

Cuban Cinephilia: Two Film Reviewers Survey the Light and Shadows of Hollywood

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Abstract: This article surveys the landscape of Cuban film reviewing and the tensions and negotiations between ideological inclinations and Hollywood machinations. On the one hand, it explores Guillermo Cabrera Infante's elegant juggling of his political stance and his devotion to Classical Hollywood. On the other hand, it charts the sharp critique of militant Mirta Aguirre and her surgical dismantling of Hollywood malaise.

Keywords: Cinephilia – Cuban Cinema – Cabrera Infante – Film Reviewing – Mirta Aguirre.

Cinephilia is an attitude that influences the way cinema is distributed, enjoyed, and perceived. It is an approach that privileges the enjoyment of cinema by focusing on locations of exhibition, fragments, collections, physical media, and many other ways that fall into this larger umbrella term. Another way in which cinephilia manifests itself is in the work of film reviewers. Cinephilia in writing is not just about love towards film. It is a lifestyle that allows for a constant interconnection of film and writing, for a stream of allusions and self-referentiality that permeates critical thinking and dissolves national boundaries creating a network of possibilities that allows for new communities to be born. These writers take upon themselves, sometimes without pay as was the case of early bloggers, the task of kindling enthusiasm on the prospective viewers or often smashing the expectations of others. Also, cinephilia has been accused of being at best apolitical and in their worse incarnation as reactionary in its approach to cinema. Although cinephilia has been the subject of increasing scholarly attention over the last decades, most studies focus on the Anglo-European scenarios (especially North American and French). Cinephilia, however, is a global phenomenon. In this article, I aim to explore how cinephilia may be differently inflected elsewhere, by exploring its expression in one intriguing but little-studied context: Cuba. Megan J. Feeney writing about film reception in Cuba has noted that while U.S reviews circulated on the island, “Cuban readers preferred the unique interpretive sensibilities of their own cultural

arbiters, as suggested by the fact that every major Havana periodical had a film critic on the payroll” (202). This booming writing scenario is often associated with the 1959 revolution. Cuban writers initially experienced a level of freedom and dissemination unprecedented during the early stages of the revolution. Alberto Baeza Flores comments on the paradisaical scenario, “Nunca ... el escritor y el artista habian sido tan halagados y se les habia ofrecido tantas ventajas materiales ... nunca se editó tanto. Nunca se les dió tanta resonancia y publicidad, tanta categoria e importancia” (Sarmiento 21). In achieve my task to scrutinize the nature of those “unique interpretive sensibilities,” mentioned by Feeley, I will examine the production of two Cuban film reviewers: Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Mirta Aguirre. I will investigate the development of style, structure, and politics in the work of these two writers, to identify patterns and classify their contribution to the international poetics of film reviewing. It is my belief that the relationship between left wing reviewing and cinephilia is much more relevant in the case of the Cuban reviewers, and I will examine how compatible these two modes of operation are within a single film community.

One thing that clearly unites these two critics is their preoccupation with Hollywood. According to Feeney, U.S. imperial hegemony in Cuba was manifested in the promotion of U.S values and this included preferential treatment for Hollywood films (17). However, their approach to U.S cinema varies greatly. Notwithstanding their undeniable cinephilia, at different moments they recognized the invasive power of the U.S dream machine and dealt with it in divergent and idiosyncratic ways.

The first critic whose work I will consider is Guillermo Cabrera Infante, a remarkable example of the confluence of different traditions in Cuban film criticism under the shadow of the U.S empire. Cabrera Infante was a card-carrying baby, born of communist parents in 1929. He experienced poverty in the countryside, an experience that continued when they all moved to Habana in 1941. A voracious reader and film watcher, he quickly became a writer publishing stories and film reviewers as well as getting in trouble. Publishing parodies using English words granted him a brief stay in jail and forced him to use a pseudonym to publish his film notes. He was a left-wing writer but above that he was a free man capable of dissent (Sarmiento 19-20) In the mid-1950s, he began publishing a regular film-reviewing column for *Carteles*, a Cuban cultural magazine. Later, he became one of the chief contributors to the newspaper *Revolución*, where he coordinated the short-lived cultural supplement *Lunes de Revolución* from its initial release in March 1959 to the final number in November 1961 (Luis *Lunes*). As a film reviewer, Cabrera Infante showed unrestrained enthusiasm for the Hollywood product. A compilation of the film reviews he wrote under the pseudonym Guillermo Caín, *Un oficio del siglo XX*, features 110 film reviews: 65 dedicated to Hollywood or British films; 17 to French and 10 to Italian cinema; and 3 each for Mexico, Spain, and Japan, with the rest scattered between Argentina, Poland, the Soviet Union, and Sweden. Cabrera Infante’s spectatorial geographies and aesthetic concerns place him in line with several U.S. reviewers like Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris.

In the United States, U.S critic Andrew Sarris borrowed and developed the French *Cahiers du Cinema* version of auteurism to craft his personal cinephilic reflections. In his attempt to define the role of the cinephile critic, he questions his own place in the canon of great U.S film critics. In the introduction to his 1969 book, *Confessions of a Cine-Cultist*, he writes, “The cultural rationale for our worthier predecessors—Agee, Ferguson, Levin, Murphy, Sherwood, et al.—was that they were too good to be reviewing movies. We, on the contrary, were not considered much good for anything else. Like one-eyed lemmings, we plunged headlong into the murky depths of specialization” (Sarris 11). Sarris considered the critic less than a writer and more like a fan, a specialized and devoted fan.

An example of Cabrera Infante’s effervescent cinephilia that connects him to the cinephilic reviewers trends can be found in his tendency to draft lists, as for example his top-twelve list included in the section called “Nondescript manuscript found in a bottle ...of milk” (167). While the list was compiled after the publication of his *Carteles* reviews, the fact that it is strategically located in the center of *Un oficio del siglo XX* points to the importance of cinephilic strategies to Cabrera Infante’s approach. The list includes U.S, French, Italian, Russian, Spanish, Indian, and Japanese films and is uncannily similar to the *Sight and Sound* 1960 poll (181). The cinephile’s obsession with list-making provides researchers with a valuable tool to gauge the taste of specific individuals or groups during a particular time. While some of Cabrera Infante’s selections are permanent fixtures in more recent polls as well (*Citizen Kane* (Welles 1941), *Vertigo* (Hitchcock 1958), others exemplify the fluctuation in cinematic taste and the ephemeral nature of “universal” recognition (for example, *Ivan the Terrible* (*Ivan Grozny* Eisenstein, 1945) and *Monsieur Verdoux* (Chaplin 1947). His fondness for the auteur theory is also demonstrated by the long reviews dedicated to figures who were recognized and canonized by *Cahiers du Cinéma*: Chaplin, Welles, Hitchcock, and Bresson along with Tati, Powell & Pressburger, Wilder, and Kubrick, among many others.

However, the Cuban intellectual landscape started to change after the success of the revolution in 1959. For example, the influence of *Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry*. While their importance cannot be efficiently covered in the limited scope of this article, it is necessary to highlight their relevance not only for Cuban film but for world cinema. Established in 1959, the ICAIC was an essential wing of the Cuban revolution and became instrumental in the development of a strong film culture and in collaboration with other Cuban cultural institutions turned the Island into “a privileged space for the sociability of artists and intellectuals from all over the world in the 1960s and 1970s” (Villaça). Before the creation of the ICAIC, Cabrera Infante’s cinephilia drove him to create the Cinemateca de Cuba, the first of this kind in Cuba and similar in style to the French cine clubs that gravitated towards Langlois Cinémathèque Française. At this early stage there was already tension between the members and two groups formed. Cabrera Infante, legendary director of photography Nestor Almendros and German Puig on one side and Alfredo Guevara, Tomas Gutierrez Alea and Julio Garcia Espinoza formed the other. The latter group with stricter Marxist views went on to become the

ICAIC. (Luis “Exhuming” 273). Later when one of Castro’s advisors became editor of *Revolución*, the newspaper of the Cuban Revolution, he invited Cabrera Infante to handle the cultural segment titled *Lunes de Revolución* (Luis, “Exhuming” 254).

The contributors to *Lunes de Revolución*, which boasted a circulation of 200,000 copies, situated their political orientation strictly on the left or as they put it “somos, eso sí, intelectuales, artistas, escritores de izquierda - tan de izquierda que a veces vemos al comunismo pasar por el lado y situarse a la derecha” (Sacco). Even so, as Amaya notes, their avantgarde aesthetics got them into clashes with the official party line represented by Alfredo Guevara, the director of the ICAIC, who believed the masses needed to be educated first before being exposed to experimental cinema (12). Moreover, while both *Lunes* and the Party’s ideologues maintained a strict anti-imperialist agenda, the *Lunes* writers sometimes presented Hollywood in a positive light or engaged in criticism of Soviet cultural products. Furthermore, the official censorship of the documentary short *P.M.* (Cabrera 1961), co-directed by Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s brother Sabá (and which provided an unvarnished glimpse of Havana’s nightlife, including public drunkenness), aggravated the already deep chasm between the approaches of ICAIC’s critics and filmmakers and the writers of *Lunes de Revolución* in the immediate post-revolutionary period (Chanan, 2004: 136). Upon the closing of *Lunes* all the cultural manifestations of Cuban intellectuals became centralized under the UNEAC (National Union of Cuban Artists and Writers) (Luis “Lunes” 2007).

During his six-year tenure as resident critic in *Carteles* from 1954 to 1960, Cabrera Infante published his reviews as Guillermo Caín. Much more than a pseudonym, Caín became an alter ego. When these reviews were published in book form in 1963, Cabrera Infante added a series of prologues, epilogues and glosses written with the goal of further fictionalizing the figure of Caín. As Jason Borge argues, these add-ons not only help establish a biographical background for Caín, but they also “reinforce cinema’s elevation to the status of literature” (349). Here it is important to note that during this same period, Cabrera Infante expanded his fiction writing as well, and would come to be associated with the Latin American Boom writers. Some of the supplements he included in his film review anthology consist of fictional notes, letters, and other forms of exchange between Cabrera Infante and Caín. The glosses include lower-capped commentaries in which Cabrera Infante criticizes Caín’s unpredictable reviews by focusing on inclusions and omissions; in this clever way, the Cuban revised his previous writings. The glosses range from the humorous--“Caín believed in generosity; therefore he was a pedant” (148)—to literary allusions--“a roll of the drums will never abolish Caín” (315)—to the more directly critical--“Caín said, at the end, and so suddenly, that ‘suddenly’ was a masterwork: I have absolved him for his last exultation: I took out the line” (310). This device also allows Cabrera Infante a second chance to expand on subjects that perhaps were unavailable to him during the time of original publication, due to the political climate.

As was mentioned earlier, Cabrera Infante’s multiple styles and interests bring him closer to some U.S film reviewers like Kael and Sarris, because his cinephilic

enthusiasm encompasses all forms of cinema and his love of language takes his reviews beyond the mere journalistic and into a more creative terrain. However, Cabrera Infante's style pushes the boundaries even further the U.S. reviewers, as when he moves into the realm of ludic and self-reflexive fiction (so characteristic of the Latin American Boom writers). Moreover, Cabrera Infante's brand of enthusiasm for pure film form occasionally drives him to destroy as well as praise films, sometimes by unleashing the most virulent criticism or even worse, reducing them to nothing in devastating one-liners. For example, in "Snorting at the Bulls," Cabrera Infante dismisses the movie *The Magnificent Matador* (Boetticher, 1955) in barely forty words: "For the reader, there might not be much value in a review where the only argument is that Morpheus will close the spectator's eyes" (59). However, it stands as a document of a particular and historical taste even in its brevity. Luckily there are only a few reviews as dismissive as the previous example. His medium-length pieces often combine praise and criticism, while his longer ones are mostly dedicated to the directors in his personal canon, and occasionally to a particular movie like the *Sweet Smell of Success* (Mackendrick 1957) or *Rio Bravo* (Hawks 1959). Some of these longer pieces offer a microcosm of his theory of reviewing. For example, in Cabrera Infante's take on Howard Hawks's classic western *Rio Bravo*, the Cuban writer approaches the film on several fronts: as a western, a Howard Hawks film, a John Wayne film, a genre-bending film and even as a self-parody. The result is a flawless review that smoothly navigates from one theme to the next with precision. While there is some plot summary, it is not exhaustive. Instead, Cabrera Infante zooms in on fragments that then allow him to expand out to a consideration of larger issues. For example, his summary of some of the scenes that Dean Martin shares with John Wayne enables him to discuss Wayne's legacy and his zeal to outperform his co-stars. He approaches biographical commentary but only so he can focus on the acting. Cabrera Infante performs a brief close analysis of the pantomime acting in the opening scene with special attention placed on the gaps of silence and the body language as an alternative and very effective method of displaying the plot structure of a film. Later, Cabrera Infante employs this close analysis as a bridge to his breakdown of Howard Hawks' style, which he labels as self-parody, comparing the movement of *Rio Bravo's* opening sequence with similar scenes in other Hawks films like *Scarface*, (1932), *Red River* (1948), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), and *To Have or Have Not* (1944).

Cabrera Infante's reviews also contribute to a tropical adaptation of the idea of auteurism that was being developed at the same time by Sarris in the US; although he never labels them as auteurs, his predilection and critical unpacking of selected directors is similar to the auteurism of the Cahier du cinema critics and their U.S. accolades like Sarris. An example of this approach is Cabrera Infante's review of Jacques Tati titled "Mr. Tati's Holiday," published in *Carteles* on April 29, 1956. Once again, Cabrera Infante deploys multiple points of entry into the film with the intention of creating a niche for Tati in the pantheon of comedians. Here he departs from the smooth fluidity of the Hawks review, dividing his five-page review into ten different sections that together compose a

hagiography of the film's auteur. Combining the biographical and historical with the sociological, Cabrera Infante links Tati with great Silent film comedians like Charles Chaplin, Max Linder and Harold Lloyd, as well as with some less obvious influences such as *The New Yorker* cartoonists (74). In this way, Cabrera Infante transcends the cultural boundaries of cinema and reaches out to other arts to contextualize Tati's work. Another important element appears between parenthesis, four paragraphs into the review: Cabrera Infante deals with the issue of different languages and how movie distributors and exhibitors address this problem. He complains about the use of distracting subtitles for the sporadic French dialogue that accompanies the mostly silent *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* (1953). He contrasts the Cuban decision to translate the dialogue with the English-language version, which leaves the dialogue as background noise. While a French spectator will be able to discern the meanings of the French dialogue in the case of this Tati film, the dialogue is not essential to understanding the form or the content of the film, according to Cabrera Infante, and for that reason the subtitles detract from the film's aesthetics.

Film comedy does not have the same time of reputation that the more serious cinema does. This is also particularly evident in the pantheons established by critics that practice auteur theory. Cabrera Infante also takes it upon himself to dissect many film comedies, looking at how they work within a larger context, and legitimizing them along the way. A clear example of this is his review of *The Gold Rush* (Chaplin 1925). The review, titled "Dorado Eldorado," is one of Cabrera Infante's longest, and it encapsulates both his admiration for Chaplin and his attempt to situate *The Gold Rush* among the best movies of all time. To achieve this purpose, Cabrera Infante first highlights Chaplin's traits as an auteur: his reluctance to abandon silent film, his autobiographical tendencies, and finally, his idiosyncratic directing style, which Cabrera Infante compares to Eric Von Stroheim, a problematic but very influential silent film director. He examines how almost all Chaplin's films feature autobiographical elements to dismiss the claim that this is a distinguishing characteristic of *The Gold Rush*. He studies how Chaplin chooses to focus on a particular social message but surrounds it with comic elements to make it more attractive for his audience; in the case of *The Gold Rush*, Chaplin unleashes a critique of the voracious competition engendered by capitalism that is encapsulated in slapstick comedy as well as in D.W. Griffith-styled melodrama (127). Another distinguishing characteristic of this review is the enumeration of seven scenes that Cabrera Infante considers as exemplifying Chaplin's comic genius, and that also reflect the comic interests of the reviewer. Finally, in his review of the 1942 re-release of the 1925 film, Cabrera Infante draws his readers' attention to Chaplin's commentary voice over, which he describes as an opportunity to know what "Chaplin the author thinks about Charles Chaplin the character" (129). This analysis is significant in its relation to Chaplin's oeuvre, but also because it mirrors what Cabrera Infante does with his own lower-capped glosses of Caín's reviews, which enable the Cuban writer to revise his thoughts and display his literary pyrotechnics.

As mentioned earlier, Cabrera Infante's reviews also stand out because he strongly favors genres that are usually less valued by the average "serious" reviewer: comedy and musicals. When reviewing these genres, he once again shows favoritism for certain directors, such as Billy Wilder. In his review of *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder 1959), Cabrera Infante argues that the movie uses humor to dismantle masculine sexuality in the United States. Cabrera Infante is so taken by the dialogue that he reproduces a full page of it to make a point about the strength of language in this film. He also explores the gender-bending techniques that Wilder deploys. For example, Cabrera Infante acknowledges that the core of the film owes a lot to Mack Sennett's films particularly regarding car chases, pathetic policemen and similar running gags (266), but Cabrera Infante believes that Wilder deliberately unfolds a second layer, that of the screwball's double entendre where language is exploited to its fullest potential. For example, Cabrera Infante reproduces an extended dialogue in which the two male protagonists discuss the difficulties for one of them to marry a millionaire man. While one of the characters is obviously concerned about same-sex marriage, the other plays around the issue by focusing on different challenges like garnering the approval of the millionaire's mother (265). Cabrera Infante also argues that the movie deliberately parodies other Wilder titles, with a satire on the romantic comedy like *Love in the Afternoon* (Wilder 1957), or even on classic gangster films like *Scarface*, borrowing codes from serious genres and using them to trigger comedy elements (266). With his statements compacted into an eight-paragraph review, Cabrera Infante unpacks the characteristics of a genre- and gender-bending comedy, canonizing it as a valuable piece of U.S. cinema. This approach, according to which comedy is praised not only for its entertainment value but also for its deployment of genre distortion, which expands the intertextual playing field legitimizes and promotes film comedy as a valid and potentially quite rich art form.

A cinephilic moment, as defined by Christian Keathley is a fragment of a film "where deeply embedded memories are stored and are only evident later upon a reflection" (145). Cinephilic moments are not embraced by all critics but those who do scan the film surface looking for those instants of excess that open the film and make them personal. Some people could find these interruptions ridiculous but for others they essentially weave the dream fabric of cinema to personal recollections. Keathley mentions as an example of this, the color of Cary Grant's socks in the crop-duster scene in *North by Northwest* (Keathley 31) Tom Paulus elaborates a whole essay where he combines theoretical musings by Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin with the recollections of quite a few film critics that seems to remember the tiny instant of Grant's socks as a significant memory (Paulus).

When analyzing the visual aspects of cinema and their relation to the written word, in most cases Cabrera Infante combines the position of screenwriter with the exuberant machinations of the cinephilic moments. One excellent example of this is his review of *Tea and Sympathy* (Minnelli, 1956). In this piece, Cabrera Infante comments on the vicissitudes of screenwriting, especially when adapting a play with a controversial

subject. In the case of *Tea and Sympathy*, that subject is homosexuality. Rather than focusing exclusively on the visuality of the adaptation, Cabrera Infante is more interested in the negotiation that takes place to reduce the controversial themes into images that the censors will tolerate. He analyzes the changes from play to script, comparing them to the parallel scenes in the original play, and exploring how certain images were “softened” to garner the censors’ approval. For example, a scene that featured a strong suggestion of a sexual encounter between a younger and an older man is transformed into a passive scene of a boy sewing with the man’s wife. While he praises the overall film as an example of Vincent Minnelli’s excellent direction, the real significance of this review is revealed when Cabrera Infante turns his attention from the changes in the script to a discussion of two cinephilic moments, which he calls “poetic instants.”

While both scenes are relevant to the plot, Cabrera Infante argues that what matters is how they are wordlessly constructed by exploring the intensity of the interconnectivity of visual metaphors (rain, windows, etc.). Cabrera Infante ends his review by emphasizing that these poetic instants are not in the play; rather, they are the creation of Minnelli and his team (115). This is not the first time that Cabrera Infante’s cinephilia manifests itself in the discussion of purely visual cinephilic moments, but this is the only place where he acknowledges the existence of these independent poetic instants, although he never theorizes about them. These reviews are good examples of Cabrera Infante’s cinephilic film reviewing, a practice that features a passionate reconnaissance of the musical and comedic landscape, and that is heavily anchored in the histories of genres and the auteur classification system.

Cabrera Infante rarely dwells on political criticism or issues of ethnic representation, something that could seem out of place coming from a writer forged by revolutionary fires. However, it is important to highlight the difficult times he had working for the revolution. His love for Hollywood and his strong dislike of social realism and neorealism perhaps drove him away from straightforward Marxist criticism, for example that deployed by Mirta Aguirre (Luis “Exhumed” 272). One such instance, however, can be found in his review of *Something of Value* (Brooks, 1957), a film that Cabrera Infante uses as an example of hypocritical racial politics. Even though he praises the photography, music and acting, in an uncharacteristic move, Cabrera Infante launches into a critique of imperialism to claim that the film is flawed: according to the Cuban writer, the work refers to the history of colonialism in Africa only to entertain and shock the audience. It is perhaps Cabrera Infante’s strongest attempt at presenting a political worldview, but as such it fails because it displays a conciliatory attitude like that of the film itself, trying (and in this case, failing) to accommodate both the cinephilic and the political.

When confronted with problems regarding the historical film, Cabrera Infante’s approach favors the aesthetic over the political. For example, in his review of the movie *La rosa blanca* (*The White Rose*, Fernández, 1954), he unpacks the problems of producing a historical film about a figure such as Cuba’s national hero José Martí. He argues that it

would be plausible to do so with a figure like El Cid, the medieval warrior protagonist of Spain's epic poem, but with someone like Martí, he believes all efforts are due to fail, since many of the most important acts in Martí's career were intellectual and political, and lacked the action that is necessary in more romanticized historical films. Cabrera Infante recognizes the excitement in reconstructing the past through cinema and asserts that a highly emotional register is needed for such an enterprise to be successful, something that *La rosa blanca* lacks. On the other hand, Cabrera Infante recommends the Hollywood production of *Viva Zapata* (Kazan 1952), even when the Pancho Villa constructed is not an accurate historical figure, because the emotion it generates impacts the audience with the force of a real historical event. Cabrera Infante goes even further when he recommends "a little less formal and historical rigor and a little more emotion" (34). It is somewhat surprising that Cabrera Infante recommends this type of mythmaking and political blindsiding; Hollywood has excelled at taking such historical licenses, from darkening the history of other countries to whitewashing North American heroes.

While it is possible to find an occasional mention in Cabrera Infante's reviews of troubling racial representations, this is usually not a priority for him. For example, in his discussion of *Carmen Jones*, (Preminger, 1954), Cabrera Infante begins by praising the movie's acting and energy. However, Cabrera Infante's review also contains two dissonant moments that perhaps reflect the Cuban writer's divided opinion regarding Hollywood and race. For example, he calls the movie "the most exciting experiment with black performers made in Hollywood since the days of King Vidor's *Hallelujah*" (46). Cabrera Infante's choice of the word "experiment" is unclear. Does he seek to reflect ironically on the relative lack of African American protagonists throughout the history of Hollywood cinema? Or does he wish simply to underline the film's broadly innovative character? Moreover, by connecting *Carmen Jones* with *Hallelujah* (Vidor, 1929), Cabrera Infante bypasses other films, such as *Cabin in the Sky* (Minnelli, 1943), and *Stormy Weather* (Stone, 1943), that belong to the genealogy of African American performance that other Cuban critics such as Mirta Aguirre will cite in their attacks on Hollywood bias. Is it possible to read this deliberate exclusion as indicating Cabrera Infante's disapproval of the racial politics of those two films, or does he omit them for purely aesthetic reasons, deeming them as less worthy examples of the Hollywood black musical? At the end of the review, Cabrera Infante shifts his tone and refers to the anguish of segregation as a more tragic subject than Carmen's fictional one (47). His review of *Carmen Jones* is immediately followed by his take on *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1939). Between these two reviews, Cabrera Infante, in his role as Caín's editor, writes: "The theme of racism escaped Caín: *Gone with the Wind* is also a monument to the segregation of the races" (47). This shows Cabrera Infante's a posteriori reflection on the disturbing lack of attention to racial representations in his reviews. However, a small editorial note certainly does not counter the effect of these frequent omissions, even though it reveals a certain degree of consciousness about the racial tensions at play in some Hollywood films.

Labeling Cabrera Infante as a political film reviewer would be a gross

misrepresentation. However, in contrast with the core of his contemporary mainstream U.S. reviewers, he exhibits slightly more political range. One review that particularly stand out was his take on *A Face in the Crowd* (Kazan, 1957). Cabrera Infante investigates and dismantles the U.S. hegemonic discourse in the Kazan film. For example, he states: “It is curious that the American popular heroes have turned out to be, each in their own way, reactionary soldiers” (190). Cabrera Infante deplores the North American propensity for conveniently creating and marketing “heroes” to satisfy their ideological needs, a very strong indictment of U.S. society and somewhat surprising given Cabrera Infante’s advocacy of historical mythmaking. He continues by weaving in references to McCarthy’s witch-hunt in his dismantling of the plot to magnify the impact upon his readership. His discussion of *A Face in the Crowd* includes a vicious attack on television but also and most importantly on advertising when he states that T.V. “sells trash to an eager audience by convincing them that the worst is the best by dint of repetition” (191). Cabrera Infante’s use of Kazan’s movie to unleash a withering critique of the U.S. ideological system is effective in reaching a wider audience since he does not discount the movie’s value as entertainment; he agrees with the topics it presents and effectively repurposes them to launch his condemnation from a more cinephilic point of view.

An analysis of Cabrera Infante’s work as a film reviewer reveals that the strong cinephilic strain is not exclusive to the United States or France, and that it can flourish in more politicized environments like 1950’s Cuba. Indeed, the Cuban context also demonstrates that cinephilia and ideological criticism can coexist. While the focus of Cabrera Infante’s criticism was mostly aesthetic, he was not an apolitical reviewer. Occasionally the blunt hegemonic messages circulated through Hollywood films prompted him to adopt a more ideological stance. Other Cuban reviewers, however, were much more committed to exploring and dismantling the Hollywood propaganda machine, while being no less cinephilic in their approach. One of these reviewers was Mirta Aguirre.

Born in 1912, Aguirre joined the Cuban communist party when she was only 20 years old. Four years later she collaborated with the Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, putting together an anthology of Cuban Poetry. A poet and a journalist herself, in 1944 she was appointed director of the cultural program of the newspaper associated with the Partido Socialista Popular, *Hoy*, founded in 1938 with the blessing of Cuba’s president, Fulgencio Batista, who at the time was trying to gain the support of the Communist party (Lister). After the 1959 revolution that toppled Batista and brought Fidel Castro to power, Aguirre quickly stood out again in cultural circles; she was part of the heated cultural exchange between the ICAIC filmmakers and the writers from *Revolución*. She remained a strong advocate of Marxist-Leninist views throughout her life.

Consistently throughout her career as a film reviewer, Aguirre praised Hollywood’s films and filmmaking, but more often she advocated for a cinema of gender, race, and class equality, focusing on themes that other contemporary film reviewers tended not to foreground. Even so, her work can be easily linked to that of the U.S. critic

Harry Alan Potamkin in terms of political commitment and subject matter.

Aguirre's reviews from 1944 to 1948 have been anthologized in *Crónicas de cine*, which provides an excellent introduction to her approach. Out of the 160 reviews included in that volume, 119 are focused on English-language films. Most of these deal with Hollywood products, although there are some British films included. The rest are Mexican (16), Argentinian (6), Soviet (5) and French (5), with at least one review each dedicated to films from Poland, Italy, Sweden, and Cuba. As is also true of Cabrera Infante's reviews, this imbalance is not simply a reflection of Aguirre's taste but also more importantly exemplifies film distribution schemes within Cuba, where Hollywood was dominant but works produced by the largest Spanish-language industries (Mexico and Argentina) were also popular. Aguirre's reviews range between five and ten paragraphs and are not dominated by plot summaries. Instead, she varies the structure by including commentaries on the music, acting, characterization and cinematography of the works in question, occasionally performing close analyses of selected scenes. She does not digress from her framework of discussion, and she also avoids any personal commentary other than her political statements. She certainly does not display a persona different from her activist self, and unlike Cabrera Infante she does not deploy a pseudonym, much less an alter ego like the latter's Caín.

When it comes to Hollywood movies, Aguirre's enthusiasm is as relentless as are her political commentaries. One example of a movie review that illustrates Aguirre's cinephilia is her treatment of *Voice in the Wind*, (Ripley, 1944) one of the very few films that earns Aguirre's label of "extraordinary." First, Aguirre analyzes the film's cinematography and mise en scène, especially commending the sobriety of the scenery and the effectiveness of the audio motifs, a combination that she describes as achieving a poetic effect. Even characteristics that sometimes prompt her to dismiss a film are lauded here, such as the camera's obstinate immobility or the slow dialogues, which she argues contribute to the resonant atmosphere (50). She continues by praising the acting, music, and theme, and regrets that she does not have more space to discuss the latter as deeply as the movie deserves. Of course, the movie also presents a strong political message about the collective character of heroism in the face of a threat like Nazism, but nevertheless Aguirre pays equal attention to many of its formalist devices.

Another individual film that deserved her praise was *Jane Eyre* (Stevenson, 1943). Aguirre declares that the great deal of plot compacting is effective because, unlike other versions of the Bronte novel, more attention may then be dedicated to the childhood of Jane Eyre. Although far from pronouncing the film a masterpiece, Aguirre thinks it is an achievement in its use of several techniques to enhance the spectator's experience. For example, sound is used not as a realist device but as a bridge between the ongoing action and future events. She also describes the effective use of shadows to add tension to the meeting of the characters (70). Focusing once again on a combination of cinematographic techniques, outstanding acting, and mise en scène, Aguirre can recommend the film without revealing much about the plot.

Aguirre's cinephilic tendencies are evident in her preference for a robust and independent aesthetic style. She takes a strong position against adaptations that lack visual flair and that depend heavily on the written word to get their ideas across. For example, in her review of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (Kazan, 1945) Aguirre laments that the film is not more visually and aurally layered and censures its lack of cinematographic rhythm. In her opinion the vitality of the literary text has been lost, replaced with an unbearable melodramatic slowness (104). In her discussion of *Henry V* (Olivier, 1944), Aguirre praises certain production values, noting, surprisingly, that they favorably compare to Disney's visual plasticity and Russian-inspired montage, but she nevertheless claims that the result is little more than photographed theater; it is thus an "anti-cinematographic" film (170).

Another example of Aguirre's position regarding visuality may be found in her review of *The Lost Weekend* (Wilder, 1945); here she chastises the production team for not exploiting the cinematographic possibilities of the film to their fullest potential. Aguirre then focuses her attention on one scene in which the main character hallucinates. In her opinion, the film could have featured a more cinematic representation of those visions, through a "subjective, impressionistic and poetic use of the camera" (136). Aguirre is not opposed to the adaptation of literary texts, but she argues that to make the transition from word to image, the production team needs to embrace the visual essence of cinema and avoid relying exclusively on the power of the written word.

Overall, Aguirre favors the well-acted dramas and melodramas, especially if it features a strong female performance, as is the case in many films starring Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. Among her reviews, Aguirre analyzes four films each with Crawford and Davis in a span of three years. Her reviews of Crawford films center on the actor's command of her art, but also emphasize that her talents are not always on full display. For example, Aguirre claims that *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, 1945) is an ineffective blend of genres, torn between a melodrama and a detective film. Aguirre asserts that the latter is much better developed than the former, and that this affects the development of the acting in the film. Aguirre highlights Crawford's impeccable attire and the way she moves on screen but claims that her acting betrays an apparent lack of interest (128). Aguirre implies that banal plots are not a challenge for Crawford, and thus result in a somnambulant performance. Aguirre has a similar opinion of *Daisy Kenyon* (Preminger, 1947) although she attributes the lackadaisical performance to the emptiness of Crawford's character when compared to those of the male leads. *Humoresque*, on the other hand, receives high praise on three counts. First, Aguirre admires the musical environment of the film, praising the overall technical composition and the way in which the director seamlessly weaves into the plot, the classical music selections from Rimsky-Korsakov, Lalo, and Wagner, among others. Secondly, while admitting that the plot lacks novelty, Aguirre focus her attention on the accurate portrayal of the artist protagonist as an egocentric creature. This leads to the third and final point Aguirre makes about the film: Crawford's impressive acting. Aguirre analyzes, for example, several close-ups in which the camera frames Crawford's intense and nearsighted eyes (a trait that strengthens

the film's psychological landscape), as well as an impressive monologue that according to Aguirre manages to redeem the movie. Crawford, according to Aguirre, melds her lush delivery of the dialogue with revealing gestures and body language to present a complete portrait of acting as an art form. All in all, Aguirre exalts Crawford and praises the strength that her characters exude even when the films are weak in their overall artistry.

With respect to Bette Davis, Aguirre's comments are even more cinephilic, and they come close to Cabrera Infante's enthusiastic iconophilia. All the Davis films discussed by Aguirre—in contrast to Crawford's noir-melodrama hybrids—can be considered textbook examples of pure melodrama, thus allowing Aguirre to focus on the development of a single genre. Her first review of a Better Davis feature focuses on *Old Acquaintance* (Sherman, 1944), a film that Aguirre praises for its acute psychological portraits—accomplished through excellent acting and dialogues—and for its anti-war propaganda. *Mr. Skeffington* (Sherman, 1944) is another example of a performance that redeems a theme that would not be as interesting if it were not expanded to include a veiled criticism of western vanity, according to Aguirre. The critic lauds the film's apt cinematography, which successfully captures key moments of the isolation of the characters (60). For example, Aguirre argues that the most accomplished moment in the movie is the ending, when in a low angle shot the desolation of the Davis character is framed by her luxurious home. It is this type of discussion that illustrates the cinephilic attention to detail characteristic of Aguirre's reviews, although she often combined the cinephilic moment or attention to detail with a biting attack to U.S ideology. The excellent acting, poignant music, and precise use of cinematography to convey emotion that Aguirre admires in the Davis melodramas continue in *Deception* (Rapper, 1946), but in Aguirre's opinion the plot is weak and is only redeemed by the strength of the ensemble led by Davis, together with her co-stars Claude Rains and Paul Henreid. Aguirre claims that while not a typical mediocre vehicle, it lacks the maturity of the previous Davis features. The only Davis film that disappoints Aguirre is *Winter Meeting* (Windust, 1948), and there are several reasons for this. First, Aguirre claims that *Winter Meeting* lacks cinematographic distinction, overtly depending on a narrator to move the plot along. Secondly, a shallow psychological portrait sabotages the development of the main character (282). But Aguirre's enthusiasm for this work is perhaps most tempered by her increasing belligerence against Hollywood products, which is most notable in her reviews dating from the end of the 1940s. Even so, Aguirre's impassioned cinephilia almost always prompted her to find something to like in Hollywood films.

Aguirre's cinephilic traits are undeniable, but the focus of her reviews is on social commentary; she produces sharp critiques that constantly seek to dismantle Hollywood's hegemonic discourses. She frequently treats issues of racism, discrimination, and imperialism in the cinema of the U.S as well as others. For example, regarding the deployment of racism in Hollywood films, she often exposes the deliberate misrepresentation of ethnic minorities and failed or misguided attempts at portraying African American characters and situations. Most of her reviews, when they deal with a

Hollywood effort at a historical representation of the “Other,” feature Aguirre’s studied efforts to unpack errors in characterization. Examples of this can be found in her discussions of historical epics made in Hollywood like *Masquerade in Mexico* (Leisen, 1945) or *Captain from Castile* (King, 1948), as well as in Latin American productions like Emilio Fernández’s *Las abandonadas* (*The Abandoned Women*, 1945) and Julio Bracho’s *El monje blanco* (*The White Monk*, 1945). In the case of Leisen’s film, *Masquerade in Mexico*, Aguirre targets the reduction of Latin Americans to a few types like the gigolo, the horse thief, or the fool, comparing these characterizations with the representation of African Americans in U.S. films (145). For example, Aguirre criticizes the role played by Arturo de Córdova, whom she considers an excellent actor, but who in *Masquerade in Mexico* is reduced to a simple one-dimensional portrait of a toreador (146).

The Captain of Castile, while showcasing stronger performances by actors with Latin American or Spanish roots like César Romero and Antonio Moreno, miscasts Tyrone Power as the protagonist Pedro de Vargas, and represents the Aztecs as a savage tribe straight out of a U.S. Western film. Aguirre admits that the intention of the film was not to be historically accurate; nevertheless, she criticizes the reduction of the trauma of the conquest to an adventure story. Both reviews are fair in their description of these U.S. films as highly effective entertainment pieces, notwithstanding the shortsightedness of the plot. While in Hollywood films the misrepresentation of other countries and their citizens facilitates the dissemination of racist politics, the Mexican productions serve a different purpose, according to Aguirre. For example, in Emilio Fernández’s *The Abandoned Women*, the Cuban reviewer chastises the production team for limiting the Mexican revolution to a unilateral portrayal of a couple of episodes starring false generals and scoundrels, although Aguirre also suggests that dullness is the movie’s greatest crime (116).

Regarding the representation of U.S. minorities, Aguirre considers that Hollywood films in the 1940’s are problematic, even when they strive to improve upon previously established models of discrimination. For example, Aguirre reviewed two musicals, *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*, both considered by regular critics to be good examples of Hollywood’s openness towards African American issues and culture. However, Aguirre finds *Cabin in the Sky*’s overall approach condescending, given that its comedy is based on a “satiric spirit” that depends on stereotypes and superstitions and can only be truly enjoyed by those who believe in the superiority of the white race (15). The strategy employed by Aguirre to expose these racial undertones is to explore not only the source of these comedic moments but also to unpack the film’s folkloric core. To prove her point she quotes extensively from Dalton Trumbo, mentioning recent examples of negative portrayals of blacks in the cinema of the United States. She also employs the review to extend the criticism to Cuba, a country she does not consider exempt from similar racial policies and attitudes. Indeed, Aguirre remarks on the effectiveness of the racist comedy of *Cabin in the Sky* in Cuba, as revealed by the reactions of the audience in Radio Cine, a popular cinema in Havana (16). Aguirre effectively combines film reviewing

with spectatorship studies, a strategy she continues in her review of *Stormy Weather*. In this case, she recognizes that the film is an improvement over *Cabin in the Sky*, but nevertheless points out that some stereotypes, albeit toned down, remain the source of comedy or antagonism in the plot. She uncovers one more aspect of what she considers a secret racist agenda: the cast is all black and not a single white performer can be seen. Aguirre accuses Hollywood of going the opposite way with racial profiling. Instead of showcasing lazy and vicious African Americans, as was the norm, the film foregrounds characters that are talented, but only in singing and dancing (37). Even so, Aguirre claims that *Stormy Weather* represents an improvement, essentially because it acts as a bridge, helping the (presumably white) audience members become familiar with the cast of outstanding black performers.

Aguirre also combines her critique of racial stereotypes with an attack on Hollywood's constant export of capitalist ideology and imperialist hegemony. Feeney claims that "Aguirre's reviews reflect a trend in much mid-century Cuban film criticism: the critic's self-consciousness about her role as Gramscian intellectual, engaged in a 'war of position'—snatching and reshaping the messages of a foreign medium" (212). In some cases, Aguirre's critique of capitalism is focused on the films' deployment of subtle messages. For example, Aguirre believes that one of the best ways to preach the gospel of capital is with movies for children (189). In her review of *The Yearling* (Brown, 1946) she finds the perfect example of this. Aguirre claims that these works are particularly dangerous because they appear to be simple and moving but they promote a reactionary program based on quiet resignation, on passively accepting the bitterness of life; everything is conveniently flavored with the most saccharine melodrama (190). Aguirre's political reading of the film undermines its communication of a prevalent social order, questioning its validity. While her analysis does not stop her from appreciating the performances given by Gregory Peck and Jane Wyman, in general she dismisses the film as an example of "the insufferable inanity of Yankee cinema" (190). She deploys the same strategy in most of her reviews of films by Disney, a company that according to Aguirre, mobilizes an extensive and highly effective promotional machinery, often to sell a cinema of ethnic/racial discrimination and capitalist ideas. Two examples that illustrate Aguirre's attitude to Disney films are her reviews of *The Three Caballeros* (Ferguson, 1944) and *Song of the South* (Foster, 1946).

In her discussion of *The Three Caballeros*, Aguirre offers a candid review of Disney's imaginative power and humor. She then redirects her critique to focus on Disney's "rumpled tourist brochure" approach to Latin American issues. Aguirre is particularly resentful of Disney's pigeonholing approach to the representative music of Mexico and Brazil (77). However, she still recommends the film as an enjoyable one. This is not the case with her review of *Song of the South*, published two years later. This review is similar in approach to her treatment of *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*. She refers to *Song of the South* as a film "made by whites for whites" (220). She notes that it takes much more effort to uncover the hidden racist tropes in a supposedly well-intended film, and Aguirre

zooms in on the characteristics that make *Song of the South* an illustration of such a work. For example, all the black characters are represented as sympathetic. According to Aguirre, this demonstrates the slave owners' dream of the ideal African American: humble docile, and always smiling (220). Once again, the harsh criticism does not prevent Aguirre from praising some aspects of the film, such as the use of Technicolor and innovative sound techniques. But in the case of *Song of the South* (in marked difference from *The Three Caballeros*), she expands her attack beyond the movie discussed and into Disney's decline and fall into reactionary filmmaking. Her last paragraph is one of the most incendiary of all her reviews. Here she dismantles Disney's subtle imperialist racism that is manifest in minute details like naming a dog Bolívar. Aguirre's sympathy for Disney's early features had diminished by 1948. She stresses that the original intent of Disney's cartoons was deeply rooted in folkloric and humoristic taste, thus rendering them incompatible with bourgeois mentality. Aguirre claims that movies like *Song of the South* are a clear sign of a departure from these popular sympathies and herald the adoption of a reactionary filmmaking style (221).

Aguirre's Disney reviews showcase her growing disenchantment with Hollywood products. In 1944 she still sounds upbeat about *The Three Caballeros* but later her approach becomes bitter and her tolerance for Hollywood mediocrity is greatly diminished. Nowhere is this more evident than in her discussion of the Cuban reception of *The Chase* (Ripley, 1946), and in the three reviews she dedicates to the film *Iron Curtain* (Wellman, 1948) and the events surrounding its exhibition. The two films in question are the object of Aguirre's most virulent attacks, which culminate in a change in the style and intensity of her reviews. Aguirre's scalding writing is motivated by the film's depiction of Cuba as a "brothel-like harbor with gaslights, horse carriages and people dressed in rags" (165). Aguirre breaks with the usual structure of her reviews, completely sidestepping the plot or any other possible redeeming quality of the film and addressing instead the reaction caused by the film and its eventual censorship. It is important to mention that Aguirre's endorsement of the censorship of the film is not based on notions of morality; instead, it is grounded in her belief that the film promotes hatred against races and nations. While Aguirre's strong reaction to *The Chase* is understandable, it pales in comparison to her reviews of Wellman's *Iron Curtain*. The first installment, published on May 23, 1948, is more than a description of the reaction to the movie's New York release, which according to Aguirre met with picket lines (237). This piece is related to her review of *The Chase* because according to Aguirre, *Iron Curtain* also violated the UN resolution that condemns the use of a belligerent tone when addressing other nations. Her piece ends with a call to arms: Aguirre inviting viewers to boycott the film.

In the previous pages, I have analyzed the types of reviews produced by Cabrera Infante and Aguirre. While Cabrera Infante was interested in musicals and comedies, Aguirre had a predilection for political dramas and melodramas with a strong female performance. Despite these differences, and notwithstanding the chronological disjuncture between their reviewing careers, they occasionally wrote about the same films.

I will now examine one example to further compare their cinephilic and political approach. One of the films reviewed by both Cabrera Infante and Aguirre is *Naked City* (Dassin, 1948). Aguirre enjoys the direction and cinematography but above all recognizes the validity of the film as an example of “capitalism in its highest stage” (241). She justifies her claim by listing all the elements that make the movie a social document, such as its depiction of a perfect police organization and houses where no one is born and no one dies, a catalogue that reflects the symptoms of the capitalist system at its most advanced point (241). Aguirre does not focus on the plot or even on the acting; instead, she uses the documentary space created by a film shot on location to explore the construction of capitalist ideologies, something that is achieved by eliminating “the falsehood of painted cardboard” (241). This review is emblematic of Aguirre’s style, an effective combination of cinephilic eye for detail and political commitment to both the elements of the plot as well as the historical and social conditions surrounding the film’s production.

Cabrera Infante is more interested in pointing out discrepancies in the plot, which he dismisses as a crude mixture of melodrama and a detective film, typical of a B movie but not significant enough to leave a mark on the genre. In terms of cinematography, Cabrera Infante criticizes the location shooting as amateurish; for example, he believes that the exterior shots, the basis of the film’s “realism,” are merely backdrops and as such not very original ones (194). There is not even a reference to the representation of social strata that captivated Aguirre’s critical eye. Although he admits that *Naked City* left a positive impression on him the first time he saw it, Cabrera Infante finds the use of location as an unnecessary and unprofessional distraction.

Conclusions

In the previous pages, I suggest an alternative road through the thick forest of film reviewing. This article was based on a chapter on a dissertation that tried to chart the different cinephilic paths to the task of writing about film. Cinephilia while etymologically meaning love of film is much more than that. It is a way of looking and experiencing film that promotes preservation, enjoyment and that prompts a desire to talk or write about the subject. This passion allows for different manifestations of that desire to write about film.

Two years after the dissertation was approved, David Bordwell published his *The Rhapsodes: How 1940s critics changed American film culture* (2016), a book that focuses on some of the writers I discussed in the larger version of my project. Of course, Bordwell makes no mention of the Cuban reviewers I discussed above. But what it shows is that there is a zeitgeist that establishes the importance of this type of writing in shaping not only audience reception but also how films are constructed and in the case of Cabrera Infante and Aguirre how they provide effective tools to if not dismantle at least illuminate the ideological machinations behind seemingly innocent entertainment pictures. Cabrera

Infante's cinephilic leaning makes him like Andrew Sarris, the godfather of auteurism in the U.S. while Aguirre's guns blazing attack on the establishment echoes the Marxist critique unleashed by Harry Alan Potamkin.

In 2023, we have seen the utter destruction of the traditional press. We have witnessed the firing of film critics and the hegemonization of the news. However, film criticism thrives under new forms of expression like blogs, videographic essays and YouTube channels. Anyone with a phone can launch a critique of Hollywood and upload it to their internet channel while receiving considerable views. This is a new era. A cinephilic one!

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