



Interview: Eliseo Subiela

Jorge Ruffinelli

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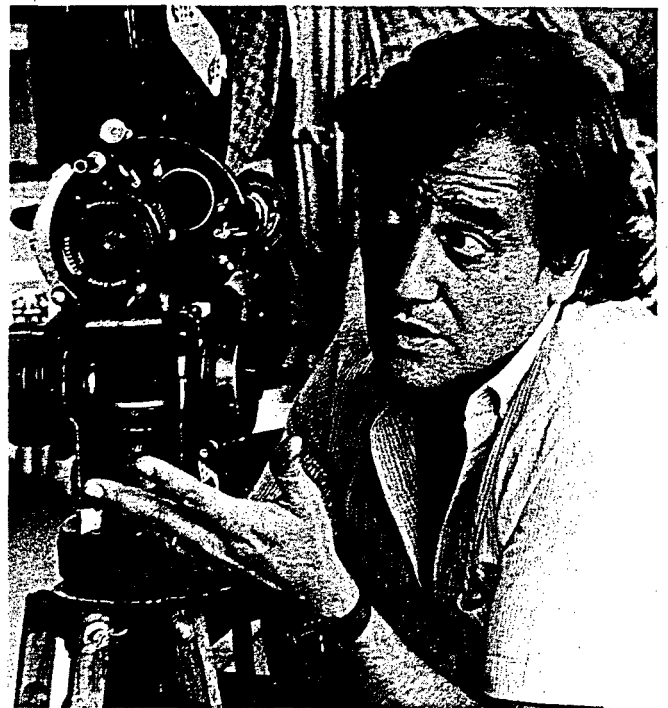
Translated by Alfred Mac Adam

Jorge Ruffinelli, critic and editor of Nuevo texto crítico, is Professor of Spanish at Stanford University. He is the author of several books, among them: Crítica en Marcha, La escritura invisible, Palabras en orden, and Poesía y descolonización.

The Conquest of Paradise (1950), Man Facing Southeast (1955), Last Images of the Shipwreck (1988), and The Dark Side of the Heart (1992), have transformed Eliseo Subiela (b. Buenos Aires, 1944) into one of Latin America's most prominent directors, a major figure in contemporary international cinema. After studying briefly in the film school

at La Plata, he became an assistant director and worked on several feature films, earning a living by making commercials. In September 1992, Eliseo Subiela's The Dark Side of the Heart won the top honor at the Montreal World Film Festival, the Grand Prix of the Americas.

Interview: Eliseo Subiela



Eliseo Subiela
Photo courtesy
of Paul Lenti.



Lorenzo Quintero. Hugo Soto.
Man Facing Southeast, by Eliseo Subiela. Courtesy of Paul Lenti.

Are your closest friends involved in film or in other media?

They are a mixed bunch. Most aren't involved in movies. The best friend I have in movies is the actor Hugo Soto.

I thought so, because he made the sculptures you use in The Dark Side of the Heart. Something really strange in that film is that you show Mario Benedetti, who's Uruguayan after all, reciting his own poems in German dressed as a sailor: why?

One day, Benedetti made the mistake of telling me he'd studied in a German secondary school and that he'd toured Germany reciting in German. Well, that made me think of him as the sailor in the cabaret. Later Mario told me the idea seemed so wild to him he just had to do it.

I loved it, because it's a mirror image of Benedetti.

The thing is—it happened to me and to lots of other people as well—that even though there are no subtitles, audiences were moved by the poem [see insert following this interview—ed.]. Mario's presence is so touching in that scene that it transmits the feeling of the poem even if the spectator doesn't understand the language.

You took a big chance in your film using poetry; a genre that doesn't sell. The protagonist, Oliverio, is continually reciting poems. But the film's been a great success.

For a long time, I had the idea of making a film based

on texts by the Argentine poet Oliverio Girondo, who always seemed to inspire images in me. Besides, I like challenges and risks. I think an artist should always take the greatest risks possible. But the real risk was making a movie with a poetic rather than a prose structure—the story in the film is really small. It worked. But according to some magazines, poetry sales are going up.

Your movies are always based on your own original ideas, you don't adapt ideas or stories created by others—except in The Dark Side of the Heart, where you use poems by Girondo or Benedetti. Why do you have to make up these stories?

I do it because I have to, I guess. Not that I refuse ever to use other people's stories, but up until now it's been a way of exorcising the ghosts I have inside me. I still have too many, and the only way of getting rid of them is to tell stories.

Do you conceive your stories in pictorial terms, or do you rethink them in cinematic terms later?

In general, I think in pictorial terms, in images. Or a story can just pop up. Every picture has its own history, how it came to be. In *Man Facing Southeast*, the first thought that occurred to me, after the real image of a man who lives in my neighborhood and who's always standing on a corner looking southeast, was the title. At that moment, I didn't know what the sub-

I always work with music, so that when the time comes to write the script I sometimes already have the tone I need. I live with earphones on. What I am, actually, is a frustrated musician.

Really? Tell me about it.

The artists I envy most are musicians. I wish I could have been one. I tried, but I was kept back by math. In those days, the teaching was bad. I tried to study composition, but unfortunately I gave it up.

What kind of music do you like best?

That depends on the situation. I like Astor Piazzola a lot, I like rock a lot, and I like Mahler a lot: how's that for three different kinds?

You were never able to compose?

No, or play either. Anyway, I own the saxophone the psychiatrist has in *Man Facing Southeast*—remember? I've got that sax put away, with the hope that someday I'll decide to learn how to play it.

In a course I gave on film, a woman student said that Man Facing Southeast has something of Cortázar to it. Because of the saxophone.

They said the same thing here. And they talked about "The Pursuer," but I don't think it has anything to do with the film. Well, there could be a touch of Cortázar in it, I don't know.

I don't see anything of "The Pursuer" in it either. But the curious thing is that your films are always searching for "something." I think I can relate the lost father in The Conquest of Paradise with the dedication of Man Looking Southeast to your own father and the fact that the character in Last Images of the Shipwreck assumes a paternal attitude toward a family in which the father is the only absent figure. Did you see these thematic links as you went along or did you have them firmly in mind from the beginning?

I started to realize they were there later. I knew that the theme of the father was very important to me, but I became aware of lots of others after watching the pictures. *The Dark Side of the Heart* is the first of my pictures in which there is no father, neither absent nor present.

ject of the movie was going to be; all I had was the title. It was like giving a painting a title.

How did the idea of Last Images of the Shipwreck come to you?

It was a story I'd heard about a family many years before. In no way different from what happens in the picture.

Did the original already have that surrealistic leap in it, that idea of always being on the edge of madness?

I think so. It isn't hard to find that edge all the time in this reality, this society. I think Argentina is a surrealistic country, like all the others in this part of the world. Sometimes I think García Márquez is only a chronicler of society, a "realist."

In the same way you imagine and write your own stories, it seems to me you intervene quite personally in the music, the plastic elements: Magritte in Man Facing Southeast or the obsession with blue in The Dark Side of the Heart. Is all that conscious, or do you discover it afterwards?

In some cases, it's conscious and in the script; in others it appears later, during the filming or the editing. But it's true, I do intervene a lot. How did you come to notice the music?

Even though the music is different in each film, there's something common to all of them. It's part of what's someday going to be known as the "Subiela touch."

Maybe it's because of the film's sexual theme. The presence of the father might have had a censoring effect, don't you think?

Maybe. I don't know. But there is a mother. She may be a cow, but she is a mother.

Why was the father theme so important to you?

Because losing my father created an important absence in my life. My father died when I was an adolescent and had been the producer of my first short films. He stood behind me in my career, and, well, it was a tremendous blow for me.

In The Conquest of Paradise there is a parable: what we seek in faraway places is usually right here next to us. And in Last Images . . . there's the idea of small-scale happiness—the kind we find in our own garden, as Voltaire might say. Even so, even if your characters seem to have found something, in your next pictures they go on searching. And what they're looking for in The Dark Side of the Heart is almost impossible to find.

True. And in my next picture as well, I just realized.

So in some way it must be your own quest.

Yes. Which is also an ongoing thing. Just like my characters, I've been finding things, some of them very important, like having a family, kids . . . But it doesn't matter because the quest goes on, and I suppose it will never end.

I'm fascinated by the fact that in Last Images of the Shipwreck the quest ends with a new child, a new family, while in the film that follows it, The Dark Side of the Heart, the quest goes on to zones like the madness or delirium of sexuality, of unconscious impulses, of terror fantasies—all of them zones where we would never like to place a family.

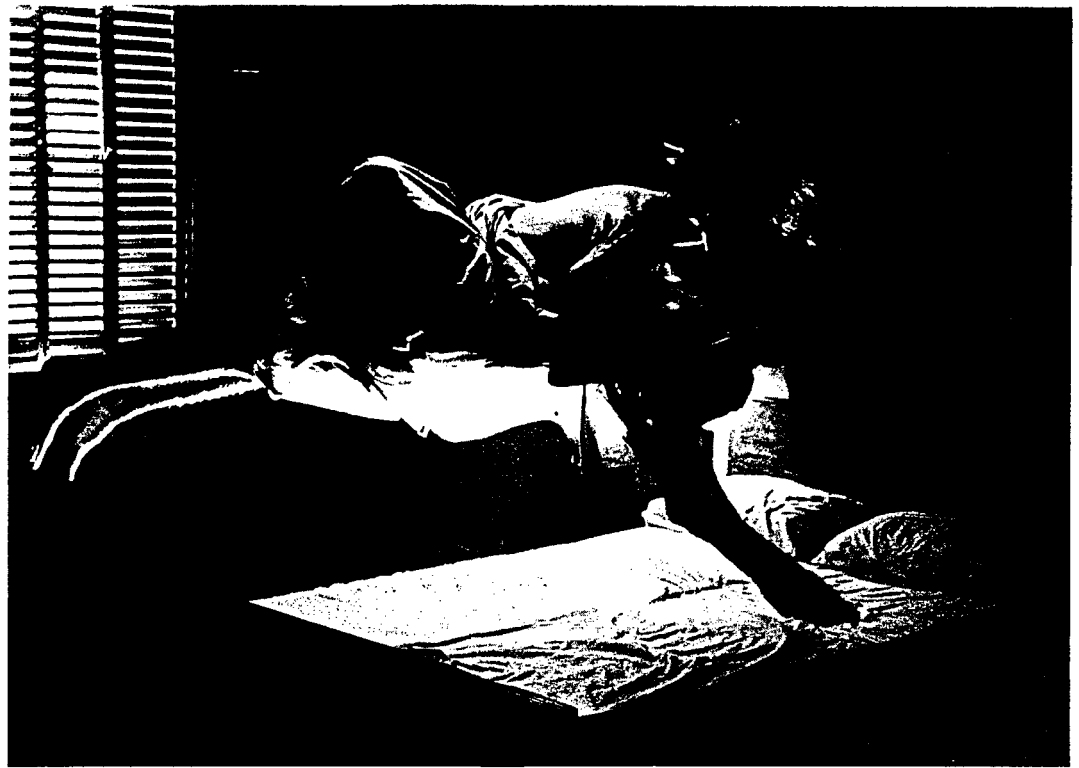
Right. It's certainly that way. I still haven't found the answer; I don't know if there is a synthesis or possible solution, but the two things are my quests, the two of them are something I carry within me at least.

Perhaps by filming them I can get them off my back.

In The Dark Side of the Heart, there is an affirmation of the unconscious and fantasy. How do you relate those two things to yourself?

I've always thought film is an essentially poetic language. I always worked with the unconscious, quite close to surrealism, and I think that with each film I make I get closer, although it isn't the same surrealism as before. In that sense, *The Dark Side of the Heart* is the one where the subconscious is most present—don't you agree? But I'm interested in dreams and I work a lot with dream material and with the inexplicable. And with poetry. I want to make movies that are more and more poetic, the sense of a poetic language. But without that language getting boring. The big challenge is to do that with popular movies and not elite cinema. And we haven't done badly so far.

Darío Grandinetti and Sandra Ballesteros. *El lado oscuro del corazón* (Dark Side of the Heart), by Eliseo Subiela. Courtesy of MaxFilms.



You certainly haven't done badly!

I mean that people accept those codes and that language.

*I wanted to ask you about that: how have your films been received, especially *The Dark Side of the Heart*? What reactions have surprised you most?*

Not surprise, confirmation. The big risk was whether people would “buy” the language. They did. By now people have gotten tired of asking me what things mean and having me say I don't know, so they accept even more. Sometimes I tell them that it's like describing a sunset. What I say then is, “Don't ask me what a sunset means. All I know is that it's there and that we've got to enjoy it.”

*Now that you've said that, I can't ask you why Santa changes her shoes every time she gets out of the hospital in *Man Facing Southeast*. I see that makes you laugh.*

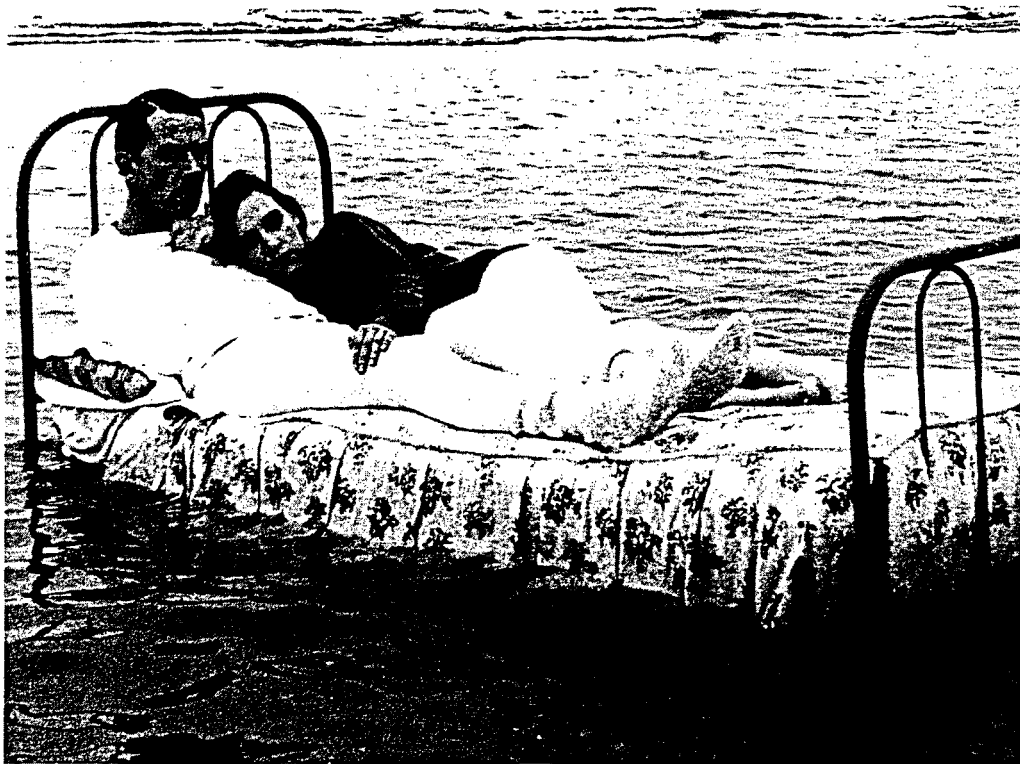
I have to. That's the question I'm asked everywhere in the world I've gone with the picture. And I always answer the same thing: “What do you think?” Or, “I don't know.” But the really bizarre thing is that if you look at all the answers I get when I ask people what they think, they're all alike. Which means that people know what it means, but they need you to formulate the answer in a clearer, more concrete way. In general, everyone says, “It's a ritual.” It doesn't matter which ritual, but it's something like that.

*Since we're on the subject of *Man Facing Southeast*, I wonder if you'd comment on the mysticism in it. And about the presence of Christ, who also seems to be included in *Last Images of the Shipwreck*, as well as the “sensual Christ” the sculptor refers to in *The Dark Side of the Heart*.*

It's very strange because mysticism and Christ are in all my films, but I don't come from a religious (to say the least) family, I'm not a churchgoer, and I don't have a high opinion of the Church. The Church has a higher opinion of me than I do of it, for example. I think all this derives from a very strong attachment I have to the *figure* of Christ, whom I admire and love a great deal. But it isn't a religious attachment; it's more ideological than anything else.

Is this a Latin American Christ or the Christ of liberation theology?

Even without the Latin American part, Christ seems to me a colossal figure, very much of the next century, ahead of His time. In *The Dark Side of the Heart*, I used a text by Wilhelm Reich. What's said there about the sensuality of Christ comes from Reich, his book *The Assassination of Christ*. It's funny because when *Man Facing Southeast* opened in Uruguay—this is something—a man stood up in the theater and asked me, “How did you come to know about Wilhelm Reich?” To which I answered, “What films did Wilhelm Reich make?” How do you like that for naïveté? And the man, a therapist who uses Reich's



Hugo Soto, Noemi Frenkel.
Ultimas imágenes del Naufragio
(Last Images of the Shipwreck),
by Eliseo Subiela. Photo credit:
Festival Latino in New York.

theories, says, "Well, blue liquid is the color of the gone energy Reich discovered." This member of the audience is a mysterious fellow who has a food store on San José street in Montevideo, and whenever I'm in Montevideo I visit him and we spend hours talking about Wilhelm Reich. That's how I discovered Reich, and then I began to read everything he wrote. It's really strange because I'd never read him before, didn't have the slightest idea about him. But this man swore I had to, because why else would I have put the blue liquid in the film, the fluid that comes out of Beatriz's mouth, which is related to orgone energy, sexual energy? It's a complicated, technical thing I knew absolutely nothing about.

Your films are made from a masculine perspective, which makes me wonder about the role of women in them. In The Conquest of Paradise, the woman is passive and abandoned; at the end of Final Images, she's missing. Things are different in The Dark Side. The woman there acts, does things, chooses, but the picture makes heavy use of a very masculine language whenever it refers to women from a sexual point of view. How have women reacted to the film?

In the case of *The Dark Side*, they've reacted quite positively. I was a bit afraid because I think that of all my pictures it's the one with the most masculine point of view. The story is about masculine fantasies not feminine fantasies, even though some women do identify with some things in the film. But they've discov-

ered that the most intelligent characters in the movie are the women and not the men. And it's true. The men are like boys who've never grown up or adolescents, and the women are much more adult, intelligent, with both feet on the ground—from the ex-wife character all the way to Ana herself, don't you agree? I don't think that's accidental. It's related to a change in my perspective and in my vision with regard to women. Today I respect women because of things they have and that we ought to absorb as part of human evolution. Until a few years ago, I was simply afraid of women or thought of them as something mythical. Generally, the heroines in my films are prostitutes.

I can just imagine how feminists in the United States would react to that.

Luckily for me, none have turned up around here. Actually, unluckily because I was hoping they would come and that the ensuing polemic would boost attendance. But so far, nothing. But I think that women who have problems should see that they're resolved when Ana throws the guy out of bed. In a way, I think it's Ana who controls the action, who finally chooses. She's the strongest character in the movie. Ana materialized as a strong figure while I was writing, and the feeling I had was that she was carrying me along, that I couldn't simply order her to go wherever I wanted.

Was it easy to find Sandra Ballesteros?

Actually, she was in the first batch of screen tests, but I still went on looking for two more months to see if someone else would turn up, because she was a beginner, and to tell you the truth, I was afraid. But no one was better. It was that image I told you about: She has a face that always seems to be hiding something. And for the character Ana, that was important.

She really worked out very nicely. And there was a special chemistry with Oliverio. But what about the cape Oliverio wears, how did you ever think of it?

No sooner did I imagine Oliverio than I saw him with that cape, which is related to flying. He looks as if he's going to take off when the wind blows it up. That's why I liked it. The funny thing is that the Oliverio look is in these days. Dressing in black, using a cape. There are dozens of Oliverios out there.

Because of the picture?

The picture reinforced it. I think that look was fashionable among young people. But there are other things. The other day a woman radio announcer told on her show how she was stopped at a light when a guy came up to her and began to recite a poem, like Oliverio.

In The Dark Side of the Heart I think you really take full advantage of Montevideo, the port market, the streets.

What was your relationship with Montevideo?

As soon as I saw Montevideo, I thought it would be a great set. It's a city I love a lot, but I don't know why exactly. Uruguay seems to me like a country of poets and fiction writers that inexplicably has no film industry. Eduardo Galeano told me once that Uruguayans have limits fixed in their heads. "I can only go this far. And no further." And one of those limits is: "Uruguay can't have a movie industry."

Did you know that years ago there was an international attempt to make a movie in Uruguay, a film in which John Derek was going to act—long before Bo Derek was born?

No, I didn't know.

It was called Ismael and was based on a novel by Eduardo Acevedo Díaz. John Derek was dressed up as a gaucho.

Did they finish it?

Another important theme in your films is death. I think you said once that making movies for you was a challenge to overcome death.

I think artists fight against death all the time. Perhaps in vain, but basically for the reasons you mentioned, the idea of enduring, surviving, transcending. But I'd go further. Besides what can happen to an artist, I think that something else very serious happens to lots of people. They die long before someone tells them they're dead. That's what I see in these cities and societies. And that concerns me profoundly. I think this death is the death of dreams, desire, wanting. That's what death is for me. Not the other thing, which I've learned to incorporate into my life. That's why it anguishes me less.

How do you manage to get such perfect faces in your films? I can't imagine Man Facing Southeast with faces other than those of Hugo Soto and Lorenzo Quinteros, and now The Dark Side of the Heart with faces other than those of Darío Grandinetti and Sandra Ballesteros.

Casting takes me months. Sometimes I don't find what I want, other times what I find is better than what I wanted, but I do a lot of searching. I think actors are above all image. Then whatever an actor can add enriches the image, but if they don't have an image that grabs you right from the start, it seems to me the rest is very hard to get.

No, the money ran out and they left.

Someday I'd like to make a film about that gaucho warlord Artigas. I find him attractive, and the trait I like in Uruguayans has a great deal to do with Artigas. It's as if he's a veiled character, and yet he's one of the greatest men who ever lived in our America.

What project are you involved in now?

Another love story with two shores, except that this time the two shores are even further apart than Buenos Aires and Montevideo. The film takes place in Buenos Aires and New York. And the provisional title is *Heart Lift*. It's about a plastic surgeon, the theme of love, and the passing of time, the struggle against time. It's a comedy and won't have the literary dimension my films have had until now. The big challenge is the cast: part will be from the U.S., and they will be speaking English.

That seems strange because a while back you said in an interview that you didn't believe in international films.

The difference is that including U.S. actors isn't some thing forced on me by production. I'm not trying to open a market. Here it's part of the story. Besides, I'm interested because these two shores are really different, not like Buenos Aires and Montevideo. It's also a search for an ideal love. Which is why I said before that the quest goes on even though some things do turn up along the road.

*The social class the characters belong to will have to change as well, because in *The Dark Side of the Heart* almost all the characters are poor.*

Right, for the first time my characters are going to be rich. Well, not rich, but the financial level of a plastic surgeon, solid middle class.

You said before that one of the things that most helped you make movies was going to the movies. What kind of movies? Which directors? Which pictures?

Nowadays, I don't get to see that many films because I just don't have time. Whenever I can, I go. This may sound like a heresy, but I'm liking U.S. films more and more. I think there are lots of great young directors coming up.

When you did go to movies a lot, what kind did you like most?

In the sixties, I liked Polish films, directors like Wajda, Kawalerowicz. And then the *nouvelle vague*, which was my first love. Much later I came to appreciate U.S. movies. Right now, even though there are many serious criticisms to be made of it, U.S. films attract me. I learn a lot from them.

Names?

Among the new directors, the Coen brothers. Tim Burton, who made *Edward Scissorhands*. I also like David Lynch a lot.

Darío Grandinetti, *El lado oscuro del corazón* (Dark Side of the Heart), by Eliseo Subiela. Courtesy of MaxFilms.



I can see where you're going. The road of free, unfettered imagination.

But how strange it is that these things should appear in the most commercial movie industry in the world instead of among the Europeans. I haven't seen anything European that's appealed to me for a long time. A few things by Peter Greenaway. I also think that the incredible technological advances that have recently taken place have opened the way for real changes in film language, changes we're not aware of yet. When I saw James Cameron's *Terminator 2*, I thought the tricks he uses might change film language. They're tools that would have driven Magritte wild if he'd had them. That's what I keep after tossing out all the rest: The sin of the U.S. film industry, in my opinion, is that the marketing bosses keep it from being more profound. But I think it's the film industry that still deals with the themes that matter most to people. For example, *Ghost* is a picture that presents an important theme, but then it only deals with it superficially. Maybe they think people are too dumb. They fall into commercial formulas, but the themes and the way they spin them out are really great.

What about Latin American films?

We just don't see that much Latin American cinema. That's the way things always work in Latin America: We see our own things least. But, based on what I have seen, I think Latin American filmmaking needs to undergo some serious changes. I think of it in

general as old-fashioned. And the worst thing is that no one's interested in it. Beyond that, there's the problem of distribution, the U.S. monopoly, etc. But basically it's a problem with the movies themselves. Our films are way behind our other forms of artistic expression: We still don't have a Juan Rulfo or a García Márquez making films yet.