

## Mobile Cinemas in Cuba: The Forms and Ideology of Traveling Exhibitions

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This essay examines uses of mobile cinemas in Cuba utilized after the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Like Russian agit-prop trains that filmed peasants and screened films in the countryside after the 1917 Revolution, Cuban *cines móviles* also emphasized bringing cinema to the rural provinces. In the Cuban case, cinema was used both in educational and entertainment contexts, in the hope that rural areas might be integrated into the nation-building project led by Castro's socialist government. These cinemas were a sign of progress and of modernity for the revolutionary government, and a means of communication with a historically disenfranchised population. Hand-in-hand with this project was a movement for better healthcare as well as a literacy campaign that were mobilized concurrently. These "basic needs" projects worked together with the "mass education and entertainment" mobile cinema project. Cinema, in the form of 16mm projectors and films, was transported in a variety of ways: trucks, mules, and even fishing boats were equipped with film projectors, so that the fishermen would have a place in the evenings to watch films. In 1962, there were over 1.2 million spectators throughout the country; by 1976, there were over three million viewers.<sup>1</sup>

By examining the processes and discourses surrounding the use of Cuban *cines móviles* via Cuban cinema histories, such as Michael Chanan's *Cuban Cinema* and articles in selected issues of *Cine cubano*, I am interested in how mobile film vehicles were utilized as a tool for development, cultural growth, entertainment, and political mobilization. Cuban mobile cinemas had their origins from both the Soviet Union, as well as, interestingly enough, the United States. There were similarities in the objectives of the Soviet agit-prop trains used in the 1917 Revolution through to 1935. In his book, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929*, Peter Kenez discusses Lenin's oft-quoted and now clichéd statement that "Film [is] the most important art." According to Kenez, Lenin may not have fully appreciated the artistic potential of the medium,<sup>2</sup> but rather Lenin saw film for its potential as an educational medium, or, as Kenez states, as an "instrument of political education."<sup>3</sup> This said, Lenin's view of film was not limited to tool for educational, as Lenin "had great faith in the use of movies in spreading all sorts of information to the people, such as in science and agriculture."<sup>4</sup> In his writings, Lenin viewed cinema exhibition as an achievement of Western technology, and something that would aid the Russians in overcoming their "backwardness."<sup>5</sup>

These purpose-built trains were orchestrated by film directors, such as Dziga Vertov in the 1910s-20s and Alexander Medvedkin in the 1930s, so that filmmakers could go out to the "frontier," shoot films of peasants working, and then show the resulting footage to local audiences who were part of these films. In Medvedkin's case, during the Five Year Plan (1928-32), he used locally produced films to encourage competition between

the various agricultural collectives and cooperatives. This was a way to compare differences between a productive farm with a large crop yield and a collective that did not work as a team. According to Emma Widdis, film was to be a direct participant in the construction of a new regime.<sup>6</sup> In addition to local films that were shot and screened in a span of a few days, the trains were also used to show government propaganda newsreels, educational films, and entertainment. Chris Marker's film, *The Train Rolls On* (1971), visually details Alexander Medvedkin's 1932 cine train experience.

Héctor García Mesa's work on the history of mobile cinema exhibition before the 1959 revolution describes how the United States Information Agency (USIA) utilized mobile cinema vans to disseminate their "propaganda films" throughout Cuba. This service was free-of-charge and operated out of the U.S. Embassy in Havana. Mesa states "the U.S. Embassy [was] well-stocked [with] propaganda film archives apologetic to the American way of life."<sup>7</sup> The USIA's project in Latin America during WWII included resources that the Office of the Coordinator for Inter-American Affairs (CIAA) provided, which not only included an arsenal of films but also trucks and 16mm projectors. The trucks were equipped with sound, projectors, and portable screens and operated on itinerant circuits in rural districts and interior areas of Latin America. By the end of the war, the CIAA had over 300 projectors and about 70 mobile units throughout Latin American republics with larger concentrations in Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia.<sup>8</sup>

In Cuba, as mentioned, mobile cinemas were a sign of progress and modernity for the revolutionary government, and a means of communication with a historically disenfranchised population. Mobile cinema van organizers chose to visit isolated rural communities without movie theatres. Many of the townspeople had never seen a movie in their lifetime. Thus, one of the objectives in the Cuban context was to provide entertainment, education and novelty to groups that had never been exposed to this technological innovation.

Use of these mobile cinema trucks was part of a broader socialist effort by the newly created Cuban government regarding the uses of cinema and the potential that it had, along with education, as a tool in transforming society into a revolutionary culture. Mobile cinema devices were just one more wing of a mass mobilization fostered in the early years of the revolution. The 1961 Literacy campaign is probably the best known campaign that involved the movement of people from cities into the countryside to educate, or as José Martí states, to bring the "light of culture" and bread of literacy to peasants and newly freed slaves across the country. It is estimated that 100,000 people were mobilized to the countryside to teach reading and writing in one year.

The year 1961 was important; not only was it the launch of the literacy campaign, but it also marked the U.S. invasion at the Bay of Pigs. It was also the launch of mobile cinemas. In June 1961, in an effort to maintain Cuba's drive and confidence in the literacy campaign, the "*brigadistas*" initiated what they called "A Second Bay of Pigs," but this time with giant pencils and literacy manuals as their weapons.

Anthropologist Ariana Hernández-Reguant discussed the government's multiple uses of the 1961 literacy campaign,

for instance, [it was] designed as a propaganda campaign, mostly over radio but also over printed media and billboards, in order to reach as many people as possible throughout the island. Radio was used to broadcast not only literacy classes but also numerous programs and spots to involve every citizen in the literacy drive. The Literacy campaign sought, obviously, to teach the illiterate to read and write, but as importantly, to disseminate revolutionary ideology as well as to bridge the urban/rural divide by bringing urban residents to the countryside to teach.<sup>9</sup>

Political scientist Richard Fagen outlined how this experience of bringing literacy to the remote areas of the country was in line with the ideals of revolutionary transformation, and how participation in political activities (such as defence exercises) were promoted to foster a feeling of national unity around political goals and accomplishments.<sup>10</sup> Screening films to “new spectators,” I would argue, worked in the same way as the literacy movement and political activities, as both were: (1) collective experiences for people, and (2) new experiences for those who had not ever seen cinema before, and for those who brought the cinema to the provinces and experienced how people would engage with the medium.

The ICAIC created the Department of Film Dissemination (*Divulgación*), which was charged with organizing and maintaining the mobile cinemas. This department oversaw the process of training projectionists in the provinces directly and teaching them how to think critically about media as part of this process. These workers were entrusted to help educate “the masses” in understanding Marxist aesthetics and ideology; this was part of an effort by the Revolutionary government to help raise the workers’ consciousness about what it means to participate in the building of a revolutionary society.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the literacy teachers who came from urban areas, projectionists–drivers came from the provinces. They were trained in the provincial capitals from where they came, and would apprentice with more experienced projectionists before striking out on their own. In addition, they would organize a seminar with filmmakers and film technicians every three months for all of mobile cinema workers. There they would watch films and learn about history, theory, and production practices—the idea being that they would gain a level of education and expertise that they could then pass on in the screenings.

In an anonymous article, “Cuban revolutionary cinema, factor in permanent education,” in *Cine cubano*, the idea behind bringing cinema to people who had never experienced it was “to inculcate values, to educate, and to help create the revolutionary ‘new man’ via the cinema in addition to education and other forms of socialization. It is the cinema then, who looks for these people in the mountains or in the plains.” These people are the disenfranchised people, those marginalized, and who could most benefit from this “social revolution.”<sup>12</sup> The work of Michael Chanan is a discussion on the ways in which the mobile cinema project worked alongside the literacy campaign. In his seminal work on Cuban cinema Chanan quotes Octavio Cortázar, who directed two films, *Por primera vez* (For the First Time) (1967), a documentary, and *El brigadista* (1977), a film about the Literacy campaign. Cortázar states “the brigadistas brought literacy where the mobile cinemas brought the movies.”<sup>13</sup> According to José Manuel Pardo (who was in charge of overseeing mobile cinemas from their inception until the 1980s when they were replaced by *videotheques*), the first mobile cinema truck began operations in the province of Havana. These mobile cinemas first began screening films at local schools, as seen famously in *Por la primera vez*. The film depicts how a Cuban mobile cinema van came into the geographically isolated community of Los Mulos, near the Guantanamo–Baracoa region, screened the 1936 classic film *Modern Times* by Charlie Chaplin (it is no accident that this film, a comedy about confronting modernization, is selected), and documents the reaction to seeing a film for the first time in their lives.

By 1962, mobile cinemas from ICAIC had organized 4,603 screenings for 1.2 million spectators. At the time of writing in 1971, Pardo states in an article for *Cine Cubano* that there were 106 mobile cinema trucks, many of them Soviet made, and some of them Jeeps. These all carried 16mm projectors, a vinyl screen, speakers, and other equipment. Projectionists were also the drivers, and their schedules demanded that they work twenty-five days per month in a row, and then get five days off. They typically would run 80 to 140 screenings per month. The daytime hours were dedicated to screening work at schools, such as technological schools, elementary, and high school, to name a few. Most of the screenings would be around forty-five minutes, and

it would consist of a weekly ICAIC newsreel, a cartoon, and a documentary of some sort—one that was “didactic” or “instructional.” The newsreel was described as “a weekly newsreel that transmits the latest news from the ideological orientation and the practical character of the Revolution. This guarantees a[n] efficiency of information that will reach the peasants as well as the thousands of workers in the cities that have left their households for months to put in their fair share to help complete the agricultural plans that have been set.” Following this a fiction film would be played, and it would usually be something recently released in the capital. The idea was to bring the notion of “Cine clubs” to the masses. The objective was to expand the notion of culture and make it truly popular, that is, “of the people.” Films from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Spain, China, and, of course, Cuba were shown.<sup>14</sup>

The *Cinemateca Cubana*, under Hector Garcia Mesa’s direction, was instrumental in gathering films used in the screenings. They were interested in showing work from all over the world, not just Cuban revolutionary cinema. On Saturdays and Sundays, they would present entertainment programs, with daytime screenings indoors and evening screenings typically outdoors. There would often be a prioritization of screenings for the places that were the most remote, such as agricultural development in rural areas and camps for voluntary sugar cane workers who came from the city.

There are a few contemporary articles that laud the way in which films newly released in the capital were also shown in rural areas. In some cases, films were shown first in the provinces before reaching the city of Havana. In other words, there was an interest in being part of a cinematic community that could partake in the latest works being produced in the metropolis. This attempt at integrating and connecting the periphery and centre of the nation via media relates to how Benedict Anderson discusses nationalism and nation building. He argues that “imagined communities” are united through national media, which help to transmit news and information to people in a relatively quick and simultaneous way.<sup>15</sup>

Pardo discusses the way in which the Revolutionary government was working to build new roads through the mountains, especially in areas of heavy rains. The trucks were a symbol of progress, but in the event that it was impossible to drive through heavily flooded areas, a system of using mules was devised to transport films to isolated areas. On August, 25th 1969, the first experiments with mules were tried. In September of the same year, groups of four mules were used to bring films, such as *Lucia* by Humberto Solás, to flooded-out areas.

In addition to trucks, mules, and carts, the ICAIC also used boats. As Cuba is an archipelago composed of small islands and keys, the ICAIC created mobile cinema boats in order to expose populations isolated by water to the silver screen. In April 1970, a boat called the Sigma created, driven by a captain and a boat projectionist. These boats, which numbered five by 1971, would travel to the islands and cays; and the mobile cinema would board the fishing boats where people would spend twelve to fifteen days on the high seas. The bestowal of film screenings to fishermen was touted as “a gift of civilization” and an “occasion to elevate oneself from the fish scales (*escamas*) and nets, in search of other oceans.”<sup>16</sup>

In sum, mobile cinema mobilization in Cuba was integrated into a larger plan to foster communication links from the city to the country, and it harnessed the power of the moving image to help “modernize” the masses via a revolutionary social agenda. While the mobile cinema units were retired in the 1980s and replaced with regional *videothèques*, ultimately, they helped expose unlikely spectators to cinema and at the same time help further a revolutionary agenda.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Manuel Pereira and José Manuel Pardo, "La pantalla móvil," *Cine cubano* 95 (1979): n.p.
- 2 According to Kenez, Lenin made this statement to Lunacharskii in 1922.
- 3 Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 106. Lenin actually had a rather conservative view of art and he probably would not have believed that cinema could ever compete with theatre in terms of artistic sensibilities.
- 4 Kenez, 106.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 See Emma Widdis, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 13-17.
- 7 Héctor García Mesa, "Estructura del cine móvil," *Cine y Revolución en Cuba*, Santiago Álvarez et al. (Madrid: Editorial Fontamara, 1975), 132.
- 8 Donald W. Rowland, *A History of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs* (Washington, D.C.: Gov. Printing Office, 1947), 80 in Gaizka S. de Usabel, *High Noon of American Films in Latin America* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982), 159.
- 9 Adriana Hernández-Reguant, *Radio Taino and the Globalization of Cuban Culture Industries, Dissertation* (University of Chicago, 2002), 108.
- 10 Richard Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1979), 60-61.
- 11 See Hector Amaya, *Viewing Political Selves in Film: A Comparative Reception Study of Cuban Films in Cuba and the United States* (Austin, TX: University of Texas-Austin, 2003), 136-138, 166 for more information on the theme of Cuban revolutionary spectatorship.
- 12 Anonymous, "El cine revolucionario, factor de educación permanente," *Cine cubano* (1969): 67.
- 13 Michael Chanan, *Cuban Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 34.
- 14 José Manuel Pardo, "30 meses de cine-móvil por los campos de Cuba" *Cine cubano* (1971): 64.
- 15 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: Verso 1983), 22-46.
- 16 Pereira and Pardo, n.p.