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## **The absolution of his(s)tory: the mythologization of the past in Cuban cinema (1968-1971)**

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# The absolution of his(s)tory: the mythologization of the past in Cuban cinema (1968–1971)

*Santiago Juan-Navarro*

*Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears...*<sup>1</sup>

In his famous defence speech at the trial for his attack on the Moncada barracks in 1953, Fidel Castro declared: 'History will absolve me'.<sup>2</sup> Since its foundation in 1959, three months after the triumph of revolution, the Cuban Institute of Film Art and Industry (ICAIC) devoted much of its efforts to manufacture a version of the past that would indeed justify and 'absolve' the new revolutionary order.<sup>3</sup> As other areas of state-sponsored culture, the film industry contributed to develop a teleological interpretation of history according to which modern Cuba was the result of a series of ever-increasingly powerful revolts that culminated in the socialist revolution of 1959. That *telos* (or providential design) allowed the interpretation of each upheaval in relation to others, infusing meaning into the entire historical pattern while privileging its end.

Throughout half a century, the revolutionary government has thus embarked on a large-scale propaganda effort to depict itself as the culmination of Cuban history. In fact, national past has served as its major alibi, conferring the revolutionary process both moral support and a sense

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<sup>1</sup> R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York 1989) 151.

<sup>2</sup> F. Castro, 'History will absolve me' in: F. Castro and R. Debray, *On trial* (London 1968) 4-28: 4.

<sup>3</sup> The ICAIC (Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industrias Cinematográficas) was set up under the Revolutionary Government's Law of 24 March 1959 and it has since been the sole agency responsible for film production in Cuba. With the expropriation of large film distribution in 1960 and of the movie theaters in 1965, the ICAIC took over all aspects of film industry, turning Cuban cinema into a state monopoly. Although Cuban filmmakers have sometimes been critical of the regime, the Instituto has always remained faithful to its mission: to create a new cinema ideology in tune with the Cuban revolution. In fact, it has proved to be one of the most successful cultural initiatives of the revolutionary leadership and a very efficient tool of propaganda both internally and abroad. All films discussed in this article were produced by the ICAIC between the late 1960s and the early 1970s.

of continuity.<sup>4</sup> The most recurrent historical referent in the new regime's strategies of legitimation was provided by the wars of independence and especially by the figure of José Martí (1853-1895), whose writings were an essential inspiration to the Cuban independence movement. As early as 16 October 1953, in his famous self-defence, Fidel evoked the Apostle as the 'intellectual author' of the assault on the Moncada barracks. However, it was by the end of the 1960s, with the centennial of Céspedes' 1868 uprising, that this appropriation of the past and its heroes became more obsessive and recurrent.

On October 10, 1968, at La Demajagua, Fidel gave a speech that consolidated a new vision of the revolutionary origin of Cuba. One hundred years after the beginning of the wars of independence, the Comandante established the basis for a thesis that would reverberate throughout the history of Cuban cinema:

What does 10 October 1868 mean to our people? What does this glorious date mean to our country's revolutionaries? It simply means the beginning of a hundred years of struggle and the beginning of the revolution in Cuba, because there has only been one revolution in Cuba – the one which Carlos Manuel de Céspedes began on 10 October 1868 and that we are still fighting! [applause].<sup>5</sup>

In this brief paragraph, Castro homogenizes different historical periods, assumes the role of absolute interpreter of the nation's historical destiny and, by inference, declares himself continuator of a Hundred Years' War. According to this eschatological (and anachronistic) view of history, the *fidelist* revolution did not begin with the attack on the Moncada barracks on 26 July 1953, or with the landing of the Granma on 2 December 1956, or even with the entry of the rebel army into Havana on 1 January 1959, but rather with Céspedes' insurrection on 10 October 1868, which started the Ten Years' Wars (1868-1878). Therefore, the wars of independence against Spain were seen as part of a continuum in which all political events of modern Cuba had their particular 'end of times' in the socialist revolution.

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<sup>4</sup> L. A. Pérez Jr., 'In the service of the Revolution: Two decades of Cuban historiography, 1959-1979' in: L. A. Pérez, Jr. ed., *Essays on Cuban historiography: historiography and research* (Gainesville, FL 1995) 144-152: 145.

<sup>5</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. F. Castro, 'En la velada conmemorativa de los Cien Años de Lucha' [At the commemorative evening for the Hundred Years of Struggle], *Discursos* [Speeches] I (Havana 1976) 60-80: 61.

The centennial of the 1868 uprising coincided with the maturity and splendour of Cuban cinema. Within a broad commemorative campaign labeled 'A Hundred Years of Cuba's Struggle for Independence', patriotic films followed one another from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. The release of those films occurred simultaneously with the publication of numerous articles in newspapers and magazines in which the independence wars against Spain were linked to the 1959 revolution and with the contemporary fight against United States imperialism.<sup>6</sup> A paradigmatic example of this tendency was the special issue of the leading film journal *Cine Cubano*, which includes interviews with 'filmmakers whose recent work is integrated in the cycle devoted to the hundred years' struggle for independence' and opens with a text by Martí as well as the above-mentioned speech by Fidel.<sup>7</sup> This superimposition of nineteenth-century independence movements and the twentieth-century revolution, and their respective leaders Martí and Fidel, continued to mark film production during the 1970s and the early 1980s.

Fiction films such as Humberto Solás' *Lucía* (1968), Manuel Octavio Gómez's *La primera carga al machete* [The first machete charge] (1969), Jorge Fraga's *La odisea del General José* [The ordeal of General José] (1968) and José Massip's *Páginas del diario de José Martí* [Pages of José Martí's diary] (1971) reflect the cultural milieu of a period in which filmmakers longed for a difficult synthesis between formal experimentation and political

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<sup>6</sup> A. Núñez Jiménez, 'Raíces de la revolución cubana en cien años de lucha' [Roots of the Cuban revolution in a hundred years of struggle], *Granma* 2.245 (10 October 1968) 4; R. Fernández Retamar, 'El mentor directo de nuestra revolución' [The direct inspirator of our revolution], *Cuba* 8 (February 1969) 20-21; A. Melis, 'Lucha antiimperialista y lucha de clases en José Martí' [Anti-imperialist struggle and class struggle in José Martí], *Casa de las Américas* [House of the Americas] 9 (May-June 1969) 126-133; C. Vitier, 'De La Demajagua al Moncada: una sola revolución' [From La Demajagua to the Moncada: A single revolution], *Granma* 9.170 (18 July 1973) 5; P. Padrón, '24 de febrero de 1895: una epopeya culminada en 1959' [24 February 1895: An epic that culminated in 1959], *Granma* 10.45 (23 February 1974) 2; M. Moreno Fragnals and Z. Lapique, 'Esta revolución comenzó en Yara' [This revolution began at Yara], *Cuba Internacional* [Cuba International] 6 (October 1974) 20-27.

<sup>7</sup> 'Cine Cubano entrevista a los realizadores cuya obra reciente se integra en el ciclo dedicado a los Cien Años de Lucha por la Liberación' [Cuban Cinema interviews filmmakers whose recent works subscribe to the Hundred Years of Struggle campaign], *Cine Cubano* [Cuban Cinema] 68 (1971) 24-44.

propaganda.<sup>8</sup> To their avant-garde and stylized nature, these works add a clear political message aimed to connect the socialist project with the national past and especially with the wars of independence.

### ***Lucía* (Humberto Solás, 1968)**

Of all the films dealing with the liberation wars *Lucía* was the most ambitious and spectacular. It almost instantly became a classic and is still regarded as one of the best Cuban movies of all time.<sup>9</sup> Organized as a triptych, each of its parts is set in a key moment of Cuban history (1895, 1932 and 196...). In all three cases, the protagonist is a woman named Lucía. Although the chosen historical periods can be labeled as epic (the war against the colonizing metropolis, the fight against Machado's dictatorship and the literacy campaign undertaken in 1961), the characters conform to the 'middle-of-the-road hero' proposed by György Lukács in his theory of historical fiction: anonymous beings who embody the nation's historical consciousness in times of change.<sup>10</sup> The three Lucías serve Solás to allegorically depict nation building throughout a century. The indeterminacy of the final episode's date (196...), places the trilogy within the eschatological view of socialism: the idea of history as a project that has its ultimate culmination in an ideal classless society set in an indefinite future.

The first section of the movie is set in 1895, when the Cuban nationalists were warring against the Spanish rule. The protagonist, a mature and repressed aristocrat, has a brother in the rebel army. With most men off fighting the war, Lucía falls violently in love with a married Spaniard who claims to be apolitical, but is really a covered agent. As they ride toward the coffee plantation where the rebels are hidden, troops hired by the Spanish gallop out of the hills. Her lover throws her off his horse and she realizes

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<sup>8</sup> Many documentaries produced by the ICAIC during this period also explored the hundred years' war with an innovative aesthetics that challenged conventional narrative. Those included Alejandro Saderman's *Hombres de mal tiempo* [Men of bad times] (1968), Santiago Villafuerte's *Un 28 de enero* [a 28th January] (1968) and *Médicos mambises* [Freedom fighter doctors] (1968), and Bernabé Hernández's *1868-1968* (1970). Due to space restrictions, I will focus on the fiction films of the period.

<sup>9</sup> J. A. García Borrero, *Guía crítica del cine cubano de ficción* [Critical guide for Cuban fiction cinema] (Havana 2001) 30.

<sup>10</sup> G. Lukács, *The historical novel* (Lincoln, NE and London 1983) 89-170.

that he was simply using her to discover the nationalists' secret headquarters. After Lucía's discovery of her brother's dead body following the Spanish raids, she stabs her betrayer to death.

The second Lucía (1933) is more directly committed to the revolutionary cause. She falls in love with a young man who is active in the clandestine struggle to overthrow the dictator Gerardo Machado (1871-1939). Leaving the safety of her bourgeois environment, she begins to take an active part in the struggle by disseminating propaganda and encouraging strike action in factories. Machado falls from power, but things do not change much. Frustrated by the betrayal of the new government, her lover rebels against it and perishes in a desperate attack. In the end, we are left to ponder whether Lucía goes back home or continues to fight injustice.

In the last episode, Lucía is a countrywoman who is being taught to read and write during the literary campaign waged by the revolution in the 1960s. This was the time when many Cuban women first realized the ways in which sexism continued to contaminate their lives during the post-revolutionary period. Despite her husband's opposition, Lucía goes forth to learn of her newly acquired rights within the new socialist society. Crazy about each other, they are unable to separate or to agree about her way of life, and as the movie ends they are still fighting between embraces.

One of the film's most remarkable achievements is its use of different cinematic styles for portraying the three historical epochs. Each corresponds to the aesthetics of the period being depicted: nineteenth-century romantic melodrama for 'Lucía 1895', thirties realism for 'Lucía 1932', and sixties comic social realism for 'Lucía 196...'<sup>11</sup> The first Lucía, the closest to the object of our analysis, evokes a stock figure of melodrama – the woman scorned, who does not hesitate to avenge her brother's death by killing her lover. The violent changes of mood, characteristic of the Romantic pathos, have their visual counterpart in a conspicuous use of high-contrast photography, which also serves to emphasize the striking disparity between classes under Spanish rule. In some cases, shots are over-exposed and acquire a surreal character, as in the tale of Fernandina, a mad nun whose story parallels Lucía. Her brutal rape has been described by Anna Marie Taylor as a 'dream-allegory, the rape of Cuba by Spain'.<sup>12</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of this aspect of the film, see J. Mraz, 'Lucía: Visual style and historical portrayal', *Jump Cut* 19 (1978) 21-27.

<sup>12</sup> A. M. Taylor, 'Review of *Lucía* by Humberto Solás', *Film Quarterly* 28.2 (1974-1975) 53-59: 55.

final embrace between an already insane Lucía and Fernandina, two victims of colonial violence, puts an end to this part of the film in one of the most moving scenes in Cuban cinema.



Ill. 1: Shooting of the last sequence of 'Lucía 1895'. *Lucía* (Humberto Solás, 1968). Courtesy of the ICAIC and the Cuban Film Archives.

### ***La primera carga al machete* (Manuel Octavio Gómez, 1969)**

The origin of another war (the 1868 uprising) is the central motif of *La primera carga al machete*, the most representative product of this cycle of ICAIC films. Set at the beginning of the Ten Years' War (1868–1878), it portrays the legendary conquest and defence of San Salvador de Bayamo by the insurgents. In order to retake the city, the Spanish governor sends seven hundred soldiers of the colonial army, who are defeated by machete-slicing Cubans under the command of General Máximo Gómez. The historical event after which the film is named took place on 25 October 1868, but it was not the first event of the war. Earlier, on October 10, Céspedes had called for the liberation of the island. On October 20, the conquest of Bayamo had also taken place, making this city into the first freed land of Cuba. The machete charge was, however, the first milestone in a long tradition of guerrilla warfare and thus achieves a foundational value in Gómez's film.

*La primera carga* depicts a historical event that took place in 1868, but it simultaneously reflects on the state of the nation hundred years later. In this sense, Gómez's film continually reminds the spectator about the contemporary nature of those events, which is very much in line with the concept of revolutionary cinema that Gómez shared with other ICAIC filmmakers of his generation:

A revolutionary cinema penetrates into history looking for the present, and into the present, for the future; it places history within a contemporary context, highlighting it as something alive, in all its full force and continuity. Only in that way history is valuable, only to the extent it refers to, and contributes to, a present concern. True revolutionary cinema deals with historical topics in the same way as with contemporary ones, in a critical objective way, within a revolutionary militancy, and without ignoring the differences nor the similarities between past and present.<sup>13</sup>

In his film, Gómez uses the techniques of the documentary and the *cine-encuesta*, with interviews to the members of both factions, direct sound and hand-held filmed takes of the battles, as if movie cameras existed in 1868. The effect is very similar to the one sought by British filmmaker Peter Watkins in *The Forgotten Faces* (1961) and *Culloden* (1962), where the techniques of *cinéma vérité* and television news-style were also used to provide a radical view of national history. Several critics have also pointed to the use of Brechtian distancing techniques to prevent the spectators from losing themselves passively and completely in the characters and instead making them consciously critical observers.<sup>14</sup> Whether Gómez succeeded or not is unclear. Since the film has such a heavy propagandistic message and

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<sup>13</sup> E. López Morales, 'La primera carga... a la luz del tiempo' [*The First Charge... in the light of time*], *Cine Cubano* 122 (1988) 13-18: 13-14.

<sup>14</sup> For an interpretation of Gómez's film in the light of Brecht's theories see M. Chanan, *Cuban cinema* (Minneapolis and London 2004) 303; J. Mraz, 'La primera carga al machete', *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers* (2001), [www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com), viewed 22 July 2009. The influence of Brecht in *La primera carga* was also acknowledged by Julio García Espinosa, who co-wrote the film's script. Through the use of what he called '*Verfremdungseffekt*' ('alienation effect') playwright Bertolt Brecht aimed at encouraging an attitude of critical detachment in the audience, rather than a passive submission to realistic illusion. See B. Brecht, *Brecht on theatre*, J. Willet ed. (New York 1964) 91.

history here is no more complex than in a Manichean allegory, it is doubtful the spectator can think critically or even think at all beyond the frame of its narrow ideology.

A troubador's songs, interpreted by a young Pablo Milanés, punctuate the film and comment on the events from beginning to end. One of those songs ('to kill or be killed, thus this soldier of life marches, he carries a machete as a weapon...'), announces the climax, which takes place with the attack after which the film is named. A voiceover informs of Donato Mármol's preparation of an ambush against the Spanish troops in Venta del Pino. On 25 October 1868, the first machete charge takes place. Jorge Herrera's cinematography achieves in those instants an extreme stylization. The long scene of the battle adopts a frenzy rhythm and photography turns into daguerreotype, which gives the impression of a burnt image eroded by time.<sup>15</sup> Figuration, which earlier had occasionally dissolved, yields now to compositions of an almost abstract nature. The Spaniards fall into Mármol's ambush, and the machetes are used in face-to-face combat. Two hundred Spanish soldiers and only forty Cuban rebels die in the end.



Ill. 2: The final battle in *La primera carga al machete* (Manuel Octavio Gómez, 1969). Courtesy of the ICAIC and the Cuban Film Archives.

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<sup>15</sup> For a study of the film's cinematography, see J. Herrera, 'Apuntes sobre la fotografía de *La primera carga al machete*' [Notes on the photography of *The first machete charge*], *Cine Cubano* 56-57 (1969) 10-13. D. Díaz Torres has also explored this topic in '*La primera carga al machete*', *Cine Cubano* 56-57 (1969) 14-19.

After the final battle, a new song brings closure to the film with a message that concentrates its teleological vision of history:

When we lonely wandered  
    in a time without a present,  
we had to rescue centuries of life,  
then we had to fight on the edge of the machete  
then we had to kill on the edge of the machete  
to win a thousand battles  
... that we are still fighting.

Before the birth of the nation, the song seems to imply, there was no present. History only began with an act of war that unleashed a revolutionary process that is still in full swing. From that perspective, any flight to the past is doomed to failure since it will always bring us back to our own present, as the film does. The past of 1868 in *La primera carga al machete* is the present of 1969. The nineteenth-century uprising was the beginning of the twentieth-century revolution.<sup>16</sup>

### ***La odisea del general José* (Jorge Fraga, 1968)**

Less known but no less interesting, Jorge Fraga's *La odisea del general José*, interprets the wars of independence as forebears of twentieth-century international guerrilla warfare. Freely based on General Máximo Gómez's homonymous account, the film describes José Maceo's (1849-1896) hardships in the tropical forest in equally allegorical terms. As in all allegories, the reader or spectator must here dig behind the text to find a subtext, which holds the work's true meaning. While the text in Fraga's film refers to an event at the origins of the 1895 War of Independence, its subtext here is given by the state of *foquismo* after the failure of Che Guevara's expedition to Bolivia.<sup>17</sup> The narrated historical events date back

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<sup>16</sup> For a historicist reading of this film, see S. Juan-Navarro, 'La primera carga al machete, de Manuel Octavio Gómez: cine, mito y revolución' [*The first machete charge, by Manuel Octavio Gómez: film, myth, and revolution*] in: J. Amiot and N. Berthier ed., *Cinéma et Révolution cubaine* (Lyon 2006) 105-113.

<sup>17</sup> The central principle of *foquismo* was that a vanguard by cadres of small, fast-moving paramilitary groups can provide a focus (in Spanish, *foco*) for popular

to the aftermath of the landing of the Maceo brothers at Baracoa (from Costa Rica) on 1 April 1895. After being attacked by the Spaniards, the expeditionaries have to disperse. As a result, José holds the command of a reduced group of five combatants. After a second attack, on April 10, three companions are killed in Alto Palmarito and the remaining two are detained. José is the only one able to escape. He spends several days wandering around the abrupt mountains of Baracoa, suffering from hunger, thirst, cold, rain, and fatigue until he reencounters the rebel army. At that time, his brother Antonio is leading the Eastern troops which the peasants soon begin to join.



Ill. 3: José Maceo (Miguel Benavides) talking to the anonymous peasant (José Antonio Rodríguez) in *La odisea del general José* (Jorge Fraga, 1968). Courtesy of the ICAIC and the Cuban Film Archives.

The first half of the film focuses on the solitude of the protagonist who confronts a hostile nature. The noises of the wilderness and an ominous musical soundtrack serve as a background to several scenes linked by a series of fades to black that show José Maceo's fight for survival. In its second half, the plot gains complexity when the protagonist finds a peasant who had fought under his command in the Little War (1879-1880), but who

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discontent against a sitting regime, and thereby lead a general insurrection. See J. Castañeda, *Utopia unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War* (New York 1994) 73-87.

does not recognize him at first. The peasant's doubts and distrust of Maceo at the beginning and the progressive awakening of his consciousness in a final critical discovery — when he finally identifies the hero — dramatize the situation of Latin American peasantry and the need for a new awakening at the end of the 1960s.

As if the allegorical subtext would not be sufficiently clear, the director himself revealed it in an interview:

In the ordeal José Maceo lived in 1895, similar to Che's in 1967, we saw another tool against the colonialists' ideology. It is true that José Maceo did not die in that ordeal but it is also true that Che did not die in his. The essential point is this one: if the presence of a guerrilla group could by itself awaken the revolutionary potential of the impoverished Latin American peasantry. Che's experience, and Fidel's analysis of it, proves that it can.<sup>18</sup>

We should keep in mind that Fraga's film was conceived only months after Che's death on 9 October 1967, when *foquismo* theory, as developed by Che himself in *La guerra de guerrillas* [Guerrilla warfare] (1960), although still fashionable, began to lose credibility among the Latin American left and demanded these acts of desperate faith.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Páginas del diario de José Martí* (José Massip, 1971)**

These same revolutionary longings, both in politics and aesthetics, are at the core of one of the most unfairly forgotten films of the ICAIC: *Páginas del diario de José Martí*. Halfway between documentary and fiction, Massip's film is as unclassifiable as it was controversial. It is a daring exercise of cinematic hybridity in which different times, voices, genres, and visual media coalesce. While on the formal level the film brings to mind the most delirious baroque, ideologically it is characterized by the most simplistic didacticism of propaganda cinema. The fact is that *Páginas* operates as the cinematic expression of Fidel's above-mentioned 1968 speech, which is quoted

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<sup>18</sup> 'Cine Cubano entrevista a los realizadores', 33.

<sup>19</sup> Although the original approach was to mobilize and launch attacks from rural areas, many *foco* ideas were adapted into urban guerrilla warfare movements by the late 1960s. See Castañeda, *Utopia unarmed*, 80.

verbatim throughout the film. Interestingly there is no trace of the Comandante in the credits, as if implying that all inserted texts came from Martí's work (as the film's title would suggest).

*Páginas* articulates documentary sections organized around quotations from Martí and Fidel and fiction sections based on José Martí's diary (*De Cabo Haitiano a Dos Ríos* [From Cabo Haitiano to Dos Ríos]). The documentary element (intermingled with an incredible variety of expressive forms) dominates over the first eleven minutes. From that moment on, the film follows Martí's diary chronologically, which narrates from his landing at La Playita, on 11 April 1895, to his death in Dos Ríos, on May 19 of the same year. *Páginas* ends with the testimony of the grandson of the soldier who killed Martí, who is part of a brigade of young avant-garde artists.

The propagandistic component of the film concentrates at both the beginning and the end. The origin of both segments has to be found in an anonymous and unpublished script deposited at the Cuban Film Archive entitled 'Los primeros treinta' [The first thirty (years)].<sup>20</sup> This thirty-five-page text is written in two columns. On the left column, the technical script provides detailed information about the settings, types of shots, camera movement, sound effects, music, and editing. It also includes part of the literary script. The column on the right consists almost exclusively of quotations from Martí and Fidel, with occasional suggestions on how to manipulate them. Although the point of departure proposed in the script is the often-quoted speech that the Comandante gave on 10 October 1968, the action depicted continually moves back and forth, connecting the wars of independence with the struggles against the dictatorships of Gerardo Machado (1924-1933) and Fulgencio Batista (1940-1944; 1952-1959), as well as with the contemporary struggle against United States imperialism. Therefore, the goal of this script is not just to celebrate a historical event, but to show repeatedly, as did Fidel's speech, that on 10 October 1868, a revolution started in La Demajagua, a revolution that is still ongoing. The implications of this manipulation go further. By placing the origin of Cuba in revolutionary wars, the ultimate message that follows from both is that the history of Cuba begins and ends with the Revolution, or what is (or

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<sup>20</sup> The title of the script alludes to the first three decades of the so-called Hundred Years' War. For a detailed analysis of this script, see S. Juan-Navarro, 'Los primeros treinta: El guión perdido del ICAIC' [The first thirty years: The ICAIC's lost script] in: E. Vincenot ed., *Le cinéma révolutionnaire cubain et les luttes d'émancipation* (Tours 2009) [Forthcoming].

would seem to be) the same: there is no possible history in Cuba outside the Revolution. This idea, as seen, is also at the core of other films of this period.

The beginning of Massip's *Páginas* shows a striking similarity with the proposals of 'Los primeros treinta'. The credits are read rapidly by several voices that intersect and sometimes even interrupt each other. The following sequences place the spectator in the origin of Cuba as a nation. 'A hundred years ago', says a voiceover, 'there was a country in the world [. . .] its conquerors decided to name it Cuba'. The most significant words and phrases are repeated on and on by different voices of women who are never identified. The colonial condition of Cuba in these initial moments is allegorically portrayed as a naked baby carried by an old man on his shoulders.



Ill. 4: Allegorical depiction of Cuba's colonial condition in *Páginas del diario de José Martí* (José Massip, 1971). Courtesy of the ICAIC and the Cuban Film Archives.

Fidel's speech is also quoted in these instances by the voiceover and in the same passages specified in 'Los primeros treinta' but without acknowledging its sources. Unless the spectators are well informed or very familiar with institutional addresses, they have no way to realize that what are being spoken are portions of a speech by Fidel, and not quotations from Martí's diary, as one would assume from the film's title. This confusion between the two voices (Martí's and Fidel's) is also emphasized in different ways. First,

by making the women who do the voiceover change roles (the one that first quotes Martí, then quotes Fidel). Second, by attributing one's deeds to the other ('[...] in this house Martí, the author of the attack on the Moncada barracks, was born')<sup>21</sup>. Third, by Massip's careful selection of those passages from their works that are similar ('FIDEL: Should we have to wait for the ideal conditions to be met before we fight, then the struggle would have never began / MARTÍ: Revolutions never succeed if they wait for human nature to change').<sup>22</sup>

But Cuba's myth of the origin as a nation is only dramatized later on, when the military uprising against Spain is explicitly narrated: 'In the country the nation was conceived [...] the nation was born from the country [...] the nation was born from war'. The statements are visually enacted by contemporary ballet dancers who mime a fertility rite.<sup>23</sup> In only eleven minutes, Massip's film summarizes all the history of Cuba from the Spanish conquest to Martí's landing on 11 April 1895, but without ceasing to refer to characters, places, and events of the twentieth-century revolution. It is only after this politically charged prologue that the chronological account of significant passages from Martí's diary really begins. The diary's linearity is only interrupted by three narrative digressions, or *microcuentos* [micro stories] as Massip calls them in an interview, which freely develop stories mentioned briefly by Martí in his diary.<sup>24</sup> These episodes are portrayed with a high degree of expressionism, evocative of Glauber Rocha's cinema or Jorge Herrera's cinematography in the first part of *Lucía* and in *La primera carga*. As Enrique Pineda Barnet points out in his review of the film, these three interpolated stories reflect on life during the wars of independence in a way that refer us to the 1959 revolution.<sup>25</sup> The 'Story of Caridad Estrada' reflects the violence of war, and underscores the need of

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<sup>21</sup> Notice the increasing mythologization of history. From the intellectual author of the attack on the Moncada barracks, Martí became the literal author of the attack.

<sup>22</sup> These same passages from Martí and Fidel are also quoted on page 13 of 'Los primeros treinta' [The first thirty years].

<sup>23</sup> A young Afro-Cuban, initially in foetal position, stands on his feet raising his arm and closing his fist, which is captured by the camera with a close-up.

<sup>24</sup> Massip's interview is included in Tomás Piard's documentary *En busca del filme perdido* [In search for the lost film], which was part of a five-episode series about Martí entitled *Un hombre interminable* [An endless human being] (1992). All episodes, but this one, were broadcasted by the Cuban television.

<sup>25</sup> E. Pineda Barnet, 'Páginas del diario de José Martí' [Pages of José Martí's diary], *Cuba Internacional* 4.29 (1972) 37.

fighting violence with violence. The ‘Story of Panchita Venero’ is a tale of rape in which a Spanish soldier’s sexual assault on an innocent woman can also be interpreted as the imperialist plunder of a whole nation. Lastly, ‘Limbano Sánchez’ depicts the social drama of The Pact of Zanjón, the treaty that ended the Cuban Ten Years’ War and opened a period of incertitude. Sánchez, who later died heroically, epitomizes here the value of hope in a time of cynicism.

While the prologue of the film summarized national history before Martí’s arrival in La Playita, an epilogue offers a synthesis of Cuban history after the hero’s death in Dos Ríos. Retaking the propagandistic and militant tone of the opening scenes, the film ends with a collage of archival images showing the United States intervention, passages from Martí’s diary, where he foretold the war’s outcome, and Máximo Gómez’s famous letter complaining against the occupation. A reflective epilogue concludes the film with images of Martí in a studio of young contemporary artists.

In addition to Pineda Barnet’s, only another review came out in Cuba: Alejo Carpentier’s, which was extremely enthusiastic. Published in *Cine Cubano* and *Granma* (two bastions of Cuban culture and politics), Carpentier praised Massip’s ability to visually convey Martí’s literary and existential worlds. Thus, one wonders why it was relegated to oblivion, if Massip’s film was so politically correct and received praise from such a distinguished (and loyal-to-the-revolution) intellectual as Carpentier? <sup>26</sup> Why was the documentary that Tomás Piard made about it years later with the significant title of ‘In Search for the Lost Film’ and that pondered the same question never broadcast by the Cuban television (which itself had commissioned Piard to shoot the film)? Why was the film script ‘Los primeros treinta’ abandoned and does it remain forgotten at the Cuban Film Archives, without ever having been mentioned by any film critic – or by its mostly likely author José Massip?

One possible answer may be found in the historical context of its production and the beginning of what some have referred to as the ‘Gray Quinquennial’ (1971-1976), others as the ‘Gray Decade’ (the 1970s), and others just as the process of sovietization of the regime (1971-1985). In its Document #15, the First National Congress on Education and Culture (1971) loathed all forms of artistic experimentation and proposed instead a

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<sup>26</sup> In fact, *Páginas* was only ignored after being censored first and not for political, but for aesthetic reasons. For the awkward history of this film and the issue of censorship, see Juan-Navarro, ‘Los primeros treinta’.

popular and pedagogical realism, 'contrary to any elite tendency',<sup>27</sup> and films like Massip's were considered elitist for been too aesthetically daring and not 'popular enough'.<sup>28</sup> The premiere of *Páginas* after the Congress had made public its theses made difficult its acceptance by the new cultural bureaucracy in power.

### History, myth, and propaganda

All the films here analyzed are characterized by a high degree of stylization. *Lucía* is the most spectacular attempt of Cuban cinema in an epic film, without falling into the Manichean traps of most historical fiction. While in *La primera carga al machete* narrative rhythm is syncopated and often delirious, *La odisea del General José* explores the possibilities of an extremely low and cadenced tempo, more in tune with nature than with the frenzy of war films. *Páginas del diario de José Martí*, in its turn, epitomizes what could be called experimental cinema about the wars of independence. Unfortunately, this golden age of Cuban cinema would end abruptly with the First National Congress on Education and Culture, which proposed a functional and didactic art, oriented towards 'educating youth within revolutionary morality'<sup>29</sup> In the new cultural paradigm, socialist realism became hegemonic and thus the continuity of the experimental project initiated by these films was suddenly aborted.

The following Cuban film on this topic was made long after the period covered by this essay. *Baraguá* (1985), also directed by Massip, lacks the formal audacity of the previous films. Thus, while *Páginas* was probably

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<sup>27</sup> 'Declaración del Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura' [Declaration of the First National Congress on Education and Culture], *Casa de las Américas* 9.65-66 (March-June 1971) 18. This was considered by former Minister of Culture Armando Hart to be one of 'the four principal documents of Cuban cultural policy.' The other three are Fidel's 1961 Words to the Intellectuals, the 1976 Constitution of the Republic, and the theses on culture produced by the First and Second Congresses of the Communist Party in Cuba in 1975 and 1980, respectively. A. Hart, *Cambiar las reglas del juego* [Changing the rules of the game] (Havana 1983) 5-6.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Tomás Piard conducted by the author on 6 May 2006 in Havana.

<sup>29</sup> 'Declaración del Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura', 22.

too daring, *Baraguá* is definitely too meek.<sup>30</sup> To a great extent it confirms the tendency to ‘mummification of history’, which could already be glimpsed in several documentaries of the ‘Gray Decade’ such as Rigoberto López’s *La primera intervención* (1975) or Santiago Álvarez’s *El primer delegado* (1975). In these films the past seems to be reduced to a dry series of commemorative events and to the mere celebration of anniversaries, which in the end tends to reinforce an impression of stasis, as if history had indeed stopped in Cuba on 1 January 1959.

## Conclusion

While formally the results of the films analyzed in this article were diverse, complex, and multifaceted, the representation of history in Cuban cinema was since the foundation of the ICAIC in 1959, and with very few exceptions, invariable, simplistic, and monolithic. In light of these films’ blatant manipulations of the past, it is hard to accept Michael Chanan’s affirmation that ‘they constituted an extended essay in *cine rescate*, the recovery of history from the suppression, distortion, and falsification to which it had been subjected by bourgeois ideology’.<sup>31</sup> Not only bourgeois ideology suppresses, distorts, and falsifies.

In fact, as we have seen, in these films the past is systematically cannibalized and turned into myth in a way that very much resembles the process of mythologization of history described by Roland Barthes:

In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world that is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See J. Luis Llopiz, ‘Baraguá’, *Cine Guía* [Cinema Guide] (6 June 1985) and J. Antonio Évora, ‘Baraguá en la memoria’ [Baraguá in the memory], *Juventud Rebelde* [Rebelious Youth] (22 April 1986).

<sup>31</sup> M. Chanan, *Cuban cinema*, 273.

<sup>32</sup> R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 143.

Something similar is at work in all of these films. Like ‘official’ Cuban historiography throughout the 1960s and 1970s, ICAIC historical films rewrote the past within a providential design that emptied out the contradictions and discontinuities that separate the various moments of Cuban history for the sake of presenting a smooth, meaningful, and oversimplified narrative.

The campaign constructing a Hundred Years’ War endowed the Revolution with a unifying historical theme of great moral value, a theme in which everything was justified in function of its continuity within the revolutionary project.<sup>33</sup> In the films produced under the motto ‘A Hundred Years of Cuba’s Struggle for Independence’ the ‘Ten Years’ War (1868-1878), the Little War (1879-1880), the Independence War (1895-1898), the struggles against Machado (1924-1933) and against Batista (1940-1944; 1952-1959), the 1959 Revolution and the permanent fight against U.S. interventions were all seen as part of different stages within a long war of national liberation. It was thus mystified history, rather than ideology, the key legitimating force behind the revolution, and the Cuban film industry succeeded in communicating that ‘blissful clarity’ of myth. We may never know if history finally absolved Fidel – what we do know is that Cuban cinema did its share to absolve his story.

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<sup>33</sup> For an assessment of the success of this campaign, see N. Miller, ‘Uses of the past in Castro’s Cuba’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 38.1 (2003) 147-162. The importance of the ICAIC contribution to the campaign thrust has been noted by A. Fornet, ‘Trente ans de cinema dans la Révolution’ in: P. A. Paranaguá ed., *Le cinéma cubain* (Paris 1990) 79-106: 87; M. Martins Villaça, *O Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC) e a política cultural em Cuba* [The Cuban Institute of Film Art and Industry (ICAIC) and cultural politics in Cuba] (São Paulo 2006) 12, 172, 188.