

Latin American Visual Studies: A Genealogical Picture

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The last fifteen years have witnessed the emergence of Latin American visual studies. In this essay, we create a genealogical picture of the field and demonstrate that, by drawing from Latin American cultural studies and cultural criticism and through its focus on the region's social and political issues, it has developed a specificity of its own. First, we briefly examine the contributions made by Latin American art history, social sciences, and communication to the discourse of Latin American visual studies. Second, we address the relationship between visual and cultural studies, arguing that the latter is the main epistemic field from which the former has emerged. In the third and main section, we detail key directions, themes, and projects currently being developed. We conclude by underscoring several aspects of Latin American visual studies' epistemic and intellectual specificity, with a final reflection on the field's potential evolution as it consolidates within academia.

Keywords: Latin America, art history, visual studies, visual culture, cultural studies

Los últimos quince años han atestiguado el surgimiento de los estudios visuales latinoamericanos. En este ensayo, creamos un cuadro genealógico del campo y demostramos que, a partir de los estudios culturales y la crítica cultural latinoamericanos y a través de su enfoque en los problemas sociales y políticos de la región, los estudios visuales han desarrollado una especificidad propia. Primero, examinamos brevemente los aportes de la historia del arte, las ciencias sociales y la comunicación latinoamericanas al discurso de los estudios visuales latinoamericanos. A continuación, abordamos la relación entre los estudios visuales y culturales, argumentando que este último es el principal campo epistémico del que ha surgido el primero. En la tercera y principal sección, detallamos las principales direcciones, temas y proyectos que se están desarrollando actualmente. Concluimos subrayando varios aspectos de la especificidad epistémica e intelectual de los estudios visuales latinoamericanos, con una reflexión final sobre la evolución potencial del campo a medida que se consolide dentro de la academia.

Palabras clave: América Latina, historia del arte, estudios visuales, cultura visual, estudios culturales

Introduction

The emergence of visual studies in Latin America is not simply a consequence of the hegemony of English-speaking academia; rather, it is the most recent stage in the

development of the episteme of visuality in Latin America. This episteme has traversed a tortuous path, having resisted, in Jesús Martín-Barbero's (1997) words, the "evil eye" that has afflicted the social sciences and humanities. The reluctance to study visual practices is a consequence of critical theory's mistrust of the visual. Perhaps as a legacy of the "literate city" and the denial of the visual in the geoeπισtemology that has most influenced Latin America, the French critical tradition, the visual has been deemed dangerous, a vessel of evils such as state ideology and propaganda, consumerism, the spectacle, and the simulacrum.¹ However, there are exceptions: in the social sciences as well as in art history, cultural criticism, and cultural studies, rigorous studies of the visual have been developed. Against this background, the emergence of visual studies and the strength they are gaining suggest that the time has come for the critique of visual culture to occupy an important place within the gallery of Latin American critical thought.

Visual studies has emerged with particular strength in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. In the last fifteen years, we have seen the creation of a number of research centers and groups, international scholarly networks, and academic journals, as well as the celebration of academic events, all dedicated to the study of visual culture and visuality. Although presently there is only one graduate program in visual studies (at the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico), the presence of this field within undergraduate and graduate art history, cultural studies, and communication departments and programs is steadily growing.

In this essay, we seek to develop a genealogical image of Latin American visual studies and demonstrate that this emerging field is developing a specificity of its own by drawing from Latin American cultural studies and cultural criticism and through its focus on the region's social and political issues. We compose a picture of the emergence of Latin American visual studies in three planes. First, we sketch the intellectual terrain from which visual studies arose, briefly examining some of the key contributions made to its discourse from the fields of Latin American art history, social sciences, and communication. Second, we address several important aspects of the relationship between visual and cultural studies, arguing that the latter is the main epistemic field in which the former is grounded. In the third and main section, we delve into some of the key directions, themes, and projects that are currently being developed.

An important note before we proceed. In this essay, "Latin America" does not refer to a geographical location, much less to an epistemic or cultural identity, but rather to a geoeπισtemic perspective. Although we cannot overlook the region's epistemic and cultural heterogeneity, neither can we ignore that, as Daniel Mato (2001) observes, "Latin America" denotes a geohistorical and critical location marked by historical trajectories

¹ On the denial of the visual within the French critical tradition, see Jay (1993).

with shared roots, converging social structures and exclusions, interrelated intellectual and political projects, and a subordinate position in the geopolitics of knowledge. This geoepistemic perspective has undeniable links to the geographic region, but it also deterritorializes it, extending it to other locations. Therefore, in saying “Latin American visual studies,” we mean visual studies developed from this geoepistemic perspective.

Background: Art History, Communication, Social Sciences

In contrast to disputes between visual culture scholars and art historians in the United States, in Latin America the relationship between visual studies and art history is one of continuity rather than conflict. In this region, the refocusing of artistic practices developed by visual studies has, as Gabriela Piñero writes, “antecedents in the work of a group of critics and artists who, since the 1960s, had pointed out the need to question the hegemonic criteria that defined avant-garde art, expand and diversify the genealogies of the contemporary, and reflect on the ways in which art and culture participated in complex webs of knowledge/power” (2017, 245).²

Without ignoring the conservative currents and the insidious elitism that the art history field sometimes displays, an important part of Latin American art history, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, is critical and political in spirit, perhaps more so than in Europe and the US, where collectionism, connoisseurship, and the technicalities of archival research are typically foregrounded (Harris 2001). At least four projects developed by Latin American art historians and critics are relevant here: the critique of the principles of art historiography, particularly the revaluation of categories such as “modern,” “modernism,” and “postmodern” (e.g., Marta Traba and Andrea Giunta); the study of the relationship between art and sociopolitical processes (Luis Camnitzer, Ana Longoni, Mario Mestman, Andrea Giunta, Carolina Ponce de León); the critique of the geopolitics of knowledge that permeates the field of art, including the questioning of the relationship between the global and the local, the production of geocultural hierarchies, the relationship between the visual arts and popular art, and the defense of autochthonous aesthetics (Juan Acha, Gerardo Mosquera, Ticio Escobar, Raquel Tibol, Aracy Amaral); and the critique of the international market of “Latin American” art (Gerardo Mosquera, Luis Camnitzer).

We propose four reasons to explain the greater continuity that we find in Latin America between art history and visual studies, in comparison to North American visual studies. First, the animosity directed at visual studies in the US from the quarters of art history,

² “antecedentes en la labor de un conjunto de críticos y artistas que ya desde los años 60 habían señalado la necesidad de cuestionar los criterios hegemónicos que definían el arte de avanzada, ampliar y diversificar las genealogías de lo contemporáneo, y reflexionar sobre los modos en que lo artístico y lo cultural participaban de complejas tramas de saber/poder.” My translations throughout.

whose most notorious instance is the “Visual Culture Questionnaire” (1996) edited by Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, had limited resonance in Latin America, where visual studies arose as a field nearly a decade later, after animosity toward the new discourse had diminished, and it became more generally accepted. Second, in Latin American art history, a field that is still consolidating and whose object of study does not have the pedigree of European or US art, there is no deep-rooted conservative tradition requiring a defense. Moreover, among those who have contributed to art history and criticism are intellectuals from other fields, including cultural studies, who have little need to defend art history. Finally, as we will see in detail below, some of the authors currently working within a visual studies perspective come from art history and, in many cases, work in art history departments.

Let us turn to the social sciences and communication. As we mentioned, one of the explanations for the “evil eye” diagnosed by Jesús Martín-Barbero (1997), the reluctance to study visual practices, is the influence of twentieth-century French theory on Latin America in social sciences and humanities. The adoption of structuralism in the 1960s brought a new linguistic matrix to the social sciences, which until then had been marked by functionalism, and to the humanities, which were immersed in the ideological project of what Ángel Rama (1984) calls “the lettered city,” i.e., the attribution, starting in the Colonial era, of urban administration to a cadre of elite men known as *letrados*, who promoted Humanism and Enlightenment values across the region.³ Although this landscape left little space for the study of the visual, some intellectuals, working within fields such as sociology, communication, and film criticism, took advantage of structuralism’s semiotic and ideological focus to delve into a variety of visual “texts” (Scolari 2011).

This type of analysis entered the region through the Southern Cone. At that time, the intellectual environment was permeated, in the words of Rafael del Villar, by “the need to envision the social totality, the ideological struggle” (1998, 39).⁴ This dynamic was later hampered by dictatorships, which condemned the academy to an obscurantist phase from which it only reemerged in the mid-1980s, when the semiotic-ideological analysis of mass media joined the critical project of overcoming right-wing extremism and resulted in important intellectual production that linked visual culture and visibility to power and political themes. By that time, the baton was already in the hands of academics from Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico.

³ On the impact of structuralism on the social sciences and the humanities, see Andrade (1990).

⁴ “la necesidad de visualizar la totalidad social, la lucha ideológica.” Semiotic analysis enters the region thanks to intellectuals such as Eliseo Verón, José Sasbón, and Oscar Masotta in Argentina; Décio Pignatari, Eduardo Peñuela Cañizal, and Leyla Perrone-Moisés in Brazil; Armand Mattelart in Chile; and Eugenio Coseriu in Uruguay, among others.

Let us reference some of the authors whose work within this academic and intellectual landscape is an important antecedent to Latin American visual studies' focus on visual culture, power, and politics. The Argentine sociologist Eliseo Verón, who trained under Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, is, in this sense, a key figure. Verón's (1993) project is ambitious: no less than to develop a "social semiosis," a general science of systems of meaning that can explain how discourses are generated, circulate, are received, and interact, creating an infinite interdiscursivity through which reality is socially constructed. Verón applied his model to the study of a range of visual culture texts and issues, with a focus on "the semantization of political violence in the media and the narration of the *fotonovela*" (Sarlo 2001, 95).⁵ Other communication scholars worth noting for their early contributions to the study of visual culture within a critical semiotic framework that linked visual culture to politics and power are Héctor Schmucler, Aníbal Ford, and Heriberto Muraro, who addressed issues such as the role of television and mass culture during Peronism, the social and economic function of media during the period of the dictatorships in Argentina, and the media's role during the trials of the military junta members.

The work of Armand Mattelart, considered one of the founders of communication studies in Latin America, is indispensable for our understanding of the development of semiotic-ideological analysis of visual media in the region. At the Center for the Study of National Reality (CEREN), Mattelart led a series of investigations on mass media in Chile in the 1960s and until Augusto Pinochet's military coup in 1973. Mattelart analyzes the role of mass media in the formation of the right-wing bourgeois hegemony that would prepare the ground for the consummation of the coup. In their well-known 1971 book *Para leer al Pato Donald* (2010), Mattelart and his colleague Ariel Dorfman, using Disney cartoons as leitmotif, develop a devastating critique of mass-media contents, which they see not only as products but also agents of imperialist ideology. In this piece, as in his less known work, Mattelart emphasizes the visual as a key site of self-alienation, social misrepresentation, and the dissolution of solidarity (Esteineu Madrid 2001). Some approaches and concerns that are similarly linked to the visual and its relation to power can be identified in the work of several Chilean authors from the same period, including Michèle Mattelart, L. F. Ribeiro, and Giselle Muzinaga, and, more recently, Rafael del Villar and Mabel Piccini.

In Brazil, two important antecedents are the Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser, who was Brazilian by adoption, and Eduardo Peñuela Cañizal, one of the pioneers of communication and visual semiotics in Latin America. Throughout the thirty-two years he lived in Brazil, Flusser made important contributions to the theory of the image and the study of the visual through his numerous publications, including his influential *A filosofia da caixa preta* (1985). In this book, Flusser explored several aspects of the

⁵ "la semantización de la violencia política en los medios y en la narrativa de la fotonovela."

production and consumption of images, particularly in relation to photography, film, television, and design. Flusser complements his phenomenological approach to such images with a critical attitude toward the proliferation of images and information in the contemporary world. Although his work rarely addresses directly the relationship between visual culture, politics, and power, his critical approach to the contemporary role of images helped pave the way for visual studies' critical focus on the ideological role of visual culture in social and cultural reproduction in Brazil and across Latin America.

Working at the University of São Paulo and starting in the sixties, Peñuela Cañizal, in *O olhar à deriva: mídia, significação e cultura* (2004), *El oscuro encanto de los textos visuales* (2010), and other works, addresses issues related to art and other visual media through the visual semiotics developed by Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. In his approach to the cultural dimension of communication, Peñuela Cañizal gives heed to the intertextuality of the image, nonverbal poetics, and the relationship between image and discourse. While Peñuela-Cañizal's work generally lacks the critical approach that we find in Flusser and has therefore contributed less to shaping Latin American visual studies' critical focus, it is a relevant antecedent of the latter through the importance it gives to images within the dynamics of contemporary mass media.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Mexico received a large group of exiled Latin American intellectuals, including Héctor Schmucler, Armand and Michèle Mattelart, Mabel Piccini, Jesús Martín-Barbero, and Néstor García Canclini (Rufer 2016), who helped develop the semiotic mode of analysis of visual media there. Mexico was also one of the Latin American countries in which communication studies were first established, not only as a field but also as the epistemic matrix from which cultural studies would later emerge. In this context, Carlos Monsiváis's "new chronicle" is particularly noteworthy. In numerous pieces written over more than thirty years, Monsiváis addresses various aspects of Mexican visual culture and visibility, particularly in relation to photography, television, and cinema. Frequently using photography to support his narrative, Monsiváis addresses television and cinema as key sites of national identity.⁶ According to his perspective, popular cinema, even in its less fortunate forms, reveals and conveys the ideological forces that shape mass culture (Paranaguá 1995). These forces are not unidirectional; rather, their assimilation is mediated by the various popular "uses" of cinema, in a manner that enables cinema to mediate processes such as the migration from the countryside to the big cities and the industrialization of urban experiences (D'Lugo 2002). Monsiváis's work is noteworthy as an antecedent of Latin American visual studies for its focus on the ideological role of images and new image media in the formation of national cultural identity and the mediation of urban social change.

⁶ Perhaps the best example of this is his book *Imágenes de la tradición viva* (Monsiváis and Holtz 2006), which consists of a selection of photographs by Débora Holtz and several texts in which Monsiváis, following Eric Hobsbawm, refers to the invention of Mexican tradition.

According to the sociologist Armando Silva, in Colombia, the semiotic matrix of structuralism became “a true theoretical problem and epistemological paradigm of the social sciences” (2000, 71).⁷ Silva is the most influential Colombian author to extend this matrix to the study of visual representation. His well-known work on the family album, derived from his doctoral thesis directed by Jacques Derrida, inaugurates the study of this private visual cultural form, which Silva classifies as one of the social arts. This work is part of an intellectual project articulated around the notion of the “imagined city,” which has its best-known manifestation in his *Imaginarios urbanos* (1992). Focusing on a series of “urban phantasmagorias,” including graffiti, billboards, street signs, and movie and advertising posters, Silva analyzes the dynamics of the real city/imagined city and the ways in which they reinforce or transgress the urban order, helping cement the focus on the relationship between visual culture and power within the Colombian context.

Let us briefly refer to the visual anthropology developed in Colombia by Marta Rodríguez, first with photographer Jorge Silva and subsequently on her own. Beginning with the celebrated film *Chircales* (1971), Rodríguez and Silva used the documentary film format not only as a research tool but also to denounce social inequality and document political struggle. Influenced by dependency theory and liberation theology (two key Latin American intellectual projects), between 1968 and 2011 Rodríguez made several films addressing the oppression and violence that marked Colombia’s urban, rural, and indigenous subaltern sectors. Her work demonstrates the epistemic and political possibilities of merging participant observation with the documentary film format, thereby demonstrating the agency of visual research, a focus that, more recently, visual studies practitioners have been interested in developing.

As we have been suggesting, there are clear similarities, if not causality, between the work of the authors we have referenced and the discourse of visual studies. By reframing structuralism within the Argentine academy, Verón brought a series of analytical premises that find continuity in visual and cultural studies, including the insistence on the social and political role of visual culture and the reading of ideology not as message but as discursive operation (Ravera 2000). Mattelart’s work focusing on the ideological function of images in relation to the region’s political regimes and issues is a precedent to the ideological analyses of images developed by the first visual studies authors, the analysis of colonial visual culture and visibility developed by authors such as Nicholas Mirzoeff, and the current focus on coloniality within Latin American cultural and visual studies. Visual Studies scholars across Latin America are still discovering Flusser; however, his influence in Brazil and, more recently, in other countries in our hemisphere, together with the originality of his theorization and critical analysis of images and visual

⁷ “un verdadero problema teórico y paradigma epistemológico de las ciencias sociales.”

culture, make him an author that visual studies will likely reference more in the future. Perhaps the work of Peñuela Cañizal, which until now has mostly resonated within the field of communication and mainly in Brazil, will follow the same path.

We could say that Monsiváis's work anticipates not only cultural but also visual studies, both in its attention to local and Latin American visual culture and in its claim to intervene in “the tense map of national identity” (Rufer 2016, 59) in which the Mexican literate middle class tried to locate itself. However, we cannot ignore that the type of theorization that Monsiváis develops in his chronicle—more implicit than explicit, less concerned with conceptual elaboration than with proximity to the reader—obfuscates his placement next to the authors we refer to below as direct antecedents of visual studies in Latin America. As for Silva and Rodríguez, they have not yet been picked up as visual studies references, although both intellectuals' focus on visual culture and power and the latter's framing of visual research as a form of political intervention suggest that this could happen in the near future.

Middle Ground: Cultural Studies and Cultural Criticism

Cultural criticism and cultural studies constitute the fertile epistemic ground from which Latin American visual studies has emerged. A key antecedent is the work on mass media and artistic images developed at the beginning of the 1990s by the four key figures of Latin American cultural studies: Jesús Martín-Barbero, Beatriz Sarlo, Néstor García Canclini, and Nelly Richard. These authors are a more direct antecedent to visual studies than the authors mentioned in the previous section, not only because they helped create the matrix of cultural studies from which the latter arose, but also because several of them eventually transited toward visual studies. We will end this section by referencing Norval Baitello Jr. and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who both arrived independently at certain positions and ideas that have been framed as Latin American visual studies (Cabrera 2014; Silva Echeto 2016).

An obligatory reference is the research developed by Martín-Barbero since the end of the 1980s on the reception practices related to televisual and audiovisual media, first in Colombia and later in Mexico. Emerging like other intellectuals of his generation from semiotics and Althusserian ideological criticism, Martín-Barbero stands out “from the reductionism of so many Marxists and Frankfurtian aristocratism” (García Canclini 1987, 6).⁸ Likewise, he distances himself from the “hypodermic syringe” model—that media “injects” ideology into passive masses—and from “cultural imperialism”—that the dominators control the contents, while the dominated simply assimilate them. In his indispensable *De los medios a las mediaciones* (1987) and other writings, Martín-Barbero

⁸ “del reduccionismo de tantos marxistas y el aristocratismo frankfurtiano.”

opens the critical analysis of mass-media (audio)visuality to the practices of reception of the new popular urban sectors. For Martín-Barbero, “the image . . . constitutes a key site of experimentation-simulation, that is, a battlefield where notions of identity and belonging are constantly disputed” (Cabrera 2014, 11).⁹ Different subaltern sectors enter this battlefield through the interplay of mediations, which are forms of use, appropriation, and symbolic re-elaboration that resignify the products of cultural industries. Martín-Barbero's critical perspective on Marxism, his emphasis on the visual in his work on popular culture, his focus on audiovisual reception, and his attention to the capacity of mediations to subvert hegemonic culture make him a key antecedent not only for cultural but also for visual studies.

Throughout Beatriz Sarlo's prolific oeuvre, we find approaches to the visual arts, cinema, television, and audiovisual media that also anticipate the discourse of visual studies. Sarlo explored the “postmodern condition” in Argentina and Latin America through the analysis of phenomena such as the transformation of popular culture and urban landscape. In some of the “scenes” from her now classic book *Escenas de la vida postmoderna* (1994), Sarlo refers to phenomena such as the video clip, zapping, and live television in Argentina, acknowledging the possibilities that these practices grant to the receiver while also criticizing the commodification of visual experience and the trivialization of politics through the cultural and media industries. Sarlo argues that the art market has both democratized and trivialized the aesthetic debate: “In the market, we hear the voices that do not have authority to speak in the society of artists: the public, whose knowledge is nonspecific, is worth as much there as those who possess specific knowledge” (1994, 87).¹⁰ Sarlo continues this critical approach in *Instantáneas* (1996), where she offers “microscopic views” on issues such as the fashion system, cyberspace, advertising, media coverage of democracy, and what she calls “contemporary video politics.” In addition, Sarlo's contributions to the journal *Puntos de vista*—which she created and edited clandestinely with Carlos Altamirano and other intellectuals—offer critical analyses of topics such as European *auteur* cinema, documentary cinema, contemporary art, mass media, and “media democracy,” in which the articulation between visual culture and society, history, and politics is a key focus. In these and other works, Sarlo approaches visual culture from a critical perspective that focuses on the dynamics of popular culture in Argentine and Latin American “peripheral modernity.”

The subject of Néstor García Canclini's first publications is popular culture. In *Arte popular y sociedad en América Latina* (1977), García Canclini questions Western aesthetic categories and sketches a theoretical framework for studying the aesthetics of

⁹ “la imagen . . . constituye un espacio clave de experimentación-simulación, es decir, un campo de batalla donde se disputan permanentemente nociones de identidad y pertenencia.”

¹⁰ “En el mercado se hacen oír las voces que no tienen autoridad para hablar en la sociedad de los artistas: el público, cuyo saber es inespecífico, vale allí tanto como quienes poseen saberes específicos.”

popular art. Through this framework, he addresses folk and popular art practices such as street art in Buenos Aires, experimental art in Cali (Colombia), improvisation in the work of Grupo Octubre, and the use of documentary film as a means for research and pedagogy. He formalizes his framework in *La producción simbólica: Teoría y método en sociología del arte* (1979), which examines the work of authors such as Erwin Panofsky, Pierre Francastel, and Arnold Hauser, as well as the contributions to the study of the social dimension of art developed through the theoretical renewal of Marxism in the 1960s and 70s. García Canclini contrasts the work of these and other authors with his own research on the cultural strategies of economic developmentalism. Although these works belong to the sociology of art, we cannot ignore the similarities that his approach to the ideological function of art and the social function of the popular art bears with the discourse of visual studies.

Although on several occasions Nelly Richard has emphasized the differences between cultural studies and her own intellectual project, which she calls “cultural criticism,” in her eclectic amalgamation of Western critical theory and Latin American cultural criticism, there is an undeniable epistemic proximity with the former field. As Paz López points out, although Richard situates her project in opposition to the hegemony of cultural studies in English-speaking academia, she does not reject this field altogether (2016, 90). Rather, she seeks to preserve the critical dimension of cultural and aesthetic practices from the depoliticizing tendency that, according to her and other authors, characterizes the “hegemonic package” exported by the North (Richard 2001, 187).

Without ignoring the specificity of Richard’s project, it is evident that there are more continuities than differences between her cultural criticism and both cultural and visual studies. The relation it traces between culture and politics, its transdisciplinarity, location on the margins of cultural institutions, theoretical references, situated use of theory, and overlap with feminist cultural theory align Richard’s cultural criticism with cultural studies, especially in its Latin American variety. In addition, what differentiates her project—its attention to “the complex symbolic-cultural refractions of aesthetics” (Richard 2001, 195)¹¹—brings it close to visual studies, particularly to the visual studies that align with the “new art history” and the refocusing of the relationship between the aesthetic and the political carried out by authors such as Jacques Rancière and Georges Didi-Huberman, which visual studies has incorporated into its discourse. As Gabriela Piñero summarizes, the “reformulation of the dominant discourses undertaken by Richard was based on a particular appropriation—singular and situated, ‘Latin

¹¹ “las complejas refracciones simbólico-culturales de la estética.”

American’—of the epistemic ruptures in which cultural studies first participated, as did visual studies later on” (2017, 253).¹²

Although these four key figures of Latin American critical intellectuality are certainly not card-holding members of visual studies, it is undeniable that, in several aspects, their work approximates this field’s discourse. This proximity is suggested by the ease with which, in recent years, Sarlo, García Canclini, and Richard have deliberately incorporated aspects of visual studies into their work. For instance, in *La ciudad vista* (2009), Sarlo addresses the urban transformation of Buenos Aires through her own photographs of the city, in a manner that is reminiscent of John Berger’s visual essay chapters in *Ways of Seeing* (1972). In his book *Imaginarios urbanos* (1997), García Canclini addresses the hybridization and globalization of Latin American culture, highlighting the crucial role played by cinema, television, and video. In “El poder de las imágenes. Diez preguntas sobre su redistribución internacional” (2007), in which García Canclini addresses the contemporary transnational circulation of images and the place of visual art within this dynamic, his dialogue with visual studies is explicit. In the prologue to her book *Fracturas de la memoria* (2007), which compiles her essays from the Pinochet era and the Transition Period in Chile, Richard writes that her work “seeks to promote art criticism through new diagrams of the gaze—sufficiently inquisitive and disturbing—to alter the flat image universe that the media visuality of capitalist globalization condemns to a rapid dissolution into pure circulation” (2007, 10).¹³ It is not controversial to say that Richard is the Latin American intellectual who most clearly contextualizes visual studies’ questioning of art and its focus on the relationship between aesthetics and politics.

Norval Baitello Jr.’s work hinges between Brazilian cultural criticism and visual studies. Baitello, who founded the Interdisciplinary Center for the Semiotics of Culture and Media in São Paulo, has made important contributions to the theorization of the image and of contemporary visual practices, particularly in relation to communication and art. Influenced by *Bildwissenschaft* authors such as Hans Belting and Gottfried Boehm, postcolonial theory, and Brazilian intellectuals such as Oswald de Andrade and Vilém Flusser, Baitello reflects on the increasingly important cultural and political role of images. The notion of “iconophagy” runs throughout his writings from the 1990s, leading to the book *A era da iconofagia* (2014). Baitello insists that the “devouring of images” constitutes the fundamental dynamic of the contemporary production of subjectivity and that the “gluttony of images” that Flusser had diagnosed has become the core of the “power-consumerism” system. The relationship between Baitello’s work and the

¹² “reformulación de los saberes dominantes que Richard emprendió se apoyaba en una particular apropiación —singular y localizada, ‘latinoamericana’— de los quiebres epistémicos de los que participaron los estudios culturales primero, y los estudios visuales después.”

¹³ “se preguntan cómo potenciar la crítica de arte mediante nuevos diagramas de la mirada —suficientemente inquisitivos y perturbadores— para alterar el universo plano de las imágenes que la visualidad mediática de la globalización capitalista condena a diluirse velozmente en la pura circulación.”

discourse of visual studies is evident, not only in his concern for the contemporary dynamics of visual culture, but also because he was one of the first Latin American authors to distinguish between image and visibility (Silva Echeto 2016). If the work by Baitello is sometimes regarded as parallel to the emergence of visual studies in Latin America rather than an early instance of it, this is because it belongs to the “Flusserian” study of mass-media visibility, rather than the matrix of Latin American cultural studies and the trajectory of visual studies.

Any synthesis of the antecedents of Latin American visual studies would be incomplete if it does not reference the sociology of the image that the Bolivian intellectual Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has been developing since the mid-nineties. Rivera Cusicanqui is interested in examining the visibility—a term she uses—of Andean countries, particularly the inscriptions of politics and visual memory in visual culture. However, she does not simply adopt European and US versions of the sociology of the image; rather, her starting point is her own intellectual project, “decolonization.” Rivera Cusicanqui seeks to free the image from its “clichés,” from its cultural inscriptions and conventional discourses. Likewise, she seeks to free the gaze from the restraints of language and Cartesian ocularcentrism by reintegrating it into the body and, consequently, into history (2015, 23–24). Throughout her work, Rivera Cusicanqui uses the image as an analytical and narrative device; indeed, part of her oeuvre consists of videos and documentary films.¹⁴

Although Rivera Cusicanqui distinguishes her decolonization project from Latin American decoloniality, of which she is critical, we cannot ignore that both have similar geoeconomic and political motivations.¹⁵ Rivera Cusicanqui points to the similarities between her project and the interests and theoretical approaches of “visual culture” as represented in compilations by Stuart Hall and Jessica Evans, both of whom she encountered in 2007, when she had already been working on her project for over a decade.¹⁶ Although she notes that she distances herself from Hall, in whom “the theme of colonialism remains implicit,” it would not be too bold to frame her work as a “decolonizing” variety of Latin American visual studies. Although it remains to be seen how much traction Rivera Cusicanqui’s contribution will gain within Latin American

¹⁴ Her films include *A cada noche sigue un alba* (1986, made with Cecilia Quiroga) and *Voces de libertad* (1989, made with Raquel Romero and Ximena Medinaceli), both about the Bolivian “anarchist world,” and *Wut Walanti. Lo Irreparable* (1993) about the Massacre of Todos Santos in 1979.

¹⁵ According to Rivera Cusicanqui (2010), Dussel, Mignolo, Catherine Walsh, and other intellectuals associated with the Modernity/Coloniality group are the creators of a new metropolitan canon of decolonization that appropriates ideas from the Andean social sciences, including her own, thereby depoliticizing them (64–65).

¹⁶ Rivera Cusicanqui is referring to the textbooks *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Hall, Evans, and Nixon 1997) and *Visual Culture: The Reader* (Hall and Evans 1999). See Rivera Cusicanqui (2015, 26).

visual studies, the strength that decolonial perspectives are developing within this field suggests that her work will increasingly be referenced.

Foreground: Visual Studies

Just as the discussions and translations into Spanish of authors such as Gramsci, Richard Hoggart, and Raymond Williams that were published in *Puntos de Vista* were important for the emergence and consolidation of Latin American cultural studies, the translations, editions, and discussions led by Spanish author José Luis Brea have been key to the emergence of visual studies in Ibero-America. Brea brought Spanish-speaking academia into contact with an important body of influential texts, including, among others, the “Visual Culture Questionnaire” and the work of authors such as W.J.T. Mitchell, James Elkins, Martin Jay, and Nicholas Mirzoeff. The *estudios visuales* journal, coordinated by Brea and active between 2003 and 2010, has become an obligatory reference for visual studies in Spanish. Brea’s ties to Latin America, where he gave lectures and taught on several occasions, as well as his collaboration with several Latin American academics, allowed his work to be incorporated into regional discussions of visual studies more readily than that of other influential Spanish authors in the field, such as the renowned art critic Ana María Guasch.

In addition, Brea has contributed his own research on the emergence and discourse of visual studies, which he disassociates from art history and brings closer to cultural studies, particularly the social science-driven brand of cultural studies that has developed in Latin America. Giving continuity to the Foucauldian theorization of visibility found in North American authors such as Jay and Mirzoeff, Brea refers visibility to “the broad repertoire of ways of doing related to seeing and being seen, looking and being looked at, watching and being watched, the production and dissemination of images, our contemplation and perception of them... and the articulation of relationships of power, domination, privilege, submission, control... that all this entails” (2005).¹⁷ According to Brea, the dynamics of visual subjection, whose study would be advanced following Lacan, and of our socialization through contemporary visual practices, following Foucault, would be the two key focuses of the study of visibility.

Another aspect of the field’s emergence consists of the growing list of centers, publications, dossiers, conferences, research programs, and scholarly networks that are emerging in Latin America under the rubric of visual studies. The privilege that the study of the political dimension of culture has had in the region’s academic and intellectual practices, particularly in cultural studies, has led to the foregrounding of the concept of

¹⁷ “todo el amplio repertorio de modos de hacer relacionados con el ver y el ser visto, el mirar y el ser mirado, el vigilar y el ser vigilado, el producir las imágenes y diseminarlas o el contemplarlas y percibir las... y la articulación de relaciones de poder, dominación, privilegio, sometimiento, control... que todo ello conlleva.”

visuality in recent visual studies. For instance, in the statement on the website of the Red de Estudios Visuales Latinoamericanos, which was formed in 2013 by academics from Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, the US, and Spain, we read: “ReVLat’s main goal is the critical analysis of images and visual practices. In a general and international context, visual studies addresses the production of cultural meaning through visuality (Brea, 2005), developing interpretative options that are diverse and heterogeneous, and also especially politicized” (ReVLat 2020).¹⁸ This emphasis on visual culture’s political dimension differentiates Latin American from US and British visual studies, which, despite the political vocation of their first texts, are producing, as authors such as James Elkins have noted, a growing number of studies that eschew analysis of the political dimension of visual culture.¹⁹

Although it is too early to propose a list of key Latin American visual studies authors and publications, we can refer to the main nodes, themes, and contributions emerging from within or in relation to this field. We will follow two criteria: that they are either explicitly framed as visual studies or relate to this field in an important manner, and that they place emphasis on visual culture and visuality.

Institutional Nodes

Visual studies gives continuity to several of the concerns of Latin American art history, including the intersections between art and sociopolitical context and the place of Latin America within geocultural and geopolitical dynamics. These contributions have emerged from a series of institutional nodes, and five stand out. Centro de Estudios Visuales NOiMAGEN (created in 2011, formerly Centro de Estudios Visuales) and its sister Fundación para el Estudio de la Imagen y la Visualidad Contemporánea (iViCON) have produced and published on their websites and, more recently, in the journal *NOiMAGEN* (created in 2018), a number of articles on the relationship between images, contemporary art, and politics, particularly in the context of the Southern Cone, as well as several essays on the social and political functions of photography and digital images within contemporary society. Another important node is Grupo de Investigación Irudi, affiliated with the Visual Anthropology Area (AAV) of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires. Throughout the different numbers of *e-imagen*, AAV’s online journal, are articles on art created during the state violence of the dictatorships in Argentina and the monuments and antimonuments created in the context of the drug violence in Mexico. A third node is the journal *el ornitorrinco tachado*, whose issues

¹⁸ “ReVLat tiene como objetivo principal el análisis crítico de las imágenes y las prácticas de visualidad. En un contexto general e internacional, los estudios visuales pueden definirse como aquellos que abordan la producción de significado cultural a través de la visualidad (Brea, 2005), desarrollando variables interpretativas diversas y heterogéneas, además de especialmente politizadas.”

¹⁹ Elkins writes: “On the one hand, Anglo-American visual studies has been political from its beginning: on the other hand, a great deal of current writing is nonpolitical or apolitical” (2015, 6).

contain a range of articles on contemporary art and visual culture that align with the discourse of visual studies, alongside others closer to history and art criticism. Similar focuses may be traced across the different issues of *Revista Caiana* (Argentine Center for Art Researchers) and *Cuadernos MAVAE* (Pontifical Javerian University, Bogotá).²⁰

The fourth node is the Center for Latin American Visual Studies of the University of Texas-Austin. Andrea Giunta, who founded the center in 2009 and directed it until 2013, is the center's key figure. Moving between art history and visual studies, Giunta's work dialogues with a wide range of referents: Latin American intellectuals such as García Canclini and Nelly Richard, image theorists such as W.J.T. Mitchell, Susan Buck-Morss, and Georges Didi-Huberman, Latin American feminism, and postcolonial theory, as well as Latin American artists who have also developed critical and theoretical work, such as León Ferrari and Luis Camnitzer. Giunta's dialogue with the discourse of visual studies is particularly noticeable in *Escribir las imágenes* (2011), where she critically reviews the assumptions of art history, including the cultural geopolitics of the label "Latin American Art," and examines a range of artistic and nonartistic visual practices. It is noteworthy that Giunta's historical and theoretical work has informed her work as an art curator and vice versa.

The fifth node consists of the growing output of research and publications produced in the context of Red de Estudios Visuales Latinoamericanos (ReVLat). Although RevLat articulates a wide range of themes and lines of work, a good part of the volumes that have been published through this network and in its journal, *Artefacto Visual*, deal with Latin American visual arts.²¹ Antonio E. de Pedro's work on Latin American art of the twentieth century stands out. In one of his most provocative books, de Pedro argues that the notion of "Latin American Art" arose from the abrogation of the project of a "Pan-American" art, amid the ideological struggles of the Cold War (2016b).

The contributions of Ana María Torres Arroyo move in a similar direction. Torres Arroyo's work addresses the official exhibitions held in Latin America since 1948 under the auspices of organizations such as the Organization of Ibero-American States. Torres Arroyo (2013) demonstrates that these exhibitions played a role in the covert "culture war" that the United States waged as part of its effort to eliminate leftist ideologies, an

²⁰ Other relevant institutional nodes are Centro de Estudios Visuales Latinoamericanos (CEVILAT, National University of Rosario), Laboratorio de Investigación y Documentación de Prácticas Artísticas y Modos de Acción Política en América Latina (INARRA, State University of Rio de Janeiro), and Grupo de Estudios Visuales (Pontifical Javerian University, now defunct).

²¹ Published books include *Lámparas de mil bujías: Fotografía y arte en América Latina desde 1839* (Rosauero and Solano 2018), *Historia y violencia en América Latina. Prácticas artísticas, 1992-2012* (Rosauero 2017), and *El arte latinoamericano durante la guerra fría: figurativos vs. abstractos* (de Pedro 2016a). Other volumes published by the network bring together work by a broad range of authors on an equally wide range of topics related to Latin American and global visual culture.

effort that, according to this author, involved the promotion of abstract and neutral aesthetic languages. Other members of the network have contributed works on a variety of topics related to the visual arts. Noteworthy are the texts and volumes edited by Elena Rosauro on the intervention of art in history and contexts of political violence, the work of Alicia Fátima Martins on the potential contributions of film criticism to visual culture education, as well as a growing list of monographs on Latin American art. We should also mention the international congresses organized by RevLat (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2023), that have arguably become Latin American visual studies' main academic event.²²

Power, Politics, History, Violence

Along a similar line we find a range of scholarship that establishes a dialogue between photography theorists (such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, John Berger, and Didi-Huberman) on the one hand, and the contributions of Latin American cultural criticism and communication studies, on the other, while addressing the political dimensions of photography and film. Here we can locate other RevLat affiliates, including Paula Bertúa, whose work on the intersections between photography, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry in Argentina—including Grete Stern's audacious photomontages for the "Psychoanalysis Will Help You" section of *Idilio* magazine and the photo essays by Helen Zout, Eduardo Gil, and Adriana Lestido on neuropsychiatric hospitals—sheds light on reconfigurations of the visible in Argentina that took place outside the artistic avant-garde.

We should also note the work of Paola Cortés Roca on the relationship between photography and national narratives. In *El tiempo de la máquina* (2011), Cortés Roca addresses theoretical, cultural, and political transformations brought about by the arrival of photography in Latin America in 1840, transformations that affected the way in which the nationalist narrative represented Latin American subjects, bodies, spaces, and historical memory. In other works, Cortés Roca, together with Martín Kohán, contributes to the study of "Evitamanía"—the popular cult of Evita Perón (Argentina's popular first lady, 1948–52), by examining the values and fictions that were projected onto the photographs of Perón.

²² Other important events not affiliated with RevLat are: the International Colloquium, The Three Eras of the Image: Visual Studies, Actuality, and Perspectives, organized by the Image Center and 17, Institute of Critical Studies of Mexico (2015); the 1st International Congress on Gender and Visual Studies at the University of Mar del Plata (2016); and the Symposium on Visual Culture and Theories of the Image "Politics of images in Latin American Visual Culture. Mediations, Dynamics and Aesthetic Impacts" at the National University of Rosario (2016).

In Colombia, Claudia Gordillo's biopolitical analysis, developed in both her book *Seguridad mediática* (2014) and the documentary film *Apuntando al corazón* (produced with Bruno Federico, 2013), which addresses the images of militarist propaganda during the two governments of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, is of particular relevance. In these and other works, photography and film are framed as key media within Latin American visual culture, thereby extending the debate on the relationship between aesthetics and politics beyond the borders of art.

As some of the cases we have cited suggest, many of the visual studies produced in Latin America are motivated by the purpose of dislodging images from the disciplinary contexts in which they emerged and have been received. This purpose invites the analysis of heterogeneous sets of images to address two interrelated topics: power and violence. A series of recent works by Lara Lis Schiavinatto should be highlighted, as they address various aspects of the visibility of the Portuguese-Brazilian empire, including images of scientific taxonomies, the exchange of postal images between Portugal and Brazil, the role of drawing in the literate society, and the expressive codification of power in the portraits of government men, merchants, and lawyers. Important is the work of Sven Schuster on the relationship between visual culture and memory, as well as his work on the role of a variety of public images—paintings, photographs, flags, coins, symbols, maps, stamps, and films—in the formation of Latin American nations following the interests of those nations' elites.

Carlos Ossa's research on the visual formation of the Chilean nation moves in the same direction, addressing the photographic and cinematographic images that fulfilled the function of mediating between "a baroque vision of power and a positivist conception of order" (2015, 213), helping establish the hegemony of that country's social and political elites. Sebastián Díaz-Duhalde (2015), working from the United States, has investigated the representations of war and state violence in Paraguay and the Southern Cone. Díaz-Duhalde examines the political and historical uses of a variety of visual materials, including paintings, war photographs, prints, and illustrations, in the context of the War Against Paraguay.

Also noteworthy are articles by Marta Cabrera on visibility, memory, and violence in Colombia, which present a series of analyses on the role of visual arts and mass-media images in the visibility and invisibility of violence, the memorialization of the Colombian armed conflict, and the construction of national narratives. In line with Cabrera's focus, my own book, *Afectando el conflicto: Mediaciones de la guerra colombiana en el arte y el cine contemporáneo* (Yepes Muñoz 2018), offers an analysis of a group of artworks and films that mediate the conflict in Colombia through their production of affect, being, as noted by authors such as Daniel Tobón (2020), the first in-depth analysis of the role that

the affective dimension of visual culture has played in mediating political violence in Colombia.

Equally worthy of mention are Verónica Capasso's recent reflections on the visibility of social protest in Brazil, in 2018, and Chile, in 2019–20, and the contributions of visual studies to the elucidation of this visibility (2020). We must also reference Sayak Valencia's provocative and original reflections on the aestheticization of violence, both in Mexican drug culture and in transnational mass-media image productions. According to this author, such images are an aspect of the necroscopic regime "gore capitalism" (2010), in which the aestheticization of violence is intrinsically linked to the active elimination of "dispensable" or unwanted individuals and groups.

Gender, Sexuality, Race

Recent scholarship explores the relationship between visibility, gender, and sexuality from feminist and queer theory perspectives. Crucial in these approaches is the representation of the body and the mediation of relationships between bodies through image technologies. Javier Guerrero's *Tecnologías del cuerpo: Exhibicionismo y visibilidad en América Latina* (2014) is gaining increasing traction. Guerrero addresses the literary fictions of Reinaldo Arenas, Salvador Novo, and Mario Bellatín, artist Armando Reverón's doll compositions, and Fernando Vallejo's "performance of the return to Colombia," in order to account for the materiality of sexed bodies that distance themselves from heteronormative codes. Guerrero argues that the sexual fluidity of the represented bodies is transferred to the bodies of their creators, with both productive and negative effects. Another author, Chilean Alejandra Castillo, explores, in *Ars disyecta: figuras para una corpo-política* (2014) and *Imagen, cuerpo* (2015), the intersection of contemporary art practices in Latin America and those from other latitudes, with feminist theories of the body, sexuality, and performance. Drawing from psychoanalytic feminism, queer theory, decolonial aesthetics, and theories of the image and of vision by Martin Jay, Hal Foster, and Jacques Rancière, Castillo exposes the capacity of artistic practices to implode the truth claims of the patriarchal-colonial order.

Other authors also address representations of the female body in pornography and postpornography. The work of Sayak Valencia is, again, noteworthy. In an article as provocative as her *Capitalismo gore* (2010), Valencia refers to the reappropriation of dominant visibility by peripheral subjects in order to stage a "corporate-decolonial politics and sexual dissidence" (2014, para. 26) through their subversion of normative gender and sexuality. Finally, Rebecca Elizabeth Biron's work on the representation of masculinity in contemporary Mexican cinema should be noted. In "NarCoMedia: Mexican Masculinities" (2015), Biron addresses the construction of hyper-aggressive and

dominant masculinity in several recent films, shedding light on the role of cultural industries in the exploitation and naturalization of Mexican narco culture.

Although an increasing number of authors are focusing on visibility and issues of gender, class, and race, few have addressed the intersections between them. In *El sentido común visual* (2012), Sergio Caggiano analyzes how public images in Argentina render bodies visible or invisible. Using images from historical albums, newspapers, school books, and the websites of feminist and indigenous groups, among other sources, Caggiano demonstrates the complex interrelations and overlapping between hegemony and resistance in public images, regardless of their political sign. By reading these images in terms of gender, class, and race, he demonstrates the mixture of hegemonic and alternative codes and contents within them. For example, certain images on indigenous websites can reclaim indigenous identities against white identities, while at the same time reinforcing certain gender inequalities. Caggiano highlights the complex intersections between the categories of gender, race, and class in public images, reflecting the complexities of the identities, representations, and sites that inform these images.

Decolonial Perspectives

One of the most interesting lines of research in Latin American visual studies is the study of the visual dimension of coloniality. Although not explicitly inscribed within the decolonial project that was spearheaded in the late 1990s and early 2000s by intellectuals such as Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Arturo Escobar, Santiago Castro-Gómez, and Walter Dignolo, Graciela Speranza's *Atlas portátil de América Latina* (2012) is paradigmatic in its attempt to correct geocultural and geoeconomic hierarchies of colonial origin. This is Speranza's response to *Atlas. How to Carry the World on One's Back?*, the grand collection of images from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries curated by Georges Didi-Huberman and exhibited at the Reina Sofía Museum in 2010, which was inspired by Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosine*. Speranza was disturbed by the absence of Latin American images in Didi-Huberman's montage, suggesting that "the broadening of the global map seems to owe more to the voracity of the market than to the democratizing theoretical crusades of postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and subaltern studies" (Speranza 2012, 12).²³

Speranza does not hold Didi-Huberman responsible for this omission; rather, she blames it on the fact that the unconscious memory of the West continues to ignore the contributions of the periphery. Her intervention responds to the persistence of geocultural hierarchies both below the politically correct surface of globalization discourse and through identity categories forged both within and in opposition to it.

²³ "la ampliación del mapa global parece deberle más a la voracidad del mercado que a las cruzadas teóricas democratizadoras del poscolonialismo, el multiculturalismo y los estudios subalternos."

Citing, among other references, García Canclini and Nelly Richard, Speranza's book compiles works of art, images, and literary and theoretical texts, not with the aim of rescuing some forgotten Latin American cultural identity, but of understanding how to "figure the world in imaginary cartographies, registering new psychogeographic experiences in cities, opening up to networks of flexible relationships or shutting down in isolated spheres, revealing survivals in the history of art, rethinking identity, territory, roots, language, and homeland" (2012, 17).²⁴ Although the *Portable Atlas* is itself an intervention in the field of visual culture, it begs conversion into an exhibition, which would arguably make it even more critically relevant.

The decolonial aesthetics project, led by the Argentine scholar Walter D. Mignolo, is of particular note.²⁵ In 2012, the book *Estéticas y opción decolonial* was published in Bogotá, edited by Mignolo and Pedro Pablo Gómez from the presentations and debates during the *Estéticas decoloniales* seminar held at the Francisco José de Caldas District University in 2010. In his contribution, Mignolo advocates "the decolonization of aesthetics to liberate aisthesis," that is, the freeing of aesthetics from European aesthetic norms and their implicit racism and ethnocentrism, in order to accommodate the sensitive experiences of non-Western societies. Although decolonial aesthetics do not occur solely in Latin America—Mignolo's examples come not only from Latin America but also from the United States, Eastern Europe, and several Asian countries—the direction they take in this region is marked by the Latin American perspective of the Modernity/Coloniality project. The decolonial aesthetics project gives continuity to Latin American art history's critical projects, which, for several decades, have focused on autochthonous artistic and aesthetic practices; at the same time, it places them in tension by extending the scope of the aesthetic beyond the field of art. This project has been given continuity in some recent texts, including the book *Sensing Decolonial Aesthetics in Latin American Art* (2018), in which Juan G. Ramos, working from the United States, addresses the decolonial aesthetics of Latin American art and the "new" Latin American cinema.

Joaquín Barriendos's work, first from the United States and later from Mexico, has become increasingly important. Barriendos theorizes the historical structures of visibility in Latin America from a decolonial perspective. Following decolonial authors such as Quijano, Dussel, Castro-Gómez, and Mignolo, Barriendos demonstrates the existence of a coloniality of seeing, which he considers, together with the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being, as one of modernity's structures of domination (Barriendos 2011).

²⁴ "figurar el mundo en cartografías imaginarias, registrar nuevas experiencias psicogeográficas en las ciudades, abrirse a redes de relaciones flexibles o clausurarse en esferas comunicadas, revelar supervivencias en la historia del arte, repensar la identidad, el territorio, las raíces, la lengua y la patria."

²⁵ Mignolo points out that this issue was introduced into the decolonial project by Adolfo Albán-Achinte and in its beginnings received the important contributions of Zulma Palermo. See Mignolo and Gómez (2012, 28–29). Mignolo had already addressed the issue of decolonial aesthetics in an article that helped shape the *Estéticas decoloniales* seminar, "Aisthesis decolonial" (2010).

According to Barriendos, visual regimes of colonial power were an important aspect of the racial and epistemic inferiorization of colonial subjects and cultures. These visual regimes have in common that they articulate the rhetoric of Indian cannibalism with the cartographic imaginary of the colonial territories. The cannibalism rhetoric moved between the discourses of missionary pedagogy and military theology and materialized in the project of “redeeming” the cannibal and the parcel system.

This rhetoric represented indigenous subjects through the figures of the “good” and the “bad” savage, those who were allies of the extractivist project and willing to redeem themselves, and those who resisted. This rhetoric was imbricated with a cartographic imaginary that represented the geographies of the New World through the categories of “ethnographic inside” and “ontological outside,” justifying the tutoring of the savages and conquest, understood as the regulation and profitability of the land and its inhabitants, while establishing a disembodied and deterritorialized locus of observation for the settler. The cannibalism rhetoric and the cartographic imaginary produced a range of visual artifacts, ranging from maps to drawings of cannibals, which together configure the visibility of the colonial system.

The key point, from a contemporary perspective, is that the historical modulation of the images of the cannibal and the savage created by the *cronistas de Indias* is at the base of the racialized, inferiorized, and objectified alterities that persist to this very day. Colonial visibility persists, albeit through changing forms of representations, through visual and verbal representations of indigenous people, peasants, blacks and immigrants; through the borders between the global North and South; and through the notions of “first” and “third” world and “first class” and “third class” citizens. In response, Barriendos advocates for a “new transmodern visual accord,” an “interepistemic visual dialogue between the visual regimes canonized by Eurocentric modernity and other visual cultures that have been racialized and hierarchically classified by the modernity/coloniality project” (2011, 14).²⁶ Although Barriendos provides few elements for us to imagine the terms of this interepistemic dialogue, the potential of the decolonial approach toward colonial visibility is undeniable.

Final Notes

We have inevitably left out many noteworthy scholars and works from our genealogy of Latin American visual studies; however, we are confident that our analysis will inspire others to create a more complete genealogical picture. The figures and details of this picture will be provided by studies of visual culture and visibility that will be developed

²⁶ “un nuevo acuerdo visual transmoderno”; “un diálogo visual interepistémico entre los regímenes visuales canonizados por la modernidad eurocentrada y las culturas visuales otras que han sido racializadas y jerarquizadas por el proyecto de la modernidad/colonialidad.”

henceforth, as well as by the highlighting of past work on visual culture that the “evil eye” diagnosed by Martín-Barbero has overshadowed.

Our analysis suggests that the burgeoning field of Latin American visual studies is developing a specificity of its own that is rooted in the tradition of Latin American cultural studies and cultural criticism, and whose main focus is the region’s social and political issues. In particular, the proximity between cultural and visual studies in Latin America is undeniable. Although, in general, most key authors have emerged from fields such as art history, literary studies, and film and media studies, visual studies incorporates several of cultural studies’ key characteristics: derogation of cultural hierarchies, focus on the culture-power relationship, contextual study of cultural practices, and transdisciplinarity. Indeed, we could say that cultural studies constitute Latin American visual studies’ epistemic matrix. Arguably, the proximity between the two fields is greater in Latin America than in the US, Canada, and Britain, where some of these characteristics, especially the focus on culture-power, are less evident in both visual and cultural studies.²⁷ If we assume that “Latin America” denotes a geohistorical, geoepistemic, and critical perspective, it seems plausible to speak of Latin American visual studies as a field with an epistemic and intellectual specificity that sets it apart from other versions of visual studies that have developed around the world.

Let us make one last point about the current moment and the future of visual studies in Latin America. The crossroads at which Latin American visual studies finds itself resembles that of Latin American cultural studies at the beginning of the new millennium. As Walter Mignolo (2003) opportunely warned in relation to the latter field, in the end what matters is the intellectual projects that we produce and nourish. Will the new field continue to be colonized with, as Mignolo puts it, “enfleshed” intellectual projects, that is, projects that are relevant to our region’s social and political issues? Our picture of the field allows us to be optimistic. The epistemic ground of cultural studies and cultural criticism, as well as the focus on the region’s social and political issues, are indeed capable of imbuing Latin American visual studies with intellectual, ethical, and political vitality.

However, we must be cautious. Although this field gives continuity to several of the region’s critical projects, we cannot ignore that the label “visual studies” (not the project) has been imported from the US. What are the effects of this importation? Although few academic programs and courses have been developed under this label, we can assume there will be more in the near future. If these spaces become the platform for the uncritical

²⁷ Authors such as Néstor García Canclini (1997), Nelly Richard (2001), Daniel Mato (2001), Armand Mattelart and Erik Neveau (2002), and Stuart Hall (1992) have argued that cultural studies were “depoliticized” and lost much of their contextualist approach through their consolidation within US academia. As we have already mentioned, authors such as James Elkins (2015) have noted the nonpolitical character of much of the recent visual studies produced in North America and Britain.

assimilation of North American discourses of visual culture, then they will be the most current contribution to the academic hegemony of the North and subalternization of the South. If, on the contrary, they become the opportunity to institutionally consolidate the critical study of visual culture and visuality in Latin America, then we would be facing an opportunity to cure the evil eye, to overcome the relative marginality of the scholarship of visual culture and visuality in the region. The challenge is to take advantage of the effervescence surrounding visual studies—including the fact that its discourse seems to sit well with the administrative logic of higher-ed institutions—to consolidate a fertile ground for new intellectual work that is relevant to Latin America’s epistemic, cultural, social, and political contexts and conjunctures.

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Dr. Yepes is the author of three books: *Afectando el conflicto: Mediaciones de la guerra colombiana en el arte y el cine contemporáneo* (2018), *María José Arjona: Lo que puede un cuerpo* (2015), and *La política del arte: Cuatro casos de arte contemporáneo en Colombia* (2012). Two more books are under contract for publication: *Estudios visuales desde América Latina: Apuntes para la consolidación del campo* and *Affecting the Conflict: Mediations of the Colombian War in Art and Film*. Dr. Yepes is also the author of several peer-reviewed articles and book chapters published in Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Mexico, and the United States.

Dr. Yepes has received several important fellowships, grants, and awards, including the National Prize for Scholarly Essay in Art History (2017, Colombia), a Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship (2016), a Grant for Research on Colombian Art from the Colombian Ministry of Culture (2015), and a Fulbright Scholarship (2012).

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