

HEMISPHERIC TRAVELLING AND (DIS)ENCOUNTERS IN OLIVER STONES'S *SOUTH OF THE*¹

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RESUMO: O filme de Oliver Stone "Ao Sul da Fronteira", produzido em 2009, apresenta entrevistas e depoimentos de diversos presidentes latino-americanos, focalizando as diferenças políticas entre a América Latina e os Estados Unidos. Neste contexto, este trabalho analisa os discursos conflitantes subjacentes ao filme, quais sejam, seus discursos denunciatórios do neoliberalismo e o apagamento de diferenças nacionais da América Latina através da própria construção estética e narrativa fílmica e da projeção de um discurso democrata e anti-republicano, que perpassa a visão política da América Latina de Oliver Stone.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Documentário; Narrativas de viagem; Oliver Stone; América Latina.

ABSTRACT: Military dictatorships, guerrillas and geopolitical conflicts in Latin-American countries like Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Nicaragua and El Salvador have been the object of analysis in various Canadian and American fictional films and documentaries in the last decades. Innumerable films and documentaries produced in Canada and the U.S. with institutional have depicted geopolitical conflicts in Latin America. Within this context of filmic production, this paper analyzes Oliver Stone's documentary "South of the Border", produced in 2009. Stone presents various interviews by former Latin American presidents. The film focuses on political differences between Latin America national politics and US foreign policies, as well as on US major TV Channels and its manipulation of the media, regarding Latin American political arena. The paper analyzes the conflicting discourses imbued in the film: its denouncing tone of neoliberalism and the erasure of Latin American national differences in the aesthetics choices and narrative techniques of the film.

KEYWORDS: Documentary; Travel narrative; Oliver Stone; Latin America; "South of the Border".

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Military dictatorships, guerrillas and geopolitical conflicts in Latin-American countries like Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Nicaragua and El Salvador have been the object of analysis in various Canadian and American fictional films and documentaries in the last decades. Innumerable films and documentaries produced in Canada and the U.S. with institutional subsidies such as the National Film Board of Canada have depicted geopolitical conflicts in Latin America. Fictional films and documentaries such as *Gringo in Mañanaland* (1995), *A Placed Called Chiapas* (1998), *Salvador* (1986), *The Fourth World War* (2003), *Our Brand is Crisis* (2005) are Anglo American productions, focusing on Latin American issues. These contemporary historical fictional films and documentaries provide an aesthetics of resistance to blockbusters, as they question stereotypical and homogeneous representations of Latin American countries in the Anglophonic media. These films not only document Latin American countries but also criticize the conflicting relationships and forms of representation involved in the making of the films, fictional or documentary, thus, revealing them as a narrative form in its making of Latin American subjects and histories.

Within this context of filmic production, this paper analyzes Oliver Stone's documentary *South of the Border*, produced in 2009. Stone presents various interviews by former Latin American presidents, focusing not only on Latin America national politics versus USA foreign policies, but also on major journalistic broadcasting in USA TV Channels and its manipulation of information regarding Latin American political arena in the 1980s and 1990s. The paper analyzes the conflicting discourses imbued in the film and in its problematic reception in the US and elsewhere. The film's reception helps to reveal its internal duplication of the hegemonic and homogenizing mechanisms it sets out to criticize: by the aesthetic and narrative choices presented in the movie, it

ends up erasing national differences within Latin America, thus duplicating in its own fabric an imperialistic view of Latin American countries.

In *South of the Border* Oliver Stone's political panorama of Latin America attempts to approximate the Southern and Northern hemispheres by foregrounding to the audience the predatory politics of Washington and the US media manipulation in relation to Hugo Chavez's rising political influence in Latin America in the 1990s. At the same time that the documentary denounces US neoliberalism, it attempts to weave a metareflexive narrative in which the documentary itself could be seen as replacing the unreliability of American media in its tendency, and alignment with Washington foreign policies, to define the new Presidents of Latin America in the 1990s as leftists, terrorists and dictators. In Stone's panoramic perception of Latin American countries in the 90s there is also a certain tendency to erase national, cultural and political differences among the visited countries such as Venezuela, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Argentina.

For a documentary, Stone's film had broad coverage in the US media and elsewhere. The director was interviewed by Hollywood Red Carpet, BBC, among other channels and the film was reviewed by *The New York Times*, *Time*, *The Guardian*, *Chicago Sun Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, NPR, *Time Out* as well as by other newspapers and magazines. Furthermore, Stone's letter to *The New York Times*, responding to Larry Rohter's criticism was published in *The New York Times* in June 27, 2010. The media reception to Stone's film is pedagogic in revealing some of the problems in the making of *South of The Border*. Stone himself responded to the NYT's critique of the geographic and historical mistakes in his film by saying that "[w]e are dealing with a big picture, and we don't stop to go into a lot of the criticism and details of each

country.”² Indeed, in the film, Stone announces in voice-over that the main opponent in Chavez election in 1998 was an ex-Miss Venezuela, when, in fact, Henrique Salas Homer, a well know political figure in Venezuela, obtained 40% of the votes. In this sense, Stone seems to be justifying some of the omissions in the documentary for the sake of the argument he wants to raise, which is within his “big picture” a rejection of US foreign policy towards Latin America.

Stone’s narrative reveals the Manichean use of the media in the US which, according to Stone, is co-opted by the Republicanism of Bush in the 1980s and the 1990s. This denunciatory tone in documentary making is aligned with Michael Moore’s, who is honored in *South of the Border* with a long sequence in which Moore is shown performing against Republican politics. Stone once more reinforces his political anti-Republicanism (the political view of the maker of *Platoon*, *JFK*, *Born on the 4th of July* and *Salvador* is obviously well known) and aligns his film with a new documentary style, less neutral. Thus, Stone draws a political map of Latin America capable of revealing not only what Stone defines as a new era in the political horizons created by Chavez in Latin America, but also how Chavez’s antagonism with Washington unveils the Manichaeism of Washington’s politics and US media.

The film was widely reviewed by newspapers and the media in general between June and September of 2010, during its release. Richard Corliss’s for *Time* described the film as “amateur night as cinema, as lopsided and cheerleadery as its worldview”³. Jay Weissberg, for *Variety*, writes that “the docu (*sic*) offers little genuine information and no investigative research, adopting a style even more polemical than Stone’s earlier

²See http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/26/movies/26stone.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 July 2, 2014.

³ (<http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1920910,00.html> in June 7, 2014)

focus on Fidel Castro and Yasser Arafat ".⁴ A less conservative source, Robert Smith, for NPR (National Public Radio), says that the film gives "kid glove treatment" to Chavez and his allies".⁵ And Elizabeth Dickison, for [*Foreign Policy Magazine*](#), criticizes the "softball questions" that Stone proposes to the South American leaders who were interviewed.⁶ Mick LaSalle for San Francisco Chronicle states "[b]ut to be fair, Stone doesn't seem even to think he's offering the last word here. Rather, he's trying to offer the first word, or at least a first opportunity to hear the other side, unfiltered by television media."⁷

Considering these responses and the broad coverage of the film, one could question the Manichean ways of the media which Stone criticizes. Partially, the large audience for Stone's documentary could be associated with the media coverage given to the film before its release as it had a total lifetime gross of domestic income of US\$198,600 (a hundred and 98 thousand dollars). Foreign income of: US\$ 70,809, with a total of 269,409; domestic summary - Opening weekend US\$21,54 (#55 rank, 1 theater average). Its widest release was of 12 theaters.⁸

The website "metacritic"⁹ provided the following statistic: out of 19 reviews of *South of the Border* in the US,

⁴ (<http://variety.com/2009/film/reviews/south-of-the-border-1200476409/#> in June 7, 2014)

⁵ (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113204260> June 7, 2014)

⁶ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foreign_Policy_in June 7, 2014)

⁷ (<http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Review-South-of-the-Border-3258609.php> in June, 2014)

⁸ (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=southoftheborder.htm> in June 7, 2014)

⁹ From <http://www.metacritic.com/movie/south-of-the-border> in June 7, 2014

1. 5 are positive;
2. 10 are mixed;
3. 4 are negative.

In spite of Stone's critique of US media, his film was widely reviewed with a variety of different perspectives, both positive and negative.

There are some paratextual issues to be considered in relation to the script writing of the documentary. Tariq Ali, a co-writer of the film, is a British Pakistani writer, contributor to *The Guardian* and *The London Review of Books*. He is also a member of the Editorial Committee of *New Left Review* and author of various books, including *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope* (2006). Mark Weisbrot (a contributor to *The Guardian*) who, with Tariq Ali, was one of the script writers, is an economist, supports the creation of a Bank of the South, to allow South American governments to become independent from the IMF.¹⁰ Previous to *South of the Border*, Oliver Stone had already been in Venezuela with Hugo Chavez in a mission to liberate political prisoners by the FARC.

In spite of its political engagement with Latin American minorities and the more liberal and leftist political stand of the writers and director, Stone's movie has such a broad view of Latin America that it inevitably ends up raising two correlated questions: a certain homogenization of Stone's view of Latin America as it neutralizes the differences among the diverse countries that are being visited, as well as a marked centrality taken by Stone, as a star persona, throughout the shots and narrativization of

¹⁰ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Weisbrot June, 7, 2014)

the film. Little by little, it is Stone's perspective, optical and intellectual, that gives authority to the presidents being interviewed.

The documentary begins with the narrative of Chavez's election in 1999 and the various political and international counter attacks he had to face in what Stone defines as the struggle against the political and economic hegemony played by the USA. From Venezuela, Stone and his crew visited Bolivia, Argentina, Brasil, Paraguai, Equador and Cuba, interviewing Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, Lula, Fernando Lugo, Rafael Correa and Raúl Castro, aligning them against USA foreign policies towards Latin America.

In *South of the Border*, the position of the journalist/interviewer/documentarist is taken by Oliver Stone, who is framed in friendly talks to the presidents in their daily routines, walks, memories and political visions. Some shots allow us to think of the documentary as a family video, undermining the alleged neutrality associated with documentaries. Nevertheless, Stone never uses the ironic and parodic tone of Michael Moore. On the contrary, the various images of the American television journals misrepresenting Chavez are explained by Stone's voice over, which is always critical of the US media, but never sarcastic or questioning of his own place in the discursive weaving of his film, as in the case, of Moore's films.

One of the first shots of *South of The Border* presents a montage of TV newsreel images interweaved with Stone's voice over. We are presented with a sequence from *Fox News* in which the TV news reporter denounces Chavez for chewing Coca; the following shot shows the anchor correcting the news reporter by saying that it was not coca but cocoa. The news reporter then immediately corrects herself by saying that "cocoa is OK". The newsreel sequences are followed by Stone's voice over narrative

explaining the reactionary perspectives of the broadcasting news in the USA and its alignment with Bush's predatory Republican perspectives.

A second sequence is quite unique. Stone asks Chavez to ride his bike in his grandmother's backyard as a scene reminiscent of his childhood, thus having Chavez counteracting with the camera in a film within a film, as a family video, without previous script or plan, with an unequalled intimacy. But this whole sequence ends with a shot of Stone, intermediating and giving narrative authenticity to the sequence.

Fernando Lugo's interview is also fully intermediated and authenticated by Stone's persona. Stone suggests to Lugo that Chavez could give a loan to Paraguay if Stone mediated it. The joke would not be worth mentioning if the camera had not displaced Hugo to reframe Stone as the main actor in the sequence. Furthermore, by the end of the interview, Stone shakes hands with Lugo affirming that "he [Lugo] is a good man". The tone of the interview can be read as a form of yankee paternalism, with the final blessing of the Godfather, in a tone that haunts the documentary with a certain imperialism. In this sense, one could argue that Stone's traveling narrative through Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Ecuador and Cuba ends up homogenizing the political affiliations of these countries.

At the same time, the documentary is emblematic of a new intercultural relation between the Southern and Northern hemispheres, thus going beyond the national frontiers to situate the displaced cultures from the economic center, here represented by the USA; it also erases the internal differences among these countries, thus reinforcing the "big" map drawn by Stone. For Stone, for the first time in history, the people of Latin America are being represented by Presidents who do not belong to an elite and who are not aligned to the economic interests of the US. Indeed, all the interviews in

the *South of the Border* call attention to the representative qualities of these Presidents for the underprivileged: Chavez stands for minority classes within the military system of Venezuela; Morales for the Bolivarian Indians; Kirchner for those who struggle against foreign capitalism; Lula for the working class. Indeed the film brings these nations together at the same time that it neutralizes their intrinsic differences. The deterritorialization provided by Stone's film in juxtaposing all these countries is thus problematic.

Stone has classified the film as a hybrid between the documentary and the Road Movie, which is a genre typically associated with Hollywood here being applied to Latin American territories. A few questions could be highlighted: who are the actors in this documentary, the presidents or Stone? The closing narrative (left versus right; poor versus rich; socialism versus capitalism) which gives us a certain taste of Hollywood preference for the narrative cinema only seems to invert the terms of the binary pairs. If we look at this film as a new form of travel narrative, does it offer us a new place for Latin America within the transnational imaginary? It seems that the film is ambiguous since it is, to a certain point, replacing the Maniqueism of broadcasting and Bush's politics in the USA with the map foregrounded by Stone, the one who ends his narrative authenticating the documentary, without ever questioning his own place in this new panorama.

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