

Animated **film** and the Construction of a Caribbean Cultural **Identity**

¡Vampiros en la Habana! by Juan Padrón
and *Chico y Rita* by Fernando Trueba and Javier Mariscal

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CINE DE ANIMACIÓN Y CONSTRUCCIÓN DE UNA IDENTIDAD CULTURAL CARIBEÑA:

¡VAMPIROS EN LA HABANA! DE JUAN PADRÓN Y CHICO Y RITA DE FERNANDO TRUEBA Y JAVIER MARISCAL

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the representation of cultural identity in two animated films: *¡Vampiros en la Habana!* (1985) produced by Cuba's ICAIC studios, as compared to a recent production from Spain, *Chico y Rita* (2010), directed by Fernando Trueba and Javier Mariscal. I argue that while Padrón's film uses humor as a device to deal with the complex political and social context of the eighties, it also emphasizes the Cubaness of its characters, conjugated as both *cubanía* and *cubeano*. Trueba and Mariscal, in turn, use animation language to mold their movie along the lines of cubanismo or "Buena Vista effect", i.e. the commodification of a local (Cuban) identity. Animation here serves as a way to stress movement, sensuality and music of the region and the "Caribbeaness" of the characters. While *Chico y Rita* has no particular political message and goes beyond local and national concerns, the film is not exempt of the well-known stereotypes applied to the Caribbean.

Keywords

Animation, Visual Arts, Film, Cultural Identity, Caribbean, Latin America.

RESUMEN

Este artículo propone analizar la representación de la identidad cultural en dos películas de animación: *¡Vampiros en la Habana!* (1985), dirigida por Juan Padrón y producida por los estudios ICAIC de Cuba, y *Chico y Rita* (2010), dirigida por Fernando Trueba y Javier Mariscal y producida en España. Arguyo que mientras que la película de Padrón usa el humor como herramienta para problematizar el complejo contexto político y social de los ochenta, también hace hincapié en la identidad cubana de sus personajes, conjugada como *cubanía* y *cubeano*. Trueba y Mariscal, en cambio, aparentemente usan la animación como lenguaje para moldear su película sobre el cubanismo o "efecto Buena Vista", i.e. la comodificación de una identidad local (cubana). Mientras que la película no escapa algunos de los estereotipos que persisten sobre el Caribe, la animación sirve aquí para subrayar movimiento, sensualidad y la música de la región, así como la "caribeñidad" de los personajes. Así, Chico y Rita va más allá de preocupaciones identitarias locales y nacionales, centrándose en la expresión de una identidad caribeña diaspórica.

Palabras Clave

Animación, Artes visuales, Cinema, Identidad Cultural, Caribe, América Latina.

1 ANIMATED FILM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A CARIBBEAN CULTURAL IDENTITY: *¡VAMPIROS EN LA HABANA!* BY JUAN PADRÓN AND *CHICO Y RITA* BY FERNANDO TRUEBA AND JAVIER MARISCAL

In this article I will discuss how animation, understood as a language and form of literacy, has been instrumental in giving shape to Caribbean identity, both from within and from outside the Caribbean, by taking a look at two major productions, one from Cuba, and one from Spain. In both countries animation studios have been active over the past decades, contributing to the promotion of a wide range of film productions at both a national and regional level. In this article I will take a brief look at the representation of cultural identity in Juan Padrón's feature-length *¡Vampiros en la Habana!* (1985), comparing the film to the more recent Spanish production *Chico y Rita* (2010) by Oscar winning director Fernando Trueba (*Belle Époque*) and Javier Mariscal, a Barcelona based artist and designer. While the former feature-length movie was made in partnership with a Spanish company, the latter does not only project an exotic image of Cuban cultural identity, but also serves as a counterpoint in showing how animation as a universal language is able to strengthen the idea of Caribbeanness. I argue that, although there is an important chronological gap between the dates of release of these films, both show how animation was, and continuous to be (especially in light of new developments in the field) a genre where the representation of cultural identity takes centre stage. Moreover, I argue that while Padrón's film is mainly dealing with a particular form of national pride or Cubaness (*cubaneo*), Trueba and Mariscal's production transcends the promotion of Cuban identity (*cubanismo*) in order to negotiate a transnational and diasporic form of Caribbeanness. However, understanding the importance of the genre of animation to a number of academic fields requires us to first take a look at what "animation" actually is or stands for, for its definition is subject to change, especially since CGI (*Computer Generated Images*) and 3D have become predominant in mainstream animated film.

2 THE GENETICS OF ANIMATION

Nowadays animation is literally everywhere, from film to videogames, from multimedia applications to photography and the very technological devices we use on a daily basis. According to Lev Manovich (2007):

In the second part of the 1990s, moving-image culture went through a fundamental transformation. Previously separate media—live-action cinematography, graphics, still photography, animation, 3D computer animation, and typography—started to be combined in numerous ways. By the end of the decade, the "pure" moving-image media became an exception and hybrid media became the norm. (p.1)

Animation, then, can best be defined as a hybrid and "impure" phenomenon. Rather than a neatly defined discipline or art, animation is a phenomenon which crosses different visual arts and fields of graphic activity. Animation is a broad term which has been used to refer to a wide range of forms of cultural expression, from amateur frame-to-frame photography to surrealist stop-motion film, from special effects in the world of spectacle to videogames, from non-digital, hand drawn art to computer generated mega-productions. Furthermore, a wide range of (technological and other) processes related to what is commonly referred to as "animation" has undergone a revolution over the past decades.

Animation is not simply the technique of making images move in “frame-by-frame” sequences as it once was defined. One early definition that went beyond “frame-by-frame” was Norman McLaren’s, who in the 1950s said that “Animation is not the art of drawings that move, but rather *the art of movements that are drawn*. What happens *between* each frame is more important than what happens on each frame” (emphasis by the author). Just as the craft of translation, the craft of animation has gone largely unacknowledged, not least in the visual arts themselves. Animation is, for instance, at the core of video art. It suffices to mention the recent hybrid work of artists such as Nathalie Djurberg or Hans Op de Beeck, who creatively integrate animation in their video installations. Nowadays, what we call “video art” — basically moving images displayed on screens in art galleries — might well be, as one critic noted, “the most riveting, the most reliably surprising artistic medium of our time” (Smee, 2014). What is less acknowledged is that video art often draws directly on animation art, including animated film. In other words, animation is an essential component in contemporary video art.

However, as Vibeke Sørensen (2003) explains, animation is not just an abstract phenomenon whereby images are put into movement, it is also a complex *language* and methodology used to communicate by putting into relation different language “acts” across various hybrid or inter-connected media: previously separate media that were largely based on the senses (such as television) are becoming more dynamic, interactive (e.g. integrated with social media) and “real-time”, and, as a consequence, more “multi-sensory” and “multi-media”. Animation language is, according to Sørensen, the primary methodology necessary to explore and understand the inner workings of the different media; animation language allows us to link, to reflect upon and to give shape to dynamic cultural experiences and identities. As with any language, animation has a grammar which is subject to change; and it is a language in which one can become more or less proficient. In other words, it requires a *literacy* which can be learned, and animators should dynamically adapt their praxis as animation penetrates new areas of activity.

Lev Manovich (2001, 2006, 2007) had previously noted that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation. Cinema has, since its very beginnings, treated animation as a subgenre, while in fact cinema is one of the myriad of modalities of animation: “born from animation, cinema pushed animation to its periphery, only in the end to become one particular case of animation” (Manovich, 2001, p. 255). When discussing the future of animation, Manovich emphasizes in a similar vein as Sørensen how every cinematic phenomenon can be genetically tracked back to animation:

Besides animated films proper and animated sequences used as a part of other moving image projects, animation has become a set of principles and techniques which animators, filmmakers and special-effect artists employ today to create new methods and new visual styles. Therefore, I think that it is not worthwhile to ask if this or that visual style or method for creating moving images which emerged after computerization is “animation” or not. It is more productive to say that most of these methods were born from animation and have animation DNA – mixed with DNA from other media. I think that such a perspective which considers “animation in an extended field” is a more productive way to think about animation today, especially if we want our reflections to be relevant for everybody concerned with contemporary visual and media cultures. (Manovich, 2006, p.26)

In other words, Manovich not only argues that the border between animation and cinema has become porous. He suggests something much more significant: that animation is cinema's mirror in which it discovers its disavowed self: cinema (the center) is discovering itself – albeit a bit late – in animation (which it considers to be a peripheral genre of itself). Innovative cinematic techniques such as Universal Capture (UCAP), which became popular in the 90s through films such as *The Matrix*, raised the bar dramatically for rendering computer generated body movements in a wide range of software applications, video-games, commercials and film. Progressively and unstopably, photographic realism became the ultimate aim of CGI, leading to a (albeit limited) valorisation of animation.

Fortunately, from the academic point of view, an analogic valorisation of animation – its discovery as a valuable object of interdisciplinary research – has been happening over the past decade, whereas Film Studies so far considered animation to be a side-product of cinema (Ward, 2003). Animation, while being wildly present across different media, at an institutional and academic level long suffered from the prejudice of being a *subgenre* of Film Studies; it took time for both scholars and institutions to fully grasp its importance as a field of knowledge. Formed in the disciplinary field of literary studies, I believe that animation's fate in academy has been, up to a certain degree, comparable to that of comparative literature: if nowadays it is acknowledged that comparative literature (through the study of transnational phenomena) has prevailed, from an institutional perspective "Comp Lit" is still to be found at the margins (above all in Europe), even though it has steadily been moving away from its 19th century origins and its initial conceptualization as a Eurocentric discipline. In times of globalization and increased inter-cultural contact not so much has changed: still predominant in academy is the division in *national* literatures, usually the well-protected object of national language departments.

3 ANIMATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

In the scholarly field known as Latin American studies, it is a little known fact that one of the South American continent's most appreciated authors, Alejo Carpentier from Cuba, was extremely enthusiastic about the visual art of animated film. In his review of Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, Carpentier applauded Disney's ability to translate the "marvelous" dimension of reality to the big screen.¹ Carpentier was fascinated by Disney's ability as a "total creator", highly praising Disney's interpretation of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*: "having been deceived so many times by choreographers and dancers, Stravinsky, the supreme composer of our times, found in Hollywood the person to capture the true sense of his musical score, showing us what no stage in the world could show us" (Carpentier, quoted in Borge, 2008, p. 151).

Nevertheless, the quest for the marvelous dimension has, unfortunately and unpredictably, played tricks both on Carpentier's own craft – writing fiction – and on animated art: the marvelous quickly turned into a trademark. As with Latin American literature, animation has become synonymous with a language that creates a magical dimension. Carpentier called that dimension *lo real maravilloso*: an evocation of the marvelous as "magic" naturally blending with reality. The idea of animation as *that which makes the impossible possible*, as that which turns reality into magic, has since long become a cliché. In a similar fashion, Latin American literature, has been packaged and stereotyped as "magical realism", an all-encompassing brand which has all too easily been (and continues to be) applied to Latin American authors, even those who have never (consciously or unconsciously) explored the marvelous dimension.

Hence, the branding of Latin American literature as inherently marvelous turned it into a kind of literary playground: in Latin American fiction, as in animation, magic is by definition hidden, only to appear unexpectedly. The famous “McOndo” and *Generación del Crack* movements led by a post-boom generation of Latin American writers (such as Alberto Fuguet and Jorge Volpi) rebelled against this standardization of Latin American writing. Their rebellion however did not provoke the much hoped-for eclipse of the marvelous/magical realist stereotype. Likewise, animation has suffered of the “magic” label, still predominantly applied by Disney’s marketing department. The commonplace of animation as a cinematic genre *producing magic* has been reinforced to some extent by the predominance of Disney’s animation since the 1930s of the past century. Although Disney most often used abstract forms and non-photographic characters, realism (or even “hyperrealism”, as Paul Wells (1998, p.28) describes Disney’s mimicking of the real) and verosimilitude in character design and narrative are at the heart of Disney’s art. Typically, magical things occur within this hyper-realist world, which is familiar to the spectator.

What Carpentier in his time could never have predicted was that his home-island, Cuba, would become the place par excellence in the Caribbean where visual arts would be developed. Indeed, on the island a tradition in film and animation would emerge, albeit at a modest scale and in line with the government’s cultural policies, through the creation of a national film institute: the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC).² Recently, ICAIC published *Explorando el Cine Caribeño [Exploring Caribbean Cinema]*, a pioneering and fascinating exploration bringing together in one volume various essays – written in or translated into Spanish – on Caribbean film and documentaries, as well as on the process of film production in the broader Caribbean region. Unfortunately, animation is absent from the book, but it shows that Cuba is not, as the stereotype goes, “lagging behind” or being “cut off” from the rest of the world of filmmaking due to its “insularity” on the political, cultural, economic and academic level. On the contrary, both Cuban academy and filmmaking have been actively participating in the creative scene, exhibiting a great potential for setting trends in the creative arts and research.

The creation of a national Film Institute where animation was, since the very beginnings of ICAIC, being given a place is remarkable, especially since animation would remain an undeveloped field in Latin America until recent years. As a matter of fact, Latin America’s market has largely been served by its northern neighbour, while pioneers of animation such as Argentinian artist Quirino Cristiani remained lone rangers, invisible both on their own national artistic scene as well as within the broader Latin American context. Disney’s early attempt to penetrate a new market in Latin America, with official support of the US government, became more obvious with feature-length films such as Donald Duck’s *Saludos Amigos* and *Los Tres Caballeros* released in the 1940s, after Disney and his team of animators had made a trip to Brazil, Peru, Chile and Argentina. Yet the rise and global success of Disney’s animation also prompted some fierce criticism against its cartoons, seen by various intellectuals as a form of cultural imperialism: may it suffice to recall the book *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* published in 1971 by Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman and Belgian sociologist Armand Mattelart – both of whom could best be described as “Disneyconoclasts”. No matter how one looks at these politically tainted books (or rather pamphlets) with an academic undertone, it is easy to see that such publications were not of much help in promoting the craft of animation throughout Latin America, less as an object of academic research.

Nonetheless, over the past few decades there has been an increasing interest in animation, both among Latin American and Caribbean (video) artists and film producers; proof is the production of feature-length films (mostly CGI inspired by mainstream north American studios such as Disney-owned company Pixar), as well as the growing number of animation festivals in the region. An example from the Caribbean was the *Kingstoon* festival (2012) in Jamaica, modest of course if compared to the bigger, established festivals in Brazil (*Anima Mundi*) and Argentina (*Animage*). In Cuba, ICAIC's annual film festival is also an important venue for animators. Within the Caribbean, Cuba is still a key spot for the formation of young animators: ICAIC has managed to consolidate Cuba's tradition in animation thanks to Juan Padrón's serial production of the popular *Elpidio Valdés* series and films, which were produced and broadcasted for more than three decades (1970-2003).

4 ¡VAMPIROS EN LA HABANA!

Juan Padrón's *¡Vampiros en La Habana!* of 1985 has to be seen as part of a tradition in animation from the 60s to the 80s, led by ICAIC, with an impressive number of annual productions (approximately three hundred per year) until the Special Period in the early 90s, when the Institute was on the brink of vanishing due to a dramatic lack of resources. ICAIC, however, miraculously survived the crisis. In her book *On Location in Cuba*, which includes a chapter on animation – and the only scholarly discussion of animation in Latin America and the Caribbean so far – Anne-Marie Stock draws a positive report of the health of ICAIC's animation studio:

Over the past decade alone [2000-2009], computer-generated images have replaced much of the hand drawing and painting, the ICAIC's Animation Studio has expanded from a suite of rooms in a house to a seven-story building, and the staff has grown to include a host of young artists working alongside their experienced counterparts. Perhaps most significantly, the entity has stepped up its efforts to engage with the international arena—participating in and hosting festivals more frequently, entering new markets, and providing services to clients around the world. Without a doubt, Cuba's animation operation has undergone sweeping changes. Yet, this transformation has not meant a complete rupture with the institution's past. (2009, pp. 107-8)

ICAIC thus was able to remain as productive as in the 1980s. The feature-length film *¡Vampiros en La Habana!* (1985) was without any doubt one of ICAIC's greatest successes, and part of it is due to the successful international collaboration with Spanish Public Television, *Radio Televisión Española* (RTVE). The film was made long before computer-generated images entered the animation production scene. Despite the simplicity of the characters, *Vampiros* has a fairly complex, not to say chaotic, storyline, where historical references freely mix with fiction and fantasy. While the topic of vampirism firmly situates the film in the realm of fantasy, the story unrolls in the Habana of the 30s, during the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado (1871-1939). The disordered storyline is in contrast with the simplicity of the hand drawn celluloid animation, as well as with the high quality of the musical score. However, Padrón's film is certainly a *tour de force* when taking into consideration both the limited team of animators, as well as the difficult logistic conditions in which they often worked; especially during Cuba's *Período Especial*, when the studios were left without any basic resources.



Figura 1. Detail of a Poster of ¡Vampiros en la Habana! (dir. J. Padrón)

At a superficial level, then, the hand-drawn celluloid animation is mainly used as a medium to facilitate the narration of a fantastic storyline that evolves around the protagonist, Pepito, brought to Cuba by his uncle, the genius Dr. von Dracula. By administrating his main invention, *Vampisol*, a magic potion consisting of a mixture of *piña colada* and rum (an ingredient von Dracula discovered in Cuba, and the reason why he moved to the island), he manages to convert Pepito into a sun-resistant vampire. Pepito gets involved, against his will, with two gangs of vampires, one in Europe and a rival gang in the US, both fighting for the recipe of *Vampisol*. One key element in the storyline is, I argue, Pepito's intention to freely distribute *Vampisol* to all vampires, an idea also favored by Pepito's uncle, as opposed to the plans of commercial exploitation by the vampire gang of Chicago (operating under the name "Capa Nostra" and led by Jacky Terrori, a character inspired on the legendary mafia boss Al Capone) and its European rival, the elitist "Grupo Vampiro" (Fig. 2). Pepito eventually defeats the gangsters thanks to his display of creativity: he succeeds at divulgating the *Vampisol* recipe in the form of a song broadcasted over *Radio Vampiro Internacional*.

The very topic of vampirism in the film is presented in a highly ambiguous way: vampires are initially presented as an obscure "European" product but predominantly popularized in the Americas through the figure of Dr. von Dracula. The extra-diegetic narrator (in *voice-over*) differentiates between good and evil vampires, where the evil is embodied by the gangs, versus Pepito and his uncle as somewhat naïve and creative idealists who care about the common welfare of vampires. Above all Pepito, the protagonist, is profiled as a rebel in an underground mission to fight the regime of General Machado (Fig. 3). However, what does *Vampiros* tell us about a vampire's identity? More awkwardly, what does it tell us about Cuban identity? If Pepe's strength consists in being an indefatigable rebel against everything evil, both from abroad as well as local/national, the choice for Machado (instead of other historical figures such as Batista) is a safe bet from the political point of view: *Vampiros'* narrative, by maintaining a chronological distance to the Post-Revolutionary regime, fits well in the Grand narrative of the Revolution.

Moreover, Pepito's effective transformation into a vampire does neither occur as a personal choice, nor is it imposed by his uncle von Dracula, rather it appears to be imposed from the outside. His "vampirisation" is something he comes to terms with as his struggle against the Machado regime intensifies: the transformation into vampire is significant when analyzed in the context of Cuban culture. As Anne-Marie Stock points out, Pepito is a character "coded with Cubanness" (Stock, 2009, p. 116). However, I argue that Stock's argument can be refined: Pepito is, to be more precise, coded with what is referred to in Cuba as *cubano*, a typical way of communicating and sharing with one's peers, of being member of a community; as one Cuban writer explains, *cubano* is an "effusive cordiality that characterizes our dealings with each other" (Pérez Firmat, 1997, p.5). Not by coincidence, Pepito is also a trumpet player, professionally, but he plays his musical instrument as a tool for both socializing *and* survival, emphasizing what Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz coined *cubanía*, or the consciousness of being Cuban (Pérez Firmat, 1997, p.7). Most importantly, the transformation into a vampire does not kill the musician in Pepito. His musical education as well as his ability to shape-shift into a vampire are naturally presented as a *part of* his Cubanness – conjugated here as both *cubanía* and *cubano* – and become part of his revolutionary ideals. Besides a trickster, Pepito is also a mediator: he operates as go-between for the Cuban community of vampires and human beings, for he has the privilege to participate and belong to both.



Figura 2. The vampire elite trying out *Vampisol*.
Film still of *¡Vampiros en la Habana!* (dir. J. Padrón).

From the perspective of Cuban national identity, the vampires' obsession with *Vampisol* is, as I have stated earlier, more than *fait-divers*. One can argue that the magical potion introduces in the story, in a hilarious (and very obvious) fashion, the topic of the cold war, the old political dialectic of communism versus Western capitalism (seen as a form of vampirism sucking out the Third world's blood).³ Recognizably, the tension between free distribution *versus* commercial exploitation is echoed nowadays in the (global) creation and distribution of so called "commons" and *open source* (the free availability to all of goods such as education and software) versus the commercial marketing of such products. From an ideological perspective, the free distribution of goods is in line with broader political interests of the Cuban regime: *Vampiros* can thus easily be interpreted as a film in line with Cuba's communist agenda in the 80s, and its aim to strengthen a sense of national identity. However, the choice for Machado's regime as the historical frame of the film is rather puzzling and contradictory

from a historical perspective, for the heroes of the Cuban Revolution fought against General Batista's dictatorship (which was put in place decades after Machado's semi-dictatorial regime). As a matter of fact, most historians dress a rather positive report of Machado, describing him as one of the trailblazers of Cuban independence.⁴ The result is an uncanny mix of fact and fiction: *Vampiros* throws (rather heavy-handed) historical references in a cocktail of pedagogical values and fantasy, but also satire and humor, typical of Juan Padrón. Not by coincidence, the main character, Pepito, inherited some traits of one of Padrón's previous animated characters, the popular Cuban hero *Elpidio Valdés*.⁵



Figura 3. Film still from ¡Vampiros en la Habana! (dir. J. Padrón)

From a pedagogical perspective, *¡Vampiros en la Habana!* has many of the features of the *Elpidio* series, which more or less explicitly aimed to educate Cuba's youth about the country's revolutionary ideals since the 19th century. It will not come as a surprise then, that Padrón's *Elpidio Valdés* (1979) was also the first feature-length film promoting patriotic values mainly to a younger spectatorship: in the theme song we are reminded, for instance, of *Elpidio's* rock-solid identity as an indefatigable "patriot without equal" fighting the Spaniards. It is easy to understand why successful Revolution-friendly troubadours such as Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez were embraced by ICAIC: by providing the theme songs for Padrón's films and series they helped to deliver a typically "Cuban" product which was largely appreciated by a national spectatorship which could easily identify with its protagonists. Besides pedagogical values such as patriotism, integrity, courage, *Elpidio* displayed – through a set of epic characters – a predominantly positive image of Cuban identity. These were, then, the various ingredients of a success formula: a strong musical score, humor, and a dose of patriotism the spectator could easily appreciate and mimic. *Elpidio* was, unlike Pepito's more fragile appearance, a straightforward, strong character both in his sense for strategic action and problem solving. Finally, both Pepito and *Elpidio's* profiles are reminiscent of popular characters such as Paddington's Felix the Cat, Peanuts characters (such as Charlie Brown), Blake Edward's Pink Panther, or Quino's Mafalda.⁶ From a technical point of view, nowadays Padrón's movies and series would look inferior, even to most animated series on television, but animators agree that, for the time being, *Elpidio Valdés* was a fairly high quality production.

Silvio Rodríguez also provided the musical theme for ICAIC’s newest feature-length film, *Meñique* (2014), its first entirely CGI produced 3D movie, about the adventures of a Cuban hero, inspired on Laboulaye’s classic fairy tale of Tom Thumb. As with the *Elpidio Valdés* series, Ernesto Padrón’s *Meñique y el espejo mágico* [*Tom Little and the Magic Mirror*] (2014) clearly shows a continuation in pedagogical tradition, something we rarely observe in animation produced in other countries.



Figura 4. Film still of *Meñique* (dir. E. Padrón)

Directed by Juan Padrón’s brother, ICAIC’s most recent animated film was co-produced by Galician animation studio Ficción producciones. Unlike *Vampiros*, *Meñique* (Fig. 4) is based on the famous short story by José Martí, the spiritual father of the Cuban revolution, known for his political engagement, his journalism, as well as his pedagogical and literary work. Martí published a journal specially targeted at children titled *La Edad de Oro* [*The Golden age*], and the short story “Meñique” appeared in the first number of the Journal in 1889.⁷ Well into the new millennium the studio’s commitment to the ideals of the Revolution, as Anne-Marie Stock argues, have remained intact:

Animators continue to perceive their primary role as serving their compatriots, especially the children of their nation, and resisting U.S. domination by proffering alternatives to Disney cartoons. So while digital technology and international market forces have had a major impact on Cuban animation in recent years, the island’s local tradition has not been usurped by the global industry. (Stock, 2009, p. 108)

However, in terms of animation technology and techniques, *Meñique*, contrary to *Vampiros*, does heavily mimick Pixar’s (a Disney company) recognizable CGI style. While ¡*Vampiros en La Habana!* is structured around *cubaneo* as an axis for performance of cultural identity, foreign animation films offer an interesting point of contrast to Padrón’s creation, for they place Cuban identity in a broader Caribbean context. It is a commonplace by now to say that since the late 90s we are witnessing a global boom of Cuban culture but also the promotion – and commodification– of Cubanness and Cuban culture. This commodification is what is referred to as *cubanismo*, or what I prefer to call the “*Buena Vista effect*”, the promotional wave of films and albums which helped putting Cuban culture on the global map.

5 CHICO Y RITA

Chico y Rita (2010), a Spanish film produced twenty five years after Juan Padrón's first *Vampiros*, is at first blush hardly comparable to the latter, both in format and content: the film does not refer to any fantastic topics (such as vampirism), and the characters are highly realistic depictions of real actors, made possible by the "rotoscope" technique.⁸ However, *Chico y Rita* is also deeply engaged with Cuban culture. I argue that, contrary to *Vampiros*, the Spanish film seems to transcend the exclusive reference to Cuban culture, placing it in a broader framework: how can Caribbean identity be represented, and what added-value does animation give to an outside perspective (or "re-presentation") of Caribbean culture? The feature-length film, produced by Fernando Trueba and Javier Mariscal, fits perfectly well in the trend of packaging Cuban culture for the Global Market. It is not hard to see why: the entire film – with a strong documentary character – is a tribute to (real) Cuban (and broader Caribbean) music entering the global scene at the end of the 90s. Even director Wim Wenders, best known for his "Independent" documentaries and movies, can said to have strongly contributed to the promotion of this wave of success through his documentary *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), a tribute, with Ry Cooder, to forgotten or hidden Cuban musicians: its international success sparked a revival of interest in traditional Cuban music, and in Latin American music as a whole.

On a superficial level, *Chico y Rita* could, quite simply, be seen as a *homage* to Cuban music, whereby animation is an efficient language to emphasize the importance of rhythm, corporality and performance in Cuban culture. However, from a broader perspective on Caribbean culture and Caribbeanness, *Chico y Rita's* exotic-flavored "Cuban" scenery and characters become a synecdoque for Caribbean culture at large: Cuban music becomes a signifier for Caribbeanness, while specific references to Cuban politics and society fade into the background, even though the spectator is at all times aware of the Cuban setting of the movie. In the wake of Wenders and Cooder, Fernando Trueba had, before co-directing *Chico y Rita*, already made a Latin jazz documentary titled *Calle 54* (2006) featuring Chucho Valdés, a production which saw the birth of his collaboration and friendship with artist and designer Javier Mariscal.⁹ Quite obviously, *Chico y Rita* is largely inspired on *Calle 54* and *Buena Vista Social Club*, and in a sense can be seen as an extension of these documentaries by focusing on the (fictional) romance between the pianist Chico and the woman he falls in love with, Rita, a singer who is discovered by the music industry and taken to New York (Chico is mostly inspired on the character of the legendary pianist Bebo Valdés). Besides, as I will explain later, the documentary effect is very strong in *Chico y Rita*, thus contributing to the emerging genre of (mostly CGI-produced) animated documentaries.

While the film narrates the betrayal and forced return of Chico to his home-island, sensitive political issues are avoided; instead the emphasis lays on the cultural heritage of Cuban music as a form of art. The language of animation, the film suggests, emphasizes the tropical setting, Cuba's racial variety as well as sensuality as exemplary for the broader Caribbean, both through the selection and depiction of its characters as the choice of warm colors. Moreover, Caribbeanness transcends the (cultural) particularities of Cubaness and *cubanismo*. From a broader perspective on Caribbean culture and Caribbeanness, then, *Chico y Rita's* music-flavored scene is the main image that the spectatorship gets of the Caribbean as a whole: Cuban music here, as it is displaced to New York, becomes a *pars pro toto* for the deeply diasporic ramifications of Caribbean culture at large; and, we can safely add, Cuban music comes to stand also for one of the key performances of Caribbeanness: music and rhythm become the main



Figura 5. *Chico y Rita* (dir. Fernando Trueba and Javier Mariscal). Film still from the Press book.

representant of Caribbean identity, an identity which is performed as much on the US island of Manhattan as in the geographical region called “Caribbean”. As such, Havana and New York become two “characters” of a two-folded Caribbean play. In the film’s Press book, the directors describe their aim as follows:

Havana and New York are two characters in the film. (...) Havana is very sunny and warm, and in terms of colours is very rich in palette, and New York is almost monochromatic. This is a very important part of the film. (...) We have Havana and New York. We have Latino and Anglo Saxon. What is Latino? It’s a weather, it’s a colour, it’s a music, it’s a fashion, it’s a way to spread the love. (Trueba y Mariscal, 2010)

By taking place in two locations (Cuba and New York), *Chico y Rita* avoids the *mise en scène* of, say, a production such as *West Side Story*, where action takes exclusively place in a marginal section of New York, focusing on the Puerto Rican community in the Upper West of Manhattan. The Caribbean imagined and created by Trueba, Errando and Mariscal does, however, foster a romanticized and exotic view of the Caribbean, thus reinforcing some of the persisting stereotypes: the Caribbean represented is one of music, sensuality and pleasure, thus reinforcing what I have called here the “*Buena Vista effect*”, the commodification of Caribbean culture which was initiated by Ry Cooder and Wim Wenders’ “recycling” of mostly hidden Cuban musicians both in Cuba and in Sweden.

Hence, *Chico y Rita*, while *stricto sensu* not an animated *documentary*, reminds us of other animated feature-length films: mostly historical films which are based on true stories, such as the autobiographical docu-film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), an Oscar nominated documentary directed by Ari Folman about the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.¹⁰ *Waltz with Bashir* tells the traumatic story of Folman who tries to recover his memories of the time he was a soldier in Lebanon. The animation in both *Waltz with Bashir* and *Chico y Rita* is based on realistically roto-scoped images; fact and fiction mix in an intelligent way, creating at times a surreal, dream-like effect, while maintaining a high degree of realism. This is particularly useful to emphasize the remembrance by the protagonists (respectively Folman and Chico). The result in both

films can be best described through Freud's concept of the "Uncanny" (*das Unheimliche*) an instance where something is perceived as familiar, yet foreign at the same time, resulting in an uncomfortable feeling where the familiar turns into strangeness (Freud, 2003 [1919]). The appearance in the film of a host of mythical figures of the world of Caribbean jazz, such as Tito Puente and Chato Pozo, reinforces the realism and documentary effect of the film. Realism, as I have stated earlier, is an important component since the early days of animation, much before the rise of Disney. In *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918), for instance, Winsor McCay, a pioneer of animation and creator of *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), realistically re-created in 1915 the tragic accident of the passenger liner *Lusitania* on the Atlantic Ocean, and by doing so arguably created the first animated documentary.

Furthermore, *Chico y Rita* moves away from the current trend of applying CGI about everywhere in animation, as an exclusive way to reach a high degree of realism: the "flat" characters occasionally move on a 3D rendered background, but the film remains faithful to traditional 2D, handdrawn animation. As Ůlo Pikkov argues, in recent animated film "the aspiration towards more and more faithful portrayals of reality has been complemented by a quest for an alternative to this fascination with realism by the major studios" (Pikkov, 2010, p. 104). As a hybrid film with documentary traits, *Chico y Rita* challenges the tradition of the documentary as a pure, non-animated genre (e.g. *Buena Vista Social Club*) as well as against the current trend of aiming for hyper-reality in CGI animation (a trend set by blockbuster movies such as *Avatar*). The aim of CGI, we should remember, is not to imitate Disney-like (hyper) realism (expressed in a character's moral and social behavior), but rather to aim for photographic realism. *Vampiros* succeeded in combining Disney-like "hyperrealism" with an original style and the codes of Cubaness. Logically, Padr3n's film was a huge success in Cuba (beating by far *Chico y Rita*), but the many references to "lo cubano", the narrative hoop-jumping and spicy, often politically not-so correct humor had a much harder time being understood outside the Caribbean region. Even though it is situated in a fantasy world, ICAIC's most recent production, *Meñique* (2014), was criticized precisely for following mainstream (US) trends in animation. Ernesto Padr3n's film indeed largely subscribes to and imitates mainstream American CGI production. Its lack of originality is in sharp contrast with the more daring and creative animation coming from Latin America: Brazilian films such as Luiz Bolognesi's *Rio 2096: Uma Hist3ria de Amor e F3ria* (2013) and Al3 Abreu's *O Menino e o mundo* (2008) clearly respond to what Pikkov calls a "quest for an alternative" to dominant modes of using computers for generating 3D animation.

6 CONCLUSION

Both *Vampiros en La Habana!* and *Chico y Rita* succeeded in creating an original style and flavor, in spite of being made in very different contexts and in different timeframes, largely thanks to experimentation with animation techniques (especially in the latter). The fact that the label "dibujo de animado cubano" appeared on the original poster of Padr3n's film (see Fig. 1) emphasized the national context of production. While the movie targeted foremost a national spectatorship, its success throughout the hispanophone world was a byproduct rather than an intended goal. *Chico y Rita*, on the contrary, from the outset targeted an international spectatorship (much like Wim Wenders did), with the explicit goal to further promote Cuban and Caribbean culture. While the former has clear pedagogical and (more indirectly) political objectives, the latter avoids any political reference and projects Cuban culture towards a globally integrated, post-communist future.

Rather than a convergence of modes of animation, the future will probably see a plurality of modes of production, especially within the Caribbean and Latin American context. Drawing on decades of know-how, Cuba occupies a privileged position in the field; ICAIC's experience allows the Institute, if resources are available, to continue its regional lead in animation, as it already created its own language and tradition; Cuba can also benefit from a transnational network of collaboration with other Latin American countries, as well as with Europe. The emergence of new technologies, and their accessibility to low-budgets, is helping to create new opportunities for animators in very diverse sectors of activity. With regards to Cuban animation, it is to be expected that the Cuban government's recent relaxation of political ties with the US will enable directors to work on a wider range of topics for future film production, including animation: less politically determined than in the past (the dictate to serve the ideals of *La Revolución*) and more open to experimentation, however maintaining an important share in 2D animation. In addition to CGI's current monopoly in mainstream animated film, stop-motion's potential is still unexplored by most Caribbean and Latin American animators, although it is an inexpensive and innovative subgenre of animation, and it is usually seen as less commercial than many of the CGI projects (think about the surrealist work by the Brothers Quay or Jan Svankmayer).¹¹ It is encouraging to see that some of the best animation recently made in Latin America used this technique (e.g. Uruguayan director Walter Tournier's movie *Selkirk el verdadero Robinson Crusoe* (2012), a film aimed at younger spectators).

Whether the emerging success of Latin American animation will have beneficiary effects (in terms of funding, distribution, and creative interaction) on intra-Caribbean collaborative projects remains to be seen. Many artists and animators across the Caribbean have an explicit interest in transnational collaboration, and concrete projects can give Caribbean animation more visibility. It is encouraging to observe a similar desire for transnational projects among Caribbean documentary and filmmakers (Notario and Paddington, 2014), many of them working in the diaspora. For Caribbean film, what is at stake then is not the implementation of animation as a new genre, but rather the re-discovery, consolidation and expansion throughout the region of its own – already present – animation language.

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NOTAS

1. See also Jason Borge's (2008) discussion in *Latin American writers and The Rise of Hollywood Cinema*, particularly relevant is the chapter on Disney's impact on Latin American writing. One might even speculate as Jason Borge suggests, about the existence of a link between Carpentier's *El Reino de este mundo* (Carpentier 1949) and Disney's concept of "Magical Kingdom", an idea which might shock some of the more conservative Latin Americanists who are not so keen to see a link between the canonized Cuban writer and the American entrepreneur affectionately known as "Uncle Walt". Interestingly, Disney's *Fantasia* challenges the supposed divide between on the one side the "high brow" culture of classical music, and, on the other, popular culture, the realm to which animation has been relegated.
2. Although there is no real school for animation, *The Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* (ICAIC) has organized many workshops to train animators, under the supervision of the Padrón brothers.
3. Marx was one of the prolific users of vampirism as a metaphor, for instance in his *Capital*, when discussing the negative effects of capitalism (Muller, 2007, pp. 196-97).
4. See for instance Richard Gott's *Cuba, a New History* (2005).
5. Juan Padrón's sequel to the film *Más vampiros en la Habana* (2003), produced almost 20 years after ¡Vampiros en La Habana! (with the aid of computers), also draws on the mixture of humor and fantasy with historical facts (*Más vampiros* starts at the dawn of the Second World War and the fight against Nazi Germany).
6. Not by coincidence ICAIC was in charge of the production of the feature-length film *Mafalda*.
7. The film's soundtrack includes music by Manu Riveiro and songs written by Silvio Rodríguez and performed by Anabel López, Miriam Ramos and Ernesto Joel Espinosa.
8. Rotoscoping was mainly used since the late 1930s for studying human and animal movement instead of actual tracing movements.
9. In another film, *Blanco Y Negro* (2003), Fernando Trueba brought together Cuban-born pianist Bebo Valdés and Flamenco singer Diego "Cigala" in a live recorded performance.
10. Another recent example of the growing success of animated films with a strong historical and documentary character is *Cafard* (2015), by Belgian director Jan Bultheel.
11. An important exception in stop-motion is the pioneering short film *Veinte Años*, again from Cuba's ICAIC, directed by Bárbaro Joel Ortiz.

