Latin American Culture, Popular Identity and Post-Modernism: Philosophy, Film, Soap and Civil Rights

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Books differ from newspapers. The most recent books are not always the most interesting. This essay reviews recent and not so recent books. As the reader should have noticed already, the selection of books for this review essay is neither a logical nor rational choice. They have come together in this review by sheer accident – three by invitation from the person responsible for book reviews, another from the showcase of KIT’s (Royal Tropical Institute) library and the last one from a search in a very hot Carioca second hand bookshop. What they have in common are aspects of Latin American culture from philosophy to telenovelas and the preoccupation of their authors to understand (popular) identity. However different in topic and aim, together they give an exciting overview of changes in Latin American cultural production and at the same time of the growing importance of the cultural industry in Latin America.

The topic of Pilcher’s book is a dramatic one. Mario Moreno, the alter ego of the film hero Cantinflas, lived a long and productive life linked with the ups and downs of the Mexican film industry. Yet, to tell the truth, it took me a long time to finish this book and not because of the main character of the book. Indeed, Cantinflas offers ‘an excellent portrait of Mexican self-image during a transitional moment from a traditional agrarian society to an industrial urban one’ (p. xvii). Moreno’s life is fascinating material for a biography: it is about how a poor working class man became influential and rich and then lost himself. Pilcher shows us how this big star played three basic, but always interlinked, roles. The first was the ‘pelado’, the country bumpkin who is bewildered by the big city but far wiser than the urbane people around him. This was a role he learned in the popular carpa (tent) theatre in the 1930s. Cantinflas is the underdog who triumphs through trickery by using especially irreverent and incomprehensible street jargon and by playing sexually insecure characters who oscillate between courage and cowardice. Another was the role of the politician portraying the powerful union boss Vincente...
Toledano; it was a role that became reality in Moreno’s struggle to defend the interests of an autonomous union of film actors from the corrupt official system. In the third role, Moreno played a member of the bourgeoisie who was the owner of a big film company and an active film director, producing film after film.

While describing Moreno-Cantinflas’s development and the change of roles within a socio-political context, the author also wants to give us insight into Mexican popular culture and the role that the common people, the cultural industries and the Mexican State as the three main actors have played. Perhaps this very broad macro-sociological approach is the reason that reading the book demanded so much effort and commitment. Although Pilcher promises us a dual biography that will examine the tension between an actor and his character, Mario Moreno does not come alive as a human being with his own feelings and perceptions. Rather, he stands as a symbol of Mexican identity during the transitional period.

The book follows a logical and chronological order based on Moreno’s biography. After an introductory chapter that summarises the objectives and findings of the book, the first three chapters are dedicated to the formative period of Moreno’s career, up to the mid-1940s. Chapter 1 describes the Cantinflas character as originating from Moreno’s roots in popular culture, especially the carpa street theatre, which is an improvised form of theatre that was very popular between 1920 and 1930. The following chapter analyses how Moreno adapted his stage character to please a more general cinema audience, including the middle classes. The third chapter illustrates how Moreno reached stardom in the period of the Mexican film industry called its ‘golden age’.

The second stage of his career runs from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s. Chapter 4 describes how this comedian who specialised in parodies on labour bosses became a union leader in his own right. Although he negotiated serious issues and was very active in union politics, Moreno was never able to escape from the comic shadow of Cantinflas. He always felt a gap between what he said and what people heard. Chapter 5 examines how Moreno, in the 50s, identified himself with the government’s policy. Gradually he lost touch with the lives of common people, although he never lost their affection. Chapter 6 recounts Moreno’s ‘adventures’ in Hollywood. His international success with his performance in ‘Around the world in 80 days’ (1956) was a reason for national pride. Pilcher then dramatically describes how Moreno sacrificed his Cantinflas character to the Hollywood stereotype in the failed movie ‘Pepe’ (1960). Once back in Mexico, Moreno attempted to recapture his youth by having a facelift, which only made him a parody of his former self, isolated him from his popular origins, and caused personal suffering in the sphere of the family. In short, this is material enough for big drama. But the reader does not feel it. We are not drawn into the story because the author does not adequately inform us of what Moreno feels.

There are other reasons for dissatisfaction. Perhaps it is not fair, seen the limited scope of this book, but many pertinent questions remain unanswered. If modernity in Mexico has been so chaotic, what has the contribution of the film industry been? Positive or negative? Is it a coincidence that Moreno was always active in advertisement films? More in general, what was the importance of the national film industry? Why was it so strong during this period? Why was Hollywood able to take over? These questions are not only relevant for the Mexican situation but also
for other Latin American countries like Argentine, Brazil, or even for a country like The Netherlands.

For The Netherlands, Bart Hofstede (2000) has developed an explanatory model that could also be of interest for understanding the Latin American film industry. Hofstede postulates the existence of a world-wide trans-national film system under the hegemony of Hollywood. This world-wide system for the production and distribution of films is influencing all national productions. The world system encompasses three subsystems: Hollywood at the centre producing for the market; a non-commercial sector producing art pour art, and national productions filmed in the local language which often aim at nationalist feelings. Four factors can explain either the more central or more peripheral position of a subsystem in the world system: the size of the internal market, the role of the state, the language spoken and the capacity to initiate productions. In addition to these four elements, the realistic style of Hollywood has become hegemonic and standard.

After the 1960s Mexican and Brazilian filmmakers lost movie goers in their own countries, in spite of state intervention and protection. National left wing filmmakers had neglected the working class audience who preferred melodrama (Oroz 1996). The decline of national film industries in the 50s is certainly linked with the introduction of TV, too. The end of the golden age of the Mexican film industry coincides with the development of commercial television. That TV has also taken over the role of constructing national identity is the opinion of the writer of the next book reviewed here.

The scope of Tufte’s book on telenovelas in Brazil is much broader than Pilcher’s study and gives more concrete answers on, for instance, the impact on and the reception of telenovelas by the audience. Tufte starts his book with an overview of the existing literature on Brazilian and Latin American communication studies. He reviews Latin-American writers on the subject, but also others, including my own 1988 thesis on telenovelas. Chapter 2 elaborates on the analytical framework for this study taking into account the TV-industry, the novela production process and the reception by the public. Each of these topics is dealt with in a separate chapter. The second part of the book is dedicated to the reception and impact of the soaps on a working class audience. The author, in spite of the risks and knowing the problems of such an enterprise, courageously attempts to write an ethnographic study, concentrating on the viewers of the telenovelas and the impact on their lives.

The ethnographic study, although based on a very small sample of only 13 women, is designed as a comparative one. The women interviewed live in three different neighbourhoods: in the favela Calabar in Salvador de Bahia; in Vila Nitro Operaria, an old residential area for workers in the far outskirts of São Paulo; and in Santa Operaria, a squatter settlement built 18 years ago at that time in the outskirts of Canoas in Rio Grande do Sul. The variety of the locations would suggest major differences between the women that were interviewed. However those differences seem only minor. Tufte uses the concept ‘neighbourhood culture’ to characterize the common life world of his interviewees. This concept borrowed from Martin-Barbero signifies a new culture that is different from the heroic working class of the early 1900s, or from the middle class living in the centre of town. This culture emerged as a result of outside influences from, for example, the church and local self-organization, especially by women. Characteristic for this group is the
concern with family, solidarity through social networks, the daily struggle to keep the house decent, class-consciousness and racial discourse as parts of their identity.

Before discussing the impact of the telenovelas, Tufte dedicates two chapters to the temporal and spatial dimensions of the novela reception. He introduces another new concept to explain the specific circumstances of the TV reception by the Brazilian proletariat: the hybrid sphere of signification. Tuft needs many words to explain this idea but, said simply, it has to do with the specific way time is spent during the day, the way the space of the house is used and how social relations are organized, and all in relation to the telenovelas. Observing the way the interviewed women watched telenovelas for hours led Tufte to coin this concept. The way these women watch is ‘radically different from watching TV in Denmark’. Indeed, Tufte’s observations are correct. In the neighbourhood he researched, TV is watched not privately, but together in a group. At the entrance of the house, a space which is neither private nor public is organised around a TV set. The stories and characters are commented on and discussed by the viewers. However, the conclusions based on this concept seem exaggerated if not far-fetched. ‘It [the hybrid sphere] has become a mediating sphere, playing an important role in the construction of the symbolic order of everyday life and in the formation of Latin American modernity – a sphere where distinct experiences of times and sociability meet’ (Tufte, 195). What Tufte actually means is only made clear later on in the book. He assumes that this hybrid sphere is ‘linked to another type of development and modernity typical for Latin America, the articulation of Latin American identity, is carried largely by emotions and with the telenovelas as central agents’ (Tufte, 226). This is the meaning of the word hybrid as borrowed from Canclini (1995). When reviewing Canclini’s book, we will come back to this point.

The final conclusions of Tufte’s study I can endorse wholeheartedly. They coincide with my own conclusions on the impact of telenovelas on a working class audience, although the study neglects the influence of the form and the proletarian taste for melodrama. Telenovelas contribute to the emancipation of working class women by offering active role models far from the Maria stereotype, and help them in the management of their emotions. Tufte is even more outspoken. He argues that television fiction constitutes a space for different social groups to be recognised and feel recognised, thereby contributing to the articulation of citizen identity among subordinated groups in society. Their own concerns, which mainly encompass suffering as an intrinsic part of daily life, are reflected in the suffering of the soap heroines and are recognised as common concerns shared by others. This is the neighbourhood way of exercising cultural citizenship.

The question remains to what extent these positive conclusions can be generalised, based on only 13 life stories and taking into account the fact that Tufte uses the novela Rainha de Sucata as the central case for the analysis of this genre. Furthermore, he was not able to watch TV with all his interviewees during the actual broadcasting of the novela and, with some of them, was only able to discuss it months after the novela’s ending. However these are minor technical points. This study is interesting and illustrates again the importance of TV fiction in the lives of millions of poor people in Latin America and the way in which the media make them a participant in public life.

These two studies reviewed here have shown the importance of the cultural
industry in Latin American culture and the perception of a Latin American identity, not only today but already in the 1940s and ‘50s. This does not mean that in this post-modernist time high culture has disappeared. The book on philosophy by the Italian philosopher Infranca and another on post-colonial studies by Robert Fiddian, respectively, make abundantly clear that construction and discussion on identity does not only take place through the cultural industry. However they do not show how this is done.

The book by Infranca contains a short and effective introduction to the ideas of one of the most original philosophers of Latin America, Enrique Dussel, who is an Argentine scholar living in Mexico because, as Dussel says, nobody is a prophet in his own country. As a philosopher Dussel has contributed greatly to the philosophical reflections from a Latin American perspective, starting from a different view on the history of this continent, and contributed equally as a Protestant to the theology of liberation His book Historia de la filosofía latinoamericana y filosofía de la liberación (1994) remains a landmark. The title of Infranca’s book El otro Occidente offers a good summary of Dussel’s approach to Latin American identity: Latin America is similar to and part of the occidental world, but different at the same time. This approach supposes self-confidence and pride. Dussel’s reflection, although rather abstract, aims at action, because his philosophy is above all ethical, and an inspiration to change the world.

The eight essays edited by Fiddian deal not only with Latin America but also with Lusophone Africa. Who are the supposed readers of this collection? Specialists in discourse analysis? The contributors have in common that they question the application to the cultures of formerly colonised territories, of concepts that are identified with metropolitan values and institutions. They insist on the specificity of Latin American postcolonial tradition. But who will disagree with them? And why are all these authors European outsiders? Why have no Latin Americans or Africans been invited to contribute? It would be in accordance with the aim of the book to create space for alternative, real post-colonial views. To the taste of this reviewer, this collection is focused too much on discourses about reality and not enough on giving real insight into reality itself. To what extent do these expressions of high culture, philosophy and literature contribute to the self-understanding of the Latin American people? The last book under review defends the idea that they do not, since the media play this role.

Canclini’s book, a collection of papers and articles, deals with the same themes as the other books but in a more provocative way and from a much broader perspective. He is also concerned with the Latin American identity and the way it changes. He wants to understand how the changes in patterns of consumption have transformed the possibilities and forms to exercise citizenship in Latin America. Canclini defends the thesis that popular participation in today’s society is achieved not through political means, such as by elections and political parties, but through participation in the market of consumer goods, especially cultural goods distributed by the mass media such as in soaps and series. For someone who has participated in the political debates of the Latin American left in the sixties, seventies and even eighties, this thesis is a provocation. Consumption was traditionally perceived by Latin American intelligentsia as a form of alienation, something very negative or at least superficial, and not worth taking into account. Political participation was the
final goal of all popular organizations. During the economy of import substitution, the conflict between national and imported products was a crucial theme: national defence against imperialism, economic and cultural, was needed. But, Canclini states, times have changed radically. Today such an approach would be senseless; culture is now a process of multinational assembling: cars, for example, are produced not in just one country, but in many different ones, and assembled elsewhere again. This is true not only for industrial products, but for cultural goods, too, as the products of cultural hybridization. A Mexican film like Como agua para chocolate and the Brazilian Dona Flor e seus dois maridos, both very popular in the domestic and international market, became hits ‘because they combined references of identity and cultural internalization of these countries’ (Canclini, 145).

Canclini elaborates a more positive concept of consumption and gives much attention to the varieties in the consumption of cultural goods, based on his own research in Mexico City and other Latin American cities. Under the influence of globalization, identity is redefined. Identity is no longer organized by participation in specific, mostly mono-linguistic territories, or in nations structured by the logic of the state, but by participation in transnational communities of consumers, such as the fans of rock music or football. He sees a transition from modern identities based on the nation-state to post-modern identities. In want for something better, this name defines an identity based not on living in the same nation-state but on participating in transnational communities constructed mainly by the media.

In this respect Canclini does not endorse Tufte’s idea about telenovelas and popular identity. As an outsider, the Danish researcher emphasizes the difference from Europe, and the specific character of Latin American modernity. Canclini stresses the cultural integration of the continent in the world market of cultural goods. Of course he knows that this integration is not the same for everybody. Class continues to play an important role. He distinguishes three different cultural circuits. The majority of the population has limited incorporation into the global culture by its access exclusively to radio and TV. Some minority group of popular and middle classes could become more informed citizens if they had access to cable TV and video. Only a small part of the entrepreneurial elite has access to the third circuit of fax, email, and parabolic antennas (Canclini, 213).

The Mexican sociologist does not base his argument on research data except when he speaks of the cinema. He found many cinema houses closed in Mexico. In less than a decade, the video has, next to TV, become the principal form of watching movies. Although movies do not play a central role in the formation of popular identity as they did before, everywhere in the country today people have access to video clubs and/or TV, and not only in big towns. North American movies are dominant and are even regarded as the films to be seen. Cinema has become part of the audio-visual field of TV and video, and of international production and distribution. Canclini tries to understand the new developments around popular culture, but is certainly not an adherent of the neo-liberal market ideology. Throughout the book he defends cultural policies that take into account the importance of mass media on the one hand and the pluriformity of the audiences on the other. His provocative approach stimulates us to rethink old assumptions both on citizenship and identity. This is an interesting approach applicable even to the Dutch situation, and
could especially be useful in regard to the discussion on our lack of national political interest and participation.

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**Bibliography**
