Cuban Documentary Retrospective at DocLisboa 2016

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At DocLisboa 2016, the documentary festival held annually in Lisbon, Portugal, the first phase of work produced by the Cuban national film unit, Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC), was on display. The retrospective, “For an Impossible Cinema: Documentary Film and Avant-Garde in Cuba,” had started at the modern art museum Reina Sophia in Madrid and would travel to Barcelona as well.

DocLisboa prides itself on understanding and showcasing documentary as cinema. DocLisboa pays no obeisance to market forces, but works with partners throughout the city to showcase documentaries that stretch the form and to host discussions about it. In such an environment, a retrospective of revolutionary Cuban documentary was comfortably at home. The period covered—1955–1972—was one of intense artistic experiment, constant political crisis, and cultural invention.

Documentary is an appropriate entry point to the revolution in Cuban filmmaking; it was the foundational medium for the wild experimentation of the first decade of revolutionary Cuban cinema. It had its roots in the curiosity that young Cuban college students had brought to the fresh, raw work of Italian neorealists, an interest that found early expression in the neorealist short El Mégano ([The Charcoal Maker], 1955), which was immediately banned by the Batista government. A fable featuring non-actors, it concerns a charcoal worker who comes to awareness of the injustice of his and other workers’ plight. The filmmakers who collaborated on El Mégano—Julio García Espinosa, Tomás Gutiérrez Alca, José Massip, and Alfredo Guevara—went on to form ICAIC.

Newsreels and short documentaries were the first productions of the “new Cuba.” The newsreels generated immense excitement at the time; they showed people unimagined achievements of their government, and they strove to unify events with storytelling about the construction of a new socialist identity. People flocked to the cinemas to be there at the very start, breaking a long-standing tradition of straggling into the movies. ICAIC famously managed to negotiate choppy ideological waters, maintaining some independence (unlike television) from officialdom while also maintaining its claim to explicitly revolutionary art. The cinematic artists working there, as Joshua Malitsky has articulated, shared a common vocation to build, by all means available, a new revolutionary consciousness, a new relationship between individual and society.

The retrospective was coordinated by the Cinemateca de Cuba, under the aegis of Vice-Director Lola Calviño (the widow of Julio García Espinosa), who has been with ICAIC since shortly after its founding. The British curator Michael Chanan, an authoritative scholar of Cuban cinema, has followed the evolution of Cuban state film production nearly since the start. The size of the retrospective was impressive—twelve sessions, from precursor El Mégano through 1972, when Manuel Herrera’s Girón, the major feature about the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, was finally released.

The retrospective itself reintroduces the defining work of this revolutionary era to the public eye. The recovery of many films that had been languishing in archives has given them new life even in Cuba. Calviño said, “This is important, because it is the work of bringing back memory. And it’s not just for the international audience, but also for ourselves. My own niece didn’t know this history. Young people haven’t seen it, and older people forget. We showed some of the early films weekly on Cuban TV all summer,
stubborn Cuban team

The diversity of experimentation on display in the retrospective was striking, testifying to ICAIC’s commitment to cinematic art, as often articulated by Alfredo Guevara. Santiago Álvarez is rightfully recognized as the enormously energetic, committed, and creative leader of documentary production, and his strident didacticism and gleeful poking of the imperial beast has become the face of early Cuban documentary to many. But ICAIC documentarians productively experimented with many styles that diverged from his, and they were on display in the retrospective, too.

Ethnographic approaches exposed theatergoers to aspects of Cuban culture that had been slighted or suppressed in
pre-revolutionary Cuba, particularly rural and Afro-Cuban culture. The warm and unpretentious work of Sara Gómez is notable in this regard. In . . . Y Tenemos Sabor ([. . . And We’ve Got Flavor], 1967), she profiles a musician’s enormous pride in “uniquely Cuban” instruments and music, many of which evolved within the Afro-Cuban tradition. She doesn’t ask the viewer to buy all the claims to uniqueness, but to delight in the musician’s pride and bask in the sounds of the often dark-skinned Cuban performers. Gómez, an Afro-Cuban, was the first woman film director at ICAIC, and someone who was unafraid to talk about “decolonizing” Cuban culture—meaning not only weaning oneself from long-standing fascination with U.S. popular culture and economic dependency but also a recognition of the importance of Afro-Cuban cultural expression and tradition in shaping authentic Cuban culture.5

Vérité approaches, which later became much more important, are present from the start. Early on, Nestor Almendros was sent to document the day that a private club’s beach property was opened to the locals. His Gente en la Playa ([People at the Beach], 1960) offers no revolutionary slogans or celebrations. In a style that features the overheard and gently observed, with ambient sound evoking the simple pleasures of the beach, Almendros gives viewers glimpses of young families, lovers, giggling groups of girls, tentative waders, and the faces of the youngest Cubans taking it all in. He quietly shares, in short, a new normal. Almendros would go on to become one of the revolution’s exiles, fleeing a harshly anti-gay policy, and a leading Hollywood cinematographer.6

One is also reminded that documentary in the early years was always hybridized with fiction, from El Mégano on. Documentaries had scripts; some situations were staged. The crafted tale of El Mégano itself is told in scenes that approach tableaux, albeit in the actual sites of charcoal production with non-actors. Alejandro Saderman’s half-hour Hombres de Mal Tiempo ([Guys from the Bad Old Days], 1968), a record of a reunion of ancient veterans of the 1898 revolution against Spanish colonialism, openly denies at the start that it is a documentary, calling itself instead a “fiesta of memories.” Both the film and the event it chronicles participate in this hybridity. The elders who had fought for Cuban
independence in 1898 came not only to a reunion but a restaging, with re-enactors, horses, and ammunition, of the events they recalled. The activities foretell the hybrid approach taken in Manuel Octavio Gómez’s fiction film La primera carga al machete (First Charge of the Machete, 1969), which features a journalist straight out of the 1960s interviewing combatants in an 1868 failed uprising against the Spanish.

Sometimes one can see different forms of experimentation with revolutionary art in the same film, and can only wonder at the conversations behind the choices. José Massip’s Guantánamo (1967) starts daringly with a dramatization by local people of daily life in the area dominated by an American base, moves into testimonials about injustices of working conditions under the Americans, and winds up with bombast and the words La lucha continua (The struggle must continue), the revolutionary equivalent of “stay tuned.” Even militancy can surprise today’s viewer by revealing positions that were later abandoned. Julio García Espinosa’s early documentary La Vivienda ([Housing], 1959), which is fueled by outrage and denunciation, pointedly compares the neighborhoods of the rich and the poor. It surprises in the end, though, by putting forward the later-abandoned dream of home ownership.

The early years were also full of experiments with soundtracks, and the excellent screening conditions at the Cinemateca Portuguesa allowed viewers to theatrically reexperience the aural surround as well. The approach taken with the soundtrack of El Mégano, which melodramatically cues all action and ends with a percussive windup that is almost self-parodying, can be seen in some of Álvarez’s work, which communicates its righteous fervor with over-the-top dramatizing sound as well as imagery. Other documentaries, such as Gente en la Playa, depend far more on diegetic and ambient sound. The rich traditions of Cuban popular music are put to good use in several films by Sara Gómez. Also present are musical experiments in cutting-edge jazz and discordant sounds repurposed from daily life, some of which still provoke and some of which now seem very much of their time.

The retrospective brought back the intensity and fearlessness of a moment at which everything was at stake. The moment had some of the frisson of the first years of the Russian Revolution, with artists writing manifestos, imagining an art so entwined with revolutionary mission that there was no space between, and trying out approaches that, frustratingly, measured the gap between. ICAIC went on to navigate the always turbulent ideological waters, with features that incorporated elements of documentary and with documentaries that began to use more cinéma vérité and to track realities less urgent than those of the first years.

Held only weeks before the death of Fidel Castro, the retrospective permitted a look back inside a creative moment where artists joined so many others in building a culture of possibility with what the retrospective itself terms, in its title, an “impossible cinema.” It testified to the extraordinary effervescence of hope and creative experiment at an earlier time of enormous, society-wide change. The series obliquely offers a critique of many of the obituaries of both Fidel Castro and the era he led. Whereas it was common in them to emphasize the dark power of one man’s control, this series testified as well to the broad participation, diversity, intensity and range of creativity marking the era’s launch.

Notes
4. Malitsky, Post-Revolution Nonfiction Film, 63–64.
5. Alessandra Muller (dir.), Sara Gomez: An Afro-Cuban Filmmaker (2005), Films for the Humanities, Switzerland.