



Historiographic Values of Cuban Fiction Cinema in the 1960s

Valores historiográficos del cine cubano de ficción en los años sesenta

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Abstract

Since their inception, History and Cinema have been interconnected. This essay examined how Cuban fiction cinema of the 1960s reflected and contributed to the understanding of revolutionary processes and the construction of a national identity in Cuba. The general objective was to analyze and highlight the historiographic values of Cuban fiction cinema produced in that decade, evaluating how these films reflected and contributed to the understanding of revolutionary processes and the construction of a national identity in Cuba. Following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution and the creation of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC) in 1959, emblematic films were produced that captured the social and political transformations of the country. Films such as *Historias de la Revolución* (1960), *Cuba baila* (1960), *El joven rebelde* (1961), *Las doce sillas* (1962), *Manuela* (1966), *La muerte de un burócrata* (1966), *Aventuras de Juan Quinquín* (1967), *Lucía* (1968), *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968), and *La primera carga al machete* (1969) stood out for their ability to document and critique historical events and offer perspectives on national identity. The detailed analysis of these films revealed how they served as historiographic tools, providing a deep understanding of the class conflicts, political tensions, and cultural transformations of the time.

Key words: Cuban cinema; Fiction; Cuban Revolution; National identity.

Resumen

Desde su nacimiento, la Historia y el Cine han estado interrelacionados. Este ensayo examinó cómo el cine cubano de ficción de los años sesenta reflejó y contribuyó a la comprensión de los procesos revolucionarios y la construcción de una identidad nacional en Cuba. El objetivo general fue analizar y destacar los valores historiográficos del cine cubano de ficción producido en esa década, evaluando cómo estas obras cinematográficas reflejaron y contribuyeron a la comprensión de los procesos revolucionarios y la construcción de una identidad nacional en Cuba. A partir del triunfo de la Revolución Cubana y la creación del Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC) en 1959, se produjeron películas emblemáticas que capturaron las transformaciones sociales y políticas del país. Películas como *Historias de la Revolución* (1960), *Cuba baila* (1960), *El joven rebelde* (1961), *Las doce sillas* (1962), *Manuela* (1966), *La muerte de un burócrata* (1966), *Aventuras de Juan Quinquín* (1967), *Lucía* (1968), *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968) y *La primera carga al machete* (1969); destacaron por su capacidad para documentar y criticar eventos históricos y ofrecer perspectivas sobre la identidad nacional. El análisis detallado de estas películas reveló cómo sirvieron de herramientas historiográficas, proporcionando una comprensión profunda de los conflictos de clase, las tensiones políticas y las transformaciones culturales de la época.

Palabras clave: Cine cubano; Ficción; Revolución Cubana; Identidad nacional.

INTRODUCTION

The pioneers of cinema glimpsed its potential to reflect, write and investigate history. The Lumière brothers in France, David Griffith in the United States, and later Sergei Eisenstein and the Russian educational establishment embarked on the effort to visually narrate the fundamental events of their individual countries' history. Despite cinema's early inclination towards historical themes, it took several decades for history to demonstrate a similar level of interest in the cinema (Ferro, 1988; Mico *et al.*, 1996; Rancière, 2017).

Knowing the fact that the first classification of the development of cinema and its analysis allows us to divide cinematographic works into fiction and documentaries. It is important to point out that the manuscript focuses on the findings derived from the research on the Cuban cinematographic production of the first decade after the triumph of the Revolution, known as the prodigious decade of this manifestation. During this period, the national cinematography was born and institutionalized with the foundation of ICAIC (Álvarez Pitaluga, 2016). There is a productive escalation of cinematographic works that today constitute referents of the national cinematographic production, known worldwide. For the first time, the technical bases for the advancement of the film sector and its distribution are established, and the principles for the exercise of a film policy as part of the cultural policy are cemented (del Valle Dávila & Villaça, 2019).

The question guiding the present study is based on knowing what are the historiographic values and cultural impact of Cuban fiction cinema (1960s), particularly in relation to the revolutionary processes and the construction of the national identity in Cuba? As a main objective, it was proposed to analyze and highlight the historiographic values of Cuban fiction cinema produced in the 1960s, evaluating how these cinematographic works reflected and contributed to the understanding of the revolutionary processes and the construction of a national identity in Cuba.

DEVELOPMENT

As soon as the revolution led by Fidel Castro came to power, the revolutionary administration marked the beginning of the deconstruction of the neocolonial political framework. Oppressive institutions were dissolved and the population was assured, for the first time in many years, better access to social justice. The administration underwent a cleansing process that led to the confiscation of embezzled assets. War criminals of the Batista regime were subjected to trials and subsequent sanctions, unethical leaders of the labor movement were dismissed, and the political parties that had collaborated with the oppressive regime were dissolved (Bustamante, 2019). The Emergency Courts and the Second Criminal Chamber of the Supreme Court were also suspended. The repressive organs of the tyranny ceased to exist and the National Revolutionary Police was formed, as well as the Department of Investigations of the Rebel Army (ER), which was given the task of investigating the tyranny's criminals who would be submitted to revolutionary justice, an organ that preceded the State Security, created later. The traditional bourgeois political parties, which had collaborated with the tyranny, faced with the lack of support from their bases and discredited before the people, were dissolved (Bustamante, 2019).

From the first days of the seizure of power, the foundations were laid for a profound educational transformation, which would have as its initial objective the access of all the people to education. On September 14, the military fortress of Columbia was handed over to the Ministry of Education and, as a symbol of the new Cuba, 69 military fortresses of the former army became educational centers throughout the country. At the end of 1959, the Law for the Integral Reform of Education was approved, whose application would guarantee access to education at all levels free of charge. The State assumed education as an essential social function when a new law proclaiming the General and Cost-free Nationalization of Education was passed in June 1961. Educational centers were created throughout the country, a constant element of the educational policy of the Revolution up to the present day (Duarte & Jacomeli, 2020).

As for culture, the policy of the Revolution was to guarantee access to it for all the people and to deploy and encourage artistic creation in all its manifestations. The first law of cultural content was the creation in March 1959 of the ICAIC, which began its work in the midst of an extraordinary transformation of cultural life. The creation of the National Council of Culture, the National Printing House of Cuba, the National Publishing House of Cuba, and a whole network of libraries and bookstores in the country were exponents of the changes in the cultural sphere. The National School of Art, the National Ballet School, the National Theater, the National Folkloric Ensemble were founded and greater support was given to the Alicia Alonso Ballet, which would become the National Ballet of Cuba (Gradszkova, 2017).

Under the direction of Alfredo Guevara, a young revolutionary intellectual who had participated in the university struggles alongside Fidel Castro, the ICAIC transformed Cuban cinema into a cultural phenomenon of great significance for the country. In addition to producing feature films, short films and documentaries, new movie theaters were inaugurated throughout the country and mobile cinema was implemented, an unprecedented initiative that took cinema to the most remote places in Cuba. About this foundational period of ICAIC, the outstanding intellectual Graziela Pogolotti offers a masterful synthesis of the importance of the creation and performance of this institution: On the sixtieth anniversary of the aforementioned triumph, after reflecting on a journey plagued with challenges, the initial stages seem to mark a significant period of establishment. The creation of the ICAIC, on March 24, 1959, raised numerous expectations and, in a symbolic sense, contributed to outline the trajectory that the cultural policy of the revolution would follow (Pogolotti, 2019).

The Revolution provided the essential resources necessary for rapid and efficient production. The people who had received formal training in Rome were only Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Julio García Espinosa. In contrast, emerging filmmakers, including directors, directors of photography, sound engineers, producers and the entire technical team working discreetly behind the final production, acquired their skills on an ad hoc basis, mainly through the creation of documentaries and fiction films. In addition, a profound intellectual debate emerged,

characterized by the dynamic exchange of theoretical concepts and practical applications, the scrutiny of prevailing contemporary trends, the exploration of the correlation of innovative forms of expression and artistic innovation, and the complexities encountered in a process of decolonization (Pogolotti, 2019, p. 2).

In this synthetic account of the Revolution in power, the founding in 1959 of Casa de las Américas, directed by Haydée Santamaría, could not be left out. This institution served as a link among Cuban intellectuals and left-wing intellectuals in Latin America, the Caribbean and the world. In addition, through ICAIC's Sonorous Experimentation Group in the 1970s, the Casa de las Américas was the cradle of the New Trova Movement, which became an ambassador of the song committed to just causes around the world and to the critical exercise of art in revolution.

As mentioned above, on March 24, 1959, the Revolutionary Government created the ICAIC through a law, thus responding to the desire of a group of intellectuals, among them Alfredo Guevara, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (Titón) and Julio García Espinosa. Committed to the Revolution, they saw in the cinema a powerful means of influence on the people and the need to decolonize culture, seeking their own and national voice in its manifestations (Coto & Domenech, 2015).

The 1960s, until well into its second half, were characterized by laying the foundations of an original creative movement "...freed from petty ties and useless servitude..." (Law nº169). The first reference was to deny the productions of North American cinema, because of its colonizing character and its generic sweetening dramaturgy. The second was the apprenticeship of two of the most prominent founders of Italian neorealism, Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica, who significantly influenced filmmakers around the world with their documentary style and their focus on the everyday problems of ordinary people (Porton, 2020). The third, at the end of the 1960s, was the cinema of the socialist countries, when socialism was adopted as the socioeconomic system and the path of the Revolution, which in the 1970s led to the definitive adoption of the features of "socialist realism", a method advocated as the only and infallible method for cultural development by this system (Fulcherberguer, 2021).

Hence, the early years of the ICAIC produced a work of great historiographic value, a reflection of the revolutionary process underway.

The first cinematographic work produced was the documentary *Esta tierra nuestra* by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, in 1959. The first Cuban fiction film -the film on which this analysis is focused- is Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Historias de la Revolución*. Imperfect for its primitive nature, it is a film that manages to capture the memorable profile of those years without falling into Manichaeism. It does not fall into the exaltation of heroism or simplistic propaganda, but prefers to emphasize human conflicts and ethical dilemmas. It reflects history through the vision of its characters. Valid as a source for the analysis of essential facts of the final stage of the struggle against Batista. It shows a legitimate recreation of the atmosphere of the period, its fashion and costumes, and its customs (Goldstone, 2003; Fulcherberguer, 2021).

The production of fiction feature films at ICAIC continues with *Cuba baila* in 1960, which competes for the role of first fiction film because it was completed before *Historias de la Revolución*. Another example is *El joven rebelde* by Julio García Espinosa in 1961. It is followed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Las doce sillas* in 1962, a comedy that adapts the Russian satirical novel of the same name. In 1966, Humberto Solás' *Manuela*, which deals with the conflicts and complexities of the revolutionary struggle from a human and emotional perspective, was released. That same year, Gutiérrez Alea presents *La muerte de un burócrata*, a scathing satire on bureaucracy and its absurdities, which consolidated his reputation as one of the must-see films of Cuban cinema (Vallina, 2014).

In 1967, Julio García Espinosa directed *Aventuras de Juan Quinquín*, based on a work by writer Samuel Feijoo. This film was well received by audiences due to its vibrant narrative and its connection to Cuban popular culture. In 1968, Humberto Solás made *Lucía*, an emblematic film that tells the story of three women in different periods of Cuban history, and which stands out for its innovative narrative structure and its profound analysis of female and national identity. That same year, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea presented *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, considered one of the best Cuban fiction films of all time. This film offers a sharp and insightful critique of post-revolutionary Cuban society through the eyes of

a bourgeois intellectual who feels alienated from the new social order. *Memorias del subdesarrollo* was highly acclaimed internationally, ranking among the top five films screened worldwide in its year of release and occupying 144th place in the list of the 150 best films of all time (Feijoo, 2001).

Fictional films of the 1960s plunge into the analysis of Cuban society and critically attack the evils inherited from the neocolonial past, while at the same time legitimizing the new social project. According to Burton (1977), two themes predominate in these films: history and underdevelopment. These themes are approached with a historicist vocation, without losing sight of their character as fictional stories. Filmmakers of this time used cinema as a tool to explore and question national identity, class conflicts, and political tensions, reflecting the complexities and contradictions of post-revolutionary Cuba. Emblematic examples of this approach are Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* and Humberto Solás's *Lucía*, which use personal narratives to illustrate broader social problems (Burton, 1977; Vallina, 2014).

All of these films are valuable for the representation of history and as a source for the analysis of essential facts of the final stage of the political struggle of those times. Through the dramatic conflicts of their characters, they illustrate the effects of neocolonial domination and underdevelopment, as well as a legitimate recreation of the atmosphere of their time, including fashion, costumes, religious beliefs and customs. Moreover, as especially revealed in *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, they are an expression of the mentalities of the Cuban people during the convulsive founding days of the revolutionary process. These films reveal the conflicts of the immediate reality, such as specific facts of the war offensive of the ER, the clandestine struggle, the conflicts of the Revolution with the national bourgeoisie and the American imperialism, and the October Crisis. Even those films that dabble in colonial history, two of the eleven films chosen from this first period, are not only valid for the knowledge of the past time in which they inquire, but also reflect the time and the thinking of their contemporaneity (Burton, 1977; Vallina, 2014).

The following critical quote from Gaitano (2018) uniquely reveals the value of *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* as an emblematic film of its time and

highlights its importance for the representation of national history. *Memorias de Subdesarrollo* is halfway between documentary, offering an objective view of the Cuban reality of the 1960s, and fiction, presenting an extremely subjective perspective of Sergio (played by Sergio Corrieri), a Cuban intellectual. Through extensive interior monologues and small details of his personal life, deep contradictions are revealed in his character, constantly and unsteadily oscillating between criticism and praise. These ideological inconsistencies illuminate the reality of an entire country at the mercy of bourgeois resentment. In addition, Gaitano states:

The film adapts the novel of the same name by Edmundo Desnoes, and according to Corrieri, even surpasses it (which is unusual in such adaptations), achieving greater complexity and relying on powerful contextual images. The reality of that 'underdeveloped island' is deeply influenced by the Missile Crisis and the effects of the Cuban Revolution on its society. This is combined with a highly prejudiced individual narrative and a mass of ordinary people struggling to stay afloat in this painful revision Gutiérrez Alea makes of his country's idiosyncrasy (Gaitano, 2018, pp. 1-2).

In fact, *Memorias del Subdesarrollo*, as a historical source, allows us to understand the mentality of a certain part of the bourgeoisie and the uncompromising intelligentsia. It shows a mosaic of the popular sectors and the masses in turmoil during the revolutionary process, functioning as a reliable and almost documentary testimony of the city of Havana, thanks to the photography of Ramón F. Suárez that enriches the film's script. It captures events such as the October Crisis and the preparation of the people for resistance against imperialist aggression, serving as a testimony of the time it represents. Beyond its value as a historical representation, these characteristics of *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* revealed in the following review speak of its validity and transcendence, reaffirming its status as a classic. The legitimacy of this film lies in its depiction of the objective social environment it reveals and in its juxtaposition with the personal perspective of the main character. Furthermore, it lies in the ideological differences that, nevertheless, enrich the description of that historical period, with its advances and fallacies, which resemble the current times (Gaitano, 2018).

The protagonist, Sergio, perceives a sense of misalignment with the new social structure, lacks understanding and seeks solace in a microcosm, as he struggles with the decision to leave or stay. How many individuals similar to Sergio exist in Cuba today? This intricately rendered character evokes potential aversion, but at the same time is presented with a degree of lucidity. This portrait allows Titón to articulate his critical perspective on the historical juncture the country was going through, analyzing those who claimed to possess the absolute truth and, therefore, institutionalize mediocrity and bureaucratic tendencies as elements of our cultural legacy. The film in question emerges as a sincere piece, encouraging introspection and mindfulness, illustrating the convergence of past and present narratives, observing the then emerging revolutionary process (Villa, 2018, p. 5).

In 1969, Manuel Octavio Gómez closes the so-called golden age of Cuban cinema with the historical film *La primera carga al machete*. This cinematographic work is a vivid testimony of the struggle for Cuban independence. The film is distinguished by its innovative approach and semi-documentary style, combining dramatization with documentary film techniques to offer a realistic and emotional representation of the fighting and the life of the mambises, the Cuban guerrilla fighters. *La primera carga al machete* not only reflects the bravery and sacrifice of Cuban patriots, but also criticizes the injustices and brutalities of Spanish colonialism. This work consolidated Gómez as one of the most important filmmakers of his time and highlighted the ability of Cuban cinema to address historical themes with depth and social commitment (Burton, 1977).

In that first decade of Cuban fiction cinema, the themes that captured the attention of filmmakers were the processes of national liberation in the colonial period, as shown in the first story of Lucía (1968). This theme is analyzed with historical rigor by contrasting it with recognized sources, such as *La Revolución de Yara* by Fernando Figueredo (1968), *Historia de Cuba* by Fernando Portuondo and the Instituto de Historia de Cuba, *La Colonia* by Santamaría (1996), and *Historia de Cuba (1492-1898)* by Torres-Cuevas and Loyola Vega (2019). In addition, the struggle against the Batista dictatorship is reflected in films such as *Historias de la revolución* (1959), *Manuela* (1966), *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968) and the se-

cond story of *Lucía* (1968), whose historical veracity is corroborated by the works of Julio Le Riverénd (*La República*) and the testimonies of Ernesto Guevara in *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria* and *La guerra de guerrillas*. Another recurring theme is the conditions and consequences of underdevelopment in Cuba, as addressed in *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968). This film bases its historical content on the aforementioned works by Le Riverénd (1974) and Portuondo (1968), as well as on *Cuba between 1899 and 1959. Seis décadas de historia* by Francisca López (2007) and the literary work of the same name by Edmundo Desnoes (2007), which serves as the basis for the film's screenplay.

Contributions to knowledge

This study provides a detailed analysis of Cuban fiction films of the 1960s, showing how these cinematographic works captured and reflected the revolutionary processes and social transformation in Cuba. By examining emblematic films such as *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and *Lucía* (1968) by Humberto Solás, it highlights ICAIC's ability to document and criticize historical events, offer perspectives on national identity, and highlight the political and social tensions of that time.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that it focuses exclusively on the decade of the 1960s, which could leave out relevant aspects of the evolution of Cuban cinema in later periods. In addition, although several emblematic films are analyzed, it does not cover the totality of the film production of the period. Likewise, the study does not compare Cuban film production with that of other countries in the region, which could provide a broader and more enriching context to better understand the particularities and achievements of Cuban cinema in that period.

CONCLUSIONS

Detailed analysis of Cuban fiction films of the 1960s revealed a rich and complex intersection between film production and the historical revolutionary processes in Cuba. The films of this decade not only captured the events and social transformations of the time, but also contributed

significantly to the construction of a national identity. Emblematic works such as *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and *Lucía* (1968) by Humberto Solás demonstrated a unique capacity to document, criticize and reflect the political, social and cultural complexities of post-revolutionary Cuba.

The first ICAIC productions, including *Esta tierra nuestra* (1959), *Historias de la Revolución* (1960) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, *Cuba baila* (1960), *El joven rebelde* (1961) by Julio García Espinosa, and *Las doce sillas* (1962) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, laid the foundations for a committed cinema that reflected the national reality. Later films such as *Manuela* (1966) by Humberto Solás, *La muerte de un burócrata* (1966) by Gutiérrez Alea, *Aventuras de Juan Quinquín* (1967) by Julio García Espinosa, and *La primera carga al machete* (1969) by Manuel Octavio Gómez, further enriched the cinematographic panorama of the decade by addressing crucial themes about history and underdevelopment in Cuba.

As a whole, these films served as historiographical tools. They provided critical perspectives on national identity, class conflict, and the political tensions inherent in the revolution. Through personal and emotional narratives, the filmmakers succeeded in illustrating the effects of underdevelopment and neocolonial domination, offering a legitimate recreation of the atmosphere of the time, including their fashions, customs and religious beliefs.

This study also highlights how the cultural policy proposed by the Cuban Revolution from its beginnings, especially the creation of the ICAIC, fostered a film production that sought to decolonize culture and find its own national voice. This policy not only allowed the production of works with a high historiographic value, but also fostered an intense intellectual debate on the relationship among cinema, history and society. Thus, the cinematography of the 1960s emerged as a powerful tool to narrate the history of the Cuban Revolution, offering a critical and reflective look at the changes and challenges that defined this crucial period.

Recommendations

For future research, it is recommended to consider extending the study to later decades to assess the evolution and continued impact of Cuban cinema, to make comparisons with the film production

of other Latin American countries to provide a broader context. In addition, it is suggested to foster interdisciplinary collaborations among historians, sociologists and film specialists, and to investigate the cultural and social impact of the films on Cuban audiences and their international reception, to better understand their influence on the construction of national identity.

Authors' contributions

Mariuska Quiñones Aguilar: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Research, Methodology, Visualization, Drafting - original draft, Writing - revision and editing..

Ernesto Santiesteban Leyva: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Research, Methodology, Drafting: original draft, Writing: proofreading and editing.

Conflictos de interés

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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