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“LA PATRÍA” ES UNA MUJER: INTERPRETING REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY CUBAN CINEMA

By

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THESIS ABSTRACT

In this thesis I explore the relationship between representations of women in post-Revolutionary Cuban cinema, and the construction of a unified national identity. Using theoretical frameworks from Visual Anthropology, Political Science and Feminist Film Theory, I discuss how the images of women in Cuban cinema serve to reify the state. Furthermore, an investigation into the history of the nationalization of the Cuban Film Industry (ICAIC) illustrates how the state-control of the filmic medium has served the ideological interests of the Revolution. I support my thesis that the selected representations of women are engineered to compliment state policy, with a narrative of women’s political and social history in Cuba, interwoven with shorter analyses of select films. My conclusion includes closer readings of three films, as well as directions for possible future research and the current climate of artistic expressions.
Introduction:

I began this thesis on one subject and ended on an entirely different one. Such, I am learning, is the nature of academia but I have surprised myself at the various interpretations of the problematic of women in Cuba that I have encountered. To say that I have changed my mind is an understatement. I originally conceptualized this paper as dealing with the discourse around sex work in Cuba, particularly as it pertains to self-identification among women whose skin color leads others to believe that they are prostitutes. Upon further reflection, and some time in Cuba, I came to believe that focusing only on the identity of prostitute would not be doing justice to the multiplicity of roles that Cuban women have inhabited in the last 40+ years. I wanted to avoid sensationalism, and yet capitalize on limited resources.

In attempting to think of a creative way I could design original research from Philadelphia, I had to indict my own reasons for why the image of Cuban sex workers looms so large in my imagination and in the critical literature. I began to think of the ways in which tourists, academics, critics, politicians, journalists, and certainly myself, have all be influenced by the circulation of images surrounding these re-emergent sex-workers. Why are these figures such powerful symbols of either individual creativity and agency, or the decay of the Revolution? The questioning of image discourse around prostitution led me to a wider query – how have Cuban women in a broader context been reified by their appropriation in what Deborah Poole terms, the “visual economy?”

Embedded in these inquiries into the Cuban visual economy come investigations into the production and reception of images – questions I can not hope to sufficiently answer in this survey. What I will engage, however, is the concept of symbolic linkage
of images for an ideological function. In the last fifty years, Anthropology as a study of
culture has widened to incorporate more fully the study of symbolic interaction (informed
particularly by the work of Clifford Geertz). Visual Anthropology has arisen as a sub-
field that deals primarily with modes of visual communication and behaviors, examining
unspoken cultural communication in the form of visual texts such as art, photography and
film. Through investigating select academic texts that deal with questions of the primacy
of visual symbols, I began to apply the theories of visual communication to the concept
of nation-building. Though Cuba is a country whose image is often invoked by the
foreign media, the indigenous production of images for ideological aims remains scantily
explored. I decided to combine interests in further investigating roles of women in
Cuban society with the ideological discourse around images – coming up with an
examination of the ways in which images of women are appropriated for understandings
of nationalism.

Despite extenuating personal preferences and experiences, Cuba is a rich site in
which to situate these questions. The structure of the post-Revolutionary art world
includes state control and an imposition of ideological content on to almost all works
created by Cuban artists currently living on the island. The unions of filmmakers,
writers, cinematographers, photographers etc have been both a source of amazing
community and creativity, and the vehicle for state-sponsored censorship. Locating a
survey of this nature in Cuba, means that I have had to engage with questions of state
representation versus individual representation, qualities that are hard to separate given
the close ties of the two bodies in the creative manufacture of films and art. I have
chosen to focus exclusively on film, mostly because it is the medium that is most
accessible outside of Cuba that has not been made within the "exile" community in the United States. Also because the richness of Cuban film can only be rivaled by Brazil in Latin America in the last 40 years, innovatively weaving documentary and narrative footage with compelling storylines.

To elucidate my final thesis, I have come to the conclusion that, given the contested history of women in Cuba, the appropriation of women as visual signifiers for the nation has been ideologically designed to valorize particular feminine roles and demonize others. For both sides of the political spectrum, employing images of women in film, has become the most widely disseminated and politicized method to create visual metaphors for political ideology. The use of women as focalizers for nation or as focalizers for the opposing political critique is not particular to Cuba, but the state-sponsorship of the film industry makes this a uniquely interesting question. The possibilities for exploration of these questions in further depth in the Cuban context, or in other sites presents an interesting jumping-off point for further research.

A Note on Methodology:

I have designed this research to be comprehensive of the films available, and to include a solid background in the theoretical and historical perspectives that influence the images and their reception. Given limited time and resources I feel that I was unable to adequately explore visual media other than film, particularly print media and advertisements, which I consider to be an extremely vital counterpoint to the study of artwork. Secondly, I feel only partly confident that I have exhausted the number of great Cuban films, particularly those by director Sara Gomez, one of the few female directors whose work was at all internationally distributed. She produced only one feature film,
*De Cierta Manera* (One Way or Another, 1977), though I believe that looking at her short films would have also greatly benefited this survey.

As for original research, location prohibited a more in-depth study. I conducted limited ethnographic fieldwork in Cuba over the course of less than a month, including a very interesting, if tangentially applicable, interview with a woman psychologist of mixed race. Her no-nonsense security with herself and the use of her representative image inspired me and contradicted what I was sure would be a subconscious insecurity on the part of women who were being constantly mistaken for prostitutes due to the dominant image-discourse. I have watched a good number of Cuban films, mostly those by director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea whose work has received much international acclaim. While I believe that this is a valid method of ethnographic research, the distance from a source such as the Latin American Film Archives has prevented me from experiencing the true scope of Cuban film. However, I do think that it is interesting to consider the implications of the selection of particular films for international distribution, and the underlying unspoken mediation of foreign interpretations of Cuban-ness.

I do not feel that I have come to a conclusion with this research, only created a set of questions for further study. I intend to use this undergraduate thesis experience as a starting point for further inquiries into the nature of representations of Cuban women in film. Furthermore, I would like to explore the implications for self-identification on the part of the women being represented, and their conclusions after seeing essentialized images of themselves on screen. There has been no systematic study made of women in relationship to the Cuban film industry, as creators or as subjects, a topic I would hope to delve into in the future.
Visual Anthropology and the Concept of Vision as Nation:

In approaching this study, it is important to ask what makes this line of questioning “anthropological” as opposed to a query better belonging in the camp of Women’s Studies or Film Studies. Though I draw upon material from a variety of sources, I believe that the orientation of this paper is anthropological because it deals with manifestations of human culture, focusing on modes of communication and meaning-making – in this case, visual. In writing about the art of photography, Julianne Newton comments, “the photograph may embody an equivalent for the photographer’s feelings, or the subject’s feelings, or the microcosm of time surrounding the dynamic moment during which the image was made, or eventually be the catalyst for the viewer’s perceptions” (64). By allowing for image-making and image-viewing as moments where cultural values and perception are inscribed, we can begin to “read” images as cultural texts, capable of challenging or enforcing dominant ideology. Therefore, the study of film and visual documents is anthropological, and “considering human visual communication a ‘form-of-life,’ inseparable from culture, locates its function beyond representation within the realm of interactions among human organisms” (Newton, 1998: 63).

Newton goes on to create what she terms a “continuum of communicative action ranging from visual embrace through visual suicide” by differentiating between various visual behaviors (60). She challenges the concept of “authenticity” in reading images, noting that all visual documents, both fictional and documentary, are subject to some degree of conscious selection – either in creation or exhibition – by the creators, by the distributors, or by the viewers. According to this argument, no visual document is static,
and that the “viewer of any resulting photograph interacts with the person imaged and the photographer via their visual record” (61).

While academic theories of Visual Anthropology have centered almost entirely on non-fiction and documentary photography and film, many of the concepts of visual interaction can be applied to fiction film. In writing about the use of video and film versus still photography, John and Malcom Collier explain,

“when an image moves it qualifies the character of human behavior. Refinements of interpersonal behavior are suggested in still photographs but conclusions must still rest on often-projective impressions that ‘fill-in’ what the photograph does not contain. With moving records, however, the nature and significance of social behavior becomes easier to define with responsible detail, for it is the language of motion that defines love and hate, anger and delight, and other qualities of behavior” (author’s emphasis, 1986: 140).

Fiction film is subject to these interpretations, plus the additional context of creative emphasis on human behavior. To use narrative film as a method of observation as to the character of human culture requires additional interpretations to extricate the sentiment and the symbolic function of the images.

Understanding that images and visual behaviors are indeed anthropological, we now turn to the ideological function of these images in the political context. In the example explored here, the symbolic function of images on film is exploited in order to create a cohesive depiction of the meaning of Cuban nationalism. In writing about the construction of nationality in general, Benedict Anderson (1991) writes, “the reality is quite plain: the ‘end of the era of nationalism,’ so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (3). Given the paradoxical nature of defining nationhoodAnderson offers this by way of definition: “[the nation] is an imagined political community – and imagined as
both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). The idea of belonging to a bounded political community requires a level of abstraction on the part of the individual. No Cuban will ever have the measure of what it means to be part of the nation in a different context because their experience of nationality derives from their lived experiences. However, the project of the modern nation-state, and particularly the post-Revolutionary Cuban state, is to create a coherence of images and understandings of nationality in order to maintain the unity of a viable state. The inability to create a common conception of nationality or “imagined community” can have disastrous results for the political life of a country.

With the goal of creating the impression of a sovereign nation in mind, Anderson goes on to describe the mechanisms through which institutions mediate the understandings of nationalism in the minds of citizens. One distinct difference in the struggle for coherent national identity in the modern context is the possibility for mass production of texts and images, which allows for continuity and universality of images dispersed to the public (36-38). While Anderson discusses the possibilities of mass production in terms of books and periodicals, the distribution of film and radio follow these same trajectories.

Anderson goes on to differentiate the “Creole” states of the New World where “language was not an element that differentiated them from their respective imperial metropoles” (47). While Cuba and other former colonies in the Americas did not have to re-negotiate language to form a united national identity, deeply imbedded issues of race
and class threatened to inhibit the creation of national consciousness. As in other locales, Anderson points to the "ways in which administrative organizations create meaning" (53) to explain the burgeoning practice of metaphorical unification. The construction of the newly independent states as liminal spaces where identities were born was the first step in creating sovereign identity; drawing on a colonial system of classification, "criollos" were differentiated from "peninsulares" by the fact of their birth on American soil. With the advent of criollo (Creole) consciousness, came accompanying specialized media births, for instance, "between 1691 and 1820 no less than 2,120 'newspapers' were published" (61). The vitality of the new print media was its immediacy, or as Anderson puts it, its "provinciality," as it related to the events occurring in the locality of the New World, and was not old news from the colonial centers. In this way, circulation of text and images for specific local use arose as a unifying possibility for literate inhabitants of new nation-states.

Though popular culture informs the creation of nationality, it is in the interests of the state to exert control over the images and texts that are being circulated. Anderson writes, "the one persistent feature of this style [of self-protective] nationalism was, and is, that it is official - i.e. something emanating from the state, and serving the interests of the state first and foremost" (159). Official control over images requires mechanisms for the exertion of authority. The conception of directed vision as an action of domination can be attributed to Michel Foucault (1977). The central concept of "Panopticism" comes from Bentham’s Panopticon, a prison based around the omniscient eye of surveillance, which traps the prisoners in their cell for fear of constantly being watched. Foucault begins his exploration of the power of vision by discussing compartmentalization, as in
what occurred during medieval times of plague, when citizens could not leave their houses for fear of contamination. Inspectors would come to the houses where, Foucault notes, that the "gaze [was] alert everywhere" (Foucault 1977: 195). Though a panopticon differs from the partitioning during the plagues in that its emphasis is on the visual field of the centerpiece rather than hiding away the prisoners, the power of the visual, and what results when you limit the line of sight, are equally central. Hegemony is produced by directing the gaze of the subject in question – in this case the citizens of the proposed nation.

While Anderson discusses mass-produced texts, maps and images to some degree, and Foucault discusses directing the gaze, as instruments of arbitration of power and the formation of national identity, neither talks specifically about the intrinsic meaning of images themselves. There exists a distinct difference between the visually informed discussions of Anderson and Foucault (among others) and the study of Visual Anthropology as a subset of Cultural Anthropology.

One way of fusing the two and exploring the idea of images to be read as cultural texts, has been proposed by Deborah Poole (1997). In her anthropological study of images of Quechua Indians in the Peruvian colonial center of Cusco, Poole suggests the concept of a "Visual Economy" which has three levels of organization. The first level is the, "organization of production encompassing both the individuals and the technologies that produce images," the second "involves the circulation of goods or, in this case, images and image-objects" and finally, the "level on which an economy of vision must be assessed: the cultural and discursive systems through which graphic images are appraised, interpreted and assigned historical, scientific, and aesthetic worth. Here it
becomes important to ask not what specific images mean but, rather, how images accrue value" (9-10). While Poole discusses the production of photographs by individuals, the level of production can be applied in the Cuban context to the nationalized industry that determines image production. The second level involves the technical means of production and circulation, and the third category denotes the symbolic function of assigning a meaning to an image. It is on these levels – of production and of symbolic value, that we now turn to the specific context of the Cuban film Industry.

Filmmaking in post-Revolutionary Cuba

The relationship between artists and the state has long been a point of contention – particularly in the context of Third World Cinema. Art as a tool for social critique has typified many of the works in the First and Third world, from Italian Neo-Realism to Brazilian Cinema Novo. However, the exceptional structure of Cuban cinema after the triumph of the Revolution in 1959 has taken on special characteristics as part of the mechanism of state-sponsored national unity that we have discussed earlier. Prior to 1959, the Cuban film industry was almost non-existent, typified by Mexican-Cuba co-productions of lesser ideological quality. Despite the low levels of productivity, Cubans attended imported movies at rates higher than almost any other nation in Latin America (Cook, 1996: 897). One of the few pre-Revolutionary films with a high degree of social commentary was *El Mégano* (The Charcoal Worker), released in 1955, an early co-production from Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Julio García Espinosa, which featured an Italian neo-realist style\(^\text{11}\) and showed the exploitation of peasant workers under the regime of Fulgencio Batista, the dictator ousted by the guerillas in 1959. *El Mégano* was the only fiction feature to be released by the National Board of Culture with any degree of
social critique prior to 1959, though it is worth noting that documentary shorts by
Gutiérrez Alea and Santiago Alvarez (who would become the leading documentarian in
Cuba, and some say Latin America) were being consistently released with limited
distribution.

After the installation of the Revolutionary government in early 1959, Castro
immediately turned to revamping the film industry as one of the major projects of the
early Revolutionary years. Second only to the massive literacy campaign of 1960-1961,
Castro dedicated enormous effort to developing a nationalized film industry that resulted
in a stunning explosion in the numbers of films released and the proliferation of film
schools across the country. Francis Ford Coppola and Gabriel García Márquez as well as
a number of other international film and literary lights have supported the most famous
school, the School of International Cinema in San Antonio de los Baños outside of
Havana.

Castro, following the tradition of the other Revolutionary regimes of the 20th
century, announced on March 24th, 1959 by an official act of law that the cinema would
become a national Cuban art and “mandated the ‘re-education’ of the Cuban people
through its fount of revolutionary inspiration, of culture, and of information” (Castro,
Quoted in West, 1987: 141). Following Lenin’s maxim that the cinema “is the most
important for us of all the arts,” Castro codified the role of the Cuban Film Industry with
the creation of ICAIC (Instituto de Cinearte Industrial Cubano – The Cuban Institute of
Film Art and Industry). ICAIC took as its first two organizational principles that “the
cinema is an art, and second, that it is an ‘instrument’ which ‘can contribute to the
development of a deeper and clearer revolutionary spirit’ (ICAIC charter, quoted in
Following its creation ICAIC supervised the production of an impressive 112 documentary and fiction features, almost 900 documentary shorts and countless weekly newsreels in the next twenty-four years (Burton, 1985: 345). Additionally, ICAIC has, since its inception, been run as a collective so that filmmakers of all statures participate in the conceptualization of each others’ work. This has resulted in the fruitful collaborations of such pairings as Sara Gomez, who served as an assistant director to Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, as well as Jose Carlos Tabio who served as his co-director on his last two features (Cook, 1996: 901).

As a means to increase the distribution and access to the newly state-sponsored film industry, Castro and ICAIC sponsored a program to bring the cinema to even the most isolated and rural areas of the island. Building on the early Soviet model of “kinotrails” the Cubans instituted over a hundred “cine-moviles” constructed from Soviet-bought trucks outfitted with 16mm projection machines and deployed to all areas of the country for free viewing (Sauvage, 1972: 27). The films included in these showcases were mostly documentary and newsreel shorts, but some fiction films were occasionally exhibited. The impact of the sight of the motion picture on the isolated Cuban populations is dramatically and touchingly depicted in Octavio Cortazar’s 1963 short, Por Primera Vez (For the First Time).

The centralization of the industry, coupled with the control over the exhibition of specifically chosen images demonstrated Castro’s commitment to making the cinema the central mechanism for cultivating national unity. Luckily, for Castro and for the Cuban people, the considerable talents of several of the fiction and non-fiction auteurs working with ICAIC resulted in a series of films with remarkable ideological and technical
content, in addition to entertainment value. The 1960’s release of films by Tomás Guitiérrez Alea, Santiago Alvarez, Humberto Solas, Octavio Gomez and others mixed documentary and fiction styles creating a hallmark form of Cuban narrative. The most notable films in these respects are Guitiérrez Alea’s 1962 Memorias del Subdesarrollo (Memories of Underdevelopment) and Octavio Gomez’s 1969 La Primera Carga al Machete (The First Charge of the Machete) which seamlessly interwove authentic and approximated newsreel footage with fiction narrative in an endeavor that came to be known as “Imperfect Cinema.” According to Oscar Quirós (1992),

“the thrust of Imperfect Cinema was to minimize the importance of form in order to improve the content, the ‘didactic message’ of the film. The ‘imperfect’ image was consciously made with lighting, compositional, and editing ‘errors,’ including scratches, in order to create two effects. The first was to distance Cuban cinema from the elaborate production values of Hollywood, and the second to improve the didactic content of Cuban films” (11).

The dual characteristics of Imperfect Cinema came to be understood as utilitarian objectives, coupled with its artistic creativity (with the former supplanting the latter when necessary).

The 1970’s heralded a new wave of experimentalism and deviation from the Imperfect Cinema model. The new model of filmmakers throughout the seventies and eighties incorporated some of the more political commentary present in Imperfect Cinema, but created a new vehicle to deliver the message. The industry diversified into incorporating esoteric experimentation on the one end, with a more polished, “perfect” cinema at the other end of the spectrum. Films such as Tomás Guixérez Alea’s La Última Cena (The Last Supper, 1974) and Humberto Solas’ Lucia (1968) typified this second phase of evolution, combining strong dedication to social issues (The Last Supper deals with a slave rebellion on a 18th century sugar plantation while Lucia deals with
three distinct vignettes of revolutionary women named Lucia in Cuban history) with unorthodox narrative styles, but in a more stylized and polished package.

While these films, and others, still have strong revolutionary consciousnesses, some film critics lamented the departure from a critical Marxist paradigm of cinematic forms (i.e., dedication to the aesthetics of dialectical materialism) and worried that the result would be a Hollywood-izing of Cuban cinema (see Chanan, 1985: 276). According to Chanan (1985), in the 1970’s many Cuban filmmakers turned to the domestic cultural milieu in order to identify themes for their films. If the issues of sexism and racism in Cuba were not made explicitly clear following the models of Imperfect Cinema, they were exhibited through concentrating on seemingly representative cultural forms that belied a deeper political conviction (260-263). In the late seventies there were a number of films dealing with Afro-Cuban cultural and religious practices that bespoke the lingering racism but did not discuss it in explicit rhetorical terms. To some extent, the number of films dealing with issues of women and sexism followed this same model of layered commentary, but were (as we will see) on the whole more explicit.

While there has been very little study done of Cuban cinema in the contemporary period, it is clear that the issue of censorship, both in the past and the present, must be addressed in this example of interpreting conceptions of national identity from artistic and cultural texts. The position of the Cuban government from the inception of ICAIC has been that of open censorship for films whose ideological content can be considered anti-Revolutionary. Castro has been quoted as saying, in reference to the arts, “within the Revolution, everything, against the Revolution, nothing” (Speech in 1961,
quoted in Sauvage, 1972: 24). In the earliest years of the Revolution, this maxim meant little on a practical level as most of the working artists willingly participated in producing artistic films, which served the Revolution’s propagandistic purposes. In more recent years, many critics have used Castro’s own rhetoric to point out the state-sponsored censorship against those who would use the filmic medium for social critique. I include this information not to take sides in the debate over the degree of censorship in Cuban film, but to point out the construction of the ideological ethos governing Cuban filmmakers. In some sense, this censorship has operated in part to maintain a high level of ideological content in Cuban cinema rather than the production of films for purely entertainment purposes, as is the case in many films from such countries as India or the United States. By limiting the exhibition of films to those whose political viewpoints serve the project of supporting the Cuban state’s quest for a national culture, Castro has utilized the possibilities for visual media discussed above.

Social Constructions of Gender and Problems of (mis)Representation: Feminism and Film Theory

In a post-modern world dominated by the politics of identity, anthropologists and social theorists have come to understand that social constructions define the discourse of gender. As we have seen, visual representations are often what inform us of our own place relative to ethnic, national or geographic Others – and the concept of gender is no exception. To understand the use of representations of women and bodies as the site of cultural articulations of national identity in the Cuban context, we must first understand social science theory that explores the construction of gender itself. Nelson (1999) writes, “Butler emphasizes the process by which the body is engendered, by which it is
invested with history and given properties. A girl is never already existing; she has to be made” (217n13). Enloe uses this same idea of gender as a constructed category noting that the concepts of gender, and of gendered power relations are categories that are “made” rather than existing naturally. Enloe (1990) points out that the recognition of the constructed nature of gender divisions is in itself a challenge to the universally accepted distinctions. The questioning is then a political response, as Enloe writes, “Asking how something has been made implies that it has been made by someone. Suddenly there are clues to trace; there is also a blame, credit and responsibility to apportion, not just at the start but at each point along the way” (3).

These observations of gender as a culturally mediated category come from the “social constructionist” school of thought, which provides that,

“the social constructionist theory of gender goes beyond the conception of gender as a cognitive variable. It is important to view gender as a major social category that functions in a complex variety of ways to influence behavior... Gender is constantly altered by social context: by culture, by cross-personal interactions, and by the consciousness of individuals themselves. It is an inconsistent and sometimes contradictory category” (Unger, 1989: 2-3).

In many ways, the theories of social construction focus on the ways in which the individual actively negotiates the particular cultural situation in which she finds herself – traversing the terrain of pre-determined categories and reconciling divergent social conceptions with her own experience.

One way in which gender is formulated by society is through the control of images of women. As we have previously discussed, the generation of visual symbols and directives is a common practice in the creation of coherent shared categories (i.e. nationality); in this case it is the female figure that is being visually constructed to allegorize the national identity. Feminist film theorists and students of
representation have problematized the often-essentialized depictions of women in visual media by pointing out the lack of plurality of image-creators of different perspectives. In the last few decades, an alternative to traditional film studies has arisen which seeks to create a critique of the appropriation of women’s bodies and sexuality in film.

Considered by many the watershed essay in feminist film analysis, Laura Mulvey’s 1975 work “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” imbued the practice of “looking” (by characters on screen and by the audience) with a psychoanalytic interpretation that explored the way power relations are inscribed in the cinema (in Thornham, 1999). Mulvey writes, “[p]sychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (58). For Mulvey, the structure of filmmaking and the exploitation of women’s bodies to titillate or focalize male desire is part of a larger social system of domination. She argues, “woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (59).

The loss of filmic agency on the part of female protagonists has been subsequently transformed into an allegorizing of the female form for the project of national imaginings. In writing about Italian film, Millicent Marcus discusses the post-War Italian tradition of “national allegory” in which “films refer, on some interpretive level, [to] the collective life of the country” (2000: 329). Marcus
highlights what we have discussed as the symbolic function of filmmaking, quoting Angela Dalle Vacche’s saying “film is a social technology offering its spectators terms of identification, an image of how they need to see themselves in order to have access to a national identity and imagine their roles in the historical process” (330). However, Marcus sharply diverges from Dalle Vacche who imagines this filmic corpus as a male. Marcus says, “I would argue for a feminized conception of corporate identity which allows filmmakers to apply all the dualisms implicit in traditional portrayals of women to the plight of the postwar state” (330).

Marcus discusses the symbols of sexual prowess and sexual violence in Italian film, noting the popular imagining of Mussolini as the “seducer” of the “Italian body politic” (334-335) and the allegorizing of rape in several seminal postwar films including DeSica’s 1964 Two Women where the rape of the young girl becomes a symbol for the lasting scars of the second world war upon the whole of the nation. She writes, “the bodies of Cesira and Rosetta [the mother and daughter of the film] become texts onto which history inscribes its most atrocious incursions into the private sphere” (335). The symbols of rape and sexual transgression, as we will see, are also often used in post-Revolutionary Cuban cinema to symbolize the exploitation of the nation by colonial or neo-colonial forces.

Once we establish that women are central in the construction of a filmic imaginary for the modern nation, we must again turn to the concept of the power inscribed in creating representations. As we have discussed, gender is a malleable and socially constructed category, such that the control over representation lies in the ability to “fix” meanings to the constructs of gender and nation. Because social
construction is so intertwined with the circulation of popular images, “power is integral to a discourse on the notions of identity and representations” (Chaisson, 2000: 1). While she focuses primarily on the (mis)representations of minorities in Hollywood cinema, Reba Chaisson’s note that “film functions as an ideological apparatus… it is a discursive practice that promotes hegemony by advancing the ideals of the dominant group” can also be applied to the context of women (50). By commodifying and appropriating the images of dominated groups for ideological aims, film is becomes subject to forces of institutional authority.

By noting the engendered power dynamics at play in the construction of national identity through the filmic medium we can work towards a more critical interpretation of these controlled representations. In order to more fully understand the particular symbol of the gendered body politic in the Cuban context, we must now turn to a short history of the social and political forces that shape the context and type of images projected on screen.

Cuba in the Wider Caribbean Context:

The situation particular to Cuban women in the post-Revolutionary period must first be understood within the framework of the wider Caribbean cultural milieu. Cuba presents individual challenges due to the emphasis on the political rhetoric of equality in the last 42 years, but in many respects is remarkably undifferentiated from the rest of the gender relations in the Caribbean. Additionally, because of the history of race-mixing in the Caribbean between European colonists, indigenous peoples and African slaves, a tradition of religious and cultural syncretism has arisen which provides that some Cuban populations of varying races may share more with their counterparts in the English-
speaking Caribbean than with women of another race within the same society. For Paravisini-Gebert (1997), the “standards familiar to the [colonial] metropolis may have been closely imitated by the small enclaves of Europeanized white or light-skinned middle and upper-middle classes, but were frequently transformed by the masses of the people who wove new configurations out of the fabric of colonial mores” (7).

Scholars of Caribbean women have often fallen into the trap of deriving knowledge of women’s social status and mobility from that of their husbands, a model that is not as readily applicable in the Caribbean which has the world’s highest percentage of female-headed households (Leco-Rhynie, 1995: 2). This is especially true in areas with high concentrations of seasonal agricultural employees including sugar-cane zones, which have correspondingly high levels of descendants from the original African slave populations who were forcibly imported for agricultural work. Derek Gordon counters the traditional formulation of social mobility as male centered by noting that sociologist have long accepted that “the class structure is predominantly through the male head of household, who is traditionally the main participant in the labor force and the main income earner” (4). By using a male dominated form of sociological study in order to view women, insightful and realistic study has been understandably absent from the record. In the Cuban context, as we will see, the practice of the government to focus on mobility and income generation by looking only at male participation has resulted in a series of failed programs.

Implicit in this new level of analysis on the individual and her smaller community units, the woman-centered history of women in the Caribbean can be seen in light of the kinship structures which have been solidified further from the move from Africa. In
thinking about the legacy of slavery and the inviability of Christian marriage within the context of the sugar plantation, Joycelin Massiah points out that "such practices [as making the children of slaves property of the mother’s owner] had the effect of giving legitimacy to the centrality of the mother’s role, a notion that was very firmly entrenched in the kin systems of the West African tribes transported to the New World" (10). In this way, studies of Caribbean matrifocality serve to "denot[e] that the role of the mother is structurally, culturally and effectively centered" (15).

Thus, many Caribbean women scholars and feminists have judged that a fundamental reformulation of the concept of feminism is needed in order to consider the Caribbean example. For Lizabeth Parvisini-Gebert, "the evaluation of a differing reality from the theoretical standpoint of other women’s praxes comes dangerously close in many cases to continued colonization"(4). In this case, the over-essentialization of the issues facing women across the globe will result in a “whitewash” of the particular considerations for Caribbean women. She rightfully points out that, “the indivisibility of gender relations from race and class, the intricate connections between sexual mores, skin pigmentation, and class mobility, the poverty and political repression that have left women’s bodies exposed to abuse and exploitation – seem alien to the concerns of European American feminist thought” (4).

As many social scientists and feminists studying the Caribbean have pointed out, the accepted goals of feminists for cultural and occupational equality have limited use in the Caribbean context. It is through this lens that we can view the government of Cuba’s post-Revolutionary history of advocacy and exchange with its female population.

The FMC and the World of Work:
Though many of the social phenomena that have been described in relationship to the Caribbean as a geographic whole can be applied to the Cuban example, there are several factors affecting the ascribed status of women in Cuban society that differentiate Cuba from the rest of the Caribbean basin. Due in part to the focus by Caribbeanists on generalizable social phenomena in areas such as the English-speaking island nations, coupled with the fact that the social sciences received extremely low participation in Cuba between 1970 to the mid 80’s, there is a resultant reduction in the amount of longitudinal or detailed study on the demographic realities of Cuban women (Bengelsdorf, 1997: 233). Additionally, it bears mention that extrapolation from the limited amount of data available on Cuba has led to the production of several ideologically divergent responses by scholars, creating a situation where mutually exclusive readings of documents must be cleverly combined to understand the context of the Cuban situation.

In examining the special case of women in Cuba, Shannon Bell draws a tripartite distinction between the three “types” of women or functions of women’s bodies within the Cuban body politic. She suggests a typology contrasting the “productive body” (the body able to produce labor and intellect), the “bio-physical body” (the healthy body, the body able to reproduce), and the “libidinal body” (the body that produces energies and desires outside of its productive functions) (Bell, 1998: 341). To understand the genesis of the category of the “productive body” we must examine the role of Women in the world of labor, which has been intertwined since the inception of the revolution with the struggle for social equality, and with the production of goods for the economic health of the nation.
The Cuban Women’s movement has taken a formal organizational structure in the creation of the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Federation of Cuban Women, FMC), which was formed in the first years of the revolution by Castro and has long been headed by Vilma Espin, the wife of Raul Castro. The FMC presents a positive picture of organized women in Cuba because of its high rates of participation (close to 80% of Cuban women over the age of 14 are members of the organization) and because of the relative “success” of the organization in working with the state to secure legal rights such as safe and legal abortions, divorce, paid maternity leave etc. However, the particular positioning and ideology of the FMC has been problematized by many Western feminists who see the organization’s purpose as “more that of representing government policy to women than that of representing women to the government” (Bell, 1998: 346).

Despite the far reach of the organization, the philosophy of the FMC’s leadership has been termed more “feminine than feminist” (Padula and Smith, 1985: 83). The distinction between the two adjectives lies partly in the inception of the organization itself, as a semi-autonomous state body that is subject to state control. In this way, the FMC is similar to ICAIC in the sense that it is both subject to and supported by the Revolutionary leadership. The distinction between “feminine” and “feminist” also lies in the understanding of this affiliation between the FMC and the government, even the leadership of the FMC openly states that the goal of the organization is not only for equality for women, but for social equality in general. Vilma Espin has famously stated that, “In reality we have never had a feminist movement. We hate that... We consider what we are doing part of the struggle, and for this reason we feel that we are more
developed... Our work is to make everyone advanced. Then, when everyone has a high consciousness, nobody will have to think in terms of equality” (Quinn, 1977: B1).

In defining the women’s struggle for equality in terms of its bond to the wider economic and ideological struggle of the Revolution, it is necessary to look primarily at the major vehicle for women’s inclusion in the Revolutionary project – the world of labor. In fact, the majority of scholarly investigation of the contemporary social situation of Cuban women has centered on this major defining characteristic of the nation – the unique structuring of labor in a Socialist state. By all accounts, at least on a rhetorical level, one of the major projects of the Cuban Revolution has been the incorporation of women into the labor force. In this light, women are framed as just another marginalized group for whom incorporation in the workforce will serve as a balancing effect against the hegemonic forces of pre-Revolutionary capitalism that created the stratified social order.

By placing primacy on the workplace as a site of social change, the Cuban government has wholeheartedly embracing what can be termed the “Engelsian Paradigm.” By way of explanation, Carollee Bengelsdorf (1997) notes that,

“The Engelsian paradigm, in brief, subordinates women’s emancipation to a more generalized emancipation resulting from the overthrow of capitalism, sees women’s emancipation as a result of their entry into the productive (that is, waged) workforce (in keeping with the Marxist axiom that human beings realize themselves through work), and postulates that women will be relieved of their work in social reproduction in the household which keeps them subordinated by the socialization of these tasks” (250n9).

In order to break down the distinction between public and private spheres, which had in Cuba been traditionally delineated by gender, the Revolutionary government has sought to incorporate women into the labor force – with varying results. The public/private
distinction in the pre-Revolutionary period is discussed by Bell (1998) as an enforced “privatization” of the woman’s body, either in her own home if she had the luxury of unemployment, or in the homes of others as a maid, or “privatized by pimps as a publicly accessible libidinal body” (349). In this way, the labor of women in the pre-Revolutionary period was an extension of personal privatization and subject to control of male authority. The concept of an autonomous female was outside of the realm of acceptable roles.

In the first years of the Revolution, the leadership of the FMC sought to incorporate women into the labor force by the instruction in new skills, attitudes and information on the types of jobs available. The FMC between the time of its founding in 1960 to the late seventies encouraged women to apply for jobs traditionally set aside for men, including manual and agricultural labor. Additionally, the FMC sought to socialize young people in such a way as to combat prejudices in the workplace by working with the Ministry of Education to avoid the use of “stereotypical” images of women in textbooks for schoolchildren, encouraging the use of photographs of women employed in factories and state farms (Bunck, 1994: 94).

The film *Hasta Cierta Punto* (Up to a Certain Point, 1984) by Tomás Guitiérrez Alea allegorizes the attempt at translation of women into traditionally male-sector jobs by creating a reflexive tale of a script-writer who spends time with dock-workers in order to research a film set along the industrial piers of Havana. He befriends a female dockworker who has long been defying the stereotypical roles for men and women within the world of labor by her choice of employment, and winds up having an affair with her. The film brilliantly interweaves actual interview footage with real-life male and female
dockworkers with the fictional storyline of a writer trying to confront society’s (and his own) lingering macho attitudes.

One interview with the male dockworkers addresses the debate over incorporation of women into the workforce for ideological versus economic reasons. The dockworkers, drinking with the writer after work, joke about their wives and the possibility of them working. Oscar, the writer figure, introduces his idea for the plot of his film – that the macho dockworker tells his wife that she has to quit working to stay with him. The dockworkers all laugh and say that “it’s when the wife doesn’t work that there’s a problem!” meaning that the economic necessity of the wife’s wages is such that the hardship on the family is more than if she worked in the first place. However, the thesis of the film seems to be aligned with the Engelsian paradigm – Gutiérrez Alea includes an interview with a real-life Black female dockworker who tells how her own husband offered the same ultimatum, saying “it’s me or work.” The woman laughs and says that she chose work so she didn’t ever have to depend on anyone.

The main fictional female protagonist, Amalia, seems to be in agreement, she refuses to compromise in order to preserve her own autonomy. Gutiérrez Alea complicates both her search for self-sufficiency as well as macho attitudes when he creates a sequence where Oscar, while driving up to Amalia’s apartment, sees the car of her old boyfriend go speeding past. In a rage he comes in and yells at Amalia who has just been raped by the ex-boyfriend. In a sense, Oscar’s macho attitude resulted in the loss of his love, and her determined search for independence contributed to her downfall.

It was during this same period of attempt at incorporation of women into male sectors that the FMC instituted the first collectivized círculos infantiles (day-care centers)
in order to free up time for women to enter the labor force. Castro’s commitment to the *circuitos* involved a great deal of government spending, from higher education courses for the staffers including psychology and human relations as well as basic pedagogical techniques. The information campaign targeted at women to use the centers levied additional costs, making the circuitos a well-publicized and praised keystone to Castro’s touted social initiatives for women and children. Pastor Vega’s *Retrato de Teresa* (Portrait of Teresa, 1980) shows the centrality of the circuitos in the lives of women, as the protagonist, a working mother named Teresa, is battling to get the masons to finish repairs on the day-care center. *Teresa* was one of the most successful films in Cuban history and its reception included many women who mentioned that the practical issues faced by Teresa were one’s that they dealt with themselves. While the circuitos served a practical purpose in freeing up more time for “productive” activities, the served several ideological functions as well. Bunck points out that by shifting the responsibility of socialization of children away from the family in this earliest period, the state could separate children from “values at home that were incompatible with those of the leadership” (97-98). A second, and perhaps more insidious interpretation of the ideological function of the circuitos was to translate women’s private sector work into the public sphere – incorporating women into the workforce but into jobs deemed appropriate for women. This is evident in the predominance of women as day-care workers up to the present-day.

It is this questioning of the ideological impetus behind the program of inclusion in the labor force that has caused many to question the altruistic aims of the Revolutionary government. While the participation of women in higher education is almost on par with
men in Cuba, the labor force continues to be bifurcated by sex. The moments of greatest female participation in the labor force coincided with nation-wide mobilization efforts, particularly around the 1969-1970 sugar harvest, which saw a disproportional rise in women laborers. The correlation between the economic necessity of recruiting more workers with the rise in female participation highlights what for many, may undermine the Revolutionary commitment to equality – that women workers are economically necessary for the maintenance of the Revolution and are not being included only out of dedication to the Revolutionary principles of egalitarianism.

Despite the increasing numbers of female members of the island’s labor force, there remains a distinct separation of the types of industries that employ women. Bengelsdorf points out that women have “by and large [been] filtered into employment centering around nurturing and service – concretely, into medicine, teaching, food service, day care – or into those industrial sectors in which they had traditionally worked textiles and cigar-making in particular”(239). In this way, women have been systematically channeled into service-sector employment and have not been allowed to make the transition in metaphorical terms, to working in male industries.

The dominant image, instead of the idealistic dockworker of Hasta Cierto Punto, has become the officious automaton in Muerte de Una Burocrata (Death of a Bureaucrat, 1966), or the retail salesgirl of Memorias del Subdesarrollo (Memories of Underdevelopment, 1968), which showcase the tailored, docile and non-threatening female employee.

The World of the Family and the Contemporary Era:
The continued segregation of the Cuban labor force is due, in part, to a continued legacy of "biological determinism," an implicit (and at times explicit) governmental practice that denies women economic and leadership roles based on traditional assumptions of gender roles. It is in discussions of the moral and physical makeup of the Cuban family that these assigned gender roles are made most visible. Since the mid-70's, the official rhetoric on the responsibilities and structure of the Cuban family has become a central topic of discussion, highlighting the continued practice of control over women by entrenched paternalistic structures. In 1973 Castro described the special circumstance of women as "producers" of progeny by calling them, "natures workshop where life is formed." (quoted in Bunck, 1994: 106). The attitude of the leadership was made clear time and time again during this period, when the philosophical shift became one from early Revolutionary universal egalitarianism, to an unambiguous separation between the types of work suited for men versus those suited for women. It is important to note that this did not mean a shift on a practical level, women were still being universally encouraged to join the workforce, but the types of work deemed appropriate were being increasingly codified.

Castro's legislation of the 1976 Cuban Family Code further encouraged female laborers, but addressed the underlying structures of family responsibility that had previously inhibited women's full involvement in the economic life of the country. The text of the Family Code sought to refocus the efforts at socialization to Revolutionary consciousness back within the confines of the nuclear family. The formulation of the Cuban family as a nuclear family, despite the social reality, was thought to be a move on the part of the government to align the country with more "modern" developing
nations. A second function of the (mis)conceptualization of the Cuban family was to put more emphasis on the heterosexual pairing between husband and wife – in order to emphasize the husband’s responsibility in caring for the family.

In this respect, the Family Code engaged traditional familial divisions of labor head-on and made a strident call for increased equality within the household. The low presence of women in Party representation was determined to be caused by the “double-burden” of women’s labor, making women workers less productive in the workplace because they had family to take care of. The lowered productivity and lessened opportunities for active participation in union activities meant that fewer women were elected to leadership positions and therefore few rose in the political ranks. *Portrait of Teresa* also deals with this catch-22; Teresa has volunteered to stay after work to sew dresses for the union’s famous cultural performance but her late hours cause her husband and sons to become angry with her for neglecting them. When she finally decides to quit the cultural production, her union friends and the leadership exert pressure on her for abandoning them in their hour of need. The only feasible answer posited by the film is for her husband to lose some of his macho attitudes and help with the work, something he is ultimately unable to do.

Teresa ultimately presents a model of an ideal powerful 1970’s Cuban woman who is willing to take on both burdens by shunning her husband and his requirements and striking out on her own. The last sequence of the film shows Teresa speaking with her husband who wants her to move with their children to Santiago de Cuba, where he has a new job. She is unwilling to compromise and give up her live for a man whose fickle macho attitudes have caused him to cheat on her and denigrate her work in the past.
While she still loves him, she remains true to her own ideals, as the final shot shows her moving purposefully through a crowded downtown Havana city street. The camera alternately focuses on her face and then pulls back out to show the crowd, implying that her strength is what is propelling her through this crisis period, and serving to symbolically generalize Teresa’s struggle. Contemporaneous to the growing awareness of the limits on women’s lives in the labor force, the government sponsored a campaign to encourage an equal partnership between men and women in the performance of household duties, a project that may have changed some attitudes but did little to ameliorate the “double- burden” of working mothers (Bunck, 1994: 113-115).

Recent years have seen an almost complete withdrawal from the ideals of sexual equality. Beginning in 1986 with Castro’s announcement of the “Rectification Campaign” which applied austerity measures and deepening labor discipline across the island, the rhetorical structure of the government’s proclamations ended its focus on social programming and education and began to focus exclusively on economic viability. The crash of the Cuban economy after the fall of the Soviet Bloc caused mass unemployment and social upheaval to an unprecedented degree and reduced numbers of laborers of both sexes. In light of the dramatic economic circumstances, the participation of women was called upon in an unabashedly pragmatic manner – the labor of all citizens was necessary for the economic success of the country and so the day care programs and other social initiatives were extended in order to heighten productivity, rather than framing them as ideological achievements. Recent films have dealt to some extent with the burdens faces by all Cubans, highlighting the sacrifices made by women. *La Lista de Espera* (The Waiting List, 2001), *Guantanamera* (1994) and *Fresa y Chocolate*
(Strawberries and Chocolate, 1993) have shown, to varying degrees, the social hardships felt by women in the contemporary period. Films critical of the Revolution, by necessity made outside of Cuba, have veiled criticism in displays of social hardships faced in part by women, including Before Night Falls (2001) and Azucar Amarga (Bitter Sugar, 1997) to be discussed below.

**Confronting Sexuality: A Subtext of Women’s History:**

As we have noted, Bell’s typology of women’s roles in Cuba included the “productive” worker’s body, the “bio-physical” mother’s body, and the “libidinal” lover’s body. Bell further argues that in the Cuban context, primacy has been placed on the presence of the “Socialist Female Body,” a mother/worker hybrid which figures prominently in the popular imaginings (as in *Hasta Cien Puntos* and *Retrato de Teresa*) and is a mixture of the first two categories (Bell, 1998: 341). It is to this third, “transgressive” category that we now turn, in order to consider the sexual subtext of women in Cuba.

During the colonial period, the deep distinction between public and private spheres served to codify relationships between men and women, such that incidental meanings were imbued with sexual significance due to their forbidden nature and the fetishized body of the hidden female. Vera Martinez-Alier (1974) discusses the entrenched system of class and race that determined the nature of couplings and interaction in the colonial period. For Martinez-Alier, women’s bodies focalized male/male interactions rather than male/female interactions, becoming the “historical means by which men challenged, contested and bonded with other men” (32). In commenting on Martinez-Alier’s work, Bengelsdorf describes how agency was stripped
from Cuban women, saying, "women were thus virtually denied access to or control of their own sexuality; rather this sexuality took on meaning only within the framework of an elaborate game played out by males for whom it was a pawn in their own quest for increased social status" (242). This control over women's bodies then became a central maintenance for social control, by limiting access to women's bodies or "upholding virginity" the white male oligarchy could successfully limit racial mixing and therefore inhibit social equality (Martínez-Alier, 1974: 106).

By equating sexuality with social control, the colonial criollo patriarchy effectively created the legacy of contested social relationships that have existed to the present day. Imbuing racial categories with sexualized meaning Tomás Guityerrez Alea exposes the racial interactions and sexual taboos of the colonial period in his work _La Última Cena_ (the Last Supper, 1976) that takes place on a sugar plantation in the mountains. Based on a true story, Guityerrez Alea recounts a slave rebellion during the visit of a Count to his plantation during Holy Week (Semana Santa) sometime during the late 18th century. The visiting Count wants to celebrate Easter by sponsoring religious instruction for slaves on the plantation. The corrupt overseer Don Manuel does not want to release the slaves from work for "frivolous" activities, and his brutality and impiousness is highlighted in the suggestion that he has been raping and molesting many of the female slaves. While the count falsely dedicates himself to religious fervor, his hypocrisy is continually underscored by the fact that he willingly chooses not to know of the brutality being visited on the slaves by Don Manuel, and further highlighted in a sensual scene where he is being bathed by a group of mulatta women.
The further equation of mulatta and Black women with deviant sexuality comes in a scene where the fully robed priest is seen in the river, teaching the male slaves how to wash and preaching some of the gospel. As he wanders upriver, he finds a group of female slaves washing the Count’s linens in the river, topless. His sputtering outrage calling the women “of satan” is made to look ridiculous as his own hidden sexual desires and frustrations cause him to order the women to cover up, just as he cannot avert his eyes and so falls over his own feet in the river. The fear associated with black males and their supposed voracious sexuality is seen when the slaves rebel and take a white woman as a hostage, a moral outrage that causes the Count to strike back with a vengeance as all of the slaves who had earlier been singled out for a special symbolic “last supper” are brutally slaughtered.

**Deviant Libidos: The Figure of the Prostitute:**

Though we can clearly see a deeply imbedded history stereotyping of sexuality in Cuba, the “libidiral” body of the Cuban women, particularly the mulatta woman, are still categorized by the present regime as socially deviant. The paragon of sexual deviance for women is, and has always been, the figure of the prostitute, a prominent character in the collective imaginings of “appropriate” female sexual behavior. As Coco Fusco points out, “prostitution is hardly new in Cuba,” and that the practice of sex work has long been associated with the island due both to its colonial history and to its proximity to the United States (1998:152).

During the colonial period, the dichotomizing of the public versus private spheres resulted in a contestation of sexuality, which lent itself to the codification of brothels as a site of clandestine social exchange between men and women. Stemming from Latin
Catholic traditions of separation by sex, brothels became entrenched as a social space for mixing, particularly between white men and women of color (Martínez-Alier, 1974:125). It was this tradition of surreptitious race mixing which contributed, in part, to the exoticization of the figure of the mixed-race (or mulatta) woman.

In examining the image of the mulatta in Peru, Deborah Poole (1997) points out that they fit into one of many racially sexualized categories of female forms, and were considered much more “disorderly” than the covered “tapadas” or white women (87). In her interpretation of a painting by Rugendas, Poole dissects what she sees as symbolic of a racial hierarchy around the interpretation of the sexuality of the various races of women represented in the painting, a hierarchy that can be extrapolated to fit the Cuban context. Poole describes first the intersected gaze of the tapada women implying that they are possessed of sexuality because their gaze is outward, but not licentious because their gaze is directed and intersected by the monk and the gentlemen to the right in the frame. The Indian women on the left are completely de-sexualized because they are a self-contained unit, their gaze internal to each other and therefore, non-threatening to the audience. However, the most sexual being in the painting is then the mulatta woman whose direct gaze off to the side of the painting is uninterrupted, direct and possibly threatening. Poole (1997) writes that “[a]s a sideways glance, this gaze is deviously uninhibited, and as such invokes popular conceptions of mulatta sexual morals” (100).

The continuing image of the brothel as a site of cultural contestation and blurred subjectivities persisted into the post-colonial period with the further codification of the social role of prostitute during the 1920’s. During this period, Cuban “pimps” concentrated bordellos in Havana and Santiago de Cuba, as well as around the American
military base at Guantanamo. The hyper-sexualized interactions in and around the
Guantanamo base extended the dichotomy between criollo and mulatta of the colonial
period to the modern era, inserting the foreign white male symbolically at the opposite
end of the sexual continuum from the colored woman, replacing the white Cuban male as
the agent of sexual control (Fusco, 1998: 153).

As the Cuban economy shifted from an emphasis on sugar production towards
income generated from tourist revenue, the institution of prostitution became increasingly
present in the major cities and popular vacation spots. The explicit ties between
prostitution and Mafia presence on the island contributed to Cuba’s growing reputation as
a gloriously sinful playground, a “whorehouse for visiting Americans and former
Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista’s cronies” (Fusco, 1998: 153). In metaphorical and
literal senses, the exploitation of the women of Cuba’s bodies for foreign pleasure
contributed to the growing Revolutionary consciousness that culminated in the 1959
Revolution. The 1961 film Soy Cuba (I am Cuba) showcases the importance of the
sexual domination of women under Batista in creating a revolutionary consciousness in a
Soviet/Cuban co-production that includes three vignettes of exploitation in the 1950’s.
The first story includes that of a mixed-race prostitute named “Betty”/Maria who is
solicited by a Russian tourist, the second two story lines involve further exploitation of
the land or of other women, creating a dialect which equates the manipulation of Cuban
women with that of the land and the sovereignty of the nation.

As a reaction to this type of sexual exploitation, Castro introduced a series of
social initiatives in the first months of the Revolution, designed to provide goods and
services to millions of the islands’ poor who had been disenfranchised during the Batista
period. A second project undertaken by Castro’s regime was the eradication of the types of moral degeneracy and excess associated with the 1940’s and 50’s. The “re-education” of the former prostitutes became a correspondingly central piece of legislation beginning in 1961 when the newly formed FMC joined with the central Party leadership to institute a series of reforms aimed at eliminating sex work from the island. Interestingly, prostitution was not framed as a problem of lack of individual moral fiber, but rather a “product of pre-Revolutionary society’s selfish capitalist culture” (Bunck, 1994: 96). The programmatic offerings of the anti-prostitution campaign included the creation of semi-elective re-education centers where “[c]lasses were offered in skills such as hairdressing, typing, and sewing. Beauty parlors were set up in the institutions for the purpose of teaching the women to dress and fix their hair in ways that were not overly ornate, and all the women were briefed on table manners and helped to break other bad habits” (Salas, 1979: 99).

The relative success of these programs in reducing the number of sex workers on the island was touted as a major accomplishment of the Revolutionary government within is maxim of repatriation on all levels. In many respects, the treatment of the former sex workers can be seen as an effort similar to the repatriation of land away from foreign control – the women were not criminalized per say, but the loss of agency or control over the individual body can be interpreted as a deeply paternalistic approach, similar to the patriarch discussed in filmic terms by Laura Mulvey. Castro’s public persona benefited from the eradication of prostitution such that his “public image as a benevolent savior was substantially enhanced by the sympathy he expressed towards these supposedly ‘fallen’ women” (Fusco, 1998: 153).
It is in this context then, that the re-emergence of the sex trade in Cuba (though it had never been completely erased) has taken on special significance as a transgressive act. The dramatic downturn of the Cuban economy as a result of the fall of the Soviet Bloc placed serious economic hardships and imposed mass shortages of food and power on Cuban citizens. Women, whose continued dual positioning as caretakers and workers, suffered particularly under these shortages, which transformed the daily chores of buying food into torturous odysseys. It was in the context of the “Special Period in Peacetime” that many women turned back to sex work, as a method of gaining access to goods and services unavailable in the peso economy.\(^v\)

The character of sex work in recent years has provided a distinct contrast to the pre-Revolutionary period, necessitating a re-evaluation of the concept of prostitution in recent years, particularly in terms of individual agency. Currently, the most visible category of sex-worker in Cuba takes the form of a jinatera, defined as the young women who are present outside almost all major hotels in Havana, wearing all degrees of identifiable costume (from the stiletto heels and tight outfits to more nondescript clothing). An article in *The Nation*, describes the environment in and around Havana’s major hotels describing how,

> “Cuban women sit with tourists or stand apart in postures of availability. At first glance it may seem that Havana is teeming with prostitutes, and in fact direct cash exchanges for sex are becoming increasingly common. But more familiar is a practice akin to that plied by old-time dance-hall girls – women offering their company, their conversation, their charm, in return for a pricey meal, a night of drinks and dancing or a chance to shop at the dollar stores” (“Working for the Tourist Dollar: Cuba’s New Economy,” Jon Glazer and Kurt Hollander, 1992: 820).

The difference between jinaterismo and prostitution can then read as a question of intent, whether there is a direct exchange of dollars for sex or a more complex relationship.
Castro has been quick to contrast the actions of the *jinateras* with the pre-Revolutionary prostitutes, ignoring as many of the structural necessities in the present day as he was quick to focus on the structural demands of the exploitative relationship with foreign capital during the 1950’s. In this way, the responsibility for the transgressive act is placed on the shoulders of the individual women, a direct contrast to the blame placed on the external capitalist system before the Revolution. Bunck (1994) draws the contrast, saying, “Castro maintained, these women are ‘jinateras,’ not prostitutes, since no one forces them to sell themselves to their customers. ‘Those women who do so, do it on their own’” (Quoting Castro in August 1992, 119). Cabezas (1998) takes issue with the implied morality directed at the *jinateras*, saying, “these claims operate from within a conceptual framework that addresses the ‘problem’ of prostitution as one of moral turpitude... Furthermore, implied herein is that the growth of sexual commerce is due to a lack of morality, or perhaps even revolutionary consciousness, and not of economics, lack of viable opportunities, and women’s determination to control their own bodies” (83). 

However viewed, the presence of *jinateras* has become a vital visual symbol for opponents of Castro’s government, as is the case in the 1993 film, *Azucar Amarga*. That the women of Cuba, and particularly the mulatta women most employed in the sex-trade, have come full circle in respect to foreign exploitation of the bodily form becomes, “the ultimate sign of the system having failed Cuban women” (Fusco, 1998: 154). Whether this is indeed the case, or whether sex work in the present day has the same meanings as in the pre-Revolutionary period is not within the scope of the paper. However, the primacy of the *jinatera* as a visual symbol in the collective consciousness has taken on
great importance in the circulation of images in the recent period. In the next section, I will begin to examine the particular problematic of visual symbols in post-Revolutionary Cuba, by close readings of select films as they relate to the circulation of images of women, both within and outside of Cuba.

**Close Reading of Films:**

After watching these, and many other films, I realized the true scope of the appropriation of women's bodies for didactic purposes of all orientations within the Cuban system. I have chose to focus on these three films because I believe that they show a spectrum of the types of images portrayed, and hint at the underlying ideologies governing the image production. I include these analyses with limited theoretical or critical review because I believe they speak for themselves in illustrating many of the theoretical points previously explored. In addition, I would hope that these descriptions stand in the place of visual clips in order to illustrate the artistic interpretation of the ideology previously mentioned.

**Lucia (Humberto Solás, 1969)**

In 1969 26-year-old director Humberto Solás, under the auspices of ICAIC, produced an unprecedented epic that explored the stories of three women named Lucia throughout Cubaa history corresponding to the three distinct epochs, the stages of colonialism, neo-colonialism and socialist revolution (Chanan, 1985: 225). The narrative structure is of vignette style, with no continuity through the stories except their undercurrent of oppression and the fact that they are united by a central thematic element – the use of women on whose bodies the history of the different eras is inscribed. In rationalizing his choice of women as the protagonists for all three stories, Solás describes
how, "The woman's role always lays bare the contradictions of a period and makes them explicit... Lucia 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 transparently affected at any given moment by contradictions and changes" (quoted in Burton, 1986: 150). In depicting three seminal moments in Cuban history through the eyes of female protagonists, Solás has further feminized the Cuban historical body politic.

In the first story, taking place in 1895, the character of Lucia is a member of the landowning class (the criollos) whose interest in an independent Cuba gave rise to the war against Spain. She is romanced by a Spaniard who claims split Cuban and Spanish identity (in order to differentiate himself from the peninsulares) and persuades her to run away with him to her family's rural coffee plantation. In the end, we discover that his romantic overtures were only a masquerade to get her to show him the way to the coffee plantation where her revolutionary brother is hiding, and where her brother and the other's fighting for independence are eventually massacred by her lover's Spanish troops.

A second important female character in the 1895 story of Lucia is the figure of Fernandina, the village crazy-woman who in a horrific sequence earlier is shown to have gone crazy after being brutally attacked and raped on the battlefield after she (while working as a nun) was comforting wounded men.

In the final scene, Lucia, driven mad by the realization that she has betrayed her brother, rushes into the town square and stabs her former lover (now wearing the uniform of the Spanish army) to death. She runs away from the scene and is shunned by all the other members of her former social circle. In the end, only Fernandina comforts her, clutching her in an embrace as she screams in agony. The visual style of the first piece of
*Lucia* is particularly notable because of its appropriation of the characters' subjectivities via the use of hand-held cameras and dizzying shots of the battlefield and the chaotic rape scene. Solás has discussed his influences, including Visconti, in his decision to “re-create the romantic culture that dominated that historical period” and to portray a hyper-stylized almost surreal vision of social codes and early formation of revolutionary fervor (Meyerson, 1973: 117). Critics have read the story of *Lucia 1895* as a parable for “the rape of Cuba by Spain” as seen in both the rape scene of Fernandina by Spanish soldiers, and the betrayal of Lucia by her Spanish lover (Anna Marie Taylor quoted in Chanan, 1985: 227). The final sequence of Lucia’s vengeance “is not just a murder for revenge, but the execution of the oppressor” (Chanan, 1985: 229).

The thread of action against an oppressor is continued in the second sequence, *Lucia 1932*, which occurs directly preceding the overthrow of then-dictator General Gerardo Machado in 1933. In this scenario, Lucia is a young upper-class woman whose father sends her away to live on a key with her mother in order to keep them from the growing political opposition to Machado. While living on the island, Lucia meets Aldo, a revolutionary who is recovering from his wounds at a safe-house. They form a relationship and eventually marry as Lucia leaves her family and her insular upper-class life in order to work in a cigar factory and join the popular struggle. After the triumph of the opposition, we see the inefficacy of the struggle as even the revolutionaries (except Aldo) fall into patterns of excess and a continuation of the bourgeois neo-colonial spirit under Machado. Aldo is finally murdered during a shoot-out showing his dedication to the goals of social equality, and a pregnant Lucia is taken to the morgue to see that he has died for his ideals. According to Meyerson (1973), the message is that “Lucia still has
her memories, but more that those she has a new way of life based on her commitment to struggle” (118).

This second episode is shot in a much more straightforward style than the first, which can be seen as similar, in some senses, to Hollywood movies of the 1930's causing some analysts to suggest that it is Solás' way of connecting the plot to the feeling of the era (see Chanan and Meyerson). Solás himself has declared this second storyline to be his favorite because it,

“grows in part out of the need to express this experience [of fighting against Machado, as Solás' own father had done in the 1930's] that, though not directly mine, touched me deeply... it is also true that the thirties were a very attractive period, a time of extraordinary richness in Cuban ideological life that had not yet been touched on in films... there came this second period [in the 30's] during which the interaction between political ideology and artistic activity proved extremely fruitful” (Burton, 1986: 149).

Also in this installment, Lucia's character can be seen using her role as a woman to create a feminized revolutionary consciousness. After having taken a job at a cigar factory, Lucia and her friend write slogans on the bathroom walls with their lipstick that read “Down with Machado” as an act of rebellion. Lucia's growing awareness is counterposed to the women who are shown with the rebellious “sell-outs” after Machado is overthrown. While she is diligently working in the factory, Aldo is attending a party in Havana populated by former revolutionaries and women on whose cleavage and overly made-up faces the camera constantly focuses.

In the third and final section, Lucia is a rural worker of mixed race whose marriage to an extremely macho man forces her to give up the work on the collective farm that she loves. Engaging what we have termed earlier, the “Engelsian Paradigm,” Lucia seeks self-realization and revolutionary participation through the world of labor.
At the start of the episode, Lucia happily runs out to join her truckload of worker friends who make fun of her for being late to work after spending the night with her boyfriend. She tells them that her fiancée, Tomás, doesn’t want her to work after they get married to which the other women laughingly reply that he should let her work and not shut her up in the house. This comment turns out not to be far from the truth as after Tomás and Lucia marry, she is not allowed out of the house and at one drunken moment, he literally pounds nails into the window frames to keep her shut up inside. The entire sequence is intercut with verses from a re-written “Guantanamera,” the iconic song of Cuba whose new verses comment on Lucia’s evolution and Tomás’ archaic attitudes.

After being enclosed the house (a commentary on the dichotomy between male public spaces and female private spaces, here taken to a higher degree), Lucia is so deluded by Tomás that she begins to doubt even her desire to work. The scenario is upended with the introduction of a young teacher from Havana who is there as part of the early-1960’s literacy campaign which brought upper-class and University students to the Cuban countryside to teach the entire population to learn to read. In his “Brigadista” (the name for the literacy brigades) uniform, the young teacher provides a powerful antithesis to Tomás’ counter-Revolutionary attitudes and behaviors. As he encourages her to leave Tomás in hushed tones over their reading and writing lessons, this messenger of the Revolution is symbolically equated with a departure from the traditional macho attitudes, and a vehicle through which women (and other oppressed peoples as Solás is quick to point out) can free themselves.

In keeping with the propaganda campaign to revision domestic responsibilities that was occurring in the 1960’s and 70’s, Solás presents a picture that clearly
demonstrates the Revolutionary goals of equal access to work for men and women. As in *Portrait of Teresa* and *Up to a Certain Point*, the best chance for individual fulfillment for Cuban women is through collective labor. However, like the other two films, *Lucia* only partially challenges the status quo, in the end she comes to Tomás to try to explain her desires, saying that she loves him, but that she also loves work. This scene occurs after a slapstick chase scene where Tomás has come to the salt fields to order Lucia back in the house. When she refuses and runs away, he chases after her and is in turn chased by the legion of Lucia’s co-workers who eventually wrestle him to the ground and keep him from further abusing her. At the end, Lucia says to Tomás (who has been humiliated and ostracized from the community) “I have to be useful, Tomás. If not, what do I want to live for... I came back because... because I can’t live without you. But I can’t stay the way you had me Tomás. I have to work. Please understand... I’m going to stick with you and I’m going to work at the farm... I’m staying right here because that’s what I married you for!” (Screenplay is included in Meyerson, 1973: 162).

Lucia’s struggle in this third chapter highlights what Solás describes as “the contradiction between a world that is avant-garde and radical in conception and an everyday morality that is archaic and full of preconceived ideas” (quoted in Meyerson, 1973: 120). In this way, Solás makes his political point via the intermediary of the woman’s struggle for autonomy, but without an explicitly feminist agenda. In discussing his reasons for using female protagonists in this and other films, Solás says, “because they are traditionally assigned to a submissive role, women have suffered more form 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” (in Burton, 1986: 151).

*Soy Cuba* (I am Cuba, Mikhail Kalatozov, 1961)

It is important to note that *Soy Cuba* is not solely a Cuban production (it was co-produced with Soviet filmmakers) and is therefore stylistically more similar to Soviet Social Realism than Cuban Imperfect Cinema (see Cook, 1996). It is also extremely propagandistic, but vital for the context of this study because it demonstrates the ways in which the social ills of the 1950’s are perceived as a catalyst for the Revolution. *Soy Cuba* is notable particularly in its personification of the island in the lilting voice-over that narrates the story. The film is a series of vignettes; each designed to highlight a certain aspect of pre-Revolution exploitation and social malaise.

The first story, and for our purposes the most salient, is that of a prostitute — “Betty.” In this allegory, Betty’s betrayal of her boyfriend Renee becomes a proxy for the desperation of women before the triumph of the Revolution. Because of its portrayal of a desolate woman prostitute is meant as an ideological polemic, *Soy Cuba* mirrors Castro’s own ideological stance in using pre-Revolutionary prostitution as the most vital symbol of social degeneracy. Betty’s story begins as the opening establishing shot pans to a group of tourists lounging by the poolside at the Havana Hilton. The fleshy sun-worshipping bodies are shown in a serious of extraneous underwater and lingering shots, highlighting their baroque extravagance. The Camera then turns to the interior, panning along a seemingly never-ending bar of attractive and heavily made-up Cuban women. If it is not already clear that these women are present only for the consumption of the tourist men, it is made explicit when the next shot shows a group of North American males
sitting at a table who eye the women and suggest to each other, “I’ll take that tasty morsel,” and “I’ll take that dish.” The Maitre D proceeds to tap the selected women on the shoulder who then make their way over to the table. It is also worth noting that at the table, the lone Russian resists the exploitation of the women, saying, “I don’t touch stuff like that.”

After the seedy interior of the nightclub, the following scene offers a marked contrast. The camera offers a close-up of an exuberant Afro-Cuban fruit vendor who joyfully sings to advertise his wares. He is carefully shot from below, figuring almost as the protagonist in a 1950’s musical who is ignorant of the bad luck about to befall him (a shot characteristic of contemporary Soviet Cinema). We quickly come to see that his girlfriend in the innocent romantic scene that follows was also one of the prostitutes at the bar the night before. He wants to woo her honestly, though he is a man of few means, by bringing fruit to her workplace every day though she refuses to tell him where she works. By contrasting the honest working Cuban to the ignoble prostitute, the films implicit misogyny indicts all prostitutes (and possibly all Cuban women) as passive participants in the island’s exploitation. He gives her a gift of a tangerine, a symbol that is to figure centrally in the scenes to come.

The story then turns again to the cabaret that evening, where Maria, who hides her identity by using the sex worker name “Betty” moves through the dark smoky club. The camera shoots from over her shoulder, in a semi-subjective sequence that displays the club as a sinful den of inequity. She is pulled into the group of prostitutes and tourists; overwhelmed she scowls and finally, intoxicated, dances herself into a swirling frenzy. At this moment, the camera appropriates her subjective confusion by peering up at the
leering faces of the other club-goers, mirroring her frenetic movements that can be seen as an approximation of a traditional spirit possession.

The previously reluctant Russian is enticed by her exotic dance performance and decides to take her home, saying that he will find it “interesante” (interesting). The two clandestine figures have to hop over a series of piles of garbage and rivulets of water, highlighting the gross inequality between the luxury nightclub and the squalid conditions she lives in – conditions that are fetishized by his outsider gaze. Once inside her clapboard shack, the walls seem to close in on Maria and the Russian as he reaches over to shut off the light – implying their sexual liaison. In the morning, he reaches over to her nightstand and peels the tangerine that had been a gift from her boyfriend, demonstrating how he symbolically steals from her and “dirties” her private world. Seconds later Renee enters the room and immediately sees what is going on just as the Russian leaves. The tourist has entered the world of the woman and “ruined” her, leaving the honest worker to pick up the pieces. As he attempts to leave the shantytown to return to the glamour of tourist Havana, he becomes lost in the endless maze of shacks and outstretched arms of small children who seem to multiply and close in on him begging for coins. He looks imploringly into the faces of the older Black women who sit despondently on the fringes of the scenes, nursing babies or smoking cigars. They look past him, hardened and uninterested, more consumed in the business of survival than in concerning themselves with the lost foreigner. As he searches around him and the camera shows the ever increasing impoverished mass, the voice over begins again, almost chanting, “I am Cuba. Why are you running away? You came to have fun. Go ahead, have fun. Isn’t this a happy picture? Don’t avert your eyes! Look! I am Cuba. For you I
am the casino, the bar, the hotels and the brothels... But the hands of these children and old people are also me. I am Cuba.”

The second vignette centers on an old campesino tenant farmer who quickly loses his land when the Creole landlord sells it to the United Fruit Company. Though the farmer has a young daughter whose body figures prominently in the tale, it is the synthesis of this story with that of the sex worker in the first makes the symbolic equation of the woman’s body with the land more literal. The “sale” for consumption of Betty’s body in the first story is aligned with the sale of the land for foreign interests in the second. In essence, the colonized body of the female is the colonized “body politic” of Cuba, so exploitation of the woman’s body by foreign tourists is the same as exploitation of the country by foreign corporations.

In the third story, a University student in Havana is called to protect a woman in the streets who is being chased and harassed by a group of American servicemen who taunt her and menace her. The semi-subjective camera demonstrates her fear of rape, and in the semiotic language of the film – the imminent rape of the country. The leering servicemen chase the helpless woman who has to be protected by the revolutionary student who physically protects her from the sailors. His growing revolutionary fervor increases throughout the story as he is finally seen giving a rousing anti-Batista speech on the steps of the University (in front of one of the most visible women in Havana, the statue of Alma Mater on the main staircase) and is brutally gunned down by Batista’s troops. Again, the symbolic language of equivalence is that of woman’s body as homeland, that protecting the figure of the woman from the imminent rape of the
American soldiers is associated with the desire to protect the “motherland” from the “rape” by foreign powers.

*Azucar Amarga (Bitter Sugar, Leon Ichaso, 1997)*

Like *Soy Cuba*, *Azucar Amarga* appropriates the image of a woman in crisis (in both cases, the crisis involves her turn to prostitution) to prove an ideological point. Just as *Soy Cuba* reifies the Revolution as “saving” the exploited pre-Revolutionary prostitute, *Azucar Amarga* attacks the Revolution in its contemporary incarnation as an evil dictatorship that has forced the re-entry into prostitution of its citizens. Additionally, like *Soy Cuba*, the film is designed around a central dogmatic point, and can be viewed similarly as propaganda on the opposite end of the political spectrum. What is interesting then, is that despite the obviously differing political stances of the two films, they both utilize the same figures of sexually exploited women to make their cases.

The basic plot line of *Azucar Amarga* follows the political evolution of the protagonist, Gustavo, a good young Communist who is supposed to study aeronautical engineering on a scholarship in Prague – a reward for his years of hard work and dedication to the Party. As the film unfolds, the hidden forces of Castro’s secret police become ever more present in Gustavo’s life – his brother is part of an underground rock group whose concerts get broken up, and eventually stages a protest by injecting himself with the AIDS virus and gets sent to a sanitarium.

The relationship that is most salient for the purposes of this paper is with his girlfriend Ana, who mirrors the “native beauty” of Tomás Guitierrez Alea’s female character in *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* and who is portrayed as idealistic and “untouched.” As a member of a community of artists who (it is implied, though not
actually shown) have been censored and persecuted by the government, she is far more critical than Gustavo of the Revolutionary government. As the film continues, their sexual relationship blossoms and finally is destroyed after she begins “dating” an Italian tourist in order to gain access to luxury goods and services unavailable to her as a Cuban woman during the “Special Period.” When Gustavo sees her prostituting herself in the bar of the hotel where his father works, he is furious and attacks the tourist, sending him into de facto exile from a society’s whose worst crime is attacking an investor. Eventually he becomes accustomed to Ana’s actions and realizes that they all must use what they have (!). An important second female figure (and prostitute) who underscores the symbol of exploitation of women is the character of a mulatta prostitute who figures emblematically in three climactic scenes.

On one of Gustavo’s first dates with Ana, the couple walk along the Malecón and stop to kiss. They are across the street from where a jinatera is working, calling out to passersby. The couple laughs and jokes with the woman, but Gustavo remarks that she is going to be in for trouble when the police see her. In fact, a police truck pulls up seconds later and the cop flirts for his own sexual favors. This first piece of Gustavo’s disillusionment with the government the body of the woman, the “deviant” to be corrected by the forces of the Revolution, is in fact only an extension of their own deviance.

This same prostitute figures importantly in several following scenes, where her relationship to Gustavo, and the semi-subjective camera shows how the necessity of prostitution is not the failure of the individual but of the society. As the film continues, at the time when Gustavo is trying to learn to deal with Ana’s “extra-curricular” activities,
he sees the same jinatera during the day, in normal clothing, playing with her daughter. At this moment he sees the seedy underbelly in more clear way, that the necessity of being a jinatera has transformed every citizen of the island, and that for women, the use of the body is on of the most horrible and yet lucrative items that they can sell.

Finally, after a series of events, Gustavo has lost all belief in what at the start of the film, he believed in so strongly. In a conversation with his father, Gustavo’s father expresses the central thesis of the film – that the “La Revolución Está en Venta” (The Revolution is For Sale, a play on words as one of the main slogans of the Revolution still emblazoned on walls all over the country is “Revolución Está en Marcha/ The Revolution is on the March). His father asks Gustavo “who did they learn it [how to sell themselves] from? You went to Lenin school?” Gustavo answers “from whom?” and his father replies, “Shit, you don’t know? From Fidel, the biggest whore in Cuban history – ‘Puta o Muerte!’” (Whore or Death, another play on words from the most famous slogan of the Revolution, Patria o Muerte/Socialismo o Muerte – Fatherland or Death/Socialism or Death). In the final moments of the film, before his desperate attempt at assassinating Castro, Gustavo sees the same jinatera shot from a low angle in front of a huge mural of Fidel, visually connecting the sale of the country to the leader himself. In this way, the body of the jinatera herself becomes the symbol for Gustavo’s awakening to the realities of the country, and finally for his realization that the country as a whole has become a prostitute like the woman – sold to the highest bidder by their leader.

Conclusion:

After reading much more feminist film analysis than I ultimately included here, I was struck at the pervasiveness of the structures of patriarchy that determine the use of
women as focalizers in all film traditions, and for all purposes. The Cuban context is particularly salient because of the unusual construction of the film Industry as a state-sponsored vehicle for the arbitration of nationality, but the conclusions included here are certainly not specific to this context. While I do not feel that the state sponsorship of the film industry has universally resulted in harmful depictions of women, it is important for filmmakers of all types to confront underlying patriarchal structures in order to contribute to an increased plurality of depictions of women in popular media.

Recently, I attended an event at Philadelphia’s University of the Arts where the former head of the Cuban radio and television collective (the equivalent of ICAIC for radio and T.V.) was presenting his work in a burgeoning collective of Independent video producers in Cuba. Informed by the rich Cuban film tradition, these video-makers have been working tangentially with ICAIC to produce short fiction and documentary films. In this modern era, they are extra-statal, they do not work within the ICAIC system but collaborate with individuals and production groups. One short film included in the talk struck me as particularly related to my thesis topic of the interrelation between the nationalization of the film industry and the production of national sentiment. In this film, called *Cuatro Hermanas* (Four Sisters), produced by a video collective called “T.V. Serrano,” the filmmakers chose to focus on the lives of four elderly sisters in the mountains of the Oriente province (considered very rural by many Cubans). The documentary short introduces the four sisters and lets them describe their quotidian life in their own words and gestures, using close-ups to follow the looks and expressions of the sisters and following them as they go about their daily tasks. The sisters express many of the same desires for autonomy through labor as those expressed in the fiction films, but
without the same lingering impression of propaganda. None of the sisters are married, yet as a unit they are self-sufficient, though they do express some regrets about their lives, and nostalgia for their youth.

The idea of “T.V. Serrano” illustrates perfectly the possibilities for image distribution and formation of national consciousness we discussed earlier. The stated goals of the video collective (who receive most of their funding from UNESCO and some from ICAIC) are to film the lives of people living in the rural areas of the country and present them to the nation in dignified and respectful manners. The idea is to present to the urbanites what the world of their fellow Cubans looks and feels like in a way that is conducive to the project of creating a cohesive national identity. T.V. Serrano has taken as its central mission to capture the stories that have been lost and share them with a wider audience. The possibilities for video production lend a new dimension to this thesis and a possible direction for the future. The costs of video production are much lower than film, and the relationship between video collectives and ICAIC at the present time allows for the likelihood of productive future collaborations.

I introduce this discussion of video by way of conclusion in order to demonstrate the ways in which the Cuban film (and now, video) industry is constantly changing technique in relationship to its maxim of informing the construction of nationhood through visual media. The theories of visual anthropology, visual analysis and feminist film theory have allowed us to examine the case of post-Revolutionary Cuban representations of women on film as they relate to the larger ideological project of creating a coherent and unified nation. The framework explored herein provides us with
a good basis through which we can consider the uses and misuses of women in contemporary Cuban film and video, as well as in a multitude of other contexts.
ENDNOTES

Anderson offers three paradoxes for understanding the nation: he first calls attention to the transformation in meaning of nationhood in the modern context versus the ancient, secondly, he queries whether nationality is inherent and intrinsically possessed, as is gender (which will be problematized later), and third, whether the “political” power of nations has any coherence (5).

Both Guitierrez Alea and Garcia Espinosa had studied at the famous Centro Sperimentale in Rome where many of the neo-realist traditions of social critique, including use of non-professional actors, a reaction to the montage aesthetic and a dedication to portraying stories of social and economic alienation had been born in the early 1950s.

At the time, more than 58.9% of Cuban households were considered “multi-generational” (Bengelsdorf, 1997: 231).

During the Special Period, the shortages of state-sponsored goods in the local “peso” stores led to the spread of the informal “gray” economy where Cubans with access to dollars could pay for items unavailable to the rest of the population. The degree of the shortages was so severe that many Cubans had to resort to illegal dollar transactions in order to ensure minimal survival. Because the illegal transactions were being conducted in dollars, Cubans with relatives abroad, or who worked in industries with access to foreign currency (i.e. Tourism), became a privileged class – in a sense mirroring the pre-Revolutionary social structure. It was in this context that Castro officially legalized the dollar as a form of currency in 1994.

Jean Mitry (1997) writes, “the sole purpose of the subjective image... is to show us what the character is seeing” whereas the semi-subjective image includes the character in the shot and “remain[s] descriptive but shared in the character’s point of view” (215).
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