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# Looking South: Teaching Latin American Cinema in the U.K.

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**T**his short piece is based on my experience of teaching film in general and Latin American film, in particular at the University of Essex. The University is very strongly cosmopolitan in its staffing and curriculum; it also attracts considerable numbers of international students from a very wide range of countries. The University has had strong connections with Latin America since its foundation in 1964. The Latin American Centre coordinates Latin American related studies and research across the departments of Art History, Sociology, History, Government, Literature Film and Theatre Studies, Language and Linguistics, and the Essex Human Rights Centre. Undergraduates following the Latin American Studies BA course are either Spanish or Portuguese speakers or learn these languages as part of the course: they also spend a year in a Latin American country. The university recruits students from Latin America, particularly at postgraduate level and its alumni occupy numerous influential positions internationally. The University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art is the only public collection dedicated solely to Latin American art in Europe and its record of research in this area is particularly strong.<sup>1</sup> The university's research profile features major projects with a Latin American component: these are the Meetings and Margins Project and the American Tropics Project, both AHRC funded.<sup>2</sup>

In the U.K. generally, outside the academic field, Latin American cinema is a neglected area. Our various film exhibition outlets—multiplexes, “art-cinemas,” community cinemas, DVD-by-post rental/internet download companies, TV programmes—provide a broad range of programming in which “Hollywood” features strongly, of course; European sources are well represented, and it is not unusual to encounter films from Asia.<sup>3</sup> By comparison, Latin American sources are conspicuous by their rarity, despite the riches currently available.<sup>4</sup> This absence is further reflected on the DVD shelves of megastores such as Zavvi and HMV. Despite this unpromising cultural situation, students have proved very willing to choose courses in the field and responses have been encouraging. Film is an attractive area of study for students who have grown up in a media conscious age and the creative vitality,

thematic and stylistic range of Latin American cinema has a powerful appeal.

The Centre for Film Studies here at Essex, adopts an interdisciplinary approach; courses are based in various departments—LiFTS (Literature, Film and Theatre Studies), History, Art History and Theory, Sociology, Latin American Studies, and US Studies. This eclectic approach produces a range of courses, varied in both content and theoretical approach.<sup>5</sup> Our current courses dealing with Latin American cinema are based on foundations laid by my former colleague Dr. Eva-Lynn Jagoe.<sup>6</sup> She created a Latin American module of five films to form one segment of our World Cinema course comprising films from Cuba, Brazil, Mexico and Argentina. Currently this has been expanded into a ten film, half year course which I will detail below. The World Cinema module is now devoted to the Cinema of Argentina. Students from a range of degree courses including BA Film, BA Film/Literature and so on, can choose this module as an option.

Before embarking on a more detailed exposition of these courses I must mention further factors that help determine their content. Not all the students choosing them speak Spanish; this means that we must restrict our film choices to those that are available with English subtitles.<sup>7</sup> In addition we are further restricted to those films that are available on DVD (or VHS) and a relatively high proportion of Latin America's past film output is not available in either format.<sup>8</sup> However there is no doubt that the existence of Amazon and eBay have helped create sufficient of a global market for films on DVD, that the catalogue of both current and past titles available to us is increasing and the dilemma facing the creator of courses is not what to include, but what to leave out.

The choice of Argentina as the source of films for a World Cinema module was made in response to the highly stimulating nature of the output of what has been labelled "The New Argentine Cinema." A module of five films only, has to be limited in its scope; it therefore seemed reasonable to trace in outline at least, some trends in Argentine cinema that emerged after the fall of the Dictatorship. That period provided a sharp break in Argentina's cinematic progress, and provided an opportunity for a new start that would lead to a further break with the techniques and political utopianism of Argentina's "Third Cinema." The "Crisis" of *circa* 2000 provided the other more contemporary focus for determining the context of the course. My highlighting of these two events indicates one aspect of the approach adopted in teaching the course: in order to make this changing context apparent to the students, introductory readings were assigned on the history of the period, together with texts such as Solanas and Getino's "Third Cinema" manifesto. The analysis of new film aesthetics to express these changes has also been an important aspect of the course. Joanna Page's new

book *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema* was assigned as a required text, together with the usual range of shorter readings from other sources. The primary texts for the course were: 1. *Camila* (Bemberg, 1984), 2. *Chronicle of an Escape* (Caetano, 2006), 3. *Crane World* (Trapero, 1999), 4. *Nine Queens* (Bielinsky, 2000), 5. *La niña santa* (Martel, 2004).

Although attention was paid to the political conditions out of which this film culture emerged, there was also a strong focus provided by the module's inclusion in a "World Cinema" course.<sup>9</sup> Students were asked to carry out short individual research assignments to be reported in seminars on a range of topics of current debate, such as globalization, the market, transnationalism, National Cinema, cosmopolitanism, globalism, neo-liberal economics – the Washington Consensus, protectionism, consumerism and cultural hybridity. A further topic was the perceived dichotomy between popular and serious culture ("art" cinema and commercial cinema). Students were encouraged to regard dichotomous categories as over-simplified; this was particularly the case when considering the effect of globalization on notions of "National Cinema," where it was held that despite the globalization of capital (and therefore of "production" influences) and the development of transnational audiences, national concerns remained clearly discernable in Argentine film production. Time was devoted to discussion of the various meanings of the expression "World Cinema" in an attempt to arrive at a definitive definition.<sup>10</sup> The student response was lively and in many cases highly committed: the response to the films was largely positive. Several years experience of teaching the World Cinema course confirms that it does enlarge the students' vision of the nature and scope of cinema well beyond the limited horizons of current UK commercial film exhibition.

The conditions that limit the approach to the creation of the Argentine Cinema module apply to an even greater extent to the ten week Latin American Cinema course. This course serves a mixed group of second and third year students including both Film Studies and Latin American Studies students. The course attempts to give students some idea of the development of film culture across the continent since the "Third Cinema" of the 1960s, together with a "snapshot" (it can be nothing more) of the output from the most recent national production centres. The primary texts are as follows:

#### Third Cinema:

*Memories of Underdevelopment*, Gutiérrez Alea (Cuba, 1968)

*How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*, Dos Santos (Brazil, 1971)

#### After the Dictatorship:

*Verónico Cruz*, Pereira (Argentina, 1988)

*La frontera*, Larraine (Chile, 1991)

The Revolution continued:

*Suite Habana*, Pérez (Cuba, 2003)

Globalization, the City and the Country:

*Y tu mamá también*, Afonso Cuarón (Mexico, 2001)

*City of God*, Meirelles (Brazil, 2002)

Indigenous postmodern:

*Destiny Has No Favourites*, Velarde (Peru, 2003)

Scenes from provincial life:

*La ciénaga*, Martel (Argentina, 2001)

The Border: barrier or bridge:

*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, Jones (U.S.A., 2005)

The approach to the teaching of this course is similar to that adopted in the Argentine Cinema module described above. Besides the political and economic contexts out of which these films respectively sprang (their radical differences being noted, as well as their similarities), the emergence of themes of postmodern reflexivity and an increasing concern with social change and individual identity (gender and sexuality becoming evident concerns as the decades pass) are noted and considered as factors in the gradual emergence of a transnational and global market for the Continent's film output.

I have tried in this brief essay to indicate our approach to film teaching in general here at Essex and to my own approach to the teaching of Latin American Cinema. These can only be introductory courses but such is the quality and appeal of the films of the region that there is little difficulty in enthusing our students. These films—springing as they do from circumstances that give a sense of urgency and immediacy to questions of individual and collective life that is often missing from those to which students are accustomed—express a commitment that much contemporary cinema lacks. In this respect they serve to emphasise the fact that we no longer see the world in terms of East and West; today we face the injustice that characterises the division between North and South.

My own personal commitment to this work arises from a love of cinema and a recognition of the particular strengths of Latin American film, especially at the current moment. I believe that such courses are of value in widening the cultural and intellectual vision of British students and in demonstrating to our Latin American students our recognition of the artistic achievements of their national cinemas. In addition I believe that film studies in general seeks to make audiences aware of the ways in which film narratives play a powerful role in mediating our experience of the world: the study of world cinema aims to promote emancipated world citizens, capable of negotiating the complexities of an increasingly globalized human context.

## NOTES

1. University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art: <<http://www.ueclaa.org/ueclaaOnline/index.jsp>>.

2. The Meetings and Margins Project: <[http://www.essex.ac.uk/arthis-tory/meeting\\_margins/](http://www.essex.ac.uk/arthis-tory/meeting_margins/)>, and the American Tropics Project: <[http://www.essex.ac.uk/lifts/American\\_Tropics/index.htm](http://www.essex.ac.uk/lifts/American_Tropics/index.htm)>.

3. The list is not comprehensive; other sources do feature, but rarely.

4. There is not space here to try to account for this, and are exceptions include: *Amores perros*, *Y tu mamá también* and *City of God*. Doubtless, both cultural and commercial factors are involved. However it should be noted that British film scholarship has produced distinguished research and critical writing over the past fifty years and that this body of work continues to grow. Much film writing in Spanish is also available in translation so that resources are by no means lacking in this respect.

5. Essex has the usual on-campus screening facilities for this purpose. Needless to say a wide range of university organisations also take advantage of these. A number of regular screening programmes run throughout the year and Latin American films find their way into these. The cinema is also used during conferences and other academic events; this year a series of films on the theme of Transitional Justice is being screened and this includes items referring to Argentina, Guatemala and Chile.

6. Dr. (now Professor) Jagoe is now at the University of Toronto, in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese.

7. Some of the less commercially oriented films fall into this category: Albertina Carri's documentary *Los rubios* (Argentina, 2003) is a (regrettable) case in point.

8. Happily the number decreases steadily, although it likely that some at least have been lost to us permanently, given the political, technical and economic circumstances of their creation and subsequent storage.

9. A one year, four module, second year undergraduate course. The other modules are respectively: 2. French and Francophone Cinema; 3. East-Asian Cinemas; 4. Local, National and Global: The Indian Cinema(s).

10. That such a definition proved elusive was regarded as instructive in itself: the term has various meanings in different contexts; each of them needs to be acknowledged and understood.

## WORKS CITED

Page, Joanna. *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema*. Durham & London: Duke UP, 2009.