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# THE ISLAND IMAGE AND GLOBAL LINKS IN PUERTO RICAN CINEMA OF THE 21ST CENTURY

MARÍA CRISTINA RODRÍGUEZ

## Résumé

*Cet essai se penche sur la production cinématographique portoricaine des années 1980 et 1990, contexte nécessaire pour comprendre la montée des jeunes réalisateurs portoricains de la première décennie du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle. Même si les contenus et les points de vue de cette nouvelle génération sont différents les uns des autres, ils présentent des éléments communs relatifs au mode de vie insulaire et aux mouvements diasporiques, et continuent à se demander qui nous sommes et comment on se définit. Les problèmes de la production locale et de la distribution internationale continuent à prévaloir dans tout projet cinématographique. L'essai analyse un certain nombre de films signés par un groupe divers de réalisateurs dans le but de repenser le concept d'un cinéma portoricain.*

## Abstract

*This essay looks back at the production of Puerto Rican films in the 1980s and 1990s as the point of departure for young Puerto Rican filmmakers in the first decades of the 21st century. Even as the stories of this newer generation differ, their concern with the island image and diasporic movement continue to question Puerto Rican identity. Problems of local film production and outside distribution remain for each film project. This essay analyzes a number of key films by a diverse group of directors whose goal is to rethink the concept of a Puerto Rican cinema.*

A thriving group of young Puerto Rican filmmakers in the first decade of the 21st century have produced debut and sometimes second feature narrative productions. They present a vision of a postmodern Puerto Rico with an emphasis on sensationalist news headlines, everyday violence, public family feuds, and sex as commodity, shunning earlier visions of a nostalgic pre-modern society with issues of family greed, state repression, and countryside tranquility as old-fashioned. The essay explores the 21st-century vision of Puerto Rican cinema as it emerges from individualized film proposals of the last 30 years of the previous century.

At the end of the 1970s, American commercial films reigned in Puerto Rico's movie theatres. Spanish-language films from Spain, Mexico, and Argentina, historically enjoying great popularity, had virtually disappeared because of the prevalence of Hollywood productions in theatres throughout the island. Furthermore, the public had lost interest in Puerto Rican movies, which consisted mainly of comedies and musicals emulating local television shows. Most of these productions were made with foreign capital by foreign directors and could not compete in screening time with U.S. commercial productions. In spite of this competition, several Puerto Rican projects were underway during this decade, with Jacobo Morales' *Dios los crea... (And God Created Them...)* (1980) in its final production stages. This film along with two other Morales films—*Nicolás y los demás (Nicholas and the Others)* (1985) and *Lo que le pasó a Santiago (What Happened to Santiago)* (1989)—opened the possibility in the 1980s of re-defining Puerto Rican cinema and establishing a film industry in the island with an urban vision of the country that could travel throughout Latin America and the United States. For several years, Puerto Rico benefitted from an existing filmmaking infrastructure, a result of the expertise and sophistication of the advertising industry. The only step needed was to put advertising technicians and equipment to work on fiction films in 35mm, targeting a wide audience and aiming for box office revenues that would make it possible for producers to get a return on their investment.

Jacobo Morales did not present a new vision of filmmaking, but rather his work refocused Puerto Rican cinema by looking at specifically Puerto Rican topics—subjects, history, characters, idiosyncrasies—and drawing on that reality to propose an original, nationally rooted definition of this art form. Just as Guadeloupean filmmaker Christian Lara attempted to define a national cinema in his 1992 interview with Mbye Cham (Cham 281), Kino García in *Breve historia del cine puertorriqueño* (*Brief History of Puerto Rican Cinema*; 1989) expresses a similar concern by suggesting a series of parameters towards identifying what constitutes a “genuinely” Puerto Rican film. According to García, the values the film presents should respond to an interpretation of reality that is essentially Puerto Rican. The film should be a Puerto Rican production, or have a significant number of Puerto Ricans taking part in the production effort, whether in the artistic, technical, or financial aspects. The subject or content should respond to a situation or an issue approached and developed from a national point of view; and the film should contribute to the development of a Puerto Rican national cinema (4-5).

The subject or content should respond to a situation or an issue approached and developed from a national point of view

Puerto Rican filmmakers in the 21st century appear to show little interest in encasing their own cinema in these parameters, although they stress their commitment to showcasing the vibrant day-to-day happenings of Puerto Rican life by focusing on the dynamic youth and young-adult culture and lifestyles; these directors include Raúl Marchand, Roberto Busó, Carlitos Ruiz, Juan Dávila, Cristian Abner, and Jean-Carlo Pérez. Their various film projects, both short and long features attached to TV sitcoms and made-for-TV movies, propose a visual style that appeals to a younger generation: unsteady camera movement, mixture of angle shots, quick action, street and colloquial language, and technologically sophisticated use of lighting and camera. Francisco González focuses on Raúl

Marchand's *12 horas* (*12 Hours*; 2001) in "La noche te llama: '12 horas' cumple diez años" ("The Night is Calling You: '12 Hours' is celebrating 10 Years") as the film that set a new trend in Puerto Rican cinema with its use of digital filmmaking on a long feature. Another innovation of this film was the use of different scenarios for stories dealing with an 18-34-year-old Puerto Rican urban population that transcends class and gender issues. González also points out the influence of the Danish film, Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* (*The Celebration*; 1998), which set the example for making independent, low-budget films with easily accessible digital cameras.

The availability of the digital camera was certainly a breakthrough in a local industry that required budgets of at least \$500,000 for a medium-length or long-feature film. As an example of this surge in film production, in 2007 five feature-length films were shown in commercial film theatres: *Angel* (Jacobo Morales), *El clown* (Pedro Adorno and Emilio Rodríguez), *El cimarrón* (*Maroon*; Iván Dariel Ortiz), *Maldeamores* (*Lovesickness*; Carlitos Ruiz and Mariem Pérez-Riera), and *Ruido* (*Noise*; César Rodríguez). These films stand out in their realistic approach to social and historical issues and the technological care and sophistication used to tell their stories. In *Angel*, Morales shifts from his previous glossy 35mm films to construct a gritty drama of political repression that conflates events in the 1960s with contemporary issues and presents these concerns with skilled artistic and acting direction. *El clown* uses metaphorical imagery to tell the story of a talented local actor who is discovered and becomes successful as an advertising emblem and then loses touch with the everyday life of his former community. *El cimarrón* is a rarity as a historical film that rescues part of the Puerto-Rican-African heritage. While Cuban filmmakers made plantation society and slavery a recurrent theme, Puerto Rican literature and film have for the most part sidestepped this history. *Maldeamores* attempts to follow a more Latin American trend of [dis]connecting dissimilar stories, à la Alejandro García Inárritu's *Amores*

*perros* (*Love's a Bitch*; 2000), but relying too much on stereotyping, overused street language, and exaggeration for easy laughs. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the film had wide distribution and critical recognition because of its endorsement by Puerto Rican Hollywood actor Benicio del Toro and its inclusion in the TRIBECA Film Festival. *Ruido* focuses on the new middle classes in which young professionals measure their success by their cars and distant townhouses; meanwhile, family relations take lower priority, creating continuous friction between parents and children. All these stories are set within a Puerto Rican socio-historical reality with which the audience can identify and empathize. As one might expect, audiences most enthusiastically responded to comedies rather than dramas.

Although migration has been a component of Puerto Rican society since 1898 when the United States invaded the island, very few films base their stories on Puerto Ricans' residence in Hawaii (before statehood in 1959) and the



Fig. 1. Film poster *La Guagua Aérea*

continental United States, or migrants' subsequent return to the island. A notable exception is Luis Molina's *La guagua aérea* (*The Airbus*; 1993), based on a collection of essays and stories by Luis Rafael Sánchez, whose narrative works were widely read when first published in Argentina and later translated to English by Gregory Rabassa. The film was extremely popular because of its marketing strategies and financial backing by a prominent higher educational institution (Universidad del Sagrado Corazón) and private enterprises. Before "the making of the film" became a standard feature on the island, Molina used it as a promotion tool that also involved a travel package from San Juan to New York where the film would be featured for the first time. Puerto Rican communities in both locations had an interactive relationship with the film as they became travelers mirroring the film's story. The film poster aptly illustrates this relationship, as a bus literally takes to the air (fig. 1).

Molina's experience in filmmaking began with documentaries on Puerto Rican cultural history such as *Boleto de ida* (*One-way Ticket*; 1983), *El teléfono: ayer y hoy* (*The Telephone: Yesterday and Today*; 1985), *Zafra* (*Sugar Cane Harvest*; 1990), *La historia de la farmacia en Puerto Rico* (*The History of Pharmacy in Puerto Rico*; 1992), *Allá viene el temporal* (*The Storm Is Coming*; 1985). For his 1990 debut feature film Molina adapted several short stories and vignettes of local colour by Puerto Rican writer Abelardo Díaz Alfaro. He directed some of the best actors on the island and established a link with the Department of Education's public television network that guaranteed the purchase and distribution of the film. In 1997 Molina returned to Alfaro's stories to produce the film *Cuentos para despertar* (*Wake-Up Stories*), which was not as successful. He also attempted another film on migration in 2005, *El sueño del regreso* (*Boricua Homecoming*), which centered on the return experience by having 10 people from the United States win a Puerto Rican vacation package, which supposedly included airfare, hotel, and sightseeing. This time around there was no literary adaptation and its comic elements resembled local sitcoms.



Fig. 2. Scene from *Maldeamores*

The reliance on familiar and overused comic elements has been one of the key drawbacks in recent Puerto Rican cinema. Critics hailed *Maldeamores* (2007) (fig. 2) as a rupture with tradition and the beginning of a youthful and vibrant new style. It had a long run in local commercial theatres and was also selected as the Puerto Rican entry in the Foreign Film category at the Oscars. It won praise from local film and entertainment critics with the lone exception of the weekly *Claridad*. One of the individual stories deals with a mama's boy in his 30s who decides to hijack a bus in order to force its driver to accept his marriage offer. Another story is about the hysteria of a dysfunctional family that has to deal in close proximity with the death of an elderly relative and the unfaithfulness and abandonment of the husband. In the third story, a ménage-à-trois delights the lives of a woman and two men in their 80s. The bookend story, which makes fun of what appears to be a case of domestic violence, is perhaps the most controversial in a machista culture where [ex]girlfriends and [ex]wives are seen as objects to possess and dispose of when no longer useful or submissive.

Raúl Marchand's 2012 film *Broche de oro (Finale)* was a box office hit—as was his 2000 *12 horas*—that appealed to a wide audience across generations. Pablo, Anselmo, and Rafael, longtime residents of an elderly compound, accept the latter's grandson's invitation to spend the day at the beach where Carlos will participate in a surfer's competition. To do this they have to evade the vigilance of the Mother Superior and the standing guard and Carlos has to "borrow" his father's car. The story becomes a celebration of friendship, sustained love across generations, and the in/significant things that hold us all together. The film is not exempt from TV-sitcom situations, but has enough storyline and talent to go beyond slapstick humor.

Although women directors are almost absent from this new generation, Sonia Fritz, Mexican-born long-time resident of Puerto Rico, has led an uninterrupted career in filmmaking. She began her career in Mexico as an anthropological film archivist. In Puerto Rico, her documentary-film trajectory has focused on fine arts and women artists: such as *Myrna Báez: los espejos del silencio (Myrna Báez: Silence's Mirrors; 1989)*, *Puerto Rico: arte e identidad (Puerto Rico: Art and Identity; 1991)*, *Barro, una celebración (Clay, a Celebration; 2014)*, and *Un retrato de Carlos Collazo (A Portrait of Carlos Collazo; 1995)*. Her films on historical figures and women's movements include *Luisa Capetillo: pasión de justicia (Luisa Capetillo: Passion for Justice; 1995)*, *Julia en tres tiempos (Julia in Three Waves; 1996)*, and *La alianza de mujeres viequenses (The Alliance of Vieques Women; 2000)*. She also examines cultural movements in such films as *Bandas, vidas y otros sonos (Bands, Lives, and Other Rhythms; 1985)*, *Las caras lindas de Tite Curet Alonso (Tite Curet Alonso's Pretty Faces; 2004)*, and *Música 100x35, notas de una transformación (Music 100x35, Notes of a Transformation; 2013)*. Some of her work deals particularly with migration: *Visa para un sueño: la inmigración de las mujeres dominicanas a Puerto Rico (Visa for a Dream: The Immigration of Dominican Women to Puerto Rico; 1990)*, *Sueños atrapados: la migración dominicana a Nueva York (Trapped Dreams: The Dominican Migration to New York; 1994)*, *Cruzando fronteras: puertorriqueñas y mexicanas en Nueva York (Crossing Frontiers: Puerto Rican and Mexican Women in New York; 2000)*, and *Puertorriqueñas de aquí y de allá (Puerto Rican Women from Here and Over There; 2001)*.

As might be expected, with limited infrastructure to produce feature films Fritz's incursion into fiction is not as prolific as her documentary filmmaking. Nevertheless, she has directed two features and produced four others. *El beso que me diste (The Kiss You Gave Me; 2000)* is based on the thriller novel *Porque el beso que me diste no lo olvidaré jamás (Because I Will Never Forget the Kiss You Gave Me)* by up-and-coming Puerto Rican writer Stella Soto, who framed her story of the politically charged and violent atmosphere of the island from the standpoint of a journalist. Her second feature, *América (2010; Figure 3)*, had the professional and financial backing of actor Edward James Olmos; the film is based on Esmeralda Santiago's novel *América's Dream* and set in Vieques, a small off-shore island near Puerto Rico, during the Navy occupation (1941-2003). *América's Dream* tells the story of a woman who is able to initially break away from a cycle of gendered violence by accepting a job as a nanny and maid and moving to a small Eastern town in the United States, away from the father of her 15-year-old daughter.



Fig. 3. Film poster *América*

Depending on the policies established by the governing party elected every four years (there are two major ruling parties in Puerto Rico—Popular Democratic, pro status-quo; and New Progressive, favouring annexation to the U.S.—and other smaller ones endorsing sovereignty and independence), the state television channel may promote filmmaking through screenwriting competitions, seed money for making films for TV, and primetime screening.

During the time that Sila María Calderón was the first woman governor of Puerto Rico (2000-2004), the state channel sponsored a series of films on labour and women's issues directed by Sonia Valentín: *Sudor*

The filmmakers prioritized involvement with community affairs, interviews with everyday people, and the use of PBS and other networks to insert themselves in the news of the day.

*Amargo* (*Bitter Sweat*; 2003) on the closing of a tuna factory in the western part of the island; and *Las combatientes* (*The Combatants*; 2004) on women in different stages of breast cancer. Valentín was also able to develop two successful series: *Parece que fue ayer* (*It Seems Like Yesterday*) and *Psicosis* (*Psychosis*). This opening in the state channel was closed when, in 2008, the government enacted drastic economic cuts and suspended almost all locally made TV productions.

Although most of the programming in local network channels is imported from Mexico or the United States, there have been some opportunities for local production. Vicente Castro, an experienced and successful stage director, has shown his made-for-TV films on commercial channels by tapping a variety of sponsors to assure that his films have a wide audience. These films have been well received because they dramatize the everyday violence that has characterized Puerto Rican society during the past decades. For example, *La recompensa* (*The Reward*; 2008) and *Locos de amor* (*Crazy Love*; 2001) had very high ratings on local TV. Even though neither of their directors had attempted to make films for the big screen—mostly because of the high cost of production and the difficulty of distribution outside the island—in December 2014, Castro took advantage of the audience's taste for action films and presented *Los Reyes: la verdadera historia del Búster y el Camaleón* (*The Kings: The True Story of Búster and Camaleón*), which screened in local movie theatres for four weeks.

If film production is an extremely difficult task, selling the film in U.S. markets and entering the stateside distribution circuit has proven the greatest burden for independent filmmakers. In the 1990s, Molina's *La guagua aérea* penetrated the circuit of Spanish-speaking films in U.S. cities with large Hispanic populations. Although other films have attempted the same strategy, none has been able to recover its overall financial investment.

Notwithstanding this drawback, Puerto Rican films—including the recent New York-based *Under My Nails*—have established their presence at a great variety of film festivals

in Phoenix, Chicago Latino, New York Latino, TRIBECA, and Montreal, and other locations. In terms of cable TV, HBO Latino has greatly contributed to the exposure of Puerto Rican films.

Even though most Puerto Ricans in the United States categorize themselves as Puerto Ricans and reject attempts during the 1970s and 1980s to rename them as Nuyoricans/Chicagoricans/Hartricans/Philiricans, etcetra, several factors stand out when comparing cinema produced in Puerto Rico and that produced in the United States. Lillian Jiménez and Ana María García, both documentary filmmakers, have written extensively on the variety and quality of film productions by Puerto Ricans residing in the U.S.. The vast majority of these films document the struggles and achievements of this population as they face ethnic and racial discrimination and poor housing facilities, schools, and medical services. The filmmakers prioritized involvement with community affairs, interviews with everyday people, and the use of PBS and other networks to insert themselves in the news of the day. They tapped city and state funds and non-profit foundations to produce their projects. As might be expected, narrative films were seldomly produced during this time because of the overall investment and difficulty of distribution, with the exception of a limited number of short films including Luis Soto's 1986 *The House of Ramón Iglesia* and María Norman's 1987 *The Sun and the Moon*.

**A**na María García in her 2000 book *Cine y video puertorriqueño/Puerto Rican Film and Video* (and previous work in the 1995 *San Juan Cinemafest* video exhibition) attempts to write the overlooked chapter on Puerto Rican cinema in the United States, missing in previous books and special issue journals since the 1980s. She selects 22 filmmakers and includes interviews and a selected filmography for each one. Some were prominent in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Lillian Jiménez, Bienvenida Matías, Diego Echevarría, with independent productions or PBS-sponsored documentaries. In the 1990s there is “a marked preference for fictionalizing their messages” (García xlv) as evidenced by Frances Negrón-Muntaner’s experimental filmmaking in *B brincando el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican* (1994), Karen Torres-Cox’s *Pleasant Dreams* (1996), Néstor Miranda’s *Destination Unknown* (1997), and Rose Troche’s *Go Fish* (1994) and *Bedrooms and Hallways* (1998). Some have moved to other cities and states and continue to work as producers and teachers. Others, as in the case of Dylcia Pagán who spent 19 years in a federal prison, moved to Puerto Rico and have inserted themselves in complex and localized community organizations.

Diego Echeverría and Ricardo Méndez-Matta, with work experience in both places, highlight the issue of language as an element that defines and separates films made by Puerto Ricans located in either Puerto Rico or the United States: “In Puerto Rico, people speak Spanish. Film has to reflect this reality [...]. There is also Puerto Rican film made in the States and this one needs to be made in English in order to reflect the fact that Puerto Ricans here speak more English than Spanish. They have lived a process of cultural transformation” (García 65). Méndez-Matta, who lives in Los Angeles and works in the film industry there, disregards any notion of a national filmmaking: “People in the industry do not make films about other nationalities. And Puerto Ricans in general work separately, not together. I don’t think there is such a thing as a Puerto Rican cinema in the United States because the work is produced sporadically

and it is not thematically cohesive” (149). Miguel Arteta is a case in point since he has a successful career in independent film in the U.S. but none of his films deal with the Puerto Rican or Hispanic Community: *Star Maps*, *Chuck and Buck*, *The Good Girl*, *Youth in Revolt*, *Cedar Rapids*. Besides the language in which a feature film “speaks to spectators,” other major differences are that the American-made productions address a reality firmly located in a U.S. context. In these stories, characters’ conflicts are initiated, resolved, or changed within the American reality of jobs, housing, schools, health, and social conditions, including racialization and ethnicization. The films are made with localized production funds (community, city, state, independent) and are inserted in the independent and Latino film distribution circuit. The question posed here is whether films such as *Under My Nails*, *El Clown*, and even *12 horas* can successfully navigate between island and mainland appeal in local and diasporic communities.

Bruno Irizarry’s *200 cartas (200 Letters; 2013)* accommodates Spanish- and English-speaking voices with shared experiences in New York and Puerto Rico by grouping four characters in a road movie: a Puerto Rican from New York, his Mexican coworker and travel companion, a Puerto Rican multi-tasker, and her Mexican friend on vacation on the island. 2014 records a major advancement in Puerto Rican cinema on the Island. *Vacas con gafas (Cows Wearing Glasses)*, the first feature by Alex Santiago Pérez, showcases the *minimalista* (minimalist) style—shoestring-budget, interior settings, use of non-professional actors, static camera, stories of everyday life—preferred by independent Latin American filmmakers. It tells the story of a once highly regarded artist and art teacher who is going blind; he chooses a strict daily routine so he can trace his steps as if he were still in control of the little he sees and what he is able to do. These films incorporate the sophisticated photography and sound that Puerto Rican film productions used to lack.

Even though the focus of this essay is the narrative long feature in this 21st century, the short film has been extremely important in the proliferation of a new generation of potential filmmakers. The accessibility to digital cameras, ability to film in a short time and with a low budget, in a collective enterprise made up of friends and close acquaintances (no one gets paid, but they have fun together) has made this format a valuable vehicle for inexpensive and highly sophisticated film projects. The internet also provides easy distribution and the many outlets provided for their exhibition in international festivals and specialized ones.

There are two important outlets for the making and promotion of short films. The Corporación de Cine de Puerto Rico/CCPR (Puerto Rican Film Commission), established in 2001 with the purpose of promoting filmmaking in Puerto Rico, has had a rocky history because directors and policies change according to the directions of the governing party. At one time, only film projects in English could apply for funds; at other times, most of its budget went to promoting the island as a film site for international productions, the great majority from the U.S. In recent years, the PR Film Commission has promoted “micro films/microcortos,” 5 to 15 minutes in length. Because these initiatives tend to be inexpensive compared to long features, the selected projects receive seed money upfront (\$5,000 to \$10,000) and are assured exhibition through closed-circuit transmission in government offices in addition to international promotional ventures. The second outlet is CineFiesta, the privately run festival that began in 2002 and is now the most important short film festival held in Puerto Rico. This festival draws the participation of hundreds of filmmakers from around the world who submit their 1 to 20-minute films to compete for Best Short and Best Screenplay. From the beginning of CineFiesta, the goal has been to promote Puerto Rican filmmaking and, to that end, they not only have a screenplay competition but also a separate award category for the Best Puerto Rican short film. In 2012, Álvaro Aponte-Centeno’s *Mi santa mirada* (*My Holy Gaze*) was the

highlight of CineFiesta because the film had also been chosen by the Cannes Festival to participate in their Short Film category. This 15-minute short about the daily life of a drug dealer unveils the violence and intimidation that abounds in drug-related turf wars with a minimum of dialogue. Shot mostly in interiors or at night, the director displays a Puerto Rican reality that does not fit in tourist advertisements or in politicians’ pictures designed to attract the favour and money of the U.S. government.

The Asociación de Productores Cinematográficos y Audiovisuales de Puerto Rico (Association of Cinematic and Audiovisual Producers or APCA), an organization that brings together film and audiovisual producers, has created an alliance with IBERMEDIA—a film fund sponsored by Spain, Portugal, and 13 Latin American countries—that offers the opportunity of co-productions and distribution in the Portuguese and Spanish circuit. Because of its emphasis on language, Puerto Rican filmmakers residing in the United States who want to participate in this fund would have to redirect their film projects to a different audience and distribution circuit. On the other hand, the Puerto Rican Film Commission (PRFC), through its own film fund, has already sponsored bilingual film projects such as *Under My Nails* (2012) and tends to favour the U.S. distribution circuit.

In celebrating 100 years of Puerto Rican cinema, an abundance of forums, panels, discussion groups, screenings, and other activities have stressed the uniqueness of a film production that has developed through its links to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and diasporic communities in the United States. Whether purposely or not, Puerto Rican film productions in the 21st century, from the island or abroad, have maintained an uninterrupted conversation that transcends language and geography, always in search of a common culture.

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## Image Notes

Figure 1: film poster La Guagua Aérea (<http://filmgates.com/title/tt0024665>)

Figure 2: scene from *Maldeamores* (<http://www.salt-co.com/index.php/titles/maldeamores>)

Figure 3: film poster América ([http://www.tinseltine.com/2013\\_04\\_01\\_archive.html](http://www.tinseltine.com/2013_04_01_archive.html))