

## **THE IMAGE OF A NATION 50 YEARS OF THE ICAIC**

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Raquel Jacomino  
*Cubarte*

"No es un mérito pequeño la creación de un cine que asume la cultura universal desde la cualidad de lo cubano, que ha desarrollado en estos años un discurso dialógico, trasgresor, irreverente, sin convencionalismos de todo lo que nos concierne, de todo lo que somos."

Numerous are the highly significant events in the area of culture which were commemorated in the year 2009. Several institutions of capital importance reached the 50th anniversary of their foundation, among them is the Instituto Cubano del Arte y la Industria Cinematográficos (Cuban Institute for Cinematographic Art and Industry), whose appearance was a prioritized measure which formed part of the new project for a nation which started in 1959 following the revolutionary triumph.



For a human life, fifty years is a very respectable period of time, even more so if that passage of time has been characterized by highly complex and contradictory occasions, by rich incidents and obstacles, by successful stages as well as others full of great difficulties, but always with projects and goals to achieve. Fifty years are more than respectably enough time in order to reflect upon what has been done and what remains to be done.

And it has been fifty years since for the first time in the history of Cuban cinema an era was opened which was characterized by the implementation and putting into practice of an ambitious program of development of one of the capital artistic manifestations of the 20th century, which at the same time would involve and contribute to the development of other artistic manifestations.

New Cuban cinema found itself in its turn faced with a convulsive and contradictory reality, generating multiple problems and preoccupations, from events with worldwide repercussions, from extraordinary deeds which remove all social stratification and would place in doubt the traditional roles of women, the family, education, couple relationships, which would question everything from our behaviors and attitudes to our usual assumptions about national history. Cuban film is witness and debate; it is a source of research into our origins and identity characteristics; it is the concretization of a past and present reality through the development of an aesthetic language of its own.

It is a cinema which broke with the exuberant, yet banal rumba comedies, with poor imitations of U.S. film noir, with low quality passionate dramas, in order to critically question the profound and traumatic changes of the new historical context as well as to assume in as much as possible the contingencies of the past, all with a high degree of aesthetic and political commitment.

Extraordinarily significant are the contributions which Cuban film has made not only to this very art form for world culture, but also to other artistic manifestations like music, literature, the plastic arts, architectural design. Additionally, we must speak of its contribution to the formation of a knowledgeable viewing public and of its promotion work in the formation of a cinematographic culture

through multiple events, radio and television presence, publications, and institutions which for the entire 50 years have uninterruptedly continued their dedication even in the midst of great material difficulties; and the pedagogical mission which our cinema and its great masters have achieved is a pedagogical mission which transcends classroom, rehearsal halls, and film sets.

Before 1959 there were experiences which were realized and which today are considered as essential spaces of obligatory reference in terms of the Cuban cultural fare of the republic which was constituted in 1902, not only for its intrinsic value but also for its exceptional quality in a context in which the aesthetic, artistic and cultural formation of the individual was of interest to only a small few, projects like the University of the Air, the radio stations of Mil Diez and CMBF, the work done by Raúl Roa in the Ministry of Education and by the cultural society Nuestro Tiempo, which came several of the most important Cuban filmmakers and founders of the ICAIC. All of these constituted milestones and model projects for the cultural and educational work of the Revolution.

The creation Cinematheque of Cuba in 1960 stimulated the implementation of a project of film distribution and exhibition that included special showings and film series that allowed Cubans to become acquainted with the world's most important filmographies as well as with other lesser known cinematographic manifestations of the time. It did so with a high level of rigor in the artistic selection and in aesthetic demands, including visits from first-rate filmmakers from all over the work.

The appearance of radio and television programs, through which the most important works of world cinema became known, had an extraordinary importance in the formation of a sophisticated, knowledgeable viewing public. In this regard, it is imperative to mention programs like *Historia del cine*, directed by the unforgettable José Antonio González and other important Cuban critics and masters, to whom the homage of these 50 years is dedicated. The Cuban film viewer learned of cinematographic styles and movements, the great actors and director; he began to be familiar with film terms and phrases like montage, editing, director of photography, sound

track, and above all, he began to enjoy and to make his own the Cuban and worldwide cinematographic patrimony.

Throughout these 50 years such program and radio/television spaces have multiplied in Cuban mass media, and this worthy accomplishment corresponds in great measure to the ICAIC and its artistic and aesthetic education project aimed at the people since its very beginnings in its 1959 founding.

In this regard, one should not pass over the importance of publications. Through the ICAIC a series of invaluable texts on film have been placed at the disposal of readers, as much for the specialized reader as for any person interested in this particular artistic manifestation. Deserving of special here is the magazine *Cine Cubano*, founded in 1960.

As part of its overall project the ICAIC began to distribute and exhibit past and contemporary Cuban and international films throughout the country, and mobile cinema has appeared in areas most distant from urban centers, including mountainous areas and those most inaccessible of territories. Who does not have stored in their memory for safekeeping that moving documentary by Octavio Cortázar titled *Por primera vez?* In that 1967 documentary, a traveling film projectionist brings the film *Modern Times* (1936) to a secluded village that has never before seen a motion picture.

Fundamental in these years has been the development of what has been considered the Cuban school of poster design beginning at the moment at which graphic design began to subvert the traditional expressive codes of film posters in order to give expression to the changes and challenges that were shaking the sixties and seventies, and in order to promote the films shown it was a form which seized not only the viewing rooms and hallways of the theater, but also the streets, avenues, plazas, parks, offices, and even Cuban homes in which the Cuban poster burst like a new aesthetic project, like an artistic object in and of itself which assimilated the achievements of contemporary filmic and artistic language, to which it made significant, internationally recognized contributions. About Cuban posters Alejo Carpentier would say: "...perenne exposición pública -educación de la retina del transeúnte

cada día- pinacoteca al alcance de todos".<sup>1</sup>

Cuban documentary has contributed classic works from that genre to world cinema, with Santiago Álvarez heading the list, and it has created that invaluable series which is the *Noticiero ICAIC*, taking the pulse and giving testimony to the daily political, artistic and social goings on in Cuba and the world for several decades and within which innumerable filmmakers and specialists of Cuban film have been able to develop.

Less remembered perhaps is an experience like that of the Enciclopedia Popular, a department created in the first stage of the ICAIC to put together didactic materials to support teaching. In these fifty years, the work which the ICAIC has done in support of education in Cuban is immeasurable, not only as it relates to artistic education, with films which are today considered classics, but also in the most diverse areas of knowledge. Of course, we have all seen numerous productions of this type in the television media, in film, and in the most diverse of educational and cultural institutions. The author of this brief essay cannot forget the documentaries done by the ICAIC that she saw in elementary school thanks to the work of an excellent teacher and which illustrated and widened the understanding of so many themes, and which made the material studied unforgettable.

The ICAIC has taken charge of copying, classifying and conserving Cuban filmic patrimony from its entire history, at a time, in the face of the risk that our filmic achievements might be lost due to a lack of interest, apathy and abandonment of many governments and institutions for whom the cultural patrimony of their nation is meaningless. In this area, we have benefited for decades from the work on numerous studies on the history of Cuban cinema, which from among archives, remains of movies and old publications that work has gone about recovering, at the same reconstructing the

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<sup>1</sup> Carpentier, Alejo: "Una siempre renovada muestra de artes sugerentes". *Cine Cubano*, no. 54-55 (1969), 90-91. "perennial public showing –every day an education for the retina of the passerby- a film library open to all."

memory of Cuban film, bringing back to relevance the names of filmmakers, actors, technicians and specialist who, under other circumstances, would have been totally forgotten along with their legacy.

The achievements since the First Festival of Latin American New Cinema in 1979 have turned this special event into real festivities in which thousands of people are mobilized to watch films and which leave many visitors astonished by the interest in film and the cinematographic sophistication which Cubans display.

One major stage achieved by the ICAIC came in the eighties with 1) the founding of the Escuela Internacional de Cine de San Antonio de los Baños (the San Antonio de los Baños International Film School) at which thousands of young Cuban and Latin American cineasts have been educated, and 2) the later creation of the Facultad de los Medios de Comunicación Audiovisuales del Instituto Superior de Arte (College of Audiovisual Communication Media at the Advanced Art Institute).



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It is not the intention of this short essay to present an apologetic view of Cuban film from these fifty years. In these five decades there have been feature-length films, documentaries, short films, animations, some have been good, some bad, and some so-so; and it is normal that it should be so in any national cinema of the world. Some projects have been brought to fruition and others have been frustrated, but the creation of a national film industry, as part of the politics of the State, the dream materialized in a truly national cinema is not a small accomplishment; it is a cinema which takes on universal culture from the standpoint of that which is Cuban and which has developed over these years a dialogic, transgressing, irreverent discourse, without conventionalisms in terms of what concerns Cubans, in terms of what they are.

The re-creation of a poetics of Cuban-ness in images and sound creating a school of permanence and continuity are major projects. The image of this nation and its catalogue of images owe a great deal to Cuban cinema founded in 1959.

**Translated by Richard K. Curry**