

Cecilia

Cuba | 1981 | 127 minutes

Credits

Director	Humbero Solas
Screenplay	Jorge Ramos, Nelson Rodríguez, Humberto Solás, Norma Torrado (based on the novel by Cirilo Villaverde)
Photography	Livio Delgado
Music	Leo Brouwer

Cast

(in credits order) Daisy Granados
Imanol Arias
Raquel Revuelta
Miguel Benavides

In Brief

TheAdapted from Cirilo Villaverde's 1882 *Cecilia Valdés o La Loma del Ángel*, often called the national novel of Cuba, and directed by Humberto Solás in the style of the first part of his tripartite *Lucía* (1968), *Cecilia* is a lavish, turbulent, delirious melodrama set in 1830s Havana amidst agitation for independence from Spain. The film is from Cuba and Spain.

It is a Romeo and Juliet-love story, of sorts—but one in which the mulatta heroine's initial motive is manipulative and complex, and, given her employment of santería, the white colonialist boy doesn't stand a chance. Their actually being, it turns out, sister and brother is no longer specified in the plot, but it's still swimming around in there, recurrently suggesting itself and slipping away whenever the boy's parents react with such hostility to his infatuation with the girl. Here, differences in race and class comeingle with at least the perpetual possibility of the darker skeleton in the closet. Moreover, Solás teases us with a two-shot of the young couple

where her complexion is only the tiniest bit darker than his: a portrait of affinity rather than stark difference. This is heady stuff.

Indeed, one of the most glorious aspects of this film is its plentitude of two-shots combinately displaying a diversity of skin tones. The girl is beautiful; the boy, pretty: another point of affinity between them—and one that toys with our eyes in a distancing way, reminding us we are watching a film.

A cautionary story, told aloud in flashback, triggers unexpected allusions to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) involving a church bell tower and, here, a child's drop/fall/plunge from it: steeped in Catholic stress and symbolism, a stupendous dream image. This is matched by the waking nightmare of the boy's interrupted wedding ceremony.

- Dennis Grunes



Humberto Solas: Director who told the stories of Cuba's struggles under Castro

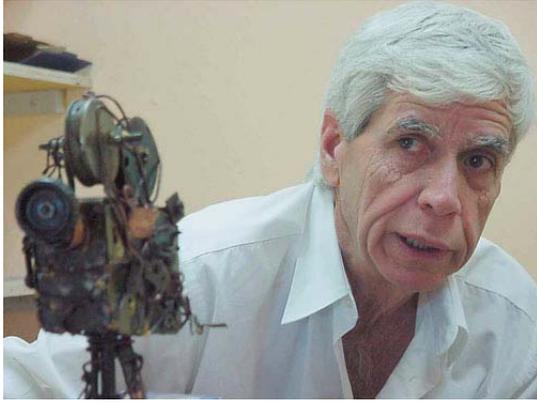
As a child of Fidel Castro's revolution, the Cuban film director Humberto Solás had to walk a fine line in his craft but he walked it well. He became one of the country's most internationally-respected film-makers, helping drag Cuban film out of early 20th century Hollywood exploitation, through communist censorship and patriotic self-censorship, to its current status as a leading light in Latin American film.

Along with his fellow director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Solás largely defined Cuban film during the latter half of the 20th century, supporting Castro's revolution but increasingly exposing its quirks and even its failings alongside its self-proclaimed "triumph." Their breakthrough portrayals of gay men and women, who had lived "in the closet," led to official acceptance of the gay community, and even laws to protect them, in a traditionally macho society.

Although he was perhaps best-known for his 1968 "historical melodrama" *Lucía*, Solás, when he died of cancer, was at the vanguard of a new revolution in international film, one that will undoubtedly survive him. In an act of defiance only someone of his stature could get away with under Castro, he founded a maverick international film festival in 2003, which he called the International Festival of Poor Cinema (in Spanish the meaning was clear – not "poor films", but films which are more "no budget" than "low budget," mostly shot on digital cameras). Solás chose the festival's location, the fishing village of Gibara in Cuba's eastern Holguin province, for two reasons: Castro's "fatherly influence" is diminished the farther you go from Havana; and the dusty village could hardly be in greater contrast to the glitz and red carpets of Hollywood or Cannes.

Modelled on Robert Redford's Sundance film festival in Utah, and showing more than 100 films each year, Solás's Festival Internacional de Cine Pobre is in direct competition with Cuba's official Festival of New Latin American cinema, held in Havana, but has nevertheless become a magnet for independent film-makers, mainly from Latin America but also West and East Europe, Africa and Asia.

Humberto Solás Borrego was born to a poor family in Havana Vieja (the capital's Old Town) on 4 December, 1941. While still at school, aged 14, he joined the urban guerrillas of the so-called 26 of July Movement against the dictator Fulgencio Batista, supporting the band of rebels, including Castro and Ernesto Ché Guevara, who had landed by sea from Mexico and were moving through the



mountains to the east.

After school he gave up his architecture studies to concentrate on guerrilla activity as a member of the rebels' Action and Sabotage unit. "It was a very unstable time to try to study," he said later. "Either Batista closed down the university, or we did." (He would later complete a history degree in 1978, at the age of 36.)

After the revolution was successful in January 1959, the first cultural body set up by Castro was the Cuban Institute of Cinematography Arts and Industry (ICAIC), into which Solás was accepted the following year. He ambitiously called his first short apprenticeship movie *Casablanca* in 1961 but it was in 1966, with the final film of his apprenticeship, *Manuela*, influenced by the *nouvelle vague*, or new wave, of French directors and Italian cinema's neo-realism, that he stamped his signature on Cuban film. It was the first of many films in which Solás told his story through the eyes of a woman, because "women reflect society more deeply, the effects of social

transformation on a woman's life are more transparent. Women have suffered more from society's contradictions and are thus more sensitive to them and more hungry for change.

In the 40-minute black-and-white film, *Manuela*, played by Adela Legrá, is a guajira, a poor Cuban peasant woman who joins revolutionary guerrillas in the jungle after her mother is killed by the armed forces. With the headlong motion of cinematographer Jorge Herrera's hand-held camera, and minimal dialogue, the film brilliantly captures her relationship with the handsome, guitar-strumming rebel known as Mejicano, played by Adolfo Llauro, until she dies in his arms after battling against an army tank.

Two years later, aged 26, Solás wrote and directed *Lucia*, a masterpiece some critics believe he never matched in his later work. It tells three different stories, in varying cinematic styles, about three women called Lucia during three distinct epochs of Cuban history: the war of independence against Spain in the late 19th century, the 1930s revolution against the dictator Gerardo Machado, and the new confidence of women, confronting machismo, in Castro's revolutionary Cuba.

The first part is memorable for its dramatic shots of black independence fighters on horseback, naked, riding to face the mighty Spanish cavalry, a scene probably influenced by the work of the Italian director Luchino Visconti. (A penniless Solás had wandered around Europe to study the new wave of films in 1964, spending most of his time in Italy.)

Among Solás's other best-known works were *Simparele* (1974), a stylish film of song and dance about the struggles against slavery and dictatorships in Cuba's Caribbean neighbour, Haiti; *Cantata de Chile* (1975), a tribute to the victims of Augusto Pinochet's 1973 coup in that country; *Cecilia* (1981), elegant but widely criticised in Cuba for the way it tampered with Cirilo Villaverde's classic 19th century novel *Cecilia Valdes*; *Un Hombre de Exito [A Successful Man]*, 1986); and *El Siglo de las Luces* (1991, known in English as *Explosion in a Cathedral*, from the great novel about the French revolution by the Cuban Alejo Carpentier.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, with Castro forced to enact a certain degree of glasnost, or opening up, Solás and his fellow Cuban film-makers became more daring, though they still had to walk that fine line between reflecting Cuba's hardships and being labelled "counter-revolutionary." In Cuban terms, it was a battle between "dogmatics" and "liberals," the latter prepared to criticise the failings of the regime while careful to support "the revolution" as a whole.

"Freedom is a very subjective thing," Solás once said. "Revolutionary freedom involves the freedom to produce revolutionary art, whereas petit bourgeois freedom entails presenting an anguished criticism, one which is often arrogant and seldom productive."

After Gutiérrez Alea announced a new direction in Cuban film with his 1994 *Fresa y Chocolate [Strawberry and Chocolate]*, Solás followed up the sweet-tooth theme with *Miel para Oshun [Honey for Oshun]* in 2001, shot with hand-held digital cameras and widely applauded when shown at both Sundance and Cannes. Starring Jorge Perugorria and the great Adela Legra, it tells the deeply-moving tale of an exiled Cuban who returns from Florida to look for his long-lost mother.

In 2005, Solás made *Barrio Cuba*, again starring Perugorria, the story of three Havana families' efforts to survive the island's economic grief, retain their spiritual faith, overcome homophobia and still find time for love and laughter. The title suggests that all Cubans are stuck in a single barrio, or neighbourhood, that unites them in national hardship on the US-blockaded island.

Phil Davison - The Independent

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