Rebellion in Patagonia

A classic anarchist film still relevant today

Muriel Lucas

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"La Patagonia rebelde"

Director: Hector Olivera

110 min. (1974)

The death of Argentine anarchist author and activist Osvaldo Bayer on December 24, 2018 came at a time of renewed interest in his long career. Recent translations of two of his works, The Anarchist Expropriators and Rebellion in Patagonia, were published by AK Press in 2016.

For fans of Latin American cinema, Bayer's passing was also cause to remember one of the best known films in Argentine history, an adaptation of the latter of those two books, La Patagonia rebelde, directed by Hector Olivera in 1974 from a screenplay penned by Bayer himself.

How that film—a serious examination of anarchist uprisings in 1920s Argentina—topped the nation's box office earners weeks before dictator Juan Peron's death, as well as its fate and the fate of its authors, are stories even more fascinating than the work itself.

"Patagonia" is an incredibly deft mixture of Bayer's political acuity and director Olivera's flair for popular entertainment. As the credits roll, the camera cuts between a well-to-do officer awakening from troubled sleep, and a somewhat scruffy younger man in a tight fitting suit waiting outside the general's townhouse, a paper bag under his arm.

After a tense buildup, the scene is at last resolved: The two meet, the young man's package is revealed to be a spherical bomb which he hurls at the general, who he then finishes off by a revolver shot. Olivera has playfully introduced cinema's most pervasive anarchist stereotype: the unkempt, bomb-throwing agent of disorder.

It isn't explained to the audience, but the scene recounts the assassination of Colonel Hector Varela (called Zavala in the film) by the anarchist Kurt Gustav Wilckens, an act of vengeance for Varela's murderous suppression of an anarchist-led labor uprising in the province of Santa Cruz in 1920 and 1921.

It also precedes his undermining of the audience's expectations. The rest of the film tells how city and rural laborers united to demand major reforms during that uprising, only to be crushed by betrayal and unprecedented state violence.

A flashback takes us back three years, to a crowded anarchist union hall. The walls are lined with red and black flags, as well as portraits of Kropotkin, Proudhon, and Bakunin, contextualizing anarchism within a political and philosophical tradition. A strike against the hotels is put to a vote, and the union leaders remind the crowd of the importance of discipline, solidarity, and consensus over brash violence and propaganda by the deed.

This is an altogether different kind of screen portrayal of anarchism, one that had never been shown in popular film before. We are soon told that the most cherished weapon an anarchist has is not a bomb, but a printing press.

What follows is alternately a wistful, if bleak, remembrance of a time when anarchist organizing had the power to reshape Argentine history, released while the memory of the 1973 Ezeiza massacre of leftists was fresh, and the Dirty War of right wing terror was just beginning.

Olivera transforms Bayer's historical anarchist organizers into tragic heroes, blending real historical trauma with genre conventions, borrowing especially from the so-called gaucho film, or Argentine Western. It is remarkable that Olivera's sympathetic and nuanced depiction of anarchy was met with such extraordinary enthusiasm by audiences.

The director's gift lay in his ability to alternate between his serious artistic ambitions and popular commercial modes, often within the same film—and in his ability to get away with highly subversive messaging.

He co-founded the Aries Cinematografica Argentina studio in 1955 in the wake of the military dictatorship's near complete dismantling of the film industry, and helmed hundreds of productions ranging from sharp political comedies like "Funny, Dirty Little War" (1983) to a bizarre string of budget films churned out for American schlock-maestro Roger Corman.

At its peak, Olivera's studio was producing over a quarter of all Argentine films, and when it closed its doors in 2014, it had long since proven to be the country's longest lasting production facility.

The success of "La Patagonia rebelde" was short-lived. Bayer's books, popular bestsellers, were banned during production. The film was released on June 13, 1974 after months of censorship-related delays. By July 1, dictator Juan Peron was dead. He was succeeded by his wife, Isabel Peron, ushering in a new era of right wing terror.

The film was quickly banned, much of its cast blacklisted, and they, along with Bayer, became the targets of threats and violence by the Triple A (Alianza Anticomunista Argentina), a state-supported terrorist group. Bayer fled to Berlin and lived in exile for the remainder of what would later be known as the Dirty War.

Today, the film is still compelling as an action pic, similar in style and as appealing as any of the better Spaghetti Westerns then pouring out of Europe. It's even more impressive as a serious and elaborated depiction of anarchist organizing, resistance, and state violence.

For all of its shortcomings, which include its absolutely male-centric drama and not a few cringe-worthy elements of exploitation, it stands as one of the most honest films about anarchism in world cinema.

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