One would not be wrong to say that Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s new film, Hasta Cierto Punto (Up to a Certain Point, 1983), joins a distinguished list of Cuban feature films exploring that country’s efforts to deal with the problems of a long tradition of Latin American machismo. Yet, to say only this, or to tag the film this way, would be to oversimplify what Hasta Cierto Punto is all about, for this probing, delicately nuanced film explores far more than merely machismo. And even this notoriously familiar phenomenon, scrutinized under the lens of Alea’s camera, reveals some unfamiliar aspects of the problem.

Moving well beyond the stereotypes depicted in Humberto Solas’s Lucia, Part III (1969), Alea’s new film also succeeds in probing both deeper and more delicately into the issues of machismo than did Sara Gomez’s excellent De Cierta Manera (One Way or Another, 1978) and Pastor Vega’s fine Retrato de Teresa (Portrait of Teresa, 1979). For starters, Alea, unlike the other film-makers, does not limit his scrutiny to working-class machismo, as if that were all there was to the problem, as if it didn’t exist at bourgeois levels as well. In fact, by no means the least of Alea’s virtues—and one which sets him apart from so many of his film-making colleagues in Cuba—is his willingness to acknowledge and to scrutinize the country’s lessening, but still very real class divisions. Thus, for Alea, machismo is a phenomenon which needs to be scrutinized up, down and all along the scale of prestige, property ownership and decision-making power which exists, albeit in a far less harsh form than elsewhere, even in a socialist country such as Cuba.

In many ways, then, Hasta Cierto Punto offers a kind of progress report on the Cuban revolution, with machismo as one index, a central one, certainly, but by no means the only index to be examined. The relativity of all notions of progress, however, is established right at the outset of Hasta Cierto Punto, which begins with one of the half dozen or so brief videotaped interviews with real workers Alea intersperses throughout the fictional narrative of the film. In this opening interview, a young black male worker questioned about machismo laughingly replies, “Oh, they’ve managed to change my attitudes on that score; I’ve certainly changed up to a certain point (hasta cierto punto). I’m probably at 80% now. Maybe they can work on me and get me up to, say, 87%. But they will never, never get me up to 100%, no way.”

Immediately following this, the title and opening credits roll on the screen, while on the soundtrack we hear a male voice singing a song whose lyrics in Basque are translated in subtitles, and go like this:

I could clip her wings if I liked.
Then she couldn’t fly;
And she’d be mine.
But what I love is the bird.

As both the opening credits and the song end, we are launched into the film’s fictional narrative which involves a scriptwriter, Oscar (played by Oscar Alvarez), who is working on a script for a film on machismo to be directed by his friend Arturo (Omar Valdés). Both men are creative professionals in their mid-forties, esconced in successful careers and apparently stable marriages, and enjoying the modest perquisites, such as a small but comfortable home, a car, travel opportunities, etc., of bourgeois intellectuals everywhere, including socialist Cuba.

Arturo’s ideas on machismo are quite simple. To him, it’s a working-class problem; and the job of intellectuals such as himself and...
Oscar is to raise the consciousness of the workers. Arturo's plan is to have Oscar, a successful playwright who has written a play on the theme of women's resistance to machismo (the ending of which we see performed in the film), research the issue among the dockworkers, where macho behavior is supposedly most flagrant. Oscar makes some preliminary contacts on the docks, videotapes some interviews with dockworkers, and observes a workers' council meeting where a young woman dockworker, Lina (played by Mirta Ibarra), speaks out animatedly and forcefully about safety hazards on the job.

Oscar seeks Lina out after the meeting, and finds her intelligent, articulate and extremely attractive in an unselfconscious way. He also finds her surprisingly nonchalant about the issue of machismo among the dockworkers. When he questions her about possible sexual harassment on the job, he is surprised to hear her reply, "Oh, the guys said a few things the first few days, since they weren't used to women working with them on the docks, but now there are no problems." When Oscar retorts that he has recorded some heavy macho interviews with some of the male dockworkers, Lina laughs it off with a good-natured "That's just talk."

What the macho talk in the interviews is about, interestingly, as we find out later in the film, largely revolves around the old double standard in marriage. This, however, is not a problem for Lina, who has never been married, although she has a son, now about ten, from a youthful love affair. Living alone with her son in a small but bright flat in an old house from which she commutes to work at the docks by ferry, Lina finds her life both challenging and rewarding, and she radiates the happiness of a woman confident of her abilities to cope with whatever life offers. In this respect, she upsets Oscar's stereotyped notions of the oppressed working woman. But she also upsets him in other ways as well, for her freshness and spontaneity, coupled with her down-to-earth working-class pragmatism, throw into sharp relief the bourgeois pretensions of Oscar's marriage to Marion, a successful actress who thrives on the adulation and special treatment accorded to those in the public eye.

Oscar soon finds himself living a divided existence, going back and forth from a wife, with whom he increasingly feels out of touch, to Lina, to whom he feels increasingly attracted. And this divided existence also involves him, on a daily basis, in experiencing life at two distinct levels of Cuban society: the working-class world of Lina and the bourgeois world he has been sharing with his wife.

The more sensitively aware he becomes of working-class life, the more Oscar sees that workers' attitudes and values just don't fit
the stereotypes bourgeois intellectuals hold of them. Consequently, he feels the need to alter the thrust and the overall conception of the films script he is preparing for his friend Arturo. When Oscar proposes that he make Lina the model for the film’s lead character, Arturo’s only response is the ironic, “Oh, sure, the woman with the fatherless kid plot: you want us to remake Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears?” At which, both men have a huge laugh. But when Oscar presses ahead with his ideas of drawing more complex, more fully aware and progressive working-class characters, Arturo just gets angry that reality is messing up the clarity of his original idea, that workers aren’t just macho brutes on the home front and corner-cutting, higher-wage-demanding louts on the work front.

When Alea presented Hasta Ciero Punto at the 1984 San Francisco Film Festival, I had the opportunity to talk with him at some length. Our discussion began with a question regarding certain similarities between his new film and his earlier Memories of Underdevelopment (1968):

In Hasta Ciero Punto, as in Memories, the central protagonist is a male intellectual from a bourgeois background who comes in contact with the working class, and who falls in love with a woman from the working class. Is the character of Oscar in Hasta Ciero Punto in some ways a continuation, fifteen years later, of the character of Sergio from Memorias?

I don’t think so; there is a big difference between these two characters. It is true that they are both intellectuals with bourgeois or petty bourgeois backgrounds, but Oscar in Hasta Ciero Punto is a revolutionary, and Sergio from Memorias could never become a revolutionary, as I see it. He’s just an onlooker.

A voyeur, with his telescope, looking at the revolution from a distance, furtively.

Yes, that’s it; he is just a voyeur. He is too old and set in his ways to join the revolution. But Oscar, on the contrary, is a committed revolutionary. Of course, he is an intellectual; and intellectuals come from the petty bourgeois, mainly. And in this respect Oscar is typical. But he is a revolutionary intellectual living in the Cuban revolutionary experience. He is committed to change; he tries to change.

Oscar tries to change, yes; but if we compare him with Sergio from Memorias is there all that much progress? Have the Oscars progressed that much over the Sergios after fifteen years of involvement with the Cuban revolution?

In many respects, yes, although perhaps not in this one area of their relations with women. In this respect there is some change but not much. At least, though, Oscar is aware of the problems of his own machismo and tries to struggle against it. In the end, we see that he has changed, but . . . hasta ciero punto . . . only up to a certain point.

Speaking of change, it is interesting to see how differently you portray working-class women in this film from your portrayal of the working-class character of Elena in Memorias. There is a tremendous progress in self-awareness and self-determination on the part of Lina in Hasta Ciero Punto in comparison with Elena in Memorias. Would you say that women in general have made more progress in revolutionary awareness over these past fifteen years than men in Cuba?

Well, let’s put it this way. Lina is a worker, while Elena was the daughter of a worker. Elena didn’t identify herself with the working class. She wanted to be an actress. She had her head full of bourgeois dreams. Lina, on the contrary, is a representative of the working-class woman in the midst of the revolution. She can be more or less conscious of her situation as a woman in society; but above all she is very fresh, sincere and spontaneous. So while there is a big difference between Elena and Lina it is not because we could say there has been so much progress in those fifteen years. Rather, these two characters have been different from the beginning, just as Sergio and Oscar have been different from the beginning.

In Hasta Ciero Punto, the more time Oscar spends around Lina the more he realizes how deeply drawn to her he feels, and he begins to sense that Lina might feel the same about him. To complicate matters, however, word starts to get around, first on a teasing basis, later in a far more volatile way, that his hang-
ing around Lina "the female dockworker" is not merely a matter of "research" for his script. When the teasing first begins, even Oscar's wife laughs it off as a good joke. But she is taken aback one day when Arturo's wife cautions her that men the age of Oscar and Arturo often go through a mid-life crisis in which they seek to assuage their gnawing sense of insecurity by "proving" themselves with other women. And Arturo's wife really shakes Marion up by confiding that this is exactly what she has to put up with of late in her marriage with Arturo.

On this score, it is interesting to see how director Alea handles developments between Oscar and Lina. While there may perhaps be elements of a mid-life crisis in Oscar's behavior, Alea does not in the slightest portray Oscar as superficially on the make. There is even a slightly shy, stolid quality in actor Oscar Alvarez's performance as Oscar. Then, too, there is in Mirta Ibarra's spirited portrayal of Lina a strong sense of Lina being just as interested in Oscar as he is in her.

In fact, the simplicity of Alea's handling of the initial love scene between Oscar and Lina is beautifully evocative. Lina invites Oscar for an improvised meal at her place one evening after work when her young son is away at a youth camp. When the still slightly hesitant Oscar finally works up the nerve to put his arms around her while she is working at the stove, Lina turns smoothly and radiantly into the embrace, without so much as dropping the fork with which she was stirring the sauteed vegetables. But after a moment's passionate embrace, when the two exit the frame arm in arm en route to their first lovemaking, suddenly Lina's bare arm reenters the frame, as she places the fork gently on the stove and prudently turns off the flame under the vegetables before returning to Oscar. This simple gesture combining passion and lucid pragmatism speaks volumes on the solidly grounded character of Lina; and it is an eloquent example of how delicately nuanced is director Alea's visual mise en scène.

Equally eloquent, however, is Lina's gesture, the morning after their first night together, of covering her head with the pillow when Oscar no sooner awakens than he makes a hasty bedside call to reassure his anxious wife that he is okay, that he'll be right home, that nothing is amiss. Lina's gesture makes it clear that for her this has not been just a one-night stand. Nor has it been this for Oscar, however, who gently removes the pillow, holds Lina tenderly, and asks simply, "Give me time to deal with this"—a request he will repeat several times throughout the development of their relationship.

Of course, when Oscar returns home that morning to his wife, Marion doesn't let him get away with trying to pass it off as "a night out with some of the dockworkers." And she lets him know that everybody has been remarking on the amount of time he spends with Lina. "How would you like it," she yells at him, "if I came back home one morning after spending the night out with one of the dockworkers?"

Oscar doesn't answer this question; nor does the film's plot take this turn—although it might have been interesting if it had. But the issue of marital possessiveness and the old double standard comes up not in the fictional narrative but rather in some of the videotaped interviews with real workers which Alea intersperses throughout Hasta Cierto Punto. One young black stevedore smilingly acknowledges that although married he's "out there fishing" for other women all the time. And if he makes a score now and then, that's fine; but he insists that his wife doesn't have the same rights to go fishing outside the
marriage. Male possessiveness is also the issue in a young black woman’s interview when she recounts that her husband didn’t want her to take a job after they were married for fear that she would start an affair with a co-worker. She says that she tried to reassure him that “a woman in love isn’t looking around to start anything”; but he wouldn’t listen, and forced her to choose between him or work. She chose work. And when the interviewer (who is Oscar) asks, “Is there no hope, then?” she replies, “For me, yes; maybe not for him.”

Later in the film, however, some of the male dockworkers in the fictional narrative (but who may be real dockworkers as well) sit around after hours drinking beer and discussing machismo with Oscar. When the case of the guy who doesn’t want his wife to work comes up, the men quickly turn the problem on its head. “The real problem is when the wife doesn’t work,” one man observes, “for that puts a real strain on the relationship when there’s only the man’s income to live on and build a family.” The others agree; and to put things in another perspective one man tells the story of the worker who got married and insisted that his wife quit her job because he didn’t want her flirting or carrying on with her co-workers. “Well, she stayed home, got terribly bored, doing nothing at home all day, so eventually she started carrying on with the milkman, the mailman, the electrical repairman, anybody who came along, because she was so bored.” All the men laugh and shake their heads at this story, and agree that it’s better all the way around when both the man and the woman work in a marriage.

Work, how work is organized, and who makes the decisions on how work is organized, form another major focus in Hasta Ciento Punto. In the film’s fictional narrative there are numerous allusions to the frequent meetings of the workers’ councils; and, as previously mentioned, we actually see one (fictional) meeting in progress when Oscar first observes Lina speaking out on safety hazards. In addition to these local, on-site meetings, which are monthly, the workers recount to Oscar that there are also quarterly regional meetings as well as the national ones—all of which provide them opportunities to compare notes with workers in other industries and to have their say about how things are planned and done. Or, at least how things should be planned and done—it being the case in Cuba, as elsewhere, that things don’t exactly happen as fast or as efficiently as they ought.

It seems, from both the fictional narrative and the interview material in Hasta Ciento Punto, that one of the problems is an unresponsive Cuban bureaucracy. The workers on the job may point out exactly what is needed to increase productivity, but it can take months or years for the bureaucrats to requisition the needed equipment or even to prepare the paper work. Of course, this is not the first time Alea has made a film calling attention to the problems of an unresponsive bureaucracy. His Muerte de un Bureaucrat (Death of a Bureaucrat, 1966) was a comic tour de force in using humor to alert Cuban audiences to the dangers of the bureaucratic mentality. Today, judging from Hasta Ciento Punto, the problem lingers on, retarding Cuba’s development, diminishing productivity, and leaving the workers with a nagging frustration when reforms they suggested long ago have still not been implemented.

In Hasta Ciento Punto, unlike the earlier Muerte de un Bureaucrat, there is no attempt by Alea to utilize humor in the struggle with bureaucracy. Here, whether the complaints against bureaucracy are voiced by fictional characters (such as Lina and her co-workers—although some of the latter may also be real dockworkers outside the film) or by the real workers who speak in Hasta Ciento Punto’s videotaped interviews, the complaints are expressed with a certain urgency and even vehemence. As I noted to Alea, one interview, in particular, struck me as very important. It is the last one, in which a male worker, black or mulatto, says “I will not compromise my standards. I will speak out when I see things being done on the job which hurt our productivity. If things could be done better, more efficiently, then I will say so, even if this is taken as criticism by some people, who will resent it. But the most important thing for me is my conscience. I may be a low level cog in the wheel of our economy, but I must do what I can, what I think is right.” To me, this is a truly revolutionary attitude. Facing the problems, being open to change, being open to criticism of what exists, thinking of new
ways of doing things, being open to collective discussion of the issues—all of this, it seems to me, is the heart of the revolutionary process.

Alea replied:

Well, I was stimulated by these interviews with workers. All these interviews are real, authentic ones; they are not prepared or scripted. They were filmed by me, and by the actor who plays Oscar. This particular worker of whom you spoke, he is a very tenacious person. He is an innovator. He is really a revolutionary in the sense that he wants to transform and perfect things. For example, in that interview he was telling us of the difficulties and obstacles he encountered when he proposed a new style of work among the dockworkers. He saw a way of making their work more productive, but he found that the bureaucracy resisted the change, because they thought that if the working procedures were changed they would also have to change the bureaucratic apparatus, so the bureaucrats resisted such change because they didn’t want to have to do more work. On the workers’ side, it would have been the same amount of work but more productivity. So he had to fight for more than a year to get those changes accepted, but he finally won.

What was this change, what new style of work was he proposing?

It involved unloading cargo from the ships and transporting it to the warehouse. They were making several movements with the machinery which were unnecessary.

Well, this is interesting. You know, in the USA during the forties and fifties there was a movement toward maximizing the efficiency of factory workers planned by bureaucratically by Frederick W. Taylor; and of course in the Soviet Union during this same period there was a similar movement planned bureaucratically by Stakhanov. But the important thing in this case, in Hasta Ciert Punto, is that the initiative for change, the discovery of the problem and the discovery of a solution to the problem, comes from the worker. It is not some bureaucratic solution imposed from the top down. It is a very concrete proposal coming from the worker on the job. The irony, of course, is that this change is resisted by the bureaucracy.

Yes, exactly. That is the problem.

Alea doesn’t tie up the loose ends of his story. The love between Oscar and Lina continues to grow; but Oscar continues to ask for more time before making a break with his wife. There are moments of passion and tenderness between Oscar and Lina, but there are moments of a kind of wistful sadness, too, between them, as they wonder how all of this will come out. Over drinks late one afternoon they sit quietly looking at each other, saying little, while on the sound track we hear a song sung by popular Cuban singer Pablo Milanés. The words of the song speak of the poetry of love, of the way the loved one embodies all the hope, all the poignancy of life, of “light and shadow in time,” of “a promised cloud,” of “foam on sand,” of “the sun on me.”

Throughout the duration of the song, Alea’s reverse-angle cutting seems to shift the point of view of the sequence back and forth from Oscar to Lina, with the words of the song first seeming to correspond to Oscar’s thoughts about Lina, then shifting to her thoughts about him, each feeling the same way about the other. At one point, when the song speaks of “the sun on me,” Alea’s camera catches Lina bathed in the amber glow of the late afternoon sun; and the song here seems to be voicing Lina’s awareness of the beauty and poignancy of this moment shared between her and Oscar, as each realizes how much the other means to them, and thus how much is at stake in this relationship.

Things are not easy, however, for Oscar and Lina. In fact, by the end of the film things have gotten even further complicated. Oscar sees Lina’s previous boyfriend leaving her flat one afternoon, which causes Oscar to create a jealous scene with Lina, who is in no condition to take such a scene, having just been forced to submit, against her will, to sex with her former boyfriend, who is furiously jealous of her recent attachment to Oscar.

At these developments, Lina can hardly be blamed for taking flight—and it appears, although one can’t be sure from the rapid editing of the film’s final shots, that Lina boards a plane, perhaps bound for Santiago.
where her parents live and whom she has recently spoken of wanting to move closer to. But all this is left up in the air, literally and figuratively. Something deeply moving has been happening between Lina and Oscar . . . is still happening between them. But, for the moment, Lina has taken wing, like the seagull in the film's final shot, or like the bird in the Basque song at the opening of the film.

In a certain way, the ending of Hasta Ciento Punto seems similar to the ending of a play Oscar has written on the subject of machismo, the ending of which we see performed in the film. In this play, the lead character, a woman, tears up the script and throws it into the audience—almost at the audience—refusing to finish the play according to the script (which was written by a man), choosing instead to leave her own choices open. Hasta Ciento Punto's ending is similarly abrupt, inconclusive, open-ended; it is almost as if the lead female character, Lina, were tearing up Oscar's script, and as if Alea were tearing up his own script and leaving the ending open, tossing it into the lap of the audience. I asked him whether this was what he intended, on all three of these levels: in the play, in the film-within-the-film and in the film itself?

He replied:

Yes, and I like so much to hear you say it that way, because it is not so easy for the spectator to find this relation, this set of relations. It requires some acute observation, which I have tried to encourage, to stimulate, without knowing if I would succeed in suggesting these parallels. You see, the play in the film was a real play by Juan Carlos Tabio. It is called La Permuta (The Transition). Tabio wrote this play basing it on an idea that came from me. Then we decided to collaborate on this film, and to incorporate the reference to the play into the film. We like this . . . to "play" with the play. Tabio collaborated with me in writing the script for the film, and we were very conscious of the many relations between the play and the film. And we hoped that the spectator of the film would be aware of these relations.

At a certain moment in Hasta Ciento Punto, Oscar is reading in bed, and the book he is reading is titled Dialectics of the Spectator. Does such a book exist?

Yes, the book exists. But I wasn't sure audiences would be able to catch the title and author of the book, since the shot is only a few seconds long. It was a kind of joke. Oscar, the character, is a scriptwriter, who has worked in the theater and is now writing a script for a film. So I thought it would be useful for him to read such a book, which is about the cinema, about the dialectical relations between the spectator and the film. Since I recently published that book, I placed it in the hands of Oscar.

How are your thoughts about the "dialectics of the spectator" realized in Hasta Ciento Punto?

For me it is very important that the spectator not be passive, not be merely contemplative. I try to push the spectator in a certain way, to make him think, to make him try to resolve some problems that remain after the film.

Even during the film.

Yes, but the most important thing is that after the film he must continue thinking, he must continue working on issues that are raised by the film but are not resolved in the film. That's what we have tried to do in this film; and that's why the actress in the play which we see within the film throws the script into the audience, so the public will finish the story.

How has the Cuban public reacted to the ending of Hasta Ciento Punto?

I think it has been quite a good reaction, because many people have gone to see the film more than once; and that is a good sign, indicating that there were things still unsettled, still stimulating them to think, making them want to give the film a second reading. The film was popular in Cuba.

What was the reaction of Cuban critics to the film?

Among the critics it was not so well received. Some critics found the ending too abrupt. And maybe they are right. We could have developed the ending a little more.

The audience doesn't really know exactly what is happening. Lina seems to get on a plane; but even this isn't sure. We see only a

*An English translation is appearing in Jump Cut, nos. 29 and 30.
glimpse of the back of her (or of someone who looks like she could be Lina) boarding a plane. But this scene, this brief shot of her boarding the plane could be a thought of Oscar’s, it could be entirely in his mind, as he is wondering where Lina is when he can’t find her at home.

Yes, good, all this is intentional. It is good for us to think that Lina can fly off somewhere, she can fly like a bird; but it is not essential to know whether or not she lands somewhere here or there or how long she stays here or there. The essential is that she can fly, and that Oscar realizes this.

We were speaking earlier of bureaucracies, and I wanted to ask whether, in Cuba as elsewhere, there might sometimes be problems within the bureaucracy of the cinema. Within ICAIC (The Cuban Film Institute), for example, are there ever problems? One area I’m curious about is the choice of subject matter for films. For example, there seem to be a lot of films coming out of Cuba on the subject of machismo. There was Lucia (Part III), Retrato de Teresa and De Cierta Manera.

Yes, and my film Hasta Cierto Punto, which has a similar title to De Cierta Manera, is a kind of continuation of that film and of that style: it is even a kind of homage to that film by Sara Gomez.

Then, too, there have been other subjects treated extensively. For example, your film La Ultima Cena (The Last Supper, 1975) was introduced by Pastor Vega at the Berlin Film Festival several years ago as one of a series of films exploring the role of blacks in the history of Cuban national development. Are such themes as machismo and the role of blacks “assigned” by a committee at ICAIC? Is there a kind of Five Year Plan, or a One or Two Year Plan, mapping out which themes should be treated in films? How free is an individual director to choose a subject matter entirely on his own and obtain ICAIC backing?

Thus far, I have always chosen my own subjects. Right now, for the first time, I’m considering making a film on a subject proposed to me by someone else. So it’s interesting for me to begin thinking about this project, a film based on Shakespeare’s Tempest, proposed to me by the BBC. I’m now beginning preliminary planning to find out if I really feel right about this project; because if I don’t feel it then I won’t shoot it, I won’t make the film. But right now I’m interested in proceeding further with it. I think it could be an interesting film, but it would be very different from the rest of my films. Now, I tell you this just to show that there is indeed total freedom to make a film of one’s choice. Nobody assigns a director to make a film on this or that subject. It is true that themes such as machismo or the role of blacks in our historical development are prevalent; but that is just “epidemic,” it’s in the air, there is a sort of contagion that reaches us. All the films on blacks or on machismo were made spontaneously by different individuals. But the interesting thing is that both themes deal with discrimination. The revolution changes the social base, and, theoretically, there is legally no more discrimination, neither against blacks nor against women. But in the minds of people, prejudices linger on, and you have to fight them at another level, not with laws but by dramatizing it. And film is a good weapon to use in this struggle. And we filmmakers feel this, so it is very organic and spontaneous that we make films on these issues. It is not a program. Also, we have made many films about our history. Why? Because our history has been distorted for many years, and we need to show things that were omitted from our history books in school, before the revolution. At the same time, we also are conscious of the need to make films about our contemporary reality. Those lines are parallel, and we think they are both important.