

## A Cinematic Calling Card: *Preludio II* and Cuban-GDR cultural dialogue

*Preludio II* (GDR / Cuba 1964, dir. Kurt Maetzig) was the third of four international co-productions realised between Cuba and predominantly socialist European partners in the early 1960s. These co-productions fulfilled important educational roles as the newly founded Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematografica (Cuban Institute for Cinematic Art and Industry, ICAIC) sought to train personnel in film production in the wake of the Revolution and significant subsequent brain drain. The film is an adventure/spy story – a popular Cold War genre – and engages with the political worries of the day. It was produced when Cuba and the German Democratic Republic were establishing the parameters and reach of their alliance, and when the Cuban Revolution was undergoing a process of rapid radicalisation partly due to hostile US responses to the initial reforms that the 1953-1958 rebellion had promised (agrarian, welfare, social).

The film has been examined from several perspectives: as an example of extended notions of Heimat and Cuba in the German imaginary (Hosek 2012), how the co-production reflected prior and shaped future cinematic collaboration between Cuba and the GDR (Matuskova 2017), the contribution GDR cinema made to the development of Cuban cinema (Smith-Mesa 2011), and as a means of exploring contemporary cultural parameters (Muñoz-Aunión 2010). However, data from the Archive of the Academy of Arts in Berlin offers fresh insights into the dynamics surrounding the film. This article will therefore explore previous research on *Preludio II* in conjunction with this newly analysed data, which includes interim reports from the film's director, Kurt Maetzig, and internal communication from the 'Red Circle' working group which he co-led. Using extensive primary sources from the Bundesarchiv as well

as secondary sources on Cuban and German history and politics, this article argues how a clash in off-screen political prerogatives in regards to artistic expression and education is palpable in the communications surrounding the making of *Preludio II*. An exploration of this conflict provides an insight into how wider transnational political and cultural priorities shaped artistic expression, imbuing the work with a larger-than-life status as the Cuban-GDR relationship developed.

*Preludio II* is a black and white adventure romp that focuses on the fictionalised challenges surrounding the build-up to a Bay of Pigs Invasion-like event, but draws on real events (Anon. c. 1962). It is set in a tense and unstable 1961 and focuses on the actions and struggles of two opposing groups: a gang, or ‘prelude’ of US-trained and funded counterrevolutionaries who set off from their training camp in Florida with the mission to blow up a strategic bridge in Western Cuba (in reality the Bacunayagua bridge) in order to prepare for a larger-scale invasion, and a group of revolutionary *milicianos* under whose jurisdiction the bridge falls. There are six key characters in the first group, four of whom are Cuban exiles: Rodriguez, the son of a wealthy landowner; Figueras, a lawyer who fought against Batista but then left Cuba; Miguel, an ambitious designer who left for economic reasons; and Ravelo, a former lowbrow reporter (Anon. 1964a); the fifth member is Rico, a Guatemalan farmer who is motivated by the \$10/day wage which he uses to support his family. All are trained by the American McLash. The other group is led by the Commander Palomino who was captured in the struggle against Batista and is now a spy for the counterrevolutionaries. Other figures in the group include Ramon Quintana, a senior lieutenant from a wealthy background who idolises Palomino (Fig. 1), Peña, a factory cement worker, and Daniela who is a ‘true daughter’ of the

Cuban People (Anon. 1964b). Daniela is a *miliciana*, a literacy teacher and a single mother after her fiancé, Miguel, left for the US – he now forms part of the counterrevolutionary ‘prelude’.

**[Insert figure 1 near here. Caption:]** Quintana defends the bridge. Frame grab.

The counterrevolutionaries’ mission is marred by misfortune, all of which foreshadows the operation’s failure. The boat taking them to Cuba from their training camp crashes, leaving them to tramp through swampland and walk a long way to the bridge they are required to destroy. On the way, the group’s commander, McLash, is fatally wounded by an early skirmish with revolutionaries in the mountains where he kills one unsuspecting revolutionary from behind and wounds another. The aerial landing of reinforcements for the hapless counterrevolutionaries is thwarted by *campesinos* working by the bridge who come to the defense of the Revolution and set fire to the surrounding swampland, causing all but one parachutist – Barro, a former henchman for Batista – to die horribly in the flames. Although the counterrevolutionaries take only one revolutionary (Peña) hostage in the initial skirmish, he convinces Rico to defect and join the revolutionary cause. Rico takes Peña’s advice, joins the Revolution and promptly reveals Palomino as a double agent. Back in HQ upon discovering he has been found out and the plot has failed, Palomino commits suicide and ultimately, the remaining counterrevolutionaries are arrested – including Miguel. In stark contrast, the *milicianos*, of mixed socio-economic and racial backgrounds, are united by the common goal of the survival of the Revolution. Working together, the *milicianos* consistently overcome the challenges they, and by extension the nascent Revolution, face without losing their sense of self. The greatest challenge is faced by Daniela,

who must ultimately choose between her love for Miguel and her love for the Revolution. She, of course, chooses the Revolution (and Quintana) (Fig. 2).

**[Insert figure 2 near here. Caption:]** Daniela and Quintana approach one another. Frame grab.

The film's key thematic elements and characterisations show Cuban society through the perspective of an East German gaze, which also shapes institutional discussions of the film. The GDR team felt the film offered a 'sociological cross section of Cuban society' (Beyer in Gräf 1963), but it also reflects East German priorities and hopes. The figures of Daniela, Miguel and Sergio Figueras in particular merit further discussion.

Daniela acts as the representation of the exotic setting in which the film takes place, her racialisation is used to other her (and by extension Cuba), signalling to the GDR viewers that the film is both relatable and different (see Hosek 2012). Daniela also pays homage to the traditions of socialist realism that were being reassessed sporadically throughout the 1960s and the Thaw(s). She is the classic sex symbol of the committed militiawoman (*miliciana*). Indeed, Smith-Mesa has argued that the entire film is a 'German celebration of Cuban beauty, particularly "la miliciana"' (2011, 116), and that Daniela is Maetzig's 'personal contribution to the long list of heroines in socialist cinema' (ibid., 117). Daniela both fits and does not fit the trope of the socialist realist heroine. She is energetic and driven and despite the challenges she faces focuses on bettering herself and those around her, but she is also conflicted and, at times, weak. With regard to specifically East German cultural expression, she also fits into the small flurry of films produced by DEFA, the state-owned Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft, in the lead-up to the Eleventh Plenum of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in 1963, and the tendency in

the GDR to celebrate single independent women in their socialist society (Feinstein 2002, 131-132; Heineman 1999). These East German celluloid women sought emancipation and self-fulfilment, similarly to Daniela who frees herself of the social expectations of women and finds meaning and happiness through her commitment to the Revolution. The similarities of Cuba's socialist society to that of the GDR is highlighted through the judgement Daniela faces from her mother's 'typical German petit-bourgeoise prejudices' (Kranz 1963, 2) for not following Miguel to the USA as his wife. Cuba's difference to the GDR is made apparent by Daniela's race, which along with the visual treatment of the Caribbean nature 'is carried out with a look that magnifies it at the same time that it exoticizes it, applying the usual mechanisms of colonial literature' (Muñoz-Aunión 2010, 238). For example, Daniela's military uniform accentuates her body rather than hides it, and she continues to pay attention to her appearance, shopping for fashionable sunglasses with Ramon Quintana in the film's opening segments (Fig. 3). This exoticisation of Daniela was also extra-diegetic, in the way the temperament of the actor who played her, Aurora Depestre, was discussed by the German press (Hosek 2012, 73). Consistently throughout the internal discussion surrounding the film, Depestre's acting skills are disparaged while her beauty is celebrated (Gräf 1963).

**[Insert figure 3 near here. Caption:]** Daniela buys sunglasses. Frame grab.

Daniela is a symbol of the young Revolution and the people's zeal, while Miguel and Sergio Figueras represent the complexities of the exile community and its threat to national security. Both of these characters are multifaceted and their reasons for leaving Cuba are never fully explored in the film. Miguel left for entrepreneurial reasons selling the patent to his infrared

emitter to the US, and his drive for returning with the counterrevolutionaries is not fully explored (Fig. 4).

**[Insert figure 4 near here. Caption:] Miguel's IR emitter.** Frame grab.

Figueras is a complex character also, having fought against Batista with the rebels in the Sierra Maestra, yet leaving after being captured and interrogated (Anon. 1961b). The figures of Miguel and particularly Figueras complicate the audience's relationship to the 'prelude', adding nuance at a time of growing binaries. In internal East German communication, Figueras' character is unpacked. In a letter to DEFA's leadership, Maetzig highlighted that the character of Figueras was designed to show that those who fought against progress ultimately fought shoulder to shoulder with 'beasts' like Barro (Maetzig 1962). Figueras, it was argued, reflected the fate of the West Germans who had declared themselves in opposition to the policies of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Defence Minister Franz Josef Strauss (and therefore in sympathy with the GDR) but did nothing (Maetzig 1962). Later, 'Red Circle' would echo this idea, championing the inclusion of the character. They framed Figueras' decision to leave Cuba for the USA as a belief in a third way rather than an antagonistic attitude towards the Revolution, but this approach would mean that the audience would have to ultimately condemn him (Anon. c. 1963) (Fig. 5).

**[Insert figure 5 near here. Caption:] Figueras clashes with the other counterrevolutionaries.**

Frame grab.

In the dynamics surrounding the counterrevolutionaries, their mission and ties to Cuba, *Preludio II* gently offers a fictionalised Cuba that speaks to the contemporary worries of the GDR regarding security, citizen engagement and identity, and which skirts around worries about cultural creation under socialism by conforming to a clear and accessible visual style. Central to the narrative of the film is what Hosek calls ‘extended Heimat’ – the idea that the (socialist) fatherland extends beyond its national borders to include the wider socialist network. In a bid to articulate a socialist national identity that sat both within bloc identity and independently, intellectuals returned to the idea of Heimat, which in the GDR ‘reclaimed domestic space as a socialist space of belonging that extended well beyond newly constraining boundaries’ (Hosek 2012, 89). Cuba, as a newly emerged socialist state near the USA, was an important addition and extension of the GDR’s socialist Heimat, and the choice to focus on the run-up to a Bay of Pigs Invasion-type event helped to emphasise this point. *Preludio II*’s focus on a landmark revolutionary event was practical as much as an act of solidarity. ICAIC was explicitly clear that it did not want a film about the Cuban Revolution, but rather the failure of a counter revolutionary attack (Hartwig 1963), and the Bay of Pigs Invasion was a manageable topic for those who knew little of Cuba, while the event lent itself to melodrama. Maetzig and script writer Wolfgang Schreyer conducted research about the event in Cuban newspaper articles between October 1960 and July 1961, Kurt Hoffmann’s (GDR Correspondent) references, discussions with Günter Letzker from the GDR mission in Havana, and their own observations (Anon. 1961c).

The adventure/spy format of the film speaks to well-established genres but also reflects the pressing political concerns of the day for the GDR (and to some extent Cuba) as well as the parallels the GDR saw with Cuba. Most obviously, the film engages with the drama and tensions

of the Bay of Pigs invasion, but the film also ‘mapped Cuba’s broadly accepted national defence agenda onto the GDR’s less broadly accepted national defence agenda’ (Hosek 2012, 72).

Revolutionary Cuba was quite literally an island in the front line of the Cold War, heroically facing down the threats of imperialistic forces; the GDR was its European only semi-metaphorical counterpart sandwiched between, and subject to, the tensions of the East and the West whilst also trying to articulate and assert its own identity. The spy element (enemy in plain sight, betrayal, national security, conflicting emotions) opened a space to reflect on internal tensions, exile communities and security threats in a theoretically less didactic way. Such space took on a new significance during production, when uncomfortable parallels could be drawn with the ‘island’ of Berlin as a space for the confrontation of communism – particularly after Kennedy’s 1963 visit.

From mutual accommodation to trepidation

This section explores the cross-institutional dialogue concerning *Preludio II* and how it changed over time, moving from pragmatic accommodation and mutual benefit towards a more tense form of collaboration. As the Revolution thrust Cuba onto the political map and into the international limelight, it captured the imaginations of the global left (and right). Cultural exchange and collaboration with Cuba rapidly became an area of exploration and a meaningful channel of international dialogue. For Cuba, early transnational cultural encounters presented an opportunity to remedy a skills deficit caused by the lack of a national cinema industry and a deficit of Cuban cinema specialists, in part due to the mass exodus following the Revolution. Such cultural shortcomings were also seen as part of the wider colonial legacy which relied on importing and imposing models and cultures rather than developing authentically Cuban cultures

(Gordon-Nesbitt 2015, 358, appendix A; Story 2019, 71). Cinema was an immediate area of focus, and ICAIC developed an early focus on documentaries as a way of creating an active and engaged viewer, and as a way of training a new cohort of creatives (Malitsky 2021).

Film was identified as a conduit for international cultural diplomacy early in the Cuban-GDR relationship, and the GDR was one of ICAIC's destinations for the financing of cinematic equipment (Montes de Oca et al. 2021, 310). Formal cooperation in the field was quickly established, with the first agreement between Cuba and the GDR on film exchange signed on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1960 (Otto and Bulla 1960). A more systematic exchange would begin the following year and included many different forms of culture (Story and Gallardo-Saborido 2023), but film forged ahead, perhaps in part due to ICAIC's status as an independent actor (other fields were subordinated to the National Council of Culture) but also since cultural policy in the first decade of the Revolution was pragmatic and responded to needs as they arose (Kumaraswami and Kapcia 2016). As Matuskova has pointed out, DEFA and ICAIC shared similar missions in creating viable, high quality national cinemas and at the same time moving their audiences' taste away from West Germany and Hollywood respectively (2017, 222). They were therefore potentially mutual high-value assets in an era in which mass media and popular culture were growing exponentially. Interaction between Cuba and the GDR inversely paralleled the growing geopolitical isolation of the two countries. As commercial relations between DEFA and ICAIC were formalised, an early, yet undefined, plan for a co-production emerged.

The concrete opportunity came about unexpectedly. In an anonymous report detailing the development of *Preludio II*, it appears that after the success of *Der Traum des Hauptmann Loy* (*Captain Loy's Dream*, GDR 1956, dir. Kurt Maetzig), DEFA was eager to capitalise on the writer Wolfgang Schreyer's success, suggesting he write a screenplay based on the hijacking of

the Portuguese ocean liner the Santa Maria in 1961. Schreyer had wanted to go to Brazil, where the assailants had been granted asylum, to study ‘the milieu’ of the area where the hijacking came to a head, but it was deemed too expensive. However, in the wake of the Bay of Pigs invasion, it was suggested a trip Cuba would be useful for Schreyer’s studies as it was also in Latin America and perhaps while there, he might have some ideas for new material and make contact with ICAIC to see what opportunities were there. Schreyer and Maetzig, members of the same DEFA artistic working group, the ‘Red Circle’, travelled to Cuba in June 1961 and while there approached ICAIC to discuss the possibility of a co-production (Anon. 1963a). Maetzig, who was one of DEFA’s most innovative, and highly paid, filmmakers (Rodenberg 1963a, 2), felt the trip had gone well. He was impressed by the level of hospitality (and the Cadillac) received, reporting that they had met with ICAIC’s Alfredo Guevara and Saul Yelin for unofficial negotiations (Maetzig 1961).

While the Cuban side was not keen on the idea of a co-production due to the ideological and aesthetic unity necessary for success, apparently they were interested in cooperation (Maetzig 1961). This more collaborative approach from ICAIC fit the institution’s focus on the development of Cuban talent. Based on the initial visit, a draft of the script was conceived and shared with Guevara and ICAIC when the young director Frank Beyer visited Cuba later that year. In a letter to Guevara, Gerhard Hartwig, the main dramaturg of ‘Red Circle’, asked for constructive criticism and highlighted how the film could contribute to the international image of the Revolution (Hartwig 1961). The letter identified what the GDR team felt were some of the first draft’s shortcomings; the inability of the central love story (Daniela and Quintana) to hold the film together, the fact that the only revolutionary Commander (Palomino) is a traitor, and Daniela’s lack of contact with other militia officers (she is removed from her unit in many of her

scenes). Nonetheless, Hartwig hoped the film would be able to show the moral disintegration of a counterrevolutionary group that is ultimately unable to carry out its planned attack. In this way the planned film would not be explicitly about the Cuban Revolution (as per Cuban requests), but rather about the failure of counterrevolutionary attacks that gamble on the support of the Cuban people (Hartwig 1961).

As discussions about the co-production developed, the first Week of East German Cinema was held in Havana. The event received national coverage in the GDR and high-profile figures visited Havana, including the Deputy Minister of Culture, Hans Rodenberg (Wendt 1961). The event added an impetus to the discussions around *Preludio II* and despite initial misgivings, the Cuban side remained positive about the script. Guevara praised Schreyer's ability to capture the essence of the Bay of Pigs invasion despite not directly experiencing it, and after just a few short weeks in Cuba. However, he agreed the script did not express the Revolution's strength or character clearly enough (Guevara 1961). Other criticisms from the group included the need for the Miguel character to be further developed, the contrast between Daniela and Quintana to be stronger, the strategic value of the counterrevolutionaries' mission to be clearer, and for Daniela not to die at the end (Anon. 1961a). Guevara suggested that Schreyer (Maetzig is not mentioned in the report) finish the work in Cuba, and that while they could not offer a glut of talented writers – those that they did have were overloaded and had very limited experience in cinema – the atmosphere would be beneficial to Schreyer's understanding (Guevara 1961). In these interactions, the strategic (inter)national political value of the co-production was highlighted and it was suggested that in the shadow of another potential US invasion, the film in production could help inform the population (Bulla 1961). Shortly after, Guevara reiterated his hope that the film – if finished quickly – might be a weapon that could help make cinema the art

form of the moment (Guevara 1961). The Cuban writer José Soler Puig, who had won the Casa de las Americas Prize for his action novel *Bertillón 166*, which dealt with the insurrectionary movement against Batista, eventually joined the team (Anon. 1964c, 23), but later reports suggest his input was limited (Kranz 1963, 3; Gräf 1963). Schreyer and Hartwig returned to Cuba in early 1962 to finish writing (Mahlich 1961; Anon. 1963a), and by April the script was completed. Although the script was accepted, the weakness of the protagonists was again highlighted by ICAIC as needing more work due to their relevance to the problems Cubans faced (Guevara 1962b; Espinosa 1962).

While the project did indeed aim to create awareness of Cuba abroad, it seems the GDR provided the materials, and most of the personnel, and, by both German and Cuban accounts, was the dominant entity in its production (Hosek 2012, 68). There have been suggestions that the GDR production crew saw the Cubans more as apprentices than as co-workers (ibid.); however, it was reported the *Preludio II* team worked well together – Monika Krause-Fuchs acted as an interpreter for the film and confirmed the good working relations (Matuskova 2017, 303), as did an internal GDR report (Wolff and Gerwien 1963). While it is easy to read the GDR dominance of the co-production as evidence of hegemonic tendencies, it is also true that the nascent Cuban film industry viewed it as a priority to strengthen cultural bonds between countries who were developing links with Cuba in other fields (Guevara 1963a) and recognised the training opportunities that such collaborative efforts presented in addition to public demonstrations of solidarity and collaboration. As Guevara stressed to Rodenberg, ‘the most important task continues to be the formation of artistic and technical cadres, and to create a creative environment capable of ensuring all possibilities and seeing talent flourish’ (Guevara 1962a). The role of the co-production as an educational and mutually supportive endeavour was clear to

the GDR team and played a role in who was selected to be part of the crew based on what training they might offer (Hartwig and Schreyer 1962). Later, the GDR would also emphasise its aim of producing a film that tackled problems of mutual interest (Mahlich and Rost 1964).

Budget restraints, particularly hard currency issues, limited the size of the East German cast and crew to a minimum (nine staff, two interpreters, four actors), whereas the Cuban staff numbered twelve (eight actors, four staff members). 100 calendar days were initially allocated to the creation of the film (Anon. 1962a), which is a long schedule by Cuban standards (Guevara 1974, 271). Two thirds of the film were shot in Cuba in various locations across Havana and Pinar del Río, with the final third being filmed in Babelsberg (Wolff and Gerwien 1963). The GDR supplied a team of cultural heavyweights which, in addition to Maetzig and Schreyer, included the actors Günther Simon (Palomino), Gerry Wolff (Figueras) and Armin Mueller-Stahl (Quintana). All were established figures with Mueller-Stahl already having embodied Cuban-GDR solidarity on screen as Ulli in ... *und deine Liebe auch* (... *and Your Love Too*, GDR 1962, dir. Frank Vogel) (discussed by Hosek 2012). By comparison, and reflective of the early stages of the Cuban cinema industry, the majority of the Cuban team were newcomers, for example, directorial assistant Pastor Vega and actress Aurora Depestre.

Reflecting the international gaze and potential reach of the revolution, but also the way it caught the cultural imagination of the international left, *Preludio II* was far from being the only co-production during this period. Teams from Czechoslovakia, the USSR and France were already filming or scheduled to do so (Maetzig 1963). Vladimir Čech was shooting *Komu tanci Havana* (*For Whom Havana Dances*, Czechoslovakia / GDR 1963) as was Armand Gatti with *El otro Cristóbal* (*The Other Christopher*, Cuba / France 1963). Meanwhile, Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Mikhail Kalatozov worked with Cuban director and writer Enrique Pineda Barnet in

Moscow on the script for *Soy Cuba (I am Cuba, Cuba / USSR 1964, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov)*. There was clearly an element of intra-socialist competition about the co-productions, and the progress of the Czech co-production was followed with interest. Hartwig even made a reference to the hapless spy Wormold in *Our Man in Havana* (UK 1959, dir. Carol Reed) in one of his letters to DEFA (Hartwig and Schreyer 1962). It must have been difficult for the interested parties not to follow the other co-productions closely and to reflect on what light it might cast on the GDR, particularly as a socialist power often seen to be firmly situated in Moscow's shadow. Maetzig certainly followed the other developments with interest. He reported back in detail on the other three co-productions, the sizes of the crew, if and how they were working with Cubans as technicians or actors, and if they were bringing any of the technical equipment with them to Cuba. The Soviet co-production, with a team over four times the size of the GDR's and a commitment to leave behind the vast amount of resources they had brought with them, particularly stood out with Maetzig highlighting the 'fierce competition' between *Preludio II* and the other co-productions and his hope that 'our DEFA brand can assert itself with dignity' (Maetzig 1963). This intrasocialist competition contributed to the growing political role of *Preludio II* throughout 1962 and 1963.

Initially planned for August 1962, filming was delayed to October as the Cuban-Czech coproduction overran and other resources were tied up in *The Other Christopher*, meaning that Maetzig's heavily pregnant wife (who remains nameless in all documents consulted) accompanied the film crew to Cuba and gave birth in Havana (Rodenberg 1962). The presence of Maetzig's wife appears to have created tension among the GDR crew, particularly during the Missile Crisis, when 'plot and reality merged into one' (Maetzig 1963). Maetzig later reported that filming continued to be supported, including with the provision of Army resources amidst

the Crisis; the only delay to the shoot was an instance of Günther Simon and Gerry Wolff donating blood (c. 1963). Maetzig was also impressed that cultural life continued amidst the shadows of the Missile Crisis (c. 1963). Other documents, however, suggest a more fraught experience. In April 1963, Gerry Wolff and Bernd Gerwien wrote to the SED to clarify rumours about the making of the film and highlight points of tension during the production in Cuba. They also included a letter of self-criticism from Maetzig which emphasised that despite intragroup tensions the crew always presented a united and well-behaved front to their Cubans colleagues (Wolff and Gerwien 1963).

Filming finished, 'Red Circle' reviewed the film, and although dismissive of Depestre's acting abilities, felt that the production would help enrich the adventure film genre (Anon. c. 1963). DEFA was satisfied enough to accept the rough cut, albeit with some criticism (Gräf 1963). However, the SED, the GDR Ministry for Culture (MfK) and ICAIC had very different opinions of the film, reflective of the change in the Cuban-GDR relationship during the filming period. *Preludio II* was subject to harsh criticism from the MfK and the SED's Cultural Department. A confidential report for the Central Committee of the SED argued that the film fell far short of expectations and should not be released. In particular, the report criticised the disconnect between the GDR population's understanding of the ardour of the Cuban Revolution and how it was portrayed in *Preludio II*. This disconnect was sufficiently pronounced, it was felt, that it could potentially raise doubts about the veracity of previous reporting on Cuba, and damage the development of the people (Kranz 1963). The potential ramifications were clearly linked to the film's international role as a public affirmation of the Cuban-GDR relationship:

... this film will serve as a visiting card: 'This is how we filmmakers from the GDR see you in Cuba'. This film would not make a good calling card in its current form. (Kranz 1963, 3).

While 'the context of the Cold War created simplistic images of the Other on both sides of the Iron Curtain' it seems that for the SED there was little room in the politically-charged cultural arena for simplistic images of the Socialist (Br)other (Hoyer 2023, 7). In DEFA and the 'Red Circle', the SED's response came as a shock, with detailed reflection on all the ways in which the film had been deemed to be progressing well throughout its long development (Anon. 1963a). ICAIC also felt that *Preludio II* fell short of expectations, artistically and politically. Concomitantly with the SED report, Guevara sent a highly critical letter to Rodenberg. He felt the film was 'a minor work' and while he had never expected anything ground-breaking, he had at least hoped for a film that would reach greater dignity and depth (Guevara 1963a). He blamed Maetzig's style – perhaps uncomfortably close to what could be construed as socialist realism during a time of aesthetic polemics and the heated rejection of the method by many in the Cuban cultural world, particularly ICAIC – and ICAIC for keeping its artistic opinions quiet out of a sense of courtesy and protocol. However, he also underlined the political value of the film as a transnational collaborative project that could demonstrate the Cuban-GDR alliance – a particularly urgent need at the time the project was planned – and therefore emphasised that there were elements of value to both sides as well as in terms of the collaboration. What particularly attracted Guevara's ire was the way in which the Cuban delegation had been treated in the GDR. ICAIC's president felt that the political spirit in which the creation of the film was viewed as a step forward despite all the challenges had not fully permeated DEFA. Guevara asserted that

while ICAIC had gone above and beyond in looking after and providing for the visiting East Germans in the spirit of friendship and solidarity, some ‘small attitudes of small people’ in DEFA meant the visiting Cubans were not received in a similar vein (Guevara 1963a). Consequently, the Cuban delegation was given inappropriate accommodation, inadequate subsistence, bad transport and had their loaned winter clothing unceremoniously confiscated when taken to Prague for their flight back to Havana (Guevara 1963a). Writ large in the recounting was an implicit accusation that the delegation received a different treatment because of an attitude that saw Cuba as underdeveloped. Explicitly, Guevara lamented the negative impression of the GDR such treatment created.

The director Roberto Fandiño travelled to DEFA to make the many cuts that ICAIC demanded, with Pastor Vega and Iberé Cavalcanti (also acting as an interpreter) remaining behind until the final cut of the film was finished (Anon. 1963b). Rodenberg personally oversaw the work of Fandiño and Maetzig to ensure that there were no delays and emphasised to Guevara the quality of treatment that Fandiño was receiving (Rodenberg 1963b). After two days of editing, Fandiño had produced a version that ICAIC was willing to put its name to (Rodenberg 1963c).

Fandiño’s changes considered the politics of the day. Potentially politically-charged dialogue that alluded to Fidel’s close relationship with the traitor Palomino, and references to the ‘Sierra del Micro’, a fictionalisation of the Sierra del Escambray mountains (Anon. 1961b), being designated by Fidel as a problem area were edited out. Great importance was placed on finishing *Preludio II* before the end of the year as part of the strengthening of ICAIC’s work and the wider defence and promotion of the Revolution (Guevara 1963b). Finally, at the end of October, the film received approval from the MfK (Mathyssek 1963). Although outside the scope

of this article, it is worth briefly mentioning the critical response to the film when it was screened in Cuba at the end of 1963. Some critics were passingly positive about the film; the film critic for *Bohemia*, Luis M López, for example, considered the dialogue better than much shown in Cuban cinemas of the time, and to him, Maetzig's visuals were the strongest element of the film. By contrast, the other three co-productions had raised López' ire (López 1963, 1964a, 1964b, 1964c, 1964d). The general cultural magazine *Bohemia* clearly recognised and communicated the film's educational function. It was pitched as an archetypal adventure movie coupled with a training opportunity rather than a cinematic masterpiece, but better than the critic expected (López 1964a), perhaps reflecting stereotypes about East German culture. Mario Rodríguez Alemán was less favourable reporting that the film was lacking in artistic value and was filmed like a tourist stroll around Havana (Rodríguez Alemán 1964). Arguably, audiences in both the GDR and Cuba were not used to such transnational co-productions that were created precisely to help develop cinematic literacy in both countries.

### Shifting values

Having explored the development of the film and the sudden shift in attitudes towards *Preludio 11*, this section explores the socio-political factors which may have contributed to this change. Through growing press coverage, and from 1961 onwards as a high-profile destination for East German tourism, Cuba had grown to become an important site of GDR cultural imaginary and possibility. As such, it was the reflection of a vision, also evident in *Preludio 11*, that saw the GDR and Cuba as members of the expanding socialist world system, with the latter holding 'an important role within this constellation, both as a site of exoticism and of revolutionary allure' (Bodie 2020, 413). In the case of *Preludio 11*, Daniela is the embodiment of this duality, and

Maetzig's mixing of politics and eroticism helped 'shape the image of Cuban Revolutionary women within the socialist cinematic tradition but also within the cinema of the Cuban Revolution' (Smith-Mesa 2011, 119). Alongside Daniela, the leading roles of the East German actors helped blur the boundaries of the socialist nationhood in favour of a more internationalist reading. As East German tourism to Cuba grew, so did public interest in the island. In a GDR report from late 1961, the author reflected on the surge in public interest in and solidarity with the Cuban Revolution since the declaration of its socialist nature in April 1961, evidenced by rallies across the GDR and millions of Deutschmarks that had been sent to the island as donations (Anon. 1961d). Outside of cinema, the annual cultural work plans for 1962 and 1963 were considerably more developed, and the exchange of cultural productions were also accompanied by an exchange of organisational information such as the structuring of the Ministry of Culture and the planning of cultural activities (Antuña 1962). Such was the value of Cuba as a socialist ally (and space of an extended Heimat) that the 1962 cruise from the GDR to Cuba actually broke the US blockade of the island (Bodie 2020, 426). Bodie argues that the GDR's commitment to Cuban tourism and its high-profile demonstrations of solidarity reflected the GDR's desire for diplomatic recognition, and also may have helped facilitate the development of Cuban-Soviet relations (Bodie 2020, 427). Eventually the GDR's Cuban investment achieved the desired result and in January 1963, Cuba formally recognised the GDR, severing relations with West Germany as per the Hallstein doctrine.

The move came at a time when there was a readjustment of Cuba's alliances and development plans. Such ideologically fraught recalibrations left less room for ambiguity in political allegiances. For example, between 1959 and 1965 the Cuban government conducted the military operation 'Fight Against Bandits' against insurgent groups in the isolate, mountainous

Escambray region. An important site of resistance in the 1953-1958 rebellion, it had become home to the anti-revolutionary guerrillas who rejected the Revolution's move towards socialism. As such, the references to problem areas and Fidel's friendship with subsequent traitors were perhaps a little too close to home. Particularly given that the plot was set in real areas given 'geographic pseudonyms' (and revised fictional locations to streamline the plot) (Anon. 1961b) and the film's opening statement that it was based on actual events. At the time of editing, it was also less than a year after the so-called 'mini-Stalinist' affair which confronted sectarian tendencies within the emerging institutions of an increasingly isolated Cuba. In 1962, internal political tensions came to a head, and those within the united-front revolutionary party, the Integrated Revolutionary Organizations (ORI), who were perceived to be loyal to the USSR rather than to Cuba, were definitively removed from positions of power. The ORI was replaced with a short-lived unified revolutionary party, the PURS. These developments alongside expulsion from the Organisation of American States, the Missile Crisis, and then the imposition of full economic sanctions from the US in 1963, contributed to the development of a siege mentality (Kapcia 2008, 99) and left little room for humanising portrayals of the enemy or nuanced reasoning for leaving the homeland.

Wider social and cultural debates in both Cuba and the GDR had also emerged during the period in which the film was created. By 1964, Cuban-Soviet relationships were beginning to become strained as the Revolution had entered a period of sustained public debate across all sectors of society (1963-1965) about which models to follow in the economic development of the Revolution (Kapcia 2008, 27, 34). In the cultural arena, this period was characterised by heated polemics about the nature and role of socialist art and the potential place of socialist realism (Story 2019); ICAIC was vociferously against the latter, which Smith-Mesa discusses in detail

(2011). Meanwhile, the GDR had rejected the idea of progressing straight to Communism, focusing instead on building a socialist state (Schneider 1978, 83). It was in the throes of implementing the New Economic System, adapted to the GDR from the ideas of Soviet economist Evsei Liberman in a bid to increase efficiency of the central planning mechanisms (Childs 1988, 68) and to help aid economic recovery from the damage done by steady *Republikflucht*. Embarking on an ambitious socio-political programme of its own making, Cuba then, as a flourishing fellow island in the shadow of both the US and USSR, was seen to hold much political potential and strategic value to the isolated and overshadowed GDR. In one document, Maetzig even called Cuba the ‘island of passion, island of hope’ (Maetzig c. 1963).

From background to protagonist

At the genesis of the co-production, the GDR had few strong ties to the Cuban Revolution. Various cultural institutes had undertaken early exploratory visits with the aim of forging links for the development of trading relations. From these early interactions, greater trade within TV, film and radio had indeed been singled out as areas of interest, which perhaps provided an additional impetus to explore creative links between DEFA and ICAIC. This prioritising of film meant that to the hard currency strapped East Germany, Cuba was a far more practical option than Brazil for a scoping visit to understand the ambiance of Latin America, not only because it was cheaper to reach, but also because it could serve the double function of a networking exercise. Concurrently, ICAIC was seeking to develop Cuban cinema, both in terms of the viewing tastes of the public and also through the creation of a body of technically able creatives to combat the gaps in knowledge left by the emigration of trained specialists. There was thus a set of shared priorities between the East German and Cuban institutions involved, as both were

eager to change the tastes of their national audiences, and to benefit from the added value of international collaboration. For Cuba, the added value was in the educative potential offered by the collaborative endeavour, and in potentially greater access to East German resources. For the GDR, it was new storytelling possibilities that could contribute to the moving of East German cinematic tastes away from West German and Hollywood films, but also the chance for greater international projection (and even recognition).

As early work on and negotiations surrounding the film continued, Cuba was once more thrust onto the international stage through the Bay of Pigs invasion, which significantly contributed to the rapid radicalisation of the revolutionary process and the Cuban population. Unsurprisingly, this landmark political event became the inspiration for *Preludio II*, a focus which worked for both DEFA who was eager to appeal to viewing tastes, and ICAIC who was eager to use film to raise revolutionary consciousness and encourage international solidarity with Cuba. Such sentiments only increased after the Missile Crisis with which filming overlapped. The production developed alongside the Cuban-East German relationship and the significantly increasing symbolic value of Cuba to East German popular imagination, as well as Cuba's growing solidarity efforts with the GDR. During the same period, the Cuban revolution experienced a phase of perceived sectarianism and, in some areas, resistance to the revolutionary process. These shifts, coupled with the tensions of the Missile Crisis, left little room for political ambiguities and accelerated the need to mobilise society and culture. Consequentially, the film was imbued with an added sense of urgency and universality (Cuba and the power of cinema) and the need to make a good impression internationally (the GDR's 'calling card') through the depiction of an ally that had only recently formally recognised the GDR and which had the potential to bring a new sense of energy and dynamism to the socialist revolution. As Maeztig

wrote to the 'Red Circle', 'as different as the production methods and the effort involved in these films are, the great interest that exists for Cuba all over the world will certainly also turn to these four co-production films' (Maetzig 1963).

The inter-institutional communications demonstrate the interplay of these complex dynamics as the project which began as a practical response to world events took on increasing global significance. As a result, the creative endeavour was imbued with a political role augmenting the scrutiny to which it was subject and investing it with a larger-than-life status. However, outside of the political issues, the conversations surrounding *Preludio II* also show the profound impression that the revolution made on the East Germans who were involved in the co-production, and foreshadow how quickly Cuba would become a point of reference for the GDR.

## Filmography

*Komu tanci Havana (For Whom Havana Dances, Czechoslovakia / GDR 1963, dir. Vladimír Čech)*

*El otro Cristóbal (The Other Christopher, Cuba / France 1963, dir. Armand Gatti)*

*Our Man in Havana (UK 1959, dir. Carol Reed)*

*Preludio II (GDR / Cuba 1964, dir. Kurt Maetzig)*

*Soy Cuba (I am Cuba, Cuba / USSR 1964, dir. Mikhail Kalatozov)*

*...und deine Liebe auch (... and Your Love Too, GDR 1962, dir. Frank Vogel)*

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