



Stefanía Socha

Lived:

September 2, 1898 - August 22, 1958

Worked as:

acting teacher, producer

Worked In:

Peru

by Mario Lucioni, Irela Núñez

Before the 1980s, the history of Peruvian cinema was based more on interviews with early filmmakers than on contemporary sources. Such informality produced misattribution. Even in 1990, Ricardo Bedoya's *100 años de cine en el Perú: Una historia crítica* attributed the film *Los abismos de la vida/The Abysses of Life* (1929) to the prolific Chilean director Alberto Santana. However, an advertisement from a 1920s Peruvian fan magazine *El Refugio* included a photograph of the writer and director of *Los abismos de la vida*: Stefania Socha. Images from the magazine were intriguing. They suggested a well-defined, eventful plot, with interesting atmosphere and archetypal characters. The lead character was a naive yet modern girl, almost a flapper. She was set against a fierce lady-killer antagonist, as well as a lecherous Asian man, and finally against the hero, who started out as a shy admirer of the girl.

Additional contemporary journals described the career of Socha in more detail. Socha, who was Polish by birth, arrived in Lima around 1926 with the Polish architect Garbowski. At the time, social life in the capital was concentrated in a very limited number of establishments, mostly coffee shops, and Socha's masculine style of dress, short hair, and independence immediately fascinated the intelligentsia. In Warsaw she had worked in the theatre and the opera. In Lima, she quickly created an acting academy for the cinema with the promising name Perú Film. In other South American countries such as Brazil, film schools played a very important role. Essentially, Perú Film organized young actors, who would then finance the films themselves in exchange for screen time. Enrique Cornejo Villanueva was likely to have been among her first students. Later, he would become the director of the second Peruvian fiction feature *Luis Pardo* (1927). In March 1929, the journalist who interviewed Socha in *El Refugio* refers to forty students at the academy and a film project, then titled *El amor de la gitana*. However, some months later, on October 31, the premiere of the film *Los abismos de la vida* was announced. The actors were all students from the academy, but the writer and the film crew were professionals. The script was written by the

journalist and poet Julio Alfonso Hernández and the film shot by Luis Ángel Scaglione, an Argentinean photographer who had assisted Enzo Longhi on *La Perricholi* (1928) and Pedro Sambarino on *Luis Pardo*. Interviewed by *El Tiempo* before the premiere, Hernández described Socha's use of the resources of her school:

The script has been written to use the faculties and knowledge of the students of the academy annex to the Perú Film Company. Thus there have been a lot of things we've sacrificed due to the impossibility of doing them with emerging actors who lack many elements and resources... I haven't been involved in the shooting. My work has been exclusively to write. I wrote the script and put it in Miss Socha's hands; she's been the one directing the film, from selecting and training the actors to selecting the sets (n. pag.).

In March 1930, *El Tiempo* published enough information on one film for us to piece together a story. The female lead in the film is Berta, a girl from a good family who falls in love with her chauffeur, a man with no scruples. She becomes pregnant, and the chauffeur takes her to a Chinese herbalist to have an abortion. Later, when the chauffeur discovers that the girl's family is wealthy, he decides to blackmail the father. But the father makes him his partner, and the chauffeur makes plans to marry Berta. Upset, Berta falls deeply into debt, and when her mother's inheritance runs out, she goes to the herbalist, who finds out everything and decides to kill the chauffeur. After his plot to poison the chauffeur is exposed, the herbalist shoots the chauffeur and then kills himself. The police take Berta home, where she falls in love with her father's assistant, whom she marries after her recovery.

The film was a success, staying at the premiere theatre for two weeks, and was continually shown in other theatres until the beginning of 1930. Critics both praised and criticized the film. *Mundial* approved of the scandalous story:

Mr. Julio Hernández, author of the script of the national film *Los abismos de la vida*, being a journalist, has a highly developed sense of sensationalism. His work addresses a social scandal. He takes two things from American cinema: realism—photographing things belonging to everyday life—yet the film also retains a certain romanticism where the bad guys are bad (and sometimes have a little mustache) and the good guys are good. Thus we follow, step by step, the tragedy in the life of Miss Iturregui and her final redemption. This doesn't lack some interest and also, the actors do a much better job than expected—even the one who plays the Chinese herbalist, who really gets it (n. pag.)

But the writer for *Revista del Touring Club Peruano* was not impressed, and writes:

Los abismos de la vida passes as an attempt. Its scenes are well shot. A little long and tiresome, but taking into account our deficient elements, it can be applauded for its

industrial and artistic aspects. But regarding the content, it is a crude realism inappropriate for a developing new country with an ample future (n. pag.).

Following the custom of the time, the reviews primarily discussed the plot, the screenwriter, and the actors, and very little is said about the work of the director. Nevertheless, the film *Los abismos de la vida* blazed the trail that was to be followed by others during the brief season of Peruvian silent cinema.

Because of this film's success, the director Alberto Santana, who started at Socha's film school, was able to convince producers to support him in making melodramas of a similar style. Before *Los abismos de la vida* was released, Santana had directed *Como Chaplin* (1929). Later, all in 1930, he made *Mientras Lima duerme*, *Alma peruana*, and *Las chicas del Jirón de la Unión*, as well as *La última lágrima* and *La huerfana de Ate*. Also, Santana worked with some of the actors who started at Socha's academy and used her financing formula—whoever wants to act in the film must pay to get it produced. Also among Socha's young students was Mario Musseto, who not only acted in several motion pictures, but also directed *La banda del Zorro* in 1930.

Perú Film and Socha never got the chance to make another film. In March 1930, Socha commented that she had been in the provinces (most likely showing her film; in a small market such as Peru, only one copy of a film was made). She claimed that she was studying some traditional Peruvian stories for her next project, but by 1930, there was suddenly a glut of silent Peruvian productions. Shortly afterward, sound films took over the market. With the worldwide 1929 depression and the fall of the Peruvian government, chaos reigned, but hope was also instilled in the people as the dictator Leguía was finally ousted from power. In 1931 Peruvian silent cinema disappeared, finally replaced by sound film in 1934.

The search for further information about Socha turned up a woman with the same name—an actress—working in Warsaw in 1952. Could this be the same Stefanía Socha?

Bibliography

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Hernández, Julio Alfonso. Interview with Stefania Socha. *El Tiempo* (11 Aug. 1929): n.p.

Quiroz, Manuel Salomón. *El Tiempo* (8 Mar. 1930): n.p.

Filmography

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Titles:

1. Stefanía Socha as Producer

Los abismos de la vida/The Abysses of Life (1929).

Citation

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