



GILDA as an Industrial Object - Recuperating Textual Analysis Through Political Economy

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Gilda tries to get her dignity back through sex, Johnny through power—the same trophies many of us seek at Yale, the former on couches and the latter in classrooms—Eve Tushnet, Editor-in-Chief *The Yale Free Press* (1999)

Unlike economic neoconservatives, I do not assume the primacy of markets in allocating preferences. Unlike market researchers, I do not accept popular film's version of itself as a narrator of universal stories. Unlike textual analysts, I do not assume that it is adequate to interpret a film's formal qualities. And unlike the psy-complexes (psychology, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and psychiatry), I do not seek to divine what is going on inside audiences' heads. Instead, I address film both theoretically and empirically, deploying methods from the left-liberal humanities and the radical end to social-science approaches to film, cinema, and media studies, via an admixture of critical political economy and cultural studies.

Socioeconomic analysis should be a natural ally of representational analysis in seeking to explain film. But a certain tendency on both sides has maintained that they are mutually exclusive, on the grounds that one approach is concerned with structures of the economy, and the other with structures of meaning. This need not be the case. Historically, the best critical political economy and the best cultural studies have worked through the imbrication of power and signification at all points on the cultural continuum. Graham Murdock puts the task well:

Critical political economy is at its strongest in explaining who gets to speak to whom and what forms these symbolic encounters take in the major spaces of public culture. But cultural studies, at its best, has much of value to say about ... how discourse and imagery are organised in complex and shifting patterns of meaning and how these meanings are reproduced, negotiated, and struggled over in the flow and flux of everyday life¹

Ideally, blending the two approaches would heal the 'sterile fissure'² between fact and interpretation and between the social sciences and the humanities, under the sign of a principled approach to cultural democracy. To that end, Lawrence Grossberg recommends 'politicizing theory and theorizing politics,' focusing on the contradictions of organizational structures, their articulations with everyday living and textuality, and their intrication with the

¹ 1995: 94.

² Wayne 2003: 84.

polity and economy, refusing any bifurcation that opposes the study of production and consumption, or fails to address axes of social stratification.³

Many of us who are committed to political-economic, industrially oriented approaches to the media feel very critical of textual analysis. It seems impressionistic, diletantish, *belle-lettristic*. But does this have to be the case? Must there be such a separation between political economy and textual analysis? The life of any popular or praised text is a passage across space and time. That life is remade again and again by institutions, discourses, and practices of distribution and reception, from merchandising to reviews. The way a film is made is industrial, and so is its after-life. Both require analysis of the material conditions of existence: one of production, the other of circulation. Cultural historian Roger Chartier proposes a tripartite approach to textual analysis, *viz.* reconstruction of ‘the diversity of older readings from their sparse and multiple traces’; a focus on ‘the text itself, the object that conveys it, and the act that grasps it’; and an identification of ‘the strategies by which authors and publishers tried to impose an orthodoxy or a prescribed reading on the text’⁴. He turns away from reflectionism, which argues that a text’s key meaning lies in its overt or covert capacity to capture the *Zeitgeist*, and rejects formalism’s claim that a close reading of sound and image cues can secure a definitive meaning. Because texts accrete and attenuate meanings on their travels, as they rub up against, trope, and are troped by other fictional and social texts, we must consider all the shifts and shocks that characterize their existence as cultural commodities, their ongoing renewal as the temporary “property” of productive workers and publics and the abiding “property” of businesspeople.

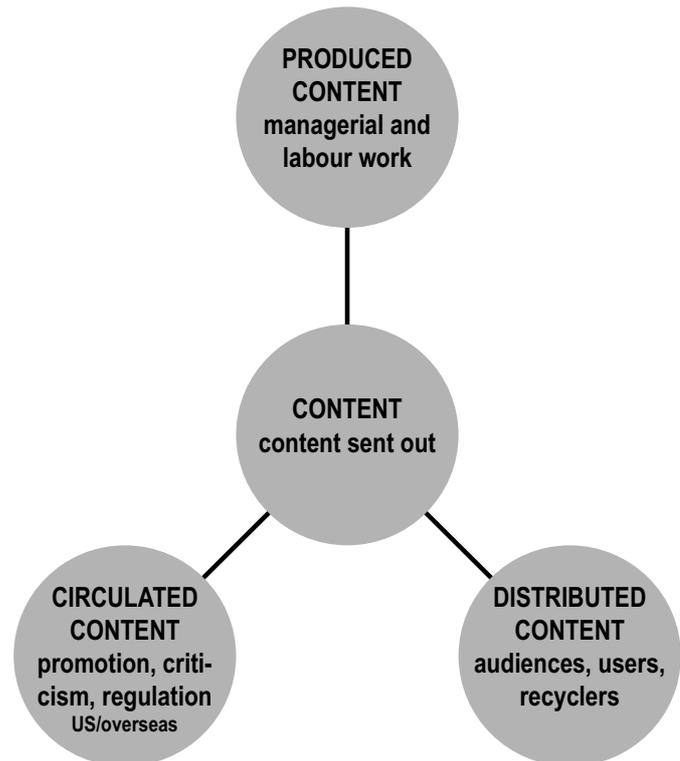
This method makes sense as guidance for tracking the life of the commodity sign. For media content is part of a multi-form network of entertainment, via CD-ROMs, the Web, DVDs, electronic games, TV, cellular phones, TiVo, and multiplexes. The brief moment when cinema, for example, could be viewed as a fairly unitary phenomenon in terms of exhibition (say, 1920 to 1950) set up the *conceptual* prospect of analysing content in academia, something that became *technologically feasible* with video-cassette recorders—just when that technology’s popularity compromised the very discourse of stable aestheticization. Now that viewing environments, audiences, technologies, and genres are so multiple, the movies are restored to a mixed-medium mode. No wonder some argue that ‘a film today is merely a

³ 1997: 4-5, 9-10.

⁴ Chartier 1989: 157, 161-63, 166.

billboard stretched out in time, designed to showcase tomorrow’s classics in the video stores and television reruns’ (Elsaesser 2001: 11)—an aesthetic ‘engine driving ... interlinked global entertainment markets’ (Prince 2000: 141). These entities have their own forms of life and sets of logics, which derive in part from their role in the labor process and signification, *and* as physical sites and mechanical and electronic objects that are located in space and perform certain functions.

I propose pluralizing and complicating content—understanding texts as existing in moments that spin their own tales of travel and uptake, as essentially unstable entities that change their very composition as they move across time and space. When it comes to key questions of meaning—what gets produced and circulated and how it signifies—I turn to a political-economic ethnography/ethnographic political economy to supplement the New International Division of Cultural Labor focus of my earlier work⁵. For a schema, see the figure above.



This paper offers an example of such an approach, applied to the career of the classic *film noir*, *Gilda*⁶. The Yale “correspondent” quoted above illustrates how key screen texts are taken up as guides for living, as when Ivy League scions use *Gilda* to conceptualize their quest for ‘vast sums of money and power’⁷. A canonical film-studies text, *Gilda* has been the subject of much elegant criticism, but criticism that has been rather monistic its preoccupation and focus. My analysis, which incorporates a materialist history of the film’s meaning and life, reveals *Gilda* to be about spaces as much as psyches, something that emerges in its travels and citations as well as its form and style. Bearing in mind the importance of serving

⁵ Miller *et al.* 2005a and b, Miller and Yúdice, 2004.

⁶ Charles Vidor, 1946.

⁷ Tushnet, 1999.

Yale's lusty and acquisitive leaders of the future, I come to renew textual analysis with an industrial focus, not to bury it.

Conventionally understood as a sexual drama, *Gilda* has been analyzed again and again in ways that pay insufficient heed to history and location, so taken are its critics with sex. The narrative backdrop to the film is that Ballin Mundson (George Macready) runs a casino in Buenos Aires. It provides money-laundering services for a global tungsten cartel run by German Nazis. Mundson himself is 'an Hitlerian presence,'⁸ his facial lesion suggesting an aristocratic German past. The casino and the cartel represent a return to international domination, for as he says, 'a man who controls a strategic material can control the world ... of stupid little people.' Mundson repeatedly disappears into 'the interior,' a mysterious site beyond urban norms, and he is reluctant to celebrate the end of the War. Two of his associates are central to the film: a new and much younger wife, the eponymous Gilda (Rita Hayworth), and a new and much younger personal (non-digital) assistant, Johnny Farrell (Glenn Ford).

There are numerous signs that Mundson and Johnny are lovers in off-screen space, such as uncharacteristically lengthy glances between the two men and references to 'gay life.' Ford claimed that he and Macready 'knew we were supposed to be playing homosexuals'⁹ in a world that film-studies scholar Richard Dyer imagines as 'caught between gayness, in no way portrayed positively, and sado-masochism'¹⁰. It also seems probable that Johnny and Gilda *used* to be lovers, as part of the back story. When added to Gilda's repeated efforts to elude the controlling *paternosters* and physical constraints of men, these signs have rightly fascinated feminist and queer critics¹¹. And their investment in psychoanalysis is encouraged and interpellated by the script's zealously obedient Freudianism:¹² Gilda "complains" that 'I can never get a zipper to close. Maybe that stands for something'; she taunts Johnny's closeness to Mundson ('Any psychiatrist would tell your thought-associations are revealing'); Mundson has an ebony walking stick that turns into a blade and is his 'little friend'; he insists to Johnny that 'I must be sure that there is no woman anywhere'; and Johnny tells him 'I was born the night you met me.' For the likes of *noir* historian Frank Krutnik, *Gilda* is 'perhaps the high-watermark of 1940s erotic displacement'¹³.

⁸ Higham and Greenberg 1968: 46.

⁹ quoted in Russo 1987: 78.

¹⁰ 1993: 71.

¹¹ Doane 1991: 99-118; Dyer 1993: 70-71.

¹² Christopher 1997: 141.

¹³ 1991: 51.

And “perhaps” it is. But that much-studied eroticism—or its watermark—have a geohistorical lineage beyond World War II and male-female-male triangulation, a history and a future beyond the boundaries of the film and its Freudianism that could undoubtedly enrich our understanding. For example, Hayworth embodied a new Hollywood aesthetic of difference—won at a price. Her “real” name was Margarita Carmen Delores Cansino, and her parents were New York dancers, her father a Spanish *Sephardim*. After the family moved West, Margarita was dancing at fifteen at the Agua Caliente Jockey Club just north of the US-Mexican border, a favored locale for gangsters and film producers, where she was transmogrified by a Hollywood mogul into Rita, and placed in several pictures as ‘the Dancing Latin.’ Her dark hair was dyed auburn, and she underwent two years of electrolysis to raise her hairline from a supposedly Latina look to what were deemed Anglo norms. Columbia Pictures executive Harry Cohn adopted her as his *protégée*, and instructed producer Virginia Van Upp to manufacture a starring vehicle for her. Thus *Gilda*¹⁴. Hayworth’s sultry torch-singer activities and exotic dancing in the film made her famous. A study of working-class women viewers in Chicago in the mid-1950s found that she represented ‘luxury and glamour ... a dashing hero ... more concerned with the now than with the future,’ and sexually available: ‘She’d like a man that could give her anything she wants. ... She just wants to show off Rita Hayworth’¹⁵. No wonder that when an atomic bomb was tested in the Bikini atoll, it was named Gilda and carried images of Hayworth¹⁶. French T-shirts depicted her as ‘La vedette atomique’ (the atomic scout)—a sign of the volcanic power associated with her semiosis in the film.

While textual analysis tends to overlook *Gilda*’s connections to the economic and the geopolitical, references to such issues abound in the film, aptly understood by the *Village Voice* as ‘the most prominent big-business-as-underworld noir.’¹⁷ Place is very consequential. As readers of *Eptic* will be aware, Argentina is the most European of all non-European nations, because of its population growth from 1880 to 1920, which drew principally on migration from Spain, Italy, Russia, and Central Europe. When added to immigrants from nearby Latin American countries, it also became the most urban country in the hemisphere, as rapid economic expansion between 1870 and 1930 ushered in a significant middle class and infrastructural development. But the Depression eroded the country’s export markets in wool, grain, and beef, and fractured society. This led to fifty years of populist/authoritarian regimes

¹⁴ Muller 1998: 96-97.

¹⁵ Elkin 1955: 99, 103-04, 106.

¹⁶ Muller 1998: 98; Inclan, 2005.

¹⁷ “Red Harvest,” 2002.

and dictatorships, and a concentration of wealth in elites. A *coup* in 1930 put the middle class, the military, and the traditional oligarchy in power. Argentina became the centerpiece of Nazi espionage in Latin America, with a spy ring established there in 1937 that also embarked on propaganda, assessing US cultural exports and recruiting fellow-travelers. Successive unstable regimes followed until a further *coup* in 1943 led by Fascist sympathizers, notably Juan Perón and his wife, Eva—she of *Evita*¹⁸, in which Madonna strips with her gloves as per Hayworth in *Gilda*¹⁹. In 1944, Argentina finally ended diplomatic relations with Germany, and arrested some of its spies²⁰.

The Peróns dominated the political stage by the end of World War II. In 1946, he became President, leading a bulky, awkward coalition of right and left-wing workerist populism cobbled together from the urban proletariat, the lower-middle class, and rural workers²¹. Perón's decade in power saw the nation become a 'preferred haven for tens of thousands of Nazi war criminals and fellow travelers.' Many departed Nazis went on to fruitful careers as advisors to right-wing dictatorships across Latin America. They brought with them large sums of money, much of which was deposited in accounts under Eva Perón's control, and there were crucial links to Siemens, the German electronics multinational. Meanwhile, Argentina's application to join the UN, resisted by the Soviet Union because of the nation's late decision to turn against Fascism, was railroaded through by the US, anxious to add to the list of client states that would give it a majority in the new body²². As part of the Cold War, the US Government blended a few anti-Fascist criticisms of Perón (a consequence of his anti-*Gringolandia* rhetoric) with a program of aid to some ex-Nazis²³.

Johnny's first line of dialogue in the film, as the camera tilts slowly upwards to show the *gringo* street gambler's thrown dice, is extra-diegetic narration, and it speaks to the attitude of the US towards Latin America from both ruling class and *petit-bourgeois* levels: 'To me a dollar was a dollar in any language. ... I didn't know much about the local citizens.' When two Nazis later dismiss him as an 'American Indian,' meddling where he is not welcome, Johnny proudly avows that this is his fate—manifest destiny goes global. Johnny's makeover from surly swindler to glamorous gambler is achieved blithely: 'By the way, about that time

¹⁸ Alan Parker, 1996.

¹⁹ Savagliano 1997: 163.

²⁰ Polmar and Allen 1989: 54.

²¹ Vacs 2002: 400, 402-05.

²² Paterson 1992: 35.

²³ Lee 2000: 109-13.

the War ended,' he offers in voice-over as a contextual counterpoint to the promise of transcendence implied in his oath to Mundson that 'I was born last night.' His character is as distant from time and space as his textual analysts.

Mundson's casino, where he goes to work, is a 'massive South American house of sin'²⁴. A sign of fabulous, corrupt modernity, the casino is for all the world an engine-room of pleasure and deceit, its huge rooms whirring with the sound and vision of spinning wheels, milling crowds, shimmering gowns, and dazzling lights. It represents the uneven modernity of Latin America, as tradition and development overlap in both contradictory and compatible ways. Buenos Aires comes alive in *Gilda* as a bizarre amalgam of sordid street life, glittering wealth, and winding, perennially dark, streets. Mundson is like a James-Bond villain in his perverse gaze on revelers from a concealed eyrie, his manipulation of other conspirators, and his determination to achieve international and interpersonal conquest. Indeed the setting calls up sequences of excess from a Bond film for the latter-day viewer.

'You can't talk to men down here the way you would at home. They think you mean it,' says Johnny to Gilda. When a gigolo dances with Gilda, and asks where she learnt to dance, her reply—'America'—draws puzzlement: 'This is not America?' The retort is perfect—her casual arrogance in appropriating the word "America" to stand for the US is problematised. Gilda goes on to use racial difference to inscribe sexual desire: 'I always say there's something about Latin men. For one thing they can dance. For another thing ...' She gives him her phone number. Johnny, who is excluded from the conversation because he is not *hispano hablante*, demands to know what was said. She deceives him, saying that she'd instructed the boy to 'hang up if a man answers.' There is no translation for the audience, so most US viewers are placed in the same position as Johnny. They must rely on the account given by a woman who is being set up as simultaneously unreliable and desirable, at least by his lights. Yet her name signifies as *palabra de honor* in Spain²⁵.

This high-tensile mix of eroticism references hot Latinism mediated through the painfully and painstakingly de-Latinized Hayworth, as well as major world events. It has left a deep historical trace. The contemporary leftist Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* included Johnny slapping Gilda as one of its remarkable fiftieth anniversary events²⁶, while Madrid's

²⁴ Higham and Greenberg 1968: 46.

²⁵ "Gilda," 2001.

²⁶ Steinsleger, 1998.

Expansión metaphorized technology stock declines of late 2000 with reference to her²⁷ and *Urban Latino* magazine nominated Hayworth alongside Che Guevara amongst the sixteen sexiest Latin historical figures in 2001, thanks to her part in the film²⁸. When Madonna sang ‘Rita Hayworth gave good face’ in her song “Vogue,” there is little doubt that she was alluding to this most famous of sexualized characters, and Pink Martin’s 2001 album *Sympathique* pays tribute to the role. The popular periodical *Entertainment Weekly* put Gilda at number 21 in its 2002 list of “The 100 Greatest Performances Ignored by Oscar,” and in 2004 the American Film Institute included Hayworth saying ‘If I’d been a ranch, they would have named me the Bar Nothing’ amongst the 400 most memorable lines of cinema²⁹.

The film’s cultural intertextuality is crucial to any evaluation of its “meaning.” Consider later film and television references: *Down to Earth*³⁰ brings back Macready’s cane and Hayworth’s dance, and *Gilda* is also a promotional intertext to Orson Welles’ *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), from the use of male voice-over and triangulation of desire through to setting and music³¹. *The Bicycle Thief*³² sees the protagonist making his way around town putting up sections of the *Gilda* poster, affirming his nation’s poverty and indexing its obligation to accept Yanqui culture as part of the Marshall Plan³³. Macready reprises his part in a 1966 episode of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, “The Gurnius Affair.” A leftover escapee Nazi living in Central America, his plans for global domination are colored by the intense delight he takes in the sadism of his junior underlings. That classic liberal moment of contemporary Hollywood, *The Shawshank Redemption*³⁴ is based on Stephen King’s short story, “Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption.” Tim Robbins’ tunnel excavation from unjust and brutal imprisonment is secreted behind a classic *Gilda* poster³⁵. Nicole Kidman’s role in *Moulin Rouge!* was a *homage* to Gilda, as were characters from André Engel’s latter-day version of Igor Stravinsky’s *Rake’s Progress* and David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* (2001)³⁶.

²⁷ Caro, 2000.

²⁸ “EEUU-Hispanos,” 2001.

²⁹ Bierly *et al.*, 2002; Spiegelman, 2004.

³⁰ Alexander Hall, 1947.

³¹ McLean 2004: 130, 150.

³² Vittorio De Sica, 1948.

³³ Trumbour, 2002; Pauwels and Loisen, 2003.

³⁴ Frank Darabont, 1994.

³⁵ Vilar, 2002.

³⁶ Frois, 2001; Roux, 2001; Ebert, 2001.

Such intertextuality also lives on in the fashion industry. In 1998, a yellow item worn by Hayworth in the film fetched 20,000 francs at auction.³⁷ Her black satin strapless evening dress became perhaps the most famous of all Hollywood garments, complete with interior harness, *grosgrain* beneath the bust, three stays, and plastic bars softened with a gas flame and placed around the top, thus defying the tendency of such items to fall.³⁸ Saks Fifth Avenue offered a short version of the gown in 2001,³⁹ when the “Gilda look” became *au courant* in London via ‘a heavy, pale pancake foundation applied with a sponge, and lashings of pale powder,’ definition thanks to mascara and eyebrow pencil, blue-red lipstick with a brush, and Vaseline for gloss. The hair relied on Titian reds and golden chestnuts plus medium rollers, topped off with beer or tea to set it.⁴⁰ The Gilda style was *de rigueur* at Naomi Campbell’s St Tropez birthday party during the 2004 Cannes Festival, and Edinburgh’s *Evening News* could imagine nothing better to enliven Hogmanay.⁴¹ Rumors that the proverbial “little black dress” was on the way “out” that year quickly led to rearguard actions, based on the certainty that the Gilda look made ‘[m]en’s jaws drop, from shock and awe,’⁴² while Garnier’s summer 2005 cosmetics line was headed by a British *Big Brother* presenter made up to resemble the role. Watching the film was even recommended to restore the joys of Flamenco-dancing to a shell-shocked US after 11 September 2001. It continued to fascinate the Valencia smart-set, and invigorated costumes for Comédie Française Molière revivals and 2005-06 Parisian *prêt-à-porter*.⁴³

The US Alzheimer’s Foundation sold a Gilda doll in 2000, and held its 2004-05 New Year’s Ball with Gilda look-alikes stalking the room, recalling Hayworth’s finest hour and later illness. No wonder that film director Ridley Scott, looking back forty years to his childhood memories of the movie, said ‘that’s where I fell in love with Rita Hayworth. ... Those were the days when you could sit and watch the film twice, and I refused to leave. It was quite an adult movie.’ As Sharon Stone put it, ‘[s]ometimes I think she got Alzheimer’s because she so desperately wanted to forget being Gilda.’⁴⁴ For Spanish viewers of the 1970s, seeing the semi-striptease performance of “Put the Blame on Mame” was a newish sensation—Franco-

³⁷ Tariant, 2001.

³⁸ Vallance, 1997; Horwell, 1997.

³⁹ “Modern,” 2001.

⁴⁰ Polan, 2001.

⁴¹ Davidson, 2003.

⁴² Woods, 2004.

⁴³ Ayuso, 2003; Torres, 2003; “La chronique,” 2005; Champenois *et al.*, 2005.

⁴⁴ quoted in Tilley, 1998.

era censors had cut the original beyond recognition, and the Roman-Catholic church had picketed what remained.⁴⁵

This life-after-the-text is available to a nimble industrial approach, but seemingly not to the always-already known world of psychoanalysis. Both the geopolitical setting of US foreign and cultural policy, and *Gilda's* latter career, elude standard Anglo-Yanqui criticism. The implication is not to jettison texts, but to pluralize and complicate them as moments that spin their own tales of travel and uptake, essentially unstable entities that change composition while moving across time and space. When it comes to key questions of texts and audiences—what gets produced and circulated and how it is read—we must embark on an analysis of hysteresis that looks for overlapping causes and sites. In search of appropriate models or exemplars, I have turned to a political-economic ethnography/ethnographic political economy. *Gilda* and *Johnny* deserve as much.

⁴⁵ Vilar, 2002; Fortes, 2004; “Red-Hot,” 2005.

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