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Problems in Latin American cinema

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The problem of Latin American cinema is the problem of world cinema, which is not to say that the Latin American filmmakers do not face specific dilemmas and contradictions. The tragic defeats suffered by the working class in that region during the 1970s and 1980s (Chile, Bolivia, Argentina and elsewhere), and the blows dealt generally to the progressive aspirations of masses of people, have had lasting consequences for social life and its most fragile reflection, art.

While not claiming to be students of Latin American filmmaking, we are obliged to report that the works from that region which have circulated at film festivals in recent years (which generally means work from Argentina, Brazil and Mexico—Cuba is a special case, which would require a separate discussion) have not overwhelmed us with their seriousness and substance, particularly in light of the traumatic events of recent decades. The viewer has been struck in too many instances by the cynicism, demoralization or occasional self-pity of the filmmakers, and even worse, by the triviality of many of the projects.

(Examples of unsatisfying works include Roberto Sneider's *Two Crimes* from Mexico and Francisco J. Lombardi's *No Mercy* from Peru (1994), Eliseo Subiela's *Don't Die Without Telling Me Where You're Going* from Argentina (1995), Tata Amaral's *A Starry Sky* from Brazil (1996), Carlos Bolado's *Under California—The Limit of Time* from Mexico (1998), Marcelo Piñeyro's *Burnt Money* from Argentina (2000) and others.)

Perhaps the most widely acclaimed figure from Latin America in recent years has been Mexico's prolific Arturo Ripstein (*Woman of the Port*, *The Beginning and the End*, *Deep Crimson*, *Divine* et al), once an assistant to Spanish-born filmmaker Luis Buñuel (who spent decades in Mexico in exile from the Franco regime). Ripstein's work bears traces of surrealism in its outlandishness, but little of that movement's social insight and protest. Petty-bourgeois audiences who attend his films find themselves laughing at his grotesque unfortunates and lowlifes. In our view, Ripstein's is another addition to the cinema of contempt, not compassion.

Three directors whose films reached a considerable international audience in the 1980s have not repeated that success—Hector Babenco (*Pixote* [1981] and his English-language *Kiss of the Spider Woman* [1985]) from Brazil (although Argentine-born), Héctor Olivera (*A Funny, Dirty Little War*, 1983) and Luis Puenzo (*The Official Version*, 1985) from Argentina. Indicative perhaps of a general decline, the 1990s brought us the banal *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) from Mexico.

Veterans of Brazil's *cinema nôvo* (New Cinema) movement of the 1960s and 1970s continue to produce works, including Carlos Diegues (*Bye Bye Brasil*, 1979), Nelson Pereira dos Santos and Ruy Guerra. (The leading figure, Glauber Rocha [*Antonio das Mortes*, 1969], died in 1981.) *Clouds*, from another veteran of the era, Argentina's Fernando Solanas (*Hour of the Furnace*, 1968), appeared in 1998. None of these latter figures, however, seems up to the task of examining contemporary society in a sufficiently critical fashion.

Patricio Guzman of Chile has produced a number of documentary works—*The Battle of Chile* (*Parts 1-3*, 1975-79) and *Chile, The Obstinate Memory* (1997)—that include important material on the CIA-organized overthrow of the Allende regime in 1973, but politically represent a defense of the Popular Front strategy that left the Chilean masses disarmed in the face of military-bourgeois barbarism.

Other filmmakers who have made their presence felt recently include and Walter Salles (*Central Station*, 1998) from Brazil and Pablo Trapero (*Crane World*, 1999) and Marco Bechis (*Garage Olimpo*, 1999) from Argentina. Brazil's Bruno Barreto (*Dona Flor and her Two Husbands* [1976] and *Four Days in September* [1997] has now "graduated" to making big budget Hollywood films. A current success in the US is Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Amores perros* (*Love's a bitch*) from Mexico, a violent and essentially manipulative work.

A new wave of Argentine filmmakers, a few of whose works we will discuss in the final part of this series, has recently emerged. But it must be said that "new waves" in general are not impressive in and of themselves. A burst of film production can take place in a given country for any number of reasons, including an improved economic climate or an infusion of state interest and subsidization. Waves come and go, but under any and all circumstances the decisive question is having something to say.

In this regard, even an initial glance at the history of Latin American cinema underscores a remarkable contradiction. Michael Chanan writes in the *Oxford History of World Cinema*: "In the late 1950s a new cinema began to appear in Latin America, carving out spaces for itself wherever it found the slightest chance, growing up even in the most inimical circumstances, indeed thriving upon them, for this was a cinema largely devoted to the denunciation of misery and the celebration of protest."

As we have explained on the *World Socialist Web Site*, conditions for the broad masses of the population in Latin America have worsened in recent years. Repressed by military and "democratic" regimes alike—regimes that take their orders from Washington and the International Monetary Fund—and betrayed by their Stalinist and petty-bourgeois nationalist leaderships, the working class has seen its living standards decimated and the limited social gains won by earlier generations taken away. Throughout Latin America, real wages have been cut in half over the past two decades. More than 210 million people live below the official poverty line.

Social polarization has never been wider in the region's history. The richest 20 percent of the population receive nearly 20 times the wealth that goes to the poorest 20 percent. According to a report issued by the Organization of American States, in a number of Latin American countries more than 50 percent of the national income goes into the pockets of the wealthiest 10 percent.

In the face of these disastrous social conditions, how is it to be explained

that the “denunciation of misery and celebration of protest” which characterized the cinema of several decades ago has so largely dissipated?

Of course, something other than formal logic comes into play here. There is, above all, the question of the dramatic events of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and their impact on the Latin American intelligentsia. As we noted in the first article of this series, to account for the overall weakness of filmmaking and art, one has to look to two general processes: on the one hand, the enrichment and rightward political shift of significant layers of the middle class; and, on the other, the crisis of perspective brought about by the fate of the Soviet Union and the ideological campaign proclaiming the “death of socialism” (and specifically in Latin America, the consequences of the defeats imposed on the region's workers and peasants referred to above).

Abandonment of political principle has taken quite spectacular forms in Latin America. Former guerrilla leaders, such as Teodoro Petkoff of Venezuela's FALN, have become cabinet ministers. The remains of the Tupamaro guerrilla movement in Uruguay have joined a bourgeois electoral front, the Frente Amplio. The M-19 movement worked out a filthy deal with the Colombian government, including a provision whereby its members could trade their weapons for small business loans. The guerrilla movements in Central America (the Sandinistas, FMLN, the URNG in Guatemala), once the great hope of middle class radicals around the world, have all signed pacts with the very forces responsible for widespread repression and murder. The trajectory of the Zapatistas in Mexico toward bourgeois respectability (and possibly government posts) is perfectly clear for anyone with eyes to see.

All these Castroite-influenced petty-bourgeois nationalist movements rejected the working class and claimed “to have discovered other, more revolutionary vehicles providing convenient shortcuts to socialism.” (*Castroism and the Politics of Petty-Bourgeois Nationalism*) In reality, these organizations, which led thousands of followers into suicidal adventures and demoralized sections of workers and the rural oppressed, rested upon the petty bourgeoisie and sections of the national bourgeoisie, while claiming to represent the interests of the oppressed. Over the course of several decades they have proven their utter worthlessness. So too have the other “left” tendencies in and around them: Stalinist, Maoist and centrist (so-called “Trotskyists” in Chile [Vitale], Argentina [Moreno], Bolivia [Lora] and elsewhere).

A first point of clarification, therefore, for serious-minded artists and intellectuals must be the understanding that the defeats and tragedies of the recent decades in Latin America resulted neither from the organic incapacity of the working class nor the hopelessness of the socialist project, but from the false theories and treacherous practices of political movements that exercised leadership and influence over wide layers of the population. Building a genuine socialist alternative remains the question of questions.

This is not a Latin American, but a world-historical problem. The predominance of a nationalist outlook continues to weigh heavily on the intelligentsia in the region. Nothing good will come of it if the present globally-integrated economy is approached from the point of view of protecting narrow national interests, much less “Latin American”—or, let's say—“Argentine pride.” This is the language of the national bourgeoisie, or at least sections of it.

It is said that the run-of-the-mill intellectual in Buenos Aires does not like to think of himself as a “South American,” in that this identifies him with the “backward” populations of Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and the rest of the continent. If this is so, it is an indefensible snobbery that needs to be overcome. The artist who prefers to solidarize himself with Left Bank cinephiles or the denizens of Manhattan's Lower East Side rather than suffering humanity will not be of much value to anyone.

However the individual artist chooses to approach the problem, a critical examination of the historical experiences of the twentieth century is unavoidable. It is simply impossible to make substantial headway until the confusion and falsification surrounding the past are dissipated. Genuine hope and the artistic inspiration genuine hope engenders will not reappear until this task of historical clarification has been undertaken. And this is not simply true, naturally, of the Latin American film artist, but film artists on every continent.

This may seem, at first glance, a tall order. Everything has been done in recent years to convince the artist (and many have convinced themselves) that he or she should have nothing to do with historical analysis or social protest—“all that” belonged to a different, less enlightened era. And, certainly, no one who understands and values art is in favor of didactic or heavy-handed productions. Such work is of little value and often bespeaks a certain insecurity on the part of the artist.

But we agree with Trotsky:

“It is silly, absurd, stupid to the highest degree, to pretend that art will remain indifferent to the convulsions of our epoch. The events are prepared by people, they are made by people, they fall upon people and change these people. Art, directly or indirectly, affects the lives of the people who make or experience the events. This refers to all art, to the grandest, as well as to the most intimate” (*Literature and Revolution*, Introduction).

Self-expression is a noble thing, but the “self” needs to be nourished by something other than late-night café conversations and the intrigues, quarrels and affairs that go on within a narrow stratum of society. Or, for that matter, a relatively facile radicalism, which is largely content to identify glaring social ills and injustices in a manner that reinforces resignation and fatalism (“What can you do, that's the way the world is!”).

It is critical to revive the notion, now unfashionable, that the material floating about in the artist's head, the material most immediately available, may not be earthshaking, that he may have to conduct an inner struggle and go against “what comes naturally.” In fact, he may have to look outside, study and consciously develop what Trotsky called “a definite and important feeling for the world.”

The artist needs to acknowledge once again that there is such a thing as objective reality, existing externally to him, which needs to be approached, explored and reflected upon. He needs to remember that a great many people would like (and need) to see rich and accurate portrayals of life, and not simply the shuffling about of his socially limited and too often, frankly, second-rate impressions.

All this will come. And there are certain, limited signs of it today.