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The Erased Filmmaker: Nicolás Guillén Landrián and the Politics of Censorship in Cuban Documentary Cinema

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Abstract

Nicolás Guillén Landrián (1938–2003) is often described as one of the most formally daring documentary filmmakers to emerge from Cuba's Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC), yet decades of institutional censorship, including imprisonment, forced psychiatric treatment, and the quiet burial of his films in archives, pushed him into a kind of official nonexistence. His work resurfaced unexpectedly during a 2003 screening in Havana, an event that seemed to reveal just how much had been missing from the historical record. This article examines the systematic relationship between the revolutionary Cuban censorship apparatus and the aesthetic strategies Guillén Landrián developed, from his early ICAIC shorts to his final exile film, *Inside Downtown* (2001). Drawing on archival materials, published interviews, critical theory (Foucault, Agamben, Bourdieu, Scott, de Certeau), and close readings of key films such as *Coffea Arábiga* (1968), *Desde La Habana ¡1969! Recordar* (1969–1971), and *Taller de Línea y 18* (1971), we argue that censorship did not simply constrain his filmmaking but shaped it in ways that opened unexpected formal paths. We describe these strategies as a "poetics of obliqueness"—a mode of working that embeds critique within intermedial collage, uneasy juxtapositions, ellipsis, allegory, and double coding. These tactics exploited the gap between the apparatus's strict monitoring of explicit ideological statements and its difficulty policing ambiguous or formally inventive gestures. Although grounded in the Cuban case, this framework speaks to broader questions about how artists under authoritarian conditions convert pressure into a generative constraint, revealing how creativity can survive, and sometimes mutate, under sustained surveillance.

Keywords: Cuban documentary cinema; censorship; Nicolás Guillén Landrián; ICAIC; poetics of obliqueness; intermediality; documentary film; Latin American cinema; art and authoritarianism

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1. Introduction: The Filmmaker Who Was Erased

1.1. A Scene of Rediscovery

How does a living filmmaker become a ghost? In his essay "Exhumaciones de Nicolás Guillén Landrián," Cuban film critic Dean Luis Reyes recounts an afternoon when one such ghost abruptly returned to view. On the afternoon of 22 February 2003, the auditorium of the Cine Charles Chaplin in Havana was only sparsely filled. At the time, the early editions of the *Muestra de Nuevos Realizadores*, the ICAIC's annual showcase of young Cuban filmmakers, had not yet become the crowded events they would later be. The program listed five short documentaries by a filmmaker whose name meant little to most spectators: Nicolás Guillén Landrián. But the moment *Desde La Habana ¡1969! Recordar* (1969–1971) began to unspool, something shifted in the room. The tension was almost palpable, an

almost electric charge settling over the sparse audience. The ferocity of the montage, the way the film compressed decades of Cuban history into a dense web of citations, and the subtle yet unmistakable pressure it placed on the Revolution's official narrative created what Reyes later described, without exaggeration, as a collective shock. The dominant sensation, he wrote, was that the history of Cuban cinema had been badly told (Reyes 2013).

That screening functioned as an act of rediscovery, posthumous in effect, even though Guillén Landrián was still alive, living in poverty and obscurity in downtown Miami. He would die of cancer five months later without learning the full extent of the impact his reemerging work would have on a new generation of Cuban filmmakers. The irony is stark. One of the most formally daring documentary filmmakers in Cuban cinema had been so thoroughly erased from the institutional record that even directors working in a tradition he helped shape did not know he existed.

The reasons for that disappearance are at once biographical and institutional. Born in Camagüey on 30 June 1938, Nicolás Guillén Landrián was the nephew of Nicolás Guillén, the "national poet" of revolutionary Cuba, president of the *Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba* (UNEAC; Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba), and a pillar of the cultural establishment. That family proximity opened doors, but it also imposed a burden. Known to friends and colleagues as "Nicolasito," Guillén Landrián was a painter, a social sciences student at the University of Havana, and an anti-Batista militant before entering the ICAIC in the early 1960s. There he was mentored by the Dutch documentarian Joris Ivens and the Danish filmmaker Theodor Christensen. He was one of only three Afro-Cuban directors active at the ICAIC in its first decade.

Over the following years, he produced a remarkable body of short documentaries—poetic, contemplative, and formally experimental portraits of subaltern Cuban life that placed him at the forefront of an alternative documentary practice within the Revolution. Yet the same aesthetic freedom that made these films distinctive also made them dangerous. His refusal to subordinate images to ideological instruction, his insistence on exhausted bodies and ambiguous faces rather than triumphant revolutionary subjects, and his increasingly radical experiments with intermedial collage were interpreted by cultural authorities as insubordination. The consequences were devastating: imprisonment at the Presidio Modelo on the Isla de Pinos; forced psychiatric internment with electroshock therapy; definitive expulsion from the ICAIC in 1972 for producing films "inconsistent with the goals of the Revolution"; a further arrest in 1976 on charges of "ideological deviationism" and an alleged conspiracy to assassinate Fidel Castro; six months of interrogation at Villa Marista (the headquarters of State Security); and transfer to Mazorra, Havana's notorious psychiatric hospital, for more electroshock treatments. When he finally emigrated to Miami in late 1989, he was a broken man. Yet even in exile, living in motels and painting to survive, he managed one final act of filmmaking: *Inside Downtown* (2001), a haunting auto-fictional portrait of Miami's downtown margins that rewrites, from the other shore, his earliest Havana documentaries.

1.2. Framing the Argument

Scholarship on Guillén Landrián has largely approached his work through one of two lenses. The first treats him as a biographical cause célèbre, the "cursed filmmaker," the genius destroyed by a repressive regime, foregrounding persecution and human drama at the expense of sustained formal analysis (Zayas 2010; Brown and Lago 1991). The second line of scholarship, more recent in tone, tends to focus on aesthetic innovation (intermedial collage, reflexive irony, radical montage), although often treating these features as if they floated free from the censorship apparatus that shaped them (Ramos 2013; Reyes 2010).

Each approach clarifies an important side of the story, yet both stop short of explaining how institutional repression and aesthetic form became so tightly intertwined in Guillén Landrián's work.

This article proposes a third way of reading him. Drawing on archival evidence, interviews and testimonies, close formal analysis, and theoretical frameworks from censorship studies and intermediality, we argue that Guillén Landrián's formal strategies emerged directly in response to a specific regime of institutional control. His cinema is not "art made in spite of repression." It is art formed *through* and *against* it, a body of work in which constraint becomes, unexpectedly, a generative force. We refer to this mode as a "poetics of obliqueness": a method grounded in allegory, ironic juxtaposition, intermedial collage, ellipsis, and double coding. Time and again, Guillén Landrián accepted institutional assignments (propaganda shorts, didactic documentaries) and then quietly subverted them from the inside. The apparatus was built to monitor explicit ideological statements; it had a harder time recognizing when a film's meaning hinged on tone, rhythm, or formal drift. Guillén Landrián worked in that gap, preserving the surface of the propaganda film while making that surface hum with small but destabilizing tensions.

For readers new to the Cuban context, useful comparisons might include Jafar Panahi in Iran, Andrei Tarkovsky in the Soviet Union, or Ai Weiwei in China, artists who developed unmistakable formal languages in dialogue with state control. Guillén Landrián belongs in that lineage, though his case highlights something those analogues rarely foreground: the use of intermedial collage (painting, photography, statistics, commercial jingles, political slogans, poetry, Afro-Cuban music) deployed in such profusion that no single element could be easily isolated as "subversive." In his films, critical force does not sit in one shot or sound cue. It is dispersed across the architecture of the work.

The concept of the "poetics of obliqueness" therefore functions as the article's central analytical category, linking censorship studies and cinema studies. It allows us to move beyond the binary of "resistance versus complicity" that has often framed discussions of art under authoritarian regimes and to describe instead a more complex dynamic: an aesthetic practice that neither confronts the apparatus head-on (which would have been suicidal) nor capitulates to it (which would have produced mere propaganda) but occupies the interstices, zones where institutional control is less codifiable, and turns them into sites of critical meaning.

1.3. Scholarly Context and Contribution

English-language scholarship on Guillén Landrián has grown significantly since the mid-2010s and produced important work from several angles. Anne Garland Mahler's analysis of race and revolutionary ideology in *Coffea Arábiga* reads the film through tricontinentalism and the suppression of Afro-Cuban critiques of racial inequality (Mahler 2015). Jessica Gordon-Burroughs examines the "migratory forms" of *Inside Downtown*, tracing how the filmmaker's late digital work circulates as a pixelated afterlife across diasporic networks (Gordon-Burroughs 2020). Nils Longueira Borrego focuses on deframing and memory in *Desde La Habana*, analyzing the film's replacement of dominant revolutionary history with fragmentary, sensorial modes of recall (Borrego 2023). Earlier Spanish-language scholarship, including Julio Ramos's archival study of the filmmaker's poetry and cinematic dissonance and Dean Luis Reyes's situating of his work within Cuban "reflexive documentary," established the interpretive foundations on which these more recent analyses build (Ramos 2013; Reyes 2010, 2013). Formal analysis of Guillén Landrián's techniques has shown that his self-reflexive montage constitutes a systematic "implosion" of the scientific–popular documentary genre from within (Juan-Navarro 2017). What has received less attention is

how the censorship apparatus that assigned him to that genre actively generated the formal strategies through which he dismantled it. That is the question that organizes this article.

The indispensable historical framework for this scholarship comes from studies of Cuban revolutionary culture and censorship. Lillian Guerra's *Visions of Power in Cuba* provides the most rigorous account of the ideological conflicts within revolutionary cultural policy in the decade following 1959, including the racialized structures of exclusion that made Afro-Cuban art systematically suspect. Without that context, the targeting of Guillén Landrián cannot be fully understood (Guerra 2012). As Figure 1 illustrates, Guillén Landrián directly confronted this racial dimension; in *Coffea Arábiga*, a montage sequence forces the question of blackness into a propagandistic genre that had no sanctioned space for it.



Figure 1. Four-frame montage sequence from *Coffea Arábiga* (Guillén Landrián 1968). Close-up images of ears are followed by the imperative "¡OIGA!" ("Listen!"), an Afro-Cuban face, and the interpolated question "¡¿los negros?!" ("the blacks?!"). The sequence ruptures the film's agricultural subject matter to introduce a racial interrogation that the *documentales científico-populares* genre was never designed to accommodate. As Mahler (2015) and Guerra (2012) have shown, such moments made Guillén Landrián's cinema illegible within an institutional framework that treated racial inequality as resolved by revolutionary decree. Source: Cuban Cinematheque.

Rafael Rojas's *Traductores de la utopía* offers the most incisive political–intellectual genealogy of the relationship between the Cuban intelligentsia and the revolutionary state, theorizing the deliberate ambiguity of Castro's "Palabras" formula as a structural mechanism of control rather than an ad hoc political statement (Rojas 2016). Ambrosio Fornet's influential lecture "El quinquenio gris: revisitando el término" initiated a public reckoning within Cuba with the cultural devastation of the 1971–76 period (Fornet 2007), while Desiderio Navarro's interventions demonstrated that the "grey" period was substantially longer and darker than its official characterization acknowledged (Navarro 2002). This scholarly revision directly informs the periodization of repression in Section 3.

Yet the most widely cited English-language institutional history of the ICAIC paradoxically exemplifies the historiographic problem this article addresses. Michael Chanan's Cuban Cinema, consolidating what has been called an "icaicentric" approach, privileges official figures such as Santiago Álvarez while omitting Guillén Landrián entirely; across both editions of the book (Chanan 1985, 2004), the filmmaker's name does not appear once (Juan-Navarro 2015, p. 3). This silence is not incidental. It reflects the same logic of institutional erasure that the ICAIC itself practiced through cajoneo. A critical historiography aligned with the cultural politics of Castroism reproduces, at the level of scholarship, the suppression it should be analyzing. Against this canonical silence, critics such as Reyes have proposed a substantially revised account in which Guillén Landrián does not merely document Cuban reality but interrogates the very impossibility of representing it from within the institutional apparatus. The result is a "post-institutional" documentary practice that dismantles the visual mechanisms of revolutionary power and exposes the fissures in hegemonic discourse that the icaicentric canon was designed to conceal (Reyes 2010, pp. 85–88).

The present article draws on the broader theoretical renovation in censorship studies, from Coetzee's understanding of censorship as a psychological and creative condition (1996) through comparative frameworks treating it as a systemic, productive force (Biltereyst and Winkel 2013; Loseff 1984; Iordanova 2003). Our objective, however, is distinct. Existing studies of Guillén Landrián tend to focus on individual films or single thematic axes (race, memory, migration, formal innovation), and censorship scholarship tends to treat Cuba as one case among many in a comparative framework. We offer instead a systematic analysis of the *relationship* between censorship mechanisms and aesthetic strategies across the full arc of a single filmmaker's career. This dual focus, one filmmaker and one apparatus tracked across four decades, allows us to demonstrate with specific formal and biographical evidence what remains theoretical in more general accounts: how institutional repression generated, rather than merely limited, a distinctive mode of aesthetic practice. The "poetics of obliqueness" constitutes the article's primary analytical contribution: a framework that describes how constraint becomes a creative condition when the artist internalizes the censor not as a voice of prohibition but as a formal problem to be solved, and one we argue is transferable well beyond the Cuban context. After this introduction, Section 2 narrates Guillén Landrián's biographical trajectory through the lens of institutional control. Section 3 reconstructs the architecture of censorship in Cuban revolutionary cinema. Section 4, the analytical core, theorizes the "poetics of obliqueness" through close readings of selected films. Section 5 traces its legacy in twenty-first-century Cuban independent documentary, and a brief conclusion reflects on the broader applicability of the concept.

2. A Life Shaped by the Apparatus: Guillén Landrián's Trajectory

To understand how censorship shaped an aesthetic, we first have to look closely at the life in which those pressures were inscribed. Nicolás Guillén Landrián's trajectory does not simply *illustrate* Cuban cultural control; it is one of its most revealing, and at times most distressing, examples. Each stage of his career, from his early promise at the ICAIC to the years marked by imprisonment, psychiatric internment, expulsion, and eventual exile, formed a distinct encounter with the censorship apparatus. And with every encounter, his aesthetic strategies shifted, as if the form itself were adjusting to the contours of repression.

2.1. Formation and Early Promise (1938–1965)

Guillén Landrián's family position placed him at a strange crossroads of privilege and constraint. As the nephew of the "national poet" Nicolás Guillén, president of UNEAC and a central figure in the revolutionary cultural elite, he had access to networks closed to many Afro-Cuban artists of his generation. But that proximity came with its own pressures. The expected deference, the unspoken comparisons, and the heightened scrutiny that accompanied the family name often felt less like support than like a burden he had to carry into every workspace. The institutional insistence that he sign all his films as "Guillén Landrián" rather than simply "Guillén" reveals an anxiety to prevent confusion between the conformist uncle and the rebellious nephew, whom colleagues and friends called Nicolasito.

A painter, social sciences student at the University of Havana, and anti-Batista militant, Guillén Landrián entered the ICAIC in the early 1960s through his friend, the filmmaker Juan Carlos Tabío. There he encountered two European documentarians invited by the institute to train a new generation: Joris Ivens and Theodor Christensen. Both encouraged a documentary practice attentive to concrete human subjects rather than abstract ideological categories, an orientation that would prove decisive. His earliest works, short didactic films for the ICAIC's *Enciclopedia Popular* series, including *Patio arenero*, *Homenaje a Picasso*,

and *Congos reales* (all 1962), already displayed a formal freedom that set them apart from the genre's rigid models.

The films that followed brought Guillén Landrián into open tension with ICAIC expectations. *En un barrio viejo* (1963), a contemplative portrait of an Afro-Cuban neighborhood in Old Havana, dwells on deteriorated spaces and marginalized subjects that rarely occupied the center of official imagery. Its ground-level camera, lingering close-ups, and refusal to provide a didactic moral marked the filmmaker as "difficult" within the institutional apparatus. As Guerra has documented, the inclusion of domestic religious altars, filmed without commentary in a context of aggressive state secularization, constituted an implicit gesture that granted symbolic dignity to beliefs the Revolution sought to suppress (Guerra 2012, pp. 317–52). After *En un barrio viejo*, Guillén Landrián moved to eastern Cuba and produced the so-called "rural trilogy": *Ociel del Toa* (1965), *Retornar a Baracoa* (1966), and *Reportaje* (1966). These contemplative documentaries focus on campesino communities, religious practices, and forms of sociability that do not resolve into the epic narrative of revolutionary transformation. Where the ICAIC expected images of "the People" as a homogeneous historical subject, Guillén Landrián insisted on individuals, tired, devout, skeptical, whose lives resist seamless incorporation into a triumphalist story.

The breaking point came with *Los del baile* (1965), a short film depicting habaneros dancing the mozambique in the streets. Like the notorious *P.M.* four years earlier, it captured ludic pleasure divorced from revolutionary messaging—bodies in motion, collective energy not reducible to productive labor. The film was never screened. It was the first clear institutional signal that Guillén Landrián's documentary practice was unacceptable, not because it spoke against the Revolution but because it declined to speak in its favor.

2.2. The Paradox of Coffea Arábiga (1966–1968)

What came next amounted to the first real cycle of punishment. Accused of attempting to leave the country without authorization, Guillén Landrián was sentenced to two years in the Presidio Modelo on the Isle of Pines, the same prison where Fidel Castro had been held after the Moncada attack. After developing nervous disorders, he was transferred to the José Galigarcía Psychiatric Center, where he was subjected to electroconvulsive therapy without anesthesia (Brown and Lago 1991, p. 68). He later described his arrest in terms that illuminate the apparatus from within: driven by anxiety to secure a position in the industry, he had dared to make a cinema about the Cuban people at a moment when that cinema was expected to be, at minimum, euphoric, and he did not possess that euphoria (Petusky Coger et al. 2023).

Paradoxically, in 1966 the ICAIC rehired him. The reasons remain unclear. His last wife, Gretel Alfonso, mentions Christensen's intercession; Reyes suggests the intervention of his uncle, the poet. Whatever the motive, the institution assigned him to the Departamento de Documentales Científico-Populares, the most rigidly didactic genre, in what appears to have been an attempt to contain his creative temperament. From this position, he directed *Coffea Arábiga* (1968), a government-commissioned propaganda film about the Plan del Cordón de La Habana, the massive campaign for coffee cultivation around the capital.

What Guillén Landrián produced was arguably the most subversive documentary to emerge from within the ICAIC system. *Coffea Arábiga* technically fulfills its propagandistic assignment, but the film quietly pulls that assignment apart through fragmented structure, unexpected juxtapositions, and a kind of intermedial collage that resists any single, tidy interpretation. The famous moment, with the Beatles' "The Fool on the Hill" drifting in as Castro climbs the podium at the Plaza de la Revolución, has become emblematic, but it is only one piece of a larger strategy. Across the soundtrack, Afro-Cuban music bumps up against children's songs, commercial jingles, and triumphant slogans, creating a sonic

mix that gradually erodes the certainties of the didactic mode. Visually, the film piles up statistics, still photographs, freeze-frames of visibly exhausted workers, and screens of text until the language of mobilization begins to feel strangely saturated, even unstable. Section 4 returns to these techniques in depth; here it is enough to note the paradox. The pressures of scrutiny and self-surveillance pushed Guillén Landrián toward formal solutions that could slip past institutional detection while still carrying critical force.

At first, the ICAIC seemed content. *Coffea Arábiga* was screened and even represented Cuba at international festivals. Its downfall had little to do with the film itself and everything to do with the spectacular failure of the coffee-planting campaign it celebrated. Once the government moved to erase the memory of that initiative, the documentary, initially read as a patriotic piece of reportage, was abruptly reclassified as an act of mockery, even treason. It was "archived" in the ICAIC's vaults through a practice known as *cajoneo*—not a formal ban or destruction but an indefinite burial that denied the work cultural efficacy while preserving material evidence of its existence.

A question implicit in the foregoing deserves a direct response: did Guillén Landrián support the Revolution whose imagery and rhetoric his commissioned films were required to celebrate? The affirmative content visible at the surface of his ICAIC documentaries does not reflect personal enthusiasm but the generic requirements of the Departamento de Documentales Científico-Populares. Every commission the department assigned was bound to communicate technical information about a revolutionary initiative and to endorse it visibly. The assigned filmmaker faced a binary choice: accept the assignment under propagandistic terms or leave the institution. After Guillén Landrián's first imprisonment and electroshock treatments, the ICAIC offered him precisely that ultimatum. He chose to stay, and *Coffea Arábiga* was the assignment that followed (Petusky Coger et al. 2023).

His own testimony complicates the picture further. He described the period leading up to his 1964 arrest as one in which he had attempted to make a cinema about the Cuban people while the institution required a euphoria he did not possess. The biographical record suggests he was never an enthusiastic militant in the first place, and the cultural authorities recognized as much. Much of the punishment directed at him over the following four decades responded to a perceived lack of consistent ideological alignment, registered in his marginal lifestyle, his attachment to Afro-Cuban religious milieus, and his reluctance to perform the public gestures of revolutionary belonging, as much as it responded to the films themselves. The affirmative content of his documentaries is therefore best understood as the generic floor the apparatus required, not as a reliable index of his convictions. Section 4 examines what he developed in addition to that floor: the poetics of obliqueness.

2.3. Escalation and Expulsion (1969–1972)

Rather than retreating, Guillén Landrián radicalized. *Desde La Habana ¡1969! Recordar* (1969–1971) pushes intermedial collage to new extremes: a convulsive reworking of Cuban nationhood's metanarrative, constructed through obsessive repetition of images and sounds, deliberately degraded celluloid, and a polyphonic soundtrack that overwhelms any single interpretive framework (Figure 2).

If *Desde La Habana* bent the revolutionary archive back on itself (see Figure 2), *Taller de Línea y 18* (Guillén Landrián 1971) pushed still further. Rather than working through archival fragments, it confronted the apparatus of control head-on. The film's repeatedly flashing intertitle, "¿Está Ud. dispuesto a ser analizado por esta asamblea?" ("Are you prepared to be analyzed by this assembly?"), transplants the language of political vigilance directly into the cinematic space. Viewers suddenly find themselves addressed as potential subjects of scrutiny, drawn into the same cycles of surveillance and self-policing the films describe. Neither film was ever screened by the ICAIC.

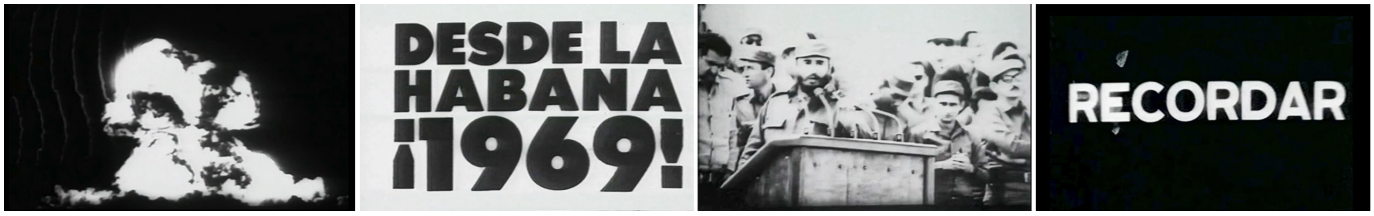


Figure 2. Opening montage from *Desde La Habana ¡1969! Recordar* (Guillén Landrián 1969–1971). A nuclear mushroom cloud, the film's title card, archival footage of Castro addressing troops, and the isolated imperative "RECORDAR" ("To Remember") are juxtaposed without commentary or connective logic. The sequence compresses Cold War geopolitics, revolutionary spectacle, and the act of memory itself into a single collision of images, establishing the film's method. The state's own visual archive—its newsreels, its parades, its iconography of power—is seized and reassembled into a montage that no longer guarantees the triumphal narrative those images were produced to sustain. Source: Cuban Cinematheque.

The institutional response was definitive. In 1970, Guillén Landrián was arrested again and imprisoned at Combinado del Este. In 1972, the ICAIC expelled him permanently for producing films "inconsistent with the goals of the Revolution." The timing matters. The expulsion coincided with the aftermath of the Padilla Affair, the First Congress of Education and Culture, and the onset of the *quinquenio gris* (gray five years), the period of harshest ideological orthodoxy. The same congress that formalized socialist realism as obligatory aesthetic doctrine, with Santiago Álvarez leading the cinematographic sector, rendered figures like Guillén Landrián structurally impossible within the institutional field.

Professional exclusion did not end the punishment. In 1976, Guillén Landrián was accused of "ideological deviationism" and conspiring to assassinate Fidel Castro. He was detained at Villa Marista, interrogated for six months without formal charges, and in 1977 was routed through a series of punitive medical and carceral spaces. A Military Tribunal sent him to the hospital at Combinado del Este; from there he was transferred to the Carbó-Serviá ward of the Hospital Psiquiátrico de La Habana (Mazorra), where electroshock treatments resumed. His case occupies a prominent place in *The Politics of Psychiatry in Revolutionary Cuba* (1991), which documents psychiatric institutionalization as a tool of political repression (Brown and Lago 1991, p. 68). For a filmmaker whose "crime" was a subjective and personal cinema, the extremity of the response signals institutional anxiety before forms of expression that could not be fully decoded or controlled.

2.4. Exile and the Final Film (1989–2003)

In late 1989, Guillén Landrián was permitted to emigrate to Miami. What followed was not a triumphant exile narrative but quiet survival: life in motels, painting to subsist, and inhabiting the marginal spaces of downtown Miami that would become the subject of his last work. After nearly three decades of enforced silence, he produced *Inside Downtown* (2001), a digital video documentary co-directed with Jorge Egusquiza. He described the film as a necessity, a way of proving to himself that he could still make cinema (Petusky Coger et al. 2023).

Inside Downtown functions as a kind of *En un barrio viejo* rewritten from exile: the same anthropological gaze trained on subaltern subjects, the same attention to marginal spaces and minimal gestures, now inflected by diaspora, illness, and the experience of historical defeat (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Five-frame sequence from *Inside Downtown* (Guillén Landrián and Egusquiza 2001). Two young men sharing a cigarette on a construction site; the title card's incongruous biblical subtitle "Declarando la alegría de nuestro Salvador" ("Declaring the joy of our Savior"); a folk-art car parked before a faded Miami apartment block; a weathered face in extreme close-up; and the English-language variant of Guillén Landrián's signature intertitle, "THE END BUT NOT THE END," superimposed on a downtown skyscraper. Shot on digital video nearly three decades after his expulsion from the ICAIC, the film transposes the formal strategies of the Havana documentaries (intermedial collage, ironic text-image friction, attention to marginal bodies and improvised spaces) into the precarious landscape of Afro-Cuban exile. Source: Personal archive of Jorge Egusquiza.

The fragmentary montage and collage techniques of the ICAIC years persist, but toward a new end: the construction of a split subjectivity suspended between a remembered Havana and a precarious Miami. In this film, street corners become "doubly exposed" sites, inscribed with the ghosts of revolutionary history and the new forms of exclusion traversing the Afro-Cuban migrant subject. Even in exile, the formal habits formed under institutional pressure seem to persist as a kind of second nature, a point the article returns to in its theoretical analysis. The English-language intertitle visible in Figure 3, "THE END BUT NOT THE END," confirms this persistence. Guillén Landrián's signature closing gesture, first developed under institutional surveillance, reappears intact in exile, its formal grammar unchanged even as its context has shifted from revolutionary Havana to diasporic Miami.

Guillén Landrián died on 23 July 2003, in Miami. He was sixty-five years old. He died without knowing that his work was already beginning to circulate again, quietly, in copies of uncertain provenance, among a generation of filmmakers who had never heard his name. The circularity is hard to miss: a life shaped at every turn by the censorship apparatus, partially redeemed, far too late, when the very mechanisms that had concealed his work finally began to loosen their grip.

3. The Architecture of Censorship in Cuban Revolutionary Cinema

The biography traced in the previous section cannot be understood without looking at the institutional machinery that produced it. Censorship in revolutionary Cuba was not a handful of isolated bans. It operated as a multi-layered apparatus, a *dispositif* in the Foucauldian sense, working through laws, institutional gatekeepers, unwritten norms, and, perhaps most powerfully, the quiet cultivation of self-censorship as a creative habit. It did not simply block specific films; it shaped the entire horizon of what could be shown, said, or even imagined within the Revolution's cultural project. In that sense, it functioned much like what Jacques Rancière calls a "distribution of the sensible": a system that predetermines which subjects are representable, which aesthetic forms count as legitimate, and who gets to produce meaning in the first place (Rancière 2004, pp. 12–19).

Understanding this system matters because Guillén Landrián's aesthetic strategies were not crafted in reaction to a single censor's stroke of the pen. They emerged inside a dense and often opaque regime of visibility and silence, one that seeped into every stage of filmmaking: the genres a director was assigned, the resources allocated to them, and the way films were circulated, debated, and ultimately woven into (or excluded from) the national canon. The apparatus did its most effective work not when it openly banned a

film but when it made certain ways of filming feel unworkable, even unimaginable, long before the camera rolled.

Before mapping these layers, a contextual remark is in order. Censorship is not a feature peculiar to revolutionary Cuba, and treating it as such risks misrepresenting both the Cuban case and the broader phenomenon. Film censorship has been a constitutive feature of cinema since its earliest decades and across political systems. The Hollywood Production Code's moral self-regulation between 1934 and 1968, the multicentric regulatory networks that govern contemporary streaming platforms, and the legal and informal mechanisms that shape film production in democratic states are all variants of the same regulatory logic (Biltereyst and Winkel 2013, pp. 12–15). Cuba itself had a substantial prerevolutionary censorship infrastructure. The Comité Censor de Películas, established in 1922 and reorganized as the Comisión Revisora de Películas in 1926, regulated film content on moral and political grounds for decades. Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* was prohibited in 1927 under the Machado regime, and fourteen Soviet films were banned in 1941. The most violent episodes of pre-1959 film suppression targeted social documentaries from the cinema-club movement; Batista's authorities confiscated *El Mégano* (Julio García Espinosa and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1954), and the Servicio de Inteligencia Militar destroyed the laboratory archive that contained *Jocuma, o el cabo de San Antonio* (José Antonio Sarol, 1955), along with much of the lab's remaining stock (Vincenot 2017, pp. 19–21). After 1959, censorship did not appear for the first time. What changed was its institutional centralization within a single state apparatus, the explicit politicization of its criteria, and its integration with a broader project of cultural production through the ICAIC. Rancière's "distribution of the sensible" describes a structural feature of every political order, including democratic ones (Rancière 2004, pp. 12–19); revolutionary Cuba represents a particularly centralized and ideologically explicit variant of a phenomenon visible across capitalist, socialist, and post-socialist film industries alike. In Guillén Landrián's time, the institution exercised control through near-total monopolization.

This section maps three central components of that architecture as they shaped Guillén Landrián's practice: the foundational formula that institutionalized censorship as cultural policy; the ICAIC's contradictory function as both patron and gatekeeper; and the cultivation of self-censorship, the apparatus's most subtle, and arguably most enduring, mechanism.

3.1. The P.M. Affair and the Founding Formula

The founding scene of revolutionary film censorship is the *P.M.* affair. In May 1961, Orlando Jiménez Leal and Sabá Cabrera Infante produced *P.M.*, a twenty-minute free-cinema portrait of Havana nightlife: people drinking, dancing, and moving through the city's bars and docks. The film contained no explicit political statement whatsoever. That was precisely the problem. Its representation of a people who danced and drank while the official discourse proclaimed imminent imperialist aggression clashed frontally with the narrative of sacrifice and total mobilization. The ICAIC confiscated and banned it, and its censorship provoked Fidel Castro to convene three days of meetings with writers and artists at the Biblioteca Nacional in June 1961.

The speech Castro delivered at the Biblioteca Nacional, now known simply as *Palabras a los intelectuales*, set the tone for the next six decades of cultural policy: "Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing" (Castro Ruz 1961, p. 11). The force of the formula lay precisely in its vagueness. What did it mean to be *within* the Revolution? Who had the authority to decide that? And on what basis? The lack of a stable definition created a climate of permanent uncertainty, one in which artists could never be entirely sure that a work deemed acceptable today would not be reclassified tomorrow as ideologically suspect. As Rafael Rojas notes, this was not a design flaw but the mechanism

itself. By keeping the boundaries unclear, the Revolution converted nearly every creative choice into a potential political risk (Rojas 2016, p. 55).

The *P.M.* affair was not just the Revolution's first major cultural scandal. It became a testing ground for the forms of control that would harden during the *quinquenio gris*. Guillén Landrián felt these pressures early. *Los del baile* (1965), with its portraits of habaneros dancing the mozambique, was sidelined for the same reason *P.M.* had been targeted—not because it rejected the Revolution but because it portrayed ordinary pleasure without ideological framing.

Behind the *Palabras* formula was a specific idea of what documentary cinema was supposed to accomplish. As Lillian Guerra has shown, ICAIC leaders such as Alfredo Guevara and Julio García Espinosa expected documentaries to produce "hyper-real" images of citizens consciously and visibly engaged in revolutionary struggle; because no part of lived reality should exist independent of the Revolution, no part of filmic reality could betray this principle (Guerra 2012, p. 318). This expectation was enforced through *cine dirigido* ("guided viewing"), in which post-screening debates gently, or not so gently, steered audiences toward the politically correct interpretation. In such a context, a film showing people dancing, campesinos praying, or workers who looked tired rather than heroic, the kinds of scenes Guillén Landrián repeatedly gravitated toward, was not just aesthetically unconventional. It disrupted the whole ideological machinery linking documentary representation to the manufacture of revolutionary subjectivity.

3.2. The ICAIC as Patron-Censor and the Practice of "Cajoneo"

The ICAIC occupied a paradoxical position in this apparatus. It was both the institution that made filmmaking possible and the one that tightly controlled it. The institute held the cameras, editing tables, film stock, and exhibition circuits; it established acceptable genres, tones, topics, and formal registers. Yet it also fostered craft, distributed scarce resources, and encouraged experimentation, up to a point. The tension between control and creativity did not unfold outside the institution but squarely within it. Guillén Landrián worked in that contradictory space; the same institution that enabled his films to exist was the one that later suppressed them.

The classification system of the ICAIC's *Departamento de Documentales Científico-Populares*, the unit to which Guillén Landrián was reassigned after his "rehabilitation," worked as a disciplinary frame. The label "scientific-popular documentary" set expectations before a single frame appeared: clarity, pedagogical linearity, and ideological closure. Guillén Landrián's films calmly ignored those expectations. When *Coffea Arábiga* ends with the official stamp "Documentales Científico-Populares," the phrase lands as a kind of institutional joke, a reminder of how far the film has drifted from the genre's intended form. Genre classification was not merely a descriptive taxonomy. It functioned as a mechanism of ideological control, and Guillén Landrián used it against itself.

When an outright ban felt too heavy-handed, the ICAIC turned to a subtler technique: *cajoneo*. The film was not burned or publicly condemned. It was simply "placed in a drawer," its circulation quietly suspended. The work still existed, but without access to historians, critics, or audiences, it had no cultural life. Foucault's notion of the archive as a *dispositif* (1980) that governs what may be remembered helps explain this practice: *cajoneo* was not only about suppressing a film but about shaping the very memory of culture, deciding which works would feed the collective imagination and which would be consigned to shadow. Several of Guillén Landrián's films languished for decades in ICAIC vaults before reappearing in alternative circuits. The eerie efficiency of the practice lies in its invisibility—no public ban, no destroyed negatives, nothing that could be held up as proof of suppression.

3.3. From Censorship to Self-Censorship: The "Inner Policeman"

The apparatus's most effective dimension was never simple prohibition. Its real power lay in fostering self-censorship, *autocensura*, the gradual internalization of the censor as a constant presence inside the creative process. J. M. Coetzee once described the censor's ideal scenario as the moment when restrictions become so deeply embedded in people's minds that they begin policing themselves, allowing the censor, in theory, to step back (Coetzee 1996, p. 4). In Foucauldian terms, this marks the shift from sovereign censorship, overt commands issued from above, to disciplinary censorship, in which surveillance has been internalized to the point that the artist anticipates judgment before it arrives. The "policeman within" starts to pre-empt the one in uniform. The remarkable efficiency of the system stems from precisely this displacement; it no longer needs to intervene constantly, because creators learn, consciously or not, to carry out part of its work on their own.

This internalization hardened dramatically after the Padilla Affair of 1971, when poet Heberto Padilla was arrested and compelled to deliver a public "self-criticism" closely modeled on Stalinist rituals. The international backlash, a letter of protest signed by Sartre, Beauvoir, Sontag, Cortázar, and many others, did nothing to alter the Cuban government's position, but it did clarify where the boundaries of permissible expression now lay. That same year, the First Congress of Education and Culture codified the new orthodoxy; art was expected to serve the Revolution, and any deviation, formal, thematic, or ideological, could justify exclusion. The period that followed, the *quinquenio gris* (roughly 1971–1976, though many scholars rightly note its effects lasted far longer), brought systematic marginalization of writers, filmmakers, and artists deemed insufficiently aligned with official ideology. Guillén Landrián's definitive expulsion from the ICAIC in 1972, on the grounds that his work failed to conform to the Revolution's goals, falls squarely in the middle of this tightening climate.

Understanding self-censorship is crucial for interpreting Guillén Landrián's aesthetic choices, though in his case the term requires a more paradoxical reading. For many filmmakers, internalizing the censor simply narrowed their creative options, pushing them toward what felt ideologically safe. Guillén Landrián took another route. He internalized the censor not to yield to it but to *redirect* it, moving critical content away from the discursive surface, where the apparatus could easily find and punish it, and embedding it instead in the film's formal machinery, where meaning was harder to codify and thus harder to police. What produced resignation in others became, for him, the basis of a different artistic logic.

As Section 4 will show, this displacement sits at the heart of what we call the "poetics of obliqueness": a creative practice in which surveillance does not impoverish expression but, counterintuitively, forces it to develop new formal strategies capable of slipping past institutional scrutiny while retaining their critical charge.

4. The Poetics of Obliqueness: Aesthetic Strategies Against the Apparatus

The previous sections have outlined two parallel stories: the life shaped by institutional repression and the apparatus that made that repression structurally possible. This section brings the two threads together. What we are proposing is not the familiar idea that Guillén Landrián produced remarkable work *in spite* of censorship, but something more complicated. Censorship, once internalized as a creative condition, generated formal strategies that arguably would not have existed otherwise. Constraint, in this sense, does not simply narrow the field. It can provoke unexpected solutions, and even new aesthetics.

4.1. Censorship as Dispositif

Drawing on Foucault's notion of the *dispositif* (Foucault 1980), later expanded by Agamben as a constellation of discourses, institutions, habits, spatial arrangements, and administrative practices that shape subjectivities, we argue that censorship in revolutionary Cuba operated not only as prohibition but as an entire field of possibilities. Working at the ICAIC meant navigating a matrix of permissions and restrictions that guided decisions long before a censor ever said "no." As Agamben puts it, an apparatus "captures, orients, determines, intercepts, models, controls, or secures the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings (Agamben 2009)." In practice, the ICAIC's control of cameras, editing equipment, film stock, distribution circuits, and even professional hierarchies created exactly that kind of environment.

This framing also resonates with Biltereyst and Vande Winkel's argument that censorship is best understood not as a simple binary of freedom versus suppression but as a complex regulatory system involving state institutions, industrial structures, and audience expectations. The key point, and the one Guillén Landrián learned to exploit, is that the apparatus was far more adept at detecting explicit ideological deviations than at policing ambiguity, tone, rhythm, or formal experimentation. A filmmaker who openly denounced the Revolution would be easy to identify and punish. A filmmaker who delivered a compliant-sounding documentary whose "disobedience" lived in editing patterns, musical choices, or intermedial friction posed a subtler challenge.

In Guillén Landrián's case, critical meaning rarely sat in a single image or line of narration. It lived in the relationship among things—sound rubbing against image, archival fragments colliding with staged material, propaganda slogans juxtaposed against exhausted bodies. Because the *dispositif* monitored discursive content more tightly than formal structure, his strategy was to let subversion circulate in the formal architecture rather than in the script.

4.2. Self-Censorship as Creative Habitus

In Section 3, we approached self-censorship as a disciplinary force embedded in the creative process. Here, we consider its more paradoxical dimension: how it may become, under certain conditions, a generative principle. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is useful here, not as a rigid structure but as a set of durable dispositions that guide practice without conscious calculation. Once the censor is internalized, the artist no longer pauses to ask "Will this be allowed?" at every step; the field of constraint becomes part of the creative reflex itself.

For many filmmakers, this produced compliance. Humberto Solás, for example, later acknowledged how the "inner censor" shaped his adaptation of *Cecilia Valdés* (1982), flattening its complexity into a more ideologically palatable narrative (Chijona 1982, pp. 118–25). In contrast, Guillén Landrián internalized the censor but refused its logic. He accepted the assignment (*make a scientific–popular documentary*; *produce propaganda about coffee*) and then subverted the assignment from the inside. His refusal was oblique, not frontal. Frontal opposition would have been immediately decipherable, and therefore punishable; obliqueness created ambiguity, and ambiguity created space.

Jun Fang's concept of "complicit creativity," developed in the context of Chinese film under state censorship, helps illuminate this move (Fang 2013, pp. 133–52). Under regulatory pressure, some filmmakers develop tactical forms of negotiation that open new expressive pathways rather than closing them off. Something similar happens in Guillén Landrián's work. The rigidity of the *documentales científico-populares* genre, with its demand for linearity, clarity, and ideological closure, became the perfect foil against which his

fragmentations and tonal ruptures could resonate. Counterintuitively, the strictness of the assignment amplified the impact of his deviations.

4.3. Ambiguity, Ellipsis, and Allegory as Survival Strategies

The poetics of obliqueness depends on a set of formal maneuvers that operate much like what James C. Scott calls "hidden transcripts": ways of expressing critique or resistance that remain legible to those who know how to look yet slip past the notice of supervisory structures (Scott 1990, pp. xviii–xix). Scott developed this framework through studies of peasants, enslaved communities, and other subordinated groups, showing how people craft "offstage" discourses that contradict the polished "public transcript" expected by those in power.

Scott also identifies a more elusive category: acts of resistance that hide in plain sight. These are the coded gestures, the double meanings, the rumors, proverbs, folk stories, songs, or ritualized behaviors that circulate openly yet carry subversive implications accessible only to audiences equipped with the right interpretive habits (Scott 1990, pp. 136–82).

Guillén Landrián's films operate squarely in this register. They moved through official channels, including the ICAIC's own distribution network and international festivals where Cuban cinema was showcased, while carrying critiques that attentive viewers could recognize but that remained difficult for censors to pin down with certainty. His work did not deny the public transcript. It inhabited it, subtly twisting it, and allowed resistance to live in the seams.

Four strategies deserve particular attention. First, intermedial collage functions as the primary weapon. By mixing painting, photography, statistical tables, commercial jingles, Afro-Cuban religious music, Beatles songs, children's nursery rhymes, and revolutionary slogans into a cacophonous montage, Guillén Landrián made it structurally difficult for a censor to isolate a discrete "subversive" element. In *Coffea Arábiga*, the didactic information about coffee cultivation is present and technically accurate. At the denotative level, the film fulfills its propagandistic mandate. Yet this information is surrounded by such a profusion of heterogeneous media that the didactic message becomes only one voice within a polyphony it cannot control. Statistics about coffee production appear in rapid montage with freeze-frames of exhausted workers; triumphalist narration competes with the melancholy strains of Afro-Cuban son; images of Castro are juxtaposed with the Beatles singing about a fool on a hill. Subversion lies not in any single image or sound, each of which, taken individually, might be defensible, but in the *relations* among them, in the friction generated by their collision. The racial montage of Figure 1, which inserts the question of blackness into the propagandistic frame, operates through the same logic. The Afro-Cuban face and the interpolated "¡¿los negros?!" could each be justified within a documentary about coffee cultivation, but their collision with the imperative "¡OIGA!" transforms them into an indictment the censor cannot formally cite. This strategy draws on what Lev Loseff terms "Aesopian language" in Soviet literature: a literary system structured to allow for communication between author and reader while concealing inadmissible content from the censor through allegory, irony, and polysemy (Loseff 1984, pp. 4–10). Like Aesopian writers, Guillén Landrián exploits the fact that censorship mechanisms are better equipped to identify explicit statements than to decode complex formal structures.

Second, ironic juxtaposition operates within collage as a second-order strategy. Placing Castro's ascent to the podium of the Plaza de la Revolución against the Beatles' "The Fool on the Hill" (Figure 4); intercutting exhausted, sweating campesinos with statistics celebrating agricultural productivity; montaging carnival footage between segments of official revolutionary historiography in *Desde La Habana* results in each juxtaposition opening a gap between what an individual image *seems* to affirm and what the *combination* suggests.



Figure 4. Four frames from the montage sequence in *Coffea Arábiga* (Guillén Landrián 1968). Read left to right, the sequence condenses the film's strategy of ironic juxtaposition: an image of Fidel Castro ascending the podium at the Plaza de la Revolución; a screen of typewritten characters evoking bureaucratic saturation and informational noise; the bilingual intertitle translating the Beatles' "The Fool on the Hill" as "El bobo sobre la colina"; and the attribution "LOS BEATLES" in stark white typography. Castro appears in his customary role; the Beatles reference could pass as a concession to popular culture; the typewritten screen mimics didactic formats. Yet the ironic alignment of the leader's ascent with the song's title, the contamination of propagandistic imagery by foreign popular music, and the typographic noise that renders the didactic mode opaque together produce a critique no individual frame carries. Source: Cuban Cinematheque.

This technique distinguishes Guillén Landrián sharply from Santiago Álvarez, the ICAIC's best-known documentarian and an internationally celebrated virtuoso of intermedial collage. Both filmmakers assemble heterogeneous materials (newsreel footage, photographs, music, intertitles) with considerable formal skill. But where Álvarez's montage is monological, affirmative, and propagandistic, with each element carefully subordinated to a single ideological thesis and building toward a moment of synthesis and mobilization, Guillén Landrián's is polyphonic, ambiguous, and corrosive. Álvarez's *Now!* (1965) deploys Lena Horne's performance of "Now!" alongside images of racist violence in the United States to produce an unambiguous denunciation; the formal brilliance serves ideological clarity. Guillén Landrián's violent contrasts of image and sound, by contrast, unfold as if the filmmaker were contesting generic constraints at every turn, producing twists and ruptures that undermine the expository documentary mode's foundational claim to transparent representation of reality.

Third, ellipsis and the unsaid emerge as survival strategies grounded in a deliberate kind of refusal. One of the most striking features of Guillén Landrián's films is precisely what they decline to state. Álvarez's documentaries tend to resolve with an unmistakable ideological synthesis, a closing gesture that tells the viewer not only what the film "means" but often what should follow from that meaning. Guillén Landrián's works usually end in a kind of productive irresolution, handing interpretive responsibility back to the spectator.

In *Desde La Habana*, the fragmented montage of Cuban history leaves conspicuous gaps in the national narrative. Some events appear fleetingly, others are nowhere to be found, and the logic behind these choices remains intentionally opaque. Certain images (police striking demonstrators, crowds marching in regimented formation, bodies subject to various forms of watchfulness) suggest parallels with the present that the film never articulates outright. Ellipsis becomes a kind of shield. There is no explicit claim for a censor to attack, yet the attentive viewer is quietly invited to fill the voids and connect the dots.

The recurring intertitle "FIN/PERO/NO/ES/EL/FIN" ("The End/But/It Is Not/The End") condenses this approach into a single gesture. It signals closure and its impossibility at the same time, functioning both as a stylistic signature and as a muted political comment on unresolved historical processes. The phrase hints that whatever story the film seems to have finished is in fact still unfolding, and that something continues beyond the frame. This gesture of refusal, repeated across his work, became one of Guillén Landrián's defining marks.

Finally, allegory allows multiple registers to coexist without forcing one to cancel out the other. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's notion of a "third space" of ambivalence, neither fully transparent nor entirely opaque, and his related concept of mimicry, the production of subjects who are "almost the same, but not quite," we can illuminate how Guillén Landrián's films perform revolutionary orthodoxy while simultaneously undermining it through slippage and excess (Bhabha 1994, pp. 36–39, 86). Although developed for explicitly colonial situations, Bhabha's framework aligns uncannily with revolutionary Cuba, where the state expected visible, even enthusiastic, identification with official ideology. Artists were required to perform the expected discursive gestures while, in Guillén Landrián's case, allowing tonal mismatches and formal excesses to open alternative meanings beneath the surface. The "cordón" (cord) around Havana in *Coffea Arábiga* refers literally to the agricultural campaign for coffee cultivation encircling the capital. Yet the film's insistent return to images of encirclement, surveillance, repetitive labor, and the obsessive chanting of "café, café, café" invites association with broader forms of political and psychological enclosure. Is repetition zealous enthusiasm or mechanical compulsion? Is the mobilization of labor voluntary participation or coerced conformity? The film sustains both readings simultaneously, never collapsing into a single interpretive framework. In *Inside Downtown*, the filmmaker's body crossing and recrossing the same Miami streets operates simultaneously as documentary record (this is what downtown Miami looks like; these are the routes of daily survival) and allegory of a diasporic subject condemned to wander between irreconcilable worlds, carrying the trace of Havana into Miami and finding both cities equally inhospitable.

4.4. Double Coding and the "Oblique Gaze"

These strategies come together in what we might describe as a form of double coding: the ability of a film to operate on two registers at once. Scott calls this the coexistence of "public" and "hidden" transcripts within a single text (Scott 1990, pp. 4–5). On the surface, Guillén Landrián's films appear to fulfill their institutional mission: a straightforward didactic short about coffee production, a compact retelling of national history, a portrait of a state-run workshop. But beneath that surface, on a more oblique register recognizable mainly to viewers who bring certain cultural, historical, or affective competencies, the films begin to unravel the very ideology they seem to support.

A censor, especially one scanning for explicit dissent, sees a propaganda film that behaves as expected. A more attentive viewer, attuned to irony, uneasy juxtapositions, or sudden breaks in tone, notices something else: a critique delivered not through slogans but through structure. This dual readability assumes differentiated audiences. As Dina Iordanova argues in her study of Eastern European cinema under state socialism, such conditions tend to foster a community of spectators trained to notice the small things, the gaps, hesitations, and odd emphases that suggest meanings operating just under the sanctioned surface (Iordanova 2003, pp. 67–89). Her insight fits Guillén Landrián's case with almost uncanny precision.

The idea of double coding has a long genealogy in discussions of late-Soviet and Eastern European film, where directors often crafted works that offered one reading for the authorities and another for viewers who understood the coded cues. Elem Klimov's *Come and See* (1985), for instance, can be read as a patriotic epic celebrating Soviet resistance to fascism, yet it is at the same time a harrowing anti-war film that questions militarized violence of any kind. Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* (1977) performs a related kind of double labor—outwardly a film about the mechanisms of Stalinist-era propaganda, but also a critique of how state power manufactures heroism, an invitation for viewers to apply that skepticism to their present reality. In these works, duality operates mainly at the narrative

level, as an allegorical story that points to contemporary politics while hiding behind the protective veil of historical distance.

Guillén Landrián's version of double coding works differently. His films rely far less on narrative allegory and far more on formal disruption. The subversive register is not tucked away in plot developments, character arcs, or dialogue (elements the state could easily monitor) but in editing rhythms, unexpected media combinations, tonal irony, sound–image clashes, and highly charged visual textures. These are precisely the areas where ideological surveillance is weakest, because the criteria for "proper" form are so slippery. A censor can flag a line of dialogue that "insults the Revolution," but it is much harder to object to a rhythm that feels off, or a clash between sound and image that generates discomfort but says nothing outright.

Meaning in Guillén Landrián's cinema does not hide in what the film declares; it emerges from how the film organizes what it shows. The opening montage of *Desde La Habana* (Figure 2) makes this clear. As the caption describes, the sequence assembles four elements drawn entirely from the state's own visual archive, yet strips them of the connective logic that would normally anchor them to a triumphal narrative. What the caption cannot fully convey is the affective experience of watching this. The mushroom cloud arrives with no explanatory voice-over, the footage of Castro with no identifying text, the imperative *RECORDAR* with no object. Nothing is told to the viewer, yet the pressure to make meaning is immense. The sequence produces not interpretation but a kind of vertigo, a sense that familiar images are simultaneously recognizable and unmoored. This is the experiential correlate of double coding: the viewer who expects revolutionary iconography to cohere finds instead that it has been silently hollowed out.

This formal embedding makes the critique simultaneously more vulnerable and more durable. It is vulnerable because it requires an informed, even sophisticated viewer to perceive it, and durable because it cannot be removed without dismantling the film's structure. There is no isolated "subversive scene" that could be cut. The subversion is systemic, woven deep into the film's formal fabric.

4.5. Tactics, Fissures, Counter-Writings

Taken together, Guillén Landrián's cinema can be understood as what Michel de Certeau calls a "tactical" practice—the art of the weak maneuvering within territory claimed by the strong, taking advantage of fleeting openings and small fissures without ever occupying the strategic high ground (de Certeau 1984, pp. 29–42). Strategy, as de Certeau reminds us, requires a stable "proper place": institutional authority, economic resources, and the legal right to define the field. Tactics, by contrast, survive through movement, improvisation, and the ability to slip into cracks in the dominant order.

Guillén Landrián never had strategic power inside the ICAIC. He worked at its edges, reliant on its equipment and budgets but exposed to its disciplinary mechanisms. His response, born partly of necessity and partly of temperament, was tactical. He navigated sideways through the system, accepted the assignments he was given, and then embedded critical charge within the very materials the institution provided. A propaganda commission became an opportunity for deconstruction. A didactic genre turned into the carrier of its own undoing. Even the institutional closing credit, *Documentales Científico-Populares* at the end of *Coffea Arábiga*, became an ironic frame that subtly recontextualized everything the viewer had just seen.

This lateral movement carried a cost. As Section 2 traced in detail, the apparatus eventually identified and punished Guillén Landrián, not because of any single, demonstrable act of subversion that could be isolated and banned, but because of a cumulative formal strangeness the institution could sense yet could not comfortably articulate within

its own ideological vocabulary. His expulsion, imprisonment, psychiatric internment, and electroshock treatments responded to an aesthetic threat the regime recognized intuitively even if it struggled to name it—a cinema that revealed cracks in the Revolution's representational machinery by making those cracks visible through form rather than through overt declaration.

What his films ultimately unsettled was the transparency the state tried to claim for its own discourse. By drawing attention to the mechanisms behind that discourse, the editing cues, the orchestration of music, the rhetorical voice-over, and the parade of statistical tables, his films showed these devices to be constructed rather than natural, ideological rather than neutral. Such demystification is precisely what authoritarian cultural systems have the hardest time tolerating, because it exposes the manufactured quality of the narratives on which their legitimacy depends.

Most strikingly, the poetics of obliqueness outlived the *dispositif* that produced it, persisting as what Bourdieu would call an incorporated "bodily hexis": a set of dispositions so deeply internalized that they continue to structure practice even when external conditions change (Bourdieu 1990, p. 72). Even in exile, in *Inside Downtown*, the shadow of censorship persists as internalized memory. The film's reticence, its preference for suggestion over declaration, and its fragmentary structure and oblique gestures suggest that the habitus of self-censorship became embedded so deeply in Guillén Landrián's creative subjectivity that it continued as a formal principle long after the institutional conditions that generated it had shifted. As Figure 3 makes visible, the formal vocabulary of the exile film (collage, the same productive tension between written word and moving image, and the signature intertitle) is recognizably continuous with the ICAIC work, even as it operates under entirely different material conditions. Restraint that began as survival strategy became inseparable from style, from a way of seeing and representing the world. This is the deepest mark left: not silence, but a way of speaking that bears the imprint of enforced obliqueness in every cut, every juxtaposition, every eloquent omission. The *dispositif* shapes not only what the artist produces but *who the artist becomes*, inscribing itself in perception, gesture, and creative practice in ways that persist beyond the moment of direct coercion. That persistence is precisely what made the 2003 rediscovery so unsettling. A young Havana audience did not encounter a relic of the 1960s but a body of work whose formal intelligence felt urgently, uncomfortably present. The apparatus had tried to erase the filmmaker; what it had actually produced was a cinema that, once uncovered, could not be neutralized.

5. "Fin. . . pero no es el fin": Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

We return to the scene that opened this article. On the afternoon of 22 February 2003, in the Cine Charles Chaplin in Havana, a young audience at the Muestra de Nuevos Realizadores encountered, for the first time, the censored films of Nicolás Guillén Landrián. That date has become a symbolic milestone. From that moment, a body of work that had languished for decades in ICAIC vaults began circulating among young filmmakers as an alternative archive, at once testimony of an intermedial sensibility from the 1960s and a toolbox for interrogating the present from the margins. The films circulated in precarious copies, yet with enormous formative power, becoming objects of cult at the International School of Film and Television (EICTV, San Antonio de los Baños) and the Facultad de los Medios de Comunicación Audiovisual (FAMCA) at the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA, Havana). Local criticism began to position Guillén Landrián alongside canonical figures such as Santiago Álvarez, and his shorts entered lists of the best Cuban non-fiction works in open defiance of earlier hierarchies. A filmmaker erased from official historiography was being rewritten into the center of an alternative genealogy of Cuban documentary.

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Two kinds of response emerged from this exhumation. The first consists of documentaries dedicated to Guillén Landrián himself, each functioning as an act of counter-memory that recovers what the apparatus had erased. Manuel Zayas's *Café con leche* (2003), built almost entirely around the filmmaker's voice in a final interview before his death, transforms the censored subject into the narrator of his own exclusion. It creates a counter-archive by using fragments of Guillén Landrián's documentaries as raw material for a biographical narrative that exposes the ICAIC's role in suppressing his work. Esteban Insausti's *Existen* (2005), dedicated "to Nicolás Guillén Landrián," carries this recuperative impulse a step further. It does not simply pay homage. It actively reworks the filmmaker's own methods, syncopated montage, layered intermedial materials, and soundtracks that lean into irony, now within the emerging landscape of digital "street cinema" produced outside institutional oversight (Stock 2009, p. 185). Most striking, perhaps, is Ernesto Daranas's *Landrián* (2023), made *within* the ICAIC itself. Its very existence marks a remarkable institutional gesture; the same body that once expelled Guillén Landrián now sponsors a feature-length documentary celebrating his legacy.

A second response, arguably the more consequential one, comes from filmmakers who do not make films *about* Guillén Landrián but instead internalize and transform his strategies as they confront new political and material conditions. Karel Ducasse's *Zona de silencio* (2007), Alejandro Alonso's *El Proyecto* (2017), Miguel Coyula's *Nadie* (2017), Alina Rodríguez Abreu's *Buscándote Habana* (2006), and Jiménez Almeida's own *Entropía* (2013) all draw, in different registers, from a toolkit Guillén Landrián helped forge: intermedial collage, reflexive irony, a deliberately oblique aesthetic, and a refusal to fold complex experience into neat ideological conclusions. These filmmakers now work outside the ICAIC, using digital technologies and independent production frameworks. That material shift reflects the changing contours of Cuba's censorship apparatus.

The institutional landscape that produced Guillén Landrián's cinema has changed substantially since his expulsion. The ICAIC of the 1960s exercised control through near-total monopoly over cameras, film stock, exhibition infrastructure, and professional accreditation, and expulsion from its ranks meant effective silence. The collapse of Soviet subsidies after 1991 and the diffusion of affordable digital equipment broke that monopoly, opening a parallel field of independent production beyond institutional channels. The state's response neither relinquished cultural control nor preserved the old mechanisms intact; instead, it reorganized them. What had once been enforced through informal gatekeeping, genre classification, and cajoneo was partly codified into law through Decree 349 (2018), which subjected independent cultural work to prior state approval (Hernández Bustos 2018). The legal and bureaucratic instruments deployed since then have continued to evolve in response to the emergence of new platforms, protest movements, and forms of cultural distribution.

The mechanisms of the present moment are not the ones that targeted Guillén Landrián in 1972. What persists is a structural orientation rather than an unchanging institution: the state's claim of sovereignty over cultural production and the cultivation of self-censorship as a disciplinary effect, now operating across a partly digital terrain his generation could not have anticipated. Within this transformed field, the dialectic that shaped his cinema (in which censorship generated the conditions for oblique, formally inventive filmmaking) reappears in altered but recognizable form, taken up by filmmakers working under technological and legal conditions distinct from his, yet inheriting strategies he helped to articulate. This altered continuity clarifies something essential about the relationship between repression and aesthetics.

Guillén Landrián's work does not simply *withstand* censorship; it metabolizes it, turning constraint into aesthetic principle. The "poetics of obliqueness" he developed is

not a style to be reproduced but a method, a way of working simultaneously within and against institutional pressure and generating formal invention from conditions designed to repress it. That is why his cinema resonates far beyond the Cuban case. In a moment when artistic expression faces renewed constraints in China, Russia, and Hungary, as well as digital surveillance regimes reshaping how culture circulates, Guillén Landrián's strategies model a form of resistance that avoids direct confrontation, which can be swiftly neutralized, and instead cultivates formal intelligence—the ability to make the apparatus speak, inadvertently and uncomfortably, against itself.

6. Conclusions

This article has aimed to reframe how we understand Nicolás Guillén Landrián. The usual narratives tend to arrange themselves into two predictable poles: on the one hand, the tragic figure undone by the Revolution's cultural machinery; on the other, the formally daring filmmaker whose montage experiments can be admired in isolation from their political conditions. Both perspectives capture something important, yet each stops just short of the larger picture.

What we have tried to show is that Guillén Landrián was neither simply a victim nor a purely autonomous innovator. He was an artist who learned, slowly and painfully, to convert the pressures of institutional repression into part of his creative method. The censorship *dispositif* examined in Section 3 did not merely constrain the field in which he worked. It shaped the very conditions from which his strategies emerged. And the biographical trajectory outlined in Section 2, far from being a straightforward tale of persecution, reveals a sustained and often costly engagement with an apparatus that demanded obedience yet inadvertently generated space for oblique forms of critique.

The "poetics of obliqueness," developed in Section 4, is offered as the article's central contribution. It names a mode of making art under constraint, one in which self-censorship becomes a kind of creative habitus and aesthetic meaning migrates away from discursive declarations into the film's formal system: editing rhythms, intermedial collisions, and tonal frictions. This approach does not simply hide criticism. It reorganizes it, placing it in zones where content-monitoring mechanisms are poorly equipped to manage. The framework, while grounded in the specifics of the Cuban case, may prove helpful in other contexts where artists navigate the overlapping pressures of political power, institutional gatekeeping, and the unspoken rules of cultural legitimacy.

There is also, inevitably, a sense of contemporary urgency. New forms of surveillance and regulation continue to shape the Cuban cultural field, and similar pressures, sometimes overt and sometimes algorithmic or bureaucratic, are visible in many parts of the world. Under these conditions, Guillén Landrián's strategies remain instructive not as a style to imitate but as a reminder that formal intelligence can open spaces where frontal opposition would quickly be silenced. His recurring intertitle, "Fin. . . pero no es el fin," still resonates. It gestures toward unfinished histories, toward the ongoing work of making visible what power would prefer to remain unseen. And as a new generation of Cuban independent filmmakers takes up that work, the history of Cuban cinema continues to unfold in ways that Guillén Landrián, erased in his own time and rediscovered too late, helped make possible.

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