



The Publicness of Melodrama in the Cuban Special Period

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THE PUBLICNESS OF MELODRAMA IN THE CUBAN SPECIAL PERIOD

There has been a resurgence of melodrama in Cuban film since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, two of Cuba's most prominent and historically significant filmmakers, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Humberto Solás, have produced highly melodramatic films in the almost two decades since the Soviet collapse, a time known in Cuba as the special period.¹ While there are certainly melodramatic tendencies in other post-revolutionary Cuban films, melodrama has generally been derided on account of its supposed complicity with the ideology of American capitalism.² It is thus notable that the films made by Cuba's two leading, and arguably most politically-committed filmmakers within the special period have been overtly melodramatic. I would like to argue, however, that the reappearance of melodrama at this moment in Cuban history is not merely coincidental, but in fact has much to tell us about contemporary Cuba as it struggles economically and ideologically to redefine itself after the Soviet Union's collapse. My interest in melodrama within the special period is oriented by what I see as an important intersection between the social and political reality of contemporary Cuba and the particular "work" performed by melodrama as an aesthetic

¹ In particular, Alea's two final films, *Strawberry and Chocolate* (1994) and *Guantanamo* (1995), and Solás's films *Honey for Ocho* (2001) and *Barrio Cuba* (2005).

² See Daniel Diaz Torres and Enrique Colina, "Ideology of Melodrama in the Old Latin American Cinema," *Latin American Filmmakers and the Third Cinema*, ed. Zuzana Pick (Ottawa: Carleton University Film Program, 1978), 46-69.

mode.³ In this way, I draw from recent reassessments of melodrama, specifically from Linda Williams's understanding of genre in general as a "cultural form of problem solving," or as a way of giving shape to and resolving major cultural deadlocks.⁴ I thus believe that we need to understand the recent manifestations of melodrama in Cuban film as important attempts to "solve" major problems facing the country in the context of late socialism. In this way, melodrama operates as a pseudo public sphere in its capacity to raise questions that are unable to be expressed in other spaces on account of the regime's general discursive inflexibility.

The Cuban public sphere, late socialism, and the role of cinema

The theoretical complexities of the question of the public sphere in late-socialist Cuba cannot be addressed in the limited scope of this paper. However, if we employ Habermas's understanding of the public sphere as a discursive space between the private and the political spheres beyond the purview of the state, then we can argue that such a space does

³ Christine Gledhill's discussion of genre as an aesthetic mode informs my discussion of melodrama. As she writes, "The notion of modality, like register in socio-linguistics, defines a specific mode of aesthetic articulation adaptable across a range of genres, across decades, and across national cultures. It provides the genre system with a mechanism of 'double articulation,' capable of generating specific and distinctly different generic formulae in particular historical conjunctures, while also providing a medium of interchange and overlap between genres" (229). Christine Gledhill, "Rethinking Genre," *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (New York: Arnold, 2000), 221-243.

⁴ Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film and Theory: an Anthology*, eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), 207-221.

not exist in contemporary Cuba.⁵ The absence of a Habermasian public sphere, generally typified by the existence of a free press, is justified within the logic of Cuban state socialism. As the argument goes, in a context where the state is implicated in every aspect of civil society, there is no need for an intermediary space, since the state in Cuba is representative of the general will of the people. Under this rhetorical umbrella, the work of the public sphere as a space between the state and private life is rendered redundant since the state is the popular voice. Moreover, the public sphere, understood in Habermasian terms as a bourgeois public sphere, represents a decadent remainder (and reminder) of Cuba's colonial past, thus intensifying the state's resistance to a Habermasian public sphere model for socialist Cuba.⁶

The absence of a formal public sphere in the form of open and active media, however, has not meant, as many hardliners contend, that there is no site for public and critical discussion in Cuba.⁷ If there is something most approximating a

public sphere in Cuba, a site where major issues relating to the state of Cuban politics and culture are addressed, it is in the realm of the fine arts, and cinema in particular. This public function of cinema can be attributed to a curious intersection of historical circumstances as well as ardent action on the part of artists and filmmakers in Cuba. As leading Cuban film scholar Michael Chanan has argued, Cuban cinema has enjoyed both an unusual popularity since the wake of the revolution as well as certain political freedoms not enjoyed in other media or areas of Cuban society. As a result, even during the most restrictive period of Soviet influence, Cuban cinema has enjoyed a freedom of expression unknown in other areas of politics or culture and has had the luxury of a large audience to receive it.⁸ Cuban cinema has thus productively straddled the ambiguous cultural policy put forward by Fidel Castro in his famous "words to the intellectuals" speech of 1961, where he declared, "within the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing."⁹

Chanan argues that the frank and sympathetic portrayal of the homosexual protagonist in *Strawberry and Chocolate* (1993)—one of the most popular Cuban films of all time, and which sparked tremendous controversy both inside and outside the country—contributed to im-

⁵ For further discussion on the press in contemporary Cuba, see Maria Lopez Vigil, "The Cuban Media," *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*, eds. Philip Brenner et al (Plymouth UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 386-391.

⁶ Cuban cultural critic Desiderio Navarro is much more derisive in his criticism of the public sphere in Cuba, making a strong case against the state's logic for this preclusion in a recently-translated article, "In Medias Res Publicas: On Intellectuals and Social Criticism in the Cuban Public Sphere," trans. Alessandro Fornazzari and Desiderio Navarro, *Boundary 2*, 29, no. 3 (2002): 187-203.

⁷ For a particularly strong attack on Cuban film, see Paul Julian Smith's description of the false openness of the film *Fresa y Chocolate*. Paul Julian Smith, *Vision Machines: Cinema, Literature and Sexuality in Spain and Cuba, 1983-1993* (London: Verso, 1996).

⁸ "When the Soviet influence began to prevail, with the effect of somewhat constraining traditional forms of public debate, ICAIC retained its own voice and became a vicarious surrogate for a public sphere diminished by ideological orthodoxy and technocratic dirigisme, balancing its output between affirmative films and those that reserved the right to critically question stereotypes and aporias." Michael Chanan, *Cuban Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 358.

⁹ Navarro, 188.

portant debates concerning the role and repression of homosexuals in Cuba. While the film did not (and cannot) substitute for a real public sphere, Chanan argues that it served as an important intervention into what was a very contentious and unresolved issue in Cuban politics and culture.¹⁰ As a result of this kind of “work” performed by cinema, Chanan describes its function as that of a surrogate or vicarious public sphere where real issues are, if not resolved, then at least addressed with a degree of frankness impossible in other forms.¹¹

The role of cinema as a venue for critical debate became more pronounced in the latter phase of the special period, from the late 1990s to the early twenty-first century. As Sujatha Fernandes argues, the early phase of the special period, from 1993 to 1996, was marked by liberalization measures “that gave greater space to human rights and professional organizations” and “legalized self employment in certain occupations.”¹² Many of these new openings, however, came to a close in 1996 as the limited economic recovery of the country put the state in a better position to “reassume control over service provision” and thus also reassume tighter political control through a new “ideological offensive.”¹³ As a consequence of this clampdown on

¹⁰ As Chanan writes, “*fresa y chocolate* was not (and not intended as) a campaigning film, but as an intervention in a national debate that by the time the film was made had already begun to change significantly,” Chanan, 472.

¹¹ Michael Chanan, “Cuba and Civil Society, or Why Cuban Intellectuals Are Talking about Gramsci,” *Nepantla: Views from the South* 2 no. 2 (2001): 398.

¹² Sujatha Fernandes, “Recasting ideology, re-creating hegemony: Critical debates about film in contemporary Cuba,” *Ethnography* 7 no. 3 (2006): 307.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 307.

formal political activities, critical debate shifted to the sphere of art and culture, “where the state tolerated a greater freedom of cultural expression.”¹⁴ In her ethnography of Cuban film audiences during this later phase of the special period, Fernandes found that film served as a major catalyst and forum for “debating, contesting, and resolving issues such as state repression, patriotism, and citizen alienation in a period of rapid social and economic change.”¹⁵

Fernandes’s observations recall Miriam Hansen’s reflections on American cinema and its role as an alternative public sphere at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁶ In *Babel and Babylon*, Hansen argues that it is against the backdrop of the mass upheaval in the spheres of American culture, technology, and labour that cinema emerged as both literal and symbolic refuge from the “traumatic” effects of industrial modernity. Although the cinema for Hansen no doubt participated in the “historical upheaval of traditional coordinates of space and time” marked by the experience of modernity, “it also offered a refuge in which the violence of the transition could be negotiated in a less threatening, playful, and intersubjective manner.”¹⁷ Hansen’s observations are important, as they point to the fact that it was the traumatic context of industrial modernity that enabled cinema to take on a significant role—as refuge—in the negotiation of these massive changes. Cinema plays a similar role during Cuba’s special period, where

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 307.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

¹⁶ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 90.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 107–108.

it is against (and because of) the instability of a political context marked by radical upheavals and readjustments that cinema has in part served as a space where Cubans can retreat in order to negotiate their collective future amid the volatility of the present.

Hansen's work also outlines different ways of considering the public sphere and thus offers a good lens for considering the publicness of cinema in the Cuban context. Drawing on the insights of Siegfried Kracauer, Hansen invites us to think of cinema spectatorship not as something wholly passive (in the way that Habermas imagines it), but as a mode of publicness in its capacity to productively engage the viewer's imagination. Citing Kracauer, she argues that cinema weakens the perceptual boundaries between the (viewing) self and (viewed) image, mobilizes the capacities of the imagination, and thus offers a "major rehearsal ground for new forms of social identity," new modes of social being and of being social.¹⁸ The cinema is thus a reflexive, discursive "horizon" that brings to light both the promises and failures of society. In drawing them into visible display, cinema functions as a "blueprint" for an alternative public sphere.¹⁹ In this understanding, therefore, the cinema becomes a space where the viewing public can negotiate the complex and often contradictory nature of social relations in the simultaneously public and anonymous space of the cinema. These insights are helpful for

¹⁸ Miriam Bratu Hansen, "America, Paris, the Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity," *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, eds. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 383.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 377.

understanding the Cuban context, where the relative anonymity that the cinema provides is significant in a culture for which public scrutiny and surveillance are part of daily life. The cinema in Cuba thus provides a context that is both public and private, shielding the spectator from direct political censorship while providing a relatively open space where people can be together in public and reflect on crucial political and cultural issues presented in a film. The melodramatic mode, as I argue, intensifies this public function of the cinema in the way that it mobilizes and keeps alive major social contradictions in contemporary Cuban society.

Collective "loss of coherency," melodrama and the special period

Considering the economic and political uncertainty of the special period, it is not surprising that there has been a resurgence of the melodramatic mode in Cuban film. In his landmark study on melodrama, Peter Brooks traces the origins of the melodramatic mode to the post-revolutionary French context of the late 1700s. The French revolution presented French society with a certain open horizon that presented new possibilities while shaking the foundations of absolute truths. These shocks were felt primarily through the loss of both feudal and religious authority, as figures of God and King ceased to function as "the source and guarantor of ethics."²⁰ The absence of this moral and spiritual guarantor left a profound vacuum at the heart of French social life as it, to use a Lacanian term,

²⁰ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 18.

annihilated the guiding structural presence of a big “Other.” For Brooks, melodrama emerged as a response to this collective vacuum by channelling the spiritual hole left by religious and feudal authority into the private realm of emotions and affects. Melodrama stages the very real anxiety posed by the large gap in the symbolic order and assuages it by relocating moral virtue to the level of the individual. In this way, the intense emotions of the protagonist serve as a substitute for the collective ritual of the religious mass. As Brooks argues,

Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought forth by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue. It demonstrates over and over that the signs of ethical forces can be discovered and can be made legible.²¹

Melodrama, in its Manichaean portrayal of good and evil and its use of stock characters and overly wrought conclusions is, for Brooks, a way of solving an incoherency in the symbolic order. It literally plays out the anxiety of collective “unmoorings” and recasts them onto new loci of virtue amidst the moral rubble of a now “fallen world.” Through the new conflict it stages, melodrama recalibrates the social order through its re-fashioned stress on private emotions. By doing so, it makes the world morally legible; it posits new territory where good and evil can be recognized in the midst of social ambiguity and thus

serves to mark a renewed collective horizon.

The “fallen” context that Brooks describes has obvious relevance to Cuba in the special period, as the fall of the Soviet Union presented profound challenges as the country was drastically forced to readjust to life without the economic and symbolic support of the Soviet block. Economically, this meant a major shift as Cuba looked to international tourism to fill the financial void left by the Soviet Union and to acquire much needed “hard” currency. This economic shift, however, produced major changes in the demographics of Cuban society as the relatively egalitarian structure fostered under state socialism was undermined by the new reality of a dual economy. In contemporary Cuba, for example, those who now work in the tourist sectors as managers or waiters have emerged as the new Cuban elite. They are now privy to foreign goods and currency and earn more than Cuban professionals (doctors, professors) who remain beyond the purview of the lucrative tourist economy.

The cultural or ideological impact of this shift cannot be underestimated. The once relatively autonomous Cuban nation (at least in relation to the United States) that was ideologically tied to international socialism has in the special period become isolated and has witnessed the resurgence of neo-colonial relationships. No longer serving as the front of an international war on colonialism and capitalism, Cuba has returned to a dependence on North American and Western European capital and currency. This new economic dependence recalls the despised and decadent colonial era that marked much of Cuba’s history, particularly the despised Batista era, where

²¹ Ibid., 20.

Cuba was regarded principally as a destination for pleasure and leisure for America's elite.²² Cuba has responded to its new and ideologically precarious status as a resort destination through an aggressive ideological offensive. This has been marked most explicitly in the change of revolutionary rhetoric from a socialist-inflected tone to one of nationalism. "Patria o Muerte" (homeland or death) has replaced "Socialismo o Muerte" (socialism or death) as the official slogan triumphantly concluding major speeches and lining billboards along the country's major arteries. Within this economic and ideological crisis, melodrama, which was heavily dismissed amid the enthusiasm and cultural confidence of the heady early years of the revolution, returns as a way of mapping out possible "solutions" to the cultural and ideological crisis—the "fallen world"—represented by the special period.

Melodrama's dual register

Not only does melodrama recalibrate the coordinates of the social in a period of collective uncertainty, but it also provides a space for critique of the political status quo by virtue of its "dual register," or its capacity to remain implicated in the dominant ideological field while at the same time exposing the limits and contradictions of that field. In her article "Melodrama Revised," Linda Williams describes melodrama as a "peculiarly democratic" mode that "seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of

pathos and action."²³ In traditional accounts within feminist film studies, Williams argues, the classical "woman's film" or "weepie" has too often been understood as complicit with patriarchal ideology by inviting a passive female spectator to sympathize and identify with the "noble" suffering of the female protagonist. In other words, melodrama has been understood as a regressive genre. Williams, however, recognizes a more subtle and profound ideological critique levied in and through melodramatic "excesses." What marks the classical American melodrama as potentially progressive or ideologically resistant is its dual recognition of how things are—the realities of capitalism and patriarchy—and how things should be—the limits and contradictions of bourgeois society. In the classic American melodrama *Stella Dallas*, for example, the female viewer never fully accepts the masochistic fate experienced by Stella as she sacrifices herself so that her daughter can succeed within the symbolic economy of patriarchy. While the female viewer may be invited to identify and sympathize with Stella's "inevitable suffering," the very excesses that produce the emotional identification simultaneously generate anger and resistance in the viewer. The inevitability of the woman's suffering in the film is therefore "at least partially" undermined, leaving the viewer to question its legitimacy.²⁴

²² For a detailed discussion of Cuba as "America's playground," see Louis Perez Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

²³ Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 42.

²⁴ As Williams argues, melodramatic pathos is "always in tension with other emotions." Williams, 49.

What is enlightening about Williams's interrogation of melodrama is that it offers a subtler (and perhaps even more realistic) model for the way that real people negotiate their ideological habitus. Melodrama insists that although bourgeois patriarchal structures necessarily compromise women's autonomy and roles, women are not always able to (or even desire to) completely abandon those prescribed roles and dominant structures. Rather than proposing a modernist strategy of radical negation that may not match the experience of most women, melodrama proposes a kind of immanent critique that acknowledges the double binds that real women face under conditions of capitalist modernity.²⁵ Melodrama is not complicit with these ideological structures, but instead applies pressure to them through performative excess. These excesses subtly reveal the flaws and contradictions within the ideological paradigm while simultaneously acknowledging the reality that people are not simply able to overthrow these structures. Instead, melodrama gives shape and expression to the ambivalent relationship experienced by viewers in what may be a very real and restrictive ideological context. It is thus at the intersection of viewer emotion—identification and empathy—that the critical ideological negotiation takes place. It is in and through the dialectic of

²⁵ Where a modernist aesthetic might seek to reveal the contradictions of capitalist ideology by dramatically undermining or negating that ideology through direct, often Brechtian negation (Godard comes most immediately to mind) melodrama operates in a much subtler manner. Where a modernist aesthetic might be said to attack ideology from the outside, melodrama inhabits the dominant ideology from the inside, and hence the easy capacity to mistake it for the dominant ideology itself.

emotional identification and rejection that a critical space of negotiation is enabled.

Melodrama in the contemporary Cuban context: *Honey for Ochún*

This latter account of melodrama as ambivalent ideological critique is invaluable for a consideration of Cuban melodrama in the special period. While Williams's discussion of melodrama describes a relationship to American film and culture and the ideological field of capitalism and bourgeois culture, this relationship does not prevent it from serving a radically different political culture like Cuba's. In fact, it is the very rigidity of the ideological reality in Cuba that perhaps makes melodrama all the more important within its political context. Whereas American melodrama presents an ambivalent relationship to that of bourgeois patriarchy, late-socialist Cuban melodrama offers an ambivalent relationship to the ideology of socialist nationalism. We may also recognize a parallel to Williams's female viewers: Cuban viewers are similarly caught in a restrictive double bind where they are unable to actively (or directly) resist the ideological paradigm of the Cuban revolution.

We may consider, for example, Humberto Solás's film *Honey for Ochún*. Released in 2001, the film is a highly charged and often over-the-top maternal melodrama. The film pivots around the protagonist, Roberto, a Cuban-American professional who was "abducted" by his father in the revolution's early years and is returning to Cuba for the first time to find his estranged mother. Upon arriving in Havana, Roberto reunites with his cousin, and together they travel across

the country in search of his mother. Despite many internal (psychic, emotional) and external obstacles specific to the special period (hustlers, petty theft, broken vehicles, lack of transportation), Roberto manages to make his way to the eastern edge of the island, where he finally finds his mother. In the final moment of the film, the two embrace tearfully in front of an equally emotional group of spectators as the film's musical score swells to punctuate the scene's triumphantly affective climax.

In many ways, *Honey for Ochún* follows the general structure of the maternal melodrama. As Linda Williams argues, the melodramatic "weepie" pivots around a desire to recapture lost innocence. Drawing from psychoanalytic theories of childhood attachment, she argues that melodrama seems to "endlessly repeat our melancholic sense of the loss of origins—impossibly hoping to return to an earlier state which is perhaps most fundamentally represented by the body of the mother."²⁶ This maternal return (with the hopes of recuperating something that has been lost) is the primary arc of *Honey for Ochún*. The first lines of Roberto's voice-over alert us to this as we learn that his father had taken him "too early" from his mother during the first wave of mass emigration from Cuba in the early 1960s. Roberto's return to the island as an adult is a way for him to satisfy this long overdue maternal reunion and thus regain some of the "innocence" lost as a result of his truncated childhood. This return, however, is complicated by a deep ambivalence that further intensifies

the film's melodramatic aspects. While Roberto no doubt requires the closure of maternal reconciliation, he is conflicted by the fear that his mother was an accomplice to his father's abduction—that she abandoned him. Moreover, his ambivalence in returning to a mother who might not want him is complicated by a sense of guilt from returning to Cuba and thus posthumously betraying his father's wishes.

This narrative of maternal reunification can be read as a political allegory in which aims of national consolidation and solidarity reflect the revolutionary rhetoric of the special period. This is suggested at the outset of the film, when Roberto's journey is literally paired with the journeys of other Cuban-American passengers making similarly emotional returns to the island. We must also note the fact that his departure from his mother, like many exile journeys, was primarily political (abandoning the socialist regime), and thus his mother, by virtue of the fact that she stayed in Cuba, is automatically associated with the Cuban nation under Castro. Another clue to the allegorical connection that aligns Roberto's mother with mother Cuba is expressed by the film's geography. Roberto's search for his mother takes him across the country, from the political centre of Havana to the spiritual heart of the island at the far eastern tip. Not only is the eastern part of the island strongly associated with the origins of the Cuban Revolution,²⁷ but it also has strong ties to Cuban ethnic and national identity, particularly through its association with Afro-Cuban traditions and culture. Al-

²⁶ Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," 217.

²⁷ Castro was born in the eastern province of Holguin, and both the first major attacks of the revolution at Moncada in 1953 and the July 26 movement were enacted in the eastern province of Santiago de Cuba.

though Cuba's relationship to its Afro-Cuban culture is historically marked by contradictions and ambivalence, at various moments in Cuba's history it has served as important ground for symbolic notions of authentic Cuban identity or *Cubanidad*.²⁸

The allegorical stress of the film works to solve an ideological problem central to the special period: the problem of waning public commitment to Cuba and the revolution. In this light, the reconciliation between Roberto and his estranged mother can be seen as an attempt to reconcile Cubans to the increasingly vulnerable project of socialist nationalism.²⁹ This problem was made starkly visible in the years leading up to and during the filming of *Honey for Ochún*, as images of Cuban "raft people"—those who fled to Florida in precarious rafts—began to circulate widely in North American media and which culminated in the tense political dispute surrounding Elian Gonzales. This ideological and allegorical aim is punctuated by the film's most intensely melodramatic scene, which features a near extra-diegetic monologue by the protagonist Roberto that seems to directly address the Cuban viewer. Exhausted from what has thus far been a fruitless pursuit of his mother, Roberto is driven over the edge by an act of petty thievery when his bike is stolen in a small Cuban village. Roberto chases the thief in vain and in the process draws

²⁸ For a good example of how Black culture has been employed in Cuba as a sign of authentic Cuban identity, see Yeidy Rivero, "Broadcasting Modernity: Cuban Television, 1950-1953," *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 3-25.

²⁹ We may also read this as a reflection of the political discourse of reconciliation oriented towards Cuban exiles that has been a cornerstone of state policy (Fernandes, 313).

many town villagers out of their houses and into the town square. In front of this large crowd of onlookers and his two travel companions, Roberto confesses that his life has been filled with immense sorrow and pain. This suffering is a result, as he laments, of his fractured connection with his Cuban homeland and his indeterminate ethnic status in the United States, where he is "neither Cuban nor American." Roberto describes how he is constantly reminded of this indeterminacy by being encouraged to renounce his Cuban identity, to "be more than just a spic," in order to truly integrate and succeed in America. The allegorical climax crystallizes when Roberto proclaims that he has never felt accepted or at home in America and is envious of the Cubans in Cuba who "know who [they] are!"

From an ideological perspective, the message is clear. Although Roberto enjoys material privileges as a Cuban-American that Cubans do not, he lacks an authentic, maternal relation to his homeland, a fact that ultimately negates any benefits of living in the United States. On the most explicit level, the film appears to be in line with the massive ideological offensive initiated by the regime in the special period as it attempted to shore up support for the revolution and discourage emigration to (and ideological identification with) the United States. However, these ideological aims are put into tension by the film's melodramatic excesses, which work to undermine the coherency of this message. While there are many such excesses in the film, the most explicit example is in the scene that is also the most ideologically didactic: the moment of Roberto's hysterical public confession. The sheer theatricality of his con-

fession (even for a notoriously melodramatic director) should alert us to some friction with the ideological objectives in the film as he gestures dramatically to the sky and curses fate for his unfortunate lot in life. These theatrics are intensified in the film as Roberto's outburst is followed by an equally melodramatic turn by his driver and travel companion, Antonio, a kind of special period everyman who survives the way many Cubans increasingly do, by hustling on the side. In response to Roberto, Antonio raises the melodramatic stakes by revealing his own tale of woe, similarly cursing fate for taking his son from him in a crazy "accident" and leaving him in a state of despair and ruin.

What is remarkable about both performances, apart from their excessiveness, is the fact that both characters gesture abstractly to fate as the reason and cause for their tragic allotment in life, a gesture that is repeated in other parts of the film. For instance, in a private conversation between Roberto and his cousin Pilar, Roberto asks why his parents divorced and his father fled the country. Rather than exploiting the father as an historically easy target expressing Cuban bourgeois ideology, Pilar collapses both parents together and vaguely claims that they were both "victims of their times." The absence of concrete historical reference or cause is significant in all of these cases, as they mark a departure from the majority of post-revolutionary Cuban films, where problems within Cuba have generally been attributed to real historical factors, such as Cuba's colonial legacy.³⁰ The lack of any

³⁰ There are many films, for example, that posit the historical problem of Cuban machismo as a prime obstacle to the work and gains of the re-

reference to real historical circumstances and, more importantly, the absence of the Cuban revolution as the intervening force within those circumstances, can be understood as a subtle, embedded critique of the revolution for its failure to adequately address the real problems of the special period.³¹ Moreover, this absence is intensified by Roberto and Antonio's excessive, melodramatic theatrics. Their futile gestures to fate further stress the gaping hole in the Cuban social fabric and the revolution's incapacity in filling this gap by reiterating revolutionary slogans and appeals for collective mobilization instead of providing real hope for the future of the country.³² In foregrounding this revolutionary absence, the narrative climax invites the spectator to interrogate the reasons for Cuba's struggles in the special period and evaluate the revolutionary government's role in resolving them. This key moment of the film thus provides a discursive space where the viewer might insert his or her own hypotheses concerning Cuba's reality and pose solutions that may be in direct contrast to official party rhetoric.

volution. Notable examples include Solás's 1968 film *Lucia* (1968), Pastor Vega's *Portrait of Teresa* (1979) and Aléa's *Strawberry and Chocolate* (1993).

³¹ Among the special period problems that the film explicitly indexes are: food and supply shortages, infrastructural decay, prostitution, profiteering, and tourism.

³² The Cuban revolution is indexed in important ways in the film through faded revolutionary billboards, which are contrasted with glossy new billboards that feature ads for Cuban products aimed at tourists. The revolutionary billboards thus appear remote and anachronistic beside the tourist billboards that reflect Cuba's present reality.

The absence of the revolution from the film is also marked by the film's use of Afro-Cuban mythology. This mythological element is indexed in the title of the film, *Ochún*, who in Afro-Cuban mythology is a Santería goddess and guardian of fresh water. What enables and facilitates Roberto's reunion with his mother is his ultimate faith in the prophesy of a *Santera*, a practitioner of the syncretic religious practice Santería, whom he reluctantly visits at the beginning of the film. It is only once Roberto begins to believe in and follow the *Santera*'s mystical clues that he is led to his mother's home. By invoking Afro-Cuban mythology, not only does the film move beyond the sphere of real politics and history (that would reflect a historical materialist position), but it also employs a religio-spiritual mode that is antithetical to the revolution's historically Marxist orientation. Moreover, this use of Afro-Cuban mythology marks a change in the moral ground of Cuban society by shifting the locus of faith. Rather than expressing or reinforcing faith in the revolution or in important figures such as Castro or Che Guevara, the film relocates faith to the ahistorical realm of spirituality and myth. This solves the major deadlock of the film—the real material and ideological problems of the special period—by shifting the “solution” outside historical and material reality and into the transcendental and timeless realm of myth,³³ a realm that stands

³³ As Williams argues, it is often at the mythic level that genre films “resolve” their contradictions: “Popular American movies have been popular because of their ability to seem to resolve basic contradictions at a mythic level—whether conflicts between garden and civilization typical of the western, or between love and ambition typical of the biopic, the family melodrama, and the gangster film”

opposed to the revolution's commitment to dialectical materialism and thus further serves as an inherent political critique.³⁴

Finally, the allegorical and ideological aims of the film are undermined by the film's melodramatic temporality. As Williams convincingly argues, the temporal structure of melodrama is that of the “too late.” We cry when watching melodramas not just at the moment that the characters cry, but at the moment we realize their desire for resolution or reconciliation becomes futile. That is, when we recognize that even the happy ending proposed by the film is in some way incomplete: it is “too late.” Temporally, then, melodrama represents a “looking back”; its dramatic resolution is a “homage to a happiness that is kissed goodbye.”³⁵ Despite the ultimate reconciliation between mother and son in *Honey for Ochún*, there is something incomplete about its resolution, as the reunion between Roberto and his mother is inevitably “too late.” While he has indeed found her, he has lived terribly for most of his life without her (and vice versa), reminding us that his reconciliation is invariably only a partial consolation. What lingers over the image of mother and son is the nagging realization that the two of them cannot turn back time and salvage the lost years. In this way, the allegorical level of the film is sullied by the melodramatic

³⁴ For a detailed discussion on the importance of history in the discourse of the revolution see Nicola Miller, “The Absolution of History: Uses of the Past in Castro's Cuba,” *Journal of Contemporary History*. 38 no. 1 (2003): 147–162.

³⁵ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” 218.

reality of a melancholic and nostalgic relationship to the past.

What all these narrative contradictions point to is the revolution's inability to imagine its future. Roberto's return, however successful, is more mournful and nostalgic than triumphant; that is, it is melodramatic. It mourns a time that has never been and never will be but that might have been. The promise of the revolution is thus cast outside the realm of real historical time (and thus beyond the scope of Cuba's real future) and is instead refigured in the space of melodramatic time: a time that never actually existed but that should have existed somewhere in an imagined past.

Imagining the public sphere

What I have been trying to argue is that melodrama as an aesthetic mode opens a small space within the context of late-socialist Cuba to engage in a complex dialogue with dominant state ideology. This dialogue straddles an important and difficult space, as it remains neither wholly complicit in nor wholly dismissive of the regime and thus can be seen to operate as a pseudo public sphere. As I have suggested, what is remarkable about the excessive climax of the film is that while it applies pressure to crucial issues of concern in the special period (Cuban cultural identity, poverty, the future of the country), Roberto's empty appeal to fate leaves a space for spectator intervention. This melodramatic paradigm, which displaces real historical questions and causes onto a mythic realm, leaves space open for Cuban spectators to fill and to propose (at least imaginatively) reasons and solutions to Cuba's crisis without calling upon open dissent.

To conclude, I would like to mention a brief anecdotal observation made by Fernandes when *Honey for Ochún* opened in Havana. Watching in a room full of excited Cubans, Fernandes noticed widespread vocal participation with the film as it screened. Remarking on the film's hysterical climax, Fernandes writes that when Roberto shouted to the vicarious audience of onlookers on the street, "at least you know who you are," someone in the audience stood up and yelled back to the screen, "No, we don't know who we are. What makes you think we know who we are?"³⁶ This observation recalls Kracauer's notion of the cinema offering a blueprint for an alternative public sphere. While he certainly did not believe the cinema could function as a public sphere, Kracauer's comments alert us to the ways cinema can, in certain contexts, work to prepare an audience for the public sphere. That is, although the cinema does not have all the coordinates of a Habermasian public sphere, it can certainly mimic and reproduce partial aspects of such a sphere and serve, as he suggests, as rehearsal ground for a future public sphere. If indeed there is a public dimension to cinema in Cuba in its ability to foster collective reflections and visions of the Cuban nation, then we must give serious consideration to the role of melodrama as a mode that structurally enables this collective imagining.

³⁶ Fernandes, 42.