

VERÓNICA CORTÍNEZ, MANFRED ENGELBERT. *Evolución en libertad: El cine chileno de fines de los sesenta*. Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2014. 2 Vols, 975pp.

The scope and ambition of this remarkable study is encapsulated on its front cover. The title itself, “Evolución en libertad,” defines the parameters both of its historical scope and of its critical intent. It is an echo of the slogan, “Revolución en libertad” that accompanied the presidency of Eduardo Frei Montalva, between 1964-1970, whilst also suggesting that sixties Chilean cinema was the result of a long period of evolution, dating back to the late 1930s. The two film stills that appear above the book title reveal that this will be a book of perhaps surprising juxtapositions. Two men are dancing a *cueca*. The first image is immediately recognizable. It is taken from Miguel Littin’s 1970 film, *El chacal de Nahueltoro*—one of the defining and much lauded films of the “new Latin American cinema” movement—as “el chacal,” played by Nelson Villagra, stumbles around the dance floor. The second image, the book reveals, is taken from Germán Becker’s 1968 movie, *Ayúdeme Ud. compadre*, a very popular musical that has either been written out of the histories of film, or else treated with scorn or ridicule. The actor dancing the *cueca* is the director himself, Becker. The images on the cover of the second volume use the same stills but with a tighter focus on the faces of the two protagonists: a famous, instantly recognizable, actor and a jovial actor/director, condemned to the margins by the critics.

The very first sentence of the prologue puts the title and cover images into a critical debate: “Al hablar de los años sesenta, la historiografía del cine chileno parte de dos premisas: que el llamado Nuevo Cine Chileno surge como milagro sin precedentes y que éste se debe al espíritu revolucionario internacional latinoamericano” (15). The book will question both of these “prejuicios”. It stands as an important corrective to the canon of criticism on Chilean and Spanish American cinema in the sixties. Chilean cinema of this period has tended to be read, anachronistically, as a precursor to the *marxisant* Popular Unity government elected in 1970, and to the revolutionary hopes and frustrations of the period 1970 to 1973 which were stifled by a military coup that fractured the intellectual field, sending many film-makers into internal or external exile. Instead of complying with the dominant, fatalistic, retrospective analysis of the late sixties—to which

I and so many others have contributed—Cortínez and Engelbert ask and answer the questions: what films were actually produced in this period? How uniform or different were they? Who went to see these movies? This seemingly straightforward approach completely changes our understanding of the period and makes us reconsider terms such as “popular” and “(pre) revolutionary” cinema. Lest we might shirk from the task, this lavishly illustrated book even includes two DVDs of popular films, *Ayúdeme Ud. compadre* and Alejo Álvarez’s 1968 “western,” *Tierra quemada* that very rarely appear in histories of the 1960s. Look at the films, the book is telling us, follow our analysis, remove the blinkers from your eyes.

This reconceptualization of sixties Chilean cinema is necessary and original. It follows the format, established so successfully in the authors’ earlier study of Raúl Ruiz, *La tristeza de los tigres y los misterios de Raúl Ruiz* (2011), of tracing both in broad brushstrokes and in very fine detail, the historical, political, biographical and cultural contexts of each director and film project, followed by a close reading of the films themselves. The films discussed, in chapter order, are *Largo viaje* (dir. Patricio Kaulen, 1967), *Valparaíso mi amor* (dir. Aldo Francia, 1969), *Morir un poco* (dir. Álvaro J. Covacevich, 1967), *Ayúdeme Ud. compadre* (dir. Germán Becker, 1968), *Tres tristes tigres* (dir. Raúl Ruiz, 1968), *El chacal de Nahueltoro* (dir. Miguel Littin, 1970), *Tierra quemada* (dir. Alejo Álvarez, 1968) and *Caliche sangriento* (dir. Helvio Soto, 1969). The analysis reveals an active cinematic moment, with a number of different directors working across a range of styles, genres and thematic concerns. It questions why certain directors have been lionized while others have been neglected and gives equal weight to each analysis. It offers surprising, illuminating readings on every page such as the insight that Becker’s film—seemingly a “light” musical—is more openly political, in its underlying support of the Christian Democrat project than Littin’s *El chacal*, so often read as one of the most defining political films of the era. This is much more than just a book about film culture. It offers a clear historical analysis over a thirty year period, tracing the roots of cinema development back to the “modernizing” project of Pedro Aguirre Cerda’s Frente Popular government (1938-1941). It reappraises the Frei presidency, and offers a very vivid picture of the broad cultural field, the universities, the theatre groups, the musicians, the poets, with an attention to popular culture in its many different forms.

It is a book in which we feel very secure that the authors have taken nothing second hand—either received critical wisdom or, indeed, any reference—but have checked everything, uncovered everything.

Following just one of the tightly interwoven strands in the book, close attention is paid to the use of music, song and dance. There is even a 48 page Cancionero in an appendix, giving the text of every song used in each film. And a musical reference offers a concluding image to the book when the authors liken Chilean cinema to the street performers, the *chinchineros*. They analyze a still from *Valparaíso mi amor* in which a *chinchinero* street musician is performing in front of a large Coca Cola billboard. Here, in essence, they argue, is an image of Chilean cinema: in a landscape dominated by US influence, the local artist—something of a one man or one woman band, with their instruments strapped to their back—can still beat out a unique rhythm, can still dance and leap and pirouette, can still play to receptive, popular audiences: “El cine chileno de fines de los años sesenta evoluciona en libertad, un poco como chinchineros con sus instrumentos y su ambiente a cuestas para complementar y contrarrestar las imágenes de Hollywood y el cine mundial” (851).

This is a book, in short, that sets new standards for the field, in terms of its archival thoroughness, its conceptual and theoretical acuity, its illuminating close textual analyses and, indeed, the elegance of its physical design.

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