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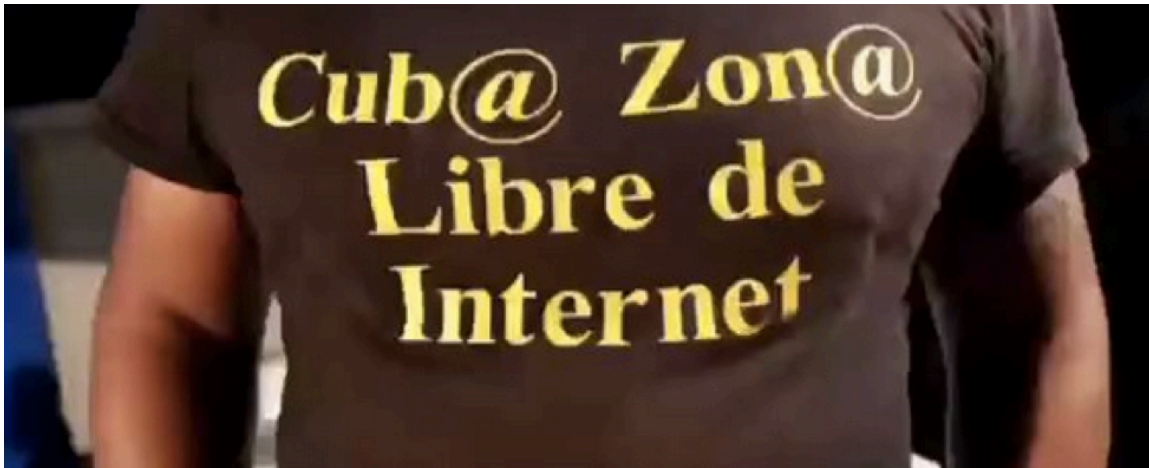
Slightly Independent and Illegal: Yaima Pardo's films *OFF_LINE* and *SWITCH ON* at the Crossroads of Literacy, Inclusion and Digital Filmmaking in Contemporary Cuban Cinema

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Abstract

Cuban filmmaker Yaima Pardo creates a participatory digital literacy campaign in her documentary *OFF_LINE* (2013) and documentary series *SWITCH ON* (2013-present). Through her work she establishes a multi-directional dialogue on digital literacy. Beyond this call for digital literacy, Pardo herself is part of a contemporary generation of Cuban filmmakers, *nuevos realizadores* that depend on digital technology to make, distribute and exhibit their works despite their illegal status as the Cuban state does not recognize their independent production companies. Challenging over five decades of control, Pardo and her peers are part of a larger national fight to redefine Cuban film.

Before clicking on Yaima Pardo's open-access, streaming documentary *OFF_LINE* (2013), the audience sees a message printed on the t-shirt of the initial shot "Cub@ Zon@ Libre de Internet."



This is not the establishing shot of the celebrated documentary, *OFF_LINE*, winner of the UNESCO's Cameras of Diversity Prize in 2013, as well as the 2013 Brownstone Foundation's Noemí Film Award. Instead, it is the image that the computer user sees upon accessing the documentary on the alternative distribution platform Vimeo. This initial shot, that reappears in the body of the film, creates a direct dialogue with one of the most praised

achievements of the Cuban Revolution: the state directed 1961 National Literacy Campaign, linking literacy with gender inclusive language, while poking fun at the current lack of digital literacy and Internet access in today's Cuba.

The 1961 effort to eradicate illiteracy across the island propelled Cuba to levels of literacy beyond those of many developed countries, including the United States. As a result of the national effort, on December 22, 1961 Fidel Castro declared Cuba “Territorio libre de analfabetismo,” a phrase that covered national billboards in the midst of the austerity measures and looming political tension of the 1960s.¹ With more than 96.1 percent of the population achieving basic literacy, the campaign proved one of the pillars of the Revolution: that literacy and access to education were not luxuries of the upper class but, rather, national rights.

Fast-forwarding fifty-two years, while echoing the language that Fidel used decades before, the previously mentioned quote “Cub@ Zon@ Libre de Internet” includes two notable contemporary twists that Pardo will address in her documentary *OFF_LINE*: digital literacy and inclusive language. First, the lack of accessible Internet that the printed quote pokes fun at has caused Cuba to fall from its 1961 position as an educative vanguard unraveling one of the greatest achievements of the Revolution. Second, the use of the ampersand in the quote hints at a reoccurring theme of gender inclusion, among other forms of inclusion that Pardo will show possible through digital technology. Including audiences to participate throughout the process, *OFF_LINE* will serve as a call for digital literacy challenging the previous state initiated top-down approach.

In this article, I analyze how Pardo's documentary film *OFF_LINE* uses cinematographic language, editing montage, and the contributions of key cultural figures to create a digital literacy campaign. I examine Pardo's follow-up participatory documentary series *SWITCH ON*, where she captures the reception of audiences upon viewing *OFF_LINE*, facilitating a multi-directional dialogue on digital literacy. I show how Pardo's works are examples of an entire wave of filmmakers known as the *nuevos realizadores* who confront five decades of the centralized male-dominated Cuban film industry. They open their own digital spaces to filmmaking in order to include previously excluded voices, made possible due to their levels of digital literacy. To place the *nuevos realizadores* within the larger Cuban film context and reflect on previous institutional exclusion in Cuban film, I use Catherine Benamou's seminal essay “Cuban Cinema: On the Threshold of Gender.” With

Benamou's work, I reflect on the previous struggles for spaces that digital filmmakers recently have created, while also revealing the persisting challenges even with digital technological advancements. I illustrate how despite their prize-winning works, and the diversity of filmmaking voices, the Cuban state does not recognize the *nuevos realizadores* and their private production companies as legitimate and legal actors in the audiovisual landscape. Consequently, Pardo's work is a piece that reflects a larger ongoing national fight in filmmaking for more participatory spaces to contribute to a needed multi-directional inclusive dialogue on contemporary Cuban film, digital technology and even Cuba.

I. *OFF_LINE* close up

In the establishing shot of the 35-minute documentary *OFF_LINE*, we see fractured images from the Internet, as the camera focuses on Yaima Pardo's Facebook page. The Facebook page serves as a form of credits presenting Pardo's identity on the Internet and as the director of the film. From this point on, the open-access documentary available on the Internet will continuously blur the boundaries between the Internet and the documentary; even within the "film," the screen doubles as that of a desktop.



The camera begins to rapidly capture digital images with opening and closing files and websites on the desktop, which occupy the entire screen. As the camera focuses on the multiple Internet sites an off camera male narrative voice explains:

[Cuba] es el pueblo más culto del mundo, pero te controlan la información. Te permiten estudiar en la universidad y acceder información del máximo nivel . . . pero una vez que te gradúas . . . no puedes tener acceso al internet, .

. . . a los medios. . . Es un poco abrirte el camino . . . para una vez . . . cerrarte la puerta o una ventana.

The voice is that of Cuban film critic and professor Gustavo Arcos, discussing the tension between Cuba as the world's most educated population that also has limited access to the Internet and information, due to government controls. Through *OFF_LINE*, we will see that Internet access does in fact exist on the island; however, there is a level of unequal and privileged access that challenges the original pillars of the Revolution. According to the most recent statistics from Freedom House, Internet penetration in Cuba is anywhere between 5-26 percent and is considered "Not free" in terms of freedom on the net status ("Freedom on the Net: Cuba 2014"). The government controls Internet access both explicitly and implicitly due to blocked pages, slow connection speeds, and high prices. The lack of shared access has also created an information embargo for those who are far from the cultural centers and hotels in Havana, thus re-enforcing the breach between the urban metropolis of Havana and the rest of the island that the 1961 campaign attempted to eradicate.² Pardo's documentary explores the lack of equal access, control and decentralization.

The documentary continues with new digital windows open on the screen and a number of Cuban intellectual and cultural figures discussing Internet access on the island. The speakers quickly share their views, while the camera captures a fast paced bombardment of images. With the celebrated sayings of the 1961 literacy campaign serving as a backdrop, there is a tension between Cuba's previous role as a pioneer in literacy, and the high level of digital illiteracy, with many Cubans left out of the digital conversation. This looming tension is at the crux of the documentary.

Given the many overlapping chat windows and images on the screen, we realize the topic of control represents a key difference between traditional and digital literacy. The 1961 campaign employed a discourse of giving access to all through literacy and effectively treating education as a human right. However, the materials used were highly curated pedagogical readers, such as the *Alfabetícemos: Manual para el alfabetizador* that the Cuban Ministry of Education in Havana created in 1961. A selection of the chapters of the reader were "The Cooperative Farms," "The Right to Housing," "Imperialism" and were carefully created pedagogical tools, vocabulary lists, and activities firmly rooted in anti-imperialist sentiment supporting the revolution.³ The culminating project of a student learning to read from the 1961 literacy program proving completion of the initial level of basic literacy was to

write a personal letter to Fidel Castro that the literacy teacher would send to the Municipal Council.

While traditional and digital literacy share some common characteristics, the camera demonstrates how the absolute control of information, with curated education materials from the 1961 campaign, would be nearly impossible in the digital world, showing quick flashes of opening and closing files, and electronic sounds and screens. Instead, the documentary explores the state's current control of who has access to the digital world. As each of the speakers share their points of view in Pardo's film, they too become part of the computer's desktop with images of Facebook pages, and Internet sites projected on their bodies, creating a digital presence in the virtual world.



These speakers are literary critics, musicians, film professors, and historians and have an advanced level of digital literacy and Internet access that is not typical among the Cuban population, due to their careers. One speaker explains this privilege in stark contrast with the majority of university students by giving a statistic that “el 80 por ciento de los estudiantes no lo conoce [Facebook or chat].” Given the digital collage that the camera captures, further blurring the lines between the digital and non-digital world with Internet pages projected on the speakers, the mention of the 80 percent of the students that are not familiar with Facebook comes as a shock. With the projected pages on the speakers, the camera makes explicit that there is Internet access in Cuba and there are those with access and those that are left off line.

While the speakers occupy one of the many windows of material open on the screen, they do not occupy the entire screen. Instead, the digital technology and the Internet are the

protagonists of the thirty-five-minute documentary. After these split screens and initial comments about the importance of Internet access to Cubans, the camera switches to the title screen.



The title screen is the one shot that does not have a series of split foci sharing the picture with other windows and voices. Instead, the title screen, *OFF_LINE* with the constantly loading “O,” focuses primarily on the silence or lack of connection with a single dark screen. It is a metaphor for Internet access in Cuba, while waiting for the title’s “O” to load, the general viewers, not the select people with Internet access, do not have contact with the array of speakers, viewpoints, and images that flooded the two minutes leading up to the title screen. The multidirectional complex digital dialogue between news outlets, websites, chat windows and Cuban intellectuals and artists is absent, as the audience waits for the connection to be reestablished, while frustratingly watching the loading and unloading of the letter “O.”

After the title screen, the camera shows the street from behind a wet windshield as the wipers attempt to clear the glass. The car advances towards a foggy view of Havana’s most iconic square, Revolution Plaza, home to many of the mass rallies and speeches of the past five decades. The car moves towards the plaza and specifically in direction of the monument dedicated to José Martí, Cuba’s most important writer, thinker, and Fidel Castro’s inspiration for the Cuban Revolution. With this watery iconic image, an off-camera voice explains: “El estado cubano tiene un control férreo sobre todo lo que tiene que ver con la ideología, con lo que tiene que ver con los medios.” The speaker’s words about ideology and the shots of Revolutionary Square appear in contrast with the previous two

minutes of Facebook pages, chat windows, and digital bombardment, yet the connection between the two worlds forms. Pardo continually links the original pillars of the Revolution, the ideas of José Martí, and Internet access to offer a different reading of the importance of the Internet. She argues that the Internet can uphold the critical dialogue crucial to the health of the Revolution, while she also highlights the importance of equal access to information and discussion from beyond the centralized government and Havana.

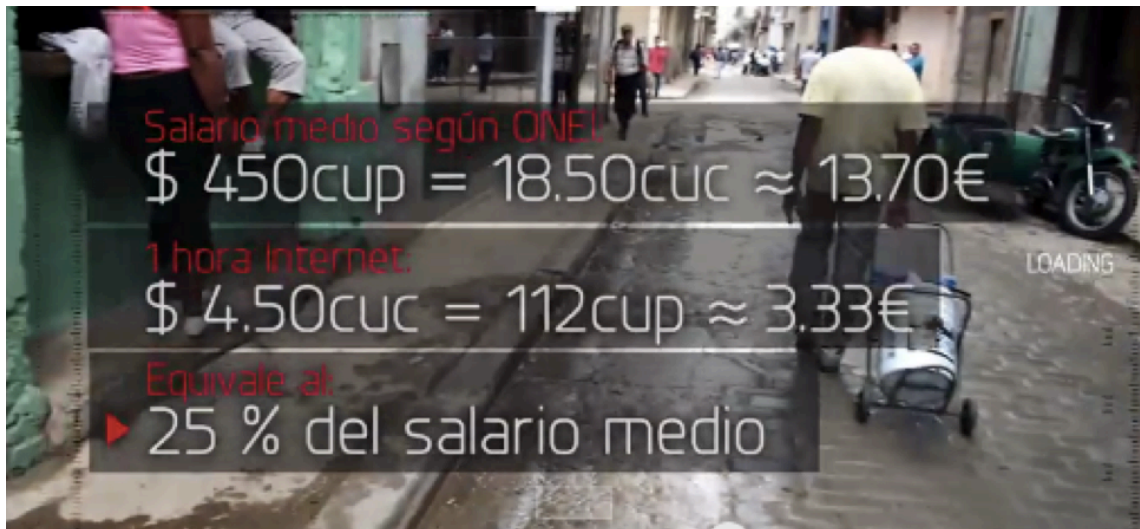
Throughout the film, the speakers chosen to share their viewpoints on this online, open access documentary explain how the Internet does not threaten the pillars of the Cuban Revolution. Instead, each explains that Internet access reflects the original mission of the Revolution itself in terms of communication, a means of organization and a space for dialogue. To further strengthen the idea of the Internet as a fundamental revolutionary tool, the camera returns to the foundational intellectual of the Revolution: José Martí. A Martí scholar, professor Josefina Toledo Benedit, explains how the Internet itself would have directly helped Martí's message by asking "Si Martí hubiese dispuesto de una computadora o un correo electrónico, una página web, ¿cuánto se hubiese podido apoyar para la organización de la guerra de independencia de Cuba, la guerra que llamó la guerra necesaria?" By channeling Martí, she has given authority to her argument for the need for public and inexpensive Internet access to the island, directly linking Internet access to the original fight for independence from both Spain and later the US and not as an anti-revolutionary, dissident weapon.

Pardo reinforces the revolutionary aspect of the Internet, yet the question persists, if the Internet is so revolutionary and socialist, why is the Cuban government so reticent to share it with the society? It comes down to the control of information and the problem with creating diverse points of view. Arcos explains: "En Cuba lo diferente desgraciadamente se asocia a lo disidente y lo disidente se asocia con la contra-revolución . . . resultado cualquier opinión contraria a lo oficial casi siempre es vista por el poder cómo sospechoso, sospecho que le haces juego al enemigo." Given this association, the multidirectional routes to create and share information on the Internet highlight many opportunities for counter-revolutionary thought.

Instead of minimizing the multi-directional conversation, Pardo uses her documentary to celebrate the lack of control of a particular viewpoint and creates a space where multiple perspectives coexist without hierarchy. The camera reflects the multiple

perspectives, with a collage of digital images imposed on one speaker, while he explains: “el Internet es un paradigma... de toma de decisiones y de movimiento de información descentralizadamente.” The decentralization of information is the Internet’s greatest strength and threat for Cuba, a country that has been able to tailor media, pedagogical tools and information for over five decades beyond the limits of the original literacy campaign. Even with the Internet, the Cuban government has managed to tailor programming for television, for example in the Cuban news program *Mesa Redonda*. Criticizing *Mesa Redonda*, one speaker comments: “se proyectan los que están en la *Mesa Redonda* una especie de oligarquía que tienen acceso a Internet que hace gala de eso y que entonces el léxico ‘bueno en Internet salió tal cosa e Internet dijeron,’ y entonces ¿Para qué es la *Mesa Redonda*? Mejor ponga el internet y que nosotros mismos tengamos la oportunidad de enterrarnos.” The news presenters’ knowledge of online sites re-enforces that there is Internet access on the island, however, it is not available to all Cubans.

The camera then captures a different form of Internet control in Cuba: exorbitant prices.



The prices that Pardo’s 2013 documentary captures equate one hour of Internet access to one fourth of the average monthly Cuban salary of \$20-24, showing an implicit level of Internet control and access (“El Salario”). Until July 1, 2015, the Cuban Telecommunications Company [ETECSA], listed the same prices as Pardo on its website for Internet. On July 1, 2015 ETECSA announced the new price of 2 CUC per hour and the Cuban government opened 35 Internet WiFi hot spots in parks in cities throughout Cuba, with a cost of 2 CUC

per hour (Hamre). The new July 2015 price is still the equivalent to one tenth/twelfth of the monthly salary, but does show signs of improvement. There are changes since the making of *OFF_LINE* since previously the prices were at 8 CUC per hour, which fell to 4.50 CUC and now 2 CUC. In a personal interview with Pardo in 2014, when I asked her about the possibility of Internet prices dropping and what that would mean for her film, she expressed that she wanted her film to be irrelevant. She is committed to Internet access, not to the permanency of her film (Pardo). Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go, given the high prices and unequal Internet access outside of downtown Havana.

In the second half of this documentary, the camera captures the testimonies of the Cubans who are left offline far from Internet centers. Cubans share their opinions about the Internet filmed on the street or in houses with screens turned off, beyond the bombardment of chat windows and computer images.



Instead the people without Internet share the screen with archival photographs from the 1961 literacy campaign, as they discuss their lack of access to information. The imposed archival photographs of the 1961 campaign make the connection between traditional and digital literacy explicit, highlighting the exclusion of many Cubans from the digital conversation. Similar to the literacy discrepancies between the city and the countryside that the 1961 campaign attempted to eradicate, today there is a large discrepancy between Internet access in Havana and outside of Havana.

Unlike the initial quote claiming that Cuba is a “zon@ libre de Internet,” the documentary concludes that Cuba does have Internet access on the island. However, Cuban

Internet depends on privileged access, and is unattainable for many beyond Havana's hot spots unable to pay the inflated prices. The documentary is proof of a need for an inclusive digital literacy campaign to close the Internet access discrepancy throughout the country and to use the Internet as a key tool to promote the original objectives of the Revolution.

II. **SWITCH ON: The Changing Role of Film and a New Literacy Campaign**

In *OFF_LINE*, we hear from cultural critics, filmmakers and artists primarily based in Havana that discuss Internet access while having a level of presence and voice in the digital world, albeit limited, due to their work in state institutions and universities. Each of these speakers explains that the Internet functions as a tool for all Cubans as the Internet promotes “y destruye de alguna manera o complejiza esa esquema unidireccional de la información.” While the Internet provides a multidirectional or decentralized flow of information, there are many Cubans that are left outside of the digital conversation.

Beyond the topic of the film, decentralization is a key aspect of the distinct journey Pardo has created for the documentary *OFF_LINE*, as well as her own path as a somewhat illegal, digital filmmaker. Pardo has focused on personally decentralizing the distribution and dissemination of this film, physically touring *OFF_LINE* with a limited crew to share with Cubans beyond the cultural metropolis of Havana. From Camaguey to Isla de los Pinos, she has brought her work, and continues to do so since 2013, to the audiences that do not have Internet access across the country. In this way, Pardo addresses the profound “Habanacentrismo” (García Borrero, “Vanguardia intelectual”), where nearly all of the official Cuban cultural institutes, particularly the *Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* [ICAIC] Cuba's film institute, are based in Havana, as well as many of the film festivals and cultural programming.

Through her commitment to bring *OFF_LINE* to audiences outside of Havana, she appears to repeat the route of the 1961 literacy campaign from Havana to the countryside. However, Pardo changes this unidirectional path sharing her film to promote discussion and create new spaces for participation beyond the film's narrative in a campaign for digital literacy. After seeing *OFF_LINE*, audiences also become the protagonists in a series of documentaries Pardo has created and continues to create called *SWITCH ON (2013 to present)*. With *SWITCH ON*, Pardo and her team film as audiences throughout Cuba participate in a post-screening discussion to catch audiences' reactions and thoughts on

digital literacy, ethical use of the Internet, and the needs of Cubans often under-heard beyond the metropolis. She shares these short documentaries on Vimeo, YouTube, and through flash drives as she also does with *OFF_LINE*, so that the Cuban communities become part of the online dialogue about Internet access.

Showing her film with a limited crew and artists moving from Havana to audiences in cities such as Camaguey and Santiago de Cuba, her work is both a micro-literacy campaign similar to 1961 while also a micro-version of the Cine-móvil project bringing film to the countryside captured in the celebrated Cuban film *Por primera vez* (1967).⁴ Unlike the ICAIC films selected to show in the Cine-móvil project to bring celebrated and canonical films like Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) to the countryside to share world-class cinema with the Cuban people, Pardo creates a space for audiences outside of Havana not only to see films, but also to become the protagonists of their own films. Additionally, Pardo challenges the direction of the highly curated literacy materials from the 1961 campaign originating from the Ministry of Education in Havana destined for the countryside. Instead, the audiences themselves contribute to the dialogue and their contributions are captured on film. In an interview with Juan Antonio García Borrero, Pardo explains her reasoning for making the *SWITCH ON* series:

Con *SWITCH ON*, quisimos que las personas consideraran, viendo *OFF_LINE*, las ventajas y desventajas que tiene el uso de las tecnologías digitales, pensar juntos en un código ético para un futuro acceso masivo a Internet; deseábamos ser actores dentro del proceso de neo-alfabetización que estamos planteando como una necesidad. (n.p.)

Pardo highlights the importance of taking part in a multidirectional dialogue in this neo-literacy campaign as well as the fact that her film *OFF_LINE* is a tool to facilitate the dialogue, but the objective is the dialogue itself.

In one *SWITCH ON* documentary in particular, entitled *SWITCH ON_Isla de los Pinos* (2015), Pardo takes her film to one of the most remote parts of Cuba: La Isla de la Juventud [known as the Isla de los Pinos by the locals]. In the film, she addresses la Isla's audience to explain that "la isla es...doble desconectada y doble cubanía." Pardo shows a play-on-words highlighting the topic of centralization and decentralization. "La isla," the common nickname for Cuba, here refers to La Isla de los Pinos—an island that is twice

removed from the multidirectional digital conversation with some of the lowest numbers of *salas de navegación* in the country.

The difference in Internet access between Havana and Isla de los Pinos is visible when searching the ETECSA official list of *salas de navegación* open to Cubans to pay the recently reduced 2 CUC hourly rate for Internet. There are twenty-eight ETECSA *salas de navegación* in Havana with an average of five computers in each location serving a population of over two million people. In Isla de los Pinos with a population of 86,420, the *salas de navegación* are located in its largest city of Nueva Gerona of 46,000 inhabitants, where there are four *salas de navegación* with an average of 3.75 computers in each center (ETECSA).

Given this reality of limited access, and removal of the Island from mainland Cuba's cultural programming, it is not surprising that in *SWITCH ON_Isla de los Pinos*, the audiences express their gratitude for Pardo's arrival and for sharing her work with them. One audience member stands to comment: "Este documental . . . es un grito, es un llanto." The audience members reflect on what they have seen, connecting it to previous controversial works over the past decades, and the arrival of other feared technologies that the government had not fully supported. Another audience member explains, "Estoy choqueado . . . Hemos puesto viejos y seguimos ni siquiera sin un miserable correo...este documental ha venido...a darme más argumento para discutir." This speaker becomes part of the film *SWITCH ON*, as he reacts to the film *OFF_LINE* by expressing the need for information and empowerment to discuss technology. Others stand to recite poetry, present Pardo with gifts, or make remarks on the film itself. Through the varied feedback there is a common thread: many cultural pieces and artists do not make it to La Isla del los Pinos and the speakers appreciate that Pardo and the film have travelled to La Isla.

In *SWITCH ON_Isla de los Pinos*, Pardo speaks with the Isla audience to share her overall motivation for making the film *OFF_LINE*:

El objetivo es ver, debatirlo todos juntos para construir algo juntos... Yo quería aclararles algo. . . El uso que le veo a la Internet, es para hacer más socialismo, para hacer un socialismo de forma horizontal, no de forma vertical, que nosotros mismos a través de la red podemos construir la sociedad que queramos. Es eso...y eso es mi aporte. Y las armas que yo tengo para luchar es hacer documentales.. (*SWITCH ON_Isla de los pinos*).

While reaching more remote communities with a non-traditional literacy campaign, Pardo's words reflect the original ideas of the Socialist revolution, and carefully weave access, critique, and social commitment, to the fabric of the Cuban nation renovating the project.

In another example of the *SWITCH ON* work, a culminating piece entitled *SWITCH ON Conferencia*, Pardo and her team splice together visits to various parts of Cuba touring the film *OFF_LINE*. In this collage of visits to towns and cities across Cuba, audience members share their knowledge of the Internet and computers through anonymous written surveys that Pardo and her team distribute. The surveys that the touring *OFF_LINE* team collects include questions such as:

1. "¿Tiene una computadora en su hogar?" [sí] [no]
2. "Del 1 al 10, ¿cuáles son sus conocimientos de información?"
3. "¿Navega por Internet?" [sí] [no]"

The camera follows Yaima and her team passing out these surveys, while showing some of the answered surveys. Many write that they do not have a computer in their homes, nor have they surfed the Internet. In this collage, Pardo interviews people in the street. One older man answers her questions about Internet access explaining, "Para mí el Internet es como el amor, sé que existe pero nunca me empato con ella." Those interviewed offer a range from frustration to comedy about the lack of Internet in Cuba.

III. Digital Technology, Gender Inclusion and Decentralizing Cuban Film

Pardo's effort to create a dialogue with the Cuban people instead of speaking for them while using digital technology to make her somewhat independent films *OFF_LINE* and *SWITCH ON* embodies the current crossroads in Cuban cinema. Her work is a response to over five decades of centralized power, not only in terms of the government's control of literacy and technology access, but also of its firm hand in the film industry. Given the tradition of a male-dominated Havana-centered film institute, grassroots participation and digital technology are key to both Pardo's call for contemporary literacy *and* challenging the ICAIC's grips on Cuban cinema. Pardo is part of a generation of Cuban filmmakers known as the *nuevos realizadores* who rely on the same digital technology and literacy that she discusses in her films to make works beyond the ICAIC system, creating other spaces and listening to instead of continually speaking for the Cuban people.

Twenty years before Pardo's work, film critic Catherine Benamou pointed out the need for such challenges to the ICAIC's approach to filmmaking to discuss the outdated ICAIC model, the exclusion of women as film directors, and the male-dominated film institution. Benamou's 1994 article "Cuban Cinema: On the Threshold of Gender" serves as a point of comparison to show how far young contemporary filmmakers such as Pardo have come to break the explicit ceiling of female film directors and the centralized patriarchal grips of the ICAIC. With a second look at Benamou's article on institutional patriarchy, we see that some of the challenges that Benamou highlights are the battles that Pardo's generation of digital filmmakers are currently facing. Also Benamou's article adds context to the current ongoing national debate on the future of Cuban film in 2015.

Benamou creates her argument using the famous scene of the intellectual conference on race in *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968), one of the most celebrated films in over five decades of the ICAIC. She draws on this ironic intellectual debate scene to exemplify the patriarchal power of the ICAIC, exclusion of other voices, and repetition of a top-down recipe for revolution. She summarizes:

a panel of male, erudite, and middle-class-looking Latin American writers are discussing the role of the intellectual in Latin American society, only to be interrupted by an "anonymous" member of the audience (North American playwright Jack Gelber). Why, he demands, if they are so revolutionary, do they not allow for a more active engagement on the part of the audience?
(51)

Similar to the scene's "anonymous" speaker, Benamou emphasizes the exclusionary practices of the ICAIC likening this particular scene to a metaphor for filmmaking in Cuba in general with established institutions that are exclusive of diverse voices. She argues for new autonomous spaces far from the centralized ICAIC, "within which diverse subjectivities and identities can be represented 'on their own terms'" (51). Her 1994 analysis facilitates the discussion of Pardo's work in two ways: Benamou underscores both the need for new autonomous spaces and self-representation within Cuban film to invite audiences to a dialogue while she also exposes the institutional patriarchy within the established ICAIC, and a need to decentralize the power of this institution. Nearly twenty years later, in the making, distribution, and dissemination of her works Pardo uses digital technology to move one step

closer to changing the limiting film landscape of Cuban canonical film that Benamou criticizes.

Benamou's article also serves as a premonition for the *nuevos realizadores*, of which Pardo is part. Since 2000, these *nuevos realizadores* have worked with inexpensive digital technology creating a level of distance from the ICAIC. The contemporary challenge to create space distant from the ICAIC is not a small endeavor given the importance Cuban film has played since the 1959 triumph of the Revolution. The ICAIC's history is tightly woven with the Revolution itself, established within three months of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution marking the first official cultural initiative and institution. With only three female directors of ICAIC-sponsored feature films in its fifty-six-year history, the ICAIC has proven an institution repeating the exclusive male-dominated roundtable race scene in *Memorias del subdesarrollo* that Benamou criticizes. Despite the exclusive round table scene and the low numbers of female feature film directors in the ICAIC, there *have* been various Cuban women directors working within the ICAIC however they have worked in documentary—a genre used as a rehearsal space to work towards the feature film and given secondary institutional importance (Diéguez “Documental y...”). Also, even with the ICAIC's grip on filmmaking, filmmakers have created works in other state institutions, and beyond the state, for decades-however there works do not enter into the official canon of Cuban film creating a form of ICAICcentrismo (García Borrero “Vanguardia intelectual...”). The other spaces for filmmaking have been made invisible by the rigid canon of the ICAIC and denied official circulation, film distribution, and legitimacy for over five decades.

Since 2000, these other filmmakers and spaces have become stronger, more visible, and their voices louder with the generation of *nuevos realizadores*, pushing for distance from the Cuban state using digital technology (Farrell “Redefining Cuban Film” n.p.). This generation includes a greater diversity of voices comprising of a cross section of Cuban filmmakers including women, LGBT, and Afro-Cuban filmmakers and younger people who have historically had fewer opportunities in the ICAIC's feature film hierarchy. Diéguez attributes the changing gender realities of the new generation of filmmakers to two main factors, “gracias al desarrollo de las nuevas tecnologías y la posibilidad de estudiar en escuelas de cine como la Facultad de Arte de los Medios de Comunicación Audiovisual, de la Universidad de las Artes (ISA) y/o la Escuela internacional de Cine y TV (EICTV), se ha

producido un mayor acceso de mujeres detrás de las cámaras” (“¿Ellas miran diferente...?”). Unlike the few exceptions of women feature film directors working within the ICAIC, this contemporary new generation includes a diverse array of filmmakers including award-winning female directors such as Maryulis Alfonso, Susana Barrigas, Heidi Hassam, Diana Montero, Yaima Pardo, and Alina Rodríguez Abreu, to name a few of the many Cuban women reshaping Cuban film using digital technology as part of this generation of *nuevos realizadores*.

The filmmakers in this young generation work outside the vertically organized and nearly monolithic ICAIC but are not completely independent of it. To highlight this lack of complete independence, film critic Stock proposes to refer to the *nuevos realizadores* as “Street Filmmakers” instead of “independent filmmakers,” since many use their personal connections and circles of colleagues to complete their projects on limited—or nonexistent—budgets (15). Some of these contacts may even come from within the ICAIC. Also Stock argues for the term “street filmmakers,” since little is accomplished in Cuba in a truly independent way and the *nuevos realizadores* are not officially recognized as independent (21).

Further complicating the way to speak about this new generation of “street filmmakers,” the term “filmmaker” proves problematic since this generation does not work with film stock, and the word ‘film’ has historically been associated with the ICAIC (García Borrero “Vanguardia intelectual” n.p.). Instead, these works come from a more flexible and rapidly changing audiovisual field. The *nuevos realizadores* depend on digital literacy, inexpensive digital technologies, and alternative distribution such as flash drives, YouTube, and Vimeo to create and share their work with others as well as the film exhibition and the audience participation process.

Beyond informal digital distribution, in 2000 the *nuevos realizadores* began to organize an annual six-day film showcase called the *Muestra Joven* in Havana to share their works with audiences in cinemas. Since then, the *Muestra* has grown in size and visibility. In the 2014 *Muestra Joven*, there were 178 works to show, and compete for filmmaking prizes. While the *nuevos realizadores* working with digital technology have carved out a space to exhibit and discuss their films, they have not completely decentralized the filmmaking process nor do they have an official exhibition forum beyond the six-day showcase in Havana—repeating the Havana/ICAIC centric problematic tradition. Annually, a handful of these films reach

other world class festivals including Havana's own New Latin American Film Festival, as well as beyond Cuba, while others continue to reach audiences through flash drives and Vimeo.

With the changing spaces for exhibition of these works and the diversity of voices in this generation of filmmakers, the exclusive intellectual debate scene that Benamou analyzes in her 1994 article, has somewhat changed but still has a ways to go. Despite their work the *nuevos realizadores* such as Pardo, have no recognition as filmmakers and private production companies in Cuba's legal framework. Instead, they hover in a space in between legality and illegality, unable to create distribution contracts, have private bank accounts, or apply for co-production funding, due to their lack of recognition by the Cuban state. The ICAIC remains the main official filmmaking arm of the Cuban government, and while these *realizadores* can exist, their works in general are not part of the national programming in cinemas in Cuba, cannot officially become private production companies, nor create contracts with foreign countries. In a personal interview with Pardo on the topic of what filmmakers in Cuba are working towards, she explained to me:

Precisamente se está luchando por el reconocimiento estatal y la legalización de las productoras independientes para lograr hacer contratos serios con productoras extranjeras o aplicar a fondos de forma legal, tener una cuenta en el banco a nombre de tu propia empresa, realizar prestaciones de servicios, en sentido general que te reconozcan como una entidad legal. Es hacer respetar la decisión de producir con nuevas y mejores dinámicas que respondan a las necesidades de las audiencias y de los productores, fuera de las instituciones estatales. Es cambiar las reglas del juego y crear uno nuevo que se reconozca de forma legal.

While digital technology has enabled these filmmakers to make their works, the Internet and digital technology have not created a way around all of the lingering legal challenges.

Given these contributions to the Cuban film landscape, the question remains why Pardo and the explosion of works by her peers continue to have an illegal status in Cuba. In July 2014, Alejandro Rodríguez in an article for the *BBC Mundo* coined the term "Los aleales" to refer to Pardo and her fellow filmmakers. Rodríguez explains that it is not exactly legal to create production companies to make private funding and distribution contracts without the state as an intermediary. It is also not completely legal to make films

beyond the Cuban state, since they are not officially recognized as filmmakers and as such do not have permission/rights to film in certain locations (Rodríguez n.p.). It is because of this legal parenthesis that with the exception of the annual showcase, the *nuevos realizadores* works are not in most Cuban theaters outside of the festival dates regardless of their success. Instead, cinemas in Cuba generally show either films made from within the ICAIC, or pirated copies of US films including titles such as Hollywood's 2012 romantic comedy *New Years Eve* and Lee Daniel's *The Butler*. This is highly ironic, given the original mission of the Cuban film institute and the revolution itself to fight against the imperial stronghold Hollywood had on Cuban cinemas before the revolution.

In the midst of this atmosphere, Pardo as well as other young celebrated filmmakers and producers, such as Victor Alfonso, Alejandro Brugués, Karel Ducasse, Ernesto Pérez Zambrano, María Luisa Leal, Aram Vidal, and Claudia Calviño, point to a greater need for a Cuban film law to protect and promote Cuban film production, exhibition, and domestic as well as international distribution. A film law could also finally recognize the works made beyond the official state body as pertaining to Cuban film.

While a Cuban film law and official recognition as filmmakers appears to be an innocuous request, the Cuban state's relationship with film is not to be taken lightly. Instead, given that film has played an active role in supporting, constructing, and sharing the ideals of the Revolution since the ICAIC's first establishment in 1959, to reconsider the role of the Cuban state in film is a metaphor to reconsider the Revolution itself. The ICAIC has had a strong grasp on who has had the ability to narrate the country in almost every aspect of filmmaking from production to distribution. With the explosion of a young filmmakers' movement working outside of the ICAIC and digital technology itself, the state refuses to legally recognize these other voices as legitimate filmmaking bodies.

In this way, the debate scene in *Memorias* that Benamou analyzes twenty years before has not *completely* changed. The *nuevos realizadores* are still not equal participants at the exclusive round table of the famous conference scene. But something important has changed-these filmmakers are creating their own digital roundtables, or spaces to legitimately speak, and are not waiting to be included in the canonical exclusive space in the ICAIC. Instead, they are looking to continue to create more distance from the state, and to produce their works in an independent but legal way.

The *nuevos realizadores* are not alone in the struggle to redefine the state's role in Cuban filmmaking and the changing legal framework. An inter-generational group of filmmakers and actors known as the G20 have come together since May 2013 to take part in the conversation to demand a redefinition of the state's role in Cuban filmmaking, while also showing the need for an official Cuban film law supporting independent filmmaking in Cuba. The G20 is a combination of over three generations of Cuban actors and directors led by established Cuban film directors and actors, such as Fernando Pérez, Jorge Perugorría, and Rebeca Chávez, including some of the *nuevos realizadores* organizing to actively participate and demand to have a voice in decentralizing the Cuban state's role in film to break a top-down state tradition. For the G.20 "La agenda de discusión incluye, además de la ley, una reestructuración sobre las funciones del ICAIC, monopolio estatal, así como la legalización de varias productoras privadas, que trabajan toleradas" ("Directores protestan" n.p.). While the ICAIC has attempted to restructure itself behind closed doors, the G.20 has demanded to participate in that process.

The fight for a Cuban film law, and an expansion of the definition of what is considered Cuban film is now more relevant than ever since the December 17, 2014 Castro/Obama announcement. With the start of the process to reestablish closer diplomatic ties-there will be even more spaces for artistic exchange, distribution and exhibition and as such a greater need to determine the legal status of filmmakers such as Pardo and protect exhibition space for national cinema. While the G20 has continuously held conversations with the ICAIC, the film law discussions have not progressed far. As of June 1, 2015 the film law conversation is moving at a snail's pace: "La demora de una ley de cine en Cuba, solicitada desde hace dos años por los realizadores, está propiciando 'prohibiciones y censuras' y marcando un déficit 'de graves consecuencias', dijeron cineastas cubanos" ("Directores protestan" n.p.). Despite the ICAIC dragging its feet to contribute to the discussions on the film law, filmmakers like Pardo continue to use digital technology to make their films yet still do not have the legal ability to grow their projects nationally or internationally.

IV. Conclusion: The Potential for Digital Literacy and Technology?

With the Cuban state's role in supporting filmmaking on the island facing a crossroads and the looming changes in Cuban/US relations, Pardo's work creating a digital

literacy campaign proves more relevant than ever. Pardo and other *nuevos realizadores* depend on digital technology and Internet access to create and distribute their works to provide perspectives on contemporary Cuba that are different from decades of male-directed and institutional ICAIC feature films. Pardo's use of inexpensive technology to share her view on the importance of digital literacy for twenty-first century Cuba, also challenges the unidirectional Havana-countryside flow of information. Through digital technology, Pardo has captured what Cubans beyond Havana have to say about the Internet's advantages and disadvantages in a multi-directional conversation shared online for domestic and international audiences to listen to voices beyond the ICAIC. Her works share a glimpse of larger changes occurring in Cuba as Pardo and Cuban filmmakers in general work to decentralize discourses, power, institutional support, and digital access. From within the work and beyond, her neo-literacy campaign highlights challenges in control, genre, gender, and technology that are occurring in Cuban cinema today. Glancing back at Benamou's criticism of the institutional patriarchy and limited spaces for Cubans to represent themselves in film, we see that Pardo and the generation of *nuevos realizadores* have worked to create some of the spaces needed beyond the institutions with filmmakers that are women, Afro-Cuban and LGBT. However, they have not reached a point to have independent legally legitimate voices in Cuba, beyond the limited showcase in Havana, and are locked out of official cinematic distribution, and visibility. The conversation between the Cuban state and the filmmakers such as Pardo continues today as a fight to redefine the nation's control of filmmaking in the digital landscape representing a much larger question on the future of censorship, control and even Cuba.

Notes

¹ See Kozol, for more analysis of the Cuban Literacy Campaign.

² See Guerra, for more analysis of the Cuban Literacy Campaign and the Havana/countryside divide.

³ See Prieto Morales, for more analysis of the Literacy campaign and its materials.

⁴ See Chanan, for more analysis of the Cine Móvil Project and the film *Por Primera Vez*.

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