

# BOOK REVIEWS

## Latin American Film Makers and the Third Cinema

Edited with an introduction  
by Zuzana M. Pick

260 pages, Ottawa: Film Studies Program, Carleton University for the author and available through her, 1978, \$5.90

In the decade since the publication of their seminal essay, "Towards a Third Cinema," the kind of revolutionary film culture described by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino has gone into a steady if not terminal decline. In Latin America, in particular, radical cinema has suffered fatal blows from overt political repression and barely less subtle economic pressures. At the same time, those English language film periodicals that regularly brought us news of Third Cinema productions have turned to other matters as the films themselves appear with a declining frequency. And, for those who have gone to the trouble to present Third Cinema in a coherent fashion, the public response in Canada has been less than enthusiastic — as evidenced by the recent move of the Third World Moving Images Project from Quebec City to Massachusetts.

Fortunately, there are those in this country who believe that the Third Cinema is not only worth remembering, but worth understanding as a basis for the socially pertinent films made today and in the future. Innovative distributors — such as Dec and New Cinema — continue to make Third Cinema titles available to us. At the same time, the National Film Board Theatre shows occasional evidence of the internationalist orientation that has disappeared from so much of Canadian public life. At the university level, an increasing number of film teachers have been working to make the Third Cinema accessible and meaningful to their students.

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Among the most substantial achievements of the continuing Canadian inquiry into Third Cinema is Zuzana Pick's anthology, *Latin American Film Makers and the Third Cinema*. The book contains some 18 translations of articles by the most prominent filmmakers and critics of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba and Uruguay as well as an introduction, filmographies and extensive bibliography of English, Spanish and French materials. As such, it is a successful progression from pioneering, though less useful, works such as E. Bradford Burn's *Latin American Cinema* and Julianne Burton's *The New Latin American Cinema*. It is a measure of the times that Pick unlike Burns and Burton, has had to print the book in *samizdat* and distribute it herself (Film Studies Program, Carleton University, Ottawa).

Pick's simple but radical step of letting the Third Cinema speak for itself yields a compilation of some of the freshest cinema writing to appear in English in recent memory. One is struck in nearly all these pieces by the clarity with which the authors integrate their understanding of their societies into the pragmatic concerns of film production in order to formulate their aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) statements. In this vein, the Bolivian director Jorge Sanjines (*The Blood of the Condor, The Courage of the People*) writes:

"We give back to culture what it has given to us. The cultural equipment we assimilate, the vision and the concepts, the styles and characteristics of our people, incorporated into our personalities; all these factors determine a particular creative style...

They add to and augment cultural values and equipment, not modifying them, but simply enriching them."

But the cinema discussed by these authors is not populist in Capra's sense of the term. The audience is not simply complimented for its instinctive good sense and traditional values. Rather, as Glauber Rocha (*Terra em Transe, Antonio das Mortes*) states:

"The public feels itself taken to task in the theatre, forced to decipher a new type of film: technically imperfect, dramatically jarring, sociologically imprecise — as is Brazil's own official sociology; politically aggressive and uncertain, as is Brazil's own politics; violent and sad — though sadder, much sadder than it is violent — like our carnival, which is much sadder than it is gay."

The tentative nature of the cinema that Rocha describes is echoed in nearly all the articles by the non-Cubans. As the Colombian director Carlos Alvarez (*Que es la Democracia?*) admits:

"Perhaps it is still very little, a beginning, but it is already being done. And the ones who learn the most from contact (with the workers and peasants) are not the people when one tries to speak of their oppressed and vilified realities, but the directors in contact with them, the people, that contemptuous word in the mouth of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie is the class of origin of all the filmmakers who have gone to the people and who have had to learn painfully that it is this social class

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that is the source of all real knowledge: a fountain of learning and the only one that can be changed and restored to its humanity."

The firmness of purpose displayed by these three writers is an outgrowth of a creative pragmatism all too often absent from the political cinemas of more developed nations. Despite their unquestionable Marxist commitment, the Third Cinema writers rarely indulge in idiosyncratic jargon or pointless distinctions. They have little difficulty in defining their revolutionary goals while the self-criticism in which they engage is practically rather than theoretically oriented. There is, to be sure, some factionalism apparent (and more suggested). However, in almost all cases, the author is writing in the name of a collective or of a unified movement — be it the once prolific Third Cinemas of Chile and Brazil or the barely extant groups in Colombia and Uruguay.

The Cuban writers stand somewhat apart from the authors of the book's other articles. They are generally conscious of their role as the only continuing embodiment of revolutionary cinema in Latin America, and, as such, can

take the time to refine the ideology and practice of what they are doing. Hence, Pastor Vega, with the unique benefit of archival facilities, systematically deals with the legacy of imperialist film culture while Alfredo Guevera can analyze his nation's cinema on the basis of ten years of uninterrupted productivity. It would, however, be a mistake to assess the Cubans as any less passionate than the more beleaguered filmmakers on the South American mainland. In their article, Jorge Fraga, Estrella Pantin and Julio Garcia Espinosa vigorously denounce previous errors in arguing for a reconstruction of the means for the production and distribution of the "didactic documentary." By the same token, editors of *Cine Cubano* call for a cinema that — while allowing for diversity — has at its core an uncompromising commitment to a direct and ideologically sound education of the Cuban people.

Pick's anthology is edited with a sense of political purpose equal to that of the authors chosen. All but one of the articles is taken from *Cine Cubano*, presumably one of the few Latin American publication outlets remaining for Third Cinema directors. Conscious of

this, Pick argues, in her extensive introduction, that it is only with a political orientation that one may begin to come to terms with the body of work these people represent:

"The application of "traditional" criticism to the Third Cinema would be a treason to the political concerns of its filmmakers. An "auteurist" approach would go against the ideological concepts outlined by the Third World film makers. It is therefore necessary to develop a critical method which takes into account some of the notions which have been introduced, such as "national culture," "decolonization," "didactic cinema," and political engagement. A traditional sociological analysis might permit an effective content analysis which demands good knowledge of the situation of the Third World, but neglects the aesthetic objectives of this cinema.

And, speaking as a Canadian, Pick concludes that this mode of understanding is not entirely irrelevant in finding "the means to express cinematically our own national identity."

Seth Feldman

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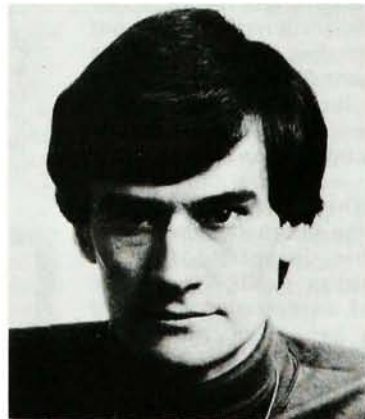
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