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Shared Dreams and Red Cockroaches: Cuba and Digital Culture

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Antique trumpets warming up. Castanets. Yuleidys. Udelvis. "Hacer patas," i.e., "leave a trace." Who will just sit and chat balanced on the edge of evanescence. Those long trails of graphic footprints left on vellum. No running water. There is no on and off, only degrees of change. No place for pedestrians: walking is simply a dance in and out of traffic. "Boca" as in "bocadillos." Un contestador. "Guarnición a su elección." With the money from my rent, they bought a sink! You can see it in an oscillograph.

–Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Territorio libre*.

Digital culture in Cuba is a sphere of overlapping zones of expression and experiences. These zones form a complex structure made up of individuals, commerce, and the state. The resulting geography reveals the movement of capital, the power of stakeholders, and spaces of intimacy. It is a map of interrelated consciousness. As such, Cuban digital culture depends on local histories and characteristics and responds to transnational exchanges and relays. While living within infrastructures of power and technology, people use digital technology to "sense the world," build creative social experiences that reshape the virtual contours, and produce new infrastructures. What are these digital Cuban environments? Where can they be found? What do they tell us about ways of living and learning that develop despite controls on information and activity? How do new networks of culture help people adapt to changes triggered by globalization? What new forms of knowing, language,

and art arise out of this complex web of elements? The following essay answers these questions, finding clues inside public spaces (hotels, government buildings), "underground" spaces (black market), and in the hardware or the architectural core of computer networks.

Spaces of appropriation and tensions left over from the Cold War are good places to begin a survey of digital Cuba. Until 2001, the Soviet Union and, later, the Russians had the largest radar base in the Western hemisphere, located in the Cuban locality of Lourdes. At first glance the site appeared to be a normal residential neighborhood of five-story block apartment buildings characteristic of the anonymous Socialist high-rises built during the post-1959 period. However, an enormous parabolic antennae and a military zone designation signaled that this was no typical communal housing sector. Rather, it was the Lourdes Radar Base, where Russians "listened to telephone conversations, intercepted faxes, and followed United States military movements, communicated with their atomic submarines in this part of the world and with their embassies throughout America" (Carlos). They also shared the information with Cuban Intelligence agents. Established in 1964, two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the base became a strategic location for both the Soviets and the Cubans. Data gathered about the Americans brought Cuba a measure of national security.

Thirty-nine years later, in October 2001, and under the specter of September 11, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the closure of the Lourdes Base, which by then was set to bring in 200 million dollars in "rent" to Cuba. The money was never paid, and President Putin, under pressure by the Bush administration, and to the dismay of Russian generals, scheduled the immediate dismantling of the base. Reminiscent of past transformations of spaces and their uses (like Ciudad Libertad, a major educational center that had previously been the Columbia Military Base in Marianao and the symbol of military rule under Batista), the forty-five square mile secret compound was transformed by 2002 into UCI, the twenty-first-century high tech University of Information Sciences, where 6,000 students now live while they study to become part of the worldwide informatics labor force. Investing heavily in the education of software programmers and engineers, Cuba has transformed the Cold War "listening post" and its military and strategic purpose into a classroom for future civil information experts.

UCI represents one of the paradoxes of the Cuban state: in a place where Internet access is limited and highly guarded, students have the latest hardware and software in classrooms and dorms, putting it to use under what

amounts to a new social contract between the State and the individual. The new network specialists and administrators acquire the potential to be active participants in the new economy and social status thanks to their high security clearance. They are young, skilled, and on the inside. On the radar-base-turned-high-tech-classroom, the students serve the state's new strategies, social needs, and desires through digital tools. Hardware has even become a verb, to *harwerear* or *harwereando*, which means one possesses expertise in designing, building, and dismantling systems. As a specialist with access to a broadband connection, downloading entertainment or software from the Internet (television shows, movies, music, etc.) creates new possible routes for "circulating" content by making it available to friends, colleagues, or the barely visible "consumer" market. While the State approves and facilitates advanced technological education, practitioners can also travel in personal zones forbidden by the State, carrying contraband to satisfy popular demand for the products of advanced technology. Nonetheless, graduates still carry out the State's plan for technological literacy across the island, ironically demonstrating the resilience of Cuban socialism to market forces, which the State guards so vigilantly against.

UCI is a place where top-down flows are captured by upward, integrating flows that circulate the currents outward. The State mandates the terms of legal access to the Internet through decrees, controls, and spaces of use. This drives Cubans to learn, to develop communicative strategies and coping mechanisms, and to create new realms for the imagination that connect individuals to new zones of global culture. Shared dreams developed from a revolutionary political projection give way to new socio-cultural solidarities emerging at the margins of official institutions and commercial networks.

Far from utopian, the flows of digital culture reveal the limits of political myths extended in the name of nationalism in Cuba (or, also, say, democracy in America). Stringent controls over electronic access, national media, and some electronic goods (like DVD players) characterize the still paternalistic character of the Cuban state. An official focus on government, scientific, administrative and commercial networks rather than on private consumption of digital technology adheres to the ideals of a socialist contract aimed at the optimization of scant resources for the national good. Still defined as part of the collective, the individual stands increasingly at odds with the constructed reality of the Cuban state.

The state subordinates individual preoccupations to its notions of the collective. It does not ban networks per se; instead, it constructs its own in the

same zones. Rather than mapping an affective topography, the state overlays an intrusive geopolitical grid of boundaries, gatekeepers, and prescribed movement. It is a socialist planner setting out programs for the social uses of products and technologies. In the new century, Cuba continues to commit firmly to socialism. For example, in 2002 a symbolic constitutional amendment asserted socialism as the eternal ideology of the State. When it comes to preserving its ideals in the face of digital technology, Cuba has to confront tools that empower the individual rather than the collective; social connectivity thus becomes prescribed development. The "war on terror" has increased the perception of threat from technology through its potential, for instance, to facilitate coalitions of dissenters, the promotion of anti-State propaganda, and the infiltration of State security. Motivated by such perceived dangers and a desire for increased social cohesion, Decree 209 set forth in 1996 a policy of "selective" access to global networks prioritizing the national interest and set in place a juridical structure for enforcement. Later resolutions define the terms for the development of high-speed wireless technology (telephones, microphones, and computers), network expansion, and limits of consumer access to specified technologies such as computers, printers, and satellite dishes. As much as these official measures deny individual affective realms, the State necessarily, if unconsciously, asks them to occupy official ones, for example, of sturdy self-denial, ingenuity, and pride. In conforming and participating at least officially, intellectuals, scientists, government officials, and the newly permitted business class join in a social and political network that reiterates Cuba's territorial and ideological sovereignty.

State support for increased interaction between scientific and medical research using digital technologies (networks, computer imaging, and experimentation) potentially catalyzes discovery and invention. This promise goes unnoticed, however, when analysis of Cuba's digital culture remains tethered to geopolitical dimensions. To explore the potential of digital media and scientific collaboration, the Foundation for Latin America Cinema held a symposium in December 2004 with digital artists, filmmakers, authors and teachers. Trans-disciplinary approaches to generate creative social uses of technology and benefit scientific research and the arts have a long, if sometimes forgotten history not just in Cuba, but also in the US. Trends in digital art that continue the tradition begun in the late 1950s by John Whitney Sr. (now considered the father of computer graphics) and "the experiments of

composers, filmmakers, and visual artists at Bell Laboratories in the 1960s, pushed ahead the field of communications and thus the digital revolution'' (Sorensen). Cross-disciplinary collaboration added to socially conscious development could produce technical, practical, and aesthetic advancements but also more enlightened individual and collective realms. This is not so far-fetched. Emblematic of this type of exchange is the website art gallery of Cuba's on-line medical network InfoMed, conceived as a means to promote physical and spiritual wellness as well as medical research. The wisdom of this approach is not lost either on the faculty at UCI, which has developed a curriculum rich in the arts. The belief that the education of students of Computer Science is incomplete without immersion in art rests on a simple, yet profound observation that creativity in one area spills over onto another to help generate new visions. As an ebullient British scholar, Marc Eisensdat, on a visit to the UCI campus exclaimed, ''Art is everywhere!'' (*Eisenblog*). We can see, then, an active involvement in technological development from a focus on human development and a perspective of ethics. The global political climate surrounding these developments, however, distorts what might be called the State's ''good intentions.'' Detractors often read such intentions from a perspective of distrust, negation, and hate. The geopolitical grid imposed by market ideologies prescribes lenses that obscure and twist achievements by the Cuban State.

Nevertheless, it remains true that the real social benefits produced in Cuba come at the expense of the individual affective which has worked positively towards inserting individuals in collective work, sacrifice, and play. The type of collective investment in future sources of economic stability and education in Cuba generates a powerful social imaginary—in the manner of Charles Taylor's notion of the imaginary where the collective dream positions the state as benefactor and regulator. The centrality of this role and its negation of individual experience of course means that the other spaces of expression and activity of digital culture are often oriented in response or opposition to the official construction of identity by the state. Chief among the elements contributing to the resulting social imaginary during the era termed euphemistically by the Cuban Government the Special Period (*Periodo especial en tiempos de paz*), is the iconography of resistance that pervades virtual spaces such as the Elian and Che Guevara on-line archives, support for the Miami 5 campaign, or the overtly agit-prop campaign, the Battle of Ideas, under

which a variety of programs were established to improve access to education, improve facilities, and learning tools.[1]

The zones of digital invention in Cuba also represent the spirited culture of protest and détente between US diplomatic representatives on the island and the Cuban government. In 2005, an expression of anger on behalf of the State, downloaded images of Abu Graib atrocities, blown-up and printed on billboards, appeared in front of the building of the US Interest Section in Havana (the diplomatic representation of the US government) with the words "fascism" and "murderers" emblazoned across the horrific imagery. The American diplomatic representatives responded to this offensive by placing a digital billboard across the roof of the main building in order to provide "real" news in bold red letters to passersby. The intention of both iconic "attacks" has several layers: for the Cuban State, to denounce the hypocrisy of the US regime; to link its own protest against terrorism to global human rights protests; and to use the image as a transformative agent. The US digital broadcast above its building, by providing news from around the globe, in turn reminds the Cuban people of State limits on information and plurality. The regime has since effectively blocked the rooftop broadcast by strategic placement of dozens of flagpoles of just the right height in front of the building. Digital tools thus bring new ways to present the opposing geopolitical lines of both nations and to deny unofficial, individual commentary and observations of national and individual experience. However, that such tools are still used alongside old-fashioned statements of national identity like flags shows that the edge in terms of communication and representation stems from the cleverness of the tool's user rather than the tool itself.

Institutions and governments create their own myths in a conscious or unconscious attempt to provide social cohesion that allows individuals to identify themselves as part of a collective. At the end of the twentieth century, during the Special Period, a decade when major development of digital technology, global networks, and a redirection of the economy took place, the situation of the individual grew progressively more at variance with the myths of Cuban identity propagated by the State. High literacy rates and standards of education, as well as good medical care, were simply not enough

1. See *Hasta la victoria siempre*, the Che Guevara website at <http://www.granma.cu/che/homeche.html>; the Miami 5 website at <http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/miami5/index.html>; and the official Elián González website in Cuba <http://www.elian.cu/>.

to dispel hopelessness, frustration, disillusion, fear, and boredom. Officially unacknowledged symptoms of repressed affective domains, these emotional currents continue to erode the State's hold on society. This leads to new crises of self-identity and mass migrations, as the overarching vision of a socialist collective unravels. Still, the majority of Cubans remain unsatisfied on several basic and civic levels, but are prepared to carve out a life adapted to official territories of consumption, creativity, and expression. How do they accomplish this in digital times, and how much of it is due to relief and diversion facilitated by digital technology?

Alternative spaces existing alongside those conceived by the Cuban state facilitate the formation of new territories of exchange for individuals to create and connect with personal, commercial, artistic, recreational, political, and intellectual networks worldwide. No matter what kinds of controls, within these areas of interaction individuals are preoccupied with mobility, identity, intimacy, and self-expression. The new territories formed by the global exchanges respond to local and external desires revealing the complexity of historical relations, boundaries, and territories. As post-colonial scholar Achille Mbembe remarks about the emergence of alternative regional networks creating integration "from below" in Africa, they are "not merely regional, for these interstate exchanges are connected with international markets and their dynamics" (25).

Connectivity, which occurred eleven years ago, helped the government jump-start the economy by supporting investment in a mixed economic plan that developed a tourist infrastructure to attract foreign investment and visitors. Chief among the new ventures were the number of foreign and Cuban-owned hotels that connect to the worldwide explosion of tourism. Since 1995, when the Spanish and Cuban-financed Meliá-Cohiba Hotel went up in front of the city's Malecón, hotels and business centers have become areas of technology available to the tourist and business traveler. Business centers provide high-speed Internet access, and satellite television is available in guest rooms and bars. Consumption of entertainment and information is demarcated by legal parameters defining who can and cannot be a guest in a hotel. These areas exist as "islands" inside Cuba removed from the warmth of home environments where neighbors might crowd around a television set to watch the available Cuban signals. They might also crowd around to watch DVDs rented from the local and illegal supplier who bicycles the discs in a backpack baring familiar party iconography to detract attention to the contraband merchandise. Contraband enterprises are often sophisticated, even using

laser printers to duplicate DVD and CD jackets. Police raids of homemade and illegal satellite dishes are carried out with enough frequency so as to try and deter their increasing use. The signal is cast from the legal subscriber and is tapped into by many others who have rigged their satellites essentially as receivers of the same signal. They cannot control channel selection or time of viewing. These scattered satellite dishes are known colloquially as the "fourth network."

I have argued that throughout the 1990s, a variety of forms of digital technology are increasingly part of Cuban life, albeit with serious limitations. The material objects of this culture—hardware, software, digital cameras, mobile phones, scanners, printers, digital projectors, DVD recorders, etc.—are all interconnected to the not-so-distant analogue world. Cubans have been e-mailing, chatting, blogging, navigating intranets and the Internet, and therefore are not as totally "isolated" as continuing journalistic accounts would have us believe.[2] On-line journals such as the literary gazette *Lengua Suelta* and tele-medicine forums provide community spaces of work and intellectual exchange, as do the personal and entrepreneurial websites that list rental housing and Santería ceremonies on the island. Incorporated to cultural traditions, digital formats offer new expressive strategies, provide entrepreneurial opportunities, and multiply underground activities. Consumers of digital tools now reinvent themselves in social rituals, independent filmmakers create with a digital arsenal, video letters articulate a new type of intimacy, and underground DVD businesses serve growing numbers of entertainment customers.

There is a social transformation going on at the macro and personal levels, such as in the way alternative futures are imagined and created. A writer might supplement his insufficient income by engaging in a personal side business for profit, even if it were illegal and subject to steep fines. Or he could learn to use the small computer facility provided to members of UNEAC [Unión de Artistas y Escritores de Cuba], advertise himself, look for desirable partners on-line, that could result in a marriage with a foreigner and emigration to Europe. This scenario is not unique, and there are a variety of ways in which frustration is expressed through whatever means are available to an individual. Digital technology is also not the motivating fac-

2. Cf. the anonymous article entitled "Isolated Cuba begins to inch into the Internet Age," written by a correspondent not authorized by Cuba to be there.

tor; it provides an available avenue for the realization of the self outside the parameters demarcated through state bureaucratic mechanisms.

In the midst of the transformations to everyday life, marriage to foreigners or between Cuban nationals became part of the tourist economy. Marriage as travel adventure mobilizes desires that expand the realm of the imagination for all those involved. Inhabiting a place of privilege in global culture, the traveler-cum-bride or groom navigates Cuban bureaucracy for the benefit of love, passion, or obsession. Spaniards married Cubans in amazing numbers during the 1990s, difficult arrangements portrayed in the cinema of both countries.[3] Cubans embellished the wedding ceremony by having more lavish wedding cakes, parties, and wedding photo albums. A traveler could just as easily plan a wedding at the Dupont House in Varadero Beach as one would in a castle in Italy. *Cuba Wedding Planners* offers a service through a website that facilitates the virtual planning of ceremonies, legalities, events, gifts, invitations, and photography. Hotels see this as a lucrative aspect of Cuban tourism and offer special wedding packages. Often the site for playing out fantasies for marriages, Havana offers couples the opportunity to set their nuptials amidst the nostalgia of colonial and modernist architecture, or spectacular beach resorts. The fantasy is not complete without hiring a newly a refurbished 1950s Chevrolet convertible or a Mercedes Benz to transport them. Memories are piled into photo albums that are beautifully rendered with digital imagery and are reproduced for families in Cuba and elsewhere. A byproduct of socialism, the affordable marriage ceremony made matrimony after the Revolution not just for the elite (Cavanaugh). Dresses could be rented from the state, fees were almost non-existent, and the liberal divorce laws made marriage highly repeatable. A newsreel report from the late 1980s titled *Nos casamos y nos divorciamos* (*We Marry and Divorce*) explored this peculiarity. *Quinceañeras,* the enduring social ritual of adolescent girls, these days demand digital photography, something unheard of ten years ago. Using graphic software to process and enhance images or to be inserted into the arms of a popular star reveals a domestication of technology in private life and leisure.[4] The color balanced, cropped images are reproduced easily,

3. See, for example, *Perfecto amor equivocado* (Gerardo Chijona, 2004), *Flores de otro mundo* (Icíar Bollaín, 1999), *Cosas que dejé en la Habana* (Manuel Gutierrez Aragón, 1997), *Habana Blues* (Benito Zambrano, 2005), and *Life is to Whistle* (Fernando Perez, 1997).

4. I am deeply indebted to my Havana colleague Victor Fowler, with whom I have had ongoing conversations about digital communities. His observations about consumers have been invaluable.

just like popular music CDs whose digital booklet covers are then printed, as are books, on laser printers. The generation who grew up with the Revolution sang lyrics of rock musicians they idolized (this is called "meter forros"), often making up words, and today's teenage rap fanatic downloads the lyrics from the Internet and repeats them word for word, understanding Eminem's message. Attracted to Black American forms of masculinity and their commercial flashy style, these same teenagers can select favorite t-shirts and sneakers from the on-line NBA store to be brought to the island by friends and relatives. Identification with rapper Tupac Shakur reveals the complicated interaction of young Cubans consuming Black American culture and the social value of its material objects and fresh hip-hop look. Young women also express in idle conversation the frustration of many teenagers growing up during the Special Period, who upon coming into contact with the growing number of visitors in the 1990s, wanted to leave Cuba to find work and create new lives. The pseudo-diplomatic openness afforded Cuba throughout the Clinton Administration, which compared to the harsher George W. Bush administration's policies now seems like a liberal free-for-all, allowed many to migrate in "orderly" fashion to the US, Mexico, Europe and other parts of the world. The point here is that people began to be more mobile, though with tremendous difficulty, and that digital technology played a role in how plans were made, illusions created, and intimacy communicated.

Increased communication and tourism interfaced with the globalization of the economy and culture in a variety of ways. The break with the Soviet Union made Cuba look elsewhere for economic support and cultural interaction. Prioritizing tourism in the nineties, exchanges with Europe, the US, and Asia allowed for the creation of zones of cultural circulation around academic, scientific, and economic contact that began to transform the way individuals planned their everyday life and survival back home. Cuban movies of the Special Period picked up on this new aspect of Cuban life through comedies and dramas that excavated the depths of familial chaos and dispersion. Working in Europe, Cubans earned *divisas*, hard currency, to return home and repair a crumbling wall, or purchase school supplies, home appliances, or food. Soap operas and police dramas also narrated the ways in which this expanded and oscillating global contact was transforming romantic relationships and crime.

Yet another cultural space that thrived in the new tourist economy were the African-Catholic ethnic communities, given the state's more liberal stance on Santería. The renewal of a heterogeneous religious practice and the

powerful role faith played during the difficult moment of the Special Period precipitated the creation of on-line networks through websites (personal and otherwise) to promote Afro-Cuban culture and its material practices carried out in ceremonies, rituals, and interpersonal relations. The symbolic value of Cuban territory within African religious practice assured the continuation of Cubans and non-Cubans traveling to the island to participate in initiation ceremonies or consultations with deities.

Wondering about the effects of globalization on art practice, Cuban art historian and critic Gerardo Mosquera suggests that "the fact that artists from every corner of the world, including Cuba, now exhibit internationally reflects only a quantitative internationalization, but numbers are not the issue. The question again is whether we are contributing or not to the transformation of a hegemonic and restrictive situation into active plurality, instead of being digested by that situation" (168). Digested or not, the tools of digital art appear to provide new narrating potential and ways of working either alone or communally across countries and cultures. This is perhaps why Cuba's ambivalence in embracing digital telecommunications (expressed through the policy of limited access) could be interesting in the long term for the production of multiple pluralities. The delay in building a privatized network structure might suggest alternative architectures and uses to the consumerist model adopted in most of the capitalist world. However, this implies that the state continues to create a restrictive mechanism around tools that easily erase, duplicate, upload, and download all sorts of potentially problematic messages for the state. System openness will wait for the same increased national security controls, now prevalent all over the globe. Despite overwhelming economic odds, digital media tools are globally dispersed either through people, business, or electronic networks. Artists working with traditional tools, say a paintbrush and a canvas, incorporate digital photography and sound design to create multimedia installation spaces. Virtual art galleries such as Espacio Aglutinador have popped up in the international art circuit supporting "banned artists" who have met "real life" censorship at the hands of conservative Cuban bureaucrats.[5] Mexican digital novelist and activist Fran Ilich, whose Possible Worlds digital media collective merges

5. Espacio Aglutinador has web space on Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco's website, <http://www.cocofusco.com>, and can be found here: <http://www.thing.net/%7Ecocofusco/espacioag.html>.

activism with market know how, is experienced in the art of evading Mexican corporate and state censorship of his web project. In what is another paradox of digital times, Ilich's website participated in Cuba's Sixth Annual Digital Art Exhibit in 2006. Ilich's expertise and commitment to electronic subversion did not pose any threat to the Cuban state or its watchful bureaucrats.

Contributing to national debate and reflection on the use of new technologies and promoting artistic and cultural values, the Centro Cultural Pablo de la Torriente Brau, under the auspices of the Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de La Habana, HIVOS [Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation], ETECSA [Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba], Cubasí Portal, and the collaboration of the Cuban Institute of Art and Cinema (ICAIC), UNEAC, and the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes organized *Cuba Digital Art: The Exhibit* (2006). Exploring the relationship between art and life, works examined an impressive range of themes including emerging spiritual geographies, everyday life and its contradictions, and the language of music videos and advertising. According to cultural promoter and critic Victor Casasus there were

> 149 artists from Cuba who sent their sets of works—124 printed and 25 audiovisual works—to be seen, discussed, and analyzed by the jury in that difficult task of learning to teach [. . .] This year [2006] the jury, demanding and committed to quality and rigorousness, chose 25 audiovisual artists who will have their works exhibited and another five whose works will also be screened together with the awarded works. The Centro Pablo decided to exhibit in [*sic*] its premises [. . .] a group of two-dimensional works that were not awarded by the jury, as an advance of something that could have been but still not fully is, but has the right to establish a dialogue, from that position, with its potential/future audience. ("Cuba Arte Digital")

A collaborative project symbolically brought together digital artists from the US and Cuba to create works in pairs that spoke to each other's realities. Pedro Juan Abreu's *Sharing Dreams* stems from the idea that

> In daily life we are surrounded by a group of devices allowing us communication and contact with other people. Although they may be on the other side of the ocean, in our same neighborhood, or in the house next door, electronic messages replace more and more personal exchanges and face-

> to-face communication. Conversations, smells, sounds and kisses become synthesized icons in the e-mail software and chat halls. Virtual contact is replacing simple conversation and meetings of people, making us feel next to each other. We believe we know each other very well and we are very near each other when we spend long hours sitting before the display reading between lines and light dots. (Casaus)

Curator Luisa Marisy notes that, "Fast-Forward accurately describes what is happening in the context of Cuban fine arts with the use of video and new technologies. In Cuba, as in most of the less developed countries in America, video and digital technologies were late to arrive. But, since Cuban artists 'discovered' them, the process of appropriation and development was very quick" ("Exposiciones"). Established as an opportunity to preview work in progress, forums such as Fast-Forward reveal that new digital tools have found their way into creative processes of artists, leading them to pose new personal and aesthetic questions. Marisy points out that they are "a group of renowned artists, with indisputable talent and large CVs that have put them in the national and international art scene [. . .] using video and digital technology to make very diverse works—video-installations, video-performances, animation, and experimental films—always maintaining the consistency of the formal and conceptual discourse they have been developing for some time" (ibid.).[6]

The next generation of Cuban filmmakers, armed with their own or borrowed digital cameras and with the support of the state-run ICAIC [Cuban Institute of Art and Cinema], are independently "speaking" with laptop editing systems, training by means of commercials, creating animation, web-design, graphic art, installation, and experimental video. In March 2007, the Sixth Annual Muestra de Jovenes Realizadores, an international event, showcased works in digital and analogue formats produced through independent production companies and Televisión Serrana (community television in the mountains). Half the members of the new group are women media makers, already a significant difference from previous generations. Coverage in the Cuban press attested to the "controversial" content of the films tackling dif-

6. Fast-Forward I showed works by Raul Cordero, the undisputed pioneer of this art in Cuba, as well as works by Alexander Arrechea and Eduardo Moltó. Fast-Forward II included works by Luis Gómez, Ernesto Leal, Sandra Ramos, René Francisco Rodríguez, Lázaro Saavedra, and José Angel Toirac.

ficult subject matter as a peculiarity of this generation who grew up in the eighties and nineties amidst the worldwide disenchantment with the socialist project.[7] Discontent has always been a productive emotion for artistic inspiration. Searching for new forms of meaning, individuals reconsider everyday life in terms of the mobile and virtual world around them, as well as on the terms of modernist identities inherited from the revolutionary project. In Carlos Díaz Lechuga and Claudia Calviño's short *Cuca y el pollo* (*Cuca and the Chicken*, 2005), silent cinema language, black and white photography, and digital special effects are combined in a hilarious look at food shortages and a waning socialist solidarity in the face of hunger. Obviously inspired by the brilliant comedic cinema of Charlie Chaplin in *The Gold Rush* (1925) and the ideas of Imperfect Cinema advanced by Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa (1969), these young modern day no-budget filmmakers comment on their low-budget era with sophistication and wit. Set in the midst of the harshness of the Special Period, the short follows several people in a Cuban neighborhood, as a chicken is offered as reward to the winner of a bicycle race. The disappointments begin when the prize turns out to be only half a chicken and the solidarity of neighbors vanishes against gaining personal advantage. Like other Cuban films of the nineties and beyond, black humor successfully captures the madness and discontent of the era.

Nor is this new generation working only in Cuba. The work of Miguel Coyula began in the bedroom of his Havana home in the mid 1990s. Inspired by the crumbling mise-en-scene visible outside his bedroom window, his short *Light Valve* (*Válvula de luz*, 1997) was partially shot on a VHS camcorder with special effects rendered on a 486 PC and edited on a ¾-inch U-matic videotape system. The early years of the Special Period would still be rendered in analog video. Coyula's high school friends were cast as the alienated youth of this stark modern society, and Special Period Havana lent itself as the ideal post-apocalyptic set for a film that was part science fiction, part surrealist dreamscape. Envisioning a landscape of inestimable loneliness, the film considers what new structures of emotions and desires remain in the aftermath of destruction. Since then Coyula continues to work alone, writing, directing, editing, and composing his films, winning international awards and essentially launching his career in the "micro cinema" movement

7. See the full program of the festival at <http://www.cubacine.cu/muestrajoven/index.html>.

in the US. Richly textured, his first feature *Red Cockroaches* (2003) has the feel of a low-budget *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), the classic postmodernist science fiction film. The signature incest plot in *Cockroaches* is a throwback to Cuban *radionovelas* (radio soap operas) born in the 1950s. But its narrative texture, borrowing from steamy and baroque science fiction artistic design of the 1980s, illustrates a depleted environment where acid rain falls on New York City, a viral epidemic encroaches, and red cockroaches appear normal to beleaguered citizens. The exaggerated colors of *Cockroaches* are the antithesis of *Light Valve*'s stark black and white video photography, which accentuates the desolation of characters that "chat balanced on the edge of evanescence" (Glazier). In *Cockroaches*, Coyula mixes animation and graphic images "scattered like graphic footprints" (Glazier) amidst live action melodrama to compose a foreboding yet playful style that is a familiar yet strange reality.

How do we make sense of these complex experiences without falling into the all-too-familiar trap of lamenting what alternative networks are not? The "chaotic movements and atomized practices," as author Victor Fowler says, "only reach unity in the barely measurable horizon of private consumption."[8] Cuban artists, writers, filmmakers, politicians, and citizens are not becoming the wireless "smart mobs" articulated by Howard Rheingold. For Rheingold, "more important than the evolution of color and video screens in telephone displays is the presence of "location awareness" in mobile phones [. . . where] increasingly, handheld devices can detect, within a few yards, where they are located on a continent, within a neighborhood, or inside a room" (xv). What the author of *Virtual Worlds* is referring to is how instant access and the evolution of wireless technologies is transforming cultures and communities by revolutionizing our sensorial and temporal relationship to place and space. This obviously "first world" rendering of information and commodity consumers links back to the millions of users and consumers of technology whose consumption is in part structured by the logic of the US embargo, a policy in desperate need of an upgrade. Cubans are acutely aware of their location within the geopolitics of the Cold War and the passionate politics of the twentieth century. New social interactions are emerging from the ever-turbulent crossings of currents between capitalist politics and alternative political imaginations for a more socially responsible

8. Victor Fowler, email correspondence, 8/1/05.

world. Its refusal to invest in capitalist or neo-liberal models that have proven detrimental in other parts of the world appears tactically to coincide with the current realignment of alternative models of regional cooperation around a new hemispheric socialist imagination.

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