funding initiatives promoted by film festivals, or the Ibermedia funding programme).¹⁵

The sample of case studies, all produced after the mid-2000s, refers to a post-Web 2.0 moment, in which the interactivity of digital environments becomes translatable into a cinema that absorbs participatory practices. In this context, grassroots interventions in public spaces co-exist with anxieties about the specificity of locality and culture becoming diluted. These poles of transformation and reaction are presented through the diversity of our objects of study (including experimental and social issue documentary, activist filmmaking, and popular fiction cinema), which reflect a range of cinematic modes re-set by digital tools of production and consumption.

In the opening essay, Josetxo Cerdán and Miguel Fernández Labayen engage with the notions of mapping and cartography in their original sense by looking at ‘film maps’ and maps filmed in documentaries emerging from both sides of the Atlantic. The authors examine in particular how their key case studies, the installation *Places that do not exist* (*Goggle Earth 1.0*) by Isaki Lacuesta and Isa Campo, and Andrés Di Tella’s *El país del diablo*

(‘Devil’s Country’) (2007) investigate the transformation of topography into cognitive systems, and the attendant production (and obscuring) of knowledge (socio-cultural, historical and political) derived from maps. Using the tools of digital documentary, these filmmakers question the relationship between maps as geographic representations of the nation, and the histories foretold in those very same topographic representations, engaging in exercises in counter-geography and counter-history, respectively. *El país del diablo* reveals social histories obscured by the processes of land appropriation and suppression of indigenous cultures, whereas the *Goggle Earth 1.0* project is a response to the areas of geopolitical erasure in-built in Google Earth as a powerful topographic tool. The key role of digital technology serves to question the histories of knowledge, power and national identity that are usually associated with the indexical quality of cartography. Cerdán and Fernández Labayen’s essay situate these projects in a trend of documentaries, instances of ‘cartographic cinema’ (after Tom Conley’s formulation)¹⁶ that situate the debates about history and memory in Latin America and Spain in a geo-coded world.

Eva Woods Peiró examines how videoactivists employ emancipatory digital communication tactics, open access archivalization and social media to amplify their visibility and impact. Her essay focuses on the feature-length documentary *Ciutat morta/Dead City* (Xavier Artigas and Xapo Ortega, 2013), which chronicles the 2006 “4F” (4th of February) case of police corruption, racial and queer profiling, and torture of detainees in Barcelona. Derailing the official story told through mainstream media outlets, the film’s creators situate their product in the continuum between online and offline worlds, navigating between surveillant guerrilla communication practices and locally based grassroots movement work. Doing so, they temporarily disrupt the meanings of mainstream media in Barcelona and beyond. Looking at the documentary’s enactment of liberatory, distributed free culture, Woods Peiró argues that *Ciutat morta* aligns itself with local social movements,

national manifestations of 15M, and the global online archive of human rights videos that witness, or ‘subveil’, abuse by states and corporations.

Deborah Shaw demonstrates the importance of digital paratexts in the way human rights documentaries promote advocacy and expand their remit as tools to raise social awareness and effect change. Her essay takes as case study the project behind *Who is Dayani Cristal?*, a documentary by Marc Silver and Gael García Bernal (2013) on illegal immigration from the region of Central America and Mexico to the United States. The film is examined as part of a digital continuum that includes official websites, interviews, testimonials, and impact assessment documents. Shaw’s analysis looks at the educational, political and marketing strategies (including the star presence of actor and producer García Bernal) embedded in the digital paratexts as tools for mapping knowledge within and beyond the film text in ways that effectively serve the ‘master text’, that is, the social issue under discussion (the human and social cost of migration across the Mexico-U.S border, in this case). Shaw argues that this example of open space documentary¹⁷ modifies the producer/consumer relationship enabled by the commercial film experience to create instead a space of information sharing, activism and engagement around the issues raised by the film.

In the last essay, Belén Vidal interrogates cinephilia as a gesture of retreat in recent co-productions across Latin America and Spain that spatially visualise the shifting nature of the cinematic experience. The discussion of cinema as *subject* of cinephilia deploys a range of film examples. Starting with *Güeros* (Alonso Ruizpalacios, 2014) as a self-reflexive festival film, the essay moves on to more explicit examples of meta-films: *El crítico/The Film Critic* (Hernán Guerschuny, 2013), *Sexo fácil, películas tristes/Easy Sex, Sad Movies* (Alejo Flah, 2014) and *La vida útil/A Useful Life* (Federico Veiroj, 2010). In all three, the cinephile (loosely signified by the figures of the critic, the screenwriter and the film archivist, respectively) is presented as an anti-hero who retreats into safe yet stagnant film worlds. This

gesture highlights the uncertain status of cinematic representation in a space of geopolitical disorientation and technological change, as well as the forms of nostalgia for the analogic world prompted by the incomplete transition to the digital. A pervasive sense of both anxiety and possibility arises from these tonally mixed films, which can be connected with the convergence of technological change and shifting localities in relation to co-production practices. The background to this discussion is the political economy behind transnational funding initiatives that promote a globalised aesthetic.

These different contributions vindicate the ways digital filmmaking arising from the Hispanic world is challenging hegemonic histories and reflecting on the porous nature of geographical boundaries through themes and modes of cross-cultural narration and relocation, human rights advocacy, oppositional activism and cartographic visuality. Through these diverse but complementary case studies, this dossier wants to contribute to the spatial turn from the perspective of Hispanic cinemas, and further the ongoing discussion about the political and aesthetic potential of the digital.

¹ The original idea for this dossier was first formulated in the two-day symposium ‘Personal Belongings: Mobility in Contemporary Hispanic Cinemas’, co-organised by the Department of Film Studies at King’s College London and the Department of Journalism and Audiovisual Communication at the University Carlos III of Madrid, which took place in London on 3-4 June 2016. The symposium, as well all contributions in this dossier have been developed in the context of the Research Project ‘Transnational relations in Spanish-American digital cinema: the cases of Spain, Mexico and Argentina’ (CSO2014-52750-P) funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of the Spanish Government and co-financed with FEDER funds. The author wants to thank all the participants in this dossier for their input in this Introduction.

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- ² Marvin D'Lugo, 'Aural identity, genealogies of sound technologies, and Hispanic transnationality on screen', in Nataša Ďurovičová and Kathleen Newman (eds), *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), p. 168.
- ³ See Jeffrey Middents, 'The first rule of Latin American cinema is you do not talk about Latin American cinema: notes on discussing a sense of place in contemporary cinema', *Transnational Cinemas*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2013), pp. 148-149.
- ⁴ See Ana M. López, 'Calling for Intermediality: Latin American Mediascapes', *Cinema Journal* vol. 54, no.1 (2014), pp. 135-141; Rob Stone, 'The Disintegration of Spanish Cinema', *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, vol. 92, no. 3 (2015), pp.423-438.
- ⁵ Deborah Shaw, 'Latin American Cinema Today. A Qualified Success Story', in Deborah Shaw (ed), *Contemporary Latin American Cinema. Breaking into the Global Market* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), pp. 1-10.
- ⁶ See Shaw, *The three amigos. The Transnational Filmmaking of Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Alfonso Cuarón* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
- ⁷ See, for example, Miriam Ross, 'The film festival as producer: Latin American Films and Rotterdam's Hubert Bals Fund', *Screen*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2011), pp. 261-267.
- ⁸ See Núria Triana-Toribio, 'Journeys of El Deseo between the nation and the transnational in Spanish cinema', *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas*, vol.4, no. 3 (2007), pp. 151-163; Marina Díaz López, 'El Deseo's "Itinerary". Almodóvar and the Spanish Film Industry' in Marvin D'Lugo and Kathleen M. Vernon (eds), *A Companion to Pedro Almodóvar* (Chichester and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 107-128.
- ⁹ Kathleen Newman, 'Notes on transnational film theory: decentered subjectivity, decentered capitalism', in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, p. 5.

¹⁰ López, 'Introduction. Geographical Imaginaries', *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2010), pp 3-8: 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Fredric Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 347-357. See also *The Geopolitical Aesthetic. Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, and London: British Film Institute, 1992).

¹³ Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Zero Books, 2015), location 195. Kindle Edition.

¹⁴ For example, Rosalind Galt, *The New European Cinema. Redrawing the Map* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006); Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

¹⁵ See Joseba Gabilondo, 'The Hispanic Atlantic: Introduction', *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, vol. 5 (2001), pp. 91-113, Marvin D'Lugo, 'Across the Hispanic Atlantic: cinema and its symbolic relocations', *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas*, vol. 5, no. 1 & 2 (2008), pp. 3-8.

¹⁶ Conley, *Cartographic Cinema*.

¹⁷ Helen de Michiel and Patricia R. Zimmermann, 'Documentary as Open Space', in Brian Winston (ed) *The Documentary Film Book* (London: British Film Institute, 2013) pp. 355-365.