

## Cuban Filmmaking: Assessing Challenges and Opportunities

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In 2009, the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográfica (ICAIC) celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary by promoting its historical significance through various retrospectives and with the highest number of films in production since 1990. For the Institute this output signaled a recovery since production plummeted in 1996 during the “special period” when the only films produced were shorts and documentaries. In the decade between 1991 and 2001 approximately 31 features were completed, at an average of three per year. Gone were the earlier levels of production when yearly output reached ten features and fifty documentaries.

Though government assistance increased, foreign financing and new investment in digital tools helped ICAIC remain afloat, a concurrence of problems faced by the industry tempered the extent of the “recovery.” ICAIC’s leadership confronted and survived economic collapse, material setbacks and political controversies while facing the new realities of film industries as cross media synergies and social networking sought to create new audiences. Audiovisual industries across the globe simultaneously grappled with how converging and pervasive technologies such as the Internet, television, satellite and mobile phones, were redefining not just models of production but also audiences and distribution platforms (Venegas 2009). Media markets themselves are shifting as companies vie for new global consumers, making the impact felt worldwide. If the heyday of Cuban cinema in the 60s and 70s was energized by filmmakers aligned with a social project that eschewed capitalist media competition and connected to world avant-gardes, ICAIC’s current goals respond principally to surviving and maintaining the cultural capital established in a bygone era.

Politically, these were also difficult years for the film institute as the long-running leadership of ICAIC changed in response to controversy over a film’s content (*Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas*, 1991). In 1992 Alfredo Guevara returned to take over the helm at ICAIC, then stepped down in 2000 to direct the International Havana Film Festival as Omar Gonzalez, the first non-filmmaker to ever run ICAIC, took over. The shift in leadership is significant since filmmakers had lobbied for a type of “autonomy” within the centralized structure. It means a culture of film is developed out of the conditions of political crisis ICAIC confronted in the early 90s, thus responding defensively to political pressure. Under Gonzalez, who has appointed other non-filmmakers to the staff, the Institute focuses on generating revenue while maintaining the directives of a centralized ideological project.

Generally, the most pressing challenges to the film industry are related to the myriad ancillary effects of the continued US economic embargo on the production of culture. This long-standing policy isolates and hinders the needed exchange of ideas, travel to conferences, festivals, or professional meetings not to mention the purchase of specialized production equipment and construction materials. Nevertheless, there are internal challenges that are equally pressing.

If film industries in general reproduce the ideologies of governments through established cultural policies or the lack thereof, in Cuba, this dialogue is more directly articulated. As with other small film industries, government support is key for

maintaining continuity of production. The centralized organization of the Cuban film industry facilitated development of a film production infrastructure by prioritizing investment linking the business of motion pictures with the larger social project. Beyond the Institute's central role, *casas de cultura* supported the growth of the amateur film movement in the 1980s, providing another example of how broad state support in the arts provides important pockets of development. However, the economic crisis of the 1990s revealed the mounting paradoxes of centralized control of media in a fragile political climate. As the government embraced, albeit cautiously, the commercialization of artistic production—music, film, literature, plastic arts—the close relationship between centralized political directives and centralized organization revealed tremendous difficulties and contradictions. At times, a politically conservative bureaucracy limited theatrical exhibition of films deemed to be “counter-revolutionary” an ineffective strategy as these titles could be easily obtained through underground video “clubs” that bicycled copies around town. While film production personnel formed part of the elite few who could gain approval for a home internet connection, they were also avid participants of this clandestine video culture. An emerging critical debate since 2007 over painful issues resulting from past and present repressive policies—as they affected the cultural sector—has begun a process of revision and renewal, but this is still hampered by entrenched attitudes and organizational infrastructures. Establishing cultural policies that facilitate openness and capitalize on the energy of younger producers would further enhance and reconcile the needs of artistic production and artists.

Despite ongoing difficulties affecting material and political infrastructures, ICAIC continues to self-finance a production slate that also includes foreign co-productions. Spanish, German and other foreign capital during the 1990s buoyed Cuban productions, some of which were critically well received (*Suite Habana*, *Miel para Oshún* and *Fresa y Chocolate*), maintaining the presence of Cuban films internationally alongside an expanding Spanish-language film market. The Cuban film industry was not alone in relying on international co-productions, as Latin American films increasingly were co-financed through new Iberoamerican funding strategies like Ibermedia or the Hubert Bals Fund in the Netherlands. In the last five years, Latin American partnerships, especially with Venezuela, provided capital for production, awards, and post-production. Raw production numbers show a consistent flow of feature films being made: six were completed in 2007 and seven in 2008. Seven have premiered in 2009 and six others are in the production pipeline. Of those projects finished in 2007, three were nationally produced and three were international co-productions. In 2008, two were co-productions and five were nationally produced. The Institute provided filmmaking services to four non-national features in 2007 and two in 2008.

ICAIC thus sits at the center of a small media industry structure that provides funding, training, services (equipment, expertise, personnel), structures exhibition and commercialization of its films, and collaborates with other Cuban entities such as the COPEXTEL corporation, the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television (ICRT), the Armed Forces (MINFAR), the Ministry of Culture, the Foundation for the New Latin American Cinema (FNCLA), and commercial enterprises. This approach presumably facilitates control to generate the necessary capital and partnerships to maintain the industry. However, given the serious economic situation, ICAIC needs huge amounts of capital investment in order to upgrade facilities and equipment necessary to provide on-going

professional services and to provide adequate support for national productions. Official statistics for 2008 count 50 overall productions completed.

Additionally, on-going economic difficulties have forced the emigration of trained personnel directly affecting the quantity and quality of production. The reduction has collateral effects for the next generation of filmmakers. As a source of income and experience, all forms of production—whether feature-length films, documentaries or commercials—provide entry level and professional work for emerging filmmakers. Reduction in production thus means reduced opportunities for work in general.

The US embargo has devastating effects for Cubans to travel in support of their work. Likewise, obstacles to travel either due to Cuban regulations, lack of economic means, or US visa restrictions continue to place Cuban artists at a disadvantage, a handicap which effects not just the actual benefit of travel, but the material conditions under which Cubans travel. Consequently, hosting institutions have a greater burden as costs and visa negotiations related to Cuban visitors are high and complicated. The Obama administration's initial flexibility on US visitors to Cuba is hopeful, but US travel restrictions to Cuba and vice versa need to be lifted completely in order to concurrently reject the unequal treatment of Cuban filmmakers.

Moreover, the dissemination and acquisition of professional information is limited given the structural difficulties of accessing the internet. The Cuban government's policy to limit internet access to designated providers also makes the situation particular, since independent producers effectively use the decentralized distribution structure of the internet. Amateurs and professionals are posting all kinds of videos online understanding, even if on a limited basis, the internet's capacity to broadly circulate materials at a low cost. Government internet controls notwithstanding, there are other reasons for the limits of information flow. Slow internet connection speeds are in part due to US policy, as are the economic conditions that prevent the acquisition of computers, and the improvement of facilities. Commercialization of films and television shows, which increased considerably and consistently since the late 1990s, has improved the circulation of films in specific points of sale within Cuba. Online vendors that often sell pirated versions of new and old Cuban films, capitalize on consumer interest for the "Cuban" brand. Television shows are also sold in DVD formats at international venues like the yearly Guadalajara book fair, eBay, Amazon, and on the island through central Artex stores. Most important to recognize about the thriving underground subculture is that it speaks to a larger hunger for media from the island. Though movie attendance is down in general, and particularly in Cuba where theatres are in bad condition, it is important to recognize that there remains a large Cuban audience for its own national products.

In the midst of countless challenges, there are opportunities for an industry that has achieved historical significance. With great foresight, ICAIC promotes a new generation of filmmakers through collateral film festival platforms in Cuba. Weaned on analogue and digital video and a still emerging internet culture the next generation of filmmakers show their films at ICAIC-sponsored *Muestra de Nuevos Realizadores* in Havana, the *International Festival de Cine Pobre* in Gibara in the eastern province of Holguín, and in the premiere venue, the Festival of New Latin American Cinema. While the *Muestra* has been vital in revealing broad ideological positions, tastes and the uneven skills of emerging filmmakers, and *Cine Pobre* strategically decentralizes film culture

away from Havana. The 2009 edition of the *Muestra* screened close to one hundred fiction shorts, documentaries, and animation.<sup>1</sup> Effective at cultivating new sources of talent, ICAIC cannot, however, guarantee that the filmmakers it develops will find opportunities to produce their work.

Nonetheless, a consistent if not always positive experience with international film co-productions in the 1990s has cultivated active involvement with foreign companies, and brought Cuban filmmakers in contact with producers, writers, and distributors. The benefits of this experience are on display as Cuban projects consistently participate in top Latin American film festivals. At the 2009 Guadalajara Film Festival in Mexico, which hosts the top film market for Latin American films, young Cuban producers competed in the Co-Production Lab and Films in Construction award. Relying on its high profile, the festival leadership's faith in the potential of the internet in film distribution profiled the brave new world of online film distribution where the hierarchical world of producer-controlled distribution is displaced by the filmmaker-controlled, flexible release strategy and direct access to consumer model. Participation in these kinds of events, although sporadic, potentially forms the relationships needed to develop projects and gain familiarity with producing and financing trends beyond the local experience in Cuba.

Fifty years on from ICAIC's founding Cuba has multiple film production and training hubs: Estudios Fílmicos de la FAR, Escuela de Cine y Television de San Antonio de los Baños (EICTV), Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), amateur film clubs and ICAIC. Video and film production in the provinces is more difficult, but there is increased access to filmmaking through *Television Serrana* (Television in the Mountains) and through its collaboration with students from EICTV and ISA. An international film school established in 1986, EICTV trains approximately sixty students per year admitted from as many countries, including Cuba. A large number of them are working back in the audiovisual industries of their native countries, as was the goal of founders Julio García Espinosa, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Gabriel García Márquez and others. To acknowledge that the most important of media industries in Latin America is television, during the early 00s, EICTV grew to a three-year program to include a curriculum in television production. In a way, the school has adopted an international co-production model as senior students produce their final projects back in home countries like Venezuela, Colombia, or Mexico. It has developed an important network of international cooperation even as its focus is on training filmmakers. Critical to developing this cross-nation outreach, EICTV's early years of operation offered free tuition to all its students, an unsustainable situation that changed in the mid-90s. It relies on ICAIC's and FNCLA's support, as well as on other international funding sources. As might be obvious, ISA is characteristically different in a number of ways. It reports directly to the Ministry of Culture, provides higher education in the arts in general and has corresponding centers of instruction in the provinces of Camagüey, Holguín and Santiago de Cuba. As its focus is on training Cuban students, it does not have the type of international network of sponsors that is necessary for an institution such as EICTV although they have collaborated in the past few years. Both centers of instruction have their student productions regularly featured in the various film festivals available throughout Cuba. All the academic and production entities rely on ICAIC's production facilities, equipment, actors, and expertise so that the closing of ICAIC's film processing laboratory negatively affects all other production.

The above difficulties notwithstanding, the production of animation is on the rise as animation provides an area in which Cuban artists can compete successfully for its own domestic audience. ISA's statistics show an increase of 195 percent between 2004 and 2005 when animated cartoons jumped from 39 to 76 respectively. ICAIC reported in 2008 an unprecedented 656 minutes of animation, a direct result of the institute's objective to promote animation through graduate and undergraduate instruction, special training workshops, access to information, and cultural exchanges with visiting professionals.<sup>ii</sup> The increased focus on developing animation is extended across all genres from children's entertainment, to special educational and medical campaigns, commercial and artistic production. All of this makes sense as ICAIC hopes to create a 3D animation studio and its foundation is a super production in 3D begun in 2007 to be completed in 2011. More than one hundred animation artists including painters, sculptors, and set designers will have collaborated in the production of *Meñique* Cuba's first animated 3D feature film (ICAIC 2009).

In other aspects of film culture, the institute's *Cineteca Nacional* and the Film Archive are collaborating with international agencies to improve the historical record of the film industry's patrimony. This area benefits the preservation of national memory but also educational, promotional activities and the production sector. International partnerships capitalize on goodwill and an interest in the history of Cuban cultural production and the preservation of patrimony. The Cinemateca and the Archive are involved in restoring Cuba's *Noticiero ICAIC Latinoamericano* (Latin American Newsreel) and in 2008 nominated it for UNESCO's Memory of the World register. Various European agencies have provided grants for training in preservation and restoration of archival materials and reconstruction of the archives.

Continued programming of Cuban films at museums, universities and festival film programs reveals a sustained international interest in Cuban film culture. In fact, depictions of Cuba by non-Cubans increased as the number of tourists to Cuba grew since 1990s accelerating the production of home movies, coffee table books, calendars, and travel guides. Although general audiences still know little about Cuba, Cuba became more visible as visiting documentary filmmakers from abroad found curious audiences for their own Cuban stories diversifying ideas about the island as well as interest in a greater understanding of the political changes on the island.

To conclude, the Cuban film industry faces severe challenges as its technical infrastructure deteriorates increasing the cost of maintenance and thus of production. ICAIC's most recent official institutional report acknowledges the difficulties ahead and calls for a realistic and truthful analysis of their situation. It's leadership puts forth that in order to attract international productions to Cuba, provide services, complete a domestic production slate and adopt new methods of production, Cuban institutions, personnel and artists must become more agile and lean. To organize a transition to new strategies for the film industry, sustainable infrastructures must emerge that maintain achievements and establish the criteria for future endeavors. How to address all of these difficulties in the context of a world financial crisis while making sure that the filmmaking infrastructure is not swallowed up by the market will be the toughest challenge of all.

Works cited

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<sup>i</sup> Muestra de Nuevos Realizadores, <http://www.cubacine.cu/muestrajoven/index.html>, accessed 5/24/09.

<sup>ii</sup> Balance oficial del ICAIC 2008-09. Unpublished document presented in March 2009.