

Democracy and Artistic Production in Latin America in a Digital and Global Era

by GRATZIA VILLARROEL, Associate Editor | St. Norbert College | gratzia.villarroel@snc.edu

The insightful articles in this volume demonstrate that political and economic forces have a powerful impact on Latin America's artistic production. When democratic trends are coupled with strong legal and financial support from the state, the result is a vibrant and diverse artistic production, as we currently see throughout the region. Moreover, when artists have access to high-quality training in their own nations, economic downturns and the resulting scarcity don't inhibit creativity, as we saw in Cuba at the end of the Cold War. When state machineries become intrusive and attempt to curtail artistic creativity, artists find ways to circumvent their influence by joining or creating more autonomous and transnational organizations, as we see in Argentina. Furthermore, when governments place value on cultural heritage, the national awareness that ensues may have a positive impact on the quantity and quality of artistic production, as we now see in Bolivia.

There is no doubt that artists still face many challenges and a delicate balancing act in the early twenty-first-century Latin American political landscape. They seek financial support from their governments but fear being used as propaganda for state historical narratives. They seek to retain native artistic identities while greater international attention threatens homogenization of artistic epistemologies. They hope to benefit from international networks and growing international attention for their artistic production but are also sensitive to the fact that once they step outside their borders they may have to negotiate art, culture, and identity, and they may not always feel comfortable with the results.

In "El cine, la democracia y el círculo vicioso," Leonardo M. D'Espósito, one of Argentina's most highly respected film critics and journalists, argues that the

democratic opening in Argentina and in other parts of Latin America gave rise to a vibrant cinematic production that had not been evident during the military dictatorships. He attributes this resurgence in the arts to the absence of censorship, which contributes to the dissemination of new ideas; strong state support for artistic production; and the existence of high-quality film schools. We can see that Latin America is increasingly represented in multiple international film festivals. The latest example is the Academy Award for Best Director given to Alfonso Cuarón for *Gravity* in 2014.

State support is crucial for the film industry, especially because it is an expensive art form, according to D'Espósito. It was the renewed state interest in the arts that gave rise to prolific and diverse film industries in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and Chile after the transition to democracy. Important examples of this new era are young, passionate directors such as Pablo Trapero and Lucrecia Martel from Argentina, Pablo Stoll and Juan Pablo Rebella from Uruguay, Hector Babenco in Brazil, and many others.

D'Espósito still sees important challenges for the Latin American film industry. For example, the better-known Argentine film companies have been able to work with the U.S. studios Disney, Universal, and Fox, whereas smaller film companies are limited in geographical reach as well as in access to state funding. In countries with strong political instability, the film industry suffers because theatres simply remain closed rather than risk getting involved in riots. Venezuela's film industry under Nicolás Maduro is an example of this. As D'Espósito concludes, any danger to democracy is also a danger to the film industry.

In "Breve diagnóstico de las artes visuales en Argentina," Carina Cagnolo

(Department of Visual Arts, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba) echoes the trends of vitality and productivity discussed by D'Espósito and also focuses on the challenge of globalization in Argentina's film industry. She argues that the connection between arts and politics increased at the turn of the twenty-first century as the Argentine state purposefully supported artistic production that dealt with human rights and the memory of the years of terror. The new and vibrant art production that emerged found strong support in state-sponsored museums, mega-exhibits, and so on.

Nevertheless, dangers to creative independence still remain, and Argentine visual artists continue with efforts to keep control of their own narratives. These efforts gave rise to the emergence of a series of autonomous and independent artistic organizations that seek to preserve artistic freedom while providing Argentine artists alternative routes for dissemination of their work. Examples of these organizations include Proyecto Trama and Red de Conceptualismos del Sur. Both organizations attempted to distance themselves from state institutions while at the same time finding creative ways to navigate domestic politics and the global neoliberal regime. These organizations had the added benefit of connecting Argentine visual artists with artists from around the world. There is still a danger, however, that globalization may have a totalizing and homogenizing impact on artistic production or promote the otherness of artistic production by categorizing it as exotic. The challenge is to seek to maintain the critical nature of art production while redefining the epistemologies within a South-South axis.

The next two articles zero in on specific challenges that artists face in Cuba and Bolivia. In "Stories that Resonate: New Cultures of Documentary Filmmaking in

Cuba,” Sujatha Fernandes (associate professor of sociology at Queens College) and Alexandra Halkin (director of the Americas Media Initiative) contend that the end of the Cold War brought very difficult economic challenges for the Cuban people. Yet during that same period, the country saw a proliferation of artistic expression. Cuban music, literature, and visual arts made it to international circles, and, contrary to what outsiders might believe, rap music and other art forms helped to shape debates about state censorship in Cuba, police harassment, race, and other issues. The authors argue that one artistic genre that is less well known to international audiences is Cuban documentary filmmaking. New and inexpensive digital technologies have contributed to the growth of Cuban investigative journalism, giving young directors the opportunity to quietly disseminate their productions via flash drives that are shared from home to home.

The state has been receptive to some of these independent productions that attempt to bridge the Cuban government’s propaganda machine and the reality of Cuban’s daily lives. Examples of this type of documentary are Marcelo Martín’s film *Elena*, depicting the deterioration of Cuba’s regular housing stock, and Ariagna Fajardo’s *¿A dónde vamos?*, describing the plight of poor farmers in the Sierra Maestra, which received wide circulation and some attention from government officials.

One of the challenges that young film directors face in Cuba is the inability to legally establish their own production companies. This, along with the desire to keep creative autonomy, has forced them to look elsewhere for funding. While funding would come easily from U.S. donors, the ongoing U.S. economic embargo of Cuba has created a very difficult barrier for funds to reach these artists. Nevertheless, a U.S.

nonprofit organization, Americas Media Initiative (AMI), has been able show Cuban films in multiple U.S. venues, generating revenue from viewings that has translated into laptops, video cameras, and other resources for young Cuban filmmakers. Under the Obama administration’s more lenient policies, AMI has expanded its activities to build contacts between U.S. and Cuban filmmakers. Therefore, despite the stereotypes of lack of freedom of speech in Cuba, investigative journalism is thriving, not only because of the long tradition of excellent film schools in Cuba but also due to the availability of new digital technologies that make it easier to reach domestic audiences.

In “The Problems of Controlling Arts and Cultures in Bolivia: An Ethnographic Report,” Michelle Bigenho (associate professor of anthropology and Africana and Latin American studies at Colgate University) and Henry Stobart (ethnomusicologist and reader at Royal Holloway, University of London) address issues of cultural property, in particular the art/culture divide in a rapidly changing Bolivia under indigenous president Evo Morales. When does “culture” become “art”? When do musical elements that are in the public domain become copyrighted art? What are the implications of “patenting culture as heritage”? The authors addressed these and many other questions through an NSF-funded workshop entitled “Rethinking Creativity, Recognition and Indigeneity.” They observe that in Bolivia, culture is often perceived to transform into art when it enters the urban centers and is rearranged, transformed, and copyrighted. This forced division between art and culture has distinct ramifications for Bolivians of different social backgrounds. Given the Morales government’s focus on Bolivia’s indigenous culture, the authors found that one pressing issue was “the fever of heritagization,” a messy and ongoing

process in Bolivia whereby heritage has increasingly come to be understood as property. Another controversial issue was the differential treatment of those who deliver “music” versus those who deliver “culture” for international audiences.

In a country where the “patenting of culture” has proliferated, piracy issues nevertheless continue to shape new forms of artistic dissemination. The availability of digital devices, home studios, and so forth makes it possible for previously obscure regional music and dance genres to acquire new levels of visibility, although economic returns are often minimal. Such democratization and localization of musical production has led to the emergence of a dynamic market of consumers with limited resources. This is perhaps why the Bolivian government so often turns a blind eye where copyright issues are concerned. Despite heated discussions about piracy in many Bolivian contexts, those who participated in the workshop discussed distinct motivations for creative works and their recognition. While economic remuneration may play a part in Bolivia’s rush to control culture, the authors argue that the trend to control culture is multilayered and multifaceted.

Overall, while Latin American artistic production continues to be influenced by the political and economic nuances of domestic environments, it has benefitted from the democratic opening in Latin America. Still, Latin American artists face the same challenges and opportunities that artists all over the world face with the impact of rapid globalization: the emergence of inexpensive digital devices, social media, and the ongoing debate over property (and cultural) rights vs. open-source dissemination of artistic productions. ■