Review/Reseña


Cuban Cinema in Transition:
On Location with Ann Marie Stock

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In its fifty years, cinema in Cuba since the Revolution has realised a remarkable number of accomplishments. It has developed an industry with a more or less continuous (if diminished since the Special Period) stream of production where no industry had previously existed. It has acted as a key player in the continent’s cultural and aesthetic debates, particularly in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It has produced a considerable roll call of auteurs (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Humberto Solás, and Fernando Pérez), particularly for a small nation, and given the world an aesthetic (imperfect cinema), whose tenets have been
taken up by independent and other non mainstream filmmakers elsewhere (the LA School, Dogme ’95) (Taylor, 1995: 457; Massood, 1999: 27). Cuban cinema has also been responsible for some of the most significant masterpieces of Latin American and World Cinema. Gutiérrez Alea’s Memorias de subdesarrollo [Memories of Underdevelopment] is still lauded as one of the ‘truly great works of cinema from the developing world’ (O’Keefe, 2008: 8). Cuba has functioned both to shelter exiled filmmakers from Latin American countries in the throes of rightwing dictatorships (Argentineans Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino edited their Third Cinema documentary La hora de los hornos [Hour of the Furnaces (1969) there] and (for a time through MECLA—the Latin American Cinema Market) facilitated the continental distribution of Latin American cinema (King, 2000: 147). Lastly, Cuban cinema has played an important role in the project of forming and maintaining (up until the Special Period at least) a ‘cohesive national imaginary’ (López, 2008: 187). However, some of the biggest and earliest achievements of Cuban revolutionary cinema need also to be weighed up alongside its subsequent struggles and failures and situated within the complex history of Cuba’s evolving Revolution.

Ann Marie Stock’s On Location in Cuba: Street Filmmaking in Times of Transition looks mostly at the subsequent struggles contemporary Cuban filmmaking has had to endure from the 1990s to the present moment, since the onset of the economic crisis (the Special Period) and the consequent dramatic decline in official filmmaking activity. On Location in Cuba thus focuses on filmmaking produced away from (but often at the same time in partnership with) the country’s national film institute, the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC). This involves exploring work produced by students of various art schools (Instituto Superior del Arte, ISA) and film schools (Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión, EICTV), community based media organizations (Televisión Serrana) and by individual entrepreneurial filmmakers (Esteban Insausti). It also involves exploring the role new governmental and non-governmental organizations like the Asociación Hermanos Sáiz, the Movimiento Nacional de Video de Cuba, and the Fundación Ludwig de Cuba have played in facilitating the continuation of Cuba’s cinematic production.
These organizations, though all founded in the 1980s, are considered products of the Special Period in that, with the loss of institutional funding for audiovisual artists in the early 1990s it was at this point that they came into themselves as important sites of support and cultural production.

*On Location in Cuba* is significant not solely because it represents the second English language book about Cuban cinema (Michael Chanan’s *Cuban Cinema*, published in 1984 and republished in 2003 is the first), but also because it engages with key debates in contemporary Cuba and also in Latin American and world cinema: how globalization and its discontents impact on notions of national identity, and how new imaging practices of production and distribution (digital cameras, digital editing, digital exhibition) facilitate the dissemination of filmmakers working outside the state’s cinematic apparatus. *On Location in Cuba* provides not just a history of past and contemporary Revolutionary Cuban filmmaking, but also some interesting and detailed textual analysis of a broad range of texts, from video shorts to student graduation projects, digital videos, and full-length features. For the scholar new to the area of Cuban cinema, readers will find useful the grounding of textual analyses within a fully detailed history of Cuban filmmaking from the Revolution onwards.

What is most noteworthy about *On Location in Cuba* is that it takes as its focus as yet little studied areas of Cuban imaging practices such as video, animation, regional television, individual entrepreneurial filmmakers, graduates of the ISA, EICTV, all those who work outside the island’s filmmaking institution and/or even outside Havana. The book therefore sheds new light on Cuban cinema by offering a different account than what is most common in this national cinema, that is, works that focus on ICAIC and feature film production. Stock therefore opens up to scrutiny what had been a neglected area in accounts of Cuban cinema.

However, one should not expect from *On Location in Cuba* a theoretical, discursive structure to the recounting of contemporary imaging practices in Cuba. Instead *On Location* takes an approach meant to accord “cultural agency” to the island-based Cubans the book focuses on. Hence the book is structured by the “impressions and recollections” of the media professionals it focuses on, sometimes
providing lengthy biographical accounts and the different directors’ daily activities in an attempt to understand the circuitous trajectories these filmmakers often have to follow in order to get films produced, shot and distributed. This is admirable in as much as Stock is effectively platforming voices, which, she argues, are otherwise “rarely heard.”

To the extent that it gives voice to those who, in its own words, would otherwise not be heard, On Location bears a striking similarity to testimonial literature from the 1980s and 1990s. And, like this testimonial literature, Stock inserts herself as the academic/researcher into the text including her own recollections and impressions of spending time with these filmmakers “on location” in Cuba. Although this makes for interesting and compelling reading (I would highlight Stock’s account of Ambrosio Fornet’s historic address on the ‘quinquenio gris’) this is a potentially problematic approach as it sometimes obscures the perspectives of Cubans themselves at these significant cultural events/moments. Having said this, it is only a small point against which should be weighed the significance and readability of this book.

On Location in Cuba, comes at a timely moment, just as the Revolution is celebrating its 50th anniversary, and when other publications (Berthier, 2008) are also looking back at the gains and losses of its cinematic practices. As such I imagine it will be a must read for the student and/or scholar of Cuban cinema.

Works Cited
