

The Aesthetics of Socialism: Cultural
Polemics in 1960s Cuba

Rebecca J. Gordon-Nesbitt

The Aesthetics of Socialism: Cultural Polemics in 1960s Cuba

Rebecca J. Gordon-Nesbitt

1. Between 1940 and 1944, Batista had served as the elected president of Cuba, establishing a constitutional democracy which he viciously eradicated after seizing power in 1952.

2. A poet who had undertaken a doctoral study of modern Cuban poetry and won the 1952 National Prize for Literature, Roberto Fernández Retamar (b. 1930) co-founded the *New Cuban Magazine* in the year of revolutionary victory. Having played a modest role in the urban struggle from the relative safety of Havana, he took up a diplomatic post in Paris, returning to Havana in 1961 to become secretary of the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC) and co-editor (with the respected novelist, Alejo Carpentier) of its in-house magazine, *Unión*, until 1964. In spring 1965, he was appointed editor of the eponymous journal of the pan-American cultural house, Casa de las Américas, becoming president of the organisation in 1986, a post he retains to date.

3. Roberto Fernández Retamar, 'Hacia Una Intelectualidad Revolucionaria En Cuba' [Towards a Revolutionary Intelligentsia in Cuba, 1966], *Cuba Defendida* [Cuba Defended], (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 2004).

4. Roberto Fernández Retamar, 'A Cuarenta Años de "Palabras a los Intelectuales"' [To Forty Years of 'Words to the Intellectuals' 2001], *Cuba Defendida*, p. 298.

5. Visiting the Sierra Maestra in February 1958 to negotiate with Fidel on behalf of the PSP, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez (1913–97) would be the first party member to join the 26 July Movement, three months before his comrades, going on to fight in the insurrection and occupy various posts in the revolutionary government, including Deputy Minister of Culture and Vice President of the Republic.

6. Joining the precursor of the PSP in 1932, Mirta Aguirre (1912–80) would come to occupy the role of Director of Theatre and Dance in the National Council of Culture (CNC).

7. Founding president of the Cuban Communist Party.

8. Born in Santiago de Cuba, Harold Gramatges (1918–2008) was a composer, pianist and teacher. He founded and directed Cuba's Municipal Conservatory Orchestra, where he worked as professor of Harmony, Composition, Aesthetics and Music History. In 1959, he created the Musical Department at Casa de las Américas.

Introduction

On 16 April 1961, at the funeral for those killed during the prelude to the Bay of Pigs invasion, Fidel Castro famously declared the Cuban Revolution to be socialist in character. This announcement – made some sixteen months after his 26 July Movement had ousted Cuba's unelected president,¹ General Fulgencio Batista – caused a certain amount of consternation among the country's creative communities. The Cuban writer, Roberto Fernández Retamar,² would later describe how, at that time, socialism was often perceived as having frozen into a monolith that inhibited politics, pluralism, and thinking more generally, turning Marxism from an orthodoxy without windows into a heterodoxy without sense.³ In the process of its reinvention in Cuba, he argued, socialism would need adequate ethics and corresponding aesthetics. 'However, for numerous writers and artists of the left, not only in Cuba but all over the world, a phantom was abreast – that of a monstrous deformation incarnate in socialist realism, which caused incalculable damage in countries called socialist'.⁴ This ambiguity around the aesthetic implications of socialism provoked a lively and extended debate, which will be explored in greater depth here.

Political Backdrop to Aesthetic Discussions

Fidel's proclamation of the socialist character of the Revolution served to exacerbate fears, among the artistic avant-garde, about the undue influence of the Stalinist-inflected Partido Socialista Popular [Popular Socialist Party (PSP)]. Having remained vehemently opposed to armed struggle until less than three months before revolutionary triumph, the PSP had paid close attention to the development of culture on the island. The attack on Batista's second largest army barracks at Moncada on 26 July 1953 – which triggered the Revolution and provided the nascent insurgent movement with its name – had prompted the PSP to deepen its synergy with culture. The party set up a Commission for Intellectual Work, led by Carlos Rafael Rodríguez,⁵ Mirta Aguirre⁶ and Juan Marinello,⁷ and forged an alliance with an influential cultural society known as *Nuestro Tiempo* [Our Time]. Founded in 1951, by a group of young musicians, painters, poets, and writers frustrated by the rift between their creative work and the Cuban people, the society organised an average of five or six cultural activities per month as an antidote to the prevailing regime's elitist programme.

Looking back on *Nuestro Tiempo* more than two decades after its inception, its founding president, Harold Gramatges,⁸ reflected that it seemed logical that those responsible for the ideological questions of the PSP would have an interest in the youthful members of the society who were using their creative efforts to denounce contemporaneous reality.⁹ *Nuestro Tiempo* began to use the unoccupied office of

the party-run Mil Diez [1010] radio station as its headquarters, and the PSP began to orientate the society into a revolutionary cultural vehicle. Its directorate was restructured, with film-makers – including Tomás Gutiérrez Alea,¹⁰ Julio García Espinosa,¹¹ Alfredo Guevara Valdés,¹² and José Massip¹³ – occupying prominent positions. Having initially considered its work to be more aesthetic than political, the society's critique of the dictatorship became increasingly explicit, leading its members to be monitored by the security services and periodically interrogated and imprisoned. This ideological turn caused certain members – notably Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Carlos Franqui, about whom we shall hear more in due course – to leave the society.

Guided by the PSP's Commission for Intellectual Work, *Nuestro Tiempo* began to develop policies pertaining to culture. So, for example, a conference, hosted by the society on 17 June 1954, provoked a treatise from Gutiérrez Alea on the realities of film-making in Cuba, in which he outlined the shared objective of creating a high-quality cinematic industry that had the capacity to become both a vehicle of national expression and an important source of work and wealth. Expressing admiration for the Italian film industry in general and the neorealist attitude in particular, Gutiérrez Alea predicted that, by directing their attention towards everyday life and promoting sincerity over artifice, Cuban film-makers could discover their own language and profoundly local subject matter, grounded in the reality of the people.¹⁴ The following year, under the auspices of *Nuestro Tiempo*, the film-makers mentioned here, who had spent time at the Experimental Film School in Rome, collaborated on a short neorealist film, called *El Mégano*, which was banned by Batista's regime.

Inception of the Cuban Film Institute

Following the triumph of the Revolution in January 1959, one of the *Nuestro Tiempo* film-makers, Alfredo Guevara Valdés (no relation to Ernesto 'Che' Guevara), was asked to help draft the Agrarian Reform Law, which divided all estates over 1,000 acres into smaller plots to be distributed among the landless. Guevara Valdés had met Fidel at university when they were both nineteen years old. Between 1949 and 1951, he had spent time in Paris, Prague, and Rome, where he developed his love of cinema. Returning from Europe, Guevara Valdés joined the PSP and was entrusted with selling the party newspaper, *Hoy* [Today], on the streets of Havana. Taking part in the training that preceded the Moncada barracks attack, he had become frustrated with the party's resolute focus on the mass movement at the expense of insurrection. This combined with other factors to prompt his defection from the party to the 26 July Movement, which saw him participating in acts of urban resistance and being detained and tortured by Batista's officials.

Having initially told Guevara Valdés that he would not be able to fulfil his vocation within cinema, Fidel relented and asked him to draw up the legislation for a new film institute. The former seized the opportunity, assembling a small advisory group that included Gutiérrez Alea and García Espinosa and applied itself to the task of inscribing the Cuban film industry into law. On 20 March 1959, just eleven weeks after revolutionary victory, the Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industrias Cinematográficas [Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Arts and Industries (ICAIC)] came into being (Fig. 1). Echoing Gutiérrez Alea's earlier thoughts, it was recognised that an entirely new apparatus would be needed for the production and dissemination of film. It is here, in the first piece of revolutionary legislation referring to ideological-cultural activity, that we first encounter the humanism that would underwrite revolutionary approaches to

9. Cited in Hernández Luis Hernández Otero (ed.), *Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo: Resistencia y Acción* [Our Time Cultural Society: Resistance and Action] (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 2002).

10. Visiting the guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra, Tomás 'Titón' Gutiérrez Alea (1928–96) went on to make some of the best-known films of the revolutionary era, including *Death of a Bureaucrat* (1966), *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968) and *Strawberry and Chocolate* (1993).

11. Julio García Espinosa (born 1926) made some of the earliest documentaries of the Revolution, including *Housing*, which sought to explain the urban reform laws.

12. Alfredo Guevara Valdés (1925–2013) was a key protagonist in the story being told here, and will be introduced fully in due course.

13. José 'Pepe' Massip (born 1926) assisted García Espinosa on the production of *Housing*, going on to direct many films.

14. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 'Realidades Del Cine En Cuba' [Realities of Cinema in Cuba] (1954), *Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo*, p. 177.



Fig. 1. Foyer of the Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industrias Cinematográficas [Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Arts and Industries (ICAIC)], showing silk-screened film posters. (Courtesy Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt.)

15. This essay is taken from a book-length study, entitled *To Defend the Revolution is to Defend Culture: The Cultural Policy of the Cuban Revolution* (Oakland: PM Press, 2015), which elaborates the Marxist humanist cultural policy that eventually prevailed over orthodox tendencies.

16. José Bell, Delia Luisa López, and Tania Caram, *Documentos De La Revolución Cubana 1959* [Documents of the Cuban Revolution 1959] (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2008), p. 152.

17. With a brief hiatus from 1980 to 1991 when he worked for UNESCO, Guevara Valdés continued his involvement with ICAIC through the annual Latin American film festival until his death in 2013.

18. Alfredo Guevara Valdés in conversation with Leadro Estupiñán Zalvidar, 'El Peor Enemigo De La Revolución Es La Ignorancia' [The Worst Enemy of the Revolution is Ignorance], *Revista Caliban*, May 2007.

culture;¹⁵ the creation of ICAIC presumed that, liberated from servitude, cinema would 'contribute all its resources to the development and enrichment of the new humanism inspiring the Revolution'.¹⁶ Describing cinema as an art, the two main objectives of ICAIC became: (i) to enrich the field of Cuban culture (by developing a new medium of artistic expression, consistent with the Cuban cultural tradition and in an atmosphere of free creation) and (ii) to form a more knowledgeable, critical, and hence revolutionary, public. Guevara Valdés agreed to serve as President-Director of ICAIC for an initial three years, with the intention of making films thereafter; in the event, this task would continue until his retirement in 2000,¹⁷ giving rise to entirely new mechanisms for the production, dissemination, and contextualisation of Cuban film.

In an autobiographical conversation conducted in 2007, Guevara Valdés hinted at the root cause of earlier tensions when he described how the three parties entering into revolutionary alliance in July 1961 (the 26 July Movement, the PSP and the Revolutionary Student Directorate) agreed to dissolve their internal structures, but the PSP failed to disband its commissions, including the Commission for Intellectual Work.¹⁸ As we shall see, this would lead to much turbulence and insecurity in the years to come.

The National Council of Culture

For two full years following revolutionary victory, the main official entity to promote Cuban culture was the Cultural Directorate of the Rebel Army. In January 1961, the Consejo Nacional de Cultura [National Council of Culture (CNC)] was set up under the Ministry of Education, governed by a president, vice president, secretary, and five other executive members. For the following fifteen years, tasks of an artistic and literary nature would be delegated to the CNC. In its first incarnation, the council was presided over by Edith García Buchaca,¹⁹ and we gain a great deal of insight from her pamphlet, *The Theory of the Superstructure: Literature and Art*, which was published as one of the council's first gestures. In this, she concedes art and literature to be social phenomena, locating the history of art within the history of man, but she persists in confining culture to the superstructure.²⁰ In the introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859, Marx defines the material superstructure as the skeleton upon which art is organised, tying this to the underlying economic structure from which all consciousness emanates.²¹ While a narrow reading of this formulation permits cultural institutions to be regarded as part of the superstructure, cultural production, and intellectual engagement would seem to relate more closely to the creation of social consciousness, which is inextricable from the economic base. In turn, this implies that, when the economic structure of society changes – as it did in Cuba throughout the 1960s – so, too, do social, political and intellectual life. By isolating culture from shifting socio-economic realities and exempting it from the process of transforming consciousness (while simultaneously berating artists and writers for their lack of engagement in these areas), García Buchaca treated culture as a frozen and dislocated entity. By confining culture to the superstructure, she effectively argued for the autonomy of art, denuding the cultural field of its political potential.

Until being relieved of her post in 1964, García Buchaca was supported in her work at the CNC by the PSP militant, Mirta Aguirre. Guevara Valdés remembers García Buchaca and Aguirre as talented and cultured, while self-admittedly exaggerating that they were more Stalinist than Stalin.²² This brings to mind a word to which the writer, Edmundo Desnoes, introduces us in a novella that formed the screenplay for Gutiérrez Alea's 1968 film, *Memories of Underdevelopment* – 'saramponado: meased; a person intoxicated with too much Marxist-Leninist theory, a dogmatic revolutionary'.²³

Various commentators have questioned the revolutionary government's willingness to delegate implementation of cultural policy to the PSP, some perceiving this as evidence of Fidel's lack of interest in culture.²⁴ However, this would have seemed logical at the time, given the party's early fomentation of cultural activism around *Nuestro Tiempo*. What was regrettable was that the *saramponados* were permitted to dominate as more moderate PSP protagonists (such as Carlos Rafael Rodríguez) were deployed elsewhere.

In the beginning, the CNC concerned itself with ironing out some of the organisational anarchy that existed in the cultural field, and the majority of cultural producers initially identified with the council's intentions.²⁵ While the majority of cultural organisations were taken under the CNC umbrella, ICAIC retained its juridical autonomy; nonetheless, the cinematic institute's activities were reported on by the council within the broader ambit of revolutionary cultural policy, and ICAIC representatives participated in meetings at which cultural policy was decided. Retrospectively considering the polemics of this period, former president of the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de



Fig. 2. Covers of *Lunes de Revolución*. (Courtesy Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt.)



Fig. 2. (continued)

19. A long-standing member of the Cuban Communist Party and former leader of its youth group, Edith García Buchaca (1916–79) was the first wife of Carlos Rafael Rodríguez (mentioned above), going on to marry fellow party stalwart, Joaquín Ordoquí.

20. Edith García Buchaca, *La Teoría De La Superestructura: La Literatura y El Arte* [The Theory of the Superstructure: Literature and Art] (La Habana: Consejo Nacional de Cultura, 1961).

21. Karl Marx, introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977 [1859]).

22. Guevara Valdés, 'El Peor Enemigo De La Revolución Es La Ignorancia', 2007.

23. Edmundo Desnoes, *Memories of Underdevelopment* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971 [1968]), p. 62.

Cuba [National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC)], Graziella Pogolotti, finds that subordination under this hierarchical organisation ended the possibility of well-defined institutions determining their own cultural policy. For her, this bringing-together of diverse entities under one official arm promoted dialogue between distinct intellectual families and made latent discrepancies visible.²⁶ Within a few months of its creation, tension between the CNC's leadership and the country's creative intellectuals would be in evidence.

Lunes de Revolución

It will be remembered that a group of cultural protagonists had broken away from *Nuestro Tiempo* in response to the perceived PSP takeover of the cultural society. Central among them were the writer, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and Carlos Franqui, a self-educated film aficionado from a peasant family, who, during the insurrectionary years, had been responsible for running the 26 July Movement newspaper, *Revolución*, and the broadcasting service, Radio Rebelde, the two main vehicles through which the guerrillas were able to communicate with the Cuban people.

When the *comandantes* marched victoriously upon Havana, Franqui had the idea of setting up a cultural supplement to *Revolución*. Cabrera Infante, who would edit this weekly magazine with fellow writer, Pablo Armando Fernández, named it *Lunes* [Monday], to emphasise its appearance at the start of the working week. A total of 131 issues were produced between 23 March 1959 and 6 November 1961, quadrupling in size from an initial twelve pages and increasing its distribution from 100,000 to 250,000 copies over its short lifespan, making it the most-read supplement in Latin America.

In the immediate post-revolutionary period, the writers and artists around *Lunes* participated in a reform of the aesthetic vocabulary. With bold layouts evoking concrete poetry (Fig. 2), *Lunes* advocated a modernist rupture with the past, championing new Latin American writers over the old guard. The group professed themselves hopeful that it might be possible to correct the historical error of Marxism-Leninism, which, in rejecting Modernism, had reinforced the segregation between political and artistic vanguards. Following his late-1960s exile, Franqui would reminisce about how, having fostered connections with the heirs of the European avant-garde, the editors of *Lunes* had advocated maximum aesthetic freedom in an attempt to bring the best universal art to the people of Cuba:

Our thesis was that we had to break down the barriers that separated elite culture from mass culture. We wanted to bring the highest quality of culture to hundreds of thousands of readers. We were motivated by a motto we got directly from Jose Martí: 'Culture brings freedom.' So we published huge editions with pictures and texts by Marx, Borges, Sartre, Neruda, Faulkner, Lezama Lima, Martí, Breton, Picasso, Miró, Virginia Woolf, Trotsky, Bernanos, and Brecht.²⁷

But, it has been observed that the *Lunes* approach implied belonging to a professional group of partial subjects, in which Sartre's doctrine of 'commitment' secured for intellectuals their participation in politics without abandoning their own field.²⁸ This position would find itself at odds with a revolutionary process in which cultural producers were increasingly being urged to play an active part in both shaping society and producing autochthonous works that demonstrated a thoroughgoing understanding of the process of societal change. In a message of support to the first anniversary

edition of *Lunes*, Fidel positioned the people of Cuba as the missing link between the Revolution and culture and Che Guevara discerned an intellectualism in *Lunes* which, at times, placed the supplement beyond Cuban reality.

First Fractures

Towards the end of 1960, *Lunes* began hosting a weekly half-hour programme on Channel Two of Cuban national television. As Christmas approached, Guillermo Cabrera Infante gave his brother, Sabá, \$500 to finish a thirteen-minute film he was making with Orlando Jiménez Leal, on the condition that it was premiered on the *Lunes* television programme. In May 1961, just a few weeks after the US-backed invasion of the Bay of Pigs by Cuban counter-revolutionaries, *PM (Pasado Meridiano)* was screened. Shot in black and white on 16 mm stock using a hand-held camera, this *cinéma vérité*-style film depicts what might have been thought of as the seedier side of Havana – the drinking, dancing, and sexual abandon that had hitherto been synonymous with its nightlife. Following its first national television outing, the *Lunes* team sought cinema distribution of the short film. Understanding its contentious depiction of persistent pre-revolutionary mores, they offered *PM* to Cinema Rex, one of the few private film houses in Havana that was not run by ICAIC. Combined with the fact that the film had been edited at the Estudios del Río [River Studios], which had not yet been nationalised by ICAIC, the production and attempted distribution of *PM* was interpreted as an attempt to create a parallel structure which threatened the autonomy and authority of the film institute.

At the same time as ICAIC had been created, a Commission for the Study and Classification of Films was set up to assess the ‘moral, aesthetic, social and political characteristics’ of all films screened on the island.²⁹ On 12 May 1961, *PM* was submitted to the commission for consideration, and it was decided that the short ‘offered a partial picture of Havana night life which impoverishes, disfigures and diverts the attitude maintained by the Cuban people against the cunning attacks of counter-revolutionaries and the dictates of Yankee imperialism’ and that permission for its further distribution should be refused.³⁰ Guevara Valdés was informed of the commission’s decision, and *Lunes* immediately mobilised support for the film, producing a protest document and collecting almost 200 signatures.

The statement in which the commission’s decision was issued also announced that, to avoid misinterpretation, the film would be screened in the presence of the Association of Artists and Writers and the film-makers on 31 May, with the intention of either ratifying the original decision as democratically correct or rejecting it as mistaken and submitting the film to its makers. In a letter to the association the day before the meeting, ICAIC made mention of the technical qualities of the film but maintained that it was far from being a ‘correct vision’ of Cuban existence in its current revolutionary phase.³¹ This missive acknowledged that the decision to prohibit national distribution – which had been condoned by the highest authorities of the revolutionary government and distinguished intellectuals and artists – had given rise to fears of a possible attack on creative freedom in the aesthetic terrain. While maintaining the validity of its decision, ICAIC expressed a willingness to immediately reverse it if asked to do so by any of the workers’, student, military, or mass organisations. At the screening, Guevara Valdés was absent, but Aguirre and her CNC team attended. The subsequent discussion apparently provoked an overwhelming majority – including those who defended and sympathised with the film – in favour of the commission’s original decision that further

24. See, for example, Carlos Franqui, *Family Portrait with Fidel* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983).

25. See Nicola Miller, ‘A Revolutionary Modernity: The Cultural Policy of the Cuban Revolution’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 40, Special Issue 04 (Cuba: 50 Years of Revolution), 2008.

26. Graziella Pogolotti (ed.), *Polémicas Culturales De Los 60* [Cultural Polemics of the 1960s] (La Habana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 2006).

27. Franqui, *Family Portrait with Fidel*, p. 129.

28. See Ariel González, ‘Lunes de Revolución y la Ideostética del Compromiso [Lunes de Revolución and the Ideo-Aesthetics of Commitment]’, *Temas*, 30, July–September 2002, pp. 83–90.

29. ICAIC Accord on the Prohibition of *PM*, William Luis, *Lunes de Revolución: Literatura y cultura en los primeros años de la Revolución Cubana* [Lunes de Revolución: literature and culture in the early years of the Cuban Revolution] (Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2003), p. 223.

30. Luis, *Lunes de Revolución*, p. 223.

31. Communication sent by ICAIC to the Association of Artists and Writers, 30 May 1961, Luis, *Lunes de Revolución*, p. 224.

32. Accord Adopted by the Commission for the Study and Classification of Films, 1 June 1961, Luis, *Lunes de Revolución*, p. 225.

33. Osvaldo Dorticós Torrado (1919–83), who had been a young communist, served as President of the Republic from 1959 to 1976, consistently arguing that high-quality artistic productions (rather than vulgar, populist works) be made available to the Cuban people.

34. Fidel Castro Ruz, 'Words to the Intellectuals' [1961], *The Revolution and Cultural Problems in Cuba* (Havana: Ministry of Foreign Relations, 1962).

35. Reported in Sandra del Valle, 'Cine y Revolución: La política cultural del ICAIC en los sesenta' [Cinema and Revolution: The cultural policy of ICAIC in the 1960s], *Perfiles de la Cultura Cubana*, May–December 2002.

36. Guillermo Cabrera Infante in Luis, *Lunes de Revolución*, p. 47.

37. 'Literatura y Revolución: Entrevista a Carlos Franqui [Literature and Revolution: Interview with Carlos Franqui]' in Luis, *Lunes de Revolución*.

38. KS Karol, *Guerrillas in Power: The Course of the Cuban Revolution* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p. 40.

39. Pogolotti, *Polémicas Culturales*.

40. Kees Boterbloem, *The Life and Times of Andrei Zhdanov, 1896–1948* (Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), p. 116.

41. Boterbloem, *The Life and Times of Andrei Zhdanov*, p. 116.

distribution of the film would be injurious to the people of Cuba, and a statement was made to this effect.³²

When *PM* failed to secure a licence, options for alternative distribution were limited. The *Lunes* team approached Guevara Valdés at the cinematic institute and called him a fascist for refusing to help them. In the event, the Commission for the Study and Classification of Films took advice from CNC personnel and the President of the Republic,³³ and exercised what Fidel would later refer to as the revolutionary government's indisputable right not to allow the film to be disseminated further.³⁴

The Personal Dimension of the Dispute

As early as October 1959, Guevara Valdés had felt the need to defend himself against an anonymous anti-communist campaign that questioned the totalitarianism of ICAIC.³⁵ Guillermo Cabrera Infante retrospectively admitted that *Lunes* had adopted a 'position directly confronting communism and its ideas' and had been 'opposed to individuals like Alfredo Guevara'.³⁶ This was partly informed by Carlos Franqui's history with the PSP. Between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, he had founded the party magazine, *Mella* (1941–42), and proofread the party newspaper, *Hoy*. He cited the reason for his conflict with the party as his love of poetry,³⁷ but KS Karol, who maintained a dialogue with Franqui, elaborates that his 'tendency to discuss rather than obey earned him the censure of [Hoy's editor] Aníbal Escalante, and led to his expulsion in 1947'.³⁸ This serves to partly explain Franqui's fear of the growing influence of the party and his subsequent actions.

The Ideo-Aesthetic Dimension of the Dispute

Pogolotti reflects broader Cuban understanding when she describes how the October Revolution had coincided with the expansion of thought in Russia, giving rise to new manifestations in visual art, poetry, architecture, and cinema and leading to a revolutionary convergence of art and politics.³⁹ However, after this initial blossoming, the dramatic circumstances of the economy of war caused the experimental adventure of art to be cancelled in favour of propagandistic immediacy, which led to the consecration of socialist realism during the Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934:

The Congress itself became notorious for its acceptance of the official writing style known as 'Socialist Realism' [which] heralded an attack on most literary experiments and the suppression of any genuine creativity and inspiration. A typical Socialist Realist work depicts supposedly true-to-life protagonists in wooden language, positive people's heroes inspired and guided by the Communist party, who always triumph over reactionary or counterrevolutionary opponents and class enemies. . . . Its didactic aim is to raise the masses to enlightenment and civilization, selfless sacrifice, and loyalty to the party and state.⁴⁰

Extrapolating from these literary beginnings, Stalin – who became obsessed with the perceived dangers of formal experimentation – would submit all art forms to the doctrine of socialist realism, which persisted until the late 1950s. Another outcome of the 1934 congress was the formation of a writers' union, which initially conferred benefits upon its members. 'But many delegates came to a tragic end in the next few years. Ultimately, 180 of the total of 597 delegates were persecuted in the Great Terror, including one-third of the Union bosses elected at the Congress'.⁴¹ Cubans were as aware of this history as they were of

the literary and artistic productions being circulated by the Soviet Union beyond its own territory.

In the wake of the *sarampionado* takeover of the CNC, combined with Fidel's socialist declaration and the Soviet co-operation this implied, those on the liberal side feared that refusing general release of *PM* was a 'threat to freedom of expression . . . which insinuated that the ghost of Stalinism had begun to project its ominous shadow over the island'.⁴² A precedent for this was to be found in the second part of Leonid Lukov's *The Great Life* of August 1948, which Stalin and Zhdanov had condemned for its crude depiction of miners. This parallel was particularly acute for *Lunes*, which had been explicitly critical of the processes used against artists in the Soviet Union from 1929 onwards.⁴³ In November 1960, the ICAIC directorate prohibited the public or private screening of eighty-seven foreign films considered to be of inferior technical and artistic quality, the reactionary content of which was feared to distort history and reality.⁴⁴

Daily meetings in Havana exaggerated speculations about the Stalinist takeover of the Revolution, at times bordering on hysteria and concluding that culture would disappear altogether. The Cuban writer, Ambrosio Fornet, contends that 'This was an unjustified fear, or at least disproportionate, as was demonstrated later, but it is true that it wasn't far from us – in secret meetings between mediocre writers, known non-partisan opportunists and cultural bureaucrats who were suddenly established as zealous guardians of the doctrine'.⁴⁵ Others are keen to emphasise that the screening of *PM* a matter of weeks after the Bay of Pigs invasion caused some to question the wisdom of its recirculation in a country that well understood the propagandistic value of film.⁴⁶

For a month, nobody could speak about anything else, and, in a bid to clear the air, three meetings were convened at the national library on consecutive Fridays in June 1961. Understanding his role as arbiter, Fidel acted to reconcile the differences that had emerged, in a closing speech which subsequently became known as 'Words to the Intellectuals'. Identifying the problem created by *PM* as one of freedom for artistic creation – with a particular emphasis on content rather than form – Fidel addressed the concern that the Revolution would attempt to stifle that freedom. Reminding his audience that a Revolution fought in the name of freedom could not be an enemy of freedom, he assured revolutionary and non-revolutionary artists alike of their continued expressive freedom, providing no harm was done to the comprehensive project of social reconstruction that was underway. Significant in the context of this discussion, the leader of the Cuban Revolution probed the specific fear that the CNC sought to inhibit creative expression, concluding that 'our comrades in the National Council of Culture are as concerned as all of you about bringing about the best conditions for the creative endeavours of artists and intellectuals. It is the duty of the Revolution and the Revolutionary Government to see that there is a highly qualified organization that can be relied upon to stimulate, encourage, develop, and guide, yes, guide, that creative spirit'.⁴⁷

Defining its own *raison d'être* in the wake of Fidel's vote of confidence, the CNC outlined how the revolutionary process made necessary the existence of an organisation that would orientate and lead the cultural activities being planned by institutions in response to the cultural policy of the Revolution.⁴⁸ This hints at the centrality and inviolability of an organisation charged with creating the indispensable conditions for the development of an art and literature that would form an integral part of the new society.

42. Ambrosio Fornet, 'La Década Prodigiosa: Un Testimonio Personal' [The Prodigious Decade: A Personal Testimony], Sonia Maldonado (ed.), *Mirar a Los 60: Antología De Una Década* [Looking at the 1960s: Anthology of a Decade] (La Habana: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2004), p. 10.

43. The 6 April 1959 issue of the supplement had included a manifesto, entitled 'For an Independent Revolutionary Art', signed by André Breton, Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky in Mexico, speculating that, if the Revolution had to choose a socialist regime for its planning, it ought to secure an anarchist regime of individual liberty for creative intellectuals. See Ariel González, 'Lunes de Revolución y la Ideostética del Compromiso' [Lunes de Revolución and the Ideo-Aesthetics of Commitment], *Temas*, July–September 2002, pp. 83–90.

44. Reported in Del Valle.

45. Fornet, 'La Década Prodigiosa', p. 10.

46. Lisandro Otero, *Llover sobre Mojado: Una reflexión personal sobre la historia* [To Rain on the Wet: A Personal Reflection on History] (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1997).

47. Castro Ruz, 'Words to the Intellectuals', p. 21.

48. Consejo Nacional de Cultura, *Política cultural del Gobierno Revolucionario y trabajo de aficionados* [Cultural Policy of the Revolutionary Government and Work of Amateur Artists] (Las Villas: Consejo Nacional de Cultura, 1963).

Orthodoxy Emboldened

49. Having been exiled for his political beliefs during the Batista era, Nicolás Guillén (1902–89) would become the Cuban national poet after the Revolution. He proved himself an outspoken participant of various early convergences of artists and writers, and was appointed inaugural president of UNEAC in 1961.

50. Nicolás Guillén, 'Report to the First National Congress of Writers and Artists' [1961], *The Revolution and Cultural Problems in Cuba*, p. 59.

51. Guillén, 'Report to the First National Congress', p. 62.

52. David Craven, 'The Visual Arts since the Cuban Revolution', *Third Text* 6, no. 20, 1992, p. 92.

53. Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdés (eds), *Cuba in Revolution* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1972 [1969]), p. 497.

54. Fornet, 'El Quinquenio Gris: Revistando El Término', p. 399.

55. García Buchaca, *La Teoría De La Superestructura*, p. 30.

In August 1961, just two months after the national library meetings had taken place, the First National Congress of Artists and Writers was convened in Havana, forming the closest Cuban parallel to the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress (given that the creation of a union of writers and artists was its stated aim). Considering revolutionary creative praxis at the 1961 congress, Nicolás Guillén⁴⁹ found that 'everything... which constitutes life in these dramatic days, and which belongs to our struggle for liberty, must be experienced by us and expressed in print, stone, music, color'.⁵⁰ But, he cautioned, this must be done without subscribing to socialist realism, which he described as 'those aggressive paintings and sculptures in which men with unpleasant faces appear with their fists raised, their lips tightly drawn, their eyes fiery, presumably due to their anger, even when the eyes are made of stone'.⁵¹ Condemnation of this aesthetic trope by Cuban artists and writers is consistent throughout the decades, primarily on account of its unrealistic positive heroes and its Manichaeian refusal of critique. In addition to this, David Craven paraphrases the understanding of many Cuban intellectuals by noting that 'The privileging of a Eurocentric style such as "socialist realism" would ultimately lead to another form of cultural domination'.⁵²

Despite the protestations of creative practitioners, Rolando Bonachea and Nelson Valdés locate 1961–2 as the period in Cuba during which 'the regime tried to impose socialist realism'.⁵³ As we shall see, this tendency was reinforced well into the first half of the 1960s. However, this was not at the instigation of the regime *per se*. Rather, functionaries at the CNC attempted to establish aesthetic parameters with disastrous consequences, managing to convince young writers that 'socialist realism was the aesthetic of the Revolution, an aesthetic that dare not speak its name, among other things because it was never officially adopted in any instance by the Party or the government'.⁵⁴

In *Theory of the Superstructure*, García Buchaca had unequivocally rejected idealism – found lurking in aesthetic theory from Plato to Hegel, via Kant – which permitted art to be evaluated on the basis of a subjective response to its formal properties. Invoking the age-old tussle between those who believed that art should not have a social function and those who maintained that it could contribute to the betterment of humanity, she exclusively harnessed art to the project of transforming social reality, accelerating the disintegration of capitalism and easing the transition to socialism. In the process, García Buchaca urged political criteria to displace aesthetic ones, arguing that those artists dissociating the form and content of their productions to advocate formal experimentation would confine their practice to the domain of 'pure' intelligentsia. This kind of minority art, she asserted, aligned itself with depravity, 'preoccupied with describing the reactions and psychological abnormalities of drug addicts, homosexuals, prostitutes and the mentally ill'.⁵⁵ In much the same way the following year, Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev, would violently dismiss abstract art during a visit to an exhibition, wondering loudly whether the artists were paedophiles.

Guevara Valdés later detailed a meeting with García Buchaca, which provides evidence of the attitude infecting the CNC. The latter reportedly spoke about a recent trip to Santiago de Cuba, during which she had seen an exhibition by two abstract painters, claiming that opinions given in the comments book were very unfavourable. Many agreed, she said, that state money should not be spent on a type of art that did not express the Revolution. At the time, Guevara Valdés dismissed this as the 'Marxism of fear', to assert that 'What we are is

Marxists, and for that reason we don't accept dogmatic distortions . . . that static, copyist, routine Marxism which desperately seeks formulae to synthesise solutions that should be applied to the most tormenting problems'.⁵⁶ But the matter was far from resolved.

The growing orthodox influence was felt in newspapers, theoretical journals, and manuals that introduced scholastic Marxism to the island, committing inevitable simplifications and opening the door to dogmatism. An exact reproduction of reality was expected of artists, and Fornet argues that, although 'Mimesis can be a good defensive tactic . . . it was lamentable that it was adopted as a trope at the moments in which the Revolution initiated the greatest process of cultural decolonisation remembered in the history of Cuba'.⁵⁷ The expectation that cultural messages would transmit themselves with the minimum of ambiguity led to the prioritisation of political novels and literature for children and adolescents. Considering the didactic function of art at a critics' forum held in the national library in 1962, Fornet would appeal to Gramsci's invocation of Croce on the limited educative potential of art to conclude that, 'In the first instance, that which art *teaches* us is to sharpen the senses; that which art *educates* is our sensibility' – in other words, art shows us how to think, rather than telling us what to think.⁵⁸

CNC advocacy of mimesis and didacticism diminished the possibilities for aesthetic games and risk-taking and gave free rein to 'prolific mediocrity'.⁵⁹ As had happened in the Soviet Union, formal experimentation was demonised, causing the Spanish-born Mexican Marxist aesthetician, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, to note that 'Everything in our times that does not fit into a narrow rubric of realism – futurism, cubism, expressionism, surrealism, etc. – is here lumped under the rubric of formalism. This sectarian and dogmatic position is indefensible, for it narrows the sphere of art, ignoring its specific nature in order to apply exclusively ideological criteria to it'.⁶⁰

Scepticism towards aesthetic experimentation was not confined to orthodox circles, and even Marinello – the trusted old communist associated with *Nuestro Tiempo*, whose conversations with abstract artists had been circulated clandestinely under Batista and re-edited for post-revolutionary times – retained reservations about abstraction. Similarly, Roberto Fandiño – a Cuban film-maker, theatre director and scenographer associated with ICAIC – would attempt to establish links between non-figurative expression and the cultural policy of the overthrown regime in an article in one of the final issues of *Nuestro Tiempo's* eponymous journal which was quickly refuted. Nonetheless, important exhibitions of abstract art were staged throughout the 1960s and received a favourable critical response, notably the 'Abstract Expressionism' exhibition held by a renowned group of Cuban artists in 1963 and the restaging of the Paris Salon in Havana during the second half of the decade (the latter spearheaded by Carlos Franqui). Aptly conveying the mood of the times, Craven reminds us that, 'In the early 1960s, when Eastern Bloc leaders were continuing to denounce modernist art, Fidel Castro declared instead: "Our enemies are capitalists and imperialists, not abstract art"'.⁶¹

From 1962, a discussion of aesthetic questions was stimulated in professional circles, based on the new lectures of Sánchez Vázquez. Exploring the main tenets that had historically underwritten considerations of aesthetics – art, society, class, ideology, form, content, autonomy, beauty, reality, and reflection – Sánchez Vázquez found that the simple equation of art with ideology had been proscribed by Marx and Engels.⁶² In 1963, the French philosopher and member of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party, Roger Garaudy, published his *D'un réalisme sans rivages* [For a borderless realism]. This

56. Alfredo Guevara, 'Aclarando Aclaraciones' [Clarifying Clarifications, 1963], Pogolotti, *Polémicas Culturales*, 2006, p. 239.

57. Fornet, 'La Década Prodigiosa', p. 10.

58. Fornet, 'La Década Prodigiosa', p. 12; italics in original.

59. Roberto Fernández Retamar, '1961: Cultura Cubana en Marcha' [1961: Cuban Culture in Progress, 1962], *Cuba Defendida*, 2004 p. 71.

60. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, *Art and Society: Essays in Marxist Aesthetics* (London: Merlin Press, 1973 [1965]), p. 35.

61. Craven, 'The Visual Arts since the Cuban Revolution', p. 80. Fidel's words are paraphrased from an interview with Claude Julien in February 1963.

62. This Marxist-humanist position concurs with that of Armando Hart Dávalos, Minister of Education (who would later become the first Minister of Culture), that 'To confuse art and politics is a political mistake. To separate art and politics is another mistake', cited in Craven, 'The Visual Arts since the Cuban Revolution', p. 77.

63. William Luis in Luis, *Lunes de Revolución*, p. 41, based on sentiments expressed in *Lunes* issue 94.

64. Fonet, 'El Quinquenio Gris', p. 385.

sought to formulate a humanistic variant of socialist realism, based on partisanship rather than party dominance. While this was greeted as an unacceptable example of Western revisionism in the Soviet Union and its satellites, leading to Garaudy's dismissal from the party, his thoughts were translated into Castilian by a member of the Argentinean Communist Party, the year after they were published, and would prove particularly useful to those pursuing alternatives to aesthetic orthodoxy in Cuba.

Viewed in this light, it seems clear that the dispute around *PM* not only exacerbated the abiding rift between orthodox and unorthodox interpretations of socialist aesthetics; it also sought to surpass those confined to combating the orthodoxy. It will already be clear that the film-makers around ICAIC had an affinity to Italian neorealism. A famous exponent of this tendency, Cesare Zavattini, visited the Nuestro Tiempo film-makers in 1956, later serving as a supervisor on García Espinosa's 1959 short, *Cuba baila*. Rejecting this aesthetic sensibility in the quest for a more experimental and spontaneous form of expression, the personnel of *Lunes* turned their attention to the British 'free cinema' and the French 'New Wave' on the grounds that 'cinema does not reflect reality but recreates it; neorealism was something from the past and "New Wave" from the present'.⁶³ In 1961, Zavattini was invited to lead a seminar at ICAIC. At the same time, a review of *PM* by Nestór Almendros – who worked for ICAIC but had loyalties to *Lunes* – championed the latter tendency and favourably compared the result with its precursor, stimulating an open debate about formalism and art for art's sake. According to this interpretation, the so-called censorship of *PM* is conceived as an attack on *Lunes* as part of an attempt to narrow interpretations of culture as a result of the increased power of the PSP within the new governmental system.

Aesthetic Polemics 1963–4

In July 1963, the CNC ceased being an appendage of the Ministry of Education and assumed responsibility for all activities related to culture, including artistic teaching, authorisation of permission for overseas travel by creative practitioners, and the organisation of artistic and literary competitions as well as the appointment of their juries, thus creating a situation of almost total control over every artistic avenue. This early autonomous period of the CNC coincided with the launch of a staunch polemic that needed to be rebutted by Cuba's creative practitioners.

Fonet reminisces that few intellectuals suspected that 'the inheritance of scholastic Marxism was so strongly in our midst, or at least among some intellectuals from the Partido Socialista Popular' until 'one of our most brilliant and respected essayists, Mirta Aguirre, wrote in October 1963' a text called 'Notes on Literature and Art'.⁶⁴ In this text, the CNC's Director of Theatre and Dance invoked art as a form of knowledge capable of investigating reality through the reconciliation of concrete creation and abstract thought. As her PSP ally and CNC superior, García Buchaca, had done before her, Aguirre grounded her argument in the wholesale rejection of idealism. Predicated on the idea that, in Marxist-Leninist aesthetics, as in science, the creative act loses all mysterious content, Aguirre's thesis presumed that the transformation of metaphysics into materialism required two routes to knowledge – science and art, or logical thought and thought acquired through images – both of which were conditioned by objective reality.

Railing against the purely sensory, Aguirre asserted that abstract art decoupled perception from intelligence and could not be considered the supreme expression

of a socialist society. Speculating on artistic work appropriate to a revolutionary situation, she categorised images as subjective reflections of the objective world. Rather than striving for a mimetic copy of external reality that would deceive the senses, she argued, the character of realism depended on the extent to which it expressed a 'correct' reflection of the real. Reaching the crux of her argument, Aguirre proclaimed that 'Socialist realism, which does not undervalue beauty in art, understands it as a vehicle of truth, an element of knowledge and a weapon of transformation of the world'.⁶⁵ Combining aesthetics with scientific materialism, she argued, socialist realism obtains an honest and historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development.

While Aguirre's essay exposed the concerted attempts that were being made to prescribe certain aesthetic approaches, this tendency and its liberal counterpart had been bubbling under the surface for some time. Six months earlier, the musician and *Nuestro Tiempo* co-founder, Juan Blanco, had found, among the dogmatists of the left and the opportunists of the right, attempts to restrict revolutionary cultural policy and to confine artists to a single expressive course – realist or abstract, depending on taste. Elsewhere, Fernández Retamar noted that both positions housed the potential to destabilise the revolutionary project:

Dogmatism would predominate one moment and recede, defeated, the next, but it was an evil that lay in wait for the Revolution, supported by comfort and ignorance, because it dispensed with the need to think and furnished apparently easy solutions to intricate problems. Anti-dogmatism, for its part, justified its vigilant presence by the measure to which dogmatism was a threat; but its sympathetic mask could cover for those who prefer to say that they are combating dogmatism who cannot openly say that they are combating the Revolution.⁶⁶

While the liberal-abstract position was occupied by *Lunes*, Blanco identified that dogmatists appealed to a deformation of Marxism-Leninism in a bid to disorientate the people. He urged his colleagues to unmask these enemies of the Revolution wherever they were found, combating them with increasing force, with the full support of the revolutionary government.⁶⁷

In the same journal issue, García Espinosa alluded to those within the cultural community who insisted on trying to impose pre-existing formulae onto a rapidly changing situation. This fits with the insistence of Ernst Fischer – whose writing had been influential upon Che Guevara – that aesthetic theory could not be applied in advance of artworks being made; as an antidote to this, he proffered the term 'socialist art', which 'clearly refers to an attitude – not a style – and emphasizes the socialist outlook, not the realist method'.⁶⁸ García Espinosa discerned that never before had Marxism been closer to a religion, attempting to freeze reality and make an abstraction of the Revolution and its people, warning that dogmatism sought to dominate men rather than encouraging them to be masters of their own destiny.⁶⁹ Three months after his article appeared, García Espinosa would be one of the more than 250 co-signatories to a statement made by a group of film-makers – including Gutiérrez Alea and Humberto Solás⁷⁰ – who met in ICAIC's Department of Artistic Programming on 4, 5, and 6 July 1963 to discuss some fundamental cultural problems, particularly the application to aesthetic questions of debatable, and largely unacceptable, principles determined in the Soviet Union.⁷¹ Like the articles preceding it, the statement was published in the bimonthly UNEAC journal, *La Gaceta de Cuba*.

Rather than representing a precise consensus, the statement achieved unanimity around certain principles considered essential to the daily

65. Mirta Aguirre, 'Apuntes sobre La Literatura y El Arte' [Notes on Literature and Art], *Cuba Socialista*, vol. 3, October 1963, p. 53.

66. Fernández Retamar, 'Hacia Una Intelectualidad Revolucionaria En Cuba', p. 280.

67. Juan Blanco, 'Los Herederos de Oscurantismo' [The Heirs of Obscurantism], *La Gaceta de Cuba*, vol. 2, no. 15, 1 April 1963, pp. 3–8.

68. Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1963 [1959]), p. 107.

69. Julio García Espinosa, 'Vivir Bajo La Lluvia' [Living under Rain], *La Gaceta de Cuba*, vol. 2, no. 15, 1 April 1963, pp. 9–13.

70. Humberto Solás (1941–2008) is particularly noted for his 1968 film, *Lucía*, which depicts Cuban womanhood at three distinct historical moments.

71. Julio García Espinosa and others, 'Statement by Film-makers', *La Gaceta de Cuba*, vol. 2, no. 23, 3 August 1963, pp. 17–22.

72. Edith García Buchaca, 'Consideraciones sobre un Manifiesto' [Considerations on a Manifesto], *La Gaceta de Cuba*, vol. 2, no. 28, 18 October 1963, pp. 26–34.

73. Iain Robertson, *Understanding International Art Markets and Management* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 13.

preoccupations of artists and intellectuals and of increasing interest to the people of Cuba. It proposed that, in a socialist society, the promotion of culture was the right and responsibility of party and government. Beyond this, the trajectory of art should be determined through a struggle between aesthetic ideas. To deny that struggle and proclaim peaceful coexistence would be to promote an illusion, and the victory of one tendency over another could only be achieved through suppression, by attributing a class character to artistic forms in ways that arbitrarily restricted the conditions of struggle necessary to the development of art. In contrast, the film-makers' statement was predicated on the idea that the formal categories of art do not have an inherently class character – rather, that art is a social phenomenon, both a reflection and a form of objective reality in which the ideological position of its author is not a determinant of quality. (Indeed, one has only to compare Andy Warhol's silk-screened collages of celebrities – made in the US from July 1962 – with the painted montages of Raúl Martínez – made in Cuba in the 1960s, which sometimes borrowed the serial structure of Warhol's work to depict revolutionary historical figures – to see that socio-economic context is crucial to any reading of cultural artefacts.)

Two months after the film-makers' statement was published, several related articles appeared. One of these was authored by Guevara Valdés in *Cine Cubano*, the in-house magazine of ICAIC, affirming the difficult, but possible, task of reconciling the ongoing struggle against class enemies and imperialism with the necessity of securing the conditions for the most absolute freedom of experimentation in all aesthetic manifestations. To Guevara Valdés, it seemed appropriate that creators would tackle the theoretical and practical problems thrown up by their work and consider, with the greatest coherence and seriousness, theses informing contemporary ideology and research. And, while the editors of the journal did not share the theoretical formulation of the film-makers' statement and maintained reservations about some of its resolutions, they subscribed to its conclusions and declared absolute agreement with the intentions underlying it. In affirming the validity of dialogue and analysis, *Cine Cubano* not only published the statement but also saluted it as a crucial advance in the movement.

On 18 October 1963, García Buchaca entered the debate, proclaiming that the task of government lay not only in promoting culture but also in orientating and leading it (as delegated to the CNC). Echoing her earlier manual, she asserted that while idealism and materialism may coexist for a while, they would be mutually exclusive if genuine Marxist criteria were adopted. In considering the film-makers' assertion that the *formal* categories of art do not have a class character, García Buchaca advised that the separation of the form of art from its content was inadmissible for a Marxist. For her, capitalism had aesthetic values as surely as it had scientific values, and limitations to creative expression were an inevitable part of the intense struggle that accompanied the transition from one socio-economic form to another.⁷²

At the same time, the insistence of CNC *sarampionados* that only selected technical aspects of bourgeois culture should be carried forward into the new society directly contradicts both Marx and Lenin on the validity of cultural inheritance. If we follow this argument through to its logical conclusion, we find that it leads to the dismissal of all object-based art on the basis of its exchange value under a capitalist system in which it may be argued that 'The international art market is the sole mechanism for conferring value onto art'.⁷³ Stopping short of this, orthodox voices advocated that certain forms of creative expression be curtailed in the transition from capitalism to socialism, singling out abstract art for particular vilification.

In an open letter to García Buchaca in the same issue of *Gaceta*, another Cuban film director, Jorge Fraga, would trace a century-long precedent in the search for a Marxist solution to the problems of aesthetics and cultural policy. He asserted that, despite the firm and consequent attitude of the revolutionary government, artistic culture was often analysed from a dogmatic position, and took issue with the idea that the conditions for ideological coexistence could not establish themselves within current Marxist criteria.⁷⁴ For him, the form and content of bourgeois culture, past and present, ought to be considered valid cultural inheritance within a dialectical process of acceptance and critique.

In the same month, the ensuing polemic provoked the aforementioned treatise from Aguirre, which has retrospectively been interpreted as a 'final reply to the positions assumed by the ICAIC film-makers'.⁷⁵ Briefly concurring with the position of her cinematic colleagues that aesthetic contradictions were inevitable on the path to communism, she was quick to state that there was no possible reconciliation between dialectical materialism and either idealism or religious faith, and aesthetic tendencies could not be tolerated that were grounded in either of these philosophical orientations. In the process, Aguirre discerned that certain intellectuals and artists were simultaneously proclaiming their dedication to eradicating the ideological vestiges of the overthrown society while continuing to justify them in their creative work.

The following month, García Espinosa reasserted that the film-makers considered it a mistake to try and diminish or negate the importance of ideological struggle. In a spirited defence of critical thought, he pointed to those self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninists who promoted a formalist current that tried to present communal truths without elucidating them. A necessary precondition for this was the separation of form and content, and García Espinosa conceded that, in proclaiming that formal categories had no class character, the film-makers had introduced some ambiguity into the debate which could have been avoided by first clarifying that form and content are inseparable.⁷⁶

The debate rumbled on, with a public discussion being staged by the Students' Association at the School of Letters, after which the film-makers felt motivated to reaffirm their commitment to both their original document and an anti-dogmatic approach. In the rebuttals that followed, they were variously accused of being part of a 'chapel' that should be rendered ineligible to use the means of dissemination financed by society and berated for their bourgeois origins in the face of the proletarian vision of the world that was being formulated. They were charged with separating art from life, in order to take positions around the former, and seen to be embracing cultural heritage in a way that was tantamount to prolonging bourgeois culture rather than contributing to social transformation. On the part of the film-makers, it was argued that consciousness did not evolve at the margins of class struggle but within it, and that, as art enriched man spiritually, it could play a vital part in the struggle for a new socialist culture (and the erasure of idealism) without necessarily having to be Marxist.

In December 1963, the discussion shifted from *Gaceta* into the party's daily newspaper, *Hoy*, edited by the former Secretary General of the pre-revolutionary Cuban Communist Party, Blas Roca Calderio. Within the 'Clarifications' column, a debate was generated around a handful of films from the capitalist world – specifically *La Dolce Vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960) *Accattone* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1961), *Alias Gardelito* (Lautaro Murúa, 1961), and *The Exterminating Angel* (Luis Buñuel, 1962) – which were accused of representing corruption and immorality. While an initial question, about whether the Cuban people should have access to these 'defeatist' films, was attributed to the well-known television actor, Severino Puente, future incarnations of the

74. Jorge Fraga, '¿Cuántas Culturas? [How Many Cultures?]', *La Gaceta de Cuba*, vol. 2, no. 28, 18 October 1963, pp. 72–85.

75. Del Valle, p. 13.

76. Julio García Espinosa, 'Galgos y Podencos' [Hounds and Greyhounds], *La Gaceta de Cuba*, vol. 2, no. 29, 5 November 1963, pp. 86–94.

77. Directors of ICAIC, '¿Qué Películas Debemos Ver?: Las Mejores' [Which Films Should We See? The Best], *Revolución*, 14 December 1963, pp. 149–51.

78. Julio García Espinosa and others, 'Carta de Severino Puente y de Directores del ICAIC' [Letter from Severino Puente and the Directors of ICAIC], *Revolución*, 17 December 1963, pp. 152–7.

79. Alfredo Guevara Valdés, 'Alfredo Guevara Responde a las Aclaraciones' [Alfredo Guevara Responds to the Clarifications], *Hoy*, 18 December 1963, pp. 169–74.

column were taken to be the work of Roca Calderio himself. The first relied on anecdotal evidence from unnamed workers that these films were particularly unsuitable for Cuban youth, inciting a combatively critical attitude in those who were more revolutionaries than artists, more Marxists than anti-dogmatists, more creators than heirs.

This suggested a conflict between the cultural policy promoted by the party and the approach sustained by ICAIC. As such, it prompted a spirited defence, from the directors of ICAIC, of the properties of film in enriching discussion and stimulating the imagination, which could become a factor in socio-economic development.⁷⁷ In a letter to the same paper – signed by García Espinosa, Gutiérrez Alea, Fraga, Massip and other film-makers – a response was made to both Puente and the directors of ICAIC: To insinuate, as the editor of the Clarifications column had done, that life is a reflection of art would be to attribute to cinema transformative powers that it could never possess. To suggest the prohibition of films of undeniable cultural value would be to restrict cultural development and negate the freedom of cinema screens that had been conquered on 1 January 1959.⁷⁸

The following day, Guevara Valdés again entered the fray to respond to the original Clarifications column and expose the abyss between the understanding of its editor and the meaning of culture sustained by ICAIC. He also eloquently advocated to artists the combined role of witness, protagonist, combatant, and prophet, arguing that there was nothing more revolutionary than an artist who applied their sensibility, knowledge, and imagination not only to themes of immediate concern but also to political agitation and revolutionary propaganda without allowing their work to become propaganda in itself.⁷⁹ This provoked a prolonged textual exchange, with six responses to Guevara Valdés being published by Roca Calderio and several other interjections being made. The latter's contention was that artists should be more closely linked to the Revolution, not only reflecting daily reality but also making explicit reference to revolutionary successes and the actions of the people. In this, he demonstrated a rather sycophantic adhesion to the central contentions of 'Words to the Intellectuals', revealing little understanding of the often fraught processes involved in creative production. Mocking Guevara Valdés as the 'champion of free thought', he also asserted that Cuba's artists and intellectuals were neither revolutionary nor socialist in the full sense of either word.

In a final reflection on the spat with Roca Calderio, written in December 1963 but left unpublished at the time, Guevara Valdés commended Fidel's refusal to excommunicate people, engender a climate of suspicion or prescribe artistic 'formulae', opting instead to create a spirit of communication and clarity about the role of party and government in the field of culture. And, while ICAIC and its leaders accepted and studied his 'Words', rather than applying them mechanically, Cuban intellectuals understood that orientation of the cultural movement remained the delicate task of party and government rather than being appropriated by anyone else. Rejecting the cult of spontaneity as inimical to Marxism, Guevara Valdés refuted the idea of holding up mythical workers as a source of knowledge while simultaneously denigrating their ability to understand art. The counter argument, mounted by elements within the PSP, exposed the moral guardianship that was assumed on behalf of apocryphal workers. It is noteworthy that this latter position sits in diametric opposition to the idea of engendering a critical spirit in the populace that is reflected in Fidel's evocation of a 'People sufficiently cultivated and educated [who are] capable of making a correct judgment about anything without fear of coming into contact with ideas that could confound or deflect them [who] could read

any book or see any film, about any theme, without changing our fundamental beliefs'.⁸⁰

Eventual Resolution of the Aesthetics of Revolution

By the mid-1960s, the very public disagreement between dogmatists and their adversaries remained unresolved. Concerns about the imposition of socialist realism persisted, and, in March 1965, it would take Che Guevara, the chief ideologue of the Cuban Revolution, to definitively decouple Cuban artists and writers from rigid aesthetic prescriptions. In a letter to Carlos Quijano, editor of a Uruguayan weekly magazine, Che railed against cultural approaches that sought 'simplification, something everyone can understand, something functionaries understand'. In this, he argued, 'True artistic experimentation ends, and the problem of general culture is reduced to assimilating the socialist present and the dead (therefore, not dangerous) past'.⁸¹ Inevitably, the defenders of creative freedom took these words – which prevented socialist realism from achieving a foothold in Cuba – to be of extraordinary importance.

In Argentina in 1965, Luis Felipe Noé postulated a theory of anti-aesthetics which presumed art to be in an intimate relationship with its surrounding reality, not reflecting existing reality but projecting what it might become; in the process, he argued, art must refute any laws that sought to constrain it, and maintain a condition of absolute freedom. In much the same way, Sánchez Vásquez posited art as a cognitive form, distinct from both scientific knowledge and the mechanical reproduction of existing reality, which creates a new reality that provides insights into the human condition. While this approach might be considered realist, he conceded, it should not become distorted to make representation an end in itself. Reinforcing an anti-dogmatic approach, this respected theorist explicitly discredited institutionalised socialist realism, to argue against the imposition of normative aesthetics.

In a discussion with art school students published in October 1967, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez would describe the many sectarian errors that had been committed in discussions around form and content over the preceding years, which had been supplanted by a gradual understanding that a vision of the world would inevitably communicate itself through the work of revolutionary artists. At the same time, he noted the aversion of socialism to 'administrative invasion in the sphere of art' – with a handful of functionaries judging what should and should not be exhibited – which had created huge catastrophes for art in other socialist countries.⁸² This influential and culturally literate figure insisted that no-one had a monopoly on contemporaneity, and that the aesthetics of revolutionary times would continue to be formed through diverse currents across all disciplines.

Consistent with this approach, the revolutionary leaders continued to demarcate an ideological line, rather than an aesthetic one. At the First National Congress of Education and Culture in 1971, otherwise known for its orthodox vindication, Fidel recoupled aesthetics to the humanistic conceptions of art underwriting the revolutionary process, asserting that 'There can be no aesthetic value without human content. There can be no aesthetic value opposed to man. There can be no aesthetic value opposed to justice, opposed to well being, opposed to freedom, opposed to man's happiness'.⁸³ During the first congress of the revamped Cuban Communist Party (PCC) in 1975, aesthetics were harnessed to the task of representing reality, but through a lateral expression of life rather than absolute mimesis. At the same time,

80. Lee Lockwood, *Castro's Cuba, Cuba's Fidel: An American Journalist's Inside Look at Today's Cuba in Text and Pictures* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990 [1967]), p. 112.

81. Ernesto Guevara, 'El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba' [Socialism and Man in Cuba], *Marcha*, March 1965, n.p.

82. Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, 'Problemas del Arte en la Revolución' [Problems of Art in the Revolution, 1967], *Revolución: Letras Artes* (La Habana: Letras Cubanas, 1980), p. 83.

83. Instituto del Libro, *Cuba '71: I Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura* [Cuba '71: First National Congress of Education and Culture] (La Habana: Instituto del Libro, 1971), n.p.

freedom of experimentation was upheld in an environment in which all aesthetic tendencies could be explored.

With the benefit of four decades of hindsight, Ambrosio Fornet realised that what Cuba witnessed in the first half of the 1960s was a blurring of the line between art, pedagogy, propaganda, and publicity. More specifically, 'aesthetic disputes formed part of the struggle for cultural power, for the control of certain zones of influence'.⁸⁴ Through ignorance, bad faith or cowardice, combined with a lack of true revolutionary spirit, the opposing camps of dogmatism and liberalism succeeded in freezing intellectual debate, and Fornet indicted everyone as culpable. For him, it was deeply regrettable that culture 'had become a battlefield, a symbolic space, in which all types of discrepancies were aired by distinct groups disputing the hegemony'.⁸⁵ But, he explained, it was somewhat inevitable that defenders of expressive freedom would find themselves in a difficult position, given that revolutionary culture was forged in a climate of violent confrontation, in spaces fortified against the constant threat of terrorism, in which it was not possible to engage in the noble exercise of ideological coexistence.

84. Fornet, 'El Quinquenio Gris', p. 386.

85. Fornet, 'La Década Prodigiosa', p. 11.