TOWARDS A UTOPIAN ARCHEOLOGY

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

by Alanna Lockward

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



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

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

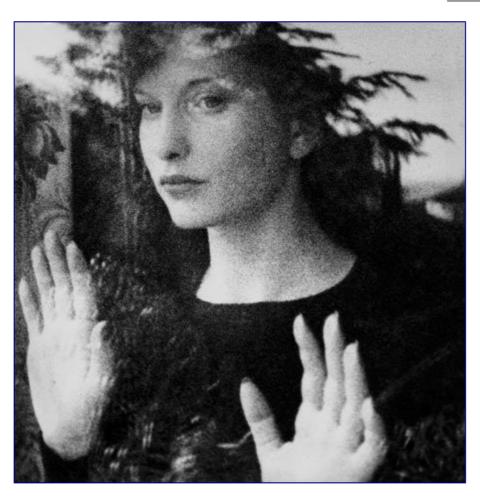
cinematographic discourse, I will focus on the use or no-use of found-footage*, and on certain parameters of Otherness as well, which were introduced in cinema by the above mentioned invisible matrix: director, theorist, writer, cinematographer, editor, performer and entrepreneur **Maya Deren**.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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



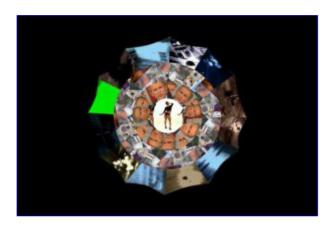
Adler Guerrier, Rhetoric That Preaches Revolution, 2008, video installation, courtesy of the artist

Rhetoric That Preaches Revolution (2008), by Adler Guerrier (Haiti/Miami), is a compilation of documentary found-footage about events that moved the world between 1965-1968: the speeches and assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy; the US marine invasion of the Dominican Republic which 'secured' the failure of the first democratically elected government after Trujillo; May in Paris; students' revolts against Vietnam and colonialism... The work is part of an installation conceived to motivate "Blck", an imaginary artists-activists group which hypothetically belonged to that

period. The rhetoric would be instrumental in mobilizing them to act in Miami. This videoart installation was conceived before **Barack Obama** re-wrote American electoral history and it was presented at the **Whitney Biennial**, in 2008. Guerrier is the first Haitian-Diaspora artist to participate in this event after **Jean-Michel Basquiat** did, in 1983, as the youngest artist ever featured there.



Raphael Montáñez Ortiz, USA, 1994, sound, 2:00, courtesy of the artist



Alejandro Quinteros, American Hypnosis, 2006, sound, 5:50, courtesy of the artist

Born in the US, Puerto-Rican experimental cinema pioneer **Raphael Montáñez Ortiz** (cofounder of El Museo del Barrio, 1969) began by "...extracting fragments and manipulating them tirelessly highlighting plastic associations or re-creating brief stories" (6). This contamination-infiltration tactic has been extremely influential in video-art in Puerto Rico. To-be or Not-to-be an American citizen, To-be or Not-to-be a hybrid, to become one day a decolonized Puerto Rican. *I Dream of America* (2003) and *Bush Dictionary* (2006), by **Alejandro Quinteros**, are two examples of appropriation and symbolic dislocation. In both of them **George W. Bush**'s image is transformed into a 'weapon' manipulated by the artist in order to reverse the media play through the repetition (reduction) to absurdness of the subject's ubiquity. This de-colonial discourse of resistance is different to that of **Guerrier**, who operates as the Other within the hegemonic host-culture, as it is made evident by the

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



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

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



Revolution Evolution (2003) by 'Dominican' video-art and gender discourses pioneer,

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

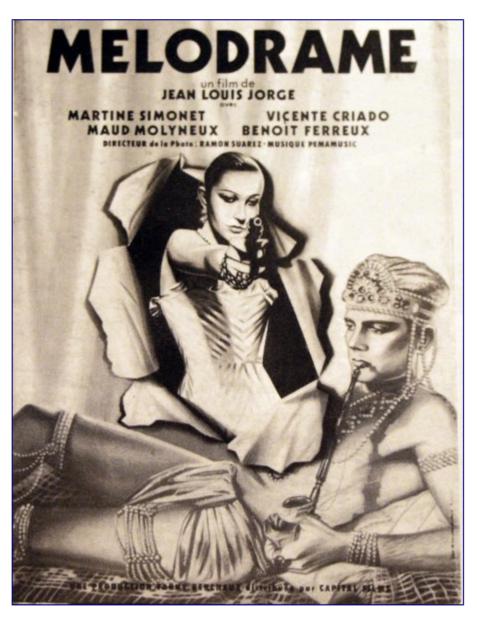


Mónica Ferreras, Psiquis, 2002, video installation, courtesy of the artist

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

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

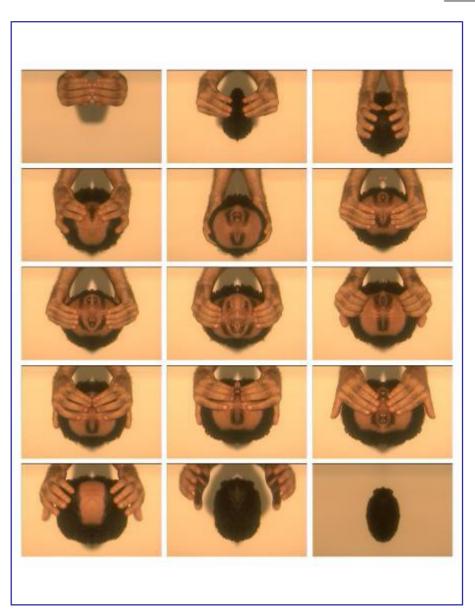
The set and the pictorial intervention within and outside the frame are recurrent elements in the video-art pieces made in the Dominican Republic, while the manipulation of appropriated footage is practically non-existent. This could be related partially to a deliberate desire to avoid relating video-art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



Jean Louis Jorge, Melodrama, 1976, sound, 90:00, Courtesy of Félix Manuel Lora



David Pérez Karmadavis, Lo que dice la piel, 2005, sound, 00:30, courtesy of the arti



Pascal Meccariello, Trampa para lágrimas, 2004, sound, 3:37, courtesy of the artist

The previously mentioned lack of production resources might also influence the scarce interest of artists working with video-art in the Dominican Republic for found-footage. As a whole, the distance from a hegemonic matrix is therefore categorical there, at least in this respect. Theatrical dramaturgy and performance are also very palpable components in video-arts of Dominican artists and this could be connected to the cinematic experience brought from Los Angeles and Paris by **Jean-Louis Jorge** in *The Serpents of the Pirates' Moon* (1973) and *Melodrama* (1976) (10). **Pascal Meccariello**, in *Trampa para una lágrima* (2005); **David Pérez**, in *Hostial* (2006) and **Límber Vilorio** in *Deseo* (2007),

interact with these conditions of production, and of imaginery, manipulating the body-scape as a dimension apt to decipher intimate, ritualistic as well as social and historical enigmas, such as those pertaining to Haitian-Dominican relations, as in the case of **David Pérez**' *Lo que dice la piel* (2008). In this particular body of work a comparative approach to **Maya Deren**'s legacy could be decisively revealing in the framework of a future decolonized video-art Caribbean forum.



Osvaldo Budet, Wareneingang, 2010, sound, 7:23, courtesy of Walter Otero Gallery



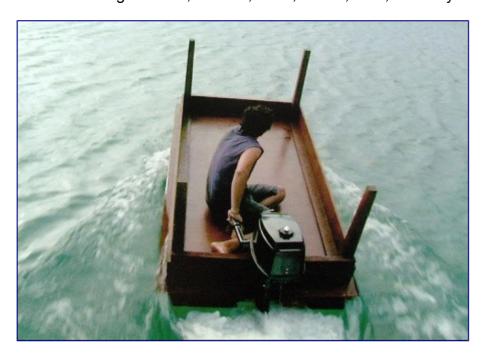
Marta Mabel Pérez, Fully bilingüal, 2005, sound, 4:50, courtesy of the artist



Quintin Rivera Toro, 10 Quejas de Caguas, 2008, video installation, courtesy of Walter Otero Gallery



Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, Archivo, 2001, sound, 7:00, courtesy of the artist



Allora y Calzadilla, Under Discussion, 2004, sound, 6:14, courtesy of Walter Otero Gallery



Wanda Raimundi Ortiz, Ask Chuleta Biennial Culture, 2010, sound, 10:00, courtesy of the artist

In the case of Puerto Rico, moving-image production has been specially privileged by the educational system. Artists trained at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas, as Jason Mena and Osvaldo Budet; or at the Universidad de Puerto Rico, as Marta Mabel Pérez, Carola Cintrón Moscoso, Quintín Rivera Toro and Carlos Valarino, have obtained MA's in film and video in the US. Thanks to the comprehensive exhibition and catalogue, curated by Elvis Fuentes, Rewind...Rewind... (2006), a quote from a poem by Félix González-Torres, valuable documentation on video-art in Puerto Rico is available to a wider public. This has been made possible by a programmatic continuity led by cultural and educational institutions (11). The relative freedom provided by comfortable conditions of production is reflected in a rigorous profile and more volume of video-art works. Another very important fact is the input of collectors interested in cutting-edge art. Acquisitions of the Berezdivin Collection (12), for example, include pieces by Beatriz Santiago and Allora y Calzadilla, who will represent the US in the next Venice Biennial, in 2011. Other artists that like Rapahel Montáñez Ortiz were born and raised in US mainland are also exhibiting in important European Biennials, such as Bronx-based Wanda Raimundi Ortiz who is participating in the Manifesta 8 in Murcia, in 2010.

With the exception of acquisition prizes from private and public biennials, the Dominican

Republic still does not enjoy either a formal training program, or a private or public acquisition program for video-art. Artists incorporating video-art in their artistic practice such as Eliú Almonte, Quisqueya Henríquez, Raúl Recio, Marcos Lora Read, the collective Shampoo and Patricia Castillo are self-taught in this particular media. The same happens with Diaspora artists like Scherezade García, Elia Alba and Nicolás Dumit Estévez. An exception to this rule are Teresa María Diaz Nerio, who studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, in Amsterdam, and Ignacio Alcántara who specialized in film at Parsons School of Design, in New York City and was awarded the Grand Prize of the XXIII Bienal Nacional de Artes Visuales with Aquí y Allá (2005). None of the art schools in the Dominican Republic owns equipment or gives training specialized on video. Centro León, in Santiago de los Treinta Caballeros, organizes, since 2007, intensive seminars with renowned artists like Colombian, José Alejandro Restrepo. Immediately after completing one of these courses, Joan Alberdy Padilla realized a video-art piece that received one of the prizes of the biennial competition organized by Grupo León Jimenes without interruption since 1964 (13).



Elia Alba, Gigglers, 2010, sound, 2:74, courtesy of the artist



Nicolás Dumit Estévez, In His shoes, 2007, sound 15:00, courtesy of Art Labour Archives



Scherezade, Salvation Action, 2003, sound, 5:00, courtesy of Art Labour Archives



Quisqueya Henríquez, Salón de baile (Merengue), 2003, sound, 2:54, courtesy of the artist



Teresa María Díaz Nerio, Hommage á Sara Bartman, 2007, silent, 4:02, courtesy of Art Labour Archives

Interestingly, despite sharing similar limitations to those of the Dominican Republic, Haitian cinema is the most internationally respected Caribbean cinema, thanks to the contribution of **Raoul Peck**, trained at the **Deutschen Film und Fernsehakademie (DFFB)** (14). The francophone colonialist cultural infrastructure has a very strong presence in the Caribbean

and the African continent, which is not the case of its Spanish and Anglophone counterparts. Haitian artists are also beneficiaries of the incalculable historic legacy of the Haitian Revolution which signaled the beginning of the end of the first European colonizing enterprise.

Maksaens Denis dedicates his video-installation L'Universel? (2004), to Leopold **Senghor**, who considered Haitian Negritude as more authentic than the African one because it is exclusively concerned with the essence and obviates the form. In this interactive installation presented in Senghor's hometown, Joual-Fadiouth, Senegal, the public could intervene the 'soundtrack' of the piece by touching metal objects such as spoons and plates. **Denis**, as **Adler Guerrier**, occasionally uses appropriated footage in his video-art installations and like **Guerrier** leaves the material intact. The dislocation occurs in the setting more than in the footage itself, the images are juxtaposed into each other not so much within the frame as much as in the space, to create a fiction that fluctuates between myth and "reality", like in Maya Deren's experimental films. Maksaens **Denis** is the director of **KROMA**, an educational centre that offers aspiring artists training in mixed media (15). He is one of the organizers of Festival Film Jákmel, an international multimedia event that also travels to Port-au-Prince carrying a huge truck with a 15 ft long screen to the poorest neighborhoods (16). After the tragic earthquake of January 2010, KROMA and the Ciné Institute, which is an expansion of the Film Festival Jákmel, continue fulfilling their mission:

"Using the power of cinema, integrated educational programming, technical training and media production support, **Ciné Institute** educates and empowers Haitian youth who seek the creative, technical and business skills necessary to grow local media industries that can provide jobs and spur economic growth needed to improve their lives and the lives of others." (17)



Maksaens Denis, L'Universelle? 2004, video installation, courtesy of the artist



Raoul Peck, Moloch tropical, 2009, sound, 107:00, courtesy of the artist

It is my wish that this compilation of experiences could serve as inspiration for a collective decolonized narrative of the moving-image in these three imaginary territories. When this utopian archeology finally takes place we would need to talk in three languages, five if we add Haitian and Spanglish. Fortunately, art is nurtured not only by theory, or like **Edouard Glissant** has said, sometimes it is necessary to learn to communicate without words (18). I cannot think of a better way to prove him right than by proposing this forum of our own polyphonic, decolonized, utopian genealogy of video-art.

Notes

- (*) I use found-footage loosely in reference to Hollywood iconographic material and/or mainstream broadcast news, within its most referred meaning as objet-trouvé.
- 1. Morata 2007.
- 2. Quiñones and Ranz 2003.
- 3. "Like Claude Cahun, she was a friend of André Breton.. Deren, however, denied any connection with the movement's aesthetic aims. The Surrealist obsession with duality with the lines separating the real and the imaginary, the rational and the irrational, the waking life and the dream—was, in fact, diametrically opposed to Deren's fascination with the continuity of life and death, the physical and the spiritual, and "I" and the "non-I." Talking about her film Meshes of the Afternoon, she stated that she was interested in the credibility of the unreal, not the incredibility of the unreal. "I am concerned," she wrote, "with that point of contact between the real and the unreal, where the unreal manifests itself in reality." Her films were intended as imaginary arenas where this point of contact could be visualized—where boundaries normally fixed could dissolve, or become wildly flexible; where protagonists could move freely between dreams and waking life without ever resolving the differences between the two; where nature and culture, urban and rural environments could be separated (and linked) by a single step; where past and future selves could meet along the road, fracturing into clones moving along parallel paths of time and space." (Rice, Shelley 1999: Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman. Online source on the exhibition:

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

- 4. "Having severed Egypt from Africa and making it safe for History, Hegel was free to zero in on what he called "Africa proper" and single it out for an extremely malicious libel, the outlines, if not the exact content, of which have continued to structure the understanding of Africa in the consciousness and institutions of Hegel's descendants. According to Hegel, 'Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained-for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World-shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself-the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night. Its isolated character originates, not merely in its tropical nature, but essentially in its geographical condition." (Taiwo 1998).
- 5. "I am using here "de-colonization" and "de-coloniality" as exchangeable in certain context, but always keeping in mind the historical distinction between a) political de-colonization and liberation between 1947 and 1970, approximately, in Africa and Asia and b) epistemic de-colonization. Ramon Grosfóguel described as "second decolonization" and Catherine Walsh and Nelson Maldonado-Torres refers to as "de-coloniality." The pedagogical advantage of de-coloniality over decolonization is twofold. On the one hand, it names the task of unveiling and undoing "the logic of coloniality" and, on the other, it names a project and a process that should be distinguished from the diverse meanings attributed to "postcoloniality"." (Mignolo 2007).
- 6. Fuentes 2006:11.
- 7. Hermann 2003.

- 8. http://www.eictv.org
- 9. Lora 2005:147-156.
- 10. Lora 2005:27.
- 11. "Como vemos en estos años el video-arte da los primeros tanteos y se relaciona con la etapa formativa de artistas que posteriormente abandonan el medio. Un caso paradigmático es Félix González Torres, quien entra en contacto con el medio gracias a un programa desarrollado por la Facultad de Humanidades para apoyar documentalmente las investigaciones universitarias." (Fuentes 2006:13.)
- 12. http://www.espacio1414.org/en_index.htm
- 13. http://www.centroleon.org.do/esp/con-xxiiiilaudo.asp
- 14. Raoul Peck,'s film L'homme sur les quais (1993), was shot entirely in the Dominican Republic and it was the first Caribbean feature film presented in Cannes. His next film Lumumba, death of a poet was also screened in Cannes, in 2000. Peck's filmography has been awarded internationally. Haitian Corner (1988), shot in Germany, Haiti and New York won the prestigious Locarno Festival Film Prize. Catherine David, curator of the Documenta X, invited Raoul Peck as well as other filmmakers such as Haroun Farocki, Charles Burnett, Antonia Lerch and Abdehrramane Sissako to create a new work for this important exhibition.
- 15. http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/small_axe/v009/9.2denis.html
- 16. http://www.festivalfilmjakmel.com/
- 17. http://www.cineinstitute.com/about-us/
- 18. Lockward 2006:109.

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Berlin, 27.09.2010