

## Gender in Cuban Cinema

From the Modern to the Postmodern

Bearbeitet von  
Guy Baron

1. Auflage 2011. Taschenbuch. VIII, 326 S. Paperback

ISBN 978 3 0343 0229 6

Format (B x L): 15 x 22,5 cm

Gewicht: 480 g

Weitere Fachgebiete > Musik, Darstellende Künste, Film > Filmwissenschaft,  
Fernsehen, Radio > Filmgeschichte

schnell und portofrei erhältlich bei

  
DIE FACHBUCHHANDLUNG

Die Online-Fachbuchhandlung [beck-shop.de](http://beck-shop.de) ist spezialisiert auf Fachbücher, insbesondere Recht, Steuern und Wirtschaft. Im Sortiment finden Sie alle Medien (Bücher, Zeitschriften, CDs, eBooks, etc.) aller Verlage. Ergänzt wird das Programm durch Services wie Neuerscheinungsdienst oder Zusammenstellungen von Büchern zu Sonderpreisen. Der Shop führt mehr als 8 Millionen Produkte.

# Introduction

*Lucía* is not a film about women; it's a film about society. But within that society, I chose the most vulnerable character, the one who is most transcendently affected at any given moment by contradictions and change [...] the effects of social transformations on a woman's life are more transparent. Because they are traditionally assigned to a submissive role, women have suffered more from society's contradictions and are thus more sensitive to them and more hungry for change. From this perspective, I feel that the female character has a great deal of dramatic potential through which I can express the entire social phenomenon I want to portray. This is a very personal and a very practical position. It has nothing to do with feminism per se.<sup>1</sup>

El deber de un cineasta revolucionario es hacer la revolución en el cine.<sup>2</sup>

## The Films, the Hypothesis and the Organisation of the Book

Humberto Solás's classic film *Lucía* (1968) provoked the above quotation from the highly acclaimed Cuban film director, who died on 17 September 2008.<sup>3</sup> It is cited in many studies of Cuban cinema as it en-

- 1 Film-maker, and one of the founders of the New Latin American Cinema of the 1960s, Humberto Solás, quoted by Julianne Burton and Marta Alvear (1978: 33) in an interview with the Cuban director.
- 2 'The duty of a revolutionary film-maker is to make a revolution in cinema,' Cuban film-maker and theorist Julio García Espinosa (2000: 28).
- 3 Solás's film *Lucía* is considered by world critics as one of the ten most important films in the history of Spanish American cinema. Some of his major credits as a director are: *Manuela* (1966), *Cecilia* (1981), *Un hombre de éxito* [A Successful Man] (1986), *El siglo de las luces* (1991) [literally 'The Century of Lights' but an adaptation of the Alejo Carpentier novel from 1962 known by the English title *Explosion in a*

capsulates perfectly Cuban cinema's relationship to its portrayal of female characters.<sup>4</sup>

Marvin D'Lugo (1997: 155), for example, argues that the female figure has long been identified with the Revolution and 'with the emergence of a truly national cinema in Cuba, that is, with the expression of the narratives that embody and circulate the values of the revolutionary community', arguing that female characters in Cuban cinema of the Revolution often retain the one 'cardinal feature' that Solás designated as the essential feature of the female characters of *Lucía* – 'transparency' (i.e. that the female protagonists are 'seen through rather than seen'). He argues that during the first decade of the Revolution, in productions such as *Lucía, De cierta manera* [One Way or Another] (1974, Sara Gómez) and *Retrato de Teresa* [Portrait of Teresa] (1979, Pastor Vega), 'the ethos associated with a revolutionary national identity was elaborated in fictional films through an insistent focus on the narrative destiny of female characters' (ibid.). He puts the 'revolutionary mythology' within the figure of the female arguing that it creates identification with the audience at a new level, in order 'to develop a form of address to, and identification by, the Cuban audience' (ibid.). He goes on to argue that between 1987 and 1997, a change occurred, in that images of women in Cuban cinema were used not only to embody the concept of nation (this has remained, he suggests) but also to express 'critical discourses about Cuban culture in general and the Revolution in particular ...', and that this is an evolving process responding to changes in contemporary Cuban society (ibid. 156).

Via the examination of six films that each address, to a greater or lesser extent, issues of gender in contemporary Cuban society between 1974 and 1990, this book argues that the portrayal of aspects of gender relations in Cuban cinema developed along a progressive path from expressions of the modern to expressions of the postmodern, closely following a cultural transition in the nation as a whole. This does not mean that there occurred

---

*Cathedral*], *Miel para Oshún* [Honey for Oshún] (2001) and *Barrio Cuba* [Cuba Neighbourhood] (2005).

4 See D'Lugo, 1997: 155; Spinella, 2004: 151; Chanan, 1985: 225–6.

an absolute rejection of all the principles of what it meant to be 'modern', but that, in the latter half of the 1980s, expressions of the postmodern as described by Jameson and others can be seen through the prism of gender relations in some of the films produced. The films to be examined are: *De cierta manera* (Sara Gómez, 1974), *Retrato de Teresa* (Pastor Vega, 1979), *Lejanía* [Far Away] (Jesús Díaz, 1985), *Hasta cierto punto* [Up to a Point] (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1983), *¡Plaff! (o demasiado miedo a la vida)* [Plaff! (or Too Afraid of Life)] (Juan Carlos Tabío, 1988), and *Mujer transparente* [Transparent Woman] (Humberto Solás, 1990).

The choice of some of these films is immediately obvious. Chapter 1 theoretically and contextually introduces the notion of *machismo* in Cuban society, while Chapter 2 analyses two films that focus on this aspect of gender relations. *De cierta manera* debates *machismo* using an experimental cinematic approach. It is often cited as one of the films that encapsulates the Revolution's early, modernist approach to its treatment of gender and gender relations. I will argue that it formulates a dialectical discussion that powerfully challenges traditional notions of gender in Cuban society via an aesthetic mechanism that breaks with traditional narrative in a number of ways. *Hasta cierto punto* is a pessimistic account of attempts to change basic attitudes towards male–female relations in the Cuban population. In its portrayal of a central female character that resists the forces of *machismo* it is critical of *machista* values that exist in both the working class and the bourgeoisie, and in many ways pays homage to *De cierta manera*.

Chapter 3 discusses the figure of the mother – its representation in film and in Cuban society – while Chapter 4 highlights two different representations of the mother-figure. *Retrato de Teresa* is an examination of domestic marital relations and was highly controversial at the time. It poses many questions regarding relations between men and women in Cuban society (this time on a much more personal level, on the domestic front) and opens up many issues regarding the cultural representation of the mother-figure, not least from the point of view of sex and sexuality.

*Lejanía*, however, is not such an obvious choice in a study of the representation of gender, as it is a film about exile as much as it is about a mother and her son. But its inclusion is justified for two reasons. First, its representation of the character of the mother makes an interesting

comparison with that of the mother in *Retrato de Teresa*, six years earlier, and second, in its bold aesthetic, it illustrates the beginnings of an emerging critical and resisting postmodernism that continued into the late 1980s and on into the early 1990s.

Whilst Chapter 5 debates the emergence of postmodern culture in Cuba, I have discussed both *¡Plaff! (o demasiado miedo a la vida)* and *Mujer transparente* in Chapter 6. In *¡Plaff!*, the tradition of allegorising the nation through female characters is intentionally parodied in postmodern style, and the film is a direct critique of aspects of the Revolution, including the status of women within it, while *Mujer transparente* discusses women's struggle for equality at one of the most significant moments in Cuba's history. It also revisits and reworks, in postmodern style, Humberto Solas's notion of the 'transparent woman' in Cuban revolutionary cinematic history.

The period of study, 1974–90, is self-evident. 1974 was the year in which *De cierta manera* was made, although it was not released until 1978 for reasons that will be made clear in Chapter 2. It was a highly significant film in Cuba's history and opens up a wealth of issues concerning gender, gender relations and *machismo* in Cuban society. It was made one year before the law on male–female relations, known as the *Código de la Familia* [Family Code] was promulgated (to be discussed shortly), and the time between its production and its release – 1974–8 – straddle a hugely important period in Cuban cultural history.

The years 1971–6 were defined by writer and cultural critic Ambrosio Fornet as the '*quinquenio gris*' [grey five years] of Cuban cultural production: a period of cultural authoritarianism stemming largely from closer political ties with the Soviet Union, when Cuba's politics became more dogmatic and, as Fornet (Chanan, 2004: 313) commented, 'a vain attempt was made to implement, along with the Soviet economic model, a sort of *criollo* socialist realism'.<sup>5</sup> These years were marked by a pathway of rigid ideological

5 Michael Chanan (1985 and 2004) discusses the politics and history of ICAIC throughout his book on Cuban Cinema. For more on the politics of ICAIC see Quiros (1996: 279–93). For other general histories of ICAIC see Burton (1997: 123–42); Caballero y Del Río (1995: 102–15), and the official website of ICAIC: <<http://www.cinecubano.com>>.

and cultural thought, and the 1971 Congress of Education and Culture proclaimed art as ‘un arma de la Revolución’ [a weapon of the Revolution], declaring such activities as homosexuality (and any others not in accord with the revolutionary process) as extravagant and counter-revolutionary. However, after the Ministry of Culture was set up in 1976, there began a process of cultural institutionalisation alongside the ‘Institutionalisation’ of the Revolution, with a huge expansion of cultural activities.<sup>6</sup>

As Michael Chanan (1985: 16) remarks, in 1977, in a country with only 10 million people, ‘there were over 46,000 professional artistic performances that recorded an attendance of almost 12 million, and nearly 270,000 aficionado performances with an attendance of almost 48 million.’

*De cierta manera* was made during the ‘grey five years’ but was not released until after the process of institutionalisation had been put in place. This, combined with the introduction of the Family Code in 1975, and the fact that one of the central concerns of the film is the prevalence of *machismo* in Cuban revolutionary society, makes it the perfect place to start an examination of gender relations.

It is very convenient to end this study in 1990, as it was the year in which the final film to be discussed, *Mujer transparente*, was released. It is a film that pays much attention to Solás’s opening quotation and was supervised by the great director himself. It was also released shortly after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, a symbolic event that ushered in the collapse of the Soviet Union, provoking enormous changes in Cuban society. What came next (the ‘Special Period’) falls outside the remit of this book. The last two chapters, however, deal with the emergence of postmodernism in

6 After the failure in 1970 to produce a targeted 10m tons of sugar, Cuba joined COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance – an economic organisation of Communist states) in 1972 and moved from a so-called ‘moral economy’ based on moral imperatives to work, to a more incentivised economy. This became formalised ‘in the various moves of 1975–6’ (Kapcia, 2000: 193) in the process of institutionalisation of the Revolution’s practices, that included, in 1976, the formation of the Ministry of Culture, and the subsequent decentralisation of publishing houses in the world of literature.