

NOTAS Y COMENTARIOS

Latin American Cinema in the 90s. Representational Space in Recent Latin American Cinema

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The situation of Latin American cinema today is that of a series of medium to small, sometimes tiny, national film industries, all of them plagued by structural weakness and small markets, but supplied with a wealth of talent and imagination. It is also a cinema with a proud and inspirational history of aesthetic and political radicalism. However, it is now a dozen years or so since the term *el nuevo cine latinoamericano*, the term for the continent-wide movement which emerged in the 60s, came under question, either because, as some commentators felt, it should be in the plural, not the singular, or because, in the opinion of others, the term was idealist and entirely voluntaristic, since the movement it was supposed to identify had no real unity; it had never been more than a disparate assembly of films by various directors in different countries for whom the idea of a movement had only been a matter of convenience, above all political convenience, during the period of the ideological hegemony of the Cuban Revolution. Worse still, it had the effect of delegitimising a whole range of efforts, again by film-makers all over the continent, whose allegiance to the implied political aesthetic was at best rather flimsy, and in other cases, non-existent. Certain aspects of this argument beg a question about the differences between artistic movements in the metropolis and the periphery, but what is certainly true is that the 80s saw a movement away from the aesthetics associated with notions such as 'third cinema' (Solanas & Getino) or 'imperfect cinema' (Julio García Espinosa) or 'the aesthetics of hunger' (Glauber Rocha). In the process, genres rarely attempted in the 60s and 70s have made a re-emergence, visual styles have

funds for films by independent producers and directors, funds provided by coproducers who were mostly happy to indulge their artistic licence in the hopes of an exotic product.² Since then, the pressure for a populist genre cinema has grown, in part with the development of a Hispanic market in the United States, which does not make it any easier for the kind of cinema I'm speaking about here.

Politically, the Marxist militancy of the 60s and 70s is obviously no longer possible. Even in Cuba, overt political rhetoric has practically disappeared from the cinema screen, except when used with ironic intent, as in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's last two films, the powerful and moving *Fresa y chocolate*, and the valedictory *Guantanamera*. As a matter of fact, this was always Alea's way, and reminds us that the political character of *el nuevo cine latinoamericano* was never primarily a matter of the party line but lay in its depth of understanding of the political space represented on the screen. Moreover, the movement, in all its diversity, was always more than this. Politics was always mixed in with a variety of stylistic experiments and excesses, which have not by any means subsided. Think of the recent films of Fernando Solanas — *Tangos, el exilio de Gardel*, from 1985, *Sur*, 1987, and *El viaje*, from 1992— and of Paul Leduc's exhilarating dance dramas, *Latino Bar*, of 1990, and *Dollar Mambo*, 1992, in which the director of *Frida, naturaleza viva*, a paradigm of narrative experiment, excels himself; although perhaps this kind of production is becoming more difficult — Leduc has recently said he is giving up film to work in video. Be that as it may, recent Latin American cinema also retains a certain utopian streak as well as a deep social conscience. Two examples are María Novaro's touching and ironic *Danzón* (Mexico, 1990), and the political comedy *La estrategia del caracol*, by Sergio Cabrera (Colombia, 1993).

Culturally, a dominant factor influencing changes in the cinema has been the spread of television, even to the poorest barrios and favelas, amidst what in other respects is a widening divide between rich and poor. The effect of television has been most spectacular in the case of Brazil and the phenomenon of TV Globo, which grew to dominance and helped to unify the largest country in the continent, while the film industry was robbed of its state support and languished.³ At the other end of the scale, in Peru, there are only half a dozen active directors of features, and their audience is tiny, since the cinemas are too expensive for 80% of the population. Here, not for the first time in Latin American cinema, television has recently become an object of satire, in a delightful comedy by Felipe Degregori, *Todos somos estrellas* (1993). Nor is it an accident that in films like *La estrategia del caracol*, Solveig Hoogesteijn's *Macu, la mujer del policía* (Venezuela, 1987) or *Como nascem os anjos* (Brazil, 1996), by Murilo Salles, social realism not only demands the

presence of television cameras in the events portrayed but assigns them an ironic narrative function. This is the way of the modern (or should we say postmodern?) world.

In all these countries, there is clearly a strong urge to develop a kind of popular art cinema, which indeed just manages to survive alongside the more standard forms of popular genre movie which typify the larger industries of Mexico, Brazil and, at times, Argentina. All the films I've mentioned so far are examples. This is a cinema which doesn't turn its back on genre but uses it as an authorial vehicle. This is different from the 60s and 70s, when the movement was busy either breaking genres apart or inventing new ones. Some of the newer films continue to address big contemporary national issues, and employ strong national character types. The paradigms here go back to Adolfo Aristarain in Argentina, with tremendous movies like *Tiempo de revancha* and *Últimos días de la víctima* in the early 80s (1981 and 1985).

These films also often take on new political tasks. Perhaps the most symptomatic, in Erving Goffman's sense of the term, is that of attacking social amnesia about *la guerra sucia*, either explicitly, as in Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial* (1984), or in a more metaphorical way, as in Eliseo Subiela's *Hombre mirando al sudeste* (1985). Here again Argentinian cinema was in the vanguard, but the genre continues in examples like the Chilean film *Amnesia*, by Gonzalo Justiniano (1994).

There has also been a distinct return to the genre of melodrama, which in the 60s and 70s had been strongly disparaged by the political susceptibilities of the revolutionary left. It has come back, however, in a new guise, informed by a feminist focus, and largely, though not exclusively, the domain of a new generation of women directors, like Fina Torres, Solveig Hoogesteijn, María Novaro, and above all, the late María Luisa Bemberg.

For some viewers, Subiela's film *Hombre mirando al sudeste* is a kind of magical realist science fiction film. For others, it has a political subtext—who is this man who has appeared in a mental hospital, claims to come from Mars, and seems to have no past but is otherwise terribly sane: is he one of the disappeared? Both would agree about its playful approach to the sci-fi genre. This playfulness with genre is quite different from a similar stance in much recent U.S. cinema, both Hollywood and Independent. For one thing, it doesn't indulge in gratuitous violence and the sex is much more tasteful. More fundamentally, it is highly syncretistic, fusing symbols and even whole symbolic systems into its pluralistic narratives.

The most extraordinary sequence of this kind in *Hombre mirando al sudeste* is the performance of Beethoven's *Choral Symphony*, which brings with it a plethora of intertextual connotations. In Latin America it has become the hymn of the Church of Liberation, sung by millions across the continent who

don't know the name of the composer, and certainly don't know that the original words were by a German poet who called it 'Ode to Joy' instead of 'Ode to Freedom' in order to avoid censorship. It crops up in more than one documentary made around the same time as Subiela's film: in a Brazilian tribute to a militant priest, Frei Beto, and in a clandestine video from Chile of a demonstration by the women's movement, *Somos Más*. Meanwhile, in Europe, this paean to revolution has now become the anthem of the E.C., and worse, was then used as the theme tune of the European Cup, which for the European viewer adds a certain spice to the magnificent way in which Subiela returns the music to its original meaning in the joyful revolt of the lunatics in the asylum.⁴

Two things here seem to me of special note —the playful attitude to genre, and the syncretistic symbolism—, since these have been constant characteristics of Latin American cinema in the past. I am reminded of Salles Gomez talking of the Brazilians' "creative incapacity for imitation." But really you can find examples throughout the continent.

Remembering Subiela's comments on the art of budgeting, another thing is evident: given the ropy conditions of production which prevail throughout Latin America, this popular art cinema is still in many ways the *cine pobre* which the champions of *el nuevo cine latinoamericano* spoke of. But it has new guise. Not, as a recent piece in the journal *Screen* claims,⁵ because imperfect cinema somehow turned into perfect cinema — which is as errant a piece of nonsense as such a journal has ever published. The process has been far more subtle.

First of all, Julio García Espinosa's idea of an imperfect cinema was never intended as an apologia for badly made films. It was an argument for low-budget film-making which didn't waste resources on trying to imitate the commercial values of Hollywood. It was also a statement about the filmmaker's need of the audience and the audience's need of films of a kind that mobilised their intelligence instead of dulling it. Additionally, it was Brechtian in its appeal to film-makers to be open about the nature of the process of representation. In other words, not to hide the poverty of means with which the film is made, and not to try and imitate the production values or the ideology of the super-productions of the North. But this, I believe, remains a strong stylistic imperative of today's popular art cinema in Latin America, with all its diversity. It is a cinema which insists on the difference of its look from that of Hollywood.

And Europe? It's not as if the directors of New Latin American Cinema went in very much for the self-referentiality and self-reflexivity which their counterparts in Europe cultivated at the same time. There was indeed a moment when the two avant gardes drew together, when Godard and Rocha

held their dialogue, but classic films like *Memorias del subdesarrollo* and *Hasta cierto punto*, by Alea, or more recently, also from Cuba, Juan Carlos Tabío's *¡Plaff!*, of 1988, are the exception rather than the rule. On the other hand, there was indeed something genuinely new about the New Latin American Cinema for which Europe was the jumping-off point: the movement embraced a generation of film-makers who were formed under the sign of Italian neo-realism—a whole bunch of them went to study film in the early 50s at the Centro Sperimentale in Rome—and then went back and took to the streets. The film studio never had any attraction for any of them. They immersed themselves from the very beginning in the actually existing space of the contemporary Latin American world. This imperative has never been abandoned, and has had a powerful influence on visual style.

The dominant style of cinematography, however, is today very different from the purposefully erratic and punctuated visual style of the 60s and 70s, the restless agility of the camera and the syncopated rhythms in the montage of films by directors like Rocha and Alea, Miguel Littín and Jorge Sanjinés. The Dionysian urges of those days have given way to Apollonian discipline, excess to control and assurance. Compare the team of Titón and Mayito—Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Mario García Joya—in their first film together, the extraordinary and vertiginous *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios*, with their last, which was *Fresa y chocolate*, where the camera has lost none of its agility but is now the silent partner of the characters in the drama, cohabitant of their space, obeying with the utmost tact the exhortation of one of the begetters of *el nuevo cine latinoamericano*, Fernando Birri: "Pongamos la cámara a la altura del ojo de un hombre."⁶

The same approach ranges across several genres. Exemplary films include both the symbolic spaces of Solanas and Leduc, and the feminised spaces found in the films of María Luisa Bemberg, or more recently, María Novaro's *Danzón* and Solveig Hoogesteijn's *Macu, la mujer del policía*. All these films are marked by a cinematography which carries a special feeling for real social space. This is not a question of style, which remains a matter of the accomplishments of the individual cinematographer, but it has a lot to do with the widespread practice of location shooting with available light and direct sound wherever possible, which draws out the grain of the locations where the film is shot without attempting to gloss either image or sound. The practice answers to the exigencies of *cine pobre* both economically and aesthetically. For example, all sorts of locations are barred to you if you need big supplies of electricity to film there, and even taking your own generators is practically impossible. This doesn't apply only to zones which are geographically remote. You cannot take lights, generators, trucks and a hundred people into a shanty town and expect the result to look authentic,

which is presumably why Alan Parker went to Buenos Aires with Madonna and built a shanty town of his own instead. On the other hand, *Macu* cost under \$100,000.⁷ In the same way, the cost of a post-synchronised (and preferably stereophonic) soundtrack is beyond the budgets of most of these productions, but at the same time, the practice of employing direct location sound-recording in the finished soundtrack serves to intensify the sense of presence in the image.⁸ The result is that the places and spaces where the film unfolds behave not like backdrops, but as characters in the drama. Henri Lefebvre, in his discussion of representational space, criticises visual media like film for abstracting the lived experience of space, detaching "the pure form from its impure content - from lived time, everyday time, and from bodies with their opacity and solidity, their warmth, their life and their death."⁹ This is exactly what these films do not do.

In speaking of the social production of space, Lefebvre, in spite of his disparagement of cinema, offers the study of film a new reading of the spatial construction of moving pictures which was first analysed by the Soviet filmmakers of the 20s. In Lefebvre's terms, a representational space is a system of symbolic representations, such as artistic and other media and forms, which in some way maps the elements and relations of the physical, the social and the mental worlds. It does so partly by representing physical space, signifying or occupying it, and making symbolic use of it. The screen is just such a representational space. It tends, in the process, towards a more or less coherent system of non-verbal symbols and signs. The products of representational spaces (to follow Lefebvre) are symbolic works —works of art, cultural products— or in this case, films. When Lefebvre disparages the medium for abstracting the lived experience of space, one can only suppose he has momentarily fallen under the sway of the very ideology of the passive consumption of images which he criticises, since the entire history of cinema can also be seen as a process of the limits of the image repeatedly transgressed.

These films from Latin America defy Lefebvre's accusation in no small measure because of the role played in the drama by place, and the way in which place is filmed. And this look is achieved precisely by not imitating unattainable production values, and by being honest about the process of representation. In this sense, the imperative behind the original movement of the 60s and 70s, to address to the audience the images of their own reality, remains a strong force, and is even being recreated in a whole number of recent Latin American films, across a whole range of genres.

Take María Novaro's *Danzón*, a reworking of the Mexican *cabalatera* of the 40s and 50s as a nostalgic romantic comedy. What one sees here is not just the use of music and dance as a metaphor for desire. The dance hall is not a

studio stage used a backdrop for spectacle, it's the authentic location of a shared utopian ideal about human relations. In Lefebvre's terms, the dance hall is a place where the wheels of social reproduction are oiled, and where private memory and desire is socialised, and which is constantly reproduced by those who come there. All of this is rendered palpable in the film by the respectful observation, in real locations shot with available light, and with the camera never pulling back to a point of view which is not that of a possible person within the scene, of the way the dancers themselves inhabit the space.

The occupation of space is the very subject of Sergio Cabrera's *La estrategia del caracol*, a political comedy in which the occupants of a house outwit the authorities trying to dispossess them. The opening of the film, in long shots which zoom in to the drama of an eviction in a popular street in the city, where the police are met with violent urban resistance, celebrates an image of the city which is not at all new, but harks back to the 60s and 70s, when the streets were a site of contestation, of protests, demonstrations and riots, the physical domain of class struggle, of revolution and of counter-repression. At the same time, the film recalls the French Popular Front movies of the 30s, in which French directors like Carné and Renoir rescued Paris from the clutches of Fantomás and handed it over to the popular classes to whom it belonged.

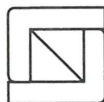
One last example: María Luisa Bemberg's *Miss Mary*, of 1984. This film remains the paradigm of the new Latin American feminist melodrama, in which the genre of melodrama is turned inside out. Miss Mary (played by Julie Christie), an English governess in Argentina, writes a letter home to her mother in which she tells lies about her welcome and the house and family; she bursts into tears but carries on. The effect for the viewer is distanciation from both the character *and the place*, which is not the *estancia típica* she describes in the letter but an imitation Elizabethan mansion. The gap this creates between our eyes and the image brings about an understanding of the historical production of the place where people behave this way.

These films, with their quite different modalities, all do for me the opposite of what Lefebvre says. They do not detach form from content, but *reassert* lived time, everyday time, *give* bodies opacity and solidity, warmth, life and death. And that is not something you find very much in Hollywood anymore.

NOTES

1. Paulo Emilio Salles Gomez, "Cinema: A Trajectory within Underdevelopment" (originally published 1980), in R. Johnson & R. Stam, eds., *Brazilian Cinema*, Columbia University Press, 1995, pp. 244-55.
2. See *Cinemas d'Amérique Latine*, No. 2, Toulouse, ARCALT, 1994.

3. New measures giving fresh state support to cinema were announced in 1996, which have resulted in the recovery of production to around fifty films a year.
4. I've come across this type of thing before, for example in Marisol Trujillo's short *Oración* (Cuba, 1985), when she uses the English anthem *Jerusalem* without knowing that it was written by William Blake and serves as the anthem of English socialism.
5. Oscar Quirós, "Critical mass of Cuban cinema: art as the vanguard of society," *Screen*, 37: 3, Autumn 1996.
6. "Poema en forma de ficha filmográfica," Fernando Birri, *Por un nuevo cine latinoamericano 1956-1991*, Cátedra/Filmoteca Española, Madrid, 1996.
7. Personal communication by Solveig Hoogesteijn, Providence, R.I., 1997.
8. In *La estrategia del caracol*, some 90% of the final soundtrack comprises direct location sound. Personal communication by Sergio Cabrera, Providence, R.I., 1997.
9. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, 1991, p. 97.



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