Recent Colombian cinema comes to Boston, via MFA

COLOMBIAN CINEMA: FROM MAGIC TO REALISM A 10-FILM SERIES OF recent colombian cinema.
July 17 to 27 at the Museum of Fine Arts.

By MANAYENDRA K. THAKUR

ALTHOUGH THE FIRST FILM appears in 1960, and the feature film was completed in 1914, the country's cinematic history is short. Colombia has not yet produced an indigenous film industry. Most filmmaking efforts have been sporadic and — despite individual successes — the attempts ultimately failed out. All that, however, is changing rapidly.

The last two decades saw the rise of a whole generation of Colombian filmmakers who attended film school in Colombi a, the United States, and Europe. A national cinema has slowly and surely begun to emerge, which is as distinct as it is diverse. Until about 1984, progress was painfully slow. Since then, however, Colombian cinema has seen its most sustained activity yet — undoubtedly due to the financial assistance provided by the FCE, Colombia's Boston office.

Despite recent developments, Colombian cinema has remained virtually unknown to Americans. Now, however, that is all about to change. Thanks to the efforts of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, a 10-film series of Colombian films — including both narrative feature films and documentaries — has been touring the country. The film series, which opened in Boston last week at the Museum of Fine Arts will continue in Columbus through July 27. This series as a whole provides an excellent and rare glimpse into a national cinema than one may easily overlook.

Of the five films that were available for press screening, the most interesting is undoubtedly Techo de dos pisos (Details of a Duel/A Man of Principle, 1986), Sergio Cabrera, at the MFA on June 29. Based on a true incident, it tells the story of two men in a small Andean town who, as a matter of honor, have decided to fight a duel. One man is the local butcher; the other is the local schoolteacher. Once coupled with the local police, an unspoken dispute between them has turned them against each other.

The film chronicles their preparation for battle and the eventual duel itself in the style of a black comedy. When the local police officer informs the judge that the two men will fight a duel, the judge (who also happens to be the town's mayor) practically beams with delight. "It's a chance to weaken the opposition, and without any effort on our part," he dryly observes.

Similarly, in the thick of their duel, the schoolteacher looks around at the crowd of people who have gathered and suddenly realizes the human absurdity of the situation. "We're the only two serious persons in the whole town," he exclaims to the butcher. Such moments spice the film and make for an interesting spin on usual tales about the duel of honor.

Technically, the film is shot well and looks good. The acting is uniformly excellent, from the two leads down to the humorously dim-witted corporal who assists the police sergeant. The only main criticism is that it unnecessarily repeats shots of the butcher's wife washing clothes and swimming as the men prepare for and fight their duel. The idea is to show how obvious she is, but that is already apparent very early in the film.

Overall, with the brevity of the storyline, the director has managed to make for an entertaining film with a certain of wit that is surprisingly absent however.

THE NARRATIVE FILM IN THE SERIES that most directly addresses political issues in Colombia is unshown today's date in the Museum of Fine Arts (A Man of Principle, 1964, Francisco Norden), at the MFA on June 7. Back in the late 1940s, Colombia was racked by assassinations and political violence during which 200,000 people died. This film tells the rise and fall of one perpetrator of such violence, who came to be known as "El Condor." The film begins with a brutal massacre of a whole family, and throughout the film a sense of lingering doom links the characters and their towns as they wonder which of their neighbors will be killed tomorrow. Those courageous enough to speak out are quickly silenced.

The movie tells the story from the perspective of the characters in the town itself. This perspective is at the same time the film's strongest point and its primary limitation: The focus on the townfolk and on El Condor himself reveals the terror and brutality of the situation quite well, but becomes constraining because events in the rest of the country — political upheaval and changes of government, for example — suddenly appear without any prior explanation or preparation. One moment El Condor is going about his business, apparently in full control of the situation. The next moment he's informed that the Conservatives have been overthrown, and that he has to escape. This flow of events is choppy and disorienting to the viewer. In addition, it makes one wonder why, if the truly decisive events were happening elsewhere, does the film focus only on El Condor and his reign of terror in this one town?

Another limitation of the film is its technical constraints. At least on two occasions, significant events are shown only through reaction shots of the characters, which are accompanied by some rather unconvincing sound effects. Directors who use such techniques also try to mask their technical limitations with strong acting, but unfortunately it makes for a rather contrived effect.

The haphazard subtitles don't help either: ironical /fast-paced conversations it impossible to match words with their speakers, and a whole written prologue that establishes the characters' backgrounds.

Similar technical problems limit the efficacy of Luis Fernando (Pacho) Bojila's film La batalla de las aguas (A Core). (Please turn to page 13)