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review

SOUTH AMERICAN FILMS

by Richard Roud

A FESTIVAL of South American films on the Italian Riviera: odd? I suppose so. The fourth festival of Latin American films has just finished at Sestri Levante, a resort a few miles east of Genoa. It is sponsored by the Columbianum, a Jesuit-run organisation whose headquarters are in Genoa and whose aims are to further cultural relations between Italy and Latin America (Columbianum-Columbus-Genoa). This is the kind of festival that is more interesting than exciting. Useful, too: one has the chance of seeing the latest and best from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, etc.

By and large, the films, too, are more interesting than exciting. The Cuban entry, *El Otro Cristobal* was directed by Armand Gatti; it is an attempt to combine fantasy with political comment. It does not really come off, but in its efforts to escape the usual subject matter of the new Cuban cinema it is an encouraging step forward. *Hombre de la Esquina Rosada* is an Argentinian adaptation of a short story by the now fashionable Borges. Successful in creating a 1910 atmosphere, it falls down on its acting and direction. Another Argentinian film, *Los Venerables Todos*, also shown at Cannes, bears witness to the characteristic post-Peron theme of disillusionment and despair. A group of men who had banded together to fight the regime find themselves cause-less after the downfall of Peron, and their noble conspiracy degenerates into adolescent plotting. An interesting theme, but unfortunately the director, Manuel Antin, is not skilful enough to realise all its possibilities.

The great discovery at Sestri this year was a Brazilian film, *Barravento*. Imagine the unimaginable: a combination of Visconti's "La Terra Trema" and Murnau's "Tabu." The director, Glauber Rocha, is only 25. He was born in Bahia, and his film is set in a near-by fishing village. On the one hand it is a Marxist denunciation of the exploitation of the fishermen and the rôle of superstition keeping them subjugated: macumba, that weird mixture of Christianity and African tribal religion which is so powerful in the Bahia province. At the same time the director seems fascinated by the ritual aspects of macumba, and some of the most striking scenes are depictions of the macumba rites. It was explained to me that this was the first time these rites had ever been filmed, and this was possible only because the director, Marxist though he is, is also a great friend of one of the high priestesses of the region. But he doesn't believe in macumba, does he, I asked. Well, no, not really, was the answer, but maybe just a little. Some of the power of the film comes, I think, from this complexity of the director's response to the struggle between old and new forces in Brazil. In any case he is sufficiently aware of the attraction of macumba to be able to express the dilemma of the hero of the film. Whereas in other Brazilian films the folklore aspects seemed to have been laid on for abroad, here they are an integral part of the film.

But "Barravento" (which means the moment of transformation in the macumba religion) is important also for its purely cinematic qualities. Powerfully and elliptically put together, it is beautifully and cleanly photographed. In its brilliance, it invites comparison with that of "Tabu," and this is high praise, indeed. Infinitely superior to last year's Cannes grand prize winner, "O Pagador Promesas," "Barravento" might well be the first really important Brazilian film. The sad thing is that apart from a few screenings in the Bahia district, this film has never yet been seen publicly in Brazil. If it's a success abroad, say the distributors, we might take a chance; otherwise, not.

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