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Dennis West

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Film and Revolution: A cuban Perspective

Julio García Espinosa. *Una imagen recorre el mundo.* Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1979. ix + 110 pp.

This collection of militantly Marxist essays on the mass media and revolution cannot be understood without some knowledge of the vast differences between filmmaking activities in Latin America and in the developed countries. For the past two decades, the leftist and progressive filmmakers of El Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano (the New Latin American Cinema of socio-political import) have routinely confronted formidable obstacles. For instance, production budgets are severely limited. The recent *Chuquiago,* the most expensive fiction film ever produced in Bolivia, cost only $82,000[1] (compared to the estimated $50 million price tag of *Superman*[2]). Materials and equipment are often inadequate or scarce. Chilean director Patricio Guzmán shot his monumental *The Battle of Chile,* a 281-minute documentary on the fall of Chilean President Salvador Allende, on film stock he received in the mail from French director Chris Marker; film could not be purchased in Chile at that time.[3] The distribution and exhibition of socially significant or political films may be extremely difficult. Bolivian director Jorge Sanjinés toured his country with portable projection equipment to bring his *Blood of the Condor* to peasants who had never before seen any movie.[4] Recently, leftist filmmakers have risked their lives for their activities. The Chilean cameraman on *The Battle of Chile,* Jorge Muller, and Argentine director Raymundo Gleyzer *(Mexico: The Frozen Revolution)* have been made to «disap-pear» in their respective countries; both are presumed dead.

The obstacles to filmmaking in Latin America were recently debated by over 400 filmmakers, writers, critics, actors, distributors, and producers at the First International Festival of New Latin American Cinema held in Havana in December of 1979.[5] The chief theoretical issues of the festival concerned the multi-national corporations' control of communications systems and the far-reaching implications of this control for the economies, cultures, and politics of the developing world. Delegations of filmmakers from various countries reported that Hollywood-style commercial movies dominate most Latin

American screens. The case of Venezuela is illustrative. In spite of the high-quality films produced by a talented group of Venezuelan filmmakers, *SaturdayNight Fever* and *Star Wars* were the leading money-making pictures in Caracas in 1978. In the same year, 451 films premiered throughout Venezuela; but only 18 were produced nationally. Foreign films netted 93% of the annual box-office earnings.[6]

It was fitting that the Cubans hosted the First International Festival of New Latin American Cinema, because Cuba is the only Latin American Country to boast a mature, self-financing film industry commited to producing pictures of sociopolitical significance while maintaining high technical standards. In Cuba all levels of production, distribution, and exhibition are controlled by the socialist state. The leaders of the Cuban Revolution had early recognized the importance of cinema, and one of the first major cultural acts of the Revolution was the founding of the Cuban Film Institute (Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos or ICAIC) on March 24, 1959. In the period 1960-78, ICAIC's production included 86 feature films, 613 shorts, 900 newsreels, 12 medium-lenght films, and 139 animated cartoons.[7] Today the Cuban film industry boasts an abundance of trained personnel and substantial technical capabilities, such as a color-film processing laboratory. A «mobile-cinema» program incorporates the far-flung rural population into the national filmgoing public.

Julio García Espinosa, the author of An *image Circles the Globe (Una imagen recorre el mundo)*, is one of ICAIC's foremost film directors. His best-known features are *Third World, Third World War* (1971), a self-reflexive documentary on the Vietnam War, and *The Adventures of Juan Quin Quin* (1967), a multi-genre parody of the literary, religious, cinematic, and folkloric traditions of prerevolution-ary Cuba. Garcia Espinosa, like fellow director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea *(Memories of Underdevelopment)*, studied filmmaking in the early 1950s at the Centro Sperimentale in Rome. Both men returned to Cuba, and in 1954 they collaborated on the documentary *The Charcoal Worker.* This exposé of the hardships of charcoal production on the island's southern coast was confiscated by Batista.[8] Garcia Espinosa's *An Image Circles the Globe,* then, is a reflection on filmmaking, politics, and culture by a man who first practiced filmmaking in bourgeois society and then actively participated in the establishment of a revolutionary film industry whose primary goal was decolonizing the taste of the moviegoing public.

García Espinosa aims this provocative collection not at film scholars, but at leftist Latin American filmmakers and others dedicated to bringing about social and cultural revolutions in Latin America. Although the author theorizes

on the esthetics of bourgeois and revolutionary film, he does not formulate a complete esthetics of the cinema. He is more concerned with assessing the sociopolitical-esthetic-technical potential of cinema and suggesting directions for the future revolutionary mass-media activities in Latin America. For North American readers this first book of film theory from Cuba will prove of particular interest as a guide to the theoretical bases sustaining the most significant revolutionary film praxis in the Americas.

The last statement of the book—« Socialism is the end of man's fragmentary era»[9]—could well serve as an epigraph for the entire collection, since Garcia Espinosa's premises derive from mainstream Marxist thought. The author adheres to the Marxist philosophy of art in that he sees art, part of the ideological superstructure, as fundamentally rooted in men's socio-economic and political existence. Like most Marxists, this essayist acknowledges a profound antagonism between artistic creativity and bourgeois ideology. A classless communist society, he believes, would make possible the reclaiming of the integrity of the self, because division of labor and class antagonism will have disappeared. In communist society, non-alienated man recovers his integral unity and escapes compartmentalization: «In a communist society there are no painters but only people who engage in painting among other activities.»[10]

«For an Imperfect Cinema» (1969) is Garcia Espinosa's best known and most influential piece.[11] In this essay, the author maintains that in an ideal future society man will be able to cultivate art as a «dis-interested» activity *(una actividad «desinteresada»)*, i.e., a nonremu-nerative, esthetic activity done by nonprofessional artists. «Disinterested» art stimulates man's creative function and generally enriches him, but it does not produce specifically applicable results, as does science. It is now impossible to practice art as a «disinterested» activity; to reach that goal, elitism must be banished from art.

Science, the author believes, is one of the factors which will contribute to the elimination of the elitist and minority practices of art. The development of science and technology has already facilitated the active presence of the masses in the artistic sphere; there are now more spectators than ever before. The current problem is how to convert those spectators into authors; art is a necessity for all, not just for specialists. The participatory tendencies of modern art also contribute to overcoming the barrier of elitism. Furthermore, the revolution itself points toward this goal by eliminating division of labor and class society, which in turn makes possible the total participation of the masses in society.

Since art as «disinterested» activity remains an unrealized goal, the immediate question is what can revolutionary filmmakers do to realize this ideal? The author calls for a cultural revolution and a new poetics of the cinema.

A new cinema, imperfect cinema, will be consciously and resolutely committed or partisan *(cine interesado).* Imperfect cinema finds its inspiration and themes in the problems of lucid persons (those who believe that revolutionary change is possible), not in the problems of neurotics. The author condems the tendency—which he relates to a Christian tradition—that links suffering and sickness with seriousness and beauty in art.

Those who struggle to bring about social revolution constitute imperfect cinema's public. An art charged with moral examples to be imitated is inappropriate for this audience. General denunciations of imperialism do not merit a high priority since pro-revolution audiences are already aware that imperialism is the enemy. Denunciation-cinema *(cine-denuncia)* would be valuable where a denunciation could directly combat a specific case of injustice.

Above all, imperfect cinema shows the process of problems. It is the opposite of a contemplative, self-sufficient cinema that illustrates in a beautiful manner the concepts and beliefs that one already holds. The author explains process via a comparison in journalism: «Showing the process of a problem is like showing the *development* of a news item without the commentary; it is like showing the multifaceted development of a piece of information without evaluating it.»[12]

One can not rigidly define the characteristics of imperfect cinema because its development is in flux. Both documentary and fictional modes are available to it, and it may mix genres. Imperfect cinema could be humorous. It rejects traditional standards of quality and the criteria of good taste; its overriding criterion is that it strive to destroy elitism in art. And finally, imperfect cinema does not represent one artistic movement replacing another; ultimately, imperfect cinema will disappear when art becomes a «disinterested» activity.

The central weakness of this essay (and the other pieces) is a failure to expand on major points and to illuminate them with concrete examples. The key concept of process is never specifically illustrated; indeed, not a single film title is mentioned in the entire essay. Patricio Guzman's *The Battle of Chile* (which García Espinosa helped to edit) would, I submit, provide an interesting test for the validity and usefulness of the process concept. This documentary does show the fall of Allende unfolding from many different political perspectives, but the filmmakers' controlling perspective~as the voice-over narrator reminds viewers—is Marxist-Leninist. The unanswered question, then, is how can filmmakers show the process of problems without a substantial degree of prior analysis? After all, Guzmán and his filmmaking collective initially had to select the socioeconomic and political issues and events to be depicted; and this

selection was done in accordance with a predetermined Marxist-Leninist analysis of the situation. Is not any documentarist's selection of his material and a theoretical framework for presenting it but a first step in the ideological manipulation of the viewer, regardless of whether or not the process of events is depicted? García Espinosa also leaves unanswered the implications of denying the importance of technical and esthetic considerations. Gould we reasonably expect audiences to look at shoddily made productions as long as they were ideologically correct? Though García Espinosa optimistically muses on spectators becoming authors, he fails to discuss overwhelming material obstacles to extending filmmaking opportunities to even a token percentage of the citizenry of an underdeveloped and dependent country.

The «Letter to the Chilean Magazine *Primer Plano*» was written in 1972 in response to a published criticism of «For an Imperfect Cinema.» In this letter García Espinosa admits that although the Cuban Revolution nationalized the movie theatres, foreign bourgeois productions still predominate. Recognizing the ideological power of cinema the author advocates taking control of movie screens by increasing Latin America's production of committed films. Latin American filmmakers should create a motion-picture industry for the cost of a single Hollywood movie; material limitations must be turned into virtues. This low-cost cinema will reject the star system and the massive use of extras, and it will require a new concept of the actor. Technological resources should be used sparingly and meaningfully, in strict accordance with the necessities of low-cost production. The author discusses the need to incorporate pleasurable elements into films that reflect the class struggle. He argues for a better understanding of the traditions of mainstream commercial cinema and suggests that films be made that are critical of those traditions. This sort of critical filmmaking could be accomplished with the input of spectators and workers.

In the six remaining essays, García Espinosa continues his discussion of the present and future directions of Latin American filmmaking: the formation of film technicians and the role of film and television schools; how to eliminate division of labor in filmmaking and reduce the size of crews; the need to broaden the traditional roles of film criticism and cinémathèques; the hosts of television shows as the well-rounded actors of the future; film as a language to be developed by common people as a means of communication;how filmmakers can prepare for seizing political and cultural power.

Radical film criticism should now take up the pressing task of relating García Espinosa's theoretical work to specific films. The theoretician-director's own films provide fruitful grounds for this study.[13] Of particular importance will be his cabaret film, *«Son» or Not «Son»*, presently in work-print stage. This comic, self-reflexive experiment combines techniques of documentary and

fiction filmmaking, incorpor-rates elements of popular genres (such as American musical), and features worker-actors in an attempt to create a radical film with both substantial themes and a broad appeal.

North American film scholars may criticize *An Image Circles the Globe* for its «underdeveloped» scholarly apparatus; there are no footnotes and the original publication information for most of the essays is left unspecified. Many will object to the author's style. While the essayist is consistent in his use of a combative revolutionary rhetoric, many of his contentions go unproved; and important topics are raised only to be dropped without thorough examination. However, film scholars in the developed countries would do well to look beyond these faults, since García Espinosa is not only one of Cuba's most influential theorists, but also a leading exponent of the New Latin American Cinema, a movement which may revitalize world cinema much as the New Latin American Novel has influenced the literary world. As for the author's Marxist premises and his revolutionary rhetoric, it should be pointed out that in Latin America a majority of intellectuals endorses the Marxist-socialist model both as political strategy and as theoretical paradigm. And for the vast majority of Latin Americans, alienation is not an obscure scholarly subject, but rather an empirical phenomenon constantly visible in the every-day circumstances of their lives.

García Espinosa's brand of militant Marxist theorizing should not be confused with current European Marxist film studies as influenced by psychoanalysis and structuralism. *An image Circles the Globe* is, at one level, a combat manual sketching the possibilities for revolutionary filmmaking in Latin America today. The distance between European Marxist film projects and Garcia Espinosa's work is the distance between Godard and Patricio Guzman; the writings of Louis Althusser and the speeches of Fidel Castro; development and underdevelopment. Lest one suspect that García Espinosa is writing ineffectually in a vacuum, I will close by mentioning that most of the personnel of the recently founded Nicaraguan Film Institute (Instituto Nicaragüense de Cine or INCINE) have trained in Cuba; and the Cuban model has profoundly influenced the ideological goals and the structure of the incipient Nicaraguan film industry.[14]

Notes

1 Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, «Bolivia,» in *International Film Guide 1979,* ed. Peter Cowie (London: Tantivy Press; New York: Barnes, 1978), p. 84.

2 James Monaco, *American Film Now: The People, the Power, the Money, the Movies* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), p. 6.

3 Julianne Burton, «Politics and the Documentary in People's Chile: An interview with Patricio Guzman on *The Battle of Chile,» Socialist Revolution,* September-October 1977, p. 46.

4 Dina Nascetti, *«The Courage of the People:* An interview with Jorge Sanjinés, » *Cineaste* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1972), p. 18.

5 This major cultural-political event presented the most complete panorama ever seen of El Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano. For a report on the festival see my forthcoming «Highlights of the First International Festival of New Latin American Cinema» in *Review* (Center for Inter-American Relations).

6 Dennis West, «Venezuelan Cinema: The Current Situation» forthcoming in *The American Hispanist.*

7 *Veinte años de cine cubano* (Centro de Información Cinematográfica of the Ministerio de Cultura: n.p., n.d.), p. 16.

8 Julianne Burton, «Revolutionary Cuban Cinema, first Part,» *Jump Cut,* no. 19, p. 17.

9 Julio García Espinosa, *Una imagen recorre el mundo* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1979), p. 106. My translation.

10 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), p. 179.

11 This essay (dated December 7, 1969) originally appeared in Spanish as «Por un cine imperfecto» in *Cine Cubano,* no. 66-67, pp. 46-53. An English translation of the essay appears in *Jump Cut,* no. 20, pp. 24-26.

12 García Espinosa, p. 15. My translation.

13 Practical criticism linking Garcia Espinosa's theoretical work and his films has already commenced. See Anna Marie Taylor's «Imperfect Cinema, Brecht, and *The Adventures of Juan Quin Quin»* in *Jump Cut,* no. 20, pp. 26-29.

14 Dennis West, «Report on the Nicaraguan Cinema» Forthcoming in *The American Hispanist.*