

CONCIENTIZAR CONTRA EL MACHISMO:

Gender and Cuban Revolutionary Film, 1960-1990

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Since World War II, progressive Latin Americans have fought for autonomy not only economically, in the form of ‘import substitution industrialization,’ but also culturally, in the form of an independent ‘culture industry.’¹ The content and form of progressive Latin American cinema, especially since 1960, reflect the conviction that film can bring about social transformation. Cuban revolutionary film offers the most potent manifestation of film as social commentator and catalyst for social change because in Cuba the ‘decolonización’ and ‘concientización’ movements were raised to the level of national agenda whereas in the rest of Latin America they were only espoused by a small number of leftist intellectuals. Despite prolonged economic difficulties, the Cuban Government continues to invest precious resources in cinema to entertain, educate, and ‘stir the pot,’ as expressed by one Cuban sociologist.² Cuban films seek to create sociopolitical awareness and a sense of responsibility among Cuba’s citizens. They underscore the difficulties involved in the project of creating an equal revolutionary society, focusing on the social problems of homophobia, racism, and sexism borne of a colonial legacy of inequality. Films and documentaries therefore provide an excellent opportunity to document social progress in Cuba.

Among the issues of inequality, the greatest emphasis by far has been placed on sexism. In fact, as argued by Jean Stubbs “it is probably safe to say that hardly a single film has not addressed, in some way or another, changing gender relations within the revolution.”³ Today, it seems that Marvin D’Lugo’s “Transparent Women: Gender and Nation in Cuban Cinema” has provided the dominant interpretive paradigm with which gender and Cuban films are being considered.⁴ D’Lugo argues that since the 1960s, Cuban films have used the female figure as a transparent vehicle through which the hopes, ideals, and realities of the new revolutionary nation are expressed. The interpretation is derived from a comment made by Humberto Solás in reference to the women in his 1968 film *Lucía* .

This paper will propose an alternative to the ‘transparency’ approach to gender and Cuban film, arguing that Cuban filmmakers have succeeded in both portraying ‘real’ female characters and making criticisms *specific to gender* in Cuban society. Starting with an overview of the New Latin American cinema movement and the Cuban film industry to help contextualize Cuban film, the study will explain why the issue of gender is such a central concern to revolutionary society and examine how this issue has been treated by Cuban filmmakers in five films produced between 1968 and 1990.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Based on the Marxist critical theories written by Theodor Adorno and Antonio Gramsci, many 1960s studies of media suggested that cinema served to legitimize the authority of state institutions, build political and cultural consensus, and impede the development of working class

¹Julianne Burton, “Introduction,” in *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America: Conversations with Filmmakers* , ed. Julianne Burton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), ix.

²Marta Nuñez, interview by author, University of Havana, May 1992.

³Jean Stubbs, “Images of Gender in Revolutionary Cuba,” in *Cuba: A View From Inside, Short Films By/About Cuban Women* (New York: The Center for Cuban Studies, 1995), 3.

⁴Marvin D’Lugo, “Transparent Women: Gender and Nation in Cuban Cinema,” in *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas* , ed. John King, Ana M. López, Manuel Alvarado (Worcester: BFI Publishing, 1993)

consciousness.⁵ For these authors, the media (including film) unproblematically transmitted messages which were unproblematically absorbed, the result being a “monolithic, and ultimately alienating ‘culture industry.’”⁶

Of late, this “magic bullet” interpretative paradigm has been abandoned and replaced by the practice of examining mass media (including films) as “dynamic sites of struggle over representation, and complex spaces in which subjectivities are constructed and identities are contested.”⁷ Within this new movement, a major topic under consideration is the role of mass media in constructing gender relations.⁸ This analysis of gender in Cuban film will be done in the context of the last approach. In considering individual films the study will therefore focus not only on the message, but also on how it is constructed and communicated.

THE NEW LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA MOVEMENT

The New Latin American Cinema movement (1960-) was very much influenced by the Marxist perception of mass media as an alienating, hegemonic force. Based on such readings, young Latin Americans deemed it paramount to challenge the then-dominant forms of media. Of all the mass media, film was heralded as “the most appropriate cultural means of social transformation” because it was accessible to all social strata.⁹ The new wave of Latin American filmmakers rejected the studio-based production system developed in Hollywood. They felt that the Hollywood model was hierarchical and overly compartmentalized--directors were subordinated to studio bosses and stars, and commercial and technical concerns were emphasized over content, all of which guaranteed an “artificial, insular, alienating product.”¹⁰

In the 1960s, young Latin American filmmakers borrowed from the Italian Neorealists production techniques such as natural sets, nonprofessional actors, a much smaller production crew and inexpensive, flexible equipment. Many of the films used Italian director Fernando Birri’s documentary mode, a mode considered to be national, popular, and realist. To these Neorealist concepts were added Argentine Fernando Solanas’s concept of a ‘third cinema’ which emphasizes the interaction between film and audience in open, essay-style documentaries that aimed to spur spectators to political action.¹¹

Progressive Latin American filmmakers began to produce films for, about, and with the disenfranchised Latin American masses. They sought to expose national reality, which they believed to be distorted or hidden by the commercial media. Intent on exposing the difficulties of the rural and urban poor, these socially conscious filmmakers embraced the entire past and present of their countries. They examined the privileged and the marginalized sectors, “historical and contemporary

⁵Debra Situlnik, “Anthropology and Mass Media,” in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22 (1993): 295.

⁶Situlnik, “Anthropology and Mass Media”, 296.

⁷Situlnik, “Anthropology and Mass Media,” 296.

⁸Situlnik, “Anthropology and Mass Media,” 296.

⁹Burton, “Introduction,” ix.

¹⁰Burton, “Introduction,” x.

¹¹Burton, “Introduction,” xi.

as well as invented examples of exploitation and rebellion, complicity, and refusal, all in the name of the discovery or recovery of a more authentic national identity.”¹²

The specific priorities and approaches of the New Latin American Cinema movement vary according to country, period, and filmmaker--from realism to expressionism, from experimental and self-reflexive styles to the transparency of classical forms. However, all of the movement’s participants share a commitment to film as a means of transforming society and expressing national and regional cultural autonomy.¹³

THE CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY FILM INDUSTRY

Prior to 1959, a large number of Cubans went to the movies. In the 1950s, out of a population of less than seven million, 1.5 million people went per week; nevertheless, between 1930 and 1958, only eighty feature films were made in Cuba.¹⁴ Cubans were accustomed to watching an imported product. In order to rectify this situation, the ‘Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográfica’ was created only three months after Castro took power. In the early stages of the revolution, Cuba represented the hope for national, continental liberation, and cinema was perceived as an important part of this continental struggle.¹⁵ The 1960s, the historical moment of the Cuban revolution, coincided with the period of aesthetic revolution in European and Latin American Cinema described above.

Like their Latin American counterparts, Cuban filmmakers sought to make didactic cinema by borrowing from the Italian Neorealists, the French New Wave, and the new documentarists. They also put their own twist on Solanas’s ‘third cinema,’ creating a new method which problematized filmmaking within the film itself. This method, coined ‘imperfect cinema’ by its author and Cuba’s foremost film theorist Julio García Espinosa, reveals that Cuban filmmaking has been a process of transculturation in order to fit the revolutionary agenda.

‘Imperfect cinema’ employs Italian Neorealist filmmaking techniques and those of Solanas’s ‘third cinema’ toward the Cuban revolutionary goal of ‘concientizar.’ Emphasizing “process over predigested analysis, experimentation and participation over the polish and compartmentalization of the Hollywood and European traditions,” the ideal imperfect film “makes a spectacle out of the destruction of the spectacle, performing this process jointly with the viewer.”¹⁶ Film was integrated into the formative revolutionary process in which notions of ‘truth’ would undergo constant redefinition as filmmaking itself became a process of ‘concientizar.’¹⁷

In its early years, Cuban revolutionary cinema was internationally acclaimed for its imaginative and critical nature, both in theme and format. The film industry’s initial creativity

¹²Burton, “Introduction,” xi .

¹³Burton, “Introduction,” xiv.

¹⁴John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1990), 145.

¹⁵John King, *Magical Reels* , 148.

¹⁶Burton, “Introduction,” p. xii. His influence is especially evident in *De Cierta Manera* (1974), *Hasta Cierta Punto* (1983), and *¡Plaff!* (1988)

¹⁷Stubbs, “Images of Gender in Revolutionary Cuba,” 3.

represented an impressive contribution toward Cuba's goal of creating a culture that was new and independent, but by the mid-1970s, much of the creativity and corresponding international attention had waned. Many consider Cuban films made since then to be "more conformist."¹⁸ Nevertheless, within the island, Cuban films are still immensely popular: although they made up only seven percent of all films shown in 1987, they attracted twenty percent of the market share (more up-to-date statistics are hard to come by.)¹⁹ Overall, the creation of ICAIC and continuous public funding has helped Cuban cinema grow significantly. Between 1959 and 1987, Cuba made 164 feature-length films, of which 112 were fiction, 49 were documentary and 3 were animation. The same time period witnessed the production of 1,370 newsreels, 1,010 documentary shorts, and 16 fiction shorts.²⁰

Today, the ICAIC budget has been severely cut due to what Cubans call "the Special Period" which began in 1989 when the USSR ceased to be the generous sponsor of the Revolution. In order to adjust to the new budgetary constraints, and in search of more innovative forms, ICAIC developed the 'talleres de creación' which enable young directors to join a group workshop through which each director gets to make a short film. It must be underscored that even in this drastically difficult economic situation, the state continues to dedicate resources to films. This is because, in a society which derives its vitality from a constant spirit of re-examination and renewal, films provide a central mechanism with which to amuse, teach and create dialogue.²¹ Cuban films consistently seek to create sociopolitical awareness about issues such as homophobia, age, and sex discrimination.

GENDER EQUALITY VERSUS THE CULTURE OF MACHISMO

In his 1963 "Speech to the Women," Castro stated that: "[w]omen are simultaneously exploited as workers and discriminated against as women."²² The 'Federación de Mujeres Cubanas' has since helped women join the workforce by providing training, maternity benefits and socialized childcare. As a result, female participation in the paid labor force has jumped from less than twenty to almost forty percent.²³ But this increased representation in paid labor has not been matched by a growing male presence on the domestic front: in 1992, Cuban sociologists reported that ninety percent of house chores are still done by women.²⁴ The 1975 Family Code attempted to remedy this by encouraging *both* parents to participate in rearing the children and caring for the home,²⁵ but it has had little success. Women facing the burdens of their multiple roles as workers, union members,

¹⁸Stubbs, "Images of Gender in Revolutionary Cuba," 3.

¹⁹Oscar Getino, *Cine latinoamericano, economía y nuevas tecnologías audiovisuales* (Mérida: Universidad de los Andes, 1987), 37.

²⁰King, *Magical Reels*, 146.

²¹Julianne Burton, "Revolutionary Cuban Cinema, First Part," in *Jump Cut* 19 (December, 1978): 19. Also: Marta Nuñez, interview by author, University of Havana, May 1992.

²²Fidel Castro quoted in Susan Kaufman Purcell, "Modernizing Women for a Modern Society: The Cuban Case," in *Female and Male in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1973), 261.

²³Stubbs, "Images of Gender in Revolutionary Cuba," 5.

²⁴Based on the findings of a 1992 study; Marta Nuñez, interview by author, University of Havana, May 1992.

²⁵The Family Code stipulates that "Marriage is established with equal rights and duties for both parties." Article twenty-six reads: "Both parties must care for the family they have created and each must cooperate with the other in the education, upbringing and guidance of the children ... They must participate, to the extent of their capacity or possibilities, in the running of the home and cooperate so tht it will develop in the best possible way." *Family Code* (Guantánamo, 1980)

mothers and wives have increasingly chosen divorce: 40% of households are now headed by single mothers. As one woman from Havana remarked: "I am single because if he won't share the work and respect your job, then why stay with him?"²⁶

The triple burden is shown in many Cuban films, as are other manifestations of machismo which include an unwillingness on the part of men to let their wives work; infidelity and the double standard; violence against women; discrimination in the workplace; and the objectification of women. Many recent critics of gender and Cuban film do not discuss these social 'facts' relating to men and women in their analyses. Marvin D'Lugo does not, and neither do Isabel Arredondo, author of an essay on women in Cuban film tellingly entitled "From Transparent to Translucid," or Catherine Benamou, whose study on women in Cuban film reads: "notwithstanding their effectiveness in promoting women as active protagonists both within the narrative and on the stage of social change, [Cuban] films have tended to construct women as preeminently social subjects, in which the ultimate referent and protagonist of change is the national collectivity."²⁷ In portraying the focus on women as merely a 'tool,' these critics do not consider why gender inequality is an important issue in and of itself, and do not give credit where credit is due to Cuban filmmakers for tackling the issues of sexism and machismo.

All three interpretations were evidently derived from Humberto Solás' comment about *Lucía*, made in 1968:

Lucía no es un filme sobre mujeres; es un filme sobre la sociedad. Pero dentro de esa sociedad, escogí el carácter más vulnerable, aquél que es más afectado en cualquier momento por las contradicciones y el cambio ... el carácter femenino tiene una gran relación con el potencial dramático, mediante el cual quiero expresar todo el fenómeno social que quiero reflejar. Esta es una posición muy personal y muy práctica que no tiene nada que ver con el feminismo per se..²⁸

This essay argues that it is a mistake to apply Solás's "posición muy personal" to the majority of films made since *Lucía*. The author does not agree that most female characters in Cuban film have been superficial or 'transparent' referents of the national struggle. In fact, the somewhat superficial *Lucías* in the first two segments of Solás's film are the exception to the rule: the female characters in most Cuban films are rich and complex, not 'transparent women.' The female characters and their male counterparts display a feature of ambiguity--ambiguous emotions, ambiguous behaviour--which make them seem very 'real' and by no means 'transparent.' The reader should keep this position in mind when considering the discussion of individual films below.

²⁶Conversation with author, Community for the Defense of the Revolution meeting in Havana, May 1992.

²⁷Isabel Arredondo, "From Transparent to Translucid: Cuban Filmmakers in 1990," (Washington, D.C.: paper prepared for the Latin American Studies Association conference, 1995); Catherine Benamou, "Women's Interventions in Cuban Documentary Films," in *Cuba: A View From Inside, Short Films By/About Cuban Women* (New York: The Center for Cuban Studies, 1995), 8.

²⁸Humberto Solas, "Que es *Lucía*? Apuntes acerca del cine por Humberto Solás," en *Cine Cubano* 53: 20

LUCIA. directed by Humberto Solás (1968)

Form: Humberto Solás's *Lucía* received international critical acclaim for its innovative use of the camera. Critics praised the film for its incorporation of realism, illusionism, and allegory--contrasting styles which created an "internal resonance" that "enriched the viewers' understanding of the film medium."²⁹ ICAIC's founder argued that this juxtaposition of different forms was the most original tactic invented to achieve the institution's goal of demystifying cinema for the entire population, "to work, in a way, against our own power; to reveal all the tricks, all the resources of language; to dismantle all the mechanisms of cinematic hypnosis."³⁰

By using multiple styles, Solás forces the observer to think dialectically. Different historical periods and different classes are depicted in conflicting visual style: the colonial aristocracy in the first segment is presented in a normal contrast range and the lower classes in high contrast. The upper class *Lucía* in the first segment is fuzzy, the middle class *Lucía* in the second segment is romantically unclear, and the working class *Lucía* in the third segment is absolutely clear. Film Critic John Mraz explains: "Situated in a context of revolutionary transformation where the 'fact of history' is ever-present, and rooted in historical-materialist mode of analysis, Cuban filmmakers are concerned to present the dialectic of perception and consciousness that is present in history."³¹

As mentioned above, Solás conveys changes in consciousness not only through contrast, but also by using completely different film styles. He plays with the conventional devices of several film genres within each of the narratives. For example, in the first segment he borrows from the techniques of romantic and historical epic films, then uses at a critical moments the devices of surrealist films or films attempting to convey altered psychic states. In the second segment, the film style shifts back-and-forth between romantic Hollywood styles of the thirties and forties and the starkness of Italian Neorealism. The final segment mixes the open documentary style with the stylized features of folkloric drama.³²

Synopsis: The trilogy *Lucía* seeks to represent revolutionary change through three narratives in which the major female character is named *Lucía*. The first takes place during the 1895 revolution against Spain. The aristocratic *Lucía*, a single woman in her thirties, is seduced by a Spanish military man who poses as an 'apolitical' half-Cuban, half-Spaniard returning to his homeland. Rafael convinces *Lucía* to reveal the location of a secret rebel camp, the family plantation where her brother and his army are in hiding. Shortly thereafter, Rafael leads the Spanish troops to the rebel camp where they kill the ambushed Cubans. In the final scene, a crazed *Lucía*, driven mad at the sight of her dead brother and his army, stabs Rafael to death in the central square of la Havana.

²⁹Burton, "Introduction," xii.

³⁰Alfredo Guevara, founder of ICAIC quoted in Mraz, "Lucía: Visual Style and Historical Portrayal," *Jump Cut* 19 (December 1978): 21

³¹John Mraz, "Lucía: Visual Styles and Historical Portrayal," 22; For further information on *Lucía*, see Eduardo Lopez-Morales, "Descubrimiento de Lucia," in *Cine Cubano* 124: 42-49; Renée Mendez Capote and Graziella Pogolotti, "Lucía 1895; Lucía 1932; Lucía 196-," in *Cine Cubano* 53: 6-17; Humberto Solas "Humberto Solás," in *Cine Cubano* 68: 37-38.

³²Peter W. Rose, "the *Orestia* and *Lucía* : The Politics of the Trilogy Form" (essay in the collection of the Center for Cuban Studies, New York), 14.

The second narrative takes place in 1932 during the revolution against dictator Gerardo Machado. The wealthy, bourgeois Lucía II falls in love with a young revolutionary named Aldo. She becomes a factory worker and participates actively in the agitation that leads to Machado's downfall. The new Batista regime that replaces Machado is equally corrupt, so Aldo and Lucía return to revolutionary struggle--Aldo in the streets, Lucía in her factory. Meanwhile, the new regime seduces into materialism and drunken revelry their friends Antonio and Flora, once so committed to the revolutionary cause. Part II concludes with Aldo being shot in an unsuccessful assassination attempt and a close-up on a severely depressed Lucía, alone and pregnant.

Part III takes place in the early 1960s in the countryside. Lucía III is an illiterate peasant working on a cooperative farm. She meets Tomás, they fall passionately in love and get married. After the marriage, Tomás refuses to let her continue working. He is insanely jealous, especially when a young literacy teacher from Havana moves in with them to educate Lucía. Fed up with Tomás' oppressive behavior, Lucía finally leaves him to return to work. The film ends with an ironic twist on the 'romantic' beach scene as Lucía and Tomás wrestle--her saying she loves him but she wants to work, him telling her she must serve and obey him.

Content: At the level of content, Solás uses sexual politics to explore political, social and economic change; to reiterate his quote, "*Lucía* no es un filme sobre mujeres; es un filme sobre la sociedad..." In the first segment, rape is the predominant allegory for the nation. Shortly after the film begins, Lucía's friend Rafaela tells the story of how the (now deranged) Fernandina and other Cuban nuns were raped by Spanish soldiers whom they believed to be dead. Rafaela, obviously empowered by the attention of her audience, keeps a controlling, manipulative distance from the tale, identifying with the soldiers' excitement: her eyes sparkle suggestively as she recounts the tale, and she even uses the terms "Here comes the good part" and "That is when the party began." In sharp contrast to Rafaela, Lucía is deeply disturbed: she identifies with the pious nuns by envisioning herself as one of them.³³ Lucía is like the Cuban nation, used and manipulated by her Spanish 'lover' Rafael who kills the rebellion and protects the 'colony.' When she stabs Rafael in the final scene, she demonstrates the potential revolutionary power of the nation. Meanwhile, throughout the film the crazed Fernandina is a symbol for national 'conciencia' as she repeatedly cries "Wake Up Cubans!!" and urges Lucía not to "go" with Rafael.

Whereas the predominant image in the first segment is rape, the second one focuses on women's access to the "man's world" of armed struggle.³⁴ Aldo enlists the bourgeois Lucía to the revolutionary struggle against Machado, becoming her lover and companion and, later, her husband. When she demands to join him in the following struggle against Batista, he rejects her support and

³³ Solás shows her literally 'identifying herself' by placing the same actress who plays Lucía in the rape segment. Burton-Carvajal's analysis is fascinating: "The telling of this tale is a modeling of the polarities of spectatorship--engaged or aloof, 'othering' or identificatory. Solás, in registering the differing reactions ... reminds us that spectatorship is not neutral, that we all choose a position from which to 'see' the experience of others as it is recounted to us ... Though, at the conclusion of the first ... segment of the trilogy, both [the poor] Fernandina and [the rich] Lucía inhabit a space of madness outside the society to which they once belonged, their alliance also figures a future nationhood bound together by the treachery and suffering that result from colonization." Julianne Burton-Carvajal, "Regarding Rape: Fictions of Origin and Film Spectatorship," in *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, ed. John King, Ana M. López, Manuel Alvarado (Worcester: BFI Publishing, 1993), 265.

³⁴ Benamou, "Women's Interventions in Cubana Documentary Film," 8.

tells her that the armed insurrection is not the place for her: “go back to your parents, I can’t give you anything.” The segment also links political corruption to the ‘corruption’ of love--infidelity, prostitution, and the objectification of women--through the story of Antonio and Flora, companions of Aldo and Lucía.³⁵ Lucía watches Flora demand money from Antonio who for his part becomes corrupt, giving himself over to political opportunism, alcoholism and the brothel-like revelry of Havana. There is a particularly powerful ‘pornographic’ scene in this segment where the hand-held, shaky camera ‘zooms in’ on breast, thighs, lipstick-covered lips and drunk men grabbing and kissing them.

The third segment demonstrates how difficult it is to change sexual patterns: though the revolution has triumphed, partially emancipating women from their ‘domestic slavery,’ the story’s protagonist holds his wife back because of his sexist and machista beliefs. The story shows how the revolution’s insistence that women engage in ‘productive,’ salaried labor pitted the prestige of the revolution against male power in the home, “*nacionalismo* versus *machismo*.”³⁶ Tomás’ obsessive macho personality, an obstacle to change in the new revolutionary society, is mocked through the depiction of exaggerated behavior--for example when he punches a fellow worker for dancing *at a distance* with Lucía and when he systematically nails all the windows shut to keep his wife at home.

During the second scene, the singer-narrator explicitly chides Tomás for his failure to adjust and conform to the new values of the revolutionary society, and for his unwillingness to let Lucía grow through work and study: “The scourge of jealousy makes one make mistakes. It was our grandfathers’ mistake to make women slaves ... this behavior has no place today.” The community leader also chides Tomás “You are staying behind,” but he privately tells his wife “With or without revolution, that mule [‘burro’] is not going to change.” While the third segment criticizes Tomás for his jealousy and machismo, it also reveals Lucía’s initial resignation and complicity. When the literacy teacher tells her she deserves better and does not have to be a slave, she responds “I like him the way he is.” The third segment underscores a dilemma which all Cubans must face: the revolution often preaches behaviour which contrasts with their upbringing. The result is inevitably ambiguous.

DE CIERTA MANERA. directed by Sara Gómez (1977)

Form: *De cierta manera* was the first and only feature film to be directed by a woman, a black woman, at that, but it had to be finished by a man--Tomás Gutiérrez Alea--after Gómez’s untimely death. In the film, *process* is very much emphasized: both Gómez and Gutiérrez Alea were most obviously influenced by Julio García Espinosa’s concept of ‘imperfect cinema,’ which, according to one critic, was actually developed in reaction to the international acclaim won by *Lucía*.³⁷ In *De cierta manera*, technology is kept to a minimum and sixteen millimeter film is used to achieve “a closer relation between reality and film” and “better communication with the spectator.”³⁸ Gómez

³⁵Lopez Morales, “Descubrimiento de Lucia”, 47.

³⁶Alfred Padula and Lois Smith, “Women in Socialist Cuba 1959-1984” in *Cuba: A Current Issues Reader* (Halifax: International Development Studies, 1992), 82.

³⁷“Wary of the international acclaim garnered by Gutiérrez Alea’s *Memories of Underdevelopment* and Solás’s *Lucía*, Cuban filmmaker and theorist Julio García Espinosa called for an ‘imperfect cinema.’” Burton, “Introduction”, xii.

³⁸Marucha Hernández (photographer), “Camera on Reality: A Tribute to Sara Gomez,” in *Cuba: A View From Inside, Short Films By/About Cuban Women*, 8.

borrowing techniques from the documentary mode in order to avoid as much as possible the image of cinema as art, instead seeking to communicate the subject matter of the film as a representation of social reality.³⁹ She also uses reflexive devices to “guard against presumptions of transparency and an overly authoritative approach to commentary.”⁴⁰

The film itself is like a visual essay. The fictional love story is frequently interrupted with visual subheadings, ‘title pages’ to documentary segments which depict and describe the anti-progressive cultural forces that plague historically marginal communities. Film critic Carlos Galiano explains the structure of *De cierta manera* in terms that help us link it to García Espinosa’s concept of ‘Imperfect Cinema’: “In order to reflect the objective reality of the environment it deals with, the film makes use of the documentary style, using forms of cinema vérité, and, at other times, puts aside fiction with the evident purpose of informing and educating.”⁴¹ This combination of styles gives the spectator the chance to reflect upon rather than simply absorb what is going on in the story. Another technique borrowed from ‘Imperfect Cinema’ is Gómez’s seamless use of professional actors and ‘personajes reales’ who can relate to the events depicted in the film.

Synopsis: The film opens with an often repeated image of buildings being smashed--a powerful symbol that revolution can more easily destroy old slum neighbourhoods and construct new ones than it can break down old thought processes and forge revolutionary consciousness.⁴² The story takes place in a housing project in Miraflores, built by ‘newly emancipated’ Cubans who formerly resided in shantytowns surrounding Havana. There are three basic story-lines in the film: the difficulties of a middle-class teacher placed in a school full of previously ‘marginalized’ students; the moral dilemma faced by a mestizo construction worker when he must decide whether to denounce his lazy friend; and the relationship that develops between the teacher and worker. The film also incorporates documentaries regarding the shantytowns, the lack of education and frequency of pregnancy among marginalized teenage girls, and the fusion of two colonial forces--Spanish male-chauvinism and African religious traditions--which helped to create machismo.

Content: *De cierta manera* is a sociological analysis of life in marginal communities which examines the effects of marginalization on psychological, moral, and cultural behaviour.⁴³ The film underscores the importance of breaking down old thought patterns along with the outward manifestations of inequality. *De cierta manera*’s content should be considered in light of one writer’s comments about the director :

“the language of her films came of detailed study based on academic knowledge and the findings of a social anthropologist and ethnologist but much more out of daily practice, the urgency of serving the cause of a people. Sara believed in the popular culture of Cuba and the Americas...She believed in the change the revolution was bringing about.

³⁹Rigoberto López, “Hablar de Sara, De Cierta Manera,” in *Cine Cubano* 93: 114.

⁴⁰Benamou, “Women’s Interventions in Cuban Documentary Film,” 9.

⁴¹Carlos Galiano, “One Way or Another” (n.p., n.d., papers of the Center for Cuban Studies, New York)

⁴²Dennis West, “One Way or Another,” in *Caribbean Review* (no journal number or date recorded: papers of the Center for Cuban Studies, New York City)

⁴³Gerardo Chijon, “De cierta manera,” in *Cine Cubano* 93: 104.

She took on her essential human condition through three underlying components: race, gender and nationality.”⁴⁴

The problem of gender-related inequality is treated both directly, in the form of the documentary on the Abacúa religion and the girls leaving school to have babies; and indirectly, in the form of the challenging but progressive relationship between the male and female protagonists. The Abacúa documentary is perhaps the most powerful segment of the film to help explain the colonial legacy of machismo. Abacúa society is based on a myth in which a woman exposes the secret of a great god. In response to this treason, women are excluded from the secret society and male members must subscribe to a “man’s code” of secrecy. The voice-over documentary explains that goats are castrated and killed to demonstrate the punishment of the traitorous female, then states: “this cultural manifestation epitomizes the social aspirations, norms, and values of male chauvinism in Cuban society.” The voice-over concludes that “Abacúa society’s traditional, secret, exclusive nature sets it against progress and prevents it from assimilating the values of modern life, therefore in the present stage it generates marginality, promoting a code of parallel social relations that is the antithesis of social integration.”⁴⁵

Indeed, the fictional story seems to prove the point: the worker’s friend has sex with women, apparently just to brag about it, instead of showing up at work in the neighbourhood construction project. He gets away with it by saying he is visiting his sick mother. The protagonist is furious at his friend’s lack of responsibility, but he feels bound to the male ‘code of secrecy.’ We see him asking himself “what is a man? what is a revolutionary?” until his conscience finally pushes him to obey revolutionary responsibility over machismo and he denounces his friend at a public meeting. When his girlfriend congratulates him for his actions, he shouts “I acted like a woman!!” and storms off. In sync with reality, the revolutionary transformation of the male protagonists is painfully slow and ambiguous.

RETRATO DE TERESA. directed by Pastor Vega (1979)

[Note that the discussions of the next four films, *Retrato de Teresa*, *Lejanía*, *Una novia para David*, and *Papeles secundarios*, will not include a treatment of form since the imaginative techniques employed in the late sixties and early seventies have been largely replaced by the classic metanarrative form that emphasizes content over form. It is important to mention, however, that at least two other films did follow the ‘imperfect cinema’ model. They are *Hasta cierto punto* (1983) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (created as an update to *De cierta manera*) and *Plaff* (1988.) These films very much problematize filmmaking, making the viewer aware that s/he is watching a construction of reality. They also provide a powerful social critique, *Hasta cierto punto* touching on gender issues including machismo, date rape and the double standard; *Plaff* depicting the barriers to a professional woman’s advancement created by bureaucracy and discrimination in the workplace.]

⁴⁴Nancy Morejón, “Sarita: A Tribute to Sara Gomez,” in *Cuba: A View From Inside, Short Films By/About Cuban Women*, 14.

⁴⁵Jean Stubbs commented at the October 1995 Latin American Studies Association Conference in Washington, D.C. that Sara Gómez would have objected to the voice-overs in the documentaries.

Retrato de Teresa traces the emotional crisis of a couple, reflecting the changes that have taken place in the Cuban family as a consequence of the revolutionary transformation process.⁴⁶ In one rather slow-moving but effective segment of the film, a day in the life of Teresa is meticulously traced. She gets up before her husband and children to prepare coffee and food, get the children dressed, do the laundry and hang it outside, all *before* going to work, where she is under great pressure to perform ‘faster’ in order to meet the ‘objectives’ of the section of which she is leader. This depiction and the complaints of her ‘compañeras’ reveal that although the revolution has been successful in emancipating women into the workforce, it has a long way to go in appropriately adjusting the traditional division of labor in the home. The result is a “triple burden” for the average Cuban women. She must work all day at a factory, is expected to participate in union and civic activities, and must also ‘take care’ of husband and children by doing all the cooking and cleaning. In an excellent scene where the union is recriminating Teresa’s group for underproduction and absenteeism, declaring that they will go around to individually talk to the women who are “having problems,” Teresa tells them to “talk to the husbands--many of them don’t do anything at home!”

When Teresa opts to put in extra time at work to help coordinate a civic talent show, her husband claims she is neglecting him and the children: “work, work, work, what about me?,” he complains. Under pressure from her husband to come home earlier, and relieved that the show is almost over, Teresa is placed in a situation of utter frustration when she is asked, in front of a union meeting, to help perfect the show to compete at a national level. She declines the offer, to her ‘revolutionary’ shame. When the factory ‘social coordinator’ tries to convince her to continue because she is ‘a born leader,’ she asks him to talk to her husband. The husband acquiesces, but regardless, he continues to pressure Teresa to spend more time at home, and eventually leaves her, “fed up with waiting at home alone.”

Teresa’s mother is completely unsympathetic and tells her: “the woman owes herself to her husband and her children... women will always be women and men will always be men. That, even Fidel cannot change.” Frustrated and alone, Teresa puts all of her energy into the show, and it is a resounding success. The two coordinators of the show, Teresa and Oscar, are interviewed on television after the performance. The commentator asks Oscar all the technical questions, and reserves for Teresa only superficial compliments and the question of whether her husband is jealous of Oscar. Evidently, the commentator seems to feel Oscar did all the real work and she is only a side-kick. *Retrato de Teresa* shows us that many Cubans--especially husbands, but also mothers and friends--who were not educated with revolutionary ideas continue to act according to the tradition of sexism, obstructing complete individual fulfillment for women who are involved in a relationship.

The final issue raised by the film, again deeply related to gender, is the double standard regarding infidelity, still very much alive in Cuban society.⁴⁷ The husband Ramón, a TV repair-man, has an affair with a young girl who seduces him while he is ‘weak and lonely’ by luring him into her house to fix her television. Teresa finds out about this affair, and is very upset. Her friend tries to

⁴⁶Translated from “Retrato de Teresa: Synopsis,” from ICAIC, 1979 (papers of the Center for Cuban Studies, New York City)

⁴⁷Referred to as the ‘doble moral’ in “Retrato de Teresa: De La Realidad a La Ficción,” in *Cine Cubano* 98: 129.

comfort her by saying: “that’s how men are,” to which the ever-defiant Teresa responds “And if I had done it?” When Ramón tries to get her back, claiming “you’re the only one I love. I had to do it, I’m a man,” Teresa asks the same question, to which he responds “It’s not the same, I’m a man.” The film ends here: with Teresa walking off, head held high amidst the crowded streets of Havana, accompanied by the lyrics of a sexist popular song: “Polish the floor, Teresa ... In love, woman is like a hen, when her rooster dies she runs after men.”

LEJANIA. directed by Jesús Díaz Rodríguez (1985)

Lejanía is commonly regarded as the first Cuban movie to treat the issue of exile. However, it is also full of indirect comments on gender. The movie narrates a visit from Susana, who comes to see her son Reinaldo ten years after she ‘abandoned’ him in Cuba (he was not able to leave with her because he was of military age.) Through his wife Aleida’s conversation with Susana, we learn that the separation was very difficult for Reinaldo. He became a thief and an alcoholic after her departure. Aleida met Reinaldo when he was selling off the items in his mother’s bourgeois home in order to pay for his alcohol problem. Aleida’s love and support helped Reinaldo straighten out so that the son Susana meets is a responsible, hard-working engineer who has tried to put the past behind him.

Marvin D’Lugo’s interpretation of the film is that the female figure of Susana “problematizes issues of national identity around the emotional contemporary cultural theme [of] the return of Cubans who had emigrated to the United States.” He argues that the Cuban audience “is led to read a decisive historical intertext through the presence of Susana who discovers in objects and spaces of her former home a nostalgia for a Cuba that exists only in her mind.” He also suggests that Susana and Aleida, and Reinaldo’s cousin (now a New Yorker) figure as “social and historical positions that transcend their status either as women or as representative members of a family.” According to D’Lugo, “the axis of dramatic tension lies squarely in the conflict between emotionally compromised positions and intellectually and politically ‘correct’ postures with regard to Susana, whom we are brought to see either as an anguished maternal figure or as a politically enemy.” Meanwhile, D’Lugo argues, when Susana voices classist and racist judgments against Aleida, the latter becomes a symbol for the egalitarian aspirations of revolutionary society.⁴⁸

This is indeed an interesting interpretation to consider, though as mentioned earlier this author believes D’Lugo’s analysis as a whole places too much weight on the connection between the female figure and the nation. Our interest now is to examine the dialogue mentioned by D’Lugo between Susana and Reinaldo near the beginning of the film. The dialogue, or rather series of rhetorical questions to which Reinaldo grudgingly responds, contrasts old values with new ones. Susana asks “Why did you marry a divorcee?” and says “I would have preferred for you to marry a señorita,” harking back to old ideals of female sexual purity. Reinaldo responds that “Nowadays, nobody worries about that.” Next, Susana comments on Aleida’s dark-skin, and asks “Is she mulatta?,” adding that there has never been *one of them* in their family. Reinaldo basically ignores her, but is later confronted with another series of questions about what Aleida *does* for him: “Does she take care of you?” to which he replies something like: “Yes. She gives me love. We share the

⁴⁸D’Lugo, “Transparent Women: Gender and Nation in Cuban Cinema”, 284-287.

work because she's a full-time chemist; she cooks and I do the dishes, I buy the groceries and she cleans the house."

This sends a very different message to the viewer than *Retrato de Teresa*, suggesting that at least in some cases machismo in the home is declining. This impression is reinforced by the fact Reinaldo resists adultery with his cousin Ana, despite the fact they were evidently very intimate and both he and Ana are visibly tempted to relive the past.

Overall, the relationship between Aleida and Reinaldo is far more equal and progressive than those depicted in the earlier films we have considered; however, there is one disturbing area regarding male-female relationships which seems to lag behind: the use of physical force against women. At the risk of blowing it out of proportion, it is important to take note of a scene where Reinaldo, drunk and frustrated with the emotional roller coaster his mother's visit is precipitating, slaps and pushes his wife, throwing an empty vodka bottle to the floor. *Lejanía* joins many other Cuban movies this author has seen to create the impression that males use force very frequently during domestic fights. This observation is supported by surveys done by sociologists in Cuba: in 1992, out of one-hundred women, twenty-five to thirty admitted they knew of husbands who were beating their wives. The same study showed that the increased economic pressure of the 'Special Period' created a rise of alcoholism and violence in Cuban homes.⁴⁹

UNA NOVIA PARA DAVID. directed by Orlando Rojas (1985)

The last two films to be discussed are both by director Orlando Rojas: they are *Una novia para David* (1985) and *Papeles secundarios* (1989). As with *Lejanía*, although the films are not specifically about gender, a lot of comment is made about the issue indirectly.⁵⁰ *Una novia para David* begins with David, an attractive adolescent, being sent off on a train by his smothering mother and grandmother whose parting words include a warning about girls. Upon arrival at a boarding-school in Havana, David quickly befriends the extroverted Miguel, who pretends to have a great deal of experience with women. David meets his first 'babe' while out with David, and the two boys try to seduce their young friends on a double date soon after the four meet. Nothing comes of the affair, but in the meantime David is befriended by 'la gordita [the chubby one]' Ofelia, the extremely bright and friendly leader of a student group. David and Ofelia run into each other at a park one evening, and they end up going on an impromptu date--first a movie, then drinks, then a moonlight conversation by the sea.

There is a corresponding leitmotiv whereby David is physically attracted to the beautiful but apparently untouchable Olga. To his surprise, his attention is reciprocated when Olga invites him to go out with her on Saturday night. The peer pressure to go out with the prettiest, most popular girl in the school is immense, and David forgets about a date Ofelia had made with him. His date with

⁴⁹Marta Nuñez, Interview by author, Havana, 1992.

⁵⁰Cuban specialist Sandra Levinson pointed out that Rojas' sensitivity to the issue of gender has been enhanced through the influence of his wife who is a very active member in the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas. Conversation with Sandra Levinson, Director of Center for Cuban Studies, New York, November, 1995.

Olga is dull and unstimulating compared to the exciting outing he experienced earlier that week with 'la gordita.' At the end of the movie, in a climactic adolescent birthday party scene, he is forced to choose "the one he loves" in front of all the other students. He tells the superficial Olga that he does not love her, and the film ends with Ofelia and David, kissing on the dock to a beautiful love song by Pablo Milanés.

The film, original in its choice of subject-matter (adolescent kids), questions the concept of 'beauty.' It also shows the power of peer pressure and the importance of acting according to one's principles. Peer pressure and machismo are evoked in another story-line which takes place alongside David's drama: the story of Lucas and María, the most stable, long-term couple at the school. Lucas returns from a visit with his sick mother to be told his girlfriend was 'seen' with the Physics teacher. The other boys always chided Lucas because he had not slept with his girlfriend (in one amusing passage they tell him women have to 'put out' according to *The Communist Manifesto* which says that 'love is free'!), so they are only too happy to provide him with a reason to 'drop' her. When he dismisses their story that she cheated on him, and resumes his relationship with her, he is ostracized and excluded from the group. In the end he leaves the school, and María is heartbroken. *Una novia para David* shows us that even among the young 'revolutionaries' of the nation there are remnants of sexism, machismo and the double standard.

PAPELES SECUNDARIOS. directed by Orlando Rojas (1989)

Like *Una novia para David*, *Papeles Secundarios* problematizes the issue of beauty, this time making the heroine a middle-aged woman (as opposed to the overweight teenager). The film opens with an aging actress named Mirta deciding to leave the theater precisely at the time when guest director Alejandro arrives to stage a new play. The play, *la Santiaguera*, is a renowned love tragedy which takes place in a Havana brothel at the beginning of the century. Alejandro seduces Mirta and promises her leading role as *la Santiaguera*, thus dissuading her from resigning. But the theater company is full of empty promises and a severe lack of professionalism. The young, blonde actress María seduces Alejandro, and he drops Mirta without so much as an apology. In fact, when Mirta asks him why he is so different with her, his response is so insensitive it is difficult to fathom: "it must be that the young are in style: María will be *la Santiaguera*.."

The film is full of double-meanings. In the play within the movie, the protagonist leaves his lover, the middle-aged madame of the brothel, for *la Santiaguera*. The dialogue reveals that he is attracted to the young, rebellious prostitute because he "cannot control her." Alejandro exhibits the same qualities as the protagonist in the play: obsessed with a desire for control, he wants to exert his power over Mirta even though he has discarded her. In the most disturbing scene in the film, Alejandro forces himself upon Mirta in the dressing room. This is reminiscent of the rape of the Lucía in the first segment of Humberto Solás' film, and reminds us of the constantly recurring images of men exerting power over women through physical force.

CONCLUSION

It would appear that with the exception of Jean Stubbs, most authors who have studied gender and Cuban films since D'Lugo's "Transparent Women" have opted to use the same paradigm whereby women and gender are considered a magnifying-glass through which to view the nation's

problems. Hopefully, this essay has contributed to challenging the ‘transparency’ approach. Solás’ quote may be applied to *Lucía*, and it may be lightly and partially applied to certain other films, but a great many Cuban films made since *Lucía* have first and foremost made important criticisms specific to gender. The Cuban films mentioned here, along with many others, do a great deal to portray sympathetic and ‘real’ female characters while at the same time offering a powerful critique of the manifestations of sexism in Cuban society, from rape and abuse to jealousy and the double standard. We should give credit where credit is due.