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Film Review: El Techo, Dir. Patricia Ramos

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El techo. Dir. Patricia Ramos. Cuba, 2016. Dur: 75 min.

Patricia Ramos' first full-length feature film *El techo* [*On the Roof*] (2016) was an immediate success at its world premiere at the 38th annual International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana, Cuba in December 2016. At the Havana Festival *El techo* won both the press prize awarded by the APEC: Association of Cuban journalists, as well as the Sara Gómez Female Filmmaker Prize awarded by the *Red de Realizadoras Cubanas* in honor of the late and exceptional filmmaker Sara Gómez. Before traveling abroad, *El techo* also won the *Caracol* Competition in Cuba and received the SIGNIS Prize for the best fictional film awarded by the National Union of Cuban Artists and Writers [UNEAC]. *El techo* has also been lauded internationally chosen as best picture in the XX Encounter of Latin American Cinemas in Marseille, France in 2018, along with the Best Actor award for the film's actor Enmanuel Galbán at the same festival. At the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival, Ramos' film won the Juror's Prize for Best Fictional Film, as well as the Young Jury's Prize for Best Fictional Film (2017).

In the US the film has been celebrated from coast to coast reaching many film festival audiences, garnering an impressive selection of awards-including The Juror's Award for Best Feature-length Fictional Film at the 20th Las Américas Film Festival in Austin, Texas, and Best New Director Prize at the Wine Country Film Festival in California 2017, Best Director prize and the Best Acting Award to Andrea Dominados both at the Providence Latin American Film Festival. Among many other national and international awards in Miami, Managua, Nicaragua-the country which co-produced the film, and Los Angeles, the online platform for Latino Culture-REMEZCLA based in New York City, Los Angeles, and Mexico City chose *El Techo* for its list of top 15 Latino and Latin American films not to be missed for 2017.

The intimate 75-minute fictional film in Spanish with English subtitles captures a side of Havana that is under-represented in Cuban cinema-a glimpse at daily life and friendship. The film focuses on three twenty-something friends who share their dreams, quotidian moments, and larger struggles from a different perspective: on the roof. The rooftops of Havana are key spaces for daily life- far from both tourists and at times the State. Under the omnipresent sun, this personal film reveals how change is slow to occur, and despite politics and social movements, life just continues on.

El techo captures Cuba's contemporary daily realities where both rapid change, and stagnation co-exist. This is an up-close, un-dramatic look that also reveals through an examination of these three characters how Cubans daily get by or as they say "resolver." Without formal jobs, employment options, and access to much money, the three friends, and other characters resolve their daily lives selling clothes to contacts, breeding pigeons, or sewing.

At the film's turning point the three friends take advantage of the recently approved micro-business opportunities and open their own rooftop pizza parlor using all of the resources they have. Working together, the three friends serve pizzas through a pulley system to deliver to other neighbors, as well as host international tourists on their roof. Through their small pizza business, the friends break with the boredom of daily life. The inertia quickly returns, when a visit from a

State official results in the closing of their pizza place. Due to a lack of a permit from the State or another unknown reason, their pizza business, and their break from boredom are brief.

Despite not being an overtly political film, this experience creating a micro-business reveals the greater social context of Cuba. It is clearly set post Raúl Castro's officially recognized entrepreneurial 2010 and 2013 lists of approved non-state businesses-or in Cuba known as *cuentapropismo*. As an audience we see that while micro-business options quickly change the pace of life for these three friends, the excitement comes to an abrupt end when their business is closed down by the State without an explanation.

El techo is a character-driven film that explores the depths of friendship through comedy, sadness, and the unknown complexities of others people's families. It also creates a window into the world of urban rooftops, micro-businesses, unemployment, increased international tourism, and how despite all of the news of great changes life just marches on. These characters through their boredom each share part of their complex story with parents in the US, racism, failed dreams, and pregnancy that surface through amazing hints of comedy. In this rare combination of depth, and comedy, we see a masterfully crafted script.

The aesthetics of Ramos' film share a Havana different from many films coming from Cuba. As 90% of the film takes place on the rooftops of Havana, without any filmmaking at street level, the camera captures a world that is literally above the eye of tourists and government officials. It reveals a light saturated society where colors are bleached from the power of the Cuban sun as drying white laundry plays as the backdrop of most scenes.

Ramos' opera prima is a quirky, comic, and critical look at a young person's Cuba. This film is appropriate for an array of audiences from high school students learning Spanish, to university students studying cinema and/or Cuba, to professional film critics, to political scientists specializing on Cuba, and of course to general film audiences. This sun-bleached exploration of friendship and contemporary Cuban daily life is not to be missed.

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