



LATIN AMERICA IN FOCUS

A key distinction of *Review of International American Studies* is its commitment to the notion that the Americas are a hemispheric and transoceanic communicating vessel. This angle provides a unique path to de-center the American Studies discipline, which has become tantamount to studies of the United States. This angle also expands the discipline beyond its traditional literary roots, inviting critical investigations into other forms of communicative media, such as cinema, television, and photography. Informed and inspired by this conceptualization of the discipline, this issue of *RIAS* is composed of several pieces specifically focused on Latin America, each of which employs a unique interpretive approach of visual media to, collectively and comprehensively, articulate how this multilayered cultural landscape manifests in our contemporary social imaginary.

The arbitrary delineation of the globe through the notion of ‘the western world’ has, seemingly, transformed the Latin American continent a no man’s land. In its vast extension, this part of the planet seems condemned to exist between two worlds. Despite being part of the western hemisphere, and despite its deep Catholic tradition, this vast region is surprisingly excluded as a member of ‘the west.’ Yet, it was neither placed in ‘the east,’ nor on the other side of the wall, when the world was politically, culturally, and economically divided by the Iron Curtain. This land’s

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perpetual homelessness might be due to its consistent political instability, to the weakness of some of its democracies, or even its colonial past, one that bears no relation to the Commonwealth of Britain, a belonging that placed Australia in the *topos* of the West. These reasons, in addition to others, have fostered an understanding of Latin America as being generally alien to the 'western world.'

Being a no man's land, deprived of a hemisphere, and broadly unintelligible by the general imaginary of the western cultural industry, this continent, populated by almost 700-million people, was traditionally subjected to stereotypes formulated during the twentieth century, and that remained unchangeable in this new millennium. Latin America has become, for the global imaginary, a place of military *juntas*, a vast lowland displaying desartic features, a tropical yet savage jungle, a poverty-stricken *favela*, and a land fought over by romantic *revolutionarios*.

Certainly, the question remains if the obsolete model 'western world,' the also obsolete 'third world,' or 'periphery,' and even the in vogue 'global south' would be able to embrace and reproduce a closer image of this heterogenous and vast continent, and by extension if this generalization is able to denote a set of multiple series of social diversities. We doubt it. This doubt encouraged us to gather diverse scholars from diverse academic disciplines to contribute to this issue of *Review of International American Studies*. And this doubt, which was at a first glance only intuitive, brought us to avoid the topic of identity and representation as the main theme for this journal's issue. Our initial plan was to structure the series of contributions on some problematics relating to the photographic medium, a medium that is widely regarded as exerting an objective representation of reality, yet also places the pictorial representation on an undetermined semiotic field. The choice of photography was also a choice of intuition that we quickly abandoned since, in our twenty-first century mediascape, photography represents only one element of a fast and global visual stream that shapes and refashions the collective imaginary of the Latin American continent. Thus, we expanded our scope to include other media such as films, paintings, and any visual-oriented human expression that could provide insights

on the complex and chaotic mechanism that formulates and constructs the imaginary on the turbulent entity that we call society.

The first contribution to the issue, a conversational exchange between German A. Duarte and Eva Leitolf, deals with the complex and problematic relationship between text and image. Through the Greek concept of *topos* (τόπος)—from which it seems to emerge the rivalry between text and image in the contemporary knowledge production—the text reformulates an interesting phenomenon raised with the development of digital technology: the spatialization of narratives. Once this theoretical framework is settled, the text proposes an analysis on the construction of social imaginaries, propaganda, and the mechanisms of meaning creation in our technological context. This first text develops arguments around a corpus composed by a series of photographic images that influenced Latin American public opinion and, at the same time, reinforced a series of stereotypes on that meridional part of the continent.

Next, Justin Michael Battin explores a series of photographs, taken in Cuba, through the lens of the “event of photography,” a term emphasizing the temporal moment when a photographer, photographed subject, and camera encounter one another. With this interpretation, photographs are positioned not only as historical documents, but also as a civil and political matter, thus inviting new possibilities to read political life and issues through a visual dimension, as well as to trace different forms of power relations made evident during the ‘event.’ The author applies phenomenological reflection, via Heideggerian concepts, to explore the meshwork manifestation of these power relations, and articulate how they provide insights about one’s place and responsibility within that ‘event’ in a range of relational contexts.

The third article, composed by Gustavo Racy, is an exploratory piece focused on the development of colonial visual culture. Racy argues how encounters between Europeans and Amerindians progressed from initially lacking in moral judgement to eventually serving as an apparatus to guarantee colonial control. Through Theodor de Bry’s depictions of early European expeditions to the American continents, Racy suggests a relationship between visual representations of female protagonism,

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cartography, and the development of early capitalism in the Latin American context.

Laura Fattori, in her reading of Laura Mora Ortega's *Matar a Jesús* (*Killing Jesus*, 2017), argues that violent and traumatic events result in not only the breakdown of language, but also the frameworks that give coherence to social worlds. Fattori demonstrates how the movie's main character, Paula, utilizes photographs as objects of memory to articulate the narrative of her father's murder. Further, by showing how the film is influenced by the filmmaker's own experiences as a victim of violence, Fattori demonstrates that recounting trauma, a recognizable practice across Colombia's mediascape, actually deepens the gap between reality and its representation.

The theme of past and memory is further explored in Bértold Salas-Murillo's analysis of *Italia 90: The Movie* (Gómez, 2014). The film, which depicts Costa Rica's first appearance in a World Cup, uses narrative tropes, visuals, and sounds to re-create the moment in such a way that invokes nostalgia in viewers. Yet, the film also 'creates' this moment by jettisoning archetypical sports tropes, such as those depicting epic triumphs, and instead conveys a more intimate story. He shows how the country, through sports, is not only united communally, but also is provided a vehicle to announce its entry into globalized society.

Diego H. Franco Cárdenas' contribution, composed in Spanish, deals with the *constumbrista* illustration in Colombia during the first half of the 19th century. Strongly influenced by the European Realism and Romanticism, this way of depicting everyday life represents a fundamental tool to better comprehend how the nation state manifested in this Andean part of the continent. Through an analysis of two illustrations authored by Ramón Torres Méndez, Franco Cárdenas highlights the appropriation, transformation, and adaptation of select European musical instruments and social practices, and how this phenomenon not only represented a fissure with colonial powers, but also determined the development of a *burguesía criolla* that owned the means of production and larger part of the national territory and the class of *campesinos* (peasant farmers). Through this analysis, Franco Cárdenas explores the presence of autochthon instruments in pictorial represen-

tations, the way these musical instruments produced the first indentarian form of the independent Colombian state and how, by the end of the millennium, these same instruments, gave shape to an indentarian Latin American form in the realm of rock music.

To conclude the thematic section of the issue, Beatriz Torres Insúa, also writing in Spanish, elucidates her experience in restoring *Cine Revista Salvadoreña*, a Latin American newsreel film. She offers insights into the difficulties that the cinematographic medium imposes on the practice of restoration, demonstrating the problems that a conservator faces while dealing with cinematographic documents, such as its fragility as an object of preservation, as well as the vast economic resources required, and the need for genuine social engagement. Torres Insúa shows that the conservator needs to restore and preserve not only a media object, but a whole experience, the experience of cinematography as a social practice that fundamentally shaped the world's social imaginary during the last century. From this particularity derives the large number of economic resources and the diversity of expertise involved, and especially the need to bring more attention to a field that, in non-developed countries, is almost inexistent.

The articles included in this volume merely scratch the surface of the conversations we would like to initiate about Latin America. As the American Studies discipline continues to broaden its scope, both in subject matter and methodological approaches, Latin America must be a key area of interest. This region, considered an orphan continent without hemisphere, offers a diverse series of experiences through which one could better understand the power struggle, visible in myriad synergies and cultural appropriations, between formerly colonized territories and the world's dominant cultural industries. This power struggle demonstrates how the region's multicultural essence and millenarian native American cultural expression reformulated and, in some cases, fully assimilated standard cultural expression derived from the industrial logic in cultural production. If the Americas are, indeed, a hemispheric and transhemispheric communicative vessel, then such expressions are necessary for consideration and investigation.

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