

## Children, Material Culture and the “New Man” Ideology in Contemporary Cuban Film

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Cuba remains among the most restricted countries in Latin America regarding freedom for cultural expression. Since the beginning of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 a rigorous institutional model for the production and distribution of cultural material has reinforced the monopoly that the government historically has kept over all media and cultural organizations. However, starting in 1989—when the Cuban government faced the fading of socialism in Eastern Europe and the resulting cease of economic sponsorship from the former U.S.S.R—the reconfigurations of nationalistic discourses around a “new Cuban cultural identity” for Post-soviet Cuba have intensified as the state’s main recovery strategy.<sup>1</sup> While all state-sponsored cultural institutions still require a dogmatic commitment from writers, artists and filmmakers, they also embrace some nonconformist artistic manifestations as a way to boost the government’s popularity as the sponsoring body of this “new” dimension of Cuban socialism and national identity. Consequently during the last two decades the Cuban government has partially regained its political hegemony using a selective conceptualization of cultural discourses as a springboard where controversial commentary—once is categorized under the umbrella label of “new Cuban identity”—creates the image of a more tolerant political administration. As Cuban Historian Rafael Rojas has keenly pointed out, these practices not only lack transparency, but they are falsely presented to the international community under a “diversity doctrine” and as inevitable consequences of the long-standing political dispute between Cuba and the United States and the economic embargo.<sup>2</sup>

Cuban cinema, nevertheless, has remained a politically contentious form of expression in Cuba due to its popularity with Cuban audiences. Despite access to limited distribution networks and technological resources, the work of most contemporary Cuban filmmakers can be described, as Michael Chanan has suggested, as “an aesthetic imbricated with a political spirit” showcasing “an ability to answer to a vicarious role in the public sphere, a calling to speak not at people, but with them.” (21) While there remains a lack of public spaces for open political debates outside state scrutiny in Cuba, and the national media only provide state-sponsored versions around controversial social topics, Cuban films continue to reach national audiences with complex, double-edged references intended to elicit the political complicity of the viewer. Filmmakers depicting daily life in Post-soviet Cuba in their films have learned to negotiate the prescribed landscapes of “new Cuban identity” in the language of irony, mainly because their films must be produced and disseminated by the State through its main film organization, the *Instituto Cubano*

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<sup>1</sup> As noted by Rojas, these new configurations of a so-called more inclusive “Cuban identity”

<sup>2</sup> See Rojas (2011) p. 262

*de Arte e Industria Cinematográfica* (ICAIC).<sup>3</sup> However, Cuban films validate their political agency by appealing to a popular discursive platform in which alternative readings or parody of government discourses on memory, diaspora, gender, race, and class serve to contest the positioning of the State over national identity.<sup>4</sup>

Coinciding with the transition of power between Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl Castro in 2006, the recurrence of children and adolescents in protagonist roles has become an acute catalyst to this subtle political dialogue between Cuban filmmakers and their audiences. Critics such as Rosana Díaz-Zambrana, for example, have pointed out the transgressive vision of the successful *Viva Cuba* (2005) through its use of child actors.<sup>5</sup> As the story of two Cuban children from different social classes, who run away from their homes in an effort to escape their parents' ideologies, *Viva Cuba* served as a metaphor for the separation between the old ways of the state (represented in the film by the adult world), and younger generations of Cubans (portrayed by the emancipation and emotional development of the children). *Viva Cuba* was the first Cuban film to present such a formula using boys and girls as actors, which would be followed by a number of childhood and adolescence films in which the tropes of a dissimilar Cuba have emerged. Some films such as *La edad de la peseta* (2006) and *Martí: El ojo del canario* (2009), have contrasted the formulaic solemnity of history books; while other features such as *Pablo* (2012), and the short film *Camionero* (2012) have exposed social phenomena like domestic violence and sexual abuse pertaining to youth and childhood which the official Cuban media outlets ignore. Similarly, the films *Y sin embargo* (2012) and *Conducta* (2013) have focused their political commentary on Cuba's decayed educational system. Such proliferation of narratives focusing on the themes of childhood and youth is a valid indicator of a discursive shift on Cuban post-revolutionary cinema, which denotes a clear intention to criticize the failure of the state's early indoctrinating discourse on childhood, youth and socialism.

Children and adolescents in Cuban film—as Carolina Rocha and Georgia Seminet already have noted for other recent Latin American cinemas—are no longer

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<sup>3</sup> As Anne Marie Stock explains in *On Location in Cuba* (2009)—her account of the entrepreneurial approaches of Cuban audiovisual artists—even directors who had gone completely independent have returned to ICAIC's infrastructure and distribution network looking to reach larger audiences (280).

<sup>4</sup> The recent horror spoof *Juan de los muertos* (2011), for instance, told the story of group of Havana slackers who face an apocalypse by zombies, whom the Cuban government claims are dissidents revolting against the state. Among the many humorous themes of the film, the protagonist, Juan, opens an agency that profits from the customers who want to exterminate “loved ones” who have been turned into zombies. Juan receives a call, apparently from the government, which he rejects, explaining that it is impossible for him kill “that one zombie” (Fidel Castro). *Juan de los muertos* nevertheless was widely shown in Cuban theaters and received the 2013 Goya Award for Best Iberoamerican production.

<sup>5</sup> See “Roads to Emancipation: Sentimental Education in *Viva Cuba*” in: Rocha, Carolina, and Georgia Seminet. *Representing History, Class, and Gender in Spain and Latin America: Children and Adolescents in Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012 (171-185)

seen as social minorities, but rather they call attention to problems in the adult sector of society.<sup>6</sup> In the Cuban context, however, the focalization of young actors gains a particularly political connotation, as youth and childhood historically have been part of a political agenda that historically has aligned their social development with the success of Cuban socialism. In this regard, Ernesto Guevara's concept of the "New Man" introduced in his 1965 seminal text *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba* has been the most widely disseminated identity archetype among younger generations to the present. Guevara's notion asserted that a young subject born into the Cuban Revolution was responsible for the realization of the sociopolitical and economic goals of socialism as he or she was being educated. Moreover, as revolutionary Cuba was being defined in contrast to capitalist societies (and especially the imperialistic model presented by the United States), the sociocultural development of those younger Cubans was centrally linked to their required rejection of commodity and the rules of consumer society. Indeed, the "New Man" ideology underscored that the construction of socialism required the sacrifice of personal interests for a communal project, and that only moral recognition should come before any other form of material compensation.

In this essay, I will focus on childhood and youth narratives in Cuban film specifically looking at their depiction of children's interaction with consumerism and material culture, the latter being a sociocultural notion for the study of Post-soviet that has emerged recently.<sup>7</sup> With this goal, I first examine the identity archetype of the "New Man" forged and promoted by Cuban cultural authorities for Cuban children through the visual discourse of animated films made after Guevara's text appeared in 1965, and how the "New Man" archetype linked the sociocultural development of the young subject to his rejection of commodity. I turn to Guevara's notion to show how this ideology was disseminated by the state, operating— among other narratives— in the popular animated series *Elpidio Valdés*, the adventures of a *mambí* fighter against the Spanish colonization armies during nineteenth-century Cuba, created in 1970 by cartoonist and filmmaker Juan Padrón. I then move to the

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the Cuban case can be observed through the critical lens offered by Georgia Seminet and Carolina Rocha who have studied films featuring children and adolescents made in Latin American and Spain during the last two decades. In these films, young actors as the center of focus allow the camera to create the ideology that the directors seek to disseminate among adult sectors of society by either following the actions of a young protagonist (focalized) or framing what the viewer will see from the young protagonist's perspective (focalizer). See: Rocha, Carolina, and Georgia Seminet. *Representing History, Class, and Gender in Spain and Latin America: Children and Adolescents in Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> My thanks to María Cabrera Arús, author of the blog *Cuba Material* and a forthcoming dissertation on Cuban material culture, for facilitating the manuscript of her text "Cuban Material Culture: Modernity, Utopia, Socialism," from which my analysis benefits greatly. Arús defines the study of material culture as the "understanding the effects of the reciprocal action between, on the one hand, society, a collective of human beings, and, on the other hand, the non-human environment in which this collective exists."

work of Ian Padrón (who I choose with a glimpse of irony, as he is the son of Juan Padrón, creator of *Elpidio Valdés*) in his most recent film *Habanastation* (2011), the story of Carlos and Mayito, two Cuban children and their videogame console in present-day Havana. I offer this contrasting comparison between these films by Juan Padrón and Ian Padrón in order to show the generational, ideological, and aesthetic transformations that have occurred in contemporary Cuban cinema concerned with the tropes of childhood and youth regarding consumer and material culture. These transformations, as my readings of *Elpidio Valdés* and *Habanastation* will set forward, describe how contemporary Cuban cinema has exposed and criticized the role of the Cuban government as it has entered an economic liberalization, abandoning the original values associated with Cuban socialism historically predicated to Cuban children and adolescents.

### **Running with Machetes**

Since its initial conception in 1965, Guevara's utopian "New Man" ideology was central to the conception and indoctrination of a pedagogical prototype that targeted specifically younger generations. For Guevara, who between 1961 and 1964 served as Cuba's Ministry of Industries and in November 1959 had introduced to Cuban society the concept of "trabajo voluntario" (unpaid voluntary work), the "New Man" was a devoted developer of new technology under socialism:

In this period of the building of socialism we can see the new man being born. His image is not yet completely finished—it never could be—since the process goes forward hand in hand with the development of new economic forms. For a long time man has been trying to free himself from alienation through culture and art. The resulting theory will, no doubt, put great stress on the two pillars of the construction of socialism: the education of the new man and the development of technology.<sup>8</sup>

The residue of the social system that had prevailed in Cuba before 1959, which had been oriented towards market relationships, jeopardized the utopian society that Guevara envisioned. Because the role of younger generations in the development of socialism and their desire for consumption were seen as conflicting opposites, the revolutionary government regulated access to material goods, media and technological sophistication from most capitalist countries. As Guevara saw it in his text: "The commodity is the economic cell of capitalist society; so long as it exists its

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<sup>8</sup> See Guevara. All translations into English are my own. The use of the masculine pronoun form "his" to refer to the "New Man" ideology in this paper is solely stylistic. It is important to note that this ideology was also promoted among young women. As noted by Ana Serra in her book *The New Man in Cuba* (2007), feminine role models of the "New Woman" as the female worker integrated into the revolutionary economic agenda were promoted by the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (FMC). (25)

effects will make themselves felt in the organization of production and, consequently, in consciousness.”<sup>9</sup>

For decades to follow, capitalist merchandise was almost non-existent and heavily critiqued as vicious propaganda, with the state as the unique mediator between consumer goods and Cuban citizens. Correspondingly, the revolution of 1959 presented itself as the ultimate modernizing process and was defined by its opposition to the modernity represented by the United States. As María Cabrera Arús acutely describes it:

The products that heralded modern socialist material culture were not advertised, advertising being banned and marketing agencies nationalized in the early-1960s. They were not periodically re-styled either, to stimulate consumption. Competition between brands did not exist, and prices were not assessed according to the capitalist criterion of maximizing profits. They spoke the language of functionality, yet they lacked other attributes traditionally associated with modernity like luxury, pleasure, packaging, distinction, and differentiation. They, moreover, catered to the domestic sphere, having a low public impact. Because of all these features, as well as because of the limited offer of goods available, socialist modernity was an austere, discreet, and I would say incomplete, modernity.<sup>10</sup>

The New Man’s own technological ingenuity and his sacrificial spirit were intended to make up for what Arús describes here as socialist Cuba’s “incomplete modernity.” As a result, the “New Man” utopia continued to evolve into dominant conceptualizations of identity for children, mostly through the cult to Guevara’s figure, as well as among the tropes found in cultural and political discourses. For example, in her clever analysis of the “New Man” ideology as ironically represented in the classic Cuban film *La muerte de un burócrata* (1966), Ariana Hernández-Reguant underlines how the encouragement of “inventiveness under dire circumstances” was the basis of the state’s most utopian formulations (205). And, in 1968, the same year Guevara was killed in Bolivia, Fidel Castro suggested to the *Organización de Pioneros Jose Martí* that they should change their slogan from “*¡Pioneros siempre listos!*” (Students always ready!) to “*¡Pioneros por el comunismo, seremos como el Ché!*” (Students for communism, we will be like Ché!)

The “New Man” ideology became a prevailing component of films made for children as American films and animated cartoons were not shown in Cuba. In 1971, Cuban filmmakers working for ICAIC were instructed to produce audiovisual material that could appeal to younger audiences, and to increase the production of animated films of high ideological and historical content.<sup>11</sup> *Una Aventura de Elpidio*

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<sup>9</sup> See Guevara.

<sup>10</sup> See Arús.

<sup>11</sup> See Mogno.

*Valdés* (1971) was the short film that inaugurated the immensely popular series created by Juan Padrón and presented the character of Elpidio as a national icon. As Anne Marie Stock points out, Elpidio was the first character to really insert a truly Cuban folkloric culture into the ICAIC animation studios (117). He was a colonel of the liberation armies during the second war of independence against Spain (1895-1898), and his physical appearance, amusing humor, and marked “Cuban Spanish” accent were modeled upon the stereotype of the Cuban countryman. Elpidio lived in the mountains with his girlfriend María Silvia; he loved black coffee, like a model Cuban, and fought with a machete that he had transformed from a working tool into a combat weapon. He embodied the archetypes of the young worker, the student, the farmer, and the soldier and all in one, in other words, a hero that confirmed the principles of socialism as a national ideology.

Between 1971 and 2003, twenty-five short films and three other full-length ones starring Elpidio and his troops were produced and repeatedly shown in theaters and broadcast on national television. As a character, Elpidio also encapsulated the New Man’s technological ingenuity and sacrificial spirit, both deeply rooted in Cuban idiosyncrasy. Far from resembling any American superhero, Elpidio had no superpowers although he was gifted with a special talent to adapting to survive challenging situations through his resourcefulness and inventions. Elpidio’s troops, for instance, could reconstruct old Spanish rifles to shoot nails and horseshoes (*Elpidio Valdés y el fusil*, 1979). Additionally, Elpidio’s faithful collaborator, Oliverio Medina, could blow up a Spanish battleship with a “homemade nitroglycerin mortar.” Oliverio the inventor also killed Spanish soldiers with his “cigar-pistol” and his “boomerang machete” both weapons he had created (*Elpidio Valdés contra dólar y cañón*, 1983). Elpidio had built his cannon out of leather strips (*Elpidio Valdés asalta el convoy*, 1976) and had designed a homemade floating torpedo (*Elpidio Valdés contra la cañonera*, 1980). His methods, like those of the “New Man,” underscored— to borrow Hernández-Reguant’s phrase—“inventiveness under dire circumstances,” as he defeated the far superior Spanish armies by throwing beehives at them (*Elpidio Valdés y los inventores*, 1992); derailed heavily armed trains with banana peels (*Elpidio Valdés contra el tren militar*, 1974) or escaped the New York police by nauseating them with tobacco smoke (*Elpidio Valdés contra la policía de Nueva York*, 1976). In any case, Elpidio’s light-hearted approach to danger was rooted in “choteo,” or Cuban popular mockery, and was always derogative of foreign culture (as represented by the Spanish and the North American characters in the series), serving him as another weapon to delegitimize anything that excluded a Cuban nationalistic character.

Justo Planas has pointed out Elpidio’s mythical characteristics that, as Planas suggests, make him “un facilitador de informaciones y fechas memorables, y sus acciones dramáticas se disuelven en el espíritu pedagógico” (a facilitator of information and memorable dates whose dramatic action is embedded with a pedagogical spirit). (50) However, in the myth of Elpidio, the hero existed in a nonlinear temporality of historical events where the wars of independence against Spain and the Cuban revolution of 1959 (and its subsequent socialist system) had

been merged. The work of Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1971) reminds us that mythical discourses feed off altered historical concepts imposing a belief precisely through the use of repeated stereotyped images (121-125). The most telling example is the short *Elpidio Valdés contra el tren militar*, in which Elpidio derails an armed train that was reinforcing the Spanish military. This particular short film alluded to the historic battle of Santa Clara in 1958 when Ernesto Guevara had achieved a decisive victory, leading to the revolutionary triumph of 1959, by derailing an armed train that was bringing reinforcements to General Fulgencio Batista's soldiers. The *Elpidio Valdés* series included many other historical episodes that supposedly were set in the last decade of the nineteenth century in Cuba but were intentionally inscribed upon social phenomena of the contemporary revolutionary period. These short films mirrored events such as the infiltration of Cuban State Security agents into the CIA when Elpidio pretended to have amnesia and fight for the Spanish side once he had been captured (*Elpidio Valdés ¡Capturado!*, 1988) and socialist Cuba's early experiences with foreign capital investment and tourism when for the first time, the Colonel is forced to receive an expeditionary solidarity mission which helps the Cuban struggle for independence (*Elpidio Valdés ataca a Jutía Dulce*, 1988).

It was also the voice of Elpidio that narrated the political act most symbolically linked to Cuban childhood for the past fifty years: the welcome ceremony of Elián González upon his return to Cuba in June 2000, an event broadcast live on national television. Elpidio, as Juan Orlando Pérez notes, had played a key role in the seven-month long propaganda battle between Cuba and the Republican right-wing in Miami.<sup>12</sup> The Cuban government sent a poster and a letter signed by Elpidio Valdés to his dear "Capitán Elián" kept in Miami, a duplicated and framed copy of which each elementary school in Cuba also received. The letter, which was published in the official newspaper *Granma* on February 12, 2000, related Elpidio's anger when he had seen Elián dressed as Batman and wrapped in the United States flag, as well as the Colonel's plans to charge with his machete against Elián's captors. Elpidio also was a prominent presence in children's everyday life in school parades and plays, and in urban imagery like parks; recreational areas and even daycare centers in Havana and other Cuban cities were named and decorated after the character. Cuban children, in other words, had unlimited access to the myth of Elpidio, and were incited to imitate, through roleplaying, Elpidio's inventiveness, his sacrifices and his anti-imperialistic feelings.

### ***Habanastation's "New Man"***

In an interview with Ian Padrón published by the Cuban cultural magazine *La Jiribilla*, the director described *Habanastation* as partly autobiographical of his experience growing up in Cuba. Ian Padrón also explained that his film looked to replace the role that animation had in previous years by allowing children to participate in the construction of their own visual images.<sup>13</sup> As Seminet and Rocha

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<sup>12</sup> See Pérez.

<sup>13</sup> See Polanco.

also have noted, autobiographical narratives are common among young Latin American directors, who allow young actors to channel the directors' childhood experiences during the intensification of globalization and neoliberal rules in Latin America in the last decades (13-15). Although Cuba's encounter with globalization and neoliberalism is still discussed as an exception, for Ian Padrón (born in 1976), a similar experience can be found into what Esther Whitfield described in her book *Cuban Currency* (2008) as the evolution of Cuban aesthetics into representational tropes for commercial processes, as artists and writers were forced to interact with new foreign markets after the demise of the former U.S.S.R. According to Whitfield, most authors of the 1990's and early 2000's explored their economic, aesthetic and creative interests, but simultaneously placed the consumption of their books to the center of their narratives, mainly as a parody to the commercial processes to which Cuban cultural production was been exposed to by both the international market and by the state. (22)<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, *Habanastation* is a film that illustrates the ways in which the state cultural institutions have manipulated cultural discourses with political purposes in Cuba. *Habanastation*, I would argue, was disseminated as the instructional manual that could convey to the masses the notion of the revolutionary ideological power reframed within a neoliberal angle, and, therefore, could help to mitigate the negative effects of material culture and the divisiveness it can produce. Featuring a young cast chosen from members of the widely popular *La Colmenita* children's theater company—numbering over 12,000 young actors across the island and highly favored by ICAIC—*Habanastation* was extremely well received by the official press, which called it “a resurgence of the best emotions absent from most recent films exhibited which have depressed our audiences.”<sup>15</sup> Most official critics celebrated the film's emotional portrayal of childhood in the last socialist frontier of Latin America, where the dignity of poverty and the triumph of the values inculcated by a socialist society could override the power of capitalist consumption. However, according to the ways in which *Habanastation* was presented to Cuban audiences, Guevara's ideal of the socialist role of younger generations was no longer exclusive of their desire for consumption and foreign material goods. Rather, the “New Man” could now access and enjoy consumer goods.

*Habanastation* tells the story of Carlos and Mayito, two twelve-year-old boys from different social classes who find themselves immersed in an adventure away from adult supervision. Reminiscent as well of Mark Twain's 1882 classic *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Habanastation*'s focus on the children's access to consumption of goods is central to the narrative. The film takes its title precisely from the play of words formed by *Habana* and *PlayStation* and emphasizes Carlos's and Mayito's very different social realities. Although the two boys attend the same public school, Carlos's father is in prison, so he lives with his grandmother in the Havana slums of

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<sup>14</sup> “Special Period fiction” was the term Whitfield coined specifically for Cuban literature of the late 1990's and early 2000's which, in my view, can be applied productively to the analysis of film narratives as well.

<sup>15</sup> See Armas.

La Tinta where Afro-Cuban religious faith, gang violence, and the black market rule life. Mayito, on the other hand, is the son of a successful jazz musician living with his overbearing mother in the comfortable bubble of their upscale Miramar neighborhood. However, more relevant than the evident contrast among social classes (already documented in most Cuban cultural production of the 1990s), *Habanastation* stands out as the first Cuban film featuring children (and made for young audiences) which openly acknowledges the affective impact of objects representing consumption on younger generations of Cubans.

In the plot, a series of accidental events articulates a counterpoint of mutual recognition between Carlos and Mayito, and a *PlayStation 3* videogame console becomes the pretext to trigger action. Mayito has taken the console out of the house without his mother's consent, only to end up lost in La Tinta, the marginal neighborhood where Carlos lives. Carlos then agrees to help Mayito survive the day in exchange for some playtime with the *PlayStation 3*, a toy Carlos has never seen before. But when the console burns out a microchip, the two children find themselves having to work, trade, and negotiate in different ways in the semi-underground economy of La Tinta in order to pay for the repairs before Mayito's parents find out. As the story develops, Mayito will discover the harsh realities beyond his Miramar mansion while Carlos will gain the civility and life philosophy he has never had to practice in La Tinta. The two boys, as expected, become best friends in what appears to be a sentimental elegy to the purity of childhood and friendship. During the final moments of the film, before his return to Miramar, Mayito decides he will gift his *PlayStation 3* to Carlos.

This ending to *Habanastation* provided certain relief to the state's problematic acknowledgement of materialistic differences as the root of recent and inexorable social conflicts in Cuba. As suggested by the Cuban official press, friendship and the dignity of poverty in a socialist society (as represented by Carlos's gesture and other honorable neighbors of La Tinta) could coexist with the power of money and capitalist consumption.<sup>16</sup> However, the idea of Cuban childhood as the idyllic path back to the utopian place where poverty recovers its ideological nobility must be contested from a much larger context, that of the ongoing political apathy of younger Cuban generations and the decrease of moral authority in educational and governmental institutions.

Ian Padrón includes a subtle commentary in *Habanastation* with the codification of a visual discourse around objects and independent economic practices that speaks of new subjectivities for Cuba. Despite the marked philosophical differences between Carlos and Mayito—witnessed throughout their many conversations in the film—their primary and only common objective for which they both sacrifice is money. The contrasting opinions of the two boys on their coming-to-age experiences (how a man should court women, how a man should defend his public image) are overridden by how they teach each other to conduct business and earn cash. As opposed to Guevara's utopian ideology of the "New Man," these new

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Castillo and del Río.

subjectivities embodied by Carlos and Mayito and appearing in *Habanastation* are modeled by children who desire, embrace, and disseminate their interaction with material culture as defined by capitalistic standards. This depiction of Cuban children could be read alongside the common experience of youth in other Latin American countries with globalization and consumption, but Carlos and Mayito live in the capital city of socialist Cuba, which, regardless of the U.S embargo—actually, never mentioned in the film—or the May Day parade and other socialist propaganda appearing in the background of several scenes, also functions as a capitalist city penetrated by foreign media where material goods dictate the social order. This is how *Habanastation* dismantles the former delineation between “evil” capitalist and “good” socialist economic practices promoted by the Cuban state and exposes the hypocrisy of the messages sent to youth by the subjective changes of the Cuban socioeconomic model.

*Habanastation*, therefore, could not work as a metaphor for the reconciliation of Cuban social classes potentially arbitrated by the state through its cultural indoctrination. Instead, the film offers a new perception of the Cuban socioeconomic experience. It steers away from the exceptionality of the Cuban case framed around the reiteration of the U.S embargo, disillusionment, and nostalgia for the lost of revolutionary utopia, where children bore the symbolism of the past and were associated with the destabilization of family, tradition, and the cultural belongings of the nation.<sup>17</sup> *Habanastation*, instead, points toward Post-Soviet’s Cuba paradoxical experimentation with capitalist economic practices—that is, the economic reforms led since 2006 by Raúl Castro’s administration— by a government that still asserts its socialist standards.

Ian Padrón’s vision in *Habanastation*, on the other hand, resonates with that of visual artist and scholar Ernesto Oroza, who coined the term “technological disobediences” to refer to the ironic way in which the inventiveness that the Cuban state initially promoted (with ideologies such as that of the “New Man”), evolved during the 1990s into transgressive strategies to navigate precisely through the incompetence of the state. Inventions and makeshift solutions during the turn of the 20th century in Cuba, as Oroza explains, displayed a degree of subversion which disobeyed not only the traditional life cycle and use of an object but also the overarching restrictions of the state.<sup>18</sup> For Ian Padrón in *Habanastation*, that degree of subversion and irony emerges from his contrasting focus on objects coming into Cuba from consumer societies and makeshift solutions looking to substitute scarcities. *Habanastation* frames its critical argument through the focalization of the camera on Carlos and Mayito, showing their reactions to objects which allow the

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<sup>17</sup> See Chanan, (489-495)

<sup>18</sup> For example, a homemade antenna built from imported beer aluminum cans could pick up the signal from an anti-Castro radio or TV station from Miami, or a repaired industrial printer stolen from a factory could falsify the official seals of cigar brands to be sold in the black market.

viewer to delve into the children's subjectivity and the affective meanings of the material culture surrounding them.

In the pivotal scene in *Habanastation*, the protagonists Carlos and Mayito meet Jesús, La Tinta's famous home appliance repairman. Allegorically, the scene represents the moment when children of present-day Cuba are faced with the forty-something aged "New Man," and what follows will deconstruct the discourses around inventiveness and sacrifice of previous decades (i.e. Elpidio Valdés). Instants before the children arrive at Jesús's repair shack, the viewer witnesses the most obvious representation of "technological disobedience" in the film as the repairman hammers into a *Caribe* TV set—an object symbolically related to the old modes of production of the state and the commercial collaboration between Cuba and the former USSR. Arriving with their broken *PlayStation 3* console, Carlos and Mayito receive the subjective gaze of Jesús who admits "never hav[ing] seen such a thing, except in movies." The reason for the *PlayStation 3* being defective is no other than the "technological disobedience" shown by Carlos when, regardless of Mayito's concern, Carlos insists on plugging it into an overloaded electricity outlet. The scene with Jesús, nevertheless, solidifies the unity of the two children, as the repairman insists on giving the children a "receipt" a piece of dirty, corroded cardboard where, for the first time in the film, Carlos and Mayito see their names written together as "joint owners" of the *PlayStation 3*.

Later, Jesús's technical verdict will indicate that the integrity of *PlayStations* cannot be violated with improvised parts, and the identical microchip needs to be bought. The pedagogical tone of this sequence is further stressed by the impossibility of playtime, demonstrated by the facial expressions of annoyance in Carlos and preoccupation in Mayito, and serves to explain to the boys (and the audience in the theater) how Cuban society has dislocated most of its social and commercial practices based on improvisation. In fact, their encounter with Jesús can be read as the lacking component of a holistic education, an opposing element to the school both Carlos and Mayito attend in which the "¡Seremos como el Ché!" (We will be like Ché!) slogan is still asserted. The small piece of cardboard given to the children stands for the resurgence of private property even in Cuba's most secluded corners of La Tinta, where commercial and technical parameters of the capitalist world begin to replace the old Cuban ways of hammering into a TV set. As the ultimate object of modernity (able to reproduce a reality itself), the *PlayStation 3* console is the *ne-plus-ultra* toy symbolic of how consumer societies have conceived and materialized children's imaginations. Returning this particular device to its normal functionality, even when Carlos and Mayito are unaware of these meanings, represents the bridge back from "technological disobedience" into the civility observed by capitalist societies, at least in terms of material culture. The children, in fact, agree to a formal contract with Jesús, who offers to pay for the microchip and return the console to its functional form, provided that Carlos and Mayito will bring the money later.

The entrepreneurship in which Carlos and Mayito are involved from this scene on—collecting empty beer bottles and soda aluminum cans, cleaning neighbors' yards, pumping air into bicycle tires, selling white pigeons to a *Santería*

practitioner— are representative of the new order the children have understood. As they exchange negotiation techniques, their friendship is solidified through the value of compensated labor. Most importantly, the visual discourse in *Habanastation* contributes to establish what Laura Podalsky has described as “affective alliances” with the spectator. The focus of the camera on body language and facial expressions, as Podalsky suggests, becomes essential to make the viewer aware of the emergence of new subjectivities and “instantiate new communitarian sensibilities” through the narrative of a film (8).<sup>19</sup>As they delightedly receive payment for their labor, Carlos and Mayito embody behavioral models that separate the children from the outdated ideological conception of the “New Man” archetype.

Several understated references to *Elpidio Valdés* are made as a way to convey how *Habanastation*’s narrative line is subtly superimposed on the myth of Elpidio. For instance, Carlos’s choice to donate his hard-earned money to the *PlayStation 3* repair fund conflicts with his childhood dream, which is to own a coronel (a large kite). “It takes about 300 bottles to buy a coronel,” explains the boy, inferring a connection of the name of the large kite with “Coronel,” precisely the military rank of the Colonel of “Coronel Elpidio Valdés.” In fact, the argument can be made that Carlos’s comment in the script could be ironic, criticizing Elpidio also as a commercial product sold to foreign producers. Mayito’s emancipation from his overbearing mother, on the other hand, is also supported by a reference to *Elpidio Valdés*. This time the subtlety is provided by the background music, which plays the reworking of *Elpidio Valdés*’s theme song originally written by Daniel Longre, precisely during a sequence when Mayito finally breaks his mother’s rule against playing in the rain and hysterically joins a soccer game with Carlos’s gang.<sup>20</sup>

*Habanastation* also stages a separation of children from adult supervision which suggests that the Cuban case could be read alongside the common experience of childhood in capitalistic countries. According to Jyostna Kapur, capitalist societies have increasingly represented children in film and literature as self-sufficient heroes of the postmodern era. As the author argues, these tropes where children are invited to enter the market as consumers with choices and are portrayed in the economic roles of adults, can be attained to the disintegration of the family premised upon the dominance of new technology and capitalist expansion(7). *Habanastation*, however, is not trying to intervene in the commodification of childhood from a particularly Cuban perspective, but rather it is exposing the failure of the state as the regulator of consumer culture. Because of the ways in which for decades the state mediated the interaction of the Cuban family with consumer culture, the separation of children from the adult world and their access to new technology in this film suggests a new generational order for Cuban society embedded with a clear political message.

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<sup>19</sup> See Podalsky.

<sup>20</sup> Remarkably, this version of the track can only be heard in the film, and was not included in the original *Habanastation* CD soundtrack produced by ICAIC and Cuba’s *Empresa de grabaciones y ediciones musicales* (EGREM).

Faced with an economic “adult” problem themselves, Carlos and Mayito are forced to reflect on a number of philosophical questions which will inform their processes of individualization and decision-making. During one of the main scenes of the film, the two boys engage in what can be read as a discussion of the future of Cuba. They face each other, sitting by the banks of the heavily polluted river that runs through La Tinta (the metonymic space representing Cuba where all the action in *Habanastation* has taken place). Carlos explains to Mayito that “La Tinta” (translated as “the ink” in Spanish) takes its name from the “dirty river that runs through it,” an allusion to the corruption Cuba endures. Fittingly, this is also the moment when Carlos “comes clean” with Mayito, as he reveals that his father is not a mason working as a volunteer in a different province but, in fact, is in prison for killing a man in a street knife fight. Carlos—the hot-headed “little macho” boy who, throughout the film, has been in charge of Mayito’s “urban” education—admits to his counterpart that his father “would have been better avoiding the fight and being called a coward” instead of yielding to social pressure in La Tinta to behave like “a man.” This recognition of individual choice not only shows Carlos’s decision to not follow in his father’s footsteps but also speaks openly against the predominantly male and heteronormative identity model associated with the “New Man” and the discourses of the revolution around manhood.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, we also learn that Mayito’s father, in fact, has grown up in La Tinta, and his success in jazz raised his economic standing to the upper, privileged Cuban minority which also has caused him to travel and be apart from his son most of the time. Again, *Habanastation* emphasizes the difference between the tolerance—and even the national pride—professed towards artists, athletes and other upper-class Cubans emerging from lower strata, and the bitter rumors about the military aristocracy of the island transformed into businessmen by Raul Castro’s administration. In Mayito’s recognitions of his father’s success and commitment to hard work, the film also stresses the binaries between corruption and a very different form of sacrifice which emerges directly from capitalistic models and not from the commitment to the communal project of socialism—or what is left of it. Mayito will not renounce to his advantageous socioeconomic status—as would need to occur in a truly utopian film— as he returns to his Miramar mansion at the end of the film. Rather, his revelation about his father helps the boy understand his new friendship with Carlos also codified through the monetary value of consumer goods and to realize, as his father proclaims, that “to want to be economically successful is not a crime.”

Mayito’s final gesture of giving the *PlayStation 3* to Carlos makes the film take an unexpected, yet valid, ideological shift in which *Habanastation* goes from an ambiguous, almost sarcastic denunciation of the existence of class conflict and disparities to the normalization of these conflicts in Cuba. In its perfect rationality, however, *Habanastation*’s mission is not to reproduce present-day Cuba as a construction for the spectator but rather to denounce this construction. When Cuba

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<sup>21</sup> See Edwards.

is represented by the contrasts between kites and *PlayStation 3s*, the underlying tone of those contrasts is no other than the historic predilection of Cubans for consumer goods during the pre-revolutionary era and the incompetence and hypocrisy of the state during the revolutionary era. *Habanastation*, thus, is the resurfacing of commercial practices in which Cubans have been involved at a semi-clandestine level but which children now openly discuss. The focus on children proposes an alternative model of Cuban childhood that manifests its resistance to the decayed indoctrinating identity models through the exposition of the very discursive structures they dominated, childhood and consumer culture, which had been understood in Cuban cinema as mutually exclusive. A radical ideological reworking of the notion of the “New Man” is offered by Ian Padrón in *Habanastation*, in which consumer culture has reached Cuban children through an interchange that, as in most Latin American countries, has not been mediated directly by the state. *Habanastation* formulates its own notion about the possibilities of Cuba re-emerging from the hegemonic power of the state as the gatekeeper against consumerism, and a *PlayStation 3* now stands in place of the old kite, or the wooden replica of Elpidio’s machete.

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