

## Through the Lens of the Camera: Propaganda, Identity and Nostalgia in Cuban Cinema

Natalia de Orellana

*They sat and watched the stripping and both drank brandy and soda. A girl went from table to table ridding herself of her clothes. She began with her gloves. A spectator took them with resignation like the contents of an In tray. Then she presented her back to Carter and told him to unhook her black lace corsets.\**

Graham Greene

---

*Mulatas* endowed with eye-catching bodies, dancers stripping to the airs of joyful Cuban percussion beats. Greene described the world of an uprooted character, Wormold, whose vision of Havana opens up onto scenes of diversity, contradictions and anxieties that floated in the air the months before the Cuban Revolution. While the Revolution might appear as a consistent historical event, it arguably reflects in fact a spectrum of multiple, not to say opposing, polemics.<sup>1</sup>

The literary Western eye, as a subject that purports to see and interpret the cultural and ethical values of the non-Western has been qualified by Kwame Anthony Appiah as a 'relatively small, Western-style, Western trained, group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism and periphery'.<sup>2</sup> Rising from this perspective is the development of a one-sided, goal-specific and commonly simplistic reading of both historical facts and cultural production. The latter is used as an apparatus to justify, or even strengthen, a dominant socio-political

hierarchy and the pre-eminence of a mode of analysis based on Western parameters.

Exploring, therefore, the Cuban Revolutionary discourse from positions beyond the literary Western eye necessitates a deeper vision that will afford space to voices within the island: thinkers, artists, politicians and viewers alike. The exploration of this discourse cannot be uniquely orchestrated by an outside 'mediator', as Appiah would have it. By affording space to the voices within the proper geographic and historical framework, I intend to push to the foreground the direct cultural production and statements that shaped it. This approach is necessary for two reasons. On the one hand, it questions interpretations offered by mediated and mediating readings that succeed in providing factual information but also risk becoming stagnated within a Eurocentric framework. On the other hand, only these voices can determine the complexity of Cuban visual production without staging it as a black and white matter, capturing thus the hybrid nature of this cultural context that is in reality intrinsic to the development of the island's political and cultural sphere.

From the very beginning of the Revolutionary regime in 1959, cultural production was directly aligned with larger socio political agendas.<sup>3</sup> The history of Cuban cinema must be seen as part of this dynamic, for it represents both a central meeting place as well as a vital marketplace.<sup>4</sup> Although post-colonial theorists have referred to issues of interpretation in relation to the establishment of cultural hierarchies, it remains unclear whether the material visual production

---

\* Graham Greene, *Our Man in Havana* (1958), p. 200.

<sup>1</sup> M.T. Martin & B. Paddington, 'Restoration or Innovation? An Interview with Humberto Solas: Post-Revolutionary Cuban Cinema', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Spring 2001), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> K.A. Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 149.

---

<sup>3</sup> M.A. Stock, *On Location in Cuba, Street Filmmaking during Times of Transition* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 9

<sup>4</sup> C. Kleinhans & J. Lesage, 'Havana Film Festival Report: New Latin American Cinema', *Jump Cut*, No. 31 (March 1986), pp. 70-71.

at stake –or the interpretative discourses tied to the latter– offer a challenge to the politics of reception.

This paper focuses on cultural narratives as intrinsically social and political. The cinematographic production in Cuba allows consideration of the articulation of a number of narratives within the country as well as a meeting platform for the creative medium, the spectator, and a growing independent critique that developed at the end of the twentieth century. It contextualises and analyses some of the principal contents of Cuban film production within a wide timeframe, between 1959 and the 2000s. Additionally, it expounds the original aims and critiques at the heart of the establishment of the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematograficos (ICAIC). The intention is to highlight the hybrid complexity of the situational context and its development for the past fifty years in order to analyse how these are integrated within present socio-cultural dynamics.

The examples analysed have not been chosen for specific technical or conceptual similarities. Rather, they are a sample of two very distinct periods linked by a constant search for identity, expression, and human assertion. It is essential however not to read their connexion as a linear trajectory. Here we seek to outline the paradoxes and principles at stake in Cuban visual art rather than mediating a congruent conclusion.

*ICAIC: the cinema within, by, and for the Cuban revolution*

In the critical essay 'And of My Cuba, What?', Cuban-born writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante retraces the main present and adverse paradoxes of the socio-cultural situation within the 'no man's land'. His text reads as a subjective political critique where he admonishes the island's post-Revolutionary, imperialism-driven functioning.<sup>5</sup>

In the Government of Castro, whose regime works like a dynasty (there are four

---

<sup>5</sup> G. Cabrera Infante, *Mea Cuba* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), pp. 260-268.

Castros at the summit of power) [...] a white man is the equivalent of the Minister of Propaganda, the head of the Film Institute.<sup>6</sup>

Infante's statement illustrates two chief contestations. Firstly, the Revolutionary government that fought 'against tyranny' and 'for the Cuban people' –to take Fidel's Castro's words in 1959–,<sup>7</sup> only represents the instalment of a new, yet still undemocratic regime. Secondly, it presents the Film Institute, the ICAIC, as a tool of cultural propaganda and of assertion for the Revolutionary regime. The institution could be approached as a way to provide propaganda image-making. The use of the moving image to foster a socio-political agenda has a history far older than that of the ICAIC. The power of the moving image had not passed unnoticed: 'Cinema was the medium par excellence, and Fidel was aware of this', commented Alfredo Guevara in an interview with the *New York Times* in 2009; 'Television for the direct message, cinema to stimulate reflection and to disquiet'.<sup>8</sup> It is equally relevant to note that only a few people have been in charge of cultural affairs in Cuba since 1959, most of whom belonged to Castro's inner circle. As a young activist who supported the guerrillas and was known as a close *compañero* of Fidel since their student days,<sup>9</sup> Alfredo Guevara was appointed head of the institution in 1959 and would remain in this position until 1983.<sup>10</sup> Guevara presided over the organisation for more than three decades, he was known for his close relationship with Castro and for the ICAIC's severe regulatory framework, which suggests that the organisation's democratic

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>7</sup> 'La tiranía a sido derrotada' – 'antes que nada esta el pueblo'; in Castro's speech upon arrival to Habana, Ciudad Libertad, 8 January 1959. La Habana, online at <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1959/esp/f080159e.html> (all online sources accessed last on 21 May 2015 unless otherwise indicated).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Victoria Burnett, 'Alfredo Guevara Valdés, 87, Steward of Cuban Cinema and Castro Ally, Dies', *The New York Times*, 22 April 2013, online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/23/movies/alfredo-guevara-valdes-steward-of-cuban-cinema-and-castro-ally-dies-at-87.html>.

<sup>9</sup> M. Chanan, *The Cuban Image: Cinema and Cultural Politics in Cuba* (London: BFI Publishing, 1985), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Guevara would return to the ICAIC at the end of the 90s.

ethos was questionable. However, this only posits an over-simplified image of the functioning of the ICAIC in the post-Revolutionary context. Below, we will follow from this position while drawing a crucial differentiation between propaganda and highly political cinema.

Given the directness and conviction of Infante's words, it is worth going back to the creation, founding ideology, and purposes of the ICAIC. As Michael Chanan recounts, the ICAIC was set up under the very first decree concerning cultural affairs approved by the Revolutionary government and signed by Armando Hart as Minister of Education and Castro as Prime Minister.<sup>11</sup> The cinema to be created was situated 'within' the Revolution. It is necessary to bear in mind that its history is characterised by a dual dynamic: radical rupture with a previous system regarded as morally bankrupt on the one hand; and on another hand the drive to create something completely new.

The 'Ley número 169 de creación del ICAIC', also known as the first cultural law of the Revolution, officialised the establishment of the institution and is an important document expounding the principal aims, ethos and principles of Cuban Revolutionary cinema. To Julie Amiot this is indicative of the regulative character of the project, which decrees what would be authorised or not. More relevant perhaps, it decrees the broad lines of Cuban cinema regarding its content and relation to national culture.<sup>12</sup> By looking closer at this text it is possible to delineate the attributes and aims of the new Cuban Revolutionary cinema, allowing us some room for exploration before dumping it under the bleak label of a propagandistic tool. The text begins with the statement 'El cine es un arte' [Cinema is a form of art], and continues by developing its expectations for the post-Revolutionary cinema:

Cinema, because of its characteristics, constitutes an instrument of opinion and

for the formation of individual and collective conscience that can contribute to make the revolutionary spirit clearer and deeper as well as to sustain its creative spirit [...]. Cinema as an art of noble conception must be at the basis of a call to conscience and contribute to eliminating ignorance, to elucidating problems, to formulating solutions and to laying out, in dramatic and contemporary ways, the great conflicts of Man and humanity.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to highlight in these lines the conception of the moral and intellectual responsibilities of this new cinema for it is because of these values that filmmaking is defined as an art. They are seen as the string tying together cinema and the ideological basis of the Revolution. They are equally aligned with Castro's words, according to which the future of the nation was to be approached 'con la razón y la inteligencia' ['with reason and intelligence'].<sup>14</sup>

Alfredo Guevara further developed the responsibilities of intellectuals and filmmakers after the Revolution. In 1963 he wrote 'El Cine Cubano', where he defines the intellectual as one condemned to *herejía*, to heresy. He does so in order to emphasise the duty of the thinker to adopt a critical and questioning attitude towards pre-established orthodox values.<sup>15</sup> This engaged attitude is aligned with the tasks of the Revolution. In his own words, 'the revolutionary seed is always present in true intellectual work, for it does not reject heresy and commits to the quest to search'.<sup>16</sup> Nancy Berthier cites this notion of social responsibility in which this new cinema claims to be embedded to defend a policy that, rather than instigating a visually institutionalised form of propaganda, is in fact based on the strengthening and diffusion of a humanistic ideology. She recalls Tomás Gutiérrez Alea:

<sup>11</sup> Chanan, *The Cuban Image*, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Julie Amiot-Guillouet, 'Discurso Oficial y Mito del "Punto Cero": Una Historia de/en Cine Cubano', *Archivos de la Filmoteca*, No. 59 (2008), p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> *Ley número 169 de la Creación del ICAIC*, online at [http://www.lajiribilla.cu/2009/n412\\_03/412\\_06.html](http://www.lajiribilla.cu/2009/n412_03/412_06.html)

<sup>14</sup> Castro, F. in his speech upon arrival to Habana, Ciudad Libertad, 8 January 1959.

<sup>15</sup> A. Guevara, *El Cine Cubano* (1963) in Chanan, *The Cuban Image*, p. 388.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

I am not interested in cinema based purely on political propaganda because it is something circumstantial, something that only functions at the moment of the proclamation and does not speak to a broad audience nor in all moments.<sup>17</sup>

Using Alea's vision on cinema, Berthier raises the idea of a cinema the purpose of which is to awaken the critical consciousness of the spectator rather than to impose an authoritative discourse.<sup>18</sup> Viewing is therefore proposed as a critical, rather than a didactic experience. In this experience, the viewer has a larger reflective and independently critical role.

Novel regulations were accompanied by infrastructure developments. Whilst the ICAIC advocated the socio-political value of cinema, it was also the source of technical workshops and screening spaces that facilitated development of the visual work. At the same time, this dynamic equally manifests the tightness of the circuit provided by the institution, for it embraced both the creative and productive facets. The close circuit of production provided by the ICAIC can be considered to have monopolised the country's cinematic production. The viewer's critical consciousness which the institute aims to sharpen would in this sense inevitably appear within a restricted platform.

Yet it is misleading to read Cuba's cultural development through such extreme binary lenses. The ICAIC provided a starting platform for cultural development within a context that was economically challenging and which aimed to be highly varied in a context where there was no framework or infrastructure for cinematic production to start with. It is worth pointing out that the ICAIC's Cineteca, which opened in 1961,<sup>19</sup> established national cinema seasons, such as Czechoslovakia, France, Germany and Italy. It is more likely that the viewer would react to the content of the programs and the films *per se* more than to the physical frame in

which it was exhibited. However, as we shall see immediately below, this reaction should not be misunderstood as political propaganda.

#### *Propaganda VS engaged cinema: Memorias del Subdesarrollo*

To situate the notion of propaganda and political consciousness on a more pragmatic ground, it is worth looking closer at one of the works by Alea. His piece, *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* [*Memories of Underdevelopment*] (1968), based on the novel of the same name by Edmundo Desnoes, has been described countless times as a politically engaged, as well as an engaging film.

The Cuban director worked inside the state-sponsored system –for the film was produced by the ICAIC– on this piece that 'revealed the influence of socio-historic forces on human feelings'.<sup>20</sup> The film does not only offer a glance at a significantly specific period of time in Cuba (1961-1962, year of the 'Missile Crisis', two years after the Revolution), but also moves into another layer by focusing on the case of a character with deep political symbolism. This character, Sergio, recreates the case of the individual that Castro described as 'lumpen bourgeoisie'.<sup>21</sup> He is the individual who, refusing to leave his country after the change of government, finds himself isolated by the political events and yet unable to leave. Chanan described him as 'the ethos of the metropolitan intellectual [...] a kind of intellectual anti-hero in a state of paralysed perceptiveness'.<sup>22</sup>

Sergio is a middle-class wannabe writer, ex-property and business owner before the Revolution. The events of 1959 leave him reduced to the State's allowance, depriving him of the lifestyle he was once accustomed to, which make his wife leave the country. Sergio appears as a passive observer of the events and the changes brought about by the Revolution in the city of Havana. Far from telling the story of either Sergio or the city, Alea's piece does not point to a specific problem; it does not even soften through its lens's reality's instability

<sup>17</sup> N. Berthier, 'Cine y Revolución: *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* de Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (1968)', in Alberto Elena and Marina Díaz López (eds.), *The Cinema of Latin America* (Wallflower Press, 2003), pp. 99-108.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Chanan, *The Cuban Image*, p. 177.

<sup>20</sup> M. Kernan, 'Cuban Cinema: Tomas Gutierrez Alea', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Winter, 1975-1976), p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Chanan, *The Cuban Image*, pp. 236-237.

and unease, but rather aims to provoke the viewer's questioning of both context and ethos.

The unattractiveness of the character and his behaviour, enacted in a 'grotesque orgy of self abuse' not only reinforces the sense of uneasiness as mentioned above, but more importantly, goes against any possible approach to the idea of a propagandistic film. In one of the scenes Sergio takes one of his exiled ex-wife's stockings to pull it over his head. The image does not do much to encourage the notion of a glorious post-Revolutionary hero, nor does it idealise the difficult immediate post-Revolutionary context in which the film is set. If *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* does not offer any poetic conclusion on the meaning of being a post-Revolution non-Revolutionary individual, it does nonetheless highlight the contradictions of the time: an uncanny in-between of loss and destruction.

While there are factors pointing to the systematisation of Cuban film production and distribution under the aegis of propaganda, it is crucial to consider the several ways in which the visual works themselves contradict this assessment. This is not to say that there were no films from the ICAIC that blatantly performed propaganda, but it is also clear that this genre was far from being the only one produced. The ICAIC has been seen as the dynamo that charged the first generation of revolutionary filmmakers with the task of developing a visual language supportive of socio-political transformation.<sup>23</sup> The ICAIC lost its autonomy in 1976 to become dependent on the Ministry of Culture twelve years later. This can either show the willingness of the Government to place culture at the reach of the masses,<sup>24</sup> or on the contrary, as a move to centralise and regulate the cultural production.

When Fidel Castro gave his June 1961 speech, 'Palabras a los Intelectuales', he did not fail to point to artistic freedom: 'the fundamental problem always floating around the room', he stated, 'was the issue of freedom of artistic

creation'.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, he also pronounced the phrase that would still be discussed decades later: 'Inside the Revolution - everything, outside - nothing'.<sup>26</sup> This statement, because of its clear ambiguity, has been discussed and interpreted in extremely contradictory ways. It offers the partisan's assertion of an art committed to the Revolutionary masses, *as well as* an authoritative exclusion of any cultural product that could question the new regime. It is not surprising that the ICAIC is inevitably situated and considered within this context.

Following from these paradoxes, we will consider in the following paragraphs the development of alternative film institutions, production and systems of diffusion. These have mostly taken place during the past twenty years and do not necessarily reveal the rise of new forces opposed to the ICAIC. Rather, they have opened and reinforced platforms of visual experimentation and film development.

#### *Alternative cinema and the renewal of the search of the self*

Anne Marie Stock coined the term 'Street Filmmaking' to denote a new mode of audiovisual expression that emerged in Cuba around 1990, when light, portable equipment started replacing the unmovable materials, and young media artists began producing films with the smallest of crews –composed by their friends and themselves– and for 'a handful of fulas', a handful of cash.<sup>27</sup> This inevitably led not only to the growth of cinematographic production, but also to a larger accessibility to the medium. An expanding number of artists explored wider aspects of their own experiences. Everyday life was increasingly and more accessibly portrayed, thus encouraging the expression and assertion of a sense of identity.

This mode of expression offered an alternative platform that could be both embraced by the ICAIC, and operate independently from the institution. Stock's study on the development

<sup>23</sup> Stock, *On Location in Cuba*, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> A. Chomsky, *The Cuba Reader* (Duke University Press, 2003, p. 449.

<sup>25</sup> Fidel Castro, *Palabras a los Intelectuales* (speech at La Habana, 30 June 1961).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Stock, *On Location in Cuba*, p. 15.

of Street Filmmaking shows the development of a series of alternative non-state supported film organizations that marked a new chapter in Cuban cinema. Among them one finds the Escuela Internacional de Cine y de Television, the Asociación Hermanos Saiz, the Movimiento Nacional de Video and the Fundación Ludwig de Cuba. These can be grouped under one major common trait, their cultural mission. The latter focuses on the production and circulation of autonomous representations.<sup>28</sup>

The foundation of these organisations does not entail the growth of an opposing force against the ICAIC. Many of the students graduating from the Escuela Internacional de Cine y de Televisión, for instance, will go on develop their projects within the framework of the ICAIC; and many of the professionals from the latter would teach in the former. There were, and still are many crossovers demonstrating the impossibility of a binary black-or-white reading. Some of these organisations share ideologies that are in tandem with those of the ICAIC. This suggests an alternative rather than an opposing force that targets a closer alignment with the country's Revolutionary agenda. The Asociación Hermanos Saiz (AHS) clearly articulates the importance of the younger generations in culture and in direct relation with the Revolution. In their official statement they write:

From its creation, AHS is committed to the work of its associates, all young people with an authentic revolutionary culture linked to the life of the Cuban people, to which the organisation owes itself in the first instance. That is why the objectives of the work are related to the stimulation of artistic and literary creation among its members, and to the promotion of spaces for theoretical discussion concerning the role of the intellectual vanguard.<sup>29</sup>

If the revolutionary aims stated by the AHS in

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-36.

<sup>29</sup> Presentation of the AHS, online at [http://www.ecured.cu/index.php/Asociación\\_Hermanos\\_Saiz%ADz](http://www.ecured.cu/index.php/Asociación_Hermanos_Saiz%ADz) (all translations my own unless indicated otherwise).

1986 appear reminiscent of those of the 1959 'Ley número 169 de creación del ICAIC', it is nonetheless misleading to draw a straight line between them. Firstly, what is commonly known as the 'special period in time of peace', the so-called Período Especial which began in 1991, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, indicates an economic crisis in the country that would last for the following decade. Decrease in demand for Cuban products such as sugar and imports of essential products from the USSR resulted in severe shortages of essential goods. Inevitably, the infrastructure of the film industry which even before this period could not be defined as wealthy, could no longer sustain the costs of a full production. The crisis in filmmaking activity becomes visible when looking at the declining numbers of production in this period. The situation became dramatic in 1996 when not a single feature film was completed.<sup>30</sup> How the Revolution was approached by those who witnessed and experienced the Batista regime, those who fought for the Revolution or whose parents took part in it and who witnessed the consequences of the Special Period in everyday life would inevitably differ from the initial 1959 Revolutionary spirit. Of course, this does not imply that film production would be any less 'Revolutionary' (as it does not mean that all of production had to be revolutionary either), but rather that the idea of the call to arms against the enemy acknowledged notions of civil engagement. In Stock's words, 'more pragmatic than idealistic, Street Filmmakers are indeed invested in the here and now'.<sup>31</sup>

The Cuban Revolution brought to the external eye narratives of extremes, where idealism, plot and blood were at the fore. However, one cannot base a historical knowledge of the Revolution as a 'before and after' tale where good and bad are confronted. In this sense, going beyond a first approach, as stressed in the introduction of this analysis, necessarily implies taking into account contextual changes brought by the wider political and socio-economic developments. These are not simple factors, but the actual grounds on which the development of Cuban visual art has taken place. This means

---

<sup>30</sup> Stock, *On Location in Cuba*, p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

that the political character of Cuban cinema cannot be defined merely in terms of a message to be consumed by the spectator. *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* clearly defies such an attitude by staging the wonders and wanders of an anti-hero through the prism of a narrative that cannot be consumed as heroically historical, personal drama, or as a happy ending fairy tale. Alea went 'beyond' this one-dimensional reading of the moving image by bringing the spectator to question and relate to the contextual frame. The sense of identity is not given but erased, offering solely a razed ground through which the viewer is invited to reflect upon and build his/her own identity.

Looking deeper into this notion of context, in little more than fifty years the socio-economic and cultural changes brought about by the Revolution were soon followed by those of the new Revolutionary government, to be then transposed by those brought at a time of crisis. As Castro says in the 'Palabras a los Intelectuales' speech:

One of the characteristics of The Revolution has been [...] the necessity to confront many problems in a hurry. And we are like the Revolution. That is, we too had to improvise a great deal.<sup>32</sup>

The precariousness that characterised Cuba during the 1990s did not dissolve. The general uncertainty of Cuba has been manifested more recently in the visual arts, which explore notions of national consciousness, loss and risk. As Cuban intellectual Fernando Martínez Heredia wrote: 'Cuban national identity today is associated with the word "risk" – the risk of losing the society of social justice into which national identity has been linked for decades, the risk of losing socialism. And the risk of losing sovereignty as a people, as a nation-state.'<sup>33</sup>

This notion of risk has been related to the 2005 film *Viva Cuba* (directed by Juan Carlos Cremata Malberti and co-directed by Iraida

Malberti Cabrera) by Ann Marie Stock as well as by Georgia Seminet in her analysis of *A Post-Revolutionary Childhood: Nostalgia and collective memory in Viva Cuba*.

In *Viva Cuba*, Malberti and Cabrera deal with the 'here' and 'now' providing the prism through which Cuba envisages its own situation. Through the gaze and perspective of two children, Malú and Jorgito (Malú Tarrau Borche and Jorge Miló respectively), Malberti shapes a narrative that builds upon Cuba's past history to create a stage on which to show the present social situation in the global economy. Henry Giroux interpreted the use of the young characters as 'a symbol of how a society thinks about itself and as an indicator of changing cultural values, sexuality, the state of the economy, and the spiritual life of a nation'.<sup>34</sup> Following this reasoning, *Viva Cuba* can be interpreted as a revision of the nation's identity from within. On the one hand, the juxtaposition of historical symbols such as images of Castro and 'el Che', or the scenes at the school's courtyard where the children sing the Himno de Bayamo, Cuba's national anthem, are evocative of a certain sense of nostalgia. On the other hand, the extensive use of an important number of landscapes and settings within the island provides a familiar setting to Cuban audiences. These two points are juxtaposed in the story line, where Malú's mother decides to leave the country with her daughter after the death of her own mother. Her case is representative of a larger phenomenon of a Cuban population willing to leave the shores of the nation, especially since the severe hardships of the 1990s. Whether the film is to be considered as political or not is relevant. The Spanish newspaper *El País* described it as 'a singular road movie with children [...] that features as backdrop the theme of emigration, though the film does not tell a political story as much as a human one'.<sup>35</sup>

The attachment to Cuba manifested by the ten-year-old characters is not grounded in political reasons, but is situated on the basis of

<sup>32</sup> Castro, *Palabras a los Intelectuales*.

<sup>33</sup> F. M. Heredia, quoted in G. Seminet. 'A Post-Revolutionary Childhood: Nostalgia and Collective Memory in *Viva Cuba*', *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas*, Vol. 8, No 2, 2011, p. 190

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> M. Vicent, "'Viva Cuba", Un Film sobre la Aventura de la Emigración', *El País*, 26 May 2006, online at [http://elpais.com/diario/2006/05/26/cine/1148594409\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/2006/05/26/cine/1148594409_850215.html)

friendship and a sense of belonging. It is essential, however, to point out that the film does not fail to pose questions concerning Cuban identity *vis-à-vis* growing globalisation. Where would post-Revolutionary youths such as Malú and Jorgito go? The notion of search is both suggested within the main narrative of the movie –for Malú is looking for her father– and outside the larger identity questioning implied by the film. This example manifests engagement with both past and present socio-cultural contexts. Far from denying the revolutionary past of the country or tracing a straight line from past to present, Malberti's work embraces the hybrid context and uncertain situation to focus on the present human impasses and contradictions. These contradictions are presented in the narrative not only through the juxtaposition of past symbols and genuine youth, but also through the fictional background of the characters. Whilst Jorgito is the son of a devoted-to-the-state citizen –the plaque in front of their home door reads: 'Castro es siempre bienvenido' ('Castro is always welcome')–, Malú belongs to the upper class, an aspect her mother never fails to emphasise in the first few minutes of the film: 'I've told you a hundred times, Malú, that they are low-class people... without standards'.<sup>36</sup>

These two opposites are humorously brought together in a stage where the balconies of both of the families are facing each other allowing the two mothers to communicate via meaningful glances of deep disapproval.

The sweetness and humour of the two young characters and their respective mothers, the use of cultural symbols and the vision of an extensive landscape have been defined by Stock as markers of 'Cubanness' that were fashioned to please a wide audience, both local and international.<sup>37</sup> This definition situates *Viva Cuba* as a negotiator between the island and the larger international arena. Malberti's film marks in fact a situation where extremes are visible and yet cannot be read at face value. The

necessity to flee the country due to the circumstances of the Special Period as expressed by Malú's mother, does not necessarily undermine the roots of the Revolution. Rather, it firstly challenges the myth of a single Revolutionary Cuba by revealing the plurality of the experience.<sup>38</sup> Secondly, the fact that the film entered the international arena calls for further analysis on the international politics of the reception of Cuban cinema, as well as the entanglement or dissent between the local and the global.

*Viva Cuba* was realised with what by Hollywood standards are the meagerest of means. Its realisation cost around \$50,000.00 and the crew was composed of approximately fifteen people, mostly family and friends.<sup>39</sup> And yet, Malberti's work has been acclaimed not only by Cuban viewers, but also by an international audience. In regards to this recognition, one might reflect on a domesticating process where, as Graham Huggan argued for literature, cultural commodities are taken from the margins and reabsorbed into mainstream culture.<sup>40</sup> I do not believe, however, that recognition of *Viva Cuba* should be taken suspiciously, but rather as an instance where the global and the local meet and raise questions concerning historical parameters and expectations. From all over the world the story of these two youngsters, Malú and Jorgito, reunites different perspectives on the difficulty of a hybrid and challenging context. It questions the most common oversimplistic approaches to Cuba's recent history, putting to the foreground the most human aspect of the political experience in a stage where global assumptions face the local situation through the eyes of those within the island.

\*\*\*

Much has been made of the way in which Cuban cinema offers vantage points for the consideration of its history and present. Whilst I believe that an approach comparing and contrasting two works from different periods would be completely pointless, not to say

---

<sup>36</sup> *Viva Cuba*, dir. by Juan Carlos Cremata Malberti, Epicentre Films, 2005. Extract from the film: Malu's mother speaking to her daughter. Online at [http://tubitv.com/video?id=30850&title=Viva\\_Cuba00.05](http://tubitv.com/video?id=30850&title=Viva_Cuba00.05)

<sup>37</sup> Stock, *On Location in Cuba*, p. 151.

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>40</sup> G. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (Routledge, 2001), p. 22.



misleading, it remains relevant to see how they both approach the notion of the Revolution, for they offer a vision from within of how individuals make sense of the paradoxes and impasses at stake. None of the examples here analysed serve as tools to draw on generalisations about the purposes and concerns of Cuban cinema at large. They shed light, however, on the way in which contradictions and paradoxes form an integral part of Cuban visual culture formation and development.

Alea's work emblematises the immediate sense of loss of the individual's belonging to a certain social class shattered after 1959. Backed up by the technical support of the ICAIC, his vision entails the need to mobilise the contradictions brought about by the new socio-political context. His work is part of a larger cultural narrative where recent history is not necessarily used as an element of propaganda, but rather as a thought-provoking tool. At least, such was the claim of Alfredo Guevara when he asserted: 'Art is not propaganda, and not even for the sake of the revolution it would be fair to swipe away its implications.'<sup>41</sup> Along the same lines, in an article published in 1981 in *Cine Cubano* one reads: '[cinema] has attempted to contribute, throughout its history and in proportion to its energies, to rescue cultural identity'.<sup>42</sup>

The ethos of many of Cuba's filmmakers could be thought of as one questioning, negotiating, and even reconciling seemingly opposing visions of the state and Cuban identity. *Viva Cuba* is a perfect example of a non-state-supported film that, far from challenging the government's authority, reveals the still-present paradoxes of Cuban identity consciousness, of nostalgia and belonging. The development of visual culture, beyond being defined as means for expression in tandem with a controversial context, is also intrinsically related to the way in which the notion of identity has been built not

as a radical new beginning, but as a collective effort that embraces a number of historical and political layers.

---

---

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Julio César Guanche Zaldívar, 'Tensiones Históricas del Campo Político-Cultural: La Polemica Alfredo Guevara-Blas Roca', *Perfiles de la Cultura Cubana* (May-August 2003), p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> 'Cien Cines Cubanos', introduction note to *Cine Cubano*, No. 100 (1981, published by Alfredo Guevara), p. 1-2.