

# El Cine Soy Yo: A Love Letter to Cinema



*More than a decade ago, I wanted to experience something different and embarked on a journey across the Atlantic Ocean. I needed a change, just like Jacinto, the main character of El Cine Soy Yo (1977, Venezuela/France) created by the filmmaker Luis Armando Roche (1938-2021) - someone I have admired and had the opportunity to work with promoting his last two feature films: Yotama se va Volando (2003) and De repente la película (2011).*



After completing several documentaries, *El Cine Soy Yo* was Roche's debut feature. Written alongside Fabrice Hèlion, the narrative is built around Jacinto (Asdrúbal Meléndez), a hard-working man full of energy and ideas who would do anything to make a living.

One day, he's selling medicinal herbs on a street stall, and the next he is a street photographer, a poet, a musician, a mechanic working in a garage... even a police officer. Above all, he is a dreamer, and in his own way a romantic 'Don Juan' looking for adventure with the ability to reinvent himself according to the circumstances.

After a day's work, Jacinto visits the cinema feeling tired. He walks into the darkened room, smoking, reflective, and immersed in his thoughts. The film has already started - a documentary about the exploitation of remote diamond villages in Venezuela, describing the diggers who are always on the move looking for their fortune but far from receiving any profits from their labour, they just help to maintain a cycle of exploitation based on the irony of poverty, despite the richness of the natural resources of their land.

Suddenly, the cinema room has transformed into a place where Jacinto understands the world around him, feeling the urgency to leave everything behind:

“*Yo necesito un cambio de ambiente, me siento como encarcelado*” - “*I need a change, it's like a jail this city.*”



Jacinto thinks of these people from faraway areas who have probably never seen a film, wondering how he could take all the equipment needed to tour the country showing moving images - "How could movies reach those places?". To be a film projectionist is his new attempt at being successful in life; something that connects him with the practice of the first film businessmen who were producers, distributors and exhibitors travelling with a big camera/projector around towns offering people their very first cinema experiences.

"You failed as a business because you didn't take the cinema to the streets" Jacinto says to an abandoned cinema worker.

"Nowadays, movies must go to the people, the television goes into their homes, the success is based on imagination" - a revolutionary idea from our perspective today, where cinemas have to consider the challenges that come with streaming platforms.

In those analogue years, Jacinto transformed an old truck, got a loan and, after collecting the equipment and big film reels, left Caracas on a round-trip adventure across the country in a descriptive journey showing the exotic landscape, different ways of living, the blue Caribbean Sea, the lively Afro-Caribbean traditions in coastal towns and the oil pumping units and oil platforms as a reminder that Venezuela is also a major petroleum producer. Jacinto's character is like a religious missionary spreading the word and the light that is film to an unexplored land.

The different communities enjoy getting together in public spaces and open-air cinemas; Jacinto knows instinctively how to get people involved in the whole film event. Almost fifty years later, we are talking about the importance of "eventualizing" film screenings to make them more appealing to audiences.

Jacinto is not alone on this trip! He soon has the company of Manuel (Alvaro Roche), an eleven-year-old orphan who offers to help with the projections; and Juliet (Juliet Bertó), a mysterious French woman who is also looking for adventure. They are like an improvised family showing films and trying to enjoy themselves on their journey. There is a feeling of pleasure relatable to childhood, innocence and honesty in these characters and a search for freedom. Although this is a journey with its own difficulties and challenges, some of the attitudes expressed by the characters about gender roles and sexuality are contentious but reminiscent of that time.

*El Cine Soy Yo* is a very evocative film, universal to those free-spirited souls who love a journey and the cinema experience. It's explored at different levels, including fragments of Mexican movies and previous short films by Roche, with even a crew in the middle of production appearing inside the film with a cameo of Luis Armando Roche.

During my adventure in England, I have become a little like Jacinto: teaching Spanish in many schools, working in a factory, in a shop, in a restaurant, and on a dairy farm. Plus, I have taught the police, cooked and sold arepas, sung in a choir, volunteered for different causes, gone back to university, become a mother for the second time, and I have shown films in my community and beyond!

For Venezuelans, this film can offer a connection with childhood memories, with those family holidays around the country exploring our warm, salty beaches, the areas of rainforest, and the Andean paramos. How much have we changed? Jacinto remembers his childhood, the cow's milk and the games. I remember my own head under the cold water as Manuel plays in the mini waterfalls in the rivers, and I see myself travelling and dreaming about the future in the back seat of that classic white Dodge Dart that belonged to my dad in the 70s.

**The new 4K restoration of *El Cine Soy Yo* was carried out by Bolivar Films Laboratories. Following its UK premiere at Cinema Rediscovered 2024, the film is on tour in cinemas across the UK and Ireland.**

**We would like to know what you think about this film. Please send us your reviews on Letterboxd or socials tagging #CineRedis24**

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