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## Turning 30: Cinema & revolution in Havana

McIntosh, David

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knowledge. Everyone, including Terry's ex-lover Roddy, knows that Terry and Spike are lovers, and that Terry's Aunt Effie is really her mother Rita's mother—but no one will speak.

The position of the audience is analogous to Spike's. She is the bewildered outsider, confused by the incestuous nature of this small community's business, by the old family quarrels and by the deluge of information she is (and we are) subjected to. She begins to make sense of the various relationships and the nature of the silences, and when the silences are broken in the end, she is included, as are we. The ending is a wonderful comic resolution. Terry forces the unsaid to be spoken and the process enables the characters to truly see one another. As Terry acknowledges that there is no letter, she must at the same time come to terms with her relationship to her father and with the rest of her family. They, in turn, must do the same.

Characterization is why this play really works. The intensely personal situations are ones in which we can see ourselves, because the characters have a depth we can recognize and share. Just as they recognize their connections to each other, so too do we recognize our connections to them. *Black Friday* succeeds because it does not attempt to create certain types, nor does it generalize for us; we are inspired to find our own meaning. *Lesbians Who Wear Lipstick*, in its attempt to portray certain character types, and to make sweeping statements, fails to develop a truly personal voice to which the audience can relate.

Articulation, as *Black Friday* suggests, is a necessary aspect of the process of imagining and exploring lesbian identities. That process cannot be adequately conveyed through the articulation of types rather than the experiences of individuals. ■

**Lisa Pottie is in her final year of her Ph.D. in English Literature at the University of Toronto.**



Poster for 10th International Festival of New Latin American Cinema

FILM

# Turning 30

## CINEMA & REVOLUTION IN HAVANA

by David McIntosh

Why beat about the bush and promise and protest all sorts of things? Why not tell the truth and say what is fact—that we want Cuba . . . because we believe that it will add to our national strength and become a purchaser at our bargain counters?

The Washington Post, 1902<sup>1</sup>

Nicaragua hoy, Cuba mañana

Contra recruitment poster in Miami<sup>2</sup>

It is the last day of 1988 and Havana's preparations for the celebration of the New Year are just about complete. Apart from the unlucky few caught in the last minute lineups for bottles of rum to see

them through the night, all of Havana is set to trek from party to party till dawn. The Prado, a long tree-lined boulevard in the heart of commercial Havana and the site of every Cuban transgression, has been transformed into an endless outdoor dancehall where crowds are beginning to form for succulent pieces of barbecued chicken or pork and cups of draught beer poured from enormous shining kettles. In the Parque Central a group of old men argue about their various memories of the time a drunken U.S. marine pissed on the statue of Jose Martí, sparking city-wide riots. Toasts to the New Year with anyone and everyone, laughter, and a boule-

vard of bands tuning up eventually drown out the argument.

This is no ordinary New Year's celebration—in Cuba January 1st marks the day Fidel Castro's July 26 Movement marched into Havana, successfully terminating a six-year guerilla war against Batista. Nor is this just any celebration of the triumph of the Revolution—this is the 30th anniversary. As the only state in Latin America which has managed to exist outside of the influence of the United States for 30 years (despite attempted invasions, assassination plots, dirty wars, and U.S. propaganda beamed in from Miami by Radio Martí and now TV Martí), Cuba finds itself the patron of an international cultural tradition and revolutionary artistic movement which was also finding its footings some 30 years ago—the New Latin America Cinema movement. This movement is celebrated each year in Havana in the form of the Festival of New Latin American Cinema, Television and Video, the 10th edition of which wound up on December 20.

As with anything or anyone that turns 30 (in this case a national revolution and an international revolutionary cinema movement), energies, ideas and radical impulses suffer unless the contradictions and accumulations of age are addressed and processes for renewal are developed. Much as Cuba fights to protect its revolution from increasing external forces of destabilization while struggling internally with a generation born since Fidel's victory (a generation which is extremely well educated, trained to think dialectically and seeking more room in the revolutionary process), the New Latin American Cinema movement fights to maintain integrity and presence in a world increasingly dominated by American film and television at the same time as it tries to create a space for new voices and new realities. And just as Cuba established an infrastructure which provides adequate health care, education, food and accommodation to all citizens, Latin American filmmakers have gained much ground



Still courtesy Mountain Top Films

Still from *Krk? Krak! Tales of a Nightmare* by Jac Avila and Vanyoska Gee.

since their first international encounter in Viña del Mar, Chile, in 1967.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the yearly film festival in Havana, there is now the broadly based permanent Committee of Latin American Filmmakers, the Foundation of New Latin American Cinema to assist developing screenwriters, and the Three Worlds International Film School in San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba.

There is one major difference between these two 30-year-olds. Cuban society experienced a revolution which eliminated the primary causes of underdevelopment; the New Latin American Cinema movement, however, finds itself operating in a majority of countries which face much the same underdevelopment which inspired the movement's birth, expressed largely now in terms of an overwhelming foreign debt.<sup>4</sup> As the following quote from an essay written over 20 years ago by the directors of *The Hour of the Furnaces* points out, much of what was "new" about this movement 30 years ago remains "new" today:

One of the more efficiently accomplished tasks of neo-colonialism has been the separation of intellectual sectors, primarily artists, from national realities, alienating them by promoting notions of 'art and universal models' . . . Ours is a period of hypothesis more than thesis, a period of works in progress, in-

conclusive, violent, made with a camera in one hand and a stone in the other, impossible to measure by traditional canons of theory and practice.<sup>5</sup>

The divergence of the national political-economic contexts for the New Latin American Cinema has had both positive and negative effects on the works being produced and the discourse that results from an international gathering such as the Festival in Havana, where at least 500 individual titles from over 25 countries are screened in a 12-day period. It is impossible to represent the true scope and diversity of work as well as the debates surrounding it, given the size of the Havana undertaking. But it is important to at least lay out some of the contradictions and accomplishments which still characterize the New Latin American Cinema, or at least as much of it as one can experience in 12 days.

*A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings* by Fernando Birri, the acknowledged father of the New Latin American Cinema, elicited one of the more bitter rhetorical exchanges of the Festival. Based on Gabriel Garcia Marquez's story of the same name, Birri's cinematic version of magical-critical-realism is a highly stylized and satirical parable of the relative seductive powers of religion and money. The film was dismissed by the *Granma*,

the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Cuba, as an artless representation of the people as passive elements in the determination of their destiny. In a press conference to defend his work, Birri referred to this critique as “a didactic auto da fe”<sup>6</sup> reminiscent of the philosophy of the tie, wherein if a suitcase is too full and a little bit of tie is left hanging out, the offending bit is cut off. Birri recalled Fidel’s version of this philosophy, articulated in a speech to artists and intellectuals in the 1970s—“dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución, nada” (within the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing)<sup>7</sup>—and warned that life should not be suffocated but rather transformed through ideology. Meanwhile, *The Lady From Shanghai Cinema*, an ostentatious and simplistic remake of the Orson Welles film *The Lady From Shanghai*, exemplified the colonized approach that the New Latin American Cinema was determined to supplant, yet it escaped any and all official critique.

Peruvian Francisco Lombardi’s *La Boca del Lobo* (The Lion’s Den)<sup>8</sup> demonstrated one of the dilemmas of the political filmmaker: faced with limited access to production resources, to what extent can reality be tailored to the profit-making dictates of the international film market before the reality depicted becomes defaced? Lombardi’s film recreates the true story of the massacre of an entire Quecha village by a Peruvian army unit. While the ensemble acting of the soldiers and the insights into their deeply rooted violence and racism are perceptive and accomplished, the film fails to present the Quecha people as anything more than non-speaking extras, an unthinking part of the landscape. The film ends with two soldiers replaying the Russian roulette scene of *The Deer Hunter*, ensuring that identification with the film is possible only through an awareness of traditional Hollywood war and buddy melodramas. At the same time, Lombardi precluded any real understand-



Filmmaker and theoretician Fernando Birri.

ing of the Quecha people who continue to suffer violence at the hands of extremists in Peru.

On the other hand, *Tiempo de Victoria* (*Time of Victory*), a documentary by revolutionary El Salvador’s Radio Venceremos, is all about political analysis, made with camera in one hand and a gun in the other. Over the past ten years Radio Venceremos has created an extensive body of films and videos to mobilize popular support for the FMLN inside El Salvador and to offer international audiences insights into their struggle that would not otherwise be available through our own mass media. *Tiempo de Victoria* has been compiled from existing material as well as new footage to create a concise and rousing history of the resourcefulness, determination and success of the FMLN, outlining a trajectory which brings viewers to the edge of the struggle, to the point where victory is not only inevitable but imminent.

An equally accomplished documentary on Haiti, *Krik? Krak! Tales of a Nightmare*, directed by Jac Avila and Vanyoska Gee, also represents a struggle over an extended period of time, but unfortunately it is not a representation of imminent victory, nor is history represented as a linear process. The film employs an innovative form of storytelling, flipping back and forth in time, spiraling through the lives of ordinary Haitians—some trying to escape the island, some working for the Macoutes (paramilitary thugs), some living in exile—drawing in archival footage of U.S. invasions and the rise and fall of dictators Papa Doc and Baby Doc as it swirls through the fears, crimes, corruption and hopes that have characterized the Haitian nightmare for most of this century.

*La Marcha por la Vida* (*The March for Life*) was one of the most powerful of a range of video documentaries from Bolivia. Starting as a record of the 200 mile

march of striking mine workers from Potosí to La Paz to demand economic justice and the removal of U.S. mercenaries from their land, the tape documents the growth of a band of marching strikers to a crowd of thousands and their defeat outside of La Paz by the Bolivian army, with tanks, screaming jets and lines of armed soldiers facing off against unarmed people whose only power was in their numbers. This tape served a vital informational function within Bolivia, given that the state prohibited any reporting on the subject. Other popular organizations separated by distance from the march only learned of its growing success and ultimate fate through this video.

As far as Cuba's presence at the Festival was concerned, *{Plaff! Demasiado Miedo a la Vida (Splat! Too Afraid to Live)}* by Juan Carlos Tabío signalled a return to the vitality and innovation that characterized Cuban cinema immediately following the Revolution. Taking as its subject a typical Cuban family, *Plaff!* is an audacious comedy of the local, exploding just about every cliché of daily life in Cuba—shopping, falling in love, bureaucracy, nosy neighbours—while the widowed mother of the family is constantly bombarded by raw eggs (thus the "Splat" of the title). She torments everyone around her, mischievously spreading suspicion and confusion as she attempts to discover who is throwing the eggs and why, all the time covering up the fact that she threw the first egg just for the hell of it. An imperfect and off the cuff film, *Plaff!* intentionally disrupts traditional narrative structures and celebrates the unique rhythms of Cuban speech and humour.

There was also evidence that the new generation of Cuban artists, born since the Revolution, is now finding more space to produce. Within ICAIC (the Cuban Film Institute), a whole range of young developing talents have banded together to utilize every spare scrap of film and every idle piece of equipment to produce their own work. Unfortunately, their most

extensive project to date, *Basura (Garbage)* by Lorenzo Regalado, was not finished in time for competition in the Festival. A direct descendant of Gutierrez Alea's *Death of a Bureaucrat*, *Basura* is a unique blend of absurd humour and social critique which traces the progress of a privileged bureaucrat's package of garbage, mistaken for an important state document, as it passes through the Kafkaesque workings of government until it reaches the highest levels of officialdom where it is finally disposed of by a phalanx of special agents, ending up—by the most circuitous route imaginable—in the dump it was always destined for.

Other works screened at the Festival which must at least be mentioned include: *Passaje de Ida* from the Dominican Republic, a harrowing and realistic account of refugees escaping their country as stowaways in the hold of a boat; *No por que lo diga Fidel*, a video documentary on gays and lesbians in Cuba, produced at the International Film School; and *Tango, Baile Nuestro*, an Argentinian documentary which returns the tango to the site of its origins, the working class of Buenos Aires.

The last word on the Festival goes to filmmaker and theoretician Fernando Birri, and even though it was spoken 30 years ago, it remains relevant today:

What cinema do the underdeveloped peoples of Latin America need? A cinema which offers consciousness; which strengthens and mobilizes the revolutionary consciousness of those who already have it; which upsets, worries, scares, weakens those who have 'bad consciousness,' reactionary consciousness; which helps to emerge from underdevelopment to development, from understomach to stomach, from underculture to culture, from underhappiness to happiness, from underlife to life.<sup>9</sup>

They say that what you are doing at midnight on New Year's Eve is how you will spend the rest of the year. It's not true. I started 1989 with my arm around a friend, riding around Havana's inky harbour in a rickety launch, drinking rum from the bottle, arguing about the films

we had seen, plotting films yet to be made. It's spring now and I'm in Toronto, contemplating the implosion of the world. Cuba is under constant pressure from foreign artists, authors and intellectuals to hold free and democratic elections.<sup>10</sup> Venezuela, held up as the most stable Latin American democracy, was the scene of hundreds of deaths as rioters rejected intolerable austerity measures imposed to repay that country's \$35 million foreign debt. The so-called "emerging democracies" (Argentina, Brazil, Peru) are on the verge of bankruptcy. And here at home, Canada's uniquely colonized and over-developed democracy is naively being integrated into the very economic forces of globalization which threaten the independence and viability of every Latin American and Caribbean state, as well as our own. ■

<sup>1</sup> *The Spanish-Cuban-American War and the Birth of American Imperialism*, Philip S. Foner, Monthly Review Press, 1972, Vol. II, p. 562.

<sup>2</sup> *Miami*, Joan Didion, Pocket Books, 1987, p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> Viña del Mar marked the first time that Latin American filmmakers and theorists met to actually give form and direction to the movement which until that point had existed only as isolated practices. This Chilean festival was suspended in 1973 by Pinochet's military dictatorship.

<sup>4</sup> Brazil alone has a total foreign debt of \$115 billion, exports \$14 billion annually in interest payments and suffers an inflation rate of 1,000%.

<sup>5</sup> "Hacia un Tercer Cine," Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 1969, reprinted in *Cine Cubano*, Number 120, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> *The Cuban Image*, Michael Chanan, British Film Institute, 1985, p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> Birri's press conference took place in the former casino of the Hotel Capri, a pre-revolutionary hangout for Al Capone. The term "auto da fe" refers to a mediaeval religious practice of proving one's faith through ritualistic self-abuse. In this case it is used to imply a rote response.

<sup>8</sup> Where English film and video titles are in brackets, the author has done a rough translation.

<sup>9</sup> "Cine y subdesarrollo", Fernando Birri, 1962, reprinted in *Hojas de Cine, Fundación del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano*, 1986, Folio 1.

<sup>10</sup> A series of open letters to Fidel Castro have been published in leading newspapers throughout Europe and the United States. See the *New York Review of Books*, February 2, 1989, p. 41. Cuban artists and intellectuals published a letter of support to Fidel in the *Granma*, December 30, 1988.

**David McIntosh is a Toronto-based writer, filmmaker and programmer.**