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Source: *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 2018), pp. 53-70

Published by: Pluto Journals

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/intejcubastud.10.1.0053>

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CUBAN CINEMA, CRISIS OR TRANSITION? NEGOTIATING A CULTURAL TIGHTROPE

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Abstract

According to García Borrero, although recent events would appear to signal a new start in Cuban cinema, the transition towards a different type of audiovisual production has been happening for a while due to a number of factors, not least the use of new digital technologies that have democratised production and have allowed many young people to make films away from the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC) when previously the institution had a very tight rein on both production and distribution. It is this loss of centralised control of the production process that is at the heart of the institution's problems, and this article draws on the work of Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci to illustrate how hegemony is operating within Cuban cinema production today, ultimately arguing that what is involved today in Cuban cinema is a struggle for hegemony and a crisis of civil society.

Keywords: Cuba, cinema, culture, hegemony, power

What matters is that a new way of conceiving the world and man is born and that this conception is no longer reserved to the great intellectuals, to professional philosophers, but tends rather to become a popular, mass phenomenon, with a concretely world-wide character, capable of modifying (even if the result includes hybrid combinations) popular thought and mummified popular culture.

– Gramsci (1971: 417)

According to García Borrero (2013), although recent events at the Cuban National Film Institute (ICAIC) would appear to signal a new start in Cuban cinema, the transition towards a different type of audiovisual production on the

island has been happening for some years due to a number of factors, not least the use of new digital technologies that have democratised production and have allowed many young people to make films away from the ICAIC when previously the institute, created in the first few months of the Revolution in 1959, had a very tight rein on both production and distribution. It is this loss of centralised control of the audiovisual production and distribution process that is at the heart of the institute's current problems, and this article draws on the work of Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, and his work on cultural hegemony, to illustrate how power is operating within Cuban cinema production today, ultimately arguing that what is involved in Cuban cinema now is a struggle for hegemony and a crisis of civil society.

2013 was a sanguine year for Cuba's film industry. 4 years after the ICAIC's fiftieth anniversary in 2009, a year in which the number of films produced reached its highest level since 1990, Cuban national cinema found itself in a very difficult period of change and uncertainty about its future. On 4 May 2013, a number of filmmakers decided to get together to informally discuss the future of the industry. As Cuban writer and film critic Juan Antonio García Borrero (2013:16) points out, the filmmakers stated that the ICAIC should no longer be the sole arbiter and representative of Cuban cinema in a changing world:

We recognise [...] the ICAIC as the state governing body of the Cuban film industry; it was born with the Revolution and its long history is a legacy that belongs to all filmmakers. At the same time, we believe that the problems and the importance of Cuban cinema today do not only concern the ICAIC; they also concern other institutions and groups whether they be governmental or independent that are involved in its production, without whose help and commitment meaningful and lasting solutions are not possible. For that reason, the reorganization and development of the Cuban film industry cannot be done solely within the framework of this organisation.

This statement reflects the rebellious nature of Cuba's filmmakers; often staunch supporters of the Revolution but also critical when necessary. One only has to consider the many instances of conflict between the state and individual filmmakers over the last 55 years to see how tensions have always been at the heart of film production in Cuba. For example, in 1961, the film *PM* by Saba Cabrera Infante was banned for being too negative about Cuba at the time; in 1981 Alfredo Guevara lost his job as head of ICAIC over the film *Cecilia* by Humberto Solas; in 1991, the institute was nearly disbanded over the production of *Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas* (Alice in Wondertown) by Daniel Díaz Torres, a film that was seen as too pessimistic during difficult times; and in

1995, Fidel Castro was extremely critical of the film *Guantanamera* by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, again due to the criticism of the Revolution depicted in the film during a sensitive political era.

Returning to 2013, in July of that year, Guatemalan filmmaker Rafael Rosal Paz y Paz was dismissed as director of the international film school outside Havana, the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión (EICTV), a school that was inaugurated in 1986 by founders Colombian Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez, Argentinean filmmaker and poet Fernando Birri and Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa, under the auspices of the Foundation of New Latin American Cinema (FNCL):

Its initial aim was to support the development of national audio-visual industries in countries that lacked the infrastructure or resources to train their own professionals. It began by providing free courses to students from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. But in 2006, it opened up to fee-paying students from the rest of the world. (Nehru 2014)

Hundreds of students from all over the world have graduated through the school, some of them reaching international acclaim with their subsequent work, including Juan Carlos Cremata Malberti, Miguel Coyula, Jorge Molina and Benito Zembrano. Rosal Paz y Paz was made director of the school in 2011, taking over from Tanya Vallette, who had been the director since 2007. But the school suffered a crisis when allegations of corruption and illegal beer sales in 2013 caused the dismissal of Rosal and the imprisonment of three workers connected to the school. According to Yinett Polanco (2014), Deputy Culture Minister Fernando Rojas revealed that the employees were caught with 'large sums of money in various currencies, virtual warehouses of beverages in their homes, cars bought with illegal income, and even a house completely renovated with the profits from the criminal activity'.

Very little has been said of the crisis in the EICTV in Cuba itself, other than in some unofficial blogs, although it is well known that Raúl Castro has highlighted the importance of combating corruption in the drive to push forward the revolutionary agenda and his economic development programme.¹ A visit to Cuba in July 2015 enabled me to question a number of filmmakers, none of whom were aware of the minutiae of the issue surrounding the school although they were aware of the dismissal of Rosal Paz y Paz. The consensus seemed to be that the former director of the school must have been dismissed for being part of the illicit activity, but he was never accused by the Cuban government of committing any offence. The real reason for his dismissal remains a mystery then but what is certain is that, combined with the calls for a new *Ley de Cine* by Cuban

filmmakers themselves and the agitation by them within the cultural enclave of the Cuban Revolution, Cuban cinema is passing through difficult times that, if a national film industry is to be preserved, must inevitably lead to a radical transition in how it operates.

This article, then, draws on the work of Gramsci to theorise what some may describe as a crisis and some may describe as a transition to something new in Cuban audiovisual production. The use of Gramsci to help to understand aspects of the Cuban revolutionary process is nothing new as Michael Chanan has commented (Chanan 2001). Chanan challenges the notion of ideological conformity within the Cuban Revolution and demonstrates how civil society in Cuba has always pushed at the boundaries of orthodoxy and has challenged the hegemony of the state, particularly, in the cultural arena. He shows that it is precisely Cuba's civil society that helps to provide the democratising process that enables the Cuban Revolution to structure its hegemony. But that democratising process can only push so far when, ultimately, the control of an important aspect of the revolutionary process (the cinema industry) is at stake, and it is this notion of control that was at the centre of the controversy surrounding the film school, according to Rosal Paz y Paz who commented in 2014 when asked about the delicate relationship between the film school and the institute: '... the ICAIC, the state entity with the monopoly, would not accept the school producing anything.'

In recent times, the ICAIC has been trimmed down. According to a former employee who worked for some years at the institute at one time, it employed up to 5000 people (Abreu Matos 2015). As García Borrero (2015) comments, former President Alfredo Guevara thought the institution had in the region of 600 too many employees, and according to Chanan (2014), Cuba's cultural minister also has said that it should be 'restructured, i.e. slimmed down'.

The ICAIC undoubtedly finds itself in a difficult situation but is not the same as the many previous crises it has suffered, briefly discussed above. This time the difficulties are both ideological (i.e., concerned with the control of filmic content) and financial. Economic times and new realities faced by the Cuban government have meant that the state needs to reduce the cost of the public sector and increase investment from the private sector. In Cuba, the markets are shouting louder than ever before in all areas of life including in the cultural arena. Capital is entering the country from China, Brazil and via remittances from abroad, and this is what the film industry, independent from the ICAIC, is using to fund production.

On 4 May 2013, a meeting was held by some 60 filmmakers in the Fresa y Chocolate café opposite the ICAIC headquarters, where an action committee was elected, dubbed the 'g20'. It is possible to see this group as an emerging

force within Cuban cinema that is attempting to challenge state hegemony within Cuban cinema production. In Gramscian terms, the members of the 'g20' are trying to develop a new way of thinking about cinema in Cuba; they are trying to create new forms of consciousness as these cannot be formed automatically, they have to be willed and so need intellectuals to provide the necessary stimulus. Gramsci was concerned with cultural hegemony (the power relations between groups and how these relations are lived on a day-to-day basis) and how this hegemony was maintained or overcome. It is this hegemony that is currently being challenged by the 'g20', who believe that a new path for Cuban audiovisual production is needed.

This was not an officially sanctioned ICAIC meeting, but as Fernando Pérez said, a rebellious act but not one of rupture. Pérez is currently Cuba's most celebrated filmmaker, but no longer works within the ICAIC and resigned his post recently as president of the organising committee of the Muestra Joven (the showcase for new audiovisual production run by the ICAIC since 2001). His credits include *Madagascar* (1994), *La vida es silbar* (Life is to Whistle, 1998), *Suite Habana* (2003), *Madrigal* (2007), *José Martí: el ojo del canario* (José Martí; the Eye of the Canary, 2010) and *La pared de las palabras* (The Wall of Words, 2015). Pérez resigned over the censoring of the film *Despertar* (Wake Up), a film about Cuban rapper Raudel Collazo and his controversial lyrics, and he also signed a petition on the right to free expression: 'Other filmmakers and art critics presented their concerns in open letters while *Despertar* was shared from computer to computer throughout Havana' (Pardo Lazo 2012). Pérez's latest film *La pared de las palabras* was not funded at all by Cuba's film institute and more will be said about this later but suffice it to say that when a nation's leading filmmaker no longer wishes to work within the confines of his own film institute and resigns from one of its official programmes, the signal is not a positive one about the state of the management of the country's national cinema. That is not to say that the quality of films coming out of Cuba at the moment is poor, far from it as discussed below.

The meeting held on 4 May 2013 focused on the unique state of Cuba's film industry, whereby many independent filmmakers exist and operate illegally but are allowed to do so by the state. The ICAIC had, for many years, a monopoly on filmmaking and distribution on the island until the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent economic implosion made it impossible for the institute to make films without using money from foreign co-producers. This control was largely maintained until the beginning of the twenty-first century when new digital technologies became more common in Cuba that made it easier for individuals to make films. Control of Cuba's cultural output is seen as crucial to the revolutionary project. In 2015, at the annual conference of the Cuba Research Forum

(Havana, 8–9 July), Rafael Hernández, the editor of Cuba’s cultural magazine *Temas*, re-iterated that the control over the production and distribution of Cuba’s culture was an integral part of the revolutionary process. The monopoly held by the ICAIC over cinema until recently and the incidences of censorship over the years are evidence of this. Cultural rights then are at the heart of the current debate within the Cuban film industry, and, as García Borrero (2015) points out, this is something new for the Revolution to deal with:

the phenomenon of cultural rights is a relatively new issue, and barely discussed between us. That is, as it is assumed that there is a cultural policy supported by a Ministry of Culture, and a system of institutions which, in theory, covers all the cultural expectations of the community, it is thought that it is not necessary to discuss possible updates to legal frameworks in which these practices operate. The problem is that today, many of the practices are on one side and the institutions are on the other, and that kind of cultural *anomie* results in paralysis, dialogue falling on deaf ears, and misunderstandings of the historical moment in which we live.

In the Cuban film industry, these misunderstandings have created a situation whereby many independent film production houses exist but are not strictly legal. Many of these operate from bedroom studios, using digital cameras obtained from abroad, the editing done on laptop computers and even the distribution being done in an ad hoc way via flash drives that are passed around between individuals. These flash drives can easily find their way abroad and the films subsequently uploaded to YouTube, Vimeo and so on, thus bypassing ICAIC’s entire production and distribution monopoly. But it is precisely this type of conflict and negotiation that is critical for a national film industry trying to reconfigure itself in a global network of production. After all, as Higson says, ‘Histories of national cinema can only [...] be understood as histories of crisis and conflict, of resistance and negotiation’ (Higson 1989: 37).

This resistance and negotiation is nothing new in the Cuban audiovisual arena; but the current points of intersection could represent one of the biggest challenges so far for the survival of Cuban national cinema. With the increased transnational marketisation of Cuban audiovisual production, as Diana Coryat says, the relevance of the ICAIC in Cuba is declining and ‘The Cuban government’s response to the increasing ability of ordinary citizens and media makers to produce their own content has ranged from ambivalence to hostility’ (Coryat 2015: 2326). This concurs with the viewpoint of Rosal Paz y Paz and illustrates how the ICAIC is sensing a lack of control over the processes of production in a country with a recent revolutionary history of tight cultural control. And the problem has been ignored in recent years by the Cuban government. At the

Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba in 2011, only two of the 313 articles declared were dedicated to ‘culture’, and nothing was mentioned of the audiovisual field (Coryat 2015: 2327). It is the independent or semi-independent filmmaker that is now driving Cuban national audiovisual production (so-called *cine joven*), a trend that began in the 1990s but that is moving inexorably towards a radical transition to something very different from the revolutionary cinema of the 1960s–1990s. As Coryat states, ‘despite formidable odds, cine joven producers have been pivotal players in the construction of a more pluralistic and democratic media landscape through their media practices and demands for change’ (Coryat 2015: 2327).

The nationalised system of film production, created in 1959 as part of the Revolution’s national cultural development programme, is becoming increasingly an anathema in an increasingly transnational context. Independent filmmakers cannot find a place to work inside the system and so operate on the margins, often producing material of which the nationalised system does not approve. This is why the filmmakers themselves, even stalwarts of the original system such as Manuel Pérez and Fernando Pérez, are calling for change – and they are doing so both on screen and off, as cultural and political tensions are negotiated as the ‘logic of cultural domination’ dictates. This is the very point of intersection that Coryat examines – the tensions arising between the state producer and new emerging independent filmmakers that will eventually create a new (but also still revolutionary) Cuban cinema.

This tension, the delicate balance of power within the cultural realm between the state and elements of civil society (in this case, producers of culture), has been evident since the beginning of the Cuban Revolution (and particularly since Fidel Castro’s speech ‘Words to the Intellectuals’ in 1961, delivered at the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí).² The speech was made at a sensitive political time for the Cuban Revolution, barely 2 months after the Bay of Pigs, and Kumaraswami (2009: 529) makes important points regarding the issue of the urgent political situation within which the speech was made and the siege mentality that resulted from this. Nonetheless, the speech has remained important, and largely because of it, Fidel Castro is still seen today as the architect of Cuba’s cultural policy. Abel Prieto, Minister of Culture in 1997, said, ‘there is no alternative cultural policy to the policy of Martí and Fidel that was inaugurated in 1961 with the “Words to the Intellectuals” speech’ (quoted in Lucien 2006: 144).³ Cuban artists, writers and filmmakers are the same as most artistic producers in their desire to be critical of dominant structures and master narratives, but at the same time, many Cuban filmmakers also wish to fit into the system. Filmmaker Esteban Insausti made this point in an interview in Havana in 2015, saying that he was finding it increasingly difficult to work within the ICAIC for

a number of reasons but that he truly wished to do so (Insausti 2015). Thus, the filmmakers negotiate this tightrope of both being critical of and remaining within the parameters set out by the system. Yvon Grenier makes this point in her article on cultural policy in Cuba, arguing that

Cuban artists and writers continuously strive to acquire more ‘space’ for expression, foiling bureaucratic control and censorship with subtle artistic and discursive strategies. In doing so, they manage to deliver critical perspectives on politics and society. Something other actors simply can’t do. (Grenier 2014: 456)

Sometimes, as in the case of Fernando Pérez, already discussed, this state interference and censorship can often be to the detriment of the state itself, by way of negative publicity, reputational damage and the loss to the state institution of Cuba’s best filmmaker.

The ‘g20’ group of filmmakers and artists needs to be somehow brought back into the system by the ICAIC, otherwise there is the very real danger of an irrecoverable ideological split. In the past, the film institute has recognised this need for inclusivity. As Ana López says, the ‘ICAIC has recognised the need to be inclusive if it is to continue to function as gate-keeper for the national cinema’ (López 2007: 193). She says that there has long been ‘alternative’ sites for film-making in Cuba and that the ICAIC has recognised the need to acknowledge new voices and has created ‘new, less institutionalised spaces for them’ (ibid. 192). But the problem now is that new digital technologies mean that it is much easier and cheaper than ever before for filmmakers to make and distribute their films. Internet access may be difficult in Cuba, but films are put onto flash drives and distributed this way and then uploaded to YouTube, Vimeo and so on by third parties outside Cuba.

The argument that Grenier puts forward is that there should be ‘liberalization’ within the cultural field by the state that would serve its best interests (Grenier 2014: 456). Other commentators agree because it is now much easier than ever before for the independent filmmaker to obtain cheap production equipment from abroad, while at the same time, production at the ICAIC has contracted. As Chanan observes, the institute is still involved in film production but has become more of a commercial operation rather than an artistic one. He puts it succinctly saying that it now puts industry before art rather than for what it was originally set up (*‘arte e industria’*), and it survives on the sale of services such as technicians to foreign producers, plus the rights and royalties that it receives (Chanan 2014). This is a dangerous position for the ICAIC to occupy if it wishes to maintain some control over artistic production that is not seen simply as censorship.

Although Cuban national film production does not have the same degree of coherence and continuity that it once had when directors such as Gutiérrez Alea, Santiago Álvarez, Manuel Pérez and Humberto Solás were making films together under the national umbrella of the institute, with the formation of the 'g20', a coherent body of filmmakers *is* being formed that sits outside the control of the ICAIC. These filmmakers are producing films that 'push the boundaries of what was acceptable to articulate publicly. Their films explore sexuality, race, marginalized subjectivities, migration, gender violence, censorship and daily frustrations that have been largely invisible in state media' (Coryat 2015: 2332). The state cultural institution then is not in a strong position to shape cultural content, and in the audiovisual field at least, the 'cultural politics of Martí and Fidel' of which Prieto speaks is in danger of being challenged at a deep-rooted ideological level.

The ICAIC cannot simply rely on individual filmmakers following Lisandro Otero's 1988 idea that 'the intellectual in an authentically revolutionary society has, above all, the duty to agree' (quoted in Grenier 2014: 457);⁴ but many filmmakers have kept within the parameters set by the Revolution as they are truly revolutionary themselves; and this does not only apply to filmmakers. Nicola Miller explains why 'such a wide range of Cuban cultural producers have opted to remain on the island and work "within the revolution", despite all the notorious problems caused by state censorship, political persecution and material shortages' (Miller 2008: 675). She argues that Cuba's cultural policy over the course of the Revolution has been sufficiently progressive and encouraging for a large body of artists and intellectuals to remain on the island and produce an inordinate quantity (and quality) of artistic work for a country of its size. She makes the valid point that culture and politics have been historically linked far more in Cuba than in the 'Western world', and so filmmakers and other artistic producers better understand their role in the building of the nation than in other parts of the world where politics and culture are more separate. Gramsci understood this perfectly and illustrated how any revolutionary process needed intellectuals to provide the process with a sense of organisation and structure. But the intellectuals have to also engage with the reality of day-to-day life or it would be irrelevant. The formation of cultural institutions then, from 1959, was a natural progression from the commitment of intellectuals as far back as the formation of the Communist Party of Cuba in 1925 to build a nation state based on the building blocks of education and culture.⁵ This link between culture and politics continued through the 1933 Revolution into the 1940 Constitution and then again in the 1976 Constitution.⁶ As Miller says, the establishment of the National Council of Culture in 1961 helped to foster relations between the State and the artists and intellectuals, and the institutions, including the ICAIC, were set up to

put into practice the individual components of the cultural recovery programme of the Revolution. The artists and intellectuals were therefore fully integrated into this programme to ‘reconcile the individual with society’ (Miller 2008: 686). But, although they had the means now to disseminate the cultural rebuilding programme, as Ambrosio Fornet said in a Channel 4 television documentary in 1985, the intellectuals were initially unsure of the kind of culture they wanted to promote. This became clearer later, and Fidel Castro’s much debated ‘Words to the Intellectuals’ speech set the course of culture for the next 55 years and set the parameters of what could and could not be said, whereby ‘cultural contestation came to be situated within the socialist state apparatus rather than in opposition to it’ (Miller 2008: 683).

So contestation has always existed, but the point is from where does it come? The filmmakers forming the ‘g20’ have set themselves up as outside and, to some extent, antagonistic to the ICAIC. Many independent production houses are producing material that does not fit within the values of revolutionary society set out in Castro’s 1961 speech, and money is coming from abroad (even from the US) to help fund most of these projects. Cultural contestation is coming from outside the state apparatus in the audiovisual field in a manner and quantity that the ICAIC has not seen before, and it could endanger the very heart of the Cultural Revolution. The integrating force that culture is supposed to be within the Revolution is in danger of being seriously compromised by the split between the filmmakers and the ICAIC in what can be seen as a potentially dangerous power struggle. The question of power was at the heart of Gramsci’s theorisation of culture, and it is as if these cultural players have become a subaltern voice within the industry and are unable to challenge the existing hegemonic accounts provided by the ICAIC. Although Gramsci’s definition of hegemony is complex and never straightforward, his notion of coercion and consent as a continuum of power relations is useful here. For Gramsci (1971: 244), state hegemony involves the organisation of consent – the winning of consent over those it rules. He also argues that at times, however, the state encompasses both consent and coercion, and this is a delicate balance that is not easily managed.

The recent censoring of films such as *Despertar* and *Regreso a Ítaca* (Return to Ithaca; Laurent Cantet, 2014) has had serious consequences for the ICAIC, once seen as the institute within which the filmmakers were happy to work, produce challenging ideas and be challenged by the state system. But with the ICAIC now having such a weak economic position and with funding being secured from outside, filmmakers believe they can challenge what they see as the institute’s cultural repressiveness from a position of strength. Fernando Pérez resigned from the ICAIC and made *La pared de las palabras* with external funding. His films display a humanistic quality that is a natural critique of such repression that is

seen as ‘anti-humanism founded in over-theoretical positions and dogmatic practices’ (Miller 2008: 692). As Miller asserts, ‘Humanism, which Cubans often make synonymous with anti-dogmatism, has often been proclaimed as the central value of Cuban culture’, an ‘ethical sense of life and of history’.⁷ This is one of the reasons, she suggests, why many Cuban intellectuals have stayed in Cuba, but the current difficulties between the ICAIC and some of the leading filmmakers could create an irrecoverable breach that could seriously harm the humanistic, ethical cultural revolution and alter the course of Cuba’s cultural history.

Cuban political scientist Rafael Hernández sees the very survival of the Revolution as due to its ‘cultural capital [...] of which the revolution may be seen as both inheritor and promoter’ (Hernández 2003: 9). The Revolution has survived far worse than the current crisis in the audiovisual arena, but unless the ICAIC and the filmmakers can negotiate this current cultural tightrope, the future of Cuban national cinema will be very different. Miller quotes Che Guevara to make it clear that ‘culture’ is the ‘the active, revolutionary element, which provokes both quantitative and qualitative change in society and makes it progress’ (quoted in Miller 2008: 687). Cuban cultural policy has never been static but has moved with the political times. The creation of the Ministry of Culture in 1976, after the dark and dogmatic ‘Grey Five Years’ of highly controlled cultural production, was due to the understanding that mistakes had been made during these 5 years; and the pressure came from the artists and intellectuals themselves to make significant changes to cultural policy. She quotes Leonardo Padura who believes that the change ‘was demanded by artists themselves, who expressed their feelings clearly in their work’ (quoted in Miller 2008: 694). The same can be seen now as both young and established filmmakers are expressing their desire for radical change in audiovisual cultural policy in their work, in their daily practice and by way of meetings, letters and emails, directly expressing their dissatisfaction with the status quo.

For example, filmmaker Ernesto Daranas (*Conducta* (Conduct), 2014; *Los dioses rotos* (Broken Gods), 2008) believes that there should be more open debate on the future of culture in Cuba across the board:

In the VII Communist Party Congress it was agreed that there was the necessity for a more democratic and participatory socialism, but at the moment the old hierarchies, the control over the areas of debate, the stigmatisation of oppositional criteria and the excessive secrecy over many of the important subjects for Cubans, still apply. (Daranas 2016)

Daranas believes that the formation of the ‘g20’ is genuinely part of this democratic and participatory socialism, but that the group is not being listened

to adequately. For him, it represents something even deeper than a cultural debate but it questions the very heart of the socialist Revolution itself:

There cannot be a truly participatory socialism that silences, ignores or discredits the claims of any kind of union or a social group. They have to enable pathways that allow the voices of those who really know their own problems to become active participants in each one of the decisions that affects them. Without this accumulation of will and intelligence the very conceptualization of the model of Cuban socialism would be a pipe dream. (Daranas 2016)

Nicholas Garnham in his 1973 book *Structures of Television* was correct, I believe, in his assertion that culture, in whatever form, is comprised not only of works but of the history and study of them and of the criticisms and confrontations that arise. The debate then among the ‘g20’ group of filmmakers forms part of Cuban culture itself, and yet it is the lack of a government strategy at the level of the ICAIC that is preventing the furthering of Cuba’s audiovisual culture. There appears to be, as filmmaker Pavel Giroud (2016) says, a conflict of interest between the ICAIC and the independent filmmakers who desire to be part of the structure of the national film industry but who cannot find a place to work within it:

The peculiar thing about the ICAIC is that it is both film institute and production company, and that creates conflicts because, never mind whether our movies may or may not be ideologically to its satisfaction or part of its profile, we have become its competitor.

The current President of the ICAIC, Roberto Smith de Castro, has acknowledged that changes are necessary and that, as in other countries within Latin America, a new ‘Law of Cinema’ could produce important advances in the national cinema. But he also sees the bigger cultural picture in that any new law has to be carefully considered in the context of the continued development of Cuban socialism, and this is not a quick process:

the changes will be possible when the proposals are discussed and approved within the greater context of updating the Cuban economic and social model, which aims to strengthen socialism in Cuba [...] a law is the result of a usually lengthy process that requires the participation of several institutions [...] and ends with approval by the National Assembly. (Smith de Castro 2015)

What is important then to national film culture within the context of the socialist Revolution is that it does not become overtaken by the logic of the

market place, and so the steps towards legalising independent film production need to be taken very carefully, the ICAIC working within the logic that culture needs to be preserved by the state:

The distribution and exhibition of films play a cultural role that must be preserved in state hands [...] In a universe saturated with foreign audiovisual production, mostly produced by the hegemonic global entertainment industry, the protection and stimulation of domestic audiovisual production is an urgent need for the protection and development of Cuban culture. (Smith de Castro 2015)

The notion of participation is central to the development of socialism in Cuba. Nationalism is integral to the morality of the Revolution in Cuba and participation is central to this sense of nationalism. The members of the 'g20' believe that their participation as artists who may at times be critical of some of the Revolution's practices (or at least be critical observers of Cuba's day-to-day reality) is central to Cuba's participatory democracy. Arturo Arango (filmmaker and member of the 'g20' himself) argues just this: 'We must always defend our right to participate,' (quoted in Martín Pastrana 2014); and director Enrique Colina (*Entre ciclones* (Between Cyclones), 2003) believes even more strongly that the pressure exerted by the filmmakers and the importance of the active citizen is a political necessity for the future of socialism in Cuba (ibid.). But Carlos Lechuga (2016), a young director, trained at the Cuban Arts Institute (ISA), in Havana, whose feature debut *Melaza* (2012) depicts economic difficulty and deprivation in contemporary Cuba, is none too optimistic about his national cinema, believing that it is swimming in dangerous waters:

The lack of a new cinema law and the rarefied atmosphere that one feels from the authorities towards the national cinema is something that is anti-Cuban [...] What is more dangerous for the national mentality [...] a critical, independent, Cuban film, filmed on the island or *Guardians of the Galaxy*? In the long run, what is more dangerous for the health of Cuban culture?

It would be a sad irony if, with the recent slow thawing of relations between the US and Cuba, it is the world's most powerful film industry, and the one that has been constantly held up as the ideological counterpoint to Cuba's revolutionary cinema since the early 1960s, that becomes its saviour. Randy Astle suggests that funding for independent filmmaking will become more readily available from Cuba's rich and powerful neighbour. This would prevent the absurdity of cases such as that of the unnamed Cuban filmmaker who funded his project on Indiegogo (a global fundraising site) only to have funds from American

donors confiscated by the Office of Foreign Asset Controls (Astle 2015). But it is a concern of Cuban filmmaker Carlos Quintela that the country could become dominated by Hollywood and used merely as a production factory for externally produced content rather than having its own thriving national film industry once again (Duran 2015). Duran quotes Quintela: ‘The first step should be to see how Cuban cinema can flourish from this relationship on its home turf, and hopefully not get swallowed up by the great machinery of the US film industry.’⁸ Quintela is a perfect example of the talented Cuban filmmaker who feels that he cannot make his films within the traditional revolutionary Cuban system of production (i.e., through the ICAIC). He set up a production company in the UK and raised funds from various parts of the world including Germany and Argentina.

Emerging filmmakers like Quintela can hope to exhibit their work in one of the variety of annual events organised by the ICAIC. Coryat lists these in some detail but they include *Televisión Serrana* (1993), a community television project located in the Sierra Maestra; the Taller Nacional de Crítica Cinematográfica (1993), an important annual event for film criticism; El Festival Internacional de Documentales ‘Santiago Alvarez en Memorium’ (2000), an international documentary film festival held in Santiago de Cuba; *La Muestra de Cine Joven* (started in 2001); and El Festival Internacional de Cine Pobre (started 2003), a film festival dedicated to low-budget filmmaking founded by Humberto Solás’ (Coryat 2015: 2331). But, Coryat argues, this space is not enough:

Although La Muestra has been an important venue to exhibit cine joven, it is by no means sufficient. For cine joven producers, there have been scarce platforms for showing their productions [...] Additionally, a lack of reliable and affordable access to the Internet has prevented cine joven producers from being able to communicate consistently with potential collaborators or to publicize their work. This is not just a problem for cine joven producers but for the majority of Cubans, given that Cuba has one of the lowest Internet access rates in the world. (Coryat 2015: 2333)

Cuban filmmakers, therefore, turn to outside sources to make and distribute their films, and with the US being Cuba’s closest and richest neighbour, it is an obvious place to turn. Diana Vargas is the artistic director of the Havana Film Festival, New York and the US representative to the EICTV, who argues that Cuban filmmakers need cheaper access to production materials that often have to be found through intermediaries often at inflated prices. Perhaps, she says, US filmmakers will use Cuba as a destination location, adding 3–6 million dollars to the Cuban film industry that could be used to fund local productions, preserve and restore classic Cuban films or maintain badly deteriorating cinema theatres for example. She also suggests that there might be an opening for Cubans to

attend the audiovisual markets in the United States to sell their productions (Astle 2015). This could of course benefit local production in Cuba, as long as the money was used properly, but might mean that the ICAIC becomes the production factory that Quintela fears.

Astle also talks with Alysa Nahmias, the co-director/producer (with Benjamin Murray) of *Unfinished Spaces*, a 2011 award-winning documentary about Cuba's ambitious National Art Schools project, who hopes that Cuban and US producers will be able to collaborate more fluidly and that individuals will have greater freedoms and more possibilities to make films independently via production grants and crowd sourcing. She also throws out the possibility that large theatre chains might take over local Cuban cinema spaces or that new indie theatres might pop up in Havana or Santiago de Cuba. Such possibilities are unlikely to happen in the short term (i.e., the next 5 years) as the diplomatic thawing is likely to be a very slow process with the Cuban government trying to maintain control at all times, particularly, over the production and dissemination of its national culture.

Alexandra Harkin founded the Americas Media Initiative in 2010, a not-for-profit organisation that works with Cuban filmmakers living in Cuba and distributes their films as a collaboration with Icarus Films, New York. He believes that Cuban filmmakers have been creating their own industry outside the ICAIC for some time:

The Cuban film industry started charting its own course a number of years ago, regardless of Obama's recent announcement on normalizing diplomatic relations with Cuba. Over the last 10–15 years there has evolved an important independent film community that works for the most part separately from ICAIC. Most Cuban feature films now have at least one international co-producer, mostly Europeans and Latin Americans, with worldwide distribution. There are far fewer Cuban feature documentaries made in Cuba today, largely due to the lack of financing in the 20 years of economic crisis since the fall of the Soviet Union and partly because of issues of securing location permissions, government control and self-censorship. (Astle 2015)

But the Cuban film industry is some way yet from being dominated by Hollywood. The US embargo is still in place preventing the US financing of fiction films (although documentaries are allowed), and independent producers in Cuba are not yet legal. There are also many filmmakers in Cuba who wish to preserve the unique status of its national cinema, while at the same time, creating the reforms necessary to deal with the new, globalised production. Filmmaker Yassel Iglesias (known for the 2012 documentary *The Chosen Island* about

Jewish émigrés in Cuba) believes that regulations in Cuba need to be relaxed for the film industry to thrive:

I think that (reform) will definitely help the production of Cuban films, but I can't use the phrase 'Cuban film industry' yet, because so far there have been no reforms or laws that recognize new independent companies, and the only 'industry' is ICAIC, which many Cuban filmmakers refuse to work with. (Quoted in Duran 2015)

For all this to happen, the film industry needs to do just what the Cuban Revolution has been doing since its inception, and that is to change so that things can remain the same.

Returning to Gramsci, it would appear that the struggle is a deep and complex one that cannot involve cinema alone but encompasses all of Cuban culture and its politics; a true struggle for hegemony, and a crisis of civil society:

The old intellectual and moral leaders of society feel the ground slipping from under their feet; they perceive that their 'sermons' have become precisely mere sermons, i.e. external to reality, pure form without any content, shades without a spirit. This is the reason for their reactionary and conservative tendencies [...] they call for repressive measures by the State [...] The development of economic forces on new bases and the progressive installation of the new structure will heal the contradictions which cannot fail to exist, and, when they have created a new 'conformism' from below, will permit new possibilities for self-discipline, i.e. for freedom, including that of the individual. (Gramsci 1971: 242)

But this crisis that the ICAIC is currently facing is only one of several in its 57-year history, and it has managed to come through them all with Cuban national cinema intact. During that time, many Cuban filmmakers have set themselves up as non-conformists and critics of a contemporary Cuban reality. But does the Cuban government really have anything to fear from those artists depicting daily struggles on the island? Surely the fear is not having those artists at all. With the undoubted talent and creativity on the island, the potential for Cuban cinema is enormous if structural changes are made that can incorporate the critical view of the independent filmmaker. As Giroud (2016) says, it is just a question of reconstructing the system.

Notes

1. For more on corruption in Cuba, see Díaz-Briquets and Pérez-López (2006).
2. For a detailed examination of the relevance of this speech to Cuba's cultural policy throughout the Revolution, see Kumaraswami (2009).

3. At the commemoration of the fifty-fifth anniversary of the 'Words to Intellectuals' speech, Miguel Barnet, President of the National Association of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC) said, 'Fidel is the architect, the manager of the Cuban cultural policy. All the cultural options Cubans have at present we owe them to Fidel' (Bedevia 2016).
4. Writer Lisandro Otero (1932–2008) was president of the organising committee of the IV Congress of UNEAC in 1988.
5. The Communist Party of Cuba was founded in 1925 by Julio Antonio Mella, a political activist and writer.
6. Miller (2008: 686) quotes in English the 1940 Constitution (article 47): 'Culture in all of its manifestations constitutes a primary interest of the State'; and the 1976 Constitution: 'The State guides, encourages and promotes education, culture and the sciences in all their manifestations.'
7. Miller quotes Armando Hart Dávalos, Cuba's Minister of Culture from 1976–1997.
8. Quintela's second film, *The Project of the Century*, about three generations of a Cuban family living near an abandoned Soviet nuclear power station, won a Tiger award at Rotterdam after being acquired for international sales by Berlin-based M-Appeal (Duran 2015).

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