

Amaya, Hector. *Screening Cuba: Film Criticism as Political Performance During the Cold War*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2010. 248 pp. Cloth \$80.00. Paper \$30.00.

In *Screening Cuba*, Hector Amaya analyzes the work of film critics in Cuba and in the United States between 1959 and 1985. As Amaya notes, the revolutionary government recognized from its very beginning the potential of film as “the most powerful ideological tool of its time,” and by March of 1959, with barely three months in power, the Council of Ministers had already issued “Law 169,” establishing a national film institute to “control filmic production and distribution in internal and external markets, prepare technicians and filmmakers, and administer studios, laboratories, and any other infrastructure related to film production and distribution” (8). Taking inspiration from the work of Janet Staiger and drawing on concepts of *habitus*, *techne*, and *telos* from Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, Amaya examines comparatively the ways in which cultural context shaped each group of critics, their understanding of their role in society, and in turn their employment of aesthetics as a tool for self-definition, self-advancement, and self-defense. During the Cold War, he asserts, in the U.S. as well as in Cuba, film criticism became a “performance that cultural workers undertook to become, or at least be seen as, proper progressive citizens” (xxiii).

The four chapters that comprise the first half of *Screening Cuba* examine the historical and social contexts in which Cuban and U.S. film criticism developed and was practiced. Chapters 1 and 2 trace the debates that shaped cultural policy and defined relationships between cinema and citizenship in post-revolutionary Cuba. Amaya identifies three distinct periods: 1959-1961: The Beginning of a Cultural Revolution; 1961-70: The Sixties, or Cultural Experimentation and Idealism; and 1970-85: Institutionalization and Cultural Accountability. Law 169 had vested Cuban film critics with a formidable charge: the promotion of educational works consonant with the spirit of the revolution. The law had also given them considerable practical power to shape that cultural production--including decisions about how to direct the film industry’s scant funds. As Amaya demonstrates in discussions of aesthetic, economic, and political conflicts, the particulars of cinema and citizenship in post-revolutionary Cuba were subject to fierce debate, and attempts to determine the proper roles of film and film critics in the ongoing revolution produced unexpected alliances as well as deep rifts. Particularly impressive in this section is his deployment of contemporary sources such as *Bohemia*, *Cine Cubano*, and *Granma*. Although Amaya modestly directs readers to lengthier studies of each controversy, the level of detail that he provides would constitute a solid foundation for a graduate seminar on Cuban cinema.

Chapters 3 and 4 shift the focus to the United States, to the social and political contexts of film criticism, and in particular to the means by which “the sixties provided the political rationale to make criticism a practice of dissent” (xxii). Amaya calls attention to the coincidence in one decade of the “brightest promise” of the Cuban revolution, the cultural revolution in the United States, and the globalization of U.S. film exhibition and criticism. Once again, despite his caveat that he is “assuming some familiarity with 1960s to 1980s U.S. history,” these chapters nevertheless offer ample grounding for a reading of the times as context for his analysis of the reception of Cuban film. From the start of the revolution, U.S. cultural critics had promoted Cuba’s pride of place in the Left imagination, and the 1972 decision on the part of the U.S. State Department, urged by radical Cuban American groups, to censor the first Festival of Cuban Film in New York engendered support for Cuban cinema among leftist critics and academics. Citing

Andrew Kopkind's account of how the viewing of *Memories of Underdevelopment* came to signify an entire web of political performance stretching from "Cambridge to Santa Cruz," Amaya underscores the roles played by critics in facilitating such "rituals of cultural consumption" and takes special note of the attraction of the nascent U.S. feminist movement to Cuban films that focused on the role of women in revolutionary culture (78).

The second half of the book is devoted to four case studies of the performance of criticism in U.S. and Cuba in response to overtly political films by Cuban directors: Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968), Humberto Solás's *Lucía* (1968), Sara Gómez's *One Way or Another* (1977), and Pastor Vega's *Portrait of Teresa* (1979). In each chapter Amaya points up contrasts between the reviews of Cuban and U.S. critics, leading to his conclusion that while in Cuba an institutionalized critical practice reflected a "revolutionary hermeneutics;" in the U.S. the "relatively unregulated, ... decentralized, highly heterogeneous, capitalist" situation of critics resulted in a "hermeneutics of ambivalence" (181). U.S. critics, Amaya finds, tended to perform in "double registers that at once claimed independence from and subjection to the field of power" (188). Even as he identifies significant differences between the two groups of critics, however, he takes care to avoid oversimplifying his case, as evident in his meticulous treatment of differences in critical practice *within* each group. Here again Amaya devotes particular attention to the gendering of film criticism, a point he illustrates, for instance, with reviews of *Lucía* by Cuban women as well as with responses of U.S. feminist critics to *Portrait of Teresa*.

In his final chapter Amaya essays a broader view of the cultural effects of Cuban and U.S. critics' respective performances of progressive political citizenship. For Cuban film critics, that progressive politics was defined by socialism, and for U.S. critics, by liberalism. The difference, he argues, resulted in profoundly different experiences of Cuban film. Amaya takes pains here to avoid taking sides: he includes an explicit disclaimer that "I am not suggesting here that the American critics were wrong" and takes both groups to task for practices that denied full citizenship to significant sectors of the population (194). He also leaves open his most provocative question: "What political world is structured when political dissention is performed through economically and political sanctioned practices such as criticism? I wonder whether this is a thinning down of the realm of civics and citizenship or just another way of being modern" (194). As valuable as *Screening Cuba* will be as a careful comparative analysis of film criticism, one hopes to see Amaya explore that larger question further in future work.

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