

September 1, 1995
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Q Magazine

FREE WILLY (2) MEETS POWER RANGERS (THE MOVIE)

I'm a filmmaker whose kids don't go to the movies. I made a deal with my older daughter that after she learns to read we'll go. Miriam is five now and she's beginning to show encouraging signs of literacy. When I was a kid in the 50's I spent long hot Midwestern summer afternoons watching three or four B movies at a time---Flash Gordon, Cyclops sagas, Godzilla, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Abbott and Costello. (I had to wait until college for the true masters of comedy---Chaplin, Keaton, Laurel and Hardy.)

Now as I get older, "drifting to the right with age," I'm more critical of popular culture, and protective of my open, empathetic, impressionable young daughters. The average U.S. child views 100,000 acts of violence by the time she's eighteen. By my calculations that's the equivalent of watching about 1 1/4 *Power Rangers (The Movie)* per week.

A dedicated researcher, I sat through this film based on the incredibly popular TV series when it played to a Quito audience of four to six year olds. The film is more than a cynical exercise in cross marketing---building audience share for the TV series and stimulating demand for the thousand-and-one types of licensed Power Ranger merchandise. Violent children's fare has measurable negative effects. The first grader seated next to me was literally on the edge of his seat throughout the film. Research by Dr. Chris J. Boyatzis, California State University (Fullerton) indicates that children viewing the Power Rangers are likely to imitate the aggressive behaviors modeled by their multi-ethnic super heroes.

This movie takes the TV formula of robot-like ninja-style warriors smashing and destroying repulsive aliens and adds sex. What do four to six year olds make of a bikini clad, leather booted, monolith worshipping, warrior queen? Is this semi-naked female marauder meant as a homage to Jane Fonda as Barbarella or to Raquel Welch in one of her forgettable cave woman roles? Even within the limits of its genre this film shows no evidence of care or creativity. The morphing and special effects are cheesy. The latex masks look like Halloween at Toys 'R Us (probably intentionally). The floating image of the wise guru is as convincing as that of the Wizard of Oz. Too bad the cheap rip-offs of Night of the Living Dead and Jurassic Park, not to mention the New Age crystals and pseudo-mystical resurrection (through the nearly 100 year old technique of reverse motion photography) go unnoticed by the film's intended audience. The one always inspiring theme that the Power Rangers shares with traditional children's films is that "adults are idiots, and only kids are clever enough to know it." What could be a more attractive conceit to any child chafing under parental restrictions?

Free Willy (2) builds its drama around just such a heart-warming premise. Not content with this sure fire plot, the filmmakers concoct a story which includes captivating wildlife photography, 15 year olds' flirtations, orphaned children and playful killer whales. Willy

gleefully dances to the sounds of a harmonica imitating whalesongs. Like a faithful puppy he loves to be petted, and when not giving barebacked whale rides, he's available for saving a drowning teenager from fiery death in an oil spill. *Free Willy* is a fable with contemporary touches---an evil oil company, a wise Indian medicineman and children from broken homes who only need a little love and attention. Underscoring this theme, the film returns repeatedly to the importance of keeping Willy's family together. The drama hinges on re-uniting Willy and his siblings with their mother. (Whale fathers--like their human counterparts--are generally not in the picture.)

Free Willy reduces the natural world to the scale of cuddly stuffed animals and offers easy magic and good intentions as palliatives for everything from exploding oil tankers to family tragedy. But perhaps this kind of reassuring world is appropriate for young children. Perhaps they don't need to know that the original Willy spent his post movie retirement years in a cramped Mexico City water park.

As for Miriam and me I think we'll work on making some movies of our own. She's a ham and a tale-spinner. And I'm not convinced that special effects and multi-million dollar budgets are essential to our family stories.

THE PLEASURES OF A (TEMPORARY) EX-PATRIATE

The word "travel" is derived from the Late Latin *trepalium* ---a rack designed to extract confessions from suspected criminals. "Travel," by derivation at least, is torture for tourists. ut I am not a tourist. I'm a North American living in Quito, renting an apartment, enrolling my eldest in kindergarten, learning the bus routes, coping with the power outages.

I moved to Quito from Los Angeles, the apparent capital of the newest, fastest, hippest. Initially living in a foreign country gives me a sense of dislocation. I never feel more red-white-and-blue American than when I'm overseas. The first symptoms are caused by the shock of sudden media withdrawal. How could I possibly live without my up-to-the minute information fixes? Telephones, faxes, electronic news groups, limitless print and electronic voices clamor for attention, creating the buzz of what's new, what's hot, what's next.

Occasionally in search of a jolt I've sought out sources of U.S. media like the Lincoln Library (Almagro 961 and Colon). Most recently I came across an issue of Harper's--- a kind of Readers Digest for pseudo-intellectuals. In LA I was a regular reader. I enjoyed the playful numerancy of the Harper's Index. ("Percentage of American adults who cannot identify the President of Mexico: 98." or "Year in which England repealed a law mandating an orderly, proper line at bus stops: 1995.) I took a special pleasure in its post-modern cynicism and its editor's latent humanism. Nothing used to amuse me more than reading the latest accounts of the barbarism, stupidities, and inanities of late 20th century U.S. culture.

A few examples:

* Machine Gun Fun a series of photos depicting recreational

attacks with machine guns, flamethrowers and a tank.
An exhibit at Allentown (PA) Art Museum

- * Psychiatrist Robert Cole writing on The Hidden Power of Envy
- * Cyberart
- * Libido The Journal of Sex and Sensibility
It's "...unafraid to bridge the barriers of gender orientation and age to turn on the mind and body."

Meanwhile here in Quito local pundits decry the lack of the latest in international culture. El Comercio greeted recent appearances of Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan revolutionary/priest/poet, and a concert by the Electric Light Orchestra (II) by bemoaning Ecuador's "twenty-years-behind-the-times" level of world culture.

But it seems to me, as a visiting outsider, that perhaps while looking longingly at the levels of "culture" available in North American and European capitals, local critics may be overlooking some of the more subtle day-to-day pleasures of living in Quito.

Living in the comfort of North Quito, isolated from the harsher realities of poverty and underdevelopment, it's not too hard to appreciate the quite rewards of ex-patriate living. First of all I'm beginning to enjoy being unplugged. Not bombarded with the latest drivel from the OJ Simpson trial, I spend time wandering, walking, musing. People here are extraordinarily friendly, cheerful even, despite the very real difficulties of inflation, corruption, power cuts and general economic and political uncertainty.

Here I have the privilege of unstructured time. Time to think, to write, to indulge my atrophied penchant for painting ----even if only with the kids' markers. There's even time for cafe life. (Favorites include the British Council at Amazonas and Orrellana, Libros para el alma at Almagro and Joaquin Pinto, and Grain de Cafe at Baquendano and Reina Victoria.)

Ecuador is, I think, still a country of close communities, a small country where extended families live close enough for regular contact. Visiting grandparents isn't a once or twice a year occasion. There are face-to-face relationships here, not on-line cyberspace "communities of interest."

Here in Quito, a city with a greater variety of world cuisines than in Buenos Aires (a city almost 10 times as large), I find only one thing missing from my accustomed life. I can't seem to locate my familiar sense of angst and alienation.

August 17, 1995
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DOING LESS WITH LESS

When I was teaching American Studies at Pitzer College in Southern California, I once devoted a class to a discussion of "voluntary simplicity." Imagine the reactions of my twenty-something students when I suggested that bigger wasn't necessarily better, that increased consumption isn't directly proportional to increased happiness, that a sustainable economy might be preferable to one predicated on ever-increasing growth, and that choosing to live more simply could have both spiritual and environmental benefits.

So here I am choosing to live in a lesser developed country and I'm confronted with the obligation---not the choice---of forgoing the use of electric power for refrigerators, water pumps, elevators, traffic lights, computers, all manner of industrial equipment, radios, televisions and public amusements for eight to ten hours per day.

Rationing is in many ways a great equalizer. Almost everyone ---excepts those ricos who own their own power plants----is reduced to the same level of scarcity. My first reaction is more than mild annoyance. How easily notions of middle class privilege are transformed into assertions of rights. "What do you mean I can't buy all the electricity I want?!" Like most people suffering greater or lesser inconveniences, I looked for someone to blame. The proximate cause of the blackouts is the lack of rainfall in the Oriente. No rain: no hydropower. And Ecuador relies on the Paute dam for 60% of its electric energy. Perhaps it is true that the government and Emelec (the state utility company) are at fault for over reliance on a single energy source, for failing to expand capacity to meet projected energy needs, for not modernizing, and perhaps for not privatizing the electric company. But ultimately, it seems that no one can be blamed for a natural disaster. Droughts happen.

As a rule I'm not much on conspiracy theories. But there is a compelling alternative explanation for the electric predicament here in Ecuador. There is evidence that the fossil-fuel-burning, carbon dioxide-increasing, global-warming, green-house-effect is already creating changes in global weather patterns. (See for example this summer's heatwave in the States.) In order to reverse the global-warming already in process some scientists suggest that it will be

necessary reduce consumption of fossil fuels by 60%. It seems unlikely that the developed countries will voluntarily adopt such a course.

We live in a globally interconnected economic, political and environmental system.

To wit:

- * Poor developing Ecuador exports oil to the rich North.
- * The North burns the oil, causing global-warming.
- * Global-warming causes a drought in Ecuador.
- * The drought and consequent lack of hydro power causes energy rationing in Ecuador.

Perhaps Ecuador should just burn its own oil for energy and cut out the middleman? It seems to me that the draconian rationing here in Ecuador is a preview of the consequences of failing to voluntarily limit world-wide fossil fuel consumption.

I'm in the process of re-examining and redefining my own assumptions about energy consumption. A healthy, sustainable global environment may require dramatic changes in energy intensive lifestyles. If so, this time of shortages may be an opportunity for me and for my children to preview the future, a chance to learn how to adjust to a coming new world order.

[Side Bar]

TEN WAYS TO SURVIVE THE BLACKOUTS

1. Keep your batteries charged. Stock up on spares.
2. Find a romantic partner for innumerable candlelight dinners.
3. Check the paper daily for the latest in blackout locations, durations and other unexpected permutations.
4. Be a good Scout. Routinely carry a flashlight, matches, candles in your kit bag.
5. Reconnoiter the locations of upscale hotels which have their own power plants--- handy refuges when you're tired of cursing the darkness.
6. Avoid elevators in unfamiliar locations. You wouldn't want to be trapped between floors when the power is cut.
7. Be particularly vigilant about where and what you eat. Under-refrigerated dairy products, meat and seafood can be deadly.
8. Crosscheck the locations of concerts, plays, movies, galleries, museums etc., with the blackout schedule. There is no point traveling across town to an event that is canceled for lack of light.
9. Eat plenty of carrots. Improve your night vision.
10. Calm down. Everything takes twice as long as you think it will, even when you allow twice as much time as you think you'll need.

TRAMITES OF TRAVEL

A Cautionary Tale of a Family Passage through the Southern Sierra

"There are 3 ways to travel----First Class, Economy and with children." Lucy Brysk

My suegra (mother-in-law) ought to know. She raised five children. My wife Alison and I had to see for ourselves. After living in Quito for 5 or 6 weeks we plotted a week-long excursion to Cuenca with our two children, Miriam (5) and Ana (1 1/2).

Renting the Car

We had made short trips in Ecuador by bus, but quickly determined that more than two or three hours of travel sorely tested our sense of family solidarity. This time we resolved to rent a car, to come and go when and where we pleased. Renting a car should be a relatively straightforward proposition----choose your dates of travel, shop around a little for price and convenience and make a reservation. Of course you need your passport, a driver's license (U.S. works.), and a major credit card. So far, so good. But we nearly overlooked Freeman's Law of the Second Question. In this case the question should be, "Are there any other charges, terms or conditions which we should be aware of?"

In the United States liability and accident insurance for a rental car is usually included if you own an insured personal vehicle, or if you use a "gold card" to charge your rental. It's usually unnecessary to purchase the exorbitantly expensive coverage

offered by the rental agencies.

The Insurance Quagmire

Rental car companies in Ecuador routinely insist that you must purchase their insurance. This can add \$50 or more to the cost of a \$200+ weekly rental. OK, you think, just part of the cost of doing business. "Fine," you say, "anything else?" Well there seems to be the small matter of the deductibles. What if someone steals your rent-a-car? With the required agency insurance you are responsible for an \$800-1200 deductible. Or if you have a little fender-bender-- not-to-worry--- you only have to pay the first \$400-600.

Here-to-fore my only experience of Ecuadorian concern for vehicular safety was as a passenger in innumerable taxis and busses--enough of an education to inspire a certain anxiety when faced with prospect of my "limited liability."

Karl Malden to the Rescue

I must admit that on occasion I've wished that American Express would send Karl Malden and his rescue helicopter to pluck me from some of my travel mis-adventures. But alas, I never have been a member of the privileged green carded club. Difficult times call for desperate measures. And only with an American Express card could we rent a car without insurance charges and the risk of millions of sucres worth of deductibles.

The friendly American Express office on Amazonas 339 and Washington (5th floor of Ecuadorian Tours) informed me that with a letter from my employer and a demora (delay) of only a few weeks they would be happy to consider my application. It was time to apply the Corollary of Freeman's Law of the Second Question.

"Sometimes it's useful to know when not to take 'no' for an answer."
After all, American Express is a U.S. company and should be held to U.S. standards. With a little persistence I had my green card in 24 hours. Three easy steps: Call American Express in U.S. collect at 305 825-0777. (You can reach an AT&T operator at 119.) Once you reach the right customer service rep, you provide your credit history. With approval, you can pick up your card in Quito the next day. Amazing.

The Trip

Fact: Cuenca is only 442 kilometers (265 miles) from Quito.

Fact: The Pana (Pan-American Highway) is the best road in the country.

Fact: We thought ourselves well-prepared, prudent travelers.

I had carefully inspected the car for damages. I knew the location of the hazard flashers and that there was a spare tire, jack and tire iron. We packed snacks, water, the baby's special blanket, audio cassettes, coloring books, an umbrella, guide books and an enormous 1:1'000.000 scale map of the Republic published by the Instituto Geografico Militar. (Also available from Libri Mundi Juan Mera 851 and Foch.) We packed the four of us, our overflowing baggage and our desire to see the countryside into our Susuki---an automobile more suited to suburban mall hopping than Andean trekking.

Our first destination was Riobamba. Perhaps it was a portent of things to come. I can't easily explain how it was that we found ourselves in the midst of the Sunday market in Sangolqui more west of Quito than the direct southernly route we intended. But it was a

clear day and Cotapoxi (5897 meters) looked to one 5 year old like a chocolate cake with vanilla frosting dripping down. This view was only surpassed by those of Chimborozo (6310) and Tungurahua (5023) which we managed to observe from the alternate route we "discovered" snaking southward from Ambato.

I best understood that we were a traveling circus when we stopped at the side of the highway to change the baby. The only available space was the rear shelf covering the tiny cargo compartment. As we pulled out our supply of disposal diapers, baby wipes, cotton balls and bottom lotion, an older woman carrying a small lamb in her shawl and leading a young boy and three donkeys stopped dead in her tracks to see what we were up to. She looked skeptical at first, but left pleased when we had successfully completed the task at hand.

I've nothing noteworthy or memorable to report from Riobamba except that guard at the Banco Central who reported that he "didn't know" when the bank's archaeology museum would open was overly optimistic. Upon returning to Quito I learned that the Banco itself is permanently closing its too large and too modern offices there.

Our road trip was held over a day in Riobamba at the less-than-delightful Hotel Whymper. Not to put too fine a point on it, there was more than a little whimpering in our overcrowded quarters as my wife ---who had lost her lunch while interviewing a local padre--- and my elder daughter recovered from a violent bout of food poisoning.

The views on the road to Cuenca changed from one kilometer to

the next. We made good time as we passed nearly vertical green mountain sides where campesinos carried enormous loads, looking like marching stalks of grass. Every nook and cranny of this part of the highlands seemed to be inhabited. Houses varied from crumbling haciendas, to concrete block homes with bright red or blue tin roofs, to the simplest mud and wattle shelters.

Alausi was our designated rest stop. And we were rewarded with a classic snapshot opportunity---dozens of European and North American tourists poised atop railroad cars waiting for what they appeared to believe was an imminent departure down the Devil's Nose (Nariz del Diablo), switchbacking their way to Guayaquil.

By now I'd grown accustomed to the typical road hazards---no signs, no guardrails, jarring potholes and unannounced speed bumps, a bus passing four cars and a log truck uphill on a blind curve. But the detour south of Alausi took me by surprise. Even though the highway was mostly closed by the large pile of earth bulldozed across it, I couldn't quite convince myself that the unpaved vertical ascent was the suggested alternate routing. It wasn't just the narrowness of the track or the steepness of the ravine, nor the ruts and rocks and holes, mostly it was the rain and fog which completely terrified me.

But the detour ended, the pavement resumed and I couldn't help but be delighted by the sight of a Canari woman wearing a red shawl, a purple shirt, an orange skirt and bright blue knee-highs. Not to mention that my 5 year old disc jockey had serendipitously provided a sound track of Judy Garland singing "Over the Rainbow."

Cuenca is indeed a delightful colonial city. The old town was crowded with lost European tour groups re-encountering the Old World---rain glistening on narrow cobblestone streets, plazas chock-a-block with old churches, Italian restaurants and Dutch ice cream. Our accommodations at the Hotel Internacional were the best of the trip and included a balcony view of the new cathedral (1885). My only disappointment was the apparently declining "panama" hat industry. I had little success in discovering a borasalino style topper.

On the return trip to Quito we planned a stop at Ingapirca. The shortest access point is from El Tambo. Ingapirca is the largest Inca sight in Ecuador, and potentially a prime tourist destination. One of our major lessons on this trip was the importance of knowing when you're lost. After a number of u-turns and with the kind assistance of strangers we found our way in the rain to the muddy 10 km track which leads to the ruins. Naturally by the time we made it to Ingapirca we were all starving. We had heard a rumor of a good restaurant "only 500 meters" from the entrance. Continuing our ascent until we could go no further in the mud, we stopped at what turned out to be a restored hacienda. As a reward for intrepidity we had the entire place to ourselves. Our table overlooked the ruins. The fire was lit, hot drinks proffered. Except for spending half of our meal attending poor Miriam who was sick again, it was a most romantic occasion. After lunch we toured the sight, inspecting the stonework and praying in the Temple of the Sun as the rains continued.

No road trip is complete without its flat tire. We rolled down to El Tambo on our slowly deflating right rear. We had all three

nails removed in twenty minutes for \$1.50 (U.S.) We spent the night in Alausi where the "friendly" proprietor of the American Ice Cream Hotel hesitated to rent us a room. "Does your baby pee? Will she wet the bed?" was his first question. Miriam was up all night with what was ultimately diagnosed as amebas and/or worms. We had asked the First Question "Is there hot water?" But had neglected the Second Question "What time is the water shut off?" By 11 p.m. there was no water, hot or cold, to flush the toilet, or for washing. In the morning our host was most concerned about when we would leave, because another lucky party was due at noon.

We all recuperated at the idyllic Casa Nahuazo in Banos. The care and kindness we received there restored our spirits, and our lagging sense of adventure. My wife and I had traveled all over the world before we had children. (A good thing.) And we want our kids to remember their time abroad fondly. Already the difficulties of this trip are fading. Miriam laughs as she writes her grandparents about all the times we got lost, and as she completes her course of Flagyl she is once again her old feisty self. Traveling with children is the same as living with them---only more so. One last dicho (saying). This one from my youth. The only thing to do is to "Keep on trucking," and enjoy the "long strange trip" ahead.

June 26, 1995
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MAKING MOVIES
A Personal View

1995 marks the 100th anniversary of the invention of motion pictures. Making pictures move was an ancient human dream. By the end of the 19th century, in Europe and North America the moment was ripe for a diverse group of engineers, scientists, eccentrics and inventors to nearly simultaneously create cameras and projectors capable of photographing and displaying motion pictures.

On Dec. 28, 1895 the Lumiere brothers' Cinematographe projected 10 short films in the basement of the Grand Cafe in Paris to a paying audience of thirty-five. Eleven years later the first Ecuadorian film, "La Procesion del Corpus en Guayaquil" directed by an Italian, Carlo Valenti was produced

The fruits of technology are often put to uses unimagined by their creators. For example, early entrepreneurs originally sold films by the foot, regardless of content. They were interested in selling machines, not telling stories. Born of scientific inquiry, motion pictures soon became an instrument of mass culture and popular entertainment. From about 1904 until the present the fictional narrative has been the most prominent form of motion picture. All the subsequent technical improvement of motion pictures: sound, color, wide screen, video, and "virtual reality" have not been the result of a search for scientific truths, but rather were driven by commercial imperatives---creating and fulfilling audience demand for ever more compelling images of fantasy and escape. For most of us Hollywood is synonymous with "The Movies"-----a combination of stars, stories and (increasingly high-tech) production values.

I came of age in the '60s. This was a period of rapid social change. It was a time of "underground film" and the independent filmmaker. Building on a long tradition of avant-garde experimentation, the generation of the '60s struggled to create an alternative cinema. Rejecting linear narrative, brazenly sexual, often highly political, these diverse films found their audiences in cinematecs, midnight movies and on college campuses.

Now at the end of the 20th century, as we approach the next millenium, another group of inventors, eccentrics and artists is re-inventing the art of moving images. There is an exciting possibility that evolving new video and computer technologies will offer an opportunity to democratize image making. To paraphrase Jean Cocteau, the French author and filmmaker----"now that cameras are nearly as available as pens," there is the possibility of a truly great film art. Today the "means of production" ---in this case inexpensive video camcorders---are actually in the hands of more and more people. Lower production costs combined with innovations in distribution may allow us to create a model of communication of from "many-to-many," rather than from a "few to the mass." For example, today on the internet short videos of from 1-5 minutes can be digitilized and distributed to anyone on the net with a \$300 "player" attached to their computers. We're promised that "500 channels of video" and "video-on-demand" are imminent developments.

If we are going to re-invent the cinema, audiences must re-invent their habits of viewing. We no longer need be merely passive consumers of mass entertainment. A visually literate audience

understands how images are created and manipulated. If we actively participate in both viewing and creating images, we empower ourselves. But a future of democratic, decentralized image making is by no means assured. There is no guarantee that new technologies will actually empower the disenfranchised, no matter how visually literate. The history of cable television and videocassettes has demonstrated that the appearance of choice doesn't assure diversity of content or style. The struggle that was once over the "means of production" is now over the meaning of production. Whose dreamworks will define our collective futures ----our own and our community's visions or the Dreamworks of Stephen Spielberg and Bill Gates?

Sometimes the best way to prepare for the future, is to study the past. The best films of the first 100 years of cinema, are expressions of the passion and vision of their makers. Idiosyncratic films, regional films, personal films are always difficult to see. Here in Quito too many theaters cater to audiences for pornography or its violent equivalent--- U.S. action films. But there are resources for the more adventurous. In English the British Council offers a video lending library, as well as a Wednesday night film series. In Spanish, ASOCINE screens cinema classics every weekend. The Cinemteca at the Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana regularly presents outstanding films. And TeleAndina (channel 23) broadcasts Latin American documentaries every Sunday evening.

As you travel through South America don't go to the movies, just for a taste of the States. The filmmakers here have much to share with you. In Quito, ASOCINE will present the 3rd National

Festival of Video this November. See the movies. Go make some of your own.

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SIDE BAR

British Council
Amazonas 1646 and Orellana
508 282

ASOCINE (Association of Ecuadorian Filmmakers)
Yanez Pinzon 215 and Colon
229 915

Casa de la Cultura
Patria and 6 de Diciembre
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Mark Freeman is a U.S. filmmaker. His documentaries have aired on U.S. public television, have won numerous awards, and have screened at the Museum of Modern Art in NY and the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington. He is currently producing "Weaving the Future" a portrait of contemporary life in an Otovaleno community.

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