

Shifting from Identity to Marketing: Central American Cinema as a Brand for Sales, not a Place in the Making

Analizar el Cine Centroamericano desde la perspectiva de la Teoría Actor-Red revela la preeminencia de dinámicas transnacionales. La región se convierte en una marca para la producción cinematográfica, un recurso que aumenta las posibilidades de su exhibición global. Dicha instrumentalización es un recordatorio de que las películas son objetos culturales que combinan factores técnicos, políticos y económicos. Las obras cinematográficas no pertenecen a un lugar: ellas realizan intercambios a manera de mercancías inmateriales, extrayendo valor mediante la imagen y la mirada. En lugar de asignar o leer roles identitarios locales en una categoría de cine, propongo analizar cómo esta reproduce una perspectiva colonial que cosifica un lugar para el beneficio de la imagen.

Palabras clave: *Centroamérica, cine, identidad, marca*

Analysing Central American Cinema from an Actor-Network Theory perspective reveals the pre-eminence of transnational dynamics. The region becomes a brand for filmmaking, a resource to increase the possibilities of global displayability. Such instrumentalization is a reminder that movies are cultural objects that combine technical, political, and economic factors. Films do not belong to a place: they perform exchanges as immaterial commodities, extracting value through the image and the gaze. Instead of assigning or reading local identity roles in a cinema category, I propose to analyze how the classification reproduces a colonial perspective, reifying a place for the sake of the image.

Keywords: *Central America, cinema, identity, branding*

In the 2013 short film by Édgar Sajcabún, *Xic Vuh* (Guatemala), three children set on a journey that takes them from solidarity to selfishness. The reason that brings the kids together, and later makes them drift apart, is the search for a kite. Their story is a fable about goodwill and craving, a conflict that speaks to anyone's daily struggles. The setting of this tale is a dusty curve upon a hill, heading towards a slope the two male characters

descend to try and find a lost paper kite. A moment before going on their quest, one of the boys is seen walking and speaking to his sister. He explains to her that crabs are crooks and as a punishment, they cannot move forward. Crabs' eyes are twisted, which forces them to walk sideways. The boy telling this fable is the one who actually returns from the slope with the paper kite. He and his sister go running back to the road, playing with the kite. It is the happy end of their part of the story. The film will reveal that the other male character is selfish, violent, and treacherous. After this second boy asks for help to look for his paper kite, he is unwilling to share the unexpected plastic kite that the two male characters find at the bottom of the slope. The second boy fights over that plastic kite, pulling and pushing the other kid who came along to help him. After the second boy wins over the plastic kite when he tries to make it soar, it escapes from his hands and flies away. Hence, the film has a karma-like dimension, happiness for the righteous pair of brother and sister, divine punishment in the form of loss and isolation for the second boy. This last character suffers the fate of the crab, he is stuck in the same place where he was at the beginning of the story, still crying, with no kite and now no friends either.

According to the director himself, the short film presents a conflict that appeals to an audience as broad as possible (Sajcabún, personal interview). That the whole movie is spoken in Kakchiquel is not the central element of the narrative. Furthermore, the choice of language came after developing the story. It was easier for the actors to speak Kakchiquel than Spanish. Rather than localize narratives or audiences, the film looks for a far-reaching representativeness and spectatorship. This article seeks to demonstrate that a motion picture like *Xic Vuh* does not align with the category Central American Cinema as its referential frame of belonging. From the analysis of *Xic Vuh's* and another two films' end-to-end process of production, I propose to elucidate within that context the functions that the isthmian classification plays in cinema. This is a pressing subject, given that the cultural objects that are supposed to fit within this category have a broad diversity of themes, production processes, distribution circuits, and even their directors have very diverse and transnational educational backgrounds. *Xic Vuh* can open such discussion on Central America because the film seeks global translatability. Furthermore, Sajcabún implements in his narrative a set of identity-building elements that have long been forced to resist their incorporation or face annihilation by the national entities which integrate the isthmian region.

Besides *Xic Vuh*, *Irene* (Costa Rica, 2013) and *El engaño* (Nicaragua, 2012) also show particular ways in which a Central American film category

fails to describe their dynamic of production, sources of financing, sense of belonging and circulation circuits. These three movies are far from an exception; they are an excerpt from a research project in which I analyze 24 films.¹ This group of movies consists of the winners at the Ícaro Film Festival (IFF) between 2009 and 2014 in the categories of documentary and fiction, both short and feature length. This festival uses the label Central American film as its selection criteria. IFF is not only the first event proposing that curatorial framing, but for the researcher and film practitioner Hispano Durón, the festival is a key to the existence of a Central American Cinema (42). In this sense, Durón considers that the Isthmus functions as an organising criterion when it comes to filmmaking. However, his perspective is at odds with the uses of the category that I identify in the production, financing and distribution dynamics of the films in my sample. At IFF the inclusion within the region applies to any film that has at least one element with a link to some point between Panama in the south to Guatemala in the north. Thus, this selection is not driven by a sense of representativeness of regional cohesion. It is rather a group option amongst many possible, even under the same idea of Central America.² However, that is no reason to deem this category useless within cinema production. IFF's loose process of inclusion is coherent with the broader sphere of action of the processes behind the films in my sample. Challenging the leading role of Central America to characterise a film requires to explain the persistence of its use by festivals, production grants and academic research. Therefore, instead of thinking about these movies in terms of a region, I propose to explore them as webs of interactions for which at certain times the Isthmus becomes a useful category.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) suggests that rather than fix structures or actors determining the outcome of exchanges, each interaction weaves its own frame of referentiality, its dynamic of production of meaning. Neither cinema nor Central America provides an explanation by themselves of how territoriality, identity, and creating moving images should relate to one another. The option that ANT offers is to consider that each of these broad subjects is a plurality of elements that interact and reconfigure their roles and outcomes constantly, both amongst them as within themselves. There is a continuous performance that instead of remaining fixed within a category, results in its permanent resignification. Bruno Latour explains that from an ANT's perspective "Groups are not silent things, but rather the provisional product of a constant uproar made by the millions of contradictory voices about what is a group and who pertains to what" (31). This focus on interconnection and creation goes a step beyond questioning "Central American" as appropriately descriptive

of these films. The tracking of exchanges enables proposing roles for the isthmian category considering both symbolic and economic factors. This is an approach that recognises the many interests involved in using and creating this regional classification.

Bill Nichols proposes the figure of the Möbius strip to understand the weaving together of meaning and commodity (78). Thus, cultural functions and commercial goals are not mutually exclusive; rather, its tandem implication is constitutive of filmmaking. Stopping to consider this entanglement of creativity and entrepreneurship might seem to drift away from the notion or exploration of a Central American Cinema. Nevertheless, it is a necessary consideration because understanding the relationship of these films with cinema and Central America requires clarifying that form, financing, meaning, and consumption of moving images are not independent stages. The hyphen in Actor-Network is an unbreakable bond since it points to a dynamic of exchange of mutual creation. There is no isolated actor interacting with an independent network; there is one continuous action, a single process of definition and interpretation. Steven B. Smith's reference to Louis Althusser's idea of "structural causality" helps explain this sort of interaction. It implies that there is no unidirectional imprint of the structure over its parts, since the structure and its effects are inseparable, because each one exists within the other (Smith 521). Thus, following this perspective of "structural causality" in filmmaking, territoriality, funding, subject, form, distribution, and even equipment all interact in the construction of meaning. In this encounter, the symbolic content of each of those elements transforms itself as well. The Möbius strip visualisation of these constant and multi-directional meaning-creation dynamics leads us to consider that a film's symbol-commodity relation is a non-dualistic one. The material, aesthetic, political or economic concerns cannot properly be separated from each other. Actually, they form a whole, and, consequently, the use of categories for selecting amongst the diversity of productions out there is a strategic analytical choice rather than a simple description.

The use of "Central America" as selection criteria for *Irene*, a short film by Alexandra Latishev, should be critically analyzed for more reasons than merely identity-formation references. Certainly, just like *Xic Vuh*, there are several inconsistencies regarding an Isthmian proposal of belonging, both for the film's use and representation of space and its distribution. Furthermore, Latishev's narrative focuses on the creation of a non-geographical space, a body, a female one. The struggle of the main character resembles Sisyphus; Irene is doomed to repetitive actions, an endless cycle with minimum gratification. Consequently, pleasure is the

meaning that Irene pursues, a reconnection with her own body, with the self. This intimate theme represents collective interests as well. Thus, Irene's quest connects with similar bodies. Such flesh and bones territory is the shared identity-formation region that the movie proposes. Irene is a young single working mother, carrying upon her shoulder the burden of providing for a family – her son, her mother and herself. However, womanhood is not the only sort of collective identity that the film addresses. Irene potentially belongs within other groups too. The character works in a photocopy shop, commutes daily by bus, deals with a persistently nagging mother, and finally finds satisfaction by herself when riding on a carousel. Her life is stuck in mechanical loop-like actions. Hence, the body is an index of yet another group, fellow humans inhabiting industrial landscapes. But still one more interpretation of the protagonist is possible, one that surpasses the identity perspective. The short film is posted on the Internet on a non-commercial site. Therefore, as Irene – the character – turns into image, her body also becomes a commodity, a spectacle available online for free. The direct lack of a commercial transaction does not prevent the film from circulating as a staple. Online access to *Irene* is part of a circuit of interactions that enables the monetization of leisure time. Certainly, the label Central America is marginal for explaining the development of these worldwide distribution dynamics. However, it is within that circulation that the isthmian category seemingly draws international attention.

The material and aesthetic dimensions of a film are not separate layers that coexist without affecting each other. Instead, the mapping of interactions suggested by ANT followed by a close textual analysis of the movies in my sample indicates that both aspects come forth in the diegesis, whose meaning neither eludes the modification that its circulation might cause. Thus, I conceptualise a film as a compound of symbol-commodity intentions and interpretations. In a film like *Irene*, the different belongings are not pushing out one another just as the circulation of the movie does not attempt against the subject of the film. But either they are performing independently from each other. Thus, instead of narrowing these motion pictures down to the limits of a Central American identification, by tracking the movies' interactions it is the category that has to be open to the broader system of exchanges of which it takes part as it meets with cinema.

Through film, the analysis of Central America expands beyond a matter of frontiers and belonging. Just as a movie is not only representation nor industry, the ideas of a territory or an identity mix symbolic and material production. Furthermore, the material is symbolic

and vice versa. Althusser calls this multidirectional dynamic of resignification and repurposing, overdetermination. A motion picture clusters a plurality that does not overcome contradictions, causes are “determining, but also determined in one and the same movement” (Althusser 101). From a dialectical point of view, synthesis does not erase its precedent, given that in the new object supersede those elements that produce it. The past of the object “is never anything more than itself” (115). Overdetermination indicates the circularity of causes and effects. In an exchange, all the elements modify each other, up to the point where the results of the exchange, its effects, can modify their causes.³ Thus, an approximation to cinema that considers overdetermination acknowledges that it exists due to technical and industrial developments that enable the capabilities to capture and project images in motion, which in turn favours the expansion and renewal of those industrial processes. Clearly, the notion of rootedness must open towards an intricacy of functions, which includes commercial activities. More than alternatives, for any given use of the Central American Cinema category, the symbolic and the material co-define each other. Just as much, the internal and the external, local and global are not separated spheres; rather, they entangle in a circular and mutual creation.

Multiplicity, coexistence, and heteronomous signification explain the seemingly contradictory roles of Central America for Florence Jaugey’s *El engaño*. In this documentary, the director presents many forms of sexual exploitation that women in Nicaragua are subjected to. Reflecting the film’s title, the narrative focuses on cases where people who are supposed to be trustworthy trick impoverished women into slavery-like conditions. For the exploited characters in *El engaño* if there are threats inside Nicaragua – even in their own homes – outside the nation’s borders there is no safe haven at all. Although being poor and female are the main conditions of vulnerability, they are completely deprived of their humanity when they cross Nicaragua’s borders and the women become merchandise in a transnational market. It does not matter that the territories where the enslaved women are brought to are still within the notion of Central America that IFF uses. Thus, the festival’s imagined area of belonging is an alien landscape for *El engaño*’s vulnerable characters. Guatemala, the main destination for the sexually exploited women, is a strange place where these characters are foreigners. That is, the regional community is far from a familiar space for the abused women of *El engaño*. This situation contrasts with the presentation of the film as Central American, a claim of regional cohesion and identification. Such latter use of the Isthmus implies that the circulation and validation of cinema take place within a network

that is not quite the same as the one that the main characters in the diegesis weave.

Overdetermination offers an explanation for the ambivalence of Central America in *El engaño*. Specifically, it reminds us that even if a cinema category claims space for an identity, it does not erase other possibilities within and beyond it. For the vulnerable characters in the documentary, nation and religion are the communities that safeguard them.⁴ The idea of Central America might include those elements, but there are further conditions that affect rootedness, and thus the role of the region. Such is also the case for the criminal groups that kidnap the women. For them, it might seem that the Isthmus is the area where they thrive. In fact, those groups have a network that allows them to operate across national borders. According to the documentary, it is thanks to the borders, i.e. the remnant of nations before a unified area, that these groups create a space for their criminal actions. They are experts in interstitial operations, using national borders as cover for the exploitation of human beings. However, their economic activity is not limited to the idea of Central America, it extends beyond it, showing that they are not limited to the Isthmus. Hence, Central America marks no endpoint, not even a pivotal one neither for the criminal groups nor the vulnerable women. The latter ones cling to a country and a global faith when they look for safety. Meanwhile, criminals extend their transnational sphere of action not only despite but exploiting the divisions between countries. The region is part of a more substantial entanglement, which is what overdetermination points to. The Isthmus does not create a fixed meaning, not for the women, their exploiters nor cinema. Different actors perform that idea of the region according to the variety of exchanges and interests they have. This identity differential within the narrative is also present along the processes related to the production, distribution and validation of the movie. As a cultural object, *El engaño*, as the other two films, expresses just as many uses for the notion of belonging and for Central America.

In his book *The Future as a Cultural Fact*, Arjun Appadurai proposes to “approach commodities as things in a certain situation ... things can move in and out of the commodity state” (19). This idea is helpful to figure cinema as a symbol-commodity compound. Economic transactions attached to an object are not the sole ones defining it. They do not rob or constrain the meaning of a thing, but neither they are absent from that process of signification. Thus, interpreting the interactions of *El engaño*, *Irene* or *Xic Vuc* with Central America as a film category has to consider the commercial elements in tandem with their thematics and identity politics proposals. Regarding financing, all the three projects share access to non-

reimbursable funds, public or private grants which do not request filmmakers to produce a profit, not even to pay back the money invested in their production. Nonetheless, the source of that support is different in each case and has very little to do with a regional criterion. Jaugey appealed directly to an international Non-Governmental Organisation, Save the Children. *El engaño*'s director pitched to the NGO the subject of women exploitation in Nicaragua from a more experience-based perspective, arguing that it was a compelling narrative helpful for the organism's activities (Jaugey, personal interview). *Irene*'s main support came from Universidad Veritas, where Latishev studied at the time of the production of her movie. In this case, a private interaction is the one enabling the shooting of this short film. For Sajcabún, access to production funds for *Xic Vuh* came in part through a local organisation, Kamin. The director lives in Comalapa, the area of action of Kamin (Sajcabún, personal communication, October 7, 2016). But that local configuration is only apparent. Hivos, a Netherlands based entity, supports the financing of cultural activities in several places around the world, and Kamin is one of its recipients. If not all the three films show a broad transnational network enabling cinema, their economic dimension in the funding stage is telling of the absence of an Isthmian perspective.

Non-refundable support for financing filmmaking still does not explain the commodity phase of *El engaño*, *Irene* and *Xic Vuh*. It is the first step, though, in weaving together a perspective that simultaneously looks upon the material, aesthetic, and thematic dimensions of cinema. Moreover, this tracking already points towards a scale of interactions where images in motion gather a transnational collaboration. Such dynamic only increases in their distribution stage. Any of these three films were available at some point on the Internet. *El engaño* and *Irene* can be accessed at no cost on web platforms, and *Xic Vuh* was distributed for some time as video on demand. Before that, the three cultural products were exhibited at international film festivals. This sort of circulation in no way means that they are either equal amongst them nor with any other movies. It does signal that they participated in processes that both mix a wide range of territorial distribution as well as economic aims. For example, *Xic Vuh* screenings at the indigenous communities of Guatemala are free of charge, while its access for an international audience on the Internet required payment. Regardless of the intervention or not of a direct payment for accessing these films, it is the platform of their digital distribution, Internet, which offers a paradigmatic case of the commodification of the image. Commenting on the overdetermination of these movies recognises in them a situation that Jean Baudrillard pointed out almost forty years

ago: material production has a meaning, and symbols are themselves a form of production (146). Thus, in this intersection of cinema with the World Wide Web, this platform is neither neutral nor one-dimensional. Filmmaking is not shielded against the materiality and the system of production that enables the existence of the Internet. Even *El engaño* and *Irene*, available for free, are not exempted from further commercial interactions. They help to reproduce the need and consumption of the devices associated with the access, maintenance, and development of the Internet. Simply put, they offer a resource for a potential public to engage in surfing the web and spending their time on it.

The Internet brings with it a high level of immateriality; for cinema, this means that the image becomes bytes, which almost immediately can be reached anywhere at any time. Therefore, the films also behave as deterritorial objects. Certainly, such range and method of circulation demonstrate that these movies move in a sphere beyond and detached from any idea of Central America. However, there are further implications than belonging, what Jonathan Beller calls the idea of the 'cinematic mode of production.' The author argues that filmmaking is a process that symbolically validates sequential production, transforms leisure into labour and increases the prevalence of experience as a visually mediated event (Beller 9, 12, 111, 130, 161). Such collection of mechanisms simulates industry and global capitalism not out of a coincidence. In Beller's perspective, this material entanglement and the seventh art have developed hand in hand. Cinema is "the movement of capital in, through, and as image" (365). In his view, the Internet is an extension of that core set of elements. What the digital web makes particularly more visible is the transformation of spectatorship into labour. Besides the link mentioned in the previous paragraph regarding the acquisition of equipment, time spent on the Internet generates capital in several other forms. Viewers consume advertisement while their data as users are gathered and sold amongst websites. Films, with a fee for watching or for free, are a staple, a spectacle offered in exchange for that time and information. Thus, regardless of the scale of production, the theme, distribution strategy or level of consumption of *El engaño*, *Irene* and *Xic Vuh*, they interact with that process of commodification, they are performing as well that cultural industry.

Beller's approach to the interaction of cinema and capitalism tends to be deterministic. The perspective that I propose, as it looks at the interactions, leans towards a more open interpretation. Because the films experience a commodity phase it does not mean that they yield to capitalism. Antonio Negri considers that "artistic activity always exists

within a specific mode of production, and that it reproduces it – or, more exactly, that it produces it and contests it, that it suffers it and destroys it” (108-09). That there are alternatives to a bound validation of any given economic system dwells in the multiplicity and even contradictions that overdetermination points to. Within this complex interaction, revisiting the use of Central America Cinema has to mix the notions of territoriality and identity with those of commercial interests and global dynamics. Thus, although the three films that I am analysing do not withdraw to a set of specific traits emanating from a regional configuration, their linkage with it does connect an imaginary and a material perspective. Rather than erasing the specificities of these movies, considering them amongst a worldwide network of filmmaking and consumption brings back the relevance of their putative Isthmian belonging. This analysis does not deny that the free of charge disposition of contents, the thematics of gender issues and sexual exploitation as well as the presence of non-colonial languages contest – in the light of the previous quote from Negri – the capitalist implementation of the image. The point here is that in the intersection of these narratives with industry – be it cinema or the Internet – the possible representativeness of a region serves branding purposes.

The praise of these films’ apparent location of origin, Central America, reifies the network that extends across their process of production. It does not matter how accurately the term describes or imagines a region. The funding instances, the identity politics elements of the characters and even the aims of the directors vanish under the idea of an Isthmian dynamic of filmmaking. This concealment of the many interactions of these movies takes place at the stages of distribution and validation – festivals and academic research. It is at the public presentation of these cultural objects that pointing to their alleged peculiarity regarding a global industry appears to be valuable. Affirming the diversion from the notion of the mainstream cinema brings back the implication of the mode of production, more specifically its reproduction. According to Ilana Gershon, there is a congruence between affirming an object’s local uniqueness – for this matter the Isthmian region – and the push forward of neoliberalism. In her perspective, there is a double transformation. First, cultural expressions circulate as possessions, even if they are acquired as an immaterial image, instead of a perspective upon a network of interactions. This shift directly implies the intervention of monetary exchanges. The specificities of any expression or place get reduced to a commercial value that can be globally tradable. Second, in Ilana Gershon’s perspective, neoliberalism finds suitable to support local expressions within a widely spread form, cinema for us, as it “acknowledge[s] variety for the sake of increasing possible

alliances and developing more nuanced or specific markets" (544). In this interaction, the claim of a regional specificity is a staple for a deterritorialized image production industry. Byung-Chul Han's cultural critique reinforces this perspective. In his words, "as a neoliberal production strategy, authenticity creates commodifiable differences" (20). In this sense, the Isthmus is not emancipating from the camera apparatus.

This potentiality of commodification offers an explanation for the selection within the same territorial category of *El engaño*, *Irene* and *Xic Vuh*. Thematically each of these narratives refutes the consistency of Central America. In the first film anywhere beyond Nicaragua is menacing and alien. The possible expanse of the region actually acts against the vulnerable women. Simultaneously, *El engaño* shows that the fragmentation amongst Central American nations is not only there, but it is also strong enough to work against the due protection of the tricked women. In *Irene*, the representation of womanhood and of a city dweller is so focused on the body that the short film avoids the depiction of identifiable landmarks. *Irene* aims at being about the characters and not their geographical location. Finally, *Xic Vuh* has a dual perspective. A story reachable anywhere, which is being told in Kakchiquel, a Mesoamerican language. In short, this latter movie reaches beyond Central America while it also speaks from a cultural-territorial division that precedes and differs from that region. The compilation of such diverse tales under the Isthmian label is telling of what Pierre Bourdieu affirms about artistic categories, "pseudo-concepts, practical classifying tools which create resemblances and differences by naming them" (106). In this case, the practicality of Central America has to do with the opportunities it brings to enhance publicity and recognizability of cultural objects that otherwise exist within a global industry.

The Isthmus identification functions not very differently from a film studio's name. They are similar because their symbolic content is entangled with their material possibilities. Paul Grainge analyses the relation of the big Hollywood production houses and branding, as it "different[iates] products and services in ways that can foster cultural attachments and consumer loyalties but that can also then translate into forms of measurable (brand) equity" (177). The aesthetic or thematic coincidences amongst a group of films might justify classifying them according to their studios. But at the same time, this classification is functional and profitable for those same institutions. It is not that identity is absent from the reproduction of practices, people's interaction, or a sense of belonging. Branding only highlights that all those elements have a commercial value as well.

That an industrial conglomerate, such as a film studio, looks for a way to monetise its name is only too congruent with their clear economic expectations. That the sense of community as deriving from a regional territorial division can experience this same process is not at all an oddity. The exploitation of Central America as a brand – even when the process might not be decidedly articulated – falls in line with the well-spread phenomenon of national branding. The creation of the notion of a region, or a nation, even any more local scale of identification, all are attached to an expected set of characteristics, history, celebrations, communal and private practices. Specifically, Benedict Anderson claims that imagining a modern nation requires for individuals to have a sense of sharing those elements, for which industrially reproduced media is essential (24, 26, 34, 35, 39, 44). Such a dynamic is not that distant from the workings of branding, the significant modification being that for those group gathering elements performing an industrial role is primordial. The cultural practices look at profitability as part of their reasons for reproduction. This situation, according to Melissa Aronczyk, grants access to global organisations' financial support for the creators of such expressions. Hence, the transformation at hand for human political or cultural groups' identification comes as they become the 'competitive edge' in the sprint for innovation and competition that characterises the contemporary world-encompassing free markets (Aronczyk 44). In the use of Central America for identifying a group of objects within a global cinema, precisely that notion of branding is at work. Hence, even if the category has limitations to cluster these films together symbolically, it nonetheless stands. The claim of an Isthmian belonging causes a reification that is valid because by discursively severing transnational or local interactions it helps the recognition and it fosters the access to the films.

Previous academic research has pointed out that the lack of distribution is a common element for those films that fall under the Central American Cinema category (Cortés 534; Alfaro-Córdoba 22; Durón 53; Cabezas 143). This "invisibility" does not invalidate the claim of a branding function for the Isthmus identification. Actually, the limited consumption of these cultural objects within the imagined Central American region reinforces the role that I am proposing for this cinema classification. Andrew Higson reflects on the possible interpretations of national cinemas. He posits that there are prescriptive and descriptive ways of using such a term. The first option pretends to define "what ought to be" (37) filmmaking. The second moves away from that scope. A descriptive notion of national cinema limits to state the many characteristics that film production within a country might have, even if they are contradictory.

Moreover, it also pays attention to the audiences, to their film consumption. Thus, the idea of a country's visual representation considers in parallel enunciation and perception. I extrapolate this last proposal to understand Central American Cinema not as if lacking an "internal" audience but in the actual constitution of its sphere of exhibition. *El engaño*, *Irene* and *Xic Vuh* all address a transnational audience, and it is for those spectators that the label of Central America on their distribution stage, even if limited to festivals, pretends to be appealing. Fostering a broad access and consumption of these films, be it related or not to direct economic revenue, is something that both studios and festivals aim at. Hence, branding equally apply to both instances, since it "cannot be defined neatly in 'cultural' or 'economic' terms; it consists inescapably of both elements and has done so from advertising's earliest history" (Grainge 460). Moreover, by bringing promotion and region into a dialogue, I am applying image's relation to a territory into the category proposition, i.e. the land is transposable as a commodity.

The ANT's approach, tracking interactions, deconstructs *Central-Americanness* as a delimitation. It follows exchanges regardless of their geographical location. As a result, that idea of a common territory does not define, but it is neither defined, it is part of a discourse. Such a narrative is in a perennial state of creation by those who both voice it and consume it. Rather than cultural objects belonging to a place, I analyse the use of that identification for the production, reproduction and validation of said objects. Hence, paying attention to the spectatorship of films is not a gratuitous complication for their regional classification. Including in my analysis processes of publicity and circulation of a film together with a perspective of branding is not meant to discard the use of Central America as a film category. The subjects of *El engaño*, *Irene* and *Xic Vuh*, as well as their schemes of funding, elude that sort of classification. It is the spectatorship that elicits the use for them of an Isthmian identification. It is a classical element of film analysis to consider distribution and exhibition as major features of cinema. Walter Benjamin reflected on these subjects more than eighty years ago under the notion of "displayability." The mechanical – and nowadays, digital as well – conditions behind the process of capturing moving images and later creation of multiple copies of them draw their wide and unrestricted access to a central position. In this interaction, it is spectatorship that defines the cult value of a film, which Benjamin measures as a movie's potential to promote group cohesion (18). Thus, besides thematics, authorship or the space represented in a motion picture, the audiences responding to those proposals matter in defining their role for imagining a community.

Moviemaking is part of a particular paradigm, that of the cultural industry. Benjamin's insights of it are far in time from contemporary film production, exhibition and consumption. Nonetheless, keeping a perspective upon the many exchanges enabling filmmaking, including "displayability," is necessary to understand the function of a Central American Cinema category. Just as a film's meaning and role are co-dependent with its public, that of the Isthmus classification is as well. The Isthmian identification does not set *El engaño*, *Irene*, *Xic Vuh* nor any of the other twenty-one titles in my sample outside their many other interactions, capitalist exchanges or global filmmaking practices for that matter. A curatorial perspective might be misleading regarding the interaction cinema-category that I wish to express. By introducing the concept of overdetermination, the notion of Central America no longer imposes a symbolic reading of the films. Instead, it becomes intertwined with the local as well as transnational interactions weaved around the production, distribution and reproduction of the movies. In this way, the analysis of the category considers it as part of cinema's interactions. The possibility of definition that Central America might have for a group of films relates to its relevance within cinema. Specifically, the Isthmus participates actively when it comes to the reproduction and distribution stages. This affirmation eludes the use of the label as prescriptive since it dwells on its relational function. It is at that circulation stage that the putative belonging to a particular category explains its role as a brand and the possibilities that it has to booster the cultural objects' potential spectatorship.

Such a claim, that a category's value for cinema consists of securing access to an audience, links its reasoning for selection with filmmaking's commodity phase. Central American Cinema's use for "displayability" consists in looking for a niche in the global market for images. The movement towards a transnational audience is not a cynical instrumentalization that directors or funding agencies envision for their narratives. "Without space for films' national projection, filmmakers have to look abroad to try to project their films at international festivals" (Cabezas 143). This turn towards a global market follows a logic of exposition, which, as stated in the case of *El engaño*, is meant to help to improve the living conditions of individuals who, just as the characters on the documentary, are also experiencing dire circumstances of exploitation. However, this interest does not shield these films, or the category, against the other possibilities and meanings deriving from the different interactions and platforms that they meet along their path. Precisely because the region acts as a brand relevant for a public spreading across

the world, it reproduces a colonial logic. On the one hand, is the process of commodification. Central America, like any other idea of a local and marginal manifestation, in words of Sandra Ponzanesi, is a suitable item for the cultural industry to turn into “commodit[ies] of a global exchange” (16). Hence, the exhibition of the symbolic object is paralleled and correlated to its forms of monetization. Film categories are not only involved but are also enablers of such a process. As I explain, the Central American branding aims to the greater “displayability” of the motion pictures thus identified, by giving them an ‘edge’ within a global market.

The other facet of this coloniality relates to the discord between the belongings reproduced in the films’ diegesis and the idea of the isthmian region. That situation seems irrelevant for the public to which Central American Cinema appeals in the distribution circuit. Thus, the branding function of the Isthmus depends on the apprehension that it has as valid, to those transnational spectators, in its description and inscription of identity upon foreign people and narratives. This latter colonial act implies more than the possible exoticism of the images and films’ locations for its global audience. The spread area where the term Central American is used is also relevant. The IFF yearly exhibits its selection of films in two cities of the United States, New York and Miami, also in the capital cities of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Argentina, and Austria. In Vienna, the festival takes place in collaboration with Papaya Media Association as the *Mittelamerikanisches Filmfestival*. Additionally, there is the Central American Film Fest, unrelated to IFF, which began at Los Angeles in the United States, and now has a second venue in Washington. In this configuration of audiences, the northern hemisphere locations are the majority, showing that the use of the brand Central America aligns with other ideological perspectives about international relationships.

The same perspective of overdetermination that brings the analysis of Central American Cinema to this point is not one that reproduces an idea of centre-periphery or of passive exploitation. Under that scope, films are immaterial and deterritorialized objects that foster, depends upon, and mould the expansion of a mode of production. Thus, branding of the region is also suitable for local actors. In the local arena, the Isthmus is seen as an advantageous niche for “displayability,” and the attraction of investment capitals. Such is the case of the global audience to which addresses the Costa Rica Festival Internacional de Cine in its category of *Competencia Centroamericana de Largometraje* (“Costa Rica Festival”), and the international call for funding that Festival Internacional de Cine de Panamá looks for through its *Primera Mirada* chapter for Central American and Caribbean productions in development (FF Panamá). These sort of calls for

global attention are also inside the radar of other organisms, which are more straightforward inserted within an economic action sphere. The reasons given by El Salvador's Fondo de Desarrollo Productivo ("MINEC entrega, a través de FONDEPRO, más de \$719 mil dólares [sic] a emprendedores y empresarios") and the constitution of Comisión Fílmica in Costa Rica (Evelyn Fernández Mora) deal with cinema and Central America from a perspective that not only implies an industry in tension with artistic proposal, but rather the support of filmmaking because of its possibilities of profitable insertion in the global market of moving images. Central America, regardless of its impossibilities to designate an identity, seems to be a good label for doing businesses.

Finding that the Central American identification has a clear role in seeking for investment, securing resources for filmmaking, as much as in promoting the exhibition and consumption of the films does not invalidate its potential function to indicate a cultural form of belonging, a style of filmmaking, or a set of narratives. However, the three latter symbolic functions, hardly act in isolation or are the primordial role of the isthmian category. Besides, the three films that this article explores, create visual representations, address collective identities and link territorial and deterritorial spaces unmatching the Isthmian label. Thus, it is necessary to be cautious when insisting on using Central America as a coherent categorisation and a necessary referential frame for the analysis of cinema. If there is a strategic reason to uphold this classification, it must be clearly stated by anyone whose proposing it. Otherwise, from an academic perspective, it is necessary to accept and challenge the shortcomings of this category. The analysis of motion pictures requires to collect them according to more attuned criteria to their dynamics of production, their representations and appeal. Furthermore, stepping outside of the isthmian label is a call to single out the value of each of the creators of these motion pictures instead of presenting or researching their oeuvre only under the veil of an impersonal group, as if otherwise their work will be unworthy of such attention. In this sense, even if unwillingly, using the regional category reproduces hierarchical and colonial perspectives reinscribing certain products as necessarily marginal and exotic.

Newcastle University (UK) / Universidad Estatal a Distancia (CR)

NOTES

- 1 The full list of films (documentary and fiction) is: *El tanque* (dirs. Lourdes Barreno et al., 2009), *Justicia para mi hermana* (dir. Kimberly Bautista, 2011), *Tercer mundo* (dir. César Caro, 2009), *Wata* (dirs. Enrique Castro and Ana Endara, 2009), *Nicté* (dir. Andrea Dardón, 2012), *A mi lado* (dir. Jean-Cosme Delaloye, 2012), *Cuilos* (dir. Paz Fábrega, 2008), *Ausentes* (dir. Tomás Guevara, 2009), *Marimbas del infierno* (dir. Julio Hernández, 2010), *El lugar más pequeño* (dir. Tatiana Huezo, 2011), *El Codo del Diablo* (dirs. Ernesto and Antonio Jara, 2014), *El engaño* (dir. Florence Jaugey), *El regreso* (dir. Hernán Jiménez), *Irene* (dir. Alexandra Latishev, 2013), *12 segundos* (dir. Kenneth Müller), *Distancia* (dir. Sergio Ramírez, 2010), *Xic Vuh* (dir. Édgar Sajcabún, 2014), *Algunas Dimensiones de Efraín Recinos* (dir. Eduardo Spiegeler, 2008), *Nosotras* (dir. Shari Sabel Strandmark, 2010), *El lugar indeseado* (dir. Álvaro Torres, 2014), *Lih wina* (dir. Dania Torres, 2012), *Sombras nada más* (dir. Max Valverde, 2010), *Por las plumas* (dir. Neto Villalobos, 2013) and *María en tierra de nadie* (dir. Marcela Zamora, 2010).
- 2 FF's definition of the region does not follow a historical perspective. Regarding the colonial forebear of Central America, Capitanía General de Guatemala, the festival's coverage neither matches the south or north of its extremes. IFF proposes a region between Panama and Guatemala. The colonial administrative structure was shorter on its southern border, but it did reach further north from Guatemala, it included Chiapas. IFF's area of interest is not derived from a physical geographic perspective either. The Isthmus between South and North America stretches from Tehuantepec in Mexico to Atrato Valley in Colombia (Hall 5). Politically there are nine countries within that territory: Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Belize, and Mexico. Colombia and Mexico are not entirely within the Isthmus, but Belize is altogether inside it. However, these three countries do not figure at IFF's nor Durón's proposals of Central America.
- 3 Modifying the causes is not a time travel trick. In this case, it refers to the interpretation, to the meaning assigned to those elements.
- 4 In the documentary, Luz Marina, when pregnant, is taken against her will to Guatemala since the criminal groups attempt to get a hold of her unborn child to sell it for adoption. It is the Hermanas Oblatas, a Catholic group, who save her and her child from such fate.

WORKS CITED

- ALFARO-CÓRDOBA, AMANDA. "La producción cultural en Centroamérica: el caso del cine." *Anuario de Estudios Centroamericanos* 33-34 (2007-2008): 15-28.

- ALTHUSSER, LOUIS. *For Marx*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 2005.
- ANDERSON, BENEDICT. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 2006.
- APPADURAI, ARJUN. *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. London: Verso, 2013.
- ARONCZYK, MELISSA. "Living the Brand: Nationality, Globality and the Identity Strategies of Nation Branding Consultants." *International Journal of Communication* 2 (2008): 41-65.
- BAUDRILLARD, JEAN. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Trans. Charles Levin. St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981.
- BELLER, JONATHAN. *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*. New Hampshire: UP of New England, 2012.
- BENJAMIN, WALTER. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Trans. J. A. Underwood. London: Penguin Books, 2008.
- BOURDIEU, PIERRE. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Trans. R. Nice, R. Swyer, C. DuVerlie, P. Parkhurst, J. Parnell, and C. Newman. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.
- CABEZAS VARGAS, ANDREA. "Cinéma centraméricain contemporain (1970-2014): la construction d'un cinéma régional: mémoires socio-historiques et culturelles." Diss. U Michel de Montaigne-Bordeaux III, 2015.
- CORTÉS, MARÍA LOURDES. *La pantalla rota: cien años de cine en Centroamérica*. México: Santillana, Ediciones Generales, S.A., 2005.
- "Costa Rica Festival Internacional de Cine 2017." Ministerio de Cultural y Juventud and Centro de Cine, Costa Rica. 8 Nov. 2017. N. pag. Web.
- DURÓN, HISPANO. "New Central American Cinema (2001-2010)." Diss. U of Kansas, 2014.
- El engaño*. Dir. Florence Jaugey. Nicaragua. Camila Films, 2012. Film.
- FERNÁNDEZ MORA, EVELYN. "Costa Rica quiere impulsar un conglomerado de negocios fílmicos." *Elfinancierocr.com*. El Financiero, 10 June 2017. N. pag. Web.
- GERSHON, ILANA. "Neoliberal Agency." *Current Anthropology* 52. 4 (2011): 537-55.
- GRAINGE, PAUL. *Brand Hollywood*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.
- HALL, CAROLYN. "América Central como región geográfica." *Anuario de Estudios Centroamericanos* 11. 2 (1985): 5-24.
- HAN, BYUNG-CHUL. *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*. Trans. Wieland Hoban. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018.
- HIGSON, ANDREW. "The Concept of National Cinema." *Screen* 30. 4 (1989): 36-47.
- "IFF Panamá: Razón de ser." Panamá, Fundación IFF Panamá. 8 Nov. 2017. N. pag. Web.
- Irene*. Dir. Alexandra Latishev. Costa Rica. U Veritas and La Linterna Films, 2013. Film.
- LATOUR, BRUNO. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.

- "MINEC entrega, a través de FONDEPRO, más de \$719 mil dólares a emprendedores y empresarios." *Fondo de Desarrollo Productivo*. El Salvador, 16 Aug. 2017. N. pag. Web.
- NEGRI, ANTONIO. *Art and Multitude*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.
- NICHOLS, BILL. "Global Image Consumption in the Age of Late Capitalism." *East-West Film Journal* 8. 1 (1994): 68-87.
- PONZANESI, SANDRA. *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry, Icons, Market, Mythologies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- SMITH, STEVEN B. "Althusser and the Overdetermined Self." *The Review of Politics* 46.4 (1984): 516-38.
- Xic Vuh*. Dir. Édgar Sajcabún. Guatemala. Kamin and Surkum Cine, 2014. Film.