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CONFRONTING THE CRISIS IN MEXICAN CINEMA

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One hundred twenty-eight feature films were shot in Mexico in 1988; 107 of these films were national productions or coproductions. Unfortunately, most of this record-high domestic production consisted of cheaply made genre movies — *churros* — that use well-worn narrative formulas in the unimaginative pursuit of commercially attractive subjects such as sex, drugs, crime, and violence.

The prolonged economic crisis that has gripped Mexico In the 1980s has brought a financial crunch to the nation's motion-picture industry, one of the "Big Three" in Latin America — along with the Brazilian and the Argentine. The Mexican economic crisis has meant that while production capital is available in the private sector for *churros*, there is little available for serious filmmaking. Yet in spite of this formidable obstacle, serious films continue to be made.

The best of the recent Mexican motion-picture production was shown in Guadalajara March 9-15, 1989 at an annual film festival known in this edition as the Cuarta Muestra de Cine Mexicano. This major non-competitive event was sponsored by the University of Guadalajara's film studies center, the Centro de Investigación y Enseñanza Cinematográficas

or CIEC. The festival showcased eight industrial and independently made features that represent a broad diversity In terms of thematic concerns, narrative and aesthetic approaches, and funding sources and modes of production.

Director José Luis Urquieta's *Muelle rojo* (1987) attempts to present a historically accurate vision of a dock workers' cooperative In Tampico — from the beginnings of the organization in 1911 to the problems facing the group today. While the film explores a theme of historical and social importance, it suffers from an uneven tone. The first two parts establish a heroic-epic tone in showing the struggle to form the cooperative and strengthen it In the face of great pressure from U.S. interests. But the third section descends to near farce with the appearance of the popular comic Roberto "Flaco" Guzmán in a presen-day setting.

In *Los camaroneros* (1986), director Raúl Araiza depicts the struggles of fishermen in Guaymas, Sonora to found a cooperative and create their own fleet. The film fails because of its unoriginal narrative approach. Screenwriter Carlos Valdemar and Araiza simply appropriate the tired clichés of action pictures and melodramas to tell the story: macho actor Eric del Castillo is involved in an improbable romantic subplot with a beautiful woman half his age; at the end of the film, the pro-cooperative and anti-cooperative *compadres* finally face off in a predictably violent showdown.

In his first feature, *El camino largo* (1988), the young director Luis Estrada uses an imaginative visual style and a loud rock music score to create an offbeat thriller set in a decaying urban landscape of automobile junkyards, abandoned factories, and a railroad roundhouse. In a Dennis Hopper-like role, actor Pedro Armendáriz abandons life in an automobile graveyard to seek out the vicious drug dealers who have kidnapped a young girl. *El camino largo* has apparently been influenced by renowned foreign films such as *Repo Man* and *A Clockwork Orange*, but Estrada's seldom seen urban locations and his overall artistic treatment are remarkable in a thriller made in the context of Mexican film culture. Producer-director Estrada shot his motion picture independently in 16mm in order to lower production costs; now he is seeking funding to blow the film up to 35mm, a prerequisite for commercial exhibition.

Scriptwriter-director Busi Cortés based her first feature, *El secreto de Romelia* (1988), on the short novel *El viudo Román* by famed Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos. In the complexly structured *El secreto de Romelia*, females from three generations of a family journey to Tlaxcala and the past to discover that patriarchal authority and sexual repression governed social life when the grandmother was a girl. The film was produced by state film enterprises and CIEC.

CIEC also coproduced Arturo Ripstein's latest feature, *Mentiras piadosas* (1988), along with private producers, two labor unions representing motion-picture personnel, and the Fund for the Support of Quality Cinema. This creative production scheme was necessary to finance the low-budget picture because Ripstein, after months of crisscrossing the bureaucratic labyrinth of the state film enterprises, had come up empty-handed — in spite of being one of Mexico's most prolific directors, in spite of his Ariel (the Oscar equivalent) for the direction of his previous film, and in spite of his personal conversations about production difficulties with the President of the Republic. The case well illustrates the difficulties of financing quality cinema in the late 1980s, when the state has de-emphasized the active role it played in production a decade earlier.

Mentiras piadosas is a poweful melodrama featuring well-rounded characters of the urban lower middle class trapped in a web of false hopes and illusions — both in business and in their love lives. Ripstein sensitively explores the relationship between adulterous lovers who abandon their families but can never overcome their petty fears, guilt, and jealousy. On-location shooting in poor areas in Mexico City visually registers the characters' grim existence amongst useless clutter, which is symbolized by a hoplessly vulgar model of Tenochtitlán (the Aztec capital) that two dreamers painstakingly construct as part of an absurd get-rich-quick scheme.

Director and co-screenwriter Sergio Olhovich's ambitious biographical epic *Esperanza* (1988) is based loosely on the life of Olhovich's father, who as a young man left Russia during the Civil War to come to Mexico in 1919. He eventually became one of Mexico's leading petroleum engineers and located vast oil reserves. To give his motion picture an epic sweep, Olhovich filmed in many outdoor locations in Mexico and the Soviet Union; and intercalated archival newsreel footage and voice-over narration effectively record the march of history across the decades.

Esperanza's subject is unusual and interesting, but Olhovich stumbles in his artistic treatment. Though the film is a personal epic set amidst political turmoil, there is little exploration of the socioeconomic and political causes of revolution in Russia or Mexico. A roving band of Mexican revolutionaries who threaten to shoot the protagonist as a *gringo* smack of cartoon stereotypes. At times the film becomes mere travelogue, as when the protagonist is introduced to the wonders of Mexico while crossing the country on foot.

To fund his expensive 138-minute epic, Olhovich struck an unusual coproduction agreement with the state's Mexican Film Institute (IMCINE) and the Soviet coproducer Lenfilm. Production costs were split approximately fifty-fifty between the two countries. The rights to the film

are held by the Soviet Union for the socialist World and IMCINE for the Americas.

Spanish Television has recently begun to invest vast sums in high-quality coproduction projects with Latin America, including fiction features. All six features in the Spanish Television series *Amores difíciles* are based on story ideas by Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez, who collaborated on all the scripts.

One of the films in the series, *El verano de la Señora Forbes* (1988), was directed and co-scripted by the prominent Mexican filmmaker Jaime Humberto Hermosillo. This adaptation of a García Márquez short story displays strong production values and Hermosillo's customary eye from biting social criticism in sketching a portrait of a rigid and repressed German governess who martially disciplines her two spoiled Mexican charges while secretly longing for a tryst with a certain handsome young man. German superstar Hanna Schygulla achieves a creditable performance in the lead role, and her participation in the film greatly enhances its international appeal.

The high costs of 35mm production have led Hermosillo to experiment with home video equipment, and at the festival he presented his latest production, the sixty-minute video *La tarea* (1989). This intelligently scripted narrative offers an engaging and in-depth look at a couple's relationship recorded essentially in a single long-duration shot from a stationary camera. According to the director-scripwriter, the total cost of production equalled the price of a single video cassette. *La tarea*, however, remains an interesting exercise without commercial potential.

Although a print of director Felipe Cazals' latest film, *Las inocentes* (1986-88), never did reach the festival, the work generated considerable interest and discussion because It is one of the first Mexican productions shot in video and transferred to 35mm. If acceptable image quality can be attained in the 35mm transfer, this low-cost mode of production could prove a boon to Mexican and all Third World filmmakers.

The festival featured a retrospective of Ripstein's oeuvre and twenty-four short and medium-length films representing the recent work of students at Mexico's three film schools. The event was most successful, however, in offering a look at the efforts of those undaunted filmmakers determined to attempt quality features in spite of the economic crisis.

Of course the production of quality motion pictures is merely a first step in a country where distribution and exhibition patterns favor foreign — principally U.S. — movies or domestic froth. Festival goers were reminded of this situation each time they entered the University of Guadalajara's principal screening site. A commercial cinema to the left advertised the latest James Bond caper; the movie house to the right, a Mexican porno flick with the imaginative title *Las seducidas.*