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20 Years of Ícaro spreading its wings: Ícaro International Film Festival

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The global imaginary of Central America, encompassing Guatemala, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama,[1] often relates to the subcontinent's turbulent history and strategic geopolitical positioning. From succumbing to European imperial forces in the 15th century to the end of the Cold War and its aftermath, the southernmost isthmus of North America that connects to South America has always been disputed and divided. 1996 marks the year that the last of the United Nations' Central American Peace Agreements was signed between national governments and revolutionary parties to officially end a long series of domestic and international conflicts. Ever since its independence from colonial powers in 1821, there have been various (failed) attempts to integrate the region as a Central American unity, be it politically, economically, socially, or culturally. For the past twenty years, referred to as the 'postwar' period, governments, institutions, and individuals have again taken to uniting in diversity. One of the ways to chart this reconstruction of a postwar identity is to look at the expressive development of a regional film culture. Despite the fact that the history of film in Central America dates back to the early 20th century as it does in most parts of the world, the first 100 years of film saw the release of barely 44 fiction features,[2] and most films documented the diverging political or ideological causes that the societies were caught up in. The 1990s in particular have been characterised as 'the silent period', for having produced only one fiction feature, aptly titled *El Silencio de Neto* (The Silence of Neto, Luis Argueta, 1994). Since 2001, however, Central America has produced around 200, 50 in Costa Rica alone. Slowly, a 'new Central American cinema'[3] has been developing as a regional cultural expression celebrating diversity and spurred by the region's long-standing politics of integration.



Fig. 1: Ícaro International Film Festival 2017.

The development of a regional film culture has largely coincided with the creation and expansion of the NGO Casa Comal[4] and the Ícaro International Film Festival in Guatemala, established in 1998 as a local platform for Guatemalan film and video productions. The founding members, Elias Jiménez Trachtenberg and Rafael Rosal Paz, were among the first-generation filmmakers to graduate from the *Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión* (EICTV) in San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba, establishing a connection that is as relevant today as it was twenty years ago. In a reference to its foundational declaration on their website, the festival identifies itself as a platform to rid cultural discourse of its explicit ideological dimension (cf. ‘New Latin American Cinema’) and as a cultural reflection of democratic values:

What could we show if talking about cinema in the country was like talking about nuclear physics? Here I believe lies the second great success we achieved: We had to give voice to all, to de-ideologize the discourse, to open wings for all regardless of political, religious or sexual orientations, without discriminating racial, cultural or economic origins. The Icaro would be a time and space for peace and learning. A moment of convergence that would allow us to see ourselves in the multiplicity of mirrors of our diverse and pluricultural reality. [5]

For the past twenty years, Ícaro has been an exhibition platform for local and regional film productions, inspiring neighbouring countries to set up film festivals (Costa Rica IFF, Panama IFF), funds (Cinergia, Pixels, Fauno, Programa Ibermedia[6]), and government support structures. Because of its pioneering role in the region, the study of the Ícaro festival sheds some light on the emerging film cultures of Central America. More generally, it presents the opportunity to understand the role of film festivals in regional exhibition circuits. The festival’s inclusive rhetoric is also expressed through the organising NGO Casa Comal’s educational programmes and through the festival’s progressive stance on gender-related matters in the world of film. The brief discussion of the festival’s selection and award policies below demonstrates

that developments at Ícaro are symptomatic of broader cultural and gender(ed) politics advocated through Central American cinema.

The Ícaro imagery returns in most of the festival's artwork and promotional material (see Figure 1) and reminds us of the Greek myth about the artist and craftsman Daedalus and the hubris of his son Icarus who flew too close to the sun. The video introduction to the 2017 festival, however, states that 'making cinema is to reach for the sun', but this also means to save the region from potentially ambitious yet unsustainable industrial practices. The NGO's three pillars of education, production, and dissemination are oriented towards structural and integral development of a shared film culture. In practice, this emphasises the organisation of film schools through Casa Comal in bilateral agreement with EICTV, and the invitation of film professionals from the region to the annual festival as meeting grounds from which new projects can arise.

EICTV, the school for every world

Before turning to the festival's multiple exhibition strategies for Central American productions, I will acknowledge the importance of the international film school from whence the idea of a regional Central American cinema emerged. The cradle of the Ícaro Festival, and of new Central American cinema as it is developing, lies unmistakably in Cuba. In response to new military regimes in several Latin American countries,[7] a support group of politically engaged filmmakers founded the Committee of Latin American Filmmakers (C-CAL) in 1974.[8] After the organisation of the first International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana in 1979, the C-CAL group expanded into the Foundation of the New Latin American Cinema (FNCL) in 1985. The FNCL was a privately funded foundation headed by Gabriel García Márquez and included members from 15 Latin American countries, Spain, and the United States, with headquarters in Havana. The group set out to collect all documents and manifestos relating to the New Latin American Cinema and established a film school in San Antonio de Los Baños: the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión, in December 1986. The three 'founding fathers' were García Márquez, Cuban filmmaker and critic Julio García Espinosa, and Argentinian filmmaker Fernando Birri, who also was the first director of the school, later followed by the Brazilian Orlando Senna and García Espinosa. Rafael Rosal Paz, co-founder of the Ícaro Festival and

EICTV graduate also joined the list of EICTV directors, a position he occupied from 2011 until financial setbacks put an early end to his stay at EICTV in 2013. EICTV's name has changed from 'The School of Three Worlds' to 'The School for Every World',[9] shedding the tripartite division of First, Second, and Third worlds from a Cold War context that has often characterised the discourse on 'world cinema'. [10] Not unsurprisingly, EICTV functions as the common ground from whence many film professionals have initiated their careers in the Central American and Caribbean region and it inspired its graduates to engage in the organisation of film schools elsewhere (cf. Casa Comal in Guatemala).

Celebrating twenty years of Ícaro

Due to the unexpected large number of submissions and with the help of European development assistance,[11] the Ícaro Film Festival turned regional for its third edition in 2000. Overall, the festival's current exhibition strategy is threefold: first, since 2008, the six Central American countries hold their own national Ícaro competition from August to September to select the films that will represent the nation at the International Ícaro Festival that takes place in Guatemala in November (see Figure 2). Second, these national selection events also include screenings of the prize-winning and nominated films from the previous international edition. Third, the victory lap of the nominated and awarded films also includes an international traveling exhibition in countries where Ícaro is represented: all six Central American countries, Cuba, and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean, New York in the US, and Barcelona in Spain, each with their own Ícaro-associated organising team. This way, the festival guarantees at least 10 extra screenings for selected films throughout and beyond the Americas.

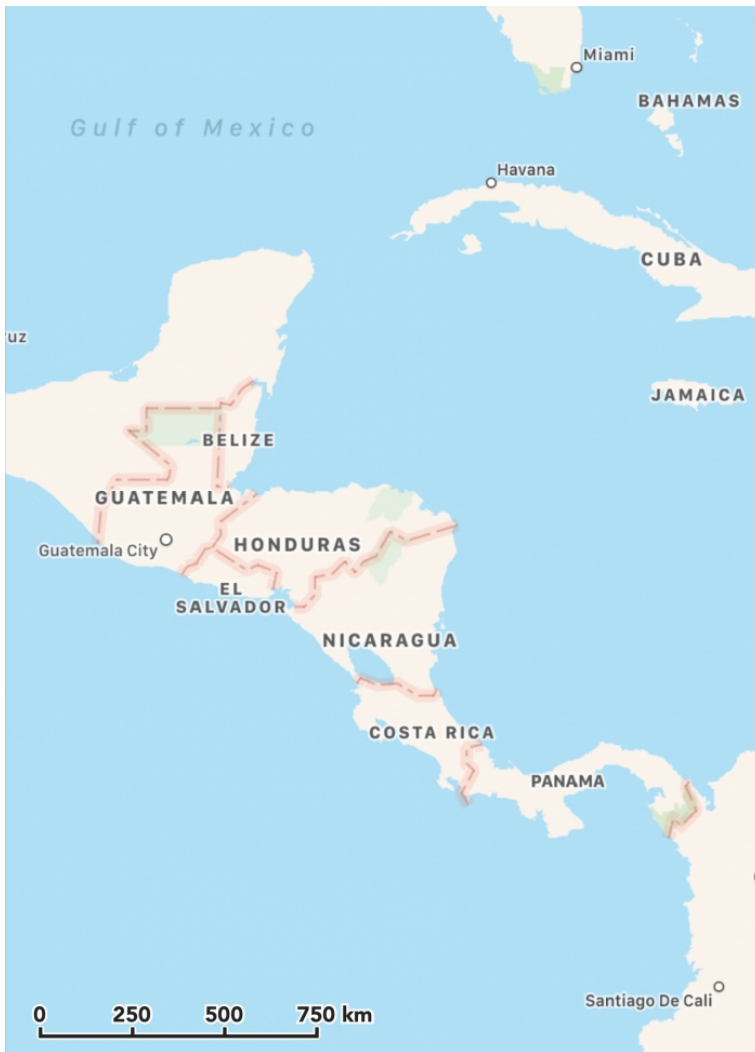


Fig. 2: The Central American Ícaro network.

The festival's twentieth anniversary edition in 2017 gathered many members of the local organising committees from the region, as well as international invitees and film professionals who, over the years, have contributed to the festival or EICTV/Casa Comal's educational activities. In its 'field- and identity-configuring'[12] capacity for Central American cinema,[13] Ícaro as a brand unites filmmakers from the region, most of whom are personally acquainted from their training at the EICTV film school in Cuba or from previous collaborations.

Over the course of one week, 116 films were screened in six categories of competition.[14]The Central American films in competition were produced in the past two years and amounted to 68 in 2017, complemented with 48 international films in competition, 23 of which were Spanish-language. Additionally, seven special Guatemalan screenings completed the programme, including a screening of the alleged first Guatemalan fiction feature, *Näskara/Amanecer* (Dawn, Juan Miguel de la Mora, 1952) which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1953 and was recovered from a Mexican archive after being lost for 60 years. Overall, out of 265 scheduled screenings, 218 were in Spanish and only eight screenings were organised for four English-language films, which is the same amount as Belgian films competing in Guatemala. The programming choices reinforce the festival's identity as a platform for local and regional productions, offering the audience an alternative to films from the US that dominate the domestic markets.

The 20th anniversary edition was markedly more intimate than the previous year, when there were 270 films in competition selected out of 4,000 films from 116 different countries, including over 100 Central American and 37 Caribbean films. What stands out in the 2017 competition is Costa Rica's overall dominance in the Central American categories and the festival's decisions in gender-related matters. Costa Rica acquired six nominations in four categories, and won five awards, including three of the most prestigious categories, being Best Central American fiction feature (*Abrázame Como Antes / Hold Me Like Before*, Jurgen Ureña, 2016), Best Director, and two times the award for Best Actress. The latter is a remarkable feat since the award for Best Actor was suspended and turned into a second Best Actress award for transgender actress Jimena Franco (*Hold Me Like Before*, 2016), who won the award alongside fellow Costa Rican Liliana Biamonte for her performance in Ariel Escalante's *El sonido de las cosas* (*The Sound of Things*, 2016). This gender-political statement from the all-female nine-person jury marks a trend within Central American cinema with respect to the acknowledgement of gender diversity on both thematic and technical-artistic levels, as was set out in the festival's foundational rhetoric (see earlier). In spite of the jury's positive intentions, there was a contradiction in acknowledging Jimena Franco as a female actor and the suspension of the Best Actor category, which would have been unnecessary if the transgender actress would have been nominated in the Best Actress category to begin with. The festival jury acknowledges the

actress' inclusion in the female category, but still, perhaps inadvertently, 'others' her by seemingly transferring her across gender boundaries in the nominations and choosing two actresses to share the award.

Out of all 18 Central American nominated films, seven were directed by women. Out of sixteen nominees in Ícaro's international competitions, ten women were responsible for the (co-)direction of eight films, two of which won awards in the categories of Best Fiction Feature (Valeria Pivato/Celia Atan, *La Novia del Desierto / The Desert Bride*, 2017) and Best Fiction Short. The rise and growth of Central American cinema in the past two decades is strongly marked by a female presence, in technical-artistic and producing capacities as well as in the films' empowering storylines, such as in the Nicaraguan *La Yuma* (Florence Jaugey, 2009), or in other critically acclaimed films such as *El camino (The Path)*, Ishtar Yasin Gutiérrez, 2008), *Cápsulas (Capsules)*, Veronica Riedel, 2011), *Agua fría de mar (Cold Water of the Sea)*, Paz Fábrega, 2010), *Del amor y otros demonios (Of Love and Other Demons)*, Hilda Hidalgo, 2009), and *El último comandante (The Last Commander)*, Vicente Ferraz and Isabel Martínez, 2010),[15] or the documentary films by Tatiana Huezo (El Salvador/Mexico) and Marcela Zamora (El Salvador/Nicaragua). The festival's stance on gender-equality can thus be seen as symptomatic of broader developments in regional Central American film culture.

Conclusion

It is clear that Casa Comal has developed into an important cultural institution in the region, extending EICTV's reach onto the North American mainland. Through the annual gathering of EICTV graduates and the organisation of film schools, the festival as an institution attempts to be a multi-sited vehicle for exhibition as well as production of film. Despite the continuing lack of structural support for filmmakers, there is a certain urgency to develop a conscious and critical Central American cinema. Following the example of the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana, Ícaro was first in breaking the silence that has characterised the Central American media landscape in the 20th century. In turn, the festival served as a model for more prestigious and premiere-oriented festivals in the region, most notably the CRFIC in Costa Rica and IFF Panama, both in countries with stronger economies and film funds. This review also briefly turned to the

festival's anti-discriminatory foundational rhetoric in considering progressive gender-related aspects in selection and award practices at the 20th anniversary edition of 2017. As has been demonstrated, Ícaro's pioneering work in the development of a regional Central American cinema and its progressive stance on gender-inequality are marking a noteworthy movement in contemporary Latin American cinemas.

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Notes

- [1] Belize, although officially a Central American country, is very often excluded from supranational categorisations on grounds of geolinguistic, historical, and cultural differences as its Anglophone character ties it more to the Caribbean isles.
- [2] Lourdes Cortés 2005.
- [3] Durón 2014.
- [4] The NGO's name is short for '*Casa Comunicación Alternativa*' which translates as 'the house of alternative communication'.
- [5] '¿Qué podíamos mostrar si en el país hablar de cine era como hablar de física nuclear? Aquí creo que está el segundo gran acierto que tuvimos: Había que darle voz a todos, desideologizar el discurso, abrir las alas para todos y todas sin importar orientaciones políticas, religiosas o sexuales, sin discriminar origen racial, cultural o económico. El Ícaro sería un espacio-tiempo de paz y aprendizaje. Un momento de convergencia que permitiera vernos en la multiplicidad de espejos

de nuestra realidad diversa y pluricultural.' (Rosal Paz 2017, xx.festivalicaro.com/noticias/20-años-en-las-alas-de-icaro/)

- [6] Founded in 2004 by scholar María Lourdes Cortés and active until 2016, '*Cinergia Fondo de fomento al audiovisual de Centroamérica y el Caribe*' constituted the main funding platform for Central American and Caribbean film. Pixels is a film fund organised by the Ministry of Economy in El Salvador and sponsored by the Productive Development Fund (FONDEPRO) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). 'El Fauno' is the Costa Rican film fund organised by Centro de Cine, the Costa Rican Film Production Center from the Ministry of Culture and Youth. The Spanish-based Programa Ibermedia is the largest supra-national film fund for Iberoamerican productions since 1997 (Falicov 2012). Honduras and El Salvador are the only Central American countries that do not participate in the Ibermedia Programme.
- [7] Bolivia, Chile, and Uruguay.
- [8] Rist 2014, p. 263.
- [9] Balaisis 2013, p. 192.
- [10] Nagib 2006; Nagib & Perriam & Dudrah 2012.
- [11] Initially, European assistance consisted of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) in coordination with the Norwegian Royal Embassy in Guatemala, and HIVOS, the Dutch 'Humanist Organisation for Development Cooperation' (Zambrano & Buvollen 2007).
- [12] '[F]ield- and identity-configuring events' are defined as 'temporal organizations [...] that encapsulate and shape the development of [...] markets and industries' and as the primary meeting grounds for filmmaking and industry professionals to network and develop industry standards (Lampel & Meyer 2008, p. 1026).
- [13] Lampel & Meyer 2008, p. 1027.
- [14] This was significantly less than the 270 films in competition in 2016. The student films from the IBERMEDIA-sponsored Latin American congregation and the Guatemalan 'Casa Comal'-students, nor those from the invited category of 'music videos' are included within the 116.
- [15] Durón 2014, p. 62.
- [i] This review has been written at the Visual and Digital Cultures Research Center (ViDi) in the context of a doctoral research project supported by the Vandenburg Baillel Latour Chair for Film Studies and Visual Culture. It is also part of the research project CSO2017-85290-P, funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of the Spanish Government and co-financed with European Regional Development Funds.