

## The Viewer's Dialectic

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### Introduction

Twenty years after taking power, the Revolution has left behind its most spectacular moments. Back in those days our shaken land offered an image, an unusual and one-time-only image: that incredible caravan accompanying Fidel as he arrived in Havana, the bearded rebels, the doves, the vertigo of all the transformations, the exodus of the traitors and timorous ones, the henchmen's trials, and the enemy's immediate response and, as for us, we experienced the nationalizations, the daily radicalization of the revolutionary process followed by the armed confrontations, the sabotages, the counterrevolution in the Escambray mountains, the Bay of Pigs invasion and the October Missile Crisis.

Those events in themselves evidently revealed the profound changes occurring at a pace nobody could have foreseen. For cinema, it was almost sufficient just to record events, to capture directly some fragment of reality, and simply reflect the goings-on in the streets. These images projected on the screen turned out to be interesting, revealing and spectacular.<sup>1</sup>

In these circumstances, stimulated or, rather, pressured by ever-changing reality, Cuban cinema emerged as one more facet of reality within the Revolution. Directors learned to make films while on the go and played their instruments "by ear" like old-time musicians.

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They interested viewers more by what they showed than by how they showed it. In those first years Cuban cinema put the emphasis on the documentary genre and little by little, as a result of consistent practice, it acquired its own physiognomy and dynamism which have enabled it to stand with renewed force, beside more developed film styles which are older but also more "tired."

Now all of that has become part of our history; our consistent revolutionary development carries us inevitably toward a process of maturation, of reflection, and analysis of our accumulated experiences.

The current stage of institutionalization we are living through is possible only because it is based on the high degree of political awareness which our people have attained as a result of years of incessant fighting. But this stage also requires the masses' active, increased participation in the building of a new society. Increasingly, a greater and greater responsibility falls on the masses and, for that reason, we can no longer let the public merely cling enthusiastically and spontaneously to the Revolution and its leaders and, to the extent that the government passes on its tasks to the people, the masses have to develop ways of understanding problems, of strengthening their ideological coherence and of reaffirming daily the principles which give life to the Revolution.

Everyday events occur now in a different way. The images of the Revolution have become ordinary, familiar. In some ways we are carrying out transformations that are even more profound than earlier ones, but they are not as "apparent" now nor are they immediately visible to the observer. These changes, or transformations, are not as surprising nor do the people respond to them only with applause or with an expression of support. We no longer crave the same kind of spectacular transformations as we did fifteen or twenty years ago. Cuban cinema confronts that new and different way of thinking about what social processes are going to hold for us because our film draws its strength from Cuban reality and endeavors, among other things, to express it. Thus we find it no longer sufficient just to take the cameras out to the street and capture fragments of that reality. This can still be a legitimate way of filmmaking, but only when, and if, the filmmaker knows how to select those aspects which, in close interrelation, offer a meaningful image or reality, which serves the film as a point of both departure and arrival. The filmmaker is immersed in a complex milieu, the profound meaning of which does not lie on its surface. If filmmakers want to express their world coherently, and at the same time respond to the demands their world places on them, they should not go out armed with just a camera and their sensibility but also with

solid theoretical judgment. They need to be able to interpret and transmit richly and authentically reality's image.

Furthermore, in moments of relative détente, capitalism and socialism air their struggle, above all, on an ideological level and, on that level, film plays a relevant role both as a mass medium, in terms of diffusion, and as a medium of artistic expression. The level of complexity at which the ideological struggle unfolds makes demands on filmmakers to overcome completely not only the spontaneity of the first years of the revolutionary triumph but also the dangers inherent in a tendency to schematize. Filmmakers may fall into this trap if they have not organically assimilated the most advanced trends, the most revolutionary ones, the most in vogue, especially those which speak to the social function which the cinematic show ought to fulfill. That is, filmmakers create cultural products which may attain mass diffusion and which manipulate expressive resources that have a certain effectiveness. Film not only entertains and informs, it also shapes taste, intellectual judgment and states of consciousness. If filmmakers fully assume their own social and historical responsibilities, they will come face to face with the inevitable need to promote the theoretical development of their artistic practice.

We understand what cinema's social function should be in Cuba in these times: It should contribute in the most effective way possible to elevating viewer's revolutionary consciousness and to arming them for the ideological struggle which they have to wage against all kinds of reactionary tendencies and it should also contribute to their enjoyment of life. . . . With this much in mind, we want to establish what might be the highest level which film—as a show—could reach in fulfilling this function. Thus, we ask ourselves to what degree a certain type of show can cause the viewers to acquire a new socio-political awareness and a consistent action thereof. We also wonder what that new awareness and action consists of that should be generated in spectators once they have stopped being spectators, that is, when viewers leave the movie theater and encounter once again that other reality, their social and individual life, their day-to-day life.

Capitalist cinema, when reduced to its state as a commodity, rarely tries to give answers to these questions. On the other hand (and for other reasons) socialist cinema has not ordinarily fully met that demand. Nevertheless, finding ourselves in the midst of the Revolution, and at this particular stage of building socialism, we should be able to establish the premises of a cinema which would be genuinely and integrally revolutionary, active, mobilizing, stimulating, and—consequently—popular.

The expressive possibilities of the cinematic show are inexhaustible: to find them and produce them is a poet's task. But on that point, for the time being, this analysis can go no further, for I am not focusing on film's purely aesthetic aspects but, rather, trying to discover in the relation which film establishes over and over again between the show and the spectator the laws which govern this relation and the possibilities within those laws for developing a socially productive cinema.

### "Popular" Film and People's Film

Of all the arts, film is considered the most popular. Nevertheless, this has not always been the case. For a long time, confusion reigned as to whether film was an art or not and that confusion continues to exist around film's popular nature.

Today it can still be said that cinema is marked by its class origin. During its short history, it has had moments of rebellion, searching and authentic success as an expression of the most revolutionary tendencies. Nevertheless, to a large extent, cinema continues to be the most natural incarnation of the petty bourgeois spirit which encouraged cinema at its birth more than eighty years ago.

At that time, capitalism was entering its imperialist phase. In the beginning, the modest invention of a machine made to capture and reproduce reality's moving images was no more than an ingenious toy used at fairs where spectators could let themselves be transported to the farthest reaches of the world without moving from their seats. Very soon the toy left the fairground but that does not mean to say that it achieved a more dignified and respectable status. It developed into a real show-business industry and began to mass produce a kind of merchandise able to satisfy the tastes and to encourage the aspirations of a society dominated by a bourgeoisie which extended its power into every corner of the world. From the beginning, cinema developed along two parallel paths: "true" documentation of certain aspects of reality and, on the other hand, the pursuit of magic fascination. Film has always moved between those two poles: documentary and fiction. Very soon cinema became "popular," not in the sense that it was an expression of the people—of the sectors most oppressed and most exploited by an alienating system of production—but, rather, in the sense that it could attract a heterogeneous public, the majority, avid for illusions.

Perhaps more than any other medium of artistic expression, cinema cannot get rid of its state as a commodity; the commercial success it achieves pushes it on to vertiginous development. It has become a

complex and costly industry and it has had to invent all kinds of formulae and recipes in order that the show it offers pleases the broadest public; huge audiences are what cinema depends on for its very survival. Therefore it was cinema's state as a commodity and its "popular" nature—more than the fact that it was a medium still in its infant stage—that provoked the resistance which existed in circles that paid unconditional reverence to "cultured" art; they did not want to elevate cinema to the category of true art. Art and the people didn't get along.

Then there were those who thought that cinema, to be art, should translate the master works from universal culture and therefore many pretentious, gilded, heavy and rhetoric works, which had nothing to do with the emerging film language, were filmed. Aside from those detours, cinema constituted a human activity which fulfilled better than others a fundamental necessity for enjoyment. In film practice, as it directed itself fundamentally toward that objective, film language began to mature and discover expressive possibilities which enabled cinema to achieve an aesthetic assessment although without intending to do so.

Hollywood cinema, with its pragmatic sense, developed furthest in that direction. It was the most vital and the richest in technical and expressive discoveries. As of the beginning of this century, it developed different genres—comedies, westerns, gangster films, historical superproductions, melodramas—which rapidly became "classics." That is to say, the genres consolidated themselves as formal models and reached a high level of development; at the same time, they became empty stereotypes. They were the most effective expression of a culture of the masses as a function of passive consumers, of contemplating and heartbroken spectators, while reality demands action from them and, at the same time, eliminates all possibilities for that action.

Cinema can create genuine ghosts, images of lights and shadows which cannot be captured. It is like a shared dream. It has been the major vehicle used to encourage viewers' false illusions and to serve as a refuge for viewers. It acts as a substitute for that reality in which the spectators are kept from developing humanly, and which, as a sort of compensation, allows them to daydream.

Film equipment and the means of film production were invented and created in the interests of bourgeois tastes and needs. Film rapidly became the most concrete manifestation of the bourgeois spirit, in objectifying its dreams. Clearly, for the bourgeoisie, film did not represent an extension of work, nor of school, nor of daily life with its many tensions; it was neither a formal ceremony nor a political discourse. The first thing burdened spectators looked for in cinema was

gratification and relaxation to occupy their leisure time. Surely, most cinematic production rarely went beyond the most vulgar levels of communicating with the public. The important thing was how much money could be obtained with the product and not to concern for high artistic quality.

In the 1920s the European avant-garde also made its incursion into filmmaking and left behind a few works which explored a vast range of expressive possibilities. But that was a vain attempt to rescue film from the vulgarity to which commercialism had condemned it. It could not put down roots. However, thanks to a few exceptional works, that movement was not completely sterile.

But it wasn't until the creation of Soviet film that the art world began to officially accept the evidence that not just a new language had been born but also a new art. This was because of the theoretical preoccupation of the Soviet directors and the practical support given to the new medium. "Collective art *par excellence*, destined for the masses," it was called then. Soviet cinema attained a real closeness to the movement of radical social transformation which was taking place. It was a collective art because it combined diverse individuals' experience and because it drew nourishment from artistic practice in other media as a function of a new art, a specifically different art, which became definitely accepted as such. It was destined for the masses, and popular, because it expressed the interests, aspirations and values of broad sectors of the population which at that time were carrying history onward. That first moment of Soviet cinema left a deep imprint on all filmmaking that was to follow and, today, the most modern filmmaking continues to drink from its fountains and nourish itself from that cinema's explorations, experiments and theoretical achievements which still have not been completely tapped.

The first years of sound-track filmmaking coincided with the capitalist economic crisis of 1929. Cinema consolidated itself as an audiovisual medium and the production apparatus became so complex that, for a long time, it was neither possible to produce films outside the big industry nor to side-step that industry's interests. In spite of that, in the 30s, the U.S. film industry produced a few works with a critical vision of society and the times. These films maintained all the conventions of an established and purified medium, but they also demonstrated an authentic realism in dealing with important contemporary themes. This cinema, which spoke about social conflicts afflicting everyone, arose at a favorable time, but very soon veered towards complacent reformism. Those were the years of the Hays Code,<sup>2</sup> also known as the code of propriety, an instrument for censorship and propaganda which responded to the interests of big finance capital and

which indicated the narrow ideological straits which U.S. cinema would traverse for a long time.

Toward the end of World War II, with wounds still open and under politically favorable circumstances, Italian neo-realist cinema emerged. With all its political and ideological limitations, it was a living, fecund movement insofar as it went the route of an authentically popular cinema.

In the heat of the post-war period in France, a "new-wave" of young directors appeared who threw themselves impetuously into revolutionizing filmmaking without going beyond the limits of the petty bourgeois world. Among them, Godard stands out as the great destroyer of bourgeois cinema. Taking Brecht as his point of departure—and the New Left as his point of arrival—he tried to make revolution on the screen. His genius, inventiveness, imagination, and clumsy aggressiveness gave him a privileged place among the "damned" filmmakers. He managed to make anti-bourgeois cinema but he could not make people's cinema. Noteworthy epigones like Jean-Marie Straub, admirable for his almost religious asceticism, have already institutionalized that position and some think they are making a revolution in the superstructure without needing to shake up the base . . .

Another phenomenon inscribed in those searches for a revolutionary filmmaking practice is that cinema called "parallel," "marginal" or "alternative." This cinema has emerged in the last few years due to the development of technology and equipment which permit the production of relatively cheap films. It lies within the reach of small, independent groups and revolutionary militants. In this cinema, revolutionary ideology is openly put forth. It is a political cinema which should serve to mobilize the masses and channel them toward revolution. As a revolutionary practice it has been effective within the narrow limits in which it operates but it cannot reach large numbers, not only because of the political obstacles it encounters within the distribution and exhibition system, but also because of its style. Most people continue to prefer the more polished product which the big industry offers them.

In the capitalist world—and in a good part of the socialist world—the public is conditioned by specific conventions of film language, by formulae and genres, which are those of bourgeois commercial filmmaking. This occurs so often that we can say that cinema, as a product originating from the bourgeoisie, almost always has responded better to capitalism's interests than to socialism's, to bourgeois interests more than to proletarian ones, to a consumer society's interests more than to a revolutionary society's interests, to alienation more

than to non-alienation, to hypocrisy and lies more than to the profound truth . . .

Popular cinema, in spite of its many notable exponents, and few exceptional phenomena, has not always been able fully to fuse revolutionary ideology with mass acceptance. As for us, we cannot accept simple numerical criteria to determine the essence of a people's cinema. Clearly, in the final analysis, when we talk about the *broad* masses, we mean the people. But such a criterion is so wide and so vague that it becomes impossible to apply any kind of value judgment to it. The number of inhabitants in a country, or any sector of a country, is no more than a group as a whole, which considered as such, abstractly, is meaningless. If we want to find some kind of concrete criterion of what *popular* means it is necessary to know what those people represent, not just in terms of geographical location, but also in terms of the historical moment and their specific class. It is necessary to distinguish within that broad group which groups—the broad masses—best incarnate, consciously or unconsciously, the lines of force which shape historical development or, in other words, move towards the *incessant betterment of living conditions on this planet*. And if the criterion for determining *popular* accepts as its basis that distinction, we can say that its essence lies in what would be the best *thing* for those broad masses, i.e., that which best suits their most vital interests.

It is true that short-term interests sometimes obscure the long-term ones, and that one may often lose sight of one's final objectives. To be more precise: *popular* ought to respond not only to immediate interests (expressed in the need to enjoy oneself, to play, to abandon oneself to the moment, to elude . . .) but also to basic needs and to the final objective: transforming reality and bettering humankind. Therefore, when I speak about popular film, I am not referring to a cinema which is simply accepted by the community, but rather to a cinema which *also* expresses the people's most profound and authentic interests and responds to these interests. In accordance with this criterion (and we must keep in mind that in a class society, cinema cannot stop being an instrument of the dominant class), an authentically popular cinema, that is, a people's cinema can be fully developed only in a society where the people's interests coincide with the state's interests; that is, in a socialist society.

During the construction of socialism, when the proletariat has not yet disappeared as a class exercising its power through a complex state apparatus and differences persist between city and countryside, between intellectual and manual work, when mercantile relations have not yet disappeared, and along with them certain manifestations—

conscious or unconscious—of bourgeois ideology (or, even worse, petty-bourgeois ideology), when there is still an insufficient material base to depend on and, above all, when imperialism still exists somewhere in the world, art's social function acquires very specific shadings in keeping with the most urgent needs and objectives, the most immediate tasks people set for themselves when they begin to feel owners of their destiny and work for its fulfillment.<sup>3</sup> In this case, art's function is to contribute to the best enjoyment of life, at the aesthetic level, and it does this not by offering a ludicrous parenthesis in the middle of everyday reality but by enriching that very reality. At the cognitive level, it contributes to a more profound comprehension of the world. This helps viewers develop criteria consistent with the path traced by society. On the ideological level, finally, art also contributes to reaffirming the new society's values and, consequently, to fighting for its preservation and development. If it is true that at this stage the ideological level is given priority, its effectiveness here stands in direct relation to the effectiveness of the aesthetic and cognitive level.

I will try to establish which approaches might be appropriate for cinema, as one of art's specific manifestations, to be able to move toward those objectives.

### From Film Show in Its Purest Sense to the "Cinema of Ideas"

As with literature, film has proceeded to establish certain basic genres according to the expressive needs of each specific material. In the same way that we have journalism—magazines and newspapers—fictional literature and essays with all their variety and shadings, all their own resources and characteristics, in film we have newsreels, shorts and feature-length films. Superficially we can point out affinities between newsreels and daily journalism, between shorts and certain kinds of articles and reports—the kind which usually appear in magazines and between feature-length films and fictional literature, especially novels, or—and we see this more and more—the essay. But these similarities are rather obvious at first glance. Of more interest is to define some peculiarities of the basic cinematic genres and to underline the fact that, as also happens in literature, this division is conventional, and the frontiers which separate them do not hinder the interchange of expressive resources and their own specific elements.

Newsreels offer primarily direct reportage of contemporary events; certain events with a specific significance are selected by the camera and projected on the screen to inform us about what is happening in the world. One usually does not receive a profound analysis of these

events' significance but because of their very selection and form of presentation political criteria and, obviously, ideology are manifest. First of all, because of the emphasis on information, the newsreel's validity is short-lived. Nevertheless, and at second glance, these newsreels constitute a body of material that is testimony to an epoch, and the importance of which is not always predictable. That is, these newsreels can acquire increased historical value and constitute the raw materials for analytic re-elaboration at a later date. Such a double function turns the newsreel into a most important political instrument. The emphasis here lies in its ideological (political) and cognitive aspects. The aesthetic aspect is subordinate to them, which is not to say that it does not exist or cannot—or should not—play a decisive role in the greater or lesser efficacy of the other two aspects.

The short film offers more variants. It can be a primarily informative report. It can be a documentary in which the events—images and sounds—brought to the screen are not captured directly from a real-life event but, rather, creatively elaborated by the director to emphasize a deeper meaning with an analytic objective. Here the cognitive aspect takes primacy. Also, the short film may include fictional works—little cinematic poems, the narration of a short story, etc. It is generally 20–40 minutes long; that length presupposes a more elaborated structure than the newsreel and more complexity in treating a theme. Consequently, the form allows the filmmaker to go into greater depth in terms of both information and analysis. Thus, its operation—its transcendency—is broader, and the aesthetic aspect usually takes on a certain significance.

The feature film is usually fiction. The plots are completely fabricated according to a preconceived idea and developed on the basis of dramatic principles. All this corresponds to an established convention, which can be either a support or a hindrance to the best and most coherent concretion of the idea which will serve as point of departure. On the other hand, in Cuba, we have extensively developed a type of feature-length documentary in which real-life events are recreated or shown exactly as they are captured by the camera at the moment of their occurrence. These events are arranged in such a way that they function as elements of a complex structure, through which the film can offer a more profound analysis of some aspect of reality. In addition, news reportage can be turned into a feature-length film, but that format is used infrequently and is generally determined by the exceptional importance of the events registered by the camera which on the screen are re-ordered so as to facilitate viewers' better understanding of them.

In Cuba, normal movie theater programming consists of a news-reel, a short documentary (or reportage) and a fiction feature. Thus, the basic genres, distinct but complementary, are seen in one sitting. Viewers can experience *various levels of mediation which bring them closer to or farther away from reality* and which can offer them a better understanding of reality. This game of approximations, produced through seeing various genres at one screening, does not always have the greatest coherence nor achieve the greatest level of "productivity," because they are films made independently of each other which may possibly be connected *a posteriori*. Nevertheless, this possibility of connections throws light on what could be achieved here, even if we are considering just the framework of a single film, in the elaboration of which the filmmaker has kept in mind this whole broad range of levels of approximating reality.

I want to focus on that genre which best answers the concept of "show" and which constitutes the basic product in any cinema: the feature fiction film.

First, I want to put aside a very specific genre: educational film. Even when operating with the same elements and resources as "show"-film, educational films are organized in terms of a special function: to complement, amplify, or illustrate, in a direct manner, classroom teaching. They are like textbooks but not a substitute for them. A student's attitude vis-à-vis educational film is radically different from the spectator confronting "show"-film. Classroom teaching demands of students a conscious effort, one directed toward acquiring specific knowledge. In contrast, spectators go to "show"-film in their leisure time to relax, to seek diversion, for entertainment, and to enjoy themselves . . . and if viewers do learn something, it is of a different nature and does not constitute the viewers' primary motivation.

Now then, without departing from the framework of "show"-film, and more specifically fictional film, we can find various options in the emphasis, according to the film's condition as a show or as a vehicle of ideas. We must keep in mind, of course, that always, to some extent, the show remains a bearer of ideology.

The superficial interpretation of the thesis which holds that the function of cinema—of art in general—in our society is to provide "aesthetic enjoyment" at the same time as "raising the people's cultural level" has again and again led some to promote additive formulae in which the "social" *content* (that, which is considered to be the educational aspect, creator of a revolutionary consciousness and also, at times, the simple diffusion of a slogan) must be introduced in an attractive *form*, or, in other words, adorned, garnished in such a way as to satisfy the consumers' tastes. It would be something like producing

a sort of ideological pap for easy digestion. Obviously, it is only a simplistic solution which considers form and content as two separate ingredients which you can mix in proportion, according to some ideal recipe. Furthermore, this attitude considers the spectator a passive entity. Such a perspective can only lead to bureaucratizing artistic activity. It does not have anything to do with a dialectical understanding of the process of an organic integration of form and content, in which both aspects are indissolubly united and, at the same time as they oppose each other, they interpenetrate each other, even to the point where they can take over each other's functions in that reciprocal interplay. That is, we are dealing with a complex and rich process of contradictions and possibilities for development, in which the formal, aesthetic and emotional aspects, on the one hand, and the thematic, educational and rational aspects, on the other, reveal certain affinities but also their own peculiarities. The diverse modalities of their mutual interaction (to the degree to which that interaction is organic, consistent with the premises which generate it) give rise to various levels of "productivity" (in terms of functionality, effectiveness and fulfillment of assigned functions . . .) in the work's relation to the spectator.

Later on, I will offer some considerations about the relation between the cinematic show and the spectator, and try to untangle certain mechanisms through which that relation takes place. For the time being, I only wish to point out that those various levels of productivity—or functionality—which the show may provide and which derive primarily from the manner in which the emphasis is distributed among the above mentioned aspects *are not excluding levels*. That is to say cinema, especially fiction film, is basically a show. Its function as a show in the purest sense, is to entertain, distract and offer an enjoyment that comes from representation. Represented are actions, situations and diverse things which have as their point of departure reality—in its broadest sense. These things constitute a fiction, another different, new reality which will enrich or expand the reality which has been already established or known up to this point.

Simple show is healthy to the extent that it does not obstruct viewers' spiritual development. But, one cannot forget that in the midst of a society immersed in class struggle, the recreational spirit which enlivens the show tends somewhat to reinforce the established values, whatever they are, since the show serves generally as an escape valve in the face of problems and tensions generated by a conflicting reality. At this level what is emphasized is the emotional aspect in general. Thus show, in its purest sense, just seeks to generate emotions in the spectator and to provide sensory pleasure, as, for instance, a sports event does. We should not view this with mistrust except when super-

ficiality becomes stupidity, when happiness becomes frivolity, when healthy eroticism becomes pornography, when, under the guise of simple entertainment, show becomes a vehicle for affirming bourgeois cultural traits, and when—consciously or unconsciously—it incarnates bourgeois ideology. That is, even “entertainment” films, which apparently “say nothing” and are seemingly simple consumer objects, could also fulfill the elemental function of spiritually enriching the spectator if they did not, to use a coined expression, contain “ideological deviationism.” The concept of consumption in a capitalist society is not—and should not be—the same as in a socialist one.

But if we want to go further, if we want film to be good for something more (or for the same thing, but more profoundly), if we want it to fulfill its function more perfectly (aesthetic, social, ethical, ideological . . .), we ought to guarantee that it constitutes a factor in spectators’ development. Film will be more fruitful to the extent that it pushes spectators toward a more profound understanding of reality and consequently, to the extent that it helps viewers live more actively and incites them to stop being mere spectators in the face of reality. To do this, film ought to appeal not only to emotion and feeling but also to reason and intellect. In this case, both instances ought to exist indissolubly united, in such a way that they come to provoke, as Pascal said, authentic “shudderings and shakings of reason.”

Thus, it is not a question of an emotion to which one can add a dose of reason, ideas, or “content.” Rather, it is emotion tied to the *discovery* of something, to the rational comprehension of some aspect of reality. Such emotion is qualitatively different from that which a simple show will elicit (suspense, the chases, terror, sentimental situations, etc.), although it might well be reinforced or impeded by those.

On the other hand, when cinema, in the well-intentioned process of shaping its objectives—to aptly fulfill its social function—neglects to fulfill its function as show and appeals exclusively to reason (to the viewers’ intellectual efforts) it noticeably reduces its effectiveness because it disregards one of its essential aspects: enjoyment.

The development of art is expressed not only in a successive change in its functions according to the various social formations which generate art throughout history, but also as an enrichment and a greater complexity of the resources which art has at its disposal. From the magician cave artist to the artist of the scientific era, the *objet d’art* has taken on various successive functions: an instrument to dominate natural forces, an instrument for one class to dominate another, for affirming an idea, for communicating, for self-awareness, for developing a critical consciousness, for celebration, for evading reality, for compensation, or for simple aesthetic enjoyment. . . . In every

historical moment the accent is placed on one or another of these functions and the others are rejected. Nevertheless, we must not forget that all of these functions form one single body of accumulated experience and, out of all of them, some valuable element endures which will enrich the others. The various levels of comprehension (or of interpretation) of an artistic work become superimposed and express art’s accumulation of multiple functions over the course of history. Thus, a cave artist is present in all true art, and if he was never effective enough to attract real bison, certainly he was able to mobilize the hunters. Suggestion continues to operate with greater or lesser success, according to the specific circumstances of each particular work. That is how so many artistic works operate when they prefigure victory over an enemy and exalt a warrior’s heroism. But the course of history has given us another type of artist who works as well through reason, through understanding and who, in specific circumstances, fully attains his objective. The various functions which art has fulfilled have enriched artistic activity with new expressive resources. The magnificent arsenal of resources accumulated throughout history which contemporary art has at its disposal permits it to fully exercise its functions at all levels of comprehension, suggestion and enjoyment.

### Show and Reality: The Extraordinary and the Everyday

Regarding those films which are usually seen on television and which mature spectators may feel uncomfortable with and find meaningless because they cannot coherently relate the films to the complex images of the world which they have formed during their lives, people may well ask, “What does this have to do with reality?” A child might answer with another question, “Well, isn’t it just a movie?” The questions remain pending, of course. It would be a hard task to explain to a child how, for mature people, the sphere of reality is constantly articulated in more detail in one’s mind, and how some things are left behind. It happens in such a way that an adult’s image of the world comes to be very different from a child’s. Mature adults keep discarding more or less apparent layers of reality, in order to draw closer and closer to its essence. They discriminate and assess reality’s different aspects as a consequence of an ever deeper understanding of reality. That is why a mature person probably feels dissatisfied vis-à-vis such a film. But, on the other hand, the child’s question does not allow for a quick, superficial response. Certainly a film is one thing and reality is another. We cannot forget that those are the rules of the game. Of

course, film and reality are not—cannot be—completely divorced from each other. A film forms part of reality. Like all man's works included in the field of art, film is a manifestation of social consciousness and also constitutes a reflection of reality.

With regard to cinema, there exists a condition which can be deceptive. The signs which cinematic language employs are no more than images of separate aspects of reality itself. It is not a question of colors, lines, sounds, textures and forms, but of objects, persons, situations, gestures, and expressions . . . which, freed from their usual, everyday connotation, take on a new meaning within the context of fiction. Film thus captures images of isolated aspects of reality. It is not a simple, mechanical copy. It does not capture reality itself, in all its breadth and depth. However, cinema can reach greater depth and generalization by establishing new relations among those images of isolated aspects. Thereby, those aspects take on new meaning—a meaning not completely alien to them, and can be more profound and more revealing—upon connecting themselves to other aspects and producing shocks and associations which in reality are dilute and opaque because of their high degree of complexity and because of day-to-day routine.

Here we may find the beginnings of a revealing operation—bound to reach an ever-growing degree of complexity and richness—which is specific to cinema because it is a language nourished by reality and which reflects reality through images of real objects which can actually be seen and heard as if it were a large ordering and sorting-out mirror. Such a way of looking at reality *through* fiction offers spectators the possibility of appreciating, enjoying, and better understanding reality.

But that must not confuse us. Cinematic realism does not lie in its alleged ability to capture reality “just like it is” (which is “just like it appears to be”), but rather lies in its ability to reveal, through associations and connections between various isolated aspects of reality—that is to say, through creating a “new reality”—deeper, more essential layers of reality itself. Therefore, we can establish a difference between the objective reality which the world offers us—life in its broadest sense—and the image of reality which cinema offers us within the narrow frame of the screen. One would be genuine *reality*; the other, fiction.

Now I would like to elaborate on how the cinematic show offers viewers an image of reality which belongs to the sphere of fiction, the imaginary, the unreal. In this sense it stands in relative opposition to the very reality it belongs to. Of course, the sphere of the real, in its broadest sense, includes social life and all man's cultural manifesta-

tions. Therefore, it encompasses the sphere of fiction itself, of show—as a cultural object. But, evidently, in fact, it is really a question of two different spheres, each with its own peculiarities, which can be characterized not only as two aspects of reality, but as two *moments* in the process of approximation to its essence. Show can be conceived as a mediation in the process of grasping reality. The moment of the show corresponds to the moment of abstraction in the process of understanding.

The artistic show inserts itself to the sphere of everyday reality (the sphere of what is continuous, stable and relatively calm . . .) as an extraordinary moment, as a rupture. It is opposed to daily life as an unreality, an other-reality, insofar as it moves and relates to the spectator on an ideal plane. (In this being *ideal*—separation from everyday life—it expresses its unusual and extraordinary character. Therefore, show is not opposed to the typical, but rather it can incarnate the typical as it is a selective process and an exacerbation of outstanding—significant—traits of reality.) We cannot say, however, that it is an extension of (daily) reality but, rather, that it is always an extension of (the artists' and the viewers') subjective reality to the extent that it objectifies man's ideological and emotional content.

Cinema can draw viewers closer to reality without giving up its condition of unreality, fiction, and other-reality as long as it lays down a bridge to reality so that viewers can return laden with experiences and stimulation. The sum of experience and information which viewers gain on the basis of this relation may not go beyond that—more or less active sensory level—, but can also bring about in viewers, once they have stopped being viewers and are facing that other aspect of reality (the viewers' own life, their daily reality), a series of reasonings, judgments, ideas and thus a better comprehension of reality itself and an adaptation of their behavior, of their practical activity. The spectator's response follows the moment of the show; is a result of the show . . .<sup>4</sup>

The most socially productive show surely cannot be one which limits itself to being a more or less precise (“truthful,” servile . . .) reflection of reality just as reality offers itself in its immediacy. That would be no more than a duplication of the image we already have of reality, a redundancy, in short and, as such, would lack interest. We could hardly say that it is a show. If we claim that the show, that which manifests itself through what we call *fiction*, is introduced as a moment of rupture, of disturbance in the midst of daily reality, and in this sense opposes it and negates it, we must establish very clearly what this negation of reality ought to consist of so that it becomes socially productive.



There is a story of a painter, Chinese for all we know, who once painted a beautiful landscape in which you could see mountains, rivers, trees . . . rendered with so much grace, in accordance with the dictates of his imagination, that all a viewer needed was to hear the birds' songs and feel the wind pass between the trees to complete the illusion of standing in front of a real landscape and not a picture. The painter, once finished, stood there enraptured contemplating the landscape which had flowed from his head and hands. . . . He was in such ecstasy that he began to walk toward the picture and feel completely enveloped by the landscape. He walked among the trees, followed the course of the river, and withdrew further and further into the mountains until he disappeared toward the horizon.

A great finale for a creative artist, probably. But similar experiences of aesthetic ecstasy for any viewers ought to be conditioned so that they do not lose their way back and so that they can return to reality both spiritually enriched and stimulated so as to live better in it. For that reason, whatever the landscape of the Chinese painter offers with all of its mysterious charm, it represents the absolute negation of reality and thus (keeping to the plane of metaphor) death or insanity.

A show which exercises this kind of fascination for the spectator can be characterized as a "metaphysical negation" of reality. That is, a negation which tries to abolish reality through an act of evasion. Of course, nor would this be the most socially productive kind of show.

But, for a long time now, that has been the ideal kind of show for a class which is essentially hypocritical and impotent, but which has been capable of inventing the most sophisticated justification mechanisms to try to hide from itself the most profound levels of reality which it cannot—or does not want—to change. But that is not the case in a society which is rebuilding itself on a new basis, whose objective is to eliminate all vestiges of exploitation of man by man, which demands all its members' active participation and consequently the development of each person's social consciousness. Metaphysical negation, which tries to abolish reality through an act of evasion, opposes dialectical negation, which aims to transform reality through revolutionary practice. As Engels said, "Negation in dialectics does not mean simply saying no, or declaring that something does not exist, or destroying it in any way one likes."<sup>5</sup> Further on he says, ". . . therefore, every kind of thing has its characteristic kind or way of being negated, of being negated in such a way that it gives rise to a development, and it is just the same with every kind of conception or idea."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, a show which is socially productive will be that which negates daily reality (the false crystallized values of daily or

ordinary consciousness) and at the same time establishes the premises of its own negation; that is, its negation as a substitute for reality or an object of contemplation. It is not offered as a simple means of escape or consolation for a burdened spectator, rather, it propitiates the viewers' return to the other reality—that which pushed them momentarily to relate themselves to the show, to become absorbed, to enjoy, to play. . . . They should not return complacent, tranquil, empty, worn out, and inert; rather, they should be stimulated and armed for practical action. This means that show must constitute a factor in the development, through enjoyment, of the spectators' consciousness. In doing that, it moves them from remaining simple, passive (contemplative) spectators in the face of reality.

### The Contemplative and the Active Spectator

Show is essentially a phenomenon intended for contemplation. People, reduced momentarily to the condition of spectators, contemplate a peculiar phenomenon, the characteristic traits of which aim at the unusual, the remarkable, the exceptional, the out of the ordinary.

Certain real phenomena—natural or social phenomena—can indeed manifest themselves spectacularly: natural forces unleashed, grandiose landscapes, wars, mass demonstrations. . . . They constitute a show insofar as they break down the habitual image we have of reality. They offer an unfamiliar image, a magnified and revealing one, to the people contemplating them—the spectators. And just as reality can manifest itself spectacularly, so too can real show, the kind people provide for themselves in play or in artistic expression, be more or less spectacular in the degree to which it distances itself from, or draws closer to, daily reality. But in any case, show exists as such on behalf of the spectator. By definition spectators are people who contemplate and whose condition is determined not just by the characteristics or the phenomenon, but rather by the position which they as individuals (subjects) occupy in relation to it. People can be actors or spectators in the face of the same phenomenon.

Does this mean that the spectator is a passive being? In a general sense, not only all knowledge but the entire complex of interests and values which make up consciousness is shaped and developed, both socio-historically and individually, through a process which has as its point of departure the moment of contemplation (sensory consciousness) and culmination in the moment of rational or theoretical consciousness. We can say, therefore, that the condition of being spectator, as a moment in the process of the subject's appropriating or

interiorizing—a reality which includes, of course, the cultural sphere as a product of specific human activity—is fundamental.

But clearly, contemplation itself does not consist of a simple, passive appropriation by the individual: it responds to a human need to improve living conditions and already bears within it a certain activity. This activity can be greater or lesser depending not only on subjects and their social and historical locus, but also—and this is what we want to emphasize—on the peculiarities of the contemplated object, and on how these can constitute a stimulus for unleashing in the viewers another kind of activity, a consequential action beyond the show.

When I refer to “contemplative” spectators, I mean ones who do not move beyond the passive-contemplative level; inasmuch as “active” spectators, taking the moment of live contemplation as their point of departure, would be those who generate a process of critically understanding reality (including, of course, the show itself) and consequently, a practical, transforming action.

Viewers looking at a show are faced with the product of a creative process of a fictitious image which also stemmed from the artist’s act of live contemplation of objective reality. Thus a show can be directly contemplated as an object in itself, as a product of practical human activity. But viewers can also refer to the more or less objective content reflected by the show, which functions as a mediation in the process of understanding reality.

When a relation takes place only at the first level, that is, when show is contemplated merely as an object in itself and nothing more, “contemplative” spectators can satisfy their need for enjoyment and aesthetic pleasure, but their activity, expressed fundamentally in accepting or rejecting the show, does not go beyond the cultural plane. Here the cultural plane is offered to people as a simple consumer object, and any reference to the social reality that conditions it is reduced to an affirmation of its values or, in other cases, to a complacent “critique.”

In capitalist society, the typical consumer film show is the light comedy or melodrama. It has invariably had a “happy ending” and has provided, and to a certain degree continues to provide, a rather efficient ideological weapon to promote and consolidate conformism among large sectors of the population. First, there is a plot. In its numerous situations we are made to feel that the stable values of society are threatened, via the hero who incarnates those values, which, on an ideological plane, make up his physiognomy. That is to say, those are the values which (people almost never understand why this happens) have become sacred ideas and objects of worship and veneration

(homeland as an abstract notion, private property, religion, and generally all that which constitutes bourgeois morality). In the end those values are saved, and we leave the movie theater with the sensation that all is well, that there is no need to change anything. One veil after another has been drawn over the reality that prevents people from being happy and forces them to turn what could be an amusing game, a healthy entertainment, into an attempt at evasion onto which the individual, trapped in a web of relations preventing him from knowing and fully developing himself, hurls himself.

Show, as a refuge in the face of a hostile reality cannot but collaborate with all the factors which sustain such a reality to the extent that it acts as a pacifier, an escape valve, and conditions the contemplative spectator vis-à-vis reality. The mechanism is too obvious and transparent and has been denounced all too often.<sup>7</sup> Many solutions have been suggested for such an irritating situation, which inverts the role of the spectator-subject submitting him to the sad condition of object.

The “happy ending’s” discredit, in the midst of a reality whose mere appearance violently disproved the rosy image sold to people, led to the use of other more sophisticated mechanisms. The most spectacular one, surely, has been the “happening,” where the game with the spectator is taken to a level which is presumably corrosive for an alienating and repressive society. Not only does the happening give spectators an opportunity to participate, but it even drags them in against their will and involves them in “provocative” and “subversive” actions. But all this goes on, of course, clearly *within* the show where anything can happen and many things can be violated. What prevails is the unusual, the unexpected, the surprise, and the exhibitionism. . . . Furthermore, it can be as useful as a ritual which helps to shape a specific behavior. Generally, it can be very funny, especially for those who can afford to just look at things from above because undoubtedly that would give them a certain kind of relief for, in spite of the happening’s seemingly truculent and disquieting appearance, it is an ingenious expedient, which in the final analysis helps to prolong the situation, not to change anything; in other words, to just sit and wait while those below reach some kind of an agreement.

In cinematic show, of course, there is no room for this kind of means to facilitate or provoke spectators’ “participation” on the basis of unpredictability. Nevertheless, the problem of spectators’ participation still persists. It demands a solution that is within—or better, based on—the cinematic show itself, which reveals how simplistically this problem has often been approached. The first thing this uneasiness reveals is something we frequently forget but which nevertheless may be an axiomatic truth: *the response one wants to arouse in the*

spectator is not only that which is elicited during the show, but also that which is elicited vis-à-vis reality. That is to say, what is fundamental is real participation, not illusory participation.

During periods of relative stability in a class society, there is minimal individual social participation. In one way or another, through physical, moral or ideological coercion, the individual's activity takes place mainly within the framework of the direct production of material goods, which mostly serve to meet the exploiting class' needs. Individual action outside this framework is illusory.

However, at those times when the class struggle is exacerbated, the level of people's general participation grows. At the same time, a leap occurs in the development of social consciousness. In those moments of rupture—extraordinary moments—spectacular events occur within social reality, and when faced with them, individuals take a stand in keeping with their own interests. Without a doubt, it is above all in these circumstances that we see revealed what Aimé Césaire referred to as the "sterile attitude of a spectator."<sup>8</sup> Reality demands that people take sides when faced with it, and that demand is fundamental to the relationship between man and the world at all times throughout history. If we consistently assume as a principle that "the world does not satisfy man, so he decides to change it through his activity,"<sup>9</sup> we must remember that man's activity, that taking of sides which becomes practical, transforming action, is conditioned by the type of social relations existing at any given moment. And in our case, in a society where we are building socialism, reality also demands partisan activity and a growing level of social participation from all those individuals who make up this society. This process is only possible if accompanied by a parallel development in social consciousness. The cinematic show falls within that process insofar as it reflects a tendency of the social consciousness which involves the spectators themselves and insofar as it can affect the spectators as a stimulus, but also as an obstacle, for consequent action. And when I speak about consequent action, I am referring to this specific type of participation, historically and socially conditioned, a concrete participation which implies people's adequate response to the problems of social reality, especially those of an ideological and political nature. What this is about, then, is stimulating and channeling spectators to act in the direction of historical movement, along the path of society's development.

To provoke such a response in the spectator it is necessary, as a first condition, that reality's problems be presented in the show, that concerns be expressed and transmitted, that questions be posed. That is to say, it is necessary to have an "open" show.

But the concept of "openness" is too broad; it is present at every level where the artistic work operates. By itself, openness does not guarantee the spectator's consequent participation. In the case of an open show presenting concerns that are not only aesthetic—as a source of active enjoyment—but rather conceptual and ideological, it becomes (without ceasing to be a *game* in the sense that every show is) a serious operation because it touches on underlying levels of reality.

Nevertheless to achieve the greatest efficacy and functionality, it is not enough for a work to be open—in the sense of indeterminate. The work itself must bear those premises which can bring the spectator to discern reality. That is to say, it must push spectators into the path of truth, into coming to what can be called a dialectical consciousness about reality. Then it could operate as a real "guide for action." One should not confuse openness with ambiguity, inconsistency, eclecticism, arbitrariness . . .

What can the artist base himself on in order to conceive a show which would not just pose problems but would also show viewers the road they ought to take in order to discover for themselves a higher level of discernment? Undoubtedly, here art must make use of the instruments developed by science for research; art must apply all methodological resources at hand and all it can gain from information theory, linguistics, psychology, sociology, etc. Show, insofar as it becomes the negative pole of the reality-fiction relationship, must develop an apt strategy for each circumstance. We must not forget that, in practice, spectators cannot be considered abstractions, but, rather, people who are historically and socially conditioned, in this way, the show must address itself first of all to concrete spectators to whom it must unfold its operative potential to the fullest.

Translated by Julia Lesage

## Notes

1. Patricio Guzmán, in notes he wrote before making *Battle of Chile*, said at that time—the months which preceded the fascist coup—he never would have made a fictional film with actors reciting a text, because reality itself, which was unfolding before his very eyes, was changing tremendously. In times of social convulsion, reality loses its everyday character, and everything which happens is extraordinary, new, unique . . . The dynamics of change, the trends of development, the essence are manifested more directly and clearly than in moments of relative calm. For that reason, it attracts our attention and in that sense we can say it is spectacular. Surely, the best thing to do is to try to capture those moments in their purest state—documentary—and to leave the re-elaboration of those elements reality offers for a time

when reality unfolds without any apparent disturbance. Then fiction is a medium, an ideal instrument, with which to penetrate reality's essence.

2. This famous code sets forth, among other things, that film "builds character, develops right ideals, inculcates correct principles, and all this in attractive story form." Regardless of any discrepancy from the "right ideals" and "correct principles" which this revealing document tried to promote, it is interesting to see how it resorts to the most puerile mechanism—that spectators "hold up for admiration high types of characters." Without a doubt, that mechanism is the one which best reveals reactionary attitudes, because its only purpose is to mold an idealized and complaisant image of reality. (Moley, R., *The Hays Office*, "Code to Govern the Making of Talking, Synchronized and Silent Motion Pictures," New York: Bobbs-Merrill, Co., 1945, p. 246).

3. In the thesis about artistic and literary culture contained in the *Plataforma Programática del Partido Comunista de Cuba* (Havana: Ed. DOR, 1976, p. 90) we can read, "Socialist society calls for art and literature which, while providing aesthetic enjoyment, contribute to raising the people's cultural level. An extremely creative climate, which impels art and literature's progress as the legitimate aspiration of working people, must be achieved. Art and literature will promote the highest values, enrich our people's lives and participate actively in shaping the communist personality."

4. Certainly, TV has brought into the home the most spectacular images of reality. For example, I think about an average American drinking beer while watching television and seeing Saigon's police chief put a bullet through the skull of a prisoner in full public view, and all of this in color. Therefore, the *representation* of those moments has to adjust to new circumstances. But the most important thing is that an act so powerful, so unusual, so naked, once it is screened as show—that is to say, once its contemplation is made available to the viewers—is found to have notably reduced its potential as a generator of a consequent reaction in practice. Probably, the surprise would make the viewer jump up from his chair, but following that, he would go to the refrigerator to open up another beer, which would make him sleep soundly. After all, those events have become little by little everyday facts of life. What would we have to do to move this viewer? It is not enough that the show be real—and that it might be happening at the very moment that one looks at it—to generate a "productive" reaction in the spectator. For that it would be necessary, possibly, to resort to more sophisticated mechanisms.

5. Engels, F., *Anti-Dühring*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962, p. 194.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

7. Brecht said: "The bourgeois passes beyond, in the theater, the threshold of another world which has no relation at all to daily life. It enjoys there a kind of venal emotion in a form of a drunkenness which eliminates thought and judgment" (Quoted in V. Klotz, *Bertolt Brecht*, Buenos Aires: La Mandragora, 1959, p. 138).

8. "And most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of griefs is not a proscaenium, a man who waits is not a dancing bear . . ." (Césaire, Aimé, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Éditions Présence Africaine, Paris, 1971, p. 62).

9. Lenin, V.I., *Cuadernos filosóficos*, Havana: Editora Política, 1964, p. 205.

## Part 2 Continental Development: Socio- historical Contexts and Modes of Production/ Consumption