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Women's Representation: Two Epochs of the Revolutionary Cuban Cinema

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Resumo

O principal objetivo deste estudo é realizar uma crítica e uma análise da precisão com que a (re)apresentação da mulher no cinema cubano descreve a relação gênero-poder na sociedade cubana. Para isso considera-se aqui o argumento de Chanan o qual afirma que o povo cubano considera aquilo que vê no cinema cubano como o mesmo que se vê (que existe) nos âmbitos público e privado de sua sociedade. Conclui-se que o meio cinematográfico aumenta nossa compreensão do papel da mulher e das relações de gênero na experiência diária daquela sociedade já que se permite à audiência interiorizar a história, o humor, as mudanças, as necessidades e a valentia do povo cubano. Os filmes estudados se referem a duas épocas. Na primeira, os personagens de mulheres cubanas são descritas como heroínas revolucionárias. Não há uma refletir ou problematizar seus medos, sua sensualidade e seus desejos como mulher. O que é feito no cinema produzido na segunda época estudada. Os resultados deste estudo sugerem que o cinema de depois de 1959 reflete com frequência sobre a história social, incluindo a dissolução de classes, através de personagens femininos. Conscientemente ou por omissão, os filmes selecionados destacam a oportunidade de incorporação das mulheres no âmbito público e as limitações deste processo; no entanto, mostra também que esta incorporação é realizada "somente até certo ponto" visto que ainda estão presentes as ideologias e práticas machistas da sociedade patriarcal.

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Palavras-chaves: Cinema , Cuba , Mulher

Resumen

El objetivo principal de este estudio es hacer una crítica y análisis de la precisión con qué la (re)presentación de la mujer en el cine cubano describe la relación género-poder en la sociedad cubana. Para esto se considera el argumento de Chanan quien afirma que el pueblo cubano considera que lo que se ve en el cine cubano es lo que se ve (o que hay) en el ámbito público y privado de su sociedad. Se concluye que el medio cinematográfico aumenta nuestra comprensión del papel de la mujer y del género en la experiencia diaria de la sociedad cubana ya que se le permite a la audiencia interiorizar la historia, el humor, los cambios, las necesidades y la valentía del pueblo cubano. Los filmes estudiados se agrupan en dos épocas. En la primera los personajes de mujeres cubanas suelen describirse como heroínas revolucionarias, sin reflejar ni proyectar sus miedos, su sensualidad y sus deseos como mujeres, lo cual sí es tipificado en la segunda época. Los resultados de este estudio sugieren que el cine de posterior a 1959 refleja con frecuencia la historia social, incluida la disolución de clases, a través de las mujeres. Conscientemente o por omisión, las películas seleccionadas destacan la oportunidad de incorporación de las mujeres en el ámbito público y las limitaciones de ese proceso, pero sólo hasta cierto punto puesto que aún están presentes las ideologías y prácticas machistas de la sociedad patriarcal.

Palabras claves: Cine, Cuba, Mujer

Abstract

The main purpose of the study is to analyse and critique how accurately the representation of women in Cuban cinema portrays the existing gender power relationships in Cuban society, in the light of Chanan's claim that Cuban people consider that what we see in Cuban cinema is what we see on the public and private spheres of Cuba. It follows that the cinematic medium increases our understanding of women and gender issues in the daily experience of Cuban society, and thereby allows spectators to engage in representations of the history, the humour, the changes, the needs, and the courage of Cuban people. The films examined here are grouped into two epochs. In the first epoch, Cuban women are generally portrayed as revolutionary heroines, without fully exploring and projecting their fear, their sensuality and their desires as women, as it is typified in the second epoch. Taken together, the results of this study suggest that post 1959 Revolutionary Cuban cinema has frequently portrayed social history—including the breakdown of social class—through women. Consciously or by default, the

films chosen highlight both the opportunities for the incorporation of women into the public sphere, and the limitations of that process but only up to a certain point: the machista ideologies and practices characteristic of a patriarchal society still remain.

Keywords: Cinema , Cuba , Woman

It is imperative to analyse the forms of representation of women according to their experiences, beliefs, and cultural, social, and political realities, that is to say, that although hegemonic ideologies (capitalism, socialism, patriarchy) in diverse societies and epochs may share much in common, these commonalities are undermined by spatial and temporal nuances which affect the shape and form artistic institutions (such as ICAIC¹ in Cuba) take on, the position women occupy in a society, and the way women are represented in cinema. More specifically, pertaining to the feminist task of liberating women from patriarchal behaviours and institutions, it is important not to draw all-encompassing conclusions or observations regarding women's experiences and thoughts through "the use of the inclusive, but ultimately indeterminable term of 'WE'" (CARBY, 1982, p. 233). As Eisenstein (2004) states in her discussion of feminism and Afghan women "it is too easy to think all women should be free like me - whoever the 'me' is" (EISENSTEIN, 2004, p. 153). In the end, the crucial questions pertain to who is telling the story and how the story is told. It matters profoundly who and what gets represented, who and what regularly and routinely are omitted/permitted; and how things, people, events and relationships are represented. Therefore, what one knows of society depends on how things are represented to her/him and that knowledge in turn informs what one does and what policies one is prepared to accept (HALL, 1986, p. 9).

The general aim of this paper is to integrate two broad topics of research: a) the representation of women and b) Cuban cinema,

within a multidisciplinary perspective, with the hope of increasing the understanding and knowledge of Cuban women by highlighting their “actual” experiences as presented, hasta cierto punto, in Cuban films. A specific aim is to examine how in a socialist country which society is purported to be organised around ethics of equality, women are represented in its cinema from a feminist point of view. Further specific aims are to examine factors such as patriarchy, machismo, and constructed notions of femininity and masculinity, and how these elements contribute to the nature of the representation of women and influence the audience’s interpretation of these elements within the revolutionary social, political and economic context. Ultimately, we argue that the representation of women in Cuban cinema is in constant flux and is ultimately defined by the social and political main events, both inside and outside of Cuba, of any given period of the Revolution, with such shifts being broadly categorised into two epochs. This will be analysed in relation to the following selected films from the first epoch: *De cierta manera* (dir. Sara Gómez, 1974/1979), *Retrato de Teresa* (dir. Pastor Vega, 1979), and *Hasta cierto punto* (dir. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1983), and from the second epoch: *Mujer transparente* (dirs. Hector Veitía, Mayra Segura, Mayra Vilasís, Mario Crespo and Ana Rodríguez, 1990), and *La vida es silbar* (dir. Fernando Pérez, 1998). The first epoch, from the 1960s to 1980s, was embedded deeply within the Cold War context in which the Revolution substituted imperialist and capitalist ideas for socialist ones. During this period Cuban cinema represented women primarily as revolutionary heroines whose preferred form of representation was to narrate societal histories in materialist terms, and specifically labour equality. The second epoch began in the late 1980s with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the subsequent collapse of Soviet communism and the defeat of the Nicaraguan Revolution. During this epoch, cinema focused and explored the representation of women’s femininity, fears and desires, and induced the audience to question gender power relations through such subjectivities – a function of Cuban cinema that was not evident in the first epoch. The cineastas of all six films attempt to inscribe the female image

into the process of the Revolution and the changes it has brought about. Thus, this paper attempts to exemplify how machismo, women's liberation, and images of women that construct diverse discourses of femininity are presented in each epoch.

Two Epochs

In order to successfully explore and understand the representation of women in Cuban cinema, it is necessary to first outline the fundamental basis upon which Cuban cinema is built. Solanas and Getino (1997) indicate that films produced in Cuba after the triumph of the Revolution were clearly revolutionary in the sense that "although their starting point was just the fact of teaching, reading and writing, they had a goal which was radically different from that of imperialism: the training of people for liberation, not for subjection" (SOLANAS; GETINO, 1997, p. 48). Chilean film-maker Miguel Littin claims that "there are no such things as a film that is revolutionary in itself", but that a film becomes revolutionary only when it grips the masses (THESHOME, 1979, p. 42). On the other hand, the Bolivian director Jorge Sanjiné's theory of revolutionary film indicates that it is an outside force, an external power that summons people to action (THESHOME, 1979, p. 42). Additionally Ousmane Sembene, a Senegalese film-maker, claims that a film can be revolutionary without creating revolution, and he defines film more in political terms than in revolutionary ones (THESHOME, 1979, p. 43)². Solanas and Getino (1997) define Revolutionary cinema as "not fundamentally one which illustrates, documents, or passively establishes a situation: rather, it attempts to intervene in the situation as an element providing thrust or rectification. To put it in another way, it provides discovery through transformation" (SOLANAS; GETINO, 1997, p. 47). Drawing from this it can be stated that Cuban cinema seeks to provoke the audience to self-reflect upon their own role in their society and then to participate in finding a solution rather than remaining passive. Given that the nature of Revolutionary cinema is considered a means of communication with the masses,

the Cuban director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea believed in the importance of realising the “social function” of cinema. This is achieved by supplying the spectator with critical insights into actual conditions to the extent that she or he ceases to be a spectator and feels moved actively to participate in the process of daily life (BURTON, 1997, p. 161). Therefore, it is expected that if questions of machismo, emancipation and egalitarianism are raised in Cuban society, these issues will be represented in Cuban films, since there is a strong tradition of Socialist Realism³ in Cuban cinema, a cinema which is characterised by the depiction of the contemporary society. Thus in opposition to Hollywood cinema which has as its primary goal entertainment for the audience, Cuban cinema primarily aims to provoke construct active thinking participants in social discourse and critique (SOLANAS; GETINO, 1997). Thus, based on a Marxist vision of popular involvement of the proletariat in daily functions and decision-making of society, Cuban cinema stressed participation over passivity. This functional relationship between the Revolution and Cuban cinema provided the opportunity for ICAIC, to become an instrument for conscience-raising and to contribute to the enthusiasm for the Revolution and development of an inclusive political process (QUIROS, 1993, p. 65-66).

The films discussed in this essay from the first epoch (*De cierta manera*, *Retrato de Teresa* and *Hasta cierto punto*) argue strongly in favour of Cuban women’s labour equality. Women were represented primarily as fighting against machismo to become strong, independent and free to participate in the labour force. By participating in the labour force, women wanted to make others conscious of the aims and ideas of the Revolution in the hope of constructing the “new woman” based upon economic materialist considerations (a revolutionary heroine). Moreover, their participation was to augment women’s and men’s capability and responsibility to critique and address social/cultural issues such as machismo and sexual double-standards to create the “new man”. This is exemplified in *Retrato de Teresa* (1979) whereby Teresa

incessantly struggles for women's equal participation in the labour force as an expression of rebellion against her husband Ramón's machista attitudes in the household. Teresa seeks her husband's support to share responsibilities in the house so she can more easily participate in a socialist society as a mother, a wife, a student, a labourer, an activist but, above all, as an equal based not just on material aspects but on non-gendered human aspects. Ultimately, in accordance with Marxian thought, labour participation represents for Teresa an outlet for emancipation from patriarchal constructions of family and femininity. However, the emancipatory element is undermined as Teresa ironically seeks Ramón's approval for entering the labour force, due ostensibly to the residues of patriarchy that continue to exist independently of Marxian materialist-based developments.

In opposition to claims that all women who play roles as mothers and wives are thus represented as submissive and weak characters, Cuban cinema details how there is no intrinsic weakness or inferiority associated with such roles through the broadening of the conceptual frame of women by appealing to the socialist ethic of equality. This functions in a way whereby work and familial roles are not prioritised or awarded more prestige or importance based upon gender. Therefore, the lack of focus upon women's feelings and fears is not as a result of them having some kind of intrinsic relative weakness as a mother or wife, but as a result of the cineastas continual permission of men's desires and wishes and omission of women's personal expression. In *Retrato de Teresa*, Pastor Vega focuses more on Teresa's marital relationship, and on Teresa's husband rather than on Teresa's feelings and frustrations. This can be seen in the close-ups where Teresa remains pensive, heart-broken, hopeless, confused and withdrawn without letting the audience witness her possible extramarital affair, her subjectivity and inner struggle (BURTON, 1994). Whilst in *Hasta cierto punto* Gutiérrez Alea focuses upon Oscar's struggle with leaving his wife than on Lina's personal emotions and hopes and her personal

reactions from her sexual abuse. Similarly, whilst Lina shows her disenchantment and pain resulting from Oscar's indecision in leaving his wife by hiding herself under her pillow, she never voices her pain. Interestingly, in *De cierta manera* (directed by the only female cineasta Sara Gómez), the representation of Yolanda, who is also very strong like Lina and Teresa, differs greatly in that she is given the opportunity to very clearly voice her frustration, her choices and her dreams; she is depicted as a woman who does not accept any machista behaviour that will prevent her from developing herself as a professional and as an individual. Drawing from this we can state that Teresa and Lina are women who struggle between the revolutionary belief of equality and emancipation, and the traditional patriarchal values and machista attitudes which inhibit exploration and expression of their identities, fears, emotions and voices. The experiences of Lina and Teresa give weight to Creed's (1987) assessment that women do not speak in their own voice and thus are represented only in terms of a male discourse about women. However, Yolanda provides subversive and emancipatory constructions of femininity due possibly to the personal experiences of double-discrimination/double-subjugation of Sara Gómez and the powerful influence these may have had on her representation of Yolanda. Accordingly, Gutiérrez Alea has indicated that "Sara [Gómez] was doubly oppressed, as a black and as a woman, so she was very much moved on the question of how sexism and racism could be dealt with after the revolution. So it is not surprising that she, a woman, undertook the problem of machismo or was interested in the secret societies [*abacúá*], where the macho elements are so well established" (ALEA cited in RICH, 1998, p. 102). Thus, Sara Gómez typifies machismo with the purpose of not just representing the problem but to emancipate women's voices in order to find a solution to the problem and act on it.

Machismo is a peculiar form of patriarchy that has to do with public relations between men as well as between men and women (LEINER, 1996). In addition, *machismo* stereotypes the female

figure and avoids openly exploring the fundamental issues of women's sexuality, femininity, gender equality and social power relations. Dussel (1985) interprets machismo as "an ideology that cloaks the domination of woman defined as sexual object, [that] not only alienates the woman but also makes the male impotent in as much as it impedes his relationship with a woman" (DUSSEL, 1985, p. 83). Thus patriarchal ideologies consider it "natural" that women are obedient, submissive, sentimental, emotive, self-sacrificing, ready and happy to perform a passive role in personal and sexual relations, acting as the man's instrument of pleasure. The male protagonists in the films from the first epoch—Mario (*De cierta manera*), Ramón (*Retrato de Teresa*), and Oscar (*Hasta cierto punto*)—resist change at the level of their personal life (the family and home) through denial of their household responsibilities and by prohibiting their wives from entering the labour force and participating in social activities. However, the male characters are ultimately forced to confront their prejudices or to change somewhat their machista behaviour in order to satisfy their sexual desire and male ego. Interestingly, although the women characters demand from their male counterparts equal rights to enter the labour force, it is the male characters such as Mario's father Candito (*De cierta manera*), and Bernal, the party secretary at the factory (*Retrato de Teresa*), that also take up the challenge of critiquing traditional notions of femininity and masculinity by reminding Mario (*De cierta manera*) and Ramón (*Retrato de Teresa*) that the goals of the Revolution are to change the old patterns of machismo. This is exemplified when Candito highlights the responsibilities of good revolutionaries which provoke Mario into choosing between the postulated goals and attitudes of the Revolution and his loyalty towards his workmate Humberto who acts contrary to such new social codes. Furthermore, Bernal challenges *machismo* by attempting to convince Ramón to allow Teresa to work more hours. Although throughout the film it is clear that Mario resists profound change of his *machista* attitudes and behaviour because of male-peer pressure, ultimately he is willing

to change because he becomes aware of the pressures that his attitudes and behaviours have on his relationship with Yolanda. It can be assumed, based upon his choice to remain by Yolanda's side at the end of the film, that he wishes dearly for the relationship to continue and to be based on love and less biased gender power relations. Conversely, Ramón maintains his reluctance to change, and expects his wife to take him back under the same machista rules that he has imposed throughout their marriage. In *Hasta cierto punto*, Oscar is an intellectual who is obviously aware of his apparent higher-class status, through his critique of the prevalence of *machismo* in the lower class (dock workers). Although Oscar's cinematic project seeks to critique *machismo* as an oppressive belief system, ultimately his failure to self-reflect and to realise that no socio-economic class is immune from the workings and attitudes of *machismo* blinds to the role he plays perpetuating the same patriarchal myths that his project seeks to uncover. In general, in the first epoch, many males are forced by social and familial networks to maintain the posture of traditional masculinity, effectively closing out to *varying degrees* the opportunity to self-create themselves as more sensitive fathers, sons and husbands.

Moreover, whilst the directors of *Retrato de Teresa* and *Hasta cierto punto* presented the problem of *machismo*, they failed to provide a critical discussion about it by omitting possible emancipatory visions for women and how change in *machista* attitudes can benefit men. Arguably, the failure to permit women to express their individuality, opinions, fears and desires, coupled with the failure to provide the real benefits for men such as the maintenance of intimate relationships and a reconnection with an intimate and personal "self", may be an important element that can explain the failure of the audience to engage deeply with the issue of *machismo* and seek solutions towards its eradication. Conversely, in *De cierta manera* Sara Gómez was primarily concerned with people of both sexes at the level of individual change, coupled with a focus on the ongoing processes of social change in Revolutionary

Cuba and how these changes were affecting women and men. Thus, Gómez does not solely present the problem of *machismo*, but continues with a presentation of both women's voice and the possibility for men to change. In addition, by ending the film with a full shot depicting an eclectic mix of materialist-based visions of demolishing buildings to make way for new housing projects and images of Yolanda and Mario discussing their relationship, the audience can be seduced by the postulated imperative for change.

At the beginning of the second epoch, machismo was presented in cinema but not discussed as a central issue, as illustrated in *Mujer transparente*. Late in the same epoch, presenting a non-typical construction of masculinity becomes important. Underlining this, Seungsook (2002) states, "masculinity is not a fixed or pre-given identity but a position (or place) in gender relations that is produced and maintained through culturally specific and continued practices, such as certain ways of acting, dressing, or speaking" (SEUNGSOOK, 2002, p. 82-83). Thus, these traditional conceptions of femininity and masculinity that have deep roots in culture and society can be negotiated in order to transform the process of creation and definition of masculine and feminine personalities and their representation in cinema. This is achieved by Fernando Pérez, in *La vida es silbar* (1998), with the character of Elpidio by providing the audience with a man who wants to express his emotions, failures and fears because he is not afraid to be ridiculed by other men or does not succumb to peer-pressure to be macho. This is clearly seen in the scene when an old man asks Elpidio if the old man is handsome. After being told by Elpidio that he is ugly, the old man walks away crying. After realising what he has done, Elpidio runs to the old man, embraces him and says to him that nobody is perfect. Upon saying these words, he immediately realises the profundity of his words, and thus being called a *marginal* by his mother no longer affected him; his own differences did not signify failure. Through Elpidio and other male characters in the film, Pérez is sending the message that the "new man" which the Revolution postulates, should

not be primarily based upon heroic and so-called “perfect” qualities, but rather the importance of being sensitive towards himself and others.

In contrast to the representation of women from the first epoch, the exploration and expression of individual and intimate desires, opinions, fears, failures and identities is central to the representation of women in the second epoch, even though they still play the roles of mother, wife, and independent and strong characters. In this epoch women want everyone to be conscious of themselves and not just conscious of the Revolution, they want to create stories as independent identity-based individuals, and not as participatory vehicles (cadres, heroines and so forth) that narrate histories of the Revolution. In this later period, machismo is apparent, but is not a central and obvious focus. Importantly, second epoch cinema seeks to reconstruct the meaning of femininity with the aim of critiquing and expanding its traditional construction (caring mother and wife) through exploring other issues such as women’s experiences, emotions and desires in their daily lives.

This new form of representation is typified in *Mujer transparente* (1990), with the character of Isabel who is an economically-independent woman who occupies a higher labour position than her husband Luis, but seeks acknowledgment from her husband as a woman with individual fears, desires and opinions (exemplified mostly through voice-over technique). The use of voice-over acts subversively within a patriarchal discourse to overcome the censoring/silencing of reflection upon women’s lived experiences, emotions, aspirations and fears, in order to empower women, thus permitting the forging of intimate identities and connections between the audience (in particular women) and the storyteller (women’s characters) (McHUGH, 2001). Other strong female characters in search of themselves represented in *Mujer transparente* are Julia and Zoe. They are not only strong but they are not afraid to show the enjoyment of their sensuality and to break old patterns of *machismo* that dictates that women should be submissive and passive.

Mariana, in *La vida es silbar* (1998), also enjoys her sensuality and her body's desires. It seems that Mariana is the one always in charge of her relationships, deciding when to start and end her relationships, and with whom to have them. Mariana expresses her power to imagine, control, and power to decide and to seduce through an indulgence and enjoyment of sex and gazing at men's bodies, showing no signs of vulgarity or obvious instrumentalism. In this epoch it seems that all these female protagonists, by taking control of their own desires and pleasures, stop being subservient to their husbands, fathers, brothers or sons. The only exceptions are Adriana in *Mujer transparente* and Julia in *La vida es silbar*. These two women are from the generation of the first epoch, who continue—throughout the second epoch—to be reminded of, made to feel guilty, and ultimately constrained by the traditional hegemonic constructions of femininity. They are presented as women who carry personal belongings from the past, and fears of taboos that do not allow them to enjoy their contemporary fantasies and desires.

Cinema and Seduction/Audience

Primarily, one of the central objectives of Cuban cinema is to present a realist cinema that challenges its viewers to think about their reality. The Cuban female film-maker Vilasís states that Cuban cinema chooses to create films in which “el resultado es una obra donde el espectador se siente interesado en la historia que le narran, pero al mismo tiempo, constantemente es obligado a reflexionar sobre ‘la realidad’ que lo circunda”⁴ (VILASIS, 1995, p. 56-57). Other Cuban *cineastas* such as Julio García Espinoza, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, and Sara Gómez also view cinema as a forum for expressing and representing revolutionary struggle. Eisenstein believed that “a revolutionary country should be given a revolutionary culture (cinema in his case) in order for the masses to obtain a revolutionary consciousness”⁵ (HAYWARD, 2000, p. 231). Therefore, true to the Marxist ideas that nurtured the Revolution, Cuban *cineastas* were

to create “the new culture advocated by the revolutionary authorities” (GARCIA OSUNA, 2003, p. 39), with the aim to make spectators think and resist old attitudes that did not fall in line with those postulated by the Revolution. Bearing much congruence with Marx’s axiom which states that “it is not sufficient to interpret the world; it is now a question of transforming it” (SOLANAS; GETINO, 1997, p. 46), Cuban cinema was viewed as an instrumental tool in raising the social and political awareness of the public, thus making film a medium for revolutionary mass education (GARCIA OSUNA, 2003, p. 39). In addition, the narrative style used in Cuban cinema together with other characteristics of a social realist, neorealist, and cinema novo such as the use of *cinéma vérité*, *mise-en-scène*, and montage, seduce the audience to share the experiences and thoughts of the protagonists and act towards finding a solution to problems that are presented.

More specifically, cinema vérité through newsreel and sections of documentary footage in the first epoch is presented in *De cierta manera* (e.g. newsreel footage on the progress of the Revolution) and *Hasta cierto punto* (e.g. the interviews at the dock harbour). This illustrates the problems of the Revolution and presents them within a specific way that affects the audience’s experiences. For instance, *machismo* and sexual double-standards are depicted in a more precise and realistic fashion that transcends, to a certain degree, the fictional base of the story. The use of *mise-en-scène* (setting, costume, sound and lighting) in the first epoch was a style determined by moments of the epoch in relation to the Revolution or to Cuban history but still had the aim of transcending life experiences into the films so that the audience could identify with those scenes affecting their senses of the shape and texture of the objects depicted and be seduced by them. An example is the use of music in the three films from the first epoch as an analogy of the story illustrated. An example of montage as a symbolic device is when Sara Gómez, in the first epoch, shows repeatedly the demolition of old buildings, thus metaphorically indicating revolutionary changes.

By presenting this scene, the film challenges the audience to realise that any substantial change in life takes time and work but that people need to demolish old patterns in order to construct new ones, built upon a stronger base.

In the second epoch the technique of *cinéma vérité* is not often used, however, through the use of mise-en-scene and montage, Cuban cinema developed its own unique style in presenting pressing issues of the time, whereby the main focus is not society-wide issues like *machismo*, but more upon an exploration of women's subjectivities continuing with the goal of seducing the audience to participate as active viewers. Fernando Pérez, in *La vida es silbar*, uses distinctly Cuban codes or cubanismos that involve Cuban audiences in a multi-layered/allegorical engagement with the films' content. For instance, superstitions, Afro-Cuban rites, popular music, and symbols (e.g. Elpidio's name, which is the name of the hero of Cuba's popular cartoon series, the name of Elpidio's mother called Cuba, and the exemplification of trains and art).

Such techniques function through the presentation and interplay of realistic and out-of-context images and discourses, which interestingly do not deter from the audience's interpretation of reality. Rather, it can be argued that utilising these techniques adds layers of profundity to the interpretation through the forming of alliances between such images and discourses with the audience's abstract emotions, essentially transcending the inhibiting confines of real images and attracting the spectator to move oneself closer to the protagonist and/or the script. Ultimately, the common denominator between first and second epoch films in regards to the seduction of the audience—firstly to become aware of the pressing issues of the time, and secondly to engage with friends, family and *compañeros* to engage in dialogue and move towards solutions to such issues—is the presentation of non-sensationalised circumstances and situations of real characters. In saying this, it seems clear that Cuban cinema, unlike many modern cinemas, is a cinema that does not have as its primary goal “pleasure” or “entertainment”, that is, it

does not idolise aesthetics at the expense of omitting or failing to critique substantial and real issues and conflicts. It seeks to create an active audience. Therefore, it can be said that Cuban women identify with female characters, not based upon a superficial and idealistic connection, but might tend to be based upon the apparent congruence of what women experience in film with the actual and daily experiences of women in socialist Cuba.

Conclusion

This essay has provided some new insights pertaining to the representation of women in Cuban cinema since the beginnings of the Revolution (when women were represented as strong and economically independent) through to the modern era (when women continue to be represented as strong and independent, but finally have been given opportunities to express themselves and explore their individuality and identity). Drawing from the previous discussion it is clear that first epoch films build upon a strictly Marxist materialist base in the representation of women, which ultimately goes some way in constructing discourses of emancipation from patriarchal ideologies and institutions. However, through Marxism's lack of conceptual tools to explore the "self", and individuality, it is unable to articulate the identities of a woman that lay beneath material considerations and thus fails to emancipate women from patriarchal discourses that silence women's free expression of identities. Contrastingly, second epoch Cuban cinema presents a woman who is in search of herself, she is tired of being invisible and she begins asking herself "who am I?, what is a woman?, what is an individual?". Arguably one can trace this dramatic shift in the nature of representation of women in Cuban cinema to the change of events in the geopolitical arena. Whereby the Cuban identity has been traditionally signified by "Communism" and the "Soviet bloc", with the demise of continental communism and the Soviet Union, questions pertaining to individual identity became pertinent and pressing –

there was no longer a big brother with whom Cuba and Cubans could identify itself with.

Furthermore, the female power of leadership and professional positions represented in the films from the first epoch is different from the Cuban films from the second epoch. In *Retrato de Teresa*, women work as textile workers leading only women, while Isabel works as a manager leading women and men. Yolanda in *De cierta manera* is a teacher at a primary school, whilst Julia is a university lecturer. Whilst Lina, in *Hasta cierto punto*, is a dock-manager student, Zoe is a liberal art student. This might signify that not all, but some, aspects in relation to women's jobs position, from the first epoch have changed in favour of women in the second epoch and that their participation in a patriarchal society has been considered further. Portrayal of women in terms of the interplay of their personal and professional relationships is very important. For example, when a woman is portrayed as working outside the home it should be asked whether she is also portrayed as strong in terms of her personal relationships, or is she depicted as weak, confused, in need of male support (MEDIA ADVOCACY GROUP, 1995, p.8-9). Overall, the underlying frame of references about the representation of women in Cuban cinema, as well as more generally in that society, is based upon the belief that women belong to the family and domestic life and men to the social world of politics and work; that femininity is about care, nurturance and compassion, and that masculinity is about efficiency, rationality and individuality. And whereas women's political, cultural and labour activities and participation try to undermine just gendered distinctions between public and private, it seems to remain the inevitable frame of reference to understand it (SREBERNY AND VAN ZOONE, 2000, p. 17). That is why women from the first epoch like Teresa and the second epoch like Isabel point to a paradox in women's attempts to break down the public-private division that characterises gender definitions and relationships in social and political life because their participation in society is still dictated by a male figure, in their case their husband. Sadly the

existence of people like Humberto in *De cierta manera*, Tomás in *Retrato de Teresa* and Arturo in *Hasta cierto punto* prevent real progress towards more equitable gender power relations.

Overall, it can be argued that through the cinematic representation the authenticity/accuracy of the representation of the situation of each female character from the films discusses above may be accepted, recognised and identified by women who are in the same condition, as well as by those men who might have a problem with their *machista* attitude because as good revolutionaries they make question their traditional patterns of masculinity and questions of power and sexuality in their private life that they might want to eradicate. These films question the audience with the aim to activate a critical exchange between the screen and the viewer. Such that the audience leaves the cinema, discusses the problems, and try to find a way to act or solve issues that they are actually experiencing in their daily lives. Drawing from this, it can be stated that Cuban cinema is not a cinema that panders to the wishes and desires of passive audience, but has as its main objective to overflow reality in its deepest sense, to make that reality active, so that it operates not just on the screen but also on the audience, not just as a dialogue but also as dialectic. Furthermore, the spectator feels interested in the on-screen history but, at the same time, is continuously obliged to reflect on “the reality” that surrounds her/him (VILASIS, 1995, p. 56-57).

Notwithstanding this, a variety of theoretical and methodological questions remain unanswered, therefore we wish to provide a number of suggestions for future research. To begin with, in order to better understand the degree of congruence between cinema and society more studies of the audience are needed. More specifically, this could be achieved by interviewing Cuban women about their views on how women are represented in Cuban cinema in regards to the representation’s pertinence to women’s real-life circumstances and experiences, and with which aspects of the representation they most profoundly identify with. In addition,

interviews with actresses from both epochs of Cuban cinema should be conducted that contrast and compare the roles they have played as women in cinema with their own views of their roles and experiences as women in Cuban society. The objective of this essay is to add to the extant literature that seeks to ascertain the role (reflector/director) realist cinema plays in society, and more specifically how cinema influences or is influenced by the interpretation and representation of women.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Cuban population has been living in a “special period” as Castro has declared it. Therefore, in this “special period”, most of the Cuban population works in the tourist sector, which has replaced sugar as Cuba’s leading foreign-exchange earner. Ostensibly, tourism has played a major role in the increasing numbers of women becoming involved in prostitution, something that Castro fought so hard against during the early days of the Revolution (LANDAU, 1999, p. 26). Castro officially and quite public in his speech of April 1992 at the VI Congress Union de Juventud Comunista (UJC—Union of Young Communists) stated that prostitution is voluntary rather than a necessity.⁶ And in his interview with the director Oliver Stone in *Comandante* (2003), quite proudly states “even our prostitutes can read and write”, which indicates that prostitution is not a problem anymore and therefore, contradicts to a certain extent his early aim during the early days of the Revolution. Sadly prostitution has once again increased in Cuba. Since Cuban cinema is a realist cinema, a cinema that wants to educate its audience and challenges them to think, act and look for solutions we highly proposed for a documentary to be made on the topic. However, if Cuban people think that this issue is not a problem such a suggestion will not be considered.

As a result of their near total omission from Cuba cinema, the individual experiences of lesbians and black women need to be analysed from film, cultural and women’s studies perspectives. This does not indicate that lesbianism and black women do not exist in Cuban society, but the lack of presence in Cuban cinema leads us

to raise the question as to why they have not been included and permitted to express their identity and subjectivity in any film by male or female cineastas. However, on the 21st of December 2004 a group of lesbians and bisexual women started to meet at the Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual (Cenesex/ National Centre of Sexual Education) to discuss issues vis-à-vis sexual diversity that until that date included only men. Following meetings have taken place once a week since then, and at the last meeting on the 11th of January 2005 these women discussed the possibility of future projects which include videos, films and literature discussion and festivals⁷. Future analyses of these projects would be invaluable in better understanding the multiple faces of women in Cuba.

Ultimately, this essay views Revolutionary Cuban cinema as a genuine cinema from a distinctive society in which Cuban women, like women in any other society, still struggle against patriarchy and biased gender power relations. The difference being that, throughout both epochs of Revolutionary Cuban cinema, women have not been represented in exploitative or objectified ways. Rather, women have been consistently represented—in distinctive manners that are apparently informed by the vicissitudes of the Revolution and geopolitical happenings—as strong and independent characters, and as models for society. Furthermore, in post-1990 Cuban cinema to this is added the liberating presentation of women's personal experiences, thoughts, desires and opinions. Ostensibly these forms of representations are diametrically opposed to those of Western cinema posed over the same period of Revolutionary Cuban cinema.

Notas

1 The Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry.

2 Sembene marks the difference between political and revolutionary film: "It's not after having read Marx or Lenin that you go out and make a revolution [...] All the works are just a point of reference in history. And that's all. Before the end of an act of creation society usually has already surpassed it". (PERRY; MCGILLIGAN, 1971 p. 43)

- 3 Underlining the purported goals and purposes of Cuban cinema is the adherence to a Socialist Realist style, which refers to the “depiction of social and economic circumstances within which particular echelons of society (usually working and middle class) find themselves” (HAYWARD, 2000, p. 331). Socialist Realism was defined by Stalin during the 1930s as “a true and historically concrete depiction of reality and its revolution[ary] development” (KUHN, 1994, p. 136). As Kuhn (1994) argues, this definition can be open to various interpretations, but it certainly suggests two basic defining characteristics of Socialist Realism: “first, as an adherence to some form of Realism (‘true [...] depiction of reality’), and, second, that representations either deal directly with history or inscribe historical specificity in some other way (‘historical concrete’)” (KUHN, 1994, p. 136). More information about Socialist Realism can be found in BAZIN, A. “The Stalin myth in Soviet culture. Movies and Methods”. V. 2. (Ed. Bill Nichols). Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 29-40, 1985; CHRISTIE, I., “Canons and Careers: The Director in Soviet Cinema”. *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, (Ed. Richard Taylor and Derek Spring). London: Routledge, 1993; GROYS, B. *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992; SHAPIRO, D. *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*. New York: Ungar, 1973; TERTZ, A. *The Trial Begins On Socialist Realism*. California: University of California Press, 1982; TAYLOR, R. and SPRING, D. *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- 4 “The result is a piece of art where the spectator is interested in the on-screen history but, at the same time, is continuously obliged to reflect on ‘the reality’ that surrounds her/him”.
- 5 Often the term “propaganda” is considered simplistically as negative. However as Terence Qualter (1962) indicates “one person’s ‘truth’ is all too often another’s ‘propaganda’”. Thus whether or not that which is being presented is true or false, it is the way in which it is used (and not ‘truthfulness’) that determines whether or not it is in fact propaganda” (QUALTER, 1962, p. 122). As Nicholas Reeves (1999) states “propaganda is the deliberate attempt by the few to influence the attitudes and behaviour of the many by the manipulation of symbolic communication” (REEVES, 1999, p. 11-12). Furthermore, “culture, like education, is not and cannot be apolitical or impartial [...] Radio, television, cinema and the press are powerful instruments of ideological education and for creation of a collective consciousness [...]. The mass media cannot be left to change or be used without direction” (Final declaration of the 1971 Cuban Congress on Education and Culture).

6 Fidel Castro “Discurso pronunciado [...] en la clausura del VI Congreso de la UJC, 4 de abril [...]”. *Granma*, April 7, 1992, suppl. p. 2-11.

7 ACOSTA, D. Cuba: *Proyecto de Diversidad Sexual abre sus Puertas a Mujeres*. *Servicios de Noticias de la Mujer*. <<http://www.rebelion.org>, 2005>.

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Retrato de Teresa (Portrait of Teresa). Director Pastor Vega. ICAIC, 1979.

Hasta cierto Punto (Up to a Certain Point). Director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, ICAIC, 1983.

Mujer transparente (Transparent Woman). Directors Hector Veitía, Mayra Segura, Mayra Vilasís, Mario Crespo and Ana Rodríguez, 1990.

La vida es silbar (Life is to Whistle). Director Fernando Pérez, ICAIC-Wanda Distribution Spain, 1998.

Comandante. Oliver Stone. USA/Spain, 2003.

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