The Poet of Argentine Cinema: An Interview with Eliseo Subiela
Cathleen Rountree (with Nancy J. Membrez)

"*Art evokes the mystery without which the world would not exist*." — René Magritte

The interview took place at the Center for Latin American Studies, Stanford University, Stanford, California (2003).

CR: What originally sparked your interest in cinema and why did you become a filmmaker?

ES: I had a childhood that was a little torturous. I had been brought up in a home where emotions were forbidden. They were to be feared because my dad had had a heart attack, and we weren't supposed to upset him as it could kill him. Emotions and death were associated at the end of my childhood and the beginning of my adolescence.

Growing up, I didn't like the world very much as I became aware of it. I would sleepwalk. I preferred the imaginary worlds of play, later the imaginary worlds of literature, and finally those of film. I had a tendency to live in an imaginary world, looking at reality from a distance. It seems to me I prolonged the imaginary world of childhood. I spent entire afternoons in movie theaters every day in my neighborhood where there were programs with three films back-to-back. They were all American movies: westerns, war movies, or romance, no film noir. My first real love for the cinema was when I discovered the Nouvelle Vague, the French New Wave — Godard, Truffaut — and also the Polish cinema of the Sixties, Wajda (especially *Ashes and Diamonds*) — when I was 14 or 15.

CR: What most affected you about movies?

ES: My great loves were idealized women who disappeared as soon as the movie was over, which made me a rather solitary adolescent. When the movies ended, the reality into which I was thrown filled me with fear and pain. I couldn't stand reality. I believe it to be the main reason I began to make movies.

CR: Tell me about the making of your first film and how you chose your subject.

ES: My dad produced my first short documentary, *Un largo silencio* (*A Long Silence*, 1963), when I was 17 years old. He funded me and bought me my first camera, a Bell and Howell 8 mm. I was very attracted to craziness, to the theme of aberrance. A definition of being crazy is the short-circuiting of one's emotions. One is not able to feel anything. There's a sense of not connecting, of disconnect.

One Sunday, I went to the Psychiatric Hospital of Buenos Aires. I didn't know exactly where the hospital, or asylum, was, so I hung out in Plaza Constitución, a famous square in Buenos Aires. There I found this little old lady carrying a bag, and I guessed she was part of the asylum, so I followed her. Indeed, she went in the gate and I discovered the Borda Hospital, named for José Tiburcio Borda, where I filmed my first short in 1963. I was in that asylum for nine months, first doing research so I could write the script and then filming. I think, since I wasn't very much in

touch with reality, I identified with the inmates. I wrote the commentary and mixed statistics with my own poems. I also edited the film myself.

I was happy when my first movie started making money. I won a prize at Viña del Mar, a film festival in Chile. After expenses, I cleared $200, which in Argentina was quite a bit. The cost of the movie had been $100. Twenty-two years later, I realized that *A Long Silence* had been a rough cut of my first successful feature-length film *Man Facing Southeast*(1986).

CR: Why do you say that you "identified" with the asylum inmates? How long did this identification continue?

ES: In the 60s and 70s, I suffered from what I believe was an identity crisis. In Paris, for 15 days, I wouldn't leave the hotel room because I didn't know who I was. It was very complicated. It was the first time I was traveling alone, the first time I ever left my neighborhood! The world came crashing down on top of me, and I suffered a great deal. I was in a permanent state of anguish, and my entire body erupted in a rash. The 1968 Havana Cultural Conference in Cuba, that had invited me to attend, was my final destination. At the time, Argentina was ruled by another military dictatorship, and my passport couldn't be stamped to show that I had been in Cuba. So, I flew first to Paris, then to Prague, and after a 24-hour trip on a Cuban Air Force turboprop with stops in Ireland and Canada, I finally arrived in Havana.

CR: And a new life began?

ES: I have lived several lives in my lifetime (and I hope to live yet a few more). One of my new lives began in Havana. On that trip, a new Eliseo emerged. I overcame the breakdown and recovered my identity. The road I took out of this tremendous crisis was the road of emotions, of getting in touch again with feelings and slowly coming out of it. Rum, the Cuban Revolution, and a love story were responsible for the transformation.

I met a girl two years younger than I was whose parents and brother were leaving Cuba to go live in Spain. Since she was a militant revolutionary, she decided to stay behind. Her family lived in a large house in the residential neighborhood of Miramar in Havana. She was all alone at age 20 because she felt her life's mission was bound up with the Revolution. She was attractive, fiery, and sweet as so many Cuban women are. I couldn't help but fall in love with her.

CR: Did it develop into a serious relationship?

ES: I left the Hotel Habana Libre, where I was staying as a participant of the Cultural Congress of 1968, and I moved in with her. It was the first experience for each of us to live as a couple. It lasted two months. I had to break it off because I was needed in Argentina to support my widowed mother and younger brother.

CR: Does she know how important she has been in your life and for your work?

ES: Twenty years after our love affair, I returned to Havana for a film festival. I tried tracking her down and found out she had left Cuba for Miami in the 1980 Mariel Boatlift. Then, the trail

went cold. I have named one of the protagonists in *Heartlift* after her in the hope that perhaps someday she'll walk into a movie theater to see the film and she'll know.

CR: How did the Military dictatorship (1976–1982) affect you and other fellow artists?

ES: There are various phases in my life, but most of the time I have lived without democracy under military dictatorship. I never took up arms, although I completed two years of compulsory military service in the Argentine Navy in the 60s. In the early 70s, I was very much involved in militant groups, but more in the publicity and propaganda wing. Along with other directors, I made anonymous films that were political in nature, but we wouldn't sign our names to them. They were shown clandestinely in groups that were in charge of diffusion and propaganda. One of the best short films I've done was about how to build Molotov cocktails in Argentina: *Mayo 1969: The Roads to Liberation!*

CR: How did your career develop after these early experiences with politics and cinema?

ES: After *A Long Silence*, I made a few experimental shorts in the 60s and early 70s, but it wasn't until the mid-80s that I had my breakthrough with *Man Facing Southeast* (1986). That film combined my fascination with the extraordinary, my love for poetic storytelling, and my ongoing exploration of human psychology.

The main character, Rantés, embodies the ideal of the outsider, someone who exists at the edge of society yet perceives it more clearly than those fully integrated. I think that theme comes from my own sense of being an observer, of being on the fringes, especially during my adolescence and early adulthood.

CR: Your films often blend the fantastic with the ordinary. How do you approach this stylistic choice?

ES: I think life itself is strange. Everyday reality is full of inexplicable moments. My approach is to heighten reality, to make the invisible visible. I want audiences to feel a sense of mystery without being jolted by it. That's why I don't rely on cheap special effects. It's about atmosphere, character, and emotion. Magic is always in the human experience — in the way we perceive and respond to the world.

CR: You've been called "the poet of Argentine cinema." How do you feel about that?

ES: I take it as a compliment, though I don't aim to write poetry in a literal sense. I try to approach cinema poetically — not through words but through images, rhythm, and emotion. Poetry is a way of seeing the world, and film is a way of sharing that vision.

CR: How has Argentine culture influenced your work?

ES: Argentina is a land of contrasts. There's poetry in everyday life here, but also pain, turmoil, and history pressing on people. Growing up in Buenos Aires, I was surrounded by art, literature, and music, yet also by political tension. That combination feeds my films — the lyrical and the tragic coexist.

CR: Do you consider your films political?

ES: Not overtly. They're humanistic. Of course, the context of dictatorship and repression in Argentina seeps into my work. But I focus on individual experience, emotion, and imagination rather than political manifestos. *Man Facing Southeast* is political only in the sense that it critiques society's treatment of the outsider, the vulnerable, and the imaginative.

CR: What about your later works, such as *The Dark Side of the Heart* (1992)?

ES: That film represents my love of poetry most directly. I adapted the work of Mario Benedetti, weaving it into a story about longing, love, and the pursuit of beauty. The protagonist searches for someone "who can fly," metaphorically speaking — someone who can escape the mundane and touch the sublime. That theme runs through my work: the tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary, reality and imagination.

CR: Your films often involve characters who are misfits or outsiders. Why do you focus on them?

ES: Outsiders are closer to truth. They observe life more sharply. And, naturally, I identify with them. Early on, I felt like an outsider myself — emotionally, socially, and even geographically at times. I want to explore what it means to live at the margins, to be misunderstood, and to seek connection despite the odds.

CR: How do you view your role as a filmmaker in Argentine society?

ES: I see myself as a witness and a guide. My films are my voice, my way of asking questions, of reflecting on human nature. Cinema allows me to explore emotion, memory, and imagination in ways that writing or other arts cannot. I hope my films inspire audiences to feel deeply, to question, and to see the world differently.

CR: Are there any particular influences that shaped your cinematic style?

ES: Many. From early Hollywood cinema to French New Wave, Italian neorealism, and Polish cinema. Also literature, especially poetry. I've been deeply influenced by visual artists like Magritte. But the strongest influence is life itself — its beauty, its pain, and its absurdity.

CR: Finally, what advice would you give to young filmmakers?

ES: Live fully, observe closely, and cultivate your own voice. Don't imitate. Learn from others, of course, but ultimately, make films that reflect your perception of reality. Be courageous emotionally; cinema is not about technical perfection alone, but about touching hearts and minds.