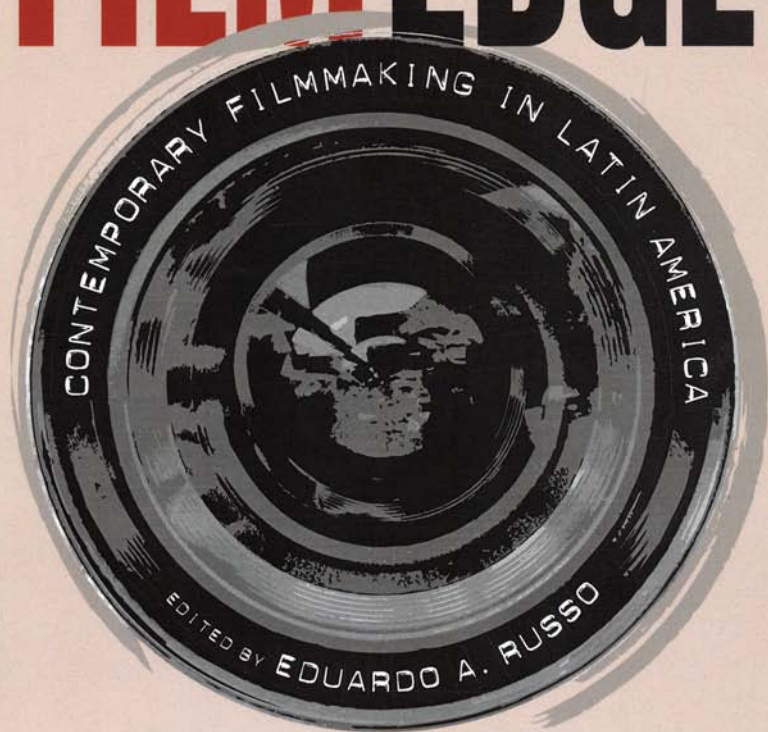


THE FILMEDGE



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FUNDACION
TyPA
TEORIA Y PRACTICA
DE LAS ARTES

Librería García Camarero

EDITED BY **EDUARDO A. RUSSO**

The Film Edge

**Contemporary Filmmaking
in Latin America**



INDEX

Acknowledgements	9
About the Authors	11
Foreword	23
1. National Perspectives, Regional Projections	29
Building at the Margins: Trajectories of New Independent Cinema in Latin America. <i>David Oubiña</i>	33
Cinematic Production in Mexico Under the Sign of Crisis. <i>Gustavo Montiel Pagés</i>	47
The Unexpected Rise of Central American Cinema. <i>María Lourdes Cortés</i>	65
Cuban Cinema Beyond Strawberries and Chocolate. <i>Luciano Castillo</i>	81
Father, Country. <i>José Carlos Avellar</i>	105
Peru: Films for After a War. <i>Ricardo Bedoya</i>	145
Mirrors on the Periphery. <i>Marcos Loayza</i>	159
Argentine Cinema: a State of Affairs. <i>Jorge La Ferla</i>	173
Memories of New Argentine Cinema. <i>Andrés Di Tella</i>	199

2. Singularities in Context.....213

Luis Ospina and Colombian Cinema:
Independence or Resistance? *Mauricio Durán Castro*215

Cristián Sánchez,
the Stationary Nomad. *Jorge Ruffinelli*.....237

Lisandro Alonso:
States and Mutations of Cinema. *Eduardo A. Russo*259

Riding the Storm. *Paz Encina*275

3. Genres, Formats, Projects.....287

From the Real to Reality:
the Creative Documentary
in Latin America. *Carmen Guarini*.....289

Forms of Audiovisual Observation
in Contemporary Latin American
Production. *Malena Di Bastiano*307

A Few Reflections on Short Film. *Paulo Pécora*319

The Mise en Scène of Early Short Films. *Daniela Goggi*.....331

The Audiovisual Arts in Argentina:
Possible Horizons. *Mariela Cantú*343

FOREWORD

Thirty years ago, the region's cinema was limited in its distribution and only circulated outside its country of origin in a few isolated cases. Video, for its part, was beginning to assert itself as an innovative medium and an alternative to film, and digital technology hinted at the imminent technological and conceptual transformations that could favor productions with limited resources.

Cultural institutions were also making an effort to adapt to the changes that would come at the end of the century. Attention was paid once more to film schools, and it was understood that without the help of public and private funding, it would be impossible to finance films that were less stereotypical than what was being produced in the international commercial market. Video camera in hand, these directors saw that it was possible – perhaps for the first time – to develop their own projects; they also realized that without a professional system of production they would not be able to forge an effective cultural alternative.

In a number of countries in the Northern Hemisphere, these changes included reception by, and the experienced support of, institutions that promoted the production of alternative content and forms, with the essential aim of airing them on public television. The Rockefeller Foundation was one such institution; by subsidizing independent and intercultural productions and creating a vehicle for their

dissemination, it made itself part of the transformation. In an innovative move, the Antorchas, Vitae and Andes foundations (of Argentina, Brazil and Chile, respectively) joined forces with the organization in the North and, together, offered the filmmakers of those countries an indispensable hand. Some of the cultural objects to which this book refers are products of this strategic alliance. New laws for the promotion of audiovisual media were established in different countries in the nineties, and toward the end of the century the fruits of these efforts – both private and public – were beginning to be seen.

Of course, these changes did not come about without resistance or debate. It is not unusual for a ‘concerned citizen’ of any Latin American city to ask us: Why should my taxes or individual contributions go to an inexperienced director to make a film? What makes an artist so special, as compared to someone in another profession, that justifies using my money to satisfy his need for self-expression? Why doesn’t he just follow the rules of the marketplace and of supply and demand like any other purveyor of goods and services? The reader may already have an answer to these questions, as we all know what supply and demand looks like in the context of cinema: Hollywood productions and their imitations. The films that will be discussed in the following chapters present a clear artistic project that, in many cases, anticipates any hypothetical demand. Unlike other less risky professions, in order for a director to gain experience he needs to actually direct films; yes, these are large sums and there is a good deal of risk that goes into the investment that must be attended to.

In a number of countries in Latin America, the State plays an important role in this process through the allotment of subsidies; a system that, questionable as parts of it can be, has meant a notable step forward in the facilitation of new productions. In other cases, non-profits not

only provide funding but can also put directors in touch with producers who might be interested in combining their investments with public resources or other private funds. The situation here described, which may seem to be balanced, is far from enjoying such equilibrium. The imbalances are constant and, in some cases, even compromise the possibility of making these films. Nor is there any consensus with regard to the importance of forging on despite the challenges. The criticisms, levied by those unable to comprehend that a society without artistic production is no more than a producer of meaningless services, are persistent and occasionally predominant.

A cultural good has the capacity to reveal shared identitarian or symbolic values, rendering the work of art a relevant object that is made complete through its consumption by the public. It is able to illuminate a value that may have gone unrecognized until it was manifested artistically. No one asks for what they do not know (how could one have asked for a Buñuel film before his films were known?) These cultural goods, as compared to simply commercial ones created to satisfy a specific or imagined demand, suffer from a malady known to economists as *cost disease* and which can, in brief, be described as a sustained and cumulative rise in costs above and beyond a country's normal rate of inflation, which is not reduced by technological innovation or the reduction in price of non-cultural goods. Furthermore, it is impossible for ticket sales to meet these rising costs, due to space limitations, access to pirated copies of the films, oligopolist policies and inequitable access to the sale of goods. This means that the market will not be able to make up for this economic imbalance. Consequently, if the funds available for cultural production do not increase at a rate greater than inflation, it will inevitably provoke a withdrawal in the quantity and quality of that production. Studies conducted on theater productions reveal that a piece

performed during the Elizabethan era needed two weeks to recuperate its financing; after the First World War, four weeks were needed; in the thirties, it took 5.5 to 8 weeks if 60% of the performances were sold out. Today, a quality work of musical theater takes at least a year to break even.

In the case of film, it could be said that access to digital recording and editing has saved a certain number of man-hours; a claim that would be impossible to make for chamber music, on the other hand. A quartet by Haydn that lasted thirty minutes in 1796 still requires the same elements – two musician-hours divided among four instruments – while the rest of the economy enjoys a 2% reduction in the labor that goes into every product due to technological advancement. Nonetheless, this reduction in the cost of cinematic production is absorbed by increasing production standards, which imply additional costs and are indispensable to a public grown accustomed to high visual and sound quality. In this way, the so-called golden age of Argentine cinema in the fifties required far fewer weeks in theaters to break even, in absolute terms, on a production that was less sophisticated technically than those we see today.

These days, Hollywood productions make up 80% of the titles playing in Argentina's movie theaters (with four times as many prints as national films); Argentine cinema is seen by about 12% of all filmgoers and that of the rest of Latin America is seen by no more than 0.5% – less than European cinema or that of any other continent. The situation throughout the rest of the region is no better; on the contrary, the figures tend to be equally grim. The figures above confirm a phenomenon that has been observed around the world: the danger, in the name of global trade, of the monopolization of image and sound and, consequently, the suppression of original cultural content from different parts of the world,

which finds itself without any means of reaching the public. In recent decades, the capitalist economy has found a new form of supranational ownership in copyright law, to which it applies the experience it has amassed in the acquisition and accumulation of wealth. A good sign has come, however, from a surprising majority of nations in 2006, in the form of the UNESCO Convention for the defense of cultural diversity.

We understand the challenges and opportunities that face the cinema of the region. As such, with objectives that are both modest and clear, at the Fundación TyPA we propose to facilitate access to alternative sources of funding for Latin American filmmakers and assure that the most diverse public possible, along with producers from other parts of the world, get the chance to see the new works of these artists. Unlike non-cultural products, cultural goods acquire a collective, patrimonial, public value once created, which differentiates them from the goods and services of the individual or private sphere. Cinema can count its ability to be incorporated into collective memory, both on an individual emotional level and as an anonymous experience shared by thousands, among its indices of effectiveness as a form. Above and beyond their unit value, films attain the status of intangible and non-transferable patrimony, clearly different from goods whose market behavior is easily comprehended by those 'concerned citizens'.

We wish to express our sincere gratitude to the essayists who contributed objectively and passionately to the debate surrounding this complex reality, as well as our recognition of the work of Eduardo Russo, who managed to bring into the spotlight a series of reflections that will allow us to better understand our field of battle.

Fundación TyPA

Américo Castilla, President

Ilse Hugan, Vice President

What does it mean to make films in Latin America? The landscape today is as complex as it is dynamic. New directors and new projects are constantly emerging; film festivals appear one after another in what could only be described as an explosion of cinema in the region. And yet inherent to this panorama, both so vital and so difficult to define, there is a troubling sense of uncertainty.

This book, which brings together the writing of directors, producers, scholars and critics, examines the current state of Latin American cinema. Exploring tendencies and possibilities for the future of the audiovisual arts within the context of recent changes in methods of production and circulation, the authors address a number of key issues, including the role of independent filmmaking in the market and in relation to alternative modes of production, the formation of new regional and global identities, means of support for filmmakers in Latin America, and the question of new formats, categories, and genres.

The result is less a mosaic of fragments than it is a tapestry whose interwoven threads create complex and changing shapes that constitute the fabric itself. This tapestry allows us to glimpse, beyond their particularities, the points of contact between different parts of the region.