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Verónica Córdova
Cinema and Revolution in Latin America: A Cinematic Reading of History. A Historical Reading of Film.
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Cinema and history

Verónica Córdova's doctoral dissertation entitled *Cinema and Revolution in Latin America: A Cinematic Reading of History. A Historical Reading of Film*, presents new opportunities for evaluating the historical trajectory and importance of a significant cinematic movement, the New Latin American Cinema movement. Córdova makes an important contribution as a Latin American filmmaker and scholar within a field that is dominated by either American or European scholars. This provides her with a unique opportunity to reflect, beyond her native Bolivia, not only on the historical trajectory of a cinema movement that gave context to her own training as a filmmaker, but also on the way in which the field has been constructed by various scholarly positions.

The importance of this should not be underestimated. The field of critical film studies in Latin America varies in scope and depth from country to country in a similar way to the way she describes imbalances in production opportunities. While there are film scholars of great importance mostly but not solely in the largest film-producing countries (Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and others), understandably this is not the case in the other areas where cinema histories are almost non-existent. In places like Cuba, where there is an important national cinema industry, film criticism was shunned after the Revolution of 1959 and the function was subsumed as part of the filmmaking process. In other words, criticism became part of the narrating process, as she discusses with respect to Tomas G. Alea. This situation is now in reverse in Cuba and in other areas where new generations of film historians and theorists are rethinking their own positions both within a national and international perspective and carving out critical spaces. Córdova joins this new generation of scholars trained particularly in the discipline of media studies.

The topic of Córdova's dissertation is not new, and in fact in the U.S. and Europe the cinema of the New Latin American Cinema Movement came to light as critics and film scholars of the 1960s and 1970s responded to the audacity of these films as they premiered in film festivals throughout the world. The political nature of this cinema has been explored by scholars such as Julianne Burton, Ana M. Lopez, Suzana Pick, Robert Stam, Michael Chanan, Paulo Antonio Paranagua and others to name just a few. Córdova reflects on this research and pro-

poses a strategy that emphasizes the historical context within which cinema is produced as well as a reciprocal reading of the historical context through the films themselves. The historical moments are further focused on the moments of Revolution: the Mexican 1910–1920, the Bolivian 1952, the Cuban, 1959 and the Nicaraguan, 1979.

Her general objective is «to carry out a *historical reading* of three major stages in Latin American film history ('Old', 'New' and Contemporary Latin American Cinema) and a *cinematographic reading* of the national revolutions of the 20th century in the continent...» a theoretical position that builds on the work of Marc Ferro taking into account the development of historical studies of film and the unfolding perspectives of film history and theory. To do this she postulates several questions: «How does film reflect social history in its narrative and in its production/financing aspects? How does film affect social history, a) when film is used as historical source and b) when film plays a role as agent for historical change? How does social history and political/cultural contexts effect filmmaking and condition narratives? How do nation-state policies effect production and narratives?» (11–12). To these questions I would add yet another implicit one that is not answered overtly: How is the writing of film history itself affected by national/international/disciplinary perspectives? The response to this is addressed in positioning the study of film history, theory and criticism within the North American and European academies.

Córdova differentiates her approach from other historical perspectives as not merely framing cinema history against the «political, social and cultural context of the period ... but analyzing the *interplay* between social history and film history» (13). This implies an active and reciprocal relationship between social, political and economic events and the way they affect the development of cinema and history. An important point of this is the uneven rate of development of film industries artisanal or commercial in Latin America and the specific way in which modernization and later development strategies affected both national myths and economic and social realities.

The evidence for this enquiry is to be found in official documents, interviews, archival sources, production histories, news media, film journals and official speeches as well as in secondary sources in the disciplines of history, political science, cultural studies and film theory.

Of most relevance is the comparative perspective between the different revolutionary periods and discourses and the various ways in which nationalist discourses and discriminatory policies are expressed in and hidden from national narratives. Córdova's analysis of Bolivia's situation is particularly strong in this regard, especially since it is an area of study that has rarely been addressed. It is certainly a strong contribution to the increasing concerns about representation and autonomy of indigenous peoples as well as new ways of conceptualizing the role of native film production within different cultural contexts.

By comparing the different historical experiences of revolution in Latin America in the 20th century, Córdova underscores that revolutionary experiences cannot be generalized nor can their effects even when they are so closely interrelated. This is a valuable point for the study of Latin American cinema, since past perspectives have tended not to evaluate the important differences and how they are represented in the types of narratives that are constructed to consolidate revolutionary gains. A case in point is the analysis of the heroic guerrilla in the Cuban films of the early 1960s.

This fact in comparison with the analysis of the way the Mexican Revolutionary discourses and images turned up in popular melodramas adds an interesting counterpoint to the isolated study of melodramatic films from the Mexican Golden Age (roughly 1940s and 1950s). It brings together perspectives of the revolutionary and the impact these roles had in the construction of national myths and stereotypes as well as gender roles. It is also a way of addressing gender at all within the context of revolutionary history and discourses, since often these issues are either at the service of nation-building or patriarchal constructions and are issues that deserve to be problematized more in-depth.

There is another discussion that is worthy of consideration. Córdova's periodization leaves for last both a questioning and an affirmation of a continuity for the «Neo» but still «New» Latin American Cinema Movement, arguing that the institutional aspect is still relevant, although I would argue quite fragile, and that this allows us to still consider the movement as such. This point could be strengthened with an important discussion regarding the relevance of continuing to constitute the historical or national study of Latin American Cinema in terms of a movement. What are the implications

for this continuity of perspective for film history? What does it mean for continental film production? What is at stake if the fragile bonds give way to market-driven concerns? This discussion might also serve to problematize the role of earlier (and more Leftist) generations of filmmakers in relation to the newer ones? Córdova states that Bolivian filmmaker Jorge Sanjines (a filmmaker from the 1960s) might be the only filmmaker capable (in Bolivia) of raising the funding necessary to make a film, which would imply a certain amount of cultural capital of the Left. This is both intriguing and important within a local and a continental perspective. Most importantly, however, are the theoretical silences that would be emphasized if we insist on the historical perspective of a movement, such as for example a comparative perspective of the different modernities that gave these revolutionary moments their definition.

Recent scholarship in Cuba by a new generation of film scholars has also questioned the canons that have been constructed around the revolutionary films at the exclusion of the more 'artisanal' mode of production within revolutionary Cuba. One Cuban author has referred to this cinema as 'submerged'. This perspective would be worthy of consideration in Córdova's dissertation because of its implications for a contemporary rethinking of 'the' revolutionary cinema of Cuba for the generation that grew up *with* the revolution. In other words, if we must contend with the contemporary issues affecting the cohesiveness of the movement at the level of industrial practices (training new filmmakers, co-productions, institutions, etc.), then there needs to be space for considering the ways in which other aspects of cinematic culture, public intellectuals, critics, etc., form part of the historical process. The need to consider a Cuban national cinema beyond the official productions of the ICAIC is telling of a new historical moment rooted in the *Special Period*—the euphemism for the 1990s in Cuba—and within a moment of transition and connection to a world economy. This reciprocal view of national cinematographic history can inform (or question?) the construction of some of the tenets of the New Latin American Cinema Movement.

There are also challenges to the particular framework. Córdova states at the outset that she will not be conducting a general history of the New Latin American Cinema Movement and thus she focuses her discussion on the specific periods

that I have outlined above. However, it is still a considerable task to account for these historical periods with great significance without falling into the generalities that are typical in some of the historical accounts that she takes to task. So while it is an intriguing comparative task, and one worthy of doing as I have already stated, it is also problematic to cover so much historical territory in such a general way. This is at times alleviated by attention to one particular event (i.e. death of Sandino or the urban guerrillas in pre-Revolutionary Cuba) but there are also vast stretches that fall into general recounting of events.

Furthermore, an emphasis on reading the filmic text in relation to history leaves little room for exploring the convergent ways in which other media played a significant role in the consolidation of revolutionary goals and ideology. This is certainly true in El Salvador (Radio Venceremos) and in Cuba (television and radio), but less so in Bolivia. It is particularly interesting in light of the kinds of uses that different governments have made of television or radio either to support or censor an ideology or a revolutionary project. Córdova mentions some of these things in passing (also mentions the popularity of radionovelas and telenovelas), but the relationship between these media is also of paramount importance in constructing or contesting those revolutionary identities. While a real consideration of this issue would expand the project considerably, it is important to consider the role of cinema within the broader cultural context of media as well, since the media have proved to be interrelated in both their development and in the construction of consumers and citizens.

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