


December 2013

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Recommended Citation

Pimentel, Sebastián (2013) "A Brief Historical Account of Trends in Contemporary Peruvian Cinema," *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective*: Vol. 7 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jgi/vol7/iss2/8>

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A Brief Historical Account of Trends in Contemporary Peruvian Cinema

Sebastián Pimentel

This essay is an overview of the thematic and stylistic tendencies in Peruvian cinema starting with the work of Armando Robles Godoy. It also focuses on the effect of the Law 19327 of 1973, which was responsible for the formation of a group of influential filmmakers led by Francisco Lombardi. At the beginning of the 21st century, female directors like Claudia Llosa and Rosario García Montero achieved recognition for their cinematic visions of a traumatic Peruvian past. The Vega brothers and Gianfranco Quatrinni also contribute with their styles to an existential study of the Peruvian identity. From the provinces Omar Forero and other filmmakers bring their personal visions to their milieu with works that emphasize Andean and other themes. Peruvian cinema, while not plentiful, is very diverse, gaining in international acclaim, and changing rapidly. Rather than review all the formats that make up the legacy of Peruvian cinema, the focus here will be on the dominant format of cinema consumption: the full-length fictional film.

The Cinema of Armando Robles Godoy

If we had to set a unique point that represents the birth of the best that Peruvian cinema has to offer—artistically ambitious and technically adroit—we have to begin with the films of Armando Robles Godoy (1923-2010). Director, playwright, and essayist, his first work of national significance was a documentary named *Ganarás el pan/You Will Earn Your Bread* (1965), which sadly is nowadays lost. His second contribution to Peruvian cinema was his first full-length fictional film, *En la selva no hay estrellas/There Are No Stars in the Jungle* (1967), which won the Golden Prize at the Moscow International Film Festival.

From these first efforts, Robles Godoy goes on to be recognized as one of the most influential and distinctly Peruvian filmmakers. Prior to him, only the so-called Cuzco School—a name given by the French cinema historian Georges Sadoul and led by Eulogio Nishiyama and Luis Figueroa—had made a few interesting short- and medium-length films. The Cuzco School was characterized by an aesthetic technique that started from what may be called a cinematic primitive poetry based not only on Andean myths and legends, but also on the grand lyrical visual compositions of Sergei Eisenstein. It can be said that *Kukuli* (1961) was this school's most emblematic film. For more information about Cuzco's cinema of the period, see Ricardo Bedoya's work (2009b, pp. 132-140). Robles Godoy's *There Are No Stars* tells the story of an adventurer born in Lima, the capital city, who penetrates the Peruvian Amazonian jungle to

steal the gold of an avaricious elderly woman who lives with the natives. Though it may seem so on the surface, this is not an adventure film. Strongly influenced by European auteur cinema—time and memory films like Alf Sjöberg's *Miss Julia* (1951) or Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) and *Last Year In Marienbad* (1961)—Robles Godoy forges a story with long flashbacks that include reconfigured facts using several visual perspectives, including a non-linear narrative style. Those were the characteristic styles of the new cinematic languages that arose and developed throughout Europe from the 60s to the 70s.

The cinema of Robles Godoy extended beyond the political force and hyperrealism of Latin American avant-garde cinematic styles like the Brazilian Cinema Novo/New Cinema led by Glauber Rocha and Nelson Pereira Dos Santos. Robles, for his part, also sought the poetry of the imaginary, memory and time. But this emphasis did not imply he stopped criticizing social and political systems in his films. In his magnum opus *La muralla verde/The Green Wall* (1970), we can see socio-political systems marked by discrimination, centralism, inaction, and governmental corruption (Pimentel, 2008, pp. 71-83). *The Green Wall* won the Golden Hugo at the Chicago Film Festival. And it was acclaimed by prestigious critics like Roger Ebert and Pauline Kael. Further, the film had a significant run through international festivals around the world. Similar success was reached by Robles Godoy's *Espejismo/Mirage* (1973), which is another production of enormous importance to Peruvian as well as Latin American film industries. It became a nominee to the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film, and in Latin America won among other awards the prestigious XIV Festival International de Cine de Cartagena de Indias, Colombia.

It is important to mention that Robles Godoy's films were exclusively financed by private investors. Sometimes this financing was the result of collaboration with financiers and technicians from Argentina (Bedoya, 2009b, pp. 157-162), a country which always was, along with Brazil and Mexico, one of the Latin American nations with a vibrant local market and cinema industry. Indeed, the most important moment for the Latin American film industry, i.e., its Golden Age, was the decade of the thirties and forties as exemplified by: Estudios Azteca, Churubusco, and Cuahtémoc in México; Laboratorios Alex de Buenos Aires and Estudios Sono Film in Argentina; Cinedia and La Atlántida de Río de Janeiro in Brazil (Sánchez Noriega, pp. 432-433). Robles Godoy, therefore, deserves acknowledgment not only because of his enormous artistic talent and his capacity to materialize his projects in spite of the Peruvian state's indifference to culture and art. It must be noted that he even persuaded Juan Velasco Alvarado's military government (1968-1975) to approve a national law that allowed Peru to create its own cinema industry (1973). Encouraged by Robles Godoy, Law 19327 was in force during the seventies and eighties. The law required the obligatory exhibition of Peruvian short films before any full-length films in commercial movie theatres throughout the country. This meant that part of the ticket revenues to movie theatres was destined to benefit emerging production companies. This in turn made possible access to education for technicians and artists, as well as improved local markets to boost the film industry (Bedoya, 2009b, pp. 163-165).

Peruvian Cinema of the 1980s and 1990s: Francisco Lombardi

As a result of Law 19327, a new generation of filmmakers would appear in the eighties. Most of them were contributors to the *Hablemos de cine/Let's Talk about Cinema* (1965-1986) magazine, written by critics like Desiderio Blanco, Ricardo Bedoya, Guillermo Niño de Guzmán, Constantino Carvallo, Juan Bullita, and filmmakers like José Carlos Huayhuaca, Nelson García, Augusto Tamayo, and Francisco Lombardi. From this group, the director who most successfully consolidated his reputation was Francisco Lombardi. The filmmakers of this generation embodied a reaction against Armando Robles Godoy's artistic vision. They pretended to practice a kind of cinema closer to Hollywood codes and were worried about local market consolidation, the strengthening of the Peruvian cinema industry, and winning the favor of the national public. Unfortunately, many of these directors failed to create a more personal vision. They also failed in their attempts to reproduce American genres like the thriller or police movies. Their lack of contributions to such "genre cinema" has been largely understudied (Pimentel, 2011).

Nevertheless, Francisco Lombardi earned some success thanks to several titles within this kind of Peruvian cinema. *Bajo la piel/Under the Skin* (1996) is the best example of a creative and inspired ensemble of thriller, neo-noir, police, and criminal themes. A small-town policeman investigates some mysterious crimes committed by an alleged serial killer. The murders seem to be related to rites of human sacrifice, which were practiced by ancient pre-Hispanic cultures. The most interesting theme in the film is the moral ambiguity embodied by the characters, including the story's supposed hero. The protagonist finally ends submerged in selfishness and nihilism, in consonance with the social and political environment of the nineties in Peru, when Alberto Fujimori's dictatorial government (1990-2000) committed abuses people did not denounce for fear of retaliation.

Other interesting films by Lombardi were his first full-length opus *Muerte al amanecer/Death at Dawn* (1977), followed by *Maruja en el infierno/Maruja in Hell* (1983) and *La boca del lobo/The Mouth of the Wolf* (1988). They all infuse psychodrama into police or criminal movie structures. According to some reviewers, *La boca del lobo* deals with intrigue and uses expressive codes of the Western genre and places the action in the highlands of Peru, within the context of the state of siege instigated by the terrorist group Sendero Luminoso/Shining Path. The most remarkable issue in the film is the serious questioning of the actions of the military on the population—the principal victim of the covert operations carried out by government antiterrorist forces.

Terrorist Subversion, Crises, and Wounds

In the first decade of the millennium (2000-2009), Peruvian cinema enters a new stage. Though full-length film production does not grow much or win access to the more commercial circuit of movie theatres (barely between four and eight full-length films are completed per year), new and diverse aesthetic perspectives of creation are expanded. A brand-new generation of filmmakers became interested in analyzing the traumatic aftermath left by the armed conflict against Sendero Luminoso. For example, Fab-

rizio Aguilar's first work *Paloma de papel/Paper Dove* (2003) showed the armed conflict from the perspective of a little farmer boy. The film opened the way for further exploration, especially due to its surprising commercial success.

However, the real apex of this period would come later with another first film. Josué Méndez's *Días de Santiago/Days of Santiago* (2004) is a hard urban chronicle, furious, austere, and impervious to the intentions of generic criminal cinema. Though we must underline a certain degree of simplistic overacting by some characters, the force and determination of taking the camera out in the streets is palpable—as if in a contemporary version of Italian neorealism—in order to capture the antihero's despair. He gives a true representation of a former soldier unable to integrate back into civilian life. A little mad and paranoid, and without apparent future, this alienated man (Pietro Sibille) reminds us of Travis Bickle from Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, but filmed in a hyper-realistic style. This film achieved acclaim in several festivals, from the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema to the Fribourg and Rotterdam festivals.

Claudia Llosa's critically acclaimed *La teta asustada/The Milk of Sorrow* (2009), winner of the Golden Bear in Berlin, and Oscar nominee for Best Foreign Language Film in 2010, represented a firm step forward in its ambitious quest to be recognized as a great film. Fausta (Magaly Solier) is an almost autistic young woman living her alienated existence in the Peruvian capital, away from her Andean roots. According to popular beliefs, her "breast is frightened," a disease transmitted by her mother's milk who was raped during the bleak years of terrorism. Due to her fear, Fausta inserts a potato into her vagina as a way of a preventive measure against the crimes her mother suffered. The story begins when her mom passes away in Fausta's arms. Throughout the film, Fausta desires something apparently simple but a matter very difficult to achieve for poor people: to bury her mother. *La teta asustada* is built through static sequences, dense atmospheric tension, and stark depictions of human settlements or huts in the middle of the desert. All we can see transports us to death: emptiness, alienation, loneliness, scarcity, and sandbanks. Yet life blooms too, as the inhabitants of those peripheral zones celebrate parties and organize marriages with tinsel and colorful balloons (Llosa prefers pink and light blue to contrast the pale and gray). They laugh, play, and improvise a swimming pool where, at first sight, Fausta thinks her relatives are going to bury her mother.

Rosario García-Montero's *Las malas intenciones/Bad Intentions* (2011) tells the story of Cayetana (Fátima Buntix), the young daughter of a rich family living in Lima during the 1980s. García-Montero does not directly depict the violence that belongs to this period, but the mood imposes its presence in suggestive ways. This is done by creating a continuously ominous atmosphere. At the same time, the protagonist experiences radical distancing to other social classes by being increasingly self-locked and protected from a threatening, ruinous, and decadent exterior. However, Cayetana is deeply affected by the separation of her parents; thus, loneliness and her inability to adapt seem to motivate her self-destructive impulses. The film also manages to present certain uniquely Peruvian topics which are left to the imagination of Cayetana, such as our patriotic heroes parading and interacting around her. The theme of death is also ever-present as part of her dual personality: she is angelic and cruel at once. The film's dreamy continuity allows us to identify a new trend in filmic storytelling.

There are interesting similarities between *The Milk of Sorrow* and *Bad Intentions*, not only because these two movies are directed by women or that they are two of the most awarded and celebrated films in the history of Peruvian cinema, but because of the compelling portrayal of the central female characters. These women are self-destructive, isolated, and influenced by a morbid social imaginary. They live apparently happy and joyful lives while hiding ominous secrets. Be that as it may, there is a basic difference: Fausta is a poor young woman who lives in the sandbanks far from the urban spaces in the city. She is a woman working as a live-in maid at the house of a wealthy Peruvian woman. Cayetana, on the other hand, is a young, upper-middle class girl living with her mom. Still, like Fausta, Cayetana is also confined to live in the city suburbs in an environment that gradually imprisons and isolates her. Both of them are witnesses of the violent and morbid environment of the city; they are witnesses of the widespread crisis of Peruvian society and its diverse forms of exclusion.

Antiheroes and Survivors Seeking a Way Out

Aside from the consequences of years of terrorist violence and the Peruvian economic crisis during the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, another matter explored by the new filmmakers appeared: the search of freedom or personal redemption by characters caught in social power structures that isolate them. An excellent example of this search is *Madeinusa* (2006), Claudia Llosa's first film, or Andrés Cotler's *Pasajeros/Passengers* (2008), which was less commercially successful than Llosa's. *Madeinusa* is the story of a girl who wants to leave her town in the Peruvian highlands, a world where myth mixes a circular conception of time and a naturalistic vision where all human beings are reduced to being either predator or prey. The heroine looks for a way out to be able to reinvent/redeem herself. Something similar happens to the friends in *Pasajeros*, who caught by the sorrow and despair of the eighties and nineties, their only desire is to travel to the United States of America.

This despair would find a sublime and purified cinematographic expression in the Vega brothers' debut: *Octubre/October* (2010), winner of the Prix du jury/Jury Prize at the Cannes International Film Festival. Clemente (Bruno Odar) is a money lender who prefers isolation instead of human contact, with the exception of the prostitutes he frequents. Every day he welcomes his clients and eats some bread with eggs that he prepares in the morning. His routine is broken by a wicker bag that mysteriously appears at his home; it contains a newborn child who probably is his own. The film gathers intensity thanks to a few key elements in the story and a sober disposition to presenting antiheroes who are undressed by the camera. Such mood is achieved in conjunction with the protagonist's portrayal of his own isolation and marginality. The style, inspired by Robert Bresson and Aki Kaurismäki and renewed by Daniel and Diego Vega, also aims to capture the inner process that starts from an existential crisis and which ends up in liberation and redemption.

The same existential ambience and excluded, marginal, solitary characters appear again in another film indispensable in this overview of the latest in Peruvian cinema: Gianfranco Quattrini's *Chicha tu madre/Screw Your Mother* (2006). Julio César is a 37-year-old taxi driver and amateur Tarot teller. His marriage doesn't work as well as

he wants; the couple faces the threat of an eviction judgment and their teenage daughter is pregnant. Julio César is a popular character, not reduced to the schematic roles of the wicked creole so abundant in Lima. This character is more complex than we might believe. Even before separating from his wife, he already was living “far” from her and his beloved daughter, yet he was sleeping in the same house. Wife and daughter feel resentment toward him, and they reproach his absence. Quattrini captured the melancholic environment of Julio César’s soul: stunned, floating around and quite “comfortable” right in the middle of his life’s banal quality.

Underground and Regional Circuits: The Future

A vigorous and new phenomenon for Peruvian cinema has arisen in the last few years: the multiplication of filmmakers who film using digital cameras and exiguous finances, while depending on their friends’ complicity and the most austere resources. Following this modality, diverse filmmakers appear in the provinces, taking advantage of the traditional myths of their localities to create a peculiar terror cinema which has very interesting possibilities of development (though precarious in their conditions of execution). Another positive development has been the creation of local and regional markets for distribution and exhibition which do not consider Lima as the locus of success (Bedoya, 2009b, pp. 231-234).

As a result, titles that prevail in overcoming any amateurism appear apart from commercial premieres and international circuits, as is the case with a film by a director born in Trujillo, a city north of Lima. In Omar Forero’s *Los actores/The Actors* (2006), everything seems to be very ordinary. Nevertheless, there is something extraordinary in the lives of the characters. It is something that leaves the topic of suffering behind but it is essential to see; it is something that passes as a secret yet takes shape during the film; it is something untouchable but necessary to catch. Since nothing is mere artifice, we must seek in Forero’s film long and fresh sequence-shots as they occur in Eric Rohmer’s, Michelangelo Antonioni’s, or Jia ZhangKe’s. Forero starts from the local to reach the universal, making a modern cinema based on “the pressure of time” in our disillusioned era, which converts the anonymous main character into the real hero who fights against invisible forces that structure the discontentment of contemporary life.

This review of contemporary Peruvian cinema comes to its conclusion by mentioning the most prominent names of this post 2000 generation, which is even younger than the one represented by Omar Forero or Raúl Del Busto (*Detrás del mar/Beyond the Sea*, 2005), who is another remarkable name in this category. It can be said that the following filmmakers come as a reinforcement and consolidation of a thematic and aesthetic renewal: Rafael Arévalo, Eduardo Quispe, Jim Marcelo, Javier Bellido, Ana Balcázar, Fernando Montenegro, and Juan Daniel Fernández.

Juan Daniel Fernández, who already has exhibited his first film, *Reminiscencias/Reminiscences* (2010), at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is creating a surprising, virtuous body of work (sometimes verging on the limits of self-indulgence) that demonstrates that one can make a complex film with the remains of family videos. It is an option close to the experimental cinema of Jonathan Caouette’s *Tarnation* (2003), or Spanish filmmaker José Luis Guerín—especially his *Tren de*

sombras/Train of Shadows (1997). Juan Daniel does not stop in reflections of the records' precariousness and its manipulation. We see the video shake and the effort to consolidate it as image in frozen flashbacks. We are witnesses of the search of a time line, produced by an electronic memory equivalent to the one in the brain sculpting some kind of work in progress with fascinating moments of revelation, interpolations, and reliving sensory experiences that go from the strictly sensorial—water, fire, light, nature—to the reconstruction of the family tree, his birthplace and sequence, as well as the conversation with Cuzco's farmers who could be linked by blood. It is a question of time invocation as film matter, but also of the ruins of this matter, the ruins of a family, and the discovery of its deepest mysteries.

In conclusion, it should be noted—after the law Robles Godoy obtained in the seventies, in operation until the eighties—that there have been many attempts to create new state laws to promote Peruvian cinema. However, the laws have been short-lived and not completely fulfilled. Even now, laws are still being created to promote the growth of the industry. Although there are a few public contests that reward some projects, these have been questioned by the lack of transparency and effective promotion. Lima's centralism still is being perpetuated, but digital cinema is already in the hands of filmmakers in the whole country. There is a lot of new talent making waves in the still very precarious, unequal reality of Peruvian cinema.

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