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The Appeal of the ‘Old School’: From *De cierta manera/One Way or Another* (1974) to *Conducta/Behaviour* (2014)

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Abstract

This article compares the critical perspectives on society, education and morality found in Sara Gómez’s classic *De cierta manera/One Way or Another* (1974) and Ernesto Daranas’ more recent *Conducta/Behaviour* (2014). Considering the films’ engagement with cinematic traditions from Italian neo-realism to melodrama, it argues that *Conducta* displays a return to a cinematic ‘old school’ in terms of its emotional appeal, its focus on a transcendent individual and its tendency to turn the social and physical context into aesthetically-appealing backdrop. Given the overdetermination of both children and teachers in Cuba’s history, the analysis shows the conversion of Daranas’ teacher, Carmela, into a sanctified, syncretic heroine, and her pupil, Chala, into a *choteo*-imbued, macho, miniature *Hombre Nuevo/new man*. Thus, the critical, imperfect and collective qualities of Gómez’s rapidly transforming revolutionary society are displaced in Daranas’ film by a melancholy aesthetic, a quasi-sacred aura and a coercive kind of care. The problem, therefore, does not necessarily lie in this film’s use of ‘old-school’ narrative techniques, but rather in their deployment to cement values of ‘authentic’ revolutionary spirit and ‘true’ *cubanía* – in other words, to reinforce the appeal of the ‘old school’.

Keywords:

children

education

Cuban cinema

melodrama

national identity

Hombre Nuevo/new man

Every so often in Cuba a film comes along that arouses such passion in audiences and critics alike that it becomes a national event. Queues form around the block, and once in the cinema, audiences participate with sighs, tears and emotional heckling of the screen. Bloggers, reviewers and critics fan the flames of this fervour by extolling the film's uncanny ability to capture and diagnose society's ills whilst also offering a glimmer of hope. Ernesto Daranas' *Conducta/Behaviour* (2014) is one such film, and in this sense, it is emblematic of the continuing importance accorded to national cinema in Cuba. The film tells the story of the charismatic but troublesome 11-year-old Chala, and the veteran teacher Carmela, who fights the unforgiving and bureaucratic school system to remove him from a remedial *escuela de conducta*/re-education school. In so doing, *Conducta* problematizes concepts of good and bad behaviour, and extensive journalistic coverage has focused on how it sheds light on marginality and stagnation in Cuban society. It is edifying to note the persistence of such a national, social and even ethical role for local cinema despite the exponential proliferation of other sources of entertainment since the early 1990s – most obviously the circulation of everything from Korean soap-operas to the latest HBO series and Hollywood blockbusters on USBs and hard drives, often via the so-called *paquete semanal*/weekly package.¹ Whilst the parallel deterioration and even closure of many cinemas around the country has further splintered viewing publics and troubled the prominence of national film in ordinary Cubans' lives, there remains a degree of loyalty and investment in

local production that suggests the tenuous survival of cinema's function as public forum described in Michael Chanan's seminal book on Cuban cinema (2004).

Indeed, *Conducta* has been credited with reviving this fragile function, as respected Cuban critic Gustavo Arcos notes that 'mobilizing so many million Cubans to such a degraded space [referring to the closure of many cinemas and the state of disrepair of those that remain], is already an event of cultural and social transcendence' (2014). His comment refers us back to the power of cinema as a collective experience, a power that the Cuban Revolutionary embraced early on, channelling it towards the creation and consolidation of a national imagined community as evidenced by films such as Octavio Cortázar's *Por primera vez/For the First Time* (1968). The most memorable moments of this documentary reveal the delight on children's faces and the shared joy of an audience watching a film for the first time. The fact that they are viewing a scene from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), incongruous in this remote Baracoa village given its humorous critique of industrial labour, recedes into the background; it is the emotion that transcends, touching even the modern viewer and creating a sense of closeness that continues the cycle of identification and community creation. Thus, when Arcos refers to the 'cultural and social transcendence' of *Conducta*, he identifies its significance and lasting impact in its creation or renewal of a collective. This common physical movement – 'to mobiliz[e] so many millions of Cubans' – towards the nation's neglected screening spaces is accompanied by a parallel, etymologically linked, movement: that of emotion and identification.

Numerous reflections referring to the film and the reactions it has elicited – 'I've watched them cry and then laugh, and the opposite' (García Borrero, 2014); 'so accurate, plausible, and moving, to the point of eliciting ovations well before the end of the film' (Rodríguez, 2014); 'I found myself sobbing, like several others in the audience' (Armas Fonseca,

2014) – point to *Conducta*'s affective power, which manifests itself in the physical and corporeal spheres, and is consistently opposed to reason. This power flows between bodies in the space of contact of the cinema, creating a community collectively moved to stand, sob or shout out. It becomes possible to imagine a wave of affect moving through the audience, creating an effect that transcends the moment of viewing. However, the strength of reaction also contributes to the 'mythical aura generated by the film' (Mira, 2014), pointing us to another connotation of the 'transcendence' named by Arcos. Andrew S. Vargas' description of the Cubans queuing to watch the film as 'hordes of devotees' (2014) suggests the presence of something almost spiritual, mystical about the film: an idea and ideal of deeper truth that contributes to a certain auratic power. For Vargas, the excitement around the film is proof that for many Cubans, *Conducta* represents the fulfilment of a 'messianic promise that one day the film would come – the film that would capture social reality in all its complexity, that would give voice to their frustrations and anxieties whilst still offering some hope for the future' (2014).

But isn't such rapture surprising, striking, out of place, even, given its emergence from a cinematic tradition so shaped by the concepts of imperfect cinema (García Espinosa, [1969] 1997) and the viewer's dialectic between identification and analytical distance (Gutiérrez Alea, [1982] 1994)? Since the foundation of ICAIC (Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos), film has been tasked with critically reflecting revolutionary society and involving the audience in its development. *Conducta* has certainly been praised for its diagnosis of contemporary Cuba's ills; amongst other issues, it touches on bureaucracy and dogmatism, dog fighting, drug addiction and alcoholism, broken families, internal migration and emigration. In fact, one of the few criticisms that has been directed at the film refers to its encyclopaedic, and therefore excessive, attempts to address as many 'issues' as possible. However, the effect of the

film on viewers suggests that whilst it may be critical in its depictions of reality, it may not be as successful in arousing the critical faculty per se: that activity – *kritikos* – etymologically associated with judging and deciding. Rather, in the words of veteran Cuban filmmaker Enrique Colina, ‘its production and exhibition is a good symptom of relief’ (2014).

This evocation of the relief of catharsis transports us back to the debate between emotion and reason, identification and Brechtian distancing that has long shaped film studies. We are forced to reconsider our image of the affective idyll of the cinema as horizontal, communal space. With the film as a ‘Messiah’ and viewers as a ‘horde of fanatics’ (Álvarez, 2014), it becomes clear that affect in *Conducta* is very quickly transfigured into emotion, ‘hardened’, fixed and directed towards particular figures and ideals. As we will see, these figures and ideals extol the appeal of the ‘old school’ – the nostalgia-tinged true ‘revolutionary spirit’ embodied by Carmela and the charisma of Chala as a kind of miniature new man. Moreover, this insertion of affective excesses into ‘circuits of function and meaning’, to evoke Brian Massumi’s distinction between affect and emotion (1995), is itself enacted via a type of ‘old-school’ appeal. In other words, the film makes use of aesthetics and modes of identification and characterization that harken back to the melodramatic tendencies associated with the classic, mainstream Hollywood cinema (and, indeed, classic Latin American cinema) against which Revolutionary Cuban film has traditionally sought to define itself. Acknowledging the important work done by critics such as Christine Gledhill (1987) and Ana López (1993) to rehabilitate melodrama from its automatic dismissal as reactionary, and drawing on Laura Podalsky’s significant reclamation of the importance of emotion in the political effectiveness of 1960s Latin American film (2011), this analysis nonetheless seeks to reveal the problematic nature of *Conducta*’s ‘old-school’ appeal. Establishing counterpoints between Daranas’ film and one of the earliest – and, indeed,

only Cuban fiction features to deal with childhood and education – Sara Gómez's *De cierta manera/One Way or Another* (1974), we will see how the film's 'old-school' appeal limits its radical, critical potential.

The View from the Rooftops

One of the most acclaimed aspects of Daranas's film has been its unflinching portrayal of contemporary urban life in Cuba. Not only does protagonist Chala live in a figuratively broken home, unaware of the identity of his father, but the film also foregrounds the physical degradation of his surroundings. Meanwhile, another strand of the story takes us, quite literally, to the other side of the (train) tracks, where excellent student and *palestina* (illegal migrant from Oriente) Yeni is forced to live in a corrugated iron shack with her father. Simultaneously exposing the physical decay and deterioration of many Havana *barrios* and the moral and social degradation of society, the film reflects on the '*crisis de valores*/crisis of values' that is perceived to have accompanied the island's economic crisis and subsequent transformation since the early 1990s. Much to Daranas' credit, however, *Conducta* manages to avoid the 'favela chic'² evoked by recent release *Habanastation* (Padrón, 2011), which told the story of an unlikely friendship between two boys, set against a backdrop of a notorious Havana neighbourhood known as La Tinta (a name probably invented to evoke the real, marginal neighbourhood of La Timba).³ Although the director's vision is a much more critical one, informed by his own experiences of living in Centro Habana as well as extensive time spent with local communities on location, it maintains a sense of the particular social life developed in these marginal contexts. This is evoked visually in both films through the repeated framing of the neighbourhood by washing lines and cables that create a web that surrounds and connects its inhabitants.

<INSERT FIGURE 1>

The precedent for such a potentially problematic – because fetishizing – interpretation of the *barrio*'s apparently chaotic but intricately interconnected organization of space was famously set by Henri Lefebvre when he noted that '[t]he vast shanty towns of Latin America (*favelas*, *barrios*, *ranchos*) manifest a social life far more intense than the bourgeois districts of the cities' (1991: 373). *Conducta* similarly posits the impoverished, marginal city space as home to and symbolic of certain romanticized values of community and collectivity.

It is interesting to note that both *Habanastation* and *Conducta* follow the example of Sara Gómez's *De cierta manera* (1974), in which the child, though a much less prominent figure, is framed against the city – specifically, the marginal Havana *barrio* of Las Yaguas that is being rebuilt by its inhabitants. Its famous credit sequence pans across the neighbourhood as the buildings are torn down, evoking the violence and dynamism of the early Revolutionary period with mobile camerawork. The demolition echoes the explosive ending of the opening scene, which culminates in an altercation between two friends at a workers' meeting. As critics such as Catherine Davies have noted (1997), the film thus establishes an ongoing parallel between the improvement of material conditions and the transformation of culture and society as equally important processes within the Revolution. In *De cierta manera*, the dust of the Revolution, very literally, has not settled. Therefore, when we are introduced to Lázaro, the film's problem child, we view him as a part of a wider context, his behavioural and psychological issues clearly linked with poverty, lack of education and an unstable home life. Whilst any dust in *Conducta* is much more likely to be the result of collapse and decay than the sign of vital transformation, Daranas maintains this counterpoint between child and society via the physical and social space of the city.

This contextualization not only serves to highlight the vulnerability of the figure, but also, given the symbolic weight of futurity associated with the child as an adult-in-the-making (Edelman, 2004), encourages a view of the city as a microcosm of society that will either mold or deform the child depending on its civic, social, moral health and physical salubriousness. This formative relationship between child and city is strongly evoked in *Conducta* through a voiceover during which Carmela explains that ‘there are four things that make a child: school, home, affect and discipline’. Her authoritative tones overlay an image of Chala returning home from school, his head hanging low as he walks towards the camera through the somewhat chaotic streets of the *barrio*.

<INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE>

The camerawork here, which uses a long shot to pan from the tangled mess of cables overhead to focus on our protagonist, renders the aforementioned valorization of the ‘close-knit’ marginal neighbourhood more ambivalent. Rather than a web embodying collectivity, the cables now take on oppressive connotations, trapping Chala by separating him from the open expanse of the sky [See cover photo]. It is this ambivalence in the representation of urban space that links Daranas’ depiction of the *barrio* with the critical materialism of *De cierta manera*, preventing it from slipping fully into the fetishizations of ‘favela chic’ more evident in *Habanastation*. However, this visual rendering of the limiting, harmful effects of a marginal context on the protagonist also sets up some of *Conducta*’s more problematic, ‘old-school’ appeal.

If street-level space is often shown to be constrained by crowded buildings on the sides and a confusion of cables overhead, this is held in counterpoint with the more open expanse of the rooftops. It is with this magical, liberating space that the film begins, as we are introduced to Chala, who is tending to his pigeons on the roof of his *solar*/tenement home. Although Sara

Gómez's mobile camera offered a privileged view, the opening sequences of *De cierta manera* trained their sights on buildings, taking in the frenzy of urban transformation. Daranas' camera, meanwhile, is even freer as it swoops towards the protagonist, adopting the point of view of one of his birds. It does not take in change, but rather picturesquely positions the protagonist against the cityscape, both of which are bathed in a golden dawn light. Viewer and child alike are thus privy to a privileged perspective, surveying the city from the roof and even, in the viewer's case, adopting a literal bird's eye view.

<INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE>

The association between the child and this special place is cemented over the course of the film, as Chala repeatedly returns to the roof at times of tension or anxiety. Even as its panoramic view helps to establish the story's rather constraining physical and socio-economic setting, the roof thus paradoxically comes to represent escape. In other words, this ambivalent topos both underlines the materialist, determining effects of context and also suggests the special status of the individual, and the possibility of rising above circumstances. Whereas *De cierta manera* constantly counterposes individual and context in a dialectic that makes clear their mutual constitution, in *Conducta*, some spaces – and significantly, some individuals – appear at least partially exempt from the tangle of social and material relations that are characteristic of socialist world views and cinematic narratives. Whilst the rooftop's aesthetic appeal threatens to undermine the hard work put in by Daranas and his crew to make the filmic *barrio* true to life, Chala's repeated physical and symbolic associations with this space sow the seeds of a kind of exceptionalism that threatens to turn him into an 'old-school (read Hollywood-esque) film hero.

These contrasting notions of constraint and determinism on one hand and freedom and exceptionalism on the other are reinforced by the trope of the *palomas* themselves, which are

represented as both caged *and* free. The opening close-up of one bird's frantically flapping wings creates a sense of anxiety even as the shot's aesthetic appeal washes over the viewer. We glide with the bird, experiencing a dizzying sense of height and liberation. However, as it flies into the distance, the pigeon is framed ominously by two enormous factory chimneys across the bay, which spew out dark smoke as if to stop our soaring spirits.

<INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE>

This is characteristic of the film's oscillation between critical, gritty realism and aestheticized, sentimental optimism. If the birds represent freedom and the possibility of rising above difficult circumstances, albeit ambivalently as they swoop through polluted air, the dogs Chala helps to train for dogfights embody the brutal realities of poverty, marginality and neglect. The dogfighting sequences use tight framing of the animals to create a sense of tension, fear and claustrophobia, showing the brutality of the fight itself as well as the frenzied and implicitly condemned participation of the onlookers and gamblers. Whilst Chala and his male friends look on keenly, Yeni and her companion are disgusted. In an attempt to assuage his love interest's fears, and redeeming himself in the viewer's eyes, Chala reassures Yeni that 'my thing is pigeons', showing her the coop where they are kept. At several other points in the film, it is made clear that his participation in the illegal act is motivated only by a heart-breaking desire to provide for his alcoholic, possibly drug-addicted mother. Later on, we see Chala reading the copy of Jack London's *White Fang* that Yeni has lent to him.

<INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE>

His natural affinity with this story of a friendship between man and dog helps to compensate further for his damning association with dogfighting, and it is significant that this reading takes

place on the roof, which, as we have seen, is symbolically associated with purity or goodness unsullied by difficult circumstances.

Although both *De cierta manera* and *Conducta* counterpose city and society, including the figure of the child, it is clear that whereas the former film invited parallels between changing interpersonal dynamics and urban transformation, Daranas's story primarily employs the setting to illuminate one particular character and heighten emotional effect. Tellingly, these uses of the city point us back to different moments within a common cinematic trajectory. The intercalation of documentary footage into fictional narrative in Gómez's film is characteristic of *Nuevo cine latinoamericano*/New Latin American Cinema, and its street scenes in particular point us to the debt of that movement to Italian neorealism, which, in films like *Ladri di biciclette/Bicycle Thieves* (de Sica, 1948), took viewers out of the film studios and into the city, where they were able to see real hardship in post-WWII Italy. But, as Laura Podalsky has argued, if *Nuevo cine latinoamericano* can be traced back to Italian neorealism, then this latter movement itself inherited much from melodrama (2004: 33). Whilst *Conducta*'s focus on faces, use of non-professional actors and its exposure of urban poverty indicate a debt to Italian neorealism, it is the latter's debts to melodrama that come through most strongly in *Conducta*'s configuration of character and context. The difference, I would suggest, lies in the kind of connections established between individual and collective through the representation of urban space. In this sense, Podalsky's discussion of Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *Rio 40 Graus/Rio 40°C* (1955) is particularly pertinent. As she points out, Pereira's film used a particular set of focalization techniques to first encourage the viewer's identification with and sympathy for the child figure, and then to relate that emotion to the wider social context via a shift from the individual to the collective, represented by images of groups of people (2004: 35). Although *Conducta* contains

equivalent changes in scale, it is noteworthy that the film repeatedly returns to Chala's solitary figure framed against a picturesque, if dilapidated urban scene, either devoid of other people or where others become anonymous. Such slight distinctions produce substantially different effects; where *De cierta manera*'s combinations of documentary depictions of the neighbourhood and fictional narrative maintained a greater balance between individual and context, emotion and analysis, identification and critical distance, in *Conducta* the foregrounding of the relationship between city and individual at times threatens to turn the *barrio* into a picturesque backdrop for personal drama, heightening identification and emotional investment and revealing an underlying melodramatic inheritance.

Chala, *el machito nuevo*: A Diamond in the Rough

Both films attest to the importance of children to the Cuban Revolutionary project by showing the educational system and the struggles of both institutions and individuals to help marginal, problematic children. From *De cierta manera*'s Lazarito to *Conducta*'s Chala it seems that little has changed;⁴ both children's behaviour is linked to their troubled home lives, and in particular, their vulnerable and 'deficient' mothers. Lázaro's mother – a real woman known as 'La mejicana' – is struggling to raise five children by herself, whilst suffering from health problems and without a great deal of education. She hits her child and struggles to control his behaviour. Chala also comes from a single-parent home and does not know who his father is. His mother is either an alcoholic or a drug-addict, or both, and it is implied that she works as a prostitute. Although frustrated by his troublemaking, she doesn't take the time to talk to or discipline her son. In both cases, institutions step in, showing that the care of the child in socialist society falls not only to the individual family but also to the society as a whole, via a number of

regular and remedial institutions.⁵ In *De cierta manera*, after Lazarito is arrested for stealing a purse, his teacher Yolanda goes to meet with the professional in charge of his case who narrates, in voiceover, the process that the child has been subject to since he was arrested. As he describes Lázaro's interviews with sociologists, psychologists and legal professionals, we watch a series of documentary images of children being checked by doctors and dentists, and of Lázaro being psychologically assessed, a series of toys on the table before him. These various reports were, we are told, collated together in order to 'offer a holistic vision', the conclusion of which was that different bodies should work together since 'this young boy needs affection, attention, and care from the mass organizations'. Not only is the solution identified in the collective and in collective action, but Lázaro himself is placed with a category or group of troubled youth who are all valued and systematically treated by the state and, by extension, society.

Whereas Gómez's problem child appears most extensively in a sequence that explains the institutional infrastructure developed by the Revolution to support marginalized youths, Daranas's story follows Chala from rooftop to street, from regular to remedial school and back again. While Lázaro is offered pre-established, systemic support, and footage of his treatment is mixed with that of other children, Chala is personally removed from the remedial, re-education school by Carmela, who pleads his difference from the other boys with the school's headmaster. In both cases, the effort to reform the child figure plays out a materialist point of view that recognizes the importance of context, upbringing and real conditions (known in Cuba as '*el ambiente*'/the environment) in shaping the individual's behaviour and attitudes.⁶ As Enrique Colina points out with characteristic bluntness in his reflection on *Conducta*, 'without a doubt materialism is the theory that states that he who lives in shit, acts like a shit' (2014). However, with the protagonization of Chala and his symbolic, albeit incomplete, elevation above the

disorder and degradation of his context, we are implicitly shown that, in Colina's terms, this 'same shit' is also an 'organic residue that becomes a fertilizer' (2014, n.p.). In other words, hardship and poverty here are a setting in which Chala can shine as a kind of 'diamond in the rough', as one Cuban critic has called him (González Rojas, 2014, n.p.).

Over the course of the film Chala displays an innate morality that not only excuses but also justifies any bad behaviour; having been let down by his family, by the school and by society, he rebels against injustice. Undermining the materialist link between individual and collective/context that has been the basis for so much of the Revolutionary project and Cuban cinema's attempts to galvanize its spectators into action, Chala thus becomes a kind of transcendent individual, a cipher of goodness, a symbol of hope for the future as well as of the troubled present. This transcendence can be linked to the aforementioned opening shot that aligned his perspective with that of the birds: he is somehow simultaneously struggling in *la mierda* and soaring above it. Problematically, this threatens to establish a naturalized moral hierarchy according to what are, inevitably, culturally specific, politically loaded criteria. In this sense, the film can be seen to partake in a wider pattern evident since the Special Period: the reconfiguration of politics and ideology as 'universal' morality or national culture and identity.

Indeed, Chala's charisma as a protagonist stems from his evident virtue, and the alignment of this virtue with Cubanness: the nationalization of supposedly 'universal' qualities of goodness. Over the course of the film, he displays many of the characteristics of Che Guevara's *hombre nuevo* – the model citizen who was to be characterized by his technical, cultural and academic education as well as his moral qualities ([1965] 1979). We see that when he tries, Chala is good at his schoolwork; more importantly, as Carmela points out, 'he is a young boy with values that he was not taught at home' – he is naturally good. Just as the new

man was to embody solidarity, fraternity among men, unselfishness and generosity, Chala is repeatedly shown in situations that prove his loyalty to his friends, his respect for his elders, his kindness and generosity even to his rivals or enemies. But as critics such as Abel Sierra Madero have argued (2006), Guevara's new man was not new in all respects. Rather, he represented an implicitly gendered, heteronormative ideal that confirmed and legitimized existing tendencies of *machismo* in Cuban culture, figuring man in Che's mythical image itself: a manly man who both fought and read books, who was self-sacrificing, brave and selfless and whose heterosexuality went without saying. Chala exemplifies all of these qualities, fighting those who pick on his friends, reading *White Fang*, and chasing his first love, Yeni. Through his flirtatious interactions with Yeni and substitute teacher Marta, and his gendered taunting of his school rival, we can see that he harbours certain *machista* behaviours that persist in Cuban society despite the Revolution's repeated attempts to eradicate them. Although these behaviours are at times represented as problematic, they also imbue him with *choteo* (Mañach, [1928] 2011) – a characteristically Cuban sense of humour and cheekiness that is clearly designed to make the protagonist sympathetic, particularly to a local audience. Identification *with* and *of* Chala as morally worthy thus also stems from his conformity to ideas of Cubanness and to traditional gender roles, marking an ironic distance from the critical insights of Sara Gómez's *De cierta manera*.

Chala simultaneously embodies and represents early Revolutionary hopes for a new society and citizen, the Cubanness of *choteo*, a certain nationalized *machismo*, as well as the innocence and vulnerability of a child, resulting in an overdetermination that points us towards the anxiety around youth, society, and future that have been a prominent feature of Revolutionary Cuba at successive moments of crisis or change. From Guevara's ideological

investment in a new citizen who would be born free from the sin of capitalism, to more recent revalorizations of youth via the Elián González saga and the *Batalla de ideas/Battle of Ideas*⁷ (which revived Guevara's ideals), the child in Cuba occupies an ambivalent, dual position as both problem and solution, a national project and a promise for the future. Although Chala has negative as well as positive characteristics, in his behaviour and personality we see the diminishing of the transformational, reformatory goals and materialist precepts of the first decades of the Revolution (the child as project), and their outweighing by a sense of innate goodness (the child as promise) that recalls the romanticism inherent in José Martí's oft repeated views about children as representing, for example, the hope of the world. Whereas for Guevara young people represented 'the fundamental clay for our work' (1979: 17), to be moulded into citizens of the future, in Chala's case, any hope for the future is to be found in that raw material itself, which already displays key civic and moral virtues associated with revolutionary Cubanness. If Guevara echoes Martí in his claim that '[w]e deposit our hope in youth', he also recognizes the need to 'prepare them to take the banner from our hands' (1979: 17). *Conducta*'s figuring of Chala as a 'diamond in the rough', on the other hand, indicates the disappearance of or loss of faith in the second clause, instead enacting an affective and symbolic investment in an inherently good, individual child.⁸ I would suggest that this shift away from the child as subject of social reform and political formation to focus instead on personal qualities is part of an 'old-school' appeal that re-establishes the power of the individual to transcend his context whilst depoliticizing, dehistoricizing and reinforcing supposedly 'universal' notions of virtue.

Carmela: Gospel of the 'Old School'

If Chala acquires a transcendent quality, embodying a particularly Cuban kind of goodness despite his problematic behaviour, Carmela undergoes a similar process of nationalized sanctification, so revealing, along the way, that a certain kind of troublemaking is in fact part of that Cuban virtue. The process is partly driven by the parallels established between the two protagonists' *conducta* – their rebelliousness, although problematic, is ultimately framed in honourable terms as it is perceived as a just response to unjust circumstances, whether these be family fragmentation or bureaucracy and dogmatism. Their characterization thus plays into the longstanding national narrative – taken up and reinforced by Revolutionary discourse particularly since the 1990s – of Cuba's long history of righteous rebelliousness in both national and international contexts. Standing up against a flawed system, however, the critique that Carmela embodies is both supported and, paradoxically, problematized by other characters' response to her. Stern but caring, authoritative, experienced, beloved by students and respected by colleagues, it becomes clear over the course of the film that she gives off an 'aura [*hálito* – literally, breath] of integration' that functions within 'the classroom, the school, and the education system, in which the cohesive principle of the nation is embodied' (del Río, 2015). Cuban audiences are encouraged to identify with her as 'a typical, everyday Cuban, with a small salary, family who have emigrated, and a simple, austere life' (del Río, 2015). But Carmela is not just a relatable individual; she is like a grandmother figure to the children and even some of the adults, whom she has known since they were children. She thus unites different individuals and generations within the film as well as reinforcing a kind of imagined community beyond it. This integration, together with her years of experience, of which we are constantly reminded, paradoxically figures her rebellion as a constant in the centre of this narrative world. Far from representing a break with the old, then, her response to the school system's unthinking

dogmatism rather attests to a return to or persistence of a certain traditional, national, revolutionary spirit.

This stalwart representation of a certain ‘old-school’ essence invites a telling, albeit limited, parallel between Carmela and *De cierta manera*’s teacher, Yolanda: both figures represent perspectives and life experiences that no longer fit with their contexts, and both adhere to those experiences, protesting against their new surroundings. Yolanda’s middle-class background makes her feel out of place in the marginal *barrio* and school in which she now works; in a Brechtian breaking of the fourth wall, she tells the camera: ‘I am not comfortable here. It’s a strange world... one that I did not know [and that] I thought didn’t exist anymore.’ However, whilst Yolanda’s difference means that she struggles to deal with the students and their parents, Carmela is a natural and embodies the idea of teaching as vocation. This term, which is used in both the film itself and in reviews, helps to show her rebelliousness in a positive light, as it becomes increasingly linked with national mythologies and revolutionary ideals. Where *De cierta manera* suggests that Yolanda must adapt to her new circumstances, Carmela’s righteousness indicates that it is the system that must change. Most obviously, the reference to ‘vocation’ highlights parallels between education and religion, framing her in the strongly humanist terms of Cuban official discourse, within which the teacher functions as a moral compass and creator of model citizens – a kind of a secular priest. For film critic Frank Padrón, Carmela is ‘that “living gospel” that José de la Luz y Caballero demanded from those who undertake the sacred task of education’ (2014). Padrón refers here, of course, to one of this Cuban *prócer*’s most famous aphorisms: ‘[a]nyone can teach; only someone who is a living gospel can educate’ (Gálvez, n.d.). Luz’s definition of education as ‘tempering the soul for life’ and the teacher as a figure responsible for the student’s ethical and spiritual formation (Gálvez,

n.d.) has proven influential in Cuba not least through its impact on José Martí, the ‘national apostle’ whose physical and intellectual figure is particularly ubiquitous in the educational sphere. The legitimization of Carmela and her ideas according to this thoroughly national and rather romanticized vein of the humanist tradition is highlighted through her repeated framing with the bust of Martí at key moments in the film.

During the meeting intended to stage Carmela’s retirement, the director of the ‘*escuela de conducta*’ points out that many of the teachers present have, themselves, been taught by her. Respected by her colleagues, then (albeit at times begrudgingly), she is not only a figure of authority but, as the children’s response to her indicates, also of affection, who symbolically binds the nation together into a family or class. Indeed, it is possible to see Carmela’s class as a microcosm of society; for example, in one section of her ‘anti-retirement’ speech, she describes the children she is teaching this year; from the son of a political prisoner, several emigres and Yeni, a *palestina* forced to live illegally on the outskirts of the city, each one seems to represent a particular problem facing Cuban society. This sense that Carmela is the point of convergence for a national collective is reinforced by the fact that, over the course of the film, visual and narrative parallels encourage us to associate her with the syncretic, saintly figure of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. This connection is suggested by the teacher’s family background, to which she alludes in references to her grandmother as the granddaughter of slaves and to both Catholicism and syncretic *santos*. Furthermore, the scene in which she lights a candle to the saint, who stands beside the framed teaching certificate in her home, reinforces the association of the two figures, and more broadly of education with religion and Cubanness.

<INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE>

After all, the Virgen de la Caridad is the patron saint of Cuba and, moreover, for Antonio Benítez Rojo, a paradigmatic syncretic figure (1996). This characteristic is highlighted in the song ('Al Cobre con mi sombrero'/'To El Cobre with my Hat') sung by the children in church, which not only suggests the virgin's racial hybridity ('*Para que todos sean uno, eres india, blanca y negra*'/'So that all may be one you are Indian, white and black') but also combines the religious with the political and nationalist (she lights up '*los ojos de los mambises*'/'the eyes of the mambises' [soldiers in the wars of independence from Spain]). The association of Carmela with the Virgen thus links this teacher to ideas of acceptance and integration, but always in the terms of a specifically syncretic Cubanness.

This thoroughly national acceptance and integration of difference is most clearly demonstrated by Carmela's controversial decision to allow Yeni to put a saint card of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre up on the traditional class mural – a ubiquitous feature of Cuban classrooms which contains quotes and pictures from the established pantheon of national heroes such as Maceo and Martí.

<INSERT FIGURE 7 HERE>

For Antonio Enrique González Rojas, this moment 'exhumes and revives from the common grave of clichés Martí's formula of triumphant love: with all, and for the good of all...' (2014). It is universal and humanist in its display of tolerance, but also highly nationalist in its combination of symbols. As González Rojas goes on to note, the only parallel to this scene in Cuban cinematic history is found in *Fresa y chocolate/Strawberry and Chocolate* (Guitérrez Alea and Tabío, 1993), when David adds his 'Movimiento 26 de julio' armband to Diego's mural of Cuban artists and intellectuals – an image that, for the critic, also represented a 'a clear display of authentic nationalism' (2014). Like *Fresa y chocolate*, *Conducta* appears to encourage

dialogue amongst Cubans beyond and across ideological divides, recreating an imagined community through a common set of references that are apparently imbued with national and affective qualities rather than political significance. Carmela's openness – demonstrated in an earlier scene where she encourages students to express what *patria*/homeland means to them – is clearly established in opposition to the dogmatism of contemporary Cuban education and society, and in this sense her 'old-school revolutionary spirit' represents a return to and development of the relative dynamism that characterized the 1960s in contrast to the increasing Sovietization and institutionalization of the 1970s and 1980s.

However, this parallel is also telling, hinting as it does towards the persistence of certain limitations on openness and acceptance. For all *Fresa y chocolate*'s breaching of taboos, the sanitization of homosexuality through the addition of a heterosexual relationship between Nancy and David (Smith 1996: 31) bespoke the film's more general 'failure to carry the critique to its ultimate conclusions' (Davies 1996: 179).⁹ This containment of critique and difference was also on some level a disciplinary move; mirrored by the 'symbolic gesture' (Santí 1998: 422) of Diego and David's final embrace, the film set terms – a particular 'strong nationalism' (Santí 1998: 409) – and limits – Diego is forced to leave Cuba, after all – for acceptance and integration. Diego's apartment and 'mural', together with David's contribution, thus played out – albeit on a micro, visual level – the film's broader gesture: presenting difference as spectacle and neutralizing it by bringing it together in one frame (Smith 1996: 84). Although *Conducta*'s ending is much more open and inconclusive, even the 'mural' that embodies Carmela's attitudes and marks her classroom as an accepting space has a frame. In other words, just as politics were replaced by an apparently apolitical (or at least partially depoliticized) patriotism in *Fresa y chocolate*'s more accepting vision of Cubanness, so *Conducta*'s critique of dogmatism and

stagnation hardly throws open the terms of debate. Rather, it reinforces certain ‘old-school’ values and virtues that reconfigure politics as national cultural identity. Moreover, as González Rojas’s reference to the ‘mural-shrine’ (2014) indicates, both films contribute to the elevation of the national to ultimate good. Altar-like, the pictures of the patron saint and quotes of the *procures* convert *cubanía* into an object of devotion, loyalty and sacrifice, reinforcing certain modes of *conducta* along the way.

As is indicated by the association between Carmela and the Virgen de la Caridad, we are encouraged to view Carmela herself as a source of veneration; she emerges simultaneously as representative of an ‘old-school revolutionary spirit’ and syncretic national identity, and as an exemplary individual – another ‘diamond in the rough’ – who, moreover, has ultimate authority: Carmela always knows best. Just as the figurative beatification of Martí in Cuban culture can be problematic in its persuasive, even coercive authority in official rhetoric and everyday life, so Carmela’s elevation to ‘living gospel’ is problematic. Carlos Álvarez, who has written one of the only critical reviews of the film, argues that *Conducta* makes Carmela ‘a quarrelsome bully of a teacher, just another hero, as if we didn’t have enough of those already’ (2014). He interprets her character as contributing to the immobilizing weight of the past, the call to heroism and sacrifice that is already so strongly felt within Cuban society. Álvarez acknowledges that Carmela’s ‘*old school* tenacity’ (emphasis added) is seductive and charismatic (and here it is interesting to note the ‘divine’ etymological roots of ‘charisma’ as ‘gift of grace’), but he notes that – her long speech comes to mind – it also suggests ‘the dictatorial side, the bad manners, the exasperating stubbornness of a person who tries to impose something without debate, whether it be an ideology, a strategy, a measure, or affection’ (2014).

It is interesting to note that in this characteristic of ‘stubbornness’, Yolanda and Carmela are very similar. In *De cierta manera*, Yolanda reacts defensively and angrily to her colleagues’ attempts to change her rather aggressive, unsympathetic attitude towards her students’ parents. Carmela’s stubbornness is evident throughout the film in how she stands her ground on the key issues of the saint card and Yeni’s illegal enrollment in the school. Calling on her age and experience, Carmela marks the classroom as her domain, exempt from any rules but her own. As she does not engage in true dialogue with others, the narrative is punctuated with fruitless exchanges between Carmela and school officials, the final meeting ending with one of her signature withering glances and the phrase, ‘[y]ou haven’t understood a thing, have you?’

<INSERT FIGURE 8 HERE>

However, if we compare these conversations with the conflicts in *De cierta manera*, it becomes evident that whilst the former represents an ‘exercise in dialogics’ according to which the protagonists continually ‘seek a way out of binaries and contradictions’ (Davies 1997: 351), in the latter, the two sides’ common inflexibility bodes ill for the establishment of any kind of dialectical (ex)change. Whereas Gómez’s film ends with a shot of Yolanda and Maria arguing as they walk into the distance, Daranas fades to black as Chala and Carmela repeat their daily exchange: ‘Good morning, teach’, ‘Good morning, Chala’. The film may end on a note of reassuring routine, but given Carmela’s ill health and impending retirement, this is tainted by a fearful uncertainty. Much as the viewer is encouraged to emotionally invest in and admire Carmela, what are we to make of the future if our rebel – the potential catalyst for change – in fact represents no vanguard, but rather a vestige of the ‘good old school’, dangerously close to extinction?

Conclusion

On some level, the analysis developed here is arguably too harsh; after all, it is clear that Carmela really does have the students' best interests at heart, and her approach is certainly more sensical and sympathetic than that of the school officials. More generally, reviewers of many colours and stripes praise the film's astute and at times even bold critiques of the state of contemporary Cuban society. Numerous viewers comment on the film's admirable avoidance of the melodrama's Manichean characterizations and neat endings. However, over and above all of this remains the overwhelming affective response the film has elicited. Noting the vehemence and persistence of such reactions, it becomes clear that we ought not to underestimate the coercive capacity of 'affection', a power which recalls arguments about the 'suffocating state care' experienced by some citizens of paternalistic socialist states.¹⁰ Extrapolating from the ideological potential in our emotional investment in Carmela and Chala to the film as a whole, then, I argue that it is important to consider more closely how and why the narrative enchants us and hooks us in. And if we're to judge by prizes won, debates generated, reviews written, popularity and queues for the cinema, *Conducta* certainly has managed to do just that.

Where *De cierta manera*'s teacher, Yolanda, was flawed, growing and open to criticism, like the rest of the film's dynamic elements, Carmela's appeal is far more authoritative and affective. Through this veteran *maestra*, *Conducta* encourages us to value experience and a certain overbearing *ternura*/affection, more or less implicitly advocating for the restoration of 'true' revolutionary, humanist, and nationalist values forgotten amidst the bureaucracy and dogmatism of the present. Meanwhile, while Gómez's Lázaro was one of many children swept along by the Revolutionary process, and served to demonstrate its institutional organization and reformatory efforts, Chala is repeatedly associated with a distinctly 'Cubanized' individual virtue

that raises him above his context, making him shine like a ‘diamond in the rough’. Finally, to return to the use of the urban setting and relationship between individual and collective in both films, we can see that there has been a shift from the portrayal of turbulent collective processes of transformation and determining material conditions in *De cierta manera*, towards a melancholy aesthetic in *Conducta*, where a deteriorated yet golden-hued *barrio* constantly threatens to become a backdrop, a source of pathetic fallacy and sentimental atmosphere that encourages us to identify with the young hero.

In its favouring of sentiment and identification over a more Brechtian, analytical distance, we can place *Conducta* within a wider move towards more conventional, ‘old-school’ narrative techniques and aesthetic tendencies evident in Cuban cinema since the 1980s, a move which is itself related to the increasing emphasis on national culture and identity in revolutionary rhetoric since the fall of the Soviet Bloc and the subsequent, disillusioned wane of socialist ideology on the island. Nevertheless, one may argue that *Conducta* puts ‘old-school’ appeal to critical use. Responding to a post-foundational moment of deterioration and stagnation, the narrative puts forth a new fiction, creating a symbolic family unit through the interaction and emotional connection between Carmela, Chala and the viewer. If in Doris Sommer’s foundational fictions, emotion and identification combined with external obstacles in order to encourage the reader to imagine an alternative society in which the lovers’ relationship could be realized (1991: 180), then *Conducta*’s assurance of its protagonists’ inherent goodness similarly shifts our focus onto external, societal obstacles, encouraging us to critique the status quo. The viewer is invited to imagine a society in which children like Chala and Yeni are helped rather than hindered by the system, and Carmela is free to act on her initiative to do so, rather than being blocked by an unthinking and inflexible state. However, whereas other films that used

‘pleasurable formal and aesthetic qualities [to] encourage wish-fulfilment through identification for a critical purpose’ (Davies 1997: 347), such as *Adorables mentiras/Adorable Lies* (Chijona, 1992), may have presented more open critiques of revolutionary society and progress, *Conducta* implicitly measures the existing state of affairs against imagined or historic traditional notions of revolutionary Cubanness. The problem, in other words, does not necessarily lie in the film’s use of ‘conventional’, ‘old-school’ narrative techniques per se, but rather in their deployment to cement values of ‘authentic’ revolutionary spirit and ‘true’ *cubanía*, embodied by Carmela as syncretic ‘living gospel’ and Chala as a ‘mini new man’ – in short, to reinforce the appeal of the ‘old school’.

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¹ For more on this phenomenon, see Pertierra (2012).

² With this phrase I refer to the particular fashion that has developed in the wake of the international success of *Cidade de Deus/City of God* (Meirelles and Lund, 2002). One of the most notable critiques of the film and the consequent interest in the ‘exotic’ appeal of the shantytown is Ivana Bentes’ discussion of its espousal of a ‘cosmetics of violence’: (2001), ‘Cosmetica da Fome Marca Cinema do Pais’, *Jornal Do Brasil*, http://jbonline.terra.com.br/destaques/glauber/glaub_arquivo4.html.

³ For more discussion of this, see Fehimović (2015).

⁴ Of course, this in itself is damning given the Revolution’s efforts to eliminate inequality, poverty, illiteracy, prostitution, neglect - in short, many of the problems associated with the urban Cuba of *De cierta manera* and which are still evident in Daranas’ Havana, some forty years later.

⁵ Again, it is noteworthy that this infrastructure is portrayed positively in *De cierta manera*, whereas characters in Daranas’ film seem to implicitly agree that the remedial re-education school will have a negative rather than a positive effect on Chala.

⁶ However, whereas state intervention represents a hope for reform in Gómez’s film, for Chala the potential saviour is an individual’s intervention, and as we will see later, this also sheds light on Carmela’s old-school appeal.

⁷ The Battle of Ideas refers to a series of political, economic, and social reforms and debates that took place in the early 2000s and particularly emphasized the reaffirmation of socialist values, mass mobilization, new internationalism, education reform, and the involvement of young people in the Revolution.

⁸ Here, as elsewhere in film, the ‘parentification’ of the child evident in his ethical, responsible behaviour (for example, Carmela points out that Chala ‘the ones that puts the food on the table’) makes them in some sense *better* than the adults around them. This serves as ‘a distraction from the violence exerted toward the child’, a violence consisting of abandonment (Tylin, 1997: 720). Although this adult-like overdetermination of the child hints towards a sense of guilt around the treatment and fate of the child in society, it also tries to make up for and conceal it.

⁹ Even the film’s ‘rosy tint’ memorably highlighted by Catherine Davies (1997) evokes *Conducta*’s sentimental sepia tones.

¹⁰ For more on this, see Dillon, M. (2007), ‘Cared to Death: The Biopoliticised Time of Your Life’, *Foucault Studies* 0: 2, pp.37–46.