

Made in Peru: Lima Film Festival comes of age

The Festival de Cine de Lima (Lima Film Festival) was launched in 1997 as ‘elcine’ with ten days of screenings composed of 21 features and 38 shorts from ten Latin American countries alongside a three-day event in the southern city of Arequipa. Over 15,000 spectators attended what was described by its organisers as an ‘unprecedented event’[1] – not just for its statistics but also for the way it encouraged private enterprise to support a major cultural activity, involved many young people in its organisation, included events designed to provoke debate about the value of cinema, sparked mass participation on the part of the public through its competition voting system, and caught the attention of the national and international press.

In August 2015, the 19th edition introduced around 300 international films to audiences across the Peruvian capital and beyond, with more of those films than ever before made by Peruvian directors, including several selected for the feature competition. Indeed, while many of the original features of this resilient festival have been retained it has been intriguing to witness the gradual increase in profile granted by the event to home-grown talent. After years of tension and mistrust between the most prominent film critics in Peru and many local film-makers battling with a precarious set of cultural, political, and financial circumstances, this change signals a welcome recognition of national production by those that have tended to look beyond national borders for inspiration. Moreover, despite the relative paucity of co-ordinated film production activity in Peru compared with other Latin American nations, it would seem that this festival (and other smaller film events that have emerged around the city over the last two decades[2]) provides some evidence of a growing interest in cinema ‘made in Peru’. This article aims to shed some light on the development of this key cultural event, to unravel its role as instigator and mediator of national and regional cinema, and to consider its place as part of the film ecology of Peru.

History, context, and mission

The first iteration of the Lima Film Festival was organised as part of the 80th anniversary celebrations of the Cultural Centre of the Catholic University of Peru (PUCP); it was supported by the national government through Promperú (the Commission for Promotion of Peru through Export and Tourism), UNESCO, and a range of cultural and commercial organisations. In setting up this celebration the university and its cultural centre were to a large extent affirming their position as leaders in the exposition of national art and culture; by choosing to place film at the heart of those celebrations they took a stand on behalf of art cinema at a time when the national government seemed reluctant or unable to do so. The advent of Lima Film Festival coincided with a gradual recovery for cinema activity in Peru towards the end of the 1990s and the reappearance of locally-generated film production that was part of a broader and well-documented turn-of-the-millennium flourishing of Latin American cinema. As outlined in earlier studies of Peruvian cinema during this period, ‘by the end of the decade [...] the government’s modified system of support for its filmmakers, while limited in scope, had begun to reap some rewards’.[3] Several of the productions that had been in development when the state withdrew from film funding in 1992 were able to be completed and screened, and there was renewed interest in short filmmaking, which has been a key element of Lima Film Festival since its inception.

Moreover, after 2000, some significant new filmmakers emerged who marked a break from the so-called 'Lombardi generation' in that their films deviated from the social realist/genre imperatives of the past and drew upon a far wider range of approaches, inspirations, and funding sources. The year 2004 marked a particularly significant shift, with several debut features receiving their national premiere at the Lima Film Festival. For example, Álvaro Velarde, who had recently returned to Peru after gaining education in the United States, delighted critics and audiences with his ironic study of class relations in Lima titled *Destiny Has No Favourites* (2003). Josué Méndez, who gained his formative cinema experience in Peru through television and theatre and participation in workshops run by veteran director Armando Robles Godoy, impressed those same critics with the technical and artistic achievements of his opera prima *Días de Santiago* (2003).[4] Just two years later the festival celebrated the work of Claudia Llosa, whose films *Madeinusa* (2006) and *La Teta Asustada / Milk of Sorrow* (2009) have transcended the global festival circuit, won major awards, and enjoyed considerable success at commercial art cinemas.[5] This new generation of directors, unaccustomed to the beneficent mechanisms of state support from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s, focused instead on searching out sources of funding and in-kind support beyond the national institutional framework, including schemes offered by other prestigious festivals such as Sundance, Rotterdam, Toulouse, Venice, and Cannes, with their policies of supporting emerging talent from around the world.

Coming of age in 2015

Having negotiated and survived nearly twenty years of economic, social, and political unrest, Lima Film Festival has become a key event on the cultural calendar of Lima and is finally being acknowledged as part of the international film festival circuit. It has developed a clear and consistent programming agenda that stems from its original mission of highlighting high quality new Latin American cinema from across the region, with a focus on auteurist principles as befitting its foundation by those involved in the highly-regarded film journal *Hablamos de Cine* (Let's Talk About Cinema), initiated 50 years ago and inspired by the work of André Bazin and the French New Wave. It has also showcased more emerging talent from Peru itself and has increasingly brought this work to the centre of the programme. The festival has expanded its locations to include screenings at the popular Cineplanet cinemas across Lima, also extending its reach to offer free open air screenings in more peripheral parts of the city in an effort to democratise its activities. Still, the prestige events remain in the cultural centre, which is located in the district of San Isidro, one of the most expensive areas of the city.

Despite a difficult relationship between government and cultural producers over the last twenty years due to crises of funding and legislative infrastructure, the Ministry of Culture continues to support the festival in spirit and in practical terms, for example by hosting the opening and closing ceremonies at the National Theatre. Indeed, Minister of Culture Diana Álvarez-Calderón Gallo declared her government's support for the event in 2015 through the foreword to the festival catalogue and with a speech at the opening event. She reinforced the ministry's commitment to financing new proposals for productions and highlighted the distinctive nature of independent cinema as a privileged way to share imaginary and worldviews among different cultures, 'adding a fundamental artistic dimension to its industrial character'.[6]

That artistic dimension is clear in the programming. In August 2015, the festival strands included a selection of films from the Cannes Critics' Week, a series of restored classics of French cinema, a selection of contemporary Turkish cinema, and *Ambulante*, the regular spotlight on documentary film from around the world. The guest of honour was Werner Herzog, whose professional and personal relationship with Peru has a long and affectionate history. Other tributes were paid to Peruvian actor Gustavo Bueno and Mexican filmmaker Arturo Ripstein along with his screenwriting collaborator Paz Alicia Garciadiego. The Festival Forum remains a work in progress, with enormous potential to support the development of future filmmakers.

In 2015, the range of opportunities was impressive compared with the early years of the festival; among them were a week-long workshop prior to the festival led by outspoken veteran documentary filmmaker Heddy Honigmann (also a member of the jury), workshops on acting for film with coach Michelle Danner, and a workshop on 4k technology involving experts from Sony. More central to the festival's cinephile ethos are the seminar-style interviews with directors, book presentations, and debates involving the guest filmmakers for the purposes of contextualising their films for audiences (mostly students) at the main universities in Lima. However, apart from the free open air screenings there is still an element of elitism about the event, with room for the organisers to increase the diversity of genuine public engagement.

Made in Peru

This year's festival succeeded in drawing attention to the relatively high number and diversity of Peruvian films that were considered worthy of selection for the programme. Indeed, four fiction films made in Peru (most with funding from at least one of the government schemes) were included in the competition section alongside the best productions from the region, one was included in the documentary section, and six were presented in the new special section titled *Made in Peru*. Moreover, the homage to Bueno featured three of the films he made with Lombardi. New short films by local directors were a core part of the programme that was taken to different parts of the city through the cineclub network.

It has taken nineteen years for national cinema to be considered so seriously by its own film festival – a cause for celebration but also for reflection on why the situation has been so precarious for so long and why the festival's programmers and critics have lacked confidence and faith in the ability of their nation's filmmakers to be compared favourably alongside those from elsewhere in Latin America. It points not only to concerns about quality but also to a prior lack of appreciation of the pivotal role such an event plays in the cinematic ecology of a nation as a key shaper of public taste and opinion, as well as to its influence on the decisions made by the funders in choosing which projects to support in the future. The inclusion of a special prize from the Ministry of Culture for Best Peruvian Film (won in 2015 by Jonatan Relayze Chiang for his debut feature *Rosa Chumbre*) and the timing of the announcements of the next round of recipients of government funding to coincide with the end of the festival suggests a realisation of the powerful position this event now enjoys on the national cultural landscape.

Lima Film Festival defies the kind of easy categorisation that Kenneth Turan attempted in his lively set of case studies. Although the festival's focus is not on business like Cannes and Sundance, nor is it

as ideologically motivated or as far-reaching in remit as those others in Latin American such as Havana or BAFICI (Argentina), it would seem to be leaning towards an increasing emphasis on nation-building alongside quality independent programming. While it prides itself on having become recognised on the international calendar as a celebration of the artistic qualities of independent cinema, through its very survival and increasing support for national cinema it has also served on the national front as a cultural response to many of the key political events since the late 1990s that relate to the end of the Fujimori regime (including revelations of high-level fraud and corruption, tightening of anti-terrorist legislation in the light of the dying days of the Shining Path conflict, and an increasingly neoliberal economic model).

Indeed, at the time of writing the signs of cinematic development on the home front are encouraging: an unprecedented nine Peruvian films are showing on commercial screens in Peru, many of which had screenings at the Lima festival; Peruvian films have been selected as part of prominent events in Spain, France, Canada, the United States, and Chile; the Ministry of Culture is preparing to support the completion of more films of a wider range of genres. Over the last two decades this festival has quietly achieved a determined negotiation, as Wong would have it, of 'local, national and supranational relations of culture, power and identity', [7] and has played a key role both as arbiter of local cinematic taste and as catalyst/champion of national cinematic production.

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[1] Galiano et al 1998, p. 7.

[2] For example, the Lima Independent International Film Festival (Lima Independiente Festival Internacional de Cine), organised by the Peruvian Independent Cinema Association with the collaboration of public and private institutions that share the desire to disseminate a type of cinema that is considered more artistically diverse and experimental than mainstream films. See more at http://www.accioncultural.es/en/2014_lima_independent__international_film_festival#sthash.r1Pcn9YM.dpuf.

[3] Barrow 2007, p. 176.

[4] Méndez is now on the festival advisory committee alongside other key players in the Peruvian cinema world such as critic, author, and academic Isaac León Frías, renowned filmmaker Francisco Lombardi, and the director of the national film archive Norma Rivera.

[5] Llosa's films have tended to discomfort many Peruvian viewers for their challenging portrayals of indigenous stories, though they have satisfied global audiences, critics, and funders, and achieved significant international success.

[6] Galiano et al 2015, p. 7.

[7] Wong 2011, p. 1.