

Guillén Landrián: Cinema as National Passion

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Nicolás Guillén Landrián (1938-2003) is considered by critics to be the *enfant terrible* of Cuban film and video. As a man, he was very marked by the trappings of Socialist Realism and intolerance. Nicola-sito, or El Loco de la Colina, as he was called by his closest friends, entered the University of Havana to study Social and Political Sciences, which he abandoned to devote himself to radio broadcasting. His only artistic training was in the plastic arts, since he took studio painting courses at various schools and academies. He was an unconditional admirer of the work of Wilfredo Lam and Rene Portocarrero.

He then entered the Instituto Cubano de las Artes e Industria Cinematográfica [Cuban Institute of Arts and Cinematic Industry] (ICAIC), at the insistence of a friend, filmmaker Juan Carlos Tabío. He assisted and collaborated with directors such as Manuel Octavio Gómez, Humberto Solás, Santiago Álvarez and Tomás Gutiérrez Alez (Titón). He ended up being a leader in Cuban cinematography's observational documentary film movement. He transgressed images, delved in Cuba's profundity, and reached a part of our undefined geographic identity. He used images to try to visibilize the 'other,' particularly



Poster: *In an old neighborhood*

those classified as people without a history, like an archaeologist of images. From this archaeology, he tried to renew Cuba's political history. Nicolasito's quick eye generated an unobjectably revolutionary cinema as a pioneer of an excessive filmic poetic and an architect of an experimental language.



Nicolás Guillén Landrián

His oeuvre amounts to an essay in visual anthropology. His political and dialogic eye sought new answers and mobilized shadows. He was seduced by the idea of crossing dangerous lines that marked emotions. While overwhelmingly ignored, his work allows us to review part of our recent history and reason while using an emotion that includes intelligence and artistic joy. He imbued his audiovisual language with never before revealed realities. His work was instrumental in the creation of a school that is part of our worldview. His critical eye documented the heartbeat of those people with non history in the market of identities. Women and blacks were his principal subjects. He used graphic codes to communicate the reality of black Cubans as a symbol of a silenced rhetoric, and re-

vealed a view of the 'other' from his or her own specificities: gender, race, and ethnic, cultural and regional origin. Nicolasito tried to be one of the most faithful interpreters of the reality people were living. He was a singular man and made no concessions to official rhetoric: he tried to burn all his bridges. He made documentary-making a political exercise, promoting their use as social engineering contributing to new visual testimonies, life stories, an attempt to create the new man, and the nobleness of the island's inhabitants. He made film under the pressure of a particular ideological content. He legitimized the tradition of documentaries with didactic purposes and as a discursive channel. He documented everyday life of zones barely explored by other period documentary makers, like San-

tiago Álvarez. He erased the artificial borders between fiction and non-fiction, and was a faithful interpreter of first-person works. In them he offered reflections of the real. Probing film and interviews were his principal tools.

His life and work connected up with his spirit of freedom. He opened a new space in realism, and became an agent for a new public. He surpassed contextual frameworks and never ceased exploring Cubanness.

His work was a natural stage on which to air pressing issues like race, gender and marginality, and practiced a new form of journalism via his audiovisual work, in order to denounce and reveal things. Leaving the censors speechless, his documentary-style tendency was characterized by an intense activism, which explored communities living in precarious circumstances not too far from today's. Sharing the anguish of their residents raised many eyebrows, for which he was entirely satanized, like writer Reinaldo Arenas.

Nicolasito never placed anyone's life in danger, but was accused of ideological diversionism, threatened by the iron cage of bureaucracy and censorship, and humiliated and pursued in his own country. Yet, he felt an urgency to tell us hidden stories. The orthodox Revolutionary leadership considered his oeuvre an indecent act, which it still does, and it is managed by institutional censorship. A survivor of the rigors of electric shock and incarceration, Nicolasito continued developing his poetics, while film and painting were his national passions.

One of his principal discursive strategies was antisystemic thought or antisystemism. His work functions like an audiovisual lab in which he activated plotlines relevant to constructing the social. He turned the private dimension into a spectacle for public consumption. He quite bravely approached the spirit of his times and defied its rigors. His films—unknown to most—are still an open book and not a close, singular or definitive one. Instead, they are a reference catalog that can help testimonial Cuba,

the Cuba that has not yet been narrated. Silence still weighs heavily on his documentaries “En un barrio viejo” [In an old neighborhood] (1963) and “Ociel del Toa” (1965).

What is unique about his film poetics is that he stripped away social masks. His politics of memory made itself known; he witnessed private experiences and encouraged the right to speak with one's own voice. He made his mark by documenting and interpreting everyday lives in a way no one else had; he was an image artist whose work still invites us to think. He suffered the rigors of exile, where he continued registering images and took refuge in painting, to prove he was still alive, despite his awful time in prison. He died of pancreatic cancer on July 23rd, 2003, in Miami. He left instructions to be buried in Cuba, where his spirit continues to watch over the island's underdevelopment. Homeland, faith and film were his personal currency.

Selected filmography:

- 1962 Assistant Director, “Historias de una batalla,” by Manuel Octavio Gómez. Script writer and Director of the documentaries “Congo Reales” and “Patio Arenero.”
- 1963 Scriptwriter and Director for the documentaries “El Morro,” “En un barrio viejo” (Special Prize at the Festival of Krakow,” 1964) and “Un festival.”
- 1964 “Rita Montaner.”
- 1965 “Ociel del Toa” and “Los del baile.”
- 1966 Report: “Retornar a Baracoa.”
- 1968 “Coffea Arábica” (Storywriter, Scriptwriter, and Director with Miguel de Zarraga Pedro, with musical background of the Beatles' song “Fool on the Hill” [1967], showing Fidel Castro).
- 1969 “Expo Maquinaria” (Cuba Pavillion).
- 1971 “Taller de Línea y 18,” “Nosotros en el Cuyaguaje.”
- 1972 “Desde la Habana,” “El Son,” “Para construir una casa,” “Un reportaje en el puerto pesquero.”
- 2001 “Inside Downtown,” with Jorge Egusquiza Zorrilla.