

Critical mass of Cuban cinema: art as the vanguard of society

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The *Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográfica* (ICAIC) has released over a thousand newsreels, experimental, documentary and feature-length narrative works since its establishment in March 1959. Several of these feature-length films, produced during the late 1960s and early 1970s, became known as *Cine imperfecto* (hereafter designated as Imperfect Cinema). Imperfect Cinema was responsible for making a reputation for Cuban film, but by the mid 1970s, Cuban filmmakers were purposely making a different style of cinema. This article focuses on the aesthetics of both Imperfect and Perfect Cinema, and on their relationship to the larger scale of ideological ramifications within Cuban society.

Julio García Espinosa coined the term Imperfect Cinema after the success of his innovative *Adventures of Juan Quin Quin/Juan Quin Quin* (1967), which embodied his ideas regarding the development of a counter-Hollywood film style. For García Espinosa and many of his fellow Latin American filmmakers, Imperfect Cinema was the answer to the need of creating 'a form of art that demonstrates the process of the problems . . . not a cinema to beautifully illustrate concepts and ideas we already know'.¹ García Espinosa placed supreme importance on cinema's 'efficacy in communicating information' and its ability 'to question the devices of the form and structure' of film.² His ideas were centred in the notion of an overt critical–utilitarian cinema with self-reflexive qualities: to use cinema to critique cinema, and bourgeois societies in the process. Aside from indicating the demonstrative, communicative and inquisitive qualities, these characteristics also convey an implicit utilitarian quality. In other

1 Julio García Espinosa, *Por un cine imperfecto* (La Habana: Edit. Salvador de la Plaza, 1973), p. 29.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

words, Imperfect Cinema possesses utilitarian features because it must perform a particular political function within society.

In contrast, Cuban films produced since the mid 1970s show the development of a new style that diverges from that of the previous era – as I will discuss in this article. However, scholars like Julianne Burton, Michael Chanan, Dennis West and Paulo Paranagua have virtually ignored, in their works on Cuban film, the aesthetic aspects of this new style, referred to as Perfect Cinema (as a contrast to Imperfect Cinema). Chanan, for example, concludes that by the late 1970s Imperfect Cinema had just about disappeared. He believes that since then Cuban cinema has given up the challenge of creating its own style in favour of imitating Hollywood.³ Only Ana López and Paranagua have suggested that Cuban film since the mid 1970s is not in decline, but simply in a new trend.⁴ Furthermore, López observes that this new trend is linked to ideological changes within Cuban society.⁵ López's position provides a starting point to develop the hypothesis that the new Cuban film style (that is Perfect Cinema) is closely related to contemporary Marxist thought, and that Cuban films falling under the Perfect Cinema rubric are, in turn, playing a role in Cuba's overall ideological evolution.

In the following discussion of both Imperfect and Perfect Cinema, the term 'style' will be used to indicate general and particular shared aesthetic traits identifiable within each of these groups of narrative–dramatic films. Style for Imperfect Cinema is thus defined by the specific techniques and qualities contextualized in orthodox Marxism's aesthetics of content over form, such as the use of 'type' characters, harsh imagery made by scratches, under/over exposure, high contrast, excessive movements of the camera, presentation of historical events and the wide use of hand-held camera. Let me add that 'type' alludes to those characters 'portraying concrete men [sic], in concrete situations, expressing concrete feelings' with a social configuration.⁶ For Perfect Cinema, style is defined by the lack of the devices used by Imperfect Cinema, or any other imposed aesthetic formulae.

The purpose of this article is to assess the shifting interactions between Marxist ideology and the Cuban cinematic apparatus between 1959 and 1989, with a particular emphasis on the transition from Imperfect to Perfect Cinema. This shifting away from the aesthetics of Imperfect Cinema, rather than representing a decline in the quality of Cuban cinema, represents ideological and philosophical changes in the Marxist tradition that have been taking place outside, as well as inside, Cuba. Because cinema is the first 'element' of society that reflects such newer ideological perspectives, Cuban cinema (art) can be regarded as being in the *vanguard* in the pursuit of the Marxian ideal of human emancipation in Cuban society.

George Huaco provides the mode of analysis used to elucidate the

3 Michael Chanan, *The Cuban Image* (London: British Film Institute, 1985), p. 276.

4 Paulo Paranagua, 'News from Havana: a restructuring of the Cuban cinema', *Framework*, no. 35 (1988), pp. 88–103; and 'Letter from Cuba to an unfaithful Europe', *Framework*, nos 38–9 (1992).

5 Ana M. López, 'Revolution and dreams: the Cuban documentary today', *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, vol. 11 (1992), p. 48.

6 Gyorgy Lukács from *A kulonosseg, mint esztetikai kategoria*. 218. quoted by Bela Kiralfalvi in *The Aesthetics of Gyorgy Lukács* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 81.

7 George Huaco, *Sociology of Film Art* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), p. 18.

8 See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (1856) (London: Penguin, 1978).

9 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 328.

10 Kuan-Hsing Chen, 'Post-Marxism: between/beyond critical postmodernism and cultural studies', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 13 (1991), p. 35.

11 Mark Poster, *Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: in Search of a Context* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 19.

relationship between cinema and philosophical change.⁷ Huaco's Marxian model confirms that art, as a social product, relates to all other aspects of society and to the social whole. In the introduction to *Grundrisse*, Marx established that social wholes have multiple aspects that are internally related.⁸ This mode of analysis is also supported by Gramsci's precept stating that ideology is a 'conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, law, in economical activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life'.⁹ This model allows the application of two analytical approaches: orthodox Marxist and post Marxist.

The orthodox Marxist approach is based on the dialectical-materialistic tradition, from Georgi Plekhanov to Gyorg Lukács. The Hegelian dialectic influence provides orthodox Marxism with a scientific foundation, and with a principle of disclosure. This principle of disclosure refers to that phase of the analytic process which brings out what is implicitly, but not explicitly, articulated. This principle has served the Marxist analytical/revelatory method to explain the implicit structure of capitalism. Marx's interest in focusing on those implicit forces, or the content of capitalism, as opposed to the appearances of the system, was interpreted by later Marxists as the supremacy of content over form. This, in turn, was the main support for the development of an orthodox Marxian aesthetic where content prevails over form, a tenet of Imperfect Cinema.

The post-Marxist approach, on the other hand, 'distances itself from the dominant aesthetic criticism which privileges artworks as its central site of analysis. . . . [This approach] departs from a philosophical criticism which locates itself within the history of philosophy.'¹⁰ This post-Marxist approach is based on the epistemology of Jurgen Habermas. Because of the limitations of orthodox Marxism in explaining, and avoiding, the human crises in capitalism and proletariat dictatorships, Habermas, following the legacy of the Frankfurt School, went back to study Marx's original thought. Habermas's project consists of a debate over the definition of:

modernity in the sociological term of Max Weber as the process of the differentiations of science, morality, and art into autonomous spheres. . . . In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas provided those conditions with the concept of the universal pragmatics of language. If public speech were structured properly the autonomous cultural domains of science, morality, and art would be integrated into society, thereby achieving human emancipation . . . fulfill[ing] the project of modernity as outlined by the Enlightenment.¹¹

Habermas's advanced concept of the three Weberian spheres gives Art an emancipatory quality against the dominating backdrop of the Polity and the Economy (this is why Weber's model of the three

12 Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), p. 291.

13 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), pp. 22–8.

14 Fidel Castro's speech on Lenin's centennial in Havana in 1970 confirms this. See Fidel Castro, *Lenin y Cuba* (Bogotá: Edic. Suramérica, 1970).

15 Max Azicri, *Cuba: Politics, Economics, and Society* (New York: Pinter, 1987), p. 73.

16 David Lane, 'Leninism', in *Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 279.

spheres is used). For Habermas, the existence of formal laws in and of themselves are enough to limit human freedom. He believes that 'the spread of legal regulations has the structure of a dilemma, because it is the legal means for securing freedom that themselves endanger the freedom of their presumptive beneficiaries'.¹² In this context, the less organically or structurally regulated an artform is, the more it appears to possess the quality to redeem the social whole from the domination of political power and reification. Freedom, therefore, appears to be the prime condition/element requisite for reaching Marx's goal of human emancipation. In other words, according to Habermas's analysis, subjectivity and freedom in Art are the *sine qua non* qualities of a post-Marxist aesthetic. By extension, it could be assumed that the domination of the Cuban Polity and Economy over Art can be counterbalanced by emphasizing the notion of freedom in the Art. As will be discussed later, it appears this is exactly what newer Cuban cinema is doing.

In particular, this critical mode allows for the analysis of the formal elements of the cinema, elements which contain implicit conceptions of the world, or ideology. Since orthodox Marxism and post Marxism are grounded in the premiss that society is divided into different activities related among themselves, I will use Max Weber's concept of the three spheres of society.¹³ Max Weber elaborates on the 'rational' division of modern societies into three distinctive spheres: Science refers to the realm of production; Morality/Law refers to the activity of control and government; and Arts refer to creation. Following Habermas's Weberian model, I use the terms 'Economy', 'Polity' and 'Art' to indicate this division of the social whole. This critical approach serves to demonstrate that the sphere of Art, particularly cinema, performs an emancipatory role in the Cuban social whole.

Although Marxism–Leninism was not official until 1976, when the constitution was written and signed, Cuba had been basically functioning as a centralized Leninist state since late 1961.¹⁴ Changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s have dropped the 'Leninist' wording in the constitution. But, as it was originally written, Article 1 of the 1976 Constitution recognized Marxism–Leninism as the state ideology, and gave the Communist Party the one and only leading role.¹⁵ Leninism 'is an approach to the seizure of power for and by the proletariat and the building of socialist society, which legitimates revolutionary action by the Party on behalf of the working class'.¹⁶ The dialectical–materialism of K. Kautsky, G. Plekhanov and Lenin became the heart of Cuban political discourse. Like the Bolsheviks, the Cuban Communist Party opted to lead the way toward social progress by institutionalizing the dictatorship of the proletariat. Plekhanov's principle of objective and indisputable truth was also

present in the Party's deontological viewpoints on what ought and ought not to be done in the Cuban social whole.

The Communist Party functioned in this Leninist vanguard position through its role as the ruling (and only) party, and through its establishment of the dictatorship in the name of the proletariat. In these roles, the Polity basically guided the sphere of Art from the early 1960s until the mid 1970s, through guidelines articulated in Fidel Castro's 'Palabras a los Intelectuales' (Words to the Intellectuals) speech of 1961. Taken as the official declaration of what was permissible or not in the exercise of art, this speech moulded the style and emphasis of Cuban Art during the Imperfect Cinema era.

Central to Castro's idea was that artists were free to express their own ideas and feelings in any way they wanted, as long as the revolution was neither questioned nor attacked: 'Within the revolution, complete freedom; against the revolution, none' (*Dentro de la revolución, todo; contra la revolución, nada*). According to Azicri:

There have been more statements by Castro and other leaders, particularly by Armando Hart, Minister of Education and of Culture, on cultural questions, but this initial broad and imprecise guideline remaine[d] the main stated policy.¹⁷

Some Cuban artists felt 'Palabras a los Intelectuales' was too limiting to their artistic freedoms. Many of these artists, like the Cabrera Infante brothers and Nestor Almendros, decided to leave the country in the early years of the revolution. However, the issue was not resolved by the departure of these and other dissidents. Orthodox bureaucrats, with a narrow view of the artists' needs and the revolution's best interest,¹⁸ began to exercise their powers against artistic freedom. The situation reached its nadir with the incarceration of Heberto Padilla in 1971 and the 'rehabilitation' of homosexual artists. It took this crisis to move the government to re-evaluate its positions and guidelines. After this turmoil, the artistic environment began to improve.

This crisis was not as tumultuous for filmmakers as for other artists. As a matter of fact, ICAIC released *Los Días del Agua/Days of Water*, one of the best examples of Imperfect Cinema, in 1971. This is very indicative of the agreeable relationship between the Polity and the film establishment at that time. In 'Vanguardia Política y Vanguardia Artística', filmmaker Gutiérrez Alea discusses the level of freedom cinema enjoyed in Cuba and concludes that it was the filmmakers' trust in the revolution that made them set their own boundaries.¹⁹

After the 'Palabras a los Intelectuales' speech, filmmakers had to defend their rights to make films according to their own views and interpretations of the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary canon. Given that the National Council for Culture (CNC) had questioned and attacked ICAIC's early aesthetic experimentalism, ICAIC launched the most significant of its defences at the First National Cultural Congress in

¹⁷ Azicri, *Cuba, Politics, Economics, and Society*, p. 182.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁹ Gutiérrez Alea, 'Vanguardia Política y Vanguardia Artística', *Cine Cubana*, nos 54-5 (1969).

1962. Alfredo Guevara, then director of ICAIC, based his comments on the by then sacred 'Palabras', when he insisted:

that the endeavour of the artist was autonomous. For example, it has educational values but its purpose is not educational. ICAIC therefore believed that if a revolutionary message is required of the creator of a work of art, in the same way as of a political speech or a philosophical essay, then only one thing will be accomplished: the spiritual assassination of the creator, the asphyxiation of art in an oxygen tent.²⁰

With Guevara's speech, ICAIC was able to gain the freedom necessary to develop artistically and also to serve the revolution. But by using 'Palabras' as a cornerstone of its defence, ICAIC tacitly signalled its adherence to Castro's guidelines.

Since Leninism was the recognized and accepted ideology of the Cuban government, then we may expect to find the same Orthodox aesthetic traits in Imperfect Cinema. For instance, in *La Primera Carga del Machete/First Machete Charge* (1969) the protagonists – Colonel Quirós, Colonel Campillo, Manuel Milanes, Benjamin Ramirez, Felíz Figueiredo and Máximo Gómez – serve to represent various 'types' of Spaniards and Cubans rather than functioning as dramatic personae who move and shape the narrative events of the film. They are not fully developed characters; rather, they represent aspects of an event – the Bayamo uprising against the Spanish Crown in October 1868 – which transcend their individual qualities. This narrative structure is a clear reversal of the typical Hollywood-type film where the historic event functions as a background to the larger-than-life romantic characters in the foreground.

This film employs hand-held camera and high contrast black-and-white in order to recreate the 'image' of early newsreel cinematography. Director Gómez wanted to 'deal with a historical event as if it were happening today, or better, as seen through the eyes of a person who would have been there as the events were taking place'.²¹ The result is a rather convincing documentary-like feature film that appears to have been shot in 1868 (three decades before the dawn of the film age). Michael Chanan comments that 'these techniques [are] not so much to transport the viewer of the film into the past as to bring the past into the present . . . the very opposite of the conventional historical movie'.²²

In another of Gómez's films, *Los Días del Agua/Days of Water*, characterization also complies with the typology. All characters possess one, or one set, of qualities. Antoñica is honest but simple minded; so, too, is the mob. The journalist is sceptical and keen, and the businessman is unscrupulous. The politician is dishonest. This film is a true story of the political manipulations of religious hysteria in the

²⁰ Chanan, *The Cuban Image*, p. 132.

²¹ Michael Myerson, *Memories of Underdevelopment: the Revolutionary Films of Cuba* (New York: Grossman, 1973), p. 170.

²² Chanan, *The Cuban Image*, p. 248.

Pinar del Rio province in the 1930s. The acting style in *Los Días* verges on the declamatory and the presentational. At first it suggests that there might be a casting and directorial problem. However, this style seems to fit Gómez's pseudo-documentary technique of capturing ordinary people confronting a real event. Within this style, actors sometimes acknowledge the camera that, for all intents and purposes, has become an extension of the omnipresent dramatic persona. This dramatic persona is the journalist who, by being able to see all, represents the ethical parameter of the action, similar to the role played by the chorus in Greek theatre. Thus, the characters, particularly the believers, by acknowledging the omnipresent journalist, are acknowledging his deontological parameters. The final impression is that the populace, the believers, are, in spite of their blind faith, seeking revolutionary guidance.

These sample films demonstrate the significant interconnection between Marxist orthodoxy and Imperfect Cinema. The official Marxism–Leninism of the Cuban Polity is implicitly and explicitly manifested, but because Cuban filmmakers were not forced to manifest and communicate party ideology, they could argue that Imperfect Cinema was reaffirming a coherent relationship between the Arts and the social whole. Consistent with the Imperfect Cinema proposition, these films served a utilitarian function.

By the late 1970s, however, Cuban cinema began to show some signs of aesthetic change. The controversy over Julio García Espinosa's Imperfect Cinema was a thing of the past. Filmmakers embarked on a new style that, superficially, could be considered in line with the Hollywood traditions. This is because post-Marxist aesthetics has no predetermined position in the relationship between content and form, the use of contemporary topics, or the possibility of using more imagery and/or developed characters. Aesthetic elements/devices are used freely according to the particular needs of each individual film. Yet they are Marxist because Perfect Cinema does not 'take' (using Chanan's term) the very codes of Hollywood to make films to be used as escapist entertainment. 'It is . . . necessary to try to reach the commercial screens with a kind of cinema that is essentially different from, for example, *Jaws*',²³ Gutiérrez Alea insists.

Unlike mainstream Hollywood-type films, Perfect Cinema is not oblivious to the structural and endemic problems of Cuban society. Perfect Cinema, on the contrary, professes freedom, de-reification and de-alienation, notions more in tune with Karl Marx's original epistemology as explained by Habermas's Critical Theory. Perfect Cinema thus falls within the post-Marxist realm. In *Amada* (1983), for instance, director Humberto Solás follows no aesthetic formula. This fictitious story deals with Amada's tribulations about whether or not to remain in an oppressive marriage in a traditional home and society, or to elope with her sensitive and attentive cousin, Marcial.

Two elements stand out in *Amada*: the cinematography, and the

²³ Interview with Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 'Beyond the reflection of reality', *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 125.

'blocking' of the actors. Cold pastels are so strong that a monochromatic sepia-like tone dominates over the virtually non-existent reds and hot colours. In terms of the blocking, the main characters are usually fixed in a setting throughout the shot. Even if they move, their movements are always slow and deliberate. When there are several characters in a shot, only one moves at a time. This limited-movement technique and the predominantly cold pastels help to embellish the film's oppressive mood. Perhaps these connotative elements are used in excess, but the sense of brooding interiority in *Amada* is so prevalent that the film ultimately emerges as a romantic melodrama whose pathetic qualities are reminiscent of Hegel's and Habermas's ideas on subjectivity: 'Modern art reveals its essence in Romanticism; an absolute inwardness determines the form and content of Romantic art'.²⁴ 'The subjective . . . gains autonomy under universal laws; but, "only with the will as subjective can freedom . . . be actual"'.²⁵ This romanticism, while diametrically opposed to the ideals of the orthodox Marxism, is at the same time in agreement with the Marxian idea of freedom (that is, the freedom that is central to the thematics of the romantic plot, and the freedom inherent in the director's aesthetic decision-making). *Amada* belongs to Perfect Cinema because of its overall aesthetic conceptualization, and, like most of the films of this period, does not appear to serve any particular political function.

Cartas del Parque/Letters from the Park (1988) also demonstrates the new aesthetics. Written by Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez and directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, this is perhaps the first full-blown love story in contemporary Cuban Cinema. Set just after the turn of the century, the film centres on a mature scribe, played by Victor Laplace, who pens love letters for lovers who come to him for assistance in the provincial city of Matanzas. One day, a beautiful young lady, played by Ivonne López, comes to hire the scribe to respond to a letter she has received from her suitor, played by Miguel Paneque. When López's character hands him the letter, the scribe realizes that he himself, on behalf of Miguel's character, wrote that letter to her. At that moment, both sides of an epistolary dialogue between the 'lovers' are developed by the scribe.

More than illuminating courtship practices of early twentieth-century Cuba, this film is an incisive study on the vagaries of love. The shift of emphasis from a scribe dealing with his clients from his *escritoire* by the park, to a scribe dealing with López away from his *escritoire*, serves to show his development and to suggest his inner conflicts. *Cartas del Parque* was Gutiérrez Alea's first film not dealing at all with politics or the revolution, as the director himself acknowledged in an interview in December 1988.²⁶ His reluctance to embrace Imperfect Cinema has also been clear in his writings, in which he has said that the primary function of cinema is to entertain, and to provide enjoyment through the representation of fictional

24 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 18.

25 Ibid. Habermas quotes Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.

26 Vivian Gamonedá-León, 'Las Cartas de Gutiérrez Alea', *Revolución y Cultura*, no. 12 (1988), pp. 22–5.

situations which, though based on reality, will enrich and widen the understanding of that reality.²⁷ His elaborate depiction of the characters (especially the scribe), the sophistication of the cinematography and costumes, and the totally fictitious nature of the dramatic events, clearly place *Cartas* under the Perfect Cinema rubric.

Another example is *La Bella del Alhambra/La Belle from Alhambra* (1989), a film about Rachel, a chorus girl, who works in a cheap show without much hope of success. She dreams of using her talent in a better place, such as the La Alhambra Theatre, and becoming famous and loved by somebody special. Her talent and beauty help her ascend to fame. The settings and costumes in this film are among the most elaborate and detailed of any Cuban period film. The theatre set contains historically authentic details such as chandeliers, velvet seats and roof ornaments that replicate the era's art-nouveau style while also allowing for bravura mise-en-scene cinematography. Costumes are also appropriate; for instance, Rachel's wardrobe reveals that her taste and refinement are not affected by time or means. Her dresses of the tent-show days are very simple, yet their basic elegance helps distinguish her from her workmates. In her years of fame, her dresses continue to indicate that her character is not entirely affected by wealth. Although her silk dresses are fashionable they are not ostentatious, as they might easily be, given Rachel's vocation. In this sense, costume helps to connote and reveal the qualities of the characters.

Characterization in *La Bella* is also effective. Characters such as Adolfo Tivoli, Rachel's best friend, and indeed Rachel herself, are provided with greater dimensionality than the 'types' of Imperfect Cinema. Adolfo is talented, funny, melancholic, humble, loyal and honest. Rachel is also talented and loyal, yet she is ambitious, persevering and astute. As the story progresses, Rachel evolves from a naïve dancer to a smartly manipulative artist without losing compassion or love for her true friends. By the end of the film, these conflicting qualities culminate in her loss of power.

By 1989, with films like those, Cuban cinema had the formal sophistication to carry any revolutionary message, or none at all. Perfect Cinema had the freedom to employ all the aesthetic possibilities the medium can offer without having to resort to particular formulae. Its aesthetic qualities suggest that the sphere of Art is not aligned with the official orthodox ideology of the Cuban Polity. Indeed, Perfect Cinema proves that the sphere of Art can maintain its relative independence within the Cuban social whole. Perfect Cinema is not only a separate film style within Cuban cinema, but also a powerful argument for conceptualizing Cuban cinema as a phenomenon independent from the codes of Hollywood.

All Imperfect Cinema works share specific qualities. *Cumbite* (1964),

Manuela (1966), *Las Aventuras de Juan Quin Quin/Juan Quin Quin* (1967), *Lucia* (1968), *La Primera Carga al Machete/The First Machete Charge* (1969), *Los Días del Agua/Days of Water* (1971), *Páginas del Diario de José Martí/The Diary of Jose Marti* (1971), *Ustedes Tienen la Palabra/Now It's Up to You* (1973), *El Hombre de Maisinicu/The Man from Maisinicu* (1973), the trilogy *El Otro Francisco/Francisco, Rancheador/Rancher, Maluala* (1973), *La Ultima Cena/The Last Supper* (1974), *De Cierta Manera/One Way or Another* (1974) and *Paty Candela* (1976), among others, share demonstrative, communicative and utilitarian qualities articulated through different cinematic devices.

These films demonstrate that there are traits of Marxist orthodoxy in Imperfect Cinema. The ideology of the Cuban Polity is implicitly and explicitly manifested in them. They all served a utilitarian function, demonstrating the injustices of the colonial and capitalist systems; they were designed to instigate a revolutionary fervour. In short, Weber's and Habermas's ideas on the relative independence of the three social spheres were not applicable during the first fifteen years of the revolution. In fact, orthodox postulates on the dictatorship of the proletariat, objective truth and centralization attempted to unify society under the leadership of the Polity. And the fact that the majority of filmmakers centred their discussions on 'how to serve' the revolution implies that the euphoria and effervescence of the revolution's triumph influenced their views. Their decision to make utilitarian films was by no means the result of an imposed mandate from the Polity. Imperfect Cinema's ideological alliance with the Polity was, in this sense, largely circumstantial. In spite of ICAIC's conflict with the National Council for Culture in the early 1960s, Imperfect Cinema, by adhering to orthodox aesthetics, was reaffirming the orthodox Marxist ideology of the Cuban Polity. It can be concluded that in this affinity between the Polity (the Communist Party) and Perfect Cinema, the sphere of politics benefited the most.

Western concepts of the Polity as a sphere encompassing state and society derive from the Aristotelian tradition. Habermas believes that these concepts, when emerging from a subsistence economy based on agrarian and handicraft production, 'form the foundations for a comprehensive political order'.

Social stratification and differential participation in (or exclusion from) political power go hand in hand – the constitution of political authority integrates the society as a whole. This conceptual framework no longer fits modern societies, in which the commodity exchange (organized under civil law) of the capitalist economy has detached itself from the order of political rule. Through the media

28 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 37.

of exchange value and power, no systems of action that are functionally complementary have been differentiated out.²⁸

Orthodox Marxism attempted to get away with this modern differentiation in Cuba. And, to a certain point, by centralizing the Economy and ‘guiding’ Art, it achieved this goal. The sphere of Economy was overpowered by the Polity, and Art was in great part voluntarily aligned with it, at least during the first fifteen years of the Marxist–Leninist government.

When Perfect Cinema emerged, it was not just a new aesthetic style. Perfect Cinema also suggested that the relationship between Art and the Polity had changed. Ana López’s contention that the new aesthetic trend in Cuban cinema is linked to ideological changes within the social whole is correct.²⁹ The predominance of a cinema aesthetic relating to post-Marxist ideology reveals that the hegemony of Marxism–Leninism in Cuba does not have the same weight as it did throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. While the Polity continued to adhere to orthodox principles, Cuban society was moving towards new Marxist views. The existence of divergent trends in society indicates the presence of independent logics. During the Perfect Cinema era, Art began to operate under its own logic, not under the logic of the Polity.

29 López, ‘Revolution and dreams’, p. 2.

Habermas, following the Hegelian approach, proposes a political solution to the problem of alienation and reification. Yet he upholds ‘the traditional Frankfurt School position that Art is an enclave of negation against the totalizing power of one-dimensional society’.³⁰ Art has the potential of indicating the existence of a set of logics independent of those of the Polity. This differentiation is what provides Art with the possibility of a subjective aesthetic–expressive quality, separate from a cognitive–instrumental Polity.³¹ However, Habermas’s problem of bringing a sense of unity between spheres in order to reach human emancipation remains unresolved.³² Although his project of unification does not mean a subjective solution, he understands that subjectivity is, as the postmodernists insist, a pervasive condition of modernity, and a condition attained by means of freedom.³³ It is freedom, best found in the subjectivity of the sphere of Art, which offers the potential of redeeming humankind, the social whole, from the domination of political power and reification. That is, by appealing to and evoking subjective reason, the practitioner, as well as the consumer, of Art is potentially able to transcend the logics of a totalizing Polity and Economy.

30 Martin Jay, ‘Habermas and modernism’, in Richard J. Bernstein (ed.), *Habermas and Modernity* (Worcester: MIT Press, 1985), p. 126.

31 In Habermas’s analysis, the three spheres are formed by three different rationality complexes: aesthetic–expressive, cognitive–instrumental and moral–practical. For detail, see Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume I (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), ch. III.

32 Jean-Francois Lyotard, ‘Réponse à la question: qu’est-ce que le postmoderne?’, *Critique*, no. 419 (1982), p. 358, and Martin Jay, ‘Habermas and modernism’, p. 139, note that Habermas has not explained how art can come to the rescue without ‘leading to an Adornesque strategy of hibernation’.

33 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 16–19.

Post-Marxist thinkers Mihailo Markovic and Svetozar Stojanovic propose a similar answer to the problem of alienation. Their solution, however, rests within the normative or deontological arena. Their praxis solution implies the conscious effort of the individual to avoid

any form of productive labour. As David Crocker argues, 'one can engage in praxis in such activities as gardening, arts, and crafts, and one can be a being of praxis in one's profession or remunerated activity when one's activity is an end in itself that realizes one's optimal dispositions.'³⁴ Their solution does not address the ontology of alienation and its social ramifications because it does not solve the problem of the self-consciousness of the individual while she/he is alienated. It provides, none the less, the rational differentiation that separates Art from productive labour. This epistemological distinction confirms and supports the presence of different logical complexes identified with the different spheres. From this premiss it can be posited that Art also evokes subjective reason, and by doing so moves the artist away from the logics of a totalizing Polity and/or Economy. Although Markovic and Stojanovic propose a different approach to the problem of alienation than that of Habermas, both solutions are based on the same epistemological categories emerging from the Enlightenment, particularly from Marx. Thus, both reconstitute the issues of subjectivity, freedom and creativity that so appropriately explain the behaviour of Cuban cinema within the Cuban social whole.

Freedom in itself is not one of the traditional aesthetic elements. However, the post-Marxist analytical approach discussed in this research posits 'freedom', 'emancipation' and 'creativity' as aesthetic qualities. Since freedom and creativity are conditions necessary for the goal of emancipation, I conclude that post Marxism privileges freedom as an imperative element for the emancipation of humankind. In this context, freedom in Art, even though it is a relative value, refers to the absence of predetermined aesthetic formulae. Traditional aesthetic elements, such as composition, plot, texture, rhythm, light and colour, volume and time, are always conditioned by the issue of freedom. In addition, in film the aesthetic issue is made more complex because of cinema's synchronous relations within the single image, and the relations of one image with the others. In other words, freedom refers to the availability of choices the artist has at her/his disposition. However, this arithmetically progressive number of artistic possibilities for manipulating its aesthetic elements is limited by the constraints of the cinema's capital-intensive nature (Economy) and the Polity's legal regulations. In this social constraint, the more choices the artist has available and employs, the greater the possibility for Art (cinema) to develop its own independent logic, thus leading humankind towards emancipation. As freedom is such an important quality in the Marxian quest for human emancipation, it explains why freedom became a central aesthetic issue in Cuban cinema.

One of the main themes which emerges from Perfect Cinema, and which illustrates its opposition to the logic of the Polity, is criticism of bureaucracy, Polity's functional base. This criticism is most prevalent in the films of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Humberto Solás. Gutiérrez

Alea's *La Muerte de un Burócrata/Death of a Bureaucrat* best exemplifies the plight of man's lonely fight against the oppression of bureaucracy. In this film, Gutiérrez Alea focuses not on the revolution, but on the pathology of modernity, specifically the logic of administration. The comic approach to the theme allows Gutiérrez Alea to criticize the entire spectrum of problems associated with bureaucracy without worrying about a backlash from the Polity. This criticism of the logic of the Polity has continued. In an interview with Silvia Oroz in 1984, Gutiérrez Alea remarked that the theme is still valid.³⁵ Juan Carlos Tabío's *Plaf/Splat* (1985) also uses an anti-bureaucracy theme. Called by *Variety*'s Paul Lenti the best Cuban film of the 1980s, this film is 'a satiric comedy that takes a hard look at bureaucracy, filmmaking, daily problems in Cuban life and "santería"'.³⁶

Solás, too, expressed antagonism towards bureaucratic logic in an interview in 1988. In discussing ways of regaining the spontaneity of the early years of the revolution, Solás insisted that it should be done in the artistic rather than the bureaucratic realm.³⁷ His opposition to political solutions derives from such frustrations as the delay in the release of *Un día de noviembre* in the late 1960s. 'Happily, the balance tilted towards the side of reason, and with the creation of the Ministry of Culture, a climate of trust among artists and intellectuals soon developed.'³⁸ Obviously, when Solás talked about reason he was talking about artistic reason, or Art logic, and not bureaucratic reason. None the less, Solás pointed out the continuing threats of self-censorship and censorship in Cuba. These threats, Solás warned, should not exist because the 'revolutionary artist should have the freedom to say whatever he/she wants to say in any way they want to say it'.³⁹ Although they use 'orthodox' rhetoric, Gutiérrez Alea's and Solás's continuing criticism of state administration confirms the independence of the Art(ist) from the Polity in Cuba. By focusing on non-revolutionary issues in a revolutionary society, Perfect Cinema is making a clear statement of not conforming to the standards. And by criticizing bureaucracy, it is attacking the Polity's most important functional base.

Unlike a capitalist country, where the Economy has its own independence from the Polity, in Cuba the economic sphere is controlled by the Polity. The Polity, however, no longer has the same kind of control over the Arts as it did in the first fifteen years of the revolution. During the Imperfect Cinema era, Cuban cinema was committed to reinforce the revolutionary ideals of the Marxist/Leninist Polity. Since the mid 1970s, however, Perfect Cinema has moved away from orthodox ideology, reflecting larger ideological changes in the social whole. However, the Polity and the Economy did not reflect such changes until much later. In the late 1970s, the Polity introduced

35 Silvia Oroz, *Tomás Gutiérrez Alea: Los filmes que no filmé* (La Habana: UNEAC, 1989), p. 105.

36 'Solanas' *Sur* wins Grand Coral at 10th Havana Film Festival, Cuban *Plaf* garners 3rd. Prize', *Cuba Update* (Winter 1989), p. 25.

37 Wilfredo Cancio interview with Humberto Solás, 'Solás en tiempo de sinceridad', *Revolución y Cultura* (November 1988), p. 4.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

39 *Ibid.*

economic changes, such as private farming and marketing. Though rejected in 1986, a successful programme to allow 'joint-ventures' with foreign companies was maintained. But it was not until 1992 that the Polity actually introduced significant political changes. In July 1992, the Constitution was changed and Leninism was eliminated as an ideological guideline.⁴⁰ From this perspective, Cuban cinema clearly preceded other spheres in introducing significant ideological changes.

In Leninist theory, the Polity, through the Party, is the vanguard of the social whole. But in the mid 1970s, Perfect Cinema led with a move that the Polity later followed. Evidence suggests that Cuban cinema thus assumed a position of the vanguard role. The object of taking the mantle of the vanguard is to lead in the process of emancipation. Marx's critique of bourgeois society mapped humankind's escape route from the trap of exploitation, alienation and reification which capitalism had imposed. Although Marx's analysis fell short by not taking into consideration other forms of alienation (and the fact that contemporary capitalism is far less exploitative than in his days), Marx's basic premisses and final goal of emancipating society are still valid. In Cuba, the Communist Party consciously took the leading role to emancipate society early in the revolution, but there is no evidence that Art consciously appropriated that role. Actually, the Polity's loss of leadership calls attention to a particular problem of orthodox Marxism: its goal is to eradicate capitalism and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, but once this is achieved, orthodoxy does not have a philosophical stance for dealing with the consequences. Cuban Art, on the other hand, by adhering to notions of freedom and self-determination closer to Marx's original postulates, has been in a better position to provide insights on Marx's goal of emancipation, and in this way, move closer to it. Marx and post Marxists see 'freedom in terms of the removal of obstacles, that is to the manifold development of human powers and the bringing into being of a form of association worthy of human nature'.⁴¹ This explains why Art, albeit unconsciously, took the leading role in moving society towards emancipation.

⁴¹ Steven Lukes, 'Emancipation', in *Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, p. 146.

⁴² Paranagua, 'Letter from Cuba to an unfaithful Europe', p. 5.

In May 1991, the central government started the process of merging ICAIC with the Television office and the Armed Forces studio. With this decision, the Film Institute lost some of its valued autonomy.⁴² Yet most of ICAIC's loss actually comes from the Polity through the Economy. ICAIC's autonomy is being eroded by a budgetary system that does not depend on ICAIC's artistic capabilities and value, but on political decisions. Thus, the Film Institute survives on a fixed budget given by the Polity. Although these political rulings took place outside the period of analysis of this research, it nevertheless suggests that the emancipatory trend initiated by the sphere of Art was viewed by the Polity as a threat to its leadership. In other words, Art was taking a vanguard position that was incompatible with the orthodox

postulates on the dictatorship of the proletariat, objective truth and centralization.

It can be concluded, and acknowledged, that Imperfect Cinema was creative, innovative and possessed a distinctive style. None the less, in spite of ICAIC's efforts to find the necessary ideological space in which to create, Imperfect Cinema adhered to orthodox Marxist aesthetics. Since it voluntarily adhered to the same ideological principles as the Polity, Imperfect Cinema was reinforcing Polity's values.

Applying a post-Marxist approach to films produced after the mid 1970s confirms that the emerging Perfect Cinema deviates significantly from Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. But this is not to accept Michael Chanan's opinion that Cuban cinema has taken the facile road of imitating the codes of Hollywood's commercial style. There is enough evidence to suggest that the aesthetic transition from Imperfect to Perfect Cinema rather represents changes in Cuba itself.

George Huaco contends that, 'the formal link between the two [approaches applied] is the assumption that the major political, social and economic changes in the larger society tend to affect art, or film, by being channelled or filtered through the social structures which constitute their social matrix'.⁴³ In line with Huaco, it is clear that those predispositions for change in Cuban society were first manifested in the sphere of Art, particularly in cinema. And because they were first manifested in cinema, it seems reasonable to conclude that Perfect Cinema led the way in the transition from Leninism towards the Marxian ideal of emancipation from political power and reification. In addition, since cinema has been ahead of the other spheres, it demonstrates that Art can be placed in the vanguard of the social whole. Thus, post Marxism, particularly Habermas's epistemology, may demonstrate why and how Perfect Cinema could fulfil the Marxian ideal of functioning as a liberating agent and action-paradigm for human emancipation in Cuban society.

⁴³ Huaco, *Sociology of Film Art*, p. 8.

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