

Cinema in Search of the Public in Cuba

**A translation of "En Cuba el cine busca al publico" published in
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For people today, film is their most frequent entertainment, their way of escape, their means to enter into contact with art or to better understand the world. Twentieth-century culture is the culture of the image. "A picture is worth a thousand words," says the Chinese proverb and particularly so with the moving image. In a socialist country, cinema signifies a powerful medium of mass education, the same way it is a powerful medium of confusion and mass bewilderment in capitalist countries. Suffice it to say that a fundamental part of the contemporary person's knowledge of trades that do not belong to her or him, of cities that she or he does not live in, of the uses and customs of other people, of techniques and science, are all due to cinema.

Film is the most popular art in the entire world and even so there are many people unfamiliar with the silver screen. In Cuba, for example, before the Revolution people in many rural communities had not experienced cinema. For people with hard lives, with little means, and who live in areas far from the cities, screening rooms are inaccessible. The big social, economic and political change of 1959 also embraced the cinema. The Cuban Institute of Art and Cinematographic Industry Foundation (ICAIC) laid the foundations for the birth and development of a film industry and a public for the films. Apart from art and fiction films that satisfy an indubitable necessity of the individual, an infinite number of ICAIC's short documentary, scientific and educational films are exhibited in schools, studios, factories, and work and recreation centres, and so forth. But there still exists a large portion of the public that does not go to the movies for reason of geography, access to communication, and education; therefore, the cinema has to go to them, in a search through the mountains and plains. For this reason, the Department of Cinematographic Disclosure was founded in the Cuban Institute of Art and Cinematographic Industry.

This department began work in the month of April 1962. Thirty-two Soviet Gaz trucks were equipped with all the necessary installations for the cinematographic projection: projector apparatus, screens, amplifiers, some electric generators, and accommodations for those in charge of the mobile exhibition units. A large number of Young Communists found themselves in charge of these jobs, which included driving trucks, mounting and operating projector equipment, as well as giving brief introductory talks about the films and leading discussions after the exhibitions.

When making decisions about the mobile unit routes, preference is given to those rural areas where cinema has never been, and this has formed a rich collection of anecdotes of sociological and simple human interest. Men, women and children tightly group together before the screen, and some are amazed at the "magic" phenomenon of the appearance of images on the white canvas. A projectionist from Camaguey

recounts that he had to explain that “magic” to an elderly man who was searching for people behind the screen, amazed and distrusting. The people initiated conversations with the images of Fidel, Chaplin and the real or fictitious characters that appeared before them. A man in one of the functions remembered having gone to the movies two or three times in about forty years. Now the cinema has come to him.

The mobile units converted all of life into an immense screening room. The portable screens were installed in the least imaginable places: on farms, at sugar refineries and plantations, in small villages, in chicken coops, at combat units, and on mountains. In one year of work, the thirty-two mobile units created 7,722 projections, of which 30% took place in the province of Havana, while the other 70% were produced in the interior provinces. Imagine what it could mean: the display and dissemination of art and culture through exhibitions, keeping in mind the enormous attraction of cinema, its power of seduction and conviction and its educative and creative possibilities. For many thousands of Cubans, the mobile units have opened the first windows into the world. The numbers speak for themselves: in that first year it was calculated conservatively that two million people viewed the mobile unit exhibitions. The work is much more admirable given the difficult conditions of access and irregular topography of certain locations. There are, for example, numerous cases in which trucks cannot pass through because of their size, so the equipment is transported in jeeps or in teams of oxen, or mounted on barges, as occurred in the Municipality of Nuevitás. In the cases of water crossings, the projection equipment and some small machines are brought in boats to the quays where the coalminers and fishermen work—95% of whom do not know the meaning of cinema.

As the Revolution develops, new communities emerge. For the moment, the mobile units respond to the lack of screening rooms in these sites, which will one day have them. In this way, these communities are born with windows of true civilized life, thus forming a public accustomed to the language of cinema, to artistic and educational cinema.

To have an idea of what the work of these mobile units signify in new Cuba, we would have to accompany them on their journeys. Every trip to a community, with the resulting installations of screens and equipment among the abundant groups of habitants of all ages and genders, is a phenomenon worth being studied by sociologists and educators. The photographs taken during these functions give a pale idea of what they are in reality, but they are still significant in their framing and immobile testimony: the faces are elevated to the screen (people bring chairs from their homes and some sit on the floor) and they look at the screen with attention that reflects thoughtfulness, amazement, admiration and happiness. The people ask questions not only about the theme of the movie, the characters, such and such a scene or cinematographic trick, but also some spectators ask about the “weird” phenomenon of film itself. The speaker begins the exhibition with a short introduction to the film and later answers any questions asked. During the projection the spectators—most of all children—take the film characters as real beings and strike up conversations with them, animate or insult them according to their moral background. And many times an emotional event was produced in which the public of one community relocates to another, bringing their chairs and stools through the country and mountain pathways, to continue viewing this wonderful world of live images.

In this work there is a fundamental part of the team that in each zone is in charge of carrying out the job. Those in charge of the projections are young candidates selected for their preparation and skill, as they need to overcome many difficulties in the conquest of new rules and spheres of activity for the cinema. The Young Communists have contributed their best elements, because, aware of the Leninist motto according to which cinema is the art of greatest interest to socialism, they bring its spirit to the realm of practice.

Translated by Sarah Larsen and Susan Lord