

Making Movies in Latin America

By Joshua Jelly-Schapiro



Photo courtesy of Andrés Wood.

Andrés Wood on the set of “Machuca.”

“When one talks of cinema,” wrote the great Brazilian auteur Glauber Rocha in the 1960s, “one talks of American cinema... Every discussion of cinema made outside Hollywood must begin with Hollywood.” At the time he wrote those words, Rocha and many of his Latin American contemporaries spoke often of the need to create a new cinema, one that not only challenged the formal dominance of “Hollywood aesthetics,” but that also challenged the economic dominance of American movies in the theaters and distribution networks of the Third World. Inspired in equal measure by Che Guevara’s *New Man* and the French New Wave, the exponents of Brazil’s *cinema novo* sought to make movies that depicted the harsh realities of impoverished societies, but that also instilled a radical vision of what those societies could become. In an epoch of revolutionary ferment,

cinemastes across the Third World commonly conceived of building national film industries as integral to the building of a new consciousness of liberation.

In today’s Latin America, a new generation of filmmakers confronts a very different political context. Theirs is an age not so much of revolutionary idealism as cautious hope. They make movies in societies coming to terms with the traumas of their recent histories, nations indelibly marked by the dashing of sixties hopes on the violent rocks of military dictatorship, dirty war and “structural adjustment.” This new generation, however, is still preoccupied with loosening the stranglehold of Hollywood films on domestic markets; American blockbusters are even more dominant in the region today than a few decades ago. And if less eager to make the stridently political films of their forebears, many of these filmmakers — responsible for what

many are calling a new boom in Latin American cinema — are still critically engaged in making movies that address the present circumstance and future trajectory of the national societies to which they belong.

Andrés Wood, the Chilean director who has recently emerged as a key figure in this new generation of cineastes, addressed these themes in a public lecture at Berkeley's Center for Latin American Studies. Wood delivered his remarks the day after introducing a special screening of "Machuca," his acclaimed semi-autobiographical depiction of events surrounding the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende, a film that was not only an unexpected smash in Chile — it was the top-grossing movie in the country in 2004 — but has since gone on to extraordinary international success. In a wide-ranging, informal talk entitled "Making Movies in Latin America," Wood discussed his own journey as a filmmaker and the place of his work in the renewed Chilean movie industry that has emerged since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship in 1990.

In sketching out the history of Chilean cinema, Wood pointed to the importance of early pioneers like Raúl Ruiz, who developed a successful career in exile after departing for France in the Pinochet years, and of Patricio Guzmán, whose three-part treatment of the politics surrounding the 1973 coup, "La Batalla de Chile" ("The Battle of Chile") remains an international classic of documentary realism. Wood also identified a few seminal figures from elsewhere in Latin America — Glauber Rocha first among them — who had articulated an important vision for cinematic art in the region and whose films had spoken to the role that a "man with a movie camera" could play in the development of national culture and identity.

Wood explained how the Pinochet regime, particularly brutal in its ideological character, had almost entirely eliminated Chile's domestic film industry during its years in power: over the near two decades of the dictatorship, no more than five feature-length films were produced in the country (this in contrast to Brazil and Argentina, which were also governed by military

regimes over much of the same period, but whose large film industries survived relatively intact).

Having grown up under the dictatorship — Wood was a boy of seven in 1973 — the director came of age at a time when there was no way to study film in Chile. Beginning on a university course in economics in Santiago, he spent time at Notre Dame in Indiana on a scholarship, and from there, attended film school at NYU. Upon returning to Chile, Wood made "Historias de fútbol" ("Soccer Stories") in 1997, a domestic hit that was a key example of the small-scale movies that young directors were making in the first years of civilian government. Though a short decade ago there wasn't a single film school in Chile, Wood reports that "today there seems to be one on every corner"; in the Santiago of Michelle Bachelet, studying cinema is the hip course of the moment. Wood estimated that the country is currently producing eight to 10 feature films each year and up to 20 documentaries.

The emergence of this newly vibrant culture, however, does not mean that the financial infrastructure needed to make movies has materialized out of thin air. Feature-length filmmakers in Chile, as in every other Latin American country (save perhaps Brazil and Argentina) depend almost exclusively upon foreign financing to make their films. As Wood explained, the financing for "Machuca" — which was made for \$1.2 million, a miniscule amount even for independent studios in the U.S. — was obtained from production companies in France, Britain and Spain, along with a small amount from the Chilean government's Fund for the Arts.

And, as Wood discussed, gaining distribution once a film is complete — and the all-important foreign distribution especially — is a further, enormous challenge. "It's very difficult. Very, very difficult," Wood said with a smile, alluding to the struggle he has personally headed up to gain distribution for his work in the United States (the "Machuca" DVD is still not available here, though he promised it will be soon).



**Andrés Wood screened his film
“Machuca” at CLAS on March 13, 2006.**



Photo courtesy of Andrés Wood.

Set in Santiago, Chile in 1973, the film portrays the unlikely friendship between two boys from different social classes.

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Of course gaining distribution is a lot easier if you are shopping a product of the altogether exceptional quality of “Machuca,” a film that has garnered numerous plaudits on the international festival circuit, and has attracted rave reviews in each of the 30 countries where it has had a theatrical release.

Critics writing about Wood’s film have praised nothing quite so often as the quietness of the director’s approach, his insistence that the defining moment in his nation’s recent history be approached not as national epic but as intimate drama. Though the film’s subject is inherently political, “its point,” as Tony Scott put in his New York Times review, “is not to settle scores or reopen old wounds, but rather to explore, after a long period of repression, the possibility of grief.”

It is perhaps for this reason that Wood’s film was so well received in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America. “Machuca” deals with a terrible time in the region’s history not by recapitulating old debates, but by depicting the epoch’s violence on a human scale. It approaches divides of ideology and class not as historical abstractions, but as complex lived realities, laid bare by events far outside the ability of the film’s young protagonists to control.

This trope that Wood uses to tell this tale — indicting a traumatic history through the sympathetic eyes of children — is a familiar one, and it carries with it a readymade form of moral clarity. But it is a trope also prone to sentimentality; tales of young innocence corrupted devolve easily into both the saccharine and the trite. Yet “Machuca,” whatever its imperfections, succeeds precisely for the degree to which it escapes these traps, managing to be a film about children and politics that is both emotively forceful and unsentimental. It succeeds in speaking to a traumatic past because it approaches that past not with the fervid alacrity of youth, but with the melancholic nuance of middle age. It befits, in other words, the stage in the life of its nation at which it was made.

Yet as Wood emphasized in his talk, he is wary of the prospect that only serious films, dramas that self-consciously address the national drama, be the measure of a national cinema. “A healthy film industry,” as he put it, “needs all kinds of films — films about Martian invasions and teenage comedies, as well as the kind of dramas I like to make.”

In Latin America today, confronting the Hollywood juggernaut is not commonly approached as a problem of building a new aesthetic; it is more often seen as problem of simply building the means for filmmakers to make the movies they want to make, to tell the stories they want to tell and to have those stories be heard at home and abroad.

Some of these stories will engage explicitly national themes; many others will not. But whatever their subject-matter, the best films, as ever, will succeed not because of their topic but because of their approach: their use of image, character and tone, their ability to engage universal themes through local detail.

The true maturity of any national cinema must lie in the freedom it affords its exponents to make their art as they will: to explore the limits and capabilities of the medium itself, to tell stories that gain their power not from their status as national allegories but from their virtues as art. In Wood’s estimation, his homeland, “after many difficult years, is getting there.” Let us hope so. If Chile — and the larger region to which it belongs — continues to produce films of the quality of “Machuca” and filmmakers of the unmistakable gifts of Andrés Wood, so much the better for us all.

Chilean director Andrés Wood spoke at CLAS on March 14.

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