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Cine Bajo Tierra: Ecuador's Booming Underground Cinema in the Aftermath of the Neoliberal Era

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> I film, therefore I am.
> Nelson Palacios, Ecuadorian filmmaker
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> When I am not around anymore, I want to be remembered as a woman who was important. I want to make something real, so when people ask "Who was Irma Herrera?" they will remember me … as the pioneer of cinema in [my hometown of] El Triunfo.
> Irma Herrera, Ecuadorian filmmaker
>
> Film or die!
> Fernando Cedeño, Ecuadorian filmmaker [1]

There is a cinematic boom going on in Ecuador. Long gone are the days when Ecuadorian films were few and far between, when there could be prolonged periods of time—sometimes several years in a row—without a single movie release, when every new motion picture felt like the first. In fact, when *La tigra* (The tigress), a film based on a short story by José de la Cuadra and directed by Camilo Luzuriaga, premiered in 1990, renowned Ecuadorian poet and cineaste Ulises Estrella sardonically criticized its promoters' apparent inaugural

pretensions (De la Vega, 2016, pp. 20–21). *La tigra* was not the first feature-length fictional film ever made in the South American country, of course,[2] but it quickly became—and, today, it still is—the biggest box office hit in the history of Ecuadorian cinema.[3]

La tigra's success notwithstanding, the 1990s saw the release of only three additional Ecuadorian movies, one of them also directed by Luzuriaga, and the other two by various members of just one single family. *Sensaciones* (Sensations), by siblings Juan Esteban Cordero and Viviana Cordero, premiered in 1991; *Entre Marx y una mujer desnuda* (Between Marx and a naked woman), by Luzuriaga, in 1996; and *Ratas, ratones, rateros* (Rats, mice, petty thieves), by Juan Esteban and Viviana's younger brother, Sebastián Cordero, in 1999. The latter film, arguably the first one made in the South American nation with international production values, marks a definite watershed in the history of Ecuadorian cinema, to such an extent that it is usually heralded as the cornerstone of today's so-called boom. Cordero would go on to become the most recognizable Ecuadorian filmmaker of all time both inside and outside his country, and to helm projects backed by global capital, such as 2004's *Crónicas* (Chronicles), a Mexico/Ecuador co-production shot in Ecuador with American, Mexican, Spanish, and Ecuadorian actors; 2009's *Rabia* (Rage), a Mexico/Spain/Colombia collaboration filmed in Spain with Colombian, Mexican, and Spanish performers; and 2013's *Europa Report*, an American movie made in the US with an international cast featuring American, Romanian, Swedish, Polish, and South African talent.

After *Ratas…*, there seemed to be an awakening of filmmaking enthusiasm in Cordero's home country. While the 1990s gave us a meager four feature-length movies, for an average of one release every two and a half years, the following decade would see the pace of production increase to an average of three releases per year. Some of the works produced in the wake of Cordero's opera prima are *Alegría de una vez* (My one time joy), directed by Mateo Herrera, and *Sueños en la mitad del mundo* (Dreams in the middle of the world), by Carlos Naranjo, in 2001; *Un titán en el ring* (A titan in the ring), by Viviana Cordero, and *Fuera de juego* (Offside), by Víctor Arregui, in 2002; *Cara o cruz* (Heads or tails), by Camilo Luzuriaga, and *Tiempo de ilusiones* (Time for illusions), by Germán Aguilar and Margarita Reyes, in 2003; *1808–1810: mientras llega el día* (1808–1810: until that day comes), by Camilo Luzuriaga, and the already mentioned *Crónicas*, in 2004; *Jaque* (Check), by Mateo Herrera, in 2005; and *Qué tan lejos* (How much further), by Tania Hermida, in 2006. The latter film is to this day the second largest box office hit in the history of Ecuadorian cinema, the

only one other than *La tigra* to sell over 220,000 tickets, and with 24 weeks in movie houses it had one of the longest theatrical runs on record for a domestic production. It was around this time—the mid to late 2000s—when some people started talking about an Ecuadorian cinematic boom.

This was not unreasonable. Some of these movies were good, some were selected to participate and even won awards at prestigious film festivals from around the world, and some were commercially successful or at least viable. And, while an average of three releases per year may look like nothing to write home about, it was progress. Yet the best was still to come: in the late 2000s and early 2010s, production climbed again, at such a pace that 2012 saw the theatrical release of six Ecuadorian motion pictures, thirteen more premiered during 2013, and 2014 brought a record sixteen.[4]

State support has been decisive in the development of this still modest cinematic boom, especially in the last decade or so—in other words, since Rafael Correa's rise to power in 2007. Charismatic leader of what he called a citizens' revolution, sympathizer of the new socialism of the 21st century, and self-proclaimed anti-neoliberal, Correa did not hide his conviction that the state can—and should—intervene in the most diverse facets of national life, including the cultural field. He also believed that those diverse facets, and in particular the cultural field, must serve a common good defined as the advancement of the key values of the citizens' revolution. Ecuador's Ley de Cine (Film Law), which was promulgated in 2006 and thus predated Correa's presidency by about a year (Maldonado, 2014), as well as the subsequent creation of the Consejo Nacional de Cinematografía (National Council of Cinematography) or CNCine, recently renamed and reconfigured as the Instituto de Cine y Creación Audiovisual (Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Creation) or ICCA, have been instrumental in the formation and consolidation of an embryonic Ecuadorian film industry mainly through the distribution of subsidies to the tune of $1 million per year on average.[5] Between 2007 and 2015, CNCine financed almost 400 projects (Criollo, 2016).

Some motion pictures made in Ecuador over the past ten years—many of them with state funding—include *Cuando me toque a mí* (When my turn comes, released in English as *My Time Will Come*), directed by Víctor Arregui, and *Esas no son penas* (Those are not sorrows, released as *Anytime Soon*), by Anahí Hoeneisen and Daniel Andrade, in 2007; *Retazos de vida* (Offcuts from real life), by Viviana Cordero, in 2008; *Impulso* (Impulse), by Mateo Herrera, *Los canallas* (The scoundrels, released as *Riff Raff*), by Ana Cristina Franco, and *Blak Mama* [*sic*], by

Miguel Alvear and Patricio Andrade, in 2009; *A tus espaldas* (Behind you), by Tito Jara, and *Prometeo deportado* (Deporting Prometheus), by Fernando Mieles, in 2010; *En el nombre de la hija* (In the name of the daughter, released as *In the Name of the Girl*), by Tania Hermida, and *Pescador* (Fisherman), by Sebastián Cordero, in 2011; *Sin otoño, sin primavera* (No autumn, no spring), by Iván Mora Manzano, and *Mejor no hablar (de ciertas cosas)* (Better not to talk (about certain things), released as *The Porcelain Horse*), by Javier Andrade, in 2012; *No robarás (a menos que sea necesario)* (Thou shalt not steal (unless it is necessary)), by Viviana Cordero, *Mono con gallinas* (Monkey with chickens, released as *Open Wound*), by Alfredo León, *Distante cercanía* (Distant proximity), by Alex Schlenker and Diego Coral, *El facilitador* (The facilitator), by Víctor Arregui, *Tinta sangre* (Blood ink), by Mateo Herrera, *La llamada* (The call, released as *On the Line*), by David Nieto Wenzell, and *Silencio en la tierra de los sueños* (Silence in the land of dreams, released as *Silence in Dreamland*), by Tito Molina, in 2013; *Quito 2023*, by César Izurieta and Juan Fernando Moscoso, *Saudade* (Melancholy), by Juan Carlos Donoso, *Sexy Montañita*, by Alberto Pablo Rivera, *Feriado* (Holiday), by Diego Araujo, and *A estas alturas de la vida* (At this point in life), by Manuel Calisto and Alex Cisneros, in 2014; *Adolescentes* (Teenagers), by Rogelio Gordon, *Sed* (Thirst), by Joe Houlberg, *La descorrupción* (The de-corruption), by María Emilia García, and *Ochentaisiete* (Eighty-seven), by Anahí Hoeneisen and Daniel Andrade, in 2015; *Alba*, by Ana Cristina Barragán, *Entre sombras: Averno* (Between shadows: Hell), by Xavier Bustamante Ruiz, *UIO: sácame a pasear* (UIO: take me for a ride),[6] by Micaela Rueda, *Tan distintos* (So different, released as *An Ocean Between Us*), by Pablo Arturo Suárez, *Translúcido* (Translucent), by Leonard Zelig, and *Sin muertos no hay carnaval* (There is no carnival without dead people, released as *Such is Life in the Tropics*), by Sebastián Cordero, in 2016; *Tal vez mañana* (Perhaps tomorrow), by Dwight Gregorich, *Sólo es una más* (It is just one more), by Viviana Cordero, and *Quijotes negros* (Black Quixotes), by Sandino Burbano, in 2017; *Oscuridad* (Darkness), by Jaime Rosero, *Cenizas* (Ashes), by Juan Sebastián Jácome, and *Agujero negro* (Black hole), by Diego Araujo, in 2018. Also worth mentioning are feature-length documentaries such as *Descartes* (Scraps), directed by Fernando Mieles (2009); *Abuelos* (Grandparents), by Carla Valencia (2010); *Con mi corazón en Yambo* (With my heart in Yambo), by María Fernanda Restrepo (2011); *La bisabuela tiene Alzheimer* (My great-grandmother has Alzheimer's disease), by Iván Mora Manzano (2012); *La muerte de Jaime Roldós* (The death of Jaime Roldós),[7] by Manolo Sarmiento and Lisandra Rivera

(2013); *Alfaro Vive Carajo*,[8] by Mauricio Samaniego (2015); and *Si yo muero primero* (If I die first), by Rodolfo Muñoz (2017).

A boom indeed, especially for a country such as Ecuador, a tiny peripheral fragment of a Latin American film industry that is itself already peripheral in the context of global capitalism. Important though it may be, however, this is not the Ecuadorian cinematic boom that this chapter wants to examine. For there is a different, unofficial, subterranean cinematic boom also going on in the South American nation.

The 'other' boom

"It turns out there is another cinema in Ecuador," Quito-based visual artist and filmmaker Miguel Alvear wrote in 2009. "It is such a different cinema that the word *another* should be capitalized," he added. Yet which one of these distinct expressions of the Ecuadorian cinematic imagination deserves to be defined by its alleged otherness was then, and remains, a debatable issue. Alvear went on to characterize this alternative Ecuadorian cinema in terms of its relationship with the marketplace and the audience:

> You will not find these movies on the screens of any theater in the country. Their place, where they thrive and feel like home, is the pirate DVD market, where anything goes, where everything can be sold and bought, where hierarchies such as artistic-commercial, good-bad, Gringo-European-Latino have been obliterated forever. And, believe it or not, in contrast to the other Ecuadorian cinema—the semi-subsidized one that wins prizes at international festivals—this cinema sells like hotcakes. (Alvear, 2009a, p.28)

Together with film critic and academic Christian León, Alvear conducted an investigation that resulted in the 2009 book *Ecuador bajo tierra: videografías en circulación paralela* (Underground Ecuador: videographies in parallel circulation), still today the best source of information about this movement. After considering other options such as amateur, exploitation, trash, and low-budget cinema, they concluded that the most fitting adjective to describe the phenomenon that they had just "unearthed" was *underground* (León, 2009, pp.12–13), and thus labeled it "Ecuador bajo tierra" (EBT). A marveled quality is palpable throughout their writing after the realization that

> there was a complex system of production, distribution, and commercialization that did not go through the quality standards, the film schools, the filmmakers guild, the audiovisual production structures, the commercial or alternative movie theaters, the Internal Revenue Service, the Ley de Cine regulations, or the jurisdiction of cultural authorities. We discovered that there was a massive audiovisual universe running parallel to the institutionalized realm of cinema, the lettered culture, the middle class, and the formal market. (León 2009, p.11)

Another voice that contributed to the task of making these subterranean movies visible was writer and academic Gabriela Alemán, who also in 2009 published an essay on the pirate DVD market in Ecuador included in the edited volume *Latsploitation, Exploitation Cinemas, and Latin America*. That same year, Alvear joined forces with Ochoymedio, a cultural organization led by film producer Mariana Andrade, to put together the EBT film festival. This event, which has had three additional iterations since then, marked the first encounter between these underground creators and mainstream audiences in Quito and Guayaquil. In 2010, Alvear would revisit the EBT movement, this time in a docu-fiction titled *Más allá del mall* (Beyond the mall). Using his own experience as a commercially unsuccessful filmmaker, a fictionalized Alvear played by actor Andrés Crespo sets out to understand where the 'real' Ecuadorian cinema is, distressed by the revelation that most domestic productions do not turn a profit—his *Blak Mama*, for instance, ends up $247,267 in the red and is seen in theaters by only 1,922 moviegoers. The protagonist then 'discovers' the elusive EBT filmography, travels around the country interviewing these popular filmmakers, and winds up deciding to bring *Blak Mama* to the pirate DVD distributors and let them copy it—he just wants his work to reach an audience. Throughout *Más allá*…, as throughout most of the texts and media dealing with the EBT phenomenon, the comparison between the two sides of Ecuadorian cinema is inevitable, awkward, and instructive.

The films that belong to the post-*Ratas*… and especially post-*Qué tan*… explosion of 'mainstream' filmmaking creativity in Ecuador described above have a number of things in common. Their participants see themselves as auteurs, regard what they make as art, usually come from Quito or Guayaquil or live in those cities, have attended film school in Ecuador or abroad, are members of the upper middle class and tell their stories from that specific perspective—even if they depict

poverty or include lower class characters—and their productions have an average budget of $370,000 (García Velásquez, 2017, p.91) that would be unthinkable without state subventions, among other reasons because very few people go to the theater to watch these expensive movies.

Until the late 2000s, each new Ecuadorian production—being a relatively isolated novelty—was able to attract an average of 100,000 moviegoers (García Velásquez, 2017, p.84). Beginning in the early 2010s, box office figures started to decline rather sharply. As the number of movies per year drastically rose, the response from the public grew colder: 2013's thirteen releases had to share 235,000 viewers, 2014's record sixteen films attracted a paltry 85,000 moviegoers, and 2015's five productions sold an embarrassing combined total of under 5,000 tickets. Indeed,

> Trying to explain the mismatch between this exponential growth in the production of national cinema (300%) and the extremely low levels of ticket sales has been a constant in the analyses on the topic. However, these analyses leave out the demand for that 'other cinema', absent from commercial theaters, that is produced not only in tune with, but even at the express request of, the public. (Montalvo, 2016, p.6)

The underground films that belong to this 'alternative' explosion of filmmaking creativity do not sell tickets in commercial theaters either, because in fact they are not even shown there. Yet despite their shoestring budgets they have an audience of hundreds of thousands, sometimes even millions, thanks to their considerable success in the informal market of pirate DVDs completely outside the conventional channels of cultural distribution—and, more recently, their free circulation on the internet via video-sharing websites such as YouTube or peer-to-peer file-sharing protocols such as BitTorrent. They are part of "globalization from below," that is, globalization "as experienced by most of the world's people" or "the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, often semi-legal or illegal transactions, often associated with 'the developing world' but in fact apparent across the globe" (Mathews and Alba Vega, 2012, p.1).

In most cases, the creators involved in this parallel cinematic boom are not from Quito or Guayaquil, nor do they live in those cities. They are from rural areas of the country, mainly in the coast.[9] The regional divide between the mainstream cinematic boom and its subterranean

counterpart cannot be overstated in a nation so intensely affected by regionalism[10]. In the words of *La Tigra*'s director, "Ecuadorian cinema is perceived as cinema from Quito; it is not perceived as national" (Luzuriaga, 2014). Suffice it to say that, according to CNCine, every year about 80% of the state monies dedicated to the promotion of the national film industry are awarded to Quito-based projects.

It is obvious, and often painfully so, that EBT filmmakers have not studied filmmaking at all, in Ecuador or abroad, and they are far from being members of the upper middle class, something that their movies make quite clear. While the first boom's creators favor non-linear narratives and other techniques typical of "great cinema," their underground counterparts choose clarity over cleverness every time. While the first boom's directors show, in general, white-mestizo city dwellers who belong to the middle or upper classes, except when they want to portray the dangers of a supposedly pervasive urban criminality, the other ones make Ecuador's enormous racial diversity visible and let the viewers peek into a world that is eminently rural, lower class, even marginal.

Crucially, and in stark contrast to their mainstream counterparts, EBT creators do not receive state funding at all, making this alternative boom a truly independent phenomenon that responds exclusively to a massive consumption by the subaltern classes of Ecuadorian society[11].

Underground movies, subaltern voices

The EBT phenomenon has multiple foci throughout the country, particularly in the littoral region, and a growing number of participants from diverse backgrounds. However, its epicenter is arguably Chone, a small city in the province of Manabí, so much so that the term Chonewood is now commonly used—albeit often in a tongue-in-cheek way—by the media, in academia, and by Choneños themselves (see for example Alvear, 2009a; Neumane, 2013; Araya, 2016; Cedeño, 2016; Coryat and Zweig, 2017).

The story of underground filmmaking in Chone is a tale of two pioneers, Nixon Chalacamá and Fernando Cedeño, with an indefatigable desire to "be in the movies"[12] and express themselves through cinematic means. As they have reminisced in numerous interviews, most notably for Alvear's *Más allá…*, in their youth both men were part of a bunch of friends in love with martial arts and motorcycles. At some point in the early 1990s, one of their pals got a hold of a VHS camcorder, so the group started taping their fights and races. One day, Chalacamá suggested they make a movie akin to the

Bruce Lee, Jean-Claude Van Damme, or Arnold Schwarzenegger-led action flicks they liked. Cedeño thought he was crazy, but went along with the idea, as did the rest of the crew. The result was 1994's *En busca del tesoro perdido* (In search of the lost treasure), followed by *Potencia blanca* (White energy) one year later. Today, both works are sadly lost, but they were shown for several days at the now defunct movie theater Oriflama,[13] where they attracted big crowds of locals despite being such rudimentary productions that their camera movements—shot without tripods or Steadicams—left many in the audience dizzy from motion sickness (Alvear, 2009a, p.33).

Chalacamá has directed or co-directed five feature-length films and several shorts since then. *El destructor invisible* (The invisible destroyer), from 1996, has in Alvear's words the privilege of being "the first postmodern Ecuadorian movie" (quoted by actor Andrés Crespo during the Pinchagua Voladora (Flying Herring) award ceremony at the second EBT film festival in 2013). To make it, Chalacamá mixed and matched scenes originally recorded for his previous productions, splicing them together, redubbing them, and ultimately managing to create a somewhat coherent story against all odds. Chalacamá's most interesting film may be 2012's *Los raidistas* (The raiders), co-directed with Ignacio Solórzano. First, because it is a historical drama based on the real-life adventure of five Choneños who in 1939 traveled cross-country to Quito in a Chevrolet convertible to demonstrate the viability of the itinerary and force the government to fund the construction of the first road connecting Chone to the capital. Second, because it features Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez, leader of the coup d'état that deposed Jamil Mahuad in 2000 and then democratically elected president of Ecuador from 2003 to 2005, in the role of 1930s dictator General Alberto Enríquez Gallo. Chalacamá's latest movie, 2017's *Un minuto de vida* (A minute to live), tackles the difficult topic of human trafficking for sexual exploitation purposes with a heavy dose of Chonewood's trademark cinematic action and violence. Made for around $20,000 (Ramos Monteiro, 2016, p.48), Chalacamá's biggest budget to date by a large margin, it was among the first Ecuadorian motion pictures to use a drone for aerial filming and shows a remarkable progress for the director in terms of production values and narrative technique when compared to his earlier efforts.

A reluctant participant at first, Cedeño is now considered one of the de facto leaders of the EBT movement, for which he prefers the term "guerrilla cinema."[14] His first movie as a director, *Avaricia* (Avarice), was released in 1999. Still made in close collaboration with Chalacamá—they parted ways, amicably, in the early 2000s—it

featured a motorcycle chase that later became a cult sequence among some professional filmmakers in Quito (Alvear, 2009a, p.34). His second work, 2004's *Sicarios manabitas* (Hitmen from Manabí), may well be the most commercially successful Ecuadorian film of all time: it is said to have sold over a million copies in the pirate DVD market (Alvear, 2009a, p.35). A tale of love, violence, and revenge, this western continues to be the undisputed flagship of the EBT phenomenon to this day. Cedeño took a long time to complete his third motion picture, *El ángel de los sicarios* (The hitmen's angel), released in 2012 to great acclaim. It tells the story of Ángel, a young man who becomes a vigilante after witnessing the murder of his parents, devoting his life to the seemingly unachievable mission of killing each and every hired gun in a Manabí full of them. As with Chalacamá's latest project, *El ángel…* exhibits unusually high production values, to such an extent that—despite a frugal budget of just $4,000—it is perhaps the only EBT creation virtually indistinguishable, in terms of 'look', from many of the movies produced by professional Ecuadorian filmmakers at almost 100 times the cost.

Manabí is not, of course, the only place with an intense EBT activity. To the south, also on the coastal region, the Guayas province—where Guayaquil, the most populous city in the country, is located—has a lot to offer in terms of underground cinema. To start with, it is the home province of Nelson Palacios, without a doubt the most prolific Ecuadorian filmmaker of all time. Born in the city of Milagro and a resident of Durán, a commuter town just outside Guayaquil, Palacios averages a whopping 4.5 movies per year: he had directed 12 by the end of 2009 (Alvear, 2009b, p.57), 26 by early 2012 (Matamoros, 2012), 36 by mid-2014 (Martillo Monserrate, 2014), and almost 50 by the end of 2016 (Alvear, 2016, p.2). Some of his films are also exceptionally popular: *Pedro, el amante de mamá* (Pedro, mom's lover), from 2014, has over 11 million views on YouTube as of November 2018, which probably makes it the most watched movie in the history of Ecuadorian cinema.

Palacios started producing his substantial body of work in 2006 with a small video camera and the help of his family, friends, and neighbors. His oeuvre includes Chonewood-style westerns full of gun violence, such as 2007's *Sicarios malditos* (Damned hitmen) and 2008's *El llanero vengador* (The avenging cowboy) as well as its sequel *El regreso del llanero vengador* (The return of the avenging cowboy) from the following year, but Palacios seems to be a creator with a wider range of interests. He has explored the horror genre in films such as 2010's *No te burles de los muertos* (Do not make fun of the dead) and 2015's *Cansado de esperar*

sentí a la muerte llegar (Tired of waiting I felt death coming), religious cinema in 2011's *El pastor, el ateo y el ciego* (The pastor, the atheist, and the blind man) and 2012's *El pastor y el siervo del mal* (The pastor and the servant of evil), and even the animal movie genre in 2012's *Sentimientos de Jashy* (Jashy's feelings), which features the director's own dog in the title role.

The main obsessions for Palacios as a storyteller, in any case, seem to be abandonment and poverty. These two themes, which are reportedly autobiographical, combine to produce a certain kind of "masculine melodrama" (León, 2009, p.125) that informs much of his output. Examples include movies such as *La niña abandonada* (The abandoned girl) and *Buscando a mamá* (Looking for mum), from 2007; *El dolor de ser pobre* (The pain of being poor), from 2008; *No me dejes, mamá* (Do not leave me, mum), from 2009; *Recordando a mamá* (Remembering mum) and *Cuando nos toca llorar* (When it is our turn to cry), from 2011; *La hija no deseada* (The unwanted daughter), from 2012; *Espérame en el cielo, mamá* (Wait for me in heaven, mum), from 2014; and *Te perdono, papá* (I forgive you, dad), from 2016.

There is room for feminine melodrama, too, within the EBT movement. Also in Guayas, two female directors have made a point of presenting their perspective in underground movies. Bárbara Morán, an actress since she was 12, is a playwright who has written over 40 theater plays (Martillo Monserrate, 2012). One day, she decided to tape some of them with the help of her family and an amateur crew, and thus 2007's *Lágrimas de una madre* (A mother's tears), 2008's *Sueño de morir* (The dream of dying), 2009's *Cuando los hijos se van* (When children leave), 2010's *El gran varón* (The great man), and 2011's *Emigrantes latinos* (Latino emigrants) were born. The latter film is undoubtedly her most interesting one, because it deals with the collapse of the national economy and its dollarization in the early 2000s, the massive migration of suddenly impoverished Ecuadorians to Spain, and the racism that many of them suffered there. Meanwhile, Irma Herrera has made three feature-length movies, each of them in a different genre, during the last decade. Inspired by Nelson Palacios, who in 2008 visited her hometown of El Triunfo in search of locations for his next production, she premiered *Fantasías de Rita* (Rita's fantasies), a fairy tale aimed at children made with a budget of less than $1,000, before an audience of 800 people. Her second film, *Odisea de un sueño* (Odyssey of a dream), tackled the drama of immigration and violence in the US–Mexico border. It cost almost $20,000 and debuted in front of 2,000 spectators (Franco, 2016, p.7). For her third movie, Herrera chose to tell the

story of her hometown's name change in the 2016 documentary *De Boca de los Sapos a El Triunfo* (From Boca de los Sapos to El Triunfo).

Indigenous people, in this case from the highlands, are another prominent demographic in the EBT movement. In fact, the films of the Sinchi Samay collective directed by William León, such as *Ch'uchipak Navidadtapash* a.k.a. *La Navidad de Pollito* (Pollito's Christmas), from 2004, and its sequel *Ch'uchi Tigramuytapash* a.k.a. *Pollito 2*, from 2007, both in Kichwa[15] and both incredibly popular, were among the first 'discoveries' that launched the original EBT research project (León, 2009, p.11). More recently, in 2014, Sinchi Samay and William León premiered a horror movie titled *Pillallaw* that narrates the legend of the titular monster. Given the current surge in indigenous filmmaking, as well as the special situation of native Ecuadorians in a country that defines itself as pluricultural,[16] CNCine created a specific category for this kind of endeavor—first conceptualized as 'community cinema' and then subsumed under the broader umbrella of 'intercultural content'—in order to provide an avenue for state funding. This makes indigenous film the only portion of Ecuadorian underground audiovisual production with access to institutional support (Coryat and Zweig, 2017, pp.276–8).

Other regions where EBT activity is conspicuous are Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, a province created in 2007 that used to belong to Pichincha (where Quito is located), and Esmeraldas, the northernmost coastal province. In the former, Manabí-born Cristóbal Zambrano has been able to complete three films, including one where he plays a feral child in the Tarzan tradition (Espinosa, 2015). In the latter, Elías Cabrera has written and directed over 15 movies, several of them—such as 2010's *La Tunda*[17] and 2011's *Mitos afro* (Afro myths) along with their respective sequels—re-telling old legends taken from Afro-Ecuadorian folklore. He is also behind the 2015 urban actioner *El taxista verdugo* (The killing taxi driver) (Bonilla, 2015). From Esmeraldas as well, but working out of Isla Trinitaria—an extremely impoverished area of Guayaquil with a large, and growing, Afro-Ecuadorian population—Jackson Jickson directed *Trinity Island: dime hasta cuándo* (Trinity Island: when will it stop) in 2014 and starred in José Daniel Cuesta's *Una noche sin sueño* (A sleepless night) the following year (Holguín, 2017). In a similar vein, Félix Caicedo has depicted how truly bare 'bare life' can be in Bastión Popular, another of Guayaquil's slums, in his 2016–17 pentalogy *Un día en Bastión* (A day in Bastión).

Granted, these films are all of variable and often questionable quality, and plenty of them are simply dreadful. Copies of copies of copies, their creators draw inspiration from Hollywood action blockbusters,

from Hong Kong martial arts movies, from the narco-narratives produced in Mexico and Colombia and other countries devastated by the consequences of the illegal drug trade and the 'legal' fight against it, from popular music, and so forth:

> Popular videographies advance readings of appropriation that take the codes of hegemonic cinema to rework, relocate, and exacerbate them in a questioning process emanated from the imitation of an impossible model. Indeed, among EBT films we find westerns, melodramas, comedies, and zombie movies that, perhaps without intention, parody Hollywood narratives from a local perspective. (León, 2009, p.22)

They employ these sources liberally, with more boldness than ability, and with very little faithfulness. Their plots are formulaic, their characters stereotypical, their actors amateurish, and, in the ultimate affront to the lettered city, their credits often contain typos or even gross grammatical errors. It seems obvious, though, that the importance of cultural artifacts such as these EBT films—however 'good' or 'bad' one considers them to be as works of art or entertainment—cannot be overstated at a time when "Latin American national majorities are accessing modernity not through books but rather through audiovisual technologies and formats" (Martín-Barbero, 1992, p.14). Furthermore, "there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, … everything is 'in the last analysis' political" (Jameson, 2002, p.5). Even lowbrow entertainment, even bad movies, and even clichéd tales of hired assassins, abandoned daughters, and ancestral indigenous monsters. Dismissing the most popular films in today's Ecuador does very little to advance the study of Ecuadorian cinema and Ecuadorian popular culture. The sensibilities these movies channel are clearly popular, in the sense of "stemming from the common people," although the concomitant senses of "adapted to the ordinary taste" and "commercially successful" are not foreign to them—*Sicarios manabitas* alone is proof of that.

Beyond the exaggeration and glamorization, understandable given their sources of inspiration, EBT's crude and generalized violence is far from gratuitous: it responds to a violent reality. Specifically, to the nefarious consequences of the application of neoliberal policies in Ecuador since the 1980s (Eguren, 2017, p.108). In a post-modern, post-revolutionary, post-ideological, in fact virtually post-everything, and—this is critical—allegedly post-national world, the spectacle of "every man for himself" seems hardly baffling. Neither should it be

surprising, in these times, to find popular narratives that treat the cruelest violence as habitual and omnipresent. EBT movies "portray, display, and create the social memory of a marginal, violent, neglected, and forgotten city for those who inhabit it from other points of view" (Henríquez Mendoza, 2017, p.97). They make visible previously silenced "memories without archive" regarding true violence and thus constitute the "irruption of the other" in Ecuador's audiovisual landscape (Pinto, 2017, pp.130–31).

That said, it is perhaps worth inquiring why this boom of a kind of cinema that is at once hyper-violent and hyper-popular—and/or offers a heightened, almost hysterical melodrama that stems from the most abject destitution—occurs precisely under an openly anti-neoliberal government whose achievements include a pronounced decrease in poverty as well as an apparently sincere effort to redistribute wealth at a level never before seen in Ecuador.

A post-neoliberal era in Ecuador?

In part, of course, the answer lies in the fact that it is impossible to undo in just a few years a reality of social and economic exclusion shaped by a history of decades, if not centuries. In part, too, a redistribution of wealth "at a level never before seen" in a country such as Ecuador still leaves us with shocking inequality, because the previous levels have always been negligible. Yet it seems clear that, also in part, the crux of the matter lies in the way Correa's anti-neoliberalism has at times been only timidly anti-neoliberal.

A good approach to measuring how truly post-neoliberal the current situation of Ecuador is may be to compare it to neighboring nations not involved in leftist rhetoric and politics for the past decade. A recent study did so and found that

> beyond alignment with 'twenty-first century socialism' or 'neo-liberalism', the differences in terms of how property concentration is treated are not major, even though the governments of Colombia and Peru are more enthusiastic supporters of investment in large-scale farming for export than are the governments in Ecuador and Bolivia. (Eguren, 2017, p.121)

While it is true that "In office, Correa has implemented policies that shifted resources to poor and marginalized sectors of society. Many of his moves against the conservative oligarchy have earned him

broad popular acclaim" (Becker, 2013, p.47), it is also undeniable that "Coupled with Correa's technocratic leadership style, his government did not organize the subaltern beyond elections, and has not promoted mechanisms of participatory democracy at the local and community level" (De la Torre, 2013, p.28), as well as that, in Correa's usage, socialism "meant state investment and spending in the pursuit of national development that essentially left intact existing class relations" (Riofrancos, 2017, p.42).

Correa has had more than his fair share of disapproval, opposition, and outright enmity from right-wing, neoliberal, or oligarchic types, but it is the criticism from the left, and specifically from social-movement activists, that matters more here. Their problem with Correa "is not that he is too radical but that he is too conciliatory toward imperial forces, has refused to make a clean break from Ecuador's neoliberal past, and has failed to open up participatory spaces" (Becker, 2013, p.53).

In fact, while he was brought to power by a coalition of social movements, particularly indigenous and ecologist ones, as well as a broad spectrum of leftist forces, Correa's relationship with most of these groups grew sour almost from the very beginning of his presidency. In a then-unstable country where "Three previous presidents—Abdalá Bucaram in 1997, Jamil Mahuad in 2000, and Lucio Gutiérrez in 2005—had been forced out of office early due in part to Quito-based street mobilizations in which a variety of social groups and media outlets had taken part," it seems clear that "taking actions to undermine the power of groups, especially those with a track record of anti-government rabble-rousing, made perfect sense" (Conaghan, 2015, p.10). Yet such a display of rational political strategy does not make Correa's stance any less disappointing, or more palatable, from a left-wing perspective.

Correa was unwilling, or unable, to fulfill the promise of the new socialism of the 21st century and move the nation beyond extractivism, economic dependency, and neoliberalism. Indeed,

> It seems that the wheel has come full circle. The Pink Tide has receded, and the promise of a Latin America in control of its own resources appears to have been abandoned. Today the governments of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela are once again under the thumb of the global market, delivering their minerals, oil, and gas to big capital, whether US, Canadian, Chinese, or Russian. (Gonzalez, 2017, p.113)

In structural terms, Correa's purported revolution did little to push Ecuadorian society toward an economically more egalitarian, politically less oppressive system. In part, this was so because he simply did not need to:

> The achievements of the Pink Tide were made possible by a particular moment in the world economy—a boom in commodity prices generated by the growth of China. The resulting primary export growth provided rents to fund social programs. This meant the Pink Tide could assist the poor, but without need for the type of structural transformation that would compromise the rich by fundamentally changing the balance of power in society. The favorable economic climate covered up the persistence of structural inequalities, and also left the social gains of the project vulnerable to fluctuations in the world market. (Sankey, 2017, pp.33–4)

Inevitably, due to the cyclical nature of capitalism, after years of bonanza "The collapse in oil prices triggered a decline in resource rents, which then forced the government to make massive cuts to social spending and state pensions," so while "The benefits that Correa's government delivered to the poor were real" they will "always be in jeopardy under the present development model, where the web of class relations is left virtually untouched" (Riofrancos, 2017, p.42)[18].

In the realm of culture, cultural promotion, and more specifically film subsidies, this new economic crisis caused a drastic reduction in available state funding. This, of course, has not affected EBT filmmakers, since they did not have access to those monies anyway. But it is interesting to note how, whether in good or lean times, and despite their revolutionary rhetoric, Ecuador's cultural authorities have maintained a two-pronged approach to national cinema that perfectly mirrors that "virtually untouched" class structure. As should become obvious by examining its notion of culture itself and its discriminatory practices when determining the allocation of cultural promotion funds discussed above, Correa's movement—not unlike other political projects in Latin America deemed more or less populist, more or less well-intentioned, more or less revolutionary—is after all an entity designed in, by, and for the lettered city. At best, the citizens' revolution aspires to bring the rest of Ecuador's social reality inside this beautiful city's tall, lettered walls. It does not seem to understand or even see what lies beyond those limits.

There is an additional explanation for the persistence of a neoliberal ethos in Ecuadorian underground cinema, this time from below, which is to say from the standpoint of the producers and consumers of this audiovisual violence themselves. Filmmakers such as Palacios, Cedeño, and Chalacamá see and present themselves as entrepreneurs, as veritable self-made men, and as profit seekers who cite money as one of their main motivations. Of course, they also talk about their vital need to express themselves through cinematic means and tell the stories they have inside. In Chalacamá's words, "We are totally underfunded. But we do these kinds of artisanal things for art's sake, for the culture, because we love cinema" (Neumane, 2013). Yet they know and fully admit that what they make is commercial entertainment, not art house film, and they dream big:

> We have not reached the movie theaters, but we are sure that our future productions will do so, because we have been sowing the seeds and the audience is ready to watch our films. The fight will not be easy, but we will win. (Cedeño, 2016, p.75)

As usual, "the agents of globalization from below are not really aiming at constructing another world from that of globalization from above; they aim at becoming rich and powerful, just like those who consider them illegal smugglers or pirates" (Lins Ribeiro, 2012, p.230). Neoliberalism comes "from above," imposed by corporations, governments, the IMF, and so forth, yet also operates "from below," once it takes root in popular subjectivities and becomes part of the collection of tools people use to participate in and adapt to—but also resist—the system. In fact,

> thinking of neoliberalism as a mutation in the "art of government," as Michel Foucault … proposes with the term governmentality, supposes understanding neoliberalism as a set of skills, technologies, and practices, deploying a new type of rationality that cannot be thought of only from above. Moreover, this rationality is not purely abstract nor macropolitical but rather arises from the encounter with forces at work and is embodied in various ways by the subjectivities and tactics of everyday life, as a variety of ways of doing, being, and thinking that organize the social machinery's calculations and affects. Here neoliberalism functions immanently: it unfolds on the territorial level,

> modulates subjectivities, and is provoked, without needing a transcendent and exterior structure. (Gago, 2017, p.2)

In this sense, though their fictions contain traces of the representation of a certain reality and even of social criticism, they also seem to carry within them the possibility of the reproduction of the very ideology—neoliberalism—that has allowed and incentivized this perpetual state of economic crisis and savage competition, this generalized anomie, this political and social morass filled with symbolic and physical violence. A violence suffered, but also practiced, by the subaltern classes in a counterproductive struggle with and against themselves that in the end makes power more powerful.

Popular culture is always a complex, contradictory, dialectical phenomenon. On the one hand, it is formed with elements and languages owned by the ruling classes, so it has no choice but to reproduce, at least partially, the logic of power. On the other hand, and in a more promising way, it is in the realm of the popular where its meanings are ultimately created and re-created, often against and despite the ruling classes' desires. It is, after all, popular use and affection that determines its success and its permanence: nothing can be popular if the public is not willing to accept it. Ecuadorian elites seem happy promoting films that Ecuadorian popular subjects reject not because they are not interested in audiovisual narratives, but because they prefer their own. They want to see themselves—or what they think of themselves—in these hyper-violent, hyper-melodramatic, hyper-popular movies that tell stories "as real as life itself." They do not need the prestige of international film festivals or the complexities of great cinema. They want "cine bajo tierra."

Frequent Chalacamá collaborator Elías Zambrano summarized it best in an interview for the 2013 documentary *Luces, cámara, ¡Chone!*, produced and directed by Ana María Neumane:

> We have the best audience right here on the streets: the gentleman who sells coconut water, the one who sells lottery, the one from the store, the one from the butcher shop. That is our public. Our cinema is popular because people identify with it. We do not aspire to be like Hollywood. … We are going to be much better. Because Hollywood may have the equipment, the money, the technique, but we have the desire, the will, and that character that identifies us as children of this land, as Choneros, which makes us feel so proud.

Notes

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Spanish are my own.

[2] Such honor belongs to *El tesoro de Atahualpa* (Atahualpa's treasure), directed by Augusto San Miguel and released in 1924 (León, 2010, p.68).

[3] *La tigra* sold over 250,000 tickets during its theatrical run. It is sometimes claimed that an older movie, a comedy titled *Dos para el camino* (Two for the road) directed by Jaime Cuesta, was able to bring half a million people to the theaters in 1980. However, there is no tangible proof of this, so most experts prefer to quote *La tigra*'s confirmed figures and treat *Dos para el camino*'s record as the stuff of legend.

[4] The number of films per year has decreased more recently but is still higher than it was in the pre-boom era.

[5] Ecuador abandoned its old currency, the sucre, and adopted the US dollar in 2000.

[6] UIO is the International Air Transport Association (IATA) code for Quito's Mariscal Sucre International Airport.

[7] Jaime Roldós Aguilera was Ecuador's president from 1979 until his untimely death in an airplane crash in 1981.

[8] ¡Alfaro Vive, Carajo!, literally 'Alfaro lives, dammit!', was an Ecuadorian terrorist group active in the 1980s.

[9] Ecuador's territory is customarily divided into four very distinct geographical regions: La Sierra, or the highlands, where Quito is located; La Costa, or the coast, where Guayaquil is located; El Oriente, literally 'the orient', which comprises the portion of the Amazon that belongs to Ecuador; and the Galápagos Islands.

[10] The rivalry between Quito and Guayaquil, and more generally between the highlands and the coast, predates the formation of Ecuador as an independent country and manifests itself in every aspect of national life, from the economy to the arts, from soccer to electoral politics.

[11] The author does not want to insinuate that state-backed filmmaking is easy: in Ecuador, as elsewhere, filmmaking is always a complex, expensive, and time-consuming endeavor. Furthermore, in most cases government funding covers only about a third of the final budget. That said, it is evident that the state has a clear-cut hierarchy when it comes to deciding which productions are worthy of its support, and it goes without saying that unsubsidized filmmaking will always be more difficult than its subsidized counterpart.

[12] "I wanted to be on Chone's movie billboards—and I did it," Chalacamá told *BBC Mundo* (Zibell, 2013).

[13] Indeed, Chone—where so many films have been produced over the past two decades—does not have a movie theater and has not had one since the Oriflama closed its doors at the dawn of the 2000s.

[14] The director makes a point of explaining that the term does not necessarily imply violence: "When we say guerrilla cinema, it can be a comedy, a drama, a horror movie, etc. It is not only a cinema about guns, but an insurgent, ideological one." (Cedeño, 2016: 75) Yet he also calls his collaborators 'soldiers' and is proud of the fact that his movies used to feature real guns firing real bullets until this practice was expressly forbidden by law (Zibell, 2013; Araya, 2016, p.57).

[15] Kichwa is a Quechuan language that encompasses all the dialects of Quechua spoken in Ecuador and Colombia.

[16] The first article of the current Ecuadorian Constitution, promulgated in 2008, characterizes the South American nation as "sovereign, unitary, independent, democratic, pluricultural, and multiethnic."

[17] La Tunda is a myth of the Pacific coastal region of Ecuador and Colombia, particularly popular among the Afro-descendant community, about a shapeshifting monster resembling a woman that lures people into the forests to suck their blood and sometimes devour them.

[18] Since the end of Correa's presidency in mid-2017, the austerity measures have worsened under his successor, Lenín Moreno (Correa's own vice president). Moreno has been accused by many critics—including Correa himself—of betraying the citizens' revolution, steering Ecuador rightward, and either allowing or pushing the return to neoliberalism.

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