

TOWARDS A UTOPIAN ARCHEOLOGY

Moving-image, decolonization and continuities in Haiti, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic

by Alanna Lockward

Observed from a distance, the moving-image landscapes in the Spanish, French and Spanglish Caribbean could appear as a typical result of postmodernism, with its juxtaposed narratives, hybrid discourses and reinvention's undertakings governed by global hegemonic parameters. But this is not the case, or at least not completely. Different discursive genealogies of resistance assert themselves within each particular socio-historical context in the atmosphere of these three Caribbean scenarios.



Maya Deren, *At Land*, 1944, silent, 15:00, courtesy of Art Labour Archives

I would like to propose and approach these genealogies from an invisible matrix that after flourishing in Haiti in the 1940's and 50's is back in business in the Caribbean, even though still incognito. In that respect, in order to position the complicated and dislocated experience of the moving-image in these islands –that are not three, but two, I suggest departing from **Lev Manovich**'s ideas on the discursive continuity between film and digital media. While searching for some similarities and differences evident in recent video-art practices from Haiti, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic from the perspective of

cinematographic discourse, I will focus on the use or no-use of found-footage*, and on certain parameters of Otherness as well, which were introduced in cinema by the above mentioned invisible matrix: director, theorist, writer, cinematographer, editor, performer and entrepreneur **Maya Deren**.

In *HARDfilms: Pixels and Celluloids*, **Kino Arsenal Berlin** (2007), a curatorial essay that linked avant-garde, experimental cinema and video-art-, curator **María Morata** (1) focused on five principles established by Lev Manovich's in order to define 'new media' and differentiate them from "old" ones:

- * Numerical representation: new media objects exist as data.
- * Modularity: the different elements of new media exist independently.
- * Automation: new media objects can be created and modified automatically.
- * Variability: new media objects exist in multiple versions.
- * Transcoding: a new media object can be converted into another format.

Manovich, who grew-up in Russia, also insists on positioning his methodology as a direct result of dialectic materialism and therefore addresses primarily the conditions of production of hardware and software; the material structures. An alternative standpoint to that of cultural and literary studies which give the final product the last word:

"...That's why I published this article called "Avant-garde software" where I was trying to suggest that perhaps the real new media art or the real avant-garde art is the software itself. Because it's actually software -like Microsoft Word, or Final Cut Pro, or browsers, or....- languages where you see the new principles at work; there's much more theory... But the finished cultural products... they're too conservative (2)."



Maya Deren, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943, sound, 14:00

I would like to agree with **Manovich** and **Morata**, that there is still no such a thing as a new media, that experimental and avant-garde cinema is presented today in a digital format within the discursive positions of what we call: video-art. And also that the conditions of production are crucial to any attempt to approach video-art and any form of art. In this sense, I propose that a pending decolonized utopian archeology on video-art in Haiti, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic should discuss its conditions of production and also its different continuities related to **Maya Deren's** pioneering use of juxtaposition, dissolve and mimicry from/with the Other. There is in my opinion sufficient substantiation for a comparative analysis under these parameters. This discussion should ideally take place in an open forum directed and performed by the artists themselves. This is an introduction or motivation for this utopian forum that could start, for example, by commenting on certain parameters of Otherness signaled, like mentioned before, by the

use or no-use of appropriated footage which functions as an indicator of the viewpoint of the subject with respect to the Norm, to the hegemonic cultural reference represented by the appropriated images. And secondly, this forum could also take into account and analyze comparatively certain conditions of production that differentiate each scenario in these Caribbean landscapes. In the following pages, I will offer some highlights on these perspectives as guidelines for future discussions.



Xavier Cambre, *Godzilla*, 2005, sound, 6:50, courtesy of the artist

Maya Deren, mother of (North)American experimental cinema, was also a film theorist like **Jean-Luc Godard** and **Sergei Eisenstein**, but unlike them her writings and films are almost exclusively discussed in feminist courses. **Shelley Rice** explains how the Haitian culture influenced **Deren's** work: "Her years in Haiti and her intense involvement with Voodoo, can be seen as her quest to experience a living culture that gave "credibility to the unreal," and thereby embody the vision she sought in her experimental films. **Maya Deren's** most significant contribution to postmodern discourse might be her profound understanding of the ties that link the avant-garde and the "primitive" [sic], the Western and the Other" (3).

One of the implications of the 'rigorous' silence imposed on **Maya Deren's** legacy, could be 'explained', among many other reasons, by **Hegel's** 'African' paradigm that established that non-white European, Christian and male philosophy and creation was illegitimate, and therefore it was and (for many) still is rendered invisible (4). **Maya Deren's** commitment to Voodoo and her attempt to bring this cultural practice not only as an object of study but as

an inspiration for her film theory and practice, has been therefore sanctioned with oblivion. Visual discourses in the Caribbean navigate between these non-territories, going from resistance to the search of legitimacy, travelling simultaneously from the center to the periphery and vice versa, resisting their endemic invisibility while operating in the logic of what **Aníbal Quijano** and **Walter Mignolo**, among others, call “De-coloniality” (5). This consciousness is always at risk in its attempt to rise above a colonized (and colonial, as in the case of Puerto Rico) framework, tempting fate and borders. In its pursue to (de)construct itself, this alertness accepts in advance the dangers implied in a process that has the potential of converting the decolonized subject in the target and medium of her/his own self-colonization. In other words, that by attempting to make aesthetics of resistance visible within the (white European) canons of (post)modernism, claiming for properly deserved legitimacy, the decolonized subject is unavoidably playing by hegemonic rules. And here, as the author of this text, I include myself.

preservation of the appropriated images' integrity in his reconstruction of an utopian History. In the work of **Quinteros**, the freedom manipulating the media material is granted by the assurance of belonging to the Norm itself.



Aixa Requena, *Betty*, 2006, video installation, courtesy of the artist

The same could be said about *Betty* (2006), by **Aixa Requena**, and *Godzilla* (2004), by Xavier Cambre. The first one presents gender counter-narratives through the appropriation of brilliant moments by **Betty Boop**, converting her in a Puerto Rican, “criolla” Betty; and the second one translates Hiroshima’s tragedy juxtaposing original and found footage against a sensibly anti-heroic poetic background.



Revolution Evolution (2003) by 'Dominican' video-art and gender discourses pioneer, **Alette Simmons-Jiménez**, codifies a new vision of Nature's performatic talents. She classifies Nature's energy through its different manifestations by combining found-footage and original material. Classic tilt-down shots of Hollywood 30's choreographies, where circular ensembles display precision and glamour, dissolve into a collage of twirls alluding to the similarities between human existence and the forces of gravity. The appropriation of found-footage carries the same notion of belonging to the hegemonic culture. There is no Otherness distance with the images. **Alette Simmons-Jiménez** won, in 1992, one of the prizes of the **XVIII Bienal Nacional de Artes Visuales** with the first video-art installation ever realized in the Dominican Republic (7). *A couple of days in the life of Julie Ozama* (1992) has a Spanglish echo, a Dominican one in this case. **Simmons-Jiménez**, an American married to a Dominican citizen, lived for almost two decades in Santo Domingo and currently directs an alternative artist's space in Miami. With this title the artist plays with her doubled alterity, transgressing the traditional route travelled by the ones who need a visa to access the promised hegemonic mainstream.



Mónica Ferreras / Title: Psiquis / Size: 5 feet/ Video installation
Sound, light, wood and T.V. monitor / Year: 2002

Mónica Ferreras, Psiquis, 2002, video installation, courtesy of the artist

The production of this piece responds to a constant in video-art in the Dominican Republic:

the collaboration between professionals of the advertising industry, musicians, performing artists and visual artists. The first ones bring the technical resources and the others offer their talent and determination. Money is no real currency since government and private funding are simply non-existent. A good example of this production paradigm is *Directrices* (2005), by **Mónica Ferreras**, produced by a video-clip and commercial's production company. **Ferreras** has also collaborated with two members of the first generation that graduated in Cuba, at the prestigious **Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión de San Antonio de los Baños**, **Jaime Gómez** and **Tanya Valette**, who is currently the school director (8).

The set and the pictorial intervention within and outside the frame are recurrent elements in the video-art pieces made in the Dominican Republic, while the manipulation of appropriated footage is practically non-existent. This could be related partially to a deliberate desire to avoid relating video-art to documentary filmmaking, which in the case of the Dominican Republic depends totally on this resource, as exemplified in the work of **René Fortunato**. Dominican film critic, **Félix Manuel Lora**, dedicates a complete chapter of his book on Dominican moving-image to **Fortunato** (9), a documentary filmmaker who has achieved considerable commercial success with his work on contemporary Dominican history. The extraordinary contribution of **Lora** to the archives of the moving-image in the Dominican Republic is remarkable; the complete list of films shot in this country is sorted chronologically in his book, where video-art pieces share the same category as short films.

Notes

(*) I use found-footage loosely in reference to Hollywood iconographic material and/or mainstream broadcast news, within its most referred meaning as objet-trouvé.

1. Morata 2007.

2. Quiñones and Ranz 2003.

3. “Like Claude Cahun, she was a friend of André Breton.. Deren, however, denied any connection with the movement’s aesthetic aims. The Surrealist obsession with duality—with the lines separating the real and the imaginary, the rational and the irrational, the waking life and the dream—was, in fact, diametrically opposed to Deren’s fascination with the continuity of life and death, the physical and the spiritual, and “I” and the “non-I.” Talking about her film *Meshes of the Afternoon*, she stated that she was interested in the credibility of the unreal, not the incredibility of the unreal. “I am concerned,” she wrote, “with that point of contact between the real and the unreal, where the unreal manifests itself in reality.” Her films were intended as imaginary arenas where this point of contact could be visualized—where boundaries normally fixed could dissolve, or become wildly flexible; where protagonists could move freely between dreams and waking life without ever resolving the differences between the two; where nature and culture, urban and rural environments could be separated (and linked) by a single step; where past and future selves could meet along the road, fracturing into clones moving along parallel paths of time and space.” (Rice, Shelley 1999: *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*. Online source on the exhibition:

http://www.nyu.edu/greyart/exhibits/odysseys/Haiti/body_haiti.html)

4. “Having severed Egypt from Africa and making it safe for History, Hegel was free to zero in on what he called “Africa proper” and single it out for an extremely malicious libel, the outlines, if not the exact content, of which have continued to structure the understanding of Africa in the consciousness and institutions of Hegel’s descendants. According to Hegel, ‘Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained-for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World-shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself-the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night. Its isolated character originates, not merely in its tropical nature, but essentially in its geographical condition.” (Taiwo 1998).

5. “I am using here “de-colonization” and “de-coloniality” as exchangeable in certain context, but always keeping in mind the historical distinction between a) political de-colonization and liberation between 1947 and 1970, approximately, in Africa and Asia and b) epistemic de-colonization. Ramon Grosfóguel described as “second decolonization” and Catherine Walsh and Nelson Maldonado-Torres refers to as “de-coloniality.” The pedagogical advantage of de-coloniality over decolonization is twofold. On the one hand, it names the task of unveiling and undoing “the logic of coloniality” and, on the other, it names a project and a process that should be distinguished from the diverse meanings attributed to “postcoloniality”.” (Mignolo 2007).

6. Fuentes 2006:11.

7. Hermann 2003.

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Maya Deren's Publications

<http://www.filmreference.com/Directors-Co-Du/Deren-Maya.html#ixzz12zh8LseT>

By DEREN: books—

An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and the Film , New York, 1946.

The Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti , New York, 1953.

Divine Horsemen: Voodoo Gods of Haiti , New York, 1970.

By DEREN: articles—

“Choreography of Camera,” in Dance (New York), October 1943.

Berlin, 27.09.2010

VIVIR 13 octubre, 2004 |

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El Centro Leon presenta la conferencia "Manuscritos Iluminados: video y produccion artistica desde República Dominicana contemporánea". Será impartida por la crítica de arte Sara Hermann el jueves 14 de octubre a las 8:00 de la noche.

La conferencia girará en torno a la produccion del video arte en Republica Dominicana en los últimos años. Más que un recuento histórico, Hermann realizará un diagnóstico visual sobre lo que pasa ahora mismo con estas producciones artísticas y también trazará vaticinios de este tipo de expresiones en el país. La también curadora de arte dominicana y del Caribe presentará ejemplos de vídeo arte de reconocidos artistas plásticos dominicanos como Eliú Almonte, Mónica Ferreras y Pascal Meccariello, entre otros.

Sara Hermann es licenciada en Historia del Arte de la Universidad de La Habana, Cuba. Fue directora del museo de Arte Moderno de República Dominicana en el período 2000-2004. Es catedrática de la Universidad Pedro Henríquez Ureña (UNPHU). Ha realizado publicaciones nacionales e internacionales sobre artes visuales. También ha participado como jurado en eventos expositivos internacionales como la Bienal del Caribe, el Concurso de Arte Eduardo León Jimenes, el Salón de Arte Contemporáneo de Aragua, Venezuela, entre otros. Es miembro de la Asociación Internacional de Críticos de Arte y del ICOM (Internacional Council of Museums) de República Dominicana.

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