

THE BIRTH OF NEW ECUADOREAN CINEMA

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The Ecuadorean Cinema is still a stranger for European, American and even Latin American viewers. Its small feature film production and the lack of state support have relegated it to historical and critical oblivion.

This cinematographic stagnation is not an exclusive case of this Andean country, but of a whole region sunk in social, political, and economic crisis.¹ In this region, two notorious examples in the scholar arena are the Bolivian director Jorge Sanjinés and the Peruvian filmmaker Francisco Lombardi. While Sanjinés portrays the harsh reality of indigenous communities of the Andean plateau in such films as *Ukamau* (1966), *Yawar mallku* (1969), *El coraje del pueblo* (1971), and *iFuera de Aquí!* (1974). Lombardi embraces divisive themes in the Peruvian society such as military brutality in *La ciudad y los perros* (1985), based on the homonymous novel of Mario Vargas Llosa (1962), or extreme poverty in Lima's suburbs as in *Caídos del cielo* (1990), just to mention a few of his films.

This current article gives a brief historical review of the Ecuadorean feature films and shows the birth of the New Ecuadorean Cinema. The term "New" Ecuadorean cinema not only alludes to the establishment of cinematography of feature films on a more constant pace,² but also, and more principally, to the inclusion of Ecuadorean cinematography in the New Latin American cinema movement already established in the sixties and

¹ The majority of Latin American countries have been dedicated to an elaboration of an artisan cinema or *auteur cinema*, due mainly to the efforts of individual and private ventures. This cinematographic stagnation is not an exclusive case of this Andean country, but of a whole region sunk in social, political, and economic crisis. Only the countries of Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico represent film industries that have premiered a countless number of films per year during their golden years and still maintain a similar market today. They still produce but in smaller scale: Brazil released 93 films in 1980, 80 in 1981 y 86 in 1982, while México released 80 films in 1982, 15 are co-productions (Mahieu 21).

² Ecuadorean born directors have released fourteen feature films between 1924 and 2006, and ten of these fourteen films belong to the past twenty years. This does not include the several movies filmed by foreign directors, some of whom settled down in the country, while others chose to work with Ecuadorean professionals. In this paper I am referring to fictional feature films as film made for distribution in theaters and a running time of at least 80 minutes.

which currently continues.³

In Ecuador, the first example of an individual effort to create a national cinema is Augusto San Miguel Reese and his films: *El Tesoro de Atahualpa* (1924), *Se necesita una guaga* (1924) and *Un abismo y dos almas* (1925). The Ecuadorean film scholar Wilma Granda describes his life: "At the age of 19 years, he managed to release three feature films and three documentaries. From 1924 to his death, San Miguel called for Latin American unity through poetry, theater, cinema, and mainly of political practice" (2: 82). Without a doubt, as Granda affirms, San Miguel Reese is the pioneer of the national fiction cinema (106). After San Miguel Reese's cinematographic collaboration in the twenties, Ecuadorean film artists focus almost exclusively on the production of documentaries, short films and low budget projects for more than 60 years.⁴ The exception in this tendency is the feature film: *Mariana de Jesús: Azucena de Quito* (Paco Villar, 1959).

During the decades of the fifties through the eighties, the Ecuadorean audience, artists and intellectuals begin to realize the importance of film as an expression of art and mass communication, and they establish film societies. These societies facilitate the establishment of the *Asociación de Cineastas del Ecuador* (ASOCINE) in 1977 and *Cinemateca Nacional* (National Film Archive) in 1981. This latter one, with the support of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is in charge of safeguarding the national audiovisual patrimony. In this supportive environment, Gustavo e Igor Guayasamín directed the most important Ecuadorean documentary *Los hieleros del Chimborazo* (1980).⁵

³ Ana María López summarizes: "What is the New Latin American Cinema? The term represents an attempt to impose unity on a number of diverse cinematic practices; a political move to create an order out of disorder and to emphasize similarities rather than differences. It acquires its cultural and political currency retroactively, as it is used to redefine and value contestational cinematic movements that emerged independently in different countries" (138).

⁴ Ecuador has an extensive production in documentaries and short films, see Estrella, Ulises, ed. *Catálogo de películas ecuatorianas 1922-1996*. Quito: CCE/UNESCO, 2000. Christian León and Miguel Alvar explore how recently low budget films are distributed in alternative channels.

⁵ This documentary was financed by the *Banco Central del Ecuador* (The Central Bank), an example of how the oil boom supported (in a way) art and education during the seventies. The Central Bank supports the museum, literature, etc. Special Mention in the International Festival of the New Latin American

In the last two decades, we have witnessed the emergence of a new Ecuadorean cinema through feature films. From *La tigra* (Camilo Luzuriaga 1989) to *Rabia* (Sebastián Cordero 2010), a unique portrait of Ecuadorean and Latin American realities is developed through these films.

This New Ecuadorean Cinema started in 1989, when Ecuadorean director Camilo Luzuriaga, releases his first feature film: *La tigra*, based on the homonymous story of the guayaquileño writer José de la Cuadra.⁶ The incessant support of Ecuadorean viewers towards the movie caused a box office hit in 1990. *La tigra* was screened in Quito and Guayaquil for several weeks, at the same time as the American mega production *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989) ("Cine: ¿Industria o Arte?" 13-15). John King considers *La tigra* as "Ecuador's first modern feature" and observes that this film reworks the *femme fatale* theme seen in Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos's famous novel *Doña Bárbara* (285). However *La tigra*, unlike its foreign counterparts, clearly distinguishes itself in presenting to the spectator a traditional and reminiscent subject. This thematic approach agrees with Jorge Schnitman's conclusions on genre development of the Latin American cinema, he alleges that one of the intentions of the Latin American cinema is to present a cinema with traditional subjects or folkloric premises as a commercial strategy (9). *La tigra*, thanks to its commercial and critical success,⁷ and to the influence in future productions, possesses unique characteristics such as theme, setting, aesthetic and ideology. *La tigra* qualifies as new Ecuadorean genre in its primitive phase, which I have named "montubio." Its influences

Cinema in Havana, Cuba (1980); Colón de Oro Audience Choice Award in VI Ibero-American Film Festival of Huelva, Spain (1980); Audience Choice Award in the X Film Festival of Lillie, France (1981); Gold Medallion by International Federation of Film Societies (FICC) (1982); First Prize in Tampere Art Film Festival, Finland, (1981); Gold Prize in Damascus International Film Festival, Syria, (1981); Silver Cup XII Moscow International Film Festival, Russia (1981), and Special Mention in the First International Festival of Indigenous Film, México (1985).

⁶ Michael Handelsam points out: "The filmmaker Luzuriaga has placed 'The Tigress' in a tradition inconsistent with Cuadra's way of thinking." which was to portray the sociohistoric complexity of the woman and the need for change in attitudes. The film represents Luzuriaga's personal point of view of this important narration" (70).

⁷ Best Opera Prima, the XXX International Film Festival of Cartagena, Colombia (1990); Best Music and Photography in the VII International Film Festival International of Bogotá, Colombia (1990); Second Prize Audience Choice Award in *Encuentro Andino de Cineastas* in Cuzco, Peru (1991).

are seen in the television adaptation of Juan Leon Mera's *Cumandá* (César Carmignani, 1993) ("La magia Sangurima" 8B) and later in Carlos Naranjo's *Sueños en la mitad del mundo* (1999). This cinematographic adaptation also re-examines the clash between civilization and barbarism established in Latin American literature. Recently Ana Maria Lusnich further explores the subject of Latin American cinema in her book *Civilización y Barbarie: en el cine argentino y latinoamericano* (2005).

Two years after *La tigre* in 1991, another Ecuadorean director Viviana Cordero released her *opera prima: Sensaciones*. This film is lesser known in the New Ecuadorean Cinema. Unfairly, *Sensaciones* is only mentioned with regards to Cordero's later work. Aside from cinema, Cordero has explored narrative, drama, and television. Her narrative work, of great critical acceptance, expresses several themes such as: the modern Ecuadorean family, migration, women in the Ecuadorean society, and the search of a cultural identity. These themes are already revealed in *Sensaciones* and allow us to analyze her work from an *auteur cinema* perspective. *Sensaciones* displays mainly a preoccupation towards the artistic creation, in search of its own originality, in this case of a "realidad andina" (a true Andean reality). This search agrees with the parameters of *Cinema novo* in Brazil or Cuban Cinema. *Cinema novo* tries to find the "brasileñidad" and the New Cuban Cinema the "cubanidad."

After the success of *La tigre*, Camilo Luzuriaga returned to the big screen with the cinematographic adaptation *Entre Marx y una mujer desnuda* (1996), a brilliant film that used the different narrative levels found on Jorge Enrique Adoum's novel.⁸ This movie is by far the most political and confronts directly the complexity of the Ecuadorean political situation and the frustration of a social revolution never accomplished. In this film, Luzuriaga handles spaces, times and characters in a singular way: jumping from one space to another, one time to another, and from one character to another. These leaps force an active participation from the viewer; not only in understanding the plot but also in forcing the audience to be conscious of the

⁸ Best Script and Soundtrack in the Trieste Festival of Latin-American Cinema, Italy (1997); Best Art Direction in the International Festival of the New Latin American Cinema in Havana, Cuba (1997). Nominated for Best Foreign Film in Goya Award of Spanish Academy of Arts and Cinematographic Sciences, Spain (1997).

reality presented in the film. *Entre Marx y una mujer desnuda* encompasses the premises of *Dialéctica del espectador* by Cuban film director and critic Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. Gutiérrez Alea proposes a popular cinema not only in the sense of viewers' approval but mainly of reflection of mass interests. Film, like other arts, must have an aesthetic value and a social purpose. These two elements should maintain a balance so viewers can enjoy the film. In other words, spectators have an "active role on their surround reality" in responding to the social issues reflected in the film (11).

Diametrically opposed to the social agenda of *Entre Marx y una mujer desnuda* is *Sueños en la mitad del mundo (cuentos ecuatorianos)*, directed by Carlos Naranjo in 1999. This film presents a commercial regional cinema and the growing tendency of the Latin American cinema in making co-productions.⁹ Regrettably, Naranjo exhibits a film with a weak and ambiguous plot for the Spanish speaking market causing the disenchantment of his target audience. In spite of the negative criticism, *Sueños en la mitad del mundo* unfolds polarities through its three separate story plots such as: civilization and barbarism; liberal and conservative; modern and traditional; real and imaginary; and erotic and chaste. The erotic-chaste polarity is in tune with Naranjo's original intention to name this film "Cuentos eróticos ecuatorianos". Naranjo explained that this project is a collection of three short erotic films connected to each other via a reappearing bus ("Un título que enciende rubores" 4B).

At the doors of the 21st century, Sebastián Cordero premieres his first feature film *Ratas, ratones, rateros* (1991) in several international festivals. Like a breath of fresh air, this film receives a great welcome from the Latin American audience and international critics. *Ratas, ratones, rateros* obtains the Prize as the best film in the Festival of Latin American Cinema in Trieste (Italy, 2000) and is also nominated for a Goya Prize in Spain as the best film of Spanish language (2002). Back in Ecuador, it becomes a box office hit and is the most popular Ecuadorean film in history with more than 130,000 spectators and 25 weeks on the billboard. This success places this film in the

⁹ Best Sound in VIII International Film Festival International of Bogotá; It was also Ecuador's submission to the 73rd Academy Awards for the Best Foreign Language Film, but was not accepted as a nominee. This film was a Spanish-Ecuadorean co-production and its cast had Ecuadorean and Spanish actors, as well as the participation of the renowned Argentinean actor, Hector Alterio.

corpus of the new Latin American cinema because of how it deals with the marginalization of the youth. This genre, established by Luis Buñuel's masterpiece *Los olvidados* (1950), continues to influence contemporary cinema throughout Latin America Cinema, to name a few recent films: *Cidade de Deus* (Brazil, 2002), and *La virgen de los sicarios* (Colombia, 2000).¹⁰ *Ratas, ratones, rateros* blatantly shows the marginal districts of the Ecuadorean metropolitan cities: its inhabitants, its realities and even its dialects.

Ten years after her first film, Viviana Cordero bring us *Un titán en el ring* (2002). This feature film simultaneously opposes and complements *Ratas, ratones, rateros*. Both movies have peripheral characters, products of the socioeconomic system of the country, but their space settings are different: *Ratas, ratones, rateros* develops in the Ecuadorean urban center, while a *Un titán en el ring* takes place in the Andean countryside. In both cases, the characters cannot escape from their own misery. Cecilia Velasco summarizes shinningly, the plot:

The town of Cordero's film is poor and is stultified by the liquor and the fights of *cachascán*, and is inhabited by people who live in precarious conditions. The family, which the story is about, consists of a drunk and chauvinistic father, an aged, mistreated, selfless mother, and two boy siblings who barely acquire their own identity, but who are reduced enough by stereotypes. In this space two characters acquire importance: a likeable antihero, representative of the free fight, with a complex mentality and a humanist spirit, and a German priest, who perhaps in an innocent way, symbolizes civilization in the middle of barbarism.

Both movies, *Ratas, ratones, rateros* and *Un titán en el ring*, tune with the Brazilian Cinema and with the geographically closer Colombian cinema. Both are cinemas that depict a cinema of violence, hunger and misery. In this matter, Glauber Rocha's "An Esthetic of Hunger" explains this violence as a struggle of expression and originality against neocolonial

¹⁰ This corpus is studied by the critic Radomiro Spotorno. Spotorno, Radomiro. *50 Años de Soledad: De Los olvidados (1950) a La Virgen de los sicarios (2000)*. Huelva: Ocho y medio, 2001.

domination (522-23).

In the years following *Un titan en el ring*, Camilo Luzuriaga offers two feature films: *Cara o cruz* (2003) and *1809-1810: Mientras llega el día* (2005). *Cara o cruz* is released at the Latin Film Festival of Chicago (2003). For the director, this is his most intimate film. The script was developed with sessions of improvisation between the director and the actors: Lissette Goatherd, Mario Muller, Valentina Pacheco, Marilú Vaca and Luis Vivanco. *Cara o cruz* invites us to witness a family drama: two twin sisters separated by distance and language. This movie explores the dismemberment of the Ecuadorean family as caused by migration and the emptiness of daily life; both relevant and recurrent problems in Ecuador.

Camilo Luzuriaga returns in 2004 with the film adaptation *1809-1810: Mientras llega el día* (2004), based on the novel with the same title of Juan Valdano (1990).¹¹ This film explores the events of the tenth of August 1809 (Ecuador's Independence day) and the massacre of the second of August 1810. An exhaustive historical investigation was conducted and the film received the support of the municipality of Quito. Luzuriaga continues to demonstrate a social interest in his films: "I believe that this effort must last, I never have wanted to make ephemeral works. Neither am I interested in posterity, but I have a sense of social responsibility" (23).

The most recent film proposals by Sebastián Cordero are *Crónicas* (2005) and *Rabia* (2010), screened in several international festivals.¹² *Crónicas*, in the words of Rodrigo Villacís Molina: "Its argument revolves around a child rapist, whose tracks are followed by a TV crew in an effort to make sensationalist news. The script was inspired by the macabre history of Garavito, the Colombian assassin of more than 200 children." *Crónicas* keeps with the rest of the Latin American cinematography and it aligns films like the Peruvian *Tinta roja* (Francisco Lombardi, 2001), a portrait of the predatory world of yellow journalism. In a different setting, now in Spain, his latest film *Rabia* explores the harsh reality of the Latin American immigrants experience and how they suffer discrimination everyday in order to keep their job, send remittances to their family and strive for a better life.

¹¹ Latin Heritage Prize in IX Miami Latin Film Festival (2005).

¹² Mexico-Ecuadorean co-production.

Another important addition to Ecuadorean directors is Tania Hermida. In her first feature film *Qué tan lejos* (2006), Hermida rediscovered the *road trip* concept already seen in Naranjo's *Sueños en la mitad del mundo* (1999), but from a feminine point to view. *Qué tan lejos*, simultaneously, not only entertains us but also shows us the daily regionalism in Ecuador. Social classes, genres, and regions are opposed and at the end it is concluded that they all belong to a great family called Ecuador. In this short period, this film has had great acceptance in the international arena.

A new face to the Ecuadorean Film, and less known compared to his colleagues, is Víctor Arregui. His first film, *Fuera de Fuego* (2002), follows an urban teenager living in a dysfunctional family and how the late 1990s Financial Crisis in Ecuador amplifies his problems. His only dream left is to migrate to Spain. In 2008, Arregui offered us an obscure film *Cuando me toque a mi* (2008) where all characters, for different reasons, end up meeting in the morgue.

In recent years, the Ecuadorean Cinema has been fortified with a new law on Film Promotion (*Ley de fomento de Cine*, 2006) and the creation of *Consejo Nacional de Cinematografía del Ecuador*, an organization in charge of helping film production and its distribution. Nowadays, there are several academic institutions with film studies and productions concentration as well as established film festivals. These efforts are boosting a new generation of film directors, actors, scriptwriters, directors of photography, editors, and film scholars.

During this brief trajectory, all these films reveal the birth of the New Ecuadorean Cinema and its development within the Latin American Cinema frame. Due to the great critical and public acceptance, the inclusion of this cinematography in the Latin American film canon is justified. It is valid because of the subject matter already seen at the discussion table for a long time: civilization and barbarism, the loss of identity, migration, political frustration, familiar dismemberment, misery, violence, regionalism and the opposition of classes.

Films

1809-1810: Mientras llega el día. Dir. Camilo Luzuriaga. Perf.. Marilú Vaca,

Aristides Vargas, Gonzalo Gonzalo, Aitor Merino, Víctor Hugo Gallegos, Alfredo Espinosa, Santita Villacís, Carlos Martínez, Diego Naranjo, Gerson Guerra, José Alvear and Josefino Suintaxi. Grupo Cine, 2004.

Cara o Cruz. Dir. Camilo Luzuriaga. Perf. Marilú Vaca, Valentina Pacheco and Luis Vivanco. 2003. DVD. Pygmalion Media, 2004.

Entre Marx y una mujer desnuda. Dir. Camilo Luzuriaga. Perf. Aristides Vargas, Felipe Terán, Maia Koulieva, Carlos Valencia, Gerson Guerra, Ximena Ferrín, Francisco Aguirre and Jorge Mateus. 1996. DVD. Pygmalion Media, 2004.

Qué tan lejos. Dir. Tania Hermida. Perf. Cecilia Vallejo, Tania Martínez, Pancho Aguirre, Fausto Miño. 2006.

Ratas, ratones, rateros. Dir. Sebastián Cordero. Actores. Carlos Valencia, Marco Bustos, Simon Brauer, Irina López, Fabricio Lalama and Cristina Dávila. 1999. DVD. Vanguard, 2000.

Sensaciones. Dir. Juan Esteban Cordero y Viviana Cordero. Perf. Juan Esteban Cordero, Luis Miguel Campos, Viviana Cordero, Gustavo Crianza, Felipe Portilla, Adriana Uribe, Ximena Torres and Ricardo Contag. 1991.

Sueños en la mitad del mundo. Dir. Carlos Naranjo. Perf. Héctor Alterio, Concha Cuentos, Santiago Naranjo, Rossana Iturralde, Oscar Ladoire, María Kosty, Patricia Galeth, Andrea Guardiola and José Antonio Negrete. Equinoccio y Alyaz, 1999.

La tigra. Dir. Camilo Luzuriaga. Perf. Lissette Cabrera, Rossana Iturralde, Verónica García, Aristides Vargas and Virgilio Valero. 1989. DVD. Pygmalion Media, 2004.

Un titán en el ring. Dir. Viviana Cordero. Perf. Toty Rodríguez, Telmo Herrera, Pablo Hanibal Vela, Juana Guarderas, Martha Romanza, Norbert Simpfing and Segundo Benítez. 2002. DVD. Vanguard, 2003.

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