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On Location in Cuba: Street Filmmaking during Times of Transition (review)

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vador Novo further complicated the construction of national identity in Brazil and Mexico, alongside the emergence of mass culture and the partial erosion of patriarchal norms in the shifting economic circumstances of the 1920s and 1930s.

A short review provides an inadequate forum to assess the contributions of this theoretically complex interdisciplinary work. Gabara successfully demonstrates the inadequacy of prevailing definitions of modernism, postmodernism, and nationalism in light of the actual experiences and artistic interventions found in Brazil and Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s. How, then, are these concepts to be reconstructed?

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On Location in Cuba: Street Filmmaking during Times of Transition. By Anne M. Stock. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Pp. xxiv, 320. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$59.95 cloth; \$21.95 paper.

Whatever happened to Cuban cinema beginning in the 1990s, when the Cuban nation entered into crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union, experiencing what has been termed a Special Period of acute shortages and uncertainties? If we look at the production of the state film institute, ICAIC, then the picture looks gloomy indeed. In 1996, for example, not a single feature film was completed. Add to this the deaths, between 1996 and 2008, of filmmakers whose names are synonymous with the expansive period of Cuban revolutionary cinema: Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Santiago Alvarez, Pastor Vega, Octavio Cortázar, and Humberto Solás. Yet, to chart the demise of Cuban cinema in this way would be, for Anne M. Stock, blind to the new audiovisual cultures and practitioners that have emerged in the past 20 years. In this absorbing, closely documented, refreshingly original, and well-written book, Stock maps a field that will be unknown to most readers and cinema goers, for whom the visibility of a “new” Latin American cinema in recent years has been synonymous with a handful of internationally acclaimed directors from Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil, like Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, Lucrecia Martel, Pablo Trapero, Walter Salles, and Fernando Meirelles.

The study is crafted with the nuance of an insider (the result of some 50 research trips to Cuba over a 20-year period), the perspective of an outsider, attuned to contemporary debates about globalization and transnational cinemas, and the commitment of a cultural bridge builder, looking to increase dialogue and exchange between the United States and Cuba. Certain shared characteristics are seen to define these street filmmakers. They are professionally trained, having completed their studies at the university or in art and film schools. They have found ways of coping with, indeed creatively transforming, the limitations imposed by economic crisis. As Stock explains, they use new lightweight digital cameras and can edit on home computers; they work with minimal budgets, usually in partnership with government and nongovernment institutions on the island and in other countries; and they are committed to experimentation and innovation. The key underlying practice is “resolviendo,” making do, getting by.

The work, “reels off like a film—with dolly backs, close ups and jump cuts exhibiting the *process* of making and circulating films as well as the *products* or film texts” (p. 26). Three chapters comprise the “dolly back” to the late 1980s and early 1990s. There is an initial account of the ways in which newly founded cultural organizations—the Escuela Nacional de Cine y Televisión, the Asociación Hermanos Saíz, the Movimiento Nacional de Video, and the Fundación Ludwig de Cuba—encouraged the work of emerging filmmakers, opening up new spaces in a field hitherto dominated by ICAIC. Chapter 2 looks at the community media collective, Televisión Sierra, while Chapter 3 describes the ways in which the ICAIC animation studios managed the transition from hand-drawn to computer-generated images. Both these chapters offer a fascinating overview of 50 years of film production, as well as a close analysis of recent developments. Chapters 4 through 6 offer a close-up of the work of three street filmmakers—Juan Carlos Cremata Malberti, Pavel Giroud, and Esteban Insausti—while a final section offers a jump cut to the yearly festival of emerging media makers, the National Exhibit of New Filmmakers.

The study offers an elegant blend of textual analysis, contextual mappings, and comments from the directors themselves. Stock notes stylistic complexity, individuality, an emphasis on the personal over the political, and a willingness to explore and push the boundaries of what might once have been considered taboo and off-limits for cinema. These filmmakers show an awareness of revolutionary tradition, but also of the need to allow concepts such as identity, nation, and revolution to become more porous, more attuned to realities rather than empty rhetoric. Stock herself plays an active part in the narrative, though the “I” voice, when it appears, remains modest and never intrusive. One example of her work alongside Cuban directors that emerges from the book is the important Cuban Cinema Classics project that seeks to preserve Cuban documentaries through digitization, and to extend the audience for these films through English subtitling. While clearly sympathetic to the travails and achievements of Cuban cineastes, the study resists any Pollyanna-ish assessment of current conditions: an epilogue points to the inadequate production facilities on the island, the dilapidated movie theatres, the lack of funds which makes even minimal co-production deals problematic, and the island’s film legacy becoming brittle in badly preserved cans, rotting in the heat and humidity. The vicissitudes of globalization are also ever present: Microsoft has recently banned its Windows Live Messenger service in Cuba, putting further pressure on cineastes who use the internet as a form of communication and dissemination. Despite this, filmmakers continue *resolviendo*, getting by, and Stock’s book is a lively and indispensable guide to this transitional moment in Cuban culture and society.

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