

Central American cinema in the twenty-first century

* This is an Accepted Manuscript to be published in the Journal Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas, entitled “Central American cinema in the twenty-first century” by Intellect in July 2018. Do not quote without permission.

Introduction

Liz Harvey-Kattou
University of Westminster

Amanda Alfaro Córdoba
University College London/ Universidad de Costa Rica

Central American cinema in the twenty-first century

In the twentieth century, Central America was associated with civil wars, social disasters and displaced populations. The literary production that arose from these struggles – especially poetry and testimonio – were at the forefront of the cultural scholarship focused on the region. Other than María Lourdes Cortés’s seminal work *La pantalla rota: Cien años de cine en Centroamérica* (2005), the films of these seven nations have received little attention, since there were few feature films produced in the isthmus. This century, however, has witnessed a resurgence of filmmaking: more Central American films were released between 2000 and 2017 than in all of the twentieth century. While they have struggled to gain local and international recognition, films such as Jayro Bustamante’s *Ixcanul/Volcano* (2015) and Julio Hernández Córdón’s post-war trilogy in Guatemala, Paz Fábrega’s *Agua fría de mar/Cold Water of the Sea* (2011) or Esteban Ramírez’s *Presos/Prisoners* (2015) from Costa Rica have attracted the attention of film festivals and popular distribution channels. *Ixcanul* was shortlisted for the Oscars as Guatemala’s entry for Best Foreign Language Film, *Presos* and *Ixcanul* were distributed on Netflix and Hernández Córdón and Fábregawon prizes at European and North American film festivals.

While ‘Latin American cinema’ as a category gained recognition and carved out a space in the globalized category of ‘world cinema’ since the 1960s, in Central America the wars and post-war years did not nourish cultural creation, especially in an industry as costly and knowledge-specific as cinema. Indeed, while many countries were inspired by the Hollywood industrial model where ‘huge-scale productions [...] bring in the bucks’ (Follows 2016), this conception of filmmaking prevented regions like Central America from attempting any cinema production at all, believing that to do so was economically and logistically impossible (Miller 2001; García Canclini 2007). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, political stability and economic prosperity have increased while the costs of filmmaking have decreased, thanks in large part to the digital turn. Coupled with the globalization of knowledge, the geomobility of film students and directors (which enables them to access audio-visual training) and the creation of regional/ national institutions and companies for audio-visual production have led to a visible resurgence of cinema in Central America. Institutions across the region have begun to offer filmmaking instruction and regional funding bodies (Ibermedia and Cinergia) and local national funds (such as the Fauno in Costa Rica) offer financial and logistical support to filmmakers. Moreover, this increased level of production has also led to the creation of new film festivals such as the Festival

Ícaro, the Costa Rica Festival Internacional de Cine and the Festival Internacional de Cine Panamá, which help to promote Central American film to local and international markets. Despite these impressive steps forward, films from the region must still overcome significant hurdles. Distribution is a key issue and filmmakers have adopted different strategies to reach broader audiences. While many films are made almost exclusively for the film festival circuit – which often sponsor productions – others are made on extremely low budgets for local audiences. Web distribution is now common worldwide, but this is challenging in Central America: broadband is limited in every country except Costa Rica and Panamá; iLifebelt studies show that in 2016 these were the only two countries in the region where over 50 per cent of the population had access to the Internet (iLifebelt). These challenges and market dynamics are the focus of the first two articles of this special issue of SLAC; they aim to give an overview of the Central American film market from an industrial perspective. In ‘Filmmaking in Central America: An overview’, María Lourdes Cortés examines the predominant forms of production in the isthmus, analysing genre, cinematography and financing, distribution and educational opportunities. Her article provides original research and statistics from across the region, offering a broad view of contemporary film institutions and directors and an examination of modes of production and audience reception in individual countries. In ‘Central American cinematographic aesthetics and their role in international film festivals’, Julia González de Canales and Andrea Vargas Cabezas trace the impact of film festival recognition on films from the region. Their article explores how filmmakers have changed their approaches after having their first films selected by an ‘art-house’ film festival, elucidating how aesthetic decisions keyed to the expectations of this specific market appear in their subsequent films. The remaining five articles focus on notable films and directors from the region, demonstrating how they have added new and different cinematic voices to those of their Latin American counterparts. Indeed, it is interesting to note that post- and decolonial perspectives are especially prominent in Central America, with filmmakers often purposely focusing on those marginalized by normative discourses. Central American cinema also often concentrates on modes of storytelling that fall outside of the mainstream colonial framework, frequently reverting to tropes of imperfect cinema, as coined by Julio García Espinosa (1979). Moreover, Walter Mignolo’s concept of Latinamericanism – whereby Latin America is the ‘other’ of both the United States and Europe and a colonial construct – are also relevant (2009). Cinema in Central America has traditionally been a neo-colonial medium and that is only now being challenged. Within this ideological framework, many films respond to the agendas of a nascent third sector that promotes discourses about human rights, ecology and the re-establishment of justice in an area where impunity for human rights crimes still prevails. Central American films also focus on external agents and shifting geopolitical relations whereby the local is marginalized in favour of the foreign, rendering Central Americans members of a precarious workforce in a new international division of labour. The articles by Amanda Alfaro Córdoba, Valeria Grinberg Pla, María del Carmen Caña Jiménez, Bértold Salas Murillo and Liz Harvey-Kattou powerfully address the theme of the colonized subject. In ‘Can María speak? Interpreting Ixcanul/Volcano (Bustamante, 2015) from a decolonial perspective’, Alfaro Córdoba considers the film’s central character, María, as a subaltern subject, othered by a physical, linguistic and cultural invisibility from which she attempts to escape. Grinberg Pla, meanwhile, discusses the pervasive affective phenomenon of anomie as a side effect of Guatemala’s wars in ‘Against anomie. Julio Hernández Cordón’s post-war trilogy: Gasolina/ Gasoline (2008), Las marimbas del infierno/The Marimbas of Hell (2010) and Polvo/Dust (2012)’, analysing how Julio Hernández Cordón’s films deal with the intersecting issues of youth, poverty and violence. Caña Jiménez’s article, ‘Symptoms of a civil war: Affect, disease and urban violence in Arturo Menéndez’s Malacrianza/The Crow’s Nest (2014)’, analyses the film from

a phenomenological point of view, arguing that this approach more appropriately unveils the polysemantic intensities of affect at work in the film and in post-war Salvadoran society. Akin to Alfaro Córdoba's analysis, Salas Murillo's article, 'Forging her path with her own fists. Autonomy and contradictions of age, class and gender in Florence Jaguey's *La Yuma* (2010)', focuses on the socio-structural challenges faced by the central character of this Nicaraguan film: a poor young woman has very limited opportunities in this country. Despite the relative prosperity of Costa Rica in comparison to its neighbours, issues of colonialism and colonized groups remain significant there and are at the heart of Harvey-Kattou's article, 'Performing for Hollywood: Coloniality and the tourist image in Esteban Ramírez's *Caribe/Caribbean* (2004)'. Her article demonstrates how the hegemonic nation-image influences the film through exoticism and stereotyping while neo-imperial Hollywood models also infiltrate the on-screen images. Above all, these articles consider how Central American cinema mimics, subverts and/or hybridizes hegemonic practices, demonstrating that the moving image has become a battlefield for meaning in the region. As cinematic production across Central America has increased, so too has the scholarship focusing on the expanding local film industries and new technical trends. It has become clear that unique obstacles have emerged as imagined communities strive to achieve the visible recognition afforded them through film. Unfortunately, as Central America attempts to construct a sustainable film industry, distribution, curation and promotion that sustain production are often overlooked. This special issue considers the practical, financial and logistical challenges of production in the region and how dominant models of filmmaking and storytelling may be adhered to and/or undercut. It explores the implications of the multiple themes and aesthetic choices employed by directors and offers an overview of the Central American filmscape in the twenty-first century and the challenges facing filmmakers.

References

Bustamante, J. (2015), *Ixcánul, Guatemala and France: La Casa de Producción*.

Cortés, M. L. (2005), *La pantalla rota: Cien años de cine en Centroamérica*, Buenos Aires: Santillana Ediciones.

Fábrega, P. (2011), *Agua fría de mar, Costa Rica/ France: Temporal Films*.

Follows, S. (2016), 'How movies make money: \$100m+ Hollywood blockbusters', Stephen Follows, July. <https://stephenfollows.com/how-moviesmake-money-hollywood-blockbusters/>. Accessed 11 February 2018.

García Canclini, N. (2007), *Lectores, espectadores e internautas*, Barcelona: Gedisa.

García Espinosa, J. (1979), 'For an imperfect cinema', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 20, pp. 24–26.

Hernández Cordón, J. (2008), *Gasolina, Guatemala: Melindrosa Films*.

—— (2010), *Las marimbas del infierno, Guatemala: Melindrosa Films, Les Films du Requin, Axolote Cine y Códice Cinema*.

—— (2012), *Polvo*, Guatemala: Melindrosa Films, Tic Tac Producciones and Autentika Films.

iLifebelt (2017), 'Brecha digital en Centroamérica: ¿Cuántos tenemos acceso a internet?' <https://ilifebelt.com/brecha-digital-centroamerica/2017/05/>. Accessed 11 February 2018.

Jaguey, F. (2010), *La Yuma*, Nicaragua: Camila Films.

Menéndez, A. (2014), *Malacrianza/The Crow's Nest*, El Salvador: Itaca Films, Meridiano 89, Sivela Pictures.

Mignolo, W. (2009), *The Idea of Latin America*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Miller, T. (2001), *Global Hollywood*, London: British Film Institute.

Ramírez, E. (2004), *Caribe/Caribbean*, Costa Rica: Cinetel S.A.

—— (2015), *Presos*, Costa Rica: Cinetel S.A.

Contributor details

Liz Harvey-Kattou is a lecturer in Spanish language and culture at the University of Westminster. Her research focuses on national and cultural identity in Latin America, with a focus on ethnicity, gender and sexuality in Costa Rican literature and film. Contact: University of Westminster, 309 Regent Street, London, W1B 2HW, UK. E-mail: l.harveykattou@westminster.ac.uk

Amanda Alfaro Córdoba is a Ph.D. candidate at University College London. She has worked as adjunct lecturer at the University of Costa Rica and written, directed and produced independent short films and a TV series about film appreciation. E-mail: amanda.alfarocordoba@ucr.ac.cr