CINEMA AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN LATIN AMERICA
By Julianne Burton
University of Texas Press, 302 pp.

With films like The Official Story and Hour of the Star reminding us once again of Latin America's rich movie art, this long-awaited collection of interviews with veteran film artists — directors, critics, distributors and one actor — is both timely and fascinating.

Don't expect to get the gossip on big-studio productions or insider stories of love on location. Latin American filmmakers have produced masterpieces and controversy, often in the worst of circumstances — censorship, poverty and Hollywood competition.

In Burton's words, the "new Latin American cinema" (charted here roughly from 1960 to 1980) is born from the driving need of mass-culture artists to find a link with their own culture and audience.

We hear the "grand old man" of new Latin American cinema, Argentina's Fernando Birri, talk about "two kinds of filmmakers. One invents an imaginary reality; the other confronts an existing reality and attempts to understand it, analyze it, criticize it, judge it, and finally, translate it into film."

We see how Chilean Patricio Guzmán did that in his majestic documentary chronicling the Allende years, The Battle of Chile. Bolivian Jorge Sanjines describes the conflicts in making Blood of the Condor with peasants who mistrusted urban intellectuals with cameras.

Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea talks about the creation of a "new spectator" in a Cuba where filmmakers work in a government studio with the "freedom of working together toward a common goal."

The 20 interviews are a treasurehouse of information on the key epoch for a major Latin artform. Many voices from that era are not heard from, of course, and each voice stands alone in its assertion. You won't hear, for instance, from critics of the Cuban cinema, and no one from the Mexican film industry answers the harsh charges of filmmaker Marcela Fernández Violante.

But this book provides the solid basis for understanding the evolution of a unique New World cinema, whose strengths are drawn from the tight relationship between the struggle for cultural identity and for artistic liberty.

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