

Mediático presents an entry by one of its founding co-editors, [Dolores Tierney](#), Senior Lecturer in the School of Media, Film and Music, University of Sussex. In it, she explores digital realisms in Cuban filmmaker Eduardo del Llano's Decalogue, about contemporary life in Cuba. The paper was first publicly delivered in a presentation Tierney gave at a Symposium on Cuban cinema organized by Guy Baron at Aberystwyth University in March 2013. The presentation began with the showing of a clip from the first of Del Llano's short films Monte Rouge. Nicanor, the protagonist receives a knock at the door.

Play video clip: <http://youtu.be/5nTs30sF-ws>

In a 2008 essay, Alexandra Juhasz suggests that the many utopian dreams of radical filmmakers worldwide (and within these we can include those of Cuban filmmaker García Espinosa author of radical manifesto 'For an Imperfect Cinema')

” “where media consumers would become producers because they could at last afford the means of production and distribution; where they could document the look, feel and meat of their daily lives; then add these records of their everyday experiences to the public sphere; and participate in the production of culture without the expertise bought at film schools (2008: 299).”

might actually be a foretelling of YouTube. Eduardo del Llano's ten short films (made over a period of 6 years), and now all uploaded onto YouTube, appear to be part of this dream of a free production of culture. Indeed other than that they are made by personnel trained within Cuba's film schools (or at ICAIC). As Cristina Venegas (2010) points out, correlations

between film culture and the freedoms of digital technology or indeed connectivity which can be made in other countries in the world (though even Juhasz actually has reservations about the accessibility and multivocality of YouTube), are much more complicated in Cuba where access to the internet has been historically much more limited and even controlled (2010: 14, 143)

This post takes as its focus the independent, digitally captured, produced and distributed ten short films of Eduardo del Llano including *Monte Rouge* (2004), *Intermezzo* (2007) and *Exit* (2011). Focusing on the daily experiences of Nicanor O'Donnell (Luis Alberto García), a kind of everyman for his generation,¹ these shorts present a satirical perspective on different aspects of contemporary Cuban reality. This post looks at the formal practices that constitute realism in Del Llano's short films as they are facilitated by digital image capturing. The post also explores the possibilities and limitations offered by digital filmmaking for Cuba's developing independent cinema sector.

In 2013, as with Carlos Lechuga's *Melaza* (2012) or Daniel Díaz Torres' *La película de Ana* (2012)², most feature films in Cuba (as in Ecuador, Peru and other resource strained national film endeavours in Latin America) are being shot with digital cameras for the simple reason that no one, not even with co-production funding from Europe, can in the words of one critic "afford to shoot on film anymore" (Lopez 2013). The advent of cheap and accessible new technologies of digital filmmaking have to a great extent facilitated both the continuity of institutional filmmaking and the flourishing of an independent cinema, outside the auspices of the state film institute ICAIC in Cuba which has since its founding in March of 1959 been at the centre of filmmaking on the island. Post the Special Period, and in financially reduced circumstances, digital image capturing has allowed filmmaking to continue. It has allowed new and established filmmakers to circumscribe the economic and institutional limitations to filmmaking. The late Humberto Solás (*Lucía* 1968), for example, was only able to make *Miel para Oshún* (*Honey for Oschun*, 2001) after having spent a

decade without filming thanks to the low cost of digital technology. (López, 2008: 192) His subsequent film *Barrio Cuba* (2005) and Humberto Padrón's *Frutas en el café* (2005) could both be made with almost no budget precisely because they were filmed using mini digital cameras. No prior script submission, institutional support from ICAIC, or outside funding is necessary for production and postproduction when a film can be made with domestic quality mini DV recorders, edited at home on a laptop and then circulated outside official channels via self authored DVDs, and the internet. Del Llano's shorts were made this way, and were originally passed 'de mano a mano' across the island (Borrero 2009) and now circulate on YouTube, Vimeo and other video sharing websites.

The norms of commercial distribution however cannot be so easily circumscribed nor can films distributed for free subsequently and easily recuperate their costs (as Del Llano's comments on his blog point out). Financially, digitally captured films, no matter how cheap their production still require additional monies (which in the case of Padrón's *Frutas en le Café* came from Spain) to pay for the transference from digital format to the 35mm and other aspects of post production necessary for commercial exhibition. Additionally, commercial distribution still requires the backing of ICAIC which acts as a gatekeeper, in control of which films are distributed across the island. Conversely, ICAIC is one source of many of the personnel who work in independent cinema (others include the alternative spaces which have proliferated since the 1980s which have made it possible for a greater numbers of individuals to be involved in filmmaking outside ICAIC, the ISA, the EICTV, Asociación Hermanos Saíz, Fundación Ludwig (Stock 2009: 36). Del Llano has been an ICAIC scriptwriter since his work on *Alicia en el pueblo de maravillas* in 1990 and most recently Premio Coral-winning co-scriptwriter of *La película de Ana* with Díaz Torres-, Luis Alberto García who plays Nicanor is also an ICAIC actor as indeed are other actors who appear in the shorts Vladimir Cruz, Jorge Perruguoia. Tellingly however, other ICAIC personnel pulled out of the production of the first film in the series *Monte Rouge*.

This last fact isn't to point towards a necessarily entrenched antagonistic relationship

between ICAIC and independent cinema (just maybe a worry amongst some personnel about the contentious nature of *Monte Rouge*). Conscious of the many barriers to new filmmakers getting a break, because of reduced funds and consequent reduced capabilities ICAIC set up in 2001 La Muestra Joven (Young Filmmakers Festival) 'in recognition of the need to take into account filmmakers working outside the institute' and 'to give visibility to a new generation of filmmakers'. (López, 2008: 191) Ana López suggests that by sponsoring this festival ICAIC could 'dispers[e] the fear of generational battles' and also give the young filmmakers the 'opportunity to have [their] work seen more widely'. (2008: 191) Celebrating its eleventh year in 2012, the festival has been an important launching pad for filmmakers with very different approaches to filmmaking in Cuba including Padrón (whose *Video de familia* won an award there in 2002), Juan Carlos Cremata (whose *Chamaco* 2010 was shown there), Arturo Infante (*Utopia*, 2005), Pavel Giroud (*La edad de la peseta* [*The Silly Age*, 2006], *Tres Veces Dos* [*Three times Two* 2005]) Tamara Morales (*Cualquier mujer* [*Any Woman*, 2005]) and Aaron Vega.

Institutionally, however Del Llano's shorts have not received any kind of official platform. Of his ten cortometrajes, only one, *Intermezzo* was accepted for exhibition at the 30th Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano. To a certain extent Del Llano's *decálogo de Nicanor*, made between 2004 and 2011, illustrates what New York-based Cuban director of *Red Cockroaches* and *Memorias de Desarrollo* (*Memories of Overdevelopment* 2010), and EICTV graduate Miguel Coyula has identified as a tendency amongst independent filmmaking in Cuba: "a greater willingness to tackle riskier and risqué subjects' (Burnett 2013). The subjects of Del Llano's shorts, ranging from state surveillance, the Cuban press, to BDSM and sex toys are indeed both politically risky and risqué. That *Intermezzo* was accepted for the Festival is recognition, esteemed critic Juan Antonio García Borrero suggests "a que existimos sin tener que hacer concesiones" (that we exist without having to make concessions; 2009)

Monte Rouge (2004) recounts a home visit from state security police to openly consult with

Nicanor (a driver for the ICAIC) on the placement in his apartment of a government listening device. Nicanor has been singled out for one of these devices because of his accurate criticisms and analysis of the problems of daily life in Cuba, plus, as agent Rodríguez (another recurring character from all the shorts played by Néstor Jiménez) explains one of their colleagues has taken the car and Nicanor lives in walking distance of headquarters. Piloting a new scheme to make their presence 'más participativa' (more participatory), the security police want Nicanor's cooperation so that they can clearly record everything he has to say against the government (and tell him to be careful not to waste their time with any of his positive comments on life in Cuba). But, having to put the only microphone the state entitles him to (as a single man who lives alone) in the toilet (which has the best acoustics - good enough Del Llano's character says 'to record a record') Rodríguez warns Nicanor to be happy to get one microphone as there are some families living ten to a single abode who have spend all their day at the housing office complaining because they also have to make do with one.

Intermezzo (2007) finds Nicanor at a union meeting accosted in the men's toilets during a break as some kind of oddity/celebrity for having been the only one to vote against the proposal (it's never clarified what the proposal was for). While he waits desperately to pee, other delegates (including one played by Vladimir Cruz) come in to congratulate him, ask him what it feels like to vote against a proposal, laugh uproariously when he says he voted against just because he didn't agree with the proposal (as if they who voted in its favour had) and even have their photograph taken with him as a minor celebrity.

Play video clip: http://youtu.be/F_vuda_ToQ8

As the photograph pose suggests, the joke in *Intermezzo* is seemingly against false unanimity in the official structures of Cuban life.

In *Exit* (2011) the final short in the series Nicanor is contracted by a French artist Rodrigo

(Jiménez with blonde hair) to beat up Cuban musicians, dancers and others so that he can record the pain of Cuban artists in one mass collage of photographs. For a 5 euro fee per beating, Nicanor is happy to do the work (if a little pained at hitting a singer he admires) but has to be persuaded to punch a female ballet dancer and a primitive painter who also happens to be a quadruple amputee. *Exit* questions the ethics of foreign artists in their desire to exploit Cuba but also the ethics of Cuban artists in their readiness to be exploited. Some shots show actors, sculptors and other artists queuing up to be beaten/included in Rodrigo's piece (which they consider 'un honor').

Along with Coyula, Del Llano is one of a "generation of media producers who have integrated digital technology and the internet into their mode of filmmaking" (Venegas 2010: 131) and who is taking an individual approach "that challenges the central position of the state." In his shorts Del Llano draws on a familiar repertoire of realist formal practices that are facilitated by the portability and accessibility of digital filming. The films are all shot on location (Del Llano's own apartment is the setting for *Monte Rouge*, the toilet at the Mella theatre is the setting for *Intermezzo*), and many of them make use of a limited space (a room, a single apartment, in the case of *Pas de Quatre* a taxi cab) and a limited amount of camera set ups including static cameras (sometimes taking place entirely in one scene as in *Pravda*). As exercises in cinematic minimalism, the style of these shorts is recognisable from other independent cinemas across the world – particularly American independent cinema of the 1990s (*Clerks*, *Stranger than Paradise*).³ But they also show a (sometimes jokey) awareness of Cuba's own cinematic language of radical critical reality developed in the 1960s.

In published work on the digital image I've suggested that in the case of Fernando Perez' *Suite Habana* digital filmmaking creates a continuity with the political and aesthetic goals of García Espinosa's cine imperfecto through a high definition rendering of late socialist reality that challenges the 'perfect' illusion of classical Hollywood realism (Tierney 2007).⁴ With Del

Llano in these ten shorts, the use of digital image capturing plays less of an ontological role and more of a pragmatic practical role, observing the action and sometimes signalling the cheapness (but not the poor quality in these excellently executed shorts) of the production. There is a cheeky reference to cine imperfecto (and perhaps to *Plaff*) when in *Monte Rouge*, a microphone boom falls briefly into shot in front of Rodríguez' face. He looks at it, then repeats his line and continues the scene. It is as if this knowing use of imperfection - is to deliberately place *Monte Rouge* in a line of Cuban filmmaking that is a critique of Cuban reality without being wholly critical. (The espousal of *Monte Rouge* by the exile community in Miami was for example not Del Llano's intention at all)

As cheap films, made with little money, Del Llano's shorts can be considered part of a reinvented 'poor cinema' approach that became a mantra and indeed a movement in Cuba, under the direction of Solás. Solás launched the Festival de Cine Pobre (No-Budget Film Festival) and with it a 'Manifiesto de Cine Pobre' in 2003 in Gíbara. 'No budget cinema', Solás claims, is a means of ensuring the diversity and legitimacy of other national and cultural identities in the face of homogenization threatened by globalization (n.d. 2003). In many ways 'cine pobre' is a defence of independent or alternative media practices and continues the anti and post-colonial arguments of García Espinosa and the New Latin American Cinema debates of the 1960s and 1970s (Venegas, 2009: 48-49) The festival attracts films from all over the world and has launched a number of Cuban films, including Solás' own no budget film *Barrio Cuba* (2005)

The digital realism of Del Llano's shorts lies not in the espousal of current realist techniques in vogue across Latin American and indeed global art cinemas (use of non professional actors, very long takes, minimal dialogue and editing - as in Amat Escalante's *Los bastardos* (2010), *Lisandro Alonso's Liverpool*, Carlos Reygadas' work). Del Llano's films are incredibly well crafted and humorous vignettes that cover a range of issues that Cuban's deal with frequently. They attest to the growing importance of independent cinema in Cuba and the decentralization of filmmaking and displacement of ICAIC as the centre of filmmaking

(indeed watch out for the next blog post for more on this).

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1. In 'The ballad of Nicanor' written by Frank Delgado and Del Llano and performed by Delgado, which plays in a variety of different styles over the credits of each cortometraje, the lyrics includes ('cada uno de nosotros lleva adentro un Nicanor'). ↩
2. According to an article in *El Diario de la juventud rebelde* this is Diaz Torres' first digitally captured film.
<http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/cultura/2012-12-15/la-pelicula-de-ana-tiene-su-historia-/> —Es la primera película que yo realizo con tecnología digital, y por lo tanto intentamos que la textura del digital formara parte de todo. La película está filmada con distintas cámaras digitales. La obra documental que realiza Ana está filmada con una cámara menos profesional; la que toman los extranjeros está rodada con una cámara distinta, mientras que la nuestra también precisó de otra muy diferente. De esta manera se establece un juego de texturas que se empastan orgánicamente en la historia. ↩
3. In *Aché* — shown at a Muestra de Cine independiente Cubano in Argentina 2012 — Nicanor gets into all kinds of problems when he has to get a new flag for his house. *Brainstorm* is a highly critical representation of the Cuban press. After a sport's stadium is hit by a meteorite killing a hundred spectators, at an editorial meeting the different editor's discuss how to spin the event on their front page. ↩
4. *Suite Havana* does this specifically through close ups on domestic objects; a ringing alarm clock, a bubbling coffee pot, an onion being sliced and a boiling pressure cooker. The impossible depth of field and colour palette of high definition digital

images of the film, looks considerably different to the muted monochrome colour palette of mainstream cinema. Viewed on DVD (and not on its 35mm transfer at the cinema) *Suite Habana* thus takes on an extraordinary self-reflexive structure signalling a defiant hyper-realist and postcolonial stance towards a Western cinematic mainstream. ↩

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