

## ***Sueños al paio* (*Dreams Adrift* 2020): On censorship, archival footage, and independent Cuban film**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, I offer an analysis of the Cuban documentary *Sueños al paio* (*Dreams Adrift*), which was scheduled to premiere in April 2020 at Havana's young filmmakers' annual showcase. While the documentary was immediately censored preventing its premiere, I examine how the filmmakers José Luis Aparicio Ferrera and Fernando Fraguela Fosado use multiple levels of hidden, and lost archival footage and memory to create a platform for the censored lyricist Mike Porcel to write him back into Cuban musical history in their documentary. Through the inclusion of the archived past, I consider how the documentary contests what Derrida refers to as archival house arrest by bringing the hidden images and stories back into the present. In doing so, I explore Arenillas and Furtado's research on the relationship between documentary and the law, to consider how documenting the past in the public present creates a space for intervention. While state censorship of artists is not new in Cuban film, *Sueños* differs because it does not focus solely on the government's responsibility; instead, it also studies the role of his artistic community in contributing directly to his silencing and does so from island-based filmmakers in dialogue with the diaspora. Despite a promising new legal framework for independent cinema, the censorship of *Sueños*'s premier appeared as a continuation of the same control Porcel had experienced years before. However, I show how the resounding artistic community response rejecting the film's 2020 censorship and its refusal to premiere their own films, points to a rupture with Porcel's censorship and Cuban film's past, thus highlighting a space for artistic solidarity absent in Porcel's time.

**Key words:** Mike Porcel, censorship, documentary, archive, Cuba, Decreto Ley 373, nuevos realizadores, *Sueños al paio*.

*Sueños al paio* (*Dreams Adrift*) is a thirty-minute Cuban independent documentary by on-island documentarians José Luis Aparicio Ferrera and Fernando Fraguela Fosado. It captures the story of lyricist Mike Porcel, who had been written out of Cuban musical history despite the fact that on-island artists still perform his arrangements.<sup>1</sup> The documentary explores Porcel's career becoming one of Cuba's distinguished artists in the 1960s-1970s Nueva Trova music movement, which often connected folk traditions with progressive social consciousness, along with sympathies to the Cuban Revolution.<sup>2</sup> While a number of Nueva Trova songwriters were considered Cuba's cultural ambassadors, such as celebrated musician Silvio Rodríguez appearing in the documentary, the film shares that Porcel's experience with the state was quite different.

The fact that he combined international musical influences with poetic lyrics resulted in Porcel's becoming persona-non-grata status on the island. While his artistic archive remained free to circulate, divorced from his name, he was denied the right to fully exist or leave. Weaving together the personal with the political in a film whose title quotes one of Porcel's songs, the documentary serves as a platform to reconnect Porcel's voice with his archive. It also reveals that it was not opposition politics that led to the lyricist's erasure from Cuban music; rather, it was Porcel's commitment to poetry and musical creation instead of writing explicitly pro-revolutionary political lyrics that was deemed unacceptable, and later criminalized.

Censored exiled artists are not a new area for off-island Cuban cinema to explore by any means. The most celebrated films on the topic include *La otra Cuba* (Almendros and Ulla 1983), *Improper Conduct* (Almendros and Ulla 1984), as well as more recent on-island clandestine films such as *Seres extravagantes* (Zayas 2004), among others. What makes *Sueños* a unique case study is that it works to write an exiled artist back into the musical archive and does so from the island, with prize support from state institutions, and in collaboration with current Cubans living abroad. Its positionality, from the island collaborating with fellow filmmakers living off the island, points to the continued efforts of the digital filmmaking movement of a young generation that challenges rigid state-directed definitions of Cuban film and ultimately Cubanness further showing a more hybrid and fluid Cuban identity.

*Sueños* was completed amidst the June 2019 approved legal framework, *Decreto ley 373*, allowing recognition for independent film production for on-island filmmakers (Cuba, Consejo del Estado n.p.). Despite this somewhat promising context, the state film institute, ICAIC, censored the film on account of "political differences" (Dirección del ICAIC) and later, when further questioned, cited the documentary's "misuse" of archival footage (Dirección del ICAIC). Ironically, the film's attempt to write Porcel back into the official archive was said to help cause the film's censorship.

In this article, I look at how the film uses and re-creates archives, to release buried stories from what Derrida refers to as "house arrest" (10). Through archive and memory, I show how the film re-appropriates state-centered national narratives and official erasures, jostling the past by opening Porcel's closed story in the unique 2020 Cuban context. I build on the work of film scholars Arenillas and Furtado in their examination of documentary film in Latin America, which represents, dialogues with, and even intervenes in legal institutions and processes (2). In this context, *Sueños al pairo*, in spite of its censorship, becomes a platform for a community to contemplate an alternative form of justice in the face of the state's failure to do so, while also causing the very artistic solidarity in 2020 that was impossible in Porcel's time decades ago.

### Re-opening and Creating Archives through Documentary

Examining the relationship between the documentary genre and the law, film scholars Arenillas and Furtado contemplate the unique positioning of documentary film as “a platform for the vindication of rights, to launch complaints in the public sphere, or to capture and preserve evidence and testimonies that would normally be destined to being forgotten” (2). While in search of justice, documentarians and their films do not always seek their vindication from state legal action. Instead, the scholars explain that a “documentary can also look for alternative forms of poetic, restorative, and transformative justice for the filmmaker, the participants in the film, and the spectators, forming new communities constituted in search of justice and film’s intervention in it” (2). Bringing audiences together around a single example of injustice to share a look into systemic power imbalances, continues to be a significant audiovisual artistic act of challenging a state narrative that cannot be undervalued in its potential for forming future political participants.

One of the ways that the documentary genre challenges official narratives is through its incorporation of archival footage from the past, since, as Furtado explains “the archive . . . is the place of power and the place of memory as well as the source and guarantor of authority and the law” (4). Building on the relationship between archive and authority, Derrida refers to the archiving process as an act of “domiciliation,”<sup>3</sup> or house arrest, placing the past in a form of controlled state quarantine. Therefore the documentarian’s work is that of breaking the cage that the footage, or memory, sits in—to make it a living moment again—this time in conversation with the present alongside personal stories and memory that also should be part of history. Documentaries therefore engage in dislodging the archive from the state in its attempt to control or erase. A documentary thus, can serve as a counter-narrative in the present, forming a platform to not only revisit the past but also to intervene in it in public forming yet another archive.

The trope of rupturing the state’s forced invisibility, or archival house arrest, exposing an imbalance of power resonates with what the documentary *Sueños al Pairo* achieves in three specific, albeit controversial, ways. The first is the most explicit since the documentary’s use of state historic archival footage eventually was said to have led to the film’s censorship in 2020. The Cuban government contestably claimed that the ICAIC had full propriety over the footage and that the filmmakers did not have clearance to use the images. The documentary’s second exploration of archival material, state power, and propriety, is through the continued use of Porcel’s personal oeuvre. His music, arrangements, and lyrics remained in circulation on the island despite his own inability to leave his home, which led to his physical absence and later erasure from Cuban musical history. Porcel

does not control his artistic archive; instead, his archive, like the title of the documentary, is still left “adrift” in Cuba—with his lyrics sung and adapted by others, but legally divorced from Porcel.

The third way the film ruptures archival control is in the documentary’s representation of missing footage that persists in the memory of the Cuban people. The State’s harrowing “actos” or “mitins de repudio” (public condemnation acts), to publicly shame an individual, were particularly common during the 1960s-1980s. Since these acts are not ordinarily represented on television or state-supported cinema, nor is the archival footage of these acts made public, the documentarians rely on Porcel’s memory, on the saved printed flyers that were thrown into his home in 1980, and on the use of animation to bring to life the missing footage. While this is not the first documentary to recall public repudiation acts, as seen in the poignant Cuban film made in the diaspora *Improper Conduct*, in *Sueños al pairo* the acts are not only recalled, but also re-performed on the screen through animation, further highlighting the lack of circulating images of these events. Thus, the documentary pieces together an absent archive to shape its demand for justice and, in doing so, challenges state archival power and “the law of what can be said” or in this case represented (Foucault 145).<sup>4</sup> Throughout these archival practices, the crucial role of Cuban independent documentary film comes into focus as a public counter-narrative, to forms of physical, archival, and narrative house arrest.

### **The Film Close-up**

*Sueños* begins with archival footage of violence towards students in Havana, followed by photographs of people awaiting boats for the 1980 Mariel Boatlift, while a group of protesters dance in the streets holding signs saying “¡Que se vayan!” (“Leave!”). After the images of mass movement, the camera settles on contemporary footage of waves on a beach, and Mike Porcel’s off-camera voice explains

este es un período en mi vida del cual no me gusta hablar. Me trae muy malos recuerdos. Los peores de mi vida. Me preguntas y te voy a contar los hechos tal y como sucedieron. Y créeme que quisiera fuera esta la última vez que tuviera que hablar de esto en público. Ojalá.

Porcel shares his public musical trajectory while giving priority to the moments that he remembers as significant to his personal story. Reminding the audience of the veracity of his words, the documentarians position Porcel as the voice of authority, decentralizing the Cuban government’s final say. Along with this positioning, the audience is also reminded of the need for the documentary to connect the public archival footage with the personal account before they are separated completely.

The camera's focus on the waves breaking on the sand hints at a common trope: the many stories that have been washed away in that body of water, untold and lost particularly on Miami's shores building on a departure tradition in Cuban filmmaking.<sup>5</sup> Unlike key Cuban documentaries on departure and censorship before this one like *La otra Cuba* and *Improper Conduct*, made from the Cuban diaspora, Porcel's story and the documentary in question will reveal that, while living off the island, he is not truncated from Cuba nor does he position himself in a politicized binary. Instead, the film is made from the island, capturing Porcel as he remains in conversation with an off-camera interlocutor waiting for a reply.

Briefly, the documentary appears as a straightforward bio-pic with childhood pictures while Porcel's off-camera adult voice tells of becoming a musician starting with his first guitar. Describing these quotidian moments, Porcel explains that the last major family purchase his father made was a set of encyclopedias, as after that "everything started to disappear." The purchase of encyclopedias marks the end of the private bio-pic, giving way to a whirlwind of experiences that deeply intertwine the public and private spheres in 1960-1970s Cuba. Porcel poetically explains how personal behavior formed part of political ideology that "ser un caballero era tener problemas ideológicos . . . Se empezaba a gestar el famoso proyecto del 'Hombre Nuevo', que al final terminó creando ese engendro social que ahora no saben cómo liberarse." In reference to Che's "New Man" revolutionary ideal committed to a shared revolutionary cause, Porcel explains that the project was steeped in chauvinism, male privilege, and conformation to a collectivist ideology. Porcel's rejection of the "New Man" forewarns of the delimitation of space for not conforming to the Cuban state's prescriptive behavior.

Further reflecting the intertwining spheres, Porcel is not the only one who narrates his story. Instead, the camera shares contemporary interviews in a talking-head format with various Nueva Trova Cuban musicians on the island who had performed with Porcel or who continue singing his arrangements. The singer Pedro Luis Ferrer explains that he met Porcel in the musical group Los Dada, for which Porcel played and composed, sharing the story of an admiring girl who fell in love with him over Porcel's song. Ferrer chuckles to himself as he explains to the camera that he did not have the heart to say that Porcel had written the song that the beautiful girl credited to him. This passing anecdote lightheartedly hints at a heavier topic that becomes further into focus in the film: propriety and rights to the archive. While Porcel's lyrics and arrangements have remained present in Cuba, his authorship has been erased from the history of Cuban music. His arrangements, and lyrics continue to circulate in Cuba, sung by many contemporary artists, but he was not personally able to freely perform, nor does he control the rights or receive credit for his work. The appropriation of

Porcel's music is further complicated with the 2020 documentary's subsequent censorship due to the "unauthorized" use of archival footage discussed further on in the article.

While the musicians speak about Porcel's talent, the documentary begins to disclose the conflict with his music. Switching to footage of Porcel singing in the group Los Dada, the camera combines the images with a recording of Fidel Castro's speech denouncing people wearing "too tight little pants with guitars in their hands, and walking like Elvis Presley." Castro's recorded speech echoes the "New Man," likening clothing and hair choices to revolutionary ideals. With images of people having their artistic haircuts carelessly chopped off, the camera visually reminds audiences through its use of footage, that in the Cuba of the late 1960s and 1970s, choices in clothing and haircuts could be considered politically subversive acts to the collective cause. Despite the combination of Castro's recorded speech with footage of Porcel's performance, Castro's words are not the focus of the documentary. Instead, the camera switches back to talking-head interviews, this time with Cuban singer Amaury Pérez, and later with Professor Vázquez Villares, discussing Porcel's talent. Vázquez Villares shares a key argument—that Porcel's depoliticized music as well as his choice of instruments may have caused his downfall. Pérez shares that "When Mike [Porcel] made my first disc, they said that it was counter-revolutionary because he did not use [Afro-Cuban] drums and bongos in the disc and they sent us from the work commission to the zoo to feed the lions." Punished to feed the lions in their cage due to a lack of Cubanness reflects a required performance of outward nationalism rather than philosophical rigor.

Porcel's voice explains that 1978 was a special cultural opening that later changed with the complexities of the Mariel Boatlift from April 15-October 31, 1980. He narrates the archival images of the lines forming at Cuba's Mariel Harbor, explaining that he wanted to exercise his own human right to free movement and to leave the country. This footage is later paired with a recording of Fidel Castro's well-known public speech ordering the people at Mariel Port to leave Cuba. Castro refers to these people as "worms," and the blight of the Cuban population. In stark contrast with Castro's speech, the state banned Porcel, a famous musician, from leaving Cuba, punished him for attempting to do so, with his papers for future departure being denied. To shame the well-known musician for attempting to leave, the authorities sent peers to participate in public denouncement acts (*actos de repudio*). These public shaming acts were performed often outside the houses of those planning to leave, or the families of those who had left. These acts, while public, were not trial by one's peers; instead, participation in these acts was implicitly, and at times explicitly, mandatory. Few

documentaries include archival footage of these well-known acts possibly due to a lack of open access to material.<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of available footage, *Sueños* uses Porcel's personal memory and reconstruction of these acts combined with animation to complete part of a missing archive. Aparicio and Fraguela turned to the talented animator Josué García Gómez to depict these under-represented acts of hatred using rotoscoping. Highlighting unseen footage, the animation serves to represent the unrepresentable, while challenging archival definitions of determining "what can be said" (Foucault 145). It is the break of the archival footage and photos that make the simple representation of these acts even more powerful.

The actos de repudio outside of Porcel's home lasted one week, making it impossible for his family to leave their house, which was particularly difficult for Porcel's ailing mother. One of the saddest parts of the acts took place when a pamphlet was slipped under his door. It denounced Porcel as weak and was signed by the Nueva Trova musicians of Cuba, some of which were his fellow artists who speak directly to the camera in the *Sueños* documentary. Porcel had kept the signed document and holds it up to the camera as further proof of the collective participation in his abuse. The pamphlet, along with Porcel's memory and the use of animation, intervene in the archival absences. Placing Porcel's consenting musicians as participants in Porcel's abuse also hints at their fear of the state's retaliation if they did not contribute to the acts. This complexity makes the musicians' participation in the documentary an opportunity to rectify or further problematize history rather than to recognize the musicians as the culprits in Porcel's suffering.

Quickly, Porcel became a Cuban persona non grata, yet had to live in Cuba—he was not allowed to leave nor to fully stay. Porcel explains "fui borrado del panorama cultural cubano." One colleague felt "fear in saying his name." Similar to the lions he was initially forced to feed: nearly invisible, Porcel began living a caged existence in Cuban society. His wife and son were eventually allowed to leave, and his wife contacted the United Nations Human Rights Commission to advocate for Porcel's departure from Cuba. In 1988, the Commission came to the island about various human rights abuse cases, and Cuban authorities warned Porcel to not speak with UN Commission, but he did despite the threats. Two weeks after approaching the UN Commission in Havana, Porcel was approved to leave the island.

The camera returns to another interview with fellow musician Pedro Luis Ferrer, reflecting on Porcel, but he cuts himself short. Ferrer asks the camera-person to stop shooting, "You aren't filming anymore, right? It's just us? Turn it off, turn off my recorder if you want." This final part of the

interview with Cuban singer Pedro Luis Ferrer may be one of the reasons the ICAIC censored the film, although it has not been mentioned in their official statements. The documentarians shut off the camera but not the sound. As the screen goes black, Ferrer's voice continues,

What I was going to say . . . what I was going to say is that Mike experienced the unimaginable, and all types of things . . . it's a sensitive button . . . there are . . . those who participated in the meetings of repudiation . . . they can feel a form of aggressive intent . . . or something . . . nobody is questioning anything. I think it was collective craze.

In this brief off-camera rambling filled with pauses and utterances, Ferrer hints at the collective systematic misdoing—not only by authorities but also by the Cuban people. He refers to a greater notion of collective “craze,” which one could assume would refer to recognizing a shared guilt. However, Ferrer makes this declaration of collective “craze” while asking the documentarians to stop recording, hinting at a continued inability to publicly recognize his own contribution to Porcel's trauma or to a possible fear of retaliation.

The speakers' lack of explicit recognition and understanding of their collective responsibility is what *Santa y Andres's* Director, Carlos Lechuga, addresses in his short article on *Sueños al pairo*: “I believe what the documentary [*Sueños al pairo*] is missing is that not one of the interviewed, the ‘great names of Cuban culture’, looks at the camera and says: I fucked him over, I am in part guilty” (Lechuga n.p.) None of the fellow musicians speak directly about their role in Porcel's house arrest, trauma, and violence. However, instead of the frustration with the documentary itself, the film does provide a platform for fellow musicians to reflect on their participation in Porcel's erasure, making their silence of their shared guilt and lack of ownership even louder. Additionally, this frustration with Porcel's peers in the documentary is in itself the intervention with the past and the present that the film makes. It does not only look at the well-documented Cuban trope of an artist's persecution by the state, but also recognizes that it was not the state alone that failed Porcel. As such, the film provokes frustration in watching the artists re-tell their witnessing of Porcel's abuse. This invigorates audiences to question their own role in the act of watching and on looking, and makes the subsequent artists' response to the documentary's censorship an example of what Furtado had referred to as documentary's intervention in the present (*Documentary Filmmaking* 7). As the film becomes an alternative platform for the musicians to publicly right their wrongs, each one decides not to. Their silence leaves the first step in amending the archive unmet: their recognition of their error. However, this inability to identify their contribution to Porcel's abuse is also telling of a possible deep-rooted continued fear of state

retaliation or, as Ferrer calls it, a “sensitive button” making Porcel’s story even more relevant to the present and a premonition to the documentary’s post production fate.

After the musicians’ interviews, Porcel’s voice alone narrates the documentary’s conclusion bringing the documentary full circle back to his own words. Speaking about how it was a dark time in the past, Porcel explains that the past is also the present. The camera is no longer focused on footage or interviews in Havana. Instead, the camera carefully registers a wall in Porcel’s Miami home covered in photos of Porcel, Ferrer, and other Nueva Trova musicians, along with images of album covers recorded off the island. Porcel stops speaking about the past and takes his reflections into the present explaining: “yo no he visto ningún cambio. Los mismos represores siguen ahí campeando por su respeto. Sí me gustaría cantar para el público . . . mi vida está aquí . . . mi nieta nació aquí . . . en mí no hay rencor.” This lack of resentment in the conclusion of the film is what is most startling about the documentary, after an audience watches his years of pain. He faces the camera straight on, a cinematic nod to the end of the film *Improper Conduct*, yet does so not in a menacing way; instead, Porcel awaits a reply.

The end of the film is one of its many achievements in a key moment in Cuban filmmaking. The camera artistically captures a peaceful Porcel, with gray hair, in his own study finally combining this archival footage, his music, the words of his fellow musicians, the signed denouncement document from 1980, with the contemporary face and voice of Porcel himself. As the camera carefully captures his guitar, body, room, and wife editing, Porcel sings the final song in the film that gives the documentary its title “Vivo con mis sueños al paio” (“I live with my dreams adrift.”) The song is told in the first-person point-of-view speaking directly to an absent interlocutor in the informal “you” form. The lyrics tell the absent interlocutor of his story of leaving, redefining his life, and re-finding happiness-but not forgetting. Concluding the final notes of his deeply poetic and intimate song, Porcel stares directly at the camera in an almost startling act of honesty singing “Y aunque he sido feliz pienso en ti.” If “I” is Porcel’s voice in the song, then the absent “you” he speaks to is Cuba, his musical colleagues, a culture and society that despite pain, violence, and injustices are still present in his mind in a deeply personal way.

The camera is steady as Porcel finishes the documentary with his own lyrics and looks directly at the camera, and possibly his colleagues. This unadorned image and strong voice tell a story that refuses to be erased. The lyrics are returned to the man that created them as well as his image, the signed acto de repudio document, his memory, and his life in Miami, all in one documentary that does not ask to be placed within a national archive—instead it forms another one. In a way, the

documentarians create this archive knowing that it too will be censored—thus making Porcel’s story even more relevant to contemporary Cuba, as well as directly implicating those today who still participate in the collective “craze” of censorship stoking the fears of retaliation.

The music Porcel has written, sung by some of Cuba’s most famous voices, continues to circulate in Cuba today, yet Porcel’s does not get the credit he deserves. The lack of copyright and authorship rights in Cuba comes as no surprise. Cuba has consistently maintained a blurred practice on copyright, authorship, and intellectual property yet the ambiguity finds clarity when the state owns the footage leading to censorship, like that of the documentary itself.

### **From State Prize to State Censorship**

*Sueños*’s documentarians Aparicio Ferrera and Fraguela Fosado are part of a generation of Cuban filmmakers known since 2000 as “nuevos realizadores,” who have been creating key digital film, while lacking legal recognition to produce independent cinema on the island.<sup>7</sup> While some of the nuevos realizadores have created many of the most interesting contemporary Cuban works showing at the annual “Muestra” showcase, they have done so without the legal ability to open bank accounts for their production companies, or enter into co-production contracts. The “Muestra” film showcase has also become a space for activism and organization among Cuban filmmakers to discuss Cuban filmmaking in the digital age and to re-define the state’s role in it (Stock, Farrell).

After years of collective struggle for the right to own independent production companies, *Sueños* was set to premiere in a cautiously optimistic moment in contemporary Cuban independent film at the annual film showcase. With its approval in July 2019, the “Decreto Ley 373” took effect in September 2019, legally recognizing independent film production and for on-island filmmakers to create and distribute their films in Cuba independent of the state.<sup>8</sup> It was not the sweeping film law decentering the state’s role in filmmaking for which the nuevos realizadores and established filmmakers had lobbied (Dorta 165). In particular, despite increasing collaborations between on and off-island filmmakers made possible through digital technologies, the Decreto did not legally recognize Cuban filmmakers living off the island as makers of Cuban film. The Decreto did, however, point to a possible opening for independent film to further distance itself from Porcel’s time of artistic censorship and the centralized role of the state captured in the documentary.

Despite this somewhat promising context for independent film, after *Muestra* director Carla Valdés León and a seven-person selection committee chose *Sueños al paio* to debut at the April 2020 showcase, the ICAIC intervened in the programming and rejected the documentary, which was, like

Porcel himself, ultimately censored. On February 28, 2020, the Cuban Film Institute [ICAIC] released its official statement citing the documentary's "unauthorized use" of archival footage as well as "political and ideological differences" as the reasons for their decision to censor the film from its planned April premiere at the showcase (Dirección del ICAIC). While censorship is not a new phenomenon in Cuban cinema on the island, this case questions the claims of progress of the recent film law from the inadequate artistic freedom that caused Porcel's own censorship in the 1980s.<sup>9</sup>

The 2019 Constitution and the Decreto framework did not protect the artists from suppression. However, unlike Porcel's own story, and in solidarity with the censored documentarians, fellow *Muestra* filmmakers refused to premiere their works, causing the showcase to be canceled, further making visible the ICAIC's censorship of *Sueños al paio*. The ICAIC quickly responded to the filmmakers' act of solidarity by firing the *Muestra's* director Carla Valdés León.

The ICAIC's citation of "improper use of archival footage" leading to the film's censorship is not a simple overstep on the part of the documentarians, but rather part of a longer story that is telling of a documentary's ability to intervene in state archives. In 2017, during the 16<sup>th</sup> *Muestra*, Aparicio Ferrera and Fraguela Fosado entered in and won a state sponsored competition specifically to gain access to the archival images in question to complete *Sueños al paio*.<sup>10</sup> To compete for the ICAIC-sponsored *Haciendo cine* finishing prize for projects in-progress, they submitted a teaser of *Sueños* as well as a project folder containing detailed information on the film to complement their pitch. After viewing the documentary's teaser and folder the ICAIC awarded Aparicio Ferrera and Fraguela Fosado the 2017 completion prize. In a personal interview with the author, Aparicio Ferrera and Fraguela Fosado share "the archival images were the principal objective of our pitch [in *Haciendo cine*] and we asked the ICAIC directly for them [the archival images]."

The prize gave the documentarians access to use the ICAIC archival footage to finish their film and yet it is their use of archival images that contributed to the same institution censoring the film in 2020. The documentarians explain

we received the approval in that moment, but a contract was not signed, just an understanding and a verbal agreement. We would review the archives, select the images to use, edit, and then formalize the process with a contract providing free access, as part of the support from the *Haciendo cine* [prize]. (Aparicio et al interview *n.p.*)

The intended use of the images was made explicit in the 2017 application, yet there was no signing of a contract granting them this right. The documentarians clarify, "We never were given conditions about the use of the archival images. That is why we acted based on our artistic intentions, without

censoring ourselves. Not all of the archival images in the documentary were from the ICAIC” (Aparicio et al interview n.p.). For two years, the filmmakers had inquired about a signed contract giving them explicit archival rights, yet were consistently dismissed in their requests. The official letter process was “drawn out bureaucratically and coincided with the film selection process for the 19<sup>th</sup> *Muestra Joven*, where the documentary was listed” (Aparicio et al interview n.p.). This could be a coincidence of events telling of a centralized organization’s slower operations. However, given the film’s subsequent censorship, the lack of a signed contract points to a possible tactic to give enough space for the filmmakers to create their documentary and then denying them the right to show their film on a technicality, which is precisely what happened in February 2020.

While archival images in the documentary capture unacknowledged events in Cuban history, such as the Mariel Boatlift and student suppression in Havana, the filmmakers were repeatedly told that it was the use of Fidel Castro’s speeches in particular that caused the censorship of the film. Aparicio explains:

the official version focuses on their displeasure with the use of Fidel’s speeches, the one from ’63, and, especially, the one from ’80. They believe that they [the speeches] are not properly contextualized and that they make Fidel appear like a villain guilty of all of the evils described in the documentary. This personal and debatable interpretation was the one they used as criteria for censorship [of the documentary]. (Aparicio et al interview n.p.)

With the incorporation of Castro’s speeches, the documentary’s controversial relationship with the past is brought to light, breaking the “domiciliation” to bring footage back into the present (Derrida and Prenowitz 10). However, invoking Castro, whether by name or through audio-visual recordings, casting him as the guilty villain, is not new in Cuban cinema, without the former Cuban leader as the focus of the film. Instead, something that the documentary reveals is that Castro is *not* the central character in Porcel’s story. The film lays bare the participation of fellow musicians and peers who still have not publicly reflected on their roles in Porcel’s story or in Cuba’s. By doing so, the film questions the definition of participation and if silence is a form of conformity in oppression pointing to a continued fear of retaliation.

The ICAIC’s claim on rights to the archival footage parallels the trajectory of the documentary and Porcel’s own confinement to his home and erasure. The filmmaker explains in a personal interview:

when they told me about the censorship, I was also informed about the decision to not formalize the legal use of the images. They left us with a finished documentary, but [that did not have the] the right to exist in our country, because of the censorship, and beyond that, because of their refusal to use archival images, that only represented 1/6 of the documentary, but is important to the [film's] story.

To have a completed film without the right to exist parallels Porcel's persona non-grata status on the island. He was not only denied the ability to leave, but also to freely stay. The said cause of the documentary's house arrest is a supposed propriety question about the use of state archival footage. However, throughout the film, there is a clear reminder that copyright and authorship do not apply to Porcel's musical contributions to Cuba's Nueva Trova music, which move freely on the island.

It is the de-archiving of state materials that *Sueños* places in juxtaposition with archival memory, which serves as a form of alternative justice, refusing erasure and reminding viewers that the hidden past remains unforgotten. Within the Cuban context, the right to the national archive has a double-edged complexity. The ICAIC's archive, while publicly funded, appears not to be used by all, but rather to be protected by the state, hidden in plain sight.

## Conclusion

The making of the film itself adds another layer to its existence as an alternative archive achieved through digital technology, peer collaboration, and community. The Havana-based documentarians collaborated with Miami-based Cuban award-winning filmmaker Javier Labrador Deulofeu to shoot the film's final six-minutes. Labrador Deulofeu, director of *Hotel Nueva Isla* (2014), and cinematographer for *Santa y Andrés*, and *El viaje extraordinario de Celeste García* (2018), teamed up with the project to ensure Porcel's presence on the island from his own Miami home in the diaspora. The filmmakers explain "the final sequence, with Mike looking at the camera, filmed in Miami at the end of 2019 by Javier Labrador, was a gift from our main character . . . it also finished our symbolic operation to return to him his usurped voice."<sup>11</sup> This collaboration, connecting Porcel with his music and the island, also reveals interconnectedness of Cuban filmmakers on and off the island, particularly present in the nuevos realizadores generation.

Despite years of centralized definitions of Cuban film officially limited to on-island productions, the Decreto Ley 373 fails to legally recognize off-island film from the diaspora as Cuban cinema. However with *Sueños*, the filmmakers on and off-the island create a documentary that in its making decentralizes the filmmaking process and the limitations of the Decreto Ley 373's top-down

rigid island-limited definition of Cubanness in cinema. As Arenillas and Furtado explain, documentaries can create a community with the ability to intervene in justice despite the absence of a legal mechanism enabling one to do so.

Even with the state efforts to prevent the film's April 2020 premiere, the documentary reached various 2020 audiences through its informal distribution and for a month-long stint on YouTube. Since then, the filmmakers removed the documentary from the platform in search for wider exhibition in film festivals and distribution to ensure that Porcel's story is seen by audiences on and off the island, regardless of its censored status. In March 2021, the film reached its world premiere at the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema (BAFICI) and at the Censurados Film Festival, in Lima, Peru, in April 2021. As such, *Sueños al paio* begins to open a space to write this story back into the narrative where it was previously denied. The film not only creates its own archive, including Porcel's story into Cuban musical history, but also does so by strengthening an already strong community of independent filmmakers on and off the island who today refuse to silently watch as one of their own is censored.

Meanwhile in Cuba, change and stagnation continue to co-exist with control. Throughout the documentary, the audience hears from Porcel himself who may be scarred but is still whole, showing the audacity to represent what it truly means to be forgotten. Digital technology and the solidarity between documentarians remaining in Cuba, in contact with those off the island—the collaboration between *Sueños al paio* documentarians José Luis Aparicio Ferrera and Fernando Fraguera Fosado with Javier Labrador Deulofeu and the Muestra filmmakers pulling their films from the showcase due to *Sueños'* censorship, combine to create a documentary that has become an archive in and of itself— one that refuses to be silenced. Challenging Porcel's official erasure, the subsequent Cuban filmmaking community responded to the question of the politics of passivity and protest.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> All film, interview quotes, laws referenced, and official state communication are translated from their original Spanish to English by the author. In order to capture the poetry of lyricist Mike Porcel, as well as the documentary's objective to serve as a platform for Porcel to write himself back into Cuban musical history, Porcel's contributions are left in their original Spanish followed by English translations.

<sup>2</sup> The Nueva Trova musical movement in Cuba built on the New Song protest movement in Latin America responding to on-going injustices, often in dialogue with musicians across the region. In parts of Latin America such as Argentina and Chile, the New Song movement used folk and regional music to speak out against the government. In Cuba, however, the Nueva Trova musicians were at times considered some of the Cuban Revolution's strongest supporters. Their music was often positioned in protest against US cultural and political neo-colonialism, influences and interventions instead of against the Cuban government. The folk and rock movement's relationship with the Cuban state was on occasion charged. For more on the Cuban Nueva Trova song movement see chapter 5 of Moore's *Music and Revolution: Cultural Change in Socialist Cuba*.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Derrida's concept of domiciliation, see Derrida and Prenowitz, "Archive Fever..."

<sup>4</sup> For more on Foucault and documentary, see Furtado's *Documentary Filmmaking*.

<sup>5</sup> With the term Cuban filmmaking, I use the inclusive concept proposed by Ana M. López to include both on island and from the diaspora filmmaking. See Ana M. López's "Cuban cinema in exile: The "other" island." *Jump Cut*, no. 38, 1993, pp. 51-59.

<sup>6</sup> Fictional representations of *actos de repudio* appear in a small number of contemporary independent Cuban fictional films such as *Espéjuelos oscuros* (Rodríguez 2015) and *Santa y Andrés* (Lechuga 2016). Both films faced levels of state censorship and distribution obstacles on the island, as did previous films made in the diaspora like *Improper Conduct*.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the *nuevos realizadores*, see Stock.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the beginning organization and struggles to re-define Cuban cinema from within pressing for a film law, see García Borrero, "Notes on the Contemporary..."

<sup>9</sup> Many Cuban films have faced censorship on the island, including but not limited to: *p.M.* (Jiménez Leal 1961), *Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas* (Díaz Torres 1991), *Memorias del desarrollo* (Coyula 2010), *Crematorio I: En fin...el mal* (Cremata 2013), *Quiero hacer mi película* (Ramírez 2018), among many more.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the documentarians' works, see Aparicio Ferrera's shorts *El Secadero* (2018) and *Silverio* (2019), and Fraguera Fosado's short *Ladridos* (2015) and the mid-length film *Las desdichas de un hombre* (2018).

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