

**Who is shooting? Technological Representation and the Ideologies of Latin American Difference in *Video Trans Americas* by Juan Downey**

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Between 1973 and 1979, the Chilean media artist Juan Downey traveled all over the Americas and recorded his journeys in his collection of works known as *Video Trans Americas* (VTA). The last video of this series is *The Laughing Alligator* that Downey recorded while living with a Yanomami community, in the Amazon region. One of the first scenes of this 27-minute video shows Juan Downey walking in the jungle with two young men of the tribe. They are going to a village located ninety minutes from where Downey was living. Both of the Yanomami are armed and ready to hunt. The video projects a sense of disorientation in the dense jungle: there are no points of reference, or a clear path to follow. Suddenly, one of the Yanomami points Downey with his shotgun. The narrator, the artist himself, says:

he was threatening me. At that instant by luck I was recording a tape. Supporting my camera with my right hand I was observing through it... Instinctively I pointed the camera to my potential assassin as if it were a firearm, with that aggressive gesture, that imaginary threat which we video-artists use as a warning that the camera also is a dangerous weapon, as if bullets could come out of the lens...the Indians also took my camera for a dangerous weapon. (*The Laughing Alligator*)

This scene, in which two dangerous cultural devices are pointing at each other,<sup>1</sup> introduces the questions and problems that I want to discuss in this article, which deals with the conflictive relation between representation, technology, and cultural identity in the Latin American postcolonial context. I analyze the visual means by which the video *The Laughing Alligator* subverts the convention of ethnographic documentary and problematizes the colonial and Eurocentric dynamics that this genre implies. I study *The Laughing Alligator* in relation to the specific cultural and discursive background of the artist by defining how this video is not only a subversion of ethnographic documentary, but also a reflection on the position of the Latin American intellectuals and artists in relation to continental heterogeneity and metropolitan cultural models. Two key questions are how Downey problematizes the location of the intellectual subject within the cultural and political processes in Latin America, and how the presence of the cultural otherness of the Yanomami people threatens the conventions of cultural representation and redefines the political scope of the use of technology as a means of social intervention.

There is a possible danger that comes with the international recognition that certain peripheral artists like Downey achieve in the metropolitan centers of contemporary art; critics tend to forget the specific cultural background from which the artist emerges. In order to avoid this risk, I study how the video dialogues critically with the models of interpretation of Latin American culture—such as *Transculturation*, *Contact Zone*, and *Cultural Antropofagia*—that have defined the debates of Latin Americanism during the last decades. In order to do so, I determine the different moments, articulations and intellectual genealogies that are defining Downey’s aesthetic and cultural agenda.

Going back to the scene in the jungle, certain questions emerge: Why does Downey use the camera as protection? What is he really protecting? Since the early Colonial encounters, Western subjects have seen in the radical otherness of the natives a threat to their cultural authority, and as a response to this threat they have had to make the unknown fit within the framework of the culturally recognizable and the familiar. Representation, then, has worked as a mechanism by which the dangerous otherness became part of a symbolic organization of the world. By using his camera in this confrontation, Downey is reactivating the imperial act of domination through

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<sup>1</sup> The Mexican artist Guillermo Gómez Peña, in his performance “A muerte (segundo duelo)” (2007) also works on the semantic and cultural ambiguity of shooting a camera and shooting a gun. The video of this short piece is available online.

representation. The artist makes a conscious comment on the ideologies of representation, and at the same time assumes a critical position, and re-acts the colonial encounter. Also, his control over the experience he is going through and the medium that he is working with are been threatened by the sudden appearance of the aggressive Yanomami. After the confrontation of camera versus shotgun, the next scene that we see is a young native woman laughing: “the foreigner was afraid,” (*The Laughing Alligator*) she says. Downey was not aware that the threat was nothing but a joke. This anticipates the challenges of communication that the artist will face in the rest of the video and his experience with the Yanomami community.

The specular scene of two shooting devices sets the interpretative coordinates of Downey’s ideological and cultural project in *VTA* and in the rest of his work. In this sense, it is possible to read the images of this encounter as *metapictures*, a term that W. J. T. Mitchell coins when talking about pictures that not only represent something, but also telling us something about the act of representation itself. These “pictures about pictures—that is, pictures that refer to themselves or to other pictures, pictures that are used to show what a picture is,” bring into question not only the capacities of representation, but also “the determining conditions of the work—its institutional setting, its historical positionality” (35-36). Downey’s work is constantly responding to this logic; every act of representation is at the same time a reflection on the dynamics of representation, in its political, cultural and epistemic implications. Throughout *The Laughing Alligator*, Downey thinks about the question of the gaze and its relation to imperialism, and the extent to which the colonial subject is defined by the gaze of the colonizer. His reflection also is on the ideological and ethical connotations of the videotape as a medium.

Since the sixties, Juan Downey was working on the possibilities of political interventions of media art, and experimenting with new media, such as electronic sculptures, happenings, video, and all inter-media that could result from the combinations of them. Many of his works were interactive, and demanded the participation of the audience in order to fulfil their final purpose; Downey understood them as complex communicative systems. His artistic production in the sixties is highly media-oriented, in the sense that the practice of art was a reflection on the material and ideological aspects of media in order to generate effective instances of communication with the audience: “(Downey) used the medium to define fundamental issues of communal or community identity—not as reportage but as a tool to structure interactive experience in such a way as to expand and universalize its effects” (Harithas

and Ross 328). As Downey's trajectory demonstrates, this engagement with the communal aspect of artistic production will reach its higher intensity during his participation in New York's artistic scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In 1967 Downey moved to New York, where he lived until his death in 1993. He participated actively in the art scene of the city, founding magazines, doing collective performances, publishing essays, and experimenting in collaboration with other artists. One of the most important magazines that gathered media artists by that time was *Radical Software* (1970-74), which studied issues of political activism, aesthetic practices and technological mediations. Highly influential for Downey were the ideas of cybernetics—understood as the scientific study of different forms of communication and exchange of information, both in technological and natural systems—that were appropriated by the artists around *Radical Software*. Basically, Downey and their partners were incorporating the principles of cybernetics into their artistic practices in order to create works that would allow a deep interaction of human beings with the environment. The utopian project of cybernetic art had technology as the mediation that, instead of perpetuating domination, would allow the deep immersion of humans in nature, which would eventually liberate them from economical and ideological oppression. Downey and other artists created a political project of emancipatory uses of technology that aimed to liberate technology from being solely a means of indoctrination and bureaucratic control of the masses. By generating alternative systems of communication between artists and audiences, the artists that participated on *Radical Software* wanted to empower common people during a historical period when massive communication was becoming one of the most important industries in capitalist societies. In the first issue of *Radical Software*, the group explains in a manifesto the characteristics of its political project. Here is an excerpt:

Power is no longer measured in land, labor, or capital, but by access to information and the means to disseminate it. As long as the most powerful tools (not weapons) are in the hands of those who would hoard them, no alternative cultural vision can succeed. Unless we design and implement alternate information structures which transcend and reconfigure the existing ones, other alternate systems and life styles will be no more than products of the existing process... Our species will survive neither by totally rejecting nor by unconditionally embracing technology, but by humanizing it; by allowing people access to the informational tools they need to shape and reassert control over their lives.

As the quote shows, the group articulates a lucid reflection on the nature of power and the agency of technological media in that historical context. For instance, the first issue

includes a brief description of a social project called “Challenge for a Change,” which encouraged the use of technological means in local communities as a tool of political organization: “technology of communications should be understood and used by the people... They can use the camera to view themselves and their neighborhood with a more perceptive eye... The processes these steps involve can make significant changes in the development of a community organization, and video can become an important tool” (*Radical Software* 11). The group argued for alternative uses of technology, seeing them as political possibilities of social change.

It is in the pages of *Radical Software* where Juan Downey presents the ambitious project of *Video Trans Americas* for the first time. In an issue of 1973, Downey publishes two short essays that provide important information about his political ideas when he was envisioning the project. In the following quote, we can see the anti-imperialistic agenda of Downey: “The judeo-Christian tradition processed for several milenia an anthropocentric reasoning that culminates in the Renaissance, declaring inferior any art created outside southern Europe. The evolution of this geopolitical arrogance is the narrow-minded, imperialistic conception of the *primitive* and the *exotic*” (“Technology and Beyond” 5). Later, Downey explains that the project is an attempt to create a Pan-American network of communication among marginalized communities that have no access to technological means of representation in order to overcome cultural dependence and isolation. Regarding the practical functioning of the project, Downey says:

cultural information (art, architecture, cooking, dance, landscape, language, etc.) will be mainly exchanged by means of video-tape shot along the way and played back in the different villages, for the people to see others and themselves. The role of the artist is conceived here as a cultural communicator, as an activating aesthetic anthropologist with visual means of expression: video-tape. (“Video Trans-Americas” 6)

These two quotes demonstrate relevant aspects of the project: the issue of cultural dependence and the postcolonial question as something to overcome through the creation of a participatory and emancipatory art; and the role of the intellectual/artist as cultural mediator that facilitates the communicative process. The means to achieve these objectives were to incorporate broad audiences and to work with the communities through the formation of alternative channels, a decolonized space of diffusion and consumption of art. The videos had two circuits: the conventional space of the art gallery, and the alternative space of the communities where the videos were recorded and then shown.

Downey conceived both the intellectual subject and technology as cultural catalysts that would allow the conditions for the formation of social and cultural awareness. Despite the fact that the project aimed to work collaboratively with the communities, intellectuals assumed a central role as the privileged subjects who can give voice or means of representation to the subaltern. Downey's diary of the journeys demonstrate that there were moments of crisis and misunderstanding between him and people of the communities, who distrusted the intentions of the artist. For example, in Mexico Downey writes: "octogenarian Indian ladies yelled at me angrily to leave[;] 'you want to ridicule us!'. . . A boy said 'You take those movies back to the USA; you paint our faces, add horns, and make fun of us.' It is a popular conviction that *gringos* take pictures of Mexican to laugh at!" ("V.T.A. First Journeys 1973-1976," 330). The resistance of the people to being recorded necessarily modifies the original plan, and also reshapes the way the artist conceives himself with regards to the social reality that he is dealing with: "Like a chemical catalyst I expected to remain identical after my video exchange has enlightened many American peoples by the cross-references of their cultures. I proved to be no real catalyst, for I was devoured by the effervescence of myths, nature and language structures. Pretentious asshole levelled off! Only then did I grow creative and in manifold directions" (333). As we read in the quote, Downey could not make the plan of acting as an agent of social change, but got transformed himself. From this moment on, *VTA* becomes more subjective and the political aspects of the project are more diffuse. This failure in the original plan coincides with the moment when Downey heard about the military Coup in Chile, on September 11, 1973; in the entry of the diary that day, Downey writes "I shall never, never, never forgive!" (331). Chile's catastrophic destiny affected Downey deeply, as we can read in his diary, generating a deep disappointment with politics that echoes in his artistic trajectory. The political crisis reshapes the aesthetic project, and *The Laughing Alligator* does not respond to the moment of Downey's political engagement, but to a moment of experimental introspection. Of course, there is political content in this introspection, but the original agenda of identity searching and continental decolonization changed. The original function of the intellectual as an agent of political change is under scrutiny, and the mediations are being problematized by different means in the video.

One of the main subversions that critics—González, Taussig, Schneider, among others—have recognized in *The Laughing Alligator* is the way in which the video dismantles the veracity and cultural authority of ethnography. The video is an explicitly subjective and partial approach to the culturally unknown. In doing so, the video is

resisting the Eurocentric authority of the subject who controls the narration. Catherine Russell argues that every ethnographic documentary rests on a “regime of veracity.” As a critical response to this convention, “experimental film can be seen as a kind of laboratory in which the politics of representation and the conventions of observational cinema are brought under scrutiny” (*Experimental Ethnography*, xii). The case of Downey’s video art responds to this political attempt to dismantle the realist aesthetics that characterizes ethnographic documentary to reveal the ideological tensions that the discipline and the filmic practice have. Instead of constructing an objective and neutral depiction of the cultural and daily practices of the Yanomani, Downey creates a complex and symbolic narration in which different narrative layers and voices overlap. Thus, the centrality of an objective gaze is challenged by permanently calling into question the truthfulness of each of these voices.

As we saw in the scene of the shotgun, *The Laughing Alligator* depicts the camera as a cultural artifact, rather than an invisible channel to capture reality. The medium is loaded with ideological connotations and the film that the video captures is itself the result of a process of cultural negotiation. Russell argues: “As a scientific instrument of representation, ethnographic film assumes that the camera records a truthful reality, ‘out there’—a reality distinct from that of the viewer and filmmaker... Documentary filmmaking has become increasingly ‘subjective,’ and the great divide between subject and object, mind and matter, is potentially breaking down” (12). *The Laughing Alligator* is not the product of a rational and controlled approach to studying cultural otherness, but rather the result of a series of cultural tensions between the subjectivity of the author, the media of reproduction, and the cultural referent.

Now, it is important to discuss certain visual mechanisms by which the centered subject is threatened in *The Laughing Alligator*. As mentioned earlier, the relation between Downey and the subjects he wanted to incorporate in his project had tensions. In a similar way, in *The Laughing Alligator* the ethnographic control of the narration is deconstructed by the incorporation of elements that break down the narrative coherence of the video. The first moments of the video respond to the conventions of the ethnographic documentary: a descriptive narration, slow and controlled movements of the camera, and unproblematic uses of the means of representation. Nevertheless, these conventions are challenged by the appearance of unexpected elements, such as images of New York or music bands, or the explicitly subjective voice of the artist explaining the reasons he made the trip to the Amazonas. The presence of the author’s subjectivity distorts and modifies the reality he is capturing, and there are moments in

which, instead of a recognizable object of reality, we see the projection of subjective questions. The paradox is that, by the explicit presence of the subjective gaze, the authority of the artist/ethnographer gets threatened because the record of this experimental and subjective exploration cannot constitute scientific knowledge. Nothing that the subject captures is shown as natural, and the camera is not a neutral device that records reality, but rather a subjective mechanism that distorts what is being seen.

Anthropologist Michael Taussig describes *The Laughing Alligator* as a “self-reflexive, self-mocking, us-mocking, and endearing video” (42). The serious tone of ethnographic documentary gets subverted at different moments, and there is a parody of the Western subject and Western knowledge. For instance, after narrating the myth of creation of the Yanomami, there is a juxtaposition that deconstructs the serious tone of the narration and the figure of the ethnographer. The last sentence of the narration says: “and this is how the Yanomami multiplied” (*The Laughing Alligator*). The next image is a ridiculous representation of Downey with his face painted like the Yanomami with a calculator multiplying. The parody uses elements of the documentary genre, but also plays with the topics of crossed identities and performatic transcultural subjectivities. In several moments, the camera records painted faces, both in ritual and ludic contexts. In these images, for instance, a child of the community has painted glasses on his face, imitating Downey’s glasses. In the following scene, we see Downey painted like the Indians talking to the camera. This image can be racially problematic—the resemblance to racist practices such as American blackface is evident—, but it is an example of the means by which Downey dismantles the commonplaces of the cultural encounter and the reciprocal influence. It also raises the question of the gaze: Who is looking at whom? Who is mimicking whom? The answers to these questions become uncertain and the encounter affects both sides.

A constant topic when talking about the Amazonian indigenous cultures is the consumption of drugs for ritual purposes. Many of the ethnographic documentaries about the Yanomami, like the series that the anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon directed, describe this cultural practice. Downey uses quite different mechanisms in order to represent the relevance of hallucinogens and the sensorial experience that the consumption of drugs represents. By experimentally altering the colors of the film, the video attempts to represent the distortion in the perception of reality that the consumers would feel. The ethnographic conventions cannot represent the experience, so experimentation is the means that opens up new possibilities of representation. In



those sequences, whose subjectivity is being depicted? By assuming the point of view of the drug consumer, the camera blurs the boundary of the observer and the observed. Symbolically, the control of the camera is taken by the Yanomami.

Far from being a catalyzer of social change, like Downey originally planned, the representation of the artist is much more complex; there is a weakening of the political centrality of the Western subject, which instead of transforming its social context is being transformed by his experience. Downey consciously critiques the arrogance of the original plan by making explicit the problematic relation between the Western subject and the otherness that is depicting. Through subjective experimentation, *The Laughing Alligator* dismantles both the regime of veracity of ethnography and the image of the intellectual as a messianic subject who emancipates the oppressed.

Downey's original project was to allow the Indians to use technology as a mechanism of emancipatory self-representation. The main question would be if these practices are subverting the centrality of the intellectual subject (writer, artist, anthropologist), or if they are cases of cooptation and reification of subaltern identities by the hegemonic subject. Regarding indigenous media, Freya Schiwy says that there are "two apparently incongruous time-spaces: the time of indigenous peoples inhabiting what the West has come to think of as the premodern, a timeless realm beyond history, and the time of digital technology, proper to the speed and time-space compression of postmodernity" (1-2). Clearly, technology has been a means of cultural dominance and control in postcolonial societies: "Film and video have reproduced the gaze of Empire, reinforcing ideas about indigenous peoples as inhabiting primitive, pre-technological world first offered with the narratives of conquest...indigenous media challenge this view on screen" (Schiwy 13). In the case of Downey's video, there is a possible contradiction: are the uses of technology by the Yanomami an emancipatory practice or just a more sophisticated version of cooptation? In order to contextualize this possible contradiction, specific and common to the Latin American *intelligentsia*, it is necessary to determine how *The Laughing Alligator* is echoing the debates of the specificity of the Latin American cultures in relation to their cultural heterogeneity.

#### *Transculturation, Contact Zone, Cultural Antropofagia*

How does a work like *The Laughing Alligator* respond to the debates on the Latin American cultural specificity? Concepts such as *Transculturation*, *Contact Zone*, and *Cultural Antropofagia* are ideological models of cultural interpretation and political

intervention in specific contingencies throughout the twentieth century, with which Downey is dialoguing throughout his project, *Video Trans America*. The specific case of *The Laughing Alligator* allows us to envision the limits and the possible contradictions of each theoretical concept.

As is well known, the term *transculturation* was firstly coined by the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in his book *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940) as an attempt to describe the dynamics of cultural interaction in colonial and postcolonial societies. Ortiz specifically studies the formation of the Cuban national imaginary. Rather than passive receivers of the metropolitan models, Ortiz argues that Latin American cultures are the result of a dynamic process of appropriation, in which the foreign influence does not displace the local. This model also understands that the cultural influence is always a bidirectional process, where both the colonized and the colonizer are transformed by the encounter with their respective counterpart. In the eighties, the Uruguayan cultural critic Ángel Rama rearticulates the term in his book *Transculturación Narrativa en América Latina*. Rama analyzes specific cases of Latin American narrators—Juan Rulfo, Gabriel García Márquez, José María Arguedas, among others—whose works exemplify the tense coexistence of different cultural systems, showing the particularity of Latin American processes of formation of autonomous regional cultures. Rama underlines the fact that the relation between metropolitan models and peripheral cultures is not just bidirectional, but also creative and productive. The result of these encounters, then, is a unique cultural expression that does not respond to the previous models.

Despite the fact that the term empowers the colonized subject within the dynamics of cultural encounter, there have been critiques of transculturation—especially Rama's version—, noting that it tries to reconcile in a relatively harmonic manner the violent encounter of the colonial past, or that it gives an excessive centrality to the lettered subjects—what Rama calls *los transculturadores*—in the continental cultural processes. Mabel Moraña argues that the concept of *transculturadores* relies on

la funcionalidad del productor cultural, su 'agencia' mediadora y sintetizadora que organiza y racionaliza las fuerzas en conflicto mediante fórmulas de hibridación que absorben el cambio social y lo procesan a través de la formalización de un nuevo orden simbólico...los transculturadores lograrían promover, en la visión de Rama, una conciliación que respeta la autenticidad vernacular y los contenidos propiamente populares que integran la nación neutralizando los efectos de una modernidad a la vez niveladora y desigual (163).

*The Laughing Alligator* echoes these critiques, in the sense that it is constantly underlining the tensions or misunderstandings between the artist and the indigenous community, thus the artist loses the cultural authority of the *transculturadores*. Julieta González argues that Downey “se alinea con el pensamiento de escritores y antropólogos de América Latina, como Fernando Ortiz, José María Arguedas y Ángel Rama, entre otros, quienes promovieron la noción de transculturización como una manera de renegociar las posiciones del sujeto y la relación colonizador/colonizado, dando paso a formas híbridas” (76). It is true that we can locate Downey in this tradition, but it is also correct to say that he inscribes himself critically in this model of cultural coexistence because his work is problematizing the possibilities of mutual understanding within the heterogeneity in Latin America.

Another concept that has been used in order to define the Latin American particularity, and that is relevant to understand Downey’s Latin Americanism, is the *Contact Zone*, defined by Mary Louise Pratt as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (“Art in the Contact Zone,” 34). Rather than a cultural process, the term refers to a particular space where different cultures gather and interact. In another moment, Pratt defines the term as “an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term ‘contact,’ I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination” (*Imperial Eyes*, 7). Pratt develops her theory of the contact zones in *Imperial Eyes*. In *Travel Writing and Transculturation*, she analyzes diaries and different travel genres that give accounts of the diverse cultural dynamics of symbolic domination, resistance and negotiations, encounters understood as productive moments of ideological and cultural redefinitions.

In the former book, Pratt defines discursive strategies by which these parts negotiate their cultural position: the *autoethnographic text* and the *anti-conquest*. By autoethnographic texts, she understands

instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations. (*Imperial Eyes* 7)

These are not pure forms of self-representation, but rather the result of the encounter with the Metropolitan ethnographic discourses and rhetoric. On the one hand, the uses of certain elements of the Eurocentric vision can be a tactical vehicle for negotiating and subverting. On the other hand, anti-conquest represents the “strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony” (*Imperial Eyes*, 7). By understanding the space of cultural encounters as a discursive and rhetoric struggle of self-representation and representation of the other, the contact zone challenges monolithic notions of identity as a fixed, unchanging entity. As I described above, *The Laughing Alligator* is making explicit the performativity and mutability of identities, which are conceived as the result of a specular and multidirectional mimicry. Reading *The Laughing Alligator* through the lens of the contact zone not only allows us to see the discursive dynamics of identity formation, but also to recognize the shifts that the original plan experimented. Pratt understands the cultural encounter as an improvisational process, in which the imperial project undergoes a drastic modification, as we saw in the case of *Video Trans Americas*.

If the contact zone is the scenario of identity struggles, it is also the place in which cultural anxieties come up, in the sense that certainties and boundaries tend to vanish away, giving place to indetermination. Among the traditional fears of imperial subjectivities, cannibalism occupies a dominant presence. Cannibalism has been, since the first document produced by the European consciousness about America (the *Diaries* of Christopher Columbus), a recurrent trope for describing the New World. As Carlos Jáuregui argues, “El caníbal es—podría decirse—un signo o cifra de la anomalía y alteridad de América al mismo tiempo que de su adscripción periférica a Occidente” (15). Cannibalism has a complex genealogy of symbolic reinterpretations throughout the history of the American continent since the first encounters, when the fear of facing a radical otherness moved the Europeans to represent the natives as human flesh eaters. Despite the presence or lack of evidence, this imagined symbol created a space for the derogatory representation of the unknown in the European worldview.

During the twentieth century, though, Latin American intellectuals and artists use the concept as “un tropo cultural de reconocimiento e identidad” (Jáuregui 15). Particularly, the Brazilian movement *Antropofagia* recognizes in cannibalism a metaphor for the peripheral cultural condition of the continent. Within the project of cultural autonomy of *Antropofagia*, the act of eating the other symbolizes the act of consuming the foreign cultural influence in order to create a new and decolonialized national

culture. Mario de Andrade, the main promoter of the *movimento antropófago*, lay claim to a radical and provocative subversion of the colonial trope of America as a land of cannibalism: “en lugar de rechazar la cultura y las tendencias artísticas europeas por extrañas, Andrade proponía devorarlas, aventurando una exitosa correspondencia analógica entre el rito caníbal y los diversos procesos de producción circulación y apropiación cultural” (Jauregui 39). He argued for a reinterpretation of the term and its cultural effects: from a Eurocentric stereotype to an emancipatory commitment with local culture.

The cannibalism trope is present throughout *The Laughing Alligator*, and I argue that Downey is engaged in a creative dialogue with the different ideologies that have incorporated the cannibal figure into their repertoire of symbols. To eat (to consume, to incorporate) and to be eaten (to be consumed, to be incorporated) are two possible consequences of the act of facing a radical other, and in the video we see this risk from the beginning. In one of the first scenes, the narrator describes the reasons why he wants to encounter the Yanomami tribe in the following terms:

in New York, 1975, I got bored of shooting any more video tapes of America because I decided that I would like to be eaten up by some Indians of the Amazon Rain Forest. Not as a self-sacrifice, consciously at least, but as a demonstration of the ultimate architecture: to inhabit, to dwell physically as well as psychically inside the human beings who would eventually eat me. I desired so orderly to be eaten up that long before in New York I ritualized my encounter with the cannibals. (*The Laughing Alligator*)

The scene raises several questions: What are the cultural and symbolic consequences of this desire to be *eaten* by cannibals? How do we read cannibalism? Is this a parody of neocolonial, introspective journeys? When the artist arrived at the community, he realizes that they were not cannibals as he thought they would be. They ate the ashes of their beloved ones after they passed away in a ritual context. The image that the artist has of the cannibalism does not fit reality, and the artist explicitly shows that his preconceptions were wrong. But the connotations of cannibalism are not limited just to the act of eating the other, but also to the multiple symbolic meanings that crisscross the video: different acts of consumption, the parodic imitation of the other, and the act of recording. Every act of representation in the contact zone is a violent (but productive) act of swallowing cultural otherness, and as in the colonial past, these representations are ideologically loaded.

*Conclusions*

*VTA* is not a steady and immutable project, but an ongoing process of cultural and political redefinition. What determines the changes in the agenda is the function that Downey attributes to himself in relation to the broader phenomena that are happening in the Latin American context. Juan Downey places his work in a conflictive and complex location, in terms of how it is addressing topics of cultural heterogeneity. Also, his position allows for thinking critically about how cultural interactions have been theorized in Latin America, and the selective form in which he incorporates certain concepts in his work facilitates a critical approach to his own intellectual agenda and to the concepts themselves and their specific cultural scopes.

Technology, starting from the utopian cybernetic project of the sixties, is conceived mostly as an ideological medium that, rather than capturing reality in a neutral and static fashion, is struggling in a tension between different forces. By bringing to the fore the ideologies of technology—either as a mechanism of domination or emancipation—Downey also is problematizing the figure of the intellectual (artist, ethnographer, scientist, etc.) who is observing cultural differences. Just like the camera, the ideological device of the gaze distorts reality and makes it fit within the framework of the culturally known, and that distortion characterizes imperialist and colonial projects. Thus, by dismantling and problematizing the veracity of the act of seeing, Juan Downey's art becomes an form of cultural resistance. The work of Juan Downey is not exempt of inner contradictions, but it is aware of them. Latin American intellectuals inhabit this contradictory space, in which cultural differences do not cohabit in harmony, but rather in a dynamic and productive tension. The engagement of Juan Downey with the continent addresses a broader phenomenon—the sixties and seventies are years of intense debates on issues of cultural emancipation throughout Latin America—, but his Latin Americanism also has particularities that make his case unique, especially regarding the lucid comment he makes about the medium with which he is working. In that sense, it is relevant to underline Downey's Latin American background, not just as an act of cultural regionalism, but also as a resistance to the oversimplified homogenization, and assuming that his case can be read in contrast to other Latin American cultural figures.

The location that the artist assumes in relation to the cultural complexity that he faces is decentered and marked due to a lack of understanding. Rather than a catalyzer of social change, the artist becomes a conflicted and precarious subject. In the following quote of *The Laughing Alligator*, Downey comments on his precarious

condition with regards to the experience that he tries to capture: “either I am a traveler in ancient times faced with the prodigious spectacle which would be almost entirely unintelligible to me... Or, I am a traveler of my own day hastening in search of a vanish reality. In either case I am the loser. For today, as I go growing among the shadows inevitably I miss the spectacle that is now taking place” (*The Laughing Alligator*). Rather than a messianic figure of social change, Downey portrays himself as hesitant and precarious, in a liminal space between different temporalities, where the experience exceeds any previous expectation, and from which all cultural certainties vanish away.

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