

LATIN AMERICA: THE NEW CINEMA

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Over the last 25 years, cinema in the developed countries has been displaced by television, to such an extent that some have prophesied the total demise of cinema as a separate form. Like so many other predictions about the effects of technological innovation, however, this is only a view from within the metropolis. In other parts of the world the prospects are often very different, and in Latin America, over the same period, a new cinema has emerged, largely outside both television and the commercial film industry, which has opened up exciting new possibilities for the use of film, the development of its languages and styles, and its relationship with the audience. This autumn provides a number of opportunities, with screenings on Channel Four, at the NFT and other venues in London and one or two places around the country, for getting to know something of this movement.

When the new Latin American films first began to arrive in Europe in the 60s, at film festivals and in art cinemas, it wasn't just their strange expressive power that was found so impressive, but also a special kind of discovery they gave their audiences — the discovery of home truths. Home truths for two reasons: because these were the first films from Latin America to show what Latin American countries are like as homelands, countries to live in, and also because in so doing they came home to *us* and showed us that we had to think again about our own countries, the home territories of transnational corporate capitalism -- which include of course, the major US film distributors, every one of which is now a subsidiary of one or other of the leading conglomerates.

Monopoly control of the screens by the North American distributors, which they already achieved in the silent days, had prevented real film industries emerging in any but the largest Latin American countries: Mexico, Brazil and Argentina. These were the only countries big enough, it seemed, for local producers to be able to recover their production costs on the home market. Even those industries never found it easy, except for brief periods. Because Hollywood got its money back first from

what used to be the largest home market in the world, the North American distributors could easily afford to rent their films abroad cut-price, and Latin American producers were forced, by this undercutting, to keep their budgets and production values down.

On top of that, since making and distributing prints of films costs very little relative to the costs of producing them, almost every peso Hollywood took home was extra profit. But surplus profits are precisely what attract the backing of the bankers, and in this way Hollywood was able to consolidate its hold on the market by continually raising its own production values.

The Latin American industries could hardly compete. For them, the doors of the banks were closed. Film production even in the three big countries was much too risky, and besides, most of the banks were North American anyway. Lacking in both resources and expertise, it was all the producers could do, with the closed mentality of the colonised and dependent Creole bourgeoisie, to imitate the Hollywood genres and invent a few of their own — musicals, comedies, and in Brazil nowadays, the pornographic combination of the two known as *pornoanchada*.

The new cinema grew up in militant opposition to all this. In his manifesto, *The Aesthetics of Hunger*, the Brazilian director Glauber Rocha wrote about how people for whom hunger is a normal condition are suffering violence — the violence of the social system that makes them go hungry. We know, he said, 'this hunger will not be cured by moderate reforms, and its tumours are not hidden but only aggravated by the cloak of technicolor'. The movement was accompanied from the outset by theoretical reflection; critical magazines appeared in several countries and the film makers themselves have been the leading contributors to the debate about the values and uses of the film medium.

The dates and places are those of the recent history of Latin America. Cuban cinema is synonymous with the Cuban Revolution, Chilean cinema with Salvador

Allende and the Government of Popular Unity tragically cut short just ten years ago. But now there's Nicaragua and El Salvador, and the rebirth of the idea of militant cinema which was first developed in the 60s, the decade of Che Guevara.

With the development of a variety of alternative distribution practices, both the response of audiences and the attacks on film makers by the official and unofficial agents of authoritarian governments clearly spell out how much the new cinema is needed, and how subversive the representations it provides of the reality of the continent. The movement displays a good deal of ingenuity in adapting to local political and economic conditions — it has to, in order to survive. But it hasn't just done that. There is, for example, a new women's cinema emerging in several countries. The catalogue of films shown in the Havana Film Festival in its four years so far, includes close on a hundred films made by some sixty women directors, or co-directors working with men.

Perhaps the most eloquent statement of the movement's sense of purpose is the view of the pioneering Cuban director, Julio Garcia Espinosa, who is now head of the Cuban Film Institute, ICAIC: 'since in our social aspirations we're looking for better ways to fulfil human self-realisation, so we have to look for the appropriate cinema. For me, the societies of the great metropolis are marked by an economy of waste, with a corresponding culture of waste. We cannot — the world cannot — aspire to such levels of consumption. Therefore culture has to provide new ways of feeling and enjoying life, different from irrational consumption. Since we're creating a society which in spite of its imperfections will finally achieve a new kind of human productiveness, I have suggested a cinema which, though it may be technically or aesthetically 'imperfect', is essentially much more consistent with real human needs.'¹

From *New Cinema of Latin America*, which will be transmitted on Channel Four on October 3 and 10, in *Eleventh Hour*, as part of the Latin American film season.