

Film Reviews – October 2012

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PRODUCTION DETAILS

A Review by Miharuru M. Miyasaka, The University of Western Ontario, Canada

Dust (Polvo) was screened at the Toronto International Film Festival 2012 as part of its Contemporary World Cinema section. By including this film, the festival shed some light on a less known form of Latin American cinematography. Most studies on Latin American cinema tend to overlook the development of the central region, mainly because of its very irregular production that has resulted in significantly fewer films than other industries on the continent. According to María Lourdes Cortés (2008) this reality started to change in the last decade, when Central America greatly increased its production levels from the 90s. In the case of Guatemala it is worth mentioning the works of several filmmakers: Rafael Rosal's *The Crosses. Next Town (Las Cruces. Poblado próximo)* in 2005, Elías Jiménez' *The House in Front (La casa de enfrente)* in 2003 and *VIP: The Other House (VIP: la otra casa)* in 2006, Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *What Sebastian Dreamt (Lo que soñó Sebastián)* in 2004, and Julio Hernández Cordón's *Gasoline (Gasolina)* in 2008. The appearance of *Dust* in 2012 could be a sign of the continuation of this production trend. While most of these films were released years ago, there isn't much access to them via commercial circuits, which exemplifies the distribution problem common to Latin American cinema. Argentinean filmmaker Octavio Getino (1998) provides interesting research on this topic, advocating for the creation of a market in which Latin American cinematic proposals could circulate. This is of vital importance in a region that hardly consumes the films that it produces. I recently found *What Sebastian Dreamt* via a sort of digital and legal "market" called *Cinépata* — a name that I interpret as a playful linguistic/phonetic combination of Spanish words for cinema and psychopath (cine, psicópata), therefore a cinepath is "crazy" about films. According to its creator Alberto

Fuguet, the site is a “virtual cinema–art or cinema–alternative, in which to find feature films and short films that usually don’t surpass the lifetime of festivals, or barely make it to the dirty and ragged theater screens of a big city” (Fuguet, 2010) [1]. In this *cinedigital* world screenings are free, although their quality can’t go beyond the prowess of your computer and its connection speed. But it is always a rewarding experience, as in the case of Rey Rosa’s film, because many times it is the only opportunity to watch contemporary Latin American audiovisual works not released in commercial theaters and digital circuits.

Following Cortés’ survey on the development of Central American cinema, these films fit some of the major thematic trends in the region’s cinematography: the problems of contemporary society, the recent past, and the environment [2]. Jiménez’s films are critical toward the modern Guatemalan political order by exposing a powerful underworld in its public institutions. In tune with the present reality, *Gasoline* proposes a social reading of the futile actions of its young middle–class protagonists. *The Crosses* and *Dust* revisit the traumatic events of the recent Civil War, and *What Sebastian Dreamt* follows the endeavors of its main character to save the natural habitat in the Petén jungle against a local practice of illegal hunting. The historical theme in Cordón’s film *Dust* should not come as a surprise in a region that has been shaped by conflicts of all sorts: natural disasters, foreign invasions, civil wars, revolutions, guerrilla movements and dictatorships (Cortés, 2008: 60). Cortés points out that in recent post–war decades, Guatemala and El Salvador have systematically approached the issues of memory and history in order to recover, document and denounce these countries’ pasts, “the violence and repression that took place in rural areas, specially in indigenous communities” (Ibid: 69) [3]. *Dust* certainly addresses the latter when it represents the conflicted present life of Juan, the protagonist of the film. He is a young villager in contemporary Guatemala who is dealing with the “disappearance” of his father by the military during the Civil War. He struggles

with oblivion by collecting past debts from the only person he can single out as being responsible: a man from his village that turned his father in. The first sequence of the film, in which Juan attempts to kill himself, immediately sets the tone of a problematic present. He will carry out another life-threatening episode, and one character mentions many others (not shown in the film). The acts seem to materialize a past that remains more unreal due to the “disappearance” of the victims’ bodies (“no body, no crime”, as a common expression in legal shows says). The suicidal performance can be interpreted as the representation of the traumatic event, therefore as a “text [...] that is not reality, but the material used to reconstruct it” (Ainsa, 2003: 65-66). In this sense, the characters and their actions are ways to construct a narrative path to *what happened*. The two main plots involve Juan, his mother and the villagers’ search for their “disappeared” relatives, and a couple of filmmakers from the capital that are making a documentary about these affairs. The stories progress through disconnected episodes that, little by little, provide the information necessary to envision the ongoing reality. Each episode shows people dealing with a past that remains in various ways: personal and local memories, national history, oral testimonies, archive photographs, bones and objects, celebrations, feelings of revenge and death, oblivion, or by imagining the future.

In one scene, Juan’s mother Delfina has a cognitive negotiation with her own memory when she has to identify her husband in a series of photographs; the problem is that in a previous scene Juan counts all the occasions in which she has identified a different picture of his father. Perhaps she can’t remember, or this is his mother’s intent to give him closure, since the photo would bring back facial features that he can’t make out anymore. It would also allow him to symbolically connect to a body that is yet to be found, something Juan experiences when he finds his father’s “disappeared” bicycle buried in the ground and becomes deeply attached to it. The story of filmmaker Ignacio and his girlfriend and collaborator Alejandra is about two outsiders from

the city documenting the villagers' search for the remains, and their work is part of a bigger project that involves other people and organizations. This speaks of a national past, because it shows a public concern — beyond the victims and their local community — in knowing *what happened*. This nation inhabited by all the characters of the story shows a gap between urban and rural, white and indigenous, technologies of knowledge (written, audiovisual, oral), social classes, and victims of the war. The repression in Juan's community relates to the last gap, because the rural areas of Guatemala experienced the "scorched earth strategy of the 1980s [that] caused the deaths of thousands and the destruction of hundreds of villages [...] of mainly Indian population" (Keen, 1996: 447, 449). Another important aspect of the filmmakers' story is that it brings about issues of intention and *writing* in history (what's his/her purpose in re-presenting the past?): only to imply that in this case *rewriting* history with unofficial versions (in a "democracy" that for years protected the military), and by documenting the unknown (e.g. the testimonies of Juan and his mother) is more important than the ethical dilemma of subjectively mediating *what happened*. María Cristina Pons would explain (in reference to historical novels) that representations of the past always convey "intentionality": in other words, they are written for something or someone, in favor or against them (139). It seems that the filmmakers share a similar opinion by explicitly taking Juan's side of the history. The film ends with Ignacio in favor of helping Juan to plan for the future, despite knowing that Juan had killed the son of *the man* that turned his father in. Historical responsibility is certainly an important issue in *Dust*, hence the fixation of Juan with *the man* who turned his father in, who lives an ordinary life in the village as if forgetful of everything. Juan reacts against this normalization of a problematic and recent past, and he is repeatedly hostile towards *the man* and his family. In this case, the past connects to the present, ironically, because the current time (symbolized by *the man*) has chosen to forget the previous one.

What makes *Dust* interesting is its attention-grabbing narrative form that requires the spectator to follow every detail in a series of apparently disconnected episodes. The first half of the film appears to be a sum of scenes and sequences without a clear narrative continuity, at one point the spectator hopes for at least one thread of collective meaning. In one scene, without previous explanation, Juan enters a grungy place, a sort of rigged up screening locale for triple X entertainment: one small TV surrounded by plastic chairs. The place is empty except for one man sitting so close to the apparatus that his body literally blocks the screen; Juan sits at the back, quiet, unexpressive. Suddenly we see him lifting a chair over his shoulders. He puts it back on the floor, and again the same intriguing action. Is he hesitating, calculating the distance or magnitude of the throw? Finally the chair flies off his hands and lands on the man's head. He reacts to the hit with a mix of shocked and sore gestures. The scene ends the way it started, without explanation. Why this type of concealed violence against that man? What is the connection of this episode and character to the others? Is there one major string holding this narrative together? Various episodes later the spectator would figure out the meaning of the past scene. Other concealed violent actions target the same man, who is revealed as *the man* that turned in Juan's father. They are like the protagonist's suicide attempts: his life rituals, in the sense that these actions form a meaningful routine, a ritual of repetitive although unavoidable acts in which to read Juan's connection to the past, more specifically, to the disappearance of his father. In tune with these symbolic performances "Juan has taken to making cryptic utterances, just as his father once did" (Sánchez, 2012), and also as Juan starts riding the discovered bike. This type of behaviour widens the distance between him and the filmmakers (Ignacio repeatedly complains about Juan's bizarre actions), because Juan is reliving the past in a way that is inexplicable to the outsiders. This is similar to the rural community that, to the surprise of Alejandra, lives with the remains in a festive way: every discovered body is welcome with

celebratory fireworks. The last scene of the film reveals an understanding of these two worlds, when both Ignacio and Juan act in a bizarre way. While talking about the future and about Juan's deadly action (against *the man's* son), they ride alternating on the bike, over and over, from here to there and back, timing their speed. The action seems bizarre given the seriousness of the situation: both present and future don't look very promising (a boy is dead, and the only option for Juan is to leave the village with his family and start from zero). Under these circumstances the rides seem meaningless, if it weren't for the fact that they are carried on the "reappeared" bike.

There is another scene that recreates the film's concept of a cryptic presence of *what happened*. A scene opens with two young men dusting off a skull on the ground. A group of women observe the procedure, and Juan, Delfina and the filmmakers are also present. By now the spectator has been trained to stay active: to observe, to listen, to remember details from previous characters' actions and dialogues, and with all this information he is set to interpret the present episode. Are those the remains of a "disappeared" (Juan's father perhaps)? Are those women like Delfina? Where are they? To make things more complex the scene is ironic, because there is a disconnect between what we hear and what we see. The close up dialogue between the two young men is totally disconnected from the act of dusting off human remains, and from the historical and personal meanings of the discovery (for the family that recovers a missing member, and for a national and local community that must face the real scope of the war). The two young men discuss something completely mundane, oblivious to the others' feelings and to the "grave" story they are unburying. It seems that not all present are really interested in digging into the past, but the irony is that the lives of the two young men are ambiguously (dis)connected to the women observers. Apparently they share the same space but not the same world, but even if it may seem that they don't share the same world the grave connects them in a deeper way.

This is because the past lies beneath the surface of things and, at the same time, surfaces (ironically) from these men's act of not caring, or *the man's* act of forgetting, or in Juan's cryptic behavior. This way the film resolves the cruelest or most emotional episodes in the least judgmental or melodramatic way, because its narrative strategy is ironic: in other words, there is discrepancy between what is represented (shown, said, acted) and its real meaning. The spectator could be watching death but hears life. In one sequence Juan kills *the man's* son and later on he also tries death upon himself by eating the content of a bag of dust-like fertilizer. The spectator doesn't see the actual beating and he or she can only imagine the bloody mess. What is shocking about Juan's suicide attempt is the realism of the performance, of the actor in real life consuming big chunks of dusty matter. This draws more attention to the physicality of the act than to its desperate and dramatic meaning, in a way that makes the spectator think that what is *really* happening is life, not representation. Despite the sadness of the story, *Dust* lacks a sort of sentimental intensity that in other films would make your eyes water: what it creates is an intense perception of details as a way of revealing the complex inner world of the characters, and of the present's connection to a previous time. *Dust* is an allegory of the past, in the sense that it narratively materializes a less concrete universe (in which not even the bodies remain, and oral memory makes up for the lack of more solid records). *Dust* deals with very upsetting issues by audiovisually deflecting the representation of explicitly shocking elements (images of the war, gruesome descriptions of the massacres, even Juan refuses to share his vivid memories for Ignacio's camera). To this contribute the editing pace, the stillness of the visual composition that gives life an (ironic) ordinary aftertaste.

This method of representing traumatic issues brings to mind other contemporary Latin American films that have dealt with issues of war and dictatorship in a not so war-like or dictatorship-like form: Paraguayan film *Paraguayan Hammock* (*Hamaca Paraguaya*, 2006) and Chilean film *Post Mortem* (2010).

The 20th century Chaco War and the military takeover, respectively, are experienced in an intriguingly still world by an old couple that awaits the return of their son from war, and by a man that waits every day for the victims' bodies to arrive at his work place, a morgue. This approach to an upsetting past contrasts, for example, with other recent historical films about Latin American 19th century wars of independence: *Revolution* (*Revolución*, 2012) and *Belgrano* (2010), or *The Secrets in Her Eyes* (*El secreto de sus ojos*, 2009) about 20th century Argentinean dictatorship. Also, these last films provide the spectator with unambiguous coordinates to the past reality that is represented by giving information in the opening credits, adding graphic remarks onto the images, inserting explanatory shots or dialogues, and in general by explicitly contextualizing the narrative. This is not the case in *Paraguayan Hammock*, *Post Mortem* and *Dust*; they don't provide those historical (mostly graphic) commentaries about date, place, and nature of the major event in which the fiction is set.

It is difficult to assess the aforementioned similarities of the approaches to the past as something more than creative coincidences; some authors consider that Latin America's current film endeavors are not systematic, because many productions are sporadic events in the lifetime of a director, a generation, or a national industry. Independent production characterizes most national cinemas on the continent, and in many occasions this independence results in the films embodying the ideas of isolated projects, affecting critical continuity. Cordón puts this in plain words when he relates the aesthetics of his films to matters of production in Guatemala. His are "simple and minimalist stories," and this has to do with very irregular and personal independent production methods in a country that lacks a film industry or institute (Entrevista, 2001). "The latter does not mean or lead to poor cinema, but perhaps to a minimalist aesthetic" (Ibid). He applies this "less is more" strategy to his previous film *Gasoline*, with its real-time narration of a few and prolonged events that

make up a day in the life of its protagonist. As in *Dust*, in *Gasoline* the events unfold without explanation, as if not mediated by an already thought narrative plan. In this sense Córdón's style brings to mind Argentinean filmmaker Lisandro Alonso's style, in films like *The Dead* (*Los muertos*, 2004), *Freedom* (*La libertad*, 2001) and *Liverpool* (2008). These are better defined by Eduardo A. Russo's idea of the "heaviness" of a filmed world that doesn't speed up to a more expected modern and digital pace, and that conveys a more immediate impression of reality (2008: 311, 313). There is a "less is more" and time-consuming narrative strategy that connects both styles — despite their aesthetic and thematic differences — and that also characterizes *Paraguayan Hammock* and *Post Mortem*. Perhaps, as Córdón suggested, this trend is a sort of "minimalist" embodiment of a production system. For instance, David Oubiña includes *Paraguayan Hammock* among a series of contemporary Latin American films that worked totally independent from aesthetic constraints related to funding or institutional policies (2008: 37). This independent model also applies to Alonso's very personal style; he started his own production company, 4L. In Guatemala, according to Córdón, the lack of a national cinema institute or law translates into a "guerilla" cinema, characterized by low budgets, independence and certain technological limitations (Entrevista, 2001). But perhaps it is related to what Dan Dargis (2011) refers as a contemporary "slow cinema" style, for which he points to critic Jonathan Romney's (2010) use of the term. Among other traits, these "slow" narratives are characterized by "an intensified sense of temporality," according to Romney (*Sometimes a vegetable*, 2011). To explore this "minimalist" and "slow cinema" trend in Latin American would require taking into consideration regional and international cinematic influences on the particular films, the development of aesthetic national traditions (e.g. the influence of literature is very strong in Latin American culture) and, very importantly, the filmmakers' personal history, intentions and creative authority. For instance, film critic Rufo Caballero has interpreted this

“minimalism” in opposition to an “all things included aesthetic” (2005: 181) that characterized the beginnings of the New Latin American Cinema movement. The films from the 60s and 70s were a sort of totalizing representations of “reality, the world, aesthetics, [and] cinema” (Ibid). This large-scale thematic and formal approach started to change in the following decades, to a full transformation in the 90s. By this time, Latin American cinema encompassed mostly small format films, with less transcendental topics, a meditative tone, and an overall “less is more” narrative strategy (Ibid 182). From Caballero’s perspective, it would seem that the New Latin American Cinema exhausted its methods, and this process coincided with the sociopolitical and economic changes in the region.

In the case of Central America, Cortés has surveyed some thematic, aesthetic, national and/or regional continuity during the 20th and 21st centuries; the inventory combines documentaries and fictional short and feature films. Although for this author, quantity in itself is a good starting point in order to evaluate this cinematography. Just the fact that “[s]ixteen feature films [were] produced between 2001 and 2006 is a highly regarded quantity [and success] for such small market, with no such precedents in its history. It is important to remember that in the whole [Central American] region only two feature films were produced during the 90s” (77). Her optimism is understandable — one should avoid dividing those sixteen feature films among five years in a region of six countries, because (if doing the math in equal terms) then each national cinema would amount to (approximately) one film for a span of only three years. It is important to value a film like *Dust* from a different angle; according to Cortés, Rafael Rosal’s film *The Crosses. Next Town* was “the first fiction feature film that dealt with the topic of the recent civil war [in Guatemala] and the army’s practice of wiping out indigenous communities” (79). Córdón’s film in 2012 makes it possible to think that a long and devastating war will prompt more filmmakers to *Dust* off the past with systematic representations.

Notes

[1] Quotes from Alberto Fuguet, María Luisa Cortés, María Cristina Pons, Fernando Ainsa, Julio Hernández Cordón and Rufo Caballero are personal translations from the original Spanish versions.

[2] María Luisa Cortés mentions other themes: ethnic groups and official history (70), indigenous communities (71), women's rights (72), issues of identity (73), literary adaptations and immigration (79).

[3] Some examples from Guatemala: "*La masacre de Panzós* (1999), *No hay cosa oculta que no venga a describirse. La tragedia de Santa María Tzejá* (1999) [and] *Mártires de la Embajada de España* (2000)." In El Salvador: "*1932: la cicatriz de la memoria* (2000) [and] *Ama, la memoria del tiempo* (2000)" (Cortés, 2008: 69).

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