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CINEMAS of Central America

What is Central American Cinema? Or more precisely, is there any single formation under which the diverse cinemas of Central American nations might come to bear? Is there a conglomeration of similar styles, identities, cultural attitudes, and ideologies from Belize, Costa Rica, Panama, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua? These are foundational inquiries for conceptualizing a regional pan-American cinema; inquiries that are answered in part by the films themselves and the festivals that screen them. The most prominent showcase of Central American cinema, the Festival Ícaro del Audiovisual Centroamericano, represents collective efforts to support, promote, and sustain Central American cinemas in the recognition of shared histories of internal wars, military dictatorships, U.S. intervention, and shared experiences of economic, social, and political instability.1

In the early years of cinema, collaborations across Central America were less evident than those between Central American and other more robust cinemas, typically Mexican cinema. A robust cinema is more of a sign of stable industrial organization than of a flourishing national economy; from the earliest years of cinema, the nations of Central America have experienced neither for any sustained amount of time. During the rise and consolidation of the film industry in the Southern hemisphere, several national industries gained prominence and even came to dominate the market. Mexican and Argentine Cinema and catapulted beyond all other Latin American cinemas, leaving behind fledgling industries like those in Central America. During the forties, with the United States, the larger cinematic industries of Latin America dominated the market and determined what audiences would see. By the fifties, these strong cinemas faced economic crises that would lead to a continental reorganization that gave rise to the New Latin American cinematic movement of the sixties.2 New Latin American cinema is a revolutionary cinema founded on the political ideal of Pan-American solidarity; so that national affiliation is subsumed by the principles of hemispheric continuity. The development and consolidation of a national cinema is not contrary to the aims of the New Latin American cinema, instead attention is drawn to the shared histories and practices of colonization and the realities of political, economic, and social destabilization. Though part of this larger movement, each national cinema maintained its particularity.

The longest cinematic history in Central America belongs to Guatemala City where the Lumière brothers held one of the first screenings on September 26th 1896.3 Yet this historical occasion did not mark the birth of the Guatemalan film industry. Instead, from the fifties to the seventies almost every Guatemalan film was a co-production with Mexican cinema. The same is true of films from El Salvador, many of which were also products of collaborations with the Mexican film industry. Almost all other Salvadorian cinematic productions were made to promote and honor the war efforts of the Peoples' Revolutionary Army during the civil war. The Nicaraguan film industry is made up largely of films from INCINE, the Nicaraguan Film Institute, an arm of the revolutionary Sandinista government that generated over seventy films from 1979 to 1990.4

In the case of Costa Rican cinema, there is an effort to promote filmmaking along with preservation. This resulted in the development of an organizational center for the production, promotion, and distribution of its national cinema known as El Centro Costarricense de Producción Cinematográfica or Centro de Cine, a body created and supported by the Ministry of Culture has been the technical and cultural center for the production of moving images in Costa Rica for more than a quarter of a century. Other film industries have
also focused their efforts on preservation and the creation of the national cinematic archive. In El Salvador the government passed a bill in 1996 that would grant funds for cinematic preservation; a task that goes back to the films of the 1935 Caribbean Sports Games.

The history of Central American Cinema is full of gaps filled by efforts at preservation. Recently, break-out filmmakers have garnered international acclaim for their films. In exile from her native El Salvador, Paula Heredia recently won an Emmy for her documentary about the tragic events on September eleventh. Guatemalan Luis Argüeta won international distribution for El Silencio de Neto (1994), the first feature film produced in Guatemala. Costa Rican Oscar Castillo won critical acclaim on the festival circuit with Asesinato en El Meneo (2001). Sami Kafati is said to be the only Honduran filmmaker known for making the first Honduran feature-length film, Mi amigo Angel, and who recently joined the international festival circuit with No hay tierra sin dueño. These are only a few examples from the various national cinemas.

The question of a Central American cinema is linked to the turbulent political histories of the nations' cinemas from Central America. All seem to share the same ruptured development and gaps that hindered full consolidation of a commercial industry. The recent reappearance of Central American cinema on the international film festival scene has as much to do with the diminishment of internal national conflicts as with the democratization of filmmaking through digital media and video. The new productions share some common features: many deal with the postwar era, the construction of national identity, and the problems associated with social and economic instability. Yet, if a sign of entering the global market is gaining representation in International Film Festivals, then more ground has yet to be broken. The recent Chicago International Film festival featured films from Latin America, but none from Central America, perhaps a sign that these cinemas have yet to achieve substantial representation on world festival circuits. Likewise, any cursory glance at recent international film festival programs or distribution catalogues still foreground the cinemas of Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, and Brazil with all other films appearing under the general rubric of Latin American cinema. This is not for lack of Central American films but a symptom of the vagaries of the international cinematic market.

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