

Historicizing *Cine Jóven* and Cuba's Audiovisual Landscape: New Paradigms in Digital Media Production and Circulation

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The Cuban government's response to the increasing ability of ordinary citizens and media makers to produce their own content has ranged from ambivalence to hostility, and such usage has challenged the state's broad control of media production and circulation. In the audiovisual sector, this new media ecology, together with economic reforms that ignore the contemporary needs of artists and the declining relevance of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry, is altering how films get produced and distributed. This essay analyzes the role that *cine jóven* is playing in the current media landscape. It argues that, despite formidable obstacles, a new generation of audiovisual producers are pivotal actors in the construction of a more pluralistic and democratic media landscape in Cuba.

Keywords: audiovisual policy, cine jóven, ICAIC, digital media, Cuban cinema

Introduction

Cuban society has been experiencing vast changes in the 21st century. Many Cubans' daily lives have been impacted by economic reforms put in place by Raul Castro's administration. They include the relaxing of bans on the buying and selling of homes and automobiles, allowing family businesses to hire non-family members, and removing some restrictions on international travel. Equally significant has been the increasing ability of ordinary citizens to produce their own digital content. An ever-growing number of Cubans has been gaining access to the Internet, video cameras, still cameras, personal computers, and cell phones. This has meant that, more than at any other time since the dawn of the Cuban Revolution, a diverse array of audiovisual material generated by citizens has been circulating inside and outside of Cuba. The government's response has ranged from ambivalence to hostility, depending upon the nature of the content, and the media landscape has been irrevocably altered (see Henken, 2011; Stock, 2009; Venegas, 2010).

In the audiovisual sector, the appropriation of new technologies has been altering how films get produced and distributed, and by whom. Relatedly, audiovisual producers have been sidestepping official channels and are setting up informal cooperatives and establishing production houses inside and outside

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of Cuba.² Yet the Economic Reform Guidelines established in 2011 dedicate only two of 313 articles to "culture," with no mention of the audiovisual sector (Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba, 2011). Such lack of consideration for the audiovisual field's role in the political economy has not escaped the attention of media makers, who have been advocating for more inclusive and democratic cultural institutions and policies and legal reforms that could facilitate the sector's sustainability.

One of the drivers of the transformations in the audiovisual field has been *cine joven*.³ *Cine joven* refers to a trend that began in the 1990s in which a new generation of media makers began to produce a wide range of audiovisual material (documentaries, animation, short films, etc.) independently or semi-independently of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC). This has been due, in part, to ICAIC's declining capacity to address the production and distribution needs of filmmakers.

This essay analyzes *cine joven*'s role in recent transformations that have conditioned audiovisual production in the current political economic context in Cuba. I examine how *cine joven* producers are creating and distributing their work in an era of downsized and financially strapped institutions. I investigate the opportunities they are seizing, the constraints they face, the changes they envision, and how their media practices are challenging the long-standing dominance of ICAIC as the producer and distributor of Cuban films. I argue that, despite formidable odds, *cine joven* producers have been pivotal players in the construction of a more pluralistic and democratic media landscape through their media practices and demands for change. I also suggest that investment in a robust audiovisual sector should be prioritized as it had been in the first decades of the Revolution, yet structured in a way that is more open to the multiplicity of identities, perspectives, and aesthetics of a new generation of audiovisual producers.

This essay begins with a discussion of conceptual foundations for understanding the complex relationship between Cuban audiovisual producers and ICAIC through the cultural politics framework of Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar (1998). I examine current debates as well as the Cuban state's long-time investment in audiovisual production, indelibly shaped by an innovative political culture since the early 1960s. The second section examines the way in which artists historically have been able to shape civil society and the state through their cultural production. The third section describes how the economic crisis of the late 1990s, particularly the diminishing capacity of Cuba's film industry, led to a measure of independence for the nation's filmmakers. In the fourth section, I discuss how *cine joven* producers have been developing new modalities of production and distribution. The fifth section focuses on the challenges this new generation of media makers face. The sixth section examines the crisis facing ICAIC and the failure of the current economic reforms to address the contemporary needs of audiovisual producers. The seventh section further examines how *cine joven* producers are circumventing state restrictions on forming legal production companies. In the eighth section, I examine the demands of *cine joven* producers

² These ways of producing, examined in a later section of this essay, are not completely legal.

³ Notable *cine joven* filmmakers include Miguel Coyula (*Memories of Overdevelopment*, 2010), Juan Carlos Cremata (*Nada*, 2001; *Viva Cuba*, 2005), Pavel Giroud (*La Edad de la Peseta*, 2006; *Omertá*, 2008), and Ian Padrón (*Habanastation*, 2011). Younger makers do not necessarily identify with this wave, yet they continue to innovate forms and practices of media making as *cine joven* did.

and institutional responses. The article concludes with a brief discussion about the increasing demands for a more democratic political culture that transcends the current economic reforms.

Cultural Politics and Political Culture in the Contemporary Cuban Context

To understand the complex relationship and tensions between the cultural politics generated by audiovisual producers and the dominant political culture in Cuba, I adapt the cultural politics framework of Alvarez et al. (1998), who propose that cultural politics are enacted "when movements deploy alternative conceptions of "woman, nature, race, economy, democracy or citizenship" (p. 6) that trouble and resignify dominant discourses and practices. This framework situates culture as political "because meanings are constitutive of processes that, implicitly or explicitly, seek to redefine social power" (p. 7). I extend this concept to audiovisual production as it constitutes material and symbolic processes and practices of meaning making. Like all practices, they are historically shaped by logics of domination, but they also contest those logics, not only in content but through new modes of production that reflect a different relationship with the state. The cultural politics of any given movement should be analyzed with respect to how it affects the dominant political culture, understood as "the domain of practices and institutions" (p. 8). For Canclini (1995), political culture is enacted through the multiplicity of interventions realized by the state and its institutions to guide cultural development (Toirac, 2012). It involves the mobilization and confrontation of values and meanings of diverse actors and institutions that operate within a given socially structured context. By exploring points of tension between the cultural politics of *cine joven* producers and the political culture of state institutions, the needs and demands of audiovisual producers become evident. My research indicates that *cine joven* demands include inclusion in reshaping cultural institutions, the legal recognition of independent audiovisual producers, and new laws that reflect the changes in this crucial sector of society.

To contextualize the current moment, it is essential to historicize the Cuban revolutionary government's massive investment in culture. Such investment has meant that artists have been able to make indelible contributions to Cuban national identity formation as well as to Cuba's international projection. In fact, it has been argued that the cultural field has been the most successful dimension of the Revolution, particularly in implementing an alternative model of modernity distinct from both the Western capitalist version and the one promoted by the Soviet Union (Miller, 2008). In the realm of the seventh art, this signified the creative development of its own national cinema and, in political economic terms, a radical departure from Hollywood's profit-driven industry model.

ICAIC was created three months after the new government was established, on March 24, 1959. As the Revolution's first cultural institution, it was clear that the development of a national cinema was viewed from the outset as a powerful shaper of the cultural and political imaginary. Unlike the mass media (TV, radio, newspapers), which were taken over by the state and have closely adhered to official ideology, ICAIC was initially run by a relatively autonomous community of filmmakers, was characterized by creative experimentation, and was sheltered from the dictates of the market. ICAIC went on to produce critically acclaimed feature films, documentaries, and newsreels. Large film-going audiences and *cine*

clubs developed across the island, and new films consistently generated public debate and dialogue (Chanan, 2004; Venegas, 2009).⁴

In the first few decades of the Revolution, many filmmakers associated with ICAIC sought to create work that reflected socialist values and concerns. In later decades (the late 1980s and beyond), filmmakers increasingly struggled to create work that reflected the contradictions and dissonances between socialist values, Cubans' day-to-day realities, and state rhetoric and practices.

Relations Between Cuban Artists, Cultural Institutions, and the State

Even centralized, strong states are permeable to change, and arts and culture have been powerful arenas of voice and struggle in Cuba. Following Kocur (2011), I agree that cultural production, though not given the accord it deserves in civil society scholarship, has contributed immensely to civil society in Cuba. "It represents a vibrant force for creating new spaces in the public sphere, providing a means to raise critical questions about Cuban society and initiate public debates . . . that are relevant to large sectors of the population" (Kocur, 2011, p. 345). Fernandes urges us to understand the complex terrain of cultural production in Cuba. In reference to the plethora of critical art forms and spaces in Cuba, she rightly asks, "how can the production of this rich body of artistic production be reconciled with the standard representations of an inflexible, authoritarian, and repressive cultural apparatus?" (2006, p. 14). Miller similarly challenges the characterization of an authoritarian state that has only limited and censored artists and asks, "Is this [artistic] activity really something which has only happened on the margins of the Cuban revolution?" (2008, p. 677). The dynamic, negotiated relationship between the state, cultural institutions, and artists has been far more complex.

Whether working within state cultural institutions or outside of them, or in the liminal space in between that is characteristic of contemporary artist-state relations in Cuba, cultural producers have consistently pushed artistic boundaries in both form and content. Fernandes' concept of "artistic public spheres" (2006, p. 12) underscores the strong relationship between Cuban artists and state, arguing that negotiated "spaces of interaction" carved out by artists are, on the one hand, critical of state institutions and, on the other hand, shaped by them, by local relations of production, as well as by global market forces. Both Fernandes' artistic public spheres and Kocur's analysis of Afro-Cuban cultural production build upon a Gramscian notion of civil society, which has been debated and subsequently embraced by critical Cuban scholars (Acanda Gonzalez, 2005; Dilla, 2005; Hernández, 2005). This notion differs from a Habermasian concept of civil society that draws a clear boundary between state and civil society. A Gramscian approach assumes a broader, relational understanding of the state, civil society, and the market, and it assumes interpenetration among them. It also acknowledges that civil society is constituted by structures and institutions (schools, mass media, professional associations, etc.) through which cultural and ideological hegemony can be reproduced or contested (Acanda Gonzalez, 2005). Miller (2008) argues that, although the blurring of the boundaries between civil society and the state has generated tensions, it has also facilitated rich artistic experimentation. Historically speaking, this has been particularly true for visual artists, filmmakers, musicians, writers, and intellectuals, whose work had largely taken place under

⁴ See Chanan (2004) for a detailed discussion of Cuban cinema.

the auspices of state cultural institutions, such as the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC, Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas Cubanas) and ICAIC.⁵ This context changed dramatically during the economic crisis of the 1990s, referred to as the Special Period.

ICAIC and UNEAC, cultural institutions that have powerfully shaped the Cuban national imaginary, are widely seen by scholars and Cuban artists as having a wider berth of creative control than, for example, the mass media or educational system (Acanda Gonzalez, 2005; Fernandes, 2006; Stock, 2009). Of course, such autonomy has always been partial and contested. Cultural institutions have fought, not always successfully, against restrictive policies and actions taken when particular works have been interpreted as lacking revolutionary values (Chanan, 2004). In some cases, the institutions have taken on battles related to artistic freedom on behalf of their members, and in other cases these institutions have fallen silent (or worse, have been participants) when artistic expression of their members has been curtailed by the state.

In contrast to the relative autonomy of ICAIC and UNEAC, the state has historically exerted more control over print media, national television, and radio. From the early days of the Revolution, the state has used the mass media to provide political and ideological orientation and to transmit the values, goals, and accomplishments of the new government (Chanan, 2004; Kapcia, 2008). To this day, state-produced media largely adhere to agendas set by the government, and they rarely cover controversial or oppositional perspectives. State-controlled media also lack in coverage of the daily lives or problems of Cubans. At the same time, Cubans increasingly access a broad range of content through the television, which is flooded with U.S. films and television programs.⁶ Additionally, the informal distribution of USB external drives containing media *paquetes* (tailored media content) is a widespread media practice; its success stemming from the fact that this form of circulation does not depend on downloading content from the Internet (Pertierra, 2012).

As we have seen thus far, cultural institutions have been instrumental in shaping Cuba's political culture. Although the period from the beginning of the Revolution in 1961 through the 1980s was characterized by prolific cultural production led by institutions such as ICAIC and UNEAC, it was also marked by struggles between artists, cultural institutions, and the state over the limits of institutional autonomy and artistic expression (Wepler-Grogan, 2010).

Economic Crisis, Cultural Shifts, and New Opportunities for Artists

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in a tumultuous and paradigm-shifting era in post-Revolutionary Cuba, referred to widely as the "Special Period in Times of Peace." Given Cuba's

⁵ However, state support for the arts and negotiated terrains do not erase a history of censorship, silencing, and control at different moments.

⁶ Although there were always some foreign programs on Cuban state television, the quantity of pirated material increased dramatically in the 1990s during the economic crisis. A study conducted on children's and youth programming in 2007–2008 found that 94% of the programs on Cuban television were foreign, with 60% from the United States (Ramos & Torres, 2008).

economic dependence on the Soviet Union, its collapse precipitated an economic crisis that left the Cuban population nearly without food, oil, and other staples. This traumatic period shattered the idea that many Cubans had (consciously or not) about the socialist project as providing for all. It delivered a severe blow to the Revolutionary project—one it has never recovered from entirely. To survive, the Cuban state reinserted itself into the global economy. Survival strategies included the development of international tourism, the courting of foreign investment, limited forms of private ownership, and the dollarization of the economy (Chanan, 2004; Kaptcia, 2008; Martínez Heredia, 2002).

While the state dealt with the economic crisis, a Special Period culture formed through, on the one hand, the development of new spaces for artistic and public expression and, on the other, the increased commodification and commercialization of Cuban culture (Hernández-Reguant, 2009; Padura Fuentes, 2003). During this period, ICAIC was unable to finance its productions to the extent that it had in the past, and, thus, the number of features it produced plummeted. For the first time since the Revolution, no films at all were produced in 1996, when previously 6 to 12 features were produced annually (Chanan, 2004; Venegas, 2009). To survive, ICAIC sought coproduction deals with European producers. Filmmakers, too, began to develop their own international relationships while also continuing to work with ICAIC (Fernandes, 2006; Hernández-Reguant, 2009; Stock, 2009).

By the mid-1990s, a younger generation of filmmakers was marked more by the Special Period than by the early revolutionary fervor. Their work exhibited a different tenor than that of their predecessors. The films of the 1990s expressed the social anxieties and upheavals that people were experiencing in the post-Soviet era. At around the same time, new media technologies began to enter the island, and an underground media market emerged, offering technologies and content unavailable in official communication channels. The CD-ROM, followed by the DVD and flash drive, became popular means of distributing and sharing work in the late 1990s and 2000s. Significantly, institutions founded prior to the Special Period paved the way for new technologies and provided sustenance for the artistic exploration of diverse genres, formats, and aesthetics (Venegas, 2009).⁷

It is noteworthy that, even in the Special Period, key institutions were established, indicating a continuing commitment to culture on the part of the state. New (and still existing) institutions included Television Serrana (1993), a community television project located in the Sierra Maestra; the Taller Nacional de Crítica Cinematográfica (1993), an important annual event for film criticism; El Festival Internacional de Documentales "Santiago Álvarez en Memorium" (2000), an international documentary film festival held in Santiago de Cuba; La Muestra de Cine Joven (2001), the preeminent venue for young directors, which is discussed below; and El Festival Internacional de Cine Pobre (2003), a film festival dedicated to low-budget filmmaking founded by beloved Cuban filmmaker Humberto Solas.

While autonomous cultural expression became more common, the Cuban state continued to invest in ICAIC and other cultural institutions as well as in the educational institutions where artistic

⁷ Including the Movimiento Nacional de Video de Cuba, La Asociación Hermanos Saiz, La Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión de San Antonio de los Baños, and La Facultad de Medios Audiovisuales of the Instituto Superior de Arte.

talents were nurtured. Such investments have been pivotal to the development of a rich audiovisual culture. Miller (2008) suggests that such state practices helped to generate and sustain legitimacy and goodwill and is one of the reasons why Cuba's cultural field has remained so vibrant despite the political and material constraints. In a larger context, Cuban cinema has stood as an important contribution to the construction of a postcolonial audiovisual field, and whose contributions continue to serve as an important referent and inspiration for other Latin American audiovisual producers. However, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Cuba's audiovisual field was characterized by ICAIC's declining revenues and capacity to meet the needs of the filmmaking community. Consequently, the increased autonomy of audiovisual producers evolved partially in response to that decreased capacity alongside the influx of digital media tools. The next section examines changing norms of cultural production within this context, particularly the increased viability of independent production.

Cine Jóven: New Modalities of Production and Distribution

While top political posts in Cuba have continued to be filled by older generations, younger people have most effectively been able to shape civil society through cultural production. In the formal absence of diverse political discourse, visual art, music, literary works, and audiovisual creation have made visible a plethora of identities, values, worldviews, political perspectives, and models of citizenship (Guanche, 2009). A particularly vibrant dimension of cultural production has been that of *cine jóven*.

Many scholars, film critics, and cultural producers agree that the dynamic explosion of *cine jóven* marked a new era in the audiovisual field in Cuba. Cuban film critic Joel Del Rio (2010) remarked that, depending upon whom you listen to, it is either a sign of ICAIC's declining leadership or its renovation as a vibrant cultural institution. He is likely referring to the fact that, although *cine jóven* is characterized by independent production, La Muestra de Cine jóven is sponsored by ICAIC. *Cine jóven* took shape during the Special Period, when ICAIC's capacity was severely diminished, and digital media tools began to make their way into the hands of filmmakers (even if "access" meant sharing an old camera or laptop among individuals or collectives). The increased availability of digital technologies and decreased institutional support facilitated a space for audiovisual creation outside of established frameworks, and at a relatively lower cost. An increasingly diverse group of media makers began to push the boundaries of what was acceptable to articulate publicly. Their films explored sexuality, race, marginalized subjectivities, migration, gender violence, censorship, and daily frustrations that have been largely invisible in state media (Hormilla & Sanchez, 2012; Stock, 2009). This collective body of work has contributed to the democratization of cultural production. While *cine jóven* documentaries have been critiqued as being more journalistic than driven by aesthetics and audiovisual language, critics have also recognized that these works fill a void left by mass media's lack of coverage of important issues (Del Rio, 2010). The mere fact that this work is able to exist and thrive has served as an inspiration to artists, intellectuals and ordinary Cubans. Hormilla & Sanchez (2012) characterize *cine jóven*:

With an irreverent spirit, this audiovisual genre refutes, questions, shows itself to be imperfect, and pushes to find a place inside an industry that is both depressed and insufficient to meet the needs of the creators and the public. If the generation of Titón, Solás, Santiago Alvarez and Julio Garcia Espinosa was marked by cohesion with respect

to ICAIC as its creative nucleus, this generation looks for new roads and structures that are less rigid, and in which they can communicate with the public. (para. 5)

Del Rio suggests that this wave of audiovisual work is not defined solely by the age of the producers, but by an "identifiable generational spirit" (2010, p. 174). Unlike their predecessors, these media makers do not have "unquestioned leaders"; nor is their ideal that of the "illuminated artist joined with the people." Some filmmakers considered to be *cine jóvenes* producers reject the reduction of this diverse body of work into a sole category. Karel Ducasse (*Zone of Silence*, 2007), an Afro-Cuban filmmaker considered part of *cine jóvenes*, argues that, although there might be a group constituted generationally, it is more a collection of individuals working on their own projects than a collective undertaking. No matter how one categorizes *cine jóvenes*, taken as a whole, these media makers, and younger generations that have come up behind them, are arguably today's most important storytellers, documenting the changes in Cuban society.

Visibility and Societal Impact: Challenges Facing *Cine Jóven*

La Muestra Jóven (the Young Directors Festival) has been the key venue in which *cine jóvenes* has been viewed, discussed, debated, criticized, and celebrated by national and international audiences (Del Rio, 2010; Fernandes, 2006; Stock, 2009). Established by ICAIC in 2001, La Muestra is an annual Havana-based film festival. Over several days, thousands of festival participants view and debate the merit of current fiction, animation, documentaries, and experimental videos. Much of the work screened at La Muestra has been produced by emerging and independent audiovisual producers, including recent graduates from The Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión or other arts institutes and universities, and acclaimed filmmakers, many of whom achieved visibility and a measure of fame due to exposure at La Muestra (including the filmmakers mentioned above).

Although La Muestra has been an important venue to exhibit *cine jóvenes*, it is by no means sufficient. For *cine jóvenes* producers, there have been scarce platforms for showing their productions. The number of movie theaters and video clubs have declined nationally due to a lack of resources needed to keep them operating. Those cinemas that have remained open increasingly screen more foreign than national productions. Cuban television has rarely aired *cine jóvenes*, and when it has, the programs have often been shown late at night. This is not a new problem, as many ICAIC-produced films, representing a more complex Cuba than typically shown on television, have received little airtime. Many media makers concur that television has still not been a viable venue for their work (Gonzales, 2010; Torres Santana, 2011). Additionally, a lack of reliable and affordable access to the Internet has prevented *cine jóvenes* producers from being able to communicate consistently with potential collaborators or to publicize their work. This is not just a problem for *cine jóvenes* producers but for the majority of Cubans, given that Cuba has one of the lowest Internet access rates in the world.

The Internet potentially offers a space in which a more plural media environment could be developed and accessed by ordinary citizens and cultural producers. Online journals, blogs of all political persuasions, and social media, produced by those on and off the island, have increasingly provided Cubans with Internet access a more diverse range of stories, perspectives, and debates than is available

in other mass media. Yet unrestricted Internet access has not been possible for most Cubans. Venegas characterizes Cuba's digital landscape as "overlapping zones of expression and experience made prominent by living and working with digital technologies and with constraints upon these technologies" (2010, p. 7). First, due in part to the U.S. embargo, Cuba has had to rely on costly and slow satellite linkups rather than broadband access. Indeed, it is the last nation in the Americas to get a fiber-optic connection to the outside world.⁸ Additionally, ongoing concerns about state security, directly related to a contentious relationship with the United States, have conditioned the cultural field and Internet policy (Kapcia, 2008).⁹

Second, Internet access sites have been limited. Most legally sanctioned computers with unrestricted Internet connections have typically been available in government offices, research and educational institutions, and a few private residences. Until recently, Internet accounts were available only to foreign residents, and, although in 2012 the restriction on Cuban accounts was lifted, the cost remains prohibitive for the majority of households. Additionally, like other restricted goods in Cuba, there has been a black market economy that includes shared ISP accounts. And those Cubans who have had a computer connected to the Internet, legally or illegally, likely have shared their computers with friends, neighbors, and colleagues.¹⁰ Taken together, these factors have made it difficult to assess just how many individuals and families have been able to access the Internet. And, although access has been available at government-designated sites and hotels, prices have been geared toward tourists.¹¹

This restricted media environment has placed most *cine jóven* producers at a considerable disadvantage compared to other cultural producers around the world, making it difficult for them to share their media, communicate with colleagues, and benefit from the shared cultural resources available online.¹² The slow speed of the Internet has made it nearly impossible to upload a trailer to YouTube. Some media makers have eventually succeeded, but only with help from friends and relatives who live off the island or who have privileged access, such as at embassies or research institutions.

Additional Barriers Facing *Cine Jóven* Producers

The majority of *cine jóven* producers have also been limited in terms of their ability to network. Traveling to festivals and other events where they might network has been off limits for most audiovisual

⁸ A fiber-optic cable connection between Venezuela and Cuba began to operate in January 2013.

⁹ For a discussion about how U.S. policies shape Cuban media and culture, see Chanan (2004).

¹⁰ According to government statistics (www.one.cu), 16% of Cubans had online access in some capacity in 2011, but often just to the intranet, and 2.9% reported having direct Internet access, though the real figure is likely much higher due to shared use.

¹¹ In June 2013, the state opened 118 Internet access centers, though the \$4.50 hourly rate is prohibitive for most Cubans (Oppmann, 2013).

¹² For a detailed discussion about Internet policy, online media, and the polemical blogosphere see Henken (2011), Venegas (2010), and Henken's blog, *La Yuma* (<http://elyuma.blogspot.com>).

producers due to the cost of travel and the difficulty of obtaining an exit visa to leave the country.¹³ Additionally, given the historical predominance of ICAIC as producer and distributor, most Cuban audiovisual producers have had little experience distributing their work outside of national venues; hence, there has been a need for information and education about distribution. *Cine joven* producers have suggested that La Muestra make more of an effort to place their work in international festivals (Hormilla & Sánchez, 2012). Unfortunately, some Cuban audiovisual producers have learned that their work has been screened or distributed outside of Cuba without their knowledge or consent. For example, I told a Cuban filmmaker that I had watched one of his documentaries on YouTube. He was surprised to learn that his film was circulating outside of Cuba. Because of limited access to the Internet, Cuban filmmakers cannot always track and control their work.¹⁴ To address issues of piracy, distribution, and access to equipment, Americas Media Initiative, a U.S.-based nonprofit, has been distributing *cine joven* and other independent work as well as organizing U.S. tours for Cuban audiovisual producers. Proceeds from the distribution of these works have gone toward the purchase of much-needed production supplies and equipment for these makers.¹⁵ The global financial crisis has also impacted audiovisual production and distribution, resulting in less access to production financing from European partners whose funding streams have been reduced.

Given the multiple barriers faced by this generation of audiovisual producers, Del Rio (2010) argues that it would be unfair to expect them to generate the next great new wave in Cuban cinema. After all, Cuba's most acclaimed filmmakers working in the 1960s through the 1980s often had consistent (although modest) salaries and financial backing of ICAIC. The contemporary reality has been that, although there are many talented directors and great ideas and projects, the majority of *cine joven* producers have had to spend most of their time on issues related to daily survival. ICAIC has not been able to provide the new generation with the institutional backing that older generations enjoyed. The sad reality is that many young audiovisual makers have left Cuba in the past few years because of these barriers, yet, as Alex Halkin of Americas Media Initiative noted, often what makes them interesting to producers and audiences is precisely their presence on the island (personal communication, March 18, 2015).

Institutional Crisis and Prospects for Reform

ICAIC has been increasingly perceived by audiovisual producers as an institution in crisis, unable to meet the needs of the current generation yet wanting to control content. These tensions were evident at the 11th Muestra de Cine joven in 2012. Once the films for exhibition were selected, ICAIC made a decision to censor *Despertar (Wake Up)*, a film about Cuban rapper Raudel Collazo Pedroso of *Escuadron Patriota (Patriotic Squadron)*, given the artist's openly critical political lyrics (see ICAIC Censura Filme,

¹³ As of January 14, 2013, Cubans only need a valid permit and entry visa to travel abroad, rather than the exit permits previously required, and they can remain abroad for up to 24 months. Although there are still barriers to travel, including cost, this is a welcome reform. For details, see "Cuba to End Exit Permits" (2012).

¹⁴ Occasionally, websites of unauthorized distributors of Cuban films have appeared, and they have only been taken down once they receive a call from a friend or colleague of those filmmakers.

¹⁵ The U.S. embargo does not permit direct payment to Cubans.

2015). The film's codirectors said that the reason cited was that *Despertar* did not meet with the established political culture.¹⁶ This was not the first time that a film had been omitted from the lineup. This debacle led to the resignation of Fernando Pérez, the president of La Muestra's organizing committee and one of Cuba's most popular filmmakers (Ciber Cuba, 2012). In a letter published online and in the festival program, Pérez stated that he resigned because he was not able to demonstrate in practice the inclusive mission of the festival. His resignation and the uncertain future of La Muestra has been a source of anxiety for Cuban filmmakers.

The precariousness with which ICAIC has operated is further evidence that the audiovisual sector has been placed on the back burner by the government. There has been a widening gap between the capacity of cultural institutions such as ICAIC and the needs of Cuban audiovisual producers. Unfortunately, the current economic reforms have not addressed this breach. Although there has been an expansion to 178 job categories that are eligible for *cuentalpropista* (self-employment) licenses, and also of the kinds of associations that are eligible to form cooperatives (in the past only agricultural associations were permitted to form cooperatives), neither of these categories have included artistic professions. The kinds of jobs that have been eligible for *cuentalpropista* licenses include those related to food service, transportation, beauty services, and other service-oriented, entrepreneurial, or low-skill jobs (Pujol, 2011). There are and will be experiments with cooperatives representing 222 different kinds of economic activities, including gastronomic, technical services, sport fishing, and shrimp cultivation, to name a few. However, allowances for audiovisual cooperatives have not been included, although many *cine joven* producers have initiated informal collectives. Cuban economist Piñero Harnecker (2012) has argued that:

The success of the changes to our economic model will be much improved if there is a recognition of the limitations of solutions that are merely economic or focused on state development. It will be important to take social and cultural elements into account, if these changes are to be successful and sustainable. (p. 96)

Since ICAIC has not been able to meet the needs of audiovisual producers, it would make sense that subsequent reforms facilitate legal pathways for producers to become more self-sustaining, just as the reform guidelines have done with other job categories. Audiovisual producers have been pushing back. A recently formed association, Cineastas por el Cine Cubano (Filmmakers for Cuban Film) has been advocating for the restructuring of the sector, including the legal recognition of all audiovisual creators, and a new audiovisual law that would include strategies to support and promote the audiovisual industry.¹⁷ While such initiatives would be welcomed, *cine joven* producers have not simply been waiting for the state to resolve their problems. The next section addresses ways in which these producers have been circumventing the current limitations.

¹⁶ The trailer of the film can be retrieved at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVZSvEuBwRY>.

¹⁷ This group of audiovisual producers met on May 4, 2013, and published their platform (Grupo de Cineastas Cubanos, 2013).

***Cine Joven* Producers Carve Out Independent Niches**

Cine joven producers have been exploring novel ways of producing and distributing their work outside of the ICAIC–European coproduction model established during the Special Period. When the credits roll at La Muestra de Cine joven, there is evidence of over 100 Cuban production companies. However, whether they are fledgling collectives set up to produce one film or are more established production companies, none of them enjoy legal status in Cuba, because the sole legal entity continues to be the government. Cuba's first zombie movie, *Juan de los Muertos* (*Juan of the Dead*, 2011), directed by Alexander Brugués, broke new ground with regard to how it was produced and distributed. This independent feature-length comedy with a sharp political subtext was shot in Havana without initial financial support from ICAIC (ICAIC eventually came on board once other investors, and hence the film's success, were secured). Additionally, the film's producers formed a production company, La 5ta Avenida, which had legal status outside of Cuba. In this way, the production was able to court foreign investors rather than rely on ICAIC to strike a coproduction deal. There have also been recent attempts by Cuban filmmakers to raise funds online on crowd-funding websites.

Juan de los Muertos has attracted an international audience, a formidable challenge for *cine joven* producers. It won the sought-after Goya Prize for Best Latin American Film, a Jury Prize at the Latin American Film Festival in Biarritz, and numerous audience awards internationally. It also was able to secure international distribution deals in over a dozen international markets. When it was screened in Cuba at the Havana Film Festival, it was shown eight times to meet audience demand. However, when asked if he thought that his film is a sign of an opening in Cuba, Brugués said he did not, and that he won't until he sees more films produced in this manner. "Right now I consider *Juan* an exception." (Tinajero & Torres, 2012). In another interview, Brugués appeared optimistic about the long-term potential of the industry: "Cuban cinema will recuperate its glorious past. But we need to give it a few years" (Brugués, 2012, para. 11, translation mine). Karel Ducasse argues that the production and distribution of independent work will remain chaotic until several issues are resolved:

We need to learn from how other countries deal with alternative production. We need an audiovisual law, one that includes script development, production, international distribution and post-production. Moreover, we need to learn how to create posters, publicity, and understand our legal rights. . . . For audiovisual production to generate profits and function with a certain rigor we need to have control over what we produce, because chaos and arbitrariness mean that we produce work, but have nowhere to distribute it. (quoted in Hormilla & Sanchez, 2012, para. 44)

Ducasse sees this as an urgent matter for filmmakers as well as for the Cuban government. A study by Ross (2010) on the recent, progressive stance of South American audiovisual laws supports Ducasse's statement. Ross suggests that new audiovisual policies in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Peru stipulate the allocation of funds for film production, exhibition, and distribution. These policies have been responsible for expanding national cinemas that are representing the cultural and ethnic diversity of these nations. He argues that policy, in the form of government regulation and funding, often provides the only means for cinema's continued existence. Moreover, the visibility of filmmakers and their access to the public cannot

be underestimated. At stake is not just the interests of filmmakers or policymakers but the interaction of the makers and their films with wider publics. Pointing to the more indelible contributions, Jorge Alvarez, vice president of the Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales in Argentina, has called audiovisual expression "a memory and mirror" (quoted in Ross, 2010, p. 419).

Cine joven makers have supplemented or funded their independent productions by working for Cuban television or freelancing for foreign production houses. This mode of working inside and outside of cultural institutions has been the norm since the 1990s (Fernandes, 2006; Hernández-Reguant, 2009; Stock, 2009). Yet not everyone has taken this approach. Marcos Menendez, a self-taught animator, has preferred to remain independent: "I have had the opportunity to work for the industry, and I believe that the freedom with which I can make independent work is evident in the final product" (quoted in Hormilla & Sanchez, 2012, para. 28). Statements such as this signal that, although audiovisual producers would like to see change, which includes institutional support, they reject a system in which government cultural institutions control content.

Institutional Responses to the Demands of *Cine Joven* Producers

ICAIC has not been blind to the cultural, economic, and technological changes under way. It celebrated its 50th anniversary with a series of conferences, screenings, and an edited volume of essays penned by leading filmmakers, cultural critics, and other intellectuals. The essays exhibited a mix of celebration, reflection, and self-criticism. The essay by Omar González (2010), the former president of ICAIC, reflects some of the tensions between ICAIC and the cultural politics of a new generation of audiovisual producers. González criticized "los llamados independientes" (the "so-called independents," likely referring to *cine joven* producers) for tripling their budgets when working with ICAIC and argued that "[v]ery few of us are convinced that our natural space is alternative *cine*" (González, 2010, p. 228). He went on to criticize some filmmakers for dismissing ICAIC and for celebrating independent films. From his perspective, the term *independent* is a misnomer, because those works are in dialogue with the history of Cuban cinema. Moreover, he added that the filmmakers of these works have benefited from the role that ICAIC has played in Cuba. González also proposed several ways in which ICAIC should "modernize," including: increasing ties with Cuban production companies; supporting *cine joven*; and being more flexible regarding independent productions, adding that ICAIC should see the media makers and their independent productions as an advantage rather than a threat. He also asserted the need for ICAIC to strengthen its relationship with Cuban television in order to increase distribution possibilities and employment opportunities for audiovisual producers (González, 2010). Although there were traces of bitterness in this statement, González simultaneously expressed a desire for ICAIC to come to terms with the new media landscape.

ICAIC has been planning to launch La Primera Muestra Nacional de Cine (the First National Film Screening). This festival's vision is to exhibit diverse genres of new works (fiction, documentary, animation) of Cubans. According to an announcement about the festival, the selection criteria would be based solely on the quality of the work (perhaps signaling a move away from a focus on political-ideological criteria). González, ICAIC's president at the time, said that all works would be considered regardless of whether they are ICAIC productions. He also remarked that he hoped that this festival could

become a showcase and market for domestic audiovisual work for Cuban audiences as well as for foreign distributors. Plans include inviting foreign producers and investors to negotiate and acquire distribution rights. González also stated that there would soon be a national script competition as well as workshops for audiovisual producers that discuss the impact of new media technologies on audiovisual production, distribution, and exhibition (García Borrero, 2013). These overtures provide some indication that ICAIC is trying to adjust to new realities and to accommodate the contemporary needs of audiovisual producers.¹⁸

Conclusion

This essay has sought to contribute to current debates about Cuba's economic reforms from an angle not yet adequately addressed in the literature—that is, how the cultural field, and specifically the audiovisual sector, is taken into account. I discussed the needs and demands of this sector, which has been undergoing transformations due to increasing access to new media technologies as well as the inadequacies of economic reforms to resolve its problems. I provided a brief historicization of the state's relationship to filmmakers and examined the shifts that have taken place in recent decades. Focusing on contemporary dynamics, I have argued that *cine joven* producers have been enacting a bold cultural politics through their diverse audiovisual products and practices, which capture an increasingly complex, heterogeneous society. I also discussed the dissatisfaction of *cine joven* producers and their emerging advocacy in the audiovisual sector.

The larger question explored herein is whether and to what extent the cultural politics enacted by the audiovisual sector can impact institutional reform and Cuba's political culture. The proliferation of *cine joven* against all odds has been a marker of regeneration for many on the island. Indeed, cultural producers, film critics, and Cuban scholars have candidly admitted that some of their hopes for change reside in this vibrant *cine joven* movement. It follows, then, that the outcomes of *cine joven* and subsequent waves of media makers—how they might grow, or be held back—is one of the barometers for political and cultural change. I concur with *cine joven* filmmakers that ICAIC must take the needs of this generation of makers seriously if it is to regain some of the relevance it has lost. In fact, investment in a vibrant, diverse audiovisual sector should be a priority.

My research has revealed a great desire for change in the political culture, which transcends current economic reforms. Toirac argues that Cuba must not only focus on sociopolitical reform, it needs to take into account the power and centrality of the "symbolic-discursive" (2013, p. 64) as part of the nation's productive activity. Toirac also proposes that the state should reformulate a political culture that is more liberatory and participatory if it wants to continue to be relevant to the great majority of Cubans.

Cuban scholars and artists concur that Cuba's path is not yet clear. History shows that the 50-plus years of Revolution have experienced many stages, which have included apertures and closures on artists, intellectuals, and society in general. Certainly, a project of democratization needs to permeate the

¹⁸ At the time of publication of this essay, the first edition of this festival, while originally planned for 2013, has not yet occurred, although its launch is still on the agenda.

emerging political culture—one that is inclusive of younger generations, accepts diverse worldviews, and builds structures that allow for genuine participation of its citizenry. Certainly, then, democratization needs to include support for a sector that has had, and continues to have, a key role in reflecting the dreams and imaginaries of Cubans.

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