

Stories That Resonate: New Cultures of Documentary Filmmaking in Cuba

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Ordinary citizens in Cuba faced tremendous difficulties after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the decades of the 1990s and 2000 ushered in a revitalization of the arts and creative responses to the crisis. Cuban music, literature, and visual arts are some of the more widely known and globally circulated cultural products of this period. Cultural forms such as rap music have helped to create new avenues for democratic debate and discussion within the country, raising such issues as racial discrimination, police harassment, and state censorship. But one cultural form less well known both inside and outside of Cuba has been the newly emerging genre of documentary filmmaking by young Cuban directors.

Young filmmakers have accessed new digital technologies to practice investigative journalism, often outside the structures of the state film industry and government-controlled media. They are using recording devices such as small digital video cameras and even cell phones to document their experiences. Some have received professional training at the Arts Institute (ISA) or the International School of Cinema and Television (EICTV) in San Antonio de los Baños, but there are also numbers of filmmakers who are self-trained. Many filmmakers seek to address the failures of Cuban National Television to cover the day-to-day realities of Cubans. These young filmmakers are teaching themselves how to tell stories that resonate with the Cuban public and to generate internal discussions to improve conditions.

Historically, in the postrevolutionary period, journalism has been under the supervision of the Communist Party-controlled Department of Revolutionary Orientation. But recently, young Cuban directors have been working more independently via coproductions or by raising funds on their own. Many of these independent

productions are screened at the Muestra Joven (Young Director's Festival) or the Havana Film Festival. Because of the lack of access to DVDs in Cuba, films are often copied onto flash drives and then passed from hand to hand for people to watch on their personal computers. There is a saying in Cuba that there should be a "flash drive award" because that is the true indicator of the popularity of a film in Cuba.

A few films make it onto national television, usually animations or films that do not present too much of a challenge to the status quo. But there are cases where a film generates so much public attention that even though it has a strong critical edge, it will eventually be broadcast, like Ariagna Fajardo's 2009 documentary *¿A dónde vamos?* (*Where Are We Going?*).

Produced by TV Serrana and financed by Cuban National Television, *¿A dónde vamos?* was a community video project that began in the early 1990s in the Sierra Maestra. The film opens with a series of scenic shots of the mountain ranges, dotted with palm trees and thatched huts. But amid the idyllic scenery, people are leaving in droves. They carry bundles, boxes, and mattresses on their backs; they pile their belongings onto horses and trucks. The film looks at the massive exodus of farmers from the Sierra Maestra due to an absence of opportunities for them to make a living.

In interviews with the farmers, coupled with footage of their difficult work conditions, the farmers relate the problems of lack of transport, the loss of animals and crops to theft, the devastation wreaked by hurricanes, the loss of money on coffee crops due to fixed prices, and the lack of help from the government. They are told that they need to produce, but they have no tools.

In one particularly devastating scene, a group of workers unload bags of ripe mangoes to a site where they are supposed to be picked up by the government. The fruit sits there, and still no one comes to pick it up. Then there are scenes of the same workers throwing out the fruit, black and rotting. Coffee also sits for days without being picked up, until it too finally goes bad and must be disposed of by the farmers who have worked so hard to grow it.

"People have lost their love for the land because they haven't received much support," says one farmer. Then he adds, cautiously, "I'm not sure if you'll be able to put that in the video. It might be difficult." While indeed these kinds of views may not have had space in official promotional-type videos, in the new investigative journalism they are more common.

The camera pans across a series of empty and abandoned buildings with peeling paint; the name reads "The Polytechnic Institute of Agronomy." A revolutionary slogan adorns the side of one of the buildings: "Venceremos!" (We Will Win!).

One of the farmers suggests that if the government were to plant cassava or corn or other crops on the abandoned cooperative land and the land belonging to the Ministry of Agriculture, then there would be enough food for people to eat. "Did the Americans say not to plant or grow things?" he asks pointedly. "No. So we can't blame the blockade."

At the end of the film, the farmers recall the historical debt that is owed to them by the revolution. "Farmers made sacrifices supporting the revolution mainly when Fidel was fighting in the mountains," says one farmer. He points to an older man gathering wood behind him. "Some are still

here.” It is ironic that the Sierra Maestra, a part of Cuban revolutionary folklore for the mythic role that it played in the guerrilla movement of the 1950s, is now the site of abandonment and poor peasant farmers barely making a living.

This film was eventually shown on Cuban TV. After it was broadcast, TV Serrana received a call from a high-ranking Communist Party official. He told them that he was unaware of the problems that people were having in the Sierra and he was going to see what he could do about it. The VI Communist Party Congress held in April 2011 declared agriculture and food production to be matters of national security, and farmers in the Sierra Maestra received assistance with their tools, were paid higher prices for their produce, and had improved distribution.

At the Young Directors Festival held in Havana in April 2013, Marcelo Martín premiered his new film *Elena* about the collapsing old residential buildings in Central Havana. Martín conducted interviews with workers and residents who showed him their deteriorated homes plagued by leaks and contaminated with raw sewage from broken pipes. One older resident walked on blocks throughout his house to avoid stepping in sewage, and after undergoing major surgery he slept on a park bench while recuperating.

The brigades sent to repair the homes did not finish their work, and they left the homes in worse condition than before. The filmmaker calls the vice president of Popular Power to ask when the homes will be fixed, and she lies and tells him the work will resume on Monday. He closes the film with a snapshot: nearly half of the housing stock in Central Havana is in bad shape, and 230 buildings in the neighborhood collapse every year.

This kind of investigative journalism—exposing official lies publicly and presenting the realities of people’s lives—has found fertile ground among young documentary filmmakers, but it often runs up against the problem of financing and distribution. Martín shot *Elena* over a period of three years on a mini DV camera using the built-in microphone. It was financed independently and received no funds from the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC) or any other state agency. Interestingly, while shooting the film, Martín was working at the Film Institute in their publicity department. He has now left the Film Institute and works freelance.

Young filmmakers are pushing for the legalization of independent production companies and freelance producers. This issue is now being intensely debated within Cuba. Under current Cuban law, the activities of independent film production companies are considered illegal, so filmmakers are unable to register as legal entities, open bank accounts, and so on. This makes it almost impossible to apply for any outside production funds, except from a Cuban state entity, unless you are able to secure a bank account in a third country.

Fund-raising abroad has been one solution for funding. The U.S. nonprofit organization Americas Media Initiative (AMI) has been a crucial source of help by selling Cuban films in the United States and organizing university tours for the filmmakers. In 2013, AMI signed a distribution collaboration agreement with Icarus Films in New York. All of the Cuban filmmakers being distributed by AMI were given a Spanish-language version of the distribution contract. This was the first time ever that any of these filmmakers had an international distributor and the first time they had seen an actual distribution

contract. Through sales of the films over the last three years, AMI has been able to purchase video cameras, laptop computers, and hard drives for many of the filmmakers who otherwise would have no real income from their films.

But there are also limitations to international funding given the restrictions of the U.S. embargo. The embargo prevents U.S. institutions or citizens from providing Cuban filmmakers with funds for their productions in Cuba. A recent example of this unfortunate regulation was the case of Cuban filmmaker Miguel Coyula. In the summer of 2013, Coyula tried to raise funds through the U.S. crowd-sourcing site Indiegogo for his new feature film *Corazon azul* (*Blue Heart*). Coyula successfully raised \$5,288 but was informed by Indiegogo that because of the U.S. embargo, not only was he not permitted to keep the money he raised, but all funds collected would be transferred to the U.S. Treasury Department. Some of the donors received their money back after applying some pressure, but many did not. The production of the film continues but American citizens have been denied the opportunity to offer their financial support.

AMI sees people-to-people contact of the kind that has expanded significantly under the Obama administration as crucial to bolstering the fledgling work of investigative filmmaking in Cuba. Since 2012, AMI has been organizing the Closing Distances/ Cerrando Distancias documentary film tours in Cuba. In order to do the tours AMI has to apply to the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Asset Controls for special public performance licenses, which can take months to be approved. Working with the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Film Department in 2012, AMI took U.S. documentary shorts to four provinces in Cuba: Cienfuegos,

The Problems of Controlling Arts and Cultures in Bolivia: An Ethnographic Report

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Camagüey, Holguín, and Havana. The films were screened at public cinemas, galleries, and art schools. Many audience members commented that they had never seen these types of documentaries or knew of these experiences in the United States.

In 2013, AMI brought U.S. filmmaker Minda Martin on a tour to Eastern Cuba. She screened two of her experimental documentary films that portrayed her experiences growing up in poverty in Arizona. At one screening in the small village of Victorino in the Sierra Maestra, over two hundred people showed up, including musicians and local performers. Not everyone could fit in the small video screening room, and the question and answer period had to be held outside. After responding to questions, Minda signed autographs and posed for photos with several people. This was the first time U.S. citizens had visited Victorino. To this day, AMI is still receiving e-mails from audience members from the tour who were moved by Martin's work.

Given the stereotypes of Cuba as a place where journalists and artists cannot practice the kinds of freedom of speech existing outside the island, the growth of a culture of investigative journalism may seem either an anomaly or a temporary opening that will not last. In fact it is neither; the island has long nurtured expressive cultures of filmmaking through its arts institutes and internationally regarded cinema school. The availability of new digital technologies has inspired young people to take those tools and approach their realities—which they don't see being represented elsewhere—with fresh eyes and perspectives.

Americas Media Initiative is organizing a U.S. tour for filmmaker Marcelo Martín (director of *Elena*) in November 2014. ■

In 2005, citizens of Bolivia, a country that boasts an indigenous majority, elected their first indigenous president, Evo Morales. His government came to power with a popular mandate to nationalize hydrocarbon resources and hold a constitutional assembly. Since then, Morales has checked off both agenda items, although not without overcoming obstacles and receiving criticism in relation to both processes. As Morales now comes to the end of his second term and eyes the possibility of a perhaps more controversial third one, we focus on what this “process of change” has meant for the arts.

To talk of the arts in Bolivia, however, particularly under a government that claims to work on decolonizing the state, requires a return to the ever-pesky art-culture divide (Clifford 1988). The country's many community-based indigenous expressions, which are so often linked with participatory practices and attitudes, tend to be placed in the “culture” category. Yet it is also common for elements from these same indigenous expressions to be taken into urban contexts, rearranged, given added value, and converted into forms that are perceived to be “art.” Such transformation often involves commodification, where the artist can claim copyright over the resulting artwork. By contrast, the collective indigenous expressions from which such artworks drew inspiration or materials have been treated often as if they were part of the public domain—albeit officially owned by the state (Sánchez 2001). Nonetheless, in Article 102 of Bolivia's new constitution (ratified by national referendum in 2009), the state commits to registering and protecting both individual and collective intellectual property. Precisely how this might work in practice remains unclear. In the middle of the process of change, a storm of pressing

questions has emerged about ownership of and control over cultural expressions, and here, the lines between art and culture remain blurred. In relationship to these questions, we will detail some of the complexities we are encountering in our ethnographic work, specifically with regards to discussions of intangible heritage and copyright.

Even though each of us has independently researched aspects of Bolivian music over many years (Bigenho 2002, 2012; Stobart 2006), we did not come to address these questions head-on until prompted to do so by our interactions with Bolivians. More recently, in our respective conversations with Bolivian friends, musicians, and consultants, a cluster of themes connecting to intangible heritage, intellectual property, and piracy kept reemerging with such insistence that we felt compelled to join forces and explore them in a participatory project, alongside two Bolivian research assistants.

To initiate the project, in July 2012 we organized a four-day NSF-funded workshop in Bolivia titled “Rethinking Creativity, Recognition and Indigeneity.” For this activity we brought together 23 Bolivians involved in various areas of culture and media, including some of indigenous backgrounds. The aim of the workshop was to open up civil society discussions on issues of cultural property, and to do so with a group of individuals who usually are not in dialogue with one another. In titling the event in terms of “creativity,” “recognition,” and “indigeneity,” we purposely avoided direct references to “cultural property,” “author's rights,” or “piracy”—all hot-button words that in previous dialogues and roundtables had led to rigid positioning, claiming of individual rights, and accusations of theft. By planning workshop activities that were