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## REVIEW / CRITICA

Review of: Jonathan Buchsbaum, *Cinema and the Sandinistas: Filmmaking in Revolutionary Nicaragua*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. 343 pp.

### **The Legacies of Revolutionary Filmmaking in Sandinista Nicaragua**

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Like most social revolutions of the modern era, Nicaragua's Sandinista Revolution (1979-90) not only sought to transform the country's political, economic, and social structures but to create a new national culture. Already in its 1969 "historic" program, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) proclaimed its goal of carrying out a "revolution in culture" that would liberate Nicaragua from its longstanding condition as a "neo-colony" of the United States. Like many Nicaraguans, the Sandinista revolutionaries believed that the United States was controlling their country via the Somoza dictatorship, which came to power on the heels of the U.S. military occupation

of 1912-33. When the Sandinistas finally toppled Central America's lengthiest dictatorship in July 1979, the revolutionary leadership thus quickly established a ministry of culture to extirpate "neocolonial penetration." Headed by the famous poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal, the ministry was also charged with the enormous task of creating a political culture conducive to revolutionary change. Despite high expectations, the ministry of culture fell victim to the economic crisis triggered by the U.S.-sponsored Contra war and was dissolved two years before the Sandinistas' surprising defeat in the 1990 elections. The ministry's ignominious end notwithstanding, the revolution's cultural project has received much scholarly attention precisely because the Sandinistas believed that cultural policy was key to creating a "new" and "free" Nicaragua.

Ironically, scholars exploring the revolution's cultural project have tended to focus on Nicaragua's perhaps most traditional form of cultural production: literature.<sup>1</sup> This focus is no coincidence, for writers dominated both the ministry of culture and the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers (ASTC), the other revolutionary institution that principally shaped Sandinista cultural policy. In fact, much scholarly work has centered on the bitter conflict between the ministry of culture and the ASTC. This conflict sprang from the ASTC's fierce defense of "professional" artists against the ministry's efforts to "democratize" cultural production. But it was also fueled by two key tensions plaguing the revolutionary project more broadly: the blurring of party-state boundaries, and the extent to which the revolution's vanguard—the FSLN—actually represented the interests of the "popular classes."

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<sup>1</sup> Arguably, the most influential study is John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*, Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1990.

More recently, scholars have revisited these tensions by exploring the role of non-literary producers of revolutionary culture, such as potters, muralists, theater groups, and musicians.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Jonathan Buchsbaum, we now have the first book-length study on filmmaking in revolutionary Nicaragua. This tardiness reflects the low priority the Sandinista government gave to filmmaking—a neglect that contrasts sharply with the way the Soviets, Cuba, and other revolutionary regimes of the twentieth century privileged filmmaking as a means for creating a new social order. Yet even if cinema was the neglected child of Sandinista cultural policy, Buchsbaum’s outstanding book sheds important new light on cultural politics in the Nicaraguan revolution and on revolutionary filmmaking more generally.

For starters, Buchsbaum’s highly readable study illuminates the key role that Cubans played in shaping the revolution’s cultural project. True, many scholars have explored how the Sandinistas both leaned on and departed from the Cuban model. Yet much of this work has treated issues of political economy and international relations rather than culture. As Buchsbaum shows, Cubans not only spearheaded the establishment of the Nicaraguan Institute of Cinema (INCINE), essentially they maintained it for much of the 1980s. Modeled after the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC), INCINE’s main goal was to contribute to the “recovery of national identity” by constructing a national film project. During the 1980s, over sixty Nicaraguans—mainly men—worked for INCINE as film directors, producers,

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<sup>2</sup> See, respectively, Les Field, *The Grimace of Macho Ratón: Artisans, Identity, and Nation in Late-Twentieth-Century Western Nicaragua*, Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1999; David Kunzle, *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979-1992*, Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995; Randy Martin, *Socialist Ensembles: Theater and Stage in Cuba and Nicaragua*, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1994; and T.M. Scruggs, “Musical Style and Revolutionary Context in Sandinista Nicaragua,” Jan Fairley and David Horn (eds.), *I Sing the Difference: Identity and Commitment in Latin American Song*, Liverpool: Univ. of Liverpool Press, 2002.

camerapersons, sound technicians, editors, and so on. Because these Nicaraguans had little filmmaking experience and relied heavily on Cuban advisers. In addition, Cuba provided economic and logistical support in the form of raw stock, extensive technical training, laboratory services, and postproduction facilities. Cubans also encouraged INCINE to replicate their model of mobile cinema, which brought films to the countryside as well as to poor urban neighborhoods without permanent theaters.

As much as Sandinista filmmakers appreciated—and depended on—Cuban support, Buchsbaum convincingly argues that they did not fully embrace the example of Cuba's revolutionary film project, for they deemed it "overtly restrictive and politicized" (10). Moreover, even if Sandinista filmmakers had wanted to replicate the Cuban model, Buchsbaum maintains that the 1970s' transformation of the media would have prevented them from doing so. While cinema still reigned supreme when the Cuban revolution triumphed in 1959, by the time the Sandinistas came to power television had emerged as the mass popular medium not just in Nicaragua but throughout Latin America. For Buchsbaum, then, Sandinista filmmakers' attempt to make cinema a key tool for the "recovery of national identity" appears to have been an "anachronistic" venture that was doomed from the very start.

Still, Buchsbaum clearly admires how INCINE overcame challenges to produce more than seventy films between 1979 and 1989. If largely forgotten, these films provide a unique view of "how Nicaraguans themselves perceived the new project of retrieving national identity in Sandinista Nicaragua" (xvii). It is in its excellent analysis of these films that Buchsbaum's path-breaking study makes its greatest contribution to the scholarship of the Sandinista Revolution.

Initially, INCINE concentrated on the production of *noticieros* (newsreels). Most were shot in 35-mm black and white, lasted about ten minutes, and appeared once a month. By the time INCINE ended its production in 1985, it had produced forty-eight *noticieros*. While they were screened in regular movie theaters and INCINE's mobile cinemas, none were aired by Sandinista television. According to Buchsbaum, "bureaucratic feudalism" (which plagued the Sandinista state apparatus more generally) and personal conflicts between the heads of INCINE and the Sandinista Television System (SSTV) prevented the *noticieros* from being seen by Nicaragua's booming television audience. INCINE's decision to first focus on *noticiero* production had much to do with Nicaraguans' lack of experience in filmmaking. But it also reflected the strong influence exerted by INCINE's Cuban advisors, who deemed *noticieros* a key means of spreading the revolution's program to the population. Under their tutelage, then, INCINE's *noticiero* production basically followed the model of Cuban newsreels.

While the Sandinista government never imposed its views on INCINE, the *noticieros* clearly reflected official positions. Not coincidentally, nearly all of INCINE's *noticieros* treated political themes dear to the revolutionary regime, such as the agrarian reform, the literacy campaign, the revolution's fate on the Atlantic coast, the struggle against U.S. imperialism, installing "popular democracy," and the Contra war. In his nuanced and wonderfully detailed analysis of the *noticieros*, Buchsbaum effectively shows how the rhetoric of the FSLN overwhelmed "the simple but powerful words of ordinary people" (27). He also does a great job of situating the *noticieros* in a broader political context, thus enhancing our understanding of key aspects of the Sandinista revolution. For example, his discussion of *La costa Atlántica* (November 1980) astutely

draws on relevant secondary sources to demonstrate how this noticiero shared with the FSLN crucial “blind spots” vis-à-vis the Atlantic coast, particularly a developmentalist rhetoric that ignored crucial socio-economic distinctions between the coast and western Nicaragua, and a paternalizing and monolithic view of the Miskitus, the main indigenous group on the Atlantic coast.

Around 1981-82, a new group of Sandinista filmmakers took charge of noticiero production. Displaying more cinematic creativity, they implemented innovative aesthetic strategies, such as highly stylized photography, new musical motifs, and “wordless, aggressive emotional montage designed for maximum audience impact” (77). Most important, they tried to give more space to grassroots voices and images in their noticieros. As Buchsbaum puts it, these new filmmakers “sought to represent the revolution in deeds, not as illustration of official words” (123).

The new noticiero makers emerged largely because the first generation decided to move into the world of documentaries. And for Buchsbaum, this shift enabled Nicaragua’s most experienced filmmakers to liberate themselves from Cuban influence and to produce films that were both more personal and more critical of the revolutionary process. True, INCINE’s documentaries continued to focus on political themes favored by the Sandinista regime. But compared to the noticieros, these medium-length films (they ranged between 15 and 30 minutes) were less dictated by conjunctural factors and less “panfletario” (propagandistic), to use the Sandinista term. In addition to presenting images that challenged official views, the documentaries gave more voice to “ordinary people.” In fact, the voices of revolutionary officials rarely appear in the sixteen documentaries produced by INCINE. Once again, Buchsbaum beautifully analyzes both

the content of these films and their broader context. In particular, he does an excellent job of highlighting the principal challenge facing Sandinista filmmakers: to develop an independent critical voice that acknowledged problems with the revolutionary process while consolidating popular support.

As the U.S.-sponsored Contra war intensified in 1984, INCINE suddenly abandoned the production of noticieros and documentaries, and poured nearly all of its resources into fiction films. Three key factors pushed INCINE to make the leap into fiction. First, it thought that fiction would allow it to further temper the “panfletario” thrust of earlier films. Second, it considered the production of fiction feature films the “next step toward consolidating a real national-production entity” (198). Third, and most important, INCINE believed that such films would be more successful on the international market than noticieros and documentaries. By moving into fiction, INCINE hoped to gain not just valuable international prestige but a self-sustaining, if not flourishing, state enterprise. In the end, INCINE produced seven fiction films that it released between 1985 and 1988. All but one dealt with the issue that most preoccupied Nicaraguans at the time: the enormous suffering caused by the Contra war. Much more than the makers of documentaries, directors of these fiction films sought, as Buchsbaum stresses, to use the individual experiences of their protagonists to “escape from the party dogmatism” found in INCINE’s earlier films.

INCINE’s final feature film, *El espectro de la guerra* (1988), represented its most ambitious undertaking. This expensive fiction film was also the one that broke INCINE’s budget and thus helped to bring about the downfall of Sandinista filmmaking. Buchsbaum does a wonderful job of explaining how the 90-minute *Espectro* traces the

coming to consciousness of a politically inexperienced character during the Contra war. Its main protagonist is Reynaldo, a young black man from the Atlantic coast who travels to Managua to become a professional dancer. Shortly after arriving in the capital, Reynaldo is drafted into the military and eventually winds up fighting the contras in a remote mountain community near the Honduran border. Still bent on studying dance in France, Reynaldo begs his girlfriend to get him out of military service. Though she manages to arrange his escape, Reynaldo ultimately refuses to desert—not for fear of being captured but because the experience in the war zone had raised his revolutionary consciousness. After being wounded in the knee during a contra attack, Reynaldo is flown to a hospital. While the doctors are able to save his life, the wound prevents him from ever becoming a professional dancer. The film ends with Reynaldo in his hospital bed dreaming about a dance with Death. Dance scenes dominate *Espectro* largely because its director Ramiro Lacayo Deshon, who headed INCINE throughout the 1980s, believed that such scenes would make the film less “panfletario.” In fact, some pro-Sandinista critics complained that the film’s images of war were far too aesthetic. Buchsbaum, however, mainly criticizes Lacayo for trying too hard to make the film palatable to an international audience. In his view, INCINE’s most ambitious production did little to recover Nicaraguan national identity, for it produced a “hybrid of musical and standard conversion drama” that was wrapped in “foreign garb.” The costly *Espectro* so depleted INCINE’s scarce resources that it would produce only one relatively short documentary after the film’s completion.

INCINE’s demise was certainly due to the economic crisis that forced the Sandinistas to massively shrink the state apparatus. But Buchsbaum argues that it sprang

further from another profound problem that also precipitated the end of the revolution: the Sandinista regime's inability to promote "popular democracy." To be sure, Buchsbaum acknowledges that INCINE faced great obstacles from the very start. Not only did INCINE operate in an inauspicious media landscape, it never enjoyed much support from the Sandinista government. Given these odds, Buchsbaum believes that INCINE "managed valiantly" until it plunged into the costly realm of fiction features. However, he maintains that INCINE might have survived had it developed closer links with Sandinista mass organizations, such as the neighborhood Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS), the Sandinista Workers Federation (CST), the Association of Rural Workers (ATC), and the women's organization AMNLAE. These ties, he argues, would have allowed INCINE to build a mass audience and thus gain the political and economic clout necessary to survive. In fact, Buchsbaum goes so far as to state that if INCINE had committed "itself to the interests of the mass organizations and even strengthen[ed] them, it might have succeeded where the FSLN ultimately failed" (242).

This is a very thought-provoking argument that goes to the heart of one of the revolution's most controversial dynamics. Yet Buchsbaum might have developed the point more fully. He asserts that INCINE should have drawn on the influential "Third Cinema" manifesto (written in 1969 by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino), because it offers revolutionary filmmakers a practical program for making militant cinema part of a mass movement. Given Buchsbaum's belief that INCINE needed a mass-based film project, it is surprising that his study does not consider the reception of Sandinista films by the Nicaraguan "masses." Granted, there are hardly any written sources that would illuminate questions of reception. And when

Buchsbaum began his research in Nicaragua in 1989, INCINE had already fallen apart. Still, since he was able to copy most of the films produced by INCINE, it might have been possible to screen them to members of the above-mentioned Sandinista mass organizations, and to thus collect and analyze peoples' responses. Buchsbaum's interviews with Sandinista filmmakers do provide some insight into their paternalistic views of "popular sectors." Yet it would have been useful to include more material on such views, for not only did the filmmakers belong to a vanguard party, many of them were of elite social origins. To truly understand whether Sandinista filmmakers would have been able to carry out the mass-based project called for by the "Third Cinema" manifesto, we need to know more about how they dealt with the class contradictions underlying INCINE's national cinema project.

In the end, then, what were the legacies of revolutionary filmmaking in Sandinista Nicaragua? For Buchsbaum, INCINE failed to achieve its main goal of recovering national identity, largely because it did not create a "reliable popular base." Fearing that national cinema projects are no longer viable, he sadly concludes that INCINE "wrote the epitaph to a long tradition of militant, revolutionary filmmaking in Latin America" (xvii). On a more positive note, Buchsbaum also maintains that INCINE's history "offers the most sustained practical laboratory of third cinema" (248). Given the post-1990 crusade to erase all vestiges of the revolutionary past, perhaps INCINE's greatest legacy was to bequeath to Nicaragua a corpus of films that provide, as Buchsbaum rightfully stresses, "a rich reflection of and commentary on an exciting popular revolution."