

Carnivals of Transition: Cuban and Russian Film (1960-2000)

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The candidate confirms that the thesis does not exceed the word limit prescribed by the University of London, and that work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given to research done by others.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on ‘carnivals of transition’, as it examines cinematic representations in relation to socio-political and cultural reforms, including globalization, from 1960 to 2000, in Cuban and Russian films. The comparative approach adopted in this study analyses films with similar aesthetics, paying particular attention to the historical periods and the directors chosen, namely Leonid Gaidai, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, El’dar Riazanov, Juan Carlos Tabío, Iurii Mamin, Daniel Díaz Torres and Fernando Pérez.

This thesis maintains that most of the selected Cuban films are carnivalesque comedies comparable to films made during the same period in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. This thesis further argues that the carnivalesque became a strategic mode for socio-political subversion in these two countries.

Informed by textual, contextual and intertextual examinations of selected films, this thesis establishes that the carnivalesque in both countries has been characterized by an eclectic mixture of genres, ranging from light farcical comedies to black, surreal comedies and satires, thus making this mode instrumental for the representation of competing socio-political, cultural, and intercultural trends.

By investigating the evolution from bright carnivalesque film comedies to dark grotesque humour in Cuba and Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, this thesis provides new insights on black humour and on the importance of intercultural dialogue for the formation of new local and global cultural trends. This thesis will also consider how shifting social attitudes prompted the appearance of new genres, such as critical utopia and dystopian critique.

The thesis concludes by asserting that as well as serving as a fertile strategy for mutual cultural illumination, the carnivalesque mode is also the cinematic mode that best captures the constant process of renewal in all areas of social life.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	7
<b>GENERAL INTRODUCTION – THE CARNIVALESQUE AESTHETICS: ANTI-HEGEMONIC TRADITION AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE</b> .....	8
<b>PART I. ADAPTATION AS A METATEXT AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE: GUTIÉRREZ ALEA’S (1962) &amp; GAIDAI’S (1971) ADAPTATIONS OF IL’F AND PETROV’S NOVEL <i>THE TWELVE CHAIRS</i> (1927)</b> .....	43
<b>INTRODUCTION: ADAPTATION AS A METATEXT. GENETTE’S THEORY OF TRANSTEXTUALITY. ADAPTATION AS REVISION AND AS AESOPIAN READING OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY</b> .....	43
<b>CHAPTER ONE: IL’F AND PETROV’S NOVEL <i>DVENADTSAT’ STUL’EV / THE TWELVE CHAIRS</i> (1927) AS A HYPOTEXT FOR GUTIÉRREZ ALEA’S AND GAIDAI’S ADAPTATIONS (<i>DOCE SILLAS</i>, 1962 AND <i>DVENADTSAT’ STUL’EV</i>, 1971)</b> .....	49
1.1 Soviet Satire and Il’f and Petrov’s Novel Cult Status.....	49
1.2 The Picaresque Genre as a Metatext for the Novel and the Novel’s Intertextuality.....	54
1.3 The Novel’s Context.....	56
1.4 The Novel’s Plot and Main Characters.....	59
<b>CHAPTER TWO: GUTIÉRREZ ALEA’S AND LEONID GAIDAI’S ADAPTATIONS IN CONTEXT</b> .....	63
2.1 Gutiérrez Alea’s Adaptation as a Translation and a Metatext of Il’f and Petrov’s Novel.....	63
2.2 The Cuban Context and Gutiérrez Alea’s Role in Post-1959 Cuban Cinema ....	66
2.3 Gutiérrez Alea’s Formal Influences and Aesthetics .....	68
2.4 Gaidai’s ‘Faithful’ Adaptation: Adaptation as a Hybrid Genre and the Origins of Gaidai’s Eccentric Carnavalesque Comedy Style .....	69
2.5 The Socio-Political and Cultural Context of Gaidai’s Adaptation .....	75
<b>CHAPTER THREE: COMPARISONS AND CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	78
3.1 Gaidai’s Version versus Alea’s Earlier Adaptation of Il’f and Petrov’s Novel..	78
3.2 Adaptation and Transculturation: An Ideological and Intercultural Dialogue ...	86
3.3 The Dialogue of Gutiérrez Alea’s Adaptation with Recent Cuban Films .....	88
3.4 More Recent Soviet and Post-Soviet Adaptations of the Novel .....	90
3.5 Adaptation as Revision or as Aesopian Reading of Contemporary Mores .....	91
<b>PART II. THE 1980s: THE REAPPEARANCE OF SOCIAL COMEDY AND SATIRE WITH MELODRAMATIC AND FANTASTIC OVERTONES</b> .....	96

<b>INTRODUCTION: MELODRAMATIC SATIRE AND THE BLACK HUMOUR TREND. EARLY <i>PERESTROIKA</i> AND CUBAN RECTIFICATION HUMOUR OF THE MID 1980S - EARLY 1990S</b> .....	96
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: EL'DAR RIAZANOV'S <i>ZABYTAIA MELODIA DLIA FLEITY</i> (1987) / <i>FORGOTTEN MELODY FOR FLUTE</i> (1987): FROM SAD COMEDY TO TRAGEDY</b> .....	101
4.1 Synopsis. Historical Context: <i>Perestroika</i> and <i>Glasnost</i> .....	101
4.2 Riazanov's Early Influences, Recurring Themes, and Aesthetics.....	107
4.3 Favourite Topics. Stylistics. Possible Russian, Soviet or European Film Influences.....	112
4.4 The Italian Connection.....	117
4.5 The Role of the Fool in Riazanov's Oeuvre .....	123
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: JUAN CARLOS TABÍO'S <i>PLAFF</i> (1988). PARODY AS A SOCIAL CRITIQUE</b> .....	127
5.1 Historical & Socio-Political Context .....	127
5.2 The Cultural Framework of Tabío's <i>Plaff</i> .....	129
5.3 Synopsis and Narrative Strategies .....	134
5.4 <i>Plaff</i> 's Style and Aesthetics .....	138
5.5 From the Parody of Melodrama to the Realms of Black Comedy.....	142
<b>CHAPTER SIX: COMPARISONS AND CONCLUSIONS. BLACK HUMOUR AS A SUBVERSIVE STRATEGY FOR REPRESENTING SOCIAL CRISIS AND DISCONTENT</b> .....	144
6.1 The Tradition of Russian and Soviet Black Humour.....	145
6.2 <i>Perestroika</i> 's Black Humour – Black Humour and Accusatory Satire in Socialist Cuba and Soviet Russia .....	146
<b>PART III. CARNIVAL AS UTOPIAN / DYSTOPIAN CRITIQUE THROUGH FILM: BLACK HUMOUR AND THE DYSTOPIAN TURN OF THE LATE 1980s AND EARLY 1990s</b> .....	152
<b>INTRODUCTION: <i>REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM</i>: UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA, ANTI-UTOPIA AND THE END OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE</b> .....	152
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: THE DYSTOPIAN TURN. <i>CHERNUKHA</i> &amp; THE BLACK HUMOUR TREND IN CUBA &amp; SOVIET RUSSIA IN THE LATE 1980S AND EARLY 1990S</b> .....	159
7.1 The End of Utopia. The <i>Chernukha</i> Trend .....	159
7.2 Towards a 'Philosophical' Definition of Black Humour.....	160
7.3 Carnival as Utopian Critique .....	162
7.4 Dystopian Critique.....	164

<b>CHAPTER EIGHT: MAMIN AS THE FILMMAKER OF RUSSIA’S TRANSITION OR THE ROAD FROM CARNIVAL TO DYSTOPIA</b> .....	167
8.1 From <i>Prazdnik Neptuna</i> (1986) to <i>Fontan</i> (1988) and <i>Bakenbardy</i> (1990) ....	167
8.2 Understanding <i>Bakenbardy</i> , or the Film’s Meta- / Intertextuality.....	172
8.3 <i>Bakenbardy</i> ’s Plot in Context .....	178
<b>CHAPTER NINE: COMPARISONS &amp; CONCLUSIONS. SHAKHNAZAROV’S GOROD ZERO (1989) AND DÍAZ TORRES’S ALICIA EN EL PUEBLO DE MARAVILLAS (1990) AS TWO VISIONS OF HELL</b> .....	183
9.1 Shakhnazarov’s <i>Gorod Zero</i> as a Dystopian Critique of Russian Statism .....	183
9.2 The Special Case of <i>Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas</i> .....	185
9.3 Through the Looking Glass to Ground Zero.....	188
<b>PART IV. REPRESENTING TRANSITION, GLOBALIZATION &amp; SHIFTING (MIGRANT) IDENTITIES</b> .....	200
<b>INTRODUCTION: CARNIVALS OF TRANSITION TO A MARKET ECONOMY. FANTASY AND THE MYTH OF THE FIRST WORLD</b> .....	200
<b>CHAPTER TEN: THE ART OF REPRESENTING TRANSITION. MAMIN’S OKNO V PARIZH / WINDOW TO PARIS (1993)</b> .....	204
10.1 <i>Okno</i> as a Transitional Comedy Film .....	204
10.2 The Art of Representing Transition .....	209
10.3 Synopsis, Style, Tropes and Metaphors .....	211
10.4 Representing Identity. Globalization and its Discontents.....	216
10.5 National Reconciliation and the Late 1990s Post-Soviet Comedy .....	219
<b>CHAPTER ELEVEN: FERNANDO PÉREZ AS AN ‘EX-UTOPIAN’ AUTEUR. THE METAMORPHOSIS OF CUBAN NATIONAL IDENTITY &amp; TRANSNATIONAL SHIFTS IN LA VIDA ES SILBAR (1998)</b> .....	222
11.1 Fernando Pérez as an ‘Ex-Utopian’ Auteur .....	222
11.2 Synopsis and Characters .....	223
11.3 The Ulysses Syndrome .....	229
11.4 Transnational Flows and the New Cuban Identity.....	232
<b>CHAPTER TWELVE: COMPARISONS &amp; CONCLUSIONS. FROM DYSTOPIA TO UTOPIAN NOSTALGIA. TRANSNATIONAL OR MIGRANT IDENTITIES? ...</b> .....	235
12.1 Representing Globalization? Comparing <i>Okno</i> & <i>La vida</i> .....	235
12.2 The Metaphor of the Journey .....	237
12.3 Music as a Metaphor of Identity .....	240
12.4 Juan Carlos Tabío’s <i>Lista de espera</i> (2000) as Critical Utopia and Allegory of the Cuban Dilemma .....	240

<b>GENERAL CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>244</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>253</b>

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## **GENERAL INTRODUCTION – THE CARNIVALESQUE AESTHETICS: ANTI-HEGEMONIC TRADITION AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE**

This thesis argues that despite appearing originally in First World cinema, the carnivalesque mode developed into a potent strategy for socio-political subversion in the former socialist countries. My aim is to make explicit some indirect yet important transcultural dynamics at work between peripheral cinemas, in this case – the Cuban and Russian cinemas. Up until the 1990s, both cinemas have been chiefly concerned with national issues, and were trying to develop original, counter-Hollywood kind of cinema.

The study's main scope is comedy films made in Cuba and Russia during the period from 1960 until 2000. The main criterion was to select carnivalesque comedies broadly comparable in topics and aesthetics, strongly identified with important directors and periods of socio-political and cultural change, such as social reforms, transition and globalization; hence, the unifying theme is 'carnivals of transition'.

As far as I am aware, this is the first such study whose goals are to provide evidence of a deep and vibrant intercultural dialogue between the two cinemas (as examples of counter-Hollywood Third and Second cinema), and to shed light on common cultural trends that have been overlooked due to the previously disproportionate focus on national area studies. The purpose here is to provide a detailed, yet much bigger picture of the process of cultural interaction, and its vital role in the formation of important local as well as global cultural trends.

My working hypothesis is that the carnivalesque is the cinematic mode that best captures the constant process of change and renewal in all areas of social, political and cultural life (Mikhail Bakhtin 1968) and as such represents a fertile model for the study of socio-political and cultural evolution. Previous studies have argued that the carnivalesque has been responsible for the vibrant dialogue between different genres, media and cultures (Bakhtin 1984; Julia Kristeva 1980; Robert Stam 1989 & 2004, Stam & Raengo 2005), for the dissemination of democratic ideas around the globe (Katerina Clark 2002), and, as I shall argue, for the formation of new cultural trends.

### **Methodology**

This thesis examines a selection of cinematic texts from USSR / Russia and Cuba over a period of forty years. The approach is based on Mikhail Bakhtin's treatment of the

carnavalesque as a key comedy trope and the examination extends over a variety of literary, scholarly and cinematic texts, reviews, interviews and testimonies of Cuban and Russian critics and filmmakers. The film texts are produced by high calibre, popular Cuban and Soviet Russian filmmakers, such as Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Juan Carlos Tabío, Daniel Díaz Torres, Fernando Pérez, Leonid Gaidai, El'dar Riazanov, Iurii Mamin, and Karen Shakhnazarov. The aim is to deliver an original comparative study that examines the role of humour as a social corrective in socialist cinema; in particular, the carnivalesque as a key comedy trope for representing cataclysmic historical changes through black humour in film. The study hopes to contribute to the overall academic understanding of state socialist culture at large.

The selected comedies and satires are key cinematic works that were most successful in expressing the social contradictions of a particular decade. The thesis argues that there was gradual evolution (over these four decades) of the carnivalesque aesthetics from mildly critical, eccentric optimistic comedies (in the 1960s) to increasingly dark, black surreal tragicomedies (in the late 1980s), and then to *reductio ad absurdum* allegorical, black humour dramas (in the early 1990s), reflecting on the absurdities of autocratic socialism. Furthermore, the study argues that the employment of the carnivalesque mode makes apparent the shift in attitudes towards social change and particularly towards socialist utopia over these four decades.

As argued by Bakhtin, what makes the carnivalesque best suited for representing the dialogue between opposing ideologies is the fact that as an inherently eclectic generic mode it captures the diversity of life, giving full expression of the world in flux between the old, which is on its way out, and the new, which is yet to come (1984). This is why Bakhtin's cultural theory of the carnivalesque and its subsequent reworking by other scholars are the most suitable methodological approach for textual and contextual examination of the selected film texts.

The study notes the apparent overlapping between national theories of intercultural dialogue, such as Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of 'the carnivalesque' (1984), Iurii Lotman's 'intercultural dialogue mechanism' (1990), and Fernando Ortiz's 'transculturation' (1940/1995) with other significant European cultural studies, such as Julia Kristeva's intertextuality (1966/1980, which had derived from Bakhtin's theory) and Gérard Genette's transtextuality (1982/97 that in its turn was inspired by Kristeva's intertextuality); as well as Robert Stam (himself a Bakhtinianist) and Ella Shoat's study

*Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994) that favoured multiculturalism over Eurocentrism, and had stimulated the realisation that it is much more accurate to talk of ‘cultural polycentrism’ (see the most recent collaboration between Lúcia Nagib, Chris Perriam and Rajinder Dudrah 2011); backed up independently by studies of ‘peripheral cinemas’ (see Dina Iordanova’s edition 2010). I claim that this overlapping in itself presents overwhelming proof that cultural exchange is polycentric in nature; an example of how intellectual thought and cultural ideas successfully cross any kind of borders; how they evolve, augment and alter after making ‘a few rounds’ around the globe.

### **Literary review:**

These ideas have developed from the textual, contextual and intertextual examinations of the films, and from studies of postnational / transnational cinema such as those by Scott MacKenzie and Mette Hjort (2000), and particularly Dina Iordanova’s study (2010) of peripheral world cinema vis-à-vis Hollywood (global / universal) cinema. Iordanova’s earlier *Cinema of the Other Europe* (2003) argues for the existence of common cultural trends in the cinemas of the former socialist countries. This became even more apparent during the transitional period of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Iordanova points out that the reasons for this were the similar socio-political conditions and intense cultural barter policies between the former Socialist bloc countries, which were extended to friendly Third World nations such as Cuba and Vietnam (2003: 21, 41), and this is where I shall insert my study.

The thesis has benefited from previous studies of film comedy and satire, such as Gerald Mast (1979), Jerry Palmer (1988), and particularly Geoff King’s (2002) incisive study of comedy, which makes an important distinction between parody and satire. I have also drawn from studies of Cuban and Russian film, in particular Andrew Horton’s study of Soviet satire (1993) which concludes that there were various ‘shades’ of carnivalesque comedies during *glasnost*; Anna Lawton’s (1992) study of Soviet *glasnost* cinema, and particularly of carnival, *chernukha* (dark pessimism) and dystopia; from analysis of Russian transitional comedy and cinema by Birgit Beumers (1999 & 2008); Russian and Soviet film by David Gillespie (2003); Soviet and post-Soviet carnivalesque comedy by Aleksander Prokhorov (2003 & 2008); Cuban film by Michael Chanan (1985 & 2004), John King (1990 & 2000), Ambrosio Fornet (1999 & 2007), Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (2007), Luciano Castillo, Manuel Pérez, Sandra del Valle et al. (2010), and from studies

by Juan Antonio García Borrero (2001, 2002 & 2009). Also, this thesis utilizes Robert Stam's idea of the carnivalesque as a form of mutual intercultural illumination (1989, 2004 and Stam & Raengo 2005); and, of carnival as critical utopia by Michael Gardiner (1992). I also refer to other studies that have addressed film comedy's role as a form of socio-political subversion in the former socialist countries, such as Amos Vogel's (1974, 2005) study of subversive film; and David Cook's (1996) history of narrative film which also makes important contribution to the subject of subversive socialist film comedy. I also refer to sociological studies of art and society, such as Sujatha Fernandez's (2006) study of contemporary Cuba; to socio-political studies of Cuba by Aviva Chomsky et al. (2003), Lydia Chávez (2005), Ted A. Henken (2008); to Russian politics and society by Richard Sakwa (2002); to Soviet cinema and society by Peter Kenez (1992); to studies of utopia and mass culture by Frederic Jameson (1979); to utopianism and the dystopian turn by Lyman Tower Sargent (1994) and Tom Moylan (2000); and to fantasy as a *mise-en-scène* of desire by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis.

In Cuba and Russia the carnivalesque mode has been characterized by an eclectic, ambiguous mixing of genres, and of high and low culture elements; it ranges from light, farcical comedies to black, surreal comedies and satires (this is the rationale behind calling it a mode, rather than a trend). This is precisely why it has become such a potent strategy for socio-political subversion and the most effective formal aesthetic for representing competing socio-political, cultural, and intercultural trends. The thesis argues that the carnivalesque mode in both countries has evolved from bright, carnivalesque film comedy to excessive, dark, grotesque realism and naturalism, collapsing eventually into something else: different trends and genres from tragicomedy to tragedy, to dystopia, *chernukha*<sup>1</sup> and 'dystopian critique'. The latter, according to Sargent (1994) and Moylan (2000), is a new genre, born out of the critical historical conditions of the late 1980s. The investigation of this evolution of the carnivalesque mode in Cuba and Soviet Russia provides new insights of the nature of black humour, and evidence of the vital role of intercultural dialogue in the creation of new local and global cultural trends.

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the *glasnost* trend of naturalism known as *chernukha*, see Seth Graham (2000: 9-27).

The thesis makes explicit the reasons for the ‘mutual attraction’ (Lotman 1990: 143) or for this ‘marriage of convenience’, depending on one’s views, between Cuba and the USSR. By applying and taking into account the findings of the above-mentioned cultural theories the study argues that the cultural exchange between these two countries has gone through numerous stages, constantly evolving and mutating over a considerable period of time (at least 40 years); that it has been, overall, mutually beneficial, yet especially stimulating for the development of Cuban revolutionary cinema.

**Socio-cultural context:**

I argue that, in the early 1960s, all the necessary conditions for an intercultural dialogue of ‘a mutual attraction’ between Cuba and the USSR were present. Both Soviet Russia and the new socialist Revolutionary Cuban government shared common goals and expected numerous mutual benefits from this union, such as expansion of the socialist system and of the anti-imperialist revolutionary cause across Latin America and the Third World countries. In the 1960s, the nationalist, anti-imperialist (anti US) nature of the Cuban revolution, the hostile actions of the US, the economic blockade instead of weakening Castro’s regime strengthened its popularity, turning Fidel Castro into a charismatic nationalist messiah. If anything, the constant hostile attacks against the regime just pushed Castro into seeking closer economic and military co-operation with the USSR, and eventually led to Cuba’s subsequent sovietisation and acceptance in the socialist bloc.

Without doubt, the ‘conversion’ of Cuba to socialism represented a huge victory for the USSR and caused enormous embarrassment to the mighty US. Soviet economic aid, its material and cultural help, particularly in the sphere of cinema (with cameras and other essential technical tools provided during the two-year visit of Soviet filmmakers of the stature of Sergei Urusevskii and Grigorii Kozintsev; noted by Vladimir Smith Mesa in his 2011 Doctoral thesis) was instrumental for the establishment of an independent, national socialist type of film industry in revolutionary Cuba. In his not yet published thesis, Smith Mesa has argued that without the Soviet help the Cubans would not have achieved so much in the sphere of film culture (2011). The Cuban revolution gained a lot of support and sympathy around the world, thus becoming a showcase for the advantages of socialism, and attracting other Latin American and Third World countries to its cause.

Therefore, there were mutual benefits for both countries, and the popular support for the Cuban revolution inspired and invigorated the socialist cause around the globe.

On a national level, the adoption of socialism, together with its doctrine and bureaucratic institutional apparatus accelerated the process of consolidation of the Revolution and of Cuba's sovietisation. By the mid-1970s this process was completed. During the 1970s, Cuba, just like the USSR and the rest of the Eastern bloc countries went through a period of increased Stalinist type of party orthodoxy, which was particularly damaging for the cultural sphere. The PCC (Cuban Communist Party) leadership started dictating the parameters of revolutionary art, setting limits to artistic freedom, thus effectively electing a Soviet type of socialism (before that, in the 1960s Castro was more interested in alternatives, such as Maoism). The period between 1971-1976 was later criticized, as *el pavonato*, after Luis Pavón Tamayo, who for three decades was a president of the Consejo Nacional de Cultura (CNC), and the period has been inscribed in the history of Cuban culture also as *el quinquenio gris* (the five grey years), term first coined by the Cuban cultural critic Ambrosio Fornet (1999; 2007). During the 1970s, the conservative, dogmatic wing of the PCC came to dominate every segment of Cuban life and society. This was the time when the Cuban revolution lost its magic and the country became a typical socialist state, modelling its numerous newfound organizations in support of the Cuban revolution on pro-Stalinist Soviet prototypes, adding to them some local flavour.

This process started with Castro's approval of the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw pact in 1968. Up until then, during the 1960s, there was more room for economic as well as intellectual diversity and experimentation. Castro was exporting armed revolutionary struggle abroad, in Latin America, against the Soviets' advice (which apparently ended disastrously, with Che Guevara's death in Bolivia, in 1967).

Just like the 1920s in Soviet Russia, the 1960s in Cuba was a period of vigorous debate and intellectual diversity. There were at least three main trends: liberals (not in favour of socialism); the dogmatists, most of whom were hardened Stalinists, and the ICAIC (The Cuban Film Institute) members, who were neither (García Borrero 2009: 78). The Institute was founded in March 1959, in the third month of the revolution by its three co-founders: Alfredo Guevara (a close friend of Fidel Castro), Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, affectionately called Titón (an inspirational cultural figure, who became Cuba's foremost film auteur; much loved and highly respected in Cuba and abroad, because of

his uncompromising and complex depiction of Cuba's realities) and Julio García Espinosa (who came to play an important managerial role in the Institute, as well as being a film director and leading theoretician of Cuban and New Latin American cinema). Soon, ICAIC became established as an important, honest and independent voice in revolutionary Cuba's cultural life. According to Law 169 for the creation of ICAIC, the films produced by the Institute should be supportive and committed to the revolution, as well as to high quality art, to capture faithfully the contradictions of the young revolutionary state.

Originally, like many other Cuban artists the three co-founders professed their dislike of the *socialist realist* canon. Instead, by the end of the 1960s, the first generation of ICAIC directors embraced ideas, best formulated by García Espinosa as *imperfect cinema* theory (1969), for effective and inexpensive filmmaking, able to represent the complexity of Cuban reality, for a cinema with a social mission, that can educate and entertain the spectators, while encouraging them to take active part in the transformation of their reality. So, right from the beginning, the ICAIC filmmakers were using cinema as a platform for national debate.

The reasons for choosing socialism in the first place were numerous. The rapid deterioration of the relationship between Cuba and the US led to increased hostilities on both sides and to Cuba's subsequent economic blockade. Because of US's escalating antagonism, the young revolutionary government was forced to seek alternative economic and military help. This is why the Russians' generous offer to buy the sugar quota rejected by the US, and soon after, for a military protection was accepted, but with some hesitation. Therefore, Castro's 'conversion' to socialism was, most likely, prompted by Cuba's need of another powerful protector, not to mention that this also helped dissociate Castro's governmental style from previous Cuban pro-US marionette regimes. Castro must have realized that he could not hold power solely on the basis of being a charismatic leader (Henken 2008). As noted by Henken, at the time the Cuban socialist party (PSP) was best organised, and had a clear vision and program for the immediate future. This made it attractive to Castro, who adopted its program, using it as a political platform for his nationalist ideas and for an alternative, non-corrupt, anti-imperialist socialist-style society, able to implement the process of Cuba's decolonisation. A close relationship with the Soviets was desirable as they were willing to help the country's socialist-style modernisation and industrialisation.

The Russians soon delivered on their promises: they continued to buy Cuban sugar at higher than the market prices; supplied the island with oil and opened the door for the influx of goods from the rest of the Soviet bloc. These were followed by cultural exchange programs, in the form of festivals (like the week of Eastern European Film, Henken 2008 & Smith Mesa 2011)<sup>2</sup> and the realisation of some co-productions with socialist Eastern European filmmakers.

After the heavy criticism of Nikita Khrushchev's handling of the missile crisis the Soviets went out of their way to support the island's economy and win back Castro's trust. Khrushchev had used the installation of nuclear missiles on the island as a bargaining chip to secure more favourable terms for the USSR. He did that behind Castro's back, and at the Cubans' expense, so they became highly suspicious of the Soviets. After all, yet again the island's destiny was decided by foreigners. Henken claims that the estimate of the Soviet help for Cuba was in the range of 65 billion dollars (2008). The only condition must have been a full commitment to socialist ideas, as with the rest of the socialist countries.

Because of the US's economic blockade and the failures of economic diversification by 1968, and particularly the failure of the 1970 sugar 10 million tons harvest (which was treated with extreme fatalism – all or nothing – by Castro), Cuba became increasingly dependent on Soviet sponsorship. From 1969 to 1976, Cuba underwent a process of rapid sovietisation, which was extended from the forms of production and managerial style to every sphere of Cuban life, including film and culture. Consequently, for the next years, until 1990, Cuba's destiny became closely aligned with that of the USSR and the Soviet bloc.

### **The historical context:**

At first, Castro's political ideology and foreign policy were quite ambiguous and only radicalized during the first years after his victory over Fulgencio Batista's regime in January 1959. PSP – the traditional kind of Popular Socialist Party – was least involved in the armed struggle but its proven organisation, clear program and connections with

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<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Smith Mesa's 2011, not yet published thesis provides overwhelming evidence for the significant cultural co-operation between Cuban and Soviet filmmakers, and with filmmakers from other Eastern European countries. His study successfully challenges previous attempts to downplay the influences of socialist film culture on ICAIC's members' careers and film production.

Moscow made it an attractive vehicle for the consolidation of his power. Castro eventually dissolved the original party and either purged its leaders or converted them into *Fidelistas*. Then he created a new Cuban Communist Party (PCC) under his leadership (Henken 2008: 205). His constant defiance of US policies has turned him into a charismatic, messianic leader, and justified the constant sacrifices, loyalty and revolutionary unity (Henken 2008: 217). By adopting the PSP political platform, Castro avoided the danger of becoming obsolete (Henken 2008: 218).

Socialism and anti-American rhetoric became more important in consolidating a revolution under attack (Henken 2008: 112). At first the US recognized the new government; however, soon the relationship between the two countries rapidly deteriorated. In 1960 Cuba nationalized all the remaining US companies on the island. The US responded with the first phase of the economic embargo and recalled their ambassador. The Cuban government promoted patriotic unity and mass mobilization, and quickly created organizations for the Defence of the revolution (CDR), the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), the Union of Communist Youth (UJC). By January 1961 thousands of Cubans have already fled to the US. The force that tried to invade the Bay of Pigs in the spring was formed entirely by those who had left as exiles (Henken 2008: 115). Two days before the invasion, Castro wisely used the atmosphere of defiance and unity to declare the revolution to be socialist as well as nationalist. Eventually, in January 1961, Castro cut all ties with the US.

In February, Anastas Mikoyan, the Soviet foreign minister paid a courtesy visit to Cuba which ended with the reinstating of the diplomatic relations between the two countries. In March, President Eisenhower authorized the CIA to start planning Castro's overthrow, what would become John F. Kennedy's most infamous fiasco – the Bay of Pigs (Henken 2008: 112-13). The economic warfare between Cuba and the US started in the summer (Henken 2008: 113-14). As astutely argued by Henken, this invasion only helped the radicalization and consolidation of the revolution (2008: 116-17). When the US cancelled the sugar quota in July, the USSR offered to purchase the balance.

Defending the revolution in the face of US attack demanded the support of the USSR. This led to the Cuban Missile Crisis, in October, 1962. A military pact with the USSR would show the US that if they invaded Cuba once more there would be war. The Russians had persuaded Castro to place nuclear missiles on the island as a counter

balance to the US missiles that encircled the USSR. As feared by Castro, the missiles were discovered by a U2 spy plane, which triggered the crisis (Henken 2008: 118-119).

However, when Khrushchev removed the missiles without consultation with Cuba, Castro was furious. While the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement included the US pledge not to invade Cuba, it also indicated that the fate of the country would yet again not be decided by the Cubans but by two foreign powers. The episode made Castro suspicious of his new sponsors. Thus he spent the rest of the decade experimenting with diversification of the economy and insurgent subversion abroad in defiance of Soviet advice. He would not reach out to the Soviets again until his experiments proved ruinous (Henken 2008: 120). These were the death of Che Guevara in Bolivia, in 1967, the failure of diversification and of the 10 million tons sugar harvest mentioned above. Castro took anything less than 10 million tons as a moral defeat (Henken 2008: 140). That caused a change of course and the renewal of closer relations with the USSR, which was followed by strict sovietisation of the economy (Henken 2008: 140). Then Khrushchev was replaced by Brezhnev, who sent the Warsaw pact armies to Prague. There is no doubt that on this occasion Castro's change of heart was dictated mostly by economic necessities. Naturally, the economic sovietisation triggered the sovietisation of Cuban life, society and culture.

Between 1971-1975 Cuba saw substantial economic growth; in the mid 1970s the country joined CEMA, the Soviet bloc's Council of Economic Mutual Assistance (Henken 2008: 144-45). Henken estimates that between 1960-1990 Cuba had received the equivalent of 65 billion dollars from the USSR (Henken 2008: 146).

### **ICAICs policies:**

In an article entitled 'Definirse en la polémica: *PM, Cecilia y Alicia*', published in 2010, Sandra del Valle discusses the relationship between culture, politics and power, which asserts that these three major cinematic polemics had determined not only the fate of the films but also those of key political and ideological issues, which as a result, were defined within the perimeters of Cuban culture (in Castillo, Pérez, del Valle 2010: 63). Del Valle claims that the banning of *PM* (1961), or *Pasado Meridiano*, directed by Alberto Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez Leal, had caused the definition of the first guidelines for revolutionary art. The limits of freedom of expression would be defined by Fidel Castro in his intervention in his *Palabras a los intelectuales*: 'dentro la revolución

todo: contra la revolución, nada' (in Castillo, Pérez, del Valle 2010: 66). These polemics went on to define the kind of socialism which was eventually built in Cuba. The position adopted by the leadership of ICAIC against the film and its creators provoked an internal conflict. As a result, Gutiérrez Alea (Titón) resigned from his post in the Consejo de Dirección, as he was accused by Alfredo Guevara of 'dancing to the music of the enemy'. The members of *Lunes de Revolución* and Alea used to belong to the old Cine Club of Havana. Guevara was implying that Titón was more loyal to his old friends (to Germán Puig, Ricardo Vigón, Néstor Almendros, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante) than to ICAIC policies (del Valle in Castillo, Pérez, del Valle 2010: 68-69). In his speech at the Biblioteca Nacional, Titón insisted that *PM* was not counter-revolutionary but rather an inopportune film and recognized its artistic merits (del Valle in Castillo, Pérez, del Valle 2010: 69). Since then, the relationship between Alfredo Guevara and Gutiérrez Alea deteriorated progressively.

The first polemic around *PM* helped define the limits of artistic freedom and thus the kind of film art and socialism that Cuba would have. Major film polemics turned into national forums of political debate. The *Cecilia* crisis (1982), for example, as a result of which Alfredo Guevara lost his position, was provoked by the need for democratization and decentralization of ICAIC, which up until then had only one dominating autocratic voice. The positive effects followed soon, with the replacement of Guevara with García Espinosa. He put together young and older directors into four different creative groups that enjoyed considerable autonomy and freedom to choose the topics they wanted to work on. There were similar crises, around *Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas* (1991), Díaz Torres, *Guantanamera* (1995), Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío, and *Suite Habana* (2003), Fernando Pérez. They questioned the limits of critical artistic space in the country, continuously challenging the boundaries of the permitted.

Manuel Pérez (head of the group that produced *Alicia*) remembers that in 1963 ICAIC showed 224 films, 19 of which were from capitalist countries. 'Cuatro de ellas (*La dolce vita*, *Alias Gardelito*, *Accatone* and *El ángel exterminador*) sirvieron de pretexto para que el 12 de diciembre se iniciara la polémica sobre qué filmes debíamos ver en las circunstancias concretas que vivía el país' (Manuel Pérez in Castillo, Pérez, del Valle 2010: 59). Fellini's *La dolce vita*, for example, was considered the wrong kind of film by some. At the time, Alfredo Guevara defended ICAIC's original position against the attacks made by Blas Roca. Manuel Pérez comments that life has given a hard lesson to

those who shared Blas Roca's 'fatal' concept of culture, formed under the influences of Stalinism, making clear the need for moderation in the relationship culture-art-politics-ideology. Such men in the name of protecting the revolution managed to suffocate and castrate its constant need for renewal (Manuel Pérez in Castillo, Pérez, del Valle 2010: 61).

Ambrosio Fornet, on the other hand, confirms that the early sources of exploration and inspiration for ICAIC were Italian neorealism, French New Wave, Independent US cinema, and early avant-garde Soviet cinema (2007: 42). One notices that these were all modernist cinemas. Thus it is possible to argue that the first 1960s period of Cuban revolutionary film was formed under the influence of modernist European cinema, and this is why some of the best works from the period have high artistic value, and why there were those who accused their directors of being too elitist for the general public.

Fornet also notes that the *quinquenio* period was in fact a process of institutionalisation of the revolution, of the First Congress of PCC in 1975 (2007: 66). By popular referendum, in 1976, Castro moved from undisputed leader of the party and the nation to a phase of institutionalisation of the Revolution. First, in 1972 Cuba became a member of CMEA (as mentioned above) and followed many Soviet models of organization. Since the First Congress of PCC, the party came to exercise a central institutional role (Henken 2008: 219). During 1975-1976 numerous organisation and government policies were also created, such as Poder Popular, Asamblea Nacional, el Consejo de Ministros, new Constitution, and el Ministerio de Cultura. Fornet observes that, due to the creation of the Ministry of Culture, ICAIC lost some of its autonomy. From president of ICAIC Alfredo Guevara became vice minister of culture, responsible for cinema. However, García Borrero has claimed that the change was welcomed by the majority of ICAIC members, or at least by those who felt excluded or marginalized by Alfredo Guevara. Again, Fornet, like Borrero, maintains that the Institute's creativity was seriously affected by the *quinquenio*, as it was producing only three feature films per year during this period. In regards to the *quinquenio*, Leonardo Padura Fuentes, has made the following comment: 'it lasted more than just five years and its colour was much darker' (cited in Henken 2008: 376). García Borrero and others have also referred to the period as *la década negra* (2002).

The most incisive comments on the 1970s have been provided by García Borrero. According to him, in 1968, after the publication of two books, *Fuera del juego*, by

Heberto Padilla, and *Los siete contra Tebas*, by Antón Arrufat, the Cuban intellectuals finally seemed symmetrically divided in two camps: one dogmatic the other liberal (2009: 78). Up to this point the ICAIC members belonged to neither, firmly defending the position that Cuban cinema should always marry high artistic values with an important social role, and always in the name of the revolution. Despite keeping a united front against external attacks, it has transpired recently, after the publication of Alfredo Guevarra's *Tiempo de fundación* (2003) and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Volver sobre mis pasos* (2007) (which was an adequate and timely response to Guevara, by Alea's widow, Mirtha Ibarra, who was also one of Alea's closest collaborators) that there were ongoing internal debates and struggles in the Institute, concerning the autocratic style of Alfredo Guevarra's leadership. See, for example Alea's 'Memorandum to Alfredo Guevara', from 25<sup>th</sup> of May, 1961 (in Gutiérrez Alea, ed. Mirtha Ibarra 2007: 85, 88). García Borrero, together with Mirtha Ibarra, took part in the selection and organization of Alea's correspondence. He wrote the forward to the collection, entitled 'El otro Titón: cartas al cine cubano' (in Alea 2007: 9-17), thus adding his voice to the subsequent polemics.

Like del Valle, García Borrero has argued that such polemics have given birth to some of Cuba's best films, namely: Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* and Humberto Solás's *Lucía*, both produced in 1968. It seems that Alfredo Guevara's support for *Verde Olivo*'s position, and for Leopoldo Ávila's extreme dogmatic attacks of Padilla's work on its pages (claiming that the voice of *Verde Olivo* was coinciding with that of the revolution), caused a further rift amongst ICAIC members. Ávila's position came to dominate 'el quinquenio gris' the five-year period between 1971-1976 (Fornet 2007: 55) of acute party orthodoxy and censorship and, simply, as noted by García Borrero, of dogmatic bullying (2009: 80).

Alea's position was entirely different: 'no es mejor estar fuera del juego. Se está dentro o contra, pero lo otro es una simple cobardía' (he wrote in October 1969, in Alea 2007: 188). Later, in 'Informe a Alfredo' from December, 1971, Alea writes: 'En la cultura es donde se evidencia el proceso de transformación del hombre, y el intelectual (y el artista) no puede ser un payaso ni un adorno en esta sociedad' (2007: 195). As a result, against Alea and others who felt like him, a policy of exclusion was used, quite effectively; its aim was to make them feel marginalized and isolated (see Alea's complaints to this effect, particularly in a letter to Alfredo Guevara, from September, 1977, in 2007: 226). As noted by García Borrero, for those like Fausto Canel, Roberto

Fandiño, Eduardo Manet, Fernando Villaverde and Ramón F. Suárez, the right thing to do was to maintain their distance, leave the Institute and even the country (2009: 82). The original formulation of Law 169 from the first ‘Por Cuanto’ for the creation of ICAIC, however, stated: ‘film is an art’ and as such is expected to be critical and polemic. Throughout his life, Alea had been true to ICAIC’s original principles, in stark contrast to Leopoldo Ávila’s 1968 new dogmatic proposal for ‘politically correct’, shallow and false representation of Cuban reality.

ICAIC’s internal rift caused a change of direction in the Institute’s policy, which was officially implemented during the First National Congress of Education and Culture (March-April 1971). The Congress’ resolution demanded of the Institute: ‘la continuación e incremento de películas y documentales cubanos de carácter histórico como medio de eslabonar el presente con el pasado’ thus limiting further possibilities for subtle intelligent representation of social contradictions (García Borrero 2009: 91). According to García Borrero (and in agreement with the earlier Fonet evaluation), the impact on creativity was catastrophic. From 1969 until 1976 only 17 fiction films were made (note the two-year difference in Borrero’s account in comparison to Fonet’s five year period). From these 17 films at least 10 were inspired by past, pre-revolutionary events (García Borrero 2009: 92). Since its creation, only three months after the victory of the revolution in 1959, ICAIC had enjoyed a rather unique, privileged position and considerable freedom in comparison with the other arts, thanks to the friendship between Alfredo Guevara and Castro. García Borrero and Fonet seem to agree that in 1976, when ICAIC became part of the Ministry of Culture, the Institute lost some of its autonomy.

In a letter to Armando Hart, the first Minister of Culture, written on 14 July 1982, in response to the attacks against Guevara, because of the crisis produced by the disproportionate expenditure on Solás’s *Cecilia* (1982), Alea, despite defending the Institute’s official response expressed his personal dissatisfaction with Guevara’s management, accusing him of inconsistency and of abuse of his position of power (2007: 260). It is true that Guevara had protected some nonconformist artists (such as the scriptwriter Jesús Díaz and the singer Pablo Milanés, for example), yet he was persistently excluding and refusing any assistance to others, such as Alea. As mentioned earlier, it was made clear that only historical projects would be given green light. Yet Alea’s ideas for a film called *El encuentro* was suppressed, despite his finding foreign sponsors for the project. However, Humberto Solás’s *Un día de noviembre*, on a

contemporary subject, was made in 1972, and then had to wait another six years for its premiere (García Borrero 2009: 92). This is what Alea meant when commenting on Guevara's management style as damaging to ICAIC's working atmosphere. In the letter to Armando Hart he did not hesitate to call Guevara's attitude 'arbitrary, capricious and inadmissible' (Alea 2007: 260).

There were also a few didactic films made during the 1970s, such as Octavio Gómez's *Ustedes tienen la palabra* (1972). As observed by García Borrero, they were too far fetched, too critical and idealistic, leaving no room for errors and real humans but only for immaculate beings (2009: 92-93). As noted by Gutiérrez Alea in December, 1971, all this indicated not only a creative but also a revolutionary crisis:

Hemos llegado al punto en que todo puede convertirse en una gran farsa, en una triste farsa que niega el sentido último de la Revolución. Y no estoy pensando solamente en el cine. Por rechazar una auténtica cultura del subdesarrollo (es a partir de ahí que empezaremos a reconocernos y a crecer), hemos ido cayendo en manifestaciones de una cultura subdesarrollada, en un verdadero callejón sin salida. (2007: 204-205)

For Titón only the free artistic expression of the intellectuals could clarify 'the semantic incoherencies' found within the revolution (Gutiérrez Alea 2007: 195).

Nonetheless, even under such oppressive climate the Institute managed to sustain a diverse, high quality selection of foreign art movies in its program. Many of them were by high profile controversial socialist auteurs. For example, García Borrero mentions: *Silence & Cry* (*Csend és kiáltás*), Miklós Jancsó (shown in 1969); *Z*, Costa-Gavras (shown in 1970); *All for sale* (*Wszystko na sprzedaż*), Andrzej Wajda (in 1970); *Pierrot le fou*, Jean-Luc Godard (in 1971); Federico Fellini's *8½* (in 1971); and *Solaris*, Andrei Tarkovski, shown in 1973 (2009: 96-97). García Borrero also notes that many filmmakers used history as an excuse to make films that continued to evaluate the present through the prism of the past. This certainly was the case with Gutiérrez Alea's *La última cena* (1976). Alea admitted in one of his last interviews that 'la iglesia y el Partido tienen tantas cosas en común, que cuando hice *La última cena* pues me di cuenta que podías extrapolar la historia' (cited in García Borrero 2009: 97). In that respect, Alea behaved just like some of his Soviet, Polish or Czechoslovak colleagues, who had also realized the potential of historical films for hidden, allegorical, Aesopian readings. No wonder that in the 1970s, which was a decade of stagnation for the whole socialist camp, historical allegory was a dominant film trend (see Cook 1996& Iordanova 2003).

### **The lack of Cuban comedies on contemporary issues in the 1970s:**

This thesis discusses key carnivalesque social comedies on contemporary issues, made in Cuba during the 1960s, the 1980s and in the 1990s. They are compared with similar Soviet/post-Soviet comedies made in 1960s – 1970s, 1980s and in the early 1990s. The study cannot include contemporary Cuban comedies made in the 1970s as there were none made. This lack of contemporary comedies in itself is of major significance.

As noted above, Castro's support for the invasion of Czechoslovakia signalled the beginning of Stalinist orthodoxy in Cuba and a return to stagnation right across the socialist camp. From 1969 to 1976, Cuba went through a period of ideological orthodoxy and tightening of censorship. Even the founders of ICAIC, who earlier enjoyed considerable independence due to their closeness to Castro, had to comply. After the 1971 Congress of Culture they were told to focus on historic, pre-revolutionary subjects. Institutional and self-censorship became a common practice. However, some directors like Alea, for example, under the pretext of history continued to address current socio-political issues (García Borrero 2002 & 2009). Others, however, decided to adopt socialist realist canon and Soviet models for the production of some didactic, overtly critical and moralising films or adopted Hollywood western genre for epic glorification of revolutionary heroes (García Borrero 2002; 2009). The latter were popular with the general public but horrified the critics abroad. During the 1970s, party dogmatism and self-censorship became so prevalent that the ICAIC filmmakers stopped making contemporary comedies altogether. Without doubt the apparent lack of artistic freedom during this period had put the brakes on ICAIC filmmakers's creativity (García Borrero 2009). The spell was broken only in 1983, with Carlos Tabío's carnivalesque comedy *Se permuta /House for Swap*.

Due to the increasingly autocratic management style of Cuba's ubiquitous bureaucratic apparatus, there were growing cases of conformism and opportunism that led to self-censorship and negative practices called 'doble moral' (double standards or hypocrisy), one of the worst side effects of Soviet style socialism. That caused widespread apathy, uniformity and stagnation. So, during the 1970s Cuba stopped being the refreshing, new face and hope of socialism and became a typical case of a Soviet style socialist country.

The rare, honest voices of criticism were silenced, pushed into exile, or kept in internal exile (*insilio*), and if not punished openly (like Heberto Padilla), found themselves completely excluded, like Alea. This explains why over his thirty-year long career Alea had made only 12 feature films, despite his high artistic standing at home and abroad.

Hence, in this study, where the main focus is on carnivalesque humour as a social corrective, I can do no more but acknowledge and explain this phenomenal absence of social comedies; of what Alea believed to be a healthy and necessary critical discussion of Cuban revolutionary society dilemmas. This absence is made even more peculiar by the striking contrast in comparison with previous (1960s) and subsequent decades (the 1980s, and the 1990s), when some key critical Cuban comedies were produced. As a norm, these were black carnivalesque comedies and satires, openly paying homage to the dark humour of Luis Buñuel and Alea's 1966 caustic comic Cuban classic, *La muerte de un burócrata*.

So, there are a few major factors which have contributed to the formation of Cuban revolutionary cinema: it was shaped firstly, by a counter-hegemonic Hollywood tendency; secondly, by a closer interaction and creative appropriations from other oppositional cinemas, such as the First World art, political and independent (US) cinemas; and thirdly, through cultural exchange and cooperation with other former socialist countries (from the so-called Second World).<sup>3</sup> The latter was omitted by Chanan and Fernet. Yet this is the main focus of my study as well as Smith Mesa's. Working independently, we have found that there were vibrant intercultural relations between the Cuban, Czech, Polish and Yugoslav New Waves in the 1960s and 1970s. As noted by Cook (1996), these new Central / Eastern European New Waves emerged as a response to the Soviet Thaw in the 1956-1968 period. Nevertheless, Cuba's Revolutionary post-1959 cinema was heavily marked by the colonial and post-colonial past of the country and of the region as a whole.

As noted by one of the distinguished scholars of the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque, Robert Stam, Bakhtin speaks of the carnivalesque as a counter-hegemonic

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<sup>3</sup> This is a socio-political and geographical term for these countries, not to be mistaken with Fernando Solanas's distinction between Hollywood-like commercial cinema as the *first cinema*, European Art cinema as the *second cinema* and militant, Revolutionary kind of cinema as the *third cinema*, in his manifesto 'Towards a Third Cinema' of 1967, written together with Octavio Getino (in Michael Martin 1997: 42-43).

tradition with a history that runs from Greek Dionysian festivals and the Roman saturnalia through the grotesque realism of the medieval plays of William Shakespeare and Miguel de Cervantes to the works of Alfred Jarry and the surrealists. Analysing and extrapolating upon Bakhtin's findings, Stam argues that 'carnival embraces an anticlassical aesthetic that rejects formal harmony and unity in favour of the asymmetrical, the heterogeneous, the oxymoronic, the miscegenated' (2004: 10). Rather significantly, he observes that many Latin American intellectuals have found Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque especially relevant to Latin American cultural production (Stam 2004: 318). According to Stam, as a result of their economic and cultural marginalization the most talented Latin American artists have become necessarily bi-cultural, occupying the ambivalent, irony-filled middle-ground, somewhere between the margins (standing for the native culture) and the metropolitan centre (representing the power centre). Stam calls this ambivalent place 'a peculiar realm of irony' where nothing is what it seems, all is caught in a game of doubling and redoubling, and where parody and carnivalization are the only ambivalent solution in this highly asymmetrical cultural situation (Stam 2004: 318). Rosanna Maule has developed this idea further, arguing that post-colonial spaces are occupied by necessarily transnational identities (2006: 73-88).

Stam observes that if the carnivalesque is only a metaphor in Europe, in Latin America it is 'a living and breathing reality', particularly in countries such as Brazil and Cuba where carnival remains 'a vibrant and protean expression of a polyphonic culture' (Stam 2004: 319). He claims that Cuban and Brazilian intellectuals have 'digested' imported cultural materials, exploiting them as raw materials for a new synthesis, thus transforming the imposed culture and using it to fight back against the colonizers, a process in Brazil called cultural 'anthropophagy', or 'cannibalisation' (Stam 2004: 320). In the light of these ideas I do not believe that it is mere coincidence that such an important theory as the now widely-accepted cultural theory of transculturation (the complex evolutionary transmutation between multiple cultural forms and influences) was first coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, in 1940.<sup>4</sup>

Stam underlines the important role of the carnivalesque in intercultural relations. He asserts that for Bakhtin entire genres, languages and even cultures are 'susceptible to mutual illumination', and that it is only in the eyes of another culture that 'foreign culture

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of transculturation see Ortiz 1995.

reveals itself fully and profoundly' (Stam 2004: 364). This is the guiding principle of this whole study, as will become apparent in the following sections.

Alongside Stam, Iurii Lotman's semiotic account of the 'dialogic mechanism' or intercultural dialogue also helps us to understand and contextualize the complex process of transculturation between Soviet and Cuban film. Lotman identifies the 'seminal role of text reception' as amongst the most important stages of one culture entering into dialogue with another: in Stage One, the imported texts keep their strangeness; in Stage Two, the receiving culture's own texts are adapted under the influence of the imported texts, which also undergo restructuring and adaptation. In Stage Three, the importing culture assumes that the process of assimilation of the foreign cultural texts is completed; but, it is only in Stage Four that the receiving culture becomes a transmitting culture (Lotman 1990: 146-47).

Thus, for example, in the 1920s both Soviet avant-garde and popular filmmakers, such as Lev Kuleshov and Boris Barnet, were inspired by Hollywood's silent comedy masters (whose comedies were visual, anarchic, subversive and deriding of the official order; Charlie Chaplin's silent comedies are amongst the best examples).<sup>5</sup> However, in the mid-1920s avant-garde, counter-hegemonic ways of filmmaking (such as Dziga Vertov's and Sergei Eisenstein's) became highly acclaimed internationally and were soon considered experimental high art achievements. The legacy and influence of the Soviet avant-garde around the globe has been substantial: for example, Sergei Eisenstein's *Bronenosets Potemkin / Battleship Potemkin* (1926)<sup>6</sup> is considered one of the greatest films of all time by the critics, because of its fragmented montage, producing highly emotional pathos.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to *Potemkin* Goebbels recognized the possibilities of film propaganda (therefore later Eisenstein was often referred to as the father of advertising); whilst according to Helen Grace the film 'wrote the book of film grammar'.<sup>8</sup> The famous Odessa steps sequence is a favourite intertextual reference with various filmmakers, including Terry Gilliam, Brian de Palma, Woody Allen, and Iurii Mamin (in *Bakenbardy*

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<sup>5</sup> In an article published in 1922, Kuleshov noted the greater appeal of foreign, particularly Hollywood detective genre, films to audiences in comparison to domestic film production. He called the phenomenon *americanshchina / Americanitis*. For more on the matter, see Denise Youngblood (1992: 50-67). Kuleshov's collective or workshop attracted the most innovative film students, such as Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Boris Barnet (see, for example, Youngblood 1992 & David Cook 1996).

<sup>6</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Potemkin*.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the film's critical reception and place in world cinema, see Richard Taylor 2000.

<sup>8</sup> At <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2000/>> [accessed 24 of July 2011].

/ *Sideburns*, 1990)<sup>9</sup> amongst others. Jean-Luc Godard, one of the most important French New Wave directors, has acknowledged his admiration of Eisenstein and of Dziga Vertov's theories and practices of documentary filmmaking, which had a direct influence on *cinéma vérité* (from Vertov's *Kino-Pravda / Film Truth*, 1925). In the 1960s Godard formed a group called the Dziga Vertov Group.<sup>10</sup> In turn, Eisenstein's fragmented montage and Godard's (Brecht inspired) self-reflexive cinema were highly influential for many Eastern European and Latin American filmmakers throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, in particular Cuba's foremost filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea.

However, by the mid-1930s, the films of the Soviet avant-garde filmmakers were considered suitable neither for the needs of the masses nor as effective propaganda of the official party line. Their films were branded formalist and elitist, and were rejected as too complex and incomprehensible for the illiterate, in their majority Soviet masses. Even the regular urban Soviet filmgoers preferred mild, Hollywood entertainment, such as musicals, romantic comedy and melodrama. This is why, in the 1930s, Ivan Pyr'ev and Grigorii Alexandrov decided to adopt some of Hollywood's popular narrative genres, reworking and adapting their bourgeois, conservative ideology to the needs of the (rather conservative, by then) Soviet One-Party-Rule system.<sup>11</sup> This was not a case of uncritical imitation but of negotiated ideological shift, which can best be described as reversed logic and point of view (or transposition). Thus, in the 1930s Soviet musical comedies, the main protagonist as a rule is the collective, rather than the individual (which was the case in Hollywood), and even the individuals were seen to be only too happy to put first the common good before their own need.

After the adoption of *socialist realism* in 1934 (which was rather unrealistic and idealistic) as the official Soviet canon, the filmmakers were advised to turn for inspiration to nineteenth-century Russian novels and to 'progressive' world classics (Hutchings 2004: 88). Adaptation of the classics became a popular practice, which actually had a twofold effect — on the one hand, popularizing and educating the masses, on the other, canonizing Russian and world literature as part of the socialist realist canon (Hutchings & Vernitski 2005: 88-89).

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<sup>9</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Bakenbardy*.

<sup>10</sup> In 1968, Godard and his followers, who associated themselves with Vertov's ideas formed a production cooperative named after the Soviet director (Cook 1996: 135).

<sup>11</sup> For more information on early popular Russian and Soviet cinema see Denise Youngblood (1992).

Not surprisingly, Soviet films of the 1940s and early 1950s were mainly devoted to the patriotic war effort (World War II) and to the cult of Stalin, who was credited with leading Russia to a decisive victory over Nazi Germany. After all, thanks to this victory the USSR became an important power in a now bi-polar world that demanded the division of Germany and Europe into two spheres of influence: that of Eastern Europe (formerly called the Second World), and that of Western Europe, linked to the US and the developed industrial countries, thus often referred to collectively as the First World. Following Stalin's death, however, in 1953, and particularly after Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956, there was a period of limited democratization and openness in the arts, known as the Soviet Thaw (1956-1968).<sup>12</sup> The 1970s, however, were marked by return to Stalinist orthodoxy and stagnation during Brezhnev's rule. Again, a great number of adaptations appeared on both the small and big screen. At the time this was attributed to elitism and the emphasis upon *kulturnost* ('culturedness') of the late Soviet period, as well as to anxiety about the damming effects of Western mass culture (Hutchings & Vernitski 2005: 19). Hutchings & Vernitski have successfully argued that many Soviet filmmakers viewed adaptation as a safer option, capable of entertaining and edifying at one and the same time (Hutchings & Vernitski 2005: 19). Nonetheless, this practice became potentially hazardous ideologically, as some Soviet as well as Cuban adaptations of the period lent themselves to potentially ambiguous, Aesopian readings and suggested indirect criticism of their current regimes (Gutiérrez Alea's *Los sobrevivientes* / *The Survivors*, 1978,<sup>13</sup> is one such case. I shall return to this point in Chapter Three).

By the early 1960s, Soviet culture was behaving as a 'transmitting culture' for Cuban Revolutionary artists as it had done previously for other European artists, particularly those from the former Eastern European countries. As a rule, artists from socialist countries were advised to follow the socialist realist canon. Gutiérrez Alea's second feature film shows a rather original, inspired choice of material. On the one hand, Ilia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov's *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev* / *Twelve Chairs* (1927) was a cult Soviet satire. On the other hand, however, the novel was officially approved as a safe classical text only during the Thaw (I. Frolov 1991: 104). Like Il'f and Petrov before him, Gutiérrez

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<sup>12</sup> I shall return to this point in sections 2.4 and 2.5.

<sup>13</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Los sobrevivientes*.

Alea was an artist both committed to the Revolution but also a true satirist, faithful to the principle of representing complex, even controversial, social issues. When given the opportunity, he openly condemned the blind adoption of foreign cultural formulas, particularly the Soviet socialist realist canon of which he was most critical. He saw it as a vulgar and rigid cultural formula that promoted mediocre, tendentious Revolutionary art with manufactured, idealized heroes, as equally divorced from reality as America's Superman. This is what Gutiérrez Alea says on the subject in an interview with Edmundo Desnoes, published a month after the film's release in 1962:

One need only remember all those works where the bourgeois character embodies all that is evil, all the corruption, all the possible rottenness; and the working class character is on the other hand an immaculate being, exceptionally talented and pasteurized, and then when there appears a political commissar, he reminds us too much of Superman, the one from American comic strips. This, you will agree, has nothing at all to do with realism. I would say it is the worst kind of idealism. (in Paul Schroeder 2002: 16).

This is why Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation ended up being both a socialist realist film and a mockery of it; supportive of the socialist ideas, yet cautious of ideological idealism and monologism. However, some filmmakers from Cuba and Soviet Russia, supportive of the official line, were often borrowing and inverting some of Hollywood's generic trends, such as the Western, appropriating its mythological epic and heroic pattern for their ruling party's ideological needs, and as part of the construction of utopian essentialist cinematic identity images. For example, there were films now called Easterns, in Soviet Russia (Birgit Beumers 2003: 445) and some epic Cuban films, on the subject of Revolutionary heroism (called 'Red westerns' in Smith Mesa's thesis). They were copying the Western genre formula, using the same Manichean opposition of good guys versus bad (García Borrero 2002: 99).

Filmmakers from both countries have often professed inspiration by the same European art cinema trends, such as the melodramatic, almost documentary cinematic style of Italian neorealism, and by international cinema auteurs of the stature of Federico Fellini and Luis Buñuel. Nevertheless, such influences always had some local perspective and flavour, often giving birth to new cultural trends. For example, García Espinosa's idea of *imperfect cinema*, which became the canon for Revolutionary Cuban and New Latin American Cinema (NLAC) filmmaking, was originally inspired by Italian

neorealism.<sup>14</sup> However, imperfect cinema was never a blind copy of Italian neorealism, Soviet montage or of Godard's self-reflexivity. Its aim was to create an original kind of militant cinema of raw beauty, which did not shy away from the aesthetics of the ugly and from disturbing, naturalistic representation of poverty and the struggle of the most underprivileged groups of society. Imperfect cinema was oppositional to Hollywood cinema, an example of Third Worldist (later New Latin American Cinema) filmmaking, which in the 1960s (its Golden era) was an avant-garde political, cinema, marvelled at international film festivals as an important model for independent and political filmmakers particularly from the Third but also from the First World.

The carnivalesque films from the period in focus here – 1960 to 2000 – are most representative of the cycle of Cuba's over forty-year-long complex 'love affair' with socialist utopia. They are broadly comparable to films made during the same period in Soviet Russia and by extension in the whole former Soviet bloc (as discussed, for example, by Cook 1996; Geoff King 2002; and Iordanova 2003). After years of close co-operation with the socialist countries, aside from regional, Latin American cultural trends of a post-colonial Third World country, Cuba also begin to display some of the typical characteristics and concerns of a Second World socialist country.

For example, in the most general terms, in both countries the 1970s were a period of stagnation and party orthodoxy, characterized by the move away from the anarchic, carnivalesque comedies of the 1960s and towards the trend of adaptations and historical allegories, whose often codified messages were not always understood by their intended audiences. By the early 1980s, however, there was a return to the popular genres of comedy and melodrama on everyday subjects, as it was realized that they lent themselves rather well to discussions of social contradictions and of the tension between the public and the private spheres of life. In both countries during early *perestroika* (economic restructuring) and its Cuban version called *rectificación* / rectification (1986-1988) there was a gradual change from lighter carnivals and satires to what I call grey carnivalesque comedies or tragicomedies – a mix of farce, melodrama and tragedy. During specific forms of transitions to a market economy in both countries in the period 1988-1998, the carnivalesque trend went through a prolonged dark phase (particularly in Cuba). If the films of the late 1980s represented the lack of confidence in reforms initiated from above,

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<sup>14</sup>For a recent study of García Espinosa, see Hart 2011.

the ones from 1989 to early 1990s collapsed into dystopian satires, reflecting their countries' almost complete social disintegration and disillusionment with bureaucratic socialism. The mid to late 1990s are characterized by a slow shift from pessimism and despair towards escapism into flights of fantasy, often dealing with projects of national reconciliation and a gradual return to hope. Most of the selected 1990s films, therefore, are dystopian critiques, films which, despite their criticism of hegemonic utopia, still argue that there is the possibility of and hope for better social organization.

Without a doubt, there were areas of resistance between these two very different geographically, culturally and traditionally peripheral cinemas. The results of direct co-operation via co-productions, nevertheless, were considered very disappointing. The best example is the rediscovery in the early 1990s of Mikhail Kalatozov and Sergei Urusevskii's propaganda film, now considered a cinematic masterpiece of poetic cinema *Ia Kuba / Soy Cuba / I am Cuba* (1964). The film was badly received in Cuba, as too slow, alien and boring for the Cubans, whereas in Soviet Russia it was shelved for ideological reasons, as it represented a rather seductive picture of the rich Cubans and Americans lifestyle. This was, at least, the verdict of Vicente Ferraz's documentary about the making and the reception of the film, in his *I am Cuba, the Siberian Mammoth* (2005), where the Brazilian filmmaker interviews some of the collaborators in the original film. After all, the Cubans, who have had their fair share of colonial and post-colonial masters in the past, were highly suspicious of the Russians' altruistic intentions.

## **Organization**

The thesis consists of twelve chapters organized in four parts, as well as a general introduction and a general conclusion. Each part in turn has an introduction, usually focusing on important theoretical points, and three chapters. The first two chapters of each part address specific national background and contextual information, concerning a particular period, filmmaker and film(s), respectively from Cuba or Russia. The third chapter of each part is dedicated to comparisons and conclusions between the main films discussed in the previous two chapters. As mentioned earlier, my aim is to discover wider phenomena without overlooking local and regional peculiarities.

In Part I, through the examination of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Leonid Gaidai's adaptations of Il'f and Petrov's novel *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev / Twelve Chairs*, I shall argue

that the secret of the novel's popularity lies in its story, which over the years has become a mythical story, an 'ur-text' or core text for representing transition and transformation in society. Through the comparison between the two adaptations (in Chapter Three) I shall comment on adaptation as metatext, critical comment, translation and revision. As mentioned above, Gutiérrez Alea is Cuba's foremost filmmaker. The 1960s were considered his most creative artistic period, when he made some important Cuban and Latin American films. The period became recognized as the Golden era of Cuban Revolutionary cinema.

*Doce sillars / Twelve Chairs* (1962)<sup>15</sup> represents his first attempt at creating popular, Cuban Revolutionary film comedy. According to his own account, unlike the making of *Historias de la revolución / Stories of a Revolution* (1960), his first feature film, when he felt under immense pressure to create nothing less than a Cuban Revolutionary masterpiece – an equivalent of Rossellini's *Paisà*, 1946 (in Silvia Oroz 1989: 51) – the making of *Doce sillars* was a joyful experience, one of experimentation and full artistic and creative freedom (in Oroz 1989: 56). The film is not amongst his most famous works but is still an important film, as it documented the rapid changes in Cuban society during the initial transition from capitalism to socialism. It is also a highly experimental film, whose formal findings were further elaborated in Gutiérrez Alea's next films, particularly in his *Memorias del subdesarrollo / Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968)<sup>16</sup>, now considered not only a Cuban but also a Latin American and World cinema masterpiece.

Leonid Gaidai was Soviet Russia's most popular comedy filmmaker of the 1960s. He had affinity to eccentric, carnivalesque, quasi-silent comedies that had an episodic, fragmented structure and privileged speedy action and physical gags. His work created visual confusion and anarchy and the possibility of ambiguous subversive interpretations, elements that stood in 'stark contrast' to narrative-driven Soviet cinema which was largely in agreement with official ideology, according to Aleksandr Prokhorov (2003: 456). Prokhorov argues that Gaidai's 1960s slapstick comedies 'revived the tradition of comedy of attractions', placing him on the border between dissident discourse and popular entertainment (2003: 472). Furthermore, Prokhorov claims that because Gaidai was the 1960s most popular Soviet filmmaker 'the appearance of verbal humour in [his]

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<sup>15</sup> I shall refer to Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation as *Doce sillars*.

<sup>16</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Memorias*.

comedies [...] signalled the reorientation of Soviet culture to more rigid verbal models' (Prokhorov 2003: 472). It is true that Gaidai's adaptation of Il'f and Petrov's *Dvenadtsat' stol'ev* (1971)<sup>17</sup> marks a radical change of direction in the filmmaker's oeuvre. Prokhorov is correct in asserting that Gaidai's inclusion of verbal humour signified a transition from the relative openness of Khrushchev's Thaw to Brezhnev's return to stagnation. However, I argue that because of the restrictive atmosphere of the 1970s, Gaidai had to shield himself behind officially approved satirical texts. His choice to adapt only recently condoned (during the Thaw) Soviet satiric theatrical and literary works speaks for itself (see 2.4 and 2.5). Unfortunately, Gaidai's personal preference for physical humour and his unique, gags-driven signature style were often ill-suited to works of exquisite narrative humour. This affected the quality of his film comedies and led to his diminishing popularity.

The undisputed champion of Soviet and Russian narrative comedy is El'dar Riazanov, who in the mid 1970s overtook Gaidai in popularity (his oeuvre is discussed in Chapter Four, Part II). He also has an affinity with carnival, particularly with New Year's festivities, when the world turns upside down (Beumers 2000: 185-209). Riazanov's comedies are often a peculiar mix of romance, light carnivalesque comedy and melodrama, and frequently feature a small miracle. This is why David MacFadyen refers to his films as 'sad comedies' (2003). In the 1980s, the tone of Riazanov's films became increasingly satiric and critical. *Garage* (1980), for example, represents an important watershed in his oeuvre, marking the filmmaker's disillusionment with the system. Riazanov's 1980s comedies are quite unsettling and dark, and display a generic mixture of satire, melodrama and tragedy. His only *perestroika* comedy, *Zabytaia melodia dlia fleity / Forgotten Melody for Flute* (1987),<sup>18</sup> was the first Soviet comedy to criticize *perestroika* itself. The film ends with the symbolic death of its main protagonist, a state bureaucrat called Leonid, whose name alludes to Leonid Brezhnev's rule and the period of stagnation associated with him. Riazanov's *perestroika* comedy is paired with Carlos Tabío's *Plaff! o demasiado miedo a la vida / Splat, or Too Much Fear of Life* (1988),<sup>19</sup> a Cuban satire comparable in both topic and story. The film is critical of Castro's version of *perestroika*, known as rectification (addressed in Chapter Five, Part II). The main

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<sup>17</sup> From now on I shall refer to Gaidai's adaptation as *Dvenadtsat'*.

<sup>18</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Zabytaia melodia*.

<sup>19</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Plaff*.

protagonist is a woman, Concha. Female characters in Cuban film are often allegories of the struggles of the nation during a particular historical period. Here Tabío parodies this tendency in order to represent the aging, stagnant Revolution, and the inability of Cuba's leadership to adapt to change. Concha's paranoia and fear of change is such that ultimately she dies as a result of a heart attack, provoked by her own panic. The film is highly symbolic, pointing the finger at the emerging cracks in Cuban society, at the ubiquitous bureaucratic apparatus, at generational, racial and class divisions, and at the severe economic problems and material shortages that jeopardize the future of ICAIC (the Cuban Film Institute) and by association of the Cuban Revolution itself. Tabío is the first director of a second post-Revolutionary generation of Cuban filmmakers, and the closest collaborator with and protégé of Gutiérrez Alea. This is his second carnivalesque comedy that enjoyed high critical and popular acclaim, representing the return to contemporary, everyday topics and to black surreal comedy in the style of Gutiérrez Alea's *La muerte de un burócrata / Death of a Bureaucrat* (1966).<sup>20</sup> Significantly, the film is both a perfect example and a postmodern self-reflexive parody of García Espinosa's canon of imperfect cinema, used to satirize the dire straits of Cuba's film practices that stand for the country's gross economic mismanagement. Both films share very similar themes and story lines about aging, stagnant bureaucrats who are unable to embrace change, that eventually die out of fear of life (change), and that demonstrate doubt in the effectiveness of reforms initiated from above. Both films are examples of grey carnivalesque comedies about everyday issues, which mix bedroom farce with satire, melodrama and tragedy.

The theme of death, of a dying body which symbolically represents a dying system and society in crisis, is one of the classical themes of black surreal comedy. The lighter, farcical carnivalesque elements of early *glasnost* laughter (up until 1988) gave way eventually to sinister surreal satires that became increasingly absurd, morbid and deadly serious (thus becoming closer to art cinema). I shall argue (in Part III, Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine) that this kind of black humour is dystopian and that its message, almost inevitably, is anti-totalitarian. In the last years of Soviet Russia this became a predominant trend, and was referred to, rather appropriately, as *chernukha*.

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<sup>20</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *La muerte*.

The focus of Part III, however, is the transition or evolution from dark carnivals to dystopia or rather to dystopian critique. The first two chapters refer to Iurii Mamin's films made during early to late *perestroika*. Mamin was the most important comedy filmmaker of Russia's transitional period, and the change in his attitude to *perestroika* signifies the general shift in social attitudes in late Soviet society. Karen Sakhnazarov's *Gorod Zero / Zero City* (1989)<sup>21</sup> and Daniel Díaz Torres's dystopian Cuban comedy *Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas / Alice in Wondertown* (1990)<sup>22</sup> are at the centre of the comparative discussion in Chapter Nine. All these films anticipate the collapse of the Soviet empire. Thus the discussion engages with issues of carnival as utopian critique, distinguishing between the genres of utopia, dystopia and anti-utopia as defined by Sargent (1994). I also examine the appearance of the new genre of dystopian critique, prompted by the necessities of the historical epoch, as argued by Sargent (1994) and Moylan (2000). I claim that despite being an anti-hegemonic (anti-totalitarian) artistic strategy, dystopian critique nevertheless retains the utopian impulse as it constantly negotiates between utopia and anti-utopia. Therefore is not a straightforward equivalent to anti-utopia, which signals a complete rejection of hope. I also discuss the Soviet dystopian and Russian black humour tradition, aiming towards wider conclusions on the nature of dystopia and black humour.

Due to the collapse of Soviet Russia and the discrediting of its socialist utopian project, there was widespread cynicism and a subsequent explosion of violent crime during late *perestroika* (which worsened further during the country's transition to a market economy in the 1990s). There was a wave of increasingly dark, anti-utopian *chernukha* films during the period from 1989 to 1991. If up until 1988 the black carnivalesque comedies and satires were still limited to exposing the absurdities of Soviet life and system (collapsing either into farce, for example, in Mamin's *Prazdnik Neptuna / Neptune's Feast*, 1986,<sup>23</sup> or to tragicomedy, like his *Fontan / Fountain*, 1988),<sup>24</sup> the *chernukha* films from 1989 onwards represent total despair, a social black hole, a void. This becomes apparent in Shakhnazarov's *Gorod Zero* which is a political spoof of Russian statism, and was received as a symbolic allegory of the Soviet system's

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<sup>21</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Gorod Zero*.

<sup>22</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Alicia*.

<sup>23</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Prazdnik Neptuna*.

<sup>24</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Fontan*.

Chernobyl ground zero-like meltdown. *Chernukha* elements can be found also in Mamin's earlier, dark carnival *Fontan*. The trend evolved from excessive, dark, grotesque realism to sly utopian satire, collapsing into absurd, dystopia and anti-utopia. Traces of this predominant during *perestroika* trend can still be found in contemporary Russian cinema.

The gradual evolution from carnival to dystopian black humour is best exemplified by Mamin's films. He is well known for his affinity with carnivalesque strategies and aesthetics (Lawton 1992: 216). His *perestroika* comedies, *Prazdnik Neptuna* and *Fontan*, represent his gradual disillusionment with the Soviet system (discussed in Chapter Seven), while his *Bakenbardy*, 1990 (discussed in Chapter Eight) is a remarkable example of the late 1980s dystopian turn — dystopian critique, which, as with utopian ideas, is about a non-existent, imaginary place (Sargent 1994). In the latter film, both people's rebellious and official carnivals collapse into *reductio ad absurdum*, into a powerful dystopian plea to prevent the rise of Nazism and totalitarianism. I argue that the key to the work is Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971),<sup>25</sup> which Mamin seems to be in a constant dialogue with throughout the film. *Bakenbardy* is also the first example of commercial censorship in late Soviet / early post-Soviet cinema. The films discussed in Part III and Part IV issue a warning about future dangers in store, trying to prevent the building of new political structures (and identity myths) from the ashes of old, totalitarian ones. Mamin's *Bakenbardy*, for example, is also a biting satire of the Russian preference for strong rulers or oppressive institutions of power. The film predicts a neo-Nazi resurgence in the country, whilst with *Gorod Zero* Shakhnazarov foretells that Russia will revert to a variation of the same old Mongolian imperial model of authoritarian statism (on which the Bolsheviks' USSR was also based, an important point discussed in detail by Sakwa 2002: 440-41). In *Gorod Zero* and *Alicia* there are surreal and fantastic elements, mixed with horror, which approach the realms of the uncanny. Both are fantastic, dystopian pictures of hell, and classic examples of a black, *reductio ad absurdum* comedy plot. Thus both use the aesthetics of the ugly and the lower body, or of carnivalesque grotesque realism, as defined by Bakhtin:

Carnival celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world — the new year, the new spring, the new kingdom. The old world that has been destroyed is

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<sup>25</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Clockwork*.

offered together with the new world and is represented with it as the dying part of the dual body. (Bakhtin 1968: 410)

This is why the carnivalesque images are often grotesque, vulgar and repulsive. Scatological humour abounds: for example, the mud-excrement in *Alicia*; some nudity and sex scenes in the Bakhtinian and *chernukha*-like sense of grotesque realism and naturalism. In both films, the lighting is bleak, depicting a surreal, nightmarish dystopian dream and the narrative follows some absurd, surreal logic. Both protagonists at some point believe that they are in hell; and there are many deliberate mystifications, arbitrariness, and ambiguity. The diegesis, particularly in *Gorod Zero*, is of another, parallel, surreal world that represents the collective unconscious, where nightmares and reality, past, present and future are all intertwined.

All former socialist block countries underwent their particular form of transition with varying successes; however, many ordinary people felt that the changes had a devastating effect on their lives. In Cuba, after the domino effect of failing communist regimes in Eastern Europe, Castro proclaimed *el período especial* (The Special Period in Times of Peace) — a package of austerity measures introduced in September 1990. The Special Period, which according to many Cubans is ‘ongoing phenomenon’ (Fernandes 2006: 36), brought further isolation, as Cuba lost its former economic partners and austerity measures and rationing increased drastically. Therefore, it is not surprising that the trend towards black humour, which in Cuba was a hybrid of *chernukha*-like dystopian satire and carnivalesque grotesque realism, was prevalent on Cuban screens for some time. Examples of this include Díaz Torres’s *Alicia* and also Pérez’s films *Madagascar* (1994) and *La vida es silbar* (1998).<sup>26</sup> The latter film is the focus of Chapter Eleven, Part IV. Nevertheless, films like Mamin’s *Okno v Parizh / Window to Paris*, 1993<sup>27</sup> (discussed in Chapter Ten) and Tabío’s *Lista de espera / Waiting List*, 2000,<sup>28</sup> (mentioned in Chapters Three and Twelve), arguably represent the filmmakers’ later attempt to reconcile a dystopian present with their countries’ former and future utopian projects.

As astutely observed by Prokhorov, Mamin is ‘a bridge figure’ between Soviet and post-Soviet satire, and thus his best films were made during 1986-1993 (2008: 115). They

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<sup>26</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *La vida*.

<sup>27</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Okno*.

<sup>28</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Lista*.

represent the difficult transition of Russian film comedy from state-owned ‘state-controlled satire to commercial comedy entertainment’ (Prokhorov 2008: 115). As noted by Prokhorov, in *Bakenbardy* and particularly in *Okno*, the Petersburg myth becomes the centre of the films, ‘as the setting of two failed utopias: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union’ (Prokhorov 2008: 102) and the tone is increasingly dystopian. In *Okno*, Mamin demonstrates, yet again, that the allegedly new builders of post-Soviet Russia are the same old incompetent, corrupt bureaucrats that caused the failure of the Soviet system.

In hindsight it has become widely accepted that the subsequent collapse of socialism in the former Soviet bloc was attributable to the processes of globalization. What I argue in Part III and Part IV is that the return to social satire and black absurdist humour in these two countries was part of a trend shared by all countries of the former Soviet bloc. Thus, it can be seen as one of the effects of transition, of globalization as well as of transculturation — a symptom of the deep socio-political crisis of the time.

In *Fontan*, *Bakenbardy* and *Okno* Mamin mocks official iconography through its visual linking with the grotesque strata of the lower body, with communal heroes and anarchic mobs. The structure of his films is fragmented and episodic; his style is an explosive, comic mix of eccentricity, farce and grotesque realism that mercilessly exposes the absurdities of Soviet and post-Soviet everyday life. His humour is irreverent and derisive of old and new utopian myths — including those of bureaucratic socialism and *perestroika*, and the transition to a market economy, Egor Gaidar’s reforms, and Russia’s Westernization — linking them to foundational Russian myths, such as Peter the Great’s imperial legend, Russia’s modernization, its messianic role in the world, and the Russians’ alleged spirituality. Mamin continues to mock the fake patriotism of Soviet and post-Soviet bureaucrats and also that of the Russian intelligentsia. *Okno* continues Mamin’s discussion of the dangers of resurgent nationalism and satirizes the re-emerging *meshchanstvo* (petite bourgeoisie) in post-Soviet Russia, reinforcing rather than deconstructing old stereotypes.

The unifying topics of Part IV are the metaphor of the journey, the myth of the First World, and the rejection of exile and happiness with a foreigner. Both films *Okno* and *La vida* deal with issues of increasingly fragmented, post-national, or rather migrant identities. In an earlier interview with Horton, Mamin mentions his intention to make a film about the dilemma of whether to leave or stay in Russia, attempting to convey that leaving at this critical moment for the country would be a tragedy (Horton 1993: 155).

George Faraday has argued that such films tend not to deconstruct but to reaffirm Russian identity, putting *Okno* in the category of *national popular* cinema (2000: 159, his emphasis). It is important to note here that, at the time, there was a movement against the dark nihilistic pessimism of *chernukha* and appeals for a national revival. *Okno* was conceived as Mamin's contribution to this process. In *Fantasy and the Cinema*, James Donald asserts that films are a 'public form of fantasy' (1989: 139) which express collective desires. This is even more apparent in fantastic films, which represent unconscious repressed desires and fears (Donald 1989: 138). I argue that *Okno* not only projects the preoccupations of many Russians with the uncertainty of their country and their own private situation in a new global world but also their injured pride (the topic of Iana Hashamova's 2007 book, see bibliography). Thus, *Okno*'s storyline exposes the Russian people's dreams at the time, represented through the character of Nikolai Chizhov, of an impossible happiness – of saving and winning over the West (symbolized by the French artist Nicole). Nikolai's decision to return to St Petersburg in effect represents an unconscious collective dream of the rejection of exile and of personal happiness with a westerner. Even Mamin considers *Okno*, together with *Prazdnik Neptuna*, as a film in the style of popular universal humour, of which he thought his mentor Riazanov was the undisputed Russian master (Larisa Maliukova 2005: 5). In contrast to both the director himself and to Faraday, Prokhorov claims that Mamin's dark satiric kind of humour puts him closer to the auteurist camp of serious art cinema as through his grotesque comedies he is trying to promote the values of high art and spirituality (2008: 104), a view that I share. (This is even more apparent in Mamin's latest movie *Ne dumai o belykh obezian / Don't Think of White Monkeys*, 2008). However, Prokhorov is rather disappointed by *Okno*'s ending, which, according to the critic, is nostalgic for the lost messianic role of the Russian intelligentsia and thus somewhat dogmatic and monologic (Prokhorov 2008: 113). However, this is the nature of carnival, simultaneously subversive and conservative, at once deriding and reaffirming, therefore disallowing strong binary oppositions. In his study *The Logic of the Absurd*, Jerry Palmer also underlines this ambiguity and complexity of comedy and satire. He states that 'regardless of the specifics of the jokes, humour is subversive and conservative, offensive and inoffensive, serious and ridiculous' (1988:182). This is true of all the films included in this study, as polyphonic carnivalesque comedies.

Pérez's *La vida* is also a quirky, baroque and eclectic carnivalesque visual re-evaluation of different nationalist myths, symbols and metaphors, and as such it opens up a national dialogue on the subject of identity as an ideological, social and performative construct, discussing a few alternatives to the official unified Revolutionary identity allegories. I claim that both films, *Okno* and *La vida*, also are escapist flights of fantasy, designed to alleviate the directors' fellow countrymen's suffering.

According to Susan Hayward's entry on fantastic film, fantasy is an expression of our unconscious: '[Fantastic] films most readily reflect areas we repress or suppress — namely, the realms of our unconscious and the world of our dreams' (Hayward 2000: 108). According to the critic, works of fantasy 'act metonymically as enunciators of dominant ideology and social myths' (Hayward 2000: 108). In both *Okno* and *La vida*, what is suppressed is the urge to leave the country in the search for a happier life abroad, ideally with a foreigner. At the end, however, this wish is rejected, forbidden or suppressed. According to Hayward, '*whatever is threatened in the dream, the threat must be removed*' (Hayward 2000: 109, my emphasis). Thus the threat to both communities of emigration and the brain-drain of their best sons and daughters to the First World is removed by the end of the films. Hayward comments that according to Lacan fantasy 'is inextricably linked with desire, which [...] is located in the Imaginary' or the unconscious (Hayward 2000: 109). Since the appearance of Laplanche and Pontalis's seminal essay on fantasy as a *mise-en-scène* of desire, it has been widely accepted that fantasy is the conscious articulation of desire, either through images or stories (Laplanche & Pontalis in Burgin 1986: 28; Donald 1989: 20 & 138-44; Hayward 2000: 108-09). As claimed by Rosemary Jackson, 'fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbolic relation to the real' (1981: 20). In other words, however distorted, condensed and mystifying a fantasy may appear to be, it is always based on something real.

Therefore, just like dreams, fantastic narratives are ambivalent and founded on contradictions. Echoing a Bakhtinian trend phrase, Jackson claims that 'fantasy is "dialogical", [thus] interrogating single or unitary ways of seeing' (1981: 36). Another important suggestion by Jackson is that:

The movement of fantastic narrative is one of *metonymical* rather than of *metaphorical* process: one object does not *stand for* another, but literally becomes

that other, slides into it, metamorphosing from one shape to another in a permanent flux and instability. (1981: 41-42)

This is manifested, by the examples of the ‘window’, turning into an enormous wall at the end of the film (*Okno*); and ‘the orphanage’, standing for the absent dissidents (*La vida*); or the dreams of falling in love with foreigners in *Okno* and *La vida*.

In the case of *Okno* and *La vida* particularly, it is significant that these two films from such different countries utilize a similar fantasy formula – that of the rejection of exile, even after a meaningful relationship with a female foreigner from the developed world. The structure of the fantasy even follows a similar pattern: the foreigner is a woman, while the main protagonist is a man. Both women, Chrissy and Nicole, are kindred spirits of the main protagonists, Elpidio and Nikolai respectively, who understand and approve of their difficult decisions to stay where they are instead of pursuing a private happiness abroad. Although representing an idealized version of the developed world, at the end Chrissy is rejected, just like the French artist Nicole in *Okno*. In both films, however, the main protagonists are torn between their sense of duty and their desires. Eventually the wishful dream / desire is dealt with, either by being controlled or repressed, yet in both films the original desire returns with a vengeance at the end and only the censure and full prohibition by the law (the pawns of destiny in *La vida* and the gigantic wall in *Okno*) can stop its powerful pull to the First World. Hence order is restored and reality wins over the escapist, comforting flight of fantasy. This is why the films were accused of being insufficiently patriotic, and uncomfortable viewing at the time.

In the concluding Chapter of Part IV, I argue that Tabío’s *Lista* (mentioned previously in Chapter Three) stands for what has been called the Cuban ‘discrete but obstinate defence of utopia’ by Ambrosio Fornet (1999: 173). Three years later, García Borrero also professed his longing for the return of hope and a utopian quixotic optimism to the Cuban screen. He uses the term ‘confiscated utopia’, which he explains as the ‘quixotic mode’ of the Latin American and Cuban style of filmmaking that was best exemplified by the 1960s Golden Era of Cuban Revolutionary cinema (2002: 193). If Pérez’s *Madagascar* and *La vida* are dystopian critiques of contemporary Cuba and more pessimistic and sceptical about the country’s socialist future, Tabío’s *Lista* is different. It is quite an uplifting film, paying homage to the quixotic utopian spirit of Gutiérrez Alea’s first popular carnivalesque comedy *Doce sillars* and to the endurance and creativity of the Cuban people, urging them, despite their disillusionment with bureaucratic socialism, not

to give up on the dream of building a better, more just and humane society. Through these films I argue that the genre of dystopian critique rejects perfection (*La vida*, for example) but retains the impulse of utopianism, that is, the hope for a better society (Fátima Vieira in Gregory Claeys 2010: 17). As in the case of *Okno* and *La vida*, *Lista* is hopeful that talented people like Jacqueline will reconsider and choose to stay and help to rebuild the country. Also, like the earlier Gutiérrez Alea and Tabío's *Fresa y chocolate / Strawberry and Chocolate* (1993),<sup>29</sup> *Lista* pleads for national unity amongst all Cubans, on the island and abroad. More recently Sargent has argued that utopianism in general has been more resilient in countries that were once colonies, because of the numerous national struggles for independence (Sargent in Gregory Claeys 2010: 215). This is a plausible explanation for the Cubans 'discrete but obstinate defence of utopia'.

In the concluding Part IV, I also discuss the appearance of a few new popular genres and trends in post-Soviet cinema, some nostalgic for previous utopian identity myths — representing a move away from dystopia and *chernukha* — and others comedies of national rebirth, such as Aleksandr Rogozhkin's *Osobennosti / Peculiarity* series (mentioned in the final section of Chapter Ten). These are, rather appropriately, called the 'cinema of reconciliation with the past' (1999: 210) by Susan Larsen.

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<sup>29</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Fresa*.

**PART I. ADAPTATION AS A METATEXT AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE: GUTIÉRREZ ALEA'S (1962) & GAIDAI'S (1971) ADAPTATIONS OF IL'F AND PETROV'S NOVEL *THE TWELVE CHAIRS* (1927)**

**INTRODUCTION: ADAPTATION AS A METATEXT. GENETTE'S THEORY OF TRANSTEXTUALITY. ADAPTATION AS REVISION AND AS AESOPIAN READING OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

In the general introduction to this study I have declared that, via close contextual and intertextual analysis of a number of films made in Cuba and Soviet and post-Soviet Russia during the period of 1960-2000, I shall investigate the intercultural dialogue between these two countries, identifying phenomena that transcend particular regional contexts.

Thus, through the examination of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Leonid Gaidai's adaptations of Il'f and Petrov's novel *Twelve Chairs*, I shall argue in this chapter that processes of *transculturation* have had a much bigger cultural impact and have often taken an even more unpredictable turn than originally thought.<sup>30</sup> Ilia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov's cult Soviet satirical novel *Twelve Chairs* has long found its place amongst both the Soviet and World's literary classics (Keith Booker & Dubravka Juraga 1995; Lesley Milne 1998 & 2003).<sup>31</sup> The novel has retained its freshness and relevance during various historical epochs, and has inspired numerous adaptations around the globe. Milne asserts that the novel's popularity is 'undiminished by the passage of time or change of regime' (2003: xi). I argue that the secret of the novel's popularity is found in its story, which over the years has become a mythical tale (an 'ur-text' or core text) for representing contradictions and transformations in society.

Through comparison of the two adaptations I shall demonstrate that one should never trust facile, obvious similarities. I argue that Gutiérrez Alea's and Gaidai's adaptations of Il'f and Petrov's *Twelve Chairs* are two very different, original readings and metatexts of the novel, whose only similarity is their emanation from one and the same core text. Both

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<sup>30</sup> The term *transculturation* was first coined by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (in 1940). The term is much more dynamic and inclusive than *acculturation*. It examines the complex and contradictory nature of intercultural dialogue and disproves claims for universal western cultural tendencies.

<sup>31</sup> Il'f and Petrov is the joint pen name used by Ilia Arnoldovich Fainzilberg (1897-1937) and Evgenii Petrovich Kataev (1903-1942).

have retained the kernel of the ‘original’ (mythical) story, yet have been modified by their directors’ differences in outlook, tradition and culture. However, in very general terms, I shall compare how both adaptations represent the changes in the respective socialist societies; both have been inspired by the early silent comedies and to some extent (explicitly or implicitly) by the Soviet avant-garde. It is also worth noting that both adaptations are concerned with their own epochs and socio-political mores, rather than with the faithful representation of the NEP period.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, each version represents two very different stages of the socio-political development of their socialist societies – in the Cuban case ‘utopian socialism’, and in the Soviet ‘mature socialism’. Both are in intertextual and intercultural dialogues with the novel and other previous literary or media forms; still, they reflect particular national-specific and directorial outlooks. It is possible to argue also that, in the case of Gaidai’s adaptation, there are a few stylistic borrowings from Gutiérrez Alea’s earlier adaptation. I shall acknowledge how in turn these two adaptations have inspired further revisions and textual permutations (metatexts) of the novel’s ur-text.<sup>33</sup> Relying on Stam’s theoretical investigation of film adaptation (2004 & Stam & Raengo 2005) and Kristeva’s reworking of Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogical, polyphonic novel and the carnivalesque (as a process of permanent becoming) as intertextuality,<sup>34</sup> and of its further, subsequent reworking by Genette as a form of transtextuality, as hyper and metatextuality, the two adaptations here are chosen as examples of important cultural trends. They are also proof of the vital socio-political role of popular entertainment in society, in particular the role of ‘eccentric’ carnivalesque comedy as a subversive tool for representing contradictions in society during periods of reform and transition.

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<sup>32</sup> The NEP refers to Lenin’s New Economic Policy, 1921 – 1928, which saw a marked return to small-scale private trade in order to deal with the famine caused by the Civil War.

<sup>33</sup> As noted by Stam, in practice it is difficult to distinguish between hypertextuality and metatextuality, terms coined originally by Genette in 1982 (here 1997), as both deal with the relationship between a text and an anterior text which it transforms and modifies. See Stam’s 1992: 208.

<sup>34</sup> For Kristeva, intertextuality consists of dialogue amongst several texts, including that of the writer, the characters, and contemporary and earlier cultural contexts. See Kristeva 1980.

## Adaptation as a metatext

Despite the critics' insistence that fidelity should be the least important issue in relation to adaptation, this problem seems to persist. The 'faithful' adaptations, on the one hand, are often criticized as non-creative, slavish copies of the originals, failing to bring a fresh outlook to the materials.<sup>35</sup> The 'unfaithful', on the other hand, are criticised for their misrepresentation and vulgarisation of given periods and customs.<sup>36</sup> Fidelity is still an important issue as we know intuitively when one adaptation is better than another, and may feel indignant if the director's political correctness has gone too far and, seemingly, against the underlying logic of the material.<sup>37</sup>

As noted by Olga Reizen, black humour deals with society in times of crisis for the nation: tragic historical periods of war, stagnation or Revolution (in Horton 1993: 94). According to Reizen, in Russia the tradition of black humour goes back to the popular fairs, where *skomorokhi* (minstrels) entertained people. It is seen in seventeenth-century prints as well as in the works of Nikolai Gogol, Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin and Fedor Dostoevskii up to 1917 (in Horton 1993: 94). Reizen claims that 'the more rotten something is in any nation the blacker is its humour' (in Horton 1993: 94). In his autobiography Riazanov himself sums up the Russian sense of black humour and folk wisdom with the following popular joke from the period: 'the bigger the country the longer it rots' (2005: 485).

As noted above, the text of Il'f and Petrov's *Twelve Chairs* has been appropriated by two very different directors, directors who were formed creatively by two very different cultural traditions - the Cuban and the Russian. However, both directors represent two socialist cultures, struggling to assert their emancipation from dominant western (European and Hollywood) cultural film tendencies. According to Ortiz's theory of transculturation, Gutiérrez Alea's background is Cuban-Hispano-American, whilst some of Gaidai's films give expression of the complex, twofold Russian fascination with European lifestyle and culture (see his *Brilliantovaia ruka* / *The Diamond Arm*, 1968,<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> In 2.4, I argue that Gaidai's version can be viewed as an example of 'faithful' adaptation.

<sup>36</sup> Such an example is Mark Zakharov's 1976 adaptation of the novel, discussed in 3.4.

<sup>37</sup> Different attitudes to the 'fidelity' issue are discussed mainly in Chapter Two, and to some extent in Chapter Three.

<sup>38</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Brilliantovaia ruka*.

for example). Hence, the films demonstrate two different amalgamations and combinations of various intertextual references and cultural influences, some of which were inherent to the 'original' text. In other words, the original novel discusses some universal issues, of interest to both directors, who on their part reflect on these according to their specific national, historic, cultural and socio-political background.

Thus, in agreement with James Naremore and Stam I argue that is more productive and satisfying to study adaptations in the light of contextual (economic, cultural, political, commercial, educational) and intertextual factors, rather than rely solely on restrictive formalistic frameworks.<sup>39</sup> I shall demonstrate how in-depth, contextual dialogical analysis (between the novel and its two adaptations) can help illuminate the impact of socio-political conditions on the intercultural dialogue between these two otherwise very distinct cultures and countries.

### **Genette's theory of transtextuality. Metatextuality. Adaptation as a revision and as Aesopian reading of contemporary society**

Building on Bakhtinian dialogism and Kristeva's intertextuality, Genette proposes a useful analytical concept: the more inclusive term 'transtextuality', which refers to all that puts one text in relation, whether manifested or covert, with other texts. He poses five types of transtextual relation, all of which can be useful for the theory of adaptation. However, according to Stam & Raengo, Genette's 'hypertextuality' is the most relevant to adaptation (2005: 31). This is 'any relationship uniting a text B (hypertext) to an earlier text A (hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner which is not that of a commentary'.<sup>40</sup> In other words, this is the relationship between one text, 'the hypertext', to an anterior text or 'hypotext', from which the former emanates either explicitly or implicitly, thanks to association, transformation, modification or elaboration.

However, Genette's third type of transtextuality, 'metatextuality', labelled by him also as a 'commentary', is of most interest to my investigation. This is the critical (contextual) relationship of one text to another, regardless of the fact that the commented upon text might be only 'silently evoked' (Genette 1997: 4). This aspect of adaptation as

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<sup>39</sup> For more on the subject, see Naremore's introduction to his *Film Adaptation* (2000: 10-12).

<sup>40</sup> See Gerald Prince's forward to Genette's work, in Genette 1997: 5.

a critical comment on earlier text(s), and even more so as a comment on current society, is most pertinent to the study conducted here.

Mireia Aragay as well as other scholars assert that it is now widely accepted that ‘a literary source is no longer conceived as an original holding of a timeless essence that has to be reproduced faithfully,’ but rather as a text to be endlessly reread and appropriated in different contexts (Aragay 2005: 22, see also Hutchings & Vernitski 2005). According to *narratology*, a story is a kind of genetic material DNA to be manifested in the body of specific texts, so therefore adaptation, just like literature in general, becomes another narratological medium – ‘*because humans need stories in order to make sense of things*’ (Stam & Raengo : 10, original emphases). This notion was first elaborated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who argued that humanity tends to mythologize its experiences in order to organize and make sense of the chaos of life (2001: 8-9).

Sarah Cardwell’s contention, however, is most pertinent to the purposes of the study conducted here in Part I. She sees adaptation as a gradual development of a ‘metatext’ (a text within a text) as a valuable story or a myth, one that is growing and developing and being retold, reinterpreted and reassessed (Cardwell 2002: 25). According to Cardwell, both cinema and the novel are subordinated developments of a myth, a singular infinite metatext or ‘ur-text’, which stands outside of each retelling of the story. They contain the most fundamental parts of the story, without which the adaptation can lose its identity (Cardwell 2002: 26). I shall examine this statement firstly through an intertextual analysis of the novel as a hypotext of the films. Next I will consider it in terms of its relationship with some of its ‘silent’ (non-declared) adaptations, in sections 2.5, 3.1 and 3.3, followed then by its ‘manifested’ (declared) adaptations, in section 3.4.

Directors of adaptations often take into account prevailing critical views or have their own original interpretation; some, like Gutiérrez Alea, for example, actively seek to provoke a dialogue and negotiation between opposing views in society. Gutiérrez Alea’s adaptation of Il’f and Petrov’s novel was the first polyphonic film in the director’s career. During his life, Gutiérrez Alea became renowned for the alleged complexity of his movies. They are all, as a rule, multilayered, polyphonic, and critical, yet still within the parameters of the Cuban Revolutionary film canon.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The canon was defined by Fidel Castro in a speech to Cuban intellectuals in 1961, and encapsulated in the now infamous phrase ‘Within the Revolution, everything; against it, nothing’. The address was made at

Often adaptations are also historical allegories and as such open possibilities for Aesopian readings of the past, using it as a critical (dialogical) comment on the present. Hutchings and Vernitski, for example, observe the ability of adaptation ‘to desacralise [revise] its source in order to exploit and influence contemporary mores’ (Hutchings and Vernitski 2005: 22). This quality of adaptation seems to be inherent within the logic of the genre itself, and was overlooked by Cuban and Soviet censors alike. Hutchings and Vernitski have argued that adaptation has played an ambiguous, subversive role in Soviet political mythology; the same idea is also relevant to socialist Cuba’s film adaptations. For example, during the 1970s — the decade of increased party orthodoxy and stagnation in both countries — adapting classics as officially approved texts became the preferred, ‘safe’ option for filmmaking, and also a way of commenting indirectly on the present (I shall come back to this point in more detail in the concluding section in 3.5).

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a meeting provoked by ICAIC’s decision not to distribute an independent, controversial documentary called *P.M.* (Michael Chanon 2004: 5).

**CHAPTER ONE - IL'F AND PETROV'S NOVEL *DVENADTSAT' STUL'EV / TWELVE CHAIRS* (1927) AS A HYPOTEXT FOR GUTIÉRREZ ALEA'S AND GAIDAI'S ADAPTATIONS (*DOCE SILLAS*, 1962 AND *DVENADTSAT' STUL'EV*, 1971)**

**1.1 Soviet Satire and Il'f and Petrov's Novel Cult Status**

Both adaptations have been inspired by Il'f and Petrov's *Twelve Chairs*, written in 1927 during the period of the NEP in Soviet Russia. As stated previously, the NEP was a policy aimed at speedy economic recovery, implemented by Vladimir Ilich Lenin in March 1921. This period represented a partial retreat from the policy of full-scale nationalization, allowing small-scale private trade. As noted by Milne, the period was 'marked by intellectual excitement, debate, diversity and relative freedom' (2003: xiii). In the autumn of 1928 the NEP was ended by an abrupt change of course with the adoption of the First Five Year Plan, consolidated in the following year by the policy of collectivisation of agriculture by Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin / Joseph Stalin (Robert Service 1997: 169-89).

The early 1960s in Cuba, when Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation was made, were also marked in a fashion similar to the NEP by rapid change, diversity, and experimentation, and by initial excitement over the Revolutionary project of building a new socialist (utopian) society. Hence there is a new positive hero in Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation – the new collective hero of the builders of socialism in Revolutionary Cuba. Khrushchev's Thaw (s) – 1954-1968 – on the other hand, were marked by a period of limited reforms and a relative relaxation of the censors' grip after the prolonged period of Stalinist orthodoxy. Beumers observes that beginning with the Thaw, Soviet cinema started deconstructing its grand narratives: for example, the comic genre subverted the monumentalism of Stalinist culture, whilst in historical films the emphasis shifted from collective heroism to the deeds of the individual (2003: 450). Even after the Thaw, the individual moved firmly back to centre stage, pushing aside the collective and political leaders (Beumers 2003: 450). This is the reason why Gaidai's adaptation, despite being made during the first years of Brezhnev's rule (reassessed after *perestroika* as a 'period of stagnation' and return to Stalinist orthodoxy) is focused firmly on the arch-individualist, non-conformist charismatic character of Ostap Bender – an anti-hero, who

is nothing like the dull and lifeless positive *socialist realist* hero.<sup>42</sup> The paragons of the *socialist realist man* in Il'f and Petrov's novel, such as the engineer Triukhov, for example, were not idealized but rather mocked by Gutiérrez Alea and Gaidai, although in a friendly, good natured manner.

Ostap, on the other hand, is the classic archetype of a *pícaro* – a rogue / trickster, whose role in World literature, according to Bakhtin, is to unmask any existing hypocrisy and contradictions in the power echelons of society (1984: 402). As noted by Booker and Jurada, the Bakhtinian principle of 'gay deception' is the main principle of the novel (Booker & Jurada 1995: 80). According to this principle, the rogue's lie is justified as it is directed towards a liar who is abusing his position of power. Therefore his language is this of a happy rogue: necessarily parodic, illuminated by ironic consciousness and wit and mocking the falsity of the corrupt officials. This turns what is a lie into a gay deception (Bakhtin 1984: 401-02). As emphasized by Booker and Jurada, this is the process through which rogues, fools and clowns ape bogus discourses of authority, thus exposing corrupt individuals and authorities (Booker & Jurada 1995: 80). With the help of the gay principle, political rhetoric turns into a subtle parody that becomes permissible to the Stalinist censors. Therefore, Ostap mocks, almost indiscriminately, greedy, stupid and corrupt individuals, from the remnants of tsarist Russia to corrupt Soviet officials. However, the main targets of Il'f and Petrov's satiric novel are the remnants of the past, whilst the critique of some undesirable elements of the NEP society is mostly indirect and mild.

I argue that the trickster is the most important hero of transition – a period characterized by the rule of chaos and opposing ideologies but also characterized by anarchic freedom and cultural diversity – when society is in a state of flux between old and new values. For example, Il'f and Petrov's novel was written in 1927, during the NEP – a transition period; Gutiérrez Alea's film was made during the initial period of transition to socialism in Cuba; and finally, Gaidai's adaptation was contemplated towards the end of the Thaw but finished in a climate of renewed stagnation, which is

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<sup>42</sup> Due to growing suspicion of the Revolutionary avant-garde, the prime goal of Soviet cultural policy became the creation of a universal middle-brow culture, capable of fostering loyalty to the regime. This need was fulfilled by *socialist realism*, officially formulated and adopted at the 1934 Union of Writers' Congress chaired by Andrei Zhdanov. Maxim Gorkii became its figurehead (Hutchings 2004: 77). *Socialist realism* actually replaced the notion of realism with a heroic, romantic stance, and an idealized notion of socialist life and people. During high Stalinism instead of the collective or unknown hero the decisive force became the figure of Stalin, 'the dear leader' (for more on this subject see Peter Kenez 1992).

also reflected in the language of the film. The character of the trickster is also revisited in later adaptations in both Cuban and post-Soviet films, during their periods of painful transition from socialism to a kind of market economy, in films such as Mamin's *Okno* and Tabío's *Lista* (which will be discussed in greater detail in Part IV, Chapters Ten and Twelve).

The novel *Twelve Chairs* was an instant classic with the Soviet people and soon acquired worldwide popularity. The reason for its popularity in Russia, according to Milne, was firstly the novel's 'irrepressible, memorably aphoristic wit' (2003: 140). Following the novel's first appearance 'countless quotations entered the fabric of the Russian language [...] and have remained there, firmly embedded, ever since' (Milne 2003: 140). These could be found everywhere: in newspaper headlines, television reports and magazines. Milne claims that the second secret of the novel's popularity is its 'breath of intellectual freedom' (Milne 2003: 140). In her own words, 'both the wit and the freedom are embodied in the character of Ostap Bender, a comic hero who has attained mythical stature' (Milne 2003:140).

Avel' Kurdiunov claims that despite the novel's popularity, contemporary (1920-1930s) Soviet critics were often dismissive of Il'f and Petrov's humour, advising them 'to focus on the greater task of building socialism' (1983: 31). He argues that traditionally, in Soviet Russia, humorists were 'seldom considered to be true writers unless they lived many centuries ago and are firmly ensconced among the classics' (Kurdiunov 1983: 31). This is one of the reasons why the novel was adapted for the first time in Soviet Russia only in 1971, as it was officially approved as a Soviet classic only at the end of the Thaw (see Hutchings 2004: 125). As Milne maintains 'Soviet criticism always relegated humour to a secondary function' (2003: 136), as the notion of humour for humour's sake was dismissed as ideologically weak and redundant in the Soviet state. The critics insisted that 'the first major point of reference for Russian comic prose is always Gogol, with his famous recipe of "laughter through tears" that has become prescriptive for Russian satire' (Milne 2003: 137). For this reason Soviet satire had a serious purpose, using bitter humour and laughter of indignation as a weapon, to target and fight internal and external enemies of socialism. This was the kind of humour called by Sergei Eisenstein 'laughter of destruction' (1970: 108). As Milne rightly extrapolates, as a consequence 'laughter without tears' or ambiguous laughter was often regarded by some as 'alien and suspicious' (2003: 138).

By ‘alien and suspicious’ the Soviet critics meant ambiguous humour for humour’s sake that originated from the European popular traditions. Shcheglov’s intertextual investigation of Il’f and Petrov’s *Twelve Chairs*, conducted in 1995, proves that the authors have created new and original Soviet art, based on borrowed, reassessed and recycled themes from classic and modern genres, built on Russian and European high and low literary models. This is why the novel’s humour is irreverent and ironic, a mocking travesty<sup>43</sup> of the adventure-detective and travelogue genres, mixed with some pseudo romantic elements and numerous profane allusions to Russian and European literary classics. From Genette’s discussion on the birth of parody and his conclusion that from tradition to tradition and from plagiarism to plagiarism its birth has been ‘lost in the mists of time (1997: 14), it is possible to extrapolate that it is easier to begin with a mockery of old literary models than to create something completely original afresh.

In *Twelve Chairs*, Il’f and Petrov have incorporated elements of other genres and media, including newspaper stories, letters, manuals, guidebooks, and even a theatre performance. The result is a rich intertextual cultural tapestry of the NEP’s cultural scene. Each genre and media, used by the authors, has its own ideology, which in itself, as argued by Booker, is ‘inimical to the authoritarian ideology of Stalinism’ (1995: 80). This mixing of contradictory ideological voicing with satire generates an ambiguous, subversive text that can be read as a critique of the Soviet regime. Yet on the other hand, Milne is also correct in her observation that the novel’s ambiguity rather accurately reflects the atmosphere of the first post-Revolutionary decade, which as noted earlier, was a transitional period when the old values were not yet completely dead and the new ones were in their initial process of formation.

Il’f and Petrov seem to have been genuine supporters of socialism; however, Ostap Bender does not believe in it, which, according to Milne, gives the novel a healthy balance of faith and scepticism. Her claim is supported by a citation from Petrov’s book about his late friend Il’f that encapsulates the mood of the 1920s: ‘Instead of morality, we had irony. It helped us to transcend that post-Revolutionary vacuum, when no one knew what was good and what was bad’.<sup>44</sup> I support Milne’s conclusion that this is the secret of the novel’s success, what has kept it so topical and fresh and made it resonate ‘in every

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<sup>43</sup> Genette defines ‘travesty’ as a form of transformational satiric parody, see table in his 1997: 26.

<sup>44</sup> Evgenii Petrov, 1967. *Moi drug Il’f* (Moscow), p.62 (cited in Milne 2003: 140).

subsequent epoch of intellectual re-evaluation: the Thaw, *perestroika* and particularly during the post-Soviet ideological void, where concepts of good and bad once more under revision' (2003: 141). Possibly, this rare opportunity to discuss social contradictions and change influenced both directors' choice of this particular material.

The complex ambivalent dialogical structure of the novel lends itself to varied ideological interpretations, which can explain its almost immediate translation into almost every European language.<sup>45</sup> As noted by Semion Chertok, foreign readers were particularly attracted to the humour of the novel, which, according to the critic, is pure and universal, good-natured rather than bitter, and not constrained by a particular time or place (1971: 33). In Chertok's words, 'it is fresh and contemporary and for decades has made people from many different countries laugh'; and not at life in Russia but at much closer and more familiar things in Manchester, Prague or Paris (1971: 33). According to Chertok, this is the reason why *Twelve Chairs* has been adapted numerous times abroad: in 1933 in Warsaw by a joint Polish-Czech company (1971: 34); in 1937 as a British comedy film, *Sit Down, Please!* (the action took place in Manchester, the chairs were six, and all the characters were English – otherwise, as reported by Chertok, the film followed the storyline closely, 1971: 34). In 1964 the Soviet public saw the Cuban version, made by Gutiérrez Alea, set in Revolutionary Cuba (Chertok 1971: 34) and in 1970, Mel Brooks made a long-awaited Hollywood version, which despite its merits it is more of a period piece.

Judging by the constant availability of the novel's different editions and by the number of more recent adaptations based on it, the book is still very popular in post-Soviet Russia, something I shall address in the conclusion of Part I. As noted by Milne and others, Gaidai's film is regularly shown on Russian television (2003: 140). After the initial negative critical reaction, his version has been proclaimed by Russian critics the most successful adaptation of Il'f and Petrov's novel to date (see Frolov 1991: 112-13).

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<sup>45</sup> English, French, German, Spanish, Polish, Dutch, Norwegian, Czech, Hungarian, Chinese, Japanese, Swedish, Serbian, Croatian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Greek, Finnish, Danish, Slovakian, Italian, and others (Milne 2003: 127).

## 1.2 The Picaresque Genre as a Metatext for the Novel and the Novel's Intertextuality

*Twelve Chairs* adopts the genre of the *picaresque novel*, which, as a rule, is a retrospective autobiography of a rogue or *pícaro* (Milne 1998: 86; Booker & Jurada 1995). As noted by Milne, this genre became popular in Russia thanks to the French model of Alain Lesage's *Gil Blas* (1998: 86). Traditionally, the picaresque novel's plot is about the travels of an anti-heroic central character, which develops into a satirical panorama of society. The first such Russian novel to achieve universal reputation was Gogol's *Mertvye dushi / Dead Souls*, written in 1842 (Milne 1998: 87; Booker & Jurada 1995). Thus the novel *Twelve Chairs* is constructed around two basic narrative elements: the motive of the 'the road' and the character of the 'rogue'. These are the two main plot vehicles of the picaresque novel, which acquired its name from sixteenth-century Spanish literature (*Lazarillo de Tormes* being the most famous example) where the *pícaro* travels the country serving several different masters. His journey is a satirical depiction of the manners and the morals of a particular country and epoch. The *pícaro*'s tales 'unmask' corruption and hypocrisy in society; however, in the end, it is the true core values of this society that triumph. It is possible for the rogue to repent, but he remains a social outcast. Eventually, the character of the rogue became romanticized (as in the French novel *Gil Blas*, which was instrumental in the dissemination of the genre throughout Europe) and it was possible for the rogues to redeem themselves and integrate into society (Milne 2003: 145-46).

Significantly, Gerald Mast lists the picaresque comedy amongst the most popular types of film comedy (1979: 7). He notes that the picaresque structure works very well in literature and film (and not so well for obvious reasons in theatre): the picaresque hero's journey is central to the film's action, which follows him around the country; familiar characters, such as Don Quixote and Huck Finn, reveal their comic superiority over people and societies they happen to come across during their travels. Mast nominates Chaplin 'the most outstanding film *pícaro*', claiming that he was at his best during his silent comedies period 1915-1936 (Mast 1979: 7). It is possible to argue then that Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, because of its story line and mixture of picaresque, romance and adventure elements, could be seen as a distant progenitor of the *Twelve Chairs*. This idea is evoked in Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation, *Doce sillars*: in his film, a newspaper vendor

crosses the screen announcing the latest news – a new edition of *Don Quixote*, which to me is the director's self-referential comment on the film's optimistic and idealistic narrative about the building of socialism in Cuba as a Quixotic, utopian project. Thus the film is also an example of what Juan Antonio García Borrero has called the 'Quixotic mode', characteristic of the 1960s Cuban Revolutionary filmmaking that reflected the initial enthusiasm, hope and utopian optimism on the island (2002: 193).

Alexander Zholkovski observes that when, finally, Il'f and Petrov received critical attention, after the revision of the post-Revolutionary literary canon (which proclaimed the end of *socialist realism*) the focus invariably turned to the ambiguity of the authors' message. This was pro-Soviet yet provocative, the novel displaying deliberate literariness and intertextuality, and previously these same qualities were viewed as 'evidence of moral compromise and stylistic shallowness' (1989: 36). The critic calls the book 'a carnival of quotations mimicking and deflating each other' (Zholkovski 1989: 38). The best illustration is, of course, the alleged adaptation to ideological censorship of Nikifor Liapis's *Gavriliad* – a sarcastic example of ideological conformism. This time Il'f and Petrov directly satirize the vulgarity of officially sanctioned Soviet culture. This is exposed in the compositions of the hack poet Nikifor Liapis, whose free 'epic' verse, the 'Gavriliad', depicts in a pompous, one-fits-all style the typical socialist realist hero – Gavrila, in a variety of unimaginably banal activities. This is a hilarious allusion to Pushkin's poem *Pushkiniada / Pushkiniad* and, possibly, to Homer's *Iliad*.

Booker and Jurada argue that although the 'popular' fiction of Il'f and Petrov seems to belong to the category of 'low' literature, they also manage to open an intertextual dialogue with classic Russian writers of 'high' culture such as Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevskii (Booker & Jurada 1995: 80). Shcheglov, on the other hand, provides overwhelming evidence that Il'f and Petrov have borrowed thematically more often from World classics, such as Miguel de Cervantes, William Shakespeare, Tobias Smollett, Mark Twain, Henry Fielding, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and many others,<sup>46</sup> demonstrating great affinity to picaresque, bildungsroman and adventure novels. This, yet again, underlines the novels' dialogic, polyphonic nature. Shcheglov spells this out,

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<sup>46</sup> See Shcheglov's foreword 'O Romanakh I.II'f i E. Petrova *Dvenadtsat' Stul'ev i Zolotoi Telenok*', which for the sake of clarity is referred to as 1995a: 7-104 (in the bibliography), here pp. 72-3. I refer to his 'Commentary to the novel' / 'Komentarii k Romanu Dvenadtsat' Stul'ev', as 1995b: 427-653. Both, however, form part of his special critical 1995 edition of I.II'f and E. Petrov, *Dvenadtsat' Stul'ev* (Moscow: Panorama).

proving in an intertextual and contextual analysis of *Twelve Chairs* and *Zolotoi telenok / The Golden Calf* (written in 1931)<sup>47</sup> that the co-authors were equally attracted to utopia and anti-utopia, forever oscillating between the two extremes, reaching eventually an organic, convincing compromise, which was satisfactory for both readers and censors alike (1995a: 7-8).

In their own way, both Gaidai and Gutiérrez Alea have acknowledged the pivotal importance of the hack poet Nikifor Liapis episode – arguably the most critical episode in the novel (Chapter 29 in Il’f and Petrov’s *Twelve Chairs*). Both have used this opportunity to criticize the apparent vulgarity of utilitarian, ideologically compromised socialist realist art. This episode is amongst the best amplifications in Gaidai’s adaptation. As in the novel, the director unmasks Liapis’s ideologically correct, universally adaptable poem as the epitome of conformism and adaptability to censorship, which could have been read at the time also as a caricature of the socialist realist canon. Gutiérrez Alea has made this reading more explicit, translating the episode to 1960s Cuban realities, and replacing it with an analogical sequence about a crazy muralist and his impoverished, ideologically compromised socialist realist art. According to García Borrero’s assessment of Gutiérrez Alea’s film, the episode exposes ‘la vulgaridad de un arte revolucionario que confundiendo valor estético con urgencia ideológica, podía desembocar en la más absoluta mediocridad’ / the vulgarity of a Revolutionary art which, by confusing aesthetic values with ideological imperative, may result in utter mediocrity (2002: 118, my translation).

### 1.3 The novel’s context

As noted above, because of its double-voiced ambivalence the novel has been received as anti-Soviet in the West, and as decisively anti-capitalist in the former Socialist block (Milne 2003: xii). Milne argues that both claims are valid, as in spite of being “true believers” in the Soviet dream Il’f and Petrov were also “true satirists” (Milne 2003: xii). In other words, as a polyphonic novel *Twelve Chairs* lends itself to multiple interpretations and to continuous contextualization. As mentioned previously, Il’f and Petrov’s *Twelve Chairs* evokes constant allusions to other literary works which generate a

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<sup>47</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Zolotoi telenok*.

complex intertextual and contextual network of meanings. As noted by Booker and Jurada, for example, the criticism of Father Fedor, a namesake of Dostoevskii, can be seen as a mockery of Dostoevskii's stature in 'high' Russian culture; yet, according to Bakhtin, Dostoevskii's novels are examples of dialogic complexity, which then also implies an invitation to alternative readings (Booker & Jurada 1995: 68).

For example, Il'f and Petrov comment extensively on the artistic scene at the time of the NEP, which as humorist writers for the satirical journal *Gudok / The Whistle* they knew rather well. The Revolution initially inspired the appearance of an artistic avant-garde. Various forms of avant-garde art, including theatre, film, literature and painting flourished in the 1920s, which became known as the Golden Era of Soviet art (Peter Kenez 1992: 50-77). Such artists were initially supported by Anatolii Lunacharskii — the Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment (in charge of education, culture and art). The situation changed, however, with the shift in political power and the shaping up of the socialist realist canon, which came to emphasize the utilitarian aspect of socialist art for providing support and propaganda for the Bolsheviks. Eventually, avant-garde artists (such as Vsevolod Meierhold, Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov) were accused of elitism, 'bourgeois decadence' (Booker & Jurada 1995: 71) and 'formalism' (Kenez 1992: 103).

Meierhold was amongst the most innovative avant-garde artists. He revolutionized Russian theatre and was instrumental in the development of Bertolt Brecht's and Eisenstein's theoretical ideas on theatre and cinema. Meierhold was renowned for his unorthodox staging and free adaptation of plays. His method was based on the circus clown and *balagan*, the Russian equivalent of fairground popular theatre, translated as buffoonery (Clark 2002: 282). Despite his success he was always a controversial figure, and by the end of the 1920s he had fallen out of grace with the orthodox Soviet authorities. Meierhold's most controversial production and, possibly, one of the reasons for his falling out with the authorities, was Gogol's *Revizor / The Inspector General*. He transformed the play by emphasizing its satirical aspects, using a number of avant-garde stage techniques which, allegedly, exposed the uncanny similarities between Soviet and tsarist authorities' corruption. Contrary to the traditional representation of the play as sheer farce, he presented it as 'a pessimistic vision of public and private vanity, greed and hypocrisy' (Booker & Jurada 1995: 72). This triggered protest among audiences who saw it as a violation of their nineteenth-century cultural Russian heritage.

As noted by Booker and Jurada, by the time of the publication of *Twelve Chairs* it would have been fashionable to criticize and mock Meierhold's avant-garde theatre productions. Indeed, this is what Il'f and Petrov do in the episode of the pursuit of the few chairs bought by the experimental theatre group for use as stage props. In order to retrieve the chairs, Bender and Vorobianinov join the theatrical troop on tour with Gogol's *Zhenit'ba / Marriage*. The troop stages this rather conventional play (about a girl courted by a several men at the same time) in a highly unconventional manner which clearly recalls Meierhold's production of *The Inspector General*, describing avant-garde stage effects and contemporary political allusions that horrify Vorobianinov. On the one hand, the criticism of Meierhold seems clear; on the other, as noted by Booker and Jurada, Vorobianinov is hardly a reliable critic. His criticism can be read as an indirect recommendation of the play that unravels some carefully concealed criticism, prompting an inverted, potentially subversive reading of the novel (Booker & Jurada 1995: 73).

As noted by Kenez, within a very short time (by the end of the 1920s and particularly after the adoption of socialist realism as the official guideline for Soviet art in 1934), the Bolsheviks pushed censorship to further extremes than any previous ruling group: 'their censorship became not only proscriptive, but also prescriptive' (1992: 5). As he states, 'Soviet films in the 1930s and after came to depict a world almost entirely devoid of reality [...] every bit as fantastic as a Busby Berkeley spectacular' (Kenez 1992: 5). However, the death of Stalin in 1953 was a huge turning point in all aspects of Soviet life, marking the revival of Soviet art and film (Kenez 1992: 6). This is exemplified particularly well in Gaidai's 1960s comedies (a point to which I shall return in more detail in section 2.4) and by his adaptation of the avant-garde theatrical spectacle episode in his version of *Twelve Chairs*. This episode is one of Gaidai's most successful additions and amplifications in his adaptation. He does not hide behind any allusions to Meierhold's production of *The Inspector General* but includes an episode of what must be an outright recreation of Meierhold's original production; thus performing a decoding of the co-authors' original idea. Hence Gaidai's addition reflects the apparent rehabilitation of Meierhold's teachings during the Thaw, and also changing attitudes in

society which were beginning since the 1960s to show a renewed interest in individualism and intellectual freedom.<sup>48</sup>

#### 1.4 The Novel's Plot and Main Characters

The novel opens in the provincial town of 'N', a parody of a literary cliché and a reference to Gogol's *Mertvye dushi (Dead Souls)* which was set in the provincial town of 'NN'. There, Madame Petukhova dies, after confessing to her priest and then to her son-in-law the secret of the treasure hidden in a chair. Both men leave the town and set off on their quest, first to Stargorod (Oldtown) then to Moscow. From Stargorod the tale bifurcates into a plot and a sub-plot. The son-in-law, Ippolit Vorobianinov, meets the resourceful Ostap Bender, who immediately becomes his business partner and 'the brains' behind the whole venture. Ostap has his ways of making people do what he wants, and lives, literally, by his wits. He is handsome and gives the impression that he can do anything he turns his hand to but it is soon evident that he cannot draw, paint or play chess. He is described as about twenty-eight years old, and of powerful build (Il'f & Petrov 1995: 130). Ostap claims to be the offspring of 'a Turkish subject'<sup>49</sup> (Il'f & Petrov 1995: 133) and a countess, who lives on unearned income, giving himself an exotic aristocratic name: Ostap-Suleiman-Maria-Bender-Bey. He thus declares his scepticism of the benefits of hard (physical) work.

Thanks to Ostap, the priest, Father Fedor Vostrikov, is set off on a false trail. Ten of the chairs are found, and the two business partners are just about to acquire them when there is a twist in the tale which sets them off again across Moscow and subsequently all over Soviet Russia. Father Fedor is sent on a wild-goose chase for the wrong set of

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<sup>48</sup> After publicly denouncing Soviet policies towards the arts in June, 1939, Meierhold was arrested and presumably executed (Brooker & Jurada 1995: 82).

<sup>49</sup> As noted by Shcheglov (1995a), this was a code for Jewish ancestry; after all, one of the authors – Ilia Arnoldovitch Fainzilberg, was Jewish. As argued by Yuri Slezkine, the Jewish diaspora was almost singlehandedly responsible for the dissemination of modernity around the world. The Jews were considered to be nomads, wanderers and outsiders in society, crossing cultural borders with ease and popularizing either communist or liberal ideas across the globe (Slezkine 2004). In a way, Slezkine's contention echoes Bakhtin's assertion of the importance of the trickster and other fairground masks in the dissemination of progressive ideas in world literature (1981: 158-67); but even more so Katerina Clark's article on the travelling mode in world literature as 'diasporic sensibility', an 'ex-centric', *extra*-local perspective and the essence of Bakhtin's anti-dogmatic 'carnavalesque sense of the world' (2002: 278, 280-81). In itself, Slezkine's book is another example of metatextuality, of how ideas grow, develop and spread around the world.

twelve chairs, and to incorrect destinations: first to Kharkov, then to Rostov-on-Don, and later to Baku and Batumi. Ostap Bender and Vorobianinov proceed from Stargorod to Moscow, then to Nizhnii Novgorod down the river Volga. After that, they head for Piatigorsk in the Caucasus, where their path again crosses that of Father Fedor. They visit Tbilisi and Ialta, before finally returning to Moscow.

Gaidai's adaptation follows the main episodes and story lines of the novel's plot but shortens the stops and omits some heroes all together, as the text's time span is adapted to real, film time. Gutiérrez Alea, on the other hand, retains the most fundamental points of the storyline, adapting it to 1960s Cuban realities. Thus he sends his heroes on a journey across Cuba.

The main vices criticized by the novel's authors are those of corruption, stupidity and greed in the NEP society, represented both as part of human nature and as an impediment to the building of a socialist society. The primary driving forces of the action in the novel are the main characters of Ippolit Vorobianinov, Ostap Bender and Father Fedor. During the NEP money was still very important; thus, like many other characters in the novel, these three try to bypass the rules of the new socialist society and gain maximum material advantages for themselves.

Vorobianinov is a survivor of the old tsarist regime, who has successfully disguised his aristocratic origins and has managed to adapt relatively well to the changes. However, it soon becomes apparent that under the surface his old values and habits remain almost intact. In the course of the quest Vorobianinov gradually deteriorates both morally and psychologically, and from being 'a leader of the gentry' he becomes subservient to Ostap, turning eventually into his murderer out of selfishness and greed. Justice, however, prevails. Vorobianinov tracks down the remaining twelfth chair to a workers' club back in Moscow. There he meets the watchman of the club, who proudly tells him how he had found the jewels that were hidden in the chair and that he had handed them in to the chairman of the workers' club. Vorobianinov's hopes are crushed as he learns that the money has been used for the renovation of the club, which now can benefit everyone. The watchman, of course, serves as a paragon of the *Soviet new man*, representing the values of the new socialist society in opposition to Vorobianinov, whose moral degradation stands for the compromised values of the old system.

The younger Bender, despite being only twenty eight years of age, then represents a reminder that certain vices are still very much alive in Soviet society. He is anything but

‘a new Soviet man’ and openly rejects the Soviet system, dreaming instead of Rio de Janeiro – for him the epitome of heaven on earth. Despite being a conman, in comparison to Vorobianinov he nevertheless has a moral code and detests violence and overt theft, extracting payments only through subtle persuasion and ‘gay deception’. According to Bakhtin’s gay deception principle, Ostap is a character-mask that exposes the NEP as opportune environment for widespread corruption. This can be read as a double-voiced criticism: on the one hand, it serves as a support for the official Stalinist line for ending the NEP and for building a proper socialist society; on the other hand, it can be interpreted as an expression of the authors’ scepticism that greed – one of human nature’s most intrinsic vices – can be eradicated simply by slogans and edicts. This is the main line of argument of the anti-utopian supporters arguing against a socialist utopia, a point to which I shall return in Part III.

Father Fedor is depicted more as a businessman than a priest (a point that Gutiérrez Alea not only picks up on but also develops further). However, his endless get-rich-quick ideas always fail. For example, he abuses the sacrament as soon as he learns about the treasure from Madame Petukhova’s death-bed confession. Thus he is depicted as being inclined more towards the material than the spiritual world, and stands for the hypocrisy of Orthodox religion which was under heavy attack by the Soviet regime at the time.

Ostap outwits the dishonest priest and many other such corrupt individuals, such as the Stargorod’s archivist, for example (played by Gaidai himself in his adaptation), from whom he learns the location of all the chairs without spending a kopeck. The first chair is recovered from a home for female pensioners. The warden has the compulsion to cover the walls with irrelevant notices and to steal the property that is entrusted to him. The mechanic Polesov and other members of the town’s pre-Revolutionary elite are also conned by Ostap Bender into forming a hoax secret society, ‘The Union of the Sword and the Ploughshare’, possibly an ironic allusion to the Soviet insignia of ‘the hammer and the sickle’ representing the union between workers and peasants. This is an example of Il’f and Petrov’s irreverent yet subtle irony, as the episode can be interpreted as a mockery of such preposterous state symbols. Ostap and Ipolit pretend that the union’s purpose is the restoration of the old tsarist regime, yet this is just another ingenious scheme for making the remnants of the past fund the pair’s pursuit of the treasure across the vastest country in the world.

Ostap, in his role as an outsider and with his less than honest activities, acts as a satirical agent for retribution not only against corrupt merchants but also against anything mean, including crooked Soviet officials. He unmask and exposes the true values of the people that he cheats, as seen with the otherwise well camouflaged former aristocrat Vorobianinov. In the case of the widow Gritsatsueva, he even goes as far as marrying her in order to obtain access to her chair. The novel and its character Ostap perform many satirical unveilings, for example of Ellochka the Cannibal, a socialite with vocabulary of thirty words, and of hypocritical editors and of hack poets like Liapis, whose name became a by-word for artistic opportunism. Even the Soviet militia / police are not spared. In Piatigorsk, Ostap finds the only place where tourists are not made to pay — the Drop, where the famous Russian romantic poet and writer, Mikhail Lermontov, died in a duel, now a sorry smelly puddle. Ostap decides to charge people for a view of the puddle, even obtaining money from a group of policemen whilst allowing them a discount usually only offered to kids, thus mocking their naivety and lack of experience. In other words, the novel represents a caricature of (any aspect of) life during the NEP.

## CHAPTER TWO: GUTIÉRREZ ALEA'S AND LEONID GAIDAI'S ADAPTATIONS IN CONTEXT

### 2.1 Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation as a Translation and a Metatext of Il'f and Petrov's Novel

Gutiérrez Alea had read and appreciated the merits of Il'f and Petrov's novel even before the Cuban Revolution, and thus, after the victory of the Revolution he undertook the project of his adaptation with great enthusiasm, embracing the opportunity to create a broader picture of the frantic changes taking place during Cuba's first years of building socialism. He hoped that the film would become the first entertaining Revolutionary Cuban comedy, and a document of the epoch (Gutiérrez Alea 1962: 15-19). This is why Gutiérrez Alea often used a hidden camera, in order to capture on screen the atmosphere of these times of transition and change.

As a former playground for its mighty North American neighbour, Cuba's historical and cultural background in the 1960s could not have been more different from that of Soviet Russia. In the period 1945 – 1990, the USSR was a superpower (competing with the other superpower, the USA, for world domination, and thus suspected of having imperialist aspirations similar to its rival's). Yet, at the beginning of the 1960s, the socio-political situation in Cuba was very much like the period of the Soviet NEP, depicted so vividly in Il'f and Petrov's novel. As in the novel, the primary targets of Gutiérrez Alea's satire are the remnants of the past – Hipólito, the priest, and Gertrudis. Gutiérrez Alea was fascinated by the rapid changes taking place in Cuba, and borrowed Il'f and Petrov's story as the situations depicted in the novel were comparable to the events on the island in the early 1960s when the fight between the old and new values was still open and easy to see. As noted by Ugo Ulive, who co-wrote the script with Gutiérrez Alea, it was only natural for an artist supportive of the Cuban socialist (utopian) experiment to turn to Soviet cultural models (1962: 21). Gutiérrez Alea kept only the most important points of the story, changing the names of the main characters and adding some local flavour, thus adapting, translating and transforming the material into a typically Cuban cultural product. According to Paul Schroeder, the film's humour is in the style of a light *choteo* (a Cuban brand of corrosive humour), 'not caustic and penetrating, but rather shallow and ineffective' (2002: 16). However, I am not sure that I agree with this assessment: firstly, the film is quite experimental; secondly, its humour is quite indeed subtle but its irony is

too refined, even seductively subversive and witty, to be categorized simply as a typical Cuban *choteo*. I even think that the humour of Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation is not so different from Il'f and Petrov's humour in *Twelve Chairs*, as it manages to almost simultaneously praise and criticize the 'new Cuban order'.

As argued by Stam & Raengo, the metaphor of translation in adaptation suggests that there will be inevitable changes of meaning and differences in connotations, with some losses and some gains, because of cultural and contextual differences (2005: 25). For example, Gaidai adapted or rather translated the novel to his own style, making it his own, while Gutiérrez Alea literally transformed and translated the story to Cuban conditions. Each time the novel's text has been recombined and its emphases changed, generating different readings and interpretations; the result is a new, original adaptation every time.

As one of the founders of ICAIC, Gutiérrez Alea was one of the few professional directors in Cuba. In the 1960s he experimented with different formulas, in a search of a clear break with the country's neo-colonial past. Thus his *Twelve Chairs* promotes the creation of a new, collective Cuban identity, and pleads for a Cuban Revolutionary art with an original voice. However, as noted earlier, in art it is often more productive and satisfying to mock and modify already existing formulas rather than to create an innovative piece of work.

Unlike the novel, in Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation the fight for domination between the old and the new is symbolically represented by the pairing of a former master – Hipólito (Enrique Santiesteban) with his ex-servant – Oscar (Reinaldo Miravalles). This is probably the most significant change in his version, and the treasure hunt serves to expose the redundancy of the old master in the new conditions. This produces a power struggle and a gradual shift in their relationship, with Hipólito becoming visibly subservient and dependent upon Oscar's rascality, superior wit and ability to survive even through hard physical work, as stated by Gutiérrez Alea in interview with Silvia Oroz (1989: 58-59). This is an important difference and addition to the original story, which also prepares the audience for a different ending. Oscar does not die, as his personal qualities make him suitable to the new society: he does not shy away from hard physical

work, unlike Ostap in the original novel, or his master Hipólito for that matter.<sup>50</sup> Instead, in Gutiérrez Alea's film, he joins the Railway workers' baseball game, representing his symbolical choice to join the new collective society.

The pairing of the two main characters is the primary drive of the narrative action. As noted in 1.2, the film is a travesty and a metatextual allusion to Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Unlike the idealistic character of Don Quixote, however, the only zeal that Hipólito possesses is his firm belief in the sacred law of private ownership and his natural right to pursue and recover the family treasure. His physical appearance is closer to that of Sancho Panza – the loyal servant of the legendary Spanish hidalgo (nobleman), whereas Oscar possesses some of the physical and idealistic attributes of Don Quixote. Nevertheless, Hipólito is neither streetwise nor loyal. As a result of this I view the Cuban version of Ostap Bender, under the Hispanic name of Oscar, as a streetwise version of the idealistic Don Quixote. There is an intentional reversal of the roles of the two popular characters from the mock-chivalric adventure novel *Don Quixote*. Thus, as implied in the film by the street newspaper-vendor, who announces the appearance of a new edition of *Don Quixote*, Gutiérrez Alea's film is a brand new, Cuban version of *Don Quixote*. Therefore, Oscar demonstrates a general trust in people, even in his disloyal former master. He possesses natural intelligence and eventually realizes that, in the new conditions of equality, his former master and the members of this class can no longer have an unfair advantage solely because of their privileged origins. Thus, in Gutiérrez Alea's version Oscar feels strong affinity to the utopian joys of collective life and displays real enthusiasm for social change.

As noted in 1.2, according to the Hispanic and European picaresque tradition, ultimately the character of the pícaro ended up being romanticized and able to conform to the rules of society. So, in this respect, Gutiérrez Alea is true to the Hispanic and European cultural traditions and to his own sympathy for Cuba's socialist project, proving less sceptical (at this point in time) than Il'f and Petrov about the future of socialism (this is why Oscar joins the baseball game at the end of the film). Led by his own cultural traditions and personal affinities Gutiérrez Alea retraces the origins of Il'f and Petrov's novel and amplifies both its picaresque and romantic elements, and as a

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<sup>50</sup> Ugo Ulive testifies that both he and Alea felt the ending of the original novel was too arbitrary and unsuitable for the needs of their film, therefore they decided to change it, and make Oscar join the workers at the end of the film (Ulive 1962: 21-22).

result exposes its structure as a silently evoked metatext of a much older story — the hypotext of the quest of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza which in his version serves as a self-referential comment on Cuba's idealistic utopian project.

## **2.2 The Cuban Context and Gutiérrez Alea's role in Post-1959 Cuban Cinema**

Given the level of the USA's interference in Cuban economy and politics, it was inevitable that the 1959 Cuban Revolution would have a strong anti-imperialistic and nationalistic character that would eventually clash with the interests of the USA. Owing to mutual hostilities the new Revolutionary Cuban government was pushed into a close alliance with the USSR (Aviva Chomsky et al. 2003: 515; Chanan 2004: 4-5). Ultimately this made Cuba an important player in Cold War politics; nevertheless, Cubans were always suspicious of the Russians, believing that their country was being used as a pawn in the game between the two superpowers for world domination.

Over time Cuba became increasingly dependent on Soviet trade and subsidies, which produced a shift away from its earlier attempts to diversify its economy and overcome its underdevelopment in the early 1960s (Leslie Bethell 1993: 107-08). In a way, this was a rerun to the same scenario as before with the USA, with a dependence on a monoculture — sugarcane — and on foreign aid (Aviva Chomsky et al. 2003: 515). However, unlike the classic dependency relationship between a powerful country and its colony or neo-colony, the Soviet Union had strategic and political reasons for supporting Castro's government. At the time Khrushchev (as well as Brezhnev later) was willing to lose money on Cuba in exchange for its political and ideological alliance (Aviva Chomsky et al. 2003: 515-16).

Castro's new Revolutionary government was well aware of the importance of propaganda and the media in winning the support of the Cuban people. Thus ICAIC was formed only three months after the victory of the Cuban Revolution, and had the role of creating films that would both educate and inform the people of their Revolutionary government's struggle to create a new, egalitarian society. This is why from the beginning priority was given to newsreels and documentary shorts. The most significant documentary director was Santiago Álvarez, who produced some important historical documentaries that captured the initial popular enthusiasm for the Revolution.

Fiction feature films were only of secondary concern. Therefore Gutiérrez Alea, despite being one of the few true filmmakers of ICAIC, made only twelve feature films during his entire career, which spanned the years 1960-1996. During the initial ‘honeymoon period’ between artists and the Revolutionary government which arguably lasted until 1971 – the year of the Padilla affair, when the poet Heberto Padilla was heavy-handedly reprimanded for his book of poetry *Fuera del juego* – there was a fusion between avant-garde politics and avant-garde arts (John King 1990: 67). The late 1960s was the Golden decade of Cuban Revolutionary cinema, when its filmmakers reached maturity and produced works that inspired, in turn, other Latin American filmmakers. These works became examples of Cuban and Latin American counter-Hollywood cinema, a new Revolutionary cinema, inspirational to other Third World filmmakers. The best year for Cuban Revolutionary cinema was 1968, when the world marvelled at Gutiérrez Alea’s *Memorias* and Humberto Solás *Lucía*. *Memorias* was considered by Gutiérrez Alea himself, by his colleagues, and by the critics, as the height of his artistic career. In a survey produced 1995-1996, important Latin American filmmakers and critics of Latin American cinema voted *Memories* the best Latin American film of all time (Carlos Galiano & Rufo Caballero 1999: 13).

As noted by Schroeder, Gutiérrez Alea’s cinematic achievements are closely connected with the achievements of ICAIC and thus with the achievements of the Cuban 1959 Revolution (2002: 2). As a filmmaker who created some of the most important Cuban post-1959 films, Gutiérrez Alea occupies a unique position in Cuban cultural life. As a teacher, friend and a mentor of many Cuban film directors, he became a trusted, highly influential and respected cultural figure in Cuba and Latin America. Like Fidel Castro, Gutiérrez Alea was from a middle class background and in a similar way he became a self-proclaimed Revolutionary. However, he never felt the need to join the Communist party. Throughout his life and work he asserted his artistic right to be critical of contemporary society, challenging certain attitudes and ways of thinking as harmful to the Revolutionary cause. This has put him in a rather ambiguous yet privileged position as the most respected auteur of Cuban Revolutionary cinema (Chanan 2004; Schroeder 2002). In interviews with Oroz (1986), José Antonio Évora (1996), Chanan (2004) and others, Gutiérrez Alea testifies that constructive criticism is fundamental to the healthy development of society for him (see, for example, Évora 1996: 126). *Doce sillars* provides early evidence of his complex position as a true satirist and Revolutionary – both critical

of some Revolutionary excesses (in the sugarcane harvest and the crazy muralist episodes) yet enthusiastic about the social changes brought about by the Revolution.

### 2.3 Gutiérrez Alea's Formal Influences and Aesthetics

In the 1960s Gutiérrez Alea was praised most for his innovative experimental formal aesthetics. In his early films he used avant-garde forms and techniques (often out of the pure necessity of making films in the most economical possible way, just like the Soviet avant-garde directors in the 1920s): combining photos and newspaper titles in a collage; and incorporating newsreels, TV and documentary footage in feature films and others. This helped him rather successfully capture the experimental, innovative spirit of the times (particularly in *Doce sillars* and *Memorias*). Gutiérrez Alea admitted openly (to Évora, Oroz and Chanan) the numerous influences on his artistic formation: from the best achievements of Hollywood – the silent cinema masters, such as Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Laurel and Hardy – to the devices of Italian neorealism, such as location shooting and the use of the hidden camera (which he learned when studying film directing in Cinecittà). Gutiérrez Alea underlined the influence of Eisenstein's theories of emotive and intellectual (fragmented) montage in his films, and the use of sound as a counterpoint; and of Brecht and later of Godard's ideas of self-reflexive acting and filmmaking. These ideas found their most compelling expression in his *Memories* and in his 1982 theoretical book, *Dialéctica del espectador / The Viewer's Dialectic*.

Evidently, many of his experimental techniques originated from or were inspired by the Soviet avant-garde. His adaptation of Il'f and Petrov's Soviet satire, *Twelve Chairs*, was thus an inspired, natural choice for the creation of the first Cuban Revolutionary film comedy, both because of the novel's vivid representation of the complexities and contradictions in society during the transitional period to socialism and because of its formal artistic audacity and intellectual freedom, so different from the later Soviet socialist realist novels. It was also comparable with Gutiérrez Alea's own taste for formally experimental and intellectually challenging art. This is why the director claimed *Doce sillars* to be his first true feature film, created with a lot of joy and freedom of experimentation (Oroz 1989: 56-57).

Despite being an adaptation of a foreign novel, transposed to fit the faithful representation of Revolutionary transformations in Cuban society, Gutiérrez Alea's film

is closer to the spirit and irreverent ironic humour of Il'f and Petrov's novel than Gaidai's. The novel and Gutiérrez Alea's film were created during an initial period of a socialist Revolution – the Soviet and the Cuban respectively – and, despite their differences, each epoch had many things in common. There were analogous social and political processes, and, most importantly, a murky transitional period when the old values were losing their relevance and power and the new ones were slowly taking shape and gaining ground. Both the novel and Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation represent the initial utopian period of socialist construction, and during this Cuba and Soviet Russia went through identical social contradictions and transformations: both the Cuban and Russian peoples experienced periods of enthusiasm and euphoria with the building of a new socialist society; in both countries members of the upper classes fled from the country; both socialist states underwent nationalization and the expropriation of private property and of foreign companies; in both there were underground conspiracy organizations plotting to bring down the Revolutionary governments; and Cuba and Soviet Russia alike enjoyed Golden periods of unprecedented artistic innovation.

#### **2.4 Gaidai's 'Faithful' Adaptation: Adaptation as a Hybrid Genre and the Origins of Gaidai's Eccentric Carnavalesque Comedy Style**

Genre is an important intertextual aspect of adaptation. Film shares with the novel certain genres, such as comedy, melodrama and tragedy, whilst others are purely film-specific, for example, the animated cartoon, which depends on the moving image and editing. Stam & Raengo, like Bakhtin before him, also insists that adaptation is a hybrid genre that mixes literary and film genres, often carrying over elements from previous literary genres and older arts (2005: 25).

Gaidai's adaptation of *Twelve Chairs* is an explicit example of this intertextual process. His *Dvenadtsat'* is an amalgamation of cartoons, the documentary and feature film mode, and silent film techniques such as speeding up, intertitles and so on. For an adaptation that follows the original plot(s) relatively closely, Gaidai's film is, at times, surprisingly cinematic, whilst some of the dialogues between Vorobianinov and Ostap are rather theatrical (the latter was noted in Bogomolov's 1971 article, whose title 'Ravnenie po Rampu' translates as 'Alignment at the Footlights'). Under close examination the film shows a return to some of the earliest stages of cinema, mixing episodes of silent comedy

style and technique with cinema as filmed theatrical spectacle. The reasons for this could be the lack of props from the NEP period (Frolov 1991), Gaidai's affinity for eccentricity, and, possibly, because the two main actors (Sergei Filippov and Archil Gomiashvili) were more stage than film actors.

By 1970 Gaidai had developed a recognizable signature style with an affinity for physical gags and character masks, which can be traced back to the 'early cinema of attractions',<sup>51</sup> to the amusement park and to vaudeville, which in turn developed from popular fairground theatre.<sup>52</sup> Tom Gunning has successfully argued that avant-garde cinema sprang from the same diverse sources of popular entertainment as the very early cinema of the period 1885-1906, which aimed primarily to entertain the masses via excitement and amusement in the style of the then immensely popular circus and vaudeville variety (acts) shows. I claim that this is the reason why the carnivalesque mode (both as form and a strategy) is inherently hybrid, polyphonic and subversive, as it has retained its democratic origins of the fairground, mass popular entertainment trend. I also claim that avant-garde and early silent comedy cinema display a similar episodic, fragmented structure, driven by an eclectic amalgam of technical, experimental, acrobatic or commedia dell'arte-like physical gags, rather than by one coherent linear narrative (as in later Hollywood genre cinema). As mentioned in 1.4, Bakhtin has argued that fairground theatre, particularly the masks of the rogue, the clown and the fool, have played an important role in world literature and art, spreading anti-hegemonic, democratic ideas around the world (1981: 158-67). His claims are supported by studies of fairground puppet theatre (N. I. Smirnova 1983) and developed by Clark in her article on the 'carnavalesque sense of the world' as the actual travelling mode in world literature, the *extra*-local (democratic global) perspective in art (2002: 280-81).

Significantly, Gaidai's 1960s carnivalesque comedies featuring the famous comedy trio ViNiMor (standing for Georgii Vitsin, Iurii Nikulin and Evgenii Morgunov) have now entered permanently into Russian folklore. The trio of stooges represent the negative sides of Soviet reality. They are anti-heroes, with character masks of the drunk – Vitsin;

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<sup>51</sup> This is a term conjured up by Tom Gunning, in 1989, establishing the link between early cinema and Eisenstein's theory of film editing, the 'montage of attractions'. The latter's purpose was maximum impact on the senses, aiming to trigger strong emotive audience response. This principle was used by many early and 1960s avant-garde filmmakers, and also for propaganda purposes – by both the Soviets and the Nazis, for example. Today such examples of excessive, visual carnivalesque style are seen in TV commercials and MTV music videos.

<sup>52</sup> For more on the subject see Gunning's article in Thomas Elsaesser & Adam Barker 1989: 56-62.

the fool – Nikulin (the most loved Soviet clown); and the conman – Morgunov. Ostep Bender is also an archetypal character mask of a pícaro / trickster – the anti-hero of transition. All these characters are rogues who desire an easy life and try to take advantage of the loopholes in the Soviet system. Their misadventures mainly serve to produce joyful comic laughter and entertainment; yet, they also unmask some fundamental problems within the Soviet system. ViNiMor's archetypal character masks have an apparent puppet quality about them, for example, it is enough to point out to the guignolesque physicality of their gags such as Vitsin's spinning head in *Kavkazskaia plennitsa / Kidnapping Caucasian Style* (1967).<sup>53</sup>

Frolov was amongst the first to note that early cinema was based on such character masks, borrowed from *commedia dell'arte* and popular fairground theatre (1991: 64). He observes that after *Kavkazskaia plennitsa* it was clear that Gaidai was the only master of eccentric comedy in Soviet Russia (Frolov 1991: 74). He also claims that Gaidai's quasi-silent, carnivalesque aesthetics are proof that 'pure comedy is only possible in silent film comedy' (Frolov 1991: 62). Like others before him, Frolov concludes, however, that pure or not 'comedy is always critical', whilst in Soviet Russia no one liked to be criticized (1991: 79).

Some biographical information here can help to contextualize Gaidai's oeuvre. Gaidai was the son of a Ukrainian political activist exiled to Siberia. After graduating in 1947 from the Studio School of the Irkutsk District Drama Theatre, Gaidai enrolled in Grigorii Aleksandrov's workshop at the Soviet State Film School VGIK, which he left in 1955 (Rollberg 2009: 235). As argued by Maia Turovskaia, Aleksandrov's comedies were generally loved by the public; nevertheless, they were later considered illustrations of a distorted, official version of Soviet life, examples of socialist realism, and vehicles for Stalinist propaganda (Turovskaia in Horton 1993: 75). However, Gaidai's first work as a film director was as an assistant to Boris Barnet on the comedy *Liana* (1955). As noted by M. Pupsheva, V. Ivanov and V. Tsukerman, this experience must have influenced greatly his development as an eccentric comedy filmmaker (2002: 49).

Significantly, Barnet started his career in film as a member of Lev Kuleshov's workshop. Kuleshov is known as the father of Soviet cinema and the first Soviet avant-garde filmmaker to realize the subversive cinematic potential of Hollywood's silent

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<sup>53</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Kavkazskaia plennitsa*.

comedies. He experimented with some of his North American colleagues' findings in a search for an authentic Soviet film style. This is evident in his feature film debut: *Neobychainye prikliuchenia mistera Vesta v strane bol'shevikov / The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924),<sup>54</sup> where Barnet played the part of cowboy Jeddy. Soon after, Barnet left Kuleshov's workshop and together with Iakov Protazanov became one of the most commercially successful filmmakers in Soviet Russia. However, his film *Dom na Trubnoi / The House on Trubnaia Street*, made in 1928, (one of Andrei Tarkovskii's favourite avant-garde films), is proof of his artistic merits as one of the greatest Soviet avant-garde filmmakers. His comedies, on the other hand, were much more popular with the public than Kuleshov's *Mr West*. By the end of 1929, just like some other commercially successful or avant-garde filmmakers, he was accused of catering for bourgeois tastes, and eventually his early achievements were almost forgotten. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, he was reinstated as one of the most important Soviet avant-garde film artists.<sup>55</sup>

Gaidai and Barnet seem to have shared a fondness for Charlie Chaplin's comedies. A comparison between Barnet's comedies, particularly his *Devushka s korobkoi / Girl with a Hatbox* (1927), and Gaidai's 1960s comedies demonstrate a similar preference for speedy action and slapstick, that is, a comedy driven by physical gags. The trio of drunken musicians from Barnet's *Liana* seem likely to have prompted the birth of Gaidai's famous trio of stooges ViNiMor.

Just like Gutiérrez Alea, then, Gaidai found Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton's silent film comedies more inspirational and cinematic than contemporary American and Soviet romantic, narrative driven comedies. As noted by Frolov, for Gaidai there were never enough gags or speedy action, particularly cross-country chases (Frolov 1991: 55). Prokhorov has also argued that Gaidai privileged a visual, more purely cinematic humour over the verbal, basing his work on a chain of loosely connected physical sight gags. This structure became his signature style, the filmmaker thus rejecting a coherent linear narrative (Prokhorov 2003: 456). According to Noël Carroll's definition:

Sight gag is a form of visual humour in which amusement is generated by the play of alternative interpretations projected by the image or the images series [...]. And it is

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<sup>54</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Mr West*.

<sup>55</sup> See Denise Youngblood on Barnet (Youngblood 1992: 127-37).

this play of alternative, often conflicting interpretations, rooted first and foremost in the visual organisation of the scene that primarily causes the amusement that attends sight gag. (1991: 26)

Rollberg also confirms that Leonid Gaidai's best pictures 'are highly original, fast-paced buffooneries, with visual humour prevailing over the verbal'; his 'humour is enriched with sufficient satiric spice yet never turns bitter'; his gags are perfectly timed, a rare achievement, which made him the most popular Soviet director in the 1960s (Rollberg 2009: 237).

Frolov, who had known Gaidai since their university years, notes that the director used Eisenstein's 'Montage of Attractions' for comedy gags and tricks (1991: 38). His claim supports Prokhorov's contention that in his 1960s comedies Gaidai was performing a 'reevaluation of Stalinist culture', recycling 1920s avant-garde comedy themes and therefore reclaiming their achievements and traditions (2003: 459). His comedies display preference for visual expressivity and comic ambiguity over narrative (or ideological) clarity. This is why his best films are quasi-silent, recalling the comedies of the Hollywood's silent masters. They foreground physical action and visual disorientation, and use any opportunity to turn narrative elements into physical gags. Their physical aggression and visual disorientation achieves a comic effect similar to that of popular puppet (fairground) theatre.

It is important to note that Gaidai's first full length feature film, *Zhenikh s togo sveta / A Bridegroom from the Other World* (1958)<sup>56</sup> – a caustic satire about the monumental absurd Soviet bureaucratic apparatus – was cut down to 47 minutes and so harshly criticized that he almost gave up the comedy genre and did not make another satire until 1992. As reported by Pupsheva, Ivanov and Tsukerman, the film was rejected and criticized by a great number of different committees and bureaucratic institutions, until reaching eventually Nikolai Mikhailov, the Soviet Minister of Culture himself (Pupsheva, Ivanov and Tsukerman 2002: 61). The Minister's angry reaction had devastating effects, and not only for Gaidai's first satire: he called the film 'a lampooning of Soviet reality', and the press criticized it for the 'absence of positive characters' (Pupsheva, Ivanov & Tsukerman 2002: 67; Rollberg 2009: 236).

Interestingly, the film was very similar in theme and aesthetics to Gutiérrez Alea's bitter caustic satire of the ubiquitous Cuban bureaucratic system, *La muerte*. Both films

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<sup>56</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film with its original Russian title – *Zhenikh s togo sveta*.

use the carnivalesque strategies of excess and grotesque realism to expose the absurdity of socialist bureaucracy, which defied even the natural laws of life and death, proclaiming the primacy of a piece of official paper over the physical facts of life. Such thematic similarities could be mere coincidence; however, one can argue that both directors were responding to an intrinsic problem within the socialist system — the need for such monstrous bureaucratic apparatus. As observed by Lev Lainer, owing to this incident Gaidai had to wait a few years before working independently again (2001: 16-17).

In 1961, Gaidai made two phenomenally successful short features: *Pes Barbos I neobychnyi kross / Barbos the Dog and an Unusual Cross-Country Race* and *Samogonshchiki / Bootleggers*. They introduced his trio of stooges (who immediately became part of popular Soviet folklore), and, rather significantly, the theme of the Russians' favourite pastime — vodka drinking (Pupsheva, Ivanov & Tsukerman 2002: 90). His next three comedies, on contemporary subject matters, enjoyed phenomenal success at the box office and made him the most prominent Soviet comedy director of the 1960s. These films were *Operatsia Y / Operation Y* (1965), *Kavkazskaia plennitsa* and *Brilliantovaia Ruka / The Diamond Arm* (1968).<sup>57</sup> All were adventure stories containing thriller and slapstick elements with increasingly satirical subversive currents. They mocked shallow political rhetoric, criminal behaviour and hypocrisy. Frolov testifies that after *Kavkazskaia Plennitsa* Gaidai wanted to go back to his first love — satire (1991: 104). According to Lainer, the two most popular Gaidai comedies — *Kavkazskaia Plennitsa* and *Brilliantovaia Ruka*, viewed by around 77 million viewers each (the former was seen by 76.54 million people, the latter by 76.7million) almost got shelved by the censors for containing anti-Soviet material.<sup>58</sup> By mere chance, Leonid Brezhnev, who loved Gaidai's comedies, asked to see his latest works and found them very entertaining. This persuaded the censors to release the films with minimal changes (Lainer 2001: 71).

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<sup>57</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Brilliantovaia ruka*.

<sup>58</sup> For more details see the online encyclopaedia of Russian and TV films, *Nashe kino*, at <http://nashekino.ru> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec 2010].

## 2.5 The Socio-political and Cultural Context of Gaidai's Adaptation

Gaidai's 1960s comedies reintroduced the themes of alcoholism and petty crime as popular themes for laughter and comic entertainment. However, the critics insisted on more satire, whilst the censors were becoming more vigilant (Frolov 1991: 104). Therefore, Gaidai's choice to adapt some of the 1920s Soviet avant-garde satires to the screen is rather telling: he must have realized that in order to improve his artistic status, without risking too much, he had to turn to approved satirical classics (see Frolov 1991: 104). The fact that his choice fell on 1920s satirists, who were only partly approved during the Thaw, speaks for itself. Apart from Il'f and Petrov's adventure novel *Dvenadtsat'* adaptation he also adapted Mikhail Bulgakov's play *Ivan Vasil'evich meniaet professiu / Ivan Vasil'evich Changes his Profession*, in 1973, and Mikhail Zoshchenko's short story *Ne mozhet byt'! / It Can't be!*, in 1975.

*Dvenadtsat'* was the beginning of a new stage in Gaidai's work. During the period of stagnation he primarily made film adaptations instead of slapstick comedies, thus moving to a narrative driven cinema, relatively-speaking, which, according to Prokhorov, undermined the quality of his comic talent (2003: 471). Nevertheless, his adaptations were still popular – 39.3 million watched *Dvenadtsat'* and 60.7 million *Ivan Vasil'evich*.<sup>59</sup>

As noted in the previous section, for Prokhorov, Gaidai symbolizes 'a return to the experimental art of the 1920s and to Kuleshov's workshop' (Prokhorov 2003: 459). Saša Milić expands on this by placing Gaidai's 1960s comedies in stylistic terms as closer to the international tradition of the French New Wave films, French New Wave cinema consciously appropriating features of early silent cinema and Soviet avant-garde, aware of their possibilities for subtle subversion. As Milić observes, 'A light touch, foregrounded reflexivity, episodic structure and cartoonish characters became the hallmark of mainstream popular European cinema in the 1960s' (Milić 2004: 1). Milić is correct in her observations that these innovations were quickly adopted, and used with greater success by Eastern European directors rather than by Western directors, as these stylistics proved to be the right vehicle for combining light heartedness with irreverent subversive satire (Milić 2004: 1). I shall demonstrate that the same is true for many Latin

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<sup>59</sup> This data is based on *Nashe kino* online information, at <http://nashekino.ru> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec 2010].

American filmmakers, for example in Gutiérrez Alea's 1960s films and, particularly, for Tabío's 1980s carnivalesque comedies, discussed in Part II, Chapter Five.

Prokhorov insists that Gaidai's comedies were popular because of their episodic, fragmented, non linear structure in comparison with the coherent ideological official narratives. They seemed closer to reality than the varnished reality in the 1930s Pyr'ev and Aleksandrov's musical comedies. Beumers points out, however, that the comedies during the stagnation era had a different goal all together: if the 1930s musical comedies confirmed the official ideology, the comedies of the Thaw and after it tended to subvert it. In her own words, if the 1930s Pyr'ev's musical comedies 'presented a stylised, lacquer-box reality, Gaidai laughed at the cracks that appeared on its surface' (Beumers 2003: 451). I argue that in comparison to the 1930s Pyr'ev and Aleksandrov's comedies, Riazanov's and Gaidai's comedies were indeed subversive of the hegemonic order, always trying to expand the boundaries of the permitted. Gaidai's comedies were driven by speed and visual anarchy, thus creating disarray and confusion amongst the official critics. Riazanov's narrative comedies, on the other hand, were playing a balancing act between opposition and affirmation of the official order, attempting to improve the system from within.

I argue that the most important addition in Gaidai's adaptation, the quasi-documentary, non-diegetic footage at the end of *Dvenadtsat'*, was aiming towards a subversive deconstruction of Stalinist monolithic art, comparing it suggestively with architectural and cultural monuments from Russia's past and present. For example, the footage compares a beautiful old church to a dull-looking building, which turns out to be 'The House of Soviet Writers', bearing all the signs of oppressive, Stalinist-style building. The camera then moves on to impressive, tall, modern buildings, obviously standing for the free artistic individualism of the 1960s, which seemingly reach for the sky and beyond and are possibly inspired by Soviet Russia's successful space missions. The 'unruly' camera then 'jumps' to the statues of famous Russian and Soviet poets — Pushkin and Vladimir Maiakovskii; then to the statue of Gogol and the monument to the team of satiric writers Il'f and Petrov. From Moscow's Kalinin Prospect and Pushkin Square the camera moves to the famous, at the time, cinema 'Rossia', lingering on the queues waiting to see Gaidai's film about the adventures of Ostap Bender. Amongst the people staring at the poster of Ostap are many of the characters from the story that Ostap has tricked in the past: Madame Gritsatsueva, Elochka the Cannibal, the hack poet Liapis,

and the members of the Vasyuki's chess club. This episode can be read as a self-reflexive comment, implying that Gaidai was aware of his artistic achievement and knew that his Ostap Bender would become one of the classic characters of Soviet film comedy. The enduring popularity of this film with Soviet and post-Soviet audiences has proven him right.

Beumers claims that 'Soviet filmmakers were largely concerned with fidelity to the original and the political correctness of their interpretations'; yet, 'after the Thaw departing from the original became a common practice' (Beumers 2005: 137). As mentioned above in 1.3, a return to the past frequently served as a backdrop for criticism of the present, albeit in a hidden form. Thus, it is possible to argue that the final non-diegetic quasi-documentary sequence of Gaidai's adaptation *Dvenadtsat'* implies that an arch-individualistic anti-hero is much more interesting and exciting than a collective or impossibly perfect positive socialist realist hero; and it also confirms that some human traits can never be eradicated. On the other hand, however, it is easy to detect some pride in Soviet Russia's achievements. Therefore, the reaction to the episode is one of confusion and mystification; however, the footage demands contemplation on the subject of past and present achievements and values, prompting comparisons and alternative readings.

## CHAPTER THREE: COMPARISONS AND CONCLUSIONS

### 3.1 Gaidai's Version versus Gutiérrez Alea's Earlier Adaptation of Il'f and Petrov's Novel

Gaidai's film is very different to both Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation and the novel in one particular aspect — it belongs to a period distant in time from the period of the NEP, and the years of frantic transformation and Revolutionary euphoria. Significantly, Gaidai's adaptation was made almost ten years later than Gutiérrez Alea's and forty three years after the novel's first publication. Gaidai's film is a product of mature Soviet society, of the epoch of 'real', rather than 'utopian socialism'.<sup>60</sup> This is where the biggest shift in the dialogue between the novel and Gaidai's adaptation, on the one hand, and between Gaidai's and Gutiérrez Alea's versions, on the other, rests.

Gaidai began his work on the novel's adaptation towards the end of the Thaw, a period of limited liberal reforms and relative (in comparison with the previous Stalinist epoch) openness in the arts, associated with Khrushchov's rule (1956-1964). Its cultural effects lasted until 1968. As Mikhail Shveitser's adaptation of the sequel to *Twelve Chairs*, *Zolotoi telenok / The Golden Calf* (1931), was due to come to the Soviet screen first, in 1968, Gaidai's work on the adaptation was put on hold for two years (Pupsheva, Ivanov & Tsukerman 2002: 268). It was completed only in 1971, which was a very different epoch — one of a return to orthodoxy and stagnation. During the two-year interruption, still absorbed with the novel's adaptation, Gaidai first made his most successful and subversive eccentric comedy — *Brilliantovaia ruka* (1969).

As noted later by critics, *Brilliantovaia ruka*'s plot is reminiscent of Il'f and Petrov's *Twelve Chairs* (Frolov 1991: 104-05; Prokhorov 2003). In this tale, however, the treasure is hidden in the cast of the broken arm of the positive hero, Gorbunkov (Iurii Nikulin). Prokhorov argues that in the *Brilliantovaia ruka* Gaidai subverts the socialist realist plot by making Gorbunkov's cast itself the main hero of the film, thus reducing the role of the positive protagonist to that of 'a puppet that fits anyone's arm' — the smugglers, who are

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<sup>60</sup> The term 'socialism' came to signify a transitory state between capitalism and communism. Engels referred to the Marxist doctrine as 'scientific socialism' in contrast to the 'utopian socialism' of other philosophers. For more on the subject see Andrew Roberts 2004: 352-54. Later, the term 'really existing socialism' became associated with the apparent discrepancies between the theory and the practices of socialism, particularly in the countries of the former Soviet bloc. See Ariel Dacal Díaz and Francisco Brown Infante's book *Russia: desde socialismo real al capitalismo real / Russia: From Real Socialism to Real Capitalism* (2005).

after the diamonds; and the cops, who are after the smugglers (Prokhorov 2003: 468). The physical function of the positive hero becomes more important than his ideological role in the narrative, generating the jokes and the sight gags in the film (Prokhorov 2003: 469). So, Gaidai reduces the socialist realist hero from a driving force to a mere sight gag; a gag which then, rather symbolically, stands for the fragmentation and de-Stalinization of Soviet culture during the Thaw. On the other hand, *Brilliantovaiia ruka* with its irreverent subversive humour is Gaidai's true, 'silently evoked', free adaptation of Il'f and Petrov's *Twelve Chairs*.

Two years later, however, Gaidai tried to follow the novel's plot more closely, facing different challenges than those encountered by Gutiérrez Alea. Il'f and Petrov were considered to be notoriously difficult to adapt, precisely because of the brilliance of their written aphoristic wit, refined sense of irony and comic ambiguity. According to Frolov and other critics, irony and parody were not Gaidai's strongest points; therefore, rather than following the novel slavishly, he adapted the novel's narrative to his own style (1991: 106). Before Gaidai many had tried and failed in the attempt to transfer the co-authors' aphoristic wit to the screen. Shveitser's adaptation of the sequel to the novel, *Zolotoi telenok* (1968), for example, was serious and philosophical rather than comical. Georgii Danelia was approached with the project first, but later admitted to Gaidai that he no longer felt able to do it, and thus passed the opportunity on to Gaidai (Frolov 1991: 104). Gaidai tried to recreate on screen the epoch of NEP as faithfully as possible, with all its contradictions and both its positive and negative sides. So on the one hand we see numerous shops and goods, and on the other barefoot hungry children; rich furnishings versus Spartan-like living conditions; luxurious restaurants and auctions next to complete poverty, and so on.

Another problem was the book's wide popularity and longstanding cult status. Ostap seems to have been Gaidai's central concern from the very start, as the audience was anticipating the appearance of its favourite character on the big screen and each member had their own ideas of what Ostap should be like; as a result, Gaidai was faced with an enormous challenge and responsibility. The director had to begin shooting from scratch three times, each time with a different actor in the role of Ostap. There were over 22 actors listed as possible choices for the part, amongst them Andrei Mironov, Vladimir Vysotskii and Nikita Mikhalkov. The final choice and most of the weight of the film fell on the shoulders of a previously unknown Georgian actor, Archil Gomiashvili, who

seems to have earned universal approval as the best screen incarnation of Ostap to date (see Pupsheva, Ivanov & Tsukerman 2002: 277-82; Frolov 1991: 105-13). Just like Gaidai, Gomiashvili was obsessed with Ostap's character. Previously, he had adapted Il'f and Petrov's sequel to the *Twelve Chairs*, *Zolotoi telenok / The Golden Calf*, for theatre and had performed it to great public acclaim over 200 times (Frolov 1991: 105; 113). Despite being 44 years of age his physical appearance, particularly his profile, and also his rakish, arrogant manner evoked an effortless likeness to Ostap, or rather to the common perception of his character (Pupsheva, Ivanov & Tsukerman: 282). His presence is colourful, expressive and memorable, conveying Bender's vitality, ingenuity and quick wit.

As a cultural product of so-called 'real socialism' Gaidai's adaptation was an indirect critique of past and current flaws in the Soviet system, and an attempt to revive the spirit of the 1920s which were years of artistic and intellectual freedom, as symbolized by Ostap's character. Therefore, Gaidai's film had a different focus than that of Gutiérrez Alea's, whose adaptation was rather optimistic and enthusiastic about the future of socialism in Cuba. As noted by Frolov, at times Gaidai's film bears signs of fatigue with its repetitive gags (Frolov 1991: 109). The director preserved far too many of the original characters and situations, and replaced some episodes with new ones. Yet the old ideological clichés are rather exaggerated and are emphasized as being so: old grotesque caricatures of the enemies of the people, in the face of the leader of the gentry, Ippolit Vorobyandinov, and Father Fedor, the ambitious but unlucky business entrepreneur who symbolizes the hypocrisy of Orthodox religion, the clandestine committee, and so on.

In contrast, Gutiérrez Alea's is a free adaptation of the novel. He wrote the script together with Uruguayan filmmaker Ugo Uliive, keeping only the most important colourful characters and situations, and giving the places and the characters Cuban names. He very successfully transposes the obviously shared situations on to the realities of the young Cuban Revolutionary society. Gutiérrez Alea found ways of translating characters and situations very effectively, visually and acoustically, to the screen. As a result, his film is more experimental, imaginative and cinematic in form than Gaidai's. He mixes here, for the first time, documentary and feature film forms, incorporating a photo-collage of the first days of the Revolution as well as a cartoon character of Hipólito's mother-in-law hiding the family jewels in one of the chairs in her mansion. There is a highly creative animation sequence of the chairs, used to accompany the film's

credits. There are also two newsreels appropriately incorporated in the film: one about the numerous hidden treasures found in the former residences of upper class Cubans who in the majority fled to Miami (instead of Paris, as do the Russians in the novel) after the nationalization of their properties; the second depicting a burial of North American companies, symbolically representing the end of neo-colonial dependency, of private property, and of capitalism in Cuba.

A few of the novel's aphorisms have kept their freshness when spoken in Gutiérrez Alea's version. Gutiérrez Alea confessed that there were many references (in the form of quotations and imitations) to other internationally renowned films in his adaptation. The episodes of the priest's wild-goose chase across Cuba, for example, are made in silent comedy style (Gutiérrez Alea in Oroz 1989: 60), using speeded-up film and even classic silent movie intertitles explaining the action. Arguably some of Gutiérrez Alea's findings made their way, later, into Gaidai's adaptation, where they were reworked. This can be seen, for example, in the use of intertitles, in the mixture of documentary and feature film form, and with the inclusion of cartoons, Gaidai thus mimicking the mixed carnivalesque aesthetics of Gutiérrez Alea's version.

Despite the possibility of future protests on the part of some Russian critics over this claim, it is not unsubstantiated. Gutiérrez Alea's film received The Honorable Diploma of the Soviet Filmmakers Union at the Third International Moscow Film Festival in 1963 (García Borrero 2001: 123), and Soviet filmmakers and critics had the opportunity to see it (as mentioned in Chertok 1971: 34). Therefore Gaidai must have seen the film, and it is not too far-fetched to suppose that he may have been influenced by some of Gutiérrez Alea's formal ideas even before his work on Il'f and Petrov's adaptation. The Soviet and Russian critics, however, were rather predictably dismissive of the merits of the novel's foreign adaptation (Frolov 2002: 106).

In Gutiérrez Alea's film, the priest's episodic adventures are incorporated into the plot very well, bringing more colour and sarcastic irony to the dramatic action as well as providing a contrast with and a break from the main story. This is not the case in Gaidai's adaptation. In his film the parallel plot becomes more of an annoying delay, breaking the rhythm of the main action. In Gutiérrez Alea's version, the overambitious family priest (René Sánchez) is painted mercilessly, in what later became known as Gutiérrez Alea's caustic satirical palette (after his *La muerte*, 1966): he is exposed as a master liar and a cheat, a hypocrite, and the biggest swindler of all the 'remnants of the past' — Hipólito

(Vorobianinov), Gertrudis, and even Oscar (Ostap). The prostitute Gertrudis (a replacement for Mme Gritsatsueva & Elena Bour, one of Ipolit's former lovers), who passes off her line of work as an honest endeavour of high integrity, is merely a dilettante in comparison to the priest. In order to expose both of them as liars and hypocrites, Gutiérrez Alea employs Eisenstein's idea of using sound (here a voiceover) as a counterpoint to the action shown on the screen.<sup>61</sup> Thus, we hear Gertrudis and the priest lying while the hidden camera reveals the truth, disproving their claims and exposing them as fraudulent, degraded individuals. For example, the camera shows Gertrudis prostituting herself on Havana's streets, making a mockery of her 'sad story' told simultaneously in a voiceover 'of how she had lost her friends who all fled to Miami after the Revolution', when in actual fact she is lamenting the loss of her former clients. Furthermore, the priest is even deceitful to his own boss, the bishop (here a rather ironic replacement for Father Fedor's wife), when reporting his progress over the phone, painting his actions as good and honourable when the reality is nothing of the kind. In Gutiérrez Alea's version Hipólito is not necessarily an evil man – at least not one capable of murder – yet he is extremely selfish and spoiled by his aristocratic upbringing, having never done a day of work in his entire life. He firmly believes in his inherent right to the treasure and abuses Oscar's sense of loyalty and fair play. Hipólito shows no moral concern or consideration for other people, whether they are former friends and / or members of his own class, so he lacks any sense of class solidarity as well.

Oscar is conceived as his master's complete antithesis: a streetwise, small-scale trickster who is trying to make the most of the murky transitional times when money still holds some importance. At first, he is closer to his former master's value system, yet he quickly grasps the new principles of equality and of the collective sharing of the workload. Therefore, he soon realizes the unsubstantiated superiority complex of his former master and the members of his master's class. He then helps Hipólito mostly out of habit and pity, but in the end Oscar realizes that his former master is beyond help as he is a selfish and greedy coward, lacking any abilities that could earn him a living or find him a place in the new socialist Cuba. Unlike his master, Oscar proves to be a resourceful and very capable individual, yet not necessarily 'the prince of rogues' as he is in the

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<sup>61</sup> Throughout his oeuvre Alea kept coming back to Eisenstein's film theories, probing one after another. Here he uses Eisenstein, Aleksandrov and Vsevolod Pudovkin's idea of 'sound in counterpoint to the image on the screen'. See their 'Statement on Sound', in Richard Taylor & Ian Christie 1994: 234.

novel. Furthermore, unlike in the novel, during the sugarcane harvesting (one of Gutiérrez Alea's most important transpositions of the text), he proves to be an exemplary worker, thus demonstrating the promise that one day he may become a valuable member of the Cuban socialist community. Yet, this is when he also becomes torn between the new and the old Cuban values. At the second delivery of Hipólito's news that the last chair is very close by, he gives in to his old ways. In the end, however, when he learns from the Revolutionary guards of the Railway workers club that the real treasure is actually the club itself (built with the money raised from the sale of the jewels), offering its numerous recreational facilities to everyone, he decides to stay and join, rather symbolically, the workers' baseball game. So, in Gutiérrez Alea's version, Oscar, because of his evolving personal and class consciousness, changes gradually from a smart small-scale con-artist into someone ready to embrace the Revolutionary transformation of society. Thus, his joining of the baseball game comes as no surprise but rather as a logical and expected outcome (probably anticipated and cheered by some members of the Cuban public at the time).

Meanwhile, Hipólito's fear of the bearded Revolutionary guards makes him run for his life, taking him away from the scene, which, in symbolic terms, signifies his flight from the Cuban historical scene. So the film is a fruit of the initial, 'utopian phase of socialism', faithfully representing the Revolutionary euphoria and romantic idealism of the first ten years of the Cuban Revolution. This also explains Gutiérrez Alea's nod to *Don Quixote*. Hipólito's fear, clearly, is widely exaggerated but produces the 'correct' ideological message and generates a few colourful comical situations, the best being when he takes the bearded circus woman for a Revolutionary guard. This is one of many cases of the film's double-edged yet refined and subtle irony, quite in the spirit of Il'f and Petrov's humour in the novel. The difference is that it is transposed masterfully on to a specific Cuban situation. It is enough for Hipólito to see a beard in order to be reminded of the mortal enemy of his class – the bearded Revolutionaries, and of Fidel Castro himself. By using the signifier of the beard as a hilarious equation and synecdoche of both Castro and the Revolution, however, Gutiérrez Alea implies that this is Castro's Revolution (a potentially contentious signifier, depending on its contextualization).

As in the book, in Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation there is a mixture of satire, irony and good-natured, entertaining humour. Sometimes situations are purely comical, as in the scene when Oscar asks the soaking wet engineer, whose new flat has been flooded, to

come down and have a glass of water. In another episode, faithful to the novel, the priest, whilst fighting with Hipólito over one of the chairs, uses the argument that the chairs are now the property of the people, applying the logic that he is now one of the people, a member of the community. The priest's hypocrisy is amplified further in Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation. Later, the same priest swears to an old upper-class woman that he will return her set of (the wrong) twelve chairs, proclaiming his firm belief in the most important bourgeois value and rule – that 'private property is sacred' (citation from the film). The priest knows this is the only way to con the woman into lending him her set of twelve chairs. Minutes later, at a safe distance from the house, he starts chopping up the chairs one by one in a rather barbaric manner, like a man possessed. Thus, symbolically, he is shown to be the most dangerous of all the enemies of the people, disrespectful of the principles of both collective and private property. Of course, one has to remember that at the time the teachings of Marxism-Leninism condemned religion as 'the opium of the people' and their greatest foe. Therefore, in Gutiérrez Alea's film, the focus shifts towards the priest as the real, evil 'prince of rogues', rather than the more idealistically-inclined Oscar. This is a major transposition from the novel, prompting one of the funniest and most successful additions in Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation: the priest comes up with an ingenious lie, asking the old woman to lend him the chairs for a religious recreation of 'The Last Supper'. This is a telling scene, unmasking the grand proportions of the priest's ability to lie, cheat and con, exposing him as having the mentality of a door-to-door salesman rather than that of a spiritual leader. This allusion is reinforced by the watermark of Christ on the door (meaning that priests are welcome in the woman's house), invoking an association with credit card signs used by small restaurants and hotels. The implication is clear – religion is a commodity to both the priest and the upper-class woman, who also knows how to bargain.

Evidently, Gutiérrez Alea's film is a successful adaptation of the novel as a Cuban comedy, poking fun at some Cuban cultural specificities, traditions, and identity trends. Another successful transposition to Cuban realities of the time is seen in the middle classes' often rather pitiful behaviour as imitators of the lifestyle and fashion of famous American millionaires, symbolized by the pathetic character of the empty-headed 'dodgy' blond in the film, a reworking of the character of Elochka the Cannibal in the novel. In Gutiérrez Alea's version, this character is ridiculed for using her limited English

to pass for an American, of all things. This transposition is rather witty, and the result quite comical.

The episode of overzealous anti-imperialist propaganda in the middle of a sugarcane field is comparable to the episode in the novel where engineer Triukhov, one of the paragons of the new Soviet man, becomes possessed by a compulsion to talk about the ‘international situation’ at the opening of a new tramline instead of praising the workers’ achievements. Significantly, this episode is omitted in Gaidai’s adaptation. One can only imagine that at times of increased censure and orthodoxy, the director had to choose the targets of his satire very carefully and apply certain levels of self-censorship. After all, he never forgot his bitter encounter with the censors over his first proper satire. Gutiérrez Alea, on the other hand, satirizes the zeal of a young militant who encourages the volunteers through a megaphone to work hard and pick up the sugarcane in a record time, assuring them that in this way they will definitely defeat the imperialist aggressor. The situation is absurd but sensitively represented, showing how easy it is for an enthusiastic person to get carried away and fall into the trap of shallow political rhetoric. Here, yet again, Gutiérrez Alea demonstrates a refined sense of irony, comparable to that of Il’f and Petrov. As noted earlier, this kind of subtle irony was, unfortunately, alien to Gaidai (Frolov 1991).

Another successful Cuban equivalent of a similar situation in the novel is the episode with the muralist artist, commissioned to paint a picture on one of the walls in the Railway workers’ club. This scene represents Gutiérrez Alea’s rejection of ideas, imposed from above, of the adoption of the overtly tendentious and unrealistic Soviet socialist realist canon as a model for the new Cuban cinema. The scene is comparable to the episode of the hack poet Liapis – the epitome of artistic conformism in Il’f and Petrov’s novel. By focusing upon a mock-heroic style in this episode Gaidai also exposes the socialist realist canon as a one-fits-all formula, targeting artistic utilitarianism and ideological conformism. Thus, in his adaptation, the episode serves as indirect critique of 1970s ‘mature socialism’, implying that such shameful practices of conformism and censorship instead of being the exception have become the norm.

In a similar fashion to Il’f and Petrov, Gutiérrez Alea and Gaidai use the tropes of the ‘journey’ and the ‘rogue’ as a means of satirically exposing remnants of bourgeois values and some negative aspects of their socialist societies. In travelogue mode, that is, as road

movies, both films revisit almost every corner of their countries, commenting on important national projects.

I assert that Gutiérrez Alea's biggest achievement is that he managed to convey the spirit and the style of Il'f and Petrov's subtle irony in a cinematic way, despite having to translate and transpose situations from 1920s Soviet Russia on to Cuba's 1960s socio-political conditions. His film is more nuanced and imaginative, both dramatically and cinematically, than Gaidai's. Gaidai's adaptation lacks Il'f and Petrov's and Gutiérrez Alea's refined, subtle sense of irony and mild, subversive parody, focusing too much on slapstick comical gags and situations. Nevertheless, Gaidai succeeds where everyone else, before and after, seems to have failed – by immortalizing one of the most colourful characters from a world literary classic: Ostap Bender, the prince of rogues himself.

### **3.2 Adaptation and Transculturation: An Ideological and Intercultural Dialogue**

Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation demonstrates well the twofold process of intercultural dialogue and transculturation whose workings were addressed by Lotman, as briefly discussed in the general Introduction. The film was made during the director's most experimental period, when he also made two satiric comedies, *Doce sillas* and *La muerte*, as well as his famous *Memorias*. As noted before, both Gutiérrez Alea and Gaidai were influenced by the silent film comedy masters of Hollywood's Golden Age, whose films were old Cuban and Russian favourites. In his second comedy, *La muerte*, Gutiérrez Alea even incorporated (at the beginning of the film) a homage to the old Hollywood silent comedy masters, whose formal styles and physical gags were copied in the film. Despite not being one of Gutiérrez Alea's best films, *Doce sillas* is an important film as it demonstrates the director's intention to create a popular, entertaining comedy, and a parody of the socialist realist formula. The film is a protest against the adoption of socialist realism, and an important example of Gutiérrez Alea's early efforts to avoid ideological clichés and negotiate different, more realistic terms of representation for Cuban Revolutionary cinema. As argued earlier, Gutiérrez Alea was afraid that such politically compromised formulas could lead to schematization and an impoverishment of the new Cuban film art. Still, Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation creates the first collective socialist realist character in Cuban Revolutionary feature films. The young volunteers collecting sugarcane and the railway workers are shown as idealized positive collective

characters, who act in ‘perfect’ agreement and harmony. The railway workers are so clever that they see the muralist’s project for what it is – pretentious nonsense. Thus Gutiérrez Alea, on the one hand, creates a positive model for the new Cuban cinema and society – the collective as an answer to Cuba’s social divisions; on the other hand, his model resembles that of an exaggeratedly positive socialist realist collective character from the 1930s Soviet comedies. So, Gutiérrez Alea’s adaptation ends up being both a socialist realist film and a mockery of it; supportive of socialist ideas, yet cautious of ideological idealism and monologism. Therefore, even in his first attempt to create a funny, entertaining picture, Gutiérrez Alea creates a polyphonic comedy that mocked not only current but also potential contradictions in Cuban Revolutionary society.

As demonstrated in the examination of the relationship between the two adaptations and the novel, there are many instances of intertextuality, metatextuality and transculturation found in both films, as in the novel itself. As stated, both adaptations are in the style of carnivalesque comedy, mimicking silent comedy masters, mixing different film modes, genres and styles, and often privileging physical gags and an episodic structure over narrative coherence; in this both directors have shown some affinity to self-reflexive filmmaking. These techniques and aesthetics create visual confusion, ambiguity and polyphonic readings. For example, it is possible to argue that the theatricality of Gaidai’s props undermines chances for full identification, and that the documentary episode entirely disregards the story’s ending with Ostap’s death. In the final moments of the film, when the animated picture of Ostap speaks, the public is forced to accept that, as real and as attractive the character may seem it is after all a character-mask whose role is to mock and expose any kind of falsehood, even the illusion of ‘realistic’ representation.

As asserted, both directors depict the contradictions in their socialist society; however, Gutiérrez Alea’s film represents the early ‘utopian’ period of the building of socialism in Cuba whereas Gaidai reflects a later period of ‘real’, ‘mature socialism’. Despite being critical of the negative sides of socialism their films are not anti-socialist, as both directors are sympathisers with socialism; nevertheless, they both had an acute (satiric) sense of the absurd and the ridiculous in life. Arguably, both directors dreamed of a more democratic kind of socialism, the kind associated with Lenin’s NEP (which Gorbachev aspired towards during *perestroika*, 1986-1990, as a more open and democratic, market economy version of socialism). The reason why Gaidai’s ‘actual’

adaptation of the novel *Twelve Chairs* (*Dvenadtsat'*) was more hesitant and tame in comparison to his 'silently evoked', free and bold earlier adaptation, *Brilliantovaia ruka*, could easily be explained by the horrifying events taking place in 1968, namely, Soviet and Warsaw Pact tanks entering the Czechoslovakian Republic and crushing the Prague Spring's legitimate government. Evidently for Brezhnev's government Alexander Dubček's version of 'socialism with a human face'<sup>62</sup> was a step too far. The invasion of Czechoslovakia signalled the end of the Soviet Thaw and a return to renewed conservatism, stagnation and Stalinist orthodoxy for the whole of the 1970 and early 1980s.

### 3.3 The Dialogue of Gutiérrez Alea's Adaptation with Recent Cuban Films

In this section I argue that Juan Carlos Tabío's *Lista de espera* (2000) is not only, as claimed by Chanan, an allegory of Cuba as a bus station which no one can leave as all the buses have stopped running (2004: 22) but also yet another metatextualization of Gutiérrez Alea's version of Il'f and Petrov's *Twelve Chairs*. As such, *Lista* is an indirect response to Gutiérrez Alea's earlier adaptation, and a critical comment and evaluation of Cuba's socialist experiment, despite the fact that Tabío's film was based on a story by the Colombian writer Arturo Arango. The Cuban actor Vladimir Cruz has stated that most of the film came about as the result of vigorous improvisations, when right from the outset and the opening credits the film pays homage to Gutiérrez Alea's oeuvre.<sup>63</sup> Tabío, then, has developed a further permutation of the earlier modified metatext by Gutiérrez Alea, creating an updated version of the story which is yet another critical comment (metatext) in intertextual dialogue with both Gutiérrez Alea's *Doce sillitas* and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.

This time, the hidden treasure is neither in a chair, nor in a cast, and it is not a workers' club, but a beautiful dream of a 'utopian community', shared by a number of passengers stuck on a bus station in the middle of the island (symbolizing Cuba at a cross-roads, in-between socialism and capitalism). The 'utopian dream', symbolizes the

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<sup>62</sup> The phrase was coined first by Dubček, at the time secretary of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party. It refers to a different version of the communist state to the Soviet, one with an emphasis upon individuals and with greater freedom.

<sup>63</sup> I interviewed the actor, during the Havana Film Festival in December 2005.

best (the promise) of Cuba's socialist experiment, which has been interrupted by the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and by the uneasy but pragmatic Cuban leadership choice to revert to a market economy, however limited.<sup>64</sup> The character of the pícaro – here named Rolando and played by Cuba's most famous actor, Jorge Perugorría – again (symbolically) pretends initially to be blind, in order to take advantage of the goodness of the other passengers. He is the drive behind most of the action and takes vital part in the transformation of the station. Rolando ends up working harder than everyone else for the creation of utopian community on the station – a quality he shares with Gutiérrez Alea's Oscar. When an opportunity arises to leave the station he refuses to go, admitting his previous deceit, repenting and begging to stay in the commune. In the end all the remaining passengers wake up from 'the beautiful common dream', and are forced to face a very different, brutal reality. Some, although with regret, assume their original destinations. Rolando, however, still under the transformative experience of the common utopian dream, chooses to go to Santiago (in the East of the island) or to the countryside. Since Solás's *Lucía*, the countryside has been used as a signifier of support for socialist and revolutionary ideas, in opposition to the capital, Havana, which is usually associated with capitalist decadence – here, for example, representing the return to market economic forces. Rolando decides to give up his old tricks, and joins the endless queues for everything in sympathy with his fellow countrymen.<sup>65</sup>

In *Lista*, then, Gutiérrez Alea's metatextualization of the earlier hypotexts of Il'f and Petrov's novel and of *Don Quixote* undergoes yet another permutation, this time concerning a common utopian dream of a better Cuban society. The remaining passengers on the station share a dream of how together they have built a truly democratic, egalitarian commune, symbolically representing a new, alternative utopian Cuban community, better than the current one, presented in the film as failed official utopia of bureaucratic socialism. The film dwells on Cuba's difficult choices; it is both a warning and an appeal to salvage the country's unity and its social achievements before it becomes too late. It is no coincidence that the film's action takes place in 1993, the darkest year of Cuba's economic crisis and a period of shortages of all kinds which triggered limited economic reforms. These unleashed a return to social inequality,

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<sup>64</sup> See Max Azicri, 2000. 'Reinventing Cuban Socialism', in his *Cuba Today and Tomorrow: Reinventing Socialism* (Miami: UP Florida), 277-307.

<sup>65</sup> For further discussion on *Lista*'s text and context, see Hillman 2009.

initiating a slow reversal; a prolonged transition to something that is neither an Eastern European kind of socialism nor a proper market economy. I shall return to the points discussed here in Chapter Twelve, Part IV.

### **3.4 More Recent Soviet and Post-Soviet Adaptations of the Novel**

Mark Zakharov's adaptation of the novel is a four-series-long, dragged-out and tedious music hall farce made in 1976 for Soviet television. It explores every imaginable opportunity for overacting and physical gags, literally losing any sense of comic timing and rhythm. Pupsheva, Ivanov and Tsukerman report that Gaidai called Zakharov's adaptation 'an artistic crime' (2002: 301). Despite being rather fond of the rest of Zakharov's work, I found myself in this case nodding in full agreement with Gaidai's assessment.

The latest 2004 Russian-Ukrainian co-produced adaptation is a musical comedy based on an idea of one of Russia's most successful producers, Konstantin Ernst (who in the same year produced the cult Russian film *Nochnoi dozor / Night Watch*). Evidently, the film is in intertextual dialogue with the two previous Russian adaptations, with Maksim Papernik's version building upon these. He borrows from their eccentric carnivalesque aesthetics, particularly from Zakharov's music hall numbers which include, in Papernik's version, musical and dance numbers in a cabaret style with over the top, kitsch, shiny costumes and semi-naked dancers. Thus, arguably, as well as popular entertainment the film is also a comment on the commercialization of contemporary Russian society and culture.

This idea is reinforced by the framing of the film's plot within the process of the novel's writing, including imaginary dialogues between the two authors, bringing it closer to the contemporary Russian cultural scene. The end result is a caricature of post-Soviet society, voicing concerns about the rapid commercialization of traditional Russian values. For example, owing to the novel's huge commercial success, in the film the two authors become rich and famous. Initially, one of the writers laments the loss of appetite for serious literature and art, but complies with his partner's insistence that they have to respond to the renewed public demand for light entertainment, adventure and detective novels. So, the updated metatext of the original novel this time comments on the contemporary Russian craze for detective novels and films; and, possibly, also on the

decision of intellectuals, such as Boris Akunin, to write popular detective novels. (Akunin's so-called 'postmodern Russian Imperial detective genre style', for example, was branded 'highly successful pulp' by Perry Anderson, in Luke Harding 2007). The two (fictitious) authors in Papernik's 2004 adaptation of *Twelve Chairs* spell out that their novel is 'about the hero of our time': an ironic allusion to the renewed prominence of the trickster in post-Soviet society (rather than to Lermontov's novel *Geroi nashego vremeni / The Hero of Our Time*). The last part of the adaptation is focused on the contemporary Russian taste for travel and a life of luxury and glamour. The two fictitious authors (Il'f and Petrov) are shown to enjoy a celebrity lifestyle, living the dream of their famous protagonist (and anti-hero), Ostap Bender, to the full. The implication is that in today's Russian society even talented artists have succumbed to the demand for mass entertainment and to the temptations of fame and money.

There is also a Russian-German transnational adaptation, made the same year, which was shown during the 2004 Berlin film festival. It has been critically acclaimed as an avant-garde film, made by a renowned German auteur Utter Ottinger. However, the indignation of online comments by Russian viewers demonstrates that avant-garde art remains too elitist for the public.

### **3.5 Adaptation as Revision or as Aesopian Reading of Contemporary Mores**

It is important to remember that film is not only a reflection of a current society but also illustrates the way that this society would like to project and view itself on the screen. As observed by Stam & Raengo, reception theory has created space for 'the idea of adaptation as supplementing the gaps of the literary text' (2005: 10), as a critical and historical re-evaluation of the past from a present perspective. He is correct in his assumption that any issues revolving around identity (feminism, queer theory, post-coloniality, or normative race), have all had an impact on the theory of adaptation, causing a revisionist view of literary history and the canon.

In the 1970s, for example, many of the Cuban and Russian classics were reworked and adapted according to the socialist realist canon. Whereas some Soviet adaptations of the Russian classics prove to be somewhat subversive and nostalgic for previous, more comfortable lifestyles or easier access to foreign travel, others were much more revisionist and politically correct. A similar process was observed, at the time, in Cuban

film. A good example of this ‘revisionist tendency’ is the 1974 film *El otro Francisco / The Other Francisco* by the Cuban director Sergio Giral. The film effectively deconstructs and reassembles the history of slavery, practically rewriting it from the point of view of the victory of the Revolution and socialist realism. Afterwards, the 1970s were assessed as the ‘quinquenio gris’ / the grey five years by Fornet, and more recently were even called the ‘decentio negro’ / the black decade in Cuba (see García Borrero 2002: 99). García Borrero (one of Cuba’s most respected contemporary film critics) comments on the damaging effect of the institutionalization of Marxist ideology in Cuban culture at the First National Congress of Education and Culture in Havana, 23-30 April 1971, which coincided with Padilla’s 27 April self-censure of his book of poetry *Fuera del juego* (García Borrero 2002: 101). Eventually the artistic merits of Padilla’s book were recognised, yet, as García Borrero points out, during the period 1970–1972 only a few feature films were made; during the rest of the 1970s contemporary subjects were avoided or approached in a dull, politically correct manner. Such films include *El hombre del Maisinicú / The Man from Maisinicú*, Manuel Pérez (1973), *Ustedes tienen la palabra / Now it’s up to you*, Manuel Octavio Gómez (1974), *El brigadista / The Literacy Teacher* Octavio Cortázar (1977), and *Patty Candela* Rogelio París (1976) (see García Borrero 2002: 99-100). As observed by García Borrero, the majority of the films of the 1970s shifted their attention to the examination of the national and continental history instead of investigating contemporary Cuban society (2002: 100). Nevertheless, a more daring film like Solás’s *Un día del noviembre / A November day* (1972) was premiered only six years later (García Borrero 2002: 100).

Furthermore, depending on its contextualization, adaptations such as Gutiérrez Alea’s *La última cena / The Last Supper* (1976), for example, can reveal the possibility of an ambiguous, Aesopian double reading: the film can be interpreted either as a caustic satire of the hypocrisy of Catholicism<sup>66</sup> or as a critique of any kind of extreme dogmatic belief.<sup>67</sup> As noted by García Borrero, Gutiérrez Alea’s *Los sobrevivientes / The Survivors* (1978) declared, originally, the final victory of socialism in Cuba; some years later, though, the film acquired a rather different meaning that completely cancelled out its previous one (2002: 105). Now the film’s caustic satire can be read as a fable, an allegory

<sup>66</sup> According to Michael Wayne, for example, the film is an example of militant, Revolutionary filmmaking (Wayne 2001: 64-67).

<sup>67</sup> Note the suggestive parallel between religion and Marxism-Leninism in Tsvetan Todorov’s 2001 article.

and a condemnation of Cuba's Revolutionary government's isolationist policies, which, with hindsight, were assessed as damaging to Cuba's socialist future.

As in Giral's case, mentioned above, there is always the danger of going too far down the road of far-fetched positivism, revisionism and political correctness. This is why Stam & Raengo is quite right to insist that fidelity is still a valid issue, as it asks 'important questions about the filmic recreation of the setting, plot, characters, themes and style' (2005: 14). Because of the specificity of the medium of film adaptation, however, Stam & Raengo asserts that absolute fidelity is 'literally impossible' as filming involves thousands of possible choices concerning casting, directing, budgets, producers, location, formats, style and so on (2005: 17). Building on Bakhtin's statement that words are saturated with 'accents' and 'intonation', Stam & Raengo extrapolates further that when transferred to film, because of a film being directed (especially in the case of Auteurist cinema), the material undergoes further contextualization, amplification and focalization: through mise-en-scène, point of view, music, sound track, performance and other factors (2005: 19). Therefore, there is an automatic difference between a novel and any number of its adaptations, as I have shown here in terms of the comparison between Gutiérrez Alea's and Gaidai's adaptations of Il'f and Petrov's Soviet novel *Twelve Chairs*.

In conclusion, both adaptations are obvious reflections of their historical periods: Gutiérrez Alea's film is a joyful, uplifting representation of the initial transition to socialism in Cuban Revolutionary society, quite compatible with the spirit of the novel which also captures some of the initial enthusiasm of the transition from capitalism to socialism in Soviet Russia. Gaidai's adaptation, on the other hand, is more of a caricature of 'real socialism', rather than of the NEP, displaying fatigue with the repetition of over 40 year-old clichés and vilifications of the so-called 'remnants of the past' or the 'external enemies' of the socialist state. The focus of Gaidai's adaptation is upon Ostap's anarchic freedom and individualism, and, as such, can be read as a nostalgic reflection on the epoch of the NEP as a period of relative openness. The film also marks the transition (or the U-turn) from Khrushchev's Thaw – a period of limited reforms, similar to Lenin's NEP – and back towards a Stalinist style of party orthodoxy, dogmatism and stagnation during Brezhnev's rule.

Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation was the first post-1959 Cuban satiric comedy, and the first of few 1960s Cuban carnivalesque Revolutionary comedies that gave birth to the Cuban theory of *imperfect cinema* (formulated by García Espinosa) — a new kind of low

budget cinema of urgency, which sought to provoke thought and create a dialogue with its audience rather than full identification and escape from reality as in the case of commercial Hollywood-style cinema. Other examples of 1960s Cuban carnivalesque comedy and of imperfect cinema are Gutiérrez Alea's *La muerte* and García Espinosa's *Las aventuras de Juan Quin Quin / The Adventures of Juan Quin Quin* (1967).<sup>68</sup>

As noted by Prokhorov, Gaidai's adaptation marks a new period in his oeuvre. His eccentric comedies made him the most significant Soviet comedy filmmaker of the 1960s, which also meant a shift in direction for Soviet film comedy of the 1970s (see Prokhorov 2003: 472). In fact the film represents the transition from a physical, gags-driven comedy, associated with Gaidai, to narrative-driven comedy, whose champion in the following 1970s and 1980s was Riazanov (whose oeuvre is discussed in the next Chapter Four, Part II).

As demonstrated in Chapter Three, Gutiérrez Alea and Gaidai's are only two amongst numerous adaptations of Il'f and Petrov's cult novel, all completely different and original in their own right, made at various epochs and in various countries. Yet they are all metatexts of the novel, for they all depart from its core mythical story (ur-text). The contextual and intertextual analysis of these two particular adaptations has found evidence that from the very beginning of the 1960s there has been a significant intercultural dialogue between the two peripheral cinemas of Cuba and Russia. Each film, in its own right, has become an important cultural meta- or hypotext for ongoing cultural and intercultural dialogues, and has marked a new turn both in the oeuvre of the filmmakers and in the inception of national and transnational film trends.

Prokhorov has claimed that 'Gaidai's comedies of the 1960s owed their phenomenal success to the visual style of his humour, in a stark contrast to the verbal instantiations of official Soviet ideology', giving Riazanov's *Karnaval'naia noch' / Carnival Night* as an example of official, narrative-driven comedy. Some critics consider the film an outright copy of Aleksandrov's popular 1938 *Volga, Volga* — Stalin's favourite comedy — and have prejudged it as an example of an 'officially sanctioned carnival of authority' (Evgenii Dobrenko 1995: 52; Prokhorov 2003: 456). I will re-examine this claim in the following chapter, arguing that the film is a potentially subversive reassessment of the

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<sup>68</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Juan Quin Quin*.

original and that Riazanov's works often expanded the limits of the permitted from within the officially sanctioned parameters.

## **PART II. THE 1980s: THE REAPPEARANCE OF SOCIAL COMEDY AND SATIRE WITH MELODRAMATIC AND FANTASTIC OVERTONES**

### **INTRODUCTION: MELODRAMATIC SATIRE AND THE BLACK HUMOUR TREND. EARLY *PERESTROIKA* AND CUBAN RECTIFICATION HUMOUR OF THE MID 1980S - EARLY 1990S**

In this part (Part II) I discuss the reappearance of black humour and social satire on contemporary subjects in Cuban and Soviet Russian cinema in the 1980s. At this time there was a marked return to the popular genres of melodrama and social comedy based upon everyday issues. I shall argue that by the late 1980s these two popular genres had merged into the hybrid genre of tragicomedy, with increasingly dark elements of social satire and black surreal humour.

Horton has asserted that in the last years of the Soviet Union, during *perestroika* and in the early post-Soviet years (1986-1993) there was a move ‘from a liberating joyful carnivalesque form of satire to a darkly troubling formula in which both the carnivalesque and satiric laughter completely break’ (Horton 1993: 138). Furthermore, he also claims that ‘the satire is always in danger of breaking down, becoming something else’ (Horton 1993: 138). Mark Polizzotti also observes that satire, one of black humour’s main components, always threatens to collapse into tragedy or a caricature (see Polizzotti’s foreword to André Breton 1997: vi). In her book on East Central European film, Iordanova comments on the reappearance of black comedy and satire in Eastern Europe, stating that ‘the 1980s can be seen as the autumn years of socialism, ultimately marked by turmoil and growing political discontent, as well as political filmmaking inspired by the Soviet policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*’ (2003: 8-9). She notes that the years 1980-1990 saw a growing dissident resistance and also the best works of political film, whose foundation and standards were established earlier in the 1960s by the Czechoslovakian and Polish cinema New Waves whose thematic and daring aesthetics became prototypes for filmmakers in other socialist countries.<sup>69</sup> Examples of the earlier cycle of surreal black socialist comedies and satires from the mid 1960s and the early 1970s and ones from the 1980s-1990s can be found in Cook (1996), Iordanova (2003) and Geoff King (2002).

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<sup>69</sup> See also ‘Subversion in Eastern Europe: Aesopian Metaphors’, in Vogel (2005: 139-59).

Iordanova insists that some similarities with other non-European cinemas, such as the cinemas from the Third World, or American independent filmmaking simply ‘beg comparison’ (Iordanova 2003: 19). This is confirmed by Geoff King’s evaluation of satire ‘as a comedy with an edge and a target, usually social or political’, including examples from America, Cuba, former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (2002: 93).<sup>70</sup> Also there he observes that in political satire there is ‘an uneasy line between comedy and more obviously “serious” and contentious material’, that ‘it can be relatively light and playful, or in deadly earnest’ (Geoff King 2002: 93). He points out that ‘the 1960s and 1970s were marked by the production of a number of prominent and biting black comedies and satires, usually understood as manifestations of a period of heightened social conflict and questioning of established values and institutions’ (Geoff King 2002: 94-95). For example, during this period the world saw anti-totalitarian black comedies, such as Jiří Menzel’s *Ostře sledované vlaky / Closely Observed Trains* (1966), (Czechoslovakia); carnivalesque satires about the absurdity of socialist economic management and social organization, such as Miloš Forman’s *Hoří, má panenko / The Fireman’s Ball* (1967), again from Czechoslovakia. However, there were also dark political and military satires produced during the same period in the First World, such as *Dr Strangelove* (1964), by Stanley Kubrick, UK; and *Catch-22* (1970), by Mike Nichols, US. They were marked by the apparent discontent with both the socialist and the capitalist systems, which culminated in the year 1968, with numerous risings and student revolts in Paris, Washington, Mexico, Prague and many other places on the globe.<sup>71</sup>

Geoff King correctly concludes that striking similarities are found in the targets of satires produced in very different parts of the world (2002: 102). Politics, politicians, and bureaucratic institutions are favourite subjects because of their potential for radical social critique (Geoff King 2002: 102). In Part II and Part III, I will argue that the overwhelming return of black humour and political satire in the 1980s in Cuba, Russia and the rest of the Soviet bloc countries was triggered by the deepening crisis of late socialism. As observed by Iordanova, the 1980s-1990s were ‘an era of gradual weakening of state socialist regimes, enhanced by the important impact of the policies of *glasnost* (openness), *perestroika* (economic restructuring) and the various reform movements

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<sup>70</sup> See his chapter ‘Satire and Parody’, in Geoff King (2002: 93-128).

<sup>71</sup> See Tariq Ali & Susan Watkins on the 1968 revolts (1998).

targeting the undemocratic political structures and the inefficient economies of the Eastern Bloc' (2003: 9).

Here in Part II I focus mostly on the comparison and analysis of satiric comedies from the Early *Glasnost* Laughter period, up until 1988, which marks the return to black surreal humour during the 1980s in Cuba and Soviet Russia. I argue that the films from early *perestroika* (economic restructuring)<sup>72</sup> and its Cuban equivalent, *rectificación* (rectification),<sup>73</sup> are grey carnivalesque comic melodramas or tragicomedies, as in the main they focus upon the greyness of everyday life, used as a metaphor in socialist film.<sup>74</sup> Their primary topic is the economic inefficiency and dogmatism of socialist bureaucratic machinery. I have chosen here two landmark films as the most representative examples of this first phase of the transformational process, marked by a wave of grey, comic melodramas (or tragicomedies) focused upon everyday issues.

In Chapter Four, Part II, I analyse Riazanov's *Zabytaia melodiia* (1987), the first dark comedy of *perestroika* which is in fact about *perestroika* itself. I shall discuss it within the socio-political and cultural context of its time, within the context of Riazanov's oeuvre, and within the wider framework of the Russian and European black comedy tradition. In Chapter Five, Part II, I examine Tabío's *Plaff* (1988) in the light of Castro's more modest campaign (in comparison to *perestroika*) of *rectificación*, and the state of Cuban cinema in the 1980s. In addition I also consider the film within the context of Cuban post-1959 *imperfect cinema*, which it parodies with comic and satiric effect, as well as within the framework of earlier Cuban black comedy cinema (including Gutiérrez Alea's *La muerte*) and the Latin American / Hispanic satiric and surrealist film tradition, in the light of Luis Buñuel's work. In the concluding, comparative chapter (Chapter Six, Part II) I comment on the features that make these two films key, landmark works of the 1980s socialist parody and satire and important examples of socialist black humour.

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<sup>72</sup> Reforms for economic restructuring and democratization of the Soviet system, associated with Mikhail Gorbachev's coming in power on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, 1985 ([http://www.britanica.com/nobelprize/article\\_9037405](http://www.britanica.com/nobelprize/article_9037405), [last accessed 08 / 09 / 2011]).

<sup>73</sup> The 'process of rectification of the errors and negative tendencies' was launched on the Third Congress of Cuba's Communist Party, held in 1986 (Angelo Trento 2000: 98); also mentioned by Chanan (2004: 428). This was a strategy to get the Cuban economy out of recession by attracting foreign capital and tourism (Trento 2000: 99).

<sup>74</sup> Jordanova mentions the metaphor of the greyness of everyday life, and life in dimly lit corridors, Communist penal colonies and monstrous apartment buildings, in the films of Central European socialist countries (2002: 92-93). These are seen, for example, in Riazanov's *Vokzal dlia dvoikh / Station for Two* (1982).

Until 1988, the predominant trend of humour in socialist countries was one of a more grey kind of carnivalesque humour, focused on the absurdity of everyday life.<sup>75</sup> (In the interests of differentiation from late *glasnost*'s dark dystopian humour I refer to early *perestroika* comedies as grey carnivals rather than black comedies.) Both films discussed here start as carnivalesque comedies, yet eventually become melodramatic satires and end as tragicomedies. Both films display strong carnivalesque elements, such as transgressive comic inversion and grotesque realism. Riazanov's sad romantic comedies are closely associated with this kind of humour, particularly his increasingly dark melodramatic comedies of the 1980s. His only *perestroika* comedy, *Zabytaia melodiia*, is a tragicomedy, whilst his next film, *Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna / Dear Elena Sergeevna* (1988)<sup>76</sup> is a tragedy.

*Zabytaia melodiia* is a generic mix of accusatory satire, melodrama, bedroom farce and tragedy, containing very realistic, almost documentary-like scenes as well as some mystic, surreal, oneiric ones. Tabío's *Plaff*, on the other hand, is a self-reflexive and subversive travesty of all 'sacred' Revolutionary institutions and dogmas, particularly of Cuban Revolutionary cinema and its official canon. The film is one of the classic examples of socialist black comedy, mentioned together with Gutiérrez Alea's *La muerte* by Geoff King in his book on film comedy (2002: 107). It is a playful, hugely experimental, clever and surprisingly entertaining self-reflexive parody of Espinosa's theory of 'imperfect cinema'. However, as noted by Chanan (2004: 439), the film is more than a mere deconstruction of Espinosa's 1967 classic model of imperfect cinema, the carnivalesque comedy *Juan Quin Quin*, or of the enormously popular genre of melodrama in Cuba. *Plaff* not only subverts the ideology behind these two popular genres but also addresses the power strategies behind government institutions. This is why the film's tragic end transforms *Plaff* from a farcical, carnivalesque parody into a tragic, pessimistic satire, making it rather uncomfortable viewing (Chanan 2004: 440).

The subsequent period, 1989-1993, in both countries was a dark period of almost complete economic collapse, of forced transformation and transition to a market economy (albeit to much lesser degree in socialist Cuba). The period was marked by black,

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<sup>75</sup> See Reizen, in Horton 1993: 95.

<sup>76</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Elena Sergeevna*.

macabre, allegoric comedies and satires, bordering on the absurd and tragic. This subject will be the focus of the following Part III.

It was widely accepted, with hindsight, that the subsequent collapse of socialism in the former Soviet bloc was attributable to the processes of globalization. I argue here that the return to satire and black absurdist humour in these two countries is part of a wider trend, shared by all the countries of the former Soviet bloc. This trend was triggered by the effects of globalization and the ongoing, at the time, deep crisis of late socialism. Iordanova, for example, has observed that during this period there was ‘a significant body of surrealist works, as well as widespread interest in magic realism’ in Eastern and Central European cinema (2003: 117).

**CHAPTER FOUR: EL'DAR RIAZANOV'S *ZABYTAIA MELODIA DLIA FLEITY* (1987) / *FORGOTTEN MELODY FOR FLUTE* (1987): FROM SAD COMEDY TO TRAGEDY**

**4.1 Synopsis. Historical Context – *Perestroika* and *Glasnost***

Leonid, an official government censor working for the Central Office of Leisure Time, is busy with his bureaucratic duties of banning subversive avant-garde plays and sending choirs on pointless tours around the country, despite *glasnost* and *perestroika*. He suffers from a rare condition: Leonid always imagines the right course of action in his head, before saying in reality what his boss would like to hear. Suddenly, this routine is interrupted by a minor stroke. This incident puts him into the care of a young, pretty nurse, Lida, who works for his institution. She is also one of the actors in the amateur play he has just banned. Leonid becomes besotted with his nurse and attempts to corrupt her, clumsily, with rare delicacies that are beyond the reach of ordinary Soviet citizens. He does behave like an important boss around her, but more as a love-struck teenager. They have an affair and his clandestine meetings with Lida make Leonid jeopardize both his career and his loyalty to his wife, which in his case are one and the same thing. However, he is unable to choose one way or the other, becoming torn between the two women who symbolize two very different ways of life: on the one hand, there is a promotion, which is his as long as he stays with his wife, the daughter of a government official. This would mean foreign travel and a life of luxury and privilege, complete with a chauffeur-driven car. On the other hand, with Lida he has the chance of true love and happiness, but with it also possibly a life of relative poverty in a shared communal apartment rather than a spacious, luxurious flat. For a while Leonid seems much happier with this second alternative, yet eventually he returns to his career and to his earlier, financially secure and privileged life. Yet on the first day of his promotion he sees Lida leaving the Central Office and senses that he will never see her again. He suffers a heart attack and goes to purgatory, where his parents reprimand him for selling himself to the highest bidder. Alerted by the sirens and the ambulance Lida runs back, sensing that something must have happened to Leonid. She manages to resuscitate him with the kiss of life, but still leaves him to the life he has grown so accustomed to.

The film is based on an original Riazanov and Emil Braginskii play called *Amoral'naia istoria / Immoral Story*, written in the 1970s during the Brezhnev stagnation

period (Horton & Brashinsky 1992: 197). Thus it deals with Brezhnev's legacy of apathy, corruption and nepotism. Generically, *Zabytaia melodia* is a carnivalesque excess of bedroom farce, with elements of romantic comedy, satire and melodrama, and therefore, as noted by Horton and Brashinsky, it does not fit clearly within any of these single categories (Horton & Brashinsky 1992: 197-98). Horton and Brashinsky are correct when stating that the film is an intertextual, carnivalesque mosaic of Soviet, Russian and Western cultural forms, and that unravelling all its elements and influences would take a special study of its own (1992: 198). Still, I will start my analysis with an examination of the film's historical and cultural contexts and subtexts.

The Soviet Thaw produced a new breed of people, the *shestidesiatniki* (those of the 1960s), who were marked by the ideas of a more democratic kind of socialism, a 'socialism with a human face' (Lynne Attwood 1993; Iordanova 2003). They would not accept Brezhnev regime's attempts to turn the clock back completely, so the interest in the individual, rather than the collective, was retained. Riazanov and Gorbachev belonged to this generation.

The years in which Brezhnev ruled (1965-1982), particularly the 1970s, are now known as 'the era of stagnation' (Lynne Attwood 1993: 78). At the time, though, they were referred to as 'developed socialism' (Attwood 1993: 78) or 'really existing socialism' (Andrew Roberts 2004). When the authorities tried to return to Stalinist orthodoxy once more during Brezhnev's rule, people responded with a mixture of hypocrisy and cynicism: their private views differed from those they expressed in public. If in public they supported the system, in private they tended to criticize it (Attwood 1993: 78). This became a universal phenomenon in the former socialist countries, corroding the system's foundations from within and creating a space for corruption, opportunism and widespread hypocrisy. As the anecdote goes, people in the former Soviet bloc were saying one thing, thinking the opposite, and planning yet an alternative form of action. Reading between the lines and decoding newspaper articles or works of art became the norm. Because of tightened censorship, in the 1970s adaptation and historical films on national topics became the only way to provide a space for discussion on universal moral values and concerns, and this became a general trend in the former Socialist bloc. As noted by Iordanova, there were numerous historical allegories which relied heavily upon symbolism and Aesopian language, usually deliberately ambiguous

and difficult to decipher.<sup>77</sup> Such films, for example, include Gutiérrez Alea's *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios / A Cuban Fight against the Demons* (1971), and of course, Andrei Tarkovskii's oeuvre. Paradoxically, this only increased the artistic value of these films, with their directors becoming recognized as important film auteurs, making more explicit the dependency relationship between authority and transgression.<sup>78</sup>

In late 1970s, after some crop and production failures, it became apparent that the economy was failing to satisfy the essential needs of the Soviet population (Lawton 1992: 7; Attwood 1993: 78). This created massive discontent, and the black market took over the failing official economy whilst the disappointing official press and culture were challenged by underground versions such as *samizdat* and *magnitizdat*, disseminating the manuscripts and recordings of banned authors like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Vladimir Visotskii from person to person. In addition to the second economy and culture that ran alongside the official Soviet versions, there were now some dissident movements that also challenged the authorities (Attwood 1993: 79). For example, in 1965, at the very beginning of the Brezhnev era, Yurii Daniel and Andrei Sinyavskii were arrested for besmirching the Soviet state when, after a ban in Soviet Russia, their collection of satirical short stories were secretly smuggled out and published abroad (Attwood 1993: 79). They were subjected to a show trial reminiscent of the earlier Stalinist purges (Attwood 1993: 79).

For cinema, just as for the other cultural and social spheres, the Brezhnev era was a period of stagnation and apathy. Nevertheless, not all the gains of Khrushchev's Thaw were lost as 'responsible' analysis of some social problems was still permitted. However, there were ill-defined boundaries, which often created confusion amongst censors and artists alike. A soft form of censorship, known as self-censorship, became widespread, but owing to censorship in general, as noted by Iordanova, in the First World '[t]here was an unstated assumption that all good [Eastern bloc] films were shelved and only the mediocre ones released' (2003: 33). This often unjustified tendency in the First World to judge the artistry of cinematic works coming from the socialist camp according to their level of dissent was common practice until even recently. For example, during her visits to London in 2006, Mirtha Ibarra — one of the few true stars of Cuban post-1959 cinema

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<sup>77</sup> For more information on adaptations and historical allegories see Horton 1993: 20-35; 98-104; Iordanova 2003: 43-91; Chanan 2004: 305-94.

<sup>78</sup> For more on this subject, see Bonnie Byaendlin & Hans Byaendlin (1996).

(and widow of Gutiérrez Alea) – complained of this sad state of affairs. She expressed the mounting frustration of many Cuban filmmakers, who were often put under double pressure by being torn between the demands of their government for loyalty to the Revolution and those of the foreign investors, whose funding is so vital to the survival of ICAIC.<sup>79</sup>

When Leonid Brezhnev died in 1982 the country was in the hands of the ‘gerontocracy’ of the Communist leadership (Attwood 1993: 95). Michail Gorbachev only came to power due to the successive deaths of such leaders (Iurii Andropov, Gorbachev’s mentor, at 69 was the youngest of the ‘ruling’ generation). When Gorbachev came to office he was only 54, and from a very different generation. If his predecessors had established their careers under Stalin, his political experiences were formed during the Thaw. According to his own testimony, he knew then that all was not well with the Soviet system (Attwood 1993: 99). As Andropov’s protégé, Gorbachev continued his predecessor’s work of eliminating the moral degeneration of Soviet life, starting with the elimination of corruption amongst the leadership and widespread apathy and drunkenness in society (Attwood 1993: 99). Within two years in power he had introduced two new terms: *perestroika* and *glasnost*.

*Perestroika* was supposed to deal with the economy and to encourage managers to focus on the cost-effectiveness of their enterprises. In early *perestroika* there was a return to the ideas of Lenin’s NEP, from the 1920s (Attwood 1993: 99-100). The main focus was on its positive effects on the Soviet economy, whilst its negative impacts on socialist society were largely overlooked (Attwood 1993: 100). In order to regain people’s confidence in the system, the government launched the *glasnost* campaign (Attwood 1993: 100). Books and films banned for years were finally released, and hidden aspects of history started to surface (Attwood 1993: 100). It soon became apparent, though, that *glasnost* was affecting society as a whole, with people demanding more political pluralism, something that Gorbachev did not foresee. Castro, however, was unhappy for some time with the developments in Moscow, increasingly seeing *perestroika* as a concession to capitalism. By mid-1988 there was an ideological split between Havana and Moscow (Chanan 2004: 444). Suddenly the *Moscow News*, a best-selling Soviet newspaper at the time in Havana, was banned (Chanan 2004: 445).

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<sup>79</sup> This certainly was the case when I visited the Havana film festival, in 2005. At times, I was under the impression that a few of the interviewees were giving me exactly what they thought I wanted to hear.

The rapid change and democratization that took place as a result of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, however, took everyone by surprise. As predicted by Castro, the authority of the Communist party was gradually challenged and undermined. As in the 1960s, the unrest escalated very quickly in the Central European region and then spread to the rest of the Eastern bloc. Years of suppressed anger and demands for democracy and freedom exploded both on the screens and on the streets.

At its Fifth congress in May 1986, the Union of Cinematographers voted against its old leadership and elected its first president, Elem Klimov, who was well respected for the uncompromising moral position of his films over the years (Attwood 1993: 105). A Conflict Commission was set up to review more than 200 banned films (Julian Graffy 1998: 186). A few years later, in 1989, the union dropped its charter concerning its allegiance to 'socialist realism' (which had already been ignored for years) and proclaimed its independence from state control, which marked the end of censorship (Attwood 1993: 105). *Glasnost* had a profound, revitalizing effect on film production (Attwood 1993: 106). By the year 1990, its peak, annual production rose to 300 films (Larsen 2003: 491).

As noted above, one of *glasnost's* first tasks was the objective revision of history (Attwood 1993: 106). It is important to remember that during the Thaw cinema underwent only partial de-Stalinization, and had experienced tighter censorship than the rest of the arts (Attwood 1993: 105). *Glasnost* went all the way, completely rejecting the Stalinist depiction of Soviet history and in the process undermining the foundations of Soviet ideology. (This is exemplified by Shakhnazarov's film *Gorod zero*, as discussed in Part III.)

As one of the 1960s generation, Gorbachev did not agree with the way that Lenin's ideas had been distorted by consecutive government officials. By the end of Brezhnev's rule there was widespread corruption amongst the Party elite, which rapidly stretched its tentacles all the way down, warping and mocking the most fundamental principles of Leninism. However, Gorbachev's reforms were not radical enough and could not satisfy the increased demands for political pluralism.

*Zabytaia melodia* depicts, rather faithfully, the nomenclatura's privileges, out of the reach of ordinary Soviet people: spacious apartments filled with luxurious, imported goods, chauffeur-driven cars, special hospitals and foreign travel. Although not publicized, these things were widely known facts and hugely resented by the general

public, and this was one of the main reasons why cynicism, opportunism and corruption proliferated fast in the 1970s, eventually affecting every segment of society (Lawton 1992: 8-9; Attwood 1993: 95).

During stagnation, the appointed head of GOSKINO (The State Committee for Cinematography) for the period 1972 – 1986 was Filipp Ermash (Lawton 1992: 8). Ermash himself was the epitome of the widespread problem with nepotism. He was not elected by the filmmakers, as one might expect, but was ‘planted’ directly by the Central Committee’s Department of Culture. This came as no surprise as he was a relative of Andrei Kirilenko, one of Brezhnev’s closest political associates, and thus benefited extensively from his high connections in the Politburo (Lawton 1992: 8-9).

In *Zabytaia melodia*, Riazanov reflects on such practices of nepotism and official corruption, exposing their disastrous effects on an increasingly disintegrating and polarized Soviet society. Leonid Filimonov, played by Leonid Filatov, as the main protagonist invokes the legacy of Leonid Brezhnev’s rule. Thanks to his marriage into the establishment, Leonid climbs all the way up from being a conservatoire musician to being the second in command at the Central Office of Leisure Time, the official censors’ bureau for amateur arts. The Office of Leisure Time is a fictitious organization through which Riazanov ironically mocks the government’s pathetic attempts to even control peoples’ free time. In 1985 the working title of the film was *The Ladder* which Ermash, of course, did not approve (Riazanov 2005: 454).

Ermash was a well known ‘admirer’ of the Hollywood film industry; thus GOSKINO returned to the idea of ‘films for the millions’, promoting commercially-orientated films that aimed to satisfy popular tastes. The *bytovoi* film – translated as ‘slice-of-life’, a mix between comedy and melodrama focused on everyday issues – was at the top of the box office charts in the early 1980s (Lawton 1992: 11). An example of such melodramas is Vladimir Menshov’s *Moskva slezam ne verit / Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1980), seen by 98 million viewers (Graffy 1998: 185). The film is a conservative, Hollywood-style modern fairy tale that shows its main protagonist enjoying a luxurious apartment and an abundance of food and goods; in other words, conditions that could not be further from Soviet reality.

However, after the enormous success of his 1975's romantic urban fairy tale *Ironiia sud'by ili s legim parom / The Irony of Fate*,<sup>80</sup> originally made for television, the undisputed champion of popular Soviet film and comedy of the 1970s and 80s was Riazanov; overtaking Gaidai, the 1960s king of Soviet comedy, in popularity (Prokhorov 2003: 472). Riazanov is responsible for some of the most popular Soviet comedies, a combination '[of] realism, romance, satire, farce and fantasy' (Horton & Brashinsky 1992: 196). Thus, according to Horton and Brashinsky, the formula for his success was the hybrid blend of joyful and accusatory laughter (Horton & Brashinsky 1992: 196) or the amalgamation of light, often romantic, comedy with a few satirical elements.

#### 4.2 Riazanov's Early Influences, Recurring Themes, and Aesthetics

Riazanov graduated from VGIK (The Soviet State Film Institute) under the legendary filmmakers Grigorii Kozintsev and Sergei Eisenstein. He is the co-writer of many of his scripts, most of which were born in partnership with Braginskii. *Zabytaia melodia* was the last item on a long list originating from their joint partnership (nine scripts in all, see Riazanov 2005). In addition to Kozintsev and Eisenstein, Riazanov names as his third mentor Ivan Pyr'ev, who encouraged and guided him during the making of *Karnaval'naia noch' / Carnival Night* (1956), his first feature comedy (Riazanov 2005: 55). Aleksandrov and Pyr'ev were the masters of 1930s Soviet musical comedy, a genre loved by the Soviet people. Later, they were accused of creating a genre that had 'varnished' reality – in Russian *lakirovka* – that is, that had glossed over the truth of the horrors of the Stalinist regime (MacFadyen 2003: 48). However, during those times of stagnation and consolidation a degree of conformism and affirmation of state propaganda was the difference between life and death, as many of the colleagues with whom they had created those films, unfortunately, found out. These films were populated with unnaturally happy faces, smiling at any given time. As argued by the celebrated critic Maia Turovskaia, this in itself represented an ironic, transgressive statement (Turovskaia in Horton 1993: 75-82).

In 1956, Pyr'ev was director of (the Moscow Film Studios). He tried to encourage young directors to work in the genre of comedy; however, there was still great fear of

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<sup>80</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Ironiia sud'by*.

satire amongst the younger generation. Up until then Riazanov had worked for MOSFIL'M's newsreel section. When he left, he dreamt of making serious, tragic films, just like his teachers Grigorii Kozintsev and Eisenstein. Instead, Riazanov succumbed to Pyr'ev's pressure and agreed to make a comedy. Nevertheless, he tried not to fall into the satire trap (Riazanov 2005: 49-51).

His feature debut, *Karnaval'naia*, was a remake of Aleksandrov's *Volga, Volga* (1938). The film was made at the beginning of Khrushchev's Thaw, and, despite its continuity with and construction upon established Soviet musical comedy formulas, it had more narrative twists and a refreshing approach to the topic of Stalinist dogmatism and standardization (Gillespie 2003: 46; MacFadyen 2003: 57). Riazanov used comedy as an opportunity to initiate the process of the de-Stalinization of Soviet society, targeting dogmatic and uniform ways of thinking and encouraging, instead, fresh thought and originality. In the film, the focus visibly shifts away from the collective and more towards the happier individual as a part of a happier collective, and this is what makes it a film of the Thaw. MacFadyen argues convincingly that the film is Riazanov's first attempt at a dialogue and negotiation 'between two forms of socialization: the ideological versus the universal, dogma versus difference' (2003: 54). The director's subsequent films certainly address many related issues based on this fundamental contradiction in Soviet society. Variations on the theme can be found in *Garazh / Garage* (1980),<sup>81</sup> *Vokzal dlia dvoikh / Station for Two* (1982)<sup>82</sup> and, all of which touch on the topic of contradiction: between one's private needs and public (social) role; between ideals and dreams versus reality; between censors, artists and others; and the clash between dogma and universal humanist values.

Riazanov's 1970s comedies were, arguably, naively optimistic about the possibility for integration between these two poles through the miracle of love. Yet *Garazh*, a caustic and angry satire on the corrupting and dehumanizing effects of power, marks a watershed, a point of no return and complete disenchantment with the system. From this point onwards Riazanov's films become increasingly dark and pessimistic. Thus his *Vokzal* and *Zabytaia melodia* are dark, melodramatic tragicomedies, while *Zhestokii romans / A Cruel Romance* (1984) and *Dorogaiia Elena Sergeevna / Dear Elena*

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<sup>81</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Garazh*.

<sup>82</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Vokzal*.

*Sergeevna* (1988) are dramatic tragedies. The former was an adaptation of a classic work that dwells on cruel social constraints, while the latter attacks, head-on, the inhumanity of ideological dogmatism as the root of all evils in Soviet society.

Nicholas Galichenko and Robert Allington report that Riazanov's satire *Garazh* was harshly criticised and shown only for a limited time (Galichenko and Allington, 1991: 113). They observe that from the very beginning of his career Riazanov loved to poke fun at bureaucrats and the privileged elites (Galichenko and Allington 1991: 113). They also note that Filimonov's forefather is Ogurtsov from *Karnaval'naia* (Galichenko and Allington 1991: 113).

In *Zabytaia melodia*, Riazanov recycles many of his previous themes, this time exposing the links between stagnation, mounting bureaucracy, corruption, opportunism, nepotism, organized crime, hypocrisy, social polarization and disintegration. The film is self-referential and also intertextual, as it refers to some of his previous comedies, to Russian literary works, to Soviet and Italian film classics, and more. With this film Riazanov renders bare the psychology and pathology of the Soviet bureaucratic apparatus and its destructive role in society. He takes a fresh look at old characters, such as the familiar Ogurtsov, yet the director has lost his romantic beliefs in the miraculous power of love. Even love's redemptive grace cannot change someone as corrupted by privilege and power as Leonid. Riazanov uses, again, the same caustic satire found in *Garazh* and also, for the first time, black surreal humour. Yet thanks to the strong elements of bedroom farce and melodrama, the film ends up as a black carnivalesque comedy or tragicomedy rather than as an allegoric satire (like the later Shakhnazarov film *Gorod Zero*, discussed in Chapter Nine, Part III). Then again, Riazanov always preferred the tragicomic, carnivalesque mix of genres, as he believed that it best represents the richness and complexity of life (2005: 100).

As noted in the last section of Part I, Prokhorov and, particularly, Dobrenko have argued that *Karnaval'naia* is a straight remake of Stalin's favourite comedy, *Volga, Volga*, and as such is not a real carnival but a 'carnival of authority' that marks a return to narrative, ideologically driven cinema (Dobrenko 1995: 52; Prokhorov 2003: 456). Gillespie and MacFadyen, on the other hand, insist that the film is a mockery of Stalinist kind of bureaucracy, of its narrow-mindedness, uniformity and dogmatism (MacFadyen 2003: 57). Its representative is the bureaucrat Ogurtsov, played (again) by Igor Ilinskii, who previously portrayed Byvalov in Aleksandrov's *Volga, Volga*. Similarly to Leonid in

*Zabytaia melodia*, Ogurtsov is a director of a ‘house of culture’ that prepares a New Year’s Show. The young students defy his unimaginative, uniform, antiquated methods and, despite his bureaucratic efforts to ruin the night for everyone, they manage to stage a very different, original and exciting show (see Gillespie 2003: 46).

I tend to agree with Gillespie and Mac Fadyen that this is, clearly, a film of the Thaw, marking the beginning of the de-Stalinization process: a carnivalesque rejection of the old stagnant uniformity and a celebration of the birth of a new world that favours originality (see Gillespie 2003: 46). Departing from an established yet genuinely popular formula, the film was refreshing and entertaining, inspiring hope that change is possible. By the end of the film Ogurtsov’s stupidity and lack of imagination are exposed fully, making him the stage buffoon. However, the ending of the film is a warning that Ogurtsov’s kind should be ridiculed and fought but never underestimated. Rather perceptively, Gillespie points out that while in Aleksandrov’s *Volga, Volga* the Stalinist bureaucrat Byvalov simply fades from view, in Riazanov’s *Karnaval’naia* Ogurtsov reappears after the closing credits and in a menacing manner directly addresses the viewers, denying any responsibility for what has happened (Gillespie 2003: 46).

I agree with Gillespie that this can be read as a warning to the public that Ogurtsov and what he stands for could easily return; that his kind has not been fully eliminated or defeated and that the happy ending of *Karnaval’naia*, promising a new order, might only be short lived (Gillespie 2003: 46). In other words, the worst thing about Ogurtsov and his ilk is that they are survivors who are able to wait for an opportune moment to return. They never accept responsibility for failure or leave the stage voluntarily. Thus the conflict in the film is not simply generational, but also between the government censors and the young artists, who naturally seek more freedom of expression — also one of the conflicts in *Zabytaia melodia*. However, the strength of the satiric criticism of the film is lessened by the love and romance and the music, which help to create an uplifting and positive comic climate.

With Leonid from his *perestroika* film *Zabytaia melodia*, Riazanov clearly returns to this same topic just as Gutiérrez Alea returned to the topic of ubiquitous bureaucracy, addressed first in his *La muerte* (in 1966) and then again in *Guantanamera* (in 1995). However this time Riazanov launches an open attack on Soviet bureaucracy and censorship, for him the most regrettable, harmful, enduring and symptomatic legacy of stagnation. Filimonov represents the ubiquitous Soviet bureaucratic apparatus as a deadly

force that destroys every segment of Soviet life and society. This is conveyed symbolically by the sorry fate of the Tambov choir, whose predominantly female members have been forgotten by Leonid and left to linger on the roads of Soviet Russia. Desperate to get home, they end up in prison for selling their folkloric costumes in order to pay for their return journey. Riazanov implies that these problems are not new, but rather inherited from the country's autocratic tsarist past and its longstanding tradition of widespread corruption amongst government officials. The bureaucrats excel in one thing only – securing their posts, whatever the costs. The communication of this message is achieved via intertextual literary reference to Gogol's play *Revizor / The Inspector General*, which satirizes the degrading, routine corruption amongst provincial tsarist government officials, and through Leonid's (twisted logic and) spiritual death, who for the sake of a short-lived promotion sacrifices his own happiness.

When viewing Gogol's play, Leonid, in his official role as a censor, does not miss the parallel with the current situation in 1980s Soviet Russia. Officially he pretends to give his approval, but a moment later turns to his assistant with the order to close the subversive play immediately. Thus Riazanov implies that during *perestroika* bureaucrats resorted to more indirect and sophisticated forms of censorship (such as bad publicity) but that they had not changed in principle. The reference to Gogol can also be read as a general charge against any form of oppression. Such periods of stagnation and autocratic rule prove to be the breeding ground for censorship and bureaucracy, a prime time for the likes of Ogurtsov.

However, what is new in *Zabytaia melodia* is its self-reflexivity, and the successful recruiting of a former artist, Leonid Filimonov, a conservatoire musician, which in a way gives the system weight and legitimacy. Filimonov is not like Ogurtsov and his kind, who are either party functionaries or blatantly opportunistic individuals like Leonid's assistant, an ambitious professional climber who starts off as the former chauffeur of a high party official and pledges his loyalty to Leonid as long as he is in a position of power. Filimonov is a modern kind of a bureaucrat: a strange, half-breed creature somewhere between an artist and a bureaucrat, who has succumbed to the corruption of privilege and power. Thus Riazanov turns the spotlight this time on the dubious role of some intellectuals and fellow artists, supportive of the official party line. The film targets those artists who have sold their souls to their natural enemies, the censors, for the sake of boring, meaningless bureaucratic careers, foreign travels and certain material benefits.

What is worse is that, unlike Ogurtsov, Leonid obviously knows right from wrong. He plays the role of a modern, more liberal kind of government censor well enough to cause some initial confusion about his real intentions. However, Riazanov makes clear that the new, modern kind of bureaucrats will be just as ineffective as the likes of Ogurtsov. They all talk of change but, as usual, do nothing. This is Riazanov's main criticism of Gorbachev's *perestroika*: that it has put the same kind of people in charge of the reforms who caused the problems in the first place. All they have done is hijack *perestroika* and *glasnost*'s slogans of openness and regeneration, using them as a camouflage and thus turning the reforms into a farce. Below, in the following section, before continuing with an analysis of *Zabytaia melodia*, I shall comment on Riazanov's earlier popular comedies, which make explicit the gradual evolution and change of his (and society's) attitude towards the Soviet system.

#### **4.3 Favourite Topics. Stylistics. Possible Russian, Soviet or European Film Influences**

In an early article on Riazanov's oeuvre in *Soviet Film*, Naia Zorkaia remarks that his comedies are a blend of both the ordinary and the extraordinary, using an atypical situation as a device for miraculous metamorphosis thus allowing a closer psychological look at his protagonists' personalities (Zorkaia 1Dec 1973: 37). As noted by Beumers, New Year's Eve is an ideal setting for such miracles and Riazanov has used it both in *Karnaval'naia* and *Ironiia sud'by* (Beumers 2000: 192-96). Both films are now Soviet comedy classics and part of traditional Russian New Year's television viewing. Up until *Garazh* (1980), his films were built around a life-changing romance, a miracle occurring in the midst of the grimmest of realities and circumstances. This became his signature formula and the secret of his sad comedies' popular appeal, with *Ironiia sud'by* (1975) putting him clearly ahead of Gaidai. In a 1976 interview with Marina Istiushina and again later, in his book, Riazanov comments that comedies and satires cannot eradicate evil but they can help to fight evil in society 'and foster a critical attitude towards anything that impedes society's progress' (in interview with Istiushina 1976: 17). Echoing Bakhtin (by then published in Russia) Riazanov claims that comedy is the most democratic genre, as it was born on the market square (1976: 19). Zorkaia also notes his predilection for carnival (1973: 37). As mentioned earlier, New Year's Eve is a particular favourite

festive time for him, when, as argued by Bakhtin (1968), the official rules are temporarily suspended and the social order is turned upside-down.

Gillespie has observed that during the stagnation years, ‘the ideological importance of comedy was still emphasised’ (2003: 37). As mentioned previously in Part I, during the 1970s comedy filmmakers hid behind satiric Russian and Soviet classics, like Gaidai, or mixed joyful comedy with satiric elements, like Danelia and Riazanov’s sad comedies. Riazanov managed to make few bold comedies, with a sharper satirical (a)political edge (Gillespie 2003: 46). Paradoxically, as noted by Iordanova (2003), the apolitical return to humanist ideas had a very political resonance in the former socialist countries. Therefore it is possible to argue that even Riazanov’s earlier film *Beregis’ avtomobilia / Beware of Cars* (1966)<sup>83</sup> is actually a rather emotive and subversive tragicomedy.

Detochkin, the main protagonist of this film, is a child-like, good and decent human being whose Quixotic, idealistic actions expose the paradox of the Soviet system, where the authorities preach the kind of behaviour that in practice they themselves find impossible to defend. Again, Detochkin seems to suffer from some form of double identity: he is a shrewd insurer during the day but a daring, Robin Hood-like character at night, when he steals the cars of corrupt individuals in order to sell them and donate the money to an orphanage. When finally apprehended, he is treated by the law as insane, as a holy fool (a figure that has a long history in Russian art, and represents the myth of the mysterious Russian soul, idealism and spirituality). The sympathetic prosecutor is so moved by his story that he ends up prosecuting the state’s judicial system and defending Detochkin’s actions instead. Thus the film puts the system’s moral foundations on trial, questioning why socialist theory has ended up being no more than an unworkable utopian fairytale in 1960s Soviet Russia thus exposing the disparity between its theory (ideology) and its practice.

It is no wonder that the authorities would not allow the production of this film prior to the original story, written with Braginskii, being published and reprinted a few times.<sup>84</sup> This was one of Riazanov’s ingenious strategies for outmanoeuvring the censors: trying every possible media until eventually succeeding in telling the story that he felt strongly about. If Riazanov did not succeed in making a film at his first attempt, he would either

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<sup>83</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Beregis’*.

<sup>84</sup> See MadFadyen 2003: 116, and Riazanov 2005.

publish the story or stage it. As a rule, adaptations were more likely to be passed by the vigilant censors, and if they were approved first for the theatre there was an improved chance of getting them filmed on second attempt. According to Riazanov's account he even had some problems with *Ironiia sud'by*, once again resolved thanks to Brezhnev's love of comedy, or rather because Brezhnev was not as witty as his censors (2005). *Zabytaia melodia* was at first rejected, under its previous title *The Ladder*, by Ermash. Originally, Riazanov wanted to make *Elena Sergeevna* after *Vokzal*, in 1982; however, the film was made almost clandestinely, and its shooting began before the finishing of *Zabytaia melodia*.<sup>85</sup> Evidently Riazanov's tactics, just like his comedies, were neither passive nor innocent and, if anything, prove his resourcefulness and great determination.

Under scrutiny, his deceptively mild satiric comedies prove to be rather complex and subversive. For example, one can conclude, ironically, that Detochkin's Quixotic idealism was inspired by the best examples of socialist realism and official Communist ideology, as he was born and bred by the Revolution. However, as subtly implied by Riazanov, this idealism is far too impractical for the 'really existing socialism'. It is also possible to argue that through one of the two main protagonists of *Vokzal*, Platon (Oleg Basilashvili), Riazanov again suggests that in Soviet Russia the best, most exemplary citizens, contrary to expectations, are in fact treated as holy fools (if not idiots) and left to rot in jail for the crimes committed by other unscrupulous but prosperous selfish (new) members of Soviet society. The character of Platon is an obvious allusion to Lev (in English Leo) Nikolaevich Tolstoi's *Voina i Mir / War and Peace*'s profoundly tragic character of Platon Karataev (Riazanov 2005: 404).

Lawton has also observed that Riazanov's popular 'fairy tales' are never as innocent as they seem (1992: 15). Horton and Brashinski (1992), Gillespie (2003) and Lawton (1992) have argued that Riazanov's popular comedies contain one or two strong satirical elements, mixed together with good-natured humour in addition to a magical, romantic story. As noted by Beumers, in *Ironiia sud'by* Riazanov uses the genre of the fairy tale in order to create an ideal mix of romantic comedy and social commentary, using the genre's mythical plot conventions<sup>86</sup> for the restoration of harmony (2003: 445). Again, as

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<sup>85</sup> For more information on this matter, please refer to Riazanov's memoirs (2005) or to MacFadyen's book on Riazanov's films (2003).

<sup>86</sup> As discussed first by Vladimir Propp in 1928, see either the Russian 1998 ed., or Anatoly Liberman 1984 English ed.

in *Karnaval'naia*, the film is about carnivalesque, comic reversals taking place during the course of New Year's Eve and Night. With the help of magic, Riazanov 'rehumanizes' soulless, uniform communities with no identity or individuality where the street names, the houses, the furniture and keys are all the same, yet they happen to be in different cities – Leningrad and Moscow, respectively (see Gillespie 2003: 47). Carnival and anarchy reign supreme. After four men drink vodka in the bath house on New Year's Eve, the intoxicated Zhenia (Andrei Miagkov) ends up in Leningrad instead of Moscow. This, of course, brings comic confusion, with the mixing up of flats and identities. Eventually, Zhenia falls in love with Nadia and undermines the moral authority of Ippolit, her boyfriend, an office functionary. After Ippolit's drunken retaliation, however, it seems that the change – the pairing of the two artistic souls, different from their initial, rather more conventional partners – will only be short-lived. However, this is not the real resolution of conflict in the film but only a narrative twist. Riazanov's solution itself is ambiguous: instead of restoring harmony (the official order) as in fairy tales (romantic comedies), owing to Nadia's final choice of Zhenia what starts as festive anarchy turns into a permanent rejection of the official position and logic. Thus the film inverts fairy tale convention and neglects to restore official order and harmony. It ultimately forgets to spare a further thought to the fate of the two rejected parties. It is a small, private change and victory over authority, but a promising one. Until *Garazh*, Riazanov's battles and victories were all limited to the private sphere.

In *Sluzhebnyi roman / Office Romance* (1978) Riazanov once more uses the fairy tale and carnival, in part to touch on some masculine concerns with female emancipation and the threat to male domination in the work place, but mostly in order to deride the 'pampered classes' who use their privileges in order to manipulate people. Here, the character of Samokhvalov (translating as Self-aggrandizer), played by Oleg Basilashvili, is an easily recognizable character from the 1970s – a self-serving bureaucrat who is accustomed to foreign travel and goods and uses everyone, even his friends, for personal gain and career advancement. In this case the director does not soften his personal disgust at, and moral condemnation of, such a character. Riazanov has professed his dislike of direct, Gogolesque harsh accusatory humour and satire (2005: 49). However, an incident in his life, at the end of the 1970s, made him change his mind and prompted the birth of his most caustic social satire, *Garazh*.

As noted by Attwood, during the Brezhnev era only a few satires managed to squeeze through ‘the cracks’ of the disintegrating system (1993: 96), and Riazanov’s *Garazh* was one of them (1993: 96). Here, his usually good-natured humour erupts into a lashing, biting satire, and in some ways is reminiscent of Buñuel’s *El ángel exterminador / Exterminating Angel* (Mexico, 1962).<sup>87</sup> In both films a group of people are trapped by what appear to be their social roles and convention, and it takes incarceration, strong provocation and shock to make them realize their own degradation and initiate the eventual recovery of some decency and humanity. Like previous scholars (Lawton, for example) Gillespie asserts that *Garazh* was Riazanov’s most perceptive and accurately observed satire (Gillespie 2003: 48). As he correctly states, ‘Riazanov has made another carnivalesque, [...] allegorical film about a collective that cuts itself off for one night from the outside world, rids itself of the corrupt members and self-seeking authorities and reinvents itself from the bottom up’ (Gillespie 2003: 48).<sup>88</sup> Laughter comes at the expense of authority and established order and hierarchies are overturned, announcing the appearance of a new order (Gillespie 2003: 49). Gillespie remarks that *Garazh* was an extremely bold film for its time; it went far beyond ‘sanctioned’ carnival and encouraged nothing short of rebellion (Gillespie 2003: 49). As noted by MacFayden, this was the first proper glimpse of the ugly face of power, and its ability to corrupt the soul (2003: 67). It is also asserted by Lawton that this was a radical departure from Riazanov’s predominant style, and she remarks further that at this time satire was virtually effaced from Soviet cinema by the non-conflict theory of socialist realism (Lawton 1992: 15). This is why one of the characters in *Garazh*, when talking to a woman researching satire, ironically remarks: ‘You have an odd profession. You study a subject which does not exist’. For Lawton, the film is rather ‘unsettling’ (1992: 15), ‘Revolutionary’ even, as it blatantly criticizes the established order (1992: 19). The film exposes the hypocrisy of the privileged ruling class, spelling out, in not so many words, that their days are numbered. Thus the academics and workers of the Ecological Institute are compared allegorically to the rare species threatened by extinction kept in the Institute’s museum.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> From now on I shall address the film as *El ángel*.

<sup>88</sup> In Chapter Twelve, I shall argue that something similar happens in Tabío’s *Lista* (2000).

<sup>89</sup> It is worth noting that in the same year, 1980, there was another remarkable, sad and melancholic comedy very close in spirit and style to Riazanov’s *Garazh*: Georgii Danelia’s *Osennii marafon / Autumn Marathon*.

#### 4.4 The Italian Connection

As noted by Zorkaia, Riazanov has been known to use handheld cameras and natural settings in order to achieve more realistic depictions of everyday life, also sometimes exchanging colour for black and white film, creating a kind of neorealist atmosphere (Zorkaia 1973: 37). She notes that despite the almost documentary-style depiction of current social issues, thanks to the snowflakes falling from the city sky the humble settings appear somehow magical (Zorkaia 1973: 37). The sheer humanity and warmth of Riazanov's films often had a reassuring and calming effect on the Soviet people. Because of this, some critics (as in the case of Dobrenko's assessment of *Karnaval'naia*) later accused him of conspiring with the Soviet authorities. Riazanov's response was that he would be really happy if he had managed to make life more bearable for people. After all, the nature of carnivalesque laughter is reaffirming and irreverent; it is ambiguous, polyphonic, multidimensional and as contradictory as life itself. For this reason Riazanov professed his fondness for tragicomedy, considering many of his films (such as those mentioned above, with the exception of *Karnaval'naia*) to be sad comedies, almost tragicomedies. He believes that tragicomedy is the genre closest to life, reflecting all its richness – from its funny to its sad side, from the farcical to the grotesque and the tragic (2005: 100).

The first possible influence that comes to mind here is the sad comedies of Charlie Chaplin, Chaplin being the most politically conscious of the early film comedians, 'combining pathos and an essentially tragic view of life' and making people laugh and cry in painful self-realization (Vogel 2005: 520). Again, many of Chaplin's films were made during periods of war (the two world wars, in fact) and during the inter-war period of depression; in other words, during periods of global and a great many national crises.

In 1973 Zorkaia had already claimed that '[Riazanov's] favourite genre is tragicomedy, which best reflects the contrasts of real life' (1973: 37). Furthermore, she comments on the director's frequently expressed admiration for Italian neorealism (Zorkaia 1973: 37). In a later interview, in 1976, as well as in his memoirs (2005) Riazanov insists emphatically that he was inspired by Italian neorealist films, which 'derive their appeal from their wonderful blend of tragedy and comedy' (Istiushina 1976: 17). Riazanov admits that he finds the humanism of the Italian film masters highly

appealing (2005: 63), and it is true that his films are comparable to some neorealist or shot in the tradition of Italian neorealism later Italian film classics.

Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* / *Rome Open City* (1945),<sup>90</sup> because of its appealing melodramatic plot, enjoyed immense success around the world (Cook 1996: 427). As noted by Cook, the film set the paradigm for Italian neorealism: for its social commitment and humanistic point of view and the parameters of its almost documentary and improvisatory standard (Cook 1996: 428). He also observes that neorealist films often lapse into sentimentality, and because of this have been labelled 'male weepies' by Raymond Durnant (in Cook 1996: 437). Their influence on international cinema, particularly on French New Wave and New Latin American Cinema, has been enormous. Peter Bondanella, when commenting on Rossellini's *Roma*, has also observed that:

Beneath the surface of the work, which often seems closer to a newsreel than to a fictional narrative, a profoundly tragicomic vision of life juxtaposes melodramatic moments or instances of comic relief and dark humour with the most tragic human experiences to reconstruct the reality of a crucial moment in Italian history. (Bondanella 2009: 68).

Again, the neorealist style and aesthetic is that of tragicomedy, melodrama and black humour, born during times of crisis and social change. One finds Bondanella's analysis also applicable to Riazanov's films *Vokzal* and *Zabytaia melodia*. They have such a grey, neorealist, almost documentary look, representing faithfully the joys of everyday living in 1980s Soviet Russia. In both films there is a constant shift between comic and tragic perspectives. Both mix melancholy and sadness with hope and humanistic concerns, and in the end resort to melodrama.

A filmmaker mentioned by Riazanov time and again is Federico Fellini, and it is obvious that he greatly admired Fellini's work. In 1973 Riazanov had to work with one of Fellini's former producers, Dino De Laurentiis, on his *Neveroiatnye prikliuchenia italiantsev v Rossii* / *The Unbelievable Adventures of the Italians in Russia*, a co-production with Italy. Of course, one has to ask if Fellini's oeuvre was a source of inspiration, something and someone to aspire to? Riazanov has admitted his enduring admiration of Fellini's most popular films, *La strada* / *The Road* (1954)<sup>91</sup> and *La notti di*

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<sup>90</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Roma*.

<sup>91</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *La strada*.

*Cabiria / The Nights of Cabiria* (1957)<sup>92</sup> (Riazanov 2005: 65). In these two films Fellini evolves beyond his neorealist origins. They represent a move towards psychological introspection, yet, as noted by Bondanella, Fellini never abandoned the neorealist belief in human solidarity and honesty (2009: 127).

The Italian master's films were greatly admired in the former Soviet bloc. His interviews and books on cinema were quickly translated and disseminated, available to connoisseurs and movie-goers alike. As noted by Iordanova, contrary to popular belief, people in socialist countries were not deprived of the best in Western art; quite the opposite in fact: they were able to focus solely on the best works created in the West. Somewhat paradoxically, thanks to censorship, they were spared from the worst: 'the only thing off limits in the socialist countries was mainstream Western mass culture, [...] particularly uninhibited violence and pornography' (Iordanova 2003: 21). Rather unwittingly, of course, this helped to create an idealized picture of life in the West, and of its cultural products. By the mid 1950s, when Riazanov began his career as a comedy filmmaker, Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni had transcended the neorealist mode by turning it inward 'so that the object of attention became not society but the human self', something that Cook has appropriately labelled 'introspective neorealism' (1996: 437).

When examining Riazanov's tragicomedies one finds some shared affinities and sensibilities with Fellini. Like the Italian filmmaker, Riazanov prefers well-rounded, complex characters. Both seem to share an acute awareness of human and social contradictions. As noted by Bondanella, *La strada* is more of a fairy tale or fable than a dramatic account of character development or narrative action (2009: 148). The road in the movie is a metaphor for a quest, a journey, and search for meaning in life.

Like Antonioni and Fellini before him, in his 1980s films Riazanov becomes concerned with the failure of communication between human beings and the resulting spiritual poverty of existence. In the two films mentioned, Fellini achieves a feeling of mystery through a keen sense of the unexpected and the unpredictable in everyday life. In both *Cabiria* and *La strada* there is salvation by grace, represented as a moment of certain belief in the beauty of human existence, achieved through suffering (Bondanella 2009: 148). As noted by Bondanella, both these Fellini films also mark a return to melodrama (2009: 127). Such tendencies and elements can be found in *Vokzal*: the same

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<sup>92</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Cabiria*.

sense of the unexpected in everyday life; the belief in humanity and salvation through suffering; and comparable shifts from comedy to melodrama and tragedy. After all, as also noted by Bondanella, despite being an important art director Fellini was also a great comedy genius, and like the majority of Italian directors felt most comfortable making comedies and tragicomedies (2009: 180). In his 1980s tragicomedies Riazanov, like Fellini, articulates the tragicomic sense of life, with the dehumanization of society through the disintegration of personal relationships owing to people's inability to communicate or because of social constraints. For example, *Vokzal* is in many ways similar to Fellini's *La strada*: it is a rather dramatic, even melodramatic, tragicomedy of self-discovery. Also, like Fellini's *Cabiria*, *Vokzal* is a film about finding grace and hope beyond hope, where and when it is least expected. This is why one of the protagonists, played by Liudmila Gurchenko, is called 'Vera / Hope'. As noted earlier, there are also Russian literary intertextual references, like Platon (played so convincingly by Basilashvili).

In *Zabytaia melodia* Riazanov comes close to Fellini's earlier films' complexity and sensibility thanks to Leonid's character's Pirandellian qualities. One can argue that, just like Fellini's earlier films, *Zabytaia melodia* is also about the existential impossibility of happiness – the tragedy of the human condition, owing to the irreconcilable contradiction between one's 'social mask' (that is, one's social, public role or 'character mask') and one's private 'true face': the individual's subconscious, dreams, aspirations and instincts.<sup>93</sup> Because of the surreal scenes in *Zabytaia melodia*, in an interview with Iuri Korshak Riazanov describes the film as a 'phantasmagoric musical tragicomedy' (1987: 12). Here he also claims that *Zabytaia melodia* results from the offshoots of nineteenth-century officialdom (a tsarist kind of bureaucracy) in modern day Soviet Russia, and that the film follows Gogol's and Saltykov-Shchedrin's footsteps by criticizing in a similar way the ubiquitous government bureaucracy, its corruption and nepotism. It is also possible then to argue that, eventually, *Zabytaia melodia* collapses into similar kind of black humour to Gogol's short horror stories, such as *Vii*, for example, being situated in the same kind of nightmarish, oneiric, supernatural world.

In the 1960s Fellini's films also became increasingly extravagant, even baroque 'surreal phantasmagorias'; yet, they made some shocking revelations about the most

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<sup>93</sup> See Bondanella on early Fellini, particularly his comparison between Fellini and Pirandello (2009: 139).

secretive, hidden, negative sides of Italian society, exposing its decadence and degradation.<sup>94</sup> The same can be said for Riazanov's *Zabytaia melodia*. Like Fellini's *La strada*, *Zabytaia melodia* is realistic in form but essentially allegorical in content, and its topics are similar to those of *La dolce vita*: the corruption and moral degradation of those at the top of the social ladder, only this time the target is the 'red Soviet bourgeoisie'.

Like Fellini, Riazanov equates his protagonist's internal, personal contradictions with those of a society in the midst of deep spiritual (and ideological) crisis. Leonid is torn between two women who allegorically represent two opposing worldviews and social currents: the exciting, associated with his wife – old, familiar, but loveless world of compromise and material comforts – and the unpredictable new order, represented by his younger mistress. In Fellini's *La dolce vita* the main protagonist also has to choose between women that stand for opposing worldviews and social classes, and he too makes the wrong choice. Riazanov employs here the genre of melodrama, a genre that facilitates a parallel between private and social contradictions.

Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger have argued that just like psychoanalysis melodrama also became increasingly preoccupied with 'the return of the repressed', in a form that directly linked the private sphere with social and political life (McReynolds & Neuberger 2002: 8). To this *Zabytaia melodia* adds black, surreal, Fellini-like comedy, instrumental in the representation of Leonid's tortured nightmarish, psychological world that exposes his contradictions, hidden secrets and fears, and sense of guilt. After *La dolce vita* it became increasingly difficult to separate fantasy from reality in Fellini's films. In *Zabytaia melodia* there is also interplay between fantasy and reality, on the one hand, and between the mysterious and the oneiric, on the other. Riazanov represents the split (Pirandellian) personality of his main protagonist, Leonid, as a constant interplay between his imagination and reality. Thus he provides the public with two perspectives on Leonid's actions – one is the hero's fantasy or how he would like to behave (his

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<sup>94</sup> In the 1950s Fellini rejected Cesare Zavattini's belief that neorealism should be only about the life of the poor as rigid and artistically limiting. He was more interested in comparisons between the decadent life of the rich and the healthier outlook of the poor, through the investigation of his heroes' psychological worlds. Fellini's films became increasingly provocative and controversial, relying more on surreal, dark humour. A turning point in the director's oeuvre was his discovery of Carl Jung's works on myth, through his psychoanalyst Dr Ernst Bernhard in 1960 (as mentioned earlier, according to Propp, fairy tales also represent mythical conventions through which people try to make sense of the chaos in life). After this discovery his films became hallucinatory, oneiric and controversial surreal satires (see, for example, his highly self-referential *8½*, 1963). He then moved on to the world of self-reflexive fantasy (Cook 1996: 608). However, even by *La dolce vita* (1960) Fellini had explored the realms of surreal exaggeration and the absurd.

hidden instincts and wishes), and the other is how he actually behaves in reality (his public mask of a conformist bureaucrat, who says what his boss would like to hear).

There is also an oneiric scene in *Zabytaia melodia*, representing Leonid's troubled subconscious and reflecting his mixed feelings on the probability of losing his promotion and his fears that *perestroika* will bring an end to the bureaucratic life of privilege and pretence. In the dream Leonid sees himself as a street musician playing his forgotten melody for flute, whilst Lida is bringing him food. One of his colleagues is arguing with a passerby that it is better to let the bureaucrats beg on the streets than to let them destroy whatever little is left intact in the country. Another colleague is playing the accordion on the metro, singing a song about the hardship of the unemployed bureaucrats. This dream exposes Leonid's fears. He sees himself together with the rest of his colleagues on the metro, instead of in a chauffer driven car. The bureaucrats' beloved desks and telephones are also there in one of the trains (symbolically on their way out). Leonid observes with surprise and undoubted pleasure how the two women in his life kiss one another, and then turn to him to form a 'harmonious love triangle'.<sup>95</sup> Of course, this is the most desirable outcome Leonid can dream of. The episode is a mocking revelation of Leonid's confused psychological world, in which he tries to reconcile dreams with reality. However, from the dream it becomes clear that Leonid will choose a life of comfort and privilege over one of love in poverty.

There is also a surreal scene of purgatory after Leonid's clinical death, where, (possibly also) in a Tarkovsky-like style,<sup>96</sup> he is reprimanded by his parents for the betrayal of his roots, that is, his former dreams and ideals. Nevertheless, Riazanov seems to sympathize with Leonid. Behind the mask of bureaucratic self-importance there is actually a rather old-fashioned, romantic, and vulnerable man, far from sure of himself. And this is what charms Lida, his mistress, and not his clumsy attempts to seduce her with rare foods. He is depicted as a weak, tortured individual, a conformist for whom the decision-making process is a painful experience, a man whose heart is not in his job, and yet he has succumbed to the world of privilege and power. This is why in purgatory he is reprimanded by his mother for his self-betrayal. There he sees others who, like him, await

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<sup>95</sup> According to Evgenii Tsymbal's account, then assistant director to Riazanov, the scene, together with the texts of the songs, was written in one night almost at the end of filming. The next morning Riazanov read it to the whole crew. After their enthusiastic reaction and encouragement everything was organized quickly and shot only in a day (communicated via email in Dec 2010).

<sup>96</sup> Noted by Ellen Chances (1993: 37).

their judgement day. Amongst them are soldiers, heroes from Afghanistan, cosmonauts, firemen from Chernobyl – all, according to MacFadyen, victims of Soviet (utopian) dogma (2003: 89). One can argue that, similar to Detochkin and Platon, then, that they are all holy fools, but more than anything they are victims of a morally flawed system. Riazanov asks some very uncomfortable questions here, such as is it justified to die in the name of an idea, a utopian ideology, for one's country or for the government of the day? This line of questioning led to a general disillusionment with ideology and utopia in early post-Communist Russia.

As reflected in *Zabytaia melodia*, by the mid 1980s there was no longer any confidence in the government. Even Gorbachev believed that Soviet society was in need of regeneration (Attwood 1993: 95). The fact that Riazanov, Soviet Russia's most popular comedy filmmaker, had turned to dark humour and tragedy by the late 1980s is in itself representative of the Soviets' disenchantment with the system.

#### **4.5 The Role of the Fool in Riazanov's Oeuvre**

Prokhorov and Horton note that Riazanov has shown affinity to a 'holy fool type' of hero in his comedies. However, I would argue that throughout his oeuvre this kind of hero evolves from a likable, idealistic and Quixotic socialist realist holy fool (for example, Detochkin, interpreted by Innokentii Smoktunovskii in *Beregis'*), to a more anarchic and rebellious Ivanushka Durachek type of fool (who always ends up victorious), as played by Miagkov (in *Ironiia sud'by* and *Sluzhebnyi roman*); and then again on to Platon – yet another 'holy fool' but this time more in keeping with the nineteenth-century Russian (as part of the European humanist) tradition. Unlike Prokhorov and Horton, I would argue, however, that Miagkov's heroes are no longer slightly crazed saints, but in fact subversive and anarchic characters who successfully challenge the official authorities and end up with the prize – the love of a beautiful woman (or private happiness).

In *Zabytaia melodia*, however, Leonid is neither a Quixotic madman (that is, an optimistic-lucky-go-happy kind of character) nor a deeply tragic one. Leonid is instead a Pirandellian character, a 'schizophrenic fool', who is trapped in an internal dialogue between his 'true face' and his 'social mask'. These two elements are constantly caught in an irresolvable conflict, in a flux that can only end tragically. By going against his rebellious, artistic nature and selling out to hypocrisy and power he has become an

unhappy, superfluous, 'lost soul'. In his public role Leonid is a powerful official in control of the destiny of many people (such as the poor women from the Tambov choir). However, all he cares about are his own privileges and self-gratification. Thus he quickly forgets the choir and abuses his position in order to pursue his own love interest (Lida, a woman younger than his wife).

This is why Lawton is correct in her claim that in *Zabytaia melodia* Riazanov has captured the psychology of the gigantic Soviet bureaucratic machine, which was trying to negotiate its terms with *perestroika* and paying only lip service to demands for change (1992: 197). She comments that the film was highly topical when it came out on the Soviet screen, as it offered the first criticism of *perestroika* (Lawton 1992: 196). She notes that Riazanov's earlier optimism and belief that 'love conquers all' in films such as *Ironiia sud'by* and *Sluzhebnyi roman* is now replaced by bitter satire (as in *Garazh*) and pessimism (Lawton 1992: 196).

Thus, *Zabytaia melodia* signals a return to accusatory satire, to black humour and Gogol's kind of 'laughter through tears'. Dobrenko and, to a point, Prokhorov seem to imply that Riazanov's comedies are 'sanctioned carnivals', promoting the latest official line, as they use narrative comedy which the critics link directly to Soviet state ideology. However, this is only part of the picture. Carnavalesque humour is always ambiguous and double-edged, and lends itself to multiple readings by being at once reaffirming and derisive. For example *Karnaval'naiia*, a comedy that Dobrenko views as an example of officially sanctioned carnival, demonstrates at most an attempt to negotiate with official ideology. After all, as argued convincingly by Josephine Woll, unlike Aleksandrov and Pyr'ev's comedies, which represented a varnished reality of everyday life in Soviet Russia as an endless holiday with constant celebrations, *Karnaval'naiia*'s festivity is confined to New Year's Eve. The film thus makes a clear distinction between life (reality) and carnival (festivity). In other words, it states clearly that life is not a celebration, and its comic premise is a 'genuine carnival' (Woll 2000: 55).

Therefore in *Zabytaia melodia* the Tambov choir, as the symbol of official mass culture (and thus of the Soviet state), almost literally disintegrates in front of our eyes, replaced by an old, forgotten tune more to Leonid's personal taste, and by new (underground) and more 'market-orientated' art beyond the official domain. As argued by Greta Slobin, the lingering fate of the female choir becomes a synecdoche of the disintegration of official popular mass culture, of the end of censorship and of the Soviet

system itself (Slobin in Horton 1993: 120-21). The latter point is developed well by Slobin; however, I think she is not entirely correct when it comes to the significance of the ‘forgotten melody for flute’ in the film. The critic considers the distinctions made between the mass, collective culture of the choir and the flute melody as representative of the contrasts between the collective and the more authentic, personal taste of Leonid for old-fashioned romances. She is right that this signifies that Leonid is rather old-fashioned,<sup>97</sup> but also argues that it suggests a return to more traditional values in the film. I believe, rather, that Riazanov meant here to indicate a return to an authentic humanist tradition and to more universal values, but this is not all: the melody and the art market symbolize the eruption of alternative cultures during *perestroika*; all that had been suppressed and kept underground had to come out. There is multiplicity and a variety of different, more personal preferences and choices in the film’s examples of both high and low culture, which range from older cultural traditions, such as sentimental romances (in the case of Leonid) to new, alternative arts and even commercial cultural products destined for the improvised folk market.

To sum up, in *Karnaval’naia, Beregis’* and *Ironiia sud’by* Riazanov targets standardization, dogmatism and uniformity, highlighting more authentic or alternative ways of thinking and behaving, whilst always insisting that personal happiness, at least, is achievable. He keeps his focus on the individual and how s / he is affected by often cruel collectives or society (*Garazh* and *Vokzal*); thus he never really shows confidence in big social ideas but rather in small, personal miracles. For example, in *Beregis’* Detochkin – a decent person, an exemplary ‘new man’ – is, rather disturbingly, treated like a madman by the society whose own ideology asserts that such selflessness should be highly desired. Similarly, in *Garazh* the ‘proverbial Soviet collective’ is shown to pick on its most defenceless, vulnerable members, who, literally, cannot speak for themselves. I have also argued that neither *Karnaval’naia* nor *Zabytaia melodia* could be officially sanctioned carnivals, as their satirical targets are the government’s censors themselves; in the latter even the new myths of *perestroika* itself are under scrutiny, making the film the first full-bodied satiric comedy of *perestroika*.

Riazanov’s mixing of genres has a longstanding tradition in Russian literature, theatre and film. According to Horton and Brashinsky, it derives from Chekhov’s drama and is

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<sup>97</sup> See her article ‘A forgotten flute and remembered popular tradition’, in Horton 1993: 117-24.

known as tragicomedy (1992: 170). Horton and Brashinsky argue further that the trend of sad comedy, in fact, gave birth to the *comic melodrama*, which was very popular during the 1970s and the 1980s (1992: 171). Its representatives are Danelia, with his *Autumn Marathon*, and Riazanov, particularly with *Vokzal* and *Zabytaia melodia*. Lawton also seems to share this opinion, pointing out that the trend started with Danelia's *Autumn Marathon* and Riazanov's *Garazh*'s shared themes of social alienation and loss of common spiritual heritage (1992: 200). For me, this translates into Riazanov's gradual disenchantment with the Soviet system, particularly with its ideology, culminating in his dramatic tragedy *Elena Sergeevna* where Soviet dogmatism is blamed for the country's spiritual and moral degradation. Therefore, I view Riazanov's sad melodramatic comedy or tragicomedy *Zabytaia melodia* as an example of the early *glasnost* humour trend, a 'greyish' prelude to the trend of black surreal humour that came to dominate the late 1980s and early 1990s.

## CHAPTER FIVE: JUAN CARLOS TABÍO'S *PLAFF* (1988). PARODY AS A SOCIAL CRITIQUE

### 5.1 Historical & Socio-political Context

After the increased Stalinization of the Cuban communist party in the late 1960s to late 1970s some Cuban artists and intellectuals became disenchanted with the Revolutionary regime. In 1971 the poet Heberto Padilla was arrested for cultural deviationism and obliged to confess his crimes against the Revolution before his fellow writers (Williamson 1992: 455). His associates also suffered ostracism. As observed by John King, the Padilla affair marked 'a watershed between the optimistic sixties and the grim realities of the seventies' (John King 1990: 67). In the years that followed, a number of prominent Cuban writers and artists chose to go into exile and criticized the intolerance of the official cultural establishment (Williamson 1992: 455). The Padilla affair also divided the Hispanic cultural world. Writers of international stature like Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes (Mexico), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), and Juan Goytisolo (Spain), who had once welcomed the Revolution, now denounced what they saw as a process of Stalinization. Others, such as Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia) and Julio Cortázar (Argentina) reaffirmed their loyalty to its ideas (Williamson 1992: 456).

During the course of the 1970s the debate over artistic freedom widened to include questions about the degree of political freedom and civil rights in Cuba, and Castro was accused of becoming a totalitarian *caudillo* (Williamson 1992: 456). In a country engulfed by secrecy, there was no accurate information regarding political prisoners, the persecution of homosexuals, and of those with religious beliefs. Evidence of growing dissatisfaction amongst people over the lack of freedom and the constant shortages became apparent in 1980, when the compound of the Peruvian embassy in Havana was overrun by nearly 11,000 people seeking political asylum. The Cuban authorities tried to defuse the situation by opening the port of Mariel to allow those who wished to leave the island by sea. Some 125,000 people embarked on small boats, headed to Miami (Williamson 1992: 456). To counteract bad international publicity, huge demonstrations in support of Castro and the Revolution were organized in Havana. This proved to be Castro's preferred and easiest method of dealing with dissidence. In order to ease the

food shortages ‘free markets’ were also allowed to operate alongside the official ration system (Williamson 1992: 456).

During the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the Revolution in 1979 Castro warned that the present generation would have to make further sacrifices so that future generations might live better. Indeed, the country’s economic performance in the 1980s continued to deteriorate. According to Williamson, its fundamental problems were historic ones: an overwhelming economic dependency on a foreign power, and the monoculture of sugar rather than diversification (Williamson 1992: 456). The Soviet Union effectively subsidized the Cuban economy, providing Cubans with cheap oil and technology. By 1980 Castro had already declared that the Cuban economy was suffering from a labour surplus (Williamson 1992: 457).

By the mid 1980s, with the universal weakening of the socialist system, the economic situation in Cuba became increasingly volatile. Owing to the blockade, Cuba was trading with only a few capitalist countries (Mexico, Spain, France, Canada and Japan) and was heavily dependent on COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, an organisation set up between socialist and friendly Third World countries such as Cuba and Vietnam). As the USSR itself was experiencing serious economic difficulties, in 1986 Gorbachev decided to put an end to foreign economic aid to former socialist or brotherly Third World countries including Cuba and Vietnam. He also insisted that the billions owed to the Soviet Union by numerous socialist countries should be repaid. Cuba was no exception, and was asked to negotiate repayments for its 7 billion dollar debt to Soviet Russia (Williamson 1992: 457). This prompted Castro’s top-down economic reforms, known as rectification, in 1986. This increased the government’s control over the economy. There were demands for increased productivity and the ‘free markets’ were once more discontinued. In the 1980s there was a return to Che Guevara’s idea of moral incentives rather than material ones, with appeals to the people to volunteer and work without pay in order to help stabilize the precarious economic situation in the country (Williamson 1992: 457). However, by the late 1980s it became evident that the reforms were not working.

Despite the failure of socialist Cuba’s economic policies, many ordinary Cubans believed that the achievements of the Revolution such as free education and health care, which had previously been admired by many Latin American countries, should be salvaged (Fernades 2006: 4). There was no doubt that the earlier achievements of

Castro's Revolution had been a great boost to the islanders' sense of pride and national identity. However, the collapse of the socialist system in the former Soviet bloc countries brought back stark, sobering realities, which threatened to eliminate the utopian dream of building a better society.

## 5.2 The Cultural Framework of Tabío's *Plaff*

In the 1960s to 1970s a group of Latin American directors, sharing similar ideas of a counter-Hollywood, militant Latin American cinema, and inspired by the Cuban Revolution, Italian neorealism and the European avant-garde, tried to promote a movement which eventually became known as New Latin American Cinema (NLAC). They were searching for an aesthetic that would reflect the production methods and style most appropriate to the economic conditions and political circumstances of Latin America and the Third World (Stam in Michael Martin 1997: 17). Their aim was to create a national as well as Pan-American cinema – an original type of cinema that was different from Hollywood-style commercial cinema and even from European art cinema, by which many of the movement's directors, such as Gutiérrez Alea, García Espinosa, Fernando Birri, Glauber Rocha and Fernando Solanas, were inspired.<sup>98</sup>

In 1969 the Cuban director Julio García Espinosa's theory of *imperfect cinema* came to best summarize this idea of a Latin American kind of cinema. In his essay 'For an Imperfect Cinema' he appeals for a cinema unconcerned with technical perfection, arguing instead for an authentic Revolutionary culture, drawing on popular art, where filmmakers and spectators are active co-authors. It is a politically and socially engaged, sometimes militant, unfinished, imperfect kind of filmmaking, representative of ordinary people's problems; a cinema different from the concerns of bourgeois dramas.<sup>99</sup> By exploring the achievements of the Soviet avant-garde, the Italian neorealists and Godard's self-reflexive cinema, the NLAC directors created films that were not afraid of mixing documentary and fictional modes, or of exposing the continent's underdevelopment and limited means of film production. The aim of these films was to provoke discussion and thought conducive to change and the improvement of society.

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<sup>98</sup> The first three studied together in Centro Sperimentale della Cinematografia in Rome, Italy in the early 1950s.

<sup>99</sup> See Julio García Espinosa, 'For an Imperfect Cinema' (in M. Martin 1997: 71-82).

Just like the Italian neorealist filmmakers before them, in order to achieve naturalistic levels of realism the filmmakers used handheld cameras, black and white film, location shooting and a mixture of amateur and professional actors. The movement, in its own right, has inspired many filmmakers from Third World countries and some independent or political filmmakers from the First World. For example, it is possible to argue that *imperfect cinema* influenced the birth of the political thriller genre in Europe and the First World, for which Costas Gavras has been credited (for his film *Z*, 1968). The genre was then appropriated by progressive Hollywood directors in films such as *The Parallax View* (Alan Pakula, 1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (Sydney Pollack, 1975) and *All The President's Men* (Alan Pakula, 1976).<sup>100</sup> As noted by Mike Wayne, the movement was also in continuous dialogue with First World cinemas (2001: 137). Over the years even the original founders of NLAC struggled to maintain the movement's stylistic characteristics, and, like the 1920s Soviet avant-garde, have been accused of being either too elitist or too political. By the 1980s (the movement's second phase) many of the filmmakers decided to appropriate the popular genres of musical, melodrama, comedy and mild satire in order to reach their intended audiences (see, for example, *Tangos: el exilio de Gardel / Tangos, the Exile of Gardel*, Solanas, 1983; *Hasta cierto punto / Up to a Point*, Gutiérrez Alea, 1983; and *Concierto barroco / Baroque Concerto*, Paul Leduc, 1989; amongst others).

In the 1970s, Revolutionary euphoria in Cuba was soon replaced by increased party orthodoxy and Stalinization, mimicking the stagnation in Soviet Russia during Brezhnev's regime and thus unwittingly copying the Soviet bureaucratic model of socialism. By then ICAIC had produced numerous memorable feature-length documentaries, by Santiago Álvarez, and a few excellent feature films. However, there were also a great number of mediocre works targeting populist tastes. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, in his *Dialéctica del espectador / Viewers' Dialectic*, Gutiérrez Alea attempted a philosophical and theoretical examination of the dilemmas facing Cuban Revolutionary cinema, insisting that healthy criticism is good for the Revolution. He argued that films in the style of 'socialist realism' were potentially reactionary and simplistic, as they were nothing more than a Socialist version of Hollywood's manipulative and schematic formula of good guys versus bad guys (Gutiérrez Alea 1988:

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<sup>100</sup> See Wayne 2001: 136-37.

42). Examples of such films are Manuel Pérez's *El hombre del Maisinicú* and Octavio Cortázar's *El brigadista* (Chanan 2004: 8). These were macho adventure epic stories, where the good guys are Revolutionaries and the bad guys are counter-Revolutionaries (John King 1990: 160).<sup>101</sup> As mentioned earlier, in 3.5, the dominant trends of the 1970s were adaptations or historical epics and national allegories.

In a later re-evaluation of the movement's achievement John King remarks that the films created by the NLAC movement were viewed and highly critically acclaimed by the international intellectual elite, but virtually unknown to the masses (John King 2000 & 2004). By the 1980s it was obvious that NLAC filmmakers were failing to reach their target audiences, who preferred more entertaining films, particularly melodramas, a genre originally considered reactionary by the movement in the 1960s-1970s (Ana López 1985: 7; John King 1990; Michael Chanan 2004). As Ana López puts it, in 'this rejecting of its melodramatic past, the New Latin American Cinema also "rejected" its targeted audiences' (1985: 7). The problem was eventually formulated by García Márquez in an address to the NLAC filmmakers: '[W]e always try to make films to win in international festivals. I think we should make films to win over spectators in our countries' (in John King 1990: 75).<sup>102</sup>

In the early 1980s there was a marked return to the popular genres of comedy and melodrama centred upon everyday issues, genres that were noticeably absent from the Cuban screen in the 1970s. As a result, the focus shifted towards family matters and contemporary topics, and in particular to the continued marginalization of women in socialist Cuban society (see Gutiérrez Alea's *Hasta cierto punto / Up to a Point*, 1982, and Pastor Vega's *Retrato de Teresa / A Portrait of Teresa*, 1979, amongst others). It was realized (by both Cuban and, more generally, NLAC filmmakers) that a reconfiguration of the genre of melodrama could be instrumental in representing wider social issues (López 1985: 10-11). Melodrama is usually centred on private and family issues. Yet through its emotive exaggeration melodrama provides an accessible route for the analysis

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<sup>101</sup> Unwittingly these films were copying the same old, rather reactionary, Hollywood western formula. There were a significant number of such films in Soviet Russia too. Amongst them are Vladimir Motyl's *The White Sun of the Desert* (1970) and Nikita Mikhalkov's *At Home Amongst Strangers, A Stranger Amongst His Own* (1973), very much in the style of Sergio Leone's westerns. Today, such films are appropriately referred to by critics as *Easterns* (Beumers 2003: 445).

<sup>102</sup> García Márquez's involvement in the movement for Pan-American cinema led to the creation (in 1979) of the annual NLAC festival in Havana, which takes place every December. The festival's aim is to provide Latin American filmmakers with a forum for discussion, information and the exchange of ideas, and, most importantly, with a common market.

of an historical epoch, and with it the interaction between the private, the public and everyday life, elucidating concerns ranging from the national to ones relating to gender and class politics. One of its central motives is the tension between the private (individual identities and genders) and the public (McReynolds & Neuberger 2002: 6), and melodrama writers and filmmakers have used the genre to explore social and national identities and social change (McReynolds & Neuberger 2002: 7). Elizabeth Dore has noted the interconnection between gender, class, race, national identity and politics in Latin America (1997: 14-7), where traditionally the domestic sphere is been associated with women and private life whilst work and politics are considered to be part of the public, male-dominated world of power and governance. Some directors realized that by focusing on power struggles within the family they could achieve symbolic and allegorical resonance, representative of wider contradictions in society.

Another concern by the 1980s was the lack of works by younger Cuban film directors. The younger generations had to work first in documentary for years before being entrusted with their first feature films (it took talented directors such as Juan Carlsó Tabío and Fernando Pérez on average twenty years to get there). As noted by John King, 'the Revolution was growing older and more bureaucratic; tensions – both internal and external – were having an adverse effect on creativity' (1990: 161). The fiasco surrounding the attempt to create a costly super co-production in 1982, Solas's *Cecilia*, exposed many problems, producing a desired change of direction and directorship of ICAIC in 1982. As a result of the *Cecilia* crisis, Alfredo Guevara became ambassador to UNESCO in Paris whilst García Espinosa replaced him as minister for cinema in the Ministry of Culture (John King 1990: 165). García Espinosa's dynamic leadership brought about a number of positive policy changes: an increase in the production of feature films; a reduction in budget per feature; the introduction of a new, younger generation of directors; and a time limit for shooting. In order to avoid bureaucratization and centralization, three creative groups were set up under the direct responsibility of Gutiérrez Alea, Humberto Solás and Manuel Pérez (Paulo Antonio Paranagua 1988; John King 1990: 165; Chanan 2004). According to Chanan, the groups were popularly respectively known, in reference to the ideological concerns of their leading directors, as the greens, the pinks and the reds (2004: 430). The greens, the colour of radicalism and 'imperfect cinema', was led by Gutiérrez Alea; the pinks, the colour signifying lush visual stylistics and hedonism, was under Humberto Solás; and the reds, equating to

political orthodoxy and populism, was headed by Manuel Pérez (Chanan 2004: 430). The following years saw a number of features which signalled a break with the past. In 1985, Jorge Fraga, one of ICAIC's heads of production, assessed that this was a 'new realist wave', 'much more concerned with everyday life in society' (in King 1990: 161-62).

Significantly, as convincingly argued by Gilberto Moisés Blasini, the incorporation of the young film directors into the existing cinematic discourses of ICAIC generated a cross-generational dialogue that re-examined Cuba's cinematic practices, particularly 'those related to making films that would simultaneously entertain and stimulate critical reflection' (Blasini 2000: 194-95). The younger generation of directors had each served apprenticeships as assistant directors, and all had made documentaries. Each of their proposed feature scripts was discussed widely in ICAIC, and there was vigorous competition amongst the younger directors for the best script. The best script was then supported, assuring a certain level of quality control. The films were often comedies in the style of Gutiérrez Alea's 1960s carnivalesque *Doce sillas* and *La muerte*, signalling a deliberate break with the epic (socialist realist trend) and a return to critical social comedy (John King 1990: 162; Chanan 2004: 437).

The first feature from a director of the new generation was Tabío's farcical social comedy *Se permuta / House for Swap* (1984). Tabío's first feature is an anarchic social comedy that is similar to his second comedy *Plaff* (1988), demonstrating remarkable comic talent and timing. According to Tabío, 'this is the same story told twice' (in García Borrero 2001: 260). He claims that the main protagonist of *Se permuta*, Gloria, is just like Concha from *Plaff* – a not very likable character, an anti-hero representing outdated values and ways of thinking – and that the conflict yet again, as in *Plaff*, is between old and new or those who embrace innovation and change and those that prefer the status quo (in García Borrero 2001: 260). However, the early 1980s belonged to a different reality. As a result of the Mariel exodus, the shortage of material goods was temporarily eased, and *Se permuta*'s main topic is the acute housing shortage in Havana. The main protagonist, Gloria, is attempting to obtain a larger apartment, and achieves (at least part of) her goal by series of swaps. (Until recently, the only way to change one's housing in socialist Cuba was literally through a swap, as people were not allowed to sell their homes.) *Plaff* also touches on this lack of housing; yet, unlike Concha, Gloria displays admirable business sense and resourcefulness; abilities which can only be truly appreciated in a different, market-orientated economy. *Se permuta* is based on a popular

theatrical play by Tabío, and marked his first proper collaboration with Titón – the affectionate nickname by which Gutiérrez Alea is known in Cuba (García Borrero 2001: 306). Nonetheless, Tabío is correct in asserting that the exaggerated, farcical tone of the film may have reduced the possibility of a more profound reflection on its central topics (Tabío in García Borrero 2001: 306).

*Se Permuta* and, particularly, the more mature and stylistically complex *Plaff*, mark a return to the 1960s genres of critical carnivalesque black comedy and satire which, as noted by Mario Naito, ‘practically disappeared from the Cuban screen’ (in García Borrero 2001: 262), whilst Chanan observes that the film marks the introduction of the ‘scatological’ in Cuban film (Chanan 2004: 437). Thus the late 1980s marked the return of the black comedy and satire trend in both Cuba and Russia, and with this the carnivalesque mode of grotesque realism. This is best expressed, according to Bakhtin, in the image of the grotesque body as the undying body of the people, as a communal perception of human life and the cycle of death, rebirth, constant change and becoming. The emphasis is on the lower body and exaggerated functions of eating, drinking, excretion, and sex. Hence, images are often ambiguous, grotesque and ugly, as the dying world is represented together with the birth of the new (see Chapter Six, in Bakhtin 1968: 368-436). For this reason, I argue that the carnivalesque mode is also the mode that best reflects socio-cultural evolution and change.

The essential principle of grotesque realism is the lowering of all that is grand: the spiritual, the ideal and the abstract. These are transported from cosmic heights to the material level, down to the body and to the earth. Carnival is the time of feast, of becoming, of change and renewal, and is hostile to all that is finalized or immortalized. It is ambivalent, as the feast folk humour is a temporary suspension of both the ideal and the real. Thus carnival denies eternal order and truth; yet it simultaneously expresses the utopian belief in a more democratic future in which fear and authority no longer exist.

### **5.3 Synopsis and Narrative Strategies:**

The plot of *Plaff* revolves around the melodramatic suffering of Concha (Daisy Granados), a neurotic and paranoid jealous mother-in-law, and her young daughter-in-law, Clarita (Thais Valdés) who is intelligent and critical of the absurdities of mature socialism. The generational and ideological clashes between the two women can be read

as metaphorical of the problems in 1980s Cuban society as a whole, and represent the tensions between two different attitudes towards the Revolution. Clarita (which translates as Claire and means clarity / lucidity) is a young professional chemical engineer, struggling against an omnipresent, counterproductive bureaucracy in her workplace. She is determined, against all odds, to offer her work a cheaper, more efficient polymer that she has invented. She is supported by her husband, José Ramón (Luis Alberto García), a popular baseball player, yet is constantly in conflict with her mother-in-law. Clarita is a child of the Revolution, born and bred under it. Frustrated with monstrous bureaucracy and dogmatism, she is openly critical of the institutional inefficiency of the government apparatus. For this reason she constantly quarrels with her mother-in-law, Concha, who never questions the absurdly dogmatic effects of stagnation.

Instead of complaining or protesting about inefficiency and the resulting shortages, Concha puts up with these stoically, even taking the moral high ground by implying that her daughter-in-law's actions are anti-Revolutionary. Concha, who was born during Batista's rule, has been involved in the Revolution from its beginning. However, in the plot mechanism upon which the narrative depends, Concha relies too much on *santería*, that is, syncretic Afro-Cuban religious practices. Thus she has retained what Clarita considers to be superstitious, if not outright reactionary, beliefs. Concha is also deeply prejudiced against men because of the promiscuity of her deceased husband. As a result she no longer trusts men, or anybody else for that matter, not allowing herself to be happy with her new love interest, Tomás. Concha will not relax and let herself live a little, also preventing everyone else around her from enjoying their lives too (just like Ogurtsov from Riazanov's *Karnaval'naia*).

Concha is particularly jealous of, and feels threatened by, her daughter-in-law, Clarita – her complete antithesis. For Clarita, on the other hand, Concha represents everything that has gone wrong with the original Revolutionary project: its stagnation, dogmatism, uniformity and, most of all, its ubiquitous bureaucracy, which seems to exist simply in order to impede innovation, change and more pragmatic ideas. Therefore, there are two narrative strands in the film: one follows the story of Concha; the other, that of Clarita's fight with the bureaucrats. The two storylines cross from time to time, representing the clashes between the two women's ideological positions and thus exposing the contradictions in Cuban society.

The narrative is circular, experimental and daring, beginning the story *in media res*. Concha lives in constant anxiety, caused by the mysterious, incessant bombardment of her house with eggs. One day Concha has a panic attack that leads to her death from a heart attack. It transpires that these mysterious eggs are thrown by those closest to her, as they all want to help the young couple get the house to themselves. Due to the clever incorporation of the ‘imperfections’ of the Cuban way of making and viewing films, the first reel is shown only at the end. Only then it is finally revealed that Concha herself was the one who initiated the egg throwing, but without the guidance of a specific *santería* spell and thus committing (according to her *santera*, or religious guide, who at the same time plays the role of detective in the film) a grave bureaucratic error, and one that costs her dearly. As observed by the *santera*: ‘even the orishas have their bureaucracy’. So, ironically, Concha is punished for not following (for once in her life) the correct protocol.

*Plaff* ridicules all sacred trends and canons, from the Latin American *telenovela*<sup>103</sup> and melodrama to national allegory and the *imperfect cinema* theory itself, thus responding to the social problems of the day in the most ingenious fashion. The film parodies the widely misunderstood notion of ‘imperfect cinema’ as technically poor cinema by taking this literally, thereby exposing the pervasive tendency to abuse its aesthetic principles as an excuse for the production of many artistically poor films. In the process, the notion of ‘imperfect cinema’ becomes a wider metaphor for the problems of an aging Cuban Revolution and government, incorporating issues such as food, housing and other endemic shortages, as well as those of stagnation, dogmatism, inefficiency and bureaucratization. Rather perceptively, the film exposes problems that threatened the very existence of ICAIC and of Cuba’s Revolutionary achievements.

Therefore the ‘technical imperfections’ of the film are an elaborate and deliberate ploy, symbolic and emblematic of perverse socialist bureaucratic practices. For example, the film starts without its first reel, as this has not been developed in time for the celebration of the Day of the Filmmaker (one of many nonsensical self-celebratory Cuban socialist practices mocked in the film). Instead the film starts with the second reel, which is upside down and thus initiates a kind of detective story. When the first reel turns up, at the film’s end, it becomes apparent that all of this has been an elaborate narrative strategy in the interests of deliberate mystification and the creation of suspense, as the audience

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<sup>103</sup> These are popular melodramatic television drama series, featuring determined storylines and stock main protagonists and endings, shorter than the endless American-style soaps. See López 1985: 8.

witnesses how Concha, in a way, provokes her own death by throwing the first egg at Clarita in an attempt to scare her away from her son while the young pair were still dating.

The parody of the absurdly melodramatic narrative is further disrupted by pseudo-Brechtian and clearly orchestrated technical gaffes, preventing any possibility of identification with the unlikable character of Concha. (This is despite the fact that the role of Concha is performed by Daisy Granados – ‘el rostro del cine cubano’ (the face of Cuban cinema) – who is associated with other popular melodramas such as *Retrato de Teresa* and *Cecilia*).<sup>104</sup> All its self-reflexive strategies expose the conditions of film production, and are seen in various other aspects of *Plaff*: a wardrobe door opening at the wrong moment, revealing the film crew in its mirror (not to mention the mysterious hand of God that closes it); the director’s straight-to-camera monologue, asking the audience to imagine a scene that could not be filmed because of lack of time and resources (mirroring the fate of Clarita’s invention); Daisy Granados pretending to forget her lines; and a missing prop (a travel bag) being thrown to the protesting actors who complain that such shortages make their work impossible. The predominant cinematic modes are mock documentary and melodrama, parodying the mix of documentary and feature film styles in early classic imperfect cinema films (such as Alea’s *Memorias* ) even whilst the acting is mostly realistic. All these factors remind the audience that this is not reality, indeed that they are watching a film – a performance – and all function as comic relief from the rather depressing plot.

Another important Cuban cinematic trend parodied in the film is that of historical allegory. Marvin D’Lugo was amongst the first to suggest that *Plaff* should be read as a film in which ‘the tradition of allegorizing the nation through female characters is intentionally parodied’ (1993: 287). D’Lugo claims that the ‘comic reduction of recent Cuban history to the conflict between mothers and daughters-in-law clearly functions as a way of addressing and engaging a Cuban audience in serious national issues’, whilst at the same time avoiding a heavy-handed moralizing approach (1993: 287).

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<sup>104</sup> For more information, see what used to be ‘El Portal de Cine Cubano’ at [http://www.ecured.cu/index.php/Daisy\\_Granados](http://www.ecured.cu/index.php/Daisy_Granados) [accessed 10 Aug 2011].

#### 5.4 *Plaff*'s Style and Aesthetics:

*Plaff* is certainly an original venture. The film employs a postmodern self-reflexive (carnavalesque) mode of parody<sup>105</sup> for the purpose of the revision and deconstruction of the notion of 'imperfect cinema' and its most dominant genres and tendencies: documentary chronicle, carnivalesque comedy, melodrama, and historical allegory. Tabío also pays homage to and mocks Gutiérrez Alea's idea of an 'active critical cinema and active spectator' (discussed in Gutiérrez Alea's *Dialéctica del espectador*). Through its numerous gaffes the film exposes the above mentioned aesthetic trends as socio-political constructs, which at the time were the appropriate aesthetic (formal) expression of particular historic conditions (content). García Espinosa himself realized this. If, in 1969, he proposed a cinema 'based on new poetics' whose true goal is to disappear, that is, a cinema of 'process' rather than 'analysis' which cultivates a plurality of forms (Espinosa in Martin 1997: 71-82), by 1972, in a response to the polemic generated by the original essay, he wrote:

Cinema can only be constructed on the ashes of what already exists. Moreover, to make a new cinema is, in fact, to reveal the process of destruction of the one that came before [...] We have to make a spectacle out of the destruction of the spectacle. This process cannot be individual [...]. What is needed is to perform this process jointly with the viewer. (Burton in Martin 1997: 159)

Thus the film becomes confirmation that every formal strategy corresponds to particular socio-political conditions (content); a notion formulated by Ruby Rich in 1991 (in Martin 1997: 278). As previously noted (in the General Introduction) NLAC is a political cinema, and as such it 'cannot be properly understood in isolation from political, social, economic, cultural and aesthetic forces' (López in Martin 1997: 137). However, as a parody, *Plaff* is also a homage to and continuity of the Cuban Revolutionary cinema's aesthetic strategies. After all, 'parody is repetition with a difference, an imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony cuts both ways' (Hutcheon, 1985: 32).

As noted by Geoff King, the terms satire and parody are often used rather loosely, as if they are interchangeable (2002: 108). The two can overlap, and, as exemplified in *Plaff*, satire can be achieved through different kinds of parody – a point to which I shall return below in this study. Firstly, however, I shall attempt to clarify the main difference

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<sup>105</sup> Which Genette defines as 'travesty', see the Introduction to Part I.

between parody and satire. As defined by Geoff King, ‘satire is comedy with an edge and a target, usually social or political’ (Geoff King 2002: 93). It is most often used to express criticism of oppressive totalitarian regimes, such as those of Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe, Franco’s fascist rule in Spain, and other oppressive Latin American governments.

Unlike satire’s direct social critique, parody usually mocks certain formal, aesthetic conventions (Steve Neale & Frank Krutnik 1990: 19). However, it can make fun of, transgress and subvert these conventions, exposing them as ideological or social constructs (Dan Harris 2000: 6). As noted by Dan Harris, parody is an ‘incongruity-generating mechanism by obliterating conventionalized codes through disruptive [...] techniques’ (2000: 6), more of a ‘discursive mode’ than a ‘meta-genre’, and, of course, a spectatorship strategy (2000: 7). The audience needs to be very familiar with the targeted films, genres, theories or directors in order for it to work. This familiarity was definitely the case with Cuban filmgoers, who were well educated and informed by television programmes such as *24X sec* and the cinema magazine *Cine cubano*. As noted by Fernandes, from the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s the arts and, particularly, Cuban cinema increasingly adopted the role of a designated space for wider socio-political discussion (2006: 9; 13; 40-41). Parody can spoof a film genre (for example chronicle, melodrama and *telenovela* in *Plaff*, and chronicle in Woody Allen’s *Zelig*); or can be self-parody (like Fellini’s *8½*, mimicked by the fictional director in *Plaff*), or of other filmmakers. It can also be an intertextual parody of a celebrated film, as in the final pun in *Some Like it Hot* being mimicked in the final embrace scene in Gutiérrez Alea and Tabío’s *Fresa y chocolate*, or *Plaff*’s reference to García Espinosa’s *Las aventuras de Juan Quin Quin / The Adventures of Juan Quin Quin* (1967),<sup>106</sup> Gutiérrez Alea’s *La muerte*, and so on. Harris calls the mechanism of parody ‘logical absurdity’, as it creates logic solely for the purpose of later rejecting it (2000: 9). This explanation is fitting to the operational principle of *Plaff*.

*Plaff*’s narrative appears to be built around García Espinosa’s ‘Meditations on Imperfect Cinema ... Fifteen Years Later’ (1984), where he elaborates and clarifies his premise for an imperfect cinema. Espinosa details his belief that ‘new content requires new forms’ and that the notion of ‘imperfect cinema’ does not justify the making of bad

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<sup>106</sup> From now on I shall refer to the film as *Juan Quin Quin*.

films, as it had been misunderstood by many (see Martin 1997: 83-85). Tabío, rather ingeniously, takes the notion of ‘imperfect cinema’ literally (through aural and visual literalization).<sup>107</sup> He thus transforms it into both a metaphor and central working principle that helps him to comment on the imperfections of the Cuban film apparatus, that is, on the particularities and difficulties of making or viewing films in Cuba owing to the growing economic constraints in the late 1980s, thereby also exposing the imperfect management style of the ruling elite. He re-examines the state of the Revolutionary Cuban project through film as a cross-generational conflict and dialogue between two opposing views of the Revolution, symbolically represented through the two women. In this cross-generational conflict and with Concha’s overly melodramatic fear and paranoia of any change, Tabío parodies and subverts the Cuban tendency to read female characters as an historical allegory of the nation, representing the country as divided between two irreconcilable ideologies. He thus subverts over exaggerated claims of national unity on the island by a government both aging and increasingly alienated from the people. Through parodic exaggeration, inversion, intertextually and literalization (to name but a few of the many parodic strategies utilized here) the film targets and satirizes the absurd practices of the Kafkaesque Revolutionary bureaucracy, and its unpredictable swings from inertia to unrealistic Revolutionary zeal – two extreme, dangerous and self-destructive patterns of economic (mis)management. Tabío achieves this via self-parody, in the character of the fictitious director of the film Juan Carlos Contreras (as opposed to Juan Carlos Tabío) who explains a scene to the viewers that he is unable to film in time for the celebrations for the Day of the Cuban Filmmakers, and also through a parody of the far from perfect viewing conditions in Cuban cinemas where the audience is used to seeing films out of sequence because of the unpredictability of transport, old projectors or other technical problems owing to the persistent blockade (that is, the country’s underdevelopment and economic mismanagement). As noted before, the faulty first reel is an ingenious narrative strategy used in the creation of suspense and in order to initiate the mock detective aspects of the film, where Concha’s *santera* becomes a hilarious Cuban version of Sherlock Holmes. In addition, there are some uncanny and surreal

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<sup>107</sup> For more on the parodic mechanisms of transformation such as reiteration, inversion, literalization, exaggeration, intertextuality and transtextualization and so on see Harris, 2000: 37-38.

elements that obviously parody the mystery and horror genres, but also evoke Gutiérrez Alea's and Buñuel's black surreal comedies.

The film also refers to García Espinosa's carnivalesque comedy *Juan Quin Quin*, recreating the use of one actor (in García Espinosa's case Enrique Santiesteban) to evoke numerous forms of oppression in pre-Revolutionary Cuba. In a similar fashion Tabío uses the actor Jorge Cao not only in the role of Contreras but also as numerous functionaries from other institutions such as the Biochemical and the Excrement institutes, where Clarita tries to implement her homemade polymer that could save the country thousands in hard currency (something invaluable to the impoverished Cubans). As noted by Blasini, this aspect of the film is used to display the ubiquity of Cuban bureaucracy (2000: 201), yet I also argue that it recontextualizes and underlines excessive bureaucracy as a dogmatic form of intellectual suppression and censorship.

As noted above, the re-employment of the almost neorealistic documentary mode of representation and acting, and the inclusion of self-reflexive elements mixed with over-exaggerated melodramatic music and close-ups of Concha's emotional state, all are intertextual references and parodies of major Cuban film trends, cinematic aesthetics and individual films (such as García Espinosa's *Juan Quin Quin*, Gutiérrez Alea's black surreal comedy *La muerte*, Humberto Solás's melodramatic historical allegory *Lucía*, Pastor Vega's social melodrama *Retrato de Teresa*, and Santiago Álvarez's consistently good documentary chronicles, amongst others). Tabío's parody of melodrama concerning Concha's dysfunctional love and family life, for example, deconstructs the mechanism of the symbolic equation between the spheres of the private and the public (employed in the earlier *Retrato de Teresa*), exposing it as a social construct for the promotion of the official party line (the 1975 family code).<sup>108</sup> It thus transforms this equation into a metaphor for Cuban society of the 1980s in deep crisis. It is possible to argue that the film borrows and develops, in an original creative manner, the idea of parodic homage from Gutiérrez Alea's *La muerte* (which openly paid tribute to many silent comedy masters), and also aspects of Fellini's self-reflexive *8½* (a film about a director making a film) to name but two influences. By recontextualizing the above mentioned trends and

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<sup>108</sup> The Family code was approved on 8 March 1975, the date celebrated as International Women's Day in Cuba. According to the code, marriage is constituted on the basis of the equal rights and duties of both partners. See, for example, 'Charting Women's Progress Since 1959' at <http://www.cuba-solidarity.org> [accessed 13 of Aug 2011].

major films, *Plaff* provokes an active dialogue with, and re-evaluation of, Cuba's critical economic situation in the 1980s. Therefore the film is not just a funny, ingeniously inventive, intelligent and playful parody, but also a 'perfect' example of Espinosa's notion of imperfect cinema and of his and Alea's desire for an active, critical Revolutionary Cuban cinema.<sup>109</sup>

### **5.5 From the Parody of Melodrama to the Realms of Black Comedy:**

As noted by Ana López, 'thematic innovations and the fact the telenovelas [were] increasingly willing to deal with social issues have [...] increased' their popularity (1985: 10). She notes further that because of this they have begun to adopt somewhat self-referential practices. This tendency is reflected on in *Plaff* when we see, for example, how Concha is perplexed by the reaction of her neighbours when watching a *telenovela*, and the over exaggerated melodramatic tune played when Concha thinks of her relationship with her former husband and that with her new love interest, Tomás. If during its first period NLAC rejected melodrama as a form of cultural dependence, during the 1980s, the second period of NLAC, the genre was used to promote national cultural specificities and the relative idiosyncrasy of Latin American culture. Nevertheless, since the days of early cinema Latin American melodrama has been considered to be different from Hollywood melodrama, in both its condemnation of certain inequitable social constraints (see, for example, Buñuel's Mexican melodramas) and in its regular subject of the gap between rich and poor. It is thought to be the most intrinsic and popular of all Latin American cinema genres, and therefore, by banning it, the NLAC movement actually rejected the means for attracting its target audience. As argued by López, in the 1980s 'the formally rejected melodrama seems to have acquired a new value in the eyes of filmmakers as a tool with which to attract the kinds of audiences needed for their films' (1985: 10).

To summarize, as demonstrated above, *Plaff* spoofs everything: from major trends to a detailed revision of imperfect cinema movement's ideas and theories (of counter hegemonic film art, not interested in technical perfection) to the spectatorship theory of Gutiérrez Alea; including the 1960s notion of mixing of documentary and fictional modes

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<sup>109</sup> Here I have listed a few observations on Tabío's deployment of almost every mode of parody, which may have been overlooked in the otherwise excellent article on *Plaff* by Blasini (2000).

of representation. It is also a self-reflexive film about the difficulties involved in making and watching films in socialist Cuba: from technical to material and prop shortages; it is a spoof of the director's role in the film, implying that there has been too much institutionalization in both economy and culture; there is also an ironic hint of the absurd bureaucratization of everything – even of *santería*. Through the use of melodrama the film also parodies the overused trend of women as historical allegories of the nation and different historical struggles, initiated by Solás's *Lucía*. The symbolism of the irreconcilable generational ideological gap in the film is subversive, suggesting the existence of two, very different national models for the future of Cuba. The film implies that at present the country's fate is in the hands of bureaucrats – inept, aging, and alienated from reality – who veer from inaction into equally dangerous Revolutionary zeal, whose managerial style, therefore, is condemned to (perpetual) failure. Thus, from melodramatic, carnivalesque comedy and social satire the film, eventually, collapses into a tragedy, as the main protagonist, Concha, dies of a self-provoked heart attack, caused by paranoia and irrational fear of change. This is why Chanan has assessed the film as a successful yet uncomfortable to watch tragicomedy, as the spectator 'is implicated in a sadistic practical joke' that ends tragically (Chanan 2004: 440).

However, how did the film escape harsh censorship? As argued, rather persuasively, by Linda Hutcheon: 'parody's transgressions ultimately remain authorized – by the very norm that it seeks to subvert' (1985: 75). After all, *Plaff* is also an exemplary film of 'imperfect cinema', a continuity and reaffirmation of its principles, imperfect cinema having been previously approved in the 1960s by the authorities as the official canon for Revolutionary filmmaking. This is why, as argued by Stam, João Vieira and Ismail Xavier, parody is 'well suited to the needs of oppositional culture, precisely because it deploys the force of the dominant discourse against itself' (in Randal Johnson & Stam 1995: 405). Unlike the political satire *Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas* (discussed in the following Part III), *Plaff* is an indirect and deceptively entertaining attack on the system. Therefore the Cuban authorities could not find obvious premises on which to ban it. Also, importantly, the film went on to earn international acclaim for the country's film industry.

## CHAPTER SIX: COMPARISONS AND CONCLUSIONS. BLACK HUMOUR AS A SUBVERSIVE STRATEGY FOR REPRESENTING SOCIAL CRISIS AND DISCONTENT

As noted in Chapters Four and Five, in the 1980s there was a return to the popular genres of comedy and melodrama centred upon everyday issues. By this point the NLAC, and Cuban filmmakers in particular, had realized that popular genres could be used effectively in the interests of social criticism and the discussion of important socio-political and national issues. Traditionally in Russian, Cuban and Latin American cinema female characters were often read as allegories of the nation (López 1985; Iordanova 2003). I argue, however, that this tendency lends itself to a potentially subversive recontextualization of 1970 and 1980s films.

Both films discussed here – *Plaff* and *Zabytaia melodia* – are amongst the most topical films produced in the 1980s in Cuba and Soviet Russia respectively, marking the return of the genre of critical social satire. They criticize the processes of *perestroika* and *rectificación* in themselves. The main conflict in both films can therefore be seen as the struggle between the legacy of stagnation and bureaucratic dogma versus the forces of change. Both directors voice their doubts about the effectiveness and sincerity of reforms introduced from above (exposing them as a typical case of ‘turkeys voting for Christmas’) because the very culprits of the system’s crisis – the most inefficient high-ranking bureaucrats – have yet again been put in charge. In both films aging, ailing bureaucrats are seen as detrimental to more effective and democratic developments, blocking and suffocating even the most worthy of initiatives coming from below. Both are landmark films that argue that change and regeneration are vital for the survival of their countries; yet both end on an elegiac, ambiguous note, expressing the directors’ doubts about the success of reforms.

*Plaff* and *Zabytaia melodia* start as comic melodramas but transform into black surreal tragicomedies, wherein reality and fantasy are intertwined with mystery. Both expose the degeneration of the old Revolutionary slogans, the hypocrisy and irrelevance of a leadership alienated and divorced from reality, deteriorating living standards, the widespread corruption that spreads from the top downwards, and racial and class divisions in supposedly classless 1980s socialist societies. The main protagonists in both films are anti-heroes whose extreme, irrational fears of change (indeed, of a life in

poverty) and their rejection of their true loves lead to their premature, self-inflicted, and tragic deaths from heart attacks. I have argued here that both films are rather uncomfortable, symbolic fables of a dying social system, but both are also prophetic fables as they predict that *perestroika* and *rectificación* will not resuscitate original, Revolutionary ideas. Both films end on an elegiac note concerning the human tendency to conform to absurd, oppressive practices.

The theme of death – that is, of the dying body, system and society – is one of the classic themes of carnivalesque black (often surreal) comedy. The lighter, farcical carnivalesque elements of early *glasnost* laughter (up until 1988) gave way, eventually, to angry and sinister surreal satire that becomes increasingly absurd, serious and even morbid. This kind of black humour, as I shall argue in the following Part III, is closer to dystopia and even to anti-utopia, as its message is almost inevitably anti-totalitarian. In the last years of Soviet Russia this became a predominant trend and was referred to, rather appropriately, as *chernukha* / darkness (see Cook 1996; Geoff King 2002; Jordanova 2003). Many of these black surreal comedies are comparable to earlier Soviet dystopian satires.

### **6.1 The Tradition of Russian and Soviet Black humour**

As noted by Olga Reizen, black humour deals with society in times of crisis for the nation: tragic historical periods of war, stagnation or Revolution (in Horton 1993: 94). According to Reizen, in Russia the tradition of black humour goes back to the popular fairs, where *skomorokhi* (minstrels) entertained people. It is seen in seventeenth-century prints as well as in the works of Gogol, Saltykov-Shchedrin and Dostoevskii up to 1917 (in Horton 1993: 94). Reizen claims that ‘the more rotten something is in any nation the blacker is its humour’ (in Horton 1993: 94). In his autobiography Riazanov himself sums up the Russian sense of black humour and folk wisdom with the following popular joke from the period: ‘the bigger the country the longer it rots’ (2005).

The 1980s were marked by the end of Brezhnev’s stagnated rule and the increasing crisis of mature socialism, which culminated in Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and its hopes for social regeneration and a more democratic form of socialism similar to Lenin’s NEP and Dupček’s idea of ‘socialism with human face’. However, Reizen fails to mention that in the early years of the Soviet Revolution during the NEP (a period of relative intellectual

freedom) there was a wealth of satirical, black humour works, many of them dystopias of the NEP society. Amongst the most famous of these are Evgenii Zamiatin's *My / We* (1921), Nikolai Erdman's play *Somoubiitsa / The Suicider* (1928), Mikhail Bulgakov's stories *Rokovye iaitsa / The Fatal Eggs* (1924) and his novel *Master i Margarita / Master and Margarita* (completed in 1940, an incomplete version of which was published first in 1966 twenty six years after Bulgakov's death), and *Sobach'e serdtse / Heart of a Dog* (1925). Evgenii Shvarts's anti-totalitarian play, *Drakon / The Dragon*, was written during the war in 1944, while Vladimir Voinovich's life's work, the trilogy *Zhizn' i neobychainye prikliucheniia soldata Ivana Chonkina / The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Ivan Chonkin*, was completed in the late 1970s. Overall, all these works are surreal satires, exposing the absurdity of totalitarianism and condemning any form of oppression.<sup>110</sup> Most of them are surreal allegories of Stalinism and they were either banned or published in full only in 1988. Their authors were either forced into exile as dissidents or were silenced in some other way. For example, owing to constant harassment by the KGB Voinovich and his family had to leave the country in 1980.

However, since the 1950s similar works lampooning the Soviet system were disseminated by underground cultural channels. These included works that were *samizdat* / self-published (typewritten scripts passed on from person to person) and *tamizdat* / there-published (manuscripts smuggled and published outside of Russia). These were in addition to the *magnitizdat* / taped underground music of Bulat Okudzhava and various youth bands, as well as bards such as Vladimir Vysotskii (the actor had cult status in the former USSR and his poetry and songs, subversive of the Soviet system, were very popular).

## 6.2 Perestroika's Black Humour – Black Humour & Accusative Satire in Socialist Cuba and Soviet Russia

The first black humour film of *perestroika*, *Monanieba / Repentance*, was made in 1984 by the Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze, but was screened for the first time only in 1986 following Gorbachev's campaign for openness and transparency known as *glasnost*.

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<sup>110</sup> Despite his attempts Riazanov failed to secure the filming of Voinović's *Chonkin*, something he mentions in his memoirs (2005). However, the novel was later filmed by Menzel, in 1994. See <http://www.imdb.com> [accessed 31 of Jan, 2011]. *Chonkin* is seen as a Russian version of Hašek's famous anti-totalitarian satire *The Good Soldier Švejk*, written in the second decade of the twentieth century.

The film is an allegorical tragicomedy that in the figure of Varlaam – a fusion of Beria, Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini – condemns any kind of tyranny and oppression. Its type of black humour is known as ‘allegorical satire’, which is reminiscent of the works of the Spanish surrealists,<sup>111</sup> especially Buñuel’s surreal film masterpieces made during his exile in Mexico (1950-1965) and his second French period (1965-1977).<sup>112</sup>

According to Reizen, one of the most common metaphors in Soviet black humour comedies is that of illness and death (Reizen in Horton 1993: 96). She gives as an example Gaidai’s *Zhenikh s togo sveta* (his first satire, made in 1957), whose main protagonist cannot get married because of a document stating his accidental death.<sup>113</sup> As previously mentioned in Part I, in Alea’s *La muerte* the main protagonist is unable to let his uncle rest in peace owing to the Cuban bureaucracy’s absurd obsession with papers and documents. Driven mad by relentless procedures, he ends up in a straitjacket after strangling a bureaucrat. As demonstrated in those two examples, there are similar metaphors, themes and black comedies in both countries. (Another example of this kind of comedy is Gutiérrez Alea’s final film, made in collaboration with Tabío, *Guantanamera* (1995), which revisits the same concerns with illness and death, symbolizing the crisis of 1990s Cuban socialist society).

I have argued that the similarity between *Plaff* and *Zabytaia melodia*’s themes and timing is no mere coincidence but determined by analogous socio-political developments. As perceptively observed by Iordanova, owing to their common social system and the close economic integration and cultural exchange between the former socialist countries there were a great many similarities in their socio-political and cultural trends (2003: 21-23). In general, whatever happened in Soviet Russia also resonated throughout the whole Socialist bloc, even the brotherly countries of Cuba and Vietnam (Iordanova 2003: 21).

It is important to note that during transitional periods of relative openness such as the NEP, the Thaw and *perestroika* there was a significant presence of black humour and accusatory satire, targeting not only the usual ‘enemies of the people’ but also some social ills and aiming for their elimination or correction. During times of ideological orthodoxy, however, satiric black humour was generally avoided and discouraged by censors and artists alike, because of its alleged double-edge. After all, as the means of

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<sup>111</sup> See Reizen’s article on Soviet black humour, 1993: 95.

<sup>112</sup> For Buñuel’s filmography and periodization, see Edwards 2005.

<sup>113</sup> See Reizen in Horton 1993: 96.

film production were in the hands of the socialist governments, it was not easy to avoid the mixture of criticism with official ideology. As mentioned earlier in Chapter Three, Part I, during the 1970s, for example, in order to fool the censors artists often resorted to coded, allegoric, historical symbolism and Aesopian language (Tarkovsky's *Zerkalo / Mirror*, 1975, is a good example). In Cuba also during the 1970s there were a great many historical allegories (such as Alea's *La última cena*), whilst in the 1980s there was a marked return to topics of everyday life and to the popular genres of comedy and melodrama, or of their generic mixture. This was due to public demand for more entertainment, and the realization that the contextualization of these popular genres could be a subversive artistic strategy.

However, by the mid-1980s, with the universal weakening of the socialist system and the advent of *glasnost*, there was yet another cycle of black humour and accusatory satires across the whole Socialist bloc. Something similar had happened once before, in the 1960s, as a result of the Soviet Thaw, whose mild and contradictory reforms had had a much greater impact in the socialist countries in the Central European region than in Soviet Russia itself. Most of the films made by the 1960s Czechoslovakian, Polish, Hungarian and Yugoslavian New Waves were black comedies and satires. This is the reason why in the early 1970s (and after the collapse of the Prague Spring, thanks to the massive military clampdown by five Warsaw Pact countries in Czechoslovakia) Yugoslavian censors banned some of the black comedies made by the Yugoslavian *Novi film / New Film* directors, out of fear and keen to please the Soviets. Amongst these was Makavejev's *WR-Misterije organizma / W.R.-Mysteries of the Organism* (1971), an anarchic, irreverent black political comedy that links sexual with political transgression and condemns any kind of oppression and demagoguery. The movement was even renamed 'Black Film' (Cook 1996: 750).

Beyond any doubt, the black comedies of the Czechoslovakian New Wave had a lasting impact and legacy, and not only on the region. As noted by Cook, during the Prague Spring Czechoslovakia 'produced over three hundred films that had a radical impact on its own socio-political structure and simultaneously changed the shape of international cinema' (1996: 716). Iordanova confirms that, thanks to the versatile system of barter of films with 'friendly' countries from the Third World and other brotherly nations (such as Cuba and Vietnam), Polish, Hungarian and particularly Czechoslovakian productions achieved truly international exposure, reaching beyond the usual channels of

Western Europe and North America (2003: 22). The Czechoslovakian films inspired many students from the other countries to study film at FAMU (The Czech Film Academy). For example, during the ‘Black Film’ counterattack in Yugoslavia, five young Yugoslavian directors went to study in Czechoslovakia. Their films were instrumental in the comeback of Yugoslavian cinema in the late 1970s, and they become known as the ‘Prague Group’. They were the ‘Yugoslav heirs of Forman, Menzel, Passer, and Chytilová [...] as they practiced a kind of absurdist social satire’ (Cook 1996: 750). The most famous member of the group is Emir Kusturica, also known as ‘the Balkans’ Fellini’ for his baroque, eclectic style and quirky mix of absurd surreal humour with magic realism alongside joyous, energetic and vivacious comedy (Iordanova 2002).

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that many of the 1980s black comedies and satires revisited and recycled topics addressed previously in the 1960s, such as the effects of dogmatism, standardization and uniformity, excessive bureaucracy, corruption, moral degradation, nepotism and censorship, amongst others. It is important to note that Alea’s *La muerte* is often compared to Buñuel’s black satires, and in turn Tabío’s *Plaff* is compared to Alea’s *La muerte*. There are many deliberate intertextual references in both Cuban films. In Alea’s, for example, all the bureaucrats wear dark glasses. This has often been seen as an homage to Buñuel, yet one can also recall Fellini’s unsavoury, superfluous characters from *La dolce vita* who all wear dark glasses too. In Tabío’s *Plaff* this idea of uniformity and standardization is taken a step further as all the bureaucrats, of any kind and of both sexes, are played by one and the same actor. In the waiting room of the director of Clarita’s institute there is a huge filling cabinet, which blocks the entrance to his office. Every time the bureaucrat or anyone else exits or enters the room they hurt themselves by bumping into the cabinet. Eventually, the bureaucrat orders his secretary to get rid of the sinister cabinet (which appears in the Institute of Excrement) only to order another, identical one for the safe-keeping of all his precious bureaucratic memos, the answers to his memos, and the answers to the answers of his memos.

In a similar fashion, Riazanov’s *Zabytaia melodia* opens with Moscow’s numerous geriatric bureaucrats being chauffeur-driven to work in their official black cars, usually Volgas. Another important symbol of their powerful status and self-importance is the essential briefcase – a must-have even for bureaucrats of the lowest rank. Also, in Leonid’s dream (which turns into a nightmare) his fellow bureaucrats are shown as being obsessed with their desks and numerous phones, moving them to Moscow’s metro after

the closure of their institution. In all the above mentioned films the absurdity of the bureaucratic apparatus is a prime satirical target. Therefore the bureaucrats' far-reaching, destructive powers, causing universal devastation and ruin, are represented in an excessive, exaggerated satirical manner.

In *Zabytaia melodia* this is represented symbolically by Moscow's rush-hour traffic, other cars needlessly held for a lengthy period of time just to clear the way for one government Chaika (a limousine-like car, used only by the highest Soviet apparatchiks).<sup>114</sup> The absurdity of this incident is underlined in several ways: medics in an ambulance, prevented from attending a presumably life and death emergency, looking at the diligent policeman with disbelief and frustration; the contrast and contradiction of the incident with newspaper appeals for increased efficiency, productivity, and a radical change of attitude; and self-satisfied bureaucrats and ordinary workers alike, holding copies of the same newspapers, seeming totally untroubled by the situation as if it is perfectly normal and acceptable behaviour. What makes the episode even more absurd is that, unlike the bureaucrats, the ordinary people are cramped in packed trams and buses. This makes their passive acceptance of such obviously regular occurrences even more shocking. So the public is encouraged to laugh and then think about this; to pause and question just how many important hours, if not days, for the economy have been lost each year thanks to such bizarre practices.

In black comedy and satire the main protagonists are usually anti-heroes. This is the case in the two main films discussed here, *Zabytaia melodia* and *Plaff*. Despite being rather comical, both films end with death and tragedy, thus eventually becoming tragicomedies.<sup>115</sup> As such, they blend different generic elements: social criticism, expressed through accusatory satire; moral concerns, dwelling on the contradictions between private and public roles, represented through melodrama; and some (fantastic) surreal, oneiric elements that introduce the hidden, private worlds of the two protagonists, exposing their deepest fears through their increasingly nightmarish dreams. In addition, there are also touches of lighter humour, such as bedroom farce, or mischievous irony and parody (in the case of *Plaff*). Bakhtin has argued that genre permeability, that is,

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<sup>114</sup> Nomenclatura and apparatchiks are terms addressing the ruling bureaucratic managerial class in the former socialist countries. Frequently they were also referred to as the 'red bourgeoisie' (in Makavejev films, for example), because of their hypocritical privileged lifestyle.

<sup>115</sup> For example, Chanan first comments that in *Plaff* 'the comedy is revealed as a tragedy' (2004: 438) or a tragicomedy (2004: 440).

inventiveness and the use of adventure, crude naturalism and the fantastic (even of mysticism), are amongst the most important characteristics of Menippean satire – the serio-comical genre of festive carnivalesque humour (Bakhtin 1984: 113-15). This is the reason for the carnivalesque ('the carnival sense of the world', see below) mode's dialogical, polyphonic, democratic and ambivalent nature, and for its enormous influence on European and world literature. In Bakhtin's own words:

This carnivalized genre, extraordinarily flexible and as changeable as Proteus, capable of penetrating other genres, has had an enormous and as yet insufficiently appreciated importance on for the development of European literatures. Menippean satire became one of the main carriers and channels for the carnival sense of the world in literature, and remains so to the present day. (Bakhtin 1984: 113)

I realize that the possibilities for an intertextual analysis of both films are, quite simply, inexhaustible. Nevertheless, the above examination demonstrates the existence of dynamic intercultural dialogues amongst First, Second and Third World cinemas, and with it the generic permeability and penetrating, subversive role of the carnivalesque mode in World culture and cinema.

**PART III. CARNIVAL AS UTOPIAN / DYSTOPIAN CRITIQUE THROUGH FILM: BLACK HUMOUR AND THE DYSTOPIAN TURN OF THE LATE 1980s AND EARLY 1990s**

**INTRODUCTION: *REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM*: UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA, ANTI-UTOPIA AND THE END OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE**

I shall discuss here the late 1980s to early 1990s dominant black humour trend in films of the former socialist countries, a trend consisting of dark carnivals and dystopias, by focusing on films from Cuba and late *glasnost* period Russia.<sup>116</sup> In the most extreme examples of black humour from both countries social satire collapses into anti-utopian negation of the idealistic impulse, and into extreme physical brutality and naturalism. Rather fittingly, in Soviet Russia this trend was called *chernukha* (which translates as dark pessimism) and it dominated the Soviet screen during the period 1989-1991.<sup>117</sup>

According to Seth Graham, the trend of *chernukha* was a parodic inversion of the socialist realist canon's logocentric, optimistic ideological model into visual naturalism (2000: 13). Its irreverent fatalism and alleged nihilism were a complete rejection of any form of utopian idealism: society and the family had both disintegrated, and there was no room for love, emotion or sentimentality; all that was left from the ruins of Soviet society was crude physical violence, crime and brutality (2000: 11). The *chernukha* style was one of grotesque realism, exaggeration, the absurd and physical excess, closely associated or deriving from black carnivalesque humour.

Gerald Mast defines *reductio ad absurdum* as the third type of comedy plot (out of a possible six): 'A [...] human mistake or social question is magnified, reducing the action to chaos and the social question to absurdity' (1979: 5-6). As I shall demonstrate with examples from the selected films here, this is the kind of humour that dominates Mamin's dark carnivalesque satire *Fontan* (1988) and his dystopian satire *Bakenbardy* (1990). According to Mast, such a plot 'reveals the ridiculousness of social or human attitudes, and frequently serves a didactic function' (1979: 6). This is also the case in Mamin's film from the next period of transition to a market economy, *Okno v Parizh* (1993), discussed in Part IV. In *Fontan*, *Bakenbardy* and *Okno* Mamin develops the theme of the Russians' conflicting Eurasian identity that springs from Russia's role as a bridge between Asia and

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<sup>116</sup> For an incisive summary of the late *perestroika* film trends of carnival, dystopia and apocalypse, see Lawton 1992: 215-33.

<sup>117</sup> For a discussion of *chernukha* see Graham 2000: 9-27.

Europe. The identity conflict is that of imperial subjects of a back-water empire which has defined itself thanks to its constant rivalry with the West, this rivalry being the main reason for the Russians' peculiar love / hate relationship with the West.

Further on in his investigation, Mast states that some of the most haunting and bitter film comedies and satires (that resort to the absurd) take an intellectual position and then reduce this to terrifying nonsense, often focusing on death and horror (Mast 1979: 6). Extreme examples of this are found in some of the pessimistic *chernukha* trend films from late *perestroika*, films reminiscent of Buñuel's most chilling, surreal social satire *Los olvidados / The Young and the Damned* (1950). This film's subject is the cruel injustice towards the poor, particularly towards and amongst underprivileged children, not only in Mexico but also in all the big cities around the globe. Therefore, the famous epigraph of the film is: 'behind every beautiful city in the world there are children living in despicable misery'. No wonder *Los olvidados* is considered one of the most pessimistic films on the subject of human attitudes, elucidating the non-existent chance for redemption amongst people living in abject poverty whose fate is doomed from birth.

As well as the previously mentioned dystopian *A Clockwork Orange*, whose subject is the use of both high and low (popular and mass) culture as a tool of social control and oppression, Kubrick's earlier black comedy *Dr Strangelove* (1964) is another example of *reductio ad absurdum*. In the latter, Kubrick satirizes the absurd notion that we need atomic weapons in order to preserve humankind. Similar anti-war sentiments – exposing the absurd logic traditionally used by the American political establishment as an excuse to launch wars (around the globe), and always in the name of humanity – are also seen in two, now classic, black absurd comedies made in 1970: Robert Altman's *Mash*, and Mike Nichols's adaptation of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*. Just like Mamin's *Fontan*, the above three comedies embrace the aesthetics of the ugly in a carnivalesque mix of genres, from lighter farce to dark satire and the absurd, often reverting to the grotesque, excessive humour of the lower body (especially in *Mash*). This is why *reductio ad absurdum* is the kind of comedy plot often referred to by the critics as black, morbid, or absurd humour, and is considered cynical and pessimistic. Mamin's *Fontan*, his *Bakenbardy*, Díaz Torres's *Alicia* and Shakhnazarov's *Gorod Zero* are all such examples of absurd black comedies. Yet, whilst *Fontan* stops short of collapsing from dark carnivalesque absurd comedy into dystopia, the other three films are more sinister, sly and pessimistic, bordering on the edge between dystopia and anti-utopia. I shall argue here that *Fontan*

represents the transition / evolution from dark carnivals to absurd dystopian comedies and that the other three black comedies – *Bakenbardy*, *Alicia* and *Gorod Zero* – are actually dystopias that have captured the darkest times of the collapse of socialism, times of political, economic and identity crisis when the future seemed fearful and unpredictable.

Satire and *reductio ad absurdum* have often been used by utopians – in the critique of the present reality, by dystopians – as a warning against a development which can hold even more problems in store for the future – and by anti-utopians – in order to reject any possibility of social improvement, owing to the impossibility of achieving perfect social harmony or perfect humanity. (The latter view does not come as any surprise following the failure of humanity to use technical progress to its advantage and liberation, instead of engaging in colonial exploitation and two horrific world wars.)

With aesthetics similar to those of Eugène Ionesco's absurdist theatre, Mamin's Soviet and early post-Soviet satires and Tabío's carnivalesque black comedies tend to combine the farcical and the intellectual potential of the absurd. In *Bakenbardy*, for example, Mamin launches an attack on mass culture (understood here in Theodor Adorno's sense as mass produced commercial popular culture) as an officially sanctioned culture that successfully appropriates and manipulates any form of culture – both high and low, and particularly youth, underground counter-culture – for ideological purposes, turning them all into a means of manipulation and masquerades of authority. He demonstrates how even genuine, popular carnival can be 'kidnapped' and absorbed by official ideology. Thus from carnivalesque comedy the film becomes absurd dystopian satire. Mamin exposes his fears of the nascent commodification and commercialization of culture, here symbolized by manufactured memorabilia of Pushkin, which exemplifies and conveys the idea of pulp, a postmodern mix of high culture (the cult of Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin) with kitsch and pop art, resulting from the absorption of the former Capella members' taste for transgressive, sexually explicit pop art objects.

In his study *The Logic of the Absurd*, Jerry Palmer underlines the ambiguity and complexity of absurd comedy and satire. He states that 'regardless of the specifics of the jokes, humour is subversive and conservative, offensive and inoffensive, serious and ridiculous' (1988:182). For example, during the height of Stalinism (the 1930s to 1940s) the Soviet satiric muse was silent (apart from the targeted anti-Fascist wartime satires, of course), and laughter took the form of Aleksandrov's overoptimistic musical comedies, filled by people with unnatural, permanent smiles on their faces (Horton & Brashinski

1992: 193). Horton and Brashinski are correct in asserting that instead of examples of carnivalesque comedies of the people, these were in fact ‘a vision of mythologized socialist utopia in which workers were happy, tables were loaded with food and drink, the shops were bustling, and progress was everywhere visible’ (Horton & Brashinski 1992: 193). As noted by Maia Turovskaia, such comedy served the state ‘by providing an escape valve for pent-up frustrations and a mythological model of what communism hoped to be’ (in Horton & Brashinski 1992: 194). However, all this unnatural jolliness, happiness and optimism became unconvincing, even grotesque; a symbol of official masquerade and deception that could not fool the people forever (providing a stark contrast to the events of real, popular carnivals, such as The Prague Spring and The Velvet Revolution).

As previously mentioned (in Chapter Six, Part II), black humour usually appears during times of national crisis, wars and Revolutions. The collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and, more importantly, its failure to deliver on its original promises shattered the beliefs and the dreams of several generations (and not only in Soviet Russia) of the possibility of a fair, egalitarian society. It represented a deadly blow not only to socialist ideology but to utopianism as a whole. As defined by Sargent, ‘utopianism is a social dreaming’ of a better and fairer society (Sargent 1994: 3). The repercussions were apocalyptic for certain socialist countries, particularly for Cuba and Soviet Russia.

The Cuban and late *perestroika* / *glasnost* Russian films from the period 1988-1991 discussed here are proof that the collapse of socialism in these countries created a deep ideological vacuum, and widespread cynicism and pessimism, which expressed itself with a period of disillusionment with utopia (closely associated with socialist ideology). As observed correctly by Horton, many Soviet films made from 1986 to 1991 were carnivals that became increasingly darker, until satire and carnivalesque humour completely break down (Horton 1993: 138). What I argue here is that from grotesque carnivals many black comedies evolved into dystopias. Thus, through the analysis of the films chosen here, I shall demonstrate that the carnivalesque not only penetrates various genres but also stimulates the emergence of new cultural trends. Hence, the Cuban and Soviet films discussed in Part III represent the appearance of a new genre – dystopian critique. They all use the black comedy plot of *reductio ad absurdum*, and as they were made during the darkest hour of disintegration of socialism they tend to collapse into dystopian if not anti-utopian rejection of hope for the future. Nonetheless, despite their

caustic satire of past and alternative future hegemonic (utopian social) models, I argue that some of them leave a tiny possibility for salvation and hope. As argued by Sargent (1994) and Moylan (2000), the appearance of such films represented a shift from the earlier genre of critical utopia to the new genre of dystopian critique, and signalled the late 1980s dystopian turn.

As noted by Lawton, and as argued in Parts I and II, the carnivalesque mode is both a strategy for socio-political subversion and a rich baroque formal style (Lawton 1992: 215). I have argued that the carnivalesque mode's grotesque realism, its gay relativity and penetration of genres make it the best mode for representing socio-political, economic and cultural transitions (transformations). As argued by Bakhtin, the grotesque body is a metaphor of the process of change and becoming, of the world in flux between the death of the old (world / community / society) and the start of the next phase of its rebirth and renewal. 'The grotesque body [...] is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body' (Bakhtin 1968: 317). This is why I claim that the carnivalesque mode is instrumental for the representation of competing socio-political, cultural and intercultural trends, as well as for the formation of new genres or trends, such as critical utopia, dystopian critique and *chernukha*.

I shall argue that many of the films discussed in Part III and Part IV (made between 1988 and 1998) are examples of 'dystopian critique'. As defined by Moylan, 'dystopian critique' is both a self-reflexive critique of the order of things (a grotesque inversion of its promises) and an exploration of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next political activities can derive (Moylan 2000: xv). According to Moylan, the genre was born out of the historical conditions, during the hard times of the 1980s and 1990s (2000: 182). He claims that again 'the times [the dystopian turn in the 1980s] [...] produced the theory required for their critique' (Moylan 2000: 134). Sargent has argued that the genre of 'dystopian critique' evolved from the previous genre of 'critical utopia', which described a good place with problems (1994: 8). The latter genre was only short-lived, due to the failure of the 1968 movements to achieve positive social change.

As noted by Fátima Vieira, the failure of any utopian social project has been followed by crisis and 'the announcement of the death of utopia' (2010: 19). Nonetheless, Vieira argues that 'the idea of the death of utopia as a literary genre is absurd', as the last two decades have proved utopia's versatility and ability to adapt to the changing social

demands and technological interests of the younger generations (2010: 19). In the twentieth century the crisis of utopian ideals has led to increasingly dystopian literature, which tried to resolve issues concerning totalitarianism, technological advancements and ecological disasters. From a perspective of critical utopia in the 1970s, some works of film and literature have become increasingly pessimistic and dystopian. Vieira claims that the writers of dystopias in the last three decades have painted very negative images of the future; and yet, (unlike apocalyptic authors that proclaim the end, the self-destruction of humanity) they expect a positive reaction as they tried to make it clear that there is still a chance for humanity, ‘normally offering a glimmer of hope at the very end of the narrative; because of this, these utopias have often been called critical dystopias [or dystopian critiques]’ (2010: 17).

What I aim to achieve here is to illuminate carnival’s role as both an anti-hegemonic, subversive rebellious strategy and as an open, oppositional ‘critical utopia’ (see Michael Gardiner 1992: 21-49). The peoples’ carnival is such an open, oppositional utopian strategy – often only hinted at by artists as a truly egalitarian democratic alternative to total, closed, traditional (nostalgic) utopias or to dominant conservative (anti-utopian) social models – represented in the dystopian critiques here as official carnivals and masquerades of authority. As critical utopia, carnival has an ambiguous, contradictory nature, both undermining and reaffirming the *status quo*. Thus, on the one hand it is self-reflexive, ironic, intertextual grotesque inversion, both deconstructing and reaffirming utopian hegemonic models, and yet it demonstrates a perpetual, oppositional utopian impulse towards democratization, aiming towards the liberation of all groups in society. This is what makes it the best cinematic mode for representing transitions, change and the basic patterns of attitudes to social reforms.

The selected films discussed in Part III (and for that matter in Part IV) are further evidence that the range of carnivalesque films made in both Cuba and Russia during 1960-2000 are representative of the social cycle of hope, failure, despair and the rejection of hope, followed by the renewal of hope, which, according to Sargent is the basic pattern of attitudes to social change (1994: 28). As noted in the General Introduction, the chronological examples of Cuban carnivalesque comedies and satires discussed in the study make this point quite obvious. Thus, if Gutiérrez Alea’s *Doce sillars* (Part I) represents the Quixotic utopian mode, Tabío’s *Plaff* (Part II) marks its failure. The subject of the crisis and collapse of socialist utopia is discussed in Díaz Torres’s *Alicia*

(Part III), whilst Fernando Pérez's *Madagascar* is a film of dystopian despair, of the darkest phase of the Special Period (1993-1994). Nevertheless this film, together with the director's subsequent *La vida es silbar* (discussed in Chapter Eleven, Part IV), exemplify the genre of dystopian critique. Both of Pérez's films mentioned above dwell on the subject of the elusiveness of happiness and utopia. Yet *La vida*, is a poetic film on the subject of the possibility of a more inclusive, Cuban democratic society in the future (2020). Tabío's *Lista de espera* (2000), on the other hand (mentioned briefly in Chapter Three, Part I and in Chapter Twelve, Part IV) can be seen more as an example of critical utopia than of dystopian critique, representing the Cubans' persistent defence of utopia (and, arguably signaling the renewal of hope).

As stated earlier, the focus of the discussion in Part III is the transition from dark carnivals to dystopian (social) critique. Thus, Chapter Seven will focus on important theoretical paradigms, such as the nature of black humour, carnival as critical utopia, as well as further discussion of the genre of utopia and its derivatives, dystopia and anti-utopia. In Chapter Eight, I will discuss the transition / evolution of Mamin's comedy from dark carnival to dystopia by the end of *perestroika*. The concluding chapter of Part III, Chapter Nine, is dedicated to two comparable dystopian representations of late 1980s Cuban and Soviet societies as visions of hell in Sakhnazarov's *Gorod Zero* and Díaz Torres's *Alicia*.

In their films from the period of late *glasnost* and *perestroika*, Shakhnazarov and Mamin managed to capture increasingly pessimistic social attitudes. The films discussed here, particularly *Bakenbardy* and *Gorod Zero*, are rather prophetic, issuing a warning about the future dangers in store and trying to prevent the building of new political structures from the ashes of old imperial myths. *Bakenbardy* is a biting satire of the Russian preference for strong rulers and hegemonic institutions, and predicts a neo-Nazi resurgence in the country. In *Gorod Zero*, Shakhnazarov warns against Russia's reversion to a variation of the same old Mongolian imperial model of authoritarian statism, on which both imperial and Soviet Russia were built.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> A point made by Richard Sakwa (2002: 260) and developed further by Edwin Bacon and Matthew Wyman (2006: 7-26).

## CHAPTER SEVEN: THE DYSTOPIAN TURN. *CHERNUKHA* & THE BLACK HUMOUR TREND IN CUBA & SOVIET RUSSIA IN THE LATE 1980S AND EARLY 1990S

### 7.1 The End of Utopia. The *Chernukha* Trend

Owing to the social collapse of Soviet Russia in the final years of *perestroika* there was widespread cynicism and an explosion of violent crime, which actually worsened during the country's initial transition to a market economy. In hindsight, the crisis in mature socialist societies was triggered not only by gross mismanagement of the economy and by a diabolical ubiquitous bureaucratic apparatus, but also by the acceleration of the process of globalization that eventually coerced every nation in the world into succumbing to global market forces. Nevertheless, the developments of the late 1980s surprised even the West. Gorbachev's *perestroika* and particularly *glasnost* seem to have unleashed all the evils from Pandora's Box, by releasing previously secret information about the horrendous crimes of the Stalinist regime against its own people. Similarly horrifying revelations soon followed in the rest of the Eastern and Central European socialist countries. The new, liberated media and artists from these countries launched an open offensive against their national Communist regimes, demanding pluralism and further democratization. The effect was a torrent of public outrage, widespread simultaneous uprisings and a condemnation of the Communist governments that eventually caused the collapse of the socialist system in Eastern and Central Europe by the end of 1989. The collapse of the Soviet Union followed soon after, in 1991.

Sharp social criticism of life in Soviet Russia became a dominant feature in the satires made during *perestroika*. After 1985 open criticism was even promoted from above, and satire became a ubiquitous cultural trope (Kirill Razlogov, in foreword to Horton 1993: vii). There was a wave of increasingly naturalistic, morbid and pessimistic, dark dystopian films which became known as *chernukha*. If up until 1988 carnivalesque black comedies and satires were still limited to exposing the absurdities of Soviet life and system (collapsing into *reductio ad absurdum* and farce – like Mamin's *Prazdnik Neptuna* 1986; into absurd and tragedy – as Riazanov's *Zabytaia melodia*; or into absurd and grotesque realism – as in Mamin's *Fontan* 1988), the films from 1989 to 1991 represented almost total despair – a social black hole, a void, which in Shakhnazarov's

*Gorod Zero* – an allegorical political spoof of Russian statism – apparently stands for Chernobyl’s ground zero.

The *chernukha* films used the aesthetics of grotesque realism, of the ugly, and the absurd. They are filled with poorly-lit filthy streets, underground corridors, dilapidated buildings, and stray, neglected animals; there is pointless violence, nudity, rape, crime, alcoholism, madness and murder, as well as representations of underground youth culture and of rock music (instead of classical music) (Graham 2000: 9). *Chernukha* elements can be found in Mamin’s dark comedy *Fontan*, which by itself represents a transition from dark carnival to dystopia. Numerous examples from the former socialist countries, and particularly from Russia, prove that the period was dominated by the trend of black humour – by dark carnivals and surreal dystopian satires. This is why Moylan has called the period the ‘dystopian turn’, as the era was marked by the appearance of numerous fictional literary and film dystopias (2000:147). The films discussed here are amongst the most representative of these trends.

## **7.2 Towards a ‘Philosophical’ Definition of Black Humour:**

Black humour seems to be a more recent comedy trend. There have been a great many surreal satires and black comedies in film, literature and painting after the Bolshevik Revolution and World War I, during the great depression, in the 1960s and in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The term comes from the French *humour noir*, as first coined by the founder of surrealism, André Breton, in 1935, when he formulated the idea of a book about the precursors and practitioners of surrealism (see Mark Polizzotti’s introduction to Breton’s book 1997: v). Breton designates Jonathan Swift as the true originator of this type of humour (1997: 3), and in his final version of *Anthology of Black Humour* (1966) are included such ‘usual suspects’ as Franz Kafka, Alfred Jarry, Edgar Allen Poe, Lewis Carroll, Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud and Guillaume Apollinaire, but also O. Henry. One immediately thinks of Dada and the surrealists as natural contenders, and the same can be said of the representatives of the theatre of the absurd – Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Becket and Harold Pinter. Others have pointed to the nineteenth century Russian satirists, such as Gogol and Saltykov-Shchedrin, and, of course, to the surrealist films of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. Again, one instantly notes the mixture of surreal humour and horror, the

breaking of moral and/or religious taboo subjects, and the inclusion of mystery, fantasy and the uncanny in these works.

Jean Collignon has argued that black humour is the humour of the cynical or the desperate (1955: 60), and thus almost always centres on the topics of illness and death: '[d]octors, sickness, and hospitals readily lend themselves to effects of dark humour', as seen, for example, in the hospital scenes in Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* (Woodin Rowe 1974: 392). Woodin Rowe also mentions the works of Gogol and Vladimir Nabokov. For example, in Gogol's *Revisor / The Inspector General* the patients in the hospital are said to be 'getting well like flies', obviously implying 'dying like flies' (Rowe 1974: 392); Nabokov also appears to be fascinated by outrageous human behaviour, as seen in the subject of paedophilia in *Lolita* and other texts (Rowe 1974: 392). Another example is Buñuel's *Los olvidados*, which depicts a whole list of the most savage and dark human instincts. To the topics of death and illness one can add insanity (*Bakenbardy*); absurd Kafkaesque bureaucracy and corruption (Gutiérrez Alea's *La muerte*, Riazanov's *Zabytaia melodia*, Tabío's *Plaff*); nightmare (Díaz Torres's *Alicia*); rape, (insanity) and murder (Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*); and mutilation (Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*, 2009). For these reasons I argue that, in the most general terms, black humour is a complex mixture of horror and humour, where the social satire collapses into *reductio ad absurdum* and then either into tragicomedy or horror.

In his *Anthology of Black Humour*, Breton describes this in Freudian terms as 'the revenge of the pleasure principle': a type of 'humour opposite of joviality, wit or sarcasm. Rather it is a partly macabre, partly ironic, often absurd turn of spirit that constitutes the "moral enemy of sentimentality"' (in Polizzotti's forward to Breton 1997: vi). However, Breton also notes that black humour has a liberating element: 'it is also something fine and elevating, deriving pleasure lacking in other forms of intellectual activity' (Breton 1997: xviii).

John Hawkes seems to be in agreement with Breton, arguing that this relatively recent kind of black comedy humour is not necessarily pessimistic, as it demonstrates an ability to 'face up to the enormities of ugliness and potential failure within ourselves and in the world around us, and to bring to this exposure a savage or saving comic spirit and the saving beauties of language' (in Donald Greiner 1975: 45). Polizzotti, on the other hand, explains dark humour as 'an attitude, which takes the form of both lampooning of social conventions and profound disrespect for the nobility of literature' (introduction to Breton

1997: vi). In my opinion, however, Ionesco seems to have made the most valid point on the matter. He was amongst the first to note the closeness of comedy to tragedy:

I have never been able to understand the difference that is made between the comic and the tragic. [...] Humour makes us conscious with a free lucidity of the tragic [...] condition of man [...]. Laughter alone does not respect any taboo; the comic alone is capable of giving us the strength to bear the tragedy of existence'. (in Esslin 1961: 33)

He calls the comic 'the intuition of the absurd', something beyond despair and hope (in Esslin 1961: 133).

Based on the above, then, it is possible to consider black humour as born out of a sceptical, self-ironic and philosophical attitude to life; and it can be described as an attempt to overcome the tragedy of human existence and the fear of death. It is not necessarily an act of pessimism but one of defiance in the face of the inevitable, which more often brings intellectual freedom, epiphany and catharsis rather than indignation.

### **7.3 Carnival as Utopian Critique**

The end of communism in Central and Eastern Europe was seen as the end of socialist utopia, if not of utopianism in general. The anti-utopians proclaimed victory, and for a while seemed to be right (Sargent 1994: 21). They argued that utopia – a fiction or a social dream of a better society for all – cannot be achieved without centralization, planning, and the enforcement of uniform rules, which, as demonstrated by the fascist and pro-Stalinist socialist regimes of the twentieth century, invariably leads to loss of freedom and to totalitarianism (Sargent 1994: 24-25).

Sargent describes the roots of utopianism as a returning to the womb, as a myth of eternal returning to the community (Sargent 1994: 3). This is close to Bakhtin's understanding of carnival, as perpetual returning to the origins of the community, to a society of equals (as seen, for example, in the final scenes of Mamin's *Fontan*). Sargent has called festivals such as Saturnalia, the Feast of Fools, and Carnival (where the world is turned upside down) a 'second step utopia', as for a few days the poor experience utopian abundance and the reversal of hierarchies. He points out that any fictional genre can be utopian – from fantasy, science fiction and fairy tales to romance; and even non-fiction – from film and music to painting and urban planning; and from utopian social theory to political philosophy (Sargent 1994: 11-12). However, Sargent underlines that

the issue of intent is very important, as a work originally intended as a positive or critical utopia may be viewed by others, from a negative perspective, as a dystopia. Such an infamous case now is Díaz Torres's *Alicia*, which became the most controversial and widely debated film in post-1959 Cuban film history.

The increased attacks on socialist utopia and the abundant evidence that it could end up costing dearly eventually discredited the utopian project in the 1990s (Sargent 1994: 22). This is the kind of utopia called 'traditional' or 'total utopia' by Gardiner (1992: 24). In general, such utopias defend the idea linked to the Enlightenment values of optimism and progress and belief in the perfectibility of humanity (Gardiner 1992: 24). Gardiner argues that this is the popular idea of utopia *per se* (Gardiner 1992: 24). It is the kind of utopia condemned by post-structuralists (such as Tsvetan Todorov, for example) because of its traditional inclinations towards totalitarianism; and by Fernando Pérez, whose main protagonist, Elpidio, in his *La vida*, challenges his mother's (in the film a symbol of Revolutionary Cuba) utopian beliefs, proving to her that 'no one is perfect'. Gardiner points out that Fredric Jameson has suggested that utopian images can be manipulated by mass culture in order to facilitate political domination (in Gardiner 1992: 24). This is the 'bad utopia' project of dominant, closed and stagnant ideology which projects false social unity, legitimizing only a particular power structure whilst repressing divergent interests (Gardiner 1992: 24). Gardiner and Moylan argue that apart from 'traditional official utopias' (and official carnivals), there are also oppositional, subversive ones that hint at the possibility of a less oppressive form of social structure. This is what Moylan refers to as 'critical utopia' when saying:

[T]raditional utopias can be read as discourses that generate metaphysical models which have served the dominant social formation. Critical utopias can be read as metaphorical displacements arising out of current contradictions within the political unconscious. [They] ultimately refer to something other than a predictable alternative paradigm, for at their core they identify self-critical utopian discourse itself as a process that can tear apart the dominant ideological web. Here, then, *critical utopian* discourse becomes a subversive expression of social change and popular sovereignty carried on in a permanently open process of envisioning which is not yet. (Moylan 1986: 213 my emphasis)

Gardiner considers Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque developed in his *Rabelais and his World* (1968) to be such an example of critical utopia. He stresses 'the potentially subversive function of the utopian imagination and the dialectical interpenetration of ideology and utopia' (Gardiner 1992: 25), because of the tendency to conflate ideology

and utopia. Stam's earlier *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (1989) takes a very similar position, demonstrating the fertility of the Bakhtinian theory of the carnivalesque when applied to film and its enormous potential for socio-political and cultural criticism. In *Bakenbardy* and *La vida*, for example, the carnivalesque fantasy of alternative identity myths and foundations for society functions as a utopian contestation of early 1990s Soviet Russia and late 1990s Cuba. Both films avoid simplistic binaries, and do not restrict themselves solely to a deconstruction and demystification of the dominant ideology but also point out already foreseeable contradictions in alternative social models.

Gardiner notes the similarity between Bakhtin's carnival and Ernst Bloch's idea of 'concrete utopia'. 'Concrete utopia' is a *processual* utopia grounded in immanent historical tendencies, already working in the presence of something better (in Gardiner 1992: 36), echoing Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque as a process of constant change and becoming, of a world (representing the collective, grotesque body of all people) in flux between the dying, old and the nascent, new one. As noted earlier, one can then argue that there is also a similarity between 'official carnival' and 'traditional, conservative, abstract utopianism', as both are closed, monologic structures that promote the ideology of a dominant group rather than an open dialogue in polyphonic diversity of voices.

#### **7.4 Dystopian Critique**

The simplest description of the genre of 'dystopian critique' is as a satiric inversion of the original project of a failed (hegemonic) utopia. As argued first by Sargent, the genre was born out of the historical conditions and reassessment of the twentieth century's (1980-1990) concept of utopia which, according to him is dystopian (1994: 26).<sup>119</sup> At this time, the theme of the death of utopia was linked to ideas of the end of history, of philosophy, of ideology and of socialism. Because of this, Sargent redefined utopianism as 'social dreaming' for a better, rather than perfect, society (1994:1), hence suggesting that whilst perfection is only a dream there is always an impulse towards and room for improvement.

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<sup>119</sup> See Sargent's reassessment of utopia in his seminal 1994 article on the subject of the late 1980s dystopian turn (1994: 1-38).

Sargent defines utopia as a ‘non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space’ (1994: 9). His definition includes positive utopia (eutopia) and its derivations – utopia gone wrong or failed utopia (dystopia) and the very negative, critical rejection of utopia (anti-utopia) (in Sargent 1994: 9).

Rather unfairly, dystopia has been used interchangeably with anti-utopia in contrast to positive utopia (also known as eutopia). Both dystopia and anti-utopia use *reductio ad absurdum* to describe an evil totalitarian place (because of the linking of utopia to political ideology and to Stalinism and fascism). They both use the dark, negative, destructive satire of failed utopian aspirations, yet in the case of anti-utopia there is no place for hope, whilst dystopia serves primarily as a warning that things in the future can become much worse if something is not done to prevent this. Dystopia thus always ends with a glimmer of hope (Vieira 2010: 17).

In a recent study of utopia Vieira notes that utopia as a concept is the tendency of men and women to think of an alternative when living in hostile conditions (2010: 20). Therefore, despite some well-founded scepticism on the part of anti-utopian intellectuals (who claim that utopia inevitably leads to totalitarianism, causes the destruction of traditional communities and ways of life, and that the perfectibility of human beings is unachievable) utopia, and the desire for social improvement, are here to stay. However, utopian ideals have had to become more pragmatic, rejecting the idea of perfection and instead seeking the constant improvement of society rather than of the individual. This has led to the appearance of the new utopian genre of dystopian critique.

As noted by Vieira, ‘dystopia came into usage not only to refer to imaginary places that were worse than real places, but also to works describing places such as these’ (2010: 17). The imagined society in utopia is the opposite of the real one, an inversion of it – either a much better social model (in the case of utopia) or a worse one than the current social order (dystopia). Vieira correctly observes that the utopian traveller usually ‘departs from a real place, visits an imagined place and goes back home’, which ‘situates utopia at the boundary between reality and fiction’ (2010: 8). This is exactly what happens in *Alicia* and *Gorod Zero*, and the dystopian films discussed here (not only in Part III but also in Part IV) follow a similar pattern. Therefore, the utopia (in all its variations) is a fantastic or fictional adventure that switches back and forth between an imaginary and a real world, providing a comprehensive discussion and picture of competing socio-political tendencies and alternatives concerning a given society’s

foreseeable future. I shall demonstrate this through the analysis of the selected films discussed in Part III and Part IV.

Tom Moylan asserts that in the late 1980s to 1990s, after serious accusations that utopia unavoidably leads to totalitarianism by anti-utopians both on the Left and the Right, the contradictions between utopia and anti-utopia were finally addressed by the appearance of the genre of ‘dystopian critique’ (2000: 134). He argues convincingly that many dystopias represent a warning, which in itself implies a choice and therefore hope (2000: 134). (This is my line of argument in reference to *Gorod Zero*, in Chapter Nine). Owing to this issue of convictions and choice, the genre of ‘dystopian critique’ can be viewed as a dialogic negotiation between reality, utopia and anti-utopia, and thus it is a critical, self-conscious and ambiguous genre that simultaneously represents hope and caution.

The utopian supporters seem to agree that any utopia contains both a criticism (a social satire) of current society and a model of a better, alternative one, like that depicted in James Cameron’s 2009 *Avatar* (an example of Hollywood’s eco-utopia).<sup>120</sup> Mamin’s *Bakenbardy*, on the other hand, paints a pessimistic, nightmarish, dystopian picture of a close future reality, worse than that of late *perestroika*, thus issuing a warning that the worst may yet be to come. The film is an example of the late *perestroika* dystopian trend (of the late 1980s and early 1990s) that stood in stark contrast to and was an inversion of the earlier 1930s Soviet utopian comedies which professed a firm belief in a ‘brighter Soviet future’, (the most representative of which are Aleksandrov’s films).

Raffaella Baccolini has described dystopian critique as texts ‘that maintain a utopian core’, and yet help ‘deconstruct tradition and reconstruct alternatives’ (in Moylan 2000: 188). The Russian critical dystopias of the late 1980s to the mid 1990s discussed here (in Part III and Part IV) dwell on the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet system, exposing the continuation between past imperial (including Soviet) and current social reforms, trying to warn against the dangers of such socio-political ‘recycling’.

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<sup>120</sup> For more information on ecotopia, see Pat Brereton 2005: 23-31.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: MAMIN AS THE FILMMAKER OF RUSSIA'S TRANSITION OR THE ROAD FROM CARNIVAL TO DYSTOPIA

In the previous section I have argued that dystopia is not a straightforward, interchangeable term for anti-utopia, as dystopia's whole *raison d'être* concerns the avoidance of variations upon and repetitions of oppressive totalitarian social models. This is different from an outright rejection of any possibility of social improvement, as knowing what you seek to avoid is already a new start that rather prudently uses the method of elimination. The main preoccupation of dystopia is the threat of totalitarianism, of social models created in the interests of stability that rely excessively upon control, order and discipline. Films such as Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and Mamin's *Bakenbardy* demonstrate how such measures, employed in the name of a better, more orderly society, can trigger a cycle of violence leading to oppression and even fascism. This is the central theme of Mamin's *Bakenbardy* and I argue that the key to understanding the film is to view it as an homage and metatext to Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, as well as to a few other art films on the subject of the nascent fascism in Italy and Germany such as Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* (1972) and Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973).

I shall begin my investigation of the dystopian turn with a discussion of Mamin's gradual transition from lighter to increasingly darker carnivals representing the absurdities of the Soviet system – from the carnivalesque farce *Prazdnik Neptuna* to the dark, grotesque and satiric *Fontan*, situated right on the edge of dystopia, and then to the dystopian (if not anti-utopian) – *Bakenbardy*. I shall examine Lawton's claim that the latter is an anti-utopian, dark satire that prophetically predicts the resurgence of nationalism and the appearance of neo-fascism in Russia (1992: 219-20). After this I shall comment on *Bakenbardy*'s intertextual references to Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* and other art movies.

### 8.1 From *Prazdnik Neptuna* (1986) to *Fontan* (1988) and *Bakenbardy* (1990)

As noted correctly by Lawton, Horton and Prokhorov, Mamin's films best capture the transitional period, demonstrating the director's gradual disillusionment with the Soviet utopian project as reflected by the change from irreverent carnival to caustic satire and by his deliberate formal choice of the aesthetics of the ugly. Lawton claims that 'in the four

*perestroika* years, Mamin's humour moved from farce, to grotesque, to chilling sardonic laughter' (1992: 216). Horton has observed correctly that during *perestroika*, which represents the initial transitional phase, the humour moved 'from a liberating joyful carnivalesque to a darkly troubling formula in which both the carnivalesque and satiric laughter completely break down' (Horton 1993: 138). As noted by Prokhorov, what made Mamin's carnivalesque comedies so pertinent and popular during the transition was that 'Iurii Mamin's satires have [adequately] captured the Soviet empire's collapse and exposed the rise of the new imperial mythology on the ruins of the Soviet utopia' (Prokhorov 2008: 101). His films filled the vacuum left by Riazanov's radical turn to tragedy (Riazanov was Mamin's teacher and mentor) as well as counteracting the failure of Danelia and Gaidai, the other two older comedy masters, to produce significant comedies on contemporary subjects.

Mamin's black comedies made during *perestroika* and the transition to a market economy (1988-1993) display his acute sense of the absurd in life, and spell out his natural affinity to carnivalesque satire and grotesque, black humour. Importantly, his films represent a continuation of the rare trend of black humour and grotesque realism in Russian culture (of which Gogol and Saltykov-Shchedrin were founders and famous representatives), a trend, historically, most unwelcome in tsarist and Soviet Russia. Films from this trend include Aleksandr Medvedkin's *Shchastie / Happiness* (1934), Gaidai's *Zhenikh s togo sveta* and Riazanov's *Garazh*, all of which were either censored, heavily criticised, or received only limited distribution. As mentioned in the introduction to Part III, black humour is a hybrid trend that soon collapses either into travesty and farce, as in Mamin's *Prazdnik Neptuna* or tragedy, like Riazanov's *Zabytaia melodia*, or into grotesque realism and absurd, as in Mamin's *Fontan*. Mamin himself has classified the genre of *Fontan* 'as a combination of all genres, "so that one flows into another"' (Horton 1993: 138). Furthermore, in interview with Horton the director comments that, like Fellini, he wishes his sense of carnival to be 'shown in all of its richness, with its own Soviet history and spirit' (Mamin in Horton 1993: 155). *Bakenbardy* exposes Mamin's darkest fears about Russia's future as a democratic state. Thus from carnivalesque satire the film eventually collapses into grotesque realism and the chilling *reductio ad absurdum* of dystopia and *chernukha*.

In *Prazdnik Neptuna* and later in *Fontan*, Mamin satirizes the Soviet authorities' false idealism and patriotism, challenging all forms of bureaucratic socialism as fake, official

carnivals of Soviet life and thus exposing *perestroika* as yet another over-hyped Soviet (utopian) myth. Both films end with spontaneously erupting, authentic carnivals of the people, which subvert and reverse the official hierarchy and reveal its futility, replacing it with the promise of a rebirth of the egalitarian communal spirit. Evidently, both films still demonstrate some utopian impulse and belief in social improvement and democracy.

As noted by Prokhorov, both *Prazdnik Neptuna* and *Fontan* invert the socialist realist principle of the ideal utopian community by transforming it into anarchic, irreverent carnivalesque crowds of vodka drinkers, war veterans, village folk and communal flat dwellers that eventually overturn the official order (2008: 104). As in previous socialist comedies, *Prazdnik Neptuna* targets the provincial bureaucracy. An obscure line (and a blatant lie) in an official report escalates (in the principle of *reductio ad absurdum*) to the point of becoming a grotesque reality.<sup>121</sup> According to this report, instead of drinking the inhabitants of a Potemkin village improve their health by swimming in icy water in the winter. However, no one amongst the villagers in Mamin's first carnivalesque comedy is mad enough to bathe in the lake in freezing winter temperatures. Still, the local party boss decides to take some decadent Swedish tourists to the village and show them the superiority of the superhuman Russian men and women.

The villagers try to create a Potemkin village in order to impress the foreigners, concocting an elaborate deception: they build a bathhouse on the lake and in front of it erect an enormous welcoming poster that also covers the bath. They are supposed to jump briefly into the icy water and then quickly hide in the warm bathhouse. However, the villagers get so excited and carried away that they forget about both the bathhouse and the Swedes, plunging into the lake long after the visitors have gone and ignoring the protests of the local bureaucrat. As Prokhorov puts it, 'the phantom official word and collective deception combine to generate a carnivalesque [make-belief] reality of the Soviet empire' (2008: 105). Therefore, the film is comparable to Tabío's *Plaff*, discussed in Part II, which also satirizes the nonsensical, unrealistic, patriotic Revolutionary zeal of the Cuban bureaucratic elite.

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<sup>121</sup> Another example of socialist satire on a similar topic is the controversial Bulgarian bureaucratic farce *Kit / Whale*, directed by Petar Vasilev, which was shot in 1967 but shelved (because of the events of the Prague Spring) until 1970. The film was just shown in studio cinemas, which were only frequented by film buffs and connoisseurs. The story is about a failed fishing trip, which down the chain of bureaucratic exaggeration of failure is represented as a miraculous achievement. The capture of a single sprat, due to successive inflated reports, evolves into a (non-existent) whale being caught in the Black Sea. The absurd lie escalates to the ministerial level and triggers the creation of a Bulgarian Whaling fleet.

Mamin's next film, *Fontan*, is a fable about the dissolution of the Soviet system, of its utopian ideology and project, represented symbolically by the pointless fight to save a crumbling tenement. The end of the film, however, also implies a return to origins and to a new beginning for the former tenement's inhabitants, which initiates a return to a primeval, primitive egalitarian community. This is why I view it as a *critical utopia*, which at that point in time pronounced the inevitable death of the old, bureaucratic Soviet order and the nascent form of a new, anarchic, yet more equal society. Many intellectuals and artists seemed to believe, rather naively, that things would improve after the collapse of socialism (mentioned in Riazanov, 2005). Soon, however, the harsh reality of the transition to a market economy and the drastic reforms imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) brought widespread disenchantment with capitalism as well. Deeply-felt disillusionment gave way to the eruption of bitter cynicism, violence and crime (the subject of Mamin's *Bakenbardy*, also touched upon in *Okno*).

In *Fontan* there are already a lot of *chernukha* style elements present (the dominant aesthetic trend of late *perestroika*) with its grotesque, naturalistic depiction of the continuous decay of the Soviet system. In interview with Horton, Mamin defended his use of the aesthetic of the ugly as the most realistic option in such absurd times (in Horton and Brashinski 1992: 206). As in *Prazdnik Neptuna*, the protagonist of the film is a collective — the dwellers of a Leningrad apartment building about to disintegrate. The roof is on the verge of collapse and the housing engineer, whose name is Peter (an allusion to the original founder of the city, Peter the Great) cannot find the supplies to fix it. The engineer's efforts to save the crumbling building are compared (indirectly) to Peter the Great's imperial utopian ambition to build the city (in 1702) on the marshes, as an act of defiance towards the Swedes and the West. The city represented the audacity and the ambitions of the autocratic tsarist empire, and over the years has been seen as a contrived, artificial place of imperial pomp and theatrical architectural display. Therefore it has been the setting of many fantastic and supernatural stories (such as Gogol's *Nos / Nose* and *Shinel' / Overcoat*). With *Fontan*, Mamin suggests that Leningrad is the Soviet equivalent of the failure of the ambitious imperial myth, particularly in its contemporary *perestroika* version, implying that, just like previous utopian projects for Russia's modernization, reform and Westernization, Gorbachev's *perestroika* is also doomed. All Peter (the engineer, that is) has left to work with are old propaganda billboards from the First of May demonstrations. His right-hand man, Victor Mikhailov, Pavel Mitrofanov,

hires local alcoholics, promising them a glass of vodka per hour, thus turning them into comical, live Atlases. The grotesque symbolism here is quite inescapable.

As noted by Julian Graffy, the film is full of allegories of the symptomatic reasons for, and inevitability of, *perestroika*'s failure (1992: 55). Mamin mocks the Soviet 'working' man who has a weakness for vodka and petty thievery (the latter is also implied in the Cuban dystopian comedy *Alicia* as one of the fundamental failures of socialist ethics: in the fictional city of Maravillas even the cutlery is chained to the tables). It turns out that Pavel Mitrofanov has been stealing from the communal supplies for years (for example, he has a whole collection of porcelain lavatories). The film similarly ridicules the empty phrases of the bureaucrats, the phoney, pompous patriotism of the intelligentsia, the war veterans' obsession with reunions, the Great Patriotic War, and the past glory of Stalinist Soviet Russia. As in *Prazdnik Neptuna*, a television crew presents a distorted version of reality, in this case the disastrous chain of events that leads to the collapse of the building: the cutting off of the building's water and electricity is represented as an innovative initiative for energy-saving – in the midst of the bitterly cold Russian winter. What makes this situation seem even more absurd is that the long-suffering, deeply unhappy and continually complaining tenants seem to be preconditioned to automatically comply and go along with the Party's boss's bizarre lie.

The crumbling tenement is an allegory of the collapsing Soviet Union: of the devastating effects of Soviet policies in Central Asia including the destruction of the region's natural communities and traditional ways of life; of the authorities' mishandling of communal property and their empty rhetoric; of the ecological costs of modernization; and of the doomed lexical mythology of *perestroika*, as its slogans represent the futility of the official line and the reforms from above. Instead of an organic community the block of flats is more of a Tower of Babel, consisting of deeply divided, self-centred individuals. In the end not only the tenants but also even the cats abandon the building as if it were a sinking ship (symbolically representing the end of the Soviet empire). Despite all the misery endured by the tenement's stoic inhabitants, the film ends on a note of hope. According to Prokhorov, in the course of their exodus the residents 'gradually undergo a reverse evolution into a primeval tribe', dancing ritualistically around a fire in front of the ruins of their former home (2008: 105). As he puts it, 'the crowd is suspended in carnivalistic ambiguity: stripped of its former identity and lacking a new one yet'

(2008: 105). It is shown to be in flux between the old and the new, mourning the death of the past whilst celebrating a potential rebirth.

A year later (1989-1990) the trend of dark carnivals and of the aesthetics of the ugly evolved into dark, surreal satires and dystopian near-futures in both Mamin's *Bakenbardy* and Shakhnazarov's *Gorod Zero*. It is worth mentioning that instead of carnival proper both films utilize what Prokhorov calls the 'official carnival of authority' (2008: 107), which quickly disintegrates into morbid, dystopian, surreal humour. Perceptively, Prokhorov draws attention to another important development in Mamin's oeuvre when he contends that while his first two pictures (*Prazdnik Neptuna* and *Fontan*) are satires, his subsequent two films, *Bakenbardy* and *Okno v Parizh* combine satire (whose target is socio-political) with parody (which usually targets style or aesthetics) (2008:106). Prokhorov considers this a new kind of parody: a 'postmodern parody of Russian culture's master narratives' (Prokhorov 2008:106). This is a borrowing of and elaboration upon Geoff King's earlier claim that postmodern parody implies a culture in crisis – a culture of exhaustion that recycles and reworks products of the past rather than moving forward (Geoff King 2002: 120) – that is, a culture that turns on itself (Prokhorov 2008: 106). This is the same kind of postmodern parody used by Tabío in *Plaff* (as discussed in Chapter Five, Part II), which inverts the socialist realist utopian canon of Revolutionary heroism and zeal into a grotesque farce of futility.

## 8.2 Understanding *Bakenbardy*, or the Film's Meta- / Intertextuality

*A Clockwork Orange* was made in 1971 by Kubrick, who also wrote the script based closely on Anthony Burgess's original, incomplete version of the novel which was first published in the USA in 1962. There was a lot of controversy surrounding the film, and accusations were made of an exploitative and gratuitous intertwining of violence and sex in it by such influential American critics as Pauline Kael (in McDougal 2003: 138)<sup>122</sup> and Andrew Sarris, amongst others (Staiger in McDougal 2003: 38). In the United Kingdom, where the film was produced, *Clockwork* was considered highly controversial, and was eventually withdrawn from release by Kubrick himself in 1974 after some allegations of

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<sup>122</sup> See her Review 'A *Clockwork Orange*: Stanley Strangelove', first published in the *New Yorker* January 1, 1972, reprinted in Stuart, Y. McDougal 2003: 134-39.

it inciting violence amongst teenagers.<sup>123</sup> The film was not re-released until Kubrick's death in 1999, and by the year 2000 *Clockwork* had achieved cult status amongst cinephiles. It is now considered a prophetic art movie: a masterpiece that has retained its contemporary appeal, relevance and freshness. Burgess himself had mixed feelings about the film. It seems he did not like the fact that Kubrick did not include the novel's final chapter, added at a later stage, which concerns the redemption of its main character Alex, the former leader of an ultra-violent youth gang.

The novel and its adaptation depict a dystopian vision of a near-future socialist Britain, where the citizens are tormented at night by violent youth gangs. As dystopian political satire, the book claims that personal freedoms are always endangered by governing bodies. Kubrick's adaptation seems to argue that there is no justification for oppression, even in the name of law and order; that the use of violence only creates more violence and thus a vicious cycle of never-ending brutality. Kubrick's film emphasizes the appropriation of culture, both high and rebellious youth counter-culture, by violent elements in society; but most importantly it indicates how easily culture can be misappropriated and manipulated by the authorities (to the Left or Right of the political spectrum) to their own ideological ends. As noted by Robert Hughes, *Clockwork* 'makes exquisitely chilling predictions about the future role of cultural artefacts' (1971: 131).<sup>124</sup>

This theme is borrowed by Mamin in order to expose how easily patriotic movements for national revival can evolve into fascism. Alongside *Clockwork*, *Bakenbardy* also contains obvious references to *Amarcord* and *Cabaret*, famous for their unusual treatment of the subject of nascent fascism. For example, Fosse's *Cabaret* shows how easily counter-culture and libertarianism can become the prelude to ultra-violence, nationalism and oppression. Fellini's *Amarcord*, on the other hand, implies that there are many similarities between adolescent male schoolyard bullying and the fascist's outburst of brutality and violence. Mamin borrows from the latter film the fascist fascination with smart uniforms, grand events and spectacular regalia, its mythologizing of violence as heroism, and so on. These references are made explicit, creating further association with these films and their subjects.

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<sup>123</sup> On the issue of the film's controversy and censorship in Britain, see McDougal's introduction (2003: 1-18) and also Janet Staiger's article 'The Cultural Productions of *A Clockwork Orange*' in McDougal (2003: 37-60).

<sup>124</sup> Hughes's is probably the most incisive early review of the film. See 'The Décor of Tomorrow's Hell', in *Time*, 27 December 1971, reprinted in McDougal 2003:131-33.

Mamin also makes some obvious stylistic borrowings from all of these three films, but mostly from *Clockwork*. For example, *Bakenbardy* mimics the stylized dandy-like smart dress style of the ASP members (ASP being an abbreviation of the full name of Alexandr Sergeevich Pushkin, one of Russia's most loved poets, Pushkin being a subject returned to below). In addition, by the end of the film the storm-troopers use Italian carnival masks similarly to Alex and his *drugi* / friends. Furthermore, as in Kubrick's film, canes are utilized both as part of a smart uniform and as deadly weapons. Mamin also often uses backstage stylized theatrical expressionist lighting, yet again borrowed from Kubrick's film. In terms of other influences, many of the scenes take place in a cabaret theatre, a hint at *Cabaret*, and this location is where the first genuine oppositional youth carnival is later transformed into staged official carnival: the former Capella musicians become the ASP's jazz band; a sculpture of Lenin becomes a sculpture of Pushkin; and, with a little colour, Leninist propaganda slogans are appropriated by the ASP group.

Later in the film we witness the creation of stylized erotic memorabilia based on manufactured historical facts about Pushkin's love-life, who is claimed by the ASP members to be the greatest national Russian poet. Again, ironically, Pushkin's most famous poem against autocracy, 'Boris Godunov', is mentioned in the film by one of the ASP members in its exact opposite sense and as the epitome of Russianness. Boris Godunov was of Tatar ancestry, and was a member of Ivan the Terrible's court and of the tsars' *oprichniki* (secret police). Hence, this is an example of double irony: an indirect reference to Stalin's rise in power and to his Georgian (non-Russian) origin, as well as a mockery of the ASP members' nationalistic claims. This is intended to highlight that the majority of the ASP neo-fascists style members are brutal simpletons, but also exposes the devious role of ideology and official Soviet mass culture. The Soviet authorities tried to claim Pushkin as a precursor of the socialist realist canon, but Mamin ironizes this appropriation of Pushkin as the most national amongst all Russian and Soviet poets. After all, Pushkin was a descendant of the famous Arab of Peter the Great, the tsar's personal page who later became a famous general, Abram Petrovich Gannibal. Therefore, Pushkin's bushy sideburns look more natural on a Jewish member of the ASP than on the Slavic, smooth-faced Russian members.

As noted by Prokhorov, the film demonstrates the appropriation of carnival for the masquerade of official ideology and culture; however, its parody also underlines the

connection between authority and transgression. Thus, from a carnivalesque parody of the masquerade of official late *perestroika* culture, the film transmutes into dystopian satire on the subject of totalitarianism. Many of the counter-culture musical numbers of the Capella members are reminiscent of the cabaret ones in Fosse's film, and as in *Cabaret* there is a boys' choir alongside the storm-troopers more jazzy performance. They perform a parody of a patriotic song (*Tomorrow Belongs to Me*, from *Cabaret*, a cappella). Twice there is reference to the famous carnivalesque Mussolini parade scene in *Amarcord*, but this time more in the style of Kubrick's *Clockwork*.

The ASP founder is a mad psychopath called Victor who fashions himself after Pushkin, proclaiming himself to be Pushkin's true spiritual descendant and a saviour of Russia. However, in Mamin's film the role of Kubrick's charismatic psychopath is divided between two characters: Viktor and Aleksandr. Viktor's madness, love of Russian / Soviet poetry and ultra-violence has been manipulated by the authorities. He has managed to gain the support of a charismatic but naïve local youth, Sasha (a shortening of the Russian name Aleksandr), who leaves university in order to become Viktor's devoted follower and his second in command of the ASP youth group. By the end of the film Sasha is redeemed, as he sees through the authorities' deception; however, he gets badly beaten by his previous comrades (as in Kubrick's *Clockwork*). Thus, to some extent, Mamin follows both Kubrick's and the full (British) version of Burgess's novel, which, unlike its shorter US version, ends with Alex's maturation and redemption.

Prokhorov contends that Mamin's *Bakenbardy* and *Okno* are postmodern satirical parodies 'of the fundamental narratives of Russian culture: the cult of the poet, specifically the cult of Pushkin, as the spiritual leader of the nation, and Westernization as the narrative of Russia's modernization' (2008: 106). He is correct in asserting that *Bakenbardy* is a dystopian parody on the subject of the revival of the Russian imperial myth after the devaluation of Soviet ideology, exposing the continuity between the two (2008: 106). This is achieved through cultural parody, thus highlighting the process of cultural and ideological mythmaking. The leader of the new youth group ASP, Viktor, claims that its members' aspirations are to be the spiritual leaders of Russia. They replace, with ease, the Soviet era idolatry of Lenin with the nationalist idolatry of Pushkin, flock under the slogan of reviving Russia's historical past, wear sideburns, long cloaks, dandy hats and canes which they use as weapons, and establish a Nazi-style storm-trooper organization. Soon they even organize pogroms against their competitors

and enforce censorship. The film demonstrates how easy it is to hijack and manipulate cultural and historical myths, even to opposing ideological ends.

As mentioned earlier, I argue that the idea for the film must have sprung from Kubrick's cult dystopia *Clockwork*, which made the link between violence and culture. *Clockwork* deconstructs cultural myths and demonstrates how even high culture can be appropriated for ideological and utopian ends, for the conditioning and brainwashing of violent youth, turning them into clockwork orange robots that are useful in dealing with oppositional political groups. The film echoes Adorno's belief that cultural choice is only an illusion, a cleverly manufactured deception by the elaborate mechanism of mass culture.<sup>125</sup> Both films imply that the deceptive use of cultural myths best serves oppressive authorities, who always find ways of manipulating youth counter-culture to their own ideological ends.

Mamin's *Bakenbardy* makes explicit the implication of Burgess's book and Kubrick's film by demonstrating how both high classical culture and counter-culture can easily be appropriated by mainstream official culture and used for the conditioning or rather brainwashing of violent youth. Like Alex, the main protagonist in Burgess's book and Kubrick's film who goes into ultra-violence frenzies when listening to Beethoven's *Nineth Symphony*, the ASP members viciously attack Zaborsk city's peaceful demonstrators whilst reciting Pushkin's poem *K Chaadaevu / To Chaadaev*. The irony is that previously it has been claimed, particularly by Soviet critics, that Pushkin's romantic poetry had inspired some liberal-minded members amongst the gentry to rebel against Russian absolutism, thus implicating Pushkin (indirectly) as one of the instigators of the Decembrist (1825) revolt. Mamin therefore makes the ingenious connection between the name of the charismatic but psychotic protagonist of *Clockwork*, Alex, and the first name of the now classic Russian poet, further linking these with the appropriation of national cultural myths for different ideological purposes.

On the other hand, Burgess uses Russian words (for example, *drugs* / friends, *Bog* / God), mixed with rhyming slang and Yiddish, in order to create the unique language of his novel, a language called 'nadsat' by the writer (the Russian word for 'teen'). This idea was realized after a visit to Leningrad, where Burgess saw first-hand how the Soviet

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<sup>125</sup> Adorno, critical theorist of the Frankfurt School, was the first to coin the concept of the 'culture industry'. He offered an extensive analysis of the ways in which the mass culture of late modernity replaces critical, political art with a conformist, commercially manufactured popular culture (see Adorno 1991). His theories laid the foundations of media communication studies.

authorities also had their fair share of youth violence problems.<sup>126</sup> Mamin elaborates on the topics discussed in the novel, and particularly on the anti-totalitarian dystopian theme of Kubrick's film. He performs visual deconstructions and reconstructions of alternative variations of Russian cultural and ideological myths: from the imperial, through a deliberate misappropriation of Pushkin, to that of the Soviet utopia, embodied by Lenin, by performing derisive visual transformations of Lenin's sculpture, slogans and billboards into Pushkinist ones. In a similar manner, later in the film the ASP members' Pushkin-inspired sideburns are shaved by the '*militia*',<sup>127</sup> thus stripping (revealing) them down to their core as a skinhead, Nazi paramilitary group. The former ASP storm troopers group have been prompted by the authorities to adopt, this time, the cult of the Soviet poet Vladimir Maiakovskii. Thus, Mamin reveals the constructed, performative ideological nature of cultural myths, and how easily they can be adopted and directed by controlling oppressive authorities. As correctly observed by Prokhorov, all these old and new myths are variations of Russia's essentialist myth (2008: 108), based on its citizens' imperial rather than nationalist consciousness (a point which I shall return to when discussing *Gorod Zero*).

The film also exposes the workings of mass culture, the process of appropriation of any culture – high or counter-culture (in the figure of the underground, Westernized punk group Capella) – into the official mass culture, and the manufacturing of historical and cultural facts and artefacts for the creation of suitable ideological (nationalistic) myths. The film emphasizes the ability of mass official culture to manipulate, brainwash, condition and control patriotic youth, underlining the 'cosy' connection between power and violence. Rather chillingly, even the former members of the counter-culture group Capella are transformed into clockwork oranges, like the rest of the ASP members. Instead of maintaining order and providing spiritual guidance for the misguided youth, the ASP's role shifts to protecting the pro-Soviet totalitarian authorities of Zaborsk from their increasingly angry constituency.

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<sup>126</sup> See the Blake Morrison edition's introduction to Burgess's book (1996 : xvi).

<sup>127</sup> A Soviet equivalent to the police.

### 8.3 *Bakenbardy's Plot in Context*

In Mamin's film Viktor and Sasha, who meet in Leningrad, decide to go together to Zaborsk, Sasha's birth place – a small, fictional, provincial historic town. The town's population is divided straight down the middle between those that like the punk group Capella and those who think they are one of the many liberal aberrations of democracy and *perestroika*. Capella is a Westernized, counter-culture, liberal youth group that has embraced freedom of expression mostly for fun, singing (a cappella), dancing, and engaging in free love (in the spirit of popular festive carnival). As claimed by a *militsia* man / policeman, they all are the well educated daughters and sons of respected Soviet citizens: an official sculptor of Lenin, a successful businessman, and even a general. Sasha notes the appeal of Capella to the youth (particularly to young women). However, amongst the first recruits of the storm troopers ASP youth organisation is Capella's gang rivals, formed mostly of illiterate, violent former bandits (criminals). Viktor and Sasha easily brainwash these bandits with the help of martial arts and Pushkin's poetry, thus conditioning them to resort to ultra-violence once they hear Pushkin's verses (mimicking, as mentioned, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony's* effect on Alex in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*).

Soon after, Viktor offers his protection services to the local Communist Party authorities, whose headquarters have been moved to a splendid former gentry's palace, something that angers the local population who is forced to share crowded communal flats. As thanks for its role as a 'phalange' of the local leadership, the ASP is rewarded and accepted into the establishment. One of their first acts is to eliminate other competing gangs and groups. Top of the list is, of course, the more democratic, underground, Westernized punk group Capella. Viktor insinuates a provocative insult to ASP quarters by Capella, and uses this as an excuse to order the burning of their HQ, a ship. (This is reminiscent of the burning of the Reichstag by the Nazis, which Hitler unsuccessfully tried to blame on the communists).<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Georgi Dimitrov, a Bulgarian communist arrested together with two other Bulgarians on the accusation of taking part in the burning of the Reichstag, managed to turn the tables, instead accusing the Nazis of arson as an act designed to provoke a witch hunt against Third International and German communists. Overnight, he became an international celebrity. Dimitrov was amongst the first to warn the world against the imminent threat of fascism. For more on the subject, see Ivo Banac's edition of Dimitrov's diary (2003).

Rather disturbingly, all the former Capella members join the ASP Hitler-Jugend style paramilitary group, which by now has also attracted a younger generation of followers (forming a pioneer / Jungvolk-like group for adolescent boys between the ages of ten and fourteen). However, during one of the unpopular meetings of the authorities with the local population, the people confront the Party leaders over their hypocrisy and abuse of power. One of the demonstrators accuses Viktor of misappropriating the name and figure of Pushkin, exposing Viktor as nothing but ‘a dirty pair of hands’ in the service of the authorities. The outraged Viktor orders merciless action against the unarmed crowds, despite Sasha’s pleas to not respond to this provocation. Just like in the scene of the Odessa steps massacre in Eisenstein’s *Bronenosets Potemkin / Battleship Potemkin* (1926) there are a few faces shown, amongst them a close up of an old woman’s face covered in blood. Sasha, who takes the side of the people, is also badly beaten.<sup>129</sup>

Despite the fact that the media is not allowed access to this unfortunate meeting, photos from the massacre are leaked to one newspaper. On the following day an article appears, written by a democratic journalist played by Mamin himself, in which Viktor is called ‘a Führer with sideburns’. One of the government officials, Kirillov (the chosen actor bares remarkable resemblance to Gorbachev), advises Viktor to disband his group for the time being. Viktor erupts into a deranged outburst, using threatening language and behaviour, thus making it obvious even to the leadership that he really is a sick, deluded and quite mad and dangerous individual. Viktor is soon taught a lesson but first the ASP goes on a spree of ultra-violence, followed by an orgy, in order to celebrate the group’s revenge on the journalist. They stamp the journalist’s face with Pushkin’s profile, shouting: ‘Na pamiat’ / ‘So that you can remember!’, a phrase whose meaning was not lost on the members of the ultranationalist Russian organization *Pamiat / Memory*. As a result, the film rights of *Bakenbardy* to be shown in Russia were bought by a secret private buyer and the film was practically shelved. As noted by Lawton and Prokhorov, this was the first example of commercial censorship in early post-Soviet Russia (Lawton 1992: 221; Prokhorov 2008).

Whilst the ASP members end up drunk in their quarters (a train in Pushkin’s village) the *militzia* / police surrounds and arrests them and their heads and sideburns are shaved. Kozlov (the leader of the local *Komsomol* or Soviet Communist youth organization,

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<sup>129</sup> In 2006 there were rumours that Mamin was beaten by such youths. So far, I have not been able to confirm these.

which always worked closely with the Party leadership), who is responsible for the registration of new youth organizations tries to reassure the hysterical Viktor that this is only the beginning of a more appropriate role for him. The group is reformed into another skinhead-style nationalist group, which now chants the name of Maiakovskii – the poet of the Bolshevik Revolution – and his poem ‘Left March’ (1918), written for the red marines. Now they wear a uniform of orange peasant kaftans and instead of canes they carry big, menacing walking sticks as weapons. In other words, under the order of the authorities the ASP has altered its image but has no intention of changing its behaviour. So, just as in Kubrick’s film, the authorities make sure that the cycle of violence and (the excuse for) totalitarian control is maintained.

Thanks to Soviet censorship, until the 1990s the dystopian mode was not really known to the Soviets. For this reason, in her article on Soviet black comedy (mentioned previously in Part II) Reizen fails to elaborate upon and make a connection with early Soviet dystopias. As pointed out by Lawton, *Bakenbardy* was made soon after the first publication of some dystopian Russian masterpieces in 1988. These include Zamiatin’s *We* (1921) and Bulgakov’s *Heart of a Dog* (1925) (Lawton 1992: 219). Prokhorov also highlights how such classic dystopias as George Orwell’s *1984* and *Animal Farm* were kept away from both artists and the public, ‘with Soviet utopianism remaining the Soviet culture’s main discourse’ until the end of its rule (2008: 107).

Prokhorov remarks that rather than replacing carnival with dystopia, *Bakenbardy* and *Okno* complicate carnivalesque discourse by questioning the liberating role of carnival when this is appropriated by the authorities (2008: 107). He is correct in arguing that in *Bakenbardy* two notions of carnival coexist, represented by two conflicting groups: the Capella, as hedonistic, Westernized punks; and the ASP members, wearing nineteenth-century clothes and reciting Pushkin (2008: 107). I argue that *Bakenbardy* demonstrates the twofold, ambiguous nature of carnival, this time used by Mamin as a parody of official mascarades of power for dystopian social critique and as a political satire of the Russians’ fondness for order and strong totalitarian style governments. The film spells out Mamin’s warning that the worst is yet to come if something is not done to prevent it. He underlines the fragility of democracy and unmasks the ugly face of the mechanisms of power and public control, exposing the looming dangers of more oppression, of fascism and nationalism in the country.

In Shakhnazarov's *Gorod Zero*, in a similar fashion, the authorities concoct afresh a rock-and-roll club with a legendary founder (the mysterious cook who commits suicide), and even try to formulate a supposed legacy by choosing Varakin for the role of the cook's son. This symbolizes, of course, the 'concocted' construction of the latest Westernization / democratization myths of *perestroika*; thus exposing these as no more than a cosmetic facelift of the old statist model. The implications are that via such cultural myths the country's political and cultural elites have insured, over the years, that Russia will always be ruled with an iron fist, and by the same, only slightly reshuffled, figures of power. In *Bakenbardy*, on the other hand, the city bosses also use the iconography of the Pushkin-inspired neo-fascists to regain legitimacy, control and respect amongst the local population, particularly its conservative members who are outraged by the Capella youth's transgressive behaviour.

Thus totalitarianism and the masquerade of power are the targets of Mamin's and Shakhnazarov's dystopian visions of Russia's near-future, where every new political order is a painful reminder of the same old Russian and Soviet imperial despotism. Both films expose this Russian tendency to resort to autocratic models of governance. In Prokhorov's words on Mamin's *Bakenbardy*, which are also relevant to Shakhnazarov's *Gorod Zero*, the film 'collapses Russia's past, present, and future into an unbroken line of despotism' (2008: 107). Prokhorov claims that Mamin's parody of essentialist Romantic conceptions of culture exposes them as empty signs that adopt meaning only when appropriated by the authorities (2008: 107). However, the fact that both films use parodic, carnivalesque inversion and satire to expose the appropriation of culture for political gains also highlights the ability of culture to manufacture genuine, oppositional, utopian impulses against hegemonic, conservative structures, thereby creating new social forces. This reiterates Jameson's thoughts on (popular) mass culture's twofold nature and on the conflation of utopia with ideology:

The works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be manipulated. (Jameson 1979: 144)

This observation was made by Jameson in the era of the commodification of culture when his position on the subject of utopia started to shift, becoming increasingly pessimistic.

Mamin deconstructs and then reconstructs a number of alternative variations of the same old imperial Russian messianic essentialist myth (implying its appropriation and modification by the Bolsheviks), and thus reveals identity to be a socio-political and performative cultural construct. It is not surprising that Prokhorov considers *Bakenbardy* to be an anti-utopia. However, I argue that Mamin's bold exposure of the mechanisms of power, and, particularly, of the link between violence and totalitarianism, imply a serious intention on his part to frighten, shock and warn the public in order to prevent such developments: he is pleading with the people not to give away their civil liberties in the name of a strong Russian government. This assertion is supported by Burgess, who himself has reportedly commented that 'Dystopias [...] are only a kind of warning to hang on to whatever freedom one has' (Burgess 1996: xxii). Vieira also assures that:

Although the writers of dystopias present very negative images of the future, they expect a very positive reaction on the part of their readers [...] the readers are to understand that the depicted future is not a reality but only a possibility that they have to learn to avoid'. (2010: 17)

As commented by Lawton (1992) and Prokhorov, Russian nationalists viewed the film as a denigration of Russian culture by anti-Russian forces, above all by Jews (Prokhorov 2008: 108). As mentioned first in Lawton (1992: 220-21) and then confirmed by Prokhorov (2008: 108), whilst the film's distribution rights in Russia were bought by a private company and practically shelved by the owners, abroad the film received critical acclaim. Indeed, it was awarded FIPRESCI (the critics' award) at the San Sebastian Film Festival in 1990 (Prokhorov 2008: 108).

**CHAPTER NINE: COMPARISONS & CONCLUSIONS. SHAKHNAZAROV'S *GOROD ZERO* (1989) AND DÍAZ TORRES'S *ALICIA EN EL PUEBLO DE MARAVILLAS* (1990) AS TWO VISIONS OF HELL**

**9.1 Shakhnazarov's *Gorod Zero* as a Dystopian Critique of Russian Statism**

Aside from attacking the myths of *perestroika*, *Gorod Zero* also connects Stalinism to *gosudarstvennost'* / statism – an idea of a strong authoritarian government based on Russia's imperial absolutist model and borrowed from the despotic Mongol rulers (after all, the country was under Tatar yoke for almost 250 years). Thus the film implies that Russians prefer to be ruled with an iron fist. According to this idea, all subjects have to accept the absolute primacy of a strong, stable state before their own personal needs.

Through the prosecutor's words to Varakin, Shakhnazarov conveys how, even under the cover of socialist utopia, statism has always been the main principle of Soviet politics. The main players occasionally change sides or appearance, yet the power principle is essentially the same. Therefore, in the underground history museum of the city, Varakin learns that the artist who is the leader of the local establishment has worked consecutively both for the state and for the dissidents, often changing roles and sides. Thus he questions the at times dubious 'leading' role of the Russian intelligentsia in the country's politics. For this reason, *perestroika* is represented allegorically as a 'concoction': a cheap historical fabrication, and clearly, a fictional story that the establishment is trying to pass off as radical social change. This process of mythologization (of Russian history) is represented through the falsification of the life and legacy of a cook, wherein Varakin has been forced to play the part of the cook's son. In the underground museum of *Gorod Zero*, past and present, historical facts and pure fiction, are barely glued together, resulting in nonsensical, political kitsch. Varakin soon understands that he has been used as a pawn in yet another pathetic historical falsification.

Despite its haunting, apocalyptic atmosphere of death and destruction, Shakhnazarov's *Gorod Zero* is a prophetic film, not only about the dissolution of the Soviet empire but also Russia's political revamping into a democratic state. After all, the shift from imperial to national identity is a long, ongoing, complex process, involving the development of a civil society based on law and order, distinct from the country's Soviet or imperial past. In the film, through the figure of the public prosecutor, Shakhnazarov directly blames imperial statism for the formation of the Russian psyche. Indeed, as

argued by Sakwa, Russia did not have an empire but was an empire, and ‘Russian identity and the Russian state became bound up with the idea of the Russian empire’ (2002: 255). Furthermore, he affirms that:

Russia had never been a nation-state but remains a ‘state-nation’ – a multinational entity focused on the institutions of the state. The USSR, too, had been an empire-state, incarnated no longer in the form of an individual [tsar] but in the guise of the collective emperor, the Party. (Sakwa 2002: 256)

This is why Russian nationalism is a peculiar form of nationalism, alien to the Western idea of this, as historically (as the public prosecutor in *Gorod Zero* claims) ‘since the Mongols’ invasion of the Russian empire’ the focus has been on maintaining a strong state.<sup>130</sup>

Shakhnazarov seems to identify Russian imperial statism as one of the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet system and its empire. According to Sakwa, even in post-Soviet Russia the *gosudarstvenniki* (statists or state-builders) continue to maintain that:

[A] strong Russian state is the central feature of the very existence of the Russian people, and thus draws on the tradition of the ‘national Bolsheviks’ who from the 1920s made their peace with the Soviet system as the re-creators of the Russian empire. (2002: 260)

This is a peculiar mix of patriotism and nationalism, exalting the leading role of the Russian people in a colonial relationship with the other nations in the union. Thus, he argues, the fall of the USSR destroyed an idea of statehood that was built up over a millennium (Sakwa 2002: 262).<sup>131</sup>

In the light of these arguments, I claim that *Gorod Zero* is Shakhnazarov’s evaluation of the exhaustion of the imperial myth. Therefore the film’s main protagonist, a medium-ranking Soviet bureaucrat named Varakin (played, as in *Zabytaia melodia*, by Leonid Filatov) is sent symbolically to a Chernobyl-like ground zero ghost city, where the rotten foundations and ruins of the Russian / Soviet empire are exposed. Against all odds, Varakin escapes from this uncanny, sinister city, where time, place and history all seem to have been condensed, turned into a void, and thus no longer make any sense. Varakin ultimately manages to flee on a boat, which takes him into the mists of the magical

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<sup>130</sup> For more on this matter see Sakwa 2002: 259-70.

<sup>131</sup> In a recent study of contemporary Russia, however, Bacon and Wyman comment on Vladimir Putin’s view of the country as a ‘regional leader of global significance’, claiming that he has tried to retain whatever is left of Russia’s status as a ‘great power’ (2006: 168). Putin’s re-election and, so far, unyielding popularity, to some extent speak for themselves.

Russian lakes and forests; in other words, he goes back to mother Russia's symbolic womb in order to search for a new beginning. This is a rather open, ambiguous end to the film, which can be read, allegorically, in terms of Russia's political and identity crisis. It can also be interpreted as a pessimistic ending – Varakin is lost forever in the mists – therefore there is no answer or solution to Russia's political crisis. However, the film's close can also be seen as a new beginning. After all, at this point in time many Russians, like Varakin, chose the unknown (to escape abroad, for example) rather than to live under such circumstances.

## **9.2 The Special Case of *Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas***

Daniel Díaz Torres's *Alicia en pueblo de Maravillas* is a Cuban example of dark, dystopian satire of socialist society. Like *Bakenbardy*, the film focuses on the negative, absurd sides of Cuban life and governance. For this reason it caused a wave of controversy and disapproval from all sides: critics, government supporters, and the wider public. There were accusations that the film was a mockery of, and attack upon, the Cuban Revolution (Chanan 2004: 459). However, as testified by Fernandes's anthropological investigation, the reasons given by ordinary people for this unprecedented hostility towards the film were based on its negativity and complete lack of constructive criticism, since the film offers no hope or way out of the country's troubles and completely dismisses the achievements of the Revolution (2006: 81). However, the film's artistic merits were defended by both the ICAIC's filmmakers and leadership. This produced a crisis in the previously comparatively harmonious relationship between ICAIC filmmakers and the Revolutionary leadership, a point to which I shall return shortly. (As noted in Part I, the first such crisis between the leadership and filmmakers versus the government was produced by Sabá Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez Leal's 1961 documentary *PM*, which prompted Castro's 'Words to the Intellectuals').

The film exposes widespread corruption, opportunism, nepotism, and double moral standards, as well as the absurd tradition of presenting failure as a 'marvellous' story of success. Created on the principle of *reductio ad absurdum*, *Alicia* takes the earlier critique of empty revolutionary rhetoric and zeal (as seen in *Plaff*) to hyperbolic, extreme proportions, creating a fictitious dystopian hellish place called Maravillas. In Maravillas

absurd language and behaviour have become the accepted norm, as encouraged by the autocratic director of the spa. This is best symbolized by the cloudy and smelly undrinkable mineral water, which, according to SATAN's director (SATAN being the sinister symbolic abbreviation for Maravillas's Sanatorium for Active Therapy and Neurology), just needs a little shake to clear before drinking. This soiled water has been promoted by Maravilla TV as having miraculous healing properties. The film uses a kind of Orwellian newspeak (as noted by Fernandes 2006: 49) alongside irony and satire, inspired by earlier Gutiérrez Alea films such as *La muerte*, for example, which also employed an eclectic mixture of styles, parodic inversion, irony and caustic satire as didactic, moralistic weapons against the errors committed by bureaucratic socialism. In his interviews, Díaz Torres refers to well known films such as Gutiérrez Alea's *La muerte* and Terry Gilliam's *Monty Python* films (Denis West 1993: 25). He seems to attribute negative criticism of the film more to the satirical ambiguity of its language and to the unfortunate timing of its Cuban premiere in 1991 – the year that marked the collapse of socialism (Díaz Torres in West 1993: 26) – rather than to the film's obvious lack of a more active intervention on behalf of Alicia: she chooses to escape from Maravillas rather than to stay and do something or confront openly the spa's director.

In interviews with West (1993) and Fernandes (given in August 2001, published in 2006) the director remarks that he had been working on the film since 1987, following Castro's rectification (1986), having had in mind the creation of a popular farce along the lines of Tabío's *Se permuta* or a black comedy like Tabío's *Plaff*. He developed the script with the help of the young satiric writers group *Nos y otros*, eventually adding grotesque elements in the tradition of Ionesco's theatre of the absurd, film noir, horror B movies and German expressionism, in a deliberate attempt to shock viewers and shake them out of the widespread apathy in the country (Díaz Torres in West 1993: 25). However, the venture became increasingly risky. As commented by the director, 'Between writing the script and releasing the film, our world ended' (in Fernandes 2006: 49). Therefore, the film has been seen either as defeatist or as a provocation. Thus, after a very short-lived premiere (of only four days) it was officially banned from public broadcast in Cuba, becoming the most controversial film in the history of Revolutionary Cuba (West 1993: 24, Chanan 2004: 459, and Fernandes 2006: 49-50). Nevertheless, the film was shown in December 1991 at the Havana film festival, and at later international film festivals including the 1993 festival of Mexican cinema in Guadalajara.

As noted above, harsh censorship was not unheard of in post-1959 Cuba. However, as stated by Fernandes, over the years the ICAIC had been relatively willing to stay within the limits of the Revolution, and has enjoyed more freedom in comparison to the other arts thanks to the personal friendship of its director and founder, Alfredo Guevarra, with Fidel Castro and the cultural authority of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (Fernandes 2006: 48). The subject of literary censorship, and the controversy surrounding the exhibition of plastic works of art in the 1980s, was later mentioned in Gutiérrez Alea and Tabío's film *Fresa y chocolate* (1993) as part of the national dialogue on the subject of artistic and civil freedom and the need for greater tolerance in the country. As a result of the unprecedented censorship of Díaz Torres's film and subsequent threat to the independence of ICAIC from the authorities, *Alicia* became an unfortunate *cause célèbre*. It took the resignation of García Espinosa (at the time a director of ICAIC) and a petition in defence of the film, signed by many respected Cuban filmmakers who argued that the film was a work of art and not a case of dissidence, to stop the proposed merger of ICAIC with the Cuban Television and the Motion Pictures Division of the Armed Forces (West 1993: 27; Fernandes 2006: 50).

Nevertheless, the negative propaganda surrounding the rough handling of *Alicia*'s case, taught Cuban authorities a lesson: that an outright ban is not the way to handle such matters, particularly when Cuba needed to improve its international image, in order to attract some foreign investments. Ultimately, one could therefore say that, for a range of reasons, the intellectuals had won. Since then, despite Castro's complaints at the filmmakers' harsh criticism (for example, in the case of his embracing public criticism of Gutiérrez Alea's last film *Guantanamera*, mentioned in Chanan 2004: 1), the authorities attempted to exercise, at times, an uneasy tolerance, eventually even incorporating the artists' criticisms in the promotion of a new official line (Fernandes 2006: 40). This was rationalized as an opportunity to improve the international image of the country as more open and democratic; it boosted its cultural exports and the investments in its recent tourist industry.

As observed by Ann Marie Stock, after thirty years of economic, political and cultural convergence between the filmmakers and the Cuban leadership, due to the harsh realities of the Special Period the relationship changed:

State funds would no longer support island filmmakers and finance their projects to the extent they once did. Filmmakers would no longer create primarily for local

audiences. And films would no longer have as a key objective the disseminating of Revolutionary ideology (2009: 13).

Revolutionary Cuba's new found openness and inclusiveness, however, came at a price. The country has ended up in limbo, in an unusually prolonged transition to a market economy, which is the discussion of Chapters Eleven and Twelve, Part IV.

### 9.3 Through the Looking Glass to Ground Zero

The directors of *Gorod Zero* and *Alicia* have created distinctly oneiric, mystifying, parallel worlds, in which the inhabitants of the diegesis are recognizable but somewhat 'uncanny'. Narrative events seem to be framed not by logic but by hazard, that is, by the accidental and arbitrary character of the surrealist aesthetics of the era of high modernism, now appropriated by the genres of dystopian critique and horror. Both stories have open, ambiguous endings, and their characters are grotesque, often simplistic and 'cartoonish', as if from horrific fairy tales. To a large extent *Gorod Zero* and *Alicia* are also detective stories / thrillers, and both are allegorical visions of their current society that indicate (in the case of Russia) and imply (in the case of Cuba) a deep crisis and (imminent) collapse of bureaucratic socialism. Both main protagonists end up in Wonderland-like cities (*Gorod Zero* and *Maravillas*, respectively) which paint two dystopian visions of hell. In *Alicia* this hell is a hyperbolized, grotesque version of a rehabilitation prison colony; and a summary of all the mistakes and ills likely to be committed by Cuban citizens: theft, speculation, corruption, opportunism, and political naiveté. The film suggests that the Cuban Revolutionary government has only itself to blame for the creation of the conditions that encourage such behaviour. All the residents of *Maravillas* are treated as sinners (and the exotic biblical animals on the streets enforce such allusions). *Gorod Zero*, on the other hand, is an allegory of the crimes committed by Stalin and previous oppressive Russian regimes. In both films the social critique escalates into the realms of sly satire and the absurd, and then on to chilling horror. Thus, both films are examples of a *reductio ad absurdum* type of pessimistic dystopian black comedy.

Significantly, the main characters in both films are played by actors who also appeared in films previously discussed in Part II, namely *Plaff* and *Zabytaia melodia*. *Alicia* is portrayed by Tais Waldes, who formerly was Clarita in *Plaff*; while Varakin is

played by Leonid Filatov, who took the role of Leonid Filimonov in *Zabytaia melodia*. These possibly deliberate coincidences in fact demonstrate an intertextual dialogue between the later and preceding films. All four pictures seem to be seeking answers to the same question: ‘how can we avoid this in the future?’

The rest of the characters in *Gorod Zero* and *Alicia* range in from freaks to more sinister, menacing, horror movie-like characters, such as (literally) Satan himself in *Alicia*. It is implied that Satan is the manager of Maravillas’ health spa, in absolute control of everything and everyone. Most of the people sent there for rehabilitation have no idea why are they there, whilst others have demonstrated some serious errors of judgement. There are those who unwittingly became involved in black marketeering, and others that have become so confused by the absurd double standards that they have ended up having a nervous breakdown.

As in Soviet *chernukha*, neglected exotic animals can be seen on the streets of Maravillas. The presence of animals reinforces the idea that an original sin has been committed (a falling from grace), and that the culprits have been sent to hell in order to pay for their sins. There is a further twist in *Alicia*’s dystopian plot: it transpires that the rehabilitators who are supposed to oversee the colonists’ swift recovery and return to society are the ones that have tempted them into criminal activities in the first place. Alicia discovers that they all are Satan’s helpers, and this explains why no one can leave Maravillas, particularly if they have drunk the cloudy mineral water prescribed by Satan.

Alicia seems to be the only inmate who feels certain that she has not done anything wrong, and who believes that she has gone there on a voluntary basis — as a theatre director. So she tries (yet again, as in *Clockwork*) to use the beneficial effects of art in order to expedite the colonists’ rehabilitation. Alicia begins work with her usual enthusiasm, but immediately notices, and feels threatened by, the absurd practices of Maravillas. She attempts to alert the colony’s inhabitants, but they have grown so used to the absurdities of the place and are so scared of Satan that they no longer dare question the authorities or are able to distinguish between right and wrong. Alicia realizes that she can no longer save the people of Maravillas and decides to escape, despite the warnings that escape is impossible (just like Varakin in *Zero City*), and at least save herself. Her escape, however, eventually stirs the population of Maravillas, breaking Satan’s spell over them (arguably an allusion to Castro’s charisma that used to hypnotize the crowds). Finally, the people wake up to the grotesque absurdity of their daily routines, realizing

that the healing mud is actually smelly excrement and the opaque mineral water has been specifically designed to cloud their ability to reason. The first ones to realize this are the people who have befriended Alicia: formerly exemplary Cuban citizens tricked by Satan's assistants. They rush to aid her flight, thus challenging Satan's authority and instigating an insurrection.

Alicia manages to flee but is soon followed by Satan, who is able to catch up with her. However, she succeeds in pushing him off of the truck they are on, thus causing his fall from a bridge all the way down into the abyss. Only a puff of yellow smoke is left at the spot where he hits the ground, implying that Alicia has succeeded in expelling Satan from Maravillas and back to hell. However, the camera later shows a hot mineral spring bubbling on the same spot where Satan fell, and it is possible to read this as a warning that the story could repeat itself. Then, Alicia suddenly wakes up from her nightmare to find that she is still waiting for a bus to Maravillas. The film ends with the didactic message: 'never drink cloudy water'. This can be interpreted in various ways, including: 'Do not believe in half-truths', and it is not surprising that the film was received as an allegory and a dystopian parody of Castro's socialist government in both Miami and in Cuba. So, despite multiple possible readings of its closing statement about cloudy water, one thing is very clear: the film is a fable of the mishandling of the country's contradictions at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s by its Revolutionary government, and a bold criticism of Castro's government failures.

Stylistically, the film is a dark, surreal satire that uses the grotesque scatological carnivalesque humour of the lower body, nudity and sexual scenes, and exaggerated farcical acting, taking the story in the realms of the surreal and the absurd. For example, the healthy mud in which the patients cover themselves every day turns out to be smelly excrement, and the children (the future of the country) find being covered in excrement perfectly acceptable. In addition, everyone is dressed uniformly, in clothes made of material with a pattern of broken eggs, even the table cloths are made of this. The implications are: everything and everyone in Maravillas is under an evil spell, as, obviously, *Alicia* takes over where Tabío's *Plaff* has left off, blowing up the effects of Concha's actions (casting an evil, unspecified spell by throwing the first egg at Clarita) into cosmic proportions, and in agreement with the *reductio ad absurdum* comedy plot principles. This emphasizes that everything in Maravillas is wrong and absurd, and as a result the mistakes are piling up and nothing is functioning as it should. Also, wherever

Alicia goes she feels watched and spied on by Big Brother, who seems to be everywhere; and the inhabitants also are keeping an eye on one another. This creates an uneasy atmosphere of tension and mistrust. As mentioned before, there is bitter criticism of regrettable attitudes towards public property (also satirized by Mamin in *Fontan* when Peter, upon discovering that his right-hand man has been stealing, asks: ‘why do you need four toilet seats when you have only one arse?’). As I myself am from an Eastern European background, I can confirm that the theft of public property was a common, everyday occurrence in the former socialist bloc. However, as a rule, it started from the top and worked its way down.)

According to Díaz Torres, the intention of *Alicia* was to shock the audience and provoke decisive action before all the achievements of socialism had been lost (in West 1993: 25). This is why a similar, positive character like Clarita, this time called Alicia, is the main protagonist of the film. Therefore, despite its caustic criticism, it is not impossible to view the film as an example of a failed ‘dystopian critique’ rather than of apocalyptic ‘anti-utopia’. As argued by Vieira, dystopias that leave no place for hope have failed in their mission (2010: 17). The world of *Maravillas* is an inverted grotesque dystopian picture of socialist utopia, of how things could become much worse if something is not done soon. It seems that the director’s aim was to warn his compatriots that the future could turn out just like this if the Cubans continued to be apathetic and did not react against the absurdities taking place in their country.

Unfortunately for Díaz Torres, this picture of hell coincides both with the Western portrayal of socialism – particularly of a Stalinist type of bureaucratic socialism, with its Gulags described by Solzhenitsyn as hell on earth – and with some Christians’ claims that socialist utopia is an original sin – the workings of Satan himself (for the latter claim see Sargent 1994: 20-21). The director has insisted that the film is a summary of all the wrongs in Cuba, and a fable of how the socialist dream can turn into a nightmare if something is not done to prevent this. Díaz Torres claims that the film’s satire and social criticism is not that different from that of *Plaff* – that satire is always extreme and double-edged – and blames much of the critique *Alicia* received on its unfortunate timing (West 1993: 26). Indeed, it is true that only two years after *Plaff*’s premiere Cuba had become a very different country in a very different world: socialism had collapsed and Cubans were having to endure the austerity of The Special Period. Yet, when compared to the much more playful and entertaining *Plaff*, *Alicia* seems almost deadly serious and anti-utopian.

Nevertheless, despite some strong views to the contrary, it is still possible to argue that the film is not an outright rejection of socialism. The film's ending is in reality ambiguous: all has been just a bad dream, a nightmare, so despite the strong associations with hell, there is still hope that the worst can be avoided. Therefore, I claim that in spite of the didactic, moralistic nature of its satire, *Alicia* remains poised between hope and despair; that in fact is an example of an overtly pessimistic dystopian critique that has gone too far, and thus, failing in its original aim – to caution.

Shakhnazarov's *Gorod Zero*, on the other hand, recreates the sense of vacuum of these years as if representing Chernobyl's meltdown, depicting a place frozen in time and space following its own uncanny logic. Some truly sinister characters inhabit this surreal parallel world, and nothing is as it seems. And yet one realizes that this is an allegory of Russia's past and present political history, of its unbroken line of despotic autocratic or collective (party) rulers. In the underground museum, the middle-management bureaucrat, Varakin, can hardly hide his amazement at the obviously concocted, rewritten history of the town, which represents the rewriting of Russia's history by Soviet ideologists, whose only concern was how to please their 'dear leader' – Stalin.

Shakhnazarov evaluates Russia's autocratic past – from the time of the Tatars up to the late 1980s – as a harrowing history of Russian statism that has shaped the Russian psyche. The Russian people have been expected to sacrifice their dreams of personal happiness in the name of an abstract greater good, for the glory of their country and their tyrannical rulers (the former tsars or the Communist party). In a way, the film continues where Riazanov's *Zabytaia melodia* left off: a vision of purgatory filled with queuing Soviet citizens who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the name of the Soviet state and its utopian ambitions. This is what was expected of Varakin as well – to sacrifice his life for the creation of yet another propaganda lie. Shakhnazarov, like Mamin, questions the foundational myths of the Soviet-Russian empire, highlighting the continuation between imperial and Soviet Russia and the obsession with strong autocratic rule.<sup>132</sup> The film's atmosphere is almost apocalyptic. Despite some artistic mystifications, *Gorod Zero*

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<sup>132</sup> It is no wonder that Stalin used to identify himself with Ivan Groznyi. Owing to this identification Eisenstein was awarded Stalin's prize for the first part of *Ivan Groznyi* (1944), a film approved by the 'dear leader'. The second part, however, which was finished in 1946, became a victim of a political censorship, the censors interpreting the film as an unflattering allegory of Stalin's regime and his secret police. Thus the film's first premiere was in 1958, during the thaw; Eisenstein never fully recovered from the heavy criticism he received, which, presumably, led to his untimely death.

exposes historical and foundational myths as fabrications, as politicized ideological constructs, pointing out that they all are variations of the same autocratic centralized power principle.

For example, Varakin realizes that he has been used as a pawn in a bigger game where the same old establishment figures have been dealt slightly different cards (for variety's sake) so they can remain in the circle of power for the next term of the so-called reformed *perestroika* government. This is why they all insist that Varakin is the son of a cook. The fact that Varakin's fictional father is a cook emphasizes how the whole history of the city / Russia is a crazy concoction of myth and fact. After Varakin's refusal to try the cake prepared specially for him by his supposed father, the cook commits suicide, or has been murdered. It is all very puzzling for Varakin, who senses that he has been chosen to take part in an elaborate deception. The cake, for example, is an exact copy of Varakin's head, and the effect of this is very menacing and unnerving.<sup>133</sup> Varakin's fictional father, his mysterious murder or suicide and the sinister cake all together stand for a Stalinist-like re-writing of history, whilst the rock-and-roll club story represents the new myth of *perestroika*, the supposed change of course and opening up to the West. Varakin's refusal to eat the cake can be interpreted as a refusal to take as a face value the party leadership claims that *perestroika* is a different, democratic kind of socialism – 'socialism with a human face'. Despite all the surreal mystifications then, it is implied that in the future the supposedly democratic socialism will most probably revert to the same old traditional totalitarian methods of governing (to tsarist and Stalinist kind of statism). Through the characters of Varakin and the prosecutor Shakhnazarov performs demythologization of the foundational myths of Russian history and statism, exposing *perestroika*, and its newly fabricated mythology as lies and as an elaborate case of official carnival (a masquerade of authority).

Fortunately for Varakin, it seems that even the prosecutor has lost faith in the traditional statist model, as everything in this ghost city and in its surroundings is in

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<sup>133</sup> The idea for such a horrific cake may have come from an earlier 1971 Yugoslavian Black Wave comedy: Bata Cengiĉ's *Uloga moje porodice u svjetskoj revoluciji / The Role of my Family in the World Revolution*. The Yugoslavian film is a bizarre political farce made just after the crushing of the Prague Spring, expressing the disillusionment of this generation with socialism. In this film there is a scene of a cake in the shape of Stalin's head with a candle growing out of it. A still of this scene can be found in Vogel's book *Film as a Subversive Art* (2005: 146). The author is correct to call this the most subversive still in the whole book, which is a collection of about 300 rare stills from avant-garde films on subjects considered to be highly subversive or taboo.

ruins, symbolized best by the rotting Russian millennial oak tree (because without a fair assessment of past mistakes there can be no hope for a better future). Traditionally, (in Tolstoi's *Voina i Mir / War and Peace*, for example) the millennial Russian oak tree symbolizes the might of the Russian empire. However, when the little group, consisting of town dignitaries led by the alleged dissident artist, reaches the tree, it finds it already dead, rotting from within. The artist encourages the members of the group to take whatever they can before the oak collapses and turns into ashes. Apart from Varakin and the prosecutor, the members of the establishment are quick to grab whatever they can from the still magnificent, dying tree. This implies that the country's elite has already divided amongst themselves whatever little was left over from the once-powerful empire.

Amongst the group is also the director of the factory, with whom Varakin had had some initial dealings when he originally arrived in the city. Varakin had a scheduled meeting with the director in his office, and at this point first realized that something was not quite right. He is the only one to notice that the director's secretary is typing while stark naked, as if there is nothing unusual in this. When confronted with the strangeness of this situation, the director only vaguely acknowledges the fact to Varakin (thus symbolically ignoring the 'naked truth', staring him in the face). Later, he promises to speak to his recently deceased engineer, which seriously alarms the Muscovite. The dissident artist has been alternatively a government spy or a democrat, depending on the twists and turns of the political history of the city. The public prosecutor, allegedly a sinister individual who dreams of committing a crime, despite all his cynicism prompts Varakin at an opportune time to escape through the mists.

Depending on one's perspective, the film's ending can be interpreted in different ways: on the one hand, Varakin goes into the mists, that is, into the unknown where he can get lost or disappear all together. This was the initial, very negative, anti-utopian reading of the film even by critics such as Lawton and Horton and Brashinski. However, the 1993 Horton interpretation is somewhat changed, acknowledging this time that the film's ending actually leaves a glimmer of hope. I argue that the film is a dystopian critique (or critical dystopia), as it is also possible to interpret Varakin's escape as a return to the magical Russian forest and then, via the lakes (mirroring the first Slavs that inhabited the country through its set of rivers and lakes) to the land's womb, to his pre-historical roots and the egalitarian origins of the Russian community. The boat drifts by itself, rudderless, as if guided by a higher power. The unknown seems to be less

frightening to Varakin than what he has left behind – the sinister, absurd ghost world of Zero City, which stands for the phoney, mythologized Russian history. So, despite the apocalyptic title and the allusion to Chernobyl's ground zero, Varakin is given a chance to escape (to freedom). After all, despite numerous failed attempts to flee from the city and the psychic child's predictions that he will never leave and will die in Gorod Zero, Varakin is finally successful. Previously, after a few futile attempts to run away he has found that this uncanny city is actually a vicious circle with no way out, where all roads lead to a dead end. Despite its chilling atmosphere, however, the film is not an anti-utopia but a sly critical dystopia, on the edges of horror, which aim is to shock, warn and provoke a response, a decisive action for a real, and not prescribed from above change. Also, the film is a dark surreal political spoof, which performs a cathartic cleansing of intellectual liberation from all that has been ominous and fearful for so long, proclaiming the symbolic death of despotism and a hope for rebirth of the Russian community.

In both films – *Gorod Zero* and *Alicia* – there are fantastic elements mixed with horror, approaching the realms of the uncanny, whilst the stories take place in surreal, dystopian Wonderland worlds (describing evil totalitarian places) where nightmarish reality and dreams have merged and the grotesque and the absurd reign supreme. Both films are dark critical dystopias, and thus, grotesque, parodic inversions of failed socialist utopias. As horrific and dystopian pictures of hell then, *Alicia* and *Gorod Zero* are also classic examples of *reductio ad absurdum* black comedy plot where carnival and satire suddenly collapse into absurd and tragedy. Thus both narratives follow peculiar, absurd logic: both protagonists are outsiders, sent to these uncanny places with a particular task; soon, however, they become convinced that they have been ticked into a trap, in a place that resembles hell from which there is no escape. The two ghost-like, existing only in a parallel universe places – Gorod Zero and Maravillas – represent exaggerated, inverted and grotesque spoofs of failed utopian socialist monologic closed societies. The freakish behaviour of the inhabitants of Maravillas and Gorod Zero, despite the near, close resemblance with acceptable socialist conduct and realities, defeats normal logic, and, not surprisingly, it does, eventually, alarm and terrify Varakin and Alicia, who make desperate attempts to escape. Despite some horrific experiences, both protagonists manage to break away unharmed, taking with them some hard learnt lessons, which they will probably remember for the rest of their lives. Also, both films are ominous, surreal allegories of the collapse of the socialist system, and therefore, there is some double

language (in *Alicia*), numerous deliberate mystifications, arbitrariness and ambiguity in their plots and acting styles (the acting is somewhat dry and menacing in *Gorod Zero* when in *Alicia* is excessive and grotesque). The diegeses are of other, parallel, surreal worlds representing the unconscious, where dreams and reality, past, present and future are all intertwined, and yet, somehow their surreal logic makes perfect sense to a viewer with a socialist background. Thus, both films successfully convey the absurdity of life in the late 1980s Cuba and Soviet Russia, and the anticipation of the imminent disintegration of socialism. Both pictures employ actors involved in previous perestroika or rectification film projects on similar themes, thus conveying a sense of continuity of major national metanarratives (of political, social, moral and identity crisis due to the disintegration of socialism in USSR and Eastern Europe). Both *Alicia* and *Gorod Zero* use the aesthetics of the ugly and the lower body, scatological, grotesque carnivalesque humour, together with caustic social and political satire. Thus both pictures share *chernukha*-like sense of physical excess, grotesque realism and naturalism. Most importantly, the Cuban film, *Alicia*, displays many of the elements of Soviet *chernukha* trend: stranded exotic animals, dilapidated buildings, bleak, filthy streets – just like in Mamin's *Fontan*, for example; and dark, narrow stairs and corridors leading underground, deep into the womb of the sanatorium, representing Satan's headquarters, or hell, if not a Gulag-like prison colony. Unfortunately for Díaz Torres' film, this is the main problem with accusatory satire: it tends to go all the way, professing full rejection and critique of every segment of society (a fact duly noted by the Russian Tsar Nikolai / Nicholas the I<sup>st</sup>, who became Gogol's most dedicated patron and supreme censor, a development that frightened the satiric writer and led, eventually, to his flight from the country into European exile).<sup>134</sup> The film conveys a sense that Alicia (who allegorically represents the Cubans on the island) together with a few other Cuban citizens has been cut off from the rest of the world, without a proper charge or explanation, and has been kept against her own free will in this claustrophobic, filthy place from which there is no escape. *Alicia* may have more comical and farcical elements than *Gorod Zero*, and yet it is similarly ominous negative and pessimistic film. And yet, despite their apocalyptic atmosphere and harsh social criticism, both films *Alicia* and *Gorod Zero* are still within the requirements of the genre of critical dystopia: they both have ambiguous, open

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<sup>134</sup> See, for example, Nikolai Gogol in Encyclopaedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com>

endings that offer a glimmer of hope. Nonetheless, largely depending on one's personal views, is not impossible to argue that both pictures have failed in their goals as critical dystopias (displaying too much cynicism and caution and not enough hope beyond hope). Then again, both films were made during dark confusing times when the whole world and a lifetime of idealistic utopian dreams and beliefs of many Cubans and Russians simply collapsed.

However, anti-utopian films are very rare. They project pessimistic, cynical view of life, painting a bleak, often nihilistic picture of reality and displaying fatalistic, morbid and misanthropic mistrust in human nature and the existence of universal human values. Buñuel's *Los olvidados* is such a film, as it cannot envision a solution to the cycle of violence triggered by abject poverty. There are also certain, more extreme, examples amongst the *chernukha* trend, for example Tamara Narutskaia's *Tamara Aleksandrovna's Husband and Daughter* (1989). As noted by Graham, this film is almost apocalyptic, representing the end of family relationships, the end of beauty and humanity itself – it is a full rejection of any sentiments and ideals, and, it represents the complete collapse, even of nuclear familial relationships and structures (Graham 2000: 14-16).

Despite its criticism and tragic, pessimistic end, in comparison to Alicia Tabío's *Plaff* is a more playful, inventive and entertaining black comedy; it creates the illusion that it is more of a spoof rather than an example of caustic social satire. Like Medvedkin's irreverent, carnivalesque *Shchast'e / Happiness* (1934), *Plaff* demonstrates a greater sense of comic timing and a lighter touch than Díaz Torres's rather dark, sinister satire. As discussed earlier, Mamin's angry, dark satire – *Bakenbardy* – is also a parody of foundational and alternative cultural (ideological) myths, misappropriated by oppressive, totalitarian authorities. Mamin's affinity to the carnivalesque and his acute sense of comic timing is somewhat closer to Tabío's comic style, than to this of Díaz Torres. As demonstrated in the next Chapter Ten, which focuses on Mamin's first post-Soviet comedy, *Okno v Parizh*, just like his Cuban colleague (Juan Carlos Tabío) Mamin can turn almost any subject into an irreverent and funny carnivalesque comedy. This is why I see both filmmakers as masters of black, carnivalesque comedy and satire, whose best works are on the subject of social change and transition. As argued earlier, they both demonstrate remarkable affinity to carnival and have produced exceptional postmodern parodies of their respective countries' (socialist) cultural canons.

Mamin's *Bakenbardy*, however, is an unusually sly and pessimistic in tone dystopian rather than carnivalesque black comedy. Again, the film was made at the eve of the Soviet collapse and like *Alicia* and *Gorod Zero* projects the darkest fears for the future. Here the carnivalesque aesthetics of grotesque realism are employed solely for the purpose of a sly dystopian critique used against oppressive totalitarian attitudes and cultural policies. Like Shakhnazarov's *Gorod Zero*, the *Bakenbardy* is a prophetic fable and a warning that even popular, democratic carnivals can easily fall prey to caning totalitarian authorities, which can transform them into tools for ideological control, oppression and manipulation of the masses. This is why *Bakenbardy* is Mamin's darkest film: its humour is more in the style of absurdist black intellectual humour of art cinema, and works such as Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, to whom it pays a metatextual homage. Recently, just like in the case of *Clockwork*, after years of unofficial (commercial) censorship, *Bakenbardy* has been recognised as a cult Russian movie.

However, similar to Tabío and Medvedkin Mamin demonstrates a remarkable sense of comic timing and outstanding satiric talent. These traits have made him the foremost comic filmmaker of the Soviet transition. As astutely observed by Prokhorov, Mamin is 'a bridge figure' between Soviet and post-Soviet satire. Therefore, his best films were made between 1986 and 1993. His works from the period represent the difficult transition of Russian film comedy from state-owned 'state-controlled satire to commercial comedy entertainment' (Prokhorov 2008: 115). His next film, *Okno*, is a summary of the hard transitional process, and (like *Bakenbardy*) an attempt to peer into the near Russian future. The film was the last Russian grotesque satire of the 1990s, and very much a film about the Russian transition. As such it represents Mamin's failed attempt at the genre of romantic comedy (as a strategy for ending the *chernukha* trend period). Instead of an uplifting comedy on the subject of national reconciliation, as originally contemplated by the filmmaker, *Okno* ended up as yet another one of his extremely entertaining and successful carnivalesque satires, which after a closer scrutiny reveals itself as a dystopian critique of contemporary post-Soviet society. This is why the film is a continuation of previous Mamin topics and concerns, retaining even some *chernukha* style elements. I shall continue its discussion in Chapter Ten, Part IV.

The next Part IV of the study is dedicated to Cuban and Russian filmmakers' attempts to find a way forward for their national film industries in the different now conditions of a global market economy. In doing so, they have discussed issues of economic, political

and identity crisis, triggered by the effects of globalization. Many of these films tried to initiate a process of national healing and reconciliation and to stimulate a return to recovery and hope with varied success.

## **PART IV. REPRESENTING TRANSITION, GLOBALIZATION & SHIFTING (MIGRANT) IDENTITIES**

### **INTRODUCTION: CARNIVALS OF TRANSITION TO A MARKET ECONOMY. FANTASY AND THE MYTH OF THE FIRST WORLD**

Throughout this thesis I have argued that avant-garde and postmodern carnivalesque cultural aesthetics (which I see as a mode, that is, both a strategy for socio-political and formal subversion), particularly in film, signal a socio-political shift, crisis or transition. Hence, I refer to them as *carnivals of transition*. Carnivals of transition indicate the ambivalent process of change and becoming, because mediation and negotiation between opposing ideologies, values and beliefs form their core. As seen in the films discussed so far, carnivals of transition are apparent in symbolic, socio-cultural parodic inversion or satiric transgression – from the sexual to the cultural, including the political – concerning any form of oppression or marginality in society. The carnivalesque comedies discussed here in Part IV also present strong evidence of the workings of this ambivalent situation of the permanent process of change and becoming. Throughout this study I have argued that as well as a fertile strategy for mutual cultural illumination, carnivals of transition or the carnivalesque mode is the most fitting cinematic mode for representing competing social tendencies, and the process of constant social, political, economic and cultural change and renewal. Also represented is the cycle of shifting attitudes towards social transformation, which, according to Sargent, is essentially ‘the cycle of hope, failure, despair, the rejection of hope altogether, followed by the renewal of hope’ (Sargent 1994: 28).

As noted earlier in Part III, Sargent and more recently Vieira have argued that every cultural product – from film to literature, architecture, philosophy and political science – is a form of utopia or of one of its sub-genres (eutopia, dystopia, anti-utopia, ecotopia and heterotopia). These all provide a comment upon a particular social model’s temporary failure or success, and evidence of the constant renewal and resurrection of certain utopian ideas and aspirations for continuous social improvement (Sargent 1994: 1). Sargent argues that the stories that they tell are part of the utopian tradition, representing dreams of and desires for a better life and for order and unity that can be read either as tragedy or farce (Sargent 1994: 1). Furthermore, in agreement with Bakhtin, Sargent (1994: 10) and Gardiner (1992) claim that festive, peoples’ carnivals last for limited

periods of time only and are examples of topsy-turvy utopian worlds, of a temporary return to common roots, unity and egalitarianism.

Through the comparative analysis of Mamin's *Okno* and Pérez's *La vida*, I shall provide further confirmation that periods of transition (represented by 'carnivals of transition' or 'the carnivalesque sense of the world') are indeed fleeting periods of popular utopian carnival, of a temporary, upside-down world gone mad wherein all hierarchies are reversed (in a state of flux and ambivalent, equal standing). Through the analysis of these final two films I shall complete my presentation of the material aiming to prove in this study that the carnivalesque mode (in itself a transgressive, satiric and self-conscious, self-reflexive parodic inversion) is the instrumental cinematic mode for depicting and exploring cycles of hope and failure, and reflecting the shifts in attitude to a particular (utopian) social model.

Since the mid 1990s it has become apparent that the collapse of really existing socialism was actually triggered by the conflicting effects of globalization rather than by socialism's internal contradictions. On the one hand, the ongoing process of globalization has caused a transition to a unifying global free market, provoking, on the other hand, economic and social restructuring on a global scale. These changes have prompted mass migration and greater geographic disjunctions, including further national, ethnic or other identity fragmentations. The common, dominant topics in Cuba and early post-Soviet Russia in this period were those of migration to the First World, the need for national reconciliation and revival, and changes in foundational identity myths. The representation of these topics will be discussed in Chapters Ten and Eleven through the contextual analysis of *Okno* and *La vida* respectively, followed by the comparison of the two films in Chapter Twelve.

According to Susan Hayward's entry on fantastic film, fantasy is an expression of our unconscious: '[Fantastic] films most readily reflect areas we repress or suppress – namely, the realms of our unconscious and the world of our dreams'. As works of fantasy, *Okno* and *La vida* 'act metonymically as enunciators of dominant ideology and social myths' (Hayward 2000: 108). The main principle in both films seems to be whatever is 'threatened' in the dream, 'the threat must be removed' (Hayward 2000:109). Hayward comments further that according to Lacan, fantasy 'is inextricably linked with desire, which [...] is located in the Imaginary' or the unconscious (Hayward 2000:109). Since the appearance of Laplanche and Pontalis's seminal essay on fantasy as a *mise-en-*

*scène* of desire, it has been widely accepted that fantasy is the conscious articulation of desire through either images or stories (Laplanche & Pontalis in Burgin 1986: 28; Donald 1989: 20 & 138-44; Hayward 2000: 109). As claimed by Jackson, ‘fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real’ (1981: 20). In other words, however distorted, condensed and mystifying a fantasy may appear to be, it is always based on something real.

Therefore, just like dreams, fantastic narratives are ambivalent and founded on contradictions. Echoing Bakhtinian terminology, Jackson claims that ‘fantasy is “dialogical”, [thus] interrogating single or unitary ways of seeing’ (1981: 36). Another important suggestion by Jackson is that:

The movement of fantastic narrative is one of *metonymical* rather than of *metaphorical* process: one object does not *stand for* another, but literally becomes that other, slides into it, metamorphosing from one shape to another in a permanent flux and instability. (1981: 41-2)

This is manifested in the examples of the ‘window’ in *Okno* turning into an enormous wall at the end of the film and ‘the orphanage’ being a symbol of the absent dissidents in *La vida*, not to mention the dreams of falling in love with foreigners in both *Okno* and *La vida*.

In the case of *Okno* and *La vida* in particular, it is highly significant that these two films from such different countries utilize a similar fantasy / dream formula, that of the ‘rejection of exile’ even after a meaningful relationship with a female foreigner from the developed world. The structure of the fantasy even follows a similar pattern: the foreigner is a female, whilst the main protagonist is a male; in addition both females (Chrissy and Nicole) are kindred spirits of the main protagonists (Elpidio and Nikolai respectively), and therefore understand and approve of their difficult decisions to stay in their native lands instead of pursuing the possibility of private happiness abroad. Chrissy possesses the gift of unconditional love; she is fertile, has access to the wisdom of the world (through proverbs from around the world), and the ability to move through sea and air. Although this is clearly an idealized version of the developed world, in the end she is rejected, just like the French artist Nicole in *Okno*. In both films the main protagonists are torn between their sense of duty and their desires. Eventually, the wishful dream / desire is dealt with by being either controlled or repressed; yet in both films the original desire returns at the end and only the censure and full prohibition of the law (represented in the

pawns of destiny in *La vida* and the gigantic wall in *Okno*) can stop the powerful pull to the First World. Hence law is restored and reality triumphs over the escapist, comforting flight of fantasy. For this reason the films were accused of being insufficiently patriotic, uncomfortable viewing.

The combination of fantasy, mixed with grotesque realism, carnivalesque excess and farce in both films signals their critical dystopian, somewhat conflicting urges – from subversion and transgression of the official law to a temporary release and escape from dystopian reality. In *La vida*, for example, the formula for happiness is found only in the year 2020, and with questionable results; whilst in *Okno* the digging of a hole through the imposing, monstrous wall is a hopeless task for anyone else to accept, except, perhaps, the Russians.

## CHAPTER TEN: THE ART OF REPRESENTING TRANSITION. MAMIN'S *OKNO V PARIZH / WINDOW TO PARIS* (1993)

### 10.1 *Okno* as a Transitional Comedy Film:

In 1991, in post-Soviet Russia, audiences and critics alike were protesting against the *chernukha* trend's extreme negativity and continuous domination. Many, for example, turned for entertainment instead to Latin American soap operas (*telenovelas*), shown in abundance on national TV at the time, as they offered a more positive outlook on life (see Beumers 1999: 1).<sup>135</sup> There were appeals for hybrid, commercially orientated films, which combined both entertaining and intellectual values (see George Faraday 2000: 178-79; also Sergei Selianov in Beumers 1999: 46). According to Faraday, in the early 1990s these appeals resulted in a move away from *chernukha* and towards active attempts for a national revival (2000: 1959). (Daniil Dondurei, chief editor of *Iskusstvo Kino*, for example, pleaded for the creation of a 'national mythology' and a 'positive national hero', Faraday 2000: 179). Faraday labelled this the *national popular* cinema movement (2000: 159, 179), and the films generally as *messianic populist* as they offered a moral message in a form accessible to the public (2000: 181).

One such national popular film is Mamin's 1993 *Okno v Parizh*. This film is representative of the popular topic, at the time, of *exile rejection* (Faraday 2000: 183). Other examples include Vladimir Khotinenko's *Patrioticheskaia komedia / A Patriotic Comedy* (1992), and Shakhnazarov's *Amerikanskaia doch' / American Daughter* (1995). A common theme in all these films is the rejection of an offer to live in the West because of a strong sense of connection to and responsibility towards mother Russia (a rather moralistic, patriotic and didactic message, emphasizing that this is the right thing to do). Another element in the creation of more commercially appealing cinema was the appropriation of Hollywood's myth-making genre cinema (see Dondurei in Beumers 1999: 48).

Mamin's *Okno*, for example, represents a not very successful attempt to search for more positive topics and heroes with the help of the romantic comedy genre. However,

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<sup>135</sup> Viewers' insistence that Latin American soaps are 'just like real life' was mocked by Mamin in his spoof of a Mexican mini-series *Sancho s rancho / Sancho from the Rancho*, part of his entertainment programme for television 'Hhameleon / Chameleon', first shown in 1997 (see Larisa Vadimova Volodimerova 2004).

Mamin's satiric genius always seems to take over despite his best 'patriotic' intentions, and the film, yet again, ends up as a parody of Peter the Great's imperial myth as well as Russian stereotypes of the West.<sup>136</sup> There are also still some strong *chernukha* elements in *Okno*, for example, the representation of St Petersburg as a dark dystopian place at the edges of Europe in comparison to Paris – the City of Light – right at the centre of European civilization (and the epitome of a consumer paradise for Russians crazed with the desire for Western goods). The title of Larisa Maliukova's 2005 article, which translates as 'How the Window to Paris Has Been Boarded Up', implies that satire (in effect since 1993) has once more become an unwelcome guest on the post-Soviet screens (2005: 1-5). Prokhorov also reaches the conclusion that whilst the satirization of Russia as a supreme messianic empire may no longer be taboo in today's Russia, it is still a delicate matter (2008: 114).

The fall of the Soviet empire certainly forced a rethinking of Russian identity. However, the million dollar question, so to speak, was "on which historical foundations should it [Russian identity] be built?", with the choice between "empire" and "nation" being far from a clear cut' (Sakwa 2002: 262). Mamin's *Okno v Parizh* continued the 'national dialogue' on Russian identity as Eurasian or semi-European, attempting to explain the country's present situation through its past as a backwater empire on the periphery of Europe, which, for long periods in its history, was cut off from European civilization and thus formed a somewhat quasi-Asiatic identity prone to despotism. The film, made during the dark period of drastic market reforms, can be read as pessimistically concluding that the era of Westernization in Russia is going to be a long, contradictory and hard process rather than a matter of a short period of austerity measures. This is why at the end of the film the trope of the 'window to Paris', which for a limited period of time provides the inhabitants of a St Petersburg communal flat with access to Parisian markets and streets, turns into an enormous imposing wall. As well as having other meanings, the window is a metaphor for a miraculous shortcut to prosperity and, without doubt, an ironic reference to Boris Nikolaevich El'tsin's (popularly known as Yeltsin) Shock therapy reforms.

The increased tension between global and local / national cultures did not help the situation. For the Russians, shell-shocked by the collapse of the union, El'tsin's

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<sup>136</sup> See Mamin's interview with Maliukova, 2005.

government's draconian economic reforms were beginning to 'rock the boat', yet again testing the limits of the alleged ability of Russians to endure anything. Therefore, Yeltsin was often forced to make concessions to the 'populists', for whom Russian identity was bound up with notions of a strong state and great-power status ambitions (Sakwa 2002: 440). Indeed, as argued by Sakwa, 'Russia's history since the Mongol conquest has been marked by a dialectic between external security and internal repression' (2002: 441), an historical fact emphasized in *Gorod Zero*, *Bakenbardy* and *Okno v Parizh*.

In *Okno*, Mamin turns the St Peterburg's myth (of Peter the Great's window to the West) into a literal metaphor, used to parody Russia's past chain of failed attempts to reform and modernize. Thus he links the reasons for Russians' contradictory attitudes towards the West to their imperial consciousness, which tends to favour strong autocratic governments rather than Western style democracies. Mamin continues his discussion of identity as a socio-political construct by comparing Russian with Western cultural trends, and by demythologizing dominant cultural stereotypes and perceptions.

Prokhorov observes that Mamin's films from the period 1986-1993 use carnivalesque and dystopian discourses in a dialogue with the St Petersburg myth of Russian culture (Prokhorov 2008: 102), expanding on Anna Lawton's earlier claims (1992: 216). Lawton has argued that in his satires Mamin demonstrates an affinity with grotesque carnival, which since Medvedkin's *Happiness* has been considered an unsuitable and inadmissible mode for mass consumption by the Soviet censors owing to its irreverent effect, destabilizing tendency, and subversion of the social order (1992: 216). Mamin mocks official iconography through its visual linking to the grotesque strata of the lower body, to communal heroes, and to anarchic mobs. The structure of his films is fragmented and episodic, and his style is an explosive, comic mix of eccentricity, farce and grotesque realism that mercilessly exposes the absurdities of Soviet and post-Soviet everyday life. His humour is irreverent and derisive of both old and new utopian myths, from those of bureaucratic socialism and *perestroika* to that of the transition to a market economy. He also ridicules El'tsin's reforms and Russia's westernization, linking these to previous foundational Russian myths (such as Peter the Great's imperial myth and Russia's modernization, as well as those of Russia's messianic role and, supposedly, more spiritual way of life).

As mentioned earlier, Mamin mocks the fake patriotism of Soviet and post-Soviet bureaucrats and also that of the Russian intelligentsia. As noted by Prokhorov, in

*Bakenbardy* and particularly *Okno*, the St Petersburg myth becomes the centre of the films ‘as the setting of two failed utopias: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union’ (Prokhorov 2008: 102). The tone in these two films is unequivocally dystopian. In *Okno*, Mamin demonstrates, yet again, that the alleged new builders of post-Soviet Russia are the same old incompetent, corrupt bureaucrats that caused the failure of the Soviet empire. *Okno* continues Mamin’s discussion of the dangers of resurgent nationalism in Russia, and satirizes the re-emerging *meshchanstvo* (petite bourgeoisie) in post-Soviet Russia.

The film is also an example of the transition from state-sponsored film to the next stage of film as commercial entertainment in the new era of transnational co-productions in the 1990s. In the 1990s, the economically ruined former socialist countries (including Cuba) were no longer able to support the creation of new films. This prompted internationally renowned directors (usually auteurs) to seek investment from abroad. Winning awards at prestigious festivals became a lifeline for many Eastern European and Latin American filmmakers; a way to become noticed and attract sponsors or promote their countries’ cultural specificities abroad. As noted by Iordanova in her recent investigations of the Film Festival Circuits, these festivals became an alternative forum for film distribution and finding markets, and important places for cultural exchange (2009: 24).

For example, *Okno* was co-produced with the help of a French company, SODAPERAGA. In interview with Maliukova in 2005, Mamin discusses some of the constraints involved in commercial filmmaking, complaining this time of a different kind of censorship: the commercial (2005: 1-5). *Okno* was the most popular comedy of 1993, yet Mamin could not find sponsors for another comedy for five long years (Maliukova 2005: 3). The director comments that interest in ‘serious humour’ is now absent, whereas paradoxically, even during totalitarian times, it was possible to occasionally slip through the cracks of the system’s censorship (Maliukova 2005: 2). In contrast, thanks to the demands of commercialized mass culture, satire has become toothless if not completely dead (in Maliukova 2005: 1& 3). However, the truth is that Mamin’s inability to tame his satiric muse and adjust to the official appeal for more entertaining films on the subject of national reconciliation in the mid 1990s, in effect, caused the waning of his popularity and marked the end of the road for post-Soviet satire.

*Okno* is a carnivalesque, irreverent spoof of Peter the Great's dream of a modern, westernized Russia; however, alongside the mocking and derisive laughter there are also certain elements of didactic and dystopian satire apparent, exposing the reasons for the failure of both the imperial and Soviet myths of a modernized Russia which could one day overtake the West. Thus, Mamin implies that the same failure could also result from El'tsin's reforms and the nationalists' ambitions to eventually rival the West. Mamin examines the Russian love / hate relationship with the West, a relationship that is bordering on obsession. Peter the Great's founding of St Petersburg as his window to the West is probably the greatest expression and culmination of the burning Russian ambition to outdo its Western neighbours. However, it is also an example of autocratic behaviour, of 'showing off' and the need to demonstrate that the Russian tsar is greater than the greatest ever French King, Louis XIV. Mamin appears to think that one of the reasons for such conflicting attitudes towards the West is Russia's complex about itself as a backwater empire with a confused Eurasian – half Asian, half European – identity; thus, Russia is constantly trying to compete with the West in order to be accepted as its equal. This explains centuries of mutual hostilities and rivalry, and consecutive periods of warming up or freezing relations with the West.

The film employs to hilarious effect a whole range of carnivalesque comic strategies and mixing of genres – from farce and parody to biting satire; and from fantasy to romance and fairytale. Through the mixture of different forms of carnival – the official versus the peoples' carnival – Mamin unmasks the hypocrisy of the authorities, who, whilst they might have changed their colours, do not alter their methods or attitudes. This time they have fully embraced the negative sides of capitalism, demonstrating an insatiable appetite for personal enrichment and Western consumer goods. Thus Mamin demythologizes the Russians' own perceptions of themselves as being more spiritual than pragmatic Westerners, representing them as consumer junkies who have exchanged their former love of culture and art for Western materialism and consumerism. Now, instead of former tsars, great nineteenth-century Russian writers or famous communists, on the walls of the business school where Nikolai Chizhov (representing the Russian intelligentsia) teaches aesthetics are hanging pictures of different world currencies; and in the school corridors there are billboards saying 'Time is Money', demonstrating the formal, lip-service adoption of Western values. One of the funniest examples of the Russian craze for Western goods is the theft of a French car from the streets of Paris by

Gorokhov (representative of the Russian *meshchanstvo*), not because he wants to drive it but in order to hang it in one of the rooms of a St Petersburg's communal flat. Thus, from a means of transport he turns the car into an object of fetish and adulation.

Mamin also shows the West not as a cradle of Enlightenment, of Western ideals, and civilization through the eyes of the Russians, but as the land of plenty, that is, a consumer paradise where unscrupulous Russian speculators and criminals can profiteer and thrive and where bourgeois mercantilism and decadence suffocate true art and culture. Like *Plaff*, *Okno* employs the same kind of postmodern parody in order to expose foundational nationalist messianic myths as socio-political, performative constructs.

## 10.2 The Art of Representing Transition

In *Okno* Mamin's window only opens for about fourteen days every twenty to thirty years. This opening signals a time of festivity and carnival and thus temporary egalitarianism, when the world order is inverted and the lunatics take over the asylum, the fools become kings, and there is no distinction between high (official) and low (popular) culture. From the very first scene this is the exact sensation conveyed by *Okno*. People queuing for vodka become an angry mob marching down a street with the sign: 'Attention, reconstruction works ahead!' – an ingenious visual summary of *perestroika* and the beginning of the Russian transition to a market economy. Mamin represents this Russian transition as a carnivalesque circus, a time of madness, anarchy, excess and absurdity.

Transition, just like Bakhtin's description of carnival (1968: 10), signals change; a world in flux and negotiation between the old and the new in a process of constant becoming (hence the topic of carnivals of transition). According to Bakhtin, carnival and the market place are 'the second [more democratic] life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance' (1968: 9), and this is just what happens in *Okno*. Real carnivals, however, often end in ugly clashes and violence, just like the time of transition, making the carnivalesque strategies of grotesque realism employed by Mamin most pertinent. In his seminal work *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin claims that 'Carnival celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world – the new year, the new spring, the new kingdom. The old world that has been destroyed is offered together with the new world and is represented with it

as the dying part of the dual body' (1968: 410). This is why the carnivalesque images are often grotesque, vulgar and repulsive. In Gorokhov's *komunalka* / communal flat, there is an incongruous community, a microcosm of Russia. Here we find sitting next to each other a former party member (a Gorbachev look-alike) and a dissident (a John Lennon like-alike), symbolically representing the old and the new in flux and grotesque, disharmonious unity.

The ideological shift is symbolically emphasized by the diminishing role of the Russian intelligentsia, personified by Nikolai, the talented, idealistic music teacher and composer who ends up unemployable in both Russia and the West. The film shows in no uncertain terms that the new leader of the emerging community is the (anti) hero of transition, the trickster Gorokhov, and the future belongs to the likes of this character. He is a grotesque version of Ostap Bender, the charismatic (anti) hero of Lenin's NEP and the transition to socialism, immortalized by Il'f and Petrov. As soon as he finds himself in the Parisian markets Gorokhov starts trading Soviet, *perestroika* and *glasnost* memorabilia for Western currency, thus devaluing them as a cheap political kitsch. He is streetwise, cunning and effective in achieving his goals. Yet, when compared to Bender, Gorokhov is more unscrupulous, unrefined and greedy; he is even at times aggressive and violent towards his wife (echoing *chernukha* trends). At other points, however, particularly when his authority has been asserted (for example after he teaches the French artist Nicole a lesson), he can be warm, generous and caring. He is shrewd, a good strategist, and, without doubt, a great organizer, just like Ostap. Furthermore, despite being the self-appointed head of the little community, his friends seem to accept him as their natural leader. He might not be as intelligent as Nikolai but is resourceful and able to outwit the Western tricksters at their own game. He is hypocritical in his attitudes towards the West and demonstrates a rather sickening, insatiable hunger for Western goods. Thus he symbolizes the mentality and attitudes of the Russian *meshchanstvo* (petit bourgeoisie).

The window which leads to Paris is a fantastic element in the film; an ambiguous and complex master metaphor situated on the border between wishful thinking, daydreaming and nightmarish reality, yet, above all, a literal parody of Peter the Great's desire to make St Petersburg his window to the West. The window stands for the opening up of Russia to the West; it is a metaphor for the journey and the changes (physical, imaginary and symbolic) that the characters and the country have to undergo (through the refraction of

space). It is also a real and rare ‘window of opportunity’. On the other hand, there is a more sinister allusion drawn by this window, to a ‘black hole’ through which thousands of Russian emigrants left the country (484,000 in 1993 alone, the year of the film’s production). Amongst them were many leading ‘brains’, as it was mainly scientists and artists that emigrated to the West.<sup>137</sup>

### 10.3 Synopsis, Style, Tropes and Metaphors

As noted by Catherine Danks, at the time for many Russians the collapse of the Soviet Union was seen as the ‘loss of an empire that over centuries and in various forms had been a vital component of Russian identity’ (2001: 31). *Okno* shows how the transition’s upheaval and the disintegration of structures once accepted as stable were perceived by many Russians, from all walks of life, as a direct threat to the integrity of their country, to their way of life and cultural uniqueness. Mamin makes some perceptive observations about the perils of a blind imitation of the West, about the dangerous Russian tendency to try to compete with and outdo the West, and also scrutinizes Russians’ own myth of themselves and the West.

On the surface, *Okno* is a fantastic adventure comedy; a story of exploration, adventure and romance in ‘the land of plenty’ as represented by Paris, the famous ‘City of Light’ and Love, notorious for its decadence, and the centre of Western civilization. Owing to the changes in Russia, Nikolai Nikolaevich Chizhov, a talented musician and intellectual, finds himself homeless and on the brink of losing his job as a teacher of aesthetics at a business school. He is housed in a communal flat, in a room which used to belong to an old lady who has disappeared, presumed dead. Nikolai joins the Gorokhovs and their friends for a family celebration which turns into a carnivalesque, excessive feast of drinking and the disharmonious playing of brass instruments.

Just as in Mamin’s earlier *Fontan*, the company represents a communal microcosm of Russia. After senseless vodka drinking and singing all fall asleep, when the old lady suddenly reappears, searching for her pet, a black cat called Maksik. After her departure the men sober up, mystified and intrigued by the event. One of them discovers a window behind a wardrobe that leads to a Parisian roof. This window allows them to pay a visit to

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<sup>137</sup> Cited in *International Migration Bulletin* no.6, published by the United Nations in Geneva, May 1995.

Paris whenever they choose. Soon they find out that the window is closing and will not be reopening for another twenty years. This prompts Nikolai to squat on the Parisian roof, whilst the Gorokhovs ‘clean’ the Parisian streets of anything that they can lay their hands on, including motorbikes and a car. Gorokhov’s wife, Vera, reproaches Nikolai for his decision to defect, warning him that life amongst strangers is not that easy.

However, the window does not close for another few days, giving Nikolai the opportunity to reconsider. Eventually, he is put off by the decadence of Paris. He turns down a job as a conductor in a lavish Parisian sex club when he finds he has to perform ‘*sans pantalons*’. Unlike his émigré friend, a virtuoso violinist turned clown for the amusement of the profane *clientele* of a French restaurant, Nikolai finds such compromises unacceptable. However, Nikolai falls in love with a French artist, the taxidermist Nicole. He rescues her from a St Petersburg police station, where she has ended up after an escalating conflict with the Gorokhovs because of their constant invasions of her privacy. Predictably, old enemies become friends and there is a romance between the two artists, Nikolai and Nicole. When the time comes though Nikolai goes back to St Petersburg, as he feels that it is his duty to be a good example to his former pupils, who symbolically represent the future of Russia. Once in Paris, the pupils, rather pragmatically and most unpatriotically, decide to stay in the land of plenty rather than to go back to dismal St Petersburg. When Nikolai’s moralistic didactics fail to persuade them otherwise, he resorts to his magic flute, the power of which they are unable to resist, and with the help of Nicole manages to lure them home.

Some time later, Nikolai, Gorokhov and company are performing together on the market square during a major celebration in St Petersburg (most likely marking the 12<sup>th</sup> of June, Russia’s new national day, as we see fire works going up in a blue sky which is only the case during St Petersburg’s *belye nochi* / white nights). Because of St Petersburg’s latitude and hence its long summer days (and white nights), this is a time of fiesta, carnival and festivity. Suddenly, Nikolai spots Maksik in the crowd. This alerts him that the window is close by. He follows the cat, which leads him to a small hole in an enormous wall. Nikolai is happy to hear the sounds of Paris behind the wall. In no time Gorokhov and company are on the job, digging a larger hole in the wall, which, once shown in perspective, seems enormous and overbearing.

Mamin uses St Petersburg’s foundational myth to discuss the failure of Russia’s previous reformers to modernize and westernize the country, thus also questioning the

wisdom of El'tsin's reformers who were then in power. The filmmaker shows St Petersburg in bleak, *chernukha* style, through the perspective of a foreigner, Nicole, instead of displaying, as is customary, its architectural, theatrical, and somewhat contrived imperial splendour. Mamin represents the city as a dismal, claustrophobic, God-forsaken place at the edges of Europe, in the midst of Russia's violent political and social turmoil. Therefore, the trope of the window as a magic portal to Paris, the centre of Enlightenment and Western civilization, allows Mamin to demonstrate the stark contrast between the two cities (and also between Russia and France and the East and the West at the time): Paris, the City of Light (or Enlightenment and progress) is right in the centre of Europe, whereas St Petersburg is its exact opposite — it is a place of darkness (in the literal and symbolic sense of the word), uncivilized and backward. As astutely observed by Prokhorov, while Paris stands for the consumer paradise of the West, St Petersburg represents the ruins of the Soviet utopia (2008: 109). As noted by Prokhorov, 'the two worlds function as mutual comic doubles' (1998: 110), allowing for an ironic juxtaposition between Russia and the West. Immediately, with a Russian artist called Nikolai, a male, and his French counterpart, Nicole, a female, the stage is set for hilarious cultural clashes, prejudices and stereotypes, but also for shared values, at least amongst the two kindred artistic souls. Of course, there is also a mutual attraction between supposed opposites. Russia is symbolized by a male, albeit a spiritually refined one, an artist and intellectual; whilst France (the West) is represented by a beautiful woman, also an artist (and supposedly, a sensitive soul). However, the fact that she is making a good living as a taxidermist, and her enquiry about the installation of an enormous, sinister, prohibitive, electric fence, implies that she is not as fragile, defenceless or sensitive as one may first think. In a way, her idea for such an enormous fence is echoed by the transformation of the window into a wall (more sinister than the Berlin wall) at the end of the film.

Mamin's satirical target in *Okno* is the dangerous, blind trust in myths, clichés and identity stereotypes. Therefore, Nicole's point of view is somewhat compromised. After all, she is wasting her artistic talent as a taxidermist, stuffing the dead pets of pretentious and pathetic bourgeois women. Her art also represents the symbolic death of true art and spirituality in the West, destroyed by the commercialism and decadence of mass culture, indicating a preoccupation with the spiritual health of the new Russian society. Unlike Nicole or Nikolai's friend (the virtuoso violinist Russian émigré turned clown), Nikolai

refuses to make any compromises when it comes to art. He will not even consider conducting Mozart's *Requiem* without trousers. He also refuses to comply with the headmistress of the business school's requirements; therefore, despite his extraordinary talents, Nikolai becomes unemployable in both countries because of his uncompromising convictions.

The westernization and commercialization of Russian values are satirized by the foreign currency bills hanging in the headmaster's office, and slogans such as 'Money does not Stink!'. The commercialization of Russia's cultural values is represented by the piano in the communal flat, completely stuffed with provisions by the greedy Gorokhov clan (who behave mostly like a primitive, barbarian tribe). Throughout the film, Mamin suggests that 'old habits die hard': this time round the same inept authorities are in charge of the westernization and democratization. Thus, through Nikolai, Mamin expresses his own verdict: 'Before, you were teaching communism, now you are teaching capitalism with the same catastrophic results: cruelty, ignorance and thievery'.

The enormous wall which has replaced the window can be seen as a symbolic visual representation of the enormity of what has separated Russia from the West (at least, at the time). It is an expressive visual metaphor of all the historic, economic and cultural divides that separated Russia from Europe. It has been noted by Beumers (1999), Faraday (2000) and Yana Hashamova (2007), amongst others, that *Okno*'s main focus is Russia's struggle to redefine its place and identity in a new global world, through a re-evaluation of its conflicting relationship with the West. Through the complex, multilayered trope of the 'window to Paris', Mamin explores Russia's conflicting attitudes to change and to the West. In the process, the director exposes the pitfalls of identity politics. Again, just as in his previous three films – *Neptune's Feast*, *Fontan* and *Bakenbardy* – Mamin's satirical whip castigates absurd Russian patriotism, nationalism and paranoia. Through the character of the impoverished but proud and patriotic Russian intellectual Nikolai, Mamin symbolically demonstrates contradictory Russian impulses: on the one hand, Nikolai pleads to the younger generation not to leave Russia, whilst on the other he himself is unable to conceal or control his own attraction towards the West.

In *Fantasy and the Cinema*, James Donald asserts that films are a 'public form of fantasy' (1989: 139) that express collective desires. This is even more apparent in fantastic films, which represent unconscious, repressed desires and fears (Donald 1989: 138). I argue that *Okno* projects the preoccupation of many Russians with the uncertainty

of their country and their own private situation in a new global world at the time. Thus, *Okno*'s storyline exposes Russia's dreams (represented through the character of Nikolai Chizhov) for an impossible happiness – of saving, and winning over the West (symbolized by Nicole). Nikolai's decision to return to St Petersburg in effect rejects an unconscious collective dream for personal happiness with a Westerner. This complex fantasy reflects the injured pride of a nation which cannot accept its diminished role in European affairs, expressing the acute desire of many Russians to be treated as equals and not as disciples of the West. The problem is that for many years the relationship of Russia with the West has been one of simultaneous love and hate, reflecting the constant internal polemics (amongst Russians) on the subject of adopting or opposing Western ideas. As noted by Iver Neumann (1996: 194) and Hashamova (2007: 19-22), over the years the West has provided the backdrop against which the 'dialogical nature' of Russian identity has been formed. Thus, just like many great Russian writers and thinkers before him, Mamin is using the West as a screen on which to project, compare, discuss and re-evaluate Russian identity myths and cultural stereotypes.

The unfolding of *Okno*'s storyline reveals a hidden, repressed desire of finding happiness in the West (a desire that returns to haunt Nikolai); nevertheless, it also develops defence mechanisms against threats, perceived by the collective unconscious, of national and cultural annihilation.<sup>138</sup> For example, many of the characters express strong criticism of the West and profess loyalty to their motherland; yet there is inconsistency, not only in Nikolai's but also in their collective behaviour as a group. Russians often claim that they are more spiritual than pragmatic Westerners; however, they seem to be only too ready to exchange their souls for Western goods, clothes and food (Gorokhov is amongst the biggest hypocrites, for example). This is most apparent at the end of the film, when all the characters show determination to regain access to Paris, whatever the costs. It is possible to read this as another expression of 'the return of the repressed', reflecting correctly what was on everybody's mind at the time: 'to see Paris and die'.

One of the many Russian cultural myths and stereotypes mocked here is the idea that in Russia individual needs are secondary to the needs of the community. Mamin does this through parodic inversion of this Russian claim: he shows Russians not as a community but as a deeply divided mob consisting of opposing ideological groups, all claiming to be

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<sup>138</sup> This is the subject of Hashamova's book entitled *Pride and Panic* 2007: 53 & 58.

the next saviours of mother Russia; this is what Nicole witnesses when in St Petersburg. The best example of this, however, is Gorokhov and company, who demonstrate complete disregard for Nicole's right to privacy. Mamin suggests that the above myth is a poor excuse for such behaviour, only helping to reinforce Western stereotypes of the Russians as ill-mannered, backward barbarians with a herd mentality. The Gorokhoffs literally treat Nicole's Parisian flat as an extension of their Petersburg's communal flat. When provoked, however, Nicole quickly resorts to shouting back insults and obscenities in Russian, which exposes the thin layer of her civilized demeanour and reveals her supposedly good manners as a surface social construct and mere performance. Soon, however, she realizes that not all Russians are the same. Thus the film constantly questions and exposes the constructed nature of cultural and identity myths, and warns against the danger of cultural prejudices and stereotypes. Thus most of the characters, depending on the circumstances, are made up of both good and bad, just as in real life.

#### **10.4 Representing Identity. Globalization and its Discontents**

Manuel Castells observes that 'our world, and our lives, have been shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity' (2004: 1). In some regions, the destruction of traditional ways of life by globalization has had a catastrophic, destabilizing effect on communities, plunging them into chaos and political unrest. This has fostered a deep disillusionment with globalization, and the formation of resistance to its forces of alleged economic and cultural 'genocide'. As a rule, this is signalled by appeals for a return to origins and by accentuating the importance of identity and difference.

In his 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation', Stuart Hall insists that identity is never 'an already accomplished historical fact' which is then represented in cinematic discourse: 'we should think instead of identity as "production", which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation' (Hall 2000: 704). Thinking along those lines then, particularly in art and film, identity is firstly a matter of enunciation and positioning; then it is in a process of becoming (constant construction, deconstruction or reconstruction); and, last but not least, identity is also a form (or style) of representation and performance.

One of the main topics of *Okno* is that of the new, emerging Russian identity in a globalized world, an environment that threatens traditional values. The film also examines the related issue of the acute danger of constructing new identities on the ashes of an old, allegedly compromised historical model. Such an example is the messianic myth of Russia as the Third Rome and a guardian of Christianity<sup>139</sup> – the saviour of Europe from the Mongols – a myth which in *Okno* is used by Gorokhov as a justification for his relentless looting on the streets of Paris. Like Shakhnazarov before him with *Gorod Zero*, Mamin exposes such essentialist myths as authoritarian imperial constructs, raising questions about the possibility of a future democratic Russia.

The film imaginatively represents the ideological vacuum resulting after seventy years of socialism, and the eruption of anger and frustration, the rocketing crime rate and political turmoil in Russia. The whole epoch is summarized in a scene of shocking, *chernukha* style violence: the senseless, vicious outburst of a man who takes all his frustration and anger on a telephone box; a scene witnessed by the already terrified Nicole.

As noted earlier, *Okno* satirizes the rapid commercialization of Russian life and its value system, and with this the subsequent threats of cultural impoverishment and rampant nationalism. The focus becomes the search for a new Russian identity, born out of the chaos and contradictions of the transitional period, when the dying old and the nascent new co-exist in the shape of a grotesque, hybrid body. Through the incongruent coupling of two opposites – the impractical, idealistic Nikolai and the greedy swindler Gorokhov – Mamin contrasts two extreme, opposing models of Russianness. Nikolai represents the formerly idolized Russian intelligentsia: he is a typical non-materialist, a humanist, a man of great talent, intelligence, spirituality, refinement and culture (arguably standing for Russian high culture). Gorokhov, on the other hand, is the epitome of the previously vilified *meshchanstvo*: he is selfish, greedy, and a bit of a philistine; yet he is also resourceful and not completely devoid of vision and leadership. Most importantly, in his own peculiar way, he loves his mother Russia (presumably, he symbolizes popular culture). Because of the murky times of transition and nascent capitalism, when everything seems to come down to the survival of the fittest, the

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<sup>139</sup> For a fascinating discussion on the subject, see Peter Duncan 2000. *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism and After*.

idealistic impractical Nikolai loses his symbolic role of being a spiritual guide to the nation. Gorokhov, on the other hand, as an opportunist, born survivor and chameleon (it is indicated that he has been in and out of the Communist party at his own convenience) thrives in such conditions, emerging as a force to be reckoned with and a natural leader. Their incongruous coupling represents the contradictions of the period and in Russian identity: a crazy mixture of opposing values and beliefs represented in an ambiguous, dialogical flux, suspended somewhere in between high and low culture, producing many memorable, lively comical situations. Despite their farcical, Guignolesque stereotyping, however, the characters have very real, endearing idiosyncrasies and appeal.

Different characters respond differently to the wonders of the West: some with idealization, admiration and excitement (Nikolai); others with envy and hypocritical criticism of its wastefulness (Gorokhov), treating it as an easy prey. The old lady, however, only regrets she did not leave long ago in her youth. She symbolizes those who have lost faith in the ‘grandiose’ Russian social experiments, and obviously does not believe that the country could ever be a democracy, particularly if ruled by brutes and philistines. She thinks that such repugnant profiteers like the Gorokhov clan ‘should not be allowed abroad to destroy another great country’. The implication is that in one form or another the likes of Gorokhov have always been in a position of influence and power in Russia – that the real power has always been in the hands of unscrupulous opportunists. If it were not for his old-fashioned sense of duty, Nikolai would have stayed in Paris, thus he is also a bit of a hypocrite himself. Gorokhov, on the other hand, sees Paris as an easy target and endless opportunity for enrichment. Nevertheless, he cannot imagine life without Russia. Predictably, the younger generation finds it easier to internalize the more pragmatic and materialistic Western values. On the other hand, the French taxidermist could never consider a life in Russia, whilst Nikolai’s friend, the Russian émigré who was so nostalgic for the old times in the poor but spiritual Russia, when given the opportunity to go back finds he no longer has the stomach for it. In other words, Mamin’s satire cuts both ways, and no one is spared from criticism.

As noted earlier, Mamin humours the Russian tendency to try to outdo the West; hence the emerging *new* Russian Gorokhov (based on the old, familiar model of the Russian *meshchanstvo*) is not simply a *pícaro* (rogue) but also a master swindler. Thus Mamin emphasizes that Russians are quick learners; however, they always first internalize the worst that comes from the West such as greed, commercialism, violence

and crime, rather than ideas of a democratic, civil society. He seems to long for a new Russia that has preserved its communal values but also respects the rights of the individual.

As noted by Prokhorov, light and electricity are important symbols of Enlightenment ideas, modernization, and westernization in Mamin's carnivalesque world (2008: 103). Thus, in *Fontan*, the members of the tenement are deprived of more than just heat and electricity. In *Bakenbardy*, again, the members of the Pushkin club illuminate the night with torch marches in the name of a new dawn, proclaiming their ambition to become the spiritual leaders of Russia. In both these films, and particularly in *Okno*, on a symbolic level neither ideas nor physical light are able to improve the state of Russian society. Therefore, despite the fact that the film is very funny and greatly entertaining, its conclusions and predictions are pessimistic. In more than one way the film is similar in strategy and style to Tabío's carnivalesque black comedy *Plaff* (which uses parodic inversion of the 'imperfect cinema' canon in order to ridicule Cuban Revolutionary utopian zeal). In *Okno*, through parodic inversions Mamin ridicules different, traditionally idealized, utopian visions of modernity (and its ideas of social and technological progress), and of Russia's and the West's different approaches to modernization.

Thus the metaphor of St Petersburg as Peter the Great's window to the West is used literally, to expose the ideological source of the Russians' imperial consciousness and their semi-European identity, which explains the tendency towards a mob rather than communal mentality and the Russian preference for strong, despotic rulers over Western style democracy. The window is a complex and multifunctional trope that stands for the conflicting urges and longing of Russians to be treated by the West as equals, and, simultaneously, as a symbol of the failure of previous reformers to Westernize and modernize the country.

### **10.5 National Reconciliation and the Late 1990s Post-Soviet Comedy**

It is important to note here that, at the time, there was a movement against the dark nihilistic pessimism of *chernukha* and appeals for national revival, and *Okno* was conceived as Mamin's contribution to this process. In an earlier interview with Horton Mamin mentions his intention to make a film about the dilemma of whether to leave or to

stay in Russia, attempting to convey his belief that leaving at this critical moment for the country is a tragedy (Horton 1993: 155). Faraday argues that some films of the period tended not to deconstruct but to reaffirm Russian identity, placing *Okno* in the category of *national popular* cinema (2000: 159). Even Mamin considers *Okno*, together with *Neptune's Feast*, a film in the style of popular, universal humour (Maliukova 2005: 5). Prokhorov, on the other hand, claims that Mamin's dark, satirical kind of humour puts him closer to the auteurist camp of serious art cinema, as he is trying to promote the values of high art and spirituality through his grotesque comedies (2008: 104). However, Prokhorov is rather disappointed by *Okno's* ending which, according to the critic, is nostalgic about the lost messianic role of the Russian intelligentsia, and thus a bit dogmatic and monologic (2008: 113). Even so, as demonstrated above, the film has so many contextual layers that these provide more than enough evidence for varying, often opposing, readings. Depending upon one's interpretation, accusations can be made of 'insufficient patriotism', utopian nostalgia, or even didactic dogmatism. Most importantly, *Okno* is an outright condemnation of rampant nationalism. As noted earlier, *Okno* also represents Mamin's (not hugely successful) attempt to explore the genre of romantic comedy as a strategy to move away from the dystopian world of *chernukha* and towards a popular kind of entertainment and humour. His satiric talent and strong sense of the absurd in life, however, in my view prevent him from making purely entertaining comedies.

Whilst Mamin was unable to recapture the popular imagination with his attempts to make romantic comedies, others, like Rogozhkin, for example, have been able to reconcile utopian dreams of the Russian imperial past with escape to the magical Russian forest, far from frustrating Russian post-Soviet realities. His series *Osobennosti natsional'noi okhoy / Peculiarities of the National Hunt* (1995), *Osobennosti natsional'noi rybalki / Peculiarities of National Fishing* (1998), and *Osobennosti natsional'noi okhoty v zimnii period / Peculiarities of the National Hunt in Winter Time* (2000) 'are amongst the most commercially and critically successful post-Soviet comedies' (Mesropova in Mesropova & Graham 2008: 6). Rogozhkin's *Peculiarities* series gained widespread acclaim (Beumers 2008: 121) as he was more successful in treating similar topics to Mamin's comedies: Russian's confused collective identity; the Russian love of vodka; and nostalgic attempts to revive some favourite pastimes such as hunting and fishing from the good old imperial days (Prokhorov 2008: 114).

As noted also by Prokhorov, with this series Rogozhkin has managed to reconcile Russia's troubled present with its contradictory past (Prokhorov 2008: 114). The protagonists of the *Peculiarities* series are 'clownish doubles' of their aristocratic ancestors, who escape from the dystopian reality of St Petersburg on fishing or hunting trips into the magical Russian forests (Prokhorov 2008: 114). Thus they represent a profane, carnivalesque comic re-enactment of a glorious utopian past, and a good natured, endearing mockery of some national idiosyncrasies. Beumers describes the characters' absurd behaviour in these comedies as 'alcohol-induced eccentricity', where the protagonists' irrational behaviour is mocked but represented as taking place in a parallel to the real world (2008: 121-28). Rogozhkin's films have been seen by Susan Larsen as examples of 'Russian cinema of reconciliation',<sup>140</sup> so instrumental in the nation's healing process by bringing people together once again and making them laugh at and accept their own excessive tendencies.

Rogozhkin has retained the eccentric style, the world of excess and the lower body from the *chernukha* period, this time using the favourite Russian pastime, drinking, to purely comic effect. His films represent the renewal of hope in the nation's revival, a theme which took over the Russian screen from 1995 in the guise of various differing genres (aside from the comedic) including thrillers, Russian mafia films and horror movies. These in many ways represent the legacy and continuation of the previous dominant dystopian trend of *chernukha* excess.

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<sup>140</sup> See Larsen's article 'In Search of an Audience: The New Russian Cinema of Reconciliation,' 1999: 192-216.

**CHAPTER ELEVEN: FERNANDO PÉREZ AS AN ‘EX-UTOPIAN’ AUTEUR. THE METAMORPHOSIS OF CUBAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND TRANSNATIONAL SHIFTS IN *LA VIDA ES SILBAR* / *LIFE IS TO WISTLE* (1998)<sup>141</sup>**

**11.1 Fernando Pérez as an ‘Ex-Utopian’ Auteur**

The feature debut of Fernando Pérez, *Clandestinos* / *The Freedom Fighters* (1987), is an homage to the militant utopia cause, to all those who have sacrificed their lives in the name of a better society. The film is an almost exact remake of a Bulgarian film called *The Black Angels* (1970), which was very popular in its time and is considered one of the best examples of Bulgarian poetic cinema.<sup>142</sup> However, the film is also a paradigm of the socialist realist canon. Thus, the idealistic ideological stance of *Clandestinos* is rather demagogic, very old-fashioned and totally out of tune with the changes in Eastern Europe and Cuba in the late 1980s. The film is a strange anachronism that was made a year after the beginning of rectification in 1986, therefore one can only suppose that Pérez wanted to remind his compatriots of how and why the Revolutionary process started, and of the numerous young clandestine members, who had died in the name of its ideas.

However, his next film, *Hello Hemingway* (1990) is a considerable improvement in quality and tone. His subsequent films are even more daring; in fact, completely opposite to *Clandestinos*. The idealism of his first film has evaporated. Therefore it can be argued that Pérez’s *Madagascar* (1994) and the subsequent *La vida es silbar* (1998) are the works of an ex-utopian, that is, someone who is rather disillusioned with the failure of the socialist utopian project and who now is closer to an anti-utopian perspective. Unlike *Clandestinos*, Pérez’s 1990s films are almost existential, surreal, dark and pessimistic critical dystopias. Through them the director expresses his doubt that pure happiness is achievable or, indeed, durable. Thus, in *Madagascar* his protagonists deconstruct the official utopia, expose the reasons for its failure, and painfully search for alternatives: for a way out of unbearable isolation and alienation. The Cuban cultural critic Ambrosio Fornet has called the film ‘an X-ray exposure of the prevailing state of soul’ (in Ann Marie Stock 2009: 2), while Stock has deemed it a ‘poignant reflection of Cubans’

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<sup>141</sup> This chapter is a combined augmented version of two previous articles, focusing on different aspects of the film, see Anna Hillman 2006 & 2008.

<sup>142</sup> Pérez has admitted his fondness of the film in various interviews.

reality' (2009: 2). For this reason Pérez was named the foremost Cuban filmmaker of the 1990s (Stock 2009: 3).

In *La vida*, Pérez rejects the utopian impulse of perfection at any cost as one of the biggest limitations and mistakes of socialism as it justifies martyrdom in the name of utopian goals. His uneasiness about hegemonic utopian projects is demonstrated in the film's proposed alternative, allegedly more liberal, future social model for Cuba in the year 2020. This marks a shift in Pérez's position, and an inclination to side now with the anti-utopians. His two critical dystopias, *Madagascar* and *La vida*, were highly acclaimed internationally both by the public and by the critics, but were not always appreciated by Cuban audiences or the authorities. Nevertheless, the pictures established his reputation as the most important contemporary Cuban filmmaker.

Here, I shall demonstrate that Pérez's *La vida* is a visual re-evaluation of different nationalist myths, symbols and metaphors. In doing so it opens a national dialogue on the subject of identity as an ideological, social and performative construct, discussing a number of identity allegories as alternatives to the official Revolutionary model. Through a postmodernist re-employment of avant-garde, surrealist, carnivalesque aesthetics, the film challenges the essentialist notion of telluric origins and the limitations of geographical borders traditionally employed by the nationalist metanarratives of official Cuban Revolutionary culture. On the other hand, however, *La vida* is a very poetic and emotive art movie, where the personal becomes political. As Chanan points out, despite its sly criticism of the errors committed by the Revolutionary government, the film has been received in Cuba as an ambiguous, symbolically coded, spiritual fantasy, in 'itself an attempt to escape reality, to soften the anxieties and disillusion of the unending Special Period' (2004: 494). The film is also amongst the first contemporary Cuban cinema attempts to penetrate different national and transnational borders.

## **11.2 Synopsis and Characters**

*La vida* is the story of four contemporary Cuban characters in search of happiness, and the subsequent destruction of their dreams. Through the use of complex, fast and very

fragmented editing in the style of Eisenstein's *intellectual montage*,<sup>143</sup> Pérez seeks juxtapositions and associations that convey some important connections and analogies between the three parallel stories, implying possible identifications between the main protagonists (Mariana, Julia and Elpidio) and the narrator, Bebé. *La vida* tells the stories of 'three end-of-the millennium Cubans, whose lives intersect on the Day of the Catholic Saint Santa Barbara' (Patricia Boero: 2004) (Santa Barbara being a virgin martyr, also known as the African Saint Changó in syncretic practices, the ruler of destinies and thunder. See Cabrera 1975 & Efundé 1979). Santa Barbara is an ambiguous figure who in her *santeria* manifestation is the male Changó, described by Agún Efundé as the most popular Cuban 'orisha'.<sup>144</sup> Efundé attributes this popularity to the close association of Changó with the Cuban national character. Changó has as much in common with the mulattos as with the blacks of Cuba. On the one hand he is famous for his violent outbursts, while on the other he is also tolerant and understanding (Efundé 1979: 46). The above description explains Pérez's choice of this particular *orisha* for the representation of the shifts in Cuban national identity, suggesting its fluidity, fragmentation, hybridity and openness to conflicting urges and influences.

*La vida's* multi-layered, complex and symbolically-coded text provides numerous examples of individual identity constructs *vis-á-vis* different national communities. These are in constant opposition to one another, thus constructing and deconstructing and exposing and transgressing each other's borders and limitations in an obvious attempt to involve the Cuban audience in a public polemic on who the Cuban nation should include or exclude and why — a topic first addressed in Gutiérrez Alea's *Fresa y chocolate*. This is most ingeniously exemplified in the sequences that visually represent the cultural and religious syncretism taking place during Elpidio's angry dialogues, or rather monologues, with the Yoruba deity Changó. We realize that in Elpidio's mind Changó stands for his mulatto mother, Cuba Valdés, who is an allegory of the best that Revolutionary Cuba has to offer. She is the symbolic foster-mother of the numerous Cubans presented in *La vida* as orphans: Bebé and Mariana, for example. Of course, she represents the official Cuban identity myth, thus we never see clearly the features of her face. Cuba Valdés brings the

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<sup>143</sup> 'The juxtaposition of a series of images to create an abstract idea not present in any one image' (Bordwell & Thompson 1993: 494).

<sup>144</sup> The generic name given to the Yoruban, West African in origin, Afro-Cuban deities.

orphans up surrounded by popular Cuban music and in an atmosphere of universal brotherhood.

The idea of fluidity versus fixed identity is also exemplified in Pérez's use of Changó. In a later dialogue with the deity we see Elpidio this time addressing a white female, in whom we recognize Bebé who herself undergoes a huge change: from 'incarceration' for her dissidence (for expressing herself differently, through whistling instead of the 'uniform' norm of speaking when only a small child), to becoming an omnipresent deity and narrator with the power to change people's destiny. She is a strange creature who narrates her stories underwater, mixing whistling with speech. Extrapolating the context of this image, another interpretation closer to Cuban reality is that Bebé is creating this story in order to escape from harsh realities as a persecuted dissident and internal exile; thus the film incorporates a justification for creating a fantastic story.

In conversations with Mercedes Santos Moray, Fernando Pérez talks about the change of atmosphere in his *Madagascar* and *La vida*. This change was to a great extent due to his partnership with the cinematographer Raúl Pérez Ureta, but his inspiration by the European avant-garde (particularly the Surrealists), his love for Arthur Rimbaud<sup>145</sup> and René Magritte<sup>146</sup> and the films of Tarkovski, Fellini, Bergman, as well as his admiration for Gutiérrez Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* are all significant (in Santos Moray 2004). Owing to these diverse influences, *La vida* is a surreal fantasy, often mixing dream, reality and utopia. After all, Bebé declares that in the future, in 2020, she will be a powerful deity in a position to help those dear to her. The surreal and fantastic elements in the film are numerous and sustained throughout. In fact, the film is a postmodern eclectic mix of genres and strategies. For example, in the final part of the story the fantastic dream of escape turns into a fiasco, and the protagonists are faced with the nightmarish, dystopian, surreal Cuban reality.

Mariana, Elpidio and Julia are the three people dearest to Bebé. So once grown up, and in a position to help them as a new powerful deity and omnipresent narrator, she sets out upon the task of changing their destiny and helping them find true happiness by reshaping and developing their stories throughout the film. Thus the film has an episodic

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<sup>145</sup> A nineteenth-century French poet whose style influenced the Symbolists, the Dadaists, and the Surrealists.

<sup>146</sup> A Belgian surrealist painter famous for his back and forth play between reality and illusion and the unusual juxtaposition of otherwise ordinary objects in his paintings that gave them an unexpected, other-worldly context.

and fragmented structure. Mariana is a ballerina torn between burning sexual desire and the vow of chastity she has made to God in order to get the part of Giselle — a dream role, reserved only for world-class ballerinas like Alicia Alonso. Julia, who could be either Mariana's or Bebé's mother as she abandoned her child in an orphanage more than twenty years ago, also serves to explore some linguistic taboos. Because of this traumatic event that she has blocked from her memory for all these years, she suffers from inexplicable fatigue and faints every time she hears the word 'sex'. Elpidio, a musician and a likable rogue, seduces a *gringa*<sup>147</sup> and ends up with an impossible dilemma on his hands: to follow his heart by searching for love, freedom and happiness abroad, or sacrifice his personal happiness and stay in Cuba. Elpidio could not imagine life without his mother, Cuba Valdés, the *mulatta* allegory of Revolutionary Cuba itself. Bebé identifies mostly with Santa Bárbara, but often we see her identifying also with her friends' problems, dilemmas and traumas; at times their personalities and stories (particularly the three women's) become completely entangled and impossible to separate. Bebé's identification with Julia's pain (when she discovers the cause of her trauma), for example, is an act of forgiveness and comprehension, forgiveness and understanding being qualities attributed to the syncretic deity Changó / Santa Bárbara (a new, more fluid unifying national symbol). All four main protagonists have been prejudiced against and marginalized for being different, either being accused of being 'too passionate' (Julia and Mariana) or 'too lazy, a good-for-nothing vagabond' (Elpidio). In the eyes of the authorities they are far from perfect citizens, so are individuals who live on the threshold of the prohibited in Cuban Revolutionary society thus defying its socialist values.

Stallybrass and White observe that '*transgressions and the attempt to control them obsessively return to somatic symbols*' as they are 'ultimate elements of social classification itself' (1986: 26, their emphasis). In *La vida* Julia is our best example of this process. For twenty years she has neither danced nor smiled. Under constant pressure to behave like a model citizen, she sacrifices and suppresses her own needs and desires in order to serve society and care for the elderly. She is symbolically identified by her pet — a peacock that cannot open its tail due to sexual frustration. According to Dr. Fernando,

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<sup>147</sup> This is the feminine form of *gringo*, a Latin American and Spanish term with some negative connotations, referring to an English-speaking person.

the psychiatrist practicing the findings of Freud in the film, the repressed will manifest itself through one's bodily functions and the inability to control them, exemplified by Julia's fainting at the sound of the word 'sex'. As we see later in the carnivalesque 'mass-fainting' scene, her case is not the exception in Revolutionary Cuba. We can then conclude that her story is a synecdoche that highlights the repressed state of the nation.

Stallybrass and White posit that 'points of antagonism overlap in an intersection between the high and the low, the classical and its "Other", thus providing some of the richest and most powerful symbolic dissonances in the culture' (1986: 25). They call this displacement '*the law of exclusion*', with the fundamental rule being: '*what is excluded at the overt level of identity-formation is productive of new objects of desire*' (Stallybrass & White 1986: 25, their emphasis). According to this law then, the excluded in *La vida* are the missing parents, who, in my reading of the film, implicitly stand for the Cuban diaspora. On a personal level, their exclusion has created feelings of lack and a huge void in the lives of the friends and relatives left behind, whilst the impact on the nation has been termed by Chanan 'the trauma of divided community' (2004: 22). One can then argue that *La vida* is also an allegory of Cuba as one huge dysfunctional family, with the missing parents – the exiles – making those Cubans left behind feel like orphaned children who experience painful feelings of rupture and a lack of the parental love and guidance vital for their formation and wellbeing. The *excluded* stands also for all that is lacking in the country: lack of freedom; lack of expression and choice; lack of difference in the marginalization and suppression of alternative views and voices, like those of Diego, forced into exile (in Gutiérrez Alea's *Fresa y chocolate*); and the lack of belonging for those, like Bebé, treated as dissidents and in internal exile, or like Elpidio, forced into self-imposed inner exile for being different. What is important is that the *excluded*, or what is lacking, produces 'new objects of desire', the most obvious example of this process in the film being Mariana, whose passions in life are 'dancing and men.' She, like the rest of the protagonists, explains her transgressive behavior by the fact that she, just like the others, 'has never known her parents'. Stallybrass and White treat the carnivalesque as a wider form of transgression. They observe that 'There is no simple fit between the imaginary repertoire of transgressive desire and economic and political contradictions in the social formation, and yet the two are always deeply connected' (1986: 26). Therefore, sexual transgression in film, and particularly in *La vida*, is equated with political subversion.

Not only are the four main characters all orphans in *La vida*, this is also the case with the three helpers and objects of desire: Dr. Fernando, Ismael and Chrissy. These three characters are celestial figures of destiny in the Jungian ‘quest’ myth created by Bebé. It is possible to argue that they stand for the Cuban diaspora. However, they also represent the ‘Other’, the expression of unconscious desires and acts of sexual transgression against the authorities. Dr. Fernando is like the Bakhtinian ‘jester’, unmasking the double standards of Cuban society. Chrissy stands for the alternative possibility of love and happiness abroad for Elpidio, the son rejected by his own mother. Chrissy also serves as a point of comparison to and critique of Elpidio’s mother – the opinionated, but far from perfect herself, Cuba Valdés, who denies her own son the sacred gift of motherly ‘unconditional love’. As reported by Fernandes, many Cuban audience members noted that the Hispanic pronunciation of the name Chrissy sounds like the Spanish for ‘crisis’, which in itself is a telling association and interpretation. The character was often received as a catalyst and materialization of Elpidio’s personal crisis with the Revolution, or as a symbol of globalization and the Special Period (Fernandes 2006: 65-68). However, as pointed out by Fernandes, these readings often went beyond Pérez’s original intentions.

Mariana and Ismael, on the other hand, present the best challenge to authoritative behaviour in the film – acting out their sexual, and hence political, transgression against hypocritical authorities that abuse their power and refuse others their right to freedom of choice. The film exposes the limitations of behaviour constructed and ‘prescribed’ from above by the Cuban Revolutionary government. Thus the point of view from the margins, in the borders of the permissive, has been rendered central, constantly undercutting and subverting the official narrative discourse.

This undermining of official discourse is probably best exemplified in the film by the sequence of the rehearsals and the premiere of the classical ballet *Giselle* and the antagonistic relationship between Mariana and Mme. Garcés. The figure of oppressive authority here is the hypocritical Mme. Garcés who imposes sexual abstinence on Mariana when she herself has a toyboy. Setimio, the toyboy, is an opportunist. He is with Mme. Garcés because he ‘wants to be comfortable’, believing that ‘she is more powerful than God’. Thus, following Stallybrass and White’s reworking of carnival as an instance of the wider phenomenon of transgression, we could claim that Mme. Garcés is a representative of high, official culture and hence is directly linked to the centre and highest echelons of power.

Ismael, Mariana's true love 'sent by God himself to save her', is, on the other hand, her greatest temptation and the test of the sincerity of her religious beliefs. He helps her to fight for her right to love and be happy, pointing out to Mariana that 'God is not a dictator, that he is merciful' and would not want her to die from a broken heart as her character Giselle does in the ballet. He puts her career into perspective, suggesting that she should not become a 'martyr' or a Saint in the name of art, emphasizing that God would not expect such sacrifices although some dictators, like Mme. Garcés, would. This sounds like a plea against any kind of dogmatism – be it political or religious. Ismael exposes Mme. Garcés as a tyrannical, merciless, self-centred figure of authority, able to sacrifice others for her own gain. Mme. Garcés's understanding of the road to perfection in art is based upon the belief that greatness cannot be achieved without enormous personal sacrifice and immense suffering. This can be read as an indirect critique of the idea of a monolithic utopian Cuban society, particularly if we bear in mind that the foundations of Cuban nationalism, which played a vital role in the initial appeal of the Cuban Revolution, were built on the messianic myth of sacrificial death in the name of one's *patria* (like in Pérez's earlier *Clandestinos*, for example).<sup>148</sup>

### 11.3 The Ulysses Syndrome

As observed by Chanan in his book *Cuban Cinema*, a number of Cuban films from the 1990s, amongst them *La vida*, 'share a common theme identified by a recent writer, Désirée Díaz, as the "Ulysses syndrome": the trope of the journey found in these films in a myriad of forms, real, metaphorical, and imagined – migration, departure, return, internal exile, the impossible promise' (2004: 22). Ruth Behar also points out that what defines the post-utopian moment of Cuba's Revolutionary children, many of whom are in exile / diaspora, is 'diasporic consciousness, nomadism, and a sense of multiple identity' (2000: 145). On the other hand, Ania Loomba insists that a 'large number [de facto the majority] of people in the Third World have not physically moved, and have to speak from "where they are", which is also often an equally ideologically, politically or emotionally fractured space' (Loomba 1998: 181).

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<sup>148</sup> *Patria* is in itself a contentious Hispanic term which, according to the Collins Spanish Dictionary, can be translated either as native motherland or as fatherland (1996: 540). I argue that a similarly hermaphroditic quality is the reason for Pérez's choice of Changó as a Cuban national symbol.

*La vida* is concerned with just such ‘migrant’ identities, as displayed by Elpidio, Julia, Mariana and Bebé, who can only dream of leaving the country. They are positioned in what Lydia Chávez calls a ‘Cuban Never-Never land’ (Chávez, 2005), dwelling in-between conflicting urges. *La vida* can be seen as speaking implicitly about exile – of those forcibly removed and displaced from their native land. This is the silent but omnipresent phantom of the ‘absent parents’ which we ‘stumble’ across again and again during the unfolding of the three parallel stories. Each and every one of the numerous protagonists in the film is an orphan who never knew his / hers parents, with the exception of Elpidio – the ‘New Transitional man’ – who, unsurprisingly, is a likable *pícaro*, particularly when compared with the ‘happy taxi driver’ – an exaggerated caricature of the ‘Perfect Socialist man’. These are the only two characters who at least know who their mothers are. It is implied, however, that both their mothers strongly disapprove of their ‘good-for-nothing sons’, even if for very different reasons: as a revolutionary, Cuba Valdés is not happy with Elpidio for being a bit idle and economical with the truth on occasions; whilst the perfect socialist man’s mother wishes her son to be a bit less idealistic and more pragmatic. Thus, Pérez highlights current divisions and changes in the country. The main characters are positioned on the cusp of two economic systems, and must face the dilemma of whether to join the Cuban diaspora or to do what may be even more difficult: to stay in a country with a social structure that is crumbling around them. The implications of this predicament reach far beyond the Cuban context, as this is also the situation of many Mexicans, Haitians, Africans and former Eastern Europeans; indeed, it is also Nikolai’s dilemma in *Okno*.

The surreal atmosphere of *La vida* resembles that of a wish-fulfillment dream that ultimately transforms into a nightmare. This development into nightmare is made concrete in the scene where the three protagonists meet at Revolution Square: they are finally reunited, but their dreams and expectations have disintegrated. In ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’ (1908), Freud was amongst the first to note the similarities between works of art, and particularly of film, to wish-fulfillment dreams, fairy tales and myths. These similarities were first explored in art and film by the Surrealists. The surreal elements and form of *La vida* create a process similar to that described in Freud’s ‘Dream Work’<sup>149</sup>, a process that ‘encodes’ the latent dream or the ideological message (as

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<sup>149</sup> This essay can be found in vol. XV of the Standard Collection of Freud’s works, published in 1961.

claimed by Hall)<sup>150</sup> into a manifest dream / image, which, in order to be understood, has to be interpreted (Freud 1961) or decoded (Hall 1980). This is imaginatively presented in *La vida* by Bebé's narrations often taking place underwater, thus articulating the work of defense mechanisms and manifest content in dreams, both of which have the role of distorting and suppressing the unconscious fantasy according to Hayward formulation (2000: 378), is what surrealist films usually deal with. If stories resemble dreams and are connected in some way to the unconscious, as claimed by Freud, then we can argue that Bebé herself stands for the oppressed, the 'Other', the 'collective unconscious' of 1990s Cuba. Hence, we see her most of the time as an underwater (that is submerged, suppressed) narrator, whilst in her stories we can find the roots of a 'New-born' 'imagined community' and 'identity.' From someone who is initially marginalized and oppressed – not even allowed to whistle – Bebé nevertheless becomes a deity in her own right, helping her friends to transgress the boundaries of late 1990s Cuban society in their struggle for recognition and freedom of expression, thus inverting all existing hierarchies. However, the very assumption of this dominant position of privilege and power proves the interdependence between authority and transgression, on the one hand, whilst on the other it re-establishes the *status quo* by putting in place power structures similar to the ones condemned. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the film's discourse is also an exploration of the limitations of utopia (regardless of its type).

I claim that the film is a critical re-evaluation of where the Cuban Revolutionary project went wrong, voicing the disillusionment of end-of-the millennium Cubans with utopian Grand Narratives, be they those of Socialism or Liberalism. At the close of the film we see how one order of the day, 'speaking', has been replaced by another, 'whistling'. On display is a rather daunting vision of Cuba in the year 2020 as a country that supposedly has found the 'secret of happiness'. According to the new deity, Bebé, this is 'to whistle'. Bebé is quite tearful when giving her secret away, and we observe rows of uniformly dressed whistling people, all moving in the same direction on roller skates. Hence the film is a kind of philosophical parable about the elusiveness of happiness – on the one hand, it is about the utopian tendency and the constant drive

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<sup>150</sup> See Hall's essay 'Encoding / Decoding', first published in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, eds Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe & Paul Willis (1980: 128-37). This essay is on the subject of the social phenomena of television programmes in which messages or official ideology first become encoded and, in order to be understood, had to be decoded by the audience. However, different viewers make different interpretations, according to their own personal inclinations.

towards improvement (in utopianism), and, on the other, the impossibility of achieving a perfect world. Throughout *La vida*, Pérez argues that the goal of absolute perfection can be limiting, discouraging and damaging. Instead, Elpidio embraces his own hard-won truth: that rather than perfection one should seek only improvement – ways to become ‘a better man’. This is why I consider the film an example of dystopian critique. Just like his mentor the late Gutiérrez Alea before him, with each new film Pérez has further stretched the limits of the permitted in Cuban Revolutionary culture and film, expanding the dialogue upon the place of Cuba in a new transnational world.

We can speculate further that if Cuba Valdés – the best of Revolutionary Cuba, worth saving – stands for Changó and Mother Earth with its Afro-Cuban roots, then she is also the symbol of the Homeland and of the State, personifying the official Revolutionary metaphor of Afro-Cuban identity.<sup>151</sup> If we follow this same logic then the new deity Bebé, like Santa Bárbara before her, can not only alter destiny but is also the ruler of the sea beneath the island (implying that Cuba as an island is porous and can float).<sup>152</sup> Bebé also represents the Unconscious, fluidity and change, that is, an alternative reality which undermines and subverts nationalistic Revolutionary myths of essentialist telluric origins.

#### **11.4 Transnational Flows and the New Cuban Identity:**

I assert that *La vida* is arguably the first film to explore new visual parameters for expressing Cuban identity through film, an identity modelled on the conclusions reached, in 1958, by the Cuban poet and cubanologist Cintio Vitier. Vitier claimed that true Cuban identity is more marine and aerial than telluric; in other words, it is essentially fluid and open to interaction and communication (1970: 580). Following Vitier’s argument some four decades later, Pérez employs this more appropriate metaphor of New Cuban identity in the marine / amphibious Bebé, destabilizing the telluric one of the Cuban Mother Earth, depicted here, typically, in the form of a Revolutionary mulatto woman. As Jorge Duany claims, ‘a more porous, liquid, or aquatic imagery is better attuned to the constant

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<sup>151</sup> Ada Ferrer also observes that a mulatto woman has often served as a metaphor of the nation (in Fernández & Cámara Betancourt 2000: 60-61).

<sup>152</sup> This idea of the floating island is also reminiscent of an earlier metaphor from the 1920s, used first by the historiographer Ramiro Guerra who called Cuba ‘la isla de corcho’ / the island made of cork (see Carlos García-Menocal, 2004: 2).

cultural flows and border crossings of every kind that lie at the centre of a transnational world' (in Fernández & Cámara Betancourt 2000: 36).

Moreover, both identities – the Old telluric Cuba Valdés, and the New aquatic Bebé – are contested and challenged by Chrissy, a tourist from the First World. Chrissy, however, is a Greenpeace activist and thus also somewhat utopian in outlook. She is an idealistic marine-biologist who possesses wisdom, knowledge and abilities different from, and more attractive than, those usually attached to foreigners in Cuban film, particularly if the outsider comes from the USA. In terms of her surprising abilities, firstly Chrissy gives herself body and soul to Elpidio. The collection of tropical flowers that she leaves to Elpidio represents her fertile body and resembles a tropical forest, and her love is a deep and unconditional. (This kind of love is something which even Elpidio's mother, Cuba Valdés, has denied him, because he did not turn out to be the exemplary son and perfect citizen she had once hoped for.) Chrissy knows all along that Elpidio has stolen her money, but this does not prejudice or stop her from loving him. Secondly, as a marine-biologist (a reference here to water as a symbol of fluidity and transnational flows) she is very close and dear to Bebé, the deity and New Cuban identity symbol. Thirdly, Chrissy comes and goes in a balloon, indicating that she has mastered both the sea and air. All these capacities make her unstoppable, attractive and irresistible. She symbolizes the best the First World has to offer, that which lures Cubans away from the island each year in their thousands and makes them leave their country in search of freedom and greater opportunities abroad. This is a new, surprisingly positive and even idealized representation of the First World, by itself a recognition that there are positive role models and examples to be found in every society.

However, the attractiveness of the developed world is almost simultaneously undermined by the presence of another Western female tourist who, without doubt, represents the old and well-known ugly, predatory face of capitalism with its sexual and economic exploitation. Although underplayed in the film, this is reminiscent of traditional suspicious attitudes towards the First World, and of Cuba's colonial legacy. In the dream-like story Bebé manages to keep Elpidio away from 'danger' by making this unwelcome tourist ride through the streets of Havana in a taxi, and we do not need a stronger reminder of what is happening in the city. As Behar correctly observes, 'Havana has been called the Bangkok of the Caribbean [...]. It is now considered a survival

strategy to *jinetear* (jockeying), the term used in Cuba for providing personal services, particularly prostitution, to tourists and foreigners' (Behar 2000: 142).

As shown in *La vida*, the relationship between Elpidio and Chrissy is not in the least bit antagonistic. Rather, it is positive, promising and optimistic, presenting the mutual attraction between two opposites in the Northerner Chrissy and the Southerner Elpidio. This relationship is represented as both desired and mutually beneficial: an enriching, warm, human experience of profound feelings of love, respect and appreciation. It symbolizes a successful cross-cultural border crossing, at least on Chrissy's part, as she constantly praises Cuba and the Cubans. However, Elpidio is not ready yet to leave Cuba. Thus, through this fantasy Pérez expresses residual doubts about and conflicting attitudes towards the First World on the island. Given the island's colonial past and years of mutual hostility and antagonism this is, of course, hardly surprising.

In conclusion, although produced in a monological state, *La vida* is a text of fragmentation, difference and newly born identity affiliations, delivered in numerous polyphonic voices. In spite of the movie's absurdist humour and surrealist, often carnivalesque, aesthetics of exaggeration and excess, the film is still a truthful and accurate reflection and testimony of the historical period of the late 1990s. For, at this time, Cuba as a country was finally waking up to its own situation of being in the grip of numerous intense and contradictory transnational economical, political and cultural flows, triggered by globalization.

## CHAPTER TWELVE: COMPARISONS & CONCLUSIONS. FROM DYSTOPIA TO UTOPIAN NOSTALGIA. TRANSNATIONAL OR MIGRANT IDENTITIES?

### 12.1 Representing Globalization? Comparing *Okno* & *La vida*

Both Cuba and Russia have suffered significant economic, social, and, in the case of Russia, even political changes triggered by the forces of globalization. At the time of the production of the two films discussed in Chapters Ten and Eleven, *Okno* and *La vida* respectively, Cuba and post-Soviet Russia were at different stages of transition to a market economy. Mamin's *Okno* and Pérez's *La vida* are amongst the best representations in World cinema of the complex and contradictory process of globalization. In both countries the transition to a market economy has been characterized by deep disillusionment, not only with the failure of socialism to deliver its promises but also with the harshness and inequality of emerging capitalist economic realities.

In 1998 Cuba was still a socialist country with a mixed, double economy of the official command economy and a black 'real' economy. The switch to a market orientated economy was dictated by the need to survive without subsidies from her former ally, the former USSR, which in 1990 was occupied with its own economic and social problems prior to its disintegration in 1991. Both countries have experienced harsh economic crises, shortages, and nearly apocalyptic traumas as a result of the collapse of the myth of 'the future communist paradise'.<sup>153</sup> What followed was a deep ideological vacuum and uncertainty about the future for both individuals and nations, producing crises of identity and challenging loyalties to and identifications with the state. Many people no longer believed in the official discourse, and opted to take charge of their own destiny. This resulted (particularly in the mid 1990s) in mass exodus and 'a brain drain' to the developed world.

Inevitably, the implications of this mass emigration had a traumatic effect on native communities, creating further rifts and divisions between those who stayed and those who left, underlining the problem of shifting loyalties, and group and national identifications. Many found they could no longer identify with the state symbolic structures (socialist, old imperial or capitalist) and began searching for more adequate

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<sup>153</sup> This is a stock phrase used by Beumers 1999; Chanan 2004; and Hashamova 2007, referring to the utopian project of communism. In *La vida* Pérez refers to the dream of better, more democratic and inclusive society as the 'secret of happiness', discovered by Bebé only in the year 2020.

affiliations. For these reasons globalization is viewed as a complex, contradictory process: global (market) transnational integration combined with accelerated national, ethnic and other group identity fragmentations. These competing tendencies have been described by Arjun Appadurai as a process of conjuncture / disjuncture between the global and the local (1996).

It has been highlighted by studies of this duality that globalization is an uneven process, producing winners and losers on a national and international scale. As asserted by Castelles, in such critical times of economic crisis and national humiliation, 'identity becomes the only source of meaning' (Castelles 2004: 6). Often people fall back on religion and start looking for lost origins, nostalgically reinventing lost mythical homelands so as to redefine their place in a global world which no longer makes sense. As highlighted by Mamin's *Okno*, the grave danger is that when national status and pride have suffered international humiliation or marginalization, there is almost certainly a resurgence of nationalism and jingoism as a reaction to the resulting inferiority complex (Paul Kennedy & Catherine J. Danks 2001: 14-15; Hashamova 2007).

*Okno* and *La vida* are co-productions, created through a combination of national and foreign sponsorship. As such, they are transnational products and an expression of globalization's duality, at once disseminating cultural and national specifics whilst promoting their countries as exotic tourist destinations and hence emphasizing difference. Higson, for example, claims that in practice, globalization actually re-establishes and reinforces cultural differences, assisting the creation of new cultural mythologies and identities (Higson 2004). The creation of new cultural identities and cultural constructs is probably best exemplified here by *Bakenbardy* and *La vida*. Nevertheless, many governments are no longer in a position to sponsor their national film industries (at least in times of economic crisis), making them globalization's first victims. There was a drastic reduction in film production in both Russia and Cuba in the late 1990s. *La vida*, for example, is one of few films produced in Cuba in 1998; more documentary and feature films were produced in 1993, the year considered the 'lowest point during the Special Period' (Stock 2009: 2). Production in Russia fell from 300 films between 1991-92, to 152 in 1993, and 50-60 in the year 1994-95 (Beumers 1999: 3). Many artists, who had previously wholeheartedly supported the reforms, were left unemployed. Attracting foreign sponsors and making co-productions became the only option in the 1990s, particularly in the case of Cuban filmmakers. As noted by Stock, in the years following

the announcement of the Special Period in Cuba, the country's filmmakers and the government would no longer work together as closely, or work predominantly on local projects, as they once had (2009: 13). Instead they responded to the demands of the world market, drawing on foundational myths in order to create concepts of Cuban identity characterized by transnational links and in response to global processes — 'an identity retaining some of the socialist values promulgated through the revolution while resisting dogmatism and the reach of state authority' (Stock 2009: 13), like in Tabío's *Lista de espera*, for example.

## 12.2 The Metaphor of the Journey

One of the common themes and predominant metaphors of films made in the 1990s is that of the journey (physical, symbolical or imagined) as the only route to salvation, to an elusive happiness, and to a newfound sense of identity. As observed by Christina Stojanova (2005), many post-communist films share not only common themes but even metaphors, with 'the metaphor of the quest — of emigration as the only way to prosperity' (2005: 222) — becoming a master metaphor. Transition to a market economy (as well as globalization) had come to imply a cinematic synecdoche of mobility and identity, and Stojanova observes that as a rule the post-socialist subject is represented as fluid, nomadic and uprooted, situated between the traditional and the postmodern, the local and the global, moving from one ambiguity to another (2005: 222).

For example, *La vida*, *Okno* and *Lista* share the theme of migration and the 'brain drain' to the First World. In all of these films, leaving one's motherland is a major dilemma and trauma. In *La vida*, the effects of the exodus are symbolically, or rather metonymically, represented by Cuba as an orphanage, where those Cubans left behind feel like abandoned orphans in a state of trauma and loss. However, it is also possible to argue that these emotions are due to the government's overambitious utopian project, which has left a large part of the population feeling isolated and alienated and in a state of internal exile. In *Okno*, the 'window' — a fantastic device that provides 'a short cut' to the West — eliminates visas, work permits and money in one go, 'as if by magic'. On the other hand, the 'window' is a complex, multilayered metaphor, which, amongst many other things, implies an opening to the Western world with its unlimited possibilities and an enlargement of the ever-expanding universe of globalization.

In style both *Okno* and *La vida* are predominantly carnivalesque, defined by grotesque realism, eccentricity, a fragmented episodic structure and the mixing of genres (from improbable, fantastic adventure and fairy tale to nightmarish reality). Overall, *Okno* and *La vida* are fantastic dystopian black comedies. Yet *La vida* is also a symbolically coded and poetic surreal fantasy, with some comic carnivalesque and burlesque outbursts. The carnivalesque style is most apparent in the culminating scene of *La vida*, entitled ‘The Moment of Truth’. The highest point of this scene is the mass fainting sequence, when the psychiatrist (Dr Fernando) acts as a Bakhtinian jester, unmasking the hypocrisies of Cuban society. In his analysis of the functions of the *rogue*, *clown* and *fool* in the novel (Bakhtin 1981: 158-67), Bakhtin describes their important role in world literature and art as character masks belonging to the public square and folk art. Their role is to carry out the unmasking of the hypocrisies of society, laughing at everything and everyone including themselves. Thus everything they do or say must be taken metaphorically rather than literally, as these figures do not exist outside of their role. ‘The rogue still has some ties that bind him to the real life; when the clown and the fool are “not of this world,” and therefore possess their own special rights and privileges’ (Bakhtin 1981: 159). In *La vida* and *Okno* these rights and privileges include the ability to expose the hypocrisies and double standards (*doble moral*) of Cuban socialist society on the streets of Havana or post-Soviet duplicity in St Petersburg. As mentioned earlier, an example of a grotesque carnivalesque episode in *Okno* is that of the vodka queue followed by the march of the old demented communist supporters, defiantly singing ‘The Internationale’, down the road with a sign reading: ‘Attention! Reconstruction works ahead!’ — a synecdoche of *perestroika* that sets the tone for the rest of the film.

In *Okno* and *La vida* carnivalesque aesthetics are employed in the representation of change and transition, a combination of medium and message that I refer to in the title of this thesis through the term ‘carnivals of transition’. The term implies a complete unity of form and content that signifies the representation of socio-political forces which have turned the world on its head — in the films discussed here the forces of globalization. Carnival is used as a wider metaphor: for political transgression, and for representing transition, globalization and social change. As seen from the films discussed in Chapters Ten and Eleven, as a result of globalization and several decades of isolation and travel restrictions many Cubans and Russians either unjustly vilified or naively idealized the developed world as the land of plenty; a place of prosperity and ‘unlimited’ possibilities.

To numerous Cubans and Russians, who for years could only fantasize about or dream of seeing the wonders of the First World, this was a potent myth providing something to aspire to.

Both films represent their countries' transitions and opening up to the world. Both *Okno* and *La vida* examine messianic myths, stereotypes and new and old utopian social models. On the one hand, they both comment on local and global trends and identity shifts from national to smaller groups affiliations, yet, on the other hand, they also represent increasingly migrant and porous identities in an expanding, transnational world. Both filmmakers treat rather serious issues in a poetic, fantastic and more entertaining, escapist manner. *Okno* exemplifies the transition from state to commercially orientated filmmaking, and the general aim (in the mid 1990s) of creating serious films with popular appeal. Pérez's, at times, rather surreal *La vida*, however, is more reminiscent of the high modernist auteurist style of filmmaking. The few Cuban films that have reached international audiences in recent years, in a way, demonstrate the characteristics of a specific style of filmmaking which seems frozen in time, as if still digesting auteurist and 1960s high art, modernist trends.

Stylistically, *Okno* is a blend of *chernukha*, grotesque realism and some fantastic, fairytale, and magic realist elements. Supernatural events, such as the appearance of a window / portal to Paris in St Petersburg, for example, are treated merely as a matter of extraordinary luck and opportunity for the inhabitants of the communal flat, who are temporarily able to pop in and out to Paris. Nikolai's extraordinary Pied Piper powers over his pupils are similarly downplayed and normalized. Thus, it is possible to argue that the film is an example of an Eastern European form of magic realism. At the time, this trend was very popular in the former Eastern European countries, as noted by Iordanova in *Cinema of the Other Europe* (2003) as well as in her 2002 study of the oeuvre of Emir Kusturica (who professes his preference for the Latin American kind of magic realism). *La vida*, on the other hand, is a mixture of carnivalesque, surreal and fantastic elements, which nevertheless help to represent the bleak Cuban reality as magical. Still, the fantastic and surreal elements are strong, and sustained throughout the film. Despite their serious subject matter, in both films there are enough fantastic elements present to consider the films as escapist flights into fantasy; as poetic and / or entertaining attempts to alleviate pain and provide a temporary relief from dystopian realities.

### 12.3 Music as a Metaphor of Identity

Both the main protagonists in *Okno* and *La vida*, Nikolai and Elpidio, are musicians, and this means that during hard times it is up to people like them to provide some relief to their fellow countrymen. Both are far from being perfect citizens and zealous nationalists, and they do not compromise easily. Elpidio (the Bakhtinian rogue) is a rather likable, down-to-earth character (in actual fact, an amalgamation of Gorokhov, the Russian transitional trickster, and Nikolai). Nikolai himself is more of a holy fool and an idealized (utopian) character, someone Bakhtin would term (as mentioned earlier) ‘not from this world’ (1981: 159). However, both protagonists are prepared to forgo their own happiness for the greater good of their community.

But what is the significance of both directors’ decision to have musicians as the main protagonists in their films? Simon Frith claims that what makes music so pertinent as a metaphor of identity is its ability to define a space without boundaries. This makes it the ideal cultural form, as it is able to both cross borders of any kind — be they physical, social or national — and to define the specifics of a place; hence, wherever we may be ‘we are only where the music takes us’ (1996: 125). According to Firth, ‘music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers to the body, time and sociability, experiences enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives’ (1996: 124). Therefore, one could argue that both main protagonists are musicians because music is an art form intrinsic to the representation of identity, a form which simultaneously defines and transgresses the borders and the limitations of identity. Music can easily translate these borders and limitations into the most fluid, abstract, porous and transnational artistic form of representation. Thus as musicians, Nikolai and Elpidio can communicate effectively both with their compatriots as well as with foreigners. In other words, they represent a model of a more permeable, transnational identity construct.

### 12.4 Juan Carlos Tabío’s *Lista de espera* (2000) as Critical Utopia and Allegory of the Cuban Dilemma

Rob Stone has argued that in *Lista* Cuba is represented as caught up in limbo, in alternative cycles of reality and utopia (see my discussion in Chapter Three). According to this reading then, the film’s ending is yet another repetition of the same or a very

similar scenario. As noted by Stone, in *Lista* there is ‘negotiation between reality and fantasy, between faith and empiricism, minds, and stomachs’ (2007: 143). I argue that the film is a comment on Cuba’s complex situation – a country at the crossroads between socialism and capitalism. Nonetheless, for me its ending is reassuring, uplifting and full of hope that utopianism will return to Cuba’s shores. Therefore, I claim that *Lista* is more of an example of critical utopia (a critique of a good place with problems), rather than of critical dystopia.

This is why Stone is correct when he states that the film is ‘a tale of an anti-authoritarian popular cultural strategy that incorporates satire and parody to deflate the dogmatism of the official language and ideology of Castro’s Cuba and institute a popular, collective, learning process in its place’ (Stone 2007: 144). Thus the film begins by painting a dystopian picture of the hell Cuba is slowly turning into, implying that these absurdities are happening thanks to the mistakes and poor choices made by the dogmatic, incompetent leadership. Despite its episodes of grotesque humour, the film is a realistic representation of contemporary Cuba’s contradictions, exposing the absurdities of everyday life in a country suspended between two incompatible economic systems – a situation found increasingly confusing by some of its inhabitants. At the beginning of the film one of the characters even directly enquires: ‘What kind of country are we after all – a communist or a capitalist one?’

This is an important question, one that represents Cuba’s dilemma as a country at a crossroads and torn between two opposing systems, ethics and attitudes, asking: ‘Who is more important – the community or the individual?’ The film implies that the new capitalist attitudes are immoral, wrong and regrettable. From the very start the film’s protagonists are positioned on the border between two economic systems and must resolve the dilemma of whether to start afresh and build a dogma-free eutopian society that promotes solidarity amongst people, or follow the logic of the global market. According to the underlying logic and style of the film, the current (at the time) options of command socialism and the increasing probability of becoming a society driven by greed and selfishness are rejected. When an indignant party official attempts to halt a community initiative (the renovation of the bus station), threatening ‘retributions’, everyone simply ignores him, even the station manager. Indignant, the party official leaves the station in order to alert his superiors about this civil disobedience, thus effectively expelling himself from ‘the common utopian dream’. ‘Carnival of transitions’

as a term for carnivalesque strategies and aesthetics aids the discussion of the ambiguous co-existence of two constructs in *Lista* – one being its satire of reality and the failure of the official utopian model, presenting a diverse, critical picture of today’s Cuba (the real picture that is); whilst the other is the film’s utopian, magic realist flight from a dystopian reality into an imaginary Cuba (Cuba as it could be).

This is best symbolised by the character of Jacqueline, a young professional woman torn between two conflicting urges: on the one hand, she is tempted to leave the island with her Spanish fiancé, who is not the stereotypical ‘coloniser’ but a kind, understanding and supportive man; on the other, she wants to stay in Cuba with Emilio, the young engineer she has just met, and build an idyllic life within the ‘common utopian dream’. As a result of her desire to stay she has fallen in love with Emilio, or rather with the dream he represents. Jacqueline’s situation reflects the dilemma of many Cubans who, after years of isolation, would love to see the wonders of the developed world, yet are neither overwhelmingly critical nor dismissive of Cuba’s socialist legacy, or the country’s future.

As in *Okno* and indeed many Eastern European films, there is a tension between the local and the global in *Lista*. *Lista* also projects the preoccupations of many Cubans with the uncertainty of their country’s future and their own private situation in a globalized world, as *Okno* has done before it. A further similarity to Mamin’s *Okno* is seen in the way that *Lista* is a testimony to the fact that the changes in Cuba have been characterized by disenchantment, not only with the autocratic socialist regime and its dogmatism and cronyism but also with the inequalities created by the emerging capitalist (dollar) economy. *Lista* too hopes that talented people like Jacqueline (who have so much to offer to their country) will reconsider, choose to stay and help rebuild it. Like the earlier *Fresa y chocolate* and *La vida*, *Lista* pleads for national unity amongst all Cubans, on the island and abroad.

As mentioned earlier in Part I, Vladimir Cruz (the actor who plays the young engineer Emilio) says of Cuba: ‘what we have constructed, rather than the dream, is the waiting room to the dream’ (Chanan 2004: 495). Thus, the film starts and ends in the waiting rooms of two different bus stations: the first one in the centre of Cuba; the second closer to Santiago and the East of the island. In conclusion, Tabío has affirmed that *Lista* is a ‘fable about socialist Cuba, and its future’ (in Forsyth 2001: 72). The film emphasises the cyclic nature and enduring appeal of utopianism. Evidently, humanity tends to revisit

models of social improvement, even after periods of doubt or serious scrutiny. The reason for this is, quite simply, that is difficult to live in a world where there is no place for hope in a better future.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Elsewhere, I have also argued that the film has anticipated the swing to more leftist social policies in a few Latin American countries (see Hillman 2009).

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

The carnivalesque comedies discussed here present strong evidence for the workings of the ambivalent process of permanent change and becoming. Throughout this study, I have argued that apart from a fertile strategy for mutual cultural illumination, the carnivalesque mode is also the cinematic mode that best captures social contradictions and the constant process of renewal, including the cycle of shifting attitudes to social transformation. Therefore, I think of it as a cultural equivalent of Darwin's process of evolution. The thesis finds that over a forty year period in Cuba and Russia (as well as in the rest of the former Socialist bloc countries) there has been a gradual evolution from the bright, eccentric carnivalesque comedies of the 1960s, to darker, grey carnivals and surreal tragicomedies of the late 1980s (1988 in this study). By the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s these grey carnivals collapsed into utopian satires featuring grotesque realism and a *reductio ad absurdum* kind of black humour, or excessive naturalism and dark, morbid comedies (which represent parodic inversions of the socialist realist canon). These were often dystopian or anti-utopian fantasies, like Shakhnazarov's *Gorod Zero* (1989), Mamin's *Bakenbardy* (1990) and Díaz Torres's *Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas* (1990).

The changes represented and reflected upon in the films discussed in this study are important evidence of economic, socio-political, cultural and intercultural dynamics taking place in different decades in Cuba and Russia, which also, in broader terms, are comparable to similar trends in the countries of the former Socialist bloc. I have also argued that they present confirmation of the connection between local and transnational histories and vibrant intercultural dialogues between different (central and peripheral) cinemas and cultures.

I have referred throughout my study to 'carnival of transitions' as I argue that the carnivalesque mode is both a strategy for subversion and a form of avant-garde or postmodern aesthetics, and that its appearance in culture, particularly in film, usually signals a socio-political change, crisis or transition. The phrase 'carnivals of transition' signifies the ambivalent process of change and becoming because mediation and negotiation between competing ideologies, values and beliefs form its core. As seen in the selected films discussed in this thesis, 'carnival of transitions' are represented by a symbolic socio-cultural parodic inversion or satiric transgression – from the sexual to the

cultural, including the political – concerning any form of oppression or marginality in society.

For example, both the adaptations discussed in Part I of the thesis are in the style of carnivalesque comedy, mimicking silent comedy masters, mixing different film genres and styles, and often privileging physical gags and an episodic structure over narrative coherence. Both directors discussed have also shown some affinity with self-reflexive filmmaking. These techniques and aesthetics create visual confusion and ambiguity, and invite polyphonic readings. Both directors depict the contradictions in socialist society; however, Gutiérrez Alea's film represents the early 'utopian' period of building socialism in Cuba, whereas Gaidai's film reflects on a later period of 'real', 'mature socialism'. Despite being critical of the negative sides of it, their films are not anti-socialist as both directors are sympathizers with socialism. Nevertheless, they both had an acute sense of the absurd and the ridiculous in life and arguably dreamed of a more democratic kind of socialism, one associated with Lenin's NEP.

I have concluded that adaptations represent the contradictions of their respective historical periods and societies; that they are in intertextual, metatextual (and often also intercultural) dialogue with the (original) novel(s) as well as many previous literary or media cultural forms. Nevertheless, they simultaneously represent a particular national-specific, historic, cultural and directorial outlook; thus, every adaptation is a different comment, a unique reading of and take upon the original source material. For example, Gutiérrez Alea's comedy marvels at the collective, whilst Gaidai's film is rather fond of the exceptional individual character of Ostap Bender. I have concluded that every new adaptation seems to be not only a comment upon the present and the original material but also upon previous adaptations. For example, in Chapter Three, I illustrate how Gutiérrez Alea's and Gaidai's adaptations have inspired further revisions and textual permutations (metatexts) of the original novel's mythical ur-text.

Despite being one of Gutiérrez Alea's least known works, *Doce sillars* is an important film as it demonstrates the director's intention to create a popular, entertaining comedy alongside a parody of the socialist realist formula. The film is a protest against the adoption of socialist realism, and an important example of his early efforts to avoid ideological clichés. Nevertheless, Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation creates the first collective socialist realist character in a Cuban Revolutionary feature film. On the one hand, Gutiérrez Alea creates a positive (utopian) model for the new Cuban cinema and society:

the collective as an answer to Cuba's social divisions; on the other hand, his model resembles that of an exceedingly positive, socialist realist, collective character from the 1930s Soviet comedies. So, Gutiérrez Alea's adaptation is both a socialist realist film and a mockery of it; supportive of socialist ideas yet cautious of ideological idealism and monologism. Hence, even on his first attempt to create a funny, entertaining picture, Gutiérrez Alea ends up creating a polyphonic comedy that mocks not only current but also potential contradictions in Cuban Revolutionary society. Gutiérrez Alea's biggest achievement is that he manages to convey the spirit and the style of Il'f and Petrov's subtle irony in a cinematic way, despite having to translate and transpose situations from 1920s Soviet Russia onto Cuba's 1960s socio-political conditions. His film is more nuanced and imaginative, both dramatically and cinematically, than Gaidai's.

Gaidai's adaptation lacks Il'f and Petrov's and Gutiérrez Alea's refined, subtle sense of irony and mild, subversive parody, focusing too much on slapstick comical gags and situations. Nevertheless, Gaidai succeeds where everyone else before or after him seems to have failed, by immortalizing one of the most colourful characters from World literary classics, Ostap Bender, prince of rogues and epitome of individualism itself. Gaidai's film is also a confirmation that despite the return to stagnation in the 1970s, since the Soviet Thaw the individual had firmly re-entered centre stage in Soviet film and that cracks in socialist society were beginning to emerge.

In Part II I have argued that after period of stagnation and orthodoxy in the 1970s in both countries, in the 1980s there was a marked return to the popular genres of comedy and melodrama on everyday issues. The thesis details the realization of some filmmakers that popular genres, particularly those of comedy and melodrama, could be used effectively for social critique and for the discussion of both specific gender and family issues (amongst other matters) as well as for subjects of broader national importance. Traditionally, in Soviet and Cuban as well as Latin American cinemas, female protagonists were received by the public as allegories of the nation (López 1985; Iordanova 2003). Following Solás's *Lucía* (1968) in particular, female characters in Cuban film came to symbolize national struggles during different historical epochs (D'Lugo in King & López 1993; Xavier in Miller & Stam 1999), potentially leading to rather reductionist readings of some films of the 1980s. The thesis concludes that the overwhelming return to black humour and social satire in the 1980s in the former Soviet

bloc countries was, without doubt, triggered by the deepening crisis of late socialism, which in hindsight was accelerated by the effects of globalization.

Both *Plaff* and *Flute* were the first comedies to criticize the processes of *perestroika* and rectification themselves. Thus, the main conflict in both is between the legacy of stagnation, that is, bureaucratic dogma, and the forces of change. Both Tabío and Riazanov have voiced their doubts about the effectiveness and sincerity of the reforms introduced from above (exposing them as a typical case of ‘turkeys voting for Christmas’) as the very culprits of the system’s crisis – the most inefficient high-ranking bureaucrats – yet again have been put in charge. In both films, the aging, ailing bureaucrats are seen as detrimental to more effective and democratic developments, blocking and suffocating even the most worthy of initiatives originating from below. Both are landmark films that argue that change and regeneration are necessary and vital for the survival of the socialist system; however, both end with a tragedy which expresses their directors’ doubts about the success of the reforms. *Plaff* and *Flute* are carnivalesque generic mixes of bedroom farce, social comedy and melodrama that eventually turn into surreal tragicomedy where reality, fantasy and mystery are intertwined. Both expose the degeneration of the old Revolutionary slogans, the hypocrisy and irrelevance of a leadership alienated and divorced from reality, widespread corruption which spreads from the top down, deteriorating living standards, and racial, gender and class divisions in supposedly classless 1980s socialist societies. The main protagonists in both films are anti-heroes, whose extreme, irrational fears of change, of life in poverty, and rejection of true love lead to their premature, self-inflicted and tragic deaths (from heart attacks). Both films are rather uncomfortable, symbolic allegories of a dying social system, and as prophetic fables they predict that *perestroika* and rectification will not resuscitate original revolutionary ideals. Both films end on an elegiac note, expressing their directors’ lament of the regretful human tendency to conform to and accept absurd, oppressive practices.

In Part III, I have argued that one of carnival’s most important functions is its role as an anti-hegemonic, subversive, rebellious strategy, which acts as open, oppositional ‘critical utopia’ (an expansion upon the discussion instigated by Gardiner 1992: 21-49). Thus carnival has an ambiguous, contradictory nature, simultaneously undermining and reaffirming the *status quo*. On the one hand, (in Mamin’s comedies, for example) carnival is used often as a self-reflexive, parodic, intertextual inversion, both deconstructing and affirming previous or pending utopian hegemonic models; and on the

other hand it has a perpetual oppositional (utopian) impulse, aiming towards the full democratization of society.

In Parts III and IV, I have argued that the term dystopia is not transposable with anti-utopia. Thus I have asserted the whole drive of dystopian narrative is the avoidance and prevention of the repetition of oppressive, totalitarian social models in the future. This is quite different from an outright rejection of any possibility of social improvement and utopianism, which is the position of anti-utopians on both the Left and Right. The main preoccupations of dystopia are the threat of totalitarianism and the misappropriation of technological advancement. In the thesis I focus on critical dystopias warning against social models that rely too heavily upon stability, control, order and discipline. Films such as Mamin's *Bakenbardy* demonstrate how such measures, employed in the name of a better, more orderly society, can trigger a cycle of violence leading to oppression and fascism. I have concluded that the key to the film's philosophy is in its intertextual dialogue with Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) as well as two other art films on the subject of nascent fascism: Fosse's *Cabaret* (1972) and Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973). *Bakenbardy* was also the victim of indirect, 'commercial' censorship in Russia.

From the films selected for study in Parts I, II and III, it is apparent that the main protagonists of carnivalesque comedies are most often anti-heroes. This is particularly true in the case of grey and black carnivalesque comedies. Grey carnivalesque comedies, as a rule, are an eclectic generic mix of comedy and melodrama, reflecting competing ideologies and contradictory impulses. Black dystopian humour, on the other hand, usually follows a *reductio ad absurdum* comedy plot, which revolves around the morbid subjects of war, national crisis, madness, physical mutilation and death. Its aesthetics are those of grotesque realism, naturalism and lower body humour, often mixed with fantastic (or science fiction), surreal and horror elements.

Mamin's film *Okno* (1993) is an example of the transition from state sponsorship to film as commercial entertainment, in the 1990s era of transnational co-productions. In the 1990s, economically ruined former socialist countries, including Cuba, were no longer able to support the production of films. This prompted internationally renowned directors (and *auteurs*) to seek sponsorship from abroad. Winning awards at prestigious film festivals became a lifeline for many Eastern European and Latin American filmmakers, who constantly competed for the same awards at international festivals. In their attempts to attract sponsors and badly needed investment, some Cuban filmmakers attempted to

promote their country as an exotic tourist destination. In her recent investigations of film festival circuits, Iordanova notes that these festivals became an alternative forum for film distribution and finding markets, and important places for cultural exchange (2009: 24).

*Okno* was the most popular comedy of 1993, yet Mamin could not find sponsors for another comedy for five years (Maliukova 2005: 3). In interview with Maliukova in 2005, the director comments that interest in serious humour in Russia is now dead and that, paradoxically, even during totalitarian times it was occasionally possible to slip through the cracks of the system's censorship. Now, thanks to the demands of commercialized mass culture, satire has become docile if not extinct (in Maliukova 2005: 2-3). *Okno* represents Mamin's not very successful attempt to explore the genre of romantic comedy, as a strategy to move away from the depressing world of *chernukha* and towards a more popular kind of entertainment and humour. His satiric talent and strong sense of the absurd in life, however, prevent him from being successful in making purely entertaining comedies with broad popular appeal. Mamin's inability to tame his satiric muse and adjust to official appeals for more entertaining films on the subject of national reconciliation in the mid 1990s has, in effect, caused the declining of his popularity and spelled out the death of post-Soviet satire.

As Mamin's popularity faded, Rogozhkin's comedies filled the gap in the Russian market for light entertainment. They retain an eccentric style from the world of carnivalesque excess, and lower body humour from the *chernukha* period. Now, however, Rogozhkin uses the favourite pastime of Russians, drinking, to purely comic effect. His films represent the renewal of hope in the nation's revival, a theme that took over the Russian screen in 1995. Russian filmmakers looked for inspiration to Hollywood film and its genres, so, apart from comedy, there are now other thriving popular film genres such as thrillers, Russian mafia films and horror movies. Traces of the long, lasting legacy of the *chernukha* trend, however, are often present.

In Cuba, the 1990s were called the decade of Fernando Pérez. By 1994 there was no sign of the initial idealism (or conformism) displayed in Pérez's first film *Clandestinos* (1987). Thus his *Madagascar* (1994) and *La vida es silbar* (1998) are, in my opinion, works of an ex-utopian who is rather disillusioned with the failure of the socialist utopian project and who has moved closer to an anti-utopian perspective. Unlike *Clandestinos*, his 1990s films are almost existential, surreal, dark and pessimistic critical dystopias. Through them Pérez expresses his doubt that pure happiness (utopia) is achievable or,

indeed, durable. Thus, in *Madagascar* his protagonists deconstruct the official utopia, expose the reasons for its failure, and painfully search for alternatives and a way out of unbearable isolation and alienation. In his next film, *La vida*, Pérez condemns the utopian target of perfection at any cost as one of the biggest limitations and mistakes of socialism, as this has justified martyrdom in the name of unrealistic goals. Furthermore, his condemnation of utopia escalates even to a future, allegedly more liberal, alternative social model in Cuba in the year 2020. Pérez's two dystopian films, *Madagascar* and *La vida*, may have received a lot of international and critical acclaim, yet they were not fully appreciated by the Cuban public and the authorities at the time of their release. Nevertheless, they put him firmly in the position of being Cuba's foremost filmmaker of the 1990s.

Through a postmodernist re-employment of avant-garde, surrealist and carnivalesque aesthetics, *La vida* challenges the essentialist notion of telluric origins and the limitations of the geographical borders traditionally employed by the nationalist metanarratives of official Cuban Revolutionary culture. Nevertheless, *La vida* is also a very poetic and emotive art movie. As Chanan points out, despite its sly criticism of the errors committed by the Revolutionary government, the film has been received in Cuba as an ambiguous, symbolically coded spiritual fantasy that is in 'itself an attempt to escape reality, to soften the anxieties and disillusion of the unending Special Period' (2004: 494). In conclusion, although produced in a monological state (in terms of state authoritarianism), *La vida* is a text of fragmentation, difference and new-born identity affiliations, delivered in numerous polyphonic voices which reveal the dialogism present in Cuban society. In spite of the movie's absurdist humour and surrealist, carnivalesque aesthetics of exaggeration and excess, the film is a truthful and accurate reflection and testimony of the historical period and of Cuba as a country that was finally waking up to its own situation in the midst of numerous intense and contradictory transnational economic, political and cultural flows triggered by globalization.

Because of other vital necessities, the funds available to the ICAIC have now been reduced significantly and are mostly used only to support internationally recognized, established Cuban filmmakers such as Pérez and Tabío. Nevertheless, thanks to improved, high definition video technology, which has made location shooting cheaper and easier, there is an important new generation of young, independent Cuban filmmakers emerging. Recently, these filmmakers have been given the opportunity to

work in conjunction with the ICAIC and to exhibit their films at specially organized festivals whose aim is to support and discover young talent.

Like Pérez, Tabío is an important Cuban filmmaker from the second generation of ICAIC film directors. As mentioned above, despite Cuba's difficult economic situation he continues to make the occasional feature film. In an interview with Scott Forsyth, Tabío has confirmed that his *Lista de espera* (2000) is a 'fable about socialist Cuba, and its future' (2001: 72). The film emphasizes the cyclic nature of social ideas and the enduring appeal of utopianism in Cuba and in the wider region of Latin America and the Caribbean. Recent events have demonstrated that certain pluralist social ideas tend to resurface again and again, following serious re-workings and reconsiderations. The reason for this is that they represent profound human dreams of and hopes for happiness, and life in a more democratic and just society. I would argue that this could also be an explanation as to why Latin America has become the natural home of magic realism. Magic realism also clearly employs the carnivalesque and an escape into the realms of fantasy and imagination as a strategy for social subversion by blurring the boundaries between reality and the imaginary. After all, magic realism represents both a Latin American form of oppositional struggle against oppressive colonial and postcolonial realities, and its people's firm belief that one day they will be victorious.

Furthermore, films like Mamin's *Okno v Parizh* and Tabío's *Lista de espera* arguably represent the filmmakers' later attempts to reconcile a dystopian present with their countries' former and future utopian projects. I claim that Tabío's *Lista*, for example, stands for what is called the Cuban 'discrete but obstinate defence of utopia' by Fornet (1999: 173) (a subject mentioned previously in Chapter Three, and again in Part II and Part IV). García Borrero also professes his own longing for the return of hope and utopian optimism to the Cuban screen. Therefore, he uses the term 'confiscated utopia', which he explains as the 'Quixotic mode' of Latin American and Cuban styles of filmmaking best exemplified by the 1960s Golden era of Cuban Revolutionary cinema (2002: 193).

In conclusion, the changes represented and reflected upon in the films discussed in this study are important evidence of the socio-political, cultural and intercultural dynamics taking place at different decades in Cuba and Soviet Russia, which also, in most general terms, are comparable with similar trends in the countries of the former Socialist bloc. I have also argued that they present verification of the connection between

local and transnational histories, and of vibrant intercultural dialogues between different (central or peripheral) cinemas and cultures.

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