

A Cinematic Dialogue between
Nicaragua and Costa Rica:
Shaping a Transnational Cinema
through Filmic Exchanges

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BY

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the ways in which Costa Rican filmmakers and the Centro Costarricense de Producción Cinematográfica (CCPC) privileged the social documentary format of the New Latin American Cinema (NLAC) movement to critically view current events from 1973 to 1979. By analyzing a variety of Costa Rican and Nicaraguan films, primarily documentaries, from 1973 to 1983, and by referring to a number of primary source interviews, it examines how the 1979 Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua gave an impetus for Costa Rican filmmakers to support more revolutionary, politicized cinematic points of view through co-productions and strategic alliances with the Nicaraguan revolutionary film institute Instituto Nicaragüense de Cine (INCINE). Additionally, this thesis also aims to provide an analysis of how these incipient national cinemas that developed in the region during the above-mentioned time period were politically and socially relevant for an international market.

Purpose and Thesis Statement

The Sandinista Revolution in 1979 not only transformed the political landscape of Nicaragua, but also the cultural and artistic spheres throughout the Central American region, such as its neighbor Costa Rica. This thesis will examine how Costa Rican filmmakers and the CCPC (Centro Costarricense de Producción Cinematográfica) privileged the social documentary format of the New Latin American Cinema (NLAC) to critically view current events from 1973 to 1979, and how the 1979 revolution in Nicaragua gave an impetus for Costa Rican filmmakers to support more revolutionary, politicized cinematic points of view through co-productions and strategic alliances with INCINE (Instituto Nicaragüense de Cine). This will be illustrated through a comparison between Costa Rican and Nicaraguan documentaries during the 1970s until 1983. Using primary source interviews with filmmakers, historians and film institute officials, I will examine the influences, cinematic and political, of both Nicaragua's INCINE and Costa Rica's CCPC. They will be framed as part of the New Latin American Cinema (NLAC) movement, and compared with cinematic influences of the 1960s and 70s, such as Brazil's Cinema Novo and Cuba's revolutionary cinema at the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográfica (ICAIC).

The New Latin American Cinema movement, which developed during the above-mentioned countries' revolutionary movements of the 1960s, is "at once continental and national." It is noteworthy for its shared "aesthetic and thematic concerns," which at their most basic level involve a rejection of the "blockbuster" Hollywood film of the day and a desire to retell centuries of colonial domination, imperialism and underdevelopment. For all the similarities within the movement, the diversity of

viewpoints and thematic choices of its filmmakers show how the idea of a pan-regional cinematic movement in Central America is both a continuation of and a break with the NLAC practices and ideology.

Rationale

Central American film, since it is coming from an exponentially disadvantaged historical and economic space, has been understudied until recently. However, the study of Central American film raises the question: What is the validity of studying a cinema produced under conditions (social, economic, technological, political) that did not allow for mass exhibition and distribution of the product? Or perhaps more simply put: Just who was watching this cinema? While there are no specific analyses or studies done on the exact number of spectators during this time period, one can posit that very few people, outside of the filmmakers themselves, actually had access to the films, and therefore, audience size was limited at best. So, in this age of “bestseller scripts,” neoliberal markets and economic policies, why study cultural products with limited viewership and little to no potential for economic gain? A simple answer lies in its theoretical ability, as a technological product, to reach a larger, illiterate audience who need not know how to read in order to understand its message. However, these national cinemas, specifically that of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, serve a larger, ideological purpose: as consolidation tools for the revolutionary agenda. Also, both Costa Rica and Nicaraguan cinemas are reflective of the unique Latin American situation in that they are cultural products that dialogue with outside, foreign influence while at the same time

rejecting it and attempting to re-define the traditional cinematic language used to talk about film.

Although I will be looking at a specific time period involving just two Central American countries, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, the value of this study lies in its examination of the cinema connecting the countries within the region to each other as well as to the larger New Latin American Cinema movement. Through the examination of Costa Rican and Nicaraguan documentaries, newsreels, and short feature films between 1973 and 1983, as well as through a sampling of short stories and poems, the significance of the alliances (economic and cultural) between Costa Rican and Nicaraguan filmmakers can be viewed as evidence of the cultural fluidity between the two countries.

I will discuss the New Latin American Cinema movement and how it pertains to the style and content of the films produced in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Costa Rica, Cuba and Nicaragua were three of the first Latin American countries to establish Ministries of Culture, along with cinema branches, which is a useful point of departure for establishing the relationship between the countries. Since very little has been studied pertaining to Central American film and its relation to the larger Latin American cinematic context, this is an excellent opportunity to look at the transnationalization of the NLAC movement in Central America (and why the diffusion of NLAC ideology and style took so long to reach the region) and how Costa Rican and Nicaraguan filmmakers adapted to the severe technological and economic restrictions associated with their cinematic projects.

With the previous research of Jonathan Buchsbaum (revolutionary Nicaraguan film) and María Lourdes Cortés (Central American film historian), I have a very solid foundation from which to begin my primary research. However, my research is not a continuation of their work, but instead presents a unique look at the shared themes and topics, equipment and production teams, and ideology and artistic vision between the neighboring countries. Because of the interconnectedness of the Central American political and economic reality and artistic production, it is paramount that my research reflect this by briefly examining the political economy of cinematic production in Nicaragua and Costa Rica during the decade, in addition to the shared aesthetics and themes in the documentary.

Along with utilizing Latin American revolutionary film theory, specifically that of Julio García Espinosa, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, Jorge Sanjinés and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, I will also use the works of Michael Chanan, Julianne Burton and Ana M. López to show the ways that Central American film both followed and strayed from the ideology and practice of the New Latin American Cinema movement. Theories of transnationalization, the “national” and cultural fluidity within Latin America, specifically those of George Yúdice and Nestor García Canclini, will provide the theoretical framework for the cinematic and literary exchanges between Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

My primary research, including interviews and films viewed, attempts to evaluate how Costa Rican and Nicaraguan filmmakers working from 1972 to 1983 (dates determined by the availability of films in Central America) made their films, from deciding what subjects or themes to study to obtaining funding and equipment. Also

examined were how the filmmakers themselves identified with their own films, the national cinematic and political agenda (particularly relevant for INCINE in Nicaragua) and the possible outside influences on style and format choices made during the time period. For example, Costa Rican filmmakers, including Antonio Yglesias and Mercedes Ramírez (also current director of CCPC) were asked how they related to and perhaps responded to INCINE in Nicaragua, and vice versa.

Plan and Synopsis of Individual Chapters

In my first chapter, entitled “Costa Rica and Nicaragua: A Political History of Divergent Paths,” I will provide a historical contextualization for the countries and time period I am examining, using theories by Jorge Castañeda in Utopia Unarmed among others, to demonstrate the political interconnectivity between Costa Rica and Nicaragua and how this translated to cinema. Some texts that I will use in my analysis of the historical context of Nicaragua and the buildup to its revolution are Shirley Christian’s Nicaragua: Revolution in the Family, James Defronzo’s Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements, Susan Eckstein’s Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements, Charles Brockett’s Land, Power and Poverty, and for a theoretical analysis of revolutions, Michael Kimmel’s Revolution: A Sociological Interpretation. This will also include an analysis of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua and a brief history of the newsreel in Latin America and as a political propaganda tool for the Somozas.

To contextualize Costa Rican history, I will begin with its 1948 revolution, John Patrick Bell’s Crisis in Costa Rica: The 1948 Revolution. Also paramount to the political comparison I hope to carry out between the two countries is Charles Stansifer’s chapter

on “Elections and Democracy in Central America.” This chapter focuses on political democracy in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, making a case for how history, economics and geography all helped to shape the current political situation, as well as that leading up to the Contra War in 1982. The escalating political tension between 1979 and 1982 between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and affecting other countries in the region, highlights the different political and diplomatic responses to the Contra War and U.S. intervention. These tensions are important to consider and discuss as I move onto cinematic alliances, because they emphasize how significant a relationship, in any field, could be.

In chapter two, “A Reflection on New Latin American Cinema Theories and Films and Their Relation to Central American Cinema,” I will discuss the film theories most relevant to a larger Latin American and smaller Central American context. Bill Nichols’ documentary theory, specifically the idea of representing reality in documentaries, will be useful for establishing a general theoretical framework for the thesis. Selected essays from Julianne Burton’s The Social Documentary in Latin America, such as those by Michael Chanan and documentary typology, will also play a large role in contextualizing the documentary within Central America. Because of the importance of Cuban cinema and filmmakers in the development of revolutionary cinematic theory, I will rely on Julio García Espinosa’s “imperfect cinema” essay. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino’s essay on “Third cinema,” will inform my discussion of a “knowledge of national reality.” Getino’s recent work on the state of Latin American cinema in the face of changing technologies, will also play a large role in developing a theory to fit my specific Central American case. John Hess’s study, “Nicaragua and El Salvador: Origins of Revolutionary National Cinemas”, will provide a

theoretical framework for examining Central American national cinemas in a revolutionary context, and although it is a study of El Salvador and Nicaragua, I hope to use elements in future chapters as I analyze the filmic relationship between Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

It is here that I will begin to examine a larger Latin American leftist solidarity, politically but especially cinematically, and how common themes and tropes of other revolutionary cinemas, such as those of Cuba, Argentina, and Brazil in the 1960s and early 1970s, were influential in shaping the path of Costa Rican cinema and the ideology of the CCPC.

Using the NLAC theories of chapter two, I will discuss the development of the CCPC in Costa Rica during the early 1970s in the third chapter, “The Costa Rican Social Documentary: An X-ray for National Crises and a Microphone for the Voiceless.” Here I will examine the common themes and tropes of CCPC produced documentaries between 1970 and 1979 to show how the overwhelming social agenda was reflective of the larger New Latin American context and also specific to the Central American situation. I will also incorporate the texts of María Lourdes Cortés, La pantalla rota and El espejo imposible into my analysis of the national film industry in Costa Rica. These two books are seminal Spanish-language studies of Central American cinema, and necessary for the quality of research conducted in Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

It is in this chapter that I will analyze my primary source interviews with Mercedes Ramírez, current director of the CCPC, and Antonio Yglesias, Costa Rican filmmaker whose documentaries were produced by the CCPC. Ramírez was able to provide a unique institutional point of view; that is, what projects the CCPC has

supported and why, its institutional goals, both past and present, along with her personal experience and viewpoint as a Costa Rican filmmaker working in her own country, in Nicaragua, and in Europe. The interviews conducted with Yglesias provide a filmmaker's perspective on both the individual and institutional directions taken within Costa Rica during the 1970s.

The key films studied from Costa Rica and the CCPC will be social documentaries made from 1972 to 1980, featuring themes such as prostitution, alcoholism, indigenous people and land use, and prisoner abuse. The documentaries that best exemplify the period are Las cuarentas, by Victor Vega (1975), La cultura de guaro by Carlos Freer (1974), Los presos by Victor Ramírez (1975), and Costa Rica: Banana Republic by Ingo Niehaus (1975).

In chapter four, "A Nicaraguan Revolutionary Cinema: A Critical Look at INCINE's Successes and Failures," I will examine the works and workings of Nicaragua's INCINE, including its institutional workings, the body of work, *noticieros* and documentaries, produced in a particular time period, and the institutional philosophy. I will also analyze a selection of INCINE documentaries, especially in terms of ideology and tone. Also, I will look at how the INCINE *noticiero* differed from the Somoza-era *noticiero* and also at similarities that may exist, using Jonathan Buchsbaum's research on the evolution of the Nicaraguan *noticiero* in his book Cinema and the Sandinistas. I will analyze the INCINE *noticiero* in terms of themes and subject matter, and how closely tied they were to an official FSLN agenda.

Following this idea of both an institutional point of view and individual point of view is my interview with Nicaraguan filmmaker Maria Jose Álvarez, who worked

closely with INCINE and its policies during its decade of operation. Álvarez's description of her experience working for/with INCINE and under/with its policies and those of the FSLN will be valuable as I begin to examine INCINE as an institution and its body of work (*noticieros*, documentaries, etc.) as both individual and institutional projects. Using the *noticiero* that Álvarez directed for INCINE, La costa atlántica (1980), I hope to show how her personal point of view as a filmmaker was not compromised by any institutional demands that might have existed. Additionally, the ways in which Cuba's revolutionary cinema influenced Nicaraguan cinema will be useful as yet another example of ideology and funds crossing regional borders.

Finally, Nicaraguan films will include the INCINE *noticieros* that I viewed at the Cinemateca Nacional Nicaragüense, including: La costa atlántica, Nacionalización de las minas (1979), 1980: Plan económico, 1979: Año de la liberación, Reforma agraria (1981), Inicio de la cruzada nacional de la alfabetización (1980), Clausura de la cruzada nacional de la alfabetización (1980) and Historia de un cine comprometido (1982). Additionally, the INCINE documentary Bananeras (1982), made by the Institution's director Ramiro Lacayo, will be analyzed as an example of revolutionary co-productions.

In my final chapter, "Shaping a Transnational Central American Cinema: A Case Study of Patria Libre o Morir (1978) and Alsino y el cóndor (1982)," I will examine the ramifications of the cultural collaboration between Costa Rican and Nicaraguan filmmakers and how this fits with the idea of a pan-regional Central American cinematic movement. Ramírez's personal experiences and her current direction of the CCPC appear to fit well with Nestor García Canclini's book, Latinoamericanos buscando lugar en este siglo. Therefore, I will use key elements from the text (including but not limited

to inter-cultural fluidity, transnational identities and identification within Latin America). Yglesias will also play a large role in this chapter, as his body of work and his production company, Istmo Films, will be examined as an example of shared thematic and economic resources between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Using Yglesias' documentary Patria Libre o Morir (1979) about the insurrection as one of the first works to demonstrate a cinematic alliance for revolutionary, political ends. I will also analyze the Oscar award-winning Alsino y el Condor (1982), a co-production between INCINE and Istmo Films and its reception in both Nicaragua and Costa Rica and internationally. In terms of exhibition and distribution, this fiction full-length film is an excellent example of a truly Latin American effort (directed by a Chilean, produced by other Central American countries, Latin American actors), and the potential culture conflicts that might arise in such a situation.

Of particular relevance will be the cultural globalization theories of George Yúdice in The Expediency of Culture. Because of the critical time period that I am examining, I find Yúdice's analysis of globalization and its effects on the production of culture to be relevant as I examine the outside, albeit regional, influences on Nicaraguan cinema. I look at how self-definition of the nation for both Costa Rica and Nicaragua, along with a preoccupation of the point of view of the "outsider", translated into the cinematic sphere. For example, I will examine what themes and subjects predominated, what projects became co-productions and with whom, and how the beginning of the Contra War also caused a reformulation of regional and international filmic alliances.

I will then look at co-productions between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, most notably Antonio Yglesias's documentary on the Sandinista insurrection in 1979, Patria Libre o Morir.

Chapter one

Costa Rica and Nicaragua: A Political History of Divergent Paths

Costa Rica and Nicaragua are neighboring countries in the Central American isthmus, and while this geographic proximity means they share a border, it does not mean that the countries have followed similar political paths in the 20th century. Costa Rica has carefully cultivated a pacific image, internationally known as the “Switzerland of Latin America,” while Nicaragua became known first for a dynasty of greedy dictators, the Somozas, then later for its Sandinista revolution in 1979 and its subsequent “socialist” economic and political policy. While revolutionary Nicaragua became a target for Cold War U.S. foreign policy during the Contra War, Costa Rican president Oscar Arias became famous for brokering peace in Central America with the 1987 Esquipulas Peace Accords that put an end to revolutionary and counter-revolutionary fighting. The importance of highlighting how history, economics and politics all helped to shape the cinematic production of both countries between 1973 and 1983 is of paramount importance for this thesis, and also lends itself to a later examination in the conclusions of the current tensions between Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

In this chapter, I will contextualize the political history of Costa Rica and Nicaragua in the 20th century, focusing on key situations that shaped national, regional and international events as they pertain to each country’s national film traditions. I hope to demonstrate how the historical interconnectivity (and at times the political disconnect) between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, especially during the insurrection and revolution, translated to the field of cinema. Because it is impossible to ignore the role the U.S. has played in the region, this chapter will also look at how foreign policy has played a role in

the two countries, and what effects, if any, each country's reaction to foreign intervention had on its development in the 20th century.

Ironically, it was Costa Rica's lack of economic, military, political and administrative power that allowed it to flourish under the colonial radar, whereas Nicaragua's growing prestige put it in the spotlight and made it an attractive geographic site for a possible "transisthmian canal" in the 1800s, which "attracted the attention of the great powers, especially Great Britain and the United States, and their involvement tended to embitter Nicaraguan politics" (Stansifer 123). This foreign interest in the country is precisely where Nicaraguan history converges with U.S. economic interests, with the U.S. filling the power void left by independence from Spanish colonial powers in the 1820s.

Nicaragua's path included further U.S. intervention when U.S. citizen William Walker assumed the Nicaraguan presidency in 1857 by the Liberal Party's invitation and wreaked havoc on the entire isthmus, poisoning future Nicaraguans against foreign influence. After all, "Almost from the moment that she secured her independence as a separate republic, Nicaragua suffered from foreign intrusion" (Busey 631). Walker, who took the tenets of the Manifest Destiny seriously, wanted to claim much of Mexico and Central America as U.S. territory, and succeeded in 1856 when he invaded Managua and set up a puppet presidency. He was thrown out by Central American forces just a year later, and when he later attempted to return to the region, Honduran forces executed him. Conservative politics then dominated Nicaragua until 1893, when the Liberal Party took over again. Although there was little ideological difference between the two parties, the

Liberal Party had shown itself, by aligning with Walker, to be traitors to the sovereignty of the Nicaraguan nation.

The Liberal Party dictator José Santos Zalaya alienated the U.S. and in 1909 the U.S. drove him from power. Conservatives ruled, with the help of the U.S., until the late 1920s. U.S. Marines focused on maintaining Conservative control and on capturing Nicaraguan guerrilla fighter and future FSLN namesake, Augusto César Sandino. Sandino, who was one of Nicaragua's true heroes. While he was alive, he represented the great hope that the country could indeed throw off the proverbial saddle of imperialism and foreign intervention and create its own independent identity. "[He] continued to press his struggle against the opposition forces—relentlessly, ruthlessly" (Booth 44).

The Marines were unable to capture Sandino, and returned to the U.S. where a noninterventionist policy was adopted. However, Anastasio Somoza García and his Nicaraguan National Guard were ready to fill the "void" left by the Marines. This began a Liberal dictatorship that would last until his son, Anastasio Debayle Somoza, fled the country after the FSLN revolutionary triumph in July of 1979. When Sandino and many of his followers were assassinated by Somoza García and the Nicaraguan National Guard in 1934, it seemed the hope he inspired for an autonomous nation had also died, but his mission and the guerrilla fighting style left behind were his legacy, and were well utilized by the FSLN, with "His spirit undaunted after five years, Sandino repeatedly excoriated the 'North American pirates' and their 'criminal international policy'" (*ibid.* 45).

While this struggle between Liberals and Conservatives was the norm in Latin America during the 19th century, immediately post-independence, it was rare for the political fighting to continue well into the 20th century. However, "In Nicaragua, unlike

most Latin American countries, the Liberal-Conservative dichotomy persisted until the mid-twentieth century. The legacy was [...] a deeply ingrained habit of bitterly partisan politics” (Stansifer 123). It has also been suggested that another legacy of this political infighting was a propensity toward authoritarian rule, much like the Somoza dynasty that lasted for 47 years. The effects of the *somocista* period will be discussed later, especially as they pertain to the development of a revolutionary situation in Nicaragua. The differences between Nicaragua and Costa Rica are numerous.

Stansifer states “The differences were more basic: They were social, economic, demographic and geographical” (123). While this quote may appear to confound the equation with many variables, the reality is that Costa Rica has cultivated, since independence in the first part of the 19th century up to the present day, a secure social and economic future for its residents, thanks in large part to its non-diverse population and its geographic location and topography. Yet another reason why Costa Rica managed to avoid a turbulent post-independence period is what many have also called a cultural weakness: “Costa Rica is not a country steeped in colonial tradition; it is a creature of the 19th century” (Stansifer 123). This lack of typical colonial cultural products (whether architecture and city planning, or a traditional colonial hierarchy of cultural production) is due to the fact that it was a largely ignored colony of the Spanish crown.

While Costa Rican democracy flourished during the first half of the 20th century, Nicaraguan democracy was at a standstill, instead subject to the dictatorial whims of the Somozas. After Sandino was executed by Somoza’s National Guard in 1934, the U.S. officially adopted a “non-interventionist” policy toward the region, but this was of course a farce, as the Somoza regime was supported by most, if not all, administrations and

foreign policy advisors. “Somoza may be a sonofabitch,” Franklin Roosevelt reportedly said, “but he is our sonofabitch.” When Somoza overthrew elected president Juan Sacasa in 1936 with the help of his National Guard, it was apparent that Nicaragua had gone from occupied country to dictatorship in the course of four short years. While the Somoza regimes were not exactly puppet regimes of the U.S., they did allow foreign interest groups, exploitative by nature, to continue their economic and social repression of the Nicaraguan people. “Each major Nicaraguan social class made significant contributions to the breakdown of the Somoza dynasty regime. The regime—Somoza, his cohort, the PLN, and the National Guard—had become so isolated that eventually only brute military force held the government in power” (Booth 125). During this time fair democratic elections were of course non-existent in the country, as Nicaraguans dealt with a dictator who was less interested in his own people than in serving U.S. imperialist powers, as evidenced in how he catered to foreign banana companies and ignored the suffering they caused Nicaraguan workers.

Costa Rica was not totally subservient to imperialist powers, and remained fairly economically and politically independent throughout this period. This is not to say that the country operated totally out of the sphere of influence of the U.S.’s “Good Neighbor” policy, but rather that they understood how supporting U.S. endeavors, such as the World Wars, would grant them further political freedom. “The positive perceptions of Costa Rica caused Washington to allow San José more flexibility and independence of action than it accorded other neighboring governments” (Longley 151). And while this relationship was “far from perfect,” it allowed for political stability in the country and for greater freedom in dealing with the only revolution Costa Rica underwent, in 1948.

From 1940 to 1948, the National Republican Party, led by Rafael Ángel Calderón Guardia, was the major political force to contend with in Costa Rica. Calderón Guardia was elected thanks to his “reputation as a doctor and a doer of charitable works” but these eight years laid the groundwork for a surprising Costa Rican civil war (Ameringer 28). Calderón Guardia’s policy of cooperating with the Communist Party of Costa Rica was seen as dangerous, but he succeeded in creating a Social Security program long before other Latin American countries. He also organized the reopening of the Universidad de Costa Rica in 1944. There were issues at the national level, though, as there were certain unsavory aspects of Calderón’s political career, like the intense agricultural persecution of German and Italian immigrants in Costa Rica, the favoritism/nepotism he displayed, and the reinstatement of the Jesuit order in education. These reforms all were part of a larger Communist agenda, as the party had been growing in power since 1929.

It has been concluded that the 1948 “event” was not a revolution in the sense of past Cuban and Mexican revolutions, but was an “anticommunist, middle-class movement in favor of political democracy [...] and marked the transition of Costa Rica’s ‘liberal oligarchic state’ to ‘liberal democratic politics’” (Stansifer 127). What this meant was that Calderón was still the preferred candidate when the 1948 elections took place, and even though he lost the popular vote to Otilio Ulate, the Costa Rican legislature still awarded Calderón the presidency and arrested Ulate. José “Pepe” Figueres, a Costa Rican of Catalán heritage who had been exiled to Mexico in 1942, now a Costa Rican hero, led his “band of rebels” to reinstate who he believed was the rightful president, Ulate. The 1948 elections were marked by allegations of fraud. Whether it was real or

imagined, these allegations of fraud certainly played a large role in the way subsequent events played out.

Costa Rica's Constitution, signed in 1949, "is perhaps the best evidence of Costa Rica's democratic political maturity" (Stansifer 127). After the shock of the civil war, Costa Rican politicians "gravitated to the political center" and reassembled the country's political order based on moderation and "basic democratic values" (*Ibid.*). The Constitution also brought about another radical change not only in Costa Rican but in Latin American politics: the abolition of a standing army, with funds instead going to support social security and educational endeavors.

In sharp contrast with Costa Rica, Nicaragua consistently struggled with democratic policies in the first part of the 20th century, reflecting the reality of a wholly non-democratic political process dominated by the Somozas and the foreign interests they represented. While the U.S. began to adopt other defining Cold War policies during the 1940s and 1950s, especially toward Latin America in general and Central America in particular, Nicaraguans became more unwilling to tolerate the abuses levied by Anastasio Somoza. With the support of the United States and imperialist business interests in the country, the two generations of Somozas, Anastasio Somoza García and his two sons, Luis and Anastasio Somoza Debayle, manipulated and exploited the Nicaraguan people and international opinions of said people. They made every attempt to destroy any hope for an autonomous economy, and by the early 1960s, opposition camps on all sides were beginning to organize, and as they did so, began to recognize that a victory against the Somozas would necessitate violence to break the National Guard and more importantly, the will and participation of the majority of the Nicaraguan people. The Frente

Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) from 1961 on was politically committed to waging guerrilla war, and to doing so in the name of Sandino, who was fast becoming a central, powerful symbolic figure in revolutionary organization.

However much Luis Somoza Debayle was a dictator, he was also a dictator that kept up appearances by paying lip service to education, agrarian and social security reform. He also understood how seemingly free elections could benefit his image, and from 1963 until his death in 1967, ruled through puppet presidents. But, of course, elections were rigged and “democracy was a façade” because the National Guard’s violent tactics ensured that any dissenters would be immediately silenced. And even though it was a dangerous time to speak out against the Somozas, this time period is marked by the FSLN’s revolutionary organization and guerrilla warfare training. This would prove to be particularly beneficial after Luis died of a heart attack in 1967 and his younger, crueller brother, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, assumed the dictatorship.

Somoza Debayle was already head of the National Guard at the time, which as we have seen, was the true source of the Somoza dynasty’s power. Instead of attempting to maintain the façade created by his older brother, Anastasio instead returned to the harsher style of dictatorship of his father. One of the greatest abuses of his power came when the great earthquake hit Managua on Christmas of 1972, killing more than 10,000 people and leveling a 600 square block area in the city center. The city was literally devastated, as Nicaraguan poet Gioconda Belli describes in her memoir, The Country Under My Skin: “The corpses of buildings lay in the streets, broken and smoldering [...] the coffins lining the sidewalks; broken bridges; poor neighborhoods in ruins and the people with blank, crazed stares” (Belli 49). The opportunity for Somoza to show himself to be a benevolent

dictator was wasted, and instead, “he chose to turn the national disaster to short-term personal advantage. While allowing the National Guard to plunder and sell international relief materials and to participate in looting the devastated commercial sector, Somoza and his associates used their control of the government to channel international relief funds into their own pockets” (Christian 31). This blatant disregard for citizens’ welfare is a perfect example of extraction, and Kimmel notes how demagogues such as Somoza mobilized armies and police forces as a “vehicle by which to maintain the level of extraction of resources for states to pursue their own ends” (210). By 1972, it was becoming more evident that the Somoza state was only interested in pursuing its own ends and goals, even though said ends had nothing to do with bettering any element of society. Therefore, it could be argued that the general population of Nicaragua, urban and rural, rich and poor, experienced a fissure in the facade of Anastasio Somoza Debayle’s corrupt state with the 1972 earthquake, even though it had actually been occurring since the first Anastasio Somoza’s ascension to power in 1934.

When the repression by the National Guard became too widespread to ignore, and spilled over into sectors and areas that affected the upper-middle classes and elites (such as the failure to rebuild Managua and its commercial enterprises), a sort of loosely-formed alliance began to take shape between Nicaraguans of all classes, even though the National Guard implemented even harsher policies of oppression against certain populations, such as students and *campesinos*. This is evident in one of their marching songs that was widely known throughout Nicaragua at the time: “¿Quién es la Guardia?/ La Guardia es un tigre/ ¿Qué le gusta el tigre?/ El tigre le gusta la sangre/ ¿La sangre de quien?/ La sangre de la gente” (Who is the Guardia? The Guardia is a tiger. What does a

tiger like? A tiger likes blood. Blood from whom? From the people) (Dunbar-Ortiz Feb. 2006). This sort of resistance across traditional societal boundaries in the face of oppression can be seen in countries as diverse as Chile, where Manuel Antonio Garretón writes that “The military has tried to eliminate collective identities, collective organization, and collective action but has failed, although it has successfully weakened and atomized the collective capacities of groups [...] Civil society has reasserted itself to the point where it has room to organize and express itself” (Power and Popular Protest 273). With the 1972 earthquake, civil society in Nicaragua began to reassert itself in the face of oppression, and an attempt at inter-class alliance and social organization was formed, under the banner of the FSLN.

This organization took many faces, often times occurring in rural areas but also more discretely in urban centers. Interestingly enough, after the Managua earthquake, many young university students from other urban centers like Granada and León also joined the FSLN. As Monica Baltodano, a commander in the guerrilla forces of the FSLN said, “The earthquake was in December [1972] and in early 1973 I was recruited by the FSLN. I think I always wanted to become a revolutionary” (Randall 65). Because the oppression of Somoza’s National Guard was growing and becoming more indiscriminant every day, many young urban people saw the work that was being done by the agrarian guerrillas in the rural area and felt drawn to it, simply because it was a way of empowering themselves. “There was a time when many kids were leaving. They were disappearing [...] The repression was increasing. They were clamping down on everyone” (Randall 65).

So with this “broad brush” of repression on the part of the National Guard, the Somoza regime continued to alienate the very people (urban, upper middle class) it would need in order to remain in power. But Somoza was so far removed from the reality of the situation that it is probable that he was unconcerned with the situation. And so the insurrection was allowed to continue, and gained strength not only in the rural areas, where the National Guard resorted to rape, torture and murder to gain information, but also in urban centers, where the repression was quieter, but still a very real threat. With the guard becoming more indiscriminate in the repression every day, it only made sense that the Sandinista movement would grow in strength and find support from previously non-supportive groups of Nicaraguan people.

While the 1970s were a bloody decade in Nicaragua, in Costa Rica events continued fairly normally, with the exception of one important occurrence: Because of its shared border with Nicaragua, certain northern parts of the country became training grounds for insurrectionist forces from the FSLN. In fact, much of the first documentary made about the insurrection, 1979’s Patria Libre o Morir, takes place in Costa Rica. The famous Nicaraguan poet and priest, Ernesto Cardenal, was filmed giving his famous *misa guerrillera* in the Costa Rican mountains. This geographical solidarity between the two countries, at least during the early years of the insurrection, shows how secure democracy was in Costa Rica at that time, although the turmoil in Nicaragua did fuel Costa Rica’s commitment to democracy.

When the Sandinista Revolution triumphed in July of 1979, after intense countryside fighting that culminated in the takeover of Managua, the Nicaraguan people were generally elated, as they saw the overthrow of a dictatorship 40 years in the making,

perhaps something they never expected to see. Headlines proclaimed that “The Sandinista insurrection had won unconditionally,” which was of course not all true, but they did capture the general feeling of euphoria. The revolutionary government, in the days, months and years following, was then forced to deal with a much more difficult task at hand, which involved creating a democratic society out of the rubble of a dictatorship. “One of the highest goals of the Sandinista government was to rule on behalf of the democratic majority rather than, as had been the case in the past, on behalf of the privileged minorities” (Stansifer 129).

The special relationship that Nicaragua has with its revolutionary movement indicates that the consolidation process succeeded to the extent that the general population identified with at least one component of its revolutionary ideals, namely a desire to rid the country of corruption in the form of demagogues such as the Somozas and foreign companies such as United Fruit. However, these ideals also came in the form of agrarian reform and land distribution, and a desire to incorporate previously ignored populations (rural, indigenous to a certain extent) into the new nation building process. During the insurrection, the FSLN came to recognize the value of the arts, such as the poetry of Ernesto Cardenal, as a valuable consolidation tool of the revolutionary agenda.

Cardenal was named Minister of Culture in 1979, and in 1980, gave a speech entitled “Anti-imperialist, Popular, National, Revolutionary Culture.” Among the tasks that the Ministry would undertake were Cardenal’s famous poetry workshops, wherein previously uneducated citizens were given the tools to express themselves poetically. This element highlights the “popular” component of the Revolutionary Ministry of Culture. There were various branches of the Ministry, all fulfilling a certain artistic or

cultural need of post-revolutionary Nicaragua. One of these branches was the Instituto nicaragüense de cine (INCINE), which will be discussed in much detail in later chapters.

The Revolution had lofty cultural, political and economic goals, and although they were achieved in part, it proved to be a difficult task for many reasons, not the least of which was U.S. antagonism and foreign intervention. However, first reactions to the Revolution were that it was “initially pluralistic in Western, liberal terms, comprising within its ranks Marxists, Social Democrats and probusiness conservatives” (Castañeda 107). Sandinista Nicaragua certainly was wary of the U.S.’s reaction to its revolution because of past administrations’ support of the Somozas and also because of the economic interest that foreign companies had in the country. The Carter administration’s initial reaction to the Sandinistas was, therefore, pleasantly surprising and perhaps served as an opiate, drugging Nicaragua and making it somewhat unprepared for the Reagan administration’s violently negative and interventionist actions just a year later in 1980.¹ But in that first year, “The Sandinistas’ remarkable international backing was premised on their nonaligned—meaning non-Soviet, non-Cuban—stance and on an American policy based on the defense of human rights” (*ibid.* 108).

After this period of international acceptance, world opinion turned on the Sandinista Revolution, which meant that many of its policies were halted or impeded by the focus turning to protecting the country from “Contra” forces, or counterrevolutionary soldiers supported by the U.S. These policies included agrarian reform and redistribution

¹ For more information about the Reagan administration’s response to Sandinista Nicaragua see: William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998).

of foreign-owned lands, electoral reform and a nearly universal education and healthcare system. Agrarian reform was a policy that suffered because of this intervention, although it could certainly be argued that the Sandinistas were ill-prepared to deal with the complex agrarian and rural issues that arose, like redistribution of lands and the Miskito indigenous question. “The agrarian reform was designed to break the economic power of the old regime and to respond ‘to the needs and involve the participation of the small peasant farmer and landless rural worker’” (Booth 241). However, this redistribution did not happen as planned, and when problems arose, the film institute, INCINE, was there to film things with a critical eye.

After Ronald Reagan assumed the U.S. presidency, the Contra War began in full force, and although it is called “low intensity warfare,” there was little that was benign about it. “The destabilization effort by the United States—financed, supplied, and at least partly directed by the CIA—was the beginning of the so-called covert war against the Sandinista regime” (Booth 262). U.S. armed forces trained soldiers in Honduran camps to participate in overthrowing the Sandinistas. While all of this may seem to be an exaggerated response, it is important to remember that the Cold War dynamics were still in place at this time, and if anything were more intense than ever because of the tumultuous state of the Soviet Union. If the new regime’s domestic and international policies happen to affect their interests adversely, foreign powers with a vested economic interest in the country will react strongly to preserve said interest. No matter that the U.S.’s imperialistic history has been viewed negatively throughout the continent, to the

extent that national poets such as Ernesto Cardenal have made anti-imperialism a cultural trademark, or that national identities have been formed around an anti-U.S. sentiment.²

It also did not help that the then FSLN leader, Daniel Ortega was an inexperienced politician. Ortega lacked experience forming domestic and international policy, and was not central to the success of the revolution in the way that Fidel Castro was. Although Castro held several meetings with Ortega during his presidency, it was of course difficult to advise on a situation that was causing extreme political and economic strife in an already destroyed region. Ortega himself did not evoke any passion, but the movement he represented, Sandinismo, did, and we see this in a statement made by ex-comandante Dora María Tellez: “Sandinismo is our national identity. And it is more than that. There are a few men and women who at a given moment in history seem to contain within themselves the dignity of all the people [...] That’s what Sandinismo is to the Nicaraguan people. It is our history, our heroes and heroines, and our people’s struggle and victory” (Randall 53).

So as the Contra War became bloodier, Central American leaders began to sense “that the conflict on the Isthmus was stagnating with continuing loss of life and economic opportunities and recognizing the peacemaking efforts had failed” (LASA Commission 2). This included Oscar Arias, then the Costa Rican president, who along with four other Central American presidents, reaffirmed the Guatemala Accord, which accepted the “legitimacy of each of the existing governments,” placing the U.S. as the antagonist in the equation since they refused to remove troops and recognize this autonomy (LASA 2). When these accords were reaffirmed in January of 1988, Costa Rica again took the lead

² For more information about Ernesto’s Cardenal anti-imperialist poetry see: Ernesto Cardenal, *Poesía escogida* (Barcelona: Barral Editores, 1974).

in ensuring that they were carried out, with the Contra War ending in 1989 and Arias winning a Nobel Peace Prize for his peacemaking efforts in a situation that seemed to be unsolvable.

These Peace Accords, otherwise known as Esquipulas II, mark the end of the historical contextualization of this chapter. After detailing the events and situations that led Costa Rica and Nicaragua to their respective political and cultural situations in the period immediately following the Sandinista Revolution leading up to the beginning of the Contra War, the reader should be better prepared to understand how cinema played a role in the development of national identities. Also, the political history given here provides a backdrop for how culture was valued (or not) in both societies and also how it was produced, either independently or by the state.

Chapter two

A Reflection on New Latin American Cinema Theories and Films and Their Relation to Central American Cinema

The New Latin American Cinema (NLAC) movement was not a “spontaneous, autonomous, unified and monolithic project” (Martin 16). Rather, it was a project spanning decades and countries within Latin America, pan-regional in a sense, with many countries re-defining and re-working its tenets to suit their political and aesthetic needs. These tenets revolved around a political commitment, normally leftist, and rejected the “Hollywood” cinema made by film studios. This chapter will examine the foundational theories and films of the NLAC movement, including its inception in Argentina with Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino’s “Third Cinema,” its evolution into revolutionary cinema in Julio García Espinosa’s “imperfect cinema,” and its relation to “European cinema” in Glauber Rocha’s an “esthetic of hunger.” Theoretically related to these NLAC manifestoes are Julianne Burton’s edited collection The Social Documentary in Latin America and in her chapter within the book entitled “Democratizing Documentary: Modes of Address in the New Latin American Cinema,” along with selections from Bill Nichols’ Blurred Boundaries and Representing Reality. Of course, the movement was more than just theoretical musings, and did produce significant films as well, and these will also be analyzed in terms of their contributions to the movement at large and also will be related to a specific Central American context from 1973 to 1983. The focus on Central America in this chapter as both a recipient of the NLAC ideology and a producer of NLAC films, albeit at least a decade later than in the rest of the continent, makes its status as “the periphery within the periphery” even more apparent in terms of cultural

production. By looking at what NLAC tenets Costa Rican and Nicaraguan national cinemas adopted, this analysis presents a new perspective on NLAC as a dynamic movement, not constrained to a particular time period or geographic location.

Before progressing to a discussion of NLAC, it is important to understand the role that certain Latin American filmmakers played in its development as a movement. The two directors, the “godfathers” of NLAC, that I will focus on in this chapter are Luis Buñuel and his 1950 film Los olvidados (The Young and the Damned) and Argentine filmmaker Fernando Birri’s *Escuela de cine documental de Santa Fe* (School of Documentary Filmmaking in Santa Fe, Argentina), more specifically his 1958 landmark documentary Tire dié (Throw Me a Dime). Included in this background will also be a discussion of the two European cinematic movements that helped to shape NLAC stylistically and ideologically: Italian Neorealism and French New Wave.

In Los olvidados, Buñuel gives his viewer an ultra realist, even documentary, view of life on the streets, as seen through the eyes of young protagonist Pedro, whose mother has rejected him and who must live on the streets to survive. This mixture of documentary techniques and fiction filmmaking is precisely where Los olvidados becomes a beacon for future NLAC filmmakers like Birri. Its harrowing and vivid description of the street “sub culture” Pedro encounters is reflective of Italian Vittorio Di Sica’s neorealist masterpiece Bicycle Thieves (1948). Los olvidados is breathtaking for its dedication to its subject, young Pedro and the marginalized sector of society he represents, and this dedication is certainly evident in future NLAC films and documentaries.

Neorealist tendencies are especially evident in NLAC documentaries, beginning with Argentine filmmaker Fernando Birri's Tire dié and extending up to the Costa Rican documentary Los presos (1974) and the Nicaraguan revolutionary *noticiero* between 1979 and 1983. Tire dié is a product of two schools of cinematic practice: Rome's Centro Sperimentale de Cinematografia-Cineteca Nazionale, and Birri's own Santa Fe Documentary School. Birri studied at Rome's Centro Sperimentale and was greatly influenced by Neorealism as a way to also show the Latin American reality; therefore he returned to Argentina to start his Santa Fe film school, of which Tire dié was the first cinematic effort. Its purpose was "para despertar una colectividad local y nacional, en su mayor parte indiferente o en el mejor de los casos engañada o desengañada" (to awaken a local and national collectivity, for the most part indifferent or in the best of cases tricked or deceived) (Paranaguá 289). And documentary seemed to be the style best suited to this purpose, as it allowed Birri to deal with a social problem (again, a marginalized sector of society) "para que quienes sufren cuenten su propia historia con sus propias palabras" (so that those who suffer can tell their own story with their own words) (Paranaguá 290). This objective is an important concept for NLAC filmmakers, officially starting with Birri and evolving through the decades to fit the Costa Rican Department of Cinema's goals in 1973, to "dar voz al que no la tiene" (to give voice to he who lacks it) (El espejo imposible 102).

Birri's documentary Tire dié (Throw Me a Dime; 1958) and Los olvidados open in very similar ways, stylistically and thematically speaking, although one is a documentary and the other a fiction film. In Tire dié, aerial shots of Santa Fe give the viewer a birds eye view of the city, when a voice of God narrator begins to present

various, seemingly incoherent statistics about the region, including the number of churches, schools, hairdressers, jewelry stores and unions. However, as the aerial shot moves toward the outskirts of the city, the narrator announces that it is here that “las estadísticas se hacen inciertas” (the statistics become uncertain).

A brief introduction to the voice of God mode of address is necessary here, because it is prevalent in NLAC documentaries for both aesthetic and financial reasons. “The anonymous, omniscient, ahistorical ‘voice of God’” documentary mode of address, or authoritarian narrator, is present in many documentaries when synchronous (sync) sound was not available and sound recordings were forced to take place either before or after the actual filming (Burton 49). Because of the high levels of monetary investment required to obtain sync recording devices and film equipment, this mode of address was popular in “underdeveloped” cinema. Also, as evidenced in Tire dié, as well as in future NLAC documentaries, such as those from Costa Rica and Nicaragua decades later, the “voice of God” narration has the power to lend a scientific, fact-based overtone to a film because of its authoritative nature as the source of knowledge within the film. This mode of address also relates to a “cine didáctico”, or didactic cinema, category that Cuban film scholar Michael Chanan established after realizing that the “amazing diversity of styles and forms” in NLAC would be better served by a “third world” system of categorization instead of a European system.

The categories that Chanan created were originally for the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográfica (ICAIC), Cuba’s revolutionary film institute. However, they also complement the idea of a NLAC social documentary, which Julianne Burton defines as a “documentary with a human subject and a descriptive or transformative

concern” (10). They expand upon the original four modes of documentary representation, as presented by Burton as expository, observational, interactive and performative. Because the NLAC movement did privilege documentaries because of their raw realism and status as an “authentic document of social reality,” according to John Grierson, their categorization had to be appropriate to the NLAC context.

Chanan names nine categories that take both documentary style and theme into account, including the aforementioned “cine didáctico”, which served its purpose as filmmakers attempted to critically film social realities and undertake the “concientización” (consciousness raising) of their public. The other categories are: “cine de combate, cine de denuncia, cine encuesta, cine ensayo, cine reportaje, cine rescate, cine testimonio” (combat cinema, cinema of denouncement, investigative cinema, cinema essay, reporting cinema, cinema that rescues aspects of national history or culture, and testimonial cinema) (Chanan in Burton 30).

While Chanan might not have intended for the categories to overlap, it does seem to happen. I will use the Nicaraguan documentary Bananeras (Lacayo, 1982) as a brief example to support this point. Although it is short, at approximately 14 minutes, it vacillates between investigating the problems with the Atlantic coast banana industry, to denouncing the foreign imperialistic influence that created such a sad state of affairs, to attempting to teach its public (perhaps an urban audience) about the problems with such imperialism in the country. One thing the documentary does not do, or at least does not do well, is attempt to provide any concrete political analysis of the situation, since it dealt with an area (agrarian reform) that had not been well-defined by the Sandinista

government at the time.³ The importance of this system of categorization, not only for Cuban cinema but also for a larger Latin American context, will become evident in the following sections of this chapter, as I discuss the theory that shaped the NLAC movement as it attempted to create an “active cinema for an active spectator” (Martin 17).

I will return briefly to Birri and his essay “Cinema and underdevelopment,” published in 1962, just two years after his *Tire dié* was completed. Although Birri’s Argentina was in a much different place politically and socially than Cuba at the time (Cuba having achieved a successful “socialist” revolution in 1959), this essay shows the variations and similarities within NLAC theory. Birri is concerned with creating “a new person, a new society, a new history and therefore a new art and cinema. Urgently” (Birri in Martin 87). This last “urgently” highlights the state of affairs in his country and also for the underdeveloped, postcolonial economy of Latin America.

While Birri conceived of this creation of a new society perhaps through art and cinema, Cuba was using cinema to document and showcase its new revolutionary society. Both Birri and ICAIC subscribed to NLAC’s general rejection of “art for art’s sake” and instead worked toward creating a “committed” and useful cinema for a “working class audience, both urban and rural” (Birri in Martin 92). “The audience for this new cinema which seeks to awaken consciousness” is something that Birri is specifically preoccupied with (*Ibid.* 92). This discussion of potential audiences is significant in Birri’s essay, because it is so closely followed by Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa’s “For an imperfect cinema” in 1969. While Birri problematizes the cinematic audience, García

³ See chapter four for a more complete analysis of *Bananeras* and its important role as an ethically and aesthetically committed documentary for INCINE

Espinosa problematizes a rigid intellectual conception of artistic creation in a revolutionary society and suggests something equally revolutionary: that there is more of an audience for this type of cinema than there exists films; therefore the audience could become creator. “The new outlook for artistic culture is no longer that everyone must share the taste of a few, but that all can be creators of that culture (García Espinosa in Martin 76).⁴

More generally in a larger NLAC context, García Espinosa discusses an acceptance of the “imperfect” techniques that Latin American countries can and should employ. “Imperfect cinema rejects exhibitionism in both (literal) senses of the word, the narcissistic and the commercial (getting shown in established theaters and circuits (García Espinosa in Martin 81-82). Therefore, his solution was a “committed” and “partisan” art form, or a cinema that “is no longer interested in quality or technique [...] Imperfect cinema is no longer interested in predetermined taste, and much less in ‘good taste’” (*ibid.* 82). This level of commitment required by the filmmaker and by the revolutionary audience (who in turn would ideally evolve to become a filmmaker) is to be “convinced that they can transform it [their world] in a revolutionary way” (Martin 80). And while there should be no doubt as to the level of commitment displayed by many revolutionary filmmakers in countries like Cuba and Nicaragua, the struggle for an audience for this type of film still remained. Of course, mobile cinema programs in both countries did attempt to create a revolutionary audience, but García Espinosa’s vision for the

⁴ See chapter four for an in-depth look at García Espinosa’s “cine imperfecto” in practice in the revolutionary cinema of Cuba and Nicaragua.

abolishment of “artistic culture as fragmentary human activity” was never achieved to the extent he might have imagined, since its value is as a utopian ideal.⁵

The “failure” (in quotations because I question whether a proposition that was originally outrageous in its expectations could actually fail when the possibility for total success never existed) of García Espinosa’s “cine imperfecto” is due in no small part to the economic conditions of the Latin American continent. The inequality between rich and poor continued to grow throughout the 1960s and 1970s, although not as much in socialist economies like Cuba’s, and a social economy of underdevelopment and reliance on traditional colonial powers prevailed.

Argentine filmmakers Getino and Solanas, in their “Third cinema” essay, call for a “clandestine, subversive, ‘guerrilla’ and ‘unfinished’ cinema that radically counteracts the hegemony of Hollywood and European capitalist production and distribution practices” (Getino and Solanas in Martin 17). However, they not only call for such a cinema, they create it in their seminal four-hour documentary La hora de los hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces) in 1968, made clandestinely in part and concerned with subverting a traditional colonial history and mindset. As intellectuals, they acknowledge a revolutionary situation in their country, and as filmmakers/activists, they create a documentary that acknowledges said situation and denounces the economic, political and social conditions that led to such a condition. “A new historical situation and a new man born in the process of the anti-imperialist struggle demanded a new, revolutionary attitude from the filmmakers of the world” (*Ibid.* 34). The anti-imperialist struggle that

⁵ See chapter four for a discussion of INCINE’s mobile cinema program (modeled after the Cuban mobile cinema program) and the “talleres de cine” that helped consolidate the Sandinista Revolution by expanding upon recipients and creators of revolutionary culture.

they identify in this quote is especially important in the Nicaraguan context. In 1969 in Nicaragua, many intellectuals were taking an increasingly anti-imperialist position, including revolutionary priest-poet Ernesto Cardenal's poem "Hora 0".⁶ While anti-imperialist film production was not an economic reality at this point for Nicaragua (or for Central America as a whole), the ideology of denouncing imperialism through artistic production was certainly a transnational reality.

This rejection of Hollywood cinema and its perfect sound quality, visuals and technology comes to a head in Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha's essay "An esthetic of hunger." Rocha not only wrote on this new esthetic, but practiced it within Brazil's Cinema Novo movement. "From Cinema Novo it should be learned that an esthetic of violence, before being primitive, is revolutionary" (Rocha in Martin 60). And it is revolutionary in the sense that it knows its situation and wants to transform it in a (radical) way. Cinema Novo also aims to conscientize its viewer. "Cinema Novo is not one film but an evolving complex of films that will ultimately make the public aware of its own misery" (*ibid.* 61).

There of course are differences between the Brazilian and Argentine and Cuban realities of the 1960s and the Costa Rican social "reality" throughout the 1970s, and this is reflected in how they were filmed and what filmmakers chose to film. For example, Costa Rica's Department of Cinema (later the Centro Costarricense de Producción Cinematográfica, or CCPC), founded in 1973, was concerned principally by the national social problems and therefore made documentaries of denouncement. Nicaragua's revolutionary film institute, INCINE, made films supported by the revolutionary

⁶ See chapter four for an analysis of "Hora 0" and Cardenal's role in revolutionary artistic production in revolutionary Nicaragua.

government, so there was no real need for Rocha's "aesthetic of violence" to bring about a revolution since one had already occurred. What we can extrapolate from these theories and their larger NLAC context is a committed ethic of responsibility and awareness on the filmmaker's part, which certainly translates more than a decade later as NLAC moved to the isthmus. Also, because of the poverty of the region, an "aesthetic of hunger" was not out of the question.

But perhaps one of the most important considerations was how accurately to "represent reality" in documentary (since it was the chosen genre of the NLAC movement), which Bill Nichols comments on in Representing Reality. The chapter, "The Domain of Documentary," discusses the ideological and historical background of the documentary and its differences with fiction films. He categorizes fiction films as treating "unconscious desires and latent meaning" whereas documentaries consciously treat "social issues." "Discourses of sobriety" is another topic that directly relates to the way society deals with all news and non-fiction material, and is basically a hierarchy of the pertinence of information. Fiction would also fall into this category, but Nichols argues that with documentaries, the audience comes to grasp an argument within its historical context and to be "engaged" by social actors and their very real destiny. He allows that documentaries as a text have been seen as "not betraying with the same intensity" as fiction films (9).

The way actual people (non-professional actors) and historical events are portrayed in NLAC directly relates to the "third-worldness" that most New Latin American documentaries want to address and critique. For filmmakers like Birri, García Espinosa or Rocha, does it "suffice to see them (the victims), nameless but not faceless,

desperate and without dignity, aware but silenced”? (12). I would argue no, that their very mission might be to bring about an awareness of the marginalized, but their methods of filming give the voiceless a voice (wherever that voice may be in the hierarchy of power or albeit mediated by the filmmaker him/herself).

Perhaps one of Nichols’ strongest areas of contribution to this chapter is his discussion of ethics, that is, the ethics of the filmmaker and his critical gaze. In the chapter “Axiographics,” Nichols discusses the question of ethics, and how values come to be known and experienced. Especially interesting are the different ways that the camera gaze poses questions of ethics, politics, and ideology. Many problems arise from the very presence of the camera. The accidental gaze, helpless gaze, endangered gaze, interventional gaze and critical gaze all draw our attention to an ethics of responsibility that the filmmaker bears, and this should be a question of primary importance in our critique of the documentary as a genre. “In documentary, we see how filmmakers regard or look at their fellow humans directly. The documentary is a record of that regard” (Nichols 80). The documentary is then a sociological record of how humans interact with and regard fellow humans, and of course each documentarist will have his or her own interactive style. The wide range of styles in the NLAC movement shows the diversity of the movement but also the predominant concern for the situation of underdevelopment in the continent and the many people said situation affects.

Central America, while it is a part of Latin America, has a unique economic reality, due to its proximity to the United States. Because of a constant U.S. presence and involvement in the isthmus, including but not limited to banana companies, coffee companies, railroads (essentially the entire economic infrastructure of countries such as

Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala), the region was constantly under surveillance and monitored for potential revolutionary activity (see the Arbenz overthrow in Guatemala by the CIA in 1954). Samuel Brockett, in his Land, Power and Poverty, does a tremendous job of detailing the social and economic injustices that are predominant in Central America. Nicaragua's main problem until 1979, according to Brockett, was the "elite obstruction of agrarian reform" that Somoza allowed, but "once in power, the Sandinista government made agrarian reform central to its program for the transformation of society" (7). The agrarian development of Nicaragua, throughout history, has been in the hands of foreign U.S., British, Italian and German companies, with the two main crops, coffee and bananas, forcing many peasants to lose their land to foreign companies and resort to subsistence farming until even that was taken away in the post-war restructuring of export-import industries.

So, while film was an artistic medium that was not readily available to Central American filmmakers in 1969 when Solanas and Getino wrote their essay in Argentina, other forms of cultural production were available, and were viable. John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman discuss the positioning of poetry as a "dominant literary mode" in Central America due to the effects of the "combined and uneven development" (25, 49). Since poetry is a "uniquely portable form of literature capable of being produced and circulated in conditions of poverty and clandestinity," there are distinct similarities between poetic, clandestine and guerrilla revolutionary production in Nicaragua and filmic production in a country like Argentina, which will be explored in a more concrete manner in chapters three and four, where I discuss the specific Costa Rican and Nicaraguan film cultures and the role of certain late-arriving NLAC ideologies (49).

Chapter three

The Costa Rican Social Documentary: An X-ray for National Crises and a Microphone for the Voiceless

The time period that this chapter covers, from 1973 onward, is precisely the period that Central American film scholar María Lourdes Cortés calls el “estado productor”, or the era of state production in Costa Rica. This is significant because it marks a change in the way cinema was made in Costa Rica, with state support under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth. It also marks a change in the types of films made, privileging the social documentary form of the New Latin American Cinema (see chapter two) to tell Costa Rican stories from a Costa Rican point of view. This social agenda was reflective of the larger New Latin American context and also specific to the Central American situation, with predominant themes being the treatment of indigenous people, prostitution, alcoholism, land use, and prisoner abuse.

Of course, Costa Rican cinema did not begin with the creation of the Departamento de cine in 1973, as a brief history of cinema in the country will show. The Lumiere apparatus arrived to Costa Rica in 1897, shortly after its first arrival in Central America, in Guatemala City in 1896. From this beginning to the end of the First World War, Costa Rican film took a turn toward political propaganda in the form of the *noticiero* (newsreel), not unusual as this happened in many countries, including but not limited to Mexico, Cuba, and also the United States.⁷ Cortés mentions that later these films took

⁷ See chapter four on Nicaraguan film for a complete discussion of the political newsreel and its functions.

the form of “documentales rudimentarios”, or rudimentary documentaries, showing the first stages of evolution in film production.

From rudimentary documentaries, cinema in Costa Rica took a new form in 1930, with the first fiction film, El retorno (The Return), still considered to be one of the best Costa Rican fiction films. Upon its release in 1930, the Diario de Costa Rica (daily newspaper) said it was “Una película verdadera y netamente nacional” (A real, national film) (El espejo imposible 35).⁸ However, this film was an international effort, made by an Italian director, A.F. Bertoni, filmed by another Italian, Walter Bolandi, and supported by a Belgian professor of French, René Van Huffel. Costa Ricans did have a role in the film, but largely as actors, chosen on the basis of a national contest. It tells a typical Costa Rican story of two young lovers who must confront many challenges (often foreign challenges) for their love ultimately to triumph, in what the *Diario* calls “el primer paso triunfal hacia la mejor comprensión de nuestra nacionalidad” (The first triumphant step toward a better comprehension of our nationalism) (*ibid.* 44). This film can be viewed as an allegory for the nation, of course, which remained strong because it was aware of the danger of foreign (read: U.S.) influences. While I was unable to see this film while in Costa Rica because of restoration work on the original reels, I find one of its most interesting elements to be its ability to strike a national chord while being produced, filmed, and directed largely by foreigners. However, this national chord that it strikes is one that would have been more resonant during the 19th century nation-building process that Costa Rica and other Latin American countries underwent after independence. As it is, it stands as an example of how the construction of the national in Costa Rica

⁸ El espejo imposible is hereafter referred to as EEI in parenthetical references.

underwent various challenges throughout the 19th and 20th centuries; namely, the presence of the “foreigner” in national affairs.

Other fiction films followed El retorno, although strangely enough, none of real note until 25 years later, with 1955’s Elvira, directed by Alfonso Patiño Gómez, and Milagro de amor (1955), directed by José Gamboa. What these films have in common is their establishment of “el campo como el espacio en que el país debe reconocerse” (the countryside as the space where Costa Rica should recognize itself) (EEI 24). All three films reject the urban space of the city, in Costa Rica the capitol city of San José, as a place of “vicios de progreso” (vices of progress) (*ibid.* 24). This has much to do with the national mindset of the time, an idealization of the country as an escape from the urban vices such as prostitution, extreme poverty, and filth, or a view of the rich Costa Rican countryside as representative of the traditional values and the urban place as progress (however tainted). This was also common earlier in the 19th century in other Latin American countries. This denial of the urban is significant here, as the late 1960s and 1970s brought many films (often documentaries) that focused on the city.

Viewing these early films as nation-building projects, especially El retorno, is exemplified by Doris Sommer’s Foundational Fictions, where she reveals a 19th century “[...] common project to build through reconciliations and amalgamations of national constituencies cast as lovers destined to desire each other” (24). El retorno’s young Costa Rican lovers, Rodrigo and Eugenia, who are destined to be together, must first pass through many obstacles in order to fulfill this destiny. Their most significant obstacle is the seductive foreign femme fatale, who Rodrigo falls for while in the city (San José). However, he does reject her (the foreign) in favor of his *tica* lover, uniting the country in

a firmly anti-imperialist position, representing the “nation’s hope for productive unions” (Sommer 24).

While these films enjoyed a modicum of success nationally, the fact remains that Costa Rican filmic production was unfortunately unable to be an economically viable endeavor, as we see in a 1960 quote from Costa Rican journalist Yehudi Monestel: “Costa Rica, país rico en promesas pero débil en su potencial económico, no conoce aún, en debida forma, la explotación de una industria fílmica propia, es precisamente por la limitada inversión que se consigue ese campo” (EEI 96).⁹ This recognition of a weak cinematic industry shows an understanding of the dire circumstances Costa Rican cinema faced between 1955 and 1973 (with the creation of only two noteworthy projects), but Monestel’s solution of more financial investment (on a national level, we can only assume, to prevent further exploitation of the industry by foreigners) was not achieved. Of course, private investment in any venture is difficult to obtain, especially if the industry is unable to promise a return on the investment, as is the case with most national cinema projects in Latin America.

The formation of a national department of cinema in Costa Rica occurred in 1973, thanks to state support and a UNESCO grant. As I mentioned in the introduction, this department was a branch of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports until 1977, when it acquired its status as an institute, el Centro Costarricense de Producción Cinematográfica (Costa Rican Center for Cinematic Production, CCPC), with “personalidad jurídica de derecho público e independencia en el ejercicio de sus funciones” (CCPC folleto). This

⁹ Costa Rica, a country rich in promises but weak in its economic potential, does not know yet that the exploitation of its own film industry is precisely because of the limited investment that the industry receives.

independence in the exercise of its functions allowed the Centro to pursue its goal, “Dar voz a quien no la tiene” (Give voice to the person who has none). Although there were only a handful of feature films made (mainly as co-productions), the CCPC was also able to produce 75 documentaries in 16 millimeter in a period of 10 years. This is an achievement in production, co-production, distribution, and promotion of audiovisual activity (both cinema and video) for a country that, 10 years earlier, was facing a crisis of limited funds and investment in the field of film.

María Lourdes Cortés divides the filmic production of the CCPC and its precursor, the Department of Cinema, into three stages: the first, from 1973 to 1976, categorized by a “gran preocupación por los problemas más acuciantes del país” (a great preoccupation with the most pressing problems of the country); the second, from 1976 to 1980, during which “se enfatizaron temáticas sobre cultura popular, problemas de desarrollo” (they emphasized themes about popular culture, and problems with development); and finally, from 1980 to 1986, when filmmakers returned to more critical tropes, including “la invasión de modelos de consumo a través de la televisión, la guerra en Centroamérica y la explotación de la mujer” (the invasion of new consumer models like television, the war in Central America, and the exploitation of women) (EEI 101). Of course, not all films produced from 1973 to 1976 were categorized by their concern with pressing social problems, as is the case with other phases, but the overlying message is one of national filmmakers showing interest in national issues, and filming them with the critical eye of an artist and an activist.

Important to mention is the fact that the CCPC filmmakers represented their version of a national reality and interpreted cinematically what they viewed as the most

pressing national problems. However, it would be incorrect to say that they were the only mouthpiece for a national agenda in Costa Rica at the time; in fact, they were one of many. Also, the focus that CCPC filmmakers gave to the “subaltern” classes of their country is admirable, but does not change the fact that these filmmakers were still operating from within the “center” of Costa Rican cultural production. This “center” that they, as filmmakers and mouthpieces, belonged to is one privilege, and while they often attempted to work outside this intellectual center of power by focusing on the emerging subaltern classes, much of the CCPC itself functioned as a center-induced project.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will be focusing mainly on documentaries produced during the first two stages, with my analyses pertaining to the elements of social documentary in each film, and during the second stage, looking at how new technologies and an awareness of Hollywood domination shaped the films being made. Before I begin to analyze the films themselves, however, I believe it is important to look at who was involved in their creation, direction and production in order to have a better idea of the artistic context surrounding them.

As in many other Latin American countries at the time, those who were able to make films, or to call themselves filmmakers, in Costa Rica were of a certain social standing, with a certain level of education. This held true in Costa Rica and in the Nicaraguan context, even after the “equalizing” Sandinista revolution in 1979.¹⁰ One might expect them also to be predominantly male, as was the case, with one notable exception: the first director of the Department of Cinema in 1973 was a woman, Kitico Moreno, who has played a significant role as producer and director of national cinema

¹⁰ See chapter four for more information on the role of the Nicaraguan intellectual in the creation of revolutionary film at the Instituto nicaragüense de cine (INCINE).

since the early 1970s, producing many of the documentaries analyzed later in this chapter. Cortés calls her the “verdadera madre del proyecto” (the true mother of the project”) (104). Moreno’s stance on documentary corresponded well with the Department’s mission: “El cine documental le daría un micrófono a los campesinos” (“Documentary film would give a microphone to the campesinos” (EEI 105).

Moreno went to Europe in order to learn how to make film, first to Paris, then to London, where the BBC gave her a scholarship to study film and television (EEI 104).¹¹ It was during this time that Moreno fell in love with documentary, “porque es la realidad, el documental enseña y uno en la vida está para aprender” (“because it is reality, documentary teaches and one is alive to learn”) (*ibid.* 104). After her time in Europe, Moreno went to Argentina, and spent 10 months learning how to make documentaries. Mercedes Ramírez, the current director of the CCPC, also studied in Europe, in Berlin, Germany, but gained valuable production experience working on La insurrección (1981), Peter Lillienthal’s co-production between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Clearly, during the 1960s and 1970s, Costa Rican film students took advantage of opportunities to study film abroad, and with this training came a European aesthetic influence.

The importance of the Costa Rican social documentary from 1973 onward spoke for the marginalized, the subaltern classes, fulfilling Moreno’s desire for a national cinema that would be a microphone for the voiceless. In her article, “Can the subaltern speak?”, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks us to consider “[...] the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of

¹¹ María José Alvarez, INCINE filmmaker in Nicaragua, also went first to London to explore a career in film.

the urban subproletariat” (283). All of these groups were present in Costa Rica, and also present in the Costa Rican social documentary of the 1970s, due to the viewpoint of its filmmakers and their conviction to speak for this “silent, silenced center,” since most often, the subaltern cannot speak for itself and requires an intermediary (read: intellectual, normally first world) presence to tell its experience. This is significant for our discussion, since the material covered in the Costa Rican social documentary from 1973 to 1980 was overlooked by most artists, authors and filmmakers as having little historical value and certainly no aesthetic value. So how did the filmmakers instill an aesthetics and ethics into their filmic representation of the subaltern? By giving them a microphone and allowing them the opportunity to talk about their experiences in the margins of Costa Rican society.

The first documentary made under the new Department of Cinema, Ingo Niehaus’ Agonía de la montaña (1973), set out on a “intensa búsqueda de la realidad nacional” (“an intense search for a national reality”) in order to establish a national cinema, “realista y crítico”, along the lines of Rocha’s “cine de la pobreza”, García Espinosa’s “cine imperfecto”, and Solanas and Getino’s “Tercer cine”. This documentary was part of the first series of the Department, “Hombre nuevo” (New man), which refers directly to revolutionary leader Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s Christ-like “New man.” The importance of creating a series of films bearing the name of a revolutionary theory that proclaimed a “New type of human being that would arise out of the revolutionary struggle to liberate humanity from the egoistic individualism, exploitation, and social alienation of capitalism” shows first the awareness of the CCPC filmmakers of the political and social relevance of their cinematic project (Harris 22). It also creates a direct link between the

social focus of the CCPC (and latent or sometimes hidden revolutionary tendencies) and the overt revolutionary cinema that Nicaragua and the Sandinistas would later establish. The principal characteristic of this “Hombre nuevo” series was “de hacer una entrevista como medio más directo para establecer un problema específico [...] y cómo se busca resolver este problema” (“to do an interview as more direct means of establishing a specific problem and how one searches to resolve this problem”) (30 años 15).

This was a direct way of confronting the problem or theme of the film, and made for a clear, up-front experience for the viewer, with the filmmaker’s presence being both seen and heard. Also, these interview-based documentaries allowed the filmmakers to rely on a variety of voices, from expert to “hombre común”, depending on the context.

Agonía de la montaña, a documentary about the negative effects of deforestation in Costa Rica, takes a very matter-of-fact approach to the ecological problems facing the country at the time. It also rings true even today, as one of the more popular documentary themes in Costa Rica now is the environment, conservation and preservation of the rich natural resources of the country. Niehaus, as director and screenwriter, approaches the subject from the point of view of the audience, and builds a film that logically progresses through any and all questions his viewer might have. For example, one of the first scenes shows a truck lumbering up the mountain to the lumber mill, where we are shown a wasteland of tree trunks and the process of making the “raw” material into lumber. The narrator asks, “Hay suficiente madera para los pedidos de la próxima semana, pero habrá suficiente para los próximos tres años?” (There is enough wood to fill the requests for the upcoming week, but will there be enough for the next three years?) The film is made with an eye toward the future, looking at potential

problems a few years down the road. In this way, Niehaus' project is also educational, or at the least thought provoking. When the camera zooms in on a large tree being cut down, as it falls the narrator observes that it took "pocos minutos para destruir 50 años de vida, pocos meses para destruir una vida milenaria" (a few minutes to destroy 50 years of life, and a few months to destroy a millennia of life). This observation on the rapid growth of the problem could also be viewed as a commentary on the lack of respect for the environment, or an obsession with fulfilling the immediate needs of society.

The narrator plays an important role in the documentary, guiding the viewer through scientific facts and environmental problems and clarifying them when needed. I would call it a "voice of God" narration, although how much of that is due to the director's choice and how much is due to financial and technological limitations remains unclear. This voice of God is different in one aspect, however, than the traditional omniscient voice of God: it asks questions, questions with no immediate answer. These questions are formulated differently than Niehaus' own on-camera questions, which are staged to include him on screen, asking the question and interacting with the interviewee. However, some of these questions are problematic. For example, he asks a group of mill workers, obviously poor men, if it hasn't occurred to them that in the near future they might not have any forest left because of deforestation. The men look a bit perplexed, then agree with him, but the viewer is left wondering why exactly he is calling these workers out on something they have to do to survive, on something they have little control over. Perhaps a better solution might have been to critically look at the elements in society causing this demand for lumber, or at the owners of the land who were allowing it to be cut. This could be a question of access (or lack thereof), or of simple

planning, but this interaction problematizes a documentary that otherwise asks the right questions and observes important things. And while now Costa Rica is known for its strict conservation policies and environmental protection laws, the strained interaction between Niehaus and his film subjects shows the past tensions between industry and protectionism in the country.

In the last few minutes of the film, the narrator brings up the “ley forestal”, passed in 1969, just four years before this film was made. While this law was put into place to protect Costa Rican forests and land, it is obvious that something failed along the way, since the images the viewer is given are of a deforested wasteland. The viewer is able to observe “con sus propios ojos la realidad de nuestro país: nos estamos convirtiendo en desierto, por la sencilla razón de que el Estado costarricense ha sido irresponsable e incapaz en este campo” (with his own eyes the reality of our country: we are converting ourselves into a desert for the simple reason that the Costa Rican state (government) has been irresponsible and incapable in this area) (30 años 19). This is important because it shows a critique of the government, and while it may be subtle and at times implied, it gives the viewer a chance to see both the ethics and aesthetics of the documentary filmmaker. The film ends with more questions, these directed at the viewer, at the state, at the companies, using the collective nosotros and looking toward the future: “¿Podremos controlarnos? ¿Podremos detener la masacre de nuestros bosques?” (Can we control ourselves? Can we stop the massacre of our forests?). In these questions, the forest becomes more than an inanimate object, and is personified as something that we are killing. In conclusion, this film celebrates Costa Rica’s natural beauty, but also serves as a warning for the viewer about the consequences of their actions.

The second film made by the Department was Carlos Freer's Desnutrición (1973), an important analysis of the causes of malnutrition in the country, and one of the first in-depth looks at the "miseria extrema" (extreme misery) that existed (and persists) in Costa Rica. Lacking access to this film, I progress to an analysis of the third documentary made by the Department, 1974's Para qué tractores sin violines, also part of the "Hombre nuevo" series. This documentary, also directed by Ingo Niehaus, was filmed mainly in color (with certain scenes in black and white) and shows growth in control of the camera and scene composition. However, in many ways this documentary is not a celebration of Costa Rican culture but instead an exaltation of European high culture and the country's need to emulate European values.

The title of this film comes from a José Figueres Ferrer speech on the role of culture in Costa Rican society, and why it continues to be important.¹² Roughly translated, it means "What good are tractors without violins?" and refers to the country's strong agro-export economy of bananas and coffee (tractors) and comments on how the money made on these products should be invested back into the arts and cultural spaces in order to create a more enriching experience for all citizens. The documentary takes a literal approach to the quote, deciding to focus on the Orquesta Sinfónica Juvenil (Youth Symphony Orchestra), specifically the violinists in the group. The opening scene comes from the Orchestra's first performance in November of 1973 at the Teatro Nacional in San José, and introduces the viewer to the orchestra and the children playing in it. The viewer is then taken into the life of a young, lower to middle class violinist, practicing at home in his bedroom. His dedication is evident, and he soon packs up to go practice with

¹² See chapter one for more information on Costa Rican president "Don Pepe" Figueres and his role in defining and framing current "tica" culture.

other symphony members. The narration begins at this point, saying “Costa Rica es un país pobre, sin ejército, con 2 millones de habitantes, conocido por su exportación de café y bananas” (Costa Rica is a poor country, without an army, with two million inhabitants and is known for its exportation of coffee and bananas). By presenting Costa Rica in such a matter-of-fact way, and by sticking just to the facts, the narrator presents a very flat, dry version of life in the country. When he says “Nuestro pueblo es un pueblo sin drama, para bien y para mal” (Our country is without drama, for good and bad), the viewer can only deduce that life in Costa Rica must be peaceful, but exceedingly boring.

It is in the next scene of the documentary that the viewer might begin to realize why the country was presented in such a way: to juxtapose the bland reality of day-to-day living with the exciting artistic potential of the Symphony. The narration picks up, becoming more animated in tone, and the camera begins to explore new angles of filming in order to capture the young musicians hard at work. This practice session is run much like an army drill, with the instructor keeping the children in line when they begin to lose concentration: “No es ruido—esta es música!” (This is not noise, it is music). After this strict practice session, in a dark indoor room, the filming moves to an outdoor soccer field. Light permeates the scene, and it is action-oriented, showing the same young violinist playing soccer with his friends. This juxtaposition of indoor and outdoors, of darkness and light, of control and freedom could be viewed as many things, including as a (subtle) directorial commentary on the “natural” state of childhood, to show the freedom of youth in this more common context of soccer as opposed to the strict regimen of the orchestra. However, this outdoor fun ends for our young violinist, when he is called in by his mother in order to go to symphony practice again.

This dedication in such young children is noteworthy, although the viewer might wonder how much is actually of their own volition and how much is imposed by the program. The vice minister of culture is interviewed later in the documentary, and the interview is telling for its focus on cultural practices in the country as well as on the foreign as example par excellence. “Es inútil pensar en un proyecto como aquí tenemos en Costa Rica si no establece de antemano una política cultural de largo plazo, capaz de garantizar la continuidad que los músicos necesitan para su formación” (It is useless to think about a project that we have here in Costa Rica if we do not first establish a long range cultural policy, capable of guaranteeing the continuity that our musicians need for their formation). This quote shows firstly the importance of Costa Rica’s cultural policies in the development of its musicians. The following statements, however, show just how important foreign influence is in order to achieve a fully developed musical force: “Primero, la clave es la estabilidad de que puedan gozar de los músicos importados, y segundo, de que la música extranjera deja su enseñanza en Costa Rica” (First, the key is that they are able to enjoy imported music, and secondly, that foreign music is instructed in Costa Rica). Since this quote is included in the documentary, it serves a variety of purposes, one of which is obviously to show the priorities of the Ministry of Culture, who hired a U.S. citizen to direct the Orchestra. Niehaus, through editing and scene composition, also makes what I consider to be another subtle critique of the cultural policies, of looking to the foreign for help and guidance instead of relying on the talent native to the country. The focus on orchestral music also shows a preference for “high” European art forms versus more popular or folkloric forms of expression (which would become more common in the late 1970s).

The last scenes of the film are cut with the screen credits, and show an idyllic mountaintop view of the city on a clear day. The young musicians we have seen throughout then appear, carrying their instruments with them and walking hand in hand. It is a joyful, optimistic scene, perhaps because it finds the children in a countryside environment as opposed to the previous “urban” scenes. I do not mean to suggest that the orchestra program was unnatural, or that it did a disservice to the musicians involved, but I do feel that certain critiques, on the part of the director and editing team, are present, and while subtle, are an important component of the documentary.

Perhaps one of the best examples of a documentary combining ethic and aesthetic is in Carlos Freer’s La cultura del guaro (1975). It is described thusly by Costa Rican newspaper La República: “Desde el título hasta la última imagen, el documental es un acierto no solo por su calidad técnica, sino, por su contenido y por la triste realidad que describe” (From its title to the last image, the documentary is a wise move not only for its technical quality but especially for its content and the sad reality it describes) (30 años 25). The documentary opens with the sound of sirens and an obviously drunk man being escorted into prison, describing how he feels: “Es un frío, un gran frío...No quiero seguir así” (It is cold, very cold...I don’t want to continue this way). This is an extreme example of the effects of alcohol, and while the documentary moves to more subdued examples later, this is an undoubtedly a strong opening scene to grab the viewer’s attention. The next scene is in a small cantina (bar), with a song extolling the virtues of guaro, an extremely strong unfiltered alcohol, playing in the background (El guaro blanco es alimento). It shows a family atmosphere, happy and relaxed, and while people are drinking it is in moderation. However, it then jumps to more extreme scenes of

drunkenness, of men passed out on sidewalks and in curbs, stumbling down streets. All of this is done without any type of narration, allowing the images and the scene composition to speak for themselves, a bold move on Freer's part that succeeds in calling the viewer's attention to the harsh reality of alcoholism.

The entire first half of the documentary is dedicated to exploring how alcoholism is a medical disease, along with its symptoms and how it affects not only the person afflicted but everyone around them. Freer allows experts, doctors and psychologists, to speak on the reality of alcoholism, and relies on them to provide important statistics on alcoholism, such as a hospital psychologist saying "Hay más que 70.000 personas alcohólicas en este país, que afectan a 300.000 otras personas" (There are more than 70,000 alcoholics in this country, who affect more than 300,000 other people). He goes on to say that alcoholism is most definitely a medical illness, and a chronic one at that. Later, a narrator appears, presenting the viewer with even more scientific and statistical data on alcoholism, all with the goal of convincing the viewers, that there is most definitely a problem in the country.

While this scientific data is presented for a definite purpose, some of the strongest scenes in the film are the personal testimonies, from people who were or still are alcoholics. One of the more captivating testimonies comes from a man in a darkened room, with only a small light above him and his face blurred out, talking about his permanent desire to drink, and how he feels uncontrollable after his first sip of alcohol. The documentary then proceeds to examine possible causes of this addiction, by looking at advertising for alcohol in the countryside and in the city. The resulting product is a three-minute montage of what seems to be every cantina fluorescent sign in the country,

advertising their special brand of liquor. The editing and filming are quick yet fluid, lingering just long enough for the viewer to experience the sheer quantity of places available for alcoholics to feed their addiction.

Not every testimony or fact presented is negative, and success stories are given. Don Antonio, a recovering alcoholic, talks about the control alcohol had over his life, and gives credit to Alcoholics Anonymous for saving him. However, while he tells his story, the camera pans over the faces of his family members, whose faces are drawn, and whose overall demeanor is uncomfortable. This focus on other family members shows just how alcoholism affects everyone, not just the alcoholic. Another bracing statistic comes just after this testimony, telling us that “En Costa Rica hay 9.000 cantinas. Hay más cantinas que escuelas y colegios, que hospitales, iglesias, gimnasios—que todo esto junto” (In Costa Rica there are 9,000 cantinas. There are more cantinas than schools, hospitals, churches, gyms, more than of all these combined).

This precise mixture of testimony and statistics is what makes the documentary so powerful. A statistic without a human face means little, and Freer understands this. While giving statistics for how many and what kinds of alcoholic beverages are consumed by Costa Ricans every year, flashes of images and words appear on the screen for just a second, in a type of subliminal messaging. The first is a black screen with white lettering “¡Qué siga el vacilón! (Long live the clown), and the second is a clip of the drunk, toothless man who opened the film. These quick flashes give meaning to the statistics, and make them more than just numbers. After all, that seems to be the motivation behind the making of the documentary: to show that advertising is not

harmless, to show that a culture of guaro is not desirable, and to make the audience, in this case, Costa Ricans, put a human face to the suffering.

The next documentary that this chapter looks at is Los presos (The Prisoners, 1975). It was directed by Victor Ramírez, and is also part of the “Hombre nuevo” series, aiming to put a human face to the suffering in the country’s penitentiary systems. Los presos is a social documentary at its best, drawing on influences from another groundbreaking New Latin American Cinema documentary, Fernando Birri’s Tire Dié. The similarities are present in the material being covered, in the scene composition, in camera angles and in narration. Another possible cinematic influence, although not as immediately apparent, could be found in Luis Buñuel’s fiction feature Los olvidados about the lives of Mexico City’s street children. An Italian neorealist aesthetic can be seen throughout, and a Costa Rican newspaper called the documentary “cinema verité”.

Los presos opens with a close up shot of a group of smiling young boys, shy because the camera is on them, but seemingly happy and content, just as children should be in an ideal world. This opening scene will be important for the second half of the documentary, although the viewer may question its relevance at first, since the documentary then jumps into another close shot, but this time of a toothless, dirty man behind bars, talking about the crimes that put him there. He tells the camera, “Me ha condenado por delitos pequeños” (They have condemned me for small crimes) and while he describes these small crimes, a close up shot captures his weathered hands gripping the cell bars. This personal testimony as a way to open a film, to introduce the audience to another perspective on the subject, was also used (to great effect) in La cultura del guaro.

The viewer is then introduced to life inside the national penitentiary, showing the prison yard, littered with trash and dead rodents, and little else. Prisoners sit on a wall, their legs hanging over the edge, swinging back and forth, in a scene that seems to indicate boredom but could also be a reflection of daily life behind bars. Time seems to stand still, and little seems to change. This is all presented in a bird's eye viewpoint, and then a narrator's voice is introduced for the first time. This narrator addresses the viewer with a voice of God omniscience, presenting statistics that show how overcrowded the prison is now compared to when it was first built (300 prisoners in 1905; 1200 in 1975). These statistics lend an objective tone to the documentary, and while Ramírez certainly has a point of view, he wisely supports it with "objective" facts, in order to "despertar a una colectividad local o nacional, en su mayor parte indiferente o en el mejor de los casos engañada o desengañada" (to awaken a local or national collectivity, for the most part indifferent or in the best of cases tricked or deceived) (Paranaguá 290). This quote, taken from Antonio Paranaguá's essay about Tire dié, could easily apply to this documentary, as it seems to be made to awaken a national conscience to the injustices of their own criminal "justice" system.

The first third of the documentary focuses on daily life inside the prison, and makes an effort to individualize the masses, to make the viewer see people instead of prisoners. When a man says "Nosotros no tenemos Dios, el dios de nosotros escapó" (We don't have a god, our god escaped), the viewer can not only see but feel a palpable hopelessness inside the prison, and when another man says "El crimen verdadero es el sistema" (The true crime is the system), the viewers are able to grasp the validity of the statement. This quote leads to the second part of the documentary, wherein Ramírez

examines the conditions in Costa Rican society that have contributed to the sheer number of prisoners in the penitentiary system. This part begins outside the prison walls again, showing a large group of children, mainly young boys, playing outside, but this time the scene is less idyllic, as the viewer is made aware that they are not carefree but instead are homeless, searching for food, or simply passing time. A female narrator's voice is then heard, only the second time in the documentary that a narrator is present, talking about a 1969 survey that found over 1100 children were abandoned and homeless in the country. The scene then cuts back to a bird's eye view of the prison, then again to the abandoned children on the streets, making a very literal connection and showing how today's homeless children can become tomorrow's criminals if nothing is done to prevent child abandonment.

The next series of scenes is where the connection to Los olvidados can be seen most clearly, as a nun leads class outside with a group of homeless boys, showing how the Church's role as an intermediary can and does make a difference, showing that not all hope is lost. A prisoner behind bars then begins to talk about his childhood, about how he learned to smoke marijuana, to drink guaro and do drugs, all while in a juvenile reform center for abandoned children, and we see how the system has failed these children. The voice of God narrator (again masculine), explains that "Podemos gastar millones en educación, en cárceles, pero mientras las calles de nuestras ciudades siguen siendo pobladas de niños abandonados, sin pan y amor, podemos estar seguros de que, a pesar de toda la educación, la delincuencia de los cárceles sea cada día mayor" (We can spend millions on education and prisons, but while our city streets continue to be populated by abandoned children, without bread or love, we can be sure that the crime in our prisons

will grow greater every day). This last speech amounts to what I would consider a call to action. After awakening the country's collective conscience to the problem, the documentary then asks us, the viewer, to do something about it. But what exactly? The ending is rather ambiguous, as if it is enough to show the problem, and now it is up to society to find an answer. Or perhaps the intended audience is the State, whose role in creating the problem is evident, and who therefore must have a role in the remedy. It is a critique of the Costa Rican government policy, but also a critique of the society which is content to ignore the problem. On a larger scale, the international viewer could feel called out as well, for the economic situation in the country that foreign policy helped create. In this way, Los presos follows Birri's social documentary agenda, "que la función del documental social en América Latina es la de no escamotear al pueblo, sino denunciar, enjuiciar, criticar y desmontar la realidad que documenta" (that the role of the Latin American social documentary is not to keep the information hidden from the public but to denounce, judge, criticize and to dismantle the reality that it documents) (Paranaguá 291).

Along these same lines of criticizing the reality that is being documented is Victor Vega's Las cuarentas (1975), whose title refers to the police call code for prostitution. As its name implies, this documentary deals with the social problem of prostitution in Costa Rica, and is also part of the "Hombre nuevo" series. Vega's presence is very strong throughout the film, as he often appears in it as an interviewer, but voice over narration is kept to a minimum. Again, the tone of the documentary is one of criticizing the existence of prostitution, but not the prostitutes themselves, who are portrayed as victims of the societal conditions that allow prostitution. Women, when asked why they

became prostitutes, speak of financial concerns or familial obligations that pushed them into the “business.” Vega does not just examine prostitution, however. He looks at alcoholism, drug use, child abandonment, and the penitentiary systems, all subjects of previous national documentaries, as examples of societal ills that contribute to the problem. Also examined is the role of the foreigner, the gringo, who comes to Costa Rica as a “sex tourist.” The tone is sympathetic toward the prostitutes themselves, but presents a harsh critique of the State that allows such conditions to develop. La Nación, the most important Costa Rican daily, wrote about Las cuarentas in 1975: “Documental no convencional. Las imágenes hablan por sí mismas. Como documental cumple una alta misión humana, positiva, que seguramente redundará en una toma de acción” (An unconventional documentary. The images speak for themselves. As a documentary it fulfills a high human mission, positive, that will surely result in action being taken) (30 años 35).

Las cuarentas is the last documentary examined in this chapter that can be categorized as pertaining to Cortés’ first category of a cinematic preoccupation with the country’s social problems. It does illustrate very well the Departamento’s social agenda, to not just function as a diagnostic tool, an X-ray, but to also demystify “la imagen de la Costa Rica culta y educada, armónica y excepcional” (the image of Costa Rica as cultured and educated, harmonious and exceptional) (EEI 118).

Costa Rica’s image as the Switzerland of Central America had long been cultivated by the State, and many people were unhappy with the work of the Department of Cinema and its filmmakers, calling their films “periodismo amarillista” (yellow journalism), determined to destroy Costa Rica’s international reputation. Antonio

Yglesias, a filmmaker whose work will be discussed at greater length in chapter five, recalls a visit then-President Figueres paid to the Department of Cinema after Agonía de la montaña was released. “Vino don Pepe a la mesa de edición. Él estaba en total desacuerdo con la postura del documental” (Don Pepe (Figueres) came to the editing table, and he was in total disagreement with the position of the documentary). While there were certain issues with leadership, other relationships worked well, such as that with the Minister of Culture, Carmen Naranjo, who was appointed in 1974 (and resigned in 1976, just a week after the censorship of the last film discussed in this chapter, Costa Rica: Banana Republic). Naranjo, a distinguished author (and also co-founder of Istmo Film with Antonio Yglesias) worked to distribute national cultural products to marginalized sectors of society who were often overlooked, and was open to a critical vision of the national reality, having served as a foreign ambassador to Israel before her appointment to the Ministry of Culture.

And there is no better example of a film that criticizes the Costa Rican national reality than Ingo Niehaus’ 1976 documentary Costa Rica: Banana Republic, a groundbreaking documentary for the country both stylistically (aesthetically) and ethically (in tone and criticism). This documentary shows the evolution from the first phase of social themes to the second phase of cultural themes, (anti) imperialism and development issues. It also was the first Costa Rican film to be officially censored by the government for its content, a move that will be discussed after a brief analysis of the documentary. Also a part of the “Hombre nuevo” series, Costa Rica: Banana Republic takes a mixed media approach to documentary, incorporating photographs, paintings, and even a puppet show to demonstrate how a political message can be transmitted

cinematically, or as Niehaus himself said, “Dieciséis minutos contra cien años de Banana Republic” (16 minutes against 100 years of a banana republic) (EEI 122).

Costa Rica: Banana Republic was originally made for an international United Nations conference in Montreal, Canada on human settlements, or habitats (30 años 49). However, before the conference the Costa Rican government “retiró la película de la Conferencia e impidió su proyección pública durante largo tiempo” (pulled the film from the conference and impeded its public projection for a long time) (EEI 122). What in the film provoked such a strong government reaction? After all, the general consensus in Latin America at the time was that the documentary “es considerada débil desde el punto de vista estético” (is considered weak from an aesthetic point of view) according to a newspaper article (EEI 123). While I take issue with this statement, and will discuss it later, the point remains that the film was not a traditional denunciatory documentary. It opens with a puppet stage, and a curtain that opens as a voice, less of a narrator and more of an announcer, tells the viewers “Bienvenidos. Hemos creado para esta ocasión un programa que esperamos será de vuestro agrado” (Welcome. We have created for this occasion a program that we hope will be pleasing to you). It then goes on to show a map of Latin America, showing a black sock puppet attacking the region of Central America. This black puppet represents the “mano negra” of the United States and their imperialist interests, but it is done with an ironic tone.

The viewer is then given a brief history of commerce in Central America, all done through vivid, colorful paintings of coffee workers, vibrant port scenes, and happy workers. Coffee is of course mentioned, but bananas are the crop that is called into question, since 90% of the industry was controlled by three U.S. companies, which ran

their companies from the U.S. The reality was grim, at least as the documentary tells it. The banana workers (bananeras), numbered more than 25,000, and their conditions were horrible. They work 10 hours daily, hauling bananas from the field to the warehouse to trucks. This is documented in a scene that takes a worm's eye view of the worker, focusing on his dirty feet and tattered clothing, then slowly tilting upward to show the large bundle of bananas he is pulling across an open field. This is a scene that must have influenced the Nicaraguan documentary Bananeras (1982), as they are so similarly composed.¹³

The main critique of the film is reserved for the international companies who control the industry from their pristine white offices in the U.S., deciding the fate of thousands of workers based on world economics and the market price of bananas. The documentary also critiques the power of economics, and the greed of foreign companies, as seen in a basic explanation of economics. The puppet show curtain opens again, and a blue circle is shown. A tiny top section of this circle is then cut off (those that take) and removed from the larger bottom portion (those that produce). The same black hand puppet then reaches from the top down into larger portion, taking out coffee, petroleum, and bananas. Of course the bottom portion is Costa Rica, a supply country, which is at the bottom of the food chain, so to speak.

The top of the chain, at least in the documentary, is the “banana heiress,” or the heirs of the owners of the banana companies, whose only job is to “comer, comer y comer banano” (to eat, eat, eat bananas). This heiress is then followed by a U.S. CEO

¹³ See chapter four for a more detailed analysis of Bananeras, a documentary by the director of INCINE, Ramiro Lacayo. It focuses on the Nicaraguan banana industry, pre- and post-Sandinista Revolution, and documents conditions similar to what Costa Rica: Banana Republic shows.

who controls the business end, whose job is to “supervisar el precio de banano” (supervise the bananas price), and then finally by the Costa Rican banana worker, who does all the work and yet only receives the leftovers. According to Cortés, the heiress is played by a professional actress, and an actor plays the part of the CEO, showing Niehaus’ ability to mix fiction and documentary styles for effect (irony and sarcasm).

The end of the film deals with the developing solidarity between producing countries like Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, Ecuador and Colombia, and how defeat of the transnationals can only be achieved through this solidarity. However, it was not an easy path, as Niehaus describes, and the actions of this group (to raise the price of bananas and decrease the level of exports), “provocó la ira de los dioses” (provoked the rage of the gods). The gods, of course, are the transnational companies, who could not stand to lose any market share to make the economic conditions of the workers even the slightest bit better. This critique is not, however, truly of the Costa Rican government, only of the foreign companies with a strong presence in the country. Citing reasons of current political situations (i.e. the Cold War), then President Oduber decided to censor the film, causing a period of great tension in the Ministry of Culture and the Department of Cinema, leading up to the resignation of Minister Naranjo and the “fin de fiesta” (end of the “party”) between the Ministry and the Departamento. In 1977, the Department became the Centro Costarricense de Producción Cinematográfica (CCPC), an independent entity with its own agenda and leadership. This period, from 1977 to 1983, will be discussed in chapter five as it pertains to Costa Rica’s establishment of cinematic relations with Nicaragua.

In conclusion, the documentaries discussed in this chapter are strong examples of an incipient national cinema, whose aesthetic and ethical evolution is evident throughout the years. The importance of the social documentary in early Costa Rican cinema showed the influence of New Latin American Cinema and also how it was adapted to fit the national situation at the time. By focusing on topics such as the environment, crime, alcoholism and prostitution, Costa Rican filmmakers were able to create a cinema that reflected the condition of the country at the time. Niehaus, Yglesias, Vega, Freer, and Moreno, among others, set out with a mission, to give a microphone to those without voice, the marginalized or subaltern classes, and succeeded insofar as they recognized the power of their cinematic technology and also its limitations.

Chapter four

A Nicaraguan Revolutionary Cinema: A Critical Look at INCINE's Successes and Failures

In this chapter, I will analyze the revolutionary national agenda in Nicaragua and its relation to a small but significant sampling of the body of work that INCINE filmmakers made between 1979 and 1984, as well as how these films were produced, distributed and exhibited. Since the majority of Nicaraguan films, and all Central American films for that matter, are not widely distributed, even within their own countries, this chapter will work with the available primary material, which extends up to 1984, which reflects the films I was allowed access to at the Cinemateca Nacional in Nicaragua during June of 2006. I also utilize theories of imperfect cinema, documentary modes of address and representation, axiographics, and the imperfect boundary between documentary and fiction, all detailed in chapter two to support my analysis of these films.

A discussion of Nicaraguan revolutionary film and cinematic agendas as seen through the organization of INCINE would be incomplete without a brief look at the circumstances surrounding its creation just two days after the Sandinistas taking of Managua in July 1979. Also significant are the parallels that can be drawn between the formation of INCINE and the creation of Cuba's ICAIC almost twenty years earlier. The significance of this influence is not coincidental; rather, Nicaraguan filmmakers looking to form a film institute did take their cue from Cuba's example par excellence, and indeed, had been receiving artistic and financial support and direction from Cuban filmmakers for at the least the last year of the insurrection. Since the second chapter of

this thesis dealt specifically with the Cuban cinematic influence as it related to a larger NLAC movement, this chapter will only briefly detail the uncanny similarities between the formation of both film institutes before progressing to an analysis of INCINE's formal and informal policies as seen through its ties (or lack thereof) with FSLN leadership and a study of its films (including newsreels, documentaries, and fictional accounts) and how their aesthetic value evolved over time. In order to distinguish my study from previous studies, I will also examine how these films function as party literature and help support the construction of hegemonic revolutionary class. To support this claim, I look at how the subject matter that the films cover and how they were received by the Nicaraguan viewing public, using Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa's theory of imperfect cinema in a revolutionary society.

Nicaragua experienced a cinematic history and tradition of Hollywood dominance, similar to that in pre-1959 Cuba, as detailed in chapter two, along with a comparable return to a national revolutionary cinema after its 1979 revolution. Nicaraguan arts and culture, both under the Somoza dictatorship and in the years preceding it, were stunted at best, and this included, of course, the film industry. Cultural production in Central America is considered to be the "periphery within the periphery"; that is within the marginalized region of Latin America, the isthmus' production is even further pushed to the periphery. The lack of growth in cinema industries illustrates this perfectly. Ana M. López notes that "Confirmed screenings using the Lumière apparatus took place shortly thereafter [1896]: in Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo and Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Santiago de Chile, Guatemala City and Havana" (101). It is interesting to note that most of these cities later developed film industries, with the exception of

Guatemala City, which as part of Central America is located in the figurative and literal “backyard” of the United States and therefore a built in market for export films.

Nicaragua too took on this identity as a dumping ground of sorts for Hollywood films.

John Ramírez also details this in his extensive studies of Nicaragua and its film history. Due to the constant U.S. and foreign presence in Nicaragua, it should not come as a surprise that Nicaragua served as a dropping off point for many U.S. movies, and there were more than 150 theaters in the major centers of commerce before the revolution to support said imperialistic cinema. Therefore, a culture of film viewing definitely existed beginning in the 1930s, even though a national cinema did not. Most notable for Ramírez is the Nicaraguan people’s recognition of this artistic repression and the history of cinematic imperialism, as shown in the Mexico- organized 1932 protests against Hollywood. “Given this fact, it is historically inaccurate to assume that no film culture predates the Sandinista cinema since Nicaraguans definitely recognized a history of cinematographic imperialism” (Ramírez 18). These protests not only demonstrate Nicaragua’s involvement in a Pan-Latin American movement, but also show a remarkable resilience to combat international influence, setting the stage for INCINE to create films that a film audience could relate to and call their own.

PRODUCINE, the national film industry during the Somoza dictatorship, is a perfect example of Somoza’s lack of dedication to the arts. In his essay, “El cine nace en Nicaragua,” Bolivian filmmaker Alfonso Gumucio Dagrón states: “As Somoza was the owner of the only producer of national cinema, he did not have the least interest in promoting cinematographic activity in the interest of the future of a national cinema. To the contrary, he would impede the development of any initiative that represented a threat

to his business” (15). This same article goes on to mention that the only real use of PRODUCINE was to irregularly produce a sort of weekly newscast that “...recorded the activities of the dictatorship and its collaborators” (Gumucio Dagrón 16). One positive aspect, cinematically speaking, that came from the PRODUCINE footage compiled during the dictatorship was its ability to be salvaged after the Sandinista victory for use in INCINE productions, most notably Bananeras, which will be discussed later in the paper.

Although Somoza had used his PRODUCINE to distribute the odd propaganda piece, it was never consistent, nor could it be considered art. After the July 19 victory, PRODUCINE headquarters were raided and “over 750,000 feet of newsreel footage, equivalent to well over 300 hours of viewing time” was found (Burton 43). With this footage, along with the *noticieros* of Santiago Alvarez in Cuba and his urgent cinema, INCINE had a model for its own *noticieros*: “It is [a model] to the degree that, like those responsible for the Cuban newsreel, we see the form as more than simply a vehicle for fragments of unconnected information” (Burton interview with Rodríguez Vázquez 43).

Because of the Sandinista Revolution’s anti-imperialist stance, there was a tendency to view the cinema of INCINE as a political tool to disseminate the ideology of the Revolution. Cuba, as a precursor to the Sandinista revolution and revolutionary culture, put an immediate emphasis on the establishment of ICAIC and cinema’s role not only as a political tool, but also as “privileged among the arts” (Buchsbaum 8). The revolution was dedicated to organizing revolutionary institutions like ICAIC and organizing people to work in a centralized fashion. On the other hand, in Nicaragua, the FSLN did establish the Ministry of Culture the day after the triumph, but lacked an organizational structure or coherency of message for its cinema branch. The INCINE

noticiero Historia de un cine comprometido (History of a Committed Cinema; 1983)

recognizes this, and says “This is why international support is fundamental for the development of our cinema [...] This is why we choose to make films with brother countries who provide us with capital, technicians and material.”

Thanks to the international community’s participation, along with Cuba’s unwavering dedication to both its own revolution and those of other countries, INCINE was formed. “Taking their cues from the Cubans, the heads of INCINE drew up preliminary plans for production, distribution, exhibition, and a mobile cinema” (Buchsbaum 9). INCINE had grand aspirations for its films, as seen in its declaration of purpose:

“El nuestro será un cine nicaragüense, lanzando a la búsqueda de un lenguaje cinematográfico que ha de surgir de nuestra realidad concreta y de las expresiones particulares de nuestra cultura. Partirá de una esfuerzo de investigación profunda en las raíces de nuestra cultura, porque sólo así podrá reflejar la esencia de nuestro ser histórico y contribuir al desarrollo del proceso revolucionario y de su protagonista: el pueblo nicaragüense” (Gumucio Dagrón 18).¹⁴

With this ambitious declaration for a cinema that “reflects the essence of our history and contributes to the development of the revolutionary process,” INCINE was attempting to establish itself as an important tool in the consolidation of the Sandinista revolution, that

¹⁴ Translation to the English provided by Jonathan Buchsbaum in Cinema and the Sandinistas “Ours will be a Nicaraguan cinema, launched in search of a cinematic language that must arise from our concrete reality and the specific experiences of our culture. It will begin with an effort of careful investigation into the roots of our culture, for only thus can it reflect the essence of our historical being and contribute to the development of the revolutionary process and its protagonist: The Nicaraguan people.”

was dedicated to exploring Nicaraguan culture and reflecting on the country's history and identity. It is here that we also see a direct acknowledgement that the function of the cinema is to help consolidate the revolution by contributing not only to the development of the revolutionary process but also to the development of the Nicaraguan people, the protagonist of the revolution. As the first woman filmmaker from INCINE, María José Álvarez, observed: "El proyecto de INCINE era dos partes: hacer cine, promover el cine nacional, y por otro lado era crear la memoria, memoria gráfica, del pueblo nicaragüense, del pueblo revolucionario. El objetivo fue grabar lo que pasaba con el proceso revolucionario, junto con el poder político del Frente" (Personal interview).¹⁵ In both of these definitions about the work of INCINE, we see a focus on the revolutionary people, on helping them recover a national identity and memory, through film and other cultural projects, such as television, poetry workshops and photography.

Álvarez, who began working for INCINE in 1979 at the age of 24, was raised as an upper-class Managuan, who lived in relative economic security with her family. At the age of 14, she was introduced to the liberation theology movement, and the work of famous Nicaraguan priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal, which had a consciousness-raising effect on her. "Y por otro lado, me eduqué por el movimiento de Paulo Freyre, de Ernesto Cardenal, la teología de la liberación, y yo tenía 14 o 15 años cuando empezó a hablar en la escuela sobre este movimiento, y para nosotros fue un descubrimiento, porque vivimos en un otro mundo, un mundo feliz, donde no te preguntabas nada"

¹⁵ Translation to the English by author: "INCINE's project was two pronged: to make cinema, to promote a national cinema, on one hand, and on the other, it was to create memory, a graphic memory, of the Nicaraguan people, the revolutionary people. The objective was to record what happened within the revolutionary process, working together with the FSLN."

(Álvarez, Personal interview).¹⁶ The poetry of Cardenal also influenced Álvarez, along with that of Joaquín Pasos and other Nicaraguan vanguards, all of whom contributed to her discovery of the “other” Nicaragua, and also contributed to the development of her sense of a Nicaraguan national identity.

Professionally trained in London and Boston, Massachusetts as a photographer, Álvarez was committed to developing a national archive of Nicaraguan images after realizing that most of what was recorded about Nicaragua was from a foreign perspective, or only recorded the wealthy or desirable elements of society, such as PRODUCINE, the Somozas’ film production company/propaganda machine. “No había una imaginación social, no teníamos una memoria social—no había una voz de los trabajadores, de los campesinos” (Álvarez).¹⁷ And, because “la fotografía es bien ligada al cine” (photography is very connected to film), her philosophy as a filmmaker, on what to document for INCINE, was similar to her photographer’s sensibility; that is, there was a strong desire to create a social memory, one where workers and peasants’ opinions were documented and voiced.

Yet even with INCINE’s seemingly profound assessment of the importance of the people, filmmaking and film viewing remained a vanguard movement, or an intellectual endeavor as evidenced in Cuba by Castro’s “Words to the Intellectuals” speech. In fact, Nicaragua adopted Castro’s language regarding cinema in both the establishment of INCINE in 1979 under the Ministry of Culture as well as in an excerpt from Historia de

¹⁶ “But on the other hand, I was educated by the movement established by Paul Freyre, and by Ernesto Cardenal, Liberation Theology, and I was 14 or 15 when they began to speak about this movement. For us, it was a discovery, because we lived in another world, a happy world, where you didn’t question anything.”

¹⁷ “There was not a social imaginary, we did not have a social memory—there was not a voice that represented the workers or the *campesinos*.”

cine comprometido, when a voiceover announces that “Cinema, being both an art form and an industry, requires organization and a considerable monetary investment.” But many have questioned what purpose this monetary investment actually served in relation to both the intended and actual audience. Or rather, did INCINE actually reach the people, or was it a purely academic endeavor meant to stroke the egos of the filmmakers, the academic vanguard, who were directly involved?

Because very little data actually exists on the subject of Nicaraguan viewership and consumer response to INCINE films, much of my analysis of this subject is rooted in Cuban revolutionary cinema theory and classification. I am aware that this type of analysis could be problematic, as it is very much rooted in an ideal environment of cultural production, as per the “imperfect cinema” theory of Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa and the documentary classification system of British film scholar Michael Chanan as briefly described in their greater NLAC context in chapter two. However, I feel that to address viewership, even in a potentially incomplete way, is better than ignoring it completely, as is the tendency of many scholars.

García Espinosa addresses the question of audience, albeit in an academic setting, in his 1965 essay “For an Imperfect Cinema.” In the essay, he comments that “It can be said that at present a greater audience exists for this kind of cinema than there are filmmakers able to supply that audience” (80). Important to note here is that García Espinosa is operating under the belief system that cinema should be used to support revolutionary ideals and further the construction of a hegemony within the revolution. He presents an all-inclusive outlook on art and cinema that is not concerned with finding an audience or with any desire to cater to one specific group. In fact, another fundamental

tenet of imperfect cinema is that there is no need to create an audience because one already exists. The ideal spectator will participate in cinema, not just as a consumer, but also as an eventual creator. “The new outlook for artistic culture is no longer that everyone must share the taste of a few, but that all can be creators of that culture” (García Espinosa 76). How much this was actually achieved in Cuba and Nicaragua is debatable, but certainly it was an ideal to aspire to. Mobile cinema, which will later be discussed in greater detail, was one of the more successful cinematic programs in both countries because of its dedication to marginalized urban and rural populations. It was able to involve them in the revolutionary process in a very real way, and certain INCINE films and policies illustrate this through different documentary typologies and modes of address.

García Espinosa has written much on the subject of revolutionary cinema and the dynamic relationship that the “pueblo revolucionario” could potentially have with this type of film, as opposed to the unidirectional relationship that was to be had with a Hollywood cinema. According to García Espinosa, the relationship between a revolutionary people and revolutionary film should be participatory, in which the audience is more than a spectator and has a creative role in the reception of the film and evolution of cinema itself. In the following quote García Espinosa focuses on the role of the revolutionary audience and the development of a “new critical consciousness” on the part of the audience:

“For imperfect cinema, ‘lucid’ people are the ones who think and feel and exist in a world, which they can change; in spite of all the problems and difficulties, they are convinced that they can transform it in a revolutionary way. Imperfect cinema

therefore has no need to struggle to create an audience. On the contrary, it can be said that at present a great audience exists for this kind of cinema than there are filmmakers able to supply that audience” (García Espinosa in Martin 80)

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this quote is that, for García Espinosa, the true power lies in the hands of those who believe in the revolutionary transformation of their society. And, if the majority of the population hold this belief, as we assume they do in a revolutionary society, it is no longer necessary for a filmmaker to have to fight to create an audience for his revolutionary film because the audience already exists. Also, according to this quote, with more demand for this type of cinema than is actually available, a creative door is opened for a new generation of filmmakers, to create more opportunities for representing the revolution, and so on in a cycle of ideal cultural production. It bears mentioning here that there is a concrete Nicaraguan example of films made by the people, for the people: the cinematic workshops held by foreign filmmakers in the early 1980s in a show of solidarity with the ideals of revolutionary cinema.

As utopic as García Espinosa often was, he also was able to look critically at the problems surrounding the film industry, especially its place as one of the more elite art forms, in terms of access and economic problems. “Perhaps film is the most elitist of all the contemporary arts. Film today, no matter where, is made by a small minority for the masses. Perhaps film will be the art form which takes the longest time to reach the hands of the masses, when we understand mass art as popular art, art created by the masses” (García Espinosa in Martin 76). This tendency to view film as art produced by a minority comes primarily from the cost of filmmaking and the lack of necessary equipment in order to film (along with a lack of knowledge about how to use such equipment, although

all this is changing in the 21st century). This left, during the time of the Cuban Revolution and Sandinista Revolution, the predictably upper-class, educated, male, white or “ladino” filmmaker to share his point of view.

Since it was a principal objective of the FSLN to give power to those who were left powerless during the Somoza regime, especially workers, campesinos, uneducated, and indigenous people, an attempt was made to extend a cinematic knowledge to these people with the Taller Popular de Video, founded in 1980 by a UNESCO grant. This workshop required the participation and guidance of foreign filmmakers, as did the education of “official” INCINE filmmakers, ironically. Bolivian filmmaker Alfonso Gumucio Dagrón and North American filmmaker Julia Lesage were two directors of the workshop, using a new video technology, Super 8, which was much less complicated and easier to use than the traditional 16 or 35 millimeter. The participating Nicaraguan organizations were the Central Sandinista de Trabajadores (Sandinista Workers’ Union) and the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (Rural Workers’ Association), and the task at hand for Lesage and Gumucio Dagrón was “to teach members how to make Super-8 films that would depict the lives, needs, and organizing efforts of the working class” (Lesage 335). By working with these local organizations, I posit that these workshops were an important component of a truly revolutionary cinema, and helped in the achievement of a FSLN and INCINE goal: the production of “un cine nicaragüense que recoja más altos valores culturales y revolucionarios para inculcar en nuestro pueblo una ideología sandinista” (Gumucio Dagrón 16). While this goal borders on utopic and idealistic, similar to García Espinosa’s “For an imperfect cinema,” this utopia should not

discount the important effort that these workshops undertook by helping to make the process of filmmaking, production and distribution more democratic and accessible.

The *noticiero* Historia de un cine comprometido, directed by Puerto Rican Emilio Rodríguez Vázquez, the same filmmaker who was quoted earlier in the chapter about imperfect cinema, presents a 15 minute overview of film production and consumerism in Nicaragua during the 20th century and attempts to “inculcar en nuestro pueblo una ideología sandinista”. While certain aspects of this documentary are problematic, it also serves as a good introduction to INCINE’s institutional point of view and preoccupation with the dominant role of Hollywood cinema in Nicaragua. Historia de un cine comprometido presents an indictment of this foreign cinema and the country’s reception of it: “The cinema of imperialism appears natural. Its message exerted a strong influence on our values and ambitions in life.” Old Hollywood images of cowboys and Indians, the gringo in Mexico, promiscuous women and horror are all harshly and individually critiqued throughout the film, as they were most often represented in the “cinema of imperialism” that Rodríguez critiques. So when the film’s narrator casually says, “Let’s have another look” at these imperialist images, it is done with the intent of educating the audience about how these images are dangerous, and how the “pueblo revolucionario” of Nicaragua should develop an awareness of the role film can have in shaping tastes and ideologies.

Historia de un cine comprometido takes clips of traditional Hollywood fare that was shown in Nicaragua and analyzes them through the “lens” of the revolution. For the exploited woman, the voice over says, “She is a sexual object, only worth something when she is young.” For the young, white, “super hero,” the voice over says, “He fights

against any force that threatens consumer society and always wins against opposing odds.” For the bloody horror clips, it is said that “They make us forget our real social problems and bewitch us with fake images of horror.” Finally, for the misrepresented “Latin,” it is said that “They present us as backwards, a people impoverished by imperialism...This is how they justify their mass murders and capitalist exploitation.” While this is an exaggerated version of the events, aimed at shocking and appalling, I find certain elements of truth in these critiques that are still applicable today; that any critical viewer of Hollywood cinema could find these images in any current movie. Especially relevant is the mention of horror as a distraction from the real societal problems, which would be much more horrifying if anyone really took the time to analyze them.

Yet another cinematic program that underlined the importance of the revolutionary people’s participation in Nicaragua, as in Cuba, was *cine movíl* or mobile cinema. Mobile cinema in Cuba and Nicaragua operated under ICAIC and INCINE, respectively. The programs were specifically cinematic, but with an overlying political message: The Revolution brings you modernity and inclusion as part of a nation-building process. Everything you wanted but were denied under Batista (or Somoza), including film, the great indicator of civilization, the Revolution now gives it freely to you. While this was an implied message, it was conveyed clearly and with a purpose.

The mobile cinema program in Nicaragua had a variety of purposes, but Buchsbaum highlights that “Mobile cinema brought cinema to areas without permanent theaters, mainly in the countryside and in poor urban neighborhoods [...] The specific *raison d’être* of mobile cinema was to screen films for audiences without theaters,

electricity or any experience of film. Mobile cinema enjoyed a monopoly, with ‘unspoiled’ spectators” (Buchsbaum 109). The idea of the unspoiled spectator is important for mobile cinema insofar as it allows for a captive audience, one who is necessarily fascinated with the cinematic product and finds it new and interesting. In this way, the populations that were marginalized under the dictatorships and regimes were incorporated into the revolution through cinema and the revolution was consolidated amongst populations who felt that their quality of life was exponentially better after the revolution than before it.

Because Historia de un cine comprometido deals specifically with INCINE’s mobile cinema program and documents exactly how it worked, it is a useful source. It verbally acknowledges that cinema is a consolidation tool, when the omniscient voice over says, “The people who show these films go into the farthest reaches of the country to bring people previously ignored the message that cinema brings.” The fact that this is being said while footage of an INCINE mobile cinema unit (clearly marked and labeled for easy understanding) transports cameras and equipment with a donkey going over a mountain range, and also while in a canoe in some remote corner of the country, indicates the power that INCINE and the Sandinistas found in the image of self-sacrificing revolutionaries bringing modernity to the marginalized.

For example, in the Miskito region of Nicaragua, many mobile cinema units were deployed there because of its important political location during the Contra War. This is a clear case of culture (a revolutionary national cinema) being mobilized to the same extent as politics and economics, in a complementary way. By using cinema to help certain marginalized groups feel like members of the revolution, and by extension the

country, the revolutions were giving these marginalized groups a sense of place and purpose within it. In Myerson's words, "More important than serving the pre-Revolution audience, in ICAIC's perspective, is taking the cinema to the peasantry. So our efforts have been concentrated on this public and in the areas where the cinema was once unknown, we now have 13 million moviegoers a year" (20). I find it especially relevant that the non-traditional moviegoer was where mobile cinema focused its attention, so that cinema ceased to be only for the elites and became something shared between urban and rural communities in a post-revolutionary context. It was through its mobile cinema unit that INCINE came closest to achieving its original proposal, "to transform the current relations between the cinema and the population" (Buchsbaum 110).

With the question of revolutionary film audiences addressed, we can progress to a discussion of one of the first genres INCINE undertook after its creation in 1979, the *noticiero* or newsreel. The previously analyzed Historia de un cine comprometido is part of this category and is an example of how the relatively low cost of producing these *noticieros* meant that a large number were made on a variety of subjects. In fact, in its first year, "INCINE concentrated exclusively on producing *noticieros*, most shot in 35 mm black and white. In the early years, INCINE finished a *noticiero* about once a month. *Noticiero* production, which continued on a fairly regular basis for four years and ended in early 1985, provided a training ground for young filmmakers" (Buchsbaum 12). INCINE filmmaker María José Álvarez echoes this sentiment, of the *noticiero* as a training ground, a stepping stone, for young filmmakers to learn not only the logistics of filming, but also an ethical code of conduct and an aesthetic style. "Lo que me propusieron cuando entré en INCINE fue hacer el *noticiero* porque no tuve mucha

experiencia. Realmente, era impresionante, aprendía mucho, era como un primer paso, como una escuela para trabajar con un equipo, trabajar con una cámara, un cameraman, el sonido, y un equipo de investigación. Y tenía que aprender todo esto para aprender a dirigir” (Personal Interview).¹⁸ It is in these *noticieros*, whose coverage ranged from literacy campaigns to indigenous populations, that one can most clearly see the connection with the Costa Rican social documentary detailed in chapter three and elaborated further in chapter five.

The role of a standard newsreel in film production was originally imagined as “recording a given reality,” or a way to quickly disseminate news in an era when “up to the minute” coverage was imperative, especially during wartime (Burton 239). But while these early newsreels made claims that they were simply documenting reality, filmmakers used editing devices and techniques to manipulate the audience. Perhaps two of the most famous examples are the Battles of Manila and Santiago Bays, whose respective newsreels were filmed in bathtubs, because “[...] these early ‘newsreel’ producers felt little compunction to adhere to the facts; a professional code of objectivity did not prevail” (Burton 11). These bathtub battles serve “[...] as a warning of the cinema’s potential for manipulation and falsification” (*ibid.* 11). This background on falsified newsreel images is particularly useful as it sheds light on the newsreel’s potential role as a disseminator of propaganda, for capitalist and socialist governments alike.

¹⁸ “What they proposed to me when I entered in INCINE was to make *noticieros* because I did not have much experience. Truthfully, I was impressionable, I learned a lot, and it was like a first step. It was a school to learn how to work with a team, to work with a camera, a cameraman, sound and an investigative team. And I had to learn all of this in order to learn how to direct.”

While the standard *noticiero* is not, by any means, a Cuban creation, the revolutionary *noticiero* of INCINE certainly found its roots in Cuban filmmaker Santiago Álvarez' groundbreaking montage-like cinematic essays. According to Jorge Fraga, longtime head of ICAIC's film production department, there were two reasons why Cuba found it necessary to re-imagine the standard *noticiero*. "The most important of these is political. Because of film's all-too-familiar virtues—the universality of the image—the newsreel is called to fulfill a basic role in popular political education. The second factor is material. We print only 60 copies of each Weekly Newsreel...To compensate for the delay, our newsreels must retain their interest for at least that long" (Burton 241). These two motives apply directly to post 1979-film production in Nicaragua, where the material and political limitations surrounding INCINE were similar.

Regarding Álvarez' distinctive montage visuals and striking political commentary, the ICAIC *noticiero* became a model of what a *noticiero* could achieve. Álvarez himself said, "Give me two photographs, a moviola and some music and I'll give you a movie" (Burton 127). With his advertising background, Álvarez worked with what little he had, and was "often obliged to draw from existing film archives and such 'second-hand' sources as news photos and television footage" (Burton 127). For Buchsbaum, "The Cuban influence was less evident then, in function and structure, but more apparent in style. Titles, freeze frames are staples of the Cuban *noticieros* used for rhetorical emphasis" (45). When INCINE filmmaker Carlos Vicente Ibarra was asked by Julianne Burton whether or not the newsreel produced in Cuba under the direction of Santiago Álvarez was a potential model for the *noticiero* work of INCINE, Ibarra responded: "It is to the degree that, like those responsible for the Cuban newsreel, we see the form as more

than simply a vehicle for fragments of unconnected information. We conceive of each newsreel as having a unity of theme and structure—more like a documentary film than a standard newsreel” (Burton 43). In the following analysis of INCINE *noticieros*, I also argue that the style and tone are resonant of the Cuban model, but in terms of events and themes covered, a more social documentary outlook is preferred, wherein the film has a human subject or subjects and a descriptive or transformative concern.

The first INCINE *noticiero*, Nacionalización de las minas, was made in color in 1979, and directed by the future INCINE head Ramiro Lacayo. It is a stylized *noticiero*, perhaps more so than future efforts, with a definite focus on form and composition. Photos of a scowling Sandino and his guerrillas from the 1920s and 30s are juxtaposed with images of a new Nicaragua, from women compadres with rifles to artistic shots of a rainbow, symbolizing a new beginning for the miners. As the title implies, the *noticiero* depicts the nationalization of the country’s gold mines, which were once U.S. property, “las compañías explotadoras”, but now, thanks to the progress of the revolution, will belong to the miners themselves. The *noticiero* opens with an old man, who we later learn is a veteran of Sandino’s wars on the U.S. Marines talking of his memories of fighting with Sandino. He fades away, and the new Sandinistas fill the screen, men and women, young adults, and sometimes even children. In many ways, this first *noticiero* is more a symbolic nod of appreciation to Sandino’s legacy than an actual commentary on the work of the Revolution, but many anti-imperialist overtones are still present, reminding the viewer why the Revolution is necessary. It is what Chanan would call *cine rescate*, or cinema of recovery, at its finest, as it serves to recall the best of Nicaragua and recover what makes it unique. As the troops in 1979 ask: “¿Qué significa la palabra

‘nacional’? Que estas propiedades dejan de ser propiedad extranjera y ahora son propiedad del pueblo” (What does the word ‘national’ mean? It means that these properties cease to be foreign property and will now belong to the people).

The second *noticiero*, 1979: año de la liberación, a black and white also directed by Lacayo and Frank Pineda, takes a more celebratory tone as it juxtaposes images of intense violence during the Somoza regime with the intense happiness following the FSLN’s triumph in July of 1979. Stylistically, it is perhaps the most similar to Álvarez’ ICAIC *noticiero*, as it incorporates stills of newspaper headlines and other *guerrilleros*, artists and musicians set to a jubilant tune. It also takes images of tanks, guerrilla warfare, bombings, and intense violence and sets them to the staccato of machine gunfire. It tells, quite effectively, the story of the insurrection and triumph through fairly simple visuals and minimal audio, although contrast editing is used to great effect to juxtapose the peaceful images of post-Revolutionary Nicaragua with the violence and death of the insurrection. Simple one line quotes predominate over traditional narration, with one of the more memorable being that of a child saying “Sigo marchando—Patria libre o morir” (I will keep on marching—Free homeland or death). The *noticiero* ends with a black screen and the sound of a typewriter writing out the following: “Nombre: FSLN. Origen: Sandino. Misión: Liberar a su país.” The mixed media approach that the *noticiero* takes in its use of newspaper headlines and still photography to tell a story is evocative of the Cuban model.

The third *noticiero*, 1980: Plan económico, is where the beginnings of a social documentary outlook can be felt. There is also a definite overtone of “cine didáctico”, wherein INCINE attempts to teach the people about the importance of hard work and

solidarity. While these are good messages in and of themselves, they feel a bit forced within the context of this *noticiero*, where it is obvious that the workers, the *campesinos*, do understand the value of hard work and do support each other, and were doing it long before the Revolution. The importance of an economic plan, the *noticiero* announces, is “para resolver los problemas del país si no hay producción” (to resolve the problems of the country when there is no production). Stylistically, this *noticiero* falls short of the first two, seemingly more concerned with its message of solidarity than its form. That being said, a few truly memorable images of campesinos shouting “Viva la unidad obrero-campesina! Viva al pueblo!” (Long with worker-peasant unity! Long live Nicaragua!).

Sometimes, the INCINE *noticiero* played a more significant role in the development of FSLN policies, as was the case with La Reforma Agraria, or *noticiero* number seven. It presents a fairly cohesive vision for how the FSLN was to achieve one of its more difficult goals, agrarian reform, which in Nicaragua meant a redistribution of land traditionally held by foreign companies into the hands of the workers, the peasants. The surprising element is that, when this *noticiero* was made, the FSLN had no real agrarian reform policy. As Buchsbaum correctly observes, “If the Agrarian Reform specialists had difficulty formulating a clear strategy for agriculture [...] one could hardly expect INCINE’s young, middle-class filmmakers to provide more than a general outline of agricultural policy. Under the circumstances, INCINE did an adequate, perhaps even an admirable job” (31). This *noticiero* is a case of INCINE being both subject to and creator of certain FSLN policies, and for this reason, is noteworthy. In terms of composition, it is a grand gesture, a testament to Nicaragua’s great natural beauty and

rich natural resources done with sweeping aerial shots and close-ups of the people who work the land.

Finally, we have Primer aniversario de la revolución, *noticiero* number 8, a color production directed by Frank Pineda. As was the case with the third *noticiero*, this one is more noteworthy for its content than its style, although a definite development in terms of technique can be seen, especially when compared with the very first undertaking. In that way, this *noticiero* is both a celebration of the success of the Revolution and of the success of INCINE, or at least its growth and continued evolution. The film opens with busy images of Nicaraguans preparing to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the revolution, with floats, parades, murals, dances, and general merrymaking. Everyone is included in this celebration, from campesino families to doctors, teachers, and other professionals, showing the all-inclusive tendencies of the Revolution and challenging the critics who were beginning to talk about the lack of business in the country. A list of achievements comes up on the screen, including nationalization of the mines, agrarian reform, healthcare, literacy programs, again challenging critics. Fidel Castro also makes an important appearance in this *noticiero*, important because it signals the beginning of a future political alignment with Cuba and also because it shows the significance of what Latin American solidarity can achieve. After Fidel's speech, a cry of "Nicaragua siempre será el 19 de julio" rings out, indicating a respect for the hard-fought Revolutionary victory.

The importance of including individual points of view in these institutional *noticieros* becomes obvious when one considers the material that was being covered. Filmmakers like Lacayo and Pineda, who also served as directors of INCINE, had a

vested interest in capturing events like the one-year anniversary of the Revolution, or elaborating upon the economic plan of the FSLN, because of their close ties to party leadership. Not to say that all INCINE filmmakers were not called to carry a political discourse within their films, but that certain filmmakers, like María José Álvarez, did so in a way that privileged voices previously silenced. Her reasoning for filming what she did is as follows: “Yo creo que estos trabajos son importantes por dos razones: la primera, para que la gente se viera, se escuchara por la primera vez en la vida de sí mismo, y también para que quedara la memoria de victoria, de la Revolución” (Personal interview)¹⁹. By acknowledging the importance of her work beyond an institutional goal, and by working with the technology available to attempt to represent the subaltern (indigenous people, women) within the country, Álvarez elevated her *noticiero* and documentary work to the level of not just political commitment, but social commitment.

The first *noticiero* that Álvarez directed, Inicio de la campaña de la alfabetización, or *noticiero* number five, deals with the Nicaraguan literacy brigades that were organized immediately after the Revolution, also designed using the model of the Cuban literacy brigades beginning in 1961, in an effort to put an end to illiteracy. It is estimated that 70 percent of the entire Nicaraguan population was illiterate, with that number probably being much lower in the cities and undoubtedly even higher in the country. However, the literacy brigades functioned in Nicaragua in very much the same way that they did in Cuba, but with even more of an emphasis on further connecting the urban and rural populations and improving the conditions of misery that existed almost everywhere in the

¹⁹ “I believe that these productions are important for two reasons: the first, so that the people can see and hear themselves for the first time in their lives, and also so that the memory of the Revolution stays with them.”

country. Nicaraguan poet and author Giaconda Belli described the unity that this program created as such: “In February [1980] the National Crusade for Literacy began; it was the most amazing and moving patriotic enterprise I was fortunate to witness [...] It was about fulfilling one of the Revolution’s fundamental promises, and a way of showing the younger generation that solidarity and generosity, not weapons, were the things that would change our country” (Belli 287). Álvarez’ rich and multidimensional *noticiero* shows just how this campaign was carried out, highlighting a variety of voices, from young urban instructors to old *campesina* women, in a show of revolutionary solidarity. The *noticiero* begins with children playing, in a scene reminiscent of a school field day, and an interview with a young teacher, who says: “Todos trabajamos juntos para el pueblo revolucionario, con la luz de Sandino.” Again, Sandino is evoked, but the voices that are heard in this *noticiero* are much more reflective of what Sandino stood for.

There is a variety of peasant voices heard throughout this *noticiero*, interspersed with basic facts about the literacy situation in Nicaragua. An older *campesina* woman, when asked to comment on the brigades, says “Estoy muy feliz porque van a enseñar a los campesinos, me van a enseñar,” or “I am happy because they are going to teach the peasants, they are going to teach me.” A group of *campesino* men later comment that “Sólo sabíamos como usar el machete,” or “In the past all we knew how to do was use the machete,” implying that their new knowledge, that of reading and writing, was certainly a skill worth bragging about. The *noticiero* closes with a shot of an old man writing on a chalkboard, in a classroom, with a crowd of people around him, chanting and cheering him on. There is a definite sense of community, of shared purpose, in this *noticiero* that is perhaps reflective of the subject matter, or perhaps due to the techniques

employed by Álvarez. By making this a celebratory film, instead of employing a didactic tone, the *noticiero* becomes more accessible, a recorded memory of the optimism of the time.

The next *noticiero* that Álvarez directed was number nine, La clausura de la campaña de alfabetización, which documents the end of the literacy brigades, and appears to pick up where the Inicio de la campaña *noticiero* left off. Of course this is not the case, but the tone and style are very consistent. One could imagine that after the old man finished writing on the chalkboard, the brigadistas could have counted their mission a success and left. “La clausura” deals with the “triumphant” (in quotes because the tone of this *noticiero* is triumphant, but also reminiscent of a propaganda piece) end of the brigades. “Cumplimos y adelante” (We achieved and now we go forward) is written everywhere, along with “Regresamos y ganamos otra batalla” (We returned and won another battle). There is still much celebration, but the interviews seem more forced, more staged, which could be reflective of the fact that “fue un proceso” (it was a process), according to Álvarez, “aprender cómo hacer un *noticiero*, como manejar las entrevistas” (learning how to make a newsreel, how to do interviews) (Personal interview). The camera seems less of an impartial observation tool in this *noticiero* and more of a presence. For example, during an exchange between a *brigadista* (teacher) and a *campesina* woman, both talk less to each other and more to the camera. In fact, it appears that little eye contact is actually made between the two, although a meaningful verbal conversation does occur, wherein the teacher shows his respect for the older woman, for her ability to learn and for her ability to survive.

Finally, the *noticiero* that best reflects the idea of giving voice to those who were

previously voiceless, and of providing a visual memory for the Nicaraguan people, is number 11, La costa atlántica, also directed by Álvarez, which also features a feminine, gendered voice in stark contrast to the overt masculinism of previous *noticieros*. This is an audiovisual memory, but interestingly enough, Álvarez also lived on the Atlantic coast for a few months after this production, and created a photo essay of the Atlantic societies and peoples. The *noticiero* opens with a “brief history of the coast,” and shows how it once was a haven for pirates, the Europeans, then North Americans. This introduction is also stylistically more similar to the Santiago Alvarez Cuban *noticiero*, as it utilizes various still images, such as maps, illustrations, portraits and more recent photographs to illustrate the history. This shows the history of foreign involvement, an imperialist history that is also the history of the entire country, the entire region, making the *noticiero* have both a regional and national feeling that others of the time might have lacked and showcasing the resistance that the Miskito community felt toward the FSLN.

Also interesting to note is the use of a female narrator, not a “voice of God” commentator but in certain instances functions more like an anthropological guide, making noteworthy observations but ultimately giving the viewer freedom to decide how to react. The fact that Álvarez, as a woman, took on the filming of the Miskitos, one of the more controversial projects of the FSLN and INCINE, drastically changes the tone of the *noticiero*. It also, intentionally or inadvertently, links the female with the indigenous in a sort of subaltern space within official discourse of the Sandinista Revolution. Her “disembodied voice” as narrator of the film is not a departure from other INCINE projects, but because it is a female voice, it is unique because it “endows this voice with a certain authority” (Doane 42). This voice “has been for the most part that of the male”

and has a “privileged, unquestioned activity of interpretation”; however, in La costa atlántica we are privy to a unique gendered, female analysis of the Miskito Indians (Doane 42).

After this “brief history” and introduction, the *noticiero* literally shows the viewer the effort that went into making this trip to the far-off coast. Images of cameramen in speedboats, then rowboats, then hiking with equipment on their backs predominate to show the physical and psychological journey that INCINE made from Managua. This is similar to how Historia de un cine comprometido treated its coverage of *cine movíl*. The female presence is carried throughout the *noticiero*, as a young *comandante* (woman) interviews the coastal inhabitants to see what they desire from the FSLN, to see what the Revolution can do for them. This *comandante* also takes a position of authority later, giving a speech on what the Frente wants to accomplish, and what they can accomplish with their help.

The *noticiero* is visually very appealing, with sweeping shots of oceanside communities, rural yet pulsing with life, idyllic and yet vibrant at once. Also used to help achieve this effect are African and Caribbean rhythms and dance, which break from the rest of the Latin influenced country. All of this leads to creating a sense of foreignness for the viewer, as there is little in the *noticiero* that a traditional Nicaraguan citizen would recognize as being Nicaraguan. In its simplest form, it is a video essay, a collection of images about a people ignored by their own country for centuries. As a visual memory, it is also poetic. Music is used to complement images, and sound and narration are minimized to make us rely on our own impressions. Save for the first scene, we see little dealing with politics, and much more of an ethnographic point of view on the part of

Álvarez. Stylistically, it certainly breaks from the traditional mold that Lacayo and Pineda had used for the first set of *noticieros*.

Bananeras has been studied in both content and form considerably more than other *noticieros*, and therefore we know much more about the process and conditions under which it was made. PRODUCINE footage played an integral role in Bananeras because it makes an important comparison between working class life under the Somoza dynasty and subsequently under the Sandinistas. This comparison was most likely not one that Lacayo or INCINE had in mind when making the film, but the message will be discussed later in conjunction with the use of Ernesto Cardenal's poem, "Hora 0" to narrate the film.

The initial idea to juxtapose cheery, jubilant footage of Anastasio Somoza catering to international interests with the gritty, harsh realities of life for the banana workers was a good one, and as John Ramírez says, "Bananeras employs the technique of dialectical juxtaposition: black and white newsreel images of the dictator are contrasted to color footage shot by INCINE of the national liberation and reconstruction process" (Ramírez 294). While Bananeras is a short film, only 13 minutes in length, it relies on what few scenes and images it has to convey a rather complicated political message. Buchsbaum describes one of the most memorable images in the documentary, where the context editing in a scene of Somoza dancing for a group of international dignitaries and throwing an extravagant party is cut with the image of a malnourished worker doing the backbreaking work of a mule. All the while Lacayo asks off-camera why he must do this work when surely there is a better way. Most of the documentary is accompanied by a reading of excerpts of Cardenal's "Hora 0."

The significance of “Hora 0” in this documentary cannot be overstated, for not only is the poem a strong critique of imperialism, it further develops the trope of banana production and the exploitation of the people and the land that is prevalent in the documentary. The following verses are those read during the opening sequences in the film:

Pero vino la United Fruit Company

Con sus subsidiarias la Tela Railroad Company

Y la Trujillo Railroad Company

Aliada con la Cuyamel Fruit Company

Y Vacarro Brothers and Company

Más tarde Standard Fruit Company & Steamship Company

De la Standard Fruit and Steamship Corporation:

La United Fruit Company. (29-36)

Cardenal, a Nicaraguan poet, priest, activist and Minister of Culture, was a central figure in the development of the revolutionary agenda in his country. The use of “Hora 0”, one of his most famous poems and also a forceful anti-imperialist commentary, shows the poetic vision that Lacayo as a director was trying to accomplish. Additionally, it gives the viewer an indication of the direction that the film will take, politically and socially, as Cardenal was also a proponent of Liberation Theology, which is “an interpretation of Christian faith out of the experience of the poor and at the same time an attempt to help the poor interpret their own faith in a new way” (Berryman 4).

Cardenal’s social, religious and political commitment are evidenced in the opening verses of “Hora 0”, as his use of the poetic style *exteriorismo*, which is defined by Cardenal

himself as “la poesía creada con las imágenes del mundo exterior, el mundo que vemos y palpamos [...] es la poesía objetiva, la poesía impura” (Valdés 120).²⁰ The usefulness of *exteriorismo* in film is evident in Bananeras, since the images that the reading of the poem evokes (those of businesses, trains and corruption) contribute to the actual visual footage.

With this poetic introduction to the history of foreign intervention in Nicaragua, Lacayo establishes the tone for the rest of the film, and by naming carefully and specifically each of the gravest offenders of the region’s autonomy, it works as a denunciation of those companies. Passages from the poem bookend the film, and the most resonant lines from the last selection deal specifically with the economic and social dangers of a society based on foreign monies and goals:

El banano es dejado podrir en las plantaciones,
 O podrir en los vagones a lo largo de la vía férrea
 O cortado maduro para poder ser rechazado. (71-73)

These lines are read as the film is ending, leaving the viewer with images of bananas and the injustices that accompanies the banana industry as closing thoughts. For Lacayo and the rest of INCINE, the idea of making Bananeras most likely corresponded to a desire to show how deeply Somoza’s economic policies had hurt the country, and for Ramírez it warrants our attention because the film’s “complex interplay of national identities, histories and textualities forges a trajectory for the interrogation of power” (313). The power that Lacayo ends up interrogating, however, is his own revolutionary party, in what could very well be construed as a critique from within the system, similar to

²⁰ “Poetry created with images of the outside/external world, the world that we see and touch [...] It is objective poetry, impure poetry.”

Castro's Cuban dialectic: "Dentro de la revolución, todo; fuera de la revolución, nada" (Within the revolution, everything; outside of the revolution, nothing).

What Lacayo could have done if his goal was to promote the FSLN agenda (which it surely was) of agrarian reform or improved human rights was at the very least make mention of improvements made on the plantations. Buchsbaum observes that "The workers never refer to union organizing or the role of the pro-FSLN Central Sandinista de Trabajadores. Nor does the film cite new laws about minimum wages or worker management" (151). Still, with all of the criticisms facing the documentary, it can also be seen as an accomplishment: a film that incorporates industry with poetry, politics with social critique, to present both the national and international viewer with the knowledge that Nicaragua has been damaged, but is strong and with the help of the Revolution will triumph once again. "There is an essential self-reflexivity to Bananeras that endorses an awareness of the status of 'history,' 'culture,' and 'self' as constructs" (Ramírez 303). As a testament to the enduring role of poetry in Nicaragua, the "Country of Poets," the documentary does experience a certain level of success. It also signals the stylistic growth of INCINE filmmakers since the founding of the Institute in 1979, with a clear cinematic vision and the ability to carry that vision to fruition (however flawed the original vision might be).

The Nicaraguan films and cinematic programs were analyzed in this chapter as they pertain to a larger INCINE and FSLN policy, but as the Ramírez quote above states, the majority of them do "endorse an awareness of the status of 'history,' 'culture,' and 'self'" (303). In attempting to recover the past, or celebrate the now, or posit future plans for the Revolution, they incorporate outside influence, specifically from other Latin American

countries, with a distinctly Nicaraguan point of view. The final chapter, chapter five, will discuss how this Nicaraguan point of view was distilled and complemented through co-productions with Costa Rica and the production company Istmo Films, on feature-length projects, specifically the documentary Patria libre o morir, and the fiction film Alsino y el cóndor. It will also take the *noticieros* discussed in this chapter and relate them to the social documentary of Costa Rica that was described in chapter three.

Chapter five

Shaping a Transnational Central American Cinema: A Case Study of Patria Libre o Morir and Alsino y el cóndor

With the necessary background on the ways in which the political situations in Nicaragua and Costa Rica were (and continue to be) inherently and uniquely tied to national artistic production, namely film, we can proceed to a more detailed look at the cinematic relationships that were developing between the two countries during the late 1970s up until 1983. Because this chapter will focus on the international involvement in film production before, during and after the revolution, I will carefully analyze two Costa Rican-Nicaraguan co-productions, Patria libre o morir (1979; a documentary) and Alsino y el cóndor (1982; a full-length feature film), using theories of globalization and transnational cultural identity to support my analysis of the films as examples of a pan-regional cinematic identity.

Patria Libre o Morir marks an important moment in time for Nicaragua, both politically and cinematically, which makes it even more significant that the FSLN chose a Costa Rican production company, Istmo Films, to make the documentary. Also noteworthy is the fact that Costa Rica wanted to be involved in the documenting of the Sandinista revolution. Antonio Yglesias, a Costa Rican director and creator of Istmo, detailed the formation of Istmo Films and its original goals: “Istmo Films era una empresa de producción, exhibición y distribución [...] fuera de las trasnacionales que maneja Hollywood y que controla la distribución en Latinoamérica y el mundo”

(Yglesias)²¹. The idea for Istmo Films was originally proposed by Yglesias, who proceeded to form a “grupo interesante: Samuel Rovinski, que venía de Francia; Carmen Naranjo, ex Ministra de Cultura [costarricense]; Oscar Castillo, actor y director de la Compañía Nacional de Teatro; y Sergio Ramírez Mercado, Director de EDUCA, escritor [nicaragüense] y abogado desde entonces ligado, de forma clandestina, al FSLN”

(Yglesias)²². With this group and “la Sala Garbo, una sala de Arte y Ensayo, creamos la Distribuidora del Istmo, encargada de distribuir cine de calidad en el area” for an all-inclusive and idealistic vision for Central American film.²³ And while Istmo supported INCINE and Nicaraguan film as much as possible, they also looked to support other Central American countries, such as El Salvador, who were in need of technical instruction and assistance as they developed their own revolutionary cinema. “Entre los miembros del colectivo salvadoreño en Costa Rica existía el deseo de hacer cine, es decir, de ir más allá de la propaganda y crear algo delicioso, memorable” (Lindo, “Sala Garbo”).²⁴ This quote speaks to the transnational mission that Istmo Film embarked upon: to create a Central American cinema that was not just good by Central American standards, but that was memorable for its quality of message and artistic capability.

²¹ “Istmo Films was a production, exhibition and distribution company [...] outside of the influence of the transnational companies that Hollywood runs and that control film distribution in Latin America and the world.”

²² “[...] An interesting group: Samuel Rovinski, who came from France; Carmen Naranjo, ex-Minister of Culture for Costa Rica; Oscar Castillo, actor and director of the National Theater Company; and Sergio Ramírez, Director of EDUCA, writer, lawyer and since then tied (clandestinely) to the FSLN.”

²³ “[...] The Sala Garbo, a theater for the Arts, we created the distribution arm of Istmo, charged with distributing quality cinema in the region.”

²⁴ “Between the members of the Salvadoran collective in Costa Rica there existed a desire to make film, to go beyond the propaganda and create something delicious and memorable.”

Part of this vision for Central American film was to create a cinema that appealed to national and international audiences alike, but often, it was more difficult to find a place and market for national exhibition (that is, within Central America) than it was to find an international distributor. So Istmo Film, having its base in San José, Costa Rica, went to the root of the problem and created a space for Central American film to be shown in the Garbo Theatre. “El grupo que se juntó en la Sala Garbo con el apoyo de Istmo Film, cineastas y aprendices de cineastas se proponía realizar un cine pensando en buena parte en la sensibilidad internacional, especialmente la estadounidense” (*ibid.*).²⁵ The importance of appealing to an international audience was in order to “educar a sus embaucados ciudadanos sobre las cosas que estaban pasando en El Salvador [y Centroamérica]” (to educate its deceived citizens about the things that were happening in El Salvador and Central America), something that the second film discussed in this chapter, Alsino y el cóndor, achieved with an Academy Award nomination (*ibid.*).

Patria Libre o Morir was an important documentary for both Istmo Film and Nicaragua, as it gave each institution a chance to reach a much larger audience combined (guaranteed viewership in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, at the very least) than would have been possible individually. It also shows a desire to look toward and “educate” that elusive international audience, as it is entirely subtitled in English. Yglesias was directing documentaries for both Costa Rica and Germany when the FSLN began their first full-frontal attack against Somoza’s National Guard. They contacted Istmo Films for logistical and promotional support for the Sandinista cause. “Se me designó para

²⁵ “The group of filmmakers and those wanting to be filmmakers met at the Sala Garbo with the help of Istmo Film where they proposed to create a cinema thinking in large part about an international sensibility, especially that of the U.S.”

dirigirlo y contratamos a Victor Vega, con quien trabajé muchos años en el Centro de Cine, para hacer la cámara. Era el proyecto oficial del FSLN y por supuesto nos dieron su apoyo logístico” (Yglesias).²⁶

The international cinematic community also took notice of Istmo Films and its project for the FSLN. Both Emilio Rodriguez Vazquez, a Puerto Rican filmmaker, and Julia Lesage, an American invited by the Sandinistas to work with and for INCINE during the early 1980s, make mention of the influence Patria Libre o Morir had in starting a sort of artistic revolution in Nicaragua, and do not discount the film, as others have done in the past, as being unfaithful to revolutionary ideals because it was produced by foreigners. In fact, Rodriguez Vazquez comments that “Members of the Frente got excited, daring for the first time to believe that it was actually possible to make a film about their struggle” (Burton 41).

Filming for Patria Libre o Morir took place in Nicaragua in 1977 for a period of two months, according to Rodriguez Vazquez, although it probably could have continued for longer as the ‘real’ action in the guerrilla army began as filming was wrapping. Directors Antonio Yglesias and Victor Vega were granted what amounts to free access to document the guerrilla troops training by the FSLN, and although no Nicaraguans were involved in the actual production, many were involved in “...writing the screenplay, in the organizing, fundraising and subsequent distribution,” and it shows (Burton 41). As Lesage mentions in her article “For our urgent use: Films on Central America” in the journal Jump Cut, the documentary “...took the time to linger over men and women

²⁶ “They [the FSLN] chose me to direct it and we contacted Victor Vega, with whom I worked for many years at the Centro de Cine, to film it. It was an official project of the FLSN and of course they gave us their logistical support.”

bearing arms eating lunch outdoors; this sequence demonstrated the social structure and the texture of the combatants' daily life" (par. 6). The scene that Lesage mentions is deceiving in its simplicity; every aspect of the filming and directing seems to blend together to produce, in the viewer, a feeling of closeness, or lack of separation from the guerrilla fighters. Not to say that we feel we are one of them, but a distinct camaraderie exists with them and the cause they have dedicated themselves to.

The opening scene of Patria Libre o Morir establishes the tone for the rest of the documentary and lets the viewer know why this film had to be made. In this first scene, Edén Pastora is interviewed after being named Commander-in-Chief of the Sandinista army in a ceremony that serves to convince the viewer of the legitimacy of the guerrillas and their war. Although the ceremony is small, and is located in a remote field surrounded by forests with none of the typical fanfare one might expect from a larger army, Yglesias and Vega lend a certain credibility to it, while at the same time making their viewer experience the palpable patriotism in the air. The following interview with Pastora is equally powerful in its simplicity, and at the same time provides the viewer with an explanation for the violence seen later in the film. As Pastora emphasizes throughout his interview: "It is impossible to attain liberation in Nicaragua without the use of weapons" (Patria Libre o Morir). This use of weapons is justified, according to the film, by the fact that Somoza and his National Guard had created "a rotten and hopeless situation" with their oppressive and violent rule. Although the film goes on to both explain and show how the FSLN's mode of employing violence was born out of necessity and was therefore more humane, this interview shows the level of commitment of the troops to defeat Somoza. "We can only talk to him [Somoza] in that language with

which he has spoken to us for 44 long years” (Patria Libre o Morir). During this statement, Pastora’s rifle is slung over his shoulder, and as he talks about Somoza’s preferred language, he makes a slight but obvious gesture to said rifle, to show that Nicaraguans have lived under the tyrannous rule of Somoza for too long, and are finally prepared to fight back using whatever means necessary.

This armed, violent face of war at the beginning of Patria Libre o Morir is tempered by a more moderate, religious experience, for both the viewer and the soldiers, near the end of the film, when Ernesto Cardenal gives a mass to the guerrilla fighters in a mountain camp. For me, this is one of the most powerful and moving scenes of the film, not only for its message, but also for the way Yglesias and Vega juxtapose the purely militant images at the beginning with an Evangelical message of peace and hope in the context of the revolution. Once again, we are struck by the closeness we feel to the Sandinista *compañeros* but in this instance, also by the inherently poetic images the Mass evokes while it remains incredibly accessible to each and every soldier, in a true demonstration of *exteriorismo* in action. Remembering from the analysis of Bananeras that *exteriorismo* is defined as “[...] Poetry created with images of the outside/exterior world, the world that we see and touch...it is objective poetry, impure poetry,” Cardenal encourages the soldiers to become involved in the Mass, to make their own connections between the just God of the Bible and their own just cause in joining the revolution and fighting against the reign of terror of the somocistas (Valdés 120). His presence in the documentary is strong, but it does not overwhelm the presence of the guerrilla soldiers, just as his poetic voice gently, quietly, unobtrusively leads the reader of his poems to a certain conclusion.

The filmmakers recognize that artistic and technical shortcomings do not lessen the overall experience of watching the documentary, and in fact can be beneficial in helping the viewer establish an emotional connection with the film. In the documentary, this can be seen in the recording of combat, especially the training scene, where commands such as “10 meters on your backs!” are shouted at guerrillas above the obvious and not-so-background noise of gunfire and battle. Here, the soldiers are clearly in training, but the sound of gunfire nearby indicates to both the viewer and the soldiers that real battle is close at hand and cannot be ignored, conveying at the very least trepidation of the unknown.

Both the montage and flash shots are techniques that Yglesias and Vega use in Patria Libre o Morir to show their viewer the reality of the revolutionary struggle and evoke at times a gentle sympathy for the cause and at other times a righteous indignation at the injustices occurring. In fact, Rodriguez Vazquez makes repeated mention during of how “The film confirmed Cuban theorist Julio García Espinosa’s ideas about *imperfect cinema*; despite its technical shortcomings, it moved me deeply” (Burton 42). Remembering the definition of imperfect cinema as “a ‘partisan’ and ‘committed’ poetics, a ‘committed’ art, a consciously and resolutely ‘committed’ cinema - that is to say, an ‘imperfect’ cinema. Imperfect cinema can make use of the documentary or the fictional mode, or both. It can use whatever genre, or all genres” (García Espinosa 79). As viewers of Patria Libre o Morir, we are fully aware of its partisanship; after all, the dedication to the Sandinista cause is the proverbial cornerstone of the documentary and what it makes committed and in turn, imperfect, according to García Espinosa. Patria Libre o Morir is not a documentary about culture or art in its traditional, separate sense

but instead follows a participatory path where the soldiers are poets when they discuss religion in Mass with Cardenal, the directors are artists because they choose to document said soldiers and the revolution, and to an equal extent those who helped distribute the documentary are aiding in the expansion of the revolution. Everyone can be a “creator of culture” within the revolution and the confines of imperfect cinema.

In INCINE’s declaration of purpose, the Nicaraguan people are mentioned as the “true protagonist” of the Sandinista Revolution, while the role of cinema is to serve the people. While not all INCINE filmmakers were Nicaraguans, most, like Yglesias and Vega, shared this vision and were committed to creating a national cinema that told a revolutionary history.

In an interview with the Nicaraguan arts journal Nicaráuac in 1982, Miguel Littín, the Chilean director of Alsino y el cóndor, commented on the importance of finding a cinematic language that speaks to the reality of most Latin Americans: “Pienso que nosotros los latinoamericanos no podemos seguir los esquemas ya manidos del lenguaje cinematográfico tradicional, ese que hemos heredado, pero que también nos ha sido impuesto” (161).²⁷ With Alsino y el cóndor, Littín and the other co-producers of the film, including Costa Rica (Istmo Film), Cuba, Mexico and Chile, attempt to create a product that is at once specifically Nicaraguan and generally “Latin American.”

While the issue of globalization, which is defined by UNESCO as “a process of economic expansion datable from the 16th century,” was not yet a cultural studies buzzword in 1982 when Alsino y el cóndor was made, it was still certainly a presence in the way that cultural products, such as film, were made and funds were raised (Yúdice

²⁷ “I think that we, as Latin Americans, cannot follow the formulas set by a traditional cinematic language, what we have inherited, but also what has been imposed on us.”

28). According to Yúdice, “globalization has pluralized the contacts among diverse peoples and facilitated migrations, thus problematizing the use of culture as a national expedient,” which is evident when one considers how Alsino y el cóndor how the international filmmaking community supported what was meant to be a national project but instead ended up being a transnational cinematic product (11).

With the transnationalization of culture, under the new market forces of globalization, indicating that “Every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries,” it is interesting to think of Alsino y el cóndor as a film that exists between the boundaries of the national and the international. One of the effects of this transnationalization of culture, even in 1982, was the fact that the idea of a national identity, of pertaining to one specific country and identifying with its practices, beliefs and customs, was becoming increasingly difficult to pinpoint. Néstor García Canclini speaks of a “transnacionalización” of culture, in which “La noción misma de identidad nacional es erosionada por los flujos económicos y comunicacionales” (39).²⁸ Others, such as Gareth Williams, speak of the development of a “post-national state”. When García Canclini mentions that “esta etapa trae también la pérdida de proyectos nacionales” (this period also brings the loss of national projects), it becomes increasingly evident that Alsino y el cóndor was made in a period of transition between the national and transnational, or when the national identity was still a viable concept, but it was being negotiated in a transnational way, along newly developing cinematic boundaries. This is clear when one thinks of a Chilean director, Littín, along with Mexican actors attempting to interpret a (very recent) Nicaraguan reality, and succeeding in the minds of everyone but

²⁸ “The same notion of national identity is eroded by economic and communicational flows.”

Nicaraguans themselves.

Like Littín, a new group of directors and artists arrived in Nicaragua after the Revolution in order to change this tradition of “cine impuesto” mentioned by Littín. This group used traditional film technology to achieve this end, but also utilized the new advances in technology of the 1980s, such as video and television, to reach their principal audience, the Nicaraguan people, and also to cross borders in order to appeal to a more international public. Also important to note is the fact that the majority of these directors were not Nicaraguan; in fact, while many came from supportive “brother” countries, a number also came from the United States in order to instruct the inexperienced, young Nicaraguan filmmakers.

INCINE’s ambitious strategy for the international distribution of its films could only be realized through this strategic international alignment with countries whose film industries were well-developed, such as Cuba’s ICAIC. Alsino y el cóndor is an excellent example of these strategic alliances that INCINE developed with other countries, and this is precisely why it illustrates the idea of a transnational cinema: it incorporates elements of each of the co-producing countries to create a film that is not necessarily “Nicaraguan,” but instead reflects the complicated relationship between the artistic vision and the political ideology of the various filmmakers and intellectuals that participated in its creation.

Because culture is what “creates space where people feel ‘safe’ and ‘at home,’ where they feel a sense of belonging and membership,” according to George Yúdice, it should not come as a surprise that various culture shocks were experienced in the filming of Alsino y el cóndor (22). As Littín himself said after hearing the Nicaraguan public air

their criticisms of his film: “I would have liked to participate in the critical discussion with you and to have agreed with you. But I completely disagree. Frankly I am disoriented” (Buchsbaum 119). This quote could be taken in many ways, but the fact that the critiques disoriented Littín would lead one to believe that his sense of Nicaraguan culture was wholly and completely different from how Nicaraguans perceived themselves, lending credence to Yúdice’s statement that culture is where people feel a sense of belonging.

Yúdice also argues that “culture has indeed become expedient insofar as it is instrumentalized for both economic and social reasons” (284). This “expediency of culture” is particularly evident in the making of Alsino y el cóndor, as a certain type of Latin American “revolutionary” culture is on display in order to achieve a number of ends, not the least of which are social and economic. I would also like to add political cause as a reason for which culture is instrumentalized, since it was part of both INCINE and Istmo Film’s missions to advocate for a larger, marginalized Central American population.

Alsino y el cóndor was made under certain conditions and stressors, both political and financial, which were detailed by Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez in an article he wrote about the film (along with Littín) for Nicarauac in 1982. Although García Márquez is best known for his contributions to the Latin American literary “boom,” his political commitment to the ideals of the Sandinista Revolution is evident in the original screenplay he wrote, El asalto: el operativo con que el FSLN se lanzó al mundo. He also wrote various short stories about the insurrectionary struggle in the country between 1977 and 1979. It is also no coincidence that he collaborated with

Littín, as Littín would be the subject of García Márquez's biographical account La aventura de Miguel Littín clandestino en Chile in 1986.

In his Alsino article, García Márquez commented on the significance of the film as a collaborative work: “Al principio no había ni argumento ni plata” (At the beginning there was not a plot or money) to make the film (163). This is a common situation, even today, for countries that lack a film infrastructure, but the lack of resources did not deter Littín or INCINE, according to García Márquez: “Pero el Instituto del cine de Nicaragua quería que Miguel Littín hiciera una película para ellos, y Miguel Littín quería hacerla...” (163).²⁹ With financial support from the FSLN, who contributed \$60,000 U.S. dollars; from Cuba, who provided a cinematographer and other technical equipment; and also from Mexico, who allowed three of their national actors and countless other volunteers to participate, Alsino y el cóndor began filming, but under unfavorable conditions. “Las circunstancias en que fue realizada [Alsino] podrían servir de argumento para otra película” (García Márquez 163). There is much truth in this statement, as filming began just as the Contra War was escalating in violence and intensity, and an accident in the conflict zones on the Honduran border caused the deaths of 14 members of the crew during filming.

The plot of Alsino y el cóndor is actually quite simple when one considers the “obsesión lírica” that characterized Littín's previous films (García Márquez 163). It tells the story of a young Nicaraguan boy, Alsino, and focuses, sometimes to a fault, on his dream life and his desire to “volar como pájaro, no como máquina”. The film takes place in the picturesque Nicaraguan countryside, where Alsino lives with his grandmother and

²⁹ “But INCINE wanted Miguel Littín to make a film for them, and Miguel Littín also wanted to do it.”

his cousin Lúcia. However, their idyllic life is interrupted on a personal level by Alsino's adolescent turmoil and on a national level by the mounting Sandinista Revolution and the violence that arrives with the political upheaval. Alsino's personal narration of the film, present from the opening scene, shows the viewer just how the story of this boy will coincide with the larger revolutionary context. The first words spoken are: "En el principio, éramos dos. Después, era sólo, como vacío, como si fuera yo perdido". This narration in the past also shows Littín's intentions to play with time, space, memory and dreams, all of which coincide with certain magic realist tenets.

The title of the only interview Littín gave to promote Alsino y el cóndor is "Alsino y la realidad mágica nicaragüense", which indicates the privileged place that he gave to magic realism as both a literary and cinematic genre. However, the title of this article also seems to reflect that Littín believed in the ability of the genre to accurately showcase the Nicaraguan reality, an assumption that was later proven incorrect when the Nicaraguan viewing public rejected the film (whereas the international film community embraced it). This problem of reception could be attributed to any number of issues, but before dealing directly with it, a brief discussion of what constitutes a magic realist work is merited. According to A Glossary of Literary Terms, "These writers interweave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairy tales" (Abrams). Littín was not entirely incorrect in his classification of the film as magic realist, according to this definition, but his assumption (as a foreign filmmaker) that the Nicaraguan public would accept a magic

realist interpretation of such a recent, painful past was flawed, and highlights one of the many challenges that transnational co-productions face.

In this same interview, Littín comments that “Primero, tendría que decir que las circunstancias, las circunstancias reales en que tuve que filmar la película, me obligaron a plantearme el cine como en los inicios” (García Márquez 161). These “real circumstances” that Littín describes indicate an awareness, however incomplete, of the social, economic and political reality of Nicaragua at the time. However, while this basic understanding was in place, it stands to reason that Littín, as an “outsider” to the revolutionary events, would encounter problems of representation with the film, especially with Nicaraguans and other Central Americans. These critics found fault with the lack of attention that Littín paid to the everyday struggles of the people, and also with the simple characters that he created, who were either good or evil, with no mention made of the gray areas that existed at the time. While these critiques are certainly valid, and Nicaraguans were aware that “the story wasn’t Nicaraguan [...] and were raising legitimate critical questions about this specific film”, some of the criticisms could have come from an incomplete understanding of what a “realist” cinema would and should achieve (Buchsbaum 119).

Colin MacCabe has explained his theories about realism and cinema as follows: “The thing itself does not appear in a moment of pure identity as it tears itself out of the world and presents itself, but rather is caught in an articulation in which each object is defined in a set of differences and oppositions” (36). Therefore, when something is represented in a film (or novel), it is being presented in a fictitious situation, and while it may exist in the real world, it cannot function as a reality in the film medium. So Littín,

as director of the film with his own vision, was able to define the parameters of reality and fiction, leaving space for interpretation and negotiation. But because of the proximity to the actual events he was portraying in Alsino y el cóndor, the space for interpretation and negotiation was actually very small.

Another problematic area for critics was in the constant intersection of Alsino's life with the Guardia Civil and North American troops, who were portrayed as conflicted men with, for the most part, good intentions. Various scenes have them asking "Whose side are you on?", which illustrates Littín's idealistic vision and his desire to humanize the troops. However, in another cinematic misunderstanding, the majority of Nicaraguans took issue with this positive representation of people who had caused so much suffering in their country. As Jonathan Buchsbaum describes: "No one believed the Guardia or the gringo soldiers in Nicaragua wrestled with their consciences [...] For Giaconda Belli, 'a Guardia was not a tormented person but someone who did things with no remorse or nightmares'" (Buchsbaum 120). In Littín's search to make a visually pleasing, poetic, complex film, it appears he sometimes forgot just how troubled Nicaragua's revolutionary past actually was. Littín makes his case by saying that the film was never intended for solely a Nicaraguan audience, but instead was "an open film on the movements of struggle in Latin America and all the movements of struggle in Central America [...] I see that the understanding of the public goes far beyond what we could have imagined" (Buchsbaum 120). This misunderstanding, coming from the point of view of an "outsider" such as Littín, is in part excusable, but the perplexing element is how INCINE directors and filmmakers, being Nicaraguans themselves, allowed him this liberty of expression, knowing the potential problems it could cause.

Since Alsino y el cóndor is, as evidenced by the broad Latin American support it received, as a pan-regional film, it is also important to talk about the international recognition it received, in the form of an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Film in 1983. Since an Academy Award is one of the more prestigious awards in film, it was obviously a huge coup for INCINE, a fledgling “third world” film institute, to have one of its first feature films nominated. García Márquez writes that “Acabo de hacerlo ahora, sorprendido por la noticia de que fue escogida en Los Ángeles como candidato al premio de la mejor película extranjera, en medio de competidores tan bien calificados. Es muy buena” (163).³⁰ This surprise that he expressed was a common sentiment, especially when one considers the fact that film resonated so much with foreign audiences in the middle of the Contra War, which was largely supported by the U.S.

But, it is also necessary to think of the role that film festivals like the Academy Awards play for foreign films: “Festivals are significant on regional, national and pan-national levels [...] Festivals function as a space of mediation, a cultural matrix [...] as well as a place for the establishment and maintenance of cross-cultural looking relations” (Stringer 134). The first part of this quote demonstrates the impact that film festivals can have at every level—local, national and pan-national—of production, distribution and reception of a movie. The idea of using Alsino y el cóndor as a cultural space in order to open up a dialogue about the political problems of the decade (i.e. Contra War, embargoes) meant that the film was actually working to establish transnational (cinematic) relations, between two seemingly binary cultures: capitalism and socialism.

³⁰ “I have just finished watching it [Alsino y el cóndor], and am surprised by the news that it has been nominated in Los Angeles for Best Foreign Film in the company of such qualified competitors. It is very good.”

And while INCINE, from the beginning, made evident its purpose to combat the imposed Hollywood cinema of the past, the recognition of Alsino y el cóndor by the Hollywood film industry was no doubt an honor.

It is interesting to view Alsino y el cóndor's Oscar nomination as a metaphorical bridge between two distinct societies, which could suggest: "the existence of a socially produced space unto itself, a unique cultural arena that acts as a contact zone for the working-through of unevenly differentiated power relationships" (Stringer 138). Within the Latin American film culture at the time, countries like Chile, Cuba and Mexico (all co-producers of the film) having much more power and resources than Central American countries like Nicaragua or Costa Rica. But with all of these countries working together on Alsino y el cóndor, a vision was negotiated, and a transnational cinematic resolution was reached when the final product was released, which fits with Mary Louise Pratt's definition of a "contact zone": "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 33). Alsino y el cóndor was made in a transnational cultural space, in which Chileans, Cubans, Mexicans, Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans met in order to arrive at the final product. This is of course a contact zone, but when the U.S. influence is added (as it was in 1983 with the Academy Award nomination) the significance of the phrase "highly asymmetrical relations of power" increases. This has much to do with the cinematic hegemony that the U.S. had established for itself in the early 20th century, with the growth of Hollywood as a center for the formation of "taste" and "quality," and the imposition of these tastes on Latin American markets.

The film itself represents a new cinematic alliance between both “brother countries” (those that supported the work of the Sandinistas) and countries that previously had little affiliation with the FSLN. It also shows that the work of INCINE, Istmo Film and the Sala Garbo succeeded in garnering international attention, especially from the United States, and in creating a “sensibilidad internacional” through these Central American films. The Academy Award nomination that Alsino y el cóndor received was not just a testament to revolutionary cinema in Nicaragua, and was not just an achievement for INCINE. Rather, it was a testament to the Latin American cinema that could be made (and continues to be made) when transnational alliances are forged and technical support is lent to countries and filmmakers who need it. The cinematographer, the director, the sources of financial support, the technical crew, and even the actors (all from different countries) all contributed some part of their political and/or artistic sensibilities to the film in order to: “encontrar lo que somos, lo que verdaderamente somos: herederos de todas las culturas, producto de un choque cultural violento” (Littín 162).³¹

The previously mentioned criticisms of the film also show what can go wrong with international co-productions, even between “brother countries,” but for INCINE, there were few other options, as it would have been impossible for them to make a film of this technical quality and compete against the hegemonic Hollywood cinema without said external economic support. It is probable that what Littín calls a “choque cultural violento” (violent culture shock) occurred during filming in order to negotiate what identity (Nicaraguan, Latin American) would best be represented within the film, and

³¹ “To find out what we are, what we truly are: inheritors of all cultures, product of a violent culture shock.”

how to best do so through various versions of what Jesus Martín Barbero calls “saberes mosaico” (370). This also showcases the fact that there was during the filming of Alsino y el cóndor, and still continues to be, a “rearticulación profunda de las relaciones entre culturas” and that “la identidad se construye en el diálogo y el intercambio” (Martín Barbero 375, 377).³² The transnational cinematic dialogue that took place in Nicaragua because of Alsino y el cóndor and Patria Libre o Morir showed that a revolutionary Central American film could be made, and made successfully, for an international audience, while still adhering to a politically and socially committed point of view.

³² “A profound rearticulation of relations between cultures” [...] “Identity is constructed in dialogue and exchange.”

Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to show the interconnectivity between national cinemas in Central America (and, by extension, Latin America). Costa Rica and Nicaragua undoubtedly shared (and continue to share) cinematic styles, themes and societal concerns as they built their incipient national cinema industries as evidenced by co-productions such as Patria Libre o Morir, Alsino y el cóndor, and by the similarities between the documentaries Bananeras and Costa Rica: Banana Republic. This cinematic relationship was especially important, as it occurred during a time of political, economic and social turmoil on the isthmus, and demonstrated a certain solidarity during a time when official relations were strained.

However, after the defeat of the Sandinista party in the 1990 Nicaraguan elections and the subsequent demise of INCINE, the country slowly began to revert to a reliance on foreign powers and monies. This was especially evident during the corrupt presidency of Arnoldo Aleman from 1997 to 2002, wherein he embezzled approximately 100 million dollars of government monies into private accounts. This fraud disillusioned an already disenchanted Nicaraguan population, and also exacerbated the difficult economic situation, with many people living in poverty. It was also during this time the most recent wave of Nicaraguans began crossing the northern border and migrating to Costa Rica.

This recent “exodus” of lower and working class Nicaraguans to Costa Rica is indicative of the relative economic and political stability that Costa Ricans have enjoyed throughout the 20th century. The national education system also contributes to Nicaraguans’ desire to reside in Costa Rica, as their children receive a (free) quality

instruction that they would be unable to pay for in Nicaragua. The large number of Nicaraguans residing in Costa Rica, specifically in the capital city of San José, has caused many tensions over the past few years, with Costa Ricans blaming Nicaraguans for the high levels of crime, for “stealing” jobs from citizens, and for generally being a drain on the Costa Rican economy. Essentially, this recent wave of Nicaraguan migrants has contributed to high levels of tension (political, social and economic) between the two countries, in a situation that has parallels with the current immigration debate and U.S.-Mexican relations. There are no easy solutions to this issue, and it is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon (again, showing uncanny parallels with the U.S. immigration system).

However, cultural programs, such as the Cinergia audiovisual fund, are attempting to connect Central American filmmakers and highlight the similarities, rather than the differences, that exist between Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans and Hondurans. Cinergia, which has its headquarters in San José, Costa Rica, was created in 2004, and is dedicated to “strengthening the relationship of co-production between the countries of the area and permitting dialogue between different creators” (Cinergia). Maria Lourdes Cortés, the founder and director of Cinergia, illustrated just how Central America’s past is affecting its present and future production of films with Cinergia research and information, and by being “in a constant process of creating new bonds between the countries of the region, strengthening national regional identities through images in motion” (Cinergia).

A formal fund like Cinergia certainly helps to increase cinematic production in a region, Central America and the Caribbean, where the private investment and/or

government support for film projects are essentially non-existent. Cinergia also wants to “build distribution or commercialization channels for audiovisual production of the region,” helping to break the hold that foreign cinema has in Central America, where few Latin American films and even fewer Central American films are screened at major movie theaters. By putting Central American filmmakers in contact with each other, specifically through its annual contest in areas such as short films, script writing, documentaries, and post production, Cinergia is encouraging a revival of the New Latin American Cinema (NLAC) movement discussed in chapter two of this thesis, making room for a “cine de autor” (auteur cinema), where there once was no space for this type of film (Cortés Personal Interview).

Cortés acknowledges how NLAC ideology and films have contributed to the current trends in filmmaking in the region, but also says that “Gracias a la nueva tecnología, es posible abrir espacios a nuestro cine” (Thanks to new technological developments, it is possible to open a space for our cinema) (Personal interview). While this thesis does not have the resources to analyze, in detail, the effects that Cinergia is having on helping to shape a transnational Central American cinema, it is certainly an interesting area for future study. Another question that the presence of Cinergia raises is whether or not a similar audiovisual fund would have helped increase quality and quantity of production during the time period I have just finished examining, and whether or not it would have succeeded during the period I examined, from 1973 to 1983. As Cortés commented earlier, new technological advances have certainly opened spaces for filmmakers that did not exist in 20 or 30 years ago, such as digital imaging and editing,

and thanks to the Internet, online sites where films can be shared and viewed, thereby bypassing the traditional routes of exhibition and distribution.

An excellent example of a film project supported by Cinergia is the documentary Mi Madrina Guerrillera, directed by Costa Rican-Nicaraguan Santiago Martínez Artavia. While it is still in post-production, and therefore I was unable to view it, I was able to interview Artavia about his project, which he wrote based on childhood experiences with the Sandinista Revolution. “Hoy recuerdo esa época como si fuese una película, llena de imágenes interesantes, personajes, drama y triunfos. Mi historia personal y la de mi familia, fue, y aun todavía es, un constante de viajes, revoluciones y discusiones políticas” (Artavia Personal Interview).³³ In this way, the experiences of the Revolution in Nicaragua and the political hardships between the two countries are being reinterpreted by the next generation of filmmakers who want to incorporate this history into a new way of thinking about the region and its complicated political past. When Artavia comments that “Hay un gran interés por revisar estas historias” (There is much interest in revising and retelling these stories today), he is also referring to the current political climate of the region, with the new presidency of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA or TLC in Spanish) that is a boon for multinational interests and represents a step backwards in worker treatment in the region.

Mi Madrina Guerrillera also opens up a space for a dialogue about the Sandinista Revolution in Costa Rica and how the two countries are intertwined. “En los que respecta al público costarricense, hay mucha ignorancia, alrededor de la revolución sandinista, a pesar que fue hace solo 28 años, en el país vecino y que incluso, muchos costarricenses se involucraron, ya casi nadie recuerda cómo fue aquello, incluso hay una naciente xenofobia hacia el nicaragüense, olvidando que no hace mucho, los mismo

³³ “Today I remember this time period as if it were a movie, full of interesting images, people, drama and triumph. My personal history, and that of my family, was still is a constant cycle of travels, revolutions and political discussions.”

costarricenses estaban dispuestos a dar la vida por el país vecino.”³⁴ It is film projects such as Mi Madrina Guerrillera that are attempting to open a civil dialogue between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, calling on past alliances and revolutionary solidarity to help work through the current tensions.

³⁴ “With respect to the Costa Rican public, there is much ignorance concerning the Sandinista Revolution even though that it was only 28 years ago, in a neighboring country, and that also, many Costa Ricans were involved in it. Now, almost no one remembers what it was like, and there is also a recent xenophobia towards Nicaraguans, forgetting that it was not that long ago that many Costa Ricans were ready to give their lives for their neighboring country.”

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