I. Introduction

This infernal American identity machine thus composes a mosaic of alterities around a mysterious core of hybridity seething with instability, threatening the First World quest for a decent fix of the black man, not to mention even more fabulous creations like the white Indian women of Darién. (Michael Taussig 143)

The development of hybridity as a site of agency and a process, or strategy, of survival and resistance is of particular concern to social theorists in current debates (Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman 6). One of the fundamental tenets of the poststructuralist, postmodernist and postcolonialist projects is the concept of heterogeneity which has replaced the modernist credo of universalism, essentialism, binary opposition and purity. Heterogeneity, itself the object of multiple interpretations, appears in current studies under terms such as polyphony, multiculturalism, difference, to name just three. In the contemporary simultaneity of global culture and economy, border crossing, diaspora, (im)migration and the information technology, people and their cultures—from language and religion to customs and art—inevitably come into contact. The intersection of popular, high, and mass cultures has encouraged the production of an art where various of these aspects are juxtaposed or combined.

To try and explain the forms that some of these cross-cultural processes have taken, words such as syncretism, fusion (assimilation, acculturation), intertextuality, bricolage (montage and collage), mestizaje, creolization, transculturation, anthropophagy and hybridity have been chosen by critics, with similar or sometimes, divergent meanings. Although these phenomena are not new, they seem magnified in our present
condition, and that is why, it has become important for current cultural analysis to explore them. Not surprisingly, the concept of hybridity (hybrid, hybridization, and hybridism) appears to cover a large semantic field within the works of social theory.

The term was borrowed from philology, where hybrids are words formed by the juxtaposition of a prefix or a suffix from one language and the stem of another. But, critics may have also been attracted by the biological definition of hybrid which, as well as meaning “offspring of a mixed union,” adds the dimension of an artificial or forced union, a coercive or violent contact as in the case of colonization and conquest, a connotation which makes it particularly appropriate to the study of postcolonialism, and more specifically, Latin America.¹

This article explores the notion and treatment of hybridity in a few selected works, from Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s analysis of the novel to Néstor García Canclini’s elaboration of an economic model. Because of his present popularity and widespread influence on many recent works, I will first look at Bakhtin’s treatment of hybridity. Then, I will explore its development in different appropriations of the Bakhtinian concept, by some postcolonialists.² I will spend more time on Homi K. Bhabha, the leading exponent of hybridity, because he has become a point of departure and reference in much of the current discussion, including the works presented here. I will end with the handling of hybridity by a more specific group of Latin Americanists, who for particular historical reasons have been especially interested in this concept. These critics, who offer insights from the vantage points of various disciplines, are themselves concerned with and committed to the intertextuality and transdisciplinarity of critical research.

² See Ella Shohat (1992), Anne McClintock (1992) and Arif Dirlik (1994) for their criticism of the term ‘post-colonial’.