Day School
An Introduction to Latin American Cinema

Outline Timetable
10.30 Introductory session
12.30 Lunch
13.15 Screening *Las acacias*
14.45 Short Break
15.00 Discussion of the film, application of ideas
16.30 Close

Background to the day
We'll focus primarily on films from Latin America since 2000, although we will briefly mention earlier periods in order to understand some of the history.

‘Latin America’ is a term first used in the 19th century and since contested as a descriptor. It is generally the term used within film studies. It might be considered to include all of Central and South America plus the Caribbean. In practice, the anglophone and francophone territories tend to be excluded in film studies and the focus is on hispanic and lusophone cinemas.

In the same way that ‘African cinema’ comprises diverse national cinemas that face similar problems, the various national cinemas of Latin America share certain features while sometimes retaining individual distinctiveness.

Common factors
1. **Language** – most Latin American countries are Spanish-speaking and this means the potential for exports within the region. It also opens up the possibility of co-productions with Spain and access to the large Spanish-speaking market in the US. Brazil does not have this advantage, but because it is the largest country in area, population and GDP, it should be able to support a local film industry. (Brazil is one of the so-called ‘BRIC’ countries with Russia, India and China.)
2. **Catholicism** – sharing the same religion makes for a cultural connection.
3. **Post-colonial status** – in most cases these countries gained independence from Spain/Portugal in the 19th century. They have been left with populations that include European migrants and indigenous peoples plus Asian and African migrants/descendants of slaves. In many countries there are communities of mixed heritage.
4. **American imperialism** – the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 instituted an American foreign policy that has claimed a form of ‘suzerainty’ over Latin America with frequent American interventions in political and economic developments in all parts of the Americas outside the US and Canada.
5. Perhaps because of that American involvement, the whole region has seen more political turmoil and changes of government than might be expected. The term ‘banana republic’ refers particularly to the problems of Guatemala and the United Fruit Company but has implications in many other Latin American countries.
6. One of the global popular cultural activities that unites and divides Latin America is **football** – and it isn’t surprising that the game features in several films. Baseball is popular in Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua. Music is popular everywhere.

Cinema history
Cinema came to Latin America at the same time it spread through all of what was still a colonial/imperial world in the 1890s. First films were produced in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Cuba before 1900. In the century since there have been periods of thriving local production in each of the four countries, but, since the 1950s the popular mass market has been dominated by Hollywood.

Major resistance to Hollywood came with the development of political filmmaking in the 1960s. The concept of a ‘Third Cinema’ (not Hollywood, not European art cinema) was formulated in Cuba in 1969 by two Argentinians and this period saw forms of political filmmaking in Brazil and Bolivia as well as Cuba. Havana became the centre for the ‘New Latin American Cinema’ and for the next thirty years the Havana Film Festival and International Film School helped to develop new filmmakers from around the region.

Since 2000 filmmakers from the region have become more successful in working in the global film marketplace. A handful of films have become international hits. The associated filmmakers have, however, moved into making films outside the region. The best known are the ‘three amigos’ from...
Mexico – Alfonso Cuaron, Alejandro G. Iñarittu and Guillermo del Toro – and the two Brazilians Walter Salles and Fernando Mereilles. The other change is that public funding (using the European model) has helped to increase production of ‘specialised films’ that are able to travel to international festivals and then to get distribution as ‘art films’ in Europe and North America. These constitute most of the films from the region that we are able to see in the UK.

**Telenovelas**

In many parts of the world there is a close connection between TV drama and film production – so much so that it is difficult to distinguish between them. In Brazil, Columbia and Mexico the television drama format known as the *telenovela* is hugely important. These ‘TV novels’ run up to 200 ‘chapters’ each up to one hour in length with broadcasts ‘stripped’ across several days of the week and the whole serial taking several months to air. Three or four different *telenovelas* air each day and they are compulsive viewing for large audiences. What is important to note here is that the *telenovela* competes successfully with US TV shows in the domestic market – and *telenovelas* are exported successfully across the world, especially in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. The only glimpse of a *telenovela* in the UK has been via the US ‘remake’ of the Mexican-Columbian *Ugly Betty*.

The *telenovela* producers are very successful media producers and some such as TV Globo in Brazil have also moved into film production.

**The industries**

The biggest producer of films (i.e. the most titles) in recent years is Argentina (see the table below), the biggest cinema industry in terms of admissions is Mexico and the biggest box office is in Brazil (Brazilian ticket prices are higher than Mexico’s).

Columbia, Chile and Venezuela also produce films for the international festival circuit and Ecuador and Bolivia are involved in co-productions. Statistics about film industries are notoriously difficult to find – partly because the international film business is dominated by the Hollywood studios and the figures they want to find refer to the success of their films in different territories. Hollywood films take 85-95% of total box office in Argentina, Mexico and Brazil. Cuba hasn’t interested Hollywood since 1959 – but it may do soon!

The figures in the chart below come from the European Audio-Visual Observatory which produces a Global Report for the Cannes Film Market each year. Though the figures are a few years old, the trends haven’t changed dramatically.

**Genres and styles**

As in most regions, there are some specific local genres and local versions of ‘universal’ genres. For instance, Mexico has a tradition of ‘masked wrestler’ horror movies in which the wrestler hero fights vampires, werewolves etc. Some 150 of these films were made in a twenty year period from the early 1950s to the early 1970s. Horror is a popular genre,
partly influenced by the form of Catholicism which has mixed with the beliefs of indigenous peoples.

Forms of melodrama, often linked to changes in society during periods of modernisation have been popular throughout the region. Many national cinemas in the region deal with political heroes and stories about independence struggles. Some of these involve thriller narratives – e.g. the many Argentinian films dealing with the aftermath of fascism and ‘the disappeared’. Many Central American films deal with the long migration and illegal entry into the US.

But there are also the comedies, crime films and romances that are recognisable from most film territories.

**Las acacias (Argentina-Spain 2011)**

This is a good example of the kind of ‘festival film’ that is now being produced in Argentina. It’s a début film that won many awards around the world and did get a release in the UK (though not in many cinemas).

The film represents a challenge to audiences in an unexpected way. There is very little dialogue and similarly not very much action in its 82 minutes. But if you engage with the film, there is pleasure in the developing relationship between a truck driver, a woman and her baby.

**The other extracts**

We’ll try to explore a range of issues through a selection of extracts and trailers. *The Second Mother* (Brazil 2015) and *Güeros* (Mexico 2014) were the films shown at Kala Sangam earlier this month. I’ll post my notes for the screenings on the website at: cinemathequebradford.wordpress.com

**The Maid** (Chile-Mexico 2009)

A good counterpart to The Second Mother, here the maid has become part of the family but there are still tensions and she reacts badly when ‘madam’ wants to lessen her load in the household.

**El ardor (The Burning,** Argentina-Brazil 2014)

This is an example of a Latin-American ‘Western’ set in the forests of North-West Argentina. The title refers to the illegal practice whereby mercenaries burn down parts of the forest and force local farmers off their land in order to take over the land for plantation crops (lumber or soya beans etc.). In this instance there is resistance led by a man who seems to live in the forest and to be skilled in using the forest’s resources to fight off the invaders. The film attempts to imbue the ‘mystery man’ with the sense of the spirit of the forest, adding a fabulous jaguar to the local fauna. This links it to the eco concerns of a film like John Boorman’s *The Emerald Forest* (UK 1985) Two of the biggest stars of Latin American cinema take lead roles – Gael García Bernal from Mexico and Alice Braga from Brazil. The film got a UK release but was poorly received by critics. In the US it is widely available on digital channels.

**You Owe Me One (Me la debes,** Mexico 2002)**

Written and directed by Carlos Cuarón, this short film appeared on the DVD for *Y tu mamá también*, the major hit in Europe and North America for Carlos’ brother Alfonso Cuarón. As a sex comedy farce, the short takes a poke at the hypocrisy of the pious upper middle-class family in Mexico. This class (and the clergy) were previously the target in Luis Buñuel’s Mexican films such as *The Exterminating Angel* in 1962.

**The Colors of the Mountains** (Colombia 2010)

Another festival hit, this lovely film is unfortunately not available in the UK. Manuel is a 9 year-old boy with two passions. One is football and the other is drawing/painting. He lives in a community in the mountains preyed upon by both the guerrillas and the government forces. A début fiction film by a documentary director it retains that sense of a ‘real’ community. Like Las acacias this film uses aspects of realist cinema.

**Los Bañistas** (Cuba 2010) (not available in the UK)

A short film exploring some of the issues associated with economic shortages and social divisions on the island. Is it the comedy that some critics suggest?

**The House at the End of Time** (Venezuela 2013)

A recent example of Latin American horror in which the haunted house takes on a distinctively Hispanic Catholic/indigenous magic tone.

**Resources**

Unless otherwise indicated, all the films today are on UK DVD. The best place to see new Latin American films is as part of the Viva Festival at HOME in Manchester.

Roy Stafford 20 February, 2016