

Diego Ramirez's Postcard eXotica traces a Western historical precedent that attempted to create domination through mainstream cinema. In this video work, this model of visual pleasure is approached as an exercise in difference. Rooted within a postmodern aesthetic of pastiche and, in particular, vernacular reading practices, Ramirez has chosen a number of cliché images used by North American people to assert and maintain a form of cultural and ideological dominance that has lasted centuries. Using the model of American narrative cinema, Ramirez traces a stagnant chronology of dominance, cliché and neo-liberalism that is part of wider global power structures.

More specifically, Ramirez achieves this by re-enacting a series of American vintage postcards depicting Mexican stereotypes in a long durational video. These postcards are loaded with significance due to the fact that they were produced during the Mexican Revolution and were influential to the history of cinema. Indeed, when the Mexican Revolution began in 1910, streams of Americans simultaneously flocked there, taking photographs of local people which they subsequently printed onto postcards and sold back in the USA. Despite their lack of ethnographic or photographic professionalism, these individuals heavily influenced the topography of Mexican identity as seen from western imperial centres: In just a couple of decades (the height of this practice spanned approximately between 1910 and 1930), the production of these postcards solidified a number of Mexican stereotypes which, to this day, have continued to prevail. Postcard eXotica thinks through some of these forms of representation and the multiple ways in which ethnic bodies were staged for the lens.

Its opening scene, in fact, sets the tone for the overt staging of the entire work. The light is warm and diffused, and a close-up of a man's pubic region is shown. He pulls up his jeans in what is reminiscent of a 90's Calvin Klein commercial, while the proceeding shot shows him throwing a leather jacket over his nude torso. His face is finally revealed and we are presented with a young and handsome man of seemingly Latin American descent (even though, as Ramirez emphasizes, none of the actors were Mexican). Our protagonist proceeds to smoke suggestively from an e-cigarette – yet another device used by Ramirez to overtly represent the construction and the fakery that is integral to the reading of Postcard eXotica – while maintaining a sense of mystery.

It is no mistake that an air of overt sexuality is exuded in this opening scene: half way through the film we see the postcard from which the character has been lifted which, in turn, realigns the viewer's consciousness. This 'Latino lover' is based upon an actual 'documentary' image, a historical precedent of the current ongoing cliché of the sexual appetite of Latin American men. Indeed, the audience is presented with a stream of such reference characters throughout the film, such as the fighter - the sombreroed guitarist, the two men embroiled in a Mexican stand off, the Mexican Indian princess - all of which have been lifted from similar historical, ethnographic stereotypes.

If we are thinking about cliché, then the cinematic techniques chosen by Ramirez also merit discussion, for they are intermittently perfect and bordering on over the top postmodern Hollywood methods: in certain scenes, the camera blurs into a Cronenberg-esque dissolution of focus which unmistakably drives home the fabricated historical references Ramirez draws upon. It is not without careful consideration that Ramirez has repeated these visual tropes of postmodern cinema.

Equally as important is the exposure of the set to the audience or, to be more accurate, the exposure of a delineated set within the set: the characters of Postcard eXotica step in and out of a cyclorama stage regularly throughout the film. It also becomes apparent that when they inhabit the delineated white backdrop of the set, these characters act out their parts in accordance with the historical stereotypes that they reference. However, outside of the set, the character bleeds into a more realist depiction of human behaviour even though a "character" is still clearly being enacted. When, for instance, a suited, smoking man enters the set containing three 'dead' bodies (in reference to a card depicting Mexicans robbed after being shot) he does so with conviction, stepping over the bodies with little care for them. Perhaps he is even the perpetrator. However, outside of this demarcated area, the same character looks sombrely back upon the bodies, as though absorbing the scene from an outsider's perspective.

An intentional lack of traditional narrative in Postcard eXotica gives way to pastiche made up of random semiotic cues. A bizarre mash up of Mexican stand-offs, fight scenes and a masked, sombrero-wearing electric guitarist are as jarring and weird as they are befitting of the collapses Ramirez seeks to create: history and contemporaneity break from traditional linear narratives to form a cyclical timeline, while fact and fiction intermingle. Indeed, these people photographed for the purpose of circulating postcards did exist, but their stories have been largely fabricated to support and maintain a western ideal of submissive cultures.

Nowhere is this implementation of pastiche more apparent than in the representation of Donald Trump as a masked, emotionless figure. The Trump character is the alliteration of Frederic Jameson's description of pastiche as a sampling of various linguistic devices which amount to a lifeless form of parody that is at once humourless as it is sombre. Most importantly, pastiche is, in the words of Jameson, "devoid of [...] any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists"¹. The Trump character, identified by a literal mask, is certainly devoid of human qualities despite exhibiting all usual human identifiers. He is also exaggeratedly grotesque in his pouring of red wine down his front for lack of a functioning mouth, and his subsequent fucking of the wine bottle. The same can be said of his characters who are exaggerated versions of their postcard selves: they are also simulacra in the sense that they are copies of individuals who never truly existed in the state that they were sold to American consumers.

Furthermore, in relying upon pre-existing linguistic markers to evoke Trump, Ramirez repeats common visual tropes to communicate the repetition of history. As Ramirez pointed out, Trump's campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," refers to a romanticised period before WWII in the USA which coincides with the Mexican Revolution and the moment of our postcards. Indeed, the only horizontal continuity – in the sense of A to B in a singular direction- is offered by the soundtrack which nonetheless goes through many arcs and tangents throughout the film. Otherwise, a cycle of back and forth prevails in a fashion which undermines dominant history narratives.

Time slippage is also driven home through the fluid combination of new footage with scenes from the classic early horror films, *Nosferatu* and *Häxan* (both 1922). The insertion of this footage, which the protagonists watch on their digital devices, suggests gothic and zombie themes, which, in recent years, have been used to theorise the living dead or, in academic terms, the resurgence of 'neo' themes (neo-colonialism/neo-liberalism/etc). We can connect these films with the concepts at play in Postcard eXotica: the notion of home as a place of fear and uncertainty, as well as the concept of supposedly dead political topics - in particular colonisation - resurfacing as new versions of their original selves.

To define the contemporary condition is to say that it is a moment of standing still. It is a moment of postmodern anguish that continues to be hung up on the unfinished modernist project of cultural domination and stereotyping for Western gain. The 'Mexican-ness' or historical accuracy of the video which Ramirez has constructed in response to these postcards is not as important as the suffocating, ongoing legacy of Western imperialism and the dominant narrative of singular histories. In Postcard eXotica, Ramirez communicates the stagnant nature of particular strands of history while also strategically reminding his viewers that subscribing to this single version of past 'events' is a redundant activity.

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¹Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, pp. 16