Film Analysis as Cultural Analysis:
The Construction of Ethnic Identities in *Amores Perros*

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1. The Practices of Films

Since the 1980s, Cultural Studies has helped to transform the academic study of film by linking textual analysis with the observation of various forms of reception and also with ethnographic audience research. The conception of deriving the viewer's positions from the structure of the media texts gives way to a qualitative treatment of the 'real' audience. It is thus from their experiences and practices that the affective and meaningful potentials of the media text can unfold (cf. Winter, *Filmsoziologie*; *Das Kino der Gesellschaft*). In so doing, Cultural Studies deals with films as they are embedded within the larger cultural and historical contexts in which they have an impact on the world.

On the one hand, film is a product of cultural and social processes; on the other, it plays an active role in these very processes (cf. Gunning 186). A constitutive characteristic of Cultural Studies approaches is their common starting point: social practices, social relationships and constructions. It is in these practices, relationships and constructions that objects, events, and experiences gain their social relevance and significance in the first place. The Cartesian subject-object paradigm, which characterizes some approaches in film studies, postulates an abstract, hypothetical viewer who is intended to be representative of all viewers. This, however, is decisively called into question and ultimately dismissed. Accordingly, the focus of analysis is shifted to the practices of film, i.e., all practices within the context of film as well as their interactions with other cultural, economic, and social practices. Essentialist opinions, the dominant aspect in some parts of film theory, are thus surrendered and interest shifts towards the history and sociology of changing film practices. These practices are understood as dynamic processes of production and performance, as relations, or as "verbs" (cf. Denzin, "Ein Schritt"). In the theory of practice, we speak of "culture in action" (cf. Hörning/Reuter). Relating to film, this means that it is not considered as an isolated text—as in some parts of semiotics—or, correspondingly, as a cognitive mentality—as in neo-formalistic film theory. Rather, we are concerned here with the normal uses and regular practices dealing with film texts. Practices as distinguished and schooled forms of acting and speaking routinely draw on existing stocks of knowledge, not only unfolding them but also starting new processes of interpretation and configuration through the competent use of knowledge (cf. Hörning, "Kulturelle

Kollisionen"). In this way, films present a social reality which is created interactively in the action, in the field of production, circulation, reception, and appropriation. The textual characteristics of genre films, for instance, which make them recognizable and predictable, are the result and the medium of 'doing genre' by various agents in various contexts (cf. Tudor; Winter, *Filmsoziologie*).

For film analysis, this means that cultural, political, and sociological contexts define the production as well as the experience of films. The focus of analysis is thus not—at least not in the first place—on the individual subject who receives a film, but rather on the culturally attuned, repeating practices dealing with the film and the social results of interpretation (cf. Winter, *Der produktive Zuschauer*; Staiger; Mikos), e.g., the influences of viewing within a group in a certain place, reviews in newspapers, online fan discourses, or even discussions after viewing in a circle of friends or in a classroom. Just by speaking about a film, certain meanings can become central while others can be pushed into the background. Thus, shared interpretations develop, which may help to solve puzzling elements or ambiguities of the film's plot. An essential characteristic of these practices is that they recur. However, they can never reproduce the past identically, but are bound to "reproduction of a situation in another context under another signature" (Hörning, "Soziale Praxis" 34, our translation). The repeated viewing of a film, for instance, produces differences in perception and in experience. If this process is enjoyed over and over again, a film can become a cult film.

Against this backdrop, as Tom Gunning (cf. 192) suggests, a film can be understood as a palimpsest into which the traces of varied and versatile film practices have been written. Even if the viewing is already anticipated in the production process, the processes of viewing and appropriation are complex, contradictory, varied, and often unpredictable.[1] This is because the post-modern subject has different socially constructed and performed identities (cf. Denzin, *Symbolic Interactionism* viii; Zima), which are constituted in various cultural practices. Categories like class, ethnicity, age, or gender account for practices of production and performance in which differences are articulated while forms of social and cultural inequality are reproduced as well as discussed.

A film can thus be interpreted in different ways by the same person in various contexts, depending on whichever aspect of their identity is being staged. By watching a film, viewers can change their perspectives and so the framing of the film. Likewise, a film, viewers can change their perspectives and so the framing of the film. Likewise, a film, viewers can change their perspectives and so the framing of the film. Likewise, different subject positions concerning, for example, gender or ethnic issues can be addressed. This is in line with a conclusion drawn by Georg Seesslen: "The postmodern work of art is a type of schizophrenia machine, which can address very different people with different expectations as well as one person at the same time in very different ways" (138, our translation). In the course of interacting with films,

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[1]   The studies by Richard Maltby show that this is why the film practices in Hollywood do not aim at a definite interpretation of a film text, but rather aim at a variety of interpretations in various (local) contexts.

subjectivity is constructed. This, however, is irrevocably linked to medial representations.

Next, we would like to consider these processes of contextualization more closely and investigate the film analysis of Cultural Studies more deeply, which is pursued mainly in the framework of critical media pedagogy, which aims at reading films for their possible political meaning, thus deriving from them a set of pedagogical interventions. Incorporating these theoretical impulses, we will then contextualize and analyze the film *Amores Perros* from an ethnic perspective.

2.   Film Analysis as Cultural Intervention: Cultural Studies and Critical Pedagogy

Critical media pedagogy, which was primarily developed in the U.S.A. (cf. Winter, "Kultur"; Wimmer), regards films as cultural practices and events in which political debates and social conflicts are expressed. Thus, their analysis allows access to cultural, social, and historical contexts which are already written into the practices or are produced by them. In this way, we can show how forms of cultural policy and arrangements of social representation are expressed in everyday life, how they are maintained through (hegemonic) patterns of meaning, and how they can be discussed and transformed by (pedagogical) interventions in the shape of analyses, interpretations, and conversations about films.

The medium film not only serves the purpose of entertainment, but can also educate, as Henry A. Giroux (cf. 3) asserts. By expressing political ideologies and cultural values, films become matters of public discussion. In terms of pedagogical processes it can also be shown how films, understood as social practices, shape everyday life by allocating, for example, certain subject positions or by reflecting and staging the post-modern subject in audio-visual, dramaturgical representations (cf. Denzin, *Images* viii). New, alternative interpretations can intervene in these processes, question them, and broaden the space for self-formation. This applies in particular to the fields of gender and ethnic belonging. Representations of gender or ethnic identity should be scrutinized in (complementary) analyses. This can demonstrate that identities are never 'naturally' given but can be transformed in everyday practice. Popular films can be understood as a form of public pedagogy which, according to Douglas Kellner (*Cinema Wars*), creates the opportunity to question and challenge current politics of representation and to look for social alternatives. Deconstructive analysis should read films against the grain in order to reveal their polysemic structure and the possibilities of rearticulation in reception and appropriation (cf. Winter, "Filmanalyse"). We react to the public pedagogy of Hollywood with committed analysis and discussions with young people, students, and addressed groups, by means of which possible, everyday versions of films should be identified, alternatives developed, and counter-narratives initiated. Giroux as well as Kellner thus highlight that film analysis should not isolate individual aspects; they should rather, according to Fredric Jameson, be regarded as

social and political allegories, which do not gain their meaning as separate texts but in the network of social practices, of cultural debates, and of institutional formations. One of critical pedagogy's concerns is thus to examine how films relate to cultural and social transformations and communicate with them, how they express fears, apprehensions, sexism, and political doubt as well as hope and utopia. Moreover, the analysis of popular films from a critical media pedagogy's point of view also offers the chance to partake in society's dialogue with itself and, according to John Dewey, to put democracy further into action. Discussing films creates or broadens public spaces in which enjoyment, reflection, and the ability to act can enter a fruitful synthesis. As Henry Giroux points out, film offers room for discussions which can connect questions of personal experience, politics, and public life with those of greater social impact.

A pedagogically orientated film analysis tries to understand social conflicts and discourse to which the audience should be sensitized. The educational intention of a critical media pedagogy aims at the teaching of skills through the deconstruction of cultural texts with the intention of raising the viewer's ability to act (cf. Kellner, *Media Culture*; Winter, *Medienkultur*). Thereby, any analysis of film is partially and perspectively constructed and can be revised or questioned at any time (cf. Giroux 13).

One analysis we carried out was that of *V for Vendetta*, which showed the potential that cultural analysis of popular films carries within it as a method of critical pedagogy (cf. Nestler/Winter). In this film, current social discourses of surveillance and control society, of media spectacles, and of terrorism appear in transcoded form (cf. Kellner, *Media Culture*; *Media Spectacle*). The film articulates risks, dangers, and fears but also refers to social discourses of hope, change, and transcendence as they are expressed, for example, at the beginning of the 21st century in the course of social movements for global justice.

Thus, *V for Vendetta* shows aspects of utopia. By staging themes like difference, the telling of infamous stories, or the unmasking of power, it visualizes the possibility of forms of resistance in totalitarian regimes. Thereby, it broaches the issue of deviance from socially defined normality, be it another religion, a different sexual orientation, or diverse political and cultural thinking: In the film, the totalitarian regime vigorously opposes all these forms, because they express a resistant potential of difference. Therefore, communication is controlled and censored in as many areas of life as possible or even cut off in the first place. These mechanisms of control, however, prove increasingly less successful because the main figure V understands that criticism of power must take place within the field of power itself. He takes advantage of the communication strategies of the system and circumvents them by means of his subversive tactics.

The double metaphor of the mask plays a central role here. By masking himself, V does not only hide his true identity, meaning that he cannot be found and therefore escapes his arrest. He furthermore succeeds in unmasking as false the established truth, namely the ideology of the current system. V uses his mask against the mask of the system. At the end of the film, thousands of equally disguised people remove their masks and are unveiled as different individuals. This illustrates the victory of diversity over leveling. Finally, by referring to the notion of 'multitude' in the sense of Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, it shows the victory of 'love,' the affective communitization, which is the engine of utopia, over the paranoid controlling ideology of the regime.

Our analysis of *V for Vendetta* thus reveals the perspectives of a pedagogically motivated film analysis which allows for discussions of social and cultural contexts that would otherwise be difficult to initiate. By means of this method, we also manage to preserve the notion of utopia, the imagination of another world, to chart a differentiated image of it, and to put to use its potential of hope for democratic practices as well as for an alternative future of society. In our analysis, which itself is a form of 'doing cinema,' we have considered the popular film reflexively. Unlike positivistic methods, we are no longer distant and indifferent researchers, i.e., the subject facing the object of examination, but we are rather observers who are taking part, experiencing, and who are also able to change in the course of observation and the subsequent discussion because the dominant description of the work is unstable and fluid. The reflexive analysis of this particular film opens the space of a utopia because it reveals alternatives to the establishment and, at least in the realm of the recipient's imagination, it creates a palpable chance of realizing these alternatives. It also makes evident that the meaning of a film is an embattled terrain on which cultural and social debates, which are neither determined in the direction of utopia nor in the direction of the dominant ideology, never cease.

In this way, popular films with their polysemic representations, which are given meaning to in the processual interaction with the viewer, can give insight into social and cultural dimensions, which otherwise would scarcely be possible (cf. Denzin, "Reading Film" 426). Norman Denzin thus declares: "Films are cultural and symbolic forms and can be used to discover and reveal important characteristics of social life" ("Reading Film" 428). Film analysis becomes cultural analysis, which also offers pedagogic opportunities for intervention and, as demonstrated by Douglas Kellner in his analysis of American films (cf. *Media Culture*; *Cinema Wars*), can run into a diagnostic criticism of social ideologies. The narratives of films can be linked with one's own stories and experiences as well as with qualitative-ethnographic investigations with the aim of grasping, understanding, and possibly breaking the spell of those all-embracing cultural narrations which shape our lives (cf. Denzin, *Images* 157).

3. Film Analysis as Cultural Analysis: The Construction of Ethnicity in *Amores Perros*

In the following, we will analyze *Amores Perros* whose (commercial) success is attributed to its complexity, intricate narrative structure, and visual persuasiveness. When we analyze this film with a view on the representation of ethnic identities, we place a perspective at the center which touches an important theme of the film, namely the question of Mexican identity. What does it mean to be a Mexican in Mexico City, in a polycentric megacity full of contrast and conflict, social and ethnic differences, in

which life becomes an "anthropological experiment" as director Iñárritu said in Cannes in 2000 (qtd. in Smith 14)? It is precisely this question of *mexicanidad* which is given central significance in the artistic, intellectual, and political life of Mexico, because the experience of national identity is shaped by the tension between its European roots in the Old World and its establishment in the New World, which places it in a permanent crisis of identity (cf. Berg). One can thus understand our analysis as an offer to reflect on the construction of subjectivity in social and cultural practices and to understand ethnicity as a social field of staging and performance. In this way, the film can be experienced as a social practice which articulates current political, social, and cultural conflicts. Our interpretation is thus a practice in the context of this film, which can be connected with other practices of a political, social, and cultural nature. With our interpretation we thus encroach upon the space of self-formation and hope to open up new spaces of contemplation and discussion. This is an intervention in the sense of a critical media pedagogy, which can in this case initiate scrutiny and review of essentialist concepts of ethnic identity. These processes can of course also occur without pedagogical assistance in the everyday interaction during and after the viewing of the film.

Here, we understand *Amores Perros* as an analytical instrument, which can reveal to us something about certain social configurations, processes, and movements like the construction of ethnic identities and their increasingly fragmented character in the process of globalization. In the film itself, however, this questioning is subordinate to the aim of telling a story as excitingly and effectively as possible. A deconstructive reading, however, turns to the margins, subtexts, and other subordinated elements in order to be able to reveal opportunities of rearticulation and of change, of resistance, transition, and empowerment.

For us, an important theoretical starting point is the notion of 'polycentric multi-culturalism,' a term coined by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. They develop it in contrast to liberal multiculturalism in order to stress how cultural identities are embedded in relations of power. Shohat's and Stam's sympathy applies to the disenfranchised and marginalized, whose voices were or still are oppressed in the media. Against this backdrop, we are interested in whether the film succeeds in crossing dominant representations and if it is able to scrutinize Eurocentric ethnic stereotypes, prejudices, and clichés in their 'naturalness' through their re-enactment understood as performative subversions in the sense of Judith Butler. Finally, we would like to find out if the film can possibly initiate a rethinking of those stereotypes, prejudices, and clichés.

The notion of polycentrism also opposes that of Eurocentrism. This is done along an axis of contrasts, namely those of East/West and North/South, whereby the West and the North occupy privileged positions in contrast to the East and the South. Admittedly, this axis is determined arbitrarily, but nevertheless it is very powerful, because it leads to an essentialization of (ethnic) identities. However, it cannot be assumed that Europe is 'the West' because Europe itself exhibits a synthesis of different cultures. This applies all the more in the context of globalization, which reveals every essentialist

conception of culture as a delusion (cf. Shohat/Stam 14f.; Hall, "The Question"). As a consequence, a strategy of the construction of identities (or communities) is to represent them as stable units and to suppress difference. In contrast, polycentric multiculturalism considers identities as historically and socially situated, as diverse and modifiable, as products of differentiated and complex processes of identification.

Furthermore, Eurocentrism is closely linked to colonialism and to racist doctrines. When it comes to normalizing and naturalizing racism, everyday practices of implicit racism, such as language use and media production, are of particular significance (cf. Hall,"The Whites"; Shohat/Stam 18). In line with the findings of Shohat and Stam, who claim that it can sometimes be more revealing to deconstruct the stereotyper rather than the stereotypes (cf. 21), we will investigate to what extent the staging of certain ethnic identities can be regarded as a form of performative subversions. Therefore, we understand *Amores Perros* as a film of the 'Third Cinema,' a form of cinema which, in a sensual-carnivalesque way, negotiates the conception of the western-dominant (Hollywood) cinema (cf. Shohat/Stam 27-30). Seen in this light, the film appears as a subversive pleasure (cf. Stam), which does not allow for an essentialist reading but rather plays with the hybridity and the tension between cultural homog-enization and heterogenization inherent within it. This pleasure always keeps an eye on the contest for power from the perspective of the social periphery and marginaliza-tion. It can thus empower by deconstructing and rejecting essentialist and oppressing forms of identity as well as by opening spaces of dialogue and of cultural exchange, in which identity is newly negotiated and viewed as transformable.

Amores Perros provides us with a view into a microcosm of conflictive ethnic identities, through which the film, by using Mexico City as a stage, also highlights dramaturgically the contrasts between the different personal destinies in this anonymous urban world. Above all, it tells the story of three individual destinies: that of Octavio, who, along with his friend Jorge, engages in dogfights trying to earn enough money in order to change his life. While not exactly poor, he is relatively underprivileged and willing to risk a new beginning in another town. He would like to lead his new life with Susana, the current wife of his brother, Ramiro. It is even Ramiro's dog, Cofi, whom Octavio (ab)uses, trying to earn money. These circumstances alone provide enough cause for conflict. But the situation becomes even more intense, since all three live with Octavio and Ramiro's very religious mother.[2] Moreover, Octavio and Jorge tangle with their opponents at the dogfights to such an extent that they make attempts on their lives. We see that these characters belong to an underprivileged social class. They have minimal financial means at their disposal and only a basic education, which prevents them from extensively analyzing and decisively changing their lives.[3] More-

[2] In the family flat there is a portrait of Pope John Paul II, next to the ubiquitous icons of Mary as indicators of the religiousness of the mother. Furthermore, she is shown as deeply conservative in terms of family values and a gender-specific division of roles.

[3] Susana is an exception to this. Although she must care for her child and her husband, Ramiro, she also attends secondary school in order to be able to lead a life which offers her

over, they are defined through ethnic aspects. By representing them as dark-skinned Mexicans, Iñárritu produces a link between marginalization and ethnic identity.

In contrast to this, the film presents a wealthy 'white' family: Daniel, Julieta, and their two children. Iñárritu thus plays with primordial elements, such as skin color, and physiognomy, and places these in direct relation to social symbols of wealth like, for example, a luxury car, expensive clothes or a large flat. As we learn in the course of the film, Daniel has an extramarital affair with a model, Valeria, whose family has links with Spain. Even here, the connection between a privileged life and Europe as well as a white skin color is established. Their 'colorlessness' makes them the normative starting point for the definition of a hierarchy of ethnic groups (cf. Dyer). In order to live with Valeria, Daniel ultimately leaves his family.

Finally, we meet El Chivo, who occupies a special role. He lives on the streets with a pack of dogs as, in fact, he is not without means. On a regular basis he takes on a contract as a professional killer, but his apparent homelessness helps him to conceal his identity and to avoid arrest. In earlier times, El Chivo led a bourgeois life; he lived with a wife and daughter, until he decided to give up this existence and henceforth to fight as a left-wing guerrilla. He then got arrested, spent 20 years in jail, and, after his release, opted for his current way of life. El Chivo appears quite dark-skinned. However, towards the end of the film, he decides to once more begin a new life and to carry out another transformation of his identity.

All these extremely different worlds exist basically alongside one another in regularized daily normality, and it is not until a fateful car accident that these worlds collide. Octavio and Jorge are on the run, pursued wildly by their dogfight opponents, while Valeria is driving through town in order to go shopping. At a crossroads their two cars ultimately crash into each other and El Chivo witnesses the accident. This accident tears all those involved from what until now has been their normality: Octavio survives seriously injured, while his friend Jorge dies. Valeria's leg is so seriously injured that it has to be amputated later on, which puts an end to her model career. This, in turn, puts tension on her relationship with Daniel who, in a few moments, fluctuates between his wife Julieta and Valeria. El Chivo changes from a mere witness to a participant when he saves Cofi, the dog, from Octavio's car and accepts him into his 'dog family.' This, however, will plunge him into a crisis as well: Having been raised a fighting dog, Cofi, after recovering from the crash, kills all the other dogs of the pack. The accident confronts all the characters, who are also linked by the fact that they are all dog owners, with the problem of reflecting on and redefining their own—not only ethnic—identities.

Yet, except for El Chivo, they do not, or rather only to a very limited extent, succeed at re-defining their lives. Octavio, badly marked by the accident, has to

more alternatives. This is even more difficult for her, as she gets no support from her family: her mother is an alcoholic and there is no father (figure) presented in the film. Additionally, she must defend herself against accusations from her mother-in-law that she does not sufficiently care for her child and husband.

abandon his plans of beginning a new life with Susana. Not only have Susana and her husband Ramiro plundered Octavio's hidden stash of money, but Ramiro is also shot dead by a guard in a bank robbery. In the end, Susana does not want to leave with Octavio anymore. The life of Daniel and Valeria also continues less happily than expected. Valeria loses her leg and with it her carefree existence as a model, which makes her tense and aggressive. When, to make matters worse, her dog, Richie, becomes the trigger for a serious fight, Daniel and Valeria's relationship is on the brink. The film, however, does not provide a clue as to whether they stay together or not. El Chivo is the only one who understands how to handle his identity crisis, by reinventing himself once more. Cofi almost gets killed by El Chivo for having annihilated his dog pack. Yet, El Chivo decides to spare Cofi's life and to give up his existence as a professional killer. He renames Cofi to Blackie and starts a new life. Consequently, he also changes his appearance significantly. He cuts his hair and his fingernails; he shaves and starts wearing his glasses again. By doing so, he no longer appears as 'dark,' but rather as an upper-class businessman. The film ends with El Chivo and Cofi/Blackie heading off into the sunset with a bag full of money—El Chivo's 'income' and his money from the sale of the cars of two potential victims, whom he, in the end, did not kill. But even though El Chivo now seems almost bourgeois again, it is clear to him that he cannot continue his earlier life as a family father.

We can thus say that El Chivo, at least as far as the film tells us, is indeed the only one who successfully weathers his identity crisis and manages to create a new identity. A decisive reason for this may be that he actively created new identities throughout his whole life and does not see any single one as guaranteed and unchangeable: from the bourgeois family man to the guerrilla, from the prisoner to the professional killer, and now on to something new, whatever this will be. Octavio and Valeria, on the other hand, seem scarcely able to handle the crisis. Most notably, Valeria seems to struggle with the new situation. This is particularly tragic because she has fallen the furthest from her mostly privileged previous life. She must accept that her European background, symbolized by her skin color and her Spanish accent, cannot guarantee her any existential security.

In this way, *Amores Perros* successfully shows that we have to submit Eurocentrism, and with it all essentialist identity concepts, to a far-reaching criticism. Because neither are ethnic identities so one-dimensional and essential as Eurocentrism suggests, nor can it guarantee a socially, politically, and culturally privileged position. The film's use of ethnic stereotypes in this case is therefore a performative subversion of current ethnic clichés, because it confuses rather than confirms certain ideas of ethnicity. It is clear that there is no pre-existing identity (cf. Butler 141), which can define which ethnic identity is true or false. Thus, the film debunks "the boundaries of the body as the limits of the socially hegemonic" (Butler 131)—as the limits of a strategy whose aim it is to immunize the vulnerable periphery of each identity against disruptions which challenge the hegemony. Precisely this challenge reveals that the hegemony is not the 'natural' order but rather a construct—and at times a very fragile

one. Its challenge therefore also shifts the meaning and need of its order, which is always concerned with coherence, in order to hide discontinuations, which are the actual normality (cf. Butler 133-34). Otherwise, the regulating ideal would reveal itself as norm and fiction (cf. Butler 135-36).

Amores Perros demonstrates the performances through which (ethnic) identity is produced, whereby the illusion of an inner core organizing an identity (cf. Butler 135-36) is revealed. Our ideas of the 'true essence' of a certain identity are thus unmasked "as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (Butler 136), which allows us to finally recognize that there is no 'truth' in identity, no ahistorical core that would define it. Rather identity must be understood as personal/cultural history of assumed meanings (cf. Butler 138). Even when the relationships between single moments of an identity are arbitrary in the end, they are in no way free from balances of power, but are always embedded into systems of constraint. This shows us, once again, that identity is indeed negotiable, and that these negotiations of identity signify a struggle for power—which can also be lost. In this sense, Iñárritu brings his characters to and sometimes beyond their limits, which they experience painfully.

Finally, in regard to the cultural dimensions of identity, the car accident in *Amores Perros* can be understood as a metaphor for globalization. Globalization questions all securely held identities and challenges us to actively and creatively form new ones, which escape essentialist concepts. In this sense, those involved in the accident no longer appear as autonomous subjects who have full sovereignty over their identity. Rather, they each become what Stuart Hall describes as 'a decentred subject', i.e., a dispersal of the subject over a series of breaches in the discourses of modern knowledge (cf. "The Question"), which brings with it a variety of paradoxes and ambivalences. This dispersal also has effects on national and ethnical identities, which can no longer be seen as 'natural' but rather as imagined and constructed (cf. "The Question").

Thus, all those involved in the accident are torn out of their previous identities. Here they learn, for example, that a particular ethnic background, in this case Valeria's European roots, cannot guarantee a privileged position in society. This certainty is nothing more than an illusion. Similarly, as the discourses of modern knowledge disperse the autonomy of the subject, Valeria is torn from her securely held existence by Octavio. Read metaphorically, the West here loses its sole hegemony and defining power, so it is no longer in the position of presenting itself as consistent and homogenous. By staging the dialectical interplay between the various ethnic identities, *Amores Perros* confirms what Hall had predicted for globalization, namely that globalization would prove itself as a part of the slow and uneven but perpetual story of the decentralization of the West, although in many ways it first gained its power from the West (cf. "The Question").

4.   Conclusion

The starting point of our deliberations was a plea for the sociological consideration of film, which, like historical analysis, questions abstract and universal conceptions of the viewer. As we have tried to show, it should start from the social context of 'doing cinema.' Thus, not only the processes of production but also those of reception and acquisition must be considered as practices which are in no way passive. In them, the images and sounds of a film are (newly) created and the meanings of the film text are actively produced. The interest of a film analysis inspired by Cultural Studies should be directed to the social practices and relationships of 'doing cinema' which in no way excludes differentiated analyses of films and their potential meanings.

Cultural Studies show that, first and foremost, popular films can be socially relevant, as we have shown in the example of *Amores Perros*. By means of our contextualization, we were able to demonstrate that this film, regarding ethnic identities, not only criticizes the hegemonic position of the West, as it is expressed in the concept of Eurocentrism, but simultaneously deconstructs it in the sense of the concept of polycentrism. *Amores Perros* stages certain stereotypical preconceptions about certain ethnicities in Mexican society, but does not confirm them by doing so. Instead, the film scrutinizes them critically. In *Amores Perros* (ethnic) identities are displayed not as essential facts but rather as discussable and negotiable, if nonetheless powerful cultural, social, and political constructions.

Popular films and their analysis can thus have interventionist effects. In the sense of Cultural Studies, they allow people to approach knowledge, even if they are not bound in the circle of academic knowledge production. Films come with the potential of making complex issues easily accessible as well as understandable through images and their montage, without bereaving them of their ambivalence, their ambiguity, and their inner contradictions (cf. Nestler, "Die Dezentrierung"). In films, the complexity of social and cultural debates can be expressed in a transcoded form. From this perspective, Sam Fuller's statement in Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* has been proven true: "Film is a battleground."

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Globalization and Transnational Place Identity along the U.S.-Mexico Border

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The U.S.-Mexico border represents a regional laboratory in which to study the processes of culture clash and ethnic intersection in an era of globalization. One way of understanding these processes of globally-driven cultural integration is by exploring place identity. In this essay, I explore some of the dimensions of what I term 'transnational place identity' in the bi-cultural setting of the United States-Mexico border region. This 2000-mile zone along the border between northern Mexico and the southwestern United States is a vibrant place that is constantly being reinvented. I will argue that the place identity of this region is best understood by analyzing slices of the 'transfrontier metropolis,' a prototype for the bifurcated urbanized culture regions that have formed along this giant international frontier.[1]

It is generally accepted that a critical driver of global change is economic. If regions are able to develop economies that can compete in the global economic system, those regions will prosper. But, in a globalizing world, economic space is dramatically shifting, changing the entire landscape. Along the border, those shifts have to do with the injection of specific kinds of border space (commerce, tourism, etc.) into the global economy.

Seen from above, the U.S.-Mexico border evokes a hard landscape of arid desert, mountains, canyons, and plateaus, suddenly interrupted by two distinct cultures that have slowly imposed their will on the natural environment.

The border is a study in contrast—a place that for centuries was what one historian called the "land of sunshine, adobe and silence" (Lummis 3), yet suddenly in the modern age, this border became a zone of attraction, growth, industry, and cities. This rapid transformation, in some ways, serves as a defining measure of the border's identity—a place of change, experimentation, and hybridization.[2] These changes express themselves continually across a range of measures—art, music, literature, architecture, and the informal or vernacular landscape. In fact, one distinguishing feature of

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[1] The concept of the 'transfrontier metropolis' was first introduced in my 1990 book *Where North Meets South*.

[2] The idea of U.S.-Mexico border hybridity is developed in Dear/LeClerc.

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