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CINEMA AND CULTURE IN CUBA: AN INTERVIEW WITH NESTOR ALMENDROS

William Luis
Translated by Virginia Lawreck

William Luis, an Associate Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Dartmouth College, is editor of Voices from Under: Latin America in the Caribbean. He has completed a manuscript entitled Fact in Fiction: Slavery in Cuban Narrative, and is finishing a book on Lunes de Revolucion.

Culture is an important social medium with the power to influence the values of societies in transition. Following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, the magazine *Lunes de Revolucion* edited by Guillermo Cabrera Infante with the assistance of Pablo Armando Fernandez, and the film *P.M.* by Saba Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jimenez Leal, were produced at a time when the cultural policies of Cuba were undergoing revision.

Many intellectuals who were living abroad during Batista's dictatorship returned to participate in Cuba's revolutionary process. The magazine and the film represented an outlet for the works of these young artists.

However, not all those who supported the Revolution thought alike. For example, those who associated themselves with *Lunes de Revolucion* were not in accord with the writers and artists who rallied around the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematograficos (ICAIC), the official organization of the movie industry, which demanded that culture play an ideological role in developing the new society. This ideological schism existed for at least a decade before the Revolution. After 1959, some individuals gained political power at the expense of

others. *Lunes de Revolucion* and *P.M.* were victims of a cultural shift. Nestor Almendros was caught up in this process of cultural definition. In this interview, Almendros talks about *Lunes de Revolucion* and *P.M.* and about the role cinema played in Cuba before and after the Revolution.

Almendros, born in Barcelona in 1930, was a member of a Spanish family opposed to the Franco dictatorship. At eighteen he immigrated to Cuba, where he completed his Liberal Arts degree at the University of Havana in 1956. During Batista's dictatorship, Almendros fled to New York. He studied cinematography at New York's City College and at Rome's Centro Sperimentale. When the Revolution triumphed, Almendros, like many writers and artists, returned

to Cuba, ready to participate in the revolutionary process. He worked for the Instituto de Arte e Industria Cinematograficos and for the magazine *Bohemia*. He also collaborated on *Lunes de Revolucion*. After witnessing the cultural and political changes, he left the island, in 1962, and since then, has been residing in Paris.

Almendros is among the most important directors of photography in the world. His first films include *Cincuenta y ocho cincuenta y nueve* and, with Orlando Jimenez Leal, the documentary *La tumba francesa*. Also to his credit are *The Story of Adele H.*, by F. Truffaut; *The Marquese of O.*, by E. Rohmer (1975); *Days of Heaven*, by T. Malick, winner of the Oscar in 1978; *Kramer vs. Kramer*, by R. Benton (1979); *The Last Metro*, by F. Truffaut, winner of the "Cesar" in

What were you doing before the Revolution? Where were you?

What were your impressions of the magazine *Lunes de Revolucion*? How did you end up working for the magazine?

Immediately before the Revolution, I lived in New York and was a Spanish teacher at Vassar College. I was self-exiled from Batista. I finished my liberal arts degree at the University of Havana in 1956 and left Cuba for the United States. While I was abroad, I studied filmmaking in Italy. In the summer of 1959, at the beginning of Castro's takeover, I returned to Cuba.

*Guillermo Cabrera Infante was a close friend of mine. Long before the Revolution we, along with a group of young artists, had created the Cinemateca de Cuba. When Cabrera was writing for the magazine *Carteles*, he collaborated on the entertainment section. *Lunes* was like his section in *Carteles*, only bigger. When I returned to Cuba after Castro's triumph, in addition to finding many of my old friends associated with *Lunes*, I made many new ones who had joined the magazine while I was abroad. Under normal circumstances I would have ended up working with that group. However, I was offered a job as a cameraman at the Instituto de Arte e Industria Cinematograficos. I wasn't one of *Lunes*'s core people. In reality, I only went to the *Lunes* offices once in a great while.*

1980; and *Sophie's Choice*, by A. Pakula. In 1984 he reunited with Jimenez to produce the film *Improper Conduct*, winner of the first prize at the Human Rights Festival in Strasbourg. Almendros is also the author of the books *A Man with a Camera* and *Cuba: pedagogia y sectarismo*.

The following interview took place in two parts, the first in Almendros's Paris apartment in June 1985, and the second by mail, concluded in the spring of 1986. I would like to thank Dartmouth College for defraying the expenses of my trip to Paris, and Jose Triana and Severo Sarduy for making this interview and my stay in Paris possible.

Let's talk more about your participation in *Lunes*. How did the magazine work?

*Of course I identified ideologically more with *Lunes* than with ICAIC, but I was so busy with my work during that first year that I didn't have time to collaborate much on the magazine. I never took charge of a section, but from time to time, they asked me to do articles for them, and so I wrote a few columns and reviews. Therefore, my vision of *Lunes* was a fairly superficial one. I saw everything from the outside. And this may be the most interesting part of what I may be able to reveal in this interview. The fact that I was on the inside and at the same time on the outside gave me a certain perspective on what was going on. The *Lunes* office was also a meeting place. Not only was a magazine published in the office, but a group of intellectuals, a club of sorts, also met there. In the building that housed the newspaper *Revolucion*, *Lunes* had a section in a large room with tables, chairs, and typewriters where people got together to discuss their works and cultural politics. A great exchange of ideas, perspectives, and points of view transpired there. It was*

a very open-minded place, the only one of its kind in those times in Cuba. The curious thing was, in keeping with the Cuban style of work, no one did anything during the first few days of the week. And at the last minute, the magazine was never done. Everyone ran around like chickens with their heads cut off the day before closing the edition, working feverishly until six in the morning, writing, composing, and designing the pages. It was a miracle. I have no idea how they got the issues out on time, but they always did, and the magazines were great. The Cuban youth of the time were creative people, the cream of the crop. Many ended up leaving Cuba, including Toni Evora, who did the planning, Cabrera Infante, Julio Matas, Jaime Soriano, Carlos Franqui, Fausto Canel.

Let's trace the ICAIC's history. How was it organized and how did you finally become part of it?

*Before the Revolution, ICAIC wasn't anything more than the Cine Club of the cultural society *Nuestro Tiempo* that was later transformed into something official. Garcia Espinosa, Alfredo Guevara, and Tomas Gutierrez Alea ran the Cine Club. I was actually more a part of Guillermo Cabrera Infante's group, which wasn't really political; we were basically "layman," with a dislike for the Batista regime, but we didn't belong to any political party. The curious thing is that the ICAIC gave me work when all the people from *Lunes* were excluded from the ICAIC. Probably because I had been out of the country for a long time and was, as they say in French, *au dessus de la meele*. ICAIC didn't have equipment until after the government had nationalized the film-making industry. So it was more convenient for them to use a camera that I furnished along with my work. They didn't have many cinematographic technicians back then either. I had made many experimental films outside of Cuba, and I had a film-studies degree from Italy. Perhaps for those*

*reasons they accepted me. The amount of work that I did prevented me from being an integral part of *Lunes*. I filmed documentaries for ICAIC that had varying themes, including agricultural reform.*

*In spite of everything, my relationship with *Lunes* caused me problems within ICAIC. They knew that I maintained contact with the people of *Lunes*, and they didn't like it. There was a rivalry between the two groups from the beginning. They probably thought that they could tame me, that maybe they could use me, being that I was politically from the left and from a family of Spanish republicans that had been exiled by both Franco and Batista. That is to say, I had a good political dossier. I wasn't a Communist, but I was at least someone whom they thought they could perhaps secure. Of course, they were mistaken.*

What is the history of the Cine Club?

Why has cinema become so important in Cuba?

The Cine Club of Havana was founded by German Puig and Ricardo Vigon. Then Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Tomas Gutierrez Alea (who at that time still was not a Marxist), and I joined. That was around 1948 and 1949. The Cine Club, which showed classic films, did not have a precise political ideology but rather defended cinematography as an art and nothing else. Later on, our film club was renamed Cinemateca de Cuba. At first, this Cinemateca de Cuba was part of the department of film of Nuestro Tiempo. It was a private society in which there were departments of painting, dance, and music, and which, in the beginning, had backed Carlos Franqui. But elements of the Cuban Communist party, then known as the Popular Socialist party, infiltrated this society little by little. It was then that we decided to abandon Nuestro Tiempo and continue our sessions on the side. The Communists wanted to impose their political points of view. We didn't. We were interested in defending cinema and nothing more. We defended a good Russian film as if it

were a good film from any other country, including the United States. This Marxist Cine Club, which was originally ours and later Nuestro Tiempo's, then divided. The Cinemateca of Cuba showed its movies in the Colegio de Arquitectos, which allowed us to use its theaters. Also at that time, a Catholic film club was created. Just as the Marxists saw the cinema as a way to influence the public, so did the Catholics. All of this happened long before Batista's dictatorship fell. When the Revolution triumphed, in January 1959, Nuestro Tiempo's Marxist film club had the chance to gain control of the ICAIC. That is to say that the rivalry between the group from the Cinemateca of Cuba, consisting of Cabrera Infante, German Puig, Ricardo Vigon, and me, and the other group, consisting of Alfredo Guevera, Garcia Espinosa, and Gutierrez Alea, which had by that time become Marxist, had been passed on. The ICAIC became a department of the Revolutionary government. We of the Cinemateca were almost completely excluded, even though we had been

the pioneers, the founders of the first Cine Club of the Cinemateca in Havana, one of the first such societies of this type in Latin America.

Today Cuba has a rigid system. Alfredo Guevera has been controlling Cuban cinema for many years. ICAIC was the first cultural department taken over by the Revolutionary government. Lenin said that film was the most important art form. Of course, the Cuban government followed suit. Before the Revolutionary government was totally controlled by the Communists, the directives of the Cuban Communist party had, from the beginning, decided that the film industry was of primary concern. For the television industry that wasn't so. It took longer for the Communists to take over the television industry, probably due to political dogma: Since there was no television in Lenin's day, Lenin never said that television was an important art form, so the Communists in Cuba, being fundamentally dogmatic, proceeded to dominate cinema in a way that seems exaggerated for a small country with such a small, reduced, domestic market. The money that Cuba budgets for film is much larger than any comparable country could afford.

What contributions has the ICAIC made? What is your impression of the work that its members have done?

I think that the ICAIC, in spite of everything that we can say about it, created a cinematic school and some interesting films during the first years of the Revolution. At the beginning, they produced some commendable works. This is due to the fact that, with or without censure, Cuba is a nation of artists. I have always believed that an artist can get ahead no matter what. I've been able to prove that time and time again by reexamining excellent Italian and German films that were made during the worst times of Mussolini's, Hitler's and, in France, De Gaulle's dictatorships. Good films were produced within those countries because the artists outwitted the censors in some way or another. In Stalin's time some excellent films were released from the Soviet Union, despite ferocious censorship and great danger to the artists creating them. Some Soviet directors suffered persecution or disappeared. They were sent to the Gulag in Siberia, and so on, but others, like Eisenstein, not without certain opportunism, managed to create an important work. It was that way in Cuba, too.

Some artists managed to create commendable works even within the strict limits imposed by the government. Of course, many ridiculous films were also made, the majority of which are vulgar propaganda. They are far from profound films. But, above all, in documentary films and in the news, there are some creators who have a fair amount of expressive force and whose creations are not completely garbage.

Let's talk about the style of Cuban cinema. Is it original?

You can't really say that it's original, because the ICAIC's style copies the Brazilian style. That is, the best that they have produced has always been in the tradition of Glauber Rocha. In Cuba it oscillates between the old Russian documentary school and the baroque Brazilian film.

What happened with P.M.?

P.M. was a short that described the nightlife in the popular Cuban bars. It was a documentary that showed these places just as they were, without commentary. Saba Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jimenez-Leal made this brief, inoffensive film outside of Castro's official control, outside the control of the ICAIC, and that's what really irked them. The Communists knew that the film was the work of a group, that it wasn't controlled, and that the group was openly making the film, without pressures of any kind. Therefore, the film was banned as a way of creating the tense situation that allowed for the termination of Lunes de Revolucion, since Lunes was known to have been behind the project and Jimenez and Cabrera both worked on the magazine.

How was your article, praising *P.M.*, received?

My critique in Bohemia magazine praising P.M. was, of course, looked upon unfavorably by the Communists, who took it as a challenge to the official ICAIC cinema. The article was the last straw. The Communists didn't like my film critiques in Bohemia (a magazine over which, at the time, they still didn't have full control). They weren't very happy about my column, in which I wasn't overly indulgent or generous toward the Soviet cinema, which had invaded the Cuban market in 1961, but the situation with P.M. was too much. In my column I praised a film prohibited by the government. Two or three weeks hadn't gone by when I was replaced by another, more complaisant critic.

The members of ICAIC supported the neorealist current of Zavattini. Were there conflicts between the current represented by the *P.M.*'s "free cinema" and ICAIC's neorealism?

*Yes, of course, ICAIC represented the last stages of neorealism. They had pressured Cesare de Zavattini to come. He was a great Italian film scriptwriter after the war. But their cinema was more or less behind the times. That is to say, by bringing Zavattini to Cuba, they were bringing a past. Moreover, the neorealist cinema of ICAIC always had an overt message, while the real Italian neorealist cinema had a more discreet one. The *P.M.* project was along the lines of the English "free cinema" or cinema verite, as it was called in France. For them, reality wasn't transformed. The hidden camera captured life as it really was. The members of ICAIC didn't like that. They wanted to change reality. They didn't present things as they really were but as they should be. For them, the peasant, the proletariat, had to be seen through a special lens. There always had to be a context, a message, a lesson, a tone.*

Let's talk about Zavattini's visit to Cuba.

*Zavattini was invited to Cuba by ICAIC, which offered him a contract in dollars, to write a film script and teach a few script-writing courses. The film *El joven rebelde*, directed by Garcia Espinoza, resulted from this experience. Zavattini was in Havana for several months in 1960. His son, who was a cameraman's assistant, and his son's father-in-law, the famous Italian director of photography Otello Martelli, came with him. Martelli did the photography for the first important ICAIC film, *Historia de la Revolucion*. I went to Zavattini's classes a few times. He was a fascinating man, very talkative, with a lot of charisma and talent. But in those times, he was already in his decline.*

Nevertheless, Saba Cabrera, Orlando Jimenez, and you followed the "free cinema" trend. Was this the reason for the attacks made on *P.M.*?

Without a doubt. But in reality it wasn't so much the "free cinema." Within the trend followed by Lunes, there was a rejection of the dying Italian neorealism. Neorealism was a sudden blaze that was extinguished by the war: It was born in 1945 to Rossellini and DeSica but destroyed by Italians like Fellini. I was caught in the middle. I liked neorealism, and I still do, but I also liked nonrealistic, imaginary cinema. In those times, Socialist Realism was a bit ridiculous in Cuba. You could simplify it by saying that the critical version of the capitalist reality represented neorealism and the apologetic version of the Communist government represented social realism. The members of ICAIC claimed they were Italian neorealists because they had studied in Italy. On the other hand, the people from Lunes, Guillermo Cabrera Infante at the head, were in favor of Hollywood cinema. And not everyone involved with Lunes thought alike. True they weren't Communists, but that didn't mean that they were always in agreement. You could even find two brothers, one pro-

Did *Lunes* and ICAIC represent a political controversy between the 26 of July Movement and the old Communist party?

*Hollywood, the other not. In the edition of *Lunes* that Guillermo Cabrera Infante did about the cinema, the fact that he described Marilyn Monroe as a paradigm of Hollywood irritated the Communists; they took it as a provocation. On the other hand, Guillermo's brother, Saba, leaned more toward the English "free cinema," which was like a branch of neorealism, though not a Communist one, in its tendency to expound upon the truth without too much commentary. The "free cinema" showed things just as they were—a documentary without commentary. That was the direction Orlando Jimenez and Saba Cabrera followed, which came in a way through me, since I had practiced "free cinema" in New York. I had previously made a film called *Cincuenta y ocho cincuenta y nueve* that was filmed one night in Times Square. Everything was done with a hand camera and natural light, without reconstruction; the exact opposite of ICAIC's cinema. They wanted reconstructed documentaries. They shot a peasant, who they had asked to make faces and cry, and*

everything had to be a little in the style of Pudovkin and Eisenstein, not with professional actors as in the Italian neorealist films but with actors just the same. ICAIC had them act very much as novices, employing the techniques of the old Soviet silent films in the famous Kuleshov experiments.

*I don't think so. It is true that Carlos Franqui, the director of *Revolucion*, was on the side of the 26 of July Movement. But on the other hand, the group supporting *Lunes*, which of course depended on Carlos Franqui, was more a group of artists, and being that most artists are pretty much individualists, it didn't really have a set ideology. Their ideology was artistic, not political. So those involved in *Lunes* sheltered themselves under the wing of the 26 of July Movement. It's certain that being under the wing of that political movement was much more comfortable than being under that of the Communist party, which demanded total orthodoxy. It would have been a very restrictive situation. Those interested in freedom turned to the 26 of July Movement when things began to get difficult. At the same time, the great witch hunt which began with the banning of P.M. and the closing of *Lunes de Revolucion* served as a great lesson in life. Some members of *Lunes* turned Communist and even denounced their comrades. They accused us of everything that one can*

*be accused of (being reactionaries and so on). One day they defended P.M., and the next they realized where the power was and what they had to do; they quickly changed their minds. These people realized years later that they had made a mistake. And three or four ended up in exile. They denounced the very people who had helped them and who had given them a chance, even though *Lunes de Revolucion* gave an entire generation the opportunity to write, photograph, paint and publish.*

What were Lunes's problems?

I remember that there were various issues, just about ready for publication, that were taken out of circulation, basically due to pressure from higher up. The Lunes staff would then have to come up with another issue at the last minute. I remember there were two issues that never came out, one about Yugoslavia, the other about the People's Republic of China. A lot of things were happening pretty quickly at that time. One country was an ally and suddenly it wasn't. All of these "mistakes" had the Communist party and Fidel Castro very irritated. Above all, Lunes had committed the sin of publishing stories by Soviet authors, like Isaac Babel. Such authors from the first generation before Stalin had ended up in disgrace in the USSR; some had even been sent to Siberia. Lunes had published works by Arthur Koestler. It also had the gall, according to the government, to have produced that previously mentioned issue praising Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot. And all these things to them seemed

sacrilegious within the Communist's puritan line, which has been described so well by Susan Sontag. The Communists wanted a cinema and a critique that were analytic, but within the Marxist point of view of reality, as in the works of Brecht and Bela Balasz. Then, of course, Lunes was widely read in Cuba. Most Cuban periodicals published at that time were dry and boring. Lunes was just the opposite. It made for pleasant reading, and that bothered the government. The magazine was not banned, because it has a large following and a lot of power with the public. That is to say, if the Communists had considered the magazine unpopular, they would have banned it without a second thought. But they had to find a pretext, some excuse. The excuse that they gave was that, because of the American imperialistic circle, there was a great shortage of paper and the number of publications in Cuba had to be reduced. And Lunes was one of the publications that was done away with. Of course there was plenty of

paper for infamous newspapers and magazines that no one read or cared about. They didn't fool anyone, but that was how it was justified.

To finish up, I'd like to know what your reaction was when the Bay of Pigs took place.

I will tell you that, at first, we were afraid. If the invasion had been successful and the Communists were defeated, we would have been in danger. Who could prove to the victors that we weren't really in favor of the Communists? That is to say, we found ourselves caught in the middle. That's why, when Castro successfully defeated the invasion, I had a double reaction. On the one hand, I took a deep breath, I was saved. On the other, I knew that the Communists were going to clamp down, and that we, the liberals and artists, were going to find ourselves with more problems regarding the growing sectarianism. Unfortunately that's how it ended up, and our situation only worsened.