

Voices from the Small Cinemas: Beyond “the Remaining Countries”

By Jeffrey Middents and Tamara Falicov, guest editors

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Abstract: This introduction to a special volume dedicated to translations of recent writings from underexamined cinematic traditions in Latin America (such as Bolivian, Cuba, Colombia, Peru and Puerto Rico) argues for the amplification of voices from “small” cinemas as essential to understanding contemporary cinema from the region as a whole.

“On the one hand, a vigorous cinema, technically and artistically vibrant, like the Brazilian; another important cinema, the Cuban; an industry that is currently undergoing a moment of crisis but remains active, the Argentine; finally, the most solid film industry in Spanish America, although perhaps, due to its commercialization, without the same expressive level as those from Brazil or Cuba: the Mexican. On the other hand, the remaining countries.”

- Isaac León Frías, 1967

When we talk about Latin American cinema – from the silent period, through the New Latin American Cinema, or now – we tend to focus on cinemas from the bigger, more developed countries: Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. In reporting at what would become the groundbreaking Viña del Mar film festival in 1967, Peruvian film critic Isaac León Frías cannot help but laud the “Big Three,” along with the amazing work produced by Cuba in its most prolific period. The rest, however, are dismissed as “the remaining countries”: “Some like Chile, Venezuela, Uruguay, and Bolivia with a short history (or,

better said, a prehistory) but likely to advance soon. Others, like ours, in an infant state. There was no news of the rest of the countries, particularly from Central America.”ⁱ

In the last forty years, there have been some news from the other countries, the so-called “smaller cinemas” from Latin America; the problem, however, lies in that we, in the United States and Europe, hear what is being said. The “Big Three” produce the lion’s share of movies from Latin America, in terms of both quantity and quality, while the other countries produce a handful each year, often to little acclaim at home and occasionally abroad. International attention and appeal, however, is tied very closely to issues of translation. We do not just mean subtitles or the mere trafficking of films across borders here: we also mean translating some of the writing about movies from the region from those who best know and understand movies from their own countries. It is no accident that the filmmakers with the largest acclaim during the period of New Latin American Cinema produced not just some of the best movies, but also some of the best writing. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino wrote in “Toward a Third Cinema” that “the camera is a gun that fires at 24 frames per second”; one could argue that the manifestos, essays and interviews that were published throughout the period extended that gun’s range – particularly as they were translated into English and French.

This volume of *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas* turns its focus to “the remaining countries” by amplifying the voices from those countries – specifically, from Cuba, Colombia, Bolivia, Puerto Rico, and Peru – through translation. Each piece was originally published elsewhere in Spanish but is published here for the first time in English. Our original goal, when we first put the call out to our colleagues in the Latino/a Caucus

within the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, was purely pedagogical: what did we want our students to read, if only they could read the Spanish? As our colleagues submitted possibilities, we realized that the focus would also extend the project begun by Mette Hjort and Douglas Petrie in their book *The Cinema of Small Nations*. In focusing on the “small,” Hjort notes that the contours of larger projects also become more defined: “As an analytic tool in the context of film studies, the concept of small nation promises to shed light on at least some of the ways in which subnational, national, international, transnational, regional and global forces dovetail and compete in the sphere of the cinema.”ⁱⁱ Puerto Rican filmmaker and scholar Frances Negrón-Muntaner says as much in a credo where she demonstrates the implicit power of the seemingly powerless: ““When speaking about a politics of small problems, we are then referring to a set of political investments and critical assumptions: that despite the fact that major public and intellectual attention tends to gravitate toward ‘big’ objects; places, practices, and peoples thought of as small are central to thinking about how the larger world works.”

The selected essays reflect a diversity of topics and formats which reveal national preoccupations from film critics, directors, journalists and academics who muse, for example, on current trends in national film production (Richards), the politics of auteurist directors (Leonard and Negrón-Muntaner), historical analyses of a nation’s film production in a certain decade (García Borrero), controversies on the reception of a particular film (Beteta), a director’s perspective of indigenous filmmaking in her country (Rodríguez), to the debate about cultural diversity in the face of Hollywood “free trade” in commercial cinema (Weber).

In 'Confiscated Utopia' by acclaimed Cuban film critic Juan Garcia Borrero (translated by Laura Podalsky), he argues that the utopian vision for building a better society has changed in the 1990s reflecting a disintegration of that dream in the 1990s. Similarly, Frances Negron-Mutaner's essay on the centrality of Jacobo Morales films within the canon of Puerto Rican cinema reveals how this filmmaker's critique of national politics appropriates a *jibarista* (peasant) discourse in order to question Puerto Rico's path towards the modernization process.

Two essays by Peruvian film critics and bloggers, Rene Weber's "Dossier on Cultural Exception in Peru" and Juan Jose Beteta's "Public Health Warning Concerning the Peruvian Cinema Flu" (both translated by Jeffrey Middents), describe some of the debates surrounding the fate of Peruvian cinema and how critics and how movie-going audiences perceive it. In the Weber essay, the main concern is that Peruvian cinema will not survive the onslaught of trade in Hollywood entertainment product if Peru does not mobilize politically and create policy advocating for cultural diversity in moving images. Beteta's extremely humorous and satirical piece subtly jabs at his fellow film critics for taking an extremist position toward Peruvian cinema to a point where he argues that it is stigmatized and subject to unreasonable standards of measurement compared to other national cinema critiques. These pieces exemplify the kinds of contemporary debates circulating among newer filmmakers and critics in what has become a vibrant cinematic community and film-industry-in-the-making.

Famed Colombian documentary filmmaker Marta Rodriguez, in her essay excerpt 'New Technologies, New Identities' (translated by David Wood) explores the ways in which

indigenous filmmakers in Colombia historically gained access to video technologies in order to be less isolated and to call attention to their marginalized status in the country. They have appropriated the technology over time, with the assistance of Marta Rodriguez herself through video workshops, as well as through the establishment of a foundation to help create community television programs among other forms of access. These opportunities paved the way for indigenous groups to harness their own collective desire to document and call attention to issues facing their community using video technologies.

Keith Richards' essay on the history of Bolivian filmmaking in the 21st century chronicles the kinds of cinema being made and some of the politics that filmmakers have confronted given the perennial issue of a dearth of state funds nor political will by the Morales government. Nonetheless, the introduction of in less expensive digital technologies, coupled with an outcropping of new film schools both in the wealthy states as well as in the indigenous *altos* of Bolivia has given way to a broad diversity of vibrant digital video and film production in the country.

We are immensely grateful to our colleagues from across the globe who took the time and effort to translate each of the pieces that they selected for this collection, along with the original authors who graciously allowed us to reprint them. Their collective intellectual and linguistic efforts to bring these essays into English will hopefully allow these “smaller” voices to become large.

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ⁱ Isaac León Frías, "Festival de Viña del Mar: Introducción," *Hablemos de cine* 34 (March–April 1967): 5.

ⁱⁱ Mette Hjort, "Introduction," *The Cinema of Small Nations*, Mette Hjort and Douglas Petrie, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 2. The volume contains one chapter on Cuban cinema, written by Ana López.