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## REVIEW ESSAYS

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### LATIN AMERICAN FILM STUDIES: Some Recent Anthologies

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- (*ALIAS*) *EL REY DEL JOROPO: UN FILM DE CARLOS REBOLLEDO Y THAELMAN URGELLES*. (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Salvador de la Plaza, Colección Cine Rocinante 6, 1978. Pp. 79.)
- CHILE: EL CINE CONTRA EL FASCISMO*. Edited by PATRICIO GUZMÁN and PEDRO SEMPERE. (Valencia: Fernando Torres, 1977. Pp. 254.)
- EL CHACAL DE NAHUELTORO. LA TIERRA PROMETIDA*. By MIGUEL LITIN. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Dirección General de Difusión Cultural, Textos de Cine 5, 1977. Pp. 135.)
- LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA: FILM AND HISTORY*. Edited by E. BRADFORD BURNS. (Los Angeles: University of California, UCLA Latin American Studies 26, 1975. Pp. 137.)
- LATIN AMERICA: A FILMIC APPROACH*. By LEON G. CAMPBELL, CARLOS E. CORTÉS, and ROBERT PINGER. (Riverside: University of California, Latin American Studies Program, Film Series No. 1, Oct. 1975. Pp. 37.)
- FILM AS REVOLUTIONARY WEAPON: A PEDAGOGICAL ANALYSIS*. By LEON G. CAMPBELL and CARLOS E. CORTÉS. (Riverside: University of California, Latin American Studies Program, Film Series No. 3, Aug. 1977. Pp. 19.)
- HISTORIA DOCUMENTAL DEL CINE MEXICANO*. Volume 7, 1958–1960. Edited by EMILIO GARCÍA RIERA. (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1975. Pp. 499.)
- HISTORIA DOCUMENTAL DEL CINE MEXICANO*. Volume 8, 1961–1963. Edited by EMILIO GARCÍA RIERA. (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1976. Pp. 475.)

- HISTORIA DOCUMENTAL DEL CINE MEXICANO*. Volume 9, 1964–1966. Edited by EMILIO GARCÍA RIERA. (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1978. Pp. 580.)
- OCHENTA AÑOS DE CINE EN MÉXICO*. By AURELIO DE LOS REYES, DAVID RAMÓN, MARIA LUISA AMADOR, and RODOLFO RIVERA. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Difusión Cultural, Serie Imágenes 2, 1977. Pp. 142.)
- CHILEAN CINEMA*. Edited by MICHAEL CHANAN. (London: British Film Institute, 1976. Pp. 102.)
- BFI DOSSIER NUMBER 2: SANTIAGO ALVAREZ*. Edited by MICHAEL CHANAN. (London: British Film Institute, 1980. Pp. 71.)
- EL CINE LATINOAMERICANO, O POR UNA ESTÉTICA DE LA FEROCIDAD, LA MAGIA Y LA VIOLENCIA*. Edited by RENÉ PALACIOS MORE and DANIEL PIRES MATEUS. (Madrid: Ediciones Sedmay, 1976. Pp. 192.)
- LATIN AMERICAN FILM MAKERS AND THE THIRD CINEMA*. Edited by ZUZANA M. PICK. (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1978. Pp. 248.)
- LOS AÑOS DE LA CONMOCIÓN, 1967–1973: ENTREVISTAS CON REALIZADORES SUDAMERICANOS*. Edited by ISAAC LEÓN FRÍAS. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Dirección General de Difusión Cultural, Cuadernos de Cine 28, 1979. Pp. 293.)
- CINE Y REVOLUCIÓN EN CUBA*. (Barcelona: Editorial Fontamara, 1975. Pp. 198.)
- POR UN CINE IMPERFECTO*. By JULIO GARCÍA ESPINOSA. (Madrid: Castellote, 1976. Pp. 75.)
- UNA IMAGEN RECORRE EL MUNDO*. By JULIO GARCÍA ESPINOSA. (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1979. Pp. 106.)

Latin American film studies—history, theory, and criticism—are in their initial stages. A wealth of anthologies published in the period 1975–80 has now established a base—albeit a modest one—for the future in-depth study of Latin American cinema. Rather than definitive studies on carefully delimited topics, these compilations bring together useful resource materials: filmographies, scripts, plot summaries, listings of film credits, manifestoes, pedagogical articles, interviews with filmmakers, brief critical commentaries, etc.

The most serious impediment to the study of Latin American cinema is the frequent absence of primary texts, i.e., the films themselves. As Raymond Durnat has recently insisted, if cinema is to be seriously studied as a performance art, or as a visual art, then the films themselves must be available for repeated screenings.<sup>1</sup> In the post-New Criticism period, students of literature have grown accustomed to keeping works of literature close at hand in order to return to the text for careful analysis of details. Close textual analysis is just as important to film studies as it is to literary studies; but film studies, unlike literary

studies, are beset by a host of obstacles preventing or limiting such analysis. These obstacles include high film purchase and rental fees, the vagaries of national and international distribution networks, imperfect prints, and lack of necessary equipment, such as analytical projectors.

Because in many cases films are not available for intensive study, many teachers and critics of Latin American cinema write and lecture relying primarily on their memory or on notes hastily scribbled in the dark. In view of this situation, the publication of film scripts is a substantial aid to scholars and students. Consulting a script, while certainly no substitute for a viewing, can nevertheless provide useful evidence concerning dialogue, the sequence of shots or of episodes, etc. (*Alias*) *El Rey del Joropo: Un film de Carlos Rebollo y Thaelman Urgelles*, Chile: *El cine contra el fascismo*, and *El Chacal de Nahueltoro. La tierra prometida* all publish scripts, fragments of scripts, or scenarios of major Latin American motion pictures. Furthermore, all three books include explanatory comments by the directors as well as other critical aids.

Art historian Arnold Hauser, commenting on cinema's "fundamental naturalism," has observed that "film is the only art that takes over considerable pieces of reality unaltered."<sup>2</sup> Given film's ability to preserve "pieces of reality," it is not surprising that historians are turning to this medium in order to understand and to explain better the past. American professors of Latin American history E. Bradford Burns, Leon G. Campbell, and Carlos E. Cortés have compiled brief manuals that describe their experiences using films as primary source materials in university classes and that include student analyses of selected films.<sup>3</sup> These authors are primarily interested not in the aesthetic qualities of Latin American films, but rather in what these works can tell historians about the history and societies of Latin America. Cinema, according to these historians, can further our understanding of major issues facing Latin America (e.g., modernization, urbanization). Burns notes that film can provide a type of visual detail and data—on living standards or the family, for instance—unavailable elsewhere. All three professors conclude that film is an effective tool with which to teach American students about Latin American history.

Burns, Campbell, and Cortés are particularly interested in the films of the New Latin American Cinema Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The leftist and progressive filmmakers associated with this movement rejected the Hollywood model of moviemaking in favor of a low-cost cinema committed to national themes. These filmmakers viewed film in the context of political change or revolution, and their productions evidenced a marked socioeconomic or political thematic thrust. Burns is correct in stressing the fact that many of these filmmakers have, through their filmmaking, become historians. Chilean director Patricio Guzmán is a case in point. Guzmán's monumental 281-minute docu-

mentary *La Batalla de Chile*, which consists principally of actuality footage, may be the single most valuable historical document on the fall of Allende, for it offers an unparalleled visual and sound record of history in the making. The most pressing task facing the film-conscious historians of Latin America at present is to develop further methodologies for the study of fiction and nonfiction films as historical documents. The student analyses of Latin American films included in these three manuals are unenlightening in this regard.

Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico are the only Latin American countries to boast long established motion-picture industries with continuing artistic traditions stretching back to the early days of the cinema. Of these three national cinemas, it is the Mexican whose history has been most thoroughly documented, thanks in part to the unflagging efforts of film historian Emilio García Riera. García Riera, in the first nine volumes of his anthological *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, proposes to examine each of the more than two thousand movies produced in Mexico from the start of sound production through 1966.<sup>4</sup> This major reference work lists a separate entry for each film; most entries give credits, production and premiere dates, brief critical appraisals, and plot synopses. The most significant films are further described by means of a broad sampling of previously published critical opinion. García Riera's history represents a very necessary first step in the compilation of data on individual Mexican films. The author states that one of his goals is "señalar las referencias, no por indirectas menos obvias, que puedan establecerse entre el desarrollo social, económico y político del país y el del cine como industria y como medio de expresión."<sup>5</sup> García Riera does provide ample notes relating the development of the Mexican motion-picture industry to changes in Mexican society, but a thorough cultural history of Mexican movies—in the manner of Robert Sklar's *Movie-Made America*—remains to be written.

The history of early Mexican cinema is examined in Aurelio de los Reyes' wide-ranging, well-documented essay "El cine en México: 1896–1930," which appears in *Ochenta años de cine en México*.<sup>6</sup> The essayist surveys exhibition, censorship, distribution, production, and the film medium as a carrier of foreign cultural influences. He shows that by the end of Don Porfirio's reign Mexican economic interests controlled 95 percent of the nation's motion-picture industry, but that the industry already suffered from an "original sin": its failure to develop a technological base for the manufacture of film stock and cameras. By the end of the Revolution, the movie industry's balance sheet was negative: censorship had been implanted; American capital had penetrated the industry; Mexican cinematographic inventions had not been perfected and marketed; and, on screen, serious treatments of the nation's social and political realities were taboo. Aurelio de los Reyes opens many research

vistas, and all the major concerns of this essay deserve further study. For instance, the development of early film techniques, such as parallel action and the dissolve, needs to be traced further and compared to the evolution of these same techniques in other movie-producing countries. Lamentably, in Mexico and other Latin American countries, research on early film conventions and techniques will be hindered severely by the scarcity of movies preserved from the silent era.

Michael Chanan has edited for the British Film Institute two brief collections that provide excellent introductions to current Marxist approaches to Latin American cinema. Of all the authors under consideration, Chanan displays the most carefully conceived and clearly articulated theoretical stance. Like many Marxist media theorists and critics, Chanan has been drawn to the study of the mass media because he sees them as a formidable means of ideological manipulation in the hands of capital or the Left. In his introduction to *Chilean Cinema*, the author reveals his understanding of the role of the mass media in bourgeois society—to sell capitalism. Chanan further contends that in today's bourgeois society the mass media have invaded nonworking hours and have imposed a kind of "time-economy" that controls workers much as they are controlled while on the job. The author believes that the bourgeoisie-dominated mass media unilaterally deliver messages to audiences conditioned to their passive reception. The media, therefore, have come to possess a dangerous authority that robs people of their basic form of communication—speech and conversation.

In his anthologies, Chanan examines two Latin American cinema movements that have challenged the bourgeoisie's control of the medium: revolutionary Cuban film and the Chilean radical film movement that arose in the late 1950s and flowered immediately before and during the Unidad Popular period. *BFI Dossier Number 2* studies the work of the prolific Cuban filmmaker Santiago Alvarez, who is now recognized as one of the world's leading documentarists. *Chilean Cinema* chronicles the efforts of Chile's radical filmmakers to alter cinema's relation to its audience as well as the methods of bourgeois film production (the elaborate financial and technological apparatus, the director as Artist).

I agree with Chanan's premise that one cannot understand how cinema works aesthetically and ideologically unless one's analysis is grounded in the relevant economic conditions. Cinema is the most expensive of the arts, and the sheer economics of film production must exert a decisive influence on the ideological cast of films. In his introduction to *Chilean Cinema*, Chanan succinctly traces the economic history of that nation's movie industry from its productive silent days to the doldrums of the Pinochet era. The study of Latin American film history would be greatly facilitated if an economic survey such as Chanan's were available for each national cinema.

While many leftist film critics have been criticized by their political opponents for being too dogmatic or too “content oriented,” Chanan, in his forty-page annotated filmography in *BFI Dossier Number 2*, proves himself capable of sensitive, insightful practical criticism. He locates all of Alvarez’ major documentaries in their socioeconomic and political contexts without neglecting analysis of their salient formal characteristics. Chanan’s criticism is particularly successful in illuminating the political dimensions of the films and their greatest aesthetic achievements, such as the innovative use of music and editing techniques to take the place of traditional voice-over narration. This critical filmography—based on close readings of films and discussions with Alvarez and other Cuban filmmakers—can serve students of Latin American cinema as a model for practical film criticism from a Marxist perspective.

For those wishing an introduction to the history, theory, and praxis of *El Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano*, the anthologies by Palacios More and Pires Mateus, Pick, and Frías (*El cine latinoamericano*, *Latin American Film Makers and the Third Cinema*, *Los años de la conmoción*) provide an appropriate point of departure. In these volumes the filmmakers themselves, in article or interview format, discuss film theory; the situation of production, distribution, exhibition, and censorship in their respective countries; the practical concerns of their own filmmaking activities; and criticism of their work. All these cineastes examine their own films and Latin American filmmaking in general within a socioeconomic and political framework. The importance of this contextualist position is underscored by Chilean director Raúl Ruiz: “. . . me parece imposible—y si se da, inútil—la existencia en nuestros países de un cine desprovisto de un contexto crítico.”<sup>7</sup>

The fundamental sociopolitical and economic premise of these filmmakers is that “Latin America is a colony; the sole difference between the colonialism of yesterday and that of today being the more refined form of the present colonizers.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, these filmmakers believe that economic imperialism inherently brings in its wake cultural imperialism. Recognizing the immense ideological power of cinema, they propose to use the medium to fight both of these types of dominance. The Latin American filmmakers who assembled in Caracas in 1974 made the following commitment: “Denunciar permanentemente la utilización de los medios de comunicación masiva por el imperialismo como instrumento de penetración ideológica y deformación de nuestra cultura latinoamericana y parte de su política de neocolonialismo cultural y dominación. Darse una política en el rescate de esos medios de comunicación masiva para que estén al servicio de los pueblos latinoamericanos.”<sup>9</sup>

While the New Latin American Cinema filmmakers agree on the need to take up significant national themes and to “decolonize” their

cinema, there is less agreement on how these goals may be achieved. The "hows" of their filmmaking practices, then, generate the major point of debate for these filmmakers; and this is the most controversial issue that arises in *Los años de la conmoción*, *El cine latinoamericano*, and *Latin American Film Makers and the Third Cinema*. For instance, some filmmakers advocate use of the technological resources and techniques of mainstream commercial cinema; their opponents argue that militant or revolutionary film must be revolutionary in form as well as in content. While Brazilian Cinema Novo directors defend their allegorical tendency (à la *Os Deuses e os Mortos*) as a means of producing socially significant films under a repressive regime, Colombian filmmaker Carlos Alvarez condemns the thematic obscurity of those films and suggests that ultimately they may be co-opted by the government. Alvarez advocates a less subtle, more directly militant cinema, perhaps in a scaled-down 8-millimeter format.

The Palacios More and Pires Mateus, Frías and Pick collections prove particularly useful for their discussions of the formidable obstacles confronting Latin American filmmakers working outside the framework of established movie industries. For example, Bolivian director Jorge Sanjinés explains how he and his filmmaking team have attempted to finance, film, distribute, and exhibit features in Bolivia, a country with no significant filmmaking traditions. Several other filmmakers discuss specific problems of censorship and governmental repression facing cineastes in their respective nations.

A thorough history of the repression levelled against leftist Latin American filmmakers has yet to be written.<sup>10</sup> This task has become increasingly urgent because in recent years that repression has risen alarmingly. Leftist filmmakers have risked their lives for their professional activities. Two well-known cases during the 1970s involved Argentine director Raymundo Gleyzer (*México: La revolución congelada*) and Chilean cameraman Jorge Muller (*La Batalla de Chile*), who were made to "disappear" in their respective countries; both are presumed dead.

Filmmaking in Cuba differs greatly from filmmaking in the other Latin American countries because in Cuba all levels of production, distribution, and exhibition are controlled by the socialist state. One of the first major cultural acts of the Cuban Revolution was the 24 March 1959 decree founding the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos. Since that time, Cuban cinema has become widely recognized as one of the most innovative cultural forces on the island.

*Cine y revolución en Cuba* consists principally of brief articles and responses to questionnaires written on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the birth of revolutionary Cuban cinema. Many of the pieces originally appeared in the journals *Cine cubano* or *Pensamiento crítico*. These pieces, many of them by Cuba's leading directors, show that in its

first ten years of development revolutionary Cuban film was marked by a constant experimentation, a search for new techniques and styles compatible with revolutionary themes and scant production budgets. Several of the articles reveal an unbounded faith in cinema's power to mold minds. For instance, Pastor Vega's "El documental didáctico y la táctica" treats the didactic documentary "Como arma para enfrentar las cicatrices que la dependencia colonial yanqui nos legara" (pp. 124–25).

Now, more than twenty years after the birth of revolutionary Cuban film, would be an appropriate time to undertake a more profoundly critical assessment of the Cuban motion-picture industry. Today Cuban cinema is a mature, self-financing industry that draws on substantial technological capabilities (including a color film processing laboratory) to produce regularly fiction and nonfiction films of high technical standards. Nevertheless, few of the recent fiction features approximate the artistic and stylistic achievements characterizing the great Cuban classics of the late 1960s: Solás' *Lucía* and Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo*. At present, the most popular style of fiction filmmaking is substantially influenced by the techniques and conventions of mainstream commercial cinema. In his seminal 1969 essay "Por un cine imperfecto," theoretician-director Julio García Espinosa warned: "Hoy en día un cine perfecto—técnica y artísticamente logrado—es casi siempre un cine reaccionario."<sup>11</sup> One project for critics and historians, then, is to trace the artistic and ideological implications of Cuban cinema's passage from its former adherence to García Espinosa's imperfect cinema ideal to its present incorporation of Hollywood conventions.

Julio García Espinosa is Cuba's leading film theorist. His militantly Marxist essays in *Por un cine imperfecto* and *Una imagen recorre el mundo*<sup>12</sup> are aimed not at film scholars, but rather at leftist Latin American filmmakers and others dedicated to bringing about social and cultural revolutions in Latin America. García Espinosa's writings share little common ground with European Marxist film studies as currently influenced by psychoanalysis, semiology, and structuralism. Rather, his books are combat manuals assessing the sociopolitical-aesthetic-technical potential of cinema and sketching directions for future revolutionary mass-media activities in Latin America. Although García Espinosa theorizes on the aesthetics of bourgeois and revolutionary film, he does not set himself the task of systematically formulating a complete aesthetics of the cinema. His concerns are more immediate—and more political. He stresses the urgent need to destroy elitism in art and to facilitate the participation of the masses in filmmaking and other artistic activities. He advocates the establishment of motion-picture industries in Latin America for the cost of a single Hollywood movie, and he offers filmmakers specific suggestions (e.g., rejection of the star system) con-



cerning ways in which the material limitations of filmmaking in Latin America may be turned into advantages.

Unfortunately, García Espinosa at times fails to bridge the gap between theory and practice. For instance, he optimistically muses on vast numbers of spectators becoming filmmakers; but he fails to consider the overwhelming material obstacles to extending filmmaking opportunities to even a token percentage of the citizenry of underdeveloped nations. His notion of *cine imperfecto* is not illustrated with concrete examples; and, indeed, the lack of specific examples to explain and illustrate his major points represents the principal shortcoming of these essays. Radical film critics should now undertake the sort of applied criticism that would relate García Espinosa's theoretical work to specific films. The theoretician-director's own innovative films will continue to provide fruitful grounds for this study.<sup>13</sup>

The publications under review have done much to bring together factual data on Latin American films and to elucidate their socioeconomic and political contexts. Now it is hoped that a wide range of critical approaches will be applied to the study of Latin American cinema. With the exception of Chanan, none of the writers I have reviewed deals extensively with the visual styles of films; in Latin American film studies, formal criticism in general has been largely ignored. Genre criticism could be productively applied to Mexico's popular genres, such as the cabaret melodrama or the *comedia ranchera*. Latin American film studies have not drawn significantly on feminism, structuralism, and semiology; yet the appropriateness of such methodologies to the study of cinema has been firmly established in American and European film studies. David Ramón in "Lectura de las imágenes propuestas por el cine mexicano de los años treinta a la fecha" (in *Ochenta años de cine en México*) briefly examines the types of characters created by many stars in Mexican movies, but we need more systematic analyses of star acting in the popular cinema.

The above-mentioned approaches are but some of the most fruitful that criticism of Latin American film may be expected to take in the immediate future. The progress of such work will depend in large part on overcoming the obstacles to the study of Latin American cinema outlined at the beginning of this essay.

#### NOTES

1. "Towards Practical Criticism," *AFI Education Newsletter* 4, no. 4 (Mar.-Apr. 1981): 1-2, 10-11. This article provides a thorough survey of the obstacles—particularly the absence of texts—presently facing film studies.
2. *The Philosophy of Art History* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Co., 1963), p. 363.

3. Campbell and Cortés prepared *Latin America: A Filmic Approach* with the assistance of Robert Pinger, a student at the University of California, Riverside.
4. García Riera's history is a continuing project; only nine volumes have appeared to date.
5. *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, Volume 1, 1926–1940 (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1969), p. 7.
6. In this essay Aurelio de los Reyes continues the historical research that he initiated in *Los orígenes del cine en México (1896–1900)* (Mexico City: UNAM, Dirección General de Difusión Cultural, 1973).
7. "El cine chileno," in *Los años de la conmoción*, p. 255.
8. Glauber Rocha, "The Aesthetics of Violence," in *Latin American Film Makers and the Third Cinema*, p. 154.
9. "Declaración de los cineastas latinoamericanos," in *El cine latinoamericano*, p. 192.
10. Alfonso Gumucio Dagron's *Cine, censura y exilio en América Latina* (La Paz: Ediciones Film/Historia, 1979) is a country-by-country examination of the censorship and repression that have plagued Latin American filmmakers, particularly those associated with the New Latin American Cinema Movement. The scholarly value of this work is limited because the author does not provide specific bibliographical references to document fully the cases of repression that he cites.
11. *Una imagen recorre el mundo*, p. 1.
12. *Una imagen recorre el mundo* contains all of García Espinosa's essays published in the collection *Por un cine imperfecto* and also four additional essays.
13. Anna Marie Taylor's "Imperfect Cinema, Brecht, and *The Adventures of Juan Quin Quin*" in *Jump Cut*, no. 20, pp. 26–29 is the only study I have seen that examines the relationship between García Espinosa's notion of imperfect cinema and his own films.