

# From imperfect to popular cinema

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Maria Alzuguir Gutierrez

## ABSTRACT

Misunderstood as a defense of technical imperfection, the idea of imperfect cinema was reviewed by Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa many times: the imperfect cinema is interested in cinema, which will only overcome this condition to the extent that man is free, releasing also art from its instrumentation. It is also to overcome the division of labor: the search is for a cinema that can be created by everyone, leaving behind the author-spectator separation. Likewise art can no longer be an autonomous sphere in relation to other life activities. According to García Espinosa, the adventure of Cuban cinema after the revolution was always a search for the end of the thought/fun dichotomy, and an attempt at a popular cinema. We will investigate, in articles published in a period of more than thirty years, what was meant by the notions imperfect cinema and popular cinema, and how the latter was reconfigured according to the historical moment. Thus, the purpose of this article is to discuss, from the texts compiled in *Un largo camino hacia la luz* (2002), the concepts of imperfect cinema and popular cinema as conceived by Julio García Espinosa through time and reflect on their permanence nowadays.

## KEYWORDS

Imperfect Cinema, Popular Cinema, Julio García Espinosa, Cuban Cinema, Filmmakers' Theory, Latin America

The idea of *cine imperfecto*, proposed in the famous text written by Julio García Espinosa in 1969, was often mistaken for a defense of technical imperfection, and approximated to Glauber Rocha's manifest, *Eztetyka da fome*, with its claim to a significant and aggressive use of material precariousness<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, the defense of technical imperfection is one of the possible interpretations of the term –as García Espinosa stated himself in a text twenty-five years later– not as an exaltation of misery, but in the sense of a stimulus to make movies with the available means, in opposition to Hollywood's aesthetic dictatorship (GARCÍA ESPINOSA, 1994). This, however, is certainly not the most important facet of the notion of *cine imperfecto*.

*Cine imperfecto* is interested cinema, which will only overcome this condition to the extent that man is free, also releasing art from its instrumentation. The purpose is also to overcome the division of labor: the search is for a cinema that can be created by everyone, leaving behind the author/viewer separation. This is the only way that art can no longer be an autonomous sphere in relation to other life activities. So, the cinema will be imperfect while it has to be interested, committed to the transformation of reality. Only when the division of society into classes is overcome, art can be a disinterested activity of man, something that people of all occupations may practice as one more life activity.

This is the utopia of García Espinosa, and he ends the text stating that art will not disappear into nothingness, but into the whole. In this regard, García Espinosa shares the greatest ambition of the historical vanguards: to break with the art institution, returning art to everyday life (BÜRGER, 2008). The contradiction, however, is that García Espinosa takes an anti-avant-garde position in the idea that there should be no longer intellectuals and artists, that art can be everyone's activity. While in the USSR, for example, constructivism intended to dissolve into the whole from a vanguard position, based on the notion of social request. The aim was to revolutionize the consciousness, organize life, the psyche, the habits, the

customs of the working class. The artist thought of himself as imbued with a social request, and its function would be to formalize, give form to demands not yet formulated by the proletariat (ALBERA, 2002). The vanguard, then, in politics as much as in art, presented itself as a consciousness outside of the working class. Far from the avant-garde, García Espinosa tuned to certain strains of anti-intellectualism and Workerism that prevailed in cultural debates in Cuba during the 1960s. For him, intellectuals and artists must produce their imperfect art –because it is interested– until they can disappear as a class.

For further reading of García Espinosa's work, we need to understand it in the context of the cultural debates that took place in Cuba during the 1960s. In that decade the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry was involved in a series of controversies. The first one, involving a veto of the exhibition of the movie *PM* (Orlando Jiménez Leal and Sabá Cabrera Infante, 1961), when the position of the ICAIC represented a kind of balance between the opposite poles of the dispute, the 'liberal' publication *Lunes de Revolución* and the 'hardliners' Marxists of the National Council of Culture (GARCÍA BORRERO, 2007). Then another controversy: this time involving the programming policy promoted by ICAIC, when a reader sent a letter to a newspaper complaining about screenings of films such as *Accattone* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1961), *Alias Big Shot* (*Alias Gardelito*, Lautaro Murúa, 1961), *The Exterminating Angel* (*El ángel exterminador*, Luis Buñuel, 1962) and *La dolce vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960), that couldn't be considered an example to the young people. Another controversy settled around a text, published and collectively signed by filmmakers linked to the institute, which claimed freedom in ownership of the cultural tradition previous to the Revolution, stating that 'culture, there is only one' (VV. AA., 1963). The text generated a range of responses and a debate was organized at the university to discuss it, after which Gutiérrez Alea published a text in which he chaffed the position of those who treat the bourgeois or petty-bourgeois origin of intellectuals and artists as an original sin that should be atoned for (GUTIÉRREZ ALEA, 2006)<sup>2</sup>.

1. There is, moreover, another important affinity with Glauber's manifesto, which is the theme of the relationship of our cinema with European criticism and public. The rapprochement between García Espinosa's text and the theoretical work of his contemporaries in Latin America has already been contemplated in other instances (AVELLAR, 1995). Here, what we would like to emphasize is that, although this theoretical-critical production is commonly known as the 'manifests of Latin American cinema', different to texts such as *Hacia un tercer cine* (*Towards a Third Cinema*) and *Eztetyka da fome* (*Aesthetics of Hunger*), *Por un cine imperfecto* is more an essay than a manifesto, asking questions more than expressing ideas in an assertive and provocative way, as do Solanas and Getino's and Glauber Rocha's texts. As for the works of Sanjinés and Gutiérrez Alea, *Teoría y práctica de un cine junto al pueblo* (*Theory and*

*Practice of a Cinema With the People*) and *Dialéctica del espectador* (*The Viewer's Dialectics*), they are a retrospective reflection on their film practice. In a course organized in the *Memorial da América Latina*, my colleague Elen Döppenschmidt drew attention to the Socratic method in García Espinosa's text. A reflection on the form of each one of these texts would be interesting, but is beyond the scope of this work, which focuses on the content of *Por un cine imperfecto* and other later texts written by García Espinosa.

2. The problem of the original sin was in the center of the debates then, as it was present in the famous text of Che Guevara, *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba*, from 1965. For an elaboration on the theme of cultural controversies in Cuba during the 1960s and the participation of ICAIC on the same, view: POGOLOTTI, 2006 and VILLAÇA, 2010.

At that moment the director of the ICAIC published an article in which he defended the artist's right to heresy (GUEVARA, 1963)<sup>3</sup>. While Alfredo Guevara advocated the role of the intellectual, the writer Félix Pita Rodríguez published a poem that questioned how long the word would be retained as one more private property, because the people had claimed their copyrights. It also stated that the intellectuals were claiming the right and freedom to keep talking about something that did not belong to them, and stored the dead, talking and talking, while the revolution was happening outside (PITA RODRÍGUEZ, 1963).

Observing the problem in a broader context, it should be noted that in the early 1960s in Latin America, intervention in the public sphere started to convert the artists into intellectuals, and established the idea that the intellectual should be one of the main agents of a radical transformation. Between 1966 and 1968, however, especially in Cuba, an opposition had been established between the idea of the intellectual as critical consciousness and that of the revolutionary intellectual. According to Claudia Gilman, the armed struggle became then the fact before which the intellectual should be measured, and the paradigms of the man of action and the man of the people placed him outside of the playing field (GILMAN, 2003). At a time when action began to have more value than the symbolic practice, the intellectual went from criticism to self-criticism, and was suspected in his claims of representation for being biased from the beginning (GILMAN, 2003; NAVARRO, 2002)<sup>4</sup>.

In this context García Espinosa writes his text, questioning why the artist intended to consider himself critic and conscience of society when these should be tasks for everyone. García Espinosa's text proposes to overcome minority concepts and practices, creating conditions for spectators to become authors. Quoting Hauser, García Espinosa differentiates mass culture from folk art. While in the cultural industry products are produced by a minority and destined to a consumer majority, popular art –when it was not frozen into folklore– is characterized precisely by its lack of distinction between creators and viewers, being considered as one more of life's activities. And, for him, this should be the goal of a truly revolutionary artistic culture.

*Por un cine imperfecto (For an Imperfect Cinema)* is about aesthetics, much more than a mere essay on cinema. It is a questioning of the very function of art. García Espinosa believed that the art has the ability to express things that are otherwise impossible to express, and this would give it a cognitive power. Based on Kant –even if the philosopher is mentioned explicitly only in later texts– García Espinosa asserts that, unlike science, however, art's results do not have immediate applicability, so art is not a job but a disinterested activity of man. The aesthetic pleasure lies precisely in the pleasure of feeling the functionality of intelligence and sensitivity without having a specific purpose. However, while we cannot break away from art as a separate sphere of life and convert mass culture into popular art, interested art should stimulate the viewer's creative function, an attitude of transformation towards life.

Here, it should be noted the utopian aspect of García Espinosa's proposal. The mass media is converted, under capitalism, in cultural industry, which absolutely denies the idea that art can be a disinterested activity of man, because what it makes are products to market. So there is nothing more utopian than converting these means, linked from the beginning to the interest of profit, in a disinterested activity of man<sup>5</sup>. The expectation of García Espinosa is that the revolution, releasing the mass media from the need of profit, can return it to the sphere of art as disinterested activity of man. Adorno and Horkheimer analysed how the cultural industry had made a transposition of art to the sphere of consumption, turning fun into an extension from work –in which 'having fun means agreeing' (ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, 2002: 25)–, depriving art from what it should seek: the release of the principle of utility and the creation of space of thought as denial.

García Espinosa, later, will explain his rejection of the intellectual who, entrenched in elite positions, is opposed to the mass media and nostalgically claims the autonomy art had prior to the spread of such means, collecting the 'spoils of a useless corpse' (GARCÍA ESPINOSA, 1973: 35). Sharing Benjamin's position, García Espinosa sees the mechanical reproduction as a progressive factor, which leads to the proletarianization of the artist and the democratization of culture, which however was denied by what he calls populist cinema –the one produced by the cultural industry– which converted us all in a 'brotherhood of grateful idiots' (GARCÍA ESPINOSA, 1988: 83).

3. This is a celebrated text, that has been revisited several times by Cuban criticism over the years.

4. For detailed documentation of the discussions about the role of the intellectual in the society between 1960 and 1970 in Cuba and Latin America, see NAVARRO, 2002 and GILMAN, 2003.

5. In a lecture held at IEB/USP on August 15th 2016, Professor Barbara Freitag drew attention to the incompatibility between the cultural industry and the notion of art as disinterested activity of man.

The time, the paths and the waywardness of the revolution led García Espinosa to give his utopia more nuance. In 1971, in the text *En busca del cine perdido*, he no longer advocates the dissolution of the artistic class arguing that it works to produce a popular art that, as he will explain later, should establish a non-alienated, renewed and enriched communication with the public, returning to them the critical spirit (GARCÍA ESPINOSA 1989: 90). According to García Espinosa, the adventure of Cuban cinema after the revolution was always a search for the end of the dichotomy between thought and fun, and the attempt at a popular cinema. Echoing Che Guevara, the filmmaker says that ‘popular cinema resides in the potential of the current cinema as the New Man resides in the potential of today’s man’ (GARCÍA ESPINOSA 1971: 31). And at another moment, he remembers a quote from Pauline Kael, for whom the popular cinema is the one which can ‘unite in a same reaction both worship and unlearned audience’ (GARCÍA ESPINOSA, s / d: 274).

At no moment García Espinosa comes to precisely define what is this popular cinema, but he gives examples of Cuban films that approach his proposal, which he opposes to the populist cinema. García Espinosa argues that artists should learn from popular culture to produce their works in dialogue with it. Against the idea of ‘educating’ the masses to high culture, he states that the artists are the ones who should be educated in popular art to make their work popular –as Brecht recommended–. The best example of what would be this popular cinema may be his own movie, *The Adventures of Juan Quin Quin* (*Aventuras de Juan Quinquín*, 1967), one of the biggest box-office successes of the Cuban cinema. This is a film that draws from the picaresque narrative tradition and at the same time from the cinema tradition genres, particularly the adventure films. García Espinosa proposes the film to make not only a criticism of reality, but of the cinema itself, defending the establishment of a critical relationship with tradition, that the proletarian art should not be created from scratch, but in dialogue with what came before, affronting Hollywood’s codes and structures with the cinematic language.

The appropriation of Hollywood genres in *The Adventures of Juan Quin Quin* and other films of Cuban cinema is reminiscent of Brecht’s operas, in which the author had given himself unto the same risky game of incorporation of the commodity form, accompanied by its criticism (PASTA, 1986). There was in Brecht’s operas an attempt to criticize the ‘culinary’ from inside,

using a technique to make it turn against itself, revealing the merchandise character not only in the fun but in the viewer himself. The operation performed in *The Adventures* is similar to that of *Death of a Bureaucrat* (*La muerte de un burócrata*, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1966). There are satirical and deconstructive citations of genres, without forgetting the pleasure of their narrative procedures. This generates an active reception, because it is aware of the language formulas (GUTIERREZ, 2014; GUTIERREZ, 2015). García Espinosa affirms that this is ‘a way that allows, without losing communication with the public, to seek the new within the possibilities that lay in the old’ (GARCÍA ESPINOSA, 2001: 238)<sup>6</sup>. So García Espinosa defends the search for a popular cinema in the commercial cinema (GARCÍA ESPINOSA 1971: 29), since, as Brecht said, to renounce to such work means represents a ‘freedom outside the means of production’ (BRECHT, 1973: 111).

In his lucidity, García Espinosa seeks compromise solutions between various antagonistic positions: between the autonomy of art and its political exploitation; between the political commitment of the artist and his freedom; between thought and fun; between formalism and propagandistic or didactic art (GARCÍA ESPINOSA, n.d.: 276); between the break with Hollywood’s narrative and experimentalism –which, most part of the time, has the ‘petty-bourgeois mentality as only addressee’ (GARCÍA ESPINOSA, 2002: 247)–. As Gutiérrez Alea in *Dialéctica del espectador* (*The Viewer’s Dialectics*), García Espinosa refused a cinema that revolutionizes the superstructure without ‘touching the base’ (GUTIÉRREZ ALEA, 1982). How to find the balance between these poles? The answer lies in respecting the viewer. For García Espinosa, the artist’s freedom is not above the freedom of the viewer (GARCÍA ESPINOSA, 2000: 212).

*Por un cine imperfecto* contains in a dense and concentrated form the thinking that García Espinosa will consistently develop later in films and essays. In *Por un cine imperfecto*, the filmmaker wrote about a poetic whose goal was to disappear as such, then defended that the aim of the revolutionary filmmaker is to make the revolution in cinema (GARCÍA ESPINOSA, 1971). Later he assumes that, at the moment, even this popular cinema still have to be in a minority position (GARCÍA ESPINOSA, 1988). It is when he makes movies such as *Son... o no son* (1980) and *El plano* (1993), that aimed at a meta-theoretical debate — as the 1969’s text, *Son... o no son* questions the function of art: how to create reflection, if the

6. This quote was taken from a text in which García Espinosa refers to the work of Lars von Trier and Wong Kar-wai, commenting how these authors use genres to subvert them. The formula, however, is very similar to that used by García

Espinosa before to comment his own film, in explaining the idea of ‘seeking the new in confrontation with the old’ (GARCÍA ESPINOSA, 1994: 122).

public goes to the cinema to 'disconnect?', is a question asked several times throughout the film. *Por un cine imperfecto* is a defense of the right to make art before the proletarianization of the filmmakers, a defense of 'what we have for today'.

In his book about the filmmakers' theories in Latin America, José Carlos Avellar (1995) comments on how some of the concepts that García Espinosa proposes in his essay had been in circulation since the 1950s or even earlier among Latin-American filmmakers such as Fernando Birri, Nelson Pereira dos Santos and Humberto Mauro. As an example, the idea of making a creative and expressive use of material precariousness. Avellar also comments on how today the utopia that art can disappear into the whole is no longer on the horizon, that technological development can lead to a democratic expansion of creative activity, since, on the contrary, the more the media multiplies, the more it requires viewers<sup>7</sup>. For Avellar, what remains in effect in the theoretical work of García Espinosa is the defense of imperfection as the only possibility of survival of our cinema.

But this is a basic assumption. For me, however, what is more permanent in the work of Julio García Espinosa and other pioneers of the cinema of the Cuban revolution is the search for a popular cinema. For there is an ever-present question: how

to make a film that seeks reflection without speaking to itself? In Cuba, during the decades of 1990 and 2000, filmmakers like García Espinosa, Gutiérrez Alea and Humberto Solás made films that can be considered, in relation to the 'prodigious decade' of 1960, a step back in aesthetic terms. With *Barrio Cuba* (2005), Solás proposes a dialogue with melodrama, and even the soap opera, in *Strawberry and Chocolate (Fresa y Chocolate*, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío, 1993) there is a return to naturalism, to the ordinary language of classical cinema, and in *Queen and King (Reina y Rey*, Julio García Espinosa, 1994), a return to realism. Here, genres and styles are no longer exactly 'subverted', but rather are used for their communication value, as a way to ensure the presence of the interlocutor and make cinema an effective intervention in the public sphere<sup>8</sup>. These films, which could be criticized for their language choices, rather reveal the profound coherence of García Espinosa and his colleagues of ICAIC, for whom the dialogue with the public was always above the mere search for personal expression. •

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7. García Espinosa himself noted, in 1988, that the spread of the cultural industry was making us all viewers of the world, more than citizens of the world. It is remarkable that today, when large portions of the population have a camera in their own pockets, we are not witnessing the fulfilment of García Espinosa's utopia. With the multiplication of the means of audiovisual production and reproduction, we have seen an increase in the number of hours spent by the population in front of the screens in the consumption of audiovisual products

that, even when performed by amateurs, most times merely repeat the cultural industry standards. The self-promotion stimulated by the Internet can be seen as a form of self-exploration, always feeding back the machine.

8. Fornet considers this search for dialogue a fundamental aspect to the development of cinema in Cuba after the Revolution, and Chanan emphasizes the role of the cinema in the Cuban public sphere since then (FORNET, 1990; CHANAN, 2004).



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### **MARIA ALZUGUIR GUTIERREZ**

Researcher and professor of cinema, PhD from the graduate program in media and audiovisual processes at ECA/USP (Brazil). With studies focused on Latin-American cinema from

the 1960s and 1970s, she has published articles and reviews in journals in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, the United States and France.