

History goes on: 128 years of Uruguayan film...

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Uruguay is a sparsely populated country. Only its capital city had the social-historical context and cultural offer to consolidate as an actual melting pot. The history of Uruguayan film is one of stubborn persistence and determination in the creation of an audiovisual industry in a context ravaged by hardship to this day, such as having too small an internal market to afford the costs involved in developing significant projects. Besides, the history of national film is a research area in constant dispute and reconsideration.

In 2023, culture critic and professor Álvaro Lema Mosca¹ proposed splitting the subject matter into five periods he named “births”, given it was several times along the 20th century when, on one hand, with more or less awareness, a milestone was announced having “the first national motion picture” premiered and, on the other hand, our national film production was often shaken by obstacles, crises and fluctuations undermining its development and continuity. This piece aims to review some highlights in the history of a particularly messy, diverse production.

A possible birth might be July 18th, with the landing of the first cinematograph in Montevideo. Charles Étienne, one of the four technicians in charge of unveiling the Lumière brothers' invention to the world, brought it here and spread the word in Uruguay. In that first audience was Catalan merchant Félix Oliver, a Uruguayan resident who, in 1898, brought a camera from one of his travels to Europe. With it, he recorded footage of his daily life the French way. His first film is claimed to have been *Carrera de bicicletas en el velódromo de Arroyo Seco* [Arroyo Seco Bicycle Race], a four-and-a-half-minute long piece of 1898. Later came other films featuring characters of the local socialites, trains and cars: After Paris in the hands of the Lumière brothers, Montevideo was also becoming part of the cities being portrayed for the new world's catalog.

In 1907, Italian Roberto Natalini opened the first company importing and distributing foreign films and, in 1911 attendance to cinemas reached over 1.5 million spectators, outnumbering theater-goers for the first time ever. As from 1910, movie theaters started projecting fiction pieces and, before 1920, the circle of aristocratic ladies Entre Nous made a film for fundraising purposes. *Pervanche*, directed by Leon Ibáñez Saavedra and based on a story taken from two French serials, is deemed to have been the first Uruguayan fiction feature film.

In 1924, businessman Leandro Cavaliere and his production house Charrúa Film completed the movie *Almas de la costa* [Souls of the Coast], a melodrama “of social interest”, directed by Juan A. Borges. It was a blockbuster and it introduced itself to all media as the first Uruguayan film ever, denying all its precedents. Later on, *El pequeño héroe del Arroyo del Oro* [Gold River Little Hero], based on Dionisio Díaz's true story, was premiered in 1932. Directed by Carlos Alonso, the movie managed to accurately narrate the contradictions of a centenary Uruguay.

Gabriel Terra's dictatorship lasted from 1933 to 1938. Novel technologies and the advent of mass media paved the way to a new sensitivity. Uruguayan film incorporated sound,

¹ Álvaro Lema Mosca, *Los nacimientos del cine uruguayo. Una historia completa*, Sujetos editores, Montevideo, Uruguay, 2023.

initiating a long co-production tradition with Argentina, which gave way to the opening of a number of musicals led by local radio and Carnival stars. *Dos Destinos* [Two Fates], the first spoken fiction feature film, was premiered in 1937.

During the so-called "Glorious Decade" (1945-1955), Uruguay enjoyed steep economic growth. In 1950, the country won its second World Cup, a real cultural milestone. Artistic activity increased considerably and film was no exception, leaning towards experimentation in aesthetics and content. There were contests, scholarships and festivals, with the Uruguayan Cinematheque founded in 1953. Besides, debate around the need of regulating the industry was beginning to take place. A new generation of filmmakers was kicking off in experimental film and a new historical film, two strong trends in Latin America.

The 60s were marked by social and political turbulence and, at the same time, by cultural burst. Critics observe a second wave of experimental film, mainly a reflection of the powerful over-crossing of different artistic forms such as dance, music, photography, poetry and film. At the same time, many young cinephiles unleashed their passion and experimented with photography and edition. Short films *La ciudad en la playa* [The City on the Beach] by Ferruccio Mussitelli (1961), *Punta del Este ciudad sin horas* [Timeless Punta del Este] by Juan José Gascue (1962) and *La raya amarilla* [The Yellow Stripe] by Carlos Maggi (1962) are outstanding pieces in the use and combination of cinematographic resources. There were also risky attempts at genre film, like the feature crime film *El detector* [The Detector] by Luis Pugliese Sánchez (1961) and *Tal vez mañana* [Maybe Tomorrow] by Omar Parada (1966), deemed the first Uruguayan sci-fi picture.

Documentary film was fundamental to record the social, economic and political crisis of the time. Mario Handler's medium-length film *Carlos, cine-retrato de un caminante en Montevideo* [Carlos, Film-Portrait of a Wanderer in Montevideo] of 1965 follows a homeless man for several months, showing society's rejection. He later shot, along with Ulive, *Elecciones* [Election] (1967), a particular view on some local political representatives' campaigns. In *Me gustan los estudiantes* [I Like Students] (1968) he documented student demonstrations, an active movement during those years. Later, he portrayed the conflict of the beef industry workers in *Uruguay 1969: el problema de la carne* [Uruguay 1969: The Problem of Meat] (1969). At the same time, in 1969, Cinemateca del Tercer Mundo (C3M) [Third World Cinematheque] was born, a group from the Marcha Magazine Cine Club who were eager to make and promote political and activist film to intervene in the social processes of the time and make connections with other filmmakers in Latin America.

In 1975, during the civic-military dictatorship, the new situation of the country became evident with the creation of the DINARP (National Public Relations Office) and the production of films with closer ties to the regime. After 1976, repression and censorship became stronger: contents that might threaten traditional social values were prohibited: nudity scenes were removed from pictures, as well as erotic, violent or obscene content and critical views of the church and the army.

In the late 80s, with the return of democracy, the arrival of video caused a technological transition transforming the audiovisual landscape. Production companies such as Grupo Hacedor and CEMA (Center of Audiovisual Media) took on a new audiovisual experience mainly based on documentary films, TV movies and experimental films. Meanwhile, video was also used in the creation of fiction, comedies and even horror movies: the work of director Ricardo Islas is a reference in this regard.

In the 90s, the industry experienced a new restructure. The use of video, the return of professionals based abroad and the creation of film schools and training programs led to an increase in production. *La historia casi verdadera de Pepita la pistolera* [The Almost True Story of Pepita, the Pistol-toter] by Beatriz Flores Silva (1993) is a good example. Together with the CEMA group, Flores Silva decided to tell the story of a real woman who robbed ten financial agencies in Montevideo using a fake gun in 1988. The movie, which had considerable success, combines several important issues of the time, such as criminality, insecurity, and the situation of women. Meanwhile, Pablo Dotta's *El dirigible* [The Zeppelin] of 1994, was also a milestone due to its complex narrative filled with intertextual references that paved the way for wholly author-centered projects.

In 1994, the Ministry of Education and Culture founded the National Audiovisual Institute (INA) and, in 1995, the Municipality of Montevideo created the Fund for the Promotion and Development of Audiovisual Production (FONA). With Uruguay joining the Ibermedia program and the steady flow of coproductions with Argentina, Brazil and several European countries, the local production experienced a remarkable growth. In the 90s, more than 20 feature films and 30 documentaries were premiered.

With the new century, Uruguayan film heightened its production standards, added international experience and started participating in the global conversation. 2001 witnessed the premiere of Beatriz Flores Silva's *En la puta vida* [In This Tricky Life], the biggest Uruguayan box-office success, and *25 watts* by Juan Pablo Rebella and Pablo Stoll, produced by Control Z, a production house that defined a whole generation's culture and was determinant for the following audiovisual decade.

In 2008, the Law of Film was passed and the Uruguayan Institute of Film & Audiovisual (ICAU) was created, thus becoming the regulator of the main national productions. These actions allowed for a real growth of the sector, added to the participation in development policies and a collaborative work with other countries in the region. During the 2000-2010 decade, an entire generation of new filmmakers took advantage of these learnings and continued to produce fiction in the following decade. Several documentaries that were highly acclaimed by the public and the critics were also produced, such as Mario Handler's *Aparte* [Apart] (2002) and *El círculo* [The Circle] by José Pedro Charlo and Aldo Garay (2008), among many others.

Between 2010 and 2020, film production experienced another important increase, with 24 premieres in 2018. Álvaro Brechner's *La noche de 12 años* [A Twelve-Year Night] was the most popular movie of the decade, with 57.928 tickets sold. In the two first decades of the 21st century, 234 films were premiered: 119 documentaries, 113 fictions, 2 animation movies. *Anina*, directed by Alfredo Soderguit (2013), was a very important animation movie that, apart from having an excellent local and regional performance, it surpassed the 60.000-ticket mark in France, the mecca of Western animation. As for specific genres, one of the most relevant works is Gustavo Hernández's 2010 horror movie *La casa muda* [The Silent House], with several recognitions in international festivals that fostered his professional career.

The Uruguay Audiovisual Program (PUA) was created in 2019 with the aim of promoting the development of the audiovisual sector in Uruguay by strengthening local capacities, professionalizing the different aspects of the value chain, and increasing the country's competitiveness in the international production market. PUA offers specific funding for international productions, international advertising productions and national productions, which are updated each year. In 2022, Uruguay's Agency of Film and

Audiovisual (ACAU) was created with the aim of centralizing the allocation and execution of funds and programs, as well as implementing initiatives oriented to the internationalization, training and development of the sector.

All of these factors, added to the increasing relevance of the audiovisual industry worldwide -fostered by technological innovation- allow more and more Uruguayan filmmakers to make their projects come true and bring them to the international arena. Training alternatives have multiplied both in the public and private areas.

Despite all the difficulties still remaining in the film-making process in Uruguay, in recent years there has been a real generational and aesthetic renovation that will certainly allow the country to continue to offer high-quality films across a wide and diverse audiovisual culture in constant growth.