FFILM FESTIVALS come in all shapes and sizes, but they often have certain patterns of growth and development in common. They typically wax and wane over a period of years, sometimes to wax again, sometimes to descend into what Marx, in another context, called a longuscapist depression.

At some stage along the line, they tend to be invaded by politics: Cannes, Venice, Berlin and Oberhausen are only the most obvious examples. There are certain distinctions of course, especially between festivals oriented primarily towards commercial criteria and those devoted to the celebration of the art, or a particular segment of it (like documentary at Oberhausen, animation at Annecy, underground cinema at Krookke, the ethnographic film at the Festival du Réel in Paris) though many of these still serve as market places.

Some try to be universal by dividing themselves into sections (Berlin and Cannes, for example), but few deny the commercial function by eschewing prizes (like Pesaro and London).

In principle, marketplace festivals fear political involvement, while the others often regard it as par for the course. But publicists are attracted to controversy like moths to light, and they exist in different guises. Havana is in this respect quite different, a place where, like journalists, they behave themselves. But Havana is also a place which takes politics and prizes together in its stride, and Hollywood film stars rub shoulders with film makers who are listed in Washington as agents of communism and apologists for terrorism.

Accordingly, the mass media in the USA ignore the festival (though Variety now reports it), but this only goads the Cubans to greater effort, and in other camps they win friends. Reports on the Festival have recently been featured on public service television arts programmes in Spain and Britain, for example.

There's a curious contrast between the politicization of a number of leading festivals in the Western European bloc, and the commercial respectability of Moscow, the most bureaucratised and apolitical of the festivals I have attended. Havana is the opposite of this too. Year by year, the spirit of the Havana Film Festival is borne on winds of political feeling that blow from Nicaragua and El Salvador, Chile, Brazil and Argentina. (Perhaps Moscow will be changing now.) I've not yet had the chance to visit Leipsic, but would guess that it is the closest in the socialist countries of Europe to the model of a film makers' forum adopted in Havana, where the politics are anti-imperialist and they count in the award of prizes. But the judging in Havana is more imaginative. The year before last was particularly notable in this respect: the first prize for full-length fiction was shared by the two most audacious films, Paul Ledes's Fría, Naturaleza Viva (Mexico) and Tangos, El Estilo de Gardel by Fernando Solanas (Argentina); titles significantly difficult to render into English, for the oddity of them—naturaleza viva is the Spanish for "still life"—signals their anti-generic quality. Both of them are ambitious, experimental, postmodern in their anti-narrativity, the first based on the paintings of Frida Kahlo, the second on choreographed tango (for which the film itself invents the untranslatable neologism tangadejado), allegorical tresteses of representation and exile respectively, which greatly exploit the pleasure, the jouissance of vision.

The vibrancy of Havana as its best arises primarily because Latin American cinema is still relatively young. The movement which the Havana Film Festival celebrates was born only in the 50s. When examples first arrived at film festivals in Europe in the ferment of the 60s, it helped to rejuvenate European ideas about cinema and the medium of film: the shock of The Hour of the Furnaces at Pesaro in 1968, the encounter of Rocha and Godard, are moments in this history as notorious as the episodes of the Oberhausen Manifesto, the invasion of Cannes, or Godard punching his producer in the nose on the stage of the National Film Theatre in London and walking out of the premiere of One Plus One (a.k.a. Sympathy for the Devil). (The producer had over-rulled how Godard wanted the soundtrack at the end of the film; Godard appealed to the audience to leave, pay the price of their tickets to a fund for Eildridge Clarke—if I remember rightly—and watch the free screening of his own version outside. The London Film Festival was extremely fair about it: they gave people refunds, and provided cables to power Godard's projector).

The New Latin American Cinema has changed since those heady days too, though to say it has lost its sense of direction would be going too far. Principally what has happened is an enormous expansion of production, with many more people producing more work in more formats and more varied circumstances; inevitably there is more diversity. Equally much of it is rough-hewn with a sense of urgency, but then this was always true. Symptomatically, the movement has discovered its own maestros in directors who have created new paradigms for the movement, like Brazil's Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Cuba's Tomas Gutierrez Alea, and
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Argentina's Fernando Birri, the last an inspirational eco-chronic who now directs the new National Film School at San Antonio de los Baños near Havana, which opened under Fidel Castro during last December's Festival. These figures are not, however, like so many past masters in Europe, played out. In the past few years, Cuba has made the notable critical Hasta cierto punto (Up to a Point). Birri's remarkable documentary portrait of his friend the poet Rafael Alberti, dos Santos a work commanding strength in Memorias do carcer.

Three are working on new productions. In this respect when I look back at Europe from Havana, I don't think of Bergman, Antonioni and Fellini, but Buñuel, Renoir, and Wajda. The Latin American regard as half their own—Havana has commemorated them with a retrospective—and its final European film was the epic of magical realism, which is why he seems still alive. Renoir they respect, but would criticize as being too cerebral. There are certainly no parallels, unless a new Argentine film, Hombre enredado (Man Lost in Net) directed by Eliseo Subiela, a low budget, low tech, low profile contemporary social work with a dash of sense of humour. By the way, Argentine cinema has emerged since the Colonels were in power, with the same sense of speaking to the media. There is Jesus the one December was on women—was passionate, intense and impressive. For myself, I was delighted that Julie Christie became the first English winner of a prize at Havana when she received the best actress award for her role in Miss Mary, and accepted it modestly with four words: "Machos graciosos, América Latina." (This was not so much, on my part, a patriotic response as the brief hope that it might just help to catch some attention for the Festival from the press back home.)

The Brazilian Fernando Torres, who shared the prize, deserved it equally for her bravura performance in Yo se que te voy a amar, but I liked this film by Armando Labor a lot less than the Argentinean pictures directed by Maria Luisa Bemberg, Miss Mary—about an English governess in Argentina in the 30's—an allegory of social illusions, those of the Argentinean bourgeoisie about English culture, those of the English about Argentina. The other is a piece of self-enclosed experimentation about a young couple engaged in a kind of love affair, two sexes, which would work much better on stage or as a television two-hander. Both were popular, but among different camps.
FIDEL HAS RECENTLY DECLARED THAT "JUST AND TIMELY CRITICISM IS MIGHTIER THAN A STATE, MIGHTIER THAN A PARTY!"

At the previous year’s Festival, Beethoven’s Choral, cropped up twice, sung in a Spanish version of Schiller’s poems (the poem originally entitled Ode to Freedom). Once was in Marlene, France’s documentary tribute to the Brazilian liberation priest Frei Tito, whom imprisonment drove to his suicide: it is the anthem in the cathedral at his funeral. The second time was in an anonymous video from Chile, where it was sung on the streets in Santiago beneath the banners of the women proclaiming “Somos mas”-“We are more.” Though the new Argentinean film is uneven, the orchestra sequence was the most thrilling I saw this year in Havana, symbol of the deep level at which the cultural process is at work in Latin America: the way it ingests the cultural icons of its imperialized past and revalues them—for a Cuban audience as much as the visiting European.

The film which moved me most, however, was Jorge Duran’s El color de tu deseo, a Brazilian production about Chileans in exile which left a deep impression on many viewers, but also divided opinion. It is impossible to do justice to such a richly complex film without another viewing. Green: sort of a coming of age story. Protagonist: an adolescent trying to exercise the memory of his elder brother killed in the aftermath of the coup against Allende. Subplot: his burgeoning sexuality, relations with girls. Character: sensitive type, with artistic talent. Except that these elements are not hierarchical in the film; they are expertly intertwined, with the narrative rhythms of the French rather than the North American examples of genre. However, it was criticized for its mileage: Chilean exiles don’t always live in middle-class comfort. I cannot explain its considerable effect without speaking of another film, which didn’t manage to reach Havana but was shown a couple of months earlier at the University of Iowa Conference. Marita Malcolms’ Journal Incidents—the now lives in Quebec—in the most extraordinary example I’ve seen of a genre which Chilean film makers have themselves created, the film of exile, which Zazuela Pick at the Iowa conference perceptively described as quintessentially multilingual (like several films by Raúl Ruiz, none of them seen in Havana). This is a deeply reflexive film in the style of a self-observational documentary, the remarkable manner in which the film maker probes the most delicate and elusive aspects of exile behaviour and her relationship with her husband (a Canadian film maker) gains its subtle force from her feminist integrity. El color de tu deseo, which is likewise traced in the clash of comprehension of different tongues, approaches, I think, a similar honesty about adolescent male experience. Both, in any case, are films which deserve to be seen as widely as possible.

At the Iowa Latin American Cinema Conference there was a lively discussion on the question of the identity of the movement. Ana Lopez, Cuban-born film theorist at Tulane University, argued with lucidity that we shouldn’t talk any longer of the New Latin American Cinema in the singular, but of the new cinemas in the plural, because that is what the movement, through its very growth, has become. This is signally different from the view of a number of Latin American film critics who don’t visit Havana, that the movement only exists in the imagination of political wishful thinkers and it’s never really had an identity. Fernando Birri counters with such notions by speaking of the movement as the active desire for utopia, which no one can deny that it’s voluntary. But that’s precisely where it garners half its energy, and the movement seems to be the place to go and refuel.

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