

NEW CENTRAL AMERICAN CINEMA (2001-2010)

By

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Film & Media Studies and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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During the 2000s, Central American cinema experienced unprecedented and rapid growth, particularly in the production of feature-length fictional films. At the same time, this production boom provoked an increased awareness of Central American films among audiences, critics and film festival organizers, both locally and internationally, who were cognizant of recurring social themes prevalent in many of the films. This historical phenomenon became known as New Central American Cinema, and its socio- economic development and thematic concerns are the subject of this dissertation.

Based on field research including interviews with filmmakers and film advocates, and textual analysis of select representative films, this study examines the New Central American Cinema movement from 2001-2010, focusing on the socio-economic factors and the recurring social themes that characterized many of the films of that period.

The study identified five socio-economic factors contributing to the rapid growth of Central American film during the period: the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión (International School of Film and Television) or EICTV as the primary training opportunity for aspiring filmmakers; the Costa Rica-based CINERGIA Project as a crucial funding source for

film production; the availability of low cost digital equipment as an affordable technology; the Guatemala-based Ícaro Central American Film Festival as an alternative channel of distribution; and transnationalism as a global force that contributed to the development of a regional identity among Central American filmmakers.

In addition to the factors that influenced New Central American film production in the 2000s, this study focuses on three recurring social themes that characterized the New Central American Film movement: migrations, gangs and civil wars. The thematic emphasis on social phenomena, suggests that collective social traumas from the recent history of the region may have influenced the selection and depiction of these recurring themes in New Central American Cinema. The combination of socio-economic factors in regard to film production and recurring thematic concerns characterized the New Central American Cinema movement of the 2000s.

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### List of Acronyms

AECID	Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (Spanish Agency of International Development Cooperation)
CCPC	Centro Costarricense de Producción Cinematográfica (Costa Rican Center of Film Production)
DANIDA	Danish International Development Agency
DKA	Catholic Children's Movement
ECTVCC	Escuela de Cine y TV de Casa Comal (Casa Comal School of Film and Television)
EICTV	Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión (International School of Film and Television)
EUROPEAID	European Directorate for Development
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front)
FNCL	Fundación del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano (Foundation of New Latin American Cinema)
FSLN	Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front)
GECU	Grupo Experimental de Cine Universitario (Experimental Group of University Cinema)
HIVOS	Dutch Humanist Institute for Cooperation
ICAIC	Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry, or Cuban Film Institute)
ICSR	Instituto Cinematográfico de El Salvador Revolucionario (Film Institute of Revolutionary El Salvador)
ILO	International Labour Organization
INCINE	Instituto Nicaragüense de Cine (Nicaraguan Film Institute)

IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPEC	International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour
NCAC	New Central American Cinema
NECTV	Nueva Escuela de Cine y Televisión de la Universidad Veritas (Veritas University New School of Film and Television)
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development
OCAL	Observatorio del Cine y el Audiovisual Latinoamericano y Caribeño (Latin American and Caribbean Film and Media Observatory)
UCLA	University of California, Los Angeles
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
URNG	Unión Revolucionaria Nacional de Guatemala (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity)

## Introduction

This doctoral dissertation focuses on New Central American Cinema (hereafter NCAC), a film movement emerging in Central America at the beginning of the new millennium. This movement is characterized by an unprecedented production boom of feature-length fictional films. While in the previous decade only one feature-length film stood out in the region, in the 2000s nearly fifty fictional features were produced and released in Central America. NCAC was spearheaded by young filmmakers, who benefitted from new filmmaking socio-economic conditions in the region that were unavailable for filmmakers of previous generations. These conditions include new regional training opportunities and new funding sources, access to low-cost digital technology, new alternative regional distribution channels, and increased regional and international film production interactions. While in the 1990s most filmmakers in the region preferred the documentary format to deal with social issues, NCAC filmmakers, taking advantage of the new filmmaking conditions, focused on the production of fictional features to represent social phenomena that characterized the region in the recent past, such as migrations, gangs, and civil wars. This new generation of filmmakers contested old Manichean ways of representing those social phenomena by bringing new interpretations to the debate of the recent history of Central America.

In this study, Central America is defined as the geographical region between Mexico and Colombia, comprised by seven countries (Belize<sup>1</sup>, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama) that share both cultural and historical traits. Based on field research, textual analysis and bibliographic sources, this investigation explores factors and recurring themes that characterized NCAC from 2001 to 2010. During the 2000s film production

in Central America grew at a rapid pace. The rise of Central American cinema was particularly noticeable because in prior decades Central American film production was sporadic. María Lourdes Cortés, documenting contemporary Central American films, reports that “in the 1990s only one feature film was produced in Central America; while in the last twelve years the number has risen to seventy four.” (Cortés, *El Periódico* 2013) Seventy four films in twelve years makes an average of six films a year, a number that is still low considering that Central America is comprised of seven countries. With such indicators, we might conclude that film production in Central America has not yet reached industrial levels. However, the rapid growth is still phenomenal taking into account the unfavorable socio-economic conditions that have characterized film production in the region: lack of private investment, little government support, small markets for film distribution, and political instability, among others (Cortés 2005). The first section of this dissertation consists of a critical examination of the socio-economic conditions that contributed to the Central American film production boom of the 2000s.

Another result of the increased film production activity in Central America was a growing awareness of Central American film culture outside the region itself. For example, the Casa América Cultural Center organized a Central American Film showcase in Madrid, Spain, in 2012, and the Papaya Media Association has organized a Central American Film Festival in Vienna, Austria, since 2008. In addition, Central American films have received academic attention in recent years. The Central American Studies program at the California State University-Northridge includes an undergraduate course on Central American film, and the UCLA César Chavez Chicana/o Studies Department organized a Central American Film festival in 2011. Despite the recent academic notice the films produced during the boom have yet to receive scholarly attention and this study aims to fill that void.

The emergence of a film movement in Central America is not an isolated phenomenon. The New Central American Cinema is linked with the New Latin American Cinema, a larger film movement that emerged in Latin America during the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between these two movements are both ideological and aesthetic. Ideologically, New Latin American Cinema was based on several manifestos that called for a reinforcement of national cinemas against the hegemony of Hollywood commercial productions<sup>3</sup>. Although New Central American Cinema was not based on any manifesto, by increasing production and distribution of national films the movement also challenged Hollywood hegemony in the region. Aesthetically, New Latin American Cinema filmmakers were strongly influenced by Italian Neorealism, an influence that was later transmitted to New Central American filmmakers. These three movements congregated historically via the EICTV, a film school in Cuba (see chapter two). This school was created in 1986 by Latin American filmmakers such as Fernando Birri, Julio García Espinoza, and Gabriel García Márquez, who had been previously trained in Italy and who had been intellectual founders of the New Latin American Cinema.<sup>4</sup> Since its creation, several Central American filmmakers were trained at this school, where they were exposed to the films and the ideas of New Latin American Cinema and the influence from Italian Neorealism. Similar thematic focus, such as parent-child relationships and post-war traumas, and production strategies such as the use of natural locations and non-professional actors may help illustrate the possible connections between Italian Neorealism films and New Central American Cinema, transmitted via New Latin American Cinema.

A personal experience motivated me to conduct this research in the first place. I am a Central American filmmaker, graduated from EICTV, and was involved in the organization of the Ícaro Central American Film Festival, acting as the national coordinator in Honduras (see

chapter two). Among my responsibilities were the promotion of the Festival and the organization of a local film showcase and a film selection for the Central American competition in Guatemala. Having participated in five of the local Ícaro film festivals in Honduras and the regional one in Guatemala, I witnessed and took part in the development of Central American film at the beginning of the century. Through this experience, I recognized that this film movement was not receiving the scholarly attention it deserved and dedicated myself to increasing the awareness of New Central American Cinema.

### **Research Question**

This dissertation addresses the question of what factors and themes contributed to and characterized New Central American Cinema during the first decade of the twenty-first century. On the one hand, this study explores the filmmaking conditions in Central America during that decade and the socio-economic factors that drove film production in the region. In societies with developed film industries, film production is mostly driven by the flow of the market. In other societies with weak industries, film production is often significantly supported by the government. But in societies without an industry and without state support, such as those in Central America, film production is driven by a complex combination of socio-economic factors. In the past century, no single country in Central America developed a significant film industry; therefore filmmakers did not have access to funds for film production. Similarly, no country in Central America had consolidated stable and systematic state support for film production (except for few and sporadic cases explained in chapters one and two). These adverse conditions did not change in the first decade of the twenty-first century. However, Central American filmmakers adopted alternative production strategies, driven by newly emerging socio-economic factors. The

first part of this study aims to examine these factors and the production strategies that characterized the Central American film boom of the 2000s.

The lack of industrial conditions and poor state support were significant determining factors in the low levels of film production in Central America in the past century. Paradoxically, in the first decade of this century, those limitations helped Central American filmmakers to create their films freely, without liabilities to private investors or the government. Except for a few commercial products, the majority of the Central American narrative films of the 2000s were independent productions with no commercial intentions. Made by independent filmmakers, free of financial or political obligations, these films are marked by narratives that openly examine recent social conflicts in the region. The second and central focus of this study aims to explore the recurring themes that characterized these narratives, paying particular attention to issues of historical memory and trauma that were a result of the many civil wars that ravaged the region during the 1970s and 1980s.

On the other hand, this study examines how Central American filmmakers dealt with their recent history by focusing on themes related to events of that past. The recent history of Central America was marked by the political crisis taking place during the 1970s and the 1980s. A long history of social and political inequality led to conflicts between military governments and rebel guerrilla organizations in different countries of Central America. In Nicaragua, the FSLN guerrilla front fought against the army of dictator Anastasio Somoza from 1974 to 1979. In El Salvador, following decades of confrontation between the leftist FMLN guerrilla front and the conservative military regime, the civil war intensified from 1980 to 1992. Likewise, in Guatemala, the unified guerrilla front UNRG fought the anti-democratic military regime from 1980 to 1996. Although internal warfare was not a major problem in Honduras or Costa Rica,

these countries were affected by the civil wars in their neighboring countries primarily by war-related migrations. The outcome of these events was tremendously destructive, as Fabrice Lehoucq summarizes:

“Civil war raged in Central America throughout the 1980s and in to the 1990s. It led to the killing of at least 300,000 people, the vast majority of whom were civilians. It produced between 1.8 million and 2.8 million refugees. War also devastated the economies of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.” (Lehoucq 2012, 30)

These traumatic events became the narrative setting for several NCAC films, many going beyond simple historical accounts and instead critically examining the recent past. For instance, *Las cruces, poblado próximo*<sup>5</sup> (*Las Cruces, Next Village*; Rafael Rosal, 2006) relates the story of seven guerrilla fighters who, during the civil war in Guatemala, protect the members of a small indigenous village from an impending attack of the ruling army. Similarly, *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* (*Surviving Guazapa*; Roberto Dávila, 2008) centers on two enemy soldiers during the civil war in El Salvador, who end up working together to save a girl lost in the middle of the jungle. Moreover, *El último comandante* (*The Last Commander*; Isabel Martínez, 2010) introduces a former Sandinista leader who, after a traumatic civil war, flees Nicaragua to live as an exile in Costa Rica. These three examples illustrate how NCAC filmmakers either directly or indirectly commented on the political conflicts that, at the same time, characterized the recent history of Central America. They also reveal how these traumatic events shaped the historical memory of the region and its recently developed film culture.

Following a decade of intense and devastating civil wars, Central American societies began a period of recovery. Once stagnated by the social conflicts, the region's economy began

to gradually improve. Politically, democracy was adopted as a form of government in countries once ruled by military rulers. Investigative teams, known as truth or human rights commissions, were created during the process of pacification. The commissions' reports, largely based on eye-witness testimonies, not only numbered and identified the victims, but also revealed the untold tragic stories of the civil wars. The media, now free of government censorship, started to publish the reports and the people learned about the atrocities that were covered up by previous government authorities. As part of the recovery process Central American societies initiated a cultural debate concerning the recent past in order to come to terms with it. I argue that Central American filmmakers created film narratives related to the civil wars of the 1980s as a way of participating in that ongoing debate, aimed at social recovery from a collective historical trauma in the region. Consequently, these films served as a way of assuaging the recent past and healing in order to create a new national identity through historical memory.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review evaluates academic sources on the representation of history in film and its connection with social trauma. This evaluation is intended to create an initial theoretical background for my research on how traumatic events during the 1980s civil wars in Central America eventually led Central American filmmakers to use those same events as recurring themes in several features during the Central American film boom. First, I examine several works on the representation of history in film, focusing primarily on the seminal contributions of Robert A. Rosenstone; second I shift the discussion of literature to trauma studies, seeking definitions of trauma and focusing on the works of scholars who have analyzed the representation of trauma in mass media; finally, I analyze the connections between history,

trauma and film studies to consolidate a theoretical context for my dissertation project on historical representations and its effects on the films of Central America during the 2000s.

In the early twentieth century, the American literary critic Van Wyck Brooks called for a new interpretation of history, according to the new ideologies of the emerging century. He believed that the available written history of his times represented a useless past, and challenged intellectuals of his era to create a new “usable past”, meaning that history needed to be rewritten for contemporary purposes (Brooks 1918). Similarly, in the late twentieth century, Robert Rosenstone suggested a new interpretation of history, a “revisioning” of the past, by challenging traditional ways of representing history in films. In his analysis of films dealing with history, Rosenstone identifies three types of historical films: the dramatic feature, the documentary, and the experimental film (Rosenstone 1995). The dramatic feature is the typical Hollywood film that relates stories of the past, following the classical narrative style. The documentary historical film presents history based on documents such as archival footage and photographs, and commonly utilizes voice-over narration and interviews. The dramatic feature and the documentary are, according to Rosenstone, both cinematic categories that do not challenge the way we understand history. By comparison, the experimental historical film often alters the way we look at the past in order to interpret historical events in light of current concerns and ideologies.

In Rosenstone’s analysis “experimental” is a category of films dealing with history, not a cinematic genre per se. Thereby, fictional films can be “experimental” in the way they create the past, rather than reconstructing the past. Among the examples of experimental historical films provided by Rosenstone are: *October* (Grigori Aleksandrov and Sergei Eisenstein, 1928), *The Rise of Louis XIV* (Roberto Rossellini, 1966), and *Walker* (Alex Cox, 1987). In opposition to Hollywood mainstream films, the experimental historical film presents an alternative to the

previous categories by combining different narratives strategies, often including both dramatic and documentary storytelling. Instead of telling stories of individuals and individual accomplishments, experimental historical films narrate stories of groups or societies. Instead of concentrating on a specific historical period, these films often oscillate between the past and the present (Rosenstone 1995, 62). Many NCAC films may fit into Rosenstone's experimental category since they represent historical events in ways that challenge the Hollywood/mainstream style of representation of the same or similar events, as I demonstrate in my analysis in chapter three.

Beyond definitions and characterizations, Rosenstone's main argument is that historical films –especially those in the experimental category– not only depict historical events, but also engage in a contemporary debate concerning that past. This cinematic debate implies a process of “revisioning” history beyond realism “to embrace innovative modes of representation, such as surrealism, collage ... and postmodernism” (Rosenstone 1995 II, 11). The act of revisioning entails an act of visioning again, or looking at the past in a new way. Accordingly, this argument leads to an interrogation in my research project: are the Central American historical films providing a new way of visioning history? If so, how was the past viewed previously? Are Central American historical films responding to a cinematic paradigm of representing history by revisioning that history? What is that paradigm? These are questions that I will address in my examination of Central American films, while applying the mode of classification laid out by Rosenstone.

Filmmakers that practice a revisioning of the historical past are implicitly assuming an ideological position towards that past. How can we interpret the viewpoint a filmmaker assumes when revisioning the past? To address that question, French historian Marc Ferro proposes an

approach with four modes. Filmmakers might approach social and historical problems: from the viewpoint of those in power, from the view point of the masses, attacking the phenomena from the filmmaker's point of view, and by "formally reconstructing a social or political object without trying to reconstituting [it]" (Ferro 1988, 163). A close examination of a historical film, applying Ferro's approach, might lead us to identify the particular viewpoint of the filmmakers and their interpretation of the past when representing history on film.

In the process of analyzing how a film represents history, the next question is: Which are the elements in a film that can indicate to us how the past is being revisioned? Ferro points out that a common way to address this question is inherited from traditional history scholarship, and "consists of verifying if the reconstruction [of the past] is precise" (Ferro 1988, 159). The verification is accomplished by comparing the cinematic reconstruction of the past with scholarly accounts of history. This approach has been applied by several scholars to analyze films concerning historical events. For example, with regards to Latin America, in his essay "Recasting Cuban Slavery," John Mraz (1997) examines historical representation in two Cuban films: *El otro Francisco (The Other Francisco)*; Sergio Giral, 1975) and *La última cena (The Last Supper)*; Tomás Guitiérrez Alea, 1976). Mraz compares cinematic histories with written histories of Cuban slavery, and finds that both films are the result of extensive research in written history. Mraz concludes (after discussing some objections) that both films "meet many of [his] expectations about what history ought to be." Certainly, Mraz verifies the accuracy in historical representation, however his analysis is a good example of a tradition in which the scholar assumes that written history is the most reliable source from which a historical film can be assessed. Nevertheless, this approach –as Ferro and Rosenstone have pointed out– limits the

interpretation of cinematic representation of history, because it overlooks the multiple possibilities of reconstructing the past unique to the film medium itself.

When a filmmaker revisions history, he/she not only depicts events of the past, but also engages in a debate on how that past is interpreted. Returning to the question on the way elements in a film indicate how the past is being revisioned, K.R.M. Short suggests a close examination of those narrative elements unique to film: “The message of a film or group of films is contained ... not only in the dialogue but also in the visual symbols that present themselves to the viewer” (Short 1981, 28). Short reminds us that film narratives are not only told with words but that images are an essential component of the cinematic discourse. However, I will add aural symbols to the narrative elements in film. Therefore, a close and comprehensive examination of the multiple narrative elements in film, including words, images, and sounds, would help to provide a better understanding of how history is represented and the viewpoint assumed by the filmmaker when revisioning history.

Several scholars have studied revisioning of history in Latin American films.<sup>6</sup> However, these scholars have generally privileged the films of the most prolific industries such as Cuba, Argentina or Mexico; overlooking the films of other regions in Latin America with underdeveloped film industries, particularly those of Central America. In response to this scholarly negligence, my aim in this study is to examine the representation of history in the films of the least studied region in Latin America, exploring how Central American filmmakers utilize innovative cinematic narratives to engage in a debate about their recent past.

Why are filmmakers of Central America and other parts of the world interested in debating about the past? What causes the need, in both filmmakers and spectators, to look at the past? Some scholars have answered these questions by exploring traces of historical trauma in

representation and observation of the past in narrative texts (or films) within the context of the relatively new field of trauma studies. To begin, Cathy Caruth, a leading scholar in trauma studies, defines trauma as “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviors stemming from the event” (Caruth 1995, 4). Sometimes, trauma takes the form of recurrent images in fictional stories, as Caruth suggests in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. In this work, Caruth examines how trauma manifests itself in narratives, and pays special attention to texts that “both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience” (Caruth 1996, 4). Texts, in Caruth’s analysis, not only consist of written stories but also film narratives. For example, she claims that in the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959) trauma is the driving force that moves the story forward. In this film, the main characters, a French woman and a Japanese man, are both victims of traumatic events in the past, and both attempt to escape trauma by looking into each other’s past (Caruth 1996, 25-56). In the case of the male character, his trauma comes from the loss of his family during the bombing of Hiroshima; a traumatic event that not only affected him and his family, but an entire society. In a general context, Caruth’s analysis of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* suggests that films representing individual traumas might reflect collective traumas. Using Caruth’s arguments, I will explore how Central American films of the 2000s represent individual stories as reflections of collective histories marked by traumatic events of the past.

Media representation of traumatic events of the past in a global context has also been explored by scholars. For example, Kaplan and Wang point out that not only individuals but also cultures can be traumatized, and “traces of traumatic events leave their mark on cultures.” In the case of the cultures of underdeveloped nations, media helps to preserve and transmit collective

traumas for a better understanding of the past. Media representation in underdeveloped nations –or indigenous media– “respond to the leveling effect of global culture and work to preserve traditional culture and assert national identity in the face of the accelerating process of globalization” (Kaplan and Wang 2004, 17). Kaplan and Wang’s analysis suggest an examination of Central American films in a global context, exploring how the representation of traumatic events of the past respond to a need to affirm a local and regional historical identity.

Several scholars have explored representation of trauma in Latin American films. Many of them examine the collective traumas that resulted from the social conflicts characterizing the Southern Cone region during the 1970s and 1980s, and the representation of these traumas in cultural products, particularly in films. For example, Tamara Falicov notes that many Argentine films of the 1980s portrayed stories of repression during the military dictatorship. The recurring cinematic depiction of these stories illustrated Argentine’s need to discuss the horrors of the recent past (Falicov 2007, 48). The way the stories are represented in those Argentine films indicate that filmmakers not only depicted events but also took on a discussion about the past as Mark D. Szuchman argues: “[Argentine] films that treated historical themes were linked to the political debates taking place at the time of production” (Szuchman 1997). In a similar way, many of the Central American films portrayed the violence of the civil wars, engaging in a political debate about their recent past. The horrors of the civil wars of the 1980s imprinted an indelible mark of trauma on the collective psyche in various Central American countries; these experiences recalled, revealed, and were negotiated in film as a counterpoint against official histories.

On the other hand, Ana Ros explored how filmmakers of a post-dictatorship generation reshaped collective memory through their films in the Southern Cone. Ros, a member of that

post-dictatorship generation herself, suggests that these filmmakers (along with other cultural producers of the same generation) intentionally avoided “closing the interpretation of the past and confront[ed] the audience with its complexity, thereby stimulating reflection.” At the same time, many of these filmmakers challenged traditional ways of representing the past, playing creatively with formats and genres. With a more flexible attitude than previous generations, post-dictatorship filmmakers motivated audiences to see the past as “an experience from which to draw lessons for the sake of the present” (Ros 2012, 203-204).

Of the films made by this post-dictatorship generation, *Crónica de una fuga* (*Chronicle of an Escape*, 2006) might be a good example. In this film, Argentine director Adrian Israel Caetano presents a group of young men escaping from a clandestine center of detention, where officers of the military regime had them kidnapped and tortured. As a narrative style, Caetano resorts to terror as a genre, but with an innovative application. Silvia Schwarzböck (2007), in her exhaustive examination of *Crónica de una fuga*, suggests that Caetano transcends the typical filmic representation of the dictatorship, because he “rethinks terror as a genre... and rewrites it, starting from a real event [that] occurred in Argentina in 1977.” The transcendence here would be making a political film playing with terror as genre, a narrative strategy unused by filmmakers of preceding generations.

This literature review provides the theoretical groundwork in order to examine how and why the civil wars were a recurring theme in the films of the Central American boom during the 2000s. In chapter three, based on Rosenstone’s definition of the historical film, I identify which of the NCAC films looked at the past, and examine how these films represent the events related to the civil wars of the 1970s and the 1980s. This examination indicated which of Rosenstone’s categories the Central American historical films comply with and what narrative strategies the

films employed. The study also explores whether the films were based on historical research and how the films engaged with a debate concerning the past. Using Caruth's arguments on the representation of trauma in media, I analyze to what extent the stories depicted in Central American films responded to traumatic events of the past. In the analysis I observe how the fictional characters and events are representative of actual events reported by the written history and how the stories of these fictional characters reflect collective traumas in the region. Finally, applying Kaplan and Wang's arguments, I examine how these Central American films respond to an exoticized representation of Central American history in mainstream films, and how they reinforce local and regional identity in a global context, by revisiting the traumatic events of the recent past. By doing so, this study addresses the gap in the literature concerning contemporary Central American film, and aims to enrich the scholarly works on Latin American and world cinema.

### **Research Design**

This study examines a selection of films produced in Central America during the 2000s and explores the oral testimonies of Central American filmmakers and film production advocates who played a key role in the development of film culture during that period. The selection of films concentrates on feature-length fictional films produced and/or released between 2001-2010, including Central American content, and involving the participation of Central American crews and casts.<sup>7</sup> These criteria, though limiting the number of films to be analyzed in this study, allow for a representative and distinct body of the most salient examples of contemporary Central American film culture.

Accessing these films was a challenge, because, with few exceptions, none are available within the U.S. However, I was able to access these films in two ways. First, I watched many of

the films during screenings at the Ícaro Film Festival, an annual Central American Film Festival in Guatemala, which I attended seven times between 2001 and 2012. Second, as a significant part of three field research trips made to Central America between 2010 and 2012, I collected DVD copies of several films selected for this study. Having these films within easy access allowed me to do a close textual examination of their content. In addition to films, this study utilizes interviews as data. During the aforementioned field trips and film festival screenings I was able to interview key participants in the development of the NCAC movement, including filmmakers and film advocates. These interviews provide insightful information on the socio-economic factors related to the development of film culture in the region.

To analyze the content of the selected Central American films and examine how these films represent events of the recent past, I employ a holistic approach, including close film analysis and the methodologies for historical film research suggested by Rosenstone, Ferro, Short, Caruth, and Kaplan and Wang.

### **Significance**

Several scholars have studied Latin American cinema, many of whom focused their examination on three countries in particular: Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina. However, few scholars have considered Central American cinema. Besides a few journal articles and book chapters, the study of Central American cinema is limited to two works: one in English and the other in Spanish. Jonathan Buchsbaum's *Cinema and the Sandinistas: Filmmaking in Revolutionary Nicaragua* (2003), is an examination of a decade of filmmaking by the state supported Nicaraguan Film Institute, during the Sandinista revolutionary government (1979-1990). María Lourdes Cortés' *La pantalla rota: Cien años de cine en Centroamérica* (2005) is a comprehensive study of the history of cinema in Central America from the beginnings to the

early twenty-first century. Both studies provide valuable but otherwise unavailable information on Central American cinema. This study aims to extend the scholarly investigations on Central American film beyond the work of Jonathan Buchsbaum and María Lourdes Cortés, and thereby constitutes a contribution for a more complete understanding of Central American cinema following the production boom of the 2000s.

### **Outline of the study**

Chapter one presents an overview of the historical development of Central American cinema during the twentieth century. It explores the socio-historical conditions that preceded the emergence of the New Central American Cinema movement and illustrates how film emerged at different times and in different conditions in each country in the region.

Chapter two identifies and analyzes the socio-economic factors that characterized the Central American film production boom in the 2000s, providing evidence on how these factors impacted a new generation of filmmakers. Based on interviews with Central American filmmakers this study identified five socio-economic factors that contributed to the rapid growth of Central American film during the first decade of the twenty-first century. First, the International Film and Television School (in Havana, Cuba) provided an accessible and affordable option to study film in the region. Second, the CINERGIA Project in Costa Rica provided funding specifically dedicated to the promotion of film in the region. Third, low cost digital technology replaced high cost analog technology and made filmmaking more affordable to Central American filmmakers. Fourth, the Ícaro Film Festival in Guatemala made Central American films accessible to regional audiences through a touring showcase. Finally, transnationalism helped to create productive interactions between filmmakers in the region. An examination of the factors that boosted film production in Central America contributes to the

academic discussion on how third world filmmakers, without significant private investment or government support, and facing a market dominated by U.S., find alternative strategies to develop a film culture.

Chapter three examines recurring themes that characterized NCAC films. Based on film analysis and supported by interviews with filmmakers I show that amidst a variety of stories, three themes were the most prevalent in Central American films during this period: migrations, gangs, and civil wars. This analysis is organized in three sections that examine how these themes are presented in the films in two ways: as a primary or secondary element of the narrative. For each theme, an analysis of a selected film is provided as a case study. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings, acknowledges the limitations and provides suggestions for future research.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Although Belize is part of Central America, there is no report of feature-length fictional film production in this country and thereby is not included in the analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Several scholars have paid attention to New Latin American Cinema, see for example Susana Pick's *The New Latin American Cinema*, and John King *Magical Reels*.

<sup>3</sup> See for example the manifestos by Glauber Rocha, Julio García Espinoza and Jorge Sanjinés included in Michael T. Martin's *New Latin American Cinema*.

<sup>4</sup> Although is mostly known as a writer, García Márquez studied film in Italy and initiated a career as a screenwriter in the Mexican film industry. He eventually decided to be a literary writer instead but remained as an advocate of the New Latin American Cinema movement. In 1985, he created the Foundation of the New Latin American Cinema, through which the EICTV film school was originated (For more on the Foundation and the School, see Ann Marie Stock's *On Location in Cuba* and Michael Channan's *Cuban Cinema*).

<sup>5</sup> Film titles are generally presented in the original version in Spanish, followed by a translation to English in parenthesis, name of director and year.

<sup>6</sup> See for example the volume edited by Donald F. Stevens *Based on a True Story: Latin American History at the Movies*, which contains essays on the representation of history in Latin American films.

<sup>7</sup> A complete list of the selected films is provided as a filmography at the end of this dissertation.

## **Chapter One: A Historical Overview of the Central American Cinema during the Twentieth Century**

This chapter outlines the historical development of Central American filmmaking during the twentieth century. It also explores the socio-historical conditions that preceded the emergence of the New Central American Cinema movement, the primary focus of this dissertation. This overview illustrates how film emerged at different times and in different conditions in each country in the region, how cinemas of other regions influenced local filmmakers, and how historical events and governments provoked changes in film production. As a result this chapter provides an overview of the topical, political, and historical themes addressed in the films, through different phases in the development of Central American cinema during the last century. This historical overview is primarily based on María Lourdes Cortés seminal study on the history of Central American cinema *La pantalla rota: Cien años de cine en Centroamérica* (2005), but also builds on the works of Jonathan Buchsbaum (2003), John Hess (1997), and John Ramírez (1997), and other sources.

### **Early Films (1904-1972)**

Filmmaking in Central America began in the early twentieth century with the production of short documentaries focused on events of national or international relevance. For example, the U.S. Army documented the construction of the Panama Canal, from 1904 to its inauguration in 1914. Meanwhile, in Costa Rica, Gómez Miralles captured the handover between outgoing President Ricardo Jiménez Oreamuno and ingoing President Alfredo González Flores in 1914. Similarly, in El Salvador, unknown filmmakers shot an eruption of the San Salvador volcano in 1917. Likewise, Guatemalan brothers Salvador and Enrique Morán filmed the first centenary of the Central American Independence in 1921. While film industries were flourishing in other

parts of Latin America, in Central America no country had a single studio systematically producing films or a company reaching significant industrial levels of production or distribution. Similarly, during the twentieth century, no country in the region had a film school or long-term state support for the developing national cinemas. With few exceptions, the majority of films produced had meager financial resources and small non-professional crews. A few of these films experienced successful local exhibition, yet none received significant international commercial distribution.

From the 1940s through the 1960s, most filmmaking in Central America concentrated on the production of newsreels. Different series of newsreels were locally produced and exhibited in almost all the countries in the region: *Actualidades guatemaltecas* (*Guatemalan Current Affairs*) in Guatemala, *Cine revista salvadoreña* (*Salvadoran Film Magazine*) in El Salvador, *Cine, Nicaragua en marcha* (*Nicaragua Marches On*) in Nicaragua, *Cine-reportajes* (*Film-Reportage*) in Costa Rica, and *Revista nacional* (*National Magazine*) in Panama. These newsreels documented a variety of topical events, including elections, presidential tours, the inauguration of public buildings, natural disasters, and notable historical events. For example, Carlos Chavarría, a newsreel cameraman, documented the end of the 1944-1948 civil war in Costa Rica, an event that preceded the reformist revolution led by José Figueres. Concurrently, in order to promote the nascent tourist industry, some governments commissioned the production of travel documentaries. Titles produced for this purpose include *Panama tierra mía* (*My Land Panama*, 1965), and *Esta es Costa Rica* (*This is Costa Rica*, 1965). Regularly, the films of this period were produced by non-Central American filmmakers, such as the Argentinean Leo Aníbal Rubens, who traveled along the region with his camera.

The earliest fictional feature films in Central America appeared in different times and under different circumstances. For example, the initial fictional feature in the region, *Las águilas civilizadas* (*The Civilized Eagles*) was made in El Salvador in 1927, and directed by Italian immigrant Virgilio Crisonino. Although it was artisanally crafted, the film was successfully released and commercialized in movie theaters. Three years later, working under similar conditions to those of his colleagues in El Salvador, Albert Frances Bertoni, also an Italian immigrant, directed the first Costa Rican fictional feature, *El retorno* (*The Return*, 1930). Both the film's script and the cast resulted from a public contest advertised in local newspapers; the same newspapers that, a few months later, announced with much fanfare the opening of "the great national film" (Cortés 2002). More than a decade afterward, Carlos Luis Nieto created the first Panamanian narrative film, *Al calor de mi bohío* (*In the Warmth of My Hut*, 1946). Although sound technology was introduced several years prior, *Al calor de mi bohío* was a silent film, including intertitles handwritten by Nieto, who was also the owner of the movie theater where the film was exhibited. In 1950, Guillermo Andreu and Eduardo Fleischmann directed *El sombrero* (*The Big Hat*), the first fictional feature ever made in Guatemala. Shot in black and white and with sound, the film is an adaptation of a popular radio soap opera, crafted in the style of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. In 1972, Felipe Hernández, created a fictional version of a documentary he made previously, resulting in the first Nicaraguan feature, *Milagro en el bosque* (*Miracle in the Woods*). Finally, in 1977 Fosi Bendeck wrote, directed and performed the first Honduran fictional feature, *El reyecito o el mero mero* (*The Little King or the one and the only*).

## **Influence of Mexico's Golden Age**

During the 1950s and the 1960s, the Golden Age of Mexican cinema had a significant impact on Central American film production. Several Mexican filmmakers, linked to that flourishing period in Mexican film history, came to the region to produce their films. For example, movie star and director José Baviera filmed *Caribeña* (*Caribbean*, 1952) in Guatemala, and *Cinco vidas y un destino* (*Five Lives and a Destiny*, 1957) in El Salvador. Meanwhile, writer and director Alfonso Patiño Gómez filmed *Elvira* (1955) in Costa Rica; and director Gilberto Gazcón filmed *Rapto al sol* (*Kidnapping to the Sun*, 1956) in Nicaragua. Similarly, celebrated Mexican Golden Age director and actor Emilio Fernández filmed *Pecado* (*Sin*, 1961) and *Paloma herida* (*Wounded Pigeon*, 1962) in Guatemala. Apparently, these Mexican filmmakers came to Central America primarily interested in its exotic locations, but at the same time, they may also have been looking for cheap labor and/or avoiding restrictive practices of the Mexican film industry. For example, the shooting of *Rapto al sol* was stopped by members of the Mexican film production workers union, because the debuting director Gilberto Gazcón was not a member of the union. Shooting resumed when the producers brought to the set a unionized director, even though Gazcón remained as an uncredited assistant director (Cortés 2005). Although these films were primarily produced by Mexican crews, many Central Americans participated in their production as co-producers, crew members or actors. This participation in the production of Mexican films can be seen as a learning experience for aspiring Central American filmmakers.

Motivated by the production of Mexican films in the region, several Central American filmmakers made their films in association with Mexican producers. Perhaps because of its cultural and geographic proximity with Mexico, this international interaction was most notable in Guatemala. For example, Guatemalan Rafel Lanuza, through his association with a Mexican film

producer, obtained financial support from Mexican film company Pelmed to make a series of commercial films in Guatemala. Three of these films were patterned after the masked-wrestler hero, a popular Mexican film genre: *Superzán y el niño en el espacio* (*Superzán and the Boy in Space*, 1971), *El triunfo de los campeones justicieros* (*The Triumph of the Righteous Champions*, 1972), and *La mansión y las siete momias* (*The Mansion and the Seven Mummies*, 1973).

Although inspired by popular Mexican characters, these films proved to be popular to Guatemalan audiences and profitable. However, a national tragedy was the source of inspiration for Lanuza's most successful Mexican co-production, *Terremoto en Guatemala* (*Earthquake in Guatemala*, 1976), a fictional feature on the 1976 destructive earthquake that devastated a large portion of Guatemala City, resulting in 23,000 deaths and one million homeless citizens.

### **Artisan Filmmakers**

Lanuza's success in obtaining funding sources, producing and distributing films is a rarity in Central America. Throughout the twentieth century, most Central American filmmakers worked as artisans, facing adverse conditions in the production of their films. In many cases, they initially developed film projects as personal endeavors, working with limited resources, shooting during weekends, and editing after hours. For example, in Costa Rica, Alberto de Goeyen spent several years (1956-1959), trying to make an ambitious film project *Atardecer de un fauno* (*Afternoon of a Faun*). De Goeyen invested family funds, acquired expensive equipment and hired actors and technicians from the United States. However, he exhausted funding before he could finish and was never able to complete the project. Similarly, in Honduras, Sami Kafati devoted a large part of his life developing another ambitious film project, *No hay tierra sin dueño* (*Calixto the Landlord*, 2003). The film was shot in the late 1980s, and edited in the early 1990s, but Kafati was never able to see his film released, because he died of a

heart attack in 1996. Nevertheless, the film was finally released in theaters in 2003, after Kafati's family and close friends obtained financial support from the French Fond Sud fund. Likewise, in El Salvador, Alejandro Coto, working with meager resources, was able to complete three films, *Caminos de Esperanza (Paths of Hope, 1959)*, *El rostro (The Face, 1961)*, and *El carretón de los sueños (The Cart of Dreams, 1973)*. However, the initial investment in his films was never recovered through distribution. In 1979, Coto began a new film, *Un universo menor (A Lesser Universe)*, but the eruption of the civil war in El Salvador forced him to abandon the project (Cortés 2005). Through much of the twentieth century, filmmakers experienced similar circumstances that provided hurdles to the production of their films.

De Goyen, Kafati, and Coto were also exceptional cases of Central American filmmakers who were trained at film schools prior to initiating their careers. During the twentieth century, except for occasional short-term training workshops, no local training opportunities were available for aspiring filmmakers in Central America. Most filmmakers worked without formal training in film, and learned mostly through practice. The few with previous training were required to travel outside the region to study at established film schools. Alberto de Goyen studied in the United States, Sami Kafati in Italy, and Alejandro Coto in Mexico. These and other filmmakers supported their studies with family funds. It was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that the first film school in Central America opened (The Veritas University Film School) in 2002. However, at the end of the twentieth century, many Central American filmmakers traveled to Cuba to study at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión (International School of Film and Television) or EICTV, a film school that played a crucial role in the development of filmmaking in the region which was inaugurated in 1986 (see chapter two).

## State Supported Film Institutions

Between 1968 and 1989, three state-supported national film institutions were created in the region. The first national film institute emerged in Panama, within the context of the so-called Panamanian Revolution, led by Colonel Omar Torrijos. Torrijos' government was guided by a nationalist ideology, aimed at nationalizing the Panama Canal. As part of his nationalist administration, Torrijos supported national cinema in 1972 through the creation of the Grupo Experimental de Cine Universitario (University Experimental Group of Cinema) or GECU, a film production department at the University of Panama. The first films produced by the GECU collective were focused on documenting the nationalization of the Panama Canal. Among these documentaries were *Canto a la patria que ahora nace* (*Song to the Nascent Motherland*, 1972), *Un año después* (*A Year Later*, 1973), *Soberanía* (*Sovereignty*, 1975), and *Mi pueblo habla, mi pueblo grita* (*My People Speak Out, My People Cry Out*, 1976). Inspired by the ideas of internationalism and Latin Americanism promoted by the Cuban revolution and also practiced by Torrijos, GECU filmmakers went abroad to make documentary films dealing with anti-imperialist movements in other parts of the continent. For example, *¡Viva Chile, mierda!* (*Long live Chile, Shit!*; Pedro Rivera and José de Jesús "Chuchú" Martínez, 1973) documents street demonstrations in Chile against the military coup. Meanwhile, *Belice vencerá* (*Belize Will Win*, 1979) and *¡Aquí hay coraje!* (*Here's Courage!*, 1980), were both made by Pedro Rivera on the independence of Belize and the Nicaraguan Revolution, respectively. GECU also advocated film culture within the region by publishing *Formato 16*, a film magazine with articles on Latin American cinema, as well as the screening of several Latin American films. In 1977, Torrijos and U.S. President Carter signed a treaty assuring the transfer of the canal to Panama. After signing the treaty, Torrijos stepped down from the government and financial support for GECU

ceased. Although GECU survived under the University administration, its film production dramatically declined.

The second state-supported national film institution emerged in Costa Rica, during the reformist government of José Figueres. In 1973, Figueres' government created, with the support of UNESCO, a film department within the administrative structure of the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports. The first films produced by this department focused on national social problems such as natural resources degradation, malnourishment and alcoholism. For example, Ingo Niehaus denounced the alarming deforestation in the country in *Agonía en la Montaña* (*Agony in the Mountain*, 1973) and Carlos Ferrer depicted a large number of Costa Rican children living in poverty in *Desnutrición* (*Malnourishment*, 1974). Implicitly, these documentaries exposed the government as being responsible for not taking action in the prevention of those problems. Despite the critical viewpoint entrenched in these documentaries, President Figueres continued supporting the film department without censorship.

However, in 1974, Daniel Oduber became the newly elected president of Costa Rica, and his administration was not as tolerant towards criticism lodged in the films. At the beginning of Oduber's administration, several documentaries produced by the film department were still denunciatory in nature. For example, Víctor Ramírez presented a deficient and dysfunctional prison system in *Los presos* (*The Prisoners*, 1975) and Ingo Niehaus exposed Costa Rica as a small country exploited by transnational banana corporations in *Costa Rica: Banana Republic* (1976). These documentaries did not project a positive image of the government, and Oduber banned *Costa Rica: Banana Republic*. The filmmakers understood that the sustainability of the department was at risk, and subsequent films were less critical. Nevertheless, the department continued growing and, in 1977, it was transformed into the Centro Costarricense de Producción

Cinematográfica (Costa Rican Center of Film Production) or CCPC. Initially, the CCPC produced documentary films, however, during the 1980s, the Center diversified production and experimented with producing some fictional works such as *Carlos Luis Sáenz. Las palabras del poeta* (Carlos Luis Sáenz. *The Words of the Poet*; Carlos M. Sáenz, 1982), *Senda ignorada* (*Ignored Path*; Ingo Niehaus, 1983), and *Tatamundo* (Juan Bautista Castro, 1984). From its founding in 1973 until the mid-1980s, the CCPC produced nearly seventy-five films, the majority of them documentaries. However, at the end of the 1980s during an economic crisis, the CCPC reduced its production substantially, and to the present day has focused on supporting the exhibition of national film and video productions, as well as maintaining a national film archive (CCPC 2014). Although production is no longer one of its priorities, the CCPC continues to be the largest state supported national film institution in Central America.

The third state-supported national film institution was founded in Nicaragua during the Sandinista Government (1979-1990). In July 1979, dictator Anastasio Somoza was overthrown and the Sandinista front took power in Nicaragua. Within a few months, the Sandinista government created the Instituto Nicaragüense de Cine (Nicaraguan Film Institute) or INCINE, according to the model of the also state-supported Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (Cuban Film Institute) or ICAIC. Comparing the Cuban with the Nicaraguan film institute Jonathan Buchsbaum noted that INCINE could not develop at the same level of ICAIC, because of its lack of control over distribution and exhibition. This prevented INCINE from generating financial resources for its sustainability, as ICAIC had done in Cuba. However, Buchsbaum praised INCINE's film production for the "variety of themes, formal invention, and implicit political interpretation in its corpus [that] provide[d] a rich reflection of and commentary on an exciting popular revolution." (Buchsbaum 2003, 248) Initially, INCINE produced

newsreels documenting events related to the nascent revolution, such as the literacy campaign, the nationalization of mines, and agrarian reform. Similar topics, but with greater in-depth analysis, were the content of several documentaries produced later by INCINE filmmakers. For example, Jorge Denti presented the literacy campaign as a second revolutionary victory in *La insurrección cultural* (*The Cultural Insurrection*, 1980), María José Álvarez explored the reactivation of the economy in *País pobre, ciudadano pobre* (*Poor Country, Poor Citizen*, 1981), and Fernando Somarriba portrayed how daily life in the city was changed by the revolution in *Managua de sol a sol* (*Managua From Sunrise to Sunset*, 1982).

During this period, several international sympathizer filmmakers flocked to Nicaragua in order to make their own cinematic interpretations of the ongoing revolution. Some of these filmmakers focused on documentaries depicting different facets of the upheavals taking place in Nicaragua. Dutch filmmaker Jan Kees de Roy, for example, examined the first days of the revolution in *Sandino hoy y siempre* (*Sandino Today and Always*, 1980), Chilean Jackie Rieter and Wolf Tirado exposed the participation of the Catholic Church in the revolution in *Gracias a Dios y la Revolución* (*Thanks to God and the Revolution*, 1981); Argentine Fernando Birri, using archival footage, created a cinematic poem of the Nicaraguan people's struggle in *Rte.: Nicaragua, (carta al mundo)* (*Sender: Nicaragua (Letter to the World)*, 1984); and Spanish Félix Zurita presented Nicaragua's struggle against foreign aggression in *Nicaragua sangre y miel* (*Nicaragua Blood and Honey*, 1986). Other foreign filmmakers came to Nicaragua to produce fictional feature films, again focused on the revolution. German Peter Lilienthal, for instance, presented the struggle against Somoza's dictatorship in *La insurrección* (*The Insurrection*, 1979); Chilean Miguel Littín created a romanticized representation of Nicaraguan civil war in the Academy Award Nominee for Foreign-Language film *Alsino y el cóndor* (*Alsino*

*and the Condor*, 1983); and British filmmaker Alex Cox paralleled the American filibuster invasion during the 1850s to the U.S. aggression in Nicaragua during the 1980s in *Walker* (1987). Although created by international filmmakers, these fictional films were co-produced with the participation of INCINE. These co-productions allowed Nicaraguan filmmakers to experience narrative filmmaking and helped motivate them to produce their own fictional cinematic stories.

INCINE also ventured into the production of narrative films, allowing Nicaraguan filmmakers to tell their own stories through fiction. The majority of these were short films exploring revolution through fictional characters such as *Manuel* (Rafael Vargas Ruiz, 1984), *Nunca nos rendiremos* (*We Will Never Surrender*; Fernando Somarriba, 1984), and *El centerfielder* (*The Centerfielder*; Ramiro Lacayo, 1985). Finally, INCINE produced *El espectro de la guerra* (*The Specter of War*, 1987), the first and only feature-length fictional film made by a Nicaraguan filmmaker during the period of the revolution. In the film, director Ramiro Lacayo featured a young professional dancer forced to abandon his artistic aspirations, because he is called to serve in the army, during the 1980s civil war. *El espectro* was a co-production involving the participation of producers and other crew members from Cuba, Mexico and Spain. As part of the involvement of Spain in the production, the film was entirely dubbed by Spanish actors. The result was a film with Nicaraguan characters speaking with Castilian accent, a technical failure that was disliked by many Nicaraguan viewers. In the short history of INCINE, *El espectro* was the most ambitious project, albeit the last. During the production of the film, INCINE was already in a process of deterioration, due to an economic crisis resulting from the civil war between the Sandinista government and the Contras (Buchsbaum 2003). In 1990, the

Sandinista lost elections and the new government, indifferent to national film production, dismantled INCINE.

### **Guerrilla Filmmaking**

During the 1970s and 1980s, Central America experienced a period of intense political crisis, marked by civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Throughout this period many Central American filmmakers focused on documenting the civil wars, from the viewpoint of the revolutionary movements. This type of filmmaking was guided by Marxist ideology and, as María Lourdes Cortés asserts, “integrated within the context of the New Latin American Cinema, both thematically and aesthetically” (2005). In Guatemala, despite the fact that the civil war was the longest and deadliest, this type of “guerrilla filmmaking” did not evolve as in other parts of Central America. Cortés attributes this “vacuum of images” to an intense oppressive campaign conducted by the government, resulting in filmmakers being killed, disappeared or exiled. For example, Oscar Barillas Barrientos, a member of a militant filmmaking group at the University of Guatemala, disappeared in 1983. Before his disappearance, Barillas made several short documentaries focused on political issues, such as *Marcha de los mineros de Ixtahuacán* (*March of the Miners of Ixtahuacán*, 1977) presenting a massive workers’ protest against the government, and *El entierro de Robin García* (*The Burial of Robin García*, 1978) portraying a university student kidnapped, tortured and killed by paramilitary forces. Later investigations revealed that Barillas (also a member of the Guatemalan Labor Party) was kidnapped and killed by the military, similar to the student protagonist in his film. Due to the repressive campaign of the government, other filmmakers opted to remain anonymous, like the members of Cinematografía de Guatemala (Guatemalan Cinematography), a group of militant filmmakers that also documented the ongoing political turmoil. This group produced, among others, *Vamos*

*patria a caminar* (*Let's Go Forward My Country*, 1983) a short documentary tracing the history of the popular struggle from the U.S. backed military coup in 1954 to the armed conflict in the 1980s. During the production of this documentary, the film group worked under financial difficulties and amidst a brutal repression. However, the film was awarded prizes at several international venues, including the Havana New Latin American Cinema Festival in 1983, the Bilbao International Documentary Festival in 1983, and the Oberhausen Short Film Festival in 1984.

Concurrent with these events, a civil war was taking place in Nicaragua, where the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front) or FSLN was fighting against the forces of dictator Anastasio Somoza. Many of the first films documenting the 1970s armed insurrection in Nicaragua were produced by filmmakers from outside the region. For example, Chilean Octavio Cortés and Dutch Frank Diamand made *Nicaragua, septiembre 1978* (*Nicaragua, September 1978*), Mexican Adrián Carrasco and Leo Gabriel made *Nicaragua: en la montaña enterraremos el corazón del enemigo* (*Nicaragua: We Will Bury the Enemy's Heart in The Mountain*, 1979), and Bertha Navarro, also Mexican, produced *Nicaragua: los que harán la libertad* (*Nicaragua: the Liberty Makers*, 1979). However, Istmo Films, a Costa Rican-based film company, integrated by former members of the CCPC, was responsible for the production of an important documentary dealing with the Nicaraguan civil war, *Patria libre o morir* (*Free Fatherland or Die*, 1979). The film, directed by Costa Rican filmmakers Antonio Yglesias and Víctor Vega, was commissioned by the FSLN aiming to break Somoza's censorship and publicize the people's struggle against the dictatorship (Lutsch 2007). The resulting documentary had wide international distribution and became a winner at the Moscow International Film Festival (Cortés 2002).

Meanwhile, in El Salvador, the civil war erupted in 1980 when the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) or FMLN fought against the U.S. backed government military forces. The guerrilla front initiated the production of several documentaries meant to expose the people's armed struggle around the world. Colectivo Cero a la Izquierda (Zero to the Left Collective), a clandestine filmmaking group, produced the first Salvadoran militant films, *Morazán* (1980) and *La decisión de vencer* (*The Decision to Win*, 1980), both focused on the first zone liberated by the guerrilla front. Later films were produced by Sistema Radio Venceremos (Radio Venceremos System), a larger organization combining radio, film and video production as the guerrilla propaganda media system.

Concurrently, a group of Salvadoran filmmakers under the guidance of Puerto Rican filmmaker Diego de la Texera settled in Costa Rica to create the Instituto Cinematográfico de El Salvador Revolucionario (Film Institute of Revolutionary El Salvador) or ICSR. Working in collaboration with Nicaraguan INCINE, Cuban ICAIC, Panamanian GECU, and Costa Rican Istmo Films, the ICSR produced *El Salvador el pueblo vencerá* (*El Salvador the People Will Win* 1981), a feature documentary commissioned by the FMLN. The film had a clear political purpose for the FMLN, although this was unknown to the filmmakers. Diego de la Texera remembers “we were documenting the war, but, working in a hurry, we did not have a clear idea of what we were doing. It was later that we realized that the FMLN needed the film to be shown in the European Parliament in order to obtain recognition as a legitimate political force” (Personal interview with Texera, 2011). Nevertheless, *El Salvador el pueblo vencerá* was also recognized as an important cinematic work at both the Havana Film Festival in Cuba and the Lille Film Festival in France, and obtained wide distribution in thirty countries.

After this successful beginning, the ICSR produced other documentaries such as *El camino de la libertad* (*The Path to Freedom*, 1982), *La mujer salvadoreña en la revolución* (*Salvadoran Woman in the Revolution*, 1982), and *La participación de la iglesia* (*The Participation of the Church*, 1982). These and other films produced by the ICSR were exhibited to mass audiences in factories, schools, universities, and rural towns through a network of *cines móviles* (mobile cinemas) inspired by a similar experiment in popular cinema conducted by the Cuban ICAIC, and emulated by the Costa Rican CCPC and the Nicaraguan INCINE. However, conflicts within the FMLN impeded the ICSR from functioning, and the institute was dismantled in 1983. With the signing of peace treaties in the 1990s, the civil wars ended in Central America and the region entered a period of relative calm that also brought to an end the militant film movement.

### **Hollywood Films in the Region**

The political crises of the 1970s and 1980s in Central America aroused the attention of many in other regions of the world. In the United States, the media published several reports on the violence that occurred a few miles south of the border. At the same time, several U.S. filmmakers produced both documentary and narrative films focused on the civil wars in the region. For example, Glen Silver and Teté Vasconcellos examined the civil war in El Salvador in the Oscar-nominated documentary *El Salvador: Another Viet-Nam* (1981); Newton Thomas Siegel and Pamela Yates explored the civil war in Guatemala, with firsthand accounts by Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú and narrated by Hollywood star Susan Sarandon, in the Sundance award-winning documentary *When the Mountains Tremble* (1983); Frank Christopher focused on the guerrilla movement in El Salvador in the Oscar nominated documentary *In the Name of the People* (1985) narrated by Martin Sheen; and Allan Francovich looked at U.S.

involvement in the civil wars of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua in the Sundance Jury Prize nominated documentary *The Houses are Full of Smoke* (1987). In the category of fictional features, Roger Spottiswood used the civil war in Nicaragua as the background of a love story between two U.S. journalists in *Under Fire* (1983); Oliver Stone portrayed the experience of a Californian journalist documenting the civil war in the Academy Award winning *Salvador* (1986); and John Duigan included film star Raul Julia to portray Archbishop Oscar Romero as a human rights defender during the civil war in El Salvador in *Romero* (1989). Although these films were all focused on Central America, they had little impact on regional cinema, due to the lack of the participation of local filmmakers. The documentaries did not include local film crews, and the fictional features were all filmed in Mexico. However, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, several Central American filmmakers dealt with civil wars to create fictional features, told from a Central American perspective, shot in Central America, including Central American casts and crews, and with Central American characters as the protagonists. Counterbalancing the perspective of U.S. filmmakers, these NCAC films provided a local interpretation of the recent history of Central America (see chapter three).

### **Scholarly Work on Central American Cinema**

Also motivated by the crises of the 1970s and 1980s, some film scholars looked at Central American militant filmmaking, focusing on production styles and thematic motifs. For example, John Hess provides an examination the similarities and differences in revolutionary filmmaking in “Nicaragua and El Salvador: Origins of Revolutionary National Cinemas” (1997). Hess emphasizes that the two most influential genres to emerge in the region were the historical and the testimonial film, as part of a revolutionary filmmaking “reclaiming national identity and history.” In addition, John Ramírez explored the beginnings of the INCINE in his essay

“Introduction to the Sandinista Documentary Cinema” (1997). Ramírez stresses how Sandinista filmmaking was committed to “the reclamation of cultural identity through a consistent expression of an ever more authentic national point of view.” However, the most in-depth English-language study on Central American cinema is Jonathan Buchsbaum’s *Cinema and the Sandinistas: Filmmaking in Revolutionary Nicaragua* (2003). Similar to the previous works, Buchsbaum examined Nicaraguan cinema during the Sandinista government (1979-1990), in terms of national identity, but offers a deeper and more extensive analysis of how “Nicaraguans themselves [through INCINE] perceived the new project of retrieving national identity in Sandinista Nicaragua.” Although it is primarily focused on Nicaragua, this study also illuminates other cinemas in the region by examining co-productions and film collaborations between Nicaragua and neighboring countries, and by situating Sandinista filmmaking within the broader context of Third Cinema.

### **A Successful Case**

During the 1980s, Oscar Castillo successfully produced several films in Costa Rica. After producing some documentaries about the civil wars, he ventured with Istmo Films in the production of commercial feature films. He started by producing *La Segua* (Antonio Yglesias, 1984), a historical period film based on a folk legend. This was an ambitious project that involved the participation of Mexican producers and the participation of Mexican movie star Blanca Guerra. The film was released theatrically in both Costa Rica and Mexico, but was unsuccessful at the box-office. Of the \$400,000 invested in film production, only \$70,000 was recovered through distribution (Cortés 2005). In a second film, Castillo opted for a more modest production, *Eulalia* (1987). This film features a Costa Rican cast in a routine melodrama concerning a country girl discovering life in the big city of San José. *Eulalia* was a huge success

in Costa Rica, attracting 70,000 viewers, who preferred it over *Rocky IV* (1985), the Hollywood blockbuster then currently being exhibited in Costa Rican theaters. Normally, in any other industrial context, the box-office success would ensure Castillo more filmmaking opportunities. However, the lack of a substantial film industry in Costa Rica prevented Castillo from making another film in the short term. His next film *Asesinato en el meneo* (*Murder in El Meneo*, 2001), would have to wait until the 2000s to be produced, once filmmaking conditions improved in the region.

### **The Last Decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

During the 1990s, Central American filmmaking was characterized by a decline in institutional productions and a rise in independent film productions. The militant film groups, once linked to the guerrilla fronts, disappeared after the peace accords. Both the GECU in Panama and the CCPC in Costa Rica, the surviving national film institutions, no longer focused on film production. With negligible local institutional support, many Central American filmmakers created their own companies, most focusing primarily on the production of documentaries that were funded by international agencies. In Costa Rica, for example, Roberto Miranda created Audiovisuales Chirripó, a video production and distribution organization supported by Dutch and Swedish funding agencies. Although based in Costa Rica, Audiovisuales Chirripó produced several documentaries on topics related to different countries in the region. For example, *Rigoberta Menchú* (1989) concerns the Guatemalan indigenous female leader and Nobel Prize recipient; *Mosquitia Hondureña* (*Honduran Mosquito Coast*, 1992) focuses on the Honduran section of the largest natural wilderness reserve in the region; and *El Salvador concertación y esperanza* (*El Salvador: Agreement and Hope*, 1994) presents a documentary account of the peace accords process in El Salvador. Independent companies similar to

Audiovisuales Chirripó, focused on documentary film production, were common in Central America during the 1990s. In some cases, these companies formed the basis for future fictional film production in the region.

For example, in Nicaragua, Florence Jaugey and Frank Pineda created Camila Films, a production company supported by such international organizations as the Spanish Agency of International Development Cooperation (AECID), the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), and the Dutch Humanist Institute for Cooperation (HIVOS). Camila Films produced several documentary shorts depicting social and cultural aspects of a post-Sandinista Nicaragua. For instance, *La hora de los generales* (*The Hour of the Generals*, 1992), focuses on how, after losing elections, the Sandinistas maintained their influence in governmental decisions through the Sandinista Popular Army; *El que todo lo puede* (*The Almighty One*, 1997) explores transvestism merging with Catholic beliefs during a popular religious festival; and *El día que me quieras* (*The Day You Love Me*, 1999) focuses on women victims of domestic violence. The experience of documenting these social issues may have motivated Jaugey and Pineda to deal with similar topics in their first fictional feature *La Yuma* (2010) (see chapter three).

Although the documentary film was the most common format during the 1990s, several filmmakers also made short fictional films that were produced independently and often supported by international agencies. In Honduras, for example, René Pauck featured a rural midwife in *Alto riesgo* (*High Risk*, 1996), a short fictional educational film funded by the British development agency Oxfam and the World Health Organization. Similarly, in Nicaragua, Florence Jaugey, shifting between fiction and documentary in the same film, observed different characters living inside an abandoned movie theater in *Cinema Alcázar* (1997), a short film produced by the aforementioned Camila Films, with financial support from HIVOS. Also in Nicaragua, María

José Álvarez and Martha Clarissa Hernández created an oneiric representation of civil war through the eyes of a young girl in *Blanco organdí* (*White Organdy*, 1998), a production funded by Norwegian, Spanish, Dutch and British development agencies.

Another notable trend in Central American films during the 1990s was an increase in the number of women filmmakers. In addition to the aforementioned cases, other women filmmakers directed fictional short films in the region. In Costa Rica, Hilda Hidalgo examined a passionate romance between a middle age woman and a young book seller in *La pasión de nuestra señora* (*The Passion of Our Lady*, 1998), and Ishtar Yasin explored femininity through the dreams of an infant girl in *Florencia de los ríos hondos y los tiburones grandes* (*Florencia of the Deep Rivers and the Great Sharks*, 1999). In Panama, Pituka Ortega directed *El mandado* (*The Errand*, 1998) about a woman remembering being sexually abused during childhood. This growing trend of women filmmakers is also noted in fictional film production during the 2000s (see chapter two).

During the late 1990s, regional filmmakers also created short narrative films based on literary works of renowned Central American writers. In El Salvador, Noe Valladares adapted a short story by Salvador Salazar Arrué aka Salarrué in *La virtud de un Santo* (*The Saint's Virtue*, 1997). Based on another Salarrué's short story, Honduran filmmaker Francisco Andino created *Voz de angel* (*Angels Voice*, 1998). In Costa Rica, Percy Angress adapted a short story by Carlos Salazar Herrera in *La calera* (*The Limestone Quarry*, 1998), and Esteban Ramírez created *Rehabilitación concluída* (*Rehabilitation Concluded*, 1998) based on a short story by Myriam Bustos. Finally, in Panamá, Jorge Cajar and Joaquín Horna Dolande adapted a short tale by Juan Andrés Castillo *Fruta prohibida* (*Forbidden Fruit*, 1993), and Tatiana Salamín adapted a story by Rogelio Sinán *Sangre* (*Blood*, 1995). These documentary and fictional short films showed an

increase in audiovisual production in Central America, compared to previous decades. However, only one feature-length fictional film would be successfully released during this decade.

After several years of living in New York, Guatemalan film director Luis Argueta returned to his homeland to make *El silencio de Neto* (*The Silence of Neto*, 1994), the only Central American feature-length fictional film to reach mass audiences in the 1990s. The story follows the experiences of Neto, a twelve-year-old child from a middle-class family, during the 1954 military coup that overthrew President Jacobo Arbenz. In many ways, this is a personal film about Argueta's own experiences, but it also provides a balanced depiction of a transcendent historical event. Jacobo Arbenz, a former military officer, was elected President of Guatemala in 1950. Leading a country where 2% of the population owned 70% of the land, Arbenz focused on agrarian reform that was intended to fairly redistribute the land to the people. However, the reform affected the interests of several prominent land owners, including U.S. banana corporations operating in Guatemala. Consequently, in 1954, Arbenz was ousted by a military coup, backed by the U.S. government and the CIA. In the film, Argueta subtly represented these historical events, using them as the backdrop for the innocent experiences of Neto. In addition to co-writing and directing, Argueta acted as executive producer, investing the money he made working as a producer of television commercials in New York. In Guatemala, the film was a huge success, playing in theaters for several weeks after its release in 1994. The film was recognized internationally by receiving such awards as the Jury Prize at the Biarritz Film Festival in France, the Best First Picture award at the New England Festival of Ibero American Cinema, and the Official Selection at the Sundance Film Festival in the United States. Today, *El silencio de Neto* is one of the few Central American films available both on DVD and online distribution in the U.S. market.

During the 1990s, Argueta was the only filmmaker who could avoid the multiple obstacles that characterized the production of fictional features in the region, including lack of funding sources, high production costs, and limited distribution channels. But in the next decade, the first part of the twenty-first century, conditions changed favorably. Many obstacles were reduced and new opportunities opened, allowing Central American filmmakers to produce more films, especially fictional features. In the following chapter I analyze the factors that characterized Central American cinema during that decade.

## **Chapter Two: Factors that Characterized New Central American Cinema**

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, Central American cinema experienced rapid growth. While, during the 1990s only one Central American fictional feature film reached mass audiences, in the 2000s forty-four new fictional features were produced, many of which were successfully and widely distributed. The rapid growth in Central American film production was due to a variety of reasons. However, this chapter focuses on some of the most salient factors that characterized New Central American Cinema from 2001 to 2010. These factors include: the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión (International School of Film and Television) or EICTV as an influencing training opportunity, the CINERGIA fund as the most important source of funding in the region, digital equipment as an affordable technology, the Ícaro Film Festival as an alternative channel of distribution, and transnationalism as a socio-economic condition reshaping the identity of Central American cinema.

### **New Training Opportunities and EICTV**

During the 2000s, Central American filmmakers had access to more training opportunities than their predecessors. In the past century, no country in the region had an established film school. The few filmmakers who had academic training went to film schools in North America or Europe (see chapter one). This lack of formal film education may have limited the possibilities of developing filmmaking in the region. However, at the end of the twentieth century, a film school in Cuba provided an affordable training opportunity to young aspiring Central American filmmakers.

EICTV was inaugurated in 1986, in Havana, Cuba, with the express purpose of supporting emerging film industries in three continents: Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The

school was created by the Fundación del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano (Foundation of New Latin American Cinema) or FNCL, with substantial support from the Cuban government.

Although EICTV arose from the anti-imperialist, Latino Americanist, and revolutionary ideas of its founders and supporters, it also mirrored the openness to new ideas taking place in Cuba following the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s. These cultural and philosophical intersections of seemingly opposing paradigms have characterized the school, where, as Nicholas Balaisis notes, students are “exposed to aspects of the radical spirit of the Cuban and New Latin American Left, [and to] a more generalized spirit of internationalism” (2013). Guided by that philosophy of internationalism, the school welcomes students from around the world. However, the vast majority of the students are from Latin American countries, including those of Central America. By 2010 a total of eighty-eight Central Americans graduated from EICTV.

Several of those EICTV graduates directed feature-length fictional films in different countries of Central America. In Guatemala, for example, Rafael Rosal directed *Las Cruces: poblado próximo* (*Las Cruces: Next Village*, 2006), Ray Figueroa *La Bodega* (*The Warehouse*, 2009), and Enrique Pérez *Puro Mula* (2010). Similarly, in Honduras, Hispano Durón directed *Anita, la cazadora de insectos* (*Anita, the Insect Catcher*, 2002). Likewise, in Costa Rica, Isabel Martínez and Vicente Ferraz directed *El último comandante* (*The Last Commander*, 2010), and Hilda Hidalgo *Del amor y otros demonios* (*Of Love and Other Demons*, 2010). Other EICTV graduates performed key crew positions during the production of several NCAC features. For example, Daniela Sagone was director of photography in *La casa de enfrente* (*Exceso*, 2003), *Las Cruces: poblado próximo*, *La Bodega* and many other Guatemalan films. Similarly, Fabiola Maldonado was director of photography in *Anita, la cazadora de insectos*. Likewise, Carlos Arango de Montis was camera operator, and Julio Molina, Arsenio Cadena and Gina Villafaña

were in charge of the sound department in *La Yuma* (2010). The integral and practical training these and other filmmakers obtained at EICTV may have facilitated their rapid and successful integration into film production in Central America. However, EICTV graduates in Central America proved to be not only filmmakers but also film advocates.

Although trained primarily in film production, several EICTV alumni successfully worked as film advocates throughout the region. In Honduras, both Hispano Durón and Nolban Medrano acted as Director of the Film Department of the Ministry of Culture. In Costa Rica, María Lourdes Cortés and Rogelio Chacón performed as Director of the Centro Costarricense de Producción Cinematográfica (Costa Rican Film Production Center) or CCPC. In Panama, Carlos Aguilar served as Director of the Radio and Television State System, the office through which the government supported film production. Moreover, Cuban-Salvadoran filmmaker Jorge Dalton acted as director of the Film Department of the Minister of Culture in El Salvador.<sup>1</sup> These EICTV-affiliated film advocates worked mostly in the promotion and exhibition of national films, by leading their respective government institutions. However, one of the most productive film institutions linked to EICTV was a nongovernmental organization, Casa Comal.

Casa Comal was originally created in 2000, by several Guatemalan EICTV alumni with the intention of organizing a festival, the Ícaro Central American Film Festival. However, by 2010, Casa Comal had expanded its activities to include a film production facility and a film school. All Casa Comal activities involve the participation of several EICTV alumni. The Ícaro Film Festival regularly includes EICTV graduates as members of the jury. For example, in the 2010 ceremony the jury was composed of the following EICTV graduates: Samuel Larson Guerra (Mexico), Luis Carlos Naguil (Uruguay), Freddy Marrero (Puerto Rico), Julia Rivero Tames (Bolivia), Álvaro Rodríguez Sánchez (Costa Rica), and Hispano Durón (Honduras)

(Casa-Comal, XIII Festival Ícaro de Cine y Vídeo en Centroamérica Catálogo 2010 2010). From 2001 to 2010, Casa Comal produced five feature films, all of which were co-produced with EICTV and included several EICTV graduates in the crew. *Las Cruces* (2006), for example, had five EICTV graduates holding key roles in the production: Rafael Rosal, director; Pedro Díaz, production designer; Daniela Sagone, director of photography; and Ray Figueroa, screenwriter. In 2006, Casa Comal opened a film school, a project that also involved the participation of several EICTV alumni. From 2006 to 2010, the school was directed by EICTV graduate Rafael Rosal, and included several EICTV alumni as faculty members, such as Otto Gaitán, Daniela Sagone, Pedro Diaz, Ray Figueroa, Joel Prieto and Álvaro Rodríguez.

The Escuela de Cine y TV de Casa Comal (Casa Comal School of Film and Television) or ECTVCC was created according to the model of EICTV. Its training program is similar to that of EICTV, including three years of study with an emphasis on practical learning. In Cuba, the Havana Film Festival has served as an open laboratory for EICTV students; similarly, the Ícaro Film Festival has provided a rich learning opportunity for students enrolled in the ECTVCC. They attend film screenings, participate in workshops and conferences, and make contacts that will help them in their future professional careers. As part of their hands-on training, students participate as crew members in the production of Casa Comal films. Although it was initially created for Guatemalan students, the school also welcomes students from other Central American countries through a scholarship program. In 2010, for example, Jessica Guifarro, a Honduran scholarship recipient, while studying at ECTVCC, participated as an assistant producer and as an actress during the production of *Toque de queda* (*Curefew*; Elías Jiménez, 2011). Guifarro stated that the school in Guatemala provided her a unique opportunity, because “there are no film schools in Honduras, and I could not afford a school somewhere else”

(Personal interview with Guifarro, 2010). In 2008, the ECTVCC, in partnership with the EICTV, initiated a series of training workshops in film production in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Through the three-year training program and the training workshops, both schools made a significant contribution to the education of young filmmakers in Central America.

Some years earlier, in 2002, the Veritas University established in Costa Rica the first film school in Central America, the Nueva Escuela de Cine y Televisión (New School of Film and Television). This school offers a university-degree program focused on film combining conceptual and technical training. The New School of Film and Television is also associated with EICTV through its faculty members, since several of them are EICTV alumni. For example, María Lourdes Cortés, Luis Naguil, and Hilda Hidalgo have served as Director of the school. Similarly, César Caro, Juan Manuel Fernández, Gabriela Hernández, Ana Lucía Jiménez, Pablo Ortega, and Gustavo Sánchez are all faculty members of the school. In 2009, while serving as Director, Luis Naguil promoted practical learning through a partnership with Costa Rican filmmaker Esteban Ramírez that allowed students to participate in the production of *Gestación* (*Gestation*, 2010). Although some universities offered film-related courses, as of 2010, the ECTVCC in Guatemala and Veritas School in Costa Rica were the only formal film training opportunities in the region. These unique schools were both benefited by a fruitful collaboration between EICTV alumni. For Luis Naguil, this collaboration is derived from one of EICTV's philosophies, because the Cuban school "was not only meant to train filmmakers as individuals, it also intended to promote collaboration between Latin American filmmakers, and that the practice of that philosophy is more evident in Central America" (Personal interview with Naguil, 2010).

## **New Funding Sources and CINERGIA**

In previous decades, Central American filmmakers experienced serious difficulties in locating funds for the production of their films, because private investment was scarce and there was insufficient state support. However in the 2000s, new funding sources emerged, allowing for an increase in the production of films, particularly fictional features. Some governmental and private institutions supported the production of several films. Nevertheless, the most significant funding source was international cooperation, through funding agencies and chiefly through CINERGIA, a regional film fund.

Despite the fact that state support for film production in Central America has been limited, during the 2000s some feature films were partially supported by governmental institutions. In Honduras, for example, both *Almas de la media noche* (*Midnight Souls*; Juan Carlos Fanconi, 2002) and *Amor y frijoles* (*Love and Beans*; Hernán Pereira, 2009) obtained support from the Ministry of Culture. Similarly, in Costa Rica, both *A ojos cerrados* (*Closed Eyes*; Hernán Jiménez, 2010) and *El último comandante* (2010) obtained support from the CCPC. At the same time, many NCAC films were supported by private investors. In El Salvador, for example, *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* (*Surviving Guazapa*; Roberto Dávila, 2008) was entirely produced by DVR Cineworks, a private company owned by director Roberto Dávila. In Costa Rica, the production of *Gestación* (2010) involved the participation of several local and international private companies, including Cinetel and Universidad Veritas (Costa Rica), Alta Definición (Argentina), and Bayer (Germany). Emulating Hollywood funding strategies, some feature films included covert or product placement advertisement. Nevertheless, the vast majority of NCAC films did not receive state or private support, and were instead supported by international organizations.

One of the international organizations that supported film production in Central America during the 2000s was IBERMEDIA, a multilateral film fund for Iberoamerican countries. IBERMEDIA provides credit investment for film production that is eventually recovered through film sales, but requires an annual membership fee from each country. The fee's amount varies according to the country's financial capabilities, ranging from \$100,000 to \$500,000. In the early 2000s, Central American countries could not become members because they were not capable of paying the membership fee, even the lowest amount. However, in the late 2000s, some countries were able to join the fund, including Panama in 2006, followed by Costa Rica in 2008 (Falicov 2012). By 2010, some Central American feature films were already supported through the IBERMEDIA fund, such as *Chance* (*Chance*; Abner Benaím, 2009) in Panama, and *El compromiso* (*The Commitment*; Oscar Castillo, 2010) in Costa Rica. Nevertheless, a regional project that required no membership fee became the most significant source of funding for film production in Central America.

CINERGIA is a regional project that supports filmmaking in Central America and the Caribbean. Though the fund supports two countries of the Caribbean islands (Cuba and the Dominican Republic), its main focus is on the countries of the Central American isthmus (Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama). CINERGIA was created in 2004 by film scholar María Lourdes Cortés, with the purpose of supporting film production in the region through three specific programs: a series of workshops and conferences, an internet website, and a film fund.

CINERGIA has contributed to the professionalization of filmmakers in the region through its program of professional training. From 2004 to 2010, CINERGIA organized sixteen workshops with an average of three hundred and twenty participants (CINERGIA 2014). The

topics developed in these workshops included: screenwriting, directing, production design, and documentary filmmaking. Although some Central American filmmakers have the opportunity to study at film schools, a considerable number of them have access to short term training through the numerous CINERGIA workshops. Through a website, the Portal Centroamericano de Cine, Video y Animación (Central American Portal for Film, Video and Animation) ([www.cineyvideocentroamericano.org](http://www.cineyvideocentroamericano.org)) CINERGIA also helps to build a regional network of filmmakers. Created in 2009, this website is intended to facilitate a virtual space for interaction and discussion among Central American filmmakers. It also provides information about the history of film in the region and contemporary news concerning film production, distribution and exhibition. The website menu includes a database of Central American films and filmmakers, and updated information about film festivals, funding sources, and other venues. Through the website, registered filmmakers can contact their colleagues in the region to create alliances either for production or distribution.

However, the strongest impact CINERGIA has in the region is through its fund. Each year CINERGIA assigns between \$20,000 and \$30,000 to support several film productions. The financial resources that nurture CINERGIA come from different funding agencies, such as the Dutch Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation (HIVOS), the Swedish Goteborg International Film Festival Fund, and the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation for Development (AECID). By 2010 CINERGIA had supported seventy-five film projects, including fictional and documentary in both short and feature formats. Several film projects supported by CINERGIA are critically acclaimed and award winning fictional features. For example, the Guatemalan film *Gasolina* (*Gasoline*; Julio Hernandez Cordon, 2008) received four awards at the San Sebastián Film Festival in Spain, including the Best Latin Film Prize. Similarly, the

Costa Rican film *El camino* (*The Path*; Ishtar Yashin, 2009) won twelve awards in several international film festivals, including the Special Jury Prize at the Fribourg Film Festival in Switzerland, Best Latin American Film at the International Film Festival in Chile, and Best Director at the Ícaro Central American Film Festival in Guatemala. Likewise, the Nicaraguan film *La Yuma* (Florence Jaugey, 2010) obtained twelve international awards, including Best Opera Prima at the Guadalajara Film Festival in Mexico, Special Jury Prize at the Malaga Film Festival in Spain, and a Special Mention for Best Opera Prima at the New Latin American Film Festival in Havana, Cuba. These examples prove that CINERGIA has contributed not only to an increase in the number of film productions in the region, but also in the quality of films for regional and international audiences.

### **Digital Technology**

During the past century, making films in Central America was difficult in part because of the high cost of technology. As in other parts of the world, the standard for film production was analog technology, requiring the use of expensive 16mm and 35mm film cameras and film stock. Therefore, Central American filmmakers invested considerable amounts of funds for acquiring or renting sophisticated equipment, and paying lab processing services abroad.

In the 2000s, however, digital technology became the new standard for filmmaking in the region. Many Central American filmmakers adopted digital technology, which allowed them to significantly reduce their production costs. In Guatemala, for example, Julio Hernández Cordón shot *Las Marimbas del Infierno* (*Marimbas from Hell*, 2010) with an inexpensive digital high definition still/video camera. Compact size and high sensitivity made this equipment even more suitable for low budget film production, since it required fewer crew members. For Hernández Cordón, making low budget films is a production strategy consistent with the economic

conditions of his country. “I tell stories that can only happen in Guatemala,” he said, “so I make low budget films according to my reality, because Guatemala is a poor country” (Personal interview with Hernández Cordón, 2010). Compact size digital technology also allowed Hernández Cordón to make his film with a small crew composed of no more than five technicians. Although made with a low budget and using inexpensive digital equipment, *Las Marimbas del Infierno* resulted in a successful film, winning several international awards such as the First Prize at the Morelia Film Festival in Mexico, an Official Selection at the Cannes Film Festival in France, and the Best Film Award at the Ícaro Central American Film Festival in Guatemala. However, digital technology not only facilitated film production, it also helped to simplify the process of distribution and exhibition.

Before the digital era, most of the movie theaters in the region were exclusively equipped with sophisticated and expensive 35mm projectors. This technological condition obliged Central American filmmakers to make 35mm copies of their films in order to access theatrical distribution markets. Some films released in the early 2000s, such as *Asesinato en El Meneo* (*Murder at El Meneo*; Oscar Castillo, 2001), *No hay tierra sin dueño* (*Calixto the Lanlord*; Sami Kafati, 2003), and *La casa de enfrente* (2003) were all exhibited using 35mm prints. Because of the high cost of 35mm prints, these films were released in a reduced number of theaters, thereby limiting the number of viewers and box office sales. In some cases, filmmakers could not afford even a single 35mm print. In Honduras, that problem was solved using digital technology. For the screening of two films released in 2002, *Almas de la media noche* and *Anita, la cazadora de insectos*, inexpensive digital projectors were installed in movie theaters, allowing filmmakers to save the prohibitive costs of 35mm prints. Similarly, in Guatemala, three of the films made by Casa Comal - V.I.P. *La otra casa* (*V.I.P. Very Important Prisoners*; Elías Jiménez, 2007), *La*

*Bodega* (2009) and *Toque de queda* (2010) - were all theatrically released using digital video technology for screening (Personal interview with Jiménez, 2010). At the end of the decade, most movie theaters in Central America switched their projectors from 35mm to digital formats, as it became the international standard. This conversion facilitated even more the distribution and the exhibition processes. *La Yuma* (2010), for example, using inexpensive DCP digital format obtained international distribution (Personal interview with Jaugey, 2010). The introduction of digital projection technology in the region eliminated costly processing of 35mm copies and facilitated exhibition of Central American films, locally and internationally. Nevertheless, digital technology did not guarantee a massive distribution of Central American films.

### **Regional Distribution and the Ícaro Film Festival**

During the 2000s, Central American filmmakers continued facing serious difficulties to make their films accessible to viewers. However, compared with previous decades, there was a notable improvement in distribution and exhibition in the region. Several feature films were successfully exhibited in national cinemas, attracting large amounts of spectators. In Guatemala, for example, all the films produced by Casa Comal obtained successful theatrical distribution. Each of the most successful Casa Comal films, *La casa de enfrente* (2003), *Las Cruces: poblado próximo* (2006), and *V.I.P. La otra casa* (2007), garnered 125,000 viewers (Cortés, *Cinematografías en Centroamérica* 2012). In El Salvador, *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* (*Surviving Guazapa*; Roberto Dávila, 2009) garnered 11,718 viewers during the first week of exhibition (Andréu 2008). In Honduras, several films such as *Almas de la media noche* (2002), *Amor y frijoles* (2009) and *Unos pocos con valor* (*A Few with Courage*, 2010) obtained successful theatrical distribution. In Costa Rica, genre films were the most commercially successful. For example, the comedy *Asesinato en el meneo* (*Murder at El Meneo*, Oscar Castillo, 2001)

garnered 75,000 spectators, the erotic drama *Caribe* (*Caribbean*; Esteban Ramírez, 2004) 60,000 spectators, and the teen romance *Gestación* (2010) 140,000 spectators. In Panama, the comedy *Chance* (Abner Benaim, 2009), the only feature-length fictional film produced during the decade in that country, garnered 140,000 spectators. The film was premiered simultaneously in fourteen theaters in Panama, and during the first six weeks of exhibition attracted more viewers than the Hollywood blockbuster *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) (Apertura-Films 2010). Since *Chance* is a co-production with Colombia, the film was also released in that South American country, garnering another 135,000 spectators. In Nicaragua, *La Yuma* (2010) garnered a lesser number than the aforementioned films, 36,000 spectators. However, *La Yuma* was probably the Central American film with the widest international distribution. Since the film was co-produced with France, it was released in twenty-eight theaters in that European country. Moreover, *La Yuma* was also exhibited through art house cinemas in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Colombia and the United States. Finally, the Spanish airline Iberia bought the Nicaraguan film to exhibit via the on-board cinema service for passengers travelling first class (Personal interview with Jaugey, 2010).

Although several films garnered large numbers of national spectators, and some reached international audiences, most Central American films remained unknown outside, and even within, the region. Some filmmakers, though, were able to exhibit their films beyond borders. For example, in 2002, Honduran filmmaker Juan Carlos Fanconi, successfully exhibited his film *Almas de la media noche* (2002) in El Salvador. Many Salvadoran viewers paid the ticket price to see the film, but the revenues for Fanconi and his partners were modest, because “the Salvadoran government applies heavy taxes to foreign traders” (Personal conversation with Fanconi, 2003). Similarly, in 2005, after a huge success in Guatemala, Elías Jiménez exhibited

the Casa Comal production *La casa de enfrente* (2003) in Honduras and El Salvador. However, box office revenues in those countries were limited, because “the local distributors pull out the film from theaters to push in the Hollywood films of the season” (Personal interview with Elías Jiménez, 2010). As a result, Jiménez and his colleagues did not distribute subsequent Casa Comal productions in other countries in the region. Similarly, in 2010, Nicaraguan filmmaker Florence Jaugey exhibited *La Yuma* (2010) in Costa Rica, hoping that the numerous Nicaraguans living in that country were interested in watching the first Nicaraguan film in many decades. Indeed, Nicaraguans were interested in the film, but the majority of them did not view it in movie theaters, because “Nicaraguans had already watched the film through pirated copies sold in San José, reducing the box office sales to nearly thirty percent” (Personal interview with Jaugey). Piracy in Central America is illegal, but anti-piracy laws are rarely enforced, and many popular films like *La Yuma* were rapidly duplicated illegally. Heavy taxes, the Hollywood hegemony, and unprosecuted piracy, among other obstacles, discouraged these and other Central American filmmakers to pursue distribution of their films beyond their national boundaries. However, many filmmakers reached Central American and international audiences through alternative channels of distribution, such as festivals and showcases.

Outside the commercial circuit, several cultural centers organized exhibitions of Central American films. However, the primary alternative channel of film distribution in the region was the Ícaro Central American Film Festival. In 1998, Casa Comal created the Ícaro Film Festival to exclusively exhibit Guatemalan productions. However, with the rapid growth and interest in the festival, in 2000 it became the Ícaro Central American Film Festival in order to include regional productions. Each year, several Central American film productions compete for the awards in different categories, including fiction, documentary, animation, and experimental. Within the

festival, and along with the competition section, Casa Comal organizes conferences, training workshops, and showcases of international films. Similarly, each year, Casa Comal partners in different countries organize exhibitions of a touring showcase that include a selection of the previous year's nominated and awarded films. Since 2004, this touring showcase known as *Muestra Ícaro*, has been exhibited in every Central American country. However, more recently the *Muestra Ícaro* has expanded to include Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the United States (New York and Miami) (Casa-Comal 2014). The festival is supported by Guatemalan governmental institutions such as the Ministries of Education and Culture, and is funded by several European organizations, such as the Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD), the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation for Development (AECID), and the British agency Save the Children.

The Ícaro Film Festival has contributed to the development of film culture in Central America by recognizing and promoting regional films that otherwise would remain unnoticed by audiences. Rafael Rosal, the founder and director of the Ícaro Film Festival, explains that these recognitions and promotions have stimulated film production in the region, because, “filmmakers have in mind that their films may be exhibited at the multiple Ícaro screenings, and watched by many viewers in Central America” (Personal interview with Rosal, 2010). The Ícaro has also served as a platform for developing a regional filmmaking network. During the festival in Guatemala, filmmakers, producers, and distributors meet together to establish partnerships for future regional productions. For example, a regional project resulting from the Ícaro meetings is the Central American and the Caribbean Exchange Program, a program launched in 2003 by Casa Comal in collaboration with EICTV and partner filmmakers in Central America, with funding support from the Norwegian agency Fredkorpset. The program allows young Central

American and Cuban filmmakers to spend one year abroad, voluntarily working on different film productions. Several of the participants initiated their filmmaking careers through their participation in this program. For example, Panamenian Gina Villafañe spent one year in Nicaragua where she participated as sound editor in the production of *La Yuma* (2010). Similarly, Cuban Joel Prieto spent one year in Guatemala, where he joined the Casa Comal production team to be editor on *La bodega* (2010) and other Guatemalan films. Also joining the Casa Comal team, Costa Rican Álvaro Rodríguez participated as director of photography on the production of *Toque de queda* (2011).

Inspired by the success of the Ícaro Film Festival, other film festivals and showcases focused in Central American cinema emerged during the 2000s. In Nicaragua, for example, the Asociación Nicaraguense de Cine (Nicaraguan Association of Cinema) or ANCI, since 2004, organized the Muestra de Cine y Video Centroamericano (Central American Film and Video Showcase). Although this showcase does not have a formal film competition, it exhibits Central American films in different cities of Nicaragua, and includes training workshops and conferences. According to its director, Kathy Sevilla, the Muestra was created because ANCI members thought that “few Central American films were exhibited in movie theaters, and they wanted Nicaraguan viewers to have access to regional productions” (Personal interview with Sevilla, 2011). Similar to the Ícaro Film Festival and other film projects in the region, the Muestra is supported primarily by European agencies such as AECID and the European Directorate for Development EUROPEAID. However, the Muestra has also been supported by two private transnational corporations, the U.S based oil company Esso and the Swiss based building materials company Holcim. Meanwhile, since 2007, the Papaya Media Association organized a Central American film festival in Vienna, Austria. During six days, the Vienna

Central American Film Festival<sup>2</sup> exhibits exclusively Central American films of different formats and includes a competition section with prizes for Best Fictional Feature, Best Documentary Feature, Best Short, and an Audience Award. The organizer of this festival, the Papaya Media Association is a non-profit, non-governmental organization, that promotes Central American culture among European audiences. The organization is based in Vienna, and is supported by local organizations such as the Austrian cooperation agency Catholic Children's Movement (DKA) and the Austrian Catholic Women's Movement. The festival also works in partnership with the Ícaro Film Festival (Papaya-Media-Association 2014). These venues have helped increase the awareness of Central American cinema by providing an alternative channel of distribution to films that otherwise would be unable to reach theatrical distribution.

### **Transnationalism**

In the 2000s, film production in Central America was characterized by transnationalism, a factor that implicated the interaction between filmmakers of different nationalities and the blurred boundaries of national identities. This phenomenon is not new to the cinema in the region, many film productions of prior decades involved the participation of filmmakers from different nationalities (see chapter one). However, in several films made during the 2000s, this cinematic transnationalism became more evident. Mette Hjort argues that cinematic transnationalism is determined by “elements related to the levels of production, distribution, reception, and the cinematic works themselves” (Hjort 2010). Based on Hjort's analysis, I found transnational interactions in three levels of Central American film productions: multinational casts and crews, co-productions and diaspora productions.

Although labeled according to nationality and aimed primarily for national audiences, several films produced in the region included casts and crews of different nationalities. For

example, the Guatemalan film *La casa de enfrente* (2003) included a Guatemalan director (Elías Jiménez), a Cuban and a Puerto Rican screenwriters (Manuel Rodríguez and Ray Figueroa), and Dominican and a Costa Rican sound directors (Franklin Hernández and Julio Molina). Meanwhile, the cast in this film was composed primarily of Guatemalan actors, but also included two international actresses: Cuban Yuliet Cruz and Norwegian Marthe Hotvedt. In another Guatemalan film, *Cápsulas* (*Capsules*; Verónica Riedel, 2010), the main character was played by Carolina Cuervo, a Colombian actress. Similarly, the Costa Rican film *Caribe* (2005) included a multinational cast: Cuban Jorge Perrugoría, Mexican Maya Zapata, and Spanish Cuca Escribano. In many cases the inclusion of multinational crews or casts may have resulted from the intervention of international partners in the production of the films. For example, *La casa de enfrente* was produced by Casa Comal in partnership with EICTV through the aforementioned Central American exchange program, which allowed the participation of several international crew members affiliated with EICTV. Similarly, the inclusion of a Norwegian actress in *La casa de enfrente* resulted from the funding support of NORAD, a Norwegian agency. Meanwhile, the producers of *Cápsulas* and *Caribe* may have included international actors to expand the marketing opportunities to other countries outside the Central American region.

Even *Amor y frijoles* (2009) a Honduran film that exploited national identity as its most appealing ingredient, was in fact a transnational production. Within the narrative, the film exploits distinctive aspects of Honduran cultural traditions. For example, the main character is a street vendor of *baleadas*, a traditional Honduran food. Moreover, the story takes place in Ojojona, a frequent tourist destination in Honduras. Similarly, the producers emphasized the Honduran identity of the film by adding *Hecho en Honduras* (Made in Honduras) as the tagline in the advertising campaign. In contrast, non-Honduran crew members occupied key roles in the

production of the film. For example, Mathew Kodath (executive producer) is from India, Hernan Pereira (director) from Argentina, William García (cinematographer) from the United States and Julio Molina (sound director) is from Costa Rica. Kodath and Pereira were living in Honduras when the film was made, but the rest of the crew traveled to Honduras expressly to take part in the shooting. Despite the diverse nationalities behind the scenes, *Amor y frijoles* was made as a national film, specifically targeting a Honduran audience. Indeed the film effectively attracted many viewers, becoming the highest grossing Honduran film of the decade. The multinational composition of the crew in this and other films, demonstrates that filmmaking in Central America had benefited from the mobility of filmmakers that easily travel from one country to another, taking advantage of contemporary transnational interactions.

Contemporary transnational interactions have also facilitated financial partnerships between Central American filmmakers and producers outside the region. During the decade, several Central American films were made as co-productions. For example, both *El camino* (2008) and *Agua fría de mar* (Cold Water of Sea; Paz Fábrega, 2009) are co-productions between Costa Rica and France. Similarly, *La Yuma* (2010) is a co-production between Nicaragua, México, and France. Likewise, *Chance* (2009) is a co-production between Panama and Colombia. Co-productions not only stimulate filmmaking, but in many cases they may also affect the film's content. Tamara Falicov noted that in many Latin American films co-produced with Spain, through the IBERMEDIA fund, "the financing economic imperatives [shaped] film narratives in particular ways." (Falicov 2012) In the cases Falicov studied, Spanish characters were over represented as a result of the intervention of Spanish financing interests. Such co-production related financing imperatives may also have shaped the cinematic narratives in some Central American co-productions. For example, the Costa Rican film *El camino* includes in its

narrative a French character (the puppeteer), performed by a French actor. Although the inclusion of a French character makes sense within the context of the film's narrative (see chapter three), the inclusion of a French actor may have also resulted from a financing imperative, because of the co-production with France.

Another Costa Rican film from the decade presents a complicated transnational interaction in its production. *Del Amor y otros demonios* (2009) is based on a novel by a Colombian writer (Gabriel García Márquez) and tells a story that takes place in a Colombian setting (Cartagena de Indias). However, the film was written and directed by a Costa Rican filmmaker (Hilda Hidalgo). Most of the pre-production work was centralized in Costa Rica, including the financial support of the Costa Rican based CINERGIA fund. However the film is a co-production between Costa Rica and Colombia, supported by IBERMEDIA. The participation of non-Costa Rican co-producers may have influenced the decision of including a Colombian actress (Eliza Triana) for the role of Sierva María and a Spanish actor (Pablo Derqui) for the role of Cayetano Delaura. However, the narrative itself suggested the nationality of these characters, since, according to the novel, Sierva María is a native of Cartagena de Indias (a city of today's Colombia) and Cayetano Delaura is a *peninsular* (born in Spain). Although *Del Amor y otros demonios* is not a cinematic representation of Costa Rican culture, the film represented Costa Rica in the Iberoamerican competition of the XXV Goya Awards in Spain. Despite these apparent contradictions, the participation of several countries in the production made possible the completion of a film like *Del Amor y otros demonios*, in a region where local funding is insufficient for film production.

Besides co-productions, some films dealing with Central American stories were made outside the region, a transnational condition that also complicated national identity. These are the

diaspora films of Central America, films made by Central American filmmakers living outside their country of origin. Although, many diaspora films have been made around the world, there are just a few examples of films made by Central Americans away from their own countries. Nevertheless, there are two examples that also illustrate the effects of transnationalism in contemporary Central American cinema. The first, *Por cobrar* (*Collect Call*, 2002), is a film made by Guatemalan filmmaker Luis Argueta, dealing with migrations (see chapter three). Argueta, himself, is a migrant living in the United States. After the huge success of his first film *El silencio de Neto* (1996) (see chapter one) he decided to make another personal film based on his own experiences as a migrant. However, this time Argueta worked “without a script, without a budget, and with a very small crew composed of friends,” because he was “still paying the debts resulting from the production of *El silencio de Neto*” (Personal interview with Argueta, 2011). As a low budget production, the film was shot in real locations. Because the narrative depicts a young man departing from his home town, some scenes were shot in Guatemala. However, a great portion of the film was shot in New York, where most of the story takes place. Although it was produced primarily in the United States, the film is linked to Guatemala, because it focuses on a Guatemalan character and was directed by a member of the Guatemalan diaspora.

The second example is *Voces Inocentes* (*Innocent Voices*; Luis Mandoki, 2004) a film written and co-produced by Oscar Torres, a member of the Salvadoran diaspora. Torres emigrated from El Salvador, during the 1980s, when a civil war in that country provoked a mass exodus (see chapter three). The city of Los Angeles in California, was the new home for many of these Salvadoran emigrants, including Oscar Torres. After graduating from college, Torres found a job in the local film industry, working as a production assistant. There he met Mexican

American film director Luis Mandoki, who encouraged Torres to write a script based on his own experience as a migrant. The resulting screenplay was a touching story of a young boy surviving the civil war in a rural town of El Salvador. Mandoki produced and directed the film, with support from Mexican and U.S. film companies, including Quentin Tarentino's production company A Band Apart. Oscar Torres recounts that, initially, the production team attempted to shoot the film in El Salvador, but "the government did not allow [them], because the film would not present a positive image of the country" (Personal interview with Torres, 2010).

Consequently, the film was shot in Mexico, with Mexican crew and cast, but keeping the characters and the setting as Salvadorans. This personal narrative of civil war and migration traveled around the world when the film was finally released in movie theaters, and exhibited at film festivals, including the Berlin International Film Festival, where it received an award in 2005. *Voces inocentes* is a film with transnational implications, because it was directed by a Mexican American director, co-produced between Mexico and the United States, and shot in Mexico with a Mexican crew and actors. However, the film kept its connections with El Salvador through its narrative, conceived by a filmmaker of the Salvadoran diaspora.

Although new training opportunities, new funding sources, digital technology, film festivals and transnationalism were important factors characterizing New Central American Cinema, additional factors should also be considered. When I interviewed Florence Jaugey in Nicaragua, she observed that "women bring forward cinema in Central America" (Jaugey, 2010). Certainly, an increasing trend of feminization is notable in NCAC films. Many women directed acclaimed NCAC films such as *El camino*, *Cápsulas*, *La Yuma*, *Agua fría de mar*, *Del amor y otros demonios*, and *El último comandante*.<sup>3</sup> Women were also in charge of significant film crew positions traditionally performed by men, such as producer in *Puro Mula*, sound director in *La*

*bodega*, and director of photography in *La casa de enfrente*, *Las Cruces: poblado próximo*, and *V.I.P. La otra casa*. Similarly, female characters defying traditional female roles were lead characters in several NCAC films. For example, a young girl leads a juvenile gang in *Cápsulas*, a woman boxer rejects male domination in *La Yuma*, and a young girl rebels against social and religious precepts in *Del amor y otros demonios*. However, these and other possible factors would require further study.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century Central America cinema experienced a significant boost, due to the emergence of socio-economic factors that facilitated better conditions for film production and distribution. However, that boost did not aim towards the creation of a film industry. The majority of Central American filmmakers continue working as they did in earlier decades, artisanally. Despite the commercial success of some films, distribution still remains a major problem in the region. The most notable feature of Central American cinema during the 2000s was a significant increase in the number of fictional feature films. The themes represented in those films are the focus of the following chapter.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, Dalton is not an EICTV alumnus, but instead one of its founder. For several years he held administrative positions at EICTV, and subsequently kept ties with the school.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.centroamerica.at/>

<sup>3</sup> *El ultimo comandante* was co-directed by Isabel Martínez and Vicente Ferraz.

### Chapter III: Migrations, Gangs and Civil Wars, as Recurring Themes in New Central American Cinema

At the end of the past century, most Central American filmmakers were primarily concerned with examining what Cortés calls “the great social revolution,” meaning a generalized struggle for social justice, which eventually led to internal armed conflicts and massive emigrations. In addition, filmmakers focused on particular struggles, such as gender equality, environmental conservation, and ethnic minority rights (2005, 401-452). Those filmmakers utilized the documentary format for expressing their thematic concerns. In the 2000s, however, NCAC filmmakers explored similar themes, but utilizing the fictional format for their works.

The Central American fictional films produced during the 2000s had a variety of formal characteristics. Some films were made strictly for box-office success, using Hollywood narrative and genre patterns. For example, in Costa Rica, Argentine filmmakers Ramiro and Adrián Bogliano, hired by local producers, directed *Donde duerme el horror* (*Where the Horror Sleeps*, 2010), and in Guatemala, Leonel Ramos wrote, produced, and directed *Maligno* (*Malignant*, 2010), both horror films targeted for young audiences. Meanwhile, in Guatemala, Jimmy and Sammy Morales made *Un presidente de a sombrero* (*A President with a Hat*, 2007), and in Panama, Abner Benaím made *Chance* (*Chance*, 2010), both comedies intended for pure entertainment consumption. However, many Central American films focused on social topics, represented through the personal viewpoint of the filmmaker, using a wide diversity of narrative styles, and aimed to provoke a critical reaction among audiences. This chapter examines the major thematic trends that distinguished those Central American fictional films from 2001-2010.<sup>1</sup>

NCAC filmmakers focused a wide variety of themes, ranging from political corruption in *Asesinato en El Meneo* (*Murder in El Meneo*; Oscar Castillo, 2001) to teen pregnancy in *Gestación* (*Gestation*; Esteban Ramírez, 2010), and from child prostitution in *Password: Una mirada en la oscuridad* (*Password: A Look in the Dark*, Andres Heindenreich, 2002) to paranormal phenomena in *Almas de la media noche* (*Midnight Souls*, Juan Carlos Fanconi, 2002). However, amidst that contrasting diversity, migrations, gangs, and civil wars came to surface as predominant themes in Central American films of the new millennium.

During field research in Central America, I interviewed filmmakers and asked them what themes characterized the recent cinema in the region. The most common answer they provided was: violence. Certainly, many NCAC films revolve around violence affecting characters in one way or another. Peasants, indigenous people, and gang members are all victims of violence in *No hay tierra sin dueño* (*Calixto the Landlord*; Sami Kafati, 2003), *Donde acaban los caminos* (*Where the Roads End*; Carlos García, 2004), and *La bodega* (*The Warehouse*; Ray Figueroa, 2010), respectively. Meanwhile, children, young men and women act or react violently in *Cápsulas* (*Capsules*; Verónica Riedel, 2010), *Gasolina* (*Gasoline*; Julio Hernández Cordón, 2008) and *La Yuma* (Florence Jaugey, 2010). However, violence is a broad concept with so many variants, such as domestic violence, street violence, structural violence, and so on. Perhaps, more than a theme, violence is a common thread in many NCAC films. Consistently, recurring themes such as migrations, gangs, and civil wars are all connected with some sort of violence, whether it be physical or psychological in nature.

Themes in NCAC became recurring when filmmakers frequently addressed them on different levels, as either primary or secondary themes. Some primary recurring themes were the central focus in the filmic narratives. Some were addressed in a secondary plot, depicted through

character behavior, or referenced in the dialogue. On all levels few themes protrude as indelible marks of a generation of filmmakers. I argue that the three most frequently recurring themes in NCAC films were migrations, gangs, and civil wars. Except for gangs, these themes are not new in Central American films. Perhaps because it is a more recent phenomenon, gangs were not a recurring theme prior the 2000s. However, civil wars and migrations, two social phenomena affecting the region in previous decades, were themes widely represented in several documentaries prior to the 2000s (see chapter one). A new way Central American filmmakers dealt with these themes during the first decade of the twenty-first century was through fictional features. My analysis of these fictional features begins with an overview of each social phenomena in the Central American context, and continues with an examination on how NCAC filmmakers addressed those themes in this particular historical juncture, by pointing to the level of representation and providing examples. Finally, I analyze one film as a case study for each of these three common themes in NCAC.

### **Migrations**

Migrations were a social phenomenon that characterized Central America during the last decades of the twentieth century. As in other parts of the world, several migratory flows moved from rural to urban centers. Nevertheless, many Central American migrants crossed geographic borders heading to North America, and especially to the United States. By 2009, nearly 2.9 million Central American immigrants lived in the United States, the majority of them living in California, Texas and Florida. These immigrants came from different parts of Central America, but two thirds of them hailed from Guatemala and El Salvador. Similarly, two thirds of all Central American immigrants in the United States entered the country during the last two decades of the twentieth century (Terrazas 2011). This end-of-the-century exodus of Central

Americans to North America was provoked for several reasons and in different times. First, the civil wars during the 1970s and the 1980s in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua pushed citizens of these countries to seek refuge abroad. Second, the economic depression that followed the civil wars in the same countries created another wave of emigration of citizens looking for better economic opportunities (García 2006). Third, natural disasters affecting Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, such as the hurricanes Mitch in 1998, and Stan in 2005, and the two earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001, pushed many affected citizens to emigrate (Davy 2006). These different waves of migration had a strong impact on Central American societies, and NCAC filmmakers frequently referred to them in their cinematic works.

Several NCAC filmmakers explored migrations as the main focus of their films.

Although they all dealt with the same theme, each filmmaker had a different approach on the subject. Luis Argueta, for example, focused on the experience of adapting to the new land in *Por cobrar* (*Collect Call*, 2002). In this film, Oscar is a young man who abandons his rural town in Guatemala and sets off to the United States hoping to start a career as an actor. However, once in New York, Oscar deals with the multiple difficulties faced by Central American immigrants in the United States. Meanwhile, Mario Rosales explored life after emigration in *El regreso de Lencho* (*The Return of Lencho*, 2010). Lencho is a graffiti artist returning to his homeland Guatemala, after living a decade in New York. Similarly, in *El último comandante* (*The Last Commander*, Isabel Martínez and Vicente Ferraz, 2010) Paco is an ex-Sandinista commander moving to Costa Rica, after deserting a civil war in Nicaragua. Finally, filmmaker Ishtar Yasin observed child migration in *El camino* (*The Path*, 2008). Saslaya and Darío are two children crossing the border from Nicaragua to Costa Rica to look for their mother. In all these narratives,

filmmakers stressed migrations as the central theme by portraying characters strongly affected by the experience of leaving or returning to their countries.

Meanwhile, in other narratives, filmmakers touched on the subject of migrations through characters aspiring to emigrate, as a way of escaping their oppressive reality. In *La casa de enfrente* (*Exceso*; Elías Jiménez, 2004), for example, Kiara is a prostitute, saving money to start a new life in the United States. In *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* (*Surviving Guazapa*; Roberto Dávila, 2008), Pablo is a Salvadoran guerrilla fighter, planning to desert and emigrate to the United States. In *La Yuma* (2010), Yuma is a Nicaraguan rookie boxer willing to travel to the United States, if given the opportunity. In *Cápsulas* (2010) Simón is a Guatemalan drug trafficker arranging quick travel to hide with his family in the United States. The aforementioned films presented characters experiencing migration in different ways, some hoping to emigrate, others leaving their countries, and others returning to their homes. This varied cinematic representation of migrations in NCAC films might suggest a particular interest among Central American filmmakers to deal with the subject.

### **El camino**

*El camino* (*The Path*; Ishtar Yasin, 2008) portrays two Nicaraguan children embarking on a long journey to Costa Rica. While the majority of Central American migrants moved northward, many Nicaraguans preferred Costa Rica as their migratory destination. For many decades, Nicaraguans departed to Costa Rica motivated by political conflicts, economic hardship, and natural disasters. However, the largest number of Nicaraguan migrants entered Costa Rica in the last decades of the twentieth century, with a notable increase in the early 1990s (Marquette 2006). In 2000, a total of 226,374 Nicaraguans were living in Costa Rica, representing 76% of immigrants in that country (Castro 2011). This exodus of Nicaraguans to

Costa Rica constitutes the historical context for the fictional narrative in Ishtar Yasin's *El camino*.

*El camino* tells the story of Saslaya, a twelve-year old girl who travels from Nicaragua to Costa Rica, along with her younger brother, Darío. The film's first scenes describe a typical day in the life of Saslaya. She lives in a small hut with her grandfather and her sibling. During the day, the family goes to a city dump for collecting whatever might be useful. At home, Saslaya handles the household chores, preparing food and caring for Darío. During the night, while her brother sleeps, her grandfather sexually abuses her. The following day, Saslaya tells her brother that they must go in search of their mother. Before the grandfather wakes, they set off for a long journey to Costa Rica.

Subsequent scenes show the many difficulties of migrants. Saslaya and Darío travel as stowaways, sleep on the streets, and go to the market to feed themselves from leftovers. The children travel on foot through mountains and valleys, transfer from town to town by bus, and cross the Lake of Nicaragua in a boat with other migrants. One of the many places they arrive to is Granada, a colonial town. There, Saslaya and Darío meet with all sorts of characters, some sympathetic, while others enigmatic. One is a friendly street child who takes them on a tour around the town and to the beach. They also meet a group of street performers, composed of a French puppeteer, a dancer and an assistant. They travel on the same route as the children. Luz, the dancer, shows maternal sympathy for Saslaya. Eventually, they become friends.

Saslaya and Darío finally cross the border, but they get separated in a dense jungle. Saslaya looks for her brother, but does not find him and walks away alone. When she arrives in San José, she does not find her mother, but she meets Luz again. Luz takes Saslaya to an old house that looks like a brothel. Saslaya is scared, but allows Luz to clean and dress her. The final

scene shows Luz taking Saslaya to the French puppeteer as a concubine. Paradoxically, the girl is again a victim of sexual abuse, a circumstance that, in the first place, motivated her to emigrate.

Though the story in *El camino* is fictional, Yasin resorted to several documentary techniques. For example, most of the scenes were shot at actual locations, such as the garbage dump, the market, and the bus station. In order to emphasize realism, Yasin also incorporated real emigrants as actors. While travelling on a boat to Costa Rica, Saslaya and Darío listen to other passengers commenting on their own experiences as migrants. They relate actual testimonies of crossing the border. One woman explains that she is moving to Costa Rica “to have a better life. If I make it, then I’ll bring my children.” Another traveler also speaks about her children: “I left them with a sister. I’m leaving because there are no jobs here in Nicaragua.” Meanwhile, a woman warns of the dangers of crossing the border: “Since the war of ‘84, this place is full of landmines.” She tells of her brother losing a leg due to a landmine explosion when crossing the border. Finally, Saslaya relates her own story: “My father died. My mom is in Costa Rica. She left eight years ago. My brother and I are going in search of her.” These actual accounts became part of the fictional story as a result of the research Yasin conducted during the preparation of the film. She travelled across the border, and interviewed several Nicaraguan migrants in order to make her film “based on real testimonies.” (Yasin 2011) Through the use of these documentary filmmaking techniques, Yasin accomplished a more realistic representation of the migratory phenomenon between Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

Yasin added more realism to her film by addressing a recent trend observed among Nicaragua migrants. Some studies report an increase of women and children among migrants between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. As the number of Nicaraguan migrant women rises, gender specificities of the phenomenon are more evident. For example, migrant women are often

victims of gender-based violence during the departure and along the journey. Some women leave to escape sexual abuse in their homes and others are forced to have sex during the voyage and upon their arrival. According to victims' testimonies, they are intercepted by local pimps who do business in the sexual trafficking of women. On the other hand, recent years have seen an increase in the number of children traveling among migrants. Statistics indicate that one in five migrants in Latin America is a child or adolescent (Feuk, Perrault and Delamónica 2010). Generally, these children go in search of their parents who have previously migrated. Consequently, minors travel alone or unaccompanied by adults, thus making them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. The recent wave of Nicaraguan women to Costa Rica has also revealed that younger people are the majority of migrants (Loría 2011). Yasin addressed these alarming tendencies by telling a story of two migrant children, and focusing on Saslaya, a child girl victim of sexual abuses during the journey. At the same time, with this gender conscious cinematic representation, Yasin challenges the habit of ignoring the participation of women in the migration process, resulting from a male-centric viewpoint of the phenomenon. Finally, the filmmaker not only centers on the issue of Nicaraguan women migrating to Costa Rica, but also focuses on young girls as the most vulnerable victims of the violence associated with the migratory process.

As an artist, Yasin had personal motives to make a migration-centered film. Her family has a history of displacements, starting with her parents. Yasin's father was born in Iraq and her mother in Chile. As international students in the former Soviet Union, they met in Moscow, where Ishtar was born. Upon completing their studies, the family moved to Chile, where Ishtar spent part of her childhood. However, after the military coup that ended Salvador Allende's socialist government in 1973, they escaped to live in exile in Costa Rica. Ishtar grew up there,

but later lived in Moscow to study at the State Film Institute. After completing a bachelor's degree and a graduate degree in acting, she moved back to Costa Rica, where she became a filmmaker. Having spent her life in different parts of the world, Yasin calls herself "a child of exile." (Yasin 2011) Motivated by her personal experience, and inspired by the experiences of the Nicaraguans she interviewed, Yasin constructed a compelling cinematic story, exposing "the social problems of emigration, physical and emotional abandonment, and sexual exploitation." (Deveny 2012)

Just as the story in *El camino* represents a border crossing between nations, the production of the film itself meant multinational interactions for the filmmakers. For example, Yasin and her crew resorted to international organizations to fund the film. In addition to local funding institutions (CINERGIA<sup>2</sup> and the Bank of Costa Rica), the filmmakers received financial support from European organizations such as Fond Sud Cinema of France, HIVOS, and AECID, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC). Moreover, both the cast and the crew are multinational. The cast includes performers from Nicaragua, Costa Rica and France. Meanwhile, the crew incorporates a Costa Rican director (Ishtar Yasin), a French cinematographer (Jacques Loiseleux), a Guatemalan producer (Pedro Díaz), and a Nicaragua producer (Martha Clarissa Hernández). This type of multinational (and chiefly regional) integration was a common production strategy among NCAC filmmakers.

Despite the multiple efforts invested in the production of the film, *El camino* had limited distribution. The film was theatrically released in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, but without major commercial success. Distribution is still one of the biggest challenges for the majority of NCAC filmmakers. "We need distribution and exhibition channels for our films," Ishtar Yasin explains,

“we need to create our own audiences.” However, the film was widely honored at several film competitions, including the renowned Berlin International Film Festival and Cannes Film Festival, for which the film was part of the official selection. After a successful film festival tour, *El camino* amassed eighteen international awards, including Best Latin American Film at the Santiago International Film Festival (Chile), Best Latin American Film at the Mar del Plata Film Festival (Argentina), Special Prize and Ecumenical Award at the Fribourg International Film Festival (Italy) and Best Direction Award at the Ícaro Central American Film Festival (Guatemala) (Astarte 2009).

Ishtar Yasin, along with other NCAC filmmakers, dealt with the issue of migration as one of the social phenomena that characterized Central America at the end of the past century. She and her colleagues told fictional stories about Central American characters longing or forced to abandon their homeland, in order to start a new life on better economic conditions. Yasin’s characters, Saslaya and Darío moved to a neighboring country, following their mother’s footsteps. However, the majority of migrant characters in NCAC films sought the United States as their ideal destination. Subsequently, that exodus to the United States would contribute to the emergence of another social phenomenon that also characterized the region in the recent past, gangs.

## **Gangs**

An additional social problem emerging in Central America at the end of the century was that of gang violence. In recent decades, gangs became a threat to public safety, especially in countries like Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras where gang activity was marked by drug trafficking and extreme violence. The primary gangs in the region, with the majority of members and geographic influence, are the 18 and the MS, locally known as *maras*. These gangs began

operations in poor neighborhoods, fighting each other for control of territory, without directly affecting outsiders. But recently, through the influence of organized crime, their activities have significantly increased (Bruneau, Lucía and Skinner 2011). Although gangs are not new to Central America, it was during the last decades of the twentieth century that they became more powerful and adopted a transnational identity.

The 18 and the MS, the largest and most influential gangs in Central America, originated in the United States, in the Latino neighborhoods of Southern California. Back in the 1960s, many young Mexican immigrants, living in the city of Los Angeles, were continually discriminated against and harassed by existing street gangs. In response, they decided to create their own gang, naming it “18” after the number of the street where they lived. Throughout the following decades, the 18 grew larger when other young Latino immigrants, looking for social integration and identity, joined the gang. Among those new members were many Salvadoran immigrants, who had escaped from the 1980s civil war. However, due to tensions with other gang members, several Salvadorans left the 18, and formed their own gang: the *Mara Salvatrucha* or MS. In the early 1990s, the MS grew rapidly with the new waves of Salvadoran immigrants who had fled the post-war economic depression in their country. This expansion of gang membership in both the 18 and the MS resulted in increased criminal activity. Taking advantage of their situation as illegal immigrants, the Mexican Mafia began enlisting several members of both Latino gangs for its drug trafficking operations. In the late 1990s, in reaction to the increasing gang-related criminal activity, the United States government launched a massive detention and deportation campaign of illegal Central American immigrants, many of whom were active 18 and MS gang members. Upon arrival to their home countries, the deportees brought with them the customs and operations associated with these criminal gangs and

transmitted them to existing gangs in Central America (Valdez 2011). It is against this historic backdrop that a number of Central American films in the 2000s focused on gangs or gang-related characters and activities as a thematic concern.

Central American countries with a major gang presence are Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. In the late 2000s, Guatemala reported the largest number of gang members, 32,000; meanwhile Nicaragua accounted for the lowest, 4,500. Except for Nicaragua, in all these countries the 18 and the MS are the dominant gangs. Due to the alarming increase of gang-related criminal activity, governments in the region have responded to the problem with legal measures. In El Salvador, after implementing an anti-gang law, the government was able to incarcerate 7,000 gang members. In Guatemala, however, the government has been less successful, having sent to prison only 400 gang members. Scholars believe that this failure in Guatemala has led desperate citizens to eradicate gang members through extrajudicial executions (Bruneau, Lucía and Skinner 2011). Although the phenomenon manifested differently in each country, gang-related crime became a major concern in Central America in recent years. Consequently, many NCAC filmmakers addressed the subject of gangs in their films.

Although gangs are not the central focus of the narrative, several NCAC films depicted characters that are either gang members or showcase gang-related behavior. For example, in *Anita, la cazadora de insectos* (*Anita, the Insect Catcher*; Hispano Durón, 2002) gang culture is suggested in the behavior of some characters. Anita, the protagonist, is kidnapped by Guacha, a character exhibiting gang member characteristics. For example, Guacha lives in a slum, consumes and sells marijuana, and always carries a gun. Although his past activities are never revealed, the multiple tattoos on his body suggest his gang associations. Moreover, in *Cápsulas* (2010), gang culture is more evident among juvenile characters. Fonsi, the central character of

the film, is an adolescent from a wealthy family living in a rich district of Guatemala City. However, his friends (the children of his nanny) live in a poor neighborhood. Fonsi often visits them to sing innocent rap songs with other kids of the area. Using his video camera, Fonsi records his friends while they get tattoos, smoke marijuana and use gang-related gestures. Later in the film, these children display more evident gang-like behavior when they kidnap Fonsi's mother at gunpoint. By depicting gang-related characters, these narratives illustrated how gang culture permeated Central American societies.

Other NCAC filmmakers addressed the issue of gangs in a more direct way by presenting characters clearly identified as gang members. In *La Yuma* (2010), for instance, director Florence Jaugey depicts various aspects of street gang life in Nicaragua. Although not as prevalent as in neighboring countries, Nicaraguan gangs exhibit similar characteristics. Gang members fight over territory, steal money and engage in localized drug trafficking. However, in Nicaragua gangs are less violent and neither the 18 nor the MS have been reported in the country. In his report on Nicaraguan street gangs, Jose Luis Rocha (2011) explains that migratory factors influenced gang-related activities. On the one hand, the majority of Nicaraguan emigrants moved to Costa Rica, where little gang activity is reported. On the other hand, the greatest part of those who immigrated to the United States settled in Miami, Florida, rather than Los Angeles, California. Consequently, few Nicaraguan immigrants came into contact with Southern Californian gangs. In addition, Nicaraguans make up only three percent of Central American deportees. According to Rocha, this might explain why 18 and MS gang activity patterns were not imported to Nicaragua. Nevertheless, many young people from the slums of Managua have organized into gangs. This social phenomenon is the point of departure for Jaugey's film *La Yuma*.

In *La Yuma*, Jaugey examines street gang culture in Nicaragua through the lead character. Yuma is a young woman living in a Managua slum, where gang activity is a part of daily life. Although gang culture does not interest her, Yuma has close ties to the neighborhood's gang members, most notably one of her siblings and her boyfriend. These gang members perform the same activities Rocha noted in his report (2011). They fight for turf by throwing stones at rival gangs, consume and sell drugs, and steal from passersby. Through the character of Yuma, Jaugey not only depicts a character trapped in gang life; she also portrays a brave and intelligent young woman, finding a way to survive street life. Eventually in the film, Yuma pursues a career as a boxer, aware that the gang does not bring her any benefits.

At a much higher rate than Nicaragua, gangs have seriously impacted Guatemala, particularly its capital city. As in neighboring El Salvador and Honduras, the primary gangs are both the 18 and the MS. In 2006, USAID reported that the 18 and the MS constituted ninety five percent of gang members in Guatemala. While imported gang patterns were crucial for the development of Guatemala gangs, the local socio-economic context was considerably influential. Guatemala has a low human development index, with nearly half of the population living in poverty, and only one third of children attending school. Likewise, income distribution is unequal, the poorest receiving 2.9 percent, while the wealthiest receiving 59.5 percent of income (Ranum 2011). Government institutions are weak or ineffective in many areas of the country, thereby creating a power vacuum that eventually is filled by criminal groups. Within this context of social imbalance, gangs have emerged as a tempting alternative for young people seeking social identity and economic growth opportunities.

Concerned with the growing phenomenon, several Guatemalan filmmakers explored the subject of gangs in their films. In *La casa de enfrente* (2003), for example, Elías Jiménez

examined the lives of Mike and El Mascota, two former gang members. Mike works as bouncer at a nightclub where white collar workers meet prostitutes. One of Mike's duties is to physically remove El Mascota from the club, because he is found selling drugs to customers without the club owner's authorization. Through conversation, we learn that both Mike and El Mascota were former members of the 18 gang and had spent time in jail. Now faced with an unpleasant situation, nonetheless gang loyalty is preserved between them. However, their bonding does not guarantee survival in an environment where crime and betrayal prevail. A government comptroller is about to reveal a network of corruption in which the club's owner is involved. Aware of Mike's criminal skills as a former gang member, the owner orders Mike to kill the comptroller. Using nothing more than a screwdriver, Mike accomplishes his lethal mission. However, following the hit, Mike is himself killed by a friend of the club owner. The final scene of the film shows El Mascota ironically replacing Mike as the club bouncer. Through this subplot in *La casa de enfrente* Jiménez exposes how organized crime exploits gang members in Guatemala, even after they are no longer officially affiliated with a gang.

In *V.I.P. La otra casa* (*V.I.P. Very important Prisoners*, 2006), a sequel to *La casa de enfrente*, filmmaker Jiménez once again focuses on the life of gang members, this time in the milieu of a Guatemalan prison. Juan Ramos (Mike's murderer in the previous film) is a government official incarcerated on charges of corruption and murder. The prison is full of inmates who are clearly identified as gang members. In a sequence that shows inmates posing for mug shots, we see on their bare torsos the distinctive tattoos of the 18 and MS gangs. Juan Ramos' white-collar appearance with clean, slicked-back hair and expensive clothes does not last long. In an environment dominated by gang members, Juan learns to survive by imitating them. He shaves his head and uncovers his torso. Juan rapidly advances as the head of his prison sector

by wisely using the intimidation strategies he has learned from the gang members. From his position as leader, he is both witness and accomplice of multiple crimes taking place within the prison.

Although the narrative story in *V.I.P. La otra casa* is fictional, both characters and situations seem to be not far from reality. On the one hand, the conditions reproduced in the film are in many ways similar to the conditions observed by Ranun in her report on gang activity in Guatemalan prisons (2011). These parallel conditions include regular inmates allying with gang inmates as a survival mechanism, gang leaders assuming control of sectors, and gang inmates perpetrating crimes within penitentiaries. On the other hand, Jiménez and his crew utilized several documentary techniques, adding realism to the narrative. The film was shot on location at an actual detention center, involving the participation of a number of actual inmates (Jiménez, *Detrás de cámaras* 2007).

In *Marimbas del Infierno* (*Marimbas from Hell*, 2010), Julio Hernández Cordón exposed gang culture in connection with two characters. One is Alfonso, a marimba player in Guatemala City. At the beginning of the film, Alfonso relates how he was a victim of gang extortion. He fled his house and now lives in a warehouse in order to hide from the gang. A second character is Chiquilín, a former gang member, whose body tattoos and drug addiction disclose his ties with gang culture. In an early scene, Chiquilín relates how he escaped from jail, a story that reveals his criminal past. Possibly, avoiding contact with his past as a gang member, Chiquilín also lives in the same warehouse. Having in common a need to stay away from gangs, Alfonso and Chiquilín develop a friendship in the warehouse. *Marimbas del Infierno* and the previous Guatemalan films, explored gang culture in different ways. However, another Guatemalan film

dealt in greatest depth with the subject, by making gang-violence the central focus of its narrative.

### **La bodega**

In *La bodega* (The Warehouse, 2009) writer and director Ray Figueroa presents different views on gangs in Guatemala, through a debate between three principal characters: Jacobo, Tono and El Pelón. The film begins with a scene in a hospital, where Jacobo hears a doctor's report on the condition of his sister, who has been brutally raped and beaten by unknown assailants. The doctor confirms that she will survive, but unfortunately has lost her baby. The news concerning his sister's pregnancy takes Jacobo by surprise, and he asks the doctor not to tell their mother. After leaving his sister at the hospital, Jacobo meets Tono, an old friend of the family. While riding in Tono's car, Jacobo, both relieved and tearful, expresses his frustration at not being able to do anything to punish those responsible. Jacobo says that both he and the police suspect the rapists to be gang members. But Jacobo distrusts the judicial system, and loses hope of ever catching and prosecuting the criminals.

With this opening sequence, director and writer Figueroa exposes a generalized feeling among Guatemalan citizens towards the judicial system in their country. Their perception is that police officers, prosecutors and judges are corrupt and inefficient, leaving no hope for institutional justice. In that sense, *La bodega* is a film about how people react to impunity in Guatemala. "I know people who have been victims of assault or abduction," Figueroa asserts, "but they do not bother to go to the police to testify about what occurred. They believe that testifying is a waste of time and that frustration will make them feel worse. So they better forget and move on" (Personal interview with Figueroa, 2010). A similar perception of impunity is

what makes Jacobo believe that nothing can be done. However, his friend Tono suggests a different way of dealing with the problem.

Tono recommends an alternative that will avenge Jacobo's sister. With the help of his bodyguard, Tono has kidnapped a gang member with the intent to commit justice for Jacobo. There is nothing to indicate that the gang member is linked to the rape, he was simply captured randomly. Tono's plan is to get justice by punishing someone who is part of the social group attributed to the rape. The punishment takes place in an abandoned warehouse owned by Tono's father. Located out of town and away from potential witnesses, the secluded warehouse is the ideal site for the plan. The gang member, thinking that he has been kidnapped by mistake, identifies himself as El Pelón, a member of the 18 gang, and demands an explanation. In response, he receives a brutal beating from Jacobo and Tono. The marimba music emanating from an old radio deafens the sounds of torture administered by the two assailants. After seeing El Pelón unconscious and covered with blood, Jacobo believes the mission is over. He turns to Tono and suggests returning the gang member to his neighborhood, before the victim bleeds to death. However, for Tono the beating is not enough, and holding a gun in his hand declares: "Now we must kill him."

From this point in the film, Figueroa focuses on a moral debate concerning gang violence and vigilante justice. In that debate, three different sectors of Guatemalan society are represented. First, Tono embodies the upper class sector. He lives in an affluent area of the city, travels in a luxury car driven by his bodyguard, and is the son of a wealthy man. Second, El Pelón symbolizes the lower socio-economic sector. He lives in a poor neighborhood, has been a gang member since the age of twelve, and commits crimes as a way of life. Between these two opposing poles is Jacobo, representing the middle class. A logo on his shirt indicates he works as

an employee in a company. However, neither his income nor that of his family is enough to pay the hospital expenses for his sister. This class-based fragmentation allows Figuerora to explore the issue of vigilantism more effectively by showcasing differing views.

Jacobo opposes the idea of killing the gang member, thereby adopting a moralistic position. He moralistically believes they cannot kill him “because only God can take life.” However, Tono is more pragmatic in his reasoning. He believes that killing El Pelón is justified because it is a security measure. If they let the gang member go free, he and his fellow gang members would take reprisals against Jacobo, Tono and their families. Further expanding on his view, Tono claims that executing El Pelón is a way of exterminating a social disease, since “all gang members are themselves murderers.” To further his argument, Tono points out the numerous tattoos El Pelón has on different parts of his body. One is a tear next to one of his eyes, another is a spider web on his elbow. In gang tradition each of these tattoos are trophies indicating that the wearer has killed someone. Finally, Tono and Jacobo determine the gang member’s fate in the following dialog:

Tono: A gang member is not a human being. Is just a rabid dog, so killing the dog, you end the disease.

Jacobo: What do we do with the body?

Tono: Chuy [the bodyguard] will throw the body in a dump that was used for similar purposes during the 1980s civil war.

However, aware that he is about to be executed, El Pelón begs his captors for mercy, claiming innocence because he had nothing to do with the girl’s rape. He also explains that rape is a common practice among MS gang members, but not the 18. Finally, El Pelón tearfully explains that he is a father of a little girl, and if he dies, his daughter will have no one to look after her.

Here Figueroa takes an unexpected turn, through *El Pelón* he brings a point of view commonly ignored in debates concerning gang violence. “We wanted to talk about violence from the point of view of those who inflict it and those who suffer from it,” Figueroa claims “our purpose was to humanize both victims and victimizers” (2010). *El Pelón* shows his human side, supplicating to his captors for mercy. However, Jacobo and Tono have made their decision, and ask the bodyguard to kill the unfortunate gang member.

In the film Figueroa depicted gang culture by going beyond the common perceptions concerning gang-related crimes. Typically, gang members are represented as criminal offenders threatening public safety. This media representation is, in many respects, consistent with reality, but ignores that gang members are themselves frequently the victims of violence. Recently in Guatemala, “the victimization of gang members has increased, and extrajudicial executions have reached alarming levels” (Ranum 2011). The direct cause of this phenomenon has been associated with the inefficiency of state institutions when combating gang violence. A general climate of violence and insecurity, combined with a lack of confidence in the judicial system led citizens “to take justice into their own hands” (Bruneau, Lucía and Skinner 2011, 85). In the film, Jacobo and Tono believe that by kidnapping, torturing and killing a single gang member, a form of justice will be served. “That is not justice,” Figueroa reflects, “but it’s the closest thing they can have, within an atmosphere of impunity” (2010). Although gang members proved to be a threat to public safety, *El Pelón* becomes a victim of prejudice and is executed by vigilante-style justice. Figueroa’s *La bodega*, implicates the spectators by making them participate in the debate concerning the type of justice to be dispensed in relation to gang-related crime in contemporary Guatemala.

The films analyzed in this and the previous sections depict two different social phenomena characterizing the region: migrations and gangs. Although different, these phenomena are not isolated, they are interconnected by historical processes. At the end of the past century, the waves of migrations from Central America to the United States induced growth and strengthening of Latino gangs in Los Angeles. Subsequently, the deportation of Central American illegal immigrants brought in to the region the importation of Latino gangs' customs and operations. The phenomenon of migrations is not the sole cause of the phenomenon of gangs in Central America, but both are part of the same historical development. Civil wars are a third phenomenon that might be added to the concatenation of historical events. The internal conflicts of the 1970s and the 1980s were among the causes provoking the exodus of Central Americans at the end of the century. In the long run, a gang-related event, such as the killing of a gang member in an abandoned warehouse, may be connected with a past of civil wars. Perhaps motivated by this historical process, NCAC filmmakers also focused on wars in their cinematic narratives. In the following section, civil wars are analyzed as a recurring theme in NCAC films.

### **Civil Wars**

A final theme characterizing NCAC films were the civil wars spawned by political and economic crises in Central America during the 1970s and 1980s. Although the conflicts took place primarily in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, the resulting crisis affected almost the entire region. For example, both Honduras and Costa Rica hosted military bases for both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary armies and refugee camps for displaced citizens. The causes leading to civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua were in many ways similar. In the three countries the oligarchy disallowed the lower classes from participating in the political processes and as a consequence, severely affected by economic depression, the lower

classes demanded reforms. The totalitarian regimes responded with negligence and repression and the lower classes organized into insurrectional movements, thereby defying the established regimes.

Despite the similarity of reasons for the emerging conflicts, each country experienced the civil war in different ways. In Guatemala, several rebel groups formed as early as the 1960s, unsuccessfully fighting the government army, primarily in rural areas. In 1982, these groups were finally able to defy the government, even in urban centers, when they coalesced to form the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity) or URNG. Two years earlier, another coalition of rebel forces was created in El Salvador under the name of Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) or FMLN. In Nicaragua the political crisis was even more complicated, since there were two civil wars. The first took place during the 1970s, when the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front) or FSLN fought against the National Guard of dictator Anastasio Somoza. This war ended in 1979, when the Sandinistas defeated the National Guard and overthrew Somoza. Once in power, the Sandinistas started a revolutionary government implementing socialist reforms. Meanwhile, ex-members of the National Guard and other Somoza sympathizers formed several rebel groups opposing the Sandinista government. From 1979-1990, these groups, commonly known as the Contra, fought against the Sandinista government.

The civil wars in Central America were also a political stage for Cold War actions. During this period, the Soviet Union and its allies supported the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, and the rebels in Guatemala and El Salvador. Meanwhile, the United States provided military and financial aid to the Contra as well as to the governments of Guatemala and El

Salvador. In El Salvador alone, the United States spent two billion dollars to prevent the guerrillas from ascending to power. At the beginning of the 1990s, however, the Cold War ended and foreign powers terminated their military and financial aid to Central America. Without external support, local and regional forces resolved to bring the conflict to an end through negotiation. As part of these negotiations, in Nicaragua the Sandinistas called for democratic elections in which the opposition parties were allowed to participate. In 1990, the Sandinistas lost the elections, the opposition took power, and the Contras were disbanded. In El Salvador and Guatemala Civil wars also ended when the rebels signed peace accords in 1992 and 1996, respectively. The resulting death tolls from the civil wars in Central America were extensive: 50,000 in Nicaragua, 70,000 in El Salvador, and 200,000 in Guatemala.<sup>3</sup>

Some NCAC filmmakers touched on the issue of the civil wars by dealing with events that either were part of the causes or part of the effects linked to the political crisis in the region. Sami Kafati, for example, examined socio-economic inequalities in rural Honduras that eventually led peasants to demand land reform in *No hay tierra sin dueño* (2003). Carlos García examined the plight of indigenous people subjected to social exclusion in Guatemala during pre-civil war period in *Donde acaban los caminos* (2004). Ishtar Yasin depicted Nicaraguan emigrants concerned about the danger of landmines left after the civil war, when crossing the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica in *El camino* (2008). Douglas Martin presented a former guerrilla acting as the intellectual leader of a kidnapping gang in *Unos pocos con valor (A Few With Courage)*, 2010). Ray Figueroa depicted a bodyguard planning to get rid of a gang member's body in a dump used for throwing bodies of the disappeared persons during the civil war in Guatemala in *La bodega* (2010). Finally, Julio Hernández Córdón showed an aspiring rock singer placing flyers advertising his band over flyers of an organization claiming justice for

the disappeared during the civil war period, in *Las Marimbas del Infierno* (2010). Although not directly relating to the conflicts themselves, these filmmakers implicitly referred to the civil wars in their filmic narratives.

Other NCAC filmmakers, however, focused on civil wars by exposing the conflicts through various viewpoints. Rafael Rosal, for example, explored violence against indigenous people during the civil war in Guatemala through the story of a Mayan town on the verge of being attacked by the army in *Las Cruces: poblado próximo* (*Las Cruces: Next Village*, 2005). Similarly, filmmakers Isabel Martínez and Vicente Ferraz examined the loss of revolutionary ideals, by focusing on a deserting Sandinista commander in *El último comandante* (2010). Meanwhile, Sammy and Jimmy Morales exposed the participation of Catholic Church leaders in the Guatemalan civil war by telling the story of a bishop who became a human rights defender in *Gerardi* (2010). Finally, Oscar Castillo portrayed a middle-age man haunted by nostalgic memories of civil war times in *El compromiso* (*The Commitment*, 2010).<sup>4</sup> By representing characters and events related to the civil wars in their films, these NCAC filmmakers invited spectators to engage in debates about the recent past. In many cases the films provoked deep controversies, especially among survivors of the civil wars. However, a Salvadoran film was the most controversial of NCAC films dealing with civil wars.

### **Sobreviviendo Guazapa**

In the NCAC landscape *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* (*Surviving Guazapa*; Roberto Dávila, 2008) stands out for several reasons. It was the only fictional feature made in El Salvador during the 2000s, it attracted a considerable amount of viewers in El Salvador, it aroused great controversy among spectators and critics, and it focused on one of the themes that characterized the films of the period: civil wars.

The civil war in El Salvador took place between 1981 and 1992, during which the FMLN front and the government security forces clashed in a costly and bloody war. The origins of the civil war in El Salvador can be traced back to 1932, when security forces squelched a major revolt by killing nearly 25,000 peasants and workers, including their leader, Farabundo Martí, the founder of El Salvador's communist party. The massacre marked a milestone in the country's recent history, characterized by "long-standing patterns of economic, political, and social exclusion." (Wood 2003, 20) In the following decades, the country was ruled by totalitarian governments and military regimes, which governed in favor of an oligarchy. That oligarchy was an elite group of coffee producers and exporters that employed unskilled and cheap labor force mostly composed of poor peasants. The elite prospered but the peasants remained poor, a socio-economic contradiction that characterized the country for many decades. As Jeffery Paige puts it, "[t]his contradiction was the cause of the revolutions of both the 1930s and the 1980s." (Paige 1997, 360) A social crisis escalated at the end of the 1970s, when guerilla groups along with other political organizations challenged the military government through the creation of a revolutionary organization, the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) or FMLN. The civil war formally began in 1981 when the FMLN launched its first offensive, aimed at overthrowing the government (Byrne 1996). However, the FMLN could not achieve its goal, nor could the government defeat the rebels. Thus, the conflict was prolonged for more than a decade, taking the lives of nearly 70,000 people, creating an exodus of Salvadorans, and devastating the country's economy.

As in other parts of Central America, the civil war in El Salvador was marked by foreign intervention within the context of the Cold War. The United States played a decisive role by providing economic and military aid to the Salvadoran government. The military aid was aimed

at defeating the insurgents, and the financial assistance in preventing an economic downturn caused by the war. During the twelve years the conflict lasted, the United States government contributed a total of six billion dollars (Byrne 1996). Conversely, the rebel insurgents were also supported by foreign governments. Similar to other revolutionary movements in Central America, Salvadoran rebels received aid from the Soviet bloc and Cuba, who acted as “friends and allies” of the guerrillas (Boot 2010, 224). In 1992, fostered by the intervention of the United Nations, the peace accords between the FMLN and the Government finally ended the war in El Salvador.

In *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*, director Roberto Dávila focuses on the civil war in El Salvador through the dramatic confrontation of two opposing characters. One is Pablo, a guerrilla fighter for the FMLN, and the other is Julio, a soldier in the government army. Though mortal enemies, they are forced to cooperate with one another when, after an intense battle, they find themselves stranded in the remote and dense jungle of the Guazapa volcano. Once they recognize that away from their battle companions they have no reason to fight each other, the young men embark on a supportive adventure of surviving in the jungle. The collaboration between the conflicting characters solidifies when they find Ana, a small girl also stranded on the slopes of the volcano. From then on, Pablo and Julio are committed to save Ana and bring her back to her home.

As with other NCAC filmmakers dealing with civil wars, Dávila incorporated documentary elements into the narrative. For example, as a filmic prologue, the film opens with a sequence of photographs depicting actual images of the civil war in El Salvador. Some images show guerrilla fighters training in camps, radio broadcasting, and shooting behind barricades. These images are accompanied by an intertitle establishing the film’s historical context: “During

the civil war in El Salvador, the Guazapa volcano was a territory controlled by the guerrillas.” Other images depict the Salvadoran Government’s aircraft bombarding the slopes of the volcano, numerous paratroopers descending in parachutes, and a soldier shooting a machine gun from a helicopter. Another intertitle comes with these images: “Between 1981 and 1991 the Government forces conducted intense attacks to recover Guazapa.” Similarly, at the end of the film, a new intertitle informs on the resolution of the conflict: “In January 1992, the signing of a peace agreement between the Government and the guerrillas ended 12 years of war.” Finally, the credit sequence, as a filmic epilogue, shows a summary of the civil war in El Salvador through documentary pictures, beginning with streets demonstrations, continuing with confrontations between the army and the guerrilla in both the cities and rural areas, and ending with the signing of the peace accords in Mexico.

Except for both the prologue and the epilogue, though inspired in historical events, the narrative in *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* is fictional. However, through that fictional narrative Roberto Dávila explored different topics related to the civil war in El Salvador. During my research, Dávila asserted that these topics were incorporated into the narrative as a result of the interviews he conducted with “former combatants from both sides, looking for anecdotes to be included in the script” (Personal interview with Dávila, 2013). Based on that interviews, Dávila included in the script such topics as the intervention of foreign governments, the participation of the church, and the implications of migration caused by the conflict. In the film, these topics are exposed through several conversations between Pablo and Julio along their venture in Guazapa.

On the topic of the intervention of foreign governments in the conflict, Pablo and Julio express two contrasting viewpoints. On the one hand, Pablo criticizes the security forces arguing that they are manipulated as “puppets” by the “Yankees” and that “if it wasn’t for them [the

“Yankees”], a long time ago we would have beaten you [the security forces].” As a reprisal Julio claims that the United States provides them with nothing but training. However, as examples of military aid that goes beyond training, Pablo lists “helicopters and bombs.” Continuing the debate, Julio asserts that the guerrillas are also assisted by the “communists” who “give them much stuff.” Though the comments of both Pablo and Julio seem infantile and superficial, the brief dialogue sequence provides a somewhat balanced representation of the Salvadoran conflict within the context of the Cold War.

In addition to foreign intervention, Dávila looked at the participation of the Catholic Church in the war. Before and during the conflict, a sector of the Catholic Church played an important role in the transformation of the consciousness of peasants and workers. This sector was linked to the Liberation Theology movement, which proposed a new interpretation of the Bible, arguing that the Scriptures specifically called for justice through political change favoring the poor. Some Liberation Theology priests induced Salvadoran peasants to organize in order to defend their rights. These peasant organizations eventually became a part of the insurreccional movement (Byrne 1996). In the film, this topic is referenced when Pablo tells Julio how he became a guerrilla. “It was through the influence of a priest in my hometown,” Pablo says “he told us that we must create God’s kingdom on earth, using bullets if necessary.” The conversational exchange, though, is brief and does not reference the fate of several priests who were tortured, exiled or killed by the security forces (Byrne 1996).

A third issue addressed in *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* is the topic of migration as a consequence of the civil war. As referenced earlier, many Salvadorans emigrated to the United States in order to avoid violence and economic hardship during the civil war. In the film, Pablo and Julio constantly refer to the subject of migration in their conversations. In one scene, Pablo

tells Julio of his mother living in the United States, and his intention to reunite with her. Concerning himself, Julio tells Pablo about his own father also living in the United States. “He sent money once but we never heard from him afterwards.” In another scene, Pablo reveals what he would like to do in the United States, “I want to help my mother open a Salvadoran restaurant.” Julio, tired of war, becomes motivated by Pablo’s plans and offers to go with him to the United States once they leave Guazapa. At film’s end, however, their joint dreams of migrating vanish, because Pablo is killed, and what becomes of Julio once he returns the girl to her home is never revealed.

While migration and other topics are directly referenced in the film, the issue of the civil war itself can also be considered on a metaphorical level. The image of two fighters of opposing sides, leaving the war, and uniting to rescue a little girl, could be seen as a metaphor of the peace accords. In this metaphor, the little girl would symbolize the new Salvadoran generations living in peace. Meanwhile, the film’s happy ending, when Julio (representing the security forces) brings Ana to her house, would symbolize the culmination of the peace accords. However, in that metaphor Pablo (representing the rebel forces) is missing. The film succeeds in depicting two opposing forces leading a country into a war, but fails in showing the same forces bringing the new generations to peace, making the cinematic metaphor lose connection with reality. This and other representational gaps in the narrative might have led viewers to unfavorable interpretations, particularly among survivors of the war, who as noted by María Lourdes Cortés, “thought that [the film] is aligned with the political right” (2010). Nevertheless, *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* was the only NCAC fictional feature concerning the subject, and thus represents a unique contribution to the discussion about the civil war in El Salvador.

After the film was released, many spectators reacted to the film's form, complaining about the quality of special effects, or praising the naturalness of the dialogue. However, most criticism addressed the film's content and its depiction of the civil war. For example, critic Héctor Ismael Sermeño welcomed the film, arguing that its merit was based on "seeing the war from the distance, without personal passions, and partisan or sentimental ideologies" (2008). Similarly, writer Rafael Menjívar Ochoa praised the filmmaker's impartial representation of the civil war, saying that he looked for "any ideological bias, but could not find it anywhere in the film" (2008). By contrast, Fernanda Granados, another critic, asserted that "the majority of scenes are biased," showing a negative representation of the guerrillas. According to her "[The filmmakers wanted to] reproduce the concept of children-eating communists."<sup>5</sup> For an ex-guerrilla combatant, under the pseudonym of Mauricio, the filmmakers "were not serious in the construction of the facts. No guerrilla ever became a friend of a soldier."<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, filmmaker Jorge Dalton opined that the film does not offer a convincing representation, because "none of the characters are credible. [Pablo and Julio] are like cartoon characters" (2008). Finally, critic Tomás Andreu argued that "the many voices against" the film were due to "the great expectation the producers created through the media," stressing that the film was "*based on the civil war of El Salvador*, a phrase that immediately raises a critical perspective" (2008). The divergence of these reactions perhaps exemplifies the polarization of a Salvadoran spectatorship still in the process of healing from the wounds left by the civil war.

The wide controversy the film generated among spectators in El Salvador might also confirm that wide audiences had access to the film. Despite the many challenges typically faced by Central American filmmakers in distributing their films (see chapter two), Roberto Dávila successfully exhibited *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* to large audiences, at least in El Salvador. In a

country with no film industry, private investment or government support, the filmmaker had to resort to funds from family and friends in order to produce and distribute his film.<sup>7</sup> Dávila and his partners hoped to recoup their investment through commercial distribution and theatrical exhibition. However, as Dávila recalls, they could not achieve that goal because following the theatrical release “pirated copies were available everywhere” (Personal interview with Dávila, 2013). Ironically, while frustrating the producers’ financial objectives, piracy helped to increase the viewership after its theatrical release. Concerning the initial theatrical exhibition of the film, María Lourdes Cortés states that “viewers massively attended movie theatres, promoting a true dialogue about the film” (Cortés 2010). Meanwhile, Arturo Rivera (the actor portraying Pablo), asserted that the film was well received by spectators in El Salvador, and likewise confirmed that “movie theaters were packed” (Personal interview with Rivera, 2013). In addition, film critic Tomás Andreu noted that during the first week of exhibition the film garnered a total of 11,718 viewers (2008), a significant number for Central America. In 2009, more viewers had access to the film when the producers released legal DVD copies and sold them in local and international markets. Although out of commercial circuits, the film also reached international audiences through a successful exhibition in festivals such as the Ottawa Film Festival, the Oxaca Film Festival, the Vienna Central American Film Festival, and the Toronto Hispanic-American Film Festival, the Boston Film Festival, and the Ícaro Central American Film Festival (DVR-Cineworks 2008). Finally, *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* is one of the few Central American films distributed via IBERMEDIA TV among public television stations in Latin America (IBERMEDIA 2013). In addition to a successful local distribution, the recognition the film garnered through exhibitions at international film festivals and other alternative distribution channels may have attracted more viewers in El Salvador. Only a successful distribution like this

made it possible for large audiences to watch the film and engage in a debate about the civil war in El Salvador.

*Sobreviviendo Guazapa* and many other NCAC films dealt with the civil wars as a way of representing history. In the past century, that representation was primarily made by guerrilla filmmakers through the documentary format. Except for the INCINE production *El espectro de la guerra* (*The Specter of War*; Ramiro Lacayo, 1987), no fictional feature focused on or made reference to the civil wars (see chapter one). However, in the 2000s, many Central American filmmakers narrated fictional stories linked to the civil wars creating cinematic representations of history. In this new interpretation of the past, filmmakers employed innovative modes of representation, according to the model proposed by Robert Rosenstone. For example, Roberto Dávila combined actual photographs of the civil war in El Salvador with his fictional story of two deserting combatants in *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*. Similarly, Isabel Martínez and Vicente Ferraz inserted archival footage of the civil war of Nicaragua, as the memories of the main character in *El último comandante* (2010). Likewise, Rafael Rosal mixed documentary footage of an actual exhumation of civil war victims in Guatemala with his fictional characters in *Las Cruces: poblado próximo* (2005). At the same time, these filmmakers transcended the simple representation of historical events by engaging in a contemporary debate of the past. For example, in *Las Cruces: poblado próximo*, Rafael Rosal presented a clash between a guerrilla and a soldier of the army using the same actor for both roles, a *mise-en-scène* element that emphasized the senselessness of a brother-against-brother war. Because they represent history through innovative modes, and bring the past to a contemporary debate, I suggest that NCAC films dealing with civil wars may fit Rosenstone's category of experimental historical films.

Moreover, in films dealing with civil wars, NCAC filmmakers avoided the typical representation of heroes and villains, showing the human side of characters with doubts and contradictions. In *Las Cruces: poblado próximo*, for example, guerrilla fighters question the futility of war. In *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*, two mortal enemies, a guerrilla and a soldier, become friends. In *El último comandante*, a former Sandinista leader has mixed feelings about the revolutionary ideals. This type of cinematic representation may be seen as a challenge to the classical good and bad dichotomy emphasized in films dealing with civil wars in previous decades, a challenge that parallels the one posed by the post-dictatorship generation of filmmakers in the Southern Cone. Ana Ros (2012) discussed how a generation of filmmakers in the Southern Cone challenged the previous generation by using innovative ways of representing reality of the dictatorship stories in their films. Ros' thesis is also supported by Silvia Schwarzböck's analysis of the Argentine film *Crónica de una fuga* (*Chronicle of An Escape*, 2006) in which director Adrian Caetano transcended the typical representation of heroes and villains and played with the horror genre to tell political stories (2007). I suggest that NCAC filmmakers, with their innovative ways of representing the civil wars, might be following the pattern of the Argentine post-dictatorship generation suggested by Ros and Schwarzböck.

The viewpoint assumed by NCAC filmmakers dealing with civil wars was less committed and more critical. The cinematic representation of civil wars in previous decades was made by militant filmmakers attached to political movements. In the 1970s, the documentaries co-produced by Istmo Films about the civil wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador were openly biased discourses, supported by guerrilla fronts and by the Cuban government through ICAIC (Cortés 2002, 225-230). In the 1980s, government-funded INCINE -with support from ICAIC, another government-funded institution- produced several documentaries about the war between

the Sandinista army and the Contra, and co-produced a few fictional films also depicting the internal conflicts (Buchsbaum 2003). In contrast, NCAC filmmakers dealing with civil wars such as Rafael Rosal, Roberto Dávila, Isabel Martínez and Vicente Ferraz were not significantly supported by governments and were not attached to political movements.<sup>8</sup> In their filmic representation of historical events, they assumed a personal viewpoint without responding to any specific interest of the sides in conflict. Their cinematic narratives do not reveal that they intended to deliver a political message on behalf of any government or organization. These NCAC filmmakers approached history through two of the models proposed by Marc Ferro, in which filmmakers do not assume the viewpoint of the masses nor that of those in power, but attack the phenomena from the filmmaker's point of view, and by formally reinterpreting a historical event without trying to recreate it (Ferro 1988).

In addition to representing civil wars, many NCAC filmmakers focused on other social phenomena such as migrations and gangs. Why were these filmmakers motivated to discuss those social phenomena? A possible answer is that some NCAC filmmakers were motivated by personal experiences. For example, Ishtar Yasin herself experienced migration, a theme that was the focus of her film *El camino* (2008). Similarly, Rafael Rosal was member of a guerrilla group during the civil war in Guatemala, an experience he later reflected in his film *Las Cruces: poblado próximo* (2005). Another possible answer is that many NCAC filmmakers reproduced not personal but collective traumas. Migrations, gangs, and civil wars were all phenomena that violently affected not only individuals, but also societies. That violence may have left wounds in the collective memory of Central American societies. Even those who did not migrate, did not suffer from gang-related violence, or did not participate in a civil war, still experienced the phenomena indirectly. Therefore, using their own interpretation of the recent past, many NCAC

filmmakers projected collective memories in their films, in the words of Guatemalan filmmaker Elías Jiménez, “as a way of relieving from the traumatic events of the past” (Personal interview with Jiménez, 2010). Through their narratives focusing on social phenomena NCAC filmmakers invited viewers to engage in a debate concerning the traumatic historical events. However, to make that debate effective, the films have to be accessible for viewers. Although the number of films produced in Central America increased during the 2000s, only a few reached massive audiences. Nevertheless, in the future, filmmaking conditions may continue to improve, and the number of films to rise, allowing filmmakers and viewers to engage in a wider and deeper debate concerning their usable past.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See the criteria for the selection of films in the Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> A detailed information on the CINERGIA film fund is included in Chapter II.

<sup>3</sup> For detailed studies on civil wars in Central America see Booth, Wade, and Walker (2010).

<sup>4</sup> No geographic location is specified in the film, except for a brief title indicating “Latin America, 1970s.” However, it can be inferred that the film represents the civil war of Nicaragua during the 1970s, because of the filmmaker’s links with that conflict. See chapter I.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in (Andréu 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Though Dávila stated that he and his family funded most of the film, there is currently some controversy surrounding the production of *Sobreviviendo Guazapa*. There exist allegations that some funds were provided by the government and/or the military. However, this could not be verified empirically and remains purely speculative at this time. Nonetheless, the rumors illustrate the ongoing polarized debate about the subject in El Salvador. Though *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* appears to take a rather neutral position, some exhibitors preferred not to screen it because of their fears that there was political involvement and bias in the production of the film.

<sup>8</sup> For the production of *El último comandante*, Martínez and Ferraz obtained minor support from state-supported CCPC (see chapter two).

## **Conclusions**

This doctoral dissertation explored the New Central American Cinema, a film movement emerging in Central America at the start of the new millennium, characterized by an increase in the production of feature-length fictional films mainly focused on social phenomena of the recent past. In addition to bibliographic sources, two sets of data were chosen to study the socio-economic factors and social themes characterizing New Central American Cinema: interviews with filmmakers and select films. The interviews were related to the New Central American Cinema movement, and the films selected were feature-length fictional films produced and released in Central America from 2001-2010. Both the interviews and the collection of NCAC films undertaken for this study were collected during field research trips between 2010 and 2012. Socio-economic factors related to Central American cinema were provided by the interviews, while a close textual examination revealed recurring thematic patterns in NCAC films.

This study covers a single decade in the history of Central American cinema. Although the analysis starts in 2001 with the turn of the century, there is not a significant event that marks a historical change in 2010. The only reason for ending the study in 2010 is that in that year the present research work was initiated. As a film movement, NCAC emerged in that decade because of the socio-economic factors that are indicated in this dissertation. However, the NCAC movement continued after 2010, growing in the same direction from its formative beginnings, but with inevitable new ramifications.

## **Findings**

This study identified five major socio-economic factors characterizing NCAC: new training opportunities, new funding sources, access to digital technology, a regional film festival,

and a growing transnational identity. With no film schools in the region, some aspiring Central American filmmakers traveled to Europe or North America to study film. However, a considerable number went to Cuba to study at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión (International School of Film and Television) or EICTV. This school offered certain advantages, such as geographic proximity and full scholarships to Central American filmmakers. By 2010 a total of eighty-eight Central American filmmakers graduated from EICTV, a number that significantly impacted the development of cinema in the region. The school in Cuba also served as a model of academic training for the two film schools emerging in the region during the late 2000s: the Veritas University New Film and Television School in Costa Rica, and the Casa Comal School of Film and Television in Guatemala.

Although some had access to training opportunities, generally NCAC filmmakers faced adverse conditions when producing their films. No country in the region had a developed film industry and government support was scarce. As a result, many filmmakers resorted to international film funding organizations such as the Huber Bals Fund, the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) or the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). However, a large number of filmmakers benefited from CINERGIA, a fund exclusively dedicated to support regional film projects. From 2004 to 2010, CINERGIA supported more than one hundred Central American film projects, including eight completed fictional features. CINERGIA also supported film in the region through funding scholarships and film showcases.

In addition to film funds, Central American filmmakers were able to access digital technology to produce and distribute their films. In the past century, costly analogue technology hindered film production in Central America. However in the 2000s, low cost digital technology

helped to reduce costs, facilitating an increase in the number of films produced in the region.

Although some were still made with analog technology, the vast majority of NCAC films were shot, edited, and distributed using digital technology. Low cost digital technology also impacted the way films were made by utilizing small production crews and small budgets.

Several NCAC films reached international audiences through film festivals, particularly those devoted to Latin American films. However, the majority of NCAC films transcended national boundaries via the regional Ícaro Film Festival. Throughout the decade, the Ícaro festival organizers hosted an annual regional film competition in Guatemala. Each year, following the competition, a selection of nominated and awarded films was screened throughout Central America, and other places, as part of a touring showcase of Central American films. For many years the Ícaro Film Festival was the only film festival focused on Central American cinema, providing a unique opportunity for the promotion of films of the region.

In Central American countries, as in other parts of the world, national cinemas were redefined globally by cooperative interactions. Film crews and casts, film content, and audiences moved from the national to the transnational identity. Although identified as a single nationality, several NCAC films had the participation of international filmmakers, actors, and producers. At the same time, many of the film narratives combined characters of multiple nationalities and locations of different countries. Finally, several NCAC films were distributed beyond their national boundaries and reached international audiences. Although these international interactions involved the participation of different parts of the world, much of them were among Central Americans, thereby reinforcing a regional identity.

Among the diversity of topics treated in NCAC films, this study identified three recurring themes: migrations, gangs, and civil wars. These three thematic concerns were commonly

examined in NCAC films as distinct social phenomena that characterized the region during the past few decades. NCAC filmmakers dealing with migrations often portrayed characters longing or forced to emigrate. These characters are often motivated by economic hardship and dreams of better economic opportunities outside the region. The United States was the favorite destination in films portraying migrants; however some films depicted characters crossing the border between Nicaragua to Costa Rica, highlighting a regional migratory pattern. In many of these films, filmmakers employed documentary techniques, adding a realistic component to their cinematic narratives.

Another social theme examined by NCAC filmmakers was gangs. Some of these filmmakers showed characters displaying effects of gang-related culture such as tattoos, street slang and gestures, and drug consumption. Although gang members are commonly portrayed as victimizers in mainstream media, some NCAC filmmakers showed gang members as victims of exploitation and vigilante justice.

Civil wars taking place in Central America during the 1970s and the 1980s were commonly represented in NCAC films. Some filmmakers focused on social crises that eventually led to civil wars, such as social inequality and the marginalization of indigenous people, while others looked at the deleterious effects of the civil wars such as migration and violence. In several narratives, filmmakers referred to peripheral topics related to the civil wars such as the intervention of foreign governments or the participation of the Catholic Church in the conflicts and the exodus produced by the violence of war.

The cinematic representations relating to civil wars, migrations, and gangs may have been a response to collective traumas produced by the same social phenomena in the region. At the same time, the focus on those social phenomena by NCAC filmmakers may have been

facilitated by the filmmaking conditions in the region. The lack of an industry, as well as government support allowed NCAC filmmakers to produce their films independently, seeking financial support from international agencies. The resulting independent film production may have provided NCAC filmmakers the freedom to focus on themes they were most interested in, such as social issues related to the recent past.

### **Limitations**

It is hoped that the present study will expand the scholarly work on Latin American cinema through its focus on Central America, a region of the continent underexamined by film scholars. However, this study is incomplete in several ways, and here I want to acknowledge some of these limitations. First, the analysis on factors characterizing NCAC provides little quantifiable information. This neglect is due in part to the lack of statistical data concerning film production and distribution in the region. While statistical data of Latin American countries with major film industries such as Argentina and Brazil is readily accessible, the same type of data for Central American countries is difficult to access. The Centro Costarricense de Producción Cinematográfica (Costa Rican Center of Film Production) or CCPC is the only governmental institution publishing reliable and updated data on national film production in the region.<sup>1</sup> Another reliable source on statistical data is a compilation by Maria Lourdes Cortés included in a recent publication of the Observatorio del Cine y el Audiovisual Latinoamericano y Caribeño (Latin American and Caribbean Film and Media Observatory) OCAL (Getino 2012). The availability of empirical statistical data on Central American cinema may have allowed me to present a more accurate portrait of film activity in the region.

Second, this study provides information on a portion of the media production in the region. As I acknowledged in the introduction, my analysis of themes characterizing NCAC is

limited to feature-length fictional films. This limitation excludes other formats (feature-length documentaries, and fictional and documentary shorts) through which Central American filmmakers also depicted many of the same social issues. Several of these filmmakers created critically acclaimed documentaries on social phenomena characterizing the region. For example, María José Álvarez and Martha Clarissa Hernández explored Nicaragua-to-Costa Rica migration in *Desde el barro al sur (From Mud to South, 2002)*; Oscar Estrada examined Honduran gangs as victims of violence in *El Porvenir (2008)*; and Oscar Orellana looked at disappeared people during the civil war in El Salvador in *Colima (2009)*. Other NCAC filmmakers touched on the same topics using short films as their format. For example, Tomás Guevara explored the life of Central American children of migrant parents in his documentary *Ausentes (Absent, 2009)*; Mario Jaén and Daniel Serrano developed two fictional stories on gang membership in *Mi vida loca (My Crazy Life, 2001)*; and Belkis Ramírez portrayed people injured by landmines left during the civil war in Nicaragua in *Víctimas de una guerra silenciosa (Victims of a Silent War, 2001)*. Although other topics were also examined in documentaries and shorts, these few examples suggest that migrations, gangs, and civil war were also recurring themes in NCAC films, beyond the feature-length fictional format.

Themes that characterized Central American films during the 2000s, such as migrations, gangs and civil wars, may prevail in subsequent films. In the Costa Rican film *El regreso (The Return; Hernán Jiménez, 2011)* for example, Antonio is a Costa Rican writer returning to Costa Rica, after having experienced emigration in the United States. Similarly, the Honduran *Mundo de ficción (Fiction World; J Jon, 2011)*<sup>2</sup> revolves around gang violence in the streets of Tegucigalpa. Meanwhile, other fictional features released after 2010 dealt with topics related to the civil wars. For example, *Distancia (Distance; Sergio Ramírez, 2011)*, winner at the Ícaro

Central American Film Festival in 2011, features an indigenous father searching for his missing daughter, disappeared during the civil war in Guatemala. Similarly, *Polvo (Dust)*; Julio Hernández Cordón, 2012), winner of the Grand Prix at the Toulouse Latin American Film Festival in 2012, depicts an indigenous young man looking for his father, another victim of the civil war in Guatemala. Finally, *Princesas Rojas (Red Princesses)*; Laura Astorga, 2013) focuses on a Costa Rican girl nostalgic for the times she spent in revolutionary Nicaragua. These films represent historical events in innovative ways by challenging traditional representation of the civil wars, similar to the NCAC films analyzed in this dissertation.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

For future research I would suggest the examination of several aspects of Central American cinema not included in this study. First, an examination of NCAC films, in formats other than fictional feature-length may provide a deeper understanding of the factors and themes characterizing contemporary cinema in the region. A study of this nature will require greater effort in collecting or accessing the films, since shorts and documentaries are rarely available through regular distribution channels. Second, a comparison between NCAC and other regional cinemas may help to redefine how NCAC filmmakers are creating a regional identity in their work. Finally, an observation of other factors not analyzed in this study, such as gender issues, may provide new insights on the growing number of women filmmakers in Central America.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Data from the CCPC is available online (in Spanish only) at: <http://www.centrodecine.go.cr/>

<sup>2</sup> *Mundo de ficción* was produced in 2011, but has not been released yet.

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## Appendices

**TABLE I: CENTRAL AMERICAN FICTIONAL FEATURE FILMS 2001-2010**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Original Title</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Country</b>
2001	Asesinato en el Meneo/ Murder at El Meneo	Comedy	Oscar Castillo	Guatemala
2002	Por cobrar/ Collect Call	Comedy	Luis Argueta	Guatemala
	Password: Una mirada en la oscuridad/ Password: A Look in the Dark	Drama	Andrés Heidenreich	Costa Rica
	La noche/ The Night	Horror	Joaquín Carrasquilla and Jaime Chung	Panama
	Almas de la Media Noche/ Midnight Souls	Horror	Juan Carlos Fanconi	Honduras
	Anita, la cazadora de insectos/ Anita, the Insect Catcher	Drama	Hispano Durón	Honduras
2003	La casa de enfrente/ Exceso	Drama-Thriller	Elías Jiménez	Guatemala
	Donde acaban los caminos/ Where the Roads End	Drama	Carlos García	Guatemala
	Lo que soñó Sebastián/ What Sebastian Dreamt	Drama	Rodrigo Rey Rosa	Guatemala
	Evidencia invisible/ Invisible Evidence	Drama	Alejandro Castillo	Guatemala
	Mujeres apasionadas/ Passionate Women	Drama	Maureen Jiménez	Costa Rica

<b>Year</b>	<b>Original Title</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Country</b>
2003	Marasmo/ Marasmus	Drama	Mauricio Mendiola	Costa Rica
	No hay tierra sin dueño/ Calixto, the Landlord	Drama	Sami Kafati	Honduras
2004	El trofeo/ The Trophy	Drama	Miguel Salguero	Costa Rica
	Caribe Caribbean	Drama	Estéban Ramírez	Costa Rica
2005	Diario de un demente/ Diary of a Demented	Drama	Rich Potter	Panama
	El último secuestro/ The Last Abduction	Thriller	José Olay	Honduras
2006	Las Cruces: poblado próximo/ Las Cruces: Next Village	Drama	Rafael Rosal	Guatemala
2007	V.I.P. La otra casa/ V.I.P. Very Important Prisoners	Drama-Thriller	Elías Jiménez	Guatemala
	Un presidente de a sombbrero/ A President with a Hat	Comedy	Jimmy and Sammy Morales	Guatemala
2008	Sobreviviendo Guazapa/ Surviving Guazapa	Drama	Roberto Dávila	El Salvador
	El camino/ The Path	Drama	Ishtar Yasin	Costa Rica
	Gasolina/ Gasoline	Drama	Julio Hernández Cordón	Guatemala
	El cielo rojo/ The Red Sky	Comedy	Miguel Gómez	Costa Rica

<b>Year</b>	<b>Original Title</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Country</b>
2008	Repechaje/ Play-off	Comedy	Jimmy and Sammy Morales	Guatemala
	El sicópata/ The Psychopath	Thriller	Luis Mena	Costa Rica
2009	Chance/ Chance	Comedy	Abner Benaím	Panama
	Amor y frijoles/ Love and Beans	Comedy	Hernán Pereira	Honduras
	Agua fría de mar/ Cold Water of Sea	Drama	Paz Fábrega	Costa Rica
	Luz en las tinieblas/ Light in the Darkness	Religious	Héctor Sacalxot	Guatemala
	La región perdida/ The Lost Region	Drama	Andrés Heidenreich	Costa Rica
	Tercer Mundo/ Third World	Science Fiction	César Caro Cruz	Costa Rica
2010	A ojos cerrados/ Closed Eyes	Drama	Hernán Jiménez	Costa Rica
	La bodega/ The Warehouse	Drama	Ray Figueroa	Guatemala
	Gestación/ Gestation	Drama	Esteban Ramírez	Costa Rica
	El último comandante/ The Last Commander	Drama	Isabel Martínez and Vicente Ferraz	Costa Rica
	Cápsulas/ Capsules	Drama	Verónica Riedel	Guatemala
	La Yuma	Drama	Florence Jaugey	Nicaragua
	El regreso de Lencho/ The Return of Lencho	Drama	Mario Rosales	Guatemala

<b>Year</b>	<b>Original Title</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Country</b>
2010	Las Marimbas del Infierno/ Marimbas from Hell	Comedy	Julio Hernández Cordón	Guatemala
	Unos pocos con valor/ A Few With Courage	Drama	Douglas Martin	Honduras
	Gerardi	Drama	Sammy and Jimmy Morales	Guatemala
	El compromiso/ The Commitment	Drama	Oscar Castillo	Costa Rica
	Puro Mula	Comedy	Enrique Pérez	Guatemala
	La vaca/ The Cow	Comedy	Mendel Samayoa	Guatemala
	Del amor y otros demonios/ Of Love and Other Demons	Drama	Hilda Hidalgo	Costa Rica
	Donde duerme el horror/ Where the Horror Sleeps	Horror	Ramiro and Adrián Bogliano	Costa Rica
	Agua fría de mar/ Cold Water of Sea	Drama	Páz Fábrega	Costa Rica
	Adentro/Afuera/ Inside/Out	Thriller	Jason Nielsen	Costa Rica
	El sanatorio/ The Sanatorium	Thriller	Miguel Gómez	Costa Rica
	El Profe Omar/ Professor Omar	Drama	Héctor Herlidan	Guatemala
	El mito del tiempo/ The Myth of Time	Thriller	Jaguar X	Guatemala
	Maligno/ Malignant	Horror	Leonel Ramos	Guatemala

<b>Year</b>	<b>Original Title</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Country</b>
2010	Un día de sol/ A Sunny Day	Drama	Rafael Tres	Guatemala

Sources: Cortés, 2005, Festival Ícaro catalogues (2007-2010) and CINERGIA catalogue 2014.

**TABLE II: CENTRAL AMERICAN FICTIONAL FEATURE FILMS 2001-2010 WITH  
MORE THAN 50,000 SPECTATORS**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Original Title</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b># of Spectators</b>	<b>Country</b>
2001	Asesinato en el Meneo/ Murder at El Meneo	Comedy	75,000	Costa Rica
	Password: Una mirada en la oscuridad/ Password: A Look in the Dark	Drama	51,000	Costa Rica
2003	La casa de enfrente/ Exxceso	Drama-Thriller	125,000	Guatemala
	Caribe/ Caribbean	Drama	60,000	Costa Rica
2006	Las Cruces: poblado próximo/ Las Cruces: Next Village	Drama	125,000	Guatemala
2007	V.I.P. La otra casa/ V.I.P. Very Important Prisoners	Drama-Thriller	125,000	Guatemala
2009	Chance/ Chance	Comedy	140,000	Panama
2010	Gestación/ Gestation	Drama	140,000	Costa Rica

**TABLE III: SCREENS IN CENTRAL AMERICA BY COUNTRY 2001-2010**

Costa Rica	94
El Salvador	59
Guatemala	96
Honduras	26
Nicaragua	47
Panama	98

Source: Cortés, 2012 and [www.cinespanama.com](http://www.cinespanama.com)