The New Mexican Cinema

On April 22, 1974, Mexican President Luis Echeverría Álvarez assembled the entire force of Mexican film-making—producers, directors, actors and technicians—on the spacious grounds of the Los Pinos Presidential estate in Mexico City and delivered a landmark address. "I formally invite all workers, now," he said, "to unite with the State, to produce [films on] the great human themes of the Mexican Revolution; to undertake social criticism, to initiate self-criticism. Each of you," he continued, "must feel this with moral authority, aesthetic capability and imaginative force, so that, together, all of us can better Mexico."

The Echeverría speech underscored many previous overtures calling for a new kind of film-making, including a major address to film-makers delivered in Santiago, Chile, in 1972 in which he declared that, "A cinema that lies is a cinema that brutalizes its public." Echeverría's invitation at Los Pinos marked a unique experiment in Mexican politics and filmic history. It was an expression of a presidential decision to lay the groundwork for a new kind of cinema—one that would respond and speak to the social concerns of Mexico. It was, at the same time, an effort by the Mexican government to finish nationalization of its film industry and to furnish its film-makers with the necessary wherewithal to elevate the quality of their art—increased capital, political support, and artistic freedom.

To what degree was the Echeverría experiment successful? How did the film-makers respond, the auteur directors who were to be the hope of the new era in cinema? What were these "great human themes of the Mexican Revolution" that the new wave of Mexican directors sought to explore? Would Rodolfo Echeverría, the president's brother and director of the powerful nationalized Banco Nacional Cinematográfico, be successful in raising the quality of Mexican cinema, and would the changes brought about by these films of "social criticism" be lasting? The answers to these questions can be partially appreciated by a review of some of the major films made during the Echeverría years of 1970 through 1977, films which today mark a new presence in Mexican cinema, and which continue to provoke many difficult and penetrating questions.

In Mexico there is a special kind of pastry which is called a churro. It is made simply by fast-frying bread dough in oil and then sprinkling on a bit of sugar. The bread which results has little nutritional value, is cheaply produced, but is popular and sells quite well.

To understand the Mexican filmic experience prior to Luis Echeverría, one must understand that the majority of films produced between 1960 and 1970 were commonly referred to, with no little disdain, as churros. These were films geared to the lowest common denominator of popular taste and lacked the ambition of serious film-making that had marked the films of Mexico's "golden era" in the forties. The churros were cheaply made, mostly by productores privados: private, profit-minded independent producers with few or no artistic pretensions. Recalls veteran director of photography Rosalio Solano, "often we would film three or four films in as many weeks, we'd forget which film we were filming!"

Actors and sets were interchangeable in these counterparts to American "B" movies—at times actors and sets would be used simultaneously for two different films. The stark realities of economic underdevelopment permitted little refinement in Mexican film-making. "The effect of these films on the Mexican public," remembers director Paul Leduc, "was summarized by a popular expression of the day, 'Cine Mexicano? Yo no veo cine Mexicanos!' (Mexican films? I never go to see Mexican films!)

Only occasionally would there surface out-of-the ordinary films such as Macario (1960), Ani-

It was not until the 1965 Experimental Film Festival sponsored by the film industry's umbrella union, the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica (STPC), that new film-makers and a distinct cinema began to emerge publicly. It is significant that the STPC (Union of Film Industry Workers) should feel the need to promote new film-makers, to inject new blood into the tradition-bound and closed writer and director guilds. "It was an effort on the part of the technicians' union to rejuvenate their ranks with new talent, people who would bring new ideas to Mexican cinema," reflects new wave director Gonzalo Martínez, "and it was a rejuvenating effort that soon bore fruit." Clearly, the talent, themes, and potential evident in such films as La Formula Secreta by Rubén Gámaz and En Este Pueblo No Hay Ladrones by Alberto Isaac, both high point winners in the contest, signalled that a new cinema was indeed in the offing.

While the STPC experimental film festival brought to notice some of the new directors who would later be incorporated into the new Mexican cinema, it was not just the film festivals which began to provoke new directions in Mexican cinema. As early as 1961, the creation of special film classes at the University of Mexico inspired the creative vision of many who would later become the auteurs of the Echeverría sexenio (six-year presidential term). In 1963, with the creation of an autonomous film department at the University, the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (CUEC), a new avenue for development of directors was institutionalized. Among the soon to be important directors who trained at the CUEC during 1964, 1965, and 1966 were: Alberto Bojorquez, Jorge Fons, Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, Alfredo Joskowicz, and Marcella Fernández Volante. Also during the mid-sixties, other Mexican directors were getting their basic training abroad: Paul Leduc and screenwriter Tomás Perez Turrent were studying in Paris; Gonzalo Martínez and Sergio Olhovich were training in Moscow; and Juan Manuel Torres was in Poland.

By 1969, the film-makers abroad had returned home, the CUEC had graduated several classes of film-makers, and the experimental film competitions had proven the viability of and need for a new cinema. This—coupled with the still fiery political consciousness awakened by the Tlatelolco massacre on 1968, and its attendant student movement—made the emergence of a new Mexican cinema, if not inevitable, at least highly predictable.

The key factors in the shift to the new filmmaking were economic and political—the changeover brought by Luis Echeverría's apertura democrática (liberalization) of the film industry was a function of Echeverría's particular brand of Mexican politics and of the deplorable economics of Mexican film-making he inherited when he became President.

When Luis Echeverría Álvarez took office in 1970, he had followed a pattern familiar in Mexican politics since the time of Plutarco Calles in the twenties. Echeverría was a member of the cabinet of the previous president, Díaz Ordaz; he was hand-picked by Ordaz to succeed him, and he was the only candidate of the major (and for practical purposes, only) political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Once in office, Echeverría set out to establish himself as a progressive president and self-appointed spokesperson for the Third World. Within a short time, his outspoken liberal declarations and policies aroused great controversy. Soon many hopeful Mexicans were comparing him favorably with Cardenas, the Mexican President of the forties who had nationalized the oil industry, booting out the "yanqui" companies, and had done much to bring about agrarian reform. Others, particularly conservatives, private industry, and foreign investors, were openly alarmed. The perennially divided Left was suspicious and skeptical of overtures by a president who had been attorney general at the time of the Tlatelolco massacre. Still, Echeverría's self-espoused liberalism, which would later result in his unsuccessful bid for Secretary General of the United Nations, was well on its way.

It is not surprising that Echeverría would carry his program of liberalization into the arena of film-making. Here was an opportunity to en-
lighten and stimulate the Mexican public through the entertainment industry. Less idealistically and perhaps more economically motivated, here too was an opportunity to open up new markets for a cinema that too often ran in the red. With his brother Rodolfo head of the Banco, Luis Echeverría added the Studio de Las Américas to the roster of state-owned studios and by the time of his Los Pinos speech, Echeverría had built up three state-operated production houses: Conacine in 1973, and later Conacite I and Conacite II. These were already on their way to producing films which suited Echeverría's image as a progressive leader of the Third World, an image that required him to liberalize the strict censorship codes and to promote “films of social criticism.”

“This liberalization,” recalls director Sergio Olhovich, president of the new wave movement, “was in response to two factors. The first was economic. Mexican cinema was failing because it had lost the market it once had; and this was because of the terrible quality of our films—the producers up to then only thought of cinema as a commercial enterprise. This prompted Rodolfo Echeverría to take economic steps which resulted in state control of film production. And this is the key point: the old-style private producers began to retire from film-making when it became evident that they could not make the fortunes they had once made. Film-making through the state was no longer commercially profitable the way it had been for independents. But now the quality of film-making began to improve. The other factor was the liberalization of theme and content, which was also necessary to open up new markets for our cinema.”

Whether motivated by economic considerations, political ambitions, in response to the creative vision of new film-makers, or a combination of these factors, once Rodolfo Echeverría took office in 1970, he began to aggressively open up channels for improved film-making. “He gave a new direction on all cinematographic fronts,” remembers Jorge Fons, a quiet-spoken and bearded new wave director who made more than five features during the Echeverría years. “He opened up the traditionally strict censorship of themes, promoted new directors, encouraged co-productions with the state, he created a new promotion department to the film industry, and began to concentrate on improving the distribution and exhibition of Mexican films.”

Within the months of Rodolfo's entry into the Banco Nacional Cinematográfico, three new progressive companies sprang up which, with the state's help, wound up producing a majority of the films produced independently during the sexenio: Marco Polo Productions, Alpha Centauri, and Scorpion Productions. At the same time the Banco itself began support of films that in another time might never have been screened. Two of these films were Reed—Mexico Insur gente, by Paul Leduc, and El Aguila D e s c a l z a , directed by and starring the popular Mexican comic, Alfonso Arau.

Paul Leduc's film, made in 16mm and later blown up for 35mm release, was based on John Reed's account of the Mexican Revolution. The film version was actually produced independently prior to Rodolfo Echeverría coming to office, but fortunately, once produced it was bought by the state, and widely promoted as an example of the new kind of film-making. “My film was made in 1969, before Rodolfo came into power,” explains Leduc, “and though he did not influence its filming, he certainly had a great deal to say about it afterwards. Public pressure and pressure from film critics had virtually forced Echeverría to legalize the film, but thereafter, to his surprise, it was very popularly received.”

Similarly, Alfonso Arau's film, El Aguila Des ca l z a , a fresh satirical farce revolving around the adventures of a Mexican superman hero, El Aguila (the eagle), who befriends the underdog in Mexican popular life, was also produced independently. As with Leduc's film, it took pressure from critics to convince Rodolfo Echeverría to release the film commercially. But once released, it proved an overwhelming box-office and artistic success, winning five “Arieles” (Mexican Oscars) when these awards were revived in 1970. Looking back, Arau says, “Both films, El Aguila Desca l z a and Reed—Mexico Insur gente, were films of a political nature, more obvious in Leduc's film and through satire in my film, but still political. Because they were produced indepen-
ently they offered a new perspective, one that would influence other directors, though perhaps not until a year or two later."

Another of the films to consciously express the social concerns later articulated emphatically by Echeverría was the 1970 production of *Calzonzín Inspector*, also directed by and starring Alfonso Arau. The film, based on Gogol’s *Inspector General* short story, and on the fictional characters of Leftist cartoonist Ruis’s “Los Supermachos,” exposed the hypocrisy and corruption of many of Mexico’s most revered institutions: government, the church, and the military.

*Calzonzín*, a humble Indian, visits a typical Mexican rural town. Unknown to him, the corrupt town officials await a visit from an “inspector general” to whom *Calzonzín* bears a remarkable resemblance. The Indian (Alfonso Arau), soon realizes the the townsfolk have mistaken him for the inspector and, knowing a good opportunity when he sees it, takes advantage of the situation and allows the guilt-ridden town fathers to shower him with gifts, bribes, and favors. All is well until he is confronted by the Indian population of the town who can only offer him flowers, fruits, and their livestock but who ask for justice and respect from the townsfolk—favors beyond *Calzonzín’s* power to grant.

Later, the corrupt town fathers contrive the dedication of a new school to impress the inspector. *Calzonzín*’s otherwise roguish character is again touched at the dedication; the Indian sensibility underneath the comedic pretense is moved to tears by the singing of the Mexican national anthem. As the camera intercuts the faces of the singing children with those of the corrupt officials, Arau for a moment reminds the viewer of what is at stake behind the farce of *Calzonzín Inspector*: the very ideals and principles of the Mexican Republic. Couched in with and satire, and with Arau’s arresting smile, *Calzonzín Inspector* displays a clear and honest perception of Mexican hopes and aspirations while commenting bitterly on those who would betray these ideals.

With the commercial success of *El Aguila Descalza* and *Calzonzín Inspector*, and their official endorsement, other films soon began to direct themselves to social criticism; among them, the films of Felipe Casals.

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Early in the Echeverría sexenio, Casals undertook two films of an historical nature with cautious political renderings: *Zapata* (1970) and *Aquellos Tiempos* (1972). Both historical dramas were antecedents to the kind of openly political films encouraged by the Echeverría directives. By 1974, Casals was ready to direct three films dealing in a more straightforward and contemporary manner with social criticism: *Canoa, El Apando*, and *Las Poquianchis*.

*Canoa* (1975) focuses on the tragic murder of several young employees of the University of Mexico by an enraged mob in the rural town of Canoa in 1968. At the time, the town priest, who was also the *cacique* (rural boss) of Canoa had been preaching to the town’s people, warning them about the dangers of radical heretics and communists such as were to be found at the University of Mexico. One day a group of University workers (not students) were hiking in the hills near Canoa and were forced to take refuge from a thundershower in the town. Before the night was out, the priest had called out the citizens of the town and, together, they had captured, mutilated, and lynched three of the five unsuspecting young men. The incident, overshadowed by the infamous massacre at Tlatelolco, was not widely publicized at the time; the Casals film finally brought the story poignantly to the Mexican public.

The Casals film is distinguished by a filmic approach which blends simulated documentary footage and on-camera interviews with a narrative rendering of the events leading to the lynchings. The pacing of the film, while slower than that found in many North American films, keeps the
viewer involved and makes credible the series of circumstances and attitude of the town people which made the tragedy possible. Actors Carlos Chavez, Roberto Sosa, Arturo Alegro, and Jaime Garza are convincing as the luckless young men. Enrique Lucero portrays the fanatical and domineering town priest, and Ernesto Gomez Cruz, who in 1977 would win the Mexican film industry’s best actor award, is superb as the well-meaning, humble farmer who tries to defend the boys from the town’s people but who is, himself, overcome and killed.

_Canoa_ received wide promotion by Procinemex, the publicity department of the nationalized film industry, and set the scene for the next Casals film, _El Apando_ (1976).

Where in _Canoa_ Casals had utilized an innovative mix of simulated documentary and traditional narrative styles, in _El Apando_ he failed to achieve as interesting a cinematographic form or as clear a social statement. The film’s title refers to the maximum security “hole” in Mexico’s infamous and now defunct Lecumberri prison and is an exploration of the brutality and violence of the Mexican prison system. The film is based on a semi-autobiographical story by one of Mexico’s leading Leftist intellectuals, the late José Revueltas. (It was Revueltas’s sister, Rosaura, who played the lead in the classic, _The Salt of the Earth_).

Salvador Sanchez, Manuel Ojeda, and José Carlos Ruiz, three of the more important new Mexican actors, portray three incorrigible inmates at Lecumberri who are addicted to drugs. With the help of their girlfriends, played by Delia Casanova and Maria Rojo, and the mother of one of the men, played by Luz Cortazar, they arrange to have drugs brought into the prison. The three men are soon caught with the contraband and thereafter confined in the maximum security hole wherein much of the film takes place. Eventually, again with the help of their girlfriends, the three escape into the main prison yard, incite other prisoners to riot, and manage to kill several guards before they themselves are cut down.

While convincing in its depiction of prison brutality, _El Apando_ suffers from excessively playing up drugs, sex, and lesbianism of female prison guards, and the moral corruption of the inmates; it thus diffuses its otherwise important commentary on the conditions in the Mexican prison system.

By 1976, Casals had collaborated with screenwriter Tomás Perez Turrent on several films. They now undertook to tell the story of a notorious case of Mexican prostitution in _Las Poquianchis_ (1977). It was in the late fifties that three sisters in Mexico opened a brothel, “The Poquianchis,” and stocked it with young girls who had been “bought” or kidnapped from rural farmland homes. In many cases destitute parents had virtually sold their daughters as bonded servants, thinking the girls would work as maids in the big city. It was not until the late sixties that the prostitution ring was broken up, and then only after many of the girls has been murdered or had themselves become killers.

The film begins with the sale of two young...
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dughters (Tina Romero and Diana Bracho) of an indigent campesino (Jorge Martínez de Hoyos) to agents of the Poquianchis brothel. The men have promised the parents of the girls that they will find jobs for the girls in the city. The transparent lie is eagerly accepted by the father of the girls, Martínez de Hoyos, who needs the money the men offer to help feed the rest of his impoverished children. The girls are taken to the Poquianchis brothel and there raped and beaten into a life of prostitution. Next Casals develops some interesting intercutting between the parallel stories of the two daughters as they accustom themselves to domineering and brutal treatment by the callous sisters who run the brothel, played eloquently by veteran actresses Leonor Llausas and Malena Doria, and the futile efforts of the campesino father to organize a strike of serf farmers against the all powerful land barons of the region.

In the end, many years later, the dejected and beaten father hears of the murder scandal surrounding the Poquianchis group and turns up to look for his daughters. He finds to his horror that one of them has been murdered, attacked and beaten to death by a group of the prostitutes, including his other daughter. Las Poquianchis is an exposé of a bitter moment in recent Mexican history, but more importantly, is an indictment against an exploitive economic system that is today still at work in some parts of the Republic.

Perhaps the film most publicized by the Mexican film industry during the Echeverría period was not directed by a Mexican at all, but rather by a Chilean in exile—Miguel Littin. Prior to Actas de Marusia (here translated Marusia Chronicle), Littin had directed two films of significance in his native Chile, El Chacal de Nahueltoro (1968) and La Tierra Prometida (1973). With the fall of the Allende government, Littin was forced into exile and settled in Mexico. He was part of the drive by a group of young directors to infiltrate the rigid Sección de Directores (Director’s Guild), and when the guild was finally pressured by Rodolfo Echeverría to permit entry of new directors, Littin was one of the first to enter.

Actas de Marusia opens with the arbitrary murder of one of the miners in the town of Marusia, in the north of Chile, an act which sets the tone for the bloody violence to be seen in much of the film. The protagonist of the film, a vagabond intellectual named Gregorio—played by Italian actor Gian Maria Volante—is fleeing the memory of a previous political massacre in which his wife has been killed. He arrives in Marusia and discovers that the miners there are desperate over their low wages and the daily
abuses they suffer. A committee of miners is elected, and a strike plan formulated. Gregorio joins in. The miners know that if they can spread the strike to the neighboring towns, the Chilean military, with its limited troops, will be unable to handle all of the strikes and the miners will be able to paralyze the economy of Chile. They will finally have some leverage by which they can achieve their demands. The Chilean military, however, in collusion with foreign owners of the copper mines, also fear a national strike of miners. They decide that they must make an example of Marusia to avert any more disruptive activities in other towns. The town of Marusia will be destroyed.

From the moment that the train bearing Chilean troops leaves for the remote town of Marusia, the town’s fate is sealed. Despite Gregorio’s experienced advice, the naive and unpoliticized miners hope to make a deal with the approaching army and to recruit the soldiers into their struggle. This hope is quickly crushed when, after the troop train has been stopped by the gallant miners’ wives who have laid themselves across the railroad tracks, the commander in charge orders the women summarily executed. Soon the attack on Marusia is on, with the army encountering the determined resistance from the now more politicized miners.

Inevitably the Chilean army is successful in overpowering the disorganized miners. Most of the women and children are spared, but the miners themselves are tortured and finally executed. Gregorio is singled out for particular humiliation and torture, but before he is killed, he manages to help three messengers escape to carry the Marusia chronicle he has written to the neighboring towns: “Learn from our mistakes, tell them of our disorganization.” Actas de Marusia, more than any other Mexican film of this period, expresses unequivocally a Marxist ideology, and though set in the Chilean past, the parallels to contemporary Chile are obvious.

Throughout Actas de Marusia Miguel Littín displays a mature directorial vision which allows eloquence in the carefully staged execution scenes, and a minimum of gore in the effective torture sequences, which reflects a subtle understanding of human psychology in the heated arguments between impassioned miners, and which elicits pathos in the ill-fated romance between Gregorio and the town schoolteacher (Diana Bracho). Littín’s direction is further enhanced by the acting abilities of Gian Maria Volante, Salvador Sanchez, Claudio Obregón, Diana Bracho, and Patricia Reyes Spindola.

The most striking aspect of Actas de Marusia, however, is not its strong politics, its directorial finesse, or its fine acting, but the fact that the Mexican film industry would back the film to the extent that it did. In contrast to other films of the period, which varied in shooting time from 30 to 50 days, Actas de Marusia was allowed 65 days and a budget of over 1 million dollars (high for Mexican films of this period). The investment seems to have paid off—Actas de Marusia was the first Mexican film in many years to be nominated for Best Foreign Film in the United States by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (in 1975), and it was Mexico’s entry at the 1975 Cannes Film Festival.

Shortly after Actas de Marusia was released, Mexican director Gonzalo Martínez Ortega finished his epic feature film, Longitud de Guerra (1976). The film is one of the most cinematographically accomplished films of the Echeverría sexenio and was nominated for Best Foreign Film in 1976.

Previous to Longitud de Guerra, Gonzalo Martínez had directed El Principio (1972), a film set in his native state of Chihuahua at the start of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. El Principio (The Beginning) analyzes the causes which provoked the Mexican Revolution by focusing on the relationship between the peons and the landed...
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gentry under the Porfirio Díaz regime. At the start of the Revolution, an effete landowner’s son, David Domínguez Solis (Fernando Balzarette), returns from Europe to find that his family home has been taken over by revolutionaries and that his father, Don Ernesto Domínguez, a tyrannical land baron (Narcisco Busquets) has been killed. David visits the family home and, in a series of flashbacks to his youth, remembers the unjust and arbitrary abuses exercised by his brutal father against the peons. The flashbacks serve to fill out the personal story of David’s estrangement from his father and convincingly explains David’s decision to join the revolutionary forces led by the very peons over whom his father was once master.

By 1975, Martinez was ready to undertake a more ambitious look at the causes of the Mexican Revolution. As the vehicle he chose the second of an intended trilogy of stories which focus on the rugged and independent-minded people of an often contested strip of territory in western Chihuahua known as the longitud de guerra (region of war). Martínez’s projected trilogy would focus on the war with the Apaches of Chihuahua which was undertaken by Colonel Joaquin Terrazas in the early 1880’s (La Guerra Sin Gloria), then tell of the heroic resistance of the town of Temochic against the abuses of the Porfirio Díaz tyranny in the late 1880’s (Temochic, later retitled Longitud de Guerra) and lastly relate the final coming of age of the Mexican revolution in the story of revolutionary leader Pascual Orozco in the early 1900’s (Pascual Orozco—1910). Only Longitud de Guerra has as yet been completed.

Longitud de Guerra begins in 1890. The men of the town of Temochic have returned from the war with the Apaches and have settled down with their families to a peaceful life of farming and ranching. They are led by a community and spiritual leader named Cruz Chavez (Bruno Rey) whom they prefer to follow instead of the municipal president (Víctor Alcocer). When the governor of the state (Jorge Russeks) comes to Temochic and arbitrarily takes several paintings from the town church, Cruz Chavez and his people are outraged. Although the paintings are later returned, the fact that the people of Temochic have adopted as their patron saint, the “saint of Cabo,” a local spiritual leader, further provokes the animosity of the Church. A Church emissary is sent to set the people of Temochic straight; he denounces their beliefs as heretical, and insults the congregation. Cruz Chavez, along with brothers Manual (Pedro Armendariz, Jr.), David (Jorge Humberto Robles), and Jesús José (Hector Saez), and their families decide the time has come to break with the established authority of the Church, and for that matter all civil authorities. The people of Temochic join the extended Cruz family and in the absence of honest government resolve to govern themselves and to continue believing in whomever they please. This renunciation of ecclesiastical and civil authority is too audacious a challenge to let pass—Porfirio Díaz orders the insurrection put down. Despite the reluctance of General José Manuel Muriel (Narciso Busquets) and General Genero Chacon (Ramón Menéndez) to commit wholesale slaughter, the town and its people are finally attacked by the federal forces. Despite a brilliant and heroic defense, in the end all but a few women and children are killed.

As in Actas de Marusia, the Martínez film focuses on the deliberate and senseless massacre
of a town and its men. Both films end with only a handful of women and children left to mourn over the ashen ideals for which brothers, fathers and sons have died. The two films differ significantly, however, on the very issue of conflict and resistance.

In Marusia the protagonists struggle against labor exploitation and, by the end of the film, have clear political (socialist) objectives in mind. The revolt in Temochic, on the other hand, is precipitated by the pure country honesty of the people of that area. Explains Martinez, “These people, historically, maintained a pure, direct attitude towards questions essential to life—love, truth, justice, and basic human dignity. Whereas in other parts of Mexico at this time people were putting up with the hypocrisy and abuses of the Diaz government, in Temochic the people were incapable of allowing such abuses, or offenses against their basic human dignity.” Though Marusia is clearly the more politically controversial of the films, it is also noteworthy that the Temochic story, which had first been suggested for filming as early as the 1940's, was only now allowed to be filmed.

Late in the Echeverría sexenio two other notable films of social character were produced which overlapped into the subsequent Lopez Portillo presidency: Cascabel (1977) and La Casta Divina (1977). Both films reveal outstanding cinematography, high production values, and creative acting.

Cascabel (Rattlesnake) relates the story of a stage director who is commissioned by the Mexican government to innocuously document the life of the Lacandón Indians, one of Mexico’s more indigent Native American people, and discovers in the course of his filming that he must instead denounce the contradictions in governmental treatment of the Indians.

As the film opens, Alfredo Castro (Sergio Jimenez) is asked to cut out controversial parts from his latest stage production; if he doesn’t the manager of the theater will be forced to close down the play. Alfredo reluctantly agrees to the cuts. Shortly thereafter, a producer in the state-run film company (Raul Ramirez) offers Alfredo his directorial debut in film if only he will adhere to a previously censored and edited script. Alfredo, egged on by his girlfriend (Norma Herrera), who accuses him of never taking a risk for fear of being compromised, decides to accept the challenge.

Within weeks, Alfredo is in the Southern state of Chiapas filming Lacandón Indians among pre-Columbian ruins. There he meets a Lacandón caught in the uneasy transition from traditional Indian lifestyle to western cosmopolitanism. Chankín is a Lacandón translator and guide who incongruously wears Indian dress with western sunglasses and short-cut hair and who is brilliantly portrayed by actor Ernesto Gomez Cruz. As Alfredo gets to know more and more about the Lacandón situation, and despite the considered advice of his cameraman (Aaron Hernan), he begins sending back controversial interviews and dailies which are not included in the script. Finally the political nature of his film-making becomes apparent to the producer and the state functionary sponsoring the film project (Mario Cid). Alfredo is relieved of his job.

On the last evening of his stay with the Lacandóns, Chankín’s wife goes into labor. Simultaneously, a rattlesnake crawls into Alfredo’s sleeping bag while the director prepares to sleep. In the provocatively edited final moments of the film, a clear relationship is developed between Alfredo’s inevitable death, the price of his moral convictions, and the hypocritical forces which will continue to keep Chankín and his newly born child impoverished.
In *Cascabel* director Raul Arraiza takes full advantage of the filmic theme of his story to illuminate the plight of the Lacandóns and to experiment with filmic form. The footage which the protagonist Alfredo sends back to the producer for review is in fact authentic man-in-the-street interviews which director Arraiza himself shot for *Cascabel*, interviews in which a cross section of real Mexicans speak out about their government and the Lacandon situation. Thus Arraiza accomplishes a sort of documentary-within-a-feature, a form which serves to emphasize a major contradiction of contemporary Mexico—the glorification of the Indian past at the same time that so many of Mexico's contemporary Indians live in abject poverty. The film challenges as well the limits of Mexico's new cinematographic censors. Both are delicate and controversial areas through which Raul Arraiza manages to step with brilliance and insight.

*La Casta Divina*, directed by Julian Pastor, chronicles the moral corruption and eventual destruction of a family of rich landowners in the remote state of Yucatan in the period just prior to the Mexican Revolution of 1910. During this time, the white landowners thought of themselves as a “Divine Race,” feudal masters over thousands of indentured Indian servants who were treated virtually as slaves. With the encroaching armies of Mexican revolutionaries everyday coming closer to the Yucatan bastion of landowner supremacy, the film examines the disintegration of family values as the landowners pathetically try to hold on to the myth of themselves as the divine race. Eventually the local Indians rise up and leave bloody and irrevocable proof of the mortality of the landowners.

The foregoing examples suggest only some of the many themes of social criticism touched on during the six years of the Echeverría presidency. Films were produced on corrupt politicians, such as Alfonso Arau’s *Calzonzin Inspector* and Raphael Baledon’s *Renuncia Por Motivos de Salud; Canoa* and *Las Poquianchis*, and Julian Pastor’s *La Casta Divina*; the prison system in Casals’ *El Apando* and the documentary *Palacio Negro* by Arturo Ripstein; the plight of Mexico’s Indian population in *Juan Perez Jolote* by Archibaldo Burns, Paul Leduc’s documentary *Mezquital*, and Raul Arraiza’s *Cascabel*: political satire in Pepe Estrada’s *Maten Al León* and Alfonso Arau’s *El Aguilu Descalza*; the life of the urban poor in Luis Alcoriza’s *Mecanica Nacional*, Jorge Fons’s *Los Albaniles* and Gabriel Retes’s *Tin-Tin El Teperocho*; the Chicano struggle in *Chicano* by Jaime Casillas and this author’s *Raíces de Sangre*; Marxism in Miguel Littin’s *Actas de Marusia*, the class struggle in Sergio Olhovich’s *Encuentro De Un Hombre Solo* and *Llovisna*, and working socialism in Alfonso Arau’s as yet unreleased documentary on Cuba, *Caribe: Estrella y Aguila*.

Other films explored controversial history. Alberto Bojorquez’s *Hermanos del Viento* (1976) takes place in the period just after the Mexican-American War and focuses on the continued resistance by Mexicans who remained in the territory conquered by the United States. Marcella Fernandez Volante’s *Cananea* (1977) explores US copper interests at the Greene Copper Company of Cananea, Sonora, in 1908. The film relates the unsuccessful strike by Mexican miners against Greene and other US interests in Mexico. Other films dealt directly with the Mexican Revolution and, to one degree or another, analyzed its causes: Paul Leduc’s *Reed—Mexico Insurgente* (1969), Felipe Casals’s *Zapata* (1970), Gonzalo Martínez’s *El Principio* (1972) and Alberto Isaac’s *Cuartelazo* (1972).

Not all films made during the Echeverría sexenio, of course, dwelt on social criticism or political themes. During his term as Director of the Banco Nacional Cinematográfico, Rodolfo Echeverría attempted to enliven Mexican film-making in more ways than by merely expanding its content. One example of this was his invitation to inter-
national film stars to contribute their talents to the Mexican film industry—such as Peter O'Toole, Charlotte Rampling, and Max Von Sydow in Arturo Ripstein's *Foxtrot* and Gian Maria Volante in *Actas de Marusia*.

Another innovation was the encouragement of cinematographic renderings of important Mexican and Latin American literary works. This trend, at least recently, had begun in such films as *Los Caifanes* (1967) (co-authored by Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes and its director Juan Ibañez), *En Este Pueblo No Hay Ladrones* (1965) (based on the Gabriel García Márquez short story) and the filmic rendering by Jorge Fons of Maria Vargas Llosa's *Los Cachorros* (1971). During the Echeverría period other literary works were transformed into films: the remake of Mariano Azuela's *Los de Abajo* (1977), the remake of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo* (1977) directed by Jose Bolaños, the film version of *Xoxontla* (1977) written by Angel Calvo de la Torre and directed by Alberto Mariscal, and the superb adaptation of José Donoso’s novel *Coronación* (1976) by director Sergio Olhovich.


It would be incorrect to think that none of the social criticism films previously mentioned would have been made without Echeverría's support. The drive and creativity of the new directors and new writers, the impetus of new actors, the demands for new themes by Mexican audiences, and the film industry's own impatience with the churros would certainly have been felt in some way. But it is equally unlikely that the superb quality achieved in many of these films—their auteur-selected themes, and their commercial success—would have been possible without the support and artistic freedom conferred on the new directors by the Echeverría government. "I think it was the coming together, at the right time of the right elements," comments Gonzalo Martínez, "we had new directors, new writers and new actors, and the proper support by Echeverría. Both of which were profoundly affected by the events of 1968, from then on the government itself saw the need to bring about certain changes."

The most interesting question yet remains. To what degree is the new film-making a fluke in the Mexican cinema experience and to what degree does it signal a lasting possibility for a new cinema? The answer to this difficult question can only be tentatively surmised from the changes that have occurred since January, 1977, when the Lopez Portillo appointees at various levels of the
film industry began their restructuring of the industry and its priorities. Paramount in the changes which have taken place is a reduction in film financing, the return of the old-style “private” producers, the freezing of filming opportunities for some of the new wave directors of the Echeverría sexenio, and increased co-productions with foreign producers.

In September of 1976, on the eve of leaving office, Echeverría complicated the subsequent financing of motion pictures by announcing the long overdue devaluation of the peso—the first such devaluation in 20 years. It was not surprising, then, that in the financial belt-tightening that followed, one of the first actions to be taken by the new Banco appointees was a reduction of film monies. Post-production budgets on films started in the Echeverría sexenio were a reduction and budgets for new films were cut to the present average of about three or four hundred thousand dollars—about half of the average during the previous Echeverría years.

The old-style “private” producers soon returned in force and, in collaboration with the Banco, have undertaken films of modest budgets where capital return and profits are more likely. These films are more concerned with “entertainment,” a euphemism for films that do not attempt social or political themes, and many of these films have, predictably, retraced the familiar formulas of sex, violence and melodrama.

As for the new directors, many have found it difficult to obtain new film assignments in the revamped Banco policies, or have refused co-production ventures with the Banco because of the “entertainment” emphasis now demanded by the Banco. Some of the new directors claim their films have been sloppily released, only at the worst theaters, while others allege that their films have been denied admittance to foreign film competitions. The Banco, meanwhile, in an effort to better invest the limited monies available for film production after the devaluation, has actively solicited co-productions with the United States.

Still, many of the new wave directors have not idly accepted the changes that have occurred. Many refuse to direct the new churros and instead have put the wealth of their experience, talent and resources to continuing the kind of film-making they mastered in the Echeverría period. Director Gonzalo Martínez is positive about what has been accomplished: “There are major advances we have made in the past six years that are irreversible, things that cannot be changed even if the government wanted to. But then I don’t think the government wants to take backward steps.”

Supporting this view is the fact that the liberalized censorship code established by Echeveda remains; not all Mexican cinema need return to the status of churros. Some directors have responded to the new era by creating their own alternatives to Banco financing, such as the two cooperatives, “Tercarela” and “Rio Mixcoac.” By means of these cooperatives new wave directors hope to continue with their own kind of film-making.

“Independent of what the state may do, or of the film-making of the old-style private producers, we have launched our own group of independent film-makers,” explains Sergio Olhovich, now speaking for a coalition of film directors known as the Frente Nacional de Cinematografistas (The United National Front of Cinematographers). “Many people want to return to the old style of film-making, but they don’t understand that it won’t work anymore. On the other hand, there is a strong group of us, many of us, who refuse to be a part of this kind of film-making that merely manufactures films. We are committed to a kind of cinema that is culturally and artistically motivated. We maintain that our Mexican cinema must be defended not merely by commercial considerations but by its quality.”