A ‘Useful’ Guide to Uruguayan Film

‘Pocket-sized’ nation Uruguay finds its place in the world of cinema with exhibition drama A USEFUL LIFE and other gems.

Uruguay’s ‘A Useful Life’ celebrates, mourns film exhibition.

By Brian Darr
A Useful Life is the kind of film that makes applying a concept like “progress” to an art form appear terribly naïve. Set and shot largely in the actual Cinemateca Uruguay, one of the longest standing film societies in South America, and drawing much of its cast from non-actors among the real Montevideo film community, this 2010 release evokes the whole history of cinema and of Uruguay’s small part in perpetuating it. But it contains far more complicated attitudes toward traditional cinephilia than one would expect a 67-minute film on this theme to be able to carry.

The story follows Jorge (played by film critic Jorge Jellinek), a middle-aged associate film programmer, projectionist and all-around factotum at an old-school cinematheque much like any other found in cities around the globe. His activities in the first half of the film may induce the pleasure of recognition among frequenters of such places. In the opening sequence, Jorge and his boss (Cinemateca Uruguay director Manuel Martínez Carril, essentially playing himself) divide DVD-watching responsibilities to prepare a program of Icelandic films, until they are interrupted by a mysterious telegram delivery. Jorge goes about his duties retrieving reels from archive shelves, recording promotional spots for the radio, etc. He shows a deeper, existential concern for the institution at the next staff meeting when he interrupts a conversation about malfunctioning projectors to mention the telegram. Though it regards eight months’ worth of unpaid back rent, his coworkers brush the issue off and resume their discussion, to Jorge’s visible consternation.

With the shadow of financial collapse looming over Jorge’s place of employment, the audience is invited to second guess the necessity of every cinephilic ritual we see performed in the film, down to testing the seats for squeaks. At the same time, we learn more details about Jorge’s life: That after 25 years of working at the cinematheque, he still lives at home with his father, and that he has his eye on a pretty law professor who occasionally attends his screenings. Alone among his colleagues, Jorge has made obvious sacrifices in his life in order to devote himself to cinema. So when, midway through the movie, the curtain closes on the screens he has so faithfully attended to, we are not surprised to follow Jorge on his new journeys away from the cinema, and forget about Martínez and the rest.
The title of 2004’s ‘Whisky’ refers not to the distilled beverage, but to the word’s use to pry smiles from photography subjects in many Spanish-speaking regions—the equivalent to 'cheese' in English.

The first half of A Useful Life is fascinating and beautiful, but at the midway point it really takes off, narratively and cinematically, in a montage of mortality buoyed by the haunting song “Los Caballos Perdidos” by Leo Maslíah, its text from a poem by Atílo Duncan Pérez Da Cunha, a.k.a. Macunaíma. Both the poem and song were written in the early 1980s as metaphorical expressions of political dissent, and according to his interview with Michael Guillén, they were selected by director Federico Veiroj to stress “themes of the loss of innocence and how one must leave the past behind in order to grow. These are themes you must handle with great care because we all share a lost past.” Equal care was given to the musical selections from tone poems by Uruguayan composer Eduardo Fabini that lend a heroic atmosphere to scenes in which Jorge sheds his skin, finds a new purpose for his life and draws from his reservoir of cinematic wisdom the strength to pursue it. Though Fabini’s music was not written or recorded to be used in an early-to-mid-20th-century motion picture, it sounds very much like it could have been. Veiroj is very much aware of his country’s cinematic past (he previously made a short documentary on the Cinemateca Uruguay that includes numerous clips from surviving films) and with A Useful Life it’s as if he’s both paying tribute to it and re-imagining a new one.

A dig into the cinema of the pocket-sized republic of Uruguay reveals a rich history. Uruguay has been called the “Switzerland of South America,” whether
because it's the most European-oriented country on that continent, or because of its comparably stable political and economic history (through the 1950s, at least). But “Switzerland of South America” could be a description of its cinema as well. Both Switzerland and Uruguay are nestled between the dominant cinema-producing nations on their respective continents, and consequently have developed longstanding and thriving film cultures based far more upon exhibition and distribution of motion picture imports than upon local production. For reference, Uruguay has perhaps a quarter of the population and twice the land of Switzerland; North Americans might imagine the residents of Connecticut spread into Washington State.

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Neighbored by Argentina to the West and Brazil to the North and East, Uruguay’s filmmaking has always been dwarfed by that of these population and production powerhouses. The influence of Argentina has loomed particularly large, with Buenos Aires and its millions lying only a short distance across the mouth of the Rio de la Plata from Montevideo; no two South American capital cities are geographically nearer. Starting in the silent era, a great many of Uruguay’s films were made with Argentine production aid. A surge of documentary and neo-realist filmmaking by Uruguayan cineastes of the late 1950s and 60s remained independent of Argentine industry, but still depended on the example of Sante Fe film school pioneer Fernando Birri, and on film stock smuggled in from its neighbor. This flurry of politically committed filmmaking was quashed along with other dissent in a 1973 military coup, and, after democracy returned in the 1980s, filmmakers turned to video production or to foreign funding sources, or both. Even today many of Uruguay’s best actors and filmmakers have split careers, working in both Argentina and their homeland. The entwining of these national cinemas has resulted in at least one high profile controversy: After Adolfo Aristarain’s *A Place In The World* was submitted to be Uruguay’s representative in the 1993 Academy Award competition for Best Foreign Language Film it became the first film to have an Oscar nomination revoked when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences determined the Uruguayan component of this Argentine production to be too small. Aristarain
sued to have the nomination reinstated, but a judge determined there was no fraud on either side and the decision stood, although the Academy was moved to clarify its eligibility rules for international co-productions. Controversies over this category continue, but AMPAS has spared itself and participating countries the embarrassment of further nomination-rescinding incidents since 1993.

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In 1994, Uruguay’s film and video makers lobbied for a state funding mechanism for audiovisual production, and by 1997 there was a modest infrastructure of grants and loans in place. The wider world began seeing some of the fruits of this shift in 2001. That year, Juan Pablo Rebella and Pablo Stoll’s co-directed first feature, *25 Watts*, won places and prizes at numerous international film festivals starting with Rotterdam’s Tiger Award. Their black-and-white comedy takes cues from no-plot, low-budget successes by the likes of Richard Linklater and Kevin Smith in its depiction of three aimless youths in a Montevideo suburb, but imbues their template with some playful experimentation in the form of unusual camera angles and movements that underline these fellows’ obsessions with those international bourgeois constants: sex, drugs, rock & roll and television. *25 Watts* not only launched its writer/directors Rebello and Stoll into the film festival limelight, but also made a slacker star out of top-billed actor Daniel Hendler, gave resume boosts to assistant director Manuel Nieto Zas and script supervisor/actor Federico Veiroj, both future auteurs, and influenced other young Latin Americans like Fernando Eimbcke (*Duck Season, Lake Tahoe*). Though *25 Watts* is, in Hendler’s words, “Uruguayan and universal at the same time,” it’s defiantly free of the kinds of touristic vistas that typify state-funded cinema in certain countries. Rebello and Stoll’s follow-up was *Whisky*, which rather than avoiding such false fronts, exposes them directly. The title of this 2004 film refers not to the distilled beverage, but to the word’s use to pry smiles from photography subjects in many Spanish-speaking regions—the equivalent to “cheese” in English. It’s an absolutely appropriate name, as each of its three central characters has a reason to wipe signs of real emotion from his or her face,
and pose with a concocted visage. Andrés Pazos and Jorge Bolani play estranged brothers Jacobo and Herman, who reunite to participate in the unveiling of their mother’s tombstone a year after her death, as their tradition of Judaism instructs. Sock-makers both, Herman’s business has prospered in the decades since he moved to Brazil while Jacobo festers at the head of a drab Montevideo factory which would certainly fall to ruin without the capable management of the equally stone-faced Marta (Mirella Pascual). In preparation for Herman’s visit, Jacobo asks Marta to apply her organizational touch to his own slovenly apartment, and what’s more, to pose as his wife while his family man brother stays with him.

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Underneath a shell of Kaurismäki-esque bone-dry humor suited to the awkwardness of Jacobo’s request and to Marta’s surprising displays of enthusiasm in fulfilling it, lies a courageous critique of Uruguayan stagnation in relation to its dynamic neighbors. In a 2009 Screen article, David Martin-Jones and Soledad Montañez argue that Whisky, and particularly its second act in which Herman invites his brother and his “wife” to the Piriápolis seaside resort, figures Uruguay “as a node of tourism and industry, a place through which money flows but does not necessarily stay.” Martin-Jones and Montañez position Whisky’s three characters as three possible reactions of Uruguayans during decades of political and economic decline: flight (and success), stoic surrender and determination to make the best of a situation. The characters encapsulate these roles during a
scene at a cinema: only Marta watches the film, as Jacobo is more focused on his popcorn, and Herman is completely checked out—asleep.

‘Leo’s Room’ possesses a serenity lacking in many coming-out films, which may reflect a more LGBT-friendly atmosphere in Uruguay than exists elsewhere in the region. Enrique Buchichio’s debut feature may be a rarity: a gay-themed film made in a country where gay equality has progressed faster and farther than its filmmaking industry has.

Mirella Pascual’s nuanced performance makes Marta the most ambiguous and surprising of Whisky’s leads, but her role in Leo’s Room, made five years later, might be the clincher for a case that she’s a brilliant actress. As the mother of the titular Leo (Martín Rodríguez), she creates a sexy and self-confident character who wears not an ounce of the buttoned-up frumpishness Marta wants to overcome. More attuned to and accepting of her son’s late-in-coming (out) sexuality than he is, her maternal presence is a burst of invigorating oxygen in a film that steps delicately into heavy subject matter. One wishes she were in more of the film, if only for Leo’s sake. Rodriguez’s protagonist has an innocently charming face built to win audience compassion, but his oblivious self-absorption is maddening. If Leo’s room is a metaphorical closet, it’s one entirely of his own construction; none of the varied members of his support system seem to hold a fraction of the homophobia that he has internalized. Released the same year that Uruguay became the first Latin American country to legalize adoption by same-sex couples nationwide, Leo’s Room possesses a serenity lacking in many coming-out films, which may reflect a more LGBT-friendly atmosphere in Uruguay than exists elsewhere in the region. Enrique Buchichio’s debut feature may be a rarity: a gay-themed film made in a country where gay equality has progressed faster and farther than its filmmaking industry has.

Whether it’s Jorge and his cinematheque, Leo and his bedroom, or Marta and her factory, Uruguayan film characters over the past decade have been breaking out of their comfort zones. Let’s hope filmmakers like Veirjo, Stoll and Buchichio continue to break their country’s cinema out of its zone, and that we continue to be able to to watch it happen.

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