

Guy Baron

# Gender in Cuban Cinema



From the Modern to the Postmodern

PETER LANG

A film institute was the first cultural institution to be created by the new Cuban revolutionary government in 1959. One of its aims was to create a new cinema to suit the needs of the Revolution in a climate of transformation and renewal. During the same period, issues of gender equality and gender relations became important as the Revolution attempted to eradicate some of the negative social tendencies of the past. Through the prism of the gender debate, Cuban cinema both reflected and shaped some of the central ideological concerns on the island at this time.

This book brings together these two extremely significant aspects of the Cuban revolutionary process by examining issues of gender and gender relations in six Cuban films produced between 1974 and 1990. Using close textual analysis and theoretical insights from feminism and postmodernism, the author 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.

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# **Gender in Cuban Cinema**

# Hispanic Studies: Culture and Ideas

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Claudio Canaparo



PETER LANG

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## 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

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*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.

Cuba and in Cuban cinema and, in this way, point towards the impending changes that were to occur after 1990.

One of the goals of this study is to illustrate how, through the prism of the gender debate presented on film, Cuban cinema both reflected and produced some of the central ideological concerns within the nation's society during this period (1974–90). It will be possible to see, through the examination of six films of the period, how the gender debate both helps to create and, at the same time, makes reference to, more general cultural debates on the island. As such, the issues around gender explored through Cuban cinema can be seen as one of the most important cultural topics of this period.

The importance of cinema to the development of the Cuban Revolution cannot be overstated and the significance of the debate on gender and gender relations within it plays a crucial part in Cuba's revolutionary cultural evolution. It is necessary, therefore, to consider how Cuban cinema developed its particular framework for expressing issues of gender on-screen, and why such a topic became one of the most important areas of expression, from the inception of a Cuban national film institute until at least the early 1990s. A brief outline of the growth and progression of the Institute will serve to establish the context within which this book operates.

## The Cuban Film Institute and the Gender Debate in Cuban Cinema

Historian, film-maker and film critic Michael Chanan (2000) provides a valuable insight into Cuban culture generally in his article, 'Cuba and Civil Society, or Why Cuban Intellectuals Are Talking about Gramsci'. In an examination of Cuban 'civil society', Chanan argues that 'Cuban society has gone through four phases since the Revolution of 1959, each corresponding to roughly a decade' (ibid.). The 1960s, he argues, was the

decade of revolutionary euphoria and ‘direct democracy’;<sup>7</sup> the 1970s the decade of institutionalisation and ‘Sovietisation’, when there was an evident move towards orthodox Marxism ‘and the hegemony of Moscow’ (ibid.); the 1980s, that of ‘rectification’, when such negative tendencies as inefficiency, absenteeism and corruption were attacked; and the 1990s, ‘following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and officially called the “Special Period” – was the decade of “*desencanto* [disenchantment] or *desconfianza* [mistrust]”’ (ibid.). Such generalised temporal divisions are obviously somewhat simplistic, but actually serve an examination of Cuban cinema very well indeed.

The *Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* [Cuban Institute of Art and Cinematographic Industries] (ICAIC) was the first cultural body to be set up by the revolutionary administration in March 1959, and was created in the whirlwind of revolutionary fervour that was sweeping Cuba and the rest of Latin America at the time. As John King argues, Cuba seemed like an exemplary solution that offered artists and intellectuals an attractive model for ‘fusing artistic and political vanguards’ at least until the ‘grim realities of the ’70s’ (1990: 67) and ICAIC, even today, retains a tight hold on cinematic production and distribution within the nation.<sup>8</sup>

7 Chanan takes the term ‘direct democracy’ from Jean-Paul Sartre, C. Wright Mills, and Paul Baran, who all described the socio-political state of Cuba in this way in the 1960s. As Chanan (2000) states this was, ‘a fair enough, though inadequate, description of a social system in embryonic form still trying to establish itself.’

8 Cinema in Cuba is not made entirely by ICAIC. As Juan Antonio García Borrero (2001: 11) points out, films are also produced by the Estudios Cinematográficos de Televisión de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias [Revolutionary Armed Forces Television and Cinema Studios] (ECTVFAR); la Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión [International School of Cinema and Television] (EICTV), at San Antonio de los Baños, outsider Havana; los Estudios Cinematográficos de la Televisión [Television Cinema Studios] (ECTV); el Taller de cine de la Asociación Hermanos Saíz (TCAHS) [Cinema Workshop of the Saíz Brothers Association], as well as via co-productions with other countries, and in small ‘cine-clubs’. However, ICAIC has been the major power in Cuban cinema since its formation, its films having more national and international significance than any others. This work

Under its first president, Alfredo Guevara, ICAIC found it easy to become an organic and creative movement with film-makers free to be artistic and experimental. It became a school where the principle was to develop talent – ‘a revolutionary cultural project’ (García Espinosa, 2000a: 202). As such it has had a powerful and significant role to play in the creation and fostering of a revolutionary ideology, and became decisive in helping to unify the country, standing, as it did, in the vanguard of culture (*ibid.*).<sup>9</sup> Although it has maintained a degree of autonomy from the state, it has always been very strongly linked to the search for and expression of a new, revolutionary, Cuban national identity.

Since its inception, then, ICAIC has been the promoter of national cinema and, according to Cuban critic García Borrero (2001: 11), from a critical point of view, virtually nothing of value was made before 1959. And, according to Álvarez (1995: 114) ‘... antes de 1959, Cuba produce un cine plagado de maracas, rumba, casinos, nightclubs, bailarinas’ [before 1959, Cuba produces a cinema plagued by maracas, rumba, casinos, nightclubs and dancers]. Cuban spectators in the major cities were fed a diet largely consisting of Hollywood films. Those in the rural areas had no access to cinema at all.

Thus, the increasingly Marxist Revolution made possible the expression of a new cinema that would be plural, diverse and aesthetically open to experimentation, counter to the dominant codes and structures of Hollywood, and the literary codes of the nineteenth century that, as García Espinosa (2000a: 205) argues, force the spectator into a passive acceptance of the image viewed, rather than into a critical position.

In the first few months of the Revolution, the larger cinemas, most of which were owned by large US corporations, were nationalised while

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acknowledges that there is an alternative contribution to Cuba’s cinema history but only considers and analyses films produced by ICAIC. Analysis of Cuba’s ‘alternative’ cinematic production would itself make for an interesting full-length study.

9 The law that created ICAIC declared cinema an art form and a body to serve the creation of a collective consciousness, able to contribute to the deepening of the revolutionary spirit. So, as Chanan argues, the creation of ICAIC was the creation of socialist cinema (1985: 18).

the smaller ones became cooperatives under the government. This was the only way to guarantee the production and distribution of Cuban national cinema. To enable the rural population to watch films, mobile cinemas were taken to remote parts of the countryside where a variety of films (including Charlie Chaplin classics) were introduced to those that had never before seen them.<sup>10</sup> John King (1990: 150) quotes Fidel Castro: 'The work of the mobile cinemas is the most interesting experience in the formulation of a new public.'

ICAIC was set up because the Revolution's leaders understood, as did Lenin, the value of cinema in promoting the ideals of a new socialist movement.<sup>11</sup> In essence ICAIC wanted to create a cinema with national characteristics. However, it would take nearly ten years before Cuban cinema asserted itself with the production in 1968 of the films *Memorias del subdesarrollo* [Memories of Underdevelopment], by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and *Lucía*. Cuban cinema, García Espinosa (2000a: 8) asserts, arrived at modernity in the 1960s almost from nothing and became a very important tool in developing a revolutionary consciousness. It helped transform a large majority of the Cuban people from a nation of viewers, dumbfounded by their first experience of cinematography, to that of active participants in a revolutionary process. A part of this process, as we shall see, included the eradication of certain negative tendencies, some of which, like *machismo* for example, are displayed in relations between men and women. The production of films, then, that presented these issues to an increasingly critical audience, became an important part of ICAIC's *raison d'être*.

In line with Chanan's division of Cuban cultural periods into separate decades, the early years of ICAIC represent a period of experimentation, using various artistic styles and filmic content, in a search for an appropriate

10 Octavio Cortázar's 1967 short film *Por primera vez* [For the First Time] illustrates the use of the mobile cinemas, and '[...] produced for its audience a vision of its own self-discovery as an audience' (Chanan, 1985: 14).

11 Michael Chanan (1985: 15) comments that for Lenin it was film that helped develop the mission of the Soviet Union as Lenin said: 'for us, film is the most important of all the arts.' This is not simple propaganda, Chanan argues, but a way of mobilising energy towards a new way of life.

genre that might best serve the requirements of a national film institute firmly attached to the revolutionary process and searching for ways to express this new radicalisation of society. As Chanan (2000) says: ‘What happened in the 1960s was that the triumph of the Revolution completely recast civil society precisely because it radicalised the political domain in a manner that redefined the political subject and the character of citizenship’. The first president of ICAIC, Alfredo Guevara, was a college friend of Fidel Castro, and the early film-makers were Julio García Espinosa, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Jorge Haydu, Jorge Fraga, Néstor Almendros and Santiago Álvarez, amongst others. Both García Espinosa and Gutiérrez Alea had studied cinema in Rome and were influenced by the European avant-garde style of film-making and Italian neo-realism in particular.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, during the 1960s, a process of social revolution was being developed that could also be seen in the so-called ‘Boom’ of Latin American literature at the same time. But, although many aspects of Cuban cinema throughout the 1960s were extraordinary in their revolutionary aspirations, techniques and, indeed, results, the images of male–female relations produced in the popular films of this period often sit uncomfortably alongside this ‘revolutionary’ practice. It is questionable whether the cultural modernity that García Espinosa rightly posits as being combined with this sense of social revolution (a modernity stemming from economic growth and industrial development, derived from Marxism) stretched as far as the development of new and radical images of male–female relations that might have aided the drive towards egalitarian politics.

12 In 1960, ICAIC made its first feature films, of which the first to be shown (though it was the second to be completed) was Gutiérrez Alea’s *Historias de la revolución* [Stories of the Revolution], made in the Italian neo-realist style. As Jaskari (1997) comments: ‘The inspiration of Italian neo-realism came from the desire to expose the true face of the nation from behind the façade of development, to create the “cinema of the humble” and discover on film the Italy of underdevelopment’. Julio García Espinosa (2000a: 203) believes that the New Latin American Cinema movement of the 1950s and 1960s was heavily influenced by Italian neo-realism. He argues that it was a useful way of filming with few resources, no effects or stars. It offered a cinema of resistance and a spirit of change, but, ultimately, was limited in developing a new narration specific to the Cuban problematic.

Films that take as one of their central concerns issues of gender relations, have formed a significant and disproportionate part of ICAIC's feature-film production. Indeed, Jean Stubbs (1995: 3) believes that 'it is probably safe to say that hardly a single film has not addressed, in some way or another, changing gender relations within the Revolution.' This is a strong claim and has a great deal of truth in it, although the presentation of gender relations is not, of course, the main objective of many Cuban films. However, such has been the ferocity of debate surrounding the subject throughout the Revolution (and particularly during the mid-1970s–mid-1980s) that any film presenting any relations at all between men and women (and what film does not?) can be viewed with this debate in mind.

Catherine Benamou (1999: 67) also believes the issue of gender has been fundamental to the development of a revolutionary society but questions whether issues of difference along lines of gender, race, or sexual preference have been adequately explored at an institutional level in Cuba or whether there should be more '*autonomous* spaces within which diverse subjectivities and identities need to be represented.' So, has Cuba been too concerned with its search for an independent 'cubanness' (a singular identity in defence of itself against cultural imperialism) that it has failed to consider sufficiently the various diverse spaces of difference that exist in a debate as wide and complex as that of gender? This is one of the central questions of this book.

Despite the revolutionary practices carried out at the level of form and construction, it can be argued that most of the films of the 1960s do not portray radical or novel images of gender relations. A brief outline of three of the most important films of the first decade of the Revolution will serve to present an initial idea of how gender relations were first dealt with in the new, radicalising Cuban cinema; from here it will be possible to establish how these representations evolved through the 1970s and 1980s. If one considers the images of woman presented in these films, at a time in the history of Latin America when the cultural space was being increasingly shaped by new and exciting aesthetic forms and practices, perhaps the risks taken were subsumed by a desire for wholeness, oneness, in the creation of a Latin American sentimentality: a desire for a solution to the continent's problems that overlooked the concerns of 'marginalised' groups,

such as women. For it must be argued that, in cinema at least, women were left on the fringes, both in terms of production and, as we shall see now in the case of three Cuban films, where the image of Woman is concerned, in terms of reception.

A brief analysis of three of the most important films of the 1960s will serve to locate the relationship between Cuban cinema and its representations of gender relations and will provide a backdrop for the analysis of the films that are central to this study. If we take, for example, the film *Aventuras de Juan Quin Quin* [Adventures of Juan Quin Quin] (1967) by Julio García Espinosa, one of Cuba's most important film-makers and film theorists – former head of both ICAIC and of the film school, Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión (EICTV) at San Antonio de Los Baños – it would appear that its highly experimental nature often subverts any attempt to display woman as anything other than a feminine object.

As Chanan (1985: 209) states, *Aventuras...* was 'Cuban cinema's first fully accomplished experimental film' and also a comedy. The film represents García Espinosa's attempt to unite pure entertainment with a revolutionary aesthetic and is a precursor to his essay on the development of a film style pertinent to the contemporary Cuban reality (written after the film was made), which is entitled 'Por un cine imperfecto' [For an Imperfect Cinema].<sup>13</sup> *Aventuras...* is a parody of Hollywood cinema genres, this parody being designed to produce a highly artificial and comical aesthetic, with the viewer's attention being deliberately drawn to this artificiality and cinematic illusion.<sup>14</sup>

But the parody is often undermined by the film's apparent support (without the irony that is attached to the male characters) of conventional notions of female representation. As Taylor (1979) argues, there are areas of underdevelopment that the film still evades, and a straight reproduction of certain codes of behaviour (albeit tinged with an ironic aesthetic) is simply not enough to break with traditional codes. Where they appear, the women characters feature as asides, aids or confectionery for the revolutionary hero

13 This essay will be discussed at length in Chapter 1.

14 For a more detailed analysis of this film see Taylor (1979).

and others. If the truth of this film lies in its brilliantly funny ironic swipe at capitalist culture then a part of that truth is left out.

Before 1974, the most significant film to address issues of gender relations was Sola's *Lucía* (1968). It is divided into three parts, each part being set during a significant time in Cuba's history.<sup>15</sup> In each of the parts the principal character is a woman whose personal life serves as a backdrop to a narrative that opens up questions about Cuban national identity at each significant historical moment. Like *Aventuras...* it is a highly experimental film that is made using a variety of different styles and techniques and is 'one of the films that supports and defines the ideals of promoting a radical new vision' (Martin and Paddington, 2001: 2).<sup>16</sup>

In Part One the character *Lucía* is finally driven to murder her lover, a man who represents the Spanish colonisation of Cuba. Here, 'Woman' and 'Nation' are fused, i.e. the female figure is mobilised to function as national allegory, and driven through circumstances to take up arms in a collective, hysterical moment of revenge against oppression. In Part Two, *Lucía* joins the fight against dictator Machado in 1933, and develops a female solidarity with her factory colleagues, but is ultimately alienated by her lover and remains eternally trapped in a one-sided relationship with him, and marginalised by the processes of revolution. In Part Three, she becomes physically trapped by her jealous husband, who refuses to let her out of the house, only for the Revolution (in the form of her other female work colleagues who represent its drive to get women into the workforce) to rescue her from this traditional *machista* behaviour.

Although the film is replete with images of revolution and change (a revolution conducted by men), for the women in the film the process of liberation is more one of 'evolution' than 'revolution' as many of the old principles appear very difficult to break. But *Lucía*, unlike *Aventuras...* is trying to develop possibilities for a new definition of gender relations within

15 Part One is set in 1895 during the Wars of Independence, Part Two in 1932 during the overthrow of dictator Gerardo Machado, and Part Three in the 1960s in the first few years of the Revolution.

16 For more on the aesthetics of *Lucía* see Chanan (2004: 275–88).

Cuban revolutionary society (even when it is accepted that this society is still loaded with patriarchal prejudice). Solás's film illustrates woman's position in an evolving culture, whereas García Espinosa presents ironic critiques of another society's filmic representations of women.

The most important Cuban film of the 1960s was *Memorias del subdesarrollo*. Although its central theme is not the debate on gender, some critics argue that it fails to address sufficiently the question of male–female relations in the new, revolutionary Cuba. Benamou (1999: 68), for example, argues that, although the treatment of women by the main character, Sergio, is criticised as pre-revolutionary decadence, 'the preclusion of an oppositional reading from a feminine viewpoint is due to its detainment in the audiovisual documentation of Sergio's conscious and preconscious experience'; at no time does there exist a unity of women in any combined opposition to male forces. Women in *Memorias...* have no 'agency' as Benamou puts it. She believes that there is no real critique of *machismo* in the film, and no real alternative to patriarchy. It is as if the criticism of Sergio is that he is not *macho* enough to belong to the new revolutionary order (*ibid.*).<sup>17</sup>

The problem with all three films, from the point of view of developing a radical new vision of male–female relations, is that priority is given to ideology over subjectivity, as the female protagonists sit alongside men in the revolutionary processes observed.<sup>18</sup> The image of Woman is created always as secondary to the development of a (male) revolutionary purpose. Women then have to fit into and alongside that purpose, their definitions only being created in relation to it.

As the quotation at the beginning of this introduction reveals, Solás was interested in the parallel between the representation of women and the expression of Cuban national identity. His other films include: *Manuela* (1966), in which a peasant woman is transformed into a revolutionary

17 For various takes on *Memorias ...* see: Chanan (2004: 288–302); Lesage (1979); Sharman (2007).

18 Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the questioning of the very notion of subjectivity and the possibilities for its representation in film.

guerrilla fighter; *Cecilia* (1981), an adaptation of the novel *Cecilia Valdés* by Cirilo Villaverde, and an attempt to reconstruct the past from a new standpoint;<sup>19</sup> and *Amada* (1983), a film about a bourgeois wife who falls in love with her cousin, a young idealist fighting against the Cuban government in 1914. Solás, then, developed the idea that the representation of female protagonists served well his concern with the projection of a new vision of Cuban society, be it an attempt to rewrite history or understand the present.

As the debate on male–female relations intensified in Cuba from the mid-1970s, so representations of this debate increased across the cultural spectrum. This coincided with the ‘Institutionalisation’ of the Revolution, discussed earlier.

The two most important films from this period for the purposes of this study are *De cierta manera* (1974) and *Retrato de Teresa* (1979) and both will be discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 4 respectively. The 1970s can be split into two parts (1971–6 and 1976–80) with the production and release of *De cierta manera*, the first film to be examined in this book, creating a bridge between the two periods. With the failure of the sugar harvest in 1970 (a misguided attempt to produce 10 million tons of sugar due to the fact that the Soviets would buy it at pre-established, inflated prices, by diverting resources away from other industries and revolutionary efforts) and the Padilla affair,<sup>20</sup> there was a concerted attempt to redefine (or at least re-appraise) all artistic production. This is when, Julianne Burton (1997: 131) argues, the process of defining and producing a national culture begins, with a reduction in the kinds of cinematic experimentation seen through the 1960s, in favour of moves towards more non-fiction features.

But many of the changes were brought about through economic necessity rather than ideological priority. The lack of resources due to the US embargo, and the failure of the sugar harvest of 1970 reduced the money

19 See González, R. (2000), ‘Some Historical Themes in Cuban Cinema’.

20 The poet Heberto Padilla (winner of the UNEAC Prize in 1968) was arrested and imprisoned in 1971 for 28 days for criticising the government after he became disenchanted with the deepening associations with the USSR. He also lost his job on the newspaper, *Granma* (Chanan, 1983: 257).

available to ICAIC and, as Chanan (1985: 256) points out, there were twenty-four documentaries made in 1970 and only one thirty-minute fiction film, plus one animation. In 1971, however, there were five fiction films produced, including José Massip's *Páginas del diario de José Martí* [Pages From the Diary of José Martí], *Los días del agua* [The days of Water] (Manuel Octavio Gómez), and Gutiérrez Alea's *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios* [A Cuban Fight Against the Demons]. These helped to develop the anti-colonial, nationalistic intent of Cuban cinema at this time.<sup>21</sup>

Historical films were prominent in the 1970s. Perhaps this points to a desire on the one hand to avoid commentary on contemporary events, or on the other hand to redefine and relocate Cuban history in the manner described by Chanan. *El otro Francisco* [The Other Francisco] (1974, Sergio Giral) forms part of this historical reconstruction, along with Giral's other two features in the 1970s, *Rancheador* [Slave Runner] (1977) and *Maluala* (1979). The battle, then, was not only fought in the mountains and at Playa Girón, and subsequently on the international stage, but was also being fought in the cultural arena – but nowhere more visibly than in the cinemas. Both Burton and John Hess (Burton, 1997: 131) argue that the 1970s was marked by artistic decline in an 'attempt to define and produce a people's culture', as ICAIC lost a degree of the autonomy it had experienced during the 'golden era' of the 1960s. So it does appear that both political necessity and socialist practice were evident in the film-makers' choice of genre and topic at least in the early part of the 1970s as the film *El hombre de Maisinicú* [The Man of Maisinicú] (1973) by Manuel Pérez

21 Many of the documentaries produced in the early 1970s had clear and evident overtones of the philosophies of José Martí, illustrating a desire to forge a new identity for Cuba through the medium of film – an attempt to relocate the nation away from its colonial past. In feature films too, this process is evident. *Páginas del diario de José Martí* is an expressionistic homage to the Cuban hero, a 'truly hallucinatory film' as Chanan argues (1985: 258) while *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios* forms part of what Chanan calls 'cine rescate' in its attempt to rescue the image of Cuba from its colonial past (ibid.). *Los días del agua* by Manuel Octavio Gómez also deals with a reformulation of Cuban identity, using a real historic event of the 1930s to point to the ease with which ordinary people can be exploited by political and religious opportunism.

would illustrate, as it deals with a struggle against CIA-backed banditry in the years immediately after 1959.

Timothy Barnard (1997: 149) also asserts that, after a period of experimentation in the 1960s, the period of the late 1960s and the 1970s saw an increase in historical themes being passed through ICAIC for fear of reprisals if contemporary subjects were dealt with. He cites *Ustedes tienen la palabra* [The Word is Yours] (1974), by Manuel Octavio Gómez, a story of corruption and opportunism told in flashback and contrasted with present day revolutionary unity, and *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios*, that recreates an account of religious fanaticism in 1672.

Both juxtapose historical and contemporary images in a re-positioning of Cuban history that has definite political overtones. These films were entirely necessary in establishing a new and more meaningful perception of history for the Cuban people and, as Barnard (ibid. 153) comments, they are formal representations of an ideology of intervening in history in order to create a need for the present. The previous carriers of the cinematic monopoly in Cuba had forged their own version both of history and of a contemporary reality largely erroneous or irrelevant to the majority of Cubans, but now a different interpretation of the past was being created.

Michael Myerson (1973: 84) makes a good point concerning the lack of contemporary criticism in films of the 1970s. He argues that, while the documentaries dealt with a present day reality, Cuban feature films attempted to rewrite Cuba's negative and badly portrayed history, not because the film-makers feared government reprisals but because they themselves were revolutionaries, many committed communists, and they did not want to weaken the position of the Revolution by making anything overly critical, and also because they did not want to make simple propaganda in favour of the Revolution as this was detrimental to the artistic values of ICAIC. The reason that they did not deal with contemporary subjects in feature films (such as gender relations) was largely because in the first years it was too soon to critically observe contemporary reality in fictional form – an analysis that is much better observed at a temporal distance. Later, particularly in the 1990s, however, contemporary reality was dealt with in fiction largely because the historical rewriting process

had been underway for some time and the themes (and forms) had been overused and overplayed.

One film during the 1970s that does present some criticism of a contemporary reality and could well have been included in this work, however, is Manuel Octavio Gómez's, *Una mujer, un hombre, una ciudad* [A Woman, a Man, a City] (1973). Complex and with a contemporary focus, it is a film that explores the physical modernisation of Cuba via the interactions between architects, male and female, who are constructing the houses of the future and, as Chanan (2004: 275) states, 'takes the role of women very seriously'. However, an analysis is not included here as space does not allow it. All six of the other films discussed pay far more attention to issues of gender *per se* and *Una mujer, un hombre, una ciudad* has a tendency to idealise the figure of the 'New Woman' of the Revolution as the 'model imagined by men' (ibid.).

But, out of the so-called 'grey five years' of the early to mid-1970s, came *De cierta manera*, a film regarded by many to be one of the most important in Cuba's cinema history and that, as Caballero and Del Río (1995: 104) say, started the move, in the latter part of the 1970s, towards popular cinema and certainly started the first wave of anti-*machista* films that appeared in the 1980s. This film will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 and is certainly one of the most important films regarding the representation of male–female relations to ever come out of Cuba – not least because, up until the production of *Ciudad en rojo* [City in Red] by Rebeca Chávez in 2009, it was the only full length feature film from ICAIC to have been directed entirely by a Cuban woman.

The early part of the 1970s was a confusing and slightly troubled time for ICAIC, finding its feet after the heady experimentalism of the 1960s but not knowing in which particular direction to step next. Chanan delves into this rather more deeply in the second edition of his book on Cuban cinema, commenting that the 1970s saw the production of several different genres of films but with a conspicuous absence of contemporary subjects. However, this makes for an extremely interesting period in Cuba's cinematic history – some would say more interesting than in the more prolific days of the 1980s, when production rose dramatically but, thematically, there was perhaps less diversity and a move towards more popular cinema.

The end of the 1970s was a significant point in the history of Cuban cinema, with the launch of the first Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana, a festival that has grown every year to become the most important event in the calendar for Latin American and Cuban cinema. Seen as a promotion of the concepts delineated by Latin American film theorists such as Jorge Sanjinés, Julio García Espinosa, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, the festival can be described as a post-colonial offensive against the Hollywood/Europe monopoly that cannot deal with the type of repression suffered by Latin American countries.

But, if the 1980s kicked off positively with an affirmation of all that was good in Latin American cinema, ICAIC was soon to be grappling with a polemic that saw the removal of Alfredo Guevara as president. It all revolved around the attempt to make a big budget spectacular in order to sell around the world. Guevara put a whole year's budget into the making of *Cecilia*, directed by Humberto Solás. Adapted from Cirilo Villaverde's well-known and loved nineteenth-century novel *Cecilia Valdés*, the film failed as it drifted markedly from the original story thereby upsetting, as Chanan (2004: 388) remarks, 'both the traditionalist and popular audiences'. Guevara was dismissed as president and replaced by García Espinosa, although neither the Institute nor Solás himself suffered to any degree, both getting on with the job of making more films. Perhaps this illustrates the extent to which ICAIC was seen at the time as an important part of Cuba's cultural make-up and something that needed to be reformed rather than removed, with artistic experimentation and risk-taking still being seen as an essential duty of the film-maker. With García Espinosa as president, ICAIC set about mending the damage done by the after-effects of *Cecilia*.

This period of the Cuban Revolution was marked by the Mariel exodus of 1980 when 120,000 people were allowed by the Cuban government to leave the country in a makeshift flotilla to Miami after a period of discontent with the Cuban economy. So, in a moment of political instability, both within ICAIC and the nation as a whole, how would García Espinosa handle the running of one of the government's most important and influential cultural bodies? He began by increasing production using low budgets, time restraints and fresh creative blood, although one of the first films under his jurisdiction, *Amada* (1983), was directed by the

experienced Solás. *Amada* is another historical drama and love story, set in 1928 and is interesting for its psychological study of the main protagonist and for its optimistic ending, with the people taking to the streets in protest at the worsening economic situation in Cuba.

But perhaps the most influential film of the early 1980s is *Hasta cierto punto* which, as García Osuna (2003: 105) states, 'gives a pessimistic account of the effort by the government to change basic attitudes in the population'. A film about sexism, *machismo* and the difficulty of changing entrenched social codes, it is partly a homage to Gómez's *De cierta manera*, and employs similar techniques in mixing documentary and fiction, but is also a critique of ICAIC itself, as we shall see in its detailed examination in Chapter 2.

Gutiérrez Alea had recently written his own Marxist theory on cinema called *Dialéctica del espectador* [The Viewer's Dialectic], in 1982, arguing that film should create a shift from everyday reality to fictional reality, where one informs the other, 'a kind of formal credo of an independent Marxist intellectual' (Chanan, 2004: 407). This is discussed further in Chapter 1, but in his book Gutiérrez Alea profoundly problematises the art of the film-maker, arguing that the old juxtaposition of form and content is far too simplistic to be relevant to a Cuban reality.

At the beginning of the 1980s, then, it was García Espinosa's plan to move away from the experimentalism of the 1960s and the historical recovery of the 1970s, to make more popular (rather than populist) films, popular in the sense that they dealt with popular issues (such as gender relations). In this sense the films of the 1980s were most certainly aimed at producing a dialogue with the spectator. *Se permuta* [House Swap] (1983, Juan Carlos Tabío) is a contemporary comedy about the difficulty of moving house in Havana, as a single mother desires to move upmarket to a better neighbourhood. The film was seen by more than two million people in Cuba (with a population of 11 million) and was a commercial hit, being both funny and critical of a contemporary reality, easily identified by the audience (ibid. 411). The following year, Rolando Díaz released his first feature, *Los pájaros tirándole a la escopeta* [Tables Turned] that drew an audience of nearly three million and again was an acclaimed hit (ibid.). Díaz's film is a generational comedy and again critical of a modern-day

reality, hence its popularity. Both films have simple and fairly traditional narrative structures, using popular and contemporary themes.

García Espinosa's policies were appearing to work and eight feature films were released in 1984 (ibid. 413). During the 1980s, there were approximately forty features produced by ICAIC that covered a variety of film genres, from historical drama (e.g. *Cecilia*) to contemporary social comedy (e.g. *Se permuta*, *Los pájaros tirándole a la escopeta*), historical satire (e.g. *Un hombre de éxito* [A Successful Man], 1986, Humberto Solás), and social commentary (e.g. *Habanera* [Havana Woman], 1984, Pastor Vega, and *Lejanía*). As Davies states, at this point in its history ICAIC seemed to be 'broadening its appeal at the expense of its thematic and linguistic audacity' (1997: 346).

Thus, there was a renewal in style and content in the 1980s that produced a number of films critical of a contemporary reality. Some, like *Los pájaros tirándole a la escopeta*, could have been included in this work in far more detail but, again, space does not permit it as around the same time, both *Hasta cierto punto* and *Lejanía* were released. Both of these last two films are extremely important regarding gender relations and could not have been replaced. The important thing about the films *Se permuta* and *Los pájaros...*, though, is that they opened the way for topical Cuban comedy because they attack bad habits under socialism, and are contemporary and immediate (Paranagua, 1988: 91–3). They prepared the ground for the production of the best of all the social comedies in the 1980s, *¡Plaff! (o demasiado miedo a la vida)*, which is analysed in detail in Chapter 6.

*Habanera* is also a film that could figure in any discussion of gender relations in Cuban cinema as it deals with a woman's desire, her psychological introspection and how she can be incorporated into the revolutionary process (Caballero y Del Río, 1995: 104), while *Otra mujer* [Another Woman] (1986, Daniel Díaz Torres) portrays a couple's conflict and masculine infidelity (Paranagua, 1988: 91).

*Lejanía*, about exile and the relationship between an émigré mother and her son, was one of the most interesting films to come out of this period during the mid-1980s and is discussed at length in Chapter 4. Later, in 1988, *¡Plaff!* set out to parody the very idea of using female characters to represent the nation.

What is evident from this period are the number of films dealing with social concerns (generational conflict, the pain of exile, housing problems, inter-marital relations etc.), attributed by some observers to the maturation of new film-makers, uninhibited by the necessity of recreating a new history for Cuba, and with the desire to question and even criticise aspects of the Revolution (Aufderheide, 1989: 498). I have chosen *Hasta cierto punto*, *Lejanía, ¡Plaff!* and *Mujer transparente* from this period as I feel they best give a sense of the overall changes occurring in ICAIC over this time and, indeed, in Cuban culture as a whole. We can witness, in this maturation of film-makers, through the prism of male–female relations, an evident move from expressions of the modern – in support of the relatively young revolutionary process – in films like *De cierta manera*, or *Retrato de Teresa*, for example, to expressions of the postmodern, which cast a critical and questioning eye over many aspects of the Marxist revolutionary project in some of the films of the late 1980s, including *¡Plaff!* and *Mujer transparente*. Comedy was one of the genres used to make this type of critical social commentary, illustrating a light-hearted way of handling societal problems.<sup>22</sup>

In 1986, as the economy suffered increasingly from the tightening US blockade, and the Soviet Union entered into *perestroika* and *glasnost*, Cuba's period called the 'Rectification of Past Errors and Negative Tendencies' (Kapcia, 2008: 42) began. This was a process of 'deep reassessment' (ibid.) that included an austerity programme, the reduction of permits given for private businesses (with a corresponding increase in the enticement of foreign investment in cooperation with the Cuban government), a denunciation of the USSR's 'betrayal of Marxism-Leninism', and an attempt to reinvigorate *conciencia* [consciousness] via an ideological purification of the population (Bunck, 1994: 18). As Julie Bunck points out, at the Third Party Congress in 1986, Castro called for a rebirth of 'consciousness, a

22 This comedy turned more satirical in the early 1990s and took one step too many as far as the authorities were concerned with the release of *Alicia en el pueblo de maravillas* [Alicia in Wondertown] by Daniel Díaz Torres, a 'scathingly satirical' film 'about the society created by Castro's revolution' (García Osuna, 2003: 53), that was pulled from the cinemas after three days.

communist spirit, a revolutionary will' (ibid.). In order to make ICAIC more economically efficient, García Espinosa split the institution into three creative groups that had their own separate production processes, each under the control of a supervisory director. With increased production, no single person could oversee the entire schedule in one year and so this appeared to be a sensible move, especially as each group would be headed by an experienced film-maker who would therefore concentrate on the artistic merits of the films he supervised, rather than on budget restrictions. Each group would therefore have control over itself thus allowing for, as Chanan (2004: 429–30) points out, a more flexible process.

At the end of the 1980s came a film that, this book argues, embodies Cuban cinema's entry into the postmodern era through its treatment of issues of gender and gender relations, and ushered in the transition to the 'Special Period' as world communism collapsed. Under the guidance of Humberto Solás's creative group, the film *Mujer transparente*, an assemblage of five short films each by a different director, reworks and reinvents Cuban cinema's approach to issues of gender. Contemporary and with a documentary feel, the five shorts deal with various aspects of women's lives in 1980s Cuba (male–female relationships, self-esteem, hopes for the future, non-conformity and relationships with friends). The film as a whole explores themes that are extremely sensitive to a Cuban political and human sensibility and portrays controversial episodes surrounding the relationship between Cubans living on the island and Cubans abroad. It is discussed at length in Chapter 6 and concludes the film analyses.

## Women and Gender in Cuba

In any study of gender and male–female relations, a major focus will be on the position and role of women in the society to which it refers. This work provides no exception to this and asserts that it is important to explore the position of women in Cuban society in order to provide a socio-historical

backdrop to the examination of how gender issues are presented on the big screen. If, as García Espinosa (2000a: 201) argues, the project of human emancipation characterises modernity, then it will be interesting to analyse whether or not Cuban cinema provides evidence of such emancipation through a period of rapid modernisation in Cuba's history.

Cuba has been and continues to be a type of social laboratory in the way that it has undertaken, for a number of generations, multiple economic and social transformations. Amongst these, the incorporation of women into all aspects of the revolutionary process has been one of the most important. To that end, the Cuban Women's Federation, the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC) was set up in 1961, led by Vilma Espín, wife of Raúl Castro, and has always been seen as part of the revolutionary vanguard.<sup>23</sup>

Since the triumph of the 1959 Revolution, Cuban society has been centred on the notion of *solidaridad*. Solidarity for Cuban society is the basic principle of human co-existence, the opposite of individualism that is seen as simply egotism. Cuban women have been seen as essential contributors to the demands of the Revolution. Yolanda Ferrer (1998b), Secretary General of the FMC, comments: 'Nuestro papel en la sociedad es contribuir a hacer realidad en todos los ámbitos y a todos los niveles, el ejército pleno de la igualdad de la mujer [...] trabajar por el fortalecimiento de la familia [...] y defender esta Revolución que desde su triunfo se situó como objetivo de especial importancia enaltecer a la mujer y garantizar que ocupará el lugar que le corresponde en la vida nacional' [Our role in society is to contribute to the realisation, in all spheres and at all levels of society, of the complete exercise of women's equality [...] to work for the strengthening of the family [...] and to defend this Revolution that since its triumph has set as a particular object of importance the praise of women and to guarantee that they will occupy their rightful place in national life].

Before 1959, as Bunck (1994: 89) asserts, going back as far as the early 1930s, women in Cuba compared well in status with other Latin American countries. They received the vote in 1934 before all but Uruguay, Brazil and

23 For a more detailed history of the FMC see Azicri (1998: 457–71); McCaughan (1998); and the website of the FMC at: <[www.mujeres.cubaweb.cu](http://www.mujeres.cubaweb.cu)>.

Ecuador. There were similar numbers of female and male students between the ages of five and fifteen, and literacy levels for women were higher than men at around 79 per cent (only Argentina had a higher female literacy rate). More women worked outside the home than in most other Latin American nations. They were elected to the House of Representatives and the Senate, were mayors, judges, cabinet members, and local councillors. The 1940 Constitution, which prohibited discrimination and called for equal pay, was one of the most progressive in the western hemisphere regarding women's rights. But, she comments, there were certain inequalities, and women were far from equal in terms of the power wielded in the governing of the state, and they were usually relegated to subordinate roles. There was an authoritarian and patriarchal family structure that was a product of the Hispanic legacy and highly influential, especially in the rural areas that made up more than 43 per cent of the population. Infidelity amongst men was accepted but not tolerated amongst women. *Machismo* was seen as a good quality in this society – 'a Latin notion of male superiority and aggressiveness demonstrated by virility, strength, confidence, courage, and power. Young girls were expected to be gracious, attractive, retiring, virtuous, and virgin' (ibid. 91).<sup>24</sup> Women only made up some 17 per cent of the labour force in 1959, the majority of these working in traditionally female occupations such as nursing, teaching and domestic service (ibid.).

After 1 January 1959 the majority of the female population of Cuba supported the Revolution, as the promotion of women into the public domain was an evident goal of the Castro government. As Espín (1990: 90) commented: 'En 1959, el primer año de la Revolución, nosotros sentimos con mucha fuerza la presión de las mujeres que deseaban unirse, organizarse para participar mejor en las tareas de la Revolución' [In 1959, the first year of the Revolution, we felt very strongly the pressure from women that wished to unite and organise themselves in order to participate more fully in the tasks of the Revolution].

24 Chapter 1 deals in depth with *machismo* in Cuban society to theoretically introduce two films that approach the subject, *De cierta manera* and *Hasta cierto punto*.