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La Batalla Del Cine Chileno: Chilean Cinema's History of Resisting Hollywood

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The United States has been a global superpower for over a century and that dominance also extends to its film industry. Since WWI the Hollywood system has controlled the global film market by exporting their films all over the world. These American films took profits from many national cinemas but they have also influenced filmmakers worldwide, especially in countries like Chile. The story of Chile's film industry shares some similarities with European nations. There is a common trend of countries failing to beat American films, then resisting the commercial cinema with 'Second Cinema' or 'Third Cinema' (Crofts 45-47), and finally modernizing and imitating Hollywood style production practices. Chilean cinema followed in the footsteps of many other film movements to compete with Hollywood by using films to establish its own national identity by having a new wave film renaissance, and eventually creating a commercial film production.

To understand how Chile fits into this common pattern of global film development, one must first look back to the very beginning of film in Chile. Chile was behind the curve during the silent film era because *Manuel Rodriguez* (Rosas), its first feature film production, wasn't released until 1910,



Scene from *Manuel Rodriguez*

whereas other countries started making silent films before 1900 (*Enciclopedia Del Cine Chileno*). Manuel Rodriguez is famous in Chilean history for leading his guerrilla fighters to overthrow Spain and win Chile's independence. The film must have been popular

because another film, *El Húsar de la Muerte* (Sienna 1925), also depicted Manuel's battle for independence. These two films are prime examples of how Chilean films often tell the story of their history and this tendency can still be seen in Chilean films today.

Overall Chile's silent film era was like most other countries at the time in terms of production style and losing profit to American films. *El Húsar de la Muerte* was a standard silent film of the era. The camera was mostly used as a recorder, rather than a narrative assistant. The films relied on title cards to relay the plot to the viewer. The production values in Chile weren't great so that even a film like *El Húsar de la Muerte*, which is the film depicting Manuel driving away the Spanish soldiers, had important battle scenes featuring only five to ten people fighting at once. Clearly, Chilean filmmakers did not have the same resources as the Americans who were starting to create blockbusters by the mid teens.

From 1916 to 1931, Chile produced eighty films which would be their peak production for many years to come but 1916 was the year American silent films began to dominate all Latin American cinemas (Schnitman 2,16). Even with impressive production numbers Chile couldn't compete with Hollywood. America would never again give up their title of number one in the Chilean market.

Although Chilean filmmaking geared down drastically for a few decades, political discourse in the country was going strong (Schnitman 78). Chile's people were still in the process of finding their voice. The '20s through the '70s was a time of socialism versus conservatism. Each type of government would come into power after a military coup d'état. The country would fall into the other party's grasp. Some elections took place during this time but it was more common that the exchange of power wasn't peaceful (Caviedes and Drake 14).

The Socialist and Marxist parties, backed by the majority of workers in Chile, held power for slightly more time than the conservative parties but this constant political discourse created the need for a prevailing national voice and film would be that voice.

The next important part of Chile's film industry requires a broader context illustrated in Stephen Crofts' *Reconceptualising National Cinema*. Hollywood may be on top of the world but is criticized for its commercialism and profit-minded motivations; this type of film is called "First Cinema" (Crofts 44). The Chilean film industry had its renaissance in the '60s when it adopted "Second" and "Third" Cinema. Both Second and Third Cinema challenge First Cinema through stories of the common person that focus on realism and political documentaries that sparked a revolution. Chilean Nuevo Cine, or New Cinema, is the movement started in the '60s which lasted into the '80s which



Scene from *El chacal de Nahueltoro*

marked a new wave of films in Chile that were focused on realism. A Chilean film that encompasses the ideas of Nuevo Cine is, *El chacal de Nahueltoro* (Littin, 1970). *El chacal de Nahueltoro*, or *The Jackal of Nahueltoro*, is one of the most significant works of New Latin

American cinema and was the most seen film in Chile at the time (Barnard 221). It tells the brutal story of how a mass murderer and his inevitable execution.

Even with a dark plot, the film was widely successful. Chilean audiences enjoyed the gritty realism and leftist ideals of *El chacal* and Nuevo Cine overall. Nuevo Cine

became the voice of the leftist parties and the country as a whole.

Nuevo Cine is a distinct style of Chilean filmmaking but it took influence from similar “Second” cinema movements such as Italian Neorealism and French New Wave. A large majority of filmmaking elements are shared between these movements: plots that show the strife of the common person, on-location shooting, auteur directors, natural lighting, little to no ADR, low budgets, and editing for emotion rather than continuity. Nuevo Cine, Italian Neorealism, and the French New Wave are part of a common thread of arthouse cinema that gave a voice to the powerless.

The state of affairs in Chile became most dire when Augusto Pinochet, a Chilean general, overthrew the socialist president at the time, Salvador Allende. Pinochet would become a vicious dictator responsible for the deaths of thousands of Chileans by execution or starvation from food shortages. The US used the CIA to help overthrow Allende (Jackson 4). During the '60s and '70s, Chile was not only being brought down by US intervention, but was still dominated by imported films from America as well. In the face of American intervention Chilean cinema finally found its rebirth.

Chilean Nuevo Cine started out as arthouse films, but in 1973, when Pinochet overthrew Allende, the films moved from arthouse to political. The second part of Chile's film renaissance was Third Cinema or political films. Political documentaries fit in the Nuevo Cine era perfectly because they had a focus on realism and tried to give a voice to the people of Chile. There was already a precedent in Chile that films with socialist themes would be spread by the leftist parties during their campaigning to help sway the voters especially because Chile's film

production was state-sponsored (Schnitman 85). Having their film schools and productions nationalized led to many progressive films being made but when Pinochet took charge he shut down filmmaking and exiled most of the leftist filmmakers. There are two films that are pivotal to showing what Chile was like during this time: *La Batalla De Chile* (Guzman, 1974-79) and *Dialogues of Exiles* (Ruiz, 1974).

La Batalla De Chile is one of the most powerful and epic films of all time. The title *La Batalla de Chile*, or *The Battle of Chile*, is appropriate because the film is a three-part documentary about the election of Allende, the coup by Pinochet, and the uprising of the people living under a dictator; each section runs around 90 minutes. Part one starts before the election and is entirely interviews with random Chilean citizens being asked who they are voting for and why. The Popular Unity (Left) and the



Poster from *La Batalla De Chile*

National Party (Right) each host many protests, marches, and speeches that only escalate tensions in Chile. After election fraud, scandals and riots, the Popular Unity party wins but their opposition maintains great support in the legislature. Chile only plunges deeper into chaos, strikes, and political discord, all leading to a near civil war between the parties. *La Batalla* would be the first of many Chilean films that emphasize remembering the mistreatment, or ‘machuca,’ of the Chilean people which would go on to become a staple of their national identity (Blaine 115).

The camera serves as a platform for the nation's voice to document historic events. The filmmakers were there for Allende's speeches, important votes in their government, the riots, and even the bombing of Allende by Pinochet. *La Batalla de Chile*'s cameraman films through many dangerous events and by the end of part one he is shot to death. Leonardo Henricksen was gunned down by militants in the streets while filming their brutality and Guzman decided to show it all in the film. Guzman and Leonardo understood that the film was more important than themselves and that they had to be the voice of the people of Chile.

In an interview, Guzman was asked about the impact of the film was and part of his response was "The film nakedly reveals (Chile's) lack of direction, the massive offensive organized by the Right, the internal disagreements for the Left, but without mystifying the situation. It removes the veils and shows things as they were." (Burton 66). Thanks to Guzman, some of the most important historical events of Chile were recorded on film, allowing future generations to know what happened and how to avoid repeating history.

Guzman was lucky he escaped with his life considering how long he'd stayed to finish filming *La Batalla* because many directors had already fled to Cuba to hide from Pinochet in exile (Barnard 229). Director Raul Ruiz was also exiled in 1973 because he was an established Nuevo Cine filmmaker who supported Allende. In his exile, Raul made the film *Dialogues of Exiles* which was a series of staged interviews for the purpose of exposing the human rights violations of the Pinochet regime. *Dialogues of Exiles* had a much larger global audience than *La Batalla de Chile* because it was released as a French co-production,

and the film was a cry for help from Chile intended for that global audience (Thompson 505). Guzman, Litten, and Ruiz didn't stir the pot by accident; they were fully aware of their activism, almost militant involvement in gaining global support to take down Pinochet. The dictator might not have succumbed to pressure without these filmmakers speaking up through their films (Pick 66). Zuzana Pick points out how ironic it was that Pinochet exiled the filmmakers to snuff out their voice but in doing so motivated the filmmakers to create their most effective political films.

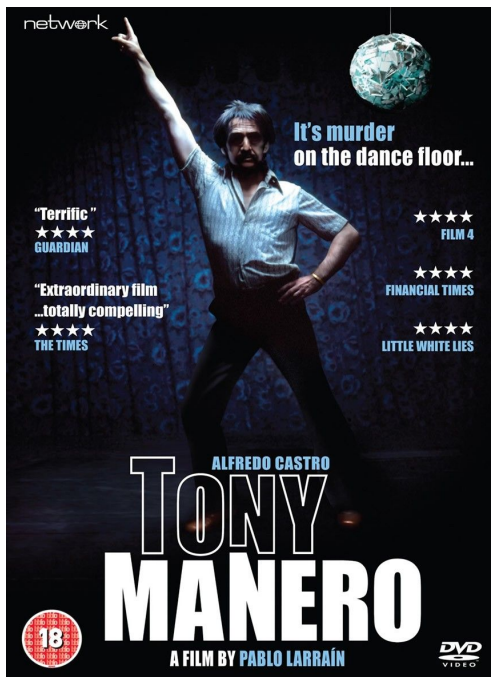
Historically, Chile has not had a strong film industry. Before the 1960s, the most successful films were imports from the US, Europe, and other Latin American countries (Schnitman 83). Chilean filmmakers didn't have the technology, funding, or education to keep up and eventually Chile Films, Chile's national production studio, closed. Soon after that Nuevo Cine developed but didn't have the success needed to revitalize the industry. *El chacal de Nahueltoro* did break records for viewership and profit. The only reason Nuevo Cine succeeded at the time was Allende's allocation of training and financing to his fellow socialist filmmakers, not because of commercial success (Schnitman 89).

Chilean cinema has had its ups and downs through the decades and the modern era is still the same story of American dominance. Nuevo Cine, although it was significant and impactful to Chile's culture, did not make enough profit to sustain itself. Nuevo Cine's Second Cinema dried up when Allende was overthrown because Pinochet stopped funding political filmmakers. The Third Cinema ended when Pinochet was kicked out of power because the country went back to a democracy rebuilt in the aftermath of its cruel dictator. When Chile

returned to democracy, the film industry returned to being dominated by American imports. Writer Walescka Pino-Ojeda argues that Chile fell into a neoliberal ideology after Pinochet which ignores the lessons Guzman fought so hard to teach in his films (Pino-Ojeda, 135).

A film that encapsulates modern Chilean cinema is *Tony Manero* (Larrain, 2008).

The main character Raul is desperately trying to win a Tony Manero imitation contest.



Poster from *Tony Manero*

Raul's devotion to American culture represents Chile's obsession with American films. MacWilliam writes about how the Chilean government tried to intervene in 2013 to help protect Chilean films in the market. Others argue that without the intervention of the Chilean government to protect Chilean culture in the film industry, then the death of its culture is inevitable (Poblete 224). Chilean films were at their strongest when cinema was largely state sponsored so re-introducing the old laws and practices of Chile's socialist government could once again bring a resurgence of Chilean cinema.

Only outliers like India are able to beat Hollywood domestically while the large majority of countries, including Chile, just imitate Hollywood's practices and style. Chile will probably never compete with Hollywood in commercial cinema but has been increasingly successful in art cinema. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Chile only makes about 30 films per year which are mostly commercial but almost every year,

Chile puts up solid arthouse films that garner critical acclaim. *No* (Larrain, 2012), a historical fiction about the plebiscite to remove Pinochet from power, was not only popular with critics but with the Chilean people because the film used Chile's history to reaffirm the nation's identity. One of the most dangerous aspects of Hollywood dominance is the loss of a nation's culture. It is the job of art cinema to keep a nation's culture alive and well. Films like *A Beautiful Woman* (Lelio, 2017), *Machuca* (Wood, 2004), *No*, and even *Tony Manero* help keep Chile relevant in the Latin American film scene and earn respect from critics around the globe.

Chile has faced American intervention in terms of political upheaval and Hollywood imports. From one point of view, the corporatist Americans have destroyed Chile's culture and government for the sole purpose of profit. From another point of view, Hollywood influenced filmmakers in Chile and brought entertainment to the fans of American films. The argument could be made that Second and Third Cinema wouldn't exist if Hollywood's First Cinema hadn't inspired filmmakers around the world to resist its commercialism. Looking at the progression of cinema through Chile's history shows that film has always been a voice for those who need it in Chile, and around the world.

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