

The United States Film Industry and its Impact on Latin American Identity

Rationalizations.

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In groups that occupy an extensive geographical space, such as Latin American nations and the United States, communal identity patterns survive and function when transmitted through wide-ranging mass media instruments. This implies continuous instruction on the identity's attributes and a conditioning of disposition, interpretation and analysis in its members. Such instruction offers a prefabricated construal of collective achievement and future objectives and helps to systematize the individuals' awareness and understanding of their surroundings.

Film, an eminently visual medium, has a very intimate, indexical relationship with "reality" and inevitably, as Mas'Ud Zavarzadeh argues [1], carries with it important political implications. This indexical relationship, as Dai Vaughan makes clear, stems from the fact that photographic imagery convinces the viewer of the "actuality" of the reality that it offers: "this actuality... is the subjective conviction on the part of the viewer of that prior and independent existence of the represented world which is specific to the photograph" [2]. Owing to this relationship, visual narrative devices can constrain and coerce the spectator into ideologically desirable subject positions, employing a formal matrix that forms a progressive order wherein expectations are fabricated and fulfillment constantly provided by the dominant system of cognition, production and consumption.

In the words of Claire Johnston, what the camera absorbs is in reality “the *naturalized* world of the dominant ideology” [3]. It is within this context that we can fully appreciate how film became a powerful device used to contrive national identity standards in Latin America and how it developed into a tool to manufacture a paradigm whose salient characteristic would be exclusion of targeted social collectives. In Linda Williams’s words [4], even documentary film is not “an essence of truth but [...] a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths.”

These relative truths orbit around the needs of white patriarchal capitalism in the USA, a system that was exported to Latin America with its early films and was received in diverse ways. These diverse ways are well exemplified by the two Latin American nations closest to the United States and yet very far apart in their film philosophies, Mexico and Cuba. As we shall see, early United States film narrative drew upon the social and cultural stereotypes extant in society, repeatedly casting those individuals that were outside the identity prototype (mostly Mexicans and blacks) in negative roles. In Mexico, a country marked by conflict with the United States and attired in the self-confidence of its indigenous identity, images of Mexicans stealing, cheating and murdering did not gain the popularity expected by Hollywood, and that nation not only turned to Europe for most of its films, but also embarked on a program of film production, often funded by the government, in which natives were cast in very positive roles: in the 1907 film *El grito de Dolores o La independencia de México* (The Dolores Manifesto or the Independence of Mexico), the main character was independence hero Miguel Hidalgo, famous for gathering an army of mostly indigenous Mexicans and slaughtering whites, mostly Spaniards and criollos. In *Santa*, 1931, and *María*

Candelaria, 1943, the main role went to indigenous women. The films *Tabaré* (1917) and *Tizoc* (1957) tell the story of the love between an indigenous man and a rich white heiress, a topic that would have been inconceivable in the USA.

A very different story is told by Cuba, a nation whose indigenous population was wiped out by the Spanish. The remaining groups, the progeny of European conquerors and the offspring of African slaves, clung to their racial identities as the absence of an overwhelming indigenous group prevented the identitary cohesion observed in Mexico. As a consequence, acceptance of racialized narratives and images being imported from the USA was broad and untroubled, given that the group flowing into the power vacuum left by Spain was European-descended, a group that progressively viewed the non-European elements as alien in the schemes of national identity construction. In sundry ways, then, exclusionary strategies long portrayed as “natural” the national social paradigm put forward by this dominant group, the upper class, U.S.-approved Euro-Cuban elite. Starting with its introduction in 1897, film actively participated in the construction of national identity by furnishing a rational and integrated view of the national reality, making available to Cubans a constructed world that served the needs of the ruling elite but had the look and feel of reality, of “nature.” By representing the constructed as natural, by laying the foundation for the exclusion of blacks in the nation’s identitary image, by sponsoring the continuation of ruling disproportionate power relations, early Cuban film greatly assisted in the fabrication and maintenance of the dominant social arrangement.

An analysis of the nation’s earliest extant film, Enrique Díaz Quesada’s 1906 one-minute production *El parque de Palatino*, provides an initial indication of this social

arrangement. Filmed as a promotional short for Havana's new, sprawling amusement park, its images show several spectators watching those enthusiastic and adventurous souls who are on the Ferris wheel. Two others, hat in hand, enjoy themselves next to the miniature train tracks. As the camera pans from right to left, we see a coffee stand with a crowd that has been attracted by a large sign that announces "CAFÉ." Next, a carousel tent surrounded by a fence and another crowd gathering around a stand that announces "MANTECADO CON BARQUILLO," a popular treat for Cubans of the period. Further scenes of the rollercoaster, slides and crowded stands will lead us to believe that Cuba is a European nation. True that Díaz Quesada did not stage these scenes, but the fact that he filmed a venue frequented by people who could afford a ticket and/or were allowed entrance because of the color of their skin (white) talks to the particular choices the filmmaker is making, as well as to the social circumstances surrounding the nation's non-white population.

Another film from this earliest decade of Cuban filmmaking, *Salida de las tropas para Santiago de Cuba durante la Guerra Racista*, captured images of the Cuban National Army's operations against rebels in the mountains of Oriente Province. This war, basically a racial conflict, pitted the National Army, made up of mostly white soldiers, against black revolutionaries, the ones the film's title suggests started this "race war." Filmic images were produced at the time of handsome, clean military doctors carefully cutting into the ruined bodies of slain rebel leaders, looking for clues to their "otherness" as if doing an autopsy of an alien being. Portraying them as the enemies of society, cutting their bodies up as if they had come from another planet, not only served as apologia for the brutal manner in which the National Army annihilated the rebels, but

also solidified the image being produced of a “Cuban” identity whose most visible and relevant feature was white skin.

So the ideological status quo, which looked very much like the white patriarchal capitalism of the great northern neighbor, was being encoded into the images offered to Cuban audiences in films like these two exemplars; good and evil were condensed into uncomplicated and racialized stereotypes and the prosperous happiness of those within the identitary assemblage was reaffirmed through images of carefree play.

As the early years give way to more sophisticated filmic production, one is reminded of Ralph Ellison’s incisive observation that “Every... technological advance since the oceanic sailing ship... [produced] a further instrument [for] the dehumanization of the Negro” [5]. Whereas in Mexico we see protagonic roles for indigenous revolutionaries in films such as *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* “Let’s Ride With Pancho Villa” (1935), one observes in Cuba that people outside identitary boundaries are articulated essentially as perfidious individuals who practice witchcraft and will rebel against the forces of culture and the intellect at the first opportunity. An example of this is *La brujería en acción*, or “Witchcraft in Action” (1919), a less than apt title for a film that purports to explore African religious practices. Two years earlier (1917) director Díaz Quesada had shot *La hija del policía en poder de los Ñañigos*, “...the story of a young lover who delivers the object of his affection, a policeman’s daughter, into the hands of a murderous organization of African origin. Díaz Quesada may have been catering to the prevailing tendencies of popular opinion: a few months before the release of the movie, many black Cubans were lynched in Matanzas for allegedly having participated in the ritual murder of a white girl” [6]. Meanwhile, the iconography for the national identity’s archetypal

individual was being assembled in films such as the 1913 release *Manuel García, rey de los campos de Cuba*, the story of a white, valorous, honest Robin Hood type that brought justice to the farthest corners of the nation.

These images are ideological practices that disguise their discourse by representing the relationship between image and reality as an unmediated one. The values communicated through film seem unadorned by opinion, as the scheme for communicating standards is masked: this ultimately validates the status quo. So it is that film serves to give “orientation” to the observing individual, turning the objective world into what Lindsay French calls a “behavioral environment” within which the individual thinks, feels and acts [7].

Remembering Marx’s insistence on the fact that there is no “meaning” without the mediation of history and structures of subjectivity, that meaning must be historically evaluated in terms of its intended consequences, it might be observed more clearly that the exploitation of film has a concrete, historical frame of reference for Cuba. And that would be the United States which, just 90 miles to the north, was producing politically charged images and exporting them.

Some of the first filmic images of Africans were archetypical of the Eurocentric idea of Africa: an unwashed horde of black-skinned natives being presided over by “The White Goddess,” an Amazonian white woman who, by virtue of her subjugating whiteness, commanded the jungle villagers who, because they were dark, were portrayed as natural inferiors to the eurofemale. Whether one talks of *Trader Horn*, *Jungle Queen* or *She*, the embodiment of the deep-rooted Eurocentric racialism that the U.S. film industry was producing early on will be recognized in them. The “White Hunter”

archetype (*Allan Quartermain*; *King Solomon's Mines*) was also a remarkable way to introduce Africans on the silver screen, as was Elmo Lincoln's 1917 *Tarzan* and Johnny Weismueller's subsequent characterizations. These archetypes coming from the north not only targeted Africans. One might recall that the 1910 epic *Bronco Billy's Redemption* had a dying white man in need of medicines to save his life. After giving his money to a Mexican and sending him to buy the medicines, the Mexican spends the money on other pursuits and, on top of it, loses the prescription. In *The Cowboy's Baby* (1910), a Mexican throws the hero's baby son into the river for the amusement of it, and in *Captured by Mexicans* (1914) a Mexican tries to murder a group of whites that have just saved his life. One could also point to screen gems such as *The Greaser's Revenge* (1911), *Tony the Greaser* (1911), *Bronco Billy and the Greaser* (1914) and D. W. Griffith's *The Greaser's Gauntlet* (1910). It becomes evident that early on film (let us remember Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*) is understood as a superlative instrument with which to outline national identity arrangements. It should not be construed that this is an outmoded model from the early XX century; one should consider that in the 1990's Michael Douglas starred in the blockbuster *Falling Down*, where an average white male, tired of all the violence and immorality that surrounds him, ventures forth into the black and Mexican streets of Los Angeles, carrying a bat, a machine gun, and even a missile launcher. He first takes back his home, telling his heretofore domineering wife to shut up when she objects to his plans, and then attempts to take back society from the scum that has overthrown his hardworking, law-abiding, moral class of humanity. It is worthy of note that director Joel Schumacher described the film as one that "shows the way things really are" [8].

Film is thus apt to allow a symptomatic reading of non-white life and obscure any recognition of it as a constituent part of social construction. In Cuba, the adoption of such images and their associated identitary logic signaled the inability to fashion a national identity that would be something other than a munificent simulacrum of Spanish identitary models.

The visual image created and sustained by early Cuban film was tautological, dominated by a relentless and unsympathetic attitude towards the African. Placed in this predicament, excluded from the privileged personal and social affirmation that is afforded by vision (which is, after all, the prime method of conceptualizing systems that define the world and one's place in it), the afro-Cuban will process and energize those assets left to him –those that converge upon the less evident power of sound, which, left essentially intact by the dominant identity designers, has been a powerful means to define his place and create his own value schematics and cultural logics. This appropriation and privileging of sound's sense-making potential (music) has to a large extent defined the afro-Cuban's cultural constructions in the nation's public realm. This privileging of sound spills over into non-musical creative endeavors, being evident in literature, for example, as is the case with the work of Cuba's national poet Nicolás Guillén. Sound-privileging even becomes the source of urban jokes, like that of the black mechanic who tells his white customer "I couldn't fix your brakes, so I made your horn louder."

There exists a strong sense that Cuba's greatest legacy to world culture is based on sound. This observation can easily be substantiated through quantitative research. It may be that Cuba's importation of film technology and its particular mode of making sense (visually) trumped indigenous modes (which are sound-based) and is, in the end, the

importation of an essentially alien language. Transforming this language was the first undertaking of the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC) after the 1959 revolution, and it is not a coincidence that most of its first productions use sound to begin to nullify the racialized intensity of visual imagery, that intensity with which it disenfranchised and vilified an important component of the nation's population. Julio García Espinosa's 1961 production *Cuba baila*, the first film completed by the ICAIC, functionally represents a direct challenge to the previous, alien language's rationalizations and casts a rearward gaze into concealed traditions in order to reclaim and bring to the fore a store of signifying practices based on sound. Using the traditional "coming out" party of a middle class girl as its background, the film exposes the original plans to hire a waltz orchestra and invite only whites as a travesty, as the party can only go forth through the efforts of a neighboring afro-Cuban whose contributions make it a success. Another example can be extracted from the popular 1968 film *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. As bourgeois intellectual Sergio walks around Havana during the first moments of the Revolution, he stumbles into a frenzied crowd dancing to typically Cuban rhythms. The sound seems to explode from the speakers as the dancers (almost all of them black) occupy the full volume of the screen. Unreceptive to this native language spontaneously exploding all around him, this sedate euro-Cuban (played by a Cuban actor of Italian descent, Sergio Corrieri) underscores the now highly inconsequential "way of being Cuban" that he represents. As he views Havana through a telescope from the heights of his apartment balcony, he spies on what seems to be a still nature painting, commenting that the city seems to be made out of cardboard. This signals the death of the alien discourse based on vision that his class had dominated for so long, and the ascendancy of

the native language that had heretofore been relegated to the realm of sound.

These two illustrative films attain a symbolic dimension at no less than two levels: thematically they make available a cognitive frame for new subject positions that undermine the old ways of making sense attendant to the vanquished identitary model; aesthetically their images pivot upon the foregrounding of the practice of meaning production. Many more films illustrate this, films like Sergio Giral's 1974 production *El otro Francisco*, a filmic adaptation of the first anti-slavery novel written in Cuba. It tells the story of a white man who falls in love with his slave Dorotea, but when she rejects his advances, he decides to have her black lover tortured. Events in the novel are initially portrayed in the film, and they are portrayed a second time as a sort of philosophical counterweight to the original novel. This second presentation of events purports to show the events without the romantic-sentimental element and more in tune with the reality of slave life in Cuba. The film's binary text demands our understanding of its dual imagery as a device to create in the second rendering a perceptual "reality" that is much like factual truth, untainted by identitary politics, one that exposes the deficiencies of the modes of meaning production generated by the vanquished paradigm.

The new Communist authorities in the post-1959 era have recognized the dominant role of the scopic as a cultural imperative in the new social and epistemological systems of the Revolution. As such, the strategies for changing identitary politics have dominated the nature of filmic images put out by filmmakers of the period. If Anderson is correct in stating that national/ethnic identity is not fatalistic, that it is manufactured and a product of history and not of DNA [9], the inclusion of the African element in Cuban society—it follows—can be assembled and put in place as a prioritized element in Cuban national

identity archetypes. That revolutionary authorities believe this is evident: Identity patterns integrated into filmic narratives by entities like the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC) have removed race as an exclusionary element, visibly including Afro-Cubans in the identity narrative. It is of consequence, though, that these entities have incorporated different exclusionary factors to their methodology, evidenced by the fact that national identity and political allegiance to the regime are expected to coincide.

Endnotes

- [1] M. Zavarzadeh, *Seeing Films Politically*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 145.
- [2] D. Vaughan, *For Documentary*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 182.
- [3] C. Johnston, "Women's cinema as counter-cinema," in *Notes on Women's Cinema*, C. Johnston, Ed. London: SEFT: 1974, p. 28.
- [4] L. Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History the New Documentary," *Film Quarterly* vol. 46, no. 3, spring 1993, p. 14.
- [5] R. Ellison, *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage, 1995, p. 275.
- [6] A. J. García Osuna, *The Cuban Filmography*. London: McFarland, 2000, p. 16.
- [7] In T. J. Csordas, Ed. *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 76.
- [8] In P. Gormley, *The New-brutality Film: Race and Affect in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2005, p. 44.
- [9] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of*

Nationalism. London: Verso, 2006, p. 149.