

7-8-2016

Paradise Lost: Cuban Exile Filmmaker León Ichaso

Amy S. Orf

Northern Michigan University, aorf@nmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.nmu.edu/facwork_conferencepresentations



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Orf, Amy S., "Paradise Lost: Cuban Exile Filmmaker León Ichaso" (2016). *Conference Presentations*. Paper 141.
http://commons.nmu.edu/facwork_conferencepresentations/141

This Conference Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by The Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Conference Presentations by an authorized administrator of The Commons. For more information, please contact kmcdonou@nmu.edu, bsarjean@nmu.edu.

“Paradise Lost: Cuban Exile Filmmaker León Ichaso”

Amy Orf

Northern Michigan University

AATSP 2016 Conference

Abstract: In this paper I examine the trilogy of Spanish-language films directed by Cuban exile León Ichaso: *El súper* (1979), *Azúcar amarga* (1996), and *Paraíso: Freedom is Murder* (2009). The profound sense of loss that Ichaso must have experienced when he left Cuba at the age of fourteen comes through in his films, which portray life after the Cuban Revolution as a loss of paradise both for those who have left Cuba, as well as for those who still live on the island.

LEÓN (RODRÍGUEZ) ICHASO

León Ichaso was born in Havana on August 3, 1948. His father, Justo Rodríguez Santos, was a renowned poet who frequently published in the Cuban literary magazine *Orígenes* and a pioneering director of television and radio. Ichaso’s father often took him to the station where he saw live television shows and films being made. His mother, Antonia Ichaso, wrote for television and radio and had her own radio magazine show. Ichaso’s parents divorced when he was eight years old. Mirta Ojito indicates that politics may have played a role. Ichaso’s father was an ardent supporter of Castro, while his mother was vehemently opposed. As it turns out, the couple ended up getting remarried twenty years later.

Ichaso left Cuba in 1963, with his mother and his sister, Mari Rodríguez Ichaso, who also became a filmmaker and writer. Ichaso’s father stayed behind, telling him:

Mírame bien porque más nunca vas a verme. Yo creo en esto y aquí me quedo. (Ojito 69)

Instead, he rejoined his family in Miami five years later, after becoming disillusioned with the Revolution. According to Ojito:

...cuando pidió permiso de salida..., lo enviaron a una granja de trabajos forzados. Sus libros desaparecieron de las librerías cubanas. Borraron su nombre de la historia literaria de Cuba. (69)

Once Ichaso’s father arrived in the U.S., the family moved to New York.

Ichaso got his start making TV commercials. He used money from the commercials to make *El súper* (1979), co-directed with fellow Cuban exile, and brother-in-law at the time, Orlando Jiménez Leal. Jiménez Leal’s controversial documentary *P.M.* (1961), co-directed with Sabá Cabrera Infante, had been censored in Cuba. Jiménez Leal and Cabrera Infante both left Cuba in 1963, the same year as Ichaso.

According to Frank Javier Garcia Berumen, *El súper* was “the first Cuban-American feature film” (72). Ichaso used candles when writing the screenplay because he couldn’t afford electricity. However, the success of *El súper* allowed him to leave commercials behind and concentrate on filmmaking. It also opened doors for him in Hollywood.

Ichaso has gone on to direct episodes of more than a dozen different TV shows: *Saturday Night Live* (1980-1981, 2005), *Miami Vice* (1986-1988), *Crime Story* (1986), *The Equalizer* (1987), *Veronica Clare* (1991), *Sins of the City* (1998), *The Division* (2004), *The Handler* (2004), *Sleeper Cell* (2005), *Cane* (2007), *Medium* (2007-2008), *The Cleaner* (2008-2009), and *Persons Unknown* (2010).

He has directed at least eleven TV/Hollywood movies: *A Table at Ciro's* (1987), *The Take* (1990), *The Fear Inside* (1992), *A Kiss to Die For* (1993), *Sugar Hill* (1994), *Zooman* (1995), *Free of Eden* (1999), *Execution of Justice* (1999), *Ali: An American Hero* (2000), *Hendrix* (2000), and *Left to Die* (2012).

In addition, he has directed a number of low-budget independent films, more personal projects: *Crossover Dreams* (1985), *Azúcar amarga* (1996), *Piñero* (2001), *El cantante* (2007), and *Paraíso* (2009).

Ojito calls Ichaso “el realizador cubano más prolífico en Hollywood” (68). For Juan Antonio García Borrero, he is “el precursor, entre los cineastas cubanos, de un cine posnacional” (75).

Regarding his own films, Ichaso states:

Mis películas tratan, en el fondo, acerca de lo que hemos perdido en el camino, acerca de la tristeza del inmigrante, de la nostalgia, del deseo de triunfar, de los problemas de identidad. Son temas cubanos, sí, pero son también, fundamentalmente, temas humanos. A mí me interesa más lo que se queda en el camino, los sueños frustrados. (Ojito 70)

He explains that he makes films for himself, and also for the children of those who left, both Cuba and Puerto Rico. He says he feels like he is sharing a secret with them.

EL SÚPER (1979)

While in New York, Ichaso attended the play *El súper*, by Cuban exile Iván Acosta, and liked it so much that before it ended he had decided to make a film. Ichaso co-wrote the screenplay with Manuel Arce. Ichaso states: “*El Super* was about a Cuban man who couldn’t accept the fact that he was here in the cold and the snow, or that his daughter was becoming Americanized and that he had no world to go back to” (Geller). Elsewhere, he indicates: “*El Super* was a comedy about the tragedy of being completely displaced...” (R. Rodríguez). Ichaso and co-director Jiménez Leal recall the premiere in a theater full of Cuban exiles in Miami:

All of them crying, screaming, and laughing. It was the first time we saw ourselves on the big screen. It was like looking in the mirror. (Rojas)

El súper portrays a loss of paradise for Cuban exiles living in the U.S. The film centers around Roberto, a building superintendent in New York City, his wife Aurelia, and their nearly-18-year-old daughter Aurelita. They have lost home and country. As with many immigrant stories, they have left everything behind. María Cristina García states:

Many [Cuban exiles] had left behind rewarding careers, homes and property, and friends and family. In essence they left behind the identities they had created. They had to begin again, in most cases at middle age..., and they had to adapt to a new society and a new way of living. (85)

The physical separation from family members is particularly difficult for the characters in this film, as I'm sure it has been for most Cuban exiles. Communication between Cuba and the U.S. is complicated. There are issues with mail service between the two countries. Aurelia's friend Ofelia receives a letter from her sister in Cuba that took a month to arrive. Aurelia sent a package of medicine to Roberto's parents in Cuba three months ago and they haven't heard back yet. Ofelia says that government people probably stole it. Her husband Pancho believes they shouldn't send anything to Cuba. He argues they should let Cubans suffer, let them know what communism is. However, Roberto points out Pancho is talking about his own parents. Pancho's comments reveal an additional ideological separation from family. Telephone communication between Cuba and the U.S. is also difficult. Roberto's brother Ramón has to call collect from Cuba. Roberto is glad to hear from Ramón, saying it's been such a long time. Sadly, Ramón has called to tell him that their mother is deceased and the funeral was last week. Roberto is devastated that he wasn't there.

It wouldn't even have been possible for Roberto and his family to return to Cuba for the funeral. María Cristina García indicates that air traffic between Cuba and the U.S. "officially ceased after the Missile Crisis" (77), and that charter air traffic from Miami to Cuba "to allow Cuban exiles the opportunity to visit their relatives in Cuba" only became available in 1979 (81). The action of *El súper* takes place in February 1978. García states that even if they could go back, "Many [exiles] realized that the Cuba they remembered no longer existed..." (85). Roberto is jealous of his immigrant friend Bobby, who can at least go back to Puerto Rico.

The situation of Cubans in the U.S. is further complicated by the fact that those who left after 1959 considered themselves political exiles, rather than immigrants. Juan Antonio García Borrero writes, "Veían su permanencia... como algo temporal, en tanto que la Revolución estaba llamada a fracasar de un momento a otro" (76). This uncertainty about the future made it more difficult for Cuban exiles to adapt to life in the U.S. In *El súper*, it is mentioned that their friend Felipe redecorated his basement. Roberto says it means Felipe plans to stay. However, Roberto intends to return to Cuba if Fidel falls. It's just a matter of time. Roberto's daughter Aurelita, who has lived the majority of her life in the U.S., insists she is staying.

Roberto wants nothing more than to return to Cuba. Jesús Rodríguez speaks of Roberto's "deseo obsesivo por volver a Cuba" (153). For Roberto, Cuba is paradise. He misses everything about it. He and his exile friends talk about it constantly. Roberto misses the sunshine. He misses Sundays in Cuba. He says Sundays are boring in the U.S. because everyone is getting ready to go to work on Monday. Roberto also misses Cuban music. He asks Aurelia, 'Do you remember the first song we danced to?' and they proceed to sing the entire song. At the end of the film Roberto and Aurelia have a party and everyone dances to Cuban music. Pancho comments it is just like a party he went to in Cuba.

If Cuba is paradise for Roberto, New York City is hell. He actually states twice in the film, ‘This is hell,’ he can’t live like this anymore, and he is dying to leave town. First of all, Roberto hates the cold and snow. He and the other characters complain about the weather through the entire film. There are numerous scenes of Roberto outside in the cold and snow, taking out garbage or walking (since he doesn’t have a car), all accompanied by discordant music. Aurelia complains that it gets dark early, the days are gray, and they can’t go out because of the weather. Even the apartment building where they live is cold. Roberto, as superintendent, has to keep the boiler going and fix broken windows to keep the cold out. There are several scenes of Roberto in front of the boiler, with the flames reflecting off his face like the flames of hell. It is interesting that after Roberto finds out about his new job in Miami, he tells his friend Bobby the snow is beautiful.

Roberto and his family live in a basement apartment, also like hell, underground. Aurelia hates it. She complains that she can’t tell one day from the next, and she says that looking through the window and watching people’s feet go by is like looking at the world from below. This is reflective of their isolation and alienation from the world around them. Their small group of friends includes primarily Cuban exiles, and some other latinos.

Roberto is worried about crime in the city. He is always telling Aurelia to lock the door when he leaves. Roberto tells Bobby about a thief who froze to death trying to break into the apartment building. He is also concerned when a tenant tells him another tenant is smoking marijuana in the building. Later, in an angry tirade, Roberto complains that kids spill garbage all over the sidewalk and he has to clean it up. He says they are all thieves, potheads, muggers, and drug addicts.

New York City also presents a lack of economic opportunity for Roberto and his family. As a building superintendent, Roberto has spent ten years cleaning stairs, shoveling, and taking out garbage, and the piles of garbage bags never seem to get taken away. He describes these as the hardest ten years of his life and says if he had known all this, he would have stayed in Cuba cutting cane. Even at the end of the film, Roberto’s new job is in a factory. Jesús Rodríguez writes: “La situación laboral de Roberto pone de relieve la experiencia de millones de inmigrantes en los Estados Unidos que, no importa cual fue el estado social y económico de que disfrutaban en sus respectivos países, al llegar aquí se ven obligados a hacer los peores trabajos” (157). According to Ichaso:

When I made *El Super*, some people asked me, “Why, of all the successful Cubans who have emigrated to this country, did you have to pick a loser who used to be a *guagüero*?” But that’s what felt interesting to me. (R. Rodríguez)

It isn’t clear which part these people take offense to, that Roberto was a bus driver in Cuba, or that he hasn’t become successful in the U.S. Of course, not only professionals left Cuba after the Revolution. María Cristina García states:

The migration out of Cuba followed a logical socioeconomic progression. Cubans of the elite classes were the first to leave, followed by the middle class. By 1962, Cubans of the working class also left: office and factory employees, artisans, and skilled and semi-

skilled laborers. ...by 1970, only 12 percent were professionals or managers, and 57 percent were blue-collar, service, or agricultural workers. (78)

According to the storyline, Roberto's family emigrated to the U.S. around 1968, so it makes sense that his character is among the latter group. With respect to Roberto's lack of success in the U.S., García points out:

While the community as a whole had fared well, and many individual Cubans had achieved success in the United States in a short period of time, ...many Cubans did not share in the community's overall wealth. In 1980, 11.7 percent of Cuban families lived below the poverty level... (83)

Thus, Roberto represents a very real segment of the Cuban exile population. For her part, Aurelia talks about doing some sewing (*costurita*) at home, so her economic opportunities seem limited also.

The inability of Roberto and Aurelia to speak English is obviously a factor with respect to their lack of economic opportunity. When a building inspector shows up at Roberto's door, he has to call his friend Cuco to translate. Even Cuco has problems understanding the inspector, and it isn't clear what the ramifications might be. Also with respect to family life, Roberto and Aurelia don't even seem to understand their daughter Aurelita when she speaks English. At one point Aurelita tells her mother she's going to her friend Millie's to dance and smoke a joint, and she talks to her friends on the phone about parties, boys, and getting stoned. Her parents don't even seem to notice, until she ends up pregnant (actually just a false alarm).

Roberto seems unable to adapt to life in New York City. Ana M. López writes: "Roberto... se encuentra en el medio de una profunda crisis psicológica típica de las condiciones del exilio: añoranza por una Cuba que nunca existió e incapacidad de acomodarse a la dura realidad de su tierra adoptiva" (83). According to Jesús Rodríguez: "La nostalgia por Cuba es, sin duda, el mayor obstáculo que nuestro protagonista debe superar para poder integrarse plenamente en su nuevo país" (158). But, perhaps Roberto doesn't really want to assimilate. After all, he still plans to return to Cuba someday. María Cristina García states:

Maintaining a sense of *cubanidad*... in the United States became crucial to the first generation. ...They regarded complete assimilation as a rejection of their heritage, as well as a denial of those forces that had compelled them to come to the United States. (84).

His daughter Aurelita, on the other hand, seems to have assimilated quite well. Having come to the U.S. when she was eight years old, she belongs to what García calls the "one-and-a-half generation." She writes:

Members of the... one-and-a half generation... were born in Cuba but came of age in the United States. They regarded themselves as both Cuban and American, feel equally comfortable with both cultures and languages, and make both an integral part of their lives. (86)

Frank Javier Garcia Berumen states that while Roberto “undergoes a loss of selfhood, clinging desperately to his memories...,” “...his daughter... is able to maintain a resiliency by becoming bilingual and bicultural” (81). It is worth noting that Ichaso also belongs to the “one-and-a-half generation” since he came to the U.S. when he was fourteen.

If not Cuba, at the very least Roberto wants to move to Miami. Jesús Rodríguez states:

Para Roberto y Aurelia, mudarse a Miami es casi como regresar a Cuba. Y decimos casi, porque Roberto es muy consciente de que nunca podrá regresar a Cuba... (158)

He continues:

Para los adultos como Roberto, ...el cambio de valores y de estilo de vida a su edad es un verdadero reto. No es ninguna casualidad... que casi el 65 por ciento de los emigrantes cubanos han elegido Miami como lugar de residencia, ciudad que en cierto sentido ha sido transformada en un enclave de la cultura cubana donde los cubanos se esfuerzan por recrear y mantener las costumbres isleñas. (159)

In fact, María Cristina García writes: “By 1990, South Florida was home to the largest Cuban population outside of the island, second only to Havana’s” (77). For Raúl Rubio, Miami is “the second homeland” (315). However, Ana M. López calls Roberto’s move to Miami “una especie de nota triunfante sorda,” explaining, “...pues Roberto nunca podrá tener aquello que más desea: no haber abandonado Cuba” (83).

It isn’t clear if Aurelita moves to Miami with her parents. She tells them she is staying in New York, that there is nothing for her in Miami. Jesús Rodríguez writes:

Para Aurelita la cultura cubana es en realidad una cultura extraña. Ella es y se siente americana, lo cual es inevitable por haberse criado y educado en este país. Para ella, mudarse a Miami es como hacer un viaje al pasado y, ella, al contrario de sus padres, vive en el presente. (158)

Roberto tells Aurelita that she is their daughter and she goes where they go. Ichaso leaves it up to the viewer to decide.

AZÚCAR AMARGA (1996)

The second film in Ichaso’s Cuba-themed trilogy, *Azúcar amarga*, was released in 1996. He came up with the idea for the film from several different news reports related to “una nueva generación cubana de roqueros y jineteras,” and “algunos jóvenes cubanos [que] se estaban inyectando el virus del sida” (Ojito 71). He explains his motivations:

Para mí, esa película fue una especie de aviso al mundo sobre lo que estaba pasando en Cuba, porque estaba un poco cansado ya de la gente que iba y contaba lo bien que habían pasado en Cuba. Y nadie contaba lo otro que estaba pasando abiertamente, o debajo del radar, pero ahí, pasando. (Ojito 71)

Ichaso's friends and family members helped to finance *Azúcar amarga*. It was filmed in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, with some footage shot in Havana to establish the setting. According to Ichaso, the crew sneaked cameras into Cuba "under the pretense of doing a Caribbean architecture documentary" (Geller). Ichaso, however, was unable to get a visa and stayed behind in Santo Domingo. Alfonso J. García Osuna calls *Azúcar amarga* "perhaps the most accomplished film made by Cubans outside of Cuba" (59).

Azúcar amarga portrays a loss of paradise for those living in Cuba in the 1990s. It tells the story of Gustavo, an idealistic young communist hoping to study aeronautical engineering in Prague; his girlfriend Yolanda, a beautiful dancer who longs to escape to Miami; Gustavo's rebellious rocker brother Bobby; and their father Tomás, a psychiatrist who quits his practice to work in a tourist hotel.

The characters in *Azúcar amarga* have lost many of their freedoms, including the freedom of expression. Bobby is a singer in a rock band. One night, while they are performing, police raid the show and confiscate their equipment. The police say they didn't have a permit. When the police refuse to give the equipment back, Bobby and the other band members paint themselves in protest and cause a scene in public. They are all arrested, interrogated, and beaten. Gustavo and Yolanda go to an underground art exhibit. Yolanda explains that the artist had been in jail and doesn't have a permit. This makes Gustavo, the good communist, very uncomfortable. Later, Gustavo and Yolanda try to buy beer at a hotel on the beach and are refused service. They are told the hotel is only for foreign tourists. According to Sam Verdeja and Guillermo Martínez, native Cubans are treated like "second-class citizen[s] within [their] own country" (408). Toward the end of the film Gustavo sees demonstrations of Cubans calling for freedom.

The characters in *Azúcar amarga* also suffer from the scarcity of basic goods. The story takes place during the 1990s, known in Cuba as the "Special Period." Clifford L. Staten indicates that with the economic collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Cuba lost approximately 70% of its exports and imports and \$8 billion a year in subsidies (6). He states this led to stagnant wages, fuel shortages, blackouts, transportation problems, food shortages, and rationing (126). Patrick Symmes reports being told by a Cuban development minister in 1999 that, "...the monthly ration supplied enough food to last just nineteen days..." (46). Transportation problems are apparent in *Azúcar amarga* in the huge crowd of people waiting to get on the bus, far too many to fit. Gustavo pulls Yolanda in through the window, and as the bus pulls away, people are hanging on outside. Food shortages are represented by the "socialist cake" speech by Gustavo's father in celebration of his scholarship to study in Prague. Tomás states that this is a true socialist cake, obtained by barter and exchange. Pepe traded a used light bulb for a little flour, Jaime donated some Quik that his brother had brought from Miami, Tomás himself found a bottle of vanilla dated 1960 on the kitchen shelf, and Aunt Antonia surrendered her virginity to a hotel chef for six eggs. He concludes his speech: "Cake o muerte, comeremos."

Azúcar amarga also portrays a lack of economic opportunity in Cuba. Although Gustavo, a model student, wins a scholarship to study in Prague, one wonders what the job prospects are for an aeronautical engineer in 1990s Cuba. Gustavo waits and waits, and nothing happens. In the end, he loses the scholarship when he shoves a wealthy Italian investor at a tourist hotel.

Alfonso J. García Osuna indicates that another effect of the “Special Period” was “the complete devaluation of the Cuban peso” (59). According to Jorge Barrueto, “...the dollar began to replace the *peso Cubano* as the preferred currency...” (105). This led to a growing economic gap among Cubans. Those who work in the tourist industry have access to foreign currency and, as a result, earn much more than other Cubans who are paid in pesos. Oswaldo Payá, one of Cuba’s most important dissidents, told Patrick Symmes:

The paradox is that the workers are the poorest people in Cuba. We’re all worse off than the guy who sells hot dogs in the gas station on the corner. (55)

In *Azúcar amarga*, Tomás quits his psychiatric practice to play the piano at a tourist hotel. He tells Gustavo that his former intern Gladys now makes \$300 a week in tips working at the hotel, while he only made \$3-4 a month as a psychiatrist. Tomás ends up losing his new job due to Gustavo’s outburst. He comes home angry and drunk and says he feels like an exile in his own country. Later on, Tomás indicates he may get a job at a different hotel, in Varadero. This one is owned by Spaniards, and he comments, ‘They are colonizing us again.’

The lack of economic opportunity in Cuba leads to a loss of innocence for one of the characters. Uncertain about her future with Gustavo because of his plans to study in Prague, Yolanda turns to prostitution. The kitchen staff at the hotel where Tomás works tell Gustavo they see her there often. One wealthy tourist named Claudio wants to marry Yolanda and take her back to Italy with him. She doesn’t love him, but seriously considers his offer for the financial security. William Luis states that, although prostitution was initially eradicated after Castro took power, “...a different form of prostitution has returned” (43). He explains: “This one is related to the difficulties caused by the need to obtain dollars and includes women who are well-educated; some are even married” (43).

The characters in *Azúcar amarga* also experience separation from family members. Gustavo’s mother died in a car accident before the action of the film takes place. A year earlier she had asked for them to leave Cuba, but Tomás thought things would get better, and she stayed for him. Although her death was not a direct result of the Revolution, Tomás blamed himself for believing in the Revolution and not leaving. Yolanda’s family experienced separation of a different kind. Her stepfather was a political prisoner who spent eight years in prison. Even Gustavo and Yolanda become separated. He asks her to marry him and gives her his mother’s ring. Yolanda says yes, but she is leaving for Miami tomorrow with her parents. She begs Gustavo to come with her. He refuses, saying that things are so bad in Cuba because everybody leaves instead of fixing the problem.

By the end of the film, the characters in *Azúcar amarga* have lost all hope for the future in Cuba. Bobby’s band members eventually inject themselves with the AIDS virus, preferring *muerte* over *socialismo*. They are later rounded up by police and taken to Los Cocos AIDS camp. Yolanda’s family has lost hope for a future in Cuba. They decide to leave for Miami on a raft. According to María Cristina García:

The *balseero* (rafter) crisis... peaked during the summer of 1994. ...During the last two weeks of August 1994, the U.S. Coast Guard picked up an average of 1,500 *balseeros* each day. (81)

Raúl Rubio indicates filming this scene was difficult for cast and crew: “As many of the extras in the film were... Cuban exiles, the crew was emotionally torn as they relived their own experiences of exile...” (322). Gustavo’s teacher, Sr. García, has also lost hope, but says he has no other options. His whole family is in Miami. He can’t show up on their doorstep twenty years later and say he made a mistake. Even Gustavo, who was so idealistic in the beginning (Yolanda had called him ‘the last communist in Cuba’), is now completely disillusioned with the Revolution. He attends a speech by Castro at the Plaza de la Revolución, grabs a gun, and tries to shoot him. Gustavo is killed by a security agent. According to Rubio: “Gustavo’s role as a disappointed ‘*hombre nuevo*’ (new man) illustrates the disillusion experienced by Cubans who at first believed in the revolution’s political ideology, but later experienced its deceptions” (321). Perhaps this is a reflection of Ichaso’s own father.

PARAÍSO: FREEDOM IS MURDER (2009)

The third film in Ichaso’s trilogy is *Paraíso: Freedom is Murder*, released in 2009. It was filmed here in Miami on a shoe-string \$30,000 budget. Ichaso states that *Paraíso* is about a “new hybrid of Cuban exile, desperate to be part of a world they can barely function in” (R. Rodríguez). According to René Rodríguez, “...the idea for the movie coalesced after a series of encounters with recent Cuban exiles the world over, such as the busboy in a posh Berlin eatery who was utterly clueless about proper table service because he had never been in a fine restaurant before.” Ichaso stresses, “It is important to remember this is one man’s tale and is not meant to be a generalization of all the Cubans who are coming here today” (R. Rodríguez). He states:

The resilience of the Cuban soul is fascinating to me. There is a great charm to seeing Iván struggle to figure out how to act in a proper manner, because he has no idea how things function. He has all these huge dreams, but once he starts trying to attain them, he can’t function well because he’s so late in life and lacking so much information. He’s damaged. It’s heartbreaking to hear stories from recent arrivals that display a complete innocence towards so many things we take for granted. You start to realize these people have gone through hell. (R. Rodríguez)

Paraíso portrays a loss of paradise for Cubans both in Cuba and in the U.S. It is the story of Iván, a *balseero* who has just arrived in Miami, and his father Remigio, a successful radio talk-show host who left Cuba years ago. Remigio and his wife separated before Iván was born. He ran into her once, years later, and she told Remigio that he had a son, but then he never saw her again.

As proof that he is who he says he is, Iván brings a crucifix that had been given to Remigio by his mother. Iván says he and his mother would listen to Remigio’s radio show from Miami with a Russian radio and an antenna made from a metal hanger, and she would tell him, ‘That’s your father.’ Iván’s arrival in the U.S. does not produce the joyful family reunion one might expect. It is awkward and uncomfortable at best. Remigio has doubts about his new son’s questionable behavior and says he is feeling ‘buyer’s remorse.’ In the end, it turns out Iván is actually an

imposter, Bic, who killed Remigio's real son Iván on the way to the U.S. Iván spent the whole trip talking about his father and how successful he had become in Miami, so Bic decided to take Iván's place. The tragedy is that Remigio never got to meet his son.

Even Bic experienced separation from his family members back in Cuba. He never really had a father. According to his mother, his father had left them with 3 pesos and a pack of cigarettes. Then Bic's mother left him behind to go to the U.S. when he was just a teenager. Bic's mother was a prostitute and taught him to steal from her johns. Once she left Cuba and Bic had to fend for himself, he also turned to prostitution.

It isn't clear what else Bic may have done in Cuba. When he runs into his old friend Flaco, now a drug addict, outside Versailles, Bic pretends not to know him in order to hide it from Remigio. Bic later meets up with Flaco, who says he heard about Yulesi, 'poor thing,' and he would have done the same thing. Flaco seems to imply that Bic killed her. When Flaco wants a commission for keeping his secret, Bic kills Flaco and his girlfriend

Remigio is a successful radio talk-show host. His condo looks like an art museum. It is newly-arrived Iván who doesn't know how to make an honest living in the U.S. Remigio's cousin Henry gives Iván a job as a pool boy at his hotel. He loses the job when Flaco shows up and causes a scene. Remigio's best friend Alina gets Iván a job on a photo shoot, and he even briefly models for a men's cologne. He later loses his cool auditioning for a commercial and blows his chances. Iván then makes plans to move to Los Angeles and get a job as an actor. He finally shows up at the radio station behind Remigio's back and asks the boss for his own show. Iván has never worked before, so he is not very successful at it once he gets to the U.S.

Instead, Iván turns to theft. When he first arrives, he shoplifts a CD at a Cuban gift shop. The store clerk sees him, but thinks he's handsome and lets him get away with it. Tamara eventually becomes his girlfriend. Iván also steals a gift bag that someone left behind at the hotel and gives it to Tamara. He later tries to use Remigio's credit card at the Cuban gift shop. The owner of the store knows Remigio and tells Iván he can't use Remigio's card, that's not how things work here. Iván doesn't think he's doing anything wrong. He is just used to the way of life in Cuba.

Patrick Symmes states that because of the impossibility of surviving on a monthly wage (approximately \$20 per month), with a monthly ration that now supplies enough food for only twelve days, Cubans have to work around the system. He gives countless examples of Cubans having to steal just to get by: a state chauffeur whose family "survived only because... he could steal about five liters of gasoline every week" (47); three women running a bakery out of their kitchen, who "had bought a bag of flour 'on the left,' meaning it was stolen flour bought from a connection" (50); a friend who bought 540 pounds of cement from workers on a state construction job (51); and another friend who made dinner for him by frying "some ground chicken (bought from a friend who stole it)" "in oil stolen from a school" (54). Symmes writes:

This was how Cuba got along: the ration stores were staffed by neighbors, who stole and resold ingredients, which were then reworked into finished products and sold back to these same neighbors. (50)

He calls it “a ration system in reverse” (52). For Symmes, “Crime is the system” (54).

In *Paraíso*, Iván not only steals, but eventually kills anyone who gets in his way, as a form of self-preservation. After having an affair with Alina, he upsets her by bringing Tamara to the studio. When Iván asks Alina to be his manager, she refuses. He tells her she doesn't know pain, that he was a prostitute in Cuba. Iván ends up killing Alina, either because she won't help him, or because she now knows his secret. Talking about life back in Cuba, Tamara tells Iván about being approached by a 15-year-old male prostitute and comments, ‘How awful.’ So Iván kills her too. One wonders if the prostitute had been Iván.

Regarding his behavior, Ichaso states:

When you've spent your life *resolviendo* [struggling to make do], there are certain emotions like regret that are set aside and stored, and you don't feel them anymore. In that way, Ivan is very much like a psychopath, because he doesn't believe he's done anything wrong other than try to be a good son and protect himself and be a part of something he's never had. (R. Rodríguez)

Remigio finds out about Iván's affair with Alina and suspects him of foul play in her death. Eventually, he discovers that Iván isn't even Iván, when a relative in Cuba sends him a photo of his son. Remigio confronts “Iván,” who fesses up his real name is Bic. Remigio kicks Bic out, but doesn't call the authorities. He doesn't want to ruin things for himself or get fired from the radio station.

After all this, one might wonder, where is the paradise in *Paraíso*? When he first arrives, Iván thinks Miami is paradise, living in Remigio's posh condo, eating at Versailles, working at Henry's hotel (which is something he says he's always wanted to do). He has a beautiful girlfriend. Iván gradually realizes that things not as great or easy as he first thought. He tells Flaco that being Cuban isn't easy, here or there. He had no idea what it would be like to live in the U.S. or how things really work. Iván ends up losing his new “dad,” all the perks, and his dreams of paradise.

CONCLUSION

The characters in Ichaso's films *El súper*, *Azúcar amarga*, and *Paraíso* have lost so much as a result of the Revolution, both Cuban exiles in the U.S. and those still living in Cuba. As an exile living in the U.S. since 1963, León Ichaso can certainly relate to their feelings of loss. In fact, since these were independent, personal projects, one could assume that his own feelings of loss, at least in part, motivated him to make these films.

Ichaso himself has never returned to Cuba. He explains that he always thought it would be too painful for his parents. Ichaso's father passed away in 1999. Mirta Ojito writes in 2007 that his mother is still alive (69). Ichaso states, “Pero mis películas se ven en Cuba, así que, de cierta manera, ya he vuelto” (Ojito 72).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acosta, Iván. "Otro esfuerzo por mantener las raíces de nuestra cultura." *Cine cubano: Nación, diáspora e identidad*. Ed. Juan Antonio García Borrero. Benalmádena (Málaga, Spain): Delegación de Juventud y festejos, 2006. 109-111.
- Barrueto, Jorge. "The Narrative of Hope in Cuban Films Reacting to the Special Period." *The Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 4.3 (2007): 105-114.
- Baumgarten, Marjorie. Review of *Bitter Sugar*.
<http://www.austinchronicle.com/calendar/films/1997-06-06/bitter-sugar/>
- Cachán, Manuel. "Bailando salsa con *El Super* en Harlem: El testimonio caribeño de El Barrio." *Explicación de textos literarios* 23.1 (1994): 57-63.
- Febles, Jorge. "*El súper*: Epic Resonance within a Nondialectic Construct." *The Michigan Academician* 18.2 (1986): 295-302.
- García, María Cristina. "The Cuban Population of the United States: An Introduction." *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced*. Ed. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera. New York: SUNY, 2007. 75-89.
- Garcia Berumen, Frank Javier. *Latino Image Makers in Hollywood: Performers, Filmmakers and Films Since the 1960s*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014.
- García Borrero, Juan Antonio. "Un posnacional en Hollywood." *Encuentro de la cultura cubana* 45-46 (2007): 74-83.
- García Osuna, Alfonso J. *The Cuban Filmography, 1897 through 2001*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003.
- Geller, Lynn. "León Ichaso." <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2447/>
- León Ichaso Filmography. <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0406687/>
- León Ichaso Website. <http://www.leonichaso.com/>
- López, Ana M. "La 'otra' isla: El cine cubano en el exilio." *Cine cubano: Nación, diáspora e identidad*. Ed. Juan Antonio García Borrero. Benalmádena (Málaga, Spain): Delegación de Juventud y festejos, 2006. 73-88.
- Luis, William. *Culture and Customs of Cuba*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001.
- Ojito, Mirta. "León Ichaso entrevistado por Mirta Ojito: Compartiendo un secreto." *Encuentro de la cultura cubana* 45-46 (2007): 68-72.
- Rodríguez, Jesús. "*El súper*, de Iván Acosta: En las entrañas de la bestia." *Cuadernos de ALDEEU* 16.1 (2000): 153-159.
- Rodríguez, René. "'Paraiso' Wraps up Film Trilogy on Cuban Exiles." <http://www.leonichaso.com/>
- Rojas, Orlando. Review of *El Super*.
http://miami.festivalgenius.com/2013/films/elsuper_leonichaso_miami2013
- Rubio, Raúl. "Framing the Cuban Diaspora: Representation and Dialogue in Recent Filmic Productions." *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced*. Ed. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera. New York: SUNY, 2007. 314-327.
- Ruffinelli, Jorge. "Un cineasta y dos culturas: León Ichaso." *Cine cubano: Nación, diáspora e identidad*. Ed. Juan Antonio García Borrero. Benalmádena (Málaga, Spain): Delegación de Juventud y festejos, 2006. 89-101.
- Silberg, Jon. Review of *Bitter Sugar*.
<http://pro.boxoffice.com/reviews/theatrical/2008-08-bitter-sugar>

- Staten, Clifford L. *The History of Cuba*. New York: Palgrave, 2005.
- Symmes, Patrick. "Letter from Havana: Thirty Days as a Cuban: Pinching Pesos and Dropping Pounds in Havana." *Harper's Magazine* (October 2010): 43-57.
- Thomas, Kevin. "'Sugar' Goes to Heart of Anti-Castro View."
http://articles.latimes.com/1996-11-22/entertainment/ca-1538_1_bitter-sugar
- Verdeja, Sam, and Guillermo Martinez. *Cubans: An Epic Journey, the Struggle of Exiles for Truth and Freedom*. St. Louis, MO: Reedy, 2011.