

LATIN AMERICANIST FILMMAKERS

Van Hastings Garner
University of California, Santa Barbara

Latin Americanist filmmakers are people with professional training both in Latin American studies and in filmmaking. As Latin Americanists, their interests and concerns are in many ways the same as those of their nonfilmmaking colleagues, but they differ in that they express themselves through a visual rather than a written medium. The problem is that their contribution to Latin American studies has been ignored because the profession has not recognized film as a legitimate vehicle for expressing scholarly ideas. Some will offer examples of a number of conference sessions devoted to film or will point to a few written works, most notably *Latin American Cinema: Film and History* by E. Bradford Burns (Los Angeles: University of California, 1975). But these are not concerned with Latin Americanist filmmakers. They mainly examine the pedagogical application of films made by non-Latin Americanists or, as with the case of *Chile with Poems and Guns*, by Latin Americanists untrained as filmmakers. As incongruous as it may seem, Latin Americanists have developed an interest in films but not in their colleagues trained to make them.

By all meaningful indicators, Latin Americanist filmmakers should not exist at all. There is no Latin American studies Ph.D. program in which filmmakers can receive thorough training. Even graduate students who have learned filmmaking on their own are held back. Though some have been allowed to dabble in film, to my knowledge no film dissertation in Latin American studies has ever been accepted in a United States university. Similarly, films count little toward promotion and tenure, thus academic survival depends upon individual tenacity. Many excellent Latin Americanist filmmakers have had to seek new professions because they were denied acceptance in Latin American studies. So at this stage the question of whether or not filmmakers can find a place in Latin American studies is the most important one.

None of this is intended as an indictment of Latin American studies—both filmmakers and nonfilmmakers have had a hand in creating and maintaining the present situation. There are those who violently oppose filmmaking on principle. Filmmakers, generally battle-scarred by dealing with such people, are intolerant of criticism. Thus, when concerned nonfilmmakers ask penetrating questions, they often receive vicious, unwarranted attacks in return. As a result, most nonfilmmakers have simply withdrawn their concern and left the more hostile of their numbers to deal with filmmakers as they please. There exists a self-sustaining bitterness that destroys any chance for communication and thus resolution. Whether or not filmmakers are to find a place in Latin American studies, all sides

need to relax and begin discussion. Nonfilmmakers must listen to those who can offer new ideas, sources, and perhaps more to the profession as a whole. Filmmakers in turn should heed those with real concerns that need to be answered. This interchange will determine the future of filmmaking and, to a large degree, the direction of professional Latin American studies as a whole. This preliminary report may hopefully encourage constructive dialogue.

There can be no meaningful exchange unless everyone recognizes the issues: Economics, disruption of traditions, and questions about the competence and potential contribution of filmmakers. At the top of the list is the economic problem. Films cost a great deal of money to make, but this fact has been obscured by misinformation published by filmmakers and their supporters. The literature from the Lucha Film Collective, for instance, emphasizes the \$150 with which the members started *Chile with Poems and Guns*, but it does not mention the high total expenses or how the quality of the film suffered as a result of inadequate funding. E. Bradford Burns points to a hoped-for technological breakthrough in cartridges that will make film inexpensive, but film technology presently has no such thing to offer. It is argued that feature-length films could be made on inexpensive super eight film, but super eight is so small that its image and sound reproduction are very poor, and distribution to the general public is unsatisfactory because it is so fragile.

The truth is that filmmakers need a great deal of money to work, astronomical sums when compared to what nonfilmmakers need. According to Martin Seeger, in "Films and Filmmaking: Win, Place, or Show," a paper given at the 1975 meeting of the Rocky Mountain Council on Latin American Studies (RMCLAS), a fully equipped 16mm lab costs approximately a quarter of a million dollars. Aside from equipment, professional filmmakers have a rule of thumb that one minute of film costs a minimum of \$1,000—a fifty-five minute film, \$55,000. Graduate students may be able to do some training with cheap super-eight film, but even then a film for a graduate seminar would cost several hundred dollars. Materials for an entire program of training would cost many thousands—this added to normal graduate student expenses. In the end, each copy of a film dissertation would cost several thousand dollars. In short, every time filmmakers use their medium, a great deal of money is required. It is foolish for them to deny their need for money because they cannot operate without it. When financing is lacking, quality drops to the point where the resultant films are not worth any investment. The problem for the profession is that the amount of funding available to Latin Americanists is at best fixed, more realistically, shrinking. Thus, to give filmmakers the support they need will bring economic hardship to nonfilmmakers who will have to give up some of their money in the process.

It must also be admitted that the problems extend beyond the economic. For instance, a new system of measuring scholarly accomplishment will have to be devised. Films do not fit into the world of articles or books. Can nonfilmmakers accept nonverbal intellectuality and accomplishment? How can nonfilmmakers accurately evaluate a skilled or unskilled filmmaker or colleague? Filmmaker graduate students with special needs will have to be incorporated into a broadly

conceived graduate program. Will other graduate students accept the necessary differences in funding?

The list of problems goes on and filmmakers must prove that they have something very important to offer in exchange for the problems they create. The first step is to prove that they are intellectually equal and that intellectuality in general can be expressed through the medium of film. A most unfortunate hinderance to this task is the prejudice created by the unscholarly and communicatively poor films that are commercially available. Though used as examples, these films are *not* made by Latin Americanist filmmakers. Financial support has generally confined their efforts to nondistributed experimental films which few people see; so, unfortunately, Latin Americanist filmmakers can offer no legacy of good examples, no work that will prove and publicize their qualifications.

Filmmakers will have to rely on the written word as some have already done. A few papers were given at the 1975 meeting of RMCLAS. There is also a fine article by Frederic Chiles and John Mraz, in the *Proceedings* of the 1974 Pacific Coast Council on Latin American Studies, which should dispel the notion of generally incompetent filmmakers. They review the thoughts behind their experimental film, *Todo es mas sabroso con . . . : An Historical Film-Essay on the Continuity of Neo-Colonialism in Mexico*, and examine the application of film to such problems as communicating concepts of time and dealing with problems of objectivity. From the article it is obvious that these filmmakers are the intellectual equals of nonfilmmakers and if they could obtain the kind of support they need, they would improve the quality of films about Latin America.

It is not enough, however, to show that filmmakers are intellectually capable and that film is as expressive as the written word. If film offers only another medium through which to express what books and articles can, then it has little to offer: Written works are cheaper to produce and easier to use. Even if filmmakers can demonstrate that they offer unique contributions to the profession, these changes will have to be substantial. Filmmakers can argue that, as they pursue the visual materials needed for their work, they will open up photographic sources rarely explored by other scholars. Nonfilmmakers have left these untouched because the time spent on these materials does not seem to yield the same return as written archives. As a result, still photographs have only peripheral use in today's Latin American studies—primarily as illustrations, sometimes as evidence.

Other than pedagogically, cinema is hardly used at all. But cinema and photographic libraries contain a great deal of useful information. History provides the best example. One of the difficulties in social history is that written sources describing ordinary life are often lacking. The photograph adds another dimension for it captures all of a scene, including much that is outside the mind of the photographer. Chiles and Mraz deal with this topic in a paper, "So How Many Words Is a Picture Worth?: The Visual Image in the History of the Americas," presented at the 1975 RMCLAS meeting. They argue that "no document in this century is more primary than the photograph. It is present history, it is time embalmed, time frozen. It can show us, perhaps as no other document can, the presence of the inarticulate masses in history."

Cinema as a source offers even more. It can illustrate not only the unnoticed, everyday details of life, but can also show the basic cultural values that dominated the period in which it was made. As Eugene C. McCreary writes in his article, "Film and History, Some Thoughts on Their Interrelationship": "The cinema is a recorder and a preserver of time, a mine of captured visual detail. It is also a reflector of the elusive and the unstated, of social mores, attitudes and values, and of the psychosocial realities of specific societies at given periods of time" (reprinted in *Latin American Cinema: Film and History*). Not only can filmmakers explore photographic libraries, they can organize the materials and present them in a way that is useful to nonfilmmakers as well.

Most reasonable professional Latin Americanists can accept the possibility that people trained both as filmmakers and Latin Americanists are intellectually competent and can improve the quality of films in the field. They can also accept that filmmakers might add a great deal to social history by uncovering and organizing a number of photographic sources heretofore unavailable. For some this is enough to consider making the adjustments necessary to give filmmakers a chance. But to win over the majority, the contribution of filmmakers will have to be much more profound. It is this profundity that was the topic of a paper, "The Split Brain: Verbal and Visual Thinking," given at the 1975 RMCLAS meeting. The author, Andrea Thompson, a psychologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, applies new theories of brain function to the potential contribution of filmmakers. Simplified here for brevity, she argues that the two hemispheres of the brain have distinct ways of processing information. The right processes information holistically, simultaneously, and relationally; the left logically and sequentially. Most academics rely on the left hemisphere and Thompson uses the accompanying illustrations to demonstrate just how one sided academic thinking has become.

Look at the illustrations and attempt to identify the objects presented. They are not easy for most Latin Americanists to identify because their normal mode of problem solving is to take the pieces contained in the illustrations and attempt to arrange them in a logical order; such an approach does not work here. Many are stumped because they cannot see the whole—a rabbit in the first illustration and a locomotive in the second. On the other hand, there are many artists who see nothing but a rabbit and a locomotive. The implications go far beyond artist and nonartist. Right hemisphere thinking is best expressed visually and spatially—the medium of the filmmaker. Thompson's contention is that filmmakers can give to Latin American studies a new way of processing information, a new way of thinking about Latin America. By this she means first, that filmmakers will be thinking in a different way, and second, that they can ignite in many of their colleagues a previously dormant approach to learning and expression. If this concept is accepted, there is an obligation also to accept filmmakers, not just for their sake but for the rest of the profession as well. The resulting addition to Latin American studies could be staggering.

Today, however, filmmakers and nonfilmmakers face a serious dilemma. As Martin Seeger describes the situation, nonfilmmakers will not share funding or tolerate adjustments asked by filmmakers until the latter start producing



From R. F. Street, Contributions to Education, no. 481 (New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1931).

professional works that prove that there is something worthwhile in which to invest. Filmmakers cannot do professional work until they receive the funding necessary to use the medium to its fullest extent. The resolution, if it is to come at all, will have to be a product of both sides. Filmmakers must start identifying themselves and describing the work they are doing. They must impose standards of quality on themselves that satisfy the rest of the profession. They must demonstrate that they offer substantial contributions to the profession as a whole. And they must listen to and address the real concerns of nonfilmmaker colleagues. At the same time, nonfilmmakers must take on faith some of the potential ascribed to filmmakers. They will have to be generous with their funding and thoughtful in their criticism. This report, in short, is a plea for understanding.